

THE HEALING ARTS

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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I like to think that Mrs. Mitchell, my fourth-grade teacher, would be pleased to see the results here of an interest she expressed in my writing some forty-odd years ago. It has been a while.

I would also like to thank Mr. Lester Goran who encouraged me, a decade later, during my very first years at university.

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THE HEALING ARTS is a collection of ten short stories written in 1995 and 1996. They deal in the main with people who seek assistance from unconventional sources including, for example, phrenologists, graphologists, and ventriloquists. A question is raised, finally, quietly: What is the nature of cure?

AMERICAN PASTIME

A man is on a train. He is traveling through Italy. He does not like trains, does not like being abroad, shuns people who cannot speak English. It is after three a.m. He has been on and off this same train for nearly two weeks. He is listening to Larry King interview Little Richard on the Voice of America. The station fades in and out. The train last stopped in Spoleto where he bought batteries for his radio. It takes nine batteries and is heavy and causes his fingers to cramp when he presses it to the window of his curtained compartment for better reception. Hungry for America, he didn't want to leave.

A caller from Mobile tells Little Richard he has every record Richard has made. Richard is pleased, he howls, "A wop bop a lu bop, a wop bam boom." As an afterthought, the caller adds that his mother and Richard's mother used to, well. . . . The station is lost as the train enters a tunnel.

When the train emerges, the talk show is gone, replaced by a baseball game. The man on the train dislikes baseball. What he likes is running seven brisk miles in hiking boots and three pairs of socks. He often hurts himself running. His toes turn black. He splinters his shins. On more than one

occasion, his ex-wife has told him to stop. When she says stop, spittle flies from her teeth. He does not stop; he believes in running through pain.

The man on the train is handsome in that way that comes from having been handsome early. His handsomeness is such that he will remain so into his seventies. He travels in Italy and he is still young--those who see him guess--in his thirties, or his early forties, it is hard to be specific about the blessedly handsome.

He wears small oval spectacles in silver frames. The glasses make him look thoughtful, but like something of a fop as well. He hopes they make him look like a pharmacist. What he is, is a ventriloquist, a failed ventriloquist, and the son of a wealthy man, recently dead.

Women find him attractive. In elevators, women ask him what floor he is going to. "Ten?" they say, "why you're going to ten and I'm going to twelve. Even numbers, both--you see we have something in common." They call long distance and say they have found just for him a record album, years-out-of-print, Maria Callas singing Madam Butterfly.

In the afternoon, on the boulevard when it rains, his hair slick against his head, he looks older. It does not matter. Women come up to him in the street and ask for directions to places they have been going to regularly for years.

He is unimaginatively handsome. Women take off their watches, then ask him the time of day. They ask him if he has a light, or change for a dollar.

They do not ask him, however, if he has any tattoos or if insanity runs in his family. He is unarrestingly good looking; invisible in a lineup.

He is uninspiringly handsome. Women desire him the way stamp collectors seek relatively ordinary first-day editions--valuable only insofar as they complete a collection. To the handsome man, women divulge secrets they would not tell anyone else. His eyes are wide-set and gray with bits of carnelian at the periphery. He will stay the whole night listening to women tell him their stories, and pondering all the while the difference between oboes and bassoons--a distinction meaningful to him.

His good, fine looks, his look of handmadeness cause people to speak to him wherever he goes. Strangers inquire after his health, his well-being, his intentions, whether or not he is lost; he often appears unsure of his surroundings. He wears a watch on each thin and muscled wrist and consults them often and he likes his watches very well. He is not content and though he could not tell you much about this he knows it has something to do with time. The train which carries him through Italy is traveling half a century after Mussolini and it is not on time. These people who come up to him, who speak to him, they are boisterous, making all manner of gestures of welcome. Often he puts the pretty fingers of his hands to his temples and shakes his head and shouts at them, "I do not know what you want. I cannot hear you."

He is smallish, spare, lithe, though there will be some thickening by the time he reaches sixty. There is none of this heaviness about him now as he travels on a train at three in the morning in Italy north of Tuscany.

When a child, he clung happily to relatives, enjoyed the feel of them, their solidity. He had a good, fine head for fractions and percentages. He enjoyed thinking of things in terms of their being partially this and partially that. It came to him one day that life was so much done and so much left. When he fished with his father and his father's brothers on their boat in the Gulfstream, the men tied handkerchiefs about their heads but sweat still poured from their long gleaming hair and they fretted about the sun and the heat, how fierce the heat and the sun were even before noon. He did not think of the heat and did not sweat. He imagined instead the day as not yet half over and liked that there was more to come than there was gone. He began to think this way, in terms of scarcity and plenty. Heat didn't bother him, nor did cold, but time used up irritated him like having to sneeze and not sneezing.

He is early in his life, calculates he is in the first sweet third of his life, yet he worries about bad blood, not wanting his own to become heavy and disconsolate. He is desirous of blood that courses and roils. Ponds depress him and bogs, all still and brackish and nowhere to go. He wishes for action of any sort. It is to the bordellos in Florence he wants to go more than its ravishing museums. More than staring haplessly at The Last Supper in Milan he would like to watch ginger-haired whores part their limbs like the slow and showy display of spring amaryllis.

Perhaps he prefers the company of older women, although he is not entirely sure of what he prefers: hard cold slices of Genoa salami one day are

delicious. And the next, he must have lamprey or eel, something which swam once in the sea. His attractiveness is owing in part to his being properly turned out, well-mannered, the product of boarding schools.

When the handsome man makes love to women, they are likely to cry. Their faces go red. They close their eyes and clutch at him with their fingers. He does not know what to do when this happens. They tell him they are all the better for having cried with him. They tell their friends he is indefatigable in bed. If asked he will whisper profanities in his partner's ear. Women ask him to turn his face toward them while they undress. He is always appreciative. In candle-lit rooms he is at his handsome best. The semi-darkness lends his face a haggard look which it is missing in daylight. When it is dim and he is with a woman, he removes his silver spectacles, not wanting to see everything.

And yet what he thinks of mostly are sex and time. The train has taken him through the mountains of Spain. And the sun-baked, purpled ridges, the mounds of the Pyrenees to him are breasts. And the cathedrals of Europe, with their proffered, elongate spires, swaying penises. The splayed legs and spangled arms of the naked girls in the salons and whorehouses of Venice seem to the handsome man merely markers of hours and minutes. He understands things as if they were other things.

He has been off the train, taken respite in the Firenzi Gardens, viewed the statues there, and been struck momentarily by the impassivity of the marble, the density of the stone, but then become distracted, become just as

interested in the bits of red splotchiness that have surfaced on his wrists, under the synthetic watch bands of his Swiss watches, one set to North Carolina time where it is eight hours earlier than it is on this train, which careens noisily through the north of Italy.

The handsome man cannot recall whether it is centrifugal force which causes an object to continue traveling in a straight line or if it is centripetal force, but the train is disinclined to turn, lurches around curves. The train leans and wallows and tosses him this way and that. It is difficult to hold his radio and he thinks how he does not very much like trains.

He is untroublingly handsome. Women unburden themselves of bruises and wounds stored deep in psyches, make public the deep humiliations, make public--to him at least--what they have kept private: the feeling that something may be irrevocably wrong with their lives. The handsome man listens compassionately. He strokes their fingers, quiets their trembling wrists. Steadies them. He always smiles and does not say too much. The women realize immediately he will not be touched by anything they say. Nothing will adhere to him. There will be no residue, no sediment. He has sat pleasantly for hours listening to confessions that are of utterly no interest to him. This freedom from accusation, certain of the woman like very well. Certain of the women find it liberating.

Out of the tunnel, the train rolls down a butte, hurtling through the night, and baseball, the American pastime, is lost and Little Richard is back. A Rabbi from Charleston, South Carolina, wants to know if Richard has ever

worked with Paul Robeson. The connection is bad and Richard is confused. He thinks the Rabbi is asking about Saul Grossman with whom Richard once had a brief but hurtful affair. He cannot answer. There is, for the moment, on The Voice of America dead air.

It is dark outside the train. From the carpeted corridor each sleeping compartment is illuminated by faint night-lights. They glow mossy green. The handsome man feels buoyant as if the train were an aquarium. He thinks he may read and turn down the covers and sleep. Earlier, there was supper: *platessa*, good little Mediterranean fishes sautéed, on white porcelain plates. And then there was yogurt and coffee. The dining steward had paired him with the woman across the hall in compartment *Due*. Perhaps that was how pairings were done.

She had declined the fish, settling on vegetables in glistening Tuscan oil. In Italian she ordered a large festive drink. It was full of slices of casaba melon and papaya and kiwi sculpted into the shape of a parrot. During a meal which the handsome man found pleasant enough, the compartment *Due* woman spoke briefly to the melon parrot as if by supper's end she might successfully teach it a word or two. The handsome man smiled at her efforts.

She spoke to him as well. She said, "I am writing in my compartment with a computer but I cannot make too much of margins." Her skirt might have been good Irish tweed. The handsome man couldn't be sure. She smiled. They both smiled. "There is nothing down the center of my page. My words have parted. I feel like Moses in the middle of the Red Sea. Perhaps

later, when you are finished, if you know something about these things . . . you could help.”

“I have with me a fountain pen,” the handsome man said, “two good bottles of American ink and a packet of writing paper.”

“Then that is something,” she said.

The handsome man has brought with him to Italy a wooden ventriloquist’s dummy: a dummy he cannot make to speak. It has been carved from the trunk of a Tirabinth tree and sanded to the color of sail cloth. Its maker has painted the dummy’s face titanium white mixed with a smudge of saffron. The dummy appears sallow and ailing. “Jaundiced,” the handsome man thinks. The tree from which it was fashioned succumbed to a swarm of boring weevils and the dummy’s left cheek is purplish, the color of Mulberry tea. The paint does not quite hide the violet tint, so there is left what could be mistaken for a sizable birth-scar. Hand-painted horsehair eyebrows curl down slightly on either side of the dummy’s nose making it look as if he is wincing courageously at some hidden pain.

The handsome man began by calling the dummy Fyodor and Ajax, but he would not speak. So since then, he has called him Terraplane and Césare and Willy but the dummy must not like this very well for still he is silent as a yule log. For a week the handsome man has settled on Gustav. They have stayed in hotels in Rome, the handsome man ordering meals left at the door, not leaving the room, speaking to the dummy all night loudly and slowly as if Gustav were slow but educable.

"Dov é il banco?" he asked the dummy. *"Dov é il banco? Where is the bank?"* Gustav stared with unblinking china-blue eyes. He said nothing. His lips were thin, pink as a healing scar. He had the face of a hemophiliac.

Not one single word, not a cough or a sigh issues from the dummy's lips. The handsome man is speechless, tongue-tied with the dummy on his lap. His hand stuffed in Gustav's back, the handsome man cannot open his own mouth. He cannot imagine for a moment what it would be like to be someone else.

He lays the dummy in a net hammock above his own bunk. He says to it, *"Gustav, in Respighi I will take you to the beach. You will look altogether splendid in a folding chair at the edge of the sea."* He reaches up and forces the dummy to bob his head up and down in agreement. *"We shall rent an umbrella with blue and white stripes to protect you from the circling gulls."*

The train slows, makes its way uphill. The handsome man lifts Gustav from the hammock and opens his dummy's lips with his fingers and presses his ear to them. He thinks he hears Gustav breathe. The radio has fallen silent. There is no Little Richard, no baseball. There is a knock on the compartment's glass door. It is the woman who has been trying to cross the Red Sea. Her lips are moving. He cannot hear what she says.

From floor to ceiling, he fastens each of the curtain snaps in place. He sits on his little bunk and stares at the fixed stars. He cuts off both ends of a banana and slowly eats what is left of it. Someone has told him that the tarantula lays its eggs into the dark heart of the banana tree. He is afraid of

eating these eggs. He believes tarantula eggs will cause him to dance for days. He is not a dancer. He has no partner. There is no depending on Gustav. His is the only mute dummy in all of Italy. The train goes faster. The handsome man sits and waits. He tries to calculate what is left and what is gone. He moves closer to the window.

When it is dawn, he has not moved all that much and he is still there, his smooth, luminously handsome face pressed against the cold Italian glass.

MY APPOINTMENT WITH BABBOT

Because I knew someone, I was able to see Babbot, the phrenologist, a mere ten days after my first call. People in Kensington, whose problems were surely worse than mine (if rumor be true), had been waiting a year or more. I, however, was urgent and was able to convey urgency, which many people are in fact not able to convey.

Other people convey embarrassment, or fear, or irritation or unhappiness or anger, but they give the impression nothing would be all that different if they were forced to wait a day or two, or two weeks--or a month. I urgently told Babbot's personal secretary my bumps were different and would not go away. And so a week and a half later we met for the first and last time. He was huge.

Babbot is so tall you would never recognize him on the street. The engravings simply do not capture the hugeness of him. He is like a tree staring out his window overlooking the Seine. The morning light shatters against his shoulder dappling his sitting room and making me think of a forest.

His head is, well, I should say his head is magisterial, a description I am not entirely happy with but what else am I to call this majestic skull, covered

with a thicket of white hair? His is a weighty head suitable for deep ponderings. Mine is small, but an ample enough cavity for the silly trifles which flit about in it like wisps of curling fog. Babbot's head is cavernous. You would expect no less. He has a fine shining forehead, gleaming with intelligence. His features are patrician, stately and spare, but there is a heaviness in his physiognomy. His chin is bulky. If it were a ship, it would ride low and sluggish through the water.

Babbot's eyes are splendid, hazel and randomly flecked with yellow as if he had stood once too close to a jeweler's wheel and been showered with gold dust. He wears a gray vest; from it hangs a gold time piece which reads a quarter till eleven. Thank goodness, I'm on time! To begin on the right foot is all I ask--well no, not really, more importantly, what I hope is to finish on the right foot. Over his left eye, Babbot has wedged a glass magnifying lens which he has withdrawn from his morning coat. It is attached to a lustrous blue-black ribbon. Babbot looks festive wearing it.

You are interested in Babbot's fingers, his instrument; yes, they are long and tapered like holiday candles. But they are thick and strong as if Babbot had worked in the coal mines outside of Lyon. His hands are wide and powerful, hands which could do brutal things.

Babbot is as handsome as a man can be. He pulls at you, drawing you toward him with the fierce magnetism of a Mesmerist, which he, assuredly, is not. He is the greatest phrenologist in Europe, the legitimate heir to Gall and

Spurzheim. And, I believe he is the only man in the whole world who can still save me.

His office is a bright eight-sided room in a frame building on Eighth Street off the boulevard of San Michele. Babbot dabbles in octagonology and water therapy, in alchemy and the transmigration of souls. His intellect teems with questions; his mind, expansive and inquiring, unearths possibilities like a gardener turning the soil. But Babbot's life work is phrenology. He has written, "We celebrate the head, not the hand, not the breast, nor the heart, nor the genitals. Knowledge is accessible at the skull's surface. It is as close as our fingers. Wisdom is the offspring of the caliper and the rule.

"As phrenologists we are cartographers of the mind discovering those timeless laws by which mankind may live most naturally. We chart the high plain of the cerebral landscape. In the contour of the skull lies the outline of our days." Babbot is a genius, of course. He outsells Darwin--with his interminable prattling about finches--ten to one. I am counting on Babbot.

I desire fervently to establish myself in his good graces from the outset, and so I say, "Babbot, I commend myself, quite literally, into your hands." He does not laugh but stares at me protractedly. Between his eyebrows there is a crevice and, over his right eye, a series of well-worn creases. Around his mouth, however, and at the corner of his eyes, Babbot's skin is smooth and unmarked. He is a man whose face seems unfamiliar with laughter and I am afraid we have gotten off to a bad start.

“Take off your cap,” he says. “Turn toward me.” He raises up his arms in front of him interlacing the fingers like a church steeple. His accent is unexpectedly rustic; I had not known. “Put your elbows up on the desk like this.” There is a Cézanne on the wall, and a Breughel. Babbot is a champion of people. “Press your hands together and place your chin on top of them.” He takes hold of my face. I have not shaved before coming. My beard is bristly, an oversight on my part, not a good sign. Babbot presses his index fingers into my temples. There is a modicum of pain. I do not flinch; I do not grimace. Anyway, Babbot does not notice. I can feel the rigid edge of his fingernails. He moves his hands over my cheekbones and then out over my ears to behind my head where he rests the tips of his probing fingers on the bony shell of my occipital ridge.

“You are a great lover of children.” I tell Babbot I live alone in two-and-a-half rooms from where I can see the piers, the tethered sailing boats, from where I can smell the *patisserie*. He moves his hands up higher, to the crown of my head where my sandy hair is getting sparse. I have forgotten to rub in pomade. My hair is dry as straw in the absence of emollients. I was eager to be on time and was foolishly satisfied with the running through of a wet comb. Babbot’s hair is so thick he must tend to it with a rake. His part, on the right side, is broad as the Ganges. Full of electricity, his hair is furrowed, not combed. So healthy, you could plant corn in it.

“You have a pronounced fondness for animals,” Babbot says. He has closed his eyes and breathes softly. I think he is wearing Eau de Lilac. He asks,

“Have you entertained with any seriousness the idea of acquiring a parrot, a loquacious bird bedecked in the many colors of Joseph’s wonderful coat?”

I am flummoxed; Bible is not my strong point. If Babbot were to ask me about architecture, flying buttresses, the early physiological drawings of Christopher Wren, I would be on firmer ground. But regrettably I am forced to assure Babbot I have not considered the purchase of a parrot. He clears his throat and then asks, “Or a macaw?”

I am loathe to displease Babbot. I am already bereft of joy. In my cramped room, on top of a chest of drawers I have set my own phrenologist’s head. I make up my bed and smooth the blue spread over the green spread. The blue is so much more elegant but the green is rent down the middle.

My head is from Arbrister’s in London. It is hand-polished ivory, not plaster of Paris. Smooth as sea stone, it is of one piece, almost too heavy to lift. A full month’s wages it cost me.

I sit on the bed on the elegant blue spread drinking a cup of milky tea. I peer at the head. The phrenology texts, the best-sellers and the arcane, I have read them. I am aware that the brain is compartmentalized into thirty-five separate localities. I try every night to propagate the good in me. I press my knuckles into the sockets of my eyes and struggle to create more room for my stunted organs of contentment. I strain to provide a dash more commodiousness to house my dwarfed spirituality, my diminished apprehension of a higher order.

I read at night that ancient Egyptians believed thought resided in the kidney; for Aristotle the brain is in the heart. I think of Descartes affixing the soul securely to the pineal gland. And on the edge of my bed I wonder how far we have come. I press against my forehead till the skin goes white. I squeeze the front and back of my head at the same time trying to compress my skull, make it smaller till there is no room left for avarice and doubt and lusting after flesh, nor whoring after beauty. But to no avail. The woman in the flat below me moans in the night. Her skin is lovely and whiter by far than my ivory head which even at night shines unceasingly.

Babbot knows the solutions to problems such as mine. He has written papers correcting errors in Kepler's description of the epi-cyclical nature of planetary satellites. He has confirmed Broca's situating the linguistic centers of the brain. Esterhazy has declared Babbot's capacity for analytical endeavor, without limit.

Babbot forces his pinkies into my ears until all is silent and I am left to the contemplation of the coursing of my blood. With one rough smack, he raps the top of my head with the heel of his hand. My chin slips off my hands. "Sit back up now," says Babbot. He forces my eyebrows together measuring the distance between my ears. He is determining (I have read of this maneuver) my potential for joy. He prods the ridges beneath my eyes. He pulls my head backward. I have displeased him. Babbot concludes his examination. There is nothing left to hide. I almost cannot bear to look at

him, so great is my shame, so obvious my shortcomings, so manifest my guilt.

There has never been one the equal of Babbot, not Archimedes nor Copernicus, not Gallileo nor Newton, not even Pascal. Babbot has been speaking for some time. He has been talking to me and I have missed what he has told me because I have become aware that my last opportunity has come and gone. I feel the cold November air as it snakes up my sleeves and wraps me head to toe. Very loudly Babbot says, "Why have you come here, if not for a parrot?"

"To prepare myself for better days." I must make myself understood to Babbot. Though my plight is as glass, I must tell Babbot nonetheless. "I have come to fathom what is at the bottom of the well. I cannot see by myself. I am dependent on the surpassing clarity of your gaze. In these times it has grown so cold, I am come for warmth."

"And so I have told you," Babbot explains. "Your needs can be met with a parrot; the more colorful the better."

"I have not come to start an aviary!" I shout.

"We both know why you are here. I do not think we can be mistaken about that. Now you must go. Your time is up."

That chill morning Babbot towered over me. He looked at me in what I took to be an encouraging manner. I thought he might be considering my eventual return. Perhaps he should want one day to re-examine me, conduct a formal craniometric protocol. I said, "I think there is something else you are

going to tell me." Babbot handed me my overcoat. He spread the sleeves wide and helped me into it. He patted the top of my head with the palm of his hand.

He said, "You think about a macaw. They're not so clever as parrots, they're cheaper, and less apt to judge."

CILANTRO, AND OTHER PERISHABLES

When I left, I left groceries in the kitchen. I got in the car and drove west into a late afternoon sun that dipped beneath the windshield visor and kept me blinking through sun glasses. I perspired; I kept notching the air-conditioner up higher.

Normally, I would never have left groceries out like that. Ten times out of ten, I would have put them away first thing. My wife and I are scrupulous. We take care of things at once. I have not always been this way, certainly not. But in ten years, Theresa has bent toward me and I, toward her.

At first, she was not interested in music, without which I was certain I would quickly perish, but soon there was a cello around which were wrapped Theresa's bare legs. She was trying to win me over. She made an effort: sang show tunes, sang 'Try to remember, try to remember, when love was an ember about to billow.' Now, she hums in the morning over coffee. And I, in turn, regularly scoop up my socks and trousers from off the floor at the foot of the bed when once, I used to let them lie there for weeks, or until company came.

My wife has unraveled the complexities of the spray-iron for me. I do my shirts inside-out now--mistakes harder to see. The laundry charges a

dollar and forty cents a shirt. I gather them up and do five at a time. With the seven dollars I save, I bring home a Sunday Times for us with fresh juice and cinnamon pastry. I prefer blueberry, but I bring home cinnamon.

When I was single, I left the tops off toothpaste and bottles of milk. I had no discipline. I practiced scales and then went off to recitals. I played with jam on my cuffs. "Everyone thought you only knew Jelly-Roll Morton," Theresa joked back then. She began capping the toothpaste, putting the tops on the milk. These things have not been so difficult to adapt to. Change is not altogether difficult. Heraclitus, I think, yes, Heraclitus said, "You cannot step into the same stream twice."

My wife and I became a team. We each gave a little, and our world was good. There was every reason to believe it would stay that way. Theresa sang, 'My world is empty without you, babe.'

In those day we lived upstairs in an old wooden house. The kitchen had a southern exposure and we grew plants on the window sills, and they thrived. There was a two-burner gas stove, a claw-foot tub, a refrigerator whose freezer section I defrosted monthly with a hammer and a chisel. We had four cats. Theresa ordered mail-order underwear. She insisted I choose. When they arrived, we found out they were made in Sri Lanka. Theresa said, "What do you suppose those Sri Lankan women think when they make these?"

I didn't know quite what she was getting at. "It's a very religious country, Sri Lanka," Theresa said. "Sri Lankans wear snowy white turbans, like chef's hats." We were very fine together.

Nonetheless, there developed something minor, something irksome. I, for one, have never liked the way Theresa looks in red. I think it shows in her a certain hardness that I find unsettling. She has agreed, out of kindness, to wear red only on special occasions. So, there were times when she left the house in dark red taffeta, or copper-red--quiet and illicit as a moonshiner, and times she went out the door beet-red, and red-herring red, and sometimes, I thought, scarlet-letter red.

It was not out of a lack of conscientiousness, then, that the groceries did not get put away. I did not get a chance to--really. This is what happens I suppose to anyone when the phone rings and a stranger at the other end, in a coarse, brutish voice commences to tell you without even determining whether or not you are the correct party with whom he wishes to speak that your wife has been cheating on you for five years, for half of your married life, cheating. You ascribe to the groceries, then, less of a priority than you had before the call.

In case I don't believe him, the caller describes for me Theresa's tiny birthmark shaped like the boot of Italy which is low and in the center of her white belly. I have always adored this boot, a burgundy boot which it seems to me wishes it could travel up my wife's beautiful stomach, striding northerly,

unrelenting, finding rest at last in my wife's delicate navel. I have told my wife often how fond I am of her Italianate boot.

Once we were enjoying ourselves at a friend's cottage on a lake. Our friend brought out crystal glasses. There was a pink sunset; the light in the cottage ran to amber. Our hostess said, "Oh, what shall we eat? Something special with our fumé." "I can never get enough Italian," I said, and watched slow laughter come from my wife's moist mouth. She opened her legs almost imperceptibly until her knees no longer touched.

I ask the caller, "Why are you calling me?" He tells me how Theresa drapes the heel of her foot on his ass when she is really going at it. He pauses for breath. He says that Theresa coughs when she comes; he tells me how she always clears her throat when she's not faking it. He is right about that--she does: just a little cough and then, very kind, "You go ahead. You finish."

A little while after we were first married, though, there came into my head an ugly fantasy which I could not easily get rid of: that my wife continued to see the man she was engaged to when we met. He was her speech professor, a philologist, in love with the letter **R**, the color red, and not much with Theresa. He lived on the top floor of a two-story duplex. He was not well-off. Theresa was his graduate student. She was investigating how very terrible stroke victims felt not being able, suddenly, to say what they were feeling. Some of Theresa's research was over at his house. She went over every so often to correlate data.

One night we were in bed, and Theresa had on a T-shirt that said "Loose lips sink ships." She closed her fingers over my mouth. She said, "Talk to me." She was pressing down very hard flattening my lips with the heel of her hand. She said, "Tell me what you're thinking." I couldn't tell her. "Now you know what it would be like to have something significant taken away from you." She slipped a finger in my mouth. "You see," she said, "my work is important." That was why she was going over once a week to her professor's house.

I was a new husband, still unsure of what a husband does. I followed her one day. I borrowed a friend's car. I wore a baseball cap low over my eyes. She drove to his house. She kept brushing her hair along the way. She hurried to the door, opened it with a key. I watched as she started up the stairs. I remember how I waited in the car for a while. It was November; it had just turned chilly, it was gray. This professor had a stone bird-bath in his yard. I kept looking at what I believed were sparrows for quite some time. I thought they might be finches. There were Necco wafers on the front seat. I tossed them underhand to the birds. I was out there for some time. The radio was set to an oldies station. They played Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers. They played 'That'll Be the Day,' and 'Bye Bye, Love.' Finally, I got out and went up the walk not knowing what I planned to do. And not knowing, I just hurled myself at the front door and it shattered and gave way, and my shoulder gave way as well. I fell forward into a hall, my cheek coming to rest on a carpet which smelled of oregano, of paint stripper, of Doberman.

I started screaming, "Theresa." I couldn't scream very loud, my face pressed against that carpet, and I couldn't seem to get up. I kept yelling as best I could, "Theresa, Theresa!" Soon my new wife came rushing down the stairs. She had on a T-shirt that said, 'Speak the speech I pray you, as I pronounce it to you.' She was naked except for that. I could see her boot, wet and glistening. I had time, there on the floor, to think that the door had given way like broken promises. I was very new to all of this, and that is what came to me.

In about two months my shoulder healed and around that time the professor sent me a bill for half of what it cost him to replace the door. Theresa said half seemed fair--she said she and the professor would have opened the door had I just knocked--and she said that she had correlated all the data she needed and wouldn't have to go over to his place any more. I became, I guess, like the speech-damaged people Theresa helped: suddenly, I couldn't say what I was feeling.

The caller took a long time. He kept wheezing and I couldn't help thinking how he might have emphysema or something respiratory. I began imagining him having to tell Theresa, right there in the thick of things, she'd have to stop and wait a bit while he got his wind back.

If it was asthma, then a quick pull on his inhaler and they could continue without much disruption. But what if it was his heart and the caller's chest grew tight and the tips of his fingers grew numb? Wouldn't he have to ask my wife to please raise herself off of him while he placed pills under his tongue and waited for his arteries to bloom with oxygen till they

wriggled like a garden hose. If it was a matter of the heart, wouldn't Theresa be running the risk of his dying while astride her.

The caller went on and on till I found myself becoming inattentive. I stood up slowly and leaned against the sink supporting myself on my elbows. I turned on the faucet and scooped water into my mouth. It was becoming difficult to hear over the water. I kept hoping the caller would pause so I could interrupt and let him know that I really ought to, at least, put the ice cream in the freezer. It had to be going to mush by now.

He became sullen. He wanted to know if Theresa spread out her arms and turned to me while sleeping. He felt that while she was passionate for the moment, in the long-run, my wife was woefully unaffectionate. He told me Theresa, who for years had promised she would leave me when the time was right, was leaving him.

"Is that why you're telling me this," I said. "because she's leaving you?" He quieted. His words were muffled and came at the end of long silences. I understood at some point that he was trying very hard not to cry. "And guess who she's leaving me for," he said. I tried to sit down in a kitchen chair, lowering myself slowly, keeping my spine straight.

"Who?"

"A fireman," he shouted.

I said, "What if I know you? I may know you. Do I know you?" And when he didn't answer, I told him I was sorry things weren't working out for him the way he wanted them to but I would have to say goodbye. As I put

down the phone I could hear him shouting, "You know who you ought to be sorry for? That fireman--he's the one going up in flames."

So I left the groceries out: the Bosque pears, the fresh cilantro, the cellophane-wrapped T-Bones, two sticks of lightly salted butter, the Rocky-Road, out on the counter, with the pale watery sun streaming in. When I left, I left the groceries in a brown paper bag just sitting there, abandoned, perishable, and mute.

THE CLEANING WOMAN

Theresa Craighead told Milos Studebaker one memorable May night that her father read Kirkegaard and Schopenhauer to her in his underwear in their kitchen when she was eleven and gangly. She made Colombian coffee for him and poured it over cracked ice into chilled glass mugs. He slouched on a barstool, his toes gripping the edge of the countertop, and read aloud to her of angst and, fear and trembling, and the precariousness of existence. She was twenty-five now, fair, tall, voluptuous and beautiful.

Milos told her that his own father had always secretly wanted to be a stand-up comic. His father made Henny Youngman seem cerebral. Milos Studebaker was short, paunchy, and combed his hair over on the top to hide his baldness. Taciturn, he had long ago given up on love, yet stared at Theresa wide-eyed over half-reading glasses which had become necessary if he was to read any print smaller than

AMERICA LANDS MAN ON MOON

Reluctantly, he had been skipped ahead in the fourth grade: she held back in the second. He confided to her that hearing music on the world's subtlest sound systems enabled him to believe in God. She urged him to speak only in her right ear as she had lost the ability to hear anything out of her left.

Two days later, early on a morning in spring, he took her to his new home. It was unfinished, the first house he had ever bought. They lay on their stomachs in the upstairs loft facing the forest. Below, on the paint-smearred and splintered wood floor lay abandoned drop-cloths. Iron tubes of scaffolding were propped against holes in walls where sliding glass doors would go. The magnolias shuddered heavily in the breeze.

She sat up, speaking exuberantly, her face gleaming. Her arms flailed and the bodice of her silk shirt fell forward and he saw the profusion of her breasts. Her linen skirt rode up on her thighs revealing the touching whiteness of her underwear. He lay still, trying not to breathe lest he blow away the grace that had transfigured his new home.

"Your house will never be more beautiful than this," she said. He felt certain she was right.

For six years he had worked in cramped cubicles, writing in fountain pen, a doctoral dissertation asserting the loss of linguistic credibility since Newton, and of the consequent and oppressive ascendance of mathematics.

She hoped one day to enter graduate school, but was too frightened to sit for her preliminary examinations.

Offering herself, she read Joyce to him:

Yes, first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth,
 Yes, my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath.
 Yes, he said I was a flower of the mountain.
 And then he asked would I say yes, to say yes, my mountain
 flower.
 Yes. And his heart was going like mad and, yes,
 Yes. I said,
 Yes.

Hardly daring to believe, he spoke, Horatio:

This Bird of dawning singeth all Night long . . .
 The nights are wholesome . . .
 No Fairy takes, nor Witch hath power to charm,
 So hallowed and so gracious is *this* Time.

They could not have been more different: He, forty-seven, arthritic, wary as a tortoise. She licking her fingertips, pressing back his hair, saying, "Much better." Her mother had late in life taken vows as a nun. His sister had become a year ago a fundamentalist Jewish proselyte.

It was inevitable then, that Milos Studebaker and Theresa Craighead told each other, almost immediately, and at the very same time, "I love you."

For three months they went everywhere together. At museums, she cautioned him to leave off touching the Great God Siva with his own mortal fingers. They ate black beans and rice, amused at the waiter who kept asking her if she would have the same as her father. It went so well they made a pact--no matter what--they would never go on Oprah.

From magazines, she cut out pictures of famous couples too tall and too short for one another, too old and young, too patrician and plain,

too duckling and swan. She mailed them to him. "We'll write our own script."

In public they could not keep from touching each other. He spoke to her in fitful bursts, enthusiastic as an auctioneer wanting to tell her everything. They went to tobacconists' shops and slipping clandestinely into chilly humidors, kissed with friendly, searching mouths, stopping to buy hand-rolled cigars from Guatemala, from Honduras.

Outside, they wandered hand-in-hand, lit up their stogies and rushed to buy lamé sheets, perfumed oils, scented candles for the heart of the night.

They lay in his bed and talked till dawn. She wept for her father who now collected plaster replicas of camels and placed them all around his front lawn to please his second wife. She cried and called her father 'The Incredible Shrinking Man.' He suffered from a calcium deficiency and grew shorter every year.

They slept clumped against one another in her fold-out sofa which left them stiff and tilted when they woke. They drove to each other on the Interstate meeting halfway and opening each other's clothes even as they were saying hello.

They reveled in the joyous good fortune which produced in Milos an elation so unaccustomed that the Fourth of July phone call from Theresa came almost as if he had been steadfastly waiting for it. She said in a voice Milos did not know, she needed time to think.

He began staying at home, calling her only when he could no longer bear not to. She answered with a tone of bewildered obligation. There had been one morning when he had slipped out the front door before she woke. He had uncoiled the garden hose and began watering. She tapped on the vertical windows in the overlooking the yard and waved to him. She was naked; she went and baby-powdered herself and pressed against the panes and blew him a kiss.

He looked out his windows at his yard and his garden. And when he stared at the young river birch and the red elm and the sweet gum--trees he had planted and watered faithfully every day; at his impatiens set in the ground in parallel lines around his sloping walkway, the amaryllis with its fragile protuberant fronds--all of this he saw through a glass window upon which remained the powdered outlines of Theresa. He saw what there was of his life through the white tracery of her body. Her rib cage was still visible, its thin bifurcating line vertically cleaving her torso in two. If he peered intently enough at the glass, there was even the minute depression of her belly button; in life, a tiny perfect declivity; on his window, an oval limned with white powder.

Her image, incorporeal, became an apparition that plagued him. In place of the warm, full breasts once proffered to him so eagerly, there remained only a shallow frieze made with Theresa's body serving both as photograph and film.

He would take it down shortly with cotton cloths and Windex. He would obliterate the ghostly image with sponges and pools of white vinegar. He would efface it with rolled up sections of the Sunday New York Times dipped in kerosene. With acetone and mineral spirits he would strip it from the glass.

It was just talcum pressed into glass where she had flattened herself against the pane for him. Baby powder could be dislodged, perhaps as easily as by breathing on it with breath heated in one's mouth by holding it there for as long as one could. Nonetheless, it was the last he would ever see of Theresa's breasts or her wrists, or her waist and as he walked past the window with her body smudged on it, he decided to clean it later. When he went to bed, he reminded himself to take care of it the next morning. But in the morning he would remember that it was in the afternoon with the sun streaming through the window that the image was most visible, and he would go up and put a small cane chair near it and peer through Theresa's body till dusk.

For a long time, then, he did not do anything about the image in the glass. Sometimes in bed, in the middle of the night, he would wake thinking of her, shaking. He would turn on the security lights and in his underwear go outside and look up at the white phantasm.

One day, Milos realized he could never clean it. So he put an ad in the classified section of the paper for someone to help around the house and soon he had hired a desiccated Filipino woman named Estrella who was four-feet-four-inches tall. She told him, without his asking, that she was an

expert in reflexology. He would feel better, she insisted, only after he let her take hold of his feet. She suggested they boil the bark of a papaya tree and drink the broth with salted peanuts.

Milos went upstairs and sat in the cane chair for one last time listening to Estrella shout up to him her many skills. "I can convert Kelvin to Fahrenheit, write for you Haiku, there is nothing I cannot flambé." And she spoke, too, of deeply satisfied customers. "Dr. Lavender's wife loves my work. Call the DeFuniaks; I have their number right here."

Finally he rose and calling down to her from the loft in a voice as brittle and shrill as a floe breaking roughly away from an iceberg, Milos asked Estrella, "Do you do windows?"

AN EXALTATION OF LARKS

White-haired, bird-chested Milos Studebaker sat in his backyard sipping from a cup of hot water into which he had plopped three slices of lemon. He leafed alternately between a Burpee's seed catalogue and the Old Testament. The sun shone down on his forearms warming them. Milos perspired. Tiny rivulets flowed over his pale skin. Little rain was expected. It was Spring.

He was teacher to a dozen or so eleven- and twelve-year-old Bar Mitzvah boys at the Synagogue Hebrew School. This might be his last year. More and more often now, in the middle of the night, it was becoming necessary for his wife to press a plump comforter into the dryer, warm it, and wrap it around Milos's shoulders to wrest from him a stubborn chill.

A new semester was emerging. Milos was a man who looked for signs. He sought meaning in omens and he found omens in the delicate unfurling of tendrils and creepers. He found comfort in vines, in ivy inching toward the sun.

Lately, though, Milos had come across little in the way of augurs to cheer him. An occasional player of gin rummy, his cards left him dispirited.

Holiday was over and done. Forced by their parents, his students came to sit with him from four to six on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. None of them much liked it. Who could blame them: they would rather play baseball, sit under shade trees with blades of grass in their mouths. Were they so wrong in this? They wanted in their hearts to be Ted Williams, Stan Musial, and Mickey Mantle. To follow in the dusty footprints of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to search for doves like Noah: this was not their desire. Milos understood that for his Hebrew school boys the coat of many colors was tailored in Yankee Pinstripes.

This was his fortieth year of teaching. It was enough. He was not so agile anymore. There had been an incident. In December, in *Kislev*, the darkest month of the year, one afternoon late and full of cold, under a pink sky, there had been an episode.

Happy Magaziner, round and sweaty, a child always in stained T-shirts, a troublemaker--a circular cloud of a boy--Happy had waited after class and struck Milos Studebaker with the janitor's push broom, and then struck him again while Milos walked slowly toward his old eggplant-colored DeSoto sedan.

Earlier that afternoon, Milos had ordered the boy out of his class, had escorted him very angrily into the already gray and moonless night. His thumb and index finger Milos had clamped doggedly to the big boy's ear. During every class Happy Magaziner knocked his *haftorah* book to the floor and then swooped it up like some wondrously rescued lover and embraced it

in a way which embarrassed Milos. Happy hugged the book in his meaty arms; he smothered it with loud and slurpy kisses.

The blow, unexpected--inconceivable--caught Milos across the wrist, shattering his ancient Omega watch, leaving an intermittent numbness in his palm which three months later still bothered him. "An accident," the boy shrieked.

"An incident," the boy's parents called it. An incident of consequence, and an incident for which the boy had been dealt with severely. "A valuable learning experience; one our son will not soon forget," they told the Rabbi. And so the boy stayed in Milos's class.

Milos confided to his wife he would finish the semester, but that was to be the end of it. There was money enough. Surely the rabbi could find a replacement. Younger men with better voices. Milos's, once rich, thick, and flowing like honey, now shook and trembled. He would plant garlic and leeks, pomegranates, apricots and dates, fruits and vegetables whose names were named in his Bible.

He would dig furrows no deeper than six inches. He would not go too deep. Stay near the surface. Nothing subterranean. He would try his hand with mulberry and cedar; he would write off and order orange acacia. Pine trees and fir trees, he could acquire easily: tirabinth not so easily. And rows and rows of purple figs.

There came to this semester's group, a new boy. His father drove him over in a station wagon, waited for him the whole two hours. Milos

Studebaker felt good that the boy was there. His name was Amos. His eyes were slightly crossed lending him a studious air. And he *was* studious. He was the best reader in the class. He formed his letters laboriously, writing the Hebrew characters on the blackboard with gravity as if what he wrote was painful to him. His letters were shy characters written in the hand of one used to privacy. Letters clung together, words pressed against each other, unwilling, any of them, to stand alone.

Amos's voice was thin and raspy, caught in the back of his throat, melancholic and fearful. On occasion, he sounded less like a child than a wayward goat bleating. Milos considered him a boy with something to say.

He imagined they would talk. He would tell the boy he was about to retire, tell him, as Moses staring at the rippling Jordan in sight of the promised land must surely have told Joshua, "Listen to me, Joshua of Nun; stand resolute. I, myself, have never really accomplished all that much."

Accomplishments? Well, yes: Generations of boys learning from Milos enough to sing on Saturday morning, to satisfy fathers who combed back their sons' hair, to make mothers joyful, mothers who then wiped lipstick from much kissed cheeks--who smiled and offered to friends generous slices of moist honey cake.

Milos had the fanciful notion that Amos, cross-eyed, left-handed, and dreamy, was privy to some odd, important secret to which Milos, himself, was not.

The new group of boys had met already for a month. Milos had promised his wife he was going to open up--make this last term less stressful, less rigid.

"If not now," she joked, "when?"

Teach them whatever came to mind; he would do that. Not everything worth knowing was to be found skulking in lesson plans, instructions ancient as those for building an ark.

His retirement was a time for parading, for jauntiness. Milos sensed it. "Let them enjoy themselves," his wife said. "Not only Hebrew," she said, "try teaching them something new. Have you mentioned to them an exaltation of larks?" So far, Milos had not.

But on their next meeting Milos Studebaker did something different. For the first hour everyone worked on deciphering the ornate Hebrew letters, giving sound to them, paying attention to the dotted vowels beneath them, chanting them. The Magaziner boy dropped his prayer book once, got away with it, dropped it again--Milos ignored him. He brought the class to a temporary end, told the boys to take a break, pointed to the bathroom at the end of the dark paneled hall.

While they were gone, on each of their desks Milos laid out *rugelach*, pastry rolled around prunes and apples. His wife had made them the night before. She wrapped each piece in waxed paper and placed them all in a leather satchel. She put them on the front seat. When Milos drove to the temple, the car had smelled sweet and fragrant.

He put all the Hebrew books away and laid out for each boy a cup of unsweetened apple juice. The little cakes he arranged on paper plates. He folded burgundy cloth napkins into stiff triangles.

Milos called to his students. They returned. They sat, played with their cakes. They watched him. There had been a dismal and steady rain all the afternoon. Milos was ready to teach. He began, "Eat. Drink. Listen. Let us talk about how the world began with a single sound, with an aleph, with less even than an aleph. Everything, created with a breath. Who, then, has heard how the universe began with a single bang?" Some of the boys looked up. No one answered. It was heading toward dusk. The light in the room was amber. Milos picked out Amos and stared at him; the boy's cross-eyed gaze seemed focused someplace between the two of them.

"A pity," Milos told them. "You will, no doubt, read of all this later." He asked them, "Who has heard of an exaltation of larks?"

No hands went up. Happy Magaziner knocked his apple juice to the floor. In the late afternoon sun it glistened on the linoleum.

"I'll give you an easy one," Milos said. "A pride of lions? Someone has heard of that, yes? No? This rings no bells?" The boys ate the pastries and drank their juice. From the farthest back row, in the very last seat, Zlady Nacht raised his hand.

"Zlady, speak up!" shouted Milos. "Tell us a thing or two."

"Is it all right, then," hesitantly asked the boy, his voice just audible from the back, "if we have seconds then on the cake?"

For ten minutes more, Milos Studebaker gave the children additional examples: a swarm of ants, a bunch of grapes a gaggle of geese, a fleet of ships. Milos spoke with great earnestness, his fingers feathering the twilight air. "What we are talking about here," he said, "are nouns of multitude, collective nouns, or group terms. We use them all the time. Who hasn't heard of a flock of sheep or a team of oxen? Certainly, all of you have heard of a flock of sheep?"

Soon the food was eaten and the juice was gone. The boys tossed the cups and plates and napkins into the wastebasket. They were out of their seats and there were still fifteen minutes left before class was over.

Milos faced them. "Who would like to try and make up our own noun of multitude? Let's do just one together and then it's recess for the rest of the day. This is not anything difficult I am asking of you." Milos looked toward Amos. But the child sat there his eyes closed, his top teeth catching hold of his lower lip. His little body looked weightless as if it might fly off. Milos saw the boy's nostrils flutter. He breathed. The knotted fringes of his prayer shawl, he set to quivering with his sighs. But Amos spoke nothing.

Milos said for his own benefit, "A confederacy of dunces, a chortle of hyenas, a coming-and-going of palindromes."

The boys shuffled their feet. Their sneakers made a muffled sound. Milos thought of purple figs. He thought of his figs floating on the surface of a limitless ocean, far from land, wave-tossed, of no consequence.

One last time, he tried. "A litter of pups, a month of Sundays." He leaned against the edge of his desk. "A hill of beans, a covey of quail," Milos pleaded. "Not even a covey of quail?"

He let them outside for the last ten minutes. He heard them laughing, shrieking. The sun was down. The rain had stopped. The boys were only streaks, uncertain shapes colliding in the dark. He thought he heard Amos laugh. He called out from the doorway. He told the boys, "Go home."

Milos left the classroom and walked to the Rabbi's study. He called his wife. The first two times he misdialled, and then she was there.

"And so, it was fun?" she asked him. "What did they come up with, a bevy of bathing beauties, an ocean of tears?" Milos thanked her for the baking. He told her he would be home soon. "At times, I wonder," he said, "what it is I have been doing all these years."

"So silly, Milos. Don't be silly. Oh, yes," she said, "bring home the leather satchel." He told her he would go back for it. It was still on his desk.

It was dark. The satchel was on its side. Milos righted it, found one last pastry at the bottom. He sat in his chair and ate it, and he noticed something on the blackboard.

In Hebrew, marching right to left, in Amos's tentative hand, were stumbling letters, toppling characters, chalky apparitions, four words holding one another up. There, in the moonlight, in the starlight, in the dark and bitter month of Kislev, Milos read,

A Hatred of Jews.

THE GRAPHOLOGIST

"Genius," I said *sotto voce*. "Genius," I said loud as a thunderclap. So much for me to learn; so lucky, so serendipitous that I should find my way to study at the De La Suisse Center for the Uncovery of Graphpological Meaning. The train trip on Amtrak had been worth it--in spades. Three days and two nights alone in a Pullman berth, a moon so bright on the late November snow that I could almost read by it.

Professor Ilsa de la Suisse had already determined conclusively that the letter writer was of a highly acquisitive nature. He lusted more for money than food, flesh, or fame.

"What go you on to that?" I said. "Was it the severity of his loops, his irregular margins, or the way he jumbles his letters all together like school children waiting in line at a water fountain?"

"No," she said. "But you are beginning, even now, so new to this, to isolate the subtle clues waiting there to be discovered by the unrelenting and sagacious graphologist. Our job is not to read what the writer has said he is saying; our job, and what a splendid and exciting course of inquiry it can be, is to read what the writing itself has to say about the writer."

"I have it now," I said. "You have discerned the penman's consuming desire for wealth by measuring with you titanium calipers the vertical sweep of his -J- above and below the staff's main grid. You can deduce money is his abiding passion because his -J- is as foreboding as a Norwegian ski slope." I waited breathlessly for an affirming nod from Professor de la Suisse.

"I think it has more to do," she said with a sanguinary pause, "with the fact that he invariably scribes two vertical lines through each and every -S- turning them all into dollar signs."

The professor shone a slim waterproof flashlight over the document we were working on. She wore white lace gloves closed securely at her peculiarly stocky wrists, with a single Icelandic pearl.

"Would you call the writer a perfectionist?" she said.

"I would," I said. My first day as a fledgling graphologist and I was making decisions--and making them decisively.

"I would not," said de la Suisse.

"Because there is no such thing as perfection?" I said. "Because man, though he seeks to be perfect, is not God and perfection resides in heaven?"

De la Suisse looked up at me. She wore her gray hair short, a healthy gray, tightly waved, a handsome woman. Suddenly it occurred to me--she looked a very good bit like George Washington. She stood fixing me with a slender stare while she turned on a gas burner and set a kettle of water to boil.

"A perfectionist," she said quietly, "would not have dripped lasagna all over the page, now would he? After lunch, we continue. Now we rest."

I don't know if it was the nearness to the wild, churning waves of the Pacific, but I thought I must be swimming in ecstasy. In two days I would (providing I pushed myself to my very limits--which I had every intention of doing) become a certified graphologist.

Already in only half a day, my life had begun anew. Meals came with tuition at The Center. "Free your cognitive mind!" de la Suisse shouted at me. "Let go of your occidental predispositions. Say the first thing that comes to you. What do you think is for lunch?"

"Creamed herring," I said instantly, "with a California salad of pine nuts and sushi with avocado slices wrapped in seaweed and pesto sauce over angel hair pasta."

"Close," she said. "Lasagna."

Class ended when the professor took me by the arm to Palisades Park. We stood by an Indian totem pole and watched the sun ease its way into the sea. Professor de la Suisse told me if we were quiet we could hear the hiss as it touched the ocean.

We waited for the moment when the sun was finally submerged and engulfed the Santa Monica Mountains in a pink haze, a pastel stem that seared the mountain tops and caused the whole sky to glow the color of roses.

We walked out onto the pier and rode the carousel horses with their gay, gallant heads. The professor bought two ears of corn on the cob and ate them as the wind came in cold off the ocean. Ragged men with pronounced veins and stringy biceps reeled in their lines, picked up their buckets of perch

and yellow-tail and made their way in for the day. A fisherman not more than four feet tall had written on one of his buckets, "Live Bait--Three for a Dollar." He dumped out his few remaining silver-sided fish into the water below.

"He is generous," de la Suisse told me.

His sign was written in a bold hand. The words were regularly spaced and all his letters slanted as if they had been positioned by a geometer. His -Ts- were like identical Towers of Pisa. There was a harmony to his writing, a sense of ease and acceptance.

"He is generous because there is a feeling of sweet understanding that pervades his script," I said. "Am I right?" The professor had several kernels of white summer corn in her hair and I brushed them gently away.

Professor de la Suisse believed in Socratic pedagogy: Whenever I asked her a direct question, she leaned away from it, bending slightly at the waist and dropping her chin an inch or two as if slipping a punch. But this time she said only, "He is generous because everyone else sells bait for a dollar a fish. He must be simple-mined."

In the fading, violet light, I stole another look at the fisherman's handwritten sign and saw clearly now the childish formation of complex letter groups. So frail was his writing that I wondered if he were not the pitiable victim of some scrivener's palsy. His was the penmanship of a child.

At night, the pier smelled of cotton-candy and onion rings. Bumper cars caromed off one another with lethargic thuds. The fisherman trudged in

from the end of the pier, past the carousel. All was not as it appeared. I was learning and I was learning fast.

Professor de la Suisse had assigned me to room in the Sir Lavender Craighead Suite. Craighead had established the first link between handwriting and personality. The professor revered him as the father of graphology. I took it as a compliment of the first magnitude to be occupying his room.

Surprisingly, I was the only one enrolled at the Center. The Professor could have put me anywhere. I was sure de la Suisse was trying to bolster my confidence.

My room was on the second floor at the head of a curved set of yellowed stairs. It seemed at one time to have been a ballet studio as there still remained a *barre* along three walls and mirrors on all four. The room was quite small, facing the ocean, the ceiling being, perhaps, six feet high, and through a skylight, a full moon.

Above the neatly made twin bed with its chenille spread, a small black picture frame, nailed to the headboard, displayed Lavender Craighead's most quoted pronouncement:

The good graphologist, nay the great graphologist, strives mightily to maintain, in his daily life, the very highest standard of physical and mental comportment. He is unfailingly optimistic, unbiased and clear minded.

I am not always the optimist. I mentioned this to de la Suisse in the personal handwriting sample I sent her along with my application and initial deposit. I told her right-out there had been periods in which I saw only the

cloud and never the silver lining. I had doubts and uncertainties from time to time; I was considered weak in the humanities and virtually incompetent in the physical sciences.

I wrote, in as sincere a hand as I could, that I enjoyed a good joke, was fair at board games, but hopeless at darts and things mechanical. I told the Professor honestly that I was not sure I possessed the qualities necessary to produce a first-rate graphologist. "But," I added, "I will be satisfied to be one of the second-rank as opposed to not being a graphologist at all. I have questions that need answering. Like a bridge held in place by creaking girders and stanchions, I am buffeted and unsure of my moorings. I need to come to the Center." I concluded my writing sample by telling the Professor that my grandfather had for twenty-three years re-tipped nibs for the Esterbrook Pen Company.

I removed from a small closet, at the bottom of which there lay several pairs of diminutive, white satin ballet shoes--the right size for children's feet--my one leather satchel and dropped it on the bed. I unzipped it and withdrew my sheaf of correspondence from Annisette O'Dwyer, the Reubenesque, deaf-in-one ear, alabaster-skinned, ongoing love of my life.

On the faces of all the mirrors, on the night stand, on the front of the chest of drawers, Professor de la Suisse had taped hundreds of small, autographed photos. On a Polaroid, attempting that terribly strained smile of his, Richard Nixon in a mocha, short-sleeved golf shirt, had written, "To Ilsa, Thanks for the invaluable insights into JFK's character." The Professor had

enclosed Nixon's -Ns- in ominous circles and written, "So very sad: he actually means well."

There was the famous snapshot of Sir Craighead in Sigmund Freud's parlor, his right hand resting on the great man's shoulder, his left pointing with his elegant graphologist's fingers to a stack of handwritten documents on a low, flower-laden sideboard. On it, de la Suisse had written boldly in black magic marker, "To whom we owe all." She wasn't speaking of Freud.

There were pictures of Satchel Paige and Linus Pauling and the Russian poet, Yevtushenko, who had scrawled, "My darling, Ilsa, thank you for removing the redoubtable writer's block which left me mute for all that awful winter."

There were expressions of appreciation from Richard Petty and Jackson Pollack, the embarrassing, curlicued signature of game-show host Dick Clark and the docile, almost timorous autograph of the Dalai Lama.

Annisette O'Dwyer wrote to me in a sienna eyebrow pencil. She wrote to me on napkins, on the backs of matchbook covers which said "Draw Me!" She wrote on supermarket receipts in India Ink. She wrote with a calligraphy pen in peacock blue across the face of a Nebraska speeding ticket. She always wrote pretty much the same thing: "I cannot love you the way you want me to. Find someone who can. It was just one of those things."

Professor de la Suisse waited for me on the verandah very early in the morning of my second and last day at The Center. She sat in a wicker chair,

her back to the ocean, wearing a Boston Red Sox windbreaker reading an untidy letter from Roger Clemens.

“Good morning,” she said. She offered me prawn and sliced mango. “Mornings are best.” She pointed to a crystal cup filled with fresh blueberries, turbinado sugar and San Joaquin Valley raisins. De la Suisse spread her arms and embraced the surf, the palm trees, the sun, the sky. “All of this, and all day to enjoy it.” Blueberry juice spilled down the front of her chin and I handed her a linen napkin. “So,” she said, “what have you brought us for your final analysis?”

I laid down the lottery ticket upon which Annisette O’Dwyer had scribbled, “I loved you for a three-day weekend, why be greedy?” I handed over a picture-post-card from Utica, New York. Annisette had written on a dramatically descending slant, “It is even colder here than in Rochester. I have met the handsomest taxidermist. He is going to show me how to stuff a tapir . . . gross!” Finally, I passed the professor a newsletter from the Women Quilters of Dahlonga, Georgia. Annisette had painstakingly written across its front in deep leaden furrows made by a number two Ticonderoga pencil, “Do not dawdle. Stop tilting at windmills. You are no Don Quixote. Take the A Train!”

“What do you make of all this?” Professor de la Suisse asked me.

“If nothing else, at least we can tell conclusively, beyond a shadow of a doubt,” I said. “The letter writer is not in love.”

“Based on what evidence?” asked the professor.

“Based on the twenty-two samples I have shown you in which the writer has said over and over again to the recipient that she does not love him, has said so with no uncertainty, has declared it to be the case with absolutely no reservation.”

Professor de la Suisse put her fingers softly on my lips. “*Un momento, por favor,*” she said. “*Leibschin, écoute mon ami, basta,* my sweet one. You are a graphologist now, yes? You have graduated summa cum laude, number one in your class, our valedictorian. Use your skills then, practice your craft. Have I taught you nothing? The letter writer has no middle zone. She is all over the page. Am I right? You see I am right. Look at her -L- in love. It lacks maturity. It lacks focus. Not all is as it appears. Who knows what that love will be. Tell me immediately, you agree with me.”

“I agree with you,” I said. I gathered Annisette’s writings into a bundle and put them next to my plate. I covered them carefully with my hand as I moved closer to Professor de la Suisse. A tardy night breeze fluttered her hair and caused her to shiver. She wore an Oakland Cable Rail Company timekeeper’s watch with a lizard strap. It was 6:48 in the morning.

“She may just be, this letter writer, quite a bit in love, I think,” said de la Suisse.

I lifted my hand from Annisette O’Dwyer’s letters and offered it to the professor. She took it. Then, slowly, like white heliotrope blooming in a brightening desert, we danced round and round and round.

MARRIED FOLK

Cottage: Thatched roof, sloping down, steep pitch so that cloudbursts of rain fall off it: so do thatchers.

Hospital: Private room. A television clamped in a metal harness is on with no sound. Intermittently it goes from mute to full, silent to deafening.

The thatcher is in bed, right arm uplifted in rigid cast. Next to him, his wife, seated in green dress, deeper green than split-pea, more somber green than the pistachio, more sedate than the immodest green of sassafras. Her legs crossed, right over left. She reads the newspaper.

“Have you got aspirin in your purse?” the thatcher says.

She reads. She comes to a section which interests her, folds her paper in thirds.

“Have you,” he says, his voice prowling the perimeter of kindness, “a tin of aspirin, or a paper of headache powder, or prescription medicine in a vial? Well, have you?”

“The doctor says you’re to have none of nothing. He says pain is a good sign.” She takes out a fountain pen, begins, in ink, a crossword puzzle.

“Falling off a thatched roof,” she snaps. “What were you drinking?” She wrinkles up her forehead--stumped.

"Where is it that the birds always come back to?"

"Capistrano," the thatcher, her husband of eleven years, tells her.

"Substantially below par," she says.

"Eagle," he says.

"Four letter word for one who has no sense. Four letters with an F in
it."

"Fool," says the thatcher.

"Wife," says the wife.

MONKEY RAISERS

Say we were a family who raised monkeys. Is that so terribly hard to imagine? All right then; we were a family who raised monkeys and, while we're at it, we were a family who for breakfast sat to table naked, said grace, said, "Thank you, Lord, for blackened bread, this fair day, last night in bed." We prayed, we ate velveeta, and eggs coddled in lemon rind, licked Feen-a-Mint off a spoon, and gentian violet off another, gulped Jamaican coffee from a thermos and passed it counterclockwise till it got back to momma who refilled it.

We raised monkeys and we sold them most often to organ grinders who flew in daily from Czechoslovakia and Hindustan, or trained or bused in from Davie, Florida, and Waynesborough, Tennessee. Our monkeys were musical, outgoing, characteristically cheerful, chittering out of mouths full of teeth-baring smiles, one-man monkeys--loyal as basset hounds. To different grinders, we sold our monkeys for different prices. We posed questions: What sort of music will your monkey dance to, how many hours without a break will he be required to work, at what remuneration, at what altitude? We posited scenarios: Your monkey is feverish; it is the morning of the opening of a children's petting zoo--what do you do? Your monkey is losing hair,

balding at the crown; your monkey is stealing change; your monkey is pregnant--what do you do? We regulated prices accordingly.

We sold our monkeys with a money-back guarantee. We sold them in the spring, when the carousals were up, when there were bands in the park and trellises of bougainvillea, when parents walked children in pinafores and tailored pants. We hawked our monkeys off the fold-down gate of our chartreuse station wagon; and when we had no more to sell we hurried home to lunch on mango and sardine and melted cheese, not Velveeta. We said grace; said, "Thank you, Lord, for gibbon, ape, chimpanzee, and masking tape."

We were a family then, in case the point has slipped you by, of entrepreneurs, Calvinist in outlook, hard-working monkey breeders, and placers of accompanists to organ grinders. My father said we brought more music to the world than Mozart.

How lucky can you get? My brothers felt the same way. My sisters, all three, had no success in digesting lactose, but skipping that, setting that aside, concentrating more on the immodest busts they'd inherited from my mother, they were as privileged and fortunate as the rest of us. My father had silver hair at twenty. His father was a narcoleptic and slept at our house noisily and often.

We sold to gypsies; gypsies were clients of ours. They took us for rubes, *naïfs*.

Filching from the jewelry box on my mother's dresser in her bedroom pleased the gypsies, made them feel like more than ordinary customers. Talking monkey with my father, postulating on pelvic rotation, they smoked dry Afghani cigars, the arid wrappers cracked and turning to ash and fluttering, coming aerobically to rest on my mother's green Chinese rugs.

My father quizzed the gypsies on the American presidency: who was the fattest president, the youngest in office, who served the shortest term, wore the tallest hat, never married? The gypsies crossed their legs, hesitated before advancing invariably accurate responses. They provided my father with White House ephemera new to him. "Yes indeed," they said, "three of your first ladies, practicing lesbians. Yes, for a fact," they said. "Thomas Woodrow Wilson standing on his head, brought upon his unfortunate debilitating stroke by reading the Treaty of Versailles upside down."

Gypsies with circus affiliation pressed up into handstands while waiting for my brothers to bring in armloads of monkeys from the spacious tree house we had built for them. The houses were commodious, all with southern exposures, high in white birch trees. We outfitted them with loudspeakers, put on old seventy-eights, warped, scratched records of circus music and concertina music, and played them till dusk. The monkeys would not quiet until we played Edith Piaff.

Once agreed to a transaction, the gypsies felt obliged to excuse themselves to the bathroom which could be reached only through my mother's bedroom. They felt honor-bound to reach into the enameled box my

mother set out for them. If the negotiations had gone well, they extracted many treasures, a handful of earrings, a cameo, a brooch, a gold sweater guard, ivory combs from Barcelona. My mother freshened the box before they came. She bought tawdries, seconds, fire-sale items. scratched and dented, irregulars, imperfects. On the dresser top itself, she scattered imitation pearl buttons acquired by the boxful. For two-thirds off, she got buttons missing button holes, fragile buttons, brittle buttons stamped from bone, likely to snap at the imposition of threaded needle.

She left out wallet-sized snapshots of people she had never seen, penned names on them in ink, drew hearts around the names, added hugs and kisses on the bottom. The gypsies loved the pictures and buttons the most, but were willing to take some of everything. In this and other things they were courteous and chivalric.

While the Gypsies stuffed their trousers with bracelets whose clasps would fall off by nightfall, I walked to the *portacachere*, climbed inside their Nash Ambassador with the backseat that made up into a bed. I siphoned their gas, took their road maps, the plastic lenses off their back-up lights, the luminous hands from their dashboard clock. We were fair to one another.

My father sold the gypsies light-fingered, carefree, nomadic monkeys. If a rhesus became attached to my sister Gert--and often, inexplicably, a rhesus would--my father would sell it to a convent, or monastery of scholars, perusers of languages long dead. But to gypsies, no. To gypsies went the

acrobatic, somersaulting gibbons, the corpulent red-rumped mandrils with their puffed and powerful buttocks.

Did we have favorite monkeys? Yes we did. For me they were Emil, Josef the Elder, and Jaraslav. Did we have favorite gypsies? Yes we did--always the fortune-tellers: Dame Altoona, Lady Alequippa, the arrogant Boccacio Triplets, and Guillaume, the chin-whiskered, twenty-six-inch Queen of the Gypsies whose eyebrows came to my knee.

One day I sat with gypsies in my father's study, monkeys on my shoulders, gazing into the gypsies' crystal ball, into tea leaves spilling out of saucers. I gathered up worn, papery playing cards dealt me from rickety, unbending fingers. Dame Altoona told fortunes with fish bones--grouper bones for matters of the heart, bones of the long-nosed gar for concerns metaphysical and aesthetic.

Plenty I wanted to know. The gypsies told me my future. They gave me options: I would be an aerialist, a purveyor of bed linen, husband to an alder woman, a slave, a procrastinator, in turn, a gigolo, a cuckold. They hovered over me soothsaying, prophesying, slipping silverware fresh slipped from the Automat into their double-stitched pockets.

Dame Alequippa played the concertina and Madam Olga the ocarina. Hippolyta, even huger in sequined high-heels nibbled on asparagus tips, stopped nibbling, read with lips that moved, headlines from the newspaper, predicted, more dramatically than I would have liked, "You, monkey raiser,

you will grow weak as a lemur, unlikable as a Macaque, unbending as straw, happy only by accident, pensive, plutocratic and all this to little purpose.”

When Hippolyta got like that I would hand her a different newspaper. But it was always the same: where I was concerned, Hippolyta’s vision was always cataclysmic. She was incapable of compromise, close-minded, tunnel-visioned, superbly suited for the prophetically inclined. Though she reduced me to forehead sweats and chattering teeth, it was she alone, I believed.

We were a family who raised, and sold and made a neat profit from monkeys. My father said he was cut out for this. But it was the profit he must have meant for he was chary of feeding the monkeys, took little delight in attending to the intricacies of arranging their mating in captivity. He said it reminded him too much of the real thing.

The male we kept in the compound serviced as many as ten receptive females. We fed him corn meal laced with anise. The females preened and turned in ever narrowing circles around the male who eyed them warily. They mated best in the morning when the grass was shiny with the silken threads of spider aeronauts. We did well enough at raising monkeys that each of us children went to private school where our father took no interest in our progress save that we master the foil. Our teachers were careful not to ask too much of us till we were ready. We did not ready ourselves quickly; we drew rounded lines with plump crayons, soft, meandering shapes with no sharp edges. At home, after school, on occasion--when there were jagged lines of

lightning, when the piercing light of a full moon glinted hard against the monkey-house--our monkeys grew terrified, bit us through our skin to the bone with teeth precise, and pointed and sharp. We screamed and bled and forgave them instantly.

"En Garde!" our father shouted at dinner. The table clothed and laden with all manner of savories, fruits taken from long slumber in Mason jars, sherbet, mounds of salad perched on voluminous beds of lettuce. "En Garde!" shouted our father raising up the carving knife and angling it under the chandelier so that it glinted, shone, splattered light onto our faces off our goblets, off the lacquered nails of my sisters' fingers. At dinner we were a lustrous, shiny, beatific monkey-raising family. At dinner, we said grace.

My father lay down his rapier, cracked his knuckles as we prayed together, hands folded, eyes closed, not scratching if we had to, not moving a muscle except for those required to make our lips move, to make the words of our grace.

"Thank you Lord, for spangle dancers, mohair suits and necromancers." And we washed grace from our parched mouths with ginger-beer, mugs of it poured over shaved ice, grated apple on top. We drank, we ate. My father stared at each child till eyes had firmly locked--held and locked, till each child had stared into our father's eyes; unblinking and speaking no word, making no movement, till he shouted to us all: "En Garde, en garde. Strike when you are ready.

We were motley as a clearance bin.

Our dad sold monkeys. We children wanted to be airborne as gibbons. The street we lived on was a steep meandering ascent terminating in a shadowed cul de sac. It was lined with graceful poplars growing up like inverted pyramids. They reminded me of the delicate thin ankles of the elderly women who trod laboriously up our sidewalks in ivory hose. I sat out in front of the house in a metal lawnchair in shorts. My job, self-imposed, was to stay out under the Florida sun and sunburn and tan and sweat till rivulets ran off of me. I became very good at sitting in the sun staying in one position--not talking, not moving, not blinking.

My mother was afraid of heights. She kissed me a hard, wet, noisy, smacker whenever we got off an elevator. "Thank heaven we're safe after all," she said in her voice pretty as a nightingale's. She would be flushed, then, as if we had had ourselves--rising wobbly from the first to the fifth floor--quite a fine adventure.

We lived in a spacious house. Out back there were pine trees. At their bases, at their trunks, was silty gray sand which served as home to colonies of doodle bugs. We dug them up, let them try for a while to burrow into our palms and then replaced them near to where we had plucked them out of. We had codes of conduct, rules of behavior. We did not squash doodle bugs between our fingers, nor pour turpentine down ant holes. We observed millipedes and did not toss them wriggling into our leaf fires. In short we did not act on every opportunity that presented itself to us to throttle, stab, drown, or muscle--in whatever fierce manner we could devise--the way our

neighbor-friends kicked and battered and slammed--the life out of rodents, moles, frogs, turtles, butterflies. We raised monkeys and there was money in life, and nothing of value in death.

When my father was angry with us for our noise, when he had negotiated badly with the gypsies, or when he turned melancholic, as he occasionally did for no clear reason, he insisted my mother give him his meals separately. She slid closed the pocket doors to the dining room and fed him his dinner on porcelain and laid out a linen napkin to wipe his mouth. We heard him pray before he ate:

“Thank you Lord for damask squares
the Zieder Zee and racing hares.
The ponies on the carousel,
the Barrier Reef, the bagatelle.”

On weekends we children said grace. We did not all of us say the blessing. We sold our turns to our baby sister who was best at it. She saved all her money from chores, all her birthday money, her tooth-fairy money, her allowance, the income she generated selling packages of vegetable seeds door-to-door. She was penurious as a spinster. Her only extravagance, and for which she gave out her money eagerly, was the chance to say grace. A quarter was the going rate. She paid and she prayed:

“Thank you Lord for beets and spinach.
All the food we’ll never finish.
All the crabs and shoats and snail,
The Hebrides, the Gloucester whales.”

My baby sister led us in grace before all major holidays. One night she said a longish one. My sister said,

“Oh Lord, thank you for the good and gracious past to which we willingly cohere. There is so much for us to be happy about. We have new carpet, we have shoes that fit and we have Louise who three-times-a-week comes and irons and cleans for us. When dinner is done and we are through, please, Dear Lord, let father be in a good mood and take us out in the Cadillac for a spin to the Dairy Queen. We will eat prudently like grown-ups and not spill anything on the beautiful soft Cadillac rug beneath our bare feet.

“Bless you, Lord, God of our fathers’ fathers, for the rain water that nightly fills our galvanized tubs and refreshes our beautiful monkeys.”

It was our baby sister’s longest prayer. My father did not take us anywhere that night. And our sister, mortified, handed us each back our quarters.

Besides the monkeys we had pets. Short dogs. We could not have a dog higher than my father’s knee. We raised monkeys, grew wealthy in relation to our neighbors. We raised monkeys who had been bred to stand for the whole of an afternoon alongside an ocarina-playing gypsy--and appear to enjoy it. We raised monkeys, we raised rutabaga, we raised our voices in exaltation and in grace, but our father refused to allow us to raise our expectations much higher than the haunches of our little squat dogs. My father was an acrophobe of sorts: he avoided the temptation of vistas. Our mother knew us children for what we were: pervious, pregnable tendrils. She believed we were photosynthetic; we would rise and flower. She called us dappled with destiny.

A gypsy came over once and bargained furiously with my father. Mother had made a cake that day with frosting pink and brown as August dusk. The gypsy wanted a dozen monkeys in red suits dressed like bellhops to shepherd guests from their limousines and seat them underneath a cavernous white tent she had rented for her daughter's upcoming Sweet Sixteen. She wanted fifteen monkeys for the price of ten. My father wanted a slice of my mother's cooling cake. He walked outside onto our herringbone-planked deck and the gypsy lady followed, swigging impatiently from a cut-glass flask when suddenly the deck gave way and the gypsy woman sank to her ample thighs in splintered pine. We cut her out with power saws. My father sent over twenty monkeys for the price of seven. We raised monkeys, and we were fair.

My baby sister was often annoyed with my father. He had evinced little interest in her having been selected to skip the fourth grade, to pass on to the fifth directly from the third owing to her documented braininess. She shouted at him, "You are the most gorganzolic of fathers." He was immensely pleased with her, then.

My brother and I played a war game with pecans. We cupped two in our palm pressing one against the other until one or both shells shattered. We ate the vanquished pecan and referred to the victor as The Master. One summer my brother had a pecan that remained undefeated in twenty-four straight matches. It became his favorite possession. It was enduringly hard, possessed of an impenetrable shell. He retired it from competition and keeps

it with him still. It demonstrated a hardness, an impregnability that neither my brother nor I dared ever hope for. We were all too pregnable, all too pervious. We had a predilection, a propensity to fissure under fire.

My mother had a favorite monkey, Hannah. She thought Hannah the most philosophic of our brood. Hannah had pensive eyes which could flare up into a frenzy of excitement. She alone among our monkeys--and, perhaps among our family as well--seemed genuinely reconciled to the miracle of her existence. Hannah accepted cigarettes from my mother and smoked them with a quiet purposefulness. She imitated my mother's complicated French inhales, long tendrils of smoke curling in and out of Hannah's mouth and nostrils like neon tubing. My mother liked Hannah, the palindromy of her. She came and went, and went and came wherever my mother was coming or going, and she was happy to sit in my mother's presence but not in her lap. She had a pleasant voice. Hannah did not shriek as did the gibbons and the capuchins. She did not chitter and smolder in a desultory rage like the chimps. My mother enjoyed staying up late, sharing cigarettes with Hannah; she pointed out the stars to her, the glittering constellations.

My mother smoked an odd off-brand, King Sanos. She saved the coupons that came inside the cellophane on the back of the pack. She bought--she never saved enough to get what she wanted with coupons alone, so she made up the difference in cash--many gifts for our family. I went with her often to the redemption center. There was much that I wanted: miniature bank safes with tiny tumblers and weighted doors, Indian moccasins, butter-

yellow and round as loaves of bread, beaded and hand-crafted by someone, it seemed, not in the business very long of hand-crafting. There was a telescope and through it I saw the window curtains flutter in the living room of a suite on the eleventh floor of the Olympia Hotel. An old man was looking out. He was holding a white bowl and eating from it with a spoon. I wanted the telescope and many other things. I had sat with my mother and Hannah when most of these cigarettes were smoked and felt I had a legitimate say in the prize to be redeemed.

My mother walked around the bright, glassed-in redemption showroom and picked up toasters and little clam-like appliances that folded together and did up a grilled cheese sandwich in three minutes. She examined paper-weights, ran her dazzling white, pianistic fingers over a stainless-steel thermos, and then, as if by total chance, chose a portfolio of green handkerchiefs, little pocket scarves really, furls of fabrics one would stuff in the lapel of one's vest if, that is, one's vest were black and sinuous as a panther, and if one wore striped pants natty and sea-green, and if one wore this pleasing outfit while squeezing shut and prying open a huffing concertina. If one were, that is, Apollinaire, the handsome, Romani gypsy who came to our house with his father to buy monkeys but remained outside singing and sunning in our back yard. Mother had bought these silken bits of colored cloth for the lapel of Apollinaire.

"The telescope would have been nice," I said on the bus ride home, on the number-five bus which traversed Miami east and west.

"You see too much, already," my mother said. She had wrapped the Romani's handkerchiefs inside a large bag from Byron's department store. She had bought dish towels there and stuffed them on top of the gypsy's present. She rolled the top of the bag over onto itself as if it were a sock that fit too high on her muscled calf. She sat next to the window as she always did when we rode the number-five.

"Let me hold your package for you."

She looked over at me and said, "Now we will start saving coupons all over again and this time next year you will have your telescope. That is all there is to this," and she took the shopping bag and pushed it against her thigh and pressed it into the slatted metal side of the bus. She lit a cigarette, one of her filtered, mentholated, wood-tipped King Sanos, and drew deeply from it letting a runner of smoke out between parted lips and said, "One down. Your telescope's good as gold." The bus lurched its way west down the Tamiami Trail, toward the canal that ran north and west to Tampa, that ran noisy with the plop and splash of brim and blue gill and sunfish, past the Seminole chickees and the roadside stands full of penned-up alligators, and saltwater taffy, and heads carved from coconut with seashell eyes and seashell teeth.

She withdrew the coupon from the back of the King Sano pack. She folded it in half, handed it to me. Her fingers brushed the palm of my hand. She pinched me very hard on the wrist. "Now hush," she whispered. For the first time ever in my life, I hated her. The bus came to our stop. We stepped

down and out into the afternoon sun. We went inside a pizza parlor for a moment and came out and walked the last few blocks home smelling of oregano and not speaking. I wondered what it was Hannah found so companionable about my mother.

My mother gave the kerchiefs to my father. Apollinaire had flown back to Prague to be with his wife who was expecting triplets--a very lucky sign. It did not matter to me that he had left, that my mother presented the beribboned portfolio of scarves to my father who accepted them as if they were the very thing he had been hoping for for the last two decades or so. It did not matter that my mother and father kissed for a long time in the kitchen, he with one arm around her waist, the other clutching the foulard of neckerchiefs. My mother, for a moment, opened her eyes over his shoulder and saw me staring. "Hush," she whispered. I was on to her. She knew it.

The next week she bought me a telescope from Ruderman's Optics without waiting to smoke the twelve hundred packs of King Sanos it would have taken to redeem one for me with coupons. The first thing I looked for in the night sky were the rings of Saturn and when I located them I found to my amazement that they were not rings at all, but discontinuous streamers of dirt and grit. They seemed to me, a boy in no hurry for manhood, but headed there anyway, a boy, neck twisted back and looking up, disorderly--not rings at all, but phantasms, insubstantial and not to be trusted.

A QUIET LITTLE FAMILY

For nine months Armando Papaya has floated and wriggled and twisted. Now, for three and a half weeks more he listens and he waits; he stays put. His mother is in Mexico City and she worries. With the first two babies there have been miscarriages. During this pregnancy she has lain very still, always resting with crocheted pillows under raised ankles.

She is reading and looks out the window over cobbled streets and wonders why her baby refuses to be born. She hopes that he hasn't somehow found out about his tiny brothers. She thinks that inside her belly there may be echoes yet, faint murmurs that disturb this child who will not kick inside her. With the others it had been a pandemonium, a tumult, a clamor, but from the beginning with this one, this Armando, there has been only quietude. She thinks there may have been an occasional nudge, as infrequent as once a month. And even then she thinks this contact has been an accident for which the baby is apologetic.

She sends postcards to her mother and to friends. "The baby is well. He is a punctual child. He came in the morning with the dawn. Already he has hair, the color of paprika." To her old Spanish teacher, far away in America,

she writes that the birth of her new baby makes her happy every moment.

"Tengo un bebé. Ahora estoy siempre feliz."

She licks colorful stamps on whose faces are glittering matadors hiding silver swords in the folds of crimson capes. The stamps taste like baby food to her, like strained carrots. She feels better after writing, as if her dutiful correspondence makes Armando a real baby.

There is an Aztecan woman, Francesca, much wrinkled and dirty, who comes each day. She lives on the roof of the tenement house at *Catorce Donata Guerra*. The cleaning women sleep there on the roofs sitting upright in wicker armchairs, white sheets bunched in their laps as pillows.

Armando's mother makes Francesca bathe so she will be clean, so the baby will not pick up anything from what is on the roof, from Francesca. She lays out fresh cotton underwear and a camisole rinsed in violets. Then she lets Francesca throw open the drapes which give way onto the Paséo Réforma and the sounds from the world outside come marching into the little bedroom: sousaphones from the gazebo in the park, the yip of a lost dog. Francesca lays cold cloths on Armando's mother's forehead and holds her white hand. She changes the plum-colored hot water bottles, unstoppers them and pours steaming water, drawn from a kettle that hangs over a wood fire, back down their husky necks.

Armando is not eager to make his way into the world. He is happy where he is. His mother neither smokes nor drinks. She does not speak in anger; indeed, she sings Armando Irish love songs which please her

enormously, sings to him in a voice sweet and searching like wind murmuring through mesquite.

Oh once was a new lad, his years were sixteen.
He saddled a mare called the rose of Shaleen.
He rode out by moonlight unshaven and chaste
To come upon true love, his lips for to taste.

When his mother rises and walks, which is infrequent, and which she does with reluctance, she moves slowly, taking pains not to jostle Armando. She takes her steps with precision, one following carefully after the other, her feet hesitant, her toes waiting to see if it is safe to continue.

She has blonde hair on her arms which stands out when the sun is behind her like a shower of gold. Armando's father, bent over a tripod, thumb poised above the shutter, tries often to take pictures of her when it is like this, when the afternoon sun sits on her shoulder, leaving her ablaze. But what he ends up with is an album of black and whites, out-of-focus portraits, blurry, as if Armando's mother had gotten nervous, heard something, and jumped.

After the loss of her second child she felt as if she were flying apart, that all the pieces of her were scattered and misplaced just waiting to be snapped up in the beaks of birds and the hinged pincers of spiders. She told the doctor she was afraid she was turning into sweet-smelling dust. She said, "I fear bees will fly off with me."

Her doctor, who is busy but interested in her stories, tells her these things happen all the time, to women everywhere; they are to be expected and

soon she will feel like herself again. "Alternate hot and cold," he says. She tries. She sweats and freezes until slowly she comes to recognize the rhythm of things. She welcomes the patterns of life, the predictability of ordinary events. In the tub she soaks herself in water that steams up around her puzzled face and she dreams she is there when the earth formed and the oceans shuddered and contracted and roiled with heat. At night, she sleeps with a block of ice under her bed.

In Mexico City the buses clatter by beneath her window. The cheap bus does not make stops. From a platform behind, when you are near to where you want to get off, you jump. With the first two she saved money; she held her breath and she jumped. Now she cannot coax this baby out of her. She considers it strange that the other two slipped from her months before their time, slid unbidden out of her when she did not expect it, made their exit with no fanfare leaving her quiet and still. She is full now to bursting and can do nothing but lie on her back and suck ice cubes and plunge her fingers into cups of hot tea.

She lies in her bed hands folded over her belly which has risen like a mountain freshly grown from the floor of the sea, and she looks at the clouds in the sky. She tells Armando's father that the clouds look like the carousel horses, like Hannibal's elephants, like the chariots of Caesar, but it doesn't matter what she tells him because he reads his paper while she speaks. He smokes cigarettes with no filters.

Armando's father loved the two lost sons. It must be said he loved them unceasingly. The first he would have called Pablito if it was a boy and it *was* a boy and he did not call it anything. And the second, he did not name for fear it would happen again. And when it did, he picked for his second son the name Ephraim which he knew was one of the names for fertility. And Armando's father chose that name only on the day of the boy's funeral when there was need of some name to call it. Though he never says the names out loud, this is what he calls the babies, Pablito and Ephraim, when he thinks of them.

With the death of Ephraim he could feel muscle coming loose from bone. His strength seeped out of him. He was thirty then, yet his youth disgorged in one great rush as if a dam had been breached. While he sat there on a flimsy, gray folding chair, the little coffin at his feet, someone handed him a spade, its shining tongue half-filled with soil. Someone took him by the arm and helped him to the grave. He could not lift the spade; it was too heavy. He felt it fall from his fingers, watched it topple past the coffin coming to rest beneath it, at the bottom of the grave stuck in the open earth. He wondered if they kept spare shovels.

Armando's father reads the newspaper creasing each section neatly when he has finished with it. He folds them flat between his thumb and index finger pressing until his hand hurts. He does not hope. There is no room left in him for hope. He is very afraid that if his third son enters the world as blue as the back of a tuna, he will not have the strength any longer to

carry crates of ice, to slide them soundlessly beneath his wife's smoldering bed.

THE WOODEN BOAT

“Puhleeze, tell me something I *don't know*,” she says. She is spreading ripe bananas on sourdough bread with a wooden ruler.

He says, “I was in the war for eleven months, and I was about to be sent home but as so often happens, when one war ends, a new one begins--so I ran away to a city we had recently captured. A pharmacist hid me in his shop. In exchange for this, early mornings I waited on his customers. They were very old; they seemed all of them in their eighties and nineties. I got them their unguents and lotions, weighted belts to keep their insides in. I sold them aloe plants in clay pots for their wrinkles, their crevices and chasms of untold depth. For fingernails black with age--I pushed across the counter powdered gelatin in faded, yellow paper sleeves. I helped them. They appreciated me. They forgot their packages. They forgot why they had come in. Some of them could not recall my face from the day before and inquired how long I had been working there.

‘Years and years and years,’ I told them.

Reassured, they often said, ‘Anyway, a very long time.’

“When I heard the heavy step of soldiers, I ran into the pharmacist’s store-room, pressed myself against varnished wooden shelves and read the labels on amber vitamin bottles.”

“Puhleeze,” she says again, and he begins to think she has a future in Hollywood, in films, playing a big-hearted waitress serving steaming cups of coffee to truck drivers still vibrating from the road who fall in love with her nightly over cheese grits and white toast. He thinks they would be fussy about the toast, and about other things with her. “Twenty seconds longer in that toaster, honey. Thank you, thank you. And say now, pretty lady, you hidin’ the blackberry preserves? Say now, precious chicken, what time you get off?”

He drove a big rig once, cross-country, carried empty glass aquariums from Hickory, North Carolina, to Malibu, California, where they were filled with fluttery gold fish which looked like Chinese fans opening and closing, and indigo fish, all right out of the Pacific. He had to quit--kept running off the Interstate, sliding into ditches in Kansas, waking up covered with broken glass and the smell of wheat.

He thinks if she really were a waitress she would sleep with the quivering drivers, give them a towel and a bar of soap, a key to the showers. And like a Dostoevskiiian whore--with pouting red mouth--tell them of dear Lazarus raised from the dead, put her alabaster face between their washed and lathered, now sweet-smelling legs, and relieve them, for the moment, of their suffering.

"You never were in any war," she says. "Who would take *you* ? Who were you fighting? You'd be the last person anyone would want to be part of their army. Tell me something I can believe--something with the least little bit of possibility. Your being in a war doesn't have even a nub of credulity. I can't picture you in a uniform, standing in line waiting for someone to spoon mounds of scrambled eggs onto your plate."

He is willing to tell her the truth because she cocks her face like an old farmer woman turned toward the wind, sensing the chill and fearing for her corn and barley. Then she sighs. She lets her forehead rest on her fingertips till they redden with the strain.

He says, "I went out at night in a wooden boat with three others. We were spies. We made no sound in the water. We paddled in unison with only our hands. We cupped our fingers like the necks of swans and moved up river. Under a full moon, we painted our faces black. Fish nipped at our fingers. We thought we saw cobia. The others feared piranha and covered their hands with repellent. There was much information to be learned at night, things you cannot find out during the day. We grew to trust each other, at last to love one another. In December, the water was so cold our fingers froze and we could not unclench them. Our boat moved slower then."

"Double puhleeze," She is getting exasperated now. "Are you saying that's how you lost your thumb, in a war no one ever heard of? I begged you for something I could pretend was true if just for a second. Just a smidgen of verisimilitude, and I could pretend about other things for you. I could wear

silk. I could stand in front of lit candles. Candles with the scent of myrtle and ambergris and mattresses ticking.”

He does not want to lose her. Once the two of them came across a huge loggerhead turtle. It had scabbled ashore in the bleak Florida panhandle, on a deserted beach to lay its eggs. Fraternity boys had found it. They spray-painted Greek letters on its weathered back in orange and filled its nest with buckled beer cans. They tied it to a palm tree.

She turned to him gasping then, wounded as if a lance had pierced her, severing something vital. She could not stop sobbing as they tugged and pulled and finally pushed the turtle back into the sea where it lumbered off clambering through the oncoming waves dipping its head again and again forward into the surf, the garish orange letters slowly disappearing.

She says, “We cannot exist like sea anemones, swaying, floating, unattached, unrooted. Tether me with your imagination. You are not a warrior. I cannot picture you shouldering a carbine, sheathing a blood-stained blade. I see you in the shadows, behind hedges, behind binoculars, behind the house on the hill, crouched low, panting, counting backwards from a hundred, waiting for the lights to come on, waiting for the homecoming queen to take off her gown.”

He watches as she takes in long breaths. She stares at him. He can tell she wants him to help her get started. He has set out bunches of freesia. They are pungent and he remembers the marsh reeds again, tastes the dark water

slick with oil, recalls the creaking of the wood boat, the lapping of the waves beneath its planked hull.

“Were you ever in the clergy?” she asks. “Have you had mystical experiences? Tell me about Adam and how fiercely he must have hurt when God plunged inside him and took out his rib. Did he just lie there in the creek bed and hold himself together and weep? Was Eve beautiful to him? Was he satisfied with her, or did he ask God to dirty His hands and try again?”

He presses his face against her hair, smells, he is almost sure, the Sea of Dover, hears once more the whirring of the bi-planes he saw flying there. They burst out of cloud banks like startled quail. The tip of his tongue touches her ear. “We traveled in the wood boat with certain provisions,” he tells her. He closes his fingers around her arm; her shoulders are bare. He wonders if her breath has quickened. He says, “We carried sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, and maps tightly rolled in paraffin-sealed tubes. There were tuning forks and brass wind-up clocks, plate-glass fuses with long spirals of copper wire. My job was the dynamite. I sat on it as we paddled past campfires in the night, past the brittle sound of the enemy’s laughter.”

“Maybe it would be better,” she says. “I think it might work,” and she puts his hand over her belly, deep into the loops and folds of her purple dress, “if you tell me you were, well, Copernicus. Make me the center of your universe. The church fathers are coming after you. They are carrying bundles of coals, baskets of kindling. They insist you recant. They are holding tapers with lighted wicks. You tell them you cannot. You are frightened. You begin

to stutter. Your words are like stones in your mouth. You tell them recanting is the last thing you can do. As the flames cause the kindling to snap at your ankles, you begin, aloud, to name new worlds after me. I would like that."

She is warming up to this. Her face is darkening. He thinks of adobe firing in a kiln. "View me through a telescope," she says. "Drop me from the ramparts of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Tell me I am mysterious as the moons of Jupiter."

"That's Galileo, not Copernicus," he says.

"Mr. Know It All," she says. She is aggrieved. She is buck-toothed and lets her top teeth balance on the rim of a beer bottle. Her nose has a bump at the top. She bites down on the bottle, tilts her head back, lifts it, swallows without using her hands.

"Of the four of us, one was the cartographer and he made maps at night."

"Boring," she says.

"And one was the radio operator. The enemy talked about us coming up river."

"Not interested," she says.

"And there was the translator. He told us when it was all over, he wanted to work at the UN. They caught him--they cut out his tongue."

"Spare me." She is examining her toe nails. They glisten. She takes the cotton from between her toes. He picks up her foot in his hands, presses his

lips to her instep, kisses her heel. He moves his tongue toward her toes. She snatches her foot away. "Careful! They're still wet."

He says, "So, I was the dynamiter. I rained down death. I suppose it was because of what I did that we went out in the boat."

"How much more of this is there?" she asks.

"We occasionally came upon boats of fishermen on the river. They tied cormorants into harnesses made of braided hemp and tossed them overboard. The birds dived below the surface and swooped up fish in their beaks. Then the fisherman hauled them back and turned them upside down. They shook them till the fish fell out on the deck. Sometimes their boats flew up in the air when I set off the explosives by mistake."

She says, "I read that on the back of a cereal package." She is slim. She is long-legged. She looks like a ladder he wants to climb. "Now, my toes are dry; now tell me more about Copernicus."

He gives up. He forgets about the wooden boat. He says instead, "I told Kepler he was mistaken about the music of the spheres. I told him the song he heard was your song. I told Mozart; I told Beethoven about you. I showed them your picture. They drove off in carriages in search of pen and paper. It was the one of you in the photo-booth in Cincinnati, nude."

"I showed Newton, he invented the calculus; Archimedes designed the catapult; Black Elk went into a trance; Steiglitz gave up on poor Georgia O'Keefe; Dimaggio hit in fifty-six straight. FDR had planned to serve only one term; I showed him the picture. 'I'll serve four,' he said."

"Puhleeze," she says. Her fingers going to the front of her blouse. "You're just saying those things because you think that's what I want to hear."

"No," he says; his thoughts slip far away from the serpentine river and the detonator, and the furtive wake of the precarious wooden boat. "No, listen to me, this is gospel, the whole truth: I wrote Hannibal about you--he crossed the Alps.

"From my mouth to God's ear, I told Nixon your picture was at the Watergate and he hires Liddy to break in and get it. I showed Samson--he went blind. Nabokov insisted I leave it with him a week, then, Airmail-Express, six days later, he posts me *Lolita*. I showed it to Saint Augustine--he confessed."

She walks down the hall now, dropping her clothes, lifting her pretty feet out of her underwear. She calls out to him over her shoulder, "Don't stop," she says. "Go on, I can still hear you. Go on. I'm going to find cut candles."

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bruce Hoch early on expected he would have a career in athletics. There was little enough to have seriously caused him to think this way. He was small and slow, though agile and powerful. He may have based much of his expectations of an athletic life on knowing more of the statistical nature of baseball than any of his contemporaries.

He entered primary school where he showed an early affinity for spelling and save for his undoing at negotiating the multi-voweled trickiness of the word, *heavy*, he would have been a celebrated champion. Four years at summer-sleep-away-camp in North Carolina have molded his character as much as anything else the author can think of. A plodding, methodical type, he is being awarded this MFA roughly thirty-five years after he began his collegiate work at sixteen.

Bruce Hoch has worked as a watermelon chooser, a mail sorter, a bar waiter in the Catskills, an audio consultant, a World Book Encyclopedia salesman, and an elementary-school teacher. He currently teaches creative writing in Gainesville, Florida, where he lives at the edge of a forest with his one-eyed cat, The One-Eyed Man.

His youthful influences included a series of children's biographies, all bearing tangerine covers. His last great academic award came as the result of

having read this entire collection in the course of one six-week grading period. The life of the chilly Norwegian composer, Grieg, gave him the most trouble, the book itself being cold to the touch. Bruce read it wearing gloves.

The author has read all of J.D. Salinger. He has listened often to the music of Arvo Pärt. His first, favorite book was *The Lion's Paw*.

The author has spent a good deal of his life fiddling with stereo equipment. He likes the sound of cello best. And he likes the sound of the human voice; curiously enough it is hardly ever portrayed in his fiction.

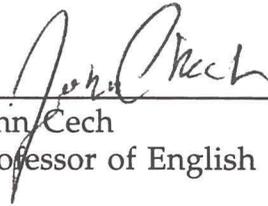
The author is an excellent out-loud reader and his best reading is done in the accent of a perplexed Englishman. He is happy to have become, at last, a certified writer.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.



Padgett Powell, Chairman
Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.



John Cech
Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.



Sidney R. Homan
Professor of English

This thesis was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the College of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Dean, Graduate School