

2000

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Recommended Citation

Singer, Natalia Rachel. "Voodoo Economics: Soul Work in the Age of Reagan." *The Iowa Review* 30.1 (2000): 113-136. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5296>

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Natalia Rachel Singer

VOODOO ECONOMICS:
SOUL WORK IN THE AGE OF REAGAN

Reagan passes grinning through the labyrinths of government and the terror of assassins, makes friendly jokes as he cancels the federal subsidies of widows and orphans, exhorts Congress, with modest self-effacement, to arm the less stable nations of the earth with weapons more barbarous than all the hordes of Ghengis Khan, listens with serene contentment to the quick geopolitics of Gen. Alexander Haig, bestowing on the nation unsound public finance as if it were a school prize.

—Lewis H. Lapham

But how does a poet put bread on the table?

—Adrienne Rich

1.

In March of 1980, around the time Republican-candidate Ronald Reagan was plotting his revenge on all those able-bodied lazies who were living off big government, I decided to become one of them. I was only nine months out of college, a little young to be contemplating what I would later think of as my first sabbatical, but back then when our world seemed poised for nuclear war, ditching the work force and contributing nothing to the military-industrial complex seemed like the most productive thing I could do.

My boyfriend and I had found a duplex in the Ballard district of Seattle and my plan was to get laid off from my job, write fiction, and “live close to nature,” goals that made perfect sense to free-spirited West Coast types but sounded self-indulgent and reckless to the Midwesterners of my past. My grandmother and mother were beside themselves with panic. Grandma had always wanted me to become a civil rights lawyer—or else marry one—and my mentally ill mother didn’t care what I did as long as I moved back to Cleveland, into my newly-dead grandfather’s scary bedroom, and took care of them both. It wasn’t the world of the imagination that seemed so alien to them—after all, my on-the-road, deadbeat dad, whom they equally revered

and reviled, was a novelist, and they both played piano and loved art and literature; nor did they—my mother having raised me on Aid to Dependent Children and Medicaid—quarrel much with my becoming a burden of the State. My crime was that I was writing and mooching and smooching 2,000 miles outside their jurisdiction. What if Joe abandoned me, having milked the cow for free? What if I got evicted? What if that fascist Reagan won the election and sent the poor people to concentration camps? Where should they mail my subscription to *The Daily Worker*?

My college friends, all fashionably installed in the West Village or Rogers Park, didn't understand what I was up to either. They'd been a little leery of me since our senior spring at Northwestern, when I started reading too much Rilke, and, aghast at how the yuppies-in-training of our generation were rushing directly into high power careers without refueling at "go," I'd lectured them on the need to "live the questions themselves," to knock around a little in the world of epistemological doubt and look inside, not outside, for safety. This came directly after my Bolshevik period, when I'd critiqued everyone as being too "bourgeois." I'd decided to move to Seattle—where I knew no one and had no employment prospects—after waking from a vivid flying dream in which I was soaring over a map of America and was drawn, like a homing pigeon, to the dense green pockets of spruce and cedar. I almost fell out of my bed.

I did have one co-conspirator, my bearded, long-haired, boyfriend Joe. We'd met in a Romanticism seminar back at college and although we'd fried a few brain cells since then, we still could quote a little Wordsworth whenever we raged against The Machine. Like me, he'd grown up near toxic steel plants and factories and spent his childhood daydreaming mountains and forests. From the moment we decided to move in together, Joe and I plotted endlessly how to break free of the constraints of our acronym-ridden, fluorescent-lit, anesthetizing, paper-pushing, nine-to-five mainstream jobs.

There were ocean hikes to be taken on the Olympic Peninsula, the trails thick with promiscuous moss. Closer to home, within walking distance of the new digs, there were outings to the Ballard Lochs, where the salmon swam upstream to spawn. A late leisurely brunch at the Greenwood Diner offered avocado omelets, cinnamon rolls as big as box turtles, and primo people-watching. You could seat yourself at the splintered counter or at wobbly tables with sticky chairs, while big, hairy, slow-moving men in aprons served up cheap hippie fare, and braless women with jangly earrings wrote down the

recipes if you asked nicely. The drone of flies and bees dive-bombing the honey jars were perfect percussion to the scratchy old Traffic tapes and conversations about silversmithing or the Dalai Lama. You could work all this atmosphere into your novel.

I did not want to spend my days breathing other people's ideas like processed air sucked through office vents. I wanted to live and breathe art. Seattle spent at least one percent of all city revenues subsidizing the arts, which allowed every theater to give one free performance for each play of the season, the one catch being that they were often in the middle of the day. Who *were* these people who were available to see the sequel to *Tally's Folly* at a Tuesday matinee? I was not yet twenty-three and I couldn't wait another forty years to join them.

Joe didn't require as much free time as I did, but he was eager to quit a job he considered "de-evolutionary, de-humanizing, and de-monic"—in short, *devo*—the word he appropriated from the punk band by the same name, who performed in sterile white jumpsuits, with gas masks. He loved how when Seattleites asked us what we did, they were almost always referring to our leisure time. Did we know that a mile from our house was a path along the railroad tracks parallel to Shilshole Bay that led to a beach called Golden Gardens, and that we could snack on the wild blackberries that grew along the fence? Had we discovered the joys of roller skating around Green Lake? Were we ready for the volcanic eruption of Mt. St. Helens and had we been to the Seattle Psychic Institute and heard the other geo-biological predictions for the end of the millennium?

All around us, it seemed, people were energetically engaged in something they called "soul work." All my life I'd known that *my* "soul work" was writing, but now I also wanted to achieve something akin to inner peace. Until that year, these two goals had seemed at odds with one another. Bringing them together as one unified project felt nothing short of radical.

Philosophically speaking, this meant trading materialism for idealism, Marx and Freud for Ram Dass and Jung—no easy feat for this not-quite-red diaper baby. My mother's illness notwithstanding, she sounded fairly lucid when she explained why I needed to join the Party and help elect Gus Hall and Angela Davis. Her uncle, Grandma's brother-in-law, had been black-listed in the Fifties for trying to unionize the longshoremen, and her cousin worked for Cesar Chavez. Her mother, a Russian immigrant, had wanted to fight for the poor but she'd been too poor to go to law school. This is why, after enduring

a fifty-year marriage to a violent man and the endless sorrow of her only child's illness, she had pinned all her hopes on me. I *did* want to right the wrongs of the world, but first I needed to take care of myself. Like a lot of seekers in the Northwest, circa 1980, I was trying to get over my childhood.

But writers were not supposed to get over their childhoods. American highbrow culture was still inundated with images of the artist with angst. After reading Edmund Wilson's "The Wound and The Bow" for a pretentious senior seminar called "The Writer in the World Today," I had learned that all great literature had been written by troubled people whose Achilles heels—childhood traumas, impotence, family madness, closeted homosexuality, substance abuse, and so on—were their sources of literary genius and drive. In this regard, I met at least some of the qualifications to be a writer. Abandoned at six by my alcoholic father, beaten and cussed at by my grandfather, emotionally abused and neglected by my paranoid schizophrenic mother, and made to feel like a traitor by my grandmother, I had enough wounds in my psyche to fuel a lifetime of creative work—as long as I kept my neuroses intact. If you exorcised the inner demon, you killed the muse, and besides, the pursuit of anything as banal as personal happiness was a hopelessly philistine preoccupation.

This seminar had only reinforced what I'd learned about the artist's life as a child. My father never visited us after he left and I grew up believing that it was impossible to write books and raise a family. I knew of no alternatives to these clichés: the writer as hard drinker—my father's specialty, along with some womanizing for local spice; the writer as suicidal depressive—Sexton and Plath were my favorite examples; the artist as heartbreaker hell-raiser—a diluted version, adapted for a North American audience, of Nietzsche's Artist as Superman. Papa Hemingway managed to embody all three. I didn't believe all this was inevitable; I wanted to prove to the world that you could be a writer and a nice, sane person at the same time, but I had no role models.

Writers within the academy seemed slightly better-behaved than their modernist dysfunctional forefathers, but I had problems with post-modernism too. Metafiction as I understood it was strictly cerebral. To announce you hoped to write from your heart was to betray your lack of understanding of the craft, worse than throwing a baseball like a girl. In fact, literature, as it had been presented to me in college, was not really much of a girl thing at all, especially for someone not inclined to put her head in an oven.

Forging my way without a legible map meant questioning everything I had been taught. From the age of six on I had dutifully done my homework, studied for tests, written for the school publications, performed at half-time with the pom pom squad—albeit stoned—nabbed the scholarship, pulled all-nighters, read everything my professors recommended and more, written the honors thesis, made lists . . . until something shifted around the time my friends started hearing back from law schools or buying the interview suits. I discovered that no matter how “good” I was, my father was never going to come back and my mother was never going to get better. What good were external accomplishments if your inner life was in ruins? I was moody, defensive, needy, and yet determined to deny I had needs. I had the persona of a plucky adventurer but was frightened by my recurring nightmares in which my mother and I, still on welfare, were marooned together for life in that smoky basement apartment we lived in before she moved in with her widowed mother. I was trying to reconcile my idealized vision of myself—a published writer, looking calm and confident and a little glamorous on the bookflap photo—with the self-loathing, despairing girl I felt myself to be whenever I heard, or even imagined I heard, the sound of my mother, a cigarette at her lips, hissing my name.

The toughest part about soul work, I soon would learn, was that it took so much time: not only to learn to write, but to meditate, bake my own organic bread, do yoga, take walks in nature, learn the names of local trees, swim laps at the Y, write down random thoughts and feelings for an hour or two daily in a journal, read everything, and record my dreams in a separate journal made of hand-made paper and studded with quotes from Rilke, Yeats, Shakespeare, Goethe, Freud, the *I Ching*, and Jung.

Marrying soul work to my politics was going to be iffy, but fitting it around a forty-hour work week was simply out of the question.

2.

“Purple is the color of the seventh chakra,” our new downstairs neighbor Vicki announced in her thick Brooklyn accent when she saw us looking curiously at her mailboxes and ours, newly painted in honor of our arrival. They were an eye-frying neon plum, so bright that we were too stunned to thank our new neighbors for their welcoming gesture. “It’s the color of transcen-

dence,” Vicki’s boyfriend Glenn explained, his voice following us upstairs along with the smells of Indian cooking from their apartment. A quick glance had already told us that purple was the color of Vicki and Glenn themselves—the homemade drapes in their windows, their gauzy shirts, her heavy eye shadow, and the dyed hemp of Glenn’s hammock where he read up on occult topics on the front porch.

Although we found our new neighbors eccentric, their comments made us think we were radiating some kind of odd, liberated energy, which in turn made us feel right at home. We’d had enough of those hyper-normal, driven, pre-professional kids we’d known and emulated in college. Transcendence was just the ticket.

We loved everything about our new place: cloud-haloed, snow-capped Mt. Rainier floating through the living room windows facing south; the short walk to buses and grocery stores and Norwegian fish shops; the reasonable, \$240-each rent; the odd, attic-like slants to some ceilings, the converted dark-room that would be my study, the tiny cubbyhole in the living room—perfect for storing Joe’s fermenting home-brews—the dark, cavernous bedroom so conducive to uninterrupted technicolor dreaming. After we’d unpacked the kitchen, Joe and I sat at the five-dollar dining room table we’d just picked up at a garage sale and gazed out the window that faced the Cascades, sipping Rainier beers and listening to the knotty branches of the giant monkey puzzle tree knock against our leaded windows. Joe unfolded a map of the Olympic Peninsula and we plotted our upcoming hike through the Hoh River Rain Forest, where the ancient, moss-cloaked trees in the guide book photographs looked as gnarled and enchanted as those in the Arthur Rackham prints from *Alice in Wonderland* we were tacking up on our living room walls. My younger sister was flying in from Chicago that week for her spring break from art school and I’d managed to reserve some comp time from work to take her to the ocean. Joe’s miserly employers had told him he couldn’t go anywhere, so rather than miss our four-day trip, he had decided just that day to quit. It was a wretched job processing forms in the windowless cubicle on the tenth floor of a bank and he’d never intended to stay there very long anyway. After the vacation, Joe would look for a less devo job that involved helping people other than “rich corporate bastards” and I would set into motion the grand scheme to dispose of *my* devo job that had been incubating inside me for weeks.

I was full of bravado about living on next to nothing. After all, I told myself, I'd been doing it all my life. The housing boom hadn't hit yet, so rent was low; produce was cheap—even cheaper if you gardened—and you could earn your weight in beans and rice by working now and then at the co-op. You could barter with people for most service needs, as we did later that summer, when I tested my fledgling skills in astrological interpretation in exchange for a tune-up on our cheap, Johnson-era Buick. The things you had to pay for, like health insurance, weren't yet impossibly out of reach, although, thanks to the free clinics, I was content to dispense with it once I stopped working. The people you saw living on the street were almost always alcoholics or drug addicts, not someone who reminded you of a hardened, streetwise version of yourself. There was, after all, a safety net. Glenn's hammock downstairs seemed to embody this net literally. Although Vicki worked at Wang, I assumed Glenn was like me, eager to stay home and live the contemplative life. I would later learn that he was collecting disability insurance having thrown his back doing seasonal inventory work stocking shelves in a warehouse, and that as someone with only a GED and no physical stamina he was unqualified to do much of anything, but at the moment I was blissfully ignorant of his sorrows. Now, all these years later, when I think of the safety net, I flash first to Glenn, nearly bald at twenty-eight, cradled like a baby in purple hemp.

It's easy and almost funny to think of Glenn's butt sagging through the hammock; it hurts more to flash to my own childhood dependence on the safety net, to the basement apartment where our mother chain-smoked and shouted accusations at invisible tormentors, and where my sister and I wouldn't have survived had it not been for Aid to Dependent Children, food stamps, and the occasional greasy lamb dinner at our grandparents' house. As a child, I never felt the safety of being cradled like a baby, but I felt hopeful about the future knowing there was something out there, some social agency, some ethos in the land that said a girl like me was worthy of some basic protection. It's not like I *liked* being on welfare—what I wanted was for my mother to be well enough to hold a job—but when I felt despairing I held this image in my mind that the government, a beneficent force not unlike God, rooting for me, quietly placing opportunities in my path, wishing me well.

Growing up, I had never quite seen myself as poor because our apartment was filled with the first editions my writer father left behind, and his paintings of Paris street scenes. Sure, we had no nice things and only one bedroom for

the three of us—my mother slept on the couch in the living room when she slept at all—but if no one came over, no one had to know. In high school I worked long hours to buy myself the same clothes the popular girls wore, and when I ran into a cheerleader at the check-out line at the A&P while my mother counted out our foodstamps, I pretended I was there by myself, buying *Teen* magazine or an Almond Joy, and hoped like hell my mother didn't turn to me and say my name. My mother liked to live it up at the beginning of the month, treating us to T-bone steak or shrimp, and when we ran out of food as we always did, I'd console myself imagining how svelte I was going to look in the new pantsuit I had on layaway at Higbees, or else I'd buy the fixings for meatloaf with my own private stash, and we'd live on it for days.

I knew from experience that the American safety net, like Glenn's hammock, wasn't as sturdy as, say, a couch, but as I planned my first sabbatical, I tried not to think of the times public assistance wasn't enough, how my sister and I were forced to submit to our grandfather's beatings for putting forks where the spoons belonged in the utensil drawer when we came over to get a hot meal. I tried not to think of the times we had to ask our grandmother for back-to-school clothes knowing she would write down every cent she spent on us into her little green ledger book and read aloud from these accounts when we seemed ungrateful. Although as a child I had needed my grandmother's money and affection, I felt some small sense of security knowing no lifetime cap on welfare would deprive me of this choice and force me to live under their roof all the time. I took all of Uncle Sam's hand-outs as my birthrights. They seemed like the least a government could do.

Now I was willingly giving up a monthly take-home check of \$700 after taxes—the most money I'd ever had access to in my life—for less than half of that—and I was nearly giddy at the prospect. My failsafe, if all else failed, was to be my own individuality and force of character. I suppose it's easy to believe in the American myth of the individual when you've benefited from the system, as I had. Growing up in the basement had taught me to be resourceful, and if I had to find work again in a hurry, I was known in my circle of friends for my excellent job karma. No matter how hard I pressed my luck, I told myself, I would always land on my feet.

I'd moved into my first Seattle household with only \$30 to spare and no job-hunting costumes, only my favorite ethnic-chic peasant dress and the mud-stained overalls I'd hiked in as I traveled cross country. On a Thursday morning I took myself clothes-shopping with the plan that I'd hit a temp

agency that afternoon and be working the next morning doing *whatever*. The woman at the temp agency was unfazed by the outfit I scavenged together from the basement of the Bon Marché: an enormous polyester floral dress with a ruffled bodice that made me look like a lactating Sunday school teacher, and black vinyl shoes with cardboard soles; she was more concerned about all the errors in my typing. She sent me cautiously to one of the nation's first HMOs—an acronym I'd never heard before—a sprawling brick complex called Group Health, with the warning that my spelling better be stellar because my mean-spirited supervisor-to-be had accused the last typist they sent—a graduate of Harvard Divinity School—of being an idiot. I figured if he fired me after one day I'd still have earned enough for a bag of groceries; I was taking it one day at a time.

My boss at Group Health was not the bogeyman I'd anticipated; he was a young, shaggy-haired man whose Wisconsin accent and slightly gooney name of Wayne Leloo instantly put me at ease. What may have appeared to his former underlings as pettiness and anal-retentive perfectionism was a passion for the English language and a hatred for the jargon and peppy slogans of corporate-speak. He loathed acronyms and was appalled by the practice of using nouns as verbs. Our very department's name—Word Systems—was ridiculous to him. He longed to write *The Great American Novel* but the financial pressures of family life and home ownership had squashed his shot at it for the moment. We recognized each other at once as kindred spirits and by the end of the day he had hired me to work full-time not as a secretary, as I'd expected and dreaded, but his assistant technical writer.

Suddenly, literally overnight, I had a really good professional-sounding job, during a year when many young people with B.A.s were washing dishes. Everyone told me how lucky I was but that didn't stop me from feeling sorry for myself when the alarm rang at half-past-six.

Although I was afraid of all machinery including computers and did not even know how to drive, it was now my task to write computer manuals, translating into what I called "humanspeak" the programming functions my colleagues described as they automated each area of the hospital wing by wing. I didn't understand why they had to computerize everything in the first place; it seemed awfully *devo*. I was not good at technical writing, and I was unwilling to work the overtime it would take to improve. Wayne seemed grateful just to have someone around the office he could talk to about literature. He never once complained when I let my Word Systems communiqués

pile up while I typed up my short stories on the company's dime, never raised an eyebrow when I put my feet up on the desk and stared longingly out the window, never took offense when I referred to our place of employment as Group Stealth or Group Death. Perhaps if he had been a boss and not a buddy, he could have kept his job. That Christmas, the management fired Wayne for "low productivity," putting me, the queen slacker, in charge of all operations. At my same salary, I might add. What could they have been thinking?

Laden with guilt over my role in Wayne's demise and panic about my new responsibilities, I began to throw the *I Ching* a dozen times a day looking for the sage's way out. What I had to do was to convince my department, without them discovering my nefarious intentions, not to fire me—that would bring up my abandonment issues and hurt my future job prospects—but to lay me off. But how would I pull this off when I was now the lone, overworked writer responsible for all the manuals in the company?

Then one day a salesman arrived wheeling in the ten volumes of a wonder-product with the laughably redundant name of Systems Development Systems, and I knew the path to my own redundancy was clear. I drafted a memo to my boss, telling him how the product would do what I did—allow the programmers to document their procedures step by step—and that *obviously* I wasn't for anything that would replace a human being with a set of binders and some systematized forms. I let it slip that Word Systems could acquire the System Development Systems for only ten thousand bucks—two thousand less than my yearly salary.

The path to freedom was clear. Management had to see that the SDS would do a much better job than a flawed human. Besides, the SDS didn't require vacations or health benefits. I would not stand in the way of progress: I would allow myself to be replaced by an acronym. If hastening the dehumanizing trends in the work world would give me time to enrich my own humanity, so be it. Even Wayne Leloo would have appreciated the irony.

"Here's to the Great American Novel," Joe said, clinking his Rainier bottle into mine. "Time for a little theme music, don't you think?"

Joe put on the new Devo album and we slam-danced around the apartment, jumping up and down on the bare hardwood floors, kicking around the empty boxes, and singing along at the top of our lungs until we remembered our new, transcendence-seeking neighbors downstairs.

"We are definitely not devo," I whispered proudly into Joe's ear later, just before we fell asleep.

Joe's tenure among the unemployed was satisfying but brief; by April he was working for minimum wage at United Cerebral Palsy and loving it. He came home with stories about his favorite patients whom he led around all day in their wheelchairs—the middle-aged man who shouted “Raymond Burr! Raymond Burr!”; the shy, married couple who asked him if he would “arrange them” so that they could have sex; the sad, soulful boy who pointed to words in magazines to make found poems. Although Joe was earning a third less than he made at the bank, the hours were flexible and he adored his co-workers, who were all in their twenties and liked to go out after work to listen to New Wave music or convene in one another's apartments to tell stories and laugh late into the night. I was glad that Joe was making such kind and hilarious friends. My sabbatical would mandate that I spend lots of time alone and I didn't want him to get bored or lonesome when I felt anti-social.

I left the American work force that May in a cloud of ash and steam. My last week at Group Death coincided with the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, a connection I found auspicious, although of what I couldn't quite say. It happened early one Sunday morning and sent an earthquake up the fault line which tossed me out of bed. Sunday was the day I usually got depressed in anticipation of the upcoming week, but now I was eager to begin my new life.

To celebrate my liberation from nine-to-five we went camping on Orcas Island in the San Juans where we spent many idyllic hours hiking up the island's small mountain, picking blueberries, and lounging in fields of mint and lupin. We saw the same eagle swooping over our campsite twice. Nearly every Friday after that we loaded up the Buick and took off: to La Push and the northern Washington coast up to the jagged rocks at Kalaloch; to Mt. Rainier; to the British Columbian coast near Port Renfrew where we rented scooters and spotted whales off the shoreline; to the hot springs near Mt. Adams.

During the week, I settled into my new routine. Joe got up most mornings at five so he could work twelve-hour shifts and be free for our long hiking weekends, and I struggled to wake up with him. It was not easy. We still were going out to the theater at night and we never went to sleep early enough for five to seem like a reasonable waking hour. Sometimes I would fall back asleep after he left and doze off until nine, when I'd bolt from bed in a panic, full of self-reproach for being such a sloth.

It was supposed to be the best year of my life and I wanted to savor every minute of it. The truth is, I spent many days in turmoil, chastising myself for failing to live up to my idealized boot camp concept of how to live the monastic artist's life: Rise before dawn for journal work and meditation, swim a mile at seven, write all day breaking only for a macrobiotic lunch, read copiously. I didn't know how to stop being the over-achiever I'd always been, but what I was discovering was that all my self-discipline to date was motivated more by fear—fear that at heart I was really just a slob, a lethargic, depressed, non-entity—and not a love of the craft. I really didn't know much about craft yet; in college I'd often written in a white heat and never really worked line by line, word by word, comma by comma. I didn't know the first thing about revision. And then there was the issue of my finding a voice—a disaster! How do you find your own voice when you've always believed there is something essentially wrong about you, when self-invention and transformation have become your reason to be? I would read Nabokov all evening and then try to imitate him, then read Wallace Stevens and try to strike a pose like his: "Hi! The creator too is blind." Somehow the scholarship girl from blue-collar Cleveland could not quite pull this off.

I thought I should write what I knew, what I'd lived, but I couldn't touch the bulk of it except in intellectualized, sanitized ways. I would not write about my father, the abandoner, although I did write him letters, ten-paged, single-spaced essays in which I compared our writing styles as though we were writing cronies in the same league as the important authors I also commented on—Gunter Grass, Saul Bellow—and I regaled him with boastful tales about my latest adventures in the outdoors. I did not mail these letters because I had no address to send them to and even if I had, I would have been afraid he'd return them unread.

I did not write about my mother, about being the daughter of that woman in the stained stretch pants with red lipstick smeared across her teeth.

For long stretches of desperate days, I couldn't really write much of anything at all.

What finally rescued me from both the pomposity of my voice-in-progress and my silences was discovering stories whose narrators reminded me of the people I'd grown up with and the way they talked: Stuart Dybeck's *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, which featured characters named Busha and Stefush and Vulk; all of Grace Paley's characters, even that unlikable narrator in "The Contest" who considers himself the "best piece of meat in the freezer" of his

girlfriend's heart. As summer changed to fall, I began to get somewhere. I stopped trying to sound like I'd been to Oxford and returned, instead, to Cleveland and the voices of the immigrant families I'd grown up with. I wrote about the West Side Market where my grandfather shopped, the ladies in black babushkas filling their baskets, the spires of the Greek Orthodox church hovering near us. I wrote about his cousin Toda, the family mystic, who read our futures in the clumps of Turkish coffee. I wrote about my grandmother shouting at the Republicans on TV—"Bastards! You bastards!"—her flabby upper arms shaking with fury under her sleeveless house shifts.

By fall I was fifty pages into a novel in which my great-aunt and my grandmother were döppelgänger twins. As I looked out the window I used the shapes of two entwined knotted branches of the monkey puzzle tree to give me the central image I was looking for: the giant heads of two matriarchs leaning back to back, their entangled gray braids like the branches of a tree. I let the two matriarchs refute each other's world views—spiritualism vs. materialism—so that I could try to resolve this conflict within myself.

And so I spent the first verdant season of my first sabbatical: writing in fits and starts in a converted darkroom, then hiking on the weekends in the violet light; squirming on meditation pillows, hoping to see God, then falling asleep; snuggling up with Joe on the royal blue fifties-era couch we'd bought for five dollars through reruns of *The Rockford Files* and *Star Trek* on our five-dollar, black-and-white TV; drinking cheap wine at nearby Shilshole Beach at sunset; writing down all my deranged dreams. I drank wheat grass juice when I was virtuous and drank the yeasty beer we brewed ourselves when I rebelled against my own regimes. I had planned to have a vegetable garden, but I decided I didn't have time. I went to readings by tarot-readers, astrologers, and spiritualist seers, always a little embarrassed by my interest in the occult, as though I'd been caught buying porn. I was told by one psychic-in-training that I had spent my last lifetime as a well-to-do intellectual in Europe during Jefferson's visit, writing important texts about democracy and revolution, and I accepted this reading as true, even though I wondered why psychics never seemed to tell people they'd been serfs, thieves, lousy dancers, or Adolph Hitler.

When anyone asked me how I was doing, I said I had never been happier. It was almost true.

It was George Bush who coined the phrase “voodoo economics.” At that time he was George Bush, the GOP candidate, and not yet George Bush, the running mate, when he got stuck with the game plan whether he liked it or not. Although the term was meant to attack what soon became known as Reaganomics and Reagan’s use of what Senator Howard Baker dubbed the “magic asterisk”—footnotes attributing further savings in the future to unidentified savings in the present—I liked the occult-sounding ring to Bush’s expression. *Voodoo*. It’s a good word if perhaps a bit racist in his hands. One imagines effigies and amulets, straw dolls with needles, African drums and incense, the graveyards in New Orleans where, unbeknownst to me at the time, my on-the-road father was buried that December in an unmarked pauper’s grave having never become the big success he abandoned his family to become.

Voodoo: the infliction of harm on one’s enemies seemed to fit many of the policies Reagan and his fellow millionaires in the Cabinet would make their own.

Voodoo. Black magic, or faith healing—who’s to say? The word suggested the plan’s unscientific principles, its intriguing appeal to the irrational. If only you believed enough, it would work—those dollars would mysteriously trickle down to all of us like manna from Heaven.

As 1980 came to a close, a little bit of magic and voodoo wouldn’t have done my own financial situation any harm. The problem: Joe and I had not accounted for the price of winter heating oil when we drew up our close-to-the-bone budget. Oil prices that year were sky-high. I needed to get some more income, and fast.

In late November a woman I met at a party told me about a small business she knew of that hired people during the pre-holiday rush. The place was sort of a hippie sweat shop, paying even less than minimum wage and forcing people to breathe in heavy fixatives without adequate ventilation, but it was under the table and therefore tax free, and one could put in unlimited hours until Christmas. There was only one catch: I would be working with my hands, and would need to be vaguely coordinated and even ambidextrous, neither of which I have ever been. I would be assembling hand-crafted jewelry boxes in precious woods for a young woodworking couple named John and Mary. I arranged to meet with them the following afternoon.

I told myself this work would be good for my soul because I had no earth signs in my astrology chart, and therefore, needed to compensate for my egghead airiness. I even explained my deficiency to John and Mary as we sat in their kitchen drinking herbal tea and spacing out to the rhapsodies of the first Windham Hill album. They nodded with enthusiasm, as though that were the most logical reason to hire someone that they'd ever heard.

John and Mary were planning on marrying that winter and were living in a nearby part of Ballard with John's mother, who had recently retired from a long career of building bombs at Boeing. John was thirty and good-looking in a long-haired, bearded, scrawny sort of way. Mary was twenty-one, plump and pixyish, with dirty blond hair, and a tendency to seize her employees for long, soulful, breast-to-breast bear hugs. After our pleasant chat, the two of them led me into their workshop in the basement and introduced me to the capable crew, all of whom, it turned out, were lesbians making their way through the underground economic system, some of whom were doing this job full-time. Most of them were training themselves to become carpenters. They were dressed as I was, in flannel shirts, jeans, and hiking boots, and were friendly at first, but within a day or two of watching me in action, they began to eye me with cool suspicion. I would have been leery of me too.

The job seemed simple at first, and to everyone else who worked there, it was. John and Mary did the hard part, cutting the wood to form each section of the jewelry box, working power tools and a lathe, and burning in delicate designs; all I had to do was to sand the bits of the box and glue them together, then cover them gingerly with varnish. My co-workers could do it blindfolded. After my mangling, however, the misshapen boxes, of varying wood thickness and bumpy with glue lumps, fell apart at the slightest provocation—usually just as John happened to walk by my station. And now I'm coming to the strange part of this story: Although John was a perfectionist and would chew someone out for microscopic flaws I was incapable of seeing, he'd smile at my pathetic boxes and actually pat me on the head. "Keep it up, dear," he whispered. "You'll get there." Sometimes he pulled his most talented gal off her favorite detail work to help me. This preferential treatment did not exactly endear me to the crew.

Even more bizarre was Mary's behavior. Although she was younger than I, and looked about twelve herself, she treated me like I was a darling five-year-old, sometimes begging to brush my long hair. One day, just when I was leaving, she sat me down for cookies and milk. "You've been to Scotland," she said mysteriously, then looked deeply into my eyes, and sighed.

I actually *had* been to Scotland, the summer before I turned twenty. I had been studying in England and afterwards I went backpacking through the highlands. I asked her if we had back met then and I'd somehow forgotten.

"I don't mean in this lifetime," she said.

Slowly, as she refilled my glass of milk, Mary told me how she and John had lived in Scotland in another life. They'd each been the opposite sex and had been married to other people. John, as a woman, had been a vain, manipulative, self-centered person; Mary had been rich and greedy. They'd become lovers, and then were stabbed to death by John's vengeful cuckolded husband. "We didn't know this until we met you," Mary said, "but we had a baby girl, and that girl witnessed our murders from a window outside the castle. Through a lot of spiritual work and nutrition we've removed the etheric swords from our bodies. But now it's our karma to remove the etheric suffering from our little girl's mind." Before I could stop her, she had braided my hair for me and tied it with a bow. "So here's some Scottish shortbread to remind you of our Scottish lifetime together."

I headed home as soon as politeness would allow.

This strange conversation had reminded me of a chat I'd had with my downstairs neighbors when I was leaving for work one day that week. I had run into them at our purple mailboxes where they were whooping with joy. "We're going to celebrate today," Vicki explained. "Glenn just found out he's eligible for unemployment!"

"Hooray for idle hands," I said. "I just got a three month extension on mine."

We got talking and they began to tell me about the spiritualist church they belonged to, where Vicki had learned that Glenn owed her multiple karmic debts from his bad behavior in prior lives. "It's my fault that Vicki's afraid of machines," Glenn said, "so I'm in charge of doing all the driving."

"I lost an arm in a factory accident in my last life as a man," Vicki explained. "Glenn was the foreman and he didn't turn off the machine in time. I think he thought it was funny. He was a bit of a sadist back then. So I break out in hives when I'm around machines of any kind. I can't even use a lawn mower. Glenn does it all, and the landlord gives us a break on the rent."

"You know, you'd probably only have gotten five years in jail if you'd been prosecuted by regular old judicial law," I said lightly. "Don't you think a whole lifetime of servitude is a little too much karmic pay-back?"

"There are other debts," Vicki said.

Back at home, Joe and I had a great time making jokes about karma all evening, but when I went to sleep, I had nightmares—gothic romances involving daggers. I woke up with a cold that lingered for weeks. I didn't believe John and Mary's fantasy about me, but I had grown up with a mother who projected me into all sorts of fantasies and injected herself into my dream life, so their past-life regression somehow made me regress too. In their presence, I began to feel more and more like a clumsy child. As impossible as it might sound, my woodworking skills deteriorated even further. The moment John walked past me, nodding his head with fatherly devotion, the box I was holding would collapse like a house of cards.

One day when I went home early complaining of stomach cramps I knew I wouldn't be back. I slept well that night for the first time in weeks. My cold disappeared. Whatever psychic voodoo John and Mary had performed on me, its effects vanished at once.

I began to see that New Age thinking had seemed so liberating in part because it was so *not*-Cleveland. In the hands of my neighbors and my seasonal employers, however, it was just as rigid as any orthodoxy from Conservative Judaism to Fundamentalist Christianity to Free-Market Capitalism to Marxism. One day Vicki told me the Jews had agreed as souls to take part in the Holocaust so as to teach the world a lesson about racism and that Hitler was being trained on "the Other Side" to come back as the most compassionate leader the world had ever known, and I knew that marrying spirituality—West Coast style—to my politics was going to be tougher than I thought.

That my job with my karmic parents was to construct square boxes, all of them identical, was not lost on me.

5.

Joe and I had to get stoned to watch Reagan's inauguration in black-and-white. We tried to pretend it was a redo of an old Fifties sit-com, and that the Beav and Donna Reed were saluting the new Commander-in-Chief from behind their white picket fences, and that their world of false platitudes couldn't hurt us. But the stakes seemed to get higher in Reagan's first State-of-the-Union address; suddenly, having a B-grade actor as President wasn't so funny. When he announced his plans for what he euphemistically called the Economic Recovery Program of 1981, I began to get nervous about my financial situation, which suddenly seemed emblematic of everything else that was

tenuous in my life. I was still trying to write beautiful stories and ignore the ugly and the mundane, but I was spending more and more time writing columns of numbers in my diary—the modest numbers that meant the difference between making rent or not. As the former California governor, a multi-millionaire, assembled his Cabinet of fellow multi-millionaires, he kept talking about getting “government off our backs.” I pictured these men in their sweeping, California ranches, riding horses named Buck or Champ all morning, then playing golf together all afternoon, their wives assembled under Tiffany lamps to gossip about so-and-so’s weight gain or someone’s trouble with their black maid. That chummy personal pronoun “our” did not include me.

I thought about all the other ways beyond immediate survival that the War on Poverty had sustained me in my childhood: the well-stocked public libraries, where I would go every weekend and get a sticker for each classic I read; the school trips to see Shakespeare and hear Mozart performed by the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, paid in full by federal arts programs; the free Cleveland Art Museum, where my mother on her more lucid Sundays would take us to stare at Van Gogh’s sunflowers and starry nights, and I would surreptitiously pat the guardian granite lion on the front steps as though he were my possession. Without all this I would have never caught a glimpse of the beauty to be found beyond the peeling walls of our cramped basement apartment, the enduring human values that ultimately saved my life. I would have never understood what Vicki and Glenn meant by *transcendence*. Without a decently funded, mostly crime-free public school with teachers who were still respected and valued by society, I would have never excelled academically. Without application fee waivers I could have never afforded to apply to college, and without government grants and scholarships and low-interest student loans, any college, let alone an expensive, private four-year university, would have been out of the question. I was a poster child for Johnson’s Great Society.

But rising Pentagon costs to fight the Commies had to be paid for somehow, and Reagan sold his cuts in social programs with hardly a whimper from the Democrats in Congress. Although Reagan insisted these cuts wouldn’t “hurt the poor,” 70% came from programs that supported the poor. With one stroke of the pen, almost every social service that had sustained me or people I’d known was cut back sharply or disappeared. Unemployment insurance was sharply reduced, along with widows’ pensions, disability benefits, Head

Start, subsidized health, the arts and humanities, school lunch—who could forget the ketchup-as-a-vegetable controversy?—education, pre-natal care, substance abuse programs, youth job training, you-name-it. Welfare payments went down 17%. Libraries had to shorten their hours and buy fewer books. Schools had to decide which to cut: music, art, athletics, or all three. Art museums had to establish or raise admission fees. After 1981, in spite of rising needs, no new subsidized housing was built and tax laws encouraged landlords of existing projects to tear down their low rent buildings, evacuate their tenants, and build condominiums.

All of these cuts made it clear just whose “renewal” and “recovery” would be subsidized and whose would not. By the end of the decade the top 20% of Americans owned 94% of the wealth and the number of Americans living in poverty had increased by 10 million.

And hence began the deeper, darker time of my struggles. I wanted to live in the world of the imagination, and bathe my old wounds in white light, but I couldn't help but think of the child I'd been, standing in the welfare office with my mother, trying not to look the other raggedy kids in the eye. How would children born with the same disadvantages as mine find the means, in the age of Reagan, to survive? The thought of all those wasted lives made me cry.

I would like to say that Reaganomics re-politicized me, brought me back to my grandmother's anthem—“the bastards! the bastards!”—and in a way it did, but it also made me feel more vulnerable, more on-the-edge, more in need of soul work than ever before. At night when I slept, my mother and I were still together again, on welfare, only now we were living in front of the old basement apartment, on the street.

6.

Just as my unemployment payments ran out in March I lucked into a job as a writer/editor for a small consulting firm called Word Masters, Inc. The business was owned by a cheerful couple named Joyce and Bob who believed they could keep the values of the Sixties alive by harnessing the humanistic aspects of the new technologies of the Eighties. Their favorite word was “synergy.” While they looked normal to the outside world with their power suits and glossy portfolios, in their hearts they were rebels. When they were *en famille*—among their loyal staff of creative young people—they referred to

the mainstream business establishment as The Other Paradigm. It was actually a company policy never to sign a contract when Mercury, the planet of communication, was retrograde. Office conversation topics might range from what you had dreamed the night before, where you had hiked that weekend, what quirks of yours could be attributable more to astrology or family conditioning—the New Age version of the nature vs. nurture debate—and what you were reading. Working at Word Masters, Inc. didn't feel like work. It was more like therapy.

Although the pace was often hectic, we had pure spring water, herbal tea, and soothing music piped in to keep us calm. We could wear whatever we wanted which was lucky for me, since I didn't have the money to buy new work outfits. The hours were flexible and the bosses were pleasant and supportive. In this setting, I developed some approximation of a work ethic. Although my principal job was to edit business plans and college catalogues, I also learned how to do word processing. I was actually eager to acquire such a useful, marketable skill.

I hadn't finished writing the Great American Novel and I certainly had not attained inner peace, but I was glad to be back among the meaningfully employed, at least on a part-time basis. I was still trying to write, mostly after dinner and on weekends, but other than continuing to hike in the mountains and cooking vegetarian meals, I'd given up the rest of my regimens. Truth be told, all that soul work had worn me out.

The world was changing rapidly into a place in which personal serenity hung on a balanced checkbook. Joe and I knew how to live like royalty on next to nothing, but next to nothing was a lot more than nothing at all. Wherever I looked, there were reminders of what could happen if you lost your way, how far you could fall.

One cold winter night, when Joe and I went to see a university production of *Waiting for Godot*, we got cornered at a stoplight by a woman about my age with a similar long, brown ponytail poking out of a green forest services cap, a thin windbreaker, and jeans. She was standing in the middle of the street, knocking on car windows, begging for money. "I just lost my job," she said, "and now I have nothing to eat and nowhere to stay." We were shocked. I had never seen a homeless woman who looked just like me and it spooked me. Other than her inadequate coat, there was nothing unusual about her at all. We emptied our pockets for her and drove home in silence.

All around me, it seemed, things were beginning to look grim. Vicki was still working but she and Glenn were now having tag sales to get by—a wash of purple on the green lawn. Although Glenn’s disability and unemployment benefits had dried up, he had yet to drum up the courage to begin hunting for whatever physically untaxing work he could get. I worried that Vicki would eventually kick him out and he would end up on the street even if it meant her having to mow the lawn herself. I didn’t have to look very far afield to see voodoo economics for what it was—an evil hex on the non-rich.

For all Reagan’s talk about the spirit of American entrepreneurship and the importance of the small family business, in Seattle, a number of small businesses were hit hard by the recession, especially those not tied into the Cold War economy. I’d only been working for them for about two months when my employers at Word Masters declared bankruptcy. I was on my way to work when Joyce called to tell me not to bother. Rent was due in a few days and I had been counting on a check I would never receive. Joe suggested I call up the Box People. “Mary’s probably pregnant by now so she won’t fixate on you,” he said. He was kind of kidding but kind of not. Luckily it wasn’t necessary.

By late afternoon desperation had brought me to the ultimate Eightiesesque operation: a corporate law firm that specialized in tax shelters, most often in the form of phony oil drilling deals. My boss was the first person I ever met who had voted for Ronald Reagan. He was in his mid-thirties and had a stay-at-home wife, a BMW, and a fanatical dedication to sixteen-hour work days, jogging, and B-vitamin injections “for zip,” he explained. Although he was nice to me he was openly vindictive towards anyone who crossed him. The story was that he had once sued his own father—for what, no one dared ask.

Despite the swank, respectable location in an historically registered building in Pioneer Square, I sensed right away that we were flirting with the limits of the law. In the year I worked there, our boss fired about thirty attorneys. Every time he kicked one out he changed the locks to the building and hid certain files. After every other purge, even the clerical staff was sent packing, so everybody had to watch their backs. I was lucky that Barbara, the heavysset office manager, had a crush on me. She took me under her wing and promised I’d be okay as long as I didn’t ask dangerous questions. In the end, I would be the only typist who played dumb enough to keep my keys.

It occurred to me sometime that year that each job I’d had since I graduated from college paid less than the one before it, and had that much less

prestige. I wasn't even a real legal secretary and had nothing that came close to job security; I was just the semi-permanent temp. I wrote my grandmother rather gleefully that I was finally spending time inside a law office, but I don't think she appreciated the irony. Still, I liked my hours—two twelve hour shifts on Saturday and Sunday for \$10 an hour—which kept the rest of the week free for my writing, and I fought to keep them. Although I didn't complain, I found it odd that my boss didn't take out taxes or social security or pay health benefits for anyone, and that he advised me to have myself incorporated and write off all my living expenses so that I, too, could keep my wealth—such as it was—from Uncle Sam. I hope by now the IRS has caught up to him.

Then the recession of 1982 affected even these corporate wheeler-dealers, and as the economy hit rock bottom, I did too. Barbara said they wouldn't need me for some weeks, and after I paid my January rent, I had \$20 to my name. One morning I went downtown to apply for food stamps, then to Kelly Services to take their demeaning tests which included filling out a sample time card, then back to the law office where I fell into Barbara's arms, sobbing. She whispered that she'd heard a rumor that more firings were in the offing, and she promised me I could come in full-time when the next person got the boot. I was supposed to be relieved. This was the upper limit, I thought—the limit of what a decent person should have to put up with to put food on the table. I decided then and there to join the Peace Corps, but on the way over I stopped at another temp office and they found me an evening word processing job that would begin at 4 that afternoon. I had two hours to kill so I went to the Y to sweat out my anxiety in the sauna, but it was closed because several years ago some evil racist had murdered Martin Luther King, and now, over Reagan's objections, we were getting a holiday I hadn't somehow anticipated. All of this seemed connected. On my way out of the Y, I stopped in a public bathroom, but as I swung open the door a drunk, half-dead, sad old bag lady who'd been leaning against it fell right on top of me and knocked us both to the ground. I was stunned. She bashed her head against the floor, and could not stop bleeding. I got her to lean her head back against the wall, cleaned the blood off her hands and mine, called 911, and waited until someone came to take her away. Then, blood-stained and weary in my white gauzy blouse, I went to work on a word processing system I had never used before, and tried not to cry onto the keyboard.

It turned out that Barbara was the next one who got fired and that's how I paid my February rent. I learned that to survive in the Darwinian world of voodoo economics, you would always have someone's blood on your hands, on your gauzy white office blouse.

The bag ladies were circling closer by the day. What *was* the universe trying to tell me? I looked back on what had launched me to Seattle, a dream of flying that now seemed more like a dream of falling. I couldn't help but wonder if my unconscious had sent me not a promise, but an omen, a warning about what happens to anti-material girls who fly too close to the sun.

7.

A few years later, when I started an MFA program in fiction in Massachusetts, I thought I'd bring all these characters I've told you about into the novel about the dueling twin sister grandmothers, the mystic and the socialist, and to make it into some big allegory about the Eighties. Everyone would be back: Glenn and Vicki with their purple clothes and purple hammock, the bag ladies and corporate lawyers, Wayne Leloo, and my so-called past-life parents, Mary and John. I thought I'd call the book *The Metaphysical Box*. I didn't get very far because it defied my imagination to plot everyone's fates. With Glenn's bad back and his GED, it was hard to figure out what he would have done to stay solvent. Although it seems unlikely John and Mary could have raised a family selling jewelry boxes, it is difficult to see them pursuing an Eighties-style career in real estate, computer programming, or fast food. Perhaps John's mother used her Boeing connections to get them on the Stealth Bomber assembly line, but I don't think they would have appreciated the karma.

The file for *The Metaphysical Box* still sits untouched in my drawer. Perhaps the truth is stranger than fiction anyway but I'll never know what happened; when I moved to the East I fell out of touch with almost everyone I'd known in Seattle.

I'd love to talk to some of the other people I met in the early days of Reagan, people who, like Joe and me, at least initially, *chose* to live close to the bone. They were all dreamers: people working part-time at restaurants and construction sites and moving companies who were trying to be painters or poets; people living on minimum wages so they could help the handicapped instead of Citibank; people who did seasonal jobs and spent six months

at a time backpacking through Katmandu, Guatemala, and Spain; people who worked at independent book stores or non-profit theaters and actually lived on their paltry incomes. People who were well-read and witty but had few practical, marketable skills. People who were generous and sweet and would give you the flea-bitten Peruvian poncho off their backs but were total space shots when it came to money. Did all the people committed to art, enlightenment, social service, or all of the above, have to go to accounting school, like Joe did, to feed their families? Has everyone joined The Other Paradigm?

A few years ago when Bill Clinton, a so-called Democrat, put five-year lifetime caps on public assistance, I thought back to Glenn in his hammock and my own various stints inside the hammock. I allowed myself to wonder what would have happened if food, shelter, art, books, medicine, education, hope, and the belief in the future hadn't come to me courtesy of Uncle Sam. I thought of all the other people who, like me growing up, had unemployable parents if they had parents at all, all those children in torn, dime store clothes who tried not to meet my eyes when we encountered each other at the welfare office, standing in those long lines with our mothers, or in the grim, waiting rooms of the public hospital, where we might wait all day just to be told we couldn't be seen by a specialist until sometime next year. In those days we felt our treatment was barbarian and our services inadequate, but before the end of Reagan's first term, this period in history was starting to look like the good old days. I began to think of my first sabbatical as a time when I learned less about the soul than, reluctantly, the world of matter—the *only* world that matters, my ancestors seemed to be saying, if only I would listen.

Fellow artists, leftists, dreamers, and welfare children, you can reach me now on e-mail. Let me know if you're okay, if you have lived to tell your tales.