# 56

# cottonwood

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Jennifer Moses
Don Judson
Laurie MacDiarmid
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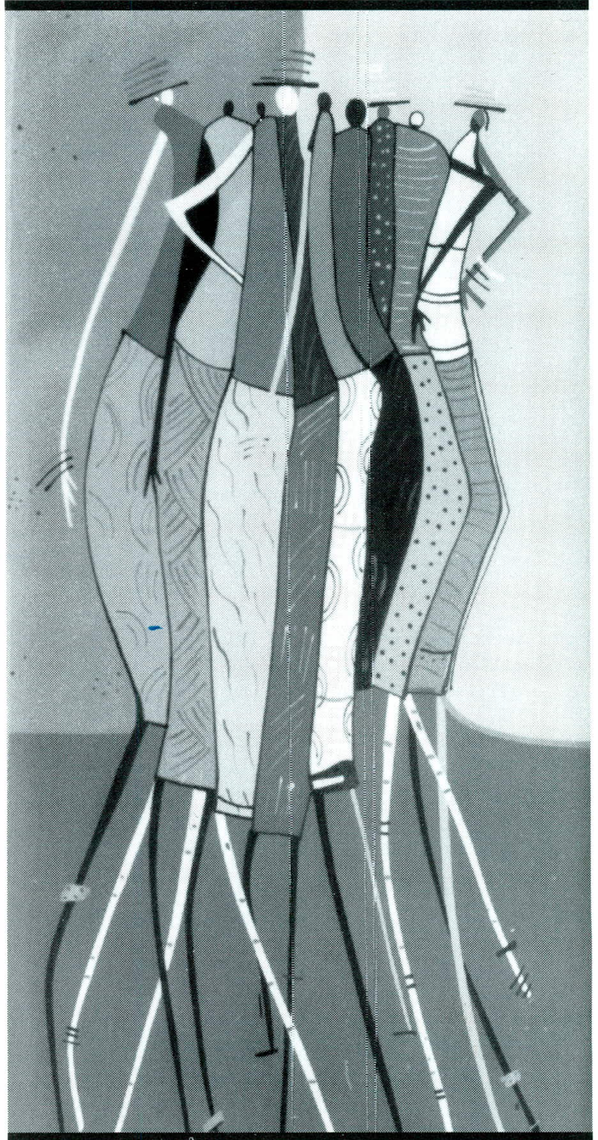

Fall 2000

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
Lawrence, Kansas
Cottonwood 56
© 2000 Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
ISSN 0147-149X

*Cottonwood* is a review of the literary and visual arts published twice yearly, in the spring and fall.

Two-issue subscriptions to *Cottonwood* are available for $15. Four-issue subscriptions are $28, and six-issue subscriptions are $40. If you wish to subscribe to *Cottonwood*, or to become a donor, patron, or benefactor, please write to: the Lawrence Arts Center, 200 W. 9th Street, Lawrence, KS, 66044; 785-843-2787 (phone); 785-843-6629 (fax).

*Cottonwood* welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, reviews, photography, and other visual arts. Please limit poetry submissions to five, prose submissions to one story, review, or essay. Submissions will not be returned unless they are accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Simultaneous submissions are accepted, and submissions are read year-round. Please send submissions care of the appropriate editor to: *Cottonwood;* Box J, 400 Kansas Union; University of Kansas; Lawrence, KS, 66045.

*Cottonwood* receives support from the Department of English of the University of Kansas and the Lawrence Arts Center. Production is facilitated by the Word Processing Center of the University of Kansas.

*Cottonwood* is indexed by the *American Humanities Index*, *Poem Finder*, and the *Index of American Periodical Verse*.

On the cover: "Dance", oil on canvas, by Butama Tobias.

Butama Tobias was born in Bungoma, Kenya, on May 12, 1959. Although basically self-taught in oil painting he did earn a Bachelor of Education in Arts degree at Kenyatta University College, Nairobi, in 1984. Since 1993 Butama Tobias has served as principal at the Buru Buru Institute of Fine Art, Nairobi.

> "We were not put into this world to 'take life as it come(s),' but to live it according to our talents, by the exercise of which life becomes meaningful."—*Butama Tobias*

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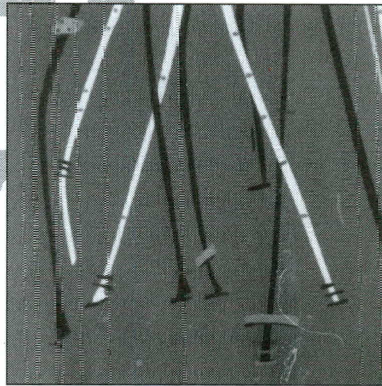

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
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Stephen Morison, Jr.

# Window Shopping

Noy makes her way through the crowded streets, stopping to glance into the open stores she knows along the way. There is a brown burn mark on the hem of her Madonna T-shirt that she got from one of Aoisa's cigarettes. She looks in the two shops that sell jeans and Western T-shirts. The two men that run the stores know by now that the girls from the district won't buy anything that isn't being offered at rock-bottom price, and neither bothers talking to her. Noy feels a tinge of pride as the words *cheap Charlie* occur to her.

She has only thirty baht left from the money Arpad from Norway pressed into her hand at Don Muang. It was her bad luck to be sick with a fever for nearly a week after he left. Now she wishes that she had gotten out of bed sooner, when Aoisa urged her to, and maybe used some of the money for a new T-shirt instead of sending so much of it to the village. As she nears the district, she begins to smell the McDonald's restaurant directly opposite the entrance of Patpong I. She slows as she nears, trying not to appear to be looking at the restaurant or desiring to go in. Across the street, the Pink Snail doorman is waving two fists clenched with color brochures at a pair of retreating *falangs.*

Noy bites her bottom lip, then turns and pushes open the glass door of the McDonald's. She busies herself by slipping her purse from her pocket while she walks toward the back and tries to look nonchalant as she joins the queue of men and women from the more prosperous districts. The white floor is immaculate, as are the plastic dispensers of napkins and straws and the plastic tables with their connected swivel chairs. Aoisa showed her the straw dispenser when she took her there her first week in the district. The line contracts, and Noy glances furtively at the bright menu screen. She calls herself a *juk jik* for coming in; she's almost broke. Everything about the restaurant is scrubbed and bright. No hint of underlying dust, no shadows. Even the back room, where Noy can see workers in tidy blue caps preparing food, is open to inspection.

French fries, Noy says when the women in the red cap looks at her expectantly. Aoisa has taught her to distinguish between the English *l* and *r*. She hands the woman twenty-five baht and waits while the woman leaves then quickly returns with the food in a white paper wrapping accompanied by a plastic square with a red drawing of a tomato on it, all placed on a brown tray.

Noy steps away from the counter, keeps her eyes from the front windows which stare across at Patpong, and sets her tray down on one of the tables in the rear. She sits on the edge of a red plastic bench and covers her mouth with the tips of her fingers of her right hand. She chews each fry and swallows before she reaches for another. With each fry, she reminds herself that this is the last meal she can afford until more luck finds her.

She does not look at the *may law* doorman from the Pink Snail as she enters Patpong I. Aoisa frowned when Noy told her about the pictures. You'll get a reputation and then Tor won't hire you, she said. But what could Noy have done? Now that pictures of her are in brochures up and down the street, she realizes Aoisa was right. Many girls, especially those that don't like Aoisa, cover their mouths and smile when Noy passes. The girls at the Kazbah began calling her *Sushi Tee Rak* in a good-natured way, but Noy worries the nickname will eventually hurt her chances with a customer.

She walks quickly to the Kazbah. The red curlicue of neon is already glowing above the door at the top of the stairs. Noy steps down the little alleyway beside the tape store on the ground floor and raps on the side door. She is later than usual. Not enough to miss her scheduled time but enough that she will have to change quickly. In the dressing room, she removes her heels from the plastic bag, then slips her T-shirt off—today she chose the black one with U2 World Tour on the back and the silk screen of the band's faces on the front, then slides out of her jeans. She fixes the straps of the pink bikini she's wearing instead of underwear, neatly fits her clothes into the plastic bag, then sets it atop her street shoes under the bench. She glances at herself in the little polished tin plate tacked beside the door, frees her hair, settles her glasses on her nose, then squints to try to make some sense out of the contorted silhouette in the metal. Ready, she opens the door and walks up the hallway past Nic-Nic in his chair, through the beaded curtains and into the bar.

She makes a quick circuit. There are only three customers this early in the afternoon: two heavy Malaysian men close to the open area that serves as a stage and one younger Thai man that Noy would guess works in one of the restaurants by the smell of *pat prio wan* on him. Two of the day girls are seated beside each of the Malaysian men. Lin is alone beside the Thai boy. She is gently touching the fingers of his hand as he watches Oh performing her trick with ping-pong balls under the lights. Noy turns and watches politely until Oh finishes then joins the rest of the girls in a round of applause. As Oh gathers her things, Noy walks to the bar and bows politely to Mama Ro.

Bah, you think we can afford your expensive trick with only three customers in the bar. You think we can afford a whole fresh fish every day?

Noy apologizes demurely to Mama Ro, but doubts she has much to fear at the Kazbah. Her act is the grand finale of the first show and the reason many of the customers come at all.

And don't think your picture on the brochures means you can't be replaced just as easily as the next one, Mama Ro says, her eyes narrowing.

Yes, Mama Ro, *kaa*, Noy says then passes by the bar to the kitchen. After her first day, when Noy told Aoisa what act Mama Ro had invented for her, Aoisa laughed and said that at least they would never go hungry. But of course the restaurant keeps the fish. The cook hands Noy the carp he's purchased.

It's too big, Noy tells him.

NicNic has stepped to the entrance to the kitchen. You should tip him for being so generous, he says, then leans back and emits one of his giant wheezing laughs. The cook joins him.

Noy leaves them, returning to the dressing room to remove and unwrap the little bottle of vegetable oil she carries to work each day. She smears the oil on the frigid side of the stout carp until she's satisfied that she's done all that she can, then she steps out into the corridor and waits for the lights to flicker. NicNic sees her and signals to Mama Ro who lowers the room lights and turns on the spotlight. Noy enters cradling the fish to her chest while cooing at it like a mother to her baby.

Mama Ro cues the U2 song Noy has selected that has the line in English about the fish and Noy begins to dance with the fish. The cradling changes to gentle writhing, during which Noy discards her bikini top, and progresses to the point where Noy is

straddling the fish, pretending to ride it about the stage. Noy feels the cold fish between her legs then brings it up to her mouth and presses it to her lips as she works off her bikini bottoms and lies on her back.

That's why she is called Sushi Darling, Noy hears Lin tells her Thai customer with a coy laugh.

Noy closes her eyes and pictures the building where they prepare fish for serving at McDonald's. She imagines white walls and strong lights and workers in clean white plastic uniforms and everywhere there are cascades of clean, cold water. Most of the girls Noy knows are like Lin. Their dream is to marry and go back to take care of their family. To have money and return to the village where everything is good, leaving behind the city where everything is bad. But Noy doesn't believe that everything is good in the little village where her father still lives. Noy is like Aoisa, who would leave if a man wanted to take her. She would go to Norway or America, anywhere that the lights aren't just on the surface and everything underneath is like a tomb.

Aoisa surprises Noy by arriving at the second show at the Rainbow Room with three young *falangs*. Noy immediately scrutinizes herself as Aoisa is drilled. She clenches the muscle she uses to pee, tugs the waist of her bikini bottoms a little higher, and adjusts the number tag pinned to her bikini top to ensure that it doesn't impede the view of her left breast. Aoisa waves to her then points her out to the men. Noy smiles and tries to appear confident.

When her turn comes, Noy walks to the end of the catwalk, stands poised a moment, one knee casually bent before the other as Aoisa has coached her; then she turns as fluidly as possible, pauses so the room can look at the back side of her then returns to her place in line at the end of the stage.

The doorman at the opposite side of the stage calls two numbers, neither of them Noy's, then the lights dim and the girls make their way backstage to put on loose dresses before fraternizing with the customers. Aoisa rushes in while Noy still has her dress over her head.

They are Canadians. They say they haven't enough money to pay for you, Aoisa whispers. But we'll be at the Palace at midnight. Come as soon as you close. One thinks you look like a student.

Noy nods quietly and smiles, but she is disappointed. She knows that Tor is already questioning how much she is worth to him. She tightens her hands and presses her palms into her hips. He may have liked Aoisa's idea that he needed different types of girls: girls with short hair, girls with long, girls with round eyes, and girls with glasses. But Noy knows that she is one of the least popular girls. If she doesn't find a customer who will ask for her soon, she is sure Tor will tell her to work at the Kazbah full time.

Her luck doesn't change as the evening continues. She sits with an English-speaking businessman from Japan for nearly forty minutes; he even purchases a drink for her. But in the end he asks for the tiny new girl with the large eyes named Ti.

Perhaps you would like two? Like sandwich? Noy suggests.

But the businessman only frowns and leaves a sixty-baht tip on the waitress' tray.

Noy switches to a party of Thai men that already has too many girls attached to it, but succeeds in gaining the attention of one man who smokes cigarettes, perhaps to cover his bad smell. She manages to fulfill her quota of three drinks just before the lights flicker and the customers begin to file out. In the changing room, she puts her jeans and black T-shirt back on and considers her shoes carefully, trying to remember whether Aoisa had ever told her what Canadians would like, before putting the high heels in the bag and putting her flat shoes back on. She exits quickly to avoid any customers that have lingered and follows the line of girls streaming toward the Palace.

When Noy arrives, Aoisa is on the dance floor with Kevin. There is already a crowd of girls dancing with each other around them while tables of young *falangs* watch them from the edges of the floor. Noy hesitates and waits by the door until Aoisa spots her and hurries over.

You finally arrived, Aoisa says. Come with me.

She leads her to a nearby table and urges her to sit beside a man with startling gray eyes and hair streaked with light. His hair falls in loose waves about his face. He wears a collared shirt with short sleeves. The shirt is blue, with bright green parrots and yellow and red fruits and yellow suns and shimmering images of water and sand.

Here Noy, Aoisa says in English. She speak very good English. You talk.

Noy turns to the man. You like Patpong very much? Her hands are in her lap. She clenches them and unclenches them.

The man smiles and Noy can tell that he is already drunk.

Very much, the man repeats.

You like beers here Patpong?

They only sell large beers, the man begins, but then goes on to say something that Noy doesn't understand. The man smiles at the end, so she smiles too. His white smile and the guttural words, each one the same tone as the last, each one with hard, clear edges, remind Noy of the strong lights and sharp odor of McDonald's. She smiles because she thinks he expects her too, but also because she suspects that these American and Canadian *falangs* must always smile when talking to one another.

I not speak very good English, she says.

Oh, no. Very, very good English. You shouldn't say that. Very good English. The man takes a sip of his drink. Noy can smell that it is Mekong. Are you a fan of U2? says the man, looking at her shirt.

Noy glances down at her T-shirt as her mind interprets the question. Yes, U2 best band. Noy smiles sweetly and sings the short refrain: A woman needs man like a fish needs bicycle.

The Canadian stares at her a moment, then opens his mouth and laughs loudly. He bumps his friend's shoulder and says something about Noy that Noy can't make out but takes to be a good thing. Her eyes soften, and she glances down at one of her hands. It looks clean and pale, and she feels her heart open with a little hope. Then Lin and another girl are beside the table, and Lin is holding out a Singha beer toward the Canadian man with the gray eyes.

Bring beer for you, Lin says to him. Remember from Kazbah, she says. We meet Palace now.

Noy stares at Lin, a heaviness creeping into the soft part she felt. Lin ignores her. Noy glances down at her lap, at her two small hands making fists, pressing into the tops of her thighs.

Oh, right. I remember you, the *falang* with gray eyes says.

I told him to meet me here after work, Lin says to Noy without looking at her. He's with me. Now get out from behind that table and find your own customer someplace else.

Noy is relieved to see Aoisa cross the floor to stand behind Lin. She taps Lin on the shoulder. You must be a fool if you think

I would let this rich boy take up with a diseased butterfly like you, Aoisa says into Lin's face.

Lin turns back to Noy. Sushi Darling, she says in English. Canadian mens no want *juk jik* who *chuk wa* with fish. Lin sniffs. What smell is coming here?

Lin leans toward the Canadian man with a smile, but before she can say another word Aoisa grabs her by the hair and jerks her away from the table. A space clears around them as Lin turns and tries to rake Aoisa's face with her nails. Aoisa steps back, appraises Lin a moment, then her eyes narrow and she steps forward with a vicious punch that makes Lin's head jerk. Lin reels, grabbing at her face. Then the bouncers arrive, grab both girls, and carry them from the club. The crowd quickly quiets down. Kevin, Lin's boyfriend, returns to the table.

Well, what was all that about?

The Canadian man beside Noy says something then laughs again, and they all look at Noy.

What? Noy says.

I better go outside and see if I can help, Kevin says.

Help that other girl, the third man says. She needed it.

So what was that all about? the Canadian says when Kevin has gone.

Aoisa not like some girls, Noy says.

But that girl was pointing at you, wasn't she?

I not understand, Noy says. I like all girls. All Patpong girls good girls. You like dancing? She slides to the edge of the bench and begins to stand.

No, I like sitting, the man says.

Oh. Noy sits back down but finds the man staring at her. You looking?

You're very pretty.

All Patpong girls pretty.

But you're smart, too. Your English is better than most of the girls. I bet you're a good reader. You like reading?

Noy shakes her head, only half understanding. I no very smart. Just girl. What your name?

Who me?

She presses a finger against his chest gently. You.

He smiles but remains mute as if he's forgotten momentarily. You call me Jake, he says finally. Jake Barnes.

Okay, Jake Barnes.

No, he laughs again. Not Jake Barnes. Just Jake.

Noy smiles. Okay, Jake.

Jake, he repeats, and takes a deep drink of his whiskey. He puts the glass down with a thump and glances about the room. Where's the bathroom? he says.

Bathroom over there, behind door, Noy says pointing.

Jake slides around the bench seat, pauses a moment, then lurches to his feet and cuts through the girls and young foreigners to the corridor at the back of the room. Noy stands and follows him, waiting at the entrance to the corridor for him to return. While they are waiting, the U2 song about the fish comes on, and two girls that Noy isn't sure she knows wave to her and giggle.

Jake returns, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Mekong, Noy says, handing him the whiskey he left at the table.

Thanks, he says, and starts for the door.

Outside, he takes a sip from the plastic cup, then spits it on the ground.

You not feel good, Noy says.

His eyes are watery when he raises them. You're sweet, he says. He stares back at the door to the Palace. Say, this is just a dance club, right? This Palace place is just for dancing, right?

Noy glances over her shoulder and interprets what he's asking. Here, just dancing, she says. Just dance.

Jake eyes her. You want to go someplace else? he says. You have a place we can go?

Noy nods and takes his hand. It's after one now and many of the clubs, like the Rainbow Room, have shut down for the night. Noy catches a fragment of high-pitched laughter, but it's distant and muted, lost among the dark faces of the buildings and the alleys. A few of the neon signs, like those above the Kazbah, still bleed soft color, but the overwhelming sensation is a cloying opacity, a dull darkness both absorbed and emitted by the city. The night is neither thick nor wet, but no stars are visible, no wash of passing cars audible, no rumble, no clack. Instead, the streets are heavy with scents, as if each fissure exhaled a private breath.

Noy leads Jake into the lobby of the Suriwong Hotel. A bald man with thick shoulders leads them up the stairs and down a corridor to wait outside a room with a gilt number 32 on the

door. The manager knocks once, then raises his finger, indicating they should wait a moment. A woman in a gray smock and kerchief emerges momentarily. She carries a bucket filled with cleaning supplies, and she trundles off down the hallway without glancing at them.

Come, come, the night manager says. He ushers them into the room.

Jake looks about. I didn't expect a hotel, he says.

The manager looks at him.

How much, Jake says.

Four hundred baht.

Jake searches both his pockets, pulling out two fists full of loose bank notes. I'm sorry, he says. Then he says something Noy can't make out, although she understands one word: *king.* Jake sits on the bed and begins smoothing out money. Four hundred and ten, he says after a moment but then makes a hesitant downturned gesture with his mouth.

Noy steps over and crouches toward him. Give it here, she says.

Jake hands her the money. She counts thirty baht back into his hands.

Three eighty, she tells the manager in Thai. You take the missing twenty out of my cut.

The manager smiles. Feeling generous, he says. He folds the bills and puts them in his pocket, shakes his head at Jake, then steps into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

Jake turns and looks at her, then flops back on the bed. Noy sits on the edge gently.

What am I doing here? Jake says.

Noy squints, then turns her head from him.

I'm sorry, Jake says, leaning up on his elbows.

You don't like? Noy says.

No, no. You're beautiful. Come here, he says, and tilts his head toward hers.

They kiss gently. He tastes of beer and whiskey. His long hair falls across her nose and smells of smoke. The roughness of his lips and chin scratches her face. She reaches a finger up and traces it over a rough cheek. Aoisa has told her that she makes all her boyfriends shave the hair off their faces twice a day. All of Aoisa's boyfriends are Western. She does not like Thai men or any Asian men, for that matter.

I'm sorry, Jake says, breaking away. He holds up his palm.

Yes? Noy says.

I don't know. I mean, how do you ask?

Noy stares inquisitively.

Is this for money? Jake asks.

Noy smiles, encouraging Jake to smile with her. She nods.

Jake sits up, letting his arms fall atop his legs. Well, I don't, I mean, you just saw. . .I don't have any money.

Noy continues smiling. She shakes her head. No, she says. It okay. You stay, she says.

Jake looks at her a moment, then smiles. He leans toward her and kisses the top of her forehead. Wait here, he says. Then he stands and walks into the bathroom. Noy turns and can see the tiled floor. She hears him running water. In a moment he returns with a small white towel that he has dampened. He leans toward her feet. Noy watches as he removes her shoes. He says something, but once again she only recognizes one word: *feet.*

I do not understand, Noy says.

Jake looks at her face. He reaches up and removes her glasses, sets them atop the little table beside the bed, carefully, so that the lenses are pointed up, then returns to the foot of the bed. He places the towel on her foot. He's run it under hot water, and it feels warm and soft to Noy as he slides it between her toes. He presses firmly on the sole of her foot, massaging the sole and the sides of the heel, gently pressing spots along the top. It feels nice, Noy thinks. She starts to lean back but remembers what Aoisa taught her about always being attentive even when the man seems to be urging her to relax, always being ready to submit to whatever request is forthcoming.

Jake switches to her other foot. When he is done with the rag, he lifts her foot off the bed and kisses the heel, kisses the sole, then her big toe. She giggles then gasps as he sucks her big toe into his mouth then begins slowly licking between each toe. This, she admits, feels very good, but she remains on her elbows reminding herself to be attentive and also curious about what he is going to do next. When he stops, he repositions himself on the bed so that he can kiss her and begin to undress her at the same time. He unzips her jeans, and she helps him pull them off, then sits up and finishes undressing for him. When she's done, he stops suddenly. He's got his hand on the top of her leg, his eyes

looking at her, looking at all of her, but something is wrong. Noy can feel it.

What? she says.

I should have asked, he says. I mean, what was your name again? He smiles self-consciously.

My name Noy, she says.

Noy, how old did you say you were?

Her eyes flicker for only the barest second as she tries to remember how old he said he was. Aoisa told her to always tell the young *falangs* that she is the same age as them. I like you, she says.

I like you, too, he says. But how old are you?

No, I am same like you, Noy says. Same-same.

Same-same, Jake says and stands up off the bed. Only I never told you how old I was.

How old Jake? Noy says softly.

I'm twenty-two, he says. How old are you?

Same-same, like Jake, Noy says. Twenty-three.

You're twenty-three?

Yes.

Jake glances down at her body again. He shakes his head and lies down beside her. Then stands again, pulls up the covers and glances at her. She scrambles under them, and he lies down beside her, then leans over and turns off the light. In the darkness, he works an arm around her shoulders and pulls her to him, then leans his head back on a pillow and doesn't speak anymore. Noy knows the room is rented for only three hours, and if they fall asleep they may awake to the manager pounding on the door, but she doesn't say anything. If Jake wants to just sleep, that is fine with her. She closes her eyes. Pulled against him like this, with his smoke-scented hair and the sharp odor of his body so close, she knows she won't sleep, but still that is fine. She lies there quietly, wondering what the boy beside her is thinking of, imagining that the images in his head are of bright scentless things painted in primary colors and unattached even to the earth below. His breathing grows regular. Noy wonders if he's asleep. She considers moving to a new position. Then he turns, and his other hand lightly touches her chin.

Are you sleeping, Noy?

No, Jake.

Twenty-three-year-old Noy.

Then he is kissing her again. His breath tastes stale. Now she can taste the sour bile taste and the too-sweet whiskey. His hands are touching her. They slide down beneath the covers, then force the covers away from her, and the cool air caresses her body. Aoisa says she thinks of the Enlightened One beneath the bodi tree when she is with men. Noy closes her eyes and tries to think of a man younger and thicker than the King but like the King, seated beneath a wide, pale tree with enormous branches. She tries to think of the cool floor and soft fine light of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, which she visited with Aoisa one afternoon. Finally, Noy closes her eyes tightly and tries to think of the white room where the clean, pale Americans work in white plastic suits to prepare the McDonald's food. But she cannot. Instead she smells the Kazbah kitchen. The man with gray eyes is atop her; she feels the fish. His face is pale and filled with the leering eyes of NicNic and the cook. She keeps her eyes closed tightly and waits for it to stop.

When it is over, Noy knows she will not sleep. Jake is breathing heavily on his back beside her. The gray light of Patpong slants down upon them in bars, slipping through the slatted blinds of the window. Noy no longer has any desire to face the manager in another hour's time.

The room for just two hours, she says.

What? he says.

Two hours only.

Oh, he says and flips back on the light. Hi, he says.

Hello, she tells him.

They pull on their clothes together, not talking, not even looking at each other. Noy knows she should say something, knows this is the moment Aoisa would begin talking in English, but she can't think of any words. Her skin feels cold, and she wants to draw fabric over it. Outside, while he is still tucking in his shirt, she tells him she is hungry.

Oh, he says. But I'm still broke. Well, I do have thirty baht, he says.

She shakes her head slowly. She knows he has more someplace, at whatever hostel he is staying at on Koh San Road. But they wouldn't let her go there with him, in any case. It is okay,

she says. You come back tomorrow, maybe? Aoisa would insist, but Noy can't find the proper words.

Oh. Maybe, Jake says. He says more, things she has trouble following about Ko Samui and the islands to the south, and she knows she won't see him tomorrow.

It okay, she says, pressing her hands to her stomach.

They walk to the end of the strip, and Jake wakes a sleeping tuk-tuk driver and asks to be taken back to Koh San Road. The driver wants sixty baht, but Noy steps forward and interrupts them.

He has only thirty baht left, she tells the boy. Thirty baht isn't nothing, she says.

The boy laughs. If he has given the rest to you, my sister, he should walk then. But then the boy turns to Jake and waves him into the back of the tuk-tuk. Get in, get in, Joe, he says.

The boy retakes the seat and jumps on the kickstart once, then twice, then the rapid-fire motor interrupts the dull silence of the morning and bathes them with its blare. The tuk-tuk driver looks at Noy and smiles. Jake lifts a hand. Behind him the sky is lightening. Noy lifts her eyes and sees a bright line of nearly white, like a blind has opened and admitted a glimpse of the day that is waiting. She turns and glances at the hotel as the tuk-tuk driver revs his motor, then engages the gears.

Noy knows the Canadian man is pulling away, returning to the brightness without her. She lifts her head and stares at the neon lights of the Suriwong Hotel. The manager still owes her thirty baht, but he will point out the late hour and try to give her less. The fingers of her right hand are curled and she is pressing them into her stomach with her left hand. She does not want to face the manager alone and wonders if it wouldn't be smarter to wait until Aoisa is beside her. But then she shakes her head. She looks down at her hands, aware of them for the first time. She holds them away from her body, unclenches them and looks at the backs of her fine slender fingers. Day is coming, and she may not see Aoisa until evening, she tells herself. A tuk-tuk passes in the street. It leaves a cold sound inside her. She is hungry. She turns and takes a step.

M. Spears

# Body for This Affair

I.

What body do I become when
calf meets bicep, mouth, or throat
and there is no recognition or care in the figure
left behind on the other
side of the door to this room—
and what voice do I use when breath
meets tongue on way to air
and is swallowed by a mouth with
lips of my own that are not really my own—
or the eyes even—my eyes follow eyes—
and I can see myself looking down on
my body and see how hard I bite my lip
when I am opened and entered?

II.

Lately I feel my body growing these strange shapes
inside made of scents and entrances.
Like another life, really, and there is a fullness,
a weight that can't be pulled out by my own fingers
or trained to rise up and out by my own voice—
I can't reach inside myself that far, or speak that loud, so
the skin, or voice, I began with months ago, refuses to
  reverse itself
and coil back into what has been shed in a past lifetime.

This is what body becomes:

When light is bound to the other side
of the house and falls steadily,
and shadows are no longer shadows
but space taken up between doors

and the quiet hollow of sleep,
I wait with arched back and hip
for this body of mine
to return to the form
of muscle and bone and thigh and teeth—
the feel of my lips on the small hairs that run up your spine—
It is then I fit into this body firmly
and I can hear the measure of its voice. How it sounds.

Laurie MacDiarmid

# For Eliza Bee

*who comes home from school*
*and falls down, crying*

Yesterday you exploded over dinner,
yanking my arm, screaming *down, down*,

and when I asked where you wanted to go
you said, *home, home*, waving a little hand

at the front door—
so another tiny room unlocked, *snick*,

in my chest, and a crucial piece of me
fell out.

Every day this happens.
Every day you let me know how I've betrayed you,

reminding me that we are two, not one,
burning—often—like old and new stars

flung far from each other's orbits.
You see, darling,

you fall down only to fly up,
and blow apart so that you can be filled again,

waking, with the recreated world.
But it seems that I get up only to fall down,

that I try to fill myself with you, every day,
but you open the doors and run through them,

screaming,
mad with joy.

Kathleen Wilker

# Telling Tales

for Wendy

You are learning to shape your memories.
Telling me about Snowy, small and white
like his name, you begin and stop.
Begin and stop
and begin again.
This circling back is Snowy's pattern,
his turning round and round before sleep.

You start with the setting:
"It was raining." Then begin again,
this time including the title:
"Snowy and The Thunderstorm."
Filling our time with stories
your words soften my duties.

Turning you to comfortable,
or as close to that as we can reach,
you ask if I've heard about the time you had your operation.
Not this one, the one before it.
I adjust the pillows beneath your knees,
at the small of your back
and your voice takes on my grandmother's purr
when her stories have an audience:

"Once upon a time my back was sore . . ."
This is a story you're too young to know
but you'll tell all your life.
Tonight it has kept you
from sleeping in tents with your friends.
At school it keeps you from other things.
Two hours of physio must fit somewhere.

"Snowy to the Rescue," you've called this one
because he heard you crying one afternoon
and barked until your mother came.

Jennifer Moses

# Sex Talk With Mom

Annie comes back from visiting her sister in San Francisco and tells me that she's in love. Like I'm surprised: Annie's been in love practically nonstop since I met her freshman year, the year she came back from Europe—where her father was a big spy for the CIA—wearing black jeans and T-shirts written in Swedish and Norwegian and all these scarves around her neck.

No, I *mean* it this time, she says. This is *it*. She takes a strand of her curly brown hair and begins to twist it, picks up her diary—Annie keeps a diary only she doesn't call it that, she calls it a *journal*—and lets her eyes fall out of focus. And then she tells me the whole story. Like, first off: The guy is her sister's husband. His name is Matt and even though he's been married to Annie's older sister for three years he loves Annie more. He and Annie's sister live in this totally rocking third-floor apartment overlooking a flower shop in some utterly cool neighborhood with lots of Chinese noodle shops and places where you can buy organic coffee, and every day, when Annie's sister went off to work, he and Annie would lie on the living room floor and make love for hours. For *hours*. The reason he was home with Annie while Annie's sister was off at work is that he is a teacher in the inner city schools in Oakland where he teaches all these Puerto Rican and black kids, only now it was summer so he just kind of hung around and did yoga and drank cappuccino and read Kierkegaard and *Native Son* which he's going to be teaching again this fall even though it's kind of out of date. He has beautiful pale pink skin and enormous green eyes and this kind of languorous male graceful beauty and he's thirty and speaks fluent Spanish.

When she's done I say, He's your sister's *husband*?

I *knew* you'd say that, she says. Then she gets up from her bed and goes over to the window to gaze out on the big brick houses that all look exactly like hers with their thick green lawns and two-car garages that were built in 1955 for about ten thousand dollars apiece and now cost close to half a mil because of

where they are: in a good school district and just a minute from the Beltway.

I hate it here, she says.

The thing is: everyone loves Annie and that includes my mother, who says things like, *That one is going places* and, *She reminds me of me when I was your age*, by which I think she means that she never exactly *planned* on being a suburban wife and mother and real-estate agent married to a lawyer who specializes in trusts and estates. This category also includes every teacher we've ever had in the college-accelerated classes we've been in together since World Civ freshman year—particularly Mrs. Kellogg, who nearly wet her pants last year when, while we were studying the Civil Rights Movement, Annie did an interpretive dance to that famous recording of "I Had a Dream" for her spring special project. The truth is, the rest of us were pretty stunned also. Because there was Annie, all alone on the stage in a black leotard and this long swishy black skirt, backlit by a single white light and moving as if she'd been up on a stage all her life. It wasn't so much that she's a particularly good *dancer*, either: How could she be, given that she hadn't taken dance since freshman year when she was briefly but passionately convinced that she'd grow up to be the next Judith Jamison, only white? It was more that she seemed possessed by some force outside herself, as if alien beings came down to earth and occupied her body every time she heard the voice of Martin Luther King saying: *one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. . ..* When it was over we just sat there, on those hard slippy seats in the auditorium, saying nothing. Then there was clapping and then more clapping and finally Mrs. Kellogg got up and gave Annie a hug and wiped her eyes and said, Beautiful, Annie, just beautiful.

I sort of couldn't believe it when she chose me to be her friend even though I knew that she chose me in part because, at least at the beginning, when she was new and went around pissing everyone off talking about how great things were over in Europe and how everything here sucked, the truly cool kids wouldn't have anything to do with her. But I represented a kind of harmless compromise between the truly cool with their own personal SUVs and the great unwashed who live in the farthest-out

subdivisions and wear clothes that their mothers buy for them in the Sears juniors department. Just by being around her I soaked up all this glamour. Plus I live in the subdivision right next to hers, meaning that, before Annie turned sixteen and her father who seems to think that Annie is the Queen of the Universe gave her her own Volkswagen Cabriolet, neither one of us ever had to bug our moms for a ride to the other one's house. But even after she lost the head scarves and the clogs she stuck with me—even *after* Ellen Gorganis who is probably the prettiest girl at Wagner started inviting her to her pool parties and Annie started dating black guys and hanging out with homegirls like Aisha Perkins, even though Aisha's no more hood than I am, probably less, given that her father is the A-number-one cosmetic surgeon in northern Virginia and everyone wants their breasts done by him. But the point is: Annie could have dumped me, but she never did. Just the opposite. Every now and then she tells me that she loves me. She puts her white white arms around my neck and says it, right out loud. *I love you, Patty*, just like that. Then I have to say it back.

When I get home from Annie's house, my brother is circling the block on his new in-line skates and doesn't even see me, and inside Mom is in the kitchen cleaning out the refrigerator and she doesn't see me either. She's got all her equipment out: the Formula 409 and the red plastic bucket and a couple of sponges and her biggest mixing bowl, for squeezing the dirty Formula 409 water into. My mother is very clean. But even with her head in the refrigerator, I can hear it: this soft *mew mew mew*. My mother cries a lot. She cries when she listens to her old Joni Mitchell albums and she cries when she reads novels and sometimes she starts crying for no reason at all, and when we ask her what's wrong she looks at us and says, *I just feel so full.* The point is, I'm definitely not alarmed. Because it's not like my dad is off having an affair with his secretary, whose name is Sandra and who has figurines of elves on her desk. Plus she's a fundamentalist Christian who, whenever I call to speak to my dad, says, Have a blessed day, Patty Elizabeth. Although sometimes I think that maybe it would liven things up a little, take everyone's mind off things, if he did have an affair. Because then I could be like everyone else and go to family therapy or even have my own therapist, like Annie has: someone named Naomi or Lena, who

would ask me to look at the line drawings on her office walls and tell her what they remind me of. Not that that's what Annie's therapist does with Annie. Annie's therapist just sits and asks questions like: *Do you really believe that*? Annie hates her. She says that she's overweight and has a bad dye job, and that if *she*, Annie, had a nose like her therapist's she'd get it fixed yesterday.

But it's not like my mother is crazy. It's more that she sometimes gets sad. She gets sad and then she starts thinking about how once upon a time she was going to be a dancer and live in New York, but instead she got swept up in the times and ended up living in this commune in New Orleans, and while she was there she met this boy but he started doing heroin and in the end she had to get her head straight, which was when she came back home to Chevy Chase and enrolled at G.W. like her parents had wanted her to in the first place. I used to try to imagine my mother living in a group house in New Orleans, wearing those long flowy cotton skirts and eating bean sprout sandwiches and stuff. I used to try to imagine her holding hands with a boy with long hair and track marks up his arms. But now I can't. My mind just folds up.

When mother was a little girl she fell in love with Rudolf Nureyev, whom her mother had taken her to see in New York. After that, the only thing she wanted to do was dance. By the time she was in junior high she was taking the bus down Connecticut Avenue every day after school to study dance at this incredibly decrepit studio over an art gallery in Georgetown that's still in business, even though the dance studio's gone and now it's a Vietnamese restaurant. But then she did the commune thing, met that boy in New Orleans, turned into a full-fledged hippie, and forgot all about her former dreams of leaping through space on a hushed stage. Everything became that boy I don't know anything about except that his eyes were the blue-green color of sea glass. What can I say? I guess she fucked up. By the time I was maybe seven she'd sit at the kitchen table with me, smoking Carlton lights, and tell me that, if she were to do it all over again, she would have done it differently, but now she was too old and too fat to squeeze into a leotard. *Don't be like me*, she'd say.

But the thing is she *did* start dancing again. It was right after my brother was born. I hated those nights because it meant

that our baby-sitter—who usually left around five when Mom came home from selling real estate—was the one who gave us our dinner and our bath and put us to bed and made us say these really dopey prayers to the Baby Jesus who we don't even believe in because Dad's Jewish. Plus, on Mom's dance nights, it was always the same thing: fish sticks with baby carrots. By the time Mom came home I was supposed to be asleep, but I never was. I'd hear her come in and put music on in the living room. Once, I snuck down the stairs and saw her dancing all by herself in the living room, and she picked me up and twirled me in her arms and her skin was hot and flushed and she smelled like dust and sweat and I knew that I was the only person in the whole world who knew how magnificent she was.

Now I stand in the kitchen doorway. But she's still too busy crying and cleaning to see me. Finally I say: Hi Mom, I'm home.

She looks up, blinking. Then, wiping her nose against her sleeve, she says: And have I told you how much I hate, and I mean *hate*, these horrible yuppies with their instant computer fortunes and their absolutely wretched taste? A lovely old Colonial house isn't good enough for them, oh no. They all want Georgian mansions with keeping rooms, for Christ's sake. Who the hell ever heard of a *keeping room*?

Has it ever occurred to you, quite simply, that maybe your mother is going through the big M? Annie says.

Again we're in her room, which is on the ground floor of her split-level, half-a-million-dollar house and decorated with all this Eurostuff, partly from when her father was the head spook of Sweden keeping his eye on all those new Russian countries with unpronounceable names and partly from the stuff her mother buys at Neiman Marcus and then gets tired of. She's lying on her back, and from where I'm sitting, on the floor, she looks like one of those old-fashioned Hollywood starlets: tiny nose, rosebud mouth, big tits. On the stand next to her bed is her journal—one of those cloth-covered jobs filled with expensive paper—and next to that is a copy of *Native Son* that I can tell she hasn't read even though it's lying open on page 153.

The big *what*? I say.

She rolls her eyes, then smiles, then says: My own little Patty. Menopause. Maybe your mom's going through menopause. Maybe that's why she cries so much.

And immediately I get this kind of squishy sweaty feeling

like I always do when I discuss my family with Annie, even though she herself is always telling me how much she hates her mother who she says is completely obsessed with making sure she gets into Wellesley, particularly now that Annie's grades aren't very good and Annie's therapist thinks that Annie's not performing up to her potential. She also hates her dad who now does something even spookier for the CIA than he did before, that I think involves germ warfare. Plus there's Annie's older sister who works for a computer firm in San Francisco. Once Annie loved her best of all, but now all she feels for her is this kind of apathetic pity because her sister used to be original and daring but now she's such a drip. Only even Annie says that of course it's far more complicated than that, given that she, Annie, is in love with her sister's husband, and he, Matt, is in love back, and they consummated their love not once but like a dozen times. And it was perfect. *Perfect.* It was what making love is *supposed to be.*

It's not like Mom was *bawling* or anything, I say.

That's what you always say, Annie says. All I'm saying is that maybe there's a *reason* for why your mother cries so much. It's nothing to be ashamed of, you know. But it must be kind of icky, the way your pussy dries up.

What? I say, which is just like me. Just for once I'd like to be a little sharper than *what?* Just once I'd like to be able to say something like: *What would you know about dry pussies?*

Instead I say: And anyway, I know she's not going through menopause. For crying out loud, she has a giant box of Tampax under her sink.

I wonder if my parents still do it, Annie says. Do you think yours do?

The first summer after Annie's family returned to the States, she and I got jobs together at the Wagner Community Center. We were day-camp counselors. Actually, we were *assistant* day-camp counselors. We were too young to be the real counselors, who were all already in college. We were assigned to the youngest group, which meant that we spent every morning helping kids go potty, every lunch time mopping up spilled Juicy Juice, and every afternoon sitting on little chairs cutting out stars and dinosaurs and flower shapes from construction paper. Annie was bored, mainly, and I was too, but I didn't mind. They were

just so tiny and sweet, with their dimpled bottoms and soft soft skin, the way they took your hand like you were their own mother and the way they sat in your lap and gazed at your face, like you actually knew what you were doing. We were paid maybe 100 bucks for the whole six weeks.

Then last summer my family took a big trip out west to see the Grand Canyon and Mesa Verde and, on the return trip, Fort Apache and Monument National Park and the Badlands. We drove in my mother's Ford Taurus station wagon, stopping at Hotel 6s at night because, as my mother said, she was damned if she was going to rough it at her age and sleep in a damn sleeping bag under the damn stars. She and Dad planned out the whole trip ahead of time, sitting at the kitchen table mapping out each day's progress, along with suggested restaurants and what tapes we would listen to in the car. Every night at dinner they'd tell me and my brother about it. It was this very big deal. We were gone more than a month, and when we got back my mother's friend from work, Susie Blakeslee, who has four-year-old twins, wanted me to baby-sit for her because her regular baby-sitter was home in Barbados visiting her family. So at least I had something to do. And anyway, that was the summer that Annie went to Belize to help build a schoolhouse. When she got back she didn't want to talk about anything but these poor Belize people who lived in this primitive village with no running water, which meant that the women all had to go to the well and the men all sat around smoking cigarettes and no one had shoes and the whole thing was like something out of Gabriel Garcia Marquez only it was worse because it was *real*, and she'd been writing about it in her journal nonstop ever since. It's all she could think of: because here we were in the United Status of America in luxury so extreme it was sickening, and why couldn't people see that? She didn't want to hear about the Grand Canyon: all those layers of red and pink. And she certainly didn't want to hear about how, one night at the Hotel 6 in Sioux Falls, my mother locked herself in the bathroom and cried so hard that she finally had to come out because she'd run out of both Kleenex and toilet paper, and how my father and my brother and myself didn't know what to say to her or how to make her stop crying, and how none of us wanted to leave her so we finally ordered really bad Chinese and my father went out to get it, leaving me and my brother with strict instructions to

stay with Mom and not even *think* about going outside to the pool or downstairs for a Coke, and when he came back Mom was a little calmer and we all sat down on the floor and ate dinner while we watched "The Practice" on TV.

But *this* summer we did something really stupid, Annie and me. We decided not to even try to get regular jobs but instead to spend the summer working on self-improvement: tennis and books, mainly. Also, we were going to drive into Washington at least once a week to go to museums. Only of course that's not what happened. What happened was that I ended up filling in for the Blakeslees' baby-sitter again, and about two days later Annie got bored and bugged her parents until they let her go to San Francisco to visit her sister, this sister who I've only seen in photographs but who looks just like Annie only a little older and maybe not quite as pretty. And she stayed almost three weeks, and now it's July, and the whole time she sent me exactly one postcard. It said: *Lost my heart in San Francisco.*

This time it's Annie who's crying. Her eyes are all red and there's a river of snot flowing out of her nose and she says: You have to help me.

Help you do what?

I have to get out of here.

And then she's got her arms around my neck, like she always does, and she's whispering in my ear in this kind of raspy, gasping, tearing whisper that I'm her only real friend in the whole world, the only one who knows her in and out and loves her for who she is and not for some surface version of herself—*not for her persona*—and if she didn't have me she'd have to slit her wrists. Her breath on my face is humid and smells like Ritz crackers and her boobs are pressing up against mine and for a moment I know what it must have felt like to be Matt, to be thirty-year-old Matt with his arms and his calves. That old awful queasy feeling is coming back now sort of like I want to vomit and sort of like I can feel every ounce of food I've eaten for the past two days, the Just Right I had for breakfast and the strawberry-banana Dannon yogurt I ate right before bed last night, and also it feels like that time last spring when Annie took me with her to a party at Ellen Gorganis' house even though I wasn't invited and I drank two beers and ended up in the back yard with Andy Korren and he kept butting his head into my

chest like I was a punching bag, and later that night Annie told me that Ellen Gorganis had been upstairs the whole time doing it with Reggie Harolls, only it was okay because Ellen was having her period; and the other thing I remember even though it doesn't make sense is this one time, when I was very very little, that Mom let me take a bath with her, and I sat between her legs and played with the three toy boats that she kept for us by the side of the tub. She must have been pretty then. She must have been thin, with slim hips. Not like now: Now she has to wear those horrible underwire bras and her stomach flab falls over the elastic waist lines of her underpants.

It's so awful I think I'm going to die, Annie says.

What? I finally say.

I think my mother read my journal.

Are you serious?

*Everything's* in there. Everything!

Everything?

I hate that fucking bitch.

Annie, sobbing, wets my neck and the back of my shirt.

Annie's mother is a tall woman with a squarish head and one of those real short haircuts that makes her head look even squarer. She wears beads, and—like Annie used to before she got un-Europeanized—silk scarves. Whenever I see her she looks at me as if she's forgotten my name, and then says: *Oh, Patty, it's you, is it?* Sometimes she'll add: *How is your mother, dear?* My mother, who's met her a dozen times at least, thinks she's condescending and says she probably comes from money—because, after all, it's not like Annie's father could possibly be making beaucoup bucks at the CIA—plus *somebody's* keeping her in overpriced bed linens and chintz curtains. I've always liked Annie's mother, though. She reminds me of a deer, and she's always offering me pieces of goat cheese. But Annie's no longer talking to her. She says that even her therapist says that she, Annie, has a right to privacy, and that if her mother can't respect that there's a reason why she, Annie, has boundary issues.

But the thing is, it's not as if Annie's absolutely positively and beyond a shadow of a doubt sure that her mother's read her stupid diary to begin with. She just *thinks* she has. Because one day, after Annie got back from Ellen Gorganis' house, her diary wasn't in the place where she had left it. She always leaves it

tucked *inside* the Master P T-shirt that her boyfriend from last year who was black and a senior which was a really big deal gave her; only when she got back, it was *under* it. Plus, her mother is suddenly on this all-girls school kick. Apparently she thinks that the environment at Wagner is too permissive and that if Annie were enrolled in a more traditional school where she wouldn't be distracted by boys, her grades would improve and she'd have a much better chance of getting in Wellesley. Every day Annie's mother comes back with a new brochure showing blonde girls wearing checked uniforms and playing field hockey, which she then leaves out on the counter for Annie's father to look at when he gets back from figuring out how to assassinate Saddam Hussein. So now Annie wants me to help her run away. Well, not exactly run away. She wants me to give her enough money to buy a bus ticket to San Francisco, which, combined with her own money, would give her enough money to hang out for a while, given that most likely she won't be able to move in with Matt right away. Swiping her mother's credit cards isn't an option.

I fucking hate that bitch, Annie says for about the tenth time when she calls me at the Blakeslees' house the next day. You really really have to help me, Patty. I have to get out of here and you're the only real friend I've got. The only one I can trust. And I figured that once I got a job, I'd be able to pay you back in a couple of months at most.

But Annie, I say, don't you think that, if your mother really *did* read your diary, wouldn't she know, you know, all about San Francisco?

Well, *duh*, Annie says. That's why she wants to send me to the nunnery. To punish me.

And if she knows all about it, I say, then wouldn't she be able to figure out that the first place you'd go is right back there? I mean, your mother isn't stupid.

She may not be stupid, but she's a dried-up old hag. Sex? She's never even heard of it. I swear she only did it so she could have kids. And now that I'm getting older, she doesn't want me to have a life. Even my therapist says so. Jesus, Patty—that journal is like my secret soul. It has everything in it. And now she's gone and read it, the frigid cow.

Annie, I say—but then I can't talk anymore because Julie Blakeslee, wearing a Barbie T-shirt, is standing in the doorway

screaming. I hang up, and a minute later Julie Blakeslee is on my lap, her little snot-covered face buried in my shoulder.

My own mother started talking to me about sex when I was still pretty little, seven or eight. She sat me down and she told me how babies are made and then she told me never ever to let anyone touch my privates except a doctor or herself. And then, when I got older, she started giving me books with cartoon-style pictures of boys with giant pimples exploding on their cheeks and erections the size of baseball bats sticking through their jeans, and girls with conical-shaped breasts and sprouts of underarm hair. That book, more than anything else, really embarrassed me about sex, and for a while I went around seeing the whole world as a cartoon and everyone in it as an anatomically distorted line drawing. Then one night right before I started high school, Mom came into my room to say that she wanted me to know that it was perfectly normal and okay to masturbate, and that all kids did it, and that most grownups did it too. After that, I could barely go to school without thinking about what was going on under my teachers' clothing. It was hard to concentrate. Then Annie came along and just kind of swept all of that out of my head. I can't even imagine her at an all-girls school though, let alone wearing a uniform. White blouse, checked skirt, brown lace-up shoes: *Hello?*

Oh Patty, it's you, is it? Annie's mother says the next time I'm over. Then she says: Annie's therapy appointment is running late. She smiles, and I can see how her two front teeth are yellower than the back ones.

But she'll be back in a few minutes, I'm sure. Why don't you sit down? Would you like some cheese?

So I sit there at the kitchen table, eating goat cheese on these crunchy Norwegian crackers, while Annie's mother fiddles with the silk scarf that's tied loosely around her neck. Then she launches into a story about some boy she had a crush on in high school back in the 60s who grew up to be an actor and ended up killing himself by driving off a cliff in Oregon, the point of which isn't entirely clear until, after I've eaten my third or fourth goat-cheese cracker, she leans in and says: Of course, I was so boy crazy at that age it shouldn't surprise me that Annie is, too.

Uh huh, is what I think I say.

That's why I've always been so grateful, so pleased, that she chose you as her friend. You have a good head on your shoulders, Patty.

Again though I don't quite know what to say, particularly since Annie's mother is staring straight into my eyeballs like my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Waller, used to do when she wanted me to do something I didn't want to do. *You will sit still this very minute young lady do you understand me?* Annie's mother's eyes are blue-green, pink around the edges, and very very wide, and I wish she'd quit making me have this staring contest with her. Finally she gets up and opens the refrigerator.

Drat, she says, I thought I had some lemonade.

It's okay. I'm not thirsty.

And then, standing in front of the open refrigerator, one hand on the door, she just starts *talking*. It's like I'm not there at all, and I wonder for a minute whether it would be okay to get up and go to the bathroom. Annie's mother just keeps on talking. It's kind of fascinating in a bizarre way. I imagine, as she goes on, that she does this all the time, first arguing one position and then the other, and so on and so forth like a bag lady on a bad day until at last the phone rings or Annie comes home and she's jolted back into something resembling reality.

I truly and really think, Annie's mother is saying as she gazes into the refrigerator, that she'd be better off at Madeira or Holton Arms. Her grades were just terrible last year which isn't exactly a secret, but of course she's so bright and so creative that it's just a shame to see all that potential wasted, not to mention that even though she thinks it's trite, she has her whole future ahead of her. On the other hand, if she doesn't want to switch schools there isn't much I can do to convince her, because after all you can lead a horse to water but you can't make her drink. And it's not that Wagner is a *bad* school, just the reverse in fact, but it's just so big a girl like Annie can easily become lost, fall in with the wrong kids, or worse. But her sister Lisa, who knows her better than I do, thinks it has nothing to do with Wagner, but she *does* think there may be a boy in the picture. But how should I know? She's so secretive, she doesn't tell me a thing. Unless maybe something happened in San Francisco, which is what Lisa thinks. But what could have happened there? She spent practically the whole time with Matt, going to bookstores. And if that's the case then switching schools isn't going to

make a damn bit of difference, although as far as I can tell at least at the private schools there's more discipline, which may be the only thing she needs right now. But I could be totally wrong, too. I could be making a mountain out of a molehill. Maybe it's perfectly normal for her to be so moody now that she's in a stage. After all, it isn't easy being seventeen, and never was. But ever since last year, when she was dating that black boy, she's simply been impossible. Not that I blame *him*. He seemed like a very nice boy.

And the whole time I'm just sitting there playing with the crumbs on my napkin, thinking: *Fuck Almighty.*

Finally, though, Annie's mother closes the refrigerator and turns back around.

Patty? she says.

I look at her.

I'm going to ask you something straight out. And I want you to know that you don't have to answer. But if the answer is yes, you'll be doing your friend a favor by speaking up.

*Shit, fuck,* etc., is going through my mind, but what I say is: What?

Is Annie doing drugs?

Drugs? I say.

Has she asked you for money?

Money?

Because apparently she's asked Ellen for money. Ellen's mother called. She's very upset. What does Annie need money for?

I don't know, I tell her, and Annie's mother, sighing, puts her hand on my shoulder. It's just that a mother worries, she says.

In Annie's room I head straight for Annie's dresser, where I find Annie's diary folded up inside her Master P T-shirt just like she said. I'm not even thinking that Annie's mother could clomp down the stairs and catch me red-handed, let alone that I'm invading Annie's privacy, messing with her boundaries. All I'm thinking is: why me? Plus—let's be serious, here—no one is about to barge in. Other than the air conditioning humming through the vents the house is silent, and as far as I know, Annie could be cruising Tyson's Corner checking out the latest in Gapwear with one of her new black girlfriends and talking about Matt's thing. Or she could be hanging out on the corner of

CoolGuy and Wisconsin, trying to score. Or maybe she really *is* at her therapist's going blah blah blah blah. Who knows? All I know is that the closest I've ever come to doing things with a boy is that time in Ellen Gorganis' back yard when Andy Korren kept pushing the top of his head into my chest, like a bull; and before that there was Sherman Hoopes, in the fourth grade, who wanted to practice French kissing on me and nearly made me barf. It's not like I'm ugly, either. In fact, I'm pretty, prettier than Annie. But Annie is *deeply* pretty, like it comes from some force inside her; plus she seems destined, if not for greatness than at least for *something*. Whereas I'm the kind of teen that other moms wish their daughters were like.

Big surprise, Annie's diary is one long romance novel, the kind with pictures of beautiful women with major cleavage on their covers. I flip through the pages. There's a lot of stuff about her dreams and her therapist, plus all this junk about being an artist, having the soul of an artist, the soul of a *sensitive* soul. But what I'm looking for is Matt, and finally I find him. Only of course he isn't called Matt; he isn't called anything at all. And there's no mention of her sister, or San Francisco, either. It's all Annie. *I'm so totally in love and swept away*, I read. And: *his hands on my thighs sent a shiver of bliss all through my body o god I never knew love was like this if only he was beside me his body pushing into mine I'm going to burst open I'm going to explode into the universe.* Upstairs I can hear the phone ring and for a second I wonder what Mrs. Kellogg would think of this shit, and I'm about to shut the stupid thing out of sheer embarrassment when I see my name.

*Poor little Patty*, is what I see. Then, even though I know I shouldn't, that it's a big mistake, that I'll live to regret it, I continue. *So literal and pokerfaced and asexual and dull, and how disappointed I am in her but perhaps it's best that I discover now that she and I are going in different directions—I myself am so full of dreams, so filled with yearning—but Patty? Who knows? She will, I am sure, end up a solid citizen, married with children, and with some sort of a job, too: an accountant, or perhaps even a nursery school teacher, the way she goes on about those horrible little drooling brats. . ..*

Fuck you, you fucking bitch, is what I think but the next minute, no, the next *moment*, I'm crying. Which is when I hear Annie's mother coming down the stairs. She pops her head in the

door and says: That was Annie on the phone. She's on her way home. She said to tell you she'll be here in a jiff.

Okay, I say.

But then Annie's mother sees me crying, and *then* she notices Annie's diary on the bed, and she just kind of stands there, in the doorway, not saying anything. Meanwhile, I've got that bad feeling in my guts, and I have to go to the bathroom. Only it's worse than that: It's like someone's injected a combination of Diet Coke and lead directly into my bloodstream. I'm bracing for a lecture, or worse, because of course Annie's mother can see with her own two eyes that I've invaded Annie's privacy and crossed her boundaries, that I've lost respect for her distinct personhood and trashed her right to a distinctive and unshackled inner life. But Annie's mom just keeps standing there, saying nothing. I'm beginning to think that either she's forgotten my name for real this time or she's having trouble deciding how to handle the delicate little situation she has on her hands, when she opens her mouth and says: What?

You don't have to worry, I say. She's not doing drugs.

And the next thing I know, Annie's mother has taken this giant lunge towards me—she actually *lunges*, in one large graceful movement—and I'm in her arms. She smells like goat cheese and perfume and powder, and her scarf is soft against my face. You're a good girl, Patty, she says over and over again. A good, good girl.

Priscilla Atkins

# What She Gets Away With

The pithy title, the rotten apple, the roller blade.
An archetype, a comma splice, an entire day
lounging in a café.
Morbidity, felicity—she gets away with
Bauhaus, Rococo, the Lennon Sisters Sing the Blues;
the amateur, the down-to-earth, the hoity well-to-do.
Last year she snuck off with Ursa Major,
Asia Minor, and the Precambrians.
I saw her scribbling marginalia in the Gutenberg
and no one said anything.
She claims to be sensible, romantic and
preternaturally Augustan.
A pebbled path, a twilit terrace,
marble stairs and stone lions.
But if you think you're getting close, take heed:
in one fell swoop this girl's sloughed off
Niagara Falls, Preservation Hall
and the Grand Canyon.
Uranium, the double helix,
all of Edison's inventions;
an aged Bordeaux, the waning moon,
a pinch of salt: your good intentions.

Geri Radacsi

# Arrival

The lilt and whir of a hummingbird, hopeful,
hovering for a fine drink from fireweed—that's how I picture
arrival.
                    And, by now I should know
all the ways of making an entrance: how to be flamboyant
as a diva or discreet as old lovers greeting
each other on time's shaky bridge; or facile
as a smuggler sneaking exotic seeds past customs.
I should be a specialist at soft-shoe and wide smiles,
not the bumbler at arrival I find
myself out to be, stranded here alone
at the immigration gate long after first-class
breezes out of sight, the agent stamping
my passport, reluctantly, eyes averted
and I, who always thought I understood
advent, the momentous flying colors, look around
the terminal lounge, but
no one carries a *Welcome* sign or lugs
the bags I myself stuffed for a walk in the woods,
where hummers flourish in arrival,
fly backwards or straight up and down on top of the world.
They are not grounded
like me emerging at journey's end through automatic
doors, boosted by an odd fanning like wings
into the light rain's embrace,
the sudden driver waiting, his taxi
mud-spattered, motor hungry, meter running.

Larry D.Thomas

# Dragonfly

Even as a nymph you were predaceous,
flourishing in the murkiness of ponds,
gorging yourself on mosquito larvae
till there was nothing you could do

but settle your fat abdomen in the silt.
Now you hover in the dank Gulf air
like an attack copter, working the complex engines
of your huge compound eyes, ferreting the sky

for yet another gnat or fly to crush
with your powerful jaws, your viselike legs
flawlessly adapted for grasping, each of your four
net-veined wings, a marvel of independence,

propelling your slender body this way and that
in a blur of blue and green, iridescent violence,
staving off, with but your stamina, the ravages
of twenty-five million savage years.

Colette Inez

# Songlines at Sweet Briar

"He's from Australia," a painter says with authority. "From outer space," a composer sweeps her hand toward the murky sky of Virginia in August. "Emu, Emu, come, come." Star, our symbolist poet, beckons to him, and he follows her. A dish of mashed vegetables and bananas is placed in the meadow, but Emu refuses to eat. The large, ostrichlike bird had arrived mysteriously on our path late in the evening looking ragtag and tired as if it had been walking for days. We hear the eerie bass drum of his buried voice as he approaches.

"He needs a boost of protein," someone calls out in the dark. "I think we should put some curry on him and bake him in a Tandoori oven," volunteers our novelist from Bombay. We have assembled a group eager to provide advice. Cat food is carried out in a dish, and to our surprise Emu gobbles it up. "I guess he likes fish," the Estonian poet shrugs. "He likes us," the art critic notes the next day. "See how he stays near to our studios. He's a people emu."

Periodically, we visit him in the field, where he paces back and forth, nervous as an escapee from a state correctional facility. Someone telephones the local sheriff, who says "uhuh" when hearing the report. The following afternoon, Emu is seen prancing toward Route 29, likely vanishing at the very moment we sit down to a meal of pork chops, hush puppies, peach cobbler, and coffee. Rain ripples through the meadows at night. We are caught in the emu spell of dream time, the songline of his spirit form.

One week later in the evening, a long-necked dog with spindly legs and a birdlike snout appears on the lawn of the artists' residence. His deep bark resonates across the pastures where Guernseys and Holsteins come to graze. We notice that when he's not preening the fur of his neck, he gazes intently at the sky. Someone in our group calls him The Astronomer. From the cook we learn he was a stray taken in last week by a couple who live near the railroad trestle back of Route 29. As we stand

and speak of who will arrive or leave in the next few days, the dog disappears and does not return.

"Where's that odd-looking mutt who gapes up at the stars?" the sculptor asks at the breakfast table. In a wormhole, a bubble in the void. Colorful speculations leap like rainbows, only to evaporate.

We go about scoring our choral work, revising novellas, sestinas, and pantoums, stretching canvases and chipping stones. When the new resident arrives the following week, we study her feather-cut hair, graceful throat, and wide-set eyes. Everyone takes in her extravagant body whose pinched-in waist flares into ample hips she chooses to emphasize with a dun-colored microskirt.

After our dinner of fish mousse, she stretches out, delicate legs draping over the edge of the couch. We are mesmerized by the swivel of her head, her sonorous voice describing frilled lizards she nursed after her mother was smashed by a meteorite. The drum of her heart grows louder as she sighs.

"Where are you from?" someone asks.

"Piscis Austrinus. Near Fomalhaut. You probably haven't heard of it." She stands and gazes out the window.

"It's in the southern sky." The New York writer who has brought his star charts joins the group.

"And what are you working on?"

"A book of miniature narratives dealing with quantum mechanics and the missing mass."

"Oh."

Lips parted, her look is wistful. Later she climbs the stairs to her room, her posture erect as a ballerina's.

The following day she is nowhere to be seen. We find out from the cook that she departed in the morning, her bed not slept in and nothing touched. "She raced out of here as quick as you can say the name of that bird." He chuckles and shuffles the cards for the weekly poker game.

Clouds disperse as we return to our studios, taking the shortcut across the lawn, past the director's house, and along the road where we first saw the great flightless bird. Peering up at the sky, some of us think we see a satellite pulsing in the south. One of the painters notices a three-sided figure of stars in the direction of Route 29. "It's the Emu Triangle," our West African writer concludes, sucking on his pipe.

That night, a large, long-legged fly hums and drones noisily at the windowpane. We fetch a water glass, slip a paper over it, and carry the trapped creature outside for release. When last seen, he is flying south along his songlines toward the constellation of the Southern Fish.

Chad Woody

# Inconsequences

I secretly renamed the neighbors' child.
I call him Horseapple
because he runs around on grass,
glad to wear dirt and imagine.

Entire civilizations rise and fall
under the old fridge, patient
as an ear that listens all winter long
for the sound of glaciers calving.

At a boardgame factory,
the janitor sweeps up lost pieces,
an unstoppable giant, brooming
houses, fighter jets, cootie appendages.

*Telluric* is a word I'd like to become.
First I'll have to become dirt, or at least dirty.
I will call to Horseapple for lessons,
even though he won't answer.

I know of a soil that coughs up blossoms
with pleasing regularity.

Lori Horvitz

# Mongrels of Salamanca

You know those times
when you drag yourself
through the streets like
an emaciated gypsy dog,
a dazed and hungry
bow-spined mongrel,
a mere carcass in motion.
When you feel like a slow-
moving target dodging
whatever comes towards
you: rocks, meteorites,
even food.

While studying
a foreign language
in a foreign city, I tossed
the dogs student grub,
but they backed away,
suspicious of charity,
reacting as if the food
were the usual stones.
Then, a lone mutt crept
toward the suspect object,
smelled it, gobbled it,
provoking the others
to hobble for a piece
of momentary salvation,
a reprieve from a paralyzing
hunger, a blinding hunger.

At times, in absolute
darkness, like the dogs,
I'm learning to spit out
stones before I swallow.

Deborah Fleming

# Harvesting Seeds from My Kentucky Wonders

Only a fair harvest after a cold spring
and a summer first too lush, then too dry.
The pods that grew away from me,
long and swollen, too big to be eaten,
I harvest for seed.

When the pod is tough I can snap the end,
squeeze the beans onto a plate to dry them,
perfect white kidneys.

I will compost the soil and plant them next spring
and they will grow green,
like the parent.

But these offspring of yours, not of one parent,
grow like you and unlike you,
tall and long-limbed,
eyes and mouth uncannily familiar
as they step into their sphere
and blossom

like cottonwoods rustling leaves,
gathering birdsong in their branches.

# Plateaus of Uncertainty: Symposia on Legacies and the Future of the Race

## Introduction

by Carmaletta Williams

Dr. Tidwell and I met when the Kansas Humanities Council had an exemplary NEH grant for a project named "Crossing Boundaries/Making Connections: African Americans and American Culture." Our job with this program was to be scholars-in-residence, taking African American culture to select high schools in Kansas. At Johnson County Community College, I proposed a scholar-in-residence program to do the same. I would bring African American culture to my students, colleagues, and community. I contacted Dr. Tidwell to ascertain his interest. We brainstormed possibilities for a three-day program that would provide the most information in a rather short time. I was committed to devising a program that would indeed display the beauty and the color and the talents of African Americans, but I needed to do more: I needed a program that would show the truth.

Dr. Tidwell and I, in our discussions on how to present this information, decided that the three parts of our program would be black Kansas writers, the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, and the future of the race. I added a fourth session: "Harlem Renaissance: Cultural Life" to share performance pieces of the era.

It became clear during our discussions that the thread connecting these symposia was the notion of uncertainty. Dr. Tidwell titled his symposium on black Kansas writers "Coming of Age in a Land of Uncertainty." The three writers he chose to discuss were: Gordon Parks, who came of age in Fort Scott and whose novel *The Learning Tree* provides the title of this symposium; Langston Hughes, who spent most of his pubescent years in Lawrence, a life he recreates in his novel *Not Without Laughter*; and Frank Marshall Davis, who was reared in Arkansas City and who recorded these events in his 1992 memoir *Livin' the Blues*. Uncertainty as a trope shared by all three texts captured

the problems of living in a state where, as Parks' narrator says, "Freedom loosed one hand while custom restrained the other. The law books stood for equal rights, but the law (a two-pistol-toting...cop called Kirky) never bothered to enforce such laws." Survival in this milieu that was, at times, arbitrary and capricious offered the writers very little promise of the lives they were each to achieve.

The following paper is a revised transcript of the symposium, which took place February 17–19, 1999. Part two of these symposia will appear in *Cottonwood* 57. Many colleagues, students, and people from the community commented afterward that they learned more about African American cultural history through these programs than through their formal education. For this I am grateful.

## Coming of Age in a Land of Uncertainty

John Edgar Tidwell

> Stony the road we trod, / Bitter the chastening rod,
> Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
> Yet with a steady beat, / Have not our weary feet
> Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
> We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
> We have come, treading our path through the blood of the
> slaughtered,
> Out from the gloomy past, / Till now we stand at last
> Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.
>
> —"Lift Every Voice and Sing"

> To Jack Winger, Cherokee Flats and the whole state [of
> Kansas] was a plateau of uncertainty.
>
> —*The Learning Tree*

No doubt James Weldon Johnson's retrospective account of the composition and subsequent popularity of his song "Lift Every Voice and Sing" foregrounds a voice self-consciously seeking both to locate itself within a socio-historical context and to probe that same context for an essential meaning of black racial

identity. In his autobiography *Along This Way* (1933), the well-known writer of the Negro National Anthem summarizes what he and his brother Rosamond felt: "The only comment we can make is that we wrote better than we knew." Who can disagree with this statement? Their poetic narrative of African American history, so magnificently distilled in three verses, traces an epic journey from slavery, through the illusory freedom of Reconstruction, through post-Reconstruction's decades of disappointment, to this song's creation in 1900. It is true, as critic Joe Skerrett writes, that the "poem's sentiments are entirely spiritual" and that it "posits communal hope for the future." Although during the Civil Rights era "Lift Every Voice" declined in popularity, perhaps because its sentiments were too conservative for the times, the song's sense of survival and its stubbornly optimistic faith that the future would bring fulfilled dreams nevertheless perfectly mirror the tenor and times that Langston Hughes, Gordon Parks, and Frank Marshall Davis reconstruct in their narratives about coming of age in Kansas.

Langston Hughes, who lived in Kansas from 1903 to 1915, relived these experiences via his first novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930). Fort Scott was the site of Gordon Parks' early years, which he fictionalized in his familiar novel *The Learning Tree* (1963). And in 1992, Frank Marshall Davis' posthumously published memoir *Livin' the Blues* appeared, detailing his life in Arkansas City. Although these three texts share the subject of growing up in Kansas, I do not wish to argue that their responses to this fact are the same. As I hope to show, their lives were deeply affected by a racial cloud of uncertainty. However, their responses to this climate were radically different—which further underscores the arbitrariness of this racial setting, as well as the heterogeneity, not homogeneity, among these writers.

James Weldon Johnson's homage to black persistence and black faith aptly captured the racial spirit of Africans in America at the turn of the century. Politically, of course, this spirit was itself buffeted about in conflicting, contradictory representations. For example, five years before Johnson wrote "Lift Every Voice," Booker T. Washington, anticipating the ruling that Plessy v. Ferguson would make *de jure* in 1896, found it expedient to embrace "separate but equal" as the official definition of interracial relations. By characterizing poor black farmers as unskilled and even misguided, he self-servingly justified the erec-

tion of Tuskegee Institute and therefore promoted the representation of himself as the national leader of black people. Three years after Johnson recreated in song the heart and imagination of the black race, W.E.B. DuBois would launch a civil but cogent attack against Washington in his poignant collection *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. Against Washington's accommodationist ideal and racially separatist imperative, DuBois brought passion and poetry to a potentially prosaic narrative of nineteenth-century black life—life that was poised for the dawning of a new century. When the gendered responses of their contemporary women activists, Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Church Terrell, are added to the political debate, what emerges is a diversity of voices seeking to uplift the race. One result of this complicated conversation—in which race, class and gender form talking points—is that we can safely conclude that the view of the world held by African Americans in this era was filled with uncertainty. Take the example of Kansas: the same Kansas known by Hughes, Parks, and Davis.

As a number of historians have remarked, the uncertainty experienced by black Kansans from 1877 to 1920 owes to the peculiar social winds shifting the racial climate in this era. Richard Kluger, writing about the Brown decision in his book *Simple Justice* (1975), discusses the "moral ambiguity" of Kansans in their treatment of its black citizens. In 1861, when Kansas was admitted to the Union, the first state legislature established separate-but-equal schools. In subsequent meetings, this law was modified: only first-class cities (over 7,000 people) were permitted to establish such schools. In 1867, the power was extended to second-class cities too (more than 1,000 people). In 1876, the recodified school laws mysteriously omitted all mention of racially segregated schools. When desegregation began, with mixed success, according to the Wyandotte County schools, this same legislature outlawed racial distinctions in "any state university, college, or other school of public instruction." In 1879, the state legislature granted first-class cities (now defined as 15,000 residents) the authority to resegregate elementary schools, leaving the high schools integrated.

Many of these policy changes followed the influx of the Exodusters, who, in 1879, began leaving the South for Kansas in the first great migration of blacks. One result of this mass movement was that many whites grew fearful that the numbers of

blacks moving to the state, instead of encouraging further white migration to Kansas, would cause migrant whites to seek a life in Nebraska or Minnesota. Also, whites, laboring under the misconception of specious racialist theory, thought blacks to be "immoral"; therefore, they deemed interracial interaction to be harmful to white children. This thinking contributed to the general post-Reconstruction horror show that culminated in what historian Rayford Logan called the "nadir" in African American life and history. It is hardly surprising, then, that Elizabeth Schultz concludes in her seminal essay "Dreams Deferred: The Personal Narratives of Four Black Kansans" that the politics of the Midwest were "enigmatic," "contradictory," "ambiguous," and "arbitrary."

*Not Without Laughter* not only develops a theme of uncertainty but it also combines personal, political, and patronage issues Langston Hughes seeks to reconcile through art. Parts of Hughes' life are fairly familiar. Born in Joplin in 1902, he lived from 1903 to 1915 mainly in Lawrence, but also in Topeka and Kansas City. In Lawrence, he was reared primarily by his grandmother, Mary Langston, and, following her death, by family friend "Auntie" Reed. His desire to write *Not Without Laughter*, as he said in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, was motivated by a need "to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those [he] had known in Kansas."

There are two issues at stake here. First, in a significant autobiographical revelation, Hughes' desire was tempered by reality when he adds, "But mine was not a typical Negro family." This moment of self-reflection reveals how striving for the imagined, ideal family required him to reject actual family experience. Unlike the fictional grandmother, Aunt Hagar, his own grandmother "never took in washing or worked in service or went much to church. She had lived in Oberlin and spoke perfect English, without a trace of dialect. She looked like an Indian. [His] mother was a newspaper woman and a stenographer. . . . [His] father lived in Mexico City. [His] granduncle has been a congressman." But despite this legacy of achievement and prominence, Hughes associated the years spent with his grandmother "not with happiness, but with poverty and insecurity" (Scott, 9). His widowed grandmother continually mortgaged their house in order to provide a place to live. The constant struggle to keep the "white mortgage man" from taking the house

became her reason for being. Behind this family description lies a second, perhaps more complex, issue Hughes had to resolve before writing the novel. In *The Life of Langston Hughes*, biographer Arnold Rampersad suggests that Hughes was eager to write a novel because Hughes sensed "a shift in the ground away from poetry, [and that] Hughes did not wish to be left behind." To find an appropriate subject, Hughes had to confront his own emotional predisposition toward loneliness. What this means is that he could not reproduce his childhood experiences and therefore tell the truth about himself. Instead, he had to reinvent his life by fictionalizing a typical black family—one that would embody ideals and values so sorely lacking in his own past. As a consequence of this process of constructing an appropriate family background, *Not Without Laughter* emerges as a rather conventional narrative—one with an almost fairy-tale feel to it.

Briefly summarized, the subject of this coming of age story is Sandy Rodgers, whose life we follow from about his eighth to his fifteenth birthday. The setting for this fictional Kansas town is Stanton, which seems very much like the Lawrence Hughes grew up in. In fact, it has been speculated that the very name Stanton was taken from the white mortgage man, who sought to evict Hughes and his grandmother from her house. The novel begins in 1912 and ends with World War I. Except when Sandy's father Jimboy is around, Sandy is the only male in the house of three females: his grandmother, Aunt Hager; his mother, Annjee; and his aunt, Harriet. Because Sandy had lived with them so long, he "learned to hold his tongue about the private doings of each of them." These women prove to be wonderful sources of instruction. But there were other sources as well. Among them are Jimboy, his guitar-playing, "traveling man" of a father; the artful orators of the black barbershop; the knowledgeable bellhops at the white hotel; and his fellow students, who graduate from the "colored fourth grade" to the "white fifth grade."

To his credit, Hughes makes some of his characters reflect the aesthetic values and sensibility that James Weldon Johnson no doubt had in mind when he wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing." The characters emerge as spokespersons for those blacks who dared to dream and to find hope in a more promising future even when their faith was sorely tested by the perniciousness of sinister racism. Sister Johnson, for example, exclaims, "White Folks is white folks, an' dey's mean." To support this

claim, she retells a narrative reminiscent of the recent movie *Rosewood*. In this story, black prosperity became the envy of less fortunate whites. To put the black people back in their place in the racial hierarchy, they burned the blacks' newly painted houses and their fields of bountiful crops and left them with nothing. To this portrait of whites, Jimboy relates how he, a master bricklayer, got fired from his job in Stanton because the white labor unions refused to work with nonunion employees. When Jimboy offers to join the union, he's denied the right to do so because the union members did not want to support racial integration. Even Sandy, by novel's end, would have a lot to contribute to this narrative. Among many other experiences, he had been refused entry into the city's new amusement park, taunted by a visiting white businessman who believed "all darkies can dance," and forced to sit in a "jim crow row" in his supposedly racially integrated classroom.

Despite the insults that formed the basis for Sandy's coming of age, Hughes clearly intends Aunt Hager to embody the values of family, morality, and perhaps political virtue for the text. Through Aunt Hager, Hughes tempers his critique of Kansas as a land of uncertainty. In a story filled with pathos, Aunt Hager counters the stories of discrimination and hate with her own narrative of love, compassion, and forgiveness. Herself a survivor of the holocaust called slavery and its aftermath, Aunt Hager explains to her grandson: "White folks is white folks, an' colored folks is colored, an' neither one of 'em is bad as 't'other make out. . . . When you starts hatin' people, you gets uglier than they is—an' I ain't never had no time for ugliness, 'cause that's where de devil comes in—in ugliness."

In effect, this portrait of Aunt Hager, with her enormous capacity for love, defines an essentialist notion of black amelioration and forgiveness. Not only does Hughes make Aunt Hager unlike his own grandmother but also reinvents his own grandmother as someone who is typically Negro. This characterization is not inherently a bad thing, except that it leads to a glorification of certain qualities that ultimately affect other features of the text. For example, Sandy emerges as an idealized figure for whom securing an education and replicating Booker T. Washington's success become his reason for being. Or the unsatisfying ending, in which Aunt Harriet, reemerging in the text as a successful blues queen, arrives in the nick of time to make

Aunt Hager's dream for Sandy financially possible. This narrative intervention, while well intentioned, nevertheless is less effective because it is little more than the conventional writing strategy of *deus ex machina*—"intervention of the gods." The novel, therefore, locates itself within the context of a very familiar fairy-tale motif.

For Gordon Parks, life in Fort Scott, Kansas, from 1912 to 1928 was no "crystal stair" either. The youngest of fifteen children, Parks learned the importance of family and family values as implacable poverty constantly dogged them. With his mother's death when Parks was sixteen years old, the fulcrum, the balance point, for the family died. Ushered off to live with a sister in St. Paul, Minnesota, he found himself nearly estranged in the world when a fight with his brother-in-law forced him out of the house and into a life on the streets. A series of odd jobs eventually led to steady work as a dining car waiter on a train, where he discovered the joys of photography. From there, his life became what one commentator described as a nonstop effort to succeed in the white man's world.

*The Learning Tree*, the first of his four autobiographical narratives, appeared in 1963, when Parks was 51 years old. Its appearance coincided with the deaths of both Dr. W.E.B. DuBois and John F. Kennedy and with Dr. Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Two years later, the rally cry of "Black Power" would signal a generational rift between the older, integrationist-minded Civil Rights advocates and the younger, racially separatist Black Nationalist insurgents. These events altered the lives of people and forced them to reassess the way they viewed the world.

Parks' writing emerged uninfluenced by contemporary events. *The Learning Tree* was published shortly before Parks had to confront the growing youth dissidence and perhaps undergo, as Topeka-born poet Gwendolyn Brooks did, a change of aesthetic belief. Given this context, it is possible to construe the guiding principles of Parks' art and life as seemingly apolitical. In commenting about his childhood, he said: "I have a right to be bitter, but I could not let bitterness destroy me. . . .you fight back, but do it in a way to help yourself and not destroy yourself." What this decision is is captured in the title of his second book—*A Choice of Weapons* (1966).

The question of weapons choice summarizes the problem Newt Winger, the novel's main character, struggles with in *The Learning Tree*. Newt's father, Jack, defines the social landscape of Cherokee Flats when Jack stands poised on the church steeple, surveying the damage done by a killer tornado. The narrator tells us Jack's thoughts: "Cherokee Flats and the whole state was a plateau of uncertainty." As if to confirm Jack's incisive observation, the reader follows Newt through a series of confrontations with social, economic, and natural forces as he gains experience, wisdom, and maturity.

Clearly, Newt would emerge, in a sense, victorious because his mother Sarah provided such a solid foundation. Nearly every character acknowledged what Newt concluded: that it would be hard to imagine their life without her. In a defining textual moment, Sarah provided him and the reader her most important piece of mother-to-son advice: "Cherokee Flats is sorta like a fruit tree. Some of the people are good and some of them are bad—like the fruit on a tree. . . . No matter is you go or stay, think of Cherokee Flats like that till the day you die—let it be your learning tree."

Of course, there are many negative examples from whom Newt receives instruction. His brother-in-law Clint, for example, vacillates between pathos and terror when alcohol permits him to remember how marriage and fatherhood have supposedly circumscribed his life and how these "limitations" prevented him traveling outside of Kansas. A hatred of Cherokee Flats developed in Clint, a self-hatred, which, in turn, gave rise to abusive behavior. Sarah was the only one who seemed to understand the depth and source of his pain. And, of course, there is Kirky, who, because of his status as town policeman, rhetorically functions as synecdoche for Kansas law. The narrator, focusing on Jack's thoughts, says:

> Like all other Kansas towns, Cherokee Flats walled in the social complexities of a borderline state. Here, for the black man, freedom loosed one hand while custom restrained the other. The law books stood for equal rights, but the law (a two-pistol-toting, tobacco-chewing . . . cop called Kirky) never bothered to enforce such laws in books—"mainly 'cause I can't read," he often bragged.

In this plateau of uncertainty—where Clint's self-hatred potentially leads to self-destruction and family destruction and where the law encourages acquiescence or death—one other voice emerges—a voice of moderation. Newt's Uncle Rob, blinded in an explosion years ago, is nearly philosophical in his vision for humanity. On one of their forays into the white section of town to sell brooms, Uncle Rob says to Newt:

> I think sometimes if all the people in the world were made up of colors. . . instead of just some black and some white, it would be a happier world. A wonderful world all mixed up with wonderful colored people, nobody bein' the same as anybody else.

Even when Newt finds himself exchanging racial slurs with a white woman and her son, Uncle Rob maintains the humanistic high road, the way of right and, therefore, might. He tells Newt: "Take the rest of your anger out on the piano." Rob's advice to Newt thinly disguises Parks' own thinking about the best response to make to the climate of social and racial uncertainty. In the choice of weapons, Uncle Rob and, therefore, Parks chose art.

For Frank Marshall Davis (1905–1987), the choices afforded Newt were not so readily offered. In fact, Davis rejected the annual Emancipation Day celebrations, the black church revivals, and other institutional forms of communal education as being too regressive because they reaffirmed, not challenged, the social status quo. Of these three coming-of-age narratives, Davis' memoir is the angriest response to Kansas' uncertainty. Part of the reason for this is that both Hughes and Parks chose to reinvent their lives via fiction. Davis chose to express himself in a memoir, which, by definition, points to the past as history and fact. Davis was therefore concerned with recalling names, dates, places—all those things that relate, as critic James Cox says, "to the external world of the author in history." *Livin' the Blues* shows a man remembering the events of his life, not, as found in autobiography, trying to discover the significance of those past events. While Hughes and Parks also recounted earlier events, they chose not to render them with the same anger that Davis did. However, anger, I will argue, serves a rhetorical purpose in Davis' narrative.

The Ark City into which Davis was born in 1905 is de-

scribed in *Livin' the Blues* as a land of contradiction, confusion, hypocrisy—in other words, uncertainty. The memoir opens with Davis on stage, awaiting the diploma that signals his graduation from high school. He says: "Although I am six feet one and weigh 190 at the age of seventeen, I feel more like one foot six; for I am black, and inferiority has been hammered into me at school and in my daily life away from home." The world of employment is rather limited for black girls and boys, even with a high school diploma. After all, no formal education is needed to work as a domestic or as a day laborer. In a rhetorical move that Hughes and Parks shy away from, Davis offers a scathing critique of Ark City public school education. He declaims:

> I accept . . . the rolled diploma showing I have completed twelve years of formal study that prepares none of us, white or black, for life in a multiracial, democratic nation. This is a mixed school—mixed in attendance, mixed-up in attitudes. . . . Our high school education has prepared us only to exist at a low level within the degrading status quo.

In effect, Davis has engaged in a form of reader manipulation that is not unlike Booker T. Washington's in his *Up From Slavery*. Washington opens his autobiography with scenes of slavery's degradation, albeit not too degrading or too graphic lest he offend his readership. This narrative of descent serves as a springboard for launching Washington's life story on an upward trajectory—in other words, *Up From Slavery*. In much the same way, Davis shows how black life came to be regarded as worthless, insignificant, and simply inferior. Rhetorically, he intends to show, in a narrative of ascent, how he reclaimed his life and restored meaning to his existence.

The process of recovery begins by foregrounding sinister acts of racism. In one of many illustrative examples, he writes:

> And I also learned about white violence, at the age of five, when . . . I was personally selected for a lynching. Both daily papers must have carried another Southern social note about this popular pastime of that era, and a couple of third graders, evidently after hearing their parents discuss it with approval, decided to stage their own junior necktie party. I was on my way home alone,

> crossing a vacant lot, when these white boys, who had been lying in wait, jumped me. They threw me to the ground and held me down while one lad produced a rope and slipped it over my head. I kicked and screamed. Just as one started to snatch the noose tight around my neck, a white man appeared. He took one look, chased the boys away, freed me, and helped brush dirt and trash off my clothes. He walked with me until I was close to home nearly a mile away, then turned around and went on about his business. I never learned who he was, nor could I single out the embryo lynchers at school next day. Naturally, school officials did not push their probe. I was still alive and unharmed, wasn't I? Besides, I was black.

The narrative of ascent, in which healing, rehabilitation, and restoration all take place, begins when Davis, at age eight, discovers the blues:

> After the first few bars [I heard of the blues], I was hooked for life. Even at the age of eight, I knew this music was part of me. I'd had the usual exposure to concert and operatic recordings at white neighbors' homes, band recitals at Wilson Park and the classic songs taught at school; but that was generally boring. I rarely felt even minimal emotional kinship with that kind of music. I did not relate. But the blues—well, this I understood. I dug it in a way impossible with the most brilliant concepts of Wagner and Verdi and Chopin. All that was alien; the blues talked my language. The blues were basic, vital black music; the rapport was natural.

After this point in Davis' memoir, acts of discrimination, hypocrisy, and other gestures he identifies have to be viewed from a blues perspective. For Davis, the blues function as a metaphoric engagement or confrontation with lived experience. Confrontation is the first stage of creating social change because it leads next to transcendence and then to triumph. In the popular imagination, the blues signify extended moans over lost love or depression or resignation. But, like poet Sterling A. Brown, Davis saw the blues as stoicism, determination, persistence, and simple strength. Self-pity, therefore, could never be the defining

spiritual mode of the blues. His discovery of these qualities in the blues led him into another, more profound revelation: of the radical significance of jazz. Jazz, for Davis, represented a musical rebellion against European musical and cultural dominance. The improvisational quality of jazz enabled a revolt against formally contrived musical structures so integral to European classical music. Eventually he would bring jazz together with free verse to imagine a distinctive approach to writing poetry. Thus the progression of Davis' aesthetic development was a narrative that began in Kansas.

James Weldon Johnson, speaking the lives of African Americans in "Lift Every Voice and Sing," clearly framed a racial history, if not a racial consciousness. The measure of his greatness was that he could create so comprehensive a context for understanding black life that it would also encompass Kansas at the turn of the century. Thanks to Johnson, we have a trope through which we can recall that Kansas produced three very capable writers whose memorable and influential work locates Kansas nationally. Thanks to Johnson, we can celebrate Langston Hughes, Gordon Parks, and Frank Marshall Davis for coming of age in a land of uncertainty.

**Audience:** What about Gwendolyn Brooks? Isn't she a black Kansas writer?

**Tidwell:** Although she was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1917, Gwen Brooks falls outside the purview of my discussion. Apparently she lived there for only five weeks before moving to Chicago. For the longest time, she disavowed any relationship to Kansas. I understand that recently she's undergone a change of thinking about this and now reclaims Kansas as part of her heritage. Honestly, though, we have to think about her and her relationship to Chicago when we think about her aesthetic development. Coincidentally, Davis himself left Kansas for Chicago too. And there appear to have been some interactions between Brooks and him in writers' groups, although their exact nature has yet to be made clear. When Davis left Chicago for Hawaii in 1948, he and Gwendolyn Brooks and Gwendolyn Brooks' husband, Henry Blakely, were all published in the same special issue of *Voices: A Quarterly of Poetry* (1949)—edited, incidentally, by

Langston Hughes. I know there were associations among all these writers. However, I don't think there's much to support any claims of formal influences, such as you'd find in a "school of writers."

**Audience:** So, Davis was a poet. What did he write, and where can his poems be found now?

**Tidwell:** He wrote three volumes of poetry, or, depending on how you want to count them, four. He started out in 1935 with *Black Man's Verse*, which is an interesting title given the time period, in which poets were either moving toward a proletarian kind of poetry or seeking not to call attention to race in such a way as to make it stand out in the way that Davis does. It's quite interesting that this very feature, the title, is what gets picked up by the black arts writers of the 1960s and 1970s when they reclaim Davis as "the father of modern Black poetry." The title poem and the title of the collection provide art and inspiration for their own concerns. *I Am the American Negro* appears two years later, and before he leaves for Hawaii Davis puts together a collection of poems based on his experiences in Chicago—which he entitled *4th Street*, named for a major thoroughfare on the Southside. Those are the three major collections that he published, and they're all out of print. There was also a small chapbook put together entitled *Jazz Interludes*. Of course, he did publish a few poems that have not been collected yet. I'm presently seeking a publisher for his collected poems.

**Audience:** There were some hints in your presentation that Davis was greatly influenced by jazz and blues. But Hughes was also influenced by those same musical forms. Would you comment on what blues and jazz meant to Hughes?

**Tidwell:** When Ralph Ellison was asked to reconstruct the writing of *Invisible Man*, he said it would be a nearly impossible task, like "commanding a smoky genie to make an orderly retreat—not simply back into the traditional bottle, but into the ribbon and keys of a by-now defunct typewriter." I would say the same thing about trying to differentiate how jazz affected Langston Hughes at different points in his life. We can look at the poetry and we can see how *Ask Your Mama*, arguably his

finest collection, reveals his careful thinking about jazz. Or, we could examine the wonderful tales of Jesse B. Semple (which means, "just be simple") and we could see how Bop and Bebop are important features of Semple's world view. As for individual musicians, I don't feel knowledgeable enough to comment on that. It's clear to me, though, that Hughes had a sort of jazz feeling about life. Of course, the blues were always important to him. His interest was revealed in an early poetry collection entitled *The Weary Blues*.

**Audience:** You've spoken eloquently about an "uncertainty" that these three writers shared. And yet black people have traditionally attained "certainty" through faith or religion or the church. Did these writers ever attain a certainty in one of these ways? What was their relationship to the church?

**Tidwell:** The "uncertainty" I was trying to develop is a bit different from the stability offered through the church. The uncertainty that I'm talking about developed from the prevailing racial climate that existed and the effort these writers made to contend with that racial climate. Given a capricious educational system, for example, it's unclear why the state legislature kept revising the desegregation laws. What I was seeking to do was to show how they used art to respond to a climate of uncertainty. About religion, it's easiest for me to think about Frank Marshall Davis because he acknowledges the fact that he was, at best, an agnostic. Langston Hughes tells us that the church was not an important part of his life growing up. James Weldon Johnson even tells us that he was an agnostic, even though some of the best poetry we have in the canon deals with the religious themes he patterned after the Negro folk sermon. Gordon Parks is a bit of a mystery to me. I would probably argue that the church did not sustain him in his mature years either. So whatever stability they gained is accomplished through their confrontations with this world of uncertainty and trying to find an art form which provides for them an oasis in the desert. A stay against confusion. A support against all the contradictoriness that they experienced in life. Gordon Parks, for example, was known at one point as a renaissance man. He wrote not only *The Learning Tree* but three other autobiographical narratives. And he was a photographer, a poet, a filmmaker, a director, and a producer.

One of the questions that was put to him was how he felt about trying to venture out in all these different areas. He said, "In a certain way what I'm trying to do is to make sure that I am able to achieve some sort of success in one of these areas just in the off chance that people will look at me as a kind of failure." It's hard to see him as a failure, given all his successes in so many different areas. But you see how the world is still an uncertain world for him. What he tries to do is to create some sort of stability, even by experimenting with different genres.

**Audience:** Much of what you've described relates to a Northern urban experience. Did the South have a role to play in this artistic movement?

**Tidwell:** If we look at the turn of the century into the Harlem Renaissance, I'm hard pressed to think of specific examples of prominent, active writers who are still in the South in this period and still writing. New York was the Mecca! Later, when the Civil Rights Movement occurs toward the middle of the century, you find a literary reaction that's analogous to the political change that occurs when the integration-minded Civil Rights advocates of the South become challenged by the largely younger, Northern, urban, Black Power Movement. Here's where geography matters. One of the problems posed by the Civil Rights Movement is that it saw itself as driven by moral suasion to create social change, while, by contrast, the less patient urban black insurgents sought power: Black Power. As a consequence, there developed a rift between the black North and black South.

**Audience:** Would Ernest Gaines be an example?

**Tidwell:** Yes. Clearly, he would be, although not a Renaissance-era one. Charles Rowell wrote an essay about Gaines and entitled his piece "That Southern Thing That Drives Me." Gaines participated in an effort made by a few writers in the 1970s to preserve and promote Southern black culture. Some did it formally through an organization called Black Arts South. They were aware of the predominance of the Northern urban movement in black arts, so they attempted to counter this pervasive influence with their own movement. Charles Rowell, who edits *Callaloo*, the nation's leading journal in African American liter-

ature, founded this journal to participate in the preservation of Southern black culture and literature. Quite naturally, Gaines' writing fits neatly into this geographic region and into this aesthetic effort.

**Audience:** There has been almost no mention of sexual preference in our discussions. Many people have concluded that Hughes was gay. Is that true?

**Tidwell:** I'm willing to accept this notion about Hughes' sexual preference. Unfortunately, the people that I'm relying upon to document this fact have shied away from making the case. In fact, Arnold Rampersad, whose work I really value and respect, seems to suggest that there is no concrete evidence on which to make an affirmative statement. If this is true, what fuels the charge that Hughes was gay? Here's an example. When I'm at a subway stop in Washington, DC, I find in a gay magazine a lengthy article about how the gay community has reclaimed Langston Hughes. Another effort can be found via a film that I have not seen, entitled *Looking for Langston.* One reason it's important to know this is that such information further enlarges our understanding of the lives and art of the Renaissance participants.

When I look at Alain Locke, his editorship of *The New Negro* (1925), and his centrality in the Renaissance, one of the questions I really have about him is why did he not invite more participation by women. In the absence of convincing scholarly discussion, I'm forced to find answers in anecdotal stuff. Before her death, one of my Miami University (Ohio) colleagues shared with me the fact she had been a student of Locke's at Howard University. It was well known among all the women who took his courses that they would *not* be given the opportunities for the "out-of-class" extra sessions with Locke that he routinely held at his home. They were just for young men. She died shortly after I got there and was embittered to the end about what Alain Locke denied her because of his sexual preference. Why the scholars have shied away from making these facts known probably relates to a perceived need to be protective about a famous person's reputation.

As I think about it, the issue of Locke's sexual preference needs to be talked about because it has implications well beyond

whether or not he was gay. It has implications for determining why women were not a more significant part of the Harlem Renaissance power structure. We know that Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen were very much a part of the group that Locke tried to assemble in order to put in place a real cultural movement. And we suspect that their relationships must have been more than just aesthetic. They had personal relationships too. In the context of that time there was more than a little bit of uncertainty about what one could say within the broader community and still be accepted by that community. So that indeed becomes another uncertainty that has to be confronted.

Gaynell Gavin

# November

A day of fallen leaves, brown
and gray, chilled, damp, I drove
to Granite City projects, boards
over mud for sidewalks, and talked
to a girl, raped outside a bar
the week after her baby's birth.

The cop told me
they'd never have believed her
if the guy hadn't torn her stitches out.

Her smaller brothers and sisters crowded
around, pale faces and running noses.
Dark hair fell across her face as I
explained wear a bra, wear a dress
to trial, comb your hair back.

I drove home, called children, left
alone after school too long, gathered
them from the yard. Now my hand
remembers an instant, stretched
along the small, soft curve
of my son's face before I started dinner.

Don Judson

# Cape Cod

The street turns
and at the corner
a boarding house, white,

        set back: clatter of fence

2 trees shade
to the walk. The women
in front
      —how the strap of an evening gown
lies across the shoulder—
      "Did you hear—" they say.
      "Can you—"
They stop. Something in a store window. The men
move past
          and the motion,
          the movement

          around

          the women,
          or the memory of it—

In the hour of sleep
a quiet sound of them in sandals

and seats of a theater: sunk in-

                    to

      Voices.
          Men turning,

                    calling back.

                    How the blacktop smelled of rain.

II.

There is a way in

heat
against a door
10 a.m.,

August. Ships
once lured by villagers
through false fire here
onto rock and breakwater

plundering what stores then
they could, taking as if afterthought

any survivor to live among them. One hundred

miles further,
1692,
women pressed beneath rock
to confess a sin not theirs

cry out—

I seek now
the knife cut gull,
its wing turned

a circle, its
own sound.

Long after childhood,
what was then passing became random as if

image or film, each
edge darkened before
the next without thread
or touch

its own
absolute. Locked ward, 1975: they

ask that we write a story of ourselves and the woman sitting beside me laughs. She is the same woman who, each evening, when I call from the ward's single phone on a table by her room which smells of sleep, appears holding like a fisher's gaffe a pencil and stabs—not to break the skin—in silence at my hand until I leave or simply hang up and stare. Today is the first time I've heard her voice.

On the Cape I recall coming awake without air (the first stirrings of asthma) and Mother would quiet me, tell me to sleep, her hand on my chest as if the rise & arc into a dream of an old house (its stilled rooms—and of a single curtain in a 2nd floor window beneath which someone moves—)

Just so, Mother would say.

Just so.

III.

The air,
close in,
like bees stunned

falls away
and out
where the water begins.
Noon: Pitch
pine, black oak
and bearberry. A child's
string trap
undone
where the crab
has settled to feed. Harbor:

mudflat and clay.
Day pulled like a blue sheet.
I count my steps.

Twenty-three. The path is one familiar
and halfway I find
what I've come for. Wrapped

in tissue

hidden just
by the base of a log
four
small
bones—a bird perhaps, fallen
from its nest and stripped—hollowed,

nearly air
alone,

faint, like clay,
as if
ribs formed

feldspar grain of cliff sediment
& beach—

some three or four hundred odd mile,

each

knuckle, slumped and windblown gray,

like some great whale
thrown open across a single tooth of land. And
light

a memory
of trees

bent like old men
fishing this coast,

or a fetus
dreaming language
where there is none. How, twenty years

gone,
a woman
steps from a room—her stare

and gesture a way alone
of naming.

Joanne Zimmerman

# Buddy

"Harold! I think I hear a noise. I know I heard something!" The loud whisper carried clearly in the silent house.

Dr. Harold Bingham's wife, Vera, shook his shoulder, waking him from a pleasant dream in which there were wealthy patients crowding his waiting room, but none of them seriously ill.

They both listened, necks craned, heads off the pillows, and heard it again—a slight, scratching, scrambling sound. "Probably an animal. A raccoon probably, after the garbage," he said, reluctant to awaken fully. "Did we have fish? I told you to put the lid on tightly, with a weight on it."

"No," Vera whispered, sitting up. "It sounds as though it's coming from the *back* of the house. I'm going to call the police." She rolled away from him and reached for the phone.

Harold put his feet on the floor, searching in the dark for his slippers, and grudgingly got up. "Don't turn the light on." He took his handgun from the drawer of the little table next to the bed, yawned, stretched, and started down the stairs, gun in hand, Vera right behind him, pulling on her robe, smoothing her hair.

"They'll be right here," she said in an excited whisper. "There's been so much . . ."

"Sh!"

Light from the street lamp filtered through the trees in the parkway and danced on the entrance wall. Harold arrived at the front door and reached for the knob. Vera clutched at him. "You're *not* going to open that door! They may be waiting for you right outside!"

"What? Raccoons? Don't be silly." But he stood at the door and waited to open it until they saw the police car pull up, spotlight circling, illuminating trees, house, car in the driveway, in hectic sequence. Harold was a small man, aware of his disadvantage against an accomplished adversary.

Two men in uniform got out of the patrol car and came briskly up the walk to the door as Harold opened it and greeted them. "Probably raccoons," he apologized. "We heard a noise. Seemed to be at the back of the house."

Officers Troobnick and Malloy stalked around the side of the house, trampling flower beds with their heavy-soled black shoes. Harold wondered why, in a quiet suburb, they came in pairs like nuns. Not even nuns travel in pairs any more, he thought. Probably boring otherwise, to be alone for hours at a time.

They returned in a few moments and politely asked Dr Bingham to accompany them. "Ah, sir," Troobnick said, "please leave your gun in the house." Harold handed it to Vera, who put it on the narrow table in the front hall. Harold threw his topcoat on over his pajamas and let himself out into a night fragrant with early spring flowering—honeysuckle, mock orange—and a slight chill in the air. There was a sliver of moon, the rotund rest of it showing ghostly. Troobnick pointed with his flashlight up into the branches of a maple tree at the back of the house where Harold had had the yardman Sam build a tree house for Buddy when he was eight years old. The light passed over the black rectangular shape of the tree house, piercing the doorway, the holes in roof and floor, picking over branches and budding leaves, and coming to rest on a pale, bearlike creature with its arms and legs locked around a large lateral branch, its white face looking down at them dumbly—Buddy, now thirteen.

"Buddy!" Harold said incredulously in a voice choked with anger. "What the hell are you doing up there?"

Malloy added, "Can you get down, son?"

After a long pause, during which the neighbors' dog began to bark, Buddy said in a friendly conversational way, "I'm watching the setting."

"The what?" Harold shivered, feeling the chill damp of the ground through the soles of his leather slippers.

"The setting. I'm watching the setting," Buddy repeated in an identical tone.

Harold, in the dark, peered at Officers Malloy and Troobnick for explanation, and looked around at the setting in which he found himself—familiar, and stranger than it had ever felt. "The setting?" he asked Buddy. Troobnick still pointed his flashlight upward, making a white circle in the black shape of the tree, with Buddy at the center. He was sitting up now. With sudden inspiration, Harold said, "The moon is setting?"

"No," Buddy said calmly. "We are."

When Harold had regained speech he shouted, even though lights were coming on in the neighbors' houses, "You come

down! You get the hell out of that damn tree right now!" He ordered Troobnick, "Turn off the damn light."

He took a menacing step toward the tree trunk, and then turned and started back toward the driveway, hoping to persuade the police to follow. "Thanks a lot, officer. I'll handle this now. Sorry to get you out for a thing, like this. My wife was nervous." Buddy didn't move as they walked away.

"That's all right, Dr. Bingham. We'd rather have a call turn out to be nothing than have people refrain from calling." Malloy had a surprisingly high, gentle voice. Troobnick added, "Better safe than sorry!"

"Well, I'm safe *and* sorry!" Harold tried to force a little laugh.

"Thanks again."

Malloy said, "I'd lock up your drugs, if I were you."

"What do you mean? Of course my drugs are. . . ."

"You're a doctor. You've got drugs around that other people don't have, probably, or access to them. I'd be very careful about that if I were you," he said in a reasoned, superior way that Harold immediately resented.

"You're saying that Buddy. . . ."

"I'm not saying anything, sir. He's your son. You know him best. Just that I'd watch him if I were you. Who are his friends? What do they do with their time?"

"Buddy has been at boarding school. He just got home . . . ah . . . about a week ago. He doesn't *have* any friends around here. But I'll check into that. Thanks a lot, officer." He listened for a snicker as they walked back to the squad car—comradely, manly, he thought.

Harold stood in the darkness for a moment of quiet in his suburban garden, looking at the moon. He remembered that when Buddy was a little boy he said he would be a policeman when he grew up, and he and Vera laughed at him. He wondered if Troobnick and Malloy had sons and if they had problems with them. Then he thought he ought to get Buddy down from the damn tree, but first he knew he ought to tell Vera what was happening.

Vera stood just inside the front door, clutching her robe together at the throat. She had combed her hair and added a touch of lipstick. She looked anxiously into his pale face. Harold said as calmly as possible, "It's Buddy. He's sitting in the maple tree."

"Buddy!"

"That's what you heard. That's the noise you heard."

"Buddy! He might fall!"

Harold said in disgust, "At this moment, I couldn't care less. I've had it. Frightening us; getting the police over here in the middle of the night. All the neighbors wondering what's going on. Making us a laughing stock."

"He just got home, Harold."

"A month, almost two months ago."

"He hasn't had time to adjust yet."

"He doesn't have to adjust in a tree in the middle of the night!"

"It's a phase he's going through."

"We'll have to find another school for him. Some place where they'll keep him busy, give him instruction in something besides tree climbing."

"Schools are just letting out now. No school is going to enroll him for the last few weeks of a semester." They both knew that this was the fourth school Buddy had flunked out of and that there weren't others in the area willing to undertake him.

"Summer camp, then. I can't stand much more of this nonsense, and that's final."

And then they realized that Buddy was standing in the hallway with them although neither of them had heard him come in, looking from one to the other with polite interest in their conversation, as though it did not concern him. He had grown as tall as Vera and outweighed her by fifty pounds, but he had always been able to move his great bulk silently, to turn up where least expected. On this weighty body was a choirboy's pretty face, small, pale, pimply, with a little black down on his upper lip. He picked up Harold's gun, removed the clip and snapped it back in place, released the safety, then held it in his right hand and considered it speculatively. "Neat gun, Dad." He looked up with a faint smile. "Were you going to shoot me?"

"Buddy! Put that damn thing down!" Harold felt a chill of fear with the authority of a gun transferred to Buddy's hand. When Buddy put it down, Harold immediately salvaged it and put it in his robe pocket.

Vera explained, "We heard a noise and we thought it might be burglars, dear. So much of that going on these days."

Harold had a lot more to say, but he didn't know how much

Buddy had overheard, which put him at a disadvantage. "You're making your mother and me very unhappy. Don't you care?"

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

"You have to find something to do with yourself. A hobby. A summer job."

"I've thought of that. I've decided what to do. I'm going to fix up the tree house."

"Well, that seems like a waste of time." Harold dismissed the idea with a laugh. "A tree house? At your age? We'll look into summer camps."

Buddy didn't reply. He was halfway to the kitchen to get something to eat, with Vera following to help him. Harold wiped his wet palms and took one step toward them. "Vera!" he called. "Don't you think he can find the refrigerator by himself? Come upstairs!"

Buddy had flunked out of public school and two local private schools, one Protestant, one Catholic. The fall he turned thirteen, his parents sent him to a boarding school a hundred and fifty miles away, but he was back early in spring before the semester was over. It seemed that he had stopped writing. He had not turned in a paper or written a theme, or even a paragraph, since returning to school after Christmas holiday. Harold sent for brochures from schools with remedial programs and psychiatric care.

They were in their early thirties when Buddy was born. When Vera became pregnant, Harold wasn't sure they should go through with it, but she wanted the baby. The boy was greeted with great joy at his birth—the first boy baby in two generations on Vera's side of the family—and expectations were high. They named him Harold, but it never seemed right to Vera—it felt strange in her mouth to call her husband Harold, a doctor, a man who demanded respect in the community and from her, and also to use the same name for this fat little baby with a soiled diaper, whose eyes didn't focus and who spit sour milk on her shoulder after being fed. It didn't seem right to call the baby Harold when talking about diaper rash, formulas, orange juice, and sleep habits. It seemed to demean the adult Harold.

As soon as his diaper was removed, Harold's little pink penis rose and he urinated on Vera, on the clean receiving blanket and his dry clothing. Harold thought this was funny, but Vera

was not amused and tried to thwart Harold by switching dry for wet with swift sleight of hand. She nicknamed the baby Buddy, and the family started to call him that, too.

Harold sometimes agreed to take Buddy with him to the office on Saturday, offering himself as model and goal in life. Buddy was such a bright little boy, curious, observant, interested in everything to the point of making a pest of himself with his incessant questions. After a number of scoldings, he learned to observe for himself, in silence.

The last Saturday Harold was willing to do this, Buddy was eight years old, livelier than ever, poking into everything. He listened with a stethoscope to his own stomach growling. He turned off the centrifuge, experimenting with the buttons when Miss Chang was testing blood samples. He used the microscope and spilled a box of slides, cutting himself on the broken glass. Miss Chang finally complained to Dr. Bingham. In her culture, children were neither seen nor heard.

"He pokes into everything. He touches everything. He has no manners, no sense of propriety," Dr. Bingham accused to his wife. "He nearly drove Miss Chang crazy."

"He's going through a phase."

"I can't take a chance on losing her. He doesn't obey at all. I told him to sit in the waiting room until I was through. He had books to read, toys to play with. What does he want from me? He won't have a doctor to look at if I take him with me again. He has to learn the limits." He sat down, wiped his face, tried to control his breathing. Then he looked up at Vera with a slight smile and said slyly, "Anyhow, I think you just want him out of the way on Saturdays."

"Me! Want him out of the way!"

"All this talk about identifying with me. He's just as pesty to you as he is to me. You just want him out of your hair. Well, you'll have to make other arrangements. Don't count on me, ever again!"

When Harold said "out of your hair" he saw this literally—Buddy as a baby, his chubby fist tangled in Vera's hair. Her hair was long, silky, falling like a shining brown cape over her shoulders when she brushed it out. She wore it pulled back tightly, wound into a knot at the back of her head, but at night she let it down and brushed it until it crackled with electricity and flew

out to meet the brush. Then she braided it loosely for sleeping, but often it freed itself and flowed across the pillow. When they first lived together, Harold loved the silken touch of it in the night; it roused him to make love. But in later years it tickled, made him sneeze, woke him in annoyance. Sometimes Vera's face was so completely covered with her hair that he could not tell if she was facing him or away. The September that Buddy went to boarding school, she had her hair cut.

When Buddy was a small boy and cried out in the night, Vera came down the hall in her nightgown to his room to see what was the matter. She leaned over him in the dark and her hair fell over his face and around his head, making a secure, private place with just the two of them, just their two faces within. He could barely see her, but he could smell her sleepsour breath and a trace of the day's perfume and feel the caress of hair. Later the tree house became such a secret, private place, but in the tree house he was alone.

Harold refused to take Buddy to the office with him again, but he considered other outings with his son. In the spring when Buddy was almost ten, his school was closed on a Wednesday, the day that Harold's office was closed. Vera suggested that Harold take Buddy to the zoo.

Harold stipulated, "If you'll be a good boy. If you'll obey and do what I say. All right?"

Harold took this opportunity to share his knowledge of anatomy, zoology, and the habits of mammals and birds. He told Buddy that giraffes have the same number of vertebrae in their necks as humans—while the giraffe's head swayed above them and slowly lowered in an arc almost to their level, its long-lashed soulful eyes returning their regard. They went rather quickly through the reptile house, barely giving Harold time to point out vestigial legs on the boa constrictor and allowing him to hide his repugnance of snakes. In the aviary, Harold gave a minilecture on protective coloration.

"Birds don't have live babies. You know that, Buddy. You've picked up robins' eggs in the yard."

"But the babies live."

"Oh, yes. Of course. That's not what I meant." That made Harold sigh with the realization of the inadequacy of language. He wondered if any of his explanations were getting through to

Buddy, given a child's perception of things. A ten-year-old soaks up knowledge, he knew, but probably half of it is wrong. In any case, they were having a good time. Buddy bought them candy and popcorn with his own money when they first arrived at the zoo. When they left the aviary, they sat on a bench and ate ice cream bars. Buddy was eager to continue to the lion house, but Harold would not let him walk around and eat ice cream at the same time. He attended to Buddy with a bunch of napkins at the ready. As he lifted Buddy's face and wiped his chin, he looked into his eyes and saw himself as a boy—saw himself looking into his own father's eyes and wondered if his father had seen himself in *his* father's eyes, and so it might go, into antiquity. Buddy finished the last of the ice cream bar without disaster and said impatiently, "Let's go."

The lion house smelled of ammonia, dung, and raw meat and rang with children's shouts and the lions' roars as they entered. The tile floor was dark, littered with food wrappers, popcorn, filth. A large male lion and several females were held behind thick glass in a reddish-brown, fake-stone environ. The cage floor, too, was littered—food scraps, a chunk of red meat, a mound of dark feces.

The male was lying down, his orange furry ruff against the glass, a few feet from where Harold and Buddy stopped. As they watched he rolled over, showing his pale belly, feet in the air. A shiny red shoot came out of the lion's penis. Buddy stared, horrified, certain that the lion's guts would next be extruded. Harold turned away, wiped his palms with his handkerchief, and sat on a stone bench near by. Buddy guessed that Harold did not want to watch the lion die.

Then the lion rolled back and got heavily to his feet. He fastened his unblinking amber eyes on Buddy. Buddy could hardly breathe. The lion's skin looked loose, as if there was more of it than he needed. Buddy watched him pace back and forth, back and forth, loose wristed, mouth slightly open, showing his tongue and his fierce canine teeth.

Buddy stepped up onto the bottom rail, hooked his arms over the cold top rail, and clung there, waiting for the lion to begin to eat the chunk of bloody meat that lay on the floor of the cage, but the lion continued to pace, its large paws going down softly in rhythmic sequence. Each time he turned, Buddy peered at his testicles. He wondered if he would ever have fuzzy tennis

balls like that instead of the little peach pits he now had and what that would feel like when he walked around. He pressed his thighs together. Vera had been lecturing him frankly and honestly about sex, and he wondered if the lion also had a vagina.

He wanted to be like the lion. He imagined himself in the cage with him, finding recognition in those fearsome amber eyes. Buddy knew the lion could snap off his head like he himself might pinch the flower off a stalk. He could feel the velvet muzzle, the warm, fetid breath, then the huge yellow teeth tearing at him, the rasping cat's tongue, teeth nibbling at his stomach, guts spilling as he had seen on television, and finally down into the dark red gorge. The lion opened his mouth as if to demonstrate. He paused and roared over and over, his ribs contracting to squeeze the sound out until echoes rolled back and tumbled over each other, submerging Buddy in sound. Buddy could feel the first rip, the gnawing in his guts, and he began to cry.

"What's the matter?" He had forgotten that his father was there and was startled by the hand on his shoulder.

"I don't know. I feel funny."

"Let's go. You've been standing there an hour." Harold was delighted with Buddy's concentration on the lion, with the length of his attention span, which he saw as learning ability.

Buddy looked at his father as though he were looking at a stranger. His legs felt wobbly, and his stomach hurt. Harold led him outside to a drinking fountain, wet his handkerchief, and washed Buddy's face. He held Buddy's hands under the cold spouting water and rubbed them vigorously. "Full of germs in there. Everything filthy. Garbage and flies all over the place."

At dinner Buddy pushed the food around on his plate. Vera said, "You're tired, darling. What's the matter? Why aren't you eating? Don't you feel well?"

"I'm all right. I'm not hungry."

"Why not? It's lamb chops. You like lamb chops."

Buddy obligingly cut a piece of pink meat, put it in his mouth, and chewed for several moments, swallowing with effort. He put his fork down. "I'm not hungry."

"But you must eat something." With sudden inspiration Vera asked, "Did you have something to eat earlier?"

There was a long silence during which Harold and Buddy did not look at one another. Buddy had treated them to popcorn when they arrived at the zoo. Harold had eaten some but he still

had a good appetite. Then he had allowed Buddy to eat ice cream. After the visit to the lion house, Buddy held his hand over his stomach. Harold assumed that he was hungry and gave him money, and Buddy ran off, returning happily eating a small blueberry pie. Harold knew that shouldn't be allowed, but he didn't throw the pie away because he didn't want to ruin the good mood of the afternoon.

Vera turned on Harold. "What did he eat? You didn't let him eat a lot of junk food, a lot of sugar, did you? Honestly!"

"Now, Vera . . ." Harold began.

Buddy saw that Harold was not going to tell the truth and get them both into trouble. He feared that Harold would use the lion as excuse. He didn't want his parents to talk about the lion at all. He offered a plausible explanation as a diversion. "I conned him into buying me a pie."

"You what!"

"I talked him into buying me a pie," he said sheepishly, "so I'm not hungry."

"No," Harold said, and Buddy was amazed to detect anger. "What was that you said first?"

"I talked you into buying me a pie." His voice was barely audible, his eyes downcast.

"That's not what you said at first. What did you say at first?" Harold leaned toward Buddy, his eyes narrowed, furious, pointing at him with his fork.

The conversation had taken a turn Buddy could not have anticipated, but he would not offer up the lion as an alibi in order to appease his father. He and the lion were one. He whispered, "I conned you into buying me a pie."

In the silence Vera put her napkin to her mouth to stifle an outburst of laughter, but it came anyhow. Harold turned his angry face toward her, and then suddenly his mouth opened and he began to laugh too. They ganged up on Buddy with their laughter, roaring, showing the entire arc of white teeth and down into their red throats, while Buddy sat frozen with fear, twisting his napkin, feeling the lion nibbling at his entrails until he ran from the table to throw up.

When they went to bed, Harold accused Vera of beginning to laugh at that moment in order to defuse his anger, to take the heat off Buddy, but she denied it and calmly continued brushing her long hair one hundred times.

The autumn that he turned thirteen, Buddy was sent to boarding school. When Buddy was at home, Harold and Vera were full-time parents, and that seemed to keep them youthful. After they sent him away they felt old. Vera added pounds around her hips and thighs, making her amply pear shaped. The flesh of her upper arms sagged softly. There were dark half-moons under her eyes, even when she had had enough sleep. She signed up for an exercise class, and then—in order not to neglect the intellect—for a class in art appreciation.

Harold teased, "Who is this Art you appreciate so much?"

Vera attended class twice a week and was enthusiastic at first; she worked hard to keep up. But at forty-five she was the oldest person in the class, older than the teacher, who seemed hostile to her for reasons she did not understand. The other students treated her with distant respect and ignored her. Well, she thought, I'm not looking for new friends, but she felt isolated and lonely.

Harold's receding hairline had flowed together with the bald spot on top of his head, leaving his head quite bare. He needed glasses all the time, not just to read fine print in medical journals. He was putting on weight around his waist, although he pushed himself out of bed early three mornings a week in order to jog before going to the office. He felt tired a lot of the time. Vera teased, "You ought to see a good doctor." And he couldn't engender a sturdy erection. He was so chagrined by his drooping penis that he had difficulty approaching Vera for sex, even though he was confident that she wouldn't laugh at him. They couldn't blame Buddy for this.

Vera felt a change was necessary and decided to have her hair cut. She drove to the beauty parlor and then sat in the car for a long while to get her courage. She was reassured by the waiting room—a room like anyone's living room with a couch, a coffee table with fashion and movie magazines, large-leafed plants in tubs, and a Chagall print of moony lovers floating unperturbed above a dark town. A heavy musky smell did not cover harsh chemical odors.

The stylist, Marco, had moist, dark, spaniel eyes. His silky, shiny hair looped around his face in soft curls. He said, "I'll make you look ten years younger." He held a sheaf of long hair on his palm and let it slide off his fingers. He called two women over. "You don't see hair like this very often," he said, which almost made Vera change her mind.

That night Vera studied herself in the mirror when they were getting ready for bed, turning her head from side to side, lowering her chin, raising it. She missed the shawl of hair around her shoulders.

Harold said, "It's hard to get used to. Don't you miss it?"

"I miss brushing it. That was a bedtime ritual, and I miss it now."

"It's like living with a different woman." Harold cupped his hands over her ears and tilted her head up, kissed her on the mouth. "Makes me feel sexy. Let's try." He felt challenged and not sure if he could meet the challenge. In any case, he suspected the new look was to make her attractive to a lover.

When Buddy came home at Thanksgiving, he could hardly bear to look at Vera.

You will write a letter to your grandmother." The words were separately spaced and fell as heavily as the pen and pad of paper Harold threw on the table in front of Buddy.

"I don't know what to say." Buddy's head was down, his hands folded in his lap.

"You will write a thank-you letter. She transferred stock to your name for Christmas. She's been very generous to you, Buddy. For Christ's sake," he laughed, trying to take the edge off his voice, "that stock might be what sends you to college, what buys you a new car some day."

The prospect was so remote that Buddy couldn't begin to imagine it. He shook his head. "I don't have anything to say."

"Just say thank you."

Buddy picked up the pen, drew a piece of paper to him and wrote, "Dear Grandmother, thank you," and dropped the pen, sat back in the chair.

Harold, who had been pleased to see him begin, became furious at the aborted start. "Goddamn it, Buddy, you're such a smart ass," he shouted. "You think you're smart. You're going to write a decent letter, and you're going to write it right now!" He paced in back of Buddy. "All right, that's a start. 'Dear Grandmother, thank you . . . for the stock.' Write it! Go ahead, write what I say!" Standing over Buddy, his hand came down hard on Buddy's shoulder; his fingers remained there, emphasizing his words with little thrusts and jabs that made Buddy's loopy handwriting more erratic than usual.

"Tell her . . . tell her . . . you like school. Tell her you went out for . . . not sports; she'd know better. For the paper, the yearbook, choir . . ."

"I didn't." Buddy squirmed at the painful fingers on his shoulder.

"Tell her that anyhow. Tell her you're having a nice Christmas, and you hope that she is, too." His voice was getting higher and higher, louder and louder. It hurt Buddy's ears. "Tell her we've had some snow, but the weather isn't bad. You hope she's well. And whatever you want to add."

When he was through, Harold ordered Buddy to copy the letter over neatly, and he left the room, fearing his own anger. He hated that glimpse of himself, of what he contained. Man of science. Man of reason. Out of his mind with anger at a stubborn fat boy, his own son. Jesus Christ, Buddy! he thought. Why do you do this to me?

Boarding school returned Buddy to their keeping in March. They did not feel that he was profiting from the resources they offered. The other boys called him "The Blob."

In his absence that year, Harold and Vera had settled into a routine that did not include Buddy. They tried to make the best of his return while investigating summer camps and schools for fall. They consulted Buddy on these plans, but he had no suggestions. He spoke only to himself:

"When I was a little kid I thought that however things were, that's the way they would always be. Then when they began to change, it made me feel as though I was on sloping ground that had become slippery. I didn't have anything to hold on to. I didn't really like things the way they were when I was a little kid, but I didn't want them to change because then they might be even worse. Things are changing. I see that. Everything is changing this minute, even if I try to put them back the way they were."

After the visit from Officers Troobnick and Malloy, Buddy began to repair the tree house. There was a gaping hole in the roof, and in that corner the floorboards had rotted. Some of the rungs of the access ladder had disappeared, and the ladder itself was shaky. They couldn't look to Sam for repairs—he had retired, and later they heard that he died. The contents of the tool shed were jumbled and covered with dust.

They held a family conference. "What will you do first?" Harold asked. "You have to have a plan. The ladder, in order to get up there? Or the roof? Might be a good idea to keep the rain out. But you can't work inside there until the floorboards are fixed. And you have to be sure the whole thing is steady. Is the whole thing steady? You're a lot bigger and heavier than you were the last time around. Are you sure you want to do this? It seems a waste of time to me."

Vera said he could use the aluminum ladder used for window washing. Harold took Buddy to the lumberyard to buy boards and nails. They decided that any project was a good project, even if they considered it to be dangerous. Buddy had nothing else to do.

Buddy worked as consistently as though he had a deadline. When reconstruction was complete, a small rug disappeared from the house, and books, a pillow, a footstool, a bowl, candlesticks. At night they could see the glow of the candles in the tree branches as though some nocturnal animal had set up housekeeping outside their window.

Since all his activities were out-of-doors, Buddy's room remained as though no one lived there.

On a warm June Sunday, Vera sat at her desk writing a letter. "Dear Mother," she wrote, "It is a lovely day, warm, the sun shining. It makes the spirits rise. Harold is in the basement cleaning the wine press and barrel. We intend to make wine this fall. Buddy has been puttering around. He decided to repair the tree house old Sam built for him so many years ago. I don't know why, at this time, but any project is a good project. The alternative is nothing—just sitting around doing nothing, driving us crazy. Why did this happen to us? We are no different than anybody else. Other people don't have such problems with their children, do they?"

She had to stop because tears blurred her vision of the page. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, looked up into the antique gilded mirror over the desk and saw a distorted image of herself. She preened in that mirror, trying to make an acceptable vision, turned her head to the right and to the left, ran her fingers through her short hair. Back of her image she could see a green and yellow smear that was the garden. She knew the tree house was visible also, but she did not turn around to look directly at it.

She bent over the paper on her desk and wrote desperately, "He was such a bright little boy. He was supposed to represent us in the world, wasn't he. Perhaps he does, and we have failed. It is hard to look at that." Big as he was, a vessel too fragile for the weight of their expectations.

She was crying again, with her face buried in her hands. When she lifted her head again, Buddy was standing in back of her, looking over her shoulder, reading what she had just written. "Buddy!" she said in a choked, stricken voice.

"It's okay, Mom. It's okay." He awkwardly patted her shoulder. She threw her arms around his wide waist and sobbed.

When they went to bed that night Harold was unusually cheerful, having spent a productive day. Vera could not explain to him why she was sad. She knew she had come to the end, to a place where she could no longer pretend, and she did not know how to say this. Buddy was busier than usual, in and out of the house, up to the tree house and down.

"What's he doing?"

"I don't know. He brought the little footstool back, and the bathroom rug."

"Maybe he's cleaning house. Spring cleaning."

"In the middle of the night?"

"It's only eleven."

"That's late enough." They could see pinpoints of candlelight through the leaves of the tree.

"I always worry about him, in that tree, with candles burning. It could catch on fire. I worry that he might fall."

"I'd like to cut down the goddamn tree."

"That wouldn't change anything," she said sadly.

They climbed into bed and lay side by side, not touching, Neither one had fallen asleep, when they heard it.

"Oh my God! What was that?"

"Sounded . . . like a shot."

Saliva had collected in the back of Vera's throat, so it was a few seconds before she could say, "Maybe a car backfired in the street."

Harold sat slumped on the side of the bed, his hands in his lap. "Maybe he's shooting at raccoons."

Vera scrambled across the bed to touch his back. "Don't go out there!"

Harold shook his head. "I don't think he hates me that much."

"I'll call the police."

Harold slowly stood at bedside. He could barely lift his right foot and set it down in front of the left and then lift the left foot to take the next step toward the little table. The gun was not in the drawer. He fished around in the drawer with his hand, then stood looking into the empty space as though it might offer an explanation. He looked forward to the sensible presence of Troobnick and Malloy.

They arrived moments before the ambulance. Two young men jumped out, running toward the back yard carrying a metal basket as though they were going to trap a dangerous animal. After a few seconds of deliberation, checking out the tree branches and the rungs of the ladder, one of them climbed up and disappeared into the tree house.

Harold and Vera stood below, clinging to each other, helpless. The night was balmy, but they shivered, standing close, arms entwined, giving each other support and warmth, peering upward through the dark, trying to get a glimpse of activity in the play of searchlights. The radio in the police car carried on an intermittent conversation with itself in the silence.

"God! He makes me so mad! I could . . ." Harold tried to calm himself. To no one in particular he said, "I'm going to have the goddamn tree cut down. I should have done it a long time ago."

After an infinity, the young man lowered Buddy in the metal basket, strapped, wrapped like a large parcel to be delivered elsewhere, something inanimate that no longer belonged to them. When the basket touched ground, the paramedic skinned down the ladder. Red and white lights played over the serious young faces of the paramedics, making the familiar garden strange and menacing.

"He's lost a lot of blood, but he's moving his hands and feet. Looks like it went through his neck, but the spine is intact. We'll start an IV."

"Oh, Buddy!" Vera sobbed. "Thank God you're alive!" She stumbled over the lawn alongside the stretcher, watching Buddy's pale moon-face for signs of consciousness. A thick white collar gave him a rather formal, surprised look. They

lifted the stretcher into the ambulance, slammed the rear doors, and in seconds were roaring down the street, the siren shattering the silence.

Harold started for the house. When he realized that Vera was not following, he turned back. She remained standing at the curb, her hands to her mouth, looking in the direction the ambulance had gone. She startled and drew away when Harold touched her arm. "Come on! We'll get dressed and go there. Aren't you coming?" She looked at him as though he were a stranger speaking an incomprehensible tongue.

"You know this is all your fault," Harold said furiously, propelling her toward the house. "Indulging him in all his craziness. Taking his side all the time. Now you see where that leads!"

Vera followed in a daze, her arms wrapped around her ribs. She hardly heard him. All she could think was how much she loved their strange bumbling child and how fervently she wished for him to live.

Review

# The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War

Roy Morris, Jr. Oxford University Press

Walt Whitman spent part of the last two years of the Civil War living in Washington, DC, and "ministering" to sick and wounded soldiers in the city's many hospitals. Most of his service consisted of short visits with patients during which he offered small gifts—candy, a cool drink, writing supplies—or simply the pleasure of his company; he wrote innumerable letters for patients and often sat up all night with dying soldiers. Those two years, although a central part of the poet's legend, have attracted relatively little attention from scholars, and in the acknowledgments prefacing *The Better Angel*, Roy Morris, Jr., biographer of Ambrose Bierce and editor of the magazine *America's Civil War*, expresses surprise that none of Whitman's many biographers "has seen fit to devote more than a passing chapter, at best, to Whitman's Civil War years, a time that the poet himself considered 'the greatest privilege and satisfaction' of his life."

Morris fills the gap, and his book suggests an explanation for this curious lacuna in Whitman scholarship: Any detailed examination of Whitman's Civil War service must unavoidably address the poet's perspective on the great issues of the day, and that perspective was often base. Whitman was a crude racist for his entire life, as demonstrated by this excerpt from a letter written thirty years after the war: "That is one reason why I never went full on the nigger question. The nigger would not turn—would not do anything for himself—he would only act when prompted to act. No! no! I should not like to see the nigger in the saddle—it seems unnatural."

Morris includes that "unenlightened" quote and several others as bad or worse in *The Better Angel*, the first comprehensive account of Whitman's no-doubt very admirable Civil War hospital service. The poet claimed later in life that he ministered to between 80 and 100 thousand patients, and while those figures are absurdly inflated, it is certain that he visited thousands of sick and wounded men. Dozens of them wrote him letters in the years after the war, all of them with manifest gratitude, and a

few even named children after him. All of this is undeniably noble, and it is plain Morris believes he is describing a noble man, but he is an honest scholar, and his honesty compels him to include several unhappy revelations about Whitman's character and politics that bar any tendency to hagiography. It is the primitive racism that sticks hardest in the craw, but Morris also tells us that a substantial portion of Whitman's hospital efforts were devoted to a small group of young men for whom he developed great affection and in some cases openly pursued, that the poet's letters attest to the fact no one was more acutely sensitive to the nobility of Whitman's efforts than Whitman himself, and that his fierce public criticism of Washington's patronage-driven bureaucracy ended the instant he was finally able to join it. Thus the Good Gray Poet.

Whitman's war was not uncontroversial among his contemporaries. After the war, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the officer who led the first black regiments of the Union Army into battle (and is remembered today as Emily Dickinson's confidante and editor), dismissed Whitman's hospital service as the refuge of a coward. Certainly the poet's war was safe, and even pleasurable, when compared to the vast sacrifices made by thousands of men his age or even older. (Whitman was forty at the outbreak of hostilities.) Morris is a fine writer, and his fascinating book allows the reader to reach an independent conclusion. The author's own conclusion is plain, and if there is any fault in *The Better Angel*, it is that Morris' evident esteem for his celebrated subject occasionally leads him to overestimate the singularity of Whitman's service. There were, after all, thousands of volunteers working in hospitals on both sides of the line, and many of them contributed considerably more to their patients' welfare than a piece of horehound candy and a kiss on the lips. Doubtless Whitman deserves credit as one of those volunteers; very likely he deserves nothing else.

—Patrick Quinn

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**John Edgar Tidwell** has published widely on aspects of African American literature, focusing on the work of poets Sterling A. Brown and Frank Marshall Davis. He has recently edited Brown's unpublished travelogue, *A Negro Looks at the South,* and Davis' unpublished *Black Moods: Poems New and Old*. His edition of Davis' *Livin' the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet* appeared in 1992.

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Joanne Zimmerman has published seventy stories in a wide variety of reviews and journals, including the *Antioch Review*, *December*, *Descant*, *Folio*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Shenandoah*, *Western Humanities Review*, and many others. Her one-act play, *Yours Very Truly*, was published by Samuel French, Inc.

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