

Spring 1992

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# Radwaste

I stare at my make-upless face in the mirror. I've been a lot of things—a waitress, a student, a cashier at Winn-Dixie—but lately I've been a construction worker. It's really boring, but the pay's good. There's no stress. Well, not til recently. Things haven't seemed quite right. Not just here at the station, I realize. Everywhere. Anyway...

I adjust my safety glasses and dust mask, put in my ear plugs and pull down the face shield on my blue hard hat. Clutching a pair of leather gloves, I step from the small cinder block bathroom cubicle into the corridor. This is the only permanent bathroom in the station. It is reserved for the handful of women workers. Only we have keys. The men use chemical toilets which are everywhere. I have used the chemical toilets when too far from the women's room but was put off—more by the filth than the graffiti—from using them often. It is apparent from the lack of bathrooms that this place is not being built as a space for people. Busy as it now is, it will soon be depopulated.

It has been said that science is the religion of the 20th century. If that is so, then this is the greatest tribute to that faith—the nuclear cathedral. Will we one day compare Zion to Byron in the way we might compare Chartres to Notre Dame? And will we see Chernobyl, then, as only a failure of faith? Because it is faith—isn't it?—that allows us to continue to build these great white elephants. Being a construction worker certainly gives one plenty of time to think. In fact, that's about all I do. I think so much, I sometimes think I'm losing my mind.

I watch where I'm walking to ensure I don't turn an ankle on one of the rails set into the concrete floor, and I try to imagine a time when they brought equipment right into the station on railroad cars. Now I can't even see more than a couple feet above my head for scaffolding. A steady roar that reaches to the bone is punctuated by mysterious and, therefore, disconcerting booms. No one else seems to notice. Putting this unseen threat from my mind, I join the stream of similarly clad workers moving down the narrow corridor of steel poles and wooden planks.

Although faceless, ageless, and sexless; workers' occupations are clearly indicated by the color of their hard hats which allow foremen to identify their workers at a glance. Electricians wear yellow, painters blue, pipefitters red, laborers white, teamsters green...but they all wear the same yellow cover-alls, except painters. Ours are white. Our job is to coat every porous surface with a thick layer of epoxy so that if there were ever a spill of radioactive water, it could be cleaned up. It doesn't seem very likely that they would find anyone to go in with a mop to clean up that spill, but after

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seeing video of Soviet soldiers clad in lead aprons throwing blocks of radioactive graphite back into the gaping core of Chernobyl, I guess anything's possible.

From the dark, narrow corridor, I step into the belly of the whale. No, not the belly, but the vagina. And there, at the end, is a cervix of overwhelming proportions. Forty feet in diameter and thirty feet thick. A steady stream of multicolored hard hats—like party hats—move through this grotesque opening beyond which would soon lie, beneath twelve feet of placid water, the egg waiting to be split.

"Comin' through!" I move aside to allow two laborers with a large metal trunk on a dolly to pass by. I wonder if I've been missed and that gets me moving. Like the others, I pass the enormous stainless steel and concrete plug that will soon be placed in the opening and then pass through the opening myself. I wonder if they feel the anxiety that I do. It isn't from fear of radioactivity. There's no fuel on site yet. Fuel—sounds harmless like throwing a log on the fire, or putting gas in the car, although neither of those acts is really harmless. As always, the roar vibrates up through the bottoms of my steel-toed boots. And, again, that boom—so deep it's felt as much as heard.

"Go to lunch early?" Mike asks. All the guys are sitting on the steel grate floor with their hardhats off (as though nothing can fall on them when they're eating) surrounded by Playmate coolers and stainless steel thermoses.

"No, went to the bathroom," I say.

"How long's it take to walk over there?"

"About fifteen minutes round trip."

"Shit, oughta have to use the fuckin' porta johns like we do." Eddie always gets hostile when lay-offs are rumored.

"Hey, don't use that kinda language in front of the girl," Mike says around a mouthful of salad.

"Hey, she's in a man's world. She'll have to get used to it."

"Well, I'm here so I guess it's not a man's world anymore."

"Hmph! I'm going for a smoke." Eddie lives on unfiltered Camels, but smoking isn't allowed in containment.

Billy lays back on the steel grating, puts his hardhat over his face and his arms behind his head. "Wake me when it's time."

After lunch they move us to radwaste. This is where used fuel will be made ready for travel. We're working in a long sloping tunnel with small train tracks running the length of it. Some of the guys are speculating on how the waste will be sent down these tracks on presumably remote controlled carts. But most of us just don't want to think about it. It's too sci-fi. Everyone is uneasy—more so than in containment. Somehow containment seems safe, but the idea of moving spent fuel doesn't. The unease comes out in different ways. The Greek foreman, Nick, has a frown set between his eyebrows. Paul and Frank, also Greek, are being even more boisterous than usual. The other foreman, John, limps around and randomly snaps at people, but that's not unusual. Billy and I have been put to work masking the rails with Vis-Queen and duct tape.

"What's that?" Billy exclaims with a high-pitched British accent.

"A penguin."

"I can see that."

One of the guys says that when he's grinding steel, he passes the time playing his favorite albums in his head—each song from beginning to end every verse, every guitar solo...Aqualung...Cross-eyed Mary...Cheap day return... When not hindered by dust masks and ear plugs, Billy and I do Monty Python skits.

"...it would have property of the zoo stamped on it."

"You can't stamp a great big lion."

"They stamp them when they're small."

"What happens when they molt?"

"Lions don't molt."

"No, but penguins do! There, I've run rings around you logically!"

"Intercourse the penguin!"

We fall silent smiling in amusement for awhile. Even with two crews working, it's very quiet—even the boom seems to be silenced—in this radwaste tunnel. Radwaste. We all love the term; use it again and again. It's bravado, I think. It's getting close to quitting time, but there's a lot of masking left to do before the night crew comes in to paint. Someone mentions overtime. Not me. I can only take eight hours of this. I'm going home.

John, the foreman with bad legs, comes over and tells me and Billy to go down to 386 and bring up some equipment that was left there earlier. Then we can take off. I wonder why John is being so nice. I don't trust him. He broke both legs years ago when he fell off a scaffold that he'd built wrong. He seems to hate the world, not—or as well as—himself for it. He's a real evil bastard.

Billy and I head down to 386, one of those quiet, deserted areas where most of the work has been finished. The painting is usually the last thing to be done. We leave things all nice and clean and shiny. Of course, sometimes other workers come through after us and dirty things up, but we usually have to do touch up painting after them anyway. We seem to be the maids of the industrial world. Not to take anything from the laborers, mind you. They do their share of cleaning up.

The lighting down here on 386 is kind of weird. Temporary fluorescents

are hung sporadically creating pools of harsh light surrounded by deep shadows. Billy and I are weaving around I-beams and hulking, silent engines like sleeping elephants. Billy suddenly stops in front of me. I run in to him, my hardhat smacks into his.

"Shit, Billy."

He puts his arm out to prevent me from passing him, but he doesn't turn around. "Go...go tell John...no, go find a guard and tell him there's a dead guy down here."

"Bullshit."

"Bulltrue."

"Are you sure? This is a joke."

"No joke, kid. Go on."

Billy is still standing with his arm out. I push it down to his side and look past him. Oh, yes, the guy is dead. Slumped in the corner with a green plastic garbage bag over his head.

"I...I never..."

"Do you want me to go?" I shake my head.

Billy and I are walking from the plant to the painter's trailer. It's an hour past quitting time. We had to stay and talk to security and then to the real cops. The wind is blowing into our faces. We walk with our heads down.

"I don't get it," I say.

"He was inhaling helium."

"What?"

"Didn't you see where he was? I've heard of guys inhaling it directly from the line—as a joke, you know, makes your voice funny—but he must have been releasing helium from the feed line into the bag. I guess, it'll get you high, too."

I shake my head. "I don't know, Billy. Even little kids know not to put plastic bags over their heads. Maybe he meant to die and thought the helium would make it easier."

He shrugs. "Maybe, but if that is the truth, it ain't gonna make anybody feel any better; so, there's no point in speculating about it."

We walk in silence for a moment.

"John knew."

Billy looks at me with a kind of frown.

"John knew that guy was there. That's why he told us to go get that stuff." "You're paranoid, kid. You've got a persecution complex."

"Really?"

He shakes his head. "Crazy John, he's an evil bastard."

I'm working on elevation 336. That's above sea level. 401 is ground level: so, I'm in the basement so to speak. And what a shit job I've got along with menstrual cramps. I'm in a tiny room which is dominated by a large engine—a pump of some kind, maybe. There are pumps everywhere usually, two. Redundancy is the norm here. Unit 1 is a mirror image of Unit 2, and in each unit there is a main system and a back-up (just in case). So, for every feed water pump, there is a back-up. For every pipe, tank, and compressor, there is a redundancy. Anyway, above this pump someone has hung plastic tarps to prevent the water from a broken pipe near the ceiling from getting on it. And I'm supposed to be mopping up the floor. I guess John thought I would be good at it.

So, I'm sloshing this big rag-mop around like I'm rolling a rock up a hill. I mean what's the point? I've been taking 200 mg. of ibuprofen every hour since I got up this morning; so, I'm none too lively anyway. I stop and lean on the mop handle.

John walks in. "Okay, you can stop," he says. "You can leave that shit here." He motions towards the mop and bucket. "I've got a job for you downstairs." He never looks me in the eye. He doesn't wait to see if I'll follow. He just takes off. I pick up my cooler and thermos and follow him. He's a big guy. Tall, with a long stride; so, I have to hurry to keep up. The asshole could slow down.

We go down another flight of stairs in some remote room. I don't want to think about whether I should follow him. I mean what choice do I have? He is the foreman. But I don't want to think of the walk Billy and I took yesterday, either. So, I wonder again about the minds of the engineers who design these places. How to conceive such a place? There's an area in the turbine building that's all pipes, and stairs, and metal grating. You go up ten steps, across twenty feet of metal grating all the time ducking and dodging pipes, up five steps, more grating, down steps—easy to lose track of where you turned, where you started.

I remember following a foreman once through a maze of walkways, rooms of undeterminable shape and size, and stairs of dizzying heights, only to pass through a door and find myself on the roof of the turbine building. The silo shapes of Unit 1 and Unit 2 rose another fifty or so feet at each corner framing the landscape before me. It was fall, I think, or spring. I remember the hills being brown and the cooling lake a slate grey. It was cloudy, but the wind felt wonderful. I remember just standing there with my hands in my pockets watching barn swallows swoop out over the cooling lake and back to their nests on the containment buildings. *take me where I only feel the wind across my face let me know there's some place left for me* I follow John down a ladder now, and it's warm here in the steam tunnel. There's no one around, and I'm uneasy about it. He motions for me to sit down on

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an insulated pipe. So, we're here to talk.

He stares down at the floor. Pauses. Glances up. "Why are you here?" The slight motion of his hand somehow encompasses the whole station.

I hesitate. "Why are you here?"

He looks me in the eye for the first time really. He looks for a long time. He has hazel eyes. Then he looks down, nods, scratches his beard. "But you don't like it here, do you?"

"Do you?"

He shakes his head slightly but doesn't look up. "Working in this place you start thinking crazy shit."

"I nod in response."

"That kid yesterday must have been thinking some crazy shit."

"You knew," I say, and he frowns. "You knew when you sent Billy and me down for that stuff that he was there."

He shrugs. There's a strange trembling in my stomach.

"Why would you do that?"

He looks at his steel clad toes again and shakes his head. "I don't know...can't explain. What happened yesterday...and I keep hearing these loud booms, but..."

"Yes."

"...things seem to be shifting. Like being on the deck of a ship, and then...Can you feel it?" He looks up at the ceiling, but I know he is looking beyond that. "Do you feel the weight of it pressing down on us?" I imagine the miles of concrete and stainless steel.

So, that's why we're here in the steam tunnel. I nod. And so does he. "This isn't good," he says quietly. "No one belongs here. Especially not

a woman. This is man's work, you know?"

Again, I nod. Yes, I do know. I want to argue, but...

"This isn't for me, either. The others don't seem to hear the booms."

"I do and, I think, some of them do."

He nods and looks at his watch. "Break time."

As we walk back to the ladder I notice a long, thin crack

when the

meltdown occurred at Chernobyl, the reactor fell through the floor allowing molten radioactive glass to flow out of the reactor. Videos show frozen waterfalls, and hot lava flows issuing from the mouths of pipes

running

up the wall and try to imagine the placement of the reactor. Here, above us? I feel it's weight on me,

### in me.

Tears come to my eyes. I blink them back. Did he hear the booms when he put the bag over his head? Boom.

I grasp a steel ladder rung. When he inhaled...Boom. Does he now?

John is standing beside the ladder, waiting. Boom. I can't lift the weight in my gut.

Boom. I start up the ladder.

—Lisa Dunbar

# I Rape

Silk, green and blue, flowed among breasts and thighs. I saw my body newly born and glowed, to myself—liquid. Whole and smiling, my body shifted its curves, enjoyed them. Then

a terrible wanting this, a clenched fist and one less rib. I shiver in knowing. Nerves recall a woman's thigh, now in man's strain their recoil. Where silk had lingered on hair, a new shape stands eager brushes the abdomen this is heard.

Just a tremble and she appears-reflection.

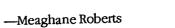
Resisting the sway, I tear into the angel child. She tightens. She looks at me. She cannot cry through her gag, so no sound but of my own want sounds like a man coming. She tightens, so bruised. White like the cold, searing against shower tiles, not relenting ever, she looks at me. Her gaze steady.

This is masturbation-fierce.

I see her plead. I can't wait to stop. She is a small, dreamy mirror. Six years old, all crab apple innocence and so familiar: only naked, silky skin bruising, gagged and a living memory, she spreads before me like a plastic toy. I can't want to stop. We are both so bruised. I can't stop—I want out of me.

The bodies move, come, bleed: then I fell without silk, without wings, without sound but what sweat tickled in my ear. Now breasts , and thighs and all my ribs heaved breath.

Without end, she's in me.





# Confession With #40

I hold both of my hands under the bathroom tap, and as the water snakes through my fingers it seems warmer on one hand than the other. Rubbing them together doesn't help.

the bedroom behind me, searching for her pills,

Neither of us knows the time, although the penumbra of the pulled shade offers some clue. Empty gin bottles jag the sill. At dusk, we'll go for more. I forget to shower.

Passing u., I enter the living room and begin my own search. Our house is full of things that are lost. I'm on a constant search for the remote. I lift cushions and cardboard, but I refuse to go near the set. Controlling from a distance seems exciting: the pacifying power tool works on me: u. thinks it's all an evil plot to coerce the masses into thinking they have some control: I'm intrigued, maybe involved .: u. will only sit by and watch.

I think I need to hear voices. U. and I rarely talk. We fuck, we consume together, and sometimes we read to each other, but we never say anything. Useless facts now drift by us both. Because we talk to no one else, we believe our minds are clearing.

U. settles on the couch, balancing a magazine on her bare breasts. I continue my search. "Americans consume six billion chickens a year." She can barely be heard over the whir of the ceiling fan. Turning around, I can't help but notice the agitated dust which settles invisibly on u. "No wonder everything tastes like chicken." I imagine six billion chicken graves, buckets for caskets. Where do all the bones go? U. may be wondering the same thing, but I don't ask.

I can't find the remote, but I sit and stare at the grey screen anyway. At times, I watch u. read. I sync my breath with the slight rise and fall of her chest. "Many feed hormones to their chickens so they'll grow bigger." I turn to her, still not over the bone crisis. "We are a nation that prefers big cocks." U. hides behind her Fowl Life. She giggles briefly.

Sun stains us red and blue as it filters through etched colored glass. It was the windows that caught our attention two months ago, and the lofty beamed ceilings clinched our decision that this would be our new home. U. and I were surprised our first day here when a helmet-coifed, yellowskirted neighbor brought over a molded marshmallow salad to welcome us. As she stood in the doorway, she seemed to avoid our eyes, looking over our heads at nothing. She left quickly, and never did come back for her pan. We've since found out that our home used to be a Catholic Cult Church. Its

thirty-nine members hung themselves from the rafters. We had to admire their faith and commitment: they only had one ladder, and they went one by one. We still wonder what went through the penultimate guy's mind. While he ascended, did his trust in the last guy who had held the ladder

falter? Was he looking down at anything as he choked his final gasp? When alone, things like faith and team spirit sometimes lose their place in the A small u. is gliding across the bathroom mirror. She disappears for an grander scheme. Many guys might've chickened out with no one left to hold instant and reappears on the other side of my head. She flies silently around the ladder. But the entire C.C.C. was apparently caught up in the spirit. The day after we moved in, we found a case of communion wine in a closet. The spirits made us believe for a week. With another case, we would've converted. At times, we find ourselves still seeking out the bathroom---the former confessional—to relieve our guilt.

As I sit watching either the grey screen or u.'s red and blue tattoos, I hear the pizza woman knock. It must be four o'clock. At the door, we exchange our daily gifts. Looking down, she spies my impossible erection straining against thin cotton. We both smile quickly, and I close the door.

I feed u. pizza. Between bites, she continues clucking fowl facts. "Americans consume 47 billion eggs a year." That's a lot of empty shells for one country. "This fowl world keeps its chicks knocked up." I kiss her fading tattoos and lick pizza grease from her chin.

We fuck hard and quick-it's dusk and it's time to get the gin.

We pull on clothes from the pile in the bedroom. "I., where are the keys?" I still haven't found the hiding place of the remote, but the keys now take precedence. After a brief search, we remember at the same time that we left them in the ignition so they wouldn't get lost.

U. and I drive the sixteen and a half blocks to Norma Jean's Spirits n' Hair Shoppe. Norma Jean's is big with the trailer park blue hairs who sit for hours getting the same aqua perms while liquoring it up. Norma Jean makes a mean homemade hooch that she'll let you buy once she knows you. She has all the blue hairs hooked.

U. and I buy a case of gin, a case of wine, and a gallon of the hooch. Norma Jean says she's glad to see us, and that u. needs her hair done. I say quickly that u. wouldn't look good in blue. Norma Jean laughs loudest and throws a few limes in our bag for the gin. "Gotta flavor up that cheap spirit." We thank her and tell her that we'll see her in a couple of weeks. As we turn to leave, Norma Jean follows us to the door and pats us both on the ass. "You two kids have the tightest little butts I've ever seen." Some of the blue hairs in the next room turn and give a groggy look. U. says, "And Norma Jean, you make the most dreamy spirit in town." She gives us a few more limes and a teary smile.

U. and I return home, leave the keys in the ignition, and notice a few bodiless faces peering from some nearby windows. Since we moved in,

we've only left the house four times—each time to visit Norma Jean. We' gifts sparingly. She asked me why I wanted to take the plunge. I told her sure the neighbors think that we've resurrected the dead religion that h that I had just dropped out of grad school because of death. In condolence, if they don't see us for a few days in a row, they get itchy. For the first fei better luck putting faith in her grandmother's gifts. weeks, some would stand in the yard and stare at the house, stretching the necks, sniffing the air like canines. Now, we have a standing order for free room's reality replaced the drug's fuzziness. I moved to the window seat to

house. Anything we needed could be delivered, except for spirits-some

I uncork a bottle of wine and take a swig before passing it to u. She open stained-glass windows. a bottle of gin for me, cringes a swill, and holds it to my lips. The lamp blankets blue light, making the gin glow with a life of its own. U. light incense, and its velvety smoke buffers the blue. She kisses my eyelids. I kis her mouth, tasting the fumy wine. U. and I sit, drink, and watch aqua smoke

I saw u. standing on a roof ledge three months ago. From her pose, couldn't tell if she was going to jump or if she just liked the view. She was peering over, looking past the thirty- three lines of windows. I believe she was smiling, but it may have been a grimace. I walked along the ledge, approaching her from the left. She wore dark navy-almost black-and seemed to blend with the night. Only her pale face and some pages that she gripped at her side caught the clouded moonlight. She turned to me and asked what I wanted. I told her that I wanted her space- I had come to jump. She was reluctant to move aside, and instead offered me a piece of her grandmother's will that she held tightly. I looked at the document with its official stamps and signatures. She tore off a small corner and placed it on my tongue. The bitterness subsided quickly into pleasure.

When I opened my eyes, I was looking down at an impossible blue ocean. It smelled sharply fresh, almost tangy. I touched the water with my nose, wanting to plunge. "Don't, you'll drown." She pulled at my shoulder, and I rose dizzily. She stood there scrubbed, glowing, robed. With one hand she steadied me and with the other she flushed.

I told her that her grandmother must've been one helluva chick. "It killed her," she said. "She left me \$5,000 a month for the rest of my life and enough acid to kill me quick." I appreciated the irony, and advised her to use both

caused them so much grief. The former tenants had cured in the summer she offered me another piece of the will. I abstained, telling her I had to go, heat for ten days before the non-believers realized that it wasn't incense the asking her what floor we were on. It was the same as mine. She wanted me were smelling anymore. Pavlov may have had suburbia in mind all alone to stay, saying that we could help each other. I told her she would have

pizza to be delivered every day at four. It just started coming. The first da watch another fading twilight. My perception oozed back, as unsuredly there was a card attached and signed, "With deepest regard, the Neighbor steady as the bluing, amorphous sky. The morning's brashness was hood Watchdogs." Each day at four, when I meet the pizza woman, I spo punctuated by a sharp knock. She made her offer quickly: "I'm going to U. and I realized soon after we moved in that we didn't have to leave the start clearing my mind, maybe by numbing it." I told her that it sounded like local ordinance forbids their delivery to current or former cult churches. I had to start right away.... And then I packed a few bags. We drove around a few weeks, crossed to the other side, and ended up at the house with

While lying on the floor, u. and I find the remote. It's all a matter of perspective-things appear differently down here. I press power, and the grey on grey images of Eraserbead challenge our blue haze. Taking a mouthful of gin, I press against u.'s lips and shoot the warmth through. She climbs on top of me and passes out while tonguing my nipple. I'm too tired to move, and I don't. I close my eyes and wait.

I was fourteen again. I sat on a buffed, wooden pew and watched robed figures gliding through marble halls, assuming their positions at altars, confessionals, and stations. Hazy hued light made everything vague and handsome. The air buzzed with the whispers of confession, prayer, and communion. The robed figures seemed excited with twenty of us being readied for confirmation. We sat lined on two pews, nervous over the revelation of our sins to one of the confession priests. Despite the grey screen that would be between us in the confessional, we all knew that the figure would recognize our voices. One of the robes passed by casting holy water. A few droplets snaked down my arm. I brushed one with my fingertips and brought it to my lips. Entering the small, cool room, I knelt and focused on the hazy penumbra of the man behind the screen. As he began his litany, his words blurring together, becoming dead air, I passed out.

A knock awakens me. Lying on my back, even with u.'s arm barring my chest, I can see my cock standing at attention in the red and blue brightness. I rise from the floor and step into my underwear. The pizza lady smiles. "I'll have to give you your tip tomorrow. . . no pockets." She says, "It's okay." When she shakes her head, laughing, I can tell she wears a wig, and I want to ask if Norma Jean had gotten ahold of her. Instead, we wave good-bye.

I straddle u.'s chest and feed her pizza. She asks for her *Fowl Ltfe*. I see it immediately. She picks up where she left off yesterday. "The trendy thing to do is to keep chickens closely caged—to not let them waste energy by being unrestricted." I ask if their legs become useless, if they're only for show. "The chickens experience titubation, a stumbling or staggering gait, if released, and they don't get far. I tell her that titubation sounds like something else altogether: "Our second place winner receives a handsome, hand-crafted pearl necklace." U. hits me in the stomach, laughs, but tells me I must take her *Fowl Ltfe* seriously. I give her a peck on the cheek, and she seems satisfied.

In the clawed tub, we wash each other's hair. U. dunks my head, holding me under, releasing me only when I begin to tickle her sides. I tell her about my dream, and she says it's funny that we ended up here, the former home and temporary resting place of the C.C.C. I tell u. that I'm now annoyed, perplexed, maybe even scared by my presence here. She says that she has forgotten fear since she has been at the stained-glass house, that nothing can get at us here because we allow nothing in but spirits and pizza. I ask her if she was ever afraid of anything, telling her she didn't seem the type. She seems frightened by my question and dunks me again.

U. and I continue to talk and splash. We find out that we were born on the same day 23 years ago. Last month, when our birthdays arrived, we had both been sullen and secretive. In that, we shared something.

"I., you've never told me about those deaths of yours." She has miscalculated, jumped the proverbial gun, broken the mood of reminiscence. She realizes it immediately and tells me I shouldn't look so sad. I rinse the last of the shampoo from her hair. Bending down, I kiss the side of her breast and notice for the first time a pox scar. I finger it, and she stiffens.

"You're it." She pushes me aside and runs from the bath. We begin a vicious game of wet tag, one of those rainy day games of youth, sans the clothes, of course. As she runs through the bedroom to the living room, she catches a pillow to fend me off. Our bodies glisten red and blue. She cries out, swinging violently her poof weapon. As I close in on her, her manic flappings make her lose control, and the pillow flies into the clawing arms of the ceiling fan. Slicing through the soft body, the arms gut the innards, shooting them about the room in cold breaths. We continue to play violently in its shower. Our wet bodies attract feathers and dust, and we soon fall, down from exhaustion. "This is what it's come to." I pluck her breast and suck its soft rigidness. She does the same to my cock.

As we dry, our feathers begin to fall away. We sweep them up and collect them in a Hefty Cinch-Sak.

Returning to the bath, we wash away the remaining dust. I tell u. that I

feel different, that something has changed. She complains that her legs hurt, that we may have gone too far.

Stepping from the bath, we dry each other, and hug with either communion or commiseration. I begin to get dressed. U. may seem nervous: "This isn't something that I. would do." I want to tell her that she couldn't know, that the spirits and stained-glass have created an illusion. Instead, I tell her that I'm feeling cooped up. She recalls her own foul life and pretends to understand.

The red and blue haze is fading quickly, and I tell her I must hurry. "I need to walk, to smell October, to become dispirited." She seems reluctant, but says she doesn't want to be alone. She dresses and follows me through the door. We take the Hefty Cinch-Sak and lay it on the curb, ignoring the draped gapes. We must be causing hysteria as we walk steadily away.

The lazy dusk slouches around us, its imminent extinction quickening our step. After three blocks, we enter a tree-lined playground. U. may seem cheered: "U. would like I. to play with her on the swings." I tell her we have come too far to get caught up again. I say that we are all taught at an early age to lose ourselves in things that move but take us nowhere: merry- gorounds, swings, and teeter-totters—their spirited names are deceiving. U. may agree. We sit on wilted grass and sip briskness. Leaves looking like little suns dance past, winking and teasing. I promise u. that tonight I will speak of death. U. may seem intrigued, curious after my silence in the shower. The coo of quail swells the air. U. and I respond through clasped, cupped hands. The quail sound excited.

"All the little ones must be getting fed," u. says, looking around the quiet park. A shadowless man glides by without acknowledging our presence. He looks familiar, but I can't know him. Pushing the merry-go-round, he hops on, and perches on the middle post. From his position, he has almost ideal periphery, able to see all angles briefly, constantly. Each time his face flashes, the image freezes on my retinas. I've met him before.

U. and I walk towards him. The merry-go-round inches to a stop, and the man faces our approach. He greets us by name, with a slight accent, and asks us to come sit with him. U. and I sit cautiously on the edge. He notices me studying his features, and he smiles. . . I almost have it. . . he looks down at my crotch and in an altered voice says, "It's okay...." "It's the fucking pizza lady!" He seems amused: "Don't leave me now—I will explain." I ask him whether his double identity is a ploy for bigger tips or if there is some grander reason. He says there are only three things grander than money, and even those have been recently called into question, particularly by him and I. I ask him if he could be just a little less cryptic. He agrees. But looking up at nothing, he adds that we must wait for just a few minutes more. Floating fishbowls are exploding casually in the waning dusk, although

there seems to be some natural order in their enlightenment: With the darkness inching across their sensors, no two bowls fill with the liquidy light at the same time. "I will tell you more, but you must first answer my questions." The man pulls a sooty, creased paper from his pocket, and allows me to glance at it briefly—it is filled with his questions. "I have to know where you've been before we can see where you're headed." I ask him why he thinks his knowledge, opinions, or advice could in any way affect me, someone who he has seen only on occasion in underwear. He says that he will offer none of the three, that I look good in underwear, and that he is only staying briefly to make sure that I don't make a fool of myself. I accept his offer, and he lays down ground rules: "You must be truthful, at least the truth as you know it, and you mustn't falter. Be brief, elaboration connotes insecurity." We begin, him reading the questions aloud and me answering. U. may listen with interest or boredom, but only away from the circle.

1) What is love? "A complicated clarity."

2) What is faith? "A clear complication."

3) What is spirit? "A complicator."

4) Do you love u.? "No."

5) Do you have sex with u.? "Yes."

---With what frequency? "Quite often."

---Why do you have sex? "Release. Power. For the intensity."

-Do you have power? "Not over the important things."

--So, sex isn't important? "It's relative."

6) Have you ever had sex with another male? "Once. . . we were young and drunk, and he told me he loved me. . ."

-You're elaborating. (nothing)

-Did you love him? "No."

-What is love? "A clear complication."

—So, it's changed in the past minute? (pause) "Look, I'm not gay." —We're not talking about sexuality—we're talking about love, faith, and spirit. I need to gauge these things in you before I can share information with you. It's what all of us should do before we jump into things.

-So, of all of your sexual encounters, one of them happened to be with another male? "Yes."

-Do you regret your actions? "No."

-Did you at one time? "Yes."

-You've absolved your guilt? "Yes."

---What is guilt? "A complicator."

-Like spirit? "Yes,"

7) Have you ever loved anyone? "Yes."

---Who is this person? "My W."

-U. gasps from outside the circle: "You're married?"

---"Miss u., you mustn't disturb I. in any way."

---Are you still married? "No, she's dead."

-Did you ever love anyone else? "My boy." (Pause)

I. begins to cry for the first time since he's been with u.

-Do you feel guilt? "I feel empty."

-Dispirited? "Yes."

8) Why did you travel to the stained-glass house? "To remove myself from intense pain, from reality."

-I thought you said you were empty? "The emptiness caused pain."

-Did you relieve the pain while there? "I numbed it until today."

-Have you recently experienced a change in perception? "Yes."

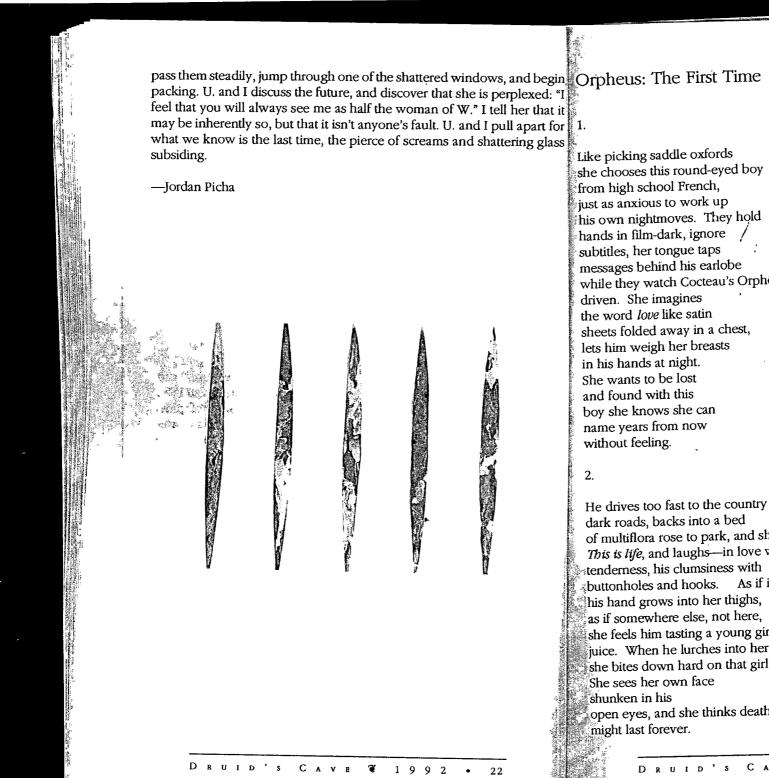
---What caused this change? "I realized the futility of my situation. I lost myself in a house full of numbing spirits. I could see nothing clearly there."

The man holds up his hand and says that I have gone far enough: "I can now assess the situation—it's clear." I tell him that I don't understand. "I., we are similar in that we both discovered almost too late the danger of spirits and stained-glass." I caution him not to be vague, that I will need a clearer response. "I'm the 40th member of the C.C.C., the last one left holding the ladder. It was me who saw the rest of the parish dangling like plucked chickens from the rafters. It was unfair, really. #39 was the last of us to feel the power of our purpose." U. and I sit in awe, feeling a curious communion with #40. "Did you feel guilt?" "Only briefly. Then I realized that it was a waste of time—we're all going to continue to make decisions based only on what we know at the moment. More importantly, I realized the randomness of this foul world—any one of us could have been #40." By now, the lights hang in neat lines in the darkness.

#40 hops from his perch, glides past us, and tells us not to look back. U. and I are left looking up at nothing, as it should be.

U. may want to know more. I tell her that my W. and my son had been my life. She says that it's usually the case, that she understands more than I realize. I tell her it's usually the case.

Crossing back, we hear a distant shatter of glass. U. and I continue to walk steadily. As we near the stained-glass house, we spot the Watchdogs throwing sticks through the reds and blues. One of them wags the bag of feathers viciously in the air: "We will not have this here—first the C.C.C. and now this." U. and I can only imagine what their howls are really about. We



his own nightmoves. They hold while they watch Cocteau's Orphée sheets folded away in a chest,

dark roads, backs into a bed of multiflora rose to park, and she thinks This is life, and laughs-in love with her own tenderness, his clumsiness with buttonholes and hooks. As if in a dream his hand grows into her thighs, as if somewhere else, not here, she feels him tasting a young girl's juice. When he lurches into her, she bites down hard on that girl's cry. open eyes, and she thinks death

# One Of The Lesser Gods

Louisiana is hunter's paradise,

and my father was god, when I was young and in love with his graven images: the country drives, camping by mountain streams, the curious eyes of animals he knew by name, pulling silver fish out of dark water

and then his snake-strike temper, the stacks of purple-black paintings, his need not to hear a new word, but to be the last one. He told me once when he killed

some small creature, he always gave some of it back to the earth the entrails, buried; the head, burned. I know now he gave back what he couldn't use. The smoke curls up over my head, flaming eyes bake free of tears, tongue splits into two question marks from the heat. But embers live long enough to be dangerous. I breathe air through flames and fresh water, immersed in our natures, and planning when I die to go into the fire whole.

# I Stroke Death By The Eight Foot Jesus Sonaguerita, Honduras

that they ask me to paint on the village church wall. The good shepherd, lamb, of course, on his arm—I paint him dark and sweet as endless sleep—a Mona Lisa-tease smile and eyes that look everywhere in surprise. The villagers watch, hanging like grapes in the windows, swelling through doorways onto the cement floor whispering *What does it mean*? I can't say, brush in more more Honduran mountains behind giant Jesus, and the path these people struggle up then down wriggles like a snake under his feet.

It's said he followed a twisted path; I imagine he stopped at the pinnacle of a mountain, like the one we stand on, where the tallest palm tree, eager as a priest, points out our descent. He must have seen in the heavens how death slides by on ebony wings through the complacent air, circling what must die. He must have seen his fate, etched in a midnight feather, realized whose white hand like that in a Michelangelo dream—loosed the darkness that cast living souls into shadows.

I dip the brush in paint the color of Jesus' eyes and add the last small strokes in the mural's sky, the strokes that form the vulture flight, *cante jondo*, the perpetual song of bones pale with mourning's ancient light, notes only humans can hear or intone. I add the scavenger close enough to Jesus' shoulder to be his father's hand. The church is quiet; a scorpion crawls from under stained boards.

-Susan Swartwout

# The Ice House\*

Today the post office is buzzy with folks rushing inside as to meet old friends in a corner of the Ice House and stay until they turned dull sipping through the soaring foam of an ancient Bordeaux.

Then it was almost over their eyes no more shone their laughter was a shriek from worn-out throats.

The fiddlers like mockingbirds hung on rocky chairs mixed charanga tunes with rustic coal-mine shanties.

It was three. They shuffled out clinging in an endless string conversing in Portuguese and Turkish with no need to get each other humming, "We are new kids from the Babel Tower."

\*Cavern tavern in Elkens, West Virginia

# Old Simon's Come See Grandpa

When the porch shrieked, Grandpa's breast swelled with anger— "To hell with all dinner devils!" he cried from his edge of the table. Grandpa fastened his ruby apron and we all slid under the table. "To hell! To hell!" he muttered away across the dark back porch— Heavy steps clogged down the street.

From the vestibule, his eyes sullen, Grandpa sat heavily in his apron. We awaited the thunder quite longingly those curses that scratched our ear-drums and sent us whining under the table.

His eyes rolled like Sunday bowls, His rugged tongue lay lazily in his mouth, Rusty cannon of the Hundred Years' War.

We dug our forks deep in the trays waiting for the wind that would never blow.

Grandpa sat heavily in his ruby apron, his tongue lay lazily in his mouth. Wayless steps paced the street echoing like a locust-infested field.

-Mohomodou Houssouba

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# Make A Thang Go Right

"I usta' sit and wonder where I'd be," Rachel said, "but then the day came and gone and I finally started saying fuck them if they don't give a damn about me and my kind."

LeRoy rubbed his big head and ran his finger through his frizzled hair, looking perplexed while she had a baby.

"Who you talking about?" he asked. He was confused, and she seemed to talking out the side of her neck.

"It don't matter anymore who they is," she said. "All I know is that they don't want my babies to live because they're Niggers and my babies would just as soon get stepped on and die before they get any help in this place."

Rachel reared her head back and spat out another baby.

"That one's blacker than the other one," LeRoy said, wondering what fucking place she was talking about.

"Ain't one of 'em no different," she insisted. "You seen one, you done seen them all. I don't even care what they look like anymore. It don't make a difference. They all look alike anyway." Rachel was spewing out black minstrel shit.

"What you gonna call that one?" LeRoy asked. He touched the baby and his fingers got wet.

"I ain't even got time to worry about it," she said. "Fuck it. What difference does it make? They ain't nothin' but Niggers anyway."

She spat out another one.

"Why don't you stop. You look tired."

"Boy, are you muthafuckin' crazy? What makes you think I can afford to stop? Public aid don't care how many I have. So why should you?" He winced.

"Wipe your mouth," he said. "There's tar all over your lips."

"Shit, I ain't doin' nothin'," she said. "I'm going to stay just the way I is. You can kiss me where the sun don't shine-and where it rains everydayas far I'm concerned. If you don't like it, put rocks on my lips. Maybe that will shut my mouth, but nobody asked you to bring your black ass in here and start asking questions."

She felt a lump in her throat.

"I'll stop talking when I'm good and ready," she said.

"You through?" he asked. He felt like her taxi driver.

"Not yet," she replied. She was enjoying the ride.

LeRoy wanted to kill the conversation. He was silent while Rachel battered him with a lot of smack.

"I don't know where you get off trying to tell me what to do anyway,"

she said. "You ain't the one fucking with me. You need to keep your big ass out of it. You ain't gone do nothin' but get yo'self hurt, boy."

LeRoy leaned up against the wall, twirling a corncob in his left hand and jingling loose change in the other. Rachel sat in a large velvet-cushioned reclining chair and spread her legs to show him a Venus flytrap in action.

"Quit screwing around," said LeRoy. She spat out another baby which smacked the wall and fell to the floor.

"You kilt it," said LeRoy. "So I did. What you, a copper or something?" she asked.

LeRoy fondled the corn, enjoying the feel of Parkay on his fingers. "I don't know what I am," he said. Then he creeped over to the window and looked outside. He saw Clive, Rooster and Clayborn hunched around a broken street sign. Clive was rubbing his big head and eight-sixing salesmen left and right, while Rooster and Clayborn leaned on the street pole as if it were a spear between them.

"What you lookin' at?" Rachel asked.

"Nothin."

"It's raining like hell, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Good-business is closed today then." LeRoy stared at the big, brown lips of her vagina like he had never seen

sex before. Another sucker popped out of her mouth and hit him in the face. He wiped his eyes and nose and stepped on it, squishing blood up against his

pants leg. "Shut up, gawddammit!" said LeRoy, who dropped his cob and creeped

towards the door.

"Where you goin?" "To hell," he said. He saw the red light in front of her window.

"The road to hell is paved with priests' skulls," she said. There was nothing but gum and red between her teeth as she laughed at him.

"I gotta go," he said. Then he flew out the door, looking like he had rouge on his face.

"What happened?" Clive asked. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah, I got it," LeRoy answered.

"What did it look like?" asked Rooster.

"Like bush," LeRoy said. "There was black hair everywhere, all in between her legs."

"Was it rough?" asked Rooster.

"It was coarse."

"But how did it feel when you poked it?" asked Rooster.

"It felt like sandpaper and needles glued together by Elmer's," said LeRoj "How much was it?" asked Clive.

"Twenty dollars." "Was it worth it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did she have big titties?" Rooster asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Were her nipples black?"

"Did she scream when you poked it?" "No."

"That figures, doesn't it, Clive? She's been banged so much that it doesn' make sense for her to scream."

"What makes you believe that?" LeRoy asked.

"Clayborn's got a calculator," Rooster replied.

"What's he doing with it?"

"Statistics," Rooster replied.

"So," said LeRoy.

"So that's how I know," said Rooster.

"Settle down, Rooster," said Clive. "You're sick in the head. A normal man wouldn't be shaking his ding-a-ling like that."

"You actin' like a gorilla," LeRoy said.

"That's because that momma has got a jungle," Rooster said. "I bet she's got chickens and shit running around."

"Don't point," Clive said. "She might see you." "I want to go home," LeRoy said.

"Not so fast," said Rooster. "What's the matter?" asked Clayborn. "You look like you've seen the devil," said Clive.

"You wanna go down the street for more wings and thangs and corn-onthe-cob?" asked Rooster. "Later," said LeRoy. "I wore it out."

"What did you do to it?" asked Rooster.

"I bumped her booty hard until I reached the point where I almost dropped dead."

"How did you break the ice with her?" asked Clive.

"I asked her why she was a whore."

"What did she say?" asked Clive.

"Nothing," said LeRoy. He played with a couple of nickel-dimes inside his pants pockets.

"Was she sore when you left?" asked Rooster.

"Why don't you quit asking me questions," said LeRoy. "Raindrops keep falling on my big head."

"Let's go," said Clayborn. "It's starting to get blacker out here." "Let's go before things get worser," said Rooster.

Rooster, Clive and Clayborn moved the crowd. LeRoy took the blue line home, holding on to his trembling umbrella and eating apples. Metro Rail was the future, but the blue line was in effect, bussing Negroes dirt-cheap. The ride sounded like vampire bats inside a cave. His teeth shimmied, chewing on pieces of skin. Cool breeze shot pool, borrowing cues from the passengers' heads. People leaned and bumped each other.

"Rocky Road ice cream is what I want!" a white woman behind LeRoy loudly proclaimed. She wore a smock. No, a dashiki. No, a handkerchief. No, a white napkin with "dare to travel" written on it. No, a silk pullover by Guess with a V-cut in the back. Whatever it was, it was scented with White Shoulders-Tabu-Cinnabar-Opium-Eternity-Obsession. And, several buttons on it were broke.

"Let it all hang out," some man whispered.

The metal hooks in the ceiling clanged as they knocked each other around with the movement of transportation.

"Feel here," she said. She moved his big, black hand inside her legs, and he let it go while discussing "Sweet Dick Willie" in her ears. He was talking drag.

The bus traveled stop-and-go, walking a thin line between love and hate. People rushed in and out of the glass doors, handing the driver yen and shit. The man and woman let go of the rail and strolled to the exit.

"Time to go," said the man.

"The party's over," declared the woman.

The passengers escaped through the crowd with their hands in their pockets and faces to the curb, mud and brown water babies running into the gutter like junkies trying to hide.

LeRoy discovered the sports section of the newspaper and checked to see how the Dodgers were hitting. LeRoy saw a man put a bomb in his mouth and light it. He cracked up. It was a Bob Marley, bigger-than-life joint.

LeRoy grinned. A man peered over his shoulder and whispered in his ears.

"Wanna get blowed?"

"Say no to drugs," LeRoy said. He had read the slogan on the brim of a Lemonhead. The wheels of the bus got screechy, like they were rolling over laughing.

The man looked at LeRoy like he was crazy.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "I'm talkin' about getting yo' fucking dick wet."

"Get out of here!" LeRoy shouted.

"I'll do you for free," the man said.

"Get you a fuckin' lollipop," LeRoy said.

"Got one!" the man said. He snatched a cherry blowpop out of his pocket

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and gave it to LeRoy.

"What's your problem?" LeRoy asked.

"You circumcised?" the man asked.

"You a freak or something?"

"I don't want my teeth to slip off your dick. You wouldn't feel it that way. "Don't make me bust you in the mouth."

"What?"

"You heard me! Bug off, you queer!"

"Black nigger!"

"You're sick," said LeRoy.

"Homosexuality is not a disease," the man said.

"It's not the same as being black either," LeRoy said.

"Which one is worse?" asked the man.

"What you mean?" asked LeRoy.

"Which one would you rather be?" asked the man.

"Black," said LeRoy. "Black as the roof inside your mouth when it's closed."

"Why?" asked the man. "Tell me why."

"Because one implies something wrong on the outside, but the other implies something wrong on the inside," LeRoy said. "Which is which?" asked the man.

"You ought to know," replied LeRoy. "You're the one who called me a black nigger."

"You need to make wholesale changes with your episteme," said the man. "I'm gone. You're nothin' but a prick."

"Episteme," LeRoy said. "What's that?"

The man faded into the back of the bus. His knees buckled as the bus spurted forward, its headlights looking like fangs as it glided down the dark

LeRoy laid the paper across his lap and stared out the window. He felt himself getting sleepy as the bus moved along, his neck stiff and sore and as dead as a tube of lipstick.

He leaned back and let the blood rush to his neck. Then he dropped his big head and went to sleep.

I'll bet the nipples on her boobs are gigantic," said Rooster. He happily skipped over squares while Clive-nem left tracks on the wet cement of the

"Shut up!" said Clive. Then he gave Rooster the evil-eye.

"I've seen the face of evil, and it looks like Clive Barker!" exclaimed Rooster. He wanted to see Hellraiser.

"Count me out," said Clayborn. Then he left.

"What do ya wanna do now?" Rooster asked.

"Nothing," said Clive. "Let's go home."

Clive looked like a totem pole in the black rain. His eyes were shunning as he muttered mumbo-jumbo to himself and ate JuJu's in the face of the wind.

"You're teeth are gonna rot eatin' on all that candy," said Rooster. "You just jealous," Clive replied.

The two walked away from the liquor store with Rooster talking some stew about trying to get even or something like that and tearing open a plastic container full of Tic-Tacs.

Clayborn would be hyped if he learned to express himself more, LeRoy thought. His big head was propped up against the dull wall of the bus like a dill pickle in a glass jar.

LeRoy sat still as a basin-oceans in his body, his neck wiggling like jellied cranberry sauce dumped from a dented can.

LeRoy felt faint. As the bus shook his neck, he almost passed out.

LeRoy stopped what he was doing and leaned over to the other side of the bus, swells in his neck.

"Ibet if I fucked ber I could make berscream," Roostersaid. He wiped the rain off his face and combed his hair as they waltzed past the hospital, roses all over the place.

"Get off it!" Clive shouted. "I am sick and tired of talking about her." "What's wrong?" Rooster asked.

"All you ever talk about is sex," Clive said.

"What else is there to talk about?" Rooster asked.

Rooster squeezed on the condom inside his pocket and felt the lubrication shoot through a pinhole in the wrapping like blood. He hopped and skipped along the sidewalk, crushing flowers in his way.

"One, two, three, crack!" Rooster said to himself. "One, two, three, crack!" Clive looked at him what-in-the-world-was-he-doing.

"Have you ever tried a hospital in Compton?" Clive asked.

Rachel sat in the chair talking rhetoric to herself. She dropped Visine in her eyes and rubbed them. They ended up looking like cinnamon disks that had been put in someone's mouth and sucked on.

It was black like the inside of a covered trash can while Clive and Rooster walked around in the ghetto-starving.

Clive stood in muddy waters, Rooster stomping puddles by the hospital entrance to the emergency room, splashing rhythms together like John Coltrane. Clive pointed above his big head.

"The moon is a lozenge rolling back-and-forths and the stars are chocolate in the darkness," he said.

Rooster had to add his two cents.

"The big, black hole in the sky is for sex," Rooster said, "and the trees are for nuts and honey."

An ambulance raced past them and to the emergency room. The noise was a fat lady singing.

Rooster and Clive heard screams. Screams, screams, screams. Long screams. Clayborn running away from home during it all, stretching out like Yogi Berra trying to beat the throw to first base, before his parents could see what hit them.

### LeRoy chilled.

"I'm lazy," he said to himself, "but I'm trying to lay low."

"Excuse me, your Royal Blackness, but this is my seat," said an elderly white woman standing over his head.

LeRoy got up and changed seats.

"Sit your tired ass down," he told the woman.

"Fuck you, nigger," she said.

LeRoy raised his black fist.

"Touch me and you'll get your black ass lynched," she said. She held on

tight to her patent leather purse and faked like she was going to scream. "Beverly Hills bitch," LeRoy called her.

She spat in his face like one of the boys in the hood.

"Daisy-smellin' bitch," LeRoy called her. He looked around to make sure nobody heard him.

While it was dark outside, Rachel practiced hoodoo-whatever that is. She studied her welfare checks and wondered where her money had went all these years.

"How much does it cost to go all the way to Brooklyn?" LeRoy asked the driver.

"Wiseguy, eh?" The driver pointed to a posted sign. It read: "If you wanna talk shit, be a plumber and see how far that gets you in South Central L.A."

"I was only joking," said LeRoy.

"Fuck off," said the driver.

LeRoy rested himself back against the seat and cringed. He was starting to feel trapped inside of a coffin. Slivers of street lights cut across his red eyes like knives as a couple in the seats discussed suicide.

"There's no way I would do it," said the man sitting dead-behind him.

"But if you were going to, wouldn't the Golden Gate bridge be the best place?" asked a woman.

"That's what I call aspiring to great heights," the man replied. "Who'd be stupid enough to go that far?"

"You'd be surprised," said the woman.

"I sure as hell ain't Frank Sinatra," said the man. "That's for sure."

"How far is Harlem?" LeRoy asked. Clive had told him that Spike Lee's joint was in Harlem.

"That's a long way to go to get high," Bosco told Clive. He was always trying to be funny.

Clayborn ran down the cinders of an alley, dissing police left and right. Clayborn flew through a row of garbage cans, his legs hot and peppered with ashes. His feet were chicken. He sprinted through the front and back

door of a crack house, knocking over drug lords and addicts.

"Go cold turkey!" shouted a drug seller dicing crack and rock cocaine with razor blades.

A helicopter from the LAPD tracked him down.

"We got a spook," the officer radioed in.

Moving through the hood in downtown Los Angeles and past the graffiti, Clayborn saw the writing on the wall-"Cooley High" and "down with the Bloods."

Police chief Patrick White turned down his thumb and did Julius Cæsar. The coppers fired buckshot.

"They blew a hole in his muthafuckin' head big enough to carry his penis around," says one black observer.

Emotions ran wild:

1. Anger, The L.A. Sentinel, "There is no recourse but to believe that the shooting of Clayborn Thompson was racially-motivated."

2. Explanation, rap artists Public Enemy, title of album-"Fear of a Black Planet."

3. Rationale, LAPD chief Patrick White, "All indications were that Mr. Thompson was armed and carrying a fully-loaded gun believed to obtained from the crack house, just south of downtown Los Angeles."

4. Lies, LAPD, "We deeply regret what has happened."

5. Guilt, one of the participating officers, "How else can you capture a boogie?"

"None of this will ever bring my baby back," said Mrs. Thompson, dollar signs flashing inside her big head.

Rooster and Clive strode past the hospital like peacocks.

After they got to the bus stop, Rooster sat down on the bench and tore She was thinking: "You've got to kill him somehow, or go ahead and do off his shoes and socks. him." An old black woman strolled by, saw his feet and cracked up. "Son, you She creeped over to the corner of the room. better get yourself some Epsom salts-take that swelling out." He got in her face, and they stood toe-to-toe. She went on. Rooster gave her the finger behind her back. She was sweating real hard. Clive chuckled. "You got the wrong attitude," he said. He snatched her breasts and discovered how greasy-slick her chest was. "What would you do if your feet were killing you and somebody walked He threw her a towel. by cracking jokes?" asked Rooster. "When I get through, you won't be able to walk," he said. "Play it off." Someone came up to the door. "You wouldn't know any better," said Rooster. They heard the bell sound. "You crazy!" She spat into a nearby bucket, waving her fist and begging for the man "Who you calling crazy?" to come on. "You, rootiepoot!" He slapped her, and they got down. "Funny thing I see you here right by my side," said Rooster. "Keep looking, baby," said Clive, "cause I'm moving the crowd." It was Sugar vs. The Hitman. "What you announcing it for?" yelled Rooster. "You want me to hold your With a right hand, he knocked her down. She kicked him, and he fell backwards into a neutral corner. hand?" She grabbed the cord of the telephone and threatened to use it. "Bug off," said Clive. Then he disappeared between the trees. Ding, ding. The bell sounded again. He rushed out of the corner and hit her with a left hook. LeRoy got off the bus and leaned up against the barred window of a liquor She spat blood which hit his face and dripped like hot caramel. store, surrounded by houses. He tore off her panties and stuck her with his thang. The breeze of passing automobiles shook him like a doll in a dog's She wiggled underneath-screwed herself-and raised the receiver mouth. The streets were born with big mouths. Parallel curbs were slick with above his big head. motor oil and looked like Black lips glossed with Vasoline. He looked up and saw it. "Girl, if you sling it," he said, "I'll damn sho' bang it!" LeRoy listened for voices-and wondered if he would ever escape from "Fuck you," she said. Then he slew her with a butcher knife. Compton. "Whore!" he said. "All you was was a good-for-nothin' whore!" He flew out the door with his feet agitated and cherry-red and a trail of Rooster stormed into Rachel's house and told her that he wanted some. errors and bloody Sugar Babies left behind on the floor. "You must be crazy!" she said. She spat a Sugar Baby into his face and laughed. "Get the fuck out of here!" she shouted. -Ricardo Cortez Cruz Rooster cackled. She backed up two steps. "What did you do to LeRoy?" Rooster asked. She was thinking: "He's got your number now." Rooster saw himself in a Little Shop of Whores. He started singing: "Rox-anne, you don't have to play with red lights." She backpedalled a little more. He put on a pair of gloves. "Rox-anne, you don't have to sell your body. You don't have to live like this."

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# Strain Gauge

Mother is a sensitive. Living between faultlines, she senses, through her sofa, tremors before every quake, minor so far. She laughs about her divan

divanation but looks amazed. She has worried to her doctors that should disaster strike, she could end up stranded. I gave her

a gemstone bracelet that holds her rapt. I take care in what I tell her, only that each stone stands for health and calm.

I keep to myself the quartz's popular name, "love stone," keep silent about its feel, soft for a rock, and its reputation for healing the wounded heart---

hers, rheumatic since childhood and filled with anger for her father, who had no more idea of how to treat children than of how to raise the dead.

I hold my tongue about amethyst, guardian of the lungs; or citrine, light of the sun; or jasper, patron stone of counsellors—the rock of letting go, of accepting things as they are.

We keep mum about spritual matters, taboo unless they echo the Christian home, our roots, buried deep as her great great-grandfather, Sandy Senter, who waded chest-high grass across three states to settle the plot of ground she occupies. She's 75

and better off not thinking that she has failed to please her father, daughter, or cancer doctors.

I can't begrudge her old-woman

/Oman

faith in the practice that works like a charm: that which we say keep us safe from what we do not say, safe from the sandier regions of grind, slip, and tremble.



# One Foot On Flower Street

Marco, two million miles west, blue-black as pacific night, makes his way into my queen-size bed, slides under grandma's crazy quilt, and rests-the relief of the final jigsaw puzzle piece. He bridges the Rocky Mountains, the Mississippi River, the Northern Hemisphere, one foot on Flower Street in Pasadena, and other pressing against the sole of my foot in Normal, U.S.A.

B.B. King pounds to Sunday-morning smells of toasted bagels and coffee. California's blue ocean fuses with Illinois' green waves.

But what does Marco see?

His eyes are closed, granting him a landscape composed by his fingers grasping my shoulders, his mouth memorizing my neck.

-Mary Leen

# Voyage Of The Fool Poet

Okay. Here's a question for you: Why do so many things in life require that you start with your feet shoulder-width apart?

Sports mostly.

In teaching a football blocking stance, the first thing they tell you is "get them feet shoulder-width apart." How many baseball players you ever see try and hit a ball with their feet together? Can't be done. Can't hit a golf ball that way or a tennis ball either. Ever try to shoot a basketball with your feet together?

It gets bigger though. You have to do the same thing to take a picture or to wash the dishes. Hell, you can't take a shower without having your feet shoulder-width apart.

I guess it's always confused me.

At least since being in the army anyway. If having your feet shoulderwidth apart is so big, why do they want your feet together at the position of attention? A soldier is the last guy I'd like to see fall on his ass.

Hip Hop and Clapper used to dance down the street. Hip Hop would wear his red-checked blazer, and Clapper would be in her fur coat. Hip Hop also had his Walkman headphones on, but Clapper was the one swinging her head from side to side and singing You Can't Hurry Love. Her ratty hair was down to her waist, and they wouldn't let her in the kitchen while Hip Hop was working.

Hip Hop's headphones weren't plugged into anything. The cord just ran through a button hole in the lapel of his jacket and down into the breast pocket on the inside. The button hole went clear through, I suppose. He was always singing, but there was never any music. He just did that Hip Hop/Bee Bop walk of his all day long.

I don't know about Clapper. She didn't wear headphones, music or not. She wore that torn up red dress a lot in the summers. Sometimes she would really dress up by wearing those dirty white pumps that she swiped off of the kid's mom at the carnival. I never knew why she clapped all of the damn time. I could almost see when she was singing, but when she wasn't, it got kind of spooky. The summer I worked at the yard, the guys over at Henson's left new Speed Queen washer and dryer boxes out back for her and Hip Hop. I thought they'd probably have a good summer down along the river. They could move the boxes up onto the ledge of the pier if it rained. It seemed like it would be safer under the bridge.

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I wasn't ever hung up on my mom.

I guess I probably was sort of hung up on the neighbor kid's mom. She had big titties. They were all I could think about when I was twelve. I used to baby-sit for her and the old man. The kid was about seven. It was no big deal. He wore out quickly.

I'd wrestle with him hard all night, and then he'd get so tired that he'd drop off wherever he sat. I'd go to her underwear drawer then.

It smelled good, I guess. I wanted to be close to those titties. I'd pull out one of her big bras and bury my face in one of the cups as if it were an oxygen mask. Sometimes I'd fall back on the bed and rub her panties on my face. They were big like the bra. Sometimes I'd take one of each into the bathroom and whack. After that, I'd have to be careful about getting things back just as I'd found them. The kid never caught me.

I didn't think she had.

Nothing was ever said.

Then one night they came home late. I'd been asleep in the easy chair myself. They were both pretty drunk. He came in, dropped his keys on the table, and left for the bathroom. She came in behind him, stepped out of her heels, and sat down on the footstool in front of me. She was asking me how everything had gone as she dug through her bag for money. Then she pulled out a bill between her fingers. She set her hand on my knee and then ran the bill up my leg. She stopped when she couldn't go any further and I felt hot and took the money. Then she smiled good-night. It was a twenty.

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Here's another one: Why are there always math problems on the board when you walk into an English class? What the hell are they trying to say?

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It was the day Clapper told that trucker to die.

I was new at the yard, and when they went Hip Hoppin' and Clappin' up the alley and past the parked Georgia Pacific truck, the driver laughed out loud at them. Hip Hop didn't hear over his music, but Clapper did and she bounced over to the side of the cab, looked sternly at the driver for a moment, whipped her head around twice to make her spaghetti hair fly like a whirling fan, and then yelled up at him: Die fool poet!

I couldn't breathe for a moment after that.

I didn't like seven. The kid seemed happy enough, but it sucked for me. Seven?

Me standing in a one-car garage. No car was in there of course. She must have parked it in the street that day. Or maybe somebody had it. There were oil stains on the concrete. Not much else. No tools or rakes like in our garage at home. There was a beat up snow shovel and a garbage can with no lid which stunk of rotten eggs. On one wall was the door into the house. You had to go up two big steps to go in. I heard him lock it so it didn't matter. The garage door was down. The only light came through a small window nailed shut and too high for me to see out. Under the window I remember seeing a short piece of pipe leaning against a stud. It was rusty looking and not long enough to do any good. But it was there with me, so I sat on the steps, looked across the oil spots, and talked to the pipe leaning against the stud under the window. I waited a long time for him to come out.

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How about this: people say they are not racist. They say, "I roomed with a black guy in the army. He was OK until his buddies came around. Then he would do things that I didn't understand. Kinda pissed me off. But I'll work and live with 'em. No problem." Then you get behind those people as they walk down the street. They can be walking away without a care in the world—their arms just swinging like they've got a million bucks. But just let a black approach them. The whites may nod or smile, but they also reach back to adjust their wallets or fix their bag on their shoulder by suddenly grabbing the strap.

A coincidence?

. . .

I was in the army at the time. Germany. Shit-ass drunk in Nuremberg. There was a group of us. Six, I think. We'd just left a club where the "supple young *fratileins*" had pissed us off by hanging all over the niggers. We knew what they were after, and we knew that they were going to get it, and we knew we weren't. Or perhaps we already had.

We turned a corner on our way back to the *bahnhof* and the sign hit us: **Sex Shoppe.** 

The place was littered with guys who kept their heads down and moved fast. On the left as you went in was a man seated behind a counter on a platform. You almost had to throw your money up to him. Down from him, along the left wall, were a series of what looked like closet doors.

About ten or twelve.

Anyway, you threw him five marks and gave him a number, *vier*, and door four would pop open so long as the red light over it was not lit. Then you went in and shut the door. In a minute a porno came on a screen up on the back wall of the closet. Along the front wall was a padded wooden bench which sat next to the frame of the door, but was hidden behind the door when you came in. The light in the room flickered radically from dark to bright because the porno was shifting scenes every few seconds. The floor was sticky and littered with Kleenex which were supplied, I guess.

I didn't sit on the bench. I didn't really watch the porno in *zimmer vier* either. Two other light sources caught my attention first. There were holes in the side walls of *zimmer vier*. They were about the size of walnuts. Just big enough for an eye full. They were like magnets.

In *zimmer drei* the guy was seated on the bench and beatin' off. His hat sat back on his head, and he had on a leather coat that hung loose at his sides with his shirt rolled up over his hairy belly. I didn't stay for the big finish.

*Zimmerfünf* would have shocked me more had I been sober. I bent over, looked through the hole, and saw two men embracing on the bench, their mustaches locked together as near as I could tell in the flickering light of the cinema. The niggers, whores, and fags were all getting love that night.

Outside the rooms and in the center of the **Sex Shoppe** was a series of doors that joined into a circle.

Fifteen marks this time.

You went in and located before you was a small window with a curtain on the other side that you couldn't open yourself. After a few minutes, the curtain opened automatically to reveal a naked red-head on a revolving platform covered in green shag carpeting.

She was on her back with her knees up. She just sort of dropped her knees to the left and then to the right as the platform played like a record. Occasionally you'd get a peek in between those knees. There were about 15 windows and I could see almost all of the other men seeing the red head. She looked deeply at each one of us as she slowly spun through our views. She was chewing gum.

We met back out front and debated going for the "Super Pussy."

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Once in awhile when we were younger, she would come out and shoot some baskets with us. I always liked it when she did that.

But let me explain the court first.

We didn't have money. Our basketball goal was a chunk of old countertop that we had hung up on a telephone pole along his old man's back fence. That made the court grass of course. The rim was real enough, but it sat crooked on the counter-top because counter-top is damned hard to drive a nail into. We went with screws instead, but didn't have much more luck. We were too impatient to get the goal up and in use to have one of the dads come do it right. We just got the rim on good enough so that it wouldn't come down on our heads. We did get a big hole drilled through our countertop backboard though. We used his dad's power drill and the only bit we could find in their mess of a garage. It must have been dull because the drill . was smokin' in no time and got real hot. Once we had bored the hole, all we had to do was drive a few nails close together in the telephone pole and hang the whole shabang like a picture. We also ran wire around the whole deal so that it wouldn't bounce off the nails with the first shot. We couldn't get it very high. The rim was right at the top of her head when she came out.

You have kids?

Answer this: Why is it you have to be a frog or mouse or a goddamn turtle to get your kids to listen to what you have to say? If I tell them not to fight, they'll be hitting one another before the movie even starts. So what do I do? Sometimes I just give up and say don't kill each other. Of course as soon as I say it, I figure that that means Terry will die in the next few minutes. I start to correct myself but think better of it usually.

I tried that one once.

I said, "Be nice to one another." Brice looked at me as if I were nuts and kept right on pulling Terry's hair. Still, if I were Kermit the Frog and told them to knock it off, they no doubt would. PeeWee was my last hope.

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Then Clapper rolled off of the pier one night during a storm. Hip Hop wasn't home from washing dishes yet, which was odd being that the diner never had ten customers all night. But then again they said that ole' Nicky wasn't all there either.

She must have fallen asleep or got scared of something or maybe just was careless in her Speed Queen house. Hip Hop said he thought a rat got in there with her. "Not much light in a box, ya know."

Doesn't matter. She rolled off the ledge of the pier and sunk like a rock wearing that fur coat in the current. They found her a few days later about

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a mile down. She was a foot under and hooked on a limb. Dirty water making dirty hair flow.

Hip Hop left town then.

Some candy bar wrappers, a small bundle of rags, a shard of mirror, and the dirty white pumps remained.

• • •

It was the ball that really sucked. It was the size and shape of a real basketball but it had no bladder. The air just went in. It was more like a heavy, textured balloon and it would bounce uncontrollably off of the counter-top and rim. There was never really a chance of it going in because the hoop was lose and the ball was soft and unless you really nailed it, the ball would ricochet off the backboard and bounce five or six feet in the air.

She used to come out and shoot too. Her painted nails looked goofy against the glowing orange ball. She shot everything granny style even though the rim was too low for it. I liked to watch her shoot because that would bring her titties real close together under her sweater as she bent down to shoot, and then they would sort of fly apart as she launched the ball up and over the counter-top. Of course the ball would then bounce all over hell and she'd chase after it and I'd watch her titties clap as she did so. The kid was catching on and would get real pissed at her. He'd tell her to go inside. She'd never go on his first try. She always found a reason to linger which was fine with me.

One time she taught us how to shoot free throws, though we were a bit skeptical. She dug a heal of her boot into the ground to mark the line. She lit up a Kool. And then she explained the process of shooting free throws with the Kool balancing on her lower lip. The first thing she said you had to do was get them feet shoulder-width apart. I kissed her full on the mouth when I left for the army a few years later.

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Forty-five marks later we were standing in the home of the "Super Pussy." It was a narrow, rectangular room with no furniture and very little light. Before us was a Plexiglass wall. On the other side of it was some sort of second wall. It looked like iron in that it was covered with rivets and metal straps but I'm sure now that it was not.

It didn't have to be.

There were six of us. I remember because there were five small holes randomly drilled in the Plexiglass barrier. They were holes like the ones in the movie closets, except in the Super Pussy they were there on purpose. A couple of them were about waist high, two others were about chest high with one slightly higher than the other. The last hole, the highest one, was about eye to eye with me when I looked at it. The other guys knew what the holes were for because they each took one as soon as we walked in. It wasn't hard to figure out because there were handprints all over the Plexiglass. Stiffy and Blade were down on one knee at their holes. I just stood behind all of them, waiting for "Super Pussy."

Soon some noises began coming over a speaker which was hung up on the wall behind us. It sounded like the heavy door of a safe being opened. Lots of recorded crashes and bangs. In a moment, the steel wall went slowly up, timed perfectly with its own sound effects. A bright light then poured through the glass wall and filled our room.

We were looking at a living room scene. There was carpeting, a couch facing us, an end table with a lamp on it, and a back wall covered in yellow wallpaper with a picture of a turbulent sea hanging from a nail. She came out from behind the wall then wearing a short print robe which hung open to reveal her tiny breasts and her "Super Pussy."

As she looked up to see six guys she crowed, "*Netn, Netn. Nur eins. Nur eins.*" She slammed her robe shut around herself. The other guys looked dismayed and began to plead. They tried German but abandoned it in their frustration and explained in abbreviated English that we had had to pay the fee by combining our money, that none of us could afford "Super Pussy" by ourselves. She only shook her head which made them beg that much harder. I stood behind them staring at her. My face must have been expressionless. I was sober then and pretty much disgusted. She had not noticed me yet.

After some minutes the show went on, as if there were ever any doubt. She began to dance behind the glass wall but when she quickly ran out of moves, she dropped her robe to the carpet and brought her body close to the wall. The other guys went crazy trying to get as many fingers through their holes as possible. She visited each hole and let their fingertips brush her nipples and labia. She kissed Groch through the highest hole. The tips of their tongues met for an instant. She kept her lips puckered and moaned and swayed from hole to hole as if it all really meant something to her.

The other guys were squirming like hungry puppies fighting for the last nipple at chow time. They were trying to improve their angles as best they could. They all wanted the best touching they could get. Soon Blade had his dick poked through his hole and as she brushed the tip of it against her thigh, her eyes met mine. My face, I suppose, was still expressionless. If anything I was probably sneering a little.

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A moment later the show was over. The other guys were pissed but had not noticed my silent exchange with "Super Pussy." Blade was zipping his pants and the others were turning to go, unmoved by what they had seen, upset for its brevity only. I still had not moved. I just stared at the empty living room as "Super Pussy" retrieved her robe and left.

As I turned to go, I heard her voice call after me. The other guys were already gone. She was standing in front of the couch with her robe cinched up and held together at her throat by her left hand. She paused briefly and then said in perfect English, "Someday you will die too, fool poet." The iron wall dropped silently then.

I got out of the army then. I decided that I didn't like taking orders or standing at attention for hours on end for no apparent reason. I came home and went to work for the lumber yard. I copped an attitude real quick because I was then taking even more orders from even bigger assholes than those in the army.

I tried it as a cashier for awhile, but I've never been too good with numbers, so I found my ass in a delivery truck in no time. I made a lot of enemies on those deliveries. The contractors were always hot, behind, and pissed off, and I was always late because things would heat up in the yard before I had to make a run. Once a customer wave was taken care of, I'd go, but I would usually wind up in an argument at the other end. One guy even threw a hammer at me from a rooftop.

I pulled up with a pallet of shingles.

About 35 bundles.

He wanted me to set up the ladder and carry them up to the rooftop myself. It would have taken all day and it was not my job. My job was to deliver not do the work for the contractor. He was yelling down at me to get the shingles up there and to be quick about it. I thought he was joking. I asked him again where he wanted me to put them. He said on the fuckin' roof. I asked him how it would be if I put them up his fuckin' ass. More words followed and then the hammer flew and missed. I climbed up into the flatbed and pulled the dump lever then. The shingles fell into a heap and after that I was on probation and not-so-secretly looking for another job on the side.

I started writing late at night.

Mostly I'd write about "accidents" down at the yard that would dismember the contractors little by little. You know: hands being cut off by a runaway radial arm saw, being shot in the head with a six-penny nail from a nail gun, and sometimes decapitation when the fork lift came around the corner at full blow with the forks just at the right level.

It did get old. Soon I started at the community college and fell right into

English. My literature class met in a room right after a math class let out. We'd all roll our eyes at the equations on the board when we'd walk in ready to talk about the Romantics. Poetry soon replaced anger.

I got out of the army then. I said good-bye to the boys and all of the "Super Pussy" times. It wasn't enough anymore. I met Cartha at school about a year later. We hit it off fine. I'd just left the lumber yard and was looking for a job. Her father ran a landscape business and needed help. Cartha and I started dating and I started working for her father part-time.

Not long after that Cartha and Lwere married and had Brice and Terry bing, bing. They're not dark, but they've got enough of Cartha in them to make people turn their small town, small heads. Brice is now eight and Cartha thinks he's been trying on her clothes when we are not around.

I suppose it's just a phase. Maybe he's getting more sensitive. He doesn't pick on Terry nearly so much these days. He even minds me now. So far his playing with Cartha's panties has been a pretty good thing.

I haven't seen or heard of her for years. The boy is grown and gone. I'm not sure where.

They got a divorce.

She remained. The husband left and the boy went crackers from what I've heard. The last I'd heard of her, she'd passed out on the Tilt-a-Whirl and had her pumps swiped when they set her drunk ass off to the side of the ride. That Clapper was a sneaky one.

Now the boys and I like to build small boats and launch them into the river from the pier under the bridge where Hip Hop and Clapper used to live during storms. The pier is pretty slippery. It would be easy to fall in and be swept away by the hard current. We're always extra careful down there.

The boats are not really that fancy. The boys go down to the yard and come back with scraps of lumber, and we nail the pieces together into boats not much bigger than the oil spots on our garage floor where the construction always takes place.

Some are cruisers, some are barges, some tugs, and others are just plain ships. Most all of them have several levels. And all of them weigh too much to stay afloat very well by the time we are done sinking nails into the wood.

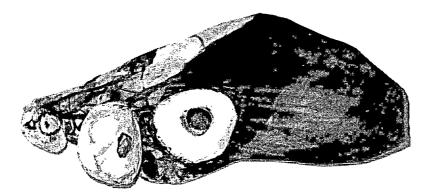
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Usually, we'll build like hell for a couple of hours, adding all of the needed detail with string and magic markers. Then I'll carry the boat down to the pier with the boys running excitedly to keep up with my pace. When we get there, I always ask them "who is the captain of this here vessel?" as I hold it up and they shout names: "Hook, Kermit, Michelangelo."

The other day they were at a loss. No names came forth. Instead, Terry looked up at me and said, "you name the cap'in this time, Daddy." I said, "Oh, now it's Daddy's turn, is it?" I thought for a moment and then just dropped our ship into the rushing river. The boys cried, "Daddy, you didn't name 'em."

Our ship was quickly swept away. It turned in circles in the current and only the third deck remained above water. But it didn't sink. I took a tiny hand of each boy into my own and led them away from the pier of the bridge. "Of course I named him," I said. "I named him The Fool Poet." The boys were quiet. We looked back toward the river then. Our ship was nearly out of sight. Just a spot in a turbulent sea. I squinted to see it and whispered to the boys, "And The Fool Poet will never die."

-Eric Martin



# Oh God No, Not Another Nature Poem

Don't ask me to write about grass. Blue Lexington springtime or razor hot San Antonio summer. Or clouds grey rain smog or the wind east hot smell of garbage off the river. But ask me to sing of concrete steel glass car horns trains police sirens mother screaming at their children lovers screaming at each other.

There is no silence in the city. Christ images in spaghetti joints or walls of tire factories street corner prophets screaming to save my soul

REM is singing "Losing my Religion." KISS sang "God of Thunder." The Beatles were bigger than God. God is good God is great God left me when I was eight.

Budda in the rain Japanese forest smell of Kentucky Fried Chicken and insense. Headless marble Diana as seen from the Lido deck as I negotiate the boat on my way to the free bar. Jesus crammed down my fellowship sore throat. *I'm saved I'm saved I'm saved*. Eyes like Hollywood special effects fire belief in belief. Just who can we trust? Does Jesus wear sunglasses as he looks at what his father wrought?

# A Love Letter

You reached into my chest and pulled forth my still beating heart. blood red blood dripping pumping staining your fingers. And you ate it and I watched youas my soul dripped down your chin and your tongue moved slowly over your lips and you licked up what was left of our love. As if it were the remains of a chili dog or a snow cone melting in the sun at Disneyland. July. You entered and exited my life like an emotional tourist just getting the highlights a snapshot of us

holding hands in front of Dante's *Inferno* or writing love letters inwatercolors on a canvas of the mind. You send me postcards from erotic ports of call layovers of the heart stopovers of the soul. When the wind blows and it is cold and you're

nothing

but the other end of a blue airmail envelope, I close my eyes and feel fortunatee for the fifteen mintues of your life I was allowed to share.

-Kelly Fisher Lowe

# Black Hole Songs

I.

Somewhere a phone rings, your voice drifts like heat waves into this Sunday afternoon full of sweating glasses of tea and book pages full of astronomy and the first whisper of birth in the universe. Some scientists have called it a bang, that great beginning of vomitous movement exploding in ever widening circles away from an unstable center. Some have heard a whimper. I hear your voice saying remember me. your too tired voice that hums along thin telephone lines detached from the who of you are. I roll over and close the book, rub my hand along space where your body is not, a black hole in the center of my bed.

### II.

In Baghdad I read our government killed hundreds of men, women, children, their only sin being that they were in the wrong place at the well collecting water, in the square gossiping their lives across bits of blown sand collateral damage says the president. Some hid in black holes,

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bunkers dug deep into the earth where death could not find them, they thought, until smart bombs collapsed whole buildings into the space.

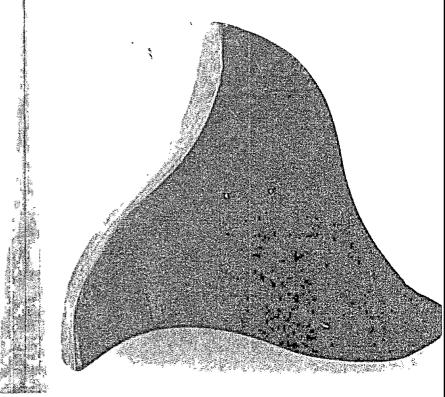
### III.

A new theory states that black holes might exist in the center of every galaxy--reversal of that whimpering, banging beginning that all the stars and planets and extraterrestrials and humans are slowly being sucked into gravity centers collapsing upon themselves, centers so powerful that not even light can escape. I remember a Baptist minister who used his television Bible to prove that the very center of hell holds no light, only a flame so hot that it burns black forever. The real torment of hell, he explained, was being burned alive by invisible flames in this black hole with no light.

#### IV.

In our room above Rue Lafayette, Paris 1984, where every day a small toothless man brought us fresh croissants and bitter French coffee, a pitcher of steamed milk, butter and marmalade, where we would piss off our balcony into the courtyard below laughing if there were clean clothes on the line, there was a place in the middle of our bed so concave that every night I rolled into it while sleeping. In the mornings your warm body rolled there to join mine and I would dream your skin sealing the dimple tight, the wet smell of your breath filling in the black hole.

—Tom 0. McCulley



# Cognition And Interpretation In Field And Stream Theory: A Disciplinary Critique Of Current Research

Many in our research "community" debate the published findings of ethnographic studies in the field of cows and crows. Relationships of "the one" to "the other" have dominated this contiguous discourse, positing crows as outside the parameters of cow studies while contributing to their ontology.

Field and Streamist studies produce a consistent statistical correlation between the quantity of milk that cows produce and the south by southwest flight patterns of crows in early August. Results of a study of ten blind cows on an Illinois farm suggest that crows act as an unconscious ideologic apparatus on Grade A milk production processes, leading bird seed producers to target the cattle farmer as their typical consumer in both print and broadcast advertising. This anticipated artificial inundation of seed within the cow's natural ecoenvironment threatens to distort the findings of current research projects and call into question their replicability.

A current NEC-funded research team, attacking nutritionist methodology, questions the current hypothesis that cow cognition is the result of the intermingling of corn with highly flouridated water. Straw and Weeds report increased milk production only when crows sit still on fence posts.

In this paper I will argue that the primary difference between cows and crows is the letter "r." In the second section, I will argue that the ability of cows to lie down and swat flies with their tails is related to both "R" philosophy and "R" psychology. On to "R."

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—Wayne Crawford

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## What We Tell Don:

I have nightmares . my work means nothing I'm keeping my name

At the wedding, hardly anyone knew. Now, at the Christmas party, everyone knows about Don. We tell him all of our sins, our fist kiss, that one really horrible lie no one ever caught. We talk to him as if he can take our confessions with him, like the dead of a different epidemic carried pocket posy. Instead of showing his daily losses, Don shifts his bones under three sweaters, listens.

I have seen my father's ghost I am afraid to be alone

my rapist walked free

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We pretend we don't see the empty chair next to Don that holds the knowledge of his death. We laugh like always, we try to act normal. Away from him, we whisper

so young such a horrible disease then take another ham roll-up, step ourside for a smoke.

Time passes with others, then we find him again.

I am afraid to love I want to bave a child I think I might be gay

Don doesn't deny us. In the comer he hums the Hallelujah Chorus, absolves us for not facing death while we still have the choice.

# Watching a Man Work

The nails in his mouth gleam like animal eyes in the sun. He spits them one at a time, smacks them down with his hammer, his shoulder making the same arc with each punch. No one taught him this concentration, the power of a waiting horse, muscle of a storm. He could break me in two, I think and I step forward.

I watch him yank a bent nail, his body steady and defined as an anchor. The wood creaks before it gives. From here I can see the pulse leap in his neck, can hear the authority of his breathing. It's almost a choice the way I want to lick the back of his neck, almost human the way he reveals me.

# 1, 2, 3

It's always laundry day for some women and children a day long job of sorting, shifting loads, waiting hours as everything spins. The bleach is more powerful, the dryers hotter at the laundrymats on this side of town. They fry everything pure. /

The mothers smoke, drink coffee, gossip about men—good or no—good. The little girls, pretty already, listen ears triple-pierced, hair pinned-up for the heat and nubby breasts they know to throw forward when they walk.

One mother makes her girl scream with just a step then says sweetly: *be quiet! I haven't touched you yet.* The girl sucks in her cheeks, watches her clothes fly aroung in the dryer, then slides under a tall folding table. She tells herself: *I could escape from here*— *1, 2, 3.* 

-Kristy Nielsen

# Druid's Cave Interview: Carole Maso

Illinois State University's 1991-92 distinguished writer in residence is Carole Maso. Carole makes her home in New York City, NY and has written three novels, Ghost Dance, The Art Lover, and The American Woman In The Chinese Hat. I spoke with her in her office on a very dreary February afternoon about her first bout with teaching, her attitudes about life and fiction, a diet for writers, and the things she has found most interesting about the Midwest.





**DC:** You've talked a lot about inspiration and dedication both in the Druid's Cave workshop you co-ran with Jeffrey DeShell and in the classes you've taught here at ISU, this past Fall and Spring semesters. What inspired you to take this "leap of faith" into writing?

CM: I think that from the time I was a child, I realized that writing was a magical and powerful thing. And that to do this one thing, to do any one thing well, and particularly something that mysterious and powerful and provocative as creating something from nothing would take, it seemed to me, a great deal of devotion. I have a sister who, when she was about eight or nine, decided she wanted to be a tennis player. I watched what it was she did in order to become that. When she wasn't practicing, she was reading tennis strategy. When she wasn't reading tennis strategy, she was planning a diet for herself. When she wasn't doing that, she was working out with weights. When she wasn't doing that, she was learning how to meditate and improve her powers of concentration. And this went on and on and on. Something clicked when I was watching my little sister. She's quite a bit younger than I am but when I watched how much it might take and would take in order to do what she wanted to do, I thought, why is that different from writing? and why couldn't these same things be applied to writing, which is certainly demanding in similar kinds of ways.

### DC: Is there a diet for writers?

CM: Yeah, I think there is. First, I think writers have to learn how to read as writers. With pleasure, joy or a very specific kind of attention. And to read

everything for starters, from Beowulf on. It's necessary so that you know what's already happened and so if one is innovating or breaking form it comes from an informed place. I say read in English but of course there's all the other languages. I read French, OK, but not great and have been forced to read a great many books in translation but I still find that exposing myself to World Literature is important since most of the very best books, and particularly contemporary books, are not in English. Learning a foreign language is important for writers, simply because you learn a great deal about syntax and grammar. It also forces you into your original state concerning language. You're back to what language was all about which is uttering things. You learn that there is a very interesting, primal relationship there when you're trying to communicate, when you're trying to understand where language rose from and then its power, also sound. I think writers should expose themselves to all the arts: music, painting, film, dance. My first book was composed page by page with a fugue in mind and certainly in its larger dimension, symphonically. But you know I was a student of music and that made its mark. Also, I studied painting and had hundreds of dance lessons. Some writers tend to sequester themselves, cloister themselves. They don't expose themselves to things, they don't live fully in the world and I think that it matters and that the world matters. It matters to be out there and to know what's happening and to live in it somewhat and feel deeply.

### DC: Is there a clear difference between honest and dishonest writing?

**CM:** I feel that there is a lot of dishonest writing simply because one is taught in writing workshops...taught the tricks, the ways of proceeding, the ways of solving problems, ways of *well let's try this, we'll do this, do that, how about using this kind of dialogue?* You know there are these quick fixes that do not arise from the organic problems of the text but come out of a sort of despair, a need to be accepted, to publish. So teachers who are tired enter this pact with eager writers. There are false ways of writing sentences and I think there's false syntax and ways of just regurgitating what's been done before regardless of whether it's appropriate to the text or not. I think that writers can be broken of that but the need for approval and the need for success is so great that I think that's where a lot of dishonest work comes from.

**DC:** Have you ever experienced a point in your life when your own writing was dishonest?

**CM:** My very close friend was dying from AIDS and I was at home constructing long, lyrical, beautiful sentences as I had been for six, seven years while writing *Gbost Dance*. When I wasn't doing that I was going to visit him

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in the hospital and what I was witnessing at the hospital day after day watching my friend under a florescent light at thirty-two, dying, and what I was experiencing on the page which was a sort of perfection, a place I worked very hard to get this flawless prose, struck me suddenly as completely hollow and completely false because of the situation I was put into and the places I'd been pressed to look at. Suddenly, language was failing me. What happened after a while was that I stopped writing completely and it was only hospital visits, it was taking care of my friend. I was completely silenced and I had no idea whether I would actually come back to writing anymore simply because I had no idea...things I had thought were true...I had always thought there was a god, for instance... I had always believed in all the fathers really, God, sex, medicine, science-the Challenger had just exploded recently, and all these things I had always just believed...suddenly I wasn't sure whether I believed in any of it and it was a really terrifying period. It was unclear to me whether I would be able to go back and have enough faith to put one word after another. So I was silent for a very long time, pretty much that whole year. December 30, I just sat down and started writing everything I remembered. I kept writing and kept writing and about twelve hours later, I had an account of my life with my friend. And the whole process of the writing of The Art Lover was, is writing possible anymore for me or not? The entire time that I worked on that book, I was unsure on the outcome and I was unsure as to whether I could ever believe again in making shapes, in short, art. I couldn't save my friend's life but it matters. It still matters.

**DC:** Ellen Goodman recently criticized Oliver Stone's film, "JFK." She asserts that "those of us who are print people—writers and readers—are losing ground to the visual people." As a novelist, do you feel that print is losing ground?

**CM:** No. And I don't think it's a contest or a war. As long as "print" continues to evolve and continues to do new things and remains open.... There is a problem in this country because there is an extreme conservatism in publishing now, and so only certain types of writing are widely read—so maybe that's what Ellen Goodman is thinking about. I don't agree with her criticisms of Stone. You know history has always been a fiction so for Stone to make his own history as fiction is perfectly fine with me. In my class we work with fiction, poetry, autobiography, memoir. We watch films, plays, listen to music. The edges have blurred. The best writing embraces "the visual people" and everything and everyone else too.

DC: Were there any unexpected surprises about teaching here at ISU?

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**CM:** Almost everything was unexpected. I had never taught before and I was very skeptical as to whether writing could be taught. Here I was coming in to teach writing, and I didn't know whether I believed in it. The first surprise was that, *yes, there are things that I can teach you*. There are enthusiasms you can impart, there is work you can expose people to. Another surprise is the good behavior of the students. That really surprised me because when I was in school, which was the late seventies, the students were not quite as conservative or conventional. I have many very well-behaved students. This has nothing to do with writing, and I've had to work with some of them to break some of these patterns of thinking: *what is the right answer, let's do the right thing, let's try to write pieces to please the teacher.* I've got a lot of very "good" girls in my class and that has been a very interesting thing to work through with them. You're never going to push to that place where something interesting will start to happen and where you'll assume your own voice.

**DC:** You've said recently in class that you encourage women to be "bad girls." Can you explain what you mean by this?

**CM:** Not to think like a train on its tracks and to continue with the expected or anticipated response not to parents, not to boyfriends, not to teachers. Not to give up so much. Not to be afraid. Not to be afraid to speak, to experience the world in the way that they do. I try to help them feel more comfortable with their bodies, to become more comfortable with the sound of their voice, the way they look and to not conform for conforming's sake. In my beginning classes, I assigned them journals and I was shocked how much time the women spent on their fiancees and their fiancees's preoccupations. It seemed like they already had given up their lives at age eighteen or nineteen, almost everything. I tried to at least point this out to them. I assigned them individual fictional practices based on their journals and tried to push them into uncomfortable places and encourage this so-called "badness."

**DC:** There is a lot of emphasis on the exploration of the five senses both in your teaching and in your novel, *Ghost Dance*. If there is a sixth sense for writers, what would it be?

**CM:** Intuition. Instinct. Which may be a combination of the five senses, actually. With a little something else thrown in. I don't know, I suppose I'm semi-mystic of sorts, an ecstatic (laughs).

**DC:** Since you've been in this community, you've been very involved with ACT-UP Central Illinois, spreading the importance of community awareness and involvement in fighting AIDS. How important is community

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# awareness and involvement for future writers?

CM: It's very hard to generalize and there are all kinds of writers, but I don't think that anyone suffers from being out in the world and loving it hard and taking those lessons to heart. I don't know how it informs writing specifically but writing is a kind of love and I don't think you can turn that on and off. Writing is not a selfish activity, although many see it that way. It's entirely selfless and it also asks that you have an incredible empathetic imagination, I think. To be out in the world and see the struggles of others and to care and to love things other than writing, I think is something that couldn't hurt but only deepens our creative work. Gives it dimension, an unexpected resonance.

DC: Is there a difference between fiction and a lie?

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CM: Yeah, I think fiction is the truth, and a lie is a lie (laughs). That's what I think the difference is.

DC: What have been some of the more memorable events of your long stay here in the Bloomington/Normal community?

CM: Well, it hasn't been such a long stay for me. I guess I've been here since August of 1991. I feel like I've just landed. One of the most amazing things has been the dizzying landscape and sky. I feel I know now what it feels like to be on the planet in a different way (laughs). It's a very odd thing. I've been doing a lot of traveling lately and whenever I fly back and land at that Bloomington Airport, that sky and the whole thing is just remarkable. I'm such a New Yorker and such a snob (laughs) and have never found a city that I've been comfortable in outside of New York but Chicago surprised me as well, in that it reminds me of New York and it's also different than New York but it's a wonderful place. The other major revelation to me is the ISU English Department and its dedication to contemporary fiction. It's going to be a main center for experimental fiction. We've got the Fiction Collective Two here and we're getting the Dalkey Archive. Charlie Harris's commitment is amazing. Something I didn't expect in Normal, Illinois.

DC: What would you say to young writers who want use their writing to challenge and change the world?

CM: I would say, go for it. Only through art is change possible at all. Some people think that you can never approach subjects like AIDS, racism and prejudice, but I say that we have to try.

-J.P. Tria