

# The BOOKPRESS

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## The Homeless, The Homicidal, and the Dead



Jack Sherman

### Bill Wittlin

#### *The Homeless*

She looked and acted like a mad woman when she was admitted: hair matted; clothing filthy, torn, and disheveled; eyes dull; temper flaring constantly out of control. Her conversation, laced liberally with obscenities, was largely an incomprehensible mixture of Spanish and English, delivered in New York, rat-a-tat bursts.

The track marks on her arms, the outer scars of fifteen years of intravenous heroin and cocaine injections, might have indicated that the proper place for Maria D. was a drug rehab center, not this intensive care unit of a world-class psychiatric teaching hospital. But the staff here knew that Maria was not simply an addict come in from the cold of the streets to shake her illegal drug habits again. Like a great many of the patients the staff saw, Maria D. had been through the revolving door of the mental health care system so often that she and her diagnosis were well documented. Indeed, in many ways, Maria is all too typical of the kind of patients who pass through our psychiatric facilities.

In the words of a psychology intern who gave a clinical summary of Maria D.'s case at a psychiatric treatment staffing meeting, she has "an extensive history of significant problems:

Maria D., the mother of seven children, all in foster care, is 27 years old and homeless. She is on Prolixin (a major tranquilizer) and, having been diagnosed as manic, she had been on lithium but wouldn't comply. She is on Methadone maintenance. She has seizures, for which she is on Phenobarbital and Dilantin. Her diagnosis includes polysubstance abuse including I.V. heroin and free-basing crack cocaine. Maria D. was physically and sexually abused. She has engaged in prostitution. Her mother and sister have just died of AIDS. Maria D. was treated with Ritalin as a child. She reports hearing voices since age 12, at which time she attempted suicide leading

to coma and a three-month hospitalization. At age 16, she had an inpatient drug rehabilitation. This was followed by four hospitalizations: two times for drug hallucinations, a third for attacking her husband, and a fourth for becoming paranoid and depressed after her sister died of AIDS.

Prolixin, lithium, Methadone, Phenobarbital, Dilantin, Ritalin; plus, later in her hospitalization, I learned she was also being given Moban, Propranolol, and Valproate. Quite a cocktail that, particularly when supplemented with heroin, crack cocaine, and alcohol, all of which she would procure as quickly as she could upon release from institutional custody.

Although I had practiced psychiatry for over twenty years, I was not Maria D.'s doctor; nor, indeed, was I anyone's doctor at this hospital. Rather, I was here in an entirely different capacity: as a sociologist of medicine studying the behavior of mental health professionals as they went about their day-to-day professional lives in a difficult and dynamic institutional setting.

The homeless mentally ill are legion in America, and evicting most of them from institutions has exacerbated both their and society's problems. Certainly, it is particularly cruel to release inadequately treated and ill-prepared homeless people from psychiatric facilities. "Of the estimated four million people in the United States with severe mental illnesses, one in twenty is homeless. Among the estimated 600,000 homeless people in the United States, one-third of the single adults are believed to be severely mentally ill."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, nearly all studies show that one-third to one-half of the homeless suffer from severe and persistent mental illness and/or drug addiction.<sup>2</sup>

1. National Institute of Mental Health, *Outcasts on Main St: Report on Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness*, 1992, p.18

2. Michael Perlin, *Competency, Deinstitutionalization, and Homelessness: A Story of Marginalization*, *Houston Law Review*, Vol. 28: 63, 1991, p.68, note 21.

In many ways, Maria D. is a perfect example of the system; both what it obviously fails to do and what it can potentially do to help restructure fragmented personalities. She had been in and out of mental health care facilities more than a dozen times, and each time she was pronounced well enough to go back to the streets. That she was never truly well enough to be released had little to do with psychiatrists' decisions to deinstitutionalize her.

So no one, least of all the psychiatrists who had attended her, was surprised when Maria D. returned to the mental health care system a few weeks or months later, new tracks on her arms, another baby given to the Bureau of Child Welfare, further away from stability or sanity than at the previous hospital admission. She simply returned to the relative safety of psychiatric wards once life on the far edges of society sent her raving into city traffic or attacking her husband with a knife, to be picked up by the police and taken to the nearest emergency facility.

But Maria D., even during her psychotic breaks, had a direction—toward what once was viewed by society as a legitimate option for people in need of longer-term psychiatric care-asylum:

Oh, I signed in so many times [the hospital], knows me. Every time I was tired and exhausted and I wanted to take a shower, get pretty and everything. I wanted to eat because I would go for like seven or eight days without eating nothing, you know. And...without even sleeping maybe an hour's sleep and get up and get high on cocaine again. Because I've been on Methadone since the age of 16 years old.

Whatever provides security and a sense of place—for Maria D., a place to "get pretty" and eat regular meals—is critical, especially when a person has a profound identity disturbance like schizophrenia.

But except for the very richest, those who are completely unaffected by managed care and insurance industry treatment limits, long-term psychiatric "talk" therapy already is an anachronism. Drugs, after all, are cheaper than psychiatric facilities, and psychiatrists have become what one psychiatric nurse ruefully referred to as "chemical engineers."

Although Maria D. had spent more than two decades shuffling in and out of the mental health care system, in one critical respect her case is atypical in that her stay on the unit totaled four months, followed by transfer to a state hospital. As recently as the early 1990s, such "long-term" treatment might have been given to about 10% of patients as sick or sicker than Maria D.; today, due to recent institutional changes, neither Maria D. nor any other patient receives such a "long" stay on the ward that was the focus of my research. And far fewer are transferred to a state hospital.

For indigent patients like Maria D., there are so few treatment options that dedicated, compassionate staff are frustrated because the best options are usually unavailable. In the first Treatment Team meeting that I attended concerning Maria D.'s situation, the staff's confusion about how to dispose of this case was obvious. Here, the dialogue is between a social worker, the chief attending psychiatrist, a psychology intern, and a nurse:

*Social Worker:* We need to file as homeless to get a SRO (single room occupancy). She's too sick for a community residence.

*Psychiatrist:* She really needs structure.

*Social Worker:* She's never complied with treatment.

*Psychology Intern:* She has a history of eloping.

*Social Worker:* She needs inpatient rehab, maybe on 5S (a voluntary drug and alcohol treatment unit).

*continued on page 2a*

# The Homeless the Homicidal and the Dead

continued from page 1a

Nurse: She's loud, intrusive, dancing, irritable, self-mutilative, impulsive. She won't be accepted by 5S.

From the very first, these professionals know exactly what kind of treatment the patient needs and how the treatment she most likely will receive will fail. She will elope, relapse into drug abuse, and not follow through with outpatient treatment, specifically including medications, unless she is provided with a high level of structure. Although such patients understandably resist the imposition of needed structure by involuntary treatment, limits are the precondition for the beginning of any real treatment. As Lamb, Bachrach, and Kass (1992) insist in their *Task Force Report of the American Psychiatric Association*:

The care of chronically mentally ill individuals should be based on an understanding, derived from our clinical experience, that these persons frequently ask for the opposite of what they want and need. It is not unusual for these patients to test for limits, nor is it unusual for them to respond with relief and lessening, or even remission, of symptoms when the limits have been set. And it is not uncommon for these patients to inform us after the fact that setting limits on them has served them well....What is needed is a treatment philosophy that recognizes that such external controls are a positive, even crucial, therapeutic approach for those in the long-term mentally ill population who lack the internal controls to deal with their impulses and to organize themselves to cope with life's demands. Such external controls may interrupt the self-destructive, chaotic life of a patient who is on the streets and in and out of jails and hospitals.

At this treatment strategy meeting, Maria D. appeared intensely desperate and agitated, speaking loudly and rapidly, jumping from subject to subject, projecting a child-like vulnerability. Yet, when she left the room, the psychiatrist's spare comments about Maria D.'s treatment and demeanor put me on immediate alert.

While I was an outsider—a sociologist researching how these professionals interacted in providing dispositions to the patients with whom they dealt—I was also an insider, a psychiatrist who had experienced the professional pecking order as a student, an intern, and a psychiatrist. Because I was not there in my capacity as a psychiatrist, or in any discernible position in the pecking order, I could more clearly focus on what was happening just beneath the sometimes flippant or off-hand remarks of the various meeting participants.

"Let's switch her seizure meds to Tegretol and Valproate," the psychiatrist, Dr. L., said with his professional doctor's/chemical engineer's certainty. But this was followed by a highly untechnical diagnosis: "Her brain is fried from amphetamines."

In my position as a sort of fly on the institutional wall, I heard the professional gears grinding in his comments, and I grimaced inwardly at the painful implications of what Dr. L. had said.

Dr. L. was attempting to insulate himself from the depth of this patient's needs by responding with a relatively minor medication intervention and by then labeling the patient as organically impaired: she had "fried her brains." Hence, as everyone else in the room also understood from the psychiatrist's comments, she was untreatable. This untreatability arises,

by implication, from her own willful drug abuse: this "bad" patient then becomes responsible for her own untreatability.

It took me the better part of a year's research, watching these mental health professionals and others interact in a terribly unsettled institutional environment, to comprehend how a psychiatrist could be so flippant when diagnosing and prescribing treatment for this obviously deeply mentally ill human being. It turned out that the implicit rationales for denying proper treatment to Maria D. and other chronically mentally ill patients—that they are "bad" patients who have "fried their brains" on drugs—are a nearly transparent mask for these caretakers' sense of helplessness in the face of truly limited treatment options due to political, social, and economic factors well beyond their control.

The tragic irony of "bad," medication-non-compliant patients is all the more absurd, given that the large majority of severely and persistently mentally ill patients are medication non-compliant. As Lamb, Bachrach, and Kass maintain: "...many individuals within the homeless mentally ill population tend to resist taking psychotropic medications and, more generally, often appear to resist treatment." Nevertheless, the clinical fact of medication non-compliance is often ignored in the treatment and discharge planning for such patients.

Unfortunately, even though most often a social conscience is present among the patient's mental health professionals, the limitations to treatment options circumscribe their ability to make use of potentially beneficial strategies, as in Maria D.'s case discussed in rounds the following week:

Nurse 1: She's labile. Meds are not helping. She's angry.

Nurse 2: I'm doing 1:1 's [therapy meetings] because she gets hypomanic in the mornings. She's saying, 'They'll put me in a camisole [physical restraints] if you send me to the state hospital.'

Activities Therapist: She can't tolerate activities. She becomes intrusive. *Psychiatric Resident:* How much of her escalation is related to the change from Thorazine to Moban [a less sedative anti-psychotic]?

*Psychiatrist:* She's going back and forth about voluntarily going to the state hospital.

*Social Worker:* Concerning her transfer to the state hospital, the social work student got the party line: 'we're working on it.'

Despite pressures to shorten lengths of stay, here the team is trying to do its best by Maria D. and transfer her for longer-term state hospital treatment. However, the social worker realizes that they will be given the run-around by the state hospital, as there are very few beds available for such a large catchment area of patients as sick as, or sicker than, Maria D.

Two weeks later, during rounds, the nature of the "we're working on it" run-around again became the focus for Maria D.'s case:

Nurse: Maria D. is on Moban, 30 mg, Propranol, Valproate, Phenobarbital, and methadone. She's hyperactive, loud, intrusive, but redirectable and shows some insight.

Psychiatrist: She came to me to say she's afraid of losing control and wants increased medication.

continued on page 6a



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Off Campus

# At The Bookery

This presentation is part of our ongoing series of readings and talks upstairs in the DeWitt Mall.

Sunday, December 7, 4:00 p.m.



**Gail Hosking Gilberg,** Author of *Snakes Daughter*, buried the Vietnam War, the protests, the Medal of Honor, and her military upbringing along with her father. But when she approached the age that her father was when he was killed in battle, she began revisiting the photo albums he had left behind. The photographs and this subsequent memoir helped her come to terms with what had been an inexplicable absence in her childhood. Gail Gilberg is a writer and teacher who lives in Rochester.

Sunday, December 14, 4:00 p.m.



**Mitch Bobrow** will discuss his new book, *View From the Tightrope: Living Wisely in an Uncertain World*, which teaches that a positive approach to taking risks can lead to a more fully-realized life. Mitch Bobrow, MSW is a psychotherapist who lives in Ithaca.

Sunday January 25, 4:00 p.m.

### Bertha Rogers and friends

Join Bertha Rogers and a host of local authors in a reading from *Out of the Catskills and Just Beyond: Literary and Visual Works by Catskill Writers and Artists*. Participants in this event include Nancy Viera Couto, Louise Budde DeLaurentis, Mary Gilliland, Lisa Harris, Peter Fortunato, Phyllis Janowitz, Summer Killian, Christopher Lott, and other regional contributors.

### Upcoming 1998 Authors Include:

Jeanne Mackin, Dianne Ackerman, Paul Cody, Meridith Small, Jo Ann Beard, Steve Kuusisto, David Weiss, Dennis Williams, and many others. Watch *The Bookpress* and *The Bookery News* for dates and times.

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### Red Dirt

*I shouldn't tell about  
the new relationship so soon  
we're still getting to know each other  
I'm so happy*

*I found it by chance on my lunch hour  
a vacant lot in downtown Newark  
just what I was looking for  
the kind of place nature spirits  
flee to in the midst of a city, even a  
suburb with its trucked-in lawns and  
over-tidy gardens*

*Weeds grew in the lot after  
violence and sorrow: the riots of '67  
probably a tenement not good enough to fix was  
bulldozed to clear it  
in the rocky red dirt charred boards,  
chunks of rusted pipe, smashed brick  
mostly hidden by the soft successful weeds  
the defiant life-loving weeds*

*Today at the chainlink fence I  
shaded my eyes scanning for even one  
tiny flower (bet I'll find some)  
I whispered hello and thank you to the laughing dancing elementals  
a police officer asked me what was I doing?  
I turned him away with the acceptable lie  
the white middle class reply  
"I was just wondering  
if this property's for sale..."*

—Mary Winters

Mary Winters works as a poverty lawyer. Her poems have appeared in *Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry*, *College English*, *Commonweal*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Kansas Quarterly*. Her chapbook, *Grace Itself Invisible* was published as a competition prizewinner.

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# Body Language: When

Peter Fortunato

Performance Art has been out of quotation marks for at least a little while, and even if some U.S. Congressional types can't say exactly what it is or why it's so subversive, a 1988 entry in *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Third College Edition) cuts to the quick with these words: "a presentation in which the artist juxtaposes images on various themes and provides a usually non-narrative commentary on them." Dangerous stuff, this: inviting people to sort out for themselves what it all means. Dictionaries aside, however, it's still about as hard to define one sub-genre of Performance Art, namely Performance Poetry, as it is to say what poetry is. "Spoken Word Art" has recently emerged as a label of choice, but what does that tell an audience except that what-you-are-about-to-experience will be at least partly oral and aural? As with all of the performing arts, if you want to know anything specific about the form, you really have to be there to catch it on the wing, but be forewarned: individuals of the species vary widely.

There have always been poets who vocalize or sing their lyrics with panache, rather than succumbing to the vaudevillian. The art is better served when they remember Longinus' warning that "amplification destroys the sense of the Sublime." While there are no doubt some rock-and-roll-poets who want nothing more than to make their fortunes through such deconstructive acts, the best Performance Poetry — some of Laurie Anderson, for example — uses language to take audiences across territories previously charted as "song," "story," "monologue," and so on. At its greatest, it also recognizes and communicates something of the power of silence, that quality upon which all poetry depends in order to approach the Sublime, which is beyond forms. Certainly, a poetry performance promises to be something different than the stereotypical reading we all dread by the diffident, mumbling author with eyes glued to the printed page.

Around forty years ago, the composer and poet John Cage, an ancestor of what we now call both Performance Art and Performance Poetry, first staged events that directly and indirectly invited audience participation. Like his dada forbears, Cage understood that the resulting awkwardness, heightened awareness, and outright fun, comprised an art form, which he dubbed a "Happening." *Be there or be square* — perhaps. More importantly: *Be there and Be*. Cage realized how this special sort of participation could enlarge our understanding of what happens in any encounter with a work of art, and inspired by Zen Buddhism, he sought in many kinds of works to show the connection between art and daily life. Cage was always pointing out that since an art experience is largely dependent on our attention, on our state of being, it is "participatory," and learning to risk ourselves with challenging artworks (including the intentionally boring, the absurd, chance events, and those that overload the senses) can have import for all of our living. That art happens to challenge us in both private and public arenas is one thing that distinguishes it from most sorts of popular entertainment.

Like any other poet, I know well enough how shy people can become when faced with poetry, whether it's presented to them in print or offered out loud. This resistance seems to come with the territory in our society, where the apparent uselessness of poetry and non-commercial art — its invaluable-ness, as Carolyn Forché says — can be clumsily equated with frivolity, self-indulgence,



From right to left, Laurel Ann Bogen, Linda Albertano, and Suzanne Lummis. Photo by Janet Klein

or a secret code intended to exclude the uninitiated. Nevertheless, as Galway Kinnell notes, even today no undergraduate education is complete without some exposure to both classic and modern poetry, and millions of college students have the experience of writing poetry either for a course or just because they understand intuitively that poetry is the language of the soul. At that level, it can't be bought or sold — at least I hope not — and this is what Stanley Kunitz points to by saying "Poetry resists commodification."

It's natural to strive to give shape to essential matters, to wish to communicate them directly with language, and to be touched in turn by the revelations of others, especially in an age of impersonal, electronic media. Furthermore, poetry, like the human soul, is fundamentally democratic and inclusive, as Whitman always reminded us, and as we feel when we risk self-revelation. These are some of the reasons why poetry publications persist despite the odds against them, and why attendance at readings and performances remains relatively high. We understand their importance to us individually as well as collectively.

I muse on these subjects often, having sometimes called myself a Performance Poet, and having tried to do more than simply read my poems aloud during the last thirty years. But the immediate inspiration for this essay is the recent visit to Ithaca of three accomplished poetry performers, three of the four members of a Los Angeles group, Nearly Fatal Women. On Wednesday, October 22, they appeared at the Moosewood Bar & Cafe, and the following afternoon, with an entirely different program, in Kaufman Auditorium at Cornell.

*Nearly Fatal Women*: not your stereo-

typical L.A. show-biz-wannabes- we'll-be-your-femmes fatales -your-sweet-and-deadly-farewell-lovelies. Hardly. These three women, these three poets from the City of the Angels have their performance licks tuned up, their wits honed bright, and a sense of humor, a collective tone, that avoids strident polemics while it affirms humane values.

Three very distinct persons, very distinct body-types and voices, three unique sensibilities. On Wednesday night they performed separately, in series, with Linda Albertano opening the set (as she would also open Thursday's program). Albertano is a woman of considerable height whose physical presence, blonde and powerful in dressy attire on both nights, was utilized as a part of every piece she presented. In a made-up language, with expressive hand-gestures she greeted the Moosewood audience, out in front of the podium, warming to us as we warmed to her. (*But how close is she going to get?* I was asking myself, noting the edginess that almost always accompanies Performance Art, where boundaries are crossed continually.) Obviously experienced in a variety of settings — here was no stage, no proscenium demarcated except by the space the performer created for herself both behind and before the podium — Albertano's work was characterized by the motion of her long arms and tall body, by her hands especially, which often counterpointed her spoken words with their own symbolic gestures. Sometimes these gestures seemed intentionally histrionic, a stylized lexicon, yet there was something more too: a snaky playfulness more often than not, that seemed to ask, *How seriously do you take me?* On Thursday night, as part of her performance poem, "The Experts," she would open with words that included these: "We are not the petty bureaucrats of

pleasure...[but] priests perfumed and serene... the hands that heal."

From Wednesday's show, the telling image that remains for me of Albertano is her work with semaphore flags audibly snapping out an S.O.S. throughout a love poem. I can't recall clearly the verbal content, and that raises an interesting point: so much can be happening simultaneously in Performance Poetry that one's enjoyment might depend on relinquishing a linear approach to "understanding." The work is by definition holistic, and its effects have at least as much to do with how the performer is in her body as with what words she actually speaks. Of the three artists, Albertano's work relied most on forceful body language and an actor's voice.

At a show by Nearly Fatal Women some of you might be uneasy, not knowing what to make of the artists' performance-inflected approach to poetry. You might ask: Shouldn't a poem be a highly structured verbal expression primarily? Shouldn't a text be sacrosanct insofar as it is made intentionally, its quality evidenced independently of audience response to the author in person (or the author in mind), and so, moreover, demanding a careful (i.e., private) reading and rereading? If you like. Or substitute some other theory of your choice. I'm talking about the primary impact of live performance: audience and artist are being together in time and space. Good Performance Art has to be more than an excuse for technical weakness as an actor or musician or poet, has to be more than exhibitionist self-indulgence, more than an emotional outpouring before an audience. In any genre, a fine artist communicates self-awareness as well as control of her material. In the Blues or the Gitano traditions, for example, "it's the singer not the song" that is most important, and the most valued moments are those when the performer becomes the message. This is what has stayed with me about Albertano's S.O.S.

I think that many Performance Poets such as the Nearly Fatal Women depend especially on their unique presence as the means by which to create an effective performance. Our bodies communicate directly with each other in all live settings — be they theaters or classrooms, doctors' offices, or automotive garages — and much more happens between us than what is verbally exchanged. With poetry in the form of a written text, more careful scrutiny of verbal content is allowed, and if it is well made, that attention can be very deeply rewarded. Poetry on the page depends upon the imaginative and sensory engagement of the private reading we give it in a kind of private performance — but a public performance asks us more directly how much we are willing to trust our senses, and a fine public reading by the author can guide us surely, quickly to the heart of the work. Do you believe you can intuit meanings, feel things directly and instantly through your body, and can continue feeling them without necessarily having a textual record called a "poem" to "study"?

Let's go back to Poetry 101 for a moment: in the Western tradition, one route along which the lyric poem developed was the understanding that the personae of verse drama might speak directly for themselves without the apparatus of a plot to give them being. The persona is literally the mask worn by a character in the Greek drama, and in the post-psychoanalytic era we understand such a mask also as having to do with public personalities, with various socially defined roles that we play, and the like. If a lyric or narrative poem can be construed as a mask speaking, then we can see how modern poetry's roots are in the theater, and how

# Poetry Leaves the Page

directly poetry in performance can remind us that in life we are continually interacting with others according to some story line or other, either consciously or unconsciously in character. As far as I'm concerned, Performance Poetry is radical because it is simply a reminder of these fundamentals. If you want to read the poems, if they're available on the page, buy a copy of the book afterwards. It will be a different experience, but the presence of the author's voice might linger in the lines, to harmonize with your own reading. If you want more of the writer's performance, buy the audiotape, CD, or video — options that are becoming more and more common.

Masks are often disturbing, altering our perceptions of reality and making plain the related impulses to transform ourselves and conceal ourselves. The resistance that I as an audience member sometimes feel toward poetry in performance is in the fact that it probably won't maintain the comfortable boundaries afforded by traditional theater or reading, or worse, in the name of something "new" or "experimental" I might be subjected to bad art. It's safer to meet the persona of the poet between the pages of a book, keeping a distance I can decide upon from that mask of printed words. Maybe I too can be embarrassed about this socially unapproved habit of mine, this love of poetry, all these conflicting feelings it touches, and can feel embarrassed when even the best poets mirror it back to me in person. I'm happy to say that the Nearly Fatal Women didn't let me off the hook easily.

On Wednesday night I was probably most impressed by Laurel Ann Bogen's powerful recitations from memory of several long narrative poems. A physical contrast to Albertano, Bogen is shorter, stockier, dark, and with her oversized eyeglasses and big beret cuts her own kind of memorable figure in a floor-length velvet dress. Her voice is rich and resonant, distinct, with a hint of a lisp that has been welcomed home and made comfortable through long acquaintance. Like Albertano, Bogen's stage presence also feels trained, but here the performance is coming from a background in Speech and Oral Interpretation rather than one in music or

theater. The poetry is all hers: confessional, funny, bizarre, surprisingly tender at unexpected moments. Each of these women knows how to use the talents she has and knows how to be in her own body. Bogen's gestures, while smaller than Albertano's, were also precise, fluid, forceful when they needed to be. I wonder if I was the only man in the audience compelled to reflect on how he looks at women's bodies, and especially women performers by the Nearly Fatales? I wonder if women in the audience reflected on their own ease with their physical presence and were inspired by the strength of this troupe?

Among other things, Bogen is literary curator of the poetry series at the L.A. County Museum of Art, and she has had plenty of opportunity to see and hear major writers present their work. To say she knows what she's doing with her style of presentation is a bit of an understatement: as with every accomplished performer you get the feeling that it could only be done this way, and that the essence of the voice — I'm not talking here about vocalization per se, but about that ineffable quality without which one is not a writer — is best revealed when she takes it over-the-top, as in the hilarious finger-snapping rap-poem called "Mom & the Goldfish":

This be the story of Mommm/ This be the story of Mommm/ This be the story of Mom she had the magenta hair/ She had the glass eye and the tupper-ware smile/ She had the look of the man who eat razorblade and liiive/ . . . Mom be good mom/Mommm nurse Nathan Goldfish with cold compresses and mercurichrome/ Mom sing the lullabyyyee/ Mom show baby pictures of Mom/ Nathan he get better/ He start to sing Satisfaction and Love Minus Zero-No limit/ He be slightly outta hip date/ He say I need to spread fins/ He say I need to swim my way across USA/ Bathtub to bathtub/ He say, Mom I love your puce- by- now- it- was- hair, and your cackle when you walk/ I see you around like a donut/ But Mom she ain't gonna give up the good thing..."

Wednesday night's show at the cafe was more intimate than what would follow on Thursday in the long, narrow lecture hall

that now goes by the name of Kaufman Auditorium. On Wednesday, three women were presenting to an appreciative crowd downtown who were giving them something in return; on Thursday, most of the time, a theatrical ensemble was performing before an audience sitting quietly like good students in rows of seats. Thursday's hour and fifteen minute show had blocking, some lights, some salient props — e.g., flashlights, hubcap, carnations and altar to MM — and it was done almost entirely as the recitation of individual or choral pieces. Impressive stage business, to be sure. Overall, however, I didn't find it as moving as what was presented on Wednesday. Perhaps this was because the theatrics distracted from the poetry as the actors became impersonal, became "characters" rather than poets. This sacrificed the close-up feeling that emerged on Wednesday night by the time Suzanne Lummis, the third member of the troupe read to us her own work and also the poems of some other L.A. poets.

In her off-stage life, Lummis, like her cohorts, wears various berets. She is the founding director of the L.A. Poetry Festival and has just edited and published the anthology *Grand Passion: The Poets of Los Angeles and Beyond*. Wirey in build, nervy, dark, her movements communicating something cagey and street-wise, sexy and aloof with a sort of secret angst, Lummis uses her thin frame and voice with just enough theatrical skill so as not to be overshadowed by her partners. The contrast is a good one, and in some ways Lummis looks and acts most the part of "poet." On Wednesday she brought into focus for me the regionalism of the Nearly Fatal Women. They could only be from L.A., where dreams are minted and burned, where both the faithful and the fallen angels have a place, where everybody is potentially a target for a freeway shooting, or is perhaps a pioneer discovering America all over again.

Suzanne Lummis' "The Fahrenheit Chronicles" — accompanied by a "silent chorus" from Linda Albertano and Laurel Ann Bogen — was in many respects the highpoint of Thursday's show, largely because of the wit and the honest satire of love relationships this series of five poems offered. Laughter was consistently invited

in by lines like these: "You were the B-movie I just had to sit through again." "She pays the ferryman and crosses into melodrama." "Anyway it was just an allegory...a little shift away from the denominator that was most common." "You were the flight of stairs I just had to fling myself down, the unlit room I entered with nothing but a struck match." Juxtaposed to Lummis' recitations, Albertano and Bogen were striking hieratic poses in the background; meanwhile, Lummis' own delivery and physical presence were communicating further meanings that kept the poems from wallowing in sentimental comedy or believing themselves with cynicism.

After the show Lummis told me these poems had lived on the page for a long time before she "took them out from behind the podium," and this remark helped clarify for me what I believe is the essential difference between most poetry readings and true performances. Performing poetry means putting your body up there in front of others — not necessarily in as theatrical ways as the Nearly Fatal Women do — but with body language as well as words, letting your audience know what it feels like to be inside your particular experience. We are powerfully drawn to identify with what is presented in this way. But recall what I have said about the way a mask can conceal a person as well as reveal a created persona; there's a fine line here any poet in performance ought to consider. Once a poem becomes a script for an actor, audiences assume a new set of expectations and a different kind of distance from both the performer and the poetry.

Strictly speaking, I think that a straight-ahead poetry reading, whatever else it does, affirms primarily the poem's text as mask, as the made-thing that Pound and the Modernists have called our attention to. Still, any public reading is also a kind of performance — there's a fine line here that any public reader ought to consider — with the potential to make a writer and her works real in ways audiences seek. The word is given flesh in such a context. It bodies forth, bound to meet the Other, even when it is whispered softly to those waiting ears, a breathing thing, just now having risen from the page.

Peter Fortunato performs with the spoken word and music group Spirit Horses.

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# The Homeless, The Homicidal

continued from page 2a

**Activities Therapist:** There's stuff going on with her family and husband, who's going into detox, and now is saying he wants her back.

[The psychiatrist and the psychiatric resident decide to increase her Moban to 40 mg]. **Social Work Intern:** I keep calling Manhattan State.

**Social Worker:** It's the same old run-around. State says they got our completed transfer package, and they'll call me, don't call them [everyone laughs].

The group laughter served to discharge some of the staff's anxiety and anger over the quandary in which these patients "awaiting placement" put them. If the unit does not perform well enough, according to managed care standards imposed on the hospital administration, they know that they might be fired or the entire unit might be closed. The staff hoped that, by using an "awaiting placement" strategy, they would not be "blamed" for such patients' extended lengths of stay.

However, this strategy did not work, as this ward was singled out as a unit that was unable to compete for managed care contracts because its lengths of stay were unacceptably long. In less than six months, this unit would be very different: the ward chief would be gone, disciplined, demoted, and perhaps scapegoated for the negligent death of a patient; most of the senior staff would be laid-off or replaced, including the Assistant Unit Chief, the Nurse Manager, the daytime Charge Nurse, three on-line nurses, and the Senior Supervising Social Worker; no patient would any longer be able to get the kind of "long-term" treatment that Maria D. was receiving; and the whole hospital, especially the 12S staff, would become demoralized, plagued by actual and potential publicity of many cases of negligent care, including patients' deaths.

Maria D., however, was transferred to a state hospital facility for longer term care. While it may take a long time to overcome the worst of the effects of her shattering life experiences, she at least has a chance to receive treatment that might stabilize her. And even if she never is able to function in a full and positive way in society at large, she will at least not be shivering on a mean street, hoping a car will stop, hoping that the john will pay enough to get the next crack rock.

## The Homicidal

I had been told that he was violent, that he was a suspect in at least two murders, but even the homicidal are entitled to psychiatric care. And anyway, there was a guard in the conference room with us, for some of the chronically and severely mentally ill state hospital patients with whom I have worked are capable of deadly violence.

But the punch was so quick, Mr. J.'s lunge across the table was so abrupt, I was on the floor before the guard could react. After sporting an extravagantly black eye to work for the next couple of weeks, I became much more vigilant about the potential for unanticipated violence contained within many of the patients who are released back into their communities. After all, if we depend on drugs to rid these people of their violent tendencies, and we know that most of them will stop taking any prescribed drugs soon after their release, we ought to anticipate that they will return to violence within their family or community.

In January and February of 1996, *The New York Times* reported several particularly gruesome crimes committed by violent, deinstitutionalized mentally ill people who had stopped taking their prescribed medications.

A pregnant doctor was stabbed to death in her office at Bellevue Hospital as she was preparing a lecture for her medical students. Despite the fact that the murderer, Steven Smith, was homeless, had "a significant violent criminal history," as well as a long history of psychiatric problems, including a hospitalization for attempting suicide by swallowing rat poison, he was released by Bellevue less than a month before the murder.<sup>3</sup>

A young woman was pushed off a subway platform in front of a speeding train. The fifteen-year-old killer had been discharged from Kings County Hospital two months earlier, but there was no aftercare effort to monitor whether he was taking his anti-psychotic medications. Indeed, as one article on this crime reported, he was discharged with "some bottles of anti-psychotic medication, a follow-up treatment plan, and an appointment at an outpatient clinic."<sup>4</sup> The killer was discharged from the hospital with the knowledge that he would likely be dangerous if he stopped taking his anti-psychotic medication, and since no follow-up was done to determine if he was continuing to take his medication, this teenager was a bomb ready to explode.

It may seem obvious that discharging seriously mentally ill, potentially violent or suicidal homeless patients back to the streets, without regard to their safety or to the safety of others, is poor policy, yet the paring of governmental support for health care, as well as managed care pressures to decrease lengths of stay, are forcing hospitals to deinstitutionalize many such people.

Our communities are much less safe due to these inappropriately released mentally ill, and our psychiatric facilities are becoming horrifically dangerous due to crippling cutbacks and hospital closures. As the *New York Times* reported in the case of Cornell University's psychiatric teaching hospital:

[The hospital] let 126 people go. In addition, 22 psychiatrists and 4 psychologists on contract at the hospital were told that their positions were eliminated. Health care professionals all over the city say that those people left working in hospitals are being asked to shoulder an intolerable workload, one that could prove dangerous to patients and staff....'There are just fewer and fewer people working with patients who are sicker and sicker.' ...'We are barely in control of this unit. We are running from emergency to emergency...We're in a perpetual state of anxiety, worrying about patients and fearing for our own jobs. It's a very disheartening and frightening environment.' It is a situation that is unlikely to change soon. In fact, many health care workers warn it is likely to get worse as new cuts in Medicaid financing and pressure from managed care force hospitals to pare their staffs even more to stay afloat.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, rather than beginning to implement the laudable aftercare programs that are now on the books, it is likely that even less money will be available to implement such programs. In 1996, for instance, New York's

3. George James, "Wrongful Death Suit Begins in Slaying of Doctor at Bellevue," *New York Times*, February 15, 1996, p.B3.

4. Rachel L. Swams, "Hospital Did Not Monitor Outpatient Treatment of Suspect in Subway Murder," *New York Times*, February 21, 1996, p. B3.

5. Esther B. Fein, "At Hospitals, Budget Ax Cuts Jobs and Care," *New York Times*, June 18, 1995, D. A25.

Governor Pataki's budget called for a \$220 million reduction in local aid statewide. "This budget is going to eviscerate services," said Philip Saperia, executive director of the Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health Agencies, which represents 115 nonprofit community-based outpatient clinics in New York City. "Especially in New York, you are going to see programs close."<sup>6</sup>

The subway murder case elicited an incisive letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, published on March 6, 1996. In this letter, Hugh Strauss, a psychiatric social worker, puts his finger on the essential problem of biologic psychiatry linked to inadequate mental health care funding. After stating that the absence of proper aftercare procedures is not the central problem that requires immediate attention, Mr. Strauss zeros in on his main point concerning the crippling effects of current discharge procedures:

It appears that the patient was merely stabilized on medication and discharged. There was evidently no attempt to help him understand his illness and his need for after-care. Why? Because the public mental health care system is driven by the need to save money. The goal is to discharge as many patients as soon as possible from psychiatric hospitals. Staff members are rewarded when they have a high discharge rate and harassed when they do not. The insight that patients need to maintain themselves would have required intensive treatment over a longer period of time than the month this patient was allowed.<sup>7</sup>

## The Dead

Perhaps the dead speak most eloquently about the consequences of failing to acknowledge fully our connections with one another. On November 17, 1996, the dead spoke particularly eloquently in my home-town of Ithaca, New York, a progressive community of some 28,000 permanent residents and almost 20,000 Cornell University and Ithaca College students.

Deborah Stagg certainly had a history of serious psychiatric incidents.

In 1981, she gained substantial local press notoriety when she used a small pocket knife to make a foot-long incision across her stomach to self-deliver her baby by Cesarean. (Some eight months earlier, she had become pregnant by another patient at Willard Psychiatric Center, a now-closed facility in Seneca County, New York.) Then, ignoring the internal injuries she had caused herself, she sewed up the incision with needle and thread, strapped the four-pound, month-premature infant into a baby carrier on her chest, and walked out onto the Commons, Ithaca's downtown pedestrian mall.

Only when she approached police officers asking for cigarette money, her pants soaked with blood, the premature baby naked and unprotected from the cool morning air, did she and her baby begin receiving the care they so desperately needed. Amazingly, the baby survived its highly unusual entrance into the world, but Deborah Stagg's mental health system revolving-door story had just begun.

Last November, After fifteen years of round trips to and from mental health facilities, Ms. Stagg once again made the local headlines: "City policeman dies in stabbing: Woman killed in attack on officer."

She hadn't taken her medications for over a month, had stopped coming to the county's mental health clinic, and had

6. Lisa W. Foderaro, "Mental Health Care for Outpatients is Often Lax," *New York Times*, February, p.B3.

7. Hugh Strauss, "Mental Health System is Ripe For Tragedies," Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, March 6, 1996, p.A20.

been exhibiting obvious signs that she was ready to go back through the institutional door. Indeed, Ms. Stagg was well known to the police, for they had responded to emergency calls about her several times, and she had a history of violent resistance to involuntary institutional care. So when the police got a call from a neighbor that Stagg had barricaded herself in her apartment, screaming threats to kill anyone who tried to enter, they sent six officers, including Officer Michael Padula, who answered the call for backup.

*The Ithaca Journal* offered the following bare-bones account of what transpired in the few minutes the drama took to play out.

When the police arrived they could see through a partially opened door that Stagg had a knife and was alone. City firefighters were called to break down the door, while police used pepper spray in an effort to get Stagg to move away from the door. Some of the firefighters came into contact with the spray and were taken to Cayuga Medical Center where they were treated and released. When police and Ithaca firefighters forced open the apartment door, they discovered Stagg had moved into the bathroom behind a closed door. Padula tried to talk her out.

'He was armed, but at the time, he was more or less negotiating through a closed door,' [state police Major Arthur] Hawker said.

Stagg, 44, surprised Padula by bolting out of a locked bathroom and stabbing him in the neck.

Another officer, whom officials would not name, shot Stagg. The entire sequence of events took place in about 45 minutes.

Here, a chronic and severely mentally ill woman, with a history of violence when threatened with hospitalization, ceases taking her medications and predictably has a crisis. A team of ten or twelve police and firefighters respond by first pepper-spraying her in the face—a tactic which accidentally hospitalizes four firefighters—they knock down her door, and they corner the already terrified woman in her bathroom. When, more than half-blind from pepper spray, fear, and paranoid schizophrenia, she explodes in homicidal fury at her imagined and real tormentors, killing one of them, she is fatally shot.

"She wasn't stabbing at Mike," a person familiar with the case said in the local paper. "She was stabbing at demons."<sup>8</sup>

This case provoked a great deal of controversy in the local press in Ithaca, some people lauding the police, some criticizing their actions, others questioning the local and state mental health care policies that brought Deborah Stagg and Michael Padula to their deadly encounter. The police, sensitive about criticism that they were not properly prepared for such an incident and that they did not respond appropriately to the situation, pointed their institutional finger at the county mental health services who knew that Stagg was not taking her medications or coming to the clinic for her appointments, yet failed to involuntarily commit her.

Anthony DeLuca, the county mental health services commissioner, became a principal target of the police's criticism after he intimated that the police tactics of pepper spray, forcible entry, and shooting to kill betrayed their lack of

8. Glenn Sharshon, "Experts Wrong in Blaming IPD for Stagg's Death," *The Ithaca Journal*, December 2, 1996, p. 9A

# and the Dead

preparation for dealing with the violently mentally ill. The public, distressed that these two deaths might have been avoidable, voiced concerns in the press about both the police and the mental health care system that so blatantly failed in this case.

And there certainly is enough blame to go around.

"Instead of arranging for Stagg getting assistance in a planned, thought-out manner," Lieutenant Glenn Sharshen of the Ithaca Police Department wrote in the Ithaca Journal in response to comments DeLuca had made, "the situation was allowed to deteriorate into a crisis."<sup>9</sup> However, "because she was an outpatient, she could not be forced to take her medication under state law," DeLuca insisted. Moreover, the Commissioner pointed out, the incident might have been avoided had the emergency outreach service personnel been available to accompany police to the scene, but state funding cuts have made this impossible.

Both Michael Padula and Deborah Stagg were memorialized and buried with a good deal of community emotion. In Ithaca, in the six months following this double tragedy, mental health care budgets have been cut further, another deinstitutionalized patient with schizophrenia successfully committed suicide, and the problems with our local killing care, while widely debated, remain.

To be sure, the dead are not all seriously mentally ill outpatients and their victims. Our mental health care system is littered with bodies of patients who died from inept institutional medical care, people like Isabel K., a homeless paranoid schizophrenic, an immigrant from Haiti, who died rather horribly in a mental hospital in which I worked. The basics of her case are taken from chart notes mostly made by attending medical students.

Ms. K. was a 29 year-old non-English-speaking schizo-affective who was lithium-toxic with neuroleptic malignant syndrome (NMS) and died at the general hospital to which she was transferred. She was given a shot of long-acting Prolixin on May 14, and an additional 10 mg of oral Prolixin was ordered daily. Also, she was on lithium, Thorazine, and Clozaril. On May 20, the patient had a temperature of over 101 degrees. On May 21, she was dizzy and complained of a bitter taste in her mouth. On May 22, she vomited, was incontinent, had unsteady gait, and her tongue was swollen. On that same day, the Resident noted an increased white blood count, and all she did was 'decrease the Prolixin.' On May 23, the patient was noted to be suffer-

ing from variable states of consciousness and arousal. She vomited twice and slept through the day, despite having slept all through the night. The resident's only order was to, 'hold Clozaril if temperature greater than 101.5 degrees.' Labs on May 23 showed renal shock with 3 plus blood, albumin, and glucose in her urine. On May 24, the patient was unconscious and the on-call Resident noted her to be lethargic and ordered Tylenol. On May 25, the diagnosis of rule-out NMS was finally made. The patient was in renal shut-down, unconscious, incontinent, and coded (she had suffered a cardio-respiratory arrest). She was transferred to a general hospital and died from arrest shortly thereafter.

The treatment this woman received is almost beyond belief. Any competent physician, including any psychiatrist, should have been able to tell that this woman's body was failing due to an adverse reaction to the many drugs she was taking for her psychosis. But instead of taking her off the psychoactive medications that were causing the toxicity, dosages were substantially increased, and she was simply given Tylenol. Yet, it is well known that neuroleptic malignant syndrome is the single most common cause of death from psychotropic medications.

The fact that the nursing clinical coordinator position had recently been eliminated was also a likely factor in this case. All of the chains in this system have been weakened by layoffs and the consequent demands on the remaining staff to do more paperwork.

This case is an extreme example of a very common tendency among psychiatrists: they prescribe several drugs for patients, often with inadequate knowledge of drug interactions and with no reason to believe that, in the case of outpatients, their intake of prescribed drugs will even vaguely follow the required regimen. Of course, the legally prescribed drugs also are replaced or supplemented by heroin, cocaine, alcohol, or any of the other drugs so easily available on the streets.

Even when polypharmacy "works," that is, when the system declares an individual healthy enough to go into workaday society and earn his or her keep, casualties are common, as the case of Thomas V. demonstrates.

At 41, Thomas was a powerfully built man whose psychosis could instantly transform his normally engaging persona into that of a dangerous paranoid schizophrenic. For thirty years, whenever he was out of institutions, he self-medicated with alcohol, cocaine, and assorted other drugs in order to escape his inner demons. Those demons had led him to a dozen suicide attempts, from stabbing himself in the stomach to throwing himself in front of a commuter train.

But New York, like many other states,

is instituting a policy to get chronic psychotic patients moved from the welfare rolls to workfare. This program in New York, Intensive Psychiatric Rehabilitation Treatment (IRPT), is part of the overall deinstitutionalization effort of the state, as well as part of the state's welfare cost-cutting measures. Thomas, having "graduated" from the IRPT program, was expected to get a full-time, low-wage job—just the sort of job he had previously repeatedly failed at—even if the stress of this job might cause another mental breakdown.

The senior social worker, Judy, who related the outcome of this case to me, told me that Thomas had fallen apart when confronted with the choice between a stressful, menial job and homelessness.

I've never seen a single chronically and severely mentally ill patient make it in IRPT. The rules of Thomas V.'s program specify that he had to leave its supportive setting within a maximum of 18 months. I've seen many patients have breakdowns at this very point in treatment when they are made to change into a step-down, less-intensive and less costly—program. Thomas just couldn't take the pressure.

Sometimes when a revolving door patient like Thomas comes to a particularly difficult juncture, he or she returns to institutional care. Sometimes they choose other exits. Thomas V., dead for several hours, was found hanging from a rope tied to a light fixture in a single-room occupancy dive. If you give seriously mentally ill people many opportunities to kill themselves, most of them are resourceful enough eventually to succeed.

One detail that Judy remembered about Thomas was that he had a friend in Arizona whom he liked to call. "He'd frequently ask me for money to call Arizona," Judy told me. "Once, when a friend visited Thomas and gave him twenty dollars, I asked him how he was going to spend the money. 'A long call to Arizona,' was his reply."

When Judy related this to me, I flashed to Ratso Rizo, Dustin Hoffman's brilliant portrayal of a down and out homeless alcoholic in *Midnight Cowboy*. Just when Ratso reaches his dream of a warmer paradise, Miami, he dies of chronic tuberculosis. In our disastrous survival-of-the-fittest mentality, Thomas V., Isabel K., Maria D., and all of the other seriously mentally ill people who live on the scraps of our culture's compassion die almost invisibly.

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9. Glenn Sharshon, "Experts Wrong in Blaming IPD for Staggs Death," *The Ithaca Journal*, December 2, 1996, p. 9A.

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*Jerome Groopman, M.D. is the Recanati Professor of Immunology at Harvard Medical School, Chief of Experimental Medicine at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and one of the world's leading researchers in cancer and AIDS. He and his work have been featured in the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and Time Magazine, as well as numerous scientific journals.*

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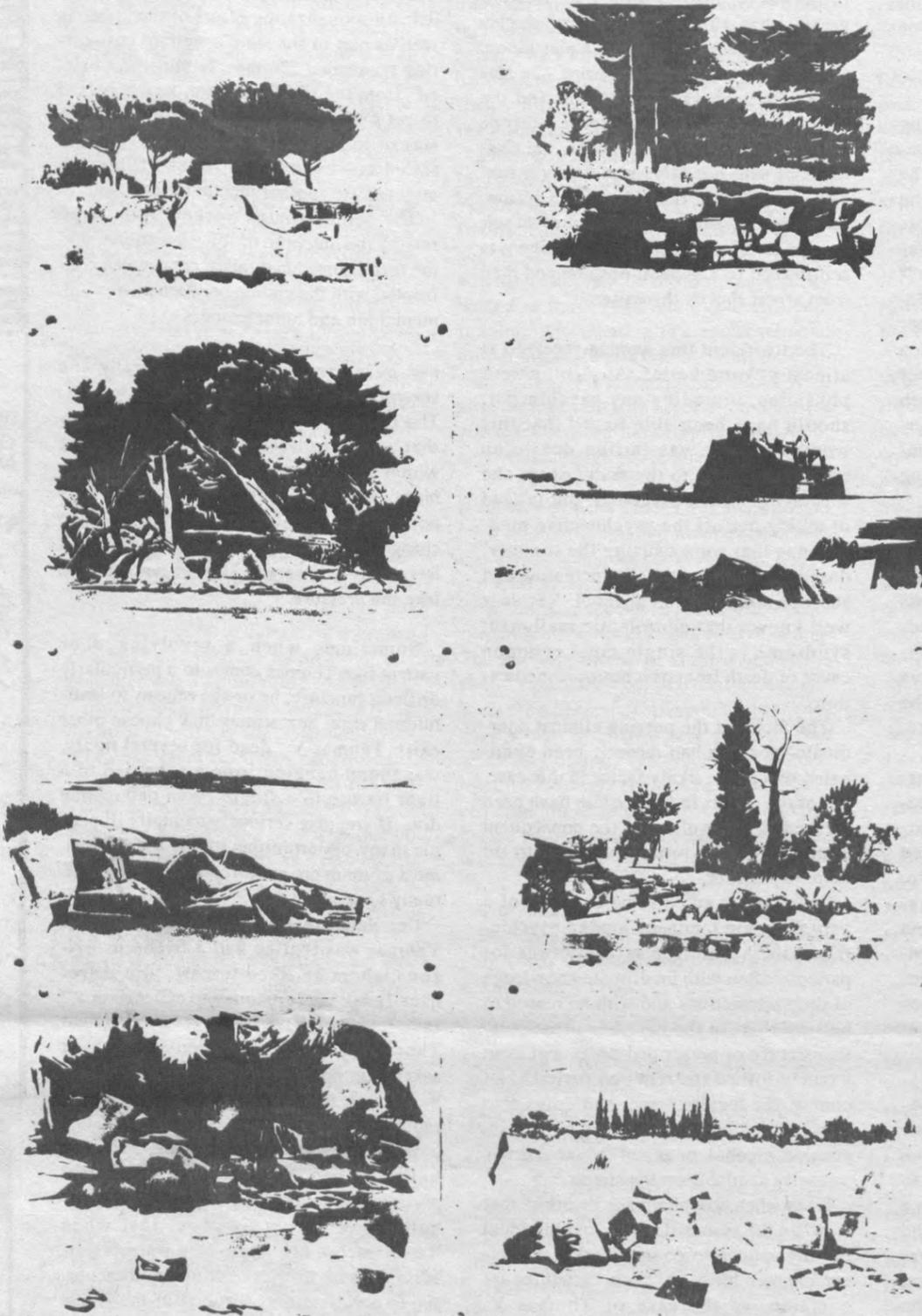
Kenneth Evett

"The far shining Loire." This fancy phrase seemed to jump off the page recently while I was reading Henry James' *The American*. My response reminded me of one typical paradox of old age. On one hand I felt a certain satisfaction that I had developed enough discernment over the years to spot this pretentious locution, yet at the same time I was vexed that it had disrupted my enjoyment of a fine novel. But nowadays being vexed is one of the things I do best. I am good at being outraged by the omnipresent restrictive banalities of contemporary art historians who ignore my work; I am easily driven to fire off letters of denunciation to such Republican politicians as Al D'Amato, Orrin Hatch, Jesse Helms, and the mealy-mouthed Haley Barbor. I am quick to anger at people who announce "Hayden bores me" or "Trollope bores me." The unctuous Pat Robertson and his Christian Coalition arouse my most satanic thoughts. Certain modern technological contraptions—the impersonal answering machines that I refuse to talk to, the canned voices, push-button instructions and interminable delays of modern telephone systems infuriate me. Computerized television ads, with their frenetic flashing images of changing scale and position always tilted on the diagonal, the impenetrable plastic wrappings that envelope the products of our gross economy, and our national dependence on polls and rankings to determine our opinions, all stir up my hostile juices.

Of course I know that such intemperate reactions can be seen as the stereotypical behavior of an embittered oldster, but beyond that awareness of reality, I have the strange sense that I am an unwilling participant in a surreal performance art event, or that I am like a youthful actor using the timeworn tricks of the trade to portray an enfeebled and addled old man in a high school play.

Although high-blood-pressure pills have deprived me of certain pleasurable physical sensations, other of my senses seem more acute. Sudden noises make me jump, and the lower registers of music sound clearly in my ears with a sense of foreboding. Recently I have become aware of whiffs of dead mouse emanating from the basement, and my old eyes have learned to discern subtle, close tonal relationships in Cubism. My sense of time has changed. No longer obliged to work for a living, I find that time moves very slowly, not at all with the sense of a hurried rush to the crematorium that one might expect at my time of life. While the progressive infirmities of aging are hard to bear, they at least become a topic of conversation when old folks get together and provide a dependable source of distraction from boredom, the worst enemy of the elderly.

Nevertheless, there are still a few interesting and rewarding experiences to be had at this late phase of existence. I have settled into a house-bound routine of gazing out our large windows at the prodigal richness of forms, colors, and spaces that nature has to offer, or I contemplate from our screened-in back porch the intricate interstices of branches and leaves that open out to many leveled layers of space until finally, through a small aperture, I can see white-clad divinities playing tennis on the grey-green faculty courts below our house; or at the end of the day I may sit on my studio sun deck, vodka martini in hand, jazz on the radio, and look up at shifting clouds



Renovated Watercolors Kenneth Evett

and the jet trails of high-flying airplanes with their cargo of fragile humans.

Our house is perched on the brink of Cascadilla gorge and the sound of rushing water accompanies our days and nights. Huge trees surround the place. Three great oaks growing from the steep side of the gorge frame one boundary of the site. A monumental linden tree and an outsized maple with scabrous bark define other limits of the property and extend their protective branches over the house. Hemlocks, a catalpa tree, flowering bushes and a tall arbor vitae hedge establish a wall around the place. In summertime these elements form a great green cage in which birds and squirrels cavort, and an occasional cautious cat or panting dog in pursuit of amatory or predatory adventures passes by along a traditional animal trail that runs by the edge of the gorge.

Of these creatures, the birds, with their neat ovoid bodies of bowels and delicate bones, their nervous perching and sudden flight, seem to me miraculous, while the squirrels' daring gymnastic leaps and ingenuity at raiding the bird feeder add a note of theatricality and comedy to the scene. Now I wonder how I could have taken these marvelous creatures for granted over the years.

To occupy the hours when I'm not

taking a nap, painting, writing, doing the day's dishes, or watching political squabbles or sporting events on TV, one of my stratagems for dealing with ennui is to reread my favorite novels. I once took *Vanity Fair* with me on a painting trip to Greece, and I remember my sense of deprivation when I finished reading it in a cold, white-walled room of a third-class hotel on the Plaka. Now, amidst the American comforts of home, once more following the fortunes of brave, heartless Becky Sharp, I am reveling in Thackeray's vigorous verbs, admiring the steadfast integrity of his portrayal of character, but above all, I'm responding to his wisdom. His unblinking revelations of the folly of human vanity have given me some perspective on my own egocentric delusions and I think of him as my friend. Indeed, I am willing to offer a new criterion for evaluating authors. If they project a humane, humorous, and empathetic view of life in vivid language that elicits the magical power of fiction to arouse our curiosity and engage our feelings, they are good writers, whatever their subtext may be. Therefore, I am devoted to 19th century British novelists, George Eliot, Trollope, Dickens, Thackeray, and Hardy, and I have found several writers of this tortured century who seem to maintain some sense of fellow feeling, wit and balance, among them, V. S. Pritchett, Joyce, Mann, R. K. Narayan, Murie! Spark, and G. B. Shaw. I'm not comfortable with Beckett, Proust, and Will Self, even though the latter, who

as an innocent babe once lay on our living room couch while his mother, Elaine, divorced wife of writer Robert Adams, and his father, her new English husband, the city planner Peter Self, had dinner with us.

When it finally dawned on me that American culture could get along without any new art work from me, but still driven by habit and necessity to the act of painting, I began to rework watercolors that I had created forty years ago at Yaddo, while in the first flush of excitement at discovering that radiant and anarchic medium. My intention was to maintain whatever vitality existed in the original marks, yet impose my current concepts of content and form on the work as a whole. In doing so, I began an enlightening adventure. It turned out that the slightest change of hue, value, or intensity led to a dislocated commotion in the entire painting. New tensions were generated, focal points were violently shifted about, and unpredictably different alignments demanded an uncharted search for a new resolution. My previous self-imposed watercolor guidelines (that I would always work directly from nature, that the method should be spontaneous and improvisational, that each stroke of the brush is irreversible and must not be changed) had to be abandoned. Instead, I began to employ technical devices that I once considered wicked: wiping out whole unwanted areas by applying water and scrubbing with kleenex, adding arbitrary tones of all sorts, even scratching out misguided marks with a sharp knife. In this process the vital power of the abstract elements of art struck me with renewed force and I carried on the action in a heightened state of awareness until I either achieved a satisfactory conclusion or gave up on the effort. As a result, I have some ruined pieces of paper but also some new paintings that are animated by diagonal

energies and darkened with tonalities of gloom.

Now, with these transfigured images covering the walls of my studio, I have developed a case of what might be called senile paranoia. I think how good my paintings are, how full of subtle nuances and elegant transitions. I believe I belong in the company of the best American watercolor painters: Homer, Prendergast, and Marin. But when it is borne in on me that no one else shares this view, then I feel that I am the victim of a vulgar and indifferent American art establishment.

In moments of sanity I know that thousands of other artists out there share similar delusions, and that none of this matters in the long run. I regret that I won't be around to see the outcomes of the never-ending contentions between the destructive and life-affirming forces of our species, and even though I am aware that the creative branch of the human family is as capable of mean-spirited behavior as the rest of mankind, I am proud that sometimes we reach a state of pure grace in which we make images, tell stories, dance, and sing in the face of death.

**Kenneth Evett**, emeritus professor of art at Cornell, recently exhibited an oil painting in the one hundred and seventy second members show at the National Academy of Design in New York City.



# The Bookpress Quarterly



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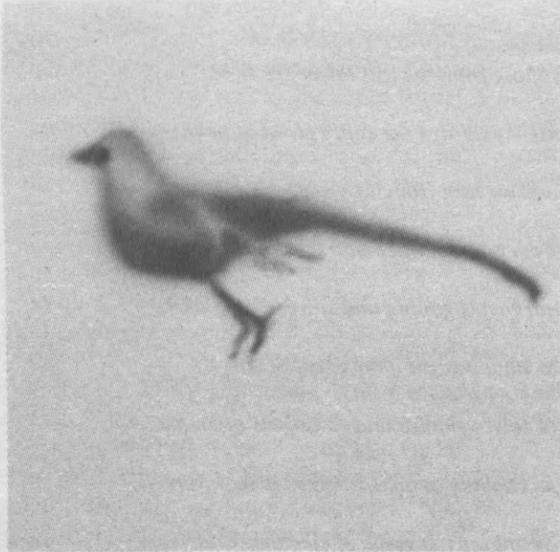
fiction

poetry

art

December 1997

## River Angel



Tim Merrick

### A. Manette Ansay

*River Angel is an excerpt from a novel that is forthcoming from Morrow.*

#### Author's note:

*River Angel* is a work of fiction, the best way I've found to tell the truth. It is less the story of an individual than the history of a community; it is less about what did or did not happen in a town I have chosen to call Ambient than it is about the ways in which we try to make sense of a world that doesn't.

In April, 1991, in a little Wisconsin town about a hundred miles southwest of the town where I grew up, a misfit boy was kidnapped by a group of high school kids who, later, would testify they'd merely meant to frighten him, to drive him around for awhile. Somehow they ended up at the river, whooping and hollering on a two lane bridge. Somehow the boy was shoved, he jumped, he slipped — accounts vary — into the icy water. The kids told police that they'd never heard a splash; one reported seeing a brilliant flash of light. (Several people in the area witnessed a similar light, while others recalled hearing something "kind of like thunder.") All night, volunteers walked the river's edge, but it was dawn before the body was found in a barn a good mile from the bridge. Investigators constructed this unlikely scenario: the boy had drifted downstream, crawled out of the

water, climbed up the slick embankment and crossed a snow-dusted pea field. But if that were the case, then where were the footprints? The evidence of his shivering scramble up the embankment? And how could he have survived the cold long enough to make it that far?

The owner of the barn had been the one to discover the body, and she said the boy's cheeks were rosy, his skin warm to the touch. A sweet smell hung in the air. "It was," she said, "as if he were just sleeping." And then she told police she believed an angel had carried him there. For years, it had been said that an angel lived in the river. Residents flipped coins into the water for luck, and a few claimed they had seen the angel, or known someone who'd seen it. The historical society downtown had a farmwife's journal, dated 1898, in which a woman described how an angel rescued her drowning family during a flood. Now as the story of the boy's death spread, more people came forward with accounts of strange things that had happened on that night. Dogs had barked without ceasing till dawn; livestock broke free of padlocked barns. Someone's child crayoned a bridge and, above it, a wide-winged tapioca angel. Several people reported dream visitations by the dead. There were the stories about the boy himself—that he frequently prayed in public places, that he never once raised his hand against another, that a childless woman conceived after showing him one small act of kindness.

Though both church and state investigators eventually deemed all evidence unsubstantiated, money was raised to build a shrine on the spot where the boy's body was found. I have been to the River Angel shrine, and to others. I have traveled to places as unlikely as Cullman, Alabama and as breathtaking as Chimayo, New Mexico. I leaf through the gift shop books about angels, books about miracles, books filled with personal testimonies. Books in which supernatural events rescue ordinary people from the effects of a world which is becoming increasingly violent, dangerous, complex. Though I myself am not a believer, I understand the desire to believe. I live every day with the weight of that desire. Ultimately, I have found it is meaningless to hold the yardstick of fact against the complexities of the human heart. Reality simply isn't large enough to hold us. And so the sky becomes a gateway to the heavens. Death is not an end but a beginning. A child crossing a pea field into the indifferent, inevitable darkness may be reborn, raised up by our longing into light.

—A. Manette Ansay  
Plymouth, Wisconsin  
1996

*Thank you, Saint Martha, for favors granted. The following prayer is to be said for 9 consecutive Tuesdays: Saint Martha, I resort to your protection and faith. Comfort me in all my difficulties*

*and through the great favor you enjoy in the house of my savior, intercede for me and my family. (Say 3 Hail Marys.) I beseech thee to have infinite pity in regard to the favor I ask of Thee, Saint Martha (name favor) and that I may be able to overcome all difficulties. Amen. This prayer has never been known to fail. You will receive your intention on or before the 9th Tuesday, no matter how impossible it might seem. Publication must be promised. BD*

—from the Ambient Weekly  
December, 1990

The boy and his father stopped for the night somewhere west of Canton, Ohio. Around them, the land lay in one vast slab, the snow crust bright as water beneath the waxing moon. The nearest town was ten miles away, unincorporated, and there was nothing in between except a handful of farmhouses, Christmas lights burning in each front window; a few roads; fewer stop signs; a small white crossroads church. High above and out of harm's way were the cold, gleaming eyes of stars, and each was so strangely iridescent that if a man in one of the farmhouses were to have risen for an aspirin or glass of warm milk, he could have been forgiven for waking his wife to tell her he'd seen—well, something. A glowing disk that swelled and shrank. A pattern of flashing lights. And she could have been forgiven, later, for telling people she'd seen something too

Continued on page 46

## Inside:

An Excerpt from *The Mensch* by David Weiss

Poetry by Lynn Powell

Edward Hardy's "Assessment"

# Local Affairs

## i. Near Cambridge

How she holds back, then floods and giddies us,  
 Dame Memory: her plump, patched hedges  
 rich in song, her fen skies wide with the long  
 drone of insects and distant aircraft. The smoke  
 of garden fires sharpens, at a short remove, the air.

This close and too-sweet island, whose halls  
 and chapels glow like honey in the failing light,  
 draws at her children. Behind the cropped  
 and proper yews, we imagine a hidden garden  
 entered once, if at all, and then as a child.

It seems close again. Even the tight, pale nettles,  
 clutche among hay stubble, catch at and repossess me.  
 Faces and gestures rise, rise from the grass, friends  
 twenty years out of mind; their movement and voices  
 become all England's: light swelling from the fleshy earth.

## ii. Buildings

Quoin, buttress, mullion and corbel:  
 foursquare banks and colleges  
 stand on profits solid as themselves:  
 the scholarship of hops and wool.

Who occupies their rooms, if only for a while,  
 should be shriver of the masters' souls.  
 Their poor and peasantry had little part  
 in this: a lot not theirs to choose, although

Their work doles out our privilege  
 and leisure yet. No theory sweetens  
 without it's well provided for  
 by merchandise, or government, or war.

Libraries and the tall chapels rise

in skilled deliberation. Will such craft  
 and argument in fretted stone redeem  
 each day's dull work for it? Know that

rood screen and roof boss sweetly gilded  
 were paid in the crash of battle; that the stuff  
 of men's lives bought the mason ale and bread,  
 who cut free these miracles of love.

Do we find his windows delicate enough?

## iii. Old World Order

Eastward over Europe, over years, how many windows  
 glowed and dimmed and stayed unlit through war and terror  
 and were remembered and made good after it?

This crippled street in Budapest, in Warsaw,  
 shows a dozen periods, starting and ending  
 in the corners of each house. Every

square and alley recalls a hero: soldier,  
 poet, patriot, whose provenance and name  
 has changed as the demands of history change.

It's easy to smile at a regime that so  
 demotes and sanctifies its past, and easy to forget.

But whatever history we choose construes us;

retelling it we make our place:  
 a style reflexive as this courtyard's walls  
 turned in upon themselves, each course

incorporating what it has replaced.  
 As morning cloudlight from gold leaf and saints,  
 the mind slides off such mass and won't be held.

Most of what had fallen was rebuilt

and cast into an image of itself. It is too square and neat.  
 The lives within seem sheltered from the street

yet are the substance of its every twist.

One who remembers may not understand  
 but who forgets, forfeits his place and land.

## iv. The Vanity of Theory

Lifting from the last tower the light,  
 night explores the softly glowing town  
 and we turn from the window's blank,  
 from the real pitch and loss of hold—  
 gargoyles gaping and spires in the dark—  
 to what we can if only half begin  
 to solve: riddles and traditions of an art  
 so recently assumed: codes to be invented  
 or to break, a game of elegance and proof,  
 which keeps far off for hours the void.

And while darkness slips out on the town  
 and westward across the island, and lights  
 flick and go out, a doubt lifts and blows  
 among old papers, fear flickers in the gaps  
 between houses, and we say: "It is only the night,"  
 and think, if thinking be done at all, that  
 we are safe in our model of the world.

And the vision whispers and builds around us  
 softly, softly; it is a theory which so nearly  
 fits the facts, we will soon have accounted for all.

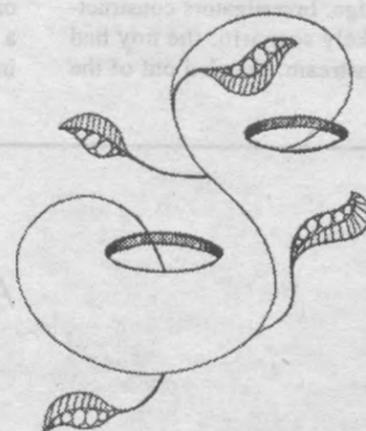
—Philip Holmes

Philip Holmes lived in Ithaca for seventeen years. In 1994 he moved to Princeton where he teaches applied mathematics and mechanics. He has published three collections of verse, the most recent being *The Green Road* (Anvil Press). The poems in this issue are taken from a forthcoming collection.

## The Bookpress Quarterly Statement of Purpose

The *Bookpress Quarterly* is a journal of fiction, poetry, essays, and artwork, published as a supplement to *The Bookpress*. It shares with *The Bookpress* the goals of encouraging literary community and conversation in upstate New York and showcasing that region's best writers and artists.

Illustrations by: Laura Glenn, Julian Bell, Joseph Meyer, Zevi Blum, Tim Merrick, Ayrton R. Johnson, Gillian Pederson-Krab, Anne Campbell



Ayrton R. Johnson

# Assessment

Edward Hardy

From the onset, we understood that gaining access to the Pinchbeck Club would prove to be our most difficult task. Still, we remained confident that a full and fair assessment would eventually occur.

The property itself, otherwise designated as Lot 314 on Plat 7 of the tax assessor's maps, is situated in a hilly, mixed-use zone of residential and professional buildings. The site has been further improved by an immense gothic structure of 111 years in age. The exterior is brick, the roof slate, and aside from numerous stained-glass windows depicting peacocks and serpents, the building closely resembles other social clubs of that era.

According to available records, the structure contains 13,124 square feet of gross living area. However, for assessment purposes—as we are in the midst of a rolling revaluation and the Pinchbeck Club has never claimed tax-exempt status—the building's interior has remained uninspected since 1927. Records show references to numerous failed attempts, the most recent occurring in 1972, followed by the dismissal of that member of the assessor's staff. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that material improvements have occurred during the intervening decades, hence we assumed this task.

Initial contact attempts for assessment purposes were made by phone, though at no time did we in fact speak to any members of the Pinchbeck Club. Instead, our repeated calls reached only a string of answering machines attached to a series of apparent wrong numbers. Once, a gruff, female voice told us to, "Leave the speed data in kbs and hang up immediately." Later, a male voice suggested we, "Place our repeat orchid order at the beep."

Following regular and routine surveillance, we observed that daily activity at the Pinchbeck facility increases toward mid-week and peaks in the early evening hours. Through the arched first floor windows we observed a number of older individuals gathered for drinks in a room near the heart of the building—adjoining what we believe to be a dining area. The functions of the numerous upper rooms we find difficult to imagine.

Subsequent to our arrival at 5:49 p.m., as we lifted the parrot-shaped knocker on the oak door, all exterior lights were suddenly extinguished. Eventually, an elderly woman with red-rimmed eyes opened the door and said, "We have fulfilled our enrollment order—now lift on out of here!"

After collecting our thoughts, we knocked again. Following a longer interval, the door swung back to reveal a pink-faced, walrus-shaped man wearing a cummerbund, who said, "No one has sent for you—as of late."

We explained that we were from the municipality, and for the purposes of accurate and proper assessment we were required, by law, to view the interior. We added that, as the quality of our assessment would be reflected in the organization's tax bill, without proper access the municipality would perhaps be forced to speculate.

"Municipality?" The man removed his glasses. "Ha! We are a principality!" He slammed the door.

Admittedly, at this juncture we debated involving the authorities. However, as the sleet began in earnest,

we grasped the cold parrot-knocker a third time. In response, a tall, elderly woman holding a blue, beaded purse and wearing an obvious wig, opened door and said, "Who?"

We replied that our briefcase contained several quite valuable items which we thought might interest the Pinchbeck membership. This statement, of course, had no basis in reality and how it came to fly, improvisationally, from our lips remains a mystery. Perhaps because we were wet? The woman, however, stepped back as though we were expected. "You've come to play," she said.

Of course, we were surprised. Once inside, in addition to the noise and general clatter, we noted that atmosphere smelled of hickory and nutmeg, and felt somehow different, as though the air pressure had changed. We were startled by the intricately carved paneling in the front hall. The ceilings and upper walls were finished in light colors. The rugs were threadbare, but as non-structural items, these are not considered for assessment purposes.

A gaunt man wearing a well-cut suit hailed us by chopping the air with the side of his hand. Although clearly over six feet in height, the man also wore a helmet. Instead of asking our business, he began running his fingers across the headpiece's hammered surface and smiling, as though this were providing him with an intense sort of mental pleasure.

"I am wearing," he said, "fifteenth century, ceremonial, Italian military headgear." He closed his eyes. "As I bend lower, you will see that it has been hammered from a single sheet of metal. It was found in my home as we remodeled, wedged between the playroom studs."

He departed before we could register our surprise. In fact, the speed at which he fled implied that our response would have had no particular impact. Nevertheless, we followed the glint of his helmet on into the great room's general din. As open living space, this area encompassed approximately 60 square feet, and featured two blue-tiled fireplaces. Drinks were served along the western wall by the walrus-like man.

Although still on-duty, we concluded that a drink might be helpful and requested a gin and tonic. The walrus-shaped man shook his head, as though we had tried that ruse in the past and handed us a Manhattan in a martini glass. As we were finally viewing the structure's interior, while riding only the most vaporous of excuses, it seemed unwise to contradict.

"How was your trip?" the walrus-like man asked. "Good to see you've

returned." Before we could answer, he turned to serve a white-haired woman in a tooled leather coat.

We fully intended to continue our assessment. We planned on it, although we were admittedly distracted by the number of odd conversational fragments darting about the room. "Two in particular, "Oh, my father was a sinecure too," and, "There were untold nymphs in our family," rose to the surface. We noticed that club members who were not talking, all exhibited the same vacant expression, as though they were reminiscing or plotting a trip. We suddenly thought of the word—spa.

"At loose ends?" A man in a black turtleneck appeared before us. "Yes?"

he said. "If you only understood how I could be of service." We noted the white echo of a beard and three rings on each index finger. "The moon is causing all your problems," he explained. "It is causing problems for all of us. Tides, death, plagues seasonal imbalances. But reorganizing the solar system is within our capability. We must no longer be held captive to the tyrannical assumptions of planetary order. We can extinguish the moon." He began a small dance. "We will. Would you like to see how?"

"Do you know these people?" we asked.

"Know?" he said. "In one sense, of course. Think of this as an island. excuse me." A tiny woman in a vivid green dress reached up to clink glasses with the turtleneck man. "Planetary realignment is only a fad," she said. "A blip on the continuum. Ancient steam-based material cultures performed this ritual on a regular—"

"I would much rather discuss the naked singularity, before the band starts," replied a man with painfully white hair. He had come by to distribute fresh drinks.

"Of love?" the woman in green asked. She shifted her gaze.

Of course we wished to linger, but the tall woman with the beaded-purse touched our arm. "One point two billion songbirds," she said in a sculpted voice. "World-wide. Killed annually by household pets. Cats killing recreationally. If we could only organize those birds—beforehand. She shook her head and we feared for the wig.

As she raised her eyes, we too gazed at the beamed ceiling and found ourselves entertaining a spiraling vision of tiny green and violet birds. A fluttering cloud. We noted that the room felt larger than we first assumed. Big, we decided. No—expansive. We began to feel faintly jittery, as though we had been missing something. "How does one join?" we asked.

"Historically," a rotund man said, pausing in mid-stride, "it involves a rhinoceros. It has always involved a rhinoceros."

"Or a set of presumptions," the man with the helmet added.

"Join?" said a woman clasping an empty cigarette holder. "Oh, my. Joining implies applications, procedures." Her voice sounded like one we might have recognized from an early-evening game show.

The beaded-purse woman wiggled her fingers. "It once involved a pheasant. A very pleasant pheasant," she said. "There are many pleasures of the tongue."

"References?" we asked.

"What good are those?" two people on either side of us replied.

"Then—" We were stumbling, puzzled, but sensing that something was again within reach. "Membership involves the non-literal use of animals?"

"Why of course," the beaded-purse woman said. "If you wish. Interest is all, eh?"

"Are you Canadian?" we asked.

"Ha! Always," she said. "Go on."

Our initial attempts felt thin and stunted. As though we were unsure of where to go and had not yet discovered the flickering balance between interest and length. But, as we recounted our recent discovery involving the use of golf clubs to divine the precise geoposition of marine archeological sites, the woman with the beaded purse began to nod. When we suggested that this had to do with unique qualities of the shaped graphite in their shafts, she rattled the ice in her drink. We noticed a warm flowing from the air circulating past our ears. We felt a slight increase in our heart rate. We recognized the presence of a pliable, but long-forgotten vein. When we mentioned once using a stapler to build an electrical charge around our being, thereby deflecting positive ions until we were ensconced in a healthy negative-ionosphere, the beaded-purse woman said, "Hmmmm. Are you joining us for dinner?"

We admitted that we were a little hungry.

"Constant truth-sifting can be so—tiresome." Her left hand began to float.

Within seconds, the man in the ceremonial helmet found us again and began to explain the technical intricacies of filling his swimming pool with blue Jell-O and exploring this creation using scuba tanks. Oddly though, as he went on, explaining how much weight was required to achieve equilibrium and describing the pleasantly distorted qualities of moving through a different, if somewhat familiar medium, we began to feel unburdened, as though we too, if only temporarily, were rising to the surface in a once-forgotten way.

When the man in the ceremonial helmet mentioned that his dog had recently learned to program, due to an increasing array of canine-related information management concerns, we too, suddenly recalled our Aunt Leah's captive crow, who—for a crow—made it quite far in the distribution end of the baked goods business. It is a very long story.

Edward Hardy grew up in Ithaca. His first novel *Geyser Life* was published last year.



Ride After the Dawn. 19/100 Zevi Blume

# River

Continued from page 1

as she'd stood by the bedroom window, sock-footed and shivering, her husband still pointing to that place in the sky.

But a wind came up in the early morning hours, scattering the stars and moon like winter seeds, so that by dawn the sky was empty, the color of a tin cup. It was the day before Christmas. They were on their way to Ambient, Wisconsin. The air had turned cold enough to make Gabriel Carpenter's nostrils pinch together as he stood in the motel parking lot, listening to his father quote figures about the length of time human skin could be exposed to various temperatures.

"It's not like this is Alaska, kiddo," Shawn Carpenter said, clattering bright yellow plastic plates and cups from the motel's kitchenette onto the floor of the station wagon. The old dog, Grumble, who was investigating the crushed snow around the dumpster, shuddered as if the sound had been gunshot. The previous day, she'd ridden on the floor between Gabriel's legs, her face at eye level with Gabriel's face, panting with motion sickness. There'd been nowhere else to put her. Behind the front seats, the space was packed with all the things that hadn't been sold or lost or left behind: clothing, cookbooks, a color TV, a neon orange bean bag chair, snow shoes, a half-built dulcimer, two miniature lemon trees in large matching lemon-shaped pots, and Shawn's extensive butterfly collection, which was mounted on pieces of wood and enclosed behind glass plates. Whenever she'd started barking crazily, they'd been forced to stop and let her outside. The last time it had taken over an hour of whistling to coax her back.

Shawn peeled off one of his gloves and held his bare hand out toward Gabriel. "One thousand," he said, demonstrating. "Two one-thousand. Three one-thousand. Four one-thousand."

An oily light spread toward them from the edge of the horizon, and now Gabriel could see I-57 in the distance, a thin gray line slicing through the snowy fields, unremarkable as a healed-over scar. A single car crept along it, and he imagined it lifting into the air as lightly as a cotton ball. He imagined it again. If you believed in something hard enough, if your faith was pure, you could make anything happen—his fifth-grade teacher, Miss Welch, had told him that. Miss Welch was born again. Still the car kept moving at its careful speed, and Gabriel knew he must have doubted, and that was the only reason why the car kept dwindling down the highway to a point no brighter than a star. "You see?" Shawn said, and he wriggled his fingers. "If this was Alaska, my hand would be frozen. If this was Alaska, we'd probably be dead."

Grumble had found a grease-stained paper bag. Her tail moved rapidly to and fro as if she believed something good was inside it. Yet Grumble wagged her tail just as energetically at snow plows and mailboxes, at the sound of canned laughter on TV, at absolutely nothing at all.

"A dog, on the other hand, is a survivor. Warm fur, sharp teeth. A survivor!" Shawn said, and he must have enjoyed the sound of that word because he said it again as they pulled out of the parking lot. Gabriel stared back at Grumble hoping she would look up, hoping she would not. Then he faced front and kicked the plates and cups aside, making room for his feet against the vent. He pulled off one of his mittens and picked up a cup, which he held in front of his glasses. Peering through the oval handle, he watched the land fit into that tiny space.

"She'll find a nice family," Shawn assured him. "She'll forget all about us."

Noreen had been much harder to leave behind. Shawn still owed her money from the camper, which they'd bought with money she'd saved from years of work at a small insurance company. That was when they still had plans to travel cross-country—Noreen and Shawn, Noreen's son Jeffy and Gabriel—to Arizona, where the weather stayed warm and dry. Noreen had a soft Southern accent which made the things she said seem original and true, and she knew how to do things like make biscuits from scratch. It had been five months since Shawn and Gabriel had moved into her one-bedroom apartment in Fairmont, West Virginia, and sometimes, during that first charmed month, when they'd taken their blankets onto the tiny balcony and

it was too muggy to sleep, lain there beneath the stars talking about the future—even Jeffy who was only four and didn't understand what anyone was saying. But the camper had brought one thousand dollars, money that would get them to Wisconsin, and feed them until Shawn found work. He handed Gabriel the thick wad of fifties and hundreds, letting him feel its weight. "You'll have to help out with expenses for awhile" he said. "A paper route, kiddo, how do you feel about that?"

Gabriel imagined slogging through the snowdrifts, dragging a wet bag of newspapers behind him. "Maybe I could work in a restaurant," he said, although he wasn't sure a ten year old could do that kind of thing, even if he was big-boned the way people said.

"A paper route would be better for you—exercise, fresh air, all that."

"OK," Gabriel said warily—was his father going to start in on his weight?—but Shawn stuffed the money back into the deep pocket of his coat and turned on the radio. More soldiers were arriving in Saudi Arabia; air craft carriers had moved into striking range of the Gulf. "Listen up, son," Shawn said. "There's going to be a war." The sun was gaining strength, bloodying the hoarfrost that clung to the shrubs and the tall wild grasses that poked up through the snow crust at the edges of the highway. They passed an intersection boasting the world's largest collection of rocks, a car dealership with its necklace of bright flags, a nursery selling Christmas trees beneath a yellow and white striped tent. The land was flatter than any place Gabriel could imagine except, perhaps, Heaven with its shining streets of gold. Miss Welch had told the class all about heaven and Jesus Christ, and how, if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they would be filled with the power of God and could perform any miracle they wished. "You mean," Gabriel said, "if I had a glass of white milk I could make it chocolate?" "That's right," Miss Welch said. "But you'd have to believe with all your heart. Most people can't do that. Most people have a little bit of doubt that they can't overcome no matter how hard they try. Otherwise it would be easy to make a miracle happen. Anyone could do it."

Gabriel picked up the rest of the cups and fitted them into a towering stack. He tried not to think about Grumble. He tried not to think about Noreen who must be waking up to an empty apartment and a bare spot on the lawn by the parking lot where the camper had been sitting. He reminded himself there would be other girlfriends and dogs and Jeffs, although his father had assured him that this time things would be different because Ambient was the place where Shawn had

grown up. This time, Shawn said, they were really going home.

In the past, when Shawn had talked about Ambient, it was to make fun of the people who lived there. Hicks and religious fanatics, he called them. Local yokels married to cousins. People with six fingers and bulging foreheads. Now he was talking about how much Gabriel was going to like country living. He talked about the way the sown fields around the town looked like a green and gold checkerboard, split by sleepy county highways where you could drive for an hour without seeing anything except meadow larks, sparrow hawks and red wing black birds and, perhaps, a sputtering tractor. He described the mill pond, how on hot summer days you could dive off the wall of the old Killsnake Dam and float on your back beneath a sky so blue it seemed like a reflection of the water itself. He talked about the Onion River, which ran all the way from the mill pond smack through the center of Ambient, where there was a park with a little gazebo and swings, and an old-fashioned town square with a five and dime, a pharmacy and a cafe with an ice cream soda counter. An angel lived in the river, he said. In fact, he'd even seen it once: small and white, about the size of a seagull, hovering just above the water. But the absolute best part about Ambient was that both Gabriel's grandfather and his uncle—Shawn's older brother, Fred—lived in a farmhouse big enough so that Gabriel could have his own room. At night, he could lie in bed and listen to the freight train passing through, just like Shawn had done as a boy, imagining he was a hobo, a stowaway, rocked to sleep inside one of the cars.

Gabriel raised the stack of cups so the top cup touched the roof of the station wagon. He wondered if the angel was real, or if it was just something his father had made up so he would want to live there.

"Ambient," Shawn announced, "is the perfect place for a boy like you to grow up, don't you think?"

The station wagon swerved a little, and Gabriel let the cups collapse, a shattering waterfall of sound. Shawn jumped and accelerated into the breakdown lane. There was the raw hiss of tires spinning on ice and, for a moment, Gabriel saw the long fingers of the weeds reaching for him, close enough to touch. Then they were back on the highway.

"Goddamn it!" Shawn said. "See what you made me do?"

Gabriel picked up a cup that had fallen into his lap.

"You blame me for everything, don't you?" Shawn said. "This is your way of getting back at me. This is your way of getting under the old man's skin."

He turned up the radio and they drove without speaking as the red sunrise dissipated into the steely morning. People were arguing over what the war was going to be about, if there even was a war at all. Gabriel tried to topple a thin stand of trees. He tried to make himself invisible. When nothing happened, he searched his soul for the blemish of doubt which, somehow, he must have overlooked. Noreen had been Born Again just like Miss Welch, and she said that Miss Welch was right: pure faith made anything possible. She told Gabriel stories of people who'd had cancer and been completely cured without surgery or drugs, leaving the doctors mystified. She told Gabriel about modern-day people who'd seen Jesus sitting beside them on a bus or in a cafeteria or even walking

along the road, plain as day. She told him about one time when she'd been broke and she'd prayed really hard for a lottery number. One appeared in her mind as if God had painted it there with His finger; she'd won five-hundred dollars. Noreen was younger than Shawn and she wore red lipstick that stuck like a miracle to the complicated shape of her mouth. She loved bright colors and soft, sweet desserts. She was good to Jeffy, and she would have been good to Gabriel if he had let her, if he had not known in his heart that someday soon his father would decide he didn't love her anymore.

Just before noon, Shawn pulled over at a rest area and parked the car at the edge



of the lot, away from the kiosk. He moved the seat back as far as it would go. "Tired?" he asked Gabriel tenderly. They were at the edge of a tiny strip of woods. The frosted ground was merry with soda cans and candy wrappers and bags of garbage people had dumped from their cars.

"A little," Gabriel said.

"You'll feel better after a catnap. Ten-fifteen minutes, and the world will be a brighter place." He took off his woolly cap and tucked his gloves inside it, making a small round pillow. Then he wedged it between the seat and the door, put his head against it, and slept.

For a long time Gabriel waited, staring at the broad, blunt shape of Shawn's chin, the fine blonde hairs outlining his ears like an aura. He divided his father into parts and let his gaze move slowly, deliberately, over each one. The lean, rough cheek. The neck with its strong Adam's apple and the finger of hair curling out from the collar. The sloping shoulders beneath the dark coat, the long narrow thighs. He looked at his father's crotch—there was no one to tell him not to—but then he made himself stop. An eyelash clung to the side of his father's nose and, breathless, he reached over and flicked it away. When Gabriel was still a little boy, his father would occasionally allow him to comb his curly black hair, and afterwards Gabriel would smell his fingers, the bitter mint

# Angel

of dandruff shampoo, the oily musk of his father's skin. He'd make up his mind to concentrate harder, to stop daydreaming, to do better in school and make his father proud. He'd lie in bed imagining scenes in which he rescued his father from some terrible danger, and—over and over again—he'd imagine his father's gratitude.

Shawn Carpenter was so handsome that people, women, and sometimes men too, would stop on the street and turn their heads to look as he walked on. He had robin's-egg eyes speckled with green, a dimple in his chin so deep you wanted to heal it with a kiss. He was an accomplished welder and electrician; he could fix cars and photocopiers; he was a nat-

potatoes, but ultimately none of that mattered because, eventually, they became the same. Shawn unpacked his butterfly collection and his bean bag chair, his dulcimer, his snow shoes, his cookbooks. He hung the butterflies on the living room wall, worked a little more on the dulcimer, and prepared chilled soups and golden puff pastries and fish baked inside parchment paper. He'd get to work on time each day and, at night, cut back on his drinking. He was charming and energetic, when he spoke, he waved his hands in the air. But it was always during these optimistic periods that he started to look at Gabriel with a shocked, critical eye, the way that Gabriel himself had looked at the world the first time he was fitted for his thick eye glasses. "Kiddo, you were blind as the proverbial bat," Shawn told him. "Things must look pretty good to you now," but the truth of the matter was that everything had looked much better before, and sometimes Gabriel still took off his glasses to enjoy a stranger's smooth complexion or a soft gray street, its velvet sidewalk lolling beside it like a tongue, the slow melt of land and sky at the horizon. "Where are your glasses?" Shawn would say. "I didn't spend that kind of money for you to decorate your pockets." Then everything jumped too close and filled with complicated detail: acne and scars and colorful litter, painfully double-jointed trees, clouds with their rough, unsympathetic faces.

Suddenly Shawn would decide that Gabriel needed more exercise, less TV. Perhaps it would occur to him that Gabriel should learn French, and then every night he'd have to listen to a tape that Shawn had ordered from a catalogue. Sometimes it was cooking lessons, Shawn standing over him as he tried to make a smooth Hollandaise. It could be his posture, or his attitude, or his ineptitude at sports, and sometimes it was all three. He'd always remember one endless fall, when they'd lived in Michigan with a woman named Bell, her three sons and their basketball hoop. Every night Gabriel had to practice jump shots and lay-ups and free-throws with the other boys. Every morning, he'd cross his fingers and stare up at the sky, willing winter to blow in early and leave the driveway slick with ice.

Eventually, Shawn would give up on Gabriel and turn to the girlfriend they were living with. At first, there were only a few small things, and he'd bring them to her attention reluctantly, sweetly, and always with a remedy: a permanent wave, adult ed. classes, a more functional arrangement of the living room. He'd sit up late in the orange bean bag chair, drinking from his flask and writing scraps of poetry, and he'd sometimes oversleep in the morning. Around that time, the fights would begin, secretive at first: a hissed exchange in the bedroom; sharp voices from the porch. One night, Gabriel would awaken to find Shawn sitting on the edge of his bed. "What was I thinking?" Shawn would ask, his breath golden with Jack Daniels. "Next time," he'd say, "warn me, kiddo. I'm almost twenty-nine. That's too old to be making big decisions with the wrong damn head," and he'd lie down on top of the covers beside Gabriel, and if Gabriel threw an arm over his chest, his father didn't shrug it away.

It was always best between them just after they'd moved back into a place of their own or, more likely, pointed the station wagon toward a city or town where they hadn't lived before, some

place where Shawn still had a friend or two, somewhere he knew he could find work. Together they'd bask in the afterglow of leaving, and it was during these times that Shawn always brought up the possibility of moving back to Ambient. Maybe he'd find a job doing piecework for the shoe factory on the River Road, something that would leave him time to write a novel, a thriller, he was certain it would sell. Or maybe he could start a little business, run it with one of his brothers—a landscaping company or, perhaps, a used car dealership. "Kiddo," Shawn would say, "I have got to get a grip on myself. I've got to get things together." At times like these, with Shawn's face flushed and open and hanging too close, Gabriel thought he might die of love for his father. "Daddy, it's all right," he'd say. "We're fine, everything's fine." And when he thought about how fervently his father believed in those words, words which fell like manna from Gabriel's own mouth, he truly understood the power of faith.

But now his father was sleeping. They were on their way to Ambient. There was no need for Gabriel to say anything. He dug down between the seats, looking for loose change, and when he'd collected enough dimes and nickels he got out of the car and went over to the kiosk. The vending machines were lined up in an outdoor alcove at the back, and he took his time before deciding on an Almond Joy. He ate the first section in one sweet, greedy bite; the remaining section he ate more slowly, licking off the chocolate to expose the clean white coconut beneath. Then he explored the small wooded area behind the kiosk. Finally, he sat down on a graffitied bench and flattened the empty Almond Joy wrapper, folded it into a fighter jet, guided it through barrel rolls and screaming dives and bombing runs. He wondered if his uncle and grandfather would really be glad to see him. He wondered if he really could have his own room, or if he'd be sleeping on a couch until Shawn found them a place of their own. His butt was getting numb from the coldness of the bench. His nose was running. His toes hurt. He decided that even if there was an angel in the Onion River, his father had never seen it.

A thin winter sunlight trickled through the trees, and he let his head fall back, thinking about the shapes the branches made against the sky. If an Iraqi plane flew over, he'd make it disappear, leave all those soldiers hanging like cartoon characters in mid-air. He imagined them falling to earth. He imagined their souls rising like milkweed, like dandelion seeds. Though he felt the thump of Shawn's hand on his shoulder, it took him a moment to respond to it.

"Like an idiot," Shawn was saying, "with your mouth hanging open and chocolate all over your face. How old are you now? Eight? Nine?"

"I'm ten," Gabriel said.

"Almost grown up," Shawn said. "Almost a goddamn man. What do you think about when you sit there like a ninny? Girls?" He plucked the candy wrapper airplane out of Gabriel's lap and threw it at the ground, but the wind caught it and sent it wafting away into the woods. "I hope to God it's girls," he said. "Christ." He pulled Gabriel up by the shoulder. "Where did you get the money for that candy?"

"The car."

"A thief, on top of everything," Shawn said. "Well, maybe your uncle and grandfather will have some idea what to do with you. Because I do not. Because I

simply have had it up to here," and he made a slicing motion across his throat. They walked back to the station wagon. As soon as they got inside, Gabriel's teeth chattered stupidly. Shawn glared at him, then started the engine and turned the heat on high. "Scared me half to death," he said, and he raked his hands through his hair. "What possessed you to get out of this car?"

"Hungry," Gabriel said. His toes burned. He shifted them carefully, trying not to rattle the cups and plates and risk drawing further attention to himself.

"Hungry!" Shawn said, as if that were the most outrageous of possibilities. He pulled back onto the highway, and they drove for another hour, listening to talk radio. Now and then there were bursts of static, which made the people sound far away, as if they were calling from the moon. A man said the hell with the UN, the US should drop the bomb. A woman said that if people over there wanted to kill each other, let them. They passed billboards advertising an adult book store, a barn with See Rock City! painted on its roof, the carcass of a deer and, less than a mile beyond it, a hitch-hiker, his face hidden by a multi-colored scarf. They passed a low, brick church decorated with a banner that read: Put the 'Christ Back in Christmas.' They passed two white crosses at the mouth of an off ramp, each decorated with a small, green wreath. At the end of the ramp was a bullet-ridden stop sign where a van idled, as if the driver was uncertain, exhaust drifting lazily through the air. But all the county roads met at ninety degree angles. There was never any question which way was left, which was right, which was straight ahead.

When Shawn finally spoke to Gabriel, his voice was softer. "You frozen anywhere?"

"Maybe my feet."

"Kick your shoes off. Get them up against that vent. Does it hurt?"

"Yeah."

"That's good, kiddo," Shawn said. "Pain is the way we know for certain that we're living. If you only remember one thing your old man tells you, try and remember that."

A truck passed them, traveling too fast, splattering their windshield with icy slush. Gabriel pictured it rolling over, bouncing off the guard rail, bursting into a perfect globe of fire. But though he believed without reservation, just the way Miss Welch had said, the truck slipped into the dark eye of the horizon. They were coming up on an exit. A McDonald's sign floated high above the highway, dazzling against all that gray and white.

"Look at that!" Shawn said heartily. "The answer to our prayers! What do you want, a hamburger? Fish sandwich?"

*Help bring the Christmas story to life! Human and animal volunteers needed for Ambient's annual Living Creche to be held in front of the railroad museum from noon till three on Christmas Eve Day. Costumes and hot chocolate provided. The manger will be heated this year! And everyone is invited to warm up in the museum lobby where the Christmas Ornament Collection of Mr. Alphonse Pearlmutter will be on display until the New Year.*

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A. Manette Ansay has an MFA from Cornell. He novels include *Vinegar Hill*, *Sister*, and *River Angel*.



Gillian Pederson-Krab

ural salesperson, an elegant waiter, a creative and indulgent chef. And when he met another woman he wanted to fall in love with, it was hard for Gabriel not to be jealous. He watched him for the early symptoms of a crush like a parent alert for fever. There were sudden bouts of giddy playfulness, late suppers, a rash of practical jokes. Raw eggs in his lunch bag instead of cooked. A fart cushion under his pillow. Next came splurges: take-out pizza, television privileges, a toy that had been previously forbidden. There were professional haircuts for them both and, for Shawn, a trip to the dentist. Soon a woman's name would ring from Shawn's tongue too often, too brightly, an insistent dinner bell, and then would come the first awkward meal all together in a restaurant with candles and fancy wine and a waiter quick to mop up any spills. One night, Shawn would step out for a goodnight kiss and not return until the next day, and tears would glaze his eyes in that moment before he shouted at Gabriel for forgiveness. "It's hard," he'd say, "raising you alone. Every day of my life since I turned eighteen I've spent looking after you."

Eventually, they'd start moving a few things from wherever they were staying into the woman's apartment or trailer or house or camp, and sometimes these places were elegant and clean, and sometimes they smelled of dog or fried

## The

## David Weiss

"Landlord!" barked Leon Roth for the third time. He rapped the door, harder this time, with his key ring. Off the hall's hard walls the word racketed like a rifle report. The vibrations of his own voice penetrating his chest made him queasy. Inside, he could hear a TV blaring, Latin music bubbling over. Roth hooked the keys back onto his belt loop and drummed the door with his fist.

"Landlord!"

The glass dot of the peephole dimmed, and Roth could make out an eyeball darting from side to side as if into an empty hallway. He glanced down at himself to make sure he was visible. Brown jacket over brown pants and boots, brown walls, brownish air: just barely.

"Landlord," he repeated.

"What do you want?" It was a gravelly, uncleared voice.

"Mr. Morales?" said Roth, clearing his own throat.

"You're two months behind in the rent."

"I told your office I don't give them nothing till my stove is fixed."

"I sent the super up last week to take care of that, Mr. Morales."

"Yeah, Gaetana, he came up. But he didn't do nothing. It ain't no better than it was." The tinny, rhythmic shriek of an infant jabbed through the door. Roth poked a loose tile with his toe. They always broke loose by the doorsill.

"All right, Mr. Morales, let me in and I'll take a look at it." Roth pressed the tile back into place.

"OK. OK," the voice said. "Wait a minute. Just wait a minute." He could hear other voices now, chattering. Roth turned and scraped his palm along the craggy textured wall; mud-dark, originally greenish with a bronze patina, it swallowed most of the light. The glow from the fluorescents in the ceiling was sucked up like an echo. Day and night these lights buzzed like flies in the last stage of dying, spinning around, flat on their backs.

In his six years coming here, not one that he could remember had ever burned out, the only things in this building that didn't need replacing. If this building went down the tubes like so many others in the Bronx, Roth had the feeling that these lights, somehow, would stay on. They seemed to have an energy source all their own.

Eternity would probably look like this, narrow, dim, no way out. It would take a saint to live here that long. No one else could stand it. No one else should have to, even for part of a lifetime. A saint might even look forward to it; if you were St. Sebastian with all those arrows through your gut, a place like this might even seem like a blessed relief. Maybe they should run an ad in the classifieds: "martyrs wanted." Except that it wasn't necessary. With so many buildings torched in the past few years, they hardly had a vacancy anywhere. Even a priest would have trouble finding an apartment these days.

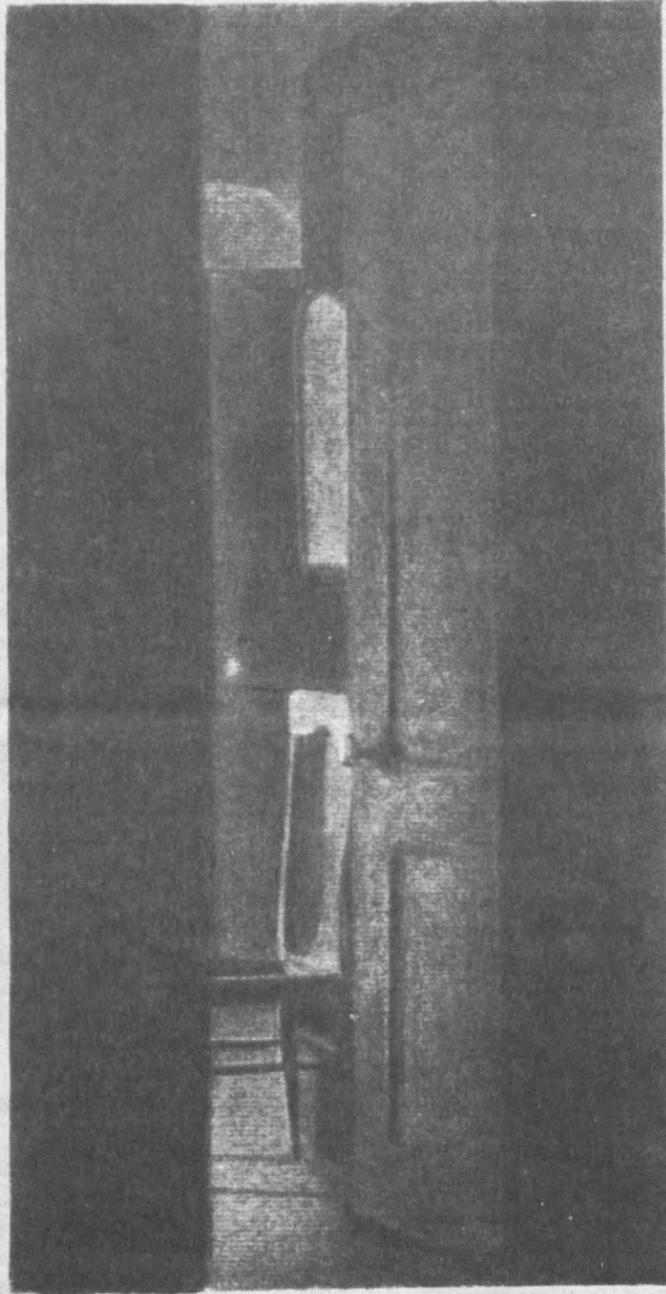
"Come on, Morales, come on," Roth seethed, toeing the wall. The air hung motionless and chilly as in a deep cave. It was amazing, he'd only just arrived, and already it felt like months, years. Already, it was hard to imagine that such a thing as day or "outside" existed at all. He felt like a stalactite forming.

\* \* \*

On the drive down, sunlight had slit open the belly of solid, gray clouds and smeared the buildings along the Grand Concourse with a thick, yellow glaze.

Idling at a light, he'd watched as each brick in the raking light stood out, etched so distinctly that every pit and pebble on its surface made or caught a shadow. Tiny worlds of rich, topographic detail, golden-red. Like the earth zoomed in on for a satellite map. So much going on in a space no larger than a billfold which a moment before had seemed flat, empty. Always the case, yet it stunned him.

His eyes throbbed as they did when he fought back his feelings at the heart-wrenching end of some movie or other. Like at *Old Yeller*. That one had really torn him up as a kid. The father raising



Joseph Meyer

the long barrel of his gun at the once faithful but now snarling, rabid dog. *Well, son.* The father seemed to say in his hokey Western drawl, *You have to kill what you love; otherwise You can't be sure you love it. The only way you'll grow up's to watch what you love die.* He'd hated that the bastards had made him love the dog. The film's arid landscape or the dog's fur or maybe its eyes were the same buttery yellow as this unnatural light.

As he nursed his container of coffee waiting at the light, Roth had the sensation that something was about to be revealed, like amethyst crystals cocooned in a crust of stone he'd often seen for sale in gift shops. Someone had tapped on that rough, ordinary surface to crack it open. Someone had known to do that. If the crude and violent earth could forge something so beautiful, however inadvertently.

He found himself hoping the light would fall on him, too, like a benediction. His car, however, lay in a building's long shadow. He was always in the shadow of something, it seemed. Then the traffic light had turned green, someone behind him leaned on the horn, and the sun's

brilliance withdrew from the sky as suddenly as it appeared.

\* \* \*

"Check it out!" said Morales. The air in the apartment was hectic with the tang of fried peppers, Bustelo and salsa. A parrot squawked in its cage. A boy and girl still in pajamas clung to Morales' legs as he led Roth past a living room bright with mirrors to the kitchen. From the darkness of a half-closed door, an old woman's face peered out.

Morales turned the knob for the oven.

Side by side in the narrow kitchen they listened to the gas hiss. "See, man, this ain't safe. I got kids here. I don't want them living in no dangerous place."

Roth shut off the gas. He got down on his knees and looked in through the broiler. The pilot was off. He got out some matches and relit the small, blue flame. He turned the knob; after a moment, the burner came on like a blue rug being rolled out.

"It's working, Mr. Morales. Sometimes the pilot goes out, that's all. If it does, you just have to relight it. Let me show you."

"No, man, that stove isn't safe. One day, I'm not here, gonna be a big explosion my wife goes to cook something. That stove's broken. I ain't living with no broken stove. I want a new one that works."

Roth turned the knob again and heard the soft whoosh of ignition. The boy and girl were down on all fours with their faces in the broiler door. Heat lifted their bangs. They held out their hands to feel the warm gusts. "Look, there's nothing wrong with this one," Roth repeated without conviction, the way he said most things. How did salesmen manage it day in and day out, conviction without belief? To feel strongly for no reason. Maybe that was the meaning of self-interest. *The trouble with you, Leon, is that you don't believe in yourself, Magda had said. It's even worse than that. You don't believe there's anyone there to believe in. That's what I like about you. Leon. You're attached by the thinnest thread.*

"Hey, you kids, how many times I got to tell you to keep away from there. I catch you near this stove again, I'm going to give it to you but good." The boy and girl jumped up and went back to clutching Morales' pants. Morales turned back to Roth. He was bleary-eyed and unshaven. An effluvia of beer and onions came off his breath. A mustache like rusty steel wool obscured his

mouth.

"I'm not giving you a cent till something's done about this." Roth turned the knob and the oven came on. "You can turn that all you like. The stove don't even cook right."

"What's wrong with the way it cooks?"

"Nothing tastes right that comes out of there. Everything is burned or raw. I get home from work, I want a good meal, not some oven that don't work right. Look at it. It's all banged up."

Morales pointed to the gouges where gray metal showed through the shiny white. An old, perfectly good stove. Roth debated whether to argue with him. The kids began slapping at each other, using Morales' legs as shields. They lunged and giggled, hitting hard and harder. Morales' pants slipped further down his hips.

"Maybe I can get you another one," said Roth. "Not new. But one without the enamel chipped off. I can't promise the pilot's going to be any different. Basically, it's just going to look better."

Roth could see Morales' slight, wiry body begin to unstiffen. He uncrossed his arms. A young woman in a short, tight skirt and a head of high, orange hair slowed, silently passing by the kitchen. The boy was chasing the girl around Morales' knees, squeezing between him and Roth as they went by. Roth heard the front door shut.

"You make sure it's a good one, otherwise my wife's gonna give me grief. Hey! Cut it out, you kids! What do you think I am, a fire hydrant or something?"

Roth hadn't seen the wife. But he was sure she was there, listening. The infant had quieted. Someone had turned the music down. As Morales led him back out, Roth wanted to ask about the rent again but couldn't bring himself to. Maybe he and Morales had an understanding, and Morales would give the rent to the super. He would tell the office that Morales would pay next week, by the eighth. That would keep them at bay. Otherwise, he'd find himself on the receiving end of another of Fine's lectures. *You gotta handle with these people, Leon. They expect you to. They don't respect you if you don't. Push. If they push back. You push harder. Threaten them with a dispossession. Give it to them if you have to. so they know you're not fooling around. Otherwise. all you're going to get is the run-around.* Roth had often heard Fine over the phone going at it hammer and tongs with a tenant. Fine kept a list of the names and numbers of recidivists on his bulletin board, and each morning he would work down it systematically, delivering sermons on basic economics, rights and responsibilities. Mr. Sanchez, if you don't pay your rent. how can I provide even basic services? Let me explain something to you. . . He made sweeping, decisive gestures with his hands which no one but Roth or the secretary ever saw. He spoke as if a failure to pay the rent on time loosened the very foundation stones on which the world was built. He was like a Lubovitcher, like any fundamentalist; no distinctions were made between small and large transgressions. Each offended the spirit of the law. Of course, Fine was shrewdly practical, too. Maybe it was persecution in the long-term that had baked self-interest right into the bricks of his being. This hadn't happened with Roth, who envied him. Fine would have maneuvered Morales into a silenced acquiescence. Mr. Morales, when you are late with your rent do I turn off your heat? do I cut off your hot water? Do I? Even the kids would have stopped playing and hidden behind their father. Fine

# Mensch

had wet, bulging eyes that never blinked as he talked at you. They made Roth feel ill, but he couldn't look away. It was like being hypnotized by a snake. Fine might not even have made a concession about the stove. He would have left Morales feeling grateful for the stove he had. *The trouble with you, Leon, Magda had said, is that you want people to be happy. so they'll leave you alone.*

He would switch the stove, Roth decided, with the one in the empty apartment, 2F, which Elvin was going to start painting tomorrow, and hope that Morales would come through before the unpaid rent was caught in the searching glare of Fine's scrutiny.

\* \* \*

The orange-haired girl was leaning at the elevator when Roth came out of the apartment. He could see between her stockings thighs the diamond pattern of tiles in the floor. In the dim air, perfume hung, tropical. One foot tapped electrically. A tiny red purse swung from her shoulder on silver chains. Where were her school books? Roth remembered girls like this from high school, just seven years ago, though it felt like a lifetime. Walking the halls they were like magnets in those physics class experiments that made all the metal filings move as if with a single mind. This one was like Monica. Always sullen and moody, angry at some guy, hard as porcelain. And disdain: she could really dish it out. Guys circled her, on the prowl. She barely gave them the time of day, it seemed. *The thing about Monica, Magda had explained, is that she thinks being tough is some sort of philosophy.* Monica copied Leon's homework; he let her cheat on tests. In return, she had let Leon hang around with her. With him, she was soft, weary, confiding. Leon didn't really count, he knew, but that's why they got along. The truth, he used to tell her, was not that boys wouldn't leave her alone but that she didn't want them to. She gave him a weak smile and a touch on the cheek. You're sweet, she'd said. Soon after that she'd stopped coming to school. Knocked up, someone had said. *The thing about Monica, Magda had said, is that she thinks her looks are some sort of diploma.*

In the elevator the girl glanced up at Roth. "You got any apartments for rent? I got a friend who's looking, my girlfriend's brother. I noticed one's empty

on the second floor." She looked down again. The gold hoops of her earrings swung against her cheeks.

"That one's already rented."

She tapped the heel of one shoe against the red patent leather toe of the other. "You got something else available?" Her

look glanced off his eyes then down to the toe again. This was a girl who couldn't ask a question without it sounding like an accusation. Roth had something on Burnside, something too large on Tremont, a cellar apartment further up the Concourse. The odor had been unbelievable when they broke into that one. The old Mick must have been dead a week. No

one had missed him. The cops had shut the door behind them and torn the place apart looking for his pot of gold.

"No, I've got nothing. Nothing at the moment," he told her.

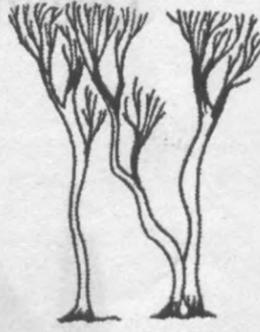
She nodded without looking up and shoved her hands further into her jacket pockets, pouting. She had the perfect, full lips for it. A real looker. The door opened at the lobby. Roth watched her ass twitch like castanets as she moved toward the front door. He felt an envy for her simple, musical unhappiness. *Music, Magda said, stroking the burgundy stain that snaked from her temple to chin, is the ladder I use to climb out of unhappiness. You, on the other hand, like to wallow in it. That makes you a sentimentalist, Leon.* The door slid shut.

Christ! She'd been beautiful, although Leon wasn't sure he'd thought so then. That he could be so stricken, made to feel so desolate by her! Christ! She'd really had his number. Well, almost anything could make him feel exposed, cast out, beyond the pale. But oh! that glittering, green-eyed sideways look she could throw at him which let him back inside the charmed circle. So lovely when its verdant light fell on him. It was like a drug. Only Magda could do that for him.

The elevator stank of urine. He hadn't noticed it before. The second time this week. Roth made a note. The walls were loud with voices. Taki 183. Kool 164. Death 179. Even the window had lately been spray painted. Arc 171.

At the basement, the door slid open. The platform stopped too high, and Roth had to step down to get out. He made a note. He patted his pocket. Bag of ten penny nails for the super. But no lock. He'd forgotten the lock.

*David Weiss is a poet who lives in Ithaca. The Mensch will be published in January by Mid-List Press.*



Julian Bell

## Wild Turkey

*The only way I knew it was a wild turkey*

*was from the pictures on bottles of burbon;*

*Otherwise it might have been a misplaced*

*marabou.*

*All morning it's been walking around in the*

*cold*

*surprised to find itself in a garden*

*full of snow in April. Maybe*

*that's what blew it off course—*

*the failure of spring to meet its expectations.*

*You can see it hoped for more than this*

*the way it spreads its three long toes*

*carefully so as not to sink low*

*into the cold slush and pokes its head forward, earnest with the effort.*

*My mother walked like that at the end,*

*the three-pronged stick placed first*

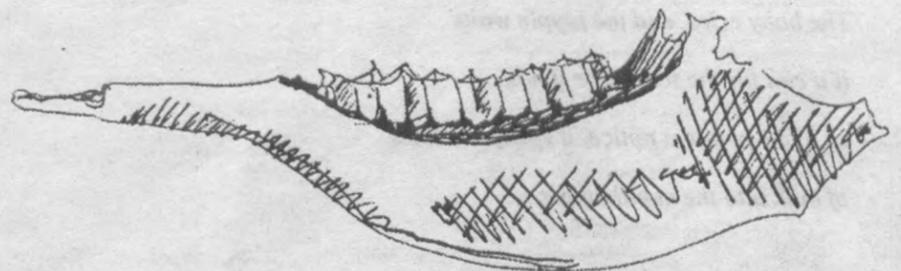
*on the paving stones, her head out,*

*determined not to break another bone*

*in a body that failed to meet her expectations.*

—Gail Holst-Warhaft

*Gail Holst -Warhaft is a poet and translator of mostly Modern Greek. She teaches part time in the Classics and Comparative Literature departments at Cornell.*



J.M Barringer

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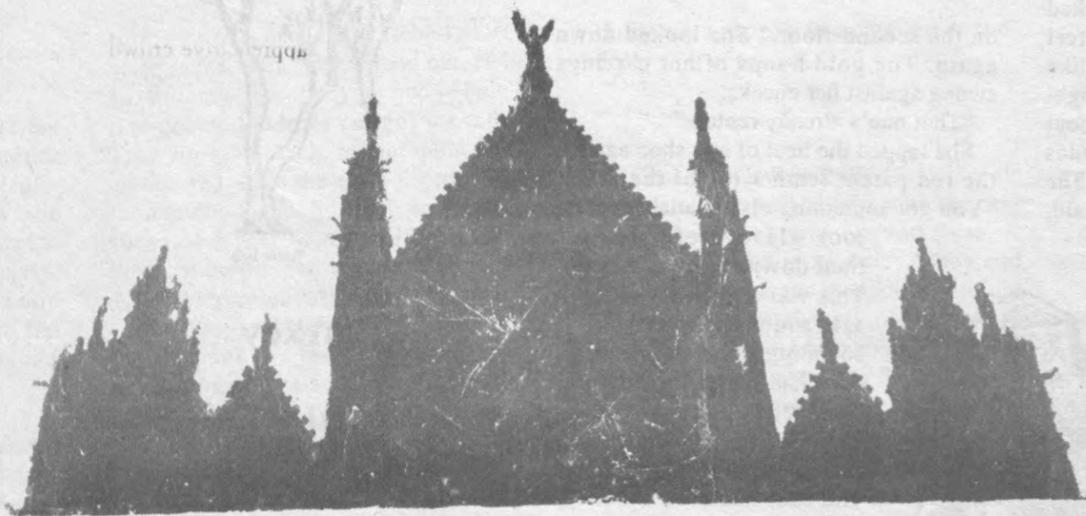
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## Dream and Memory



Tim Merrick

### *The Interpretation of Dreams*

A man preparing his suicide had a change of heart:  
 he aimed the glint of the forked tongue at my throat.  
 Dreamer's luck, it just slipped down my shirt!  
 All night I was frantic to be rid of it.  
 No place safe enough to bury it till I cleverly  
 poured molten lead into a block around it.  
 Now my luggage is so heavy, I cannot  
 raise myself onto the necessary train ....

My daughter rolls her eyes and gives me one of her looks.  
 Really, Mom what an idiot!  
 Why didn't you just throw the fork out onto the track?  
 The train would have crushed it, you know.  
 Then she heads for the door, gathering steam,  
 my admiration fluttering behind her  
 like a white handkerchief.

### *Gospel*

When a breast is round and hard  
 as Mary's was so often in the Renaissance,  
 it aches for a small mouth to relieve it  
 of a saved-up sweetness.  
 The baby cries, and the nipple waits  
 if it can for the tongue or if not,  
 as a few painters notice, it sprays its lines  
 of milk into the mouth of air.  
 Maddened by milksmell, the baby  
 roots, latches on, works skin to skin

in passionate nursery with the mother.

They keep and ponder all this in their hearts.

—Lynn Powell

Lynn Powell's collection of poems, *Old and New Testaments*, won the 1995 *Brittingham Prize in Poetry* from University of Wisconsin Press and the 1996 *New Writers Award* from the Great Lakes Colleges Association. This fall she is a *Visiting Writer in the English Department at Cornell*.

### *My Grandmother's Dishes*

I believe I heard that when she walked  
 own the street they peeked in awe at her,  
 tall her beauty and her majesty  
 But that was when? Eighteen eighty three?  
 In age, she was not beautiful; at least, not  
 Beautiful to me,

Nor is this porcelain marked "France T.V."  
 A delight. It isn't even "dish-washer safe."  
 Still I use it because I like the shape.  
 And am too lazy to buy another.  
 Besides, I'm not selling my grandmother  
 To the Salvation Army for a tax rebate.

Here they are: the tureen, cover, the large plate -  
 A century of use and going strong.  
 I think of my grandmother and her beauty both long gone  
 And yet, the china - perfect - at dinners where  
 She could not ever be.  
 The china, perfect, waiting to outlive me.

—Jane S. Wilson

Jane S. Wilson taught English at Los Alamos High School and was one of the women who made significant cultural, social, and intellectual contributions to that frontier community in its formative years.