Winter 1995

CutBank 43

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Buddha Asked Monk

“If you were always right
would it be Easier
or more Difficult
Living In The World?”

“I knew you’d ask that!”
Monk said, Blue and
Invisible.
Amiri Baraka

Superstar

We thought it was a game. Toss the ball up through the stone ring. Miss too often they take yr head

But then it went on & on, & the referees looked stupid. Turning to look at the crowd, we saw they were in chains

Now it occurred to us, that something weird had happened The other team surrounded us dressed in steel. We cd see our dead brothers strewn around the court & their wives and family bent mourning them

looking up at the score board was worse Our faces were painted there, glamorous in nooses & headless

You were wondering what we did next? This is next. Right Now. And we’re still trying to figure it out.
Wendy Guild

**Blind**

But how could I know?
The girl who kneels
to wipe lipstick from my instep,
does her untouched hair hang silver?
Perfumes rattle the windows or the wind
presses scent at the panes.
The light may be out.

He told me I would like it.
Emil was so clever, always talking, always
describing the aroma of the rooms, the plush
velvet curtains or silk tassels grazing his lids.
I could taste the exact acid of salt
licked from a collarbone’s hollow.
I believed. But here,

her hands are gerbils beneath my vest.
Tiny claws pinch. A sluggish mouth
draws over mine, a vague resuscitative kiss.
The wine she spooned me rises metallic in my throat.

Time has passed. Time is spent like coins
moist from palms and smelling of copper.
I assume wakefulness, which is to say,
my eyes open. The woman is gone
or is not touching me. I find my trousers
folded, crease out, on the bureau.
Emil is waiting by the cab. His face is cold with the breeze. I feel his wink, a moth wing on my palm. “Step up,” he says.
“What I mainly want to know is what’s supposed to collide with what?”
“Sub-atomic particles,” I told Wally, “and don’t ask me how.”

Wally Ketchpaw was walking fast and I was riding slowly on a blue bike up to where Riverway Road dead-ended and Mandan Indian land began. Moments ago we’d seen a pink and lavender Winnebago drive off the road and bump across the low brush and gopher holes of what, a century ago, had been the Mandans’ carefully kept cornfield. Two men in pastel-colored shirts and pleated trousers had gotten out of the motor home and were standing now on opposite sides of that field talking to each other on walkie-talkies.

“The newspaper says no one’s actually ever seen any colliding going on,” Wally said.

This morning I’d filled the bicycle’s tires with air at the Sunoco station, but already they were nearly flat, and I was huffing and puffing, riding on a loose ridge of rubber, close to the wheels’ rims. “I guess they’ve seen the results of collisions, though, and that must be what they’re mainly after. Results.”

“And it takes 59 square miles down underground to do that?” He nodded at the field as if it might answer for itself.

“This supercollider thing will never happen, Wally. That rock under there has all sorts of fissures and holes. Just wait till they dig up a few core samples
and see what they’re dealing with. They don’t want a site that’s going to leak who knows what.”

All this way up Riverway Road Wally had been carrying something bundled up in a dirty brown towel in the crook of his elbow. My guess was he’d unearthed another bone fragment from the carcass of that long-buried something I’d started calling Rex—at least, as I told Wally, for now. He’d been on his way home from the hole he’d just opened another two feet deeper into his cow pasture, and at first glance as I caught up with him on my bike, I thought what he was holding there so carefully could only be a baby.

Now we came to the fenceline and stopped. The two men were working the keyboards of micro-computers that hung around their necks and rested on their chests like shiny silver amulets. The one in the pink shirt saw us and waved.

“Don’t speak to them, Martha. We don’t want to start anything,” Wally said.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“We’re better off just biding our time.”

The pink-shirted man’s small computer beeped, and he stared down at it and shook his head.

“See,” I said to Wally. “I told you. It’s no good out there.”

Wally opened one edge of his blanket, then another, and reached his hand inside. When his hand came back out, it held a sandwich of dark yellow cheese on white bread. He carefully ripped the sandwich in two and handed me half.

“Here,” he said. “Eat this. No arguments.”

At the fenceline where we stood chewing our cheese and bread, not only the road ended but the White Deer River itself. It came to a stop in an acre of marshy wetlands, mostly dried weeds now, though a few green
and brown cattails poked through the tan grasses.

The two men walked back to their Winnebago, got in, and started slowly across the field, coming toward us. The black tires, barely visible in the dry marsh, bent down the cattails which made a swishing sound as they collapsed. Suddenly a great blue heron rose up in front of the Winnebago and flew directly over it. The bird’s long sharp claws clattered against the front windshield.

Slammed down that hard, the Winnebago’s brakes squealed sharply. The men’s heads fell forward and back, and from the shapes of their mouths, I could make out the words they shouted to each other. *What*, the one man said. *What? What?* the other answered.

Mrs. Doctor stood between Wally and me. He wouldn’t look at her.

“If you’d be so kind as to tell him I only want to offer him the available resources of the Society.” She had on a navy straw hat with a red bow, navy pumps. A quarter inch of pink slip hung down beneath the back of her navy and white polka dot dress.

“I think you’re wasting your time here, Dr. Moffitt,” I said. We were standing outside the padlocked doors of Wally’s pole barn. “Mr. Ketchpaw happens to have one very made-up mind.”

Wally turned, looking past her, and nodded to me as if I were reading from the script and I’d finally said my two lines right.

It was 100 degrees, the sun directly overhead,
and no one was giving an inch.

I thought there was a lot we didn’t know, and maybe a good bit she did. She had pictures, for instance, reconstructions, she’d told me, of similar prehistoric creatures found in this vicinity. She’d brought them, rolled up into dozens of white logs on the backseat of her rental car, from the Antiquity Society Museum in Grand Forks.

The parts of the puzzle Wally had in that barn were: 17 vertebrae, 8 odd Y-shaped ribs, 2 fibula that resembled oars for a canoe, and a mandible that when pieced together was 52 inches long.

Yesterday the woman whose name Wally chose to remember as Mrs. Doctor had sat across from me at a table in the Motel Edgeway Lounge. She maintained a sphinxy smile, though she’d been in town four days already and hadn’t yet been allowed on Wally’s property.

“My dear, have you ever considered that what you’re unearthing out there is no more a dinosaur than you or I, but rather a giant winged reptile, a Pteranodon perhaps? Actually, they’re most common. Really rather omnipresent in these part.” She sighed.

In a few minutes I was to meet Danny McCogle, the man everyone in town said was exactly right for me—if I’d just give him some time, since he was, as I’d been repeatedly told, an old-fashioned guy who liked to take his courting slow.

I sucked my wedge of lime until just the rind was left. Then I set it on my napkin, and when I looked up, Danny McCogle was standing in the doorway. He nodded to me but didn’t take a single step toward our table. I thought he didn’t look at that moment like the same man whose Appaloosa mare I’d visited Thursday, whose hands held a plastic cup under the horse’s boil
I’d lanced and let drain. Now Danny’s pale hair was combed back so neatly from his forehead, the white places near his scalp which the sun rarely touched were shiny. So was the silver buffalo of his belt buckle. He motioned to me that he’d wait at the bar while I finished my business with Dr. Moffitt.

I took an envelope from my purse and set it on the table. I knew I’d probably never dare tell Wally I’d exchanged any information with her, though it was only a few sizes and shapes of bones she was after. I couldn’t help it. I wanted to know myself what the thing was, which didn’t explain why, as I passed her the slip of paper, I felt like an enemy spy.

Now, two days later, she was standing by her beige car in Wally’s driveway. She didn’t show any signs of getting back in, much less of leaving.

Then Wally and I looked up at the sky at the same time. A lazy red-tailed hawk was dallying over the field to our left, where we both knew certain remains of an uncertain something lay buried under a black layer of North Dakota dirt. Suddenly the hawk saw what it was after—a field mouse probably—and swooped down after it. The hawk’s trajectory cut a swath through our three intersecting planes of vision. We’d been standing like this by Wally’s barn for fifteen or twenty minutes, in a sweltering midday heat; none of us had lunch, and we were all as busy as we could be getting nowhere.

After Wally had patched every hole, restaked all
the gaps and low places in the field fence around his 280 acres, he strung another foot of barbed wire on top. Though I couldn’t be sure, none of this activity seemed to have much to do with protecting his dozen heifers.

I’d drive by, honk, and wave, and there’d be Wally unrolling a huge wheel of wire that gleamed in the sun. Then he’d drag the come-along and cinch it up tight to the wire. He concentrated such efforts on the edge of the fence that ran along our road. This went on all through July.

Yesterday he’d told me that Mrs. Doctor, she knows what she knows, and he knows what he knows.

“Which is what?”

“Which is that when the questions are wrong from the get-go, the answers just buzz around in circles.”

I nodded, asking myself how much of that response was directed at me, at my own questions, all of them over the years, which suddenly seemed to stretch before me like a field of old cornstalks after a hailstorm—bent down, crooked.

“Things that come up from way down don’t always need to be hauled off. The same’s so for whatever drifts in from up high. Remember the geese, Martha? Remember them?”

“Geese?”

Wally smiled, one eyebrow raised. Then I remembered. I’d been the one to tell him about the geese in the first place, how the city fathers in Fargo, where I’d gone to veterinary college, had decided too many geese were ruining the municipal park. Geese were everywhere, their little goslings trailing. They’d adopted the park and its man-made pond as their nesting ground, and protected there, their numbers kept growing. Goose scat, which resembled the long grey
ashy remains of a lit cigarette left completely unsmoked in an ashtray, lay in flower beds, under hedges, and all across the neatly weeded and mowed grass.

So the city council came up with a plan: half that many geese were okay, but half had to go. So 123 geese were captured and packed into wooden crates, then loaded on a freight train and sent to St. Louis, where city park department officials thought a few geese would be a nice addition to springtime in Missouri. Back then I had this image of the geese waddling around the strange new city—furious, flapping and hopping in that wild way of theirs.

Forty-eight hours after their arrival in St. Louis, they were spotted in their wide beautiful V flying back over Fargo. Downtown, shoppers and businessmen came out of buildings and looked up as the geese zeroed in for a landing. The geese honked, and people, pulling up to stoplights and curbsides, honked back.

Wally had liked this story. He’d put his head back and laughed. “They navigate by the stars,” he’d said. “You’ve got your sick goose, your cooked goose, but there ain’t no such thing as a lost goose.”

The only reason I knew about Wally Ketchpaw’s bone fossils at all was because years ago I’d made a mistake in his barn. He’d had a mare in trouble trying to foal. She’d almost ripped her womb apart with her first colt a few years before, and Wally, being cautious about the second one, had called my mother and asked if I’d come over and have a look. My mother, who’d
just married Bert, was cuddled up with him by the fire. It was Easter break for me, my last year of vet school, and when Wally’s call came, I thought my mom and Bert would be glad to have the evening to themselves.

By the time I got to Wally’s, stepping through cow dung and April mud into his barn, the foal’s front hooves were out, and the mare was barely breathing, let alone pushing.

Wally glanced at me as if I’d been there the whole time. “I’m going to the house to get my pistol. This whole production is turning into one lost cause.”

I bent down and got my hands around the foal’s two hooves and yanked hard. It dove forward another ten inches so that its muzzle was out. Back then I thought there was way too much blood, but over the years since, I’ve seen worse. “We can save this colt,” I said. “Come on, let’s pull him out.”

Wally stopped and stood by the barn door. “I’ve got 280 acres of wheat to get in the ground. This week. Where am I going to find time for bottle feeding a puny horse six times a day?”

He disappeared out the door before I could voice a single argument. I’d already begun to think, To hell with Wally. If he didn’t want to raise the colt himself, I’d find someone who would. Then, knowing I’d never get a good grip on those hooves without some rope, I hurriedly searched around me, finally heading up the ladder to the hayloft where I thought surely there’d be some baling twine.

I’d stepped across four or five bales before I spotted the twine hanging from a nail in the wall. I headed for it and had just gotten my hands on it when I saw what I shouldn’t have: the bone fossil of some huge creature’s pelvic girdle. Farther back behind that, lying in shadows, were more ones—also large, but their
shapes less recognizable, although one enormous femur lay among them.

When from down below the shot rang out, my arm jerked so hard I pulled the whole mess of twine off the wall. I could hear my pulse pounding in a panic as I climbed down the ladder, a descent that seemed to take hours. Feeling my way with my feet from rung to rung, I got myself tangled up in the baling twine I was carrying and in all that I’d seen up there and somehow already knew I shouldn’t have.

Wally stood near the ladder watching my descent. He held the gun at his side. The mare hadn’t had a chance to make it. We’d both seen that. Too much inside her had been hemorrhaging, and all at once.

I looked from Wally to the foal whose long snout, half in and half out of the dead mare, was twisting and writhing. Then I turned, loosed my arm and hand from the twine, and knelt down in the blood. I ran my hand across the foal’s nose, wiping off the thick lining of the birth sac. I heard it gulp its first breath.

Then it gasped. With its ribcage still stuck in the mare, it couldn’t fill its lungs enough to get a full breath. “Give me a hand here, Wally.” I didn’t even turn to look at him.

I wrapped both hand around one hoof, and then there were Wally’s hands around the other. “On three,” I said, and quickly counted. “One, two, three.” We took off backwards, walking on our heels. The foal fell out, half on top of me. A stallion. I felt his hind legs kick into my hips.

When I stood up, covered in the sticky blood, Wally was coiling the baling twine around his arm, from elbow to hand.

The colt was already trying to get to his knees, which kept buckling. I watched him for a minute, then
bent down and pushed his nose toward the mare’s teat. But the colt just brushed past it and went back to his struggles to stand. So finally I just held him there against her, one hand on either side of his muzzle, almost covering his eyes, until I heard the sucking sound begin.

Wally wouldn’t look at me. He put the coiled twine over his shoulder and headed up the ladder.

I found a grain sack and swabbed down the rest of the colt’s face, neck, and sides. I rubbed him hard, and he went on sucking and sucking. He had the hang of it by then, which in many ways was too bad since soon I’d have to get him used to a bottle. But at least for the moment he was getting that early real milk, full of antibodies and nourishment.

Wally’s steps down the ladder were much quicker than mine had been. He stepped off a waist-high rung to the floor. “Just what in the Sam hill did you think you were doing up there? That hayloft is off limits.”

I kept rubbing the colt. “I thought if we saved the colt, someone else might want him.”

“What makes you think he belongs somewhere else?”

I took a step toward Wally. “Okay, I’m sorry. I guess I could take him myself, get him started. I’ve got a few days before I go back to school. Then I’ll bring him back here.”

Wally turned and watched the colt nurse. He shook his head. I saw he’d put the gun behind his back, its barrel in his belt.

Wally Ketchpaw had kept to himself on this ranch his whole life, and although my father had always claimed Wally was a man who followed his own mind and kept that mind in a level head, I thought maybe,
just maybe, the years had skewed that level. I glanced sideways toward the colt, the mare a wide dark bloody blur all around it.

“What’s up there is nobody’s business,” Wally said.


“Well,” he said, heading toward the door, “if that don’t sound like somebody I once knew.”

I slid my arms, held out like the tines of a forklift, under the colt’s belly and hoisted him up. He turned his head, saw me at last, and let go a loud high-pitched cry.

“Yep, your father...he’d sure enough be surprised to see all what’s happened. To you, and your ma....All your sheep sold off....”

“Wouldn’t he?” Wally’s hard gaze met mine as I came up beside him, feeling the heaviness of each slow step.

I didn’t know then how to answer such a question. “I’ll bring this little guy back on Sunday,” I said, and then I’d ducked out, the mud sucking at my feet as I stepped toward my car by way of one then another of Wally’s huge bootprints.

The day I turned 33 I felt a little down, aged and sagging in the wrong places. That is, until I stood out in the middle of Wally Ketchpaw’s wheatfield and tried to see everything around me in its 66-million-year-old incarnation. The creature, whose identity we may as
well classify for the time being as a Triceratops, stood in front of me to the north, dipping his seven-foot snout in the river. But now I let the river disappear. I was there, then gone. That easy.

The place where Wally knelt by a pit in the ground and busied himself picking up pieces of bones, turning them over one by one, and then setting them inside a child’s rusty wagon—that place could be swamp, spotted with water lilies and fragrant lotus. I had to squeeze my eyes—not shut but held in a tight squint—to see the wide foreground as floodplain, all the way to the slats of grey horizon lines. To my left, a stand of laurel trees; behind me, dogwoods and persimmons; and farther back, the tulip trees that would soon be in blossom.

Triceratops had three horns sprouting from his massive brow and a frill high up around his treetrunk of a neck, although Wally had yet to find any bones that resembled a neck like that. When all nine tons walked a ways towards where Wally no longer stood but where now a swamp hummed with insect life and a six-foot-long fish swam just under the surface, the earth trembled. We were, all of us, suddenly at sea level. North America was parted down the middle by a narrow inland sea, and its two shores were inching together, a foot a century. A couple hundred miles to the west, volcanos rumbled and spit smoke. They’d be angry for a while and spew fire, then cool down, and rest for three or four benign decades. Then the creature lowered himself into the swamp and floated across it towards a delicious understory of far-off green: sassafras, soapberry, ginseng. It was hard to lose sight of so enormous a creature.

But when Wally called to me, looming up from the swamp like a strange new creature himself, I did.
My vision blurred.

He stood and raised his hand in that way of his I’d come to know—a brief flick of his wrist at waist level—and then I did the same.

“So Dean Snyder finally heard from his friend about the bone.” I stood by the hole where Wally had almost finished excavating the five-foot piece of whatever.

“His friend the paleontologist?” Wally said, running the syllables together so that it came out closer to pale ologist. He walked a step towards me, putting the wagon behind him, and stopped.

“He says he thinks what you’ve got here are the remains of something about 66 million years old. He said it probably stood ten feet high at the hips and could have weighed nine tons.”

Wally put his head back, closed his eyes for a moment, then let out an exhalation that was part sigh and part laugh. “And just how does the man figure all that?”

“It has to do with measuring the decay of radioactive elements in and around that bone fragment we sent. I couldn’t tell you how that’s done though.”

“That many million years is a long time to be lying around by this river. It’s a wonder it didn’t just wash away.”

I looked down and saw that Wally had put a tattered but thick patchwork quilt into the bottom of the wagon. On it were fifteen or twenty bone shards arranged into three parallel lines.

I’d been straight with Wally all along, so I just came out and said it. “There didn’t use to be a river here. Way out there was an ocean,” and I pointed as if we might both look to the northeast and see at that moment a great stretch of blue water. “Several feet
down they’ve found seashells and fish skeletons.”

Wally stared in the direction I’d just pointed.

“Once there was a bayou right here, like down south in Louisiana.”

He glanced around him again, shaking his head.

Then he passed me a piece of bone.

I felt the sharp splintered edge where the piece had recently broken. “I suppose dinosaurs did have bones that size,” I said.

“Dinosaurs,” Wally said loudly. “That’s just some people’s word for something they don’t know.”

Looking up, past him, I could see it had begun to rain on Buzz Jenkins’ field on the other side of the White Deer river. Wally turned and followed my gaze to where a fat grey cloud hovered above Buzz’s newly seeded sorghum field, its mounds of furrows in patterns of light and dark brown. The cloud was maybe three quarters of a mile off, but I could, I was sure, smell that rain. I thought I could even hear it, the downpour, way across there. It hadn’t rained on this side of the river in five weeks.

“Well at least that piece we sent to Fargo has gotten dated more exactly.”

Wally shrugged. “Just so it comes back here the same as when it left. Each of them, every piece, has to stay right here in the end. Just so we’re clear on that, Martha.”

We glanced at each other across the wagon.

“All this”—he waved his hand in the air above the bones—”is bad enough already without letting parts of it go every which way.”

“Sure,” I said. “Okay.” We both turned to watch the rain pour down to the east of us.

Wally shook his head again, slower this time.

Then he handed me a fourth piece of bone, a fifth piece,
and so on, until he was sure I’d seen them all.

In front of us and farther off behind Wally’s small white house, the huge disc of August sun was going down. We said nothing and walked towards it, Wally pulling the bone-wagon, which clattered on its tiny black wheels.

The landscape was so much blur and glare, I thought we could just as well have been nowhere at all. I was turning 33, but right then I could have been any age under the sun.

Mrs. Doctor stood in the road by Wally’s fence watching him through the tiniest pair of binoculars I’d ever seen. She didn’t even notice me huffing and puffing up Riverway Road on my bike. I stopped—dead center in her long black shadow on the gravel.

“I thought you’d gone,” I said, one foot on a bike pedal and one on the road. When I spoke the crickets abruptly halted their loud clatter, which I hadn’t even noticed until the sudden quiet descended.

“No,” she said. “There’s excavation sites all over that field, aren’t there?” She looked at me quickly, then turned her binoculars back to Wally, who was busy piling up a new mound of dirt about sixty yards from the new femur he’d found by the river. We both watched as first he’d use the black garden hoe to break up the soil, then, letting that fall, bend down and go at the dirt with a hand trowel.

“That man has no idea what he’s doing. This makes me a nervous wreck.” Mrs. Doctor’s raised
binoculars seemed to pull her own eyes forward so that for a moment the eyes themselves appeared to be extensions of the two black tubes.

“Actually he’s doing a real professional job,” I said.

She let the binoculars fall and dangle on the black cord around her neck. “What in the world would you know about it, Martha? This could be as big as Drumheller, as Red River. It can’t belong to any one man.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s a matter of belonging. It’s more a matter of containment. Stewardship.”

“Stewardship, for Christ’s sake. In a dairy barn!” She shook her head, walked to her car door, and jerked it open.

I noticed the hem of her dress had four or five big purple thistles stuck to it. The crickets started up again.

I never thought I’d stay this long in my home town—not after my mother died, then my stepfather Bert six months later. I thought, Okay, now there’s nothing to keep me here. Most folks had never thought of me anyway as anything but old Dr. Zetter’s assistant—certainly not as a vet in my own right. But lately this Danny McCogle business had begun to turn my thinking back the other way around. Yesterday he’d been delivering a truckload of hay in Wally’s and he’d stopped by my place on his way. The clover and alfalfa smelled sweet and rich, and I’d run my hands over the bales as we stood talking by his truck.

“I don’t see what Wally Ketchpaw wants with half a ton of hay anyway. Didn’t he always grow his own for those few heifers?”

“Wally’s a very busy man,” I said.

“Funny, that’s exactly what he said.”
We’d both glanced up the road where Wally’s property began at an old cottonwood tree, and mine stopped.

Now Mrs. Doctor and I stood by that same cottonwood and listened to the din of crickets rising as if someone were slowly turning up the volume. Then, all at once, they stopped as the pink and lavender Winnebago careened onto our road and sped toward us, and past us. Puffs of dust and grit swirled into our faces. The Winnebago’s side windows were tinted a dark grey, so that as it rushed by, it seemed to do so without a driver. In those windows I caught just the brief flickering reflections of Mrs. Doctor and myself, two women who appeared as if maybe they’d had a mishap on a road along the edge of nowhere.

“And that’s another thing. Those Berkeley people,” Mrs. Doctor said, both her hands trying to wave away the dust. “The Society has made its opinion known on their project. We’re getting this place declared a protected archaeological site. Those boys are on their way out... Who knows but the fossil extinction horizon extends way west there as well.”

The Winnebago had driven off the road and bumped around to the left of the dried marsh grasses. Mrs. Doctor turned and raised her binoculars in that direction. A man got out the driver’s side and closed the door. I didn’t need any binoculars to see two big metal antennae rise up on either side of the rear of the Winnebago and begin whirling like windmills. The man walked a few yards into the thigh-high canary grass, and though I couldn’t see exactly what it was that had made him jump so suddenly and take three quick long strides back to the mobile home, no doubt Mrs. Doctor had, which was beside the point, since I had a very good idea.
Fireflies flickered here and there—small flares through which Wally’s field appeared in bits and pieces, tiny oval scenes of it, backlit, on the wing. But I was the only one watching.

Danny and Wally were busy—up to their elbows in a dusty soapy water. They sat cross-legged outside Wally’s barn. They’d dunk the bones one at a time, then pat each one dry with a dish towel. They hadn’t even noticed the sun hit the last low rung of tree limbs across the river, then disappear.

I’d gone to Dan’s truck for my sweatshirt, and by the time I’d returned to the patch of grass where they sat working, it was dark. That’s because, as my mother used to say, I dawdled. I let my mind wander, and my feet slowed down on their own.

One corner of Wally’s field, like a huge dingy grey mattress, was held down by the green dot of Dan’s pickup. I’d shown up with Dan at Wally’s barn door, and though for a good ten minutes Wally hadn’t given him more than a brief nod, now they were going about their business as though they’d been doing this work, in just this careful silent way, for years. The field behind them was an explosion of dirt mounds, which the fireflies lit up. Dark heaps of cool earth that had cradled the craggy old bones of who knew what since who knew when—now they sat empty as robbed tombs.

Since I’d made her a promise, I asked Wally one last time. “Dr. Moffitt just wants to take a peek at these things, just to get a general idea of what this all adds up
to.” I waved my hands over the bone pieces.

Dan raised his gaze in my direction, his lips pushed forward as if he’d tasted a fruit not nearly ripe enough to eat.

“I’ll be good and dead and she can take herself a peek at my bones first,” Wally said without looking up from the one he was drying, which had the contours of a vertebra.

The bare bulb that stuck out from high up over the barn door threw an oval of light into the tub of water.

I stood in my sweatshirt by the corral fence and watched the men’s hands rise and fall in steady rhythms between water and towel and the tan bones that made a ring around them on the grass.

The fireflies flew between the hands and the bones and me. The fireflies I’d caught as a child I’d put in jars with nail-holes hammered in the lids. At night on my bedside table those jars were mostly containers of darkness themselves, except for brief occasional illuminations. And once, when I’d been ill with a high fever and surrounded by a delirium of ghosts in my room, my father had spoken to me about them from the doorway, already almost a ghost himself. Fireflies, he’d said, were prayers on their way to heaven. Later that night as my fever rose and I tossed between damp sheets, I’d been sure the fireflies’ lights were growing dimmer, sure that whatever final flash I’d see in that jar would also be my own.

I watched as a single insect positioned itself now on a piece of bone near Wally’s elbow, lighting up that bone, which was, it seemed, half a rim of an enormous eye socket. Then the firefly flew to another bone, and another, lighting them up one by one, as if to suggest to anyone who was watching that here were the
instructions we’d needed all along: the perfect order into which all the pieces should finally be reassembled.

When the thunderheads rumbled, changed direction, and moved right at us, the sky flashing sudden shades of purple, yellow, gray—like signals—and when at last the rains came, we just sat there—Wally, Danny McCogle and me—in Wally’s field watching it happen.

Danny counted “one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi,” etc. after each lightning bolt, and occasionally Wally’s lips moved, as he counted along to himself. Between each flash and its echoing rumble, there was a stillness, a quiet that went through us as much as each boom of thunder.

With three hand trowels we’d spent the whole afternoon scraping dirt away from the top and sides of a new bone. We had no idea yet how wide this one was, or how deep. Its exact contour was mystery we uncovered inch by slow inch, brushing at the crumbs of dirt with our fingers and palms.

The supercollider was, as Danny pointed out, a mute point. The one good thing Dr. Moffitt had accomplished was directing the Bureau of Land Management’s attention to our probable Mesozoic remains. This in turn put a stop to further talk of a subterranean haven for colliding quarks. Now everything had been put on hold, which was, Wally and I agreed, just the way we liked it.

We were tired this afternoon, and except for a
few grunts as one of us bent awkwardly sideways to dig, none of us had spoken in the last hour. Though earlier in the afternoon Danny had mentioned a couple of times that he should be getting back, he still hadn’t made the least move toward leaving. I’d worn holes in the three middle fingers of my right-hand glove, and my fingertips poked through: raw and red, my nails jagged, filthy.

“Should this be getting wet, Wally?” Dan glanced down at the bone that was beginning to look like the mandible of...of what, I wondered. Some gigantic gator?

Wally sat back, stretched out one leg, and rubbed his kneecap. “I guess he’s been wet before.”

Looking up, I saw three or four black clouds swirling. One large raindrop and immediately another fell on my forehead. They ran down my cheek in two cool lines. Then I stretched my legs out too and leaned back on my hands.

All at once it was coming down hard. The air around us was grey, the wheatfield an intense somber brown. A sudden coolness seemed to drape us as if lowered like an invisible cloak, and the fat clouds appeared within arms’ reach.

Wally took our three trowels and jabbed them one by one in a line—red handle, blue handle, brown handle—into the mound of dirt we’d dug up and pushed to one side.

We let the water pour over us, leaving streaks in the dust on our arms, then erasing the streaks, rinsing our arms and faces clean. Water filled the hole we’d been making until the bone was completely covered. I took off both gloves and dipped my hands into that water which was beige and cool.

For a few moments the rain came down so hard
that when I looked across at Dan and Wally, all I saw were the shapes of their bodies, their two heads tipped back, mouths open, tasting rain as if it were the first rain ever.

Danny and I stood like sentries against the doors of Wally’s barn. We’d knocked but we couldn’t come in, Wally said, until he got something ready to show us. Dan held the bottle of glue in both hands as if it were a casserole on its way to a potluck.

Wally’s spiel was that he’d built a dozen clipper ships in bottles, a 12-foot high grandfather clock; he’d carved—with a chainsaw and a fishing knife—an American Bald Eagle out of a stump of Douglas fir; and as God was his witness, he could glue the pieces of the ancient so & so back together. Better him, he said, than some goofball from the Antiquity Society.

Danny’s father had worked through August whipping up a special glue, which we told him was for bones, very old bones, but we couldn’t say whose. One week his garage had smelled like pig intestines, the next week like sour goats’ milk. And for all we knew, perhaps such things were actual components of the formula. Mr. McCogle wasn’t saying.

We’d been waiting for ten minutes. Inside, Wally was hammering something. Then we heard a motor whirr. A tiny saw? We waited five minutes, each of us leaning against one of the big double doors.

So that when the doors flew open, Dan and I almost toppled in. Bathed in a bright fluorescence from
three sputtering work lights hanging from the rafters, the giant femur lay in eighty or ninety pieces across the bench, but close enough together that a definite femur shape was discernible.

"Ee-gads," Dan said. "That's what I call a leg bone." It ran down the length of the workbench, nearly ten feet.

"Jeez, that must be a back leg, Wally. I don't think they had front legs that long." I couldn't take my eyes off the bone pieces, all pushed up close together in what seemed an expert jigsaw puzzle worker's careful arrangement.

"I just finished getting this new gadget, this glue gun, fixed," Wally said, "so now we're all set. We're set to go." He nodded to the mayonnaise bottle with the straw-colored glue that Dan was holding.

Hanging on the wall behind Wally's workbench were about a dozen garden implements—hoes, picks, pitchforks—so that the whole place had the look of a surgical room from another country in another century.

We glued, literally, until the cows came home. When the first few appeared, their huge heads through the door, they hesitated briefly, seeing the three of us inside. Then timidly they sauntered in, their full udders swinging.

Wally left Dan and me to our gluing and went to "hook up the girls" to the milk lines. The heat from the overhead lights and the glue had turned our hands golden. Dan came up behind me and put his arms around my waist, leaving a cool kiss on the back of my neck. "Can you believe this," he said, "how lucky we are to be here, to be seeing it?"

I bent down and brushed my lips across his knuckles as he reached out to steady a big jagged shard, the shape bearing an odd resemblance to a bear claw. I
positioned my smaller piece above it and slowly lowered it until it slipped in—like a little miracle, which at first I only thought, then turned to Dan and said, just like that, aloud.

We heard the milking machines start up then, and the swoosh swoosh of milk through the lines. The barn floor trembled from the sound, and the patched-up bone, perfectly adhering in its special glue, took shape beneath our hands, and held firm.
Crank Call From Tabriz

All day short of nails, 
dying from dawn’s poisoned mist. 
Desert shack, shrunken tin sheets, 
a scribe’s table, no ink.

The donkey shits on the fire 
to put out the heat. 
They’ll skin its hide 
if I default on my loan.

I never got a crank call from Tabriz. 
No one will come see me today.

Will you buy something if I grow my hair? 
Just rest awhile 
and watch the snowballs fall 
and the sand dunes lap them down.

Never doubt a man 
shivering in the cold. 
Never wave a taxi with a driver 
that’s got no head.

Friday’s a hymn. Thursday’s a ball. 
Those days weren’t so bad.

If you see me at the mullah’s 
pretend I’m your son.
I’ll wear the turban he made me, 
and the socks he took off to keep me warm.

I’ll take my needle 
and patch up my quilt. 
Maybe you’ll get a postcard from Mecca. 
Maybe a lizard will die at your door.
Christopher Murray

In Your Bathing Suit

The car is speeding toward us.
The car is growing larger.
We stand with our backs to the hedge,
which is tall—I keep ducking
when the blackbird flies out. The neighbor folds
his chair, returning from a swim.
You’ll never know I read your diary.
You’ll never know I know
you slept with your sister on the couch
on Christmas morning.

Nonetheless you’re disappearing
over the winding road
in the back of a yellow car.
You left your shoes
in the road. I pluck a hard leaf
from the hedge. It would hurt to be dropped
from a great height into the hedge.
To leap off a ranch-style house...

Do you still play
the piano on the porch where we ate shrimp
while your grandmother slept? She was still
gripping the silver tray. Did you see
her feet? I took some of her medication. I shivered on the green tile and ruined the leather waste basket. You patted my head with a towel while I whispered and dreamed of a smoky field.

What did we find in the dunes? A punctured ball? A Portuguese man-of-war? You ran to the house. I followed, tearing the screen door, spilling my drink, but you’d gone on the tandem bike alone. I threw your keys into a wave. I cut a strap off your father’s sandal. He asked me what I was doing crouched in his closet. Smelling his shirts? He carried me through the empty house into your room. He whispered to me and searched in the shade for my tan-line.
A drug had just come onto the market, the illegal drug market. It had been used briefly at Harvard in psychiatric testing, but had been shown to be completely useless and full of unpredictable side effects. Even the less scrupulous psychiatrists could find no use for it, since they could see no reason why anyone would want a drug that did nothing. That, however, was the beauty of it. It had no effect at all, only side effects, and the drug was so sensitive that slightly different chemical combinations caused radical differences in those side effects. You never knew what would happen. It could cause a person to lie all the time, throw them into sexual ecstasies, convince them they were Marlene Dietrich, cause them to lose 50 pounds, anything. It was called “dice.” It was the biggest drug to hit America since crack cocaine.

People took dice for one of two reasons: to play dangerous Russian Roulette with their brains, or to give themselves a new personality entirely. Surprisingly, most people took it for the second reason. They were sad people, mostly. They had heard about dice from friends, neighbors, talk shows. Mostly they were in periods of their lives where they were discovering life does not give you what you want, that you have to accept the serendipitous pleasures and forgive life for being so deaf and dumb. They mostly felt only the first part, and saw this pain and suffering as a reflection of their own trapped and inadequate personalities. They were lonely. They were so
damned tired of being with themselves. Some would even tell you they hated themselves. So they diced up.

Unless you knew a person, you couldn't tell if they were diced up or not. They just seemed like any regular Joe, unless their personal side effect was particularly bizarre, such as constantly urinating or painting everything red. Mostly, however, the joy of dice came from realizing the side effects simply made you into a different person. It was a loving drug, also, so personalized that only identical twins would share the same dice experience. It was your own drug. And it would react the same way every time, so you had only to try it once to see what being diced up all the time would be like. You might be just wonderful; why not try it on? That was the philosophy behind the drug.

Therefore, Owen and Monica did not know that Raoul Marvel was diced up when they met him for the second time. The first had been when Monica bought a hot dog from him. She had not known then his sad history: Raoul had been unfortunate enough to be born not only a sissy, but a straight man. It had made his life very complicated. Women did not believe him, for instance, when he said he loved them. He had put up with this oppression for years until, finally, Raoul founded a movement to protect the rights of effeminate men. This was, of course, the American Ef-feminist Movement. It had been quite powerful in the eighties, but political differences within the group destroyed it. Raoul had started using dice when the last Effeminist encounter group was canceled due to political differences. His self-esteem plummeted. He desperately needed a new take on life. This was Raoul on dice: butch, daydreamy, and prone to speak-singing Cat Stevens songs.

“Oo-wa-ee-wa-aaaa this is the Peace Train...”
Raoul was mumbling as he walked towards them in the Sushi Diner. Monica and Owen awaited a grant to fund another of their ludicrous schemes, this time a deep sea dive to find an ancient pre-Roman settlement. Bored with waiting, they were having a wasabi eating contest, piling the spicy horseradish onto sticks of celery and battling to see who could keep a smile on their face the longest while carrying on a conversation.

“I was wondering if you could come over tonight to my Mom’s house,” Monica was saying, red seeping into her face.

“Sure,” Owen replied, stuttering, “why do you want?”

“I want to neuter my cat. There’s this do-it-yourself-kit.”

“You bought a kit?” He breathed heavily through his mouth.

“Yeah. At CVS. It’s totally sanitary.”

“You’re lying. You don’t even have a cat.”

“Then let’s find one, I can’t wait to use this thing.”

Owen gagged and grabbed a glass of water. Monica laughed in a repetitive way, like a tape loop. She pushed the rice towards him. She knew how to cheat at this game, too.

“Trouble ooh trouble please be kind...” Raoul continued. “Hey, you,” he bellowed at Owen. Raoul on dice had dressed in a lumberjack plaid and brown boots. He felt manly and powerful. One of the boots kicked the chair.

Owen turned around. “What’s up, man?”

“Move aside. I’m talkin’ to her.”

“Get outta here, creep,” Monica chimed in.

More celery went in her mouth.

Owen tried a different tack. “Hey, calm down
man. It’s okay.”

“It ain’t okay. Move aside, asshole. *It’s not time to make a change...*”

Owen was confused. Raoul was so intimidating, but one look at his body told he could never deliver the blows he promised. All of those years hiding from gym class. Owen decided he must be insane. He was, in a way. Raoul would never have approached Monica directly if he had not diced up in a fit of depression earlier that evening. He had been taking voice lessons to deepen and masculinize his voice, tightening his “s” by pronouncing it further back in his mouth on his gum ridge, like real men do. With his coach he lowered his register and smoothed out the looping personality in his effeminacy. But he could not go through with it. If Nightline ever found out, he would be a laughingstock. So instead he took “dice” like a preacher might sip bourbon.

He also had a knife.

He brought it out quickly and shoved it under Owen’s throat. The cold of it forced the boy off the chair and onto the floor. Wet coils of radish followed him. Raoul flicked the knife back up and let it glint in front of Monica.

“If you get that money for the fucking dive I swear I’ll kill you.”

“That’s a butter knife, weirdo.”

It was a butter knife. Raoul had not paid attention to which knives he was taking, not being versed in their authoritative value, and also responding to another of the dice’s personalized side effects: a dreamy absent mindedness.

Which now overtook him. He began to stare at the knife and smile, for it reminded him of a favorite restaurant of his, from which he had stolen it. He had
taken a girl there, a long time ago, impressed her with his knowledge of red snapper and coulis and his love of cold, sweet butter. She was a fragile woman, intelligent and distantly frightened, but as they sipped the Merlot, Raoul began to glimpse her longing and she unfolded before him petal by petal.

Owen, humiliated by a butter knife, took the opportunity to trip him. Raoul fell to the floor, clutching the knife, unfocused.

“Let’s scram,” whispered Monica and they ducked out without paying the bill, back home to prepare their departure.

But Raoul held the woman as carefully as a glass ornament. He was once again grateful for such trust, years ago.
April

April. I lie on my back and watch the girls on the red bicycles with the red and white baskets pedal by, their wheels casting small lights in the grass. Is it noon yet? There are a few kites floating at the horizon between the stone church and the clock tower. The bench under the tree is still cold. If I squint, I can see past the yellow hills to the blue wall. I put my hands around my knees and squeeze until my fingertips meet. Is the house with the pink porch swing something I’ve taught myself or something I learned? I don’t know how those girls do it. There’s glass in the air if you go high enough. It gets hard to breathe. I say the names of cities to myself while I watch. In San Francisco the buildings have wrought iron doors and some of the streets aren’t paved. There are orange trees in the gardens. My second wish? Only to go on wanting. Yesterday a boy in a red hat climbed
the brick wall and laughed
at me because I can't talk. Is the sun
always flashing? I have one wish left.
I roll over on my belly
and pick flecks of grass from my
fingernails. Everything
has a green cast.
I

Today is almost summer. Lila and I drive ten miles out of town to play keno at the all-night truck stop. At the desk, a man in a pinstripe shirt trades us gold tokens for our coins. Lila puts one in her purse and one in my back pocket. She asks me if we’re safe yet. The machines against the walls light up. The numbers change.

II

A few leaves cluster in the tree branches, a few clothespins hang staggered on the wire running from the back porch to the lawn. Lila sits at the picnic table with a tin ashtray and a book. I fold pieces of paper into boxes and arrange them by size. I consider the term *deliberate topiary*. I consider Lila in the horse’s eye this afternoon, after we hiked up to the plateau. Is there a half-language of want? A way to measure the dimensions of sky in a horse’s head? There are a few hours of light left.

III

The wind picks up, blows the blue tarp over the rabbit cages against the house next door. Lila leaves to turn the porch lights on and won’t come out of the kitchen.
I can't move. I'm thinking of the numbers again. I'm thinking of a word which would mean both *topography* and *God*. Director? The lights shine on the wet slats of the fence like spotlights. I wipe rain off my neck, off my forearms. It takes both hands to find my face in the dark.
Michael Byers

Maxfield

Sandra and I broke up very slowly. It was a function of distance and time, the distance being mostly mine, and the blame, too, if there was any. I am living alone on the Oregon coast now, in a borrowed house, where I am writing a play about Thomas Edison. This dubious project, commissioned by an easily bamboozled theater in Eugene, fills my days. I have money saved up from two years’ teaching in Eugene, and I pay no rent; this house belongs to my aunt, who has moved to Jamaica. It’s a big cedar-shake house on the mouth of a river, and moss grows thick on the roof, and the gallant fir trees drip and scrape against the windows. Occasionally I see woodpeckers going after the eaves. My aunt has most of her furniture in Jamaica, so many of these rooms are empty, the carpets gone, the white walls naked, and I sweep spiders off the bare floors and down the long echoing halls. It’s the sort of ramshackle house Sandra always talked about, though if this were her house it would be packed to the rafters with things.

I work, if you want to call it that, at the dining room table, with a desk lamp. I have a stack of relevant books on one of the chairs beside me, and I have a rubber pad for my typewriter. I am here at the table eight or nine hours a day, typing and typing, so by most measures I have a boring life; and because I don’t know anyone down here on this windy stretch of beach, I see no living people unless I go up to Eugene. As a result, I occasionally feel as if Thomas Edison is actually living in the house with me, prowling somewhere in the upper
rooms, a secretive and silent boarder. It is a useful sort of delusion, and sometimes I actually leave a door open for him or leave a light on in the hallway. It’s not an obsessive thing; these actions just help complete the illusion.

I have a few of his biographies open on the table before me now; in these books are photographs of his wives and children. He had three children, two boys and a girl—here they are standing obligingly in the garden, hands behind their backs. I find myself thinking of these as acquaintances; I am familiar with their striped outfits and cascading ringlets; but I feel a little uncomfortable with Edison himself. He is grumpy and ill-mannered, irritated by his deafness, impatient with people, and I have the idea that he puts up with me grudgingly, as he would put up with his doctor, or his mother. But he doesn’t have a choice, does he? He is at my mercy, and the mercy of the Rue St. James Theater Company, which, believe me, is bad news for him.

Edison’s wives were both beautiful women. His first wife, Mary Stilwell, looked quite a bit like my own Sandra: big round cheeks and long dark hair. Mary, when she married him at sixteen, had already in her eyes a look of rich experience, of amusement. You think, She cannot possibly be sixteen. You think, She is far too wise. But in another photograph she wears a girlish black choker and the front of her dress is elaborately ruffled and bowed and spangled with black buttons, a girl’s extravagance.
In act one, Mary Stilwell meets Edison when her sister Elizabeth, on a whim, visits Menlo Park. They’ve heard stories about the inventor and his strange habits; it is a rainy day, and by coincidence the three of them end up caught together under an awning in town. The girls giggle into their wrists, and Edison, affected by Mary’s beauty, offers her a job, which she accepts. She was a woman driven by curiosity, and she was drawn, she said later, by the acrid smells and violent bangs and booms coming from the long wood building in Menlo Park—we can picture the building shuddering like a bad engine in the grassy field. Visitors to the wizard-works were encouraged, and common, being good for business and Edison’s growing reputation, and on some especially busy days his men strung ropes to keep people out of important or dangerous rooms.

In a letter to her mother (act one, scene three), Mary remarks upon his dirty hands and matted hair and the gloomy shadows slung like hammocks beneath his eyes. He appears like a ghost behind her as she works, and he breathes on her neck. When Edison proposes to her in the grease and clutter of his workshop, she is shocked, and looks down at her folded fingers, embarrassed, in a demure gesture common to the times. Though to be honest, he isn’t that romantic:

**Edison:** Tell me, little girl, what do you think of me? Do you like me?
**Mary:** I—
**Edison:** You can be honest.
**Mary:** You frighten me, Mr. Edison.
**Edison:** What?
**Mary:** You *frighten* me.
**Edison:** Well, that doesn’t matter much. Unless
you'd like to marry me.

At least it’s not a musical, which is what they wanted at first. Oh, in-can-desc-ence!

Mary Stilwell died unexpectedly of typhoid in the summer of 1884. In eight years she had borne him three children, and Edison had to wake them all in the night and tell them their mother had died. The biographies reveal no great history of feeling for her, but he is described as crying and shaking. He could hardly talk. We can imagine him wandering through the halls of his big house in Menlo Park, lost and disoriented, coming as if by accident to his children’s bedroom doors. Do they hear him approach? The shuffle of his feet, his sobs? Some nights in this house I imagine him coming down the stairs in his big boots, stepping heavily, mourning, inexorable in his approach, all the while hoping somehow things will return, magically, to their rational course.

Why did I offer to take on this project? The money’s good, and I like Eugene, and it sounded like fun at the time. I try to take it seriously, but most days I feel like a hack. The subject keeps me interested, though, because I have long been fascinated by the nineteenth century, and, more specifically, by the last half of that century, when things were really starting to roll. I am going to say that this was a simpler time, and I know this is a cliché, but I mean this in a very specific
way: that things were actually simpler—*machines*, I mean, with their gears and belts, their steel and iron and rubber. There is an attractive geometry to the machinery, its circles and angles and hearty, rational curves. More of the world was superficially apparent. Look at a paddlewheel steamship, or at one of the huge iron locomotives of the day. There is in these things a real objective shuddering power, a power derived from such simple things as coal and fire, water and steam.

This is where most people get off. By this I mean that most people’s understanding of machinery, if they give it a second thought at all, stops around 1880, when Edison perfected his light bulb. Electricity introduces a new element. How exactly does a light bulb work? This is what makes Edison intriguing. Like a wizard indeed, he conjured hidden and mysterious forces. *Where* is the electricity, exactly? We know the bulb becomes white hot, and perhaps we imagine a light bulb as a peculiar, filamentary ember. But the physics of the light bulb are lost to us—lost visually, anyway, as they were lost to Edison. He was up front about the whole thing. Like any wizard worth his salt, he wasn’t quite sure how things worked either.

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My Sandra, long gone now, liked the ornate complications of the nineteenth century. You might say this would have made us opposites, and I wouldn’t argue. The complications she liked had to do with dress and manners. From old library books she read lists of no-nos, her small hands pushing back her hair. Should you lean back in your chair at dinner? Ha! Only if
you’re an incorrigible boor. Never smoke in the presence of ladies. Tip your hat with the hand farthest from the person saluted. Talk while moving the facial muscles only slightly. Do not drink from your saucer. Can you manipulate a terrapin fork? She borrowed one from the museum and used it when she ate spaghetti; and she had a fascination with corsets. Imagine buckling on that steel, she’d say. I’d feel like I was going to war! She’d suck in her stomach and put her hands on her hips, pressing inward. What do you think? Could I sew one myself? Do you find this attractive? She’d turn this way and that, pinched like a wasp, her long black hair pitched over her shoulder.

I, too, like thinking about those dark red parlors with their heavy carved furniture, and their huge velvet drapes, and their flocked wallpaper. There is a certain complicated despair that, at a distance, becomes somewhat attractive, as an all-night drive can seem attractive from a distance. The Victorian rooms are impossibly hot and stuffy in my imagination. Your collar feels like a handcuff around your neck. What can you say to people? What wit is too much? Everything stays on the tip of your tongue. Never cross your arms, or put a hand on the wall. Move with grace and deliberation. There are a thousand absolute rules. There is in you a homunculus, something already born and fully formed, but tiny; this is your truest soul.

Sandra’s favorite artist of the period was Maxfield Parrish. I suppose he’s not technically of the period—he was big in the first and second decades of this century—but Sandra associated him with the ornate aesthetic of the time. Sandra was exuberant in her love of Parrish; she bought the calendars and posters and note cards. Above our stove in Eugene was a huge poster called Ecstasy, a painting in which a pretty girl...
stands on a rock above a lake. The girl’s face is lit up orange by an unseen setting sun, and her brown hair is flying in a glorious wave behind her. She is staring at the sky, and her delicate mouth is open in a vaguely sexual way. She is wearing a gauzy white blouse and skirt and these, too, are orange in the sunset. The painting is super-realistic: Parrish has picked out the rocks in their every crease and hollow. The folds in the girl’s clothes weave perfectly in and out of shadow.

All Parrish’s paintings are like this. They have a central object—a house, for example, or this ecstatic woman—that gives off light, and then there are peripheral objects that reflect this light. Often the women are naked (or nude, shall we say), and they recline beneath a tree, every leaf of which has been meticulously, descriptively drawn, and which is orange in the sunset; or there is a white marble fountain, and there are nude boys lounging around it, and they are orange in the sunset; or there is an emir’s palace, upon whose grounds the white walls and dark latticed minarets and veiled women are all stained orange in the sunset.

Why do I bring this up? I bring this up because Maxfield Parrish actually painted elaborate magazine advertisements for the Edison Mazda Company in the nineteen-teens. This was no accident. Edison’s homebound lights, golden and gentle, brought Parrish’s dull orange glow indoors—or, you might say, the low angle of Parrish’s sunset light reminded you, vaguely, of a desk lamp. However you like it; the point is, either way, the two of them are in my mind connected. The two men never actually met, as far as I know, but in my play I have blithely made the two of them friends.

Be not alarmed. This is only one of the many ridiculous things I have done. Mark Twain also shows up, and there’s an eclipse, and a train wreck—suffice it
to say it’s a mess, but they love it in Eugene. Good enough. They love the idea of Parrish meeting Edison — The sets! they exclaim, clapping their hands—but I cringe when I imagine Sandra seeing the play performed. She would be appalled to see how I have failed to understand the painter Parrish, who remains a sort of flighty and two-dimensional figure to me, someone you can’t take too seriously, someone who, these days, might show up at a Renaissance Fair wearing a long, flowing gown. Grow up, I hear Sandra telling me, He wasn’t anything like that.

I have given Edison, shabby and finger-stained, a vacation to Maxfield Parrish’s studio in the country; Edison is not grateful. He regards with disdain Parrish’s white wicker chairs, and his long sloping lawn, and the tropical birds squatting on the porch rails. Parrish is a small, energetic man with a thin black mustache—in my mind he looks a little like John Waters. It is a sunny day, and when he strides onto the porch Parrish is wearing a white suit and a white hat, and he calls Edison Edison. Bring up the yellow lights, stage front, and:

Parrish: My dear man! (shakes hand) How good of you to come.
Edison: (shrugging in wrinkled suit) Mr. Parrish.

And that’s about as far as I get. Edison I can do, I think, prickly as he is. But the conversation seizes up and dies when Parrish comes on, exuberant, flamboyant, ornamental—and I feel I must get Parrish right, as if he has some real part in this idiotic play, and as if he is more than a guilty, perfunctory nod to Sandra, who is far away and still holding her mighty grudges.
The Rue St. James Theater, in Eugene, is close to the university but not affiliated with it. It is a converted bank building, a big gothic high-windowed edifice with limestone crenelations and copper stains streaking from the gutter. The lobby inside has a green-veined marble floor, worn smooth and opaque by a hundred years of feet. After the bank failed it became a movie theater, and on the linoleum floor of the control booth you can still see the rusty ghosts of the bolts that held down the projector. The red velour seats are still there, and the house itself is cavernous, and dark, and the walls are hung with huge red curtains that swim slowly in the air, like large harmless things underwater. The ceiling is high; the movie theater installed a chandelier that tinkles now and then when it spins at the end of its chain.

The theater puts on musicals and children’s plays for money, and by way of its proximity to the affluence of the university, and a rack of grants, it manages to keep itself afloat financially. It is a rather grand place, but a feeling of cheapness pervades. Every possible light is kept off at evening rehearsals, and the coffee pot has a styrofoam cup for your quarters, and the staff bathrooms are cleaned only twice a week. It is damp and cold inside, and when the basement furnace comes on, which is rarely, the big building hums absentely to itself, and the curtains become more active along the walls.
I am running out of time. I have three weeks before the director wants a final draft, and frankly it's not looking good. In an effort to get more done, I have stripped my days down to a few events: at eleven every morning I leave my typewriter and drive two miles to the post office, where I get my mail and buy a newspaper. At five I start a fire—it is dark by then, and usually raining—and at midnight I draw my bath in my aunt's big blue-tiled bathroom, where I sing "Amazing Grace" or "The Star-Spangled Banner." I also spend quite a bit of time listening to the radio—the reception out here is very good, and most days I can get Seattle and San Francisco easily, and it seems right and just to listen to the radio while writing a play about Edison, as it seems right and just to have a strict routine and a long, ostensibly productive day. He was a grinding worker who slept in his clothes and went days without bathing. He tended to ignore his wives.

After Mary Stilwell died, and after she was buried beneath a big spreading tree in Menlo Park, Edison spent more time with his children. This is all true—he invited them into his lab, into the barn out back, and in the oil-smelling building they stood enthralled, as their mother had, years before, by the motors that shook and roared and ran their canvas drive belts round and round through slots in the ceiling. He built a small railroad train and laid track around the farmyard; he took his kids on rides back and forth on this train, which ran a hundred yards in either direction. The engine, which he built himself, was electric and
hummed as it sped along. I like to imagine Edison riding it through the grassy yard, clutching it between his knees; his vest is unbuttoned, and his hat is back on his head, and his motherless children are hanging to his waist like opossums, joyous and terrified. But I realize scenes like this don't play well on the stage, and I have thrown away quite a bit.

I have had a year to finish the play, but for the first nine months I was a little distracted. For a long time last summer I made a special effort to stay in Sandra's good graces. I was a fool, and I remain a fool, though I am now a different fool than I was before. This special effort of mine involved spending a lot of money on flowers wired to San Francisco, and priority-mailed books, things she accepted gratefully but with a definite lack of enthusiasm. I was often driving long distances in order to find some new present that might excite her, though in my heart I understood that these motions of mine were cosmetic, and that as a couple we were doomed.

On one of these summertime trips—this one down the coast—I came across a little antique shop set by a river, near Gold Beach. It was a beautiful day; the windsurfers were out kiting themselves over the water. The river, among its reeds, smelled green and warm. I felt wonderful, and, despite everything, full of hope for the future. I had a mind to buy something very special for Sandra, who, of course, liked old things.

The antique shop was a charming disaster. On display in clouded glass cases were old paper fans, and ancient flat irons, and green potion bottles, and little Indian reed baskets; and here and there around the shop were lacquered desks and tables, and old overstuffed chairs, and there was a profusion of tiny things climbing the shelves—the rooms were cluttered thick with
things, and the air seemed thick, too, full of dust and the smell of old books. I wandered in, unnoticed. I found the proprietress, Flora Holloway, behind the cash register. She was smoking and tipping her ashes into a porcelain mug—she was an old woman in blue sweat clothes and short curly gray hair. “Well hello,” she said. She had a sly, smart look about her, a cynical smile, as if she had just gypped an old man out of his Chippendales.

“I’m looking for a gift,” I said. “Something romantic.”

“Illustrations,” she said.

From beneath the counter she pulled two old bound magazines, library volumes with the leather covers pried off and the signatures unsewn—an atrocity, difficult to look at. The yellow threads were tangled and loose. “There are some very rare illustrations in these two particular volumes,” she said.

“Oh really.”

“Are you familiar with Maxfield Parrish?”

“Well, yes,” I said, surprised. “Mr. Orange Sky.”

“These are different,” she said, pointedly. “You’re talking about his posters. Here,” she said. “Look at these.” She turned the magazine around on the counter. Two drawings, on facing pages, showed a desert scene; the colors were easy and diffuse. There were some far-off sandy mountains, and a weathered wood-and-wire fence ran into the distance, and though the pictures were only page-high I felt in them a sense of light and distance. Far away a stand of cottonwoods peeked out of a ravine.

“Well! They’re very nice.”

“Aren’t they? He took a trip out west and painted.”
"They're not so meticulous as his others."
"No, they're not." She settled a pair of black glasses on her nose. "I've got some more." She opened the other volume and found four more paintings. *Verdant Pastures* was the caption of one that showed a sea-green hillside. In another, *The Flock*, a shepherd stood in the middle distance, his sheep milling around him like children. "Aren't they beautiful?"
"They are," I said. "My girlfriend would love them."
"Of course she would."
"She loves Maxfield Parrish. They're for sale?"
"Well, not yet. I'm going to have them framed first. I think I'll frame these two together, one on top of the other, and then I'll do these four all sort of side by side, like a panorama, see?" She held them up to demonstrate. She seemed girlish in her pleasure. "What do you think?"
"Looks good."
"I might put them aside for you."
"That would be wonderful," I said. And out of politeness I found an intact library copy of The Century magazine, leather-bound, which I bought.
"Very nice choice," she said.
I gave her my phone number, which she scrutinized.
"You're not from here?"
"Well, not right here."
She seemed satisfied, and I drove off with the Century magazine. I felt happy and beneficent; I had lucked into the Parrishes, and framed to boot—certain to win Sandra over, finally. The Century magazine sat on the seat next to me, brown and heavy, and gave its thick, nostalgic odor to the car.
Back at the house, I put the Century on the
dining room table. I had the windows open, and a grassy summer wind blew through the house. The curtains waved and billowed. The Century looked perfect in my aunt’s warm, expansive room; it distracted me with its loveliness. It shone in the summer light. Leather crumbs dusted the table. So instead of working, I opened the Century and read about The Dangers of Small Talk, and Four Confirmed Lincoln Conspiracies (about the assassination), and I read a story about a nun and a foundling, “Sister Catherine’s Own.” Sister Catherine was young and pretty and walked daily in the cloister’s sunny gardens. The foundling was four or five years old, a little boy with curly blond hair. The two of them were bound by isolation and an innocent beauty, though the boy was often in trouble for stealing potatoes or picking the wrong flowers. Sister Catherine eventually gave the foundling up to a family in a nearby village, though not without some sorrow. On that summer day I thought of Sandra in sunlight, a hopeless romantic, full of hope and actually believing we would eventually be happy again.

In Eugene, the part of Mary Stilwell is being played by a drama teacher from the college. This is intimidating, and I have tried to provide her with some good scenes. She is an attractive woman, perhaps in her middle thirties, and she even looks a little like Mary, and therefore a little like Sandra. We see in each other a sort of kindred cynicism, and she’s good for a
snappy line or a dismissive roll of the eyes.

She and I went out for coffee after rehearsal last week, and the bright, fluorescent cafe I saw the shadows under her eyes and the pink tinge around the rims of her nostrils, like a rabbit. She is divorced but she has no children and does not want them, and in fact she curled her lip when I mentioned them, and stubbed out her cigarette, and gave me a look meant to drop me dead where I sat. “Kids give me the willies,” she said. “Course I know you’re nuts over them. Teacher.” She spat the last word at me.

“How,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“You were probably the kids’ favorite. You probably made them laugh.”

“Oh, you bet,” I said.

Often sitting with her I have considered asking her back to my place, an hour away, or even asking her to invite me back to her place. She wears black turtle-necks and tight black jeans and has a tiny red purse from which she takes lipstick, cigarettes, and gum. But I don’t want her to think badly of me, and I have the feeling that if I went home with her I’d say her name rapturously, or look at her secretly with love, and, somehow, I’d end up showing her how uncynical and hopeful I really am, and she would loathe me for it. Some nights I want to tell her about my Century, but I’m afraid I’d speak of it with too much love, and she’d become suspicious. “What the hell is this place? What books are these?” she’d say, stepping critically through my aunt’s house, her arms folded. “Ever heard of furniture?”

Her name is Janine Richardson. We end up walking the nighttime streets of Eugene, me back to my car, she back to hers.
When Sandra and I lived together in Eugene, I taught fourth grade. Sandra worked for the city, doing restoration work in the pioneer museum near the university. We had an apartment downtown, above a movie theater. I would get home from school in the middle of the afternoon, and I’d grade some homework or draw up a few worksheets, and in the spring we could open the sliding door onto the balcony so bustling street noises would float up into the apartment. Starting around six we could smell the popcorn from the theater. Sandra and I had a good, stable life, and a few good friends. We were busy, and we were happy.

Sandra loved her work. She roamed the basement of her museum—an old remodeled train station—where the old farm machines and gingham dresses stood labeled in their wooden crates. Old store signs leaned against the walls. In one room they were preparing an exhibit on Japanese internment, and there were boxes full of censored postcards and sad photographs of desert camps. At night, once in a while, Sandra led me by the hand through the maze of underground rooms. We would choose one, dark and empty—we kept blankets and pillows stashed in the boiler room—and when we laid ourselves down, all sorts of things happened. She became loose and flexible and warm in my hands. She smiled the whole time, a huge beatific smile, as if she were being blessed. Her skin grew smooth and beautiful. Her hands became strong and confident. She sighed in brilliant colors. She talked and made a complicated progression of sounds, each breathier than the last, and more exhilarated, as her
body twisted and pushed against me, and as I counted multiples of elevens, and of eleven elevens, over and over. We were perfectly matched; we pulled each other back and forth, a simple, powerful machine. Afterward she would gently try on the pioneers' clothes. She might poke her hair under their carriage bonnets or slip her feet into their tall, narrow shoes, and when I saw her dressed like this I believed I had known her in former lives, in simpler times.

And I was happy with my work, too. At school I was Mr. Organization. We had charts for homework, and good behavior, and books my kids had read, and tests they'd taken, on and on. I had one whole wall of charts; my classroom looked like a bookie's office. The kids liked me, more or less, because I kept things running so smoothly. You might say my trains ran on time. But I was fairly unaffectionate.

On the other hand, there were times—at recess, for example, when I could see the kids all at a distance—when I did feel some affection for them. There they were, clambering over the monkey bars, or chasing one another around in the dirt and wood chips, and I thought, well, one day I'll have one of those, one of them will be mine; and an anticipatory love surged in me, warmly. I imagined my child's little crib, and the squeak of his plastic pants, and how Sandra would look distended in pregnancy: she would be beautiful, and she would waddle through our rooms smiling, her hands on her stomach. At the end of the day, I imagined, she would take a slow splashing bath, then stand at the steamy mirror and stare at herself. How could she have grown this big? She would comb her long hair and feel the baby's feet kicking beneath her surface, like a cat under a blanket. This was a pleasant, if strange, fantasy, which I indulged only in the greatest secrecy. I
think it would have alarmed her to know about it.

Then one day in Eugene, in the springtime, Sandra came home, and she took a short shower, and then we went out to dinner, and she told me she might be pregnant. For real? I asked. It was strange, disorienting, to have it come true like this, so suddenly. It had been six weeks, she said. She stared into her food.

The next day we bought a kit in a box. The white tab turned a sudden, decisive blue, a blue like the sky, like a glowing sea, an instant, brilliant color that made us gasp.

Parrish: I wonder about the sources of inspiration. I know mine are almost entirely commercial.

Edison: Well, in the best of all possible—

Parrish: I suppose you don’t like me for that, you find it sort of life-killing to be so practical and self Considering and all that.

Edison: Well, no. In fact, I’m probably more practical than—

Parrish: You quite frighten me, actually, you really do, I don’t know why.

Looking back on this Parrish reads like a woman, or perhaps a very effeminate man, and this is what he’s turning out to be, actually; the man who’s gearing up to play him has an eyebrow ring and long dramatic sideburns and smokes quite a bit. His name is
Kevin Love. Edison is being played by a high school chemistry teacher, Howard Turner, who has a bad slouch and a huge red nose, and in the auditorium the two of them stay as far away from each other as possible, except on stage, and even there they are uncomfortable together, which is fine, I suppose. Everyone’s afraid of Edison; and Edison doesn’t seem to like anyone.

Sometime last summer I was in a telephone conversation with Sandra. I don’t remember when, exactly; it doesn’t matter. Our conversations last summer typically spiraled down toward the question we hadn’t yet asked: Why were we still together? You know how these things go. We felt a certain obligation to our history, as all couples do, and we certainly didn’t hate one another. But we were apart, and we had already become a little foreign to one another. I couldn’t quite imagine her face. She was quickly developing a life of her own in San Francisco.

This summer, on the phone—whenever it was—she said, “I have a new boss, and guess what. He’s going to transfer me to the conservation wing next week. There’s a woman over there who’s very cool.”

“Great,” I said.

“She has the most amazing clothes. I can’t wait till I’m rich.”

“I miss you,” I said.

“Well,” she said, “you know what to do about that.”
“Can I come see you soon?” I asked.
“No,” she said.
“Why not?”
“I don’t think you like me very much.”
This is how these conversations went. “Why do you say that?”
“I think you just like to have me off to the side, so you don’t have to worry about finding anyone.”
“That’s not true,” I said.
“Yes, I think it is. Also, you were mean. You did all those mean things to me.”
“What mean things?” (mystified)
“All those things.”
“What things?”
She said nothing. I heard her shuffle the phone from one ear to the other.
“Hey, guess what,” I said. “I’m going to buy you the greatest present in the world.”
“A new car?”
“No.”
“Well, forget it then. That’s all I need.” (dismissive)
“You’ll love this, though.”
“And you know what? I was reading my journals from last year,” she said.
“Oh.”
“You never wanted to sleep with me,” Sandra said.
“That’s not true,” I said. “You mean afterward?”
“You were all cold and distant.”
“Well, it frightened me,” I said. We hadn’t talked about it in months. “Not any more, though. I’m over that. I’m not frightened any more. I won’t be distant.”
“You just say that because you’re not here.”
“I could move down there,” I said.
“No.”
“I could get a job there. I like San Francisco.”
“Just wait a little while,” she said. “I’m still not sure how I feel about you.”
“Well,” I said. “Don’t go out with anyone else. At least not until I get you your present.”
“I won’t,” she said, but she sounded weary and bored.

After we hung up I ran out to the car and drove all the way down to Flora Holloway’s shop again, understanding that my need had suddenly become immediate. Flora Holloway was there, behind the counter, smoking a cigarette and stacking and smoothing dollar bills. “Hello,” she said. She didn’t recognize me.

“Ms. Holloway,” I said.
“Do I know you?”
“I bought the Century,” I said.
“Oh!” She tilted her head back and looked down her nose at me. “Right. I remember you.” She reached for her glasses.

“I was wondering about those Parrish pictures you had.”
“Oh. Well.” She looked down at her money again, frowning. She rolled a few bills against the edge of the counter. “Those are at the framer’s.”
“They are.”
“In Eugene. I’ll be going up there this week.”
“Well, I’m still interested in them.”
“You are.” She began counting her money, and I counted along. She waited until she’d finished counting, then said, “Well, come back on Thursday. They’ll be ready then.”
“All right.”
"You enjoying that book?"
"It's beautiful, isn't it?"
"It is."
"I knew you'd like it."
"Would you call me when you get those pictures in?" I gave her my number again.
She nodded. "Be happy to," she said. "Thursday."

When Sandra visited the school that week—the week we found out she was pregnant—for Career Day, the kids were fascinated with her. Why? Her hair? Her sneaky expression, as if she might say something shocking any moment? She certainly wasn't showing. She was quiet, and she held herself in reserve when she talked about becoming curator; but they gathered eagerly around her in the halls, touching her hands and twisting her silver rings. She was dressed in an antique calico dress, and wore a bonnet, and had flowers twisted into her hair. Is Mr. Pearson your boyfriend? they asked, and she put her sharp chin in the air and said, Children shouldn't ask such personal questions. And then after a moment she said, Besides I have a thousand boyfriends, at which they laughed and pointed at me. Later, a few very serious boys spoke to me, privately, and said they admired her. They thought I'd made a good choice.

That afternoon, in normal clothes, she was examined by a doctor with a huge gray mustache. She disappeared into the back room. I imagined her walk-
ing uneasily through the white hallways. Did she feel as if she were being blamed? I knew she was terribly embarrassed. I imagined the doctor turning his back as she lifted herself carefully onto the table. When she reappeared she was chaste and distant. What a complication, she said, finally, in the car, considering things. She was gazing through the windshield, her hands settled in her lap.

What Sandra hated about me, if she hated anything, was this: everything had to be worked out. That is, I had to work everything out. I belabored things. We had to go over and over her decision, though I knew she didn’t want to talk about it, and we stayed up all night that night, a long terrible night during which we both cried quite a bit, and rested in one another’s arms, and gazed out the window. At four in the morning we walked through the empty streets of Eugene, smelling the bakeries and drycleaning shops. And if she had decided to keep the child—if we had taken on this new, unimagined life together—we would have gone over it and over it, at my insistence, in a selfish act designed to remove all surprises.

Last week I stood in the back of the auditorium, in the dark, with the director, a bearded John Lennon type who makes his own ice cream and brings it to rehearsal. His name is Dan Hamann. He wanted a long view.

I said, “I’d want to get as far away from this as I could, too.”

He said, “You’re not kidding.”
In the white depths of Parrish’s house Edison was beckoning one of the maids over. The maid was a haggard, chain-smoking college student; she wore jeans and a baggy blue sweater and had huge, perfect breasts. Had Mr. Turner taught her, a few years back? He looked like the sort of guy who’d remember that chest. In blue light he approached her, hunched over, familiar, confident in his status as a great man.

**Edison:** Where does the man do his painting?

**Maid:** (intimidated, but she’ll talk about this for years, and in a whisper) Oh, I can’t tell you that.

**Edison:** Oh, now, my dear, he’s a friend of mine. And if he fires you, well, I’ll hire you on.

**Maid:** I like it here. (adjusts her baggy blue sweater)

**Edison:** You’ll like it at my place, too.

**Maid:** (relenting, but knowing she’ll get into trouble) Please don’t say anything...

**Edison:** Oh, he seems like a very forgiving man.

Now he is in the man’s studio, in the heart of the house, and there’s a biting smell of oil and alcohol. Edison sniffs once and wipes his nose. There are imaginary small glass jars near the doorway, full of turpentine, and there are imaginary rags heaped in a pile. Parrish’s paintings are propped against the walls, vivid and brilliant. In these paintings Edison sees a thousand things: he sees a forest of autumn trees, and a school of dolphins jumping above the bright green water and piercing the water like needles, and a shining
white city on an Italian hill with the Mediterranean
glowing impossibly blue at the base of the frame. He
sees a thousand trees and a hundred tiny white houses
on islands.

Against the far wall he sees dozens of beautiful
women lost in dappled and shining woods. Edison
walks closer. He crouches down and peers closely at
the paintings. The women have left their clothes
hanging on the branches; vague gray shapes swing like
ghosts in the trees. But their bodies are vague and gray,
too; their breasts have no nipples, and their loins are
shadowed and featureless. Their featureless bodies line
the wall. Edison stands and counts the paintings,
needing to somehow quantify this mass of work; but he
keeps losing count, and goes back three or four times
before giving up.

The bearded Hamann says, “You need more
words.

“It looked good at the time,” I say.
“He’s a drunk.”
“Who, Turner?”
“He’s drunk now.”

Mr. Turner is counting nothing, but doing a very
convincing job of it; and now that Dan mentions it,
Turner does seem to be swaying slightly. The maid is
standing at the side of the stage, not quite sure where
she’s supposed to be, and she peers back angrily toward
us; her hair is caught in the yellow lights, and for a
moment she is beautiful.

Sandra went to a clinic on a Saturday morning,
and that night we saw a movie in the theater below our apartment. We sat in the dark, and from time to time she cried, but quietly, just sniffing and clearing her throat. What was she thinking? By the end of the movie she had stopped, but her laugh was a little gummy, and she still sniffled every so often.

We walked downtown and let ourselves into the museum. The marble halls were dark and cold. She kept a few steps away from me, her hands clasped behind her back. Imagine us in the dark rooms. I felt distant, as if I were only observing the scene. Picture the butter churns and horse plows, and the huge two-handed saws; and in the middle of one room, picture a big lacquered buggy with a leather top. Sandra touched the leather with her palm, though the signs said Please Don’t Touch; it was surprisingly supple and soft. She would not look at me. In the museum that night, in the dark, echoing rooms, I felt a deep and seeping fear, a terror, really, that we had created something, and destroyed it, and had never quite seen it fully, had never quite let ourselves imagine the life we might have had.

Flora Holloway never called back. Did she forget? I looked for her name in the phone book but found nothing, then decided to drive down again. Do I blame her? The pictures wouldn’t have made a bit of difference.

She was up on a ladder, reaching to a high shelf to stow away an ashtray. I saw a white flash of skin, the small of her back. “Have you got the pictures in?” I
asked.
She looked down at me. “I’ve got them in,” she said, “but I don’t think I’m going to sell them.”
“You’re not?”
“No.”
“Why not?”
“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, brightly. “I like the way they turned out. I think I’m going to hang them in my bathroom.” She came down off the ladder. I followed her into a back room. On a worktable lay two flat packages wrapped in brown paper. She picked one up and broke the tape, then unfolded the paper. “They’re just perfect,” she said, holding up the desert scenes. “The guy did a wonderful job.”
“Well. He sure did,” I said. They were matted on green paper and framed behind glass. They were beautiful. There were worlds of light behind the glass. I tapped them. The sheep bleated harmlessly, a distant sound, pastoral, happy. Parrish was, for all his kitsch, a genius at this; his worlds were perfect and original, complete in themselves. You could spend hours walking in those fields, leaning against those trees. “You must be happy,” I said.
“They turned out nice,” she said. She unwrapped the second package and held it up. “Maybe in my bedroom. I’ve got green wallpaper, and that’ll go nicely.”

In the final scene, I have ended up with Parrish standing far out on the sloping lawn, his back to Edison. What’s Parrish thinking of? He’s peering out over the
audience. I imagine he’s looking at his green trees and the far green hillside. Suddenly Parrish sees a balloon rising—we’ll project a slide, maybe, an ornate painted Montgolfier balloon with a wicker basket and three men with telescopes peering over the sides. It is a wonderful, buoyant sight, and to our modern eyes it defies logic: a colorful bulb hanging silently in the air, no motor, no fuss. Sandbags are dangling from the rails. Now we’ll down the lights; and in the dark theater we’ll play a tape of ropes being tugged, and a gas flame whooshing hot air into the bag, and voices: Ho! Below there! And bring the lights back up, and see how we’ve put Parrish in the balloon. We understand, in the empty auditorium, that this is the perfect way for him to travel, aimless but beautiful and actually quite complicated, full of a number of variables. The view from here is quiet and regal, and we imagine him drifting over the landscape like this. Below him he sees his house, white and glowing; and then off he floats, alive in one of his paintings, clutching his hat.

And Edison? Do I still have responsibility to him, to his family? Of course I do; I carry him with me like an extra head. He has lost a wife; and let’s pretend he’s just now recovering enough to venture out. That’s why he’s here, to see the world again. He wanders down the lawn, waving to his painter friend. In the machinery of his mind he sees the balloon sailing off, and, absently, he calculates its weight and lift, and the curve of its dimpled surface, and this, to him, is a matter of beauty, too.
Spring

Even the snow in the shade is melting.
Soon the hardware store will put out
flats of tomato and pepper plants,
bags of beans dusted with pink powder.
I think I look relaxed, one foot
propped on the porch rail.
I don’t look like I’m waiting.
A girl rides by on a bike,
fast over the bumpy street,
her blond hair bundled under a scarf.
I would be all right
if I could stop that woman from calling
every night to say rhymes in my ear—
coat rack, rabbit track.
She won’t say what she wants.
I hold the phone, try to grab
the string that turns the light on
but it swings over my head.
She laughs and asks,
“Are you there? Are you still there?”
I’m trying to remember a song.
People are all out walking
with their children. Next door
a man carves something small and ornate
from a piece of oak.
The clear air sharpens my ears.
I hear sawdust falling,
potatoes growing in their buckets.
I hear bubbles from the mouths
of the goldfish. The sun is just where it should be.
I remember this street. I remember the plaster wall where I stop to rest. My fingers throb. In the fighting a bullet grazed my ear. That day we walked in the forest he quoted Keats. She stood in tears amid the alien corn. I stood in tears while he poked the dead tiger with a stick, lifted the black gums to expose the teeth. “Une abeille,” he said, “that’s what stung you.” He smeared green ointment on my hand. In the bar I hardly recognize him. He orders a martini. He still has the stick, the end coated with tar. When I was a baby in a bar like this they gave me wedding cake. They beat drums. “It’s my birthday,” he says, “the day of the dead.” “I don’t care,” I tell him. Where is the dictionary that used to be on the bar? I used to know more words. He takes the maps from his pocket and spreads them out. “Los dias de muertos.” Send me some red leaves from home. Show me some grief.
Manong, Angola

"This is not the way I was supposed to live."

Oil and diamonds
afloat in black markets,
Unita, the govt,
in the heart of madness,
Luanda Central Hospital,
"Domingo,
I whisper.
Who has eaten dogs,
cats, rats,
grasshoppers,
is blind from hunger,
and as he rocks
in the darkness
he swats flies.

All are conscripting
fifteen year olds,
and one without anesthetic,
screams in groin shrapnel,
screams in black market places,

which is South Africa,
which is the patois
of money, for power,
our poetry of exchange
in life and death.

All is paid in dollars.

for Anani Dzidzienyo
Heat in the short field and dust scuffed up, glare
off the guard tower glass where the three pickets
lean on their guns. The score is one to one.
Everybody’s nervous but the inmates,
who joke around—they jostle, they hassle
the team of boys in trouble and their dads.
It’s all in sport. The warden is the ump.
The flat bleachers are dotted with guards; no
one can recall the last time they got one
over the wall. The cons play hard, but lose.
So the warden springs for drinks all around—
something he calls graveyard, which is five kinds
of soda pop poured over ice into
each one’s cup, until the cup overflows.
Charcoal, pastel, house paint, 42" x 56."
Woodcut, 16" x 23."
Woodcut, 16" x 23".
Wood, copper, brass, steel, 18" x 24" x 36."
Eva Mastandrea, *Polonez Series.*
Ink on paper, 36" x 40."
On the hill above a narrow hollow, a dog sat in the woods with its head propped over a log. A bluejay called from a shagbark. The dog twitched an ear, causing fleas to rise and circle its head before settling back to the black fur. The jay moved on. From an arched weedstem, a tick slipped onto the dog’s hind shank.

Below the dog at the foot of the hill, a yellow bus stopped beside the grade school. The driver spat a brown arc of tobacco against a limestone shelf that jutted from the hillside. Lines of heat shimmered above the blacktop, the edge of which was soft enough to hold a footprint. The driver squinted into the murky shadows, seeking the dog. It came every day to meet a boy. The dog was part coonhound and part something the driver had never been able to name—husky or lab, maybe wolf. He wanted to ask the kid, but he walked to school, and the driver never left the bus.

The black dog stood and stretched like a cat. It scratched itself and the tick fell from a strand of hair and landed on a fern. The dog followed a game path to a rain gully, scattering rocks down the hill from beneath its footpads. The dog left the cool shade of the woods. The sudden sunlight was swift and harsh as an ax cut, but the dog continued without breaking stride, accepting heat with the same ease that the boy had accepted the dog’s presence outside the schoolhouse every afternoon for seven years.

At the bottom of the hill, the dog stopped, its
nostrils opening wide. The fur along its neck rose. The dog became very still. Twined with the smell of bus exhaust was that of an enemy.

"What a ye got, old son?" the driver said. "Snake in the ditch line?"

A child left the school. The driver spat. The dog's quarry slank along the cool stone toward the children spewing from the building. All were bald, shaved by the State to stave a plague of lice. From the combined scents of sweat, urine, and food that marked the human presence in the hollow, the dog smelled the boy. A grey and yellow shepherd was near him. The dog charged across the road in a galloping fury.

The driver lost sight of the black dog when it passed by the bus, and looked for it on the other side. It leaped with jaws wide and struck the shepherd in the throat. The shepherd reared on its hindlegs and batted the attacker into the stone wall. It clamped its teeth to the black dog, tearing away part of its ear spindled on an incisor. The dogs rolled across the clay dirt and into the throng of children. Older kids dragged siblings away. Within seconds of combat, the animals were slinging blood, saliva and clods of dirt into the air.

The principal ran from the school with a coal shovel and hit the black dog on the head. It turned briefly to consider the fresh attack and ruled the man out. The black dog wheeled to face the shepherd, which clamped its jaws over the black dog's head, pulling the left eye partly out, and tearing the skin from lid to nose. The principal kicked the black dog. He drew his leg back to kick again. Something struck him in the side and he pivoted quickly, expecting another dog but found a scrawny boy hitting him with a tree limb. The boy's face was grim. Even his eyebrows were shaved. The principal grabbed the branch and
wrenched it, and the other end hit the boy in the face. The boy yelled and the black dog was suddenly upon the man, clawing at his legs while biting into the flesh below the ribs. The shepherd leaped for the black dog’s throat. The boy began kicking the shepherd, and from the crowd of children came another bald kid who rammed his shoulder into the thin one. Both boys fell to the yellow clay dirt.

From the bus door, the driver bellowed a primal roar that drew the dogs’ wary attention to a new and potential threat. They broke from each other and circled, their fur glossy with blood. Strings of spit slid over their torn jaws to the ground. The thin boy crawled to the black dog and wrapped his arms around him as the dust slowly dissipated. Dislodged fleas hovered above the children, hunting the safety of hair.

The driver stepped from the bus, both arms clasped across his belly, his face white, eyes glazed. A sudden sweat leaked from his hairline. He bent from the waist and began to retch. Children made a circle around him. They dodged the splash of vomit and delivered into the air a laughter that drifted the hillside like a fragrance. A blue fly left a spot of blood to land beside the driver’s vomit.

When the driver finished, he wiped his face. “Swallered a chew big as a baby’s fist,” he said. “You’uns go on and get on the bus now.”

There was a cut in the boy’s head. He had the makings of a shiner, and bite marks in his arm. Both he and the dog were bleeding freely, but the dog’s eye was worse. The boy looked up the gully to the woods, decided against the shortcut and began walking the road. He favored one leg.

Through a tear in his shirt, the principal prodded his ripped flesh. He’d never been struck by a child
before. When the bus was gone, the principal hurled the coal shovel against the rock bluff across the road. A sharp peal echoed off the rock and faded into the air.

Around the bend and hidden from school, the boy crouched beside the shaded creek that trickled off the slope. Tatters of garbage hung in the trees from spring rains. He and the black dog drank from the ferrous water, and the boy washed the dog’s wounds. There were deep gashes about its neck. Most of an ear was gone. The dog bore up to its cleaning without a sound, even when the creekwater ran into the open flesh surrounding its eye.

The boy cupped water in his hands and poured it over the cut on his own head. Pink water streamed down his face. His eye throbbed. The boy leaned against the dog. For a long time they panted together in the cool quiet of the woods. A squirrel watched them from an oak. A hawk veered in the sky, watching the squirrel.
I have a blue chair; there is a blue rock
and a weed in flower just before the hill
begins in earnest. There is a little chorus
somewhere down there and something that lost its voice
a half century ago is starting up
again; it was a tenor, it was a boy
soprano, it lives by itself, it is
disincarnate, it moves from C to C,
and it is in a valley beside some mint,
against a cherry. I sang my heart out. I learned
to pipe early, I held my arms out, I buried
one hand in another—so we could have something
to do with our wrists, so we could expand our lungs
at the same time, so we could warble, so we could last
forever. Consider the basso profundo that sang
as if he were a string, his voice expanded
and shook, consider the alto. The hair on my face,
the hormones in my heart, the flesh in my hand—
this is how a soprano just disappeared
and a hoarse baritone with a narrow range
suddenly took her place. The sun in the desert
going quickly down, the dark from nowhere, voices
droning, voices shrieking, I am grateful.
Gerald Stern

Essay On Rime

God knows those apes my father’s relatives
born in the Ukraine and raised on white cheese and herring
will live till their hundred and twenties so I will be
careful when I tell my Ukrainian tales
and check all the cities from Novgorod to Dallas.

God knows, God knows, they lived on a small farm
owned by ethnic Germans and cut trees down
and studied for only a month a year in the autumn
and one in the spring. God the trumpeter knows
that one of them owned a stogie factory in Pittsburgh
and one was a dentist in Michigan and one
had a perfume shop on the rue Madelaine and drove
a Buick. Because of his luck and where he was sent
to sojourn during the first days of the war
one of them ended up in Florida filling
prescriptions and later cashing checks. I
who have the brains in the family, I ended up
on a wooden porch arguing with a swallow
and wrestling with a bluebell. My plan is now
to live in three places, maybe divide my books
and maybe divide my time. One of my houses
will have to be near Turkey since that is the way
to get back to the Crimea and the Sea of
Azov; and I have chosen Samos only
because Pythagoras rebuked the petty tyrant
Polycrates there by the waters of Ambelos; and I could have a cat who eats his catch behind the wet rocks and shakes his rear leg and read my American subscriptions and rant as I did when I was twenty, even if I was alone, though

I would be, I think, surrounded as always and listen to the sound of waves assembling and count the intervals. Even the druggist, even the perfumist, would understand that, wouldn’t they, my rich cousins who burned, the one

at Nice, the other at Coral Gables. I who sat and slept for hours and knew white crests and the brown valleys and what they meant, and I who loved the sun just as they did and burned from the same fire I sang with my broken fingers.
Francesca Abbate, Karin Schalm, and Robert Firth

Five Questions: An Interview with Gerald Stern

Gerald Stern: Let’s call this five questions. You can ask me anything you want, but the one thing I’d like to talk about is content.

Karin Schalm: I notice that you often write about cardinals and other common birds.

GS I like common things like wrens, cardinals, sparrows and pigeons because they’re ordinary—because they’re common—and because they’re not, as such, in the realm of the beautiful. They’re like weeds: they’re ignored and they’re omnipresent, a little unacknowledged. That’s what I focus on.

KS You consciously focus on the unacknowledged?

GS Yes. I mean, I didn’t originally do it consciously. And I do it consciously and unconsciously. The other reason is that I don’t really have an enormous knowledge of birds, and so I write about the ones I do know. I was talking during my reading about how in Yiddish they don’t even use the names of flowers. They just say "blumen" which means flower in German or Yiddish. It’s okay to know one thing well compared to knowing a number of things half well.

KS You were saying that you’re trying to write
longer poems, although you’re drawn to writing shorter poems.

GS Actually, the truth is that I started off writing short poems. And I became a kind of minor master of the short lyric. Then somehow, and I don’t think I planned it, the poems got longer and longer—until in my last book, *Bread Without Sugar*, there’s only one poem that’s truly short, the poem called "Chicken with Three Hearts." The others are all two, three, four pages long, though occasionally there’s one that’s one page. And then of course there’s the long poem at the end of that book.

I’ve always been tempted by the long poem, the truly long poem, and in fact I’m just finishing writing a fifty-five page poem. What I want to do now is write fifty poems under twenty lines. I want to do that because it’s a challenge, and as a counternote to the long poems I’ve been writing, and to get into simplicity. I want to get into something very, very simple—a direct emotional statement—because I trust that, and because I’ve already done the other, and because Jack Gilbert’s written a book of short poems and I want to outdo him.

KS Is this on or off the record?

GS On the record. Everything I say is on the record! *And* because I’m reading Greek poets, like Cavafy, who write short poems. To me one of the supreme desires is to write either a long poem (four thousand pages long) or a short poem (twelve lines long). That’s where I really have to be absolutely honest with you.

KS You said you were interested in content. Do
you feel like there's a difference in content between the fifty-five page poem and the shorter poems?

GS  Definitely.

KS  What is the content of the fifty-five page poem? Do you have a title for it yet?

GS  "Hot Dog." It's about a woman named Hot Dog. She's a street person in the East Village in New York. She sleeps outside. She's a thirty-year-old Afro-American who should be in a hospital. She's emotionally disturbed and incoherent. She hangs out in the street across from Tompkins Square Park where for years the homeless lived, until they were driven out by the mayor of New York City, the former mayor, Ed Koch. She's in the poem, Augustine's in the poem, Walt Whitman's in the poem, Noah's in the poem, a black preacher from Iowa City, and myself. These are the characters, though it's all focused through me, my identity, and my connections; it's more or less in the first person.

KS  Is there a story line?

GS.  The narrative is implied, though individual sections of the poem (there are about sixteen sections) will often have narratives, or there will be meditations. There is a progression that is philosophic, rather than a narrative that can be described discreetly from outside the poem. The poem is about salvation. It's about God. It's about redemption. It's a comic poem too. In the very beginning, Hot Dog is arrested, and I discover her sitting on a curb on a hot summer day with her hands cuffed behind her. Four or five police cars are there
with their lights going round and two men are arguing over her soul. One of them is Augustine, who’s the civilian spokesman for the police, and the other is the spokesman for the homeless—he’s on rollerblades; he probably is Whitman. And that’s how the poem starts, but it goes through all kinds of things. There’s some sad parts and some happy parts, and a lot of people will not like it because it combines the serious and the light. And it’s irreverent, and it strays, and it’s indulgent—or it might appear indulgent—I don’t think it is. And it’s solipsistic. But other people will like it because it’s extraordinary writing, and because it’s totally original, and nothing has ever been done like it in the English language. And because it’s honest. It’s concerned a lot with Jewish history, with the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, with God, with poverty, with charity. As far as I’m concerned, the truly unrecognized character, though his presence is felt throughout, is Jesus. Though I never talk about him directly.

That’s the long poem. In a certain sense the long poem really doesn’t sound much different from the shorter poem in terms of structure. That is, they are on one level manifest, and lucid, and easy to hear and understand. And on another level, they are difficult and even obscure—elusive rather than obscure—I can’t help it. I’d like to be as clear as that dandelion right over there. *(He points toward the lawn.*) I don’t want to be difficult. I’m not as difficult as many people. My language is simple. I would like to be lucid as possible, but my mind leads me astray, and my heart.

Francesca Abbate: How does the shorter poem affect the content?

GS In a short poem there is almost always one turn,
or two turns, as in a dance. You have a single thing to say, or to do. I just finished—almost finished—a short poem. It’s about twelve or fifteen lines long, and it’s about two bodies of water in New York City below 14th on the West Side. One is the Great Hudson, though I don’t mention it by name, and the other is an underground stream. And it occurred to me that New York City, you know below 14th Street as well as above 14th, must have had dozens of streams like any other place. They’re no longer visible. So it’s that stream I’m looking for. But of course on another level—I realized this after the poem was written—it’s my own underground stream I’m talking about. The poem focuses on the two streams, and in the very end, there’s a preacher looking for water with a divining rod. So the poem really focuses on one thing. That’s one of the virtues of the short poem. A short poem is magic. It’s a song. It’s beautiful if it works. It’s like a puzzle, a great challenge. Though you have one thing to say, the challenge is totally musical. And of course musical does not mean adornment, rather, musical means that you find the right words or the right thing to say. The thing that’s most musical is when you have something to say. That’s why I keep talking about content.

Last week at a conference in Des Moines [the poet, W.S.] Merwin and Lucille Clifton and I were talking about this; Merwin was the one emphasizing content. He said the critics don’t get it. They don’t understand that poets themselves are interested in what they themselves have to say. The critics are frightened by that—it’s too much out of the realm of reference and control. The huge threat is that amateur poets, or bad poets (if there are such things), are interested exclusively in what they have to say. And they think that the poem consists of celebrating, or grieving over, say, the
death of a son, or a mother, or the loss of a lover. And
they believe by saying it, that’s enough. That’s not
what I’m saying. That’s not what Merwin was saying,
or Lucille Clifton. Maybe it’s saying something well.
Maybe it’s that simple.

I talked about this the other day, either in a class
or at my reading, in terms of an experience I had when I
was shot in the neck during a holdup. I couldn’t write
about being shot because it became too melodramatic
and too self-pitying, but I had to find a way to do it.
That’s a great trap, but one does not—in order to avoid
that trap—not write. You have to accept the challenge.
And one does not hide behind music, whatever music
is. I mean mere music, or mere form—whatever that
might be.

I think of a poet like, say, Etheridge Knight, one
of the great poets of the century. Etheridge’s greatest
single poem—I think—is a poem called "Feeling Fucked
Up." It’s a magnificent poem, a poem about his beloved
leaving him. Now the poem is couched in an old
Provençal form, in a Provençal tradition. It starts out
"Lord, she done left me"—he’s sad about that—then he
curses all the things that are dear to him, as a figure in
a funeral who might, out of extraordinary pain, as
people used to do, cut himself or herself with a knife.
In an orthodox Jewish funeral, cheap neckties are
provided, and they’re cut as a kind of surrogate for
cutting the flesh. But in his case, he’s doing it in the
poem, and he’s cursing all the things he loves. He says
"fuck Marx, fuck Mao, fuck smack and red, ripe toma-
toes, fuck Mary, fuck Joseph, fuck Jesus—all I want is
my love in my arms, so my soul can sing" is the way it
ends. I think it’s a great poem. Why is it great? It’s
great because of his passion, because of what he’s
saying, whatever saying means. I think that’s the case,
though it also is the case that he luckily found a vessel, a container for the poem. Did you ever take an old flowerpot—it’s a classic situation—we have the container and the thing contained, we have the flowerpot and the dirt inside it, and maybe a flower, a "blume." Well, that’s a neoclassical poem. What if you took a little scoop or a little shovel and took the whole mess out—and it still hangs together because the roots are holding it together? Do you have a picture in your mind? Do you see it? Smell it? That’s what a poem is—there’s no container. The container was "dis-contained," "de-contained," but there’s still a container—it’s an implied container. The container is the thing contained. The thing contained is the container. That’s true in Etheridge’s poem, I think.

And I can think of a number of poets—I just thought about it twenty minutes ago so maybe there are dozens and dozens I didn’t think of—I can think of poems of deep emotion and passionate existence, and statements they have to make. One doesn’t do this all one’s life, every poem is not that. Some poems are sort of in-between times. I am thinking of Berryman’s "77 Dream Songs." The poems that move me most are poems about Delmore, his dear friend Delmore Schwartz—where he says, "Have you heard the news? Delmore is dead." Why is that different than any other poem that Berryman wrote—hundreds of poems that he wrote—some of them indulgent, some cute, some boring, some name-dropping, some beautiful—"Have you heard the news? Delmore is dead." Ah—I mean, your whole body grows cold with terror. Paul Goodman, who I think was an extraordinary poet, more so than an educator and a novelist, wrote a poem—I’m trying to remember the name of it—his son fell off
Percy Mountain in New England, and he wrote a kind of very traditional poem, an extraordinary elegy to that son, and another poem of his called "The Lordly Hudson," a poem about the Hudson River. Sylvia Plath's "Lesbos" or "Daddy." Muriel Rukeyser's—what is that poem? It's the poem about a roach—"St. Roach." It's because of the subject that she was driven to the poem. It's a poem where she blesses roaches. Hayden Carruth, who sort of committed suicide and then came back to life, read a series of poems about three or four years ago—one is called "The Crucifixion." It's an extraordinary poem about Jesus and the two thieves; and it was Hayden's personal experience that makes that poem—as with Bishop's "The Waiting Room." These are the poems I look at.

And I have here. . . I have here in front of me (he says in a Nixon voice) Jack Gilbert's new book called The Great Fires. It just came out, and I was going through it quickly this morning. Here's a very short poem of his. I'll read it to you, then just talk about it. It's an utterly simple poem, called "The Lives of Famous Men." Is there a book called The Lives of Famous Men?—there should be—this poem is ten lines long. Now of course Gilbert's late poems celebrate his stubborn isolation, his poverty, his detachment from other things, his loneliness, his loyalty to the ideal of existence, life, and love. And his memory of certain people is part of that. So there is, in the poem, to some degree, a kind of indulgence or romanticization of the self. And some people, in criticizing his poems, talk often about the coldness of them, that they don't let other people in. I'm going to let that argument go for the moment and just read the poem: "Trying to scrape the burned soup from my only pan"—hear 'my only pan,' okay, he's telling us here that he's poor, poor with
only one pan—but you can buy a pan for a quarter; I mean if you shop at a flea market you can buy forty pans—all right, I don’t want to get into criticizing my dear friend Jack. *(He reads the rest of the poem.)* So he’s alone, he’s in the country, he’s getting water from the well. What makes the poem work is not the self-pity or the silliness. What makes the poem work is the madness, the turn in the middle of the poem, it seems to me, where he suddenly views himself not with self-pity but with total objectivity and detachment. "I go out to get more water"—for the soup—"from the well and happen to look up through the bright stars/Yes, yes, I say, and go on pulling at the long rope" That’s totally about Jack. That’s totally content, and yet, we could argue—one of you might want to argue—if he just said it, it wouldn’t be a poem. It takes fifty years to be able to focus; I couldn’t agree more. That’s where the art is, and now I’m going to reverse myself and say "the art is everything."

KS The content and the form?

GS Yeah, but then I’m not separating them. Remember the flower pot? Huh?

KS What question are we on?

GS I don’t know, this is question two or three or something.

Robert Firth: I have a question about that Stevens poem, the Stevens poem about the jar in Tennessee.

GS Oh, yeah, how’s that go? Like nothing else in Tennessee . . .
RF He puts the jar down and somehow the jar—
everything that surrounds the jar becomes... 

GS ... surrounded by woods, by that wilderness. 
But you know, that's a complicated poem, really, 
because it's a poem about history and culture and 
archaeology, and civilization, and human efforts to 
make that—it's about what art is, by making a line, and 
another line, or a word and a counter-word, (Oh, there's 
that dog I love) or a dance and a counter-dance. It's a 
beautiful poem. It's allusive. Yeah, that's an interesting 
thing. I don't know if that poem is an illustration of 
what I'm talking about. I mean, it's a lovely poem, and 
I love that poem, I think it's a great poem, but I don't 
think it's a poem about content in the sense which I'm 
talking about it. A Stevens poem that is a poem about 
content is one of his late poems, where he says— 
finally, after fifty years of writing—in his great last 
poems, he says—"the mind"—because he's been 
writing about the imagination all his life—he finally 
defines it; he says—"The mind and the imagination are 
one." When he says that—I mean, buildings are falling 
down, rivers stop flowing, dogs stop barking, because 
he finally was able to say it in utter simplicity. And 
that's another example of content—it doesn't have to be 
a fascinating story or a beloved leaving you or suffering 
alone on a hillside. 

KS I want to go back to Jack Gilbert. 

GS Okay, go back to Jack Gilbert. 

KS ... and look at you guys in your twenties in 
Europe. Maybe you could tell us a story or two about
GS Man, I could tell you a thousand stories, and they would all be glorifying me—no, that’s not true. You notice in that particular photograph (the cover of Gerald Stern’s book *The Red Coal*) how the people in the background are dressed. They’re wearing—the women are wearing—formidable undergarments, shoulder pads, hats, white blouses, the men have suits, dark suits, white shirts and ties, umbrellas—and Jack and I are, not out of posing or anything, dressed in old clothes the way we dressed then, and I guess, dress now.

Jack went to Europe first, and I followed him about a year and a half later. He and a group of others had a scheme—I don’t totally understand the scheme—it was a scam, rather than a scheme. They lived close to the borders of three different countries—Italy, Switzerland, and France, I think. And they were able to make a minimal amount of profit from discount, from trading, you know, Swiss francs for French francs for English pounds, and back, and lived for nothing for a couple of years in a castle. And then—we were on our way over, I and Dick Hazley, who died last year, were on our way over from Pittsburgh to join them in the castle, and we got a postcard from Jack—"We’ve been ruined. The pound has been devalued." (Laughter) Isn’t that wonderful, coming from a twenty-three year old poverty-ridden bug? "We have been ruined. The pound has been devalued"—it had gone down to two dollars and eighty cents.

Then we all went to Paris, and we lived there, and what I did—well, we all did the same thing—we wrote privately in the morning, we took long walks, and we met over dinner and spent the evenings together.
reciting poetry to each other and talking about ideas. We never exchanged our poems with each other, we never workshopped poems. Later I did a little of that, and Jack did, too. Jack loves workshops—he's very good at it. But we didn't do that with each other. We were very, very private, very private with our time, with our poetry.

And those were glorious times. I was on the GI Bill, and I was getting seventy-five dollars a month, which was a fortune in money then because you could live in France on about a dollar a day the way we lived. I was also in the black market, and I was a kind of racketeer in a minor way. I bought and sold passports, and typewriters. I traded money and made another hundred dollars or so a month, so I was rich.

KS How was that time different from the army and what you were doing then? Could you say something about that?

GS About the army?

KS Yes.

GS I hated the army. The army's stupid.

KS Did that help plant a seed for your political behavior later, or were you political before?

GS I was political before. The army provided a little bit of distance and time for me to make up my mind to write and to be alone, and it's the first time I really left Pittsburgh. I discovered that what I wanted to do was not to become a lawyer, but to become a writer or thinker or bum; something like that. I was
stationed in places like Baltimore, New Orleans, Washington D.C., and I would go to bookstores, and, you know, meet different kinds of people than I had before. It was important, for a couple of years, it was very important to me. And I also—and I don’t want to talk about that right now—spent six months in the guard house, when I was in the army. That was—stimulating—and I learned a lot about people and about betrayal, and lying and the function of the state.

RF Maybe this goes back to what you were saying about long poems, about writing long poems, and I don’t remember exactly what you said, but in the reading, you read a poem where I think you ended up talking about Horace at the end.

GS Yes, yes, that was called "First Day of Spring."

RF Something about the third loss or the third separation.

GS Yes, yes, yeah, right, exactly.

RF That really struck me somehow. I was curious about the connection between writing a long poem where you’re interested in the idea of redemption, but also the sort of poem you read the other day, how you ended up talking about Horace—and there’s a real note of sadness and isolation at the end of that.

GS Well, there’s a sense of giving up and redemption at the same time, you know. You write differently in your late sixties than you do in your late twenties. And in fact, I have a poem called "Steps" that’s about giving up. There’s a kind of joy in giving up—I mean,
I do it in that poem in terms of steps, climbing steps; at a certain point you can’t take one more step, your legs are made of lead. Everyone here has had that experience. But this is the end of the poem you’re talking about. (He reads from Bread Without Sugar.) "I am sitting/in Arizona, the moon is full, so check/the twenty-first of March 1989./I was reading Horace tonight"—so I bring him in to create a new element technically because I wasn’t satisfied with the other elements, and this will be the final element, and will reconcile and finally, so to speak, explain what happened before. At least, that’s the pose, the aesthetic pose."I was reading Horace tonight, who never/wrote by porch light"—the implication is that I am writing by porch light, because they didn’t have electricity of course—"maybe a dish of oil/outside Brindisi"—where he had his summer home. "Ah, the stricken soul./he sat till midnight, waiting for a girl"—now the form changes here in the poem. Up until this point there’d been a three stress line, and now it’s almost an iambic line. "He sat till midnight waiting for a girl/who never came. I love"—I’m talking about Horace now—"his sense, he knew/where the ludicrous lay, he hated/quackery"—then--"I wonder/if maybe in the palace he had seen"—because I had just seen, you see—"a bromeliad"—a flower—"once and touched the drooping flower-/the rubbery claws; I wonder if he talked/to a passing fox." Now, this part of the poem is about a woman whose name is Fox, so I make her the passing fox, and of course, the word fox has other meanings and connotations—"about the frogs that lived in those leaves"—that’s what Fox told me about these bromeliads—"how it clings to palm trees; I wonder..." And this is the third of the three, the litany of three—"I wonder/if March twenty-first was when the plum tree bloomed/in
Tivoli"—where the summer gardens were in Italy—"if he had also seen/hundreds of butterflies"—as I did, you see—"in those branches, if he/lay down and wept"—as maybe, by implication, I am doing—"in spite of his careful mind"—and, by implication, my careful mind—"if that is the third suspension, the third abandonment." Now I never say what a suspension or an abandonment is, but there's a fulfillment I see there, and a completion, and a kind of, maybe not so much a redemption but a realization—which is just as good—maybe, because it gives you knowledge rather than salvation—which, in a way, I value more highly, or just as highly. I don't know whether that happens just linguistically or whether it actually happens, but as I read it, I don't have to define what the third suspension or the third abandonment is. I just have to name it, that there is such a thing that can become in your mind symbolic of anything you want to call it. You know? I don't know if I'm answering all the things you asked, though.

RF I'm not sure what my question was, exactly.

GS Okay, we'll leave it. We're done?

FA,KS,RF Yes, thank you.

GS So, finis?

Missoula, Montana

March 1994
Francesca Abbate was raised in Oak Park, Illinois by wonderful people. She attended Beloit College before finding herself in Missoula.

David Baker is the author of four books of poems, including *Sweet Home, Saturday Night* (1991) and *After the Reunion* (1994), both from the University of Arkansas Press. His poetry and criticism appear often in such magazines as *Antaeus, The Atlantic, The New Yorker, Poetry, The Paris Review*, and others.

Amiri Baraka was born LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey in 1934. He is the author of poetry, fiction, plays, social criticism, music criticism, and literary essays. Among his many books are *Blues People; Dutchman and the Slave; Home, Social Essays; The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader;* and *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (edited with Larry Neal). *Conversations with Amiri Baraka* was recently published by the University Press of Mississippi.

Michael Byers grew up in Seattle and now lives in Ann Arbor. He attended Oberlin College and is currently working towards his MFA at the University of Michigan.

Henrietta Goodman received her MFA in poetry from the University of Montana in 1994. Her poems have appeared in *Passages North* and *The Midwest Quarterly*.

Andrew Sean Greer, having lived all his life on the East Coast, recently moved from New York City to Missoula,
Montana. He has had articles published in *Issues* and *Metropolis* magazines and is working towards his MFA at the University of Montana. He is presently writing a novel.

**Wendy Guild** grew up in western New York and now lives in Missoula. She received her MFA from the University of Montana in 1993.

**Michael S. Harper** is a Professor of English at Brown University and the author of ten books of poetry, including *Dear John, Dear Coltrane; Images of Kin*; and *Honorable Amendments*. He is also the co-editor of *Chant of Saints: An Anthology of African American Art, Writing and Scholarship*; and *Every Shut Eye Ain’t Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans since 1945*. Harper’s *Collected Poems* will be published in 1996.

**Khaled Mattawa** will have his first book, *Ismalia Eclipse*, published by Sheep Meadow Press in 1995. His poems have appeared in several magazines, including *Poetry, The Iowa Review* and *Callaloo*. One of his poems will be featured in the 1994 *Pushcart Prize Anthology."

**Christopher Murray** was born in New Jersey. He grew up on the East Coast. He came to Montana in 1990 and received his BA in English from the University of Montana. Currently he plays drums in the band Stand Up Stella.

**Chris Offutt** grew up in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky and now lives in the Rocky Mountains of western Montana. He is the author of *Kentucky Straight* and *The Same River Twice*. His short stories have appeared in many magazines, including *Esquire* and *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, and are anthologized in

Gerald Stern is the author of Leaving Another Kingdom, Selected Poems, and Bread Without Sugar (1992). His next volume, Odd Mercy, will be brought out by Norton in 1995. He has just retired from the Writers’ Workshop in Iowa.

Nance Van Winckel’s second collection of poems, The Dirt, was published by Miami University Press in the spring of 1994. Her collection of stories, Limited Lifetime Warranty, has recently been published by the University of Missouri Press. She directs the MFA program at Eastern Washington University and edits Willow Springs.
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From the review by Walter Satterthwait

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