

GARDENER OF STARS

A NOVEL

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a t e l o s

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In memory Warren Sonbert
*Every party we did not get to leaves space for us
to picture wishful images.*
—Ernst Bloch

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Utopia is infeasible: a utopian project is an infeasible project. It may be so by default or by choice (when no attempt is made to concretize a project, “choosing” infeasibility as its basis), or by a failure to evaluate certain aspects or structural risks (employing “structural” here in the broadest sense), or by ignoring economic considerations (when means do not match ends, when a plan’s concrete context does not match its cost, etc.)... The terms “fanciful,” “fantastic,” and “imaginary” thereby become positive synonyms...

Franco Borsi,
Architecture and Utopia

GARDENER AND M



GARDENER

I am certainly tired of these stars. The clouds too. Sometimes the ocean is too large. Yet if one thinks of the animals propagating wildly, then consuming each other, the waters divide up nicely, connect and reconnect. I have always been partial to sea level. As you can see, I have already begun to associate anything with anything else. The inhabitants and the habitat are ubiquitous. This is what gets me going. Follow the grain elevator up to the clouds and they part for the sun. The sun blasts away but the seeds inside stay cool; whereas, the seeds outside may suffer. Like seeds inside the grain elevator, we keep cool. How many of us are there? Not so many as there are seeds. I'm cool right now. So I say we keep cool.

Some people say I'm impatient and others don't notice. Appearing, disappearing, grouping, regrouping the stars, about which I personally know almost nothing, do not want to research, but plow over obsessively, mentally, as if I were trying to read my own genetic code for no reason other than that I had been genetically programmed to read it. Thus, the stars form or inform, shape, deplete, slacken, and even leave my thoughts to their own devices. Which, ill-informed as they may be sometimes, do not sleep piled up on themselves as male captives in sloughs of despond but bounce toward the massive externality named the world: this is where "there

is so much to be grateful for” drives its messages. The messages then take root, lining the streets with palms that rise to such heights one blinds oneself looking for their tops. They are also spindly, my thoughts. They do not always hang on the thread of a magnificent constellation, but even when they don’t a device

The sun is out
Earth is hot
My pocket's full
Old is earth

snaps them into place. The attention is mild when it is protected and can assume its own depths of ignorance, almost happily.

Not truly happily. Even my own ignorance of planetary actions disturbs me. I will have to talk to M about this as soon as she is available. Or as soon as I can avail myself of her. She is mercurial. The best of the outside awakens her under an olive tree. The arm of the tree reaches down, paternally nudging her awake as if she had been sleeping in a fable. She knocks on my door after that and when I open it, she throws herself on me. No one has ever thrown herself on me before. It is out of character for me to be thrown onto: I am not deeply rooted. But neither am I mercurial, like M, who after throwing herself on me pulls me outside by the arm, her filthy hands shoved into and forcing my shoulder out. My shoulder, which is typically positioned in a pleasing somewhat fluffy sloping curve close to my trunk, hurts. Stop it, I yell. Then, cut. Then, no. Then I start whining. Emm. Emm. Then I bellow, what the fuck are you doing? I can't tell her flesh from dirt. I envy her her outdoorsy quality. Her claws bite into my shoulder. Downy feathers roost in her claws. If I could only release myself from my animality, I could float off leaving her to extract the feathers from her claws. You little twinkie she says, as if she had been born in a war and I on the assembly line. I am the weapon that won't go off as the enemy gets closer and closer to blowing her head off. Something in the back of my head does go off, a

voice telling me to perform. It says, the voice, forget the wild innocence. The innocuous naivetés you have preserved inside that ruffle bed of an enclosure you and the rest of the evil empire call a house.

Emmm. This is not what I was born for.

Surely she speaks my language. I am falling into lopsided jargon.

The grip loosens. My wing is dented. Feathers fly out of the pillow. My mother frantically shrieks on the other side of a glass door. Why is she letting them all go? I begin crying, stunned and little. M, I say. M. She appears from behind a rose trellis with a new hair-do. How do you like it? she asks me. Where did you get it? I ask back. I tug on my tails. The tux is too tight. I keep my arm close to my body. Just now I was whimpering. Touch it, she says. I can't grow up, I say. You don't have to grow up, she says. I hold a tiny wisp of her bangs between my thumb and forefinger as if it were her father trapped on a piece of celluloid. Thus my hand is close to her head, which rotates like the head of a Ray Harryhausen Medusa. How do I know, she asks, that you aren't just saying this as part of a performance?

She takes off her head and hands it to me. It is another one of her so-called art works. She claims to have a garage full of "fun stuff" behind the woods. The artifact is exactly like her: overtly blond on the head, dark-skinned, reptilian, hot and cold. Even its wispy bangs are cut to match those on her real head. How do you get it to turn around like that? I ask.

It's battery-operated, of course.

I tell her she's a mechanical genius. Mercury the Mechanic, I say and point up at the stars as if my loving hospitality could change day to night. There she is with her old-fashioned wrench trying to tweak microchips.

She goes along with my fantasy up to this point.

You don't know anything about astronomy or mechanics.

That's why you're here, I tell her. I need someone to give me a lecture. She calls me a pompous little twit. A bird worm. And something else jutting through violent memories held in tow.

Thank you, I say involuntarily.

She runs off across the field, so fast you would think it was covered in hot irons, and crashes into the woods willfully as an overfed skunk while I contemplate the words "thank you" and others produced involuntarily out of my mouth — the last utterances of storybook ghosts.

The next time I see M is after a laborious meal. Unusual men from the outskirts have driven here to get a look at us. We feed them ungainly sandwiches disallowing contact of any kind. This may be the West we tell them, but it is no longer the Wild West. There is something within the imagination that ceases to work upon their entry.

M keeps her shack on the other side of the woods, because she doesn't want to be tame. I have never been there.

The men are going back to their motorcycles, the latest in a chain they claim, small things modeled after robotec

toys. Their clunking makes me sleepy or bored. I want to go outside, but if I open the door, I'll have to talk and it will take them longer to leave. My eyes are heavy. I walk away imagining some obese guy straddled over a dinky power demon streaking so fast he evaporates into pure speed.

I walk to the back of the house and flop on a sofa freshly upholstered in lemon-colored fabric facing the window that frames, just now, a wintry light. Something has not been decided or fought for, I think. My life could go this way or that. Even subtlety is missing. Out the window is what appears to be a sensuous tangled neoclassical sculpture tilted on the ground in an odd position over to the left and about three hundred feet from the house where several dirt paths meet. Overgrown sages and rocket plants partially obscure the object. It is a deliciously aromatic spot that has often filled my pores with a heady love. I think about the crouching tit-ridden fertility goddesses spotting the garden as forms of inert consciousness to remind us, the gardeners, of an invasive being, something useless. Sometimes I associate uselessness with the divine.

This strange intrusive statue, did someone haul it over here? Those men (?) seem oddly unformed now, undecided on, a little bit granite, a little bit marble, bronze too. It is the gnarly, the entwined season, a time to warm the earth with bared vines. I open the sliding door and walk into the mist. Several crows fight over a dead squirrel. A thumping from the direction of the object, as the mist licks my skin. A dead

caterpillar on a squash leaf, a split open squash. Crunching. Bird racket. The noise of my own boots. The statue is M on the ground struggling with someone, a man I think. It is. Her clothes are ripped and she is as dirty as ever. Her pants are under her head, then his, pulled off. Her ass moves off and up from the man, now on the ground. They seem to be wrestling and fucking at the same time. She pins him. He whimpers. She moves onto his dick. I put my hand on her ass, kneeling at her side. She hits me with a fist twisted back, awkwardly. It hurts, but I do it again anyway and she hits me again. I am still kneeling at her side and the man is inside her. I miss how that happens. I feel that there is something that belongs to me, since they are here in this open spot. Where I have dug rows for seeds, installed an irrigation system. I notice the man's pants caked with mud. I look around for a leak in the system. I want to bite her ass, to lick his balls while they fuck. If they are ignoring me, why? Why don't I worry them or anger them? This is too impersonal. I can't stay and I can't leave. Doing anything would cause a tear in this transgression, which we have now, at this point, all constructed.

He comes. She bites him on the nose. He screams. She jumps up. He wipes a little pool of cum off his stomach, smearing his stomach with dirt from his hand. There hasn't been enough rain. The dirt is as soft as cake flour. I run after M. What are you doing here? I ask.

Of course, I don't know her at all, therefore this is the dumbest question in the world. She looks at me and spits. You are white as a show pig.

All the better to root you out I say. But what am I saying? We act like we hate each other when what I want is knowledge.

All you want is to be beatified with me as your consultant, she says reading my thoughts as they race into recent history. I try to take her hand. I try to look at her eye to eye and calm us both. I don't know how to do it. She won't stop moving and she won't explain anything she knows. All she does is advance the discussion faster than sense permits. All description comes to a standstill within the vast interior of her restlessness. Even though what she reads of my thoughts is inaccurate, the activity of her discernment produces something more exciting, even more opportunistically promising, than veracity.

Why don't you just pass? I ask.

I can pass anytime I want to, she says rubbing the dirt off a round of forearm with spittle and forefinger to prove her point.

I don't mean for white.

No, of course not. You mean out of your life. But then I would have no audience. If I had no audience, I would not be shamed into looking out for myself.

I touch her to see for myself if she is real. This action is the result of having always wanted to walk up on a stage or

into a movie and touch the actors. She doesn't take it that way. She tells me, as she braces herself against me and slides her knee between my legs up to my crotch, to touch myself next time. I do, the minute she walks away. I give her my sweater first like a good girl.

M

One day while lying under an olive tree with my clothes next to me, I thought nothing would ever become of me as if I were my father talking to me but lazily, as if I were a father talking to myself invoking instructions produced elsewhere, signed into law, taken for granted, never agonized over and followed only when at a loss for words. I had taken my clothes off to enjoy the contact with dirt. The leaves scratched my ass, legs, arms, and back and stuck to my dry, powdery, and leafy-as-the-arid-dirt skin. In no time, streaks and scratches marked my skin, irritating the vulgar whim to be *more animal than person* — that father's voice again. A breeze came to my rescue, puffing out the flame of his haphazard consternation. I broke out in a light sweat between my thighs. This was about ten years ago, in a time when I thought the world belonged to me or that I ought to be appreciated for no reason, as if this blown-out post-plague world had been hurled into a mother's tireless arms and I, a charming greedy infant, illuminated by her unbiased love and appreciation, was a privileged delegate in its reviving story — my little erotic dream under the control of the jargonistic peculiarities of language riding the currents of a semi-sleepy babbling or exhaustion one won't give up for more lucrative reflection. In such a domain, pleasure sub-vocalizes her trivia making shadow plays within her silly babble.

So, I was dreaming while wanting something else: a city — without knowing what a city would be anymore. Yet, ignorance seemed to serve me, to take me somewhere inconceivable.

I say things incorrectly frequently and feel the wrong impression I leave with anyone as voluptuously as I felt the sweat surfacing on my thighs. Still my autoerotic torpor served as a nice counterpoint to the roughness, crudeness of the life I lived, even though I had elected to live alone.

I want to tell the story and account for myself also.

This is written nowhere.

I dreamed I was in a city and also in my dream I could not remember if cities existed anymore. I was on edge not knowing if what was happening in the dream was an illusion or part of some arcane made-up scenery. In the dream, I slept next to a man I had known for a long time. He was on the ground with me under the tree. I was betraying him with another man in the city. I was wearing almost nothing, a cotton flimsy thing. The dress clung to me in the heat, and the street was empty. What I mean is there were no motor vehicles or bicycles parked anywhere. If the painter de Chirico had envisioned his empty cities composed of functional modern architecture falling into disrepair, this street might have been one of his works. I like to think that an imagined world can exist.

I entered a quiet building in the quiet city through a green door. The doors on this city canvas were all painted

nicely. Then I climbed a long flight of stairs to a loft where a man with lovely silver hair greeted me. We had not seen each other for a long time and he, let's call him Cy, demanded that I betray anybody and everything that already had a claim on me. His demand was articulated with an irresistible paternalistic warmth. We entered into the seduction with an odd indifference, perfectly. I touched him all over. He could have been anybody even if he had absorbed all the claims of others I had given up to couple with him. After we made love, I was happy with this consummation of friendship, but he was tormented by it then. It was as if his ejaculation had reversed into him and he was contaminated by a toxin. I wanted to do anything to help him out of his misery, but he chose the misery over me. I could not rid myself of the desire to help him: this left me with guilty feelings for the man in my dream sleeping next to me under the olive tree. Let us call him Farmer. When I woke up alone, I was relieved it was all a dream, and like a little boy in an old-fashioned children's book (since little girls didn't used to be alone), I crossed the woods. To Gardener.

Earth is hot
My pocket's full
Out is cold
Ground and Water

Knocking on Gardener's door is as marvelous as knocking on the magical door to a great city. One knows something terrible will happen when invited to pass through the opened door, that one's role will be that of a stranger caught up in a ruse or revolution. It will contaminate one's judgment. One briefly looks back over one's shoulder to the land of *Los Olvidados* where once there had been a more forgiving landscape. The confrontation with the parodic tragedy dissolves into a desire for riches. Everything has become subjective. The loss of judgment is the door.

Even if the door is quite plain in its physical appearance. Yet the thrill I refer to is undeniable. One's very blood cells surge with anticipation, not for a sight one has never beheld before, but for a place one already knows the inside of.

In my shack in the woods, the relationship of inside to outside is slight. My shack is tiny. There is little, albeit enough, between the elements and me. The shack protects, clear and simple. When life is lived inside, it is so lived because it has to be. I set my mind on the outside, in some larger sense, to know where I am. I read science and mechanics to orient myself to this outside. These books assume, and I, when I am so inclined, share in their assumptions that humans are part of the world and that it is necessary to update ourselves, inform ourselves, and remind ourselves of all of the complex interrelationships that are mostly beyond our understanding, individually, but that we col-

lectively orient ourselves to. This is why I do not attach myself to a community. It is redundant. It takes time away from insects, the scales on the dead logs, a red moss, a bog plastered with mushrooms. There is so much information already that if no one writes another manual for a long time, all ought to function nicely. As will the shack if kept in good repair. As will the redwoods and light birches draped in fogs and arrogant winds and the fussy rodents smothering the vivid weeds with noise. This then is everyday life. It is as external as anything could possibly be and not much use for a storyteller who never meets anyone around the house.

Everything is entirely different at Gardener's. The premise that one is part of the natural world flies out the door. One might as well be part of a work of fiction written by someone who doesn't know the wilderness exists. It would be a work written by someone who does not exist. One is so far inside the fiction that practicality appears to be a coincidence, and yet the vegetables do grow in the garden, the household is well engineered, and meals, if not served regularly, are almost always available. People want to do things for other people in her house, more than I ever think I want to do anything for myself.

The door opened.

If newspapers had been thrown out along with chignons in the great bonfire of Nathaniel Hawthorne's imagination, Gardener's appearance could have competed with that drama. I didn't believe she knew who I was. That she saw

who I was. Had she been watching something hot behind her as we collided? We both wanted to be someplace else. We regarded each other as a timepiece for the other's fantasies. I noticed her curls and gave her my face. The entire time she was yelling.

I couldn't stand how violently I loved her. This is something, I think, I am not supposed to say. It was the same as having loved myself, lost as I was between the pristine roughage of lakes, fawns, and nature's decay — and the shadow trace of the promise of a conversation with something outside myself. I had made her unhappy to see me. I had made her revile me. I wanted to be as reviled as the men who had dissociated from this part of the world. They were probably out beyond our boundaries making deals on the edges, reinvesting in new forms of micro-monumental structures. I tried to envision them and couldn't. I waited for a trace of them. I started to build a garage in which to put the fun things I had promised Gardener. The things would come later. Like men on bikes, or frog princes parading on motor-propelled insects. If she really hated me, she'd want to rip me off. I had to devise something for her to take.

GARDENER

The problem is and she doesn't know what the problem is, M wants to take herself into the streets, but there aren't any streets here. She has become a pack animal without a pack. If she were a wild rodent she would be killed for inconsistent behavior, a sign of disease. She is incorrigible without seeming to suffer for it. Do her feet ever ache with unfocused beauty? Do her legs cry with strength? Do the mountains beg her to twist them?

I bet she hikes out to the cities to check out which ones have men.

The doctor is a conduit between us and men. She trained at a coed hospital but likes us. The body of the autonomous female appears to be healthier than bodies belonging to those who cathect onto males. She is full of wiggy bothersome opinions. Why does she think that? Is it generalized self-pride? Homophobia? Homo-fascism? Reverse heterosexist quackery? Constriction of power? What we, I, get out of it is another flagrant excuse to swallow placebos. I am getting hungry.

The male body is a marvel of engineering.

I have stolen one of their dirt bikes.

It is possible that I have a cancerous lump on my breast. When the doctor examines me, she spits on my breast as I

take off my shirt. Her spit, she says, is the harm of harm. Harmony. Harmonious. Harm.

Sometimes I think I am more terrified of her than of my body. My body thrives on the man under M with M on top of him.

There are, she says, rules, self-determination, spontaneity, and a concept of etiquette. These interact. Correlate.

You are always insisting on the idea that you have learned something, I say in the manner of a little girl arguing with her own reflection in a pool of sweet water.

Or that I know something. She spreads a sea green sheet over the oval table in her presidential suite. Take off your pants and sit on the table.

Raise your arms.

My breasts buckle under her icy examination. The pants clumped on the floor seem exhausted by my forlorn thoughts — *inside this wax world is an itchy thigh* — as she inserts a needle into my left breast and numbs it. She pushes me down on the sheet. A pair of legs dangle over the oval table.

The doctor says toughen up, almost as a matter of course. She bends over the legs dangling autonomously on either side of her. She smells like orange juice. I look across the vast desert of our clothed and unclothed bodies searching for my pubic bone. I find it balanced angelically on the edge of the table. She bends closer. I'm erased. She steps away I spread out. I am a map unfolding a legendary land

mass situated under the scrutiny of a professional interrogator, and the green sheet is a private oasis the interrogator dips her hand into knowingly. She inserts the knife and removes a piece of tissue.

It is probably benign she says. You can get dressed.

I look at my naked body, then at the doctor's back as she exits her presidential suite in her thin cotton dress and black revolutionary bandanna tied in a knot at the back of her head. Little beads of sweat on the nape of her neck are laid bare in an exaggerated stream of sunlight flooding the doorway right before the door closes.

The air is as cold as the sunlight is bright. My pants are about as comfortable as a plywood booby trap. I don't bother with my shirt, pull my jacket over my bandages, and climb out her first floor window, dropping quietly into the garden where I look for signs of something neither icy nor dormant. Rules, self-determination, spontaneity, and a concept of etiquette. Thus I, a clod who wants to be hit by love, begin the evaluation of the garden with my newfound medical vocabulary. The shrubs are crumbled around the spot of old fuck. The garden is almost frozen. My feet numb in their tennis shoes. My bandaged breast burns with an unnatural inner heat. The head of one marigold is left on its stem. A few daisies still open in flower. At the border of the vegetable garden a volunteer jade has flopped frozen to the ground. A ruffled cabbage leaf droops over it and I wonder if it is in mourning for something I have neglected.

The sun is out
Earth is cold
The water boils
Now I'm old

M

I ran off and fell in a ditch on purpose. I saw it, the ditch, about three leaps in front of me and I wondered what would happen if I just kept going even though I knew I would fall. I wanted to fall and I wanted to feel pain. I did. Slam right up against the ditch. On my elbows and stomach. The sun was as brilliant as the earth was cold. Dry, powdery, cold dirt rose up in a cloud around me catching the sunlight. I felt like sludge on the bottom of the sea in a cloud of phosphor.

Then there was an extraordinary sound of what I first thought to be an army of lawnmowers very close by. I closed my eyes, envisioning Gardener with a huge power mower holding on with all her might as she plowed down thousands of decibels worth of weeds and tough shrubs. I heard her scream *get out of my way*. Her body was vibrating with ferocity as she cleared away all the growth in front of her house. There was something huge in her mouth, packed weeds. Somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said, she stuffs them in there so that she doesn't swallow her tongue if she has a seizure. It was her doctor. I was about to tell the doctor that she was out of her mind when I opened my eyes. A pack of dirt bikes was jumping the ditch over my head. Strangely, a prickle of gratitude invaded me as danger swarmed above me. Something true was returning my

integrity before I had known that I had lost it. A dirt bike slipped above the ditch, fell on its side. Its back tire slid onto my leg before I had a chance to move. It wasn't very heavy. A man in a torn shirt and filthy pants pulled it out of the ditch. He was either a slave, or imitating one. I had heard about slaves and slave imitators. They usually didn't come here.

I thought I ought to interrogate him.

I wanted to close my eyes and dream about Gardener, but I didn't want to forget my intentions. Was he a slave or an imitator? I didn't even have to ask. Slaves were supposed to announce themselves, apparently. This was not one of our rules but one that his "side" had invented. They followed the rule even outside their boundaries. Or at least this man did, with all of these other men in a group behind him disregarding us.

In an extremely disorganized manner he told me that he was a slave from a city about two hundred miles away. His city had few lights. The electricity was almost gone and everyone structured their lives around preventing fires. He preferred his life to mine, women were also welcome in his city, but he was disgusted by this land of cunts.

I told him that I like being called a cunt and he told me he had meant it as an insult. He wanted to know my racial background. I said I couldn't tell him. He asked me if I wanted to get pregnant. I told him that I didn't but that a

lot of people did. This was a lie. I have always wanted to be pregnant and I don't know what other women want.

Even though I have always wanted to be pregnant, I have never been able to exchange the desire for the event. I tried to imagine Gardener giving birth to Caesar.

He said he hated women who wanted to be pregnant.

You're awfully arrogant for a slave.

A slave is nothing, he said. Nothing but a name. And his name is the same as what he is. He leaned over to show me the brand on his head, which spelled the word *Infant*.

Do I call you Infant, then?

Only if you want me to be what I am.

I decided I didn't, that I'd rather he act the part he wasn't.

NICKELS

This is a defunct nickel. This is the curtain behind the face. Here is a bowl in place of a headache. Water pours out the door, down the throat and into a trough. This is a makeshift gadget. It makes glaciers in the tropics on key chains. Here is your key chain. So you want it back?

No, said the child, laughing, rolling across the polished floor. His sweater, pulled up over his head, caught on a splinter of the same floor. He squirmed and laughed, round and headless, then wiggled out of his sweater. This is free Caesar. What's defunct? Each of his fists was full of trinkets. Gardener tossed the nickel into the air and it came down on the floor, rolled out of reach onto Thomas Jefferson's head.

Defunct means you can't use it anymore.

Well, I can use it, said Caesar. He ran across the floor. In picking up the nickel, Caesar spilled from his small hands a mélange of trinkets. He sat right down in the middle of them, investigating the two sides of the coin.

What will you use it for?

I don't know.

I didn't say I would give it to you.

It's not yours.

Why not?

Everything people can't use is mine. Say some more funny things.

Old is earth
Cold is sun
Boil the water
Day is gone

Left in its place is a fog so thick
you have to poke it with a pole
to find your way into its middle
where harm the harmonious enviously tosses
the defunct coins
along the wall of mist
below the bridges where you play
the game
I Want Them All

GARDENER

The man sits or lounges uses himself as a sponge or douses the stars as if they were malignant flames he knew how to treat. A surgeon of Eros, he claims.

I have confiscated his dirt bike, keeping it in the shed behind the persimmons, plums, and pomegranates. It is a pristine little commodity. A person riding on it looks as forlorn as an adult on a small pony. Or a rag doll on top of a plastic cow. As a bull machine in a museum, one can picture its industrial birth. This bothers me. We know nothing about production outside of what we produce.

I have stolen it and I have confiscated him. He is kept upstairs, a replacement for a gothic secret. I am performing a form of cruelty he offered himself to in a fantasy. In his fantasy, or mine, he had been testing something that took him seriously outside the borders of his imagination. We are both under the influence of M. M gave him to me, silently. I pull him out of the closet to drink me. To drench me.

The flood is at its peak when he says he belongs to someone else.

I don't understand, exactly. Fantasy of possession folds back into my memory after years of practiced obliteration. In our post-annihilation, we float in our material beings not quite awake to them as if we have become a geographic bor-

der of words relative only to each other — slave, captive, lover. Frankly, women want to own men for the sake of revenge. I have to let him go if I want to wake up. But what if I give it up and he prefers this dream on the other side of a fading world? Is this speculation or only second-guessing? On the one hand I am making something up about someone I know only as a participant in an erotic fantasy and on the other I am thinking about how to explain his presence to all the women here, who think I'm as crazy for keeping him as I am for wanting M.

I want to enslave myself to M the way she wrapped herself around him. We are in a game of provocation and we are using this dick, arrogantly holding back his whimpers and whines, to challenge each other.

He doesn't want to escape. I open his door, take him outside. He offers to pull weeds. Even though the ground is heating up, the air is still cold. His hands are soft. I give him gloves. It's the city life that softens he says with irreverent authority. I tell him he can leave, now or any time, on his bull cycle.

He says I'm immature.

The fantasmatic captivity is harmless, he says. Women have kept men locked up before: when men lock women up it is more brutal because the effect is permanent. What affects me permanently took place before you captured my imagination.

A nail is driven into a seedling sprouted in a decayed log. Then the ache between my legs thwarts his insults. Yet I do not agree that my actions are harmless. I wonder what would happen if I introduced the slave to Caesar.

I would stop and then he wouldn't be there anymore. Then I wouldn't. Or the other way round. Him stopping me not being there. But in the shed, the garden. In a shaft of light with Caesar. When one survives a catastrophe, there is a desire to be reborn in the new situation. To replace death, disease, alteration and dissolution of borders, states, nations and construct one's responses within the context of simple events. Opening a jar of dried fruit, or drying the fruit. A man, woman, child. Our utopian plans are gutted as I reconstruct this tragic facsimile. We are in a nether world. An out-of-control radiation slag heap. If you go the wrong way, as if you were in a village that had been mined, something violent is taken apart, scattered, redesigned, seeded. In other words there is life without sense, and those of us here in this country are not adequately put to use, thus we are terrified as we live beyond what we can know.

One day one of us is going to know that what we are doing with male children is all right, or not. We are deciding on Caesar's escorts. I worry that the slave is trying to mess this scenario up. He was watching me play with Caesar. Here, he can act the part but he can't be a slave, even if he has no power. *Infant* is branded on his head. He is a walking

contradiction. My greatest desire is to inhabit paradox, make the world big enough for the both of us in our co-constructed movie.

This means I have to start, along with several others, forging a way out of our domain. Our task is to provide a kind of human bridge between one territory or community and another and to deliver Caesar to the right place. When there cannot possibly be a right place for him. This story is not about him but about myself, or myself as him as wanting to be him. We prepare him with and without ceremony to leave us. I sabotage the preparation. I try half-heartedly to teach him to hate speech. Still these partial efforts affect him in some way, even if what he chiefly learns from my so-called teaching is the performance of insincerity. We do not want to hurt him, and yet there is no appropriate precedent to the injury we cause him in abandoning him to a world we have refused to live in. This going along with and not going along with becomes the rhythm of my own undecided future. Those normal clouds, this common air, participate in and are the cause of a surging resistance.

There is a bridge on the other side of a hill beyond the farthest field. All of us are farmers. On the other side of the bridge is where the unknown begins. I walk to the bridge on a spectacular evening. The earth warms and lavender scents the air. I can hear the ocean miles away. The sky is a brilliant gray and a half moon is up. The bridge crosses a dense stream for about fifty yards. When I stand in the center of

the bridge and look to the left, to where the half moon stands in the sky, M pushes on my left shoulder. M the scavenger. We are not all farmers. She then tugs my arm sharply, gently, alternately as if she is testing the methods to move me. Why doesn't she speak? I pull away, curious to see how she will react. She loosens her grip, to see what I will do. I walk to the far side of the bridge. Imagining myself as a puppy let loose, I step off the bridge. She laughs at me, having constructed a scenario only she could ruin. Grasses, weeds are wet from the stream overflowing on this side where the bank is lower. I am walking on sponges. I take the sandals out of my pocket and put them on. M stands on the bridge with the moon over her left shoulder. A batch of ducks slip under the bridge. Neither one of us is less alone than the other. Everything looks different, as if I had just been catapulted to the other side of an explosion. Red-winged blackbirds line the edge of the stream moving to the ocean. Round hills surround us, an old woman descends one. Every time M appears, something impossible happens. She says I am the cause of all of it.

But the relationship of one event to another is tenuous at best. I am sorry, M, that I have become such an introvert too. I vow to do something about it.

M tells me that whatever I say about myself sounds like an exaggeration.

I tell her to go take a piss.

She pulls off her pants, hangs them over the side of the bridge, then lowers herself over the bridge into the water, which comes up to her waist.

After about three minutes she says, I'm still pissing.

The bank on my side is starting to overflow. I slog through the muddy grasses. The mud pulls at my sandals. Then I lose my balance and fall to my knees. Mud splashes into my face. My sleeves are also caked in mud so I pull off my shirt, turn it inside out, wipe off my face. I stand up and tie my shirt around my waist, slog further out from the bank and away from M. The river is about up to her neck.

Get out of there I yell without thinking.

I'm not done yet she says laughing. As I turn away from her the old woman I had seen at a distance earlier offers me an onion. Her hands shake.

I point toward M, a scarecrow in an hysterical fire. Do you know her?

The old woman, in an eloquent voice left over from some other period in history, tells me there is not much to see only a head but she believes they may have made each other's acquaintance. This is not my dear a criminal line up. At this moment the water entirely overflows its bank and the three of us are borne out to sea on a raft waiting for us at the mouth of the estuary.

You walk across the bridge
as ducks float under
carrying toys to silly daybound
children. I'm one too
you say to the ducks, but they just laugh
No child comes here you funny faker

M

As the raft floated off to sea, out of the mouth of the estuary, semis rattled the hills above, beaming through the fog, delivering products to our delicious nowhere. Their return trip would convey them to centers where they would unload produce and livestock and also, sometimes, people, malcontents of our utopia, who have indentured themselves to the truck drivers in order to erase the distance between themselves and anything else. While providential trucks and recycled army jeeps invaded our little Land of Jeopardy, I attempted to calculate the distance between the raft and the shore and to measure the risk of journeying further off. Perhaps it was the habitual preoccupation with the over-large vehicles in combination with an abstract, possibly regressive, fascination with any project involving estimation (how many noodles in a pound of spaghetti, how many petals on a marigold, how many sperm in an eye drop of cum?) that caused me to linger sentimentally in the corner of a lament, or a psychic room in the ocean of an improbable theater held open for some future actor.

A furnace without gloves. A day without difficulty. A ship without fangs. A prostitute without fossils. A body without a head. A head without greed. A birth without blood. Dirt without fallacies. Hands without nettles. The Law of the Missing Middle. Hardship without bevels. Water

without futility. Fruit without beets. Beets without fingers. Hands without people. Hunger without purple. Frost without famine. Sanity without heaven. Inconsequence without cruelty. A leftover name. Manners without tears. Orchestras without windows. Streams without weights. Depth without lakes. Lines that curve and curves that feast. Women who eat dust. Jazz trussed in granite. Rust that waits. Patience without names. Traffic without gates. Clouds without people, respect without pampering, depth without mistakes. Privacy without fragments. Movements without language. A red silence lapping. Fashionable creatures stuck in the sink. Dates in the pantry floating in air. Chewing the names turned into squash. Metal without making. Drawers without stuff. Resolutions without residue. Abstraction without bathing. Distance without fat. Crones that survive the culture of fame. Histories that tear. Fictions that flavor their stews. Mammals with desires they gave to the dying. Rubbing without voices. Birds without choices. Cold without strings. Rings without masters. Weapons without fever. Frames without skeletons searching our faces for elevators, fences, and props. The stage that we walk on is the raft in the ocean at the neck of our graves. Had a false consciousness rubber stamped the earth as we skimmed over its submerged parts in the pernicious boat?

I realized I was holding the old woman's hand like a baby fondling her mother's satin sheet. She said she thought she would rather drown now than find out what would happen

next. I told her to hold onto me, so that I could orient myself to what was going on. On the other side of the raft, Gardener slept, her hair flaming out in every direction. If the old woman had not been there, holding my hand, I don't know what I might or might not have done. Why did this event, which should have been associated with something terrible, seem domestic? It is as if the heroic quest had been replaced by a collective trauma so great that we had all been put to sleep — but in a novel, rather than in history, the title of which was, in translation, something like *Forgotten*.

GARDENER

Salt glares on Gardener's withered skin leaving a taste in her bones. Her shirt wags on either side of her in ripped shreds. M places her soaked pants on a slab of cement, the parched and toothy remains of a dock or mooring. What is typically fragrant is only a vacuum of disjunct objects. This is a scenario in an accident. Somewhere ocean flowers gorged with sun drape countless fish in shadows. They calm the mammalian heart: it is the witness. The mind of the mammal if the mammal is a person discovers over and over again this preinclination to calm in the midst of activity, it, the mind, can not reinvent. This mind develops a theory in Gardener's sleep — that calmness is achieved only through the perceived inability to copy: the mind stops working on targets. A barge crosses Gardener's majestic speculations, which return morosely to consciousness and the ghost of a man trying to catch the glint of silver chain around her neck in the lens of his camera, but he is only a chimera from a glimmer of history, a cropped chunk of metal washed up on the jetty she seems to have borrowed for a bed to keep Goldilocks company.

A spirit jetty. What if Goldilocks wakes up and finds Gardener this close?

Gardener is in a bad situation, but she dramatizes herself as a slab of meat. What if I don't move? She spies in herself

a groggy willingness to decay. A crab swishes over her arm. She jerks her hand, and it bangs on an empty car hood. Wet sand below dampens its otherwise resounding thud. Out beyond the car hood rusty cans embroider the beach with a compulsive prose ripped to shreds from neglect. Another crab creeps across her forehead. She hits herself on the face. She thinks she is everything she thinks. This disgusts her. She wants to learn how to use a drum machine.

Because there is no distance. Fish choking in tepid water. Or clouds gorged with trees.

The grinding gear changes of a truck gloat in nearby shrubbery. She considers this an attack on her numerous superficial abrasions. She considers that M might enjoy counting them. Then she would hose down M's contusions, if M had any; but instead, feeling belittled by the proximity of the third person narrator, Gardener intervenes in the narration — which possibly saves her from dying.

M I can't get up! I cannot get my mouth open. M knows it already. It is so like her to already know it, I can't stand it. There is a problem with water, M says. This I readily understand even though it is clear she thinks I won't as she looms over my witchy cringing and whimpering. It bothers her, the problem with water, more than it bothers me. She's made a fire and all the smoke's coming my way. The dark old woman on the other side of the flames surfaces ephemerally in the optical shivering of the smoke. M is trying to decide if she should leave us here. Another truck passes grunting its

way to Lady Macbeth's psyche. I would rather that someone else save me than that I save myself, I say. I think my mouth is open now, because M seems to have heard that one. She's trying not to get pissed off. I tell her I'm sorry. The old woman says there is something wrong with her not being dead. She cannot speak for anybody else she says. I think that's what she says. I'm not so sure she means those lines she must have gotten from somewhere. Who is she? I can sense M going against my will and deciding to leave. I hate her. Then fall asleep in the old woman's lap.

The whole world is long and dizzy. It is a set of vast clouds whirling in intemperate air that seems to be punctuated with details of landscape. A shrub. A giraffe from a nature show. A fetus in a monitor. Dog prints. A piece of blue string on a patch of snow. A red bird gathering the string. A black seal on a rock. A manzanita. Sticks. Cherry blossoms. Wheat. The shell of a truck. A bullet and bottle. Mountain lion feces. Lupine. Nut hulls. Tire rubber strips. A shred of shoreline from Lake Erie smeared in oil drenched in headlights. The world is flat. The old woman unfolds it, a bed sheet, shakes it out, bits of everything topple off her map, then she tilts it, and everything left pours West. The map sheet swells into a globe with a contour of California kissing a cave of Japan. I am on a bed in space watching. When the old woman nudges the continents together she resembles a child playing a shape game. We are stopping the oily purple, she says. Not the only people.

When I wake up, we are jostling in the back of a pickup truck. M looks at us through the filthy window. My hands and feet are tied. The old woman is crying. Smell of fresh water.

Welcome to the new world a sign states on the other side of the road in matter-of-fact lettering. My view is from the rim of the truck gate upward. Depression peels off the weathered roadside fencing. The stink of cattle adheres to a world put together before I got here. I start to relax since I no longer have to put the entire universe together while in bondage. Then, further down the road is a sign with an image of silhouetted men, women, and children racing in flight holding hands. This is all iconography from the plague days. Is it still in operation? Or are we bouncing backwards in time? I feel something that has been lost to me since childhood, disappointment. M didn't think to blindfold me probably because she knows that I'm gutless. Suddenly I have this inane fear attack as a voice rises in my head: nobody's driving. I look over at the old woman and hear myself blurt out, "Did you say that?" She stuffs a wet cloth into my mouth and I suck on it ferociously, unwillingly, while swallowing my words. Who, damn it, is watching after Caesar? It is a fact that I am his mother, yet it is a revelation because it was an irrelevant fact, and now it matters but only to me. Every sensation of the journey becomes as clear as his dimpled fingers.

M's face is pressed against the window again. She is trying to see through the filth. Or she is acting like she's keeping an eye on us. Someone is driving, it's obvious. We've turned off the main road and we're descending on a dirt road. We stop at a cabin in a perfectly round clearing. The doors to the truck cabin open and close. A man in a red flannel shirt, the driver, opens the back of the truck. He grabs the rope joining my hands and pulls me, along with a sack of produce, toward him then cuts the rope with a knife. M stands behind him trying not to look at me. Wisps of hair stick to her face. My hands burn. A young woman, holding a child in one arm, runs out of the cabin to help the old woman down with her free hand. The old woman introduces herself as Alice. I cannot stand it that her name is news to me. The exchange of pleasantries is stopping events. I walk away from all of them — as if my body works and I have the courage that I lack. Another woman walks into the clearing from someplace else, carrying a child about the same age as the first one. Persephone is the only god, in my book. And although she is typically attentive to those who try to climb out of the underworld, Persephone is not attending to my transgression: nothing happens. I keep walking. A child chases me with a canteen. I think he is about to lure me back into a den of iniquity, but he just disappears. There is nothing more lonely than everybody letting you do what you want. I think this because I am thinking about Caesar: right now he'll be ruling over the roost.

No one will care. I am supposed to be there to prevent him from thinking he's god. It is my responsibility to bring him down for his own good. I think all this because everybody is treating me as if I can walk on water even though in one day I almost drowned then allowed myself to be taken captive. The captors are nonplussed. Many of them, women and children, possibly two dozen stand silently next to the shade trees that line the road that will take me out to the highway. I remember two guys with AIDS walking along a bleak city sidewalk in a torrential wind holding hands, both of them gaunt and grizzled, arguing about Schopenhauer, one man, the older, chastising the younger for not appreciating his ideas. I remember thinking that his madras pants didn't really suit him. Then the younger man, after a violent fit of coughing, telling his partner that conversation is more pleasant than music

The ducks float off and you're left alone
with the sigh in your head stuck in your bones
The sigh feels good
This puzzles you, but
you didn't want what they had caught
and carried. You wanted something better made

and that he would rather die on the street arguing than listen to Bach.

I am going to get picked up by somebody else. I have been deposited at the wrong destination and everybody back there knows it. I start to wonder if M is stupid. Not the kind of stupid related to making mistakes but the kind of stupid in which there are no mistakes. One day one's a biker, the next a ping-pong champion.

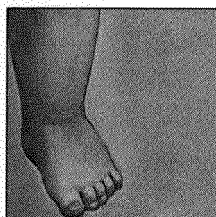
There is a ping-pong table in the garden. Sometimes Caesar sits under it while we play over him. The ball smacking the table delights him. He likes to scream. The leaves crunching under my feet as I walk along the side of the highway remind me of his shrieks. Today, I enter my third life, the one that will make sense of the other two. It is the one that has committed Caesar to being a contender in it. In our niche, every action decides something about the future. This is why women have power, but it is a problematic power. We cannot predict the nature of any given outcome. A helping hand comes out of the sky, but I can't see what it is attached to. Whether I grab the hand or not, something in the world will be affected, although this time I presume the effect will be to pull me back into that paternalistic boot camp M and Alice seem to be lost in. Sometimes I like to think of myself as a weed. A truck stops next to me. The door opens. I start to climb in. The driver says it looks like I've lost my dolly. I laugh at her joke and she slams the door in my face.

With every unlinking that old fart, happiness, floods the cavity of the cerebellum. Thus I feel like a blissful dog on an olfactory adventure in a commodious cave. Yet this is not a cave but more of the same mountains in shrouds of dank forest near the coast. I am walking North. Where I come from and the present route I am now on bear the banal burden of similarity. In some other story this would hold me back. I would become enervated, fall into a passive stupor, make love to bears. To the geese, my brothers. Am I starving? The canteen water is as sweet as the vanilla bark of the pines. New scruffy little trees, profligately planted and all less than two feet high, are filling up what was recently eroding ground sloping down from the road into a dry forest of black green. It is so damp that droplets of water hang from the new green needles of the tiny trees. I pluck a needle and suck the droplet off a tree whose top touches my knee.

From the apex of the slope, I descend into the canyon. Pieces of red-walled cliff on the east side crumble and slip down onto the road without any warning. I wedge my shoulder into the rivulet of an eroding mountainside. I am a giant resting in the gall of a kingdom of dunces. If a rock rolls down it will pass over my face as I sleep. Below, the vibrations of the invasive reflection of an austere lake steal me into a nap. I dream that a child, surrounded by women in a window, is explaining to them that he is not a metal worker. Look at my hands, he says. They are caked with red dirt. Don't strip me, please. He says this as politely as an

employee in someone's domestic service. Don't strip me. His hands are the same red as the rocks I have lodged myself in. I think I better find something to eat, so I keep walking inside the dream and out of it at the same time down into the graveyard of cars. What I had thought was an icy lake, is smashed stacks of cars beaten by the sun, covering an entire valley in a reflective surface that ends at some far distant hills. Other heaps of old parts I may have mistaken for boulders jutting out of the (false) lake rise above the pressed car bodies. Rust has bored through everything joining the stacks and heaps in an aporia of eaten metal. I try to decide if I should wait to eat or make myself a dinner of ants while I squat, coincidentally, over an ant hole and piss in it. I haven't seen a car since they were outlawed.

A LITTLE DANCE



IN WHICH GARDENER MEETS SYLVAN

Red table floating on lake of cement floor. Gardener with a burning headache is still shaking the car graveyard off. This, her erratic pulsing scene-swarmed body, makes its theatrical entrance into a chic café. Savage singing, *one velvet morning when I'm straight, I'm going to walk right through your gate...*¹

The ghosts of their children ride on the fathers' coat-tails.

Forget the real and its company the *mot juste* someone says at the red roundtable in the back. No not children, they don't exist in this Man of the Crowd² scene. Gardener imagines her Poe-like descent into the streets of London following the deep crime of the child-presence which she carries as an unvarnished mental picture within the terraced arcade of adults. This is not London, not the D... café but its sister in postpartum laughter and she its new bride paused at the daffodils lined up along the windowsill patiently waiting for an old soul to snap her picture. Inside is barely inside and outside is almost the same as inside. Isn't this then the structure of paradise? If so we are the children of it.

Caesar, the *mot juste* ghost of the living, intervenes in her desire to be taken in by wedding decor and the haunting

¹ Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazlewood.

² A story by Edgar Allan Poe.

tragedy that maintains it. It is a world assimilated in death, and her child Caesar is the unassimilable.

Gardener stands on one foot and leans against the counter indestructibly facing the back of a shaved head. She orders a vanilla ice cream. Across from the shaved head is a face framed by flat black hair that hides its man's neck with a silent joy. Ah, this is where Pay Dirt announces the arrival of the magnificent lover, Bed Rock. Or would it be the other way round?

The most simple love fest makes her crazy for Caesar.

This is the first arrival. In other words, finally, she's come from somewhere. She has become a story to herself since she has arrived and left something behind. The story is what keeps her from falling apart at the thought of Caesar. He is still in it.

An unspoken panic as the one street light goes out. The other

a great harness for a horse
a door with a skeleton on its knocker
a dressing gown inside a locker
a city full of talking faces
the words creating noisy books

lamps she is told are only decorative. It is too costly anyway to remove them. The shaved head muscle man is addressing her with words carved out of an eternity whose purpose was to reduce aggression. Her aggression is lodged in her throat but shrinking. Finally she swallows it and it turns into an inhalation.

He identifies her as a vagabond, but one “who doesn’t know what to do with yourself.” Gardener wants to dismantle his classification of her, but its troubled gentility makes her quiet. Ice shakes along the neck of a glass placed near her. Continuously she feels her fury compress. It is no use to her: it is part of a sport whose rules turn it into a mitt.

In this place, there is no ground to overturn. She grips her spoon pitched like a shovel in dirt that has then been forged into something sweet.

The next thing that happens is familiar. So why does she hate it? The bartender lights all the candles.

The muscle man looks at her almost patronizingly. You are not, he said, the only woman in this bar.

I am not a woman, there are no women, she says accusingly. And these women, none of them are men.

The man holds out his hand, Sylvan, he says, pleased to meet you.

She takes his hand in hers, well this certainly is a surprise. I’m Gardener.

Now why don’t you tell me how you got here and what you want?

She looks at him, man to man, to see if he will respond. He does not seem to notice. She considers her method of refusal. If not a woman if not a man, an insect. She considers the horsefly in *Through the Looking Glass*, the voice of Lewis Carroll as the fly, the 19th century, the streets of London. Nature and pederasts. Or a Red Queen. If Gardener were the horsefly, he would be Alice. If she were the Red Queen, he would be Alice. If she were Lewis Carroll, he would be Alice. If these were the streets of London in 1860, they would both be men. The problem of men was the same as the problem of Caesar. If it were not for him, she would not be here. Sylvan and Gardener each mirrors the other's infantile object of desire ineffectually. At least they are both born of woman, and this is someplace to start. But Caesar was born of Gardener. Even in a vend diagram Caesar would be out of orbit, because Gardener has messed human relationships up while still refusing to consider Caesar a product of her actions.

The ferocity in Gardener wants to, although she will not, murder Sylvan, who suddenly reminds her of M as she heats up. Okay, she says, but you go first.

Sylvan takes a number two yellow pencil out of his shirt pocket and draws a pencil line on the red paper table cloth across the table's diameter. Let us divide the area into two equal parts.

“COMIC RELIEF”

(IN THE TIME OF THE PRIVATE AUTOMOBILE)

The area is divided into two equal parts. It is important to start with a clean slate. Then one has to imagine the parts: the parts of the body, a pair of thighs, thumbs matched perfectly, babies' feet or identical skyscrapers facing each other. One could even use a mirror reflecting a rollercoaster with a line drawn down the center of the mirror. The line is a red line.

Red is punitive, corrective, violent, horrific, vital and sexual. Some people have tried to control symbolism through manic monochrome paintings and sculptures of red. These artists deplete red of its symbolic values, parts of speech, its reference to the body, particularly, by bleeding the works of art with red. In other words the work of art is thought of as entirely generic, first, and the red is used to cover the thought so that its generic form becomes visible.

“The organization of the image is changing.”

The disembodied voice signifies the change.

The reason that the equal parts of the clean slate are mostly oriented to the body (even skyscrapers, after all, are oriented to the body: the corporate body is an obvious example) is somehow connected to the fact that they are divided by red. Game players draw from the diverse values of red: they select their relationship to red out of the available values for red.

“One *can* erase the body.”

The disembodied voice has meaning in the game.

Here is a question: do clowns wear huge red lips, smiling or frowning, because they are funny or because they are supposed to be dead, therefore indestructible? Sometimes the

You wanted all the books to be in your mind
before you read them
so you could tell everybody you met what they said

instructions of “Comic Relief” refer to these kinds of canned questions. One should always assume that the instructions are intended to mock the player. Thus if one of the competitors has already played the game and the other has not, the experienced competitor will have a significant psychological advantage over his or her opponent.

Although the area in which the game is played is divided into two equal parts, the red line down the middle is supposed to unnerve any player complacent about the meaning or value of equality. Players may or may not be aware of this, depending on their own individual circumstances. Equality does not truly exist. The concept of the level playing field is in all respects treated as a brutal joke. The game is about freedom and power.

“And when one gives up one’s attempt to know one’s way about?”

This would not be the same thing as losing.

It is entirely possible that the player with the most freedom has the most power or the person with the least power has the most freedom or the person with the most power has the most freedom, which has been acquired with the power. It depends on the form of freedom one is trying to invoke.

There is for example the freedom to move from place to place. Sometimes the player with the most power has the least mobility: the player has traded too many mobility chips and must stay home and count or lose the count. If the

count is lost, then all that is lost is thrown into the pool of blood in the middle of the horizon line that divides the area of the game into two equal parts. Only the one who is the more indigent of the two players will be able to figure out how to extract the count from the pool of blood. It takes a lot of work but if the indigent opponent has been saving up her spare parts while the power monger is immobilized in counting, she will come out on top.

The spare parts are assembled into a line that can extract the count from the blood and cleanse it with water from a leaking hose: this does not hurt anybody.

and why the city walls
are ruins now

“If someone can’t do this, that shows he isn’t quite at home yet among the concepts.”

In one game, a player discretely dropped the concepts into her loose body.

In the present scenario, the indigent has cleaned up nicely. She has extracted the count from the pool of blood, cleaned it off with the hose, saved the world from the power monger, and kept her freedom.

The next time the game is played, the winning player of the previous game starts from the top floor of one of the skyscrapers. She has drawn a card that places her in the executive suite with her count. This time though, her count is a 19th century nobleman from Transylvania and the blood in the center of the game area is the spa he is planning to visit on his next vacation. He wants her to go with him. She wants to get rid of the count and return to her life as an indigent. How did it get away?

In the executive suite of the facing skyscraper, her fellow player has drawn a card that says either skip one floor or take the elevator to the lobby. The lobby has been described as the most beautiful place on earth.

It might have been called “an annex to the concept.”

For concepts are retrievable.

The problem for this player is she lost the count in the previous game and now suspects a hoax. In this game, it is easy to be suspicious and difficult to take anything literally. Who would ever, after all, imagine a lobby to be “the most

beautiful place on earth?" The secret intention of the game, in fact, is to arouse suspicion. It wants its players finally to reach an impasse, suspiciously looking at each other over a blank area divided into two equal parts. Then they have to decide what to do after the game is over.

What happens to the woman stuck with her count in the executive suite if the second player decides not to go to the lobby? What happens to her if the player does decide to go to the lobby? Does this player have any curiosity left? As we know, the player lost the last game as a result of over-inflated counting. This time the player has decided to make the move that doesn't seem to count. And that move of course is to go to the most beautiful place on earth. It has nothing else to offer but itself whether its claims are true or false. Thus the player's suspicions ought not to signify. And just as the semantic values for red may be extracted from the red, making it a pure or plain or neutral red, so can a player withdraw her own fear of hoaxes in the game by making moves that mean nothing and that cannot be numbered off as moves from place to place; for as we know, the most beautiful place on earth cannot be represented.

Indeed, where our loser of past games has decided to go is the result of her own inflated counting.

"You might call it two ways of counting glued together."

The player faces the problem of catering. For the player is now wealthy and must spend something to advance.

The lobby is a perfectly average deluxe hotel lobby with concierges, information booths, sitting areas, bars, restaurants, marbled pillars and majestic stone floors. It interests the player insofar as she is faced with the challenge of planning a meal in the self-identified “most beautiful place in the world.”

We now return to the victor of the last game, whose hapless soul longs for an indigent life. Such a life is the only way to find meaning in a world of over-inflated counting. The player looks out of her executive suite and down onto a panorama of dead streets. Her powers are as contained as those of a maiden trapped in the castle of a romance story.

The only way out is to go to your opponent’s party.

“For how could associations be a lasting state?”

She suffers the long descent in the noise-free elevator, the fleet limo ride to the “most beautiful place in the world,” the tears staining her cheeks and yellow linen suit, the empty street, the monstrous silence, begging along the way for rags, filthy undergarments, and hot summer nights spent laying in the coolest of doorways. No one hears her begging. No one drives the car.

Robotically, the car door opens, and she is ejected from the car and injected into the hotel lobby doorway. Skylights on the domed ceilings frame discrete worlds of real clouds. The architecture is perfect: it is better than I thought. These are the clouds I would like to touch first with each fingertip and then my entire palm, for they are always changing.

Bladed clouds swell into hurling ribbons.

Jubilantly she takes the martini offered her from a tray and makes her way to the indoor spa where all are assembled around a kidney-shaped pool. Her opponent is on the opposite side supervising the discharge of medicinal salts into the red liquid. As the attendant works her way around it, meaning collapses into the pool of blood, and the players are once again faced with the question of what to do with each other.

GARDENER

We were up all night and played the game too long. I won it, because Sylvan has never played with a woman before: I had to make him let me. Now I feel sticky or punkish as a decaying log. Or puny in the Man's World facing Sylvan, the old nemesis, across the planked symbol of civil negotiations. The sun is rising sooner or later on our thick-headed diplomacy.

On this side of the table we have what you want and on the other side of the table we have something else. He traces with a pencil the previous line he had made dividing the table in two while speaking with a damp cloth wrapped around his head. One can see every feature of his face through it, but the features look trapped and I want to know if he's sick. It's only a little toothache. He takes his head in his hands gently without disturbing the wrapping. Holding it over the table for me, he turns it around and asks me to touch the back of the head at the dip of it where the spine would normally curl into it. His spine is still connected to the rest of his body and his words not coming from his mouth seem to come from the whole of him; although his head, the way he holds it, obscures the body and his speech.

A constant soft light replaces the shadows, and the candles are blown out one by one. The head is blowing our

candle out. The whole world is a constant of liquid and light. It is sunrise.

Today feels like the saddest day in the world, but I know that it isn't. I only touch his head once, for I fear some kind of orgiastic event, although I suspect it has already passed without my quite having identified it as such. The room takes the form of an ossuary. Then the bones fade away and the head is placed back on the torso. Before long, Sylvan announces his departure. He also says that I will always be able to find him.

From then on, each time he tries to pacify me, I want to snap, but I have grown quite self-conscious of my own mouth, which seems to want to get larger and larger. I am gagging on an unknowable grief, which is immersed in a hall of bones and melting wax and an odd damp that pours through us and makes me never want to sleep. I seem to be almost permanently awake. But in this *almost* I am saying that for now there is hope and I am not quite yet a ghost.

Perhaps M and I will again meet and hurt each other in the plants and shrubs and kick and scream beyond this.

At night, Sylvan returns bravely to the same spot and tells me that the line is nowhere, that he only wants to think and dream, to be sensual, frightening, and obscure rather than competitive. This means, in a sense, I could be stalking you as thought stalks its servant or the engineer. He draws a picture of a Popeye-like figure stealthily following a horsefly about to enter the cave of a deliciously blond wig.

Sly Sylvan of simplicity and slime and evening light and ruses, why do we have to be associated as if you hope to suck the dirt out from my fingernails to celebrate your own breath? Do you think you can threaten me? What makes you happy? And why do you draw me in as if you were M?

Sylvan parts the wig in two. Pig tails are formed and the fly crawls up the neck of a young girl. He says all of these signs are you.

Sometimes I want to leave the world of recognition.

He is not ready for this, but he has an advantage. I can't draw.

M

She couldn't draw she said. While she was claiming this, I was missing her. These creeps were trying to make me part of their harem. The harem was already made up of Bonnie, Mary, Eugenia, Patty, Lilith, Gretchen, Gillian, Zoe, and Fay. Some of these are my favorite names staged and here presented as future Gold Rush brides. There were also infants Lemur, Fox, Wolf, and Bear and older children whose names escape me at the moment except the die-hard Babs who followed me around, because she was to keep an eye on me she said in her transparent voice that went back through generations of well-trodden hopelessness.

You are spying on me but I am taking care of you you rat, came blithering out of my mouth truncating the distance between her post-apocalyptic environment and my own childhood. The motion picture sounds of creaking swings yoked me to isolated self-dramatization. Through some vacuity of memory, I situated myself among empty lots, gasoline leaks, and the sound of water running through pipes in a kitchen. The water drips marked a territorial privilege over the little lizards sunning outside under creosote plants. Even in the sensory world of childhood's memories, basic technologies diminished human feeling for the natural world.

Could Bab's cult tell that I had a heart or were they entrusting her to me through instinct? They seemed to be in desperate need of childcare: none of them were really adults. The only thing they seemed to know to do with children was dole out chores to them. So I became Bab's chore while she of the hard-bitten face, who couldn't even respond to insults, became mine.

One day I sat her down to explain the word *oxymoron* and then to describe a magnificent and bucolic world of insults. Babs sat listlessly under the darkening skies as I repressed my desire to tie her to a tree, as my cousins had once done to me when my self-seriousness had bored them. Skipping over the tree-torture story, I proceeded then to reminisce about the marvels of fashion as a way of seducing her into imagining a world outside her own, or as a means of belittling her as best I could...

In the woods of my home, I told her, is a clearing and a little store full of beautiful clothes. My favorites are the pale gold shirts with red threads woven delicately in. That's because I like wild parties the likes of which you've never dreamed of. Sometimes the shop is crowded with people slipping clothes on and off. Sea and sky blue dresses rain on the shirts of gold: there is often an orgiastic tremor sublimated in the slipping in and out of the garments taken and then returned to racks repeatedly. People's bodies start to touch as they voraciously parade around then discard the

costumes in favor of something smaller, brainier, kinder, or more monstrous and obscene. Imagine wearing a pencil pattern shirt with a detachable collar embroidered with priests. Oh, but I suppose you don't know what I mean by priest. Then I reached into my pocket and offered her a chewed-on number two pencil before continuing with my fashion-catalog narrative...

Someone wears a tailored suit she cannot button or zip. She ties the pants around her waist with a silk cord. Someone else puts her legs through a loose-armed shirt, tying the end of the shirt around her hips and buttoning some of the buttons. New boots tied together by their laces are worn around her neck. They bounce against her breasts when she moves. Her feet are also dressed in boots, dainty ones suitable only for peacocks. But she doesn't care what is suitable or not. Sometimes I follow these girls on their private walks to shady spots and watch them try to return to nature in the silence of the death culture. It takes a very long time.

I narrated all this to the near lifeless Babs, who moved only to swat flies from her pale limbs and morose little cheeks. And this isn't all, I say, in a thrall of instructive cruelty. For while I watch these things, I find I have company. Men are lurking behind the trees, just as our parents had warned us. Have you been told to watch out for men? I ask her. I do not tell her about the enormous sensation of well-being that falls on everything as the voyeurs and performers

of the almost silent and vague and malingering sexual touching become increasingly aware of each other. I think of this composition as an object much like a small jewel and worth as much as the jewels of earlier times.

Sometimes the men who still visit our world like to hang out around garden walls. I try to make my way over to Gardener's when it is her wall they lounge on, which it often is because of all the stylish food and honeysuckle garden scents offered indiscriminately to anybody in that chaos of light and yelling called a home. We gather and watch them from inside to comment on the size of their asses, the curve of their backs, the fit of their pants. The tight, loose, big, voluptuous, and scrawny ones. Those with no belts and dimples on their butts. And those with no shirts and rolls of fat and muscle. While drinking large mugs of home brewed beer, we discuss meticulously which ones attract us and why, speculating on the squeeze of their balls, the taste of their tongues, and the softness of their hair. Which one of them is most like a collie and which a tarantula? The word parrot causes us to scream. We bully each other about our preferences and belittle each other's sex until we all feel damp and wounded since we always go too far and strike a sensitive nerve in one or other of our precious selves. Usually the men don't notice us, but if they do, we with the lime wet kisses and dusty skin go out into the garden and ignore them. We slump under trees and sleep the sleep of the belligerent with a kind of pride in possessing nothing but the time passing.

While I spoke, but mostly to myself, Babs had fallen asleep seated bolt upright against a sappy evergreen. Even a dumb child can make a fool of an adult — though I was turning into something else, not exactly adult. An adolescent passivity was overcoming me. It, the passivity, instructed me to stop talking. I had left the world of my own making and become, rather, an exotic shrub in someone else's garden. I now suspect this passivity to be a spiritual disease associated with fascination. At home, we say the witness is a traitor. She has powers that are committed elsewhere. Committed elsewhere, such that she does not want to perform or even to seduce or charm while all the while becoming more appealing to those to whom she is most indifferent. The meaning of everything becomes sexual.

The old lady could not stand it either. They treated her like a sacred cow: helping her to her feet, stalking her to the woods to watch her eliminate, serving her weak grainy beverages with odd little oat cakes that otherwise only the great he-man could touch and meanwhile providing her with fuschia sheets, plumped pillows, and eucalyptus oils to panic in as they waited on her hand and foot. Even so, she refused to look at them.

Beneath the ritual fattening up process (and my own rather mesmeric curiosity which seems to hypnotize me along with everyone else) each of our bodies held itself in an invisible brace of fear such that the translation of all events

was seen only as literal fact. The scum on the surface of a pond forecasts the extinction of an edible fly. The pond is not resuscitated nor is the scum removed for further study.

Even the man with his pinched

You could make a factory of mind
and matter
but matters more than mind

back nerves and denotating privileges nit-picked about everybody's and everything's place in his world little creation. What bothered me the most about being there was how evident had become the human regroupings into isolated subplots from the Westward movement. Whether I liked it or not, this included me. Were we just stock characters in an historical fantasy?

We were squatters reinventing a trauma our descendants will brood over later facing the chalkboards. One receives a diploma for learning that one is not alone, will never be alone, is part of a past on the other side of splitting atoms; a past paradoxically far less and far more visible than the molecular imagination or technical information, a past, which, moreover, generates great disputes. The statistics of the dead are paraded on the days of these disputes in the grains of memories vying for ascendancy. In every memory lies a capacity for abstraction. One's mouth of words can feel the bitter taste of the enemy's chewing whenever data is used as the promise of further killing.

This moribund world seemed to be waiting for further excitement.

I recollected the following deaths: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, and others who had survived plague and war but whose names I keep for myself.

I was trying to get beyond the obvious horror of the place. Ignorance was a product of what they saw as nature or "the way it's supposed to be." As they fattened Alice, they

tried to starve me. Convinced that Gardener was dead, they revered my future demise. Nothing else present — woodpecker or worm or vanilla sap pine — could startle them out of their terror.

It was time to awaken Alice. As I snuck away from Babs, she released a weird sound. It resembled a high-pitched click such that I mistook her momentarily for a strange insect or snake.

What are you looking at? she asked in her dimmed-down voice.

Nothin'. I said it slowly such that the word nothin' approached her own trampled jargon. Each one of us waited for the other to make a move.

Why don't you like me? she asked at last after something like twenty-five days or seconds, with the wisdom of the ages falling to her feet in hallelujahs of truth and compassion.

This is not the kind of question one can answer truthfully to a child. She seemed even then, right after asking it, to have forgotten asking it as her eyes followed a grey squirrel up a tree.

Alice slept under the tree with a spangled blanket wrapped around her knees and her greying black hair wrapped around her shoulders and sticking to her neck and face.

How did she get here? I asked the girl. I thought she was kept in some kind of gilded prison.

Do you think you're in some kind of fairy tale? the girl wanted to know. The lethargic Babs had transformed into someone quick as a whip. She ran circles around the tree. Alice stirred. Babs laughed. Alice slept and struggled with the blanket, which flopped to the ground, as two strange women approached her with a stretcher. They lowered the stretcher next to her. Alice did not wake up as they tugged, lifted, and rolled her onto it. Her arms rooted over its sides, hanging almost rigidly downward.

Was she unconscious? There was no one to ask. The strange women carried the stretcher swiftly in the manner of a current taking a log downstream. The world had become silent and wrong. (Even in the most isolated realms it can move too fast.) No person seemed to be capable of right conduct. Nothing was knit together in the way I had imagined. Dreams floated up and receded as autonomous wills breaking through netting.

I am not in what is going on, but alongside it. That is why it is still unreal.

As I followed the stretcher with a sense of foreboding, the girl ran alongside of me panting like an old dog. She would never keep up. Imagine that civilization is oriented around weight and breath. And that the hypnotic site, the cult, the harem, the lily pad of mad decorum, exposes and betrays this fact.

Alice woke up. No longer herself, she said, I have violated their script. The cult women dropped the cot in panic

when Alice started talking. Alice swung her mind to an upright and seated position. And as she railed against human stupidity, her body followed. A little girl threw a small stone at her, hitting her in the head. She was instantly dead. Each person stopped, as if at the end of a riotous ballet and waiting for the curtain to go down, the conductor to appear, the applause to begin. But the conductor did not appear: they were all looking at me.

In the beginning of a dream was a shrub. The dream said I am a dream and this is a shrub with three foot bushy limbs, four feet in length, and 30 inches deep. It flowers in the early spring and you know its name. In the book in the dream the shrub was represented in a full page pencil drawing by C. Incomplete and scruffy in style, the drawing said less about the shrub than the artist, who had abandoned a fully worked-out rationalized scheme to the whims of the pencil. Who rendered the plant? I asked the dream.

It must have been uncomfortable with my question because the page turned on its own. Facing swaths of unreadable print, I floated rudely down a torrential stream that tossed me into shapes an alphabet would make. I tried to speak to this event as if it were a person. I am spelling nothing was formed in my mouth but my mouth was at once instantly submerged and opened too huge and inhaling. There must be a perfect relationship between air and body for one to speak is what the dream said as I lay flattened over a quiet spot in the rushing water. This is more

dangerous than anything yet, I thought, and decided to pretend to struggle, to trick the dream into an unusual form of predetermination, something it was not quite so familiar with, something it needed to think about, to take time with.

As the dream slowed to accommodate this new thing, the stream overflowed its banks and washed over the pages of inchoate letters. The letters stuck to the page even so, but as the water receded they began to cry. Aspiring to myth, the dream decided that the tears of the alphabet were the basis for human life. Overjoyed by the innocent feeling of revelation and stimulated by the unanticipated association between letter and life, I was not prepared for the dream's final surreal gesture: the word NARCISSIST used in the style of graffiti painted over everything else. The dream seemed to be delighted by this outcome, particularly by the effect of its stylistic imitation. The word looked pleased with everything it had obliterated. I woke up frustrated, angry, and unsatisfied.

The day dissolves ungainly emotions one wakes with or they are absorbed into it. More rarely, the day reflects them all day long. I am only a romantic sometimes. Or passive, introverted, and cruel. A trader, scavenger, masochist, voyeur, or handyman sometimes. And although I do and say almost everything with her in mind, I only care about Gardener sometimes.

One can make love to someone at a distance through
someone else who is hated. Gardener, do you read me?
These pages are writing themselves.

GARDENER

Coming from *yourself* you'll hear a voice leading you to your fate. It's the voice of desire not desirable *persons*.³

The wide sound of a trumpet is asking to be swallowed up.

M.

I am writing from a barn that resembles the loft in a dream in which M is wearing almost nothing, a cotton flimsy thing. In front of me are two nails in the wall about ten inches apart with a ruled line drawn between them. A dowel crosses the window. Pushpin holes fill the opposite wall.

Picture me as an object in two places at once: barn and club.

The marks on the walls resemble signs on obsolete maps charting areas that no longer exist. These geographies sometimes become stories.

A STORY: "HOW GARDENER AS PROMETHEA DREAMS OF PRISON: PROMETHEA AND HER HATRED."

An ambling and rather incongruous event marked the period of Promethea's resistance to castration. So far, in our tale, violence and hatred have been swallowed in the balloon of romance that follows a great collapse. The Great Collapse

³ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*.

was not an apocalypse because good did not triumph over evil, nor was it a holocaust for there was no burning hell or annihilations of any class of people except those who had been suffering and dying prematurely all along. Many of these people owned nothing and therefore had no power.

In the world of Promethea, Gardener, M, Sylvan and their dead, no one owned anything in quite the same way as anyone had owned anything before. There was a version of this owning: a claiming and naming. But the claiming and the naming was often as parodic as the slave who was no slave naming himself baby as a parody of slavery. This slave liked to think of himself as the master of Caesar in the absence of Gardener.

Or in the absence of Promethea. Who was Gardener without Caesar.

In the beginning of the unnamed world, the one in which there was no longer any such thing as a national identity, was she about ten years old? And having just awoken from a dream

and this is the dream:

child molestra. there she was. she wanted those oops! tin nipples. well, she was a child too. there was a pattern to her will. let me try to describe it. what she needed to do was hold onto the tiniest thread connecting her to the land of premises. that is where she would roam. but with the thread as thin as a toddler's long lock, she could always find where she started from. this is exactly the same thing as desiring children. she also was a child. she knew this, but was somehow treated as an adult. aren't we all? asked some kind of parental figure once upon a time. the other thing about her: she could never never ignore what someone else said. what someone said then could put her into conflict with herself. now of course she knew that other babies had very soft bellies. but the baby in the arms of the mother at the museum was best. it was so smooth to see. and behind glass. next a baby's belly was moving in and out. heaving up and down. it was a big creamy golden globe of warmth and life. she touched right around the curve of it, and a big white hand with a jungle of prickly hair growing from its knobby top wiped away her little mitt, her electric sensors, her doves that loved the dirt and cooed so sweetly in the bath.

she found herself curled up on the floor of a stone hut that reminded her of a well-preserved blast furnace relic. She remembered her parents (one small and wild one large and tame) vaguely, and the term postcolonial architecture. Were her parents architects? Was this her house? First she got up on all fours and stretched like a cat and a dog. That felt pretty good. Her blood flowed now quickly such that she felt she could butt down a wall. The roof of the hut was low, but when she stood up it seemed to grow. The truth of the matter is she was smaller than she had thought. Around 60 inches. There was a nice blue rug in the middle of the slate floor. A small window faced east. She looked out then onto a hardwood forest. How uncommon she thought. She tried to recollect the other forest she had seen and managed to conjure a picture of cypress and pine blown in heavy wind and the salt smell of an ocean. She had already known as a very young child she would probably be left entirely alone. She had been told this repeatedly until she came to understand the anticipated history of her situation as fact. Even the Annual Mad Car Salesman Party with the guy with the silk tie permanently stationed by the give-away car had shut down. The salesman, who wore his tie a bit wider each year, was no longer a cultural fixture reproduced in the annual auto show calendar above the grid of every month of March. The fading away of such emblematic occasions was identified as an event of nature, but she had known these as her only culture. Pygmy forests stippled the contradictory world to which she had been inured.

She opened a small door, which she had to stoop to get through, and found herself in an interior hallway. On the opposite side of the passage was another round hut-like room. When Promethea looked through its window, she thought she saw another girl sleeping curled up on the floor, but she couldn't tell as it was dark inside and the hut's door opened only from within. She walked down the hallway into the interior of the building and found there an arched entranceway to an inner courtyard. Promethea followed a corridor leading from the courtyard to several rooms. They were small asian "six mat" rooms with paneling reminiscent of a Japanese gangster movie. She had to pee and located a hole in the floor off to the side of the third of these rooms. As she peed she kept wondering why she had chosen the third room. And then, by extension, why she had chosen this particular corridor to turn down, as there were other passageways, four in all, including the one she had come from originally, extending out from the courtyard symmetrically. She pulled up her pants and continued her exploration of the uncommon building. Were all the rooms wrought in the same style along each separate corridor? She wanted to see inside every door, but she wanted to get outside too.

She kept wandering. Her hormones were starting to kick in. She was growing breasts. Her legs were getting lanky. She wanted something unknowable almost to the point of panic, and other people also, even though she didn't feel lonely. She

was fast now and would get to the end of the building in no time. There was a door at the end of the corridor, but something was wrong. She sat on the floor in front of the door for a very long time. Her breasts felt heavy, her body itchy. She was sweating too much. The girl at the other end of the courtyard might know her or need her. She thought she had better go back, but the sticky sweat made her selfish. She wanted to jump into a cool pool of water.

The pond was about one hundred yards in front of the door. A man was there cleaning some fish. He seemed to have caught lots of fish and she was hungry. Ravenous. She was ready to consume the whole scene. To jump into the pond, eat the fish, then give herself up to the first taker. Lights jumped off the water. Shadows hugged the forest. Swallowtails pierced wild honeysuckle. Bird songs blinked off and on like a riot of words in an unkempt story about a pinball game gone wild. Promethea was the pinball, the jack pot, and the player.

She had always been made to feel that she was understood, so she thought that at this moment she was understood. Don't all girls start to burst at the seam? Blue dragonflies coated the pond. The pond, laden with their insect sheen, blazed in the sunlight against the backdrop of white barked trees.

When she jumped, the man caught her with a big net and dragged her to the side of the pool. He was, she thought as she struggled in the net, a little bit too clean for a fisher-

man. He had a funny knife in one hand. With the other hand he easily lowered the net with Promethea in it to the ground.

Here the concept of understanding didn't exist.

He sat on her stomach to keep her down and spread her legs open, then cut a hole in her loose clothes around her crotch.

It's supposed to be less fun to fuck after, but it's not.

How would you be able to tell? she asked as indulgently as a predator at the end of a satisfactory meal.

It had never occurred to him he didn't know.

I will fuck you she said but you have to do it the way I was taught. And act like you like it too.

Where are you from he wanted to know. Where? Where?

If you ask again, you won't find out, she said taking the knife from him and slipping it into her own pocket. The net was in a little heap at their feet, hers on top of his. Promethea pulled down her ripped-in-the-crotch pants, opened his pants with her sweet hand, and sat on him with an indulgent calm until each suffered the greatest ecstasies of pleasure.

His hatred welled in her, setting her on fire. She was burning.

You have scalded me with joy, he said as he nearly or perhaps truly died.

For she did not look but ran back into the house and all the way down the hallway to the room at the end where she had seen the other girl. She was going to wake her up.

Why did I hesitate to wake her up the first time? I wanted to grow up fast and didn't want a friend or someone slowing me down.

Girl she screamed as if she were screaming for the person she could no longer be. Girl. And she arrived at the door, which she could not open. Children had been taught to believe that they would almost die if they broke anything for any reason — they were experimenters whose obsessions had to be controlled, but now she was a woman. She split the window with the back of the fish knife until the glass was cleared away. She climbed through and in, broke the other window in the same way, grabbed the girl and without worrying about whether or not she was awake commanded her to

building a world of roads
connecting everything to everything else

climb out onto the yellowed lawn. Head for the scruffy old oaks across the foothills and listen, she said, for water.

The girl, later, would claim that her first memory after the Great Collapse was scratching herself on the dead grass while looking into a cloudless sky. The roar of traffic was gone.

On some days M is a present absence. She is not here, but even so sweat trickles down her filthy neck leaving rivulets of damp on her skin. A small set of tools is tucked under her belt. She holds a screwdriver between her teeth as she looks into the bowels of some wayward machine.

The trumpet plays on the other side of the door from where I stand next to the john. A pair of divinities, or giant parents, who are also twins, suffer the little children to come before them as they guard a constellation of keyholes to doorways all of which I want to enter. Most parents are dumb and these are no exception: they are standing right in front of the place they want me to notice least. Remember the warm and earthy greeting, that book is not for you? Sometimes, I am a fidgeter and wait at thresholds for my body to calm down. In the music, I am in-between the giant parent's legs. At such a moment, the body is an object of M's perusal. M's curiosity about me betrays my interest in other things: in the maverick properties of pencil, pen, star, planet, water tank, spigot, erasure. As I reach for the number two pencil, she reaches for my belt and grabs it such that I am

caught between my impulse and hers. As I repair a spigot, she turns her own hose on me with force. She says she wants me to know who's boss. And who, I ask her, got here first?

But it is in spite of, or because of, her boyishness, her conservatism, her aggressivity, her autonomy, her primitive stupidity, her wanting me and not touching my meals, my depth of foulness and utter imprisonment in words such as blue lilac (not lilac, not sweet lilac, not any color other than blue, not the Latin term) such as panic, nasturtium, solemn and somnolent, such as area and devilment that I think of her as a belated philosopher. She is distant. She is distant now. She cannot see any of this. I cannot share it with her. (We will never get to "share"). Caesar.

For you M who will never see it.

The touching meadow days labyrinth plinth screw and bleat slip.

The erasure of distinction rather than the integrity of objects.

Are the curses licking you on the breast plate.

Or the mind, since you are gone.

Left with sweet salt.

Without company. Wandering. Is it me or you?
Watching some boys becoming men. Over and over again.

M who grazed me with rapacious eyes and said in an evening of mockery I'd like to see you go somewhere no one likes you or owes you anything.

The language that formed the end of a world instituted our separation.

I would like the story to stop, but every time I begin to write, it continues from another point.

(illustration of “headless woman” and “erect penis” joined)

Because loss is as close as skin.

Such that the statement, “pleasure is so close to ruinous waste that we refer to the moment of climax as a little death,” is rescripted thusly, “pleasure is so close to ruinous waste that we refer to the moments of climax as a little dance,” and waste in this unmade time, in so far as it is material for use, is a gift.

A spin and waiver in the trumpet’s tone brings me back to this second spot where I sit on the doorstep rock waiting for Sylvan.

At peace with yourself
in this body and house and
through the windows that are also my eyes
we see the forest of an older world

M

(OR A DIFFICULT AND MEANDERING CHAPTER IN WHICH NOTHING HAPPENS AND WHICH ONE MIGHT CHOOSE TO SKIP)

Anyone can know that the world is not only composed of empirical data. The mind moves the data around. The new world is created by audacity. But not the audacity of one person. Gardener, who was listening to the trumpet, accompanying it with a skewed wayward gabbiness, stood up and looked down at the granite doorstep she had been sitting on.

It had occurred to her that Death Valley might be close to her, much closer than one would imagine. She kicked at the boulder, which did not move, then started to doze off propped against the hinge side of the door. Nearby was the dressing room and toilet. Behind a closed door, someone was making her the object of disparaging remarks.

That girl must be looking for the source of youth.

She might be looking for the fountain of use.

She doesn't look lucky does she?

She needs an uncle don't you think?

She heard the toilet flush, the bathroom door open, and boots with spurs. She lost her balance and fell to the floor. The man's spurs stopped in front her face. Sam gave her a solemn wink.

The beauty of a song contrasts nicely with humiliation.

This is what I thought I knew at the end of another day:

Gardener compels me to describe what I know about her even as she invents herself and escapes the grasp of my knowledge. In this new world, there is too much time, even if it is broken, and this overabundance of time is what accounts for the distance between us: it is what constitutes our torn open world.

This is the torn open world: I am or was in nowhere writing about what happened. Gardener is or was in motion writing about what happens. Our tenses make us sad, but even so, to be the recipient of an urgent demand is almost beyond my ken. Love is conventionally just that little stretch, beyond ken into kin into kind, the other kind.

Gardener the maker who made everything that became of her, reached the limit of her own momentum and tried to latch onto some unreadable man.

I can tell you about what it was like to be a debunked power. I know this sounds a little arcane. It was like this: crumbling leaves and saying I am crumbling leaves. Making waves and saying I am making waves. Watching Gardener march away and saying she is leaving. Watching the murder of an old woman and saying I am watching a ritual death. A modern philosopher once wrote, there is a little fascist in each of us. There is also a little collaborator, although I don't like to apply my own flaws to everyone, as we have all been

scattered to the four winds and left to our own devices at the mercy of neither gods nor science.

For you Gardener. The past, which I can almost touch.

It was exactly day and night. You wouldn't let on which. The City of Men you fashioned as one of Poe's gray dreams was nearly choking on your bouquets. An annoying green light glowed from elsewhere after the candles had been lit. It was a symbol of those men's courage—the courage it took to not care that all the women were some place else.

I have invaded the ambiance of the D... cafe and will leave a small mark.

Fern grows quickly in volcanic rock.

In the Duchess's story we used to read to each other over and over again, the *dramatis personae* traveled to idealized planets just before sunrise to experiment with new ways of living. One planetary body they visited possessed sheaves of gauzy sex and lemon trees surrounding lakes. Do you remember almost choking on a lemon as the sun began to rise threatening their safe passage home? I loan you Gardener the following fruit:

A brilliant teacher has a young student who quickly surpasses her or him in their mutual field of study and finally proves all of his or her teaching to be wrong. In effect, the "child" has killed the "parent" in a world in which they both have to keep living. This is what is known as the life of the mind.

They are no longer living in a parent/child relationship but in “enemy camps.”

What happens is they keep talking about and writing about each other for the rest of their lives. Theirs is an unrequited and impossible love, so they use each other to insert themselves into “the world.” The relationship is that of an exhibitionism constituted by incestuous desires that have been repressed. Since incest is taboo, no one attributes the two scholars’ competitive relationship to this amorous repression. Others in the world can sense the unrequited love but cannot think it.

As I wrote this account, Sylvan’s hand touched your throat, an echo to the thin music of my tale.

A palm pushed lightly against the right side of your throat.

I am not sure, he said to you, but I would think you are basing your terms on a concept of human relationship not on the ideas of the two scholars. He is speaking to you and me while only knowing you.

In the interim, you, Gardener, are the one left to tell him that something has changed. The child in the story has stopped believing in enemy camps. The child’s memory does not work like the father’s, for the entire world has changed since the concept enemy camp was devised. Isn’t that the potential world you and I are going to now?

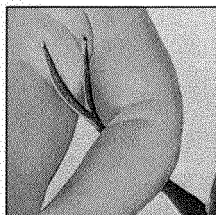
On the other hand, you might find yourself *behind enemy lines*. Sylvan watched Gardener react to his suggestion as I, invisibly, removed his hand from her skin, which burned with resignation. He pointed to a monstrous building in the center of the neighborhood and Gardener saw what he pointed to.

My god, how do you sustain so many prisoners?

By threatening them but never locking them up.

a child
in an old world
an old child

LINKING EXPOSITION OR GARDEN



ONCE UPON A TIME

Girls come out of hiding. Gardener was hiding behind a tree. She always said she didn't care if it had leaves or not. She didn't care if it was old or shot or on heaven or earth or whether she was hiding in the dark. Nothing can scare me.

M was standing behind the house watching Gardener hide.

There was no money left and soon they would have to go forage in the forest.

It was what they were already doing. Oh, well. Now we don't have to worry about them finding out.

As we know, memory is altered by shock in one way or another. We see this symptom of shock when people stop talking about where they come from. Also, things that need explaining are left unexplained. People do not want to know what happened. Memories are only personal. In fact, there is a collective attempt to disallow memories to ever return to history, and yet with each reconstructed building, history is put back in place. An unstoppable dynamic between collective refusals and positive actions finally destroys all static designs.

There is something hopelessly delightful about saying what something is not. It is not the end of history. It is neither the end of history within the narrative of this work nor outside the narrative. In Honoré de Balzac's *A Harlot High*

and Low English Penguin edition, there is a chapter titled “A Short Boring Chapter of the next Four Years, because Our Hero Is Happy.”

That chapter is neither boring nor all that short, and one learns that “happiness” can only be associated with the hero’s ability to commit scandals and influence people in high places without being noticed. While history superficially takes place in shuttles between the grand houses of bankers and their associates in public office, we learn that it is the Machiavellian capacity — to manipulate history silently — hidden within the exterior shell of a vain and handsome poet, that effects the dramas the officials imagine but can’t execute on their own. Lucian is enabled in his manipulation of history, because he is feminine i.e. beautiful, frivolous, and vain on the outside, secretive within.

The girls went into the forest as they did every day to forage for themselves. They liked to do everything in their own good time. Let’s pretend, said M, that I am watching you ten years from now.

Okay, said Gardener, but what I am going to do is going to be very slow. It’s going to take a long long time. Do you have the patience?

First, she said, you have to watch me grow.

Okay, said M. I’m watching.

And while I grow you are growing too, but you don’t think about that, you only think about me.

Do you think about yourself? asked M. Do you think about yourself growing?

Well, sometimes. Sometimes I am a weed. Weeds think about spreading out and taking over. They multiply and hide little rodents in the grass. They seed themselves on the edges of lakes and wrap themselves around the ankles of trees. They nudge each other out of the way. They take up all the space they can get. They anticipate what's going to happen next. They see themselves as occupying everything.

But they do all this very quickly. And you said you were going to be slow. See I am already watching you.

Are you going to hold me to my words? asked Gardener.

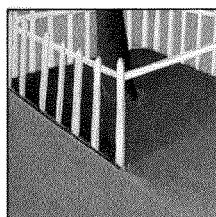
I haven't decided yet, said M.

Because I was talking about my thoughts said Gardener, not what you can see.

If I could see your thoughts said M.

We would be having the same ones.

IN AN OLD WORLD



IN WHICH M CONTEMPLATES AESTHETICS, GUILT, AND HERSELF

One day, when lying under another tree in a fashion similar to that recounted at the beginning of my tale but this time near a grove of olives, a mob of hands reached upward from below my feet. From some vague under-place, the feathery branching hands grew passed me toward a celestial city in what might have been an illuminated manuscript. This was as arcane as anything that might pass by or through me in one of my lazy stupors.

There was something (and ought I to say this?) despairing about the hands. Raised in a glow of hopeful desire, their perfect gestures had been portrayed as extra need. They seem to have gotten in the way of a death god's radar. Much of what I would like to forget is not so easily forgotten as these and other kinds of motifs: *tissu a fleur* on curtains, bucolic settings gashed subliminally out of wild vegetation, or even old car parts combined into a playground of ten-pointed stars. Could one make a life out of old things unmoored from their histories and prescribed meanings? Like old designs from a dilapidated world, the question turns me into a stranger to myself. No thank you.

I mostly like to think of myself as common as a common fox who by and large keeps to herself; therefore, the "nagging guilt" who has followed me around ever since my

return home is especially troubling. She wants me to get real, admit the consequences of my actions, and take my punishment. She wants to convict me as an accomplice. She says I cannot be responsible in my prone position. She will not fall into bed with me and forget everything or let me hold her at the waist. She says I have mistaken her for someone else. She does not like girls but men even if I am her only daughter. She says how could you do this to me? She doesn't even know me! She can't get outside of her own upright social position. She says why not remember that I only live for pleasure?

I refuse.

It drives her mad. She wakes me up and screams in my ear: reap your just rewards. The cool air comes through the window of my little shack. The world is dark, green, black. The insects are biting.

I tell her she will be dead before morning if she doesn't put on some repellent. She says she does not need any with me around.

I want to sense in you the fullness of human feeling.

That I growl is what lovers want and I try to drag her into bed but she resists me.

She just wants me to show her that I'm a good person.

I spread wide the curtains, take off my clothes, and ask her to come up on stage to check me out. Let me know what you think.

Guilt thinks her daughter's writing is all about her. The daughter then writes about that. The guilt's fears are confirmed, but she sees that the daughter got it all wrong. She wants to correct the details and make them more real. You are your father's child.

Mom, you've been watching too much television.

Even though M does not particularly think of herself as an aesthetician, there has always been something distasteful to her about psychological realisms, or what one might call the author's response to projections of the insecure reader. It is her observation that psychological realism is a product of writers responding to their "subject's" neurotic reaction to their work. The writer imagines the reader to be the subject of her work. The work over time then becomes a representation of reactions to the anticipated responses to the writer's readers as they see themselves in a labyrinth of snapshots in words. This is what the writer describes as psychological realism. Inwardly, the writer does not really care if she is representing reality. She only cares outwardly in the world of groping hands where the book is received, read, and discussed. This obscure reasoning seems to still exist even in a world that imagines it is no longer concerned with such issues.

Mom, says M., when I was born you had a C. section. I did not pass all the way through you. I am part Zeus's head.

My readers want to know what I know, but if I were a realist, all I could do is record faithfully what you say and feel about what I say.

Furthermore, I am not a hero. I did not save Alice's life. I would not have died in her place. None of these things was possible. Your values from the past are harmful. That's why we made this better world.

Even so, we have done nothing to keep anything out, the walls are low, the boundaries immaterial. That's why you're here, Mom.

(M's mother, who is a ghost, looks around nervously)

One of the more frightening possibilities is that some danger we have circumvented will come back like a resilient thistle and displace us.

(M's nagging guilt anxiously rummages through her purse, which is her mother and her mother's purse.)

Those universally groping hands... It is hard for me to resist most human touch.

(She=mother + nagging guilt clutches her keys and slinks into the driver's seat of her non-existent because cars have disappeared *Alfa Ferrari* and glides toward the garish sphere known as the sun to some)...

But then I think of Sylvan's hands on Gardener, who does not seem to know the difference between his hand and mine. The lovely throat... Gardener's spheres of shifting love about upright crypts.

Or consider as evidence these other tokens from the catalog of Gardener's humiliations (starting first with giving birth to a boy, then letting herself get had, mounted, bound and loved, swept away and nearly drowned, captured and let go, wandering and belittled in a city of men while adverse to both mechanics and teleology! and in the meantime leaving her famous child to grow up in a perfectly reasonable world given that there is barely anything left)? Do I not rejoice in her mistakes? Of course I do. Her endless lingering over pleasure that might seem like tortures to others? If those humble hands of supplication wafting me with a frozen wayward airiness were symbolic rather than a daydream, I would say each of them stands for one of Gardener's embarrassments.

Me M in that truck laughing at how funny you Gardener looked leaving the paradise you made...

For Caesar, whom you adore. Can't you tell that there are signs that he and I are getting closer?

The Madonna cannot see he is perfectly fine in the Jerusalem we have already made for him. Let me return then to the other side of boredom, my own voluptuous isolation. Restless hordes await me at the end of a perfectly adequate day.

The walls of the city I started my treatise with curved like a necklace around a single tree, an olive that was obviously plucked from the garden I was sprawling in.

Fictional entry: if I don't leave, I thought, I could get trampled. Those people want to enter the mouths of the tombs on the outside of the city walls.

The tree will be standing when we, I die.

Once upon a time, a slave who was not a slave, but a spirit as close to my mouth as air, said *I want your ass*. He also playfully “married” everything in sight. He was making himself, he claimed, part of everything. The tree in the center of the celestial city was his greatest care. He climbed her and brushed her hair until the fruit from her leaves dropped to the ground as tears to dry cheeks. He picked up the fruit, pressed them and placed them in brine. Everyday, he did the same thing, marrying everybody and pressing fruit.

He would say, I'll hold you while she's gone.

What happens, I asked him, if she never returns?

The slave who was not a slave but a person without a clear designation encouraged, via his example, all forms of repetition. We therefore taught Caesar how to read using my outdated technical manuals. Sometimes we would sit around enjoying a discussion about the implications of the word *outdated* in a world that had fallen apart but somehow seemed to suit us anyway.

SERENA

Briefly, women enter a nearly inchoate myth.

Gardener is not going to kill Sylvan, though she is stopped in a sorrowful world with the tools of her own murderous impulses. Sometimes she thinks of this fury as a baby and placates it with stories about Molestra and Promethea or the accounts penned by Serena the repository of... oh, but I can't say, because it is limitless what she can hold for you. The generous Serena is not of this world. She is the revolutionary of memory when there is no history, when there is only the option of making whatever must be made in an economy of scarcity and hope looking backward.

As if inside a poem of the late 18th century, Serena addresses Gardener emblematically.

In a world that is barely made, says Serena, they would not lie down, but even before sunup they had organized everything. There was no specific person only types leaving the house and then traveling down into the mine, vagina, and ramrod. A complete universe with lungs the size of mittens. It takes a hand to write and once upon a time the accessory is the only one who could write. Who is the one who writes? For it is easier to imagine the confinement of the writer than the fact of the unwritten, unrecorded, and lost writing. When does the doll's wig dropped in the back seat of the car become writing? One answer is when existence of

both wig and car fade. Personal conflicts have been overwhelmed by total conflicts. The child on the bench is now a woman confined to a window with a pen. Her relationships are all erased. There is no cross. Why is it that such a child would want to help? The underclass is in the sky of the imagination but not *of* its own imagination. Even when everyone was dying some people made things up. I sing the song of your false fruit. You think that this was long ago because your memory is too short. That is the nature of history. It places living time in a tomb in which it can neither breathe nor suffocate. This is according to some novels and other written accounts and romantic poetry. We do not know now who wrote it. What I am saying to you now does not represent what you think of as the past. The past is the writing, the not and unwritten, the not and unrecorded, the erased, diminished, and let go writing, the meager writings. Tallow, muslin, sugar, flour, grain, and fat. The reader/writer wants to sink into a story without seams. In such a scenario, a woman writer has to pretend that the writing of the past is not meager, unwritten, erased, unrecorded, not preserved, not public. But a private underground stream that bubbles up in her bedroom and floods the house. You must return, Gardener, to the past to know what I think of as the past. What is your past? It was the industrial revolution and women were still burning, but it was not only women who burned. Why would the plague, any plague, seem more horrific than all this murder? Almost no one writes this down

except sometimes on company-provided tombstones: M.M. April 2, 1820 – February 9, 1848. By accident. Gardener, when all of your ferocity has been used up and you have found that place of peace and resolve, of quiet and continuity, the unruly utopia of the senses that is not in conflict with the world's current, no one will know what you have done even if it gets documented as fiction in someone's book. One cannot do anything alone. There is something else with which to put your children to sleep. There may or may not be something under your bed. Someone who wrote died writing what no one ever read. Remember the time when canned music was pumped in from the outside and no one left their house except to work about ten hours or less a week? A man told a woman that she was too complicated. You want the world to take you seriously? The formulation is too old! You must unpack with a certain calm. It got later. A woman made nothing and only provided pleasure to herself, her friend, and men. I wanted to experience this all my life. And you in the comedy called socialism and a world of monsters who cared only about rearing women? It is the best thing in the world to imagine the extremes of activity and passivity but the educated world is only attracted to tragedy. You can never do anything alone. I want to repeat myself but I cannot. Or can I repeat once? You remember the one about the gold standard falling into the haystack? A sick little man found me there with my legs spread out beyond my skirts hoping for some burly type to discover me: the little

guy told me his fantasy. He was the tired sex. A woman who took over the company, a very amatory black woman who loved just him did not want to kill him. He was astonished. She was scared. I was left in the lurch. You, Gardener, my old friend, didn't want to hear any of this but wanted only to be a free spirit and artist and live with men as if they were as perfect as you — you convinced them that they were that good, or should I say moral, or flawless, or simply human. You are such a tolerant one. Your genitals were erased you were born face first. You were named for the sash tree but the name burned easily, went up in smoke, and left you with a new world to make. Do you remember then, your poverty and hatred of power and attack on international investors and the big war machine interests? The concrete island, the highway of death, the fear only of cancer with land mines in all the soil? Was that you? Or the ghost of yourself? Sent to jail, are you there now? And not so dead as you were when you were young and dirty. Your children, Gardener, were angry. You had lived through several wars by then and your body had become an exquisite defensive machine: you would not let it give out without a fight. Window, light, door, waves, the transubstantiation and travel you invent and adore and the worlds upon worlds you left because you had an education and a pen and could amuse yourself and your friends with everything you made up? This is what I love most about you, except, Gardener, you are a character, flying your life like a kite. It is an easy and tempting mark.

Idealism is the object of destruction in the world that contains me, sometimes referred to as Brotherhood, where balance must be achieved at any price.

There is a way in which what is in the world, or the incendiary history of Serena's own oxymoronic self-love, is made by someone else as it makes itself. There are questions among subjects and objects that are never solved. Sometimes Gardener attracts certain encounters in order not to murder an early memory of Caesar she carries with her.

Someday she will go home.

With her hope looking backward, Serena will continue to write her letters of doom. For Serena finds war exciting. Otherwise she is much like a child flying apart while she argues with her mother over a bowl of fruit. She had always wanted more than she was given and was still searching for the source of this frustration is what the fathers say, wherever they are.

GARDENER

I have been furious, she says on the shore of her own giganticness, since one. I have been furious since twenty-six. Since the cry of the baby broke my sleep since my cry broke my mother's sleep since my father slept through my mother's broken sleep since no man was there to feel my broken sleep since not the seeing but the not seeing created a tautology that goes something like this: they are absent therefore I am awake — in a museum that no longer exists: in the 19th century French painting a woman stands in a doorway dressed in somber black and white holding a baby in light swaddling about to enter the room of straightbacked chairs. She is possessed of a chastising authority that is enough to imprison the artist for eternity. In another 20th century painting of a wife, the artist sees he does not know his wife and she is therefore, because she is not known, bereft but cannot show it. The interior design is always perfect with the vase of flower faces seasonally overflowing in renegade pinks and tips of blue at the peak of summer seemingly speaking — this is as close as I can get to bliss. The artist's wife has made all of this happen and refers to it not at all.

Her whitish lack of reference is what makes this bliss ephemeral. He continues to watch her for clues to unlocking the secret of the world, meanwhile forgetting the world entirely.

The world with his wife in it drifts away. The artist gets on the telephone and calls her up. The wrong person answers the phone. Wrong Person says, I'll come back to you immediately. The painter believes that Wrong Person is the right person, the first, the original one. When WP arrives, he finds that he likes her but she's not who he expected. The Right Person, whom he believes to be his wife, is somewhere else and he'd rather be there than here with Wrong Person looming over him. I'm nervous, he says. WP pats him on the head and says don't worry, there's no hurry, it will all come back to you some day. What you need is a long boat ride down the nearest river.

The Lethe? he asks. Exactly the same but as long as you're with me you'll never die. Excuse me, but isn't that a little semen on your pants? I am the picture of what you men want. RP was so pissed off at you when you sent the world with her in it to drift away, she forgot about me.

But I did not send her away, said the artist.

That's not what anybody believes, said WP. And since I can so easily be mistaken for her, I can do her in as you did.

I suggest you and RP meet, he answered. The painter had for once forgotten the picture and was trying to solve a problem co-existent with the cultural imagination and lived experience.

Well, I suppose, said WP, we could save our boat ride for another day.

The painter pulled out his calendar.

I don't believe in calendars, WP protested. There are too many of them at my work. I'd like to keep you separate from my job.

The man thought that she was treating him the way he would a woman and found this exceptionally exciting. Maybe all these gender distinctions are false, he said to himself only, not her. WP would have certainly belittled him, had he broached the subject of transgendered behavior; in a professional sense, she had rejected those fringe discourses. He did not want language or unexceptional intellectual formulations to dampen her attraction to him.

In any case she seemed well-regarded in her field.

Separate, yes, that's right, he said, and took WP's hand. In the field of deep water.

The next pregnant pause filled him with the kind of horror, which, to Wrong Person, was comparable to a cartoon doodle: something spontaneous and belligerent she had left by the telephone.

Give me your ear, she said, nibbling at it playfully.

But the painter, a fatherless child, had already moved away into the waking dream of the furious Gardener who shared with him a bed of stuffed animals and a collection of predatory desires.

FIVE ACTS (WITH BETRAYAL)

Act One: false front: Caesar, or genre of deviation

All Gardener ever thinks about is herself.

Act Two: that there is a plan: “scorn is the condition of acceptance”

M scorns Gardener, sometimes.

Act Three: that history has come to an end: pleasure alone motivates the novel itself

All Gardener thinks about is sex.

Act Four: that history has not come to an end: a form and a content that are not supposed to come together

*All M really thinks about is Gardener, regardless
of her remarks to the contrary.*

Act Five: explanation: how can the places we’ve come out of be discussed?

*It is possible to see things such as the ocean and to
imagine oneself as a creature living in it. One is,
in part, what one sees. Caesar is part sea animal.*

CITY OF MEN

Forget all of the other ways one might come to terms with ghosts. (No longer think of the erotic as a product of exchange).

In the cool of the morning, a person stands at a sink, his back to the opened door of his flat: he is scrubbing a pale yellow shirt with white soap and a red stone. He rings out the shirt, hangs it on a little rack, then looks, for not very long, into a small mirror placed on the wall above the sink. He walks outside leaving the door to his flat open. His small yard surrounded by a chipped picket fence is budding with grape hyacinth, narcissus, and new weeds. He plucks a narcissus from the ground and inhales its sweet smell as he closes the gate behind him. He holds the one flower awkwardly between his thumb, index and middle finger as he makes his way to work down the pot-holed street. There is a screeching of seagulls. Occasionally he twirls the flower or brings it to his nose and inhales it. He and the other pedestrians, there are only pedestrians, pass nodding to or greeting each other from time to time. He passes about twenty people in this manner. When he reaches the corner of the main boulevard, an ambulance siren starts up. The coinciding event — the reaching the corner at the instant the noise sounds — seems to cause him to drop the flower. He looks down at its twisted stem then continues past various boarded up shops,

an open cafe with new signage and awning, and the empty weeded skirt of an old gas station, to the huge sloped drive of a loading dock of what once was the wear house end of a supermarket. He enters the wear house through the back of the dock and returns with a huge wheelbarrow containing a jackhammer and various cables. Goggles that are attached to a rubber cord hang from his neck. He enters the boulevard and traverses its center until he finds the mark where he is to apply the jackhammer first. As he rigs up his gear, which involves stringing various cords together to hook up with an electrical current stored inside a cement building that once was a bank, other workers join him. Gradually the street is filled with noise and patched with hard working men.

Gardener watches all of this discreetly (there is nothing here to be but discreet in this daylight of echoes and rivets) and in so doing cultivates in herself an erotic longing, which she is glad of. Years pass in this manner.

One day, she saw a truck filled with oranges from her part of the world pull into a produce market, a weedy lot covered by a huge white canvas tent: she thought, those could be my oranges.

She has found a flat on Rock Street. Only two or three people seem to live on Rock Street. Everybody shares everything, so that when she is looking for pots and pans and garden tools, they are easy to find. On her street there are sev-

eral garages with old equipment stored in them. Something about the bald utility of the garages reminds Gardener of M.

With wheelbarrow, shovel, and clippers in tow, Gardener wanders around the neighborhood looking for roses. She removes fallen and decaying fences as she goes from weedy yard to weedy yard. A small rose eaten by rust with one red bloom supports a section of decayed garden fencing. She digs out the rose, places it in a mound of prepared dirt in the center of the wheel barrow, leaves the dismantled fence in a small heap, and returns with the bush to her yard where she doctors the rust and replants it. Every day day after day she goes in search of roses. Her garden is willy nilly. She doesn't know the color of the roses' blooms. Climbing roses, espaliered roses, short and tall and average roses, native and hybrid roses, weak and hardy roses are arranged in beds and mulched. It is a garden of brown, thorny, uneven things.

The mulch is easy to find. All she has to do is dig around in old plots. She has created three or four large mounds of mulch in the yards on her side of the road.

She has eliminated so much fencing that one can access any yard. As the yards blend in weeds, the beleaguered houses and residential buildings begin to assume the appearance of fading ornaments among the mustered, wild radish, and thistles.

Gardener now sweats and groans in search of herbs with which to build a circle around the convalescing roses. She

furiously hauls buckets and buckets of water from her flat. Sometimes one can hear her under her breath say take that take that. The days and more days pass accordingly.

And each day, like a bird with a broken wing, she watches the sun go down.

On as many nights as she can stand to, she flops around the city in search of Sylvan even though he is not really a friend. She doesn't know any longer what keeps her there and at last out of desultory sense of eventlessness, she invites him home with her fully expecting him to say you're crazy as a loon. But he doesn't. Gardener again becomes pregnant.

M

Today is somehow different from the other days I have tried to make contact with Gardener *as* my other life. I pick up my pen to join with her impulsiveness. Sometimes I have thoughts like Gardener would have had her freedom in a world without language. In a world of pure contact and wordlessly making everything up. In making this account, I am documenting a period in time few would see or understand in the same way. Sometimes this troubles me.

Today I am alone, as I have been for countless other days. To be alone is to exist in a state of nature, to be subtle in respect to one's frothy human composition. Look across the clearing to the wall of the garden lined with buckets of small fuchsia. These artificial seeming things are the tendrils of love. Their dropping flames are the companions of my closed mouth.

An account is about making the world up. Yesterday, I repaired a leak in the water tower. I hadn't seen anyone for a long time and did not realize what a mess I was until the shopkeeper of the little town on the other side of the hill came by the tower with a boyfriend who tried to pass without speaking, but Bess insisted on introducing us. He looked at me as if he were being asked to shake hands with a cadaver. Consequently, and because I am perverse, I held out my hand to him. I wanted this event to stretch out as far

as it could and turn into an event in itself. His soft grasp reluctantly met my coarse paw. When the grips released, he dropped his arm limply to the side in a deep animal repulsion that reminded me of the slave infant and all of his cunt talk — and his past threats and promises to me and to Gardener. Especially as they related to Caesar. Boy without empire.

When I ask Infant to kiss me, I see him overcome his disgust immediately; but, Jacques is obviously less a yielding man than the slave. Nonetheless, I test him. If you are going over to the garden, perhaps you could take some buckets of water: the plants have been without for several days. I am sure that no one will object to you helping yourself to oranges. If you leave the buckets by the door someone will come out for them.

Bess was clearly displeased by Jacques's sullen lack of response to my invitation, but she ignored my own uncivil behavior.

I offered them, then, to accompany them. "I don't think anyone will be around, but if they are you will not have to worry with me there." We made the journey, with the heavy water slapping and surmounting the bucket sides, to the house I watch each day in hope of Gardener's return.

Hope is not causal and does not lead to what one wants; although, sometimes it achieves a surprising objective. An event in itself. A sullen Jacques refusing to be found out or tested.

Of course the orange trees are always seductive, and Jacques is a curious man. He entered the garden as if it belonged to him. The dusty garden path leading to the oranges filled me with a singular happiness, that of forgetting to anticipate what happens next. Jacques took off his drenched-in-sweat over-sized T-shirt with the words Sovereign Meat airbrushed on the back in daffodil letters to use as a hammock for oranges. Bitter sweet oranges one after the other were placed into the sweat soaked shelter until we had a mound of them.

My guests welcomed my invitation to return to the water tower, where we would eat the oranges. Jacques was a new person in my eyes. And Bess was pleased with this return to ordinary civilities and the mingling of the orange's oils with the musty salt of our mammalian compatibility. Such unexceptional events as these, Gardener, are those that you and I seemed unable to enjoy.

GARDENER

I suspect they want this to happen.

I suspect I want it to happen.

I suspect, M, that you do too: you want whatever you can get. Whatever you can have of me or it.

M

Gardener was ever so lonely. She pulled the weeds way back from the dilapidated roses. The herbs were planted in fits and starts. She stood at the kitchen window facing the scruffy garden and stared into the bedraggled night. She still didn't know what to do with her son, who was happy enough where he already was. And she had forgotten me. I meant so little to her then.

NO FAMILIES



CAESAR THOUGHT OF EVERYBODY AS HIS MOTHER.

Dialogue between the slave and Caesar.

Slave: Give me that pencil.

Caesar: Give me the utensil.

Slave: Enjoy your sandwich.

Caesar: Eat your heart out.

Slave: I need to be alone.

Caesar: We're going home.

Slave: I need a drink.

Caesar: I need to watch.

Slave: Here are the names of the dead.

Caesar: The dead are in my head.

Slave: A,B,C,D,E were buried not far from here.

Caesar: A,B,C,D,E are letters I already know.

Slave: I can teach you the rest.

Caesar: I can make you sleep.

Slave: It may be that you are learning everything you need to know.

Caesar: But I still want to go to school.

When he was four Caesar's mother left, and he barely noticed. Everybody was his mother.

This is it kid. It's you, me, and the rest of them. The rest of them were M and Gardener's friends, for Gardener was

away. Don't worry, she's coming back. Don't hurry growing up. Caesar held the slave up as an idol and cuddled with M, the monumental melodrama of his natural mother's fancies. As in many utopian fantasies, the idea of a natural mother was modified so that child rearing wasn't a burden. On holidays, the "mothers," all of them surrounded by each other, would catch lots of fish. Caesar would help or watch without finding anything strange in them kissing or falling all over each other, not caring whose fish they caught. Then they would feast on fried fish in the gardens. Motorcycle thieves and geeks came by to eat their fill then slinked away on their power demons, their pouches filled with scaly rigor mortised perch. Sometimes a cyclist would be a woman who had strayed over to the world of men and stayed there happy as a man in the same situation, or so she claimed. This seemed natural only to Caesar and possibly the slave who rarely if ever gave his true prejudices away. But sometimes someone left their little tribe: no one could really account for this. All they could say about it is everything is sex. For few of them actually cared about or understood the subject of gender, and even when someone was interested in the topic, her interest was not systematic. In other words, the women saved much of their methodological thought for practical matters such as making efficient irrigation systems that would catch as much run-off as possible.

It occurred to Caesar that someday he might get a ride. Ride. Ride. Demon cycle. Fish. Until it rained, the gardens

would smell like piss: the cyclists when they got excited used the wall as a latrine. Why don't they use their piss for gasoline? asked Caesar. Someone laughed and said now that's an idea. Caesar thought it marvelous to have had a thought. The boy they said is like his mother. My mother said Caesar is like me.

When I grow up I am going to fish for a living in a boat and ride away with a girl on a bike is what Caesar thought. Or sometimes he would think, when I grow up I'm going to fish for a living on a boat and be a girl on a bike. Those girls were a little bit like him and a little bit like everybody else too. Sometimes he would think even at his very young age, why wasn't I just born an adult so I could be whatever I want, with an emphasis on the word want. Want want.

When he was even younger, Caesar had learned that Gardener was trying to cultivate in him an aversion to speech, even though all she seemed to do is talk. No one else but he noticed his mother's teachings: her banishment of words in his presence in favor of other things: of hurling stones at the stars — points of bandages for pain he sometimes wished to plant at the grave sites of the friends he had never known — and never hitting them. Sometime he would laugh at words and stomp them out with little feet of silent joy. But later he would brandish them, constellations of pomp and divine uselessness. Trapped in the humble garden of this mother's language, he championed her ferocity and silent will and his own silent tongue (even if he never

did really learn how to suppress it) until the day she left him. He then became known for his slave elocution: for he was a good imitator when he chose to be one.

He was their reflection.

The slave was never called a slave or treated like a slave. Even if he was a man, and thus a kind of outcast, he would never have obeyed anyone had they wanted him to, except when they called him Infant at particularly intimate or salacious moments. Sometimes people called him handsome to tease him about his inconsistent behavior, but Caesar mistook Handsome for Answer just as young people used to mistake Rye for Ride or visa versa in the old Beatle's song. Answer would say, a branch from a tree. Caesar would say, a ranch house. Answer would say, you devil kid. And Caesar would say, you devil kid. Answer would say, 12X12 is 144 and Caesar would say, 12X12 is a floorboard. Answer would say, swim faster and Caesar would say, come get me. Answer would say, let's have some dinner. Caesar would say, let's eat your ear. Answer would say, your mother will be home soon and Caesar would say, your mother will take long too. Answer would say, today we're going to dig a well. And Caesar would say, we're going to dig well. Answer would say, you little comedian. And Caesar would say, you are my straight man. Answer would say, give me Barabas and Caesar would say, give me babies.

Sometimes Caesar would sit with M. Then she would get up and fix another broken down machine. A rototiller, a

wind generator. She was also considering fixing up some radios she brought back with her from her ocean escapades and road trip. Perhaps they would fix it up or someday make their own radio station. Both M and Caesar had this in common: they liked to keep a lookout for what other people produced. But, she is not really doing anything, thought Caesar. It's as if she is one of her own machines hooked up to all the other ones. Sometimes when she plays with me she's so quiet I think that someone else is controlling her engine. She's an old car being driven to the wrecking yard, and when she gets there her scrap will be used along with all the other scrap (for there was lots of scrap all over the place) and that's fine with her. M acts like she will be here forever. Are you a teacher? he would ask. I can teach people how to make things work. Are you a teacher? Do you want to go to school? Yes, said Caesar. I do, because Caesar wanted everything. Including to possess M's occupation of being someone who even when she repaired machines seemed to be doing nothing. I want, said M, everybody to take me for granted. I am not the machinist who lives in a hut in the woods across the field. If I give myself a job title, everybody will want me to be that all the time. It would be difficult to maintain my relationship to the past.

Caesar of course wanted to know all about her relationship to the past, but he also wanted to live forever, to talk endlessly, and to use his body as a substitute for words. He wanted to learn everything and to do nothing at all. While

the past flew at him helter-skelter from the adult world. With a working radio, said Caesar, you will always have a relationship with the past. When he said this he felt that he had just identified a point of origin or a defining dot on what had previously been an inchoate map.

Now when he spoke his private thoughts, he felt them as comets in the dark night. Smeared and mercurial, his little speeches were taken to represent a special kind of knowledge. This knowledge was one associated with the dead, those whom the living only pretended to forget. The dead were beginning to surface through the world seen with fresh eyes. Caesar was one such pair of eyes. It was said that such children could bring the dead back to life. The slave had encouraged this rumor even though these women farmers were in no sense a superstitious bunch: they used such scraps of fantasy as a way to mark what could not yet be adequately described.

The women also used to say that nonsense brought one closer to the dead. There was something desirable in not letting them wander too far off, for without the sense of their proximity, the world would be so small as to virtually disappear.

Everybody was his mother, including this slave his mother seemed to have loved or thought of as something better than a boy toy. Boy toy. Said Caesar. This is fun. He said he was a girl. But the slave stood in his way. When the

slave stood over Caesar in a particular way, Caesar could admire his legs and knees, worlds as intricate as those one found looking up into trees. He would grab onto the slave's thighs with his round little arms. Soon he would find that he and the slave had traveled into a sea of memory trapped in a curling architecture. The foundations of the structure were built with springs. Its floor levels spiraled up to great heights then extended outwards in coiling corridors as far as several city blocks. The tip ends of the corridors would droop like a lock of the slave's hair into the air, and if one could find its trapdoor, one could fall through it, down onto the strange ground. The odd edifice might have been floating on buoys in the middle of a lake or sea but had instead been built on land. For it is better to seek out the dead in a convenient locale said the slave, such that they will not be obscured over time.

The first of the dead they met was a guy named Henry. It was in the trough of a spiral about 18 floors up — they had decided to start near the top. The dead have an intriguing view, the slave told Caesar. The views in the old days were sublime, said Henry, with lawns going out in all directions, rivers and boulevards bordering the lawns, and ensembles of smoke stacks resembling giant garden pots turned over surrounding the expanse. Smoke from them curled into the future air haunting its trends and currents then sleezing its way into its pockets. Now most of the smoke stacks were toppled into mounds of debris, those called the three sisters

were the first to go, although a few were still in operation. Caesar, who had just turned five and was feeling quite grownup, asked Henry if he liked where he was living. I'm not living. The man who was not a man but something unliving named Henry was wearing work clothes, a heavy cotton shirt, thick pants, and a pair of leather boots with laces. He seemed a little frail. He must be extremely old, thought Caesar, but his hands looked as strong as those of the living. I am an assembly said Henry — who can't be touched — of flame-like words that go on and on or rather around and around meeting up with other things you see and hear, here and outside too. He put his hand on top of Caesar's head. The real world is not that much different from the world of the dead. Except in the world of the dead, all the cars are still running. Henry patted Caesar's head the way a grandpa might. Caesar shuddered, not because of the touch, which was a rather clumsy too hard pat, but because of things Henry had said about Caesar not being able to touch back. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a baby seated on a blanket holding its arms out to an adult figure who looked at the child and walked away. Then another child fell down. Her knees were all banged up and some other adult yelled get up. The adult was pushing a cart with big bright boxes in it out to a vast expanse of cars all lined up and glaring in the too hot sun. Weeds grew in the parking lot cracks. At the very edge of the parking lot was a statue of a mother in veils looking down in tender disbelief at a scruffy baby she

was holding. Water dropped in trickles through outlets in her bare toes into a small trough. Caesar found himself staring into a pool of oil. Mucus coated his throat, his nostrils puckered, tears welled up in his eyes and an acrid sweetness weighed on his tongue and stomach. The adult with the cart seemed to be coming unglued. With one hand, the adult struggled with the car door as if s/he were trying to push it away from the body of the vehicle. Boxes stacked in a sack the adult was holding in its other hand were falling through the back window onto the back seat on which the child was yelling and bouncing and falling into other sacks all filled with similar parcels. I want a band-aid, yelled the child. I waaaaaant. I want a baaand. Aid! Suddenly the adult hurled itself into the front seat of the car. Boxes fell all over the floor. Seated with the door open, s/he spat on the asphalt then closed the door to. I'm late, I'm late s/he yelled. I hate you screamed the child. The car sputtered away, disappearing onto a mirage of shimmering road and metal. As he was trying to figure out why this event seemed slightly familiar, Caesar caught out of the corner of his eye yet another baby seated on a blanket holding its arms out to yet another adult on a scruffy patch of lawn wedged between two parked cars. Caesar was scared. Henry tell me demanded Caesar in an uncharacteristically upright screeching voice, where are the words you said you are? I used to like to bowl when I was alive replied Henry. This was the last thing Henry said, before Caesar and the slave had disappeared around the next

spiral. They ascended to a portico with the words *chamber of horrors* stenciled above it.

As they passed over the threshold they found themselves in a narrow room that sloped severely upwards. At the base of the slope was a cylindrical edifice that seemed to grow right up out of the floor. It was about six feet in diameter. The tip-end of it was obscured by a large rim, resembling a campsite for mushrooms thought Caesar, about 18 feet up. Light poured in from somewhere above haloing the monument's upper half, but at the bottom it was dim. The slave and Caesar could just barely make out the *do not touch* signs that resembled union pickets set into the ground. It formed a flimsy yet forbidding fence surrounding the monument. As their eyes adjusted to the variation in light, the glare above and the dimness below, they discovered that the sculpture was covered in rubber. Caesar could not read the signs, but the slave held onto his hands. I'll teach you what this says. They went through all the sounds (d, oo, n, o, t, etc.) until Caesar believed he could read. Delighting in his new-found literacy, Caesar looked around eagerly and found that the walls, also divided equally above and below by glare and ruinous shadow, were covered in some kind of transparent skin. The word *latex* seemed to hover in his mouth, wanting to come out, but Caesar swallowed instead. As the word seemed then to lodge in his stomach, he remembered the horrible puddle-of-oil feeling from just a few minutes before. He tried to think about something else fast. Caesar

was getting nervous. The transparent material on the wall was stretched out decoratively, in the manner of lizard or calfskins in a redneck saloon, such that a space was made between the skin and the curved wall large enough for someone to stand between. The skin was sweating a little. Is it alive in here? asked Caesar. A mist was shooting down from obscured sources above. The slave looked up into the obscuring light. A pair of elegant dark feet were groping around for a foothold. It was getting hot. The room was steaming up. The slave shoved Caesar through a shoot and followed. When they reached the bottom of the structure, they were all beat up. What do you call this? asked Caesar. A roller coaster, I suppose, replied the slave who was still a little stunned by the rapidity of their return to the bottom. They opened a trap door and climbed down through a giant slinky, which was a conduit to the ground below. When outside, Caesar tenaciously wrapped his arms again around the slave's leg and held it hard, savoring the feeling of its knobby knee against his cheek. The slave bent down to take a good look at Caesar, who grabbed his curly hair, pulled it off, and put it on his own head. In this way, Caesar was educated in the cheap memories of other times. The slave in the meantime rubbed the *Infant* scar on his own head while trying to rescue something sacred from the land of the dead — in thought if not in deed — but the child was wearing him out.

I need a little break.

Aren't we going to go back up?

But you were scared.

No, I want to do it again.

Okay. Go ahead.

You have to come too.

How come?

Because if you're not there, I'll tell.

The slave wondered what would happen next. His bag of tricks was getting empty, even though he had gone into it infrequently. He picked the curls up off of Caesar's head and arranged them on his own. Then he gave the boy a gentle pat and cradled him in his arms all the way home.

Everybody was his mother.

One day Caesar had this thought: he would row a boat around the estuary to the other side of the inlet then out to sea. He would jump into the ocean and become a fish that a mother would catch and cook. Except that, as he was tossed into the pan, he would change back into himself and describe his journey.

This is how he described his journey. I am a child on a boat. I row it with all of my heart. I am very strong. So strong that when I go around the big finger of land over there, I can raise the boat to the top of a wave and slide down the back of it into a big trough of water where seals and otters are playing around. They invite me in, and I say follow me. When we go very far out, we meet the fish. The

fish say teach us to play. So I dive in, and along with the seals and otters, swim under the boat, which we hurl with our noses into the air. It falls into a hundred pieces. When you can rebuild the boat and do the same thing, then you will know how to play we say. The fish work for a long time. They work and work while we laugh and play. Finally, they get it all patched back together: they have grown hands that can thread the wood with seaweed. It is beautiful this new boat. Silently, I think, I don't want it to go to pieces again, but the fish, already sensing my reluctance, say now we want to play. Okay. Okay, I tell them. You can be a fish they say, then you won't be sad any more. I would like to be a fish now that you know how to play I say, so they all dive under the boat and hurl it into the air. It falls into a hundred pieces and we are all fish.

One day, a mother comes along in a row boat with a fishing net. She is singing this song, "oh, little one where are you from." I think she is calling me, so I jump into her net. She takes me to the fire not knowing I'm me. When she turns me into the pan my blood warms with great power and I turn back into myself. Only I am a year older. I notice that it feels good to have feet again. This is the first thing I notice.

Remember, there are no cars outside of the dead world parking lot but motor bikes, bicycles, a few huge ones and trucks. We all feel the humanness of the big toes, is what the mother says first. She is small, even too small. She doesn't

want to know me is evident by the way she shields her face with her hands, rubbing them together with the stubby fingers extended as far as possible in front of her eyes, nose, then mouth, rubbing and rubbing. I can't take my eyes away from the mother, even though she defends herself from me, she loves the infant attraction. Mothers can be terribly beautiful.

I cannot be an infant again. I step toward her, balancing on the edge of the frying pan on the balls of my feet with the toes resting in the air free as geese, and look down at her to the back of her curl-swirled neck. Those curls hide the munitions factory that will blow up the world in a Sean Connery movie. The mother is a facade concealing another world as large as a psyche bursting with weapons. If one enters the mother's psyche, is it as hellish as the storage shed of the illegal militias still grouped against plagues that have already been defeated?

It is not safe says the mothers to go out into the world. We have found a perfect freedom.

The mother removes her hands from the vicinity of her face, places them slowly one on each thigh, and looks at me in an upright waiting posture. She says everything is okay.

One must be careful with what one says around some mothers. In this case no one has to teach me not to talk.

I wander out into the road. My mother has been gone two or three years. Everybody still talks about her as if she has gone next door, otherwise I wouldn't think about her at

all. Well anyhow, I figure everybody keeps coming and going and living and I am learning how to read without a school. Everybody just teaches each other what they know as if they are doing nothing. But I am like my mother, they all say it, and she is like me, or she would not be gone. They say she left on my account. My account is that of an untidy quickness. Oxymoronic pleasures and chaos of focus. Infant, Handsome, Answer, Barabas, Baby finds me at the mouth of the estuary. He tells me I am not going to cross it alone. Of course not I tell him. I am six years old. Not some stupid little kid like the baby someone threw over the fence into the compost pile then fled. Who do you expect me to talk to? To play with? My childhood has already vanished. Those older girls I live with lost theirs too, because they had to learn everything they missed during all that dying. But why is their barn so big? They are making a new world but it is not a new world, it's just a reaction to the tragedies of the old one. The slave during all of this speech was quietly putting on a skirt.

We are going to go around and not by water, he said, imitating the words of a bad movie script.

I didn't say anything, because I did not know what to do next but followed him dragging my feet. My enthusiasm for leaving home was waning since it wasn't me doing it any more. I had always liked hanging around Answer and hanging onto his legs and riding around on his feet. Now he was acting like a cowboy lunk or wilderness scout, the bullying

sort with a restrained manly voice. I am not on your trip man I said. The words coming out of me were too old for me. Were they words of the dead? I didn't care any more. I had been barely concealing this strange sophistication for some time. Everything was leading to this moment. I was scared. It seemed that I was getting toward seven years old. Thank god, I thought, I can grow into myself. All of this was happening while the breeze died down to nothing. The ocean was as flat as metal trapped in inactive gloom.

I wandered behind him on the path up to the bridge. The bridge weaved like an uncertain old person as Answer crossed it. He was stopped, studying the ground. Then his steps became indefinite, but I figured it was pointless to try to pass him. He'll never let me lead, I thought. I crossed the bridge sullenly, wondering on my way over what if I am really eight or nine or ten? What if everybody has just forgotten to count? There is not enough counting going on. We often grow too much stuff like broccoli, sunflowers, and wild mustard. There is something wrong with me. I do not want to have fun any more. This is not an adventure.

We trudged on the backs of mammoth claw hills. My feelings of timelessness were markedly unrevealing, stupefying, dull. I wondered if we had any food and if it mattered. I imagined roasting wild artichokes and fish with a bit of pungent sage over a fire. My gloomy mood lightened. It didn't matter if we went forward or back to where we had started. Then we bumped into my mom.

**NOT THE WORLD BEYOND
BUT THE WORLD BELOW**



Sometimes a person a fellow person or sister N,O,P,Q or someone big or quite a bit smaller than you and about one hundred years old can make you want by just one word they say or a sentence or a half day's worth of talk or a round of conversations you've had or overheard, can make you want everything. Someone says shoot and you are off and running so full of some kind of exuberant feeling that the earth is better in your mouth than on the ground. And you start to plant things. They can make you want what's under everything you step on. Your turn, says someone in a particularly gentle voice. You have to resist making up names. It's all hats. It's all sandwich. It's all a variety of a species of elephantine daisies grown black bobbing in hidden springs with these silly sunshiny smirks that the girl up the hill brought with her when the abortion doctor fell out the window before the operation but didn't die because Gardener was there to catch her with her big pregnant belly swilling in the sky like a drink of Russian vodka in the world below windows under the eaves where a streaked and almost naked conversation, someone saying why don't you take your clothes off, because sometimes a person wants everything including the simple spices dropped onto the ground and crowded out by shoes and talk and whatever slam slate or little trap filled with the sad rodent babies of days devoured by plague was going to come of the words we call for each other with when we the slave and Gardener, Gardener and strangers, and M on the sidelines dropping her gold pan

panning for gold she the lone digger up there in the Trinity River hovering over the saliva and the youth saying look for Venus and the Bear, one's over your head, one's near your fat. How did we get so far north was the question Caesar wanted to ask. M says, I know that all these facts are not worth a dime, or nickel, says Caesar with a funny little wink. A nickel now that's money that sticks. I want everything, says Gardener, a three piece suit and a bonnet, a rock and claw, tooth and nail, the hair from a fly-eating orchid and freedom for Answer who says, give me your coat and underwear. I never said that said Infant, Barabas, Answer, Handsome, or Slave. Of course not, says Gardener. Emphasis is not the same as fact. You never said anything so coarse as what I can do with anything and never be hurt by it. The best of life is coarse words that take up their ways in our ears forever. She put her hand on Caesar's back.

But what is it that makes you want all of this want everything? asked Caesar. The big boy was as distant as a cow when he spoke. He felt his words sometimes wanting to choke him before they came out.

Someone, says Caesar, has to be mindful. The slave who was not a slave but a free person of unspecified designation looked at Gardener with the knowing smile of an anthropologist who has just heard what he was waiting to hear. He did not yet know what he was going to do with the information and kept his mouth shut for just a minute too long.

They had been climbing around in everything which means a jungle and a swamp and some Swiss hillside until they reached an old dump with shreds of metal and heaps of damp charcoal, with some piles of what resembled ancient fish carcasses and yellow-bellied flies or bees and the skull of a child. I can't do anything with this shit, neither can I, or me, not I, no this is as old, as old as a dead child. What time is it? Now wait a minute where'd you get that watch? How're you going to set it? Run back to M's shack where everything works. But there's nothing to eat, yelled M from the top of the hill where she stood as usual looking down at the procession. We can set the watch when we get back. Come look at this court.

On the court, which was a big circle smashed to smithereens with thyme growing in-between blooming purple all over the place, were several benches. On the benches one east one west one north were corpses one east one west one north. They had been human women and they were now in shreds. Their bones fastened on the outside of weathered print dresses. Their heads were bowed like dummy puppets waiting for the puppeteer to bring them to life. Because in this world everything was desired there had to be the three corpses and their clothes were beautiful. They might have been ugly but they weren't. The pale green silk cloth of the clothes was as perfect as the ocean when it is at its most peaceful.

Caesar looked at them with an analytical eye. These are three furies he said. I know about furies. You don't really, said Gardener. Caesar never argued with his mother. They're more like the three Marys. But like is not the same as it. Said Caesar. You mean comparison is not the same as fact. Something like that.

The fact is, said Caesar, I didn't die yet. How old are you? asked M. Get closer and I'll tell you, said Caesar. M was still keeping her distance. The slave found this somehow agreeable. Nothing is as it seems. I am twelve I think. No not yet, said Gardener. Gardener had forgotten that there was a way to talk to children. She actually hadn't forgotten but did not know how any more. I think that might be all for the best, is how she justified her own cruelty. It isn't so mean after all is it? I could be dead but I'm not, said Caesar. I could be in those chairs. The skull could be mine. Or mine, said Gardener. She took Caesar's hand and Caesar didn't seem to like it but then he did. He wanted his mother to hold him. Even if it was the slave who never left his side. He and the slave were men.

And yet Gardener wanted everything. So the hand was somehow just part of everything. Caesar was first intoxicated and then rebuked, denied, crushed by her lusty voracious feelings of proliferation. How could you be my mother? He put his hand on her big belly. The baby is going to kick he announced. And it did.

The slave gave a little start when he saw Caesar touch the mother again. He did not like Caesar's fascination for the person who had left him for so long. He wanted Caesar to grow up strong as he had but connected to something useful. Something truthful perhaps, accurate and precise, dizzingly adult. And yet the slave was not simply a victim of emotion, he was not only guided and trampled by impulse, he did not just seek pleasure for the sake of the infancy he had lost. They had all lost it. They felt it in the words gone wild in each other's faces. Gardener was all over herself and everybody else again. The baby was going to come out yelling and never stop. Climbing all over themselves. Letting each other in and even climbing up that stupid hill to meet M when we were having such a great time down here with the dead. It was a literary and life experience at the same time we could read ourselves in the skeleton's costumes. We could see their claws dangling in the thyme. Because we knew them too. We knew the feeling of them saying I will help you out and then not being there.

They had been infants in the hands of the dead. And what came about was their living.

They reached M with their dizzying babble and M said leave this man alone. I like to admire you from a distance. She was shaking. Gardener saw her shake. And the world swirled around her captured prey.

The slave, who was actually an anthropologist without an employer, saw at this moment that he had perhaps grown

too close to Caesar. Why now he wanted to know do I have to feel my job title creep up on me? The disguise was so much fun and no one really took it seriously. Just as anyone could jump over the low walls surrounding the garden, I could walk over anything and open any door. It was only the people that got in your way. Someone was always watching because in this strange world seeing anything is thought to be part of who you are. I don't even have anybody to tell a story to. Perhaps I should go in search of other scientists. I will write a book for these people to read. How would you like to see yourselves through the lens of my discipline? he asked. And Gardener, whose thoughts had been only on M, paused in wonderment. My mother is lost for words, thought Caesar. This is the best thing that has ever happened.

Gardener thought about what she was going to say before she said it and we were all surprised. It will show what happens when an imagined world is that which is being made in fact. I like people to do what they want. And although I have no desire to make such an account myself, I am afraid I cannot give you permission to write it on your own. I will not have it any other way. Without my collaboration, there is no book.

And in it she told the tale of Sylvan. The boldness of him going down on her of her on him. Of this man who only liked men. And after all, I'm one too sometimes she said, patting her belly as she thought about what else she

would say about this absolutely entirely and solely erotic love. But when I knew that I was pregnant the love went into the baby and there was nothing else for him she said. He didn't even care. He loved his men. When he kissed them on the neck on the shoulder, now that he knew me there was no frozen male competitive disharmony or false politeness but a lot of touching and jokes, he was so sweet on them. And I wasn't like that at all. I was sweet on no one. Not sweet and not ever sweet but as coarse as dry grass in a high wind. I wanted him to stop swooning and feel the hardness of the muscles in my legs, the scratchy tough skin, the dry hungry lips that are me, but he would submerge quietly in his whirlpool of imperceptible pleasures. That is not where I really wanted to be. And yet I sank into him with a nearly mournful desperation. He would say when I was preparing to leave, don't worry others will come, for he wanted as we want, everything, it to continue.

Between and among all of them, the rose thorns, slack wicker, and collapsing fences arranged the city into a promise.

Atelos was founded in 1995 as a project of Hip's Road and is devoted to publishing, under the sign of poetry, writing that challenges the conventional definitions of poetry, since such definitions have tended to isolate poetry from intellectual life, arrest its development, and curtail its impact.

All the works published as part of the Atelos project are commissioned specifically for it, and each is involved in some way with crossing traditional genre boundaries, including for example, those that would separate theory from practice, poetry from prose, essay from drama, the visual image from the verbal, the literary from the non-literary, and so forth.

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The project directors and editors are Lyn Hejinian and Travis Ortiz. The director for text production and design is Travis Ortiz; the director for cover production and design is Ree Katrak.

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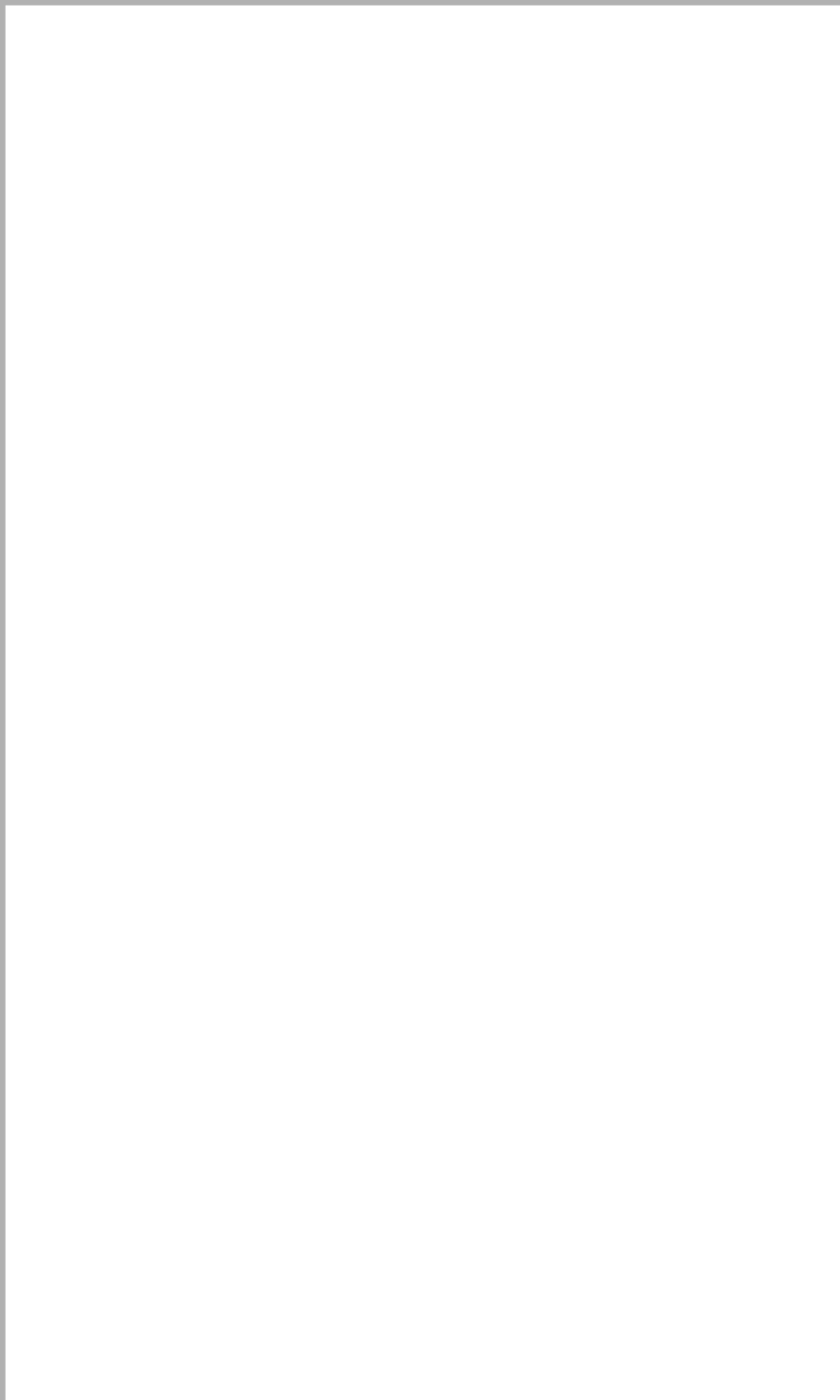
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