



**BARNARD LITERARY MAGAZINE**

**Autumn, 1983**

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AUTUMN, 1983

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## FOR YOU AND THE TUB

You want me to be silent, I refuse.  
It is not my mind, It is my hands.  
They shake hard with this between them.  
Don't write, don't let that pain swallow paper.  
Keep it down.

I tried, I stared at the ceiling,  
the white-clean-white, the black shelves,  
the bright rugs were too alive to watch.  
I walked into the bathroom and settled  
my eyes over the rounding porcelain.  
Its cold touch was obscene and I had to gag.  
The walls were damp with tiles and sweat,  
they held in everything, I could feel the pressure,  
feel the bulging, enormous feat of holding out  
between floor and floor, between sharp angles.  
That skin must have begged many times  
for the relief of just one crack.  
I grabbed the tap and screamed,  
just let it come, just one  
quick rush of ice-clean water.  
The taps bellowed back in gasps.  
The rust came out sparkling as a jewel and flashed past.  
I had no time to howl before the moon  
sank hollow into the air shaft  
and cut the window in two precise halves  
glistening with the power of jagged glass,  
craving soft skin, that easy tear and smooth slicing  
would sound so sweet against the silence of iron gratings,  
against the deep yearning moans of dark cement,  
obscured by a flat brick shadow twenty stories high.

I see your lips  
in the egg-shell mouth  
of the tub.

You say that this is not a poem, no structure, no form,  
Does it even have a meaning, you ask.  
I admit that the meaning is mine.  
I am self centered, incapable of comprehending  
the universal whole and sliding it neatly  
into place like glass doors, until every possibility  
is questioned, answered, and affirmed.  
At least an attempt, you say,  
the simple glorification of a flower  
would do to prove that you have come  
within an inch of the written word.

I am lost in the gilt-edged pages of your book.  
I wish to slither out and find my own apple, you can have a bite  
if you ask nicely. If you refuse then I beg you,  
pass me a glance of dog-eared pity, and leave me alone.  
I will push my shaking hand down into the swaying heads of trees,  
I will find my own core, but first,  
tonight, standing between sink and obscene tub  
I am going to cry my fears far into the bowels of this firm building.  
I am going to leave my pain deep in someone else's structure.

Nina Solomon

## UNTITLED

Sleep my darling, darling dear,  
While I think  
What I like in the white tailed deer  
Are the mating habits: speedy and direct,  
Like a good route.

This is not our mushroom love,  
With clumsy growth and clumsy tongue:

Deer love is lip over gum,  
Swollen gland and swollen round,  
With the snap of having just begun and ended  
Then  
With little sound.

Snore on, my love, lover of mushrooms;  
Even now we are a deadly cloud.  
Over the combat that kept hands between us.  
Over the part that was fiery and loud.

Soon will be time for breakfast and shyness;  
Then come the rituals of towels and plates;  
There will be children and cocktails between us—  
As many and often as deer change their mates.

I ache  
From the ram mount quake  
And distant leaf crackle  
Of go away wake.

(Roll me to sleep in elbows and arms;  
Whisper me proof of breeding and charm;  
Bathe me; scent me; polish my toes;  
I sleep and wish for you antlers and hooves.)

Katharine Gelfman

### **PYGMALION'S SECRET**

that he carved her first  
from an apple  
and left her  
glowering on a tablecloth

that he felt her  
in a bar of soap

that he traced her  
over and over again  
in his heel  
with his thumbnail

that he finally chose stone

Katharine Gelfman



## HOW TO HANDLE A POEM

Lay it on a pillow  
And tuck clean sheets  
Against it.

Hang it across the courtyard  
And let the wind  
Belly and swell it against the sky.  
You can watch from the cobblestones.  
Watch the light  
Bring out all the color it finds  
Where you thought there was none.

Spread it on the beach  
Where the waves can peak  
And then splash it with white;  
Where the sand will loll with it  
Under a lazy sun  
Or skirt with it through the dunes.  
You watch from the boardwalk.  
Listen to it babble with the ocean.

And then walk with it in evening.  
It will be careful when it crosses rocks,  
And it will whisper to you  
so softly  
You may need to hear it twice.  
Listen with it to the sounds of sleeping birds,  
And to the quietude it tucks into the night.

Diane Moroff

Why; why; why? All they ask. For hours. For days on end, or nights. I don't know. I'm on artificial time now. Interrogation time. Why did you do it? How could you do it, Miss Himeros? Why did you stab your lover to death? Why murder? Like in all those old spaghetti westerns where they hassle the Mexican guy, all he says is, "porque." I like that. I've always liked Spanish because the word for "why" is the same as the word for "because." That's my answer. Mom says, "Why do you cry so, Dorothy? Good God! David's dead and you did it. You, who once loved him and probably still do. Are you sorry? Please give someone a *real* motive so all the nice detectives can go home to their meatloaf dinners in white houses." Like rats in Skinner boxes; pull the lever—get a reward; nice little rat.

No. I say because and I mean it. Say, start from the beginning? Oh let's! I should start from there. people always do. If you are gonna start it'll probably be at the beginning. They say that. They also say that life is a circle. If life is a circle, then there can't be any real beginning. Silly. They always contradict themselves. Idiots. Idiots who ask "why." Funny.

Pick a circle segment to curve around. I know, the time right before they turned New Jersey into a parking lot for New York and right after they found out that all the jokes about Jersey were true. There was a Jersey Mentality after all. Called it, "Jersey Mentality Syndrome." Horrid. David, I've always hated N.J. just because you were from there. You don't even or didn't even have a Jersey Mentality. But your family did. Your family. Mom, the eternal statistic; raises 2.5 children and neurotically sits in the kitchen chewing her nails between Valiums. And Dad, something in a beer can perhaps? Ever drunk and belching insults back at the t.v. and Mom. Out of work, out of anything that vaguely resembles patience. When his ship came in, he was in the VIP lounge pre-

tending to be a VI anything and picking peanut skins out of his teeth with a parking ticket. And the 2.5 children, yes, David, you were one of them, a whole digit with your fluoride smile and knotty hands, and your brother, Tom, was one with his nasal voice and menthol perception. But your sister, Allison, only a .5, definitely not a full numerical value there. No, not Allison with no man to hold her, a real Venus di Milo of a girl; no man's arms to hold her, nope, no arms to hold them back. No one is ever good enough for her, not my brother Jeff, not Paul Newman, not Godzilla, no one. The eternal asexual. What a jerk. She watches the "Wizard of Oz" every year and cries everytime. Insists on a transcending plot line along the lines of Goethe. A true .5, not even but, hey, we're trying for that 2.5 image so we'll let it go this time. What time? This time, remember?

I was working for the Renwick Agency, theatrical booking agency. This was after I finally failed as an actress. I was then the bodiless phone voice who said "no" to everyone all day, every day, as was done straight to my little actress face so many times before. No, no, no. No, Mr. David, What's-your-face the writer. "We" are not interested in reading your scripts. No, Mr. David, you may not come in for an appointment. No. "We'll" be in touch . . . maybe.

He liked my voice. My pleasant sugar-coated on-the-phone one. He could have it all the time. I told him so, at the movies. We'd go all the time. He's a true movie fiend. Worse than me. Hey, David! Remember Peter Lorre? "I had no place to put my knife, so I put it in his back." Actually, it was a letter opener and I put it in his front; so he could see. Watch me open my male. He didn't even struggle. David just looked up at me with his Hershey syrup eyes and cracked zigzag face. He was so pathetic, comically so, and I'm a true sucker for pathos. I always wanted to die for love but I don't know how. Next best thing . . . I guess.

But I feel so damn honored. My sister, the saint, came to visit me. Dear me, you mean you took time off from perfection to climb off your pedestal and to whimper into a hand-

kerchief for me? Amazing. I don't know why anyone would actually *use* a handkerchief. Guess she can't bear to waste those precious tears on disposable Kleenex. They might fall into the wrong hands or something and heal somebody or worse, they might discover her tears are only salt water and tell her she's only human after all. Mom couldn't have that. You know, I've always had this awful desire to ask Saint Anne if she masturbates! I almost believe she has nothing there to touch. I think it all sealed up from lack of use years ago. We all know she never peed in her life. I can't ever remember her being in line for the bathroom anyway. She's so precious. She brought me some "little things" from "home" that I might need "during my stay." She makes it sound like I'm at a health club. She brought two washcloths and those scented bath beads that look like fish eyes. Poor Anne probably thinks they are going to wash the murder away.

She also brought me a batch of her "oh-so-famous" oatmeal cookies. They are enormous and weigh a ton; such a martyr to carry them with her. She thinks of everything, one really needs one's roughage in prison, always thinking that girl, and always thought of. If they gas me, I want her face to be my last thought; her face in Grecian marble with blank eye holes staring.

Now, Howard the guard stares at me all the time. Why do you stare at me with your beefy red face? Everything about that man says "beef." MEAT! He even smells like bologna. He's so damned messy too. Crumbs in his beard. How can you take someone seriously when you can see what they had for lunch. Mr. Beef stares at me like I'm in a deli window and I'll end up in his beard with mustard spotted upon his accordian-pleated paunch. Your buzzer is ringing. If it's Hollywood, do tell them "NO." Thinks I'm a criminal. I don't think I am. Not really. Maybe I've a criminal mind but I'd say I'm more like a spy. I watch and wait the way spies do. And wait and wait. Problem is when you're waiting, it helps to know what you're waiting for. I just wait, for David,

for my life to fix itself, and for the sake of waiting. David. It always comes back to him. Funny.

I used to like to see myself through his brown eyes. Mine are blue and I think I see things too crisply and cool. He saw things bathed in the warmth of hot cocoa. He had a *Reader's Digest* perception of things. Everything was all condensed—edited. It was charming though, sort of. He said I had a body like a fire hydrant—Charming. He'd laugh at me. I wanted to be a virgin bride. I didn't make it. Mom used to say, "Reputations like stockings run easily and can never be repaired." Well, Mom, I ran mine, ripped and shredded them to pieces, so I wore pants. Sex has always been a big problem for me. It never quite lived up to what I thought it would be. In the movies, it's so soft and beautiful. No one ever sweats or grunts, and no one ever waits til you fall asleep and sneaks off to take a shower. Big let down. Life is like that.

Life is always different than the movies. David never minded but that always bothered me. Funny.

They know I like movies. I saw it on one of their charts. HIMEROS: DOROTHY, NICKNAME: DOT, CAUCASIAN, FEMALE, 5'3", BLUE/BROWN, CHARGE: MURDER, TRIAL: PENDING PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSERVATION AND EVALUATION, LIKES MOVIES.

I'm really 5'5 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". I suppose the BLUE/BROWN is eyes/hair though I did suggest that color scheme for a more contemporary isolation cell. In "Niagra," Marilyn would have liked that, MURDER . . . David? I just opened him up to see what was really in there. There are so many things to take in a human being. I only took his life.

Joanne Brown

## DISTORTIONS

Not like the time I thought  
I had no arms and two left legs  
And mumbled of two kittens  
Playing violin and cello duets—  
No excuse of fever this time,  
No excuse but idleness perhaps:

I closed my eyes and saw  
Pagodas, brocade robes, ivory  
And jade, festival dragons, orient  
Lions: so vividly. And I believed  
A short minute, that I was  
The Great Wall of China,  
All those miles long laid out,  
And every bit aching, weeping pain.

The next night, closing eyes,  
I saw all around Eskimos, and  
White, wide-eyed baby harp seals.  
I heard them crying, I thought.  
China, Alaska, where will I go  
Tomorrow night? How I stray  
In idleness, yet I cannot will  
My soul myself on any travel.

Kathryn Fernquist—Bosco

## PLAYING

I am alone on one side of the street, yelling "Car. Car, C-A-R." They are all on the other, yelling too, and waving at me over the station wagon as it drives past. I hear my voice, louder and more panicky than the rest. It echoes even as I yell.

Mother says we can hide in any room but hers. It is raining against the side of the house and gray sits in the windows where light is supposed to spread. When they are It, they hide in dark places, in attics and basements and old trunks, so I look only in closets, under beds and behind doors. They wait where I will never find them and come out too soon. I hide where a light is on and I let a flap of my sweater or a few strands of my hair stick out across the rug like bread crumbs—ending their search and my seclusion quickly.

After dinner we play Flashlight Tag in the backyard. Black bushes with dark eyes and gaping hollows crouch along the edges of the lawn. I make mad, reckless dashes from one bush to the next, knowing the flashlight's beam will touch me and I'll be It. I squeal or laugh when I run so that they'll not miss me. The bushes hold a splotchy ring around us while we play. I cannot remain within their dark arms. I cannot risk their grabbing me and holding me in their lonesome obscurity.

I am crying while my mother holds open the screen door to the kitchen. "Go back and play," she says. But they always catch me. "Be responsible. Move slowly," she says. The girl on the lawn in red shorts yells, "Green light!" She turns her back and we run up the yard, cautiously, toward her. My mother smiles at me from the screen door. "Red light!" the girl yells and I am caught with one arm still falling, one foot sweeping through the grass. "You have to learn to be more careful," Mother says. I say it's beyond my control.

"You are very cold," a boy in blue jeans says as I look be-

tween books on the shelf. "The winds are howling," he says. I cross the room. "Warmer, warmer." I dig under the cushions on the couch. "You're burning," he says. "You're on fire!" and then I find the napkin he hid. I am bitterly disappointed with my prize.

Father is standing in the doorway of my room. My eyes are closed but I know it's him. I heard him whisper to see if I was up. He walks to the side of my bed and kisses my forehead. When he is gone, I slide my hand under my pillow as he had done and find the two quarters he left for my tooth.

Now I know, and I am disappointed. Some kids have said there's no such thing while we play kickball in the street. And now I know. But if there are no fairies then maybe I can take care of myself. The bushes will be nothing but bushes. I could run to my parents now and yell excitedly, "I know! I know!" But I decide against it. I think, it is dark and I am alone, and I laugh exultant laughter.

Diane Moroff



## WINDOW KEEPING

But what if these are not pine trees?  
—if they are oaks or elms  
or some other deciduous masterpiece  
of rhythm and smell,  
will it mean our deal is off?

The woman  
standing in her window  
across the street  
Smokes her cigarettes without inhaling.  
Cooks with lard in black skillet.  
Lifts her child to see over the plants.  
This is the keeping track of humanness.

It is entirely possible  
that someone has been editing the texts  
without telling us.  
Do we reread?

Or do we just prefer  
to exit out our doorways  
into the space held between  
without glancing up to see who's watching?

The window keeps the woman  
five floors up.  
I steady myself.  
Your voice rings  
the answer to some question:  
some tree-worry gone silly.  
You somehow do not hear in my voice  
that I have turned to warm stone.

I tell you  
that we have all been being too humble.  
All of us taught  
some weak whisper  
at wooden dinner tables.

And we have been ungrateful  
not to the woman or to the window,  
but to the keeping track.  
There is a rustling sound to it,  
and a thin odor.

I suspect you of some special knowledge:  
How long before I *am* this building?  
I hang my tongue down half a story  
and scowl with all my breathy might  
to impress the other gargoyles.

Tell me how long before I wear this window for clothes  
when I walk down this street  
and into the grocery?

I am alarmed, but I don't apologize.  
I can wait quietly, solidly on the street.

Lynn Dougherty

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR 3 P.M. RAIN DANCE

Your eyes will adjust  
to this queer afternoon brightness,  
and so will the other senses  
and intuitions.

You must already be wondering  
if there will also be rain here.

Ask.

In every new place  
we each get three wishes.

Say this:

*Where is the rain?*

Or:

*I need the rain of the off-season  
with all the winds and flashes.*

*Give it to me now  
or expect the dry eyed look  
of weariness  
that is so common here  
in this part of the year.*

You may hear some whispering.  
Ignore it. You will need to sound responsible.

Try:

*Give to me the thunderstorms  
that break open steeples  
and yes, I will set out  
the pond watchers  
and the painted Wood Duck decoys.*

Then demand:  
*Hand me over the deluge*  
*that is this and every day's easy fury.*

If you get this far,  
the rest will come to you.  
You will hear your voice  
pouring:  
*Make to me the gift of water*  
*and I will make it*  
*somehow up to you.*  
*My torrential gratitude*  
*will wash your sleep*  
*with the tropical storms of your childhood.*

These are suggestions.  
Do not be afraid  
to find some instinct  
in your long pointed fingers  
that are so well suited for this.  
When it begins to rain,  
you can, of course, ask for other things:  
birds, trees, bodies of water.

Lynn Dougherty

## A MAN, HIS WIFE, AND THE SEA

Once upon a time there was a man who lived with his beautiful wife in a house by the sea. He was not a fisherman, however—he owned a store in the town. Like his father, who had owned the store before him, he sold mostly fruits, vegetables, and cheeses, and other farmers' goods. But he also sold baubles and ribbons and bright-colored garments made by his wife. They were very happy in their house by the sea, because they loved the fierce water, especially during storms when it crashed against the rocks and made majestic high white dragons of foam. But they did not love each other.

One day, like every day, the man was in town tending his store, and the woman sat on a rock above the sea embroidering a purple-ribboned vest with scarlet floss, and sang as she worked. The foam-dragons loved her voice, and rose up to listen. The storm did not disturb her, and with the wind lashing her salt-wet hair against her cheeks, she remained on the rock, sewing and singing.

The highest and mightiest and whitest of the foam-dragons was named Karth. For a long time he had burned with passion for the storekeeper's beautiful wife. Now, her voice had never been more beautiful, she had never been more beautiful, and she had never been nearer. Karth rose up and crashed down upon the rock. He surrounded the woman, and carried her into the sea. Water filled her mouth and lungs, and she could no longer sing.

The storm died down, and the man returned to his house by the sea. He called for his wife, but of course, she did not answer. He went out to the back of the house, where it faced the wild water. He saw the half-embroidered, purple-ribboned vest lying on the rock. He went out on the rock and looked into the water. Deep down, he thought he saw his wife's soft hair undulating with the waves—but perhaps it was only sea-grass. He picked up the vest, intending to take it to the store and sell it the next day. Suddenly and unexpectedly he

began to weep, and flung the vest into the sea, hating the foam-dragons for taking her away.

The scarlet-embroidered vest floated slowly down through the water. A red-haired mermaid swimming along the anemones found it and thought it was a gift for her. She was enchanted by it. She adored it. She put it on, and swam eagerly up to the surface to thank her supposed admirer. When she poked her head out of the water she saw the man weeping and cursing on the rock. The sun was starting to set now and was tinting the horizon gold. As the mermaid waited for the man to notice her, the gold light crept down from the horizon toward the shore, and by the time he looked at her she was enveloped in it. She was very beautiful, but the man did not care and did not speak, but stared at the vest.

“Thank you, my lord, for this lovely garment. It is the nicest present I have ever received,” the mermaid said in a sing-song voice. The man still only stared, and did not say anything. The mermaid thought he was a mute.

“My lord, let me thank you for your gift. Let me give you something in return. I will give you a strong and resonant and singing voice, if you’ll let me.”

The man coughed and tried to stop his sobbing. “I have a voice. I have no wife.” He began to weep again.

The mermaid misunderstood, and was only too glad to make the shopkeeper her husband. She swam closer to the rock and stretched out her arms to him. A sunset-gilded wave swept him off the rock, and down into the sea with the mermaid who wore his wife’s purple-ribboned vest. She took him to her anemone garden, which was not far away from the coral palace of Karth.

In the coral palace Karth made love to the shopkeeper’s beautiful wife, and dressed her in strings of pearls, and made her a queen of the foam-dragons. Whenever he went up to the surface to plunder ships, he brought back to her as much of

the voyagers' treasure as he could carry, so that she was soon adorned with more jewels than any queen of the land. She was under Karth's spell, for he filled her with the power that she had loved to watch during storms from the windows and rocky beach of her house by the sea.

One day she was wandering through Karth's gardens, and strayed from the grounds of the coral palace into the mermaid's anemone garden. She heard the mermaid singing beautifully, and was entranced. She went closer to listen. Something rose up within her, and impetuously she tried to join the song—but the salt water had destroyed her voice, and she made no sound. As she listened to the mermaid's she began to grow jealous, and went still closer to see the singer. Parting a soft wall of kelp, she first saw the mermaid's tail, then the rich rusty-colored hair, and the beautiful face. Then she saw the scarlet-embroidered vest, barely covering the mermaid's round white breasts—and then she saw her husband smiling, with his head resting in her lap. Something rose up within her, but she could not even speak to call her husband. The salty water began to hurt her eyes as it never had before.

Suddenly a great roar came from the coral palace. Karth had returned from sinking a ship, loaded with gold coins and rubies to adorn his queen, and was angry at finding her gone. She did not even hear the sounds of his rage, for she was transfixed by her husband's beauty. She had never before noticed how lovely—like sea foam—her husband's wavy hair was. She saw for the first time the depth and color of the sea in his eyes. She fell in love with him.

At Karth's roar the mermaid cut short her song. She and the shopkeeper looked up, startled, toward the coral palace, and immediately saw the woman peering at them through the kelp. She held out her hand to the man, but the mermaid held him back. He could not speak either. He looked at his wife, and then at the mermaid who had made him her husband. He looked at his wife's pearls and jewels, and then at the mermaid's purple-ribboned vest. He became vaguely

aware that something was wrong with the garments, that neither belonged to the woman who wore it, but to the other. He became vaguely aware that both loved him. But he did not have time to puzzle out all of this for behind his wife the sea was stirring violently as raging Karth approached the anemone garden, looking for the shopkeeper's beautiful wife, to take her back again.

Then the shopkeeper remembered his anger at losing her the first time, and knew he could not bear it to happen again. The woman was his, and they were the land's. The mermaid was Karth's, and the sea's. Gently, because she had been kind to him, and without her he would not have found his wife, he took the scarlet and purple vest from the mermaid, and went to his wife with it. Now Karth was only a few years away, and even the mermaid had to clutch at the seagrass against the power of the boiling water stirred up by the foam-dragon. Karth parted the kelp wall and reached out, intending with a lash of one claw to do away with the shopkeeper, and with the other to seize the woman. But the shopkeeper tore the pearl gown from his wife, and threw the pearls at Karth. Some hit him in the eyes; the rest rolled beneath his feet. The foam-dragon slid on the pearls, and the strong jetting current caused by his fall carried the man and his wife away.

They were washed together up onto the rock where the woman had sat embroidering long ago. They breathed hard, and reached for each other, and held each other. They coughed the salt water out of their lungs and throats, and for the first time said words of love to each other, as the sun warmed and dried them.

Below the waves, the highest and mightiest and whitest of the foam-dragons was blind. He reached for his queen, but instead embraced the mermaid. They wept together—it was the only time salt water ever hurt their eyes.

Kathryn Fernquist-Bosco



## TO CASSANDRA

She's there, alone in the cellar  
shifting glances down its passageways,  
guarded whispers round its bleak, damp  
crevices and corners—  
she's waiting for that diffident belated cue.

Once she saw the sky and shivered in its nighttime,  
revelled in its day it was a  
Sanctioned, an  
Absolute proposal.

Damn, how she bore the curses, rejected the prayers,  
stocked her chronicles with laughter.

Sad, that venture that would leave her daughter,  
                    (and then her daughter's daughter),  
richer and more knowing.

Now, instead, knowing nothing but a formula for 'certain'  
                    liberation  
that recurs as if only in a dream of sensible requests  
guiding what we'll ask for next,  
a raise,  
a friendship,  
we block the sky.

As you crouch low amidst the damp, cold, shivering plentitude  
of the early vision  
waiting for our cue  
we mangle all our meanings in the few words we've learned by  
                    heart.

Yes, we know the sky's our right,  
but haggle after it like barterers in the late, dull  
and empty afternoon of open market.

Yes, we know, and yet have offered less than knowing to your,  
to our,  
venture—  
good god how we have grown so fearful of the sky.

Julia D. Lisella

## PHENNIS

Now, the house was for the lamps. That was a secret I thought they knew. The house was simply a great wood frame for the lamps. Harry had his own reasons, but to me the house was a beating vessel: sea and ship in one; but a vessel nevertheless for the lamps. I tried to put them in such peculiar spots that I myself would forget where they were; what lovely surprises I gave myself! I would come upon a curving form, like arms that yearned until they merged into one flame, reaching for me. I saw the lamps as eternal children, whose breath I could kindle and lower, kindle and kindle, always.

I have many secrets. Ellen and Anne, like the lamps, reveal thousands of my seed-pearl secrets every second, but I have hidden them so well they do not know what shines in their hands, their eyes, their rage. Every few years one or the other returns home, outraged at having finally discovered a bloom between her bones that I implanted there. "Why didn't you tell me?" she screams, pointing out that there she was, sitting in a restaurant, and someone looked too closely beneath her skin and found something growing there. When she saw the traces of my fingers, she took the next train home. I couldn't have told you, I say calmly, but I won't deny that I was, perhaps, cruel.

Harry denied it until his death. But Harry had no secrets, really, did not know the nature of secrets. He supposedly died of heart failure, but I think his pragmatism had finished the journey it began at his birth from head to heart. He couldn't think of a reason to continue parading all that blood around, so he simply stopped. Not that he didn't hear what was knocking through the walls that summer the house burned down, but he was able to admit he heard it, then to roll over and go to sleep. It's all just physical, said his inert back, don't cry, Phennis. When I think of him now I remember his glasses, pinched and golden on his bony nose, dividing

the two halves of his head: the half with features and the half without. His nose was as thin and upright as the hands of a clock, brought eternally together in the center of his face. Not that I never loved him. Only, a certain inertia which both kept us together and depressed us lay over our eyes like gauze. I peered out through the tiny squares for years. As I could see clearly except for those fine white lines, I thought I didn't notice them. But after he died I remembered how that gauze hadn't always stretched and scratched across my head.

I took Harry for my husband and the garden for my own. I still grieve for the garden. The new landowners have never touched my private plot and it has therefore rioted in a sort of permanent organic reflection of the night the house burned. By the time I came to the garden I was too old to run through it; I could only tend it, hoping it would drive or drown my children. So you see the trip they made every day, from lamps to garden, garden to lamps, day to night, unaware of what they were learning, but learning it all the same. How else could I have told them so that they would truly see, truly hear?

The secrets I hoarded did not have names. I did not pull them out of drawers at night, hold them up to the light, and look through the wrappings to say, "Oh yes, here is the third." They were certain matrices, constellations of events and qualities by which I charted myself. My breath caught when I first saw four-year-old Ellen throw back her head as my sister threw back her head as my mother threw back her head. Or when the girls talked and between them there flashed what had flashed between me and my own sister.

I rubbed another vein of my secrets into the wood. On the afternoons when I didn't fall asleep, my hands were in the wood. I read once that the faith healers of the Philippines can plunge their hands into a stomach as if it were water and bring forth the organs to be cured. I brought forth light from the wood. Furniture. Dead objects, cut off from their roots scattered God-knows-where: I gave them lustre slipping down all the curves. Some mornings I went back into

the country, to other people's houses, for the cabinets, sofas, end-tables left to rot in barns. Every time I brought back a piece it was a resurrection. Although some afternoons my ever-present glass simply slid to the floor with its traces of gin and orange juice coloring the bottom. I mentioned Harry's eyeglasses earlier: he looked out at my furniture through them, through his magnified blue eyes which wobbled and bobbed as if suspended by strings from the underside of his skull. More than once I thought his eyes had as little color and as much relevance to his emotion as the glasses rimmed on the bottom with orange had to mine. I used to think, I can't let the glass drop, it will make a great clatter, everything will be fine if I just don't let it fall. And every night after Harry had cleaned his glasses with a pale blue rag he would draw his feet up and behind him, close his eyes, and lie down on his side in one motion, all with his back to me. He seemed to feel exposed without those round bits over his eyes. During the first few years of our marriage he would look me full in the eye at night and say, "Phennis, there are only a few things I can do without my glasses, so we'd best take advantage of my limited abilities." Then he would wink and I would smile hesitantly. Desire for him in the present, active tense was strange to me. The garden, the lamps, the wood—we all touched constantly, intimately, consconsiously in the house.

When Ellen and Anne run to the walls for forgiveness now, they should remember the house and the times they found me sleeping late into the afternoon.

Anne remembers details, of course, because she was older. Ellen, however, is imprinted more deeply because she had fewer layers, fewer years to wrap around her when the horrible silence was cutting closer and closer right before Harry died. How could I have told her that to come hear me was to hug the blade so tight that it became a bond between us, even now?

I knew that Anne sought redemption in women, I knew that Celia, who was there the summer the house burned, was

her lover. And I opened my house to them, my garden, allowed them to lie on my furniture, touch under the light of my lamps. I told them tales they never knew they had heard, implanting in each one a piece of myself so that if they were all—Celia, Anne, Ellen—gathered in one room they would understand quite suddenly why they must be together. So that when they emptied even the emptiest pockets they would find me there. And, if in those days when Anne mercilessly doubted herself, she was trying to cut through my silence to find her own, I imagine she succeeded only in discovering that there is no difference, no sign marked “Anne’s personal dark” standing between mine and hers, or hers and Celia’s, or anyone’s. Ellen, who had assumed the fear-riddled silence was her own, is only now suspecting otherwise.

When one or the other comes to see me in my little house, we tell each other the story of the weather, the job, the rent, these topics have taken the place of the three or four bedtime stories I repeated for them every night when they were children. Don’t tell me the story of the house, say their eyes, tell me the one about who you saw in the grocery store yesterday and I’ll tell you about my landlord. Once in a while one of them will bring up the burning, tentatively, but I give no sign of encouragement.

This is what I remember of the house burning. I could only find three or four lamps as I ran through the hallways in the dark. I set them in a row well away from the house, which seemed to wait politely for its inhabitants to leave before it devoured itself with a vengeance reserved for personal vendettas. There were a few pieces of furniture and some clothing on the lawn. I had the idea in my head that if I arranged the furniture on the lawn as it had been arranged in its separate rooms, and found hangers for the clothing, and sat down calmly on my sofa, the walls and doorways and windows would return, like homing pigeons. I remember pulling the furniture this way and that until, exhausted, I realized the futility of my efforts. I looked into the garden and saw

Ellen and Anne and Celia there, standing in a silent line. Even then I knew that we would have to sell the land to cover our losses and with the land went my garden. I still live in this neighborhood only so I can drive up the driveway to get a glimpse of the tangle of green every now and then.

The grieving began not on the night of the fire, when I felt and saw the flames, but afterwards, when they had left me with the dark hull. Fortunately, Harry and I only had to walk through the house once.

I closed my eyes, I touched the walls. At every step I had the curious sensation that I had somehow separated into two beings: the one who walked and the one who was being walked through. My spirit-feet touched the burned-down interior of my body at places it had never been touched before. While Harry estimated how much we could get for the property, I disturbed my own charred tissues and flaking plaster. This is enough, Harry, I said. Take me away from this place.

So we took a small, comfortable house with a guest room for the girls. Harry died. Mother, why so bitter? Why so cold? they say when they come to visit. Why not a little garden in the back? Here, Mother, we brought you some seeds—tomatoes, cabbages, carrots. I shake my head, no.

Stacey D'Erasmio