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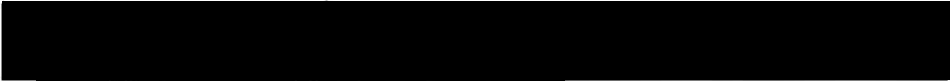
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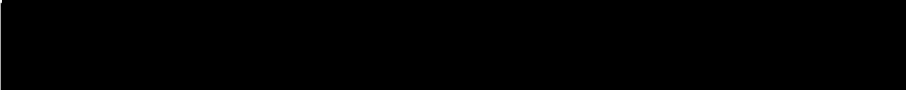
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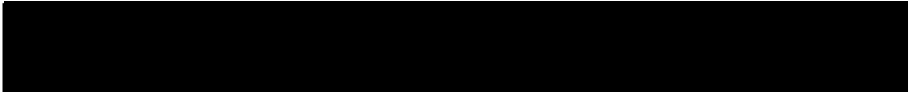
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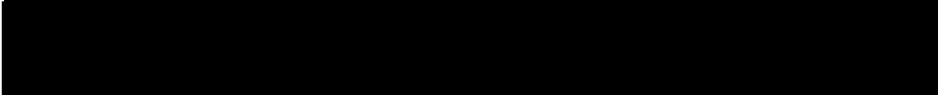

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I Have Kept My Heart Yellow: Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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B.A., Virginia Commonwealth University
May 1984

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May 1992

INVOCATION

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

--W.B. Yeats
from "Sailing to Byzantium"

EPIGRAPH

Already the Great Khan was leafing through his atlas, over the maps of the cities that menace in nightmares and maledictions: Enoch, Babylon, Yahoooland, Butua, Brave New World.

He said: "It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us."

And Polo said: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."

--Italo Calvino
from Invisible Cities

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CASTING JUDAS

In the town of Despair everyone wore black and drank espresso out of small, brittle cups. The inhabitants were so pale and so thin and so fond of thick, bitter coffee that the town of Despair was often confused with more fashionable cities, but the town of Despair was anything but fashionable.

In the town of Despair, which was situated between two mountains, both topped with fine white snow, there were train tracks, but there was no station, and every day a silver train would come rumbling through the town from the east, and later approach from the west. But the train never stopped and this was a cause for constant complaint. If the train were to have stopped, however, allowing people to board, to hand over their belongings to porters wearing grim expressions, the town of Despair would not have been the same town. The town of Despair would have been nothing without people despairing and complaining in it, without people holding their heads in their hands and muttering curses into their cold bowls of vichyssoise. In the library there, you could find no books by German philosophers because that would have been rubbing so much salt into so many wounds.

Not very far from the town of Despair was the town of

Perpetual Joy. In this town the women were always baking thick loaves of brown bread and braiding each other's long blonde hair while the men tended the sheep and goats and taught their children how to whistle.

In the town of Perpetual Joy there were no taxes and no lean solicitors, and when Death came it knocked on the broad walnut doors and waited to be invited in, at the proper time. Ginseng tea was prepared, towels were dipped in cool spring water, shutters were closed and old records, Mozart usually, were played on the phonograph when Death came. In the town of Perpetual Joy, everyone died in their sleep.

Every year at Easter the people of the town of Perpetual Joy would stage a passion play. In the weeks leading up to this event the women would make only unleavened bread and bury small casks of wine in the riverbank, the children would sew shrouds with gold thread and twist rose stems into crowns, and the men cut planks out of the cedar trees. Easter was a time of great festivity and the passion play was its pinnacle.

Every year the men would argue, graciously, over who was going to play Jesus, who would be Pilate, washing his hands of the whole affair? Who would be Thomas, doubting the obvious? The women would haggle, amiably, over the role of Mary, over the chance to grieve hysterically, if only for one day. There was one role, however, which no one in the town of Perpetual Joy would consent to play, and that was the role of Judas. In order to contract the role of Judas, an emissary

would be sent to the town of Despair, a mission which the people of the town of Despair never ceased to grumble about.

Why is it, the people of the town of Despair would always ask, that we should provide them with a Judas? What do we get in return? they would ask, slamming down their spoons still dripping with cold borscht, on various tables in various rathskellers. But whenever the emissary from the town of Perpetual Joy would arrive, usually in early April, a garland of violets woven into his auburn hair, the people of the town of Despair, not known for their courage, would invariably volunteer someone for the task, some clerk or pharmacist's apprentice, and they would watch him leave, his black suitcase in hand, his black oxfords clicking on the cobblestones, and they would forget about him, too absorbed in their own problems, until he returned.

One year, not too long ago, they say some time in early April, the town of Despair had more to despair about than usual. The bank president had shot himself after investing most of the town's money in forged Manets, the milk cows were sick, spitting up blood, and Martenglass the tailor, old and revered, was losing his eyesight and making everyone's trousers too long or too short. People were no longer muttering, they were openly cursing. It was at this time that the emissary from the town of Perpetual Joy arrived, a garland of violets woven into his auburn hair, and the people of the town of Despair, in a foul mood, were ready for him.

Wielding sticks and steins of dark beer, they brought him to the town square and shoved him up against a statue of the old mayor, saying, which one of us looks like Judas now, eh? and, who's going to be Judas this year, hm? The butcher, a real bully, tweaked the emissary's nose and said, why he's the perfect Judas, isn't he? Did you hear the way his nose just squeaked? the butcher asked everyone, laughing crudely.

With everyone pitching in to help, they relieved the emissary of all his clothes and using the butcher's gutting knife, they cut out his tongue. Being a pacifist, he didn't resist. Does Judas need to speak? the new mayor asked the tongueless emissary. No, he continued, Judas only points and acts sullen, and when Jesus embraces you at supper and says to you, "My brother, I know you will betray me, but you are still my brother," you need only stammer, as if you are in shock at being found out.

They grabbed Jonas, the barrister, who was the emissary's size and said, give him your suit, yes, Jonas, give Judas your suit, and Jonas took off his suit, grudgingly. Don't forget the shoes, the new mayor said, and Jonas was indignant: the shoes, also? The emissary put these things on, slowly, like a man dressing himself for the first time. Hurry, the townspeople said, waving their sticks in the air, hurry Judas, or you'll be late.

With some black polish they darkened his hair and made his fingernails dirty. Now, the new mayor said, when you

return to your town and they ask you, where is the man who brought you here, just shrug your shoulders and point behind you, those people are so gullible, they will believe anything. And then they took him to the edge of town, where the red dianthus grows between the gray rocks, behind Mrs. Elgar's house, and that is where they let him go, pushing him through the back gate.

When Judas returned to the town of Perpetual Joy, his steps slow and heavy, the play had already begun, but no one was worried about where he might be. Every year, Judas arrives late, a sour expression on his face, his hair disheveled, his fingernails dirty from counting money. The Last Supper was just beginning and Judas was asked to sit down at the table. When Jesus asked him to raise his glass, Judas raised his glass, but he could not drink, so strong was his sense of foreboding. And when Jesus said, let's break this bread, Judas tore his loaf in half, but he could not eat it. Jesus, sensing something was wrong, asked Judas to come to him, and Judas got up from his chair and went over to Jesus who grabbed his shoulders and pulled him down, embracing him and saying, "Brother, I know you will betray me, but you are still my brother."

When Jesus let go of him and Judas stood up, awkwardly, the man playing Jesus saw that the man who was going to betray him was indeed his brother, and this went against all of their traditions. But the play continued, and later Judas, with

Roman soldiers, came upon Jesus praying in the garden and pointed him out to the soldiers who asked, "Are you the man who says he is the king of the Jews?" And when Jesus turned to see who had let the soldiers disturb his prayers, Judas turned his face and ran out, and the man who played Judas was ashamed at what he had done.

They say that now, if you are ever in that part of the country where the winters are harsh and the summers are profuse with Queen Anne's lace, it is becoming more and more difficult to tell where the town of Despair ends and the town of Perpetual Joy begins. They say that if you are in the town of Despair, strolling along the Stuttgarten and admiring the linden trees, it is not uncommon to walk by a tavern and hear the sounds of raucous laughter inside, a man slamming his stein down upon a table and exclaiming, "If you could have only seen his face!" They say that if you are on your way to the town of Perpetual Joy, driving through the low green hills, it is not uncommon to see, just on the outskirts in the window of some yellow-gabled house, the figure of a man leaning over a desk, his head in his hands.

I HAVE KEPT MY HEART YELLOW

"It is indeed probable that we know little about the medium which surrounds us, since our knowledge is limited to phenomena which can affect our senses, either directly or indirectly."

--Pierre and Marie Curie
from "On Radioactive Substances"

"From what windows did I stand
staring into dead time?"

What can it mean to endure
in death's alley?"

--Pablo Neruda
from "The Question Book"

Perhaps you know of me. Perhaps you don't. It would depend. How old are you? If you're thirty, let's say, or older, when you were a child you might have found a book, one of your mother's old books, a collection of illustrated biographies, Famous Women: Volume 4, the pale green cover faded, almost yellow, stained by water? Someone's barley soup? A glass of wine? It doesn't really matter.

When you held the book in your hands, a discovery from the back of a closet, the bottom of a box filled with yellowed photographs, perhaps the pages contained no dampness, no distinct odor, but there I was sketched in dry, humorless prose--a woman hunched over a glass beaker, her hair streaked

with gray, her palms glowing, a scientist. I discovered radium and it was the death of me. Literally. See page ninety-six. Sometimes I can still hear the crackling of electrons. From around a black corner, a sliver of gold light will occasionally reveal itself to me. In this place reserved for the dead, these muted resonances, flashes of memory, are all they allow us.

Perhaps, I say only perhaps. If you're not old enough, or if you don't have what they call a european education, never mind. It's of no real importance whether or not you've come across me in some dusty book, its pages curling. I lived once. Just like you I know the color of morning's light filtered through a lace curtain, of oranges piled on carts, of smoke rising through grates in the street. I've run up hills and lost my breath. I've seized many days, and I've let others slip by.

I started out as Manya Sklodowska, a girl afraid of being confined forever behind Poland's brown hills, of having to go out to the icehouse every morning and bring in the butter, the sour cream, of having to wring out the wet linen each week and hang it on the line, daily reciting my lessons in order to teach other Polish girls how to daily recite their lessons. I was exceptionally gifted, the child of a professor. My father taught farmer's sons at the local college how to count their eggs and predict their potato yields. He would often spend long evenings at the kitchen table devising theorems,

adding columns of whole numbers and trying to see how many times (just how many times!) a figure could be divided. "The possibilities of numbers!" my father would often exclaim, pounding our table with his fist. It was his wish that I would join him one day, that I would teach farmer's daughters how water becomes ice, how locusts cling to stalks of wheat, devouring its golden chaff, how the rain wasn't so much a matter of prayer as it was of condensation.

A mathematics scholarship provided my escape to Paris where I met Pierre, a professor of chemistry at the Sorbonne and sixteen years older than me. I was enchanted. My father was not happy when I left home, but he loved Pierre. He loved his pressed gray suits tailored by Henri Vinaver and his quiet, sedate manner, and he told my mother (lying in the room next to theirs, home on holiday with Pierre, my new husband, I could hear him tell her), "That is a man of distinction! Our Manya is some girl." But I was Marie by then, Marie Curie, a woman with definition in my face, in my shoulders. I had re-named myself. The rest is history, the kind of history which is written down and recorded, even exaggerated, slipped into encyclopedias and unabridged dictionaries. I was the first woman to teach at the Sorbonne. They gave me Pierre's post after he died.

There was a time when Pierre and I were talked about, when other scientists envied our partnership, our symbiosis, but I wasn't interested in notoriety, in what other people

thought. I was only interested in my work, mine and Pierre's work. I was concerned with the elements and their properties, with their properties' properties. I spent a good portion of my life looking for something with no odor, no form. There was no tactile way of stumbling over it, of grasping it. All I could do was locate a field, a shadow of condensed energy, and then guide it from one place to another. I was a genius at extraction. I could have taken things out of you you never even knew you had.

There were many years of research, many evenings of atomic contemplation, watching Pierre bent over a microscope, his eyebrows twitching, his movements mirroring mine, before my body began to burn, slowly, from the inside out, a fact I wasn't completely aware of at the time. When I felt my blood go hot, my fingers pulsing, I thought it was a side effect of scientific fervor, the heat of knowledge pulled out of its hiding place, indignant at being found out and, I know now, poisonous also. Sometimes when I'm sitting on my stool here, stripped of anything that could cause me pain, I will go over my old exercises, the stacking of probabilities, the splitting of stubborn atoms.

Contrary to what you might think, there is no new knowledge after death, no dangerous terrain. Not all questions are readily answered here. There are no officials, no clerks with clipboards who come by to take roll or relay queries. But

the amount of time, the space in which we shuffle through our memories, is immeasurable. Just beyond our horizon (and that is all we have, a horizon, an infinite line of diffuse, amber light) the world occasionally reveals itself, springs up and throws its shadows across the chasm. The rest, all the fine points and subtle nuances of history, we have to glean and imagine.

With old age (and after all, I am still getting older, so very much older) the memory gets weaker, very weak. Nothing is restored to us that we do not restore to ourselves. Our bodies continue to atrophy, to spot and shrivel. I suppose we are being slowly converted, distilled into a purer essence, something finally freed from remembering. My memory is like a shredded cloth which I arrange and re-arrange. Trying to match up threads, to discern a pattern, I finger my way through an old and threadbare tapestry.

There is an amusing man here--he tells me he's a poet, but I don't hold it against him. He has a wrinkled linen suit he always wears, and a bolero tie with silver tips, and though it is perennially dusk I will sometimes see him out of the corner of my eye coming towards me, a flash of rumpled yellow. I must admit, it sometimes makes me happy to see him, perhaps because he is always so cheerful. And he brings me cherries. Where he gets them, I don't know. Of course he is never without his poems.

"It happened in this month, in this country," he recited

to me that last time I saw him. "Day after day, the country brimmed over with cherries. And cherry by cherry, change was wrought in the world."

I was satisfied with the fruit itself, only with the fruit, but he continued, "If anyone doubts this, I say to all comers: look into my will, at my heart's true transparency, for though wind swept the summer away, I have cherries enough for you all, hidden cherries."

I don't know when cherries ever had such an effect on the world, but he certainly has the room for them (he has somehow resisted the usual dissipation) and they were delicious that day, a dusky red, succulent. We have no actual need of cherries, of thick white bread or wine, but the impression of a cherry on the tongue, its sour taste, is still an unmistakable sensation. For whatever reason, we have not been left entirely defenseless. Still, I wonder why we need these things, or where they come from.

Pablo (he had to tell me his name, of course) has told me that he received the Nobel prize before he came here, for literature. I had two of those myself, one for physics and one for chemistry, but I can't possibly believe him--a silly, fat man like himself? "Why do the leaves kill themselves as soon as they feel yellow?" he often asks me. I think he's trying to show off, but I don't tell him that. It would break his heart. Metaphorically, that is.

Before I came to this place of residues and long, shapeless evenings, there was a woman who lived next to me in Paris. A gray stone wall squatted between her garden and mine. Fragrances, rosemary and lemon thyme, burning toast, boiling potatoes, crept back and forth between our two bungalows. One war had ended, another one was shaking out its bones in the distance, digging its trenches with coffee spoons and puffing out thin strands of smoke no one could decipher. Her name was Willie, a nickname. We were the sort of friends who talk every evening over the garden wall and make poundcakes for each other on Sundays. It wasn't necessary to have anything in common.

I was a femme de science, of course. Willie was a menagere, minus the husband. But I loved to talk to Willie. We could talk about all the mundane, unscientific things--where to get black stockings, what herbs to use when making soup, how best to strangle a pullet. Willie had an inheritance, part of a family fortune in parsnips and other leafy vegetables. Money, a moderate amount, was the only thing that Willie had of her family's. At some point she had disgraced them in an irrevocable way, or so she told me. She would sometimes say to me, "I'm the daughter of the king of cabbage, but he doesn't care beans about me, and I could carrot less." There was never anyone calling after her or ringing her on the telephone. The postman never stopped at her house to slip letters under her door. According to Willie,

anyway. Willie liked to think of herself in rather tragic terms. "There are many fish in the sea," Willie would tell me, "but we live inland."

Lately just the idea of Willie, the image of her pale ears, her white wrists, has been distressing me. In the same way you might glimpse through a doorway a figure in motion, I have seen her, flickering in front of me like the pictures in a zoetrope. I have seen her standing in her back garden at night waving a flashlight over her head. One summer she did that every evening, stood underneath her red cedar and earnestly waved a column of light over all of the houses. Into the trees, over the houses. Into the trees, over the houses.

You might be thinking--aha, a Nazi sympathizer, but it was too early for that. It was 1932. I would be dead that very year, never reaching sixty, never knowing what was coming, how Jews would be made into pies, stripped and shoved into ovens, baked down to their teeth, how France would become another country, two countries, occupied, a place where ordinary people collaborated with evil, paid it coin and licked its boots. The facts of history have not been altogether kept from me. Pablo will sometimes tell me the old news.

While I was still looking for radium, storing it and hoarding it, not even knowing why I was so nauseous all the time, the world was shifting and groaning, the old trains were having their wheels greased, their engines stoked, their cabins painted a glossy black, and Willie, so painfully thin,

a woman like smoke, was trying to summon something down out of the night sky. She was trying to call down a silver bird, a plane with the shape of a deserted wife painted on its nose.

Willie was looking for her husband, Gunter, whom she was convinced would fly overhead one night and see her signalling to him. How Gunter could have been anywhere but on the ground, perhaps passed out under a table somewhere or in some woman's bed, I was never quite sure of. But Willie could never get over her ordinary husband, a red-haired German bricklayer, a union man, an expatriate, someone probably fed up with poisson and potage every Monday evening, someone who didn't want to be so ordinary. Perhaps he missed his country's pilsners. In any case, one night, it was when the crocuses were just beginning to open up, Gunter did not come home at the usual time, and the next night he was still missing, and the next, and so on.

Once, drunk from too many beers after work, Gunter had told Willie that he dreamed of one day being an army pilot, of dropping bombs on small, uncivilized countries, of making people tremble, again, when they heard the name, Deutschland. So there Willie was, the perpetual light of the rue de Lalique. She didn't know how planes could hug the fifteenth parallel, all the way from Germany to Tunisia, without ever passing over France. She didn't know that Germany had no army, that the glory of the Luftwaffe was still only a dim hope, one man's prophetic vision of the terrible future.

The summer came, but Gunter did not. There were nights I couldn't sleep with it, I really couldn't. It was unbearable, all day in the laboratory and then lying awake on my duvet at night, naked because of the heat, my skin crawling with the heat, the shutters thrown open. I felt hunted, stalked by Willie's flashlight. When does she sleep, I would wonder to myself. When, I would ask my husband Pierre, does she ever get any sleep? When? He was dead by then, run over by a dray on the rue Dauhphine. I had poured the evening tea the day he was killed, was sitting in the kitchen eating one of Willie's lemon poundcakes and waiting for him to come home from the college. Reading the paper, I sipped my tea and waited for a corpse to arrive (I didn't know), his notebooks clutched in his lifeless hand, an expression of surprise on his face, but still I would ask him things. There was no one else to ask.

Yesterday (if you can call it "yesterday"--in this place one day is not distinguishable from the next), Pablo and I were engaged in a philosophical debate. It was an amicable debate over whether or not the heart, our hearts, were more spirit than flesh, whether they were organic folds of tissue which evolved, changed colors and moods and rattled in our bodies like second, anxious selves, or whether they were mechanized meters only, blood-red and bloated in life, over-worked pumps reduced finally to gray stringy matter and then

to hollow ornaments which swing on cords and dangle at our ankles. Because they do dangle at our ankles.

We're given necklaces when we arrive here, long papier-mache chains that look like charm bracelets, and all of our once vital organs, our livers and spleens, etc. are attached, drained of their juices, painted gray and shellacked. It's an idea partly stolen from the Egyptians, I think, though they were discreet enough to stay in their tombs with it. I might not have chosen to wear something like this before. It would have horrified my students at the Sorbonne, but I've grown used to it here and it's almost soothing to realize I continue and go on without these things beating and breathing inside of me. Sometimes I feel like Cleopatra who once said, "I am fire and air; my other elements I give to baser life." That's according to Shakespeare, anyway.

So I must confess, my heart is dangling nearby, between my stony knees actually, but I don't see how it matters. My heart has no real use in this place, but Pablo sees things differently. He contends his heart is not gray here, but yellow. A curious color, I think, not altogether medically correct, but he's written a poem about it and recently, while I was musing over certain forgotten isotopes, he recited it to me, his hands clasped behind his thick waist, his long black hair, wet and steaming, combed behind his ears, his mustache quivering around the corners of his mouth,

"After ranging at large in a region unrecorded in books,

I got used to that harsher terrain where nobody wanted to know if I preferred lettuces to the mint of the elephant's fodder, and by giving no answers, I have kept my heart yellow."

Pablo believes his heart is going to be revived. In fact he is cautiously waiting for this to happen, has pulled up his heart from where he felt it was stranded and folded it into one of his generous thighs. He is keeping it warm and yellow in the hopes that it will become fleshy again, slimy and pink with possibility. I told him, "Pablo, listen, why do you do these silly things? We shouldn't hope for anything. The heart was never intended for resurrection. Lazarus was an apparition, a corpse with timely rigor mortis. Where is the heart in amoebae? In viruses which live and feed on us? Some poet's silly invention, that's what the heart is."

Pablo told me there was a machine, something invented after my departure, a box which throws out tendrils of wire, attaches itself to a dead person's chest with suction cups, and shocks them back to life. Can you imagine, you've left the world, you're unraveling and then, then, you are yanked, suckered, shocked back into life? It's absolutely absurd, an obscene concept, and I don't for a minute believe him. I read Mary Shelley's Frankenstein when I was girl and I know what fiction is. I'm the scientist, he's the romantic, we'll never see things in the same way. Anyway, we're too brittle for incarnations. Our bodies can no longer withstand the shocks of life. I hardly ever get off the stool I sit on most of the

time, I'm so afraid I'll crack all to pieces. I've never felt so whole as I do here. Fragile, but whole.

When I was sick from the radium, I felt my body disintegrate in pieces and portions, first fingers, then toes. I didn't know what had gotten into me, something so tangible, something with thousands of tiny legs, with hundreds of tiny mouths, moving through me like a caterpillar, chewing relentlessly. Why start up the heart again? It was never anything but trouble for me, a distraction, but Pablo wants to go back to the world, or at least have some version of it here. Secretly, I think he has a crush on me, but I'm not falling for that kind of nonsense. Men have always had their ploys and it's no different here.

I don't know if I'll ever see Pierre again. I haven't the energy to go looking for him, to root up his corpse, probably as thin as paper by now. I don't know if this place is exclusive, or if everyone is welcome. I can only wait, perhaps vainly. When Pierre died, when our colleagues were coming by the house with bottles of sherry and tins of biscuits every day for weeks, I felt almost paralyzed. I sat on my red divan when they came to offer their condolences, and I nodded my head up, then down, up, then down, over and over again, expressing my grief with restraint, with subtle gestures, as if to say, yes, so terrible, but somehow I'll get on.

But I couldn't see how anything would continue without

Pierre. We had been like one person, one mind. Pierre had never questioned my motives or what I wanted to do, only silently encouraged my efforts. On every project we had collaborated. On every article we had each signed our name, first his, then mine. It wasn't our hearts that had come together in that life. It was something purer, less visceral, something more basic and more profound than sentimental love.

Our daughters, Eve and Irene, took up our profession and they wouldn't let me give up after Pierre. We set up the Pierre Curie Institute, a radium repository, and I spent every possible moment there peeling back layers of spinning atoms, extracting light. Pitchblende was my medium, my thick tar, my means of breaking everything down. We were storing radium for all of the hospitals in France and we could ship it anywhere in the world. Anywhere. There were more requests than we could handle at the time. Everywhere doctors had a desperate need to glimpse the interior body without having to cut into it and ruin its symmetry.

So I learned to manage without Pierre. I became even more dedicated. I could often feel him standing behind me, a nervous, bespectacled shadow urging me on, "Marie, you must do the work of two scientists now. Don't let our efforts go unfulfilled, Marie." There were nights I would fall asleep at my desk, the light of my microscope still on, my pencil still in my hand. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of those nights and forget where I was, the generators humming loudly,

startling me. I would peer into the microscope one last time before leaving, trying to discern some movement on the glass, some reflex of heat and light, some molecule snapping open to reveal to me its fibrous secrets.

Even though I never completely forgot Pierre, the more involved my research became, the more my recollection of him faded, and eventually I found it difficult to even recall him physically. It's true that when I first met him I could think of nothing but his features, his nose, his neck, his hands, the way he stood in the classroom, how he bent over the lectern, his thin hair hanging seductively over his forehead, but the forehead itself--how did it look? How was it creased when he was worried? Was his nose bent in any particular way? How was his spine arranged when he sat in the bath. How did his shoulders express themselves? I didn't know anymore, and I still don't know, can't recall him.

Without any conscious attempt to conjure Willie, however, she appears before me in her black dress, sleeveless, tiny eyelets stitched throughout, her skin so white, moving through her garden at night like a prowler, a menace. Her nose is broad, almost flat, the center of a face shaped like a perfect oval, the face of a weepy heroine out of a Victorian novel, any Victorian novel. Of course, I am only speaking figuratively. I am only remembering.

The summer Gunter left I would stand at my bedroom window and curse Willie under my breath (how was I to sleep?), but

I secretly envied her frenetic energy, her lack of shame. While I spent most of every day rooted to one spot, my back stiff, my hands cramped from the figuring of equations, playing the role of the respectable alchemist, Willie wandered through juniper and shrubbery like a madwoman, the secret agent of waylaid husbands. Sometimes she would stand absolutely still and hold her flashlight steady, fix it on some distant point and keep it there, put one hand on her narrow hip and throw her head back, the pose of a Parrish girl, and I would stand at my window watching her, suspiciously, as if she were a kind of apparition sent to remind me: a woman should never forget her husband. But I knew what Pierre had known, what he had taught me: the work is the most important thing. Nothing else matters.

Willie wasn't entirely crazy. She must have known that Gunter wasn't coming back, certainly not in a plane, but she must have loved him. She must have loved him without any sense or reason because she was out there every night, pacing and pointing her flashlight at various constellations, turning it off, then on again. They couldn't have agreed on a code--he left without notice, forgetting to even lock the back gate behind him. There were rumors he was staying with Madame Iser in her apartment over the confectionery, that he could be seen every morning bringing in the milk bottles.

I could have told her some things. I knew what it was to seek a thing out, to have it appear unexpectedly, and when it

finally does (and it will) it gets under your skin. You have waited for it so long it will burrow into you, and then you can only suffer from it. I didn't always know what was crouching inside of the elements, what was full of venom and what was sweet. After Pierre, after his ghost lost its hold on me, there was no one to tell me, over there, careful, in that place. I threw myself into my work, my only solace, forgetting to be cautious, to be suspicious. What Willie wanted wasn't good for her, couldn't possibly have done her any good even if it had shown up at the back gate one night, shoes and flowers in hand, the moon swinging behind its head, the stars out of orbit.

One night, still alive, still burning and weak with the burning, I hurried down the stairs of my house. In one of my rarer moments, I had given myself over to impulse. I had only my gown on, open from my neck to my knees, a death-shroud. I felt flushed, thirsty. I was going to join Willie. My body was in the process of turning itself inside out, of rejecting life. I felt as if I were slowly evaporating, losing my definition. I wanted Willie to affirm my existence. It was July.

I wasn't sure--was I in the process of some obscene metamorphosis? No one knew how radium distorted cells, infected them with visions of grandeur. I wasn't sure--had the elements somehow turned against me? In order to return to the original forms from which I had taken them, were they breaking

me down first, an act of vengeance, reducing me to bone and skin, then only bone, the cornerstone of the body?

I had to see Willie, suddenly, I wanted to be with someone, anyone. I needed someone to look at me, to say, yes, I can see you standing there, I can see you. She dropped her flashlight. For a moment in the dark we stood close together, only the wall between us. I didn't want to talk. I was feeling a kind of ecstasy, a kind of exhibitionism. While I stood in my garden I felt my body was somehow still in the house, twisting underneath the sheets soaked with my sweat. But I didn't care about those kinds of polarities any longer. I was both atom and system of atoms, density and infinite space, fused in the moment.

"I know people have been complaining," she finally said. I could hear her hand moving through the summer grass, her fingers opening and closing, my difficult breathing.

"You know I don't mean to bother anyone," she said, "and if I have bothered you, I'm sorry, but Gunter and I agreed. He can't find his way otherwise."

We had talked about this before and I had told her repeatedly, Gunter is not coming back, how could anyone sleep if she kept on like this, had she been to the confectionery lately? Over endless cups of espresso, glasses of sherry, our cakes, biscuits in the shapes of stars and crescents, I had told her, Willie, concentrate on your flora, prune your tea roses, tie back your pines. I was afraid her garden was

beginning to reflect her state of mind.

Bury Gunter's clothing, I told her. Burn his knickers. One evening, I told her, you will fix the tea and take only one cup out of the cupboard and it will seem perfectly natural. Then, in the middle of a July night, in a summer that stank of burning savannahs, of boiling sugar, my advice seemed hollow, inane, as silly as star-shaped biscuits.

"I think I'm dying," I told her. "There's something inside of me, something like ants."

"Oh, Marie," she said, her tone scolding.

I heard a click. We were flooded with a sudden, grainy light. I could see that she knew. I had nothing to hide. My wilted breasts, my emaciated hips, my radioactive sickness-- I was giving it all to her. My thin, neglected heart--it was hers. She had to have something. I expected no requital. But Willie had regained her light and she wanted to continue her searching, her signalling. She was eyeing the horizon, nervously.

"I'm extremely ill," I told her.

"What? Marie, you're just tired," she said. "You work so much, much too much."

"Yes," I said, "I am tired. I'm very tired."

"Go back to bed," she said. "You're going to catch a chill out here like you are, really. You know I have to do this. Maybe you have some influenza. I'll bring you some oranges in the morning. I'll brew my ginseng tea."

"When I'm gone," I said to her, "make sure you come into my garden and look for me. Three short flashes and a long one, that can be our code, but I'm going to be under your feet, so you'll have to tap it out."

"Oh, Marie," she said, "don't be silly. What's come over you? You're not going anywhere. Go back to bed."

"How can anyone sleep with you out here all night?"

"Marie." She sounded firm.

I moved closer to the wall. Willie took a step backwards. I could tell I was frightening her. I ran the palm of my hand over the coarse stones, and a coolness entered my skin. My heart, that constant blood-filled organ, became imperceptible, almost stopped. I moved even closer.

She said to me, "Marie."

Certainly I had crossed over some boundaries in my life, broken sacred concordats between man and Nature, disturbed the common order of things, dabbled in atomic arcana--a wall like that one between us was nothing. Still, something stayed my hand from reaching over, some final lethargy.

We were going to have ginseng tea the next morning, and oranges would be refreshing, ribbed and translucent, tart. Life would go on in its small-footed, intrepid way. Pierre was gone, my one companion, my soul, but I could barely even conjure his features. His nose, his chin--these were distant enigmas for me. He was run over by a dray. He wasn't paying attention. What was love?

I lay in my bed that night, unable to sleep. My skin was feverish, crawling with a disease I had no name for. Something was inside of my bones, nibbling and gnawing, gouging tunnels through my marrow, without apology, and Willie's nocturnal movements were imposed upon all of this. Her light passed through my windows and floated above me, hovered unsteadily, then vanished. Then passed through again. Then vanished. I was going to die in a hospital.

Pablo's come by again. He's trying to wear me down. He danced for me, something he learned in Argentina, a slow movement of the hips, a wild fluttering of the arms. He took off his coat for this and rolled up his shirt sleeves. I've seen this dance before, I think. It's common to all countries. It represents the body's harmony with water, with the ocean, with the crabs in the ocean.

I put my palm to my forehead to check my temperature, then remembered we have no temperature here, no pulse or rhythm. But while Pablo continued to dance, I imagined a sun in the sky, the air thick with humidity, brown-skinned children running between his legs, laughing. There was only the two of us and I could not help but think, this is a silly man. He is going to make me fall off my stool. It is getting so hot, he has got to stop.

A little later he left and returned with two beers, German pilsners. I didn't want to seem too pleased, but I had

forgotten how wonderful a beer could be. Pablo's dance had made me thirsty. I was so very thirsty.

It's true I have loved, so I know some things about it. I have made some observations. When you love someone, even if you don't know you love them yet, at the moment when you are just beginning to discover that you love them, the most unlikely things, the most unlikely expressions or gestures, can provoke desire, and when Pablo brought me my beer I asked him where he could have found such a thing, not like cherries at all, and he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Why do I roll around without wheels and fly without feathers or wings?" And I thought to myself: those shoulders--the way they shrug themselves.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: All of Pablo's dialogue is taken from Pablo Neruda's Late and Posthumous Poems: 1968-1974 (edited and translated by Ben Belitt, New York: Grove Press, 1988)

VOLVO IN THE SKY: BOY NEVADA'S LAMENT

"Where one cannot love, there should one--pass by."
--Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

"I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!"
--Alfred Tennyson
from "Ulysses"

Have you ever seen a Volvo in the sky, burning bright, a streak of fire in the absolute night? Did you think you were crazy, dreaming--twinkle, twinkle, little Volvo? Did you spill your Jack Daniels, stumble backwards, throw your arm in crazy circles, say . . . well, what could you have said? Star light, Volvo bright, first sedan I see tonight? Twinkle, twinkle, little Volvo?

This is how I came here: Volvo in the sky, cruising from cloud to cloud, six cylinders humming, wheels spinning, steel struts shaking past your pocked and pitted moon. Driving all night in my not-so-red-anymore scratched and dented, sweet and holy-rolling 1972 Volvo, the jalopy of the cosmos, I was feeling fine, getting my kinks out and then some. I'm a man who likes to roll down all the windows and feel the blue

sparks of night hit me in the face, the moondust settle in my hair. I don't love anything more than driving.

I had my bourbon and my Dutch Masters, I was out for the usual ride, cruising the ancient time line and heading up north to catch some green stars when it happened, and all I want to know is: how long has that fucking hole been there? Car goes out of control, no nucleic mass to catch the re-treads, no groove to glide in, nothing but hot oxygen and a few carbos and a long, squealing descent. Volvo's on fire, I'm bailing out, listen to her whine, air whipping through her like a fierce howl. My ears rang for days. Shit, I loved that car.

I buried her in Alaska, some unmarked place, every last smoking metal piece of her. Seat cushions, too. I never found the hubcaps. If you're ever up that way and you see a strange heap of ice, won't melt no matter what kind of heat is traveling through, don't touch it. That's a shrine, a holy place. If you have something in your pocket, a coin, a piece of blue quartz, anything hard and bright, leave it there. Think of it as an offering, karmic maintenance. She'll rise up one day, shiny as your dime. She'll come looking for me, throwing loose gravel on the freeway. We'll fly again. Me, I had to go south, warm my bruised bones.

I'm in Reno now working the Strip, taking it all off and then some, letting lonely women put quarters in my mouth, other places. I cried in my last bottle of Jack all the way

down here. Falling out of the sky at hundreds of miles an hour, I still didn't let go of that bottle. You never know where your next bottle of bourbon will come from. I walked and walked, drank my tears, cried some more. Sure, I cried. Where I come from, men cry all the time. That way we never go hungry.

The Rockies made me homesick--my moon in greener days. When I saw Reno, I knew I didn't have to go any further: all those crazy lights and purple sky. The energy here is strictly direct current, lots of static cling, the air so dry you can hear the grass snapping into pieces when the wind comes through, loose trash scuttling down the streets. Nothing is straight in Reno. Everything is flimsy curves, shimmering desert. Average temperature: one-fifty, fahrenheit. Plenty of Jack and Dutch Masters, too. You can get Jack anywhere in the universe it seems, a major franchise. I've never had any money, but I know how to take things when no one is looking.

I got looked at, though, corner of Skyline and East Plum. I was scoping out the tamale stand, figuring how I might snag some salsa when the woman was checking me out, said I had a sweet walk and nice jeans. Nice jeans, sure. Her language was all cliches, film noire, husky as an unfiltered cigarette.

"My name's Maria," she said. "I can set you up nice, give you a place to live, the money's easy."

"There's no such thing as easy money," I said, noticing how long her legs were, how her nails were painted a bright

red, thinking: this woman has walked straight out of some B-movie.

"Do you think taking your clothes off is hard work?" she asked me. "You've probably had plenty of practice."

I thought: this woman's cocky, but hell, the Volvo's gone, can't get back, why not settle in and see what it's really like? After you've looked around and dug your leather heels in, you see one planet isn't much different from another. Some places are literal, some are more figurative. Some have drive-thrus, some don't. The Jack is fine and mellow here, over the tongue and into the heart, and Maria, well, it turns out she's fine, too.

"Yeah," I said to her. "Yeah, why not? I don't mind working, if it's honest."

She said, "Oh, it's definitely honest."

Maria takes me to the Virgo, a red-glitter watering-hole-in-the-wall, plastic five-point stars on top, white bulbs flashing on and off twenty-four hours a day. Pink neon sign says: COCKTAILS. Another sign says: MALE STRIPPERS. It's Maria's place. She inherited it when her old man was knocked off, shot in the groin by a lady customer who wasn't happy with the floor show and had the firepower to prove it. When she pointed her pistol at Maria, Maria swore she'd do better. Maria tells me she's glad the time has finally come when a woman can pick and choose. I say, sure, if she has a gun. Maria says, since when doesn't everybody have a gun? So I

guess it's a question of aim.

Maria fed me, made me omelette after omelette until I told her to stop. She told me if I was going to put on a good show, I had to have more than skin on my bones. I told her where I came from it was the dancing that mattered. How a man moved his hips, the cadence of his thrust, was what mattered most. Maria said she didn't know what I was talking about, women liked to see things, that's all, and just where did I come from, anyway? I've always been right here, I told her, right under your nose. Is that a fact? she said.

Now I live upstairs underneath one of the plastic stars, two bulbs missing, shattered by a not-so-stray rock. At night my room is filled with white light blinking on and off, on and off: some kind of code, but no one is answering. When I'm in here by myself, trying to think, I can hear tubes of blue and red neon humming, the trucks going by, paint flaking off the stucco walls.

Maria named me: Boy Nevada. Isn't that something? Boy Nevada. She said I had to have a stage name, plus I won't tell her my real name. She wants to know if I'm some kind of punk. Did I hop some prison fence, rip my jeans on some kind of barbed wire?

"Boy Nevada," she says, "don't even think about pulling any shit with me."

"Boy Nevada," she says, "I like you a lot, but I am not stupid."

Maria bought me a boom box, some tapes, Don Giovanni, Carmen. She says opera purges the soul, cleans out your colon. She's right. After I'm through stripping, doing the walk, balancing quarters on my tongue, Maria comes to my room, we sing the ancient songs. Maria says it's nothing personal, she just doesn't want me getting too lonely, or discouraged, but I love the taste of her brown skin, sour like limes, and her black hair--so black, you could lose your way in that dark wood and you wouldn't want to come back. Of course it's personal.

When the box starts shaking with the high notes, trying to move across the floor with some Italian's grief, we ride the anguish like a slow train and glow amber with the heat. I like to pull Maria's heart out and feel its meaty weight in the palm of my hand. I always put it back. It's a trick I learned on Venus. Afterwards I get the towels, soak them in cold water. We wrap ourselves in the cool cotton, sip our Jack Black and watch the red moon do the shimmy in the sky. The haze here, it makes everything dance.

During the day I walk around, see what's what. Maria says I'm crazy, why don't I take her car, an Olds? No one walks in Reno, she says, but I think: drive another car? That would be unfaithful. I've got to stretch my legs, I tell her. Got to keep that walk in shape, she says. Yeah, I say, Boy Nevada doesn't want to let anybody down.

I can't sit still like people do here, slumped in their

lawn chairs and tipping back mai-tais, water popping out of their heads like glass beads. I'm used to motion, the pulse of the stars, pistons pumping, the click of my boots on the pavement, a constant thump. When you're moving, dust can't settle. If you move fast enough, you're bound to see yourself one day going the other way: the proof of eternity. It's a simple formula. Maria knows how it works. She says sex with me is like flying, like losing gravity and being pulled under all at the same time. But she also says,

"I saw you coming, Boy Nevada. I've flown before. This is not love."

She won't admit it, but I know she's afraid I'm going to leave her, walk out her red door and never come back, vanish over the desert like a mirage.

I've got a friend on Stardust Road, Jimmy, he sells papers. Tokyo, London, New York--Jimmy sells all the news. Belfast, Beirut, Dakaar--he knows what's happening, all the dirty underhanded things. Is the sun still burning a hole through Nepal? Ask Jimmy. Did the Prime Minister recover from that blow to the head? Jimmy knows.

"Brothers, brothers, brothers," Jimmy will say whenever anyone walks by, "it's time to get hip to the news! The news is happ-e-ning all the time, even when you sleep! You cannot stop the news! No, brothers, you cannot! Ignorance is not bliss! If you do not get hip to the news, you will be the

news, and that is not pretty, brothers, not pretty at all!"

One day a woman walked up, pink plastic pumps with goldfish swimming in the heels, hair bleached white, white handbag, white sweater, white stretch pants--you get the picture: a retro chick.

"Hey," she said to Jimmy, "some of us are sisters, you know what I'm saying? Some of us are not brothers, and we sisters are not buying any news from a brother who doesn't know anything about sisters."

"Well, shit, sister," Jimmy said. "I know all about sisters, but sisters are pure, they are clean, the news does not implicate them. To read the news is to accept part of the blame for it, and sister, I do not blame the sisters."

Around here, people say, "Jimmy ain't right," but I knew when I first met him, his yellow hair hanging over his green eyes, his topaz earring flashing signals through the grainy light, that he was a friend. When I saw he was missing one of his hands, some kind of accident, I knew I could trust him. A man missing a hand can see things far off in the distance because a part of him is in the next world.

When Jimmy first saw me he dropped a stack of Beirut Gazettes on his blue boots. The way he looked at me, with recognition, was unsettling at first. He just kept staring at me, picking up his papers, then he said, "Brother, you definitely took a wrong turn somewhere." Now when Jimmy sees me he says,

"Volvo dude, Volvo man, four pistons up, two down, bad situation, what are you going to do?"

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I say.

"Mother-fuck," Jimmy says.

Jimmy's a philosopher. He says he only believes in one thing: the will-to-power. Jimmy sleeps on the street every night underneath his stand, a big black book by Nietzsche under his head. If you understand at least one great book, Jimmy says, people will leave you alone, they will say, what the fuck is that thing under his head? A great book, Jimmy says, is very intimidating, especially if it's unfinished.

"You know why I live on the street?" he asked me one time.

"Because of the will-to-power?" I said.

Jimmy said, "Brother, yes."

Jimmy says the universe is in constant flux, planets colliding, comets whipping through space, clouds always on the move, and no one man can stay in any one place unless he is the strongest force in the cosmos and even then he's got to push against something, or be pushed. Jimmy says life is a constant ergonomic struggle in which he represents the weakest link, a piece of space junk.

"I am pure flotsam," he told me.

"How long have you been on Stardust?" I asked him.

"Ten years," he said, "give or take a few."

"Time to move on," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "I'm just waiting for the next shift in power. Any day now, I'm ready."

"Jimmy," I said, "don't underestimate yourself. There's plenty of stuff weaker than you. Don't forget sand, Jimmy. The desert is always drifting."

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "the desert never sleeps."

Some man was standing there, bright pink shirt and snakeskin boots, waving The London Times in Jimmy's face.

"Hey, Jimmy," he said. "Hey, Jimmy, you gonna take my money, or what?"

One time I tried to coax Jimmy over to the Virgo, told him Maria would feed him and fatten him up and he could strip with me, we'd be a team, he could make some real money and have a real place to sleep.

"Oh no, brother," Jimmy had said to me. "I can't compromise myself like that."

Jimmy told me that Nietzsche believed the body was the fruit of chance, that it was only through the body that a man could transport himself out of misery, could burn a hole through the world, leave his mark. It's a solitary kind of thing.

After I've been here a while, walked all over this town, walked all over it again, smoked ten cartons of Dutch Masters, swung my hips for every blue-hair in town on a bus tour, watched the red sun set like a fireball, sixty times, watched

it rise, Maria, still uncommitted, lying beside me, Jimmy asked me,

"Brother, what are you waiting for?"

"Jimmy," I said, "I need parts. I haven't got any parts."

"Special parts," Jimmy said.

"Yeah," I said, "special parts."

Jimmy knew this junkyard, an acre of rusted metal and broken bed frames, ancient green bottles and pieces of wood, doors ripped out of houses, black birds perched on the hoods of gutted Chevrolets. He took me there one day, showed me everything. He said,

"This is where I get all my special parts."

"I don't know, Jimmy," I said.

Jimmy asked me, "What kind of car does Maria have?"

I said, "An Olds, ninety-eight."

Jimmy said, "An antique, huh? Well, you work with what you have."

"Yeah," I said, "you work with what you have."

Every week I go and see Jimmy he has something for me, some curved piece of pipe, polished and pure, some strip of black rubber. He finds these things, cleans them up and gives them to me. I'm feeling kind of lethargic and he's trying to help me out. He says to me,

"Brother, the sum of these parts will be greater than the whole."

"Jimmy," I always say, "I need special parts."

Jimmy says, "Brother, these are special parts."

So I've been tinkering a little, lifting up the hood of Maria's Olds, unscrewing some things, shifting some things around. One time Maria came out and saw me and said,

"Boy Nevada, just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

I told her, "I used to fix cars."

"I get it," Maria said. "You can fix cars, but you just can't drive them."

I didn't say anything.

Maria said, "Boy, I didn't know my car needed to be fixed."

"Maria," I said, "cars always need to be fixed."

Maria said, "Don't fuck up my car, Boy, I mean it."

Yesterday was my day off, no doing the walk, no hip-shaking. When I woke up Maria was gone already, downstairs cracking eggs, chopping peppers, getting ready for the morning crowd. Everyone in Reno loves Maria's omelettes. I put on my jeans, my favorite black t-shirt, "Born to Ride." I pulled on my black boots, silver spurs throwing rust, and threw some brown water on my face. It was time to shake some dust off, get rid of any scent I could be tracked by.

When I went downstairs Patti was there setting tables. Patti works for Maria part-time. Where you going, she says to me. I say I'm going to stretch my legs. Stretch your pretty

legs, she says. Yeah, I say, going to stretch my pretty legs, shake some dust off. Maria yells from the kitchen,

"Take my car, Boy, I mean it. Don't get lost, I mean it."

She said, "Boy Nevada, are you listening to me?"

Yeah, sometimes I get lost. Sometimes Maria has to come looking for me and drive me home. Sometimes I'll be talking to Jimmy and Jimmy will get tired, blank out on me, and I'll walk out to the desert. I try to get back before the stars come out. Usually the only stars I see are at the Virgo, false stars, glitter on the wall, someone's gold tooth flashing under the red lights. I don't want to get too homesick.

I yelled to Maria, "Don't worry, Maria. I'm just gonna check out the news, see what's what." I didn't wait for a response.

I went to see Jimmy, see how the world was looking, if it was still bouncing along. There were a few cars on the road, some people playing miniature golf. The sun, fierce as always, was keeping most people inside. Jimmy was leaning on his stand, flipping through a magazine. He said to me,

"Volvo man, why is life so hard?"

I said to him, "The will-to-power, my brother, the will-to-power."

"Yes, brother, yes," Jimmy said. "If life was too easy, who would stick around? You gotta push on something."

"Or be pushed," I said.

"Hey, Jimmy," I said, "let's go out to the desert. Let's

check out some constellations."

Jimmy perked up, put down his magazine, reached under his stand and brought out a bottle.

"Mescal," Jimmy said, "ninety-proof. We'll see God."

"Jimmy," I said, "I thought I'd have to drag you away."

"The world's going to hell," Jimmy said, "and I'm tired of reading about it."

Jimmy said I might have a vision of what to do if I could see through to the bottom of his bottle. I said, okay, a vision might take my mind off things. I told him we would have to walk. He said, brother, we are already there, and he was right. All we had to do was cross the street--that's where the desert begins, right underneath the billboard that says, "Eat at Frankie's--Everyone Else Does."

"Jimmy," I said, "let's walk until we can't see this billboard."

So we started walking. It got so hot we took our t-shirts off and wrapped them around our heads. Everyone says it's crazy to walk out in the desert during the day, so we drank the mescal like it was precious water, a few small sips at a time. Every now and then Jimmy turned around and said,

"Shit, I can still see that thing."

Somewhere, I don't know where, we stopped. It got dark. I had broken a promise with myself--I was going to see the stars. We laid down in the sand and Jimmy said to me,

"Brother, is it okay if I hold your hand? I'm feeling a

little dizzy."

I told him, "Jimmy, where I come from, men hold each other's hands all the time. That way, we never get lonely."

So Jimmy held my hand and I finished the bottle of mescal, not even thinking how we were going to get back, just looking at the Milky Way, dense as my brain and clotted with stars, the unblinking eye of the night. I thought I saw something moving in the sky, some faded red star, silver hubcaps spinning, unable to hang in any longer, its threads cut away. Something was underneath the sand, humping along like a giant worm and snaking into my veins. I didn't see God, but I think my hair was on fire.

"Jimmy," I said, squeezing his hand, he was so quiet, "that Olds ain't going anywhere."

He didn't say anything right away. I noticed his eyes were closed. He mumbled something, then he said,

"What kind of fuel, man?"

"What?" I said. I noticed how hard it was to talk, how my throat was dry and my whole body felt swollen and sore. Jimmy said, his eyes still closed,

"Fuel, brother. What kind of fuel do you need?"

Fuel, I thought, fuel for what? Maria's Olds isn't going anywhere, that's what I was saying. Loaded down with Jimmy's special parts, crouching in the parking lot of the Virgo, Maria's Olds was constipated with Jimmy's re-conditioned hoses and clamps. I don't know if I answered Jimmy's question or

not. I guess that's when I passed out, the whole sky blinking, grains of sand digging into my skin like insects, Jimmy's bottle lying between us like a talisman.

When the sun came up, I was dizzy, I was trying to sit up. I didn't know where I was or who I was. I was thinking, why is the sky that color? when I saw it: a wave of liquid light, a silver glare, something gliding over the white sand, hovering, something fat and otherworldly and puffing smoke and coming towards me cautiously, like an old friend. When it stopped, I heard a door slam. I heard the sand being displaced. Every grain of sand was moving, being moved.

"Shit, Boy."

That is what I heard.

"Shit, Boy."

I looked up. Maria.

"Shit, Boy Nevada," she said. "You could die out here."

"You want to die?" she said. "You trying to kill yourself? Tell me now, Boy, cause I don't need this shit."

I couldn't say anything--it was the heat. I was experiencing a neuron meltdown. Maria was like a hologram, she was going all fuzzy at the edges, becoming distinct, then indistinct, shaking her head.

"I mean it, Boy," she said. "This shit's got to stop."

She pointed at something just beyond me and said,

"Who the hell is that?"

I turned my head and saw Jimmy, still asleep, at least I hoped he was sleeping.

I said, "That's Jimmy."

"Boy Nevada," she said, "you are lucky I grew up around here and know my way around."

Later, at the Virgo, after Jimmy and I stumbled into Maria's car and she drove us into town, I got sober. I sat at the bar with Maria and drank my way into total consciousness, a fifth of Wild Turkey, straight up. Maria was out of Jack. Jimmy was asleep at one of the tables. We weren't open for the evening crowd yet. I said to Maria,

"Look, just like you say, nothing personal. Jimmy and I had some business."

Maria said, "Boy, all I want to know is, what are you really doing here? Why are you still hanging around?"

"Boy," Maria said, pointing at Jimmy, "Just how long is that guy gonna sleep?"

I looked out the door, propped open with a chair. It was dusk. All the signs were buzzing, the Strip was the only thing happening, red and yellow and hot white glass cutting across the black sky. The clouds, dark and purple, were trying to get somewhere else, fast. Someone in a black convertible, hubcaps polished and gleaming, pulled into the parking lot.

"Maria," I said, "let's go for a ride. I'll drive."

Maria said, "You can drive?"

"Sure," I said. "I can drive."

Maria said, "Boy, the show starts in an hour."

I said, "Let's go for a ride, Maria. We'll come back. Come on, Maria. We'll come back, I promise."

Maria said, "Boy Nevada, you are crazy."

I said, "Maria. Come on, Maria."

I told Maria to meet me in the parking lot, that I had to take care of Jimmy first. After she left I went over to the table where he was passed out and shook his shoulders.

"Jimmy," I said. "Jimmy, wake up."

He didn't move, but I could hear his uneven breathing.

"Jimmy," I said, leaning over him, whispering in his ear, "don't forget: the body is the fruit of chance."

I got a blanket from my bed and covered him up before I left, taking a bottle of Cuervo with me.

When I turned the key in the ignition and the engine turned over, my stomach jumped. Some things only the body remembers: the way a car throttles into gear, struggles against the brake. What Maria's car lacked for in parts, we'd make up with speed. Maria said to me,

"Boy, what's wrong with you?"

I didn't answer. I just steered Maria's Olds out of the parking lot and onto the Strip, feeling the vibrations of the engine work through my spine, into my throat, out the top of my head. I hung on to the steering wheel and stared straight ahead, my eyes burning from the fumes. Cars were passing by

me on the other side of the road. Everyone was going somewhere. I took a taste from the bottle, passed it on to Maria.

Maria said to me, "We're changing our liquor?"

"Yeah," I said, "something like that."

I turned on to the highway where it was cool and dark, going fifty, sixty, seventy. Eighty. Maria's looking at the speedometer, looking at me. If it isn't love, then what the hell is it? When I hit ninety, Maria said, "Boy, you better slow down. I do not have insurance."

I said, "Maria, don't worry. I'm taking you home."

EMMA

History has many skins, layer upon layer of fragile papyrus, a thick apocrypha of facts and fictions, strands of white hair, cups full of brown teeth and jewelry gone green with rust. If our skin becomes dust and dust persists through all of our calamities, then I'm as eternal as air, sitting on the prow of the ship that sails to Byzantium, a twinkle in my eye. My bones might rot in the hull of the earth, but I hope there is a part of me that will settle on the wing of a gull and I will survive, yes, I will survive in spite of everything. It is love, the star in my palm, that will get me through, shake me out of time, make me like the seed plucked out of the poppy, small and hard, tasteless, eternal.

As of now I'm still alive, still tormented by fleshy possibilities. I may be old, a bachelor, my white knees turned wobbly, my hands shaky from too much wanting, my heart gaunt and unused, wheezy, but I'm not ready for the shroud. I'm still capable of walking down our long, narrow alleys, knocking on doors with the brass knob of my cane, grinding my teeth in the middle of the night. If at my age time is a rare currency, perhaps I've squandered it spending every day pining for Emma, the woman who lives across from me, but I am tired

of prudence, of thriftiness.

The country I live in is small, named after my great great-grandfather, Merula, which is also my name. My family lost political favor when I was a child, but the new Merula didn't have the time for nurturing old grudges--there were too many fresh vendettas, and bullets were scarce. When the turmoil was over we weren't exiled or lined up against a basement wall. We were appointed the official State Bakers, perhaps a kind of humiliation, and now I carry that tradition forward, waking at six every morning to lay blackbirds into pie crusts, beaks and all.

Blackbird pie is a national delicacy, a sweet crunchy tart, and there is some status in bringing things to their final sugary rest. I don't have to wait in line for bread like everyone else. My vodka is made from the finest grains. Tailors stitch my suits. But I am not a man inclined to snobbery. I make the pies myself, and the cakes. I spend most of my time in storms of flour and salt and my nails are blanched a pale yellow color. On the door of my shop is a brass knocker in the shape of a dove (it must be grasped around the breast), but no one thinks to knock when they come to visit. I'm a public servant, after all.

If you were to seek me out, a small formality, your gloved hand around the gold bird knocking very gently, perhaps urgently, would please me. I am a lonely man. They say we are a country of the dispossessed, but in fact we are, most of us,

quite possessed by one thing or another, quite beguiled by grim-faced men who often interrupt our dreams, come into our houses, uninvited, wearing black uniforms and carrying guns. Personally, I find myself possessed by a foreign woman who wears men's trousers and smokes French cigars. She lives across from me and her name, her beautiful name, is Emma.

During Nehora, which is our siesta, I sit on my terrace reading my maps and hoping I'll see her. It has been almost two weeks since I've last caught sight of her and I'm craving a glimpse of her long black hair and her crooked nose. Maps are my distraction. Only yesterday I learned "sierra" means mountains. We have no mountains here, no hills covered with olive trees or steep, sandy cliffs. I have never been anywhere but this hot stretch of beach, nor have I seen any sea except the green one which surrounds us, but I want to know how the world is fitted together, the ways in which it groans and cracks, where God's fingers have pressed down into it.

I have a regular correspondence with the Royal Geographic Society and they have sent me a number of their traveler's maps. Currently I am studying "The Land of the Maya," an ancient kingdom, its bones and crockery embedded in the Yucatan Peninsula, a body of land which swells into the Caribbean Sea like a cancer. Guatemala and Honduras lie beneath it, crumpled pieces of brown land. Everywhere, indicated by small black triangles on the map, there are piles of stones testifying to something not so apparent.

Here in Merula we have no ancient civilizations over which we have to carefully cover our tracks. If there are pyramids in Mexico, one should not be too smug, for there is surely something in the grass there as well, some residue of Aztec breath, grown heavy with time. Nothing is truly dead in this world. Even the blackbirds I shoot and bake into pies occasionally cause the Prime Minister, and others, indigestion. Sometimes I am blamed for including too much nutmeg in the recipe, but my ingredients never vary, only the birds, which come in all shapes and sizes.

They will sometimes fly over my bungalow in groups at night, taunting me with their throaty mourning. They know I am a man of ritual. I will only pick up my gun on Sunday mornings to shoot them. In this way, I give them a fighting chance. I am a man of honor, but once I killed a blackbird with my bare hands, and it was a terrible thing to have to do, but I couldn't help myself.

So it has been two weeks, two weeks now since Emma has allowed me to touch her luminous hair. We had an appointment once, every Wednesday for the first hour after midnight, the time when Emma said she felt most alive. She would sit on her terrace and I would stand behind her, stiff in my evening coat, brushing her hair into the warm wind. It was too long for her to manage all by herself. I would stroke it until the sparks fell out like rain, tiny constellations of light dancing between us, then turning to ash, and the sea would be

black, humming behind us.

The joy I felt then was excruciating, almost painful, for that was all Emma allowed me, the brushing of her hair. My fingertips would be numb with desire, with electricity. Afterwards Emma would pour us a black market scotch and we would lean against the cool stucco plaster of her house, passing the glass back and forth and looking for some chance of life in the stars. Emma called me her companion, her compagnon, but I was never invited inside, no, that would be unseemly, she once told me.

Perhaps if you had walked by at one of those times, one of those Wednesdays, and you had looked up, you would have thought there had recently been some fight, some disagreement between us. The silence would have been overwhelming, but it was the silence of two people who had told each other everything, it was the calm of two people who had reached a comfortable agreement, though at times, old and bereft as I am, I suppose I yearned for more.

There was a time when we had talked non-stop, when I would tell her everything about Merula and she would tell me her own personal history, how she came to Merula alone from a country with grass and convents and a medieval past, how she had left behind a shattered life, a trail of men who probably thought her dead, her escape had been so perfect.

I told her how our island had started: sand and wind and blackbirds covering the beaches like blankets of flies, so

many blackbirds, they outnumbered everything, even us. There was a time when the birds were sacred. Their songs, low and mournful, were considered holy, but there were years of drought, shrunken fruit, poisoned water. We were hungry and the birds seemed indifferent to us, seemed like sweet meat posing, falsely, as prophecy. Now they are a delicacy, a piquant dessert, and it seems there are so many of them we will never be without this luxury of eating blackbirds, of licking from our fingers the remains of the first inhabitants of this place.

Since I spent most of my childhood in political uncertainty and have spent most of my adult life with crusts and birds, a woman like Emma was a discovery for me. Anyone can see she is not from Merula. She is much too tall to be one of us and her skin is too close to her bones, almost transparent. Our sun is not good for her, but she will frequently take in the night air, in defiance of curfew. This is how we first met.

I was contemplating Canis Major one evening (through my bedroom window) when I saw her descending the steps of her terrace. It was too windy for star-gazing. My windows were rattling; there was clattering in my cupboards. I couldn't believe anyone would be so ill-advised to venture out after the prescribed hour. I didn't know someone had moved into the empty house across the street from me, let alone someone so beautifully gaunt, so pale-looking. I rushed outside, not even

thinking. I know I must have startled her at first because she backed away from me.

"You're the baker," she said. "We're neighbors," she said, as if she were repeating herself, as if I did not understand her clearly.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"I live here."

"Yes, so?" I said to her.

"I'm going for a walk," she told me. "What do you want?"

She was confused. I convinced her to go back to her house, that if she had to be outside we could sit on her balcony. It wasn't safe for anyone to walk anywhere, not after eight, even to just sit at the door of your house, idly staring, is considered a threat in this place. But we could sit outside for a short while, I told her, I am a man of public office, after all, my family has a history here, we could talk. If someone were to walk by, I told her, an officer or gendarme, I'll simply lean over the balcony and say, "Good evening, brother!" He'll see who I am and pass on.

She was distracted, but she agreed in the end. She told me she didn't know what she had been thinking, why she had started down the street as if she were in another place. I suppose, now, she knew exactly where she was going--some kind of rendezvous. She's a master of subterfuge, of mixed signals.

Nevertheless she took my advice, we ascended the steps of her terrace and we became friends, drinking acquaintances.

Emma appointed me guardian of her hair; she was my confessor. I have committed no sins that I am aware of, but there are little things that happen in a day, things I need to tell someone, how various cats perch on my windowsill in the afternoons, eyeing my ovens and greedily licking their lips, how a blackbird, in rigor mortis, might extend a wing, tentatively, over the edge of my chopping block. I fell in love, perhaps out of pity for a woman whose reputation had been maligned in another place. This was a tragedy I understood intimately. It's a simple progression--from pity to love. But circumstances are never quite so simple.

In her own country Emma had been sadly misunderstood. She was born in a place where houses are built at the foot of brown hills, overlooking nothing, where trees are miserly and hide the sun. She was educated in a convent and severely punished for trying to assert herself. Her husband was a doctor who had worshipped her, who had tried to please her, but he hadn't understood her sensual nature, her need to always hear the clicking of horses' hooves on the pavement outside her window, to hear the strains of an opera while making love, to feel that love could burn holes in her hands. She had acquired lovers, with disastrous results.

Emma would tell me the most intimate details of these affairs, how she had been desperate for a grand passion, how she faked her suicide in order to get away from all the monotonous men, ate black poison and survived its inky death,

watched her husband hover over her, sick with despair, and despised him for it. She told me she understood perfectly if I felt I had to fall in love with her, but she wanted me to know that she couldn't accomodate me. Emma likes to refer to herself as "one of the disappeared."

Once she told me, "Making love to me would be like making love to a dead woman."

I don't believe her. Emma's movements are slow, first she speaks, then she gestures what she means, as the shades do in Hades, but there is something about her which is not from the side of the dead. Underneath her white skin is a mass of veins, small branches of blue ice, a frozen life that begs to be revived.

All my life I've buried things, stripped birds of their skins, scraped out hearts and lungs for puddings--one resurrection was all I wanted, some atonement. It couldn't be a woman from Merula, a woman who ate my pies, who didn't understand how to properly hold a fork, how to chew and swallow gracefully. Emma seemed to understand this, to understand my hesitation when it came to the women of my island. In our conversations, when we used to drink and talk and not just drink, we kept nothing from each other. But Emma told me she was not willing to be revived, not by anyone.

Emma once said to me, "Think of me as an insufferable tourist."

Another time she said to me, "Men are bastards."

But Emma let me brush her hair, she pressed glasses of scotch into my hands, and I was dizzy from these things, almost grateful, but a man my age is impatient. Perhaps I shouldn't have killed her bird and caused so much grief between us, but she had taken that bird in, given it comfort. She said it had just flown into her window one day and perched on the back of a chair, acted as if it wanted to stay. I suppose I was jealous.

And there is another matter, another woman, young, a woman with brown skin and green eyes like mine, something else Emma has taken in, given succor--the butcher's wife, Xenobia, thrown out by the butcher one day last month, they say for acting sullen, and no one knew where she had gone to. So Emma had taken in Xenobia, perhaps lured her over, had let a blackbird fly in her window, but I was to stay on the terrace. I was to keep my distance. She says she will never forgive me, that men are always cruel when they can't have what they want.

"I think you really wanted to strangle me," she told me, only her gown on, three buttons undone, shocked at seeing me there, Xenobia lying behind her, the sheets thrown off the bed, the moon illuminating the arch of Xenobia's oiled back, the curve of her satisfied neck.

I wish Emma understood, a woman won't take in a man, then takes in a woman, takes in a bird, feeds it and strokes its beak. In my mind, there was an inequity. An old man like me, never married, cannot easily shake the image of two women

intertwined, an inarticulate moan disturbing the serenity of the evening.

"Who are you kidding?" Emma had said to me, defiantly, holding the dead, broken bird against her breast. "I've seen the way you eye the soldiers when they gather on the corner."

In the Land of the Maya, in Kohunlich, there is a stucco-covered pyramid. Stone idols, women carved out of limestone, surround it. There is no other information on the map. I am forced to imagine the rest, the brown grass, the missing ears and noses, cans and broken glass, graffiti--the trash of history. I imagine the faces of the idols as broad, their features worn down in the wind, but their lips remain full with defiance.

I had only meant to show Emma the Hunger Moon, the full moon of February. It wasn't our regular night, I know, but I didn't think Emma would mind. I had drunk some vodka, my head was light, I had only my robe on. I didn't think to knock. I hadn't thought Emma would mind the intrusion. A full moon is a happy occasion in Merula.

Didn't Emma know how much of a temptation that bird would be for me? A man has to direct his anger at something. Even with its heart beating against my palm, I couldn't stop myself. When I felt its small bones crack under my fingers, the small rush of warm air (its last exhalation) on my face, I knew I had accomplished something: a finality, an end.

There is no undoing any of this, but if you could, try

to imagine us, Emma and me, up ahead of you. See if you can't picture us in the distant future, leaning out of a window and sipping our scotch, smiling at some unknown friend passing by below--an unrealized story. Nothing is irrevocable. We are only hinted at, suggested. We are only the faintest point of light on your retina, the smallest ingredient of the churning brew of what's to come. History hasn't claimed us. Not yet. How many times can a person start over, reinvent themselves? Anything is possible.

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

"We make bitter sauce, and cry out that the meat is bitter."

--William Whatley
from "A Wedding Sermon" (1608)

When it was morning, finally, I looked out my window and saw nothing. That is, nothing different. Everything was in its usual place. Every stick was on top of its usual stick. I saw brown grass, green in patches, my vegetable garden, a few bare trees bent and gathered like old men standing around a smoldering fire. My cat, Vincent, a gray Abyssinian with one yellow eye, was crouching on the windowsill, looking in at me, squinting, really. The color of his other eye is indescribable. A woman passed by, a chair on her head, and saw me looking at her. She smiled, and kept walking. The sky promised no rain. In Africa, nothing ever changes.

A little later, after the grass began to crackle from the heat, Abram, my sentinel and also my neighbor, was going to come over and tell me that his daughter had died in the middle of the night. He was going to tell me about her long bouts of coughing, how her blood had dribbled out of the corner of her mouth (in tiny rivulets), about her thin and ragged breathing

and the cool hands that snatched her away and left only a brown sack of bones curled up on the mattress. He was going to tell me this without any visible sign of emotion, looking away towards the low hills of Caga Bandoro and then back at me--the gesture of a man seeking a bargain.

When it was morning, finally, I looked out my window and saw that nothing had changed. The road still curved to the east, red dust swirling with the occasional breeze; no flowers bloomed. It was too early for Abram to come by, to tell me his bit of news, though he had probably been up all night. I had dreamt of beans unable to climb to the top of their poles and of shriveled red peppers, and when I woke up and looked out my window, my dream stared back at me. Whoever walked by, Alice (a neighbor of mine), two children (sisters), I didn't acknowledge them. I was thinking I would have to go to the market to purchase some things because I am the wali so la a leke savon, the woman who makes soap, and I had work that needed finishing, a kettle to heat, wax to dip and stir. Abram was going to disturb my routine. He was going to try and upset me.

Perhaps if Abram's daughter had been older than eight months, if she had been old enough to bring me water from the well or to help me chase my chickens out of my house, or if she could have run after my bicycle when I rode to the market, crying after me like the other children, "The white woman is going to town! Where are you going, white woman? The white

woman is going to town!" Perhaps if so many children did not die here all the time, without any good reason, all the time, and I was not drinking too much Bangui gin every night, so much gin, no ice, then I could have comprehended Abram's stoic composure as the most grievous form of mourning, and I would have fallen apart right there in my doorway, lost my will to speak. I would have collapsed with grief when he told me, but how many times can a person collapse from grief?

Standing in my doorway (Abram finally come), watching Abram watch the sky over the low hills of Caga Bandoro, I thought: what black bird, whose approach, is he waiting for? He wanted me to know why there had been so many exclamations in the middle of the night, why women had been wailing, every half-hour or so, the most distressing wailing. It was true, the women of that family had let themselves be taken over by the darkest of songs.

I could have put my hands in his, or to my face (a gesture of sympathy), but instead I looked into my house at the blank walls, and then at my feet, avoiding his glance, and I told him (when people speak here they are friendly, but formal), "I will give you money for a coffin. I will get coffee and sugar for the wake." Since I am Abram's employer, have hired him to watch over my house when I am away in other villages, it is understood that I will provide for certain things.

Everyone is surprised I have stayed here as long as I have. Six years ago I came to this country to make the desert spit water, to turn dust into black, fertile soil, to crease the ground with deep, wet furrows. All of my projects have failed utterly, and even though my contract expired several years ago, I cannot convince myself to leave. I have become obsessed with a place so indifferent, so unyielding, even the small Caga river, which they say had run through here for thousands of years, dried up after my efforts. Each irrigation ditch, now comfortable hiding places for rats and snakes, I dug myself, yard by yard, my palms covered with blisters, splinters under my nails. Now I make soap, an occupation so humble I am considered unthreatening.

Everyone is surprised I am still here, but of course they are reticent about their surprise; they are stingy with their incredulity. They don't want to appear too concerned about anything a white woman might do, or not do, but I am going to stay here until I wither away with age, until flowers grow on the moon, its milky surface covered with Iberian irises. Each night I burn a candle in my window to let them know: I am still here.

After Abram thanked me for my generosity, I sat at my desk and made a list of things to be purchased in town, but as soon as I arrived at the market I could not keep my mind on anything. I remembered the coffee and sugar, but I forgot

the herbs and oils for my soaps. I was distracted by the children who were everywhere, unaccompanied, running back and forth between the stalls, hitting each other, playfully, on the back of the head, laughing. There are always children at the market, so many children it seems that the marketplace is their domain, their own province, a place where no one ever asks them: what are you doing, stop, get out of our way. No one is ever bothered by the children, but I was out of sorts that morning.

On the carts loaded with the carcasses of goats, I could see the eyes of children staring at me from inside the animals' heads, the goats' beards giving their glances a certain wisdom, a certain humor, as if the goats were saying: we are still alive, there are children inside of us, you can't eat something that looks at you with the eyes of a child.

Selling is women's work. Every stall had one or two women standing with their hands on their hips, leaning over piles of fish and lemons, and raising their voices when intimidation was necessary. In one stall two monkeys, roasted to a black crisp, were hanging on hooks, their small hands curled into fists, the shocked expressions on their faces covered with a fine, gray dust.

Some of the children were eyeing my bicycle, enviously, and I was shaking my finger at them, the usual game between us, but I was feeling nervous, apprehensive. I forgot to buy something for them, a grapefruit they could use as a soccer

ball, or some powdered chocolate. They threw stones at me when I pedaled away. It was a harmless joke, but when one of the stones hit me on the shoulder I was angry at myself for forgetting to buy the children something, and I wondered if they were angry with me, also. Against the children, I hold no grudges.

I wondered if Abram was buying the coffin ready-made or having one built, pieced together from scraps of wood, a coffin so small. I could see him bargaining for the wood, saying, I won't pay that much, this wood, well, I know what kind of a tree it came from, when you cheat a man on his daughter's coffin, you are cheating Allah. The seller, a thin man (only thin, hungry-looking men can sell coffins and not be disdained, not be hated by widows)--this man I saw stretching out his arms, the gesture of a shaman, and rolling his eyes, as if to say, Abram, do the clothes I am wearing look like the clothes of a rich man?

As I made my way home it began to rain, a miracle, though even in the driest of countries a thirst can sometimes be satisfied. The downpour wouldn't last long, it was only a shower, but still, it was fierce. The trees were hunched over in the wind, drenched and shivering. Everything was cowering. The dry season is stingy with rain, but when it finally comes, if at all, it is swift and furious and leaves no traces, only a thin fog which hangs above the trees in ribbons.

I decided to stop and surprise a woman I know along the

road. She is a friend and we often smoke my cigarettes together. I was hoping she would offer me a cup of palm wine. Florence saw me standing under a tree outside of her house one day last summer--I was trying to get out of the rain then, also--and she told me to come into her house. She told me that anything could happen to a white woman standing by herself under a baobab tree. Not everyone is so friendly, she had told me. With her long fingers, furrowed with age, she had unrolled a mat for me to sit on while she brewed some tea, a luxury here, and we had talked about the rain, about her family, my house (what was my house like, did I have any chickens?). But Florence did not ask me: why are you in this country, where is your family? She did not say: are you the retired scientist who lives next to Abram, the one who doesn't want to go home? My presence in her house had been as natural as the steam rising from our cups of tea.

Now, chilled by the unexpected rain, again, my packages from the market heavy with water, Florence beckoned me into her house. The clay tiles were warm and reassuring under my bare feet. Florence began to tell me about her granddaughter while we passed a cup of wine back and forth, her eyes glazed over from the strong Turkish cigarettes I shared with her. Her granddaughter had fallen in love with a man from another village, someone already married and too old for her, so she was hardly ever home and oh, what was happening when granddaughters didn't come home when they were supposed to?

What was happening when granddaughters forgot the villages they were from, forgot the pattern of houses on the old streets, and lost their way? Florence has no one but her granddaughter to take care of and look over, no one else to count her beads for, one by one, with worry: a reassuring ritual. Florence has no one but her granddaughter to take care of her.

One of Florence's chickens came in and looked at me, tilting its head, and then more chickens came in and Florence was saying, scat, scat, since when do chickens come into my house before I ask them to? Since when are chickens afraid of a little rain? Perhaps we should go into the chickens' house, there is plenty of room in there now without chickens in it, Florence said, and we both laughed. Looking into the cup I had just drunk from, I could see there was nothing left, but I couldn't let go of the empty cup, of Florence's laughter. I wasn't ready to leave.

I was wondering how to tell Florence about Abram's daughter, but then decided not to. It was not my place to go from village to village telling everyone the sad, inevitable news. I could not be properly mournful, making clicking noises by pressing my tongue between my teeth. I knew no funeral songs. In this matter, Florence did not need my assistance. If she had not already heard the wailing (a sound which pierces everything), someone would tell her and she would come to the wake. She would have to be escorted because of her age

and she would have a dark cloth wrapped around her head and shoulders. She would enter Abram's house as slowly and gracefully as a boat drifting into a familiar harbor. Because she has sung the funeral songs more times than anyone, everyone would defer to her.

When my cup was not re-filled, I stood to leave. Florence touched my wrist, closed her old eyes and nodded. She was tired and didn't know yet how she was going to stay up all night moaning over a small coffin. My head buzzing with wine tapped from ancient trees, I rode through brown cassava fields, roots and sticks twisting in the heat, the tires of my bicycle skidding through the damp earth. In the distance I could see one of my old projects, an hydraulic pump, now useless, looking like some kind of totem risen out of the ground, gleaming under the new sun.

Once when I was digging my ditches, Abram had come out to watch me and to talk. Why is it, he had asked me, that you want to dig all these ditches when we have learned to live with the little water we have? Even if you bring in more water, he told me, people will always want more than you can provide because no one is ever satisfied. If you hoard what the sky gives you, Abram had said, the sky will stop giving. Later that day I broke my wrist, the ground was so hard.

When I lifted the small body wrapped in its linen cloth, my fingers trembled. Inside my heart something stirred and

begged for better judgement, but I was not listening. Abram's daughter was small enough to fit inside my market sack. As quietly as smoke, I slipped out the back door.

Everyone was out front in the courtyard: Abram's relatives, our neighbors, mourning an empty coffin, pressing the palms of their hands together, digging their heels into the soft ground, shaking their heads and passing a slim pipe back and forth. The women were making low, inarticulate sounds. No one was contemplating justice the way I was contemplating justice.

Once when I had been gone for five days selling my soap in other villages, I came back to find my dog, Lucy, dead, beaten to death it seemed and shoved underneath my bed. A few months earlier there had been a rabies outbreak and the magistrate in Bangui had ordered that all stray dogs in the villages would be shot on sight. He hired teenage boys to do the shooting and it got out of hand. They shot every dog they could find, even those sleeping peacefully on front stoops. Boys love to kill things, to squash the heads of beetles and tear the wings off of bumblebees.

When they came to our village with their guns and their wheelbarrows full of dead dogs, I hid Lucy in my house (in my clothes trunk) and I stood in my doorway, angrily, as if to say: you wouldn't shoot a white woman for a dog. No one else thought to hide their dog, or to stand in the way. In a country where meat is scarce, it is not considered wise to get

too attached to a pet, any kind of pet. Later that evening the smell of burning dog flesh, pungent as wood-smoke, travelled to our village from some other place and settled in like a dense vapor. In this country it is considered frivolous to bury a dog.

When I picked Lucy up to bury her, after coming home and finding her under my bed, all of her bones, smashed, moved in the wrong directions. I buried a wrecked animal, a wet sack of rocks. "She got sick, then she died," one neighbor, Alice, told me. "We didn't know what to do," Abram had said. "She went under your bed and wouldn't come out."

Sometimes I will come back after having been gone for a while and all of my tomatoes will be gone, or some of my pigeons, and no one will say anything to me. There are no excuses for hunger. Sometimes I will have only eggs to eat and I will say to my chickens, "Look, I am eating your children." If it is too depressing for me to do even that I will drink gin out of a metal cup, no ice, and sit against the outside of my house, my legs crossed, until it gets too cold or until Abram's goat comes over and starts sniffing at my empty cup.

Having stolen the dead child (not really a child anymore just as my pumps, without water flowing through them, are no longer pumps), I realized I would have to wait a few hours, until Florence arrived at Abram's house. The wake would last the entire night, maybe longer. No one would check the coffin

until morning. I sat on the edge of my bed, my market sack beside me: an inscrutable omen. I was thinking, hoping actually, that Florence remembered the nge-nge. The nge-nge was a kind of medicine man. Every village had one, and some still do.

There are doctors now, heads of surgery in Bangui, but they are so scared of Africans with strange blood diseases, of Africans with viruses, they are incapable of practicing medicine. Children are not important to them because there are so many. The doctors forget they were children once. There will always be children, they say. They are experts at keeping a professional distance and only rush in at the last moment when a patient is dead and someone needs to make it official. After that, they head straight for the showers. I have seen this happen.

I brought a child to one of them once, a child sick with dehydration whose mother, a cattle herder from a village over sixty miles away, was too malnourished to carry the child all the way to the hospital. She had been walking for forty miles when I met her and offered to take the child the rest of the way. At the hospital in Bangui one of the doctors said to me: what makes this child so important, I am only one man. There isn't enough formula for everyone, he told me, we have to take care of those who are already here. I stayed at the hospital for a week, slept in the lobby and ate rice cakes and waited for someone to help me because the nurses kept telling me:

someone will help you, but right now we are extremely busy and as you can see, we do not have enough formula for everyone, we have to take care of those who were already here.

When the child died I had to carry her for twelve miles, back to the mother who was staying with relatives in a nearby village. She wouldn't come out to greet me, or to take the dead child. Her relatives, making peanut oil in their courtyard when I disturbed them, took the child and told me: she is so depressed, she won't get up from the bed, she has slept for four days, but she has other children who need her, she will get up soon, she won't forget this.

A nge-nge almost never touched a person who was sick. Sometimes he did not even see them--a relative would relate the illness, but he would always prescribe a remedy: the burial of some object in the ground, the stringing of glass beads, prayers, the payment to him of a hen or a goat, or of someone's virginity, if he was unscrupulous. Or perhaps he would recommend the burial of his payment, the hen or the goat, at a specific time and place, and in the middle of the night he would somehow gather these things so as not to appear too greedy.

Nge-nges were more than just healers. They were also sorcerers. They could make people disappear or bring them back from where they were lost. They could help barren women bear children or take fertile women and shrivel them up inside. They could take a person's soul and place it into the heart

of a wolf, or a wild pig, and when that wolf or pig was slaughtered, the hunter could be charged with murder, a nice little trick. There were good nge-nges and there were corrupt nge-nges. They could be bought and influenced, just like anyone.

I have only read about these men, but I wondered if Florence remembered nge-nges because her granddaughter had left her alone for days at a time, sometimes weeks, and if Florence had a nge-nge she could say to him, tell me what to do to get my granddaughter to come home, an old woman like me needs someone to take care of her. But instead she sits in her house alone, saying to me when I stop by: what is happening to the world when granddaughters don't come home to help their grandmothers pound the millet, to chase the chickens out of the house, to fill a pipe and then smoke it? If Florence needed a nge-nge, and I thought she did, I was going to accommodate her.

I put my market sack around my neck and biked to Florence's, Abram's daughter nestled between my shoulder blades, no heavier than an Abyssinian cat. No one was home. Only the one baobab tree was witness to my digging. Everyone had gone to the next village, mine and Abram's village, to wail if they were related or just to cluck their tongues and shake their heads if they were not kin.

Everything was violet because the sun was setting. Every shadow, mine and also my shovel's, was growing longer and

longer. The violet color reflected on the roof of Florence's house was going to turn a velvet red. I kept the linen cloth wrapped around the body because I wanted the ground to know: this was something different, not a yam, or the shrunken root of a tree. In order for Abram's daughter to be accepted she had to be an obvious intrusion, a hidden jewel, something shining, faintly, underneath the coarse dirt.

I had foreseen all of this. When I had awakened that morning and stretched my legs over the side of my bed, all of this had already happened because I had decided. I had made a decision. When it was morning, finally, I had looked out my window and nothing had changed. Nothing was ever going to change.

Imagine my body bent over the newly turned dirt, my face reflecting the bright orange color of my determination while everything else goes black, my face hot with energy, with intent (a fire in a grate), then redness (the blood-red color finally come), the night's purple veins pulsing along the outlines of branches, along the curve of the road.

While I was hunched over, patting the dirt, sinking my palms into the soft earth, my shovel lay beside me and I was intoning my chant: "Kete molenge ti Florence, mbeni ye ti mo a yeke na da ti aita ti mo. Kete molenge ti Florence, a kondo kwe a lingbi ti kiri na kodoro tiala mbeni la. Kete molenge ti Florence, mbeni ye ti mo a yeke na da ti aita ti mo. A kondo kwe a lingbi ti kiri na kodoro tiala mbeni la."

All nge-nges have their chants. Mine loosely translates: "Granddaughter of Florence, there is something for you at your grandmother's house. Granddaughter of Florence, all chickens have to come home to roost at some time. Granddaughter of Florence, there is something for you at your grandmother's house. All chickens have to come home to roost at some time."

When the coffin was lifted in the morning, perhaps by Abram and one other man, it would seem too light and there would be rattling noises. Perhaps, in shock, they would drop the coffin unexpectedly. Or perhaps they would set it back down quickly and ask the women to leave the room for just a moment, but the women would not leave, they are too stubborn, and they would lift up the lid and see that there was no child inside, only a few stones gathered from the edge of a dry riverbed. I would be in the room when this happened and act as horrified as anyone. Some of the women would start wailing again and saying, Allah, Allah, Allah.

Yes, I came late to the wake, my hair untied and no shoes on, shiny granules of dirt (rough diamonds) under my fingernails, but didn't I buy the coffee and sugar and provide the money for that very same coffin and didn't I cry, even wail, along with everyone else? But these people, my neighbors, they needed to know: nothing belongs to anyone--this is the lesson I first learned from them. Perhaps I was mistaken--the sun here, so fierce, can make a person

unrecognizable, inconsolable. The path home is obscured by the glare.

But I was hoping Abram would feel an indescribable loss, though his daughter, once dead, wasn't his daughter anymore. Weren't the stones the same thing--an ossified nothingness? But I hoped there was some pain for him still, a sense of dark foreboding, a strong foul-smelling wind. For Florence, upon returning home in a state of distress, the palms of her hands sore from so much clasping, I hoped her granddaughter was waiting for her. Because Florence has shown me some kindness. She has shown me her infinite kindness.

ALL THAT FOOD IN LIMBO

"If a blight kill not a tree, but it still bear fruit,
let none say that the fruit was in consequence of the
blight."

--William Blake

When Izzy gets to the boardwalk she thinks about turning back. Maybe he won't remember her. It might be all forgotten by him, but he's a psychic, of course he'll remember her. She doesn't need to worry. The past, lives already lived, are his specialty. If it's water under the bridge he can reach in and pull out the stones: the small, hidden, calcified truths worn smooth by years of forgetting and finally seized, finally fingered, held. For Izzy, maybe he seized the wrong stones, he's an old man, but still she feels she owes him something.

The oil from the fish she had brought for him is beginning to seep through the paper, smearing the black ink: somebody's old news. She is hoping he won't notice where she has made the incision, or how she has carefully sewn the two pieces of silver skin back together. Her fingers are still sticky with iridescence, with fishy residue.

The beach is deserted, littered with what the sea abandons in winter, carp skeletons picked clean by gulls,

broken shells, arthritic crabs scuttling through black seaweed. It is only at this time of year, in late December, when the wind helps the gray beach creep up over the gray boardwalk and into the empty arcades, and nothing is discernible from anything else, that Sparrow can be found.

Between the Skee-Ball Palace and Jazz Ella's Soft Pretzels is the red door, his door, the small brass knob shaped like an egg, and the gold hand-painted lettering above the weatherbeaten frame: "Lives Re-Told! Past's Illuminated! Ghosts Given Up! Faith Restored! \$5.00 - \$50.00 Per Session." And in small script on the door itself: "Sparrow, Proprietor."

When the sun slips out of its harness the sea begins to tug at everything around it, to pull what color is left out of the sky, the tall sea oats, the crouched buildings, but the red door is unmistakable, defiant, thick with borrowed light.

Izzy sees the small brass knob turn, the door open. Sparrow, a small bent shadow of a man, thick white hair curling around his ears, steps outside to roll a cigarette and to watch, to bear witness to the sun's desertion. Each day, neatly ended like this, adds to his repertoire. This is how Izzy, also a resident of the island, first met him a year ago. And now she has come back. Now she can pay what she owes.

"Izzy!"

So he recognizes her.

"Izzy," he says, smiling, "what's happening with you? It's been so long, a whole year."

"I've brought you something," she says.

"Look at you, Izzy," he says, suddenly disconcerted. "You look different. There's not as much of you as there used to be."

Izzy moves one leg, abstractly. She doesn't want to say anything more. She doesn't want to start a conversation, get tangled up in Sparrow's concern, which always leads to coffee and stale pretzels, a consultation, a disinterment of old sorrows. Saying nothing, she holds out her package for him, a leaking, spoiling gift, a wet and salty prophecy of her own making.

"You're so thin, Iz," Sparrow says, walking towards her.

"Well--."

"Too thin."

Imagine a woman, now thin, who used to be much larger, enormous really, a woman composed of rolls and bulges, a woman who had eaten her way through despair, who would fall into fitful sleep next to half-empty cartons of sour cream, half-eaten loaves of bread, half-gorged pans of manicotti, drained bowls of cream-of-anything soup, her lips glistening, bloated. Imagine a woman, now thin, her yellow dress hanging on her shoulders like a slack piece of cloth, who used to be much larger. Her body was a burden to her, a foreign country she had been exiled to, and she was determined to chew her way out, to shed her skin like an old, forgotten coat. She

imagined her heart as a thick overdone pudding no one wanted to taste. She lived alone.

It was Jazz Ella's pretzels that had first brought Izzy to Sparrow, an accident. Last December, when Jazz Ella and everyone else had gone to the mainland for the winter, Izzy would drive to the boardwalk and lean with longing against Jazz Ella's chrome counter. She would run her tongue along the ridges of the steel gate, along the cardboard sign that read, "gone to guatemala" (an inside joke), imagining the flour and butter inside, the empty mixing bowls, the shakers of salt, the jars of mustard: all that food in limbo, all that doughy heaven.

The night she first met Sparrow she had stayed too long. Her tongue was raw, her intestines lay coiled inside of her, tense with expectation. A line of purple light hovered over the black curve of the earth. Everything was waiting. Waiting.

"She'll be back," he had said to her.

She had jumped, one thick hand on her generous chest, her shoulders twitching, her ears echoing with the rasp of Sparrow's match, his slow exhaling, the scratch of the sea clawing its way up the beach. Izzy wasn't used to people, to people talking to her.

"She'll be back?" she said.

"Jazz Ella," he said. "She always comes back. Me, I'm here all the time."

"Me, too," she had heard herself saying. "Sort of."

"Did you ever hear her sing?" he asked her.

"What?"

Why is he talking to me? she had thought.

"Jazz Ella--did you ever hear her when she used to sing?"

"I don't think so."

"You'd remember if you had."

Sparrow recalled Ella's whiskey vibrato, her courageous forays into jazz's darker side, the blues, the way her throat would tremble when she sang "Summertime," a song that held out a promise it couldn't keep. Izzy listened with only one ear, one hip, the rest of her leaning into the dark, trying to leave. She only came to the boardwalk in the off-season, or at night, only when she was sure no one would see her, the sight of a woman who could block out the sun caused a general kind of anxiety, but she was hungry and Sparrow invited her upstairs, through the red door, for coffee and salted herring, and stale pretzels. Certain things can't be refused.

"Ella always gives me her leftovers," Sparrow had explained.

When they were both sitting down, coffee cups balanced on their laps, he had told her, "I only see people in the off-season. I don't really advertise. That's how you find the neediest people."

Izzy hadn't known he was talking about her, that she was the needy person, that needy persons came to him like this,

hungry, unaware, a tingling in their tongues. What is he talking about? she had thought, licking the salt from her fingers.

Izzy had felt strangely comfortable in Sparrow's apartment which was cluttered with unthreatening things, brass reading lamps, several over-finished pine end tables, as if that was another business of his, stacks of newspapers, small yellow fish swimming in a bowl on top of a bookcase. The chairs they sat on were large and comfortable even though the brown leather was cracking in places. There was an odor of cloves, and spearmint.

"You're a psychic?" she had asked him.

"Sort of," he told her, "but don't ask me about the future. The future's a mystery to me. The future could be any number of things, you know, depending on which way you want it to go, but the past is something that has to be dealt with on its own terms. You might say I remember things for people, things that happened to them that they've forgotten about."

"Like a psychiatrist."

"Oh no, Izzy," Sparrow had said, leaning towards her, laughing, "not like a psychiatrist. They make you do all the work. I just show people things, that's all. You might think knowing someone's past is no big deal, on an island like this, but God gave me this gift, I don't know, even in a person's past there are hidden things, lost things, things you don't even know you've lost to begin with. One day, you're a child,

you're playing with marbles in the hallway of your house, you lose a marble under the stairwell, or under a sofa, a chair, another day you lose another marble, then you get older, you forget about the marbles, you know?"

"Not really," Izzy had said, leaning as far back in her chair as possible. "Marbles?"

"Forget the marbles," he said. "I know things, that's all. I know things about you, Izzy. I know things about everyone who comes in here."

Izzy was suddenly terrified, crumbs stuck in her throat, her knees locked together. She had eaten this man's food, and now he was going to take something from her. Everything had a price. Something was stuck in her throat. She began coughing.

"Izzy," Sparrow said, rising and taking her cup from her lap, slapping her back, "are you all right? Can I get you some water?"

Without waiting for an answer, Sparrow left the room and returned a few moments later with a glass of water. Izzy had stopped coughing, was wiping her chin with the back of her hand.

"Izzy," Sparrow said, handing her the glass, "just relax. Drink the water, you'll be okay."

Izzy didn't know what he meant--what was "okay"? She had never been "okay," she was still wiping dribbled spit from her chin, hitting her chest with her fist. She took the glass of

water, drank greedily, sloppily. Sparrow was sitting down again, was observing her quietly, intently.

"I should go now," Izzy said, her coughing subsided, but she didn't stand up.

"Izzy," Sparrow said, "you don't have to go, really. I'd like you to stay, please. There's nothing to be upset about, so I know some things--big deal."

"Izzy," Sparrow continued, his legs apart, his hands on his knees, leaning forward again, "what are you afraid of? It's a blessing you showed up here, really--a good omen is what it is. What are you afraid of?"

Placing her glass on the table in front of her, Izzy had felt unusually serene, placid as still water. So she was in this man's apartment and he knew something about her, the island was small, but what could he know? What could he really know? It would be easy to leave.

"Mr. Sparrow, I really think--."

"Sparrow, Izzy, just Sparrow. It was my grandfather's name."

"Sparrow," she had said, "I should really go. I...I don't know what I was thinking. It's late."

"Izzy," Sparrow had said, "what is late? Late for what? Look, Izzy, I don't want to mislead you. No one ends up anywhere by mistake. You're here, and I have something to tell you. I'm no fortune teller, sure. I never knew if you'd come here or not, but you're here. I'm a patient man, you're

anxious. Still, what I have to tell you, it can wait, it can wait a long time. I know a lot of stories--some people never come here, never make it here."

Stories, Izzy had thought. Story was not a word she had ever associated with her life, a life she felt was more random circumstance than carefully plotted event, though she knew the world was always constructing plots, always setting snares, and that was why she never went out, not if she could help it. That was why she stayed indoors during the day, peered at the mailman through the shutters as he carefully placed her letters, junk mail, bills, her monthly welfare check, into the black box screwed to the pink aluminum siding of her house. She would wait for him to leave, then venture out, cautiously. The world was always bringing her things, trying to lure her out, she was sure, to catch her in daylight, to see the sun fall on her like a spotlight.

"Izzy," Sparrow had said, bringing her back from where she was lost, "I know why you eat so much, Izzy. You can't stand yourself. You think you could have saved your mother's life? You were only a child anyway. Only a child."

"I know all that stuff already," she said, wanting him to stop. She imagined herself standing up and leaving, quickly, as quickly as she could, but she remained where she was. She couldn't stand up. She couldn't think of what else to say, how to say, stop, I don't want to hear anymore. She wasn't used to people, to people talking to her, to

conversation of any kind.

"Izzy," Sparrow said, "some things you don't know. Maybe I can help you. Do you remember?--you were only twelve and when your stepfather came home he was so drunk, he was always that way, but that night was different. He was so angry that night, yelling at your mother to stay out of his way, but your mother wouldn't leave the kitchen or let him get by, remember?"

She remembered.

"Maybe you didn't understand," Sparrow continued, "you were too young, but your mother, she'd had enough. She told him he wasn't going to stay in her house anymore, not like that, not drunk every night and swinging his fists at her."

Izzy remembered the knife first, the way her stepfather had pulled it out of his boot, her mother pressed up against the stove. She remembered the way the blood had rushed out of her mother's throat, staining her white dress a dark red, the color of the apples sitting in a bowl on the kitchen table. She remembered the way her mother fell to the floor, listlessly, like a woman falling asleep.

"Okay," Sparrow said, "so you ran outside, so what? What else could you have done? That pile of stones you left on the back stoop--you knocked them over, they went flying all over the steps when you pushed open the screen door so hard, you forgot they were there, I know. You went and hid in your mother's car.

"Sure, your stepfather was drunk, everyone said he couldn't see straight, he just tripped down the steps, then bam," Sparrow hit the table in front of him for effect, "he hits his head, he never gets up again and it's just as well, a man who kills his wife like that should burn in hell, but that's not everything, Izzy."

Izzy could feel her nails pressed into the palm of her hand, her life being peeled open, sliced into. How could that not be everything? Her mouth was dry: a pink, wrinkled desert. Yes, the island was small, but who told this man, this Sparrow she had never seen before, never even heard of?

"If it weren't for the stones," Sparrow told her, "if you hadn't left them there for him to trip over, he would have made it down those steps and he was heading straight for Oyster, he didn't have any shame, your stepfather. Remember Oyster, your old basset hound? He was your mother's favorite. Mr. Oyster, she always called him, my sweet Mr. Oyster."

Izzy remembered how her mother had found Oyster, how she had told her stepfather one evening that she had been out walking and the dog had been left on the fishing pier by some heartless fisherman, abandoned it seemed, that she had found the dog asleep on a pile of blue mussels, flies buzzing around his head, how she couldn't leave the dog there all by himself with no one to take care of him. Her stepfather had taken his beer bottle and swung it at her mother--since when do you go out walking alone, he had said, the bottle cracking against

her mother's jaw, the beer spilling to the floor, the dog standing underneath the kitchen table, wagging his brown tail.

"Your stepfather couldn't stand that dog," Sparrow had said, bringing Izzy back to herself. "Stinky, he always called him, Mr. Stinkbreath. He had so much anger in him, Izzy. He was going to stab Oyster right through the throat, over and over again, if he'd had the chance. Why don't you give yourself a break now? Anyway, you're forty years old. You hold on to grief too long, Izzy, it starts to bite back. Anyway, the dead--they stay that way, but we have to keep living, Izzy. We have to keep going."

Izzy still didn't know what to say. She was waiting, waiting for the rest of the story. So the dead stayed dead; she knew that already. There had to be something else, something more. But Sparrow had leaned back in his chair, had folded his arms against his chest as if there were nothing else.

"It doesn't seem like much," she finally said. "A dog."

"It's more than you think," Sparrow told her. "Mrs. Olin came and got Oyster from the pound, remember? He lived with her a long time, chased her cat and slept next to her washing machine. For a dog, it was a good life."

"I'm supposed to be happy because of a dog?" She was beginning to feel swindled, indignant.

"A dog isn't nothing, Izzy. A dog has a life, just like us, a life that has to be lived, happily or unhappily. Anyway,

your mother loved that dog."

But Izzy hadn't loved the dog. She hadn't really loved it the way her mother had loved it. The dog had been an interloper, an intruder, a thief of her mother's affections. He had slept at the foot of her mother's bed in the afternoons, been petted and cooed at, fussed over, except in the evenings when Izzy's stepfather would come home and then the dog was banished to the backyard. At night Izzy would sometimes hear him on the porch, scratching the wall underneath her mother's bedroom window, whimpering. During the day he padded through the house on four slippered feet and cheated her out of everything.

When they had come to take the dog away, to take it to the pound, to see if anyone would want it, would want to take care of it, Izzy had thought they were coming for her. She hadn't cared about the dog. She had wondered why no one was coming to get her, why she was being left in the back of her mother's Chevrolet, police sirens howling towards the house, men slamming car doors and running after the dog, pushing through the neighbors into the house, picking up her stepfather's heavy body and swinging him onto a stretcher, his spine as loose as a piece of rope, her mother splayed on the floor next to the stove, everyone ignoring her, the one survivor.

Who said she had wanted her stepfather to die, to knock himself out and go to hell? Sparrow couldn't have understood,

but while her mother had been terrified by her stepfather, then fed up, finally angry, not caring what happened to her, Izzy had been secretly thrilled by her stepfather's brute anger, by his violent and whiskey-filled tempers. Her mother, depressed because she had married the wrong man, again, had mostly ignored Izzy, had sat at the kitchen table with her head in her hands, or just never got out of bed, laid in bed and nursed her bruises with gin-and-tonics, had considered Izzy inconsequential, never asked her why she wasn't in school, why she was always in the back digging holes and stacking rocks, the whole yard a kind of potter's field.

When Izzy's stepfather would come home and stand over her, drunk and incoherent, usually upset because she was blocking his reeling path, his bellowing down at her had made her pores tingle, had made her bones vibrate and knock together. His rage was a kind of love, the only love she knew, and she knew it was love because it filled her up. It made her tremble. And there were other ways he filled her up, stumbling into her room late at night, bloated with something he had to give her. There were many other ways, terrible ways. But at least she was something to somebody.

So Sparrow was a kind of fraud, a nice enough man, but wrong, so very wrong. What could he know, this old man who lived alone, about love, about what a person needed to know in order to be happy? Izzy didn't see how he could ever really know: the manner in which she had been loved, how much she

still needed that, and hated herself for needing that. Her mother had been nothing to her, another fraud, an imposter in ultrasuede, beautiful in her own aloof way, but so unfit, so unfit for anything.

The dog had been insufficient, just one more reminder of how everything had turned out badly. The dog had been happy. This was the way life worked--the dog got the best of it. Unless Sparrow could conjure up spirits, bring her stepfather back from the dead, from the Hell Sparrow had relegated him to, unless her stepfather loomed over her, once more, large and unsteady, to let her go, to explain how his love was the wrong kind of love, an error in judgement, a soggy mistake, the past would remain unexplained, unalterable, illegible, a scrawl.

But Izzy had found something out, something she needed to know, that the past, anyone's past, was filled with hinges and hasps, well-oiled secrets anyone could pry open, at least part of the way. Izzy knew debts, even questionable ones, had to be paid.

"How much do I owe you?" she had asked Sparrow.

"Oh please, Izzy," he had said to her. "Don't be silly."

So now a year has gone by and Izzy is whittled down, reduced. She has brought Sparrow a gift, a fish from Tillie's Market, a turbot pregnant with her mother's pearl necklace, fake, which she has sewn up inside. She wants Sparrow to be

surprised. She wants something from her past to get stuck in his teeth, in his throat, something which isn't what it appears to be, shiny as money, but worthless as dirt. She doesn't hate Sparrow, he tried to help her, she just wants him to know--what it feels like.

Before, when she hadn't known about Oyster or her stepfather in Hell, how she had saved her mother's dog from drowning in his own blood, she had only wanted to step out of her thick skin, to be pushed up out of it, leaving it behind her like an old coat while she slipped away, unnoticed, out to the sea, her bones cutting through the green water with silent grace. She'd swim and swim until the horizon ate up what was left of her. She'd eat, and be eaten, and everything would make sense, how some people end up in the wrong body, the wrong place, how it's necessary sometimes to refuse the assignment. They'd find her discarded skin, the loins and chops of it, and no one would know it was her, she would seem so deflated. She'd be a missing person, an expatriate.

Now she's afraid of letting anything in, of what it would take to billow up out of herself, how she would have to infect herself first. She doesn't know what's in the meat she buys at the market, where it comes from, who yanked it from its bones, carved it into cutlets and thighs, flanks and shoulders. She doesn't know what misery might lie on her plate, roasted and inconsolable, waiting only for the right moment to reveal itself.

Sometimes, when she's walking, anywhere, anywhere to get away from all the things that want to crawl inside of her and confess their despair, she'll feel the urge to get inside someone's car, anyone's, to lie down in the back. She imagines being found hours later, someone opening the car door and saying, "You can come out now. It's okay now, you can come out." That was the only time in her life she had felt safe, when they had finally found her in her mother's car, when they had told her it was okay. But it hadn't been okay. So now a year has gone by, and Izzy is whittled down, reduced.

"Izzy," Sparrow says to her, crushing his cigarette under his heel, "let's go in and have some coffee. You look tired."

"I really can't stay," she says. "I just wanted to bring you something."

"One cup of coffee, Izzy. Whatever it is, bring it inside. You don't look so good to me."

Izzy feels so weak she doesn't know how to protest. She thinks: one cup of coffee, that's all, I can't stay here. She follows Sparrow upstairs. He takes her damp gift into the kitchen and tells her to sit down, to relax. He asks her why she's so thin, over and over: why so thin, Iz, why?

"I don't know, Sparrow," she says. "I'm okay, anyway, you're the psychic."

Sparrow doesn't answer, but Izzy can hear him in the kitchen unwrapping the newspaper, the water running. She doesn't know how long it is before Sparrow comes back out and

sits down beside her.

"Izzy," he says, taking one of her thin hands, stroking her gaunt knuckles, "I don't understand. Some things I don't understand."

"I'm okay," she says. "Don't worry about me."

"How about if I cook the fish?" Sparrow asks her. "I'll cook the fish and we'll eat it together. I'm a good cook, Iz, you'll love it. It won't be fancy, just plain fried fish, maybe some garlic, some basil."

"I can't, Sparrow, really. I just wanted you to have it."

Izzy closes her eyes and leans her head back on the chair. She is so tired, she couldn't possibly eat anything, not the fish, she has to leave before he cooks the fish, she knows she shouldn't fall asleep, not here, but maybe she will. Sparrow watches her arms and fingers go limp, her hand slip out of his. He bends over to kiss her forehead, her neck. There are other ways to find things that are lost, but he has to hurry. There is only so much time a person can steal, carry off.

When Izzy wakes up Sparrow's white head is nestled between her thighs, her dress pushed up around her waist. A warm sensation, a ticking in her veins, is moving from her shoulders to the soles of her feet, through her knees. She feels dizzy, drugged. Sparrow's tongue is inside her, moving hesitantly, searching--for what? Time passes, she doesn't know

how long they have been together like this, Sparrow's coarse hands grasping her narrow hips, kneading her waist.

She feels a tugging between her legs, a dull pain below her kidneys, a scraping in her uterus. For the first time she feels as if she is standing outside of her body, watching everything. She feels a vague excitement, some kind of expectancy, hope, moving through her body like the hands of a clock: turning, descending, turning, descending. Sparrow pulls something out of her into his mouth, a roe of lust clicking over his teeth. With each click, her body trembles. It is her mother's necklace, each fake pearl glistening with his saliva, that he has taken out of her.

Sparrow stands up, awkwardly, his mouth full, but still he can say,

"I'm not too old yet to make a little magic."

Izzy is unable to say anything--again. The necklace. Inside of her. She is suddenly hungry, so hungry she thinks she could eat the entire fish now lying on Sparrow's kitchen table, its stitches undone, its wound reopened, its gills moving, fluttering, up, then down, shuddering with desire, with the anticipation of their teeth, Sparrow's and Izzy's teeth, tearing gently through its skin, its blanched flesh, its lungs, its heart.

DIOGENES' NOTES

Oh Diogenes, great and benevolent patron of burned and forgotten cities, of cities reduced to red ash where men wander for days searching for some evidence of a former home (once scorned and now lamented), we beseech you. Oh Diogenes, blessed and beneficent protector of change-beggars (only now there is no change to beg, no people to accost), we ask you to hear our humble prayer. We have gathered wood for you, Diogenes, singed floorboards and pieces of once-favorite benches, and we have made a fire in your honor. In our overcoats (tattered), wearing our finger-less gloves, we rub our hands over the flames crackling your name. Oh Diogenes, we beseech you: hear our prayer. While we were foraging, rummaging through once-pink bodies (now black and bubbling from atomic heat) for some sign of sustenance, we found these notes (down in the caves where the train tracks still gleam and the sulphur still smells so sweet--oh sweet, holy incense!), and oh Diogenes, we do not know what they mean. Here is a man who knew the signs in the sand and loved the FISHGOD as we love the FISHGOD, but oh Diogenes, great and merciful God, God of the change-beggars and the men who own nothing except one rough cloak, shall we keep these notes?

Shall we pass them from man to man (when men return), memorize them until their words are burned into our hearts, eat each scrap of paper as if it were the blessed wafer, and hunger for nothing else? Oh Diogenes, are these notes sacred, your holy apocrypha, or is it just the dead taunting us with their misery?

Because there are many voices in my head, many inquisitors; because they all demand of me one thing: a RECORD, a RECORD, they chant; because they say to me, if you cannot answer our questions, at least leave us notes, something to ponder, something to mull over; because I do not know if it will help, but do not want to displease this clamor in my brain, I've found some graysticks (FORBIDDEN!) to write with and have pulled handkerchiefs out of the breast pockets of long-dead bankers (the first ones to be crossfixed, and WE WERE NOT SORRY).

If we must stand on ceremony, let me introduce myself. I am nobody and everybody, the wandering Jew finally come home, the prodigal son, the corner statesman, the wise fool, the holy mendicant taking bread in exchange for a blessing, a benediction. If I were to be given a name, one familiar to you, it would be street person, layabout, beggar, pariah, leech, moocher, bum. But I have never been named, not

officially. No mother or father ever loomed over me in a crib or tickled me under my chin. I never had the privilege of licking porridge from the sides of a bowl, of hearing grown-ups say, "Look at what Johnny-boy is doing now."

I have always lived on one street or another, in this or that alley, around some corner. Stones are my pillows, gutters my pissoir. I can often be found smirking over the top of a brown bottle, my lips wet and twitching. For the first three years of my life, I was raised by stray cats, fat gray tabbies who suckled me and boxed my ears when I needed it.

Call these notes.

I am one of the Cynics (YES I AM). Not all men are deemed so worthy. There are only five of us: Nik, Thomas, Paul, me and Bob (that's BOB spelled backwards, a testament to his silent constancy--backwards or forwards, BOB is BOB). You could say Nik is our leader (NIK=LEADER/LEADER= NIK--this is what one MIGHT say), but we don't believe in leaders. No man can tell another man what is right or wrong for him--this is one of our tenets. But Nik often starts the discussions. If there is such a thing as wisdom, Nik has been allowed to chew off some of it. Nik speaks in epithets, in aphorisms--there is no time now for lengthy exegesis. Nik says (NIK SAYS!) that a man crossfixed as a heretic in one century is a celebrity in the

next. Nik says (NIK SAYS!) that God's body wouldn't be wafer and wine in our time, but roasted pork ribs instead, covered in hot sauce. Nik is just teasing (NIK TEASES!) because all we have now are beans, rationed weekly, scooped out of tin cans with our fingers and eaten cold. There is no more fire. The boys (in BLACK uniforms) have taken all of the fire away, have hauled off all of the holy & once-perpetual KENMORE 4-BURNERS and the sacred & blessed JENN-AIRS, strapped them onto carts with bungee cords and beat the horses until they took off running, galloping through black smoke (everything on FIRE--but now: no more fire).

Cynics don't wear shoes (on PRINCIPLE). Our suits, shiny from the skins of gray sharks, we found behind the meathouse on 44th Street. The meathouse--that's our name for the warehouse the boys (in BLACK uniforms) built, where the bodies are kept in piles (like logs), all waiting for boats (NOW IT IS AUTUMN AND THE FALLING FRUIT AND THE LONG JOURNEY TOWARDS OBLIVION, THE APPLES FALLING LIKE GREAT DROPS OF DEW TO BRUISE THEMSELVES AND EXIT FROM THEMSELVES AND IT IS TIME TO GO, TO BID FAREWELL TO ONE'S OWN SELF AND FIND AN EXIT FROM THE FALLEN SELF, HAVE YOU BUILT YOUR SHIP OF DEATH, O! HAVE YOU? O! BUILD YOUR SHIP OF DEATH, FOR YOU WILL NEED IT, THE GRIM FROST IS AT HAND WHEN THE APPLES WILL FALL THICK, ALMOST THUNDEROUS, ON THE HARDENED EARTH, AND DEATH IS ON THE AIR LIKE A SMELL OF ASHES! O! CAN'T YOU SMELL IT?). I could show

you so many stiff people, all sprouting daisies out of their noses, they've been waiting so long. Our viruses are not choosy, only voracious. Nothing decays neatly anymore, the air is so fetid. What is autumn?--something I read about in a poem (O! BUILD YOUR SHIP OF DEATH O! BUILD IT!), something I remember from the old city.

What is that French saying?--the more things change, the more they stay the same? C'est la meme something something something?

Do we Cynics care where our clothing has last been draped? (NO!) It is our duty to show no concern over apparel, over appearances of any kind. Also, it keeps most people a good distance away from us (the ODOR is not agreeable). In case any are not aware of our stature (our privileged position) and venture too closely, we simply spit on them. We love to spit. We carry long metal pipes for bashing in heads. We are old, my four friends and I, and we are often accosted by those hungry for more than their allotted share of chillweed: the sacred vision-making leaf the boys (in BLACK uniforms) dole out to us weekly in small packets, crushed to a fine white powder. When we converse behind the meathouse (our regular meeting place) we lean on our pipes, as if to say: we lean on our strength. We do not eat the crushed leaf (we throw it in the gutter and piss on it when no one else is looking). We are

wary of other men's visions.

A long time ago they used to say: the one thing THEY can't take away from you is your sanity. Times have changed. The chillweed is insanity (white haze, manufactured ennui): this is why we Cynics piss on the chillweed and drink whiskey (secretly, carefully, smuggled in from a NEWTOWN close to an old distillery--casks and casks still under the ground, undiscovered). We're not adverse to numbing our brains, to having visions--we just like to do it on our own terms.

As Cynics we take all of our comfort from Diogenes, the barefoot philosopher of 4th-century Greece who, when introduced to Alexander the Great (supposedly a great honor), asked him to get out of his light (ALEXANDER, WHOEVER YOU ARE, I DON'T CARE, YOU ARE BLOCKING MY LIGHT!). Ha!--that's a good one. We wear our gray beards long and tangled, and sleep on cardboard in the middle of the street--any street will do. We are old men, and often accosted, but Nik says (NIK SAYS!) that in the face of God, we are all spring vegetables, supple and green and full of pure water. The only things that come near us at night (other than BOYS) are the aphids which crawl through our bare toes and burrow into our pores, hang in groups from the ends of our beards. Now that there are no more harvests, the aphids have no green stalks to chew and chew on us instead. When the boys (in BLACK uniforms) come by to check

on us, to poke us with the long black barrels of their black guns, I always pray, DEAR GOD THEY CAN HAVE MY APHIDS, PLEASE GOD GIVE THEM MY APHIDS. We do not eat the crushed leaf.

While we sleep, are we afraid that someone will run over us? (NO!) Who has seen a car or truck in the last ten years? Only the train runs now (one train) and it runs for reasons no one can fathom. In the evenings we can hear it racing underground, wheels screaming, whooshing, a silver worm at work in the night. Perhaps it isn't always the same train, but it is always the same racket, the same clatter of metal hitting metal. The boys (in BLACK uniforms) are always up to something, always busy. Everyone dreams of the train. At night you can hear the train whistling through everyone's head, snaking into that part of us that vaguely recalls some other place, some amber field, hawks circling. Everyone wants to get on the train and go somewhere (fast), but this is not allowed. No one is allowed to leave. For all intents (and purposes), we are confined here (jailed, if you will).

Perhaps you think, for a bum (YOU would say FOR A BUM) I speak too eloquently, and yet if I were to say to you (if I were to say), tell me your story, tell me what you know, the words would catch in your throat, you would begin to stutter (to stut-stut-stut-stutter). In our history, yours and mine (for we are not-so-distant cousins), there are many stories and

many tellers, but there is only one TRUETELLER. If that TRUETELLER were to rise from a heap of rotting garbage, from the rinds of apples and the yellow skins of chickens, would you challenge him? Of course you would challenge him--you would crossfix him if you could. But on what grounds?

Paul has decided to start keeping his bean rations in his beard. He told us this at our last meeting. Every Thursday behind the meathouse we meet: the Cynics-of-the-21st-Century-NO-LADIES-ALLOWED-downtown-club. Nik brings the whiskey, one bottle, 80 proof, passed from man to man (some things never change, though there are no longer fires in the cans).

So Paul is going to start storing his bean rations in his beard. "And the reason for storing your rations in your beard?" (NIK ASKED!) "So no one can take my beans," Paul answered. Tom said, "But everyone gets beans! Everyone gets the SAME AMOUNT OF THE SAME LOUSY BEANS! No one WANTS your beans!" Tom is always exasperated, always wanting to start an argument, always doubting good intentions (and basically doesn't like Paul). Nik is the calm one, always choosing his words carefully, rolling them around on his tongue like pieces of ice (which we miss terribly--ice, that is). "As hard as this may be to believe," Paul said, very slowly, "Some people WANT MORE BEANS THAN THEY GET." O! Diogenes, our mentor and inspiration, sage philosopher who preached against

material possessions, how you would have agreed! Diogenes once said, "LOOK AT ME, I AM WITHOUT A HOME, WITHOUT A CITY, WITHOUT PROPERTY, WITHOUT A SLAVE; I SLEEP ON THE GROUND; I HAVE NEITHER WIFE NOR CHILDREN, NO MISERABLE GOVERNOR'S MANSION, BUT ONLY EARTH AND SKY, AND ONE ROUGH CLOAK. YET WHAT DO I LACK? AM I NOT FREE FROM PAIN AND FEAR, AM I NOT FREE?" Diogenes lived in a discarded bathtub. In honor of him (O! sage philosopher!) we cultivate idleness, indifference, rudeness and apathy. Our daily labor consists of nurturing these qualities within ourselves. We have become quite excellent spitters.

"How is it," Tom said, "that Diogenes was able to sustain himself if he hung out all day in the middle of the street, IN A BATHTUB, and never pursued a vocation and never took anything from anybody?" AND (Tom said, in case anyone thought he was finished), "he did not have bean rations!"

We were stumped.

YOU may well wonder: where are these Cynics(?), these old and indifferent men, what is it like there(?), who is this man without a name(?), am I being spoken to from the past(?), the future(?) HA!--the past, of course, it will always be the past which speaks to you. The future will never have anything to say to you. The future is nothing but a precipice, a cliff,

a long black hose sucking us all along some polished track, nibbling our toes. The future has no voice, no language, only the sound of metal on metal, a high screeching whine, an inarticulate WHOOSH! When you hear the sound that wind makes, slow but furious, banging all the doors shut (whack! wham! whack!): that's the future. It may sound pleasant at first (the soothing rustling of branches), but listen to me (I am your ancestor, your wino father--I piss on the chillweed for YOU): the future has no form, no shape, no mercy, no survivors, BUT IT IS IRREVOCABLE (O! BUILD YOUR SHIP! O! BUILD IT!). Do not be fooled by all those books which say, "We went to the future and this is what we saw: we saw towers, gold and silver, gleaming in the light of three suns; we saw men and women, seven feet tall, freely embracing in the streets; we saw children, all blond, sitting on top of pink marble columns, dispensing justice." It is a lie (NO ONE HAS BEEN THERE). Speculation is a sin, pride's brother, but (BUT): the future will come. Do not be unprepared (O! BUILD YOUR SHIP! O! BUILD IT, FOR YOU WILL NEED IT!).

Often, when I'm torn between cold Cynicism (of the highest order) and an aching for love (a terrible weakness), I recite my old lessons; I re-finger the abacus of grief taught me when I was a child of the alleys, a hanger-on of the men of the oil drum fires. These men, their faces always black with smoke, their fingernails dirty (BLACK), gave me my only instruction,

taught me everything they had learned in schools (before the BURNINGS). They were scholars-in-hiding, their blue-and-gray-striped ties left behind, their notes shredded, their faces greased to avoid recognition. Carnage, they told me, was an old currency, but it was being re-minted, thrown back into the forge and melted down, re-shaped. Love is impossible, they told me--after carnage, there is nothing left to love, but we will tell you stories (they told me), we will tell you about Rome and Carthage, about Thermopylae and Agincourt, about Gallipoli and Vietnam, all the places where carnage reigned and love suffered. They told me that no matter what the carnage, as long as some bones were still connected (ball in socket), there was a story to be told, and if there was a story to be told, it had to be knitted, carefully, into the shape of a road and that road had to be followed--it was the only way out. In the midst of carnage, they told me, stories were the only places with exits.

The scholars-in-hiding told me, ONCE WE WERE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS AND SCHOLARS AND WHEN THE CARNAGE CAME WE WERE READY FOR IT (passing the whiskey bottle from man to man, coughing into hands white from the cold--when there was still cold). ONCE WE WERE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS AND SCHOLARS AND WHEN THE CARNAGE CAME WE HAD BEEN KNITTING, WE HAD BEEN KNITTING A ROAD FOR MONTHS AND IT WAS ALMOST READY, WE HAD TO FOLLOW THE ROAD THAT WAS ALMOST FINISHED BUT WASN'T FINISHED (so instead of

ending up in trees, reclined on the wide branches of ancient fruit trees, eating golden apples on an island beyond the sun, expatriates, they ended up in the City, the City of Gold and Silver Towers where Men and Women, Etc.: my black-faced teachers, my fathers, my recently crossfixed brothers). Often they would chastise themselves: MEN USED TO SET THEMSELVES ON FIRE WHEN CARNAGE CAME, BUT WE HIDE HERE LIKE COWARDS AND DRINK OURSELVES INTO OBLIVION.

I have only one story. It is not a road. I do not want to speak ill of my recently crossfixed brothers, but they may have misled me. I have only one story. It is not a road. Men cannot knit this story or travel along its bends. This story locks men up, knits US, puts hinges on our jaws so we can't close them when it is time for what the story wants to feed us, to stick its beak down our throats. I have only one story (it is not a road).

Once, there was a city, THE city, the CITY OF GOLD AND SILVER TOWERS WHERE MEN AND WOMEN, ETC. This city was a jewel glittering over a wide brown river. Twenty-four hours a day the city hummed, glowed. If you lived there, you never wanted to leave. If you never saw trees or mountains, tigers or bears or water tumbling over cliffs, you didn't care. Every now and then the sidewalks would quiver and crack, tall buildings would crumble (all part of a tempestuous, fickle geology), but

it was all water under the bridge as soon as it happened. The city held no grudges, and the people who lived there held no grudges against the city. The stars (when you could still see the stars) always clustered over the city's gold and silver towers, the place was so irresistible. Of course some people were not happy there. There are always complainers. There was Misery. There was Poverty, its pockets always empty, a scowl on its face. But Misery and Poverty stuck with each other, they sold each other protection, they kept out of everyone else's business, they had their own rackets, their own debtors.

Imagine an exodus. Everyone leaves the irresistible city. Some people leave the old-fashioned way--they get sick, feverish. Their lungs fill up with water, they stop breathing. All the unimportant people who have managed to keep their lungs free of viruses are beaten with pipes, run over by horses pulling carts, either shooting or shot at: a free-for-all! Everyone is running, trying to get to the highway (the only stretch of land with weeds tall enough to hide behind). Everything is on fire. All of the important people (the bankers, the teachers, the doctors, the g-men, the guys who sell hot dogs, the guys who sell anything else) are struck in the head with the black butts of black rifles and dragged to the old exit ramp where the crosses have been set up. Some of them are flayed--the man who gives the orders to the boys (in BLACK uniforms) has read

too much French history--but there isn't enough time to flay everyone. There is plenty of time for crossfixing, however.

Those of us who run for the weeds on the highway (yes, this is my one story and it is a first-person account) don't get too far. Just outside the city, the boys (in BLACK uniforms) have clearly been waiting for us. Boys. Every time it is always Boys, grim-faced and eager. They do not shoot us because we have work to do, we are special, we are being given citizenship in a New Order, we will work hard and the sweat of our bodies will water the earth and make it whole again, we are going to build a city out of trash, the whole country is going to be burned to the ground and then re-built with trash, it is all part of the New Order and we are lucky we were so chosen. YOU HAVE MADE IT TO THE WEEDS, the boys (in BLACK uniforms) tell us, YOU WERE LUCKY, NOW YOU ARE GOING TO SEE PROVIDENCE.

Trash (empty boxes and scraps of metal, wire and string and tin cans and plastic bottles, old tires and newspapers, dixie cups and gum wrappers and orange peels and chicken bones) has been brought from the trash islands. The boys (in BLACK uniforms) are not architects. They tell us to invent something, to make it livable because we are going to live there. We make our houses out of everything we have and put them in groups back-to-back so we can have alleys and streets,

so we can have the kind of city we know best. Our streets have no names, but we point them out to each other and say, that one is 44th, that one is 57th (this is our small act of defiance). The boys (in BLACK uniforms) do not stop us from recalling certain streets, certain corners--the ironies are clear enough. There is no electricity, no running water, no music coming out of portable radios, no pretzels with mustard. Everything is flimsy. With every wind or breeze, our houses lean and whistle. The first city is our backdrop, a smoking wreck, once-important men and women nailed to rough poles, the red underside of their skin picked at by black birds caw-cawing.

In the new city (let's call it a town) there is no glow, no beat or pulse, only a resigned languor. Oh yes, there is some rioting (some people don't like being demoted), but nothing a few jabs in the groin with a rifle butt can't cure. In the new city (let's call it a town), beans scooped out of tin cans and eaten cold are the new manna, the food of PROVIDENCE (the bean-eaters shall inherit the earth, etc.). Everyone is so high on chillweed most of the time, lying on their backs and staring through windows cut out of boxes at the gray sky, rebellion is not an option. At first, I miss the museum (one of my old haunts) and the smell of exhaust fumes, of eggrolls sold on street corners, of damp steam rising out of steel grates. Then I meet Nik--the word is out: he is gathering some

good men. I turn to Cynicism.

If one feels a need to travel outside of PROVIDENCE, one must get sick, must wake up in the middle of the night, soaked with sweat (glug glug). Otherwise, leaving PROVIDENCE is strictly forbidden (Verboten, mein Freund).

Mary came by last night. She lives alone in a box on 35th Street. She wants to be a member of our not-so-merry band, but we simply can't let her. NO WOMEN ALLOWED (this is a cardinal rule). Nothing can change indifference into obsession as quickly as a woman. Don't misunderstand me. Mary is not attractive. She is at least fifty (and then some, and then some, and then some), has a white mustache and is missing her left leg (missing it terribly), a casualty of her obstinacy in the early days of PROVIDENCE. She hops everywhere (a crutch would be undignified)--no one can hop as expertly as Mary. RATS CHEWED IT OFF is what Mary says whenever anyone asks. Standing behind the meathouse (a place where Death blooms), sipping whiskey, old hands shaking, a man is more inclined than usual towards love (a sure killer, a waster of men). In these times (like so many "times") any one of us could easily come to love Mary, to desire her lopsided body and whiskered face. We could eat her up, feast on her one limb, but there is no integrity in that, nothing to hang on to. After lust has its way, there is not even a bone to lick. Lust wants

everything for itself and never leaves anything for love. I'd rather be drunk, among men.

Mary comes over almost every Thursday. She wants to be one of us. Last night she said to us, "I guess being a SINK couldn't be all that bad." Tom said, "That's CYNIC." She was trying to be indifferent, to show her cool disdain, but her eagerness showed through. The week before it had been, "I guess I wouldn't mind being a sink TOO much." Tom said, "Forget it, Mary, no women allowed." Mary asked, "Why NO WOMEN?" She was being belligerent, edging close to Tom, sniffing his beard, making faces of disgust. "How come," she said, "HOW COME, always, NO WOMEN? I bet you don't even have a fucking reason, who cares about being a SINK anyway, you're all just a bunch of limp-dick fags." Nik asked her (NIK ASKS!), "So why do you come over here all the time?" Mary answered, "I'm bored" (Good answer). Tom said, "She's attracting attention to us, you know." "Oh yeah," Mary said, "I can tell some really subversive shit is going down here." "Mary," Nik said, "we are men of philosophy, we have a calling, indifference IS subversive, but we don't answer to you or to anyone. Anyway, women are incapable of indifference," (SPEECH! SPEECH!) "women bear children and therefore are always inclined towards love." Mary said, "WHAT? Do I look like I'm going to have any children? I'm emptier than any of you fags, I never had children, I'm never GOING to have children, I've been beat too

many times, had too many pipes brought down on me to have any children, SHIT." Nik said to her, "As I said, women are inclined towards love, you might come upon an abandoned child one day, there are lots of those, and you would be drawn to that child," (SPEECH! SPEECH!) "instinctively you would love that child. You are a woman, Mary. If you saw a cabbage in the street you would adopt it. It is the way of all women." Mary said, "I'm not a woman." Tom said, "Forget it, Mary. Go away. Leave us alone."

Not a woman? Barren (as a broom closet)?

A week has passed. Another meeting. "How can we stand out as indifferent in an indifferent society?" Tom asked, his usual argumentative self. I said, "We are indifferent to their indifference." I glanced over at Nik to see if he was pleased with my response. He was nodding. We try to nod as much as possible, a deference to tongueless Bob, who can only gurgle. Tom continued: "And how can we stand out as unkempt when everyone is unkempt?" Feeling rather bold, I said, "We are proud of our unkemptness. We wear the clothes of the dead with obvious pleasure." Everyone was nodding in agreement. I continued: "For us, unkemptness is an art, a religion. We have constructed our unkemptness out of indifference and a few pieces of soiled cloth." Bob gurgled and passed the bottle to Nik who said, "Those are good thoughts." I could see Mary

out of the corner of my eye, standing behind a fence made out of chicken bones across the street, staring at me, fingering her stump. I pretended not to see her.

Do not misjudge us. We are the most radical of philosophers. We believe in God, but not in people. We have never wanted what we couldn't have. In the old city (the city of gold and silver towers where men and women, etc.) we begged for change and slept on benches (we had been cast out). Now we have made a choice--we have chosen to cast ourselves out. Yes, it looks like we are a part of all this, inheritors of PROVIDENCE (stoned and meek bean-eaters), but we have gone out of our old, wrinkled bodies and what is left of us is only here to observe, to take notes. We are men of God and when our survey is finished, He will take us home.

Diogenes hated most men, but he, too, loved God.

The Army marches through every week or so (a parade). Those with the fever know this is their chance to get out, they stagger along the streets, faint and wait in the gutter to be picked up and thrown in the back of a cart. The Army marches through every week or so (a parade). We are all given small red flags for these charades and we must wave them when the boys (in BLACK uniforms) march through, and we do, if feebly. O! COUNTRY, O! SOVEREIGN NATION, O! FATHERLAND, O! SWEET

PROVIDENCE! And when the Army passes, we Cynics turn our heads and spit. We cough and hack. Perhaps we are old men with emphysema. Perhaps we are making a statement. O! SWEET, SWEET PROVIDENCE!

When I was an infant (a babe) my so-called mother strangled me, put me in a brown paper sack and discarded me in the dumpster behind Duke's Piano Lounge on 45th Street. It didn't TAKE. Someone rummaging through the dumpster for dinner took me out to see if I might be tasty. He was disappointed. I still have a scar on my shoulder where he tried to bite into me. I know all this because a rat witnessed everything, kept the awful secret for years, then told it all to me. So I have always been mistrustful. I was raised by stray cats for the first three years of my life, then I was on my own. Various women, all change-beggars, adopted me at various times. I was like a doll to them, an experiment, a what-if. I sucked at various breasts, but there was never any milk, only a mixture of vodka, ash and honey. When I was old enough to stand with the men around the fires in the cans, I knew I had finally found my family, my brothers.

I never ventured beyond the first city (the city of gold and silver towers where men and women, etc.), beyond the maze of streets and alleys. Though I often longed for a glimpse beyond the weeds of the highway, I was afraid to venture out.

Everyone flew into the first city, and flew back out, never looking down (WHOOSH!). When I wanted to know what the world used to look like I would go to the museum (it was open to the public and, wretched as I was, I was still one of the public). They did not like it when I would try to stay the night. There was a painting there I especially liked, Tissot's HIDE AND SEEK (circa 1877, oil on wood). It was a painting of a room inside someone's house, a sitting room, a very cheerful place. The light in the painting was muted, a dust-filled yellow, but if I stared hard enough, I could see many things. There were four red-cheeked children, all girls, all blond (one hiding behind a screen with green peacocks etched on it, the others huddled on the carpet in front of sofa). Another girl, older, was sitting in a chair draped with a tiger skin, reading a paper (quite seriously, it seemed, unaware of the other girls' game). There was an open window through which you could see that spring was just beginning, the branches of a tree dotted with small white buds. There was a gold tea set on a low table and a red-and-blue-striped ball rolling (I suppose it was rolling) along the carpet. Heavy purple drapes hung from the tall ceiling to the floor. There were mirrors on the walls, brass lamps, a yellow bird in a wicker cage. Just beyond an open door you could see tall green ferns bent over clay urns. If I stared at Tissot's painting long and hard enough a warm breeze would begin to stir the drapes, the paper in the older girl's hands would begin to rustle, the ball would move along

the carpet even further, my skin would begin to tingle. Only in Dickens novels, thrown in dumpsters behind the high school and read voraciously by me, did such a place seem possible. But I was a part of that world, also. Just beyond the sitting room, around a shadowed corner, Dickens penciled in Fagin, the rats and the homeless. He didn't forsake me.

In my dream (when the silver worm snakes into ME) I board the train as a regular passenger. Some kind of party is going on, the dining car is filled with revelers, men in tuxedos, women in shiny low-cut dresses, apparitions from the past. Everyone is beautiful, smiling. Everyone is talking, laughing, drinking wine. Musicians are playing something jazzy, something Ellington. Couples are dancing between the tables and bumping into harried waiters. No one seems to care. Chefs with tall white hats are wheeling out carts from the kitchen, carts piled with roasted ducks, with souffles and tortes, with gleaming loaves of bread and bowls of raspberries. I watch them from the doorway, mesmerized. No one notices that I am there. No one asks me if I want to sit down, if I want a glass of wine, if I'd like something to eat. No one is waiting for me. I am obviously alone, obviously in the wrong car.

The next car is filled with the carcasses of animals and everything shucked off for the party--duck heads (bills still attached), livers, hearts (some still beating, oozing red

slime), all the claws and feathers and hooves, the corks of champagne bottles, the rinds of oranges, mushroom stalks, the skins of red potatoes. I become nauseous and cover my mouth with my hand. My eyes sting from my tears.

I am in a passenger car. All of the seats are empty, but the conductor is slowly advancing down the aisle towards me, something small and silver clicking in his hand. Through the windows I can see the country we're traveling through, its brown and green hills, its yellow and purple wildflowers massed on the bank of a blue river, its white laurel and wet moss. The conductor taps me on the shoulder, sternly. He wants to know: where is my ticket? But I can't take my eyes from the windows. I've never seen such a landscape, except in paintings at the museum. The conductor is getting angry (where is my ticket?). He doesn't think I'm one of the regular passengers and tells me so, poking my chest. I look down at myself. I have on my usual suit, but the jacket is frayed at the cuffs, my pants are too long (rolled at the bottom), my shoes are missing their laces. I search my pockets, but find nothing. I become anxious. The conductor pokes me again (the landscape rushing by, blurring).

I become anxious.

One morning last week I heard wings, hundreds of small wings

beating the air. When I looked up (straight up) I saw a flock of black birds skimming the gray sky, heading north. I couldn't believe what I was seeing--it is rare to see birds, to see animals of any kind. When I looked around me, I saw that everyone had come out of their boxes and were looking up, their hands twitching from so much troubled sleep. We were all thinking the same thing: somehow those birds were getting away.

Another meeting, perhaps my last one, for Mary has brought me a fish, a beautiful five-eyed fish. I write this secretly, my beard quivering (as always), but I am newly disturbed, my philosophy shaken.

Earlier this evening Mary asked us, "Another meeting of the Limp Dick Society?" She had come up behind me and nudged me with her stump. It was a secretive, collaborative nudge. "Mary," Nik asked her, "what's in the bag?" Mary was holding a canvas bag (someone's old purse). "I brought you something to eat," Mary said, "but first you have to pass me some of that whiskey." Mary reached for the bottle, but Tom stepped away from her grasp. "What do you mean," Tom said, "SOMETHING TO EAT?" "Christ!" Mary said, getting excited. "You know, like something you put in your mouth and go mmm-mmm, that's good, that ain't beans!" No one said anything. Mary had said (CHRIST), a bit of shock. And there was another matter:

something other than beans? There was nothing else. Everywhere there are posters, BEANS MAKE SENSE and BEANS ARE BETTER.

Nik said (NIK SAYS!), "Don't take it out here, whatever it is." We decided to follow Mary to where the chillweed grows in stalks like sugar cane, behind the chicken-bone fence (where she lives--35th Street). Could I have imagined it--the one piece of cardboard for a mattress and the red plastic cup beside it which, judging from its contents, Mary used for spitting. Like all faithful Cynics, Mary has been laboring over a spare existence. She is not a hoarder. She is one of us (I kept this observation to myself).

"What is it--CHOCOLATE?" (That was Paul) Tom said, "Don't be such an idiot, where would she get chocolate from?" Paul said, "She could have saved it from before." Tom said, exasperated, "SAVED IT? SAVED CHOCOLATE FROM BEFORE FOR OVER TWO YEARS?" Mary put her bag down and we huddled around her. "Don't crowd me!" she snapped. "There's enough for everyone." Tom said, "We're just trying to cover you so no one will see." Mary said, "You see anyone here? No one ever bothers me back here, now let me have that bottle." She pointed at Bob who was clutching our usual fifth. We never let Mary have any of our whiskey. "It's okay, Bob," Nik said (NIK SAYS!). "Let her have some." Tom and Paul were indignant (I could tell), but they didn't say a word. Bob handed the bottle over to Mary who

drank sloppily, whiskey dribbling down her chin. When she was done she handed the bottle to Nik and reached into her bag. I noticed Bob's shoulders were twitching with excitement. His arms were moving, fluttering at his sides.

What Mary pulled out of her bag was a fish (THE fish--fat and wet), a fish with five eyes (luminous), silver scales, and a stench like a backed-up sewer. Its tail had been cut into and was oozing the same thick liquid its eyes were floating in. "THAT IS DISGUSTING!" Tom said. "WHAT IS THAT?" He turned away, his hand over his mouth. "Is this some kind of a joke?" Paul asked. Nik was shaking his head (speechless). Bob's arms were fluttering more wildly. "What's wrong with you ASSHOLES?" Mary said. "It's not beans." "No," Nik said (NIK REGAINS HIS SPEECH!), "beans it is not." Mary said, "If you know how to cook something like this, it is heaven. Come on weenies, let a woman do something for you for once." Nobody said anything. Mary lowered her voice: "I know how to start a fire." Nik said, "That's it, we're leaving. You cannot tempt us with fire, Mary, and unless you are a witch, you are lying." I said, "With some shallots and garlic and a little wine that fish could indeed be quite tasty." My fellow Cynics were staring at me, surprised at my arrogance (Nik would not be happy). "I used to scavenge behind Dominique's," I explained. "Yes," Nik said (NIK SAYS!), "well I think we have made a grave mistake by coming over here. We were too eager (SPEECH!

SPEECH!), we rushed over without thinking, we have been taught a lesson. We have been tempted and we gave in to that temptation, and by a hag no less." Mary swung the fish at Nik's head, just barely missing him, saying: "YOU SON OF A BITCH!" "Yes," Nik said (NIK SAYS!), "precisely." Since Cynics are also pacifists, he simply began walking away.

When Nik motioned for us to follow him (but not Mary, of course) I said to him, perhaps too boldly, "When Mary says SOMETHING GOOD NOT BEANS, perhaps we should ask ourselves: what does NOT BEANS stand in for--what does it signify? What is the essence of something that is NOT BEANS?" Nik turned and looked at me with pity, started to say something, then thought better of it. He turned away (from me and Mary) and kept walking. The lapdogs followed. I was being cast out, again, by the cast-outs.

O! DIOGENES FORGIVE ME FOR I HAVE FALTERED, I HAVE FORSAKEN YOU AND THE PALACE OF WISDOM. O! LAMB OF DIOGENES, HAVE MERCY ON ME. O! Diogenes, please forgive an old man's curiosity. Where fish swim and birds fly, there must be water. Where there is water, old men can wade in, their trousers rolled, the sun in their hair, daisies braided in their beards. O! Diogenes, forgive this romantic notion I have: that there is a place where the sky is a color other than gray, a place where it rains and old men can stand in that rain (feel that

rain coursing down their bare backs), a place where a man can start over, if only for a little while.

"Mary," I said, as soon as everyone was out of sight, grabbing her shoulder, perhaps too roughly, "where did you get that fish?" She said to me, "I know a place where the train stops, then starts again." I asked her, "Is that where you found the fish?" She said, "I could show you."

Mary and I agreed to rendez-vous at the shitting holes (late, near dawn)--the stench is so bad there I figured no BOYS would be hanging around. When I finally saw her hopping towards me, I noticed she still had her fish with her, or at least the bag it was in. "You're late," I said to her. "Who's got the train schedule?" she said. "What?" I said. She said, "It's a joke for Christ's sake!" "I'm not in the mood," I said (and it was true--I was too anxious). We began walking (Mary hopping, expertly), an oozing fish our only voodoo. I had brought a flask (filled with amber light--our holy whiskey, our Protector).

When we got to the edge of PROVIDENCE, to where the old billboards still stand on tall stilts, blank and peeling, I asked Mary, "Where are the BOYS? What if someone sees us? Shouldn't we be more careful? If this how you always go?" Mary said, "The BOYS never follow me. I'm just an old, ugly woman."

"I don't understand," I said. "You ever try it before?" she said (she had a point). "Mary," I said, "why do you come back?" She didn't answer me. I could tell she was becoming impatient with my questions.

I followed Mary, I put my trust in her (like an old fool--O! Diogenes!). I followed Mary past the billboards and through an open field suffused with an eerie green light, its dead grass and tree stumps glowing. There was a moon above us, almost full, casting shadows through the haze. I had never been far from any place (not from the first city, not from the second). There was a jazz song in my head, something I remembered hearing (as a child) floating into the alley from Duke's Piano Lounge (RIGHT NOW IT MAY NOT SEEM LIKE SPRING AT ALL, WE'RE DRIFTING AND THE LAUGHS ARE FEW, BUT I'VE GOT RAINBOWS PLANNED FOR TOMORROW AND ALL MY TOMORROWS BELONG TO YOU). Mary said to me, "You're not going to sing all night, I hope." "I didn't know I was singing," I said. "I was singing?" "You were singing," she said. "I thought maybe I stepped on a cat." A cat--since when has anyone seen a prowling cat, a squirrel clutching an acorn, a dog sleeping on a front stoop? All the animals have fled from us.

I did not know what was in front of us, or what was beyond what was in front of us (Mary hopped, I followed). We went straight through the field (glowing green, tree stumps twisted

from an old agony) towards a dense, almost red horizon. I could hear water. Finally I saw something up ahead, majestic figures, trees clustered together, huddled like old men gathered around a bottle. They were bare, their branches stripped of anything alive, but they had somehow managed to stand their ground. As we crossed over a small stream (now in the trees, winding our way like pilgrims) I looked down and saw figures in the water darting back and forth: FISH! There were FISH everywhere. I could feel my heart pounding. I reached into the water (so warm, slimy) and pulled out a stone (rough as old skin, pocked with small holes). I put the stone in the pocket of my trousers. I did not tell Mary I had put my hand in the water.

In the days of the first PERSECUTION the good men would indicate to each other their presence by drawing (with their toes) the figure of a fish in the sand (first one line, concave, then another, convex). Using their bare heel the figure would then be quickly erased, covered over. In the days of the first PERSECUTION it was sure death to worship the FISHGOD (O! SWEET, SWEET JESUS!), to reach into any kind of water (looking for something cool and wet). Everything was desert and only the good men could satisfy the neverending thirst, could draw lines in the sand which would fill up with blue water--the good men would bend down and kiss the blue vein (quickly, before anyone could see what they were doing),

and when they rose up they were refreshed.

Without Mary telling me, I knew when we had reached our destination--I felt, through the soles of my feet, a distant rumbling. There were tracks in front of us, two silver lines appearing out of nowhere it seemed (phosphorescent), then vanishing into a white fog. The tracks seemed suspended, floated in the air. Mary knelt down and put her ear to the ground. "It's coming," she said.

First, I heard the low groaning of the engine, then the clackety-clack of the wheels (coming CLOSER--closer). "It's going to stop here," Mary said. Instinctively I grabbed Mary's hand, but she pulled it away. The noise of the approaching train increased, was almost deafening. All of a sudden a flash of silver flew in front of us, then stopped (becoming, as if a changeling, a solid expanse of steel), its brakes squealing. "Damn!" Mary said. "That noise! Drives me crazy!"

I followed Mary as she moved along the side of the stationary train. It was one of the old commuter trains, silver with red, white and blue stripes, its windows scratched and stained with the old city's stains. Mary stopped where there were steps up to one of the cars (in my dream, when the silver worm snakes into ME, I board the train as a passenger). She said to me, "Help me up, but don't get any ideas, I could do this myself

if I wanted to, but I'm tired tonight--you make me tired."
"All right, all right," I said, grabbing her good leg and lifting her up. I stepped up after her and we were IN (just like that). There was only one door, the door between cars, and it opened easily. The car was dark, but with the moon's help I could make out the outlines of the seats, of the racks above them, the long thin aisle. "Where is everyone?" I said. "I don't know," Mary said. "I never see anyone."

The train lurched forward (lurch, lurch), and I lost my balance. Mary stood over me, laughing, as we began to move (it seemed forward, but who knew?). "Two legs ain't always better than one," Mary said, still laughing. I grabbed her leg and she said, "whoa" (then she fell on top of me). "Damn!" she said, her warm whiskey breath tickling my neck. I was still holding her leg when I felt the motion of the train underneath us, its thick vibrations causing my spine to tingle. Mary said, "Let go of me." "Mary," I said, not letting go, "where are we going?" "I don't know," she said. "You don't know?" I said. "I don't understand." Mary said, "I ain't never been on this train before, I couldn't get on it before." She punched me (I punched her back). "Actually," Mary said (after she bit my chin, hard, but I still wouldn't let go), "I guess we're on our way back. I never rode the train, but I guess it always goes back." "Back where?" I asked. Mary said, "Under the ground, I guess."

Even though I know I am going BACK (under the ground, perhaps to HELL where the forges are still lit, where the BOYS work around the clock, hoarding and fanning fire), I have had a change of heart. The train has us in its teeth and is pulling us, rushing us into the black bowels of the earth, shaking its struts and rods all around us. Tree branches are slapping the windows, breaking off, we are going so fast. My heart, old and covered with barnacles, has tumbled out of some high dust-filled attic, and that is why I could not let go of Mary (that is why I kissed her wrinkled chin, her nose). I have decided to give up old habits.

"Mary," I said, after we had stopped struggling against each other, "I don't know how much longer we have, but if you can make a fire, if you are really a witch, let's eat the fish. Let's eat the fish before we get there." So now Mary has started a fire (near the door, in the aisle) and is hunched over it (intoning a chant) and I am sitting down, a passenger (writing this). From between her legs, Mary has drawn spices (and sweet wine). Our fish lies between us, peeking up with its five watery eyes, its gills fluttering with the bumpy motion of the train.

Somehow (if you can, if you have gotten this far), try to forgive me (as Diogenes would not--O! Diogenes!). I am not the

wise fool, or the holy mendicant--I am only a drunk, an old drunk who has lost his senses. I am only a man. Mary is no more than a hag (a crone). Perhaps we are a spectacle, but you must learn to love us--you must learn to love the one-legged hag and the old drunk. If you could love us, if you could put your lips to our creased brows, to our necks (and taste honey) you could love anything and maybe things will be different one day (we will crossfix the BOYS, white birds will fly through the trees, return to their old, green branches). And what of the fish? A little garlic and rosemary, seared, blackened in butter, a bottle of cabernet: what is on the tongue is hidden from the eyes, but not from the heart. At such a meal, you might weep with joy.

VITA

