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the color of the month is . . . magenta

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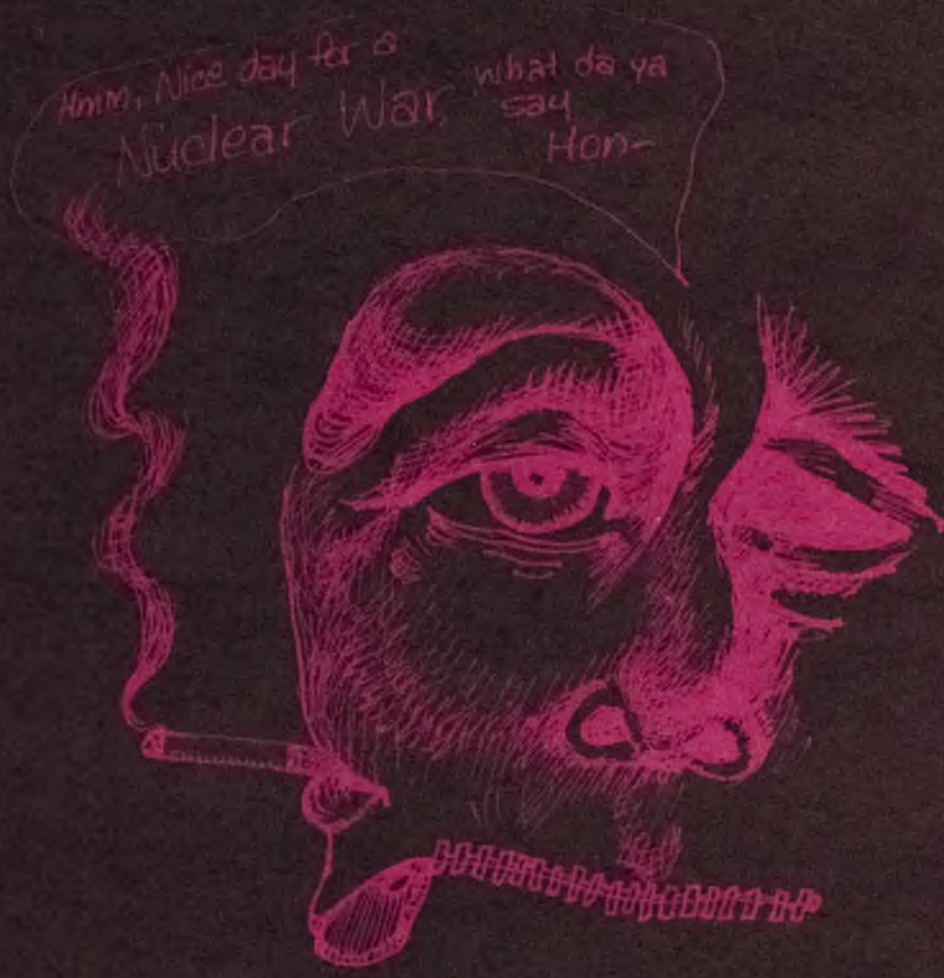
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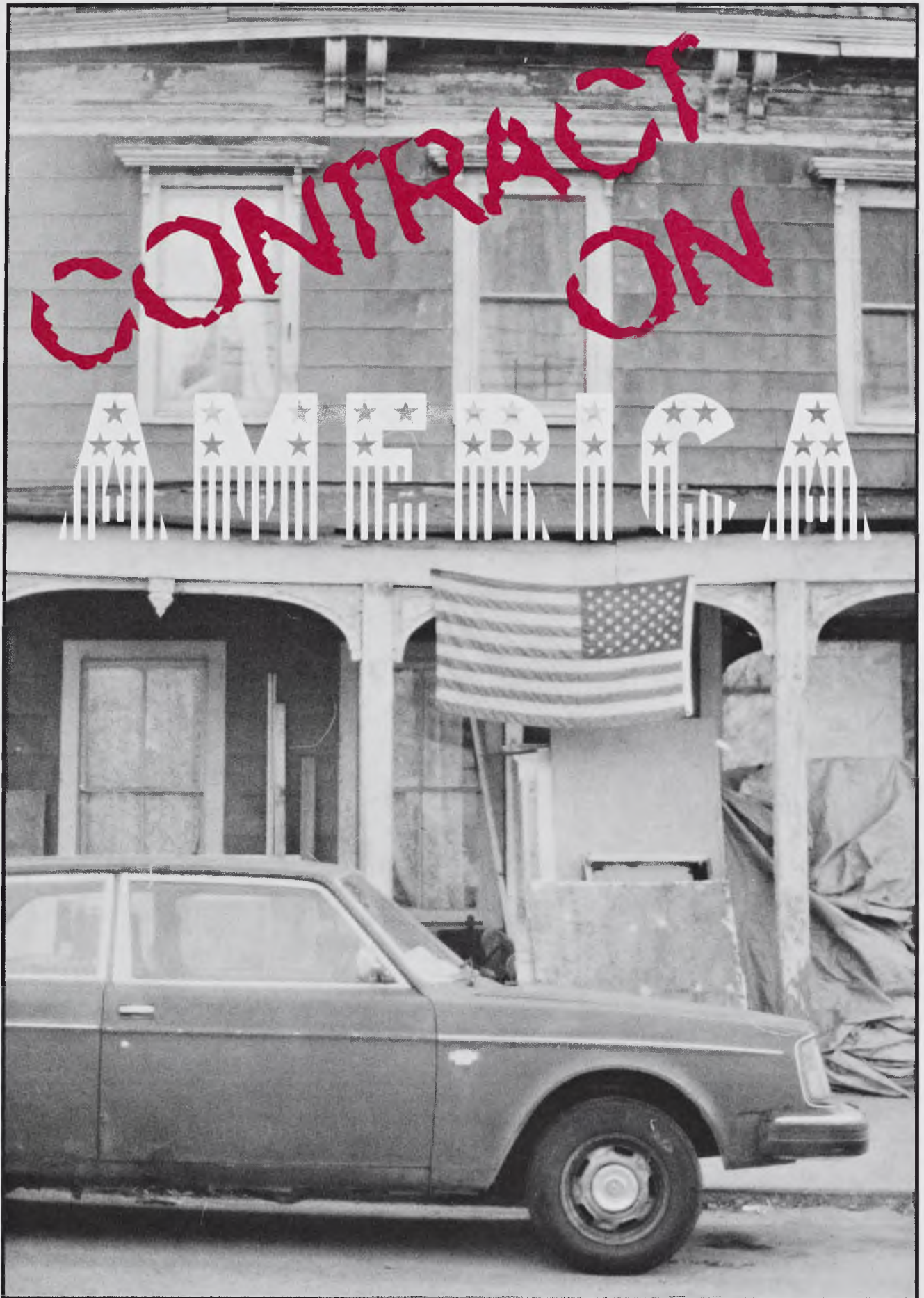
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JOHN LOHSE



Saw some kids on the beach building sand condos, carrying water up from the shore for the built-in, solar-heated swimming pool. This ended in disaster when they began fist fighting over property rights



JAY CASERTANO



While it has generally been the editorial position of Ictus Review to refrain from any direct dialogue of a purely political nature, we feel that the draconian nature of the “Contract With America” and similar programs throughout the country demand our voice. As a publication that comes out of an educational institution that is publicly funded and one that concerns itself with art, the assault on these pillars of our country’s economic, political, spiritual and intellectual health cannot be ignored. The positive platitudes by which they try to sell us their plan to destroy our social and educational systems, undermine consumer and environmental protection, crush debate and dissent and undermine our constitutional rights cannot go without comment.

While only 20% of America’s voters actually voted for this “revolution” (only 38% voted at all in the last election) the repercussions will affect us all. It is because of apathy and disinterest that this far right agenda has not only taken over the Republican Party, but our nation as well. The targeting of the weakest in our society as being the “cause” of our nation’s ills, the increasing use of violence by the far right against their perceived enemies, the redbaiting of any who oppose them, the demand for ideological uniformity within the Republican Party and a hopelessly compromised and flaccid Democratic Party, remind us of Weimar Germany in the late twenties and early thirties.

It is not out of any rash, youthful need to rebel that we make such statements. But to caution our friends on all sides (and sidelines) of the political spectrum to stop, take a deep breath and carefully consider the consequences of their actions. The violence that we have seen in Oklahoma and towards family planning centers across the nation, as well as the increasingly violent rhetoric towards the poor, immigrants, the Japanese, and towards each other, is indicative of a society slipping from a healthy democracy into the beginnings of fascism.

The Editors

THE REDUNDANCY OF DUNCES:

Newt Gingrich & The Contract On America.

THOMAS GOOD

Yep. I was wasting time, watching a B movie on the tube (something about a mutant salamander threatening the Land of the Free) and eating a Goodfellas' pizza when the call from ICTUS came. The ICTUS people asked me to write a short piece about Nuke Gingrich and the contract on America...coincidence? I don't think so.

Initially, I was inclined to decline the invite. Why? Well, dear readers, I was of the opinion that Nuke Gingrich & that crowd (i.e. dumb rednecks whose salaries we sponsor) are already self-parody, therefore how could I spoof what is already low comedy? C'mon, write something from your vantage point as a social service provider, I was told. OK, I said, as I finished the pizza and switched off the NEWS.

I switched on my computer and froze. I worried over how to begin. I thought maybe I could rant about how Republicans are homophobic, pea-brained, racist, selfish and sexist, overblown and overstuffed drunken louts who can only get it up for their secretaries (it's a Power thing). I could carry on about how these invertebrates reap huge profits off the fear and ignorance they sell to middleclass America as "statesmanship." I could rant about how these dimwits stuff their pockets and those of their buddies in the "defense industry" while slashing funding for school lunches (their philosophical forefather declared ketchup a vegetable, remember?). I could crescendo by shrieking out my rhetorical question: would you buy a used car from one of these dirtbags? Then why would you buy into their recycled paranoia? I could shout my followup: Why do we throw good money after bad in the endless pursuit of the bogeyman of the week while our fearless leaders seek to reduce the "quality" of American education? Why must the American people always be the butt of every lame joke (and pay the salary of every lame jokester) that comes along? Why the hell do we allow the Village Idiots to run the show? Why do we blame the victim (in the case of welfare, health care, veterans' benefits, etc...) instead of looking to hang the real thieves? Yep. I could do all these things, make all these passionate assertions. But hell, why belabor the obvious? Besides, Dennis Miller is already the king of the rant.

I reached a decision. I decided I better just sit back and take it. Tell the people at ICTUS, I'm sorry, I can't get involved. Hell, they ain't coming for me, anyhow...It ain't my fight. I decided I better just switch the NEWS back on, order another pie...Ah, hell. I can't do that. I still believe in happy endings. I'm an incurable American. Not like these carnival hucksters who want to sell us a used lemon of an idea. I love my country and feel a need to protect it from its government, the gaggle of bloodsuckers who infest Washington. I want to do something to do away with this redundancy of dunces and end their endless prattle, the hackneyed pablum with which they insult our intelligence. And I encourage you to do the same: to indulge your desire to punch the used car salesman who screwed you back in 1984—let's vote the scum out of office. Let's be vocal and challenge their stupidity for what it is—horsey dung. Let's reveal the emperor's new pose.

Alright, against my better judgement I said my piece. I mean, after all, I am a social worker and I am goddam tired of imbeciles looking to slam those people who have nothing. Can you imagine someone who has made a career of stealing from the American people calling someone who is impoverished a "cheat"? Give me a break! It's as American as apple pie to hate cheats. I do. But let's call a spade a spade. Newt Gingrich and his fellows are the same type of excrement that exposed American vets to Agent Orange and then denied them their rightful benefits. All the while stuffing their Swiss bank accounts at our expense. Enough said?

Hell no. (Dennis Miller eat yer heart out...)

THE WELFARE SCAPEGOAT

DIANE PARRIS

The Contract With America has pledged to "pave the way for the pursuit of happiness for all Americans", with plentiful economic opportunity, no crime, the "American Dream" restored, isolationism, and a balanced budget not only for each household, but for our "country". Proponents are interested in shifting the debt from the Federal government to the state, who in turn forces it upon the local communities and then ultimately on the individual. In trying to achieve these goals, the Republican Contract with America is trying to return the nation to a system of rugged individualism, early twentieth century family values, laissez faire economics and tax breaks that ultimately allow the rich to get richer and the poor to stay poor. I am a reformist, yet reform should be to reform the exact nature of the wrongs, injustices or excessiveness, not look towards the bottom shelf of the social and economic strata as a scapegoat for change.

The "Contract's" welfare reform is a conservative reform program that blames the poor for an expansive welfare system, and forces Americans to comply with an "American" morality unrealistic to our current society. It has cited abuses in the welfare system only on the individuals who receive benefits, ignoring the excesses in human resources administration or the inadequate distribution of funds. Those who suffer from the slings and arrows of the Contract's proponents are the children and single parents (more so women) on welfare who are trying to survive social pressures related to welfare recipients, and an economic system which does not allow them to rise above their poverty. The plight to remove oneself from the welfare roster is further impeded by an economic system that does not provide adequate jobs or wages for recipients to support their families, and the limited access of education to train for skilled jobs of choice.

As a single mother and welfare recipient, I feel marked by these changes, more so by the principles the supporters of the contract have imposed as their reasons for such reform. The proponents of the Contract suppose that I am lazy and just want to stay on the welfare roles because it is easier than working. It is not that welfare women do not want to work, they are not skilled sufficiently to earn a wage in the economic sphere that enables them to adequately care for their children. Training programs are limited, and force women into specific jobs rather than provide a choice or adequate education. I wanted to become a teacher, but welfare programs do not feel that this is a reasonable job for welfare women because it entails too much time for educating a skilled teacher. Women now are only allowed assistance for two year training courses in order to get a job, and the opportunities are limited to technical careers, clerical or partial training for nursing.

The contract proposes that women don't need charity, they need to pick themselves up by the boot straps and become independent; become like the rugged individual this nation has built itself with! Rugged individualism is a middle class ideology, ignoring the lack of access of those on the bottom rung. Education is the cornerstone of survival: it is the difference between a skilled laborer and an unskilled one. The inability to further oneself in society through education becomes a much larger reality for millions of Americans. Without the access to education, women and men on the welfare roles have limited means to get themselves off the welfare line permanently.

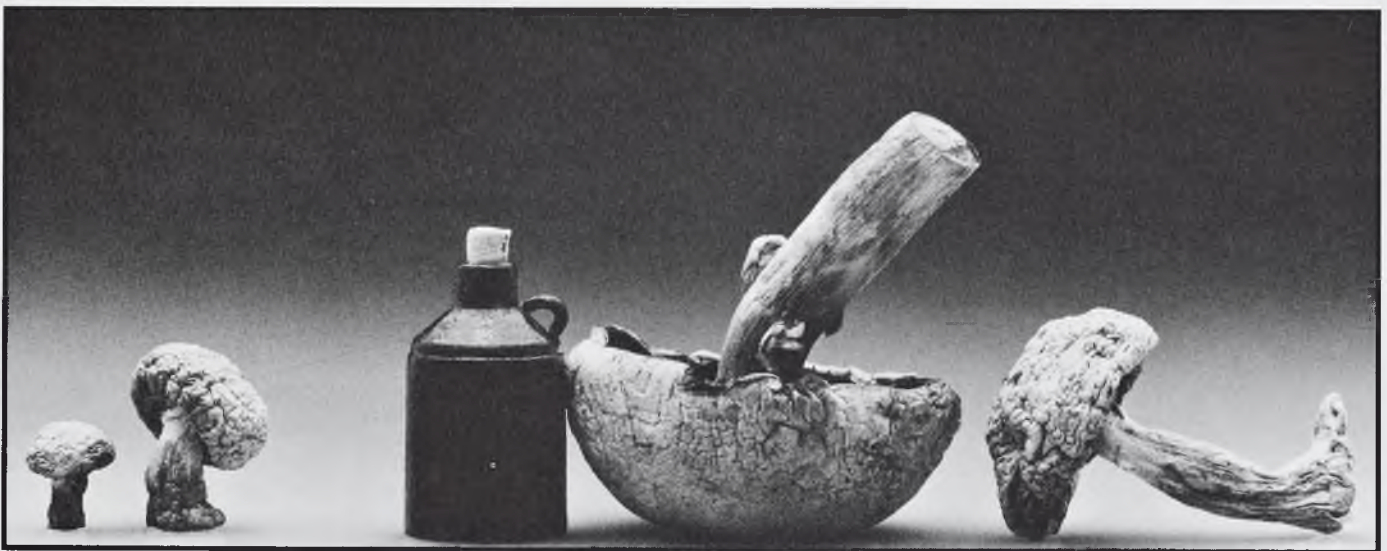
When I found myself the sole provider for my daughter, there were no golden doors of opportunity open for me to work a full time job and care for my child in a positive manner. My daughter would have been in the care of another person for some twelve hours a day, five days a week at a daycare institution that would eat up 50% of my paycheck per month. I would not have been able to provide emotional support during a time in her life that the "American Dream," outlined in the contract, claims mothers should be nurturing their children. In the contract's proposed "American family" (a mother, father and children) there is no room for the single family household. If such exists, it is because the parents of children have failed, rather than succeeded. The contract supposes that since I have found myself in this single-parent situation of desperation, I am destined to stay at this level. This thinking contradicts not only the protestant ethic of capitalism, but also the idea that through meritocracy via a vis education and available opportunities I can rise out of my crisis.

Another myth perpetuated by the Contract is the notion that mothers are having children to increase their benefits. This is an outdated myth which is perpetuated to justify welfare reform. When I became pregnant while in school, it was my ability to choose that allowed me the opportunity to finish my education, and work towards a career to get myself off the welfare roster.

Women will be denied this choice if the Contract's welfare reformers have their way. Not only are women victims of the stigmas placed on welfare recipients, but also of religious morals that oppose abortions and further escalate their inability to choose. Anti-abortionists have succeed in deterring mothers to terminate pregnancies, yet the human resources institution to help these same mothers support the children they have supposedly saved is being dismantled.

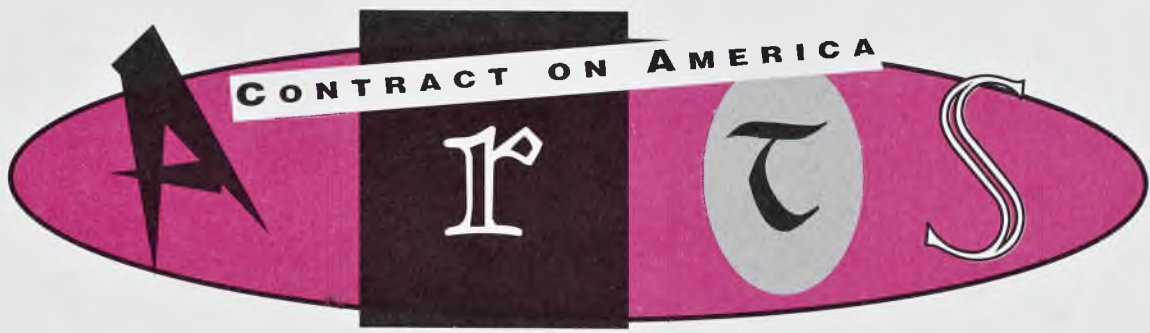
Welfare reform is the beginning of a systematic plan to decrease the choice for women in our society. Underlying the Contract's proposals is a concerted effort to reverse abortion laws by blocking aid for abortions, through the welfare and healthcare systems, and instilling "puritan" values towards 21st century families. The reality for teenagers is an anti-abortion stance by the government with no provision for them to care for the children they are forced to have. Proponents claim that teenage mothers or any women who decides to have a child out of wedlock should have been more careful, and now should suffer for the consequences of their choices. Women's choices are reduced to a point of no-choice, unless they follow the middle class morality set by the contract. This situation makes it difficult for women, both young and old, to choose a future for themselves. Aid to dependent children also means for the mother of such children an opportunity to lift themselves out of the poverty they have been propelled into because there are no other alternatives for survival. Birth control and free choice help women to make a decision for their future, and become independent from the strains of motherhood. The nation must face the reality that single family households on welfare are not the result of people trying to get over on the system, but rather the strains of limited economic opportunity, dysfunctional upbringings that are constantly compared to the mythic family of "Ozzie and Harriet" and traditional values stuck in a society that has been transformed.

The Contract's welfare reform seeks to eliminate programs through slash and burn techniques. The elimination of services and funds will not eliminate the problems of financial irresponsibility or solve the social ills of society. Welfare reform through the Contract With America seeks to push the "dirt" of our society under the carpet, so on paper it all reads right. It is easy for those in the ivory towers of our government to be dispassionate about those suffering on the bottom. Until they have walked the shoes of a welfare recipient, drug addict, criminal or homeless child, they will never know or understand the desperation, low self esteem or fear they live each day. The downtrodden are viewed as a sore spot in the "traditional patriotic" portrait of America which the contract is trying to re-invent with its expansive legislation. Today, nations are judged by how well the poorest exist. It is clear that the United States is failing compared to its economic counterparts. The Contract With America blames the ills of our society on a welfare system that has failed because of the people at the bottom who are taking rather than giving at the expense of "true American patriots." This is a distortion of reality and the Contract's inability to accept that the problem is a distorted and inequitable economic system. What has come to fruition is that the taking is now in the upper stratas of society, at the expense of those giving in the lower stratas. History from the top down at the expense of those at the bottom. History through the myths perpetuated by the Contract With America, at the expense of those exploited because they don't fit into the "portrait" of a "white patriarchal America."



"STEWED MUSHROOMS"

MARTIN BOUGH



DENISE MUMM

The Republicans' Contract "On" America presents a bleak future for the American people. The quality of life it outlines is based on a self-centered, cruel, retaliative attitude. Gone is the belief in the dignity and rights of each American, no matter what advantages or disadvantages we may be dealt in life. The marks of a well-developed civilization in which all citizens are healthy, educated, housed, employed and respected are being systematically wiped out.

As the director of a cultural institution on Staten Island, the Art Lab, I have my own perspective. The Art Lab has been in existence for 20 years and during all that time we have tried to serve all of Staten Island. The core of our programming is the classes we offer in 10 week sessions, 4 terms a year on the Art Lab premises at Snug Harbor. We teach art to people from 3 years of age through senior citizens.

Our overhead is very low. All administration is done by one part time person and myself. The reasonable rate we charge for tuition is manageable for most middle class families. We are able to cover most of our overhead through tuition income. However, part of our mission is to make art instruction available to those who could not otherwise afford it. In the past, we have had government support to help us do this. For instance, government money underwrote scholarships for high school students to take intensive university level art classes.

Our earned income also does not allow us to keep up with facility maintenance or to expand our facilities. We have had government support to acquire equipment for use in our classrooms and to improve the lighting and electrical capacity on the premises.

All but a small percentage of our government funding for this year has been either eliminated or threatened. We don't know the end of the story yet and I don't think anyone can predict the outcome.

The Art Lab might need to turn into a middle class and upper middle class institution. We could raise our prices and become a self-sustaining elitist art school and survive. Although we want to survive, we don't want to be forced to take this track. It goes against our mission to serve all Staten Islanders.

Art at the Art Lab is not about making products, not for any of our students. It's about the process of artmaking; the soothing, contemplative, explorative process, as well as about learning skills. Art can turn a child inward, allowing that child to take the time and focus to process feelings. An art class is one of the few magic times when a teacher can praise a child for whatever effort that child makes, because there is no right or wrong answer. This kind of positive reinforcement is so rare in some young lives that an art class can be the only thing that makes them feel worthy, that makes them feel what they have to say counts. This is why art is important to society.

Currently in government when it is thought that school lunch is dispensible, art doesn't seem to be on the chart of funding possibilities. This shortsightedness is unfortunate. Art is something that can change people from within, can change attitudes about oneself, and mold contributing members of society. This isn't just theory, I've witnessed it. I've seen young people who were labeled "at risk" by the Juvenile Justice Dept. become proud participants in community mural projects, working side by side with their neighbors and taking fierce pride in beautiful creations that will last for at least 20 years. It didn't happen overnight. It took a lot of work. It was possible through government funding.

Quantifiable outcomes of art programming are difficult to project. Government statistics usually deal with the negative: the number of people in jail, the number of people on welfare, the number of people who are homeless. This is how people come into contact with the system and therefore become counted. How can we say how many have avoided these institutional contacts through their contact with the arts? It's difficult to prove the positive. How many have not taken up drug abuse; how many have not joined a gang; how many have decided not to carry a gun because they have turned to something else, like art, which fulfills the need in them for self worth, self expression, and a sense of belonging.

What's going to happen to our civilization now?

Education On The Chopping Block

ALLAN DiBIASE

i've been asked to write about the impact of impending state and city budgets on the 95-96 academic year at the College of Staten Island. The catalog of things that might result is not quite yet a litany but the repetition of speculation at budget briefings, hearings, emergency meetings, union meetings, management meetings, in offices, newspapers, and bulletins already seems endless, numbing, incomprehensible. Retirement buyouts, non reappointment of adjunct faculty for next fall, trimming back (slightly) the number of course sections for the 95 summer session. These are the prelude to a potential 25% cut in the 95-96 overall budget at CSI. Such a cut would mean hundreds of fewer class sections available, the elimination of up to 130 faculty and staff positions, the non-reappointment of 1/2 of the adjunct faculty, the elimination of 1/2 the part-time clerical assistance positions. Current projections indicate a yearly \$1,000 increase in tuition fees for full-time students. At the same time, cutbacks in TAP, APTS, and STAP financial aid awards and the elimination of SEEK mean less money and support for students who are already struggling to get an education and make ends meet. Potential cutbacks in federal student aid programs will only compound the misery.

At CSI, due the nature of the new campus, there are not huge "classroom" pens that hold hundreds of students for the "teaching" of introductory level courses. The largest classrooms at CSI hold about 85 students. Pedagogically this is good. But in terms of absorbing the impact of fewer teachers and fewer class sections, it seems that enrollment will have to be limited, ironically at a time when it has been increasing steadily. For those already enrolled, it may take longer to graduate. Many of the most troublesome aspects of attending CSI, e.g., getting a good class schedule, getting the classes you need, meeting the rigid payment requirements of the Bursar, will be more

troublesome. Many of the best aspects of CSI, e.g., the lovely campus, the accessibility of faculty and staff, will be increasingly stressed. At CSI, already chronically understaffed and underfunded as a result of moving to the new Willowbrook campus, cuts will be felt more than at other CUNY campuses. CUNY colleges that have grown and expanded over the course of many years, some of the economically good ones, have built in reserves of programs and staff that will allow them to make painful cuts but not ones which are life threatening. CSI, born out of a fiscal crisis, is still in its skinny, gawky adolescence. No fat and even less muscle. CSI is in deep crisis.

When CUNY moves toward consolidation of academic programs to help reduce cost, CSI, due to its geographical isolation, will suffer more than those CUNY colleges in Manhattan where trips between City College, John Jay, Hunter and Baruch are facilitated by a sophisticated transportation infrastructure. CSI is the only institution of public, higher education on the Borough of Staten Island. Travel, especially public transportation, to the new Willowbrook campus is problematic enough without the prospect of sojourning to Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan. Yet the decision making at CUNY, located in Manhattan, is largely conditioned by the experience of those who work and perhaps live there. In many ways CSI is unique and this fact is not recognized by the University, Mayor Guiliani, the State Legislature or, increasingly, even Staten Islanders, most of whom today do not have real roots in, or an understanding of, the nature of an island culture. It's not that we're Samoa, but then we're not Manhattan either. And that difference is a difference that counts.

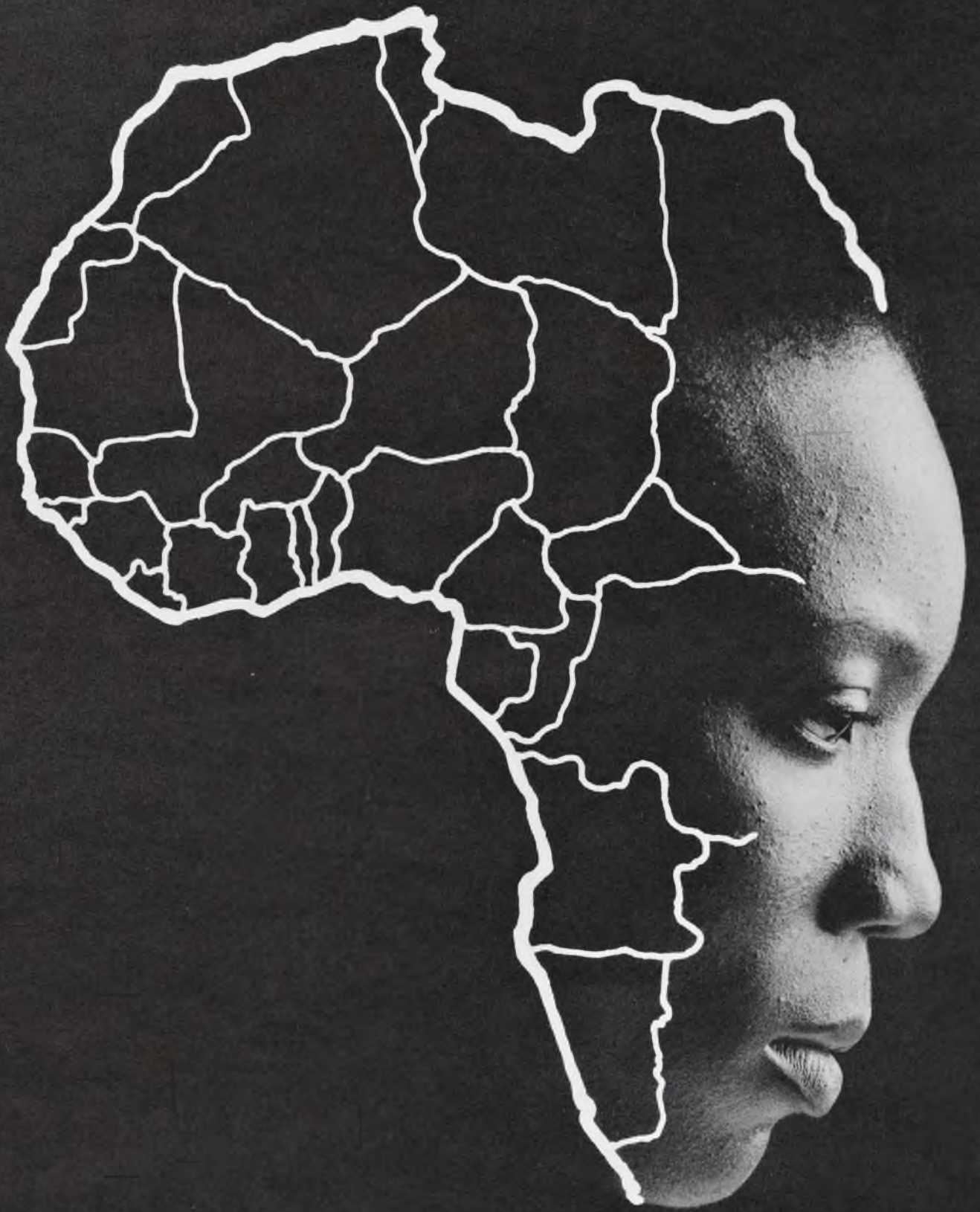
As horrible as this growing chorus of lamentations ringing in our ears is, the true impact of the budget cuts is even more profound. The cuts lay bare the naked power of the state to shape and control education. Over the years, the changes in the way higher education is structured and funded in New York can now be seen for what they were; powerless educational institutions that cannot resist the coercive force of the state. We used to have a Board of Higher Education. Now we have a Board of Trustees. At one time this Board resigned en masse over destructive budget cutting. Such an action is now unimaginable. We used to have Deans at our Colleges. Now, for the most part, we have Vice Presidents. More corporate structure. Does function follow form? Corporate titles feed different aspirations than do the older names (Provosts, Deans) that are deeply rooted and entangled with the notion of higher education before massive state intervention and control. Most upper level administrators in the University now are part of the State "executive pay plan." Again this stresses the corporate, executive nature of the new university and emphasizes that its administrators will never be able to resist the state when it decides to exercise its will (capital punishment for educational goals and ideals). Faculty, who now only wear their academic robes at CSI once a year, and only then about 25% of them, are so enfeebled that they pathetically ask the administration to cover the rental costs of their last remain-

ing symbol of difference. Soon the state will reduce the faculty to a similar status of that of New York City grade school teachers. Demoralized workers, bereft of pride, having no control over the means of their own practice. Students, truly at the bottom of this heap of degradation, should they step beyond the bounds of officially sanctioned protest, are subject to immediate and direct police intervention. People wonder why students seem apathetic to their plight. If you consider their position at the bottom of this mess, it becomes clear why they might feel helpless, abandoned and powerless.

Read the justifications resisting the budget cuts offered by the University and the Professional Staff Congress union. They are all economic. It would be sheer folly, a joke, to voice a concern about the true mission of educating people. This is how remote the new university is from educating. Again, as the state continues to shape and revise all aspects of the new university, including the forms of argument by which people justify their own practices, the university becomes a mere tool of state indoctrination. We will teach only what the state funds. The academic consolidation plan, now revealed and discussed by the University public relations staff as a necessary response to state budget intervention, is living proof of how the state is directly controlling curriculum. Anyone who spoke these words, or saw the inevitability of this a few years ago, met the full wrath of the Chancellor and the Board of Trustees. At that time, President Volpe of CSI found out exactly how the game would be played.

Now I watch President Springer speak to the college community about the budget cuts. Her face hardens, the lines draw, and I imagine she hardens her heart to what she must do and what she certainly knows about the demise of her predecessor. The conflict must be enormous. The terms of employment must preclude true resistance just as the terms of state intervention now preclude true education. The best she can do is salvage. One can see that opportunity (access to the university) has been slipping away for a long time. Now even the hope of fairness (things like affirmative action) are beginning to slip away too. Openness and truthfulness (clear direct communication versus double speak, i.e., academic consolidation) have been gone for some time now. Freedom (to have the energy and power to act and speak forcefully in opposition) is severely bounded. And that specialized subset of freedom: Academic freedom (to teach joyfully with enthusiasm and without encumbrance) is rapidly becoming a memory. Depression and oppression are no platform for the exercise of freedoms.

And now, drawing to a close, I do hear a litany, a litany of what is lost, a requiem for what was and what could have been. The grinding down and final grinding out of any ideal or aspiration is the grim reality of death and the transcendence of a political, economic regime determined to exterminate. Today students will stage a "funeral for CUNY" on the main pedestrian walkway at the College of Staten Island. If they only knew, if they only knew how true their symbolic actions are.



MARTIN BOUGH

EVERY
 •
 DAY
 •
 IS

He opened the office door with a self important wish, like they do
 Stubble chin, dog shit on sneakers, stupid look to his face
 Stepping over his long scarf, bulky in a hand-me-down overcoat
 This beleaguered messenger stuttered forth, then stopped
 Between the open door of my office to the other
 From one woman to the other
 It's the fourteenth of February
 Why, only this morning, I received a postcard for Valentine's Day
 From the gift shop at the Metropolitan Art
 It was a medieval print; tiny figures stealing, fornicating
 Impaling each other on long spears
 Scrawled across the back, in fountain ink, the words
 Where are you? Are you still living? What have been your adventures?
 Love, Stanley
 Penmanship like Monday morning deco
 It's Valentine's Day
 Dropping the card in a puddle on a sprint to the subway
 Tried to remember Stanley
 His basset hound was named Frieda, her hair stuck to the palms
 She was cranky with arthritis
 Stanley and Frieda ate their dinners together by candlelight
 To the music of Brahms
 Stanley was lithe, menopausal, effeminately cultivated
 Kierkegaard, tennis, chamber music
 Winter afternoons spent in dusty art books
 The evening I spent in his soft old bed had nothing to do with romance

The messenger weighs the odds
 He disappears with his flowers into the other cubbyhole
 Diane is performing her five o'clock ritual
 She coos over the flowers, plugs in her curling iron
 Pulls a slinky dress from a carrying case
 Dabs milky cream under her eyes
 In a mirror propped against the windowpane
 Her mouth opened into a perfect O

Sounds of traffic twenty stories down
 If I close my eyes, the horror makes me nauseous
 I see it all again, the old Polish woman making her crippled way
 Across Ninth Avenue on that cold winter night
 Dressed in rags, carrying bags of groceries
 Dragging her feet across the intersection, barely off the curb
 When the light turns green and the tractor trailer wheel
 She fell under with the faintest, saddest last cry
 The stump of her torso atop a damp dark puddle
 In the middle of the street, her eyes wide open, staring into mine
 Cars drove around it, stopping and moving, green, red, green

The grimace of pain around my father's mouth in his coffin
 undertakers could not disguise
 My dry-eyed impassive fear

The high-pitched electrical hum of an empty office
 Meaningless papers, Meaningless loves, emptied time
 Stanley drove me home next morning on his motorbike
 Riding shotgun with Frieda in my arms
 Picking strands of fur from my tongue in the wind, wondering nothing
 Left a pair of my favorite shoes tied to Stanley's bike
 When he left my place they were gone
 Someone had stolen my shoes

Memories

KALLI VALADAKIS

THE FACT THAT I REMEMBER IT AT ALL REVEALS THE BEGINNING OF ADULTHOOD AND A SENSE OF SIN BEYOND MY YEARS.

LOREN EISELEY

A stone threshold still stands. The remains summon memories of my childhood. The hinged door holding on to the arch leaning on the yellowed, seasoned face of the eroding wall separates the echoes of a time long gone from the sounds of the present. As I look back to that time, I shudder.

When my father emigrated to America, my mother, my two brothers and I were hurled back to the dark ages. We were placed under the supervision of my father's mother. That meant that we were transported to the remote village where my father was born and raised. We had lived in the city before that with my mother's three sisters, three brothers and my grandfather. They were beyond poor yet even in their wretched circumstances could still laugh. I don't know whether my mother objected to this arrangement, whether my father who knew his mother all his life was out of his mind to leave us in her care, whether grandma volunteered or whether anyone asked. All I know is that we were carted off without choice. I was four years old.

We lived on the island of Crete, a beautiful and savage land. It is an island cradled in the Mediterranean Sea with Africa on the south, Asia in the east and Europe in the north. All three continents point to Crete as if it were the middle of the world. It was inevitable that it would attract settlers and invaders. The Minoan civilization flourished, the Dorians replaced it, the Romans followed. In more modern times, the Venetians, the Saracens and the Turks came. And finally, the Germans. The ground is soaked with the blood of different peoples and the spirit of freedom runs in the veins of the Cretans who always anticipate the next wave of invaders.

The village, Alikambos, Ali's field, gets its name from the Turkish occupants who lived here long before my brothers and I arrived. The village sits like a fortress on the highest and flattest part of the landscape surrounded by ravines, making intruders visible and vulnerable. The few well-worn paths leading to and away from the village bring the outside world in. Safety and isolation are inseparable. There is no electricity, no newspapers, no radio. We cannot imagine television. Not in our house.

The house we live in is one of the sixty that form the circle that is the village. Ours is boxed in by two other houses. The one on the right, with the big carob tree in its yard keeps its main entrance always shut; the one on the left was built after we had lived here for about two years. This house brought the world closer. The contact we have with the city is through the colorful gypsies, the traveling peddlers and, sometimes, groups of musicians and entertainers. The village square serves as the center for any extraordinary activity.

I remember one time, an early summer evening, my two aunts, Vangelia and Eleftheria, took me with them to the village square. I was young enough to be shown off and old enough to be used as an excuse. The villagers gathered around and a woman with strong, clear, articulate words asked for a volunteer. There was a lot of mumbling and finally a boy, about eight years old, raised his hand. One detail that stands out in my mind is that he had a crew cut, the kind that is only a few days old. The woman praised the boy for his bravery, took his hand, and brought him to the center. A man appeared with a bucket full of water. Water was poured over the boy's head. Then, as magicians do, she pointed to a bottle and poured something in her hand. She promised no harm would come to the boy. She smiled and rubbed her hands into the boy's stubbly head. Suddenly, his head became all fluffy white. Oohs and aahs followed. Is that how the cavemen reacted when they saw

sparks turn into fire for the first time? Then, the boy put his head down and she poured more water over it. The white foam fizzled away. A towel dried his head, the boy was smiling, everyone applauded, and I don't remember what followed. I was fascinated with the shampoo's magic, since we only used my grandmother's homemade fat-and-lye soap.

We lived in a single room, a windowless house. It was built with stones without cement. Against one wall, the oven's O-shaped, fire-breathing mouth waits for the weekly bread bake. The floor is pounded earth that each Saturday I'd sprinkle with water and then sweep the loose dirt. That was one of my chores. The broom was bigger than me and my grandmother would tell me to make sure to get every particle and speck of dust from every corner or I'd marry a bald man. I must have missed zillions of dusty specks.

My grandmother ruled that windowless house. She is dressed in black from head to toe. She is short and stout, a walking duffel bag. A cord separates her upper from her lower body. She reminds us of our grandfather's death at the hands of the Germans during the war, daily, like a prayer. She wore black as her sentence but mainly in honor of his memory. The black she wore earned her all the dignity widowhood afforded.

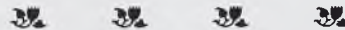
I cannot recall her face nor the color of her eyes. That may be because we were not allowed to look at her straight in the face. Her eyes shifted like searchlights scanning our faces. "It's disrespectful to look at older people in the eyes," she reminded us. She never laughed; she rarely smiled. Did she have teeth? She must have because I can hear the cracking of chicken bones when she sucked the marrow.

She'd tell us stories and on starlit nights we'd sit outside. She sat on a comfortable stone and mesmerized and sometimes terrorized us with her tales. She'd point to the sentinel-like cypresses that lined the narrow road and tell us that the devil was stalking for children. "He waits for little children in the branches of the cypresses because their flesh is very tender," she said, emphasizing tender. "Then," she lowered voice, "he skins them. From the top of the head to the bottom of their feet. One strip at a time." In my child's imagination I could clearly see the torn strips of skin leaving the inner flesh exposed and my grandmother's devil devouring the peeled body of a child like an orange.

Only on moonlit nights I was not afraid; still, I was careful not to go too far because of the shadows. But then I would think of all the children who asked the moon to light their way to go to school to learn to read and write, to keep their heritage, language and religion from vanishing into the Turkish way of life. The Turks ruled for four hundred years yet somehow the Greeks managed to salvage their national identity. I took courage from the anonymous children who traveled sometimes in the darkness, sometimes in the moonlight, and kept walking. One night, when I was about ten years old, my mother was panting in her sleep and I was sent to get help. I was terrified of the shadows lurking in the trees, but the fear that my mother might die overcame my terror of the dark.

I remember the night my father left for America. It was in February, cold and damp. We had a rare dinner of chicken soup and I was awakened in the darkness of the morning hours by the whispering farewells. I did not understand his leaving to be a terrible thing. But then I was not my mother. I didn't see me or my brothers as fatherless children but as would-be-Americans. That made me feel important, and that, I didn't realize, placed us in an enviable position. It was the way out. America was beckoning, and my father was one of the lucky people to have the opportunity to go and change his life and ours.

I am sure my grandmother gave her blessing as he was leaving, but did she mean it? As a young woman, she also had the opportunity to go to America. She would marry my grandfather's brother. If that had happened, I would not be. Nor my father, nor my brothers. She needed to learn to write so she could sign her name. She did not learn to read or write and married my grandfather. People said he was very handsome, unusually tall, well-built, fawn-haired with hazel eyes. He must've had more than good looks to convince her to change her plans. Maybe he was irresistible, but maybe she was more petrified of crossing the ocean and starting a new life in a strange place. Or maybe she was embarrassed about going to school at her age. It seems that grandmother settled for what she could readily have and that may have been all she could do instead of daring the future. Did she blame her destiny or did she regret her decision and did she forgive herself? She and no one else spoke about this critical point in her life, but her bitterness could not be ignored as she scowled at my mother and her two daughters.

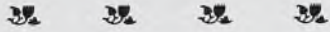


"Grandma, where do we come from?" I asked.

"From manure," she answered carelessly.

Although I liked our donkey and understood the importance of fertilizer to the plants in the garden, I looked at the heap of manure buzzing with flies at the side of the house. I had seen beans sprouting from the ground and I tried to imagine a child emerging from the earth covered with layers of another creature's excrement. A Dung Heap Baby! I did not accept her answer. Besides I had listened to my mother's pained moans in the middle of the night, trembling from fright in the dark along with my two brothers, and the next morning my third brother was amongst us.

I was asking the age-old question in all seriousness, and when I persisted I was blessed with the wrath of my grandmother's switch, a slender tree branch, stripped of its bark that never missed. I never detected the swishing sound until I felt the burning coursing my skin, followed by, "Don't ask questions that are not meant for you to ask." Then she'd say "Get behind me, Satan," cross herself and turn away. I believed I was the Satan she was putting behind her. Her words were far more painful than the lashes. Instead of a child's natural curiosity, my question made me evil. I think even then I recognized the power of veiled ignorance in the guise of discipline. My children asked the same question years later, and I made sure that my answer did not include the stork nor a miraculous birth and certainly not an emergence from the cracked pavement of a sidewalk in Brooklyn.



Across from our house stood St. Anthony's, an abandoned church with a cemetery. My grandmother, with her usual preoccupation for the macabre, made certain that we did not go there even though it was only yards away. The spirit of death hovered around our house. Laughter was discouraged as if some unseen spirit might be offended and then what punishment would descend on the household!

"Ah," she said, sighing deeply, "I am going to DIE one of these days, SOOOON." She paused.

"Then you will see. Nobody'll take care of you," she continued, nodding her head and waving her fingers. A faraway look swept her face.

My mother rolled her eyes to the heavens and a smile streaked her lip as my grandmother bemoaned her fate. What did she mean "nobody'll take care of you?" Didn't we have a father and a mother? We were not orphans. Or, so I thought. What was I supposed to think? Being an orphan was a terrible fate, my mother told my brothers and me. She was one.

"There were seven of us," she told us, "and our father gambled. I remember my mother holding a piece of food and my youngest sister grabbed it right out of her hand and gobbled it up."

She didn't say very much about her mother or about the rest of the family. I pictured my mother as a child, like me, almost six years old, alone, at the mercy of neighbors or relatives, and I cried for both of us. My mother conveniently failed to tell us that she was about eighteen years old when her mother died. The arithmetic I knew did not ease the fear I felt for my brothers and me should my mother die.

The first time I saw a corpse it was a frail woman whose name I cannot recall. My aunts took me with them. I remember seeing the bony body in a wooden box, in the middle of the room, her hands crossed over her chest, a waxed cross on her lips and bunches of basil as decoration. The basil's scent disguised the smell of death. Chairs were placed around the coffin and people shifted in and out their seats. "Long life to you," each newcomer whispered and assumed a mask of sadness. Wails and cries cut the heaviness in the room. Each person who approached the coffin gave her own rendition of lamenting shrills. The cries were directed to the dead woman who was told to listen over and over to what they were saying. She didn't stir. Did they expect her to get up and greet everyone? I'd heard about Lazarus but he had help. From where I sat, the wooden box did not look comfortable and the loud cries would have awakened her by now. I certainly could not sleep even though it was past my bedtime. I don't remember how long we stayed in that house; I was watching as if in a daze but I still hear the non-stop ululating. "May God forgive her," muttered the departing visitors as a wave of fresh air rushed in through the opening door. I remember being offered bread and potatoes boiled in some kind of broth. The grown-ups had a choice of wine or raki. I was too perplexed to eat.

Food was probably the real reason my aunts and I had gone to that house. Although my father sent us valuable American dollars, we never had enough. Four children, four grown-ups and my lame uncle were fed from that monthly check. My grandmother received a widow's pension, but still there was not enough money for food or clothes, let alone luxuries. My mother cashed the check my father sent and my grandmother disposed of the money.

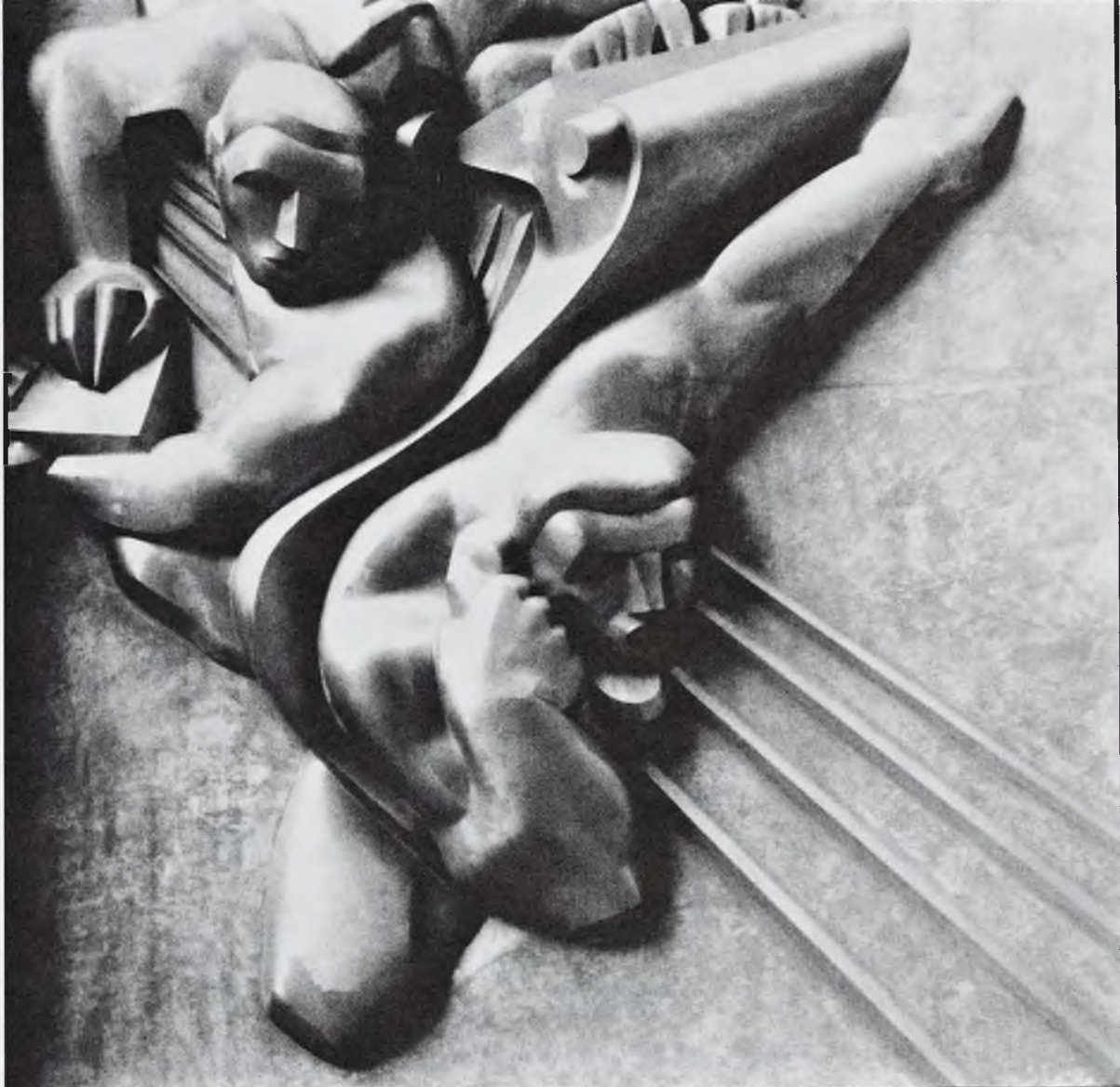
As children, we learned to ignore our hunger pains. We'd eat a piece of bread soaked in water or olive oil topped with sugar. The smell of baked bread and fresh goat milk or white bread with honey made us forget the bitter dandelion meals, the three days of bean soup with pork rinds or the potatoes with rice. Meat was even a more rare treat. Once a month my grandmother killed a chicken that made Sunday a feast. She slashed the chicken's head with ease and then the headless bird spasmodically bounced around till it finally died. I didn't want to grow up if I had to kill chickens. In the winter, we often ate dried cod fish and smoked herring along with bean soup. One of my favorite foods was snails and we didn't have to buy them. When it rained the snails crawled out of their shells all over the ground and my aunts were very good at finding them. They were stored in a covered basket dangling from the hook on the ceiling. I liked them best fried in oil and splashed with vinegar. I winced as the poor things were tossed alive into the hot oil but my full belly erased my misgivings. The next meal was a major concern. There were times that one of us children refused to eat because the food was either the same as the day before or just plain awful. These women knew hunger during the war years and they could not forget. What ungrateful children we were! To help us prize the value of the unsavory food we were blessed to have, after they finished eating, they rinsed the dirty dishes and collected the dirty water in a bowl. While my aunt held us down the filthy water was poured through a funnel to our mouth forcing us to swallow the vile concoction. My brother George and I lived through that indignity, at different times. The forced feeding, that monstrous lesson, only reinforced the realization that any attempt to any choices at all would be squelched and punished.

I don't know where my mother was. I am astonished that she never raised her voice to protect us. Even small birds screech and attack a bigger animal even the size of a cat, if their young are in danger. Was she so terrified of my grandmother that she didn't dare to object? She often referred to her as Cerberus and from the tone of her voice I sensed that the word was not complimentary. I later found out that Cerberus was the three-headed hound guarding the entrance to the underworld. I understood.

The woman who is my mother answers to Antonia. She was not an unforgettable beauty. She was attractive to look at, laughed infrequently, shawled in melancholy. Inexperienced with the world and subdued by her bitterness of living, she was like a lamb in need of a shepherd. She was limp and lifeless until my grandmother was not around. Then she was animated, energetic, even cheerful. A different person. She and my aunts became dumb when my grandmother appeared. And she was always around. What power did she have over all three? Was this going to happen to me and my brothers? "No," I vowed to myself. "I will not be like them."



The only time my mother sat next to me, guided my hand and spoke to me with kind attentiveness was when she taught me the cross-stitch. I was almost five years old. One day, unexpectedly, she offered to teach me this womanly skill. She brought a piece of rough burlap from a potato sack she had asked for from the man who owned the only



R O C K E F E L L E R P L A Z A



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Hats

I've begun to sweat in my sleep
Too much shirt leaves me waking
with damp collar cold, and neck breaking
under trespass thoughts of hats I keep-
The funeral fedora blackened and feathered
or vaudeville strawed red showband;
my bandanna skullcap- colors proud
like Jimmy Jones Mack bulldog
weathered with rock dust of Staten Island
and cinderblock wall of Rahway

Guard hats check the punch clock
call the cops we got another- Black
hat her hat is cheap but warm, Fat
she hid thirty dollars worth of shit in there
and another hundred and thirty in her shirt-

My shirt hides a product of lesser value;
weak muscle throbbing with Dimmesdale
scars

This Puritan hat, however indispensable
covers my brain when my throat is tight
and I'm shivering open-eyed wide-
Give me cloves and wraps for rain
It's begun to snow in my sleep

BRIAN BELULOVICH'

claire is learning how to use punctuation how to dot i's cross t's and do all those other neat things that help us learn to write and sometimes think ms. wright says 'put your thoughts on the page' but claire can hardly keep her thoughts from flying away before they touch the page sometimes they land on one of the blue fuzzy straight edged lines but they don't look like letters at all so of course she's failing penmanship no one understands why she just won't try harder it's those damn exclamation points she says i can't understand how to use these things they look so pretty i just want to put them all over the place but she can't because she's afraid that they will all laugh and sooner or later she's going to have to learn to write a thesis statement

VICTORIA SERETIS

grocery store in the village, two colors of yarn, red and black, and a large needle with an eye. She showed me how to thread the needle, how to hold it, and, finally how to make the stitches. She showed me how to shape squares and instructed me to make one black and one red square over and over till the surface of the piece of burlap was covered.

I eagerly maneuvered the needle to form perfect Xs. Over and over my hands made Xs without hesitation and with little concern for mistakes. I outlined the squares and filled in the missing stitches. I was reprimanded for the shortcut. Ambitiously, I replaced the straight lines of Xs with diagonals and, before long, I had diamond shapes. I had to unstitch my diamonds and resume to form the same square design. I complied. I did not want to displease.

All the women who were a part of my life, my mother, my grandmother, my aunts, the neighbors, did the same thing in the afternoon after they finished their chores. They would get together, sit and sip Turkish coffee, gossip or chatter. They worked on complicated and calculated designs on finer fabrics than burlap. They were decorating tablecloths, napkins, sheets, pillows, all sorts of things that a daughter would bring to her own house, part of her dowry. My mother, however, never made anything intended for such a purpose. Maybe she really believed that we'd get to America and I wouldn't need a dowry. If I didn't find a husband that would mean I could expect to work and support myself and that would be a fate worse than death. My two aunts faced that problem. They were old enough to marry but they didn't have any money to bring to a marriage. No land with olive trees, no house, no animal stock. The future looked dim for them.

My father's oldest sister, Vangelia, ran off with a man. She eloped. How could she continue to live under my grandmother's roof? It was the only solution. Since she had no dowry, her only choice was to elope. Would she continue to smile and let her golden tooth show? My aunt was a robust woman with light brown braids crowning her head and when she hugged me, my bones cried with joy. I felt like the favorite toy in the hands of a contented child. She left to live with her new-found husband banished from her mother's house.

I wanted to be accepted by these women. They laughed at me good-naturedly and told me I had a lot to learn. Children were not allowed in their gatherings. The talk they shared was exclusively for adults. I suspect my curiosity was piqued by the forbidden insinuated as they whispered about "wicked things" and exchanged knowing looks. I now knew the basics of needlework, I could imitate in an inexperienced way what the grown women were doing but I was still not allowed to sit with them. Like an owl, perched alone on a tree branch, in the dark, plaintively hooting, I was forced to hear the resignation in the sad sighs escaping their lips. I didn't want their fate, their way of life to be mine.

I took myself where I could be alone, under the plane tree. I spent many hours under its shade. It stood alone and had weathered many seasons. It only moved when the wind ran through its leafy branches or when the rain showered it mercilessly. I'd wrap my arms around its weather-beaten

trunk, close my eyes, hear the rustle of its broad leaves and feel the ground quiver. Just a few feet away the earth dropped. The thorny branches of the blackberry bush reached near the edge separating safety from impending doom. The small stones I hurled down the slope as I laid on my belly sent echoes of protest till they settled far down among the aromatic thyme and the indifferently scattered rocks. A man-made spring under this plane tree supplied the water for our house and the neighbors. I liked to imagine that water sprites congregated under the tree and that one day they would bestow me with special talents. Then I would show these women to shun me as they did.

I resolved to practice my big yarny cross-stitches but not without sulking. I worked to finish my assignment and suddenly I realized that my hands were doing one thing while my mind was elsewhere. Just as a cloud blocking the sun moves and sunlight is restored, an opaque film was lifted from my eyes. My sulking subsided, quickly replaced by self-congratulatory smiles. Why had I not seen it before? "If they knew what I was thinking, they would be furious with me," I realized. "Look, look!" I wanted to shout. "I am living! I am living in my mind and no one can touch that part of me." I appeared absorbed in my work, I was not bothersome, but all the while I was free to think, free to escape my limited world, free to plan the changes to come. My grandmother approved, my mother did not object and all the other women smiled. No one looked closely to catch the world shaping behind my eyes. Was this discovery my mother's intention? Or, was this a secret women share? I don't know, but I consider it the only gift my mother could give me and she gave it to me when she taught me to do the cross-stitch. I did not pursue the arts of needlepoint, knitting or crocheting but the constant motion of my strong, agile fingers still disguises my mind's escapades as I blend with the background wherever I may be.

It is a strange thing, but I knew in my heart of hearts that I would not be in that place forever. My mind roamed with the clouds as I watched them float high above. In my child's heart I believed that a god was listening to my hopes. Each time I searched the clouds for a message. I expected to see a sign like the Emperor Constantine had seen, a golden cross emblazoned in the sky. That was a favorite story and my father had been named after that glorious man. I never saw a cross, but I saw the apricot sun pierce the tawny clouds and watermelon pink clouds lead the sun away. I saw fluffy white and grey mares galloping across the sky and the hawks gliding in the wind. All along I hoped that a great bird with strong wings would swoop down, pick me up and carry me to a place where there were other children, music, books, toys and, most of all, a mother who played the violin and smiled kindly and spoke gently. I wanted my brothers there too, but how could I expect the great bird to make four trips? I knew no great bird would carry us all away, but I was convinced that another place awaited our arrival.

"Go, fetch the donkey," my grandmother's commanding voice brought my thoughts to a halt. Swiftly, I stored my hopes in my mind's pouch and prepared to find the donkey grazing in the field.

I D E A S O F R E F E R E N C E :

a **lexicon.**

BY THOMAS GOOD

delusion, Slavish devotion to a fixed, and profitable, belief: The business of America is delusion. (R. Reagan)

democracy, The spirit or practice of adherence to conventional behavior. (see Delusion)

duplicity, A two story edifice. Exam: The Drug Enforcement Agency controls the importation and distribution of illegal drugs.

fetus envy, An ideology with Christian trappings. (see National Socialism)

intelligence, The gathering of incorrect information, by governmental agencies, upon which inescapable conclusions are based. (see Delusion)

labor, To suffer the pangs of childbirth. Exam: The Department of Labor was stillborn.

masturbation, The belief that only the best and the brightest hold public office. (see Delusion)

morality, The elevation of stupidity to an ideal. (see Fetus Envy)

national security, A defense mechanism manufactured by the Defense Industry. (see Delusion)

nocturnal emissions, The issuance of toxic waste. Exam: Exxon Corporation has nocturnal emissions.

peace, The continuation of State policy by covert means. (see Duplicity)

television, A symptom of regularity. (see Morality)

war, A joyous leprosy: the result of Fetus Envy. (see Delusion)

(for Clara)

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE



KIM BROWN

Sometimes I dream big dreams, gossamer sighs coalescing in small breaths, each a gilded stepping stone toward a star-bright light. I think I'm going to wind up so insanely great that the world will briefly stop turning, in deference to my success.

My peers offer unctuous applause at these milestones, busy cranking up their backlashed mean machine. Winged monkeymen come screeching out of the sky to pelt me with gobs of dung. It's unnerving. I retreat to the nearest bunker, to hunker down till the onslaught subsides. My peers giggle while mouthing condolences toward my predicament. But still the dung storm flies.

One step forward, two steps back.

Just like that for as long as I can remember: monumental shi-train following momentary sunshine. I'm used to it. In the arena twist my ears a cast of characters offer admonitions and advice on procedure. They sketch wonderful designs for umbrellas; conjure grandiose schemes and subtle strategies for reaching the end of the rainbow. I head back onto the road, looking for the next golden stone. The monkeys hover on the periphery, occasionally mounting strafing runs to keep me on my toes; leery of attacking while I have my legs beneath me. Bastards won't take me straight on.

My legs are wobbly now, but they've regained enough steam to make me formidable. My peers perform the cruelest of responses: indifference. That's okay; they come and go. The monkeys are what I have to worry about. The monkeys are perennial. There's this current squadron—real nasty bastards—who've stepped up their sniping. They have lain waste to my wa and my wallet in steady, swanning swoops. They've forced my social circus into reconstruction. And they're clever bastards, these monkeys. A lovely face leads them. They use others' arms to launch their salvos, but still they act as the guidance systems for the missives launched against me—strident strictures aimed at my head and heart. With a lovely face leading them.

"Attack the Loser from the angles," the lovely face whis-

pers through the wiring. "Overwhelm the bastard...then we'll win."

Smart bombs with no remorse ignite engines and detach from webbed wing pylons to waylay my existence. The battle is engaged, pinning me on my haunches, making me lash out blindly, erratically, wasting energy along the while.

My battlements are worn, near breached. Reason has no place in this onslaught; my fallback is on futile ground. Common sense is but a concept my opposition will ignore, determined to overwhelm me with guilt and acrimony, two charges known to strike my chord.

The other side is glacial in its ignorance of malfeasance, while I burn neon bright. It cannot do a wrong; I cannot do a right.

How does one compete in this existence? The cacophony in my skull creates a crescendo, demanding resolution.

"Where are you stepping next?"

Tell me where to go.

I'll go, no matter the pain, but how do I leave the past behind? How do you take the next step, when it feels like you're walking away from your destiny? To give up a thing that you dreamt would be with you the rest of your life...is there an easy way to do this?

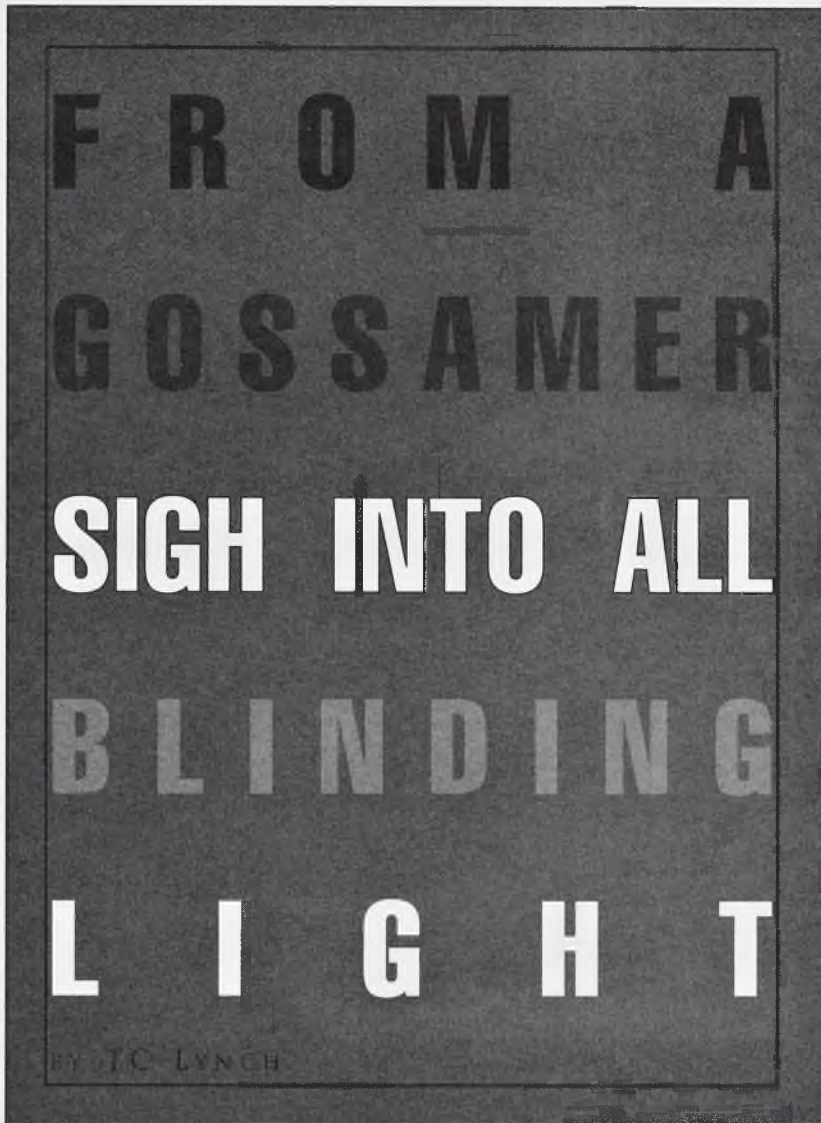
I don't know or trust anything anymore, especially the whiny weasels in my current crop of camaradic contretemps. Where is Homicide when I need him? Or Gino? Is Photoboy off snapping horses on the Carolina coast? Or is he holding in arrears till camera-ready carnage from my destruction affords him another

"NY Post" front page? Where the hell is the Big Red Dog?

To see the fiery brilliance laid flat before me, and to know I've naught achieved. It seems more relief than letdown. A nerve-racking rain, reeking of rejection, the next departure brings upon me; drenching me, offering no cover from the tears my thoughts transcribe across the sky. It's a harsh, damp blanket to be wrapped in on the road to the all-blinding light.

All is gone. I don't give a toss.... Rhymes may read all right, but I'm alone tonight. I hate that I am here. Will no one hold me dear?

Bollox! Bullshit! I'm Phoenix from the ashes. I'll claw my way out of this shit. I'm one resourceful bastard.



"Who's on the phone?"

"No one."

"Who?"

I sigh loudly. I hate repeating myself.

"No one! Wrong number!"

My father goes back to his crossword puzzle. That's all he's been doing since his back went out at work two months ago. He sits in his favorite chair, the black leather recliner. Woe to the mor-

"Dad, the phone is for you!"

"What?"

"The phone is for you!"

"Who is it?"

"It's Kyrie Gianni!"

"Who?"

"Mr. John from down the street!"

"Stop your yelling, I heard you the first time!"

I sit and continue to study for

"What?"

"I wanted to help. You got some things wrong on it."

"I didn't ask you."

"Sorry. I was only trying to do something nice."

"What?"

"Nothing!"

My mom says I should try doing more nice things for him.

"Try to be nice, do what you can for him. He's done so much for you."

"I DO! He doesn't say thank you, he acts like he doesn't care. Why should I care?"

"He loves you."

When I was younger I remember my dad taking us to the park on weekends and dragging us around in a

sled. I used to like to kiss his stubbled cheeks. Last time I tried I think he pulled away.

"He loves you."

I don't think my dad knows that I write every night in my journal. I know he hasn't read any of my poetry. I don't think he knows my favorite color, or my favorite band. He knows my favorite radio station. I keep programming it on the car stereo. And he keeps erasing it just to spite me. I know him for twenty three years. But I don't know him at all.

"What was dad like when he was young?"

"Younger I guess."

"I mean, has he always been like this?"

"Lately it's been bad, I know."

It's been bad. It's been very bad. I don't remember when it started. All I remember is that one day I grew up, and he wasn't my daddy anymore. He was just my father. The guy who let me have a couple of chromosomes.

"But why does he do this to us ma! Why can't he feel close to us?"

"It's not his fault! He's had a very rough life, just leave him in peace!"

My dad always dreamed of America. When he was fifteen he'd run to the subway station and try to earn some money shining shoes, so that he could catch the latest Clint Eastwood flick on the neighborhood's whitewashed wall. My dad was a cowboy. When we came to New York, he was rescuing us. He was the hero. The plan was to make a fortune in America, and then move

CHERRY

popsicles

VICTORIA SERETIS

tal found sitting in this king's throne. No one ever sits in that chair; well, at least not while he's home.

"But why?"

"What?"

"Why? Why can't we sit on the chair?"

"Because it's mine that's why. I paid for it." No one talks much to father. Only my mom. She explains things that he may have not picked up. Life with my father is one of constant repetition. Not all of us are patient with him like mom, and sometimes we feel shitty about that. I mean we don't exactly forget his birthday or anything; George and I always try to do things to show him that we care. I guess we just gave up long ago on having the "ideal parental relationship" with him. I don't think it could have ever happened.

"He's wrong, but he's your father!"

"So? Does being a parent entitle you to some sort of exemption that I'm not aware of?"

"He can't even hear you most of the time."

"He's got a hearing aid, ma! Tell him to wear it!"

He never wears that thing. God only knows why he bought it. Every time we mention it to him he gets angry with us, so it's gotten to the point that we just don't say anything anymore. If we don't speak loud enough he thinks we've got some secret, or that we're talking about him. If we speak to him loudly, he'll tell us to stop yelling and that he can hear us; that he's not deaf.

midterms. Concentration has never been my forte. The phone is ringing off the hook today. My father sits there, oblivious to it all. Sometimes I can't help but feel like he's ignoring it, waiting for me to get the call.

My mom says he can't hear it.

"If he heard it he would answer it!"

"I'm sick of excuses, ma. Tell him to wear the damn thing!"

"Why can't you answer the phone?"

"I DO answer the phone!"

And the doorbell, may I add. He can't hear that either. Many times I've locked myself outside. I've had to climb our fire escape to get in through my bedroom window. I wonder what Mrs. Palermo thought when she saw me trying to get in through the window one night last summer.

"What are you doing up there?"

"My dad can't hear the doorbell. I forgot my keys again."

"Oh."

My brother George just doesn't come home. My mother will worry herself half to death, thinking some terrible fate has fallen upon her son, while my dad will just sit in the leather recliner doing another crossword.

He never finishes them. Most times he gets the words wrong. I used to correct his mistakes and fill in the words he may have missed. He wasn't exactly appreciative.

"Who did this?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"I wanted to help."

back home to live comfortably. Moving to America was the most macho thing my father did. When he returned the second time it was the most cowardly.

"He wants to see his mother. It's been fourteen years. He misses his family."

"Last time I checked I thought we were family. I can't forgive him. I need my father. I don't need stories of how he sacrificed for us."

He can't go back to visit his family. When we returned to Greece for good he made some very unwise financial speculations. His own brother cheated him out of his small fortune. The banks foreclosed. My family fled.

And so did my father's spirit.

I need my father.

I know my father will never know that I was almost raped and how for

ten years I had to carry those demons in my head. He'll never know my pain because I too hide it like he does, I bury it deep. I put up the the barbed wire fence early on, like he did because some things in life are just genetic. I won't do crossword puzzles like he does because I don't need to search for the words to fit. There is no glory in me or my predicament. Like him, I am a survivor, but it's no big deal. I am no warrior.

I'm the epitome of status quo. My stony apathy is inherited like everything else. I carry out the legacy you leave daddy. It's the only thing I know or feel.

"Coffee. Make some coffee."

I have not heard my father say my name in years. He'll call me "you" or

"hey you", but never by my name. I get up and start making coffee. A silent offering to this god of stone. It's the only thing I know I can give him.

"No sugar. A little milk."

He used to wake up early on Sundays and eat cherry popsicles with me for breakfast. He carried me on his shoulders and helped me build my first snowman.

"He loves you."

Silently I stir the milk in. I see him hunched over his puzzle looking for the right words again. My hands grasp my gift, ignoring the steaming heat that emanates through the pores of the dried, lifeless clay mug. Our fingers briefly touch as we embrace it's warmth.



"FERRY LANDING"

ED DAVIN





PHOTOGRAPHS BY EUGENE GRUBBS

I was born on the second Tuesday of last week: a small fly with biting mouth parts. My Father, a pugnacious Termite named Moldy Toe Tom, named me "Gnathaniel". My Mother, a curvasceous Mexican Red Leg Tarantula (Olé!), called me her little Spithead. Every other Bug called me "Gnat"

Lyric Behaviour

BY THOMAS GOOD

My Father had become bitter early in his life, primarily as a defense mechanism against predators but also in response

to the untimely demise of my Aunt Mayfly (an Insectorial replica of Minny Pearl). Aunt May died of a contrived plotline after Medicaid refused to fund a Deus Ex Machina—due to some kind of a paperwork foulup. (My Dad, the diligent Termite, had eaten her Medicaid application by mistake.) Thereafter, the Old Dad had insisted that life was a tragicomedy: this Bug's view of Life greatly influenced my post-pupal development.

My Mother was an eightlegged Catholic. ("What a set of legs!" Dad always said.) She loved magical tales: virgin births, angry gods. etc. Thus, whenever I asked how it came to pass that a White Ant and a Spider could mate and produce a Gnat, she would simply smile and say: "If you believe, anything is possible." Mom was a mystic but the Old Dad would get angry when she waxed theological.

"Religion is a pharmaceutical product for invertebrates," he would say, quoting some old Stinkbug philosopher named Dada. My Dad had been a Dadaist, even before I was hatched. Dad, who worked as a writer, told me

that my existence was allegorical, not supernatural. In any case, I had a larvelous childhood, full of wondrous and bad puns. When I was big enough to handle some responsibility Mom got me a pet Aphid named Rover. Dad called him Hoover, a reference, he said, to a fictitious crime fighter who made his fortune selling vacuum cleaners door to door.

Rover was especially fond of my Grandfather, who lived with us for a time. Grand Daddy Longlegs used to drive me to elementary school when I was a pupa. He was an erratic driver who liked to straddle the centerline on the highway. When the other drivers honked their horns at us Grand Daddy would spit tobacco at them (he was part Grasshopper). When I was older Dad told me that Grand Daddy drove the way he did because he was a freemason. But I think that Grand Daddy Longlegs was a cranky old Spider because he missed Grand Mommy Longlegs, who died before I was born. Grand Daddy kept her empty shell in his lair. He and Rover would sit next to her for hours at a

time. Rover would howl along when Grand Daddy played Grand Mommy old Johnny Cash records.

When Grand Daddy died in his sleep we put his shell next to Grand Mommy's. Rover stood vigil. We all missed Grand Daddy Longlegs.

Our next door neighbors were the Mantises. Mrs. Mantis was named Carolina and one day she ate her husband right on the front lawn. They were Protestants, Dad said. A short time later their son was born. Beauregard was my best friend in the world, until one day his mother ate him too. After Beau died I became introspective and kind of sad. I asked Dad why Mrs. Mantis ate her family.

Dad explained the facts of life thus: "Insects have strong needs. It was perfectly natural for Mrs. Mantis to eat her family given her entomological and religious background. We all have needs, son."

Shortly afterwards I discovered my own needs, almost by accident. One day, while going through my drawers, I discovered my genitalia. It was a messy business but Mom said everything was alright. She told me to ask my Father to explain what had happened. Dad told me that, in the past I would have been

told to read the Bible and proclaim self denial while abusing myself privately, so to speak. Mom grew angry with Dad for his tangential nature. She reared up on her four hinglegs and hissed: "Get to the point!"

Dad smiled knowingly and winked at me: "That's your Momma! Arachnid women are the best! Hot blooded and hot headed..."

"But what do I do, Dad? About my needs?"

"Affirm a love object, pursue courtship, wet your end."

I must have looked too eager because Dad attached a disclaimer: "Don't go for the kill right away, Gnathaniel, maintain the romance, the sexual tension, for as long as possible, at least an hour. A great romance has tremendous literary value and love is about more than swollen euphemisms."

Mom smiled at this but I was still confused. "Get a girlfriend," she said. And so I did. My first love was a beautiful creature, a Katydid named Holly. She had the cutest ears, right behind her knees. We went together only a short time but even today green is one of my favorite colours. (The Old Dad was right about the affairs of an Insect's heart.)

* * *

One day, while the family was eating ice cream off the sidewalk outside Baskin Robbins, I saw a handsome Cricket surrounded by women. I asked my Dad why this Bug had so many girlfriends.

"He's a Mormon, that Cricket," Dad said.

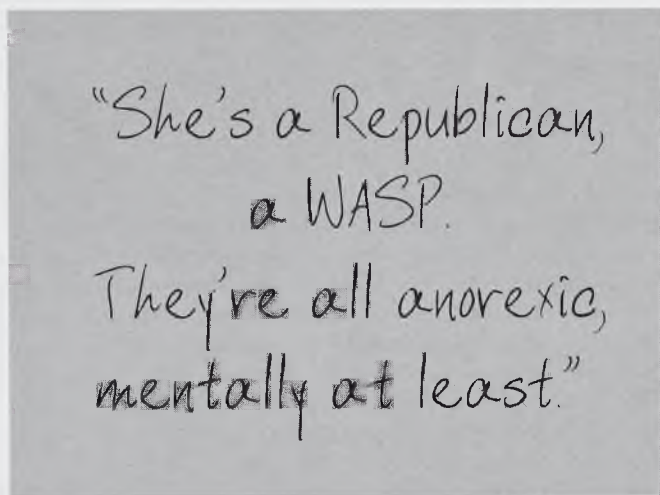
One of his paramours was a pretty woman with a thin, thin waist. I pointed her out to the Old Dad.

"She's a Republican," Dad said, "a WASP. They're all anorexic, mentally at least. Find yourself a good housefly and settle down. Houseflies are hard workers, the salt of the Earth." Mom nodded her assent.

Dad liked the salt of the Earth, which is how he got high blood pressure. He often told me tales of hard working Bugs like Field Crickets and Migratory Grasshoppers who were used as migrant laborers. Or the Japanese Beetles who suffered so

much when they were interned by the Government during World War Two. Dad was a Lefty: he said that all governments were parasites, sucking dry the salt of the Earth.

When I was little, Dad used to take me to the New York State Correctional Facility for the Dramatic Arts. Here, Dad said, unruly characters like me were given lethal injections of some poison called "white out". I got scared the first time he said this but Dad was only kidding. The Correctional Facility was actually the place where the State molded promising young writers into productive citizens with acceptable plotlines. Dad said that Stephen King was a graduate of the Facility. Dad told me that some writers refused to conform and were put on permanent display in the facility's museum. Dad liked these pesty Insects alot and he took me to the museum often. He showed me Joseph K, the Click Beetle and famous dramatist; André Breton, the



ferocious looking Earwig who was actually a lyric poet; Syd Barrett, the Tiger Beetle songwriter; Salvador Dali, the conspicuous Doodlebug; Max Ernst, the former Croton Bug who now dressed as a woman and called himself Eros Leafhopper, and Dad's favorite; Jean Cockroach, the French playwright who chronicled the seamy side of Insect life.

I was fascinated by these Bugs and couldn't understand why the State had locked them up. During our last trip to the museum I asked my Dad why these men were on public display.

"All of the writers imprisoned by the State have been found guilty of heinous crimes," Dad said.

"By who, Dad? Who found them?"

"By WHOM, Gnathaniel. By whom," Dad said. He was a strict grammarian.

"By whom, Daddy?"

"By a jury of their contemporaries."

Dad went on to explain about something called "The Seven Ancient Blunders", a collection of commandments upon which all of our present day laws are based. These ancient codes were set down by some old Greek Bug named Mediocrites.

Joseph K had been found guilty of didactic turpitude; André Breton, public alliteration; Syd Barrett, deprived effervescence, and; Jean Cockroach, illegal possession and distribution of poetic devices. Max/Eros had been found guilty of gender betrayal, the most serious crime. I admired these men (and woman) tremendously. Especially André Breton, the poet and visionary. I asked the Old Dad if I could be a writer too.

"No!" he bellowed, in his most stern voice. But he held my hand for the rest of the day, a rare display of affection from an old Termite. I felt like Jesse James the famous Thief Ant who had been hanged for stealing Horseflies.

Although I didn't realize it until some time later, the trips to the Correctional Facility had a tremendous impact on me. At school I began to associate with a group of likeminded rogues and miscreants. We called ourselves "artists", although we had yet to produce any art. Dad said that he was upset that I forsook my friends on the Spittleball team to take up with these "hooligans" but I got the feeling he approved of my decision to be an artist and a writer. In later years I realized that the Old Dad was very pleased that I had chosen to follow in his footsteps. Mimicry is very important in the Insect world.

My new friends included one Arnold Tuber, a Potato Bug who wore loud stripes and listened to punk rock. Arnie would become my best friend. Arnie's pal, Aleister "Groovy" Tripper, was a true eccentric, a Firefly with a psychedelic mind. He used expressions like "Can you dig that?" and "Far out!" Tripp introduced me to the woman who would share my adult stage. Her name was Vera Vixen and she was a Wood Nymph with beautiful eyes on the corners of her wings.

Arnie and I joined with Vera and Tripp to start a small colony of fellow Gadflies and Booklice. In no time we became as thick as Fleas. In no time we began to emulate the exploits of our heroes in the Correctional Facility.



Thanks mainly to the brilliant manoeuvres of Groovy Tripper the Firefly, our colony of anti-artists began to attract attention almost immediately. We recruited some fellow travelers and incorporated as the "New Arts Society: Tainted by Youth" (NASTY). Acting on a tip from The Old Dad, we applied for a grant from the National Endowment for Entomological Studies, Department of Pest Control/Philology. The monies were used as a startup fund for a literary magazine. We elected Groovy Tripper the editor of our official journal, GIGOLO ANTICS. As Angry Young Insects we opposed everything that smacked of the status quo. This was reflected in the manifestoes we published in G/A.

Early on we attracted a crusty old Hermit Crab named Jolly Jack. An epigrammatic type, this reclusive Crustacean was an admirer of the famous Stinkbug storyteller, Charles Bukowski. Jolly Jack wrote caustic essays and aphorisms in the blunt style of his hero. These articles were illustrated by Jack's friend, Harry Mygalomorph, a burly Trapdoor Spider. Harry, a Faustian bargainer, agreed to work for G/A provided we kept him plied with food and drink. Done deal.

Layout was handled by Vera, our staff photographer, and another new addition, a Shakespearian architect named Cosmic Decoy. "Mick", a Tiger Beetle, got on famously with Groovy Tripper. Although noncommittal by nature and ambivalent by design, Mick was an effective architect (he designed parking lots for Ant Farms and Bee Hives). He was also a good artist, a talented editor and a clever humorist. Mick became Tripp's right foreleg and GIGOLO ANTICS improved markedly under his tutelage.

Over the next two years, as I teetered on the brink of my adult stage and we started to acquire significant circulation, Groovy Tripper began to behave erratically. A confirmed occultist with a psychedelic bent, Tripp began to abuse boric acid. Pesticides took a toll on Tripp's ability to do his job and he resigned from his

position as editor-in-chief. I was elected to succeed him. At his farewell party Tripp announced that he was planning to change his name and journey to another plane. A short time later "Roger Wilco" moved to Scotland, where, he said, he planned to go bald and become an eccentric. ("Too late," The Old Dad said.)

Worried over the loss of Tripp/Roger, I got Arnie Tuber, the punk Potato Beetle, to recruit some new writers. Arnold found a famous poet, a Clothes Moth with an impossibly protrusive proboscis: one Robin Lee. Bobby Lee contributed a number of poems satirizing "appropriate" behaviour and public figures. He also recruited his lifelong friend, Blueberry Max, a Carrion Beetle famous for his dung sculptures. (Max did busts of various celebrities in wet and dry dung.) Blue Max, who suffered from incurable flatulence, was chosen to handle outside distribution. His wife, C. Emily Play, a Velvet Ant photographer, pitched in.

Upon reaching literary and physical maturity I became a strict grammarian, just like The Old Dad, who now read my work with feigned disinterest. Dad needed me to learn a trade, like the Potter Wasps who had moved in across the street. Although he was persistent in his nagging, I knew he was full of sawdust. He was obviously proud of his son.

About the time we really got rolling, one of Jack's biting essays got us in hot water. The community was buzzing with outrage (and threatening to contact the officials at the NYS Correctional Facility) over Jolly Jack's statement that "Morality is the elevation of stupidity to an Ideal," and that "Religion is a mental masturbation, in praise of this Ideal."

Senator A'damo himself spoke out against us. The distinguished Mosquito from New Jersey began a campaign of character assassination (his modus operandi) directed against all of us, but against our minority members in particular. Harry the Arachnid and Jack the Crustacean bore the brunt of his Bugbait-ing. (Racism is an age old problem in Insect life—one of the Seven Ancient Blunders on which our society was founded.)

In response, we decided that we would run Cosmic Decoy as a candidate against A'damo in the next election. He would campaign under the slogan "Better a wise fool than a foolish wise man." Come October we were

ready to take on A'damo. I served as Mick's campaign manager. Blueberry Max exhibited two new sculptures: a bust of A'damo with his proboscis in the till and a second sculpture of the Senator feeding on infants. GIGOLO ANTICS cranked out numerous articles and satires, becoming a political forum and major weapon in our propaganda war.

Senator A'damo came out swinging. He promised to cut syntaxes at the expense of literacy programs, a measure popular with conservative elements. To counter this move we put out a special "Fear and Ignorance" issue of GIGOLO ANTICS in which I called Senator A'damo a "morbid characteristic." A'damo responded on the evening news. His proboscis quivered as he croaked out a rebuttal. In his shrill Mosquito voice he demanded that we retract this and other comments. In a taped reply, Bobby Lee called Senator A'damo a closet masticator and a known pedestrian. And so it went.

Despite running a brilliant anti-campaign, we lost the election. Mick and the gang were despondent but I was personally devastated. I had suffered a major loss during the campaign, the full impact of which did not hit me until after the election. My father, The Old Dad, had died of a metrical arrhythmia (he had ruptured a pentameter and the doctors were unable to save his end rhyme). Mom was distraught and I moved home to care for her. Gradually, GIGOLO ANTICS and NASTY collapsed.

Blueberry Max was the first to go. Blue Max left his wife Emily and gave up dung sculpting. He moved to North Carolina to become a verb farmer, and, a short time later contracted a cybernetic virus. Sadly, he continues to mutate, having no definitive format. Every so often he pops up as an unruly character, men in white jackets (armed with white out) never far behind him.

Arnold Tuber the Potato Bug overdosed on starch. His funeral was clad in grey skies and falling tears.

Cosmic Decoy married his long time lover, Long Sally Lang, and together they had a daughter named Mallard.

Harry Mygalomorph changed his surname to Doyle and became a famous pseudonym.

Jolly Jack started touring bars across this great nation, reading his poems and essays and drinking red wine (room temperature, please!).



MARTIN BOUGH

WE HAVE UMBRELLAS



RICHMOND TERRACE. SNOW SHADOWS
ED DAVIN

Bobby Lee became a good natured policeman, a self described oxymoron, loved for his Beat poetry. He married and has a brood of young.

I took a job at an Ant Farm to make ends meet. Vera and I married and settled down. Today we are proud parents (my Mother is content in her new role as Grandmom, although she continues to mourn the passing of her cranky husband). When our son was born, Vera wrapped him in metaphor and, in honour of the Old Dad, named him "Literary Device."

Oh yeah, my old friend Aleister Tripper returned from Scotland recently (Roger Wilco over and out). He opened up a psychedelic pediatrics practice, having been trained by Doctor Seuss, and is back in my life as my son's doctor and one of my dearest friends. In fact,

Tripp and I have been talking lately about starting a new journal...

One day, I think it was the second Tuesday of last week, when I was feeling sad over my recent losses: mourning Blueberry Max, Arnold Tuber, The Old Dad and Granddaddy Longlegs; Tripper took me somewhere very special. We arrived, at dusk, in a small swamp called Purple Loosestrife Pond.

"When I feel down in the mouth parts I come here," Tripp said, as the pitch black sky erupted in a thousand flashes of bioluminescence. Together we watched as a multitude of Fireflies performed a cosmic dance of light.

As we watched those brilliant manoeuvres illumine the night sky I began to understand where this strange Bug was coming from.

"Tripp, you brought me here to learn that we come and go, linger-

ing on this mortal plane for just a Moment—occasionally lighting the Night with our Lyric Behaviours. And that dance of light is all that matters...all that endures..."

Aleister "Groovy" Tripper smiled as he flickered to Life's beat. "Excuse me, while I kiss the sky," he said. Then he was off. A moment later he returned. "Come on along," he said, "it's a stone groove."

I hesitated. "Tripp, I can't flicker...I'm no Firefly..."

The Tripp grinned and motioned me to join him.

"Ah, what the hell," I said. And with that, I was aloft, a part of the Swarm. For the first time I felt that I was one with all who had gone before...GrandDaddy Longlegs...and The Old Dad...

(for Joe Carelli)

Sweeping It Under The Rug

Full House
soft seats
this baby will never feel.
sweep sweep
I'm not the only one in this room;
they made mistakes just like me.
Besides,
I'm too young to have this baby,
or
I don't need this baby,
or
It was a mistake with him,
or
I was drunk and stupid,
or
sweep sweep sweep
(the rug is getting lumpy),
I'll go to church
God will forgive.
loud sweep loud sweep
Can't let him know
Can't let anyone know
It'll be okay
No one will know except me...and her.
scream sweep scream
sweep
(the lump is flattening out).

by S.S.

As I scream through the torment, people begin to circle around me. No one tries to help. Instead they just flock around to ask each other "What's wrong with him?" There is one voice that asks, "Hey buddy, you okay?" I continue to scream out in



"WELCOME TO NOWHERE"

JAY CASERTANO

madness but I realize that the whistling has stopped. There's nothing there; not even a faint melody. My screams turn to hysterical laughter. The crowd begins to disperse as I hear faint remarks like, "Just another nut," and "God damn lunatic." I remain on the curb, still laughing in the sunlight that illuminates all darkness. I am so grateful to be here and I don't want to leave.

- excerpt from "Salvation at 110th Street" by Debra Behr

As Lucy opened the door, she braced herself for the cold of her mother's bedroom.

"Did you bring the box?" Her mother's voice was hollow in the lightless room.

Lucy took a worn cardboard box off the tray she carried and gave it a loud shake, rattling the contents.

"Good." Helen had stopped getting out of the bed in March, and Lucy had been bringing meals to her since. Usually Helen sent her away. That was until Lucy discovered the box.

Steam swirled up from the bowl of soup Lucy set on the bedside table. Since her mother had turned off the radiator, the winter's chill lingered in every corner of the room. Helen had also managed to shut out the bright spring morning by draping towels over plastic window shades.

Lucy tucked a napkin into the gray lace collar of her mother's negligee, but Helen said, "I don't want to eat."

"You're so skinny, Mama." Lucy saw that her mother grimaced when she sat beside her on the bed. Handing her the box, with its torn Kodak film label, Lucy watched Helen's hair spill across the lid in a smooth black wave. Lucy had always fancied her hair was like her mother's, until recently. Without her mother's diligent brushing, Lucy's hair had become snarled. So she'd done what most eleven-year-olds would do; she'd stuffed it into a rubber band. A matted little ponytail wasn't going to bring her down. Even now, in the low brown wash of light, Lucy's eyes shone as bright as two Easter eggs dipped in blue dye.

"Oh, that's so pretty," Lucy murmured, touching the purple stone dangling from the brooch in her mother's palm.

"It is pretty. There's a story to that one," Helen said.

"There is?" Lucy smiled, now she could stay for awhile. The smile might annoy her mother, so Lucy hid it behind her hand. But Helen had already leaned back against the pillows, eyes shut and the brooch clutched to her chest. She reminded Lucy of the princess who bit the poison fruit in one of her fairy tale books.

"It was my big break! I finally got the chance to show off my legs," Helen said, suddenly talkative.

"Your legs?"

"I've got great legs! It was clear as day soon as I lined up with all the girls. Everybody said so. That was before I got pregnant with you, when I was on Broadway in the One and Only. The very first night of the show there was a little velvet box wrapped in green tissue waiting for me? Guess what was inside?"

"What?"

"Lucy? What? What do you think?" She wiggled the brooch sharply in front of Lucy's nose.

"Did Daddy give it to you?"

"Steve? No, honey. He gave me flowers—only flowers," Helen said.

"Tulips."

"Tulips from Holland!" Helen said gleefully and they both hooted with laughter. "Stevie's so jealous," she went on, "he asked me to get rid of all the jewelry. I couldn't, they were gifts to me. We'll hide it again when he comes home."

"When will daddy come home?" Lucy asked.

"He's got to harvest tulips, doesn't he? He'll be back, don't worry about that."

As Lucy closed the door behind her, she felt the warmth from the kitchen's wood-burning stove. Pouring the soup back into a pot to warm for her own meal. Lucy ate the sandwich her mother had also left untouched.

They'd had a laugh together. This made Lucy happy. It didn't matter the joke was mostly funny to her mother. What her mother did when it came to Stevie hadn't always made

much sense to

Lucy.

Helen

had

met

Stevie,

the

man

Lucy

called Daddy, two years before when they were living in New York City. Every night he'd come to the show and send a bouquet of tulips to her mother's dressing room. "It's nice to get something fresh like flowers from a man," she'd told Lucy after Stevie proposed to her, saying they'd live on his farm in Holland. When Lucy had asked her mother how much she loved Stevie, Helen had said, "What do you think? You always complain we never see each other. I'm giving this city up so you can get lost in some tulip patch. That's how much."

Lucy supposed what made her mother laugh about tulips from Holland was from when she'd asked Stevie about getting passports, and he'd said, "Passports? What the hell for? My farm's in Holland, Michigan. It's famous for tulip bulbs."

Lucy formed the word tulip in her mouth. Tulips. Tu-lips. "Two lips are better than one," she said aloud then quieted. Outside the bay window she heard the rustling sounds. Probably some animal drawn to the light from the kitchen. She heard them every night now. Lucy had never noticed anything when they'd all eaten together, the window clouded with cooking and Stevie's cigarette smoke. Suddenly, she missed her dog Precious because he would have growled at the noises.

Stepping outside into a thickly fogged night, Lucy wished she had gone to the freezer earlier. Stevie's dinners aren't more than a few skips away, she told herself as the heavy door to the freezer closed behind her. Shining the flashlight beam straight ahead, Lucy passed row upon row of deer carcasses hanging from hooks, the limbs like branches casting shadows across the floor.

Soon her light fell on what she came for, plates of food covered in plastic wrap. Lucy had found the dinners a week after she hadn't seen Stevie anymore, the day her mother got into bed. It hadn't worried Lucy that Stevie left so many

Tulips

from

Holland

MARY KURYLA

frozen meals; he was always doing comfy things like splitting wood for the fire, making jams for their toast and collecting funny jokes to tell her. Tucking the flashlight under her arm, she gathered the last of the frozen plates. The light bobbed up and down as she walked through the raw cold of the vault, flashing against the half-skinned animals whose shiny eyes winked behind turned down pelts.

As Lucy opened the door, the light beam scanned the nearest shelves. She tried not to look. But there he was, her dog, Precious, curled up on a shelf like he'd just gone to sleep. He'd died in January, the month it rained so much. The ground was swimming in water, so Stevie had stowed Precious in the deer freezer until the earth was dry enough to dig a grave. It wasn't long after the rain stopped that Stevie had gone. But until Lucy chased the neighbor's dog, Mazie, out of the freezer had she realized Stevie still hadn't dug that hole.

Pushing the freezer door shut, Lucy knew she should dig the grave herself. But what if Precious was just sleeping after all?

The last split of wood cracked in the stove as Lucy stacked the individual meals on the barren refrigerator shelves. Soon the cold from her mother's room would creep through the whole house. She had better go to sleep. In the fading light from the stove, Lucy peered into the shadowy corners of the kitchen. The box still sat on the dinner table. She's forgotten to put her mother's jewelry in its safe place.

Opening the broom closet, Lucy reached up on her tiptoes to set the box on the top shelf, above her mother's suitcase. She'd found the box by chance, while playing "Going on a Trip". It was the only thing inside the suitcase, hidden there like buried treasure. Lucy had quickly discovered what the box of shiny accessories was worth. It was the key to her mother's room, where Lucy was even allowed to stay—as long as a story lasted. When Lucy had asked her mother if the jewelry was real, Helen had said coldly, "Never ask a grown woman such a question. It's costume jewelry, Lucy. It's valuable alright. Valuable to me." And so, Lucy believed the jewelry was priceless.

Unrolling a sleeping bag decorated with mermaids balancing on narrow tails, Lucy lay down next to the stove, in the place where Precious used to sleep. She didn't call good night to Helen. Since Stevie had left, Lucy learned it didn't pay to push her luck with her mother.

Warmed by the orange glow of the stove, Lucy wished her mother had eaten tonight. The memory of the boy who'd sent her the purple jewelry had upset her. "He liked my legs," Helen had said, pulling a quilt off one leg to show Lucy. All Lucy had seen was a red knee cap protruding from loose rubber bands of muscle. Helen had slapped her thigh. "You'd think they'd show more loyalty for all the years I took them dancing."

The jewelry reminded Lucy of their lives in New York, too. The rhinestones in her mother's bracelet glimmered like lights the L train tapped on and off when it had passed by their apartments at night. The colored stones in the brooch were like the gems she'd stolen from her friend Kindra, who lived on Park Avenue and had more toys in her Christmas stocking than Lucy got under her entire tree. Kindra's gems looked like dollops of marmalade, but they were meant to be used as jacks. "My mom says they don't hurt as much if you step on them," Kindra had told Lucy.

"They're beautiful," Lucy had said and they were now a part

of her jack collection. Before falling asleep, Lucy resolved to play with them in the mourning. She wanted to keep in shape since she'd been a competitive player in the city.

Jacks and gems dotted the square of paved road at the end of the farm house driveway. Lucy tossed the rubber ball up, its sparkles glinting in the sunlight and grabbed four jacks. Maize rested in front of her, eyes half closed. Tossing the ball again, Lucy picked up all the orange-colored gems. Abruptly, the dog raised its head as a truck lurched down the two-lane country road.

Lucy saw the truck as it neared, wheels so loose on the axles they seemed to spin toward separate destinations. Then there was a gasping sound and the truck's engine just quit. All was quiet save the nervous sound of the clucking chickens stacked in crates along its payload. Without warning, the engine fired back up and the vehicle hurled forward, picking Stevie's mailbox right off the stand. The truck stopped at the foot of the driveway, and Lucy stared up at a silk red rooster retrieving its balance on the very top crate. The bird had thin-shelled eyelids and a beak that swelled open with each slow breath.

"How come he isn't locked up?" Lucy asked the man as he slammed the door of his truck behind him.

"Damn car. Goddamn car," the man said.

The dog's fur rose up in tufts along its spine. "Maize, stay," Lucy whispered.

"You there, I need gas. I'm out of gas," the man said, indicating a rusted gas pump next to Stevie's greenhouse.

Maize was climbing up the chicken crates in pursuit of the rooster by this time, sending crates bumping to the ground with its scrambling hind legs. Lucy saw the bird's lids disappear like blinds, the black ball eyes pressing out as Maize's teeth clamped onto its crimson middle.

"Get your dog out of there," the man yelled, but Maize was already galloping down the road, shaking the rooster back and forth in her jaws, red feathers dropping along the road. The man threw his boots at Maize. Missing, he turned and ran back toward Lucy, his lips rolled back so far his gums showed.

Jacks and gems sprayed out from Lucy's hand onto the pavement. He stepped on a jack, bouncing back as if his socks were loaded with springs and landed on the pavement with a grunt. Long blue-jeaned legs bowed out as he rubbed his foot. "I'd as good as sold that cock," he said.

Lucy stared at him for a moment, licking her dry lips. Then she started to laugh from the very back of her throat. She dropped to her knees, her small hands pushing the jacks and gems into a pile. She looked around for the ball. The man tossed the ball into the air and Lucy scooped up all the metal jacks and caught it. She bounced the ball for him.

"I'll play you for some gasoline," he said as his long fingers fumbled over the smooth surface of the plastic gems. The ball bounced to a standstill. "But let me get the hang of these things."

"My name's Lucy," she said retrieving the ball.

"I'm Valentine."

"Like a heart?" Lucy blushed.

Valentine smiled at her slowly. "Will you be mine?"

Lucy looked away, then began chattering. She hadn't played jacks with anyone since her mom had felt bad. Her

mom would play jacks on the kitchen floor with her, while daddy did the dishes. Daddy didn't like her mom's hands wasted in dishwater because she was a dancer on Broadway. When Valentine said, "I'm in entertainment myself," Lucy nodded as though she could have guessed.

"You're a lot like my mom," Lucy said.

"I am?"

"Yeah, it took her a long time to pick up gems."

"Oh," Valentine said, sounding relieved.

"Don't worry," Lucy assured him. "I don't want you to be like a mom to me."

"Got it." Valentine held one gem and the ball safely in his hand.

Lucy took her turn, easily picking up two gems as she told Valentine her mother had nice legs, and that "everybody says so." When Valentine said he was on his way to launch his singing career in New York, Lucy begged him to stay with her. He could sing locally. "There's a festival for something every couple of months in Holland, with music and dancing," Lucy said. "Two months ago it was the tulip festival and there was a stunt show. a lady with red hair dropped from a plane in a parachute."

Lucy remembered Stevie's face that day. The red-haired lady had landed so near their picnic spot, her parachute blanketed both Stevie and her like a cloud. When Helen had

began lifting the fallen chicken crates off the ground. Lucy stamped her foot. "Hey, you can't go. I didn't say you could go."

"I can't go without some gas," Valentine said in a way that made Lucy feel a little ashamed.

"If I give you the gas, will you come back to visit?" Lucy said, "I can show you my daddy's tulips or my mommy's jewelry, maybe."

"I don't think your parents would like that Lucy." Valentine sounded like he was losing patience.

"Daddy won't know because he's gone, even if she says he's coming back."

"Why do you say your dad's gone?" he asked, looking closely at Lucy's blue eyes, paler than the sky.

"I don't know. Anyway, my mom likes to show me her jewelry. She'd show it to you."

"You shouldn't tempt a man, Lucy." Valentine took a gas can from the cab of his truck and walked down the driveway toward the pump.

The sound of gasoline hitting the bottom of the canister reminded Lucy of her mother's clothes washer filling up with water. She'd tried to wash some sheets when her mother had first gotten into bed but had forgotten to hang them out to dry. Now when she lifted the lid, a bad smell came out.

Valentine was whistling a tune as he pumped gas.



"RUNNING THROUGH A DREAM"

P. C. GUAGENTI

pulled the parachute off, Stevie had the look of a man who just woke up from a long, long sleep.

Strands of the parachutist's red hair had gotten tangled on the buttons of his blue corduroy dress shirt. Lucy figured her mom wasn't any better at loosening hair from Stevie's shirt than she was at combing Lucy's hair after a bath since the lady kept crying out. Stevie just sat there with that woman's head on his lap and his wife tugging at his shirt, staring up at the sky like Chicken Little.

Valentine took a theatrically deep breath and threw the ball up in the air. He scooped up all the gems, but the ball landed in his hand at the wrong angle, sending the gems clattering to the ground.

"I win!" Lucy chortled, "I win, I win!"

Valentine stood up, walked to the back of his truck and

indicating the greenhouse with a chin that looked to Lucy like it belonged on a bust in the Metropolitan Museum, he said, "That where you daddy grows tulips?"

"Tulips for picking," Lucy replied.

"What other kind of tulips are there?"

"Tulips for bulbs. Over there, in those fields." Lucy spread her arms out wide, past the plastic walls of the greenhouse to the flat fields with rows of vermilion, lavender and pink tulips. Most of the petals were on the ground.

"They don't look so good," Valentine said as he replaced the nozzle on the tank.

"I've never seen them bloom in the fields before," Lucy said.

"No, they don't look so good. Ah, thanks for the gas, Lucy."

"I'm sorry about your rooster, Valentine."

"Just shoot the dog for me, honey." He winked at her.

"See you tomorrow, then." Lucy said.

"Oh, no."

"But I want to show you my mother's jewelry. It's too valuable to be in an old box meant for Kodak pictures," Lucy pleaded as she followed him back to his truck.

Valentine turned around abruptly, "Why do you suppose she keeps it in that old box?"

"Probably 'cause it's worth millions: diamonds, rubies, everything," Lucy said, encouraged by his sudden interest.

"Millions?" Valentine asked quietly.

Lucy nodded with her head down. Since her mother said it was rude to ask if the jewelry was real, it was probably impolite to brag about its worth, too.

Valentine tilted her chin up. "You got pretty eyes, Lucy."

Lucy widened them, then looked away.

"Remember, you owe me one for my rooster," Valentine said, placing a red feather in her hand.

Lucy set the tray of uneaten food down on the kitchen table. She didn't have much appetite herself tonight. The animal rustling outside was louder than usual. Maybe it was a sick fox like the one that stood at the edge of the highway when Stevie had driven them home from church in town that last Sunday. Lucy had seen the chill in the fox's wide eyes as the wind circled around the few patches of fur left on its hide. "Mange," Stevie had said. "It'll be dead by harvest."

Then it must be a fish making all that noise, Lucy thought, like the one from Lake Saugatuck where Stevie had taken them swimming. Stevie had been so impressed when the fisherman showed his catch, all wound up in an aluminum net. A three foot bass, maybe forty years old, the bulging eye looked back as if it were still being pursued. She remembered what her mother had said at the sight of that fish, "Forty years is a long time to live in a lake. Seems it earned something more than a hook in its mouth."

Lucy decided to go to sleep early. She had to be up and ready for Valentine. Replacing the box of jewelry on the top shelf, she thought about what her mother had told her that evening. She'd been searching in the box for the pieces to what her mother called a set.

"You know, he didn't kid me, Lucy," Helen had said. "Stevie knew we weren't each other's ideal, but I think we're good together, don't you?"

"What's an ideal?" Lucy asked quietly, afraid the explanation would make the same kind of sense Holland being a place in Michigan had.

Helen had laughed. "A fortune teller told Stevie that he could only love an angel who came down to him from the sky... It was worth the risk, Lucy. Since when do angels fall on Holland, Michigan?"

Lucy crawled in the sleeping bag, feeling the heat from the fire in the stove. After a moment, she pulled the covers over her head, trying to keep buried the sounds of Stevie's yelps and whistles that had come from the greenhouse that last day. Like an unfinished thought, the image of his broad shape moving behind the plastic panels returned. Staring at the pulsing red curtain of her sleeping bag, Lucy allowed the memory to play. She had heard the woman's voice responding to Stevie's calls with little packs of giggles. When Lucy had reached the door of the greenhouse, Stevie had shouted, "Oh my lord, I've got you now!"

Listening for their whispers, Lucy had walked along the rows of tables where pots lay on their sides and the long necks of French tulips dusted the floor. The crude cement

floor had been awash with red petals and clay shards powdered with black soil. A peal of laughter, then a pot had crashed behind Lucy. She had turned to see the spray of woman's hair and Stevie's hand reaching out, grabbing the red. As they fled through the back door, Lucy had wondered if the lady still had her parachute on.

Standing up every pot that wasn't broken on the center table, Lucy had scooped soil off the floor. She had pushed it back into the pots until her mother called her in for dinner, and they had begun their wait for Stevie.

A twig snapped outside, followed by the sound of leaves crunching under an animal's heavy weight. Lucy knew it wasn't right to feel fear from some poor creature which longed for the warmth and light of the farm house kitchen. Yanking the blanket off her face, Lucy looked at her mother's closed door. She knew what that longing was like. The animal outside brushed against the back door, but Lucy was thinking about playing jacks on the driveway with Valentine in the morning. Hearing the faint sound of clucking chickens, Lucy fell soundly asleep, never sensing the long shadow that slanted across her face, lambent in the dying fire of the stove.

In spite of Lucy's vigil at the end of the driveway, the jacks and gems remained in her pocket. As the day turned a yellow blue, Lucy felt the cold through her sweater, and something else too. Something hard and mean that made her slap kindling wood into her arms. The splints made loud, cracking sounds that stung. When Stevie's neat stack of wood collapsed and rolled across the doorstep, she just stepped over it without looking back. Though she lit the fire in the stove, she knew it would not warm her, not as long as she brought food to her mother's cold room.

After loading the tray with dinner, Lucy opened the closet and reached for the jewelry. The box was empty. Lucy looked around the room warily, though it was at best a reflex. Valentine was long gone. While the fire smoked and the soup grew cold, she tried to think of what to do. Perhaps she could bring her mother some tulips, a big bouquet. She would understand then that Lucy was sorry.

Looking over the tulips in the greenhouse, Lucy knew the bouquet wasn't going to be beautiful. Though she'd watered the flowers since Stevie had left, most had bloomed and gone. She did her best, only snapping up tulips with three petals or more and discarding those whose colors had drained from red to pink. Walking back to the farm house, Lucy considered the collection of flowers bunched in her hand. What could her mother expect? Tulips were delicate flowers and needed attention. Left to their own devices, they were bound to get into trouble.

Though the blue ribbon Lucy found in her mother's pencil drawer added something to the bouquet, Lucy knew the flowers would do nothing to soften her mother's anger. The truth was, without the jewelry, she might never see her mother again. Panicking, Lucy yanked out drawers and swung open kitchen cupboards in search of a substitute, something that would fool her mother in to thinking the box was still full of her jewels. Not until the pocket of her sweater caught in a drawer did Lucy remember her jacks. Jacks and gems were just the thing. It was so dark in her mother's room, she might never know the difference. Closing the lid on her toys, Lucy gave the box a shake. It

was too light, but the sound was close. She entered her mother's bedroom without knocking.

"Where were you all day?" Helen had been waiting.

"Outside." Lucy sat on the bed.

"Doing what?"

"Look, I brought you flowers." Lucy produced the bouquet from behind her back.

Helen eyed them critically. "Those tulips are shot. Where'd they come from?"

"Daddy said not to pick the bulbs," Lucy began.

"Of course."

"I couldn't anyway because the tulips in the fields already bloomed and died. These were the best ones from the greenhouse." Lucy said staring into the darkness above her mother's head.

"Go away," Helen whispered.

Lucy slid off the bed, holding the box to her.

"Leave the box."

"No," Lucy took a half step back.

"It's mine," Helen's voice rose. "I have to hide it."

"What?"

"Stevie can't find it when he comes back."

"He's not coming back," Lucy said simply.

"Give me my jewelry and get out," Helen said, her hand extended rigidly.

"Don't make me go, mommy." Lucy clung to the box as her mother pried it from her hands.

"You're a bad girl who tells lies -"

Lucy let go and Helen fell back against the pillows with her prize.

Though the fire had gone out in the stove, Lucy did not relight it. She just took a seat at the kitchen table. The kitchen was still warm when Lucy's mother finally opened her door.



ALAN GOUIRAN

CHIEF

- BY STEPHEN DOWDELL -

You ever want to kill somebody? I have.

I have hated enough to want to do that, and I mean really want to. I don't mean wanting to kill for a few seconds, or even a few days, because of a rush of anger that fades.

This is wanting to kill somebody for longer, for half a lifetime. It comes from rage that was hot when it started, but instead of burning off into nothing, it cools down, it hardens, and it lives. It's the kind of rage that lays back and waits, that becomes something worse, that shows up in your dreams and changes you.

This is the rage that made me want to kill Esposito. For fifteen years, I'd wanted to, with that rage smoldering away. And then Esposito showed up, clutching a big bouquet, at the door of the intensive care ward where my father lay.

He stepped right up to the bedside. My dad's vital signs were beeping softly, as he opened his eyes. "Chief Dowdell," he said, as if just noticing that my father was sitting next to him on a bar stool. My dad smiled at him, and continued softly beeping.

My heart, on the other hand, was racing. Even now, I see Esposito's name on the page in front of me and it shakes something loose. The taste of the saliva below my tongue turns acrid. My left leg starts bouncing. I still hate him. I've hated him since at least 1970, since I was eleven years old, since the fifth grade in Holy Rosary Catholic school, Staten Island, New York.

That was when he and his South Beach buddies decided to focus in on me. They never liked me. I was different, smarter than they were, too smart for a boy, in that school. I'd get A's, and write compositions that the teachers would read out loud, and Esposito and his friends would giggle, or glare. There was something wrong with me, all right.

Also, I didn't even live in South Beach, where they all lived. In the summer after first grade, my parents had moved us from the South Beach projects, which was next door to the parish school, to a house in Rosebank. Rosebank was about 15 minutes away by bus, but South Beach was a neighborhood wrapped so tight that I might as well have moved to New Jersey. They would never see me around outside of school, didn't know who I was away from the classroom or the recess yard.

If I intimidated them in the classroom, however, it was another story at recess. I was pretty useless at most games, and that me made easy to ridicule when I was forced to play baseball in the dusty brown field across the street from school. I'd swing the bat and miss, again and again, and they'd laugh.

By the fifth grade, my classmates had reached the stage where the public humiliation of somebody else could be a handy tool for building social standing. I was already used to being picked on. I'd been bearing the brunt of someone else's resentment for my whole life, someone bigger and with better access to me. That was Tommy, my brother, who was five years older than me. But Tommy mostly worked on me in the privacy of our home, in the bedroom we shared, or in the back seat of the car.

He'd only interacted with me once at school, shortly after I'd entered as a first grader. I'd spotted him in the parking lot during recess, and decided to act on a fantasy that there, in this new place, among all the other kids, he'd act like a different big brother, like a comrade. I went up to him, punched him lightly in the thigh and smiled up at him. He looked down at me with no emotion, except maybe puzzlement, like I was some bug too small to be worth stepping on because it would slip in between the treads on the bottom of your shoe. I stayed out of his way after that. But still, even that slight was a personal thing, probably not noticed by other kids.

The humiliation I received from Esposito and his crew was different. The public element in it was what made it attractive. It went on for years. Not everyday, but often enough, they would do and say things to show they hated me and I'd absorb it, hating them for their aggression and meanness.

It seemed Esposito most of all made a point of working on me. I was thin, taller than him but spindly, and looked easy to pick on. He was a compact kid with thick sandy hair, a dark complexion, and long eyelashes. He looked tough and acted tough. He was slow and lazy as a student, but he showed talent in cruelty, and could even be entertaining at it. Some of girls in our class seemed impressed by this talent, and he was clever enough to pick up on that.

I believe I really began wanting to kill him one day in the seventh grade, during recess time, just after lunch, on a hot bright day in late May. I was off by myself, walking around slowly in the field, kicking stones. Then I was beamed in the back of the head by a football.

When I turned around, he was there. He had a good arm, and had thrown a tight spiral at me from far away. He was smiling, planted in the middle of a small group of some pals and girls, all of them looking in my direction. When I looked back at him, coldly, he stopped smiling and taunted me. "Hey, faggot! I threw it at you, you little girl. Bring my football back here, you faggot! Why don't you throw it back? You

can't even throw it back!" And so on. Most of the kids standing there were laughing. My head throbbed. I wanted to kill him. I turned away.

Esposito kept jabbing at me like that, for another year. But his performance began to have less impact on some of the other kids. By the spring of eighth grade, some of the girls from his group started liking me. Adolescence was looking better on me, and my quietness had turned into mysteriousness. And maybe, too, they were starting to grow tired of the crude, mean bravado guys like Esposito depended on for gaining attention.

There was one girl, Francesca Barchitta, who had dark skin and had always seemed to have more hair on her body than I did, tiny, fine black hairs on her thin arms and up the back of her long neck. She was lanky but still nicely curved for a fourteen year old, with big dark eyes and a wide mouth that was so inviting I could hardly look at it.

Coming back from a class trip to the Museum of Natural History, the last class trip of all, she and her friend Rita Brandefine kept turning around in their seats and flirting with me and Robert Longo. I was buzzed for days.

Then I graduated out of Holy Rosary and slipped beyond Esposito's range. Life improved quickly.

The next time I saw him was about two years later. He was standing about thirty yards away. We were both in a crowd of teenagers waiting to squeeze through the gym doors at Msgr. Farrell High and into a Friday night dance. I was stoned and happy, looking around for a familiar face. I found one. I doubt he noticed me. I sure noticed him.

He was basically the same, slightly taller and more stocky, but still stuck in the role of the South Beach tough guy. I, on the other hand, had shed the skin of the scrawny victim. In fact, I was a rocker. I got high. I had a shag haircut that brushed at my shoulders, and wore a tight black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up to expose the muscles in my upper arms, which were finally more noticeable. My jeans were black and tight, too, and beneath them I didn't have underwear on because I thought that might make my crotch bulge more noticeable, too.

Joyce, my girlfriend, was at my side. She was short, slight and quite cute, dressed in dark grey pinstriped gauchos and a vest that matched, over a white T-shirt that clung to her.

Joyce picked up on the change in me immediately, on the tightening of my face and coldness in my eyes.

"What?"

"I just spotted this guy, a guy I'd like to kill," I said. It came out more calmly than I thought it would. My face was getting hot, and my heart was bouncing around against my ribs.

"What do you mean? What guy?"

"Over there. See those four guys in the motorcycle jackets? The short one. That fuck, I want to kill him. He used to make my life hell in school. I told you."

"Esposito? That's Esposito?" She sounded surprised that he wasn't somehow meaner or more monstrous looking.

I didn't answer. In the right pocket of my black leather jacket, my fingers were wrapped tight around the handle of an open jackknife, its stiletto blade poking against the pocket's lining.

I wanted to glide over to him, look him straight in the face, smiling, until I knew he recognized me, and then swipe the blade across his throat. My body leaned in his direction, but I went rigid.

My senses seemed extra sharp. The band inside had started to play "Suffragette City." I could smell stale beer, and the Chloe perfume Joyce was wearing. I could feel Joyce's eyes on me. I hung there in the harsh shadowy blue light of the parking lot, for several long minutes, the fantasy of killing Esposito playing behind my eyes like a movie in my head. I tingled.

Then Joyce leaned into me and pressed her lips against my ear. "Forget about him. He's not worth it. Relax, please?" And I was released from the spell, and I did relax, and snapped the blade in my pocket back into its handle. The crowd started moving from the bright parking lot into the warm darkness of the gym. I didn't see Esposito once we were in there.

But I did not forget about him, of course.

And now he was close enough to me in the hospital room that I could smell the fresh mud on his work boots.

He was telling my father how the whole battalion was pulling for him, how he was the fireman picked to visit my father because he lived on Staten Island and was closest to the hospital, but that that was okay since he wanted to see how he was, anyway, because all the guys felt my father was a great battalion chief, and a great guy to work for, and he'd better hurry up and get back to the 5-7 because things were too quiet without him, and that he wished he could stay but he had to make some calls and get on the way to work, and here's these flowers that everybody chipped in for and get better and come back soon, Chief Dowdell.

Then Esposito turned to leave, smiling and looking a little embarrassed but pleased with himself. He said good-bye to my mother and sister, who were there with us in the ward, and they smiled back at him. Then he said good-bye to me. I had not moved or said a thing. He left.

My father reached slowly toward the flowers, the clear IV tube rustling as he moved his arm. He plucked the card from its little plastic holder, squinted at it, and smiled more broadly. "He's a great kid; they're all great kids," he said softly. Sensing my stare, he turned his eyes to me. "He was in your class at Holy Rosary, right?"

I did not want to answer him, so instead I took the card from him and read it. I don't remember every word of what it said, but this is close enough: "Hurry up and get well, Cheif."

He must have written the card himself, I thought. The dumb fuck could not even spell chief, and my own father, struck down the day before by a heart attack, and maybe still in danger of dying, lying there with his vital signs beeping, was telling me how great a kid Esposito was.

What was I supposed to say to that? I wanted to murder this guy, I hated him so much. He bullied me for years, slapped me down a thousand times, made me prove to him and everyone else that I was weak and a coward because I'd never stood up to him. He was a stupid, mean little scumbag, and girls that I had daydreamed about treated him like a hero. He'd made me low.

You ever
want to kill
somebody?
I have.



“WET PAINT”

MARTIN BOUGH

Now, my father was so pleased by his showing up in the hospital to deliver flowers and a clumsily written card that he almost yanked the IV right out of his arm.

I should not have been surprised by my dad's reaction, of course, because he and Esposito shared a bond I'd never break. Esposito, whatever else he was to me, was to my dad a brother, a comrade, a brave and loyal fireman from the 57th Battalion, one of the almost 150 men that looked at him as their leader, the chief.

A lot of kids thought I was lucky to have a father that was a fireman. It meant that he was a big and brave man, a hero, a real man playing a role they could easily understand, not like the office clerk or salesman or whatever roles they saw in their own fathers. They envied me for what they thought would be advantages: my ability to go to a firehouse whenever I wanted, to play with the dalmatian and climb on the fire trucks, to touch the hose and the axe, to be able to say, “My dad's a fireman.” A lot of them even wanted to grow up to be firemen.

Well, I did not want to grow up to be a fireman. And those kids had no idea what it was like to have one as a father.

To me, firehouses were frightening places. He always called them quarters, and I visited them in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Staten Island as he transferred from quarter to quarter throughout his 30 years in the “Department.”

My strongest memories of them are from when I was a small boy, maybe five or six, because that was probably when they seemed the most frightening of all. They were mostly the same: old buildings, with weathered red brick on the outside and dark, tremendous doors that were flung up for letting the trucks either come careening out on an alarm, or come backing in, coughing and and lurching, into their berths.

I remember that everything inside was clean, but looked old and overused. There was usually water on the floor, and the atmosphere was damp. The floors were smooth, worn tile or just bare cement. The walls seemed bare, too, though they probably weren't as bare as I remember them. Anything that was painted had been painted over many times, the coats thick and rough and almost tacky to the touch, as if the paint upon paint upon paint would never really dry.

On the ground floor, the interior was cavernous, dominated by the huge red monsters he called the apparatus, usually pairs of them, in some combination of the stocky, heavy-looking pumper or the longer, even larger hook-and-ladder. The men called them the engine and the “truck”, respectively.

When the apparatus was in quarters, everything seemed tighter, closer. The trucks seemed almost alive to me, silent and still but ready to roar into life in a moment, without warning. I was always tense in the firehouse, but was most tense when the trucks stood there, waiting.

Everything about the trucks terrified me. Their size, so wide and impossibly high. Their touch, so hard and cold, from the tires to the old leather bench in the cab. Their smell, that mixture of oil, fire smoke and cleaning fluid. The tools and chains and hoses and cables, swinging and hanging from them, strapped to them or wrapped around them. Their sounds most of all, the spitting diesel engine, the bells and siren, the air horn that still makes me wince when I hear it in the street.

I never wanted to climb onto one, no matter how much I was urged to do so by my father or the other firemen. I did relent once or twice, reluctantly, but was scared to death

that an alarm would come in and that the company would have to move fast, to jump on the truck, fire it up and move it out, with me still on it.

It never actually happened. I was never at a firehouse when an alarm came in, though I was present several times when the apparatus returned, and that was unnerving enough. The trucks would back up slowly, the engine growling and the air brakes sighing loudly. And the men would climb down, sometimes covered with gear, and sometimes filthy from a real fire, a "worker", their residual adrenaline still pumping so that I could feel it like a change in air pressure.

The gear was kept down with the trucks. Long rows of heavy, rubbery raincoats colored dark black-brown with blocks of bright yellow, and rows of boots as well, also heavy and rubber. I'd tried my father's boots on a few times as a kid, and could not believe how large and unyielding they were. He always had them turned down halfway, but they'd still cover almost my entire thighs, so that I couldn't bend my knees when I tried to walk in them.

Also on the ground floor was the kitchen and recreation rooms. The kitchens were bright and pungent, and TV rooms dark and musty. Men were usually lolling about, and would stand up, towering over me, to shake my hand or pat my head as I went by. They were always loud and cheerful, joking with me, winking and grinning. I'd smile back, sheepish and quiet. They'd try to draw me out with banter that I never knew how to answer. They'd ask me, did I want to arm wrestle, did I want to slide down the pole, did I want to climb into the bucket on the tower ladder? It did not seem to bother them much that I was timid. I was Ray's youngest boy, a fireman's son, and that meant I was okay.

The second floor usually held the sleeping quarters, where it was usually quieter and darker still, though still large and filled with echoes. A few men were always sleeping and my father would guide me silently through the dormitory-style room to where his separate quarters, the officers' quarters, were.

He was an officer since I was four years old, for as long as I could remember, really. He was first a lieutenant, "made" in January 1963; then made captain in 1973 and battalion chief in 1977. He was a fireman for three and a half years before I was born. The job defined him for me, in fact. And I believe he defined himself by it as well.

He told me once, without quite saying it, that becoming a fireman had saved his life. He told it this way. After high school, he had dozens of menial jobs. He'd tried office work but was too restless, and "could never see himself sucking up to superiors for his whole career."

He turned to civil service, first driving a bus for the city. He soon figured out, however, that he'd have few opportunities for promotion from behind the wheel. Next, he moved to the Corrections Department, but six months of being locked up with criminals in the Tombs prison downtown was enough of a mistake. The police were his next choice, but he was disqualified from joining after an old enemy had written the department a letter disclosing a childhood ear injury that had impaired his hearing slightly.

"It was probably the lowest point in my life I'd ever seen," he told me. Waiting on a subway platform for a train to take him home, he imagined stepping in front of the first car as it approached.

The fire department did not reject him, however. Instead, it gave him an outcropping he could lash onto. It gave him a life, and he would be forever grateful for it.

The department also made him part of a brotherhood, a

family of men who didn't just work together; they ate together, and slept together, for nine, fifteen or twenty-four hours at a time. They faced death together, sometimes more than once on a single tour of duty. They were New York's Bravest, and he was one of them.

He studied for 20 years while in the department, climbing through the ranks by passing test after test. When he retired, it was as chief of the 57th Battalion of the 11th Division, based in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

He called it the "Five-Seven." He shared the battalion with three other chiefs, but when he was on duty, he led 129 men, 125 fireman and four officers split into four companies, three engines and one truck. One hundred and twenty-nine men—at that time, it was all men in his battalion—129 men who, on a typical night tour, answered about a dozen alarms, at least two of them workers, structural fires, burning apartments or brownstones or bigger buildings that they'd rush into on his orders.

It was actually a small company by citywide standards, but one of the three busiest in Brooklyn, because it covered a poor neighborhood where homes tended to catch fire and burn more often and more readily. The battalion was filled with young firemen, many of them "probies" out of the academy and eager for exciting work. "Full of piss and vinegar," he said. They usually stayed in a battalion like the Five-Seven for 10 years at most. A few veterans would hang on, too, usually becoming the drivers of the apparatus or the chief's car, and the unofficial mentors of the probies.

The officers in the busy battalions were the department's best, too, skilled in managing all kinds of structural fires as well as keeping control of the reckless young men. "The firemen were very respectful of the officers," he told me once. "They depended on each other a lot more than in other companies.

"It was like the service," he said. "When you were under fire a lot, the officers were in the mud right beside you. I was crawling along the floor with my men every night. The officers in the Five-Seven don't check to see if your shoes are shined. Nobody pulls out the rule book in Bed-Stuy."

It was a world of loud camaraderie, of moving confidently among brave men, of heros. My father was a hero, not only as a successful leader of men in dangerous circumstances, but a hero directly, having personally saved lives.

Here is one example. In 1981, as a battalion chief, he'd found a baby alive inside a burning apartment where two other children had died. He stood outside the building, watching his men in the last stages of beating down the fire, when a woman ran up to him screaming that her baby was inside, maybe in a room that his truck company had already swept for trapped victims. The quickest thing to do was go in, and he did. The room was consumed in heat and smoke. Almost at once, he bumped into a couch, reached down, and there she was.

He showed me a letter of commendation he'd received from the commissioner for that one, and another letter from the borough president of Staten Island. Both are tucked into an envelope, along with his retirement orders, that he keeps in the top drawer of his bureau.

My father thrived in this world. He ruled it. In fact, the Fire Department was my father, and he was the department.

Esposito shared that world with my father. They both knew what it was like to fight a fire—and, I guess, what it was like to hit a curve ball. My dad's childhood had been anchored by sports, Manhattan street sports like roller hockey and stickball. Even my brother Tommy shared that world with them, turning to sports as a way to succeed in childhood

and then becoming a fireman after being adrift for years as an adult.

My dad did try to share it with me, too, but he didn't reach me because he didn't really know who I was. He cajoled me into joining the East Shore Little League, which had a baseball diamond just around the corner from our block in Rosebank. I guess he figured, new neighborhood, new house, why not make a new start at sports? The problem was, most of the kids had been playing for years, and I was awful. I endured two years of embarrassingly poor baseball until he allowed me to skulk off the field for good.

When I was much older, a young college graduate, he tried again to give me a piece of his world, by urging me to take the entrance exam for the Department. Again, I reluctantly acquiesced. I signed up to train for the grueling physical portion, but went only once to the class, and left it early, to go get high with my friends. I did not want to be a fireman, after all. Unprepared, I passed the test anyway, but with a score too low to be called before the candidate list was scrapped, because of a lawsuit filed by women who claimed the test was so tough it was discriminatory. They won. So did I.

I realize now he was only attempting to pass on to me the cup that gave him life, but he did not know me well enough to know I was thirsty for other things.

Hero that he was, how could he know me? He was working almost all the time as we were growing up, if not at the firehouse, then at a series of side jobs, as a pall bearer, a chauffeur, and so on. He wasn't home very often or for long, and when he was, I think he found himself in a world that was difficult for him to connect with, more subtle and confusing and less easy to manage than a fire. I think he was more comfortable at the firehouse, more at home being a leader of men than a parent to children who didn't always follow orders, or who needed more than simple solutions.

When I was small, he was a big, brave man, too distant from me to touch. As a child, I saw human frailty in him only once.

He'd just buried his mother. The funeral was over, and relatives gone home, and he and I were alone in the car. As he drove, his eyes keeping straight ahead, he quietly told me that he felt lost, that his mother was gone and he was afraid he'd never see her again. I told him not to worry, that he'd see her again in heaven, and his father, too. He agreed, instantly comforted by the thought and at the same time surprised, I think, by the effect my words had on time. I was surprised, too, to find myself for a moment in a position of superiority.

We were able to connect only occasionally. For several summers, once I was strong enough to be a helper at his side jobs, we actually found common ground. They were mostly part-time ventures like washing doctor's cars for five bucks a shot in the parking lot of the Staten Island Medical Center, or when he bought a pair of Lawnboys and we cut the lawns at the homes of the same doctors. We could share something as men for a day or two—the pleasure that comes from hard physical work, from making a good job of it.

As he lived it, his life was his work. Being a fireman gave him almost everything, and he gave almost everything back: his loyalty, his time, his love, even his heart.

The heart attack came in 1985, after a day tour. He was home, at around 7 p.m., and got the classic signs he'd learned

about in his EMT training: the tightness down the arms, the chest pains. My brother got him to the hospital within five minutes. The doctors told him he had a 95% blockage of the coronary artery. As he put it, "Part of my heart died, they told me. But not enough to make me an invalid or kill me."

It changed everything, forever. Fourteen days in the hospital, then six months on sick leave. He was offered "light duty," a desk job with no prospect of ever going back to the firehouse.

I remember one afternoon, during his leave, a fire truck cruised down the street and stopped at the house. We could hear the crack of the dispatcher's voice from the radio outside, and rushed to the front door. It was one of his companies from the Five-Seven, come to see how he was getting along. They were AWOL. He was thrilled, and they were pleased at his reaction. After a minute, though, there was nothing for anyone to say, and they climbed back on the truck and pulled away, giving a blast on the air horn. He watched them go.

The first time he went back to the battalion, still on sick leave, an alarm came in. He jumped into the chief's car and went to the fire, a worker. As he stood across the street from the building that "was up," his adrenaline started and so did the angina. "I knew that was the end of it," he told me much later. "Once I realized I could not go back to fighting fires, that was it."

In retirement, he wasn't leading 129 men into anything. He was just a guy with a heart condition, with a sometimes cranky and impatient disposition, with a worsening hearing problem and weakening hips that he'd eventually have to have replaced.

If you asked him, he'd say that he never really liked being a boss anyway, that it was the money that led him to chase promotions, take on more responsibility and pour more of himself into his job. He also says that if he went back to the Five-Seven now, almost every face will be new. It wasn't his world anymore.

Maybe not. But he still dreams about fires. He's still refighting them.

As a child, I was as detached from his world, as much as I was from that tight little universe of kids like Esposito—detached from the sensation of being able to whack a baseball into the outfield, or being able to spin a football straight and hard into a receiver's chest, or being bold enough to take your hands under and up the uniform skirt of a girl like Francesca Barchitta.

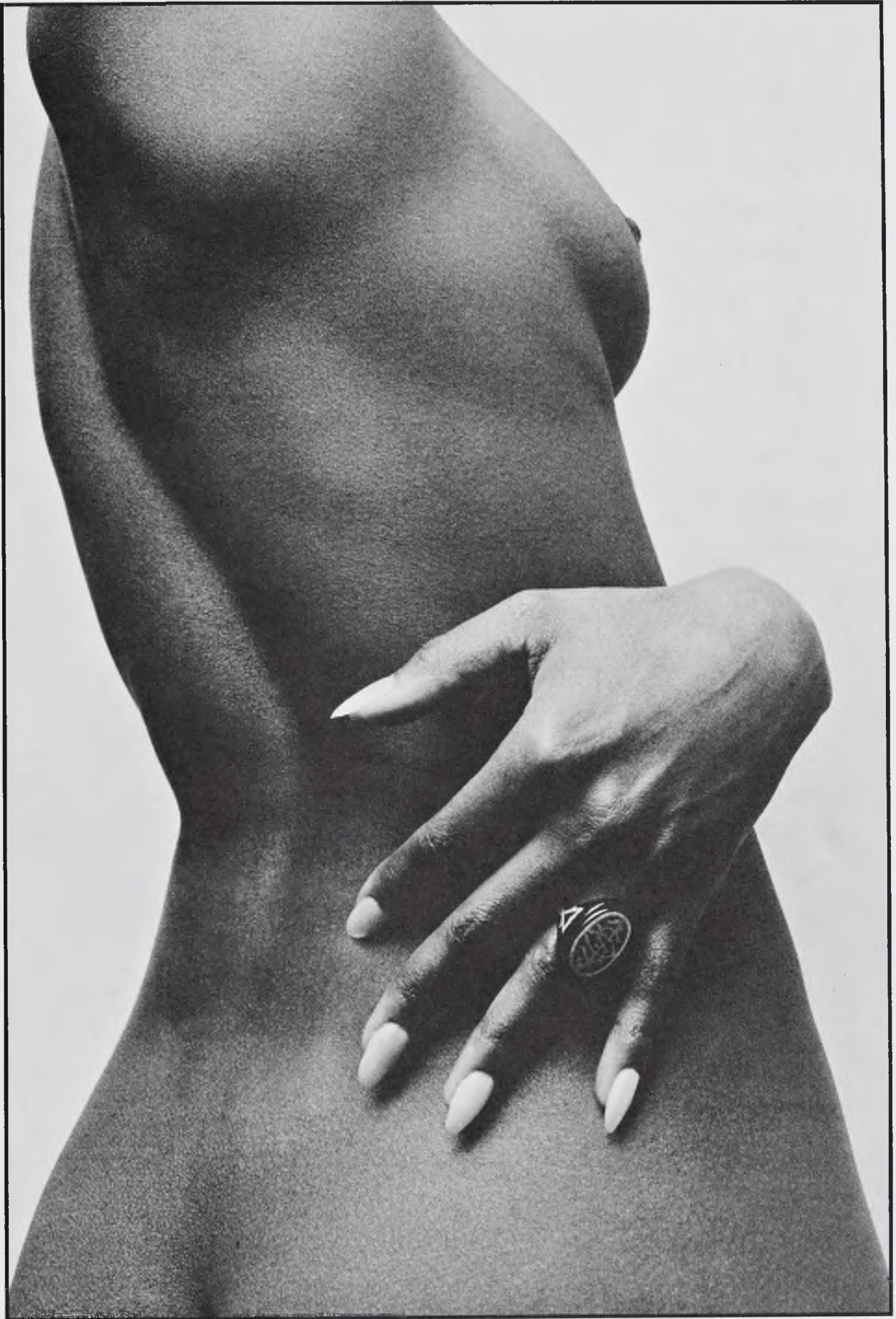
Now, the hero had fallen. He was just old, sick, and my father. I placed the small card back onto its little plastic holder sticking out from the "Get Well" bouquet, and headed down to the hospital lobby for awhile.

Esposito was standing there as I stepped off the elevator. I sat down on one of the orange vinyl couches in the waiting area, and he came down and sat next to me.

He told me he was sorry that my father was ill, and that he thought he looked pretty good for going through what he went through. I said thanks, and that it meant a lot to my father that he'd dropped by. Then he told me my dad was a great guy, that he was one of the best officers he'd ever worked for.

I decided then, I didn't want to kill Esposito. There was no need to anymore.

It changed
everything,
forever.



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The Straightener

PETER QUINONES

In June, in Chicago, my wife, Patricia demonstrated conclusively that she was one of the least astute criminals in all the United States; accordingly we had to high tail it to San Antonio to lay low for a bit to recuperate and convalesce and to recover from her miscues. Our partners Hector and Lasa came as well, although their presence wasn't required by the logistics of the operation. I wished they hadn't felt the need to provide their solemn accompaniment - they both had a lot of quirks of personality which made me disquieted. Options, however, looked equally as grim and since they were highly educated thugs I didn't mind as much I might have. Still, I disliked these features in my colleagues. Lasa was little more than a narcissistic, nihilistic cartoon and Hector was an academically trained geologist (specializing in plate tectonics) who took his avocation, the reading of existentialist theology, very very seriously. My feeling was that, unlike Patricia and myself, they weren't particularly suited for life on the frayed edges of trust. We were laboring in a field of endeavor that required a psyche akin to, say, Nixon's. There had to be a concentrated laser beam of focus.

The Riverwalk in San Antonio might qualify as the most romantic place in America, especially at sunset. Much honeymooning is done, much nuzzling and hand holding, many plans for a lifetime together must be initially blueprinted there. It was a little wistful not to be a part of that general climate. Hector and I were walking back from a visit to the Alamo. The women showed no interest in such specific forays into Texan-ness. They preferred to laze about the Riverwalk. It was very much against my better judgement to split up the group for such a long period of time no one was to be trusted—but they all bitched about my caution and made me relent. I unhappily regarded my doing as a breakdown of will.

We'd arranged to meet at the outdoor theater where the river flows between the stage and the audience. In the scorching, blistering heat—I felt as if the sun were three inches from my head—Hector and I made our way past the pleasant outdoor cafes, winding around young couples and families. Like an imbecile, Hector kept twavering to the people in the tourist boats passing to and fro. Many waved back. I implored him to cease. His flair for the inopportune was immense.

Hector looked more like a rodent than anyone I ever met in my life: the shape of his face, his weak whiskers, his darting lunatic eyes, the way he held a burger in both hands and nibbled away at it; he was recognizable enough in terms of his pure phenomenological self without drawing attention via behavior.

When I was considering some prospects for this job I always asked that they go home, rent Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver*, watch it, and come back to talk to me about it the next day. Out of about twenty candidates Hector was the only one who told me what I wanted to hear (most took it literally, as a story about a nut trying to shoot a politician). Hector told me, "All right man, see, this picture, it's some kind of bastardized version of a picture John Ford made with John Wayne, Jeffrey Hunter and Natalie Wood, all right? Here, man, Harvey Keitel, he plays this pimp? He's made up to look exactly like the Indian chief John Wayne is chasing."

"Your know your movies huh?"

"Yo man, wack-a-doo wack-a-doo, bit-a-bing-bit-a-bang."

I felt at the time that a person who could demonstrate fluency in both the study of the physical earth and the genealogy of American film would be a hood of some value, someone able to think on their feet. I hired him. But I immediately made a mistake in letting him talk me into making Lasa the second female in the gang when I had trouble securing a satisfactory one by my own resources. Frankly, the criterion I used was that Patricia hated her, within minutes of the interview ("Lasa, what the hell kind of name is Lasa, Isn't that the capital of Tibet or something?"). A redhead of vitality, Lasa had a host of grat-

ing habits. Any time she was near fruit, for example, she would select three spherical fruits like apples, oranges or plums, and start juggling them. In Market Square in San Antonio she started doing this with three large red peppers. She was an excellent juggler but anonymity, blending in, being inconspicuous, were of paramount importance. Angry, I seized her by her upper arm and delivered a sharp rebuke. She put her hand on top of mine as if to yank it off but didn't. Instead she let it rest. She dug the nail (she slaved over all her nails) of the index finger into the back of my hand and said, "You have big sweat stains all over your shirt. You sweat a lot. you must be hot." Her teeth glistened under her dark glasses and perky little nose.

We were the kind of people for whom speech existed almost exclusively as either offense or agitated defense; common conversation was a mode rarely used and rarely germane. Therefore I responded with incredible profanity: "Bitch, your mother sucks the penis of Satan. I hated her, hated everything about her: her denim shirt with the sleeves cut off, her jeans, her sandals, her swirling red hair, her delicious lawbreaking capabilities. The second annoying habit she had, doing finger exercises for piano players, stuff like Hanon and Czerny, drove me even more nuts than the juggling. It made her stand out in crowds; moreover, she didn't even play but just did the exercises for their own sake.

"You must be hot," she repeated. The sharp nail was still in my hand; her breast was against my upper arm. The fruit stand vendor regarded us with high amusement. An old mariachi in a ruffled white shirt went by, holding his guitar by the neck, his sensibility light years from mine and Lasa's.

"There's no way," I said.

"We can make a way." Hector and Patricia were off looking at piñatas. She smiled. "I know about Patty you know. That you never make love anymore."

I was wearing Italian shoes with a sharp heel; I raised my leg, bending it at the knee, about eight inches off the ground, and rammed the heel of the shoe right down on top of her toes with about half my available force. She winced, putting her hand to her mouth to suppress the justified howl of agony that wanted to come screeching out from the depths of her lungs. She couldn't do a thing about it; I had her; she knew it. Plenty of police patrolled the market area, and there was no way she could afford to be talking to a cop. She had nothing on me that she could make stick but I could grill her ass for life with two sentences (my precautions paying off). She was powerless to play games with me.

She hobbled away. Maybe she went to go look at piñatas.

Hector, as he and I made our way along the river to meet the women at the theater, spoke with deep feeling and conviction about essays he was reading by Paul Tillich. In other circumstances I might have found some of this stuff—the ground of being, existential courage, etc.—quite interesting. "Give me one of your cigarettes, man" he tacked onto the end of one particularly rambling discourse.

I held the pack out to him. "Man you ever buy you own?" "Wack-a-doo wack-a-doo, trying to quit." He sucked on the butt as if he thought it would prolong his life instead of end it.

"Yeah well, that's the absolute last one."

"I'm trying to quit, bit-a-bing bit-a-bang, you know?"

"And not succeeding."

"We should all be grateful. In Bosnia they're killing each other for cigarettes. It's a principal form of trade, more important than food."

"Yes, I know."

"Like, it's a good thing for us we're only in uh, like, in a form of psychological Bosnia."

We came to within view of the theater. Very few people were able to hang out in the bleachers, the audiences' section, because on the sun. People wanted to keep moving. Lasa's wild, wicked red hair stood out too much; I should have had her dye it a more subdued color. Mistakes I had made kept rushing to my attention with too much frequency, and this disturbed my heretofore intact sense of profes-

sionalism. My image was suffering in my own eyes. Perhaps the fact the we were maintaining freedom was the only thing that saved it.

I could see that Lasa was shoeing Patricia how to do a finger exercise. They were well up in the seats, about three quarters of the way back. As Hector and I started to ascend a sharp sound of hammering suddenly became audible behind us. It entered the auditory field with such violence and abruptness

I felt compelled to

turn around. Across the river, near the stage, a couple of workmen had begun to hammer at what appeared to be planks of white wood. Almost tripping, I faced front to affix my attention on the face of my wife, viewing her with the consciousness that I was getting closer and closer and, thus, more in sync with the reality of her being there, like when a movie camera makes a frontal pan.

It was believed that Patricia was one of the first women in the history of amusement parks to perform marriage ceremonies (she was an ordained minister in the Church of the Cement-Surrounded Faithful, Inc., a storefront church) wedding ten or fifteen couples at once while they all simultaneously screamed, "I do!", while riding a roller coaster (the "Love Rollercoaster") The women would take the vow on the first bid drop, the men on the second; Patricia, standing on a podium in her cassock and surplice, yelled the vows into a gigantic bullhorn, but it all worked out fine. However, at a certain point the pastor of the church was convicted of fraudulent co-op apartment sales (he led a double life) and the Love Rollercoaster receded into our ordinary run of the mill ride; Patricia was out of a job. No other church would have her. Somewhat stunned by all of this, she decided to return to the criminal life and met me soon after. We married and settled in a hip section of Chicago, River North, in a loft-type apartment over an art gallery that specialized in rather softcore lesbian lithographs. during the first year of our marriage I went out (when someone needed to go out;

I felt that a person
who could
demonstrate fluency
in both the
study of the
physical earth and
the genealogy
of American film
would be a hood
of some value

I was in a lot too because I planned all my crimes by computer) to do all the annoying tasks of daily life while she, I guess, didn't do a hell of a lot but hang out smoking excellent Caribbean weed with some reggae disc jockeys in clubs way up on Clark Street near Wrigley Field. She hung around the art gallery too, and in about the thirteenth month of our marriage, she informed me that she no longer wished to have heterosexual relations. I assumed this meant a conversion to lesbianism, but that was wrong: her preference from now on would be to masturbate. (I think she must have been reading novels by Moravia, in the Italian, or some shit.) Well, divorce was out of the question—we were handcuffed together by the planned job. After a time I put her in charge of the computer graphics to give her something to do

Both Patricia and Lasa had their sandals off, toes curled over the edges of the seats in front of them. Patricia was dressed correctly, denim in both her floppy shirt and floppy jeans, her oily black hair pulled back in a ponytail, most of the features of her face downplayed by dark shades and lack of makeup. Lasa, though had on a multi-colored exercise bra, bare midriff, vivid silver workout tights and clippy high heels. Five seconds worth of seeing her would be all it took to create a lasting memory. She was an advertisement.

“... is all that's needed to eclipse our fundamental condition of aloneness,” Hector was saying.

“What? Fundamental condition of aloneness? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Wack-a-doo, wack-a-doo, main symptoms of contemporary angst.” We reached the ladies. They stopped the finger exercises in acknowledgement of our arrival.

“Lasa, what the hell is wrong with you?” I demanded.

“What, what?”

“Damn it, you look too flashy.”

“Yeah well, I'm sick of burying my personality under all your God damn rules, all right? We're clear now. I'm sick, I'm sick of it and I'm sick of you.”

Here for a moment there was a rare and weird adjustment in the usual manner of perception, stripped of thought, was at work. Sound: the hammering. Sight: the men doing the hammering. Touch: the burning sun on my skin. I imagine my three companions were undergoing something similar, because they were as riveted as I was. It was as if the hammering men were magnetizing our eyes, our corneas, our retinas. Other people in the vicinity seemed to be having similar experience; everyone stopped what they were doing. People stopped talking. A woman pushing a baby carriage along came to a dead halt. All the tourists in passing boat looked, ignoring the guide, their heads turned the other way. The whole area was like a frozen movie frame. Captivation; when the hammers smashed the wood white chips flew into the air. The hammering seemed to be almost choreographed. The men raised their hammers above their heads and hit, hit, hit, never hitting at the same time—when one hammer was high in the air the other's was pounding the wood. One worker was right handed, the other left. The lefty wore a black cap with the logo of the San Antonio Spurs. Dark hair, a flowing mane, past his shoulders, flowed out from underneath the cap like cascading water. He wore no shirt and the tops of his jeans were tucked into construction boots that were caked with dirt and mud. His skin was tanned the color of iced tea and his arms, legs and chest were heavily muscled—you could practically see the

blue veins throbbing in his biceps ever time he swung the hammer. His body lacked the tight sculpture of the rest of him and bulged over the waist of his jeans just a little bit. The other was hatless, with a marine crewcut, and even more massive than the first, and tanned the same color. Dog tags dangled around his neck and rattled on his chest in sychopation with his movements. A tattoo of a snake ran almost the entire length of his arm from wrist to shoulder.

The hammering stopped as abruptly as it had started. The men laid down their tools and went behind the empty stage.

Hector's gun was pressed into my ribs.

“I'm out,” he snarled. “Lasa's out too. We're out.”

“You're crazy.”

“Actually man, no, we're not. You're sizzled boy, wack-a-doo wack-a-doo.”

“You can't get away from me. I'll burn you like a piece of balsa wood. Patricia's got all the shit on the disks, stored away—”

“Bit-a-bing bit-bang.” My mouth fell open. I looked at my wife. “You are one blind bastard, Jack. Pat's in with us. Your ass is isolated.”

Patricia's mouth was a grim line of pragmatism and betrayal. I saw the reflection of my confounded face in both lenses of her glasses. Suddenly everything in my mind opened up very clearly, and I realized that some of the errors she had made in Chicago weren't errors at all but, rather, carefully considered actions that must have been in Hector's plot even way back then. I turned to him. “Looks like I underestimated you, pal.”

He made a disgusted face. “You. You're too much in your own little world.”

Lasa put an arm around Patricia's shoulder and kissed her pretty much on the lips, an action producing a loud smacking noise. “How do you know,” I said, “that I haven't got anything else hidden away somewhere?”

He grinned broadly. “I thought of that. I'm sure you're like, you're like just dying to get on our tail as soon as we're out of sight. Well my man, just look around you. I'm sure you've heard of the Mexican Mafia here in Texas, man?” Of course. There were drug shootings on the news every night.

I said, “Yeah.”

“Look around you then. Look to your left, look to your right, behind you down there in front of you. Some of these drug mavens always be looking for a little part time work, you dig what I am saying to you?”

Suspicious looking people in dark glasses suddenly were all around us, in pairs. Some of them smiled at me. You know how menacingly people in shades can smile.

Lasa and Patricia got up and started going down the stairs to the Riverwalk. Lasa blew me a kiss over her shoulder; Patricia didn't look back at all. That was the coda to our marriage, the back of her head. “Later, fool,” Hector said, and then he was going too. I watched them fade out in the distance among the happy loving couples. I sat there with my hands under my butt, palms flat against the seat. The goons were all around me, watching. Later, back at the motel, I noticed that they were still on top of me, and would remain so for three whole days.

I just sat there. The sun was blistering, relentless, a torturer. The workmen came out and started hammering again. They hit the wood with more ferocity than before, their bodies glistening in heavy sweat. Rap, rap, rap went the hammers. The wood chips flew in the air like bullets.



JULIO DUFFOO

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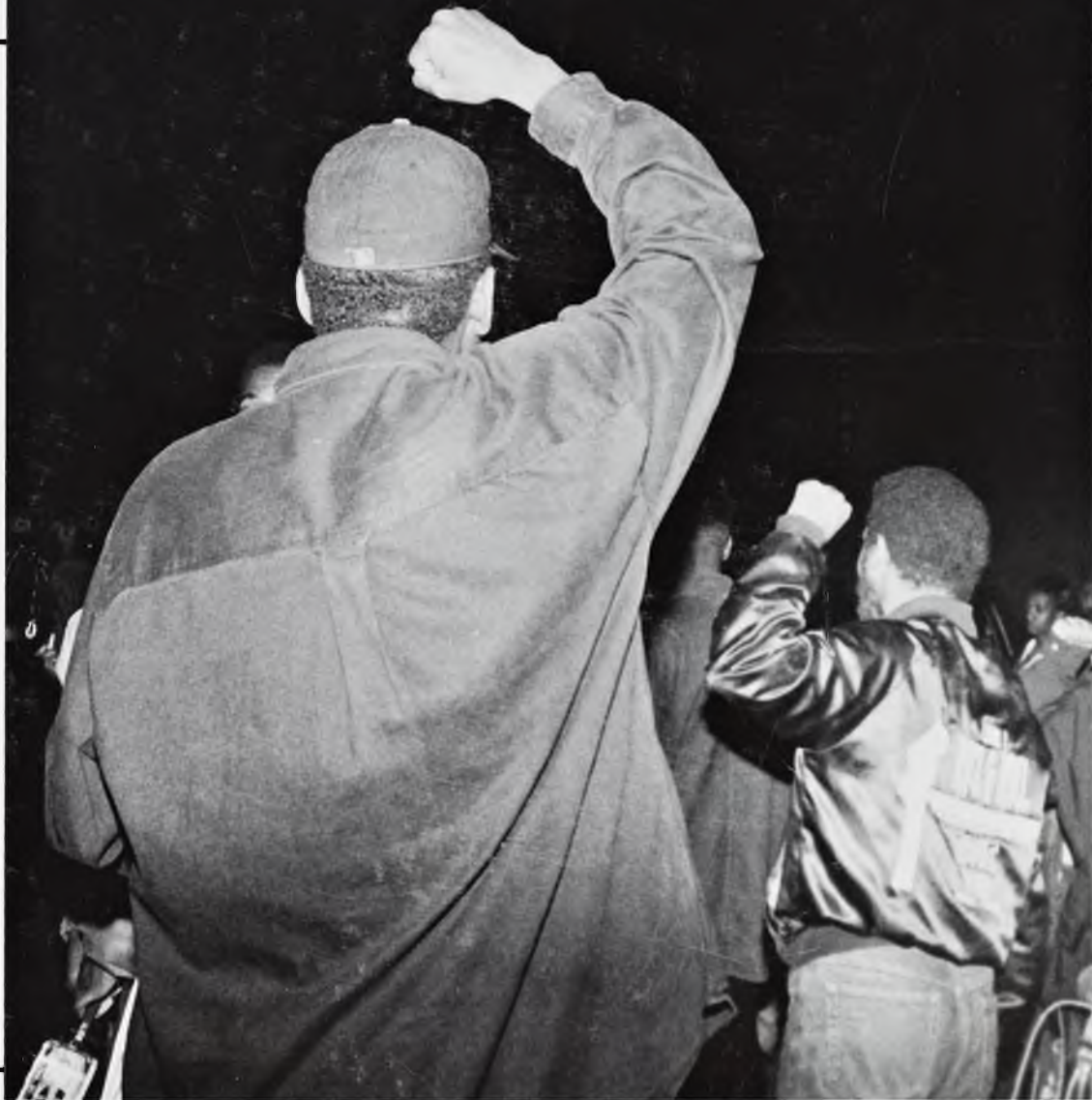
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