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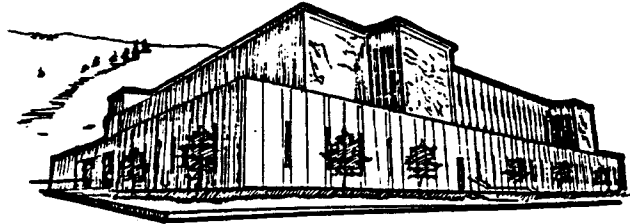
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University of
Montana

Poly Spekk(s)

By

Cindy A. Linse

B. A., Eastern Montana College, 1987

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

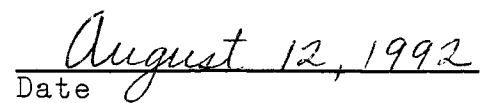
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The Brief Ecstatic Flight of Steppen Icarus
Chapter I

On the day that Steppen Icarus decided to move out of his parents' villa and into his head, he had been raking the leaves up in the park in front. He was raking the leaves because the gardener quit, just walked off the job, and his mother was "having guests in" that evening. Steppen demanded why the park needed raking if the guests were going to be "in" as she had put it. His mother promptly chucked a gin and tonic at him, told him to watch his mouth, and informed him that he obviously hadn't anything better to do, so he would rake the park and happily since he contributed little else to the household than his presence which made him merely an exotic and expensive ornament. He found the gardener's gloves and the rake near the wrought iron gate at the entrance. The gloves were on top a pile of crisp fall foliage and the rake leaned against the brick wall which surrounded the grounds.

The gardener had quit because Steppen's father continually assaulted him. He couldn't so much as bend over to pluck the weeds from the asphodel but what Rex

Icarus wasn't bumping up against the seat of his coveralls. Or so he told the Mrs. that night when he showed up for dinner after the Jukebox Bar and Grill consumed his last buck-fifty. Of course, he could have talked to Mrs. Connell, chief chef and housekeeper, who'd had the same problem with her apron strings but had found an excellent remedy in the form of a cast-iron skillet. But, then, Mrs. Connell pushed more weight around Villa Rex than the gardener ever had, what with her famous brioche, Canard Aux Verte and Gateaux des Peches.

Steppen knew nothing about this; except he frequently wondered how his father managed to get his tennis shorts so dirty all the time. Sometimes he imagined his father out in the freshly tilled flowerbeds, rubbing himself into the ground, ecstatic from the smell of the deep, rich loam. Or maybe it was the scent of the natural fertilizer the gardener used. Either way, it was disgusting. Sometimes Steppen hated his imagination. His father's dirty shorts were probably caused by something as innocuous as leaning against the net or crawling over the wall to get a wild ball. But then maybe the balls gone wild weren't quite so innocuous since Hartley Sheffield, the famous model, lived on the other side of the wall by the

tennis court. Anyway, Steppen knew nothing certain about how his father's tennis shorts got so dirty, nor the manner in which the gardener had put to use, in a clumsy effort at self-defense, the rake-handle the boy now gripped.

Steppen began raking with no particular direction in mind, just enjoying the stretch and retraction of his body, pulling along a pile of leaves with the rake. He imagined himself a neural cell stretching to breach the gap with an impulse, connecting himself with Nature. That was when he got the idea to move out of Villa Rex and into his head. While he was raking, connecting himself with Nature, it seemed like Nature wasn't enough. The more he thought about it, the less satisfactory Nature got; especially when he looked out across the park at the skiffs of fallen leaves in all their golden glory, diadems for forest gods, and realized that he would have to spend a good deal more time in his fervent communion with afore mentioned Nature. It began to make more sense to disconnect himself and remove himself as far as possible from Nature and its golden crown. It seemed much preferable, the stretch and retraction of neurons, to the stabbing shoulder-pain and blistered hands of his body communing with golden-browed Nature.

He got the idea to sweep all the leaves to the poolside when he figured he would leave his body floating belly-up for the guests to find in case they decided to come "out" because with all this raking they might find it such a shame to waste the momentary clarity of the grass in the park.

By sundown, he had swept all the leaves over to the pool and coppery drifts of them threatened to bury the Pen Mobler patio furniture. He rested a moment, leaning against the rake handle, enumerating the steps by which he would move himself into his head, then separate his head from his body. Observing the standard practices of his psycho-therapist, Dr. Hobbson, who asked him to describe what it was like inside himself, it occurred to Steppen that this was actually an instance of retracting himself into his head. So the first part would be easy; he would just pretend to be having a therapy session. Except this time there would be no little silverbell sounding to yank him out of an exquisite retirement bathed in the luxury of his own frontal lobes; no Dr. Hobbson droning, "Time's up, Boyyo." But how to get the head off his body and the body into the pool, now that was a question worthy of the greatest genius.

Steppen leaned on the rake staring out at the

distant sunset, irritatingly aware of the deepening chill and the distance of the heated colors in the western sky. Why did the sky look so fiery while the air felt so shivery? It felt like snow; and snow was like the drifts of leaves around the Pen Mobler patio furniture. Thus Steppen got the idea to burn the leaves in order to have light and warmth by which to separate his head from his body.

He swept them all into the corner on top of the patio furniture and posted a pack of cigarettes, carefully lit, one by one, at regular intervals throughout the heap. Then he stood back and enjoyed a last smoke before the whole thing burst into flame and he would have to know how to separate his head from his body.

Steppen thought perhaps he could sneak a butcher knife out from under Mrs. Connell, the cook, who took her employment as the guardian of the hearth to heart in a most proprietary way. But he wasn't at all sure that he could administer the severing blow to himself. It wasn't the finality of the act. It was simply the thought that he would have to be at least partially in his body to wield the knife and that simply wouldn't do. If he was partially in his body at the moment of separation with it then he would lose that part of

himself and the way he figured it, he would need all of himself in his head. Otherwise, it would be like leaving a leg or a hand on the door stoop before entering the house. The Japanese tradition of taking off your shoes before entering a building was perfectly sensible--you wouldn't get the floors dirty that way. But to leave an arm or leg on the veranda before entering your own house made absolutely no sense at all.

At about this moment in his thoughts, Steppen perceived a man with dark, bushy hair and full beard crawling over the wall, wearing sandals with the straps loose and flapping in one place or another, baggy pants of unknown origin, and an old, stained cardigan sweater. The man appeared, head and shoulders, over the top of the wall, raised one leg then the other until he lay belly-down on the six-foot high wall. He then reached down the outside and drew after him a three-foot length of two-by-four. He dropped himself from the wall and shambled to the pile of leaves, where he stood a moment, staring in wonderment, before lowering himself to a seat on the ground. Pulling round his two-by-four, he began to strum the lumber and sing in a tuneless voice that meandered and skipped up and down the scale,

"Smoke, smoke,
over the wall
carried me up
and into your patio.

High, high,
piled to the sky
candlestick smoke
like a Christmas Tree."

All the while, the man stared through his darkly glassy eyes at a point somewhere just behind Steppen's face, then reached to pluck a cigarette from the mound of leaves and sucked furiously on it, trying to revive the waning cinders that remained in its tip.

Steppen, outraged and scandalized, shouted, "It's not a Christmas tree; it's a bonfire. Who are you anyway? Why don't you just leave if you don't like the way I do things?"

The man commenced to strum and sing, letting the cigarette dangle from the corner of his mouth:

"Tunes is my name,
this is your game
but you don't know the rules

Your game needs a match
the fire to catch
instead of all these Kools

Steppen, at a lack for a more assertive response-mechanism, groped in the pockets of his jeans

and gave into the calloused and smudged hands of Tunes a gold, monogrammed lighter that his sister, Ophelia had sent him for Graduation last June with a note attached: "Now you're ready to set the world on fire. Congrats! Love always, Phelia."

Tunes first inspected the monogram, cooing slightly, then lit his 'bummed' cigarette and inhaled a few puffs of smoke with an obvious sense of pleasure. Sucking slowly, almost ecstatically, on the cigarette as if it were a ceremonial pipe, he crawled around the bonfire on his knees, stopping occasionally to pluck out and pocket cigarettes or touch a butane flame here and there to the leaves. He went at it with all the intensity of a shaman, caressing the leaves with the flame as if he were brushing away an illness with magic feathers. Having achieved a decent blaze which licked up the pile of leaves to where he had settled the butt of his finished cigarette on top like a propitious offering, he leaned back on his haunches to strum and chant 'Happy Birthday to Me.'

Upon rising this morning, Tunes had had the presentiment that today was, in fact, his Birthday. And thinking himself deserving of a little treat, had strolled up the hill to Summerville Estates where the pickin's, one might well imagine, would be a little

rarified. Of course it was a little more difficult to get at, too, being kept in little houses built into the walls and padlocked from the outside. He hadn't made out so bad though. He'd picked up five bottles of French wine with two or three fingers left in them, a lace and satin negligee with the straps ripped out that would make perfect hankies, a couple unfinished steaks and a bowl almost full of crab salad, two unopened bottles of cologne, a few half-used bars of soap, a good-sized hunk of bread, pieces of six types of cheese, butter pats, an unopened package of nylon stockings, a pocket radio, a cameo brooch and earrings, two pairs of gloves in good condition, six audio-cassettes and one video, some socks and undershorts with only small holes or none at all, a pair of Reboks with broken laces and a pair of loafers that fit perfectly. And he'd only rummaged about three trash bins. Tunes had stuffed his Army/Navy-Surplus parka with everything but the food items and wine, which he had consumed on the spot. He had left his loot, coat and all, on the other side of the wall when he smelled the smoke, not wanting to show up with full pockets to bum a cigarette.

He still hadn't found any cake, but this bonfire was a dandy substitute for candles. The fire had

reached its peak and crackled and blazed like some great and howling beast with a Pen Mobler patio furniture skeleton.

Steppen, who still harbored an uneasy belief in Divine Providence even if he'd given up on Nature, suspected Tunes, hunkered cross-legged before his fire, had been sent in answer to some unspoken prayer. The man's wild hair was decorated with bits of grass and leaves. His eyes, that seemed as if they'd seen too much, stared reflectively into the fire. His long, matted beard waggled as he chanted and rocked like a primitive magician in a trance. Perhaps he would know how to get the head from the body and the body into the pool.

Approaching cautiously, Steppen asked, "Is today really your Birthday, or do you just like the song?"

"The songs I sing
I sing to truth
I like them best
that truth have dressed."

His voice quavered and hesitated as if he were searching for the next note (which he invariably missed if he was aiming at any sort of continuity). He held out the gold lighter to Steppen and strummed one-handed,

"Come light this pipe
a Birthday Cake fire."

"Hey, keep it. A present from me." The all-seeing eyes of Tunes remained as fixed on a spot somewhere just behind Steppen's face as the hand offering up the lighter to him stayed fixed in mid-air. "A present," Steppen repeated. "For your Birthday." He waved away the outstretched hand and little gold lighter. He was close enough now to see the bread crumbs in Tunes's beard and pick up the garbage-can smell on him. It wasn't a sour, trashy smell, though. It was more wild, deep and pungent, imbued with smoke and charred meat, sweat and saliva.

"Actually," Steppen said, "It's kind of a Birthday for me today, too. I'm going to start all over again, sort of." Steppen remembered Tunes statement about truth. "I mean, I'm going to move into my head tonight and I could use your help." He waited, head hung and eyes downcast, for reprisals....condemnation....lightening bolts from the heavens. Tunes drew another cigarette from his pocket and lit up. After a few puffs, Tunes handed the cigarette to Steppen and sang:

"Trouble, trouble,
up in your bubble
shall I haul in the couch
or the kitchen table."

Steppen returned the cigarette to Tunes
outstretched hand. "I'm not taking any furniture with
me. I need someone to separate my head from my body
and leave the body in the pool."

The cigarette circled back to Steppen and Tunes
took up his two-by-four again.

"The furniture burns
in the fire's belly
the pool will put it out.

The cigarette cycled back to Tunes. Steppen
commenced an explanation beginning in the beginning
with the gardener and the raking. His mother's
ultimatum followed and the whole chain of thought from
Dr. Hobbson's office through Mrs. Connell's kitchen
and out to the pool. When he got to the part about the
sensibility of the Japanese leaving their shoes on the
doorstep, and the ridiculousness of leaving one's
appendages on the porch, Tunes laid down the lumber,
put out the cigarette and said, "This is serious."

The dark eyes of Tunes bored through Steppen's
face and rested somewhere in the vicinity of his
cerebellum. They haunted. They fascinated. They coaxed

and seduced. Steppen stared back, caught, trapped in his own looking. He mouthed words without a sense of their meaning. He said, "I've seen, through the house, the inadequacy of Nature."

Tunes rose, gripping his two-by-four, and advanced on Steppen without breaking their gaze. The boy, held fast to the spot, never even a fleeting thought of retreat, mumbled, "I'm pulling the plug on everything, breaking the current that runs me." Tunes had begun humming his odd, wandering song. When he stood a short distance from Steppen, he added a puffing to the song and gently pushed at the boys chest with his lumber. Steppen sank to the ground and lay stretched before the dying Birthday bonfire. "Without my body, my tie and manacle. no longer will I produce the illusion," he said. Tunes swayed over him, strumming, humming and puffing.

They remained in eye-lock for what seemed an eternity. The humming took on a note of urgency, a subtle rythmn of hunting, then Steppen felt a slipping. The planes of his gaze twisted out, away from him, and he slid into a dark tunnel. The sliding accelerated until he felt like he usually did just as the airplane's wheels leave the runway. The unmelodic humming still followed him, pressing close on his

heels, or his back, or perhaps it was his chest and he was going backwards.

Steppen had absolutely no sense of himself, of his body. He only knew darkness and motion and the humming seemed to be the source of both. The humming thumped and whined and pushed him onward. There, just ahead, a greenish light flickered. As he closed in on the flickering he saw that it was more like lightening bolts in a fishbowl. And then he emptied out into it, floating in the caged lightening. The humming had been left behind; only an echo undulated around him, reminding him of charmed serpents or the flesh of a belly dancer's midriff. He began to sift downward, like the last feather settling to the floor after a pillow-fight.

When he finally hit bottom, Steppen found himself in a kind of well that was neither so dank nor so narrow as it was dark. If he tried to reach out, both arms stretched like wings, to touch the other side he had to take a few steps before reaching it. And the stone walls felt crumbly to his fingertips. Yet, try as he might, squint...imagine...struggle toward self-induced hallucination, Steppen saw nothing but blackness. He walked round and round, pushing on the

walls, slithering fingers between the stones to find a hidden doorway. He crawled on hands and knees exploring, thinking the passage out might be hidden nearer the floor. He stretched out his full length searching high for an outlet. He even tried to climb out, but the stones turned to dust in his hands. He started to get a little panicky and actually thought about screaming. It came out in a hoarse croak, "Let me out, please. Oh, I wish I were out of here." Around and around he tramped. "I can't believe I've moved into my head, at great personal risk I might add, only to discover the whole of my delicious cranium consists of a bunch of lightening in a fishbowl and a black pit. A crumbling black pit at that." His feet began to tingle. "What did I think I was going to find here, Paradise? I just can't believe it. My head is nothing but a black pit." Steppen walked for a considerable time before he realized that the wall had straightened out.

Now, he needed some light. The path beside the stone wall seemed to be getting rougher. He had stubbed his toes twice and discovered that Gucci loafers didn't stand up well to a whole day of gardening, entrapment in a pit in your brain and a decent hike. The soles had worn through on the balls

of his feet and one heel had begun to flop.

Being the kind of guy that enjoys his own company, Steppen began a conversation thus: "If I'm inside my head now, how come my feet hurt like hell?"

"I don't know. But I'm positive I've got blisters."

"I wish I could see my feet."

Immediately, a pair of luminous feet danced before him. "Great," said Steppen. "If they glowed a bit more I could see where I'm going." The feet continued to dance, but got no dimmer or brighter either. "Damn it! I wish it were lighter in my head," Steppen said. "I'm beginning to feel like I must be stupid or something; it's so dark in here." Presently, Steppen found himself marching down a winding road walled in on both sides. It was narrow and curved sharply at frequent intervals and he was glad he wasn't driving because of the blind turns. The walls were made of flat, grey stones stacked to about shoulder height and beyond them were dense woods of thin-trunked oaks and hazel-nut trees. It reminded him of Europe.

He followed the road for some time until he spied an Army/Navy Surplus parka off to one side, pockets bulging with a lace and satin negligee with the straps

ripped out that would be perfect for hankies, two unopened bottles of cologne, a few half-used bars of soap, an unopened package of nylon stockings, a pocket radio, a cameo brooch and earrings, two pairs of gloves in good condition, six audio cassettes and one video, some socks and undershorts with only small holes or none at all, and a pair of Reeboks with broken laces.

The Reeboks were red (he'd always wanted a pair of red Reeboks, but his Mother insisted on Converse) and they fit perfectly, so he put them on, or tried to at any rate. He hadn't really thought about it before, except to complain of the blisters, but now it became imperative to analyse this whole concept of being inside one's own head accompanied by a body. After all, the entire motivation for this relocation project had been to escape Nature and what She did to the body. It seemed rather futile to be as hampered by the body while inside one's own head as one would have been outside it. If this kept up, he'd have to attempt a return. Although, the means to accomplishing this feat escaped him at the moment.

The problem was: as he struggled with the Reeboks, Steppen's feet kept changing. At first they were rather beaten and blistered, but as soon as he

got hold of a Reebok, the feet became small, then large with hair at the joints like his Dad's, then they were thin and wet, then he recognized his feet as they had appeared after he'd scraped the toenails off one of them in fifth grade when he missed the peddle of his Huffy bicycle in an urgent attempt to slam on the brakes. Steppen concentrated on this image while he slipped into the Reeboks and pulled the laces tight. He almost lost his concentration during the shodding of the toenailless foot, but he bit his lower lip. Now, unless he started having prenatal memories of his feet, the hightops would probably keep them in the shoes.

Tying the bows was virtually out of the question. His fingers kept changing size and shape and coordination level. For a moment, they were extremely coordinated and he almost got the lace through the loop, but he paused at a crucial moment to wonder about the blood-red fingernail polish and, in a blink, those fingers faded into a child's hand. He still couldn't remember where he'd seen that fingernail polish before. At long last, he managed a couple of knots and stood up.

It was then that he noticed the sign over which the parka had been draped. Shaped like a guitar, it

read, "Steppen's House." Except the last 'p' had been omitted, the last 'e' replaced by an 'i' and the apostrophe was backwards. Steppen supposed that the neck of the guitar was meant as a pointer, so he headed out in that direction.

Steppen Icarus had every reason to believe his head would be well furnished with every sort of amenity. His father had insisted on an ivy-league education. He was somewhat surprised when he finally arrived at his house. It stood inside a stone wall six feet high and was covered with bronzed leaves and vines that crumpled in his hand like tin-foil. He pulled some of the ivy down and discovered that the house was unfinished. It had only been framed up--no siding, no roof except the bronzed ivy. It didn't even have a floor.

Steppen walked around back, hoping to find some materials so he could finish it off himself. Instead he found a rather grand tree house that resembled a castle perched in an enormous oak. He remembered the tree from his childhood. The shape was right. There was that high, arching branch like the one he hung the swing from and fell from and sprained his ankle. And there was Ophelia's branch, the gnarled and twisted one with all the little twigs coming out of it, that

she used to climb out on when he tried to tickle her and she wanted to get away. And the castle rested in the larger of the two crotches, just like the little, shingle hut he and his Dad had built. But, somehow, it had looked smaller then.

He climbed up the ladder, crossed the drawbridge and entered through the open portcullis. In the main hall, he found a huge fireplace, a trestle table, a Lazy-boy recliner and some record albums. There were Vincent Price reading Alice in Wonderland, the sound track from Pinocchio, Judas Priest--Screaming for Vengeance, the Thompson Twins--Into the Gap and Pere Ubu--The Tenement Year. As he sorted through the albums, they seemed to multiply, to get heavier and slip out of his grasp. Or they faded away. He was really in the mood for some Einstuerzende Neubauten, but it hadn't put in an appearance yet.

He picked up Pere Ubu and slipped the disc from the jacket. Six tiny men with little guitars, synthesizers, drum kit and brass tumbled to the floor. He could hear their tinny, tiny music when they begin to play. He wished it were louder. In his educated opinion, Pere Ubu wasn't any good unless it was loud enough to be classified as a physical sensation. At its best, Pere Ubu feels like decapitated Barbie dolls

driving crushed Corvettes. The first time he heard it, Steppen had been repulsed. But the longer he listened, the more he understood that it was exactly the sound of the world that he'd been hearing all these years as a sort of background noise to his life. But it was mighty frustrating to listen to the microscopic version. Steppen screamed, "Can't you play any louder? I say, I wish you'd grow up and play louder." The band began to grow until, there they were, concert-sized, smack dab in front of the cavernous fireplace, setting up a horrendous acoustical cross-current. The Corvettes revved up, the decapitated Barbies laughed in spite of their lost heads.

Steppen slumped into the Lazy-boy recliner to better enjoy the vibrations, with his tired feet propped on the footrest and directed toward the speakers to receive the maximum benefit. He'd been about to ponder something that had struck him as curious about the way things were working out in this place, a sort of operational theory for inhabiting one's mind, something to do with making things happen. But he dozed before he could trace it back to the moment he'd first noticed it.

Steppen heard a deep thrumming, rhythmic and

forceful, but he couldn't decide whether Einstuerzende Neubauten had finally arrived or he himself had returned to the electrified fishbowl. He woke up--no German punk band, no caged lightning. It took a while to realize that someone was knocking on the door. Then it took another little while to remember how to get there. He had to leave the main hall by the central portal, cross the antechamber to the entrance hall on the right and pass through the guardroom. There they stood, the enormous, oaken double doors bound in iron with a cross bar as thick as his thigh, reverberating to a somewhat insistant thump of the knocker.

"One moment, please," he shouted. By applying his entire force and most of his body weight to the cross bar, he at last managed to unlock the massive barrier. It took more than a moment; then he pulled one door back on its well-oiled hinges.

A woman stood before him, wearing a blue and white arobics outfit--blue leotard with a white, diagonal ruffle that crossed some pretty well-developed terrain, white tights and blue slippers. Her blonde braid sprang out of a terry binder on top of her head and tumbled down the left side of her face. "Hi, Steppen," she said. "I just thought I'd stop by with a housewarming gift."

Steppen regarded the white ruffle with a rather appreciative yet somewhat perplexed expression.

"Alice, Steppen," she said and held out her hand. "You remember me don't you. Alice. Not so recently of Wonderland."

"Oh, yeah. But weren't you smaller, too."

"Well, in Wonderland I was both smaller and larger, but in your mind I'm life-sized and all grown-up. Can I come in?"

"Sure. I guess I meant younger."

"Do you want me younger?"

"Not really. I just sort of expected it that way. You wouldn't happen to know what happened to my Einstuerzende Neubauten albums, would you?"

"No. Did you wish for them?"

"Well, yeah. I'd sort of like to listen to them."

"No, no. I mean wish for them, you know, make a wish, like 'upon a star.'"

They had entered the entrance hall with its sweeping staircase of alabaster and its crystal chandelier. "Like this," Alice said. "I wish we were having tea." Instantly, the Mad Hatter and company, replete with dining table, linen and silver tea service, filled the hall.

"Alice, old girl, how good of you to have us to

tea." the Mad Hatter said. But his face twisted, sunk in on itself and deformed itself.

"Oh no!" said Alice. "I wish not." Quite as suddenly, the whole troupe and trappings disappeared. Alice explained. "You see, I can't really wish things as long as I'm in your head, unless you wish them, too. They just don't turn out the same as I..."

The loud thumping of the knocker on the main portal interrupted. It was followed by a booming voice that echoed into the hall. "Alice, I know you're in there. I'll tear him from limb to limb if you don't exit immediately."

"Oh shit! The White Rabbit." Alice blanched.

"The White Rabbit is in here, too?"

"Of course. He's my lover. But he's extremely jealous and wouldn't let me anywhere without himself." She took hold of Steppen's shoulders. "Look. You sound as if you could use someone to show you the ropes. I'll be back tomorrow morning. The White Rabbit has an appointment with the Queen. See ya! I wish I was outside the front door ten seconds ago." And she vanished.

Steppen tried to scratch his head, said, "I wish I had my normal, 12th-of-October-1990 body," and thought. Did he really want it to be tomorrow morning

already or would he rather listen to Eistuerzende Neubauten? He wandered toward the main hall. If he wished for the music, then his curiosity would probably plague him so that he couldn't enjoy it. But if he wished for tomorrow morning...he thought out a string of consequences here...Alice would no doubt be delighted. He got the feeling she would rejoice that he wanted to see her so much he wished it right away. But if the White Rabbit suddenly found himself in the presence of the Queen, he might suspect something. Oh, what to do?

"I wish I were listening to Einsturzende Neubauten," Steppen said. "No. I wish not." There was only one way to find out if the Rabbit would perceive the alteration in his activities, one way to measure the extent of his own, Steppen's, wishes.

"I wish it were tomorrow morning," Steppen said.

The Other Side of Water

As my shadow crosses her knitting, Mother slowly becomes aware of me in the doorway. It is a gradual awareness as subtle as the knowledge that the sun has set because the creeping expansion of darkness changes the color of things. She looks up at me, and just before the light of her smile reaches her eyes I see in them a cold, speculating blankness, the unreadable regard one casts over an intruder like a net to hold him, fixed to the spot, until one has determined what to do with him.

I have been watching her call her little cats. She let her knitting fall, the ball of yarn on the floor and the needles balanced on the arm of her overstuffed chair. She hunched down, her fingers making butterfly motions near the carpet and called, "Mitty! Mimi! Mitty-kitty! Mimi-bebe! Come play with Mama!" She is a very gentle person, cuddling her cats like babies, petting them, but only when they come of their own accord. She would never think of inflicting her affection on her little cats. She puts out food for the birds and hedgehogs in the park behind the

house whenever it rains or the snow is deep. Yet her face is so harsh, so square with big, bushy eyebrows and thin lips, a sharp nose and strong jaw. I have watched her without letting her know I was there. My mother's face intimidates me.

She says something I can't quite make out and motions for me to come closer. It is not 'come, play.' I am not her little cats. She repeats the phrase, and it occurs to me that she wishes to try the knitting against me to see if it is long enough. She is knitting a sweater for me.

There is something terrifying in a dozen red roses which arrive on your doorstep in the hands of a prospective lover. There is something frightening in a sweater knit by hand especially for you.

"You shouldn't wear black," she says. "It brings out the dark circles under your eyes."

She pats and smooths the knitting over my back and measures the span of unknitted sweater with her fingers. I feel just four fingers left to knit.

"I'm glad I chose this pale blue," she says. "It will bring out your color--brighten your eyes. You have lovely eyes, dear, when they aren't ringed in black. You're so peaked lately. Haven't you been sleeping well?"

She has the pale blue knitting under my chin to estimate its effect on my eyes, but she isn't really looking at me. She's looking at something only she can see--her dream daughter wearing a pale blue sweater with sparkling eyes, a concert pianist with a husband and kids. She had once studied to try out for the Met. As far as I can tell, her try-outs would have come about two months before I was born. She'd won several state and national competitions. She was nearly ready for the big push. Maybe accounts like this are never settled, but I've been paying for my Birthday every day of my life for twenty-nine years.

I used to take piano lessons. Ever since I was five years old, my memories are played out to the sound of scales: either hers, a solitary voice rising like a scream barely contained by the measured increments of rigorously applied aesthetics, or mine, the carefully attended fruit of ivory-impressed fingers under the watchful gaze of a woman with a wooden spoon.

The music ends after seventeen, just before I left for college. She burnt the green beans for dinner. Pots and utensils dripping potatoes or sauces were strewn across the countertop, the accidental debris of catastrophe. With the measured steps of a

wedding procession, she brought them to the table in her best china bowl. "The beans are burnt," she announced. My father looked up, his fork suspended above the roast beef, and she produced the inevitable wooden spoon from behind her back as she engaged my father's eyes.

"It's Christine's fault," she screamed and smashed the spoon into the bowl. Father turned away, cradling his plate as if someone threatened to grab it from him. "Practicing longer and longer, but making no progress," she hissed through tight lips. Her fingers sank into my scalp, and I felt my chair gaining distance beneath me. "If you followed the fingerings Mrs. Krempasky marks out, but no, you think you know it all." My head hit the refrigerator behind my place at the table, and the rebound loosened her grip on my hair. "I have to stand over you, make sure you practice them right." I felt the cupboard meet my skull and understood that we had moved further from the table. "I don't have enough time to fix dinner because you want to fail." My hand, blindly seeking support, found its way into the roaster in the sink, and gravy slid between my fingers. "You have to be best," she screamed. The roaster slipped from my fingers, and I felt some hair let go of my scalp. The

cupboard door met my head again as she screamed, "You just don't understand. You have to be best." Her voice mounted to a fevered howl as my head careened first into her breast then hurled out over the sink full of dirty pots. And beneath that howl, like a descant, I heard the carefully parcelled increments of the scale.

She crumpled to her chair, closest to the oven. Father stared glazedly into the carport. I righted my chair and took my place before a cooled dinner. My fork entered the mashed potatoes like a snow shovel penetrating a crusted drift, and my stomach turned just once, switching its attention from the digestion of emotion to that of food.

Mother began to poke about her plate. I set down my fork and knife and said, "I won't play piano anymore. Do you hear me? I said I won't play piano anymore." She just looked at me with tears in her eyes, and maybe it was then that her dream daughter began to slip through the barricade between project for a better future and unspoken, ineffable past. For her perhaps the dream changed. But Mother still held on to me, the image of her wooden spoon beating out a stiff, four/four time, trying to call me back with advice and admonishment, confession and punishment.

"Well, I suppose it isn't the kind of thing you'd wear to an interview for a big, fashion-buyer job," she says. "But it will be nice for you anyway. It will keep you warm and make you feel better. You look a little ill?" Her voice is strokingly soft, almost ingratiating, an invitation to confession. I don't want to feel better. I want to scream in her face that I don't need a sweater, that I don't want to be here. I failed. I left Danny and lost my job. And maybe it was my fault and maybe it wasn't.

I want to scream now--that it wasn't all my fault. I want to throw what Danny did to me into my mother's lap and watch her knit that into a hairball to choke her to silence. But my mouth is bound shut. Mother simply stares at me, expecting words. I try a smile instead. It floats on my face, feeble and guilty. I raise my hand to my face as if to help support the smile, but Mother has already turned away. Her cats have tangled the ball of yarn, and she counts her stitches to see how many they have pulled out.

This morning I took a count of the goldfish in the fishpond. It isn't really a pond at all. It's more like a swimming pool sunk into a flagstone patio, except the water isn't chlorinated blue. It's nearly

black. But the wrought-iron bridge and the fountain, those could only belong in an ornamental fishpond.

The pond is deep enough to be a swimming pool, and I'm sure I missed counting a great number of fish because they hid in the shadows.

It is difficult to count fish; they never stop moving, and one looks much the same as another underwater. If only they would stop, come up for air. If only they could come for tea, sit on the patio furniture and chat so that I could get to know them personally. If one fish would come up to talk, I would be able to see the other side of the black void that is the surface of the water. I can see it in my imagination; a stunning orange being, like a mermaid sits beside me at the little wrought-iron patio set, sipping on one of those tropical drinks with the little umbrellas. She is covered in golden-orange sequins, and her hands float near the glass, waving languidly. She says, "I am Gioga's daughter. One evening, we, my people and I, had come onto the beach to dance the spring moon. She had risen full, and the music wove rich countercurrents in Her honor. A fisherman of Unst strolled the beach unbeknownst to us. By moonlight he made out our merry-making, singing and dancing and the place just beyond where we'd left

in a heap our seal skins. Water-folk use the skins of seals to pass from our homes on the bottom of the sea to the land of sun and air. Only by means of the seal skin can we travel thus. So, at the first sound of the fisherman's approach, the merriment ceased and all flew to their garments and returned to the sea. But I had been so heated by the dancing and had gone to the cool of the woods. While I contemplated the life of the little pool I found there, hoping some lover would follow me, the Shetlander wandered over the dancing grounds and found one skin left behind, mine. He was smart, this fisherman, and thought to gain access to the secrets of the sea. He took my skin and made all haste for home, where he hid it. Or so I later discovered.

I had heard the music stop, but also the sound of footsteps in the brush and thought my lover approached. So I waited some time before returning to the beach to find my robe and all my family missing. When the fisherman returned, I was in a terrible state, stumbling up and down the beach, wailing and calling out for my family. He asked why did I cry so and startled me. The answer sprang from my lips without my will that I had lost my robe and could not return to my family without it. For a time he helped

me search. then, seeing dawn's approach was near at hand, he took me by the elbow and said I must come live with him until such time as my robe could be recovered. He offered me his heart, his home and his family. He offered me marriage. I was so distraught with the moon fast sinking now, and he was not uncomely. I could not stay on the beach to become a spectacle for the morning's press of boats and nets. You must understand how confused I was! I consented and we were married within the month." The mermaid lowers her lashes, hiding away her seagreen eyes, and one tear drops into her tropical drink. She presses herself into the fur draped over the back of her chair.

I want to tell her my own tale about Danny. I don't want her to feel so alone. I say, "When I moved to San Francisco to take a job at the corporate headquarters there, I met a young account exec, Danny, who was both handsome and gentle. We had so much in common--classical music, the theatre, our jobs--that I thought we were like one. We took in plays and concerts and discussed them long into the night over consummately prepared meals at his apartment or mine. He cooked as well as I, and we worked together in the kitchen as if we had always cooked together. And

sometimes we took long drives up the coast in his Audi and stopped at an interesting nightclub along the way to dine and dance. And we laughed for hours over the time the sunroof blew off just in front of a Chippie. It sailed up behind us and crashed to the pavement not twenty feet in front of the patrol car, giving it a flat tire. The ticket was horrendous, but the expression on the patrolman's face fed our hilarity nearly every time we took that route. And when we offered to give him a lift to the nearest garage...it always made us double over. Danny could take little mishaps and setbacks like that and turn them into the funniest stories. I fell for him hard and fast. We consolidated our household a month and a half after we met. I loved the smell of his aftershave in my bathroom, the sight of his trousers draped over a chair. I loved him, you know."

Maybe if the fish were bigger than four or five inches long, I could make out their distinguishing features better: this one has a white splotch on its nose and that one a black streak in its tail and so on. But they never rest and I can't be sure if I haven't already counted this one or not, and I can't really tell if this is the one with the black streak

or not. The fish ripple just beneath the glaring reflection of the sky on top of the water. They ripple there like a woman behind a veil: halfway hidden, halfway exposed, wholly fascinating.

I didn't break-off my fish counting until I noticed the black ones. Early in the morning, it is the pallid ones, the sickly-white ones, that rise to the surface first. They soak energy from the sun faster and circle hungrily in the pond while the bright orange ones seem to hover sleepily a foot below the surface and would rest wholly undiscovered if it weren't for their brilliant color.

And the black fish lie waiting even lower, camouflaged in the murky dark of deep water. I hadn't even realized they were there; they so closely resemble the shadow of depth in the water that it wasn't until I became distracted by my own shadow, and let my eyes rest halfway out of focus, that I discovered the black fish cruising just opposite the shattered fragments of sky and fall foliage on the surface, like the reverse image of light in a photo negative. And somehow these shadows intensified the shimmering orange of the other fish so that I was deflected from seeing them.

Mother has forgotten me to the clicking of her knitting, and I wander to the kitchen.

Father says nothing. He is repairing a part to the fountain, I think. He bakes the water out of it in the oven and wears mother's apron to keep the grease off his shirt. His hands are too large, too sinewy. He is plunging a screwdriver into a valve, poking and prodding at the gummy mess inside. When he notices me standing there, watching, his eyes grow. I have surprised him. Then he indicates a bowl of bread crumbs and trout guts for the goldfish. His wedding band shimmers gold beneath the grease. It makes me think of my own engagement ring, and I wonder if I could spot it in the bottom of the fishpond where I tossed it when I came home. Perhaps it lies there, glittering beneath the swimming shadows. I take the bowl with me to the pond.

I sit on the wrought iron bridge and thread my arms and legs out around one of the bars that holds up the hand rail. My toes are in the water, the bar presses between my legs and my breast brushes across the cold metal when I toss out the first string of guts. I am suddenly overwhelmed with desire. But that sort of pleasure doesn't work anymore, not since the night I left Danny. I touch myself in all those

well-known places, burning with the need in me, but I can no longer find the spot where pleasure is. It floats elusively across my body, hidden from me, and I must give up looking for it because my flesh feels painfully sensitive as if my skin were flayed away. I think of the mermaid without her robe and imagine she is beside me, her long, sequined tail dangling into the pond below, the fins waving just below the water's surface. She plays out her story, bit by bit--Scheherazade staving off her execution

"I lived as his wife happily enough for several years and had many children, none of which resembled me in the least, all perfectly human. The fisherman lavished me with every sort of affection and love-making, yet I remained forever listless and disenchanted, grieving over my lost family. He brought me ivory combs and fine dress-stuff. Still they could not compare to the fine abalone combs of our people or the shimmering seaweed threads of our finest satins. He held me soft and gentle in the night and whispered his love in my ear, but it only reminded me of the sound of the sea and the fluid caress of the tide. I left his bed for midnight treks to the shore where I called to my family and friends. Often

they answered on moonlit nights and conversed with me in their seal forms. But I longed so to be deep in the water with them, humming out the melody of our native tongue. The fisherman saw all these things, but he could not understand my endless desire to return to the water-world of my true home. To him the things of his sunlit and airy world were fine beyond compare, and he had no experience of the other side of the water.

Then, one day, the fisherman, having cast his nets, was beset by a squall blown down from the north too quickly for him to get his boat around and head to safe harbour. The sky blackened, and lightening streaked it. The sea heaved up in great waves as would capsize him. The fisherman bore no hope of surviving and was about to say his prayers when a small, furred head with glistening, round eyes poked out of the waves."

I play out the trout guts, strand by strand, and watch the fish swarm beneath a mosaic of pale, gold poplar leaves and the reflected blue of the sky. The guts float on the surface, and numbers of gold and white fish tug them this way and that. Suddenly, the guts disappear, snatched right out from under the

bright and pale ones. I toss out another string. Once again the fish swarm. This time I detect a shadow cruising in for a raid. One tug and the guts disappear beneath the surface. I am disgusted by their cannibalism. They push and shove and tear at the guts of their cousins. I hate these fish. I hurl all the rest of the guts on them, hoping to trap them in a net of guts, hoping they will consume each other in their attempt to reach the fishguts on their backs, hoping the shadows will come up and rend them to pieces.

I am surprised to see Danny's face staring up at me from the water, twisted and shining with cold sweat, eyes gone black with hate. But it is only my reflection, my twisted face and blackened eyes. And there are my hands holding an empty plate. I hate my hands, too small, too soft to play the notes with the right fingering. I hate my body for its paralysis in the pursuit of pleasure. I hate it for not hating enough, for loving and expecting love. I hate my hands for not pummelling back, for not gouging into the softest part of the body pummelling and plowing into me, rending me open with my guts spilling until I have to leave everything, leave my job, leave love and seek out this dark place to hide. I want to smash my hands against the bars until the fingers break and the flesh

peels away for deserting me, leaving me haunted by a rage that I couldn't drown with a lake of tears. I have smashed Mother's plate on the bars, and the shards shatter my reflection.

I turn to the mermaid and ask, "Did you ever hate yourself for not loving him enough?" Danny was always so perfect in every way except in bed. At first, I supposed he was scared, and I thought it would wear off after we'd been together for a while. Then I decided to talk to him about it. We only argued.

I don't remember the exact words we exchanged that night; we had had this argument so many times before. We screamed, and I cried, and we didn't talk to each other for hours or even days afterwards. But soon he'd talk to me, reasonably, about what we had and what he wanted. And he'd listen when I'd tell him my side. And then he'd put his arms around me, hold me tight, and we would want each other again. But he never wanted me so much he'd risk touching me; he was never able to forget himself. And so we arrived at that night when everything flipped upside-down.

"Why are you always so distant? We're lovers; we're supposed to make love," I said.

"Why did you let them move your office?" he said.

"I 'let them' move my office because Stephanie

was being harrassed by someone in the sales department, and they thought if they moved her back away from the receptionist's area and put her between two senior buyers that he'd get the point and leave her alone."

"Now you're close to the receptionist, and he can visit you."

"No. I have seniority."

"Yeh, so as a senior buyer, you shouldn't have to have an office so close to the receptionist. Why didn't you move to an office further down the hall?"

"Why should everybody have to switch offices. Danny, what's bugging you? It's not a big deal."

"Maybe you don't think so, but then you'll never get anywhere in this business. You're too soft. If you let them move you around, put you in a lower position, you just show them how weak you are."

"So this is why you won't let me kiss you, because I'm weak and traded offices with Stephanie?"

"We've been through this before. I don't turn you on the way most women get turned on, so why bother?"

"Because I love you; I want to touch you, and I want you to touch me."

"Oh goody! Let's all touch and hug, then the world will be a better place, won't it?"

"No, but my world would be a better place if you would let me kiss you."

"Why did you fix beans for dinner? You know I hate beans."

"I didn't know."

"That's what I mean. If you were really in love with me, you'd pay attention to things like that."

"It was just beans, Danny. There was left-over corn in the fridge." I bent over him to kiss him, he was irresistible when he pouted and tried to ignore me.

He said he'd show me how much he wanted me; he'd teach me how a real woman liked to be touched. He threw himself into me, hurled himself on my body, screaming how did I like it? Was it hard enough? fast enough? And all I could do was shudder tears into my pillow. When he was done, he got up and dressed and said I was only half a woman before he walked out the door." The mermaid smiles sadly and says, before she slips between the bars and into the water, "They always steal your skin."

After dinner, I try to help Mother clean-up. She has gone to a great deal of trouble to make dinner special. She has got out all the good china and

silver. She decorated the meat with parsley and twisted lemon slices and made raspberry tart, my favorite dessert. She even set out the candles. Mother is very tired, now.

I try to help, but, first, I use the wrong towel. I have grabbed the one hanging nearest the sink, the one for drying your hands. All the stem-ware has to be washed again. Then I step in the cat's dish and track grease on the floor. We have to stop so Mother can scrub the tiles while I put my shoes outside and fetch my slippers. Finally, I have gotten the silver dried and laid into its slots separating the spoons from the forks from the knives. I fold down the velvet cover and push at the little drawer in the cedar-wood case. I push too hard. The case slips across the table, teeters a second at the edge and plunges to the floor, scattering the silver every which way. The knives and forks glitter and ripple like trout on the other side of my tears. I am horrified at the water welling up in my eyes, threatening to drown me as Mother bends and retrieves the chips and splinters of her great-grandmother's silver case. She looks up, shaking her head, eyes begging me to tell her what all this means.

But my voice is caught and held fast, hidden

where I can't find it. Mother moves toward me, saying, "It's not so grave. It doesn't deserve these tears." But beneath her voice I hear the scale of 'I told you so's,' the four/four beat of 'you want to fail's,' and I see that this beat measures out her life now that her rage is spent, the scales of her dreams drowned out by the clicking of knitting needles.

She reaches out to pull me into her arms and brushes my hair back from my face. Her large breasts are painfully soft to me. She bends over me, kissing my eyes, and her lips make hungry sucking sounds at my tears. I begin to tremble, and then to shake violently. I cannot breathe with her face so close, with her arms around me. I cannot breathe with her breasts against mine. She hears the choking noises, and puts me away from her. Her eyes have locked mine in inquisition. They demand, again and again. "What is wrong with you?" I can only summon the strength to break away from her, to run out to the fishpond.

Outside the air is fresh and bites my lungs. The fishpond is a pit of blackness. I light up a cigarette, and the black abyss blinks a curious secret-code to my soul, the broken reflection of my cigarette's glowing orange tip. I get down on my belly and hang my cigarette out over the edge of the pool,

hoping to attract some fish. It must not produce enough light. I cannot see any glittering, shadow bodies. So I lean my head out over the water and drag on the cigarette. After two or three puffs, I think I see something moving, just beneath the mirrored blackness of the water. Perhaps it is the mermaid:

"The fisherman, trapped in an angry sea, begged the seal, who was my mother Gioga, to save him. He only hoped it would be one of the water-folk and was surprised to hear her reply, 'I will take you to land, but you must return the robe of my daughter. Should you fail to do this, all the fish will disappear from these waters, and you will never again get your living by the sea.' The fisherman swore an oath on his name, and Mother swam in close to the boat. The fisherman was suddenly struck with fear at the sight of her slippery wet back and begged her to let him cut some slits in her skin so that he might have better grip. Mother loved me so much she consented to this great wound. The fisherman slit her and looped his hands through her skin. Mother swam mightily so that they reached land in nearly no time. As the fisherman's feet touched the rocky shingle, she shouted, 'I will await my daughter here, as soon as the seas calm.'

I sat embroidering by the firelight when he came through the door. His eyes were red, and tears streaked his cheeks. He tore up the floorboards and pulled up my robe. At the sight of it I could not help myself; I jumped with gladness, pulling the skin around my shoulders even as he sobbed. Arrayed round about me were my children and husband, all mournful and tears coursing from their eyes. The sight of it nearly checked me, even in my joy, but I steeled myself against them only saying, as I parted, 'I have loved thee well enough these years, but I must return to my element.'

The fisherman and the children followed me to the beach and watched me pull on my sealskin robe. They spied their grandmother not far off in the water and cried out to her not to take me away from them. I shed tears as I kissed their little foreheads. I kissed my fisherman, too, and promised him good fishing. Then I took my seal form and slipped into the sea. No friends and family waited with garlands of sea weed and anenome to drape o'er my brow. Only lone Gioga, my mother. But the sea, as it swallowed me, blinked a curious message in a language only my people know. The fisherman could never understand my desperate longing to return to the water."

"After Danny left, I took the tram downtown, thinking of a bar he'd mentioned recently. It was near the beach, he'd said.

I got off the train at Golden Gate, thinking of that beach near the Cliffhouse, and, avoiding the park, walked past a dozen or so apartments before his Audi on a side street seemed to suddenly block my path, its Camper Van Beethoven bumpersticker revealing its identity. I remembered that concert, how Danny thought it would be synthesized Beethoven, and I sat on the hood to wait for him. But I got restless, and my thoughts wouldn't leave me alone. I couldn't imagine what he was doing, who he knew here, which apartment was he in, but I had to know what it meant, what he'd done to me tonight. I couldn't sit still.

In the little courtyard of the nearest building, my feet crunched too loudly in gravel, making me feel as if eyes watched me from every window, and everyone knew that I didn't belong there. The security door wouldn't open to me. I stood with my hands cupped round my eyes, staring through the glass, trying to decipher the names on the mailboxes just inside the door. A few I could make out and one seemed familiar. But it didn't come to me right away that she was the sales director for Sally Mae, one of the companies we

buy men's wear from. I thought about buzzing for her to open the door, maybe asking her why it was that her name seemed familiar.

Her apartment was on the second floor. I searched for a way up to the window ledge, only finding a drain-pipe. Somehow it held while my body clumsily worked out the memory a childhood skill. Crawling on the narrow ledge, expecting at any moment to meet a pair of eyes staring back, to hear the sound of sirens. I stared into one window after another until, near an open window, voices pressed out the sounds of traffic. I thought it was Danny's voice I heard, saying, "How was I supposed to know you'd come back." He added something I couldn't quite make out. Then a woman's voice, raised, said, "So why don't you leave her? I'm not going to wait forever. I mean, get a life, Danny."

The building peeled away from me, spinning wildly, a lurch in my stomach. But I managed to land on my feet, cat-like, and my knees knocked the breath from my chest. My lungs burned, and a flush of heat swept through my limbs, disconnecting my joints. Wanting to smash something, my hands closed around gravel, but it was too small and insignificant. Waves of burning heat rolled over me. A nauseating, ringing

sound drowned out the traffic noises, the memory of her voice, my thoughts.

I filled my shoe and flung it toward her window, missing the open part and shattering the glass above it. Then I ran, limping and rolling for a long time. I don't even remember how I got home, or what I said to Danny when I left two days later. I think I told him that I had loved him."

Mother calls, standing in front of the light from the open door and waving one arm, motioning for me to come. She is calling my name, "Christine. Christine." But it sounds like, "Tristine, Tristine." She lifts her other arm and holds up the sweater. It is finished, now.

POLY SPEAK(S)

I
Dies Lot

My name is Poly. It is not the name my father gave me, nor the name my mother called me. My father named me Agatha, or Agnes, or Agnostura and left me to fend as well as I could with it. He did not come from Gomorrah or Sodom, my father, a foreigner, perhaps impressed to service on some far flung ship then sold in the slave markets. It is an old tale, full of romance as are all old tales. It had been said in the market that my mother was sold into slavery by the priests of Malak, but she returned some months later, with child and in my father's care. They called her the One Marked By The Gods. I know not the truth of it, but I sometimes like to imagine them in their slave-chains, cooling their sand-burnt feet at an oasis, whispering secrets with eyes like crystal pools of moonlight and silvered sand, praying for the wind to erase the traces they will leave in passing. My father is the secret spoken by eyes and the writing of

the wind. And one thing I know for certain; the priests of Malak left us to ourselves. My mother called me Hagi, and we lived in the house of my seventh Uncle, Ben-Abu, where my mother wove carpets, and I came to weave beside her.

Wonderful carpets we wove, magical. Our hands flew like morning birds from thread to thread so that patterns would arise, intricate and fine, commanding great prices at the market. We worked the finest threads and richest colors, but that was not our magic. Each thread was an indecipherable universe that I could never enter, never know. Though it imbibe the sweat of my hands and the water of my breath as I followed it through the warp, all I could hope to know of this universe, or of the next that I must take up, were their collision courses with any number of other universes. And you who buy these carpets can know no more, though the fiber imbibes the dust and henna of your feet as you trace your pattern across the threads with the myriad traipsings of common existence. Your life becomes a part of the carpet; each trip to the well, each time you sit on your haunches to knead the bread, each meal, each cuddling and comforting of your infant child, each dream of your deepest sleep collides with the universe of each thread. And that is

the magic of the carpet: to follow the course of an indecipherable universe as it collides with innumerable others; that is what makes the carpet fly, what transports you when you try to trace it out in the threads.

So I am Poly who was once called Hagi, or Aggie, or Agnostura, who once wove carpets beside her mother in the city of Gomorrah. And how I came to be here is another old tale which I will leave you to garnish with whatever romance you best like, for I will tell it plain.

I had not long been a woman with a monthly flow of blood when I came down from the roof, where we slept in the summer months, to find my mother huddled over her tea, weary and pale. The steam from the tea made silver droplets in the wisps of her hair that escaped from beneath her chador, and though she smiled to see me her eyes made droplets deep in their dark hollows.

"Mother," I said, "Are you not well?"

"I am fine," she replied. "But you must go to the hammam today. Your uncle has invited a guest for dinner."

"Mother, why must I go out, when I see you need me? I should stay beside you today. I have never

before needed to bathe for Uncle's guests."

My cousins had come down and tittered over their tea about my reluctance. Auntie smiled knowingly as she passed me the plate of cucumber slices and the morning's bread. Mother continued, "Nevertheless, you will bathe today. I am happy. These are tears of joy. You must go to the hammam, and I must go to the market, for we are to have a feast tonight?"

But the tears of joy had dried in their wells and Mother's voice sighed in a decidedly unjubilant way. I tried again.

"I do not understand what can be so important about this guest to have all the household upset."

"You do understand," she said. "But you don't wish to acknowledge it. Do you question your mother's decision? You will go to the hammam as I ask."

And that was the end of it. I went to the hammam, thinking it strange that none of my cousins accompanied me. Were they not also expected to bathe for the guest? But that night, they were not even allowed to dine with us. We were seated in my uncle's reception room, a room ordinarily forbidden to the women of the house.

My uncle made many gestures of hospitality to his guest, a man named Lot who I understood to have come

all the way from Sodom. Uncle Ben-Abu offered many luxurious gifts: fine woven stuffs, little boxes of rare wood, ornaments of gold, all manner of brass and pottery, even the glass jar from Egypt that had set on my mother's chest all these years. It was not until much later that I realized all these gifts were actually Mother's things.

And Lot, urged on by the magnanimity of Uncle Ben-Abu, promised a steady flow of fine dyed wools and linens from his business, which he assured my uncle was the premiere dye house of Sodom and practically overrun with wealthy customers from all around the valley. Lot promised a special place in his house to my uncle and his family. Lot gifted my uncle with fine tobacco while the rest of the family sat on the roof to eat each course as I returned it and took down the next. Each course brought a new gift and a new promise until my head fairly swam. I would take the hummus back to the roof and bring down the tabouli and lamb, and Lot would acquire some household treasure. I would take up the lamb and bring down the chicken roasted with olives, pickled lemon and almonds, and my uncle would receive Lot's promise. I would take up the chicken and bring down the fish stuffed with pepper and cilantro, and another round of gifts would begin.

I had never seen my uncle so generous before and decided Lot must truly be an extraordinary man, perhaps a petty prince or city Father. By the time we had gotten to the cakes seasoned with orange peel and almond, I was feeling somewhat sick. Not even at holidays had we feasted so well. And all those trips up and down the stairs, the taunting remarks of my cousins, the ostentatious show conspired to make me dizzy. I had gotten slower and slower in my service, and Mother looked at me with concern. As I departed with the cakes to bring down the dates and oranges, I overheard the guest ask my uncle if I were always so pallid and lethargic. Lot said, "Excellent weaver or no, I am but a sojourner in Sodom, with no family, and I can't take on a woman who is sickly." I felt the garlic, almonds and olives well up in revolt so suddenly that I hadn't time to flee before my stomach was emptied, the pitious "NO" I wanted to scream cut off in my throat by the finest stuffing a temple goose has ever got. Yes, I had understood, from this morning I had really understood, but it was all too horrible. Even now I searched my mind for a way out of this knowledge.

Mother appeared before me, held my face in her hands. The tears of joy filled her pained eyes, and

her lips quivered. Then she spoke the words I could not hear, the words I watched with my eyes as they came to rest at my door, demanding hospitality of me. But I could not let them inside; I had nothing to feed them.

My cheeks pinched to a healthy glow, I was reissued into the room and given the nuptial glass to drink. Then I was shuttled off to the care of my mother and aunt, while Uncle Ben-Abu and the man, Lot, smoked and fulfilled the closing obligations of the ritual.

I slept feverishly that night and woke to hear soft footfall receding toward the courtyard where the looms stood. The shadowed form of my mother carried a lamp to the workplace, and I followed, silently, to the doorway. The lamp hung on a branch of the lemon tree beside her loom, she cast off her chador and disrobed. I had seen Mother naked before, in the hammam, her droopy breasts somehow sad and her great, rolling buttocks. But I had never seen anyone naked in the house before. I wanted to go and cover her, but the private nature of her act and the secrecy of my observation conspired to keep me in place. She undid her hair, and it fell, long and dark, streaked with grey, to veil her nakedness.

She pricked her finger with the spindle and pried at the center of the whorl there until her skin began to unravel in a fine thread. As she undid the whorl of her fingertip, gently lifting and prying, she worked swiftly to wind it on the spindle. I had traced those whorls and marked the callouses wrought by years of swiftly running thread; I had held her thin, veiny hands and kissed her palms. Now, gently, ever so gently, she pulled at that thread and slowly unwound the skin from her finger. It was such a fine filament that I could barely see it against the glow of the lamp, but from time to time it would sparkle like a dewy spider's web. And strong was that thread. Never once did it break, but unravelled itself in one continuous strand from finger to finger, then to her hand, then up her arm, strong, fleshy arm that had held me and comforted me, and down her leg, strong, fleshy leg that had carried carpets to market and water back from the well.

As her skin came off, Mother bled; droplets became rivulets became oozing sheets that flooded the basin beneath her feet. My soul sank as if to seek exit through my bowels. It was as if Mother, in unravelling her skin, were undoing every carpet we'd ever woven. I wanted so desperately to stop her, to

cry out, to strike the spindle from her hands, yet the magic of something so sacred and holy held me silent and motionless. The gods were passing by and had turned their awful gaze on my life, a mirror condensing and focusing the light to a white hot point, and the sacred enveloped me like the smoke of wet wood, choking and blinding.

Not even the soles of her feet did my mother spare. The merciless filament broke not, but erased every fine line and wrinkle of her skin until it wound out across her face. It took away her fine high forehead and apple cheeks; it blotted out her nose. That finite thread pulled away her eyelids and left her eyes to stare starkly, eyes that had taught me all the lessons I will ever know, eyes that praised me silently when I had done good, or condemned me with equal silence when I misbehaved. I would forever blast this baleful vision of my Mother's stark, unhooded eyes with the ones I see in my imagination, eyes full of moonlight and silvered sand. But then her beautiful lashes fell, one by one, like my tears. Finally the relentless filament banished her lips and ended at the right-hand corner of her mouth.

She moved to the loom, hobbling on her heels, and put up the warp. The shuttle flew through the fine

mesh from bloody hand to bloody hand, and as the woof began to grow, Mother's flesh began to glaze like the cutlets and haunches in the marketplace. The flies gathered and prickled her legs and arms, her mouth and eyes. But she was so intent on the weaving that she never even stopped to brush them away.

I tried to move to her side; I pleaded with I know not what gods to be allowed to at least keep the flies away, but the sacred awe would not release me. Finally, as the sun's light swallowed the lamp's light, the cloth was done. It was fine, more fine than anything I had ever seen before or since, so fine and sheer that one could look through it and still trace a spider's web, one could see the pattern of the dust motes' dance through it. Mother gathered it into her glazed, cracked arms and stirred it into the basin. When she pulled it out and hung it up to dry, it was the only, purest red of a mother's blood, a color even the famous Lot of Sodom was never able to match. Only then did she look up into my eyes. Only then did she speak, and only three words in a hoarse whisper, "Your wedding veil."

So, on the seventieth day, according to custom, though I hardly had begun to mourn, my baggage was packed and loaded on donkeys. My uncle, my aunt and

all my cousins dressed in their finest. My aunt and first cousin lifted the veil and covered me with it to my very toes, the weave so fine as to be almost transparent. And, as I made my nuptial journey, I looked out for the first time on the world beyond the gates of Gomorrah, and saw it through tears and my mother's skin. So my mother died. So I was transported.

The wedding festivities whirled around me like a dervish wind, never touching my skin through the protective veil, and soon, so very soon, night closed its eyes. Had I been initiated in the temples of Malak, I would have been prepared for the bridal bed, and, perhaps, I could have welcomed it. But instead my ignorance froze me, and I could only imagine that horrors now awaited me.

Lot was not a careful lover. Though he unveiled and undressed me gently, reverently, his attentions to my flesh were perfunctory. His first kisses kindled a fire, but no sooner had it begun to seep its warmth into my limbs than he began to brutally crush my lips against my teeth, and the timid flame was stomped out. His hand took measure of my breast, then pushed it here and there as if it might be better were it positioned differently. My buttocks succumbed to the

same rearrangement. Were all this meant to prepare my flesh it surely failed dismally. But it seemed only meant to prepare his. While he molded and tried my body, Lot's flesh rearranged itself and prodded at my belly, and, foreigner though it was, I had no choice but to give it hospitality. So the words Mother had spoken entered me at last, and they found sustenance there.

I soon came to understand what Lot had meant in saying that he couldn't take on a sickly woman. He had no family in Sodom; there were no other women to help with the household work. I had precious little time for weaving which seemed to upset him greatly. And if I let slacken my attentions to the house, this, too, upset him greatly. But the words had found sustenance and grew fat within me. My belly swelled to give them more room, and Lot purchased a servant to keep the house. Suddenly, I had nothing to do, for Lot forbade my weaving, except sit all day and watch the words grow fat, and feel them rearranging themselves in my belly.

When they had grown as big and round as a watermelon, Auntie was called and came to live with us. She cooed and gurgled over the swelling in such a way that I found myself covering it protectively with

my hands, instinctively resting my arms atop its protruding mass to be ready to fend off her next attack. If I sat in the sun on the rooftop while Fatima did the laundry, Auntie would scold me into the shade, cooing to my belly that all would be well. If I sat in the courtyard in the shade of the almond tree, she would come to scold me into the warmth of the house or set out a brazier to keep the chill off my belly. And just when I realized I should have no peace in my own home, just when I began to plot an escape, the words started screaming to be let out. They pushed and prodded blindly, searching for the door, and all my belly was in upheaval. And though they'd grown too fat for the lintel and post, they pushed and tore and broke through my flesh, no longer the words but a word. I had transformed them into a daughter, and this word, daughter, I had fed and clothed in my flesh. Here my flesh lay screaming and red up to the little tuft of black hair, a word outside of me. I wrapped her in nine veils and held her to my breast, where she continued to swell and make herself known to me.

Lot, whose right was that of the word, named her Kahali, but I knew her in my heart as Pearl, for, like the oyster dressing the grain of sand, I had clothed this word in my flesh. Twice more, the word fattened

itself in my belly, and I gained another daughter, who Lot named Samhira, and I knew in my heart as Honey; for as the bee eats the pollen to transform it, I had eaten the word and made it sweet. But the last swelling did not survive and was swept from my body like dust and crumbs. I cried long for it because it was my flesh. I cried until my carpets and sleeping cushions were soaked through, and I had to move from my place on the floor. Finally, Lot came to comfort me, stroke my hair, and move me to his cushion for the night.

When my second daughter had gained her thirteenth year, the priests of Malak beset us. At first they came but one at a time, tall and gaunt, shaven headed with black-ringed eyes, to instruct us on the necessity of the girls' initiation. Then they came by twos, probing into our business affairs and reminding Lot that, as a sojourner there, he was expected to conform to the Temple's edicts. Then they were coming in hoards, eating a week's worth of food, wreaking havoc in the workshop, frightening the customers and threatening us.

They sat in the first room, demanding tea and sweetmeats, according to the custom. Fatima and I

could hardly keep up with their appetites. And all the while Lot could only sit by helplessly as they joked and guffawed.

"Brother Lot, you have two fine daughters, the finest and fairest that I have seen in quite some time. At least, since last week," one would start, to the concerted hilarity of his fellows.

"But you know what they say of the man who keeps his daughters for himself, don't you," another would continue.

Still a third, choking down the last bit of date cake, would deliver the punchline: "They say he has his camels and his horses mixed."

At this they would laugh and slap each others' knees. Yet a fourth would, again, take up the line of interrogation. "Brother Lot, can you imagine what a horse might look like with a camel's back?"

On and on with their thin-veiled threats and innuendo, all the while stuffing their mouths with the food I'd laid by for the whole week, bottomless pits into which I delivered cucumbers and bread, tabouli and hummus, tomatoes and poultry and lamb, dates and oranges and gallons of tea. I wondered at their gaunt physiques. And just when I feared my larder would give out and we would be shamed, up they'd fetch themselves

to the workshop, where they would piss in the dye pots, break the woof on the looms by carelessly leaning on the budding cloth there and take strange liberties with any customers so unfortunate as to appear at our door during one of their visits, fondling between their own legs and tugging at the merchant's robes.

For months I pleaded with Lot to return to Gomorrah; Uncle Ben-Abu would surely help us. But Lot insisted that the priests of Gomorrah were no more polite than those of Sodom, and I could not refute the charge. Somewhere else, then, I'd beg. But Lot refused to hear me. "I have established myself as the premiere dryer of Sodom. I can hardly expect my customers to follow me as I wander from city to city, plagued by the Temples which they themselves endorse. Besides, my position in the commerce of this city is what keeps them from becoming truly destructive." Still, he never broke his promise to me that my daughters not be given up to the priests of Malak. And so it was when he brought home the two strangers.

We lived near the great gate of the city as all foreigners in all cities do. And that is where Lot found the strangers on his way home from the marketplace to secure passage of some dyed stuffs for

Uncle Ben-Abu on a caravan which would pass through Gomorrah. The strangers were warily making their way through the street, avoiding the offal, beggars and the thieves that whirl like harbor eddies about the gates of any city. The strangers wore robes with long sleeves and deep hoods so that they were nearly completely hidden from view. Where one might expect to see their faces, they wore wooden masks carved in the likeness of men of surpassing beauty, except a strange white light, bright as the sun's, flowed from a slit in the place of the mouth. And their fingers gave off a cold blue glow like the sheen of certain kinds of marble. They greeted me in the harmonious unison of a beehive that I was soon to know as their only voice, "Blessed be this house and all who dwell in it."

As we dined, I watched them and saw no food pass beyond the slit in their masks, but disappeared when it entered the beam of light and gave off a slight smoke that was not unpleasant to the nose. They asked many questions of Lot about the temple and its doings.

"My generous host, is it true that the priests here sell the sons and daughters of the city into slavery?"

"This is true, my guests, as I have seen it with my own eyes, long lines of children paraded from the

temple to the marketplace with great ostentation. And often I recognize the son or daughter of a friend or neighbor among them."

"And how is it that the people of the city never cry out against this?"

"It is considered a great honor, and the father gains much prestige. Besides, most often they only take the girls and, to a man with many daughters, one less dowry can be a blessing."

"And is it true that the high priests of Malak wear garments made of womens' parts?"

"This, too, is true as I have seen it with my own eyes in the market."

"How do they come to wear these strange garments?"

"It is said that they take them from the daughters of extremely fertile women while the girls yet live, and they wear them to gain the power of fertility. It is said that during certain rites they fornicate with each other through the garments and that is how a high priest is born."

"And do the believers also participate in this rite?"

"Certain princes and city Fathers are said to be elect with the privilege of this ritual, though they

may not be seen in public, wearing the vesture of the high priests."

"We have heard tell that the priests of Malak breed their followers with animals to produce abominations. Perhaps you can tell us if this also is true?"

"Of this I know nothing for certain. Yet the temple is fond of oddities, the misshapen and stillborn, and they are said to keep a garden of sorts where they may stroll and look upon these things. And, indeed, the priests have made odd remarks to me concerning horses with camels' backs. And my wife has seen, with her own eyes, my neighbor's wife brought to bear of a son with two heads and the tail of a swine."

I am unaccustomed to such talk at dinner and was almost grateful when it was interrupted by a great clamouring at our front door. I had not eaten more than a bite from my plate, and the girls were likewise fasting. But the noise of an angry mob is no better for the appetite than recitations on atrocity. As a resounding knocking set up at the door, Lot arose. I clutched at the hem of his sleeve, but he brushed away my hand. I went to the rooftop to better see the arrival of my fate.

The priests had led a large gathering of all

sorts; golden diadems glittered amidst the patches and rags, and all stood screaming, raising their fists against the sky. Then the priests quelled them and demanded of Lot that he turn out the two strangers. I hardly wanted to believe my ears, yet I heard it quite clearly when Lot replied, "I have two daughters who have never known man. These I will give to you, but leave my guests in peace."

My soul once again sought to flee through my bowels as it had the night Mother wove my wedding veil. I thought I would tumble from the roof into the maddened throng. In all the years of my marriage, I had asked of Lot but one thing, that my daughters should never know the Temple. And Lot, who had never been a bad husband to me, had given me his promise. Now, he would turn them over to a crazed hoard, stirred to rape and murder by the priests of this very same temple. I ran from the roof. Lot would not have my daughters so long as I drew breath.

But the priests, who just yesterday had beset us for possession of those daughters, now would not have them, insisting on the strangers. Lot called out his refusal as the two men pulled him back into the house. And for the second time, the gods turned their baleful glare on my life. Horrid were the cries of pain and

anguish from the mob. "My eyes, my eyes," they screamed. "I have been struck blind." The common rabble stumbled off into the darkness, and the princes and nobles milled about in the street, clasping their hands over their eyes. But the priests of Malak scabbled over the house, seeking purchase of any kind. They would tear down the very walls with their bare fingers, could they but find a seam. Yet, search though they might, their fingertips were as numb as their eyes and finally, after the terrible hours we huddled together, enduring the sound of their scratching and scrambling just beyond our walls, they too departed.

Then the strangers said, "My most generous and benevolent host, Lot, who have taken us under your roof, fed us and kept us safe when your neighbors wished you harm on our account, for this we are thankful and would spare you. Our God commands that we destroy this city and all those like it where the abominations of Malak raise their stench to the heavens. Take your wife and family and go from here before the first light."

But stubborn Lot, even now, could not let go of his dye pots and accounts. "How can I leave with no means to keep myself and my family? We would surely

perish out in the wilderness."

The strangers were not put off and took Lot by the shoulders and pointed him out the door. "You are blessed among men, and God smiles on you. There is a city not far from here where you will find health. Flee with your life and the lives of your family, and do not look back, not a one of you."

So we found ourselves running through the street, through the gate and out into the wilderness with no more than the clothes on our backs. Soon a tremendous rumbling shook the earth beneath our feet, and we stumbled over treacherous rocks. Waves of heat blasted our backs, and terrible flashes more bright than the sun lit our road. The roar of a great fire assaulted our ears, and I knew that Sodom and Gomorrah existed no more. Then I realized that I had forgotten Mother. I had left her skin in my trunk to be consumed with the god Malak, whom she had hated so. It was only a moment, a thoughtless moment, and I turned my head to look back, as if through some silly magic she was floating along behind me, a red veil that refused to be parted from my head and followed me of its own accord.

And it was no more than a moment, a relentless moment that seemed, then, an eternity, and my feet

froze stiff and I felt a crystalline madness creep up my legs. It seemed forever that I refused to believe what I felt. Then I screamed out a great "NO!" as if to stop its progress. My legs were welded, numb and solid. Then my belly where the words had grown so fat, now frozen, forbidding any sustenance. And my breasts, where my daughters had grown fat and made themselves known to me, cold and dry as stone. I could feel the hard little crystals swallowing my throat like a thousand thousand pinpricks. And the last thing I saw, before my eyes were engulfed in the boiling whirl, were the faces of my daughters who had followed behind me; their eyes gone stark and round, lidless with fear; their mouths gaping, lips twisted and peeled back by a horrified scream. So Malak was destroyed. So I was transformed.

II

Malleus Galatea

Though my body was frozen in stone, my mind whirled on and on, and after a time I came to know new senses. I could taste or smell nothing but salt, yet a subtle difference in its pungency gave me to know what seasons passed. I could not hear as I used to, but sensed vibrations and knew when man or beast passed close to me. I could not reach and touch and feel as once I did, but I knew the change of temperature and was aware of subtle pressures like raindrops, wind and the tongues of the beasts who crave salt. So perhaps you will allow me this one small pinch of romance, for it is still my tale I tell.

For years untold I exercised my imagination, building whole universes out of the slightest sensations. Eventually, there came, regularly, the voices of an old man and old woman, who placed small bowls on the block of stone that was me. I think of

them as aged beyond understanding, their skin sagging around bare bones, grey tresses matted and hanging over their shoulders. They lived, perhaps, in a hut of waddle and daub. Each evening they would put out, for the small beasts of the woods, dishes of food and water on an altar of stone in which I was housed. And so they lived for many seasons when a young man, a famous sculptor, passed through their glen. He was dressed stylishly, in fine linen and gold, and spoke with a foreign accent. His hair, a whirlwind of gold curls, bobbed appreciatively at his animated gestures, as if applauding his every move.

It being close to nightfall, he asked hospitality of them and spoke poetry through their mean meal. At dusk, on the appointed hour, they made their obeisance before the altar and left offerings for the beasts of the woods, and he, the sculptor, observed them. The slab of stone intrigued him in the way of all artists who see in one thing another. In this rare stone rested a figure he could barely make out, a figure of surpassing beauty.

That night he slept fitfully, dreaming of the figure trapped in the stone, and in his dream a goddess spoke and said to him, "In this stone is bound the figure of woman perfect of all her type. Because

you have so long refused her, loathing her weaknesses and vices, and so have refused me, I charge you to free her." Then the goddess was gone, and Pygmalion awoke, for Pygmalion was truly his name and of this dream I did hear from his own lips.

So Pygmalion was fired to have the stone altar and informed his host of his intentions. The morning sun broke through the leafy roof of the small clearing and birdsong shattered its quiet. Pygmalion stood beside the stone, pointing and drawing curves in the air, saying, "I see a perfect woman in this stone, her face like so and her breasts like so and her hips just there. Do you see her also?"

The old man and old woman, somewhat confused, suspecting the worst, shook their heads dumbly. This only made Pygmalion's gesticulations more wild and erratic. "Well, she's there, whether you see her or not, a goddess among women, a truth amidst mere representations. And you will know that I speak the truth when I tell you the dream that visited me last night." On and on he lectured the old ones, waving his arms as if to shoo them away, then bending low with hand outstretched to call them to him again.

"But where will the beasts of the woods come if you take from us this altar? Where will they find salt

and water, and where will we set out our gifts to the world?"

Pygmalion promised them an altar of carved marble, and promised to bring back all the chips and chunks of salt that he would carve away from the woman trapped in the stone. And to make good show of his intentions, he removed from his sack a hammer and chisel and worked free a great block from above my head. You who are craftsmen might wonder that the carving of salt could be wrought like the carving of marble; do not forget that this was no ordinary salt, but the stubborn forgery of a god.

The pounding reverberations I knew all too well. I felt my head would be split asunder, my bones crushed by the vibrations. Every inch of my being felt the slightest tap of his hammer down to my very core. It was a thousand times worse than the pinpricks of being swallowed by salt. Then I was hoisted to stand once again on my feet, and worse still, levered and hoisted to the bed of a wagon, jolted mercilessly all the way to the sea. And, eventually, after much jostling, I came to rest in Pygmalion's workshop.

Day after day, he would come to me with hammer and chisel, at first lopping off great chunks that

caused me much pain and rattled my very soul. But as the weight of my casing grew lighter, the vibrations faded. Soon he was working more closely to my flesh, and the taps of the chisel were like the persistent itch of a limb healing in its bindings. And with each layer shaved off by his chisel, the tapping became a tickling, a feather brushed across my skin. Slowly and carefully he smoothed out the rough shape of my legs, working down to the knobs of my ankles and the line of my heels, up to the curve of my calves. And as he peeled away the layers of stone, he brushed away the particles there; it felt like the application of a soothing balm. He caressed my hands, chipping and brushing even the cuticles of my fingernails. He worked across my back, perfecting the line of my shoulderblades, brushing and caressing. He smoothed my belly, working long over the button there, and brushed out my long, free hair, caressing its length. His hands smoothed my forehead and cheeks, brushed my eyelids and lips. And he plied my shoulders gently, and troubled over my collarbone. His chisel licked the curves of my heavy breasts, giving them a fullness they had never before known and a firmness they had long lost. And then came a nibbling at my nipples, perfecting their hard roundness. His hands slid up my

thighs, separating them and smoothing the curves. He worked long and tediously to free each hair of my womanhood, for he was a marvelous sculptor. And his minute ministrations transformed me to a being of fire, a phoenix rising from dust and burning to ashes.

But the heat he generated transformed him as well, and as I emerged from the pillar of salt he grew to desire me. Each time the chisel caressed me, his chiton would swell at the belly, and he took to kissing me, to fondling me. Then he began whispering in my ear the things we would do if only I were flesh instead of stone. Pygmalion called me Galatea and My Perfect One. He sat with me all his waking hours, admiring my form, searching out the perfection he had carved of me, and took me to bed with him, caressing me until he spent himself and fell asleep. He brought me small favors and dressed me in fine robes and pretended to stroll with me in his garden. Then he would make love to me in the shade of a tree and bathe me in the fountain. And I burned, and I burned, and I burned, tempered again and again, like steel.

One day he set me in the garden, saying, "My perfect darling, you should take the fresh breeze here in the garden today. I've left you fresh fruit and fine wine. You might pick the flowers while I am away,

but it is the feast day of Venus, and I must go to the temple." And he left me.

You cannot imagine how I wished that I might eat of that fruit, how I wished I might pick the flowers and fall into his arms when he returned. Never before had I known my body as I knew it now. He had pared away everything that was not my flesh, and I knew myself as a being of liquid sunlight, white hot glare from limb to limb. Unbearable to behold, still worse to be caressed, I stood beneath an eternal sun in a crucible of infinite sand, until I felt I boiled and flowed, a rare quicksilver. Yet these feelings never truly touched me, never transformed me, veiled as I was in the crystalline revenge of a god. Solid I remained, immobile stone that only another might form and heat. I was like the threads of that long ago loom, indecipherable except in my collisions with the innumerable dreams of uncountable others.

A woman appeared, in the garden, so bright she rivaled the sun, but cold as marble. She reminded me of the two strangers Lot had brought home. And she sent a dream to me. Her face was perfect of form, all gently rounded planes and angles, and her hair burnished by the light of her being. I knew her to be a god, but I was not afraid; she was no different to

me than my own flesh as I had come to know it of late.

She whispered to me secrets and held my hand, drawing small circles in my palm. "Galatea he calls you. But I mean you no harm. You are no more than a stone to me that I cast toward other stones that will roll and slide until half the mountain falls at my feet. Long have I watched this sculptor, Pygmalion, how he hated woman for her flesh and desire. And in hating her, he hated me. But now he goes to do me honor in my temple, and it is because he believes he has carved the perfect woman. He comes now to the altar and lays his offering there, silently praying that I give you life while his lips mumble only what he dares to ask, that I grant him a flesh and blood woman in your image. And now I give him signs that he has found favor in my eyes, because I know who you are and what will become of you. It is not by my hand that you have life. And it is not by my hand that you will be freed; the wind and rain are the wind and rain. But he will never know these things, and you will never tell him of them, for in so speaking you would lose all power over him. He will bring me many believers, many devotees, all wishing his wish for the perfect woman shaped and formed by their desire alone. They will never wonder at who shapes their desire." She

laughed the sound of the sea bubbling and lapping the sand, making the shells clatter against each other. And long after she had left my side I heard the echoes of her laughter.

In the afternoon a storm shook out its veils, far out over the sea, and the wind picked them up and brought them to me, one after another, and wrapped me in them. The rain pelted me, stinging, and then I felt the drops penetrate me. I felt them sucked up into my flesh, easing a prickly pain that I had known so long I had forgotten its existence. Each thirsty pore of my skin became a conduit inviting the water deeper and deeper, lubricating the crystalline particles that had consumed me so that they no longer grated upon each other. And slowly I felt them dissolve, loosening and breaking away. Rivulets formed within me, then streams as the god-forged salt was washed from my flesh. My soul leaped as the last of my bonds pooled beneath my feet, and I tentatively tried my limbs, reaching out with my arms, slowly at first, reaching up to the wonderous rain. I was almost surprised when my flesh responded, and I bent back my head and opened my mouth, gulping at the sudden downpour that had liberated me. And I laughed and laughed, feeling the air fill my lungs again, and brushed the drops from my

eyes. And then I danced.

When Pygmalion returned, I waited in the garden, my arms full of flowers, my lips stained with pomegranate. And a week later I stood in the temple, my arms full of flowers, my lips whispering wedding vows, my belly fattening words again.

For weeks I knew only bliss. Pygmalion wondered over every pore of my skin, tracing each line of my form as if by memory, and he gifted me with every small pleasure: baubles and gowns, ribbons and rare wines, sweets and servants to wait on my every whim. But, as my belly became obvious in its swelling, he grew distracted. We would be lying in bed, his hands delicately cupping my breast, then slowly slipping down my side, and when it reached my belly he would let it drop, rise from the bed, pace the room, stare out at the moon and turn back toward me with blank, unfathomable eyes.

He began another statue, a man of heroic proportions, striding out as if he, too, would be free of the stone. Pygmalion had got him blocked out and was beginning the painstaking process of honing each limb, each ligament and muscle when I was brought to bear. My third daughter he named Paphos, but I knew her in my heart as Diamond, for she had been welded

into flesh tempered by great heat and the tremendous pressures of stone and earth.

Pygmalion doted on her, cradling her in his arms, singing to her, marvelling over each tiny finger, each long, dark lash. Whenever he was not caressing his statue, he was to be found caressing Paphos, tracing the lines of her face and her tiny arms. For me he had no hands. I would come to him at night, draped in sheerest gauze, the fire in my eyes. And he would take me to him, kissing me and stroking my form. But the moment the gauze dropped away, he would turn from me. One such night, as he stood looking out over the sea, I came up behind him and caressed his shoulders, his back. I turned him to me and stroked his hard chest. I bent his face to me, his beautiful youth's face still full and round and soft, and plunged my fingers into the wreath of curls that framed his smooth cheeks. The light of the moon played tricks in the corners of the room, making elephants of the wardrobe and chimeras of the bedclothes. But it played no trick with Pygmalion's face; his beauty shone like rare metal and his eyes were upon me, but they did not see me, did not see my heart split open like overripe fruit, the tears streaking my skin like pomegranate juice. Something hot and molten swelled within me and I

wailed, "Why, Pygmalion, why have you left me?"

"I am right here. I will never be parted from you who I have made with my own hands."

"But your heart is far from me. Why do you never touch me and love me as you used to do?"

"Do not plague me woman. It is not becoming to you. I have work to do now. I cannot while away forever dallying with you."

"But you are not working now. Why did you turn from me just now, and why do you look on me as if you do not know me?"

"I do not know you. You have changed. Some evil has gotten inside of you, and begins to make itself known in your flesh. Look how your breast sag under its weight and your belly puffs up with it."

"But that is no more than the effects of having born your daughter. My breasts sag under the weight of her milk, and my belly is puffed for she laid her head to rest there, like a featherdown pillow that will bear the mark of the sleeper when he has risen."

"Perhaps the evil stole inside you to fill the hollow Paphos left behind. But listen to you. You are consumed with it. You would not have plagued me so while you were still as I had shaped you."

"You gave me no cause then."

"Be still. I will not hear. It is the evil in you speaking."

That night I filled my bed with water from my eyes. And for days I wandered the house like an empty pitcher. But I was not empty, for his words haunted me, his words had pierced my ear and rotted in my heart. And cry though I might, I could not dislodge them.

On the third day, I went to watch him at his work. Perhaps the pain would drive this ghost from my heart. So I sat beneath the fig tree, on a bench. And the fountain whispered to me, and the birds darted near to beg crumbs of me, but I remained still as stone, my eyes full of Pygmalion and Pygmalion alone. His stone man had grown thin, almost emaciated under his obsessive attentions. The powerfully muscled thighs had been chipped away to the rough again and looked to be no more than dog's shanks. The brawny arms were likewise pared to rough and stuck out like twigs. And strangest of all was the heroic chest at which Pygmalion worked feverishly now, stripping it of its vestiges of human likeness, working it back to rough. Yet he left some bulk there. As the sun burned through the sky and began its descent to the sea, I realized that he was making a woman of this strider, a

woman perched on legs set to flee.

For three more days I watched him chisel, pondering how I might win him back from this other woman. I watched her grow sleek and smooth under his hand, but she was awkward looking, gangly legged and long-boned. She looked as if her flesh had been stretched to fit its frame, gaunt as the priests of Malak, small breasted and hollow-bellied. I really had nothing to fear, for she would never spring to life as he believed I had, but still she consumed his every waking hour that was not devoted to Paphos. It was Paphos that kept him from being completely lost to this new stone woman, and it was Paphos that brought him to my company each day; she was beginning to totter around on her little, bowed legs, but she yet stayed close by her mother.

I wondered if, perhaps, the evil had really gotten into Pygmalion and put itself in his eye so that it appeared to be in me. When he worked at that other woman, his eyes burned feverishly and his cheeks were flushed crimson. I decided that he must be working out this demon on the stone, for what he carved had the appearance of something otherworldly and malevolent. There was little else I could do than to sit demurely, speak softly of our child when the

three of us were together, and carry myself in such a way as to prove to him that I harbored no demons.

But this still left me empty and haunted, and kept me from my sleep at nights. I puzzled over the handiwork Pygmalion yet wrought of me. It was as if he were carving out my insides now, and I desperately needed something to quell the rotting in my heart before it poisoned me. So I sat in the garden with Paphos at my side, and on the third day the answer came to me. I had brought out a ball of twine to roll on the ground, hoping it would entertain the child and keep her from fussing or wandering in the way of the chips which flew from her father's work. And she was kept happy for quite some time picking it up and rolling it back to me. Then it grew tedious to her, and she took the ball and ran to hide with it behind a flowering bush. I sat still and let her think she had gotten away, then quietly followed and observed her. Paphos had unwound a great deal of twine and was hopelessly tangled in it, but she seemed not to notice; she sat busily twisting the end of it in what might have been an attempt to wind it up again. When she saw me peeking from the other side of the bush, she laughed and clapped her hands, then, noticing that she still held the twine, she offered it to me. As I

untangled the baby, the feel of the thread in my fingers revived old memories of weaving, the taut feel of the woof and the pleasure of the shuttle singing back and forth, all those universes colliding at my fingertips. Surely this would fill me and leave no space for rotting ghosts. That evening, as we shared our dinner, I asked Pygmalion if I might have a loom to while away the hours while Paphos napped. He seemed surprised and almost pleased. He said, "I've noticed you mooning about in the garden all day, watching me. A loom might keep your eyes busy. But you are not like other women, who learned to weave at their mothers' knees. How will you do when you find you lack skill at first?"

"I am not like other women, but perhaps because I am not, because I was the image of your perfect desire, I will know how to weave, now, as it is also your desire."

When the loom arrived, I had already decided that I should weave a tapestry depicting Pygmalion, the sculptor, hard at work. So I filled my days with weaving and watching over my daughter, and Pygmalion filled his with the sickly statue he chiseled. We both worked in the garden, and I watched him

surreptitiously. He spent hours working on her nose, then he would stand back to measure its effect. Spotting some defect on her calves, he would beset them and whittle them even thinner. Then he would stand back and, shaking his head in disgust, commence to shave away even more of her belly. She would have been the image of a starveling some weeks ago. Now she looked to be on the verge of evaporation.

One morning, after I had put a fair amount of cloth up, Pygmalion took interest in my loom and came to see how I progressed. Paphos joyously snarled thread at my feet, and the birds whistled overhead in the fig tree. I was watching the shuttle carefully as I worked a difficult piece: Pygmalion's face. I didn't even notice him beside me until his shadow had crept across the the loom and covered my hand. He was so close to me I could feel his breath at my ear. I turned to look at him, and he backed away.

"You are truly a gift of the gods, I see. Your weaving is the match of the finest in Athens."

"Are you pleased with the image? It will be a portrait of you working me out of stone."

"It's a fine image, but why did you choose to represent me?"

"I hoped to please you. I have such fond memories

of that time and hoped you would, too?"

"Memories? Of my carving you? How could you have memories of that? You were but lifeless stone."

His eyes were wild and glazed. Paphos wailed. The birds fled the fig tree in a flock that blotted out the sun for a moment. And my soul sunk to my bowels. I bent to pick up the babe, but he had me by the shoulders. He held my face between his hands and long poured over my eyes as if to read secrets there. When he released me, I whispered, "Even stone has memory." But he was beyond my words. He sank to the ground and covered his face as I picked up the baby, and Paphos and I spent the rest of the day indoors.

After the heat of the noon had passed, I heard the hammer and chisel at work, furiously trimming the sickly woman. I rose and stood to the side of the window and looked out on him. He had carved a hole in her stomach, and light poured through her in a wide beam. Carefully, he trimmed and smoothed this gaping wound until a storm blew up and sent him into the house with us. Fortunately, Paphos was wakened by the thunder, and comforted her father by crying fearfully whenever she was not in his arms.

Dinner was a silent affair that night. He did not even look up from his plate. I pleaded a headache and

went to my bedchamber.

The clouds were breaking before a cold, full moon when an enormous clatter arose from the garden. I rushed, grabbing a robe on my way to see what he had done now. He swung the hammer with the full of his weight, and the muscles rippled across his back as he smashed into the sickly woman's belly. Her torso being supported by only two slender arches at the sides, she toppled forward and shattered at his feet, where her head had already been knocked. Several large chunks of stone had grazed his arms and legs, and the blood stood out on them. He swung wildly, now, missing the statue completely. I stood clutching my robe in clenched fists and watched him dance a demonic arabesque that finally ended when he connected with the buttocks of the statue and sent the rest of it to the ground. He wailed more pitiously than a cat down a dry well.

For one incomprehensible moment I felt frozen as I had the night Mother weaved my wedding veil. Then I strode to his side, my gown still clutched in one hand, and I pulled him up by the chin. I caressed his face and hair and cooed soothingly to him, but soon he pushed my hand away. "Pygmalion," I said. "Don't you think you have punished us long enough with this.

Whether I am the woman you wanted me to be makes no difference now. Cast out your demon, if not for yourself, then for your daughter."

He fell ill for several days, and I called for a physician. But it did no good. In his fever, he cried out for Venus to take him, so I sent for the priestesses of her temple. Three women came back with the servant I'd sent, all dressed in pure white with gold cords about their slender waists. They were neither pretty nor plain, and their voices were gentle and respectful. Each one brought a sachel full of herbs and various devices. I know not what magic they worked over him; they kept behind closed doors. But they were kind to Paphos and I, almost as troubled by our confusion and pain as they were by his illness. And after a time, we all mended.

Pygmalion, once his strength returned, redoubled his attentions to Paphos and began instructing her in the arts. He started with poetry, reciting to her long passages, but when he attempted to show her to make letters in a soft clay tablet, she chose instead to mold it into butterflies. Pygmalion decided that it was a sign from the gods that he should instruct her in sculpture. Whole menageries they would mold in clay, until a butterfly would flit past or a squirrel

would scold and the girl would be off on the chase. When the sun grew hot they played in the fountain. When Pygmalion grew weary, after the noon meal, Paphos would sit at my feet and tangle threads or stand at the end of the garden and throw small stones at the birds perched on the wall. Pygmalion had not taken up his hammer and chisel since that night.

I wove while they played. I unravelled my offensive portrait and set about immortalizing my daughter in thread. She made a much more inspiring subject since, as soon as I finished one portrait, she had changed so much as to merit a new one. By the time she reached her fifth year, I had woven fourteen tapestries of Paphos, she had learned to read, and Pygmalion had taken up his hammer again to give into the hands of his daughter.

They started out with soft sandstone, chipping and scraping out little animals. And it was a marvel to watch how gently Pygmalion instructed his daughter. "Only tap lightly, now," he said as they hunched over a small block of stone. And she would take the hammer and a chisel and tap; the stone would split in half. But Pygmalion would already have another in his hands, and would wipe away her one tear and place the next victim before her. "It's difficult to learn this first

step, but once you've mastered it, the rest is easier. Now, let's try again." Soon she could take out small chips, and the first rough squirrels and lions graced niches in our walls. But the child had a short span of attention, and when she often abruptly ran away from her lessons, Pygmalion sighed and listlessly paced the garden, calling her back after a time.

As she grew older, Paphos grew stubborn and willful, refusing to come back when he bid her. Her terrible shrieking pierced my ears frequently when Pygmalion would tire of her refusals and drag her by the arm back to her lessons. And nearly each time she screamed I would prick my finger with the shuttle or break the thread.

Phirrhea, the eldest of Venus priestesses, who had come back so often to check in on us and thus become my only friend, witnessed one of these outbursts and marked it well. She warned me that it would end badly. "He is sculpting the child as he would a stone, and she knows it. My dear Galatea, mark her resentment. You must put a stop to this, or she will."

But how could I stop him. Though he spoke to me politely, we hadn't shared the same bed for years. I feared to speak plainly to him, not wanting to arouse

another fever such as the one that had driven him to smash his last sculpture. So I let it go, thinking a day would arise that it would be proper to broach the subject with him. And so time passed.

Paphos had gotten quite good at sculpting in spite of herself. Her bears and bulls, now smoothed and polished, became increasingly intricate until they were standing on four, well-formed legs. But Paphos was bored with little animals; she felt herself ready for a real challenge. Paphos wanted to sculpt a man.

"You are but twelve years old," her father said.

"Nearly thirteen, only one month more."

"And you are a girl. You cannot sculpt a man. I forbid it."

"Then I won't sculpt anything at all." Paphos threw down the hammer and stomped into the house.

Pygmalion was livid. He clenched his fists, and stomped after her. I followed them both. As soon as I'd put my foot over the doorstep, the terrible shriek went up. I rushed to my bedchamber, where Paphos slept and usually hid from him, to see Pygmalion grasping her by the ankles, hauling her from my bed. She tore at the bedclothes, and finding little salvation in this, she turned on her father and neatly trimmed his face with scratches. He loosened his grip on her

ankles only to take her by the throat and shake her until I thought her head would fly off. I rushed to pull them apart, and was delivered a slap for my troubles. Then Paphos took a slap and another. Then Pygmalion stomped out of the house, leaving Paphos red-faced and screaming, "I hate him. I hate him."

I held out my arms to comfort her, but she wanted a target for her anger and flew from the room to find one. Crash from the hall, crash, crash from the portico, crash and crash again all through the house: she hurled each little animal from its niche to watch it explode into a thousand fragments on the floor. And when she had smashed every single sculpture she'd ever made, she burst into tears and flew to the bedchamber, cocooned herself in a blanket and curled up in a corner. I let her cry it out and put her to bed with a fever.

Pygmalion didn't return for dinner, and Paphos barely waked long enough to sip some broth. Sometime after nightfall I gave up waiting for Pygmalion and turned to seek my bed. I kept the lamp lit to look in on Paphos and found her bed empty. After rousing the servants and searching the house, we only turned up one clue: a rope of wool thread, tied to the fig tree and hung over the garden wall. Paphos had run away.

Time once again stood immeasurable, a brief moment expanded and became impossible to fill with thought. Dizzily, two things circled in my mind like a dervish wind twisting up the dust I'd laid to rest so long ago, my own flight so many ages ago. All I could think was Paphos, all I could see were the faces of my first daughters, eyes lidless in fear, mouths twisted, teeth barred. Round and round went the two, but they never collided, never met. And some small part of me that hid in my bowels found it strange the way memories are threaded together.

When first light was but an hour away, Pygmalion returned. I had only one word for him, Paphos, and I struck his chest with it, hammering it in with my fists again and again until he plucked me away from him. The servants told him the rest. I know little of what he did after that. He howled and raged, for I remember hearing it. But I was not in myself. I danced like pure fire, liquid sunlight, and a cold blue sheen over everything that had become of me, as if I were seeing it in a tapestry for the first time. Something had gone wrong, but I could not find it. There was one thread I could not account for, nor could I mark which one was missing.

Then Phirrhea entered the house. Like a sudden

squall, a great wave of water, it struck me. The gods had turned their dire gaze on my life once again. My soul this time found passage.

I waked some hours later, and screamed my daughter's name. Phirrhea sat beside my with a cool cloth pressed to my head.

"She is safe, Galatea. She found her way to the temple. Now rest."

"Did you bring her home to me? I must see her."

"No. She would not come back. Perhaps in time she will, and as soon as you are well enough, you may come visit her. But she wishes to stay with us. She wishes to become a votress in the Temple of Venus."

The sun still shone the same bright color, and the same birds whistled in the fig tree, but this world was not the same one I had left the night before. The next day I deemed myself strong enough, and went to see her. She held out the hem of her new white gown to show me. She laughed and sat in my lap and spilled my tea as always, but she was no longer my daughter, for she said goodbye at the door and wished me well on my journey.

Pygmalion sat in the garden. He took no food. He didn't sleep. He wasted away, his flesh dark and sagging beneath his eyes, and he fell ill again. I

sent for the priestesses of Venus, but he wouldn't have them. I tended him as best I could under their instruction, but he didn't wish to be well again. So here was my new life: I went once a day to visit Paphos at the temple, and I spent the rest of my time in the sickroom of her father. Long weeks passed this way. Pygmalion resembled more and more the last statue he had carved, while Paphos resembled more and more the votresses of Venus. When Pygmalion died and the obsequies had been observed, I returned one time more to hold my daughter who was no longer mine. She had grown tall for thirteen years, and carried herself as if she were much older. She would not sit in my lap, but sat beside me on the bench. "You are a votress now, I see."

"No, Mother. I have not bled so I cannot take the vows."

"But you act the part and have the air."

"I like it here."

"They sculpt you in ways your father never even attempted."

"No, Mother. I sculpt myself."

"Yes, but according to whose desire."

"Mother, a votress of Venus is free to love as little or as greatly as she wishes, and to take

pleasure wherever she finds it, and to give pleasure whenever she deems it earned."

"Paphos, the votresses are whores. They give pleasure whenever the coffers are sufficiently filled. And they are not given to be selective."

"You cannot understand."

"No. You cannot understand. You know I speak true, but you do not know it yet because you do not want to know it. You will lay on an altar with your face covered and your legs spread and never know which man enters you, which man has left his word on you. This you know, but will not see. Your head is full of the pretty lies they tell you here."

"For a noblewoman, and so I am considered here, it is only on special feast days, and it is blessed work. The rest of my time is my own, to take pleasure where I please, even to sculpt men if I like."

"Blessed work I know. Three daughters have I clothed in my own flesh. I also know that she is blessed who the gods pass by blindly. I would not trust the temple if I were you."

"You, who were but stone until brought to life by Venus herself, would not trust the gods. You are just jealous, Mother. It is because of you that I was meant to be here."

"I never told you who I was, really, or where I came from because it would have driven your father mad to know the truth. But Venus did not wake me from the stone. That's just a pretty romance for your father to believe, and men like him."

"Mother, you've gone mad with loss."

"No. You've grown impertinent. Listen, and I will tell you my tale."

"I will not listen to your mad ravings, Mother, for it makes me ill to see you so broken and weak. I will not listen. You should go home now. I don't think our visits are good for you just yet. I will send Phirrhea to tend to your sorrow."

"I am not coming back, my daughter. Your tapestries await you in front of the temple, along with the one servant I give you. I wish you well, for you are my flesh."

When I rose to leave, she grabbed at my elbow, and I saw the tears just behind her eyes. Yes, she knew that she knew, and it was too late to change anything. I kissed her and held her and told her where she could find me, if ever she needed me.

You have heard my tale that my daughter would not. So Pygmalion died. So I was set free. And now the night closes up its eye and will have no more of my

story. And you will go home to your kitchen fires and warm mattresses, crossing your carpets on the way. And, perhaps, somewhere in the night, your dreams will collide with mine.