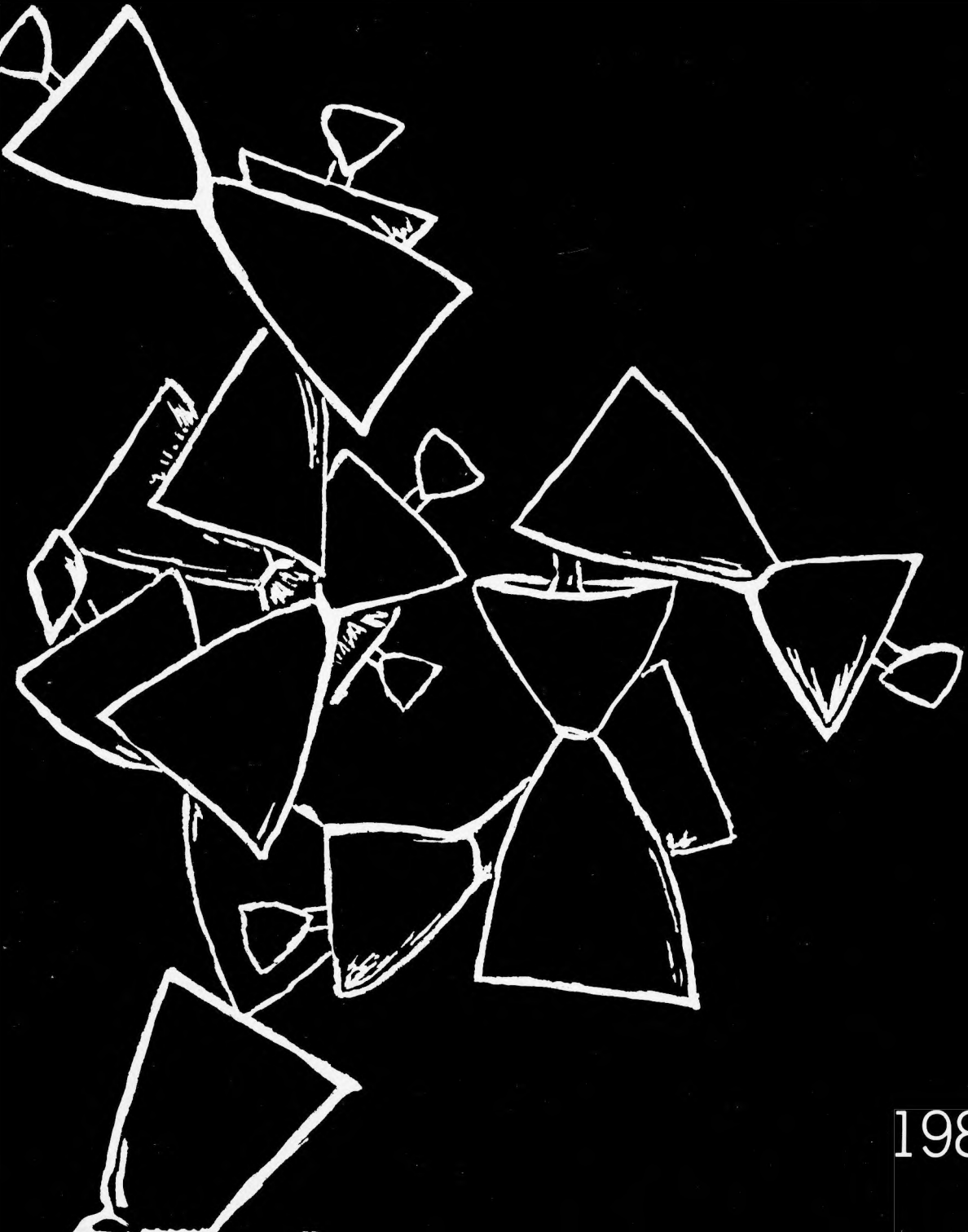


HARBINGER



1984

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Johna J. Ramos

Carmel 1978

We sat and talked,
recalling
our long walks
down Sunset Beach,
eating Jimmy Jazz sandwiches
over some cheap bottle of wine
I picked up at the corner store.
Conversation then flew,
fragments of crisp
explanations
of how life was.
Profound, eh?
I miss our rock
at the edge
of the world.
I miss the everlasting
roar,
your funky sunglasses
and most of all
ignorance.

Past Illusions

I see your face melting
into the water cup beside my bed.
I reach to satisfy thirst.
Your bones stick in my throat
coughing up fragments
air forced out—
My lungs float downward
cradling ovaries,
red pulsating targets
splitting in half.
An apple slice in a child's hand.
Eating the skin off first
the juicy insides last,
spitting out seeds,
hard shells,
concealing a secret.
I am the mattress
sinking lower,
springs wrap around my thighs
binding my feet,
Leaving the core to rot in the sun.

Mary Ann Sprinkle

Tuesday's Group

An upright piano in the corner
Missing a few sharps and flats,
Propped on cardboard coupons.
Joan can play the top part
of that Heart and Soul duet
But no one knows the accompaniment.

Tina swears she's pregnant,
She can feel it kicking.
"Do you think Amanda Nicole
Is a pretty name for a girl?" she asks me.

Billy Bob's smoke and the air conditioning
Make my head ache.
He puffs the cigarettes to the very end
Like fingernails to the quick.

Gloria says she reads *The Power of Positive Thinking*
To make it through each day.
She parks her car five lots away
And wonders if people can see her
Through the venetian blinds.

Empty plant hangers dangle,
Bits of styrofoam from a cup someone ripped apart
on the two-toned carpet,
Sandy plays a game of tic-tac-toe
In the dust of the coffee table.

I'm scared but I lead the group,
"Grab a crayon and give me your definition of being well,"
John rocks in a straight back chair
And hums.

Orderly Chaos

Someone Scotch-taped the screen in the kitchen,
Stuck strips in "x" designs up and down
To keep the flies out,
But they got in anyway.

My friend from Oregon called.
The Earth Science teacher turned lawyer,
She's been making margaritas by the gallon
To get through the day,
It's been two years since Billy was killed in the mines.

The girl next door's shelf just fell on the floor
She had lined the books just right,
Like a librarian in the rare volume section.
She has color coordinated coat hangers too.

The man in 222 asked me if I knew
How to give mouth to mouth resuscitation to a cat,
It choked on a bone or something.
I said no and poked holes in my cake
With Michael's Pick Up Stix.

The Teabag

In the afternoon I had the party
And invited my imaginary friends
Susan, Shelia, Paddington Bear—
Tea for two and two.
I passed the cloth package
With its stapled string and label
The finest blend for robust flavor.

"Dunk it in and pass it on,"
I whispered to my guests,
It would hardly dye the water
After it made the rounds.
I wrapped it on my spoon
As I'd seen my father do,
Wound it tightly
Strangling, choking, hanging it.

Nora Infante

Sprinkled With Office Paper

1.

How is the season of long scarves
And short socks treating you?
Have you found some new sanity
In the smell of dry, dead
Leaves on the front lawn?
Here all is less than lively,
But look carefully,
And it's bursting with energy.
The sky has taken a color of coal,
Highlighted by ashes.
Ivy is growing quickly and it seems
Soon enough we'll have no place
To hang our laundry out to dry.
Clothes will be dripping and draping.
Today the sun hardly filtered through at all,
so the whole day has been a long night.

2.

Just yesterday I saw a generic self-defense handbook.
Open it and a cheap motel room key falls out.
The power of succumbing.
I wonder what Motel 6 would do
If they knew what their rooms
Were being used for:
Self-defense.
What would they say about
How many women
Are walking the dark streets
With Motel 6 keys clutched in their hands,
Praying to save their throats
From a sharp blade covered in shiny blood?
Praying to save the front of their dress
From dirty nails and strong fingers.
Self-defense.
Motel 6 would move to another city
or change their name. Shame.
Maybe they would stay. Proud.

Because of the great service they are doing
For your grandmother and my sister.
All because of generic
Self-defense.

3.

The phone just rang
With questions and information
About specific people and places: *I don't know.*
I sit here and imagine
There are seven more rooms in this office
Twelve more telephones
Six more radios
Fifty-nine lukewarm cups of coffee
And five people less roaming the carpet
With fingernails down to their knees.
I could answer the million and one inquisitive calls:
"Hello, I can whip up a metallic pinstripe at the tone.
Double-breasted? Oh, sorry you must have the wrong extension,
The wrong office, the wrong tailor,
The wrong station, the wrong program.
You read about this on the side of a cigarette carton?
Oh well, call on Monday,
We may have something in your size."

4.

I haven't received a pink slip yet.
Maybe I had better
Lick up the lunch crumbs from the desk
Comb my hair
And tie my pink ribbon.

5.

Still no sun or moon or cheese.
Just institutional tables
Foods and feelings.

Hope your leaves have fallen down
In straight rows under your window.

Vivian Christiansen

Sandinista Screwdriver

Tomas Borge arrives on Air Nicaragua.
His cheek-sucking hero's face
is haggard from hell's vacation,
his gringo's green is khaki the tint
of the olive that decorates his poisonous martini,
rippling along with the playerless piano's keys

Borge breathes in velvet.
A Republican's democratic face
its jowls padded with butter squares,
its Irish eyes begging him for domino.
Roll, boy roll, the good old one laughs.

In the game of zero sum, zero is a number.
Borge trusts his martini,
if not the man who beat it,
squeezed it strong as Sandinista red.
He's mute, his eyes level stiff as bored death.
He knows he's a begger in George Washington's parlor,
and the wig's long since been passed.
These days beggars play up or bleed;
Still Sandinista means *stay Red or drop Red*

Borge bites the domino.
Rubrication rules you color blind
because the fiction is food, righteous Fathers,
living your last in the Land of the Fat.
Peasants' pealed faces may sway with hunger's dizziness,
or from your bullets dying their brains your favorite color,
but your mind is immutable as a winning streak
in your invisible game of dominoes.
Cut your trench; I'll bury you in a piano case.

Bacchante Blues

to LX

"You do it, then someone comes along and does it pretty."
—Pablo Picasso

Slice me slender as the mandarin umbrella
that warms the naked light bulb of your face,
shaded in midnight like this town
where it's required to be a titillating whore.
Calloused finger tips beckon me into the red interior
of your black cadillac. Heal me with your black boots.
I inhale light, tart as limes, in your cry.
New Orleans' boozy breath has lured a languid minstrel,
his stoic brand of whiskey needs a swirling mind
like mine that finally snaps—off—a flickering lamp
absorbed in real light.

Eighteen years of pumps that make a cleavage
between my toes, and yellow hair prepared me
for fair games, but brilliantine daddy,
hanging on the juke box in your shimmering suit,
you switched on the light on Blanche du Bois;
you made happy shadows insubstantial souls.
So, Rockabilly's forlock split, split, splits your face.
Dangle me delirious, dip me jitterbug slick
to lick your ichor off the tiles. Shot to kill,
your dark eyes thick as cocaine's tooth-ache.

Loving is licking the glitter off your face to see
the scars of success, excess, LX.
Love is plucking the coins off my eyes
in the hole of a quarter after quarter movie theatre
where men and women become dogs and cats.
Prostitution is the artfulness of art,
but you died half-way. I may.
Your quest from deification is devoid
of darkness. But find me, daddy,
along a similar string of beads.

Detente

It is dancing that exorcises my sublimated soul
and begs a fluid answer to the question
splintered as style, hasty as my Charleston,
hazy as the evening we spend in this garish cotillion.

Your smile beguiles discotheque pretense.
This is our America amour—sing
me something superficial and I will touch
with filial freedom what wasn't mine until nine.
— Nihilism is the only freedom;
you show chagrin at patriotic pain.
Your necktie chokes you, dear—charmingly;
Mine is loose enough to dance with the abandon
Isadora might even die for again.

If your Moscow is a mint of non-returnable memories,
mine is rich in reaction: polio for the '80's,
fashions which dictate eyelashes grown long,
and a return to boogie-wiggle nerve gas.
Our brothers and sisters are twins in distrust;
but you and I piece together a tall truth.

It is bled from whipping wrought.
Mine is a moth suddenly myriad under light.
I want detente from a position of weakness.
I want a piece of your Moscow, and the glass
you crushed with placid face, "Truth?
It certainly isn't singular, my dear."

Lisa Record

The Depression

I'm into my eighth month of bread
and water and time to write.
Alive by treatments of rye and wheat,
both non-refillable prescriptions.

People were once proud
but now beg for a fix of rye
or a job of any sort and of any price.
Most of them never ask why,
or even how much longer
until they'll be alright.

"Things have to be bad before they're better,"
my government says through newspapers.
I wait for answers for logical questions,
the ones I'm encouraged to ask.
And I work in factories instead of schools,
make new blocks for sidewalks,
and now tremble when I hold a pen.

Margaret Epple

Dearest Sir,

We (in the Royal sense, darling) find your last letter swelling with pretentious rubbish that insults one's intelligence and our friendship.

You write that your 'deep and slow, silent despair culminates in a desire for everlasting death'.

Everlasting death?

And when has death been anything but everlasting?

Affected lines cannot affect me.

Oh Martin. You try to write to me of your feelings because I am your friend, but you stuff these emotions with such infected filling that I can only mock them.

Must I sift through words to discover you now?

How tiresome that becomes.

Write to me of our discoveries on the banks of the Cam where we once could laugh at our own worth and those rotted souls around.

I love your laughter, for though in it I sense emptiness, that sound was real.

Tell me how the smoke fills the pubs and lingers on the scratchy red booths until some ragged, grinning old char shoos us, the scarved students, away and sprays for tomorrow's raucous crowd.

Send me such truths.

Cambridge will be swept by winds now.

The students will huddle, like so many footballers, in the courts against the chill,

soon scattering, arm in arm, to spout

Byron, Bacon or Balzac.

Cursing the withered dons, they'll light fires

while they sip champagne, glowing with their wit

and newfound wisdom, saved by those hallowed halls.

Oh and they are young, these elite,

beloved by a world which stupidly
lifts them to heights undeserved.
Do you not remember? We saw and understood.
We spat on all this and turned away.
Today you return, become one of them
again in your letters. Must I reject you too,
with all of your airs and pasted faces?

Yet now I realise. I return as well.
We wore those garish masks,
ermine robes, the plummy tongues. I loved them.
I don them still. I, too, long to yield
to the world's delusion, to be placed
in the realm that surpasses truth
and protects us from ordinary people.
I condemn you for pretentiousness,
as we condemned others, but do you see?
I cannot survive outside it either.

Yes, darling. We actually do wish to retain
our lofty, ever so Cambridge ideals.
Stuff your next letter with ostentation,
cram every conceited word with falsity.
I cannot read anything else. For I sadly
understand that my mind is still drunk
with these once condemned illusions.

I remember our truths, our superior realisations,
our smug smiles.
And Martin, I am scared,
as I read your letters, as I write my own.

Stormy Stipe

Home

Shelling peas with practiced speed,
She swings on the screened porch
Engrossed in the land and her children—
With bare, blackened feet
Necklaces of sweaty dirt,
And dead leaves entangled in their hair.
Daring each other to go in the dark
Cold tobacco shed alone.
Donning palm branches for swords
Pinecones for torpedoes,
Digging up the cool dirt
To put down the shirts of their enemies.
Grinding the redness of pyracantha berries
Into their playmates' chests.

Supper time comes
Past the house,
Across the cotton field.

The children wash.
All gather.
Trees bend closer to home.

Game

Momma cried today,
Said it was for joy.
Joy because Wes brought us a deer.
"It's so big and fine. And the boy's only 14,"
She said again and again,
While she ran her hands down its sleek body,
Avoiding rich blood
That ruined the pure white
Of chalky teeth and one eye,
And ran down across his sculptured face,
Down from the fresh wound.
"Got him right in the top of his head too!"

We ate good tonight,
Ate until our ribs ached.
And I lay in front of the fire
Feeling like a baby, warm and full,
Forgetting how the deer might have been grazing.

Momma cried again today,
This time for Daddy,
While she rubbed his pipe against her stained apron,
As if to wipe his smell from it.
"He'll need this when he gets home," she said,
Wanting not to think of men with raised guns,
Who, when a body drops,
Pick, take his knife, his canteen,
Rob his still body,
Just as we took the antlers.
But then they go.

No, don't leave him.
Eat his flesh—
Make death worthwhile.
And after your bodies are so full they surely bulge,
Settle back in the warm dirt
And be content.

Mimi Orem

And the Poets Exploding Like Bombs

We are told things are not really as we see them,
but I see the bomb exploding.
A picture of greys and reds splatter in sunny air.

"Quite a picture," says the businessman through his cigar.
Turning to him. "What?"
He hands me another drink, pointing to the watercolor
in front of me, he repeats, "I said, quite a realistic painting
don't you think?"
"Oh." I stare down at my bourbon & seven,
seven minutes before the fallout.

Seven minutes before the smell of charcoal
and before the feel of snow in May.
Deep in the drifts, someone interrupts,
"We knew it would be good for you to get out—
be with friends."

Friends, do I know these people?
Nice home with nice pictures on the wall,
people laughing and drinking,
but I do not see my poet.
I stare around the room, looking for an embraceable
someone, someone to hold me when the world ends, someone
who won't smoke cigars and hand out drinks.

And this businessman tries to reach me again,
"You haven't touched your drink; your ice is melting."
"So are people."
"What?"
He does not understand that I am looking for someone
I cannot find.

I see a fire going in a lonely house.
poet and artist painting reds and greys.
Bombs explode from their fingertips.
Lovers preoccupied with death and a last embrace
before the fallout.

Before the parties end, and the watercolor drops,
crashing to the floor.
And before blank faces wonder
what they saw splatter in air.

Father

Madman Einstein I called you when a kid.
I remember you nights
into days into nights again.
Obsessed with theories and cures
for epilepsy, crib death, and sleep disorder.
REM NONREM,
red waves crashing on paper
rolled out by machines that went too fast.
I couldn't keep up
with the number of times nerves awaken in sleep,
by how many times that epileptic cat fell asleep
by how many times the red button next to the green one on top
beaped.

And the cats, the experimental cats
with the electrodes protruding from their furry heads,
like a permanent crown
adorned with silver wires and mini-radars.
Amazing cats you told me—
they recorded their own brainwaves.
And when one was lost, King cats infected by technology,
you said even amazing cats die.
But you wondered as well.
I heard you up in the dark,
echoing to yourself.
Couldn't understand,
what went wrong.
What went wrong?

Home for Christmas,
I see you in your rocking chair,
the one you made at twenty, still rocking—
never stopped your obsession,
that neuro-physiological love/hate relation with science.
Rocking out philosophies of sleep processes
to Mother, who still listens and accepts this affair.
Rocking out the chapters of "Dreams" for the next journal,
John Orem (et al.).
Your "dreams" were not ours,
sleep did not come in REM and NONREM for me,
but I understood the importance
of how many times
nerves awaken during sleep.

Sharon H. O'Neil

Where, Oh Where, is My Mother?

Freud gave me a father
who gave me a brother
to be jealous of.
Twenty years developed
my baseball envy
into such curiosity
that I killed my brother,
thereby saving my father
so he could show me
where he had hidden my mother.

More Cigarettes Than Matches

People change
or just their habits do,
rearranged for style
or size. We wait,
pick up lines not struck
in the right places
and give each other sentences.
We compare scars over tea,
graduate to coffee
and intellectual pastries.
We are so clever, so careful
to scrape this off our plates
and that off our lists
as our posture sucks in talk—
smoke—talk.

Mary Louise Lynch

You Say, Calmly Standing There
in Your Pressed White Coat

I challenge you,
all of you doctors,
to crawl inside my body
feel my webbed interior.

Now watch me closely—
that constant tug of war
on vessels, two teams
equally strong.

Doctor, watch the game—
see the vessels
stretched and pulled
pulled and stretched.

Now hurry doctor,
see that vessel break
and the shock the rest
must endure.

Electrical impulses shoot
robbing energy.
No use doctor, you're trapped with me
blood fast. Let it take its course.

I fell asleep you said,
shaking me to wake.
Answer your question?
How does it feel?
I laugh, closing my eyes.

Kata Conlon

Attention Span

As the value of K gets bigger
And the inverse of its square decreases,
You will notice the louvered light dance
Off the empty desks across the room.

During compound interest where E denotes
Certain values of constant population,
Your eyes wander and read jacket labels
That hang from the chairs two rows ahead of you.

While logarithm bases fluctuate,
With X and Y in direct proportion,
You examine the flaws in your nails
And peel away the polish for the next hour.

Amy Knox Brown

Bodies

You named your cadaver Aunt Emma
and speak of her affectionately,
your voice thin through miles of wires.
"Today I dissected her chest."
I imagine you
scrub-suited, dark eyes
peering down at Aunt Emma's breasts.
Afterwards you threw them away
like the pouch of gizzards
stuffed in fryers,
the smell of formaldehyde
lingering on your fingers.

Once I asked
why you wanted to be a doctor
and you said,
"Because I like bodies."
That night, late August,
we lay naked on the fourth hole
at Oak Hills Country Club.
Turf short as a boy's crewcut
scraped my knees raw.
From the highway
sirens sliced through air
and your fingers traced
the shiver
that rippled down my spine.

The blood congealed in Aunt Emma's veins
makes you think of sand
as you peel back skin,
cut away muscles
and set them aside
like the loose threads
you pick off your trousers
in the morning.
I imagine you
deaf to the fluorescent hum of lights,
eyes scanning tendons, bones.
You realize the body
is not as mysterious as they say.

Now when you touch me
will your hands slide over skin,
unconsciously counting ribs,
will your mind flash back
to cool bloodless flesh,
will you remember
its perfect acquiescence?

Staking Claims

Tonight the full moon
makes us crazy
as a couple of dogs
let loose after weeks penned
in a closed room.
We run through woods,
skid down a path of pine needles
on our butts and
hit the dock,
feet first.
A breeze stirs hairs
on the back of my neck.

In the boat
we skim over Woman Lake
like a greyhound,
so fast air forces screams
back into my throat,
roars like a machine
in my ears.

Now we are out so far
I see nothing but water.
You cut the engine,
pop the cork
on the champagne
you stole from your father's wine cellar.
Standing together
on the top of the boat
we gaze at the moon,
heads tipped back,
dogs ready to bay.

Killing Grasshoppers

Summer nights
I lay under you
on sheets, damp
from our bodies,
pinned

like those grasshoppers
you used to catch
and pin,
still alive,
legs jerking,
to the lids of shoeboxes.
Summers ago
you stuffed Coke bottles
full of them,
lined the bottles
like bowling pins
on the driveway.
Playing the warden
you paced around your prisoners,
imagined you could hear them chirping,
"Let me go."
At night
you dreamed of blank eyes
and quivering antennae
that metamorphosed
into breasts and legs
and woke to the noise of cicadas,
your whole body itching with heat.

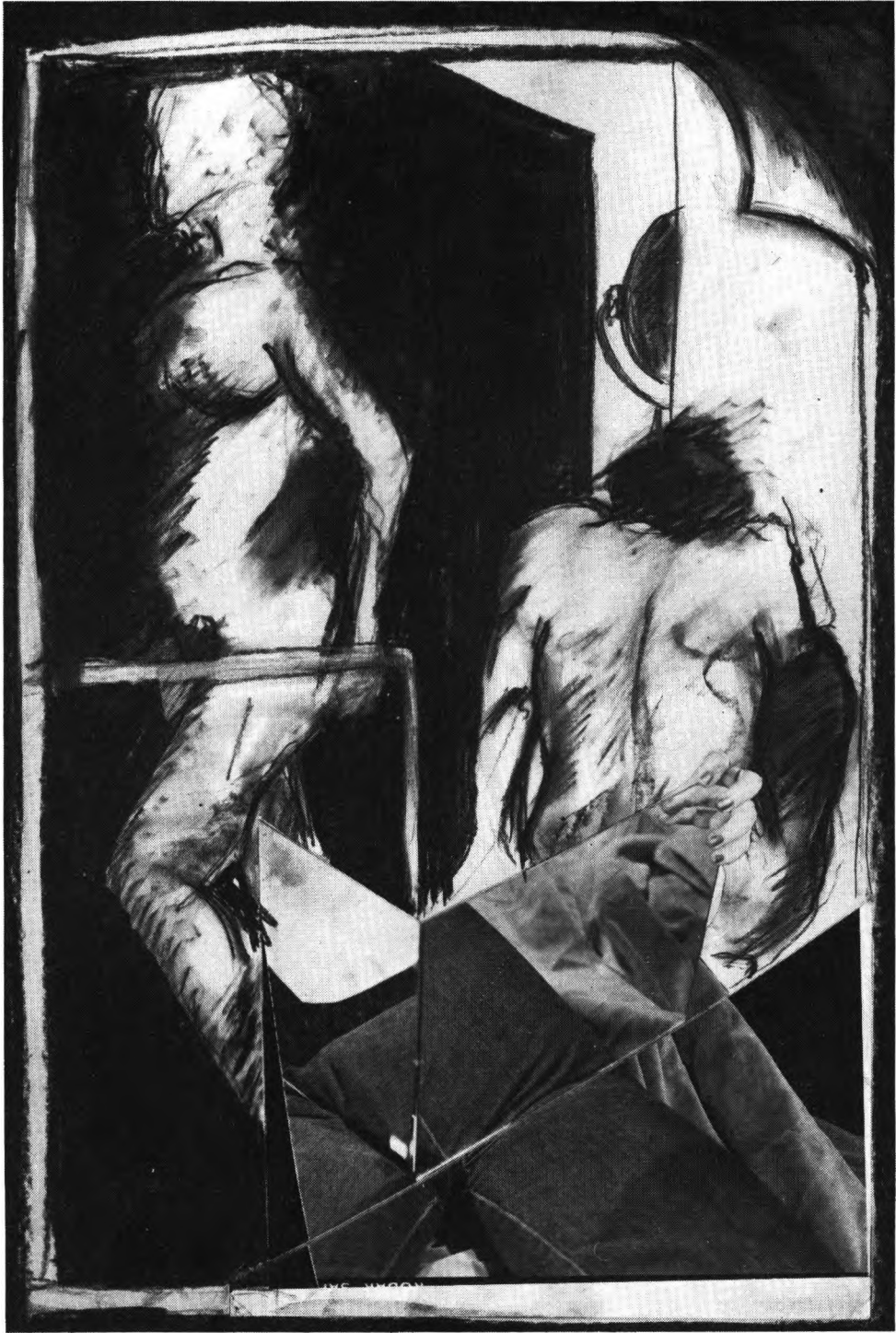
Your hands slide easily up my ribs
as if you were stripping off
a grasshopper's wings.
Sometimes you did that,
let them struggle on hot cement
then tossed a lit firecracker,
watched one clutch it
and explode.

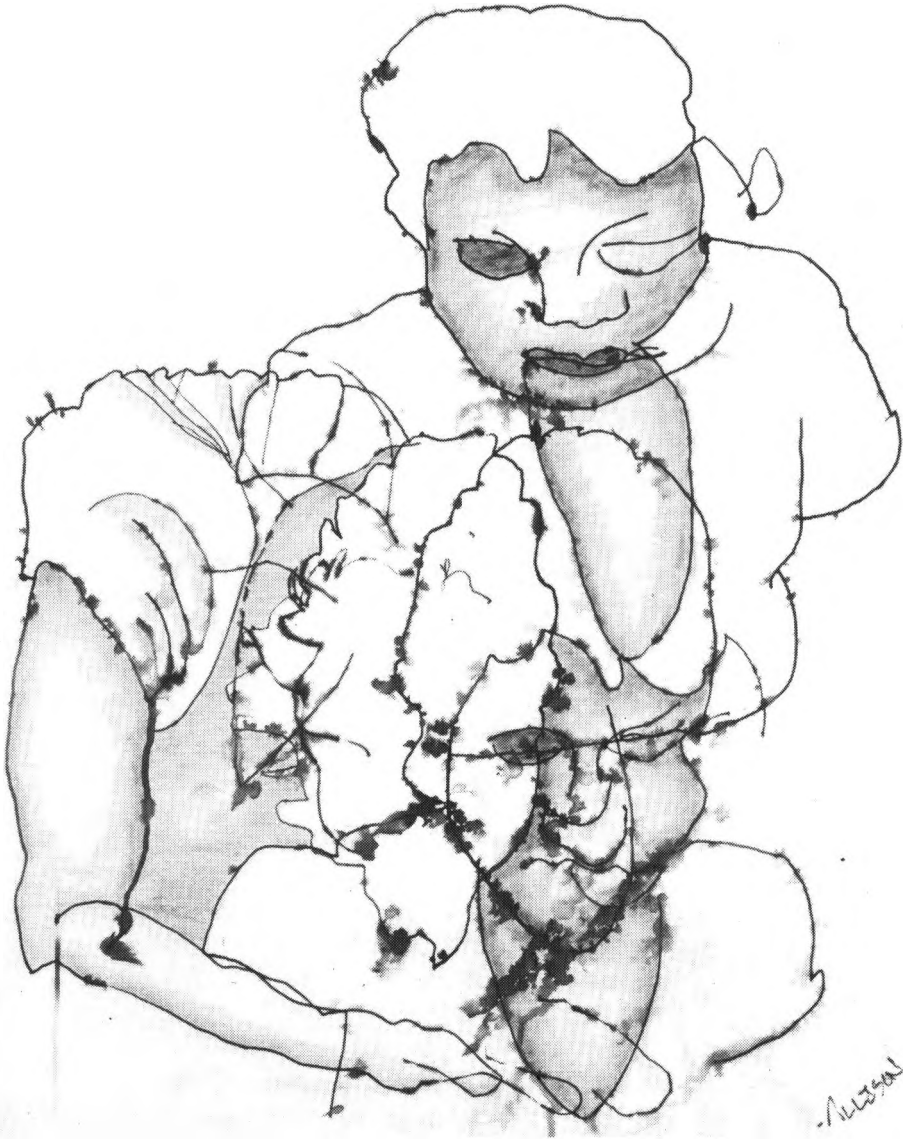












Diamonds

The stage is bare except for a loft (which should look somewhat like a beach lifeguard station) which is about ten feet above where the visible character, a woman who is about twenty years old and dressed in a long slip, is sitting on a large silk pillow. Her legs are crossed and her hands are over her knees as if she is meditating. In the loft is a man who is heard but not seen. He has a deck of cards, dresses, and shoes which he drops to the woman at particular moments in the play.

A playing card (twice as large as average playing cards and weighted) drops from the loft. The woman picks it up, looks at it, folds it into an airplane, and throws it in any direction. She laughs abruptly.

WOMAN: I ask for aspirin; you give me an ace. Does it have some significance? High? Low? Can it read my palm? Will my headache go away? Do I have only one minute left to live one life? Or is it just another card to confuse me?

A card drops from the loft but falls out of her reach.

I'm not going to exert myself for a three of spades.

A card drops in front of her. She picks it up.

Mmm. . . Three of spades. (pause) You think I'll think I was wrong about the other three of spades and I'll be so curious to prove myself wrong that I'll be compelled to pick up the card. Well I'm not stupid and I am not moving. If I was right a minute ago, then I still am.

Music from a radio is heard from the loft.

Stop it.

The sound of radio stations being rapidly changed is heard.

Stop stop stop it!

Music from a country/western radio station is heard.

It's too early for music. Find the news.

MAN'S VOICE: (*imitating a radio newscast*) South Africa has raised the price of diamonds to six cents a pound, upsetting apartheid commitments. And the weather today will be the same throughout the world . . . warm with warm with warm with scattered tropical-rain-forest-rain, causing ankle-flooding . . .

Three playing cards are dropped, one after the other, from the loft.

The streets will be . . . Pick them up. Will be buried in snow, preventing unnecessary precautions against unexpected brush fires surrounding the city, the cities . . . Pick them up!

She picks up the three cards.

WOMAN: Diamond! Diamonds! Diamonds!

A deck of cards falls from the loft and hits her on the head.

(*Rubbing her head*) O.K. O.K. So they are all spades, all threes of spades, who cares? I mean why the hell are you dropping duplicates anyway? What happened to your originality that originally attracted you to me? (*pause*) Are you going to drink your coffee?

MAN'S VOICE: (*imitating a radio commercial*) Yes! You too can add flavor to your life with the latest video nightclubs. For only thirty-nine ninety-five you can have hundreds of mod people bopping to the most current hits in your home. Yes, imagine it now! No more dull evenings brushing the dog. We have a nightclub for every home system. Just send your

WOMAN: Shut up! (*pause*) Sorry. Hey, look, I uh, I know you make the cards so why can't you just drop me a diamond?

MAN'S VOICE: We have oldtime southern ballroom videos, we have

WOMAN: You do make them. Is that supposed to be fair?

MAN'S VOICE: If you're still square, we have Southern Country Jamboree.

WOMAN: Why do you buy coffee and never drink it?

MAN'S VOICE: We have Southern South Side Punks.

WOMAN: I can hear you pouring it into the plants.

MAN'S VOICE: We have southern

WOMAN: (*as if swearing*) Sorry! (*as if apologizing*) Shut up. I'm late for work.

MAN'S VOICE: We have we

WOMAN: I need clothes for work.

A southern ballgown is dropped from the loft.

MAN'S VOICE: And now, back to the news. Yesterday, the U.S. misplaced a foot in Nicaragua. However, the President stated that there's no need for concern or press since all of our feet are shoed in

Odor-Eaters. And now we bring you back to our music with the latest hit by our favorite boy from Memphis. (*imitates the stereotype of teenage girls' screeching*) Oh Elvis, Elvis! Tie my blue shoes for me Elvis! Take my scarf Elvis. Mom, Dad, I'd like you to meet my Elvis. (*back to imitating a radio announcer's voice*) Yes folks, you guessed it, Elvis Presley is here in person to tell you about his latest hit-home-video, Suspicious Minds. Hum a few bars for us, El-vus. (*hums a few bars of the song*) We have — oh yes we do—Elvis Southern videos-o-os. Thank you Elvis. Now, back to the news.

WOMAN: Give me clothes a human can wear. I keep getting later to work. And drink your goddamned coffee. Does it need sugar? More sugar? Milk? Coffee? Give me some clothes!

A card drops from the loft.

MAN'S VOICE: And now for the news.

WOMAN: I have to go to work an hour ago.

MAN'S VOICE: April to June. June to July, August through January. Buy your subscription now.

WOMAN: How about a diamond if you won't give me real clothes?

MAN'S VOICE: And now we go back in time for today's news bulletin.

A dress is dropped from the loft. She puts it on. A shoe drops from above. She puts it on her left foot, then her right.

Early last night, the din for equity was heard at Disneyland which subsequently was closed for repairs but is scheduled to reopen at countdown. The L.A. Rams and the Los Angeles Dollars signed contracts today to let Michael Jackson write the soundtrack for their new southern video.

WOMAN: Shoe. (*pause*) Shoe!

MAN'S VOICE: Don't interrupt the broadcast or you will be shot.

A shoe drops from the loft.

On Wall Street, consumer wardrobes declined sharply. Hershey corporation will sponsor educational television commercials for underprivileged children.

Three more shoes are dropped from the loft.

WOMAN: Does one expect one to walk through one's life with one shoe?

MAN'S VOICE: Signed contracting contracts.

WOMAN: Do you expect me to hop around ignoring my left foot? I'm talking balance; give me another shoe.

A matching shoe is dropped from the loft. She puts it on.

MAN'S VOICE: Questions have been raised in direct parallel to the oppositions' eyebrows, ending on a professional sports basis.

WOMAN: How low were the questions?

MAN'S VOICE: Parallel. Parallel.

Woman takes off her right shoe and looks inside it.

WOMAN: Even after they were raised?

I Really Hope it's Been One of the Better Days of Your Life, Elizabeth

Set: A bedroom, wallpaper is dull and aging, there is an iron bed just left of center-stage back. It is completely dark now; when light is used it should have a yellow tone.

Light slowly comes over the top of the bed, like a spotlight, but it is soft, dream-like, not bright. A young woman, perhaps in her late teens, wakes immediately, as though she is frightened. She wears a white nightgown.

ELIZABETH: *(speaks loudly, with fear)* Hello, hello

A phone rings. She pulls off covers, sits on audience's right side of bed; a light comes up over a woman sitting to the right of the bed. She wears a tailored dress; she is not entirely modern. There is a table near her with a phone on it. She speaks quickly, without feeling, somewhat nasally and masculinely — a bit like a telephone operator. Light fades off girl.

WOMAN: *(speaking into phone)* I really hope it's been one of the better days of your life, Elizabeth, and if your not sitting, do. I took it upon myself to inform you that your mother was killed in a car accident today—I do hope your sitting. It was on the corner by Stockdales, they were having a fabulous sale. You wouldn't believe the bargain I got on this pink silk dress, it's no more than fabulous. Then there were wonderful accesories on the third floor, got a marvelous hat, and gloves like you could never imagine. *(her voice rapidly quickens, then begins to fade)* Then on to the eighth for linens, then thirty-third for hosiery, then seventy-ninth for jewels, one-hundred and eleventh for perfume, one-thousand fif-

teen for nasal spray . . .

Light on WOMAN blacks out. Lights come up on ELIZABETH, then go softly down to center stage, where ELIZABETH runs.

ELIZABETH: *(shouts)* No!

She now stands center stage. Stage left: a light comes up on a man. He is middle-aged, dressed conventionally, a bit sloppily.

MAN: She's really gone Elizabeth. You know what that means; you've got a lot of growing up to do.

ELIZABETH: One hour after the funeral, where did all the scotch go? Three days after the funeral, you're wearing a new cologne, scottish brand. Of all the liquors you could have chosen you picked a real skunk. Three years after the funeral, I can't find my way to the bathroom — too many empty bottles — quite a collection he has, and I still hate the smell.

MAN is blacked out, light goes on a woman to the opposite side of the man. She is ELIZABETH'S STEPMOTHER. She is dressed very conventionally, revealing nothing. Her hair and face are plain, somewhat evil looking.

STEMMOTHER: He's your father; you have no right to talk to him that way.

ELIZABETH: *(speaks without turning towards or looking at STEPMOTHER who stands a little behind her. ELIZABETH'S tone is light, without making sarcasm too obvious)* You can come up with something more original than that.

STEMMOTHER: You always have been difficult Liz Beth.

ELIZABETH: On second thought, you probably couldn't.

STEMMOTHER: The Kennedys are having a brunch next Thursday. You'll need something modest, preferably pastel—and wear half the paint, those girls won't be done up like that. Remember, you're representing the family.

ELIZABETH: You forgot to mention the chastity belt.

STEMMOTHER: Radical

ELIZABETH: Conformist

STEMMOTHER: You've always been entranced with oddity-four-inch heels.

ELIZABETH: Color vocabulary: navy blue, beige.

STEMMOTHER: If there's swimming after the party you'd be better keeping on your sundress; they wouldn't dream of wearing those low-cut swimsuits on the East Coast.

ELIZABETH: So there are no dreams on the East Coast.

STEMMOTHER: By the way, you could stand to lose ten pounds.

ELIZABETH: I feel grades coming.

STEMMOTHER: A ninety-four? Well, I should certainly hope you'd be able to bring it up to at least a ninety-eight; it's an easy school, Liz Beth. Of course Martin's done wonderfully: all B's, and you really have to work for a B at . . .

ELIZABETH: Chipmunk Teck.

STEMMOTHER: His accounting is coming along fabulously—he's gotten into one of the top fraternities, is dating a very smart girl—darling personality . . .

ELIZABETH: Must need plastic surgery.

STEMMOTHER: (*very quickly now*) He's thinking about running for class president; he'll probably get a job with the largest accounting firm in the world. (*very fast, begins to fade*) I think he may even run for president; he could win the Nobel Peace Prize for accounting-and-presidency. He could conquer the Russians, he could invent a better ping-pong ball.

STEMMOTHER *is blackened out. In corner, backstage left, a light comes up on a young man sitting on the floor, playing a guitar. He has sloppy hair and spontaneous, unpretentious clothing. ELIZABETH hears his soft music: she approaches him.*

ELIZABETH: So, when's the world going to start demanding its favorite folk singer intellectual?

BOY: (*gives a last dramatic strum*) Any side but mine, right.

ELIZABETH: What a way with words you have.

BOY: (*stands, approaches her*) Just when did you acquire this hatred for poets.

ELIZABETH: (*walks upstage, stage left is softly lit now*) When was it we met—last March I believe?

BOY: Unoriginal

ELIZABETH: *Failed* humanist.

BOY: In what way?

ELIZABETH: Lust.

BOY: (*moves closer to her*) You call that inhuman.

ELIZABETH: In your case, boring.

BOY: You jest.

ELIZABETH: Nay, you were the one who cherished that space of yours you always had to be in.

BOY: (*brief pause*) Sometimes I need to sleep alone, it gives me a chance to clear my head—just happened my head needed clearing the night you decide to prance around in a G-string. . . That's the trouble with you Beth, you don't understand space.

ELIZABETH: Never been there.

BOY: Smart ass.

ELIZABETH: . . . Impotent.

BOY: You want a fight, don't you.

ELIZABETH: Wanna be in my own space now.

BOY: You're forgetting lust.

ELIZABETH: Impotent.

He begins to unzip his pants; she snaps her fingers and, but for her, all is blacked out. Light comes up on a girl, backstage right,

she is dressed femininely.

GIRL: Bitter, bitter.

ELIZABETH: (*does not face her*) you accuse without knowledge.

GIRL: I needn't remind you that I had four years of psychology . . .

ELIZABETH: And you really have to work to get a B.

GIRL: At Emily Dickinson — and I won't remind you I had two jobs.

ELIZABETH: She never reminds.

GIRL: What I really wanted to know is, can I . . .

ELIZABETH: Certainly not an English major.

GIRL: Borrow your pink silk dress, I'm not sure it'll fit, of course I'm a little larger in the bust. I'll just get it out of my—your closet.

ELIZABETH: Fine, it won't go past your not-so-better-half anyway.

GIRL: You know (*goes to front stage right, she stands opposite ELIZABETH they do not look at each other*), you've been awfully ill-tempered lately, like slamming the door just because I accidentally threw away your journal . . . for God's sake, Liz, it's just sex. It's not your fault if no one's dying to wake up next to you.

ELIZABETH: They always assume it can only happen at night.

GIRL: And that ridiculous beatnik who claims to be a folk singer you lust after. Surely even you can do better.

ELIZABETH: And this is a *nice* day for her.

GIRL: I'll just grab the dress and run.

ELIZABETH: Has a straight skirt—no good for you, doesn't accomodate groups so well.

GIRL: I'm sure I'll be smashing in it, pink weakens men—I learned that in psychology.

ELIZABETH: And they gave you a diploma.

GIRL: Who knows? Maybe I'll be the next Sigmund Freud, cure manic depression.

ELIZABETH: Sure you didn't mean cause?

GIRL: (*says quickly, then fades*) I'll go over the world solving people's problems and I'll be invited to all kinds of parties. I'll be asked to write a book, they'll want to know who designs my dresses and what kind of make-up I wear, all natural crushed fish scales, of course. (*black out on girl. ELIZABETH goes to center stage*)

ELIZABETH'S FATHER: (*lights come up on him as he approaches*) She really is dead, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: No.

STEPMOTHER: (*lights come up on her as she approaches*) Wear half the paint to the funeral—no runny mascara

ELIZABETH: No.

BOY: (*lights come up on him as he approaches*) She's probably in her own space now.

GIRL: (*lights come up on her as she approaches*) She was probably a manic depressive.

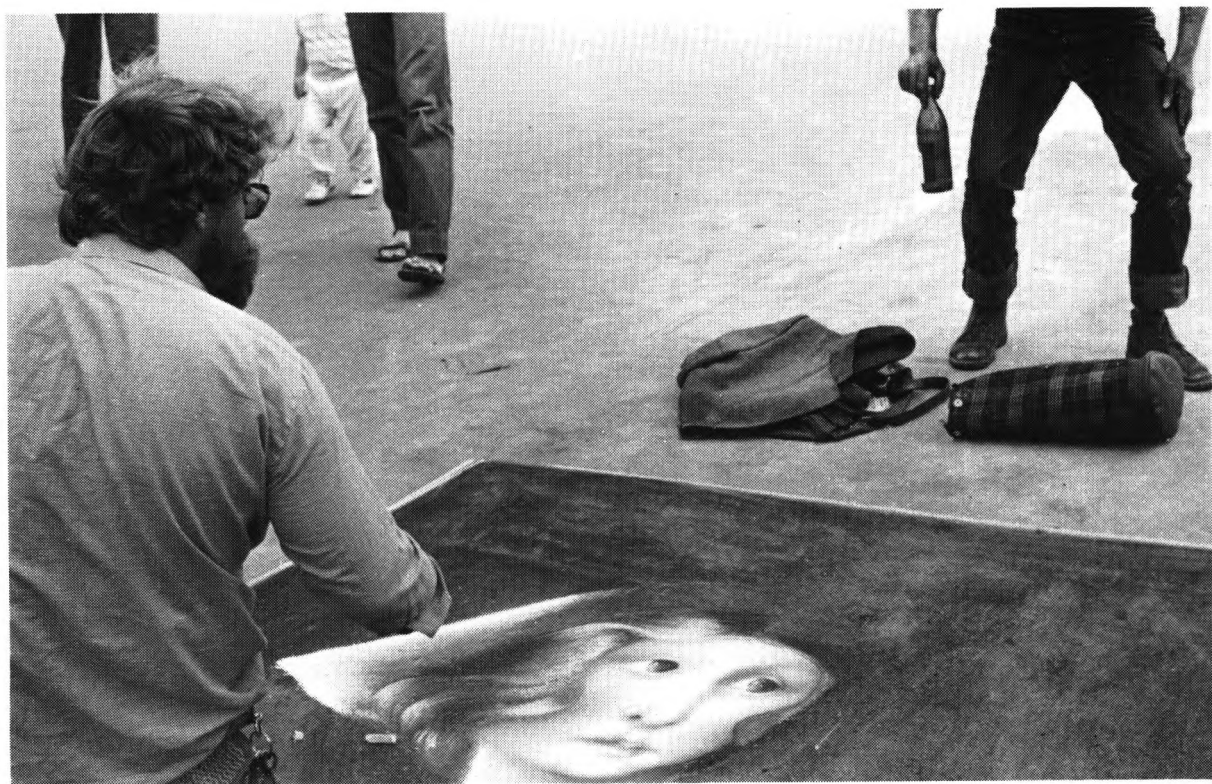
All form an arc around Elizabeth.

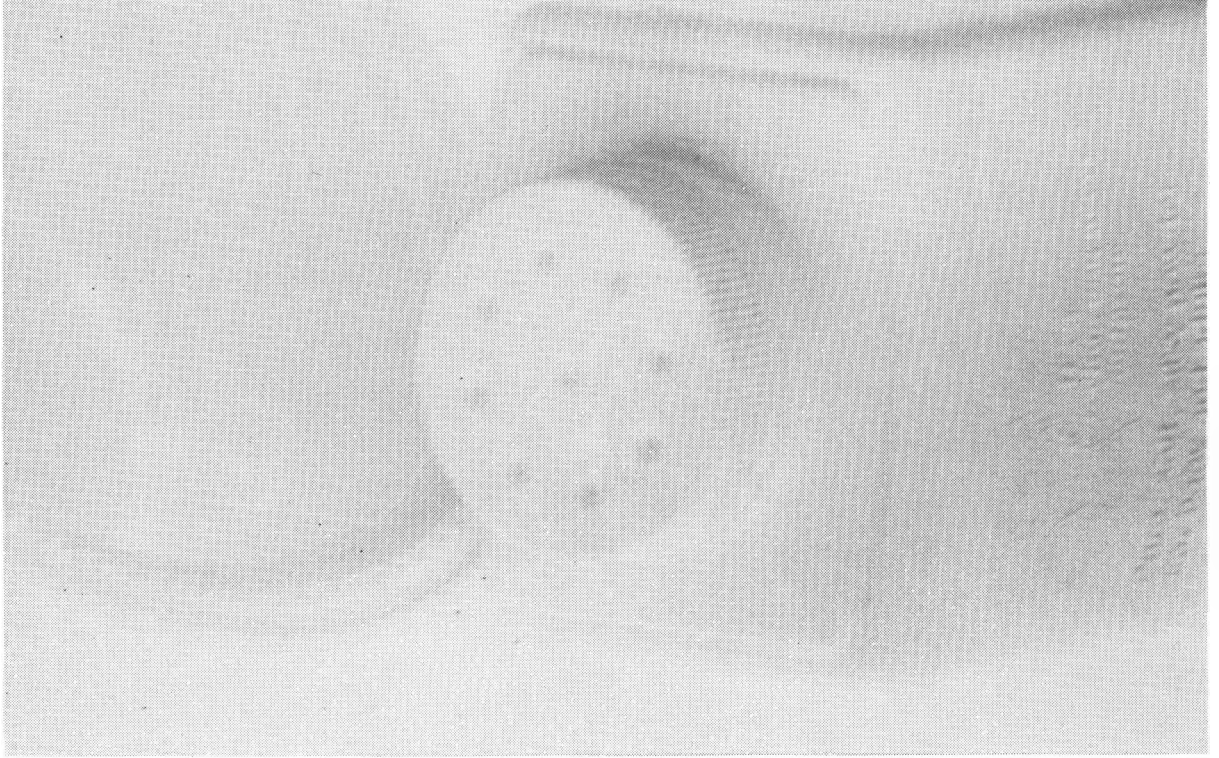
ELIZABETH: No!

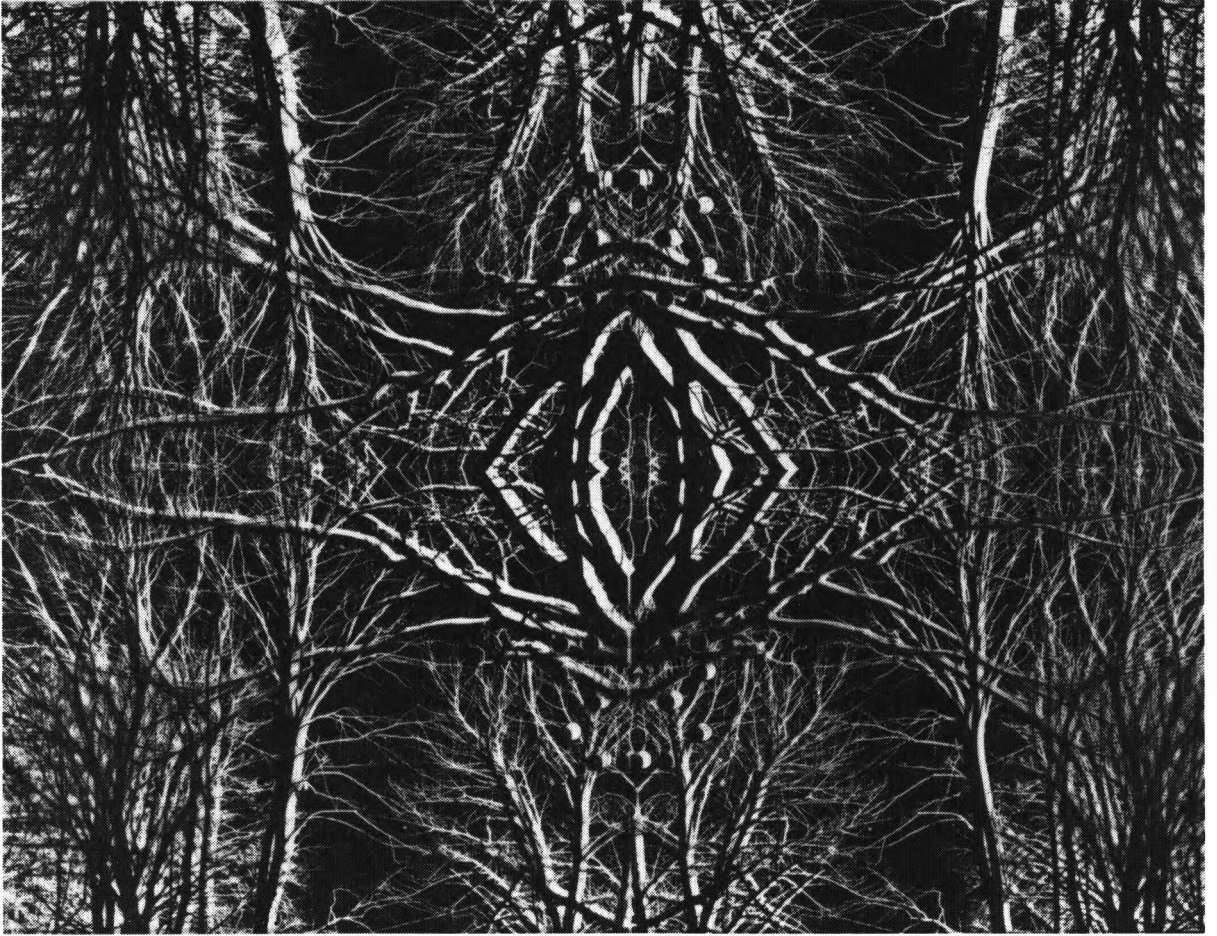
Light comes up on woman at phone.

WOMAN: They had the most fabulous golden slippers and scarfs, purses and earrings, and the steering wheel was in the street and there was blood everywhere, and her pink silk dress was torn to shreds, covered in blood, and such a pretty dress! Such a pretty woman . . . *Blackout, the buzz of the telephone is heard as it is dropped. A bluish light comes up on a woman in a pink silk dress — stage right. She hangs up phone. Blackout.*













Barbara Swafford

I Guess it's Night Now

March 27, 1991

Mommy and Daddy,

My old letter is gone today so I guess the woman mailed it. She watches me lots and takes care of me until you're back. I wish you were here. I miss you guys and I want to go home. I've drawn some more pictures to send to you. I hope you get them soon. I don't have nothing to do here except sleep eat and draw pictures and write to you guys.

I walked around the school today not outside though because the woman says it's not safe yet. We're in the basement the woman says so we're safer. There are sick people here just like she said. People are tired and lying down always. I saw three people get sick when I walked around. They were throwing up and everything. There were only four other kids besides me there. The woman says they lost one, but I guess they'll find him soon because this place ain't that big. The other kids are all too sick to play. One even has burns like she's been in a fire. They're red burns and she was crying and screaming a lot. Some of the big people have burns too but they don't scream or anything. The woman says that one of the burned women is losing her hair. I guess she's like Uncle Chester. The woman wouldn't let me go to one part of the basement because the bad burns and bleeders are there she says. I'm kind of glad I can't go because I hate blood and even the little red burns girl made me cry.

I'm thirsty a lot, but the woman says the water's no good so we're drinking water from bottles. She says I'm young and should try to do without. I don't eat much neither. We've all been eating can stuff like

beans and some shriveled fruit too. Some of the old people with spaces like mine talk about a big mushroom but I haven't seen it yet. I don't like mushrooms I tell them and then they get teary and say no one does. I don't understand that we have to have them if no one wants them, but I'm quiet. Someone else can have my share.

I've been really tired all day, but I don't know why. I did draw eight pictures today though. I feel bad because I drew you eleven yesterday. It's not that I miss you all less, it's just that I'm so tired. I'm going to bed really early today so that I'll be awake if you guys come here tomorrow. The woman says that she'll wake me if you come in the night, so let her know who you want when you get here, and she'll come get me right away. I'll write to you tomorrow and draw some more too.

March 30, 1991

Mommy, Daddy and Joey,

I haven't been able to draw for a few days because I was real tired. Now is the first time the woman has let me have my paper and colors. She says I really need my rest and I tell her I'll take a nap if I can write and draw and maybe go for a walk because I'm getting so bored.

The old man by my space said to the woman that he'd heard they had lost the little red burns girl just like they lost the other kid. The woman says this is true. I hope they don't lose me too.

There are less and less people here every day. I guess they're all going home. I wish you guys would come for me so I could go home too.

The woman says that she's never met Uncle Chester, but she guesses that the lady with no hair looks a lot like him. I want to go visiting with her, but the woman says that the bald lady's sick. Maybe tomorrow she says.

I can only draw one picture today and this letter is real short. I really need to take a nap because I'm tired. The woman says I don't eat right but I do. I just throw it up sometimes though. Maybe tomorrow I can write more and go for a walk she says if I'm not as tired.

April 7, 1991

I won't draw any pictures today. I'm not even knowing why I'm writing anymore. The woman wasn't watching me the other day and I got out of
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bed. I wanted to visit with the bald lady, but I couldn't find her anywhere. I got really tired and had to sit down even before I got back to my space.

The only seat I found near me was by a trash can. It was filled with the pictures I made for you and my letters were in there too. I can't find the woman to ask her what happened all I could do was cry when I did get back to my space. I think that maybe you guys sent them back and that you're not ever coming to get me here. But Joey said he would come with you guys and I guess I believe him. I wish you guys would have gotten my pictures. Maybe you don't know I'm here and am sad like I am.

I'm real tired and going to sleep. Maybe the woman will explain when she comes to check up on me. I wish you guys would get here soon. I'm really tired and I want to go home. I am throwing up everything and the woman said the other day that that is why I am very weak.

I will sleep now. I dream of you guys every night and of Uncle Chester. It makes me sad because I've never seen a girl with no hair except me. I hope I don't grow up if I have to look like him.



Blue Cul-De-Sac

*to Thomas Dillingham
and Carey Kaltenbach*

The screams of seagulls resound freely over the blue and mysterious immensity.

The thin sand burns the arches of my bare feet. When I walk, my feet sink deeply into this smokeless fire. This burn increases with each step that I take. Every time I lift my feet from this hellish sand, a thousand crystalline stones slide to the side or jump ahead of them. During these jumps, with the phosphorescent complicity of the Egyptian's idol, Ra, the silica and the quartz metamorphose into a diamond's dust. The thinner particles of these diamonds regroup into a diabolic chain of Kamikazes and, helped by the northern wind, drive into my eyes. Simultaneously, the wings of the offensive wind bring salt to my nostrils. This familiar scent allows my sense to intensely feel the magnetism of the ocean. Like a spy, I follow my mind travelling inside Poseidon's immortal and free territory. Climbing the sandhill, I stumble against a dry shell from a horseshoe crab. Knocking the enormous shell, I interrupt the cleansing work of an army of red ants. In the confusion, these Lilliputian slaves still run orderly to a miniature underground tunnel dug by their own engineering near a grey polished stone. As I walk the last yards of the dune, I feel the Viking's wind more vividly against my skin. I take a deep breath full of sea-scent. The drying effect of the sun amplifies the strong smell which is a mixture of salt, shells, seaweed, rocks, wet sand, and gluey octopuses dying on the dry beach. Standing at the top of the dune, I discover Father Neptune. My eyes trick me because its thin blue veil is in reality a transparent, sometimes green or grey extension. I recognize the circular motion of the waves only by the soapy foam splashing like popcorn here and there. The

bluish grey of the horizon contrasts widely with the bluest blue of the water. White cumulus charge the sky with ghostly filaments. Pushed by the wind, they travel placidly over the ocean, the prairie, the mountain and back to the ocean, continuously. The predominant blue representing satiety and movement, contrasts sharply with the desert like color of the beach revealing dehydration and stasis. In the middle of the beach, two palm trees stand against the wind, like two lost sentinels guarding a precious treasure. Between the trees, I see a man lying on a wooden bench. I walk down the hill, sit in the middle of it, and roll and roll and roll, remembering my childhood until my body stops against the flatness of the beach. I stand up. I shake my hair releasing a rain of stony drops. Walking slowly to the palm trees, I breathe back the playful life of my boyhood. I preciously savour this childish air of the ocean. Approaching the two lost sentinels, I glance at the man on the pine bench; I think he is probably asleep. As I come closer, my subconscious alerts me to some kind of danger. Anxiety embraces my whole body. About twenty feet from the old man, I stop. His body looks tense, not like the natural position of sleep. I walk slowly in a circle in order to face the top of his head. Now I can see his face, his blue eyes wide open. His mouth slightly contracted, lets flow a thin line of dry blood. In the middle of his floppy, grey hairy chest there is a little hole.

The screams of seagulls resound freely over the blue and mysterious immensity.

The Cenotaph

Conformity comes in the form of a John Romanoff, who sits gracefully next to me in a once cool cafe. His linen suit is forest green; his manners are imported; his talk is banal bliss. "Noodles Romanoff," I laugh to myself, losing his train of talk.

I look at him politely: I want his blinders for just an hour or two. What must it be like to own sports teams, senators, newspapers. . .? He's never had to think. He has nothing to say; but it doesn't matter: I'm content to sneak looks at his profile, something real against his gutless electric bar with carpet one could trip on, with a disco ball hanging pendulously above my head, sparkling on to a syrupy chandelier. I feel pairs and pairs of eyes on me, and my escort's particularly, I feel the sting of the only orgasm I'll get tonight: vanity and with it a stab of pain. Alas, I'm a lumpy roast in a meat market, and everywhere I look I see the same faces, the same clothes, the same drab expression I've worked hard to acquire. Money, money, money manifested; and I, too, (If I can learn to play ball—and play with his balls) can be a diamond neon, a sports car in shape of his phallus; a smiler, a winker, a drippingly cool "lady," a Romanoff, a noodle-brained, goddamned Romanoff.

And what is this "cool?" A gauge of something, I expect; whatever, he seems to possess that fashionable virtue due to his extreme composure. In his case, it's an inherited quality, like a football team, or a house in the Rocky Mountains, or an arrogant nose.

Knowing I shouldn't mention it, I say anyway: "Do you remember the bar that used to be here?" My excuse is boredom.

He coughs derisively.

"I was here quite a bit then," I continue prettily.

He orders another brandy and soda; I shouldn't expect him to answer.

After all, it was torn down. Bili's edifice smashed.

"Do coke?" he asks casually.

Not your way, I think. I shake my head, no.

"Ski?"

"Yes, sometimes."

"Play tennis?"

"When I . . ." I pause, noticing with a certain disgust that his eyes are reflectionless.

"When what?" He leans closer. "Sorry, I can't hear you." He grins condescendingly, "Music's too loud."

"When I . . . can," I say scooting my chair backwards a bit. "You?"

"When I can." He swallows his drink with a haughty air that makes me blurt drunkenly, aghast at myself:

"Screw?"

He pauses. He sniffs, then smiles stiffly, standing up with a soiled expression on his upper lip, "Not if I can be *sucked*, my charming 'lidy.'" The bill sticks magically to his finger as he leaves me alone.

I sit back, stung, and wonder how I could explain things to someone like him. "Sorry I blew the coke off your tray. I've never done it that way before." That logic might work for him. Blew it all away—the power to change things in my beloved, fucked-up town—the vicarious, sickening power, snuffed onto the orange shag carpet of the electric discotheque.

I see him drive silkedly away from the picture window that used to reflect me dancing dizzily upon—perhaps—this very table in a bar by another name, in a town by another smell, in another mind, in a . . . never mind. Everything was different then, than now when the snow seems to shit on Denver's Capitol Building, since it turns cancerous gray immediately upon impact. Capitol Hill isn't even a ghost of itself, I think, and sip my warm wine wishing I could go back; it could go back, to not only a time but a place within the visceral fluids of our bellies, where it hurt; where it all hurt.

The spirit of the heart of my city is dead; mine went with it: just a ball of Bili's pit churning in the gutter. My throes of liquid desire, as anguished as a sexual cry, became righteous withdrawal, which became minor hiccups, nervous tics; then disappeared like the variant spicy smells of a friendly slum frozen into Forest Dream disinfectant.

Icicles drop with thuds on the new white concrete that won't burn your feet. Broken bottles used to lace the jet asphalt like broken bum's teeth. I used to decorate this street once too: pathetically evanescent, a waning, stumbling young woman with angry adolescent eyes and bruises. Could it be this calm, rather stiff, very smooth neighborhood was once a place—embarrassingly close to the State Capitol!—where one could trade a watch for a gram of heroin in the middle of the street; where dancing was a public affair, its ethnicity changing on every block; a place where nothing was swept under, beneath, or aside, until the entire neighborhood

and its occupants were swept entirely away?

I mesh with ribs of my chair as I settle into the pictures the memory and burgundy provide, the smiling shots; so sad now that time has told me their meaning. I feel myself laughing and chewing the thin glass that contains my wine.

Suddenly, I've been transported; backwards, slick, and open-eyed I slide back through the frightening tube of time's roller coaster. "To your cock, John Calvin," a voice says. I've made the sacrificial toast.

Bili?

And when I close my eyes, Capitol Hill's subterranean splendor transposes the lightning sparkling of my slate-like mind's eye. Again I am there, climbing the tall stair-hall to sit in scented cushions amongst chatter in a din for the rich in repartee. Private! The torn plaster walls betray tales of frantic escape from an existence that forces the wise to stupefy themselves. Soft delerium embraces me; I vaguely hear the cool squeeze of metal pressing into my skin. It warms me and I am falling, happily!, falling back.

Bili's face jumps out at me as large as a drive-in screen: my mentor who taught me how to walk, to talk, to survive on the streets from whence he came. My lips smile numbly, unwittingly, at my Bili buried in my brain—he who I can resurrect anytime—his mad tic, his cultivated sneer, his dead-white skin beneath a dime store T-shirt. Bili is dead, and I constrict with guilt as if I killed him personally.

Capitalist's piglet, he leers at me, only his eyes grinning. Innocence is something I hawked at thirteen, in fact, never had. Birth christened a bloody pig, and now that Bili's gone, it's something I have to do; I gladly spill my blood in bathrooms, in kitchens, in alleys, and cough it too. My ridiculous little retribution: a donation from the kind that killed him, found him, drowned by himself in a boozey puddle stained fuchsia from neon light. Bili, you bastard, they found you in Poe's pose.

Bili smilingly said: *Too sentient to be sane. Well don't be afraid to blow, hon. Spread your legs and let the litter in. Let your green eyes determine your profit. Opportunity's no cost because you are the leisure class.*

Bili, satanic Svengali sent to tutor me in Dostoyevski's steps to degradation. Now he's left me, still hungry and searching wildly, alone in his neighborhood of symbiotic cultures, unlike the suburbs which are as homogeneous as the milk which arrives on the doorsteps. Here, old women are abandoned close to their cathedrals; men walk around with the American flag protruding from one ear; men need more starch in their wrists and less swish in their walks, tuft haired punks, black leather, organic people with skimmed milk skin, very black skin and every shade between, stray cats and lazy hounds, litter and cockroaches, bitter-smelling flowers and sweet shit, mansions and tenements, bustle, life, passion, love, hate, life.

* * *

Is that me? A wealthy tourist in disguise, always note-taking and ashamed of my origins. I sit in the sunlight emanating from French doors and carefully place Bili's false eyelashes, "coming-out" dress, Class of '65 yearbook in my grandmother's chest. He's gone like a belle in flight. If he was here, I'd tell him I'm feeling slightly Epicurean these days, at having solved our common puzzle, survived our story. Even now, I can only tell it in smoky bars to anyone who'll listen; the older I get, the more colorful it will become, knowing that every story, like American heroin, loses something in the translation. Bili, Bili, Bili, where are you? You remain a shattering memory, like your whiskey bottle I savour sweetly, but shattered against the wall that wouldn't answer, like your invented ghosts. Bloody-ass faggot. Stone-cold cocksucker, I miss your face; you're my fairy godfather. It's no consolation to know you'll appear to me when I'm drunk or dreaming: your impassive face, cocky arse, white arms, your laugh—I could recognize you a mile away, my dear—and if I ran across the city and screamed your name, you'd turn half-way and say:

"Twat, I cunt hear you, Ms. V."

Bili's not even history. Everyone who knew him's moved further downtown. How far downtown can you slide without falling in? Even I finally pack and leave my father's tenement where we met; but I arrive into a fog as thick as a witch's fingernail.

* * *

Let's be bodies, yawns Bili. I feel awake. I feel that this is true; but there is a point of no return one meets when sleep takes over and dreams punch into reality. Bili is another dead drunk. But here he is, as cadaverous as always, escorting me into this hole-in-the-wall, complete with holes in the wall, sturdy pool table, live band who know every song you request, dark and crowded, slick floors, smiling faces. Stanley Milton is crying into a hole in his guitar that: "he wouldn't treat his dog the way his baby's been treatin' him." His cherubic virtuoso's face is too white in his brother-in-blues' estimation. There's too much smile, faces as bald as glazed doughnuts: "it's a Kum Baya bar," murmurs Bili, moving on.

I stand too quickly, my feverish brains swim in stale gin. Through the smoke, we taste the cool air emanating from the street. Bili is pulling me into ammoniac heaven of Kitty's Pleasure Palace. Other women stare vaguely, blankly at me from inside the glass encased booths that light up their shady domicile. Their faces are blue and pink and purple streaked; their skins are translucent white and shivering from air conditioning that rattles annoyingly from the ceiling. Bili reclines against a wall. He looks abstract, painted to it. I feel a pang of appreciation, looking at him. He opened his fermented mind to me, lovingly, timidly, like a bum poking

open his lunch sack. I wish that I could will everything I own, stored in some suburban safe, to him who I love the most. he stands in front of me with pleading eyes. His detached, hanging knife invites me purposely to be with him again. Hot and cold are struggling siamese twins inside me. The air is so thick and pungent; I can hardly breathe as Bili's thick-lidded expression lifts me up by the roots of my hair. He looks down at me. Is he sad? I touch his knife to be sure he doesn't move. I can feel this strong pulse against my fingers. I want to make him unafraid, like me. But he shows no other signs, he's outwardly calm, even haughty. I grasp the knife and he pulls back cautiously. Then, I feel his body thrown on top of me, on top of his upturned knife. We stare at each other, related almost in some ultimate knowledge; related more intimately than if we'd ever been lovers; related more to each other than to our mothers: blood buddies, I laugh, breaking the glance, and we swing ape-like and laugh into a corner. I hit my head on a wall which rains plaster into my hair and mouth. As I spit, I feel Bili's body close by, his arms around me, then lightly dusting off my shoulders. He blows plaster from my face and his breath is like alfalfa in the springtime, strange. He grasps my waist and the knife scorches my skin, leaving me insideout and flapping loose for air to sting. Bili lies back and, laughing, swallows a handful of blood from his belly, licks his fingers. The whores stare at us dumbly, probably afraid to leave their posts, though no one is interested in talking dirty or touching tonight. Their boss finally comes and sticks her head out the door in a quotidian way and yells down the street. She sighs and leans back in. I want to make her understand that it's Bili who is dead, but she seems not to hear me. A group of male prostitutes laugh at her; I suppose there was a comic element to her screeching and in the way she popped her curled head back inside. Through the open door I see "Smiley's" sign which boasts: ****LARGEST DISCOUNT LAUNDRY IN THE WORLD****, all sorts of people laugh and carry on, bum cigarettes and trade shots. On a Saturday night! Whores strut freely, paying a stringy blond boy to stand by them every once in a while. The only way to discern their sex is to carefully study the shape of their arms, and sometimes even that doesn't work. The door swings shut. As I slowly die, I unhappily awake.

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During the day, realism is added with color: at McDonald's whores and bums lounge easily at the elbows of businessmen and government workers whose expressions suggest they've been caught with their pants down. Herms in slim linen are cooler than when in nights leather.

The acacia tilts from the heat in the courtyard of The Acacia, Daddy's big apartment building: raspberry brick and centrally located on 14th and Pennsylvania, with an alley beside my window that leads to Colfax. It is infested with cockroaches whose lineage in the building extends back to 1900 when some of the old ladies who live here less and less were young

girls who used to pull up on carriages trailing servants who carried hat-boxes from Neusteters. They rode up in the gilt elevator and took dinner from the dumbwaiters Bili used to climb into my apartment at night when he was drunk.

When I was a child I used to sit in the car, in the parking lot, while my father collected the rent money. In the parking lot (with its alley that leads to Colfax) I saw my first non-white person, my first fag, my first drag queen: a fragile gorgeous creature in spikes and boa, leaning feebly on the elbow of someone who might have been noteworthy in other company, my first old lady without a relative to take care of her, a man who exposed a cancerous growth on his shaved head like a Henry Miller memorial.

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I'm told to walk around the block with my joint, by Marylin, the owner, in a friendly, conspiratorial voice. The pounding heart-stopping music follows me; everywhere there are passionate, potent, stances of shadows I can recognize at a glance. The quaaludes are making me light headed and graceful and clumsy simultaneously; my cigarette burns my finger; my legs suck in the music like a vacuum: SWOOP. I lean on a shoulder and up, up the stairs to the red-lit apartment where Sunday finds me holding a drink which has tipped, stained the scarred wood.

Fourteenth street. Every lamp you walk by—mark my words—will turn off as you pass. Faces appear, disappear in windows, curtains shift. A man in a black leather bottomless sailer suit knocks at the door of a skinny green mansion, passes inside unnoticed; a neuter voice cries out: *yyyyyy!* A physical murder a night; a rebirth a minute; painters caress their canvasses in their sleep; drunk poets in bars write with bloody ink on napkins; humans coil into inhuman positions, wretch with the pain that is orgasm; junk induced vomit soaks into paved streets, and blood and semen.

Bili stood me up, I think, noticing mosquitoes in the street lamps. They are probably observing me as well, bizarre looking in cocaine's myriad mania, flocking to hear the Dead Kennedy's at the Mercury Cafe on Pearl Street. I run down my favorite alley, kicking the beautiful trash and listening to its happy clamour. Through the fog filled tunnel I see Colfax blinking her whorish eye. Diane, my favorite drag queen, who thinks she is Marilyn Monroe, is dressed in sleeveless silk as she hurriedly takes out her trash.

"Bili's at the Starlight," she offers, before running back inside.

The Starlight is dusted pink and powdery blue from soft swooping lights. I stop for a second, in the middle of the street, frantically biting a nail. In an unconscious way I know that the bum laying face down in the blackened blood puddle is dead. I walk over to him and sit down at a timid distance, study him almost academically. His hands lay palm down as if he tried to get up; his slumped shoulders show that he couldn't. Thank God, I dumbly think, thank God. . . I can't see his face, only his short, tufted hair,

clumped in blood. He lays now only for the kicking of cops. What will they do with him? I wonder.

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Or any of us? The question is of sudden importance. The answer seems to buzz in my head, encircle me like that rotating ambulance light. I wander down the street in search of some answer to my question, in the eyes of pimps with their whores, in the hardened eyes of the whores, who seem to have been drug from underground: the cesspool where knowledge spits on its reflection, in the eyes of cars, splayed steel like perfect streamlined people; always the answer escapes me, only just, leaving me gasping at the air in frustration. The answer, the *why*, flashes routinely, like a light. I grasp the air and the light, the textureless, rotates back and forth upon my hand. I can see it but not feel it. Yet, in some hidden crevice of my body, I can feel it itching me, a damp sponge of delight. But that I can't see.

A bum approaches me for change. I offer him pennies, and he shakes his head, no.

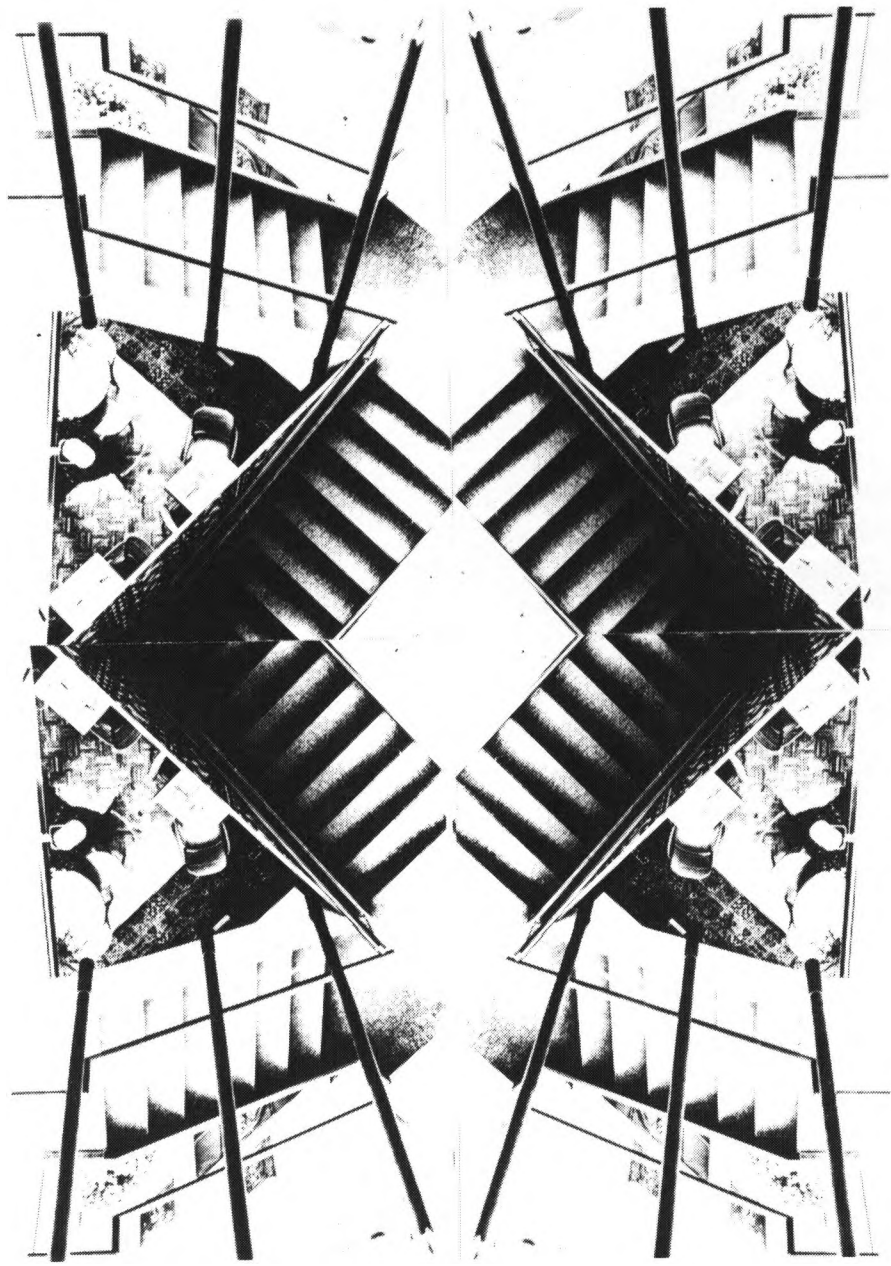
No?

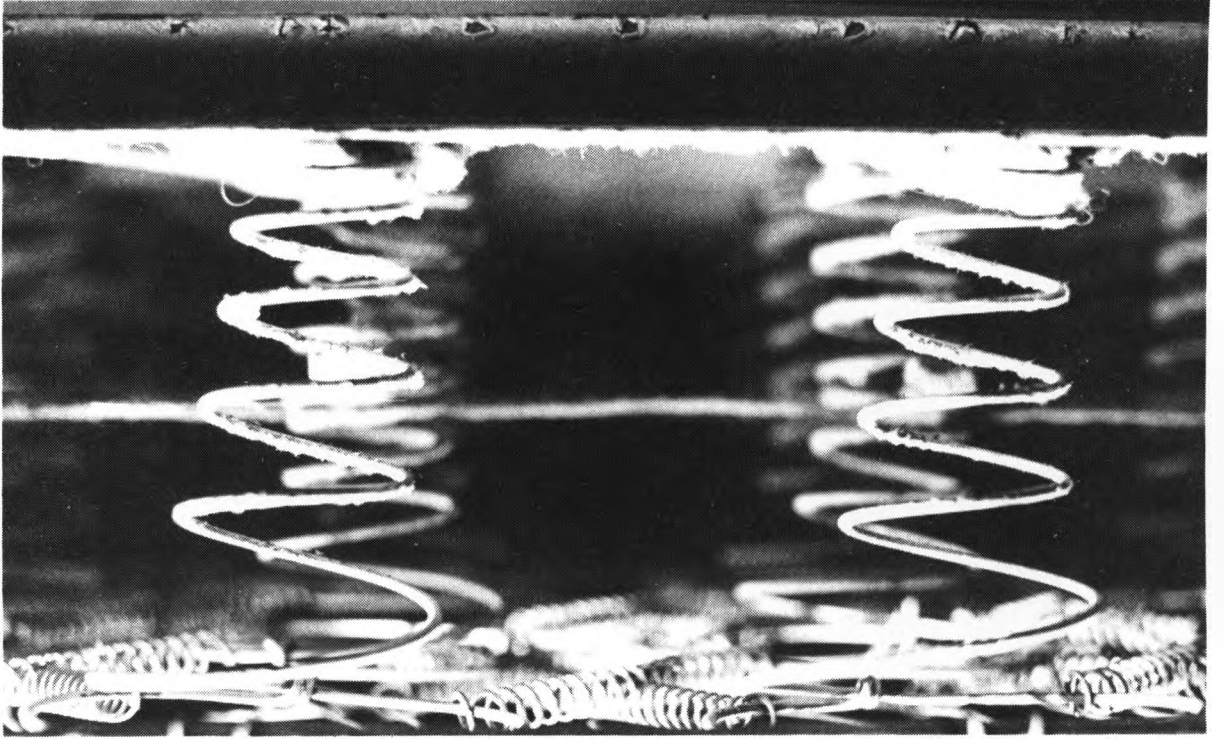
I run after him, "Why not? Tell, me why not!" He stares at me, his eyes watering.

"Lady, please leave me alone." He disappears.

I fall back on a wall. If I let go, I will explode into steamy night; if I release this last little bit of hold, I will sever cruelly, a model of multiplicity. . .

With the warmth, the cessation of pain, I open my eyes to discover that I own many more perspectives. I think with a laugh, that I understand now the theory of relativity; hours dissolve like seconds that don't exist into the hot, swirling wax of my mind. When some man I swear I recognize tries to talk to me, I let him know I've seen it, and it isn't so; nevertheless, I go with him because I have nowhere else to go except into the thick smog which makes Denver look postcard pretty—bronze and golden—when the sun sets.



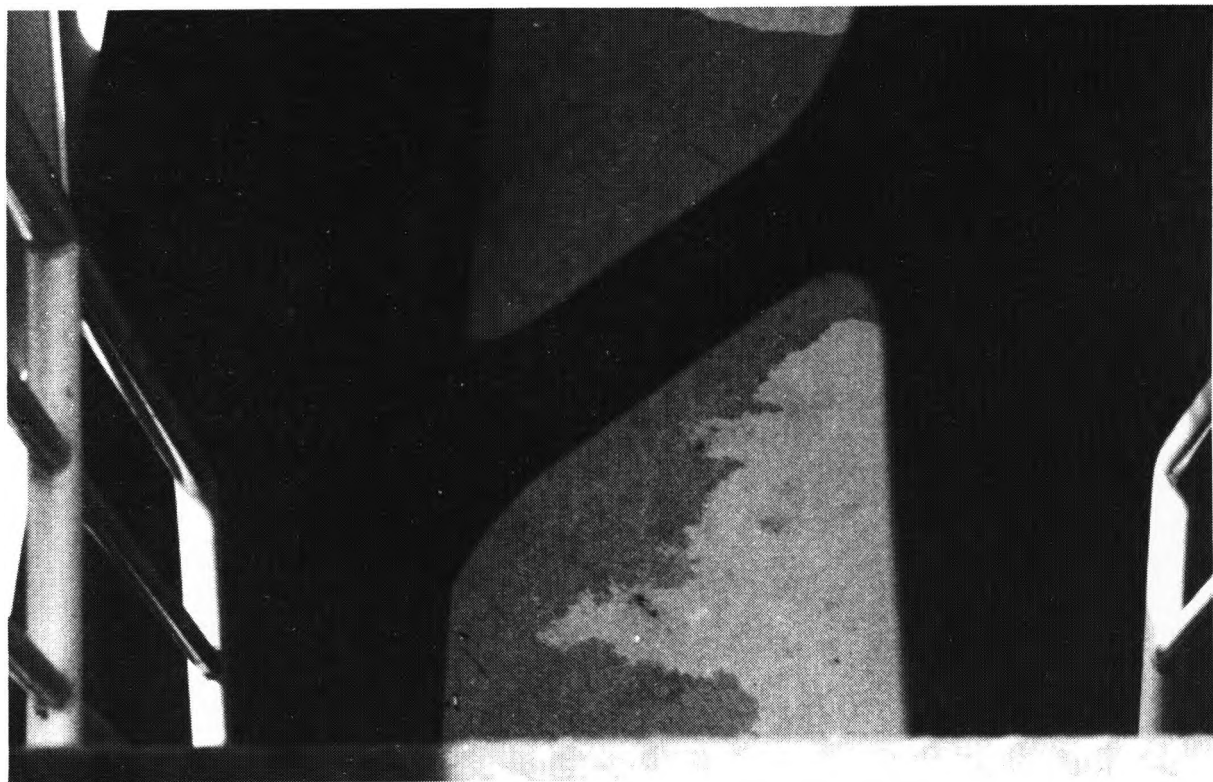




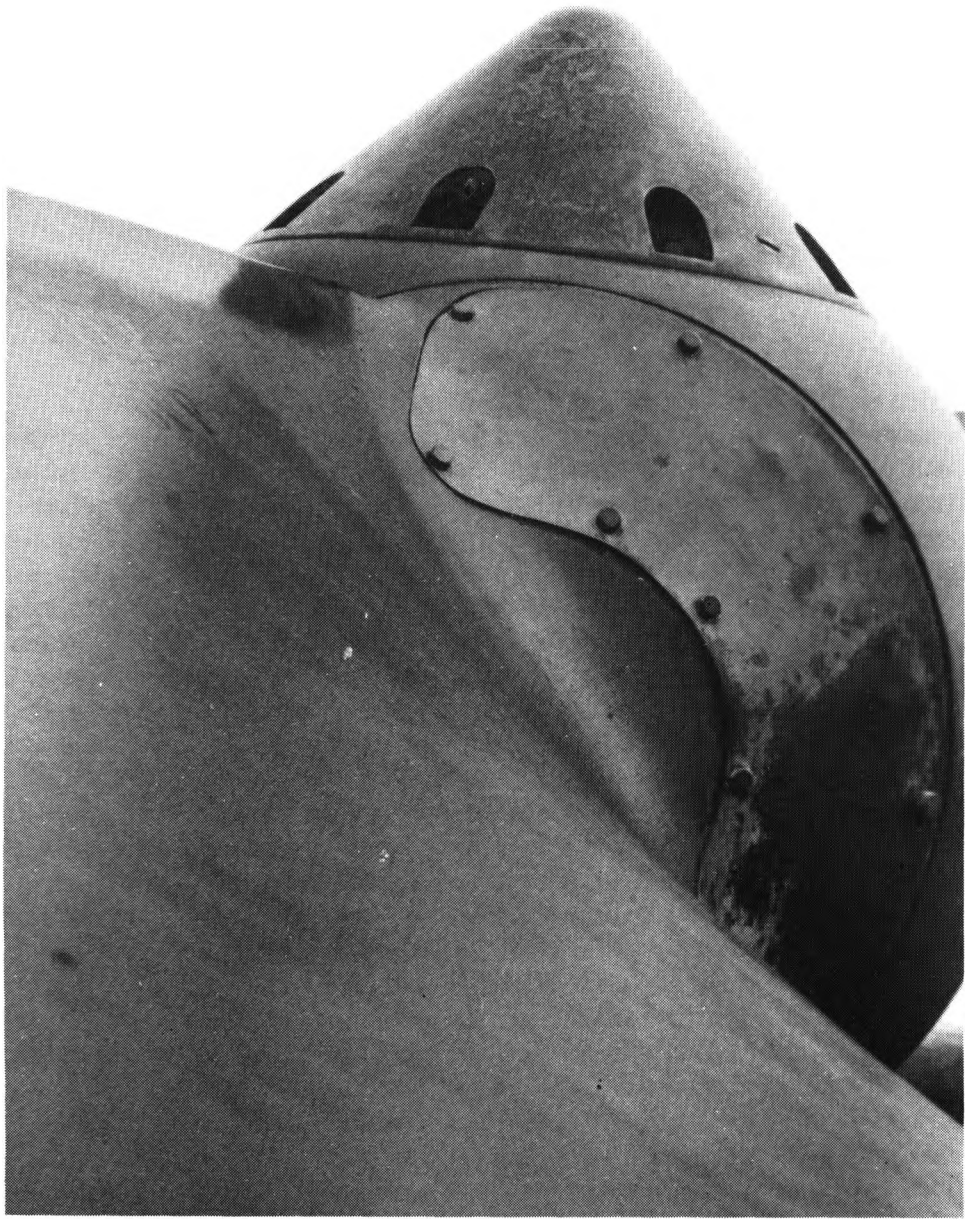




INFLATABLE LIFE R









The Architect's Son

October 21, 1939 was Raymond Brenner's forty-second birthday. He was sitting in the courtyard facing the building he had designed two years before. It was an office building, the largest and most complex he had ever designed. He looked at it that night, pretending that he hadn't seen it before. "It's beautiful," he thought, "dark, geometric—but all buildings are that way now." He was particularly impressed with the fountains in front. He wanted their flowing streams to be hypnotic, but for some reason, it didn't happen. One of the fountains flowed smoothly. The other was interrupted by spastic, uneven spurts, but one would have to study it awhile to notice this. He had carefully planned it so this wouldn't happen; it was ruined for him now. He tried not to dwell on it but it was there in front of him. Then he realized something. Up to that point he had thought he was the only person there; he was wrong. At the top of the steps by the fountain—the bad one—a boy and girl were making love. It was awkward looking from where Raymond sat. They were dressed, she much better than he. They sat with their legs twisted around each other. Raymond couldn't really be sure, but it seemed that the boy was much more excited than the girl. He waited until he felt the boy had climaxed; it took awhile. They began to look like a statue up there. For the rest of his life, Raymond would remember that statue everytime he saw the building.

Raymond felt it was late, but it wasn't really, so he went to a bar. It was in a part of town that everyone he knew in the daytime would have avoided. There are mostly men there. They did a lot of laughing and some liked pretending they were in a crisis so someone would approach them with pity bigger than life. A lot of men approached Raymond. He could talk to them for awhile but then he'd have to make something up, like he was waiting for someone. Everytime he went there, there were more faces that

he had turned down before. He knew he couldn't go there much longer.

He sat alone now. There was a piano in the middle of the place; no one was playing it. He couldn't remember a time when someone had. He used to play the piano. Once, he wanted to be a concert pianist. Raymond had been a swimmer too—quite striking actually. Girls waited to see his beautiful swimmer's body come up wet, out of the pool. Most of the men there had soft bodies, he noticed. They were high-waisted and walked like women. He was afraid his own body was becoming like theirs.

Looking at the piano, he remembered his instructor, Erik Von Kisor, a brilliant man with fair hair and a voice that was tranquil, like his music. Raymond could never have matched his master's talent. He had admired Erik though he never fully understood him—he was so . . . European. He had an artist's manner; everything about him was fascinating. His apartment was classic, like a museum, full of art.

Once after a lesson, he stayed particularly long, so long that Erik quit being a teacher and went into his regimen. First, he took off his jacket and shirt. His body was pale, like it was covered in powder. It was beautiful though not muscular, somewhat like a painting. He went into his bathroom; Raymond followed. Erik stood over the sink, opened the cabinet above, and pulled out a razor. Raymond stood, hypnotized. Erik turned on freezing cold water, lifted his arm, then lifted the razor and splashed water on his body. He turned and stared at Raymond, then smiled.

That was over twenty years ago. He no longer wanted to think of it. He stared at the piano, remembering the girl that used to go there. She said she played the piano by ear, yet she never played it there for Raymond. She was brilliant in a primeval sort of way, he thought. He found himself thinking of her often. There were visions of her in the daytime, where she had no place, when he designed or was at work. She had never told him her name, so he couldn't look her up. He could only be with her in the bar but she hadn't been there in so long. He had, at times, thought of being her lover but there was something wrong about it. She was not much older than his son, Edward, who was fifteen now. Raymond hadn't seen him in three years. He was a delicate boy, with long fingers, like a pianist.

Raymond was almost the last to leave the bar that night. There was nothing complete about the evening. It had been that way before. But he decided he would do something about it now—perhaps because of what he had thought when he looked at the piano—or perhaps, because it was his birthday. When he got home, he went into his bathroom, a rather cold room. Otherwise, the apartment was warm, a bit masculine. It looked like an architect's apartment. There was no piano. He opened his medicine cabinet. There was a little box—inside it was a piece of paper. He took it out. The paper had yellowed and there was a strange scent to it, a familiar smell he had forgotten up to that point. Perhaps it was just in his mind. There was a number on the paper. He went to the room where he worked.

He picked up his telephone and dialed the number. A young boy answered. The voice was familiar. It was gentle, tranquil, suggesting qualities like his own. He wanted to talk but there was something in the voice that he didn't want to hear. It was, decidedly, feminine. He could not answer.

The Swimming Pool

When I was eight and my sister Michelle was ten, one of our favorite summer pastimes was swimming at the high school. It cost money to swim but Mom always gave it to Michelle and she was to pay for both of us. Sometimes Michelle would say that Mom had only given her enough for one—because she was older, she would be the one to swim. I couldn't even answer because there would be this lump in my throat, the kind that if you talked or even opened your mouth a little you knew that tears would run wild. So I would just stand in line and stare at her closed fist and try to figure out how much money was really in there. I'd get nervous as the line moved forward because I loved to swim and would hate to have to just watch Michelle. When it came time to pay, Michelle would always have enough for both of us and my heart would jump because I was so happy. I never really got upset because it was all a joke, and after all, I always got to swim. Michelle would ask, "Why did you believe me? You always believe me." I'd say, "Just because you're my sister and I don't know why." Michelle would only try this trick about once a month, enough time for me to forget the last time. All I knew was we always ended up swimming and that was all that mattered. "Just like a fish, Dad" is what I would report to my father when he got home from work. Michelle didn't really like to swim all that much; she just liked to jump from the big board and from blocks the big swimmers dove from. I just liked to swim and stay on the bottom until the breath inside my mouth was gone and my ears would pop. Then I would come up fast because I no longer wanted to be at the bottom.

Once we got past the line we would go to the locker room; it had all of those green boxes where you would put your clothes and then would have to remember the numbers. Michelle was always in charge and gave me one number to remember and herself two. One day when I forgot the

number she called me dumb but whenever she forgot one, she said it was because she had two to remember. We would change and then run through the showers even if we had already taken a bath. Michelle said it was because the chlorine only worked with clean bodies and some people would just lie and really not take a bath in the morning. You also had to wear those swimming caps which I hated. I didn't have to wear one when I swam at the lake, just at the pool. Michelle told me it was because the chlorine didn't like girl's hair. I thought chlorine was pretty picky and wished it wasn't in the pool. It made my eyes sting anyhow. I told Michelle we looked just like Uncle Fester on the Adams' Family. She screamed with laughter and made a dash to the hall towards the pool. I was right behind her. Sometimes as we bolted through the door and run-walked to the pool, the lifeguard with the whistle would tell us to slow down. Michelle said it was so nobody fell and cracked their head open. I still never slowed down. I was always excited and besides, I had seen people fall on the slippery tile but they just got back up. Nobody ever cracked open their head. Once this boy fell on the diving board and his nose was all bloody, but he only cried for a while. Michelle could have just been fooling, like she did about the money, but you could never really know for sure.

In the pool is where all the fun began. We would play tag and stand on our hands and have races. Michelle would go to the board a lot, and when she did, I would just swim around finding other people to swim with. I liked to swim alone but for some reason it was more fun with others. Sometimes I would go to the deep end and count how long it took to go to the bottom and then come up. Sometimes I would keep my eyes open 'cause I liked to watch where I was going.

Well on this one day, after Michelle had been jumping on the board and I had been playing tag with some new friends, Michelle told me I had to try the board because everyone was playing follow the leader. I said I was a fish and could not breathe out of water and while I wanted to, if I stood in line for the board, I would die. I was afraid of that board because I didn't want to have a bloody nose like the boy. Michelle said I had to and that my fish story was dumb. I don't remember how, because I was pretty scared, but Michelle convinced me to play follow the leader.

The lifeguard, who was really old—I think he went to this huge school we were at—was always talking to these old girls. Michelle and I got in line at the board and played the game for a long time. The jumps were easy, like cannon balls, or just flapping your arms when you jumped. I was having fun and was glad I had Michelle to talk me into things.

Well, just as I was thinking this and it was Michelle's turn to be the leader, she does a dive which she had just learned a few weeks before. I didn't dive, I only jumped off the big board. I said, "I'm not doing that because I don't dive I just jump." Everyone in line told me I had to dive, except my friend Kelly because she couldn't dive either. Well, I thought maybe I could try it once and I let a few people go ahead so I could have

time to decide. People in line called me a chicken—which is about the worst name to be called—and they also made *buk, buk, buk* sounds. Michelle came over when she got out of the pool and said "I know you can do it because you're ready to." I didn't answer. I just glared and I think she knew I was mad. I decided I would do it just to show them. I felt my knees tighten a little as I climbed up to the board. It was higher when you were going to do a dive. I was going to back out but remembered the girl I didn't like calling me chicken and making the noise. I remember Mom always said to say "sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me." I think this might have worked when my Mom was a kid or maybe the words didn't hurt and it was the chicken sounds that did. Anyway, I knew I had to try the dive. I walked to the end of the board and it felt like I was walking the plank. I got to the end, did a little jump, and did my majestic first dive: a belly flop which was probably heard in China and which knocked all the air out of my body. I was gasping for breath but was able to yell for Michelle's help as I started sinking down. I thought I was going to die. Michelle dove off the side, one of her best dives, and swam as fast as she could. When she got to my sinking body, I was so glad to see her I found enough strength to clutch my arms around her neck and hang on. We both started going down together. That old lifeguard wasn't even noticing us because he was with those girls. Finally, Michelle got my arms unclutched from her neck and she started swimming for the side. I was so mad at her for leaving me there to drown that I swam after her to fight her. By the time I reached the side of the pool I realized that I wasn't going to drown. I told Michelle that she really shouldn't have just left me because I really was drowning. She accused me of trying to kill her, and I said that was a lie.

We got out of the pool and sat down on the wooden benches where Mom always sat when she came to watch us. After a long time sitting in silence, I told Michelle that we had made the bench all wet and when a grown up sat down they would get all wet and mad. Her eyes lit up and this was my signal that my plan would work. I jumped in the pool, crawled out and sat down on a new spot on the bench, Michelle did the same. We were going for a second plunge when that old lifeguard had to notice us. Why he couldn't stop talking to those girls while we were drowning but could when we were just having fun I'll never know.

We swam a little longer but stayed in the shallow end. We would have swam longer but that old lifeguard blew his whistle and that meant we all had to get out of the pool. We had to shower again—three times in one day—Michelle said it was to get the chlorine off. That picky chlorine probably only liked it in the pool with clean bodies and girls only in swim caps. We got dressed—I remembered the number today and so did Michelle—after we dried off with towels that didn't feel or smell like our towels at home.

We left the locker room and then the building. We saw Mom waiting

in the car and ran toward the car racing one another. Mom smiled and asked how swimming was. I wondered what Michelle would say. "Wonderful and Jo even dove off the board," I felt her loving elbow jab me in the side, and when I looked at her she winked. Thank God, she would not tell the embarrassing real story. How I loved her for this.

Bloody M

The Man sits before his fireplace reading a magazine. He is not relaxing. This is what He does at the end of a workday. He flips through the pages and reads the first paragraph of every article, but cannot remember what the words said when He has finished. He takes note of certain pictures, mostly those in advertisements. Tonight, He is sitting at the edge of his easy chair. He turns the page. The phone rings. He jumps up, letting the magazine fall to the floor in front of the fire, open-faced.

It is quiet here, except for an occasional scream.

"Not scream," the lady across from me said. She's holding a drink, *Bloody M*, the letters read. (I suppose there are more letters after the *M*, but if so, they lay on the far side of the hump in her page and from my horizontal position I can't see them.)

"Nobody screams in here," she said.

"You must have been asleep," I said, tired of the argument. "There have always been screams." She smiles at me. I imagine that she is a terrible beast, not at all like the woman she presents herself to be, and that her glass is filled with blood, rather than an expensive liquor. I am only a child and am very afraid of beasts, but I felt I had to say something.

"Just drink your *Bloody M*," I said. She refused. She liked better to just stand there, propped up by her tight black gown, and tease me with it, simply because she knows I am starving. I've never seen her drink but she must have something to be able to stand so tall and strong. She isn't hungry anyway. I can tell by the way she looks down into my empty hands and smiles. How I despise those hands placed conspicuously before me, palms upturned and holding nothing but filth. I want desperately to hide them so she won't see the dirt. I've even prayed that the Man would come and tear them off so I would not have to be constantly reminded of my con-

dition. I haven't seen Him for a long time, though, and fear I will remain forever posed in this position. I remember that I am a child and that much weaker, infinitely smaller, than the lady. This, I know, can never change. Nothing does; nothing moves.

I heard the scream again, a long droning sound. It has been coming in regular intervals and it seems to be getting louder, closer. I know, of course, that it is coming from the other side of my page. But it hadn't occurred to me, until now, that it might at any moment pass through the page and onto my plane. The thought horrifies me. My first impulse is to try to get out, to somehow separate myself from the page. Only then will I be free to move. I push against the page with every muscle in my body but the harder I strain to release myself, the more I feel the gravity of my plane increase. I look to the lady. She must be able to see me struggling but she remains in her flat pose, beaming. I cannot believe it is possible to remain so aloof. I must force her to see our predicament. I cry out to her. It was a small cry but she heard it and brightened her smile. She misunderstood, I think, or perhaps she is only laughing at my futile efforts. I cry out again, this time in despair, but the sound of my voice is silenced by another scream.

"There! Did you hear it?" I thought if she hadn't I must be mad. Maybe I only imagined it, hearing the sound of my own heart, each scream a beat marking time. But if this were so, what if the screams should stop? The possibility of not being able to hear the screams had never occurred to me before. I look at my hands and see them tremble.

Scream. So close I feel the sound vibrating through my body. The lady, as usual, hasn't been listening. I try to imagine her hearing the screams, to picture her fear. I suppose she would be so shocked at hearing anything at all that she would forget about holding her drink and drop it. *Bloody M* all over her gown, all over the page with a million slivers of glass. Then surely the Man would come, to clean the mess up. I wonder if He would, though, and guess He hasn't heard the screams either. He's busy with another magazine, perhaps, or else has forgotten us altogether, in which case my only hope is in the lady.

Scream. Deafening.

"Did you hear that siren?" she asks coolly.

Siren. The word tumbles around in my head for a moment but I reject it. There is a terror in the sound that could come from nothing so mechanical as a siren.

"It was a scream," I insist.

"Scream? How ridiculous. There's no one to hear it." She returns to concentrating on holding her *Bloody M*.

But we heard it, and I wanted to tell her that it was because no one else had heard it that we must take matters into our own hands, so to speak. Instead, I say nothing, for while her remark sickens me, she is correct in thinking there is nothing she or I can do. Nothing to do because we cannot

move.

I remember the Man's face, soft and kind. It moves. His muscles flex around His mouth when He speaks. But He walked away. How easy it would have been to yell after Him, "I hate you! I hate you for not being able to hear me!" and then I think He is blameless, really. Still, He walked away.

Scream. If I could walk away, where should I go? I'm sure the screams would follow me, even if I could make them stop with my empty hands. I wonder if I have the courage to try.

Scream. The lady is comfortable, neatly wrapped up in her gown. Is she braver than I or just safer?

Scream. Screams. She doesn't think she has anything to worry about. The screams are, after all, coming from the other side of my page. She is removed. She thinks she doesn't have to listen to them. If I could move, I would take her *Bloody M* and smash it, so she would know I demanded that she listen. I could scream, scream back. She smiles. I think of the Man and wonder what He felt when He looked at the two of us, side by side. He had looked at her and smiled.

Scream. I wish it would come, this screaming thing, and be done with its task. It's destroying me already in its potential. It doesn't even need to come to finish me off. I couldn't fight back anyway . . . screams . . . I think maybe it will be better after it is done . . . it will cause a change in my position somehow . . . screams . . . my page will be changed . . . it will be done and there will be no one left, not even the lady, to stand and stare at my bloody mess . . . screams.

The Man has come. His face is changed, though. It is twisted, contorted in pain or evil, I am not sure which. The screams are constant. They appear to come from within Him, although His mouth does not move. He lifts us altogether and tears out the pages of our magazine so that, for the first time, I can see the others. There are children on pages like mine and men and women in suits and gowns, all hands reaching out empty.

There is a tremendous heat on my face and at last, I see the screaming things leap out to take us. They are red, *Bloody M*. They engulf us, every one, as the Man sets us into their flames.

There is silence in here.

