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## Peculiar Eye

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Peculiar Eye

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Art  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Julia Marlene Townsend

M.F.A, Louisiana State University, 1991

May, 2008

## *Acknowledgments*

I thank my director and nonfiction professor, Randy Bates for his kind and unfailing support and guidance not only with this project but throughout my course of study in graduate school; to Professors Joanna Leake and Kris Lackey for serving on my committee; to my in-laws Hugh, Ruth ,and Patricia Finklea, for their support and generosity and for reading my rough drafts and finished pieces; and to my husband, Brent Finklea, for his patience and understanding. Finally, I would like to thank all my undergraduate English teachers, wherever they may be, for recognizing my talent and encouraging me to develop it, and to my family, from whom I inherited my interest in literature. Thank you all.

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## **Abstract**

From earliest childhood, I have had an interest in the grotesque, the remote and the mysterious. These interests, or more precisely, obsessions, dovetail with my experiences and training in photography, art, literature and psychiatric case management. My thesis is a verbal translation of the visual world, a journey of ekphrasis.

## Preface

The themes peculiar to these ten essays are travel, art, and the peculiar, but the binding thread in all *is* the peculiar—the odd, the bizarre, the fantastic. Sensation, mystery, alienation, exclusion, and isolation also figure prominently, as do imagery and the natural world.

I think of my essays as journeys. I travel into the worlds of the mentally ill, fundamentalist religion, missing people, *film noir*, outsider art, remote islands, suburban hinterlands, and the most taboo, death. I travel into the past, remembering my experiences as a psychiatric case manager and the strange, disoriented worlds of the schizophrenic or Saturdays spent in an insular and cultish church. Sometimes the travel is literal, as in “Summerheaven,” and sometimes it is both real *and* imagined, as in “Camera Obscura.” At other times the travel is metaphysical, as in “The Mezzanine.” When people vanish from our lives and when we can no longer see them, they exist only in our thoughts, regardless of physical reality. I also like to travel into the minds and visions of others: the skewed and playful minds of those who create gloriously dreadful or humorous art, the raw uncompromising minds of primitive *auteurs* like the filmmaker Samuel Fuller, or the grotesque but illuminating visions of seemingly disparate artists such as Flannery O’Connor and Diane Arbus. And then there is the final journey, death, and so it seems only fitting that “The Last Retort” is the last essay in my thesis.

In all my essays I feel as if I have revealed some hidden corner or sliver of the world, either public or private. As a child, I enjoyed horror movies, stories about the paranormal and strange phenomena—any kind of mystery. I am still interested, possibly even obsessed, with the mystery—if indeed that is *le mot juste*—of missing people. But mysteries are often less

compelling after they are solved. My fascination with the world of the missing is often less about “whodunit” and more of an inquiry or exploration into marginal and obscure lives, forgotten lives, lives cut short by death or misadventure, lives transformed by the need to escape. Not all disappearances are strange, but the case of a missing person is strange only if because the vanished is seemingly both dead *and* alive. The runaway known only as case file FLA931 was, or is, a real person. What was she like? I try to imagine her world: her thoughts, likes, dislikes.

The worlds of the mentally ill are as peculiar, and in some respects just as remote from the ordinary, as any far-flung island in the South Atlantic or the Indian Ocean. Few people have heard of the volcanic island of Tristan da Cunha, or know that Madagascar is the home of the baobab tree or the aye-aye, a bizarre primate with an elongated middle finger. And few people know of the bizarre inner worlds of the schizophrenic or the manic-depressive, or of the torment of the fifteen-year-old ward of the state with two children or that of the battered woman. Or the confused and disorganized world of the adult illiterate. My first essay, “Progress Note,” is a story of my experiences as a psychiatric case manager. I wrote it not only because my clients were peculiar and maddening and saddening and endearing, but in order to understand what had led me to choose this sort of work, other than desperation and a dim need to “help people.” I think I wanted to see other worlds, not romantic Treasure Island worlds, but worlds where people lived in trailers with holes in the floors and ceilings, worlds where people ate leaves off trees and painted their eyelids with red lipstick, the world of a client I allowed myself to get myself too close to, who, when once asked her place of birth, replied, “Deep in the heart of Jesus.” Their worlds were not my world, nor would I want them to be. Yet the lives of my clients, though tawdry and tattered, didn’t lack color, energy, or humor.

Like “Progress Note,” “The World Tomorrow” is one of my most personal essays, the story of my experiences in an isolated and peculiar fundamentalist church in the Deep South. As one of its members, I often felt as if I had been plunked down on some remote island, hidden from the rest of the world. And indeed, my church attendance was an embarrassing secret that I wanted to keep from my peers. For how bizarre and incongruous it seemed that a Mississippian was going to church on Saturday, eating a kosher diet, and forbidden to observe Christmas, Halloween, Easter, or Valentine’s Day. How peculiar it was to attend church in a movie theater, bible in hand, popcorn at my feet, looking at my minister’s head silhouetted against a celluloid screen. But I realized I also needed to re-visit this peculiar world, and remember it not merely as an awkward and socially ostracizing one but also as one of tenderness and longing and the childlike need to believe.

Though my first two essays are memoirs, my later works grew out of a different sort of passion, a passion not only for the physical world but the one of ideas. “Camera Obscura” and “Summerheaven” are both tales of travel, and celebrations of the physical world. In the former essay, I imagine what it would be like to travel to those far-flung, singular, seldom-heard of places, like Madagascar and Tristan da Cunha. And I actually travel to singular neighborhoods less than an hour from my home as odd and unique in their own right as islands in the Indian Ocean or South Atlantic. In my own neighborhood I see aberrations of imagination: houses encrusted with aluminum pie plates, CDs, shards of crockery, mosaics of trash, house trailers the color of Pepto-Bismol, and oddly maritime churches festooned with bay windows and portholes. “Summerheaven,” a travelogue about two weeks in Arizona, is perhaps my least peculiar essay, but then again, maybe not. Saguaro and gorges and tumbleweed are peculiar to the Southwest, but not to Louisiana, where I live. So though not natural anomalies or phenomena, they were



nevertheless different and strange to me. In Arizona, I heard and felt and saw things foreign to me: the cackle of a magpie, the tang of mountain air, the bloom of prickly pear. When we stay in the same place too long, we can get tired. Our eyes can get tired. We often stop seeing. Traveling to new places, whether near or far, can revitalize our vision.

I like to see the world from the eyes of others. Art, with all its attendant peculiar imagery, intrigues and fascinates me. In “The Museum of Bad Art,” I ponder the issue of good and bad art. Who decides? How do our eyes separate the lively from the merely garish? The clumsy from the rough-hewn? Can “bad art” still be a delight? Even if garish and sloppy and misconceived, can bad or amateurish art not please the mind and senses? I think that it can. Likewise, in “The House of Myrtle,” I question why there is so little humor—not arch cynical smirking, but *humor*—in art. If art is not serious, that is, if it doesn’t provoke contemplation, sadness, reverence, or even disgust, or other “serious” emotions, is it art? Why does one person adore Duchamp and another despise him as a poseur? How do our eyes—and mind—decide?

Film and photography are also passions. In “So Long, Tiger,” I explore the work of the late film director Samuel Fuller, who delights me with his *noir*, his tough-guy/girl lingo, his chiaroscuro lighting and stentorian soundtracks. He takes me into the worlds of the prostitute, the child molester, the catatonic schizophrenic, underground worlds like those that the late photographer Diane Arbus and the fiction writer Flannery O’Connor (herself also a visual artist) created, and which I discuss and compare in “Subterraneans.” Fuller’s films provoke the eyes and his characters are sometimes as grotesque as O’Connor’s and Arbus’s, but none of these artists create purely for shock value. Arbus once said that there were things that no one would see unless she photographed them. I get a similar feeling when I read O’Connor or when I look at Fuller’s films. These are artists who are not subtle. Their words and images grab me by the

throat. I feel privy to peculiar and disturbing secrets. With Fuller, the jolt is that things are often not what they seem and that every man or woman is his or her own protagonist; with O'Connor, it is the revelation of human dishonor and the fall from divine grace; with Arbus, it is the shock of the freakishness in the ordinary.

“The Last Retort,” which is the last essay in my thesis, explores the most subterranean journey of all—and in some respects, the most grotesque reality—death. Seemingly hidden and remote, death is also absolute and non-negotiable. Yet the rituals and trappings of death are not only banal, peculiar and irrational, sometimes they are even beautiful. Thus, this essay, like all the others in this collection, is imagistic, particularly in regard to the New Orleans cemetery. Often baroque, sometimes funky, New Orleans graveyards are works of art in their own right. Though I have never really been able to understand why so many of us choose burial with all its hideous transmogrification, I also consider the viewpoint of others who view cremation as radical destruction. Yet at the same time I have tried to keep a light touch about this almost forbidden subject. Though we are subjected to images and descriptions of death in the media almost daily, it is rare that we see actual images of the physical decomposition of the body, or read scientific descriptions of embalming or cremation in mainstream literature.

Though all my essays are personal, I begin my sojourn in the inner world of the memoir and orbit outward into the worlds of art, film, literature, crime, travel, and death. I love to research, discover, inform and educate. Over time, I began to feel an undeniable and insatiable need to transmit what I had learned to the reader, though I hope never to the expense of pedantry. Rather, I have tried to take all the information and facts and images that I have absorbed—personal and impersonal, public and private, local and foreign—and to illuminate and focus them through my own point of view, my own peculiar lens.

## *Chapter 1* *Progress Note*

Something is wrong at Shirley's house. The front door is open, and I hear a radio blaring from her bedroom. I call her name, but get no answer and step tentatively inside. Clothes: scattered everywhere. On the floor, in the chairs, and on the couch, still bound in its plastic cover. The air smells like dirty laundry, and a plate of runny eggs congeals on the coffee table. A tiny tortoise shell kitten squeaks pitifully and skitters between my legs.

Shirley's house is hardly *Better Homes and Gardens* at the best of times, but I've never seen it look this derelict, ever. And it's not like her to leave the door open. Where is she?

I call her, my voice cracking with bravado. I'm late for our appointment, and I'm nervous. I stare at the door to Shirley's bedroom. It's closed. I knock. Nothing. Only the fuzz of the radio answers.

Just last week, Shirley told me someone had tried to break into her house. Nothing was missing, but the latch on her front door had been tampered with, and she thought she had heard rustling at her window that night. But once Shirley also told me she saw a purple eagle eclipsing the sun, so I had learned to be somewhat skeptical of her claims. Then again, she didn't usually lie just for the hell of it, at least not when she was taking her Haldol. And her story was plausible—look at the neighborhood. Mr. Rogers wouldn't last an hour here. Car washes, abandoned warehouses, snarls of graffiti, weed choked yards, and debris. Just a few blocks from the Fisher Housing Development, itself home to a brisk drug trade and incongruously flanked by streets named after dead white men: Socrates, Ptolemy, Copernicus. A few glints in the murk: trim houses in lilac or peach or turquoise, yards spruce with azaleas, morning glory vines or

small gardens. At least Shirley's new apartment was liveable. The last place she'd lived, out in New Orleans East, had a hole in the roof big enough for a cow to fall through.

It's not just the purported break-in that has me wary. It's the way people look at me when I drive down this street. Like that tall, dreadlocked woman a few houses down. Though I've waved to her several times, she never smiles. Her eyes are bullets. She makes me think of Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad wife in *Jane Eyre*. And a few weeks ago, a young boy rapped on my car window as I was driving away from Shirley's and asked me what I was doing in the neighborhood. With a tinny voice and a wan smile, I said I was Shirley's social worker.

"Uh huh," he muttered and stalked off. I don't belong. This is not the place for a white woman. Especially alone. And undefended. I have no gun, no knife, no mace, no cell phone, nothing—no means of self protection other than my lungs and legs. And I know better. I had meant to pick up a can of pepper spray last week.

But I feel an unease that has nothing to do with the neighbors or my own personal safety, a feeling I can't place. *I don't know how you do it*, a friend tells me. Nor do I. Further, I don't know why I am doing it. *Mental health case management*. "What do you do for a living?" This from the clerk who's opening up my new checking account at Hibernia Bank. "I'm a mental health case manager," I say. Oh, she responds. "What's that?" I start to say I work with crazy people, but I don't. The clerk's eyes widen and she says, "I bet that's not much fun" No. But much of the time, neither was toiling for three years to get my MFA. I'm a photographer who isn't photographing, my two-year-old diploma jammed under a pile of junk in my closet, my camera lenses thick with dust. *There weren't any jobs. I just didn't want to take an adjunct position at a community college in Vermilion, South Dakota, or Crook County, Wyoming.*

*Why am I doing this?* I was supposed to be living on the west coast, in a place with crisp air and forward-thinking people. I was supposed to be lecturing college students from behind a lectern or striding across a classroom, pointing out a detail in an Egyptian frieze or discussing the street photography of Diane Arbus or Weegee. Instead, I'm living in the murder capital of the United States and counting out antipsychotic medication and writing progress notes on my clients, both young and old, schizophrenic and behavior disordered, clinically depressed and manically depressed. *Brandon came to kindergarten today with a knife in his shoe. Donaya showed me a story he'd written today. He was quite proud of it. It started off in the style of a Stephen King novel, but rapidly devolved into a graphic account of brother and sister incest. His verbal precocity, however, is quite impressive. Beverly doesn't like taking her Lithium because she can't laugh or cry anymore. Leslie tested positive for gonorrhea.*

Shirley knew we had an appointment today with her Operation Mainstream literacy tutor. Usually she meets me right at the door, her reading primer in hand. Shirley has been taking reading lessons for nearly two months, but she hasn't made much progress. Probably because she doesn't practice. But who can help her? I can't. As her case manager, I'm not supposed to provide direct services. And all her friends, if you can call them that, are either illiterate, drunk, on drugs, or off their Thorazine. Shirley has no family, as such. She doesn't know where her family is. When her first psychiatrist asked her where she was born, she replied, "Deep in the heart of Jesus."

I walk into the kitchen. Dirty dishes cram the sink. There is a stench of sour milk. A fly buzzes through the torn screen window. I see Shirley's bottle of medication—flat red lozenges to quiet the buzz and shriek in her head, the voices, the hallucinations.

I pick up the bottle to see if Shirley has any refills. I'd forgotten to check last time—what's wrong with me? Just then the back kitchen door opens, and Shirley's boyfriend, Joe, walks in. Joe is a bulky man with bleary blue eyes, yellow-white hair, and the mottled skin and gin blossoms of the chronic alcoholic. He makes me want to laugh, not because of his appearance, which is more pathetic than comical, but because of something Shirley once told me about him. "Do you know he wanted me to stick that thing right in my mouth!" she spouted. "Suck it! I told him only thing goin' in my mouth was the communion host!"

"Shirley's getting' ready," Joe says, picking at his fingernails and staring at his feet. I don't know much about him, except that he grew up in Arizona and now works at Avondale shipyard. He seems reasonably intelligent, an assumption I base on the fact that he subscribes to Newsweek and speaks in complete sentences. Joe is always polite, but I was angry at him because he'd told Shirley her reading lessons were a waste of time. Joe can read and Shirley can't, and that's just the way he likes it. On top. His ability to read is one of the few things he has to feel superior about. I guess he prefers Shirley to spend her time talking to the people in the TV set.

"Getting ready? We're ten minutes later as it is," I say. It's Friday. I want to get my work done and go home and swim a few laps in the pool. I'm hungry. My head hurts. I haven't eaten all day. And the stink in the kitchen isn't helping. I ask Joe to turn down the radio, and he knocks on Shirley's door. She stumbles from the bedroom. Her hair is tousled, her eyes unfocused, and she looks sleepy. She tells me she's lost her reading primer.

Shirley is forty-six. She is an undifferentiated schizophrenic, which is to say she is not catatonic, hebephrenic or paranoid. She does not sit motionless for hours or exhibit "waxy flexibility." She does not think that the President is reading her mail, nor does she giggle

uncontrollably at funerals or echo the speech and movements of other people. She does, however, have delusions and hallucinations, and she used to stare at the sun for minutes at a time, hoping for a vision.

Her skin is so dark that the whites of her eyes seem to glow, giving her a feral and mischievous look. She has a sideways smile and pink, shiny scars on her forehead and chin caused by lupus, an autoimmune disease. Her almost frightening appearance causes a lot of gaping, but she doesn't seem to mind. I have always liked Shirley's spunk—a welcome change from the inertness of many schizophrenics. There is no sexual detail too intimate for Shirley to share—her jones for white men, her daughter who strips at Rick's Cabaret, her past life as a prostitute. At her last eye appointment, she'd stopped her ophthalmologist flat in his tracks when she blurted, "Goddamn, you is one fine looking man." She said that she couldn't help it—he had made her "nature" rise. I don't share my private life with her, but I'm not above telling filthy jokes to her now and then. It's not the sort of thing case managers are supposed to do, but it makes her laugh and it makes me happy.

I tell Shirley to find her primer. She lights a Kool and hacks violently. Her clubbed fingernails curve downward like talons. Pulmonary disease. I'm surprised she's lasted this long. She scratches her head and stares vacantly at the floor. I wonder if she's sick. I remind her again that we need to go. My voice sounds shrill, high strung. Shirley says no, she's okay, she's not sick. She goes into her bedroom and after a few minutes brings her reading books in a paper bag. I reach out to take the bag from her and drop it on the floor, ripping it open and spilling the books everywhere. Kneeling to pick up the mess, I look up at Shirley. She glares down at me, her lips quivering, her eyes wide, exposing the whites at the top. I've never seen her look so wild.

“Pick it up, you fucking bitch,” she says. Joe hovers in the background, silent. I feel like someone has just pitched freezing water on my neck. Shirley’s lips twitch. Without even thinking, I walk out of the house and to my car.

“I’ll kick your motherfucking ass!” Shirley screeches from the doorway.

“Don’t talk to that woman like that,” Joe mumbles, in a pathetic attempt at damage control.

Now I’m not Shirley’s case manager. I’m just “that woman.”

I speed off in a numb haze, shifting gears like an automaton. Once home, I lock all my doors, close the blinds, click off my pager, and huddle under a blanket for an hour or more. I don’t know what to do. It’s Friday, and the mental health center is now closed. They do have an emergency number, but is this an emergency? I’m not hurt. If I try to prove that Shirley hadn’t been taking her medication, I’ll be forced to admit that I had forgotten to count out her pills. Shirley has no phone, so I can’t call her. Not that I really want to.

Lying there on the bed, I seem to hear the voice of Craig, a case manager who’d resigned a year earlier. *Don’t get too attached to these people. Believe me, you ain’t shit to them.* I’d never liked Craig—I had found him surly and self-pitying—but now his words hit me like a sledgehammer. I feel foolish and naïve. Sure, I’d had misunderstandings with clients, but nothing like this. Nobody had ever threatened or cursed me, at least not to my face. But somehow I know if I had stayed in Shirley’s house one second longer she would have grabbed the knife she kept in her purse and jammed it right in my throat. Hindsight. But in her condition, had she mistaken me for someone else? A demon? Was she drunk? I hadn’t smelled liquor. Was she hallucinating? I hadn’t checked her Haldol, but the bottle had looked suspiciously full, and I now remembered that she’d had it filled a month ago, which meant she



was due for a refill. Too many pills in that bottle, but not in her blood. *They like being crazy,* Craig had said. *It's fun being wacked.*

\*

All of my clients were poor—most received Medicaid and disability income. Few, if any, were able to work, and most of them were more than a little warped, though not all of them were schizophrenic. There was John, who had once eaten nothing but eggs and leaves for a month; Beverly, a bipolar ex-prostitute, who once took off her clothes and danced around the pool at the supported housing complex where she lived; Evelyn, who sometimes came to her psychiatrist's appointments with lipstick on her eyelids; Vincent, who once kept a dead hamster in his freezer; Fred, an astute paranoid schizophrenic whose skin was chronically inflamed from psoriasis; shy sweet Diane, a seamstress who barely spoke above a whisper and always thanked me for taking her to her doctor's appointments; Rachel, a bubbly, hyperactive, sixteen-year old, Ozzy Osbourne fanatic whose mother was in prison for selling cocaine; four-hundred-pound Wanda, who had nine children and lived in a trailer with a hole in the floor; Veronica, who suffered from major depression and who was living in a battered woman's shelter when I first met her, Veronica, whose name meant "true icon," Veronica, who considered me her best friend. Her apartment, lovingly decorated, an aquarium full of tropical fish and flame colored plants, the ceilings hung with philodendron, the kitchen sink immaculate as newly cleaned teeth.

I think about turning on the pager. Maybe Shirley will stumble to a phone and apologize. Maybe Veronica or Diane will call, asking some small favor of me. They often call in the afternoon, and right now it would be nice to be wanted. I think of calling them just to see if everything's okay, but their well-being is not really my motive. I want sympathy and

understanding, and those are things my clients are not supposed to give me. I can't tell Diane or Veronica that Shirley nearly attacked me. And I don't want to call my supervisor. So I do nothing. I lie under the cover and think about Shirley's eyes. About what I'd seen there. Hate. No. That wasn't quite right—that look was confusion and fatigue and frustration. The confusion and fatigue and frustration of a person who's been pushed too far and realizes that she's never going to make it. Shirley is not going to learn to read. She is going to keep on living in this wretched house with a man who humiliates her. She is going to have to take Haldol every day for the rest of her life. Or not. Maybe she just didn't want to keep this appointment today. Or any other appointments, for that matter.

Now I know I should have seen it coming. I think of all the things I have always disliked about her. Her delight in pointing out my faults. The time I'd driven her to a doctor's appointment and gotten lost, only to have her complain that I was terrible with directions. The times she'd stared at me and pointed out some flaw, like a broken blood vessel or a pimple. The time she'd swept her eyes up and down my body and cackled and said, *Damn, you gettin' a big ass on you girl.* The times she'd told me she'd never met anyone as confusing as me. The times she hadn't shown up for her appointments. The time she had forgotten to wear a Tampax and had bled all over my car seat.

*Mentally ill people are unvarnished*, a friend who'd once worked at an asylum had told me. *Don't take anything personally*, said Jane, my first supervisor. Leaning back in her seat, she had blown smoke through her nose and appraised me. *Really. Don't let them upset you. I used to have a client who called me up nearly every day, shrieking and cursing about something. Once it was because she'd torn off the wrong end of a gas bill and mailed it in.* My friend Ann, who'd battled more than her share of depression, told me that my clients couldn't help

themselves. They *were* mentally ill, weren't they? Yes—hence their antiseptic sounding medications: Clozaril, Risperdal, Thorazine. *Schizophrenics show significant shrinkage in regions of the brain and enlargement of the ventricles. They are often disorganized and exhibit socially inappropriate behavior.*

*Most schizophrenics are not violent. They just want to be left alone.*

Only a couple of weeks earlier, Shirley had told me of a dream she'd had. A black man, stern and gruff, had replaced me as her case manager. Shirley told me often that I was the best case manager she'd ever had, even though I was only the second case manager she'd ever had. "You ain't gonna leave me, are you?" she pleaded. I thought about the card she'd once sent me, probably written with Joe's grudging aid, thanking me for all my help. How she'd hugged my neck the first day I met her.

*You ain't shit to them.*

After awhile, I go out by the apartment pool and sit there drinking beer and staring into the water. I don't swim. I try to think positive. I think about my company director, who compliments me on my job performance. Or all my friends, who remind me that my job is *hard* and here I am out in the trenches every day and how many people can do what I do? The pep talk is useless, and I drink until I get sleepy and trudge back to my apartment.

\*

The following Monday I tell my supervisor, Elaine, about what happened. That Shirley had either been drinking, though I hadn't smelled alcohol, or off her meds. That I hadn't had time to count out her pills, the whole thing had happened so fast. Elaine's eyebrows shoot up, and she purses her lips but says that she'll call Shirley's psychiatrist and explain the situation and that I

should call Shirley's Supplemental Security payee, Mrs. Davis. I have never liked Elaine. She is hard-working and meticulous but has about as much warmth as a glacier. I know her youth and inexperience are partly to blame, but it doesn't help much. *Thanks, Elaine. I'm okay. Her steak knife missed my carotid artery by only one sixteenth of an inch.*

I call Mrs. Davis. She manages Shirley's disability income, which isn't much—around four hundred dollars a month—and handles various other business affairs. Shirley had complained once that Mrs. Davis was taking all her money, and I'd gone to the Social Security office to investigate, but the folks there had told me to just ignore Shirley's ramblings. *Mrs. Davis knows what she's doing. Shirley wants to spend that money on liquor.*

Mrs. Davis's voice is bassy and rough, like a man's. She knows. "Shirley said you was trying to make her read," she says.

I don't argue the point. Instead, I tell her that Shirley was medically non-compliant. Didn't want to take her pills. We talk for awhile. Mrs. Davis sounds sympathetic. She says she'd never seen Shirley do so well—she'd stopped drinking and turning tricks and was learning to read. Now look. Started boozing again, dressing like a hoochie mama and talking shit. I tell Mrs. Davis that Shirley will be hooked up with another case manager, give her the date of Shirley's next mental health appointment, and hang up.

Two weeks later Shirley leaves a message at the office. Had I forgotten her mental health appointment? *I'm sorry I made you mad.*

I rip the note into shreds. *Too late.* I know it's childish. Shirley is a sick woman. What the hell did I expect her to do, lick my hand like an adoring puppy?

But I can't make myself call her.

I never see her again. I continue working at the community independent living center. I do my job adequately, no more. My cameras remain in the closet, unused. Eighteen months later, I land a job managing an independent-living apartment complex for foster children. The pay is the same but the paperwork far less. And I think I'll like working with teenagers. Veronica and I have a hard time letting each other go, though I assure her she'll get a new case manager.

"I don't want another case manager," she says and starts to cry. Her seven-year-old son, Ronnie, walks in from school and asks what's wrong. Veronica asks me to leave or else she's going to lose it. Ronnie looks like he's been slapped.

I go home and cry for three hours. I can't get the sight of Veronica out of my mind, her head in her hands, weeping. I think of all our conversations together. Of how we had talked for two hours when I first met her in the battered womens' shelter. Or Veronica's daughter, Tyra, who'd rushed up to me one day and flung her arms around my waist. *I don't think of you as a case manager, Julie. I think of you as a friend.*

I work with the foster children for another year, and then give it up after I land a job teaching art in the public school system. I try not to think about Veronica. Or Shirley.

\*

Nine years later, I drive back to Shirley's old neighborhood. The house she'd lived in is still there, but it is now painted green and yellow, like an Easter basket. Nobody appears to be home, though the place looks lived in. The neighborhood shows signs of improvement. Many of the houses have been fixed up and painted, and the graffiti is gone. I don't see anybody on the street

I recognize. A few people are out working in their yards, but nobody pays any attention to me. I don't have a can of pepper spray, but I do have a cell phone.

There is no need to use it. Nobody is going to bother me. I'm sure of that. They have better things to do. I am okay. But I know that no matter how hard I stare at Shirley's door, she is not going to walk down those steps and over to my car to tell me that she is very, very sorry after all these years. Can't I understand?

I think of Shirley's head bent over the primer, her gnarled finger tracing out words slowly and painfully. *The boy is RUNNING. The dog is JUMPing.* And then her tutor's voice, irritable, tense. *Now read the next line. No, that's not it. You're not trying.*

*Can't call it,* Shirley says and rubs her forehead. *Do you think I was too hard on her?* the tutor asks when I tell her that Shirley won't be coming to her tutoring sessions anymore.

Somehow I know Shirley is dead. I can't see her living past fifty. How can I find out? I don't know anybody who can tell me where she is.

I try to imagine being Shirley—the twisted and aching body, the scrambled thoughts, the squalor that she lived in. Looking forward to the next trick and nip on the bottle or a cigarette. The thing is, she'd never seemed unhappy.

Maybe she was too sick to know how bad off she was, or maybe she just didn't care. Maybe she'd reached a muddled satori, beyond fear and hope. She existed, she *was*. And fucked up or not, Shirley was self-willed enough to do what she wanted. I couldn't always say the same for myself. In some strange way I envied her, though I knew I'd never trade my life for hers.

I drive away and think about what it would have been like if Shirley had walked through the door. Down the steps and over to my car. She wouldn't pull out her knife or scream or curse.

I'd have a joke ready, and she'd look through the car window at me, eyes shining with glee, and then she'd remember and say, "Where the hell you been?"

## *Chapter 2*

### *The World Tomorrow*

I'm sitting at the back of the classroom, squirming, rubbing my damp hands together, and hoping that the bell rings before my teacher calls on me. Mrs. Foy has a question. I have an answer. The answer is the truth, but it's still the wrong answer.

I don't know much, if anything, about separation of church and state, so I'm unaware that Mrs. Foy is asking us kids questions she has no business asking. Personal questions. *Religious* questions. This is southern Mississippi at the tail end of the sixties. Deep in the deep the South. I am eight years old, and there is a lot I don't know. I've never even heard of Martin Luther King.

Mrs. Foy is a tall, big boned woman, busty and square jawed. She has small blue eyes and a small red mouth. Sometimes I like her, and sometimes I don't, but I feel there is something skewed and out of focus and not quite right about her. And so it proves. Midway through my first year of junior high she will kill herself with a shotgun.

But on this sparkling fall day in 1968 Mrs. Foy is very much alive, her blue eyes keen and piercing. Pitiless. I don't think she likes me because once I corrected her when she was reading the class a story about a Mexican boy named Jose.

"You say the J like an H, Mrs. Foy. It's HO-ZAY, not Josie."

Blushing furiously, she had slammed the book shut and sent me to the office for being disrespectful.

Today Mrs. Foy is not reading, but rather picking her way down row after row of children. "Now Tammy. Where does your family attend church?" Tammy's family is Episcopalian, which is slightly exotic, but at least she attends church. Child after child replies "Rose of Sharon Baptist," or "Fifth Avenue Methodist," or even "Immaculate Conception," and



there is one child who is Pentecostal, like my grandmother. But they all have something in common. They all go to church.

I'm not lucky. The bell doesn't ring, at least not in time to save me, nor does the fact that my last name begins with a letter near the end of the alphabet. I fidget and chew my thumbnail. Mrs. Foy's blue eye pierces me like a laser. "*Julia*. Where does *your* family attend church?"

I can't say I attend any of the churches the other kids go to. Laurel, Mississippi is a small town, and everybody will know I'm lying. I have been to church once in my life, with my cousins. I didn't like it.

Our family never goes to church. Never. My father is mute on the subject of religion, though I think he has some dim belief in God and an afterlife, and my mother doesn't go to church because she doesn't agree with any of the local gospel. She won't go to church just because it's expected of her or just to be social. She'll say she'll go when she finds something truly worth believing in. Her own father had stopped going to church when he saw their minister with another man's wife.

I can't say any of this.

What I really want to do is to ask Mrs. Foy why my family's religious practices are any of her damn business. I feel invaded, exposed. I hate her.

"Well.....we don't go.....because of the way my father works," I say. Yes. That's it. Dad works the graveyard shift and sleeps in the daytime, even on Sunday, and that's why we don't go. But it still doesn't explain why my mother doesn't take me and my brother to church services or have us go with a neighbor or a relative.

The whole room is hushed. My classmates swivel around to gape at me, the heathen in the corner. My face is hot. Two girls at the front of the room are whispering. I feel like I have just wet my pants.

\*

December 1970. Christmas presents scattered under the faux spruce tree with its glaucous needles. Like Easter, the best part of Christmas is the anticipation. The delight of spying a turquoise egg in the crook of a tree branch or ripping the shiny red and green paper from a box to the mystery inside. Even if the gift is hideous—like an oily patent leather purse with metal lips—the suspense makes up for the disappointment.

I'm eleven years old, and this is my last Christmas. In a few months my mother will make a religious conversion that will change our lives. Ours will finally be a churchgoing family—except for my father, who has severed all his ties to religion—but that will not make me feel, at long last, normal. Our religious beliefs will instead be a secret to hide, just as the lack of them had been before.

But tonight things are okay, even though we are still living in the ugly, little, faded green house trailer with a stain on the door and a gash in the side, a wound from a moving accident. My mom and dad still fight all the time, and my baby sister, who is nine months old, cries a lot, and I am worried about my far from stellar grades in mathematics and the fact that this is my last year of elementary school. I'd never admit it to anyone, but I'm nervous about going to high school with not only freshmen and sophomores, but *seniors*—big girls with shiny lipstick and frosted hair and boys with fringed vests and peace symbol decals on faded jeans. Though I try to hide my insecurity behind wise cracks and pranks, I feel very young for my age.

But tonight I can forget all that. There is a cinnamon candle burning on a table by the tree, and my mother is wearing deep red lipstick, which makes her look very pretty, and she has just cooked our favorite meal, beef stroganoff. And my dad is out of town on a job, which is cause for celebration, as he usually manages to spoil things with his surliness and griping. Like on Father's Day when he held up the shirt we'd bought him with our allowance money and bellowed, "You must think I'm as big as a goddamned elephant!"

So tonight it is just my brother and my sister and my mother and me. After we eat, my mom lets us open our gifts. I gleefully tear into my presents immediately, but Gerry, who is three years younger than I, picks his first package up slowly and turns it over thoughtfully, almost methodically. I tease him sometimes for his seriousness and call him a little old man, but it may be that he's afraid that he won't like what's inside and is calculating how to respond should that be the case. Or maybe he just wants to postpone the suspense.

Mom does have peculiar ideas about the kinds of presents kids should receive. She's never bought Gerry GI Joes because she doesn't think the war in Vietnam should be fodder for plastic toys, and she's never let me have a Barbie Doll, because they're too "grown up," with their sprouting breasts and slashes of pink lipstick. When I open the first of my presents, I'm afraid that I'll find a big floppy Raggedy Ann inside. Sometimes she forgets how old I am.

Instead, I find a pair of moccasins, which I've been wanting for a long time, and a big bottle of pink bubble bath in the shape of a mermaid, and a Ripley's *Believe It Or Not* "comic" book, and best of all, a keyboard that I learn to plink out "Camptown Races" and "A Bicycle Built For Two" on. Everything is great. It's a gala night.

\*

Mom is in bed weeping, her throat swollen from a bacterial infection. It looks like a small goiter. She's sick a lot. Sometimes it's her ears or her sinuses, at other times headaches. She's always tired. I guess if I was married to someone as exasperating as my father, I'd be tired too. Since her illness, Dad has tried to take care of her and cook and clean house but he's not very good at it and gets upset and blows up at Gerry and me. He makes me think of the geyser, Old Faithful, in Yellowstone National Park, that erupts every hour on the hour. Or so they say. I wouldn't know. We've never been west of Little Rock.

My father is always scowling, forehead creased, lips like a cut. Never what you'd call lighthearted, there are still times when he can be really funny, cracking jokes and laughing raucously. This is not one of those times. Though he's always on our case about keeping our rooms clean, he leaves the kitchen looking like the aftermath of a hurricane. His cooking is no treat, either. We've eaten charred bacon and runny eggs for four days straight now. Coke for breakfast.

My mother refuses to see a doctor. She and Gerry and I have been going to the Worldwide Church of God for five months now, a fundamentalist gumbo of Christianity and Judaism. The church believes in treating illness with "natural foods," lots of vitamins, and lots of prayer. Conventional medicine is a last resort.

Mom is crying because just an hour ago Mr. Hosey, her pastor, had stopped by our trailer and attempted to treat her malaise with prayer and homeopathic medicine. I would say "our" pastor, but I don't like Mr. Hosey. His sermons are bombastic and replete with references to worldwide atrocities and the end of the world. On our first day at church, he had pounded the lectern and screamed almost the whole time, pausing only to wipe his red, sweaty face with a handkerchief.

For a moment I had thought he was going to fall flat on the floor in front of the congregation. I hated to see adults sweat or cry. So disgusting, all those leaking fluids.

My father was out of town when my mom got sick, and when he came home and found Mr. Hosey kneeling by her bedside with his bible and his pills, he predictably blew sky high. It's not the idea of church he's opposed to exactly. He just doesn't understand why my mother can't be like other men's wives. He's embarrassed by this church, or "cult," as he likes to call it, and because he's jealous by nature, he resents the amount of time my mother spends at church or as he so eloquently puts it, "running up and down the damn road."

"Take your goddamn vitamins and your bible and get out of my house!" my father roared. No longer a force of nature, Mr. Hosey shambled off, shoulders hunched, his red birthmark inflamed and irritated. I sometimes think that Mr. Hosey has the mark of God on his forehead, or when I am feeling particularly cruel, the mark of Cain, which seems more appropriate now, especially since he has been banished from our shabby house trailer for all eternity.

I hate it when Dad yells at Mom, but I understand his embarrassment. I'm embarrassed too. WCG just doesn't feel right, sort of like an itchy, ugly -colored sweater two sizes too small. I'm also really pissed that I'm twelve years old and will never get to celebrate Christmas again. Or Easter. Or Halloween. Or Valentine's Day. And for the first time in my life, I'll be going to church on Saturday. I don't know anybody who goes to church on Saturday. I've heard of Seventh Day Adventists, but I've never met any. I know that Jews go to temple on Saturday, but I don't know any of them either. It is 1971 and this is south Mississippi, a rock hard Protestant stronghold. I wish I did know some Jewish people, though, because I think I'd have more in common with them than my classmates and neighbors. They would understand why I scrape the

ham off my cafeteria plate into the trash when nobody is looking or why my brother and I can't go out on Friday nights. Gerry hasn't said much but I can tell he's having trouble with the unceasing stream of prohibitions.

Something else I just don't understand is why WCG doesn't have a regular church building with its name on it like the Baptists and the Methodists or just about any other church, for that matter. My mother tells me that WCG church doctrine is partially based on biblical prophecy from the Book of Revelation that predicts that the world will end. Soon. In less than five years, to be exact. Obviously, there's a lot to do to get ready, but the elders and deacons are vague on evacuation procedures and emergency preparedness.

The church founders, Herbert W. Armstrong, a squat, tomato faced man who liberally punctuates his portentous writings with exclamation points, capital letters, and italics, and his charismatic, handsome son, Garner Ted, who will one day be captured on video assaulting a massage therapist, assure us that all WCG brethren will be taken to a "place of safety" while twentieth-century Armageddon rages around us. After the last battle, we will live in a wonderful world tomorrow. Why build a place of worship if it's going to be destroyed by fire and flood and earthquakes or maybe even blood and frogs and locusts?

Eventually I would deduce that the ten percent tithed by the faithful to the Armstrongs ended up in their back pockets, which was probably why they never hired a building contractor, but at the time it never occurred to me to wonder why Herbert W. and Garner T. resided in a Greek Revival mansion in Pasadena while the rest of the brethren lived in house trailers and ate Chef Boyardee. So in the meantime we wait for the world to end and we rent space. We worship at the Dixie Electric Power Company, in school cafeterias and the National Guard Armory. We warble hymns in gymnasiums. And we praise the Lord in movie theatres.

And somehow we even managed to secure a country club, of all places. It was secluded on a back road a few miles out of town and bordered by a big lake you could stroll around before plunking your behind on an unforgiving metal chair for an hour and a half while Mr. Hosey blistered your ears with yet another screeching sermon.

But church in a *theater*? Nobody did that. I was glad that at least the theaters weren't drive -ins, and that they were in Hattiesburg, about a forty-five minute drive from home, where I could be reasonably sure that none of my classmates would see me emerging from the dark with a bible tucked under my arm and *Rollerball* or *The Towering Inferno* on the marquee overhead.

One Saturday as our ragged flock gathered outside the Avanti Cinema on Hardy Street, I heard a man bark, "Just where in the *fuck* are all those people going?" Not to watch the Ten Commandments in Technicolor, for damn sure. My face flaming, I turned away.

Eventually we find a YMCA in Hattiesburg tucked behind a state prison on a quiet back street, where I waved to the jailbirds above or mosey out to the courtyard and stuffed rocks in the fountain cherub's mouth.

It's hard to get used to going to church. I can't sit still for long, and I find the sermons incomprehensible and the members wacky and off kilter. There's Mr. Vaught, a church deacon, who has bushy eyebrows like a schnauzer and a voice like a clogged drain, and his wife, Londa, who follows him around like a puppy; Mrs. Ishee, a hornet haired woman who insists on singing solos every Saturday and torturing us with her lugubrious squawking; John and James Jefcoat, two thin, pimply brothers who barely speak above a whisper yet insist that a woman's proper place is in the home, chained to the oven; Steve Ulmer, a nominal adult who always has hoops of sweat under the arms of his polyester suit, a buzz of tics and hics, always snapping his fingers or tapping his feet or just plain yapping, incapable of standing still for more than a nanosecond. A

healthy dose of Ritalin would probably focus his lens, but in the early seventies world of toe socks, mood rings, Nixon, and eight-track tapes, Steve is just regarded as a boy who has too much “nervous energy.” Yet he’s fun in his own wonky way, is quick with a joke, and is at least not pious and self-righteous like the Jefcoat brothers.

And then there’s my best friend, Sheila, who hates church nearly as much as I do, yet gamely tries to read Scripture and listen to Mr. Hosey pontificate about the permissiveness, promiscuity, and lax moral values rampant in our society. But she is easily tempted, and one Saturday after I draw a caricature of the Jefcoat brothers and slip it underneath her bible, we both explode with laughter and are dismissed from services until we can behave.

When we get home, my mother wails that she has never been so embarrassed in her life, that I had shamed her, and that I was a bad influence on Sheila. She shut herself in the bathroom and wept for the better part of an hour.

Though I’m a blowhard on the surface, my mother’s hunched, heaving shoulders unglue me. I lock myself in my room and do what I hate to do: I cry. Then I ask God to forgive me, resolving to help my mother, to be good, to be proper. After all, I don’t want to be left behind when doomsday rolls around.

Actually, for all of our church’s weirdness, I do feel safe and protected there, not that I would ever admit it. I never feel scared or nervous around the folks at church because I know they are as lost and confused as I am. And church isn’t all hellfire and squawking. Our youth group has a lot of fun. We go to Six Flags in the summer, we have picnics, and we roller skate and bowl on Saturday nights. I have made several new friends. The WCG folks may be geeks, but they aren’t officious or condescending the way so many other churchgoers seem to be.



Somehow I just can't see myself at Franklin Methodist with the deputy sheriff's social climbing daughter, Peaches, or at Rose of Sharon Baptist with her sprayed and bouffanted cousin, Grace. I sneered at their fluffiness but they possessed a social and sartorial sophistication that I lacked. I couldn't show up at *their* place of worship in my mother's clumsily stitched knit dresses. For Southerners, going to church is not just a place to praise Jesus. It's an event: seeing and being seen and displaying one's plumage. I still remembered going to church with my aunt, and her flowered hat, white gloves and cloud of cologne. By comparison, WCG women were as drab as pigeons.

If I had felt awkward in elementary school, I feel doubly so in junior high. Many of my female classmates are growing breasts, menstruating, and wearing makeup. I am doing none of these things and I'm not sure I ever want to. Things are moving too fast. Feeling displaced, I decide that church will be my asylum: a cloistered, timeless sanctuary. The world tomorrow is beckoning.

So for a few months or so I do my best to be a model disciple. I take notes in church scrupulously, read the Scripture daily, pencil mantras in my notebooks as penance for my misdeeds, and for a short time feel very virtuous. Smug, even. Yet I hide my religion from my classmates, knowing that I can never begin to explain why we refrain from eating "unclean" meats, attend church on Saturday, or believe Easter, Halloween and Christmas are pagan holidays.

But like a bad home permanent, my conversion just won't hold. Soon I'm back to my old ways: cutting up in class, telling dirty jokes, and in time, smoking, drinking and skipping school. Reverence was just not in my nature. It's not until my last year of junior college that I stop going to church altogether. Reluctantly, my mother accepted my decision, and my dad just didn't care.

\*

It's said that we don't develop the ability for abstract thought until we are in our late teens, so it makes one wonder why we drag children to church. God is certainly an abstract concept, though we continually seek personification: praying hands, church steeples and blue madonnas are ways to make the intangible concrete.

By the time I am in in my mid- twenties, I am really no longer sure what I believe. Despite the Armstrongs' predictions, the world is still whirling and the world tomorrow has proved to be nothing more than working, eating, sleeping and getting up to do it all over again. Having graduated from college, I feel I ought to be sophisticated and embrace atheism or at the very least, agnosticism, but there is a part of me that still wants desperately to believe. Sporadically I break down and pray, though I continue to do all the things I was sure "he" wouldn't like: smoking pot, drinking, gossiping, listening to punk rock, and having casual sex, still unable to think of God as a she, an it, or even they. Did God have a sex, or was God a genderless entity? Confused, I decide to re-create my own higher power. God as mass of energy. God as quasar: the most luminous and distant light in the galaxy. My God, then, is clean, impersonal, distant, and disinterested in harm or petty vengeance, yet somehow always available to heal and illuminate. It is a convenient, if inconsistent, explanation.

I dabble in "alternative" religions, as do so many of my peers in the late seventies and early eighties. Yet none holds: Taoism is too shapeless, Zen too austere, Buddhism incomprehensible, and each in its own way, restrictive. I don't like meditating. Macrobiotic food tastes horrible. And I love *maya*, the world of illusions: horror movies, heavy metal, cheeseburgers. The realm of the senses. What else is there, really?

Eventually I turn to Western philosophy, settle for a life of secular humanism, and in my mid forties, nourish my green thumb. God, I tell myself, is in the garden.

\*

Nearly a quarter of a century after I'd last seen or spoken to her, I call my old friend Sheila, who is living in a rural community outside Laurel, Mississippi.

We talk for almost three hours. Now an RN, Sheila had remarried, and is still an avid horsewoman. Like myself, she has no ties at all to WCG, though she'd stayed the course for about ten years after I'd left. There is a depth and maturity in her voice I'd never heard before. Well, we are both seasoned middle-aged women, though it is hard to believe this was the twenty-first century.

"Where Are They Now?" is our first topic, and as it turns out, a lot of bad things have happened to WCG people. Sheila herself speaks calmly and without self pity of her only son who is severely handicapped and requires constant care. We talk about Ruby Andrus, whose husband has deserted her and left her with two small children to support. We remember Amy and Darlene, whose mother had committed suicide in the late 80's; Linda Posey, who had been married three times and had had two children out of wedlock; and Kurt Manson, who had a face and body girls swooned over. No more. Kurt became addicted to cocaine, tried to rape another man's wife one buzzy night, and afterwards tried to kill himself with a shotgun. He blew his face off and lived.

There was Wayne Sellers, tall and tanned, the son of a preacher, whom I'd dated fresh out of high school and dry humped with on a lumpy bed at the El Patio motel one summer night.

Just 22, he had died in 1981 from injuries sustained in a fall. He'd been working as a roofer, and church gossip held that he'd been stoned out of his mind.

Other stories are less tragic but still unhappy. Londa Vaught, tired of being a penurious and submissive deacon's wife, had divorced her husband, and one of the Jefcoat brothers had been ejected from a church festival after he and his wife had had a knock out, drag down fight in full view of the congregation. Yet some stories are happy: my brother Gerry, still a WCG member, is happily married with a decent job and two healthy children, and several other members are likewise alive, well, healthy, and even wealthy, if not particularly wise.

Rambling on, Sheila and I also remember Craig Wells, AKA John Revolta, who'd worn tight white leisure suits at the height of *Saturday Night Fever* mania and whizzed around the roller rink trying to pick up girls. We laugh about Mrs. Ishee's toneless singing and the red birth mark on Mr. Hosey's head and Steve Ulmer's electric blue polyester jackets. We giggle about not getting Christmas presents or eating pork chops and the church's prohibition on makeup, and how the day after they'd lifted the ban Sheila and I had sauntered into services, painted with three shades of eye shadow, glitter blush and tangerine lip gloss.

Briefly we speak of religion. Belief. Sheila said she believes in God and I say I just don't know, though I feel that the atheist's argument against his or her or its existence is a strong one. We both laugh about the Armstrongs' bungled prophecies, and about the shining world of tomorrow, now as then a phantom. Then we say our goodbyes and I agree to call her whenever I am in town.

\*

Now I attend the Unitarian Universalist church, if only sporadically. Emphasis on weekly attendance there is as loose as its dogma or lack thereof: The church's umbrella is wide enough

to embrace almost one and all: pagans, new agers, born again Christians, Jews, agnostics, atheists, theists, deists, Buddhists, and perhaps a bit grudgingly, Republicans.

Women are allowed to wear makeup at CCUU, though many don't. Fashion is hodge podge: dress suits and sweat pants, high heels and sneakers. We have a church building, and church members may eat whatever they like, though many are vegetarian. We welcome homosexuals and the cross-gendered. There are no scorching sermons or talk of a world tomorrow or sin and punishment. There is only the world today as we know it. We have a tree of life tapestry behind the minister's pulpit and every Sunday we light a chalice that symbolizes our commitment to good works and ethical living.

I sing in the choir and love it, though it's a bit wearying to follow hymns written in a 5/4 time signature. There are clubs and groups to accommodate almost anyone's interest: photography, writing, dancing, bird watching, bridge. There are practically no *no's*: refrain from cruelty, and treat others with respect. If Unitarians are guilty of any sin, it may be intellectual vanity. Proud of their questioning, probing minds, there are always one or two members who just can't refrain from telling you exactly how much they know about postmodernism or medieval architecture or Spanish literature or the fact that their Scrabble scores are consistently in the 600's.

Yet I returned to church not for intellectual stimulation or even to connect with a higher power, but because I was lonely. I didn't want God, whoever he or she was; I wanted fellowship. Good conversation. Socializing. Maybe I'm not so different from Peaches and Grace after all. There is still a part of me that wants to believe, but that cannot surrender. Mostly I am proud of my stubbornness: I could never go back to the Worldwide Church of God or to any fundamentalist church, nor do I want to.

Some religious evils I know firsthand: the self righteousness, the irrationality, the intolerance. Others I don't, such as violence and murder, namely the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, an act of terrorism partly spawned by religious zealotry.

And now that I'm in graduate school, I know it's definitely not *au courant* to say anything praiseworthy about religion on college campuses. Fine to speak of its abominations, but not its positive force. Better to keep quiet than to be mistaken for a fanatic, or God forbid, a Republican.

Fair enough. Maybe when the final scores are tallied, religion will prove to have more strikes than hits. But I also know that it's possible to believe and to be intellectual. To embrace both sensuality and spirituality. To be compassionate but not sheepish.

Much of the time I believe that atheists are right: there *is* no God: the probability that God exists is low enough to simply render belief impractical. The day Wayne Sellers died, I remembered wondering why God had let him die, but I may have as well asked why God had allowed me to live. It would have made as much sense.

Despite its logical loopholes, I also know religion can be a force for good. Isn't religion really just another name for ethics? A way to temper our excesses? To prevent ourselves from doing things that seem good at the time and prove to be very, very bad later? To treat others as we want to be treated ourselves? To try to be compassionate in an ungentle world?

A few weeks ago I was in the dentist's office and saw one of the WCG's publications, *The World Tomorrow*, in the waiting room. On the cover was a reproduction of *Peaceable Kingdom* and a prediction that one day countries would turn their swords into ploughshares and that the lion would lie down with the lamb.

Intellectually, I knew it was bunk and for a moment I pitied my mother and brother, who still waited in vain for kingdom come and forked over their dollars to a crooked church whose tax records had once been seized by the attorney general of California.

But I still couldn't forget the maternal comforts of church or myself at twelve, pushing myself to read cryptic scriptures, enduring the numbness in my rear end and the crick in my neck, scribbling furiously in my notebook, trying my best to do the right thing, and anxiously awaiting the world tomorrow.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *The Mezzanine*

When I was eleven, I flirted with the idea of becoming a detective. I don't know how I got the idea, though it may have been Louise Fitzhugh's book *Harriet the Spy* which I discovered as a bored fifth grader, or the Nancy Drew series I got for Christmas about the same time. I soon developed a taste for mystery and suspense, partly because I lived in a small, sleepy Southern town where nothing much ever happened. The only exciting thing I can remember is when a railcar of petroleum gas derailed and exploded in early 1969, causing two fatalities, several injuries, and extensive damage to an entire neighborhood.

At any rate, I tried to supplement my prosaic life by spying on my classmates, slipping faked love letters from "secret admirers" in their school books when they weren't looking, concocting chemical experiments in the bathroom with cosmetics and cleaning fluids (in the hopes, perhaps, of simulating the infamous railcar explosion) and watching the TV show Columbo faithfully. I loved the inverted plot and Peter Falk's scruffy shamus with his tan trench coat, glass eye, and sideways mutter. I fantasized what it would be like to *be* Nancy Drew, all *savoir faire*, with her blonde pageboy and sleek blue roadster. I imagined myself as bespectacled, tomboy Harriet, walking the streets of Manhattan, notebook and pen in pocket. Or even Inspector Columbo with his trademark "Just one more thing."

But I really didn't care that much about how the mystery got solved; I was along for the ride. Harriet the Spy and Nancy Drew and Columbo lived in worlds vastly different from mine. Harriet hid in dumbwaiters and spied on bored rich matrons in New York City; rich, motherless Nancy poked around in creepy mansions with poisoned portraits and winding staircases, and Falk's Columbo fingered charismatic villains in Los Angeles. This was adventure. This was escape. I didn't really care whodunit. And the fact that I didn't—that I loved a mystery for its



own sake— was probably linked to my love of anything paranormal, especially mysterious and unexplained disappearances.

The first Nancy Drew book I read was *The Clue in the Crumbling Wall*, which was about a missing dancer and Nancy's search for her, which, like all of Nancy's by-the-numbers searches, was successful. But then I discovered Frank Edwards's 1959 book *Stranger Than Science*, which frightened me into a sleepless night in the summer of 1969, with stories of bug eyed demons, weird things washed up on beaches, and spontaneous combustions.

Less sensational and gory, but even more disturbing, was Edwards' account of the disappearance of David Lang on September 23, 1880 from Gallatin, Tennessee. Lang, a farmer with a wife and two children, had strolled across his pasture to look at his two quarter horses, when he suddenly disappeared "in full view of all those present." Edwards does not say whether Lang evaporated slowly like a mist or fog, and if so, what part of his body faded first. Lang was simply erased; here one minute, gone the next. According to Edwards, there were no clues to mark the site of Lang's vanishing and no sinkholes into which he might have fallen. But as strange as Lang's disappearance was the odd event that occurred seven months afterward. Lang's two children were playing in the spot where their father had vanished and noticed that there was a circle of stunted yellow grass marking it. Lang's eleven-year-old daughter, Sarah, called to her father, and then "heard his voice...calling faintly for help...over and over...until it faded away, forever."

At eleven, I was too unsophisticated to critique Edwards' hyperbolic style of writing, to wonder why there were no pictures of any of the phenomena in the book, or even to question why there were no footnotes or bibliography. The story of Lang's disappearance scared me silly. It disturbed me in a way that the tales of spontaneous combustions and jinxed schooners and

invisible biting demons didn't. In a way that I could not articulate, the story seemed more plausible. Or maybe subconsciously I was afraid that my own father would walk out into the backyard and dematerialize just as Lang had. But this weird tale did mark the beginning of my fascination with mysterious vanishings and missing people.

Jay Robert Nash's 1978 book *Among the Missing: An Anecdotal History of Missing Persons from 1800 to the Present*, also relates the tale of David Lang, but Nash states that the vanished man was actually one Orion Williamson from Selma, Alabama, and that he disappeared not in the fall of 1881, but on a hot July day in 1854. Nash claims that Williamson's disappearance have been "changed for various reasons by different writers." In every other respect, the details of the vanishing are the same, though Nash notes that "Williamson seemed to evaporate."

In any case, news of this bizarre event got around, and attracted the attention of the acerbic writer Ambrose Bierce, who thought it a farce and wrote about it in a collection of odd stories called *Can Such Things Be?* Bierce consulted with Dr Maximilian Hern, a German scientist who specialized in the paranormal. Hern stated that Williamson had "inadvertently walked into a void spot of universal ether." Other scientists surmised that Williamson had walked into a periodic "magnetic field" that "disintegrated the identity of the victim."

Ironically, Bierce himself would disappear in 1914 on a journey to Mexico. Nash notes that Bierce referred to his final adventure as his "*Jornada de Muerte*," a journey of death, and said, "To be a Gringo in Mexico, that is indeed euthanasia." Bierce was rumored to have been executed by the bandit Pancho Villa, to have been poisoned, or to have gotten lost in the wilds of Mexico. None of these theories has ever been proved, and for all purposes, Bierce, like Orion Williamson, vanished, never to be seen or heard from again.

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It isn't hard to imagine why some people vanish. One might conjecture that Bierce, known for his cynicism and bitterness, was simply tired of living or wanted to escape his responsibilities back in *Estados Unidos*, just as it is logical to assume that the Mafia or some disgruntled Teamster murdered Jimmy Hoffa, or that Amelia Earhart's plane crashed into the Pacific Ocean. But other vanishings are seemingly inexplicable.

The disappearance of Richard Colvin Cox from West Point Academy on January 14, 1950, is one of these cases, and is included in the chapter "No Reason At All" in Nash's *Among the Missing*. To date, Cox is the only West Point cadet ever to have vanished permanently. Rigidly controlled, Academy cadets use a series of checkpoints and sign-ins, which makes Cox's disappearance even harder to understand. Moreover, the disciplined, conservative, twenty-two-year-old cadet had never been in any sort of trouble. An excellent athlete and student, Cox had been promoted to sergeant and was planning to marry his girlfriend, Betty Timmons, when he disappeared.

Before he entered West Point, Cox had enlisted in the Army and had been assigned to the 27<sup>th</sup> Constabulary Squadron in Germany. Here the mystery begins. While assigned there, Cox, a Ranger, made the acquaintance of a man named George who was in his outfit. On the night of January 7, 1950, George, who spoke with a German accent, called the Academy and asked for Cox. The two men then went out for drinks. The week before he vanished, Cox had talked to one of his fellow cadets about George, saying that he was "morbid" and had committed war crimes while in Germany. Though Cox admitted to disliking George, he nevertheless agreed to have dinner with him a week later at the Hotel Thayer, located on the grounds of the Academy. At 6:18 pm January 14, 1950, Cox's roommate saw him buttoning up his overcoat as he stood

next to his barrack bed, looking rather “lackadaisical.” And that was the last anyone ever heard or saw of Cox again.

Nobody at the Academy remembered seeing Cox leave the barracks or walk to the hotel. There is no record of Cox dining at the Thayer, nor did the sentries guarding the gate of the Academy remember seeing him or his eccentric friend George leaving or entering the premises. When Cox did not return to his barracks by 11 pm, the Academy called the New York State Police and sent out a thirteen-state alarm. The biggest dragnet in the history of West Point commenced.

According to Nash, soldiers searched every cellar and attic and building on the post; helicopters whirred over the area day and night, and a nearby pond was drained, to no avail. Though there would be numerous sightings of Cox in hotel lobbies, swimming pools, and bus terminals over the years, none of them checked out, and 1500 leads proved bogus. And when the C.I.D. checked the rolls of Ranger battalions for the mysterious George, they found nothing. Cox was the only West Point cadet ever to disappear permanently. His case is still open, and he is still listed as AWOL.

Some believed that George may have kidnapped Cox for money, but the cadet’s family was not wealthy. Others question whether the mysterious George could have overpowered the physically fit, “hard and lean” Cox, but nevertheless, most believe that George had something to do with his disappearance. Whatever the reasons, Cox was gone. But even though West Point has no record of Cox leaving his barracks or dining at the hotel, that obviously doesn’t mean that Cox did not leave his barracks or dine at the hotel. Even the most tightly regimented organizations can slip up.

Still, it's hard to explain why nobody has come forth with any information about the missing cadet. Like Orion Williamson, Richard Cox seems to have evaporated.

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People vanish all the time: infants, toddlers, pre-teens, teenagers, young adults, the middle aged, and elderly, male and female, persons of all races, from all over the world. They vanish from their homes, while jogging or riding horses, from nightclubs and taxicabs, while taking out the trash, while hiking or on picnics or on cruise ships, while climbing mountains or swimming in the ocean or strolling along the beach. Sometimes the clues are ample, and sometimes, as missing persons websites like The Charley Project or The Doe Network often note, "few details are available in this case." According to the National Missing Persons Helpline, a charity established in 1992 to support missing people, most of the missing return within hours, but thousands do not. Most missing people are males in their early twenties or people over sixty who are suffering from Alzheimer's, dementia, or other health problems. The organization reports that people usually disappear for the following reasons: family conflict or relationship problems, debt, illness or accident, abuse, anxiety or stress, depression or Alzheimer's, or alcohol or drug problems. Abduction, the most feared type of disappearance, is actually the least likely.

For whatever reasons, most of the missing will never be found and seem to exist in a state between the living and dead, like Bierce's Peyton Farquar in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," or perhaps some indeterminate zone or parallel universe. In Margaret Atwood's short story, "Death by Landscape" (a story eerily similar to Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, a story of three Australian schoolgirls and their schoolteacher who vanish mysteriously)

Lois, a woman, in her mid-fifties, remembers her childhood friend, Lucy, who vanished at summer camp when she and Lois were both thirteen. Some forty years after Lucy has gone missing, Lois reminisces, “A dead person is a body; a body occupies space, it exists somewhere. You can see it; you put it in a box and bury it in the ground, and then it’s in a box in the ground. But Lucy is not in a box, or in the ground. Because she is nowhere definite, she could be anywhere.”

Atwood’s story is tinged with the supernatural; just like the missing schoolgirls in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Lucy disappears at high noon while climbing a cliff. Lois, who is sitting at the bottom of the hill waiting for Lucy to return, hears a shout, but “not a shout of fear. Not a scream. More like a cry of surprise, cut off too soon.” Though the cliff overlooks a lake, Lois never hears a splash or any other kind of noise. A subsequent search of the area reveals no clues whatsoever to Lucy’s whereabouts. Just like that, she’s gone. In Lindsey’s novel, the missing girls’ classmates report seeing a strange red cloud hovering overhead just before the girls vanish. There is much debate whether *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is purely fictional or based on a real incident. In her introduction, Lindsey coyly says, “the readers must decide for themselves.”

George Sluizer’s film *The Vanishing* (1988) and Francois Ozon’s *Under the Sand* (2000) also deal with missing persons, though the element of the supernatural is absent. Rather, these two films underscore the ways in which those left behind deal with the tragedy. In Sluizer’s film, the missing woman’s boyfriend, Rex, becomes obsessed to the point of mania, searching everywhere, posting flyers and rewards and even going so far as to appear on TV to appeal to the kidnapper. Marie, the heroine of *Under the Sand*, who obdurately refuses to believe that her husband is dead—or even missing—speaks of him in the present tense to her friends, who naturally fear for her sanity. Marie cooks dinner for her absent spouse, keeps his coat draped

over a chair in his office, and berates herself for her “infidelity” with another man. While Rex’s search ends in a way that can only be described as bloodcurdling, Marie’s does not. Even when her husband’s body turns up at the morgue, an apparent drowning, Marie refuses to accept reality. At the movie’s end, she sits on the beach at the spot where her husband disappeared. When she sees a man at the water’s edge, she begins to shout and wave, and when he fails to respond, she runs after him. But the careful observer will note that though Marie is gaining on the man, she doesn’t seem to be moving. Rather, she is running in place, suspended, her search for her husband never ending

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Though I have mostly outgrown the tales of the paranormal that fascinated me as a child, I have retained my fascination with the missing, and regularly scour missing persons websites, such as The Doe Network and The Charley Project. I am also searching for something, though not a missing loved one or friend. Dozens of people have disappeared from my life, but I have never known anyone who has gone missing. I don’t know or recognize any of the thousands of faces on missing person websites. Many of these cases and faces haunt me in ways I sometimes find hard to explain, though they compel me for different reasons.

Consider the case of forty-year-old Merrian Carver, an investment banker who disappeared from an Alaskan Royal Caribbean cruise ship on August 28, 2004. Carver, a vivacious redhead who loved to write poetry, was a divorcee and the mother of a thirteen-year old. For some reason, Carver had not told anyone about her cruise. After failing for several weeks to reach her, Carver’s parents had filed a missing person’s report. When her parents had her bank statements accessed, they discovered she’d bought a cruise ticket. Though there is a grainy black and white photo of Carver boarding the *Mercury*, her cabin steward reported that

Carver had stopped using her cabin after the second night. Nor did she use her Sea Pass, an onboard cruise credit card. The cruise ship has no record of Carver disembarking at the ports of the call along the cruise—Juneau, Skagway, Ketchikan, or Prince Rupert. It's possible that Carver got off at Vancouver, the *Mercury's* last stop, since the cruise line keeps no records of passengers who exit at this port. But that would hardly explain why Carver didn't use her Sea Pass, or why she didn't use her cabin after the second night, or, if she did exit at Vancouver, why she left \$107.00 in cash and all her clothing and belongings behind on the ship.

It's possible that Carver committed suicide, because she had threatened to do so several years before when she was going through her divorce, and the private eye Carver's father hired to cover the case says it's the most plausible explanation. The windows of Carver's ocean view room were bolted shut, but the open air deck was only a short walk away. Though the cabin steward who brought Carver sandwiches from room service on the second night of the cruise reports that she did not seem upset, sad or angry, it's also true that suicidal people don't always signal their intentions. Kendall Carver, who has spent about \$250, 000 to find his missing daughter, says that Merrian was a "private person" who did not always tell him everything she was doing. Still, it seems strange that the mother of a young teenager would not tell even her own daughter her whereabouts. That said, cruise ship disappearances are fairly common, and Carver was one of eight people to vanish aboard cruise ships between August 2004 and August 2005.

Then there is the case of thirteen-year-old Scott Fandel and his eight-year old sister, Amy, who went missing from Sterling, Alaska, on September 5, 1978. Their mother and aunt, who had gone out drinking, returned around 2:00 that morning to find both children missing from the cabin, a pot of water boiling on the stove and a package of macaroni and cheese on the



kitchen cabinet, as if someone or something had disturbed them in the middle of their activities. Bullet casings were later found outside the cabin, but it is unknown whether they had anything to do with the Fandels' disappearances. Oddly, the cabin itself burned down not long after the children disappeared. Roger Fandel, Scott's stepfather, was once considered a suspect in the case but has been ruled out. Scott and Amy's whereabouts are still unknown.

Keith Dean Fleming was another thirteen-year-old, one who disappeared sixteen months before the Fandels, on April 28, 1977, from Cocoa Beach, Florida. Keith had gone to his girlfriend's house after school but was supposed to return home for dinner. After their visit, Keith and his girlfriend rode her bicycle to the end of Osceola Street, where Keith got off and said he was going to hitchhike home. He has never been heard from or seen since. The serial killer John Rodney McRae, who died in prison in 2005, is considered the only suspect in Fleming's case. McRae, who was paroled in 1972 for the murder of an eight-year-old boy, moved to Brevard County, Florida in 1976, and after doctoring his employment records, became a correctional officer. Though McRae claimed innocence in Fleming's case and that of two other Florida boys who vanished not long afterward, he did admit that he liked to hang out at the Cocoa Beach pier and watch young boys surf, something Fleming liked to do. And in 1998, McRae was convicted of the 1987 stabbing of his next-door neighbor, 15-year-old Randy Laufer. The next year, investigators using ground-penetrating radar at McRae's former property in Brevard found nothing.

Maria Fleming, Keith's mother, was interviewed shortly after McRae's death. On the Serial Killer Central Website, Fleming, haggard and weary, faces away from the camera, clutching a picture of her son. She spoke of wanting to talk to Barbara McRae, the suspect's wife, in order to get some answers. Barbara McRae, for her part, claims to know nothing

whatsoever about any of the missing boys. Her husband was never charged with any of the Florida disappearances, because local authorities simply didn't have a case. In the 1970s, forensics was limited to blood typing and fingerprinting.

Keith's father died in 2003, but Gerald Fleming, his older brother, speaks of wanting "closure" for his mother. Gerald, who has the Marines emblem tattooed on his right shoulder in a tribute to his father, a veteran of the Korean war, says that "The Marines' emblem means that you bring everybody home, and my father passed away without bringing his son home." Maria Fleming adds, "I used to think maybe [Keith] is in an institution somewhere, or was brainwashed by the Moonies, or he's in a jail in Tijuana. But if something happened to him, I want to lay him to rest with his father." But Maria Fleming's son has been missing thirty years, and it is unlikely he's coming back anytime soon.

None of these cases smacks of the paranormal. Neither Merrian Carver, the Fandels, nor Keith Fleming walked into a "void of universal ether." None of these three victims was obliterated by a magnetically charged field. But like Margaret Atwood's Lucy, because Merrian and Keith and the Fandel children are nowhere definite, they could be anywhere.

And so the detective in me considers the details, the knowns. I question. I recreate. The Fandel children lived in a heavily wooded area of Alaska. The lock on the front door of the cabin didn't work, which would have made it easy for an intruder to gain access. Neighbors driving by the Fandel cabin noticed lights on at 11:45, but when the mother and aunt arrived back in the morning, the lights were out, which was odd, because both children were afraid of the dark. More questions. More oddities. Why did the cabin burn down shortly after the Fandel children vanished? Were the bullet casings left by a hunter? What sort of bullets were they—the issue of a handgun, a semi-automatic, or a hunting rifle? The missing persons report doesn't say. Why

would the children's mother leave them alone in a cabin—in a heavily wooded area of Alaska, no less— with a malfunctioning lock, and then upon returning, go to bed, assuming that the children were at the neighbors' house, even though a pot of water was boiling on the stove?

And what about Merrian Carver? Though she may have been a private person, why would a mother of a thirteen-year-old go on a cruise and not tell a soul? Carver's father said that Merrian adored cruises, so did she want to spend her last night on earth near the water? In other words, did she want to do something she loved before killing herself? Did she leave her cabin early in the morning when she knew few people would be likely to be up and about, stroll to the open-air deck, look furtively around, and then jump to her death?

And then there's Fleming. Why didn't he call his parents to come get him? Why didn't his girlfriend's parents see that he got home safely? Why would Fleming choose to hitchhike home? Probably because hitchhiking was a common practice in the 1970's, because Cocoa Beach was a relatively small town, and Keith, who like many young teenage boys, was somewhat adventurous, probably thought he could handle anything that came his way. A surfer, Keith had broken his left leg and wore a partial plate for his upper teeth, both likely results of sports injuries. Why couldn't he handle a hitchhiker? And what about the supposed murderer? Though McRae had been seen with teenaged boys, maybe it wasn't McRae who murdered Fleming, but someone else. Nobody saw Fleming getting into a car with anyone. Did Fleming decide to go for a late night swim or surf at the Cocoa Beach pier and drown? Or get attacked by sharks? (I admit this last scenario is unlikely, because Fleming would have had to gone home to get his surfboard, or to have been wearing swim trunks, and had he drowned, his body would have probably washed ashore).

So much for speculation. Merrian Carver, the Fandel children, and Keith Fleming are gone, and the odds are high that they will never be seen again. Not only cold cases or missing people, these are young lives snuffed out too soon, people with families and brothers and sisters and children. Each had interests and left something personal behind: Scott Fandel his beloved Yamaha Y280 motorcycle; Keith his surfboard; Merrian her CD of poems. These were not just case files FLA212 or AK1397, but real people. I almost feel as if I know them: redheaded Merrian in a tropical print dress and red lipstick, cocktail glass in hand; impish, freckled, blue-eyed Scott who was said to be a prankster and class clown, yet who was highly protective of his sister; blonde haired, brown-eyed Keith with his puka necklace and impassive, monk-like gaze, heading for his girlfriend's house on what may have been his last night on earth.

And what of the people they left behind? It is hard to imagine what it must be like, year after year, wondering if your child is ever going to come home. Looking at that picture on the mantle, or the wall, or the dresser. Do the parents blame themselves for the fates of their children? They must, at least occasionally. *If only I hadn't let him go to his girlfriend's house after school. If only I had warned him that hitchhiking is dangerous. If only I had come back home at a decent hour. If only I had gotten that lock fixed on the door. If I had done A instead of B, or X instead of Y, none of this would have happened.*

But again, all of this is speculation. I have to wonder why these particular cases capture my interest and haunt me the way they do. (Judging from the numerous blogs and MySpace pages and the aforementioned books, stories, and movies about the missing, I know I'm not alone). Scott and Keith were both teenagers, and of course there is something poignant about a person who dies young, because there is simply so much they will not do: finish high school, go

to college, date, hold a job, vote, buy a house, marry, have children, travel. Of course, it is not certain that Scott, and Keith, or even Merrian, are dead. But the odds are very high that they are.

And as for Merrian, she herself left behind a thirteen-year-old- daughter, who must wonder if or when her mother is coming home. I wonder why she thought it necessary to kill herself, if that's indeed what she did. And having been on a cruise myself, I know there's something both spooky and romantic about those open air decks late at night. Nothing but black sky and water for miles. Or those long narrow hallways leading fore and aft. Did someone reach out and pull her into his room? Sneak up behind her as she was looking out to sea? Carver, who was 5'7, but weighed only 100 pounds, would probably have been easy to overpower.

Also, atmosphere and setting heighten the mystery, make it more intriguing. Carver vanished on an ocean cruise. The Fandels disappeared in Alaska, certainly an awe-inspiring and foreboding setting for a vanishing, and Keith Fleming lived near the Atlantic Ocean. McRae might have disposed of his body there. But these are questions for the ages.

I also wonder if these vanished people remind me of people I have known and met, people I will never see again. Just think about all the people we meet in elementary and middle school, high school and college, graduate school and job after job after job. Friends, enemies, lovers, employers, teachers, acquaintances, girlfriends, boyfriends, students. Sometimes I'll dream about someone I knew in high school or even middle school and wonder where this person is now. And I wonder if he or she ever thinks or dreams about me. Sometimes I wonder if a person even existed or if I simply invented him, simply because it's been such a long time ago. But no, here he is, grinning or frowning from the pages of a yellowed high school annual. In a sense, all of the people who pass through our lives are missing people. Once they leave us, it's as if they no longer exist. Invisible. Alive only in our minds.

Sometimes I think I'd like to look up old classmates. I think of trying to get in touch with that crazy redheaded girl named Jenny (or was it Janey?) that I knew back in seventh grade, thirty-five years ago. I play detective for a minute, trying to figure out how I'd do it. Let's see—what was her dad's name? Wasn't he from Paducah, Kentucky? But he's probably dead now. And Jenny/Janey is probably married. And I don't know her date of birth. Or her place of birth. So I let it go, knowing even if I could trace my old classmate via tax records or such, she probably wouldn't remember me. Would probably think I was crazy. For practical purposes, my childhood friend may as well be floating in a spot of universal ether. Besides, even though solving mysteries can be fun, I still love a mystery for its own sake. An unsolved mystery goes on forever, provides endless speculation and conjecture and theories and “what-ifs,” a ball of yarn that continues to unravel, like Ariadne's red fleece.

As do the cases of the missing, yet the thread does not lead the way out of the labyrinth. Many—or even most—of the missing, whether long gone friends or cold cases on a missing persons website, will never be found. Neither dead nor alive, they seem to inhabit an underworld, yet an underworld suggests resolution. Rather, we might think of the missing as being in *limbo*, two definitions of which, according to the Oxford Dictionary, are: 2. an indeterminate state of awaiting a decision and 4. a state of neglect or oblivion (oblivion especially seems apt). A third definition of *limbo* is “prison or confinement.” But are the missing confined? Perhaps, if they are dead. At the bottom of a lake or river or ocean or ravine. Or inside a box. But they are too disembodied for that. Maybe missing people are in *purgatory*, not the “supposed place of spiritual cleansing,” but a place of “temporary suffering or expiation.” But what are they, or even the persons they leave behind, supposed to expiate?

Somehow my mental image of the world of missing people is much more banal than all these images of limbos and purgatories and ethers and magnetic voids. Rather, I see them as stuck on an elevator between several floors, neither at the top or bottom, moving neither up or down, but hovering somewhere right in the middle—a suspended world between the living and the dead.

## *Chapter 4* *Camera Obscura*

The Badlands of South Dakota. The Isle of Capri. The British Museum. Devil's Tower. Crater Lake. Lake Mono. Jamaica. The Ozarks. The Hill Country of Texas. Down East Maine. The Oregon Coast. Manhattan. L.A. Seattle. Venice Beach. Chicago. Paris. London. Rome. Florence. These are all places I've visited, and each has its own appeal and unique charm and flavor: twisted serene eroded cliffs; lemons big as footballs; Peruvian voodoo dolls and Easter Island heads; the bluest freshwater I'll ever see; gigantic hibiscus and young boys trying to sell me marijuana in the street; a saltwater lake populated by nothing but brine shrimp; chiggers and hairpin mountain roads; roadrunners and wineries; granite cliffs and lobster; MOMA; the LA Zoo; Puget Sound; Rastafarians on rollerskates; Frank Lloyd's House; the Louvre and the Latin Quarter; graffiti and flower gardens; horrendous honking squawking traffic, beautiful girls in black shades and miniskirts zigzagging around on motorcycles; cobbled labyrinthian streets, red poppies and leather factories.

Yet none of these places is really what you'd call marginal or obscure. Or more to the point, *remote*. Remote is a relative term, but all the places I've visited, whether craggy or tropical, rustic or sophisticated, are nevertheless, accessible. Easy enough to travel to. Even though I have done a fair share of traveling, and even though I am pushing fifty and probably ought to look for a serene and leisurely form of sightseeing, I still feel the need for a trip more daunting and difficult. I feel the need for the liminal. Extreme. Even bizarre. Yes, it's the romantic in me, but I still feel a need, as the travel writer Pico Iyer might put it, to "fall off the map." And I know the first place I'd go.

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*Shifakh!* hisses *P. verreauxi*, the white lemur, and according to Alison Jolly, a primatologist and lemur expert, the best studied and most photographed of all these primates. The long-limbed, silken furred sifaka, is named for the alarm signals it issues to predators. *Shifakh!* A sifaka leaps from a tree onto my shoulder, its round golden eyes inquisitive and alert. Springing to the ground, it presses paws to head for balance, and boings away like a pogo stick. And that's how I imagine my first day in Madagascar.

Some might wonder, why not just go back to Europe and further investigate and delve into all its cultural glories; God knows three hours isn't sufficient to see the Louvre or the British Museum, let alone three days. Or even three weeks. Why poke my way through a thorn forest or stroke a chameleon's scales or risk cholera or malaria or dengue fever when I could sit in a café and sip ouzo? Then there are all those awful stories I've heard from friends and acquaintances about Peace Corps workers contracting horrible four syllable diseases that do not spill trippingly off the tongue—Trypanosomiasis, leishmaniasis, schistomiasis, onchocerciasis—diseases that cause the skin to boil and itch or swell the joints or worse yet, cause permanent blindness. And Madagascar is a politically unstable country. Why put my life in peril? Why cut my feet trudging through the *tsingy*, formations of shrapnel-like limestone, or gaze at a fossil of *Aepyornis*, the elephant bird, or slog through a dank rain forest searching for lithe prosimians? When I could take a plane to the Cayman Islands and snorkel in its turquoise waters with the stingrays? (Which is something I have done, long before Steve Irwin had his aorta punctured by one of these creatures. Or, why not go back to Chichen Itza and the Mayan ruins of Mexico? At worst, I might have to suffer a little Montezuma's revenge.

Why? Because Madagascar, the fourth largest island in the world, is unique, host to flora and fauna found nowhere else in the world. Even though it is so deforested that its red earth

bleeds into the ocean, nowhere else in the world will you find the aye-aye, a nightmarish primate with spoon-shaped ears, bulging pea-green eyes, rodent-like fangs that grow continuously and a black, wizened claw like a fairy witch. The aye-aye also sports an elongated middle finger, and Malagasy superstition has it that if it points its third digit at you, you will die. Consequently, the islanders kill it at every opportunity.

Aside from lemurs and chameleons with hands like mittens and the *tsingy*, this red island boasts seven species of baobab tree, a bizarre pot-bellied specimen that appears as if it were planted upside-down; coral reefs; a variety of forests ranging from tropical to deciduous to montane; spiny forests; pygmy forests; moths the size of fans, and gargantuan woodlice. Madagascar's waters teem with tropical fish as flamboyant as the *lambas*, or sarongs, the Malagasy women wear; and in the *zomas*, which are enormous open-air markets, you can buy carp, embroidered dresses, vanilla (Madagascar is one of the largest exporters in the world), or zebu lips. There's no place like it, and I've never even been there.

"*Madagascar? Why there?* It's a third world country. You'd have to get every immunization known to man," says my mother-in-law. She's been to Australia, and that was exotic enough for her.

"Well, there's always Tristan da Cunha," I say.

"Where's *that*?"

Where, indeed. Tristan da Cunha, which is often not even shown on many atlases, is figuratively and literally in the middle of nowhere. Dubbed the "loneliest island in the world" by *National Geographic*, TDC, an almost perfectly circular volcanic fragment in the middle of the South Atlantic, is the remotest inhabited island in the world. The nearest habitation is the island of St. Helena, 1500 miles to the east, and best known for being Napoleon's last exile. Part of the

UK, Tristan was first colonized in 1816, when the British set up a garrison there to prevent the emperor's escape. Three hundred people live on TDC now, though there are only seven surnames on the island.

Named after the Portuguese explorer Tristao da Cunha, who discovered it in 1506, TDC is located in the "Roaring Forties," a name given to the latitudes between 40 S and 50 S, because of their intense and prevailing westerly winds. There is little landmass to slow the winds, making this area of the South Atlantic particularly treacherous and the cause of many a shipwreck. Tristan's sheer cliffs rocket 2000 feet up from the ocean. It is a place of lush ferns, blue mists, lava, gales, and according to *National Geographic*, "tempestuous winds that shriek with supernatural intensity." The people of Tristan make their living from potato farming, crayfishing, and selling stamps to philatelists. Every four months or so a dinghy arrives with supplies, news, and mail. Though Tristan began receiving Internet services in 1998, its amenities are sparse. TDC has no harbor, no airport, no movie theaters, no shopping malls. One Internet source notes that though the islanders use TV sets to watch videotapes, there are no video rental services. The island has one school, one hospital, one post office, one museum, one café, one pub, and one swimming pool. Tristaners live in houses cobbled from lava and thatched roofs of New Zealand flax. Tristan exudes a fey, unworldly charm, the sort of place where you might expect to see trolls or elves or fairies popping up from behind the lush green knolls or from some volcanic crevice.

The word "Tristan" may be derived from the French form *triste*, which means sadness. Yet in Welsh, the name means "bold." You'd have to be more than a little bold to travel to Tristan da Cunha, since it has no airport and no harbor. Though cruise ships go there, I'm not sure how passengers get from ship to shore. I have seen pictures of people descending ladders

dangling from helicopters, down into boats that row them to the rocky beach. This lonely island is definitely not for the faint of heart. And though gorgeous Tristan may be, living in the middle of nowhere has got to be a little saddening from time to time.

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Tristan da Cunha and Madagascar definitely veer off the radar and fall off the map. But there are also places here in New Orleans, where I live, places almost as singular and mysterious—and in their own way, remote— as misty blue green Tristan with its *rara avises* and potato fields and boiling ocean currents. These places don't boast Madagascar's crusty chameleons or the Traveller's Palm, a tree like an outstretched hand, or the demonic aye-aye. Yet these local oddities hold an attraction for me I find hard to define. I return to them again and again in an attempt to articulate my fascination.

At the end of Avenue G in Marrero, Louisiana, a community on the West Bank of the Mississippi River in the Greater New Orleans area, sits a most unusual house. Like the rest of the houses on the block, this one is brick, boxed in by a chain link fence. Three large brick columns form an archway in front of this house encrusted with junk: hub caps, car parts, egg cartons, mosaic tiles, and clusters of fake flowers. That's just the beginning. The tiny yard is crammed with cement angels and madonnas, rocking horses and candelabra, shanks of wrought iron, and mounds of faded blue, yellow and pink plastic flowers. An old plastic Santa Claus, its ruddy face cracked and peeling from years of exposure, peers out from the mass of debris. This home owner evidently raided Mardi Gras floats, junk yards, thrift shops, automotive repairs, cemeteries and nurseries to cut and paste this montage.

There's more. Stuffed into the grassless yard are plaster swans, owls, lions and seahorses. The home itself (if you can call it that—it is actually more like some surreal monument) is also studded with light bulbs, glass bottles of robin's egg blue and cobalt and turquoise, old LPs warped by the sun, and traffic signals. My favorite piece, a red crockery bull, gleams from the roof. A big rusted metal chain drapes the chain link fence like a bow. This is a place fit not for a king, but a crow.

But though I'm gaga about this house, I wouldn't want to live in it. I'd choke on the clutter. But I love looking at this kitschy, funky, eclectic eye candy. Though I've driven by this Marrero version of the Watts Tower several times, I've never seen anyone at home. Today a yellow cat skulks through the dark, empty carport. I imagine the homeowner as either an exuberant, fun-loving goofball, or a hoarder of epic proportions. With a mild mental illness. Then I wonder: what does the inside of the house look like?

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Another place I visit in Kenner lacks the free-for-all whimsy of the Avenue G house, but it pulls me back again and again. It has its secrets, though I haven't decoded them.

Back on the east bank of the Mississippi River in Metairie, a Jefferson Parish community west of New Orleans, I head down Veterans Highway. I pass David Drive and a clot of strip malls. Then Walmart and the Home Depot. Past the Louis Armstrong International Airport and into Kenner, a city northwest of Metairie. Veterans Highway soon segues into a two-lane road and then the strip malls and veterinary offices and Pier Ones and Bank Ones and Burger Kings vanish, replaced by automotive repair shops and trailer parks. The houses space farther apart; the vegetation gets scrubbier. Teenagers in baggy pants and hooded jackets trudge along the

shoulder of the road. Veterans turns rougher and bumpier just before it butts into the St. Charles Parish line. I swerve my truck around and pass a scrap metal place, hub caps and tire rims and crushed cars glinting through the chain link fence.

Weed-choked lots, abandoned houses, skeletal trees, brambles, and industrial facilities make up these scruffy seven or so blocks between the airport and the St. Charles Parish line. The Party Palace, a building shaped like a milk carton, rubs shoulders with the Marine Bureau and a pile driving company, and a business that sells adult videos lies just around the corner from the Pro Clean experts. A juxtaposition of junk, the cluttered closet of far west Kenner.

In these seven blocks, you'll also find Aberdeen Stables, where sleek horses graze in a field overlooking a landing strip, building contractors' trailers scrawled with graffiti and old cars half submerged in ditches. And behind Tunnel Experts, Pro Clean and Lynn Dimm's nursery, patches of forest littered with plastic Jesuses and Madonnas, baby buggies, slabs of masonry, lidless toilets, and decomposing sofas. But the rubble has no pattern: it is not organized, like the bric-a-brac of the Avenue G house.

Within these seven blocks, at the end of Hamlet Street (there is a Duncan, but no Macbeth or Ophelia), dark and lined with gnarled trees, an old trailer faces a murky brown canal. The door hangs open, revealing graffiti-laced walls. I imagine that gangs come here at night and smoke crack and gape through the dirty windows at the planes zooming by. This road reeks of abandonment and decay. And not a little menace. I roll my windows down, but keep my doors locked and try to keep from running over nails, glass shards, red crockery bulls, or the (plastic) baby Jesus.

Though this sliver of Kenner has no bric-a-brac houses, there is a very odd building on Sharon Street that I first mistook for a marine equipment or fishing supply place. Its slanting,

arc-like, wooden planks, eccentric windows (one hexagonal, the other triangular) give it a vaguely maritime appearance. The slightly bowed windows remind me of warped portholes. A rotunda adorns the top of the building: a dome-like structure wrapped with plexiglass. Adjacent to this dome juts a small box, a hybrid of attic and cupola. Large, irregular “Fred Flintstone” blocks decorate the sides of the building. A sign on the building reads “Journey Church” and parked in the driveway is a van inscribed with the church’s logo. Could this be an interdenominational church? The amalgamation of architecture makes me think so.

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Nearly four years later, I cruise down Crestview, the last street parallel to the St. Charles Parish line. I’m looking for a trailer park, but I can’t find it. Maybe it wasn’t on Crestview. Maybe it was on Salem. Maybe Hurricane Katrina blew it away, because it wasn’t really a trailer park, just a few battered and dented mobile homes scattered along the banks of a muddy canal. I circle block after block. I see a woman riding a horse; I see a plane landing; I see another woman being arrested. But I don’t see a trailer park.

But I do remember it. Remember driving around after leaving the architectural disaster and seeing a patch of purple through the trees. Hopped up purple. Purple cow purple. It was a purple trailer, and my crow’s eye, attracted to anything gaudy, had to see it. I drove behind the trailer park, behind scrubby banana trees and boarded up windows and broken windows. I saw a trailer with a number spray painted on the door. Then I saw a trailer without a door. I saw amputated tree stumps. And then the road petered out into pocked, pot-holed gravel, and I turned my pick up around, spraying a plume of dust behind. A trailer park. Faded trailers, green with

mold, “WARNING: GUARD DOG” signs taped to the windows. I tried not to stare. Of course I stared.

Forlorn attempts at decoration. Plastic plants strewn across porches, clusters of artificial gladiolas stuck over a door. A bumper sticker on the back of a truck read: GOD, GUNS, AND GUTS MADE THIS COUNTRY. A clothes line sagged with laundry. The laundry draped not only the line, but the porch, trees, and even the bushes. Three dark children, Hispanic or maybe Native American, stared at me. I smiled and waved. The road, wide enough for only one vehicle, curved sharply around a muddy canal. God only knew what was in that ooze. Not very deep, but very, very filthy. You wouldn't want to fall into it. But the people in the trailer park had to look at that shit brown water every day. This was certainly not a world that I wanted to live in, but it did remind me that there were entire other worlds within the world I inhabited.

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Seeing takes me out of myself, and the need to see—and to seek, and find—is one of the reasons I became a photographer. I have always liked the freedom of jumping in my truck and driving until I find something, anything. A stray cat, a mummified dog, a ripped up sofa, a drunk man in a ditch. Even if the discoveries are ugly or shocking, I felt like a child on an Easter egg hunt, anticipating the tiny shock of color, the bright orb in the grass. Or a glint of bone or sparkling trash. With my viewfinder pressed to my eye and my world neatly framed, I felt intrepid.

I believe the overlooked and the underlooked are almost one and the same. Sights so common most of us never give them a second look. How else to explain my fascination with cul-de-sacs, dead end roads, abandoned houses, mounds of sand, vacant lots? Are these things and places metaphors for loss and abandonment? A poetry of detritus? Who knows? A scene



either pulls me in or it doesn't. Sylvia Plachy, a photojournalist of some reknown, was once asked how she made photographs. She replied: "I listen for the hum."

Maybe these secret, forgotten, remote worlds, whether exotic or prosaic, emanate a subsonic murmur I like to think few of us can hear. But listening for the hum, and getting the perfect shot, isn't always the most important thing. Again, sometimes it's critical just to look. To *see*, with or without a camera.

The late Diane Arbus sometimes instructed her photography students to shoot without any film in their cameras, her method of getting them to slow down and respond to the world without frantically clicking the shutter again and again. The point was to become more aware, more sensitive—not to simply point and click robotically.

When I was younger, I often just clicked and clacked at people without even asking their permission—that is, until an angry man threatened to "knock the fucking camera" out of my hand. That was a lesson in sensitivity. Now I (almost) always ask people permission before shooting—excuse me—photographing them. When I lived in Baton Rouge, I got to know a family who lived on River Road, a thoroughfare that winds around and is named for the Mississippi. I took portraits of all the family—playing cards, singing, drinking, or just hanging out. Photography can be an aggressive act, and photographers, notably Arbus, are often accused of exploiting people, especially the marginal, poor, or disabled. But even though the family on River Road was poor, I never felt that I was exploiting them. I think they felt honored to have their pictures taken. They were unguarded and open in a way that I certainly can't imagine rich people being. Their world wasn't my world, but it was one that I needed to see

And there are other worlds as well. I'd like to interview the owner of the Avenue G house. What was this person's vision? Was it accidental or planned? And I'd still like to go to

Tristan da Cunha and gaze over its foggy crags to the roaring sea below. Sleep in a thatched hut. See a right whale breach or an albatross swoop across the sky. Or pet a sifaka or photograph a baobab tree, its branches like upside down roots clawing the sky. I imagine my friends sighing over shots that would make even a veteran *National Geographic* photographer swoon and gasp.

Pico Iyer has also intrigued me with his descriptions of Paraguay in his collection of travel essays, *Falling Off the Map*. And I'm reading John Gimlette's book *At the Tomb of the Inflatable Pig*, about the South American backwater Paraguay, which the writer P.J. O'Rourke has described as a landlocked island, "nowhere and famous for nothing." Paraguay is known for the Chaco, or "green hell," a wilderness of thorn and scrub where temperatures soar up to 112 degrees; its history of brutal dictatorship; its propensity for sheltering Nazis and war criminals; and its odd wildlife. It's a place where Ache Indian women breastfeed monkeys (there's a picture in Gimlette's book if you don't believe me) and where you can find the memoirs of the Marquis de Sade in the grocery store. I don't know—Paraguay might be a place to visit only in my mind.

In the meantime, I've got some other trips on the backburner. Not abroad, but that doesn't matter. Apalachicola, Florida's "forgotten coast" is but a scant seven or eight hours away from my home in New Orleans. And there are Utah, and Montana, and Idaho's Craters of the Moon, and one of the most exalted of Northwestern cities, Portland, Oregon, the "City of Roses." Yes, Portland is known for its beautiful botanical gardens, clean air, great beer and food, but what I really can't wait to see is Velveteria—a museum dedicated to velvet paintings of all sorts, from "clowns to banditos to unicorns and Yoda." The grotesque made sublime.

My friends and in-laws assure me I'll love Portland, and I believe them. But first I really need to back to Marrero and get a second gander at that old abandoned factory in almost the

exact shape of a whiskey decanter, with dark windows like blown out eyes. My eyes are open,  
my camera loaded.

## *Chapter 5* *Summerheaven*

The mountain loomed before me, a rocky pincushion needled with hundreds of bulbous saguaros. On and on and up and up and round and round the canyon road I drove. The desert air smelled sharp and clean. I was seventeen hundred miles from home, nine thousand miles above sea level, and happier than I had ever been. And alone. But not afraid, though the sun was beginning to dip behind the Santa Catalina Mountains, and the narrow passage kinked like a snake's spine, and Turkey Run Road, the gateway to my cabin in the Coronado Forest, was nowhere listed on my Mapquest directions. I knew I would find my destination. I was reckless. Dauntless. Intrepid.

The travel writer Pico Iyer wrote that we travel because we want to feel like young fools again, and this aptly describes the way I felt on that early August evening in 2005. No longer a forty-six-year-old married woman with a house in the suburbs and two cats in the yard, but a bold twenty-year-old, rattling west across I-10 and beyond in her clanking pickup, wind whipping her hair, rock and roll—my *paramours* of late adolescence—Cheap Trick, T. Rex, and Bob Seger—blaring from the stereo. Not *amour fou*, but close enough. I didn't have to do a damned thing I didn't want to do. I had embarked on one of the most exuberant of American pastimes, the stuff myths and movies are made of: the road trip.

I had left on August 1, bound for Mt. Lemmon, Arizona, telling everyone that I was going to visit some old friends in Albuquerque and Tucson, which I was, but this was not the real reason for my journey. I wanted adventure. I wanted to be alone. I did not want to ask anyone for advice or opinions or directions. I did not want to fulfill anyone's demands or endure the

sound of anyone else's voice or share my space with anyone or anything other than my luggage and my music. I wanted nothing but sweet, selfish solitude for two straight weeks.

The road was open, and so was I. And so on I motored, bypassing Dallas and its snarl of traffic, through the counties of Collins and Franklin and Palo Pinto, and on to Abilene, where I spent a night in a sun bleached and wind battered Super 8 motel just off I-10. According to my Rand McNally atlas, I was now officially in West Texas. The frontier had begun. The gentle green humps and hills of eastern and central Texas faded to tan and taupe, and the foliage crumbled into dust and tumbleweed and acres of bleak, unforgiving plains.

I basked in my solitude as my truck bumped and lurched along that cracked and pitted stretch of freeway from Abilene to El Paso. Cattle and windmills replaced shopping malls and chain restaurants. My cell phone gave up its ghost of a signal for over an hour. Where was everybody? Had I landed on the dark side of the moon, or a lost highway? Indeed, just a thirty-minute detour north of Pecos would have taken me into Loving County. With a population of sixty-three, Loving County holds the distinction of being the most sparsely inhabited county in the continental United States. I tucked Loving County away for a future trip, El Paso in my sights. When I passed through the gap of the Sierra Diablo mountains at 5:35 pm Mountain Standard Time, I felt I had truly crossed the border deep into the heart of the Wild Wild West.

El Paso. Border patrol. Ocotillo cactus and road runners. Chiles rellenos and chorizo and *micheladas*: beer and lime juice with a salted rim. Sun washed mountain ridges with gunslinger names: Sierra Blanco, Devil's Ridge, Apache. I attempted my best Spanish: broken but earnest. *Que hora es? Donde es bano? Tengo mucho sed, dos cervezas, por favor. Si, con limon. Gracias.* Flattered, the waiters and cashiers checked their amusement. *La gringa es muy tonta!*

I highlighted each westward progression on my coffee and beer stained atlas: Canutillo, Texas, Las Cruces, New Mexico, Willcox, Arizona. Cities slid eastward as I hurtled myself farther and farther away from jambalaya, wetlands, jazz, and the Superdome, on to the little cabin I had reserved for three days on Mount Lemmon, Arizona. I spent one night in El Paso and sped off to Arizona.

I made it to my cabin just before sunset; though not on my map, Turkey Run Road had popped up out of nowhere. My cabin, the last on the right, sat at the top and the end of Turkey Run Road. I liked that. Civilization ended here. My mountain home faced the dark green mass of the Coronado Forest and the dirt road disappearing into it. I parked and set my emergency brake, something I never had to worry about doing back in pancake-flat New Orleans.

My host, Darby Lindholm, whose name, appropriately enough, was Swedish for “house in the woods,” had given me a numerical code for the lock on the door. I looked at the little white box with its grid of buttons and hoped that I would not have trouble gaining entry. I thought of the summer before in Italy and how I’d struggled for what seemed hours fumbling with a skeleton key trying to get into my hotel room. What would happen if I couldn’t get in? I didn’t know anybody here. My cell phone had once again surrendered its signal.

I looked at the code on my Post-it. I punched in the numbers and turned the knob. Nothing. I tried the sequence again, this time jabbing the buttons ferociously. Maybe I just hadn’t used enough pressure before. Still the knob wouldn’t turn. I jiggled it up and down and back and forth and leaned on the door. No dice. Shit! I tried a third time and was no luckier. What if I couldn’t get in? I imagined sleeping on a pile of clothing under the stars, shivering in the icy mountain air, imagined having my throat slashed by a ravenous puma or my arm amputated by a hungry black bear. I could always sleep in my truck, but what if one of those gnarly construction

workers I'd seen as I'd driven in discovered me? At least I'd had the foresight to bring Pepper Spray. I punched in the code again and this time the button panel swung open, revealing the key to the door. Why the hell hadn't Darby told me there was a *key* inside the box?

There were three bedrooms in the cabin, and I chose the one with the skylight, waterbed, log walls, and Indian blankets. Over the bed was a black and white poster of a man naked to the waist, cradling a baby against his magnificent chest. I plunked my luggage down and unpacked my groceries and put a beer in the refrigerator to cool. I examined the bookshelves in my bedroom: Darby had stocked them with a variety of hippie literature: *Linda Goodman's Sun Signs*, *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *Another Roadside Attraction*, and a slew of others. Outside the kitchen window hung a hummingbird feeder, and there was a chaise lounge on the deck. The only essential missing was a hot tub.

I looked out my bedroom window, eye-level with the roots of birch and aspen. The cabin was built into the side of a hill, and that seemed strange to me, probably because I lived in a city below sea level. I thumbed through *Linda Goodman*, feeling juvenile in the extreme, while admiring some of her piquant passages, and thought it a shame she hadn't turned her talents to fiction writing. I flicked through *The Whole Earth Catalogue* and thought I detected a whiff of patchouli. Then I drank a beer and lay back on the groovy undulating mattress. I stared through the skylight above at the stars that were like sugar on black velvet, and fell into a long dreamless sleep.

The next morning I awoke early, drank coffee, and looked out the kitchen window at the buzzing, whizzing hummingbirds at the feeder, admiring the iridescent sheen on their tiny throats. Hummingbirds have always seemed more like gigantic insects or whirligigs than birds to me. I had never seen so many feeding at once. They whirred in and back, back and in, in and out,

a flurry of beaks and feathers. I grabbed my camera and managed to get a couple of shots before the flash sent them speeding off in a manic blur. Though it was early August and “monsoon season” down below in Tucson, the mountain air was as crisp and sparkling as dry champagne. I decided to go for a walk and went to my truck to get my hiking boots. I stopped short. A wolf was sniffing at my tires.

The wolf, which didn't seem wary or afraid in the least, turned a pair of pale blue eyes on me. Then I noticed its collar. This wasn't a wolf, it was a Siberian Husky. Somebody's pet. *Of course.* There weren't any *wolves* in this part of the country. Feeling slightly silly, I approached the dog and bent down and stroked his fur. The tag on his collar read “Nanook.” Later I discovered he belonged to my next-door neighbor, who apparently was gone a large part of the time, leaving his dog to fend for himself. Siberian Huskies are very friendly, and for the next couple of days, Nanook accompanied me on all my hikes and slept next to me on the chaise lounge while I wrote or drank beer or napped. I loved big dogs but didn't own one because my husband hated them. Not that it mattered; our back yard was the size of a postage stamp. Now I had a dog, if only for a couple of days. A dog, a waterbed, a skylight, hummingbirds, saguaros, prickly pear and mountains for miles—close to heaven.

Okay, this wasn't exactly roughing it. But it wasn't as if I could just run down to the local 7-11 and grab a quick snack. That would have entailed an arduous forty-five minute drive down the mountain road to Tucson. And though I had Nanook to protect me on my forays around the mountains, the Coronado Forest was full of black bears, and a few years ago a young girl had been mauled on Mt. Lemmon by a mountain lion. As I had driven through Summerhaven, the small town at the foothills of Mt. Lemmon, I'd seen a line of ruined trees like burnt matchsticks, testimony to the devastation of a 2003 forest fire. There was just the right



amount of danger, just enough to impress my more cautious friends and family back home who had thought me foolhardy to travel so far alone, even though I was hardly the first woman in history to do so.

During the day I walked down to The Summerhaven Café, treating myself to their German potato salad and homemade sour cherry pie or their wide selection of microbrewed beers. I hiked the mountain trails, ignoring the pains in my calves. My muscles definitely were not used to such steep terrain. I thought about how different everything looked and smelled and felt here: the bulbous saguaros, the black-eyed birches, and quaking aspens. I looked over and into canyons, into hollows and pockets of rock and conifer, over the Santa Catalina Mountains fading into a blue haze. I definitely had a sense of depth and distance and perspective here that I never got in New Orleans. The Arizona landscape, just like much of the West, seemed to me more majestic and imposing than Louisiana's primeval vegetable excess. Yet it also seemed more threatening: I could fall into a ravine, twist my ankle climbing a cliff, get clobbered by a falling rock, drive my truck over the edge of the winding mountain road, or get attacked by wild animals. And then there were scorpions. I was always careful to shake out my boots in the morning, because I'd heard they liked to hide there. The Louisiana landscape—aside from alligators—felt tame by comparison.

I can't really say that I ever feared for my life during my three days on the mountain or in the remainder of my trip. I did not get smacked by a boulder, twist my ankle, get stung by a scorpion, or drive my truck into the canyon. The people of Summerhaven were friendly and the construction workers kept to themselves. I slept soundly at night. I heard no strange noises, no scratching or rattling at the windows or doors. Because Darby had warned me that the bears liked to scavenge, I was careful not to leave any food on the porch or in my truck.

Yet one afternoon while walking back to my cabin after an afternoon hike, Nanook having gone for a walk with his master, I had the odd sensation that someone—or something—was watching me. I turned my head and thought I saw a black bear cub hiding in a patch of undergrowth. As I got closer, I saw that I'd mistaken flora for fauna: the "bear cub" was nothing more than a charred tree stump, a remnant of the 2003 fire. If bears there were, they had evidently gone over the mountain.

I wanted to stay on Mt. Lemmon forever. I didn't want to go home. Even though I was only there for three days, I had fallen in love with the place. I loved the dry air, the conifers, the canyons, the saguaros. I wanted a dog to romp around with. I wanted space. Distance. Altitude. As a child, I had always longed to live out West, had longed for peaks and pinnacles and gorges and snow. I had dreamed of learning to ski and ride horses. Why on earth, then, was I still living in Louisiana, at the very bottom of the deep humid South? This was where I belonged.

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Though a couple of dust storms in the Texas panhandle nearly blew my truck off the road on the way home to New Orleans, weaving my way through Houston's traffic choked arteries was probably my biggest challenge. After all, that is one stipulation of a road trip: there must be a challenge to meet.

And I did meet what felt like challenges to me, though I had no hair-raising tales to tell, even though I had met with no extreme danger, and even though the return home felt anticlimactic. Still, driving so far away all alone was a first for me and I felt I had accomplished something real and true and meaningful. I didn't want the trip to end. I hated to return to my little suburban ranch house in the lowlands and the thick humid air and tangled vegetation of

Louisiana. The traffic. The litter. The mucky canals. I missed the high desert, the silence, the whizzing and buzzing hummingbirds outside my window, the taste of sour cherry pie and *Micheladas*. And I missed Nanook.

But I also knew that all trips have to end eventually. A few years on Mt. Lemmon might have proven as boring as my ordinary, everyday, below-sea-level life sometimes was. And while solitude can be soothing, it can also be stultifying. I knew I needed the urban stimulation (and irritation) of traffic, clatter and chatter. Driving an hour to buy groceries, fleeing forest fires, or getting snowbound in winter might have been just as vexing as slogging through suburban traffic, wrangling for a parking spot, or enduring the threat of hurricanes six months of the year. Paradise only exists in our minds.

But I still remember, with intense affection and keen nostalgia, my little cabin in the woods, that place where I spent one of the happiest times of my life. It *was* my home, my summer haven, if only briefly; yet I remember it not only as a shelter but also as a lover, calling to me and luring me back with its alpine siren song, and I can't help thinking that I should go back there once again. That is a road trip for another time but a trip that I am ready to take when that shimmering moment presents itself, when I am mad and foolish and reckless and crazy enough to let down my hair and my guard and fall in love.

## *Chapter 6*

### *The Museum of Bad Art*

Is there such a thing as bad art? The Boston-based Museum of Bad Art, or MOBA, seems to think so. Established in 1994, MOBA calls itself “the only institution in the world dedicated to the collection, preservation, exhibition, and celebration of bad art in all its forms and in all its glory.”

The idea of dedicating a museum to bad art is not only unique but, to some, presumptuous. After all, who’s to say what characterizes good or bad art? Art is a subjective medium and experience, and trying to define it is like trying to capture the sea in a sieve.

Many, if not most of us, think of art, or fine art at any rate, as possessing certain attributes, such as craft, skill, finesse, masterful technique, and often, but certainly not always, beauty. We usually think of something beautiful as good, because it brings us pleasure. If beauty is good, and art is beautiful, then art is good because it is beautiful and hence pleasurable. If this is true, then bad art creates discomfort and displeasure in the viewer.

Yet it is important to distinguish art that is technically bad from art that contains negative, disturbing or unpleasant subject matter. Some art, of course, may display both characteristics. A viewer may recoil from a painting because of its muddy colors, sloppy brushwork and perceived incompetence or be shocked and revolted by a masterful, diamond hard representation of say, dismembered bodies. Yet another viewer may not regard the technically incompetent painting as bad; she may be delighted by its rough primitivism and yet another may not see the technically accomplished yet shocking picture as bad in a moral sense, but instead as thought or emotion provoking.

The Museum of Bad Art chiefly displays works that are technically bad, though certain of the subject matter, if not exactly shocking, is also bizarre or simply perplexing. (A viewer may well wonder why anyone would want to paint a Pointillist picture of a fat man on the toilet or a gladiator in a pink toga, black shoes and white socks.) Some of the work in MOBA is donated by the artists themselves or their relatives, while others are picked out of curbside garbage cans.

In MOBA's 1996 publication subtitled *Art Too Bad To Be Ignored*, there are few examples of skill, craft, or know-how, though as curator Scott Wilson states, the creator of *Sunday on the Pot with George* "had complete control, even mastery of the brush," a point with which I agree, though the artist's decision to cut off George's feet creates a disturbingly truncated compositional effect.

At any rate, one will not, for the most part, find works in MOBA that are "tasteful, ornamental, decorative, attractive, beautiful, graceful, refined, or sensitive," all synonyms of the adjective *artistic*, as defined by *Roget's Thesaurus*.

What one *will* find in this slim volume is pure, untrammelled artistic expression that defies, or is ignorant of, standard aesthetic rules of composition, organization, or color theory. The book's frontispiece *Lucy in the Field with Flowers* by "artist unknown" features an angry looking grandmother who appears to be standing, rather than sitting, on a folding chair in the midst of a field of woolly flowers and a lemon yellow sky, while Sarah Irani's *Mama and Babe* on page four is pure visual cacophony. Quite simply, you've never seen colors like this before. Mama's face has the cyanotic hue of someone deprived of oxygen for several hours, while the "babe," who is not a babe at all, but a young girl of roughly six or seven, is a green haired, magenta faced imp with glowing red eyes and dark purple lips, who could easily double as one of Satan's minions.

Likewise, Frank B. Oldfield's portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln (again, an odd choice of subject matter) resembles nothing so much as an iridescent potato head with tiny squinting eyes and a tight pinched mouth. It is unique in content as well as form, and as the book's authors tell us, it is "painted layer by layer on four sheets of lace and adorned with previously used holiday decorations."

But again, who's to say that this is *bad* art? Again, what *is* art? Sarah Irani's Pepto-Bismol pinks and lurid reds shock the eye, but let's not forget that the Post Impressionist Gauguin painted women with lemony skins and eggplant purple hair. Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Matisse, to name a few other well known artists, also used unusual, jarring colors and violated compositional rules.

To reiterate, art need not be beautiful to be provocative or significant. For example, Picasso's Cubist portrait *Weeping Woman* is garish, dissonant, and hardly pleasurable to look at, though to use a well-worn cliché, beauty is often in the eye of the beholder. Picasso paints acidic yellows, caustic greens and fiery reds thickly on a face that appears to have been hacked apart and stitched back together again. Compelling though it is, *Weeping Woman* is abrasive and yes, *ugly*. So why is this painting considered *good* art (good enough to be exhibited in prestigious fine art museums throughout the world) and not Frank B. Oldfield's *Mary Todd Lincoln* or Irani's mother and daughter portrait?

Comparing MOBA artist F. Angelo Le's portrait *Eileen* with Henri Matisse's *Portrait with a Green Stripe* is a more precise analogy, as both are frontal portraits of women with more or less neutral facial expressions and green in their faces, a color not normally associated with skin. Besides the similarity of hues, both portraits grab the viewer's attention in a vivid, magnetic manner. But the similarities end there.

Matisse's reds, oranges and yellows contrast chromatically in a clean, fresh way as they are meant to, against the cooler blues and greens, and his composition is well-designed, making effective use of positive and negative space. By contrast, Le's *Eileen* ends abruptly at the shoulders, suggesting amputation, and giving it at best, an unfinished appearance; the head seems to float in space, detached from the body. Where Matisse's brushstrokes are controlled and vigorous, Le's are limp and clumsy; Le's use of red (Eileen's scrap of a garment) next to the yellowish-blue background, unlike Matisse's, is not fresh and vibrant, but dirty and bilious. Matisse's green stripe intentionally divides his lady's face into a lively contrasting color scheme; Le's *Eileen* has green circles around the eyes which unintentionally suggest liver failure.

The primary difference is one of intent. Matisse's use of green was deliberate and systematic, while Le's, as far as we know, was not. Matisse, like Picasso, was a trained artist who was unconcerned with creating a realistic portrait, while Le, if his uncertain blend of flesh tones and clumsy composition is any clue, probably was not. Because, judging from appearance, he was untrained, he was unable to achieve verisimilitude. In short, his unusual color scheme was an accident, or appears to be.

So perhaps we could say that good art, even it is not always pleasurable or beautiful, is deliberate and intentional, as in *Weeping Woman*. Picasso used the Cubist method of showing an object from various angles simultaneously in this artwork. Consequently, the woman's jagged, violently discolored face mirrors her broken emotions but evokes more revulsion than pity. We are reminded that strong emotions contort the face and often appear ugly, pathetic, or frightening rather than touching. (Picasso was often accused of misogyny and of portraying women in cruel and ugly ways.) Love it or hate it, misogynistic or not, Picasso's work employs finesse and expertise; it is artful.

In contrast, we could say that “bad” art is accidental, uncontrolled, artless, simple or naïve; that’s why the work of Oldfield, Irani, and Le ended up at MOBA and not MOMA. Or the Met, or the Guggenheim. But even this distinction isn’t hard and fast, as much naïve or “folk” art is exhibited in fine art museums around the country.

One thing *was* clear to me: much of MOBA’s “bad” art did exhibit characteristics associated with “good” art: it brought me pleasure, it was often provocative, and it was original, another feature we often demand of the best art. Most importantly, it was vital, strong, full of passion and brio. My pleasure was in part guilty, because I couldn’t help laughing at many of the works in MOBA, which, again, were often clumsy, amateurish and sometimes unintentionally comical.

Then again, maybe I was laughing at the sometimes absurdity of high art, which can often be such a ponderous, stuffy and self-righteous affair. In the final analysis, it’s all just pigment, canvas, graphite, and a whole mess of other materials. Art is vitally important and highly significant to our culture, but let’s face it: artists aren’t saints, and they don’t save souls.

It may be impossible to ever make a clear distinction between good and bad art, or to define art at all, so broad has it become. One person is enthralled by the gaiety of Renoir, while another derides the mushy sweetness of his brushstrokes and gamboling picnickers. What is perceived as sublime by one is thought of as utter garbage by another; one person declares the nude amputees and bound women of photographer Joel Peter Witkin mystical and riveting, while another denounces his *oeuvre* as the rankest sort of pornography. And so it goes.

But whether art be pleasurable or unsettling, sophisticated or artless, rough as sandpaper or polished to a high hard sheen, a work of art should stimulate our minds and emotions, either negatively or positively, or at the very least, make us *look*. It should wrench more than a quick



glimpse from us, unlike so many of the bland and “tasteful” seascapes or milky landscapes we see in banks or doctors’ or dentists’ offices that do little more than blend effortlessly into the wallpaper and serve as the visual analogue of elevator music. One characteristic absolutely necessary to art, regardless of its technique, intent or subject matter is this: it shouldn’t bore us or put us to sleep. The artists at MOBA certainly don’t.

One thing is certain. The art of MOBA sparkles with vitality. *Vital*: 1. Of or pertaining to life. 2. Having remarkable energy, liveliness, or force of personality. And so to all the bad artists at MOBA, I say: Bravo!

## *Chapter 7*

### *The House of Myrtle*

“That ain’t art.”

“Well then, what is it?”

“It ain’t art. I know that much. Hell, I could do that good.”

Yeah, but you didn’t.

My father has rained down his absolute and unyielding judgment on the Morris Hirschfeld poster I have just brought back from The Museum of Modern Art. I love the poster, love the folk-naïve way this little known Polish artist has painted this glowing white cat with its hypnotic eyes, stretched out on a bed.

My father does not.

“That don’t even look like no cat. That looks like an owl.”

“That’s because it is, Dad. It *is* an owl. It’s an owl lying on a bed.”

With a humph and a snort, my father shakes his head rapidly side to side, as if trying to expel water from his eardrums, and stomps off down the hall.

*Philistine!*

Snickering at his lack of aesthetic taste and judgment, I lie down on my bed and reexamine the poster on the wall. I stare into the cat’s eyes. It stares back.

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What is art? One man’s meat is another man’s poison. I enjoyed the magical power of Hirschfeld’s painting and didn’t mind that the cat’s ears were slightly lopsided and its nose a

little off-kilter, but my father found it clumsy and amateurish. The cat simply did not look enough like a cat.

Many others share my father's sentiments, believing that a work of art should look exactly like the thing it was intended to represent and not vary one jot. *Trompe l'oeil* explicates the artist's mastery and technique. Technique is certainly important, but overemphasis on it can lead to the belief that anything that looks rough-hewn or simple— or *fun*—cannot possibly be art.

A few years ago, I presented a slide show to my high school art class. When I paused for a moment to discuss Picasso's *Bull Head*---a sculpture assembled from a bicycle seat and handlebars---one of my students, an audacious sophomore named Gary, promptly proclaimed that it was not art.

Trying to stifle my irritation, because after all, art *is* subjective, I asked Gary to defend his assertion.

“I could do that.”

But you didn't.

“That ain't art. All that man did was slap a bike seat and handlebars together. Looks like something a kid would do. It's silly.”

I struggled for a moment, trying to explain that art need not be ornate, time-consuming, or even serious. I wanted to get on my soap box and explain the difference between interpretative realism and photographic realism. But because I had always impressed upon my students that they shouldn't like a work of art just because it was done by a famous person, I clicked to the next slide.

Gary thought Picasso's sculpture childish and slapdash. And like many of my students, as well as my father, he also disliked abstract art because he thought it made no sense, conveyed no message, was little more than a mess of color, line and geometric shapes. Is this wrong? A dislike for abstract art isn't necessarily synonymous with lack of worldliness or sophistication. Vladimir Nabokov, an aesthete himself, disdained abstract art and longed for the days when painters painted "lilacs and lambs." Some art critics and even artists themselves, bemoaning the jots, blots and smears on display at museums, claim that many contemporary artists have forgotten how to draw. These critics have a point. When I first saw the "paintings" of the artist Cy Twombly, they seemed little more than frenzied childish scribbles. Form did not even trump content, as is sometimes the case with non-representational art.

Yet Gary didn't dislike *Bull Head* because it was too abstract. Though the sculpture is stripped of detail, it's obvious that it is an animal. I also quickly informed Gary that Picasso was an accomplished draftsman. But Gary's main objection was that the sculpture just wasn't *serious* enough. A kid could have done it. So that begs the question: must art be serious? Like most of my students, and quite a few other people I have met, Gary also expressed a curious aesthetic dichotomy: while art should *be* fun, it should not *look* fun. Or *funny*.

Most art museums and galleries today feature a Baskin-Robbins of images: folk-naïve art ; photo-realism; photography; sculptures of every conceivable shape, size and material; collage; bricolage; art that is simultaneously abstract and realistic: art polished to crystalline perfection; art that is pornographic; art that is kitsch; art that is little more than frenzied, amorphous scribbles. But it is safe to say that most of it is intended to be serious. Or profound. Intended to provoke admiration, reflection, inspiration. Perhaps nostalgia. Sometimes even disgust or horror. Or as in

the paintings of Mark Rothko, a feeling of spiritual rapture. But fine art seldom produces a guffaw, much less a chuckle. So if art makes us laugh, is it art? Or visual entertainment?

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Nicholas Roukes' book *Humor in Art: A Celebration of Visual Wit*, provides many examples of art as comedy: rip-roaring, understated, and black. My favorites are *Don Zimmer Talks Baseball*, a 1989 sculpture by Bob Selby, which depicts the former manager of the Red Sox with—what else?—a baseball jammed into his cavernous mouth; David Gilhooly's 1984 ceramic piece *Monumental Leaning Dagwood Sandwich*, an exuberantly painted tower of bread, olives, meat, lettuce, and onions; and Picasso's *Baboon and Young*, a 1949 bronze sculpture which substitutes a toy VW Bug for the baboon's head.

Roukes points out that humorous art is nothing new. Rene Magritte, a Belgian Surrealist, was known for his paradoxical wit, for example, the 1928 painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (*This is not a Pipe*). Of course this is not a pipe: this is paint on canvas. Leonardo Da Vinci excelled at caricature, as did Edhard Schoen, whose 1521 woodcut depicts the devil wearing a rooster's head and using the Reformation leader Martin Luther as a bagpipe. Likewise, *Two Animals Playing Draughts*, an historical Egyptian scroll from c. 1185 B.C., parodies a lion and a unicorn playing draughts, a form of chess.

There's also Giuseppe Arcimboldo, a sixteenth century Milanese painter famous for his bizarre botanical imagery, such as men with corn stalk ears, eggplant noses, and heads of cabbage and cherries: vegetative satires of mainstream Italian portraiture. Roukes notes that Arcimboldo's work was considered to be in poor taste at the time, but continues to inspire artists today.

Other artists, such as the Flemish painters Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Brueghel, also active in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were known for their grisly-comic humor. Often religious in nature, their work detailed the results of folly and weakness. As Roukes tells us, Brueghel's *The Painter and the Connoisseur* shows the artist as a "visionary with keen hand and fixed concentration, while the 'connoisseur' is depicted as a slightly befuddled and dull-witted oaf, with his hand firmly clutching his money bag" (30).

More sinister, but equally funny, are Bosch's *Last Judgment and Garden of Earthly Delights*. According to Walter Bosing, author of *Hieronymous Bosch: Between Heaven and Hell*, Bosch was a religious painter who belonged to the Brotherhood of Our Lady, a group dedicated to the veneration of the Virgin which flourished in the Middle Ages (7). Certainly he intended his work to be serious. But these nightmarish, highly detailed paintings can make the viewer both laugh and shudder: dwarves with four feet, men with their heads on backward, sinners swallowed by gluttonous fish, and bird-headed monsters who gulp down naked men with crows bursting from their rear ends and then "defecate them into a transparent chamber pot from which they plunge into a pit below" (58). Such are the wages of sin.

With such a rich legacy of visual humor, it seems surprising that anyone would question the role of comedy in art. Why should anyone question the use of visual absurdity, incongruity, satire and contradiction? Though the sexual, shocking, and even scatological is nothing new in modern art, why is there relatively little humor? Anti-art, the legacy of the French prankster Marcel Duchamp, has been in vogue for decades, but much of it is neither well-made nor amusing.

Roukes quotes Robert M. Polhemus, author of *Comic Faith*, who says that laughter and comedy have traditionally been seen as blasphemous. Greek idealism and Judeo-Christianity

monotheism held that “an active sense of humor [had] an unsavory quality about it, and because humor can make authority appear ludicrous, it threatens a sense of law and order” (19). But by the same token, doesn’t anti-art, which is still *au courant* and well accepted by the modern art world, celebrate absurdity and threaten law and order?

Dada, the anti-art movement started by Duchamp and his minions in the 1920’s, was a jab in the eye of bourgeois society and a protest against the horror and brutality of the World War I. Duchamp sucker-punched the art world when he exhibited a urinal and called it “art,” (or anti-art) and the word *Dada* is French for “hobbyhorse,” further proof of the movement’s nonsensical character. Andy Warhol, influenced by Duchamp’s ready-mades, continued the nose-thumbing with his Campbell’s soup cans: art as commodity, art as concept. But while anti-art may produce a knowing smirk in the viewer, it seldom produces a chuckle or cackle or guffaw, unlike the well-crafted and robust paintings and sculptures on display in Roukes’s book. Split-a-gut-laughter is too unsophisticated for today’s art connoisseur.

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One of my most memorable pieces of comical art would have to be a sculpted clay head that I myself made as an undergraduate art student. Unfortunately, it was not meant to be funny. Nor was it meant to be bad. Yet “bad” doesn’t really do the sculpture justice—it was appallingly and gloriously dreadful. If it still exists, it deserves a place of (dis)honor in Boston’s Museum of Bad Art, an institution dedicated to the collection and celebration of bad art in “all its forms and in all its glory.” Much of MOBA’s work is also unintentionally funny.

A bust both literally and figuratively, my sculpture looked nothing whatever like the model, an attractive woman of twenty-one, with smooth skin, large bright eyes, and bow shaped lips. Words cannot really do justice to the sculpture's wretchedness.

Aside from the fact that it managed to stand upright, the head's only redeeming feature was its perfectly placed curls. I knew I'd botched things badly when my sculpture teacher looked my masterpiece over, stepped back, cleared his throat, and said, "I don't think it's quite there yet." I was quick to reply, "But I'm quite finished."

Not only was the head "there," it was way out there. In the back of beyond, in fact. The eyes popped out of its skull, the nose looked like it had been smashed with a skillet, and the lips were pursed as if the model—or her replica—were sucking on the world's sourest lemon. Yet my roommate, Susan, loved the head, and insisted on displaying it front and center on our bookshelf, where it sat for several months accumulating lint and dust bunnies, but little applause.

That's not to say it didn't provoke any responses. Our next-door neighbor owned an inquisitive boxer puppy named Roxie, who liked to visit us on occasion. Because our air-conditioner was broken, we often left our apartment door open. One day Roxie came bounding up the stairs and into our living room in search of smell-worthy objects. She scampered around the living room, sticking her nose into this and that, as dogs will do. Then she spotted the clay head on the bookshelf. She stood stock-still, bristling, and began to bark furiously. It was several minutes before Susan and I could herd her out of the apartment and down the stairs. We were laughing too hard. Whether Roxie was afraid of the head because she thought it was real or because it offended her canine sensibilities, I'll never know. I suspect the latter. I decided to christen the head Myrtle because Myrtle is one of the ugliest feminine names in the English language. After Susan married and moved away, she took Myrtle with her, but subsequently



banished her to the garden, where for all I know, she may still be today—gaping, pop-eyed, and splattered with bird droppings.

So why is art—especially when it’s *not* intended to be bad—often funnier than art that *is* intended to be funny? Is it because laughing at the foibles and weaknesses of others is a guilty pleasure? Probably. Or because we need to laugh at our own ridiculousness to keep from going berserk? Undoubtedly. Comedy exploits absurdities, and a work of art that is unintentionally funny is even more absurd than one that is intended to be. I had fully intended for my sculpture to faithfully represent the lissome model, but what I created instead was a lemon-lipped old hag. Alas—the hubris of the artist!

Make of art what you will: it’s an odd, ever-changing quilt of mediums and ideas. Plaster and clay, steel and wood, canvas and wire, bronze and plastic, acrylic and oil, kitsch and anti-art, *trompe l’oeil* and Velvet Elvises. It delights, shocks, inspires, puzzles, reveals, conceals, mystifies, refines, awes and disgusts. And if we’re lucky, art can also make us laugh. Not with just a smirk or a snicker, but with raucous, rip-roaring, split-a-gut laughter.

My father never saw Myrtle, but I can imagine what he’d say if he did: “That ain’t art.” To which I’d reply, “You’re absolutely correct, Dad. It ain’t art. It’s Myrtle—a travesty of art. A blasphemy in clay—presented especially for your viewing displeasure.” But this time my father would not stomp away, because he’d be laughing too hard. And for the first time ever, he’d finally agree with me about something—that for once in my life, by God, I’d finally learned to be accurate—and call a thing by its right name.

## *Chapter 8* *So Long, Tiger*

Samuel M. Fuller was a belter. The stentorian filmmaker, called “an authentic American primitive,” by the film critic Andrew Sarris, died in 1997 and was best known for *The Steel Helmet*, a study of an American patrol who occupies a Buddhist temple during the Korean war (1950); *Pickup on South Street*, a “propaganda” piece about an American undercover agent who passes US military secrets to the Communists (1953); *The Big Red One* (1980); a story of Fuller’s experience in the First Infantry Division in World War II; and *White Dog* (1983), which deals with racial tensions. Fuller was somewhat of a cult director, and two of the movies he made in the early 1960’s, *Shock Corridor* (1963) and *The Naked Kiss* (1964) have the biggest cult following.

Fuller made twenty three films. I’ve seen three of them: *Pickup*, *The Naked Kiss*, and *Shock Corridor*. *Kiss* and *Shock Corridor* were midnight movies way back in 1994 at New Orleans’ now defunct Movie Pitcher, a funky little cinema on Bienville Street, where you could order popcorn, pizza, poboys—and pitchers of beer—or catch a rising young comedian. Somehow it was cooler for a cineaste to see pulp fiction in this odd little place as opposed to on VHS at home.

Though *Pickup on South Street* won the Bronze Lion award at Venice, and *The Big Red One* was a solid commercial success, *The Naked Kiss* and *Shock Corridor* were both financial failures when they were released, and many critics at the time described them as shoddy, overwrought, and overacted. I’ve always found them compelling—perhaps for these exact reasons. Visually flamboyant, they’re also great exercises in style, as is *Pickup on South Street*.

Popular overseas, especially in France, Fuller's melodramatic films, with their theatrical lighting, blaring soundtracks, over-the-top acting, and rat-a-tat-tat dialogue, never really caught fire in the US, and many of his movies are still not even on DVD. A friend of mine compares Fuller's films to Jerry Springer and reality TV, and says a craving for things this cheesy, this kitschy, is a guilty pleasure, kind of like eating powdered donuts. Bad for you, sure, but hard to resist. I disagree. Fuller's moralistic movies are not for all tastes, but they go beyond shock and sensationalism. I see Fuller as a social critic who had something to say and said it top volume and full throttle. Fuller sold newspapers as a child, and was later quoted as saying "It's not the headline that counts but how hard you shout it."

Usually drawn to movies with subtle soundtracks and naturalistic, fully shaded acting, I liked *The Naked Kiss* immediately. *Shock Corridor* also packs a wallop, but *Kiss*, with its tough guys, hardboiled dames, and small-town-with-a-secret-plot, hits me like a brick each time I see it. *Pickup*, an espionage flick, lacks the psychological grit and luridness of the two later films, but is nevertheless a small gem.

*Kiss's* leading lady is played by Constance Towers, who appeared in *Shock Corridor* a year earlier. Towers, famous for playing tough gals, also starred in two John Ford films, *The Horse Soldiers* and *Sergeant Rutledge*, but is perhaps best known to most viewers for her role as the villainess Helena Cassadine on the soap opera *General Hospital*.

The first frame of *Kiss* is a black and white close up of a woman's furious face, a prostitute named Kelly. In this opening scene, she beats her drunken pimp with her handbag, squirts him in the face with seltzer water and rifles through his wallet for the money he has stolen from her. As she slugs him, her wig falls off, revealing a shorn skull. As punishment, her pimp

had drugged her, taken her money, and shaved off all her hair. As her business manager lies moaning on the floor, Kelly yanks her wig back on, fixes the camera with a look of steel, and skips town. From that point on I rooted for her. Straight out of the pages of Raymond Chandler, this diamond hard dame doesn't take any shit.

Two years later, sans pimp and with every hair in place, Kelly arrives in the bucolic town of Grantville, named for a wealthy philanthropist whose grandfather built the local hospital and orthopedic center for handicapped children. Grantville is seemingly mom-and-apple-pie sweet, though its only movie theatre just happens to be playing, of all things, *Shock Corridor*, in one of Fuller's self-referential jokes. Perhaps the marquee is also a warning that there are hidden horrors in this sleepy town.

Kelly finds a "pleasant room for rent" offered by seamstress Madame Josephine, who gushes about the canopied bed, and asks Kelly, "Do you know we spend a third of our lives in bed?" Kelly, who has spent well over a third of her life in just that very place, smiles wryly. I thought this was one of the funniest scenes in the movie: a "madam" renting a bed to a prostitute.

Entrepreneur that she is, Kelly tries at first to make her way in Grantville selling "Angel Foam" champagne. Her first and last customer is the gruff, tough-talking Griff, (a name that sounds suspiciously like "grift") the town sheriff. No common call girl, Kelly supplies Griff with both sex and culture. As they listen to *Moonlight Sonata*, Kelly asks Griff if he can "see" the music. "I can't see nothing," he snaps. "I'm tone deaf." Romance is not this man's forte. When Griff asks for the change from the twenty he has given Kelly for the liquor, Kelly tells him "she never makes change." It's all or nothing.

Fuller repeats this quasi-comical, tough guy/tough gal dialogue throughout the movie. Critics often denounced it as unnatural, but it's exactly one of the reasons I like these two movies, and it's also partly why I like hardboiled fiction and Raymond Chandler. "Natural" speech rambles. It's hesitant. Offscreen, most people pack their speech with "likes," "ums," and "you knows." Few spit out sentences with snappy, rapid-fire delivery.

His characters also exhibit a sharp-edged glamour and sartorial panache seldom seen in today's often ruffled, wrinkled world of fashion: his brusque but womanly leading ladies with their pearls, stilettos, and slashes of lipstick, and his sleek-suited gents with their hats cocked just so, cigars jammed into their mouths.

Griff, increasingly suspicious of Kelly, tries to run her out of town and suggests she get a job slinging bon-bons at Candy's, a nightclub-cum-brothel, famous for its girls who sell both chocolates and "Indescribable Pleasure." Angered by his hypocrisy and determined to make a new life for herself, Kelly gets a job as a nurse at the orthopedic hospital and soon acquires a reputation for discipline and tough love. Says one nurse: "Kelly manages her ward like a pirate ship. She makes Captain Bligh look like a sissy!"

Fuller never reveals why Kelly has chosen to be a prostitute or any other origins of her troubled past, but she's more than just an amoral, tough broad. She sings *The Bluebird of Happiness* to her young charges, quotes Goethe and Byron, and sternly admonishes the young and naïve nurse Buff not to get a job at Candy's. "You'll meet men you live on, and men who live on you. And those are the only kinds of men you'll meet," Kelly stage whispers to the whimpering Buff. "You'll be living on the skin of a nightmare for the rest of your life."

Soon, newly reformed Kelly meets bachelor philanthropist and Korean war veteran Grant, a man of culture, who is dazzled by Kelly's classiness. Soon the two are sipping wine, listening to Beethoven, and watching Grant's home movies of Venice. Though smartly dressed and sleekly handsome, Grant reeks of rot and decadence. If Kelly notices his hidden depravity, she doesn't let on. They get engaged, and needing to come clean, Kelly tells Grant about her past. He neglects to tell her that he is a child molester. When Kelly discovers that he has been sexually abusing his niece, she hits him over the head with a telephone and kills him—with one blow.

In the end, Kelly is acquitted of murder and all the townspeople rally to her cause. This scene is full-blown melodrama. Released from jail, Kelly faces the entire applauding town, which surrounds her with awed, tear-streaked faces. Griff and Kelly say their goodbyes. "So long, tiger," Kelly tells Griff. "Good luck, muffin," he replies, as tender as he'll ever get.

As Kelly walks out of town with her suitcase, leaving just the way she came in, Griff confides to a buddy that she still owes him ten bucks. "Then you'll be seeing her again," says his buddy." "Not her," is Griff's rejoinder. "She never makes change."

And she doesn't. Kelly has left the corrupt world of prostitution, only to find her new world just as tainted. Everyone in Grantville is afflicted: the handicapped children; the delusional Madame Josephine; the wayward Buff; the corrupt Candy and her bon bon girls; the unmarried and pregnant nurse Dusty who seeks Kelly's help; the hypocritical Griff; and above all, the town pervert, Grant. Grant is attracted to Kelly not just because she is beautiful and cultured, but because he thinks that she is as aberrant as he is. Just before Kelly kills him, Grant tells her: "I could never marry a normal woman." In jail, Kelly confesses that she too knew that

Grant was abnormal when he first kissed her. “It was the kiss of a pervert,” she says. “A naked kiss.” Kelly never reveals why she decided to marry Grant anyway. The raw title adds to the movie’s shock appeal, though what kiss isn’t naked? Fuller seems to be saying that a normal kiss is clothed in romance or sweetness, just as Candy’s chocolates are a cover for sex. But a pervert’s kiss is raw, naked lust. Nothing can hide it.

*The Naked Kiss* is a not a subtle movie, and its stark black and white photography mirrors the flatness of its characters. With the possible exception of Kelly, they are all types: hooker, young girl in peril, cheap floozy, tough madam, corrupt cop, sick child, pervert. They represent the ideas Fuller wants to convey about a sick society.

Though Kelly isn’t an especially poignant or vulnerable character, I found it easy to empathize with her actions. She is a loner who has to fend for herself in a world controlled by men, and so she has to be decisive, even hard, and to take the consequences.

I like *Shock Corridor* more for its style than its message, but I think that these two movies, both made in the early 1960’s, are almost reversals of each other. In *Kiss*, a woman enters a sick and alien society and emerges triumphant; in the earlier of the two movies, *Shock Corridor*, a man enters a sick and alien society and never leaves.

*Corridor’s* plot revolves around a journalist, John Barratt, who is trying to solve the murder of an inmate named Sloane, who was knifed to death in an insane asylum. Wanting to crack the story and win a Pulitzer Prize, Barratt, with the reluctant help of his stripper girlfriend, Cathy (Constance Towers, in her debut Fuller role) fakes insanity to get inside the asylum and solve the murder.

Fuller spares neither psychiatry nor journalism in this indictment of a sick and hypocritical society. Smug and venal, Barratt will stop at nothing to get the Pulitzer Prize, and his cynical editor is content to let him do whatever it takes to get the story. Fame and a name is what Barratt wants, not truth. It's also interesting that Pulitzer's name was once connected with yellow journalism and *The Journal*, a newspaper William Randolph Hearst bought from the Pulitzer family and which specialized in sensationalism and scandal-mongering.

Pretending to be Barratt's sister, Cathy goes to the police and tells them that he has been molesting her. Soon Barratt is overreacting and overacting and blathering in classic Fuller fashion to the white coats about his lust for his "sister" and his fetish for her braids. The gullible doctors buy his story, and Barratt is hauled into the loony bin, diagnosed with *dementia praecox*.

Named after the asylum's corridor or "street" where all the inmates congregate, most of them frozen in catatonic stupor, *Shock Corridor* features the same stark but alluring photography of *Naked Kiss*. Hatchet lighting splits faces in half, portentous shadows creep across the walls, skin is striped like the bars from a jail cell and spotlights bright as noon flood the actors' faces, as if in interrogation.

Once inside the asylum, Barratt meets the inmates: a grossly obese man who calls himself Pagliacci and sings arias from *La Boheme*; a Korean veteran who is convinced that he's the Confederate war general Jeb Stuart; a thin man with a neck like a beanstalk who eats food with his hands and claims to be pregnant; Trent, a black man who believes that he's the KKK Imperial Wizard; and the nuclear physicist Boden who now has the mind of a child and spends his time scribbling in a sketchpad. Three of the inmates have witnessed the murder in the asylum's kitchen, and Barratt hopes to wrestle the story out of them, bit by bit.



While he is trying to solve Sloane's murder, Barratt becomes privy to the inmates' own secrets, which they reveal during lucid intervals. The Korean veteran and Communist defector tearily confesses to Barratt that he was fed "bigotry for breakfast and ignorance for supper," while the syrupy strains of a violin play in the background, and the "white supremacist" reveals that he was used as a test experiment at an all-white college soon after the advent of integration. Everyone is delusional, nobody knows his real identity, and after awhile, neither does Barratt, who soon starts to drift in and out of reality. Worn down by the atmosphere of the asylum and its inmates' idiosyncrasies, Barratt comes to believe the phony story he and Cathy have concocted. Hardly surprising, since journalists do sometimes blur the line between truth and fiction.

Barratt begins having fits, becomes convinced that he is losing his voice—a terrible punishment for a man who makes his living from words—and is given electroshock therapy, to no avail. During a moment of lucidity, Barratt wrests the name of the killer from Boden. But when Boden sketches Barratt's portrait (which Fuller doesn't reveal to the viewer), Barratt erupts in hysteria and is abruptly whisked away and straitjacketed to his bed.

Once again, Barratt recovers, only to discover that he has forgotten the name of the killer. As he sits next to Pagliacci on a bench, a violent thunderstorm commences, and Barratt starts to hallucinate wildly: rain pours into the corridor, a color image of a rushing waterfall flashes, and Barratt's head appears upside down in a torrent of raindrops, one of the most striking images in the picture.

His head cleared from the hallucination, Barratt is once again able to remember the name of the murderer, an attendant at the ward named Wilkes. Barratt beats a confession out of

Wilkes, and alerts the doctors, but his stay in the psycho ward has strained his mind to the breaking point, and break he does.

In the penultimate scene, Barratt, now a catatonic schizophrenic, sits in a chair with one arm raised, rigid and unbending. “What a tragedy,” proclaims the pompous Dr. Crystal. “An insane mute will win the Pulitzer Prize!” Fuller ends the movie with a line from Euripides: “He whom God wishes to destroy he first makes mad.” God obviously accomplished his goal with Barratt.

It would be easy to become distracted by *Shock Corridor's* black humor, striking photography, and bombastic soundtrack, but once again, Fuller has a moral message. As comical as they are, the inmates are victims of a hypocritical society. It's not hard to see why a poor uneducated man raised on “bigotry for breakfast” and “ignorance for supper” might rebel and defect to the side of the enemy. Reviled and spat on by his family for his treason, he snaps and chooses to believe that he is instead a Confederate general.

Likewise, Trent, the victim of a botched experiment in integration, was so mistreated by bigoted whites that he too would rather believe that he is someone else—the hateful enemy. It's probably no coincidence that *Shock Corridor* was filmed at the height of the Civil Rights movement.

Fuller shows other abuses of power. The “nymphomaniacs” are shut up in an insane asylum, even though they are not insane. The attendant Wilkes killed the inmate Sloane because Sloane had threatened to expose him for sexually abusing female inmates, but nobody at the hospital seems to know or care about these abuses, least of all Barratt. Yet it is Barratt who suffers the ultimate punishment, shocked out of his complacency and greed into total silence.

*Pickup on South Street*, which was released a decade before *Kiss* and *Shock Corridor*, isn't as raw or emotion-provoking as *Naked Kiss* or *Shock Corridor*, but its chiaroscuro photography, jazzy soundtrack, and tough-gal/guy lingo display Fuller's distinctive style front and center. *Pickup* stars Richard Widmark, famous for his role as the sociopath in *Kiss of Death*; Jean Peters (once married to Howard Hughes) who appeared in the noir film *Niagra* with Marilyn Monroe; Thelma Ritter from *Rear Window* and *Miracle on 37<sup>th</sup> Street*; and Richard Kiley, best known for his voice work and role as Don Quixote in the 1965 Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha*.

*Pickup*, dismissed by some as cheap anti-Communist propaganda, is the story of the "cannon" or pickpocket Skip (Widmark) who steals a wallet from ex-prostitute Candy (played by Peters) on the New York subway and unwittingly comes into the possession of a sheet of microfilm with US military secrets on it. Candy, a courier for undercover Communist agent Joey (Kiley) believes Joey is passing chemical formulas to an industrial firm. Unbeknownst to both Candy and Skip, they are also being watched by FBI agents Zara and Enyart, who have been tracking Candy for six months in order to find the brains behind the spy ring.

When Candy discovers her missing wallet, she contacts Joey, who insists she use her street connections to find the "cannon." Meanwhile, the G-men inform police chief Dan Tiger of the subway theft. Tough-talking, cigar smoking Tiger summons raspy-voiced, world-weary stool pigeon Moe (Thelma Ritter) asks her to locate the pickpocket, and with her help, tracks him down to a shack on the Hudson River. Tiger, who dislikes insolent "three-time-loser" Skip, informs him of the film's contents, appeals to his American pride, and offers to drop the theft charges in exchange for the film. Skip dismisses the offer as "patriotic eyewash," and flees.

In the meantime, Candy gets Skip's address from Moe and goes to Skip's shack to retrieve the microfilm. Returning home, Skip hears noises in the dark and slugs Candy. He wakes up her by pouring beer on her face, clues her in about the film, and agrees to return it in exchange for \$25,000. Candy flees and confronts Joey, who confesses his double-dealing, and demands both the film and Skip's address. Candy, sexually attracted to Skip ever since their rendezvous on the train, gives Joey a false address, while Moe promises to keep her mouth shut. Moe, who regards Skip as an old pal, tells him that Joey is looking for him but that the "muffin" (Candy) loves him. Skip, also secretly in love with Candy, masks his feelings with macho bravura.

When Joey finds out Moe has squealed on him, he shoots her dead. Candy returns to Skip's riverside shack, K.O.'s Skip, and takes the film to the police, but the FBI instructs her to return the film to Joey so that they can set up a sting. But when Joey discovers a section of the microfilm missing, he beats Candy up, shoots her, and leaves her for dead. When lovelorn Skip visits badly injured Candy in the hospital, she tearily tells him she turned him in because she prefers a "live pickpocket" to a "dead traitor." Skip hunts for Joey and trails him to the subway on South Street where he spots him delivering the microfilm to the communist ringleader. Skip punches out the ringleader and then goes after Joey, beating him nearly to death. Now convinced of Skip's efforts at reform, Tiger releases him from jail, while grudgingly predicting that Skip will never be able to play it straight. Candy, fully recovered from her ordeal and back in true form, cracks, "Wanna bet?" Then the pickpocket and prostitute go off to make a new life together.

*Pickup* is less psychological than *Kiss* and *Shock Corridor*, but at the same time, even more noir-ish than either of them, evoking the fears of the Cold War era and the Red threat. (It was filmed at the height of the Korean War.) It's a delight to watch Jean Peters in her Betty Boop hairdo and beestung lips utter double entendres like "How many times you got caught with your hand where it doesn't belong?," or Widmark snapping back to Tiger, "This guy wouldn't grift the dame on the train," or to Candy, "Okay, Muffin, let's have a nice dose of street talk." In *Pickup*, everyone smokes and all the men wear suits and dial numbers from heavy black rotary phones. Crooks hide in dumbwaiters; Skip cools his beer in a crate that he keeps in the Hudson River; Moe, the informer who peddles both secrets and neckties, is "feeding her kitty" for a fancy plot, and "if not, it's Potter's Field." Names, which are short and snappy, rarely exceed two syllables and hint at the psychology of the characters: The tough Tiger, fast cat Lightning Louie, hard but sweet Candy (her name hints at her former profession and is also perhaps a precursor of the brothel Candy in *Naked Kiss*); Skip, the insouciant gent who'd like to take the \$25 Gs and skip town; Moe, who despite her flowered hat and fondness for French cabaret music, exudes little femininity. Again, Fuller's characters are types: cop, prostitute, stool pigeon, G-man, commie, thief.

But there's no denying Fuller's artistry. Many of the shots in *Pickup* are filmed in extreme close-up, lending new meaning to the term "in your face." Fuller employs his trademark split lighting and extreme contrasts of light and dark throughout the movie, especially in the waterfront scenes, where stark white faces loom from ominous shadows. Fuller's chiaroscuro rivals Rembrandt's in its dramatic impact.

The viewer seeking naturalism had better go elsewhere, though. As in *Pickup and Kiss*, Fuller's characters can go from hard-boiled heavies to maudlin saps in the space of a second. When Joey confronts Moe in her shabby little room, she blubbers, "I'm an old clock runnin' down. You'd be doing me a favor if you killed me," as her phonograph bleats, "The violins were sweet and so were you"; Candy utters hard-to-swallow lines such as "Skip's trying to fight something decent inside him—something decent trying to come out:" and after being given a fifty/fifty chance of survival after her shooting, springs back like an alley cat and gazes longingly at Skip from her hospital bed as syrupy violins trill from the background. The cops arrive in the nick of time, Commies and Reds are punished, loose cannons go straight, and the guy gets the girl. But then again, we don't really know if Candy and Skip will heel to the straight and narrow, just as we are not sure whether call girl Kelly in *The Naked Kiss* will meander back to the primrose path.

The film critic Phil Hardy has written that Fuller's films transform ethics into aesthetics and "sacrifice external naturalism to internal significance." Or one might say the medium is the message, and that Fuller's theatrical photography, bombastic soundtracks and stage-whispered lines convey sentiment, sex, patriotism, and a strong sense of right and wrong. No gray. No middle ground. Shoot from the hip, right now. This tiger didn't pussyfoot.

It's best to take Fuller in small doses. By today's standards, his high-key social commentary may seem unsophisticated. Cheesy. Kitschy. Overblown. Way, way over the top. But that friend of mine was wrong. *Kiss* and *Corridor* and *Pickup* go way beyond Springer's reality TV, and they're more nutritious than a powdered donut any day. If you're hungry for some red meat, if you're tired of all those small under-the-bottom indie movies or *cinema verite*,

and you want some noir, and some action, and some hardboiled guys and tough dames, then Fuller's your man. So kick back, light that cigar, and shake that martini.

## *Chapter 9*

### *Subterraneans: Diane Arbus and Flannery O'Connor*

*Grotesque*: Anything odd or unnatural, fantastically ugly, absurd or bizarre. Anything distorted, deformed, weird, antic, or wild. Derived from the Italian *grotto*, “grotesque” literally means any sort of cavern, subterranean passage or crypt.

What comes to mind when we use the word *grotesque*? The elephant man, John Merrick. Edgar Allan Poe’s Hop Frog. Two-headed calves. Siamese twins. Animals like Madagascar’s aye-aye, with its elongated middle finger, spoon shaped ears and bulging eyes. One might consider mermaids, zombies, ghosts and werewolves grotesque because fantastic, but they are unreal, and the grotesque is always much more compelling when it is real.

Recently I was looking at *Revelations*, a publication and retrospective of photographs by the late Diane Arbus. Nearly forty years after her death, her stark, black and white pictures still shock, though her *oeuvre* of transvestites, dwarves, giants, circus performers, and strippers, may seem like well-worn subject matter. So maybe *shock* isn’t the right verb. I don’t gasp or shake when I see Arbus’s work, but her photographs work on me like a strong drug. They grab me by the throat. No matter how many times I look at her portraits, I still feel as if I’m looking at something I shouldn’t. But not like I’m looking at something dirty, exactly, or degrading. It would be easy enough to say that I feel like a voyeur, which I can’t deny. But more than that, it’s as if Arbus has led me into a subterranean passage. As Arbus herself said, there were things that nobody could see unless she photographed them.

As far as I know, Arbus never called her subject matter grotesque, but nobody can deny that sword-swallowers and hermaphrodites or even transvestites are bizarre or fantastic or strange. But I find her photographs of “ordinary” people—those without physical deformities or



unusual height or quirky tastes in clothing—the most captivating. Arbus makes even the seemingly prosaic look twisted: the thin-lipped, poker faced young man with his straw hat, American flag, and “Bomb Hanoi” button; the young platinum-haired girl with her shiny white lipstick and Cleopatra eyeliner who looms eerily from the picture frame; the tired, squinting, woman on a park bench in bouffant and pearls; or the spindly-legged, grimacing young boy clutching a toy hand grenade in Central Park, one of Arbus’s most well-known photographs. She even renders babies (and parents) monstrous, as in “Loser at a Diaper Derby,” where a leering, greasy-faced mother appears to be squeezing drool from her squawling child. Arbus said that *intention* is what people *want* you to know, but the *flaw* is what you notice. And I do. Arbus exposes the scar in her subjects, and so *Revelations* seems a fitting title for her body of work.

Another interesting aspect of Arbus’s work is its liminal quality, which also heightens its grotesqueness. Many of her subjects appear to be not quite one thing or another; identities flicker in and out of focus. Witness the square-jawed young woman with a cigar in Washington Square Park, the bushy-haired, shirtless, androgynous young woman on her bed, or most sensational of all, Arbus’s lipsticked and rouged hermaphrodite. Or even the heavily made up Puerto Rican housewife in her low-cut dress perched on the edge of her bed, as if awaiting a client. Children and teenagers also often look aged, careworn, and vacant. Are they old-looking young people, or young-looking old people?

I actually find Arbus’s photograph of the hermaphrodite and dog in a carnival trailer in Maryland less grotesque than many of her other photographs, maybe because I’m not sure that what I’m seeing is real. Because the hermaphrodite isn’t naked, I can’t be sure that the man/woman isn’t just a man who put on makeup and shaved half his/her body, though the breasts look real enough. Maybe it doesn’t matter. I’m still magnetized. Arbus’s subjects, often

placed dead center like a snapshot or folk painting, burst from the picture frame. When shot from a low vantage point, her men and women and children appear massive, looming. Fringed with black borders, visceral, pocked with shadows, Arbus's pictures radiate secrets, though I can't always be exactly sure what they are.

As I pored over the shots, I suddenly thought of the equally visceral and grotesque work of another artist, the writer Flannery O'Connor, and thought to myself, "O'Connor writes like Arbus shoots." And I remembered O'Connor saying that Southern writing was often thought of as grotesque, unless it actually was, in which case it was considered realistic—especially by Northern readers. And I thought of the hermaphrodite in O'Connor's short story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," who tells the gawking crowd—men on one side, women on the other—that God has "made him thisaway," and that he "doesn't dispute hit."

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Flannery O'Connor once said that she was unable to write anything subtle, and this proclamation seems fitting for a woman who was a cartoonist for her college newspaper, who admired Hawthorne and Poe, and whose favorite animal was one of the most fantastic and spectacular of all birds, the peacock. And who can forget her equally fantastic and vivid characters, her tableaux of grotesques? The hulking Joy-Hulga from "Good Country People," with her bad heart, "freezing blue eyes," and wooden leg, and her paramour, the lewdly named Manley Pointer, in his garish blue suit, yellow socks, and greasy hair? Pitiably mulberry-haired Ruby Hill from "A Stroke of Good Fortune," "shaped nearly like a funeral urn?" Or the club-footed sociopath in "The Lame Shall Enter First," who torments the officious and ironically named social worker Sheppard, whose "saintliness" is reflected in his halo of white hair and "pink

sensitive face.” Physical deformities mirror psychological and spiritual aberrations or characteristics, as do names—Mrs. Hopewell, Mr. Shiflet, Mrs. Cope.

Many of O’Connor’s characters attain spiritual knowledge or insight at the expense of humiliation or even violence. The manipulative grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” expires in a pool of her own blood after being shot by the Misfit, an oddly courteous criminal who claims his name reflects the fact that none of his punishments fit his crimes. Manley Pointer, who is not a good country person at all, but instead a slick con man, steals Joy-Hulga’s wooden limb, leaving her literally and figuratively without a leg to stand on, and the hapless but snobby Mrs. May is mortally gored by a bull in “Greenleaf.” The fates of O’Connor’s characters are often as grotesque as the characters themselves.

Some might dismiss her characters as cruel caricatures, just as some, notably Susan Sontag, charged Arbus with exploiting her subjects and making them look ugly. While Arbus said that “photographs didn’t have to be mean,” she also emphasized that photographs, unlike film, deal with facts, and that photographs could not evade facts. Similarly, O’Connor’s fervid Catholicism led her to take a dim view of human nature: her faith was in God, not mankind. And just as O’Connor seems determined to stick it to her characters, there is no doubt that some of Arbus’s photographs *are* downright ugly, particularly her portraits of Norman Mailer, feminist Germaine Greer, and Viva, a protégé of Andy Warhol. Shot in extreme close-up, Greer’s face is greasy and pitted, her nails ragged. Viva lies on a dirty couch, naked from the waist up, her eyes rolled back in her head, and Norman Mailer sprawls on a couch clutching his crotch. All three were very upset with the way Arbus had photographed them, prompting Mailer to famously remark, “Giving a camera to Diane Arbus is like giving a hand grenade to a baby.”

Yet it's also true that Arbus almost never photographed people without permission, unlike a lot of "street" photographers. Reportedly soft-spoken and reticent in demeanor, Arbus had a good rapport with many of her subjects, and took her time getting to know them. Maybe Arbus just didn't like celebrities; arguably, her photographs of Viva and Mailer are crueller than her much reviled portraits of retarded children. Maybe Arbus sought out the soiled and the seamy simply because they were there, and again, because she couldn't help exposing the flaw, and because there were certain subjects nobody would see unless she photographed them. In *The Eternal Crossroads*, an analysis of O'Connor's life and work, authors Leon Driskell and Joan Brittain note:

Her fiction does not seek to accomplish the aims of satire: the ordinary Georgians she wrote about even when she was away from home—her poor people, her ignorant backwoodsmen—are not there to incite our sympathy or to urge specific social action. They are there precisely because they are there and thus have significant human and religious meaning; they make real her "realm of mystery" (Asked why she used the sun as a symbol so often, Miss O'Connor replied with characteristic practicality, "Because it's always there.") (5).

Nor did Arbus attempt to satirize her subjects, or to raise the viewer's social consciousness. When I look at Arbus's strippers and bouffanted matrons and jingoistic young men, I enter that realm of psychological and physical mystery, that realm of the real with all its incongruities and secrets, just as I do when I read O'Connor's stories of human dishonor and revelation.

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There are other parallels between Arbus and O'Connor. Arbus was born in 1923, O'Connor two years later. Both died young and within less than a decade of one another: O'Connor in 1964 of lupus, an autoimmune disease, Arbus in 1971 by suicide. Arbus, whose brother was the acclaimed poet Howard Nemerov, longed to be a writer, and wrote richly expressive text for her fashion photography; O'Connor was also both a cartoonist and an amateur painter.

The work of both Arbus and O'Connor deals with particulars, peculiar to and limited by character and place. Arbus worked almost exclusively in Manhattan, and aside from her fashion photography, her art exhibits little range. She photographed no landscapes, animals, or architecture; shot primarily in black and white; never cropped her pictures; and typically situated the subject in the center of the frame. Unlike the fashion photographer Richard Avedon, who was known not only for his sleek celebrity shots but also for his stark portraits of cowboys, roughnecks, rodeo clowns, miners and slaughterhouse workers, Arbus's vista is resolutely urban. Likewise, O'Connor's characters vary little; practically all are rural, afflicted Southerners. Arbus disliked travel, preferring the streets of her native Manhattan; O'Connor's illness limited her sojourns.

Arbus's and O'Connor's deaths were likewise grotesque, or at any rate, horrific. Arbus, a divorcee, struggled financially and was plagued by depression and recurrent bouts of hepatitis; one day in July of 1971, she climbed into her bathtub fully clothed and slashed her wrists. An oddly religious entry in her diary from that day read, "The Last Supper." O'Connor suffered debilitating pain and heaviness in her arms, as well as anemia, kidney problems, and bruising. The joint inflammation caused by the lupus forced her to use crutches, and eventually she was confined to bed.

In other respects the two women were very different: Arbus, a rich, sexually adventurous Jewish girl from Manhattan, O'Connor a conservative, ascetic Southern spinster whose Catholic faith imbued her work. And while some of Arbus's photographs of children emanate a certain soulfulness, it would be a stretch to call them religious. Though the two women were contemporaries, I have found no record that either was familiar with the other's work. If they had met, I doubt that they would have liked or understood each other. While the depravity of O'Connor's characters serves to reflect their fall from divine grace, Arbus seems to have regarded her afflicted subjects with a sort of awe and admiration, even remarking, "Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats." One might infer that Arbus felt similarly about transvestites, gays, and lesbians. In contrast, O'Connor, when asked for her views on lesbianism, said that she regarded it like any other form of uncleanness, and disparaged the "arty people in the (Greenwich) Village who feel that all kinds of experimentation is [sic] necessary to discovering life and whatnot" (Cash 143). If O'Connor had seen Arbus's photographs of swimsuited lesbians or cross-dressing men, she probably would have responded much the same.

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All art abstracts reality, but it's debatable which removes or detaches more of it, visual or literary. As a photographer and writer myself, I wondered if it was even fair—or accurate—to compare the work of an artist to that of a writer. But I think it's an intriguing question.

Walker Percy once said that writing was harder on the nerves than visual art. I agree. In a sense, that's because writing is more abstract, if indeed abstract is the right word. When I write, I am removed from the subject matter I write about. If I describe in writing the way a shaft of

light looked falling on a corner of an abandoned church on a March afternoon in 1989, or the ambience of a rundown neighborhood in Kenner, I have to rely on imagination. Words stand in for the image, for the thing itself. I cannot present the concrete image, just my description of it. Words and writing are less direct and immediate and emotionally exhilarating than photographs and picture-taking. If a photograph is once removed from the subject, then writing is twice removed.

But if writing is in a sense, more abstract or detached or less immediate, it can also be richer and more informative than a picture. Even the most finely grained photograph extracts detail. Even the most exquisite of lenses can't capture every wrinkle, pore, or hair, and the camera lens isn't synchronous with the human eye. That's why so often I'll look at a picture I shot and think, "That's not what I saw!"

When I look at Arbus's photographs or my photographs or anyone's photographs, for that matter, I have to furnish details, fill in the blanks, complete the story. I can only imagine what Arbus's circus performers or strippers or nudists may say or think or eat, can only imagine how they walk or sound, whereas I know that O'Connor's Joy-Hulga in "Good Country People" eats boiled eggs and clomps around on a wooden leg and scowls and wears childish clothing, and I know that she regards everyone around her as beneath contempt. I know that she suffers from heart trouble, a metaphor for her lack of compassion, and that she studied philosophy and I can almost hear her cold, clipped, ironic tone of voice. I know that the cloddish Mrs. Freeman is her own agent and that she's shrewder than she looks or lets on and that her two absurdly named daughters are floozies, despite what Joy-Hulga's mother, Mrs. Hopewell, a greeting card disguised as a woman, would prefer to think. I can almost hear Mrs. Freeman's syrupy Georgia drawl: "I see you ain't ate many of them figs you put up last summer." Perhaps Arbus's stripper

speaks with a Bronx honk.; I don't know. I can imagine that many of Arbus's subjects are both poorly educated and poor, and of course in a sense they do speak to me, but I can't imagine having a dialogue with Arbus's characters the way I can, say, Manley Pointer. Art speaks, but literature speaks, moves, smells, tastes, touches, hears and sees. None of this is to say that writing is superior to visual art, only that it is a fuller and more complete expression of reality and imagination.

But both photography and literature illuminate the dark and hidden. So while the work of Arbus and O'Connor may indeed be grotesque, that is, ugly, bizarre, fantastic, distorted, deformed, weird, antic, or wild, it's much more than that. Both artists lead the viewer and reader into the caverns of their characters. I find it interesting that Arbus's retrospective is named *Revelations*, and that O'Connor also wrote a short story called "Revelation." Like Arbus, O'Connor saw the flaws in her characters, which they are unable to conceal despite their best intentions. The shallow Mrs. Turpin of "Revelation," whose name may symbolize her turpitude, is one such case.

Just as Arbus's subjects bulge from the picture frame, Mrs. Turpin makes the doctor's waiting room in which she experiences her humiliating revelation, "look even smaller by her presence." Mrs. Turpin considers herself bigger and better than everyone else, particularly the white trash woman in the waiting room with her "snuff-stained lips," or the old woman sitting next to her whom Mrs. Turpin derisively notices wears a feed sack dress, or especially the scowling, acne-pocked girl reading a college textbook, *Human Development*, which she hurls across the room and hits Mrs. Turpin in the head with after being driven to madness by her condescending and fatuous talk.



Mrs. Turpin needs some sense—and human development—knocked into her. Considering herself superior because of what she possesses, not because of how she treats others, she praises Jesus simply because she occupies a higher rung on the ladder of human hierarchy than the white trash or ugly people or “niggers.” But after the scowling girl smacks her upside the head and calls her a “warthog from hell,” Mrs. Turpin despite her inordinate pride in her “good order and common sense and respectable behavior,” sees she’s little different than the hogs she raises, intelligent animals who nevertheless grunt, root, groan and indulge in dirty behavior. The scowling girl has exposed Mrs. Turpin’s flaw: “There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition.”

With Arbus, it’s the viewer who gets the vision. Again, the less seemingly grotesque photographs reveal the most. Mothers and babies aren’t always warm and cuddly; mothers may be avaricious and base, and Arbus reminds the viewer just how hideous and demanding that little bundle of joy can be. Childhood isn’t necessarily rainbows and moonbeams; it’s also a time of enforced dependency and peer humiliations and bowing to the wishes of adults. Maybe that’s why the two prepubescent ballroom dancers with their shiny trophies look so aged and weary; maybe it’s a stage mother’s stick driving them onward and upward and not their desire for the dance. Likewise, the spindly little boy clenching the toy hand grenade reminds us not only of children’s potential for cruelty but their hysteria and vulnerability. And the aging woman in her frilly negligee and lipstick reminds us that all the feminine trappings in the world can’t stop age—and death.

Of course it’s not necessarily true that photographs—or stories—always tell the truth. Arbus didn’t just take one shot of her subjects, she took many, and she often selected the most

shocking and seamy of the whole bunch. She took several pictures of the young spindly-legged boy in Central Park *without* the hand grenade, and in several of them, he is smiling, cheerful, and not particularly deviant looking. No doubt she used the same selective process for many of her other pictures. And O'Connor certainly knew her share of good country people who didn't go around conning folks and stealing their wooden legs. But they'd probably make for dull reading, and had Arbus always photographed exemplary people or contrived to make her subjects look as pleasing as possible, it would have made for dull viewing. That's one reason she gave up fashion photography.

Maybe literal truth isn't the issue. Art selects and exaggerates for effect. Arbus and O'Connor pull me into the psychological crypts of their subjects. They imbue the concrete and visible world with poetry. They evoke both the tangible and the intangible.

Flannery O'Connor said it best:

...this physical, sensible world is good because it proceeds from a divine source. The artist usually knows this by instinct; his senses, which are used to penetrating the concrete, tell him so. When Conrad said that his aim as an artist was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe, he was speaking with the novelist's surest instinct. The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality (Driskell 8).

But Arbus's and O'Connor's artistic motivations, and their reasons for penetrating the concrete world and its images of ultimate reality were quite different.

In her 1977 book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag posits that Arbus was attracted to the world of the bizarre because it was a completely different world from the one she'd grown up in, a world of health, privilege, protection, and affluence. Taking pictures, made Arbus, in her own

words, “feel naughty” and apparently served as an antidote to the feelings of “immunity” and “lack of adversity” she’d complained about in her sheltered youth (43). Seeking out the louche and seamy made Arbus feel more engaged, more daring, more alive, and less protected. And not a little wicked. Photographing the ugly and deformed was also probably Arbus’s slap in the face to the fashion photography that she had made a living at and reportedly despised: As Sontag puts it, Arbus’s street photography was a way of saying, “Fuck what’s pretty.” (44).

Conversely, the peculiar world that O’Connor created sprang from her intense religious convictions. In *The Eternal Crossroads*, Driskell and Brittain quote O’Connor as saying that religious writers “will tend to certain violences of expression to get [their] vision across to what [they] take to be a hostile audience, and that “writers who do believe in religious realities and propose to get them across in fiction have to cope with a deaf, dumb, and blind reader; and the grotesque may be one of our desperate answers” (4). In other words, strongly drawn characters like Joy-Hulga and The Misfit and Mrs. Turpin get the reader’s attention, but they are not there purely for shock value. They convey O’Connor’s concern with human dishonor and the need for spiritual growth and divine grace. Like Arbus, O’Connor was not concerned with social reform, but unlike her, she was attentive to and concerned with the nature of evil.

Sontag notes that Arbus seems to have been ambivalent about success, as were many other children of the Jewish middle classes in the 1960s, and compares Arbus’s naïve, almost innocent persona with that of the narcissistic and driven Andy Warhol, who was Catholic. As Sontag puts it, “To someone raised as a Catholic, a fascination with evil comes much more genuinely than it does to someone of a Jewish background” (45). Likewise, O’Connor was genuinely fascinated with evil, not for the sake of sensationalism, but as a way to express her desire for and belief in a “Christ-centered universe.” While the physical deformities of

O'Connor's characters—a cast in the eye, a wooden leg, a clubfoot—mirror their spiritual and moral iniquity, Arbus projected no religious message. She was drawn to freaks and oddities not only because photographing them made her feel naughty and daring, but again, because she thought of them as aristocrats in the sense that they were born into suffering.

But no matter their differences, Arbus and O'Connor were artists of the particular, peculiar, the singular. In a paper Arbus wrote in her senior year of high school, she states,

“Everything that has been on earth has been different from any other thing. This is what I love: the differentness (*sic*), the uniqueness of all things, and the importance of life...I see something that *seems* wonderful; I see the divineness in ordinary things” (*Revelations 70*).

How similar this sentiment is to O'Connor's expression that the physical world was good because it proceeded from a divine source. Both Arbus and O'Connor saw not only the flaws but the divinity in ordinary things, and their uniqueness. They penetrated and rendered justice to the visible universe, and especially to its grotesque facets, in all their fantastic, bizarre, ugly, absurd, distorted, deformed, weird, antic, wild, peacock-feathered glory.

## *Chapter 10* *The Last Retort*

Red, yellow and blue dinosaurs, draped with shiny beads, wage war with a tiny plastic Spiderman and a miniature stone terrier. Motley action figures, frozen in mid-stance, watch the battle. A crumpled, airless Casper the Ghost balloon, wedged between the spreading limbs of a gnarled, massive oak tree, smiles and twinkles, and the praying cherub with its curled cap of frozen hair seems to offer a benediction. Elsewhere, madonnas beckon and beseech, and saints and angels gesture, gaze, and ponder. His left hand upraised, a ring round his index and middle finger, a squat yellow haired man of stone garbed in red and gold robes, black rosary and imperial crown, stares into the distance with wide, baby blue eyes. In his right hand, he cups a golden and turquoise orb. Across the street, a bronze elk stands sentinel, his hindquarters to the marble garden behind him.

A delicious morbidity infests my thoughts on this sparkling June day in 2007. I am walking through a cemetery. Or more precisely, two cemeteries. The small scale dinosaur-and-action-figure-Armageddon decorates the grave of a child and the imperially robed yellow haired man is the Infant Jesus of Prague, both part of New Orleans' Cypress Grove Cemetery on Canal Street. The bronze elk, the mascot or symbol of the Royal Order of the Elks, BPOE # 30, graces the grassy knoll at Greenwood Cemetery, directly across the street on City Park Avenue. And the saints, madonnas, cherubs, urns, angels, beads, teddy bears, painted pumpkins, fresh and faded flowers, rusted crosses, odd obelisks, exhausted balloons, and other eccentric, shiny and sun-bleached fragments are part and parcel of these graveyards. John Kennedy Toole, author of *A Confederacy of Dunces* and New Orleans native son of posthumous fame, is supposed to be buried at Greenwood, but I have never been able to find his grave.

But I do find the tomb of Verna Duffy Taminello, the first female sergeant of the NOPD, d. 1988, and the vaults of the Munches, Bienvenus, Schwannopites, Hablutzels, and Sbisas. Not far from Taminello's vault is that of Officer Debbie M. Dunn (1959-1992) and I speculate as to whether she had been gunned down in the line of duty, or had simply succumbed to disease or misadventure, just as I wonder what happened to the dead child at Cypress Grove. Though their graves yield clues about their lives, the dead are mute, and that is one reason why cemeteries are good places to muse and meditate. It's *quiet* here.

A friend of mine once said, "Gravity pulls us to the grave." Cemeteries—*graveyards*—are somber places, intended to invoke sobriety. Reflection. Gravity. But New Orleans cemeteries, unique because they are above-ground and almost baroque in their rich ornamentation, provoke my imagination in a way the stark plunked-in-the-ground Protestant headstones of my youth never did. I conjure up dead classmates from years gone by, wonder where they are interred or scattered. Summon horror stories about angels that weep at midnight, nights of the living dead, festering zombies, restless coffins. Think of a story I read as a child. The Chase family of Barbados, legend had it, literally turned in their graves. Supposedly, every time gravediggers opened the Chase vault, they found the family's coffins standing on end, tumbled around or stacked on top of each other. Different theories—earthquakes, floods, magnetic disturbances, and the most plausible, vandalism—abounded, but naturally, I always preferred the supernatural ones. I close my eyes, pretend I'm ten, bask in the dark allure of the place James Joyce called the "boneyard." What was that flicker behind the Hirsu tomb? That rustling noise behind me? If I stare at that eyeless angel long enough, will it sob stony tears?

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So much for romance. An astringent rationalism always undercuts my graveside daydreams. Though I love cemeteries, I hate the idea of burial. As always, I wonder: why choose burial at all? Why decorate graves? Why spend money on a vault, a tomb, a headstone, a mahogany casket that will fall to pieces in the ground, along with the elaborately embalmed body it holds? Why not just remember our loved ones through photo albums, journals, conversation? Why this morbid clinging? Minus the restless coffins, gamboling lambs, weeping angels, and flowered wreaths, aren't cemeteries—

to put it bluntly—dumps for the dead, their icy surface beauty a distraction from the active, maggoty decay below? Aren't all these artful stone trappings really just a waste of space?

I agree with George Bernard Shaw, who had this to say about burial:

Dead bodies can be cremated. All of them ought to be; for earth burial, a horrible practice, will some day be prohibited by law, not only because it is hideously unaesthetic, but because the dead would crowd the living off the earth if it could be carried out to its end of preserving our bodies for their resurrection on an imaginary day of judgment (in sober fact every day is a day of judgment).

Well put, George. Yes, burial (or the process of decomposition, anyway) is ugly. Yes, it is a waste of space. However, it has yet to be prohibited by law.

Yet people continue to die, and many opt for burial over cremation, necessitating more graves. In *Death to Dust*, an incisive (and for the squeamish, extremely disturbing) 1996 medical reference book about bodily decomposition and disposal, Dr. Kenneth W. Iserson states that burial space in the United States annually approximates two square miles, and “with the same rate of death and burial, over the next 230 years, new graves will take up a land area equal to the

side of Los Angeles.” So not only is burial unaesthetic and wasteful, it is expensive—more so than cremation, the second most common form of corpse disposal.

In *The American Way of Death Revisted*, Jessica Mitford calls the cemetery “God’s Little Million Dollar Acre,” pointing out that though historically graveyards used “cheap land that [didn’t] lend itself to the needs of the living such as housing and agriculture” (82) and was not supposed to turn a profit, that is not the case today. Cemeteries, though tax-free, are also “money making propositions.” Burial rates have soared, due to the emergence of land speculators and cemetery promoters who rake in money by offering “perpetual care” resources (upkeep and maintenance of the grave) and “pre-need” burial plot selling (86).

Mitford explains the mechanics thus: non-profit cemeteries are controlled by promoters. The promoters contract with the cemetery corporations who operate the grounds and sell the graves, and in return, the promoters receive a certain percentage of the sales. For example, the Beautiful Beyond Boneyard doesn’t own the burial grounds, but it operates them. BBB gives the promoter fifty percent of each grave sold, and sixty percent of each mausoleum. Because BBB bears the entire cost of cemetery operation and maintenance, it gets to keep its non-profit status, and the promoters pack their pockets—as Mitford says, “thousands of dollars per acre for their low-cost land.” (84). And while space may prohibit below ground burial, crafty promoters know how to get around that too: hence the success of the mausoleum.

Death is big business. And business is good indeed for the funeral industry, which certainly knows how to make a killing on sorrow, emphasizing the need for “grief therapy” and the “emotional catharsis reached through ceremony” (17). The plain pine box of yore has been replaced by the “the burial vault, flowers, clothing, clergy, musician’s honorarium, and cemetery charges” (17). According to Mitford, the total average cost for an adult funeral in the United



States in 1978 was \$7,800, up from \$750 in 1961 (17). Knowing how anxious survivors are to do the right thing, the funeral industry manages to convince them of the need for “durable” caskets, and believing that families also benefit from being able to view their loved ones *in* the casket, it also manages to convince them that embalming is a “must.”

It isn't. Nor is it sanitary or even much of a preservative. Yet the funeral industry works its black magic by making the survivors believe that embalming is a health measure, necessary for public hygiene. Mitford quotes Dr. I.M. Feinberg as saying “Sanitation is probably the farthest thing from the mind of the modern embalmer. The motives are economic and sentimental, with a slight religious overtone.” (56). Dr. Jesse Carr, chief of pathology at San Francisco General Hospital, puts the matter of embalming and public hygiene even more bluntly: “[Embalmers] are not guardians of anything except their pocketbook” (57). He further explains that the body of a person who has died from a non-communicable disease presents no danger to the public, and that the problems of the ancient cemetery, such as rodents and seepage from graves into the water supply, have largely been solved by city planning and modern engineering. Furthermore, disease causing organisms which live in the bowel, blood and organs, cannot be destroyed by the embalming process.

Neither is embalming required by law: its main function is to prepare a dead body for public display, as an aid to the “grief therapy” funeral directors love to expound upon. And even though the directors of, say, the Beautiful Beyond Boneyard would have us believe otherwise, embalming is not a legal requirement even when the body is presented for display. Cognizant of the public's ignorance, the funeral industry often does not even ask for family permission, and simply proceeds with the embalming procedure. As Mitford so comically puts it, the loved one is “whisked off to a funeral parlor and is in short order sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed,

trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged, and neatly dressed---transformed from a common corpse into a Beautiful Memory Picture” (43).

Yet a “beautiful memory picture” was not what came to mind when I viewed my grandmother’s body at her memorial service two years ago. Her skin displayed a stiff, waxy sheen, as if it had been frozen or stretched. I joined the procession of mourners straggling past her open casket. Several of my relatives touched her cheek, and I followed suit. I soon wished that I had not. It felt shocking, as if I had somehow violated her. She was cold. She was stiff. She was unbending. This was not my grandmother. Was touching her embalmed skin and gazing at her dead body supposed to be a tribute? An honor? It didn’t feel that way. I wanted to remember my grandmother as she had *lived*, vibrant and energetic, standing by a pond holding the five pound perch she had just caught. I didn’t feel that I was doing much to help my distraught relatives, nor did I want to think of myself in the same situation, packed with embalming fluid, my hands folded primly on my chest, laid out for my brothers and aunts and nieces and nephews to weep and wail over. If this was “grief therapy” it was one that was entirely too morbid for my tastes.

Again, why even choose burial? Why not forgo the whole pickled-creamed-flowered-eulogized memorial? Why not choose cremation, a cheaper, cleaner and more efficient method of bodily disposal? Certainly religious beliefs prohibit some from choosing cremation, but so does—as you may have already guessed—the deep pocketed funeral industry. Mitford says that the funeral industry scorns cremation (again, cheaper than burial) and often dissuades prospective buyers from choosing it, denouncing cremation as “burn and scatter,” or “shake and bake” (117). After all, “a full-fig funeral with open casket and viewing of the embalmed remains, is a time-honored, meaningful ritual with its proven benefit of peace of mind for the survivors”

(115). Mitford notes. This time honored ritual also provides peace of mind for the funeral industry, which has managed to compromise its principles by offering funeral services-with-cremation and by selling crematory “art urns” decorated with “leaping dolphins” crafted in bronze, wood, “semi-precious metals,” glass, and “true marble” (119).

Yet some simply find the thought of cremation disturbing, sans influence of the Funeral Director’s Association. “I just don’t like the idea of it,” a close friend of mine told me, although she couldn’t articulate why. When I mentioned to another friend whom I usually admire for her common sense and practicality, that I thought burials were a waste of space, she snippily retorted, “If they don’t use that land for graves, they’ll just use it for something else.” Irritated by her unexpected irrationality, I considered that my friend was employing the “dirty hands” argument here: “If we don’t do it, somebody else will.” I dropped the argument, knowing that beliefs about death are personal and deeply emotional. For instance, when I had told my mother that I wanted direct cremation—no memorial, no casket, no urn, just the cardboard box and the retort, the formal term for the cremation oven—there was a long, sticky pause. Then: “Well, honey, that’s your choice.” My mother is deeply religious, and I knew that her own father’s choice to donate his body to science had disturbed not only her but our entire Southern Protestant family. Though I am an atheist, I reminded my mother that since the soul departs the body at the moment of death, how could cremation possibly be wrong in the eyes of God? Though she ultimately agreed, I sensed that the concept of cremation still disturbed her.

I felt that my mother didn’t think of cremation as sinful, but rather, *unseemly*. Disrespectful. Perhaps it could be seen that way. But is sliding a body into a 2000 degree oven (like a pepperoni pizza, some might say) really any less respectful than letting it putrefy in the ground, gnawed and nibbled on by a legion of insects? In *Death to Dust*, Iseron discusses the

conflict over cremation between early Christians and Romans. Minicus Felix, a first century Roman writer, had this to say about Christian cremation queasiness:

....it is easy to understand why they curse our funeral pyres and condemn cremation; just as if every body, although withdrawn from the flames, were not reduced to dust as the years roll on, just as if it makes any difference whether our bodies are torn to pieces by wild beasts, swallowed up in the sea, covered with earth, or destroyed by fire. Any kind of burial must be a punishment to them, if they have any feeling after death. If they have not, cremation must be regarded as a beneficent remedy in the rapidity of its effect.

In other words, if bodily sensations do not cease after death, then burial is a form of torture: just imagine lying stiff as a stone in the ground while mice and maggots munch on one's flesh. But if the dead feel nothing, then cremation simply dispenses of them quickly and efficiently. Whether they are burned, buried, submerged, or sundered, bodies are impermanent.

In Chapter Six of *Death to Dust*, titled "The Eternal Flame," Iserson discusses cremation beliefs and practices at length. The early Christians feared that they could not be resurrected "if their bodies did not rest in their graves" (275) and many other religions also disapprove of, and even disallow, cremation. Yet others approve of it, and Hindu and Buddhist religions even require it, viewing cremation as a symbol of purification and releasing the soul from a corrupted body. Many Protestant religions now support cremation, as does the Church of England which reasoned that if the church were to ban cremation, "What in such a case would become of the Blessed Martyrs?" (274).

Other religious objections to cremation have been more practical. Iserson notes that Orthodox Jewish religion forbade burial of cremains chiefly because of Old Testament

prohibitions; Biblical Jews considered cremation a form of idolatry, perhaps simply because it was a pagan practice. Even though Conservative Jews are not as strongly opposed to cremation, they generally refrain from the practice because of the experience of the Holocaust. And again, even though early Christians feared that they could not be resurrected if their bodies were burned, their own religious persecution by pagans played a part as well. Cremation pyres would have attracted too much attention.

Cremation practices are not only divided along religious lines, but throughout the world. Iserson notes that densely populated countries, such as England and Japan, have shown the greatest increase in cremation. In England, cremation is now the main method of bodily disposal, and nearly ninety-six percent of Japanese are cremated. In the United States, Californians and Nevadans, who are less likely to hold orthodox religious beliefs, opt most for cremation and Mississippians, who are largely Protestant, the least, perhaps a reflection of the prohibition against it by the Baptist Society.

So even though factors such as religious beliefs and history and population density influence the prevalence of cremation, again, some just don't like the *idea* of it. Maybe cremation just seems too harsh. Deliberate. Hasty. A headlong rush to burn the body and be done with it. Irrespective of religion, perhaps slipping the cinders of our beloved into a space the size of an envelope seems wrong. Better to let nature take its course, slowly. And while there are many, such as myself, who find burial wasteful and disgusting, others like the idea of their loved ones visiting their graves and honoring them with beads, bows, bears, and flowers, and if the survivors benefit from doing so, then that's fine, too.

And of course it's not hard to understand why a person wouldn't want to be cremated: the very idea of being set on fire is disturbing. If being mistakenly buried alive is hideous, being

mistakenly burned alive is even more so, though the chances of it happening are slim. But though most of us probably have little difficulty visualizing what happens to a buried body, few of us know what happens to a burned one. It takes about fourteen years for a body to decay completely. How long does it take a body to burn? And what happens to the ashes, or cremains?

Iserson , quoting from a physician's description of a cremation in *The Chemistry of Death*, explains how it works:

You are slid into the retort in either your casket or cardboard box, and once in, the temperature in the oven, which requires an initial heat of around 1,300 F may soar as high as 2,500 F. Efficient cremation requires air, but the exact amount depends on the state of the body, the coffin itself, and the temperature at which the crematorium is operated. At any rate, the coffin rapidly catches fire, bulges and warps, and may even collapse. The skin and hair immediately scorch and char, and the muscles contract. Occasionally, the abdomen swells, due to formation of steam and gas in the abdominal cavity. The soft tissues peel away, exposing the skeleton. The hands and feet may fall away from the long bones. The abdominal contents burn relatively slowly, and the lungs even more. The brain (perhaps because it is about 77% fluid ) (parentheses mine) is the last to go. Eventually the spine is exposed as the viscera burn, the bones glow whitely, and the skeleton falls apart. You are, depending on sex, reduced to between roughly six to eight pounds of small, clean white bone fragments (261).

Iserson states that most modern crematories now use “electric processors to quickly pulverize residual bone fragments to the size of sugar crystals” (263). Once ground up, then, your cremains, depending upon your preference, may be scattered over the Pacific Ocean, bottled

up in a dolphin -decorated urn and placed on Mother's mantle, or even buried in the back yard by the tomatoes and pansies. Or, you may choose to have your inurned ashes placed in a columbarium, which is a building, room, or wall with a row of niches for urns. While on the whole cremation is more practical than burial, it is not without a certain poetry, which is why it often appeals to artistic personalities. Having one's ashes scattered from a plane over the ocean is certainly a much more beautiful image than having one's body buried six feet under, and...well, use your imagination.

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Cemeteries too have their poetry, and burial, memorials, gleaming caskets, marble headstones, and florid wreaths all appeal to the human love of ceremony. Many people shell out big bucks for funerals for the same reason they pay astronomical sums for a wedding that lasts two hours: pomp and circumstance. Perhaps worshipping at the loved one's grave makes the survivor feel as if the departed is not really gone. Here are tangible, concrete markers: the dreaming cherub, the pensive Madonna, the stern saint, the glass jars, the bears, the beads. Indeed, it is hard for me to stroll through just about any New Orleans cemetery and not see it as a work of art.

Even the shabbiest of New Orleans cemeteries possess a certain emotional and deeply personal charm. Holt Cemetery, unique for being one of few New Orleans' below-ground graveyard, is one of them. Adjacent to Delgado Junior College on City Park Avenue, it might be accurately described as a pauper's or potter's field. Holt is where the poor bury their dead. Here you will find no sleek black vaults, mausoleums, or headstones, nor the manicured geometry of nearby Greenwood or Metairie's immaculate Garden of Memories.

Bordered by a caved-in, rusted fence, Holt is best described as ramshackle. The day I was there, I was completely alone. Underneath a gigantic live oak tree with muscular arms lay a heap of dead branches, spray cans, flower pots, faded plastic flowers, glass jars and clumps of Spanish moss. Many of the headstones leaned to one side, as if woozy, and were hand lettered with Magic Marker or spray paint. The small, unpretentious stones of several WWI veterans jutted from the weedy ground. I saw fresh clumps of dirt in one corner, evidence of a recent interment.

Some of the epitaphs were tender: “In life, I loved you dearly. In death, I love you still.” Others were humorous: near the headstone of one Charles Joseph stood a sign: “In an unmarked grave near here rests Buddy Bolden, legendary cornet player, NOLA jazz pioneer, 1<sup>st</sup> king of Jazz and the “blowingest” man since Jelly Roll Morton.” Bolden, nicknamed Buddy, was the founding father of jazz and acclaimed by other greats such as Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong. The details of Bolden’s life are sketchy, but after being diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1907, he was confined to the East Louisiana State Hospital where he remained until his death in 1931, which probably explains why he was buried in a pauper’s grave.

Other graves were even more poignant, especially the one belonging to a three-month old child. Around it someone had placed three pony-tailed, blue-eyed, pink-lipped, African-American dolls. Similarly, I found the grave of one Antoinette Morgan touching, not least because she and I had been born the same year. But it was the small, withered, pink, one-eyed teddy bear by her grave that seemed especially sad. What had happened to her? She was only forty-five when she had died. No marble, no engraved tribute, no elaborate wreath. A hand lettered plaster headstone and a shrunken stuffed animal were the only mementoes of her life.

Other burial sites at Holt displayed a riotous and exuberant imagination. Pink splattered chicken wire and an old bed rail fringed one unmarked grave. Inside this ragged border and atop



the unknown beloved's grave, someone had arranged an eccentric ensemble: a large "NO TRESPASSING" sign, a black striped velveteen chair, another chair missing one of its legs, a blue plastic jack'o lantern, an eyeless sock monkey, and a stuffed, mildewed puppy dog. This graveyard gumbo, both sentimental and humorous, was folk art at its best. Was this not poetry? Holt—nor any other cemetery, for that matter—is not a place where I want to go in my time of dying, but I appreciate the fact that the survivors of the dead here had done so much with so little. Though remarkable in their own right, Greenwood and even Cypress Grove felt cold and impersonal in comparison.

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Death isn't something most of us like to think about, but it is absolute and non-negotiable. So we might as well have a sense of humor about it, and regardless of whether you choose to be burned, interred, or buried at sea, do it in style and with personality. Iseron relates the story of one Chuck Roberts of Lawsonville, North Carolina, whose friends loaded up their shotguns with his cremains and fired them in a volley, explaining that Chuck had always loved a good joke (272). And a former Native American forest ranger had his cremains deposited inside a large boulder (This account sounds slightly dubious, since Iseron doesn't explain exactly how one gets bone fragments inside a rock) which was then dropped by helicopter near a hiking site. Painted with directions for hikers, it rests near an intersection of hiking trails, so that the ranger could "still do his job, even after death" (272).

I have not decided what I want done with my ashes, but having them scattered over a mountainside or a body of water are two poetic, if time worn ideas. Though my mother is aware that I want cremation, should I die before my time, I am absolutely certain she doesn't want my

bone fragments in an urn atop her mantle. Since my dad likes to hunt, I think it would be hilarious to let him load up his shotgun with my cremains and blast cans and bottles with them, but he'd never get the joke and would probably have me committed if I suggested such a macabre idea. Because I love to garden, maybe I will have my ashes buried in the back yard with the pansies and the tomatoes. Or perhaps I'll have the shards lovingly arranged—so Zen—inside a rock garden. Or sealed inside a Patron tequila bottle. Or I might have one of my bone fragments pierced so that my husband could wear it around his neck as an amulet. Just joking, really—that one's way too ghoulish, even for me.

The day I visited Holt, I also drove by the St. Patrick Cemetery a few blocks away where I saw a black hearse with magenta curtains parked by the curb. I thought to myself, "*Only in New Orleans.*" Not white, black, or even pale pink curtains, but *magenta*. The silhouette of a one-armed angel above the cemetery wall heightened the black comedy, and I thought of a line I'd heard some years back in an English movie. The lead character, concerned about his aging mother, and wanting to get things in order before her death, asks her if she prefers to be buried or cremated. She pauses for a moment and replies, "Surprise me."

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