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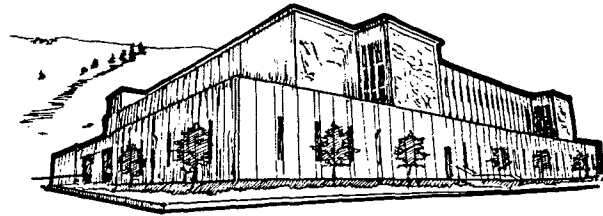
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West of Wisdom

by

Kristin Bloomer

M.F.A., University of Montana--Missoula, 1993

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

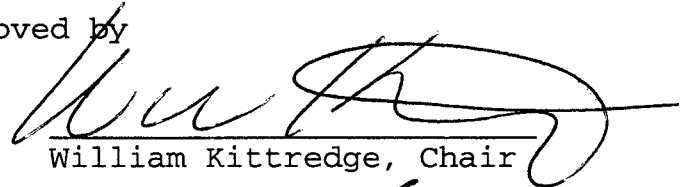
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1993

Approved by



William Kittredge, Chair



Dean of Graduate School

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In 676 Cuthbert sought seclusion on the Inner Farne, Scotland. He remained on the island for nine years, living in a cell designed to isolate him from everything, even views of the land and sea, which may have distracted him from his prayers and meditation.

Pilgrimage, 1991

To ride across causeway is almost too easy. I prefer penance, hard-earned transcendence in this place far from coast.

I'll leave alone and early from Beal. I'll take the straight path across tidal flats, carry my shoes on my shoulders to Lindisfarne Isle.

I'll walk fast, with two sticks to beat the tide. If I'm caught in the wash, I'll swim, and wait at the Snook, or climb in a box

built for unwary pilgrims. I'll sit in my perch like a warbler, thrush, or finch. Ringed plover, Redshank, and Whimbrel will come,

and four species of grebe. The wind will tighten and shiver my skin -- the shards will fall clean to the sea. I'll descend at low tide,

and walk bonily over sands to the shore at Cahre Ends. The tiny priory will resemble the cathedral at Ely. I'll sing a short prayer

in the nave, leave, find a boat, row to a still smaller isle -- Inner Farne -- and build a cell of shale, sea aster, thrift,

and dolerite rocks. I'll give
my shoes to the gulls, stand in the sand,
and build myself in the small round.
I'll thatch it with reeds, careful to leave

no windows, just a hole in the roof
beyond reach, for those times
when desire, a cell without seams,
and the sound of the sea aren't enough.

In his Ascent of Mount Carmel, St. John of the Cross describes how the soul can prepare itself to attain -- in a short time -- Divine union, the highest state of perfection that is the union of the soul with God.

BOOK I.

Chapter I.--Describes two different nights through which spiritual persons pass, according to the two parts of man, the lower and the higher.

Chapter II.--Explains the nature of this dark night through which the soul says that it has passed on the road to union.

Chapter III.--Speaks of the first cause of this night, which is that of the privation of the desire in all things, and gives the reason for which it is called night.

Chapter IV.--Wherein it is declared how necessary it is for the soul to pass through this dark night of sense, which is mortification of desire, in order that it may journey to union with God.

Chapter V.--Wherein the aforementioned subject is treated and continued, and it is shown in passages and figures from Holy Scripture how necessary it is for the soul to journey to God through this dark night of the mortification of desire in all things.

Chapter VI.--Wherein are treated two serious evils caused in the soul by the desires, the one evil being privative and the other positive.

Chapter VII.--Wherein is shown how the desires torment the soul. This is proved likewise by comparisons and quotations.

Chapter VIII.--Wherein is shown how the desires darken and blind the soul.

Chapter IX.--Wherein is described how the desires defile the soul.

Chapter X.--Wherein is described how the desires weaken the soul and make it lukewarm.

Chapter XI.--Wherein it is proved necessary that the soul that would attain to Divine union should be free from desires, however slight they might be.

Etc., through Chapter 91.

Dark Night of the Soul

The night before my father left us for a week at my grandmother's house, she leaned over my bed, kissed me goodnight, and asked if I'd said my prayers. Her wool dress smelled of Emeraude -- like the perfumed mink coat she wore each Sunday to church, the one I liked to run my hands over while we knelt in the pew. I liked to see the coat's knapp change from dark chocolate to black. She always smelled like the church, my grandmother did -- like a cloud of dark, holy myrrh, like the oil of Good Friday or the scent of a priest's heavy vestments as they swung down the aisle.

I said yes, Gaga, I've prayed -- but I lied, since I knew I'd pray later, under the covers. The wood floor looked cold.

She squeezed my hand four times, our secret morse code: "Do you love me?" she squeezed. "Yes, I do," I squeezed back three times. "How much?" she squeezed twice, and my one long squeeze meant the world. She gave me a butterfly kiss with her eyelashes; we laughed because she barely had any. Her face smelled clean, like Noxema.

I woke up later with my nightgown twisted around my chest and my parents' voices in my ears. They were coming from my grandmother's bedroom, next door to mine. Their voices sounded like they did when they came up from the kitchen through the airshaft at home, but more clear. I wasn't used to their fighting at my grandmother's house. No one ever fought at my grandmother's house. It just wasn't done.

"John, keep your voice down," my mother was saying. She said he'd had too much to drink. She said something about his losing control.

"Control," my father said, "Look who's out of control!"

I pulled the covers over my head and pretended I saw angels. If I squeezed my eyes very tight and opened them fast, I saw filaments of red sparkles, chains and clumps of bright light. I must have been six or eight at the time -- I was familiar with these angels; I knew they were there to protect me; that's what my mother had said. At home, they danced around my bedposts at night. At my grandmother's house, they danced under the covers and helped me fall back to sleep.

The next day, he was gone.

I don't remember a kiss or good-bye the day my father left us at my grandmother's house -- only the close of the door and his wave and the wooden puzzle I was putting

together, the picture of a house in a frame. I sat on the floor in my socks, clicking the pieces in and out, glad to stay at my grandmother's fantastic house for a whole extra week while my father went back to his job and our home in Connecticut.

My mother lay upstairs in the bed. I didn't ask why she needed to stay in that bed; I knew she was sick, and that I needed to stay quiet. We all knew that much. They said she was exhausted, but whatever it was, it was bad, and I thought she had caught it from us. We made her tired, they said. She needed care.

It was then, I imagine, that my mother fell into her dark night of the soul. I imagine she went into her room, shut the door, pulled down the blinds, peeled down the blue corduroy quilt, slid between the cool bedsheets, and fell into a spiral, a hole deeper than the sea. She tried to hear the waves lapping up on the shore, but she couldn't; there was no shore -- only black water, filling her in, pushing her down, stretching her out. She went so deep into herself there was nothing to hear but the voices in her own head, and the water filling her ears. Her body lay on the bed, but her soul was far -- too far, maybe, to come back. The only thing left to do was wait.

My mother tells me that week had not been her dark night, but that it came later, in Connecticut, after she went on a women's retreat. Still, I imagine it happened

that week in New Jersey: she was sick, that I know -- one of her long stints she explained as fatigue. But I remember more than fatigue: I remember being afraid she might not come back; I remember imagining water sucking her down like a whirlpool. I imagined the emptiness of a vortex, a black hole, pulling on her feet till she was thin as a string of spaghetti. I'd like to imagine she was in control of her journey, and that she knew what she wanted. I'd like to imagine she saw light at the end.

The puzzle I played the day my father left came from a box in my grandmother's attic, an old, mysterious place that held stories. The puzzles had been my mother's: she fit the same pieces together -- moved them around on the board till they clicked into place for her. Like me, she had followed my grandfather up three flights of stairs to the two attic bedrooms and bathroom where servants had lived before my grandparents moved in. My grandfather held the keys to these rooms. I'd watch him jiggle the lock, open the small bathroom door, and pick up the box, awash with the light in the tub.

My grandfather would set the box on the living room rug and my sister and I would pull out our favorites: a squawking wooden hippo on wheels and the puzzle of a house that looked just like my grandmother's -- big, bourgeois, bold. Beneath the pieces, the painted frame held a

family, busy and happy in rooms. I covered and uncovered the family a hundred times over. My sister pulled the hippo around me in circles, the two of them squawcking, till my grandmother came into the room, and told us to shush: our mother was resting.

Climbing the stairs to her room, I would pass the large Degas print on the wall and the wide, stained glass window above the first landing. I'd run my hands along the broad dark-wood banister all the way to the room with pale flowered wallpaper, where she lay stretched out in the four-postered bed. I ran my hands the length of her legs, over the smooth yellow sheets, up the long mahogany bedposts. The slim tips held pineapples. I was a little afraid they might break.

Her hands stretched out over the bedsheets. She wore a silver wedding ring; the bottom point of the diamond fit into a jag. I twisted the diamond out of the jag and back in again, catching her skin until she cried "Ow" and I lay my head on her covers.

My grandmother came in with the tea. "Stand back, dear," she'd say. "You don't want to get sick, do you?" The tea smelled like lemon and spice. Steam rolled over the cup and the tray and into my grandmother's hair. Steam rolled over the bed.

When my mother lifted the tea, her arms seemed thin as bedposts. "Don't burn yourself," my grandmother

said.

I moved back from the bed, towards the mirror. The bureau beneath had been imported from England, booty from one of my grandparents' trips; its dark wood shone through the green glass with bursts of green spidery light. Its lace doily came from Ireland; the statue of the Virgin, from Rome. I ran my finger along Mary's cold porcelain dress, and down again to the yellow globe she stood on. She wore stars around her head; she cast her eyes down towards the sun.

When my mother was sick in bed as a child, she says she read Heidi over and over -- especially the part where Heidi is sick and has to go to the mountains and eat goat's cheese and milk on white crusty bread. My mother said she would crave the food in the book; and her mother would serve it to her on a tray. I picture her feeding her thin body, imagining herself getting well. The imagining would help her body remake itself so that she could go to school the next day.

For this reason, perhaps, she gave me Heidi to read when I was sick, and other books that had been hers: Wuthering Heights, Little Women, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, The Secret Garden, and a book called Mary the Virgin. The book's breaking spine held yellow pages with corners worn from my mother's thin hands. I liked to touch the large

colored glossies. In the first picture, my favorite, Mary is Born, with the caption: "And Anna says to the midwife, 'To what have I given birth?' The midwife answers, 'A little girl.'" On the next page, the High Priest receives twelve-year-old Mary as a temple virgin; she stands tiny, the height of two temple steps, and her face is adult, her figure like a small Barbie doll. On the next page, she kneels at a small altar, clamping her hands to her breast. Her eyes gaze down sadly to white and pink roses, strewn at her feet.

I looked at these photos and imagined my life; like my mother, I prayed to Mary that I might be like her. On my twelfth birthday, my mother gave me a set of rosary beads and a book of novenas, which I kept in an empty chocolate box by my bed. If I said a Rosary every Wednesday and went to church the second Friday of every month, my book said, Mary would say a special word to God about my entrance to heaven. I wasn't sure I believed this, but I wagered. If it were true that Mary did influence God, and I did not say my Rosary, then I was wasting a good chance at heaven. If it wasn't true, at least I could fall asleep. "Hail Mary, full of grace," I would pray. "The Lord is with Thee." I thought I felt the Lord with me, too -- His calm presence, His strong, fatherly love. I turned my bedside light off, watched the red sparkling angels dance at the end of my bed. I felt Mary's love, clear and blue, like my

beads. I imagined her talking to God for me, softening his anger, calming his rapid-fire judgement.

I liked kneeling beside my mother in church every Sunday. I liked the statues of Mary and Joseph; I watched them and prayed till my knees ached. If I leaned my rear end against the edge of the pew, my mother tapped it: sitting meant sloth. I had time -- a whole hour -- to think about Mary, my hands clasped tight in my pew. I thought I might want to be like her -- holy and pure, beautiful and scarless in body and soul. I looked up at her flowing stone gown, her down-turned face, her soft, lovely cheeks, and thought it might not be so bad to stand on a pedestal.

I later learned how, unlike other stories my mother and I read as girls, Mary's was controlled by men in scripture and doctrine. I grew up so close to Mary's story that it surprised me to find that Luke is the only synoptic to write about her; he is the only one to portray her immaculate conception. He alone tells us that God sent the angel Gabriel to the city of Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to Joseph. He alone put words to a story that later became formalized in Church ritual and dogma, words repeated by Catholic women all over the world: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!" And Luke tells us she "was greatly troubled at this saying, and considered in her heart what sort of greeting this might be."

In the Bible, Mary holds a lot in her heart without speaking. She does it again in Luke's gospel after the twelve-year-old Jesus rebukes her for worrying. "I was in the temple," he says, "doing my father's business." "And the boy increases in wisdom and stature," Luke tells us, continuing to do business, while Mary remains on the margin.

Mary's business is brief: her job is to give birth to Jesus. According to Luke, God sends the angel Gabriel to her -- "to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph." And Gabriel comes to her and says "Greetings, fair one!" And Mary is troubled. "Fear not," commands Gabriel. What woman wouldn't fear a man with large wings in her bedroom? "You shall conceive in your womb, and bear a son," the angel continues, as if this is supposed to make her feel better. And Mary suppresses her fear and asks: "But how can this be?" And Gabriel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." (In the Greek, *epanesthēnē*: "to overshadow, or envelop, like a cloud.")

I have imagined this frightful overshadowing, this enveloping of Mary's mind and body. I have imagined Mary's passive submission. I have imagined it as the experience of my mother, of myself as a girl, and countless other women who have sought their reflection in Bible narrative. I have imagined it two different ways.

It is morning in Nazareth, pre-dawn, and Mary is whispering prayers from the Hallakkah. She has risen before the sun to draw water from the well. She has carried the water in a bowl to her room; she undresses, dips the rag in the water and rinses her arms, her breasts, her narrow lower back. A thin beam of dawn light filters through the window. She ties her hair with a piece of lamb's wool. She bends to dip and sandal her feet. She is thinking about Joseph, the man whom she thinks she could love -- the man to whom she is betrothed, the bearded widower with two sons. She hopes she will see him today; she feels a tingling between her thighs as her thoughts come, heavy, dreamlike, and she imagines a great chasm like a desert she will cross soon -- she feels herself on the edge of a threshold.

She is on her knees, swirling her rag in a bucket when she feels the pressure in the room change. She feels a draft like the beat of large wings. She tries to turn, but she can't; her knees are pressed to the ground, as if they are glued; she feels the gravel dig into her palms. She hears a rasp in her ear. "Hail, full of grace," the rasp says. "The Lord is with thee." Her stomach heaves, her thigh muscles contract; the draft lifts her skirt. She wants to close her knees tighter, raise herself to her heels, but she can't. "Fear not," beats the rasp. "Thou hast found favor."

Mary feels herself falling away from the wings and the clawing hands at her back; she feels herself spiraling. She peels away from her own body. She refuses to feel the stabbing, the seering light, the great pain. Instead, she feels only darkness -- she finds a safe, dark night in her heart.

A bucket. A rag. Cool white walls. No beam of light from a window -- it is too early yet. Mary is washing the base of the walls -- her morning chore, which she gives each day to Yaweh, her love.

Her hand swirls the water, clear blue. Water sloshes out of the bucket and onto the floor. Beads of sweat mark her forehead. She rubs the rag hard on the walls; the work salts her lips.

Then she feels it: the sudden slant in the darkness.

"Fear not," says a voice in a pale beam of light. "Fear not, Mary," it says. Something glass-like -- an eye? Light in the stirring of dust? Swirl, incense; filament; an opening in time.

Her damp hand reaches out towards the light. No one else knows her spirit like this, not her mother, not Joseph.

"You shall bear a son." The warp of the voice comes from a place out-of-time.

Swirling sun, swirling bed, tossed sheets from the line, spilt water, stars. "Yes," she says. "Yes." The word grows inside her. She carries it close to her heart.

My mother taught me -- as her mother did -- that Mary chose to say "Yes." "The choice came from her heart," she would tell me as light fell on the kitchen table. "Yes," I said. "Yes." I wanted to be just like her -- like my mother, like Mary.

But here was the catch: how does a girl reconcile this "freedom of will" with the fear of God she is taught also to have? How does she reckon it with other strong teaching: "God always is watching," "God sees into your heart?" Surely, God knows what he wants, and all good boys and girls obey. In Mary's case, He wanted a son -- a particular son, a Messiah -- to enter the world in his name. God gets what he wants.

But where does this leave Mary, except as the chosen vessel for God's action -- her will and humanity diminished, her vitality reduced, her whole vibrant being turned into a passive receptacle? Where does it leave women in the church? Some women -- like my grandmother and mother -- have tried to redeem Mary's vitality by interpreting her "Yes" as an active choice spoken in grace, wisdom, and love.

Others have seen it as rape. Others, less strident, perhaps, have at the very least seen it as a panacea for powerlessness -- an acceptance of meekness. We might decide that our mothers and grandmothers are repeating a story that runs the grooves in their lives deeper with each repetition, with each story's telling, each "Hail Mary."

When I imagine my own story -- and my mother's -- I return to my grandmother's house. We all returned there -- every Easter and Christmas. I woke up with stomach aches the mornings before the two-hour ride; I lay curled up on my bed while my mother packed my best clothes. Car sickness pills only made me feel worse -- head-lolling, fuzzy-brained doped in a way that made everything blend together, made me feel trapped. My parents fought on the ride to my grandmother's -- sometimes the first half, sometimes the last, usually small bits of both. I watched them from the back seat, watched my father's straight jaw chew on his gum, watched my mother's cheeks redden. I pulled on my collar, cracked open my window. "Can we put a few windows down?" I asked. My sister and I sat curled up in our seats, counted exits, held our breath over the Tappan Zee bridge. I don't recall what my parents fought about. I only remember the feeling of dread in that car and the relief of finally driving through the pillars of my grandmother's house,

where silence and grace would envelop us, where things were controlled.

My grandmother's house sat behind a long stretch of elms and cracked sidewalk, on Clark Street in Westfield, New Jersey. I knew a block of this sidewalk, which ran from Roosevelt High School on one corner past a stretch of older, large houses that seemed to extend into infinity. My grandmother's house loomed over these, large, white, and regal, like a great Queen Victoria. A long screened-in porch ran around its white shingles; its black roof sloped over a triangular attic window. Two stone pillars marked the end of the driveway.

She never came down her porch to greet us: we went to her. I'd climb the painted gray steps, and she'd take my face in her hands, press her cheek next to mine, and kiss the air next to my ear. "Ooooh," she say, her voice shaking. "I could eat you right up." Her eyes were bright green, her skin smooth and white. "You've still got the chin," she'd say.

She meant the Libby chin -- a small pointed thing that stuck out more than most, which I had inherited. I was supposed to be proud of this chin; it somehow made me more of a Libby than my two younger sisters whose chins were well-chiseled, normal. My grandmother was proud of her ancestors Libby who landed on Prout's Neck in Maine not long after John Winthrop. She often spoke of the people and

places up in Prout's Neck -- Libby's Grocery, Libby's Realty. She wanted us to know what stock we had come from.

My mother, too, wore the chin. It looked fine on her. But on me, it felt wrong, like an extra appendage. I wished it would come off in my grandmother's hands when she grabbed it, but I was destined to wear it, to carry the chin even if I'd never carry the name.

Inside my grandmother's house, everything seemed foreign, fragile, and placed. I walked softly past each delicate object, each golden room. It was a house that held few places for hiding. The downstairs held no doors, only arches; upstairs, each bedroom opened onto a wide hall. At Easter, we found our eggs quickly in the bright silver bowls, or behind curtains of tassled chartreuse. Life at my grandmother's house was a book that stayed open, where only the fine pages showed. The dining room cabinets, made of clear glass, held objects from all over the world where my grandparents had travelled. My grandmother showed me the place under the glass peacocks from Holland, where the blowing tube entered; she let me touch the circle's rough edges. These peacocks were numinous, heavy, rose swirled with blue. She placed them back on the shelf beside her bone china tea cups from England -- each one so thin you could almost see light through it. The great stained glass window from Italy hung over the sideboard and drew light from the garden, as did the larger glass window on the

stairs' first floor landing. The stained glass window made my grandmother's house seem like a church -- not rich enough to be Catholic, not spare Presbyterian, but something else in-between, a place for quiet and sunlight through colored glass, a place for fine music and books, a life where all things were expected to be beautiful.

My sisters and I danced in black leotards before dinner, at the adults' request. We danced what we'd learned from ballet classes my grandmother paid for. And after the silver-set meal, my grandfather -- who was raised Presbyterian, and converted to Catholicism after seeing a vision of the Virgin Mary from his asthmatic sick bed -- sat in his armchair and read us books from his shelves: Sir Walter Scott, Kipling, Twain, thick biographies, tomes about war. We knelt by the sides of his chair while he turned the thin pages, and the old leather spine left crumbs in his lap. He read us *Lady of the Lake* till I grew to love the far-away sounds of the words. They held mystery, obscurity, foreign power, like a Latin Cantata.

Catholicism suited my grandparents well -- it espoused blind faith and learned knowledge, mystery and meaning, power and etiquette. Etiquette, at my grandmother's house, provided an order within which beauty could exist. Etiquette meant serving on the left and taking away on the right; placing your knife and your fork at ten and four o'clock

when you were finished with dinner; walking without dragging your feet; writing thank-yous to all aunts, uncles, god-parents, and long-lost cousins who sent you a Christmas gift; taking a small piece of paper with your name on it from the deck my grandmother held out every cocktail hour. The pieces held kitchen assignments; mine always read "Server."

Etiquette meant dresses at dinner, white gloves to church, and patent leather shoes -- a Protestant air. (The nuns at my mother's school had banned patent leather shoes, since boys might look up girls' skirts in the reflection. Etiquette meant powder and perfume like incense. It meant sitting or standing during entrances and good-byes at all the right times. It meant cleanliness, an immaculate home, no dust on tables, ironed napkins. It meant shiny sinks -- preferably cleaned not by the homeowner, but by a man or woman you hired, who was probably black.

The week my mother lay in bed, my sister and I bumped down the stairs, laughing at the way our voices jiggled. Our grandmother stood at the top of the stairs and warned us: "Girls," she'd say, "please. You'll wake your mother." We froze, sweating a little, the blood in our ears, till she disappeared and we climbed to the top just once more. My sister went first; I slid behind, went faster than usual,

fell smack on top of her, landed with my legs tangled in hers, and felt a terrible burning down in my crotch.

My grandmother was down in a second. She held me in her apron; her body smelled sweet of lamb, apples and spice. I was grabbing the seat of my pants, holding it tight. Tears burned my face. I clung to my grandmother's warm neck while she unzipped and pulled down my pants. A small spot of blood stained the white cotton tongue -- a small stain, the size of a dime. I stood with my head on her shoulder, blood in my pants, feeling guilty, ashamed, damaged, all wrong. "You shouldn't have done that," she said. Then she kissed me. "It's all right, dear, you'll heal."

My grandmother insisted that my mother go to Catholic girls' schools, where she would learn church doctrine and go to confession once a week, every Friday. I imagine my mother walking in line to the chapel with the other uniformed girls in her class, filing into the pews, setting down kneelers. Mass was said in Latin those days, priests faced the altar. Confession was heard in a closet-like box, behind a curtain or screen. My mother would enter the box at her turn, cross herself, and begin: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession and these are my sins...." She sometimes made up sins for the priest, she said, since she couldn't sin fast enough to confess real ones each week. This made her feel

guilty, she said. If she confessed she had lied, she killed two birds with one stone.

Still, my mother said she loved going to confession -- she loved feeling so light afterwards, "like a butterfly," she would say. She hoped we would go at least once a month, and while we lived at home, we went for her if not for ourselves.

My mother taught me Catholic Church doctrine, just like her mother and the nuns had taught her. She taught me the doctrine of Semper Virgo, Mary's perpetual virginity. She taught me that Mary abstained from sex the rest of her life because she had given herself up to God, that she was born without sin, that she never suffered at death -- God spared her this -- and that her body was wholly assumed by him into heaven.

Christian theology -- like many avatar religions -- must resolve one grand biological and theological contradiction: how a god can be born of a human. Because Jesus is born free of sin, Mary must also be entirely pure, or her "dirt" might rub off on him. It makes sense, then, that the Catholic church chooses stories from James and Luke that depict Mary so stainless, so close to "spirit," that she never comes into contact with a man, never rips her hymen -- even in birth -- never has sex, never dies, never decays. Luke and James say that Mary is born without sin: she turns twelve and does not stain the temple; she is

infused with the seed of the spirit; she gives birth to Jesus as light through a window; she is assumed into heaven, transfixed, catatonic, where she sits forever preserved at the right hand of God, her Father, her lover, her rapist.

My mother grew up in the fifties, to hoop skirts and Ike. She grew up with Tupperware -- all those seal-tight containers, those clean, empty vessels. While some girls were twisting, she ballroom danced in white gloves; she wore plaid school uniforms when other girls wore peddle pushers and saddle shoes.

My grandmother held parties for my mother and her college friends at her house. She had them pose for photos on the couch or on the floor -- women's legs crossed at the ankles, the men sitting straight in their dinner coats. My mother then was quite beautiful, her mouth painted red, her brown hair curled at the shoulders. In one photo, she sits on the rug, her skirt spread over her legs, her hands in her lap. Mike -- her first love and one of the first to die in Vietnam -- wears his gray West Point uniform. His hand rests on her shoulder. My mother often returned home from college with Mike and her friends and their dates -- they met at my grandmother's house for dances and holiday parties, games of bridge and tennis on the grass court out back, barbeques on the patio. They sipped sodas in the clubroom converted from the old stable.

The week my mother stayed up in bed, my sister and I explored these old places. In the stable's windows, we rubbed clean spots and peered inside at the old soda fountain where my mother had sat with her friends and their dates. The counter stood in the back, with still-shiny chrome soda-taps. My grandfather unlocked the door so we could see inside. We stood on the counter, ran our hands along the cold chrome. We sat in the half-moon-shaped booth by the window, dialed the old rotary phone. We pretended to talk to our boyfriends. We pretended to be our mother.

Outside, spring had thawed the ground. Tulips opened around the bird bath, daffodils bloomed under the bay kitchen window. The air smelled like mud and new grass, and we sweat under the winter coats my grandmother had zippered us into. Our breath trailed behind us in streams. We ran to the grass tennis court, vacant for years. It waited, ghost-like, behind tall rusty gates, it filled with tall weeds and puddles. I imagined a net strung taut across, and my mother and uncle dressed all in white, swinging their rackets. But the court was too muddy for playing, so my sister and I ran past to the patio, which held an old world of its own.

The slate crumbled in places. The cherry trees promised to bloom, but not yet, and the tall stone fireplace still held the grating for cookouts. We climbed up on the

stone wall and pronounced it our fortress. Robin Hoods, we were, and Maid Marions, and queens of the forest. It was our magic garden, our walled kingdom, within which we did what we pleased. We slayed dragons with sticks and staged kidnappings and ransoms. We threw off our coats and felt the smack of the cold on our wet shirts. We cast pebbles over the wall and walked on its edge beside budding branches.

When my father came back for us at the end of the week, we didn't want to go home -- we preferred the world we had created. We ran back to the patio, threw off our coats and our mittens, hung them on branches, climbed the walls and played all the old roles. We stole from the rich and gave to the poor; we fought for our love; we died for our love; we surrendered; we vowed never to surrender; we swore we'd fight till the end. We played till we heard my father call "Girls!"

We tried to keep playing; we brandished our swords.

"Girls!" He called again.

Silence. The yard seemed full of it.

We grabbed our jackets off the trees and kicked the loose slate with our shoes as we ran.

Later, at home in Connecticut, we are sitting at the kitchen table, my mother and I, after she and my father

have been fighting, and she's explaining Jung to me. I am ten. My sisters, seven and two, are in the next room. She draws me a diagram, a circle. She calls one half anima, the other animus. "He hates his anima," she says. "We remind him of that. But he doesn't hate us; he just hates that part of himself. He dislikes his emotions. They make him feel ashamed."

We are sitting at the kitchen table, my mother and I. She explains to me that my father's medication for his epilepsy affects his memory, his personality, his mood, his sense of control. "It makes him angry," she says. Drinking, she says, makes it worse.

I imagine him slapping the left side of his face, the anima side. I imagine his synapses flaring.

I am sitting at the kitchen table and my mother is praying in tongues. She has been slain in the spirit, she says. She has gone away to a weekend women's retreat and has come back a prophet, a healer. She has stood at the church podium to prophesy with words she says came from God. "My children," she would begin, and go on to describe a great love beyond understanding. My father and I have sat together and listened to her prophesy -- he, too, went on a charismatic retreat -- one for men -- at my mother's

request, a year or so after the week at my grandmother's house. He, too, came home changed.

Now, my mother and I are alone in the kitchen, and she's doing the dishes and singing in tongues. She trills "Alleluia's" -- transforms them as they roll off her tongue, and turns them into another, new language -- not the church's, not God's, but her own -- one between her and the Spirit.

I sit at the kitchen table over my homework while she stands by the washer, scrubbing our clothes with a brush. She scrubs every stain. I imagine her singing with angels and seraphs and sibyls while her hands move through the water.

"Allelulilela...." she starts, and the brush scratches the cloth, and the cloth rubs the board, until the sounds reverberate on the tiles and move through the house, through the open window, and into the wide yard and the sky. Her singing fills the house with an emptiness, a joyful sadness, as full as a vase, or a round, glass-glowed vessel. It turns blue into rose and rose into blue; the house is pregnant with undescribed meaning. Its rooms and halls echo -- long after her voice stops singing.

And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues,

as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 1:12-14;
2:1-4)

My father was in love with another woman -- a woman from my parents' prayer group, my sister tells me. We are in our twenties. We're eating dinner in an Ethiopian restaurant in New Haven, where she lives: I'm home from Montana; she's been hanging out more at home, talking to mom.

"She said he just walked in and told her one day," she said, dipping her piece of sourdough into the shah'ani ful. "He just confessed, he was in love with a woman from their prayer group. He just apologized, like he stole candy or something."

She asked me if I thought anything had "really" happened.

"What does it matter?" I said. I imagined the trust -- the layers of it -- broken by his single confession. I thought of my mother's dark night; I imagined the shame she must have felt whenever she stepped foot in that church -- the place that had been her main source of solace.

I wanted to know when he told her. I wanted to know if it happened around the time we stayed at our grandmother's house.

"I didn't ask when," she said. She fingered the stem of her wine glass. "I was afraid to ask any questions. I didn't want to upset her. She seemed so peaceful about it."

The reasons my father left us at my grandmother's house that spring week are still no more clear to me than the reasons for my mother's dark nights or her attention to Mary -- though I've always suspected the three were related. When I told my mother I'd been thinking and writing about the dark night of the soul, she described hers to me more specifically. She had always referred to it mysteriously, in abstract terms.

It started when she was alone, she said. It was after her retreat, after her ecstatic experience of being "born again," of being slain in the spirit, of singing in tongues. Dad was away with some other members of their prayer group, she said -- she had decided instead to stay home. She'd felt like being alone, she'd felt like being quiet and staying with me and my sisters. She said she was suddenly overwhelmed with a loneliness, a spiritual numbness that went through her whole being.

When Dad came home, she said, he and the others from their prayer were boisterous, joyful, "full of love for the Lord," she said. She mentioned a woman who said something that sent under under. She didn't say who this woman was, or what she said. I'm sure it was someone I knew well, from my parents' home masses, but I didn't ask.

While their friends stayed for coffee, my mother sat without saying a word. When they left, she felt thrown into

a chasm so deep, so far away, there was no coming back. She sank down against the wall, in a fetal position, she said, in front of my father, and felt herself spiraling away, withdrawing from him, the kitchen, the world. She said she's not sure where we were, my sisters and I, and I have no memory of seeing her like this -- only later, of her lying in bed. She said she cried out, and that my father started to pray with her, and that this didn't help. She said she'd never been so scared in her life. It was worse than depression, she said. It was as if all of her senses had been cut off from the world. She lay in bed for a week, she said, not sure if she would ever get up again. My father called a priest, their good friend. He told her she was going through a dark night of the soul.

A few years ago, my grandparents announced they were feeling their age. They feared living alone; they feared not being able to get out of bed in the morning. My father offered to have them live with us; they built a small, two-room apartment on the side of our house and moved in.

Their peacocks were set on my parents' piano; their books rested on my parents' bookshelves. At Christmas, my grandmother wrapped and labelled a large box for me and my sisters and set it under the tree. She insisted on being the one to unwrap it.

"This one is from Ireland," she said, handing an

embroidered dish towel to my sister. "This," she said, handing my mother a gold bracelet, "is from Spain." For me, she unwrapped her bone china teacups from England. I held them carefully, so afraid they might break.

Now, after Christmas dinner, as I sat with my mother in our dark family room, my sister slept on the couch, her head in my mother's lap. I sat on the floor at her feet.

My mother was telling me about how hard it was seeing her parents approach death. She told me about a recent fight she had had with my grandmother.

"Don't you think I know what goes on in this house?" my grandmother had said.

"No, mom," my mother had said. "You don't know."

"Yes, I do know," my grandmother said. "I've lived with you all of my life."

"No, mom," she said, "you've lived with me for 25 years. I've lived without you for 27."

My grandmother had stormed back to her apartment. She said she was packing up -- that she would leave tomorrow. Later that night, my mother went to apologize and found her ironing madly in her small bedroom. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"It was amazing," my mother said. "She told me she hadn't been able to cry since she was sixteen, when her own mother died. She felt ashamed of tears. She said she was also afraid of crying, afraid of losing control."

"When I was growing up," she continued, "no one showed emotion. I'd feel so alone."

I reached out to her. I squeezed her hand.

"As a kid, she said, sometimes I felt so alone," she said, "I'd lock myself in the bathroom. I'd think about suicide."

"Mom," I said, "No one should ever have to feel so alone. I hope you'll tell me if that happens again." I imagined her going into the gold-and-black-tiled bathroom in my grandmother's old house, the one connecting her room with mine. I imagined what it would be like to be her in that big house, hooking the latch on both doors and quietly crying.

"Funny," she said, stroking my sister's blond hair. "When I was going through my dark night of the soul, my best friend at church asked me if I'd ever been suicidal."

"Were you suicidal then, mom," I asked, squeezing her hand, "when you went through your dark night of the soul?"

She turned her face down towards my sister. I could see her profile, her dark hair, the Libby chin.

"No,..." she said softly. "No, not really." She bit her lip. "That's when I threw myself at the feet of God. I'm sure that's what kept me from doing it."

I believe my mother lost a great deal that night. I believe she lost her autonomy, her will, her whole sense of

self. She may have lost her ability to care for herself, to ask for and get what she needed. Like Mary, her body was sublimated to virtual catatonia as she lay in that bed. Her mind, will, and spirit was invaded; she became a passive receptacle. In a very real sense, she was spiritually raped -- by the supreme Seminal Idea, the "Word made Flesh," the God of the Catholic church.

But she also claimed something that night, something as old and as deep as the myth of Persephone. She claimed her life, her ability to go into an underworld and come up again; she claimed her ability to survive. She transformed socially shared symbols into personal ones -- symbols passed down to her from the gospel writers, St. John, her mother, the church -- she turned them into tools for change in her life. She eventually got out of bed.

I, too, carry a dark night within me. To deny this would be to deny my own history and my humanity. It would be to deny my own fears of sadness, my memories of my mother. I have heard it said that the dark night is archetypal, that we inherit our primal fears of abyss from a fear of abandonment and separation from our mothers. While I believe the dark night goes deeper, that it springs from a sadness connected to women's place in society, in the family, in the workplace, I can never pretend to know my mother's dark night any more than I can pretend to know Mary. To do so would be to invade the mystery of my

mother's own sacred experience -- a lonely experience that is still holy.

I'd like to imagine my mother's dark night as I'd like to imagine Mary's "Yes" -- without denying the vortex it implies, a vortex of depression, anger and rage. I'd like to imagine it without subscribing to the God she continues to pray to. Instead, I'd like to imagine each "Yes" -- the "yes" of her submersion, the "yes" of her return, and the "yes" she makes every day of her life -- as a supreme act of creativity. In considering the alternative -- the vortex she faced, the depth of her dive, and the spare symbols offered her -- I understand her imagining to be all the more powerful. That she hung on -- that she resurfaced in the face of this frightening darkness -- is proof to me of the living vitality of her imagination, and the power of her own stories.

West of Wisdom

In August 1992, on a dig sponsored by Hank Williams, Junior, archeologists uncovered the mutilated skeleton of a Nez Perce girl at the Big Hole battlefield near Wisdom, Montana. Williams owns a gunshop in the Bitterroot Valley called "Deadly Nostalgia" -- archeologists were searching for military paraphernalia when they uncovered the tip of a knife. Digging deeper, they hit bone.

"The girl's arms and legs had been cut off at the joints," said Otis Halfmoon, a Nez Perce Park Service ranger who worked at the battlefield. "Her bones were covered with knife gashes. She was in pretty bad shape."

I'd called the battlefield's Visitor's Center to ask about a 115th anniversary memorial I'd read about in the paper. Halfmoon said that on Sunday, Nez Perce tribal members would drive in from Idaho to tell their stories, and dance and sing until sundown.

"We'll be mourning the girl," he said.

I'd been to the battlefield twice before -- once with a friend on a whim, and once with a woman from the Omaha tribe who taught me to sleep with my bag turned east, in respect for the Omaha dead who lie facing West. We'd camped in a meadow eight miles from the battlefield. I'd felt a tightening in my stomach and chest as we snapped our bags away from the sun -- a sudden, uncommon fear for the dead. Uncommon, I thought, because I grew up Catholic, believing that ghosts lived among us, shared our same air.

Now, as I drove alone in my friend's Subaru, past Lolo and Sula, I felt that same tightening, stronger. Storm clouds rolled over the saw-toothed Bitterroots; the sky seemed to hover. My mind reeled over questions for Halfmoon: Where had they found the remains of the girl? How deep had she been buried? How had the discovery made him feel?

I was thinking, too, about the attack -- on the girl, the non-treaty Nez Perce, 80 Nez Perce men, women, and children who were killed. I was thinking about the irony of their particular attack -- the fact that the Nez Perce had been the first to welcome Lewis and Clark in 1805 when the explorers came down off the Rockies; that the tribe had fed them and cared for their horses while the party canoed on towards the Pacific; that they had prided themselves on their friendship with whites, despite attacks on their cattle and land. I was thinking about the government's

ultimatum that they leave their Wallowa homeland and relocate to a reservation. I was thinking about their subsequent flight through this valley as they tried to escape the whole U.S. Army.

It was snowing as I approached Lost Trail pass. I crossed the swollen Bitterroot River twice, and the road hit a slick incline. Sheer cliffs dropped to my right. I turned east at the border of Idaho, where the road ran on a ridge, and drove into the forest, along May Creek -- past aspens, cottonwoods, lupine -- until the sky opened up at the Big Hole.

The Sapphire Mountains rimmed the valley's blue, northern edge; the Pioneers rimmed its darker southeastern lip; in-between lay sage, grasses, and sky, and a small town called Wisdom. The Big Hole Visitor's Center, a brown-shingled building the shape of a tipi, stood on a hill overlooking the battlefield.

I turned into the parking lot in time to hear a volunteer soldier dressed in blue period costume blow bad notes on a bugle. Four other volunteer soldiers tried raising the flag, which hit a snag and stopped at half mast. The volunteers yanked and gave up.

Otis Halfmoon stood on the edge of the green, his dark ponytail shaded by a brown ranger hat. I wanted to ask him if this "living history" seemed strange to him. I wanted to ask if it was really very appropriate.

I wanted to ask the Nez Perce girl if it seemed strange to her, or if it seemed familiar. I wanted to ask if she recognized these men's faces and uniforms, and if their reveille was raising the dead. I wanted to ask: Did you recognize your attacker in the gray, pre-dawn light? Had he smiled at you when you passed through the valley? Had he offered you blankets or wine? Had he offered you bread?

The Bitterroot and Big Hole Valleys had been familiar territory to the non-treaty Nez Perce -- they had hunted and fished there for years; they'd traded with Bitterroot settlers just days before their own massacre. Records show that the whites had offered them food and blankets, a few guns. According to accounts on both sides, the exchange was friendly.

Did the Nez Perce girl recognize her attacker in the gray, pre-dawn light? Had he smiled at her, offered her blankets or wine, flour or bread?

A tall man dressed in a brown Park Service uniform stepped by the flagpole and introduced himself as Jock Whitworth, Unit Manager of the Visitor's Center.

"This is sacred and tragic ground to the Nez Perce," he said to us visitors. "It's tragic too, to the army -- tragic to both sides in a way."

"In what way?" I wanted to ask. In what way is this ground sacred to the U.S. Park Service? Why do we return?

On the morning of August 7, Chief Joseph and his group of Nez Perce crossed the pass at the south end of the valley and settled at the junction of two creeks, in a clearing of cedars and willows. They cut new cedar poles for their tipis, dug camas, fished for trout. They danced and played stick games till dark. They felt safe; they did not set out guards.

The Nez Perce did not know that General "One-arm" Oliver O. Howard -- the man who had lost his arm in a civil war battle at Gettysburg, the humiliated U.S. leader of the Nez Perce war -- had summoned troops from up and down the West Coast to encircle the eastward Nez Perce. They did not know that in answer to One-arm's orders, Colonel John Gibbon had been advancing toward them with 162 men from Fort Shaw and 34 Bitterroot Volunteers. Nor did they know that the full force had spotted their camp by August 8th, or that -- by the 9th -- the troops formed a skirmish line on the bald hillside overlooking the tipis. They did not know that, on the 10th, most of the soldiers and volunteers were moving through the willows to the west river bank, where they sat within 200 yards of the camp, waiting for first light to attack.

The plan was simple: drive all the Nez Perce out of the village, destroy the tipis, food supplies, and everything the Nez Perce owned. The Nez Perce would surrender or be killed. At a signal from Gibbon, the soldiers were to fire three volleys and charge.

But the plans went awry. Before the soldiers came out of the willows, Natellekin, an old man with failing eyesight -- rode out to check on the horse herds and stumbled right into the snipers. Three volunteer soldiers opened fire and killed him.

I slipped away from Whitworth's introduction to check out the "living history" in uniform -- the six men from the Frontier Soldiers' Association in Helena who had volunteered to camp out in period costume for the day. I sat on a small folding stool with them, drinking their coffee from a tin mug. The coffee was sweet, heavy with unrefined sugar, and these men had spent the night drinking it, hunkered down in these white, open-backed tents, which now rippled like sheets in the wind.

"Damn near froze to death," said Bernie Campbell, a rancher from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho who started his career as a volunteer infantryman when the film Son of the Morning Star was looking for extras.

"Living history," he said, "is more than just props -- it's social structure. It's fitting yourself into a Victorian mind-set. You have to build a sort of history, a..." he fumbled.

"A persona?" I offered.

"A persona. You don't try to reach out in left field and build something really strange. You try to build it from your own personality. So you can work with it, you know, work it out, and build cases."

The volunteers aren't assigned roles; they create them. Bill Roy imagined himself a gray-back sergeant who rode with Colonel John Mosby, the Confederate cavalry officer who fought in the civil war, lost, and went west. Roy said it takes all his self-control not to shoot blue-bellies. Mark Powell saw himself as an ex-Kentucky cavalryman who enlisted in 1862 as a private. He served several years in the West under Grant before coming further west to kill red-skins, he said.

Brian Sweeney is a rookie. Nineteen, he'd been recruited for this job the night before. "It's wierd," he said, brushing his blue woolen arms. "One minute I'm at my job in Helena grooming dogs, the next I'm here dressed like this."

On the sidewalk a few yards from the tents, a large man dressed in cowboy boots was filming the soldiers with a home video camera he held on his shoulder. He worked for the

National Guard, who wanted to use the film to discuss strategy, he said. He swept the lens across the bare hillside above the battlefield.

"Strategy?" I said.

"Yeah. You know, what went wrong, what went right."

"Oh," I said. What went right.

"We take cadets through her every year," he continued. "We look at tactics used by the 1870's troops. The basic concepts are still the same. You know: reconnaissance, intelligence, how you develop you plan."

"Right," I said. Intelligence. Plan.

He said that the soldiers had left most of their belongings behind when they came over the hill. They didn't have jackets. They didn't expect much of a fight.

"They didn't realize they were attacking families down there," he said.

Halfmoon said that Lt. Bradley and three scouts from Gibbon's command hid in the trees, watched the lodges go up the day before the battle, and crept back in the night to tell Gibbon. They knew there were families inside of those tipis, he said.

The Nez Perce girl would have been dancing and singing, playing stick games, telling stories. She would have helped set up tipis on the grassy east bank, dug camas

roots, and cooked a large meal. She would have felt safe -- perhaps for the first time in weeks, since she left her homeland in Wallowa. After the dancing, she would have settled down under her buffalo blankets to sleep well that cold night, perhaps for the first time in months.

My plan had been to travel to Paris, collect real experience, follow the haunts of great artists. I dropped my gear in my girlfriend's apartment and followed the trails of impressionist painters; I visited all the galleries and parks, took photos of strangers, chessplayers, lovers kissing on benches. I drank coffee in cafes Hemingway had visited, read Rimbaud's Illuminations on the metro. I felt free as a poet -- awake, immortal, alive.

I drank wine at La Polidor Cremerie Odeon -- the restaurant I'd heard Hemingway and Ionesco had visited -- next to the man who would rape me. The place was famous and busy -- the waitress had seated me and my two friends with three strangers: two French men and a woman. While they talked with my friends, I scribbled notes on my plate; I'd given up on the French conversation, and the white tablecloth begged to be filled. I noted the place -- loud, smoky, open -- his hair -- brown, shoulder-lengthed, fine -- his large liquid eyes. He seemed different, exotic. While the red wine flowed from our carafes and swirled in our

glasses, I kept writing, until the chairs sat stacked on the tables and the owner asked us politely to leave.

The soldiers at the Big Hole were stragglers, escapees, trying to get it right out here in the West. The army sagged under debt: Sherman was signing I.O.U.'s, and the soldiers hadn't been paid their \$13-a-month wage in six months. They ate salt pork, hard tack, and coffee; they slept on soggy blankets that froze so hard the commanding officers had to kick them loose in the morning. A third had deserted. Punishments were divied out quickly, without trial. Bucking and gagging was common. This consisted of sticking a pole between a man's legs, tying his arms and feet to it, gagging his mouth, and leaving him somewhere -- anywhere -- no matter what time of year, until his officer thought he'd had enough.

After the rape, I lay with Frederic in the wet, bloody sheets and listened to his story. I wanted to talk, to make sense of things. I wanted to understand where his impulse had come from. Abuse doesn't occur overnight, I thought to myself -- it is usually handed down by people who feel they are themselves victims.

His mother had committed suicide when he was young; his father, a musician, died when he was twenty. He said he was still angry at his mother, that he longed for his father, that the world was crazy, that God did not exist, that he could love people as individuals but not as a collective.

He stroked my hair afterwards, kissed my neck and shoulders. I noticed blood on his fingers. He asked if he'd hurt me. When I said yes, he seemed surprised. He apologized to me in French.

Late that afternoon -- we'd lain in bed a whole day -- he washed his hair in the tub, wrote his address and phone on a small piece of paper, and asked me to call him. I shut the door after him, took a hot shower, and ran to the laudromat with the stained sheets in my hands.

And if I had fought?

I might have died. That's what passed through my mind when his eyes suddenly changed and he raised himself over me. I thought: he's going to kill me. I turned my head towards the door, I heard my friends' voices, he pulled my arm higher. I concentrated hard on my breathing, and tried to relax, tried to numb myself to the pain.

I suppose I felt desperate afterwards for something to cling to. That I let him stroke me later for even a second, that I lay with him a whole day, has often made me want to hit something. But I felt trapped in that room, and once I submitted to being trapped -- once I decided not to

fight back, to follow his orders, to play by his rules -- I lost most of my physical strength. I buried my pain. I surrendered so I could survive.

"Dismemberment robbed the dead of their power in afterlife," said Otis Halfmoon. We were sitting together in Whitworth's office, in the back of the Visitor's Center. "It dispersed their strength."

An American flag stood in the corner beside a portrait of George Bush. Outside, snow whirled over the battlefield. I'd camped out that night, after the soldiers and tourists had called it a day. I'd lain in my tent thinking about the young Nez Perce woman. It was probably Bannock scouts, Whitworth had said -- old Nez Perce enemies -- who had mutilated her. At least, that's what some archeologists thought.

Now in the office, Halfmoon said it may have been soldiers who did it. He said some women had returned to mourn for the dead during the battle, while warriors held off the army.

"But the women weren't able to bury them all," Halfmoon said. "They had to move on."

The Nez Perce girl never had a proper burial, Halfmoon said. When the war came to an end -- when Colonel Nelson A. Miles and his troops had surprised the remaining Nez Perce

near the Bear Paw Mountains, just 30 miles south of the Canadian border -- and Chief Joseph surrendered, Nelson promised the tribe that they could return to the battlefield to bury the dead. But he reneged, and sent them directly to the Lapwai reservation in Idaho.

Months later, the army sent their own soldiers, who merely kicked dirt over the bodies. Many had been mutilated when they found them -- at least, that's what they wrote in their reports to the feds.

Archeologists had found the girl's remains on top of a camas oven -- a large rock hearth near the North Fork of the Big Hole. The night before the massacre, the women had been digging and baking camas -- the low-growing Bitterroot lily -- before they went to bed. At least, that's what Penahwemonmi, Wounded Head's wife, supposedly told L.V. McWhorter, who published her story in his book. "Many women who had camas were killed," she said. "Their camas were left where they had baked it when we had to leave."

When the archeologists recovered the bones, they showed no signs of charring. The archeological report says the rocks were probably not hot when the body was deposited. The fire may never have been lit.

I have no memory of leaving Paris, no memory of what I did the next few days, no memory of where I went, or what I

saw. I cried a lot for two years followig the rape, without knowing why. I lost sleep. I told no one.

I do remember travelling the next spring to Berlin, to a man I might have loved. I remember twisting in bed the night before I left, chastising myself for saying I'd go. I'd sent my books ahead with him in his car, and I felt I'd given up my last sense of control. I never told him about the rape -- I never connected the experiences myself.

He met me on the West Berlin platform with a rose. We walked in the gardens, cycled through the Brandenburg gates, drank coffee in East German cafes. He introduced me to his best friends; he made me rich meals.

Day four, I panicked. "I've made a mistake," I told him. "This isn't real."

I cycled to the station in the rain the next day and changed my return ticket to the midnight train from Moscow. I felt great relief as he waved good-bye from the platform. I cried all the way home.

The Nez Perce reburied the remains of the girl in a grave near the visitors' trail, beside a small cinquefoil bush. They wrapped them first in a yellow blanket, then in a larger Pendleton blanket, and placed the bundle with native food and herbs in a grave about one meter square and one meter deep.

Halfmoon came later and left prayers and tobacco.

I asked him why, if so many memorials just rehashed old pain, the Nez Perce continued to come back year after year?

"I used to think that after the traditional year of mourning was up, you didn't feel sad anymore," Halfmoon said. "You didn't speak the deceased person's name. But seeing the girl in that condition brought back old hatred," he said. "It made me want to retell the story."

"Was the Nez Perce girl a hero," I asked. "Or a victim?"

He looked out over the battlefield. "People tend to think the story ended here at the Big Hole, or at Bear paw. But it's more than just a story of a battle or a surrender. Over 200 Nez Perce made it to Canada. My great grandmother was one of them -- she gave birth to my grandmother there. They were the heroes, I think. They survived to tell the story."

Two years ago when I arrived in Montana, I started to get flashbacks of the rape. I was terrified I might cry on the sidewalk -- in front of Buttrey's, or Freddy's Feed and Read, or walking downtown to my job.

And then there were nightmares -- dreams about being attacked by wild dogs, about being trapped in a cabin with a man who wanted to kill me. I read Wallace Stevens and

Adrienne Rich half the night to try to keep sane, I made lists, took up smoking, hated myself for feeling alone.

That summer, I sat in a circle with other women who had been raped -- White and Indian -- and one by one we shared our stories. It was August 1992; I'd been in Montana one year.

One woman in her forties said she was raped by her brother-in-law on a desk in her office, where she had thought she'd be safe for the night. Another woman told how her ex-boyfriend showed up drunk at her door, took her down to the basement, and raped her. Another woman -- an fifteen-year-old Indian woman, a member of the Salish-Kootenai tribe -- told how her step-brothers raped her when she was six, and how, that year at a party, six college men had held her down and raped her, over and over.

She brushed her long brown hair behind one ear, took a deep breath, and began: "It all started with a friend of mine....," she said. "We went to this party, there was drinking...." Cross-legged, her knees held close to her chest, she told the whole long story through tears.

Afterwards, we held each other.

"It wasn't your fault," she said. "You're not alone."

That summer, I made my first trip to the Big Hole. It took three trips and several drafts of an essay to make sense of what happened -- to be able to understand what had happened as rape.

Late afternoon. I sit in a circle with about 200 people -- White and Nez Perce. Halfmoon stands before us with Alan Slickpoo, a Nez Perce member who earlier conducted the raped girl's burial ceremony.

"We are all closely related to the earth," Slickpoo says. "And to the water, it's blood. The blood makes life happen. We use it to clean our hearts, and our hands."

Slickpoo sings, and his voice fills the valley. The drumming begins.

Halfmoon says that the songs we will hear have been passed down like stories, through repetition, by memory. They are not recorded, he says; they are alive.

I sit on the grass while drummers beat out a warrior song called the "Duck and Dive." Dancers' heads bob and jerk under invisible arrows. Next comes an Owl dance -- women ask men. A Nez Perce woman asks to dance with a white Park Service ranger -- he in his brown ranger suit, she in her long cowhide and feathers. They hold each other gently.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's Harry Slickpoo, a

drummer.

"When the sun goes down in the West," he says, "I'll be thinking of you."

"Thanks," I say, my palms sweating.

"No," he says. He is laughing. "Those are the words of the song."

Clouds move towards Canada and uncover the sun. I unwrap my coat and look towards the tipis of Chiefs Joseph, Ollokot, Lean Elk. Red ribbons -- traces of Nez Perce memorial ceremonies held in the night -- blow from their poles like tell-tails on ships. Breeze blows through the sleeves of my shirt.

Halfmoon stands at the mic and invites us all to dance a new story -- Whites and Nez Perce, men, women, and children.

"There's lots of room out there," he says. "Everybody is welcome today."

I get up to dance in the circle. Drums beat through the earth and into my legs. A Nez Perce woman passes me and shakes my hand; her eyes meet mine. The circle is moving.

I dance for the earth, for the girl buried here, for the women and men. I dance to drive out the enemy, to wipe out the blood made by our hands on this earth. I dance to keep moving. I dance for the work that remains. I am here with all my intelligence. I am dancing and praying.

Claying the Fens

I dreamt I was erecting gravestones for my dissertation. Some of the stones I'd engraved myself; others had been set and engraved long ago. I worked in a dark clearing of cedars and pine, and the object of my work was precision: the even arrangement of stones for aesthetic effect. But each time I looked away, the stones shifted; they skewed at odd angles like rows of bad teeth.

In my dream, I am trying to measure the shift of the stones with an old piece of wood when my Director of Studies steps out from behind the trees to check on my progress -- it is, after all, the end of my first year at Cambridge. He walks the edge of the clearing.

"I rather like some of these engravings," he says, "but what is the purpose of all this work, anyway?"

I'd come to England on a scholarship bequeathed by a man named Keasbey, whose asbestos plant had made millions. At the send-off dinner in New York, the head trustee raised his glass: "We expect you to be over-achievers, to do big things. Your work is important."

An ex-Keasbey seated beside me, an ex-Olympic runner and lawyer, tapped my arm. "Believe me," he said softly, "You will gain a whole new sense of yourself at Cambridge. No one there will tell you what you can or can't do. You'll leave feeling anything's possible. Even now, I swear I could do anything."

When the bus dropped me off at Drummer Street Station, I thought: is this it, this city sprung out of a cow field? The young man seated behind me assured me -- yes, this was Cambridge. Miles of flat fields had erupted into markets, towers and spires, medieval stone buildings, restaurants, boutiques, whizzing bikes, and streets full of tweeds.

I trailed my black Samsonite through the streets to King's College. The crowned chapel spires stuck up over the striped blue and white tents of the market; I followed them to the college gate along King's Parade and into the porter's lodge, the gate's inner sanctum.

"Ah, yes, Miss Bloomer -- the American," said the porter when I gave him my name. He dangled my room key and

said I'd best get a taxi with all of my bags. "It's qui' a waies to Grass'oppa, luv," he said.

Grasshopper Lodge -- Kings' graduate hostel -- sat at the edge of the university rugby fields and bordered drained fens. My room -- room 28, a garret room furnished with a single bed, a desk, reading chair, sink, and small fridge -- was cleaned and bedded each day by Liz and Ira Goodwin, sisters from a Northern Irish family of twelve, single mothers who held more jobs than I could keep track of. Ira was the younger -- blond, plump, in mid-thirties. She raised two kids, worked the college lunch shift, served silver-service banquets, and pumped gas at night. Liz, who wore her reddish hair bobbed, worked the lunch shift and banquets and occasionally bartended the King's College bar. At 11:00 each morning the two of them would knock on my door. "'Ow's i' goin' luv?" Liz would ask every day. And I'd put down my books to tuck corners with them.

Except for a rugby player who drank like a fiend and a Classicist who came out of her books only to eat, I shared the house with 25 men. Raza was from Pakistan, an affiliated student like me who'd arrived for a two-year degree on a scholarship. I met him in the TV lounge, where he often chain-smoked and watched news.

"Get to know the system as quickly as possible," he said, shaking his cigarette at me. "Read all the old exams in the library. Study them. Know the questions. And make

friends." He would repeat this over and over. "Make friends in your field, whatever you do. Make friends and discuss your reading. Make friends." He said he got shingles his first year from the pressure. I believed him.

English Literature lectures turned out to be a place not to make friends -- the hall filled with hundreds; lecturers rarely took off their coats; students scribbled notes and left in stampedes. It was a bad time for English at Cambridge: course hadn't changed since the sixties, and students stooped under a weighty dissatisfaction. They read, wrote and breathed deconstruction twenty years late.

Students who wished to avoid solitary depression joined the university's deconstructionist society called "Degree Zero," which hoped to subvert the English Tripos exams, introduce contemporary and "marginalized" literature into the canon, and a cumulative grading system, "like in the States." Being American, I was recruited -- I signed my name to a reading group list and attended an evening lecture series called "Death of the Author," which -- like most subversive activities in Cambridge -- took place in an upper room in Emmanuel College, known for its graduate John Harvard and its radical dean, Don Cupitt, who called himself a post-modernist Buddhist Christian. The first night's lecture hosted Colin McCabe, who had quit (or, for all intensive pupposes, had been fired) after not recieving

tenure for "all that French nonsense" he preached. His legal suit against Cambridge had found its way into the leading British newspapers.

As McCabe sat reading his paper in the crowded upper room, running his hands through his hair, I sat by the door beside Pippa Berry, my Greek tragedy tutor, one of four female fellows at King's. Around her, on the floor, sat a dozen or so other women students; the men sat in front, on chairs, and asked questions. Pippa clucked her tongue.

"Oh, come on," she whispered, looking down at the women, who crossed and uncrossed their black-stockinged legs to revive circulation. "One of you ask a question -- your ideas are just as important." She prodded my shoulder. "How embarrassing," she said. "You're not going to let them get away with this, are you?"

I raised my hand and asked McCabe if his literary criticism ever got in the way of his play writing.

He took a sip of his water. "No," he said. "I write creative work to answer the questions raised by criticism."

"Bravo," Pippa said, and asked me to tea.

I suppose I was searching for meaning, something to hold. I found myself cycling each day between the Faculty of English and the Divinity School -- which lay at opposite ends of the university -- to hear lectures in Hinduism and Buddhism, and Modern Theology. I felt my palms sweat while

I took notes.

That week, I took Pippa up on her invitation for tea. We sat in her study, overlooking King's Parade.

"I can understand how you feel," she said, turning the teapot three times. "I've been wondering lately whether I'm in the right subject. I've realized lately, more than ever, that all of literature is the articulation of a yearning that English culture has suppressed for ages. I've repressed it myself, in my own work." She was submitting her paper entitled "Tears and Melancholia in 18th Century British Literature" as part of her application for a full lectureship position. She was worried about not being accepted into the faculty, for being a woman and for having a theological approach to literature. "I've been asking myself," she said, holding her steaming Earl Grey, "why study the artistic expression of yearning when you can study the yearning itself?"

My new Director of Studies wore tweeds and brown shoes. Dean of the College, he ran services in chapel and tutored and lectured on Modern Theology. He had a shock of white hair and a long, buoyant walk. His house stood a hundred yards down the street from Grasshopper Lodge. We sat in his office overlooking the King's Backs -- the pasture between the college quad and the Cam. I told him I wanted to read theology: Buddhism, Hinduism, Modern Theology, Philosophy,

Cutlural Anthropology.

"You'll need ancient language," he said. "Have you any Greek?"

I shook my head, no.

"Latin?"

No, I said. Just half of seventh grade, I said.

"Well, then," he said. "I advise Greek." His wife taught it. It would help me with my New Testament studies, he said.

"We'll start you with philosophy," he said, pulling out a card. "I'll send you to Banner, Dean of Peterhouse, an expert on Plato and Kant." He wrote a few lines of introduction in sweeping calligraphy. "He's a bit dry," he said. "But ask him about his new baby and you'll get along fine."

Banner held his supervisions, as they were called, in his study, in a tower overlooking a rainy street. The room was small and well-lit. We sat opposite one another in high-backed armchairs beneath a ticking clock. Young, in his mid-thirties, he lectured on Plato in the Divinity School, held services in the college chapel, and some afternoons lectured on subjects such as the rights of unbron children. He wore a white anglican collar with his black robe. He gave me the books and topics for my essays, and each week, as I read the essay aloud to him, he would stop me and tell me where I had gone wrong. Then we'd make an

appointment for the following week, and I'd cycle back to my room on the edge of the fens and begin again.

He chose the topics for my essays -- those likely to appear on the exam -- questions like, "Why does Kant suppose that all arguments for the existence of God are dependent on the ontological argument, and are his criticisms valid?" We were to cover Plato, Hume, and Kant in the course of the year -- but especially Kant, or especially to me, for Kant was the one who stuck so heavily in my mind's craw, the one whose notions of God and the world I found so exciting and -- simultaneously -- so appalling, that they drove me to the brink of despair.

Nights before my essays were due, I sat at my desk, head in my hands, over the questions. "In five to eight pages, using the evidence available in the Critique of Pure Reason, would you say that Kant believed in God?" Each of these nights, I asked myself why I was there, why I didn't just pack it all in and go home.

Home was the last place I wanted to go. Home was where people called Jesus Christ their personal Lord and Savior, where small holy fonts of holy water hung by the doors, where people feared Satan, where a world without God was unheard of. Here was a chance -- a free chance -- to escape from that world and into another, to make sense of my own earlier beliefs about God, and to study great minds -- minds who'd considered our yearning and found answers, minds who

had altered the course of civilization. I wanted to know and converse with them; I wanted to be let into the club. Knowing Kant would be crucial to answering my own questions, I thought. Days my essays were due, I put my bin outside my door -- a signal for Ira and Liz to pass by my room -- worked through lunch, and cycled back into town for my next supervision.

Just outside my Grasshopper Lodge was a public footpath called Walpole's Way, which stretched into the fens. I often walked this path to escape -- to think for a while with my body, to feel my blood rise. I walked to think about Kant in relationship to the world, to pull him out of the tower and test him in a world of stinging air and moving cloud. I wanted to take him out into the fens, where the sky often felt like the roof of the world, murky and dense, where I longed for an earth that was a floor for the sky. I longed for a sky full of motion; where over the solid sheep and cows and hedgerows, the clouds moved in a space wider than the North Sea. I liked to walk in early evening, when the sun bled the sky red and transformed it, like a match set to kerosene.

Tying a scarf round my neck, I would walk out the door, past the University rugby fields, and west onto Walpole's Way, a narrow strip of gravel path that ran past private tennis courts on one side and a sheep farm on the other, to

where the sky blazed red over green. I walked down the paved stretch, my breath steaming from my mouth, the air heavy and wet, the dampness seeping into my clothes. A few hundred yards led me past the Cavendish laboratories, where chemists plied Kant's ideas, well-hidden behind hedgerows. "How far does a person have to walk," I would think, "to put Kant behind her?" Students cycled in and out, hunched over their handlebars, home and back again from their petri dishes and microscopes. I walked to where the pavement turned to muddy clay and the earth smelled heady and real, full of brome.

The cows stood white and black by their troughs. A chicken-wire fence separated them from my path; they watched me with steady, impenetrable stares. Beyond them, to the northwest, hung the fiberglass roof of Fison's, Inc. -- the company known for its lucrative business of stripping and selling rich peat. The roof, pulled ingeniously taut between suspension wires, looked like the canvas folds of a circus tent.

Here, almost at the motorway, I would turn to see King's Chapel spires fall behind me; by the time I reached the M11 motorway, they had sunk almost beneath the horizon.

Crossing the overpass, I would come down to a dirt path that led through a lane of alder trees to the village of Coton. The town pub and the church marked the village

center; around it, poplars and hedgerows divided one-acre plots stitched with wheat.

At the end of one of these patches lay the village cricket pitch; in the spring, I could see the white forms of the men through the alders; I could hear a ball crack against a wicket. Beyond the alders, a woman clipped roses and geraniums from her garden; a fish-and-chip truck parked each afternoon outside her small gray house.

At the pub called the Crown, I turned south, and walked down a winding lane which led me past horses, hedges, more cottages. Here, I would sometimes come across a man mending the steps of his style -- we'd wave, and I'd walk on, towards open fields.

These fields were my sole destination -- my manna, my daily bread; I'd turn back once I reached them. In early spring, they blossomed into bright yellow acres of oilseed rape, which smelled awful in the breeze -- too rich to be real. But when the wind died down and the waves of rape stilled, I would feel -- for a moment -- almost as if I were looking upon the face of God. It was a good place, I thought, to try Kant.

Okay, Manny, I thought as I stood on the edge of the field -- let's talk about God. Let's talk about proofs and knowledge. Let's start with this field.

Knowledge, you say, can exist only in the synthesis of

empirical and rational worlds -- the coming together of this field with the categories that already exist in my brain, categories like substance and causality. I chew on this seed of wheat, I chew it till it becomes glutinous gum, and still, you say, I can't know it -- not really, not as a noumena, a "thing-in-itself." I can only know my perception of the field -- the field as it appears to me -- a raging, explosive field of bloomed seed. But I can never know this field intimately, you say. For as much as my cognitive perceptions -- my rational categories, not to mention my taste buds -- help me to know it, I still read them from a distance; my perceptions always get in the way.

Worse -- but not unrelated -- you say that this fields is like all matter: "fickle," "messy," "unreliable."
(Female? I ask.) Is reason more reliable than intuition? Can I know nothing as it is-in-itself? Does love and desire mean nothing?

If I can't know this field, how can I know God as a noumena, a "thou" I can praise? Isn't longing always full of endless distances? Isn't knowledge an intimate thing? You say that ideas of God and the soul are concepts alone -- with no corresponding intuition, no objects of sense experience on which to attach themselves. You say they offer us no chaff to chew on. For this reason, you say, ideas of God and the soul cannot amount to knowledge, that I

cannot know God, except as an "as if," a regulative principle, a moral precept in the sky.

Let's walk back to Cambridge another way, Kant. Let's walk back along the slippery edge of this field towards something I think you should see. Notice how the clouds here hover; notice how they cover this field like a glove. Notice how the sky is crucial, how it looms over the land. Let's walk over this dwindling earth while our eyes scan its horizon. Do you ever yearn while you walk, Kant? Does your eye never roam the horizon for distractions -- objects of pity, or love, such as a tractor, dragging its dark wake? Or its driver, who commutes an hour and back each day to his home in the suburbs? Does that distance not make you wonder?

Here, let's veer off the path at Granchester, and walk a circular path back to Cambridge. Let's trace the border of muddy fields by new shoots of rape, wheat, or cole-seed -- to where an enormous drain, empty and open, separates the fields from small houses' back gardens. Let's follow the edge of the drain until the mud becomes too slippery or sucks at our shoes -- then we can walk on the drain's white cement lip and imagine the great pattern of drains crossing the fens -- the endless pumping, the combines, the great mills turning like clockwork. We can think about precisely-managed balances -- not balances that happen, but

balances achieved with a kind of Swiss perfection -- like those in Stevens' poetics. We can walk on this edge and try not to fall in.

I often wondered: if Kant had been an historian, would his theories have changed? Would a narrative context, a story, a grounding in real people and events -- have made him a mystic? A prophet? A conservationist-priest? Would it have made him think more about cause and effect -- about the repercussions of words, or and the events that have shaped them?

The Bible says it was God who separated the land from the waters, but the Romans, it is thought, cut the 70-mile Carr Dyke which doubled as a canal to carry grain from Waterbeach to Lincoln. It was also thought that they cleared all the willows and alder carr that had grown in the peat. But recent pollen studies have shown that three thousand years ago, rising sea levels backed up the rivers and forced water into the forest, choking and killing the trees. The peat -- the rich, dark soil well worth its weight in gold to a gardener and sold now by Fison's who scrapes it off the land hundreds of acres at a time, in a process called surface-milling -- is really the remains of the original bog oaks which had drowned in the sea.

It was the medieval monasteries -- or their money -- that later kept the rivers clean and the waters moving. But by 1539, the monasteries had all been dissolved by King Henry, and their passing away marked one of the greatest changes in the history of the fenlands. Suddenly, a huge body of land was deprived of its caretakers, and the sedge, fother, reed, willow, and alder wood were completely covered with water.

Marshes swelled. Pike filled the waters. Banks and bushes moved with Widgeon, Coot, Water-woosell, Dob-chick, Puffin, Swan, and Osprey. People adapted, livelihoods flourished. Fishers towed their nets; fowlers set their lymed twigs. Others squared peat with spades for burning; they drew sedge and reed from the carr for thatch and for stover. Some fensdwellers walked on stilts. In 1611, a scholar from the Continent who kept a good travel log was shocked at how fast these stilted fensmen could run. At Downham, he saw one such man drive 400 cattle to pasture with the help of one small boy (who, we would like to assume, also wore stilts).

In the seventeenth century, a group of speculators, or "Gentlemen Adventurers," cast covetous eyes on the land. Led by the Fourth Duke of Bedford, they decided to drain it down to its valuable peat, and hired a Dutchman named Cornelius Vermuyden to help them dig the canals to take the water out to the Wash, the inlet of the north Sea. They

hired him to raise a few windmills.

Their plan was not popular, nor was Vermuyden. His ditches and dykes changed the face of the Fens forever and precipitated an new, long list of enclosure laws and taxes which caused the fenspeople to lose most of their land. The king would receive 57,000 acres upon the project's completion; the adventurers would get 40,000.

Petitions poured in. the town and university of Cambridge, worried about navigation up the Granta and the end of good commerce at Stourbridge Fair, joined in the protest. People refused to pay taxes, and Vermuyden had a hard time finding workers to finish his scheme. But with the help of 11,000 laborers, mostly Scottish prisoners, he managed to complete a second stage of construction--a waterway running parallel to the first and separated by half a mile of grazing marsh. The fields produced bounteous crops of cole-seed, rape-seed, and wheat. It was decided that improving a kingdom was certainly better than conquering a new one.

Cambridge, placated by navigable waters and a good fair at Stourbridge, was impressed. The air, may said, was better for study. However, when Defoe visited the area, he pitied the people who lived there, and wrote that "when the Downs and higher grounds of the adjacent county were gilded by the beams of the sun, the Isle of Ely looked as if it were wrapped up in blankets, and nothing to be seen, but

now and then, the lanthorn or cupola of Ely Minister." It was something like living in a watery cave.

As the windmills of Cambridgeshire turned, the surface level of the peat continued to fall, the banks of the dykes weakened, and the water often poured in. More dykes were cut, more sluices laid; but the soil only shrank more. summer winds spun the sails and brought drought: the fen moors cracked, the cattle stopped grazing. In spring, the topsoil dried out and took off in the wind like a black fog. By the late 1800s -- a hundred years after Kant's Critique of Pure Reason -- the peat had become so thin that underlying clay fell within easy reach of the plow.

Farmers started "claying the soil;" they cut the fields with deep trenches and flung the clay out over the light sooty moor. The clay gave tenacity to the soil and held moisture in. Its siliceous matter fed the wheat-stem; mixed with peat, it gave carbon to cole. William Cobbett, travelling between Cambridge and Lincoln, noticed that here, "there were more good things than man could have the conscience to ask of God."

Mid-way through my first year, Pippa Berry invited me again to tea, before her last lecture on "The Literature of Melancholia." She had been denied tenureship. We sat in her room overlooking King's Parade, where bicycles rushed below us.

"Do you find Cambridge a mystical place?" she said, turning the tea pot three times. Mystical? "Yes. I mean empty. flat. Void." She poured the tea over milk. "Oxford is more English, somehow, with the Cotswolds right there--all those rolling hills. But Cambridge is like a great void. I do like it, I like the negative space, but I do rather like Oxford more."

It was renegade scholars from Oxford--a small group of monks--who settled on the River Cam to found the monastery that became Cambridge. This later derivation caused a small inferiority complex amongst some of Cambridge's students and dons, who still say that in beauty and spectacle, their turf far surpasses Oxford's. But the land blends together: it is said that you can walk from Oxford to Cambridge on land owned by both, a distance of 70 miles.

Unlike Oxford, however, Cambridge is built on a marsh. Even this, it boasts to its advantage, for the theory that all great civilizations are built on them. Marshes, it is said, make for highly organized societies, seats of power, and control. The air, too, is thought to hold power. When Vermuyden first drained the land around Cambridge, people thought that the air would be better for study. Athens, they noted, was also seated in a "fenny place," as was Rome. The thick damp air would quicken the wit and strengthen the memory.

When the pastoral land behind the chapel and Gibb's

building--the King's College Backs--first were reclaimed, the River Cam served as its drain. Squeezed dry, it was then rented to college servants who built their cottages there. In the nineteenth century, the college enclosed the property, manicured the grass, and raised signs asking visitors not to walk on it--Fellows alone have this privilege. Servants found housing elsewhere, such as the basement across from my tutor. Now, porters monitor the greens through video cameras to make sure no students or tourists wander off pavement. Students can be "sent down" for such a crime.

The year I arrived, a few naughty students snuck into the front court after dark and led the college cows there, who grazed quite happily until sunrise. When the porter awoke to find large quadrupeds lumbering across his TV screen, he led them back to their small enclosed field on the Backs, on the other side of the river. The college rents these cows from a local farmer to give the college the bucolic look for which it is famous, and which it also boasts over Oxford.

The gates of Cambridge are closed to visitors during exam time, during May and June. During this time, each college is its own little hothouse; students scurry back and forth between meals; they lock themselves in their rooms for

days. You could cut the air with a shoe lace. One student, a graduate who lived downstairs from me, died of a heart attack during exam week, while rowing on the college ergometer. He held the record for the highest ergos in the college. It had generally been assumed he was in spectacular shape.

Students must pass six exams if they are going to wear black robes and ermine collars and process down King's Parade into the Senate House, where they will officially graduate. Once inside, they will hold a Proctor's cold, fat finger, and be led before the red-gowned Provost, who blesses them in Latin as they kneel at his feet.

The professors and lecturers grading exams class them into four categories: firsts, two-ones, two-twos, and thirds. In each subject, between zero and ten students win firsts every year. Results are posted on the wall of the Senate House, at the heart of the University, which at the end of June looks something like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The Faculty of Maths dispenses particularly cruel punishment by announcing their students' results from the Senate House stairs at 9:00 AM on the fated day. The Maths students, some still weaving and carrying last night's bottles of wine, wait in the court, hoping to hear their names called. No name means failure.

You don't have to go to the wall; you can read your result in one of three national newspapers -- The Guardian,

The Independent, or The Times. There is more than a student's honor at stake with exams -- though to some students, honor can mean everything; whole futures are also held in the balance. British entrance into a Ph.D. course is awarded largely on the basis of exam results. If a college knows a student's work to be outstanding, a 2.1 may still get them accepted into a Ph.D. program, but it won't get them a government grant, awarded to firsts.

At the end of May in my first year, on my first day of exams, we theology students filed into the great dark-wood lecture hall of the old Divinity School, found the cards that read our name, pulled down our benches, and wrote for three hours under the scrutiny of the men in black robes.

For a moment, all I wanted was to trick them, to dazzle them blind. I wanted to tell them what I thought; I wanted to revolt, stand up on my chair. Instead, I wrote an essay for Modern Theology that got me my only Cambridge first. I felt cocky that day: I wore a sign on my back that said "GOD IS DEAD" in large black letters. The student sitting behind me tore it off the minute I sat down; he was studying for the ministry.

The dons sat at the front of the room, on an elevated platform from which they looked down at us with careful eyes and pinched faces. Meanwhile, another one or two of their colleagues paced up and down the aisles, looking for

cheaters, their shoes slowly knocking on the hard wood floor while our pencils scratched and the clock ticked minutes. This is it, I thought, this is being let into the club. Candy wrappers crinkled, feet tapped. I sat staring at the page. My philosophy tutor looked up from his perch up above. I kept my eyes down, heard the footsteps walk by, felt the robe swing at my feet. Sometimes the sleeve of a robe swept over my page.

It was as if they wanted to pump our brains. They wanted us to funnel them out right there, to siphon whatever we knew into five exams of three hours each--into the great pool of knowledge that is power. All year, they had worked to pump old ideas out and new ideas in. They, too, had been pumped full of this knowledge; they, too, had sat here years ago and scratched the their way to the top. They weren't interested in what I thought; they were interested in what they thought, and what others like them had thought. They wanted to hear what they had trained us to say--a hundred voices all saying the same thing, in loud and almost identical ways.

Final year students can write a dissertation in place of one exam. When I petitioned to write a non-fiction essay about the desert, my tutor said no, preposterous, how would

they grade such a thing? Besides, he said, leaning back in his swivel chair, my mind was like a quickly-turning motor: it moved fast, but the minute I fed it with information, ideas splattered all over the walls. I would have to be careful about what I put into that head of mine, and how. I would have to control myself. Discipline was essential.

Okay, I said, after two more petitions, how about a dissertation on Emerson?

"No, no, no," said my tutor, "the man is always contradicting himself. I could never understand him."

How about Wallace Stevens?

"He's too difficult. Why not Kant? You're good with him. You know him already."

In his Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant says that the principle of human morality is not borrowed from experience. It arises from pure reason. Objectively, he says, the ground of every moral decision lies in the rule of universality. This is Kant's famous categorical imperative: every maxim must be one that we would also will as a universal law for all rational beings. Subjectively, the ground of every moral decision lies in its end. This end is always another rational being--not as a means, but as an end in itself. The latter, subjective position is derived from the former, object one, and it operates out of the realm of ends [people]. But the realm which unifies us

rational beings exists only in the mind, in pure reason. By realm, Kant says he means "the systematic union of different rational beings through common laws." In order to imagine this systematic unity, this realm of ends, we must imagine a world in which we abstract from rational beings all their personal differences and private purposes. Such a world would result in a kind of ideal club, in which we members co-exist as rational ends in themselves, a systematic connection of minds and wills. When every member of the club treats himself and all others never merely as means, but as ends in themselves, he has plugged himself into Kant's "systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws."

A rational being qualifies as a member of this Ends Club when he contributes his own universal laws to it--his rational dues--while also himself being subject to these laws. He belongs to it as a sovereign when, as legislator, he is subject to the will of no other. He maintains his position as sovereign only when he is "a completely independent being without need and with unlimited power adequate to his will."

[The word sovereign, we note, means "one possessed of extreme power;" "unlimited in extent, as in the sense of absolute;" or "enjoying autonomy from a position of

undisputed ascendancy." When taken as a noun, sovereign may also mean "the coin of Great Britain, containing 113 grains of fine gold."]

Morality, Kant says, must arise from the will. when it does not--when maxims do not by their nature already conform to the objective principle of rational beings and universal law--then acting according to that maxim is called duty. The practical necessity of acting out of a sense of duty "does not rest at all on feelings, impulses, and inclinations; it rests solely on the relation of rational beings to one another, in which the will of a rational being must always be regarded as legislative." In this relationship to other rational beings, the will acts this way not for the sake of utility or future advantage, but from an Idea: that dignity belongs to any rational being who obeys no law except one which he himself also gives.

In the Kingdom of Ends, everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent [a sugar beet for a ten pence, a square of peat for a pound]. On the other hand, whatever is above all price [a pearl? a prince?] and therefore admits no equivalent, has dignity.

To be worthy of this dignity--to be considered as an end in itself, a thing must be rational. A plant is not, of course, rational. Nor is an animal. Women sometimes are

not rational--at least, not according to history. According to Kant, every rational being has dignity over other, merely natural beings. This dignity (or prerogative) over all merely natural beings entails that the rational being must regard himself as legislative. "Rational beings are, on this account, called persons." [We have to be reminded.] "in this way, a world of rational beings, a mundus intelligibilis is possible as a realm of ends [a cult of the rational] because of the legislation belonging to all persons as member."

Nature is allowed a club of its own--"the realm of nature"--in so far as it is related to rational beings as an end. [We can allow this, Kant says, even though the natural whole is looked upon as a machine.] However, the rational being cannot expect the realm of nature and its orderly design to harmonize with him as a fitting member of the realm of ends. That is, he cannot count on its favoring his expectation of happiness.

Still, he is bound to the law of universals, the categorical imperative. Two things serve to bind him to it: the dignity of humanity as rational--even without any end or advantage gained by it--and respect for a mere Idea. Together, these should serve as the inflexible precept of his will.

Kant says the idea of God only has regulative use, in so far as it encourages us to greater and more systematic

scientific efforts. (As a supersensible object, existing beyond our knowledge, the idea of God, he says, has no constitutive use.) The idea of God, Kant says, exists only in the realm of possible experience: "As if the sum of all appearances had a single, highest ground beyond itself." Used in this way (an "as if," a single, highest realm in the sky), the idea of a wise and omnipotent Author of the world has utility, in relation to the systematic and purposive ordering of this world of appearance, which we must presuppose if we are to function as a society. The idea of God, then, is valid only in the realm of ethics: "in respect to the employment of our reason in reference to the world in its quest for unity."

But, I'd retort on my walks, hasn't Kant neglected the realm of experience? Is not the idea of God -- even as fiction, as a projection of our human desire -- also "useful" in its ability to answer our most intimate, existential needs? Is it not useful in answering our need to feel ourselves in relationship to the world? Is it not useful in that it begs us to have faith and respect in the world's mystery? That we can never know God as a thing-in-itself -- a noumena, a great spirit -- is, it seems to me, the very substance of faith. It is the beginning of revelation. It is the very marrow of praise.

The fens are as level as the table on which I now write, or the sea in dead calm. In winter and spring, the fens are damp and murky with fog. To walk out of your house is to walk into a thick whiteness, like a blank page, or a ghostly, spiritual snow. It rarely does snow in Cambridge - - the air is too mild, and the land too close to the sea.

On one of these foggy days, as I walked into town for a meeting with my tutor, I rounded the corner and stumbled into a woman I'd met earlier that year at a friend's dinner. I'd sat beside her on the floor; blond, blue-eyed, she'd seemed poised beyond what seemed natural for this group of bohemian students eating stir-fry from cracked bowls. Her energy was intense; she seemed to hold herself back till I thought she might burst. She was not taking classes, she said, but had recovered from a long bout of mono and was taking time off. She held a job at a local jewelry store until next term, when she would start tutorials again.

Now in the street, we had almost collided, and as her eyes flashed off the pavement, I could see they were rimmed red. I found myself touching her sleeve.

What was wrong, I asked, was she all right? Did she want company?

No, she said. No. Better not to draw me in, better she went off alone. She just had to cry, she said. It would pass.

Please, I said. Let me help you. We can talk.

No, she said, thanking me. She'd be all right. She'd been through this before. And I watched her walk into the fens.

Later, worried about her loneliness, I made frequent visits to her room. It turned out she was a sculptress, a potter; she had several sculptures in her room. Women's figures, masks, ink wells, ash trays, bowls, open palms. She asked if I wanted to learn how to throw: I said yes.

We worked weekly in a pottery studio in the basement of the Cambridge Union Society, below the mahogany benches and red-carpeted floor, where men in dinner jackets debated whether Her Majesty's government had failed in her responsibility to develop the Third World.

Below, in the bright dusty room, we would hang up our jackets, throw on our smocks, and dig our hands into the barrels of red clay. Cold and wet, the clay smelled like deep earth, like the fens. She showed me how to wedge the clay -- how to press it through the extruder and throw the chunk on the board. "Harder," she'd say, and we'd laugh at how hard we could slam it, and slam it again, before rolling it into a small, dense piece of clay.

When we sat at the wheels -- each with our own hunk of clay -- we'd center the clay and stop talking. We spun the wheel with one foot and centered the clay by pressing with the heels of our hands. Cupping one side with wet palms to steady ourselves, we would push our thumbs into the center

and draw out the hollow, raising the vessel with both hands.

I felt centered here. Here, finally, I forgot about Kant and the fens; I forgot about the books on my desk; I forgot about God. All that mattered was that one piece of clay, and its process, its changing, wet shape. If the pot fell -- if our hands were too wet or we raised it too high, we could wedge it again and start over. It was the process that mattered -- the shaping, the molding, the feel of the earth under our hands.

After our evenings of potting, my friend and I would cook dinner together, eat by her fire, drink wine, and tell stories. I learned much about her during these dinners: she had grown up on the coast of Cornwall in a family like mine -- a tight-knit, evangelical family -- and the discovery of our similar backgrounds strengthened our friendship. We talked about changing beliefs: she was agnostic, a wavering atheist; I believed in the need to believe, and in the living of fictions. We talked about searching for answers, about the phenomena of our lives, of trying to break from its earlier landscapes. We talked about wanting to take risks, and daring to desire things we'd been taught never to crave -- careers, love, adventure. We talked, too, about noumena, about the spirits that haunted certain places--the coast of Cornwall, my home in Connecticut, Cambridge, the fens. We talked about revelations, frustrations, and about a sinking feeling we sometimes had, an emptiness we'd never

felt before.

One night, while talking about these things and sipping hot Ribena by the fire, she told me the true reason for her year off. Near exam time, in one of her feelings of loneliness, she had taken an overdose of sleeping pills and had cycled into the fens. Someone who happened to be walking found her crashed off her bike by the bank of the river. The hospital pumped her stomach; she was badly bruised and her eyesight, weakened. She recuperated at home, and returned soon to Cambridge, to be closer to friends.

It is not uncommon to have ten suicides a year at Cambridge, around exam time. We grew to learn that an ambulance outside the college gates during spring term usually meant that someone had gone off the deep end.

I, too, came near the edge. When my lower lip started to quiver during my last supervision, my tutor laughed.

"Look at yourself!" he said. "You're falling apart. I've seen this happen before; you need time off. What will you tell your children? That their mother broke down before her exams? That she couldn't handle the pressure? Take five days off, go to London, play some good, hard squash, and don't open a book for a week."

He was right; this was ridiculous. Who ever said anything about children? I thanked him, grabbed my books,

and found myself cycling straight to my Director of Studies.

My Director of Studies was a kind man who had said to call on him any time in these weeks before exams. I found him painting in his garage. I told him what had happened; he called to his wife that I'd had a nervous breakdown, drew me into the kitchen, and opened a map of Cambridgeshire onto the table. He pointed to Audley End, where there were some hills, and recommended that I take a train and walk for a day. I decided to follow his advice. I woke early the next morning, put on my walking shoes, got on the wrong train, and landed in London, where I rode the Underground in circles with a little old lady who looked about as lost as I was. Eventually, I managed to find my way to the Tate, map in hand, where I stood in front of Blake's "Elohim Greeting Adam" and gaped at the pain of the sixth day.

I sometimes played squash in the mornings with a very short, quick friend who was doing a degree in philosophy. She had been the assistant to the President of Costa Rica and moved like a jumping bean. The week before exams, I kept missing the ball, and she would shout, "THINK! THE BALL AND THE VOID!

"T H E B A L L A N D T H E V O I D!!!"

The game must have upset me. Afterwards, I cycled to see the chaplain of King's--he'd spread word that he had a study technique that worked without fail, and I'd been

unable to study for days. I looked at my notes and nothing made sense. My Director of Studies had recommended I see him.

"It might make him feel," he said with a smile, "like he's being useful."

The Chaplain had done his graduate work in psychology; he told me, one day he'd had me to lunch at his house, that he'd written his Ph.D. dissertation on the psychology of guilt. He wore a goatee.

Racket in hand, I climbed the worn stone stairs, round and round, till I reached the great wooden door to his office. I knocked. Silence. I knocked again. "Come in," a voice said. I opened the great outer door to the inner door, covered in green felt. I pulled the brass handle.

Inside, the clock ticked on the wall. There were the two armchairs, there the desk. The chaplain looked up and smiled. I set my squash racket and told him I was here for a study session.

"Ah, right," he said. "Yes. Sit here, by my desk." I did; he handed me a large sheet of white drawing paper and a black magic marker the size of a cigar. Seating himself beside me, he told me to draw a diagram of the subject I knew the least about, in large capital letters. I stared at the huge sheet of white. It loomed up at me; I saw nothing but white.

Nothing. I could remember nothing--not even the

courses I had taken. Finally, I picked up the marker, and, like a child, drew KANT.

"Fine, fine," he said, his voice controlled, almost hypnotic. "Now, what about Kant don't you know? What are the things you know least about Kant--the things you'll have to study if you'd like to do well on your exam?"

I held the pen in mid-air. His eyes flickered over my face. "Regulative principles," I said, finally. I need to know more about those.

"Good," he said. "Good. Now write it: 'Regulative Principles.'"

I wrote REGULATIVE PRINCIPLES and drew a line from it to KANT. I thought I might die.

It is said that Kant walked with such metronomical precision that the housewives of Konisberg set their watches to him. I've often wondered what he would think of the fens, if he walked along Walpole's Way. What would he think of this muddy path through wheat, rape, and grass? Would he think it alive, of itself? Is there nothing beyond what we compose?

H E Y !!! I say to him, now. Hey, Kant--look out the window, pull up your socks!! Throw off your watch! What would you say to the fact that this land, the fens--the best cropping soil in Europe, land that sells for more than 3000

an acre and must be pumped round-the-clock to stay afloat-- is slowly but surely sinking, at the rate of one inch per year? What would you say to the plows that bite into the clays and the dykes driven deeper to drain off this land? What would you say to the globe that is warming, and the sea and rising? If the world is a story--if it's telling a story we reinvent every day--then what do we tell of this land? Do we reinvent it? Take out our crayons and color our God? Just plot predicted sea-level on the map of East Anglia, color it blue, and you'll see that soon the sea will be lapping at the gates of Cambridge.

We can continue to fight the flood. According to predictions of the Natural Environment Research Council, it will cost 5 billion to build up Britain's existing coastal defenses to withstand the 1.65 meters the sea is predicted to rise by 2050. According to experts such as Dr. Michael Tooley, reader in geography at Durham University and Britain's leading expert in sea-level changes, we don't have to wait till the year 2050 for the fens to be at risk. He says that given the range of storm surge altitudes around the coast, they are at risk now.

Given this news, it would be no surprise to me if God really is dying. For if the world is God's body, then we're busy killing it. We've lost our sense of relationship with God as we've lost or love for the world.

My last full day in Cambridge, I stopped at Ira's house to say good-bye. She had accepted a job as head-of-house at Peterhouse College and took up full residence in the basement of student flats across the road from Michael Banner's tower. You could see its tip from her window.

We sat at her kitchen table and had tea. I told her how much I would miss her, how I'd let her know how things went in Montana, how I didn't know what I'd have done without her.

She started to cry, hugged me quickly, and told me to go before she flooded all King's Parade.

My last day in Cambridge, I took a last walk down Walpole's Way. Far past the two university laboratories, far beyond cows and bright fields of rape, I met an old fensman fixing the steps on his style.

It was summer, a burning hot day -- and the man was wearing brown wool trousers and a tweed fowler's cap. I'd seen him before on my walks, cycling back and forth over the path, very slowly, teetering in the wind and never stopping -- but I'd taken him then for a fool, in league with the cows.

Now he stood on the style, in tiny relief against the tremendous grey sky; he held a string to a stake, which he seemed to be measuring.

I said hello, rather too formally. (That's what I forgot, I thought to myself, forgot to forget my manners back there in the tower.) He nodded at me and looked back at his string.

"Do you come here often?" I asked. I sounded awkward, cliched; I suppose I wasn't used to speaking in the fens.

"Oh, I'm here all the time," he said. "Didn't you know? Cambridge is sinking."

"Yes, I know Cambridge is sinking," I said. I had my degree. "But what are you doing?"

"Measuring," he said. "Measuring fens."

My face must have shown great consternation: I could feel my eyes twitch.

He explained. His grandfather drove this post down into the soil in 1951. Drove it down till the top was level with peat, and he measured it periodically, to see just how fast things were sinking. When his father had died, he'd taken over the job.

"Today," he said, looking quite young, "I count thirteen feet, two inches."

"Thirteen feet!" I said. "But the books! The Wren Library!"

I thought about the man in the tower. He would be stuck, or have to swim.