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San Jose Studies
San Jose State University
Journal of the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Sciences, and Business.
$5.00
Acknowledgments

The publication of *San José Studies* is possible only through the support of its guarantor, benefactor, and patron subscribers. The Trustees and Staff of *SJS* wish to acknowledge these supporters and hope to see their ranks grow.

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Cover and other map (p. 4) courtesy U.S. Geological Survey, Menlo Park, California.
On October 17, 1989, at 5:04 p.m. a 7.1 earthquake centered near Loma Prieta in the Santa Cruz Mountains struck, to be followed by a swarm of aftershocks. These poems based on personal experience are a response to the earthquake and its aftermath.
The woman God

is a spider, a hole in the ground, oracle
The woman God shines like spit, is multiple arms and legs. All that warm thicket seizes your face. Better far her web than any man light: they can have the sun to race around in. Her preferred daughters choke on dust and song that last always

—the mother God is a spider—

and those who bring her their shallow particulars, she wraps up in her nightgown, in cocoons until the end comes and all earth in tune rumbles and hums

The woman God is a spider

The woman God is a Granny who sits and spins storytime
The woman God glows phosphorus at night, a book laying on her lap. All those words her poor eyes recognize. Hard ones and soft, secrets you get held in the pinch of her knees: secrets that thrill, secrets that break, one secrecy the North wind makes music of

—the woman God is a Granny—

in the dark asthmatic hours when book and you and she are one single muttering of song until the end comes and all dust belongs to you

The woman God Mother hum
The Rail

You don't rest your full weight on it.  
The porch rail might not be a real rail. 
All dark country surfaces project 
multiples, especially by moonlight: 
no staircase has a secure last step, 
the limp garden hose is a snake trap, 
and a cobweb hangs where no one hung 
her bright masterpiece of air and silk.

Why are no human companions here? 
They are here, are rails without porches. 
They splinter into your hands and snag 
your shirtsleeves and break off and attack 
you invisibly through the fabric: 
fragile bloodlines and wooden voices.

Timor Mortis

They're so gone! Not even their pictures, 
the nausea of family albums, 
can recall their voices, nor rose petals 
in dry bibles and dictionaries, 
the soft smiles of their experience. 
This night the bell clapper in your throat 
dangles mucus, no one rings, the cat's 
thud on the backporch boards sounds crippled.

Who comes to your bed to be consoled? 
Who comes to you to be consoler? 
You cut the thistle heads in the long grass, 
cut the foxtails, cut down the wild berries. 
Juice and thorns of thistle cling to you. 
Where have they gotten to, the dark leaders?
Kin

The rain done, in the lifting fog
among the jays, among the rabbits,
they rise on downslopes out of their adobe hatches,
shoulders straight, hands closed in leaping fists,
thick braids to the small of the back
•

Your shovel cracked the earth overlay,
plummeting into a cache of acorns,
and gravesites opened their pottery faces
by bones worn wise and porous as sea glass, tide smells,
mother-of-pearl, clam shells
•

They will not turn to you their vacant expressions
or let you listen or let you smoke their weed
for visions, but they let you follow them,
your ankles turned slightly in,
the balls of your feet vibrant, dancing
•

The cove is close: the dune grasses
beaten down like wet fur, soon have your gentle legs
bleeding; the waves are still by the sea stacks
and in procession, they and you enter
washing the blood touches clean
•

In the trilling bubbles of fish breath,
the sudden black charge of seals where the soft surf
speaks to you in muscles like your own muscles,
pulsing: nothing flees you or them:
you have swum waves before, but none like these
•

Nor have you ever belonged anywhere as much,
nor have you sung so well, nor beaten
your breath out through the slotted skin, nor rioted
as much, been as true or simple, and the path
out of the sea is a tunnel again
Miriam

A woman who sleeps alone
—having driven back from work after dark,
before moonrise, before the night rain
washes the porch—
talks to the dog, lets the kitchen cat
eat at the sink, turns on
the tape that yesterday turned itself off,
takes her own bowl to her bedroom and eats.
All her life is a measurement.
That she occupies only half
of the blankets and the pillows and sheets
could be seen by herself—and has been seen—
as a loss, could be read
as loneliness, the early warning that her death
sits preparing her date
in breasts or abdomen or lungs,
but that’s not what she usually sees.
She hears what she hears, sees what she sees.
Her life is a measurement.
It trolls a long line for her and it waits.
The crowds in her bed, vaporous,
are her friends and speak one or more
of her many names, measuring how her histories
stretch from this sunlit shelf
to the sunless darkness where her last form
slides in the silt there: a fish,
a jaw low-slung, fins as thick as feet.
All of her sleep is a dream.
Loveletter

while she smelling of the sea and while she like a small bird beats her short wings in the mud pool that the road cups, a tin mirror to cloud cover, in which snow flowers gather, and while she holding to her damp face your love letter, reading what it says about love, love, the blunt helicopter from the Alma Bridge Forestry Fire Station on Highway 17 grinds over at 100 feet shocking the mud bird into the willows and the loud mate of the scrub jay into the prune thickets where it makes a dark knob and winces

this is the winter palette on which she grinds and mixes your love's refusal, love, in pigments of hard afternoon she spreads with a full brush over the bareroot roses in pots on the deck, wipes over the frail caterpillar bloom of willows, and as root tentacles grow brittle and break says no she will not love you back she will not love you as the sky thickens for she has run out of love and is a blanket thief who likes her rumpled bed, and will nestle grief and suckle it, not generate any more grief to feed

that when she pulls the waxed bowstring back to her neck she will not release the hard shaft of love but will let her back break first: kinks and knots of snow, she says, weigh on the skylight for the snowmoon to yellow them as she lives the planet life and if discreet blood yet beat in the hole of her heart she will pour and drink it down bittersweet is the cup of her cowardice while stormwinds fell the powerlines in the yard of her house, generators kick on, she turns the blood lamp to off, and she sleeps
Trio

Brittle and black by the shower stall
the startling cricket stands out
like a locomotive in the snow.

The marigolds of the shower drape
sag over the cricket knees and neck
in slabs of polyester.

And I, half-done after the one
flush doesn’t flush it, rise by degrees
to interpose my defending feet

between the cricket and the cat
that strums its idle on the damp bath mat
in hunger and allergens.

Hard it is, Comrades, to field intact
with a wad of rustling toilet paper
an Olympic cricket in its leap.

Night, in your armor through which poke
the eyebeams of your constellations:
Hear and record

the soprano cricket in November grass,
the carnivore drone of baritone, the light
alto of the rescuer.
Winter's Real

From condominiums to tin trailers
all mattresses agree in whines and creaks
that Winter is, and want the percussive
lovers’ lips and sighs, their hips and knees
beating up the bodies’ temperatures
to tropic heights, rivulets, beach grasses
slashing the hot backs, rinsing rib cages,
soaking the dark hairlines with clear juices,
till out of the wet tangles of bedclothes
rises radioactive one of each
 parched pair to fill the streaked bathroom glasses
with the soft water of absolute youth.
They drink like they drank on Mount Olympus.
Nothing their mirrors say makes love less new.
Loma Prieta

The house stood as a metaphor
for love and food, and when it shook,
out gusted a perfume of Ovaltine
and holiday turkeys and bacon rinds,
and the vomit of sick children on the stair,
and the wool of bygone dogs, and the dust
of mouse carcasses, and the sweat
of adult sex—cries choked into pillowslips,
legs' drench under counterpanes

The house stood as a metaphor
for food stamps and custody cases and day care,
for a sleeping princess and a prince's kiss,
for knights who wheelied mountain trails,
who rocked to their winter dreams
rolled in raggedy sleeping bags,
boys whose underworld of memory
glows with the long grasses of summer fields
where the same house still lives and strains

No condemnation notices can turn that air
city air, no fires or slides or droughts
or the wrench of leaving or being left
can break the spine that remakes itself
in the perfect realm where houses never fail,
world where each child is the golden one,
world nothing the earth does can shake
But she wakes to it like a dog, ridgeback.  
The blood messages hit the spine,  
the spine speaks: her twitch  
a quiet howl in the flesh preview  
of aftershock and then aftershock.  
Under the counterpane her bare knees grind.  
She turns on her back and spreads her limbs  
like the star body of Leonardo:

    the lion mane

in peaked locks, the eyes aglare  
against the earth jounce, the roar  
the timbers make; and the room moves  
in the cramped darkness where the autumn night  
spends itself, bends and cracks  
the slabs, the doors, the walls off plumb.  
Dust devils roll more smelled than seen,  
and under her the palm of a hand, wide and flat,  
adjusts itself to her quaking back.  
The lips that touch her ear are breaking waves.

Underneath are the everlasting arms
Vernal Equinox

Soundness everywhere you look: a solid, sound moon shard sinking its newness, earthglow, behind the shattered willow, the willow trunk lying in a hot hover just above the dark ground. The well sinking its solid, sound steel gun barrel down through shale and granite into the ground core that’s sound and firm, though up through the earth layers come Sierra snowmelt and the strong, sound breath of broken rocks, and the huffing spaces between rocks where quartz crystals form around dense water drops.

Yet when you walk on it, it all moves underfoot. the snakes make sluices with their flat coils through the mud tiers, they make toboggan runs down the mud banks and slide them, quiet snakes with no humor in their faces, doing what children do—or did—with shouts on chill afternoons. The birds fall through the air: no soundness at all about the bird air, crackling with calls and arguments. The birds have plucked the combed dog fur knots from the grass to make nest mattresses out of, for their naked eggs.

God being a network weather person sees all of this from an astronaut’s viewpoint: God travels via satellite and being blind to detail, figures nothing’s lost or everything is, over the earth rim, where beams lose themselves, where soundness is fluid, and fluid’s rock. Out of God’s sight, birds fill the soft or solid air, and round black bees gossip like radio short waves and eat up the wasp swarms, snipping their long brown legs.

You’re either a part of all this or else you’re a mind or weather station, and you can’t decide which. If you’re God, you’re loneliness and false report. If not, you have blessed circumference and sound and buzz and water glittering in your rock, a snake slide to slide, a nest to twine, fur and a death to die. You decide to be a sound and fragile life that quickens and slakes its thirst, neither significant nor whole.
Mountian Woman

A sense of place settles where her nose ages in moles and dots. Locale caps her head in redwood, greenwood, moss, mists her with rain that held in air and then dropped. Place is her mouth and sob. Blanched face is place to live in a while yet, breathe salt. Surely loss will accompany her all of her days, bone deep, loss that took and still takes her sleep away, her mind rest, self-love, self­-steadiness. But place in her is deep root: hand, brain, nerve, tooth. Planted, she will spill upwards in fern fronds, tight buds and fists. Overhead, winter and summer activity will move, and she remain planted in true place.
Beatitudes

1 Blessed are those who climb the wood.
2 Blessed are those who give their flesh for food for they shall eat.
3 Blessed are those who cough all night, yellow and green, for they shall sleep in air and drink mountain wind.
4 Blessed are those who mistake a splinter for a fin, who replace the white spider in the shattered web, who rewrap the cocoon.
5 Blessed are you when the mosquito walks over your lip, over your slumped chest, your soft thighs, and you lie still.
6 Blessed are you when the earth pit molds itself to you, to fit your present shoulders and legs, when the hard dirt clods fall, broken by human hands, and darkness resumes.
7 Blessed, when to the dust community you add your weight or your lightness, something your cheek said, half a joke, half a memory your singular mind produced out of a couple hours' pain, some solitude.
8 Blessed are you to be found again, in whatever shape.
   The dampness thickens: practically a river, that moves when you move along its gesture—you, its thickening.
   She is the mother of gifts, who takes. All cells, all milk, multiples of breasts, flakes and grime of her attentiveness, smiling your smile, on her cheeks your short tears.
9 Blessed are the generous in defeat, blessed are the weak.
The Sixth Sense

It's at night you hear it but not always:
Conditions have to be right: Your ear flaps
Turned cosy down, no accidental bugs
That in the failing bliss of oxygen
Buzz in the passages of cartilege,
And your antenna turning like a dish
pulling it all down (BIS):
Then you get to hear one heart bump and thump

And the hindlegs of the world ripping space apart:
Rocks and clods and dust in a fine Chinese
Display Apocalypse: A stupid bark
That passes for laughter, a collapse of beds
Wherein all possible companions sink
Until again merciful dream resumes.
Aftershook

The neighbor said: "I don't pull away, I fall, I lie down harder."

Neither could the contents of her house. Gravity flung the North wall of the kitchen to the South floor. The contents fell and lay down harder.

She said: "It's like when I was three and my Dad threw me into the cove water where the low tide is still high on the rocks, and said not to fight it. To float: toes up, knees apart. To ride it."

The cat had lain soft and small in the clothes hamper afloat in the towels, bouncing off the wicker. Wood was the same, had a cat's spine, a cat's temper.

"Otherwise you'll be afraid all the time. But I don't think at our age you can learn it. Don't be sad, no one's green at sixty who wasn't green at six."

At dawn the friendly epicenter woke and yawned. You knew that down the hill, your neighbor rocked on her coverlets while the shards fell, being brittle. Rocked with the epicenter. She called:

"The secret, Dear, is knowing your mother. You don't want to ask her, Am I your child? You want to reach into her armpits and hold your mouth on her lips and say, Mother, Grandmother."
Time for a Showing

Lewis Horne

Evie knew well the sorrows of her brother Phile, clouding her mind as they did often enough. But often enough she had her own tribulations to stare down, her sky no more clear than any normal human being could expect a sky to be. No everlasting blue for her. Oh, no.

The day of her showing, though, was not a day of tribulations, only a day of rushing and running as though she were a newspaper the wind blew. Back and forth, back and forth. But it was also a day—though she didn't expect it when that day began—that Phile's sorrows swelled for her with the freshest of pain.

It took six trips, buzzing in her Volkswagen from her Rosewood Villa apartment to the Carraway Gallery on the river. Her brother's Peugeot would have cut them to four, maybe three. But Phile wouldn't let anybody drive the polished white station wagon except himself, pale and starchy at the wheel. He'd have helped load and unload her paintings. But she hadn't had the stamina to make claims on his skinny stride and strength. Her underarms were sopping, her dress like adhesive. If she didn't catch her death going from outdoor heat to indoor chill—well, Evie, all fools have their angels, Phile liked to say.

Even so, she could have called him, not knowing yet what news he had to break her composure with. Wasn't he always there when she needed him, her baby brother, still selling for New York Life but only enough to make his "retirement" livable? He would scold her this afternoon when she stopped for late lunch, exasperated she hadn't asked for help. But as she scrubbed one of her rags across her forehead and around her neck and felt the ends of her clipped hair bunched with damp, she called herself wise. Today, even a sigh raised sweat. Think of Phile immaculate in coat and tie, in pajamas and robe, in gardening shirt and trousers. Even, she had no doubt, in his underwear. He'd be much happier listening to his records, some so old you could barely hear Tetrazzinni or Melba or Ruffo through the crackle and rasp.

"Landscape Paintings by Eve Holbrook."
There they were, her paintings, stacked against the walls upon which they were to be hung and, if all the right friends came, admired. Bare walls now. A bare room. Jane Clayton-Osborne sat down and cried at her first showing, she’d said. How could she ever manage to hang them? Space like you never saw! she’d told Eve. She’d collapsed in the middle of this very floor, her work in piles around her, she said, and cried.

Well, Eve wouldn’t cry, though any television oldie pulled tears like a bunny out of a hat. Here was one of her earliest she’d chosen to show. “Do the woodline around the lake.” So the instructor had instructed. Eve had put in the trunks. You knew where the water began. The rest in the class swept blobs of color across the canvas. Herself she preferred to see the trunks. Her manifesto: let me see the trunks!

Eve was 56, Phile 53. Since retiring from teaching with her 25 years in Grade 9 math and algebra at Rolly Haymore High School, she’d gotten fatter. Not fat, which she was already, but fatter. From the time she started teaching she wore muumuus, though she didn’t know that was what they were called till they came in style for a time in the early 1960s. Tent-lady, the kids called her as she billowed down the hall. Hot weather, cold weather—tent-lady.

She had four brothers like pine trees. She was the berry bush, the fern, as they lifted toward the sky above her.

She found a stepladder. Glass and frame made some of her paintings heavy. She should have been a miniaturist like Jane Clayton-Osborne. But Jane stretched ceilingward. She gazed across the tops of heads the way Eve’s brothers did. Jane could narrow in by choice. But if you come from a farm with brothers like pine trees, you wanted to see the forest line, not narrow in. She’d looked at the moss since before she stopped believing in fairies, and she was tired of it.

Her father showed her the piglets at the teats of the old sow. She rolled with Phile under the rugs that Pop and Momma pulled across the stubble to clean. She polished her Sunday shoes with blacking from the woodstove. She wanted the woodline and she wanted the trunks.

She stood back to survey. She might not win prizes like at 4H. In one of her summer classes, held among the woods and mountains, she’d wanted to paint the ocean for its mood. “You ever lived near the ocean?” the instructor cried. “No.” “You ever been on the ocean?” “No.” “Was your father a sea captain?” “No.” “Did he ever see the ocean?” “No.” “Then why—” throwing out his hairy arms— “do you want to paint the ocean?”

So she had lakes and woods, fields and barns, cows, gardens, and ponds.

Might as well instruct her to cast her brush over the sprawl of empty desks after a day in the classroom. Who’d ever catch a lifetime of
squirming kids? The chalkdust on the blackboard? Her desktop creaking with papers?

"Painting classes!” Phile had said. “I should think you’d want to rest. What’s wrong with staying at home?”

Nothing, she would not say, if you were like Phile. Look at his name. Philemon. What could Pop and Momma have been thinking? Shorten it to Phile. Phile of New York Life. Then if you were crude enough, it became ‘vile.’ Poor boy. ‘You vile thing.’ ‘Here, Vile, come boy.’ ‘Don’t be so vile.’ And if it was Marilyn—no telling in the passions of love what combinations that woman would come up with. Verbal combinations, that is, though the other kind might strain an imagination given to blush.

“You know your problem?” she told her brother. “It’s that Marilyn.” Merry Lynne she called herself to anybody’s face. But Eve had refused the made-over moniker. She wouldn’t let it off her tongue, whatever Phile in his immaculate ranch-style said. “You turn around and look her in the eye. ‘You’re a tramp,’ tell her. ‘You weren’t worth my valuable time,’ tell her. ‘I got better things to do.’ Admit it, Phile, you made a mistake marrying a tramp. Don’t be proud. ‘I’m a fool,’ tell yourself.”

“That was 20 years ago.”

“Twenty years. Twenty days. Don’t let a rotten peach stain.”

If she’d told him once, she’d told him enough times that the whole business should by now be laundered out of his system. Didn’t he know about laundry and scrubbing floors and walls and washing dishes? Not just the last 20 years since Marilyn had gathered up her three Persian cats and her Russian mink coat and driven away to California in the 1963 Lincoln Continental she’d put Phile in hock for. For five years before that she’d been so frightened of nicking her manicure that she did no scrubbing after she cornered him with her saber-tooth smile. What do they say now? The word? A “wimp.” Yes, dear; no, dear. Her little brother like a pine tree—and a wimp. All in the same breath.

Even with air-conditioning in Carraway Gallery, she dripped. Among her streams and meadows and woods, she dripped.

With Phile, the sting still pained. Sorrow. From Marilyn’s sting he was one big swelling. He was a man who needed children, grandchildren. Something more than an eccentric tent-lady who was his sister and embarrassed him. Joan and Renata singing Christmas carols in stereophonic sound—that was beautiful, heavenly. But those pale voices—Galli-Curci and Lehmann and old Enrico himself—coming through an electrical storm, it sometimes seemed. Poor Phile. Two people it takes to tango. A good man and a good woman. Not a sad man and a silly sister.

“Yellow!” he cried. “Your car’s yellow! Who did that?”
"Larry Ludachowska. One of my old students. He’s starting his own shop, and I wanted to help him out."

“You want to be a canary? Or is it a buttercup? You want people to think buttercup? With red pinstripes besides?”

“You don’t have to ride in my little beetle.”

“Ha!” he said. “Ha!”

And opened the door to his ranch-style for her.

So that was over. Finished like a harvest. Quick in the flourish, Phile would leave her be. When she stopped in the drive alongside the smooth nap of the lawn and the color exploding from his flower beds the other side of her car—marigolds and snapdragons and daisies and poppies and anything else that might have spilled through the Garden of Eden with all the profusion controlled the way a would-be dictator like Phile would have it, benevolent of course but dictating all the same to beat the band—when she turned off the key, she knew he’d plant both slippers on the outdoors carpet of his porch and, thin hands on thin hips, read out the act of riot.

As she answered, she unstuck her dress from her skin, wiped her forehead and neck with a soggy Kleenex, and walked—as tall as his Adam’s apple—into his air-conditioned living room. With dignity. She had no difficulty with Phile in holding her aplomb high.

Tie and shirt. You didn’t invite a guest for a light lunch in Phile’s house, not even your tent of a sister, without a tie and shirt.

“You got your lawn chairs put away?” she said. “There’s a cloud lighting up like machineguns in the west.”

“You think I don’t hear the thunder?”

“With Enrico or Luciano? It’s not that close yet.”

“But Evie,” he said as she dropped at his kitchen table, “Why yellow? I’ll serve on the sunporch. ‘There goes Evie Holbrook,’ they’ll say. ‘Like a buttercup.’”

“So they notice me. I like to be noticed.”

He shook his head. He even smiled. He was a good man, this Phile. He told her to sit with the plants and he’d bring lunch. She looked like she’d been through a hanging, he said. “You should have let me help.”

“Be sure you appear tonight.”

“Even in your buttercup,” he promised.

She heard thunder in the distance. A good sound in the heat. No music.

“Either you listen or you talk. No in-between stuff.” Christmas-time was listening time for her. In her “studio,” it was different. She liked music to paint to.

Tall glasses of ice water with a lemon slice in each. Sliced tomatoes with cottage cheese on crisp lettuce with sunflower seeds sprinkled over. Some cold roast beef and some cheese.

“I tell you, Phile,” she said, “if I had to pick a favorite brother—”
“Don’t,” he said.
In his white shirt and tie, he said a blessing—bless him. “And be with Evie tonight at her opening,” he prayed. She knew her favorite brother.
There was Ammon like a pine tree and looking as fierce as an Old Testament prophet, those deep sockets burning with the Holbrook gray-blue eyes and scarcely a twitch of a smile to his pinched mouth. He never said much, though—70 years old if a day—which was just as well because with his adenoid problem the poor man had the same voice he did as a child. Like his windpipe was pinched.
Then Virgil left home like the maverick, even renegade, he was with his one hundred dollar bill handed him for managing to get a high school diploma, and zigzagged to Florida where he made thousands, maybe millions, developing in real estate—and maybe other things besides sand and orange trees that shouldn’t be looked into and she didn’t want to think about. While Wally—down to earth with a name, finally, Momma and Pop!—had just retired from teaching geology at the University of Arizona. For six months of the year, he argued with Ammon who pulled a trailerhouse south for the winter. Then when Ammon pulled it back north so Sheryl and he could keep an eye on how their boy was running the family farm, Wally wrote confession stories like you’d never believe could happen.
Those were her brothers that she was a berry bush among. Phile was tallest and straightest of the lot. He’d even modeled for her once, in overalls, standing on a bucket so she could get the perspective she wanted. And her sarcastic simpleton art instructor? “Is your brother a ghost?”
“No.” “Why is he levitating then?”
Levitating on a bucket? she wanted to say.
As for the berry bush, she could paint that with her eyes blindfolded—if she cared about self-portraits. Cheeks forthright and cheery like flower petals. Face aglow with scarcely a wrinkle in the plumpness. Like a trusting child. Didn’t people expect fatness to be happy? Jolly? So be it if that’s the way she looked—fresh-eyed and blonde with a good hair rinse—whatever she felt sometimes inside.
“Merry Lynne called,” he said. The sorrow.
Then he stuffed his mouth with lettuce and chewed and chewed while she nearly choked on her ice water with the lemon slice in it. She saw lightning. Thunder boomed closer. She had to wait till he swallowed which he was slow to do. His eyes were deepset like the other pine trees. Twenty years and he still said it the same, probably saw her the same—not plain “Marilyn” but “Merry Lynne” the cheerleader and Miss Idaho and Miss Princess hersel. Miss Floozie, too, if you wanted to know it with the truckers stopping in town—and a somebody’s husband with New York Life who was supposed to be a friend of Phile’s—and a quarterback at the University of Idaho in Moscow. And what about the time Phile
borrowed money so she could go see her dying Aunt Mae in Sacramento and Virgil, her own brother-in-law, saw her checking into a Nevada dude ranch with her quarterback hero? "Merry Lynne called." The news stunned her.

"She just terminated a long relationship with an engineer working in Peru, she told me."

"A long relationship."

"It was a difficult relationship," he said. "She's now in a very fragile space."

"A fragile space."

"She has multiple sclerosis."

He was an angel.

"She's already using a cane."

An angel.

Now she chewed lettuce, taking her time. Twenty years, she thought, with her Persian cats and Russian mink and Lincoln Continental.

As though he read her thoughts, Phile said, "She has kept in touch. Not very often. But it isn't a bolt like out of the blue the way it sounds. I mentioned it to Wally whenever she called."

"Wally?"

"I knew it would upset you, Evie. You and Merry Lynne could never meet eye to eye. You and Ammon felt the same way about her."

She slumped in the wicker chair. Trying to make herself small so she wouldn't break through, she slumped.

"She could come to your showing. Oh, no, Evie, she's not here now. But you'll be on for three weeks. You'll find you got lots in common, I'm sure. She'd like your showing. I always felt that Merry Lynne had an artistic personality. And after 20 years, who knows what might—""

"Miracles," she said.

"Yes, except it wouldn't have to be a miracle. It's 20 years. You might—you've changed, too, Evie."

"I should hope."

Her cottage cheese and tomato were half gone. The remains looked dismal. Drops of rain hit the windows.

"So you'll marry her again," she said. Phile wasn't the sort for cohabiting, not in his ranch-style.

"We weren't ever unmarried."

"Oh, Phile, what was all that with lawyers and agreements and papers—?"

He repeated, "Evie, we weren't ever unmarried. But that doesn't mean—not necessarily—that we'll be like we were before. I'm not so big a fool as you always tell yourself."

"You think Marilyn—Merry Lynne is going to live here with the likes of Renata and Frederica and—who's the big one?—Kirsten? She rides a dif-
different wave, believe me. Married or unmarried."

"It's 20 years, Evie."

"Twenty years, 20 days. You know your problem, Phile? You never went on a mission. Ammon—he went and baptized people in Tennessee. Virgil—well, he had his own mission of dollars and cents and made his own conversions. Wally was in Mexico. You'd have made a tremendous missionary, Phile, if the Korean War hadn't forced the cutbacks. Why don't you go now? Tell Marilyn—Merry Lynne you're going on a Mormon mission. Tell her she can come along, too, if she wants."

Merry Lynne speaking for the church, bringing the word of God to the doorsteps. Eve knew the incongruity of what she spoke. And pushed all the harder.

"She never got baptized, Evie."

"Twenty years. Things change. You're going on a mission, tell her. If she wants to come, too, she gets baptized. Who knows, Phile? Maybe if I'd gone on a mission, maybe if I'd gotten some people under the water, I wouldn't do the nutty stuff I do now. You're right. A buttercup. What do I want to drive a buttercup around the city for? And as for this silly showing tonight—"

"Evie!" he cried. "You didn't roll up your windows!"

He bolted as a wall of rain hit the house, blotting out his green lawn and weeping birch. When he came back, he was soaked, all his six feet and three inches of straightness. His dark hair with its streaks of gray lay slicked like a raincap.

While he went to find dry clothes, Eve paced in her bare feet, having doffed her sneakers on entering. Merry Lynne. Here she was using the name. But what was making her way back to them like a sick wind but the very woman herself that by any name would smell as cheap? Did she still wear the same perfume that gave Eve hayfever to enter the house? And cane or no cane—oh my, but it was a terrible thing, not something to wish on anybody—would she sweep all gauze and net out of the bedroom even so at 10:30 in the a.m.? And cat hair—was there going to be cat hair so your clothes were next thing to pollinated from a hello-goodbye and nothing in between? There was lots she wanted to know. She stood on her toes to see the B shelf of records. Fidelio, Carmen, Albert Herring.

"You should have gone to Africa with Albert Schweitzer," she cried when Phile came back with a new white shirt and light blue summer trousers, his tie in perfect place. "You should have had children and grandchildren. Carloads of them. They'd enjoy your Peter Grimes and Pearl Fishers."

She saw the hurt clear to the bottom of his eyes. Thorns on the berry bush.

The rain rattled the rooftiles. She came to the window beside him and watched the water pour from the sky and sheets stream from the eaves.
Currents flowed in the street and her drenched yellow beetle looked like a pet left out of doors.

"Sell a policy to yourself." She had to lift her voice against the sound of the water. "You need a policy against the Merry Lynnes of the world."

Thunder jarred the floor.

He climbed on a stool to close a window. "Evie." He turned to her, speaking from the heights. "What you said—"

"Said when? I don't take back—"

"About your showing. And what you said to Wally about your not going on a mission because you wanted to get your degree and start teaching. And the way you are being now—"

"Anybody would do things different if they got a chance."

He stepped down. The blue rose in the sockets and his mouth let his teeth shine in a smile. "I'm proud of your showing, Evie."

The rain didn't last long. But it was sufficient to itself and what it did. The street in front of Phile's house rippled clear across. The gutters ran like irrigation ditches. Phile said he would come with her. According to the radio, water covered hubcaps downtown. The railroad underpass on Circle Drive was a swimming hole. Sewers backed into basements like something was chasing.

He had to put on a suit so he wouldn't shame her showing.

"You know your problem?" she cried when he returned in a gray summer seersucker. "Trust. How do you know the cane's for real? I believe it's real only when a bonafide doctor tells me."

"Evie—"

"You tell her, 'Before you come through my door, I want a bonafide affidavit from a bonafide doctor.'"

Phile offered to drive his Peugeot but acquiesced to the beetle, dripping in the drive. The flowers glistened. Some leaned as though they carried a weight. Petals strewed the ground.

"You should avoid Pawnee Avenue," he said. "The radio says—"

She chose her own way, window down a couple of inches. Merry Lynne would take over. How much for Phile's records? The noisier the grinding the more priceless, she suspected. Merry Lynne would know their value or she'd soon find out. Phile would acquiesce. To Merry Lynne he would acquiesce like an angel.

"You make her show you," she said.

"You keep going toward Pawnee, you'll never reach your apartment house."

When she saw kids canoeing on 18th, she decided it was her turn to acquiesce.

With Merry Lynne in the house, he hadn't a record, old or new. Only after she left. With all said and done, she couldn't say she regretted the
woman's absconding.

At her apartment, Phile waited for her to shower and dress, him picking up her clutter and her hustling her heels or he'd be getting out the vacuum. She found in her refrigerator the daisy corsage with a card from him.

"The caretaker let me in this morning," he explained, "while you were hanging."

"I could pick my favorite brother without two seconds to ponder."

"Don't," he said.

The flowers matched her yellow muumuu. Phile pinned them on and the tent-lady was ready. Smile so big that he bussed her pink cheek.

"Evie," he said, "it's not like she left and gave me nothing."

"You take her to a bonafide doctor all the same."

"I envied Wally in Mexico. But after I got out of the army, there was Merry Lynne. She was a risk, but everything is a risk. Even your showing is a risk."

"Even my showing."

His eyes darkened. "I knew more about the risk than you think. I knew Merry Lynne better than you think. I couldn't leave her and go on a mission."

Was he trying to levitate before her very eyes?

"She isn't heartless. She never was."

"And I'm no artist," she said. "I know."

So what if I do crazy things? she wanted to say. I got friends who will come to my showing, and I got old students who liked the tent-lady, let them chortle as they may, and they'll come, too. They'll say, Evie, you've done some lovely things here. And I'll smile and think, I know it. Because I have. Even if I never painted the ocean. But I won't ask them what lovely things. I won't expect from them the trunks because that would be too much to ask—even from friends.

"Evie, where do you think I first got my records?"

"You mean your Ezios and Enricos—?"

"She sent them to me. They were her father's."

But the truckdrivers, she wanted to say. Your insurance buddy. That quarterback hero from the University of Idaho in Moscow.

"Who's perfect?" he said. "Let me touch you if you are."

She looked enormous in her bedroom mirror, rosy-faced in her yellow dress, ballooning as if she could blow away with the winds of revelation.

He came to the bedroom door. "You've got your painting, Evie. And Merry Lynne—"

"She's got her cane," she cried desperately, wanting to add, lucky doll.

It took fancy maneuvering over the wet streets to reach the gallery.
They guided themselves from the announcements on the car radio. Even so, coming down Stratton, she saw a large pool at its intersection with 23rd.

"We'll take it, Phile," she said.

"No, Evie, not here!"

She barreled in. Water sprayed like wings to carry them through. Then the motor died. And they were floating, the wheels raised from the pavement. Three boys in swimming trunks paddling a nearby canoe pointed and haw-hawed as the nose of the car turned slowly like the needle of a broken compass to the west and then to the north. Lifted, she felt no control.

The boys left their canoe at the curb and waded over. They pushed the beetle across, the water starting to dampen the floorboards. She had to wait half an hour before it would start again. Floated right off the earth she had. Strange sensation. Cut loose and frightened. From her barns and fields and gardens, her ponds and woods. Everyone had needs. She needed her painting, Phile his records and—and—whatever it was. Even Merry Lynne. Sometimes you needed more than yourself, whatever the cost and whatever the pain, whatever the sorrow.

She couldn't get a free breath again until the motor caught and with Phile she was rolling on. Quick to her showing.
The Poet's Curse

Andy Roberts

Making jazz swing in
Seventeen syllables ain't
No square poet's job.
—Etheridge Knight

JAMISON Wordleby stopped his fork in midflight to his mouth, dropped it to his plate full of turkey and dressing, and dove headlong into his coat pockets, rummaging about wildly through his filthy size XXX Army Supply flight jacket for the chewed-up yellow stub of a pencil he knew was hidden in there, dumping his cup of hot coffee in the process into the lap of the man eating beside him.

"Hey man, what the!—." The little brittleboned black man jumped up, raising a knobby fist in anger. "I ought to . . ." He stopped. "Man, look at me when I'm talking to you!"

"What? . . . What's that? Did you say something?" Wordleby cut his eyes quickly to the angry little man at his elbow. "Just a minute. Be with you in a minute."

Cowhide our ranching forefathers
and protect our sibling sin nibbling
Carrot sticks of abandonment while
Shattered Ages die like wounded Beagles
in original streets of sin.
Sheath! Sheath! Transmogrify your swords and vivid minds
till truth bites razor-sharp and villainy
extinctifies upon the face of the earth
like the shattered ramface of various black rhinoceroses.

—on the back of a coffee-stained envelope.

"What? Say what?" said the black man, spitting in exasperation. "I be with you in a minute? Man, I ought to slap you!" He shook his bony fist. "I ought to be on you like a bad suit in a minute!" The little man's eyes were
livid—two bright dimes in a dead shoe leather face.

Wordleby smiled, he felt good—no matter that the man was mad, he'd get over it soon enough—Wordleby was happy, pleased with himself that he'd seized the opportunity and gotten a good start on his poem. He smiled, he knew he would sleep well tonight.

He hoped.
If it would leave him alone.
For once.

The Open Shelter was not the safest place to sleep. Lots of homeless felt that way. Wordleby too. It was dangerous.

They didn't trust each other much, the homeless, didn't place much faith in the warmth of human behavior, would rather take their chances on the streets by themselves (self-sufficient, looking out for number one) than to be cramped up in a wheezing, moaning room full of loonies.

Except on cold nights like this. On cold nights like this it was worth the risk. A bone-snapping, toe-freezing cold; the first of the hard frosts. Especially when it was getting so hard to build a fire anymore—the way the cops were, on the lookout all the time—since a couple of abandoned warehouses had gone up in flames and been blamed on the vagrants. That made it tougher.

Yeah, on nights like this one you could risk The Shelter. You got all the hot coffee you could drink and a night on a sour mattress, which wasn't too bad. But that goddamned TV, that goddamned everloving TV—didn't they ever turn that thing off? It ran night and day: the eleven o'clock news, "Alice," "Three's Company." Wordleby couldn't stand it.

He'd escape some nights to the post office. The self-service station was open 24 hours a day. It was heated and, best of all, deserted—most people didn't even know about it. He liked it all alone at night under the big marble-topped desk scribbling down poems on the backs of tax-return forms.

That was one of his places.

And he liked it behind DiPaolo's Seafood too, on nights when it wasn't too cold. He could build a little fire out of cardboard and sticks and warm his hands and smoke cigarettes and think. Behind the fishy-smelling dumpsters, hidden from the traffic by weeds. He'd scrounge for pop bottles in the morning and get a pack of Lucky Strikes and a Slim Jim. That was another place.

Yeah, it was risky at The Shelter—and Wordleby kept his bag close. He couldn't lose that. Two years of his life in that bag. That was what he was worried about most.

That and the Curse.

Because the Curse had dropped him like a hot potato from a six-figure Ad Man to a hobo in three years. When he first lost his job he didn't worry,
he could get another, educated man like himself, and he did.
And another.
And another.

But when he lost that job too he started to worry—no Madison Avenue future anymore. Word was out: Wordleby was unreliable, unprofessional, unproductive—he wasn’t turning anything out. But, oh yes—he was turning something out—the hotshot V.P.’s were wrong about that one.

He was turning plenty out. . . . and keeping it for himself.
All his best lines, his best concepts, painstakingly wrought into poems. Oh he was turning plenty out. Plenty of poems, that is. And getting accepted and published too.
He was happier now than he’d ever been before . . . going from job to job, getting fired, getting published, getting poorer, getting divorced.
Wordleby stepped down the ladder of success.

And still the Curse plagued him.
He couldn’t even hold a job as a laborer. Not even with Manpower: digging ditches, stopping with his shovel in mid-air to rummage through his pockets for a stub of pencil and scrap paper, seizing the inspiration with his feet in the mud, completing the problem and losing his job—exhilarated, drunk with the pleasure of life, love, and language.
He could hardly even cross the street anymore, without stopping, smack dab in the middle, cars whizzing past on both sides, to write—

"you’re swarthy, aren’t you."
on a cigarette pack, and rushing to the next lamppost to write—

"How about some more Toad-in-the-Hole, Jim?"

Somehow he got a job as a taxi cab driver. But he failed at that too—always late for fares, caught up in a web of emotion, trying to write while driving, running through red lights, working on the next line of his poem.
He totaled the taxi, and while coming to consciousness on his way to the hospital, strapped into a stretcher in the back of the ambulance, asked the medic for pencil and paper and wrote—

precious bodily fluids

—on the back of a vomit bag, the last line of the poem he was writing when his Checker Cab crossed the centerline into oncoming traffic.
Wordleby’s wounds healed, but he lost his job.
Cursed.
He tried to escape it with booze, and that worked for while, but now look at him: a bum, a derelict, reduced to writing on dirty napkins and the backs of cigarette packs. He couldn’t afford paper. He couldn’t even afford envelopes, and that’s why he had his bag—a Columbus Dispatch newspaper bag—the kind you slung over your shoulder, filled to the brim with two years of his life.

But tonight Wordleby was satisfied, he knew he would sleep well. If it would leave alone, that is.

But it didn’t.

He woke twice to write—

Amid the butchered looneys

and

Infected mothers infillette our burning words of waste spreading lunacy, advancing radical rejection theorem.

But Wordleby woke the next morning with his mind a blank. Precious blank.

He could almost enjoy the sounds of the man gagging behind him. He smiled and breathed in the aroma of pissed sheets. One hundred stinking men. A thick cloud of cigarette smoke. It wasn’t so bad. . . . sometimes. . . . If your mind was a blank. Precious nothing. Sweet nothing. But he better not push his luck. He got up and relieved himself and went to the table for breakfast.

Wordleby sat warming his cracked, weatherbeaten hands with his coffee and ignored the slurps of the others around him. His mind was still a blank, still on hold and he smiled. It hadn’t kicked in yet—the thought process. He’d usually be in the john by now, sitting cross-legged on the floor with the commode as a table to scribble his scraps of poems—the only safe place in The Shelter. If he wrote in the open they’d tease him: “Hey, Shakespeare,” “Attaboy, Hemingway”—quite a few of the derelicts were educated. It was the only safe place, the john, but he never had enough time—somebody was always banging on the door saying: “Come on, man, hurry up. I’m dyin’ out here!”

But today Wordleby sat with his coffee and smiled, sweetly lobotomized. Almost like a night of boozing, without the hangover. When asked, he passed the butter to a woman with no lips, her smile folding in on itself as she thanked him for his trouble. “No trouble,” said Wordleby. “No trouble at all.”

How true. Even his feet didn’t hurt. It always meant good weather if his bunions weren’t hurting. Because they’d scream like a bitch in the rain, that’s for sure. Wordleby cut flaps in his shoes to make room for his twisted toes. He hated doing that to a new pair, but no choice—even EEE
gave no relief.

He didn't have an appetite this early, usually, just a cup of joe and he'd be on his way. But he took a little bacon and a slice of white toast. Rules said you had to be out of The Shelter by 8 a.m.—fine with him.

He would wander the streets with his pencil in hand; visit the library where he'd wash his clothes once a week in the bathroom sink, standing naked while they dried over the register vent; or to White Castle to sit for an hour before noon, smoking butts and working his appetite up for a free lunch at the Macedonia Faith Mission.

8 a.m.: Wordleby drained the dregs from his coffee cup and stepped out into pale morning sun. Clear cold November—a good day for football. Wordleby stepped out, breaking his breath with the plow of his face. He felt young again, free of worry, his mind still a blank. Precious blank. He strode eagerly, whistling little tunes that popped into his head—"Camptown Races" and "Seventy Six Trombones." The weather was crisp. Bicentennial Park was covered in a thin film of ice—someone had turned the sprinkler system on by mistake. He'd catch hell for that, thought Wordleby; whoever it was, the mayor'd have his ass for sure.

He crunched through the ice-covered grounds of the park, past the arboretum and the Japanese gardens, over the bridge and the chill of the river. A pair of gloves would be nice, he thought, and wrapped his hands in the sleeves of his coat. His feet were cold too, ice and wind sneaked in through the flaps in his shoes.

He saw the library at the edge of the park and reconsidered—better not press his luck, better not get around books and wake up the thought, torture himself for hours over the use of "glimmering" or "glistening," "shimmering" or merely "shining." Wasn't it Mark Twain who said: "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning bug and lightning."? He was free now. Free from thought. He better not push it.

He walked on past the library to Big Boy and ordered bouillon for 60 cents.

And still no Curse.

For two hours Wordleby sat over a cup of cold bouillon and not an errant thought entered his mind. He even pushed it a bit, took a chance at reading the menu—but still nothing. Still nothing. Sweet nothing. Thank Jesus. He smiled, left a crumpled dollar bill for the waitress, and stepped outside.

It had warmed up quite a bit. Wordleby unzipped his jacket and turned left on Summit, past the Uniroyal factory and the CCC Brickworks and Columbus School for Wayward Girls, on past the Dairy Queen and Joe's Meat Market and Smith Brothers Fish. He walked slowly now. He took his time and, warmed by the sun, felt the poetic thoughts beginning to surface—random phrases, scraps of dialogue, old advertising slogans—
slowly rising up to the surface, as though, like a basking reptile’s, a giant coiled anaconda’s, his brain was slowly being brought back to life by the sun.

In a panic, he ducked quickly into the shade of an overhanging ledge and sat down, trembling. As though with a life of their own, Wordleby’s hands dug through his newspaper bag for a cigarette pack and his coat pockets for the yellow stub of pencil. The sounds and smells of city life floated in through his senses and out again, unused: the beep of a backing garbage truck, the stench of a diesel’s exhaust—he was losing touch with reality. It was back!

He shook it off and pushed himself to his feet, his old bones cracking in protest. He knew he had to make it fast, had to do something, to engage himself in something concrete, to talk to someone at least, or dig ditches or fling himself into an icy pond. He glanced east on Spring Street—it was only five blocks. He could make it. With a lunge, Wordleby started running, an ancient pathetic shamble, his shoe flaps flopping ridiculously and his coattails streaming behind, but at least his screaming joints and tendons kept him occupied with pain. He could fight it that way. He hoped.

His breath choked in his throat and his bile rose with each jarring stride. He felt muscles strain that hadn’t been used in years, but he made it—five city blocks to the Macedonia Faith Mission.

He was early, and collapsed in a heap on the sidewalk. Thank God there were others waiting. As soon as I can catch my breath I’ll—

“Hey, Shakespeare, what’s the hurry?” The big guy named Ronno ambled over. Six-foot-four, chunky, with a pink, almost adolescent looking, acne-scarred face, he shambled over to where Wordleby sat exhausted on the sidewalk. He wore a tan trenchcoat. A tissue was stuck in his left nostril to stop the bleeding. “What’s your rush, man?” he said.

“No rush. How you doing, Ronno?” Wordleby could only manage fragments, his breath gone. “Nice day, huh?”

“Ah man, you ain’t run in how long, professor?” Ronno rotated the tissue in his nostril, pulled it out to look at it and stuck it back in.

“No, I’m still in shape. I can still do it, you know,” said Wordleby, panting.

“Hey, look at my glasses, will you. They want to charge me 30 bucks down at State to fix ’em, but I can get it 28 down at Buckeye, that’s what Smitty told me. That’s where he goes.” The lenses were held to the frame with scotch tape.

“Let me see.” Wordleby reached for the glasses. He turned them over in his hands, squinted through the murky lenses. “I think you better get them fixed,” he said. “Why don’t you go to Buckeye then if they’re cheaper.”

“Maybe... I don’t know,” said Ronno.

“Why don’t you go tomorrow then,” said Wordleby, smiling, his
thoughts engaged.

"Yeah, well, maybe I will, professor."

The Mission bell struck twelve and Wordleby and Ronno went in.

They suffered through a sermon on the wages of sin and were served the usual refreshments: cheese sandwich, tomato soup, and black coffee. No sweets. A banana if they wanted it.

After the service they were allowed to smoke, idling in the courtyard, and got their weapons back at the doorcheck. Ronno had a nine-inch fish-skinning knife in a handtooled, Six Flags Over Georgia cowhide sheath. He strapped it to his waistband beneath the trenchcoat. An Indian got back a sharpened screwdriver.

"Take it easy, Ronno," said Wordleby. "Take care of those glasses now."

He stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"All right, professor. Ciao, babe."

Wordleby laughed. He had forgotten all about his thoughts of an hour ago. Before he knew it, he found himself on his way to the library. That's okay, he thought, I don't have to read anything. I can sit in the park by the fountain. Watch the girls go by and soak up the sun.

Birds were singing like mad in the treetops and Wordleby stopped for a moment to watch them. He sat down on a park bench and looked up at the high, cloudless sky. There won't be many more days like this, he thought. The sun warmed him and his thoughts drifted back, back before his advertising career, when he worked third shift at the water plant. He thought about the incident that caused him to quit. About a man with whom he shared first names. His eyes closed and his thoughts came into focus. His hands sought his pencil. An idea was taking form. He didn't fight it this time. Before he knew it, he had a napkin out and was writing:

Janison got his nose open. He was saying:

"I been rode hard and put up wet"—you know how he is. He was hot, man. Jesus! Wasn't nothing we could do. Next thing we know he's pulling his piece. Randy says, "Don't you ever point that at somebody unless you intend to use it." He pulled the trigger, man. Shit! Randy's face exploded like a dropped watermelon—Plup— all over the floor. I slipped on his blood heading for the door. Janison's standing there. Then, "Don't nobody move," he says. His eyes are crazy. Randy's still dripping on the floor, you can hear it. Somebody's crying, Chauncy, I think. Just scared shitless, man. It's like a church in there.
He finished and rewrote and revised it again. He still wasn’t satisfied, but it was dark and he couldn’t see. He shoved it into his newspaper bag and, thoughts swimming, trudged aimlessly back to The Shelter. Lost in thought, he missed by inches being flattened to the asphalt by a bus crossing Main. He didn’t even notice.

An hour and seven cigarettes later, Wordleby picked half-heartedly at his plate of corned beef and cabbage. He could take no interest in food. A million thoughts were gnawing at his mind, transporting him out of The Shelter, somewhere, anywhere, wherever his mind would wander. He twitched, a thought had entered, and he knocked over his water glass as he rose from the table, already reaching for his bag, a scrap of paper, his yellow stub of pencil. He stumbled blindly toward the bathroom door.

He flipped the lid on the toilet seat and sat down. Fumes rose from the pissey floor and from the subconscious of his own brain, rising up through the fog to the daylight, up through the cortex and to his eyes and then down again, through his shoulders and his arms to the tips of his fingers where his disbelieving eyes watched them scribble:

All you can hear is Chauncey crying. That, and Jamison wringing the pistol grip. We’re down on our knees. Quiet. Like a church in there. The sobbing’s driving me crazy.

Bang. Bang. Bang. “Goddammit, Shakespeare, get outta there!” “Shit!” Wordleby cursed and stuffed the scrap paper back into his bag. He glanced in the mirror and was shocked, his face was pale and sweaty, his hair a wild mess. He grabbed a stocking cap from his coat pocket and pulled it down over his ears.

It was Dave Catchins at the door, the longhaired Shelter cook. “What are you doin’ in there, man? There’s other folks here got to use it, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, go ahead.” Wordleby stumbled ahead in a sour mood to his mattress. He hated being interrupted. He couldn’t think out here in the hall, surrounded by people, his thoughts choked by cigarette smoke. Well, he could think, all right—and that was the trouble—he couldn’t shut off the thought, but yet it wouldn’t come clearly. He’d get something, and then reach for the pencil, and as soon as he’d try to write it, it would be gone. He needed privacy, any kind of isolation, if only a ¾ inch plywood door. God, how he wished he could shut it off. When a thought entered his mind he wished he could call the Brain Police and have the thing led away in handcuffs. But it would come back again, gnawing at his brain. Someone would ask him a question and 30 seconds later he would answer, “What?”

They thought he was crazy. “Hey, professor.” “Hey, Shakespeare.”

He lay down on his mattress and shut his eyes. If only he could sleep.
That would help. His unconscious dreams were no match for his waking ones, anyway. But the gagging, retching noises of the man behind him shot that idea down—Old Mojo, a three-pack-a-day Camel smoker. "Goddammit, why don't you give it up!" yelled Wordleby.

"Fuck you, Shakespeare," sputtered Mojo, between horrendous hacks and spits, "and your momma too."


He decided to try the TV room. Maybe the sheer volume of the thing would drive the thoughts from his mind. He took a seat in the back row between a punchdrunk ex-prizefighter and a lesbian gas station attendant. The show was called "Facts of Life." Blair, a healthy blond, had just been thrown into jail for breaking and entering. Disgusted, Wordleby zipped up his jacket and headed for the door.

He needed a change of pace, a new way of looking at things, anything to clear his cluttered mind. It seemed his thoughts lately were as convoluted as his twisted toes—he needed to cut flaps in his brain and let the cold air whistle through, rinse it of all mad, demented ideas and start out fresh again with a new lease on life. He hunched his shoulders in his flight jacket and made for the post office, but then changed his mind. DiPaolo's was closer.

He found a good spot behind the dumpsters, lit a fire, and sat down on a concrete block, whittling a piece of wood. He tried to will his mind a blank but it wouldn't die, he could feel it working, wheels and levers whirring, but smoothly, with a sense of order, not some frantic engine rushing out of control. For once in his life he felt his thoughts in order, not jumbled up, not just scraps of nothing. These thoughts were concrete, they had a base. This was something new. This was no Curse. Suddenly, he lay down his knife and reached for his newspaper bag. There was no torment now, no wavering, he knew what he wanted. He plunged into his bag and drew out a reasonably clean sheet of paper. At its head he wrote:

BEGINNINGS

He chewed on his pencil, then continued on without a pause.

Every day's a new beginning
reservoir of hope refilled
To scale the height of soul's ambition
To start out fresh, renewed, alive!
And die each night, hopes felled asunder,
torn and flaved by life's demands
But don't give up! Pray not despair
For life renews again tomorrow
and over failure hope prevails.

He looked at it happily. Hell, it's good, he thought. He smiled and let out a hoot of joy. Maybe there was hope after all.
Mary Delphine Troy

Betsy Peters was talking to her current lover, the one she called Cream Puff. He wore a blue on blue aloha shirt opened to the fourth button, and when he leaned forward, his forearms, covered thickly with black hair, rested on the small round table. He held his glass of scotch and water with both hands and spoke quickly as if to interrupt. "I mean it, though. I want to settle down. I'm ready."

She drained her can of Fosters Lager and leaned against the flowered back cushion of the rattan chair. "So, go on. Settle down. Find some nice girl and do it. Just don't expect it to be the answer, the way to a fuller life." She signaled the waiter with a wave, and when he arrived, ordered a Kirin. As a member of the Master Beer Drinkers Club at the Island Paradise Pub, she was working her way through every one of their 103 brands, domestics and imports. She had 15 to go before her initials would be carved into a pewter mug which would hang in perpetuity over the bar for her use. "The secret to a fuller life, Cream Puff, is not to quit." She smiled, picturing herself as a woman of great wisdom, giving enigmatic but valuable advice.

When she offered to buy him another drink, something besides the scotch he had been nursing all evening, he declined. "You really ought to join the beer club," she said. "After you settle down, I could come in here, see a mug with C.P. on it, and remember you. When I get to be really old, not that I'm not old now of course, but when I'm really old, I'll probably be a confirmed barfly. Every now and then, I'll lift my head from the bar and tell the poor soul next to me about my lost love." Maybe not love, but certainly lost. The losing was already under way.

"No one will care," he said. "Not about a man named Cream Puff."

"I'll say you were the love of my life, the one who got away, the one who preferred a wife and kids and a station wagon filled with sand buckets, water wings, and Kool-Aid." When the waiter set the bottle of beer before her—she had vowed to drink only from the cans or bottles until she got her mug—she reminded him to check the Kirin off on her card, and turned back to Cream Puff. "They'll know, all the other barflies who will
only half listen, that I'm only farting. It's all farting. I sit here trying to
drink every beer ever made, or up on my mountain, or whatever, and say,
'The world is thus and so. Life is like such and such.' You say, 'Oh yes, isn't
it just!' or 'No, it's more like something else.' We talk around until we have
it all figured out, and we usually mean it when we say it. Or we think we
mean it." It defeated the purpose, she told herself, to be saddened by his
leaving. The purpose, after all, was pleasure, and she had always known
he would leave. "Verbal farting."

She called him Cream Puff because they had met, more than a year ago
now, at the T. Komoda store and bakery in Makawao, Maui. She was vaca-
tioning then with her son, Paul, who was living with her because his wife
had kicked him out again. While they waited in line to buy cream puffs,
Komoda's speciality, a dark-haired young man entered, dressed only in
running shorts, and said to no one in particular, "I can't stand to wait in
lines." His sweaty thighs reminded her of a picture she had seen once of
undersea cables without their protective sleeves—thick, strong strands
intertwined, "Wait outside," she said. "I'll bring you some."

Later the three of them leaned up against the shady side of Komoda's,
against the dirty white-painted wood, and ate two cream puffs a piece. He
said his name was Jack, he was staying at the Kula Lodge with a woman
who liked to sleep late, and he had run down to Makawao to kill time. She
used her napkin to wipe a dot of cream from the corner of his lips,
dabbing gently. Then, with Paul's frown and heavy sighs providing the
background, she described the view from her home on Tantalus, a moun-
tain overlooking Honolulu—"much better than what you see from
Kula"—adding that she never slept late. And though that last part did not
matter as he always dressed quickly in the dark and let himself out, that
was the beginning of what she liked to call their Friday night trysts. Only
on Fridays was his stipulation, and she never asked why, preferring to
imagine herself as a respite, a relief from the cute young things that filled
the rest of his week.

"If it's all farting," he said, "what's the point of discussion? What's the
point of analyzing my life or yours?"

"It's great fun," she said. "Don't you find it tremendously
entertaining?"

"Still," he said. "I'm 35. I'm beginning to have a settle-down urge."

"By all means, follow it. My advice is always follow the urge." That was
one of the many parts of her Paul couldn't, wouldn't accept. He com-
plained about his embarrassment every time she took a new lover, a
young lover. "I know why you do it," he would say. "It's to make yourself
feel younger." "Isn't amateur psychology a marvel," she would answer. "I
thought I did it for fun." But she knew he was right in a way, and it was not
just young she wanted to feel, but different, different from other women
her age. Besides, older men were too lazy to be good lovers.

Cream Puff finished his scotch and set the glass down. "I may let you
She ordered a margarita for him and a Primo for herself. When the drinks arrived, she toasted him with the blue and gold can. "I'll miss you," she said. But when she looked at him, as so often happened, her eyes were drawn to the half carat diamond—flawless, the salesman had assured her and had charged her accordingly—a gift that sparkled in his right ear. Well, money was just money, just something to spend, and she liked it that even though he never asked for gifts, he accepted them, always with grace, as if they were his due.

He licked the salt from the rim of his glass, all the way around. "Can I stay with you tonight?"

"No." She knew he only asked because he felt he should, knew he considered his nocturnal descents from the mountain one way of establishing bounds, setting limits. "You snore." And perhaps it was for the best; in the mornings, her eyes were puffy and the cross-hatched lines above her upper lip seemed more pronounced.

The following morning she was awakened early when Mortimer, her gray tom cat, jumped on her chest. "Scat, you old fool," she said, pushing him off and on top of a sterling silver porriger lying next to her on the bed and containing the crusted remains of canned corned beef hash, last night's comfort food after Cream Puff left. Then, when rolling over to sit up, she felt a sharp pain in her right shoulder and stopped in mid-action. She lay back flat and waited until the pain was gone before rotating the shoulder slowly, gingerly. Still no pain. It would be a mild case, she thought, but she would take an Aspirin or two to be safe. When she had had her first attack of bursitis a year ago, she had complained to the doctor. "I don't want an old person's disease," she had said, and he had answered her, humorlessly she thought at the time, that bursitis was not an old person's disease and that she wasn't old anyway. "Sure," she had said. "Fifty-nine is middle age."

She walked carefully now to the bathroom, trying not to think of the pain she hoped would not return, trying not to think the word pain. At its worst, it reminded her of the menstrual cramps, at once sharp and dull, she used to get before Paul was born. Well, that part of her life was over, but it didn't seem fair just to have exchanged one pain for another.

The mirror on her medicine cabinet was half blackened with mildew, but she no longer noticed. She had been forced to accept dampness and its side effects long ago when Ben and she married and moved to the mountain, a mountain that seemed to catch every cloud blown over the Pacific. Ben used to say that it didn't matter if the Honolulu City and County water lines only went halfway up Tantalus. The people on top got their water directly from God.

She swallowed a couple of Aspirin and, realizing on her way down the hall that she was walking like an old lady, picked up the pace and stepped
briskly into her kitchen. You had to keep fighting, she told herself. If you relaxed for just a moment, you ended up a senior citizen. In two weeks she would be 60. She poured two bowls of dry generic brand cat food and set them outside on the back lanai. One bowl was for Mortimer, and the other was for roaches or mice or other creatures who liked to come inside. It was an experiment, but after having killed a five-inch roach—she measured him afterwards—and, over the years, having tried all the sprays and roach hotels available, she decided it was worth a try to keep them content outside. She had heard roaches liked mashed potatoes better, but as she told Paul, who rolled his eyes at her oddity, she damned sure wasn't going to cook for them when she seldom did for herself.

As Mortimer sniffed at his food, she thought about her own appetite, about what she would start the day with. She considered the advisability of drinking so early, drinking on pills, but decided she was becoming too cautious. A sudden burst of common sense now could be the beginning of the end, so she poured the remains of a bottle of champagne, two days old and lifeless, into a plastic tumbler. Then she put on her tightest pair of blue jeans, a T-shirt that directed, "Grab a teacher, you'll learn something," and took her champagne out to the front lanai which jutted 12 feet from the house and, supported by wooden stilts, hung over the city.

"It's Saturday," she said to Mortimer who jumped on her lap when she sat in the chaise lounge. "No noses to blow, no songs about nets and little fishies to sing, no blocks to trip over." After Ben's death, she had gone back to school for a degree in early childhood education, thinking she might discover what she had done wrong with Paul, why the only time he seemed sure of himself was when he criticized her. But not only had she not found the answer, she had quit believing there was one. Nevertheless, the degree qualified her for a job in a day care center in Makiki at the foot of her mountain. She did not work for the money. Ben had left her more than enough, and she had not had to think twice about buying leather seat covers for Cream Puff's car or taking him to Maui again for more of Komoda's speciality, his name sake. She worked because she wanted someone to expect her at certain times on certain days, to count on her, to miss her if she did not show up, to wonder where she was.

She sipped her champagne, inhaled the sweet spun-sugar scent of yellow ginger, and looked to the horizon where the sky and water blended as one until they reached the surf line. Patches of what appeared to be a narrow strip of beige beach followed but could be seen only occasionally through the massive concrete structures, ugly things that crept closer to her mountain. Ben would have been aghast at the growth. One of the buildings was the retirement apartment Paul thought she should apply to. At least, he reasoned, she should get on the waiting list. She remembered how Ben had often sat where she sat now and, as he said, watched the city expand. But if she did not stop thinking of him, she told
herself, she would spend her day as a weepy old lush.

She heard tires on gravel and turned her head to the right as Paul pulled his Honda Civic into her driveway. He had Malia, his four-year-old, with him. "I tried to call you last night," he said as he helped Malia climb the lava rocks that served as steps up the steep terrace. "You weren't home."

"I spend my Fridays with Cream Puff. Remember? And I have only 13 beers to go."

Malia giggled and said Cream Puff was a funny name.

"Mom, please," Paul said. "Not in front of the baby."

Mortimer ran off to the back of the house, Malia followed in close pursuit, and Betsy silently wished the old cat success in his escape. When Paul sat in the redwood lawn chair next to Betsy, she offered him coffee or orange juice, adding she was sorry there was no more champagne.

"Nothing for me," he said waving the offer away. She noticed that, as she had expected, he did not even comment on the champagne. He was a CPA and she thought how well he fit the image, played the part almost deliberately, almost as if he was aware it was a part, as if he had chosen the role. And he looked it, too. At 28 he had a rapidly receding hairline, horizontal frown lines across his brow, and permanent shadows under his eyes.

"Things aren't going well at home," he said. "Right now, I mean. They're tense."

They're always tense, she thought. It used to annoy her that Paul put up with a woman who had thrown him out six times in their seven-year marriage, and had gone running back, even before Malia was a consideration, every time his wife had a change of heart. Even when Betsy realized that somehow he liked bouncing back and forth, she had been impatient with his complaining. Finally—and she wondered why it had taken her so long—she decided he liked, needed, the complaining, too. "I'm sorry," she said.

"We don't communicate well," he said. "That's the whole problem. Communication is the most important ingredient in a good marriage."

More farting. It used to be understanding, then sex, now communication. Next year, the talk show hosts would come up with a new simplistic answer. Someday they'd get to love and shock the country. But that would be farting, too.

"We really need time for ourselves. We need to be alone," he said, and she knew what was coming.

"I'm not a babysitter."

"It's just for the day. You won't even have to keep her overnight. I've got some of her toys in the car."

"I'll pay for the sitter, but I won't be the sitter. You won't understand this, but I'll say it anyway. I'm too old, too old to spend my time being a grandmother."
Moments later, after staying just long enough to get Malia strapped into the car again, Paul left in what he called a state of extreme disappointment. Then she called Cream Puff. "Find the girl of your dreams yet?"

"No," he said. "After last night with you, I'm too tired to look."

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said and laughed, though her mind was still on Paul. How old did she have to be before Paul would not make her feel inadequate, a failure? Then she told Cream Puff she wanted to do something different, something exciting. Last night, she added, had been exciting—she believed all young men needed flattery—but she wanted a daytime activity, something not grandmotherly. She was open to suggestions.

She had come to the right place, he said, and told her of a girl he knew who went skydiving at Dillingham Field and who called it the most physically exhilarating experience ever. Then he teased her about being included in her will—"I'll be Mortimer's guardian"—swearing that he would join her if he did not have such a fear of heights.

"Coward," she said and laughed again. After all, she knew he reserved only Fridays for her, and she had not been asking for company.

"I've never needed to test myself by climbing mountains, swimming in rough water, or running marathons," she said. "I think this jumping out of airplanes stuff would be just as silly. Thanks, anyway, but it's not for me." But as she kissed loudly into the mouthpiece before hanging up, she thought, this could be the final good-bye. If not, the real end would be coming soon. Cream Puff may not make it much past her birthday. There may be no one to celebrate her next birthday with but Paul and Malia and Mortimer. And someday she may have to find fulfillment in gardening, in baking, in tacking Malia's cute little drawings up around the house, or in watching television game shows in a retirement apartment smaller than her lanai.

It was an hour's drive to Dillingham Field, through sugar cane mostly, green stalks so tall they blocked all but the sky until the road curved through a clearing or went over a small crest, and Betsy could see blue water everywhere. She screeched the tires on her Ford pick-up at every curve and talked to herself. You are a foolish old woman. Look at the way you acted last night when you said you loved Cream Puff and cried because he didn't say it back. He said he loved the dimple on the right side of your face, your small waist, your generosity, your boyish haircut. He went on and on, obviously assuming you were fishing for compliments. And you, you dolt, kept crying. Shameful. It was the beers talking. Thank God, he didn't bring it up this morning. And after he left, you were worse.

That was when she had heated the canned corned beef hash and taken it to bed to indulge her sorrow by eating. She had enjoyed playing the part of the wounded lover, as if any kind of love, even unrequited, could
turn her into a romantic figure. Pathetic figure, she told herself. Pitiful.

The man behind the desk, really two crack seed crates joined by a piece of plywood, told her a class for beginners would start at noon. He took her money, told her he was the instructor, and she looked into his light green, almost yellow eyes. She guessed he was close to Paul’s age, and she smiled and said she knew it would be a good lesson. Then she went to the ladies room and took two more pills to ward off the pain which was beginning another attack on her shoulder.

As she sat on the grass outside the office and waited for her lesson, she wished she could have been more helpful to Paul that morning. She wondered why she never seemed able to give him what he asked, wondered why he never asked her out for a beer. Anyway, he was wrong when he said, as he often did, that she had begun picking up young men right after Ben’s death. In fact, she had been a widow for almost two years when she met David in an exercise class and began to fantasize about his thick arms, about how it would feel to be touched by his short fingers. Lying awake at night, thinking of his shiny black running shorts, she decided she had to try. She had propositioned him awkwardly—“If I ever got you alone, I’d give us both a work-out we wouldn’t soon forget”—but after all, it was her first attempt. David had been more direct, though, just saying she was too old. But bless David, she thought now. He had been the catalyst; he had made the others possible. And there had not been nearly so many as Paul imagined. Likely they would be scarcer from now on.

Two adolescent Filipino boys and Betsy were the jump class, and for four hours they tumbled from ladders and tables to practice roll landings, had toggle lines, static lines, and reserve and dummy chutes explained to them, were told to cover their faces for landings in trees, and to unfasten their harnesses quickly for landings in the ocean. After that, they were strapped into their harnesses, which seemed to weigh as much as the two boys together, and packed into the Cessna which would take them up 3000 feet.

“I thought you’d chicken out,” the boy squatting behind Betsy said. “My mother would never do this.”

“I doubt,” she said, “I’m anything like your mother.” She did not know why she was trying to impress him. “I’m not like anyone’s mother.”

“Many people,” the instructor shouted over the engine noise, “start saying their prayers about now.”

“Oh no. I’ve still got 13 beers to finish,” she said, and he nodded and smiled, and she knew he hadn’t heard correctly. But because they knelt so closely together she could smell his perspiration as distinctly as her own; she turned her face more to the right, towards him, to give him her better side. She wondered what he did when he wasn’t working. When he opened the door, she crawled forward—the heaviest one had to be the
first out—and sat in the doorway, dangling her legs in air. She started to
look down, out over the former cane field and across the narrow asphalt
road to the pines along the beach, but the wind hit her face harder than
she ever imagined it could, and she was forced to sit up straight.

If Paul were to ask why she had jumped, she wouldn't tell him the truth.
She jumped, she knew suddenly and with embarrassment—did being
3000 feet above earth enable insight?—because he would ask why, would
consider her odd for doing it. She might say it was because Cream Puff
was leaving, or because Ben had left her too abruptly with too much left
undone. She might say it was because she was turning 60. Or she might
say why was a useless question, and the answer was just so many words,
just farting.

"O.K., Teach," the instructor said. "Grab the strut."

"O.K., Yellow Eyes," she said, pleased he had read her T-shirt. She
leaned out, reached for the metal rod, closed her eyes, and hung on. She
wondered who would go with her to the Island Paradise Pub next time.
And the time after that? Who would be there as she downed her final
beer? He touched her back as a signal to drop and she opened her hands
and began falling. "One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-
thousand . . ." Her chute opened, jerking her out of her count, and she
looked down at the target stretched out on the grass below, and reached
for her toggle lines. She drifted, floated, and at times felt the freedom of
not moving at all. She knew the ride would last only three minutes, but it
would be three minutes of not being an exceptional almost-60 year old.

"Hell," she said out loud and laughed. There was plenty of time to
worry about being different, about being alone, about all the other stuff
that was part of her life on earth. For three minutes now she did not have
to do Betsy Peters, did not have to work on it. "Hell," she said again just to
feel the wind take the word and bounce it back against her face. She
looked up into the bright orange nylon shell and grinned. She had quite a
few good seconds left before she would hit the ground.
Reflections on Feminist Literary Criticism

Gabrielle Dane

Women have had the power of naming stolen from us.
—Mary Daly

Our first task... is to thoroughly dissociate “women”
(the class within which we fight)
and “woman,” the myth.
For “woman” does not exist for us;
it is only an imaginary formulation...
—Monique Wittig

all the male poets write of orpheus
as if they look back & expect
to find me walking patiently
behind them. they claim i fell into hell.
damn them, i say.
i stand in my own pain
& sing my own song.
—Alta¹

Personally, politically, philosophically, and aesthetically, the male perspective has long crafted the parameters of meaning for Western culture. The Western literary tradition has encoded the reality of the culture at large. Legends of male creation have pervaded this literature from its beginnings, as theologically, God the Father gives parthenogenetic birth to a son who in turn invests a rib to produce woman and, mythologically, Zeus births Athena from his head without benefit of maternal interference and Ovid’s Pygmalion crafts an “ivory girl” who melts into life under his embrace. Women characters, fashioned from male fantasy,
have been reduced to epithets: whores, goddesses, virgins, madonnas, witches.

In the late 1960s, as women critics began to rebel against the male vision as the single, sacred version of reality, contemporary feminist criticism was born. Literary history, feminist critics saw, remained a masculine preserve, a "male-dominated scholarly tradition,"\(^2\) presiding over both canon selection and the critical perspective which interpreted it. Feminist critics began to protest a canon of Great Works which included so few women writers,\(^3\) to criticize the sexist rendering of women in literary works, and to question a body of critical theory which assigned aesthetic value to texts that reinforced this limited portrait of women.

Today feminist critics have placed virtually every aspect of literary theory under scrutiny: the notion of a critical aesthetics which leads to the construction of a gender-limited body of Great Works; critical interpretation as a "learned, historically determined, and thereby necessarily gender-inflected" process;\(^4\) and even critical reading which is never done "directly or freely, but always through the perspective allowed by theories," theories which "have led to the exclusion of women authors from the canon."\(^5\) Yet there remains much debate over the development of a clearly defined critical strategy of the feminists’ own. "Resist dogma"\(^6\) has become almost a slogan to a critical body which has denounced prior critical theories as stifling, "potentially Procrustean"\(^7\) reductive strategies, which appear inevitably to "congeal sooner or later into instant capsules which . . . end by asphyxiating the creative process."\(^8\) Since it does not derive its literary principles from a single authority figure or from a body of sacred texts,\(^9\) feminist criticism is often seen as an open system which offers the freedom to utilize diverse approaches to literature—Marxist, psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, structuralist, semiotic—but requires allegiance to none. Additionally, many feminist critics regard as a strength their marginal position with respect to the dominant culture. Rachel Blau DuPlessis claims that women’s writing is "profoundly revolutionary," since the incomplete integration of women "into the [larger critical] structures," has given women "a privileged position from which to rebel and to envision alternatives."\(^10\) Some feminist critics think that an official drafting of a critical theory would so tame this revolutionary privilege that the result would be a static, restrictive dogma espousing universality, all-too similar to the male-centered theories they reject. Attempting to avoid such pitfalls of theory, Annette Kolodny advocates "a playful pluralism, responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none."\(^11\)

Yet the absence of a clearly articulated theory renders feminist criticism vulnerable to attack on the grounds that it lacks "both definition and coherence." Elaine Showalter, while sympathetic toward the feminist "suspicion of theory,"\(^12\) outlines
a poetics of feminist criticism, in the hope that it will serve as an introduction to a body of work which needs to be considered both as a major contribution to English studies and as a part of an interdisciplinary effort to reconstruct the social, political, and cultural experience of women.

Showalter does not intend her vision to be reductive. Rather, she attempts to define feminist criticism in a manner which "include[s] all the different modes of critical and political commentary that feminism ha[s] produced" and utilized. Actually, Showalter's feminist "poetics" differs from Kolodny's notion of "playful pluralism" in only one aspect, yet perhaps to feminist criticism, the ultimate aspect: where Kolodny refuses to restrict feminist criticism by defining it, Showalter dares to give it a name. In voicing a poetics of feminist criticism, Showalter symbolically usurps the power of male critics to name female experience (via feminist criticism) as incoherent or vague; Showalter regains the power that feminist critics first went to battle for: the power to name their own experience.

In defining a feminist poetics, Showalter divides feminist critical theory into two models. Although both models are deeply revisionary, "questioning the adequacy of accepted conceptual structures," the first model, which Showalter calls "the feminist critique," is concerned with "woman as reader," while the second model, for which Showalter creates the name "gynocritics," deals with "woman as writer." In dealing with woman as reader, the feminist critique analyzes the experience of the aware female as consumer of a text written from the perspective of a male-dominated ideology. This reader is awake to the significance of what the sexual codes of that ideology imply for women. The feminist critique attempts to revise the history of Western literature so that woman's voice is no longer omitted. It undertakes this revision by examining the images and stereotypes of female characters in literature, the absence or misinterpretation of the female voice in literary criticism, and the lacunae in a gender-restricted literary history. As a fresh critical approach to the Great Works, this strategy provides insights into the ideological practices that have led to women's silencing. Yet as a model the feminist critique remains incomplete. As Showalter notes, "One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented." It does not teach "... what women have felt and experienced," according to Showalter, "but only what men have thought women should be." About that subject, she implies, women have gleaned enough.

Mill's Advice

Although continuing the attack on sexism in criticism and literature remains imperative, Showalter applies to feminist criticism John Stuart
Mill's advice to women's literature that it should eventually "emancipate itself from the influence of accepted models, and guide itself by its own impulses." Her gynocritical model, dealing with the woman as writer, as "producer of textual meaning," does just that. By gynocritics, Showalter envisions "a feminist criticism that is genuinely woman-centered, independent, and intellectually coherent," a distinctly female model based in women's experience, which studies "the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women," the psyche of the woman writer, the shape of the literary woman's career, and "the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition." 16

But in order to analyze the female literary tradition, feminist critics have found it necessary to uncover it. Excavating lost or ignored works by women writers and reinterpreting (and reevaluating) the handful of canonized "classics," feminist critics have begun to reconstruct a uniquely female literary history, examining their "finds" by methods like the gynocritical model outlined by Showalter. Without desiring to reduce many elegant theories into an "instant capsule," analyzable in a gulp, I will explore a single fascinating concept which links many of these essayists: the problems and possibilities of a uniquely female language.

Language historically has reflected the androcentric perspective of the dominant culture and thus has been inadequate for women writers to use to shape, define, name their own experience. A canonized body of works, wherein women were often reduced to stereotypic epithets, made it nearly impossible for the woman writer to establish a relationship to the extant literary models, because they spoke to her of an alien world composed in words insufficient to define her female experience. The woman writer found herself an uneasy apprentice wielding language, the tool of the master. Alicia Ostricker, discussing the alienated relationship between the woman writer and the language of the dominant culture, states, "[T]he language we speak and write has been an encoding of male privilege . . . inadequate to describe or express women's experience, a 'Law of the Father' which transforms the daughter" into an invisible, silent self; therefore, "the woman writer has had to state her self-definitions in code form, disguising passion as piety, rebellion as obedience." 17 Through this "code language," evolving out of women writers' need for creative self-expression which could not be found in the language of their "Fathers," women writers often shaped their creative expression into an overtly submissive linguistic form, delivered in a language that effectively muffled the female voice.

Since their writing was penned in a form which the dominant culture could not decipher, this coded female language actually undermined women's literary works, often leading to their critical devaluation. Joanna Russ explores this notion using the example of Charlotte Bronte's "minor" work, *Jane Eyre*, which she suggests is not awarded its appropriate merit since "it grows out of experiences . . . entirely foreign to [the
male critic's] own." Russ posits that Bronte's female experience which describes its "events, fantasies, wishes, fears, daydreams, images of self" in a different language, a suppressed code of resistance, remains untranslatable to the male-centered critical tradition. So the work is trivialized, retaining its "minor" status. Viewed in this light, language possesses a vast importance "in establishing, reflecting, and maintaining an asymmetrical relationship between women and men." If the language of our culture is insufficient for cogent female expression, it remains a sustaining force of social domination. That is to say, if woman's voice cannot be comprehended, it remains, in essence, silent. Since women's writing has been devalued because of their misinterpreted manipulation of the language, the only language the female writer has had, then, in Blau DuPlessis's words, "disrupting [the existing forms of language] as radically as possible can give us hope and possibilities." This prescription to subvert the very structure of language is echoed by feminist critics who advocate finding a new language, one in which women can find words to express adequately their own experience.

Are these feminist critics promoting the development of a language created by and for women, an exclusively female mother tongue through which women may speak to other women in a blissful little world of shared feminine experience? No. Rather, they describe what is metaphorically a different language. As T. S. Eliot observed, regarding British and American literature, they are "two literatures in the same language." In the same way, men and women in our culture have developed two different literatures: one, the voice of the dominant culture; the other, the dialect of the oppressed. As it appears evident that women and men manipulate their shared language differently due to their different cultural experiences, feminist critics have found it necessary to decode the "different literature" of women writers, subverting the known forms of an androcentric language, to accommodate a uniquely female voice. The current struggle for feminist critics according to Luce Irigaray is this recovery "of a possible operation of the feminine in language." But along with recovery, there is more. If feminist critics are not to set up a counter-canon, endlessly admiring the exiled female in literary works, they must find a way to translate the codes of women's literature to the dominant tradition. Women's literature, if it is to be deemed worthy of study, must become appreciated by the male-dominated scholarly tradition, the current canon-makers. Kolodny, too, stresses the need for men to learn the female context of signs and symbols so as to have access to female codes of meaning. women's different literary voice, since men can only become equipped to appreciate, become "better readers . . . of women's books . . . (as women have always been taught to become astute readers of men's texts)," when they have read them with a greater understanding of their differences.
Inherent Meanings

But this need to learn how to read women's writing, to become more fully equipped to understand the inherent meanings that stem from women's unique experience, is not confined to men. I too, although a long-time feminist, had in the past dismissed such works as Jane Eyre as trivial, unimportant to my contemporary search for appropriate literary tools to express my own female experience. Yet these feminist critics are exploring the language of all women's writing—domestic/sentimental fiction, female Gothic, women's sensational novels, romances, with the understanding that the entire body of women's works constitutes a legitimate cultural and aesthetic concern to those critics attempting to uncover women's literary history. Only after all critical readers, both male and female, “learn to penetrate the otherwise unfamiliar universes of symbolic action that comprise women's writings, past and present;” and successfully decipher the code language of women's literature, will women writers be more fully understood and valued.

Lest I be accused of reducing the vast variety of women writers into a tiny sect sharing a foreign tongue, let me be clear. If women authors may be said to share a code language, a system of meanings which speaks of a different experience and hence remains largely indecipherable to the dominant culture, this is not to suggest that all women's writing derives from a single source or describes a solitary experience. One important fact that feminist critics have discovered in piecing together women's literary history is that the female experience is described as richly and multitudinously as the male one.

In Helen in Egypt, H. D. gives a fascinating account of female experience, creating a Helen who undergoes a psychological journey, a journey to define the female self. In so doing, H. D. explodes the myth of Helen as “that Fury,” “the daughter of... all wickedness that swarms on earth,” “a demon... of death... shin[ing]... in man’s memory... for the thousand lives... she killed under Troy’s shadow.” In fact, H. D.’s Helen never actually goes to Troy. Based on Stesichorus’s “Pallinode,” which claims that Hermes snatched Helen at the onset of the battle and deposited her safely in Egypt, H. D. claims, “Helen of Troy was a phantom... The Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion.”

But the illusion of these warriors lies not solely in their ignorance regarding a proxy Helen, H. D. implies, but in their misrepresentation of Helen of Sparta, the Greek’s ostensible reason for storming Troy. Helen “knows what the Greeks think of her;”(15) yet she defies this simplistic rendering of herself as villain, refusing to shoulder the blame for a war which was not her fault: “I am not nor mean to be/the Daemon they made of me.”(109)

The Trojan siege, Helen knows, is the men’s war, not hers: “I do not
care for separate/might and grandeur,/I do not want to hear of Agamemnon/and the Trojan Walls/. . . [the] fortress and [the] tower/were built for man, alone.” (18,30) Helen sees that these men seek their glory in bloodshed using her infidelity as a pretext: “so they fought, forgetting women,/hero to hero, sworn brother and lover,/and cursing Helen through eternity.” (4) She comes to realize that the fierce battle her kinsmen wage stems from their desire for empire and insatiable lust for the drama of combat. “[C]ould they have chosen/another way, another Fate?/each could—Agamemnon, Achilles,/but would they?/they would not.” (99) War was their choice, their desire. Ultimately Helen realizes that the Greeks deluded themselves, not simply in their rationalizing the Trojan War as a glorious quest to reinstate Menelaus’ errant bride but also in their choice to waste so many years of their lives in a senseless battle, the losses of which proved too high for either side to emerge victorious. And so, Helen reflects, “they had lost—/the war-Lords of Greece.” (19)

Helen turns her focus from her battle-loving “warrior race,/Agamemnon and Menelaus,”(90) to her own personal quest, a spiritual journey of self-definition. H. D.’s poem does not take place on the material plane, rather it is more like the analysis of a dream, a glimpse into Helen’s psyche. Helen’s search for her self is a psychological voyage, staged in the interiors of her mind. Helen has found that she must fight for her identity—battle the myth which they have created of her (“Helen hated of all Greece”[2]), cleanse herself of their misreading, and “reconstruct the legend”(11) of herself. “[S]tricken, forsaken,” (5) Helen draws more deeply into her mind, searching for answers to the riddle of her abused identity. Who is she? If not Greece’s “daemon” goddess, causing the death of thousands through her wantonness, then who? “What is this Helen?” (15)

Yearning for her sister’s company (“remembrance of childhood together;/.. Clytaemnstra and Helen,/.. twin-sisters of twin-brothers,” [72,70-1]) Helen begins mentally to fuse her identity with that of her sister. Helen and Clytaemnstra have both committed sins against their husbands; Helen, the crime of infidelity, Clytaemnstra, of murder. “They share Nemesis together.” (75) Helen begins to live Clytaemnstra’s story in her fantasies, envisioning herself as her sister, “with a bride’s innocence,”(74) bringing “their” daughter, Iphigenia, to be joined in marriage with Achilles, “the greatest hero in Greece.” But the bridal altar turns out to be a sacrificial altar, and the bridal pledge “a pledge to Death,/to War and the armies of Greece.” (73)

Iphigenia was to be a sacrifice at the hands of her father, Agamemnon, so that he and his armies might be granted fair wind to sail to Troy, yet, Helen sees, her sister was also a sacrifice. Mother and daughter fuse into one in Helen’s mind, a single, sacrificial offering for Agamemnon’s war. Duped by Agamemnon, Clytaemnstra and Iphigenia “stood together/as one, before the altar;/.. it was a moment/of infinite beauty,/but a war-
Lord/blighted that peace."(74) Helen judges Agamemnon’s deception of his wife to be the beginning of Clytaemnestra’s ruin, leading to her murder of Agamemnon as revenge for her daughter, and ending with her murder by their son, Orestes. Like Iphigenia, Clytaemnestra represents to Helen a sacrifice at Agamemnon’s hand. Yet unlike Iphigenia, Helen’s twin is not granted a reprieve.

Turning her focus onto her sister’s child, Helen begins to identify herself with Iphigenia. Like her niece, Helen was to be a sacrifice; on pretext of her adultery, her identity was to be sacrificed for the Greek men’s war. As Iphigenia was saved from death by Artemis, Helen was rescued from Troy, a life of confinement and probable death, by Hermes. The two women’s strangely similar fates whirl through Helen’s mind. “Achilles was the hero promised/to my sister’s child,” she intones, “promised to her,/promised to me,/promised to Iphigenia.”(80–1)

Yet Helen’s thoughts continually return to that which, to her, remains incomprehensible: How could Achilles and Agamemnon (the girl’s own father) pledge Iphigenia to death? Replaying this scene over and over in her mind, Helen cannot solve the riddle of the men’s willingness to murder an innocent child for a burst of wind. At last, she accedes to her inability to comprehend the men’s war-lust; the Greek women had no access to their Lord’s motives, Helen notes; “we lived alone and apart.”(84) Feeling increasingly estranged from her homeland “where desolation ruled,/and a warrior race,/Agamemnon and Menelaus,”(90) Helen’s psyche merges more completely with her female relations. Identifying herself with both her twin sister and her niece, Helen recognizes that all three were victims, female sacrifices for the men’s war. The trio coalesces in Helen’s mind into a single whole, “one root, one branch in the dark.”(91) Discovering herself as part of this shadowy branch—Clytaemnestra, Iphigenia and Helen, joined in a circle of experience, each a pawn in the male game of war—Helen begins to rebuild her shattered identity. As the reality of her Greek world fades, Helen deliberately sculpts a new reality in herself. She feels centered, whole, at peace in her solitude. Having explored her own world of experience, she banishes the “Helen hated of all Greece,” the mythological pretext for the Trojan War and slowly defines her own, unique self.

Sigmund Freud, speaking to women of their notorious mystery, claimed, “You yourselves are the riddle.” Feminist critics, on the same excursion as Helen to define the female self, hope to undermine Freud’s diagnosis. As they strive to make women’s experience understood, feminist critics serve as translators for a body of women artists attempting to write themselves into existence. By endeavoring to equip men (and
women) to become better readers of women’s stories, these critics believe that female experience may no longer appear inexplicable, encoded in puzzling metaphor and thus dismissed as trivial or incomprehensible. “You yourselves are the riddle.” Is that true? Was Freud really equipped to “read” Dora?

Notes


3 Lillian S. Robinson offers these statistics: “In a survey of 50 introductory courses in American literature offered at 25 U.S. colleges and universities, Emily Dickinson’s name appeared more often than that of any other woman writer: 20 times . . . Among the 61 most frequently taught authors, only 7 others are women; Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin are each mentioned 8 times, Sarah Orne Jewett and Anne Bradstreet 6 each, Flannery O’Connor 4 times, Willa Cather and Mary Wilkins Freeman each 3 times. The same list includes 5 black authors, all of them male.” Robinson, “Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon,” The New Feminist Criticism, p. 118.


12 This and the following quotation are from Elaine Showalter, “Toward a Feminist Poetics,” The New Feminist Criticism, p. 127 and p. 128 respectively.


54
This and the following four quotations are from Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," p. 128, p. 128, p. 130, p. 139, and p. 128 respectively.


Ostriker, p. 315.


Blau DuPlessis, p. 287.


This and the next two quotations are from Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield," p. 148, p. 157, and p. 149 respectively.

This critique focuses on the first part of H. D.'s complex poem, "Pallinode," because here are lodged the ideas most directly applicable to my thesis.


Unbearable Parmenides: The Metaphysics of Milan Kundera

John C. Hampsey

In his 1984 essay, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," Milan Kundera called for renaming a portion of Eastern Europe. A Czechoslovakian emigré, Kundera deplored the total war of cultural annihilation waged by Russia on his native country and all of "Central Europe." Czechoslovakia was never Eastern, according to Kundera, but only considered politically as such since the convention at Yalta, whereupon several nations (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland) that had always thought themselves to be Western "woke up to discover that they were now in the East." People in Western Europe and the United States, having acquiesced to the imposition of this concept, share the blame for a phenomenon which has driven Czechoslovakia "from its own destiny, beyond its own history, [forcing it to lose] the essence of its identity." (Tragedy, p. 33) The instances of revolt in Prague and Warsaw are dramas of the "West," a West that, "kidnapped, displaced, and brainwashed, nevertheless insists on defending its identity."

To think of Kundera's country as Eastern, then, is tantamount to granting victory to totalitarianism by virtue of amnesia. As he profoundly states at the beginning of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against Forgetting." By offering the term "Central Europe," Kundera begs for memory, and for weight.

The need for weight, and the desire to escape into its opposite, lightness, are notions present to some degree in all of Kundera's works. Yet
most of the articles written on Kundera in recent years have ignored this metapsychic, focusing instead on the topics of sexuality, irony, comedy, and politics. In other words, the critics have been concerned with Kundera's ethics. However useful these articles may be, it is imperative to acknowledge the metaphysics that lie behind any ethics, even if the metaphysics are unsystematic, as Kundera's surely are.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984), by its very title, demands this metaphysical attention. The philosophic pondering in the book's first six pages (musings upon certain notions of Nietzsche and Parmenides) forms the metaphysical basis for the ethical questions that follow. The novel's structure of alternating chapters entitled "Lightness and Weight" and "Soul and Body" stresses the metaphysical contrast between Parmenides's positivism/negativism and Plato's materialism/idealism. Kundera forces the reader to struggle with a single philosophical and moral question: is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid? Heaviness, of course, implies a life of memory, meaning, and value. As Kundera suggests at the opening of his novel, heaviness rests upon Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, a notion that "everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum!" (p. 3) It then follows, according to Kundera, that human lives are nailed to eternity, like Jesus to the cross. Kundera uses Nietzsche's term for this condition: "das schwerste Gewicht" or the heaviest of burdens.

Kundera then defers to Parmenides, the sixth century B.C. Greek philosopher who divided the world into opposites of positive and negative, lightness and weight, light and dark, warmth and cold, being and nonbeing. In Parmenides's metaphysical construct, the element of fire moves upward and is good, and earth moves downward and is evil. Yet the question is not merely one of curious metaphysics, but of moral imperatives. Do the basic elements of existence point to a clear ethical division between good and evil? As Kundera asks in his novel—"Was he [Parmenides] correct or not?" (p. 6) The choice between lightness and weight is a certainty, but in such a morally ambiguous post-modern world, how can one be sure that lightness is positive and weight negative?

Sabina and "Lightness"

The reader of The Unbearable Lightness of Being soon discovers that "lightness" is the life of Sabina, whose artistic wandering and sexual betrayals lead her forever westward, from Prague to Zurich to Paris to New York and eventually to California, where the ashes of her cremated body will float into the air like fire. Lightness is also the dominant side of Tomas, whose proclivity for sexual dalliances causes him to rid all women from his bedroom by midnight, so as to avoid the "weight" of mutual
sleep. Thomas operates in a system whereby he may either see a woman three times in a row and then terminate the affair or see her once every three weeks and continue the affair indefinitely. However, after living with Tereza, a country girl whom he meets either by accident (lightness) or by fate (weight), Tomas concludes:

Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite. Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman). (p. 15)

At a later point in the story, Tereza returns from Zurich to Russian-occupied Czechoslovakia without Tomas. Finding himself totally free, the chains of romance lifted, Tomas's step is lighter and he soars back into Parmenides's magic field, "enjoying the sweet lightness of being." (p. 30) But the flight is momentary because Tomas chooses the weight of return. He gives up his political and romantic freedom and follows Tereza back to Prague.

The "Soul and Body" chapters, filtered through Tereza's point of view, focus on the metaphysical horror that her soul suffers when confronted with the functions of her body. Demanding lightness, freedom, and indifference, the desires of her body conflict with the demands of her Platonic soul which, as a center of weight, works to deny the body's light existence. Trapped in her soul, Tereza looks from a distance at her pathetic body and longs "to dismiss her body as one dismisses a servant: to stay on with Tomas only as a soul and send her body into the world to behave as other female bodies behave with male bodies." (p. 139)

When she finally does attempt lightness, urged by Tomas's bidding and her own nightmares, her copulation with another man ends in disaster: "the body was acting against its will; the body was betraying it [the soul], and the soul was looking on." (p. 155) This scene ends ironically for Tereza. She realizes that the so-called engineer she had the afternoon affair with is actually a member of the secret police and that, furthermore, he has photographed their activity so that it may later be used as blackmail against Tomas. Thus, Tereza is unable to enjoy the sweet lightness of being.

The Danish theologian and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, writing in the first half of the 19th century, addressed this problem of lightness when he formulated his "existential dialectic." Kierkegaard divided individual experience into three levels: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The aesthetic level is a life of soaring lightness, an existence without commitments to spouse or children. Consider again Tomas's sexual experiences away from Tereza, and Sabina's eroticism leading into...
thin air. Aesthetic existence, like the life of Byron’s Don Juan, ends in despair.

Kierkegaard’s ethical level is marked by social responsibility, a commitment to family and group values. On this level the individual gives up selfhood, one kind of freedom, in order to participate morally with the many. Ethical existence obviously carries with it the burden of weight, and it ends in the norm.

For Kierkegaard, aesthetic and ethical existence are synthesized into the religious, where the Absolute (God) is present. The religious level is a place of rarefied experience achieved only by the few, a place that is simultaneously light and heavy. On this religious level, the individual finds himself/herself in an “absolute relation to the Absolute.” In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard argues that the individual may have to forsake ethics and civilization to do something completely absurd for the sake of the Absolute, and in this sense his heavy action appears light. Kierkegaard offers the example of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac on the mountain top, even though child murder is deplorable. Yet because Abraham acts by faith, in the name of a God he cannot see or understand, his action is heavy. He is a Knight of Faith (weight), acting by virtue of the absurd (lightness), who completes the famous “leap of faith.”

Kierkegaard’s Absolute is a kind of personal Parmenidesian Being That Is, and cannot not-be. His Absolute is truth, yet it can only be known subjectively through faith. Parmenides’s Being, on the other hand, is credible through reason. (It is Parmenides’s Not-Being that cannot be grasped by the reasoning mind.)

**Paradoxical Relationship**

For Kundera, absurdity lies not in any Absolute, but in the paradoxical relationship between lightness and weight and their related variables of chance and fate. His favorite subject for examining these questions is human sexuality, where all opposing forces come into play. One might assume the realm of sex to be a bastion of privacy, even in a totalitarian world. But, as exemplified by Tereza’s affair with the police agent, human sexuality cannot be separated from politics, aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics.

One third of the way through The Unbearable Lightness of Being, a love scene occurs between Sabina and Tomas that involves a bowler hat. Sabina wears the hat as she and Tomas undress before the mirror. The reflected vision is at first exciting and then comical. Perhaps the hat accentuates the absurd aspect of human sexual conduct. But, as symbol, the hat problematically suggests both lightness and weight; as a sentimental object passed down from her grandfather, the hat represents family, heredity, property, and therefore memory; and it also serves as an
expression of Sabina's originality, making her sexual relations with Tomas gamelike, light, and safe from the world of weight.

When Sabina wears the hat for Franz, however, the comedic and aesthetic meanings confound him. Franz, whose ethics allow him to have sex with Sabina only outside of Prague, where he lives with his wife, cannot understand that the hat is Sabina's attempt to avoid "kitsch" during the act of sex. Avoiding kitsch is the only meaningful goal in Sabina's life. It is her raison d'être. In order to be kitsch-free, she not only wears the bowler hat but also refuses to march in May Day parades or even to protest her country's occupation by Russia, because "behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil, . . . a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison." (p. 100) Because she is anti-kitsch, Sabina is capable of seeing a cemetery, for instance, as more than an "ugly dump of stones and bones" (p. 104) (Franz's conventionalized aesthetic). Instead, Sabina sees that "When the sun goes down, the cemetery sparkles with tiny candles . . . as though the dead are dancing at a children's ball." (p. 104)

Sabina's abhorrence of conformity results in an ethics of betrayal, a sexuality of invention, a politics of nonconformism, and an aesthetics of personal imagination. "My enemy is kitsch, not Communism," Sabina proclaims. (p. 254) And although kitsch is her life-long enemy, forcing Sabina to abnegate the image of home and harmony ruled by a loving mother and wise father, and, once recognized for the lie it is, moving her into the context of non-kitsch, Sabina is still not "superman enough to escape kitsch completely." For it is a metaphysic that can't be denied—"no matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition." (p. 256)

The metaphysical motion of kitsch unifies Kundera's novel and dissolves the dualism of Parmenides. Kitsch grants weight in the lightest way possible. Like thousands of balloons bound to earth by mere pennies, kitsch negates lightness by spreading out the weight until heaviness itself is the sheerest of things. Although in its contemporary usage, the word usually refers to bad art or bad taste, when the term originated in mid-19th century Germany, it stood for the utilitarian attempt to please the greatest number simply by confirming what everyone wants to hear.

In his 1985 address upon receiving the Jerusalem Prize for Literature, Kundera called kitsch the "translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of body and feeling." It moves people to tears for the very banality of what they think and feel, like Sabina's hated May Day parade where the people chant the idiotic tautology, "Long Live Life!" In the capitalist West, kitsch would describe a leader such as President Reagan proclaiming "America is back!" Using the aesthetic of mass media, Reagan may be said to have espoused a kitsch that takes control
politically, before eventually becoming an aesthetic and moral code. In a general sense, kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all political parties and all politicians kissing babies in mid-air.

Kitsch Metaphysic

Kundera's kitsch metaphysic ironically allows him to take refuge in a sort of "Central Europe of the Mind." He is free to criticize both East and West, the totalitarian kitsch of communism and the mass-media kitsch of capitalism. This paradoxical positioning by Kundera frustrates critics of both the left and the right, who want to place the writer-emigré in one camp and use his works as ammunition against the other.

As a metaphysical concept, kitsch has its source "in the categorical agreement with being" (Kundera's definition in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, p. 248), and it takes on many forms: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national, international. After several references earlier in the novel, Kundera's dissertation on kitsch arrives in the second to the last section, "The Grand March." (The chapter title refers to the pathetic march on Cambodia by a band of Western celebrities in 1979.) Kundera prefaces his remarks with an anecdote about the death of Stalin's son:

Not until 1980 were we able to read in the Sunday Times how Stalin's son, Yakov, died. Captured by the Germans during the Second World War, he was placed in a camp together with a group of British officers. They shared a latrine. Stalin's son habitually left a foul mess. The British officers resented having their latrine smeared with shit, even if it was the shit of the son of the most powerful man in the world. They brought the matter to his attention. He took offense. They brought it to his attention again and again, and tried to make him clean the latrine. He raged, argued, and fought. Finally, he demanded a hearing with the camp commander. He wanted the commander to act as arbiter. But the arrogant German refused to talk about shit. Stalin's son could no longer stand the humiliation. Crying out to heaven in the most terrifying of Russian curses, he took a running jump into the electrified barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp. He hit the target. His body, which would never again make a mess of the Britisher's latrine, was pinned to the wire. (p. 243)

Kundera concludes that, because Stalin's son suffered such a fate, life itself must be unbearably light and the world without dimension. Amidst the idiocy of the war, "... the death of Stalin's son stands out as the sole metaphysical death."(p. 245) Shit, no longer a moral problem for
Kundera, becomes a metaphysical one. If man was created in God's image then God also has intestines, or else "God lacks intestines and man is not like Him." (p. 245) By objecting to shit, one objects to the nature of Creation. And so it follows that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being "is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch." (p. 248)

Spending one's life metaphysically denying shit turns one into kitsch, which is the "stopover between being and oblivion." (p. 278)

Thus, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Kundera offers a metaphysically either/or situation: Either human beings spend their life denying shit and end up as kitsch, or they spend their life denying kitsch, like Sabina, and end up with a life that is unbearably light. Tomas and Tereza end up crushed by the "weight" of totalitarian kitsch (they are literally buried by a truck). This is after, for a modicum of happiness in the country, they have given up the freedom to live in Prague. (Tomas had previously been stripped of his right to practice medicine and forced to wash windows because of a letter he wrote during the brief "lightness" of the Prague Spring.) Although Tomas and Tereza's lives end in terrible weight, either by chance or by fate (Tomas's echo of "Es Muss Sein"), the metaphysic in Kundera's novel points to lightness.

What happens once might as well not have happened at all. The history of the Czechs will not be repeated, nor will the history of Europe. The history of the Czechs and of Europe is a pair of sketches from the pen of mankind's fateful inexperience. History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow. (p. 223)

This lightness is seen in "Lost Letters," the first story of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1980). The story concerns a man named Mirek who has kept a careful diary and preserved all his correspondence. These writings are his personal "struggle of memory against forgetting." When finally convinced of the danger of such incriminating papers, Mirek decides to hide them. But first he drives off to visit Zdena, a girl he knew 25 years earlier, when they were both avid members of the Communist Party. As Mirek moved away from the Party and totalitarian kitsch, Zdena became more involved. The irony of the story is that Mirek wants to remove Zdena from the pages of his life just as the oppressive regime after 1968 wants to "airbrush" elements of the political past away. The Communist Party wants to rewrite history, to instill "forgetting," and Mirek wants to get back the love letters he wrote to Zdena because he is embarrassed that he ever loved such an ugly woman. Mirek desires to do privately what the state does publicly. Zdena refuses to give him the letters, though, and when he returns to his apartment, the police, in
possession of his diaries, arrest him and his son. The lesson: as light as history may seem, it cannot be changed so easily. Again, the call for memory.

At the end of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, philosophy appears to give way to sentiment. The last chapter focuses mostly on the death of Tereza's dog, Karenin. Perhaps Kundera is asking the reader to feel for his characters as the characters feel for the dog. Whatever the case, such sentimentalism does not seem a proper ending for the novel. The ending clashes with the previous tone set by Kundera's intrusive narrative voice which has manipulated the characters throughout, so that they exist more as tokens for ideas than as representations of life. Earlier in the novel, Kundera admits that his characters are "born of a situation" and, in an effort to avoid literary kitsch, he admits that his novel is "an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become." (p. 221)

Yet it is the reader who feels trapped. If, during the course of the book, the reader has granted weight to the characters's lives, then the ending hopelessly "nails" the characters to the cross, and if the reader has maintained an attitude of lightness toward the characters, then the book's sentimental ending appears dreadfully kitsch-like. So the dilemma of feeling is once again a metaphysical problem, confronting the reader with Parmenides's dualism and the uncertainty of the positive/negative. The reader ultimately wants neither eternal return (Nietzsche) nor floating away (Parmenides). Both lightness and weight are terrible, and this is why Kundera's Czech protagonists appear to languish in a realm of death-like life, like Tennyson's Tithonus who proclaims, "Yet hold me not forever in thine East, / How can my nature longer mix with thine?"

The book's metaphysical problem is more than a question of East and West, though, or even of lightness and weight. It is a question of truth (as opposed to kitsch), and the moral responsibility to find that truth by defining history through memory, without which there is no enduring the tightening "trap the world has become."

Notes

1 Milan Kundera writes, (The New York Review of Books no.7, [1984]:p. 33) "... three fundamental situations developed in Europe after the war: that of Western Europe, that of Eastern Europe, and, most complicated, that of Europe situated geographically in the center—culturally in the West and politically in the East."

A logical methodology in teaching Western philosophy is to establish the metaphysics first and then the ethics. For instance, one can better grasp Kant's moral imperative if one is first made familiar with his metaphysical notions of the noumenal and the phenomenal.


It is interesting to note Deuteronomy 23:11–14, which states that the latrine should be kept outside "the camp" otherwise God will not journey "within your camp to defend you."
Romantic Desire

Mervyn Nicholson

"Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?"

One of the most peculiar episodes in literature occurs near the start of Matthew ("Monk") Lewis's Gothic novel The Monk (1793). It is an episode very instructive for the student of desire. It concerns Ambrosio, the charismatic monk of the title, a monk so holy that he doesn’t even know what the difference between the sexes is—surely a miracle by anyone’s standards, given that he is in his 30s. Ironically, he arouses in his hearers—he is famous for his electrifying preaching—an excitement almost sexual in its intensity. Thus his church is a favorite meeting place for lovers. After performing his usual holy/erotic magic in church one evening, Ambrosio returns to his ascetic cell for private devotions before an icon of the Blessed Virgin. But it soon appears that his devotion to the Virgin is not quite chaste contemplation. Rather, the picture incites a fantasia of lust; indeed the monk appears to masturbate in front of the Madonna’s stimulating portrait, her sacred breast having an especial charm for the confused abbot.

Ambrosio is spiritual guru to a novice named Rosario. One night the two men earnestly discuss spiritual matters in the monastic garden. Rosario suddenly discloses that “he” is really a “she” who has smuggled herself into the holy community to be with the man she loves—Ambrosio himself. All she wants is to be near him, so she says. The shocked Ambrosio naturally declares he will expel her. “Rosario” rips open her robe and dramatically threatens to stab herself if he does not let her stay. In her excitement, she reveals her breast in the moonlight. When Ambrosio sees her naked bosom, he has what amounts to a conversion experience. The vision of the breast, in full bloom as it were, is an erotic epiphany: an equivalent in profane history to the burning bush of Moses in sacred history.

When Rosario—now called Matilda—and Ambrosio eventually, or not so eventually, have sex, Matilda turns out to look exactly like the adored
Madonna on the wall of Ambrosio’s ascetic cell. Thus Ambrosio first desires, then gets what he desires. He first had a picture of what he wanted — then he had its exact, fleshly embodiment. He knocked (in the biblical symbolism of his calling), and the door was opened unto him. The paradigm, so to speak, in this episode is that desire somehow brings about its own satisfaction. Desire is thus a constituting factor of reality: it is not a feeble impulse crushed under the weight of what Freud calls the “reality principle” as opposed to the anarchically desiring “pleasure principle.” Desire, in short, has the power to create reality.

To the student of Romantic desire, this episode is full of meaning: essentially a profound revaluation of desire that occurs during the Romantic period. The paradigm that desire creates reality is an organizing concept of Romanticism. Nor is it confined to literature: it gains real authority in society itself. Intellectually its parent is probably the Enlightenment view that the purpose of life is happiness: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as the Declaration of Independence has it. The wording is significant. The purpose of existence, as self-evident as the rights of man, is not just happiness — but its pursuit. This is the basic image of desire: a searching or wishing for something one does not have. One recalls that Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” presents lovers about to kiss, but not actually kissing, as the ultimate expression of desire. Anticipation — the imagining of experience — is even more intense than fulfillment.

Desire is a mysterious affair, as Jacques Lacan demonstrates in his concept of the “Other,” which is source, means, and object of our desire — all at once. Desire is not only a goal but the activity that leads to that goal. As both fulfillment and pursuit of fulfillment, it is like the road that leads to the place one wishes to go. One cannot get there without the road; really, the road is the goal itself extended toward one. The road is not just a preliminary, then; it is part of the goal itself. What one desires is, by definition, something one does not have: it is a nothing, for one does not have it. And yet, in another form, it is something one already has — and must have — because if one didn’t, one would not recognize it when one found it. Thus desire is an embryonic form of what it desires.

Desire is noun and verb: it eludes the split between subject and object, for it is subjective and objective at once. Both force and image, desire directs — indeed propels — us, toward something we see in our mind’s eye. Desire requires its own category: it is neither an object in space, nor a subjective shadow. As a power that motivates action and that even orients one’s whole life, desire implies a different model of what reality is truly like, a model whose constituting dimension is not space, but time: reality as a complex of energies in time, not as a pile of objects in space.

If the notion that desire creates reality seems far-fetched, it finds surprising support in the great economist of the period, David Ricardo. The practical Ricardo — a businessman who made a fortune — hated writing
and was about as far from the Gothic or Romantic as anyone in the same culture can be. Yet he argues that desire has the power to cause economic depression: "To sustain life food is necessary, and the demand for food must continue in all ages, and in all countries. It is different with manufactures; the demand for any particular manufactured commodity is subject not only to the wants, but to the *tastes and caprice of the purchasers." Food is a necessity: manufactured goods are a desire. Thus a whim may cause depression. This is a distinction between necessity and desire—and Ricardo suggests that in society based on manufacturing, necessity is not decisive: desire is. Desire is capricious, yet upon its impulse depends the wealth of nations. Ricardo then implies that depressions are in fact a sign of advancement, for societies based on agriculture, not manufactures, do not have commercial depression. The glut has become an index of the industrial society now appearing for the first time in history: disaster is a sign of prosperity!

Thus: no desire = no risk-taking = no investment = no future. Desire ceases to be, at most, authority's handmaid and becomes the basis of civilization. Indeed it usurps necessity and becomes an inexorable law in its own right: a law of self-interest that requires people, above all, to accumulate, to desire accumulation with all their heart and soul and mind. In classical economics, self-interest is the *primum mobile of social organization, and self-interest is desire. From a precapitalist point of view, self-interest is that form of desire known as greed. Yet it now constitutes civilization.

Reconstituting Desire

The function of desire—its ontological status, as it were—undergoes a great reconstitution in the Romantic age. In medieval-Renaissance culture, desire is conceived as inseparable from original sin; indeed desire caused the Fall. In the fallen world, what people desire naturally is naturally bad. "Better is the sight of the eye than the wandering of the desire" says Ecclesiastes (6:9), who ought to know, having tried everything and found only vanity. Chaucer concluded his career by retracting his tales of desire; John Donne similarly switched from profane to sacred love: both poets affirm the authorized valuation of desire. Original sin is a sexually-transmitted disease that is always fatal—and a direct consequence of desire. The fall began with Eve's rebellious desire for the apple, for sensual gratification that she believed would give her more power than that allowed by the hierarchy she was created to observe and obey. In *Paradise Lost*, the desire to eat forbidden fruit is a metaphor for the desire to become a deity, a being higher on the ladder of power than the rung Eve was assigned to.

While desire is not totally evil, it must be strictly pruned—clipped,
shaped, bent—so as to fit authority's demands. The desire to obey is acceptable, for obedience to authority is the core of what Good is. But any other desire is necessarily and finally the desire for damnation: either/or: one way. "As the caterpiller chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys," as William Blake puts it.

Sexual desire especially is dangerous. A long tradition holds that sex began only after Adam and Eve fell; the belief that sex had something to do with the Fall seems to make some kind of primitive sense. Certainly the imagery of fornication as a paradigm for evil is second nature to Christianity. Sex is attractive, intense, transitory, and strong enough to defy both reason and authority, often leaving nothing but grief behind: it is a paradigm for temptation in general. The desire for procreation is allowed, but the desire for sexual pleasure is not—hence the teaching of the key church father: "Augustine indicates that sex is a necessary evil, necessary, that is, for having children." Sex, except for procreation, is vicious. One must just grit one's teeth and pretend it isn't happening.

Even the conceiving of babies has a certain odor of sin about it. For procreation is shaped by the original sin of disobeying authority, the painful task of childbirth being women's work, not men's. Reproduction is a burden women must bear because of Eve's insubordination—the revolt of appetite against reason, inferior against superior: female rebellion is a metaphor for all rebellion. Furthermore, to reproduce is to reproduce misery, not just because childbirth hurts—but because of our fallen state. Sex desire makes babies, and babies are from birth (or should I say conception?) sinners needing salvation. What desire does is to multiply death; it generates a cycle of death: dying beings multiplying dying beings.

The best desire is, then, self-neutralization: to sacrifice desire to authority, as monks do when they sacrifice sexual desire to God and become celibate. The surrender of desire to authority correlates with the fact that desire conflicts with authority, somehow by its very nature: it is authority's natural enemy. Because desire wants what one doesn't have, it shows dissatisfaction with what is: it implies a critique of existing arrangements. Obedience means repressing desire, whose inherently anarchic quality is the germ of rebellion. Thus conservatives like T.S. Eliot emphasize renouncing desire as the sine qua non of virtue. The idea that repressing desire is somehow holy is the premise of institutional religion in The Monk and elsewhere. "The link between religion and sexual repression has long been known. Every patriarchal religion, which means every modern religion, is antsexual to one degree or another."3

Which brings us back to the instructive episode from The Monk. One notices that Ambrosio gets what he wants: his sexually provocative picture turns into a sexually available partner. But all is not clear sailing: the transformation unfolds as a deception. His desire, now uncontrollable, is
the instrument of damnation. Lewis exhibits the desire paradigm (desire creates it own fulfillment)—and its catastrophic result. This would seem the natural moral of the novel. Ambrosio desired improperly: his unbridled lust really expressed his primary sin, pride, rebellion against authority. Thus readers may happily approve of the monk's fate. Tricked into willing his damnation by a grotesque stratagem, he is hurled to earth from a great height and not permitted to die until he has writhed for days in agony on desert rocks. Desire must not merely be corrected but crushed, humiliated—and exorcised. For it is a demon if given in to.

But this conclusion won't do. Ambrosio is more pathetic than wicked, a victim as well as victimizer. Despite desire's unpleasant consequences, the novel's point, inescapably, is that desire must be satisfied. Not satisfying it spells disaster. Not desire, but frustrated desire, causes human grief. Frustrated desire ceases to be desire: it mutates into compulsion. It is not Ambrosio that is stupidly proud, but celibacy and forced isolation from the world, with all the authoritarian rules that frustration and repression make necessary. And evil, for desire must be accommodated, not repressed.

Ambrosio became a monster because, given to the convent as a baby, he was automatically denied sexual intimacy. He was doomed to ignorance of sexuality—and to frustration. This frustration, in turn, was made worse by his not knowing that he was frustrated and not knowing how to satisfy it. His belief that desire (sexual desire specifically) is evil only compounded the horror of frustration. What Ambrosio needs is psychotherapy, not a clever plan to damn him. Torturing him cannot benefit anybody, surely not God. That the author of The Monk was homosexual gives its motifs of desire, frustration, and forbidden desire added sharpness.

Another lesson of The Monk for the student of desire emerges here: sexual desire is a synecdoche for desire in general. Not because every desire is for sex, of course. But because sexual desire is the most intense and familiar form of desire. As such it becomes a metaphor—a way to conceive and understand—all desires: a paradigm for how desire acts in experience. In The Monk, Matilda personifies desire. She begins as a demure youth, turns into an inexperienced but loving maid, then into a passionate mistress, then into a power-hungry superwoman spouting Nietzschean blasphemies. If one desires sexually, one desires in other ways, too; thus advertising harnesses its products to the desire for sexual power. In particular, one desires to know, because sexual desire needs knowledge in order to satisfy itself. Curiosity and sexuality are intimate relations. And everyone knows what curiosity did to the cat: a fate that reveals perfectly authority's verdict on curiosity. Curiosity is little more than rebellion of the mind. Rebellion of the mind is even worse than rebellion of the body, which, with its appetitive impulses, is bad enough.
Sex Desire as Paradigm

Since sex desire is the paradigm of desire in general, exploring desire quickly acquires a sexual aspect. Thus it is no surprise that sexual desire becomes a metaphor in the Romantics for spiritual power and enlightenment. Keats, the greatest poet of orgasm in English, supplies a striking example. In *Endymion* orgasm is a metaphor for enlightenment and self-transformation. But this metaphor is also crucial in Blake, Shelley and even in Byron, where, for example in *Heaven and Earth* and *The Island*, sexual attraction is inseparable from self-transformation, spiritual liberation—and rebellion against unjust authority.

In order to desire, we must imagine what we desire, imagine in the sense of visualize. This brings us to another key lesson of the love affair of Ambrosio and Matilda: desire and sexual desire go together with imagination. Desire incites imagination, so that desiring and imagining are co-extensive. To desire without imagining the object of our desire is probably impossible. In *The Monk*, this imaginative dimension is immediately presented in the motif of the painting. A painting is a way of projecting mental images, and mental images are the medium of desire.

By mental image I do not mean merely seeing with the mind’s eye—I mean also hearing with the mind’s ear and using the mind’s tongue, fingers, and nose. Visualizing is especially relevant to sexual desire, where seeing implies touching. What one dwells on visually, one touches mentally; as the romance writer W. H. Hudson put it, “What we see we feel,” a principle with intense erotic resonance. Dante’s *Vita Nuova* for example makes clear that the desire to touch is aroused by the act of looking. One may add that touch awakens sexual desire. Infatuation is essentially imagining a certain relation with the beloved: sexual excitement and imagination can hardly be separated. It may be noted that the appearance of sexual desire in youth corresponds to a great expansion of emotion in all ways—and of imagination, with all its mental images of loving, touching, nakedness, intimate clothing, and fantasies of being together freely. This imaginative dimension is integral to desire in general, once again, where the power of desire can virtually be measured by the persistence and precision of the mental images it generates. Desire and imagination (as visualization) interpenetrate—and an age-old tendency regards both as evil.

Aesop’s fable of the milkmaid illustrates this complex of motifs with unusual clarity. As she goes to market with a milk jug on her head, a milkmaid visualizes the money she will get from selling the milk. She plans to buy some eggs, then hatch them and raise the chickens. After selling the chickens, she will be able to buy a beautiful dress. Here she comes to the climax of her fantasy: an intense visualization of herself in that alluring dress, with all the boys gawking. She imagines tossing her head disdain.
fully at their admiring glances. So intense is her fantasy that she actually does toss her head, whereupon the milk crashes to the ground: visualizations and desire come to nothing. Overweening appetite, associated with mental images and with the motif of illusory female power over males, brings about her fall. The standard moral of this fable, Don’t count your chickens till they’re hatched, should read: Women, stop desiring to control men. Desire, sexuality, imagination, and power are bad for subordinates.

Here we come to an instinctive fear of desire. The anxiety of desire, which pervades The Monk, is ancient, especially in the taboo on boasting conspicuous in Greek culture. The gods hate boasting, regarding it as an attack on their interests, and do not tolerate any mortal going beyond—or talking about going beyond—his subordinate status. One notes that the monk gets into trouble not because of fantasies aroused by a painting but because he swells with foolish pride at believing he is holier than others, a god among ordinary humans. It is common to repress desire because to desire but not get what one desires is so painful that it is better to kill desire altogether. Romantic writers reject this view, no matter how safe it is. This is the strategy of tyranny, of keeping subordinates in their place: people without desires are easier to manipulate. The repression of desire is very cost-effective for maintaining control. Once again, desire inevitably conflicts with authority. Desire is subversive. Getting what you want is more dangerous than being frustrated: it is what gets you into trouble—better avoid it altogether and be cautious in all matters of desire. Be careful what you desire, because you may get it.

The notion that one’s desires cause things to happen is usually applied to negative wishes and is common in childhood. Wishing is a big part of the texture of childhood experience. Children who lose a parent often believe it is because at some time they wanted to get rid of the parent; such a loss confirms the anxieties involved in desiring. Thus the seminal passage of Wordsworth’s Prelude sets out his concept of the “spot of time,” a concept beyond our scope here, except for his example. One Christmas at boarding school, he impatiently waited for his father to send for him and over-eagerly climbed a “crag” to watch for the horses being sent to get him (the crag, like the tower, is an image of overweening ambition). A few days later, his father died. The boy interpreted his father’s death as a rebuke to his impatient desire: “I bowed low / To God, Who thus corrected my desires,” he comments (12.315-16; 1850 version), calmly endorsing the view that God punishes improper desires, punishing him in this case by killing his father—a rather savage model of God, to say the least.

Folktales often dramatize the anxiety surrounding desire; a familiar example is the story of the woodcutter’s three wishes. This tale, like its Grimm relative “The Fisherman and His Wife,” is simple. A kind fairy
gives a peasant three wishes. At supper, he discusses what to wish for with his wife—then carelessly complains, "Soup again? I wish I had a sausage for a change!" Instantly his wish is granted. His wife is so furious that he shouts without thinking "I wish the sausage were stuck to your nose"—and it is. When he insists they still have a wish, she cries "What is there to wish for? I can't have this on my nose," and wishes it away. Thus they end as they started, wishes notwithstanding. They didn't even eat the sausage! Those stupid peasants are better off without desires.

A literary example of wish-anxiety is Guy de Maupassant's *La Parure, "The Necklace."* A female's fantasy of rising in the world results in disaster for her—and for her dominated husband, who should have known better than to listen to a subordinate's desires. In contemporary culture the "fear of success" is a common, often crippling illustration of wish-anxiety. Simply having desires, even without acting on them, is somehow dangerous. We have it on rather high authority that merely to desire sex is actually to commit adultery.

Desire, sexual desire, imagination, all go together with the further motif of turning into or becoming something else. Desire is desire for change. Hence the motif of metamorphosis is latent in desire. Desire is time-constituted: it is inherently a matter of change and changing shapes. Without a change of shape, desire could not be satisfied. Or even aroused, for that matter. Arousal is above all a change, either an acceleration of consciousness or a change of direction of consciousness. One desire leads to another; desire's eager interest in experience has no limit. Ambrosio encounters this change of shape in his erotic conversion: he switches from sacred to profane love.

**Inward Conversion**

This inward conversion is outwardly dramatized by Rosario the novice "turning" into Matilda the tricky female. First an innocent maid, not unlike the Virgin Mary whom she impersonates in the portrait, she then becomes an amoral daredevil preaching defiance to God—a "hyena in petticoats," like the wicked Wollstonecraft. Matilda is a will-o'-the-wisp of desire, always changing shape, always drawing Ambrosio on, further and further into the horrors of compulsion without satisfaction, revealing another facet of Ambrosio's veneration of the Virgin: a religious act is turned into a sexual act. The usual course, by which sexual energy is sublimated into religious conviction, is reversed. Here religious belief is drained back into sexual action. This principle has several implications. One is that sexuality itself becomes religious. Whatever form it takes, genuine religion must include/accept sexuality: religion must at least be sex-positive. The ecstasy of orgasm is a glimpse of a higher reality. Like looking at the sun, it cannot be experienced except as a gap, an interruption of ordinary life and its limitations and absurdities: an instant of
unconsciousness in which the frustrated ego, with all its whining miseries, vanishes. This brief transcendence gives sex an appeal deeper than the compulsion to control that often masquerades as sexual pleasure. For orgastic potency is only possible with letting go: not controlling. Orgasm offers a many-sided paradigm for spiritual truth.

Thus the climax of Byron’s Island is a religious fantasy of liberation, with imagery of angel-fires of transformation:

And let not this seem strange: the devotee
Lives not in earth, but in his ecstasy;
Around him days and worlds are heedless driven,
His soul is gone before his dust to heaven.
Is love less potent? No—his path is trod,
Alike uplifted gloriously to God;
Or link’d to all we know of heaven below,
The other better self, whose joy or woe
Is more than ours; the all-absorbing flame
Which kindled by another, grows the same,
Wrapt in one blaze; the pure, yet funeral pile,
Where gentle hearts, like Bramins, sit and smile. (2.16.1-12)

This “fire” is the Heraclitean fire of transformation-in-time: a seraphic/cherubic fire recalling “burning Sappho” in Byron’s “The Isles of Greece.” Note that sexual desire here is a participation in divinity and in physical nature: it manifests a unifying life-energy. Byron clearly saw an affinity with eastern—not Christian—religious traditions, hence his allusion to “Bramins” smiling in ecstatic serenity.

The conversion of the sexual into the religious has a corollary fact: institutional religion is basically repressed sexuality. Such religion reduces to the repression of sexual feeling. “Pale religious lechery” is an obsessive theme of blasphemous Blake. “Brothels are built with bricks of religion.” Thus dissolving institutionalized religion correlates with a release of sexual love. More to the point, by replacing sacred with profane love, Ambrosio is committing the ultimate crime: he is challenging the idea of divine superiority to humanity. He does so by making the divine (the Blessed Virgin) an object of sexual attraction/action. He is breaking down the bar between the human and the superhuman (as Victor Frankenstein thinks he is doing by stumbling upon the secret of animation; as Endymion truly does in Keats). Byron’s comment on The Monk was that Lewis should have made Matilda truly love Ambrosio—the theme of spirits in love with mortals being a favorite of Byron, who regarded the human and the divine as inseparable.

The monk’s crime is thus not hypocrisy but challenging vested authority and its values. That is why he must be destroyed—convolutedly and horribly. Hence this novel’s devil and its God act
together; indeed they are not distinguishable. Matilda is doing God's work as much as the devil's. To take desire seriously is to challenge religion as traditionally constituted; it is to redefine the divine in terms of a religion of rebellion and resistance: a kind of Romantic Liberation Theology. This connection is not so far-fetched: the God found in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is emphatically a God with a "preferential option" for the oppressed.

The formula of desire without satisfaction is the basis of Blake's concept of evil. In Blake, evil is essentially frustrated desire; it does not denote disobedience to authority. In his view, frustrated people behave irrationally, either withdrawing into compulsive-controlling behavior, like his Urizen, or indulging in bursts of rebellion incited by panic or impulse, like his Orc. Whereas earlier culture had regarded frustration as good—it is a sacrifice to authority, as in priestly celibacy—Blake takes desire as good. "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence"; "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires." What differentiates Los, Blake's hero, from Urizen and Orc is that Los takes desire seriously: he uses it as the power to create. Orc by contrast explodes, then subsides exhausted: he turns into Urizen, the spirit of frustration—and repression. "Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained," says Blake's *Marriage of Heaven & Hell*, "And being restrain'd, it by degrees becomes passive, till it is only the shadow of desire."

The idea that evil derives from frustrated, hence distorted desire, is the key to the maverick psychoanalyst, Wilhelm Reich. In Reich, desire originates in sexual desire. For him this is a body-force identical with a mysterious cosmic ("orgone") energy. Desire is the accumulation of and need to discharge sex-energy, which, if denied or blocked, tenses the body into a mechanism of self-control. This control mechanism in turn can only relate to others by seeking to frustrate their desires, too. Frustrated desire turns into a compulsion to control, a pseudo-desire often manifesting as a fetish for collecting or owning. In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Reich reaches Blake's conclusion that the compulsion to control by its very nature cannot be satisfied. Nothing can be totally dominated—something always eludes control. Hence the only true exercise of control is by destroying.

The power to destroy acts as a paradigm of power itself and an obsessive goal, a way to prove that one exists, given that frustrated desire undermines one's sense of identity. If one can destroy something, one has proof positive of power over reality—and a persuasive demonstration by which to control others. A fascination with destructive violence is thus the corollary and infallible sign of frustrated desire, often a desire so deeply frustrated that it lies unconscious, inarticulate. Thus a dichotomy of desire/create vs. control/destroy emerges in the period of *The Monk*. The industrial revolution was making humanity's great wish possible: a
world without scarcity, a world with enough for everybody. The leap in productive power is, after the neolithic revolution, unprecedented, "the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world recorded in written documents." After averaging under 1 per cent yearly in the 18th century, industrial output rose 23 per cent between 1800 and 1810, more than 38 per cent between 1810 and 1820, despite the slump following the Napoleonic wars, and more than 47 per cent between 1820 and 1830. This increase marks a shift in the power relations by which humanity, nature, and God are arranged. Human power enlarges at the others' expense—and with it the scope of desire. Civilization (as Rousseau speculated) is now visibly a product of human creative power, and hence of human desire. In Blake, desire guided by imagination (the power to visualize) has the mission to create civilization itself. The Industrial Revolution demonstrates the power of desire to shape reality, human desire unleashed along with a wave of revolutionary actions aimed at removing authoritarian structures. Desire was recreating European—and world—civilization.

Thou Shalt Not

Yet the civilization created by this desire also yielded negative results, as Ricardo implies when he notes that caprice can cause a depression. Along with the massive jump in productive power emerged a new kind of impoverishment, new ferocity in warfare and colonial exploitation, and alienation: the loss of meaning which is at bottom a loss of the desire to be alive. For living and desiring cannot be separated. One recalls Ricardo's distinction between agrarian society, the product of centuries of feudalism, and society based upon "manufactures," the latter being dominated by necessity, the former by desire. Ricardo's debating partner was Reverend Thomas Malthus of population fame, an "agrarian economist" whose "unrelenting defence of the landlord class . . . still causes one to wince today." Malthus has had unparalleled influence; his Essay on Population appeared in 1798, the year of Wordsworth and Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads and the year when the popularity of the Gothic novel peaked. Population was not conceived as demography but as polemic against reordering property relations: demography proved a novel weapon. The work is an assault on political desire expressed as an assault on sexual desire.

Malthus's target was William Godwin, who advocated radical changes in property relations. Godwin argued that if everyone worked, collaboratively, then only about two hours a day would suffice to meet the needs of all the population, allowing the security—and freedom—for everyone to develop to full human potential. Godwin typifies a complex and profound realization that emerges with the French and Industrial Revolutions: (1) The physical means for ending scarcity are within reach:
an unprecedented situation. For poverty, famine, disease had hitherto been unavoidable—built into the constitution of reality by necessity. (2) Civilization is a human creation, the result of human desire, not of obeying authority-ordained rules. Thus (3) civilization is capable of being changed to meet human wishes. (4) Social emancipation is not only desirable, it is inevitable.

Malthus, by contrast, set out to prove, scientifically, that changing property relations is not only wrong: it also violates the physical constitution of the cosmos itself. In Malthus, property relations are God's will: self-interest is "the moving principle of society." "To the established administration of property and to the apparently narrow principle of self-love," we owe "everything, indeed, that distinguishes the civilized from the savage state." Desire is the property of people with property. Equalizing property relations undermines God and nature's design.

Population proved that helping people is really hurting them; hurting them, in turn, really helps them, for only deprivation will stop them from reproducing beyond market demand—and keep them producing. Godwinian benevolence is nothing compared to Malthus's self-interest. Desire is again the enemy. The desire for social change is really anarchic, an insane impulse to unleash the terror of population explosion. The key point, for the student of desire, is that Malthus identifies the evil desire to change society with sex impulse: unchecked sex desire = disaster. Thus only by repressing desire can one have one's desire. This idea is not quite so paradoxical if one realizes that desire in the world view of Malthus is essentially not desire at all, but control and the need to control. Hence Byron sums up Malthus's social doctrine in property terms thus: "Thou shalt not marry—except well." Or as Blake definitively puts it in "The Garden of Love": "Thou shalt not."

In the history of desire, Malthus anticipates Freud by about a century. For Freud, unrestrained sex impulse would destroy civilization. The "pleasure principle" must be subordinated to the "reality principle," or the individual and society will crash to pieces. The postponement of desire is the basis of the reality principle—really, of sanity itself. It is an analogue of the businessman's need to invest, not consume, his profit: a practice that paradoxically demands substantial reward. Freud's fear of desire in general suggests that the real difficulty for human beings is not his death "instinct," but the pleasure principle itself. In The Future of an Illusion he defines what makes an illusion: desire. The "characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from wishes." It follows that a belief is "an illusion when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation." Wishing and deceiving are co-extensive. The power to desire is (also) the power to delude oneself. Illusions—like dreams in The Interpretation of Dreams—are in essence desires. One believes what one wants to believe, often in spite of evidence. The tenacity of illusion derives from the persistence of desire, its blind refusal to be crushed out.

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Here Freud seems confused. Illusion is not a result of desire, but of a need to control, for every illusion expresses a struggle for domination, not liberation. Desire seeks possibilities, what-might-be: not what-must-be. What desire sees is neither real nor unreal; it is the hypothetical, the imaginable. Those who do not know (or who deny) their desires destroy their power to imagine, and hence to change—and hence to create. This is the final lesson of *The Monk*. Ambrosio acts on his wish, against conscience and institution, but soon tires of his mistress and seeks another. The stimulus of arousal evaporates; he is more frustrated than ever, for he cannot untangle desire from the thrill of dominating. His sex-compulsion is really a need to get rid of or evade love—not experience it. Love requires trust. Trust, the opposite of controlling, is impossible in a controller-controlled relation. Without trust, there can be no full sexual release, no approach to the transcendence sex briefly realizes: a desire for total liberation. As Blake says, “Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?” when we desire total union, like the lovemaking of Milton’s angels.

Thus what sexual desire manifests is a deeper kind of desire, the desire of an unknown, almost totally repressed self. This pat of personality has been denied, criticized, ridiculed, and repressed for so long that it fears to appear. Where desire “comes from” is perhaps the deepest mystery in desire; for Blake, it originates in the divine identity to which all people belong. In his fragment “On Love,” Shelley says desire springs from a “chasm” or “void” inside us: the origin of desire is something unknowable within that cannot be directly accessed. Carl Jung called it the “superconscious” mind. It is a mystery; it resembles the physicist David Bohm’s concept of the “implicate order.” Human beings have a need to create that derives from this implicate order and that is essentially play: desire freely expressed. Society, Bohm notes, crushes this need early and with fanatical thoroughness.14 Therefore, in the case of the monk, sex desire is only the outward shell of a deeper need, which is to be a genuine spiritual leader, one whose experience of suffering enables him to help others. The desire of the repressed self for a better world is ultimately the creative power within us. This is more threatening than any sexual urge. To paraphrase Abraham Maslow, we fear to know the negative things about ourselves, but we fear, even more, to know the godlike in us.15

Notes


5 Dante, La Vita Nuova, tr. Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) p. 58. Even in poems where visualization is not about sex, the implicit model is sexual. In Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” the poet sounds as if he has masturbation in mind when he describes visualizing: “When on my couch I lie, in vacant or in pensive mood, They [the mental image of the flowers] flash upon that inward eye, / Which is the bliss of solitude.”


7 This is Horace Walpole on Wollstonecraft—a “philosophizing serpent in our bosom” (quoted in Moira Ferguson, Introduction to Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft [New York: Norton, 1975], p. 10). The 1790s were a great period for the theory of desire, witnessing not only Wollstonecraft’s important work, but also other great manifestos of desire, Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man and William Godwin’s Political Justice. See my “The Eleventh Commandment: Sex and Spirit in Wollstonecraft and Malthus,” Journal of the History of Ideas, 51 [July–October, 1990], pp. 1–21.


12 Don Juan 15:297–304. Byron refers to Malthus in Don Juan, where he epitomizes hypocrisy: preaching abstinence, he produces numerous offspring. Malthus does not say, of course, don’t reproduce, but do not have children you can’t pay for. To Byron, Malthusian sex is essentially prostitution: available only to those who can pay; those who cannot must go without.

Freely expressing desire—for its own sake—is the key to creativity for Bohm; chimpanzees, he notes, paint just as young children do. But if rewarded externally, their interest and the quality of their work decline markedly. Reward/punish training destroys creativity, which springs from spontaneous desire: “It eventually brings about violence of various kinds. For creativity is a prime need”…“its denial brings about a pervasive state of dissatisfaction and boredom. This leads to intense frustration that is conducive to a search for exciting ‘outlets,’ which can readily involve a degree of force that is destructive”: desire/create vs. control/destroy, again (Science, Order, and Creativity [New York: Bantam, 1987], p. 232).

Tobias Smollett and *Roderick Random*

Ben Satterfield

Contemporary novels, mired in domestic dross or childhood nostalgia, seem so trifling these days, and offer little to a reader except more of the same—the detailed accounts of coming of age, initiation into adulthood, or the family fumbles that are recorded over and over, endlessly. Writers seem to have lost sight of their audience and are standing at gaze in front of their mirrors, which reflect very little since not much is there—no experience, no vision, no struggle—just words.

By comparison, the literature of other centuries is rife with action, conflict, inventiveness, and energy. The characters were robust, they wanted something, and they acted, they didn't wander aimlessly or become catatonic with indecision. Some of these older novels have lost freshness and charm, as one might expect, but one in particular is still exciting, still capable of giving pleasure the way it did in the 18th century.

*Roderick Random*, the first novel of 26-year-old Tobias Smollett, was published anonymously in January, 1748, and was an immediate success despite the fact that contemporary journals gave it slight notice and hardly any praise. British readers, however, instantly recognized it as the work of a master of fiction and were curious to discover the author. Lady Mary Wortley Montague supposed Henry Fielding (her cousin) to be responsible; further conjecture ended in April when Smollett's name appeared on the second edition. In November, 1749, a third edition brought the printing total to 6,500 copies, an extraordinarily high figure for the time.

Sandwiched between Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747) and Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), a lesser novel might have perished, but *Roderick Random* held its own—just as, in the face of vacillating critical opinion, it still does today. Only a novel of merit could have survived the vicissitudes of almost two and a half centuries of literary scrutiny—and *Roderick Random* has had more than its share of detractors. Even those
who profess some admiration for the author do not hesitate to disparage the book by pointing out and condemning its flaws; those who are not at all fond of Smollett deprecate the novel as tasteless, cruel, and gratuitously brutal, while denouncing the author as a disagreeable and cynical minor writer of historical interest only.

In the midst of such strong attacks, an objective appraisal of *Roderick Random* is difficult. The novel has its imperfections—as, of course, most novels do—but it has a rare energy and sheer invigorating gusto that cannot be dismissed; it is full of mordant wit, comic incidents, and satiric observations, as well as accurate descriptions and a sardonic anatomy of the economics of survival in the middle of the 18th century. The so-called flaws of the novel are due more to the form Smollett employed than to a lack of talent, which some have imputed. Smollett imitated neither Richardson nor Fielding—indeed he thought (mistakenly) that Fielding took from *Roderick Random* models for some of the characters in *Tom Jones*—but followed, as he says in the preface, the example of the picaresque novelists. He states unequivocally his attempt to "represent modest merit struggling with every difficulty to which a friendless orphan is exposed, from his own want of experience, as well as from the selfishness, envy, malice, and base indifference of mankind."

By definition, no one can argue that Roderick lacks "modest merit," but whether Smollett succeeds in representing "every difficulty" is a moot question and not really significant; he certainly provides a panoply of incidents to illustrate the exigencies of his character's situation and to evoke "that generous indignation which ought to animate the reader against the sordid and vicious disposition of the world."

The disposition of the world that Roderick encounters is profoundly sordid and rapacious, but the presentation of it is by no means hyperbolic. Smollett's writing, always vivid, is especially realistic concerning the age, and it tenaciously displays a fidelity to life. The following evaluation by a 19th century biographer, Oliphant Smeaton, is an overstatement but is not without validity:

Roderick Random was the spirit incarnate of the cold-blooded, coarse-fibred, religionless eighteenth century—a century wherein virtue was perpetually on the lips, and vice as perpetually in the hearts of its men, a century wherein its women were colorless puppets, without true individuality or definite aims, but oscillating aimlessly between Deism and Methodism to escape from the ennui that resulted from the lack of true culture.
Captures Period

Doubters may refer to the respected historian, J. H. Plumb, whose *England in the Eighteenth Century* should confirm the assertion that Smollett captured the period’s sharp “edge to life” as well as or perhaps better than any contemporary writer. (If Smollett is to be criticized for his depiction of base behavior and incident, then so must the major English writers from Chaucer through Shakespeare to Daniel Defoe and on to Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and Harold Pinter, not to mention great Irish writers such as Jonathan Swift, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett; ultimately, of course, such criticism is useless.)

Roderick’s experiences in the world, from a very early age, are largely composed of anguish and trauma: as a child he is often abused without cause and punished unfairly, and as an adult he is duped, swindled, molested, shanghaied, abandoned, and victimized in general by grossly inhumane treatment. His indignation, therefore, is not surprising, nor is the fact that he himself sometimes devises schemes of deceit or revenge, a natural response that offers little grounds for criticism. Roderick is no saint; he is flesh and blood throughout, and his displays of pride and anger are the result of his human weaknesses—of which he has his mortal share. But notwithstanding the abundance of callous mistreatment heaped upon Roderick, he never learns enough to protect himself from the next swindler or scoundrel, and in spite of his professed skepticism, he is usually vulnerable. In fact, he remains so inherently innocent that he repeatedly ends up the loser. This gullibility has to be a redeeming quality: Roderick is never soiled by his misadventures, his soul is never really warped, his own humanity never twisted, or his own feelings insulated from others. Throughout the novel he is capable of sympathy—even to the point of sending money to a man who despicably misused him—and if he is not always able to forgive, perhaps we should forgive him for that.

Anyone looking askance at Roderick’s own attempts to cheat should remember that he feels he must play the game of survival on the world’s terms. Since he is the world’s plaything, he cannot be much blamed (the masterful opening establishes Roderick as an object of sport, a ball to be knocked about; fortunately, he is resilient and can bounce back hardily). Also it is in his favor that Roderick is never slickly skilled enough to succeed in his schemes. Again, redemption for him lies in his inability to accommodate himself facilely to a life of crime.

If Roderick never really learns much, perhaps it is just as well, considering the severity of some of his lessons; but the reasons for his lack of development may lie in the picaresque tradition Smollett follows. The original picaresque novels were concerned with a pícaro, a rogue, vagabond, or knave; he was low-born, and his roguery was usually
displayed in a light and amusing vein, the machinations of the *picaro* to sustain himself being of more concern to the author than the character *per se*, and the focus of the author being more upon the external world through which the adventurer moved than upon his internal or psychological world. Irony was often present, but the satirical jabs were more humorous than malicious, since the *picaro* was usually a participant in the satire rather than a satiric observer. The vagabond never learned nor grew nor changed in spite of all his experiences.

While Smollett maintains many of the picaresque traditions, he carefully alters those not amenable to his particular brand of satire, a type more severe and biting, which it must be in order to incite indignation for "the sordid and vicious disposition of the world." Smollett's creation is altogether original: Roderick is not of humble birth, never laughs at himself, and possesses emotions that the true *picaro* cannot afford. In addition, Roderick is never satirized but is used as the vehicle through which Smollett wields his satire, the means by which he can focus on social ills. The book contains other innovations, and Smollett adroitly distinguishes his use of the picaresque form from the models he only loosely follows.

Some critics have speculated that Smollett was his own model for the main character. While it is true that Smollett himself experienced many of the difficulties about which he wrote and that similarities exist between his life and Roderick's, any claim that *Roderick Random* is largely a biography is unfounded. Indeed, some critics of Smollett are so uncharitable that they give the writer no credit for invention. Roderick is Smollett's mouthpiece, to be sure, but he is no literary *Doppelgänger*. Walter Scott, who wrote a gentlemanly biography of Smollett, believed that the author exaggerated rather than softened his "cynical turn of temper" in his characters. But all Smollett's characters are skillful creations, so lifelike in many cases that more than a dozen people have been proposed as the subjects of imitation, and in one instance several real individuals have been supposed to be the sole model for a Smollett character. Perhaps such speculations should be viewed as testimony of Smollett's talent.

**Not from Life**

The characters in *Roderick Random* are not mere copies from life and should not be interpreted as representing real people. It is a human tendency to read biographical knowledge into a work of fiction, but it is a mistake to confuse the author with his creation. In an unsympathetic introduction to Smollett's works, W. E. Henley uses a string of words to characterize the author, "humorous, arrogant, red-headed, stiff-necked, thin-skinned, scurrilous," that could apply equally well to Roderick, as though the two were inextricably blended. They are not. Smollett's father
married without parental sanction and, having died the year Tobias was born, left his children dependent upon the mercy of his disgruntled father, a man not nearly so harsh as Roderick's grandparent. It is known that Smollett was bullied by his cousins, underwent the usual tribulations of a Scotsman in London, and served as a surgeon's mate in the Royal Navy—an occupation that took him to the Caribbean (where, in 1741, he took part in the British attack on the port of Cartagena) and undoubtedly provided the material for the brilliant sections concerning Roderick's naval service.

Whether Smollett actually suffered the deliberate hurt of malice is not known, but there is no doubt that he felt abused, just as there is no question about Roderick's mistreatment having the ring of reality. Elements of Smollett's own experiences appear throughout the book. For example, the poet Melopoyn's story is an exaggerated, sympathetic, and one-sided view of the trials that Smollett had with his first play. But these elements are fictionalized sufficiently to be removed from biography. In a letter from London dated May 8, 1763, Smollett vowed:

The only similitude between the circumstances of my own Fortune, and those I have attributed to Roderick Random, consists in my being born of a reputable Family in Scotland, in my being bred a Surgeon, and having served as a Surgeon's mate on board of a man of war during the Expedition to Carthagena. The low situations in which I have exhibited Roderick, I never experienced in my own person.

As noted, Roderick Random has faults—of which critics have said and made too much. The novel is episodic, the main character is static, and the events propelling the action are, more often than not, inorganic. Smollett clearly intends to engross his reader in the variety and number of adventures; as a result, unity, consistency, and character delineation are subordinated to diversity. The book is not tightly ordered, but loose structure is not synonymous with formlessness. This is a novel of incident, of event piled upon event, a fast-paced series of episodes joined together for the purpose of displaying "the sordid and vicious disposition of the world" through which the hero moves. True, the events more frequently serve to illuminate theme than character, but since satire is a principal aim in Roderick Random, readers should be as reluctant to censure Smollett on this account as they are to censure him for the episodic structure indigenous to the picaresque novel.

Some criticism has been leveled at the section on Miss Williams as being irrelevant, but her story is no more irrelevant to Roderick Random than is the story of The Old Man of the Hills to Tom Jones. What happens to Miss Williams essentially parallels what happens to Roderick: she is
repeatedly tricked (her impetuous nature makes her an easy victim of duplicity), betrayed, abused, and ultimately imprisoned. She is intelligent, not inherently wicked, and her behavior is as much the result of economics as Roderick's. She also evokes sympathy from Roderick, and at a time when his sympathy is purely magnanimous and motivated by no ulterior considerations.

As an innovative literary figure of the 18th century, Smollett is important. He was the first author to publish a long historical work in weekly segments at a modest price; he was the first major novelist to publish a complete novel as a serial; and he initiated the Gothic elements of romantic Jacobean and Elizabethan drama into the novel (in *Ferdinand Count Fathom*). *Roderick Random* has the first British tar in English fiction—and the colorful and eccentric sea dog has grown in popularity and number ever since. In introducing the jargon of the seafaring life, Smollett was the first novelist to use a professional argot. Also, in *Roderick Random* (and again fidelity to life is noted) appears the first account of homosexuality in English fiction and probably the first in European fiction since Petronius. And lastly, Smollett's talent for caricature, so amply evident in *Roderick Random*, can be seen reflected in the creations of a later admirer, Dickens, whose novels were primarily designed for serial publication, by his day a well-established practice.

Many novelists as well as legions of readers owe a debt of gratitude to Tobias Smollett, an original and imaginative writer with a lucid style that conveys both precision and ease, a true storyteller's art, and a clarity of wit, all of which are still fresh and enjoyable today. Of how many other writers, regardless of their century, can this be said?
Visits with a Cambodian Refugee Family

Usha Welaratna

A MAN came to the door, carrying a stack of frying pans. “You want frying pans, lady? Ten dollars for one.” They were the kind one could buy from Sears for three dollars apiece. We were not at my house, but at a Khmer (Cambodian) refugee’s home in Northern California where I was teaching English to six women as part of a research project. These refugees, the survivors of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, had been in the United States for fewer than five years.

The man held out a frying pan. But neither Pu Ma, in whose house I was teaching, nor any of the other refugees said anything. I looked at them. They were avoiding the salesman by looking away. They looked uncomfortable and it was obvious they did not want to deal with the man. I said to him, “These people have frying pans. They don’t need any.” As the salesman turned to leave, he said to the refugees, “I will get you the next time around.”

It was not an idle threat. He probably would “get them,” for the social behavior of Khmer refugees differs from typical American behavior. As Brown and Levinson have observed, interethnic miscommunication constitutes a means for discovering cultural norms of politeness.\(^1\) For example, Cambodians avoid face-to-face confrontations and open conflicts between individuals, and shun aggressive and competitive behavior. As observed by May Ebihara, the first American anthropologist to study a Khmer village, “Even when caught in troublesome situations the Khmer do not assert themselves or ‘fight for their rights’ as Americans might do, [and] they usually express anger only to third parties.” This is precisely what I found: after the man left, Pu Ma and other
refugees complained to me that they were harassed by other people as well. Some church groups tried to convert them to various denominations without the refugees's consent, and in some cases intimidated them and took their children off to Sunday school. Various "volunteers" asked for donations for causes such as "helping the homeless." Youngsters collected money for newspapers which they promised to deliver but never did. I myself have witnessed some of these incidents.

The Cambodian Historical Experience

Why don't the Khmer refugees assert their rights in troublesome situations such as those described above? To understand, we must look at their history and background before they came to the U.S., and how these influence their experiences as refugees here.

Cambodia is an agricultural country, and for more than 2000 years was influenced by primarily non-western, Indian culture and thought. Even though Cambodia was a French Protectorate for nearly a century before her independence in 1954, due to poor transportation and communication, western influences were limited to the capital city of Phnom Penh and one or two other large cities. These were occupied by a small number of ethnic Cambodian elites and a "middle class" formed mainly by people of Chinese and Vietnamese origins. More than 90 per cent of the ethnic Cambodians lived in rural villages as peasant cultivators of rice, fruits, and vegetables, as artisans and craftsmen, and a few as fishermen.

Cambodian society was structured hierarchically in a manner similar to that in India. While many peasants were self-sufficient, they showed great respect through both word and action to the nobility, to Buddhist monks, to elders, and to both traditionally and western-educated segments of society. These cultural values were further reinforced by religious values. About 98 per cent of the people were Theravada Buddhists who generally adhered to Buddhist doctrines of non-violence and of social peace through harmony and cooperation. As one refugee explained, aggressive behavior and provocative speech were avoided because, "When one speaks nicely to others they do the same, and no one has to regret afterwards. It fosters feelings of love, harmony, and goodwill towards others." Cambodians also believed they must be hospitable to people who come to their homes.

I talked to Pu Ma and other refugees at length and discovered that these social ideals were passed down to each generation both in schools and at home. In her halting English, Pu Ma narrated her life story to me. She had experienced excessive poverty in her early years. Because she was poor, Pu Ma's formal education ended when she was about nine years old. However, her mother ensured that she grew up with the proper social values. Pu Ma says,
In my country people were very, very polite. When we saw the monks walking on the street, we worshiped them. If I saw an old lady or old man, I said “Chumriep Sova” (Good day). When the old lady walked past me, I bowed. My mother told me whenever I saw the old lady and old man, I must bow and say “Chumriep Sova.” I think that is good because in Cambodia for a long time, people did the same thing. My mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, did the same. My mother said to me “Don’t forget to show respect.”

As a rule, these values were upheld both by rural people and western-educated urban dwellers. But they were particularly important in the villages; rural farmers needed each other’s help and cooperation for sustaining their economic self-sufficiency. Even after independence in 1954, successive governments continued to instill national pride in their own history and heritage and did not emphasize westernization. As a result, the Khmer lifestyle continued with little change until the communists gained power in 1975.

In the pre-communist Khmer society, the nuclear family was “the most fundamental social group, bound together by a variety of affective, economic, moral, and legal ties.” (Ebihara 1968:111.) After marriage children set up nuclear households but maintained close ties with their parents and siblings. Pu Ma told me how she and her husband had cared for both their extended families. Even though they themselves were quite poor, Pu Ma and her husband provided financial support to her father-in-law and physically cared for her ailing mother.

The communist Khmer Rouge regime headed by Pol Pot came into power with the aim of creating an egalitarian and racially pure Khmer society by initiating a complete social revolution. One of their first targets was the traditional Khmer family. The regime told the people that they now owed their allegiance only to the “high organization” that headed the revolution. They separated families (including Pu Ma’s) and communities by forcibly sending husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, relatives, and friends to age- and sex-graded labor camps, often far away from one another. Family members were forced to spy against their own relatives. Human labor replaced technological innovations. All members of society became “equals,” regardless of age, previous social status, or wealth.

In their attempts to “purify” the society, the regime began to annihilate certain segments of society which they considered corrupt or tainted. These included the educated, the wealthy, the westernized urban sector of society, the Buddhist monks (considered “parasites” because they sustained themselves on food offered by the lay people in return for education and moral guidance), former government and military officials, and people of Vietnamese and Chinese origins.
Pu Ma's Experiences under the Khmer Rouge

As time went on, the killings became indiscriminate. Every member of society, especially the men, regardless of their social or ethnic backgrounds, became potential murder victims of the ruthless regime that starved and mentally and physically tortured them. Even the Khmer Rouge cadre who displeased their superiors were included. Pu Ma's husband was killed with about 700 other men. His crime was that he had accompanied her when she took some food to her starving sister in another village. On the return journey, both Pu Ma and her husband were caught, accused of attempting to escape to Vietnam, and imprisoned in a Buddhist temple where male prisoners were starved, chained, and left on the floor among their bodily wastes for more than a month. In a deliberate desecration of traditional values, temples, previously associated with the sanctity of life, were turned into prisons by the regime.

Two days after her husband was murdered, Pu Ma escaped her own execution by running away when she and about 80 other women were led to the "Killing Fields." After a week of hiding in the jungle by the day and trekking through the night, Pu Ma reached her three young children whom she had left with her mother. But her agony was not over. Her mother was murdered soon afterwards, and Pu Ma again had to run for her life when she was warned by a friendly Khmer Rouge spy who told her that she was to be killed that night along with many other women and children. This time, she also had to ensure the safety of her children and her younger brother. She describes the night they fled into the jungle:

It was raining that night, and it was very, very cold and very dark. We couldn't see. We were very scared. We sat under a tree. Maybe half an hour later the soldiers took the people to kill. I could see the soldiers smoking the cigarettes. When they finished smoking they started to kill. I could hear the children cry. Sometimes I heard the lady, she cried very loud. My children and I, we were very scared. I saw the communist Pol Pot smoke the cigarettes again and they walked far away. I took my children and walked again.

Two weeks after her escape, the Vietnamese communists defeated the Khmer Rouge. Pu Ma went back to her village and managed to earn a living by selling homemade sweets. But because she was a widow and had no male protection, she was harassed by plundering soldiers. This prompted her to flee her country with her brother and children in search of refuge elsewhere. After spending five years in refugee camps, she came to America in 1985.
Cambodians in America

In the three years and eight months that the Khmer Rouge were in power, it is estimated that between one to three million people died out of a population of seven million. Since many of those who died were westernized and urban and were men, the vast majority of Cambodians who fled in search of refuge from the autogenocidal communist regime were peasant women.

Unlike immigrants who migrate to new lands with prior mental and physical preparations for changes, Cambodian refugees fled from their homeland due to circumstances beyond their control, with no preparation. When these refugees arrived in the U.S., they came lacking not only the cultural skills to cope successfully with the American way but also without knowledge of the English language. French had been Cambodia's second language. English was introduced in schools only in the late 1960s but limited to the cities. Many of the refugees were illiterate or had minimal literacy in Khmer, and almost all became familiar with English only when they escaped to Thai refugee camps where basic English skills were taught to ease their resettlement in third countries. But even when refugees learn the English language as some have done, they do not know how to use it effectively in daily life. They do not know how to speak aggressively or assertively, nor would they feel comfortable doing so. The reactions of Pu Ma and other refugees to salesmen and other solicitors convinced me that I should design my English lessons to meet their needs, to enable them to cope with situations they encounter as refugees living in socially and economically depressed areas. I further resolved to teach them about American lifestyles and values so that they would be able to adjust more successfully to the society here.

Another Cultural Misunderstanding

Not long after the incident involving the salesman, I returned to Pu Ma's house. As I turned my car around the corner to New Drive where Pu Ma lives, clouds of brown dust from road and building construction swirled into my face, choking me and making my eyes run. New Drive has no trees, only rows of substandard houses occupied by a few Laotion refugee families and Hispanic families but mainly by Cambodian refugees. Groups of children played on the gritty roadside littered with remnants of garbage. The city considers this a "blighted area" and periodically cleans it, but on this bright, hot, September morning the stench was terrible. Several mothers stood around with babies and toddlers, keeping an eye on those playing. Older men who had been farmers, whose knowledge of traditional Cambodian cultivation techniques gave them no job skills suitable for America, squatted on the
roadside. Some were chatting but a few sat staring into space. I wondered if they were thinking of their cool green rice fields at home that Haing Ngor, a Cambodian medical doctor who survived the Khmer Rouge slaughter, nostalgically describes in his autobiography: "Over the rainy months, the rice plants grew thick and green and lush, and the dikes were hidden from sight until around August, when the rains stopped, and the plants gradually began to turn golden..." (Ngor 1987, 7.)

I walked up the dark, narrow, concrete stairs leading to the apartment that Pu Ma shares with her children, her unmarried brother, another refugee family of four, and a man who was the only member of his family to escape the Khmer Rouge. Altogether, there are ten occupants in the apartment sharing two bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room. The refugees do not live like this by choice; for many, the only way to afford housing is to share a place with others. And because almost all lost many immediate or extended family members, refugees end up sharing their houses with people who are neither relatives nor even former acquaintances. Their cooperative social values have helped the Khmer refugees to cope with their economic hardships in America. They also find comfort and solace from their own people, who had the same experiences.

When I knocked on Pu Ma’s apartment door, Koun Srey, her 14-year-old daughter, opened it and greeted me saying "Hi, teacher, come in. Please sit down." I went in, removed my shoes, and placed them against the wall inside the house. Every Khmer refugee household has a big box placed just inside the door for footwear. Although they prefer to leave footwear outdoors, they no longer do so because of thefts.

I sat down on the couch in the living room. The room was bare. But the walls were decorated with posters of the famous Angkor Wat and of the Buddha, with Cambodian proverbs carefully printed in the Khmer language by Pu Ma’s 17-year-old son, and with beautiful black and white line drawings done by Koun Srey.

Pu Ma’s five-year-old daughter sat on a low chair in front of the television, eating a bowl of noodles. Giyey, the 56-year-old woman who was the head of the other family, sat on a mat on the floor, preparing betel leaves, which the older adults chew. As they did in their villages, most Cambodians prefer to sit on the floor when performing various chores: chopping vegetables, folding laundry, and even eating. In fact, they have different woven mats they lay out for food preparation and for consumption. On my left was a hide-away-bed on which a man slept. He works the night shift in an electronics company. He had drawn the blankets over his head to shut out the noise and babble. In almost all these overcrowded households, the younger men sleep in the living rooms at night so the women can have some privacy in the rooms. It is not much; every night Pu Ma shares her one room and bed with her two daughters. In the
kitchen two young men were seated at a sewing machine, ripping the seams of two pairs of jeans to adjust them. They had bought the machine and the jeans at the flea market. All the children were home because it was a school holiday. My regular adult students were not present for the English lesson, since their children were also home from school.

Koun Srey sat next to me, and we discussed her school work and her future. I commented that her drawings were beautiful and said she should develop her artistic talents. Koun Srey mentioned that an art teacher had offered to teach her in his house if she went there on Saturdays. I said that she should take up the offer, which was an opportunity for her to develop her abilities; perhaps this might even lead the way to a financially successful, satisfying job in the future. But Koun Srey did not reply. She glanced at her mother and looked away. I felt puzzled and looked at her mother. Pu Ma was avoiding my eyes. She seemed as uncomfortable as when the salesman had come. As it was obvious that neither Pu Ma nor her daughter wished to continue the discussion, I changed the subject. I was disconcerted. I felt I had acted wrongly, but was not sure in what way.

**Learning When Not To Intervene**

I returned to Pu Ma's home the next day hoping to find out what I had done wrong. I was apprehensive about my welcome, but Pu Ma invited me in warmly. We both sat on the sofa, and I explained to her the reason for my visit. After a moment's silence, she spoke gently, yet with certainty, searching for the right words both to express her views and to preserve my dignity. "Teacher, in my country girls do not become artists. It is not right. I want Koun Srey to go to school and learn a lot. But I don't like her to be an artist." She also did not want her daughter to be alone with a man, and she could not chaperone Koun Srey since she had to care for the rest of her family. Cambodian girls are expected to get married and become an example for their children, and if a girl had a reputation of entertaining boyfriends, she would not be considered a suitable wife for a man. Both Pu Ma and Koun Srey value education, not only for Koun Srey's future employment but also for her better marriage prospects. Cambodians look upon school as a place of learning, not romance. Pu Ma says,

I think about the future. People ask me if my daughter can marry with their son. But when I ask my daughter, she says she wants to go to school. I can't see my daughter when she is in school. I don't like my daughter having a boyfriend in the school like the other people living here. When girls have boyfriends they don't study. I say to my daughter if you have a boyfriend and if I know, I will hate it.
Like most other Khmer refugees, Pu Ma also came to America with no prior knowledge of this society and culture. She still hopes to return to Cambodia one day. Due to poor English skills, her interactions are still largely with her own people. She upholds traditional Khmer values, and considers it her duty as a parent to guide her children to grow up to be worthy people. From her point of view, a girl must be brought up so that she can find a good husband. Pu Ma is not alone in her outlook. A Khmer community leader I interviewed later echoed her sentiments:

The important thing for us in this society is not to lose our culture, our heritage. We want to compare both the American culture and our culture, and add new ideas. But we must be careful to pick only the good things. For example, we want to keep the Cambodian family style. The parent must protect the children and children must respect the parent. Children must understand this is my parent, brother, sister and look after each other. Girls should not go out at night and date. They must understand they are Asian girls, not American. They must go to school, come home, take care of studies and home. We don't want Asian girls to hang around on the streets. It doesn't look nice.

Such sentiments do not mean that the Khmer are opposed to romance; what they object to are the explicit public displays of physical love and marriage without parental consent. Khmer parents prefer to arrange suitably matched partners for their children, because they believe social and other compatibilities contribute to successful marriages. While many Cambodians allow their children to choose their own partners, parents nevertheless consider it important for their children to show consideration and respect for their feelings by asking them to find out about the backgrounds of their potential sons- and daughters-in-law.

I wondered how Koun Srey, a teen-ager growing up in America, felt about such values regarding love and marriage. She said,

My mom wants me to take care of myself so she advises me a lot. If I get a good education, when I want to marry, I can know if a man is good or bad. If I have a boyfriend and if she knew about it, she will advise me. I do what my mom says. I have a boy who likes me, but I don't want to have a boyfriend. I want to just keep studying. If you have boyfriends and girlfriends you forget about learning and think only about writing letter [sic].

It was obvious that, just as her own mother had done, Pu Ma also attempts
to instill in Koun Srey those values she considers important and that Koun Srey respects her mother's views. Koun Srey explained to me that her mother wants her to be employed so they can improve their financial condition but that financial success is not the only thing that mattered. It is also important to find the type of work that does not present social and moral problems. For example, Koun Srey worked at an assembly line in an electronics company. She gave all her wages to her mother. Her desire to ensure the welfare of her family was much greater than her desire for individual independence. The experience which destroyed their families and their way of life seems to strengthen these ideals even more.

I realized that like many in their community, Pu Ma and her family wanted to become economically self-sufficient and that they were making major changes in their lives to become a productive segment of this society. But it was also clear that they wanted to preserve those aspects of life that they believed contributed to a person's self-worth and that those aspects were at times more important than immediate economic success. These attitudes were understandable in light of Theravada Buddhist ideals which encourage spiritual rather than economic growth. In Cambodia, it was a person's character and integrity rather than economic worth that brought social recognition.

After hearing the explanations of Pu Ma and Koun Srey, I felt ashamed at my insensitivity to Pu Ma's social values. As a Sri Lankan and a fellow Asian, I share similar values and ideals regarding child rearing and consciously try to steer my children away from western influences that I consider undesirable or unsuitable for our background. Pu Ma sought refuge in America to keep her family intact and to provide a safe home for them. They had suffered enormous losses of family, society, country, and culture under Pol Pot. In my haste to "Americanize" Pu Ma's daughter, to help her seek a "successful future," I had completely overlooked the values that were more important to them. What I considered "success" and the way to achieve it would have led to distress and disruption for Pu Ma and her family. After all their losses, they surely needed no further crises.

In the course of my conversation with Pu Ma, I also discovered that though she was unhappy with my career suggestion to her daughter, Pu Ma did not want to correct or admonish me; she did not feel comfortable doing so, especially since I was her guest and her teacher. But because I stopped to find out, she was able to let her views be known without violating her cultural values by "saying bad things to me," as she put it, and to preserve her dignity.

In their present existence as refugees who came from a vastly different social and cultural background, Pu Ma and others in her community experience economic, social, and psychological hardships, mainly due to their living conditions in socially and economically depressed areas. To minimize their exploitation, I sought the help of a Cambodian com-
munity leader and arranged a public meeting at which a lawyer spoke to the refugees of their rights as legal residents of this country. At this meeting, we also taught them to assert their rights in ways that did not violate their social values so they could deal with these situations. For example, we taught them simple sentences like “I am Buddhist and I go to the temple,” and, “No, thank you. Please leave.”

While these actions contributed positively to the welfare of the refugees, I realized that in our desire to help others, we may at other times interfere adversely with their lives, even if inadvertently and with noble intentions. It became clear that we should stop to question whether our interventions provide actual benefits or whether they are harmful from the refugees’ points of view. For after all, refugees are not just objects to be rescued, but human beings with feelings and values which they deeply cherish.

Acknowledgements

This article would not have been written without the encouragement and support of Dr. James M. Freeman, professor of Anthropology, San Jose State University, and I thank him sincerely for his generosity. I also thank his wife, Patricia Freeman, for providing an “American perspective” which greatly enhanced the contents.

The real names of refugees whose views and lives are portrayed in this article have been changed for their protection. I am grateful to them for their friendship and cooperation.

Notes


Selected References for Readers Who Wish To Know More About Cambodian Refugees

Early Cambodian History
Pre-Revolutionary Cambodian Culture and Society

The Khmer Rouge Experience (Autobiographies)

Cambodians as Refugees in America
My Brother Read Lincoln

After a costumed procession
into the patriotic assembly,
my brother read Lincoln's monologue
under an old top hat,
wore a beard of Halloween hair
which reminded most of the teachers
of Fred Astaire as a Mennonite pacifist.

I took the usual early roles;
a crow with yellow paper beak
and black, crepe wings.
Then, a little windmill with six
others in windmill chorus
for "Jack in the Beanstalk."
No spoken lines in that,
but one song in wooden shoes
from Holland Michigan Tulip Festival.

Finally, I was Moon
from the bumpkin's play-within-a-play;
"Midsummer Night's Dream."
I stood above Wall
where Pyramus and Thisbe met.
"This lantern doth the moon present."
I croaked while he celebrated
battles, sacrifices not in vain
from the back of a Valentine envelope.
Flatheads

I knew disheveled children
living in a cottage
of green shingle siding
at the end of our alley;
fronting on no street,
serviced only by the alley
and easements of neighbor yards.
These children had flat heads
and played under flapping laundry
or tag through others' gardens.

Perhaps they seemed disfigured
because of those bowl haircuts,
shorn by an obese mother
who fed them surplus oatmeal.
She brayed for them at dark
like a hoarse fishmonger.
My parents insisted
their heads were actually flat,
a condition caused by hours
of neglect in their cribs.

When they were the lucky ones
to receive Easter baskets,
baby rabbits from Methodists
as tulips opened along the alley,
I wanted to be the father
they could not afford.
I would roll them over
each hour on their stained quilts,
and never chase them away
from the playground for sport.
Hootenanny

“Puff the Magic Dragon” thumps and strums out of those deep Bose speakers we bolt into Cadillacs now, because it’s Friday and that foreman, one line over, has gone home. Someone in a pastel shirt and tie will sprint to turn it down before a superintendent of Trim Shop hears it, if he hasn’t left too, or it will be drowned out by a yellow “mule” pulling seven trash carts full speed to punch out. This kid with a clip-board, on loan from Tech Center to learn how the other half lives, always thought that was a converted C-47 anyway-nursery tale beast from his own youth, bristling with gatling guns. It could chew up an LZ the area of a football field in some miracle of brevity, one round every square yard.
A Few Laps with the Mall Walkers

While my car waits on Sears' hydraulic pedestal, I scout future competition, take a few laps with the mall walkers. There are hundreds of Good Friday shoppers ready to spend and hundreds of the sweat-suited elderly circling, flaunting survival, everyone polite not to cut corners 'round Easter Bunny's Magic Cottage or in arcades off the main concourse. Big Boy teases its opening with each tour, fixing caffeine and French toast.

Ahead, two widowed schoolteachers strut studying pulse rate monitors at intervals. Sure, I plan to overtake them! Meanwhile I can hear, like echoes, tires send hissing off a curb when asphalt is wet, those noises they miss, so deaf with exertion: Vacuum sweepers hidden by grates of stores, a rain forest crashing of water in the fountain, speech wrung out of plate glass by crews of youths with squeegees, the soft cooing of dark stained grandmas catching breath near a pet store display of baby rabbits.
Squall

Snuck off
the line before the full
storm whipped through to find
sprinkles blowing, coffee cups
dancing across the parking
lot, bruised black udders
of clouds that bolt lightning
couldn't stitch down, dragged
by an algae sky. I was
safe in the car when the horn
blew and the auto workers
came running, some with news-
papers snapping above
their heads; the born-again
man who peddles peanut-
brITTLE for the Assembly
of God eyeing those thunder-
heads like fat snakes; the wide-
hipped woman who pounds
on door rubbers near me
with the tall Puerto
Rican
girl's hand on her shoulder
huddled under one child's
umbrella; a thin kid with
a radio like a suit-
case and traffic-signal red
sweatshirt monogramed 'SHIT
HAPPENS' sprinting ahead
of the squalls' dark lash.
Flesh Shadows

I stretch out on a straw mat,
legs relaxed from an afternoon run.
My husband lies next to me.
The sun casts shadows
across his middle. I study
freckles—the space between each one.
In some sense
this moment is full.
We talk about
our need for days apart.
Days when I read,
entertain friends.
He traces my cheek with his finger,
exploring its indents and rounds.
Even The Lemon Matures

We often talk about
what angers us in each other.
How the tenderness
of an evening
can be crowded out
next morning,
even as large aspens
crowd out small ones.
I face him with apologies
as he accuses me:
"You didn't make the dentist appointment,
you forgot to exchange the blue silk shirt."
My name
an insistent tree scrape
against window panes.
In our garden,
sprinklers swish like skirts.
Toads jump in a circle
under the spray.
I catch one and hold its face
close to mine.
Do I jump like you?
I set the toad down in our family orchard.
The grapefruit, oranges, tangerines
are ready to be picked.
Even the lemon matures,
fragrant, round and firm.
Its body grows in season.
Two People

We talk and cry together
late into the night.
My friend cannot find
a way out.
She tells me she paints
the entry to her new home
bright yellow then waits
for her husband’s approval.
He only sees the places she missed
that wave like tall dry weeds.
He picks through their garden,
ignores ripe green.
She grabs him by the shoulders
to shake the arrogance from his body.
His eyes, nose, lips
form a hard, angry line.
“Damn it, you bitch!”

Next morning,
I come down to their kitchen
for coffee.
I see two sill-ripened
tomatoes,
on the ledge of the square-paned window,
an Andrew Wyeth painting,
in a cold New England kitchen.
"Is this room okay?" she asks.
I carry the last suitcase,
nod,
begin to unpack perfume, books, red shoes,
fingering each for a moment.
"Karen, take the softest pillow,
the bedside near the window
for fresh air."
Friends for twenty years,
we hug, link arms,
hurry out to October sunshine,
cold beer on the beach
at Zelda's.
Leaning back,
my friend recounts other Saturday afternoons
when we talked about her childhood.
How Daddy Ray locked her in a closet.
Fear of darkness, small space
still haunts her. She told me
what our trials were for: to change us
into God's likeness.

We are two starfish,
who cling to the same rock,
survive the over and over of the surf.
Our arms connect
starfish content.
Touches of green/azure glint on rocks.
Ruby Talks

I remember when there was no money.
I cut peaches for eight hours
to buy my sons' school jeans.
The freshly cut halves were open wounds;
the red I saw on those Elbertas
was the blood of my dreams:
my husband and one son gone.

Yesterday when the nurse met me
in the hospital corridor—
_a Greyhound bus hit your son_
on old Highway 99—
cold linoleum became a shelf of pain
for this, another death.

Before his death,
I poured milk for my son
into the fat, ceramic pitcher.
I poured for his father and older brother.
I blessed each meal,
thanks for food, take care of my children Lord,
thanks again for family.
James Sutherland-Smith

In the Tropical Fern House at Kew

This is not the icy English coast
Where you huddled in my car
Squinting through tears and frozen lashes
At your Arabic-English dictionary
And photographs of plants you couldn't name.
Your face vanished when your breath fogged the windscreen.

Above me the ferns hang in baskets
Like discarded ballet dresses
Ragged and ungraceful, and there is one
With layers of fronds of white and brown and red
As though the pages of your dictionary
Had been flipped over to where transparencies

Reveal successive depths of skin, muscle,
Nerves, a blood system, the skeleton.
We are turned over beyond body or bone
Or burial or definition,
Beyond belief. To each other now
We are not even parts of speech.

On the benches green tongues loll from pots,
A vegetable silence with all words said,
And where the plants crowd near the windows
The glass is misted as something warm
Touches something cold. Outside, couples,
Who could come from anywhere, look back

And stare, hand-in-hand, at where I wait.
They point, seeing not me, but something else,
Until they make it out and smile
At a trick of the eye, condensation,
Where someone has carefully breathed
The shape of lovers on the glass.
Rainoo Repeats Her English in Bombay

Rainoo dresses and combs her hair. 
On the wall there is a scrap of broken glass
Which she uses as a mirror.
If she stands up straight she can see
Her eyes and lips when she puts on rouge and kohl.
If she bends her knees she can see
Her eyes again and her thick, black hair
Which she piles and pins on top of her head.
This is something she does every day.

Rainoo murmurs the English she picked up
In a house in the Persian Gulf.
A yellow-haired Englishwoman taught
The children who listened, sometimes.
Rainoo listened all the time
As she carefully cleaned the schoolroom.
"Do you understand, children? Please listen!
Rainoo is listening, aren't you?
Rainoo is good at languages."
This was something the teacher said every day.

There were flowers in the schoolroom.
They used to close when Rainoo touched them.
The master of the house used to touch her.
What didn't he use to touch?
Rainoo used to close like a flower.
She used to close her mouth and turn her head
When he pulled her sari to her waist.
This was something he used to do every day.

Rainoo tucks a rupee inside her bra
For the bus she takes to the brothel.
She walks with a limp from the the time
The mistress of the house surprised her
With the master and pushed her downstairs.
This was something she did only once.
Rainoo's passport was stamped with a word for "whore."
Today Rainoo will speak Marat'hi,
Hindi, English, Arabic, and French.
What language won't she speak today?
This is something she does every day.
Nightfishing

We have packed our meagre haul
Of skeen, lahlah and hummur
In ice we smashed with mallets.
I caught only tiny sharks
And a goatfish with a blonde moustache.
It was slimy to the touch
So a plimsoll flicked it back.

Now the others sleep as the boat
Wriggles against its anchor
Pointed between the Seven Sisters
And the orange bell of Jupiter
On a sea which the colder gods
With white hair seldom shake in rage.
This warm tide is a goodtime girl.
Here the sea-snake twists and sinks
Away from torchbeams and here,
To my delight, four dolphins
Girble and dive, circle and dive
Near enough for me to wish to speak.

I clean the barbecue grill
Casting on the water’s turf
Cooled embers of charcoal
And handfuls of ash, the dryness
I shall become again on land
While a cockroach trots on the gunwale
Between galley and bowsprit
Vanishing at a secret place
Somewhere above the waterline.
Contributors

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