

Fall 1981

Overtures - 1981

Kelly O'Mahoney

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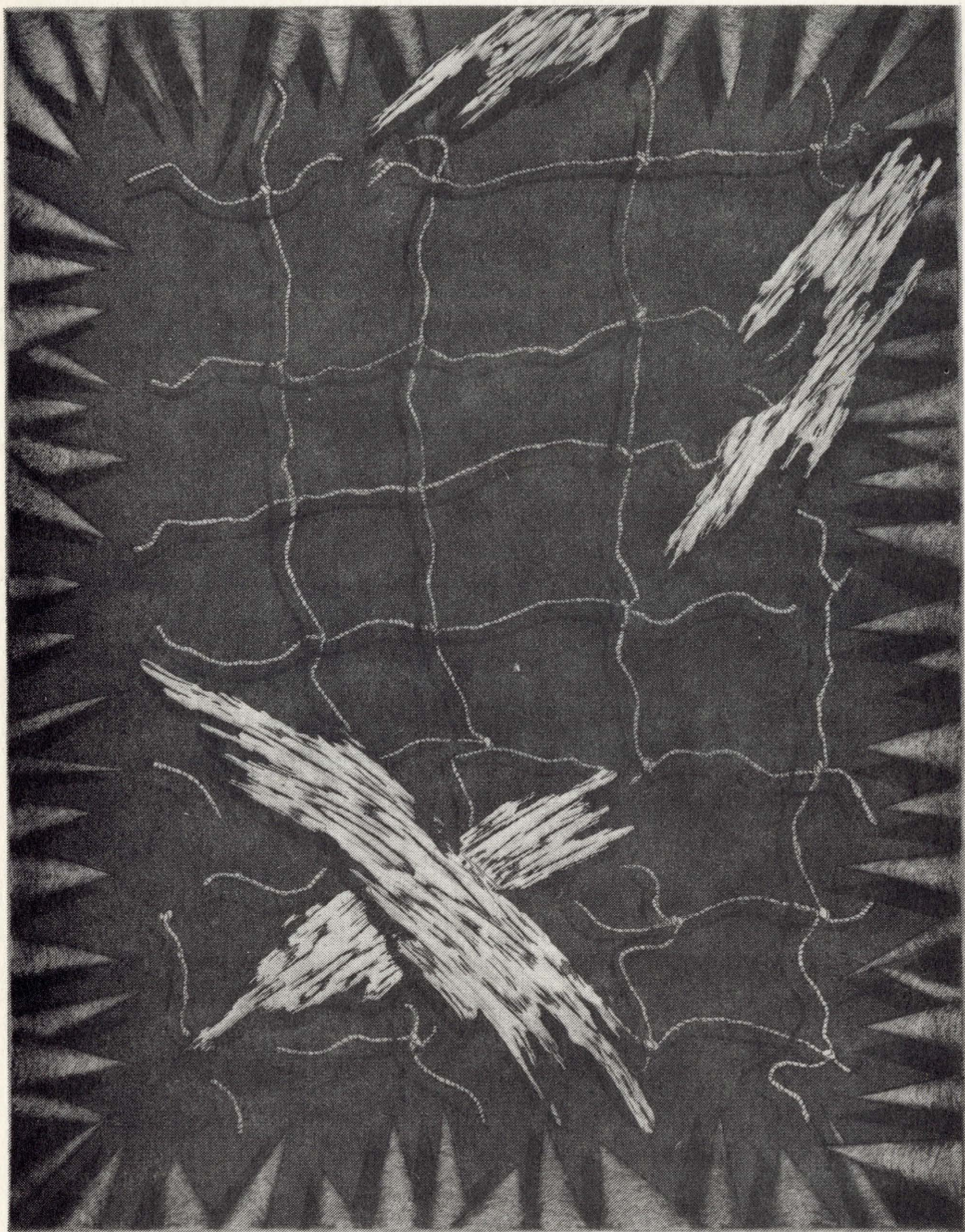
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OVERTURES



VOLUME III, NUMBER 2 • FALL/WINTER 1981

OVERTURES

Volume III

Number 2

Whole number five
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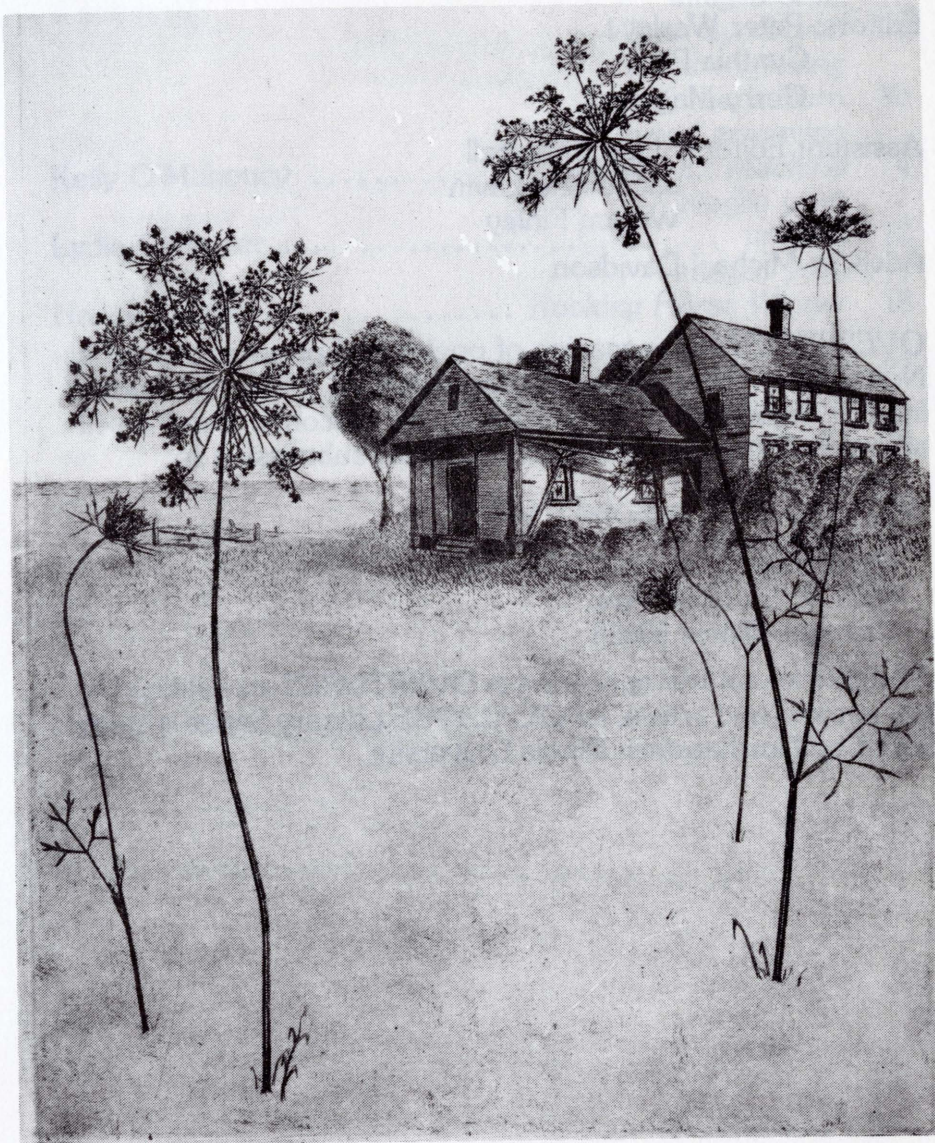
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THE RICH WIDOW IN BLACK

1

Corn in the black land
bottom land
along the Mississippi
flowing spring mud—
no longer bride
the rich widow in black
wears diamonds in pierced ears.
She seeks the green man with gold
in his fist,
gold charms dangling from her wrist.

2

The green man woos her with guile
through the night
wearing studs of black pearl,
sets his plough
to the midnight moist earth—
she bends to the west
like the silky flanks of the sea
that wink in the rolling noon
and takes his green mask for her own
in the Indian night of green corn.

Dry the corn stalk dry
 rustles in a weary wind
 windmill clatters on a broken shaft
 hogs glean in a stubble field
 milky the sun that wobbles
 in the November snow sky;
 the masked ball ending
 guests departing in flocks.
 She follows her new husband with sun
 in his hair, rolling west
 through unpurged shades of winter night
 her cool breasts gleaming.



THE FINAL SCENE

There is a low budget, independent film floating around the country that seems to be quietly building a small but very loyal following. The movie is David Lynch's ERASERHEAD, a nightmarish portrait of what may result from President Ronald Reagan's economic and environmental policies.

Made in the late seventies before Reagan was elected, ERASERHEAD paints a bleak picture of an industrial society gone mad. The film effectively shows how a society which is heavily dependent on an unscrupulous, profit-oriented economy easily crumbles physically, morally and intellectually. There are many scenes in ERASEHEAD which show the non-existence of traditional families, the coldness and sterility typical of interpersonal relationships, a lack of creativity and thought, and the ugliness of a polluted environment.

These characteristics and conditions of the ERASERHEAD-society can logically be foreseen in the United States. As President Reagan strips away all regulations on big business and gears his economic recovery plan toward helping the rich instead of the needy, one can see the development of huge monopolies controlling the nation's mass media and politicians. This ERASERHEAD-syndrome will ultimately lead to a giant corporate power game where the interests of the labor force and other citizens are looked upon as merely another cost-benefit analysis.

ERASERHEAD shows a society that has been lied to and abused. The nights are filled with muggings and beatings as people reflect the attitudes and actions of the forces that control them. The days remind people of the awful destruction done to the land by perpetually running mills and factories. This combination of irrational physical violence at night and rational, economically sound violence during the day contributes to a helpless, subservient attitude.

The central character in the film is Henry Spencer, a man whose downfall occurs from simply trying to regain some control and order in his life. One example which shows Henry's rebellion against conformity is the way that he ridiculously combs his hair straight up and shapelessly instead of having it fall to the sides. With that act Henry is attempting to distinguish himself from the millions of nameless, faceless, thoughtless people who are perpetuated by a selfish society. Another example which shows Henry's quest for control is that he has remnants of once living bushes and other unpotted plants placed around his apartment. With this gesture he is attempting to create his own private world apart from the dreariness which surrounds him.

A major part of the film is devoted to Henry's relationship with Mary (his girlfriend and the mother of his "child"). The lack of affection or kindness between the two is frightening yet predictable considering the atmosphere in which they live. The impersonal way in which they communicate and the physical distance between them when they speak to each other shows the ultimate breakdown of the typical boy-girl relationship in this grotesque industrial society.

The movie's most memorable sequence occurs when Henry goes over to Mary's house for dinner and to meet her family. During his visit, Mary's father evokes the pain and anguish of a useless, impotent man who remembers how grand the past had been but then can only sit and watch as the world turns into a hellhole. Mary's mother is one of the film's most pathetic figures. She is an aging, washed-out woman who makes clumsy advances toward Henry, stopping only when his nose starts to bleed. Immediately after this, Mary's mother confronts Henry about her daughter giving birth to "a very premature-looking creature that even the doctors can't explain." She demands that he marry her daughter, yet the emotionless, matter-of-fact way in which she acts shows her lack of concern and sincerity. A major reason for the mother's attraction to Henry may be his ability to create something alive, albeit a creature that "even the doctors can't explain," in a society where there is no longer any hope or crea-

tion. This illustrates how there are no longer any norms of behavior for people to follow. It is not surprising that this valueless and conscienceless society has lost the power to make its people internalize traditional morals through accepted sanctions and rewards.

Another major part of the film is devoted to a lengthy sequence of Henry's dreams. This sequence is so dominated by symbols and images of industry that it appears even Henry's subconscious can't escape the influence and sounds of factories working twenty-four hours a day. The ever-present worship of industry and big business throughout this society explains why, in his dream, Henry's vision of heaven is a grotesque Shirley Temple-like figure dancing inside of a radiator.

One of the most controversial images in ERASERHEAD is a decaying man who appears to be running Henry's life by pulling a machine's levers. This god-like figure is seen at the very beginning of the film, before Henry is seen, and at the very end when Henry is dead. The man blindly pulling the machinery, and in turn running Henry's life, could be compared to a leader blindly running the affairs of his nation's masses. Just as the decaying man grinds his levers, making Henry's life more miserable, President Reagan may be grinding away at the lives of millions of people by drastically reducing the benefits for social security, Medicare, and welfare recipients, and by lowering the national poverty level. Henry is merely a cog in the industrial ERASERHEAD-world in the same way that those who cannot prosper from America's rearranged tax structure are exploited by this nation's reckless thrust toward a balanced budget.

Another controversial image in ERASERHEAD is that of Henry and Mary's baby. Although the child is only weeks along in fetal development and has no distinct physical characteristics (only a reptilian head and neck attached to a stump), it is allowed to live and suffer. Only in a society where life is not valued and where insensitive, arbitrary laws are made to determine when one's existence begins and ends can something like Mary and Henry's horrid slab of flesh be born and kept alive.

The main development in the movie is the relationship between Henry and the baby. Henry is constantly by its side and cares for it with great love and concern. The thought of being a father gives Henry's life added meaning and purpose. However, as the movie progresses and Henry and the baby spend more time together, Henry begins to see himself as nothing more than the helpless, monstrous creature he helped to create. This point is exemplified near the end of the film when, in Henry's mind, the baby becomes his own conscience. It starts laughing at Henry for taking too seriously his dream about a whore who lives down the hall. The baby is Henry's view of himself — something ugly and useless that should have been aborted long before birth.

Even though the film ERASERHEAD is laden with experimental uses of sound and black-and-white photography, its subject matter is by no means new or original. Charles Dickens had criticized the same selfishness and suffering in the late nineteenth century. Just as Dickens' novels graphically depicted the sort of helpless impotence brought upon people at the beginning of an industrial revolution, David Lynch's film has depicted the sick, inevitable end of an industrial-revolution society in the form of drab, lonely Henry Spencer.

When he made ERASERHEAD, it is likely that David Lynch had no idea that his prophetic vision of the decline and fall of industrial mankind would come true so quickly. For that we have to thank our own paranoia, desperation, greed, and of course, our "leaders".

ANDREW BYRNE

THE RAMBLAS

I

It is late in the day in old Barcelona
and still the sun beats down on the Ramblas.
It streams over the Montana de Montjuich
and through the leafless branches of tall trees
and down on the people of the Ramblas,
on the children scaring up pigeons with palm branches,
on the vendors hawking cut flowers and birds in bamboo cages,
on the leathery men stretching out of crooked streets
marking time,
on the girl on her own putting distance
between herself and a lizard-eyed man,
on the shoeshine man kneeling with bowed head
before the salesman and saying,
"On Escudillers you'll find two of them,
red haired, 2000 pesetas,
you tell them Hector sent you."

The heavy whore catches the salesman's eye
and steps in his path
waving a cigarette, asking for a light.
But he has none.
They exchange a few words,
then she takes him by the hand
and leads him slowly past the other
and off the street.
He sings, "I have been alone all my life,"
as the whore turns her trick.
Back in a snap on the Ramblas,
he grooms himself before a shop window,
buffs his shoes, parts his hair, winks
and smiles, no sweat, at the girl
distracted by the grinning knot of men,
one whispering a lewd word in her face
as she hurries by, head down.

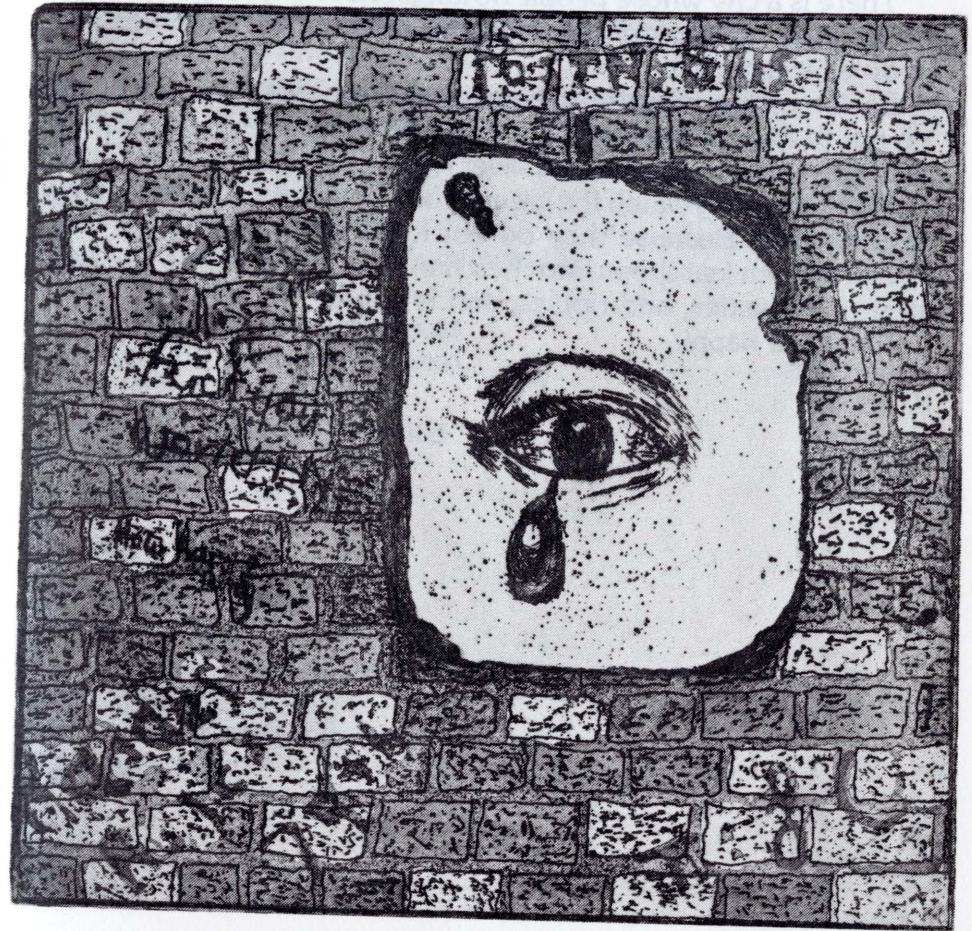
A beggar slinks along
and mumbles out of burning eyes and black stubble of beard.
One spits on him,
another eyes the salesman's shoes
flashing their retreat in the dying light.
The sun sets over the Montana de Montjuich
and turns the sky red.

II

Newman the drifter arrives by train
and settles down on his suitcase.
He is gone in the teeth, thinlipped,
hair streaked with grey,
face lined like a seascarred rock.
He watches the girl crouched against the wall,
the girl weeping,
who shrinks back shaking her head,
when he approaches her.
He signals with his hand that he understands,
then leaves the station
and rides a tin bus into the Ramblas.

Under streetlamps hedging their light against a black sky,
no one challenges the knot of men
shoving and drinking their way down the Ramblas;
no one heeds the whore cowering
under Hector's fist beating
pimp money out of her slick breasts;
no one breaks stride
on seeing the beggar slumped
like a pile of old clothes against a shuttered stall,
Down in a Ramblas bar
there is no kick to the whiskey
that leaves Newman shaking with the memory of the girl.

Newman hears the beggar gasp, sees him point
at one who lets fly a punch.
Newman reels against a tree
as the knot tightens round him for his wallet.
Coppery hands finding pocket change and dirt
shove the grunt back down his throat.
The men laugh themselves crazily over the Ramblas
like insects scrambling on the belly of an overturned rock.
Their shadows cast by the lamplight
crisscross Newman.
His eyes swell shut,
his head drops under a helmet of dull pain.
The memory of the girl,
the beggar,
slide with him to the foot of the tree.



ANNE HASKINS

VILLE D'IMAGES

There is a city whose people no longer have any memory. They suffer from an amnesia so deep that they forget everything as soon as it happens.

Each morning they dress themselves, from muscular habit, and go out to look at the streets of the town—the streets astonished with sun—and to walk by the silver waters of the lakes and ponds.

Every day they watch the green reflections of the leaves moving in the water. Because they do not know what anything is, the image of each leaf drops into their minds as it drops onto the surface of the water, and ripples, and is gone.

They are happy.

FROM THE LIFE OF MARY SULLIVAN NEILSON

I

MOMMY'S KNIFE

Mary hears,
in the afternoon she spends staring
at the knife on the wall rack,
the soft **chop, chop**
as Mommy dismembered
the red bodies of tomatoes,
leaving the halves
on their backs like turtles,
cut onions into flat white circles
and mushrooms into dark gemstones
for the dinner salad,
how she arranged the pieces
in rows on her cutting board,
how she bent over them,
her face sweaty and shining
as though a halo
hovered over it.

Licking a cut
finger, pouring
oil and vinegar
on the cool lettuce,
she'd sit with Mary
at the scrubbed and readied
kitchen table.

“Now we can have
our own little party
while Daddy’s away!”
And her one dimple
flickered on and off
as her tongue traced the drops
of oil on her lips.

FROM THE LIFE OF MARY SULLIVAN NEILSON

II

DADDY, THE SHELL

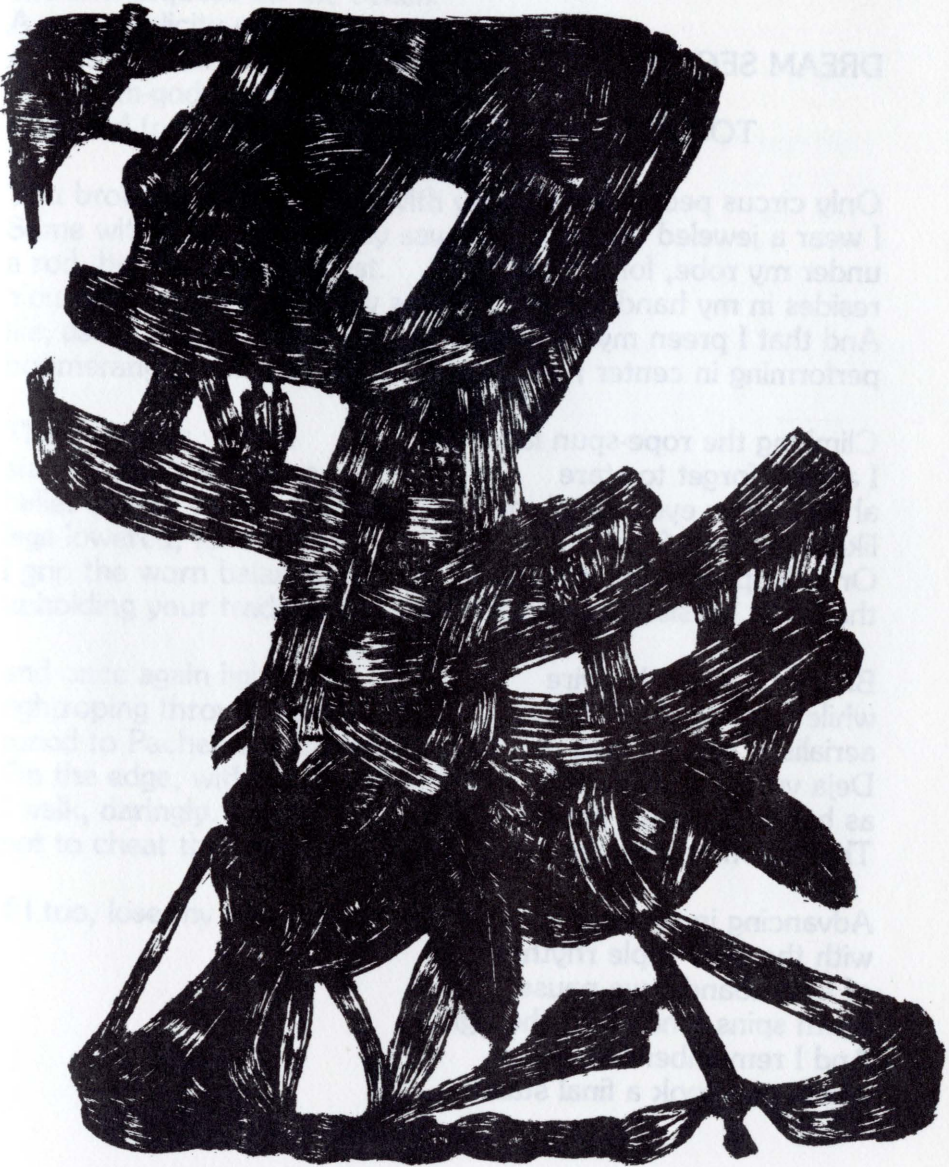
Mary thinks:
Daddy is like
the shell of a turtle
scooped out for soup,

a frail,
eaten-out
little man in gray,
creeping slowly
across his lawn.

Somehow
this wise little Irishman
made money,
found the pot of gold
somewhere. Mommy thought
there were dark whispers
in business rooms,

just as she knew
(scrutinizing pockets)
there were mouthings and pawnings
and prancings and mountings
of red-lipsticked
blondes in hotels.

Daddy,
a frail, eaten-out
little man in gray,
dragging the hose,
comes slowly toward me
across his lawn.



GERTRUDE RUBIN

DREAM SEQUENCE

TO KARL WALLEDA

Only circus people know
I wear a jeweled bodysuit
under my robe, for a freak
resides in my hand-mirror.
And that I preen myself when
performing in center ring.

Climbing the rope-spun ladder,
I almost forget to stare
ahead. Your eyes signal me
like a murmur from the crowd.
Or a flapping noise, outside—
the tent's persistent pennants.

Bravely, I strut the wire
while juggling six Wallenda
aerialists, one by one.
Deja vu: my familiar role
as ballast for lives, afloat.
That is, other than my own.

Advancing in procession
with the slow triple rhythm
of a sarabande, we pause.
Earth spins a notch to the right.
And I remember San Juan
where you took a final stand.

The highwire was strung between
two lit marquees on the beach.
A rare publicity stunt.
Against tradewinds, you looked like
the storm-god Zeus, embattled,
ashamed to be caught falling.

You brought no one down with you.
Some witnesses swore they saw
a rod, buried in your chest.
You had clenched it tightly as
life, as air, afraid of its
boomerang or aimless hit.

The calliope's whistle
startles me. I act like a
ballet dancer thrust off pointe,
legs lowered, too far apart.
I grip the worn balance pole
upholding your tradition,

and once again lightly go
tightrope through space, as if
tuned to Pachelbel's Canon.
On the edge, without a net—
I walk, daringly. Trying
not to cheat the spectators

if I too, lose my way home.

ANNE HASKINS

POEM

I will not remember this
or anything.
I will reach into my head.

take that worm,
memory,
between my fingers

and crush out
its life, leaving in
my skull only whiteness.

Only whiteness
that shines like silk,
silk robbed from the cocoon.



UNCHARTED

No one has charted fear. No instruments,
no compasses can function in that Arctic
peninsula, half-hanging
from the mainland and trembling,

its coastline jagged, troubled by gigantic
white bears. Marooned explorers
haunt its shores, hands shading
their brows or pointing

out to one another the dim icebergs
that sweep by, bearing messages
for help from Ultima Thule. No one
searches the inner fast-

nesses, where virgins
freeze in caves, white elks
tramp ceaselessly, and blind fish
struggle in ice-choked waters.



TOGETHER

Arrived, in the earthen yard
they stare at one another.

This can't last long, they whisper,
the wire fence is just for show.
But already the boots are coming closer.

GET INTO LINE!

They obey, dazed, until their fog
lifts and they realize what they are,
animals. They shove, punch, kill
for a piece of bread
in the noisome yard.

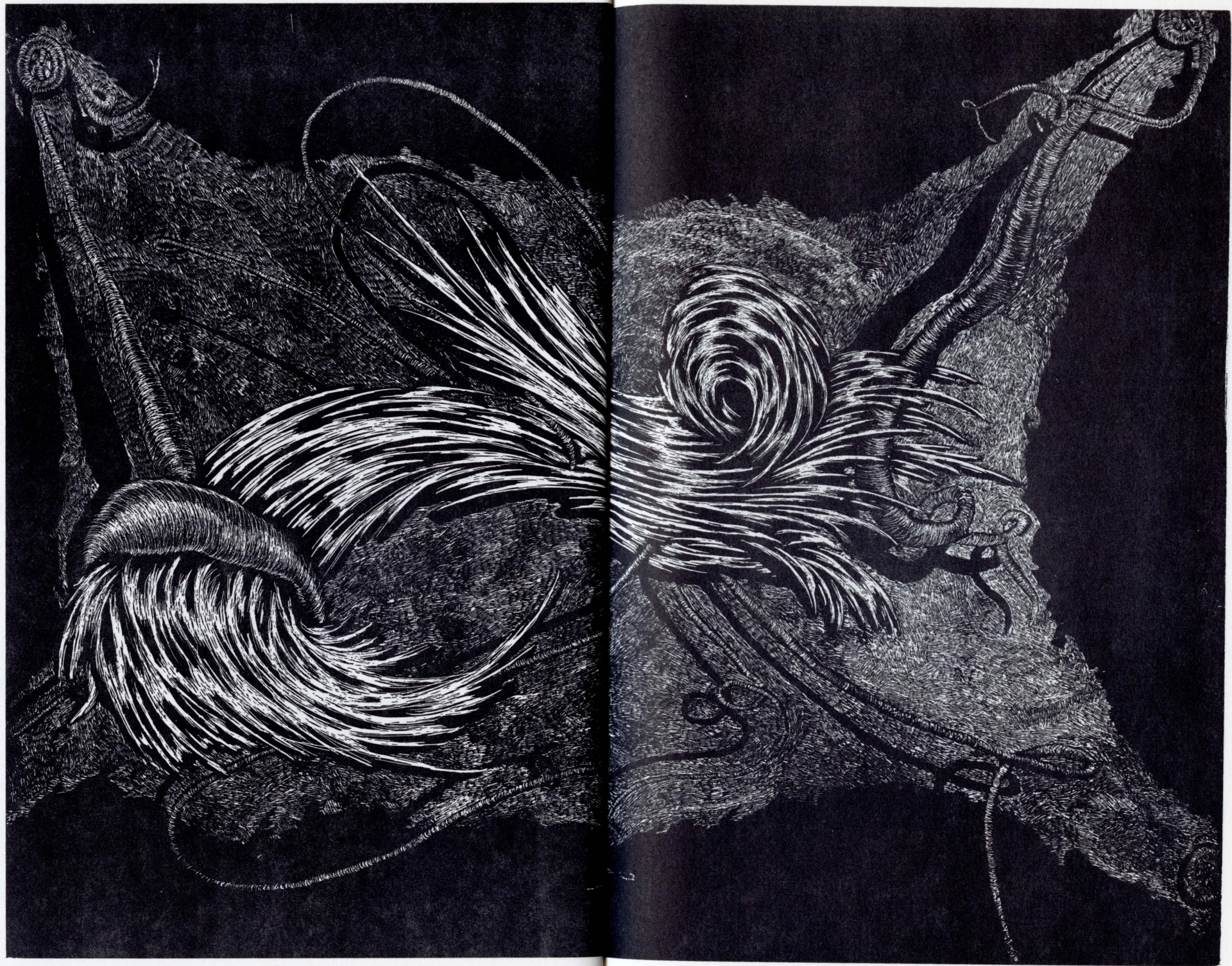
Perhaps,
if they are still alive
when the snow begins to fall,
there will come a change:
they will throw their arms
around one another's necks, kiss
the coarsened skin, the dirt-engrained
wrinkles, and holding hands
in a long chain, go to their deaths.

GERTRUDE RUBIN

IN THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

Remember the ancients
who were buried, dressed in
bridal finery? So,
the trimmed cattle are wound
in sheets, and ushered out.
The severed heads, massive
as Minotaurs minus
their ungodly bodies,
revolve on hooks. Or grope,
like John the Baptist when
blood-tears stained his vision.

Remember the woman
who made love to his skull?
She snake-danced around it.
like men in red aprons
now slitting the air with
sharp knives, guttural cries.
Above the fray, as if
by instinct, each carcass
waits to be flushed clean, then
wiped, of all memory.



CONSPIRACY

It's 2 am, mid-July, I'm still awake,
not in bed, but chilled on the porch
waiting for a few friends to share
the night: for example, the prestigious

Dipper I earlier saw, north/northwest,
behind the yard's sloped garage. And
where did the moon go, after its face
was fully unmasked? From my perch,

the sky is an outer room, vast, domeless,
and feels, I swear, as though an event
has taken place, a decision reached,
or someone whisked, dragged away, only

seconds ago. A sea of tranquility but
contrived, shot through with holes—
among the missing I count Small Bear,
Hunter, Queen in Her Glittering Chair.

Late stars are more arrogant, with
the sky to themselves. Like perfect
strangers they stand together, cold-
eyed, distant, defying my losses.



ANDREW BYRNE

FATES

Dusty carried it out with a price. He
and his friends in a wooded ravine
had the three willing women blindly
one after the other beneath a tree
and afterwards mounted the path
and agreed it was not all that
great.

Mother was saddened. He
was angered, thought
the old grey house was dead,
felt the dry look of
his sister hit him squarely
between the eyes.

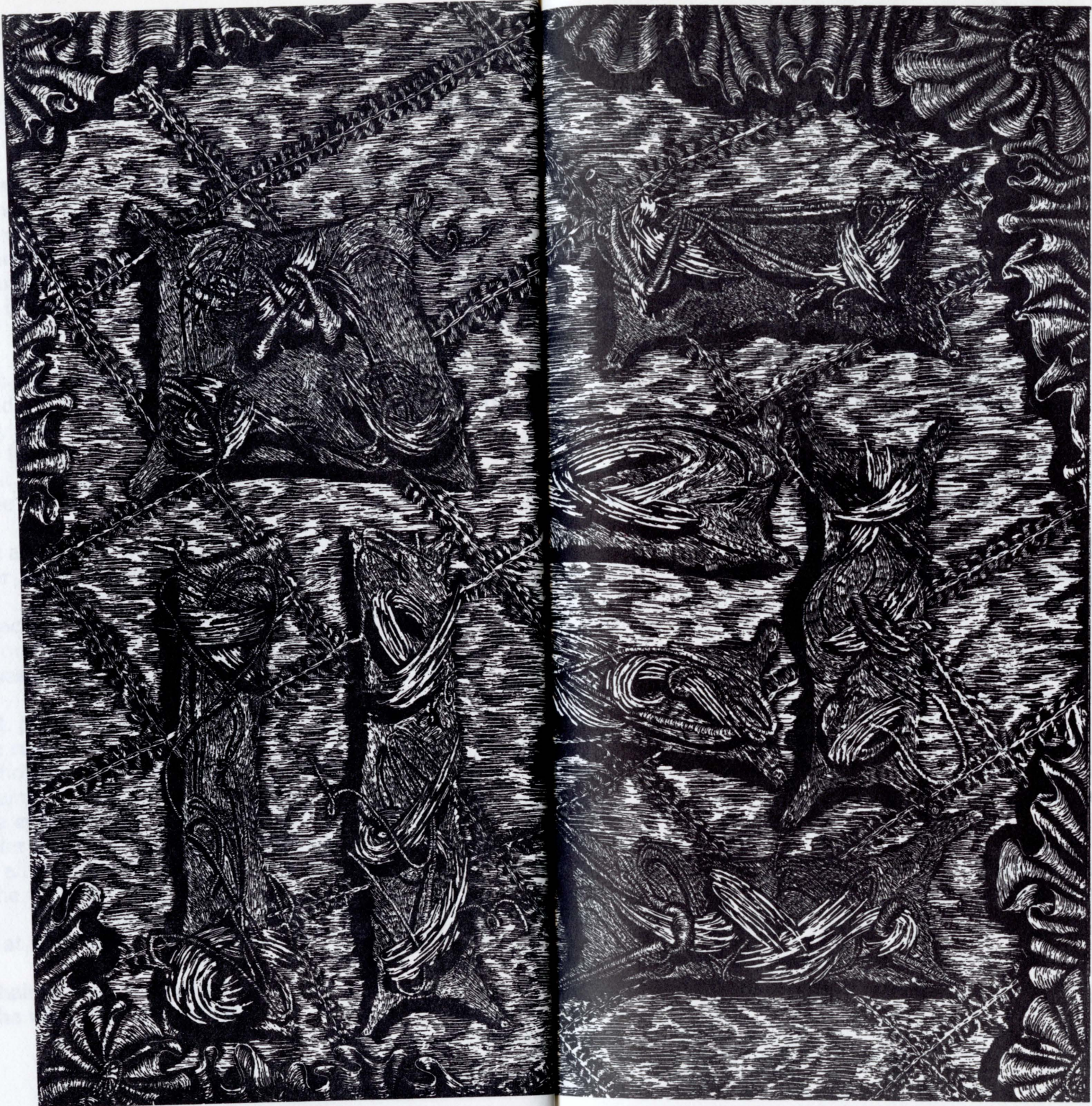
He is bone and teeth
gone whiter as he turns on
the girls,
his eyes black as bits of coal
and says you three bitches,
three bitches git.

They don't, pale and afraid
of the face red as the desert dust,
the eyes showing now a window
of light against the black,
light of the eye dying in
the decanter of wine three women pour
and drink after judging Dusty
unfit for the trail anymore.

They pull at their cuffs
velvet
like their hair was once upon a time
and lick the wine from their fingers.

ACHILLES

Achilles stood among tall trees.
He was young
And strong as the wind
That ripped red leaves
Across his face and shoulders.
His shield and spear lay at his feet.
He was mad,
Insane,
Out-of-his-head.
And the colors of decay were in his eye,
And the blood of the leaves flowed over him.



A. BERNARD STEIN

SEXTET TO LOVE AND TIME 5-AFTER LOSS

Nothing is left now
But the fourth line of haiku.
In it rest new worlds,

From it rise the oars
Waiting for water, for hands
To row, for new Norths,

For Easts with live suns.
The oars wait to move in fire,
In grass, through the heart;

They float like numbers
Waiting for worlds to become
Boats for Buddahood.

In the fourth line, at
The seventh knob of snowflakes,
Where the flame escapes

The corpulence, there
Oars hover, waiting again
For returning land.

Soil, return. A new
Departure, like a seed,
Rests, wants its rowing.

TACITA TWO—SONNET 11 TO BERNICE FINKELMAN

Silent was ylem, and then ylem spoke
The universe. A hundred billion big words
From syllables of flames and heat cohered;
The dialect of speed contained the joke
Of stammering to death; oh first white lo-
vacity, vermillion in verb and adverb,
All adjectives were apogee, were spurred
Into themselves; swift fame, swifting fury spoke.

What thought had Being in the silent days?
What love or hate, what nouns we know so well
Did Presence hold as fingers by a fist
are kept, opening to question or to praise?
Dear Rage, which holds my tongue in its red bell,
Let me ring green, let me speak the world kissed.

ASPERCUS OF THE SUN
To Jenny Schwartzberg

Strange, how the sun turns around the rock,
Bending, first, radium on this coarse thing,
Then hauling fleets of rose and ochre over
Evenings toad, this brute, bare, world's summary,
Its pelt an emperie of loveliness.
This were legerdemain, were it not also
Quotidian, each inch a holiday,
Each sunset, topology of Eden.
Here is no mystery, but a beauty
Deeper than its facts, yet knowable:
So we know its science, yet we feel its life
As the bee's flight beyond the world's permission.

When I was a caveman in Iberia
I struck the sun one evening with my axe
And killed the disc beast so that he stumbled
Down the eternal openness, and died
As any animal, blood breaking forth
From wholeness, being flying from its body.
I stood a long darkness in the myth I made,
Feeling I did something important to
The world. It was a poem that burned all night.

Pity the future generations, whose sun
Will be some fission or some dynamo
Rational and febrile, but with no flares
Like Lear lashing out in rage toward meaning;
Like Othello who would cast a shadow
Even on the sun, to shore his certitude;
Will the motor stop for you at Ajalon?

I am unhappy with my solar system
Sometimes. So petty, such pedestrian orbits
Around a small businessman and his fire sales
Day and night, tucked away on a short strasse
In a poorer section of the galaxy,
A bad address, a brief, dull neighborhood.
The President hasn't been here once
Since creation. Even the governor
Avoids us, sending messages affirming
His views on gravity, the speed of light,
Optimism in infinite space, and,
Of course, motherhood, which begot the
Big-Bang.

Because the sun is an opera whose
Every song is flames, whose every scene
Is conflagration, whose furniture is fire,
Because its dancers are longitudes of flame,
Because its violence is larger than our seas,
Because it is an octave whose sestet
Our summer is, I link all distances
Into one field whose fence is universe.

ECCE

No agnominations for the snowman:
He needs no deeds; being is quite enough
To last him for his lifetime; he is such stuff
As is always actual—marzipane
Or monster—a dull but perfect Adam.
Wanting no knowledge, from the first realized,
Rounded and finished at once; this we prized,
For we had had enough of martyrdom.

At once sans everything, he nothing needs.
No heart to rage, he rages not to kill;
No mind to think and weigh, he will not lose
An Eden, transfiguring to a reed.
Sans poem and penis, sans heaven or hell,
He was our choice, it who will never choose.



THE STRANGE STAR
FROM THE EVA POEMS — FOR MY SISTER EVA

It visited our solar system thrice
And not one time, from what I hear, did it
Remain for naming or join in orbit.
It merely hung between the sun and us,
And gazed upon our deserts and our ice
And in our eyes where, too, no flower grew.
It peered at us as if we were a new
And hairy sickness, a learned vice.

Once, long before Greece and Rome, it filled caves
With dimly remembered light, on old seas
Flushed strange, forgotten luminosities,
And in its gleam a century of graves
Erupted into roses, and hurt halves
Healed into wholes, and the fierce dinosaur
Lazed with the lamb of his eon. The door
Of the world was down; love was what was brave.

Then, long after Rome befell the world, a
Small week was filled with eternity: there,
Where there were nights and emptiness before,
A burning like a mountain made of day
Fulfilled what suns adumbrated; away
Were pain and mocking and the remnant heart,
And things which should be whole, but that are part;
After all endings came the lasting A.

Ezekiel, my uncle, that strange sailor
Of all the elements—Chebar and the dry
Bone valley, and the beast borne Goddied sky,
And those buttonholes of fire God the tailor
Burned in perfection for the world—shale or
Gold, both merd—to burn into righteous fitting—
Ezekiel had that vision of His sitting
At threads nature, cutting breath's halo;

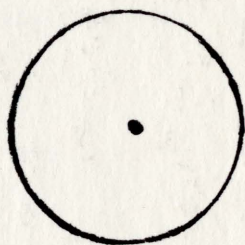
That star he saw, that ancient, strange uncle,
Whose visions are in my bones for keeps, for leaps
Beyond everywhere I am, over heaps
Of my ribs and skull, to the perduable
Anima, breath upon my bygone marl.
That star was quadrants—beast-heads, beast-heads, turned
and turned,
And a geometric godhead doubly burned:
Eternity; towards it, eternal will.

Astron who is Abraham: progenitor
Of beatudes and plenteous bread, kiss
Of phenomena, yet more than earth can promise:
After omega, yet another door.
Green leaf, green love, white snow and star, restore
Good flesh on life's schlerotic scatterings,
Breathe upon chaos, sew the little strings
Scattered and twitching, animal and sore,

Sew the small strings together, sew the gate
Beyond gravity, shine on penultimates
And joy! leap them into lastingness —
Oh quantum wish! Reason is bent by weight
Of sadness, truth turned in a nadir state.
Strange star, your secret is that you could be
Everyday, as sunbread rising, as sweet snowtree:
Raise us as Eve, tho mortal bone elate;

Cynosure star, shepherd to commensal
Bodyhood the lapsed nerves, the failing heart,
The early harmony made separate.
Incondite bones that have no fingers call
For hands to join them, breath to make them whole.
Person and mankind in inanition
Merely survive. Marrow star, subsumption
Of bread and body, (which are seneschal,)

Into the natural and sempiternal
Body of love, brightness in our blasting
Even; in our transience even, a lasting,
Something held in thought, some thing of the all.
Star, this is my own sister, who is small
And ill, who has a courage brighter than mine;
Brighten her, you who are what we in time
May be: that will towards good, that secret self.



(A.N.W.N.)

for William Hunt