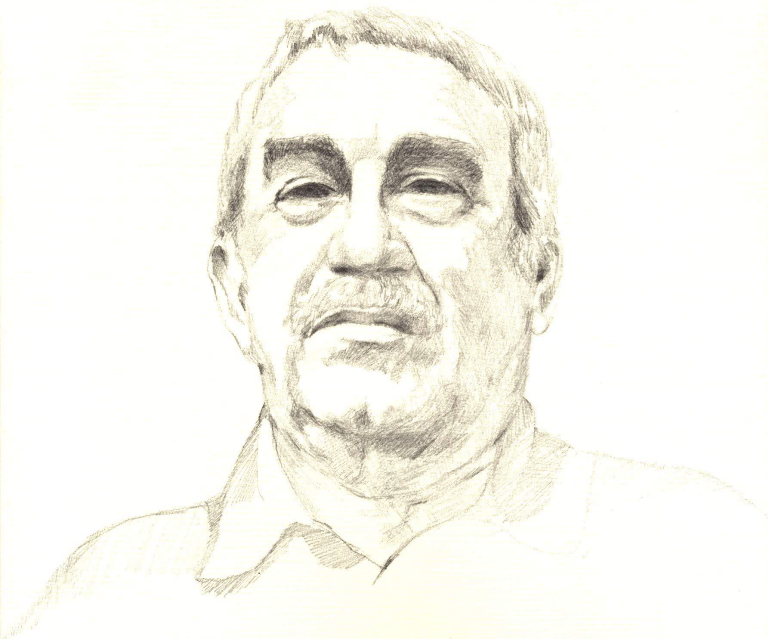
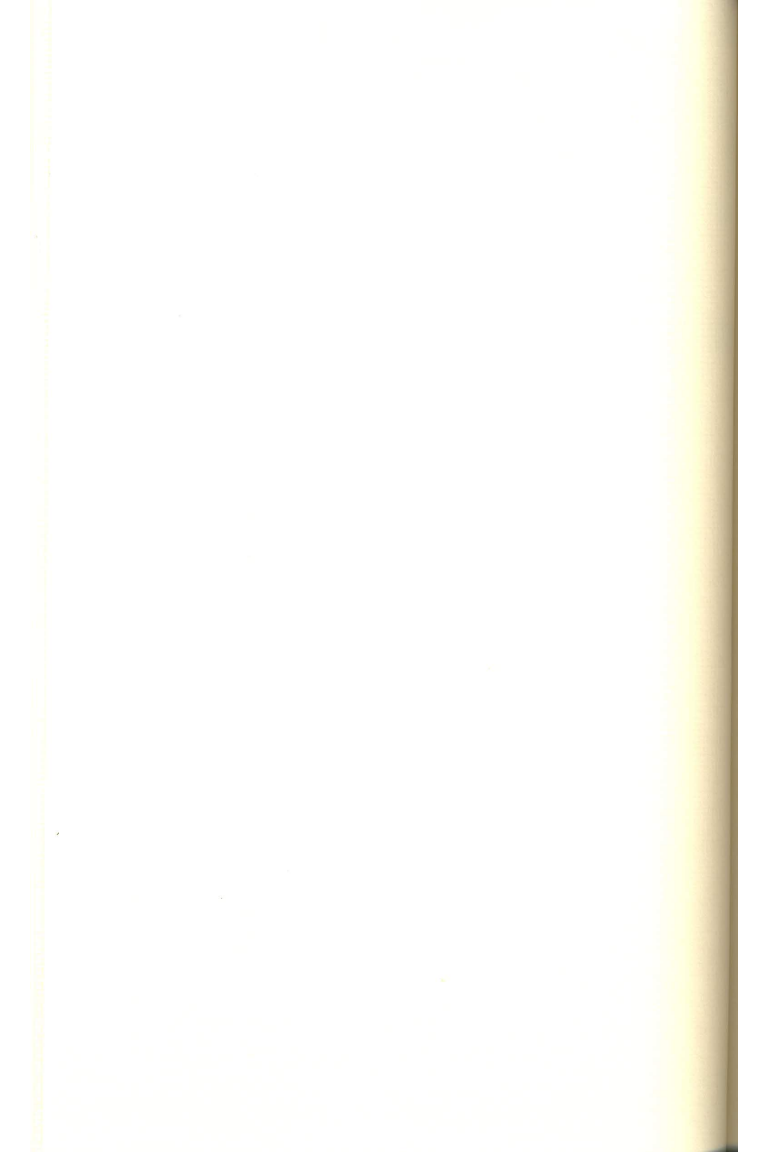

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



Fall / Winter 1991

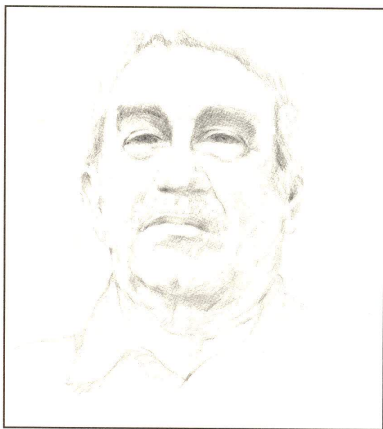
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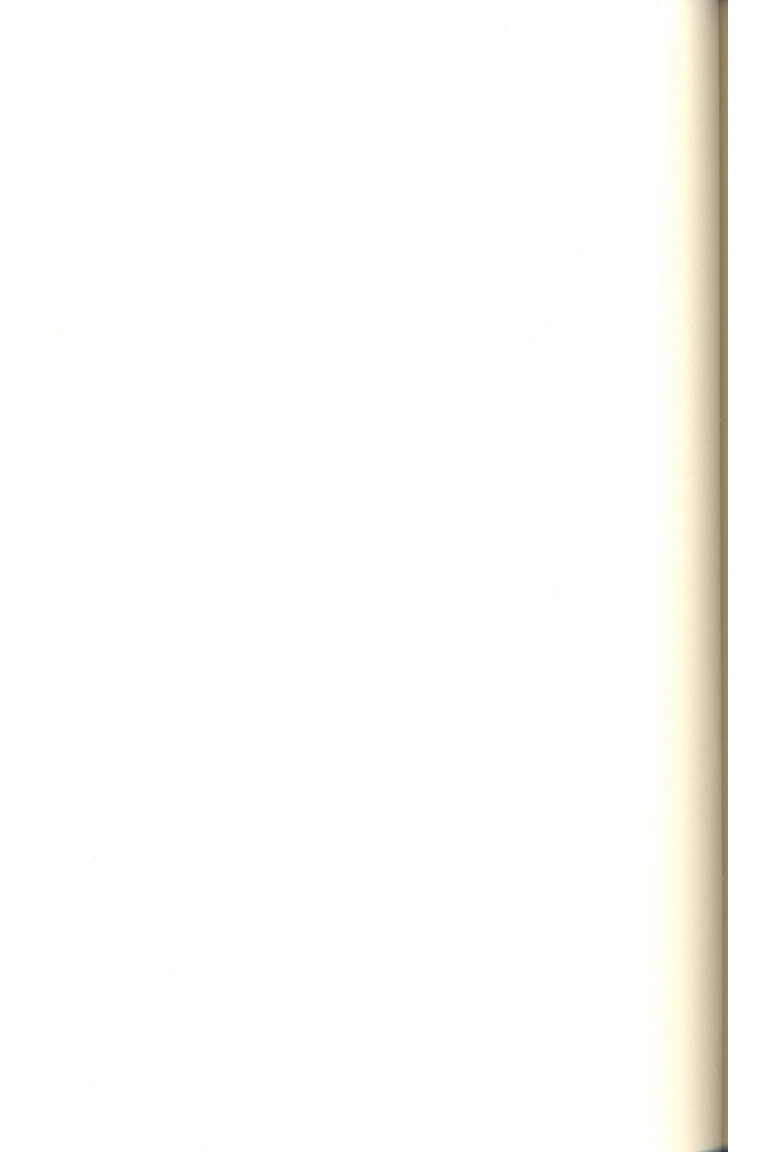
ALABAMA
LITERARY
REVUE

*Fall/
Winter 1991*

*Volume 5
Number 2*



Gabriel García Márquez



Panic-stricken, she told her Aunt Escolastica, who gave her advice with the courage and lucidity she had not had when she was twenty and was forced to decide her own fate.

"Tell him yes," she said. "Even if you are dying of fear, even if you are sorry later, because whatever you do, you will be sorry all the rest of your life if you say no."

— GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ
from *Love in the Time of Cholera*

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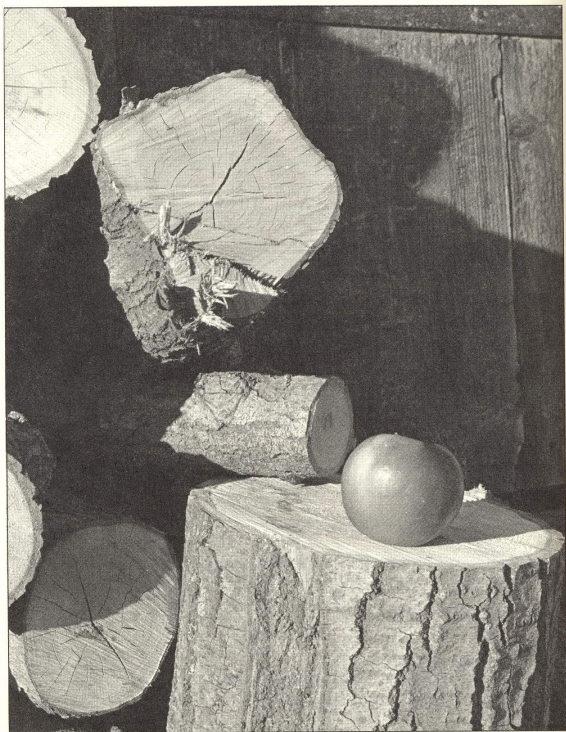
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Sherri L. Falatovich

A Pearl for Mama

Mary Sue Weston

I was eleven going on twelve when electricity first came to Lebeau. It was a big deal. People had been talking about it since a year before when it came to Pearl River City just west of us. Skeeter and Bubba, my little brothers, had been running around the house pretending to turn on lights for weeks, and Mama was "fixing to put away the coal oil lamps" just any day.

Lebeau was a community of ten, maybe fifteen, families just on the edge of Pearl. It was named Lebeau because a lady living there by that name had a vision. An angel told her to name it that. But the folks in the big white houses in Pearl called it "The Colony," like we were lepers or something. Sister Lebeau said we were the chosen of God to proclaim the days of judgment, which were just around the corner, so to speak.

It was July, so hot you could about see steam rising from the dry clay dust. Mama spent most of her time, when she wasn't helping Sister Lebeau, sitting and rocking, fanning herself with one of those cardboard fold-out fans she'd "borry'd" from the church. It had a picture of Jesus in the Garden on it in color, and printed below that was ROCK OF AGES FUNERAL HOME, 112 Main, Pearl River City.

Mama was sick a lot that summer and the heat like to have killed her. Sister Lebeau said it was high blood that caused it, but she never saw a doctor. Skeeter and Bubba and I spent most of the days fishing in the Pearl River that was close by, even though Mama always said, "Queenie, a girl ought to be learning something 'stead of fishing and playing all the time." But we always caught a mess of cat and they came in good with Mama's biscuit and white gravy for supper.

The day the electric came to our house I was sitting out on the front porch starting at daylight. We knew it was coming that day because Sister Lebeau had talked to God about it the last Sunday and He told her that He saw fit that we'd have it that week; Wednesday, in fact. So that morning I got up before light and stirred up some oatmeal over the wood stove. Skeeter and Bubba didn't like oatmeal but that was breakfast. Mama had a picture of Eleanor Roosevelt off the cover of a magazine tacked to the wall. "You all are going to look like that," I said, "if you don't eat your oats." And just like always they tipped up their bowls and let it slide down their throats, saying, "Not me, I ain't." Then they took off down the road toward Sister Lebeau's house so they could get some chopping done before the sun got up too high. We lived in one of her houses. Free rent if we all pitched in on her tomatoes and watermelon. And she was nice. Sent down a gallon of warm, fresh milk every day or so and a sack of eggs when Mama did her ironing.

Mama was rocking and fanning and I was squatting on the front porch picking my nose when I saw dust rising from something big coming down the road. "Mama, here they come!"

Mama came out on the porch, shaded her eyes like an Indian scout. "Well sure enough now," she said, as if amazed. "Y'all go wash your face." Whispering as if those men could hear in that loud truck; as if they'd care anyway. Skeeter and Bubba had seen the moving dust cloud too and had cut across the field to beat the truck to the house. "I seen it first," each called as they high-tailed it around back to the cistern. I heard the bucket drop and the old rusty pulley squeaking and grating as the rope came up with the cool, stale water. Not me. I wasn't going to wash up for no 'lectric men.

"Queen Esther Jones!" Mama shouted. "Get your skinny ass out there and wash up!" She always called my whole name when she was mad. I wriggled my bare toes in the dust and watched old mother-cat panting beside me. Fleas came to the surface of her silky yellow fur, then dived back down when they saw daylight. "What if your Daddy was to come home right now, see you looking like a ragamuffin in front of strangers?"

She always brought up Daddy. But I had a feeling he would

never come home. I remember hearing Admiral Nimitz talking one day on Sister Lebeau's wireless radio while Mama was doing the ironing. I'd run errands, feed the cows and chickens, then I'd rest and listen to the radio every chance I'd get. I was sitting there picking my nose and asking questions about the news.

"Shush now," says Mama. "That's Daddy's boss talking." Admiral Nimitz was talking about the war.

"That's a sign of worms," says Sister Lebeau, looking over her specs at me.

"Boss says another ship was sank yesterday," says Mama. "But I don't believe Jesus would let it be Daddy's."

"Ever checked her for worms?" asks Sister Lebeau.

"Daddy ain't never coming home," I says, still picking my nose.

"Lord going to strike you dumb someday, Queenie," says Mama. "Got to have faith."

"Vermifuge," says Sister Lebeau. "Give her a dose of vermifuge. Can't hurt nothing."

"His eye is on the sparrow," sings Mama, pressing a lace petticoat. Sister Lebeau had word from Jesus that Mama had a secret sin and just as soon as she quit it Daddy would come home. I never could figure out what it was. Mama always seemed as innocent as a sparrow to me.

The truck drove up into the yard in a swirl of dust. Mama lined up with Skeeter and Bubba on the front porch, smiling faces all ashine. I sat on the steps and studied a flea I'd caught between my fingers. "Impudent sinner," Mama said from between smiling, clenched teeth. She wiped her hands down the sides of her dress.

They always said I was no account and impudent. Wasn't scared of anyone, except God maybe. Then I checked Him out and wasn't scared of Him anymore either. Mama said if I didn't quit playing with myself that God would strike me dumb and make me forget my name. Being no account and impudent I figured I'd have to chance it. I played with myself all one night, saying my name every so often. In the morning I got up and went straight to Mama and said, "Queen Esther Jones, so there!"

The electric men got out of the truck. Three of them. Mama ran out like a fool and said, "Y'all going to put us in some 'lectric?"

"Yes'm," said the driver looking her over. He was a skinny sawed-off fart with a little pinched up face. He looked over at me. I pulled my legs together and hugged up my knees. I was wearing a raggedy old rayon dress Mama had dug from the bottom of a Salvation Army box. It smelled of mothballs and mildew. The side zipper had been ripped out and the buttons snipped off.

"How long's it going to take you?"

"Could take all day," said the driver, sidling up to Mama.

"You mean we could have lights tonight?"

"You got a light bu'b you can," he said. "If you got the bu'b I got the juice." He turned and laughed toward the other men.

"I don't have no light bu'b," said Mama. I could see her wondering how we were going to have light with no bulbs and no money to buy any. We hadn't had any cash money in the house since Daddy left. She'd already polished the coal oil lamps and put them away, having faith in Sister Lebeau's message from God that we'd have lights on Wednesday night. She'd promised the kids that they could sit up half the night and we'd play hide boogie man.

Skeeter stood looking at the ground twisting his fingers. Bubba's lower lip dropped down and he walked over and kicked mother-cat. "I hate Jesus," he said. But Mama let it pass.

"Where's your old man?" asked the driver, getting up closer to Mama. I jumped up and stood in front of him.

"Daddy's fighting in the war. Be home any day though," I said. "Might be he's in Pearl River City right now waiting for a ride out here."

He slid his hand across Mama's broad hips and around her waist. "Reckon I could see to it you get your light bu'b." He turned and winked at the other two men. I got as close to his face as I could. Standing on my toes looking up I could see every wrinkle in his ugly little face.

"Mama's got high blood," I said loud.

He looked at me hard, spat on the ground near my feet and said, "Aaw she-ut."

We watched them all morning as they dug, put in the pole, and rolled out the line. That line came straight from Sister Lebeau's house to ours. It was like being linked up to God. Every so often Skeeter would proudly bring out a fresh bucket of cool cistern water. Never mind the wigglers in it. It was cool. Mama went into the house and came out dressed in her real silk kimono from Japan. She'd found it in that same box my dress came from. That was all she had on. You could see her nipples tickling the silk in the front. She was beautiful, smiling like the Mona Lisa would have if she'd had nice white teeth like Mama's.

Driver looked at me, then at her. Skeeter and Bubba sidled up to the truck trying to look in; see all those buttons, levers, indicators. Driver winked at me. "Son of a bitch," I said between my teeth. Mama stuck me with her elbow.

The men stopped work about noon and brought out their lunch pails. Their backs were dripping sweat. The sun just wouldn't let up. Even old mother-cat had gone under the porch to watch in the shade. Driver sat under a live oak tree and brought out a meat sandwich on white bread. Skeeter and Bubba stood slack-jawed like fools and watched every bite. He tossed the last of his sandwich into the dust and opened a coke soda.

"Piss ant," I said.

"Shut up, Queenie," Mama said. "Jesus hates a dirty mouth. 'Sides these men are nice enough to come out here and put in 'lectric for us so's we can read at night, play a radio, things like that."

I looked up at Mama. We didn't have a radio, Mama couldn't read, and "things like that" didn't cover much territory.

"Never mind," said the driver, grinning with his brown teeth, "I like 'em with spunk."

"That's the way I am," said Mama. "Spunky. She gets that from me."

Across the creek watermelon was ripening in the field. The driver stood grinning at me and pulled another sandwich from his rusty lunch pail. Mother-cat rubbed against my leg. I gave her the sandwich scrap he'd thrown away. She'd never eaten

white bread before. I thought about how the creek fed into the Pearl and the Pearl fed into the Gulf and from there into the great wide ocean which touched every faraway land. Where there were wars and rumors of wars and God was visiting His 'niquity upon the third and fourth generations. Revelations was coming to pass. Sister Lebeau said so. I used to take half a peanut shell and sail it on the creek water like a boat. I'd say, "Sail away far across the ocean to my Daddy and tell him to come home. Tell that old goat, Nimitz, he don't need him no more." Once I'd found a real pearl when I opened a mussel shell from the bottom of the river. It wasn't perfectly round or perfectly white, but its pearliness flickered and shimmered in my palm like the light of the sun and moon put together. I put it in my mouth under my tongue so I wouldn't lose it and carried it home to Mama.

The driver sat down by me on the porch to eat his sandwich. His coke soda was right by my hand but I didn't touch it. He grinned in my face and his breath smelled like bologna and mustard. "I wouldn't eat none of your shitty white bread on a bet," I said, giving him the middle finger as I walked stiffly into the house. Bastard bastard bastard, I sang under my breath. I sat on the bed twirling my bead chain with Daddy's dog tag on it. He'd left it under the bed the morning he went away to war. I didn't think about the meat and white bread. But my stomach did. And it chewed at my guts till my throat hurt.

I heard the driver tell the men to go into town and get a socket with a pull chain. "Bring back a forty watt bu'b too," he said. I heard the truck pull out and then Skeeter calling to me. I cracked the front door to take a look.

"Hey little lady," driver said. "How about taking me across the creek, help me pick out a watermelon?"

"I can pick one better," said Mama, smiling extra pretty.

"Like hell," I said under my breath, stepping outside.

Driver took my hand and grinned. "Come on, Queenie, you little spunky thing," he said. "You're just a wild deer ain't you?"

"The man says he'll bring us out some white bread and meat," whined Bubba, "if you go with him to get the watermelon."

"Piss ant," I said.

"Says he'll pay cash money for the watermelon," said Skeeter. "And get us a light bu'b."

"And let us set in the truck too," added Bubba. They jumped up and down chanting, "Please! Please! Please!"

"Piss ant," I said, trying to break his grip on my wrist.

"I like to hear 'em squeal," he laughed, holding me easily. I clamped my teeth into his hand and held on. I could taste blood before he hit me across the bridge of my nose.

"She ain't no wild deer," he laughed. "She's a wild cat!" He pulled me toward the creek. The water was cool on my feet. I didn't look back.

"I don't want no 'lectric," shouted Mama. "Take it back!" I jerked away from him and walked on ahead down the dusty path to the watermelon field.

Far away across the ocean Admiral Nimitz was laughing. A shell sailed away down the Pearl River and across the water to the war. I opened my eyes looking straight up from between two rows of watermelon. Great rain clouds, thunderheads, were moving in. I made pictures out of them, just like when I was a kid. Jesus was there. And the war in slow motion. And Sister Lebeau talking about the Lord.

I saw a queen with a pearl necklace smiling at me. A red ant bit me between my bare toes. I got up and went across the creek to home.

The truck was back and they were eating watermelon. Mama was in the house. Nobody would look at me. Maybe I was invisible now. Truck driver was telling Skeeter and Bubba about the levers and meters in the truck. The other two men sat under the tree laughing and talking. Driver got out of the truck. "Let's us all chip in on the watermelon, you guys." He held out his hat and threw in a fifty-cent piece. The men dug in their pockets for change.

I watched the dust rise after them. It turned the sky red as they passed Sister Lebeau's house. The thunderhead moved north without letting down a drop. Night crept slowly across Lebeau. The red hot sun hung in the live oaks on the edge of Pearl River forever. We sat at the table looking up at the light

bulb hanging from the ceiling. Then Mama lifted up Bubba and had him pull the bead chain. "Let there be light," she said.

Mama and I sat at the table and let the kids play boogie man, turning the light off while one would go hide, then back on till we heard a wild screech, meaning he'd been found. Sister Lebeau came over and made them stop so we could sing hymns. Then she sat in Mama's rocking chair and talked about the war and how it was a sign of the end of the world. How we'd have to repent and work for the Lord. "Queenie," she said, "you got to quit that fishing and playing and picking your nose. You're a adult woman now."

"Yes'm," I said, watching Skeeter and Bubba get sleepy-eyed.

After Sister Lebeau left, the kids crawled into bed talking about growing up to be 'lectric men with giant trucks and all the meat and white bread sandwiches you could eat; all the coke soda you could drink. Mama turned out the light and we sat silently at the table listening to the crickets and swatting mosquitoes off our legs. Mama was beautiful even in the dark. She had big sorrowful eyes, and her skin shined like gold from the reflection of the full moon through the window. Not a sign of a secret sin anywhere. She reached across the table to me with her large, rough hands.

"Let's get us one of them white hob-nail lamps," she whispered, not to wake up the kids. "They've got them now at Pearl City."

"Sure, Mama."

"I seen one in the window of the five and dime."

"Yes, Mama."

"You can learn me to read before Daddy gets home."

"Yes'm."

July nights are cold near the Pearl River. The wind whips off the water and around the mossy live oaks right into your bones. I got up and tip-toed to the back door.

The moon was high. I sat on the back step, my bony bottom cold against the damp boards. A silvery cloud the shape of a grave passed in front of the steadfast moon. Daddy would never come home. I felt the moonlight cool on my face and listened to the sounds of night. The midnight train cried

mournfully as it passed through Pearl River City. Mother-cat purred against my legs, looking up at me every now and then; playfully batting at a loose thread on my dress. "It's time for you and me to grow up, mother-cat," I whispered. "Put away childish things. I'm a adult woman now." I went back to bed and shivered under the flannel sheet.

Toward morning I heard Mama sniffing and crying. I got up and tip-toed to her bed and crawled in beside her. She was soft and warm. Her skin was satin-smooth and her hair smelled like biscuit and white gravy. She spit on the hem of her kimono and dabbed at a spot of dried blood between my legs. She drew me close, smoothing my matted hair, kissing the bridge of my nose where it ached. I cuddled in between her large soft breasts and slept. Dreaming of tomorrow. Dreaming of fishing and playing in the sun by the Pearl. 🐱

Bones

Stephen Perry

The winter demon is in grandmamma's bones,
frosted her hair and made her sleep —
over the cobblestones
the wind breezes —
I wipe the ice from our window
and watch the old mother cat
drag her kitten by the nape of its neck
so its bottom bounces —

I wish it was *Luilak*, when the May breeze
runs along the waves, outrunning the children
in the morning, as we shout and scream the town
awake — stamp on the cobblestones, scare the crows
into shocks of black flight — our parents
coming to the doors and smiling, cracking
their fingers, the bones in their necks,
so the nerves can wake in the still chill dawn

of children — then into the parlor with her rocking
chair I'll go, with her coffin like a boat
on the table with claw feet, like a cat's,
the light from the frosted window like flour
on her face, her hands caught on her chest
with a rose among the lacy swirls of her best dress,
and say, "Wake up, wake up, you lazybones,
and come outside and play!" And she'll rise,

creaking like the sun through the window,
and touch her cold hand to my neck,
smile again, and we'll ghost through the morning
streets of the Netherlands, past gingerbread
houses, with faces lacy in the warming windows,
sun-glinted, diamonds spitting light
like cats on the still-cold cobbles,
and through all the panes of suns we'll vanish

into light.



Sherri L. Falatovich

The Crucified One

Linda I. Solomon

In Cameroon, West Africa, I was wanted by large numbers of men — the only time in my life I had been exotic enough for this to happen. I was traveling with my best friend Madeline; we were both twenty-one and were wooed wherever we went. When the chief of a small tribe offered his old ivory bracelet and a herd of good cattle for my hand in marriage, I told him if he wanted me for a wife, he would have to go to America to ask my father's permission. That was the custom, he admitted, but what Cameroonian could afford to go to America?

Secretly, of course, I was attracted to the Cameroonian men, but the prospect of falling in love with one and becoming one of his five or ten wives did not excite me. I could not envision myself breaking the fields, planting yams, bent to the ground with a baby on my back. I envied the women I saw ambling down the roads. Their feet were bare and their breasts moved freely. They were black jewels sparkling against the beige desert and blue sky. They made me glad to be a woman. But Madeline and I did not belong to the Cameroonians. On the rare occasions we encountered whites, we always felt at home.

One day, Madeline and I were trying to hail a taxi in the town of Mora. We were traveling with Herman, a young Belgian man. Suddenly, a small truck pulled over to the side of the road. The white man in the truck stuck his head out the window and in French asked me if we would like a ride. Impulsively, we accepted his offer. Madeline and I climbed into the front of the truck while Herman jumped into the open back.

The man had lots of hair, wild grey curls and a wrinkled face. He wore heavy black glasses on his straight tanned nose.

He asked where we were headed and I told him to the bank where we intended to cash our travelers checks. From the start, it was clear he fancied Madeline who sat in the middle stuck between the Frenchman and me. He glanced aside from the road to her blue eyes posing the questions: Where had we been? Where were we headed? Were we Americans? Ah, yes, he had guessed as much. Were we married? Something sly about the way he asked this told us both to lie.

Yes, Madeline said. Herman was her husband. I was her sister and we were traveling through Cameroon together with my husband, whom we would meet the next day in Rhumsiki, a tiny mountain town. Oh, he said, that was interesting. He had traveled the same territory in the course of promoting his business, the sale of Parisian perfume, but that was not his only business. He also ran the town's only bakery and specialized in cooking bread, fluffy and tasty as the stuff they made in France.

When we reached the bank, the Frenchman pulled into the parking lot, but before he turned off the motor, he scratched his head and said, "Ah!" as if remembering something important. Neither Madeline nor I spoke French very well, just enough to get by. I understood him to say that it had occurred to him what a help it would be if he could change our money, as he was planning to leave the country in a week and needed dollars. He happened to have a good deal of Cameroonian cash at his house and he'd give a better exchange rate than the bank.

He thumped his thumbs against the steering wheel, waiting for us to decide. He knew he had us. He could see from our clothes we were living on a tight budget, trying hard to be frugal. At the bank, our checks would be worth six hundred dollars. The Frenchman would cash them for fifty dollars more. Madeline had less money than I and I knew she would want to make the deal.

"Okay," I said and motioned to Herman to accompany me into the bank under the pretext of checking the exchange rate. Inside, I explained to him what we'd said and he agreed to pretend to be Madeline's husband. We returned to the car and left the lot, heading for the Frenchman's home.

The Frenchman halted before a bakery, across the street

from a white mansion. I assumed the mansion to be his. It was his khaki shorts that impressed me. The only Cameroonians who wear shorts are prisoners who are forced to do so by the wardens as a means of humiliating them. I took this to mean that the Frenchman had the wealth to exempt him from local customs and the contempt to wish to do so. He seemed like just the sort of man who would live in a mansion protected by an ornate black fence and half-hidden behind leafy mango trees.

After barking his way through the bakery, shouting commands at employees, complaining about one thing and another, he motioned for us to follow him. We did not cross the street to the mansion, however, but turned the other way, down a walkway to the back of the bakery. At the door, the Frenchman ordered one of his employees to go for a bottle of French wine. "*Le meilleur!*" he shouted, swatting his hand through the air. He was short and stocky, with a chest that reminded me of a refrigerator door. Although his employees didn't appear to be frightened by him, to me, at that moment, he seemed quite fierce. As soon as the order was delivered, his face relaxed, his wrinkles sagged, and once again he looked harmless. He pushed away some plastic strips hanging down in the doorway and stepped aside to let us pass. The small room had walls a little longer than the length of a normal-sized bed. Two cots, each made with clean, white sheets folded over blue blankets, filled much of the wall space. There was a closet, a desk and a bookcase brimming with food.

The three of us could hardly hide our surprise at the man's meager living quarters. Neither could we keep our eyes off the array of canned delicacies. It was so typical of the way our expectations had been dashed on this trip that I smiled. Our eyes met and the Frenchman turned away, begging us all to sit. Since there was nowhere else, we sat on the cots, while he opened his briefcase and gave us each a ballpoint pen.

Again, I felt a little frightened. Once we signed the checks over to him the deal would be irrevocable, even if he did not come through with the cash. He could simply refuse to pay. Then what? We could go to the police, but they were so corrupt, we would have to pay them to get anything done. Even if they accepted a bribe, they probably would not touch him.

No matter how simply he lived, he was the only baker in a town where the local people could hardly afford ovens. If they wanted bread, they had to buy it from him.

"Listen," I said in English, hoping the Frenchman would not understand, "I think we better get cash before we sign over any checks." Herman and Madeline had the same thing in mind. They nodded.

In French, Herman explained. The Frenchman shrugged. "*Pourquoi pas?*" he asked, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a fat roll of bills. As I wondered what kind of man carried a thousand dollars or so in his front shirt pocket, he let another arrow fly.

"*Mademoiselle,*" he said to Madeline and he handed her two hundred dollars. "*Pour vous.*"

We all heard it and realized that he knew we had lied to him. We had told him Madeline and Herman were married and he had not called her "*Madame.*" He handed over the rest of the money, a slight smile on his face. Then he sat down at his desk, his back to us, saying he had to look for receipt forms.

He shuffled through magazines in his desk drawer, tisking as he did, holding one, then another up, as if to get a better look at them. They were pornography magazines, colorful and crude, more explicit and lewd than the insides of any magazine I had ever seen. Herman and I exchanged worried glances. Madeline did not see them, as she was counting her money and placing the bills in her wallet. I made motion with my head towards the door and Herman nodded, but as he did, the plastic strips parted and the employee returned with the wine.

By now the Frenchman had located the receipts, but instead of filling them out, he took the bottle and shooed his employee out of the room. He opened the wine, sniffed it, and nodded, setting it on the table. Then he lit a small, propane stove. He placed a skillet on top and poured in some oil. Without warning, he turned and winked at Madeline, who returned the gesture with a look of disgust. This appeared to please him and he laughed loud, spanking his thigh. Chuckling, he opened a can of chicken fillet.

At the time, I was suffering from diarrhea, so the sight of food and wine held no appeal to me, but the effect on Herman

and Madeline was different. We had been eating Cameroonian food for two months now, white yams, plantains, and a cornmeal concoction called Fu Fu. Madeline and Herman moved to the edge of their seats to look closer at the chicken sizzling in the skillet. The sweet scent pervaded the room.

The employee reappeared carrying a white box and a loaf of bread straight out of the oven. The Frenchman cut us each a piece, spread butter on top and handed them out. Even I could enjoy the bread. The three of us ate quietly while the Frenchman began to talk. Later, after Madeline, Herman and I compared notes, it turned out I'd gotten the gist of what he said. One phrase, however, he repeated again and again, thumping his chest with his thumb, which I did not understand. "*Le seul qui est crucifié,*" he said. It seemed to hold special meaning for him.

He told the tale of how he arrived in Cameroon and how he had occupied himself since. He said he had come with his parents to the country before there were roads. They had traveled on horseback, crossing the Sahara with several other families, all from the same village in Northern France. Shortly after they entered the country, a tragedy occurred. Men from a local tribe surprised their party and murdered his parents, beheading them both. As he recounted this, his face took on a grizzly look and his wrinkles tightened, left and right. At the time of the massacre, he was fourteen years old. One of the families of the party adopted him, but he grew wild and on his eighteenth birthday, returned to the tribe and caught two of its members, a man and a woman, as they wandered down the road with five children behind them. He shot the adults, and while the children looked on, severed the corpses' ears. He did not say how he managed all this and came out alive. He did say he had strung the ears into a necklace.

"Would you like to see it?" he asked.

We refused his offer, laughing nervously, and shifting uncomfortably on the cots. Meanwhile, the wine had breathed sufficiently to suit him and he filled four glasses. He rose and handed a glass to Herman and another to Madeline. When he handed one to me, I politely refused.

"*Non, merci,*" I said, and motioned that I did not want any.

"*Porquois?*" he asked, as if he had never heard anything as strange.

"*J'ai mal au ventre,*" I said. "My stomach is bad."

"Bah!" he said, glowering at me. He raised the glass to his lips and drained it. Staring at me, he flung his arms behind him, threw it forward and smashed the glass against the floor. The glass lay shimmering against the floor. Seconds later, the Frenchman sat calmly, taking little sips of wine and fussing like an old chef over the chicken in the skillet. He opened a can of artichoke hearts and filled three plates with food, cutting fresh bread and placing it on the side. He insisted that I accept a plate. I tried not to look at the food and wondered how we could get out of the room, without provoking him more.

My friends, however, seemed to forget the Frenchman's wild action the moment they received their plates. I sighed, telling myself I had overreacted. The man was a performer, an eccentric, yes, but an important person in the town. He couldn't be all bad. Herman gulped down his food as Madeline sat on the bed, her long legs crossed, her blonde bangs falling in her face, savoring each bite.

The Frenchman drained a glass of wine, then poured himself another and began to talk. Yes, he said, he'd married the daughter of a Norwegian missionary, a beautiful, blue-eyed woman whom he'd abducted from her parents one stormy day as the three of them walked to church. He'd taken her into a remote part of the desert and charmed her into falling in love with him. Soon, she did not want to leave him. They traveled the country by horseback, then by jeep and he took her to Paris to buy clothes and silk scarves. She loved scarves and collected them the way men collect ties. At the age of forty-eight, she died of malaria and since then, he had existed without her.

"All there is to life is to eat and make love," he said, stealing a sidelong glance at me. I laughed nervously. He laughed, too, slapping his knee. Then he stopped and shouted, "To eat and make love!"

"I think we'd better be going," I said.

"*Attendez,*" he cried. "*Vous ne pouvez pas aller sans manger le dessert!*"

He opened the cardboard box. It contained four cream

puffs and four chocolate-covered eclairs. He displayed the box to each of us as if it contained emeralds and gold. Ruefully, Madeline looked at me, and then at the pastries. She chose a cream puff, studying it carefully before licking the whipped cream. Herman took an éclair. Again, I refused to eat and this time, the Frenchman did not insist.

Yes, he said, it was a tricky thing for a wealthy white man like himself to go about his business in a country filled with poor blacks. But he had no fear because he never went anywhere unarmed. At this, Madeline and Herman both stopped eating and we all exchanged glances. A revolver was under the pillow now, if we would like to see it, he said. He motioned to the bed.

"Well," said Herman casually in French, "thank you for the meal. We'll go now to catch a taxi."

"To Rhumsiki," the Frenchman said. "But when are you coming back?"

The only place to go from Rhumsiki was Nigeria. While Herman planned to take that road, Madeline and I did not have visas for Nigeria. We had to return to Mora, if we did not want to enter Nigeria illegally, or stay in Rhumsiki for the rest of our lives.

"We're not coming back," I said.

Herman looked at his watch. "Can we find a taxi in the street now?"

"No, no," the Frenchman said. "I'll drive you to the station."

"Don't be ridiculous," Herman said.

Three times Herman refused and each time the Frenchman insisted.

"Okay," Herman relented, "but we have to leave right now, or we'll be late."

"No problem," the Frenchman responded and motioned for us to follow him. He led us down the walkway to the front of the bakery where he had parked the truck. It felt wonderful to be outside again among the people in the street. We threw our backpacks in the truck. A smiling woman with a pierced nose tried to sell us some bananas and mangos out of a wide, shallow basket. Herman and Madeline bought mangos. Then

the Frenchman drove us to the station. I was both relieved and elated as I jumped out of the truck. I joined Madeline and Herman in thanking the man profusely for his "kindness." He simply nodded and drove away, without the slightest trace of humor on his face.

When we arrived in Rhumsiki, a large crowd gathered and many people offered us a place to stay in their homes. The hotel was closed. Herman located a guide, Christopher Columbus, who told us we could pitch our tent near his house beside a boulder where the chiefs usually met. Cows had dumped on the ground next to the boulder and, before we could stop her, Christopher's mother, shirtless, scooped up the pies into a gourd, smiling at us as she worked.

Christopher's wife built us a fire, bending over to poke it. Greenish tattoos covered her cheeks like tiny abstract paintings. She had a plump, happy face and a baby bundled on her back. That night, Christopher cooked us chicken, smothered in peanut sauce, peanut flavored Fu Fu and boiled potatoes. We ate in his home, a round hut made of rocks topped with a thatched roof. We sat on mats on the dirt floor, crossed-legged, talking softly. He told us about the Saharan wind, the *Harmatton* which blows in every year leaving a great cloud of dust in its path. It would gust in tonight, clouding the sky until the rainy season washed the air clean several months later.

After dinner, Herman, Madeline and I lay under the stars. At first, we laughed about the Frenchman and then tried to figure him out. Billions of yellow stars sparkled in the inky black sky. The stars seemed close enough to snatch. From Christopher's house came the sound of a baby crying, then the song of his mother lulling him back to sleep. I was ready for dreams when I heard Madeline say, "*Le seul qui est crucifié*. What did he mean?"

"The crucified one," Herman said. "He was calling himself the crucified one."

"You mean like Jesus. Does he think he's Jesus Christ?" Madeline said.

"All crazies think they're Jesus Christ," Herman said.

Wind howled that night, swirling leaves and shaking

branches. At dawn, the wind stilled, leaving sky and desert canyons filtered by Saharan sand. Herman left that morning. Neither Madeline nor I wanted to see him go, but he was determined to get to Togo where he believed he would find the most beautiful waterfall in the world. He kissed us good-bye. "See you later," he said, hopping into the back of a truck which drove away, leaving us alone on the red clay road in front of a hut that served as Rhumsiki's bus stop. We stood motionless, trying to blink the dust away. A goat bleated. A man knelt beside the goat by the hut. As he massaged the animal's balls, he stared at us. We left that spot as fast as we could.

We spent the rest of the day with Christopher Columbus, trying to locate horses. None of the men in town believed a woman could stay mounted on a steed, so for our own safety, they said, they could only rent us asses. Madeline and I bounced off on two fat ones. Christopher followed on his bicycle, pedaling hard. When the asses got bored and tried to stop to eat, Christopher struck them with a thorny switch. We stopped on a plateau, looking down into the canyon as the sun glowed orange and sunk down behind mountains and lavender tipped grass shuddered in the wind.

"Why go back to Mora?" I said, gazing out at the dull sky. "Let's stay here."

Christopher smiled. "Stay forever," he said.

"We have to go back," Madeline said.

"No we don't," I said. "Let's go to Nigeria."

"But we don't have visas," she said.

"We'll get in. Let's do anything not to run into that Frenchman again."

"Oh, ladies, not Nigeria," Christopher said. "Nigerians are bad. They steal ladies like yourselves. You must bribe them to get in the country. You must bribe them to get out. If you complain, they shoot you and throw you in the ditch."

"We should have gone on with Herman," I said, as we turned our asses back and climbed up the hill.

"Mora's big," Madeline said. "We're not going to run into the Frenchman again."

We arrived in Mora at twilight and asked a taxi driver to

take us to a moderately priced hotel. He chose a comfortable and clean hotel on the edge of town at the end of a long, unlit road. Stars glittered through Saharan dust. As soon as we got out of the car, a man appeared and took our backpacks to the office. I did not like the fact that the place was so isolated. If the man had not taken our packs, I might have insisted we move on. But I did not have the energy to retrieve the bags and neither did Madeline. We decided to eat at the hotel then go to bed. We were starving. We paid the taxi driver and thanked him.

The hotel restaurant consisted of several tables and a bar around which a crowd of young Cameroonians stood drinking. They toasted our health and begged us to join them. We were tired, we said, and only wanted to eat. Oh, said one of the men, then you have certainly come to the right place. He pointed to a long menu which hung from the wall, grinning and winking.

Madeline and I walked up to the menu and began to read. My mouth watered at the sight. Along with standard Cameroonian fare, the place served chicken, all kinds of omelettes, salads, bread and soup. We sat down at a table. After a long time, a waiter in track shoes appeared.

Madeline ordered a ham and cheese omelette.

"There is none," said the waiter.

She asked for a plain omelette.

"There is none," he said.

"How about some chicken?" she asked.

"None," said the waiter.

"I'll have some soup," I said.

"There is none," said the waiter.

"What else are you out of?" asked Madeline.

"We are out of eggs. We are out of soup. We are out of salad. We are out of chicken and we are out of bread. We have Fu Fu and we have plantains."

A loud round of laughter sounded at the bar. "If you want a good meal," said the man who had shown us the menu, "go to the Saint Hubert."

The Saint Hubert was a white hotel with brown shutters on the windows, surrounded by a tall white wall. Behind the wall sprawled a terrace filled with tables and chairs, one side

cordoned off for drinking and the other for eating. The clients were white, except for here and there a black man wearing the short sleeved double-knit jacket of the government *functionnaire*. Women wore fine dresses embellished with jewelry. Men wore well-pressed pants, their shirts starched and tucked neatly in. Squatting around one side of the terrace, trader men offered wares of ebony, ivory and gold. "Regardez regardez," they murmured as we passed. Madeline chose a table far away from them and I walked into the cabana which housed the bar to order us drinks.

His face appeared to me magnified in the midst of the crowd that stood drinking at the bar. Beneath his knit shirt, his biceps bulged. He leaned against the bar, holding his cocktail in one hand, using the other to stir it with a straw. His eyes darted around the room. He spotted me and straightened. We stared at one another. He seemed to grit his teeth.

I walked to the bar and from the corner of my eye, saw him go outside. On the way out the door, I passed him. Apparently, he had seen all he needed to see outside and was returning to the bar to order another drink. We nearly brushed arms. The thick hair on his arm swept the skin of mine.

"Bon soir," I said. In response, he said nothing, frowned at me and moved on.

I hurried back to the table.

"Did you see him?" I asked Madeline, clenching the beers. "The Frenchman," I said. "He's here."

"You're kidding," she said.

"I'm serious. I told him *bon soir* and he just looked at me."

He stood by the door, assessing the situation, jerking his head left and right. His eyes settled on the table behind Madeline. He strode to it and sat down. I sat down also, tipping my head toward him to let Madeline know he was there. He lounged behind her, his gaze fixed on her hair. It was the color of jonquils, pale yellow and wispy. It lay on her shoulders and fell down her back.

She studied her beer, tearing pieces off the label and rolling them into balls. After a while, she took a long drink. When she put the bottle down, she shrugged. "Let's eat," she said.

"Okay," I said, "one last meal."

"It's not our last meal," she said. But my mind raced, insisting that maybe it was. We rose from the table and walked to the dining section, me leading the way. The Frenchman got up to follow us.

My shish kabobs came on two sticks, juicy chunks of beef and onions, peppers and garlic deliciously marinated. It was the best food I had seen in weeks, but I could hardly enjoy the meal. Madeline ordered a steak and she carved into it with delight, but I knew her usual gratification in eating had been dampened by the man's presence. I could not see him now. He sat behind me where he could get a good look at Madeline.

The covers of his pornography magazines flashed through my mind. Would it be murder or rape? After he assaulted us, would he want to shut us up? Would anyone know or care in this town stuck so far from home?

Madeline ordered a Napoleon.

"Damn, Madeline," I whispered. "Let's get this over with." My voice shook.

"And you, *Mademoiselle*?" the waiter asked.

"Nothing," I answered.

Madeline ate the caramel frosted tasty in tiny bites. It seemed to last forever and although I tried to stare off into space, the cake demanded my attention. With each bite she took, cream spilled over the multi-layered edges and her tongue darted to the corners of her mouth to salvage it. Finally, she dabbed her mouth with a napkin and sighed.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

We walked out of the restaurant and hurried down the long dark road, our arms entwined.

"Good God," I said.

"What?" Madeline asked.

"There are people all along here."

It had taken my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. Once they did, I saw shadowy figures sleeping on mats at the foot of the white walls which surrounded the houses. Inside the thatched roofed huts, the rooms must have been sweltering and the men had come out to sleep in the breeze. I doubted they were all asleep, however, and soon a prostrate form confirmed

my suspicion. He sat up murmuring, "*Bon soir.*" After this, everyone we passed sat up and greeted us. "*Bon soir, bon soir.*" Normally, their friendliness would have touched me. Tonight, it scared me.

"They'll tell him which way we've gone," I said.

"We don't know that," Madeline said.

"We can guess. Anyway, there's nothing we can do about it. For heavens sake, let's keep walking," I said.

I suppressed an urge to run as a vehicle screeched into the road behind us. We halted and turned around. It was him. The motor of the truck whirled off and the door clicked open. The Frenchman stepped out, his white legs luminous in the dark. He shut the door behind him and stopped, glowering with bent elbows and hands gripping his hips. Around his thighs, his shorts bagged and in the vicinity of one of his pockets, I detected a bulge. The revolver, I thought, as he stepped forward. His face looked square with his big jaw set, his grey curls wild and tangled on his head. His black rectangular glasses gave him the ominous look of an insect with large eyes. His gaze focused on Madeline, who gripped my wrist so hard it throbbed.

He stopped a foot away and stared provocatively at Madeline. He reached into his pocket. I clenched my eyes, bracing myself for a blast. I heard nothing, I opened my eyes. Small white hairs bristled from his nose.

"Come with me," he said, gazing at Madeline, who squeezed my wrist even harder. His hand moved in his pocket. He pulled out a scarf and stepped closer to Madeline. He stared at her eyes, his own eyes widening, his hands kneading the scarf. My throat tightened. He wrapped the scarf around her neck.

"You're mine," he said in a far away voice, softly brushing the silk against her cheek. He took her other arm.

"Let go," Madeline said, glaring at him. She tried to shake him off, but he clung.

"Let go," I yelled in panic.

"*Patron,*" came a voice from the shadows. "*Go home.*" A tall, thin man with sleepy eyes emerged from the night. He placed a big hand on the Frenchman's shoulder. "*Release her.*"

"Patron," another voice said, "the women will be coming in the morning to buy your bread."

"Patron," another voice said, "you must get some sleep." The evening filled with murmurs. "Patron, patron, patron. . . ."

The hushed cadence of voices lulled the Frenchman. He flashed Madeline a look that digested her in a glance, touched the scarf, her cheek, then let the tall man lead him away. "Take it," she cried, pulling off the scarf and thrusting it towards him, but the Frenchman did not look back. He climbed inside the truck, closed the door, and the motor whined on. Roaring around in a semi-circle, the truck threw up clouds of dirt and drove away. I could hardly believe our luck. The men walked away, blending back into the shadows.

"Let's go home," Madeline said, her voice quavering.

Inside our small round hut, Madeline flipped the scarf onto the bed. The naked bulb overhead spotlighted it.

"He wanted you to be his wife," I said.

Madeline pushed off her jeans and tossed them on the chair. Sighing, she inspected herself in a small square mirror over a tiny bowl-shaped sink. I sat down on the bed, then she dove under the covers and drew the sheet up to her chin. *Harmatton* wind rattled the roof, reminding me of Herman, and I climbed under the covers, wondering if he'd found his waterfall. From Herman, my thoughts turned to chiefs offering ivory to Cameroonian men whose wives worked the fields. I fell to sleep and dreamed of my father dressed in colorful garb treading a red clay path. I presented him with a herd of curling-horned cattle, when Madeline's hand grasped me by the shoulder and shook me awake.

"That hurts," I said.

"Wake up, then," she insisted, holding my shoulder.

I rolled out of her grasp.

"What?" I asked.

She leaned against the wall, staring down at the scarf placed neatly across her knees. She blew her nose on the corner of a sheet.

"You're crying," I said.

"Jesus," she shot back, her voice plaintive. "He thought he had a chance." Wind howled around the hut, as plaintive as her

voice. She tied the scarf around her neck, flopped under the covers and retreated into sleep, tossing and whimpering from time to time. I watched her and couldn't sleep. I imagined the wind shaking the mango trees, pictured him lying face up on his cot, conjuring his ghostly wife. His face would be grizzly, his curls askew. "To eat and make love!" he would cry out loud, but it would never be heard on such a fierce, windy night. 🐼

Lincoln, Arkansas, 1956

Judy Turner

An Ozark Spring
Warming the memories of red clay earth
and the white white morning light
We are not talking of the gold light
of Autumn nor golder light of Autumn afternoon
but of the white cold light of morning
May morning
white light
Grandmother's sunroom

Captain Kangaroo, kind clown
in black white and static gray
kept company with Grandma
and Mr. Greenjeans
(with ducklings, today, perhaps
or a foal)
but T.V. was
more of a miracle to Grandmother
than to the 4-year-old child who preferred
color
a picture puzzle of Roy and Trigger
majestically rearing on two legs
on the cold linoleum floor

Grandma's violets lined the window
furry leaves catching the dust motes
softly descending

White muslin sheets
line hung to dry

caught the scent of morning
scent of sweetgrass and earth and cold moss
drying in the sun
brought indoors
to make her bed

Cold white light
sliced onions and peeled cucumbers pickling
in an ivory bowl
the air pungent with white vinegar and
bruised mint
on the kitchen oilcloth
pattern of strawberry and hyssop
on chipped crockery
hyssop and lavender
waiting

She had earned the right to her bed
and her thoughts

To a linen gown
and a privacy she might never have known otherwise
Earned the right to Captain Kangaroo
to bed trays
and lilies and crocus
to portable T.V.
and short cheerful calls by family and neighbors

You might say that it must have been really terrible
for her
waiting to die
like that
but I was there
and I know
miracles lurked everywhere
(behind the bedpost
and in every corner of the room
mutating faster than virus or grief)
and Grace
came descending with the dust



Sherri L. Falatovich

Invisible line

Timothy Strong

A walk through ankle-deep froth spun from tumbled bubbles. Young women jog. Their breasts jiggle and bounce: Jacques thinks how that sight must hurt his mother, and instead of staring at the young exciting women he gazes out at the ocean. They've come so far to Massachusetts from home in Canada where the word ocean is foreign, like bikinis here in February. He and his mother stop and hold hands, waves beating out an uneven rhythm, cacophonous.

Mother and son, black hair, sharp noses, full lips, alike in profile, contrasted by age; white foam against white ankles.

"Oh, where does time go?" she asks, her gravelly voice barely audible above the ocean wash.

He thinks, I'll get there soon, Momma. I'll get there soon.

A big-breasted redhead chases a white frisbee into the surf. He cannot ignore her.

"You should walk today's sunset with her," Momma says.

"I will, some other time."

The redhead splashes near them; freckles magnified by water droplets glisten in the sun. Deep heavy breasts. Close enough that Jacques smells a windswept whiff of coconut oil sweat.

Jacques' mother turns a pirouette in the sand. "I once had a great figure," she says, then pats her cheeks and tom-toms her stomach.

"Everyone ages differently, Momma." All the action around them seeps in and out and Jacques asks, "Are you finished walking?"

She stares at the wave-washed sand, then lifts her head and

points straight out. "This way is closer to France." Crooked forefinger wavering. "You said."

"Yes." Jacques steps closer to her, their shoulders just touching.

She moves her hand straight across the horizon. "It rests just beyond that invisible line, you said."

"Yes, Momma, and a few more after that one." He stares at the raised wave marks near the very edge of the surf's reach, no more than a thirty-second of an inch tall; each wave's telltale indication of its last shoreward approach.

They walk the beach every day and she often stares at the horizon as if its deep perspective signifies death. Or at least that's how Jacques interprets what has quickly become her near-obsession with that invisible line.

She has triggered meaning in things he has never considered before, like the fact he is half his mother's age, thirty. He imagines the tiny wrinkles around his eyes, like hers, in exactly the same locations. Age the only difference. Time and cancer and death. Every day he listens closely to the ocean's consoling voice for clues to life questions.

On one of their walks she points to that imaginary line between sky and ocean and wants to know if he's sure they would reach France if they traveled in a straight line.

"I'll show you on the map," he says. "We'll buy a compass and I'll prove it to you."

"Oh," she says. "I believe you. The country of my ancestors." She pauses. "Your ancestors."

She picks up bits and pieces of shell, seaweed, anything that's shiny and wet, and later laments their dried dullness, complains of their dank smell. Jacques buys her a fancy canning jar at a flea market up the coast at a place called Bear's Neck and they fill it with sea water. She arranges the shells, seaweed, and small stones in the jar and says she likes their appearance that way much better. "Like a fish tank without fish," she says. Then, "Oh, but the fish that lived in these shells are dead." She stares at Jacques, then at the jar, and places a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you for bringing me. I wish your father were alive."

He can see bits of her reflection on the side of the glass jar

and tells her the shellfish haven't died — they've moved to better homes, then asks if she minds him taking a jog.

"No, no, I'll sit on the warm sand and rest."

Soon the cancer will take her. Jacques trots for a hundred yards, then sprints, quickly out of breath. He pushes back the thin hair on top of his head, family inherited baldness; he hates it, and stares hungrily as a teenaged girl trots past, splashing, tight and firm. Momma's last operation lasted five hours. They cut and cut while Jacques and his brother, Willie, sat in the Montreal hospital cafeteria drinking coffee, asking each other unanswerable questions, arguing, about what in hell cancer researchers had been doing for all the years, with all the money. Willie said, "All they do is find a problem, go in and cut it out and wait — maybe give a little chemo or radiation. I wonder if she'd get better treatment in the states."

"It's a lot of shit wherever you go," Jacques said. "All the money will probably go for AIDS now. This is Momma's third cancer operation in fifteen years and you're right, Willie, they've always done the same thing. Cut it out and tell the family they think they got it all."

Jacques sees a flock of sea gulls flying toward him, almost over him. He veers into the water and dives under a small wave. I won't let the bastards shit on me, he thinks, blood pounding. He comes up gasping for air. This last time the doctor had given her a year to live. No bullshit, that guy. Willie persuaded Jacques she had a right to know. When they told her, she said she already knew, then agreed to take this trip to Gloucester, Massachusetts. Jacques told her it was as close to the France of her childhood, her birthplace, that he and Willie could manage. Her trip over to Canada in 1930, a faded memory to her. She'd said, "I want to smell ocean water clean, like when I was a small girl splashing in the cold sea. Remove the hospital stink forever."

Jacques jogs back to where Momma sits on the sand and she asks if he wants to go back to their blanket. He helps her up, hands tightly gripping wrists, his heels dug in at an angle.

Momma says, "As I was sitting on the sand I thought that even though we might travel in a straight line, we'd be moving over the roundness of the earth."

"I guess."

"Then it isn't a straight line."

"It is if you are high enough above it. I think of it that way."

"I want to be close to the water. It's much more . . . I don't know. Alive I guess."

Jacques thinks she's trying to say she wants to go to France, but he's not sure. She knows he couldn't afford it on the money he makes as a stone mason, his father's trade, who learned from his father. "What are you trying to say, Momma?"

"Nothing. It just occurred to me. That's all. Now I'll think of it as curved flatness."

Back at their blanket Jacques lies down, his face in the blanket, tired from the run. Momma reads a Herriot book she bought at the flea market, but ends up staring out at the ocean. "That invisible line," she whispers. "Maybe no one ever dies if they reach there."

Jacques feigns sleep. Then she rests her head near his and he hears the sand shift and crunch as she moves to find a comfortable spot. "Jacques?"

He nods.

She asks if he thinks cancer makes a noise as it grows. He opens his eyes and looks at her oddly.

She doesn't see and goes on and tells him she thinks it's devouring her liver.

He doesn't know the answer, so many answers, and tells her to try and stop thinking about it.

"You've always been there when no one else understood. Three operations, Jacques. Three promises the stuff was gone." She moves her head, shifts, and sits up. Jacques does, too.

Couples walk hand in hand and the sunset casts long mingling shadows. She takes a pill, a tranquilizer, swallows it with iced tea from the thermos.

A dog comes near, sniffs the air. She reaches out to it and looks for the owner. "Come on dog," she whispers, and they walk down the wave-ribbed mud of low tide. The dog scampers and leaps as if urging her to go faster. Jacques rubs a hand through his hair and watches as she bends down and ruffles its fur. It bares sharp teeth and growls. Jacques stands. Momma

steps back, then walks away, up the beach. She squares her shoulders, picks each foot higher, and Jacques imagines she's practicing a straight walk to the first invisible line.

"Momma, where are you going?" Jacques calls from the blanket.

She stares toward the blanket and has to shade her eyes against the sun.

Jacques trots down to the water, splashes his face and walks up to her and says, "Let's go back. I'm hungry for lobster, and let's get a few shrimp."

She tells him the valium lessens the anxiety. She's hungry, too. "I want a couple ears of corn with gobs of butter. That's one thing. I don't have to worry about cholesterol anymore."

They stop at the fish market in town, then head back to the private campsite the Chamber of Commerce had recommended to Jacques two weeks before. He'd called and reserved a small camper trailer for a week. He could barely understand, or make himself understood to the man on the phone. When he had hung up Jacques thought, dialect versus dialect, and wondered if the whole trip was such a good idea. What if they don't want Canadians down there?

After dinner she sits under the awning attached to the camper while inside Jacques does the dishes. He watches her stare at the bright pine fire he's kept going since before dinner. A moth flies into the flames. She asks him to bring a blanket. For over a month now she's told him that anything that even hints of death, or is death, causes images of cold: cemeteries, coffins, and wilted flowers. She's convinced it will be hot on the day they bury her, but isn't sure why.

"Here, Momma. But it must be seventy." He hands her a scotch plaid lap robe, remembers her helping her mother so many years ago when he was young. Jacques sits on a fallen log near her, remembers his father, dead now two years. They'd worked side by side for ten years as masons, building fireplaces, stone walls, everything always in stone. The fingerprint erasing trade, his father called it. Papa swore he had never touched a single cinder block in his life, even laughed about that while Jacques and Willie sat next to him, a bitter north wind flapping the shutters, several days before he died.

"Old bones get cold," Momma says, staring into the fire, holding one hand out, as if to push away cold, death — all unpleasantness. "Sixty-year-old bones that finally received a retirement check." She laughs at that and the tears roll down her face. "I worked so hard cooking and cleaning in that school cafeteria all those years and I can't even live long enough to enjoy their security. How I looked forward to that."

"I know you did, Momma. Tomorrow's the first of July. Even though we haven't got the check in our hands let's blow every nickel of it." He's spent a good deal of the money he and Willie pooled for the trip, and thinks of Willie laying up a cinder block foundation alone. No one will pay for stone because of high labor cost. Sometimes betrayal sneaks behind Jacques the way his father's shadow did when he was a child on the way to the bedroom at night.

"I'll buy you that picture you liked," Momma says.

"No. Spend it on you."

"You've done so much. Rented this camper, given up time from your work. I want to buy that photograph at the artist's colony in Bear's Neck."

"All right. If that's what you want, if it will make you happy."

"Not much does. Then everything does. The taste of lobster, the gorgeous sunset today. Being here with you."

"Thanks." Jacques doesn't know what else to say. She's happy like a kid, then sad, or nervous, and he doesn't know any more if he should be the son that he is, act like his father, or console her, like she and grandmama used to console him when he was a little boy and sick. He stands up. "Want to go inside?"

"God, I feel old. Cold and old." She laughs, then rises slowly from the chair. "Let's not talk about dying tomorrow. Live it like life meant all happiness."

"Good deal. And if I snore tonight hit me with a shoe or something." He wants their last three days here to be the best.

She rests her head on the down-filled pillow, and asks Jacques how many ducks died for a soft place to rest her head, remembers and covers her mouth, then sees Jacques smile at the little table where he is reading.

The next morning at the artist's colony in Bear's Neck, a town that crookedly weaves along the shoreline, its claim to fame a pier with a fishing boat alongside and lobster pots hung on a shed wall which a plaque proclaims as the most painted scene on the eastern seaboard. The tourists are so thick they have to wait in line to snap a picture of it. Thick like a bear's fur, Jacques thinks.

Jacques charges the framed photograph on his MasterCard. In the photo a small apple-red racing sloop runs before the wind, several plumes of white spray from the bow and a bubble wake shine in moonlight, all the rest dark blues and dim starlight. Jacques thinks of the old box camera his grandpapa gave him, upside-down images through the overhead viewer.

He tells her how much he likes it, and that he plans to put it in a sunny place. She'd told him two days before when they visited the shop that she thought it a gloomy picture.

"You still have a hundred and eighty to spend," he says, once they are back on the crowded sidewalk. "Go Momma go," he says, then laughs and pats her shoulder.

"I don't know if it's such a good idea. I've never spent that much money for fun in my life."

"C'mon. We agreed. No backing out."

Like two children they look in the shops, and she wants to buy something for anyone but herself. A seashell and onyx necklace for a friend, a heavy-knit fisherman's sweater for Willie.

"No. Something for you. We'll stay here all day and fight this crowd until you do," Jacques says, and they smile at each other.

At a shop near the end of a narrow piece of land that juts out into the bay, called Bear Neck's reach, she picks out a pair of leather sandals. On their way back, she stops and says, "I want to get it."

He doesn't know at all what she's talking about. Momma leads him by the hand into a fairly large shop that sells kites, games, and other paraphernalia for the beach. She walks to a display of the largest beach umbrellas he has ever seen. He hasn't seen her eyes sparkle like this in years. She picks one up, all shades of purple, from a royal hue that's almost black to a

lavender close to white. She tells Jacques she imagines the sun shining through and can't wait to try it. "I saw it when we were here the other day, but thought, What would we use this for at home?"

"It is beautiful. Buy it," Jacques says. She carries it up front and he charges it on his card. Fifty-five dollars. "You still have money left," he says.

"No. No more will I spend today. Let's go to the beach."

They spread their blanket on the sand and Jacques drives the center pole deep. It's so big, at least eight feet in diameter, that two elastic guy wires attached to long slender pegs are included. He pushes them in at sharp angles to hold the canopy stiff against the morning's offshore breeze. Momma stands next to the umbrella, moves the tips of her fingers along its taut nylon surface, then turns to the ocean. Jacques knows, as every other day, that she is focusing on the invisible line, although today she says nothing about it and enters the shade under her umbrella.

"Wonderful," Momma says, once underneath, a rolled-up towel under her head. Bright warm colors shift above her head and noisy gull cries echo up and down the beach. The breeze carries a cleaner salt freshness than on the other days.

"Thank you retirement," she says, closing her eyes, then opening them the least tiny bit, she describes how the colors blend into a spectrum of purples, and how, when she closes her eyes tight, thousands of purple spots swim before them. She says she can't tell if the purples are real or imagined or which color matches with any on the cloth above her.

Jacques says, "I'll leave you with your new toy, Momma," and he heads for the water. A hundred feet away he turns and sees her watching him. She points up at the colors, then out to sea.

After a short swim and quick jog Jacques comes back. Momma seems almost a different person today.

She tells him in a low voice that just before she drifted off to sleep she thought that if she died right at that instant she'd go to heaven, pursuing a perfectly straight line and crossing an infinite number of horizontal lines to reach there, and her husband and parents.

Jacques dries off and listens. She's told him all this with her eyes closed, and he half thinks she's dream talking.

She sits up and tells him she wants to be dead, has dreamed, somehow, that she would be dead when she woke up.

"I thought we weren't talking about that today." Jacques joins her under the soft colors, sits near. "I'm listening," he says.

"In my dream I was dead, living in a purple world, and knew when I woke up I'd still be dead."

Jacques rubs his belly, scratched red by the sand from body surfing. "You can't be both dead and alive." He stares at a scantily clad woman jogging up the beach. "Except if you're in heaven. Then you would be considered dead here, but alive up there." He turns toward Momma, guilty for his staring, not paying attention. "It's all in the definition, Momma."

"It's beauty of form," she says and nods toward the woman, quite a ways up the beach now. "They cut my breasts off after they had served their purpose."

"Oh, Momma."

"All right then. My dream. Even if dreams don't usually make sense. Maybe I am dead, and if I believe that, I can go on living and not worry about dying."

"Do you feel all right?"

"Better than I have in a long time. Want to wrestle?"

She hasn't said that to him in fifteen years, at least, and he can't believe she said it now, or even thought of saying it.

"Let's take a walk instead," Jacques says.

They walk a long ways up the beach, further than ever before, toward an island surrounded by shallow water at low tide. She tells him details of his childhood that he could never have remembered without her triggering them. The small white sand beach at the river where she taught him to swim. She reminds him that he preferred to swim underwater instead of on top. She says, "Invisible lines were there, too. Neither of us saw them, though. Lines to the north and the Arctic, the North Pole. A line at each end of the long stretches of the St. Lawrence River where we used to picnic on holidays." She pauses. "I have them all in my head, better than any map could show."

She even skips a little to illustrate how he often walked to the school bus. And then she points to that imaginary line and says, "I can go there and live forever if I want to. I don't. I want to stay right where I'm loved and wanted. Maybe this dream has changed me, even if only for a little bit." She stops. "It's a sign the end is closer."

"C'mon, Momma. The doctor says you have more time."

"Yes, and it matters how the rest is spent." She kicks inch-deep water up into the air and points to the rainbow. "My color, my favorite royal purple is," she kicks again, "just there."

"Maybe this is your second childhood."

"I've decided to love every minute, no every second of life left in me." She turns, and in the bright high sun she stares at him, then tells him she sees herself more in him each day, the strong nose and deep brown eyes particularly, and that it doesn't matter they've cut so much away. He doesn't need them any more. No. She weaves it all into a part of the dying living dead dream, too, that she so badly wants to keep forever.

Jacques shakes his head, fascinated, puzzled.

"Imagine," she says, "to be alive in heaven and here on earth, too. The best of both worlds is what I'm living, Jacques."

He stops and she keeps on going. He doesn't remember telling it that way when she first asked him what the dream could mean. He catches up, grips her arm, and she stops. Small waves lap at their feet, eroding the sand beneath. This trip has been so good for her. He wishes he could build a small stone house on the shore, constructed of the smooth-rolled river rocks from Canada's clean, cold streams. Jacques imagines the rounded stones jutting from the walls facing the ocean, small windows framing his and Momma's faces inside.

They continue out to the island and collect shells. In a tidal pool they watch crabs skitter into hiding spots as soon as shadows touch them. They walk around the lichen-encrusted boulders and bend to pick up pretty sea shells. Jacques sees the redness on Momma's shoulders and they start back. After a swim in the choppy surf Jacques runs ahead, and then back past her. When he stops at her side, all out of breath, she holds out her hand and they walk like that, hands lightly gripping, all the way to the purple umbrella. She lies down underneath and

closes her eyes. Jacques imagines it might be for the last time. He sits and watches her chest rise and fall, rise and fall, then after a long sigh, there is a too-long pause. He grips her hand. She opens her eyes and points to her favorite color, just there, directly above her head. 🐼

A Cup of Tea

Allison Joseph

Wherever words will take me —
past the divining rod of sight,
the locked and cluttered room
called memory — I will go there,
a little diffident, but learning,
discerning salt, sweet,
this hot tea's bitter edge,
camomile, laced with honey.
I drink it to quiet
those rare moments something
must be said, when that magisterial

inner voice decrees: *This is your life,*
pay attention, a demand that sounds
in the brain's vital crux
of reverb and vision, until
there is nothing but its admonition,
its high-pitched traffic. This morning,
I'm learning the secret is play,
shuffling these words so you
may believe them, so I may offer
something of this world — this

small kitchen I write from,
its stacked, unwashed dishes,
white rind of egg shell
on my plate. All I can tell you
is what I know: the compromises
each day allows, the joys
the body knows — tense, stretch,
fingers that grasp, release.
The clamor of these words
will help me find a home
for this body, learn to sing

its hymn — a music so slight,
so seldom listened to,
I've got to try here
in this kitchen's dim light,
my feet on cold tile, hands
wrapped around this earthenware
mug's rocky contours, to capture
that sound before I move on,
into this day, before speaking
any further.

Mother Waiting

Rawdon Tomlinson

The background blurs from sleep to sleep,
with pills at nine and morning toast.
He bathes and dresses me; he cuts
the meat and bits of fruit; I add
some rouge before the mirror,
my gray hair wild as a baby's.

On this side, doctor visits and family:
they repeat the same non-answer,
"We will just have to wait and see."
Upstarts, knowing nothing, feeling nothing,
can't remedy the burning tongue
or restore a crumbling memory.

The children phone long distance,
sensing the floor giving way;
I transpose their names; they
happened long ago; my grand-
daughter babbles like me, she takes
each step breathlessly.

In this limbo the movie
changes: my husband is the clever
stranger impersonating my husband,
doctoring my food, selling the house
behind my back; as he watches TV
crime stories, I sit against a wall

wrapped in a blanket of silence,
rotting from the head down, one eye
wandering while the other fixes on nowhere
or haunts the past, where my people wait —
and God every day. Pain

says the prayers, the dull
nausea which grinds me down
to a whimpering thing, then terrorizes
suddenly — a door flung open,
wind scattering the props,
the new script full of masks.

What lesson I must learn from this
on top of age, I do not know;
and now they are here, their caroling faces
lit by the flickering lights
on the white-ice cake, and dressed in my new

blue gown, wishing, I step across
and blow out the candles.



Sherri L. Falatovich

Saturdays

Clyde E. Buzzard

Winner of the 1991 Hackney Literary Award for State Short Story, sponsored by the Hackney family through Writing Today and Birmingham-Southern College

Awake, Harold Dean moves his arms and legs between the flannel sheets, feeling the contrast between warm cotton on his body and chill air on his exposed face. Aromas of bacon and coffee creep up the attic stairs and he works his feet toward the edge of the bed until they pierce the covers and emerge. Then he flings back the bedding and sits up quickly to grab the blue and white striped overalls tossed on a chair beside the bed. His algebra textbook and a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* are underneath.

"Mr. Layton."

A voice calls:

"Mis-ter Lay-ton."

The voice is far away at first, then closer until it is here in the room. Harold stares out the window for several seconds before his right hand moves to the wheel and reverses his direction in one smooth motion which leaves him facing a slim dark-haired young man. They examine each other across the empty bed.

"Mr. Layton?" the young man says again, "I'm Dr. May."

"What kind of doctor?"

Harold does not know all the doctors in this place but he knows none of them are young.

"Well...", the young man hesitates, "I'm not a medical doctor, Mr. Layton. I'm a Ph.D."

"That's nice."

"I'm a psychologist, Mr. Layton, and I was wondering if you'd mind having a few words with me. I'd like to get acquainted a little bit if I could."

Harold closes his eyes to dismiss his fading dream. When he opens them again he speaks more politely.

"Come on in."

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Layton?"

Harold hates this question, the first they always ask. He asked the nurse to make him a sign saying JUST FINE, THANKS, but she missed the humor of it. He gives the Ph.D. the nod of life.

"What can I do for you, Doc?"

"The nurses asked me to stop by to talk with you, to see . . . to see if there is anything I can do to make you more comfortable."

"Not unless you can work miracles. If you can, I'll take my wife and health and a fifth of good bourbon. Or maybe my health and then my wife." He looks at the briefcase in the doctor's hand.

Dr. May feigns a laugh. He smiles and resumes the placating voice Harold recognizes as for children and the old.

"Well the nurses say you do get a little grumpy with them sometimes. They thought I might be able to help."

Harold Dean slides his bare legs into the overalls. It is late October and his father has not built a fire, so there is enough bite in the air to discourage dawdling. He has slept in his underwear and a flannel shirt, so he has only to slip into the overalls and then the high top leather shoes. He descends the steep staircase and passes through his parents' bedroom to the kitchen, bright from the Aladdin lamp on the icebox. He pours himself coffee from the gray-speckled pot and sits down at the heavy table to drink it with sugar and lots of cream.

In a few minutes his father is scraping his shoes at the door and then comes in, a big smile lighting his face as he sees the table and Harold Dean and his wife Adele busy at the stove. He puts his arms around her from behind and gives her a hug. She shakes him off, pretending annoyance, but pleased.

"I'm just an old man," Harold says. "It's not a lot of fun being an old man."

"I know what you mean," says Dr. May, who looks to be twenty-seven or eight. Harold knows he doesn't know, but what can he do about that?

"What I'd like," continues Dr. May, "is to get you to do some things for me so I can see what you can do and what you like and don't like."

"Sure, fine," says Harold. "You want to do it now?"

"Uh, in a few minutes. I've arranged for us to use a room down the hall. Let me go get my stuff set up and then I'll come back for you. Is that okay?"

"Fine."

Harold wheels back toward the window and lets his head slump down onto his chest. He tries to pick up his dad's voice, his dad's smile, his mother's bustle and clatter at the stove.

"Saturday," says his dad, with almost the same tone of expectancy Harold Dean might use.

After breakfast he and his dad will do the chores — milk the cows and pour hot foamy milk through the big stainless steel strainers, then mix bran and sour milk and table scraps for the hogs. His dad likes to lean on the fence and watch the hogs grunting and shoving to get up into the trough: the more they push and eat, the fatter they grow, and butchering time is not far off.

"Are you ready, Mr. Layton?"

The voice at his elbow startles him as that Saturday fades into this. Dr. May takes the handles of Harold's chair and backs all the way into the hall. Harold does not like being rolled backward but he knows Dr. May can't turn in the space between the two beds — one empty now, since Arthur, his second roommate, died.

I'm the kiss of death, Harold thinks, but I can't kiss my own ear.

The doctor rolls him down the hall to an office with a sign that says ACTIVITY DIRECTOR on the door. Inside is a table with some paper and pencils and flat little blue boxes. Dr. May parks Harold on one side of the table and then sits opposite.

"Now Mr. Layton, I'm going to ask you some questions and ask you to do some things. Some will be easy and some will get pretty hard. Nobody gets them all right, so just do the best you can. . . .

"Now, Mr. Layton . . . tell me . . . in what *direction* does the sun rise?"

Harold is quiet a moment.

"East," he says.

"How many *months* in a *year*?"

"At least twelve."

Dr. May gives Harold a look, asking just how difficult this has to be. Then he goes on, and Harold finds some pride in his ability to answer. They plow along until they get to one about Madame Curie, whom Harold confuses with Madame Chaing Kai-shek. Then Dr. May stops and picks up one of the flat blue boxes and lays a stopwatch on the table.

Oh, Jesus, he's going to time me, Harold thinks. Doesn't he see that I'm an old man?

Fair or not, Dr. May has him put puzzles together and make patterns with the blocks while he looks at the watch. Harold thinks he got most of them right, but he can tell he is terribly slow. Dr. May keeps saying, "Good, Good," which irritates Harold.

"Whadya mean, Good? I messed up, didn't I?"

"You're doing just fine, Mr. Layton. Am I making you nervous? Would you like to rest for a while?"

Harold nods yes. He doesn't need the rest, but he feels himself growing angry. Things don't go right anymore, even when he knows how. He thinks about the buttons on his shirt and then about the galluses on his overalls and how much easier it was to slip the button under the clip. Overalls are for people who have better things to do than poke slippery buttons at invisible holes.

And then they are all tramping out of the house to the blue Plymouth in the yard, a big sedan with doors that open in both direction like a cupboard. The kids pile into the back and his mother and father sit proudly in front: his dad proud of the car and his wife; his mother proud of the children in their neatly ironed clothes; all of them proud and happy and excited to be driving off to town on a fine fall Saturday, to see neighbors, buy groceries, go to the picture show. It will be like all Saturdays, and yet a new one, another milestone along a path of possibility leading someplace exciting and unknown.

"Everyone misses some, Mr. Layton. It's designed that way."

In the afternoon, while Harold Dean and his sister are at the movies, his mother and father will buy groceries and Harold will ride home with his feet up on a five-gallon can of lard or a 50-pound sack of flour.

"Rest a minute, Mr. Layton. I'll get us some Cokes."

He heads for Evans' Drugs because they have the best comic books. If you squeeze back in the corner they won't see you reading for free, or at least Harold Dean thinks they don't.

Dr. May puts some cards with cartoons of *The Little King* in front of Harold.

"Now if you put these in the right order, they will tell a story. Can you do that, Mr. Layton?"

Harold shuffles the cards around, wondering if there is still a Superman, a Wonder Woman — all those heroes who were never to die. He feels tired. Maybe being old is just tired, but not the happy tiredness of riding home on Saturday with his feet up on the can of lard. How different to have those feet up in a wheelchair, to be going no farther than lunch.

After an hour or so, one of the pharmacists, usually the younger Mr. Evans, comes up and asks politely if he wants to buy anything. It is the signal for Harold Dean to leave.

"That's fine, Mr. Layton. You're doing just fine."

But Dr. May stops on that section of the test, so Harold knows he has got it wrong. There are too many possibilities — a story can go in so many ways. Maybe Dr. May is too young to understand.

In a few minutes they will line up for the picture show. Most of them are under twelve, and those older will put down a dime to see if they pass, keeping the other fifteen cents ready in case. The manager, in a black suit like Mr. Evans, walks up and down the aisle with a flashlight to look sternly at those who throw popcorn or make noise.

"Are you listening, Mr. Layton?"

Harold looks up. Dr. May has put the cartoons away.

"That's all of that one. Now I'd just like to get you to do a couple more things and we'll be through." He puts down a card with designs on it. "Can you copy that onto the paper there?"

Harold grasps the pencil and begins to push. It seems not to want to move, as though he writes in syrup. He can't make out the designs clearly but doesn't want Dr. May to see him have to pick up the card. He leans over a little and sees he is doing it wrong. He starts to turn the pencil over to erase — but loses patience with it and draws the new line on top of the old.

"That's fine, Mr. Layton, just fine. Now would you try this one?"

This one is a bunch of stars or dots or something, a whole line of them. Harold is not about to do all that. He makes three dots on the paper and looks up.

"Will that be enough?"

"If that's the way you see it, Mr. Layton."

"It's not the way I see it, I just don't feel like doing all those."

"I want you to do the best you can, Mr. Layton."

"And then you're going to lie to me, right?"

The accepted practice is not to lie, but simply push the dime through the cut-out to see if it gets by. It is a fine moral distinction drawn by hundreds of youngsters over the years.

"There's no need to lie to you, Mr. Layton. You have a lot of ability For-A-Man-Of-Your-Age."

That is the way Harold hears it and hates it, Dr. May's finely drawn lie.

"But you may have some brain deterioration, too, some arteries clogged. It's not uncommon at your age. You know it's uncommon to be your age."

Harold hears a note of honesty, even respect. He looks up at the young doctor and Dr. May looks back at him. Harold looks down at his hands.

"I don't mind the slowing down so much, Doc. It's not having any plans. Everything's a dead end."

In line with the others, he waits, certain as death that the hero will triumph, that Saturdays have not changed. They will march on endlessly into the future, the reward for works and days.

"I know what you mean," says Dr. May, packing his boxes and forms back into the case.

He pauses, then says, more softly, "I'm sorry, Mr. Layton, of course I don't know what that means."

"There's no way you can, Doc. These tests won't tell you anything we didn't know an hour ago — that I'm old and slow, forgetful, living in the past. That's because there's no living left ahead, don't you see."

They move into the theater and race for a favorite seat: first

row... sixth row... balcony. Already the Movietone cameraman is pointing his lens and zooming up to the *News of the World*.

"So sometimes I get a little grumpy, like you say... but it's not at the nurses. It's at myself.

"You've done very well. Really, Mr. Layton, you have. I've enjoyed working with you... and getting acquainted. Now I'll take you back to your room."

The hall is much busier now. Old people come on walkers and in wheelchairs, collector bags hanging from their waists or under the chairs. Some are hungry and goal oriented, but others meander, purpose flickering in and out of consciousness like images on a screen.

Daffy Duck, who has been ironed flat by a boulder, shakes it off and runs away. The children scream with delight.

They reach Harold's room and Dr. May slows to make the turn. A man is sitting on the bed nearest the door, his old smooth skinny legs dangling from under his gown. Mrs. Franks, the duty nurse, is there.

"Oh, there you are, Mr. Layton. This is your new roommate, Charles McRae. Mr. McRae, this is Harold Layton."

"All right now, let's hold it down!" says the usher. "Some people might like to hear this."

The two men look at each other in silence. There seems no need to speak.

The Lone Ranger rears suddenly on his great white horse and he and Tonto gallop off the screen.

"Who was that masked man, anyway?" says the same puzzled townsman who says that in every Lone Ranger film.

"I enjoyed meeting you, Mr. Layton. I'd like to see you again."

"Come again anytime, Doc. I'll be here until I'm not here anymore."

"Maybe I could just drop in from time to time and talk. Would that be okay?"

"I'll look forward to it," says Harold, surprised to find that it is true.

Then he falls back heavily into the car seat, exhausted from Saturday.

"Did you have a good time?" his father asks as he works the gears.

"It was okay. About the same."

Coming Attractions discloses a scene of violent death as the U-Boat Commandos wreak their terrible revenge.

"Better make it soon, Doc. You never know."

"Is that good or bad," says his mother, looking back.

"I don't know," says Harold Dean.

"Don't be silly, Mr. Layton," says the nurse.

Then she and Dr. May leave Harold and Charles to stare warily at each other.

"What're you in for?" asks Harold.

"Just old age, I guess," says Charles. He has a soft, shy smile. His skin is baby smooth and pink.

"Pretty serious crime," says Harold. "You'll have to watch your step."

His sister lies flat on the car seat and flubs her lips with a finger.

"Look at them," says his mother, "Saturdays just wear them out." ❧

Talking to the Stove: Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*

Jay Paul

Beth Henley's play *Crimes of the Heart* offers the audience a chance to stand around the kitchen with three sisters — Lenny, Meg, and Babe — as though at a party in home of good friends. It is a play that flaunts family and home and honesty, but its success lies in seeming to be what it is not — a tale with a happy ending.

One might debate the degree of hope present at the end. The final moment creates a “magical, golden, sparkling” snapshot of “The sisters . . . laughing and catching” pieces of Lenny's birthday cake (*Crimes* 125).¹ Meg has already said, “I could want someone” (98), rather than resorting to the old tactic of fabricating a story that will please Old Granddaddy. Barnette Lloyd seems to have struck a deal with Zackery to take the heat off Babe. And Lenny has finally stood her ground against her cousin Chick, as well as phoning Charlie Hill in Memphis. But Henley has countered these gestures of autonomy with too many acknowledgments of the sisters' immaturity for the ending to be triumphant.

Among them are details and actions that may be understood more clearly within the context of fairy tales — Babe's brushing her hair, Meg's broken shoe, Lenny's dead horse, all three sisters' fondness for eating sweets, to name several. But the most pervasive is the set — the kitchen. It recalls the site of Cinderella's drudgery, but it also evokes the qualities of nurturing and security associated with the hearth and stove, and ultimately the mother.

As Bruno Bettelheim has articulated in *The Uses of Enchantment*, many of the best-known fairy tales — “Hansel and

Gretel," "Little Red Riding-Hood," "Rapunzel," "The Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," and "Cinderella" among them — demonstrate the successful negotiating of the perils of childhood and adolescence. A heroine like Snow White, for instance, must outgrow narcissism, mentally and physically, before becoming an autonomous individual. Bettelheim stresses that the failure to develop completely precludes the forming of successful relationships in adulthood.

An examination of *Crimes of the Heart* — especially the images and actions that define its central characters — reveals that Henley speaks the same language as the tellers of the tales that have offered reassuring examples of personal development for centuries in cultures around the world. But Henley shows us three infantile women for whom psychological autonomy and thus satisfactory relations remain unlikely; moreover, she tempts us to remain in the kitchen with the three MaGrath sisters, intoxicated and diverted by rediscovered affection and apparent freedom.

Henley's persistent symbol of the sisters' immaturity — the eating of sweets — reveals the most durable relationship influencing the MaGrath women. On the day of their mother's funeral, Old Granddaddy tried to console them by treating them to "banana splits for breakfast" (72). Meg recalls that "he thought that would make it all better," thus distracting the sisters from their grief. "I think I ate about five!" Babe gloats. "He kept shoving them down us!" (73). Such gorging brings to mind Hansel and Gretel's compulsive devouring of the gingerbread house, an act representative of immaturity.

From the opening curtain, when Lenny is trying to mount a solitary candle in her birthday cookie, until the last, when all three women exult in the cake, sweets proliferate. Chick presents Lenny with a box of assorted cremes. Cokes are drunk, candies nibbled. Meg remembers Willie Jay as "that little kid we used to pay a nickel to, to . . . bring us back a cherry coke" (46). Barnette fondly savors the time he saw Babe: "At the Christmas bazaar, year before last. You were selling cakes and cookies and . . . candy" (59). Of course, the most excessive indulgence of sugar *per se* is Babe's stirring it into lemonade by the spoonfuls. "I like a lot of sugar in mine," she explains (33).

Although Old Granddaddy never appears in the play and is comatose by the end, his influence is undeniable. Meg chides Lenny for "living your life as Old Granddaddy's nursemaid" (79) and accuses him of discouraging, if not preventing, any romantic activities on Lenny's part. While Lenny's loyalty to Old Granddaddy might be written off as the eldest female child's traditional duty, he has perpetrated the same dominion over the other sisters. Babe, whose nickname — "Dancing Sugar Plum" — continues the eating motif, provided what Meg calls Old Granddaddy's "finest hour" (21) by marrying Zackery Botrelle. Lenny agrees enthusiastically: "He remarked how Babe was gonna skyrocket right to the heights of Hazlehurst society. And how Zackery was just the right man for her whether she knew it or not" (22). Apparently the most footloose of the sisters, Meg, too, pays allegiance to Old Granddaddy — by fabricating glamorous lies about her recording career, her movie career, even an appearance on Johnny Carson.

While Old Granddaddy may have encouraged self-gratification in order to curtail the sisters' grieving (and, by extension, their personal development), subsequent events point out the harm done. Babe has tried to relinquish control of herself to the extent that she appears unable to distinguish between the trivial (making lemonade) and the lethal (shooting Zackery). Meg's whimsy has led to her abandonment of Doc Porter in Biloxi and his crippling by Hurricane Camille. Also, after the night with Doc during the play, she returns with the heel broken off one of her shoes, a detail that reminds one of the important role the slipper, a traditional female symbol, plays in some variants of the Cinderella story. But whereas the slipper's fitting signifies Cinderella's achievement of selfhood, the broken heel of Meg's shoe suggests her incomplete condition. But the sharpest complaint of the harm Old Granddaddy has done to Meg comes from Lenny, who scolds, thinking of the extra jingle bells Meg wore sewn in her petticoats after being the one to find her mother hanged, "You have no respect for other people's property! You just take whatever you want! You just take it!" (78).

Crimes of the Heart evokes another recurrent fairy tale symbol — brushing one's hair, an act associated with sexuality

in "Rapunzel," "Snow White," "The Goosegirl," and other stories. In *Crimes of the Heart*, Babe, "always the prettiest and most perfect" (21) McGrath sister, according to Lenny, spends much of Act Two brushing her hair and, as Act Three opens, appears with the same "pink hair curlers" she brought from jail and "begins brushing her hair" (63). If Meg has been the most flamboyant in exhibiting the incompleteness of her personality by means of self-gratification, Babe passively counts on her beauty to escape responsibility. As her collecting articles about her shooting Zackery "to keep an accurate record" (70) implies, Babe pretends to be an observer of her own life. Her disinterest takes the form of falling asleep while Zackery talks at the dinner table, and she appears to misunderstand the ramifications of having been discovered with a black lover ("Why do you think I'm so worried about his getting public exposure? I don't want to ruin his reputation!" [48]). Babe's greatest exertion is to escape life through suicide; and if she does make a discovery, as when she decides her mother had "hung that cat along with her" "'cause she was afraid of dying all alone" (118), Babe's imagination is capable of nothing more than self-projection. On occasion, she exhibits understanding of her predicament, but she is more likely to resort to mindless truisms as she tries to comfort herself or her sisters. When Lenny complains that she "can't seem to do too much" (96), Babe is ready with this illogical encouragement: "You just have to put your mind to it, that's all. It's like how I went out and bought that saxophone, just hoping I'd be able to attend music school and start up my own career. I just went out and did it. Just on hope. Of course, now it looks like . . . Well, it just doesn't look like things are gonna work out for me. But I know they would for you" (97).

It should be noted that Chick makes a point of brushing her hair in Act One, soon after changing her stockings, an act Henley's stage directions say should seem "slightly grotesque" (4). No doubt, Chick would like to seem fetching, but the inappropriateness of her grooming in someone else's kitchen is emphasized by her concern that her hair might be "pooching out in the back" (7) and by her grotesque dropping of a ball of hair onto the floor. But when Babe brushes her hair, she is alone

and taking pleasure in the mutual attraction between Barnette Lloyd and herself.

It is Lenny MaGrath whose actions seem most promising of independence, even though at thirty she seems to have been the sister most contained by domesticity. Lenny's association with the kitchen might suggest that she would carry out a nurturing role, or that she were being nurtured for eventual autonomy. But neither possibility obtains. Her misformed ovary precludes childbearing; and even though she has served Old Granddaddy faithfully, Lenny cannot sustain Babe in the crisis that follows the shooting of Zackery. Indeed, Lenny frantically wires Meg; and when the sisters have gathered, neither Lenny nor the others do much nurturing.

The cot that Lenny has moved into the kitchen while looking after Old Granddaddy indicates she is no mother figure, but like Cinderella sleeping among the hearth ashes, a not-yet intact individual, in need of nurturing. And her behavior has the self-effacing quality of her fairy tale forebear: Lenny is admirable for her loyalty, her meekness; she is certainly more likable than her self-centered, self-righteous (though often *right*) cousin Chick. Out of this womb of character-building, we might expect Lenny to emerge mature. Indeed, as the play ends, she finally expresses her resentment at Chick, chasing her out of the kitchen "right up the mimosa tree" (114), and she has mustered the courage to phone Charlie Hill. It is possible, to continue this line of thought, to regard the final feast of the play — the gorging on birthday cake — as further nurturing of Lenny.

But there is too much evidence otherwise. First and foremost, it is too late for Lenny. She is not an adolescent in the process of forming herself for adulthood; instead, she is thirty years old, with a long record of uncertainty. Second, there is no one to nurture her — no dwarfs or other surrogate parents. Third, the nourishment her sisters provide is reminiscent of the gingerbread house in "Hansel and Gretel" — a symbol of self-gratification.

In her confusion, Lenny puts on service to Old Granddaddy like one more disguise, a role assumed by default because it was available. For the snapshots she sent to Lonely Hearts of

the South, Lenny wore a wig; when she works outdoors, she dons Old Grandmama's hat and gloves. These "faces" suggest, as does her undeveloped ovary, that Lenny has not developed to the extent of being independent and productive. Moreover, the news that her horse Billy Boy has been killed symbolically rules out any journeying toward maturity, as is often the case in fairy tales like "The Goosegirl," in which the talking horse Falada is an important figure.

If there is anywhere Lenny is getting, it is, as she herself admits, older. Knowledge of her birthday permeates the play's three acts; and though the occasion prompts celebrations, it reminds Lenny of her mortality and loneliness. Doc Porter's news about Billy Boy makes her weep for her age. On several occasions, she apologizes about her age to her sisters, and with good reason. As soon as Meg enters in Act One, she exclaims, looking at Lenny's face, "My God, we're getting so old!" (15). Even when the sisters are happily gathered together and eager to play a game of Hearts, Lenny remembers the rules: "Hearts are bad, but the Black Sister is the worst of all" (74).²

Thus, independence remains elusive (and illusive) for Lenny, just as it has for Meg and Babe. Unlike mature fairy tale heroines, who get married (and thus embody the harmonious integration of the various elements of their personalities, according to Bettelheim), the MaGrath sisters' dealings with men have been disastrous. Far from being whole women, Lenny, Meg, and Babe represent, respectively, drudgery, self-indulgence, and passivity — three facets of stunted selfhood, all in a suspension of subservience to Old Granddaddy. He has been both protector and oppressor; they have been molded by him and remain unable to resist him effectively. Now the old man lies in a coma — an absent, senseless patriarch, an impersonal god; and the play offers us a final image of the sisters hilarious together, a bitter greeting-card tableau commemorating their delusions and their regressive regrouping.

In addition to activating the ambiguous condition of the MaGraths, Henley's setting *Crimes of the Heart* in the kitchen recalls a favorite means of a fairy tale character's telling a secret without breaking a vow of secrecy — speaking to a stove or fireplace so that the intended auditor might overhear. In this

case, there is no beneficent character (usually an older male in the tales) to effect the teller's salvation; instead, the audience eavesdrops on the sisters' intimacies. Ironically, we are the only auditors of the *whole* story and so develop an understanding that surpasses any individual character's.

Crimes of the Heart, in other words, invites an audience — we moderns uprooted from families and dislocated from the small town or ethnic neighborhood — to return home. Not only does the play star nostalgic women, but also its format can effect nostalgia. As we laugh with (and at) the women — and certainly at the clichés — that humor, becoming progressively wilder, may be our permission once more to revel in what we believe, as autonomous individuals, we left behind. ♣

Notes

1. Since all subsequent citations in this article come from the play, only page numbers will be included parenthetically.
2. Predictably, Meg becomes excited by this symbol of death, while Babe wonders, "And spades are the black cards that aren't the puppy dog feet?" (74).

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Sherri L. Falatovich

The Houyhnhnms and Rhetoric

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One of the problems of reading Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels* is the unattractiveness of the Houyhnhnms, and pure Reason, as an ideal. Kathleen Williams is one of many critics who "prefer" the giants in Part II, despite their imperfections:

They are, in fact, very like ourselves, easily swayed by self-love and the desires and passions common to humanity. But it is not only our tendency to brutishness and selfishness that is that is displayed in them; they also possess human warmth, sympathy, and affection; the animal side of man is shown in its capacity for good as well as evil, and the huge size of the giants can impress upon us not only animality but expansive good humor, magnanimity, and a breadth of moral understanding. (161)

She adds, however, that this comprehension of the giants' many virtues is not immediate but comes only "when we have read to the end" (164). In other words, the disenchantment she comes to feel toward the Houyhnhnms forces her to reexamine whatever previous assumptions she had about the Brobdingnagians.

Williams' argument not only demonstrates an affinity for the giants but also an affinity for their method of reasoning. The Brobdingnagians form an appealing contrast, with her empiricism, to the Houyhnhnms, with their rationalism. The immediate apprehension of virtue, knowledge, or truth makes present-day critics uncomfortable, perhaps in part because, as Mark Walhout argues in *College English*, we are the products of a Nuclear Age. Our criticism reflects the ambiguities and uncertainties that surround us. The (im)possibility of the immediate apprehension of truth marks one of the breaks between classical rhetoric and modern rhetoric (see Knoblauch 36), although

most rhetoricians still attracted to the classical model would probably concede the point.

The connection between rhetoric and Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels* is important for several reasons. Swift's implied attitude is almost Platonic as he uses rhetorical figures as well as rhetorical methods to inform the character of the inquiries into the nature of man. This Platonism reaches its ideal form in Part IV with the Houyhnhnms' stated attitude toward the art of persuasion, which calls for its exclusion. Yet rhetoric does operate within the Houyhnhnms' society — not in a loose sense but in its specific Aristotelian forms. Since the Houyhnhnms' attitude toward language is central to the success of their society, they are undercut by an irony of their own making.

The several rhetorical figures introduced into the *Travels* are Aristotle, Plato, Demosthenes, and Cicero. The latter two are the least interesting, although they represent the clearest sign of Swift's awareness of rhetoric. Demosthenes and Cicero are presented in the context of being *rhetors*, or practitioners of the art — an oversimplification of Cicero, of course, whose rhetorical theory has influenced the discipline as much as any other figure. In describing his attempt to present European man to the King of Brobdingnag, Gulliver says:

Imagine with thy self, courteous Reader, how often I then wished for the Tongue of a *Demosthenes* or *Cicero*, that might have enabled me to celebrate the Praise of my own dear Country in a style equal to its Merits and Felicity. (Pt. II, Ch. 6)

He calls what he produces a "Panegyrick," the technical term for a speech of praise.

Gulliver's view of rhetoric here is a common one. If prostitution is the world's oldest profession, then rhetoric must be the second, and its reputation for promiscuity is well-noted. Socrates reflects this same attitude when he chastises Polus, one of the rhetoricians in the *Gorgias*. "He seems to have had more practice in what is called rhetoric than in the give and take of discussion," Socrates comments (448). Rhetoric in these terms is *persuasion*: "Its entire business is persuasion; the whole

sum and substance of it comes to that" (443). Rhetoric subverts inquiry, Socrates thinks, and "give and take of discussion" that he prefers is certainly more what the King of Brobdingnag has in mind when he asks Gulliver for an account.

Socrates, of course, goes on to say quite a bit more about the nature of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* (and later in the *Phaedrus*). How he says it, however, is almost as significant as *what* he says. I want to reproduce, then, a little of the dialogue between him and Gorgias, a rhetorician whose name is so synonymous with the rhetoric Gulliver desires during his "Panegyrick" to the King of Brobdingnag that he could have easily been included with Demosthenes and Cicero on Gulliver's list. Socrates examines the difference between belief and knowledge in his excerpt as a subpoint of his inquiry into rhetoric:

SOCR. Shall we, then, assume two kinds of persuasion, the one producing belief without certainty, the other knowledge?

GORG. Yes, of course.

SOCR. Then which kind of persuasion concerning justice and injustice does rhetoric effect in law courts and other public gatherings, the kind which produces belief without knowledge, or the kind which yields knowledge?

GORG. It would seem quite obvious, Socrates, that it is the kind which produces mere belief.

Any reproduction does an injustice to the fullness of the Socratic method. Yet in this particular instance Socrates forces Gorgias through his skillful questioning, to make an admission about his art that directly contradicts what Gorgias wanted to believe: "[It is concerned w]ith the greatest of human concerns, Socrates, and the best" (451).

The Socratic method illustrated in the *Gorgias* is (ironically) a rhetorical device: our designation of such dialogues as "Platonic" rather than "Socratic" acknowledges the fictions behind them. With this device, Plato constructs the *appearance* of dialectic, "the give and take of discussion" in which Polus (and Gulliver) lack practice. Despite some minor variations, the device is largely formulaic. Typically, Socrates allows the other characters to "instruct" him, using his questions to reveal the fallacies in their arguments. Yet there is the illusion that So-

crates' conclusions are not preconceived, but rather worked out in the course of the dialogue — hence, giving the dialogues the appearance of the methodology they employ (rhetoric).

Swift uses this same rhetorical device in the *Travels*, Gulliver and the King becoming Platonic figures that are analogous to Gorgias and Plato. For example, the motive behind the two inquiries is much the same. Socrates requests, "Please, therefore, do not stop the lessons you have begun to give me, but show me clearly what I ought to pursue, and how I may come to pursue it" (488); Gulliver says, "[The King said] 'he should be glad to hear of any thing that might deserve imitation.'" The character of the inquirer, then, is a man open to instruction. Both are treated to a broad panegyric that is consequently deflated by the skilled questioner.

Of course, Swift does not necessarily use the *Gorgias* as a model for the Socratic method; it is useful for my purposes because it concentrates on rhetoric, but most of Plato's early dialogues use the same method and characterization. It suffices that the model exists in *Gulliver's Travels* and that we recognize it. But this is not the only instance of rhetoric in *Gulliver's Travels*: Gulliver, and so Swift, introduces it again in Part IV. After describing the relationship between Reason and Virtue, Gulliver goes on to say:

Neither is *Reason* among them [the Houyhnhnms] a Point as problematical as with us, where Men can argue with Plausibility on both Sides of a Question; but strikes you with immediate Conviction, as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by Passion and Interest. I remember it was with extreme Difficulty that I could bring my Master to understand the Meaning of the word *Opinion*, or how a Point could be disputable; because Reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain; and beyond our Knowledge we cannot do either. (Ch. 8)

Remembering what Socrates forces Gorgias to admit, that rhetoric "produces belief without knowledge," we can reasonably assume the Houyhnhnms disdain or reject rhetoric.

That is, they exclude rhetoric *in principle*. What *in fact* goes on in Houyhnhnmland — in other words, the gap between theory and praxis — generates most of the critical controversy

that surrounds Part IV. Even a "hard" critic like George Sherburn — that is, one who sees the Houyhnhnms as Swift's ideal — admits that the "Houyhnhnms represent Swift's clearly imperfect concept. . . . He did perhaps as well as could be expected" (264). I give Swift more credit than that — he *invites* the reader to laugh at the Houyhnhnms on occasion, as in the examination of man's physical liabilities (here man is not perfect because man is not a *horse*), a hallmark of the conspiracy between author and reader that is inherent in irony. Be that as it may, rhetoric does exist in their society. Gulliver's resumption of his earlier role as a rhetorician "defending" his country elicits their participation as audience. Yet the Houyhnhnms are practitioners as well.

Gulliver is again a rhetorician when he answers his Houyhnhnm Master's questions about his society and his species. In Part II, we witnessed his "panegyrick," which is a subcategory in Aristotle's complete *Rhetoric*; the antithesis is a speech of blame. And Gulliver's discourse on the nature of man in Part IV is certainly such an antithesis. Many critics dislike the discourse in Part IV primarily because of its negative nature without recognizing the *precise* reversal it forms to that in Part II. If we can reject Gulliver's panegyric as "mere" rhetoric, then we can dismiss its opposite for the same reason.

Gulliver is, however, a much more successful rhetorician in Part IV than in Part II. He fully persuades his immediate audience that man is a depraved creature with only pretensions to reason; most of all, he persuades himself. Yet there should be some doubt that he is supposed to be so persuasive within the larger context of audience — that is, readers. Certain passages convincingly reduce human motives, but they also negate what we know about Swift's own views. For example, Gulliver reduces all religion to "whether *Flesh* be *Bread*, or *Bread* be *Flesh*; Whether the Juice of a certain *Berry* be *Blood* or *Wine*; Whether *Whistling* be a *Vice* or a *Virtue*; Whether it be better to *kiss* a *Post*, or throw it into the *Fire*" and so on (Ch. 5). Irvin Ehrenpreis explains these as references to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the use of instrumental music in church, and the veneration of the cross — all religion issues on which Swift had "the strongest convictions." Further, "he attacked those who dis-

agreed with him, in *A Tale of a Tub* and in his writing on ecclesiastical issues" (222-23).

Audience is an important role in rhetoric, for the success or failure of a particular discourse depends to a large extent on the audience rather than the discourse itself. Gulliver's speech of praise fails in Part II because the King assumes a certain role, that of the Socratic inquirer. Gulliver's speech of blame succeeds in Part IV because the Houyhnhnms assume a different role. There is no convenient term for this role, but it related to Socrates' notion of audience in the *Gorgias*. Socrates asks Gorgias if an orator is not more persuasive than a doctor on the subject of health, and Gorgias qualifies with "in a crowd." Socrates then interprets:

Then the qualification 'in a crowd' means 'among the ignorant'? For surely the orator will not be more persuasive than the doctor among those who really know. (459)

Gulliver persuades the Houyhnhnms because they do not "really know" what it is to be human. Consequently they do not ask the right questions or insist, as Socrates always does, on answers that address the specific question asked. "[W]ould you be so kind, Gorgias," he asks, "as to continue the manner of our present conversation, asking and answering questions, and lay aside for a subsequent occasion the sort of lengthy exposition which Polus began" (449). This method actually masks a type of control over the inquiry, forestalling lengthy responses that obscure the specific objection.

Gulliver's Master is not a Socratic inquirer. He has difficulty framing the sort of perceptive questions that the King in Part II used, ones that provided the heart of Swift's satire there. For example, Gulliver's Master in Part IV asks him about the costly meats he mentioned, which does not get to the heart of his *real* query as to why all do not have a rightful share in the production of the earth (Ch. 6). Nor does Gulliver lose the opportunity to turn the question, which only requires enumeration, into a further diatribe against humanity's "Begging, Robbing, Stealing, Cheating, Pimping, Forswearing, Flattering, Suborning, Forging, Gaming, Lying, Fawning, Hectoring, Voting, Scrib-

ling, Stargazing, Poysoning, Whoring, Canting, Libelling, Free-thinking" occupations.

But Gulliver is not the only rhetorician in Houyhnhnmland. For all their rejection of rhetoric, the Houyhnhnms practice it as well. I want to emphasize the contradiction in that by differentiating the type of rhetoric they choose. By rights, they should be Platonic — like Socrates, they wish to exclude a rhetoric that produces belief and not knowledge. But they fail to use the dialectical form to examine Gulliver's accounts of man, even though dialectic is rhetoric's counterpart in matters of reason (see *Rhetoric* I.i.1-ii.7-8). Instead, they exemplify Aristotelian rhetoric — a rhetoric that ironically finds its justification in what they exclude: that a question may have more than one answer. "The orator should be able to prove opposites," Aristotle explains, "... not that we should do both (for one ought not to persuade people to do that which is wrong), but that the real state of the case may not escape us" (I.i.12). Aristotelian rhetoric, then, is as much a means of inquiry as it is a method of persuasion, the crux of Aristotle's insistence on it as the counterpart to dialectic. Yet Aristotle admits rhetoric does not distinguish moral purpose, as dialectic does (see I.i.14). Ironically, the Houyhnhnms use all three of the specific Aristotelian forms of rhetoric: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic.

Aristotle identifies the first type of discourse as deliberative, characteristic of all assemblies. Each of the three types of rhetoric possesses distinctive means and ends — those for deliberative discourse include a view toward the *expedient* or harmful (I.iii.5, emphasis added). The nature of deliberative is either hortatory or dissuasive, for as Aristotle points out, "he who *exhorts* recommends a course of action as better, and he who dissuades advises against it as worse; all other considerations, such as justice and injustice, honour and disgrace, are included as accessory in reference to this" (emphasis added — Aristotle previously uses the words "exhortation" as well).

We do not, perhaps, think of the Houyhnhnms' society as political. Michael Wilding, however, argues that "for all the lack of political vocabulary, the society also has its political institutions" (315). He sees the quaternary Representative Council as nothing but a parliament, of which Gulliver's Master is a

representative. Certainly the Assembly's discourse supports his view. Their eye on the future, they reallocate food and children — with no dissension, it seems, but at least thorough discussion.

There has been at least *one* debate, though, in the history of the Assembly, a recurring one over the problem of the Yahoos. Its statement is even rhetorical: "Whether the *Yahoos* should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth" (Ch. 9). Summarized, the arguments focus on the Yahoos' loathsomeness, their origin, and their inferiority to asses. Then comes the proper rhetorical solution: "[M]y Master proposed an *Expedient* to the Assembly" (emphasis added). But if we doubt the connection, there is the word they substitute for the compulsion of law: the Assembly *exhorts* Gulliver's Master to expel Gulliver (Ch. 10, emphasis added). Theirs is a model of Aristotelian deliberative rhetoric.

The second type of discourse, *forensic*, belongs to courts: it seeks to accuse or defend (*Rhetoric* I.iii.3). Even given the absence of courts in Houyhnhnmland, mankind goes on trial there. Gulliver contradicts the absolute apprehension of truth and knowledge that Reason offers in this society — for example, the Houyhnhnms do not feel the natural antipathy toward Gulliver that represents the usual response toward a Yahoo. They are forced, then, to make judgments based on evidence.

Man stands accused of being a Yahoo — this is in fact the thrust of the entire last book. Evidence against this judgment includes Gulliver's use of language, his preference for cleanliness, his clothes, his aversion for the species, and his measure of reason, no matter how comparatively small that may be. Some evidence argues that Gulliver is actually closer to the Houyhnhnms — the Yahoos' natural antipathy toward him (and his toward them) characterized by the scene in which they discharge excrement all over him, his adaptation of the Houyhnhnms' food (he cooks the oats instead of the asses' flesh) before such adaptation becomes tainted with his admiration for them (like whinnying and trotting), and, again, his small "tincture" of reason. Evidence for the judgment that man is a Yahoo includes his physical shape and his abuse of reason.

The problem with the judgment in Part IV is that prosecu-

tors abound — but no defenders. So the evidence considered includes only the latter — man's physical shape and his abuse of reason. In a survey reminiscent of the three scholars of Brobdingnag, who concluded only that Gulliver was a freak of nature, the Houyhnhnm Master focuses on the length of Gulliver's nails, the hairiness of his hands, the brownness of his palms. Ironically, he finds the differences significant, although later man's inferiority to Yahoos comes into question because of these differences (Ch. 2, Ch. 4). Yet even though the physical evidence does not entirely support the conclusion, Gulliver is deemed a Yahoo because he looks like one. The presentation he then makes of mankind is viewed in light of this *a priori* assumption. For the purposes of this argument, a demonstration of the presence of rhetoric and the forms that it takes, it is not necessary to prove the Houyhnhnms' verdict incorrect.

Finally, there is the third type of rhetoric, *epideictic*, the discourse of praise and blame. We have seen earlier how Gulliver uses this form, both in Part IV and in Part II. He does not, however, represent the only user of epideictic language. The Houyhnhnms' everyday use of language reflects this third type of rhetoric as well. In their etymology for their own name, "Perfection of Nature," they praise. In using "Yahoo" as a synonym for evil, such as "Ynholmhnmrhlnw Yahoo" for an ill-contrived house, they blame. The Houyhnhnms refuse to name Gulliver — at the end, he is still only "gentle Yahoo" — so they are bound by their rhetoric to convict Gulliver, and so humanity, of being Yahoos. In turn, Gulliver's use of the word "Yahoo" to refer to mankind and to himself becomes a confession. Epideictic discourse is the most persuasive of all in Houyhnhnmland.

The contradiction between the Houyhnhnms' stated attitude toward the art of persuasion and its implicit presence there calls into question other expressed attitudes toward language and its use. One other suspect notion is their insistence "That the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts" (Ch. 4). As we have seen, even the Houyhnhnms' limited use of language accomplishes more than that — it exhorts and dissuades, it accuses and defends, it praises and blames.

The discrepancy, however, may be inherent in language itself, at least from the perspective of classical rhetoric. For Aristotle, Cy Knoblauch explains:

arguments themselves have . . . an independent integrity, a reality apart from discourse, discernible to the rational mind though inaccessible to weaker intellects, which require verbal representation to remember and appreciate them. (32)

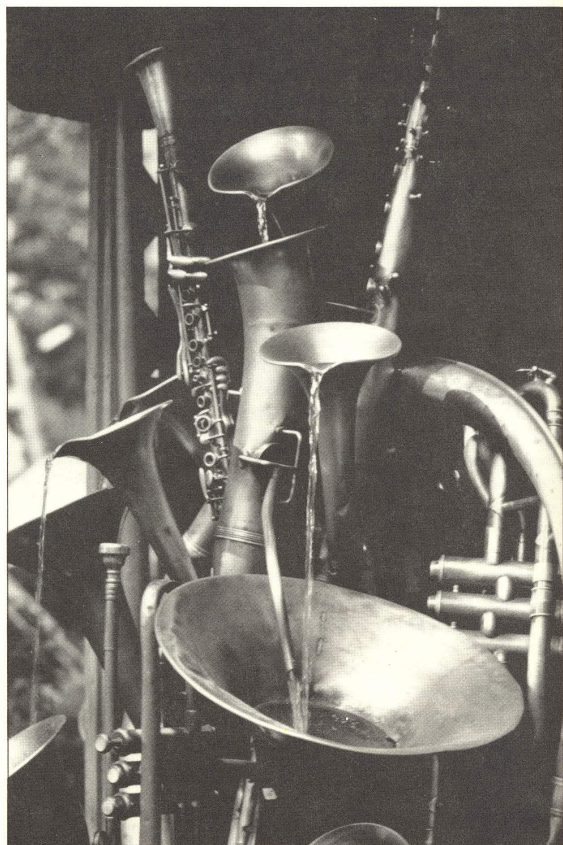
Language, then, is thought dressed, and that dressing, no matter how consciously plain, can never completely efface itself. If Swift subscribed to this classical notion of the relationship between language and thought, or even if it is merely reasonably correct, then the Houyhnhnms are undone not by the irony inherent in their universe, but that inherent in language itself.

Yet we must not forget that the Houyhnhnms go further and try to deliberately regulate the truth-value in language. It is supposedly impossible to express a lie, although they accuse Gulliver often enough. They must have a different notion of what constitutes a lie, for they themselves fall short of the ideal "whole truth and nothing but the truth" (emphasis added). They deceive Gulliver, for example, about the outcome of the Assembly: Gulliver reveals that "My Master . . . was pleased to conceal one Particular, which related personally to myself" (Ch. 9).

I would argue that their whole system collapses because of the burden they place on language, revealing them as liars and rhetoricians and otherwise participating in human defects. Whether Swift "intended" this effect is another question, of course, and is as always impossible to determine. I will only point out that nowhere does Swift dissociate himself more firmly from his mouthpiece and invite the reader to laugh *at* Gulliver than in the final chapter. Poor Gulliver supports the offering of his tale for mankind's amendment with Sinon's words from the *Aeneid*: "Though Fortune has made Sinon wretched, she has not made him untrue and a liar" (Pt. IV, Ch. 12) — words used in context to beguile the Trojans into accepting the instrument of their destruction (a horse). If we accept the analogy, Sinon proves a much better rhetorician, I think, than Gulliver. ♪

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Sherri L. Falatovich

Peter Taylor's "The Throughway": The Death of a Marriage

Linda Kandel Kuehl

Common to Peter Taylor's early and recent work is the depiction of marriage as a doomed institution. What should be the most comforting and enduring of relationships is presented as a paradox that ultimately defies comprehension, for, as Jonathan Yardley observes, "nobody knows what is happening inside that most intimate human arrangement... except the two people in it — and often they don't know themselves" (E8). Perhaps no story more poignantly illustrates the dangers, deceptions, and disloyalties inherent in matrimony than Taylor's "The Throughway."¹ In this disturbing tale, what appears to outsiders as an ideal marriage between "sane and sensible and unsuperficial people" (59) is revealed to be a neurotic, destructive liaison dependent upon victimization and capitulation.

This revelation, which slowly heightens in intensity during the course of the twenty-page story, is communicated to the audience via a structure closely resembling the one-act play, a genre familiar to Taylor.² His merging of the two genres is suggested by the descriptive tag — "a sort of a story, a sort of a play, a sort of a dream" — attached to one of his works, "The Early Guest," where stage directions call for the two protagonists, reunited lovers, to wear actual masks in a symbolic attempt to conceal the inevitable changes that the passage of time has wrought. Though no such artificial device is used in "The Throughway," this story can also be viewed "as a sort of a play, a sort of a dream," with perhaps "nightmare" a more appropriate substitute for the latter term. As in "The Early Guest," we witness here the painful "unmasking" of a relation-

ship, but unlike the characters in the first story, who safely resume their protective shields and go their separate ways, the protagonists in "The Throughway" are doomed to remain together in an undisguised state of contempt, fear, and hatred.

Before the figurative curtain rises *in medias res* on this highly charged scene of marital discord, an omniscient narrator, assuming a chorus-like function throughout the story, provides a brief prologue, telling us that Harry and Isabel, a happily married couple of many years, "had lived always in the same house since they had first married." Though the once fashionable neighborhood, "where they had themselves been young" and where they had raised their daughters, gradually deteriorated, precipitating the flight of most of their old friends, they were content to remain. Their settled, unpretentious life causes their "contemporaries," who "had all prospered more than they had...and had moved into newer developments," to express some envy, albeit condescendingly, of Harry and Isabel's situation: "In a changing, uncertain world it was good to know a couple who enjoyed such stability" (59).

Their stability, however, was suddenly shaken when they learned that one section of an elaborate new throughway system connecting the suburbs to the city was slated to come down their street, necessitating the destruction of the entire block. Upon receiving this news, Harry, previously viewed as a "sane and sensible" man, "revealed himself to all the world as nothing more than a local crank" (60) when he initiated, without the support of his wife, a fruitless protest against the impending demolition. Consequently, the two were shunned by their friends and, even worse, became "almost strangers to each other. . . . The routing of the new throughway, which was considered to be in the public interest, seemed to have undermined the very serenity for which Harry and Isabel were envied" (60).

The narrator's exposition might suggest that "The Throughway" constitutes a topical commentary on the ills of progress, dramatizing the heavy price the victims of such progress must pay. In reality, however, this story is not merely an indictment of a contemporary problem but also a subtle

dissection of a doomed relationship. As Albert J. Griffith accurately notes:

Taylor goes to great pains to strip his situation of those possibilities which might give it undue social significance. . . . Harry and Isabel are nobodies; and they do not in an ostensible way represent any tradition or any historic values. Even the house they are losing is rented, not inherited or even earned by work or sacrifice. The house is, moreover, not a thing of beauty, of economic worth, or of sentimental attachment. The story obviously, then, cannot be the expected melodrama about old values being crowded out by new. (150)

The couple take center stage on "the day scheduled for their removal from the old house . . . not as two who were allied against an intruding world but as two adversaries" (60). And the psychological warfare is made all the more acute by various trappings that give this story its theatrical dimension. For one thing, all the traditional unities are scrupulously observed. Once the short expository section ends, the action is restricted to depicting the death throes of a thirty-one-year marriage within the confines of a few hours, the morning of Isabel and Harry's expected exodus from their old neighborhood. So too, from beginning to end, the story takes place in one interior setting consisting of the living room, connecting hallway, and dining room of the condemned house, where the chaos attendant upon any move — half-packed cartons, misplaced personal effects, precariously stacked furniture — mirror the emotional turmoil of the inhabitants.

The setting also contains stage props that further illustrate the couple's mounting crisis. On a dreary autumnal day, the rain pelts a curtainless plate-glass window and increases in intensity as the pair's pathetic attempts at communication become less and less successful. The window itself offers a depressing vision of the external world, an objective correlative of Harry and Isabel's lonely inner landscape: "[N]obody passed on the sidewalk. There wasn't another house in the block that hadn't been vacated. Two across the street had already come down[,] . . . [leaving] empty lots . . . with the gaping holes that had once been basements" (67) and, more importantly, that had once been homes.

Isabel and Harry, the last living souls on their block, have become public curiosities, like animals on display in a zoo. An ambience of entrapment and isolation is pervasive, enhanced by two additional stage props. A caged canary belonging to Isabel sits among the packing crates, a "poor, protected creature, so innocent and unsuspecting" that the woman "couldn't bear to look at [it]" (74). In addition, "four little mottled fish" remain unfed in their glass bowl, like their master, who sits without breakfast amidst the "jumble and disarray and . . . terrible, blank bareness" (61) of his soon-to-be-demolished home. Throughout the story such animal imagery is evoked to describe the protagonists' desperation: for example, "All weekend he [Harry] had wandered about the house like a sick animal who only *sensed* there was going to be a change" (62); Isabel "uttered a little shriek[. . .] the cry of a small animal suddenly finding itself trapped when it thought it had escaped" (74).

To a certain extent these two symbolically imprisoned characters are both victims, Harry of his own inadequacies, which have crippled him in a highly competitive world, and Isabel of her inability to establish an identity strong enough to counter Harry's demoralizing domination. Since the narrator alternately slips into the consciousness of each character, the internal monologues promote understanding and sympathy. Thus Harry is not presented as some two-dimensional villain but as a complex individual who has lost touch with reality and feels betrayed by a wife unable to share his warped perspective. And in his Quixote-like stand against a nebulous enemy designing to rob him of the life he has led for over thirty years, he elicits a compassionate response, reminded as we are of other Taylor characters whose lives, Donald Phelps notes, "have gently petrified around locations: little shrines, sometimes houses, sometimes towns or localities, by which they can certify the reality of their lives, and their very identities" (78). When Harry pleadingly asks, "'Can't you have a right to something without owning it?'" and explains, "'I own nothing. . . . I thought that nothing was something they could never take away from me'" (68-69), he becomes a modern-day Bartleby in his passive but stubborn refusal to vacate his abode.

It is apparent that this man's bizarre behavior is indicative

of some form of mental collapse, and Harry's allusions to deep emotional difficulties that date back to childhood make his callous and paranoid treatment of Isabel at least comprehensible. Yet, no matter how unbalanced and pathetic Harry is, the narrator and reader's sympathies rest predominantly with Isabel, for her husband, whether sane or insane, nonetheless victimizes his wife.

The narrator spends far more time in Isabel's consciousness than in Harry's, and her gradually deepening perceptions ultimately lead to the story's disturbing climax. Her stature grows and Harry's diminishes as she repeatedly attempts to communicate with the man she has loved for over three decades, only to be cruelly rebuffed. But each rejection fosters her reexamination of their marriage and the humiliating role she has unwittingly played.

Many of Isabel's progressively disturbing revelations take place during the painful duologues engaged in by the couple, parallel conversations that expose the inefficacy of words to bridge the emotional chasm between husband and wife. On the morning of their intended move, Isabel patiently tries to reason with her distracted husband, gently pointing out all the flaws of their dilapidated house and deteriorating neighborhood; however, her words are met with silence, and her presence is ignored: "He descended the stairs as though he didn't see her. . . . [I]t seemed that his not looking at her during the past weeks had been what hurt her most. Presently, in a tone so dispirited and soft that he may not have noticed that she had spoken, she asked, 'How can you even want to stay on here?'" (60-61).

When Harry finally responds, he accuses his wife of caring too little for their home, and, accustomed as she is to his domination, Isabel must fight against being sucked into the vortex of her husband's madness since "[i]t was never easy for her not to see things the way he saw them or the way he wanted her to see them" (63). Struggling to preserve herself and Harry, she becomes the aggressor for the first time in her life, a role she finds perplexing: "She wondered at her own fierceness. She was saying things she couldn't have said to him six weeks before. . . . [S]he wanted to stop her ears to shut out her own voice" (64).

Unfortunately, her "fierceness" is short-lived. As Harry calmly announces that he intends to die in the house they are expected to vacate within the hour, aggression turns to fear, for Isabel is finally forced to see in her husband what she has tried too long to deny:

Her fright seemed like something new to her, and yet it seemed familiar too. . . . It was not the throughway that was the cause of their distress. It was Harry's drawing away from life. All through the years, really, he had only been waiting for the throughway, even wishing for it in his own way, wanting to be cornered. (65)

Isabel realizes that Harry's desire for death is stronger than any other force in his life and poses a danger not only to himself but to her. After attempting to escape his influence by exclaiming, "I'm not thinking of dying, Harry! . . . And you shouldn't be," she plaintively asks, "Isn't it enough just to go on being alive? No matter where it is? Isn't our love anything at all to you any more?" (65). This last question reveals an awful truth: "But at once she felt she had spoken the word 'love' exactly as she would have spoken the name of a long-dead child" (65-66).

With that truth come others in rapid succession. Harry had claimed all of his life he wanted nothing when, in reality, he wanted everything. Knowing the impossibility of acquiring all he desired, he settled instead for a self-inflicted martyrdom, which Isabel had unwittingly undermined. Being an efficient homemaker and nonmaterialist, she "made their nothing such a great plenty. She had never allowed him to feel poor, to feel himself a nobody. But he had *wanted* to feel himself a nobody, to know that he was poor. He had needed to need" (66). Isabel momentarily believes that simply because she now understands Harry's smoldering frustrations, this understanding will unite them once again, and she loyally reaffirms her commitment to him: "I've never had any thought but to be what you wanted me to be. My one desire in life has been to give in to you . . . and make you comfortable" (68).

Harry verbally confirms Isabel's assessment of her altruism, and, encouraged by this response, she believes she can convince him that she fully comprehends the symbolic signifi-

cance he has attributed to the throughway. Isabel is shocked to discover, however, that her insights provide no comfort to her husband, ironically eliciting from him "open hatred" instead of tenderness or appreciation. Penetrating the ego-protecting defense Harry has erected over a lifetime, she succeeds only in increasing his hostility, for his unachieved ambitions and chronic failures have been suddenly laid bare. He ultimately tells her, "No matter how you make me out or how you explain my coming to where I am, it doesn't alter anything" (75), a perception his wife reluctantly comes to share.

Thus compassion, love, reason, and truth fail to save a marriage precariously sustained for too many years by daily routine, familiar surroundings, and debasing domination. As the disillusioned wife recalls a bit earlier in the story:

Wasn't it that she had really known all along that in his meekness he was far stronger and more willful than she and would never yield an inch to her in any struggle there might ever be between them? His self-righteous withdrawal from the contest of life she saw not as a negative thing but as a positive force pulling her with it toward a precipice somewhere. (71)

Isabel struggles to save herself when she finally sees there is little she can do for Harry and even attempts to exit the house without her demented husband; however, his overpowering determination and her ultimate recognition that "those long, peaceful years they had known together seemed but . . . a brief interlude almost forgotten" (78) leave her literally prostrate upon the floor, her emotional defeat registered in her physical collapse. After Harry announces that he has cancelled the moving vans and makes a number of veiled threats about setting fire to the house with the two of them in it, Isabel tacitly encourages him to do so to avoid "the terrible eternity of life there seemed left before her" (76). But this suicidal pact is never implemented. Ironically, the telephone and throughway, two intrusive emblems of the outside world, protect them against themselves:

[S]he became aware of the ringing sound.... Of course it would be one of the girls! And there was no not answering it. For if they did not answer, then the husband of one of the girls would leap in his car and, traveling the one already completed leg of the throughway, would arrive at their

door within a matter of minutes. And if they did answer, it would no doubt bring the same son-in-law, because there would be no concealing that everything had gone wrong. (77-78)

The thought of a future with a man who has become a menacing stranger and children who will soon insist upon making "all important decisions" for her so overwhelms Isabel that she remains "crouched on the floor" (78), an abject creature with no will to escape. Perhaps, as one critic has charged, Isabel's initial failure was "in putting up with [her husband] . . . and not sending him forth to the fray" and her subsequent "punishment is their life together in his now narcissistic senility" (Lytle 15). Yet is this woman deserving of punishment for a lifetime of devotion? The narrator, a more sympathetic observer than the critic, provides a highly dramatic epilogue that conveys the hopelessness of the couple's situation, for, in essence, what is depicted is the death of a marriage:

Across the bare floor of the hall Harry and Isabel looked into each other's eyes with cold indifference. . . . Who was that stranger standing awkwardly with one foot on the cellar stair? . . . Who was the odd-looking old woman. . . ? Ah, yes, ah, yes. . . a husband. . . a wife. . . a fellow human creature, . . . estranged from one. What matter if it took a quarter of an hour, a year, or a lifetime? (78)

There is no happy exit from "The Throughway" for these two people, with Harry trapped by madness and Isabel by responsibility. Unfortunately joining the ranks of many women in Taylor's fiction who discovered that from "the moment they pledged their love they were all, somehow, widows" ("The Dark Walk" 304), Isabel must sacrifice her own needs and seek what little comfort she can in the knowledge that her loneliness and victimization are often the sad legacies of her gender. In "The Throughway," the death of a marriage is even more tragic than the death of a spouse as this couple become for one another "merely a hand one holds in the dark so that sleep will come" ("Guests" 206). ♪

Notes

1. "The Throughway" first appeared in the *Sewanee Review* 72 (1964): [559-78], and was subsequently published in *In the Miro District and Other Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 57-78. All citations in the text are from this volume.
2. Taylor has written several plays, including a collection of one-act dramas entitled *Presences: Seven Dramatic Pieces* (Boston: Houghton, 1973).

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Heraldry, Scholarship, and *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*

J. F. R. Day

The Oxford Guide to Heraldry. Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson. London: Oxford University Press, 1990. ISBN 0-19-285224-8. \$15.95 paperback.

Several years ago at a dinner party I was informed that the five most dreadful words in the English language were "The port rests with you." I had to be told that they implied someone was guilty of hogging the decanter and if he did not immediately pass the port, he would be forever branded a boozier and a boor. So I passed the port. However, it seems to me even now that as dreadful as "The port rests with you" is, there are worse phrases. Any Southerner, for instance, should immediately recognize the horror of "But who *are* his people?" If you doubt this, think for a moment of some poor Southern belle trying to convince her mother (Gorgon and local Junior League Treasurer) that marrying a carpet-bagging Yankee confidence man is a Good Thing. Lady Bracknell is a piker by comparison with that particular outraged matriarch.

Yet this question, "But who are his people?" however daunting, is a perennial one. It has occurred not only in the Old (or for that matter the New Rich) South; it has been around in Europe for centuries. In Europe there was always the possibility of giving a visual response — "But who are his people" could frequently be answered by determining if the carpetbagger had a coat of arms. If he did, he might still be a cad, but in much of Europe and the British Isles, he was still a gentleman of coat armor and as such would be far less susceptible to the glares of outraged Gorgons guarding their daughters. After all, "gentleman" used to be a social rank as much as anything else.

In our own country, heraldry remains an ubiquitous, if misunderstood, presence. We Americans are fascinated by it. The number of mail order firms willing to supply you with

"your" family coat of arms grows apace, and the number of homes displaying mass-produced armorial plaques for their owners' surnames is even a bit daunting. Unfortunately, the relationship between a coat of arms for "Johnson" and the particular Johnson who displays it is usually pretty tenuous — it is rather like assuming that every Johnson is a talcum powder heir just because he and "Johnson and Johnson" share the same last name.

The American ignorance of what heraldry is and how it works can be readily remedied by *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*, which has recently been reissued as a paperback. The text, written by two of Her Britannic Majesty's Officers of Arms (that is, the Heralds), is authoritative and fascinating. It discusses the theories of the origin of coat armor and traces the development of the shield (the most important part of any coat of arms), the crest (the device on the top of the helmet rather than the whole coat), supporters (figures that hold up the shield), and blazon (the description of a coat of arms in its own Norman French argot). The granting and recording of English coats of arms in the College of Arms, London, is also treated, including an account of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Visitations, which surveyed the gentry of England to record (for a fee) their arms. The book is both informative and useful — it is even great fun. It discusses all the major aspects of heraldry, including the inheritance of coats of arms and the differences between English and Continental heraldry, with verve and understanding. There is a particularly fascinating account of heraldry in the New World, which includes an attempt by the British Crown to set up an hereditary nobility of Landgraves and Cassiques in America, something that really could have been flaunted at your local D.A.R. chapter.

More importantly, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* takes a genuinely critical and scholarly approach. In the past, heralds were sometimes better at invention than accuracy; Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson do not fall into that trap. In recent years the heralds' College of Arms has not only been more accessible to scholars, it has even produced them. Sir Anthony Wagner, formerly Garter King of Arms, has produced many works on genealogy and the history of the heralds which

are of immense use to historians and antiquarians. John P. B. Brooke-Little, Norroy and Ulster King of Arms, founded the Heraldry Society to encourage heraldic studies and is himself an author and editor of *Boutell's Heraldry* and Fox-Davies' *Complete Guide to Heraldry*, still the most useful guides to describing coats of arms correctly. Other works also demonstrate a marked renewal of interest in heraldry from a scholarly perspective. *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* is clearly in this camp. Instead of the mythical snobbisms beloved of some earlier writers, what we get here is careful and well-presented historical argument. This book is sound not only from the standpoint of the authors' heraldic expertise, it is good scholarship as well.

It is also magnificently illustrated. One of the great advantages of having this work written by heralds is that they can make use of the archives of the College of Arms not only for the sake of evidence, but also for the sake of art. Many of the records in the College of Arms are beautifully illuminated and illustrated, and *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* is full of beautiful plates, from medieval Rolls of Arms to double-spouted whales. Both in color and in black and white, the illustrations are worth the price of the book.

Anyone interested in heraldry will find this book fascinating, and anyone even slightly interested in history will want to read it. Heraldry is more than a social climber's dream; it is history made visible. It is also the iconography of honor, and as such still exerts a powerful symbolism appeal on both sides of the Atlantic. 🐉

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