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Contemporary  
American poetry  
about art: Rita

Dove, Lisel

Mueller and Jorie  
Graham

May 31, 1999

Contemporary American Poetry About Art: Rita Dove, Lisel Mueller and Jorie Graham

by

Farah L. Miller

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

Of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English Literature

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5 MAY 1999  
Date

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## Abstract

### **Contemporary American Poetry About Art: Rita Dove, Lisel Mueller and Jorie Graham**

Dove, Mueller and Graham use visual art to symbolize and explore aspects of culture. Paintings and sculptures allow the poets to view an increasingly complex world through personal lenses and make contemplative statements about aesthetics and society. Residing in the late twentieth century, their poems address issues of race, morality and fragmentation specific to the postmodern world and despite distinct styles and backgrounds their treatment of paintings and sculptures also reveals the existence of an exceptional aesthetic discourse. Together they achieve interpretation, elucidate the creative process, and allow room for further explication. Inspired by visual art, from a range of perspectives Dove, Mueller and Graham reveal emotion behind interpretation and generate passion in their own work.

In her poem, *Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove*, Rita Dove speaks to themes of the painting by the same name. By imagining the perspective of its painter, Christian Schad (1894-1982) she achieves three purposes. First, Dove makes her interpretation of the painting seem the only possible one. She does not simply describe the painting, and explain why she was inspired to write about it. Instead, by entering the artist's psyche she joins her view of the painting to a particular moment in time, dramatizes that moment, and claims it is reality. Thus, by linking her vision to the artist's, she also succeeds in characterizing the way art is created. Her poem is not just about Schad; it is about the imaginative process. Finally, Dove concentrates on themes specific to her place in American society. She indicates Schad's painting is important to her, and in turn, makes a connection between the painted image and her own life.

Dove is only one of many contemporary American poets writing about visual art. In this essay, I will also examine poems by Jorie Graham and Lisel Mueller to show how they use works of art to symbolize and explore aspects of culture. Despite distinct styles and backgrounds their treatment of paintings and sculptures proves the existence of an exceptional aesthetic discourse. They follow a historical pattern of artists inspired by other art forms. In Rilke's Florence diary, as translated in *Diaries of a Young Poet*, he devotes pages to the inspirational quality of Renaissance painters. More recently, the 1980 spring volume of *Contemporary Literature* was devoted to linking art and literature, and a massive amount of theory written on the subject in between suggests understanding poetry and visual art as well as literature, music and dance as interchangeable enterprises. Rilke says, "Whoever speaks of 'art' must necessarily mean 'the arts' for they are all expressive forms of one language" (28).



It seems only natural, then for one type of artist to comment on the work of another. Traditionally, critics interpret works from a methodological perspective. Using art to reflect on art, however, achieves interpretation, elucidates the creative process, and allows room for further explication. "Art inclines to be eternally young and mysterious while history tends to make art old, and philosophy, conceivable" (Langer, 82) Mehilis explains in "The Problem of Distance." Dove herself avers that poetry is inconclusive; she files poems in colored folders by the way they feel to her (Harrington).

The link between aesthetic fields is inherited, but Dove, Graham and Mueller's poems reside in the late twentieth century, addressing issues of race, morality and fragmentation specific to the postmodern world. Drawing on the title of Graham's second book, Bonnie Costello says she "poses as beholder in the world of erosion, reflecting on the work, its relation to her world, and the creative process of the artist" (375). Likewise, Dove and Mueller adopt this position. Paintings and sculptures allow the poets to view an increasingly complex world through personal lenses and make contemplative statements about aesthetics and society.



By assuming Schad has the ability to perceive injustice she does not implicate the artist in this prejudice. Instead, she imagines him to be a sympathetic creator, and therefore makes a general claim about artistic perception. Part of the “aesthetic experience” of reading Dove’s poem is to see an artist reaching greater levels of understanding than that of the cruel world.

The poem begins with Schad and a “blank space” to indicate the beginning of any artistic endeavor. The artist or poet is always faced with a void anticipating a new creation. For Schad, the blank space is offset by “the clang and hum of Hardenbergstrasse,/ its automobiles and organ grinders./ Quarter to five.” The noise of the outside world and the announcement of time emphasize an everyday filled with events that interrupt the creative process opposed to inspiring moments Schad is seeking. He looks up toward heaven, but the ceiling prohibits him from seeing it. Thus, Dove symbolizes the artist’s search for perfection hindered by limits and confusion. He also looks within himself, but decides “he could not leave his skin – once/ he’d painted himself in a new one.” As soon as Schad characterizes himself he is trapped in a particular vision. Dove is pointing out how difficult it is for the artist to explore the self.

To fill the “blank space” the artist needs to find inspiration in the outside world.

Dove writes of Schad:

He thought  
of Rasha, so far from Madagascar,  
turning slowly in place as  
the boa constrictor  
coiled counterwise its  
heavy love.

Rasha is not perfection or a reflection of the artist. Dove uses the near rhyme Rasha and Madagascar to show the figure really belongs in her homeland; she inspires the artist



A contemporary review of the painting reads, "Schad [described] his paintings as symbols rather than illustrations of reality.... In *Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove* there is an element of exaggeration, an intensification of visual experience and a degree of mannerism that goes beyond the dictates of realism" (Lloyd, 142). This element is the outside source that controls Dove. By ending the poem with her claim, "their gaze was merciless" she creates a circle of inspiration composed of the performers, Schad, Dove and her poem.

Specifically, Dove sees the image of Rasha as merciless. In a very literal way, they are connected --the poet, like Rasha is black and called Dove. Since she finds an image of herself in a white German man's painting the mirror compels her to write the poem. In turn, the poem retains a unique "aesthetic existence" through Dove's attention to racism.

The images of Rasha are extremely important to the poem's claims. Dove emphasizes Schad's memories of Rasha eating chicken in her trailer and bringing "fresh eggs into the studio" to show he does not view her as a freak. He sees her for the person she is outside the spectacle she must make of herself, yet Dove says in the portrait she is "without passion." The painting begs to be interpreted so Dove provides Rasha with feelings Schad has left ambiguous.

Essentially, Dove uses her contemporary American viewpoint to see and understand Rasha's pain. Her poems *Nigger Song: An Odyssey*, *The House Slave*, and *The Slave's Critique of Practical Reason* are overt in their discussion of race, but she writes other poems about Bocaccio, some set in Germany, and a Pulitzer Prize-Winning *Thomas and Beulah* about her grandparents. Each poem is a reflection of Dove's

personal world -- her love for literature, life in Germany, family heritage and experience as an African American. In the case of *Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove*, art helps her to consider the world through her unique background. Hence, the poem shows how visual art can be a guide for the poet as a structured exhibition of human emotion.

## Confronting the Reader: Lisel Mueller

Mueller's poem *Muse* is quite different from Dove's in form, but she also interprets art through an individual perspective and latches onto lonesome painted figures. The major influence on her poetry is her childhood experience fleeing Nazi Germany with her family. Having witnessed atrocities in her homeland and escaped death she is both aware of injustice and thankful. Specifically, she is concerned with her position as an outsider in America. In an interview she explains:

Let me say what countless other displaced persons must have said; I am more at home here than anywhere. At the same time I am not a native; I see the culture and myself in it through a serum, with European eyes, and my poetry accommodates a bias toward historical determinism, no doubt the burdensome heritage of a twentieth century native German.

(65)

In *Muse* she looks to Edward Hopper, an American painter known for his depictions of "grim lonely scenes and desolate non-communicating figures." She begins where Dove ends, linking herself to the painting *Nighthawks* by saying she always looks at a poster of it when she types (see fig. 2). The style is honest. The structure is that of a natural paragraph without any breaks between lines; rather, it seems like something she just jotted down, a quick realization. In fact, Mueller says, "is there to keep me honest." For her, there is no role-playing like Dove's choice to imagine Schad's creative process. The poem literally chronicles her own discovery of the painting's meaning in relation to her life. In this way, Mueller's snapshot produces the same effect as *Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove*, but she reveals *Muse* is a personal interpretation of the painting more explicit than Dove's.

She describes each person in the poster, decides the "couple having coffee" is "ambiguous," the "waiter...wants to tell them about himself," and the "man apart is a

mystery.” Then she translates the image to the present day. She fills in and rounds the images within contexts. The man is now “hatless.” The waiter is a waitress and “can’t support her kids on what she makes.”

Her conclusion is poignant. She says, “the loner sits in the corner and faces me now, but his face might as well be a back.” By focusing on the peripheral character she draws attention to the importance of people in the background, realizing she will never know more about them than how they reflect the scene in the foreground. For her, this man represents people who exist outside life’s actions, not just because of their loneliness, but their relation to other feelings that are more easily understood. He is a symbol for Mueller as a European in America and for her position as a poet.

She asks an important question for the poet writing about art -- “Forty-five years ago, when Hopper painted these people, did he know they would endure?” Just as Dove imagines Schad’s creative process to be like her own, Mueller wonders about Hopper to define her own work’s importance. She means, how does any artist know her work will endure when they sit alone, isolated, commenting on a melancholy world?



## Understanding the World: Jorie Graham

In her poems about visual works Graham suggests issues of morality preserve artistic meaning. Her approach to writing about art resides at the opposite end of the spectrum from Mueller. Their meanings are less clear and often inconclusive because she grapples with serious philosophical questions. Yet, inasmuch as Graham is recognized for her attention to ethics critics respond to her poems about art. They say, "Art is Graham's version of the pastoral" (Spiegleman, 245), and "Painting rather than nature becomes her primary model for how we can pursue the invisible in the visible" (Costello, 373).

She connects art to moral issues in her poetry for the same reason Dove explores racism in hers and Mueller writes about marginal figures -- she views paintings through the lens she applies to the rest of the world. Her mother, an artist, and father, a student of art history and theology handed down the link between art and morality to her. As Peyton Brien says in an article on Graham, "This combination of the secular and the theological, derived from her parents, with both involved in the aesthetic perspective, played a substantial role in the formation of her own artistic searching" (Brien, 97). In her poems *Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt* and *At Luca Signorelli's Resurrection of the Body*, she exhibits this tendency to search for the intersection between art and a code of right and wrong, yet despite her attention to philosophical issues Graham does not furnish strict analysis. By writing poems about art she, along with Dove and Mueller, provides explanations that are open to extended interpretations.

*Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt* compares a finished famous work to an unfinished unknown work. The former, *Buchenwald*, is a painting of a forest during autumn: orange

and gold trees, green plants and bits of sky poking through (see fig. 3). The latter is an unfinished painting called *The Bride* that Graham characterizes as “pornographic” (see fig. 4). What is interesting is that the comparison is based solely on Graham’s interpretation of the first painting as a symbol for morality struggles. Her claim that the second poem is indicative of sexuality is easier to agree with than her invocation of meaning for *Buchenwald* because *The Bride* includes a graphic nude portrait.

In his biography of Klimt, Comini describes the unfinished painting. He says, “In opposition to the floating knot of figures covering the left side of the canvas, the splayed out nude body of a young girl dominated the other half.... The knees were bent and the legs spread apart to expose a carefully detailed pubic area upon which the artist had leisurely begun to paint an overlay ‘dress’ of suggestive and ornamental shapes” (5). Whether Graham was familiar with Comini’s analysis or not, her agreement with his interpretation of *The Bride* makes a case for a universal awareness of sexuality. Her interpretation of the trees, however, reinforces a belief that meaning resides with the viewer or the reader. She does not look back for any particular facts to assess the painting; rather, she attaches her own personal issues to it and thus provides interpretation.

Vendler says, “If we compare her with her Romantic predecessors, [Graham] is nearest to Shelley in her creation of clouds of thought, accumulating and breaking open in a shower of consequences” (237). In fact, she begins the Klimt poem with a series of ideas. She establishes an opposition between the glittering trees as representations of injustice and the “chips on the bark of each beech tree catching the light” as representations of human mistakes. These representations do not seem like an opposition

because injustice and mistakes are both usually negative, but she builds a binary out of the fact that glittering trees are considered beautiful and chips of wood are passed over as ugly. The binary, however, is more complicated because she defies common associations to say the injustice is ugly and the mistakes are beautiful.

After she sets up this confusing opposition, Graham begins a new thought. She says, “The dead would give anything...to step again onto the leafrot,” and goes on to explain that in their “sheer open parenthesis” they actually need “something to lean on.” It is up to the reader to make a connection between the first thought and the second, to decide who or what the dead represent. Perhaps they are mere after-thoughts with no source of support in reality. Costello suggests that in the painting Graham is pondering the German forest, and they are Holocaust victims. Regardless, Graham has begun to make a case for the process of judgment. Unlike Dove, she will not come to a conclusion so the burden of interpretation is truly on the reader. This responsibility is supported by Graham’s personal demonstration of her ability to provide meaning for the Klimt painting.

The third thought she introduces is not a conclusion. She does not even make a definite claim. By beginning the sentence with “I think I would weep...” she further indicates her subjectivity, just as she explains that her poem is about the “moral nature of this world...right and wrong like pools of shadow and light you can step in and out of.” She links subjectivity with morality to emphasize the value of interpretation in our world. She says the “autumn afternoon [is] late in the twentieth century,” and completely severs the painting from its original time period (an autumn afternoon late in the nineteenth century) to show how Klimt’s work applies to the confusion of her own postmodern

world. Costello's interpretation refers specifically to the Holocaust, but Graham's poem is clearly concerned with a multitude of atrocities and questions of morality.

She introduces Klimt midway through to break down the wall between her thoughts and the painting. Although she has been describing the painting throughout, she deliberately phrases her claims in terms of solitary thoughts. Bringing Klimt as creator into the poem begins the "shower of consequences" Vendler speaks of. She intertwines his presence with the discovery of the unfinished painting so the association between artist and painting prohibits her from making her own assessment of the work's meaning.

Comini says, "The unfinished painting, by the mere fact that it was unfinished, contained the clue to the erotic premise of Klimt's great allegories involving female figures" (5). In the poem, Graham says:

Slowly,  
feathery,  
he had begun to paint  
a delicate  
garment (his trademark)  
over this mouth  
of her body.

She emphasizes the garment as a symbol for Klimt's possession of his creation, his male domination over the female, but she compares it to the colors in the famous painting:

The fabric  
defines the surface,  
the story  
so we are drawn to it,  
its blues  
and yellows glittering  
like a stand  
of beech trees late  
one afternoon

in Germany, in fall.  
It is called  
Buchenwald.

Thus, her poem juxtaposes morality and sexuality to emphasize the privilege of judgment in comparison to the strict terms of sexuality.

Ultimately, however, Graham compares the two paintings to show that “in the finished painting the argument has something to do with pleasure.” For her, the finished painting is more enjoyable because it is open to interpretation. C. J. Ducasse says, “That an object is beautiful means that, in aesthetic contemplation, it is found pleasurable” (Jacobus, 52). Although sexuality usually signifies pleasure, Graham forces an opposition to show why that might be a limiting assumption.

*At Luca Signorelli's Resurrection of the Body* is also a poem in favor of subjectivity and open interpretations. It is about *The Resurrection*, a Renaissance image of people pulling themselves out of ground strewn with skeletons (see fig. 5). Overhead, there are two angels with trumpets, cherubs gazing at the naked bodies, and the walls of the Orvieto cathedral containing the painting itself. Graham interprets it as proposing questions about humanity. She sees the cherubs as spirits entering the bodies. Beginning with them, the primary emphasis of her interpretation is on the word “hurry” which she repeats six times. “They hurry to enter their bodies, these spirits.” She also says, the people “hurry to congregate,” and “all round the cathedral streets hurry to open.” Thus, Graham poses the philosophical question, why do we hurry? She uses the painting to support this question when Signorelli's intent may not have been to depict busyness.

It is like the Klimt poem because Graham introduces the artist midway through. Again, the beginning of the poem uses a series of ideas to set up a claim Signorelli enters

into. In this case, Graham claims that distance allows the viewer to see the crime in hurrying. She says,

Standing below them  
in the church  
in Orvieto, how can we  
tell them  
to be stern and brazen  
and slow,

that there is no  
entrance,  
only entering. They keep on  
arriving,  
wanting names,  
wanting  
happiness.

She emphasizes perspective. The figures in the painting do not realize they are hurrying, but viewers wonder why. Temporal and physical distance allows them to make a connection between the painting and contemporary society.

*At Luca Signorelli's Resurrection of the Body*, therefore, becomes a poem about the artist like *Agosta the Winged Man* and *Rasha the Black Dove* and *Muse*. Supposedly, Signorelli performed an autopsy on his only son to gain a better understanding of the human body, and Graham uses this rumor as a symbol for how the artist labors to re-interpret the world. She says Signorelli

broke into the body  
studying arrival.  
But the wall  
of the flesh  
opens endlessly,  
its vanishing point so deep  
and receding  
we have yet to find it,  
to have it  
stop us. So he cut

deeper,  
graduating slowly  
from the symbolic

to the beautiful.

She describes Signorelli's concern with anatomy to show the artist as occupying the ideal position; his perspective enables him to see and recreate the human condition exactly.

He is, in fact, like the supernatural beings in the painting, as he too wants to enter flesh.

For Graham, the poet writing about art, this interpretation means her job as a poet is to wonder and search for new ways to reflect her world. Taken together, then, the

Signorelli poem actually adds to the Klimt poem. For her, the world is made up of a series of choices, and artistic creations act as guides in confusing times. This claim does not only refer to interpreting artwork, but in it, Graham asks readers to use her poems for a greater understanding of the contemporary world.

## From Many Perspectives: Back to Mueller

In *Muse*, Mueller's analysis of *Nighthawks* is like Grahams's because she is acting as reader designating Hopper as poet, but in other poems about visual works she shifts perspectives to gain a better understanding of how art intersects with life. As a woman suffering from glaucoma she writes from the viewpoint of a blind person once sighted. Since she cannot see Mueller thinks about what others do see, taking on the point of view of painted and sculpted images and other viewers. Disease becomes inspirational; this part of her history fills the lens through which she interprets art with the wonder Graham deems necessary.

In *A Nude By Edward Hopper*, and *The Artist's Model CA. 1912* Mueller adopts the point of view of the model's in a painting and a sculpture. Although the former is also about a work by Hopper it is totally different from *Muse* in structure and content. The poems, however, share Mueller's imagination of painted images as real people with contemporary viewpoints. Specifically, the model in this painting notices imperfections on her body because she is inspected through eternity, her very identity characterized by careful examination. Thus, she says, "The light drains me of what I might be." She thinks her body would be more beautiful if it were not her only quality presented. Since it is, however, she thinks she is "blue veins, a scar, . . . used thighs and shoulders." Mueller points to the body as a cage by presenting the nude as a trap that has caught the model.

The end of the poem sees a transformation in the model's opinion. She says, "This body is home." Hence, Mueller's final statement -- she thinks Hopper's painting venerates the body. Yet, for her it is important to realize that wrapped up in that veneration are moments of opposition, and the best way to express them is through the



eyes of the model. She suggests the necessity of multiple perspectives by pointing out the impossibility of pure awe with respect to the human body.

Again, in *The Artist's Model* CA. 1912, Mueller adopts the perspective of the model for a work of art, but in this poem, she uses the device to come to a different conclusion. This model does not want to be free. She says, "I came apart...splintered into thousands of particles," to show that the process of viewing art from a contemporary perspective is sometimes violent. Because of restricted viewpoints the gaze of the outside world has degenerated into a destructive force.

*The Artist's Model* is the reverse of *Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove*. Instead of beginning with a void to be filled with an artist, Mueller begins with an artist's creation, tears it down, and ends with "space, inside your head where [the model] started." The model says, "Now, they are stacking me like... blocks.... They tell me the world has changed, haven't I heard...say in the future only my parts will be known." Mueller is drawing attention to the distinction between modern and postmodern art; the former allowed the model to be whole while the latter emphasizes parts of her, "a gigantic pair of lips, a nipple, slick as candy, and even those will disappear." The model's fear of abstraction represents the difficulty of re-interpretation. Mueller reveals using art as inspiration will sometimes demolish original meaning, and is more interested in reading artwork like Hopper's *Nighthawks* from new perspectives

In *The Exhibit*, Mueller comments on the effect a painting has on another viewer to emphasize the range of perspectives available. It is a short poem, a story about viewing a painting with her uncle, but packed with meaning. As an observer who witnesses someone else interpret artwork she shows interpretation is personal --

everybody brings baggage to explanations of not only paintings and sculptures, but the world in general.

Her “uncle in East Germany/ points to the unicorn in the painting/ and explains it is now extinct.” A character in the poem, Mueller contrasts his reaction, corrects him, says, “such a creature never existed.” At the outset, she implies his interpretation is wrong, but tolerable because:

A prisoner of war  
even after the war was over,  
my uncle needs to believe in something  
that could not be captured except by love.

His past provided him with a particular lens through which to view the unicorn as reality. As the poem progresses, however, Mueller’s tight style reveals his interpretation as extremely valuable. There is no way to judge right from wrong when interpreting art. He uses the image to give himself hope, and that is more precious than an accurate reading.

Essentially, Mueller explains why Dove and Graham interpret paintings the way they do. She says,

This world,  
this terrible world we live in,  
is not the only possible one,  
his eighty year old eyes insist,  
dry wells that fill so easily now.

Like the old man, when she interprets Schad’s painting as sympathetic Dove insists on a new world. Graham works out problems through her interpretations of Klimt’s and Signorelli’s paintings. Mueller’s poems about art are different; she does not adhere to the metaphor of artist as poet and viewer as reader. Instead, she explores the act of reinterpretation.

Indeed, the analysis presented in this essay is not the “only possible one.” When we search for definition art reminds us there will be multiple solutions, and poems like paintings are pleasurable because they are inconclusive by nature. Dove, Mueller and Graham reveal emotion behind interpretation. Inspired by visual art, through distinct styles, and from a range of perspectives they generate passion and make meaning.

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Figures



fig. 1

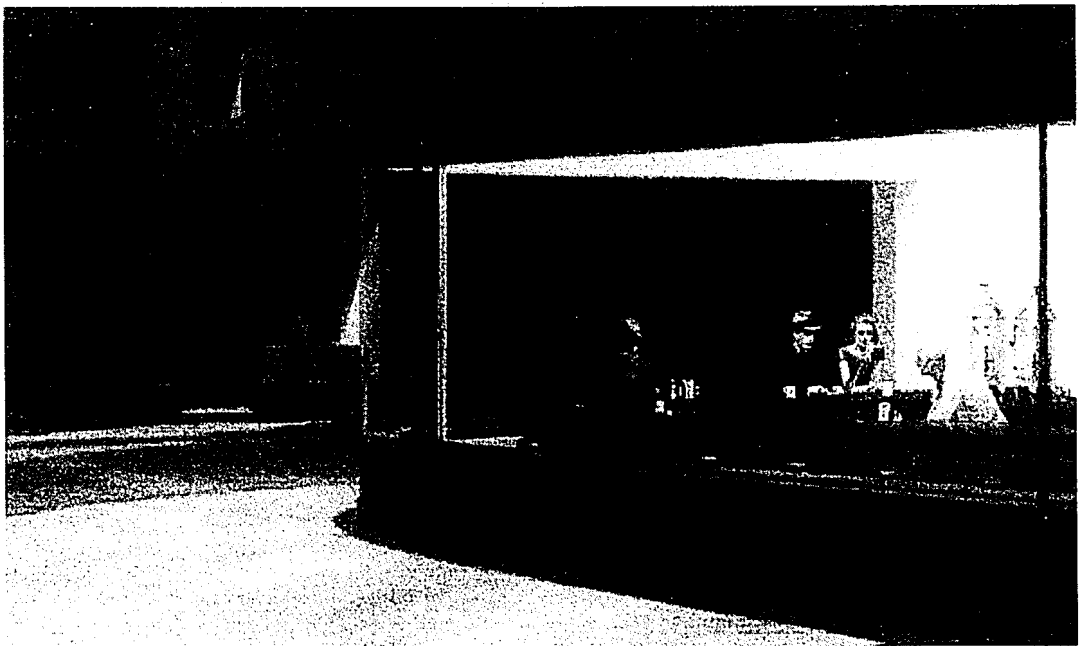


fig. 2

Figures



fig. 1



fig. 2

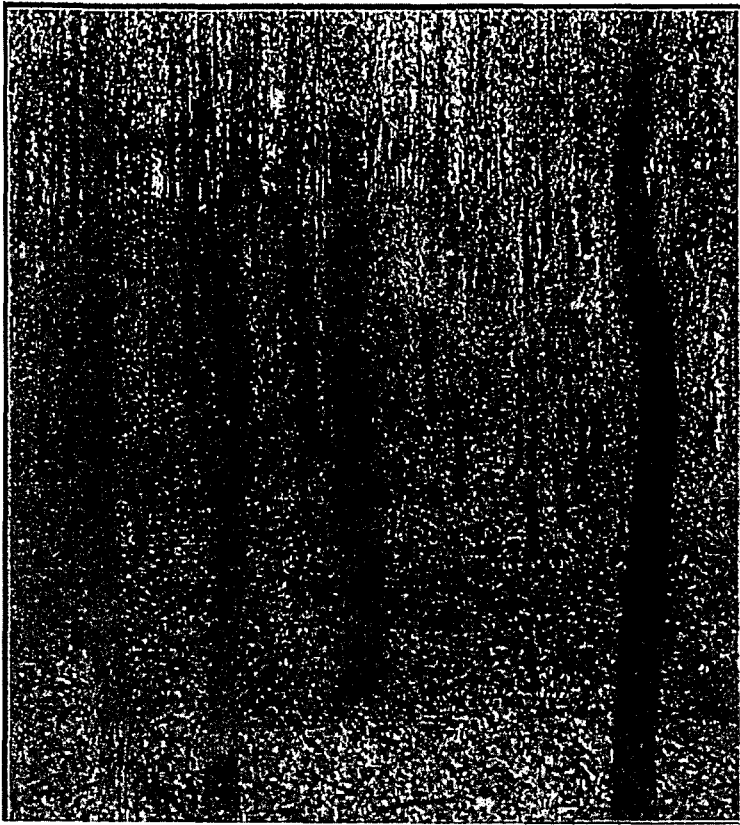


fig. 3

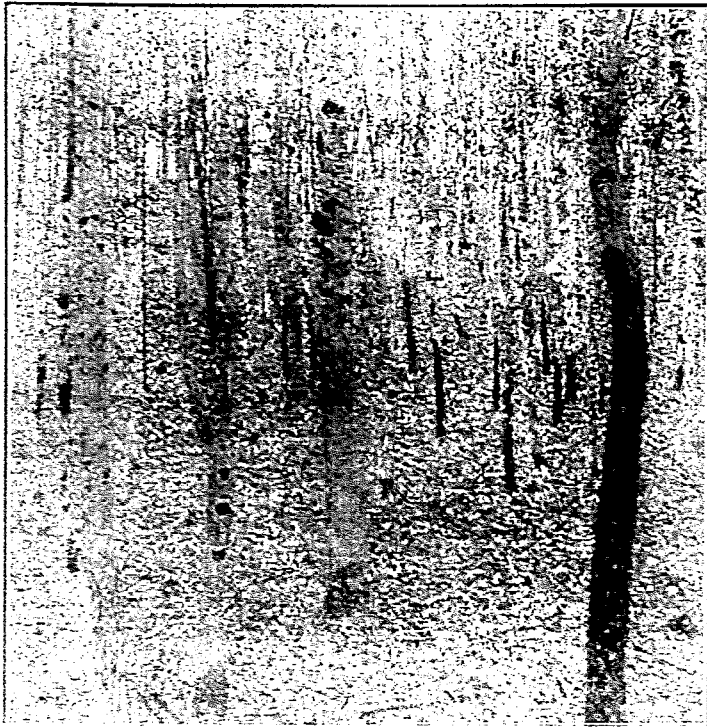


fig. 3





fig. 4



fig. 4



fig. 5



fig. 5

## VITA

Farah L. Miller

In 1998, Farah graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Lehigh University with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and Psychology. During her time as an undergraduate she was active in theater, spent six weeks studying geology in Wyoming and Idaho, edited an academic journal, studied abroad at University College London in London, England, and made wonderful friends. For her senior project she compiled her memories in *Postcards and Train Schedules*, a collection of creative writing and was awarded the first place Williams Fiction Prize for "Voice Lesson," a short story in three parts. Granted Lehigh's Presidential Scholarship for academic excellence, Farah was able to complete her graduate work at Lehigh in one academic year, tuition-free. This thesis was written in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English Literature. She plans to use her background in the humanities to remain undecided about life but committed to learning and imagination, and thanks her mother Melody for so much love and support.

**END  
OF  
TITLE**