

THE EIGHTH DAY: A NOVEL WITH CRITICAL COMMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contains two parts: a novel, *The Eighth Day* and its critical commentary. The novel sets the story of Olivia, a contemporary protagonist, into the Sumerian myth of *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth*. Like Inanna, Olivia descends, removing her mortal vestments or metaphors of belief, in seven stages or gates that lead to the underworld where she will arrive naked and bowing low before her sister-self, *Rahab*.

Because Olivia's ideology is rigidly bound by ethics framed in the Old Testament, both of these myths play a large part in the unfolding of her story. Livia's beliefs must be closely identified before she can discard or amend them. The Inanna myth illuminates the spiral nature of life's journey from the blind innocence of a child descending down to a conscious innocence born of choice.

The critical commentary that precedes the novel discusses the art and technique that plays part in all fiction and in the novel, *The Eighth Day*.

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The lyf so short . . .

the craft so

long to lerne.

- - - Chaucer

Critical Commentary

Introduction

The core of my novel was written in principle form the summer of 1992; written silently, and for the most part, unconsciously. The events, the characters, the story flowed helter-skelter through the pen. Chaos was emancipated, cut loose, released to run unfettered throughout the story. Bits of poetry learned in grade school, ancient text, mythologies: the muses ran amok. That was the first draft.

Studies in art and technique proved that much of what unfolded in the original story/drama was a surprise, a surprise that needed much refining. Following drafts were affected by the scholarly work of such critics as Gass, Lubbock, Stevick, Booth, Frye and so on. Henry James suggests that criticism is a sort of exhibition and analysis: "To criticize is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticized thing and make it one's own" (viii). So, too, my studies in literature and criticism allowed me to take hold of my novel, possess it, appreciate it and edit.

I began again cognizant of such techniques as stream of consciousness, dialogue, frame and so forth; thus, re-visioning the second and third drafts for clarity. My studies spawned a means to approach fiction consciously, reading closely for the multi-leveled layers of art and technique. I read with new attention the works of Findley, Dostoyevsky, Atwood, Welty, Lawrence, Joyce and more. The realm of fiction became a presence more authentic than reality. Coming to the fourth draft, I was no longer the unconscious writer, but also reader and critic. What had been clear only to me in former drafts, I re-wrote to make clear to another. Confusing dialogue was set off with italics, dubious sentence constructions were disentangled or cut away. The story which, in earlier

versions, took place over a year was now restricted to three days. Emotions, too complex to show, tell or disclose were consciously enlightened with works of art, scripture, poetry and rhyme. The blithe protagonist descends as she removes her masks of virtue, purity and honor, to reveal shame, censure and guilt; finally to return on The Eighth Day to a potential innocence born of excruciating choice.

Many symbols, principle theories, and images for *The Eighth Day* were suggested and even exceeded by the protagonist versed and rigidly grounded in Old Testament stories and values. The living world of flowers, shrubbery, trees, fishes, creatures, Adam (Hebrew for earth-man) and from his rib, Eve (Hebrew for mother of life), were created by Yahweh within six days. On the seventh day God rested. Olivia, the protagonist, issues from a dark wet womb to fall into *the eighth day* only to wake, eat and sleep again, showing the reader by both symbol and scene the human predicament. The idea of falling into divisive life is a notion that Milton describes in *Paradise Lost* when Adam divided becomes Adam and Eve (211). The two forever searching for what was lost (Campbell 104). Looking horizontally into the world, looking vertically for answers, looking past, around and over one another. This inception of wholeness is the *animus*, *anima* concept of Carl Jung even somewhat like the oriental notion of *yin* and *yang*.

Olivia believes Adam and Eve partook of the Tree of Knowledge on the eighth day and thus, humanity collectively fell into a condition of unconscious being (Campbell 101). The catch, however, is that what remains is the journey to consciousness, the reunion of the fragmented self, the quest for the Tree of Life. Consciousness is caught in moments of awakening, epiphanies. James Joyce recorded the following about these revelatory moments: "Epiphany is a crisis action in the mind, a moment when a person, an event or a thing is seen in a light so new that it is as if it has never been seen before; at this recognition, the mental landscape of the viewer is permanently changed" (Gifford 12). All novels contain epiphanies; they are the devices that help to move a novel into

the realm of myth. Maurice Shroder discusses this mythic motif of the novel in "The Novel as Genre":

The novel records the passage from a state of innocence to a state of experience, from ignorance which is bliss to a mature recognition of the actual way of the world. (Stevick 15)

Such beams of enlightenment, found in an *other's* story, open our eyes to our own notes—blinding craters that have reduced us to blaming, to sleeping, to gazing, mouth ajar, at the moon. Such moments are mythic in nature for when these moments are perceived as markers of an archetype, the *human story* takes on mythic proportions.

The Eighth Day relates the story of a woman with four children and pregnant with another. Since she can remember, Olivia Whitiker Brown has restlessly searched for the Tree of Life, the meaning of her being. She pursues this in spite of the answers transmitted by her community. In her linear life of meals, bills and children, answers are not forthcoming. Olivia finds the ancient myth of *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* in a cardboard box of discarded university notes. With concordance in hand, Livie reads the ancient cuneiform of Inanna: Goddess of Sumeria and after many days of translation, many days of anguish, many days of introspection, Livie concludes she will follow this goddess (7).

In the ancient myth, the goddess Inanna descends and passes seven conditional portals that lead to the underworld to confront her unconscious sister-self; in Sumerian it is *Ereshkigal*, or in Hebrew it is *Rahab*, the dragon who resides in the *shades* as Queen. The keeper at the gate at each of the seven thresholds demands a piece of Inanna's queenly vestments before she may pass.

Thus, the narrative in the novel takes as a paradigmatic guide for Livie's vertical descent the Sumerian myth of *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (2000 B.C.E.). Olivia takes the conscious myth of Inanna to unravel her accepted yet unconscious Judaeo-Christian myth. As the Sumerian myth describes, so Livie descends locating and stripping herself of honors, those symbols and kudos that have proved her communal

worth; locating and stripping her ruling beliefs, those tenets that upheld her as she upheld them; locating and stripping her Judaeo-Christian metaphors, the laws and testaments of how to live the model life. The chapters recount her mythic travail, and thus transpose the ancient myth into contemporary experience. The guide of the Inanna myth, along with a composite of rhyme, riddle, scripture, prose and poetry endow Livie with the strength to move from the limited world view on/of the Brown Farm to an internal world where she can examine her inner boundaries, those rigid community parameters that reject change or exchange. Each chapter moves the initiate through the *rites of passage* requisite when a petitioner advances to the many individual thresholds that must be traversed in the dark journey that leads to the underworld of the unconscious.

With the assistance of classes in structural anthropology, myth, metaphor, fiction and with close critical readings from adept Professors, this novel comes to a close. It has been visioned and re-visioned, written and rewritten. It has been combed for integrity.

The following essay includes significant concepts and techniques of this late and controversial art form called the novel and specifically my novel, *The Eighth Day*. Because myth is a central determinant in this novel, myth will be extensively addressed as the universal governing story of the human emotional predicament of which John Gardner says: "Human history, it seems to me, never repeats itself and can never be recaptured; but human emotions endure like granite" (4).

Fiction in general

Fiction cuts through the human condition that insists on dividing the world into categories in order to discuss, perceive and live in an orderly way. By this division, humans limit or are limited by their beliefs, their language, their very cultures. The language humans receive as infants, the experience available to them eventually fragments human consciousness. A way for the novelist, and others, to observe limited perceptions is to regard the language that relates the story of disparate lives—prevailing

myths, cultures, communities, religions—as the forces that focus on the creation or the existence of the individual. Language structures, connotations, and particularly beliefs acquired in early years mark near impassable boundaries, boundaries that limit human freedom. As humans categorize, they cut themselves off from new perceptions, from each other, from dissimilar human lives whom, nevertheless, have tangled with the same mortal coil. Their story lives in fiction.

In the introduction to *The Theory of the Novel*, Stevick discusses the novel as a "comparatively new genre" (1). He suggests: "The novel has suffered from the conviction that it was an inferior form" (2). Yet, beginning in uncertainty, much later than drama or poetry, the novel as an accepted art form was inevitable. Readers are Peeping Toms longing for a look at *other*. Compared to poetry, conversation or lecture, fiction has the inherent ability to show the forces of our limited attitudes, social boundaries or cultural restraints. The novel with a beginning, middle and end "uses materials . . . deployed in such a way as to give the image of coherence, continuity, and wholeness, and with certain tensions and anticipations regarding the central characters carried through the entire length of the works, to be resolved at their ends" (2). In this process, an other's story is shown through such interconnected techniques as scene, summary, dialogue, mediation and plot. Thus, throughout the novel, the reader is able to get into, and under, the skin of the various characters who themselves reveal lives of restraint dictated by their own fragmented worlds.

Tension is the adhesive that keeps the peeper glued to the window into another life. The novel introduces tension between events and characters, between ideas and obstacles, between characters and characters, and always there exists a tension between reader and story. The light that peeks throughout the story enlightens both the story and the readers transfixed by the spectacle of their own limited perspectives. Within this luminous tension breaks the moment of epiphany where the self may choose to pass through limits to an increased recognition of potential. In the following excerpt, Livie

perceives her true inherent being on the fine day in a cow pasture. The moment was an epiphany to the child lost in a veil of tears:

The cow waits for the little girl to open the gate and drive her home. There will be time enough for that; the girl is busy weaving a weedy crown for her God. God rejoices in his yellow crown, and kisses her stained hands. He places his regal wreath upon her head ordaining her his Queen. Oh, it is a Holy Coronation in a cow pasture. (20)

An unbelievable Coronation. Thus, Olivia, governed by the ways of her family life and limitations, excuses her day with God, and proceeds through the evening as the household directs:

"Perhaps the Coronation never was."
Perhaps the coronation never was. (21)

So, she sweeps away the dandelion crown that lies in fragments beside her bed. "Who did she think she was? The Queen of England? (20)"

Paradoxically, to encompass potential, one must pass through the shadow of death, the Hebrew *pit*, the Greek *shades*. Picasso addresses the portion of grief to expect when one accommodates *other* even when the change is desirable: "Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction" (May, *Creativity* 63). Often the disillusioned adventurer would rather suffocate under a former mask than face the unknown and possibly hideous self. Yet, this hunt for self continues. It is a universal longing. M. C. Richards, writer of poetry and designer of pottery, speaks of this longing:

As I read the newspapers, talk to friends, teach my classes, I can tell the hunt is on. I can hear everyone questing for personhood; I can hear the belling and baying, the hoofs, the trembling ground. Everywhere the mystery is being searched out. (7)

Personhood or individuation occurs when humans break away from the script that binds them to the rigid traditions and myths of the community and family. The breaking of dependence for interdependence and then for independence is an ongoing process. Babies begin this archetypal course as they venture from their earthly home in search of

self. In the third chapter of *The Eighth Day*, baby Livie sallies forth in sturdy walking shoes. She has fuzzy yellow hair, big dimples and green eyes. The world was before her:

My new shoes shined like anything; they squeak, squeak, squeak when I walked. Shoes! Walking! No one to stop me! I walk, walk, walk. I walk till I find home. A crack in the sidewalk looms. My new shoes. Walking. Shine. Walking. Like anything. Walking. They squeak. Can't stop. Squeak. A crack. Squeak. A crack! When I walk. Crack. I fell powerless on the cracked cement. I had not yet learned how to get up. (26)

Taking symbols from the acceptable Old Testament, the woman Olivia speaks for that child howling for Jerusalem: daughter of Zion, city of gold, beauty of all Israel. Baby Livie contemplated walking her new white shoes up to the Tree of Life. Instead, she, like all of us, has fallen onto the Lone and Dreary world. Mr. Sun beats down bleaching her golden curly crown. He promises a brighter day:

"Come up," says the sun, "come up". (26)

All humanity falls, all cradles rock with a midday breeze. The trick is to get back up and query the Wind from a familiar refuge. Lawren Harris speaks of humans' attempts to expand their range of possibilities:

It must be that all possibilities, all directions, all courses in nature and in man have to be explored, manifested, and exhausted. We live only when we adventure and give expression to the results of our adventure. So we permit all rules, conventions, institutions, and prohibitions to become stable only that we may thereby have a base from which to adventure further, a working place wherein to give form to our findings, and a resting place wherein to recuperate from past efforts and acquire energy for further adventure. (138)

The human story posits a safe place where confines can be challenged, perceptions distanced so that dialogue can begin with the reader/author/text and, hence, limits can be experienced. This "liminal space" described by Victor Turner is a safe space where perceived boundaries can be examined and expanded. Frye suggests that literature is a space where interchange between illusion and reality can correspond thus, literature posits a safe place to dialogue in a powerful way with perceived boundaries (Harris 4). "What the imagination re-creates is the only thing that can be genuinely real,

because it is the only thing that does not change or changes entirely on its own terms. (xii)" Thus, the telling of the human story becomes a mythic guide for such an interchange. Douglas Hunt speaks of this transaction:

All stories create a separate world that stands beside this everyday one and becomes a commentary on it. All challenge our complacent and sometimes unexamined assumptions about life. Perhaps most significantly, all explore a region opened up to the oldest recorded stories, the region of our deep hopes and fears. (5)

We are journeying to a conscious ontology at our own pace. Estes regards solemn moments of observation in story as map fragments, little pieces of pine pitch for fastening feathers to trees to show the way, flattened underbrush as a guide to *el mundo subterraneo*, the underground world of our psychic home:

Stories set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged or cornered. Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way out, down, or up, and for our trouble, cuts for us fine wide doors in previously blank walls, openings that lead to the dreamland, that lead to love and learning that lead us back to our real lives. (39)

The challenge to our beliefs becomes the climax of the story. The reader limply walks back into the world having seen life from a novel standpoint. The book has had an *affect* on him or her. Life will never quite be the same.

Ian Watts describes the possible transaction of ideas posited by story which has "a milieu which contains an insistence upon the importance of individual experience and the distrust of universals, and an elevation of the data of the senses as the necessary means by which ideas are formed" (24). The individual experience, or the encountering of diverse human relationships becomes, for the length of the book, a new milieu in which to ponder one's existence, distrust of universals, elevate senses and incorporate new ideas.

This leads to an explication of fiction, which takes its part in the mythologizing or demythologizing of our human selves and stories, as an imaginative exploration of the limitations of the human condition through which boundaries are momentarily

transcended allowing the discovery, exploration and transcending of meta-boundaries in such a way that what is numinous and limitless is allowed to shine through what is mortal and limited. These illuminations are summits consciously and unconsciously placed by a sensitive writer to be consciously and unconsciously received by a sympathetic reader. Yet, always present is the human story, the most important motif in fiction.

In the novel, Olivia recounts her disappointment with her seemingly immovable limits. She perceives her limits as the product of a moment of disobedience. Her shame will forever affect her outlook:

Perhaps I should not have opened my eyes leaving retinas unshielded against the great celestial orb; blindness became my block. Why didn't I use the folded negative like the others? Why did I rebel and look till auras overwhelmed my vision. Auras around my Mom, around my Dad, around my teachers. Haloes. Yet, even when I stared and stared, no auras for me. Mirror, mirror on the wall, where are my auras? Blackness. Blue Moon, what went wrong? (6)

The paradigm of the family has become frame and boundary for Livie's allowable world. Lily should not have been so silly. Blinded by looking at Mr. Sun with eyes unshielded, Livia blames herself.

Perspectives narrow to adopt a tolerated culture, community, universe. Tradition demands her to conform, conform, conform. Yet, there is an unconscious that knows more. Livie has partaken of the fruit. If literature discloses the inner self in the story of human against human, human against nature, human against society, human against machine, human against God, human against self, then literature is obviously the story of human conflict within his or her perceived limits. The forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is the Tree of Life that looms in the midst of the Garden protected by the armed cherubim of our own fears and desires (Campbell 103).

Perhaps the war that rages in fiction is that war humans wage against their own cherished perceptions. And yet, the war continues, and fiction is the peaceful account of that war. Armed for the battle, we fluff up our pillows to lie down with the book

prepared for the story of our lives. Epiphanies, those illuminating thoughts that have emerged since Day One, trip us up to tell us something of who we really are. Erich Kahler views the internalization of narrative as "the movement from external action and epic adventure to the ever-deeper and more intense exploration of character and personality—as part of the general evolution of human consciousness as a whole" (xiii). Literature points to the vast subjective world of both the writer and the reader intensifying his or her awareness of the world within.

Narrative Techniques

Yet, the novel is not without technique for technique is the craft that leads to a satisfying whole. Literary criticism directs an identification and an examination of the parts to see how they pull the work together. To appreciate a literary work is to understand the strategies, the power of various techniques that move the heart of the narrative into the heart of the reader. In the preface to *The Craft of Fiction*, Percy Lubbock describes the skill that fashions the story into a work of art:

The craft of fiction, not the art: they may be one and the same, the art and the craft, with no true working distinction to be drawn between them, and so indeed they are—but how differently they sound! Art is a winged word, neither to hold nor to bind, ever ready to fly away with a discussion that would fasten it to its own ground and to the work that bears its name. The homely note of the craft allows no such distractions; it holds you fast to the matter in hand, to the thing that has been made and the manner of its making; nor lets you forget that the whole of the matter is contained within the finished form of the thing, and that the form was fashioned by the craft.

The word *technique* can refer to any device the author uses to advance the narrative. It is the sequence and the proportion, the mix of technical devices that bring movement to the rhythm of the story. Not only do these techniques reveal the character of the protagonist, Olivia, they also further her story. Schorer speaks of technique in "Technique as Discovery":

Everything is technique which is not the lump of experience itself, and one cannot properly say that a writer has no technique, or that he eschews technique, for, being a writer, he cannot do so. We can speak of good and bad technique, of adequate and inadequate, of technique which serves the novel's purpose, or disserves. (Stevick 67)

Critical analysis discloses the parts and how the marriage of those parts together work to bring about a satisfying whole. While there is a multitude of devices that could be discussed, those I have chosen to examine are: scene, summary, dialogue and the characterization that evolves through these devices to demonstrate the interlocking effect that builds sound fiction. Form, mediation, language and plot will be addressed under separate headings.

Scene sequences are significant because they relay the body of the narrative while allowing characterization to develop and radiate. Penetrating the mechanics of scene, we find the perspective, most often limited, of the narrator and characters. Scenes cut through descriptions because the character or story action is shown, not told. This demands that the reader contribute his or her imagination to bridge the fictional gaps to find the human element. A scene from *The Eighth Day* recounts Livie's search for the meaning of life as she and her sister belly up to a bar in Vegas:

The ice tinkled in the thin glass, and through the clear liquor and the cut glass, I could perceive the whole glorious world as through a seer stone. Las Vegas. Glory be. Look at the lights. The honest glamour. I'd been cloistered. It was true. I'd been in the same closet that Doreen fermented grape juice in a corked crockpot that was about to burst. We ordered another. Money rained down like bells of angels; we had arrived. The Almighty dollar. (82)

The technique of portraying a scene such as this beckons the reader to recapture the forces that guide the protagonist towards his or her personal perspectives. Many scenes, framed by their collective coalition, move the novel while telling the human story.

Scenes work in conjunction with summaries that describe character, flashbacks, a review of a day on the river and so on. Livie summarizes the scene at the Pop home where she will baby-sit until morning:

Mrs. Pop was ready to go when I arrived. She was already wearing a rabbit skin fur that reached the floor. Two hundred rabbits had given up the ghost. (109))

Livie's description of the scene reports more about Livie than the Pop's home. This is as it should be; the novel is not about the Pops. In a summary, we can discover in the flattened underbrush the resting place of many silent characteristics and beliefs. The mediator employs summary as a meaningful way to condense a scene that has passed. This is particularly apparent if the summary is written in the first person as in the example above. Summaries intrude to say something of the characters while disclosing the scene narrated.

Both scene setting and the scene summarized bring about the developing characters of the story. Dialogue articulates and shades a character further, often by his or her own report, as well as descriptive dialogue suggested by another; thus character enlarges relationships within the art of discourse. The combination of dialogue with other narrative techniques is the mainstay of the writer's craft. In the following dialogue, Livia and Ralph quarrel about the hurtful truth of Livia's progress into puberty:

If he was lying about my K.T.A. shirt, I didn't know. I prayed he would be honest just this once. He said that he could *not* see through the shirt. "Are you sure?"

"Hate God if it's a lie."

"That oath means something only if you love God in the first place."

"I do love God; he is my Lord and Savior." (102)

It is with the blend of scene, summary and dialogue that the characters come alive and waken the reader to a fictional reality. Used well, these techniques progress to become the art of the novel. Bentley sums up these devices:

The blend of scene, summary, dialogue, is—or was . . . the novelist's medium, his fictitious prose narrative; through and by this he must portray characters and actions representative of reality in a plot of more or less complexity; through and by this he must give us that patterned impression of dynamic life which is the purpose of all art. (Stevick 57)

Explicit characterization is the result of direct exposition or description that defines the figure. Characterization through action occurs where little or no explanation is given—the human condition is shown in dialogue, in actions of the character or shown through the actions and reactions of related characters. Characterization through behavior is inferred from contextual behavior and diction. The following excerpt, where personality is shown through behavior, portrays the development of Livia's young character. Moreover, the excerpt shows the permission she receives from accepting adults to be, to be, to become. Ten year old Livie speaks of a peak moment in a coffee shop:

But there was a dancing chihuahua in the coffee shop, he stood on his back legs and begged for glossette raisins. Even Gee, the Chinaman liked him, and the dog liked me, and Gee liked me, and the men looked up from their coffee and laughed. And when the men looked up from their coffee, they saw me; they saw me when they looked up from their coffee. And all of mankind was created in their glance. I sneezed. Oh, it was like the first Sabbath day, only better. And the chihuahua danced for his raisins and I whirled with him resting in the joy of living. It was David before the Ark of the Covenant. Ecstatic, crazy, rapt in the bliss of dog and child. Deeper, deeper, deeper!
(21)

Characters, though created and disciplined by the juxtaposition of words, nevertheless live prior to and outside language. Characters become tangible personalities realized in words. Douglas Hunt suggests that "we learn more about a man in 150 words than we will ever learn about most of our neighbors" (9). A few minutes in the coffee shop reveals Livie's need to be recognized as a distinct individual. The development of her character moves reality into the writer/reader's world like some mysterious ghost to possess their mind and hearts. Place the pencil on the paper, Livie knows where to go; the young protagonist has a life that needs exploring. Sit back and incorporate her adventure. She will go where no one has dared to go, she will seek out new adventures, she will address her (and perhaps our own) deepest shame. On discovering the beauty of

flesh, Livie, alone and frightened, tentatively and sheepishly explores her own breasts, showing her character through action:

Stop. My hand crept up my stomach. Stop. My arms reached round to the clasp. Stop. Undid it. Stop. I lifted the cloth. Stop. I looked down. Stop. To see breasts. Stop. I had fleshy breasts. Stop. My fingers tingled. Stop. My nipples stood erect. Stop. I had fleshy breasts. Stop. Just like the pictures. Stop. I brushed across. It was soft and smooth. It was warm, like living flesh. Like graceful living flesh—artistic, refined, beautiful. A breastplate of desire. Stop. This I discovered. Stop. At two AM. Stop. At Pops'. Stop. Breathtaking. (110)

The scene above relates both the character of Olivia while it sets the stage and advances the narrative. Livie, who loathed the thought of womanhood has come to an epiphany of her own while sitting on the tattered chesterfield at the Pops reading a girlie magazine. It is 2 A.M.

Writing characterization in *The Eighth Day* was, in part, another unconscious action. As I suggested above, I set down the pencil and watched the characters interact until the story was told through scene, summary, dialogue and characterization. The host in *Canterbury Tales* expounds similarly when a group of pilgrims ride to Canterbury while they spin their stories. So, too, the pilgrim, Livie, has a story to tell. Without technical devices the story would be flat exposition. With devices used skillfully, the story comes alive. For the most part, I have simply listened and written, allowing scenes, summaries, dialogue and the resulting characterization to join forces as they meld together an unfolding story:

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddess love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse. (lines 3171-3177)

Form and Function

While form is almost synonymous with structure, function defines the strategies and patterns that enclose the world of the story, those motifs which perform cooperatively to give the story full definition. Just as the meaning of a literary text cannot be divided from narrative devices such as scene and summary, neither can the form be separated from its function. Form *is* the unifying structure that draws the scenes, summaries, dialogues into a cohesive whole while allowing characters to develop throughout. The form can be set by multiple viewpoints of a developing narration as in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a story that slowly discloses a mulish family's individual hidden agendas as they proceed to move Mother's coffin by mules to the city where she supposedly can rest in peace. The function is influenced by the trials, the life and times of the novel. In Burney's *Evelina*, letters function as the means of relating the narrative form of the novel as the protagonist Evelina receives and writes the story of her life in London to her country guardian, Reverend Vickers. Form in *The Eighth Day* functions to bring a seven stage descent to fruition within a three day sojourn in Kings Crossing Municipal Hospital.

Form restrains superfluous episodes and events that may impinge on the story at hand. Form confines a text to the meaningful moment giving the reader a structure, a strong sense of foundation, wherewith he or she can accept preposterous stories. I stand all amazed with Gass that form can set up a reality in the novel which functions to bring about a believable interpretation, sets up a world where readers can believe in fictional characters or even accept unbelievable ones simply by using ordinary words. Gass observes:

It seems incredible, the ease with which we sink through books quite out of sight, pass clamorous pages into soundless dreams. That novels should be made of words, and merely words, is shocking, really. It's as though you had discovered that your wife were made of rubber: the bliss of all those years, the fears . . . from sponge. (27)

Gass may be correct. Perhaps the world is an illusion, smoke and mirrors, and his fear of a rubber wife is legitimate. Heaven only knows the hell that authors recognize as they people actual worlds with words. An internal mythic descent is not externally ordinary or believable. Yet, because of a reliable form, Livia's descent becomes credible, her suffering convincing.

Life, as the protagonist knows it, ends at the beginning of *The Eighth Day*. Unhappily confined by tradition, forty year old Livia uses a Sumerian myth as a paradigm that coaxes Livia to follow the Sumerian Queen's quest: to descend, and in her descent find her death or perhaps another life.

Olivia's initial descent is decided because she refuses to live the expected life. Using handfuls of drugs, the novel begins as Olivia attempts to close the life she has lived, the life she is living. Any end is better than to continue. Frustrated by lost expectations and defeated desires, the scene begins with dialogue between Olivia and Stan, her estranged husband. She asks him to sign documents that leave to her four children all her worldly goods:

What is this all supposed to mean? You are not going to get one more dime out of me. Not one thin dime! Not even when the baby is born, so I wouldn't go around giving away your only means of livelihood! Here, I'll gladly sign. Hand me the papers. (12)

With Stan and the children gone, Livia and her fetal child can escape the powerless and uncertain world she has inhabited:

He's gone! They're all gone! The baby! Blessed Mary. The toilet! Get to the toilet. Hot blood warms my shivering legs. I'm sick. I'm so sick. Oh, I'm so sick.

I'm blind. Can these two blue lines get me to the bathroom? I think not. Rest. Rest. Rest. "What have I done?"

"Blue lines, will you guide me to the sink? No?"

Hail Mary Full of Grace,
Find this child a resting place.
Amen. (13)

Can Kings Crossing Municipal keep Livie and her unborn infant alive? The laws of life grant them only three days to make their seven stage descent.

Mediation

To detach an author from the story, an author sets up a point of view from which to mediate the story. Although the world presented in the work takes its quality from the consciousness of the author, the mediator sets down the spectacle of the book moving the curtain back and forth to develop a continuum of control while arranging the timing of insight, the distance of intimacy and the peaks of crises. Endless varieties of distance are portioned to the mediator for endless sorts of effects. Mediation consciously directs, seemingly by reliability, often coaxing the reader to accept or reject the many attitudes purported in the work.

Authors have experimented with different degrees of mediation control. The range of mediation is wide, moving from first person to third person, from limited to limited omniscient or completely privileged. An author chooses the method of mediation that posits the best possibility of catching skewed perspectives, ironies, distances that allow characters to exist in their own right.

In a third person limited point of view a single character provides the means of knowing the world depicted. The limited third person works from a vantage of "he" or "she". *The Eighth Day* is written almost entirely in the first person yet, Livie, reviewing a frightening encounter with her Father, slips into a third person account:

He was her father. Why did he hurt his daughter? Why did he leave her half dead on the road to Jericho? He was supposed to be a Father, not a thief. She thought he was a Priest or maybe God. Would God freeze baby cats? Perhaps He would. He pulled the girl's hair. He blacked her eyes. He broke her red rose tea set. What is a rose cup to obedience: no eating in the living room — not ever. (66)

This third person mediation supplies Livia the ability to distance herself from this intimate and appalling scene so that she can retrieve the event while detaching from much of the fear and shame she experienced.

The first person mediator in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* allows the reader to enter into the central experience of Moll's consciousness. Her memoirs are the story skewed as they may be. Moll, the first person mediator, spins the story of her life, consciously and unconsciously telling and showing the life and times in early London and the attitudes that propel her to forsake children, to steal, to move against her own consciousness in an attempt to live however awful and shameful that life may be.

Mediators, limited in perspective or attitude, such as the first person narrator in Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, weave dubious stories where readers must remain guarded, fill in gaps and work for the truth. Mrs. Noyse relates a one sided story of her life before and during the great deluge. Readers find sympathy for her, the fairies, the dying unicorn and even for the tall Lucifer dressed as the woman, Lucy. Yet Mrs. Noyse' story shows us the guilt ridden Noah who cares more about pleasing his silent God. Thus, readers find compassion for all the characters carried in three large boats sailing for a new land. In this way opposition is reconciled, not by the mediator, but by the reader.

An omniscient mediator in Jean Toomer's "Becky" moves without restriction into the minds and motives of all characters weaving stories that readers accept only tentatively because this sort of mediator creates a multi-consciousness that fragments reality according to the number and the variety of perspectives shown. Although motives, personal thoughts and perceptions are shown, the reader, introduced to this chaotic multi-conscious narrative, must work for some form of reality and meaning.

In choosing narrative distance, the author can allow the characters to develop by scene, summary and dialogue to portray vivid worlds of expanding individuals or graphically suspicious individuals who will affect the reader. "One of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to

obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart" (Booth 3). In this way, the author records a story dependent upon the consciousness of the mediator or the various mediators.

However the mediation is developed, the author is always present, an implied version of the self, bidding the story to strip away the fabricated life, always coaxing, always showing a partial unveiling. Booth describes: "The created author, the 'second self,' is built up in our minds from our experience with all of the elements of the presented story" (Stevick, "Distance and Point of View" 93).

Using the consciousness of one character all but dissolves the distance between the narrator and the author. This sort of presentation sets up an intimacy between the narrator and the reader as in a confessional. A sympathetic, if not biased, relationship exists as the first person narrator, the primary mediator in *The Eighth Day* who relates from the consciousness of the protagonist, is limited by her own perspectives and thus limits the reader's look at reality.

The protagonist's report, the experiences she relates, however biased or unbalanced, is the reality of this novel. The character, Olivia, in *The Eighth Day*, is the novel. Her thoughts, perceptions, her stream of consciousness, however distorted, play a more important part than the discourse, description, or the action of the story. She is an adult who looks back on a life ruled by convention and a protective imagination:

My job was to pry the heavy wooden door open from the rotted cement foundation while potatoes eyed me through corrupt basement cracks. Only strong bony hands and fingernails filled with determination could budge that archaic door. My hands ached with a will to win. Shouldering that inch opening, I forced my callused foot to take the distance. With my spine braced inside the inch of rotting door, sawdust showered my hair, and about me, scattering confetti as if I were Hathor, primeval mother of us all, as she greeted the sun. Fetal crouched legs successively straightened to press bare feet against stony cement, my back against the wall, and as in the creation of the world, the potato pit door scraped open. And in the dim light of the cold basement, I gave the salamanders time to scurry to their hollow and putrid

potato mothers. Spontaneous combustion in the potato pit; this is where I began. (13)

The mediator has dissolved, or moved by osmosis, into the skin of the woman Olivia.

There is, however, a variety of ways the mediation moves within the story. Novels, as has been pointed out, are not necessarily only one point of view. As another mediating device, Olivia uses bits of poetry, rhymes, prayers and excerpts from various pieces of prose to assist her in the telling of her tale; they leap out of her mind to dialogue as old friends, old arguments. Throughout the book, she raises prayers to Mary, Mother of God; Mary, her sister who died at three days old; Mary, her wetsome betsome doll. Dreams, poetry, prayers, the muses in all their variety, mediate, advise and speak for the protagonist as the journey advances. During the chapter that concerns her puberty, Livie laments if only she could wear her Kindness To All Animals T-shirt. If only she didn't have to grow up. The following poem relates her strong sentiments against her budding breasts:

I could know
Wonders wild
if I could grow
Up to a child. (94)

This short poem, placed in the context of undesired womanhood, changes the meaning of the original rhyme to relate the feelings of a reluctant adolescent.

In a spiteful quarrel with her sister, Rahab repeats a poem of the war, the faceless holy jihad that has so nobly enlisted the unconscious Olivia.

*A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers;
There was lack of woman's nursing, there was dearth of woman's tears;
But a comrade stood beside him, and he took that comrade's hand,
And he said, "I never more shall see my own, my native land. (Crane, "Open Boat" 68)*

while she was shepherded to church or the great public school while the geranium on the windowsill died.

Language

Language can never be fully adequate to accomplish the task demanded of it because neither grammar nor connotation can contain a total expression or a mixed emotion. Language is limited to words, not gestures, not smiles or body language, nor can you predict what effect the words will bring to the reader. Because literature is imaginative, one can neither judge its worth nor validate its meaning by looking at factual details. Yet, common words can be manipulated to speak of frightening emotions as well as tumultuous events. It is the mix and mixture of ordinary words in an extraordinary way that wakes the reader to a true fictional story. Chaucer speaks of the honor that a writer must use to relate stories constructed with words, the genius that words envelop, the capacity that words contain to equitably relate a tale to a reader:

Whoso that kan hym rede,

The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede. (line 741)

In an attempt to understand human perceptions, or limited perceptions, language has to be studied as a system of relations. Because humans see the world through language, coherence begins between word associations and categories. This emphasis can be found in a *syntagmatic* model as in sentences where the linear syntax relates noun to verb to object in a chain of sequential associations, or the relation can be found in the *paradigmatic* model where a kind of similar pattern is suggested between ideas as in the metaphor. The language that orients the reader to the story takes the reader along a horizontal axis, following a syntagmatic model, whereas language using metaphorical comparisons takes the reader along a vertical axis, following a paradigmatic model. Together, these devices work in tension to take the reader beyond the language used in the text into the deeper structures of language and perception relationships.

The Eighth Day relates the linear story of a contemporary woman, Olivia, whose account is a narrative about her horizontal, expected/accepted Brown life on the Brown Farm. In her youth, Livie was drawn by tradition to accept this syntagmatic life. However, dreams, musings and conversations intrude into her pristine life pressing her to the boundaries where she is installed, or has installed herself. While pregnant, Olivia is jerked into an unforeseen divorce; the story relates how Olivia is propelled towards a threshold that demands mystical-mythic intervention. Dialogue and summary urge the reader to appreciate the point of Olivia's dissolution.

Because our language controls what we see, we see life only in relation to the language system that we use. We describe what we see, we see what we describe. Analysis allows one to look at the language structures that posit the generating principles of the text. Just as a psychologist sees patterns in a way a person presents his or her life, so a structuralist sees patterns operating in an individual work. Rules and broken rules of grammar describe conformity, or the lack of it. Verbs carry conscious and unconscious directional order. Characters, seemingly in opposition, are often two sides of the same coin. Rites that separate also incorporate. A structural study describes how Inanna's descent may become her ascent. By penetrating below the level of the apparent, a reader can penetrate to key beliefs, perceptions, and actions and thereby find patterns that characters live by. These patterns are found in language which allow the reader to receive parallel, expansive paradigms and new ideologies.

Because the human progression of life insists that candidates move from puberty to adolescence, from an unconscious to more conscious, from life to death, human life is hedged about by thresholds of shifting paradigms which become the subject of the human story. In a structuralist's reading, these stories are studied in an effort to discover the movement of a society or individual who progresses from one paradigm of thinking into another. Van Gennep describes movements from stage to stage as *rites of passage*. By studying the language of myth employed by a culture performing or describing their rites of passage, information is made available to those who look for both author's intention as

well as unconscious constraints which are partially manifested through the language systems employed.

A structural reading of Olivia's account will note the language relationships employed and thus, see in the midst of unlimited potential, boundaries that hold Olivia to a rigid Judaeo Christian past. The Inanna myth is the conscious and almost tangible tool Olivia may use as a guide to deconstruct her rigid boundaries to cross frightening thresholds that she must pass to journey to a new and conscious space. To do so Olivia must deconstruct or disassemble her controlling metaphors while cautiously looking before and after. The Inanna myth will press Olivia to scrutinize the language, the metaphors and allegories which structure her life.

Plot

Plot is an ordered action based on the author's notions of causality where individual scenes, summaries, events and so on are related to the larger design. Often called *defamiliarized story*, plot incorporates characters, events, actions exterior or interior into a coherent whole, enclosing the story as they are narrated. While events do not occur in fiction as they do in real life, plot pulls together the incongruent parts to a whole.

Plot is the mortar that keeps the reader involved while conflicts, yearnings, doubts, possible alternate paths confront the characters during the story. Annie Dillard speaks of the intrigue in the plot of the novel which

is not a tract. Insofar as it is complex and honest, it will be enriched by a certain amount of contradiction which gives depth and rondure to ideas; insofar as it is energetic and powerful, it will have the vigor of many clashing materials; insofar as it is broad and broken, like the great world, much that is in it will make little or no sense. (153)

In the novel, Olivia cleaves to Farmer Brown's boy who cleaves to the Brown Farm. Her resolve long years ago to carve an intimate family life and home on Alberta's windy prairie has come to an impasse. She has explored, searched and ultimately she has

resigned herself to wait for divine intervention. The Fathers Brown impede her inquest. The Browns are a private family ; Olivia is too public. Better keep her away from the farm hands. Anyones hands. Perhaps she'd like another baby? Watch that she doesn't get it into her head to open a Tour Agency (140).

Thus, Olivia's sovereignty comes to a halt because of her faith in harmony and her overwhelming fear of the fear of the great Patriarch—Father Brown. Years pass while Livie, ever faithful to the infant children and the covenant of marriage, quietly stands by—powerless. What happened to her dreams of intimacy? Will Stan ever leave his mama and come home? Will they ever get off the Brown Farm? O, where is the light, that epiphany that beckoned her so many years ago? Surely, it did not carry her to this quiet contentious life?

The plot of this novel moves only when Livie is moved or ready to investigate her perceptions, the responsible beliefs that have kept her dutifully vacuuming the carpets, frying bacon, praying for deliverance while staring out of her picture window gazing at the moon for a hopeful look at a familiar face.

One day she comes to an impasse. Her life cannot continue this way. The end of the woman the town knew as Olivia Whitiker Brown commences at the beginning. For Olivia it is a journey through the veil into the depths of death.

With a handful of drugs, she and her fetus quietly slip through the curtain. A return to the human race would be, for Livie, an unwilling circular return to loneliness. She will not respond to the hospital efforts to revive her or her child. She came to find an *other* life, an *other* death.

With a stranger's blood dripping through an intravenous, the life of Livie and her fetus are held in check for three days. Surrounded by the suck and surge of ICU, Livie leaves her mortal life in the hands of the hospital while she knowingly plunges into the pit. The story moves from horizontal to a pilgrimage that moves up and down a vertical

axis as Livie sleeps and wakes discovering her governing metaphors; metaphors that hold her compulsive world in chaos.

The myth of Inanna coaxes Olivia to reveal the significance of her experiences. Reflections of childhood related by the cynical adult illuminate and distort the tender story of the powerless child; the displaced innocent, and more significantly, the innocent in the adult. Looking back on earlier versions of herself, Olivia reviews the past placing it into the present, projecting it into the future. Deeply affected by powerful inheritances from her past, Olivia comes to a conclusion at the beginning of the novel—what folly it has been to have searched for tranquillity and happiness:

Three beautiful children, a matchless marriage, a career in tourism were doomed to wax, wane, and finally give up. Oh, gibbous moon, eclipsed as you are, what do you hide that the tides must tell your restless story? What stories lie buried in crater dust and brachia rock on the *other* side? If only I could stamp out your ember, pull the blind, give myself respite from your officious gaze, but like some Peeping Tom, I urge you to yield your secrets—demons living in caves, the Moscow Sea, cheese. Tell me, Artemis, waxing and waning. What is the point? (6)

Wrestling with these past perceptions, Olivia is coaxed to look and reconcile, look and reconcile. But for Livie who has lived in the whirlwind, where is the eye of the storm?

I was legally blind in one eye; my other eye made up for it, seeing things as they should be. Every moment was protected by my sight, if not by one eye then by the other; not even hindsight sullied my world. (36)

In an attempt to appreciate this blindness, Livie is carried before the great courts of the Underworld. She need not open her eyelids to admit the unfortunate place she has inhabited, the unfortunate place she inhabits. In a dramatic scene, Livie is tried. Judgment is decreed by Queen Rahab:

The dark sister fastened on Inanna the eye of death.
She spoke against her the word of wrath.
She uttered against her the cry of guilt:

Rahab addresses the court:

Ladies, and Gentlemen of the jury. You have heard this woman admit that she has consistently, and almost effectively hidden all evidence that she herself is Rahab, Queen of the Underworld; that she has single-handedly denied this Noble Queen a life; that she has destroyed her own life, and that of her unborn child, in a futile effort to contain the truth that she is not only Inanna, Queen of Heaven, in fact, she is Rahab, wife, and mother in Hell. I petition the court to find the defendant guilty as charged. There is no other course.
(193)

Olivia, desiring the perfect life, has excluded the light of her dark sister. She has lived the cheerful life of fear and she is now found guilty as charged. The charge of guilt becomes the climax of the story. Livie's life has been framed. Naked, she is hung on a hook, left to rot. Olivia descended to find death; instead, she found the enlightening metaphors that framed her unexamined life. The beginning of a new life for Livie and her infant closes the story:

I was released from Kings Crossing Municipal, a certified potato mother, with long rooty eyes snaking up to the leafy heavens and down, down to the dark, wet underworld. I peeped opened my eyes. The one was still looking inward for more than just the cotton ball I'd shoved there in grade four, the other was still seeing things as they should be. I looked in and I looked out. And it was still the Eighth Day. (260)

Technical devices, form, mediation and language, if artfully developed, explicate a narrative that advances a credible plot to resolve and close the novel binding it with paper and glue into fashioned craft and printed art.

Myth

Built on the rock of the psyche, myth is a story whose truth is set forth symbolically and is so basic it serves as a pattern which enhances our understanding sometimes calling for emulation. Joseph Gaer speaks of the employment humans have made of myth:

Men's minds are ruled as much by fable as by fact, as much by myth as by mathematics, and as much by legend as by logic. For the unknown is

infinitely greater than the known, and in the realm of the mysterious, the imagination is a readier guide than the intellect. (vii)

Myth is not primarily concerned with the horizontal axis of cause and effect, but with the vertical relationships of microcosm and macrocosm. Yet, a horizontal life can bring an initiate to this vertical axis with cosmic questions that beg consideration. Since all of humanity has fears, wishes, hopes and dreams, all of humanity begs the question: What is the point of this horizontal life? This question asked with true intent brings consciousness to the human predicament. The place is the threshold of a rite of passage; a place where myths pilot while metaphors reveal.

Turner suggests that *rites de passage* are found in all societies, but tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies where change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrence rather than technological innovations (94). I would suggest that contemporary life also conforms with his description of cyclical societies where rites of passage are observable, and describable. Contemporary man and woman are also moving through and looking from a liminal state. We are all in process of becoming, of transforming from age to age, child to adult, from dependent to interdependent. Such conditions are in need of perspective, a wholeness which mitigates transitions between states of fragmentation. The common human condition of moving from age to age, from state to state fits the structural description of transition observed and laid out by Turner:

All rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limin*), and aggregation. The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions; during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state; in the third phase the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate is in a stable state once more. (94)

The Descent of Inanna is a myth with potent metaphorical implications and directions for contemporary transitions. Although the story of Inanna's descent is an ancient ritual text believed to have risen in the context of a vegetation and rebirth

ceremony, any enterprise to interpret life, which is the heart of ritual, is translated through metaphor, the juxtaposition of one image or idea with another. The idea of the pure meeting the corrupt presents a threshold of potential reconciliation—a liminal, transitory field, a place where unrestrained elements ring with the possibility of growth and unity. The myth of Inanna stacks the metaphors of her descent enabling Livie to investigate the metaphors that govern her life. Each governing metaphor must be found and appreciated and amended before she can descend paradigmatically through seven liminal portals that lead to the Underworld. To become whole, "an individual must transcend what he or she is, consider what he or she is not, evaluate external pressures to conform to social norms, and only then can that person emerge as a unique soul" (Jung 88). Somehow, the unfolding and investigation of our dominant metaphors lead us closer to individuation to bring our masquerade into the light and thus, to reveal our individual, and collective human predicament. Metaphors connect disparate relationships—more affective than description, more effective than explanation, which, if reconciled, contains the terror of intimacy and wholeness. In the myth of the descent of Inanna, the Great Above meets the Great Below. Because the myth of Inanna describes, through metaphor, the merger of the Great Above with the Great Below, the myth serves the novel as a road map that allows Olivia, the initiate, to reconcile her dissimilar metaphors:

From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below.

From the Great Above the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.

From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.

My Lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.

Inanna abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.

She abandoned her office of holy priestess to descend to the underworld.

(Wolkstein 52)

Although *The Eighth Day* can be studied syntagmatically as the story/narrative of the life of Olivia, the mythic story posits metaphoric paradigms for the initiate whose rite demands that she descend to discover her unconscious motives and beliefs. The examination of individual limits is the only way one can ascend to the present life and language of options and choice.

The metaphor holds paradoxical and dissimilar language images which invite the reader to change his or her perception of reality. Conflict in elements of language posit incompatibility; however, if one accepts the truth of the compared, yet dissimilar ideas, and changes a frame of reference, the elements may suddenly appear to be compatible, even true; a truth which establishes a new perspective. Kahler suggests such consciousness is arrived at in polarity: "Only when viewed in terms of this dualistic aspect—the development of consciousness and the development of the reality corresponding to it—do the arts gain their full human significance" (3). This process encourages readers to sacrifice traditional concepts, to take risks, to make leaps into the dark, to reassess our assumptions.

James Fernandez speaks of this divisive world of assumptions as one in which humans try to find their place: "[as humans] we are required to invent ways of being—from rules and plans to world views and cosmologies—more or less appropriate to any of the diverse milieus in which we have installed ourselves" (vii). Because humans are installed, or have installed themselves, in the diverse human milieu, the honest, however clever, account of the adventure of humankind called fiction will assist them as they read dissimilar lives, find motives, conscious and unconscious, that might illuminate their own human predicament.

The syntagmatic story in *The Eighth Day* recounts the life of a woman with four children and another child on the way. Married to Farmer Brown's boy, this woman resolves to plant a family of order with deeply-rooted desires for intimacy with the infinite. Years pass. God? god? man or woman in the moon? Is this horizontal life honest? In Kings Crossing Municipal, Olivia is safe from the Brown Clan. Only in Kings Crossing Municipal can she ask the serious vertical questions.

In the first third of the novel, the reader is introduced to a syntagmatic narrative that represents Livie's flat, horizontal life where dreams are dropped, and compromise reigns. This is not only Livie expecting the familiar life found in a well-known

community and family, it is also the fruit of living and working with the English language. Frye explains the dilemma of working with syntax in language:

In English a central agreement is the subject-predicate-object convention. The authority of the non-verbal fact gets considerably cut down in this process: we may try to pretend that the subject-predicate-object relation is inherent in the nature of things, but even if it were, the grammatical convention would still be the limit of what we can reach by this road. The difficulties in trying to understand much of contemporary science, for example, through a cumbersome verbal grid of nouns and verbs that insist on turning processes in space-time into things in space and events in time are recognized by everyone now (8).

Olivia's descent is not a descent into space, nor is it an event in time. To make the descent, she must allow a connection that transcends syntax. She needs a means to access more than the verbal structure will allow. Her frustration rules here because it takes more than literal language to acknowledge wordless memories, feelings, and beliefs that drive compulsion and cynicism.

Humans need language to apprehend and express undisclosed feelings and beliefs, and thus, arrive at a more complete understanding. A vehicle is needed with the power to speak the inchoate, the inexplicable. Metaphor is that powerful figure in language having the ability to unite "XYZ" to "A" in order to recognize and appreciate an unknown "O". In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur explains metaphor's function in shaping world view: "In the creation of meaning, metaphor destroys an order only to invent a new one. . . . Pushing this idea to the limit, one must say that metaphor bears information because it 're-describes' reality" (22). In the way tension between language and narrative spin intrigue, humans reinvent new reality by the juxtaposition of one idea to another. It is the syntagmatic and the metaphoric working together to tell a story that encompasses both the ontology and the chronology of our lives; to give us the perspective to see where we are going, where we are, and where we have gone.

All her life, Livie has looked upward for answers. Would the heavens ever open and disclose their secrets to her? Unaccepted, Livie wanders on, changing diapers, preparing meals, standing at the sink: should she wash the bread knife, or use it on her

arms, her legs, her face? She wipes the knife carefully, and slides it into the wooden rack. Where is God? And after the Girl Guide meeting, she sits the children on the chesterfield for bedtime stories: "Papa bear's bed was too hard." Who is God? Now, Lise needs another drink and Max forgot to brush his teeth. What is God? Will Stan ever leave his Father's god and come home? Should she hide the newspaper so they can talk? Is there a God?

Structurally speaking Livie's life is like wandering in a flat Judaeo Christian wilderness, looking upwards only to gape at a smoking mountain. Father Brown is the designated and exclusive Moses. He descends from the smoking mount with her answers:

With the drought the crops are burning, the Farm is going to purchase another combine, grocery money will be reduced by half. This must be as it should be: Father Knows Best. The patriarch, speaking with the voice of God Almighty, has disclosed His character. (141)

Livie is trapped in the tents of the wilderness: accept the manna and praise God. Livie lives in constant tension with her true *being*; therefore, Olivia is ushered into Kings Crossing Municipal where she can work out this conflict with fear, trembling and the guiding myth of Inanna: Queen of Heaven *and* Earth. Threatened with miscarriage and hospitalized with a depression that demands quick attention, Olivia's metaphors open in visions and dreams to disclose to Olivia her unexamined life. Her unconscious demands to be recognized. The myth of Inanna's descent guides here. *Rahab*, her long neglected creature-self, commands audience while *Inanna*, her dutiful persona, is reluctant to liberate Livie into the great unknown to sister Rahab, and the Great, Great Below. A house divided against itself must fall. Livie is such a house.

Olivia has fallen into a state of neurosis dictated by the desire to keep the values of the family, so that what appears is the good family, ideal, true and fully functional. She has been an innocent believer. But dark mysteries, locked away from her conscious mind, encroach on her pristine paradise. Although family myths, community myths and

metaphors may have served her as a safe refuge in her youth, they now threaten to consume her access to choice. In Kings Crossing Municipal, however, Olivia finds a safe place to transpose the Sumerian myth taken mythologically to amend a Christian myth taken literally, thus, assisting her to expand the limits of her world, to break the bands of life—the mortal fears that have held her back from being truly vulnerable, truly alive. Here, paradoxically, is the safe haven from which she may burst the chains that bind her; inherited chains accepted without question.

Jonathan Miller catalogues various conceptions of how the mind operates in both the preconscious state where ideas are accepted and used as scaffolding to limit and frame a safe world, and the unconscious state where unexpected ideas and frightening feelings are repressed and therefore rejected:

The child determines the boundaries of her world—limiting, forever after, all contrary intruders, skewing thought, screening information until all ideas fit into her safe familiar world. We need, as we grow up and as we learn, to control instinctual forces by repression, and repression normally makes our unconscious thinking inaccessible to us. There's a barrier which is very hard to lift and which cuts off our conscious reflective mind from our unconscious thinking. (104)

With the Queen of Heaven as guide, Livie descends into the womb of her being where she will meet her soiled-soul-sinister-self, Rahab. Along this journey she can discover amend or discard her heavy burdens of rigid beliefs. Only the clay of the gritty underworld can be used for an earthy crown. Only the inferno of the underworld can fire such a crown.

The descent of Inanna is divided into seven stages, each stage interchangeable, each stage a metaphor for further denuding the initiate until she arrives naked and kneeling at the foot of the throne of her sister, Queen of the earthy Underworld. This liminal process of proceeding through the gates can take any amount of time, sometimes a lifetime, often skewed and out of order. The valuables that Livie examines and removes at each portal are internal. To retrieve them she would have to ascend; however,

no one returns from the Underworld with the same character, the same temper. As with all candidates poised at a threshold, Livie understands the consequences. She has become a willing participant in this myth-ritual that will leave her beaten, stripped and hung on a hook.

In the original myth, Inanna's deliverer is *Enki*, the god of wisdom who creates flies to buzz through the portals and rescue the courageous woman with the bread and water of life. In the novel, the heroine does not fare so well. Olivia is not ready to accept rebirth:

The bread of Life. Again? It flies in the face of all experience. I don't want the Bread of Life—I don't want any bread. I don't want any life. Don't make me remarry Stan. Don't make me love the neighbors who reject me. Don't make me go back to the Little Brown Church in the Wildwood. Don't make this baby know a life like this. Don't make me need a Savior. Why did I come all this hellish way to rescue Rahab if I turn around and need rescuing myself. I don't. I knew that no traveler returns. I came down anyway; I'd nothing to lose. Let me lose nothing, and be finished with it. Let me rot on this hook; maggots are welcome to worm through my flesh. They fall out in clumps. I reach down and place them back. Consume. Consume. (212)

Although the myth is used as a decided center for the book, Olivia's experiences flesh out real bare bones in this myth. No more a trusting candidate, Livie refuses rebirth. Paul Ricoeur, the French phenomenologist, says that interpretation of a text involves a process of "appropriation" or making "one's own what is initially 'alien'". For Ricoeur, "the aim of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation. Interpretation brings together, equalizes, renders what was disparate, contemporary and similar. This goal is attained only insofar as interpretation actualized the meaning of the text for the present reader" (*Hermeneutics* 185). A text should not be a prisoner of the meaning ascribed to it by its original author or its original audience nor should it become the exclusive property of its present critics. If it is to continue to be vital, it must have a life of its own. Both extreme subjectivity and extreme objectivity can be avoided if the reader can reinterpret the text in the present yet watching before and aft into the world of the text. Thus, the reader experiences and simultaneously

appropriates the text while relinquishing his or her own biases to receive the myth as a vehicle to new self-knowledge. In this way, a contemporary and personal interpretation of the Inanna myth may bring about a product that is an extension of the text, a new version. And because this myth speaks of the process of examining our metaphors, *The Eighth Day* becomes through Olivia and her readers, a meta-metaphor, a meta-myth.

Conclusion

In *the end*, the composite of many narrative devices reveal the art, the craft and the narrative of fiction: there is the author who controls the strings, the implied author or narrators who reveal the puppet characters, there is the reader or audience who finds meaning, and there is the *second voice over*, the chime that insists upon *multiple* meanings that trail from *other* worlds— worlds that together the writer and reader bring to the story. There must be a sort of collaboration, a buying in on the part of the reader. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" It takes both writer and reader cooperation to set down the tale. William Gass speaks of the world of players:

In the dice game, the players finger disks, but if the game, by its conventions, calls them horses, they are horses. . . . For [art] can succeed only through the cooperating imagination and intelligence of its consumers, who fill out, for themselves, the artist's world and make it round, and whose own special genius partly determines the ultimate glory of it. (23)

In an unpublished essay, "Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons?", Ursula LeGuin speaks of the truth of fiction: "Children know perfectly well that unicorns aren't real, but they also know that books about unicorns are true"(1). Authors write story using a particular set of language relationships that set the text in time. Readers, fixed in their own time and perspective, read the text and assign significance. Both reader and writer play a part in the unpacking of the intrigue, meaning, or consequence. In this way, literature becomes a sort of inner dialogue that has possibility to distract or to lead to self discovery. W. H. Auden speaks of the relationship between reader and writer in a poetic dialogue between them:

"O Where are you going?" said reader to rider,
That valley is fatal where furnaces burn,
Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,
That gap is the grave where the tall return." (78)

Where are you going says reader to writer? Where are you going says writer to reader? Both perspectives finish the novel. Like the Eucharist, the finished novel takes on a new life for both the reader and writer. "If only for a moment, we participate in a myth of creation of a text, of our own selves. Order comes out of disorder, form out of chaos, as it did in the creation of the universe. The sense of joy comes from our participation" (May, *Courage* 148). Truly, we are in the Eighth Day. The Fall that Adam and Eve initiated describes the fall we all take as we leave our Garden of Innocence on a venture for Canaan, the Promised Land, abundant life in the lone and dreary world. So, we can all sing,

Ring around the rosies
A pocket full o' posies
Ashes, ashes
We *all* fall down.

And if we all fall, then the novel is the story of our fall, or worse, the story of our refusal to fall. Which is the more tragic? With thoughtful regard, we can be aware of the journey which eventually brings us 'round to the earthy *ring of roses*. Henry James pleads for this cognizant respect: "The one faculty [he] felt that the artist may require of his audience is that of close attention or deliberate appreciation; for it is by this faculty alone that the audience participates in the work of art" (xvii).

This limited critical commentary invites the reader to participate, pay attention — this story is a humus story rooted under the threshold window of two worlds that mark an eclipsed self. When the shadow of the moon comes between the earth and the sun, there is a darkening of the heavenly body. Saint John of the Cross' dark night of the soul. The tide rolls out. Structuralists could lay the rhythm on a grid. This tale begins in a potato pit and closes in the stalky world of leaves shooting for moonlight.

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The Eighth Day

by

Evelyn Van Galbraith

To Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth

To Eve, Mother of all living

To Livie

To you

Preface

Since my novel is a book that follows the light of the Sumerian myth of *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth*, I'm compelled to recognize holiness in the wind today. Writing is like giving birth. We are giving birth to innocence:

When the contraction first started, three days overdue, I thought I had a bad backache, then the flu; was this a migraine? I closed the door and cried. I was about to fragment and just as in *The Garden*, there was nothing I could do about it. I hung over the wretched toilet and talked to my mother who had long since given up the Ghost. She had six of us. Tell her I'm here, Mary. I understand her at last. (113)

Writing is moaning until the infant's head ruptures the Flood waters. It is the creative spill of guts, beliefs, hopes, betrayals; so many stories, so many to edit. I've spiraled to hell and back; drugs, divorce, miscarriage . . . everything I thought life would never be. My joy and grief has shaped who I am. Disillusioned, I am not who I would have been had I not descended.

I used to think I cried alone. Having written this novel, I now see I've simply rewritten the universal story, the universal predicament. Nor have I interpreted it humorously or as well as Eudora Welty or Timothy Findley, nor wittily or artfully as Virginia Woolf or Lawrence Sterne, but I have written it and at last I recognize the reason Sterne "slips us the wink". I understand, in part, Joyce's preoccupation with the church; I have witnessed the corruption of the human body of Elder Zossima.

Alan Friedman sums up my feelings:

"The whole becomes the sum not only of the parts but also of something more: the interconnectedness between and through the parts that sweeps us back as well as forward as we move through [life]" (Halperin, "The Modern Multivalent Novel" 123).

What fragile people this monumental humanity. Let us hold hands and confirm tenderly. Hear and understand, hear and understand—the moon calls each of us—malignantly.

The Eighth Day

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When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called.
But the more I called to them: the further they went from me.
They sacrificed unto the Baals, and they burned incense to graven images.
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the hand;
but they knew not that it was I who healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love;
I lifted the yoke from their necks and bent down to feed them.

For I am God, and not man—

The Holy One among you. Hosea 11:1-4 11:9b

Chapter One

Potato Pit Mother

From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below.

From the Great Above the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.

From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.

So many months ago, so many moons I was a baby born in ecstasy, born for ecstasy, and ecstasy was my lot whose secure boundaries ran to the skirts of town. But something happened the day of the eclipse. I should never have opened my eyes to expose retinas unshielded before the great, celestial orbs; blindness became my part. Why didn't I use the folded negative like the others? Why did I rebel and look till auras became my block? Auras around my Mother, around my Father, around my teachers. Haloed. Yet, even when I stared and stared, no auras for me. Mirror, mirror on the wall, where are my auras? Blackness. New Moon, blue moon, what went wrong?

Three beautiful children, a matchless marriage, a career in tourism were doomed to wax, wane, and finally give up. Oh, gibbous moon, eclipsed as you are, what do you hide that the tides must relate your restless report? What stories lie buried in crater dust and brachia rock on the *other side*?

If only I could stamp out your ember, pull the blind, give myself respite from your officious gaze, but like some Peeping Tom, I urge you to yield your secrets — demons living in caves, the Moscow Sea, cheese. Tell me, Artemis, this waxing and waning. What is the point? Why does the moon endure, night after night, calling me from my bed of sleep to haunt me with seas of crisis, oceans of storms, Apollo

landing to meet his ardent Artemis. Man or Woman of the moon, give up your mystery, I have become a gazing lunatic.

Stan had every right to leave. But why did he just leave the home, the marriage, the children? Why does he not leave honestly—leave life—soar like Icarus. Why does he not name the pure sea of despair on the dark side of the moon, consummate in the cosmos, extinguish in the haloes of the sun? I don't understand.

To my only daughter, Lise, I leave my Cherokee Jeep. Lise, I want you to have a vehicle that can take you to Kettle Creek which is impassable without a four wheel drive. It's a place you can be alone. Take the left fork at the broken gray barn. Nearby you will find a sacred space. I leave it to you. Drive carefully between the cliffs. But right after the cliffs, and before you get to the river, there is a big womanly rock that overlooks the cavern. Look up over your left shoulder to find her. She is a true Goddess, Lise. I found a copy of her story in a cardboard box of discarded university notes. I worked through much of the ancient cuneiform myself and after many days of translation, and many more days of anguish, and many many days of reflection, I have decided to follow her.

Her name is *Inanna*. Being so exposed and made of red sandstone, she knows the buffetings of this Lone and Dreary world. Inanna is the Sumerian Goddess of Heaven and Earth. Her stories pervade ancient Mesopotamia. I was drawn to her, Lise. Drawn to her like a mother is drawn to her child.

Shards of her story can be found in museums across the world. I found original tablets in the British Museum. The narrative recounts her descent into the underworld, a place where no traveler returns. And yet, carved into the foundation of the new world, she remains: solid, constant, abiding.

It's not an easy climb but I urge you to visit her often. Sit in her bosom, Lise. She will encircle you with her wisdom, her boundless love, her primeval story. She

will nurture you better than I have done. Go to her, Lise. Ask her, why? You'll understand, then. Go to her, Lise.

Your friends will enjoy the Jeep, with new tires, and the whole system retuned. Change the oil every 3000 miles. Don't let the brakes deceive you. Though they bump, they have been rotated, and the drums changed. If you go to sell it, don't let anybody trick you. Dated invoices for all the work I've had done are in the jockey box. Good luck, my dear daughter.

I have paid out your student loan. There remains nothing to hold you back but your own limits. See the bank note under your pillow, along with it one last item. It has more to do with me than with you; however, take it in good faith. I want you to go to Israel, Egypt, Syria—breathe in the Near East. Tickets for two. A seven hundred dollar traveler's check should help. Perhaps you will want to take Webb? Go to the old cities. Taste the curry. Buy yourself a leather bag. But mostly, inhale the wheat fields. And bring me back a handful of the ancient wheat, emmer, it grows wild on the steppes. Sail On, Little One!

I love you, Lise. I love you. I love you. I love you, my only daughter.

Your Mother.

"What? You are just going to up and give Lise your Jeep?"

"Yes, just witness it. Will you?"

"Why?"

"I thought she would enjoy it. Would you just witness it?"

"But what will you drive?"

"I won't be needing a car anymore."

"How will you get to your crazy Doctor Sukkal? Crazier than you are. How will you manage without a car? Don't think you can come running back to me, Olivia."

"I won't think it. Now sign."

"How could you have paid off her student loan? It was over twelve thousand dollars. You don't get that kind of money in child support, not even when the new baby arrives. Where will you get that kind of money?"

"You should be happy that a daughter of yours is set up with a trip to the East. You wouldn't do it. Seventeen years after your promise to me, and you are further than ever from keeping your vows."

"I could keep my promise still if I didn't have to pay you three-quarters of my monthly salary. I could have, and I planned on taking all of you as soon as I inherited the Farm. You knew that, too. We planned that for years. And now, you just bail out and give Lise our dreams?"

Stan's shoulders twitched. Here was blessed revelation: Stan's shoulders had just revealed that he was annoyed. Bet he'd be angry if he knew his body was betraying his stony face. Stoned. That's what he'd been. Stoned without drugs. Too bad he couldn't market it.

"Making me look bad again? The mighty Olivia buys the Brown children. It was you that wanted the Jeep. It was you that wanted the basement finished. It was you that flew off to Toronto to set up a business in tourism. Those things didn't come free. I could have taken you all around the world eighty times on your grocery bills alone."

"Lucky you. You've outwaited me again. I guess you could say that I saved you the headache, did your dirty work, but that wouldn't sound good in the community. Tell the boys that I took half the farm when I left. Whittled the money. Spent the children's inheritances. Bought them. There's an idea. But then, you've probably already used it. Sign Stan. Please, just sign."

"You have ruined me, Olivia. You have robbed me of my children, robbed my dreams and you are robbing my money. All because of your obsession to find

the so called Tree of Life. It's gone, Olivia! The Lord took it off the map! You should know, you've looked around the whole damn world, you got yourself a foolish degree in Ancient Studies. You read native nonsense while you pierce your flesh with the Indians. When will it stop? There is no Tree of Knowledge and, likewise, there is no Tree of Life. The secret to life, Olivia, is there is no secret. How could any man keep up with your eternal wrestling with the whole bloody universe. I had to give up! I had to for your sake."

"Right. Here's a pen."

"No wonder I divorced you. You are an obsession. You run over anything that gets in your way. Turns out you decided it was me. You are a bitch; a castrating bitch. You have ruined me. Don't think you'll ever marry again, not anyone in this town. They all know your game. And don't think anyone else would be sucker enough to put up with your obsessions. As if you succeeded in any of your efforts. Not even your tourism career. You couldn't even finish your undergraduate degree until you married and became even partly rational; even still you had to re-enter on mature status. As if you ever matured. You are a loser, Olivia. A loser. And everyone seems to know it but you."

"Just sign."

"Olivia, do you really think you can pull off a living without me? You, with a baby on the way. You really think you have the mental stability to raise another baby? What a joke."

"Then why don't you go back to the Brown mansion, Stan. Go live with your Mother and Father Brown. Sit down with them on their hilarious brocade chesterfield and roll over each other in laughter. Rock with your Mother in her sacred oak chair that came west with her beloved grandfathers. Nestle in her varicose arms and laugh yourself sick. The Divine Comedy. It's got to be that. Can we get back to the subject?"

"I thought we agreed that Lise spent too much on her student loans. That she should have to pay them herself."

"You should know she overspent. My guess is that you did your share of sneaking from your joint account. You know I never once thought to check on something like that. How naive can one be?"

"What are you accusing me of?"

"Forget it. I don't want you blanking out on me before you witness these few items. Just witness."

On this, the 6th day of July '94, I, Stanley L. Brown, being of sound mind and body, do hereby witness the agreement above between my daughter, Lise Brown, and her mother, Olivia Whitiker Brown.

"Good, now here's another for Max."

"You're giving Max your computers?"

"Yeah, I figure he'll like them. Don't you?"

"Dare I ask what you are giving Will?"

"I'm giving him my darkroom, cameras and studio."

"Oh, this is good. What will you do for a living?"

"I plan to do nothing for a living."

"You mean, the raging workaholic proposes to stop?"

"I won't need to work now that you are giving me and the children all that Brown money. I've never had it so good."

"Livia, that's a low blow. You know as well as I do that the Farm took all the extra money I would have given you. It takes money to establish a corporation like we have with state-of-the-art equipment. We're the envy of every Alberta farmer."

"I know as well as you the Corporation doesn't even know your name; has never even seen it on the books. The computer would reject it, suggesting the reliable John Deer in your stead. Nor will you ever own one pasture, not one cow, not one sheep. Their promise to you has been as hollow as your promise to me. You've worked here as a cheap hired hand; you don't own one thing, and you never will. Poor Grampa and Gramma Brown, not only do they have to suffer the shame of a fifty year old farm hand come home to live; they have to support his mad wife and children. Yes, Father Brown, things would have been different, if they'd been different; only, the difference wasn't Mrs. Stan Brown."

"Oh? You know that? Mentally ill half your life. Blame it on the Browns. Psychic clairvoyant of the Brown fortune. How come it took twenty years for your crystal ball to work? You seem to be forgetting your Mother practically threw you into my arms? She wanted the demented girl off her hands. That's for sure! I was tricked into this marriage and you know it. And after all these years, now, I know. You are still crazy, Livia. Migraines, depression, rage. You are still crazy. You are crazy and you always have been. You are stark raving crazy. Cracked! A lunatic staring at the moon. I'll get those children from you too, and you know it. There is no court in the land that would trust a woman with your history to raise those kids. If we are paying for them, they may as well live with us. If you don't think my mother can do a better job than you, then you're cracked. And you *are* cracked. Always have been. Always will be. Crazy. Nuts. Mad I'm seeing my lawyer today."

"If I were you, I'd wait until tomorrow. You'll have more to talk about."

"What is that supposed to mean? You are not going to get one more dime out of me. Not one thin dime! Not even when the baby is born. So I wouldn't go around giving away your only means of livelihood! Here, I'll gladly sign. Hand me the papers. And by the way, I get to take the kids for the weekend, so don't be thinking your little plan of buying them is going to work because it won't."

"Play with them, Stan. Take Bev with you if you want, but don't just drop them off. Work with them like we used to."

"Too late. You can't run my life anymore. I'll do as I please. And if I feel like dropping them off, that's my business. You go have yourself a nice weekend without one single friend in this world. You haven't even a sister that can stand you. You are going to be a lonely old woman, Livia. Tell that to your Doctor Sukkal. A lonely old woman."

He's gone! The kids are gone! The baby! Blessed Mary. The toilet! Get to the toilet. Blood warms my shivering legs. I'm sick. I'm so sick. Oh, I'm so sick.

"Moon, is this your dark side?"

Eclipse indeed! I'm truly blind. Can these blue lines get me to the bathroom? I think not. Rest. Rest. Rest.

Dumb numb legs: walk! crawl! What have I done? "Blue lines, just guide me to the sink. No?"

Hail Mary Full of Grace,

Find this child a resting place.

Amen, amen and amen.

My job was to pry the heavy wooden door open from the rotted cement foundation while potatoes eyed me through corrupt basement cracks. Only strong bony hands and fingernails filled with determination could budge that archaic door. My hands ached from a will to win. Shouldering that inch opening, I forced my calloused foot to take the distance. With my spine braced inside the inch of rotting door, sawdust showered on my hair and about me, scattering confetti as if I were Hathor, primeval mother of us all, as she greeted the sun. Fetal-crouched-legs painfully and successfully straightened to press bare feet against stony cement, my

back against the wall, and as in the creation of the world, the potato pit door scraped open. And in the dim light of the cold basement, I gave the salamanders time to scurry to their hollow and putrid potato mothers. Spontaneous combustion in the potato pit; this is where I began.

I never knew my potato mother. She was likely squashed by some man's black boots as he piled gunny sack after gunny sack on top of what was presumed an empty pit. The salamanders were safe in some corner, licking their knees. At least we never ate my mother. I might have pecked my share of her to take entrance into the lone and dreary potato-pit-world with some long-gone salamander egg tooth. But nobody else ate her. I know that. I gathered all the potatoes for the family dinner and supper. I never took my mother; I never took anybody's mother. They protected themselves like reeking milky mildew, they oozed an inhuman stench that only slightly exceeded the pig bucket. I never got near a mother potato. No way.

"Where is she? Where is that girl? Will she never bring those potatoes? Rollo, go find your sister."

Poor retarded Rollo forever afraid of the potato pit. He searched the entire basement, through the furnace duct maze, under the wooden laundry table, deep into the fruit room where the crumbled cement floor left dozens of ingenious mouse holes. I could hear the mice scurry ahead of him; I almost giggled at his powerlessness. Big black-haired Rollo. Rocking as he walked, hitting his head on the ceiling of the storage room, every time. That made him mad, maybe that made him retarded. He roared at me, "I know you're down here, and when I find you I'm going to knock you to sleep." Fee fi fo fum and all that. There was no way he could find me in the dark corner of the potato pit licking my knees. Not even the mighty Rollo. Oh, I'd get it when I did come out, but then again, maybe I never would. What about that?

Four blond girls and one big dark Rollo in the middle. Some potato mother was glad to be rid of him. I bet she pushed him out with all her might. Death was

better than carrying a glut like Rollo. Poor potato mother. Ooooh poor potato mother. Ooooh poor mother. Ooooh poor potato. Ooooh . . .

"Just pant, Mrs. Brown, just pant."

The world is screaming wildly. Lights are whirling as the ambulance takes someone to the Kings Crossing Municipal. Orion streaks above the startling road lights. The siren signals an emergency. Perhaps somebody's grandmother has just joined the stars. Who should I call? To whom should I pray. Who should I petition? For whom? Oh, I'm too sick. Won't someone deliver? I can't. I can't handle it. "Let" me sleep. Please, let me sleep.

"You'll be all right."

The north star has pulled Aries away from the handle. I can't handle it. I cannot handle it. I can't. Let me go. Let Livie die. Let her fly up, up, up to the dark side of the moon, name the seas, consume in the rays of the Sun..

"Just pant."

Just pant? Just pant? Where have I heard that before? Where?

"We're just going to give you a little poke. Roll over. Roll over."

Roll over! Rollo! Roll over and just pant.

"Just roll over, Mrs. Brown. We are trying to stop the contractions."

"Pant."

"No." Big Black Rollo. He's panting as he reaches into his pants.

"I'm going to give you a shot; it's just a little poke. "

"No."

"It won't hurt."

"No."

"You mustn't crouch like that; we can't reach you if you don't lie flat. Now lie flat!"

"Lie flat, Mrs. Brown."

"Livie, this will only sting for a minute."

"No."

"Pant, Mrs. Brown, and when we tell you, just hold your breath a minute."

"Oxygen!"

"Roll over."

Rollo!

"Now hold your breath."

"Just a little poke in your bum."

No.

"That's a good girl."

No.

"She's blacking out!"

No.

"Good girl. It's all over."

No.

"See that? It wasn't so bad?"

"Good job, Livie."

No.

"Leave on the oxygen."

No! No! No! Get off me. Get off me. Rollo get off me! Roollo get ooofff!

"You'll be all right, Mrs. Brown. If you take it easy in the hospital, I believe we can keep this baby to term. Frightening to go into labor this early, I bet? Idale Brown said to tell you everything would be fine without you. Not to worry. Stan will take the boys up to the home place."

No.

"I'll have to wait a minute for you to calm down before I can take your vitals. Doctor Sukkal is on his way. You just relax, dear. I'll be quiet, and you can rest."

No.

Chapter Two

The Dandelion Crown

"What a nuisance," said the Queen,
"I've lost my golden crown.
It must be somewhere in this place,
Where did I put it down?"

How long have I stared at the familiar face of my moon, old, waxing, waning, new, old, waxing, waning, new, old, waxing, waning, new. The moon gleaming on my golden ball, my ball beaming back a reply, like morse code. This moon knows my golden ball; maybe the moon is my golden ball. I'll lay beside bunker's hill until I hear a familiar voice. I will not leave the moon unattended, abandoned. Where the moon is, I will be also.

Wheresoever Eden was, there was Eve and her shadow—Rahab:

Waiting beside the dead tree in the cow pasture, the murky canal water should have told Livie something, No way could she discover her cherished golden ball in filth where nothing mirrors, but having fruitlessly turned over the muddy stones searching for her water frog, she will rest. And there she has rested restlessly through melancholy, through joy, through dissolution, forever waiting for deliverance. Poor kid has listened to the Great Above for forty years. To what end? Like the Goddess Inanna, she's arrived; she's Queen of Heaven. She's scaled the rocky foundation of the terrible wilderness, followed the cloudy pillar, listened to her elders. Always searching, searching and then searching for her daily share of manna, learning long-suffering, obedience and honor. At last she's landed— hallelujah! on the banks of the Jordan to earn her bread by the sweat of her brow. To misery, to humanity, to circumcision, the walled city of Jericho, the Promised Land; to

the Babylonian garment; to two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold; to divorce. And now she waits by the dead tree stump in the cow pasture. And see here. They've burned the neighborhood. There is no turning back, not to bondage, not to the fleshpots, not to the heavenly worship of golden calves, not to her marriage bed, and certainly not to the ferocious, fiery Tree of Life. Not for Livie, not for her sorry fetal cherub. Time to move on to Canaan where seeds of corn await her fearless farmer arrival.

Luckless Eve, the Tree is protected with torches of your own shame— fierce cherubim of Fear and Desire. You, Livie, filled with fear of humanity, with desire for 'other', are trapped far from the home you love. No place to advance but down, the Great, Great Below. Come down to your sister. Kneel, Olivia, I've come up to deliver you. Worm through the webbed hollow of this log, I'll lead you by a Kindly Light to the Great Below. Aw Aw Awooo!

Yes, I believe I'll make my call through this crack in the wall of Jericho; see if she won't pay her deserted sister a long overdue visit. If I'm correct about my virtuous Inanna, no three-headed Cerberus could waylay her from saintly duty. Damn, she'll gird up her loins and plunge into the unknown. She'll come ignorantly running to rescue me, her dark soul, her fragmented self, her own discarded dragon, her alchemic black salamander, Rahab. She'd ransom her light for the benefit of Leviathan everywhere, for the interest of goodwill, social graces, curiosity, purity, dharma. Armed only with faith, hope and charity, a loaf of bread, a container of milk, a stick of butter. I almost feel guilty.

Oh hell, what do mine eyes with grief behold.

Taking off my dandelion stained dress, someone gowns me in yellow with skinny strings that show my backside; even strangers can see me now. Oh, I wish that I were a cow, or I wish that God would speak in a louder voice, or carry a longer stick. I plead with him to use that stick on me when I run back to the dandelion patch. Instead, he holds my hand and we go as playmates over the bridge, through the thistles, to the furthest corner

of the pasture. The water moves on its way to meet the sea while we sit together in the tall grass to weave dandelion crowns, one for him and one for me.

The cow waits for the little girl to open the gate and drive her home. There will be time enough for that, the little girl is busy weaving a weedy crown for her God. God rejoices in his yellow crown, and kisses her stained hands. He places his regal wreath upon her head ordaining her his Queen. Oh, it is a Holy Coronation in a cow pasture. "Smell this", he teases, "do you like butter?" Her yellow nose is the silly evidence; she loves butter. Mustard and butter sandwiches on the dead tree stump. A stump with feet planted in an ant hill and branches that reach over the wall. At the highest end, she could be Queen of the castle, Dame of Bunker's hill, Mistress of the Universe. The grass, the thistles, the ants, the canal. They could see the whole world from this place.

"Wanna bite?" God dines on her mustard sandwiches; they are about his favorite kind of sandwich in the whole world. They share with the ants and the fuzzy woolly bear caterpillars. Mustard sandwiches and the blue, blue sky. Heaven. "Oh, this is truly Heaven."

But, Livie, remember, you were late getting home with the cow. What in hell were you doing? Didn't you have a single clue in your head? Get rid of those asinine dandelions. Look at the stains all over your dress and hands! Who made the mess with the mustard? You wait until supper to eat, do you hear me young lady? What makes you think that you're the Queen of England around here? What makes you think it, Livia. What?

The little girl takes off her golden crown and lays it reverently beside her safe bed. She moves to the bathroom sink and scrubs at the stains; they don't budge and are yet to be the cause of more ridicule at the supper table.

"Livie has picked up a disease in the cow pasture."

"Unclean, unclean."

"I'm not sitting beside her."

So, Livie proceeds as directed throughout the rest of the night.

And you never knew whether to celebrate the holy supper on the ant hill or to forever avoid it at all costs. Oh, but at least you had your sacred crown.

In the morning the crown beside her bed has wilted, the flowers have closed, the stems have shrunk, the frail braid that once held the crown together has fallen into fragments upon the bedroom floor.

Perhaps the Holy Coronation never was.

Perhaps the Holy Coronation never was.

I'd buy a package of chocolate covered raisins to share with my mom, my dad and me. I took the shortcut, didn't I? It couldn't have taken me more than seven minutes, could it? I clutched the coin and hastened down the dark alley. It was a small sacrifice. I would simply outrun the frightening Mr. Zugo, I would kick his scary boy, Francis, and if I had to, I could cut through the vacant lot. God separated the light from the dark, and the twilight that still ruled the day shone on my curly head as I turned long legs for the store. We'd soon be on our way to the city sucking raisins till they dissolved. Yes, raisins would do it. No fair to bite them. Raisins would keep us safe from the wicked Giants in the Promised Land. Like Calab, I'd scout the land. Spy. And bring home manifold boxes of dried grapes dipped in, chocolate.

But there was a miniature dancing chihuahua in the coffee shop; he stood on his back legs and begged for glossette raisins. Even Gee liked him and the dog liked me so Gee liked me and the men looked up from their coffee and laughed. And when the men looked up from their coffee, they saw me; they saw me when they looked up from their coffee. And grass, flowers, shrubbery, trees, birds of the air, fish in the waters and all mammals were created in their glance. Like some beloved rat, the chihuahua danced surrounded by abundant life and I whirled with him resting in the joy of living. It was

David before the Ark of the Covenant. Ecstatic, crazy, rapt in the bliss of Glosettes, Gee, coffee, dog and Livie. Deeper, deeper, deeper!

And even as I meant to run home, Father passed me; Father passed me, even as I meant to run home. And when I got home, they were gone. They abandoned me to the ether of the potato pit to work out my salvation with fear and trembling. The Eighth Day.

And I believed that I was cursing God, and in my cursing, I did not know that Inanna and Rahab had been split asunder in seven minutes flat. Rahab understood God was a bum, he was a poop, God was the cracked one. Would a real Father abandon a dizzy child? I kicked and scratched with my shoes and my legs hurt and I cried because I struck blood. And I licked the blood from my knees, but the scratches wouldn't quit bleeding.

My mom and dad never got their raisins. I should never have looked at the eclipse. I should never have stolen the earrings. I should never have played with boys. I should never have smoked the grass. I should never have married in white. I should never have raged at the children. I should never have deserted them for my own ends. I should never have gotten depression. I should never have given up. I should never have divorced a perfect one. I should never have disenchanted the children. I should never have taken the back alley. I should never have fed that dancing chihuahua begging for Glosettes. Sad.

The joy of my heart has ceased;
My dance is turned into mourning.
The crown has fallen from my head:
Woe unto me, for I have sinned.

Yes! The crown has fallen from your head; the first gate. Come through the seven portals and greet me. You, with your face to the wall, see here, we are soul sisters. Move from this sterile hospital bed and confront your soul.

For this my heart has become sick,
For these things my eyes have grown dim.

It's late afternoon on the Eighth Day. Quick! get up and proceed to the first gate.

Rescue me!

"Livie, Doctor Sukkal is here to check you. Livie, can you wake up and speak to him?"

Yes, Rahab, I am willing to proceed. And if I do not return in three days, I will be delivered?

Chapter Three

The Garden of Innocence

Once upon a time there was a girl who was out singing and picking flowers; while she was doing that, she was chased by a lion; a snake came along and tried to poison the girl; a monkey was going to swing over and save her, but she went running to her house; it was raining when she went running home; the chimney caught on fire; the garbage can tipped over; a butterfly was flying over her house, and there she stood.

I woke up on my third day in this very same Municipal Hospital— a forty-year round-trip— and I smiled. I wanted to be known as Olivio; my dad heard me gurgling my name with delight. Baby Olivio, after Gramma Olivio, a grace-filled woman carried all the way from the wet lands of Holland to rough life in a granary, walls covered with cheesecloth, on Alberta's yellow prairie. I would bear her name with passion— Olivio, a name that sailed on the Van Wagoner from tulip festivals, lacy curtains, wooden shoes and Friesian milk cows.

When I got home, everyone laughed; they called me Lily, Silly Lily and having given me their new name, they knew all they needed. I was christened Olivia even though I begged to them to reconsider throughout the blessing. I was encircled by oblivious men of God.

And after the blessed event, mother shrunk into the Ladies' bathroom and changed my poopy pants; she'd born her baby in sorrow and therefore, missed mine. Blessed baby Mary died on her third day. Lucky baby sister.

Blessed Mary full of Grace:

The Lord is with thee, and thou art with the Lord.

Lucky art thou among babies,
And blessed is the fruit of the womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, baby sister—
Pray for us sinners
Now— at the hour of our birth.
Blessed Mary, Blessed Mary, Blessed Mary.

Amen

I had fuzzy yellow hair, deep dimples and dark green eyes. I barely knew how to walk when I got my first pair of shoes and ventured forth. The world was before me. My new shoes shined like anything; they squeaked, squeaked, squeaked when I walked. Shoes! Walking! No one could stop me! I could walk, walk, walk. I would walk somewhere and back again. A crack in the sidewalk loomed. My new shoes. Walking. Shine. Walking. Like anything. Walking. They squeak. Can't stop. Squeak. A crack. Squeak. A crack! When I walk. Crack. I fell powerless on the sidewalk. I had not yet learned how to get up. Trapped. Betrayed. Hurt. Bleeding. Alone.

Some gentle one is looking warmly on me; maybe it's Old Mr. Sun,

A dew drop lay in cold, cold ground,

"Come up!" said the sun, "come up!"

But I have torn my poor knees; I am betrayed by new white shoes. So, I will howl for Jerusalem: daughter of Zion, city of gold, beauty of all Israel. I had contemplated sea and sidewalk and now I couldn't get up. My injured knees, my hope, my faith. Mr. Sun pursued, beating my golden curly crown, promising a brighter day, "Come up," coaxed the sun, "come up."

Every time I step into the potato pit I feel this same dazzling sensation streaming from the light of the scummy gray window; yet I have never been able to see past the light to witness who is behind it. I thought I might glimpse the Mysterious One during the eclipse; instead, I was blinded as if I were Saul on his way to Damascus. Maybe this

presence was our neighbor, the Tin Man. He serenaded me in a voice that leaped over the sheets and sheets of shining tin. He sang,

O Livia, Sweet Livia,
Livie, that girl of mine.
O Livia, Sweet Livia,
Livie, that girl is fine.

It was new tune every day. "But I am not O Livia, Sweet Livia, Livie that girl at home. At home I am Silly Lily."

"They must call you Lily because they adore you. Lily is a fragrant name."

"But I am Olivia, not Lily, not Silly Lily, not some fragrant name."

The Tin Man was always kind.

Consider the lilies of the field,
How they grow;
They toil not, neither do they spin.
And yet I say unto you,
That Solomon in all his glory
Was not arrayed like one of these.

Yeah, it must have been the Tin Man who coaxed me to get up. He wiped my face, comforting the heart of the Lily. And I am not Silly Lily—I am O Livia. And I can pick myself up and walk. The sun shines warm as I walk to the Tin Shop and the Tin Man gives me gingersnaps.

I don't care about being a lily, they don't know the song and they don't know about lilies of the field. They just think they are cracking a very funny joke.

I crack them, too. I am a funny baby, a funny, funny baby. I eat more buttery popcorn faster than my father. We sit down to the white dishpan of yellow clouds; I snake in chubby handfuls— old maids and all. Everybody laughs at silly lily. I'm not hungry but I eat some more for them.

I'm the only one with courage enough to pull the pecking leghorns off their nests; I find the warm egg and hold it to my cheek. There are dozens of eggs that coolly wait my mid-morning arrival; I put them in the egg bucket. It's the warm egg for which I am known. I pause as I leave the hen house comforting them in a rousing song, *If you chance to meet a frown, do not let it stay. Quickly turn it upside down and smile that frown away.* Please forgive me, chickens. I sing as I dump them some oyster shell. I sing for their supper and for ours because you can bet we'll be having soft boiled eggs.

Mother calls this supper *Birdie Eggs*. She puts us in the bathtub together and feeds us in turns from the same dish. We chirp between bites. I hate birdie eggs; they taste like yellow glue and I'm the only one that knows about the leghorn mother I personally pulled off the nest. It's her warm egg for which I am known. The luckless hen all nestled down to hatch a batch of chicks. We sit in the luke warm water and dash her hopes, but I like chirping, so does Rollo and Doreen, so we eat at least seven eggs while poor Mama leans over the tub and groans. She puts the egg bowl on her belly shelf that will some day be a baby. I hope the baby doesn't kick off our supper. No, I hope it does.

I'd almost rather eat my mudpies. I make them in the cool of the wet sandpile, straining on extra green grassy sugar and folding in cream from the Jersey hose. The ingredients fuse in the heat of summer and sunshine, and I don't care what the Queen of England orders for dinner. Sometimes Doreen couldn't either, but that's only if she has whipped up her own pie. She seldom wants mine. As the sun beams down to cook the sand, I am growing faster than a downy thistle and that's good because I'm not the little baby anymore— Hallelujah— Gloria is born. I should have asked for her name. But Lily is happy, Lily is not hurt; everybody laughs at Lily.

Father holds a bouquet of carnations that smell much better than they taste. He puts them beside his wee sleeping baby. She is a prize; a prize straight from heaven. She has just seen God. What can she tell me? "Tell me, Gloria." Her fingers won't let go of something; no way can I pry it out of her. But when she's awake, she knows. I beg her to

tell me, but she has no teeth, and by the time she does, she'll care more about lunch than the face of God. If only she would tell me while she knows. I can't for the life of me remember God— unless he looks like the Tin Man, always waiting for my morning visit, always a package of cookies. Still, I wish I could see like Gloria. When she wakes I trick her into turning to me with a warm hand on her cheek, she turns and she looks, but she sees right on past me straight to the angels. And when she coos, she coos to them. Maybe God looks something like Gloria, so white and innocent—she shines. But she keeps her hands and her toes curled up holding the secrets of the universe; no toy can trick her into letting them go.

I get to feed her with a bottle when Marie and Doreen aren't around. Doreen says she is going to spoil Gloria; Mother and Marie already do. They pick her up before she's awake. They change her when she's still dry. They take her from me to hear the burp. I am five and I cry more than baby Gloria. I'm glad I can cry in my own safe crib. My head reaches the top and my toes stretch to push the bottom and I can squeak the crib before I go to sleep. For Rollo I squeak *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, *Baa Baa Black Sheep, have you any wool?* *A B C D E F G*— they all have the same tune. Rollo sleeps in the bed beside my crib. He's going to smack me if I don't stop squeaking. He doesn't want to learn the alphabet or the tune.

Rollo's home from school in California. He has a gun, a pair of black chaps, a sheriff star and a cowboy hat with a silver band. Aunt Melba has brought Rollo home along with Uncle Lee, avocados, strings of suckers and a red scooter for the family. It's mine. I know it's mine even though it's mine by accident. I am just the right size. I scoot out of the house and down the street. No one can stop me now; I have wheels and an iron handle to hold on for dear life. Bliss is to ride the family's red scooter. Up, up, to the Tin Shop where the sun looks down on sheets and sheets of shiny tin and tin snippers and the Tin Man and me.

Rollo is ten; he doesn't begin to know the alphabet. They buy him guns, holsters, caps and a genuine Gene Autrey cowboy hat. Rollo is the only one who gets new clothes; the rest of us have brains. They whisper together that he might be retarded; they're not quite sure because he is the only Whitiker boy. Rollo makes my dad cranky when he gets home. Maybe Deerhome can fix him. Too bad Aunt Melba or California or even my songs didn't help.

If Rollo is stupid, it's only with the alphabet. If I hadn't overheard he was retarded, I'd never know it. Dad could be proud of him for that. Instead, Rollo with the unfamiliar black hair, gets the lickin' for breaking the cup I carefully puzzled back together and placed back on the shelf. Shame on me. But I was just avoiding a good spankin'; I didn't know Rollo would get it. I planned it all for Dad— the broken cup was meant for the High Priest.

What made Rollo angry, skipped over cranky Doreen and fell upon me. In the end, there was justice. I was punished for the broken cup. Rollo was a seer, a prophet without honor in his own home. He knew everything. He knew I pitied him. He knew where to go to get his way. I felt so sorry for a brother without brains that I let him hold me down and drool in my face. Poor Rollo, he had radar set out for Dad, well, for Mom and Dad; they supported each other in doing what was fair. It's just that Mom was the good guy for Rollo. With her eye single to the Glory of God, he knew she would miss his tricks of holding me to shove grass in my mouth. I figured since he was six years older, God must have wanted it that way or it wouldn't have happened.

My mother drives a big black car. I wait for her in the darkness under the porch, hiding from Rollo. She is a special nurse helping those souls who need extra hope. I pray for the red measles and we all get them except me; I am the cornucopia of health. Maybe someday I'll be sick and she can care for me. As it turns out, mother is ailing. She enjoys having her white shoes off and her poor feet rubbed; her crooked baby toes have corns from working so hard; she is exhausted so she closes her eyes and doesn't see where Rollo

threw the rock. I tiptoe out to set the table. It looks blameless for supper and for Dad who will come home from the farm smelling of gasoline and axle grease from fixing the truck.

But Mother can smell Dad's oily coat in her dreams. The fragrance wakes her; she starts on my dad. She loves God with all her sight, might, mind and strength; too bad Dad isn't God though he tries to be. I dash my dad's coat to the farthest end of the basement; it's a secret place that no one knows but me.

In this nest the coat can crouch between the big tin stove and the potato pit; here it can rest, crooned to sweet dreams by the hum of the gas converted furnace. Shh, don't be afraid. I am the little match girl— I'll come for you in the morning. Watch the blue flame burn. It goes off when the house is warm. But it will start again, and it will lead you by its kindly light. Hmm . . .

Lead Kindly Light ,
Amid the encircling gloom—
Lead thou me on.
The night is dark
And I am far from home.
Lead thou me on.

Look here, you are a fine woolly lined coat. So, here you are; you've come all the way to our house. You are the sheep with the curly horn. You gave Him your fleece to keep Him warm. He wore your coat on Christmas morn. You are the sheep with the curly horn. I'm so pleased to meet you; I'm proud to share my nest. Rest here.

When I get back, my Mom is demanding to know where the money is going. Dad has no idea where the money is going; maybe she could tell him where all the money is going. Marie pours milk in every glass.

"You're the one using the cheque book."

"Well you're the one with the prosperous farm."

"Whose idea was it to have so damn many kids?" I know he means Rollo and so does Rollo.

It's dinner and Mother sighs. We kneel down, quiet for prayers. Please bless the children, the food, the missionaries, the sick and those who mourn. Rollo waits until heads are bowed to flex his arm at me; I should have bowed my head and missed it. The meat is wild venison that died for days hanging from the basket ball hoop, a sad meal, even the gravy, but it's been blessed and the coat and I have been twice blessed. We're blessed so that even in our mourning we can stand the sorrow. Rollo need not worry, I'm not going to tell. Mary knows about the hurtful rock that hit the mark and Mary is enough.

Rollo washes the dishes after every meal; Mom is training him to be a dishwasher when he grows up. Maybe she loves him most or maybe least. I dry. Mary watches over us that we might be made worthy of the promises of Christ Jesus.

Holy Mary, baby Mary, intercede for our family.

Hail Mary, blessed Mary, pray for us.

And she did.

That was the time when Mother believed that life had meaning in her six children; she had an eye single to their Glory. Father blessed her: some of her children would grow up perfect. These rare ones could possibly spring the rest; our family wouldn't need the Atonement. 'Course Rollo would be perfect, being retarded and unable to make choices, but who would be the other? There had to be at least two because the blessing said—*some*. Rollo might not even try to spring us. I know he wouldn't spring me. Us kids kept Mother guessing who would be good enough to break her bands of Hell. She guessed right up until a tumor in her pituitary forecast her fate. Like the Cyclops, she lost her vision and as it turned out, she didn't even need a savior. Dying heartbroken, she took with her the coin of Christian heaven.

Not one of us thought to look at the sons-in-law. My own husband. Perhaps he was the other perfect one and to think our marriage didn't make it. Too bad. And Mother.

She was led to believe by that blessing that she was raising the very Christ Jesus. I personally kissed her cheek, resting at peace. Dear Mother of God, forgive me, it wasn't cancer that betrayed you.

It wasn't my mother's fault I turned out bad. I had a wonder-filled childhood. Growing up in awe. It's the hours in the thick tall grasses I loved the most. Their taste of summer and salt. Oh, and the sneezes; nothing in this world will ever hold a straw to ten straight minutes of sneezing. Mama, they were fine days. And good friends. I'll be Olive Oyl and you be Popeye, then you be Olive Oyl and I'll be Popeye—in the tall grass—smokin' tumble weeds, chewin' Timothy.

Then Doreen and I converted to Players. Players Please. Only we had to steal them and hide. When Doreen lit up her cigarette, she was playing with the fires of hell because she was already ten. I was only seven, wouldn't know right from wrong for another year. Twelve more months to sin. One moment covered in smoke and ash; then in a twinkle, I'd be clean— every bit— no soap. Ashes to ashes; dust to dust.

The sun shone harder in those good olden days. I woke up at five to catch his first rays. The quiet house didn't fool me; morning was already sifting through the scratches in the old green blind. I scraped Doreen with my toe, learned my lesson and went out alone. The rooster didn't scare me, not much. "Hurry on your way!" he sang; and I did. I woke up early to have a nap, outside, in the sun, in the tall green grass of home.

And when it rained, the grass smelled even fresher like the potato pit or the first whiff of the car heater after a long dry summer. We ran out with bars of pioneer lye soap to shower just like Hancocks, only their shower was in their house. The lather would slip and foam around our arms and legs and then the rain would stop. The wind would weld leaves and kindling on your skin. Standing around sticky was gritty, but true. It was true, just like the church. I wanted to convert the whole neighborhood, but nobody would listen but Doreen. So only Doreen and I enjoyed the shower with the robins, but then Doreen and I could use a few extra sprinklings. If somebody got to see your business, I'm glad it

was God. He left the punishing up to Mom with her single eye and Dad doing church work to please her. It worked out mercifully. Nobody ever had a clue that Doreen and I were chain smokers. Puzzling though.

And when it hailed, we always hoped that it would hail enough to freeze ice-cream. But it only hailed enough for that on our farm five miles away from home, so we were lucky to get ice-cream ever, but when we did, it was sweet cold cream straight from the separator, smooth and buttery, smelling of vanilla. Dad complained that it was grainy and that Mom didn't use enough salt in the ice. Mom suggested that he was miserable and why didn't he just go back to the farm, but I always licked the beater and I always knew it was pure manna from God. And it was, so I told her.

And it was worth chasing the cow back and forth to the pasture. And I was Roy Rogers and Inez Whyte was Dale Evans or she wouldn't help me with the cow, but she was fine company and well worth it. And I didn't mind catching Inez's lice. She was my best friend and anyway she didn't have lice, she only had an outdoor toilet inside her house, so everybody just figured she must have lice, too. Nor was the toilet Inez's fault. Her mother was a war bride from England. Her Canadian boyfriend told her that he owned a farm in Alberta, which was a white lie, just so she would marry him. The only farm Mr. Whyte owned was a gopher farm in his own front yard. I should know. I was at Whyte's house plenty of times, breathing through my mouth, listening to her mother talk about being tricked. Too bad she was a Quaker girl and didn't know about liars.

Liars abounded in our town; a person would cringe if they knew the half. Like the time Mr. and Mrs. Bothello accused Inez's quiet brother of stealing twenty dollars when I'm sure they misplaced it or spent it. I mean, who would walk into somebody's house and steal? Because of the Bothellos, the school kids saw quiet Noli Whyte for the first time, so they named him Zest after the soap he didn't use much and I know that Zest suffered from his dad hitting him so he didn't need to be called a stealer, too. And if you ask me, Bothellos just heaped it on Christ. Stinking doesn't sting like being called a

stealer. I would have stolen twenty dollars just to sneak it back into Bothello's house, so would anyone if they ever heard Zest yelping after one of his dad's lickin's.

Where was Christ to begin in a mess like that? I mean, whose debt is he going to pay? Zest's? But even if he stole, with a cruel dad like his, he had at least twenty dollars coming. So suffer for his dad? Mrs. Whyte was already suffering from being married to him and anyway he believed the Bothellos. Suffer for the Pop kids that lied about seeing Zest take the money? They were just talking when all of a sudden someone took them seriously. First time. Now, how could they turn around and tell the truth when, for the first time, somebody believed or even listened to them? Suffer for Bothellos? They truly believed they'd lost twenty bucks somewhere; the Pops confession sealed up the mystery. The mood was right to accuse Zest. Everybody was already suffering. So if Christ suffers for us, and he says he does, it's for no good reason.

I was sure hoping other places weren't as devout as King's Crossing where everybody was Christian and blameless; cross yourself and live. We were the kings of crossings; guess that's how we got our name. But I wanted out. I wanted to see the whole world. I built a house trailer to pull with my bike. I constructed it out of boards from the pig pen. Nails from the garage. I framed a box on top of an old wheel barrow. I sawed a window and molded it with caulking so that I could see the light, if it came. And I would have journeyed far and seen the entire world if I hadn't fallen out of the tree house. And while I was bleeding, Rollo destroyed my trailer. He said it was a mess, that's all it was to him, but to me it was a dream complete with curtains. Only had one hitch—there wasn't a hitch.

Rollo saved me a headache on that account. I had lots of other headaches, though. Well, I mean I got headaches from not wearing my magnifying glasses; I got the blindness from looking at the eclipse. I feared the blindness mainly. The flu wasn't so bad, sort of a nice change. Those nights I slept till late morning and got up barely in time to wash the milk bucket. But I mean no one would have minded the headaches either if they'd ever

seen my glasses. I should have broken them; I think I did. Anyway, blindness was my fate.

I was legally blind in one eye; my other eye made up for it seeing things as they should be. Every moment was protected by my sight, if not by one eye then by the other; not even hindsight sullied my world. My childhood was peerless, that's all I know, and it bugs the hell out of me when people suggest otherwise.

"Livia, Doctor Sukkal has ordered you to drink a bottle of charcoal every hour! I will hold the cup, Livie. Can you drink? Drink Livie. Livie? No?"

"I need you to grip my fingers as hard as you can. Squeeze hard. Harder. Can you hear me, Livie? OK."

"Livie, we are putting these leads on your chest. They're just a little cold. Just relax. Doctor Sukkal wants you hooked up to this heart monitor. Can you hear us, Livia?"

I could hear every word, screaming as if I were deaf. I simply had no energy to answer them. None.

"Just hook it up. She won't be turning over tonight."

"Livia, can you hear me? Can you hear me, Livie? You can't turn over with this monitor hooked up."

"I'll go through the routine in fifteen minutes. You go ahead and hook her up. Just pull off her gown."

"Place the fetal monitor on the left."

"Bev, do you know what went on here?"

"Not really. Doctor Sukkal should be right in."

Rahab knows what went on here with O Livia. But did Rahab understand? The pillar of light that guided Israel was burning down on me, calling me by name, "Livie, Livie." And I answered from the snow bank, "Speak, for thy servant heareth." And then

the haloes descended into my eyes. Moon dogs. It was my calling. I was chosen, called up, anointed. Joan of Arc. Ruth. Deborah. Mary was there. I piled the snow around my head to feel safe like a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. Nobody could hurt me now; nobody could hurt the Angel of the Lord. Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy. And I was happy for the rest of my life. I was happy before that even happened and it didn't even have to happen for me to be happy. The peacemaker for the Prince of Peace. It didn't matter if the teachers ruled my hands; maybe it kept them from harming someone who didn't know they'd been called. So even when I was injured, it really never hurt. And even when I was sad, it really didn't matter. And even when I cried, inside I was really happy. I was called or why else did this halo blind me with headaches?

It was strange how no one believed in my column of light. A bush could burn for Moses, a fire could lead Israel, a light could stop Saul; they even believed in Balaam's speaking ass, but they jeered at my stupid shaft of light because Livie ought to be wearing her magnifying glasses. For them, what was sacred was explained away with a pair of glasses that didn't help me see any better than before. Not anything important.

My mom and dad must have believed me or loved me or something down deep or I doubt they'd have given me the bright budgie and, like the Tin Man, like the shaft of light, that wee bird flew into my heart to stay. I called her Cheerpy because she was always happy; even when she wasn't, she would still light up my gloomy room with her chirp. Cheerpy would sit on my shoulder and together we would scrub the tub, no problem. I had to train her to quit biting my ear, yet even when I hit her, she came fluttering back. She shouldn't have messed in the dress patterns, though; but even then, the mice would have kept the blame but for her nest of *back neck facing* in the corner of her cage. I prayed every night she would lay an egg.

Thank goodness she ate the matching dress pattern or all of us sisters would have ended up in this very hospital bed. There's a picture of us standing in front of the fake fireplace wearing matching gingham dresses, smiling matching cheshire smiles; we were

ready for church, appearing exactly the same. They figured they only had to raise one daughter. Too bad they didn't notice any differences; maybe one of us could have worked out. I guess they were hoping by raising us in duplicate that the other perfect one in the blessing would have the good works to sneak the rest through. You can't blame them there. Trouble with that theory is it could work both ways.

My insight didn't help me; the legally blind eye was kept busy looking inside for the cotton ball I shoved there one day during Arithmetic. It never did show up. If it had, maybe I would have learned my times tables. As it turned out one eye was tied up looking inside, the other eye was keeping an eye out for trouble. 'Course, trouble was at hand if you didn't know your times tables. Eventually I had to force my blind eye to give up on the cotton ball in order to keep an eye out for trouble, probably would have been just as easy to learn seven times seven.

Anyway, recess was good even though the grass on the playgrounds was smothered by jagged black cinders. Everyday I'd wake up and think— recess today! I had blisters on my palms from the monkey bars and every time they began to heal, they'd bleed again, but I was fine at monkey bars so they never hurt. I was excellent at skip rope. And unless somebody cheated, Inez and I could jump almost all recess and my dress would fly up and we'd sing,

Johnny went to England,
Johnny went to tea,
How many pretty girls did he see?
1 2 3 4 5 6
Pepper!

I didn't live in England, though Mrs. Whyte had, and I didn't drink tea, though I drank her tea when no one was looking, and I wasn't such a pretty girl, I was way too tall to be pretty, but Johnny saw my underpants if he was looking, tall grass or no. Saw Inez's, too.

Physical education was the next best thing about being alive. I soon learned to dodge every ball that came my way. 'Course that was in dodge ball, in baseball, too, I guess, and you'd dodge, too, if you ever got a ball in your face. It was fine being fielder. Everybody forgot I was there, even Mrs. Harper. And in the Fall, when every person was given a fresh chance, I managed to find a place to lie down in the yellow grass and sneeze a bit. And Vincent Knight would pinch hit for me so I was always chosen right off the bat and yet I never ever had to play. Oh, it was grand, and nobody even missed me.

Nowhere are the roses as red,
Oh, nowhere are the thorns as small,
And nowhere are the downs as soft,
As those upon which my childhood rested.

I had a kitten that was a mama cat and even though she had babies, when they weren't nursing, she was. She would push and pull with her front claws and wrap her sharp tongue around a chunk of my skin so I hardly dared lie down with her. Her purring was jet engine noise, only it was comforting like the washer chugging or the lawn mower buzzing when Rollo was busy mowing.

I went up and down the street to sell her kittens for a dollar a piece and I would have made four dollars if anybody would have bought one and they should have because one dollar is cheap for a perfect black and white kitty, and they were. I named the momma kitten, Carol, and the father, wherever he was, I called John.

We played hide and seek and I hid so well nobody could find me. If it wasn't for John, I would be there still. When he found me, I found him. I recognized him by his kittens, all of them with the same black spot over their eyebrow just like their wild dad. He was ferocious, too, but I managed to hold his paws and encircle him in my arms so that he could meet his family, which was only right. I was always sorting out the ways of life; if they didn't stumble across me, I stumbled across them.

Like the time I heard Dad tell Mom that they were going to lose the farm; they had no idea I understood their trouble, rocking my dolls. It was sad, but it was better than the time she threw plates, way better than then, only this time they were quiet so that part was worse. I poured them both a cup of water into my tea set and I broke some pieces of bread. I asked them if they'd like to share the sacrament with me and my doll, baby Mary; they never missed taking the sacrament, but this time it was true reverence. It was too bad everybody didn't lose their farms. Baby Mary, precious Mary; thank you, Mary.

I loved my Mom and Dad. Mother was a perfect angel with wings, feeding the hungry, blessing the sick, clothing the naked; she was an select lady. She never stopped, well, only once to suck her breath when they told her the lump was malignant. That's all she did was suck her breath; if she'd have cried, I could have comforted her. I guess that's why she didn't. I took Gloria straight to bed, and wrote a note to tell my dear mother how much I adored her; I'm not sure she found it. I started the next morning to hear Mother retching. I stood by the bathroom door; she told me to go away quickly. Malignant was serious. They took her away to do cobalt and radiation—malignant was grim. They took her before she bought me my school books. So, I borrowed Thelma's and Thelma got real sick of me, but Dad always said, "Wait till Mom gets back." That's what he was doing, anyway.

Gloria cried; Bell played in the pots; I prayed like crazy for us all. If she lived, we all would. Dad was a High Priest, but it wouldn't have been safe without Mother. I don't know why. We tip-toed through the days like they were Gramma's bone china, baptizing each plate separately, and firing them with clean cotton towels before they came to rest in Grandmother's mahogany bureau. Mother had taught us how to clean the dishes, to scrub the tub, to proceed throughout the day without a minute of instruction. The meals, the dishes, the jobs, the days held us all in a picturesque trance except I sometimes I crept from the schedule to go into my closet to cry in secret. If Mom couldn't cry, she didn't have to.

She'd bent me and Doreen a pin to hook fish so we tied sticks to our bikes and pedaled out to the reservoir. "Legs, carefully push the pedals, push, push, push." The gravel road was definitely not a place to skid. The red wing black birds encouraged us from their rancid rural swamps, the wind came up; we were nearly there. The banks of the reservoir were pocked with cow tracks, pies, watering holes. I threw my line in just as a frog leaped into the dark cloudy pond; we'd better get fishin', it was going to rain. But the fishin' was hot. I personally had eight bites that took eight fat worms, but they all got away. You can't hook a trout without a barb no matter how fiercely the trout are biting. And poor mama didn't know. She laid there in the cancer ward of a cold hospital in Calgary. And she didn't know. I prayed for all of us out there fishin' with pins.

Dad waited the minutes, the hours the days and the months for my mother's return while he worked the farm, making ends meet or balancing church books. Hence, many of the thin fragile plates shattered. Doreen stopped piano lessons and took up her habits and then it was late summer and Rollo came back from Deerhome, and he still didn't know the alphabet. Gloria and Bell went to live at Aunt Tilley's. I got kicked out of Sunday School for being restless.

Mama did come back. Well, not all of her. She came back without a breast and with a cave for an armpit. I got my schoolbooks in November, promising never to cross out, always to do my best, to keep the pages smelling like wet paper and ink, and to never make Mama retch like that ever again.

And it was sad to watch her veiny hands hold the hymn book after her operation. I guess her heart was breaking, pumping like crazy to get rid of the radiation, seeing her family fall to pieces at her feet. I remember Dad at the pulpit. He looked a little bit like a haloed monkey man. He was looking green daggers at Mother who passed blue daggers to me. I remember her veiny hands snaking over to pinch a chunk of my thigh for lack of reverence because crying was better than whispering. I remember that. And that was after my prayers, so they worked and she was alive. That's for sure. Just because her heart was

breaking and she was dying didn't mean she wasn't testy. I knew what was smart. I'd sit on the swollen arm side next week though I didn't usually have a choice.

And for that matter, who had a choice? The free agency business was a joke, but then again, life's either comedy or tragedy so at least we had some perverse comedy. A comedy filled with tragedy? Is that funny? I guess it's entertaining if you are God, or the teacher, but it was sober stuff sitting there listening to the sermon ferment knowing that the saints had no desire to lend faith to my flash of enlightenment. I kept my friends all glad; I'd been called to leaven. And so I did. The dew drop came up from the cold, cold ground. Came up and I got punished for its' budding joy.

Life piled up on life. Under the grandstand, Doreen and I found pop bottles to cash them for candy and pop. We were poor, but we were rich. If there were no pop bottles, we could use coupons for candy and if there were no coupons, Doreen could always find money. Doreen had loads of friends; she bought them pop at Ritz's. Ritz was so pushy that you never had to feel bad; she'd smile at Doreen and ask her how she was going to spend her other pop bottles. She had no clue that these were the same bottles we sold to her yesterday. We had no choice but to pick them up at the back of the store and bring them around to the front. Now, there was a greedy woman. We drank our cream sodas on the banks of the torn down swimming pool.

That's where I saw my first snake. It was magnificent, a greenish-blue with tiny orange diamonds and two red stripes, or maybe three green stripes. A real serpent! There was this lovely yellowish hue throughout. His eyes were the same color as his skin—every color and more. The serpent, dare I pick it up? His tongue was brown with a dark vein and delicately split on the black tip. I followed it as it slithered its way through the tall grass. Could I close my eye and pick him up? Close. Tighter! Tighter! Touch! He was dry and cool! Close. Tighter! Grab! He was cool and dry! I turned him over and around. His head was the exact size as his neck that tapered to a body that looked like Christmas ribbon candy except it tapered to a pencil point at the end. And underneath it

was vanilla ice-cream—cold and creamy like homemade. You sort of wanted to lick it. And oh, it was smooth as cream; mother had used enough salt.

Who would have taken the hours to design such a thing? I looked at it winding around my arm and I knew I had to hand it back to God. Nobody else could have colored like this even Beverly Zaugg who had sixty-four crayon colors to choose from. Impossible.

Poor Eve, standing there all ordinary and white and plain and bright; no wonder she believed in the serpent of the Garden. What else could Eve do but run for the fig leaves and the cauls and the chains and the bracelets and the mufflers and the bonnets and the ornaments of the legs and the headbands and the ear rings and the nose jewels and the mantles and the wimples and the crisping pins. She was staring into the beauty of eternity. I'd have done it, too. God. If he wanted those two out of Eden, he knew what he was doing when he let a snake address woman.

My snake just stayed long enough to coax me to eat of the Tree of Knowledge; then he slipped gracefully and noiselessly into the underworld of a gopher hole. I never stopped trying to find him. And from that moment on, I began without ceasing, to question the gods.

God? Are you really there? Do you hear and answer every child's prayer?

At long last, sleeping isn't impossible. I wash out with the tide The full moon is out all colors of fish— lemon tangs, clown fish, wolf eels. I'll come back in the morn to the clinking of the ice . The aids carrying water .

I dream I am standing on a sand bar with all of my aunts, uncles and grandparents. Everyone is shouting and tossing a beach ball and laughing; I am the only one who sees a huge dorsal fin circling closer and closer. I am unable

to get anyone's attention. I watch the strange water beast reach shore. It approaches me on nubby elbows, fierce rocking from one stub to the other, until it is in front of me. A monster. It nudges my thigh with its snout and in my dream, it is a terrifying push on my thigh. I lean on one leg and hesitantly hand my other leg to the shark like a piece of wood. The shark turns and takes my leg away to devour in the depths of the water. From on the beach where he sits, my father squints up at me through the sun and says, "Don't you know if you give them flesh, they always come back for more?!"

No!

"Doctor! Help! Doctor Sukkal! I'm wounded! A shark!" . . . has taken my wooden leg. He has carried it to glut on in the deep, deep, sea. And Father says it will come back for more. Help! Help me! All is lost. I'll never get to the pasture now. I'll never get to the church on time. I'll never get back my golden curls, my golden ball, my golden crown. Physician, save me. I go to the watery world of sharks and psychedelic fish; I can't swim, I go to despair.

"Livia, I'm right here. There are no sharks here. You are safe."

"Livia, I'm going to give you a shot in your bum. Just take a deep breath."

Take my yellow curls; I pulled them, straightened them, darkened them long ago. Take my golden ball; it rolled years since to the bottom of the murky creek that wanders through green frog bottom. Take my dandelion crown; it lies in seedy fragments under my bed upon the cold linoleum floor; there, since the day in the pasture that didn't happen anyway. Rahab, I have no strength left to fight you. The shark has consumed my leg, I can climb no longer. Let the descent begin.

And when she entered the first gate,

From her head, the dandelion crown was removed.

Chapter Four

Baptism by Immersion

I am descending to the *kur*, the bottom of the underworld.
If I do not return,
Set up a lament for me by the ruins.
Beat the drum for me in the assembly places.
Circle the houses of the gods.
Tear at your eyes, at your mouth, at your thighs

Eight years old and dressed in pure white, I entered the frightening waters of baptism: good-bye to smoking, to stealing pop bottles from Ritz, to whispering during Primary, to copying answers from the back of the book; good-bye to license, hello to freedom—I would be Christian. Angela hung her arm over my shoulder for a picture on the plush lawn of the great church—a picture that would document the day: CHEESE. Angela was born two days before me; our cleansing was scheduled for the same day. Angela was delighted. The holy water didn't seem to worry her. But I had cause to fret. Rollo. Can lukewarm water cleanse me of Rollo? Could this ruffling pool of Siloam heal my guilty parts? I curled my toes and descended, Father at my side, angels as witnesses. Water of Life swirled around my legs and under my white dress, and as I went down, down, down, my white skirt came up, up, up and over my chin. The shame! The shame! My disgrace was given to the whole church. The lukewarm Styx. What could I do but suffer and because Rollo was retarded, I suffered alone. What else could I do?

And I ascended immorally gathering and pressing down my wet dress, my toes securely curled against the heartless tile of the font. But sure enough, Father knew best;

the shark that took my leg had returned. With one leg in the water, the creature's reaction was predictable. Eventually I had no choice but to be baptized by immersion, toes to the floor, by this formidable minotaur of the deep. There'd be a blood frenzy. Leviathan? Rahab? Rollo? God?

"The intravenous bag is empty. I'll change it while you do vital signs."

"Livie, will you press as hard as you can against me with your toes?"

"Livie, I'm going to run a sharp wheel up your legs. Can you feel it?"

"I'm getting no response at all."

"Livie, can you hear me? What day is it?"

"Can you tell me the names of your children?"

"Grip my fingers as hard as you can."

"Marilyn, she seems to be trying to grip. Come and feel."

"Livie, I want you to grip Marilyn's fingers really hard like you did for me.

Grip."

"Could you feel anything?"

"I really don't think so."

"Doctor Sukkal will be in at ten. Maybe she will try for him."

"Bev, come and look at this fetal monitor strip. What does it look like? The fetus is looking strong. But, are we losing Olivia?"

"Doctor Sukkal needs to come."

"I'll call."

We were supposed to stay clean and chaste. We were rapt in the royal robes of virtue. Did cleanliness mean that we were not supposed to meet the boys after Young Women's class? Did virtue mean to run like hell for home? But I could run faster than any boy. Twelve years old. I had the longest legs in grade six and they knew it. If I wanted to belong, I simply had to slow down. I did, trying my purity in virtue's fire.

Art Fisk caught me on cue, but instead of kissing me, he threw me to the grass breaking the toggles on my red winter coat. He grabbed my swollen nipples in his strong vile fingers, he rammed me over and over with his heavy crotch. The others watched, even the girls. And they cheered Art, lying on top of me, Art, panting like the dancing chihuahua at the Utah Cafe. My nipples stung, shooting signals into the singed budgie in my heart. What was he doing? Everyone snickered, knowing something amusing I didn't quite understand; even Angela and Joy cheered. And I laughed, but it wasn't funny; I laughed, but it wasn't funny at all, and I walked home alone and in despair. I wasn't laughing anymore. I should never have let him catch me. How could I trust me now?

Why not smoke the cigarette stub outside the skating rink; it lay there swaddled in the snow, daring me to dare. I wasn't pure anyway; never was. What a holy lie. How were we ever supposed to be washed clean immersed in the bloody waters of the Flood? Players Please. The girls stood aghast. I drew in the smoke—I knew exactly how it was done—and blew the fumes from my nostrils straight into the nostrils of the living God. Dust to dust, ashes to ash. Angela cried; Joy went home without a word.

Inanna humbly stripped off the vestiges of her maiden royalty at each of the seven portals leading to the underworld, but I was clinging to mine. I knew what shame felt like and I was ashamed to walk down naked. Give me my royal robes and my shammed innocence. Give me my psychedelic fish. I'll drift down Styx, Charon is master; let Charon row the boat. I am still moral, yes. See these fig leaves intact? See my blue Primary beads? I wasn't disqualified from being a perfect one in the grand Whitiker family, was I? Mary? the tempest is rolling, the billows are tossing high.

Yes, I wanted to drown, and I knew it. Instead of going *up* to Ninevah, I'd go down to Joppa,

I'd find a ship bound for Tarshish.

pay the fare,

go down in her
and sail for Tarshish
from before the Lord.

Like Jonah, no one need know how low I was sinking.

No one needed to know. No one needed to know that I didn't run my fastest. I was a bigger liar than the Pops kids ever thought of being. A bigger liar than Christ paying for my sins. Christ suffered that I might not suffer? Well, then, I suffered in vain. And I will go down in this disinfected institution. Living is vain.

And when my bird died, I prayed in vain. I begged her to live; I adored my yellow bird. I pleaded, promised God my tiny lapis beads—the primary symbol of my work with the elderly. I heated up Cheerpy's little body in the oven. But she just lay there smelling like the singed end of new rope. When God took Cheerpy, she soared straight to Him taking my heart with her. How could I descend into the pit from whence no traveler returns? What about my bird? She lay in the oven and stared at me. Stared without blinking. But I was blind from the eclipse, so I missed her message. And if my bird died that I might live, I simply couldn't see it. Mary, tell Him I'm sorry. Sorry for living. Sorry for life.

Let a stranger's blood pour down my vein; I don't understand. If I understood, maybe I'd waken. Where is that Tree of Knowledge? If I knew, I'd know where to find the cherubim with their fiery swords, and if I found the cherubim, I'd find the Tree of Life in the midst of the Garden. If I'm going to be extinguished, I may as well go out with the cherubim.

The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who knows? Like Eve, I have partaken of the Tree of Knowledge. Don't I need to know enough to find the other tree? Two trees grow in the midst of the Garden? Maybe One. Who knows? God.

If Christ paid for our sins, then I was His right hand sinner. I was a thorn in His thistly crown. I was in league, a true disciple of the very Christ Jesus, His most knowing and needy friend. He knew my name and I knew His. And every night before I knelt to pray, He would ask me, "Olivia, why didn't you say no?" "Why didn't you run faster?" "Why did you kill your little yellow soul mate?" And I'd answer him by asking how He managed to watch over me without helping. In the end, neither of us was satisfied with the other. But even still. Well, even still, we remained friends.

And I had plenty of other friends. He didn't ever really have to show up though I gave him abundant chance waiting for Him in the dark by my bed, breathing silently. I'd know him when he came. But Angela came, and Meredith and Joy; what more could I ask? We walked to school together, the brisk Fall wind warning us to take cover. I would call for Angela and we would call for Meredith. Her mother named me Tiny so she couldn't have liked me because I was going to be the tallest girl in the universe. What demon would rub it in? I smiled and hurried out; we were meeting Joy on the corner by the pop stand, so the torment never lasted long.

We were the Junior High Hellers. We drew pictures of sex, hid them in the wood pile behind Joneses; we lied about washing and ironing our hair, and we stole cauls, wipples, criscing pins. We were corrupt. My mother should know. She innocently picked up the other phone and accidentally overheard Angela and I talking. I whispered, "Nobody in the house even suspects."

"Will your mom find out?"

"No way."

That was a joke. Mother's craft was to find out what was never her business and miss everything that was. "Get in here, Olivia. What were you two talking about?"

"Nothing. Private stuff."

"Tell me this minute. Explain this business in your diary about becoming a 'pick up'!"

"Mom, please."

She gritted her teeth. "Now! young lady."

And that was all it was. I became a young lady. I started my period, and took a ride home from the store with Dirk Stone—same day. He'd teased me about being a pickup and I teased him back that he was an easy ride. I had made the mistake of repeating it in my diary. My mother was practiced at reading my diary by mistake; furthermore, she was an authority at reading between the lines. No explanation would cheat her, not even the truth. That should keep the shark happy with a thigh. Though it tells me more about Mama, still, her suspicions took a bite out of life mainly because I believed them in spite of the facts. I was a dirty little scamp. I started my menses. With a pad from Tamer and no belt to hold it up, I became a woman and a tramp.

Protected by angels unaware, the scamp earned a place in our little town. We had a horse I called my own. Dad woke me up at five to go out and saddle Willow—my life without a crowd. I used a running martingale to keep her head in present tense, a snaffle bit to press direction, an English saddle for comfort. She loved barley, so she loved me; she'd whinny when she saw me coming with the Roger's Golden Syrup bucket. And while I brushed and saddled her, she'd grind the barley between her grass stained teeth. Her breath was fresh asparagus, new green peas. I felt noble. The winter white hair fell from her bay coat; I untangled the cockleburs from her mane. The horse-hair blanket was cold and wet from last night's ride, the saddle was easy to lift. I rode her to the track where I could work out my frustration with salvation in the biting cool air, round and round and around, horse hooves drumming the ground. And I was hell bent for heaven, and heaven was right there in the saddle with foam dripping from her sweat and sweat freezing on my brow. Jumping fences, in Victoria Park, me

against man, against the elements, against time—five o'clock in the morning. And at five o'clock in the evening, we'd do it all over again, this time I'd ride against time, against for Rollo, thighs clinging mightily. And nobody could figure out how a girl from a one-horse-town could take the Grand Rotary Horse Jumping trophy; they thought it was luck and they were right. I was lucky to have a horse. Willow. She kept me when no one else would; she kept me where no one else could—on track. Angels all around me.

And no person ever shared that singular fragment of my life; Angela, Meredith, Joy, they shared other fragments; Doreen shared humor, school was one life, church another, Mom, Ralph, God, Stan, Dad, each one knew a different me; would the real Olivia stand up? I just wonder who that could be? Some fraud, some fragment, a figment of someone else's schemes or dreams.

I'd get home from this hospital just in time to take a picture of the peach pits' down and put up the two white vases for Jeanne's visit. I'd take down the vases and put up a picture of Christ for Dad. With Elaine I wear silk, with Joyce I wear jeans, with Deb I wear shorts, with Ted I didn't. I served veggies to Cynth, steak to Jake, chocolate to Michael, tea to the queen; I am the chameleon comedian—Zelig. The shark may as well take my other leg. It's only wooden anyway, and what's a piece of wood? Can wood become flesh? I keep the cross, though; the cross is constant, for you Mary, for us.

However it was, I could never win with my mom. There was no threat or bribe that could triumph. She held the trump—breast cancer, the constant threat of diffusion and death. "How's your dear, sweet mother?"

"She's doing well."

"Oh, hasn't she had more than her share of crosses to bear?"

Christ had one wooden cross, my mom had manifold, and I was her heaviest. My reputation preceded me; I seemed to be dangerous like Judas or Matthew Fox. All

teachers separated me from Joy the first day of school. And there I stayed, at the front of the class, where they could keep an eye on me, and where I could keep my eyes on them: the left one legally blind, the right one seeing Botany as it should be. And the days passed away, and the geranium on the windowsill died, and I failed French. "Whatever you're going to do, do quickly." I kissed off my learning from school, and became a dissident in our little school at Kings Crossing, learning from life. School offered no other options. And because two heads are better than one, Joy and I put our heads together and made life worth living. And creativity ran amok. Nor could Snotrag ever make us cry again. We'd sat on the toilets in the perfume-drenched lavatory and rung our handkerchiefs out for the last time.

"Scrapelegs is a nice old lady with fat thighs."

"Did you hear? Gently sings soprano in the all-men's choir."

"Rubber ordered books from three different Book of the Month Clubs without his even knowing it. My, my, isn't he an example of continuing education?"

"Joy, how would Willow's manure smell inside the French class?"

"Somebody phoned the radio station and canceled school?"

"The culprit, or culprits will be expelled. This is not an idle threat."

I followed my bliss for years and then one day school ended and I was going to a university to become a Botanist. Botanist? Yes, I'd made 94% on the final without studying. My love affair with the good native grasses paid in kind. I'd become a Botanist, why not? Timothy grass, I'd serve you now. Somebody needed to identify a gall when they saw one; I was the resident expert. And I suppose I did identify the gall that second year when I was kicked out of the university.

Something agreed with me in that place and though I smoked pot on Fridays, marched for peace on Saturdays, sat in church on Sundays, I moved into the Biology department during the week, and there I studied early wheat grass to my heart's content. Wheat—when it was only a flash in daddy's wild grass eye. Yet for this grass to

become a productive wheat—complex enough for man's use, a common diploid wheat (AA) had to cross with my wild grass friend (BB). The civilization of man has commonly been dated back to this cross and this unbelievable phenomenon has been termed: Man's Domestication of Wheat.

The catch was that man had no way to cross (AA) with (BB). The (A) chromosomes differ to such an extent from the (B) chromosomes that meiosis in the hybrid is abnormal, the hybrid (AB) is sterile. The only way for this plant to be fertile is for an unnatural doubling to occur (AABB). This enigma is accomplished only sporadically during the phase of mitosis when the chromosomes are doubled and lined up along the spindle in preparation for division into two identical daughter cells; but then something mysterious happens to the cell—the spindle uncharacteristically dissolves and division does not occur. The cell now has doubled the number of chromosomes; this is called polyploidy. The doubling happened ethereally and on these mystical occasions, the cross between my wild grass and her diploid friend was united producing a wheat grass complex enough to harvest as edible wheat—the staff of life. The polyploid (AABB) is completely fertile as is the ancient wheat *emmer*, Sumerian wheat, 11,000 B.C.E.

At the Sumerian New Year Festival, this wheat grass was celebrated. A representative for King Dimuzi ritually descended the pit for three days. When found, the god-king resurrected, bringing with him rebirth, the Season and this ancient polyploid—wild emmer. His queen, Inanna, was by his side—Dimuzi and Inanna consummate—(AA), (BB)—in Sumer, 11,000 B.C.E.

"Tis Spring," laughed the Sun, "'tis Spring."

The question: What agent caused these chromosomes to double and what part did man play in the process? Or: who domesticated wheat and hence domesticated man?

My working hypothesis: Man played no part. Doubling was a result of some outside influence such as a blast of heat. My guess: probably Old Mr. Sun doubled the

chromosomes. Wild emmer grew freely on Syria's sunny steppes. Animals stumbled across it and the brittle shells shattered scattering early fertile wheat. Wheat fields sprang up! And man settled down: town planners, mayors, doctors, lawyers, fathers, mothers, babies—all breaking bread in community. And God, represented by the god-king, waited in the Tower for the New Year Festival when they could celebrate the set-up in his royal descent and his regal ascent.

Simple wheat grains with genes going back to 11,000 BC are still found in the Near East. Several species of wild diploid wheat (AA) grow in Tell Ramad (Syria). Also growing in the region is my wild grass (BB). I was alive with the idea of gathering this grass off the steppes, gleaned diploid wheat from the meadows and investigating from scratch. Perhaps I could measure if man was the measure of all things. Without Russell's permission, I would finish humanism. Couldn't I?

While the idea crystallized, Kriss and I hitchhiked across provinces to participate in the Rotary Indoor Horseshow. Willow, waiting in the cool pasture, and I were scheduled to jump. If I won, I could finance the trip to Syria. Air proposals, theory papers and Botany books strewn around my room would simply have to wait through the weekend.

Dear Heather:

I know how angry this mess makes you. I promise to clean it Monday.

I went home and jumped. The painted wood loomed as wicked brick walls or water. There were poles, double poles, in and outs, stone walls, brush trees; each one a new experience, each one needing to be sized up by my companion and me. And as it turned out, Willow and I qualified to jump in both Junior and Senior events, three nights of competition where we triumphed over rocks, grass, shrubbery, trees. Father was pleased, I was his daughter, but could I take off my Hippie glasses?

Willow pranced beside the red carpet; Kriss was proud to hold the trophies; I held the cheques. We came back rejoicing in our rejoicing only to find there was no

place to go. Roommates had reported my drug abuse. School court in those days couldn't deal with such things; I was given the option of withdrawing or being excused. I stood over the dorm sink with a butcher knife. God, won't you help me? I wasn't angry with my roommates, I wasn't angry with the university, but I would never forgive myself. And I withdrew.

I withdrew with nowhere to go. My stunning career came to a screeching halt. I married. And my marriage to Stan was entirely dishonest. When I wasn't avoiding my memories of Rollo, I was thinking about the grasses I'd loved so long ago: the diploid wheat grasses I left in the wild pastures of Syria, the timothy sneeze grass that encircled my childhood holding me in the arms of spidery safety. My past held my future in ransom so that what might have survived and even sweetened—didn't. And the unsuspecting children went upstairs mourning. We'd covered our dysfunction so well we'd leaked them no clues. It was winter and Christmas and the grasses that might have comforted them—didn't. They were covered in ice and thirty-below winds. And Santa Claus that came with a box of canned food, didn't even look back and take a candy from Will who stood holding the ribbony jar out to him.

I let the phone ring ten times before Gloria picked it up. I called to ask what to do: let Stan take the kids to the spaghetti supper and the Christmas band concert without me, or to go?

"Let Stan take the kids; it's the perfect opportunity to relax at home without kids."

"But I have to wake up at six every morning to see them off, and now I miss their concert because their dad is going to be there? Back away and let him take all the pleasure?"

"Go, then."

"Do I sit with him and the kids, or do I sit alone?"

"Sit with him."

"I can't."

"Then don't sit with him."

"I can't not sit with the kids. What, sit alone?"

"Olivia, you're interrupting something important. Can you call back tomorrow?"

"The concert will be over tomorrow."

"I understand. Call back tomorrow."

She understands. Gloria understands. Well, then, I wonder why she isn't over here to give me a hand because I need help. I'm sick. I'm sick, sick, sick. I'm sick. And I'm still sick. Something or someone needs to give. Help me!

I'll help you.

You will?

You know I will.

When? When will you help me? You say you will help me, but when?

I would have helped you when you were yet a child. I would have helped you anytime since, and I will help you now.

You lie. You won't help me. You will keep me in all this, and there's the rub. If you keep me, what will become of me? What kind of help is that?

I'll take care of you along with the rest of Adam's posterity.

Am I to believe this lie, just like Mrs. Whyte who knew better, but wanted out of being a Quaker girl so bad that she faked belief? - Everyone living their scriptures, speaking their script.

When my cue comes, call me; I will answer.

Lies, lies, lies. Why should I believe you? Why would I believe anyone? Belief? Faith? What a bloody joke. It has to make sense, doesn't it? Pretend to believe that Christ can pay for our sins? How is he going to pay? Bleed harder than I? That is

payment. Payment to whom? To the universe? The universe is out of warp because I didn't tell Rollo, *no*? God will bleed for my not running? Are the stars going to fall from the heavens because I dropped acid? Atlas will shrug because I divorced a good man? You've got to be joking. Where is that little black book with my name in it? I'll tell you how to pay for my sins. Burn it, I'm already shamed, I've already cried, I'm already sorry. I dropped out of the university, didn't I? That wasn't enough? I married in white? Too much? Oh hell, there were so many lies I honestly didn't know how to know the truth. How could I know what love meant? I only loved my bird, and she I killed. What will become? The present won't let go of the past; there is no hope for any future.

The second door. All right. Take my royal round beads. I'll advance through the second door. It is Ash Wednesday. Put out the fire. In sackcloth and ashes I offer this sacrifice, the alchemic stones. Take them.

And behold, these stones shall be a witness.

Between me and thee.

The beginning of Lent I offer up my lapis soul, and I sacrifice it willingly as a living oblation to Leviathan, to Rahab, to Rollo. I deny the *way* no longer. "Charon, row me to the second door." And if I die, then I die in the womb of baptism, the Styx, the Red Sea, the Old Man River. Someone will deliver me?

Father Enki, the God of Wisdom, knows the food of life,

He knows the water of life;

He knows the secrets.

Surely he will not let me die.

All My Grandfathers.

Chapter Five

Bitter Waters

And a voice called to Moses from a burning bush. The cryings of the Israelites had reached the ears of the Lord, and their suffering was of great concern. And thus the voice said to Moses, "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt and out of bondage." But Moses said, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? They won't come with me. And they will surely want to know who you are!" "Tell them I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Tell them I AM who I AM has sent you to them."

I Am Popeye the sailor man - Toot Toot!

I live in a garbage can - Toot Toot!

I loves to go swimmin' with bare naked women—

I Am Popeye the sailor man. Toot Toot!

I Am who I Am who I Am!

Where am I headed? Is there a place? Is it Zion? The Promised Land? Or am I just leaving Egypt? Is it a race or does everybody get a prize? The third door prize? An over the hill, declining sort of advance? Old age. And like the Children of Israel, I decline lest I move through the third door, see God's face and die. Yet all I've ever wanted is to receive Him. But I am blind from the eclipse, blinded by my Pillar—twice blind. I'm in this space because of sight—the left that cannot see, the right that sees too much.

I believe I can hear old folks from the auxiliary coming in wheelchairs. I used to sing for these feeble ones, but now they hum as they pass: *Firm as the Mountains Around Us*. Stop singing. Let Moses go.

And all the people saw the thunders, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed and stood afar off. And they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die."

O frightening rumblings of a holy mountain, granite boulder quaking before my flesh. Are you the holy footstool of El Shaddai? I would rather worship lapis stones than Thee. Lapis stones mark my heart's intent to love and honor Thee, to serve with all my might. But don't make me look. Don't make me see Thy countenance. Show Moses; let him tell the story. I'm only twelve, and I have service hours planned today to earn another bead. The beads together form a chain, the chains together form a plate, the plate of beads heralds righteousness, a job well done. A document commends me to the church. I've served the Lord.

I have bread to bake for Grampa Roy and biscuits hot for the crippled one next door. The Old Folks Home needs songs and poems. The flies are in the buttermilk and they've forgotten. I should know. I visit every Sabbath and sing, *Put your shoulder to the wheel*. They can't hear much, but they know they're safe. I hold their hands because I love them, hands that labored through the thorns so my hands can pick only the prairie crocus. I rub lotion on the old deteriorated knuckles, and up the flabby arms, the worn out arms that used to hold me. My turn. The circle completes with this bottle of rose water. And soon I'll have a blue bead's chest, a ministering breastplate marking these service hours to the less comely. The beads already form a circle and every week the circle enlarges.

There's Vi. Vi looks at me like I'm an apparition. "Hello, Vi, its me."

"Who?"

"Its Olivia ."

"Oh, Livie dear. Who is your father?"

"Whitiker, Whit Whitiker."

"I know him, so your his daughter?" Every week the same.

Vi taught me how to knit left-handed. I knit a doily. "Too tight, dear, perhaps you have a doll that needs a hat?" So Mary got a woolly hat from Vi and me.

Where did her memory go, her hearing? I shout, "It's Livie. I've come to sing to you." She looks straight through me.

"Livie dear. Who is your father?"

"Whitiker, Whit Whitiker."

"I know him, so your his daughter?"

No one stands before her vision of angels. She's waiting for angels. I sing while we knit and she waits.

They like the oldest songs the best; the self same songs that charm the hens. And though the snow sleets down around the Home, it's *Springtime in the Rockies* for these folks. Sing it again. Like David on his lyre, I sing for Saul,

We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us,

What deeds thou didst perform in days of old.

I love the Sabbath with these old souls. I wouldn't even take the beads except I need the plate of stones to guard my breast; Art Fisk will never come for me again. All of my grandparents will gladly see to that, a blue bead every Sabbath. And while they tell me story after yarn after joke, I string them all as jewels to my King, a blue bead necklace, chained with tales I've heard a hundred times or more. Layers of sagging necks reveal the truth and where it lies,

Dan and Billy bolted just before the barn The hay was strewn from there to Lonesome Vale. By dint of the moonlight it was gathered in. And gathered just in time to feel the morning sun and feed the cows.

They read the scriptures as if scriptures were their God,

And Moses turned and went down from the mount with two commandment tables in his hands, tables that were written on both sides. The tables were the work of El Shaddai.

They spanked their kids into blind obedience to these laws,

Spare the rod and spoil the child was slogan. "We whipped all ten of them in line. There wasn't one that didn't do us proud though I've not seen them in a while."

They wonder why the children never come. But I come; week after week they can wonder to me.

Then my friend, George, sitting at his familiar stained table mat, wants lemonade for supper. I find the nurse and ask to make a trade and while I'm asking, George goes off to slumber. He's gone to hunt those good old prosperous days. He was Willow's blacksmith. He could lift an anvil with one hand and set it down without a dent upon the earth. He shod more horses than he'd like to count. Though now he counts. I wish I'd known him better. Known him when he drank straight whiskey and took on any bossy boy in town. He stacked a field of barley in an evening. He never lacked for hire, on the spot, the farmers knew his strength. I wish old George McClain was still a scrapper; he sleeps, his head upon his sunken chest. Awake, George,

Awake, awake, put on thy strength, George; awake, as one in ancient days, awake, as generations of old. Art not thou he that hath cut Rahab, hast thou not wounded the fierce dragon?

This guy has wearied bringing in the sheaves. He's cut his part of Rahab. Let him sleep.

He's cut his part of Rahab? Let him sleep?

He's done his part; you know it. Don't be-stupid. He's older than your dad by quite a shot. The Fathers riveted traditions with steel upon his hearth. This blacksmith did his part to break your heart. Meet Adam. Do you think he wanted farming, to work by sweat and toil in the thorns? No way.

So why did he work? He was famous for it? And all the time he hated Eve like sweat? But look, he sleeps with lips counting the horses. His arms hang pitifully weak.

He doesn't lift a finger now to fend or feed himself; how could he ever think of harming me? He doesn't.

But he raged until you learned to do it to yourself. With failing hands, he threw your dad the blazing torch. You took it up. And generation after generation with you.

What do you mean? I was a baby girl with golden hair; I had green eyes, just like my dad. O, I loved kitties. I liked their hard wet noses, their perfect song, their nine lives. I liked their indomitable spirits. I liked their smell. Their fragrance smelled like barns, like mother cats, like me. I scratched my kitties under their chins and arms, places where they itched but couldn't reach. I dressed them up for tea at Tiffanies with doll hats and dresses, toilet paper pants; I was Madam Duvet standing tall in Mother's Sunday shoes, a black hat with a big black plume. The whole world was before me because I had kitties and we had a red rose tea set made in China.

Kitten Cera wore a handkerchief, Dot and Sal wore toilet paper skirts. Baby Mary came as Queen with tinsel crown. The afternoon was nap time, but I could play with toys as long as no one called out or woke up Bell. We all whispered. "Would you care for seconds?" I served jam, and red rose tea, and cheese and cracker snacks, and kitty food. I curled my baby finger as I poured each thimble cup. I barely spilled a drop. Shhh! Madam Duvet. We read *The Secret Garden* and it was our secret strewn with a plush rose carpet, a velvet chesterfield, wallpaper leaves.

I never saw Dot paw the velvet couch. I never smelled the difference. We hardly dropped a single cracker crumb. Our celebration to abundant life completed with a quiet belch. And we were drunk on water. And I had the hiccups and so did Dot. We whirled off toilet paper rolls, tumbling kitties all around and over themselves like deflating balloons. They were relieved to have the party end and the toilet paper off—like mother rolling off her girdle with a sigh. Luxury.

But the cryings of the kittens reached the ears of your Father.

My father glared through the glass darkly. Oh, no. The couch was new, and Cera had made a mess; she'd made a filthy mess; the couch was new. I was real sorry. But I saw thunderings and lightnings; I heard noise upon the mount. Trembling. Father saw the golden calf, the water beading on the carpet, he saw the cracker crumbs upon the floor, he smelled the difference in the corner of the couch. The new couch. The new green couch. He raged; I didn't blame him. He smashed my red rose teaset made in China. Pulled down my pants and spanked my legs and bum. He tore my yellow hair and blacked my blind eye, green like his own. I was real sorry about the couch, but it was far too late, and sorry wasn't good enough.

He threw your kittens out to freeze. The snow and winter wind took their innocence and your hope, your sense of holiness.

Shut-up, Rahab. What do you know? He was my father, and my kittens had made a mess in the corner of the new green couch. He was being a father. He was a father. What do you know? What? Answer me, Rahab?

And yet, he was her father. Why did he hurt his daughter? Why did he leave her half dead on the road to Jericho? He was supposed to be a Father, not a thief. She thought he was a Priest or maybe God. Would God freeze baby cats? Perhaps He would. He pulled the girl's hair. He blacked her eyes. He broke her red rose tea set. What is a rose cup to obedience: no eating in the living room—not ever. Tell them,

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

She had no reason to protect herself: hands prying in the dark, Art's laughter on her breasts, Rollo's dreadful body in her face. She had no voice to call for help. Call who? Who should she call? Call Father? No. Cold comfort, Father, and the hanging bare bulb of consolation. Where was the good Samaritan then? Where?

And Popeye wants me naked. See yourself as you truly are. The unexamined life's not worth the living. Wander the Sinai 'till you know yourself or stay out of the Promised Land. Says who?

Wade in the water, bathe in the mikva, cross the Red Sea to enter forty years wandering around in a desert with I AM. You'll know yourself by then: being or non-being. Forty years of following a man, who is following a man, who is following a man, who is following a cloudy pillar. Forty years getting up each morning to gather spun gelatin. We've been blessed! We knew we were really alive when we choked for water and received—*marah*—bitter waters. We exist!

A man. Why did I follow a man? Is George a man? Am I to follow him to veal cutlets, lemonade and sleep? Says who? Look at him dozing in his supper. One day he hammered horse shoes with blare and fire; I inspected every move. The sparks flew when the horses kicked, and George blew up. I learned more words from George than I heard hanging around the Utah. He winked at me and pitched the burning shoe. Two minutes on the hearth and it was malleable iron he could hammer any form to fit Old Dan whose hoofs could glue a factory. Or he could tailor them to fit Shultze's ornery Shetland. George worked. He prayed. He testified of God. What more can I? Yet look at him—Adam still asleep. Follow man to this? Follow George to the Old Folk's Home? Says who?

You said, your mother said, your father, your school, your church, your community, your God,

Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and thy mother. That it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest live long on the earth.

Live long? Who wants to? Live long enough to sleep in my supper? Follow George to the skirts of town . . . my skirts. What? George winked at me across the back of my bay horse. He liked shoeing her. It wasn't my blonde hair, my long legs, my short shorts. Willow stood still for him to shoe, that's why George winked. That's why he sat on the bum bench with the men drinking coke; a men's choir who yodeled in unison when I passed by. Fishy.

I always liked George even though he slept upon his plate. But not for me to repeat a life like that. Work, eat, sleep, work, eat, sleep. What is going on here? Lemonade. Bitter water, indeed. Moses, throw in the rod. If life is this, I vote with George. Please pass the lemonade, and let me sleep.

I am Adam in a deep sleep in the Garden. And one day I awake to find me-man, me-woman—helpmeets. Together we wander round and name the animals never, never eating of the forbidden Tree. Always, always feeling incomplete. What about it?

Simple. Adam wants to name the animals again. Leave him, well enough alone, in the Garden.

But the unlawful fruit called out to me. Desiring something more, I took the risk and rejoined. Only the fruit did not complete the longing. No. It brought knowledge of division and partition. The aching recognition of separation like the amputee who longs to scratch the phantom itch. But Eve had partaken and Adam was forced to make a choice: eat or walk alone in the cool of the Garden. He ate. And though Eve went down with enlightenment, she evoked centuries of Adam's condemnation; she soon found out what sorrow meant.

What is the purpose of it all? Why life? What's the sense? I already had wholeness, and it was taken. This is not madness? The stupidity of it consumes. My body quakes. My fingers pulse. The existential angst. I've been divided, driven from innocence, to ache with a knowledge of partition in a wilderness. Examined life? A conscious life's the one that's not worth living. Male and female need to be fused again. Adam? Adam?

Shh! I'm camouflaged in the tall grass—stalking myself. He won't answer. He's angry that he has to sweat; blames me. I guess this union is something one cannot bring about for oneself? Independence, you are my enemy. It's wholeness glued with Grace and not with horse's hoofs. Success blocks the way. Amusing isn't it, this same successful independence was wrought by Grace. God, it looks like this game is yours.

The rules don't fit Monopoly, not Risk, not Careers, not Snakes and Ladders, not Sorry.

Blind Man's Bluff and I can't find the rules. You blindfolded me, separated me into two; sin came between me. Sin alienated me. Sin is the culprit. What's sin? You sent us into a dreary world to see. But my left eye is blind, and my right's no better. Even my eyes are angry at each other—forever blaming the one for the other—a beam! a mote! A beam! a mote! Could such a union ever find wholeness? Angry wholeness it would seem. I'll wait here in the ditch to see. Default to wholeness. I'll go with you or with your brother. Bed for bed. Pyre for pyre. Fire for fire. I suppose you won't turn out the light? You won't mind if I close my eyes and sleep just a little? Ah, sleep. Sweet, sweet, sweet. Perhaps heaven is right here all along. I'll sleep with George while God makes lemonade.

And do we have a choice?

By all means you have a choice, and this choice makes sense. You can choose to wander aimlessly and die fragmented with the ancients in the Sinai of Kings Crossing's congregation, or you can wander meaningfully and choose wholeness with me and die in Kings Crossing's Promised Land.

In the end, they both convene at the auxiliary?

Yes only some are in confused peace like Vi, some wait for lemonade like George; the sun falls on the just and the unjust, the conscious and the unconscious.

Who's unjust? Adam because he declines to leave the Garden? His is the greater sin? A life spent counting horses, naming sheep? Or Vi hidden under the bed, knit one, pearl one? Still pearling a swaddling blanket for the King. Life.

Oh, Rahab, I need another bite of fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Give me a bite, a taste. Please, sister dear. I'm a house divided. The division was planned, God's plan, without which I should still be whole as Adam in the Garden of Eden. In my longing



for completeness, I looked past God to the Tree of Knowledge; I sinned. And now my alienation is so great that I cannot possibly unite without the Almighty? I never could. But God is fair, He'll see me through. He'll pay for my sins. He said.

I'll say. Sounds to me like if it has to be done, He'd have to do it. OK, you need Him something awful. You must plug into the plan of salvation. Heady stuff this. Incredible logic. God encompasses this plot? From A to Z? The wounding serpent in the Garden all the way to Moses raising the healing Serpent in Sinai.

Rahab. Is this unlike my father who beat me? Who took away my sense of innocence and abandoned me to the men of Jericho to do their sport? I sinned because I lived. George, because he did. Heaven—you set me up! You make the rules. You call the shots. I supplicate you now because you reign. You always did. Master of the Universe—what would you have me do? The wounds have not healed in all these years. The longer you wait to return to the Inn, the more the debt. I'll need you soon. I need you now. Poor George has entered senile bliss and missed the point.

What point? Was it the fruit of knowledge Eve wanted or the prize of wit and wisdom behind the third door? Dear Livia, you chose the fruit. And every time you do, you fall from innocence of bondage in the garden of Egypt straight down to polarity in the Lone and Dreary Promised Land. And then, you whine for the fleshpots. Make up your mind.

Now wash your hands and sit up to the table; we're having boiled manna and lemonade. Break camp and fall in, everybody. Rejoice, you have freedom from bondage—agency to choose God within forty years or die with the unseeing elderly. Now wake up and march. One-two, one-two, one-two. Choose the despair of innocence, or the bliss of the Fall; if you're going to walk, you're going to drop. May as well know it. New shoes.

Rahab, I'm afraid. I'm afraid you're right. I am still afraid of the looming sidewalk. I'm afraid that this should turn into a chemical thing—irrational synapses. Therefore, I sleep; I allow a stranger's blood to feed me. And I sleep again.

Everybody does. Dinner today . Lamb roast. Sad. A living creature died so a house of healing can stay alive. The Sacrificial Lamb. Served up with mint jelly on this hospital tray. Goes down like manna with coffee or lemonade. Your choice.

Christ loved us so much that he wanted this life for us? For George? In his omniscience, then, he'll appreciate why I don't appreciate the sacrifice. Inanna, surely it is time for a word from you? Take this away. I hate my sister. I hate people, space, time, God. I hate me. I hate!

Listen to yourself, Livie. You throw your world as waste to me. Ban God to the underworld as you ban all things you can't or won't deal with. God did not hurt you. He has picked you up if you would ever notice. He has bound up your wounds. He has poured in the oil of mourning and the wine of his own blood. He has set you on his own beast and carried you to an Inn. And as he departed, he paid the Innkeeper to take care of you. He promised the Innkeeper that he'd return and repay whatever more it would cost.

What do you mean whatever more it would cost?

It might cost more than was apparent at first.

You mean he couldn't see that I'd been abused so he'll return to pay for unsightly wounds if, in fact, they are discovered? Sometime around forty when a life has been wasted and and children all but raised I suppose?

No. He knew about those wounds.

You mean he'll return and pay more because he never realized how often abuse occurred?

No. He knew and he wept for you. He bled for you. He died from every pore for you.

Then why will he return? You torment me. Are you devil? God? Why do you torment me? What will he pay for when he returns? If I have healed, I will be paying my own way by then.

You will be paying for your way by gambling perhaps, by cheating maybe, by addicting; certainly by suffering, by dying.

Will he return to take care of the gambler's debts and the whore's pollutions at the Inn? The compulsive forever addicting? The wounded forever wounding? The bruised forever bruising? Angry forever hurting? The dead forever dying? He can take care of these things?

Yes, he can take care of all these things, if you want him to.

If I want him to? You are the intertwined snake! I've got to think about this. Didn't he set it all up? Something's rotten in the state of Denmark. The Innkeeper. He paid him to take care of me, and the Innkeeper did. He took care of me, but he didn't care for me. There is the tragic flaw.

Livie, thou art beside thyself; your script doth make thee mad.

Since nothing at all makes the least bit of sense, we must be at the door of faith. I have to have faith that he loves me. I have to have faith that he knows what's good for me. I have to have faith that his pyre is better than my own. Hell sakes, thou almost persuadest me to be a Christian. Faith, the flip side of doubt! And doubt I've got! Hallelujah! I've arrived! I doubt the whole damn story!

You are the knight that languishes outside the Castle never beholding the Holy Grail. Your choice.

Now there's a threat! I guess I'd better knock! If I knock, he has to open the draw bridge and let me in. He said he would. Did he lie? I'm going to knock and ask him why he trusted the Innkeeper. A father. I suppose he thought a father steeped in orthodoxy and church standard was as good as anyone to trust. Who better than a parent? It does make

perfect sense unless you're omniscient. Spare the rod and spoil the child. One day I'll wake and find myself sitting alone in the Old Folk's Home waiting for Godot.

Rahab, life stinks to high heaven. Maybe father wasn't listening when Moses told him to look up to the Bronze Serpent and live. My guess is he should have followed me. I live at the Bronze Serpent. My only real barometer as to how I'm doing is how close together my appointments are scheduled. They ration me my prozac, and my xanax; not too many in case I figure out that man is only following man who is following man who is wandering aimlessly. That's dangerous information. My shrink must have figured it out in school. As a matter of fact I've seen how he can't look me straight in the eye. But then he knows my eyes and I don't think he believes either of them.

"Livie, Doctor Sukkal is here. Can you see him?"

"She doesn't ever open her eyes."

"He is going to listen to your lungs and heart."

"Livie, can you tell Doctor Sukkal what has happened to you?"

"Can you hear me, Livie?"

"Her vitals are way down. Here's the chart."

"She speaks, but it never makes any sense."

"Livia, will you speak with the Doctor?"

"I think she could, if she would. She just doesn't respond to us. She's in another world. The fetal heartbeats are stable now, but look at this chart. She thrashes all day and night."

"Try to keep her quiet. I want someone in at all times. Call me if there is a change."

I take my eyes to the optometrist, my ears to the audiologist, my skin to the dermatologist, my heart to the cardiologist, my kidneys to the urologist, my vagina to the gynecologist, my neurosis to the psychiatrist, my children to the pediatrician, my dog to the veterinarian. I need know nothing. I just hope the guy in front of me is following the guy

in front of him who's following the guy in front of him who's following the guy in front of him who's following the cloudy pillar to the Bronze Serpent. And they better make it before the Pharmacy closes. Who knows what dangerous fire-breathing monster sleeps under the spell of Prozac? I don't ever want to know.

Boots, boots, boots, boots, moving up and down again.

Men, men, men, men, men go mad with watching them.

Men go mad, and women follow. I can do anything you can do better, I can do anything better than you. No, you can't. Yes, I can. No, you can't. Yes, I can. No, you can't. Yes, I can. Yes, I can. Yes, I can. Yes, I can. Yes, I can.

My nights at the third door in the underworld have caused my freckled skin to age, my green eyes to blacken, my cheeks to hollow. My youthful energy is gone. My tubes are tied. My despair is renewed. I have no interest to emerge into the same old world. How could things be any different? I'm crawling under the covers, into the potato pit, under the log in the pasture. Moon, put out your ember.

Mother can drive past me in her big black car. I don't mind. Father can work on his truck. Who cares about his greasy smelling coat? Let their marriage break. There is a queer peace about it down here. It feels like a refuge, a safe place at last. I am alone. There's no God here hammering out my random destiny. Only black widow spiders that bite, but not like life. It's dark and icy cold, but I would rather lie under the log than beside a raging fire. I would rather starve under the porch than to eat a generous banquet in a warm church house. I would rather hug my knees to my chest than kneel beside my bed to pray. I prefer the smell of this wet dirt to the smell of the sacramental wine for in that frightening golden cup swirls true bitter waters. Bitter cup, indeed. No wonder You shrank before the cup. I know You, here.

I shrink too. The life examined hurts. The life examined takes in Vi and George, my Dad, my Mom, Mary, Art, me—and Thee. No wonder George didn't wait for me and lemonade. Perhaps the hero deserted his soul to approach it in his dreams.

To sleep, perchance to dream—now there's the rub.

The cherubs of the night coax me to follow. Through bitter water, through mikva, through the font. Remove the breast beads. It's the third door.

The third door down the hall, and on the right? That's George's door. George, too old to hurt me now, but once he was my father, once Art Fisk. He cut Rahab to pieces in his day. Remove the beady plate for George? He's how I earned the beads. He's why I need them now.

Me miserable, which way shall I fly?
Infinite wrath and infinite despair—
Which way I fly is hell—myself am hell;
And in this lowest deep a lower deep,
To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.

I am afraid. I fear I can't advance with this breastplate of beads. Surely I can't advance without. It's too dark for the eye that sees things as they should be; the other is legally blind. Where shall I turn? Call who? The cherubs, moving by their own fire, don't hear a single word; they jabber as I talk. Cherubim, I cannot follow. I'll have to abide the time sleeping beside this dead tree. Sorry, I can't move even if it means that I die with the elderly. I'm far too conscious of the shame. I can't. I can't remove my beads. What will they reveal?

The mountain quakes for you, Livie. Your cryings have reached the ears of God; your suffering is of great concern to him. He wants to deliver you. You must descend from the mount. Jump off His altar. It was never yours. Come to me. Take off the beads; He'll keep you safe. Your virgin's lamp is full of oil. Look to the Fathers. They knew more than they said with their old turkey necks: Come down, Livie.

Dear, God, dear, dear Inanna, I'm terrified to see His face. What if God is George sleeping in his supper? And I've discarded beads for Him? The great I AM has fallen in his stew. O, let us rest a spell. There's giants in the Promised Land. Thousands of uncircumcised Goliaths and Rollo. Who will I call? Call who? Rahab? Inanna, not the third door; not the breast plate. Please. I know each bead by heart.

Chapter Six

Ahasverus: Isaac the Old

"If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me."

On my tenth birthday, a gray stray tomcat slunk into our yard while I was singing in the sand pile. I rushed into the house and got a lid of milk to coax him to me. As he hungrily splashed up the white stuff, I noticed, with a deep sorrow, the tips of his ears were missing. Dropped off in some dark alley? I stroked his long thin striped back and pulled my hand up to the tip of his boney tail; he sang like a motor and rubbed against my neck. He sniffed my arm and licked my cheek. I knew he could smell fresh peas from the garden. I pressed my nose to his dry nose, my Eskimo kiss smelled of blubber. This cat had been places; he had seen the world; I called him Yid. Diaspora; I would wander, too. I would wander till I smelled like blubber. I would follow this Jonah to the depths of the boat, to the depths of the sea, to the depths of the Great Blue Whale. Perhaps I would be delivered? God? Do you hear me? I will serve you. Tell me how. I'm willing to go over mountains high or over stormy seas. A spiritual journey. Yes. I will do whatever you, in your majesty, cannot do. Unlike Jonah, I will go to Ninevah. I will find the hurt, the shamed, the lost. I'll find the lost tribes. Whatever. You say where.

I'd go wherever the journey took me. If life were spiral, I would spiral to Jerusalem, city of Gold, Land of Promise even if I had to begin by spiraling my way out of Merton's trash. Yid did. Like the Wandering Jew, Isaac the Old, Ahasverus searching for the lost tribe of Ephraim. Adventures lay ahead like Stanley and Livingston's exploration

of Africa. Who wants to join me? Jolene. She'd go as far as the pleasant pasture. That's a step. And having enjoyed the lush green grass and weeds from her day in the meadow, she'd better watch her step chasing Bossy home. One slip-up could be miserable. Jolene and I stopped at the Utah for a cream soda.

Butter Bailey came busting into the Cafe. Nobody could bust like Butter. He had things to say; even his biceps knotted launching the Players out of his sleeves. "The churches in King's Crossing stink to high heaven." Everybody looked at me drinking my cream soda. My dad was Elder and my smokes were in my bag of chips. I studied the mustard stained special on the menu.

"God is dead. Yet still they meet and reek of dead men's bones."

The coffee shop was silent. Oppressive silence. I took a swig of my Cream Soda. It slid down straight into my lungs. I needed to cough. No way, man. My eyes watered. I needed to cough so bad I was going to choke to death. Then die. I was going to die sometime. Die now. I guess nobody dared to cough, smoke, clear their throats, throw the first stone; I didn't. Stone your mother? Your wife and children? Stone Stephen? Most all these men were heavily enlisted till the conflict was over. The fan above stirred up the smells of eons of hamburger grease, fresh coffee and working men. Round and round and round. If you thought of hamburgers, the smell was old grease; if you thought of coffee, the smell was scorched wheat; if you thought about the men, the smell was sweat. If you didn't think, it just smelled like the Utah. The comfortable red booths became harder than the pews at church. I was being tested for such a blatant promise to God. I counted my blue beads, swallowing my cough. whispering my prayers. *Hail, holy Queen. . . .*

"Liars, they are, liars that would rather pray than pay."

Like taking the bottles from the back of the Utah and trading Gee for cream soda at the front. That hurt.

He might have been talking about me, about our family. Our family loved church more than life. I liked all churches. Not that I liked the way my dad forced me to like ours

but, I liked them all in spite of my dad scowling down at the naves in the congregation from his inner sanctum as if he were the plurality of majesty. I bet he bought his way to the front lines. Orthodox man of God? Were he and the Ghost of God in cahoots? I wondered. Or did the Holy Ghost see through him? Anyway, I even liked our church. I didn't really believe that the whales and all the other animals marched into the ark two by two but, I loved the stories. God must have been a real minstrel. I liked the tales he told. Maybe they were lies to tell a truth somehow. Oh, but I liked Butter, too. He said that the churches here invented gods of their own so when they quarreled, they could quarrel with authority. He said the Buddhists were just as bad as the Mormons. The Anglicans were Catholics without a Pope. The United were just that— united against the others. Butter was serious. He took off his cap. His sweaty brown hair swirled around in matted waves; I doubt he ever washed it, not with anything that sudsed. His filthy shirt over his fat paunch apprised the public that he'd just come in from dirty, sweaty, work. I'm sure Butter got his name because he was a grease ball. A grease ball everybody loved; they could have called him Lard.

He was usually in good cheer. The cafe waited his one o'clock arrival; at least I did. We were waiting to hear who was pregnant, who was stepping out with whom. Butter always knew; he could tell by the way a women walked. I think he was a seer and didn't know it. There were plenty of seers in our little town. I knew that.

I knew Butter's father was a seer, had to be. He couldn't see. Had cataracts in both lenses; he was blinder than my one blind eye. I have no idea why he wore dark glasses; I doubt the sun got past his cloudy stare. Butter's dad was legal. He even used a white cane when he walked down to Lila's to buy sen-sens, sensing just where they were among the varieties of candy. And sittin' in the Old Folks Home, he always knew what was cookin'. Butter was just like his dad only two hundred pounds heavier. Today, he sat in the booth without so much as sipping his afternoon caffeine. He declared his words straight into the face of Ken Seeley who was sitting across from him. Yet, Ken himself

was united with his church. Butter knew that. The perspiration seeped through Butter's shirt. He meant it and to hell with Ken or anybody else that wanted to contest the accusation. 'Course that wouldn't be me.

Butter's sweat smelled sweet. He was a roofer which meant he shoveled tar on roofs in the blaring sun. He'd roofed all over town so he knew whereof he spoke. He'd roofed the churches dislodging all those prayers that didn't make it past the rafters. The vain repetitions. Probably heard last week's sermon on integrity. I'm sure it smelled. I always sat in church hoping there were no Butters in the crowd listening to us hypocrites and our oaths. I was the biggest of the lot, praying for salvation with fresh shit house ashes on my fingers and soda pop bought with cereal coupons. Anyway, I hope he dislodged my prayers for me and Yid, sent them on their way to God. The Almighty was my only ticket out of King's Crossing, the only hope I knew. 'Though most of my constant prayers didn't make it past the roof, like praying for candy or for a trip to Disneyland, still, I prayed anyway in case the quality of mercy dropped like the dews of heaven. Prayed on my blue beads. I was praying that I could go on the Lord's adventure, do the Lord's duty. Still, it wasn't totally honest because I mostly wanted out and Butter knew that better than anyone at the table. Butter knew my prayers better than God knew them. He'd fixed our roof a year ago.

Our family was such a wonder on the outside; all of us. Marie playing piano in church, Doreen pumping accordion at the Rotary, me and Willow jumping fences, Gloria and Flander's Field every Remembrance Day, Bell with her white blond hair. And poor little Rollo. Mom and Dad were the celestial prototype for King's devout society. Far, far from rich, but sterling assets to the community. Mother, the dear nurse, the first woman in town with breast cancer, a model to those poor souls condemned to follow. And Dad, elder, town councilor, and farmer. Valuable people. I don't know if they paid their bills or not; they paid their offerings.

Hail Mary full of Grace, make sure they've paid off Butter.

Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail Mary.

You could hardly squint and fault us. Morning began at seven. Dinner at twelve. Supper at six. The dishes, washed by Rollo, were dried by me, and set into the cupboard by Doreen; Gloria swept. I knew the Testaments better than my Sunday school teachers. During this cleanup, Mother read scriptures. Everyday. The scriptures were wonderful if unlikely histories. A boat that carried the world, a woman turned to salt, a nation that wandered forty years when they could have made it in eleven days. However, I excused the history of the stories and persevered—wondering. Wondering was dangerous so I kept it to myself. We were supposed to be a solid family, the rock of Gibraltar. We knew the "journey". Still it was straight hell being everybody else's heaven. So all the while, I fingered my blue beads, a primary rosary for baby Mary. Mother read:

Therefore the Lord was very angry with Ephraim, and removed them out of his sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only.

"Where have those ten tribes gone? Taken captive by Assyria?"

"Lost. Displaced."

A whole nation lost? Ephraim, where are you wandering? My father said they migrated from the Euphrates northward. Mrs. Whyte believed they'd been transported to another planet. Bothellos said they'd gone to the center of the hollow earth; it was their flying saucers that were sighted. Mr. Bothello knew somebody whose cousin spoke to one of them; they flew out of an opening around the North Pole in a Flying Saucer. That theory fit with Father's; it was north and all. Dorthea Lewis said they ended up in Wales; her genealogy took her back to Jeroboam the King. That made her princess, related to the royalty of Europe. Her regal family were carved in stone which made them gods, I guess, on the west front of Chartres. Royalty or no, because of Jeroboam, the Assyrians took them captive like so many commoners. North. And still, there was North America. Ephraim, that wandering Ahasverus, was somewhere.

I knew that Old Isaac, the shoemaker, had boxed Christ's ears and so was doomed to wander lost along with the ten tribes. And all the rest of us.

"I go, but you shall walk until I come again."

In my wanderlust, I was determined to search until I found Old Isaac. Being a shoemaker, he could have picked up and gone by now. Where north? I'd just have to wait until my prayers were answered and then I'd search for them.

I was sixteen when Doreen and I hitchhiked to Las Vegas on spring break. Doreen was enrolled in Dixie College in Saint George. "Take the bus and visit that old pioneer town," they told me. "Take in the Easter Parade, check out the school, return the following Monday." Instead, Doreen and I willingly took the bus one hour north-east of Dixie to Las Vegas, the twinkly city of Ninevah. Ninevah, at last.

With Stardust in our eyes, Doreen and I bellied up to the bright bar and ordered a dry martini on the rocks. The waitress laughed. The ice tinkled in the thin glass, and through the clear liquor and the cut glass, I could perceive the whole glorious world as through a seer stone. I was clairvoyant. Las Vegas. Glory be. Look at the lights. The honest glamour. This was not *Ed Sullivan*, this was real, with blood and guts, and splendor. Where had I been all my life. I'd been cloistered. It was true. I'd been in the same closet where Doreen fermented grape juice in a corked crockpot that was about to burst. We ordered another. Money rained down like bells of angels; we had arrived. The Almighty dollar. Surely if old Isaac was wandering, he'd make it to this vagrant town.

"Doreen, see there! It's the Easter Bunny! Doreen! It's the Easter Bunny! Doreen!"

A miniature white rabbit hopped along the edge of the bar. I dove to catch it, but stumbled like some drunk. "Doreen!" But it was too late; I never caught the vision. Doreen was busy, anyway, in sacred hand grip with a penny bandit. She missed the vision, too. Like the white rabbit in Alice's dream, he begged me follow. I did so promptly and I found myself in a big and spacious building, everyone appointed in

sparkling bare-breasted attire and star-studded. I didn't gleam, but I was appropriately bare—short shorts. A woman passed out complimentary drinks. I accepted and complimented her; she rolled her eyes. Guess she needed tipping. And I had money, lots of money, but how to tip I had no clue. And when I was about to sit down on the floor, a sudden security guard took my arm. He wanted to know my name and where I hailed. Horrors! What was my name? Not Whitiker. Not Olivia. Not Doreen. Who? No one came to mind. There was nothing good about this Friday. I wasn't near old enough to be in this tinkling place whose only alchemy was found in usury. My beads! Attending to the matter, he asked me if he could take my picture. "Sixteen Year Old Caught Drinking in Vegas Casino—Her Father Thinking She was at Dixie College Watching the Easter Parade."

Who am I? Where did I come from? Where was I going?

Think fast! If I ducked these golden questions, played my cards right with this man, I could gather Doreen and we could ring the bell and run like hell. We'd be singin' Dixie before anyone knew any better. Yid, here goes an ear. The Security man, still holding my arm said that he wanted me to come up to his room. Oh, like dread. I held my breath and nothing came to mind but Merton's garbage. Merton's stinking garbage just before the garbage man came by. Merton's garbage when you watched them load and saw cats fly out in all directions. Except I had nowhere to flee.

"Come with me," he said. "You are beautiful," he said. "One of the singular most beautiful women I have ever seen."

Beautiful? Woman? Like, I was sixteen; I'd hardly call that woman. He would. He'd pay me fifty dollars in advance for a photo session. You mean he hadn't discovered my age? He'd discovered me?

"OK, for sure."

He wore guns and called it a shoot. I followed him reverently as if he was some Lord, "right behind you, your worship." He was very handsome, tall and blond. His

uniform hid any signals of the contrary; he looked honest to me. He was police and all, wasn't he? He had handcuffs, ropes, knives, even a hangman's rope. He just wanted me to lay down on top of this fake fur drop and smile.

"Like this?" He knelt beside me, and kissed my head. What was he doing? His hairy hands toyed with my beads, my blue bead necklace, a bead for every Sunday. The beads to form a chain; the chains, a plate. He said he liked them very much. He lifted them to see beneath. His eyes were piercing and ice blue, watering like thawing glaciers. Tears? He painfully unbuttoned the top of my silk blouse. Oh, please. Please, no. I couldn't say it. I couldn't say a word. I sucked air. He inhaled as he touched my breasts, held his breath to swallow, and exhaled freely. Not tears. I winced. He stroked my breasts as far as he could stretch his yellow fingers. And then he laid back, reaching inside his own pants to rub his crotch, without a breath, withdrew and smelled his hand; his lungs enlarged to pop a button. I saw thick black hair.

He swallowed. "I like girls like you, a lot". I breathed in the liquor, the intent. Would I take the beads off? So he could look without the beads? Just look? Just lay and look? No harm. "Come on."

"No, no! No! Art Fisk, get off me! Get off, Art Fisk! Get off me. Now!"

He did. He didn't mean to startle me. No problem. Let's just shoot the picture. With my beads around my neck, he snapped the camera. And shivering, I whispered that my sister was waiting for me at the crap table; it wasn't a lie. He apologized, and thanked me. If I'd like to do it again anytime, he'd be there. He pulled out another ten. Smiling like the golden sun, he said he ought to tuck it down my cute shorts. Tried to. Did.

But I got out, walking as straight as I could down into the casino with their blaring lights. I was gasping air, but I was OK. I was OK. It was good Friday! The beads—worked! Art Fisk. Christ died for me! Dad would never know the difference!

Hail Mary, Full of Grace,

The Lord is with Thee, and with me.

Translucent moonbeams pierced our heavy shadows. I'd think about Las Vegas some other day. Not tonight. No, not tonight. It was glorious to be out of the shelter and away from Rollo. No, not tonight. Not tonight! 'Course, I had to be back Sunday morning in time for church and family prayers. Nor did I close my eyes. Not because God hadn't protected me; I knew He had. I would forever know my debt, the Las Vegas deficit. I kept my eyes open to watch Rollo who was watching me. How did a retarded brother have such power? He didn't!

The Dixie coyote's wailing cry informed me to howl along, to stop playing happy family games. "Ow, ow owooo!" We were a miserable family, weren't we? I don't know. Maybe we were happy, and I didn't comprehend it. I told Mom three times that Rollo was disgusting! Hades from the dungeon in the basement. She knew what I meant, but she had taken some sort of drug that brought him on prematurely so what could she do now? I mean, the animal was her own creation. She lost her chance at a healthy male child the day she toyed with God. Europa and the white bull. She begot the Minotaur. For shame. Leave him in the labyrinth of the basement; close your eyes and feed him sheep.

After years, and many months, and many, many days, my mom convinced herself to play god one last time. I guess it killed her. She had Rollo fixed.

"Fixed how?"

"Fixed. He won't bother you again."

But he didn't stop bothering me. He hated being fixed. I was the one that tattled, bleated until somebody came. He got even with me, that's what he did. Fixing Rollo didn't save me. Except for my dimples, see my dimples, see I'm happy, always happy. They didn't just fix Rollo when they fixed him. But what could they do more? And what could I? Call who? I got out of bed and threw up.

"Just the flu, Mom. I should be better by morning."

But I wasn't better. I was worse, and I was ready to live by rebellion. Joy had a bloody nose; I followed her out of church and straight to the theater, *The Birds*, who

gathered together like they'd been called by Tarzan. When you'd least expect them, they'd be there to peck you in churches, in vacant lots, in stores, in closets. Black crows flew down to eat the guts out of living men, blind men condemned by beautiful blackbirds. Kids couldn't leave the schools for fear of wren's attack. So, they were stuck with the vultures that fed on children inside the school. A teenage girl and a pair of devoted love birds were locked in the attic of the old house. The love birds went berserk attacking her; she was mental by the time they finished. I'd say, what does one expect from love birds. But the scariest part of the show was sneaking home with a frown. I mean there was no way I would have been smiling if I had sat through the church meeting. My sparking eyes almost gave me away. Mother was no fool unless she desired it. This was one of those rare times. Instead of scrutinizing, she skipped the scam. She thought the trip south had done a world of good; Doreen was perfect influence. They were sure it was the Easter Parade. (The parade we didn't even see.) They believed everything they wanted. And they wanted to believe that Rollo was fixed, and everything was fine, and so they did.

Fine, like in high school where the big wigs tried to suspend me for being a hooky-playing smart ass. Even though I was only a smart ass using alternate study halls, they still tried to get even, but they'd met their match. I'd seen the Easter Parade. I caught a vision of the White Rabbit. I learned some tricks from the coyotes. The way to win in our school was to pull the teachers with you, any teacher, grab a leg and pull with all your mind and strength and you might get one to accompany you down the deep vortex of detention hell. "How you like your dinner, Mr. Wong?"

"How would you like detention every night for the rest of the school year, Miss Whitiker? Sit there!"

I cut pictures out of stacks of magazines for a bulletin on Greece. I was to make a collage. This ought to teach me to skip the Wong study hall. And then one night, all Grace broke loose and I found an ad where the Wind of God is blowing the cobwebs out of the Parthenon, ravaged and bare. The maiden Athena is overflowing as she stands dreaming

of bygone glories in Greece. Ahh, she is Woman; she is wearing her Maidenform brassiere. I had my centerpiece, and after that everything else fit perfectly. Because Adam is scared to death of Eve, I was excused from three weeks of detention. Wong couldn't take it.

I loaded the car with bridle, saddle, blankets, and picked up a whole car load of girls to cruise Lethbridge for a Saturday afternoon. I got paid for training the colt to ride! Hell, my dad took him out for the very first time he'd had a saddle on him and since Dad never got bucked off, figured I'd done a good job. Anyway, our lies were even like shoplifting an over priced crusting pin. I never did the work I promised, and he never paid me for the work he thought I'd done.

It was time to throw away those ignorant regulations foisted by my home, my school, my church. Just what did Dad know anyway? How to smash a teaset with one easy blow? What did Scrapelegs know? How to fail me in study hall? What did the church know anyway? That reverence meant never to ask a question? To doubt the sacred histories?

Yet, I desired to stop playing games. I was sick to death of faking. I wanted the truth; I wanted to see the real world not just Dad's or Mom's and not just mine. The whole earth was before me. Yet, how was I ever going to recognize it? I was blinded by my sight. When I ran up against home, I was sorry; when I ran up against school, I was detained; when I ran up against the church, I was labeled. And because I ached for freedom, I took license on every occasion. I had no idea there was any difference. What mask? I wanted life, autonomy, agency. I would harbor it, hold it, taste it, eat it. And if my ears froze off, I would never say I didn't bargain for it. I would hitch hike to any place but here. I was Walt Whitman, whom

Nothing tantalized more than being sophisticated, worldly or self reliant. Those things I didn't understand proved that my upbringing was shoddy, wrong, ignorant, innocent, incomplete, simple and stupid.

To earn my freedom, I cleaned office buildings, filthy sinks and toilets, thick muddy floors. Got up at five o'clock winter mornings, walked down town in snow up over my boots. You can buy anything in this world for money. God is gold. He'd see us through. I planned to pay him back for saving me in Vegas. I'd get out of debt; I would find Ahasverus, that old shoe maker. I'd speak to him. Convert him to Christ or life or whatever.

I would fly to Europe. I was barely seventeen. I put out the bait and Sally bit; the lure was swimming in the Riviera, the barb was Christian duty. Sally would help me find this Isaac of Old.

Sally was a *Daughter of Job*; her mother was in the *Purple*. When I showed her folks the map of Europe with all the churches circled, they heartily agreed and liberally financed Sally's trip. Sally was potential renegade. She had her parents worried sick that she was going to be a Hippie. When they imagined a summer on the lake, without their rebellious girl, they snapped. The hook was barbed. Their worries were unfounded; Sally was an innocent. Her parents had no idea that cynicism is only innocence, flip side. She got her naiveté from both of them; she was purebred-unconscious. Anyway, their dread earned her a fast trip to Europe.

Sally's face was flawless Victorian, white, and heart shaped. She wore porcelain pancake, black-red lips, her sandy hair pulled off her face. She looked like one who dabbled in the down side of alchemy. Especially if you ever saw her breasts. Nobody seventeen could have breasts that voluminous, nobody. Not unless you made a pact with Beelzebub. She liked to show them, too. She had no rules about breasts. If you were blessed with nice breasts, they were to be enjoyed by everybody. God said. We planned to see the whole of Europe; the Old World would get their peek. Watch out, here comes Sally— the innocent abroad.

We'd land in Copenhagen and from thence the Continent. We'd see it, taste it, and if we found old Isaac, you could bet, we'd show him home. Sally agreed. We'd search all

Europe for his lost ten tribes; we'd stay until we found them or our god gave up. Samuel, Samuel. Testing, testing, like George Phlox bent over and blowing in the microphone at church, all I could see was bum crack. We had no idea if we were even plugged in.

Ephraim, Ephraim! Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am.

Mr. Gilbert said I'd never make it, not past French class, not to University, not to France. To him my life would be one giant failure and all because I failed French. What did Gilbert know about determination or desire? He knew that I had thighs that made him want to heave. I guess my thighs were particularly gross. Only he knew for sure, sitting at the front of the class, a place from which he could compare them to others like some leering John afraid to ask the golden questions, afraid to live the golden rule. No wonder I couldn't believe the Security Guard.

My blue beads broke the day before we lifted off for Denmark. I brought the unstrung mess with me; perhaps I could sort them out along the way.

"Life Vest is Under Your Seat." The caution was true. I threaded the rows of beads praying all the way across the ocean. I couldn't swim, life vest or no. Our celestial horizon was miles below us. "Creme de Menthe, please." To life! To Mother Earth! To landing on dry ground! To Ahasverus! To all of us!

Denmark. Wandering Jew, why wouldn't you be here? I would. These Vikings with battle-ax and sword once owned England, Germany, Sweden, Norway as well as Iceland and Greenland. Yet, King and Queen Christian Juliana settled for this small nation. Peace-loving, they made home a haven filled with fairy tales, sagas, ballads and mythology. No mountains here, no poor, no rich. A democracy where every citizen has a right to be; people, the nation's greatest asset. Hans knew this Denmark,

God holds dear this old swan's nest between the Baltic and the North Sea. Let mighty birds come through the air to break it asunder: it shall not happen!

Green copper roofs surrounding fishy markets were a prairie girl's delight. Just breathe through your mouth. Who guessed a cod would look like that? Prairie cod was always breaded. There were plenty of delicious sandwiches in this place, sandwiches fit to serve on Christmas Day with sweet purple cabbage. A pastry for dessert—almond, almonds. Colored lights lit the sidewalk cafe; we sat and marveled. Denmark. Valhalla. Viking heaven. Anderson knew it all—this Swan's Nest.

We saw the Mermaid forever looking to the foam for her beloved sister. In a bookstore, I bought Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and read in the train station where we listened to this country of free speech. We saw women walking arm in arm, keeping perfect step with the unseen rhythm of the station. Children in green uniforms debriefing as they hurried home from school. Old men sitting on train benches just like us—watching.

Wonderful, wonderful Copenhagen . . .

Except there were shops and vending machines; everywhere were shops and vending machines with pictures. Half a crown. All of it eye level. Windows and windows of naked flesh. Men. Naked men. Hard naked men. Neither of my eyes would look away; they were compelled, attracted by some fiery force. "Look down!" I demanded them, but neither eye would obey. They basked in the beauty of stark naked men. Neither eye was blind this time, staring at this raw flesh. This too solid flesh. "Look away!" "Walk away!" "Get away!"

No way!

I hated my eyes. Pure hate. At least Rollo was retarded.

We'd be safe from my eyes if we followed the food and the churches. The liquor in Denmark, the goulash in Germany, the bread, the cheeses, the chocolate bars; Sally and I, hand in hand. We were seeing the old world and food, smelling it, tasting it, devouring it. Yid, you old cat you.

God made the world, but the Dutch made Holland.

"Where was our green card?" We couldn't cross the border into France. Gilbert was right, I'd never make it.

"What green card?"

"You must have a green card!"

We didn't know anything about a green card. What does he mean, a green card? Since when do we need a green card? We waited at the border crossing for two hours. Finally, some bus driver came through. Growling, he said, "Let them pass!" So they did. Was it Ephraim? Isaac, the Old Shoemaker? Ahasverus? Rescuing us?

And every town had a castle, a chateau, a church, so we stopped, and looked for him. Ahasverus? And each church breathed a faithful story of Christians gathering before lunch. They smelled of potato pits and home in the wet grass; filled with stories of our long gone grandparents, they were grand. The designs, the gardens and the planners; they were real with true lives and real histories of men and ladies, knights in armor, escapades, confessions, architects, stories to tell. Tell us! We Colonists had come for stories not for dates. Europe was civilization. We knew that much before we came. And now we wanted flesh not structural facts as we followed the guide down damp passages of long gone centuries. "The revival of past styles is a characteristic of European design throughout most of the Nineteenth Century."

No sweat and tears? We turned away from the queue to dash bare-headed in the rain to look for a newspaper of hot frites and vinegar. Europeans left fish like this to conquer new worlds? Amazing. Like Alex the Great, they'd leave fish and chips behind and set sail to enlighten the east. Poor sea-dogs-didn't even get to India, to spice or warmth. No, they got new beaver skin hats, freezing death, a name in history. And Indian wars.

Hey, Gilbert, listen to this: "*Ou se-trouve la toilette?*" Is that guy still standing in the damp cathedral wearing his navy blue suit and his flat top hat forever pointing to the toilettes?

Ate horse meat one day. Sort of sad. What isn't sad? Even tulips have to die. And so do we, so let's get to the Riviera before we pass away. Perhaps old Isaac isn't stupid; perhaps he accompanied Adam, Eve and Pinch-Me-Quick, and went down to the river to bathe. But that was before Chartres, before the boys in the hostel stole us blind in the night. Stole Sally blind. And I was blinded once again.

Still, Sally blamed it on the churches. She raged. We ate what we could find. I sold a ring. Sally found a boy. I slept in a hostel with rats. Ate nothing. Strung the rest of my beads together. Should have traded them for supper. This must be where Yid froze his ears and sloughed them in some alley. Maybe we shouldn't have stopped for so many churches, candles twenty five cents a piece. Sally was flaming, but what could I do? For Ephraim, how could I not? Lost all these years. And what about my promise? To look until I found him.

Yet, we hadn't even seen Chartres; Dorthea's stony grandfathers chiseled on the wall. We nearly missed it; too much for Sal. "Come, Sal, just five minutes more. How could we miss seeing Chartres, her stained glass nave? How could we miss being a part of that unique light?"

Sally was silent.

Sculptured ceiling vaulted to the heavens. Oh, there was so much colorful design held by these thin walls. More and more stone quarried from the hills. Stone transformed by faith to blessed cathedral where Sally and I could pass eight hundred years later and see the whole transfixed in acres and acres of radiant windows. What masters crafted here? Why? What were they trying to say?

And then I understood. Attend the windows; they'll give up sapphire secrets in sacred stories of Yahweh and his people. Abraham finding the ram caught in the thicket. Where are you, Ephraim? These are your stories. Where north? The Covenant before the Lord, the law of Moses, the years of struggling with and against their bond. The wanderings. The prophets. Jonah in the Whale—delivered. The Lost Ephraim. Judah

into Babylon. The Temple destroyed. The Temple rebuilt. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Maccabees. Glorious windows of constant pictures telling their story.

Then mirroring Eve, Mary bears the good news. The New Covenant. We can leave this place of waiting for Godot. A babe is born.

A great tree springs forth from Jesse who is lying asleep; kings sit one above the other forming the trunk of a tree which leads to Mary, and her son Jesus Christ. Mother read to us:

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding.

In his twelfth year, this son teaches the doctors, both hearing and asking them questions. He preaches the new year of the Lord. He reads Isaiah casting the intricate widening net to gather up the Old and the New. The Fisher King is Wonderful, Councilor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He heals the blind man. He raises the daughter of Jairus. He is Master of the Universe yet stoops to bathe disciples' dusty feet.

Was not Old Isaac blind to strike the laboring Christ? Would one who sees have cuffed him? Why not heal *this* blind man? Why must this blind man wander till Christ comes again? Are we not all blind and wandering with our dark glasses, avoiding all that's fearful, our white canes leading us to the corner store for sen-sens? Bless him, Father; bless us all in our fear as we stare uncontrollably at the naked men in Danish bookstores.

The stories in the great cathedral swelled with solemn forgiving light. The promise of salvation emanated, flowing forth to all humanity- To all humanity? To the lost ones? Mother read:

Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.

"What artisans altared these stones where decades later I could kneel and weep? Whose vision to fashion the holy story? Servants of the King?"

"Nonsense!" Sally whispers, "Servants of the king. Look what the people of this town had to give up to construct this cathedral—gold leafing and these leaded doors and windows and all of this stained glass. This is not holy. It was Chartres competing with the world to be finest, competing on the backs of the common artisans, on the backs of the ordinary heavily taxed citizens."

Poor Sally, no common people built this place. These were dedicated saints who understood the price, and paid it willingly. Repentant people. These people were not vanquished; they were delivered. And now they deliver me. Ephraim. Father was right. You wandered north to Europe. You took the centuries to live this art, to hang your harps upon the willows and quarry rock to holy walls, fire sand to glass, and fashion leaded glass to wholly comprehended story. The lost is finding me. The Light. After centuries you'd know the difference.

I once was lost, but now I'm found—

Was blind, but now I see.

The blind man who cuffed the bleeding Christ is healed here. And there is Christ struggling to Golgotha with the tree where he will decorate the stages of the churches in Kings Crossing. Forgive us, Butter, we are all blind men poking life along our way. Yet, I have waited all these years to see His kind face. The grandeur is the work of artisans. Their charity reaches to my racing heart, tugs at the dark glass overshadowing my eyes. And I can touch God's hands if I move my hand just three short inches. And I move them in awe. I am doubting Thomas. Is God dead? And did I too cuff him on his solitary way? Does he forgive me and Butter and the churches at Kings Crossing? And now I see Christ's hands reflect on mine. His wounds become my own.

And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell upon his neck, and kissed his cheek: and they wept.

He knows the errant Ephraim and loves him still. Beads or no.

Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.

He'd visited me when I visited him. And I spent my last few quarters on dozens of candles to thank him for it and I was still in debt. The leper returning again and again and again. The candle lights flared up like a thousand million diamonds; I'd given all I had. And I counted my beads and thanked the villagers one-by-one who went without. I thanked the guilds and the artisans in those guilds. I thanked the world for being such a place. I thanked Mr. Gilbert who didn't believe I could learn French. I came to prove him wrong and found myself. Mr. Wong who sent me to Greece and thence to Athena. They spent their last breaths to make it my first. And I thanked Butter.

Thank them, Mary, tell them thank you. Tell them for me. Make sure they hear you. Mary, give them these blue beads. Perhaps they can be crushed up for repairs. Glory to the Father.

But Sally was angry because we didn't have a cent to spend on the Riviera. And she was right, but I'd spent my last cent exactly how I wanted. Let my salty tears join the Mediterranean. Sally's tears, too, I guess. Now I could go home to my closet and bleed —with Christ.

Bring me my bow of burning gold!

Bring me my arrows of desire!

Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold.

Bring me my chariot of fire!

I'd wandered half way round the world and found Zion was England and England was King's Crossing.

Mother of all living. You and your baby are still kicking. "Olivia? Do you know where you are? Do you know who you are? Will you open your weeping eyes and speak to me?"

Chapter Seven

Come, Man, Come

Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned.

When she entered the fourth gate,
The breastplate called "Come, man, come!" was called for.

Even in the summer, when I know that he's gone South to see the Sun, I always look for the Mighty Hunter. Orion. They say he imbibed Bacchus' wine, toyed with the daughters of the king of Oenopion, so the king blinded him. Poor Orion had to beg for sight from the rays of the sun-god, Helios. On a repentant quest, he cleared Crete of wild beasts as a favor to the king. With sight regained he saw, sunning herself, the silver moon-goddess, Artemis. Too bad the sun restored his sight. He had it coming to be exiled into the winter constellation. Who would mess with Artemis! Though not entirely virginal, she wasn't one to rape. No wonder she ran him through with a golden arrow, finished him off with the scorpion she formed from the very dust of the earth. Yet, Orion attends to the night sky like some faithful lover, tramping off in March, returning when the nights are cold, and woman needs a man. Fidelity in the winter sky. It started with a Big Bang.

Artemis had every right to sting him to a life in constellation. Yet, he remains a glorious figure. He rules the sky with permanence, with eternal return like some repentant lover—Saul to Paul. I love him. I unashamedly love him. I will never renounce him. I can't. I love Orion best. I always have. I am his faithful dog, Sirius.

Bothello's dog, Skippy, was barking at Orion one night. Turns out there was an intruder in their house; it wasn't Zest. This guy came right in on Mrs. Bothello, jerked off her bed clothes and got inside. Her young son, Ralph, said she was too petrified to scream. I guess he was there over an hour. Ralph's dad was in the next room sleeping; never heard a thing. Two days later, she announced that she'd been raped. A rapist at Kings Crossing? Orion and Mrs. Bothello? I guess. She was still sobbing when I got there three days later. Her red hair hung in dread locks. Mrs. Bothello had a nasty temper. I have no idea who would want to rape her. Even Mr. Bothello slept in a separate bed. Every few minutes her mascara flash flooded down her cheeks. It was true. Mrs. Bothello wouldn't cry if something hadn't happened. She was a cold heart. And it couldn't have been a boyfriend for that same reason. It took her 48 hours to realize what hit her. Poor thing. And all the time she was being raped, Canis Minor, in the guise of Skippy, was outside barking at Canis Major, old Sirius himself. The whole town was ready to strangle Mrs. Bothello—her yapping dog was in heat. The whole town peevied. The whole town, and all its strays.

I should know. Ralph Bothello and I formed a K.T.A. club: Kindness to All Animals. We were the only members. We had the charter and the rules; we had white T-shirts with black felt-pen lettering: K.T.A. We would honor all animals as ourselves. If they were hungry, we would feed them. If they were cold, we would warm them. If they were scarce, we would find them. Where did we look? For the next three weeks, we could look in Ralph's own back yard. Skippy went before us.

The food was too much for me to steal alone, and Ralph loved to steal. I really do believe it was Ralph who stole the money that they blamed on Zest. I figure Bothellos knew it. Instead of letting it break their hearts, they blamed Zest. Ralph was a commendable stealer yet his parents knew that he was a capital boy, down deep. He was, excepting that twenty dollars. Being a thief is partly why he made the perfect charter member of the club. The club was his salvation; he was doing bad for a good cause. Like

Robin Hood turning to honest crime, he stole tuna fish, pork and beans and jello for dessert. Like the Prodigal, he was squandering his parents' inheritance on strays; we ate with the animals. His mother wasn't up to making any meals and there were no meals forthcoming from the community.

Ralph was no Orion, that's for sure. He was ten years old and still he'd never worried about sex until this thing happened with his mother. He was a chubby boy with freckles and red hair; I never heard him speak of sex. He wouldn't even check to see a male dog from a female dog; he didn't care who was eating the beans with pork. Just make it out the door with an armful of food, make it past mother. 'Course, it helped to have Mrs. Bothello shut into her dark room.

I still marvel that the town didn't come in and clean her house. I mean, this woman had been raped. They cleaned houses for women home with babies. They cleaned houses for gall bladder attacks. They cleaned houses for the dead. But no one came near this place. Somebody needed to fill a bath with hot soapy water and wash her freckled face. Somebody needed to lay her body carefully down in a hot bath of smelling salts and shampoo her red tangled hair. Somebody needed to scrub her filthy crotch, and her blue-white legs. Somebody needed to dry her skin, her hair, her eyes. Somebody needed to take care of Mrs. Bothello, rub glycerin rose water into her blue blue skin. She may have been somewhere in her fifties, but to me, she was just a feisty little girl that needed care. Where was everybody? Where was my mother? She was a nurse. We needed a nurse here. The town could clean a dirty house, but not a dirty woman? I picked her buffalo beans, but I was too afraid to go into her shadowy room and give them to her. I left them by the phone that didn't ring.

Turns out this guy had been seen hanging around her house for days. But who could tell with rumors. The enlightenment came four days later from the same two who saw Zest leave the house with the twenty dollars Ralph had tucked down his own pants.

Small town eyes. It's a puzzler to me that they could immediately see Zest who wasn't there, and completely miss a rapist who was.

Ralph's dad was furious. He already had a temper to match his red-headed wife. I'd hate to wager on their fights. Stand back. I'm sure his fat fists would have broken every bone in the intruder's body. If he was anywhere, he'd better hide. Otto Bothello was one tough Italian. And he was ready to explode. Someone had contaminated his wife. Someone had destroyed his property. He raged.

While Otto was raging, Ralph and I just needed a few cans of beans to feed the strays. No real problem. Except that now we had to sneak past Father. Let's hope it's blind rage, too blind to look out the back window. Trudy was a bitch across main street. If Trudy wasn't having puppies, she should be in heat anytime. That would be pure relief; the strays would move to the other end of town which would free us from being caught feeding beggars in our own back yard.

Ralph was a dense boy. I mean, he belonged to a club of starving strays yet he let his mother throw away the dinner scraps without retrieving them for Butch. Butch would eat carrot salad. I begged, "Can we have your scraps?" But Mrs. Bothello turned away from me like she was in a deaf trance. She scraped them even before the echo of the words hit the ceiling and descended to scatter empty-handed on the plates of left-over stew.

Ralph left me standing agape. He asked for nothing. He'd rather retrieve creamed beans out of the garbage. For him, it was the thrill of the sneak. He would smile at his sick mother and cheerfully help her throw away bacon and eggs; he stole it right back the minute her back was turned. If she, by chance, turned back, he was straight faced and ready. "They need donations at the shelter." Ralph could lie his way out of Hell. He fooled me only when the truth hurt like hot coals in your eyes.

If he was lying about my K.T.A. shirt, I don't know. I pray he was honest just this once. He said that he couldn't see through the shirt. "Are you sure?"

"Hate God if it's a lie."

"That oath means something only if you love God in the first place."

"I do love God; he is my Lord and Savior."

"Brother." Poor, pathetic Savior, bleeding from every pore so Ralph could swear about the five foot waves on the canal. Waves that died down by the time we got our bathing suits and followed him to swim. Pinch-Me-Quick, let me believe him this time. I could feel the constant throb of my waking breasts, but could he see anything, anything at all?

"I swear."

There was no way to get an honest oath out of him. I had either to abandon the club, and all the strays at Kings Crossing, or forget about my plight. I tried to forget. I tried to forget that anything could ever interrupt my innocence. If I could, I would be flat chested forever. Oh, Ginsberg,

I could know
Wonders wild
if I could grow
Up to a child.

If only I could stay a child forever. Like the Wandering Jew, I would wander in innocence. Mary did. Says she had several children yet she was virgin to the end.

Please God. If there is a God in Heaven. Then please. I'll attend the strays for all my days. A Nightingale to things that creep. A holy trade. Let this be covenant between Thee and me. I'll erect a stony monument to mark and witness to our pact. Me and my house will serve the Lord. I'll serve with all my might, but no breasts, no womanly chest, not ever.

In the name of the Father and in the name of the Son and in the name of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

One week later, dressed in my white T-shirt, I, Artemis, looked down to spy lumps. Lumps! Lumps where the aching had been and where it still was. Lumps, oh,

please no! Ralph could see something now. I spared God a drop of His atoning blood and didn't ask Ralph anything. Lumps. We finished our rounds downtown that day, and all the days of the following week, bringing fresh loaves of bread, bottles of milk, canned salmon, and left-overs. But all the while I suffered, pulling my shirt out from contact with the lumps. I worked single-handedly. But it was too much. Too much to deny. I laid down on my bed and looked. Horrors. Like the *Blob* that started growing, picked up speed, and weight, and terrified the earth. Nothing could stop them now, not even God. They had agenda of their own. I disbanded the Club, and threw away the shirt. I'd stick to blouses and bulky sweaters. I'd move to the potato pit in winter, under the porch for summer.

Mrs. Bothello thought I had been using Ralph, dropped him for girlfriends and breasts; that's what she thought. I could tell by the turn of her head. She saw my breasts; she knew my shame yet had no idea that I was probably the only one in the whole world that really knew hers. She looked away to avoid seeing a stray in her own home. She fed Ralph toast and honey, never offered me a bite. That bit. She'd have made a lousy member of the defunct club. Next year she would teach our class English. I'd already failed. Those lumps ruined my life; that's all I knew. And Mother pressed the point. She wanted me to start wearing a bra. She got a used trainer from her niece. Could life be worse? Chasing the milk cow to the pasture made me cringe. Her bag swinging back and forth, the neighbors seeing us, flop, flop, flop. Her tits hanging down to Dad or Rollo to be milked. Oh, please.

Breasts! And if Ralph didn't notice, Gil did. "Nice can-cans." Right in front of Sidone. Gil was the school blue-eyed stud. Too bad he was muscular, and beautiful. I wanted to despise him. Sidone, the captain of the cheering squad, wanted him to despise me. Too bad we didn't work together, form an alliance.

Sidone wanted Gil to see her amply padded chest; his neglect prompted her to plot my demise. Who cares? She can kill me. These breasts already have, so what's the

difference? There was nothing fulfilling, nothing wonderful, or beautiful nor any sort of charm about my breasts. I despised them. Wanted to slit them with a knife, cut out the hard-core lump like some sort of cancer. Lucky mother; she lost one to cancer. 'Course two would have been a sight better. Would an operation stop the process? Could binding cripple them like Chinese feet? Could tobacco stunt their growth?

I layered sweater over T-shirt over my cousin-used brassiere. Gil found it anyway and snapped it out. Oh, please God. Why did you abandon me? I knew a little of how Christ felt on the cross. Double crossed. And I double crossed myself, and prayed on the names of all the saints. I didn't care which ones were true; I'd cover every one. Cover everything. I had penis envy, that's for sure. If I had a penis, Sidone would be my friend. If I had a penis, I could be comrades with the boys, and Gil. If I had a penis, I could still be member of the K.T.A. Club. If I had a penis, Butch would have carrot salad, green peas, and t-bones for his supper. But I didn't have a penis—I had breasts.

Women covertly ruled in our town, in our house. Mother ought to know. Father demanded obedience. To what? Mother defined it. And whatever she determined was his rule, for all of us. No wonder she obeyed him. That scripture to obey Adam was, in our house, Woman's Lib. Women, do whatever you want. I didn't know any house it didn't work like this. I wouldn't say that my mom's marriage was joy and happiness unbounded; both Mom and Dad could rage. It's just her tempest was the stronger of the two. She won before the war started. Our home was cold-war which looked, on the outside, like peace and joy unbounded.

"Olivia," she said, "you are becoming a young woman. Look at you. You have hairy armpits. The rest will follow. Because you are female, there are some things you ought to know. Listen to your mother! Your body is a Temple, sacred and holy space. You don't ever let a man pollute your purity. Your body is innocence from God. It is his Temple. Never defile it with unclean hands." She asked,

"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place?"

She answered,

"He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.

She asked,

"Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot?"

She exclaimed,

"God forbid. For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

What did my mother know? What was she saying? Why did she read me this? Was she using sacred text to hit bedrock in my heart? What did she know about my hands? Was she some gypsy palm reader? She read my palms and knew the rest? Guilty hands. But my heart was pure. Could Rollo count against a pure heart? Rollo couldn't count against himself. He was retarded; he couldn't even count. How could Rollo count if God is God? Rollo wouldn't count. Rollo's account would be like air to God. Would God make a retard accountable? Rollo couldn't count. Rollo wouldn't count against himself. How could a retard know what he was doing? Rollo couldn't count. Rollo's account would be like air to God. Rollo is the perfect one. Could a retard be unclean? Rollo couldn't count. His hands are clean. Perfectly clean. If Rollo didn't count, was I not Artemis, not entirely virginal, but pure in heart?

But to bind my body into the body of Christ. God forbid. Complete the Trinity with contaminated humanity, human pollution? There's shame bought with a price. Did Mother know? How could she know attending all the cancers, the surgeries, the gall bladders. She couldn't even attend to her own swollen arm, her broken heart at being lopsided. My mother was a little higher than the angels. How could she know anything of

my dirty plight? She came home tired, her toes were swollen, her corns were sore. Look the other way. Put up your feet. She said, "Be good, Olivia. Always be good." She closed her eyes, and slept.

The fourth gate. The breastplate—Come, Man, Come. What is wanted here? Come, Man, Come? I've been warned to stay clear of this Dionysian wine. What is chastity? The commandments said chastity. Too late.

My recurring dream begins with the big guy in the sky; it's a dream for Orion. I am sitting behind myself inside the Hansen Planetarium. The lights go down yet I am able to watch me watch the canvas of the sky. A beautiful male voice rings out a recorded message,

The universe is everything that exists. It extends as far as our telescopes can see and beyond. We live in a lumpy universe. The stars are found in big groups or galaxies separated by wide spaces.

I'm watching me hear about the lumpy universe. I see me look down and check my lumps. I do it every time this message is played, in every dream it's played in. And every time I cringe to watch me cringe. Lumps. And then I watch me wait for Orion. Wait, and wait, and wait. They are showing the Dippers, pointing to Polaris. Yawn. These stars never go away; they're there in winter, there in summer, constant and stalwart. And now we're to the Royal Ethiopian Family. Boasting that she was the most beautiful of all, Cassiopeia, the queen of Cepheus, offended the lovely sea nymphs, and more importantly, their King Poseidon. Poseidon sent a sea monster to ravage the land until her daughter, Andromeda, was offered to a beast. But this was not to be! Perseus flew down, killed the beast and released Andromeda who was chained to a rock. The story is recounted night after night in the summer sky. The constellation *Cepheus* lies between *Cassiopeia* and the *Dragon*; *Andromeda* is by her side. *Perseus* has saved the night. I watch me clap with everybody. It's time for the Milky Way. I ought to know. I've seen this show so many times.

I watch me waiting for Orion. I'm sitting there holding my breath.

In the wintertime a new set of constellations is seen at night.

I watch me sit up. I know that I know that Orion will be next.

The easiest to recognize is Orion.

Just as I expected, I expected. And then, at last, look, there is the tiny light of the faithful Sirius, the eye of Canis Major awaiting his mighty master, Orion. I watch me watch me smile when I see Orion's stars light up one by one. Fidelity.

The three bright diamonds in a line are in his belt.

The three bright stars light up.

The star of Orion is blazing buckle called Alnitam.

Yes!

The bluish-white star in the southwest corner is Rigel.

I watch me mouth the narrator's words; I know them all by heart.

And now! I watch me panic. Where is Betelgeuse? I watch me wait for Betelgeuse's light. That light that won't light up. Night after night. I watch me watch for the star in the northeast corner of Orion, the star that marks the mighty hunter's spear. I watch me wait for the whole of Orion to return. Fidelity? A sign lights up the sky of my dream, blazing a comet of bad news,

We're sorry, folks, but Betelgeuse will not be starring in tonight's performance.

And every night I wake to disappointment. Someday you'd think I'd learn that the spear star simply isn't there. It never will be. But the announcement makes it sound like any day. You'd think that they would replace the bulb. Why not replace the bulb? Why disappoint the girl in the middle of the planetarium. Why hurt her like that night after night. Why does she wait for Betelgeuse? He isn't coming!

Mrs. Pops phoned to ask my mother if I would baby-sit. My mother agreed for me. So did my dad, I guess. Which means we all agreed. Was this not the law of heaven? Anyway, I had to baby-sit one dark night at the Pops. Orion was in the sky; I

watched him watch me as I walked to Pops across the snow that sparkled with his stirring light. My breath blew out like smokes; I should know. They said they'd pay me double after midnight. Pops were a family that made you wonder what was wrong. Mr. Pops did nothing; Mrs. Pops raised the Pop kids. There were six of them, each one never washed or brushed their hair; each one had influenza or runny nose or fleas. Other things were not quite right with the Pops, but what? I knew the minute I set foot in their home. It stunk like urine and some wild spice; it smelled like urine and cumin. No one would want to know more.

Mrs. Pops was ready to go when I arrived; she was already wearing a rabbit skin fur that reached the floor. Two hundred rabbits must have given up the ghost. If you thought about it for even a second, you simply couldn't suffer it. She had to be half-witted to hang around the smell of two hundred dead rabbits. Her hair was teased into a high, light brown, honey comb. Her lips were red. Her face was white. And she was happy! Unbelievable, absolutely incredible. Mr. Pop came out of the bathroom doing up his fly. His knit pants were covered with polyester balls; he wore a pink turtleneck. His face was whiter than his wife's though he hid it well with sideburns down and growing like some hairy beast across his cheeks. He'd spent the winter on his back, like tanning, only he was fading as he grew more and more hair down his neck. I didn't like him. He carried on some kind of conversation with me while I marveled at the two of them decked out in duds to do the two step at the bar. And they had to stink. If cigarettes smelled like this, I'd quit.

The kids were all in bed and supposed to stay that way. Mom and Dad wouldn't be home until late which it was already. I locked the door; locking Mr. Pop out of his own home. He was the only one I was afraid to see on a dark, dark night. Baby-sitting like this always troubled me. Was I supposed to stay awake and watch sleeping children? I picked up a magazine. The late night news was over, the music for it had already stopped. I lifted the filthy cushions on the couch, brushed out the popcorn, the papers and the dirt and lay

down under them; it was cold and I needed to warm up. I opened up the magazine to read by the light of the Indian test pattern.

This was a magazine? A naked woman! Another, and another. A whole book dedicated to breasts? More magazines. More women. More breasts. I sat up warm and flushed. And what about them? They were not mothers or udders. These breasts were beautiful and the women were stunning. These were potent, powerful bodies. They were flesh. My soles tingled. Something in me stirred like a coiled king snake unwinding to sniff out a mouse—coiled cold-blooded energy. Energy that now must turn against the curl and push against bone, muscle, scale to dart towards the unsuspecting.

I lifted up my shirt. Dared I peek? I had breasts covered with a cousin's bra. But I had breasts. Could I touch them? No, I couldn't touch them. Like the Ark of the Covenant, they would electrocute the next unholy touch. How close could I get before I'd incinerate?

Stop. My hand crept up my stomach. Stop. My arms reached round to the clasp. Stop. Undid it. Stop. I lifted the cloth. Stop. I looked down. Stop. To see breasts. Stop. I had fleshy breasts. Stop. My fingers tingled. Stop. My nipples stood erect. Stop. I had fleshy breasts. Stop. Just like the pictures. Stop. I brushed across. They were soft and smooth. Warm, like living flesh. Like graceful living flesh—artistic, refined, beautiful. A breastplate of desire. Stop. This I discovered. Stop. At two AM. Stop. At Pops'. Stop. Breathtaking.

Star-light, star-bright
First star I see tonight;
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Get the wish I wish tonight.

My recurring dream occurred again. I watched me watch the winter sky, the Milky Way, faithful Sirius. I braced myself to see my vacant star, and what?

Betelgeuse. Betelgeuse winked on.

Chapter Eight

The Love Letters

He loves me
He loves me not
He loves me
He loves me not
He loves me

Dear Darling Olivia:

It is noon. The sun is ever hot, thirty degrees in the shade, and you are on my mind. The most precious event happened for us today and I can only hope that I can find the words that you will understand and agree. I came to the field today in prayer, fasting and in deep meditation. I brought the Bible you gave me just to set before me on the tool case. It was like having you here. Well, not really. But, oh, I love those holy words you quoted when we was in the woods and you sang the Psalms. I can still hear your beautiful voice even over the grind of the tractor; this book will never be the same. I stopped at noon to read the self same words again, to reinvent our moment. As I was reading, I was overcome and went into a trance. A vision opened, exactly like the conduit of light you spoke about. I seen it written in the margin of your own sacred book that you would be my wife. The Lord spoke to me, or rather wrote: BE GOOD, AND SHE'LL BE THINE. It's true. It truly happened. Honest. I looked upon the page and there was the words. It's Providence. Oh, Livia, I will be good. I will be a righteous man. Could you consider being mine? Would you?

Dear One, I love you without measure. I never knew a love like this. I would love you every second of your life. I would love you when you are red-nosed from

crying. When you are pregnant with our babies. When you are sick or failing. Each day my love for you will deepen; the more I know you, the more I'll love you.

I can hardly plow the field before me because you are on my mind. Yet, you are like my fresh turned field. Fragrant, sweet, pure. I remember your smells, your touch, your beautiful body. You are forever before my eyes; I am possessed. Would you consider marriage? To me? There is a little community church down the way. Your father has preached there. It's there that we could wed.

I may have less education than this Chris fellow you date, but I have a heart bursting with interest for all you know and all you care about. And all you've studied of grasses would sure be an asset to the business. I'll read your books, I'll learn your Biology; teach me about my own pasture grass.

Please don't go to Syria. Let's get married; I'll fly you everywhere in this whole world; you'll see the East, I'll take you. As soon as the Brown farm is turned over to me, we'll have money for trips to the Orient. We'll go for spices, gold, silver and mandrakes. Ha Ha. I'll fly you and Sally back to Europe. The world is ours. Until Father dies, we could live and love here on the farm. The big old house is mine and yours. I live there now alone like some stumbling thirty-year-old bachelor. It needs a woman's touch. You could fill it with your great knowledge of things. Decorate any way a woman would. I have money for paint, rugs and new linoleum. What do girls like? I'll bring it to you. I'll do it for you.

It's a good farm, Livia. Including the crown lands we lease, there is ten thousand acres. We are the biggest lambing operation, the second biggest cow operation in Alberta. And this mild winter has been especially good for the business. We keep the sheep and young lambs in the south-east field; you'll love it there. I sit in my truck and watch the sheep in the meadows, the rams at rutting time, the lambs born in late winter. Livia, could you marry a shepherd? I love this farm. You'll love it,

too. And I will be your shepherd. Your *good* shepherd. I covenanted to the Lord today on your own holy Bible.

Three years ago I spent the summer months digging a reservoir. There's a cool pasture for your horses and this reservoir for winter watering. I'll plow you an arena; we'll build new fences for you to jump. Your horses will have all they want on this wide open range. We can lay beside the creek and hold our love in each other's arms. I need you more than life itself. Can you hear me?

Father wants the entire east quarter plowed before the rains predicted for the weekend. So I go round and round the field doing my duty. Duty that must be done, but, nevertheless, I think of you, my love. With each turn of the plow blade, I think of you.

You say you're planning to jump in the Rotary horse show on the weekend? I could drive you back to campus if you'd let me. I'm sure I could get away by then. We'll drive all night, spend Sunday together, and I'll be home for Monday planting. And if, by God, it rains, then I can abide with you. Please let me drive you.

I love you, dear sweet one. Dare I tell you so straight? Your image shimmers before my wet eyes and waters the dry ground on this Brown farm. I love you, Livia. I don't deserve you, but I love you. I will always love you. Always, always love you. Who could offer such a forever promise? I do. And if you reject my pledge, I'll love you anyway. I'll love you to death. My love overwhelms the blare of the tractor as I pause from work to write these simple words of my bursting heart.

I must get busy now if I'm to see you on the weekend. I'll call, my love, if only to hear your voice, your decision. Say yes and you can jump your horse, then we'll be back before Sunday sunrise service. I pray you haven't found another ride.

I love you,

Stanley L. Brown

He loves me. Holiness inscribed the Holy page. He loves me. He'll be good.
He loves me. Even when I'm red-nosed from crying. He loves me. Pregnant with his
child. He loves me. When I am sick and failing. He loves me. There is a church
down in the wildwood. He loves me. Father would approve. He loves me. A Bible-
loving, God-fearing man. He loves me. With no education. He loves me. Poor
grammar and all. He loves me. Each day he'll love me more? He loves me. He'll
inherit the enterprising farm. He loves me. A big house there to decorate. He loves
me. What do girls like? He'll bring it to me. He loves me. He'll give me all I ask.
He loves me. He'll finance Sally and I to Europe. He loves me. A farmer plowing
fields. He loves me. A shepherd with lambs and calves. He loves me. Acres of
pasture for me and mine. He loves me. My horses could lie down in green pastures.
He loves me. I would be an asset to the farm. He loves me. He wants to learn the
things I know. He loves me. He'll study Botany. He loves me. He's seen my pillar
of light. He loves me. He'll take me to the East. He loves me. Obedient man of duty.
He loves me. We can lie in the wheat grass and conceive. He loves me. Father asks
me to marry him. He loves me. He loves me forever. He loves me always. He loves
me. What more do I want?

I love him not.

Hail Mary full of Grace

He loves me.

Hail Mary full of Grace

Save me.

I've got the flu. Is flu love? I poured over the letter twenty times crying freely.
He is flawlessly in love. I cried so hard I threw up. Same as when Mother died and I
loved her. I threw up when my little bird died and I surely loved him. I retch again.
My hell, could vomit be a sign? Do I love Stan?

I love him not. But he loves me. I love him because he loved me first? What more could any woman ask for? What more? I'll only get less from Chris who loves me but would rather switch than fight. I've waited half the year for him to win. He won't.

But, I love Chris. We speak. Converse. Disagree. Concede. Compromise. And Chris loves me and tall grass and smoking tumbleweed.

Chris reads Milton, writes in blank verse; yet, he won't marry in the church where "red lipped women mouth beatitudes." He says he reads Milton for the ingenious references to the Greeks. Chris, well, Chris studies philosophy, the ice that covers the stirring waters. He stands on the solid edge refusing to get his feet wet. Yet, is he not the Trickster laying his humble poetry before the blessed feet of divinity? Poet, you are an arrogant son-of-a-bitch quoting and misquoting Nietzsche—whatever fits. God is dead. God is us. God is. Yet his writing is more holy than St. John of the Cross, and his body more beautiful than any spire.

Oh, Chris, *be* Zarathustra. Come down from your holy mountain and mingle with the struggling saints. Oh, but you are like bitter Butter, blinder than Butter's sightless father wending his way to the corner store for *sen-sens*. Ultimate man. Too holy for the churches. Too good for Christ. I hate you. I hate you for your blindness!

Maybe if you saw Chartres. Maybe if you saw the exquisite leaded glass carefully placed by faithful artisans. Maybe if you gave faith a chance. But you won't will you? You are an arrogant leper. And you will not ask to be healed.

Your poetry betrays you. Will you not look behind the veil of words that unfolds the mystery of love and living? Damn you. Damn you to hell, Chris.

I love him.

He loves me not enough to compromise.

We quarreled last night. Quarreled the night before. We quarrel every night. He loves me, but he simply won't comply with Father's conditions. I dare not beg.

Beg God for candy? Chris, why will you not marry in the church? What are your wounds? Are they greater than Christ's? You wound the Christ in me, more than a spade-like lance in my side. My bloody water gushes in tears falling recklessly upon the earth.

He insists on his Ecology. He loves the world. Loathing pastures sprayed with Avadex. This world is too much with him. Yet, he says I am the world to him. Too much? Chris fears not God or Mammon; or fears too much. He wants to marry in the Legion, dance up a storm; he wants an orchestra; Father won't allow it. Marriage is a solemn affair. A solemn affair, and Father knows he knows best.

Father will win. I am transported to the Lamplighter Steak House. The family is reverently and ritually assembled for dinner. It is a rare thing that we are together—second time since Mother died. Marie has brought her husband, Warren, and her boys, Mitch and Brett. Doreen is home from Dixie; Gloria has a man; Bell's laughter leavens. Rollo fidgets with the silver. Father, in control of everything, is paying for everyone which totals fifteen expensive entrees. The whole room has been reserved for our seven o'clock meal. The waitress goes about the room and asks for orders. We are carnivores ordering red meat, salad with oil and vinegar, potatoes baked. And then she comes to Father. He wants his steak well done. "I'm sorry, sir, but the chef refuses to broil a steak well done." Father is adamant. So is the chef. Father won't eat a bleeding steak. The chef won't cook one otherwise. So Father pardons the party. Using family to make his powerful point, he herds us out to leave the waitress standing there beside the seven o'clock table, beautifully attended, polluted with fifteen half drunk Cokes. Father doesn't budge. And Chris, like the chef, won't be bullied by a controlling man.

I'm caught like a trout hooked on a pin. No barb. Hooked by a pin to both of them, free to get away. To where? To whom?

Chris, ultimate man, stands before me with narrow bony face, fatal brown puppy dog eyes, hairy black legs, khaki knee shorts, a numinous bare brown chest, hard, smooth muscled skin, pecks, biceps, triceps; he wears a radiant golden chain around his neck. This is more than I expected, and I expected all. Yet, Father forbids?

I stand arms length from his frightful fierce body. I am Salome wearing seven veils to hide green eyes, straight blonde hair, long legs, large breasts and no hips. I have acquired a shiny new breastplate— Come, Man, Come. Do come. I watch him through a key-hole in the veil.

He casts me his stray-dog face; I run to the cupboard of my mind's eye, lift the first veil and reach with desire for tuna fish, chicken noodle and jello for dessert. I feed him t-bones from the freezer and carrot salad. Butch had created a paradigm; one stray has gently displaced the other with hunger in a look that invokes much more than protection.

Turn away thine eyes from me for they have overcome me.

Chris, do you love me? Where is your faith? God won't betray you; God knows just how it feels to be betrayed. He wouldn't do it to another. Come with me to Syria. We can stop at Chartres; then you'll understand why Father insists. He has good reason. Come, Chris, come.

I see Chris swallow. He moves his hand to stroke his chest. His fingers tunnel through an enchanted forest of black curly hair, his flesh extends through the seven veils like iridescent metal shavings waiting for a magnet. My God has engendered a sacred creation. Is this love? I remove the veil of sun-glasses to reveal green eyes. Green magnet eyes that find the metal filings of his tanned torso. The filings stand erect. I notice.

An unexpected puff of air moves the second veil. I smell the fragrance of leaves in Fall like wet knees under the porch, like blood and sinew. Chemical. He is a man with a man's smell. I draw air through my nose. And swallow back.

O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!

For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant.

The adder of amorous roses perfumed by this thorny man who doesn't believe God's poetry; not if it's bound between black leather covers. He won't pretend for anyone. Not even Father.

He answers with a step that penetrates space, shattering the glass of separation like a stunt man blasting through some sugar fabricated stage prop. He removes the third veil and touches my hand. Contact. Could I inhabit this too hot flesh? He sees my body sear, charge with warmth. I can't hide. His touch burns the forth veil; singes it to black curl of carbon. Has he no knowledge of the harm he might cause, the harm he causes? The suffering? Has the ark of the covenant been safely breached? Will he look inside? Will he try?

No. The ark remains underneath the protecting wings of the cherubim carried by covenant priests, safely placed into the holy inner sanctuary of the holy of holies in the magnificent churches of Kings Crossing, churches surrounded by this appalling baptismal moat. Will Chris cross? Even the ignorant children of Israel crossed the Jordan before they entered into the Promised Land. Unlike crossing at the Red Sea, this time they enter waters at high tide. Yet even Israel, Ephraim and all, had faith enough to wet their feet. With music and shouting, with the trill of women's voices, with laughter and great joy, I coax, praying as Solomon,

The Lord has set the sun in the heavens,

but has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.

I have built thee an exalted house, a place for thee to dwell in forever.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.

I've a heart for thee to dwell forever. What can I add? A Psalm embellished,

My heart overflows with a goodly theme;

I address my verses to the king;

my tongue is pen of ready scribe.

A hymn, dedicated to the Chris I love like David to the Sovereign Lord. A temple, lavished with the cedars of Lebanon; nothing is too great for you. Let the pillars of the temple quake with song. A terrible musical effect. A New Year's festival of dedication. We'll complete the Spring. Oh, Chris, won't you cross the moat and thereby pass the sentinels? My father will never allow our union otherwise. Won't you be holy man, be Aaron? For me? Listen to the muses. Do they not speak to you? Chris, they do, and you won't hear. Even Solomon, the great King, stands signifying with arms raised to the heavens. It's the only way. Let me part this fifth gossamer veil; you can see the mercy seat gleams, gold pounded thin by strength of sturdy Daedalus, exquisite craftsman. Won't you sit down?

Stubborn man. Rival and competitor of gods. Mirror image. Mulish one who magnifies me. You unknowable illusion; you world reversed. What is your identity? Holy man of the world, it would take love to understand you. It will take Father's consent to know you. Oh, Eros, most fair, I need your master on a shining charger. I would cut it off that you might perceive without your head. I almost see myself by your reflecting light. How can I live without you? Lead Kindly Light. Illusion? I am being seduced by mirrors of my own alert sensations. Cuddled by reversal.

Tyger, tyger burning bright

In the forest of the night

What immortal hand or eye

Could frame thy fearful symmetry.

Dance on, Salome. Dance on. The subject and the object reconcile here. Fulfilled. Yet, Chris, we can't altar this illusion if you aren't God. Father declares.

Oh, but you are beautiful. Your height fits mine, an unexpected reach for one so tall all my life. At last the boys have caught up with the girls. Now catch me, Lil'

Abner. Pappy says there is one way. Be God. You are already. Now, be God, in Father's way. Lift the sixth veil. See this?

It is the blossoming Rod of Aaron. The sixth veil.

And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth the buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.

This almond rod and staff may comfort you, but Aaron's rod is a poisonous snake to Pharaoh; he won't let the Israelites go free. Take my budding rod and let's be free. Chris, won't you try? Christ is not good enough for you? Too good? Chris, please.

The seventh veil? No?

Paradise lost. Chris walks away from the pot of manna, the holy ark, the fleshy tablets of my heart. He didn't kneel to look inside; he wouldn't stoop that far. He never did remove the seventh veil. I couldn't have it any other way. I whisper to the winds, the seventh veil, "My name is O Livia, Sweet Livia, Livie, that girl of mine. O Livia, Sweet Livia, Livie, that girl is thine . . ."

I approach the fourth gate resigned. The keeper waits for me to lowly lay. Remove the breastplate, Come, Man, Come. This magnificent plate of the ineffable body. You require I take it off? Give up this exaltation? I've wandered looking for this effect all my life, and now you ask me to transfer it? It was life and death to get it on. What will become? Hand it to some barker at the gate? Stand alone? I'll fall without a man to hold me.

Yet, if you take this plate, I'll descend again to get it back. I will, you wait and see. I may surrender the plate, but never volunteer. How could anyone? Betelgeuse is staff to Orion; the seventh most important star. I adore the missing light more now that I give it up? No! Pull out all stops. The breastplate Come, Man, Come is coming off? Chris! Help me!

Memory of our first enclosing kiss will be my forever phantom. I whirl for John's head on a charger. No other prize will give me this man. I whirl, and whirl, and whirl. Only one veil left. I am Moses standing dizzy from wandering the Sinai, at last on Mount Nebo. I am watching through a veil of tears as the children march in numbered tribes into the Promised Land— without me.

Dear Stan:

Haven't a ride back on the weekend. Stop. Would appreciate your offer.
Stop. Jumping Friday night. Stop. See you then. Stop. Livia

"Doctor, she was here. She refused help, but she was here. Doctor I believe she will make it."

"Livie, this is Doctor Sukkal. Will you open your eyes? Can you hear us? Do you know where you are? Olivia?"

"Stop. . ."

Chapter Nine

Pinch Me Quick

Adam and Eve and Pinch me Quick
Went down to the River to bathe--
Adam and Eve were drowned
Who do you think was saved?

Pinch Me Quick. Pinch me Quick was saved. Pinch me Quick was the only one that wasn't tricked into baptism in the river Styx. Adam and Eve were consumed in the Flood. They went down with the wicked humans of Sodom and Gormorrah. Gravity channeled them away to the town reservoir. Let us raise a swirling cup of humanity, of Father and Mother. Remember them but never, never go down to the river to swim.

Chris, I regret. I regret your wits. Too bright to bathe in the river. Too dim to dip into an *other*. Mother Father! My life will never be the same. The Jordan is flooding. Who would plunge? Quick! climb to dry ground. Bunker's Hill.

Mother and Father of us all, as you swirl around in my glass of water, ice chiming like the beginning of Sabbath school, what do you know? Were you tricked too? Was it your desire of forbidden fruit? Your fear of childless loneliness? O, curious ones, did anyone warn you that you'd never come back from the bath? Why did you rule that we all follow you to the bath coating us all in layers and layers of rules, laws, reprisals? Drowned, you must understand why Chris won't follow.

Did the serpent ever explain that life bites? Could it be you never understood? Misunderstood woman followed by misunderstanding man into the river Styx. Your absence alarms Chris. He can't seem to find you. He won't follow any fearsome ones into the cool bath no matter how hot the day. You simply don't exist.

But, I have searched dragging past the canal. Authorities scoff, it's a myth, it's a legend. But I know where you are. You speak to me from the water. I hug my legs on the bank of the canal and watch, unexpectedly perhaps, but still I watch for a shock of your dark hair. I long only for a tangible testament for all of us, to show a repentant Chris—exhibit A.

Nights find me raving at the moon. "O heavenly body, you must know." He must know. "Familiar face in the moon, where are they?" But only one side of the face shines— winter, summer, spring and fall, winter, summer, spring and fall. Same solid rocky face. Expressionless. All survivors must take it on faith. Oh, Eve, where are you? You, who drowned.

Like my ancient Mother, I desire more; I wonder how the Forbidden fruit tastes. I, too, have desires, I have fears. But Chris won't plunge, no-way will he go down to the river to bathe. "The water is polluted. Polluted with the decaying bodies of the flood." Too bad.

Eve, I will bathe with you now. A lifetime of missing you. I lift the mortal water to wash my legs that they would never trample another. My arms, that they would lift and wash a child's face. My back that it would hold the burdens of a marriage, my eyes and ears to see and hear the joy and misery and hang them on a balance.

It's been miserable sitting beside the sacred mikva, seeing nothing. I am descending to marriage. To find you. I am Pinch me Quick; willing, at last, to bite into life. Perhaps I'll find the soul mates I abandoned on a summer's day four thousand years ago.

Pinch me Quick! I plunge and leave Chris behind. Pinch me. Pinch me. Pinch me Quick! I have lost all I adored. Pinch Me Quick! I'll marry one who promises to bathe, but I'll never forget Chris.

Pinch me quick but never holler. Never cry.

Chapter Ten

Little Brown Church

Whither thou goest, I will go. Wherever thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, my love. Thy God shall be my God. However thou diest, I will die. And there will I be buried, the Lord do so for me and more also—if death part me from thee.

Thy consort shall be my consort. And his God my God.

"Who are you? Where do you come from and where are you going? Are you a messenger? Here to receive me the moment I was voluntarily withdrawn from school? Whoa! Is this Providence? Imminence? Eminence? You were reading scriptures beside your tractor, and dreamed a dream wherein I was to be your lawfully wedded wife? You mean, the mermaids speak to you? They don't communicate with me, and I don't think they ever will. Such power. Are you Dumuzi, Shepherd King? Are you Patriarchal guide? Are you husband?"

"I'll order the Prime Rib, medium, with baked potato, sour cream; she'll have the rack of lamb, rare, with baked potato, sour cream. Red wine for both of us."

"For both of us? We? What did the Farm think of *our* revelation? What did Father say? Mother? How did you answer the hallowed words? I've waited all my life for reasons. Am I to believe my answer came to *you*?" The Great WE ARE.

"Yes, we raise Rambouillet, a hardy sheep known for producing wool and mutton under very harsh conditions. White sheep."

I will follow. As the vision demands, so be it, I do. For what is Syria to me? What is me to Thee if this is meant to be? I will be Farmer Brown's wife, I will lie in a

spidery nest on the Brown Farm. Farmer Brown's boy hears my mermaids! I'll feed his sheep. I'll feed his lambs. I'll feed his sheep.

The year's at the spring.

And day's at the morn:

Morning's at seven;

The hillside's dew-pearled:

The lark's on the wing;

The snail's on the thorn:

God's in His heaven —

All's right with the world!

All right, and anyway, Mary is just down the road beckoning me to the little brown church in the wildwood. I will go into that wilderness that I may sacrifice my voluntary will: a broken spirit. I am coming. I am tramping through the pastures on the Brown farm marking my territory.

See here in the thicket, a wet newborn lamb. Oh, so tiny I had no idea how innocent we come into this world. What's this? He's unwilling to stir? "Good-morning, sunshine. Lift up your eyes. Welcome to life. See your mama there? Oh, you're so sleepy and cold. Brrr, it was a dreary night to be born no matter what stamina pools in the genes of the hearty ramboiullet. Take courage, you made it thus far. Time to drink, babe; drink, or you will die. Kneel and gulp, it's dinner time; your mother waits with a swollen bag of warm milk. Come now. This will be your last supper if you refuse. Go on, Tiny One. Was the night so cold you reject some warmth? The night is over, Tiny One, and you are yet alive. I'll snuggle you in this grassy hay; a golden day awaits you, temperatures will soar above freezing today. Look, the sun is out. Don't you dare roll those eyes back at me. See here, you already have a name—Tiny One of the Brown Clan. And look, you have dark eyes like my own, a narrow little nose with nostrils all ready to breathe and smell this wild place: grass, flowers, shrubbery, trees. You have been forged

so carefully. Floppy ears like your mama's, longer eyelashes than mine and look at your lovely coat. Precious white wool! Don't you dare give up. This place is not so dreary. This wild wind will die and you'll see there is simple beauty in this level prairie. Give it a chance.

Open up. That's the way. OK, now bite down. Milk before meat. Milk and more milk. Warm your ice cold tongue. Swallow now. Swallow. There you go. Tip back your head and let it run down. That's the way. While I tickle your soft fleecy throat. Swallow. Swallow now. Swallow, damn you. Swallow!

Oh no, she's going to die. She's going to die right here. Die while her mother waits for her to choose, life or death. Moses begs his lambs,

I have set before you life and death, blessings and cursings: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.

Complete the circle of life that both you and yours may live. Choose. Come on, Tiny One. Don't default to death. You must choose. Not death. Don't give up. See your mama, see these wild flowers, see the sun? Swallow. Please swallow. Tiny One? Precious Tiny One? Can you hear me? "Wake up, wake up", says the sun, "wake up". It's morning. A brand new day. Spring! Take a chance. It is a New Year.

A new day on the Brown farm. A new day and already diminished without so much as a wag from that tail. What is this place? Barren, windy world. In sorrow we bring forth life, I'll say. Look, here. Who will attend the mama sheep? She stands expectant, patiently waiting for her baby. Who will reveal the news to her? Her labors were in vain. How long will she wait heaving for her baby to wake? One has just escaped the fold—hungry and helpless and cold. Who will hasten to the rescue? I will. I'll hasten to little brown church and marry. And I will return for never again will one escape the Brown fold without me.

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

I am no hireling. I am Olivia Whitiker, woman, servant, Goddess; I'll feed his sheep, I'll feed his lambs, I'll feed his sheep. I will be a good self-appointed shepherd. I'll keep the records; I'll know their names, their problems, their lineage. No lamb will wander without attention. No wolf will call these little ones his.

I do. I will marry you, Stan Brown, and I will make a difference in this world. Cut down the early wheat grass. We've got a lambing operation to attend. Yes, yes, I will enroll in *Livestock Management*. How good to be alive.

Sister Mary

Circle of Grace

I'll wear this radiant ring

I'll marry Stan, *and* Christ

Coronas for all

"Good-bye, Heather. You couldn't have had a more confused roommate. I'll leave you a clean desk at last."

"Come and visit, Meredith, forever friend. We'll have three vacant bedrooms in that big, old farmhouse. You can have your own."

"Shalom, Sally. I'll miss discovering the world with you; you'll have to bring the East West."

"Angela, the first one of us to wed, haven't heard from you since. Can you get away, bring those babies, come up and visit? Oh, Angela, bring Joy with you, if you ever locate her."

* Olivia Whitiker Brown of the Stanish Brown Farm.

Ewes come into season every twenty-one to twenty-six days; gestation is five months. If the Browns breed the ewes in October, they will lamb in April; that would be better. If they would choose only the polled rams, if they would carefully attend to timing, if they would use grease collars to identify bred lambs, if they would confine the sheep in

the latter part of the fourth month, if they would flush the ewes at breeding time, if they would keep accurate records, if they would repair the fences.

If, if, if, if, if,

If ifs and ans were pots and pans—

There'd be no need of tinkers.

If only. If only I can fleece the Browns into making change. A hospital pen and heat lamp would save the day; colostrum drench for late bloomers and early comers. Electrolyte drench for the less comely. Tetracycline, one tenth cortisone, for scours and pneumonia. Chopped carrots, apples, soda crackers, rolled oats, molasses: treats to entice appetite. Creep feeders for early *Lambs Only* nutrition. Tails docked in the second week. Bummer Lambs in a box by the house. Yes, yes, I can do it. We must do all that we can. The Atonement won't cover stupidity. Perhaps I can do it single-handedly; the other hand pulling blouse over growing belly. Was I not the Vice President of *Kindness to Animals* Club? Surely Mr. Brown will see my reasons?

I will preach Providential care for the birds of the air and the unsurpassable beauty of wildflowers. I will declare the oneness of Creation realized in shalom community of lion, lamb, and child.

Come, Stan, let's mend this place, restore the fences, build a refuge; these dreams can be ours. Come, Lord Jesus. Get me to the church on time. I will listen for the mermaids. Perhaps one day they will commune with me.

Chapter Eleven

Zion Consummated: Mated and Consumed

How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel! Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters. Water will flow from their buckets; their seed will have abundant water.

My father hired the minstrels, my mother baked the wedding cake, my Auntie adorned it with a lovely plastic bride and groom, and the shepherd and I were wed. Sealed with a kiss and a luminous golden wrist ring.

The king went with lifted head to the holy loins.

He went with lifted head to the loins of Inanna.

He went to the queen with lifted head.

He opened wide his arms to the holy priestess of heaven.

I tried, I honestly tried. But with Zeus's blessing, Zion died, died a dishonest death because she had no business marrying Hades, Farmer Brown's boy. No business eating the pomegranate seeds.

And I strolled with him among the standing trees,

I stood with him among the fallen trees,

And we moved to Lucky Strike and took up residency on the family farm.

Johnny Appleseed made it here? The apple orchard hosted wild turkeys, bobolinks, eagles, robins, jays, hawks and the whipping sound of the quail—music of nature's muses. There was a cornucopia of foods, lamb roast, red potatoes from the pit,

strawberries, gooseberries, raspberries, mint tea perked in the sun. Oh, and the pasture with its familiar gracious grasses.

I scrubbed the pink paint from the house with a wire brush and painted it white. White to match my black and white world; reinforced with black and white movies on our black and white set, and black and white photographs I developed in a black storage room under the stairs. This black and white world was familiar, devout, as safe as the white sheep on the Brown hillside.

And the summer became the fall

I was not ready for the winter

It makes no difference at all

'Cuz I wear boots all summer long.

I pulled the wedding rings off and laid them reverently to rest inside a box of costume jewelry. Turns out they were too heavy. "Goodnight, Stan."

He didn't answer.

I had my suitcase packed, shampoo, cream rinse, curling iron, and nightgowns. The diaper bag had been ready for three weeks, wee white sleepers, tiny home-sewed cloth diapers, Johnson & Johnson powder and rose-bud lotion. All these preparations for a total stranger. Who could it be? Somebody I loved, or would learn to love? I adored the bony belly reminders that I was not alone.

When the contraction first started, three days overdue, I thought I had a bad backache, then the flu. Was this a migraine? I closed the door and cried. I was about to fragment and just as in *The Garden*, there was nothing I could do about it. I hung over the wretched toilet and talked to my mother. She had six of us. Tell her I'm here, Mary. I understand her at last.

And Zion rose in the ninth month and the third day awakened with rebirth—an infant son. Zion flowered with life carrying buckets of water and the seed was abundant

like aloes planted by the Lord. Snuggled next to my breast waiting for some instinct to propose to wake and suckle; he lay sleeping like a beautiful bald kitten-like creature. Bone of my bone. A wonderful, willing fragment. The tears were straight joy and surprise beyond measure. God had truly visited me. He knew me by my name. He opened the windows of heaven and poured me a blessing that there was not room enough to receive it. That singular visit surpassed all the sorrow. God didn't tell Eve the whole story; the finest part is learned only by frightening flesh and bony experience of a precious baby.

The nurse poked her head in the doorway. "Are you awake?"

I was awake watching the blood drip predictably down the tube that led to the needle in my vein. I would use this blood to make milk for my sleeping baby. A food pyramid with a total stranger on top. From a stranger to a stranger to a stranger all strangers in a stranger land.

Zion adored the seed and it was worth her death. And she learned to spread her thighs to receive the shepherd's milk. And she bore her shepherd four strong children. Four consummate manifestations of the Most High. And life was good to the family. They lived on homemade cheese, honey carefully extracted from the hives and lamb chops. Life magnified. There were always chickens to feed, brilliant hollyhock to water, hockey games on the pond, and when did the old Jeep not need fixing? Yes. One of life's best kept secrets is the immense and extraordinary pleasure children bring.

Livie, how you wax on, may I interrupt your glowing report? If you'll recall, even your knowing was filled with wonder. Look at your marriage to the stranger on top.

The days did pile up with sacred complications. The guinea pig died, the baby tipped the box of Cheerios, Max broke his toe, and the dog chewed the sprinkler. Walls needed washing, potatoes needed peeling, shirts needed ironing and somebody caught a fish. And when she discussed the day, she talked about grilled cheese, smelly trout, bandaged toes and math homework. When she considered the day, she thought about feeding healthy, hardy Max, tasting the bloom of Willy's cheek, the tearful faces at the

guinea pig's funeral, the long, long hours teaching rational fractions with irrational numbers, and always, always she wondered about the native grass of Syria. These things kept her heart in check pushing away the knowledge of her lonely marriage to the silent shepherd man.

Walking down to the cow barn early one morning, the cool of the night was just lifting out of the tall grasses. The crisp air warned that snails will rot in the fishbowl, that flowers go brown and die, that harvest will be gathered and that school begins. I found a cowboy hat in the path and a little mound of wet sand that looked almost like a castle. I saw a jungle for the boys tramped down in the tall grass behind the barn. Willy hid there the last time we played hide and seek.

"We give up, Willy!" we called. "We can't find you anywhere!"

Will shot up, barely visible for the drooping heads of timothy, and trumpeted, "I found me!"

Just in time to grow up and lose himself again. Yes, I was standing in the long stalks of crabgrass, six o'clock in the morning, searching for what Willy found that summer day. I may as well have stayed asleep. It seemed I could not wake.

My darling lives in a world that is not mine .

An old child, misunderstood . . . out of time.

Timeless is the creature who is wise .

And so very timeless is the prisoner in disguise.

Was I a prisoner in disguise? I did disguise my loneliness. I wasn't exactly lonely, was I? I had carried these beautiful babies to term; nothing could touch that. Together we licked the earth like she was our mother. Who could be lonely with such abundance? There was always the white sheep on the Brown hill.

White sheep, white sheep

On the Brown hill,

When the wind stops

You all stand still.
When the wind blows
You walk away slow
White sheep; white sheep;
Where do you go?

I will follow. I will fill the old jeep with kids, with electrolytes, with tetracycline, and markers to keep my promise to the wet lamb that didn't wait to see the sun. I would make a difference. Bumping over the farm, we'd watch for the sick, for the sad, for the strays. And when we found them, we'd feed them crackers, soda water and apples for dessert. Our fold of lambs.

Each nurtured lamb was our gift to the earth. Yet, no matter how many we saved, the farm corporation went before us ever expanding. First, it was a feedlot. Then a cow calf operation. They went on to experiment on the financial gain of breeding year old heifers, still babies, carrying babies. Every small thing I did to save that first lamb was undone, a hundred fold.

We came upon a calf being born; the hirelings were pulling the slippery back heels of the fetus. The young cow was straining with all of her might. Dear God, may this cow survive. And then with one last push, out slipped the hips, the smooth wet back, and with a beller that called to God himself, she heaved the head. Whirling to see what caused such pain, the calf, propelled by centrifugal force was flung to the ground. Mama smelled her offspring with delight—bone of my bone—stood up. Mother and child were alive and well. In two days they'd be sent to the range to forage in the north-west sections. Perhaps we'd see them some time on our rounds. Around and around and around. That's what we did. Picking up strays. No coyote called while we were around.

Except for the dead pile. What could anyone do there? The dead pile. The Business' rash decision to experiment with breeding one year old heifers, calves still, to small Black Angus bulls cost many lives. They may have made money managing the

Business, but they paid a terrible price— young inexperienced heifers. I wonder what the success rate really was. "Stanley, can't you stop this calving carnage? Is any amount of money worth the dead?" Sometimes the young cows would have their calves unassisted, but most of the time they needed help. The calves were simply too big.

The men had several ways to get the calf out. They would hook chains to the back feet and pull it out. If that didn't work, they'd hook a pulley system to the chains and winch the calf. If all else failed, they'd call a Vet; however, they knew by then, or they knew that by the time the Vet got there, the calf was or would be dead. So they would skip the Vet's cost. They'd reach in and cut the dead or dying calf into pieces; they'd pull it out piece by piece. The pieces were then thrown onto the Dead Pile. And the dead piled on the Dead Pile. "Do you really believe the Business could ever be ahead for having bred the cows so young?" So often the heifers had no idea what to do with the bawling calf that caused them so much pain. Sometimes they would whirl around and gore their own calf. Sometimes they wouldn't let the new one suck. Sometimes the young heifer wouldn't get up; she'd simply lie there and shake to death.

The poor calvers that survived were recorded and sold; the dead had their story to tell. Oh, there was just so much death. And the dead piled up on the Dead Pile. Babies carried to gestation that simply didn't make it in the last few hours. What madman balanced the books? "Stan?"

He wouldn't discuss it. He wouldn't discuss anything. So why didn't I run along home; his father would be out any minute and they had things to deliberate.

They did deliberate. The hirelings were complaining. They didn't like Livie to witness the work around the barns; the noise of the Jeep in the fields disturbed the sheep. It would be a lot better if she didn't come out. The president directed the vice, the vice directed me and the children to stay away. Slice yourself some fine life twenty-five miles away, but stay away from our barns. Stop.

"What? What did you say? Don't help around the barns? Leave the heifers and their calves alone? Stay clear of the sheep?"

Where would we go? Call who? He had no answers other than the one he'd said. Perhaps no one is understood. I didn't understand this silent man. I did not understand this silent man.

How could I? I didn't even understand me. Never knew me. What do I like? What is my favorite color? What do I live for? Whom do I trust? Do I comprehend love after all these years?

I tried for another five years to carve a life twenty-five miles from the closest town. I cut the kids hair, baked bread, organized house work crews, learned to sew, took long jeep rides into the night ever listening to the coyotes. Anyway, there was always the chatter of children and the grind of the school bus motor as it lurched my noisy brood away from me. Books to be read. The banging of the computer. The creaking of the bed. The late night news. And my unrecognized anger coming out skewed towards the children, towards Stan, towards floors needing a mop.

There was never any money to pay a visit to an old friend. Never any pocket money. Never a vehicle I could use. Carve a life away from the barns, we'll support you, but don't ask for money or car or gas. Powerless Livie.

"No! The farm is not failing! As a matter of fact it's doing better than ever; never worry!"

"Never speak? Never worry?"

"I'm speaking to you right now? What else do you want me to say?"

"I want you to say" "I"

"I"

"am"

"am"

"a"

"a"

"son-of-a-bitch."

"Stop."

"Doctor Sukkal, she spoke. She said, stop. Livia spoke, she said, stop."

Who is the Beauty, who the Beast?

Will you die of grieving when I leave?

Two children too blind to see

I would fall in your shadow, I believe.

"Stop. Stop. Stop."

"She'll make it doctor. Livia is going to make it! Call Dorothy! Marilyn, call Dorothy. Tell her Livia spoke. She told Doctor Sukkal to stop!"

Stop. Stop. Stop. I was cruel to him, I guess. He says I was. He'd never heard bickering in his home. Browns didn't condescend to speak that much, not even to each other. Raising only an eyebrow, they agreed to treat me like I was some sort of school girl without brains enough to balance a grocery budget. No, Stanley didn't even let me buy the groceries. Couldn't trust someone that might buy real butter or shrimp cocktail. Couldn't trust somebody who might see the unbelievable abundant displays of food and color and delightful smells found in a grocery store, couldn't trust somebody who might enjoy life. It wasn't even like he used coupons or shopped for sales; he just couldn't bear to hand me any cash. And if I wanted any from the Browns, I had to have the check signed by Stanley, by Father and by Grandfather. Who cares? Like I want to eat anyway. So, I quit. I couldn't see the sense. Just fed the family and followed the kids to bed. Floors were vacuumed, clothes were clean, Stan would be in sometime tonight. Look at the wall long enough, then sleep. Sleep, sleep, sleep. Wakeup, kids! the bus is honking. Why didn't you set your alarm? He thought he had. He meant to get up at five and finish his math exam. I was angry. "Damn, you never said a word about your math test when there

was time to work on it!" Stan walked in during my rage! "You told me you had no homework."

"I forgot the math test." Another passive forgetter. All my precious sheep passively surviving. Like Stan! No! Not my children, too.

"Your mother is out of control; no state to take you to school. Hop in the truck. Perhaps, Livie, you should get some rest. Come on, kids. Your mother is sick. I'll speak to the principal, he'll understand why the assignment couldn't be done."

There mother was sick. Everyday sick. Sick in the head.

My makeup's dark and it's careless;

Some circles around my eyes.

Sometimes the real color of my skin

Is my eyes without any shadow.

Something had to give. I up and stole the car, drove to the hospital emergency. The Browns hung their head in shame. I was a Whitiker. I stayed my first of many weeks to come. Stanley was right. I was sick. My head was fucked. By whom? By myself? Help! When did this happen? Why? I was safe with Doctor Sukkal by my side. Not one Brown would enter hospital doors. I missed the children who, I guess, never missed their mother fucker. Nobody called. Nobody came. Stan making them omelets for breakfast, lunches filled with pop and chocolate bars. "Home will be a haven from now on." He told them that. "A haven without your mother." I was dispensable. Totally dispensable.

I returned to suspicious children. Not one of them would look me in the eyes. I was silenced on my last surviving turf—shunned like a sinning Mennonite. Beaten with my own whip. The silence was deadly. Should I? Shan't I? Live. Was I useful in any way?

"Livie, dear, you are not needed here. Rest. The children are big enough to make it on their own. I'll return from the barns in time to see them off.

Dispensable mother. Disposable mother. Not to be trusted with the kids. I crawled under the porch and covered myself in good Brown loam. I would rot. But, Doctor Sukkal watered me and I took root. However, my leaves were diseased and of no use to the Brown Farm. Spray her with DDT. Cut her back to the root. Bury her. Stop.

I left off sitting under the porch and learned some skills. As in the creation of the bulletin board collage so many years ago, my creativity ran amok and I earned money. Good money. Soon it was Stan who needed me. I organized and conducted tours. These bi-annual events brought big returns at a high emotional price, but money for a car, gas, a trampoline, a trip to Disneyland, operas, university classes, baby-sitters. And I earned enough to leave the Brown Farm, much to the Brown Farm disapproval. I enrolled in a Master's Degree Program, taking the children with me for the summer. And each summer, I slunk back to Kings Crossing, the dreaded Women's Libber. Men took me as a threat. Stan was a man.

So what? Each fall I filled a plane with seniors ready to go on tour again. Angry energy spurred me on. We flew to the red maples of Eastern Canada; I was able to set my eyes on the Holland of my ancestors taking seniors to Spring tulip festivals; took a coach to the saguaro cactus of the Western States; eventually took my bravado and a small group to the rolling hills and the rain forests of New Zealand and the outback of Australia, but that was a different difficult story.

In New Zealand I broke down. I was pregnant. Barely pregnant and forty years old. Two weeks pregnant. Surprise! I was surprised and very happy. A reason to ponder, a new thing and a good thing to ponder about. But I started to lose him, alone, across the world, bleeding. I prayed without ceasing while the blood gushed in unexpected spurts. Called dear doctor Sukkal, but not even he could contain the bleeding.

The traveling seniors needed energetic legs, "Livia, dear, would you mind running back to my room for my sweater?" Run, run check, check. Blood! No blood!

"Livia, would you stand beside that marvelous sugar cane so I can take a picture?"
Pose, pose, check, check. Blood! No blood!

Doctor Sukkal said I'd either lose the baby or not; there was not much gain in lying still. "Doctor Sukkal, don't lie to me." Called again, same advice. Call, check, check. Blood! No blood! The bleeding never fully quit until Hawaii. In Hawaii I met Stan and completed a total emotional breakdown. Only saw that tropical island through a veil of tears. And even now the memory of the tangled monkey trees, the warm blue ocean, the sandy white beaches, wondrous turtle bay and the brilliant and strange fish of the aquariums shimmer and intermingle.

But, check, check, the blotter turned blue, the baby was intact; a good reason to live. I held together a group of twenty adults clear around the world and not one of them even knew that their fearless conductor stopped at all bathrooms to throw up, to cry, and to drip great drops of blood. But I held on. I guess I did. Maybe I didn't. I didn't. How could I? I held the world together, but not me.

Winter is really here and now
And the blankets that I love
Sometimes I am surrounded
By too much love.

I flew home and bought the Cherokee Jeep, a good baby seat, a swing, a wardrobe. Doctor Sukkal predicted no more problems. He still didn't know about the marriage.

This was the early spring of our discontent. I went away in June to be examined for the Master's orals associated with my M.A. in Ancient East. I waddled up the stairs with four men watching my fat bum and defended my knowledge of ancient Mesopotamia, of Hebrew, of the Torah. With what I saved from the New Zealand trip, I was able to buy tickets to Los Angeles; took the family and fetus to experience the "Phantom of the Opera," Universal Studios, Knotts Berry Farm and the Disneyland I prayed to see so many years ago. Prayers do come true if you wish upon a star.

I walked with the children, boated around "the small world", but I saw only my belly swelling with child. I was worn out, worn from Australia, worn from school, worn from the fetus forever draining all my energy, worn from being in charge of all the family energy. I was worn—worn—worn out. I'd carried this baby clear across the world, defended my masters thesis, and now I was in Disneyland standing in line with all the kids waiting for E.T. to go home.

Stan wasn't speaking. No. He didn't care about the colors of the Great Barrier Reef, he wasn't interested in the thesis defense, he didn't want to know my feet were swollen twice their size. Something I said as we crossed the desert annoyed him into the familiar silence.

"This car is hot. I think I'm going to faint." That did it. He took it personal. It was a slur against his air conditioning. He never spoke again. Oh, God, I was so lonely. I had so much to share, nobody to tell. And Doctor Sukkal, with his bread of life, I'd overdosed, I'd prayed too long, tried too hard, laughed too much, cried too often, worked too earnestly and driven too far. I was exhausted. Dizzy. In Disneyland.

We never got to Syria, but we made it to the Pacific; I looked over the waves and waves of water rolling in, and I got nauseous. Unexpectedly and suddenly, I was sick of life. This poor fetus, forever deciding whether to give up. I would take care of his dilemma before December arrived, before he discovered Disneyland. Waves, and waves of Dizzneyland. I stood up, dashed into the ocean and threw up in my wake.

Yes, dear, you rubbed spittle on your eyes; bathed in the pool of Siloam and were beginning to see.

I've dreaded this marriage fragment of my life. What happened to it? Was there anything good? Besides the kids, I mean. Were there happy days? Doesn't even one prized moment, one good book, one great day justify the rest? I have the flu again. I mean this segment gives me the flu. I've built the labyrinth so well that I can't find my own

Minotaur. He's just around the corner, but which corner? And I am tangled in this damnable golden thread of Ariadne. I'll never find the way out.

You're not a stranger to me—
And you are something to see
You don't even know how to please
You say a lot, but you're unaware
Of how to leave.

Everything in Stan's world was sacred: his opinions, his complexes, his sex, his virtue, his religion. He defended and pleased all he decided to love. He loved his air conditioning; he didn't love me.

Nothing in my world was even good: not my marriage, not my opinions, not my body, not my religion, not God and not my life. I despised all, and tracked all I despised. The Minotaur was angry. No one escaped my labyrinth alive. Not even the good Doctor Sukkal could stop the waking monster.

Sacred is shame, shame is sacred.

The devil is God, God is the devil.

And black is white and white is black, no matter what color your sheep. The more I confessed, the more palpable my panic, the more frequent were my visits to the hospital. The Browns had seepage—Stan's wife. Stan was afraid. Afraid to touch me. Afraid to look at me. Afraid to visit me. He'd married a wild woman and nothing the Browns did could change that. For shame. Recruiting the community, the Browns asked what they should do with me.

Whatever you do, do quickly.

If I ever reconciled the black and white scenario, I'd break the bands of hellish life on the Brown farm. I didn't understand compromise. I only knew when all is sacred, nothing is sacred. So, in fact, we all believe the same, or opposite, which is the same. Though believing even this much puts me in an insane space alone. Who would

accompany me here? Only a mad man. And Stan is not mad, not angry, not sad, not worried, not interested. Stan is a Brown boy. He doesn't need to believe. His believing was done for him some millennia ago by some great great great Brown grandparents who have since left this earthly garden. So reasoning with him is fruitless because reasoning with them is impossible.

Like compliant children, we stayed married. I contributed contentious energy. He diffused it with sacred sex. I wanted to bomb the place to get an honest response. That does it. He was out of there. I was the aggressor. I was the one holding the dynamite. Put it down, Mother, before you scare the kids to death. And so we went back to the killing silence and my death came because he pretended to agree with everything in order to close the door, close the subject, close my mind. Two hours or days or minutes after any discussion, he would apologize or humor me with an agreement. In the end, all conversations sounded like some mental woman has personally attacked him or his great grandmother. In the mean time, he was totally justified in getting even: more silence, late for meals, overdue gas bills, leaving my car disassembled, debt. There was hope here?

Help! I needed an advocate out there on the big Brown farm. I tried like hell to get him to commit himself, discuss something, be fair. He took these efforts as an affront and quietly left the discussion. I was left shadowboxing by moonlight.

Father Enki, the God of Wisdom, knows the food of life,

He know the water of life;

He knows the secrets.

Surely he will not let me die.

I am lost in the labyrinth with a silent monster. Who is Beauty, who the Beast? Where is out? Where? Can I think my way out of here? Is wholeness the way? Jung? Christ? Buddha? I want out! Somebody help me out! What have we here? Uncle!

"Uncle. Uncle. Uncle."

"Doctor Sukkal, will you listen to her. Livie is ready to cooperate."

man? For raging against powerlessness? For not memorizing the script? This place is chaos. This place was built to break down like Gillette's disposable blue blades. I see.

I see poor Stan. Forced into an upstairs bedroom, I see the poor boy returning the deed. The sad, sweet, sweating victim out on the porch waiting like a wolf waits for his sheep. This is adversity of the worst kind. I am at a loss. No bad guy. All of it adversity. Born into sin. All of us punished for Eve's transgression. We live. Punished because of the actions of a stranger at the top of life's pyramid. So God does punish a man born blind, and he punishes his wife and children.

Work from the egg—fertilized and freed by the pull of the universe, then, burdened with guilt, a birth that gives life to an insatiable Minotaur. Hide the Minotaur. Shame, shame. Guilty of birth. Children sacrificed to their own insatiable monsters while parents lay down puzzling labyrinths leaving behind latch key children. Unsupervised children. Children who deign to go upstairs and fuck. It doesn't take much for parents, teachers, mates to confirm the negative beliefs. Bad. Little wonder we have infant baptism since innocence is a feigned thing. We are corrupted by a lie, a pretense to innocence. Fools fooled. Foils foiled.

Get thee to a nunnery and quickly too.

Stan, lodged for life, a twelve year old, forever being seduced by a cousin. Obsessed since twelve years old with sweet revenge.

I cried an entire day. I tried to stand up, but my legs fell out from under me. I laid in a heap. Stan remarked that I was having a bad day, wasn't I? No, I was not having a bad day. I was having a normal day, a usual day, a day like every other Saturday of my married life. I got up early to be alone. Max announced poopy pants and breakfast time and "wake-up everybody". They all did except Stanley. He'd had the breakfast of champions. Yesterday's bread making mess was piled in the sink. I emptied the dishes with one hand so I could bathe the baby. Cartoons were blaring. I made the kids turn

OK, we have a man born blind; it's nobody's fault. Nobody sinned neither he nor his parents, not even his great grandparents. Nobody to answer. Nobody to point to. Nobody to blame. All that the works of God may be manifest in him. What is this? God blinded a man so that he could find God? There's an idea. All of us blind. I concede. I know I'm blind. One eye's lazy, and my Odin-eye offends me, so I'm plucking it out.

Pull out your eyes, pull out your eyes—apologize, apologize

Pull out your eyes, apologize.

And I am truly sorry. I apologize. I'm sorry. I repent. This scripture only implies that the blindness was not a result of sin. However, it does not suggest that this blind man has not sinned or walked a path that has heaped sorrow on his blind family.

That the works of God can be made manifest in me or Stan. But don't think this blind man has tried over the years to find the Grail castle; in fact, he has resisted all efforts. He didn't need it. It existed in the arms of the Brown farm, the Brown tradition, the Brown family. And he is a Brown. Farmer Brown's boy. And get this straight: the Browns are not to blame. I am worn out.

And now there is more. The Brown boy admitted to being wounded sexually well before marriage. The wounded man was wounded by a wounded woman, he wounded her back, then forth. Back forth. Back forth. Back forth. I was caught in the middle. I commiserate with the woman; I commiserate with the thieves at Jericho, I commiserate with Stan. How more can I grieve? Nobody in this world is a sinner. We are all blinded by adversity. What is iniquity then, what is wickedness, what does it mean that vengeance is the Lord's? Inanna has her compass, she has her measuring rod and line; 1 2 3 5 8 13 21 34 55 89 . . . the physics of the cosmos: we are all spiraling to hell! Vengeance to the man born blind? No. To the young woman who passed along the treatment passed to her? Pretty mean stuff this, and if not this, who gets the Lord's vengeance? Who is at fault? Me? For further wounding a wounded man? For piling up obstacles in front of a blind

them off and help me. They were angry. Sulked over soggy cheerios. I made Will a lunch. Drove him to ball. This was all so typical. I never cried because I was having a bad day. I cried and I couldn't stop crying because this was a regular day. No different from any other Saturday. I was crying because I was so darn conscious of the loneliness of it all. I cried all day. I thought again about the knife. I didn't have the strength.

Dear child, you are still dreaming that there is supposed to be some sort of intimacy, some sort of love. Too bad you love those children of yours. Now the whole world has to march to your right eye's expectations of intimacy. You've got your sex. You've got food on the table, gas in your car, a good job. You have all the middle class comforts of a beautiful home. Don't worry, be happy.

Well, then, why did Eve worry? Why wasn't she happy? Why did she eat the fruit of knowledge? Wasn't Eve content to abide in a happy better-than-middle-class marriage? Riddle me that, Samson.

With a donkey's jawbone
I have made donkeys of them.
With a donkey's jawbone
I have killed a thousand men.

*The marriage? Marriage to whom? You took your wedding bands off long ago.
What marriage? Where are your rings, Livie?*

I keep them safe; I hold them dear.

Where, dear?

In a jewelry case tucked in my drawer.

Then what are those intertwined rings you wear?

A set of four; I bought them in Europe.

You wear them on your wedding hand. Wed to whom?

What do you mean?

*I mean you took the wedding bands off long ago; replaced them with these four.
I'm curious. To whom are you wed?*

What do you imply? What? Do you imply that it was I who left the marriage? What marriage? What bloody marriage? There was no marriage. None from the start. Here, let me find the rings you want. Somewhere in this drawer. Where are they? They were here a year ago. I saw them, didn't I? I saw them when Will was born; I saw them then for sure. Yes, here they are! Take the bloody rings. Here, I'll throw them at you! Take them, take everything.

I don't want these rings.

What? You said I can't enter the fifth gate with the rings, so here they are!

I want the four rings intertwined.

I married Stan, didn't I? You can have these marriage rings, but give you my symbol of holy Trinity? Be not waiting, virgin? But my lamp is full of oil. Divide my oil, and spill it into foolish virgin's lamp, and move misunderstood through the fifth gate? Help! No. No, not these rings, these rings aren't mine to give. These rings are holy, haloes—all of them. These rings are Trinity to me, Trinity and me, Trinity in me. No, I can't give up the Trinity. Go down alone? No, not alone. Abandon hope that someone understands? Descend to further loneliness? Christ, not this. Don't ask for these four rings. What would you want with them? They're not just symbols anymore. They encompass my soul. They are my reason to be; they encircle my only true essence. The Trinity to me, the Trinity and me, the Trinity in me. Take these and you'll leave mystery and death.

Have them! What more do you want?

The rings clatter to the floor like a sounding brass band, a tinkling gold symbol.

Chapter Twelve

The Journey to Saint Ives

I was alive without these laws once: But when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.

And now, keeper of the shades, you desire my measuring rod and line? The quaternary. You take them, and cause more death by your unworldly law? Where will it end? Whoa! The plunge stops here. Listen, I have a plan to check the wheel. I am the fourth part, the one with rod and line to square the globe. Someone needs to stop it before it runs over the whole earth gathering mass along its mighty way, smashing children, men and women, rolling onward, ever onward like some demented globe until it comes to rest as a mount that fills the earth, a mount that is the earth. Who can stop it? How can I without the line? I was called for this. You know that, Rahab. I'll be alone. Alone without the tools to stop the wheel, that everlasting, ever rolling wheel. The globe will squash me, like some blood-red, grape waiting agog, helpless before the wheel.

I should know. Mother was still in Calgary with cancer, and I didn't have a geometry set. I'd borrow Thelma's when she was finished. May I? And who has a pencil I can use? I need a sheet of paper.

I am without crown, without beads, without breastplate, without wrist ring; I'm without measuring rod and line. Father says I'll get all of my things as soon as Mother returns. But what if mother dies? What if Mother never does come back? What if mother dies and leaves me with Rollo? Cancer is a kill, but I'll be ruined without a geometry set.

"I'm sorry, teacher. I don't have the answer. Thelma isn't finished with her compass and I don't have one yet."

Thelma was an ignorant one. She had so few friends she made my friendship endure throughout the class. She could have done her work in half the time, but no, her brown hair hung over her eyes, and straggled down her cheeks, shielding her vision from seeing my unfortunate hope. She had to erase it, do it all again, extend my waiting to eternity. I was always aligning myself with this sort; I could not unfold the universe of Elementary without her say. Thelma got it how she wanted it just before the recess bell. I had to work inside during freeze-tag. Thelma said I couldn't use her pencil. I sharpen them too much, waste lead. I got a pen from Reed and while the teacher took the break to commiserate with the staff, my circles ran wild. I made circles on my desk, the seat, on every page of every book; circles on my arms, my legs, my cheeks, around my eyes. Circles within circles within circles. Wheels within wheels within wheels. Spheres. Designs. Globes. All of them the dear ball I dropped in frog bottom. All of them turning. All of them rolling. And all of them the color of beryl stone.

And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire enfolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire.

Miss Wald entered the room with mouth agape. Tattoo Girl. I was completely marked with dreaded hoops. Nor I could jump through them for her. They were solidly, stubbornly drawn in ink. Like Thelma, I had to erase. Erase all inky circles. Circles on my desk, the seat, on every page of every book; circles on my arms, my legs, my cheeks, around my eyes. Miss Wald was like Ezekiel; she said she wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it with her eyes. I wished she hadn't seen it with her eyes. Nothing in this world is worse than a believer. I should know. She dashed out of class to the staff room. It was these believers who spoiled my life.

She returned. "Come to the office, young lady." And where I went, the wheels went, and when I stood, they stood, and when I was lifted up, the wheels were lifted up. Pedestals are living hell to me. I had to make a spectacle for her, elevate to laughing stock

of the Elementary. Circles hurt; they hurt getting them on, they hurt scrubbing them off. Still, I've always liked a compass. What wonder-filled designs could be constructed with that tool. Bury the pointed foot in paper, desk, flesh, the arm reaches to the heavens, and then veers back on vortex hinge to ring around the point with ink. It takes a triangular tool to form a circle. Amazing.

Math was amazing. Simply amazing. Amazing, but not simple. It was elementary to learn as long as it was flat. Connect point A to B. What have you got? A line: length without breadth, a ruler. Yet ever before the beginning of time "the sum of the squares constructed on the arms of a right triangle is equal to the square constructed on the hypotenuse." That amazing law is older than man. Before the sun. Euclid got it from Pythagoras. Pythagoras from Alexandria. To Alexandria from Mesopotamia. To Mesopotamia from God. To God from the Cosmos. I learned it in Grade Ten.

Laws were commendable as long as they were lines. But laws could turn on you. Lines could be transformed to circumferences and back again by the irrational, never-ending π . Quite so. We crib from the whirling Universe when we learn Arithmetic. Stop the wheel! Butter was right. The reputed holy carriage rolls over me; I am trampled by the old guard. Filled with volumes of despair.

Don't turn by π to spheres, don't give me spheres. Fail me, I'd rather fail than know this. It is irrational to understand the spheres—I simply didn't get them. Did anyone? Nor did I ever get a geometry set. By the time Thelma was finished, we were to Arithmetic. I still had panic; I didn't know my times table. Where was that cotton ball I shoved into my eye that day? I was never shrewd enough to learn fractions. By December it was Christmas. Who could times a fraction by a fraction when all you ever wanted was not to get a bra?

What is a hypotenuse? Some cross-hairs in a scope to shoot old Butch; they killed him, killed him 'cuz he was a stray. Butch, divided from his home when he was still a puppy. Eliminate Butch and we'll have a more respectable town; eliminate Butch and you

cancel out eagles, dodo birds, kit foxes, carp. Sorry, this is a town by-law. Who would ever times a minus by a minus to get plus? Laws were untenable to me, suspect. How was it nature knew this silent poetry?

A straight line casts a straight shadow, and a tangent to a curve casts a shadow that is tangent to the shadow of the curve.

Projected geometry posited duality, locking man and woman in a fox-trot with paradox. Converse, congruent projections—interchanging point and line. Unbelievable. Tables of divisions. And each number had a corresponding minus. Absolute value. Subtracting and including. Functions, equations, notations, explanations begging to describe the root sense of nonsense to me. The whole world could pass away with one flawed law.

On and on the pendulum swings, further and further away from home: +5, -5; +16, -16; +27, -27; +38, -38; +49, -49. . . I'm on that ball, swinging away, away, away from the boundaries of my faithful abode. I want to ascend, see God. Return my gold wrist ring, give me my breastplate—Come, Man, Come, give me my beads to form a plate, give me my tiny lapis soul, give me my dandelion crown. The more I lunge for valued home, the further the pendulum sweeps me away demanding ever more: "Give up the measuring rod and line."

I only saw the sun-sphere once, a hollow circle behind the shadow of the earth . It was a sad day to perceive that pyramidal energy shaping and restructuring our lives in Kings Crossing. These things I didn't want to know. To me the ruler ruled. Warm, comfortable, understandable, $2L + 2W = P$. We were mindlessly stuck on the perimeter of a glad rectangle; even on the day of the eclipse, I could see that. I came home with blind flu; Mother got cancer; Father fled to church. Take my line, and you leave me the wheel, forever running from the principal, forever clamoring before your rolling stone, forever fleeing from the changing guard, the caravan, the world.

Oh no, I have these rings of haloes in my eyes, ghostly auras, afterburners of the eclipse. Here comes this wicked headache again; I am truly blind. I repent. What is my part in all of this? When I look I see only the dark eclipse. That's what we were told to find. Maybe I'm afraid to see the whole—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—holy triangular compass encompassing the sun. I would not have killed the Christ. Rahab would and she still will. I'd only turn the sun sphere into flat paper; square Christ to the world with measuring rod and line. That's all. The whole world loves a line. I wouldn't have killed you. Would I? What about Tattoo Girl? Was she not your walking sphere? What about our rings?

I won't give up the line, disturb the universe. Shove over, the story will not fare this way. Faith, let's keep the Rockies where they stand even if badly arranged, and poorly lit. No rock will roll if I believe.

Forget the sixth door! We'll cube the sphere! Straighten the walls. I won't let you hang on the proscenium clad in bloody rags. Who could? I can't endure their bruising you over my own dead body. Don't grieve. The pendulum can rescue you like Tarzan rescues Jane. You'll be all right. I'll save you. I'll be you. Virtuous and just. I'll do it. I'll be all right. I'll be all right and no wrong. I swear on the Holy Bible. I'll be your ardent lover. You, the bridegroom, turning ordinary water into precious wine. I would be thy virgin. Even Rahab was useful. Rahab saved because she saved the day. I am a barren vessel in Jericho waiting for Israel's assault. I, too, will save the day. I will tend your vineyard; it will spring forth with abundance and your desire shall be sated. My water will bring prize wine for Israel in the Promised Land. Let me call you husband, Master, Baal. The pendulum is gaining breadth. I'll greet you soon; just a few more tries should do it. You give me purpose, you give me reason to live, to bleed. I'll divide myself, cut my arms and legs, anything you ask. Swing high, low. Back forth. Back forth. Back forth.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word.

Rollo! Nooooo! Not little Rollo. Not my little brother, Rollo. Just me. It only happened to me. Nobody else. Please. Tell me I'm right. It's OK if it's just me. Let it just be me. Not you. No, not little Rollo. Not you, too. Oh Rollo, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I love you, Rollo. Don't cry. I love you. I love Rollo. I love you, Rollo. No one will hurt you anymore. No wolf will ever knock again upon your door. I love you, Rollo. I love you without shame. I love you. Knit one, pearl one. The serpent has just swallowed her tail. Knit one, pearl one.

The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her forehead was written, Mystery, Babylon, The Mother of Harlots and Abominations.

Mystery, Babylon, The Mother of Harlots and Abominations, decked with gold and precious stones. I've knit myself a filthy pearl. I'll knit a toque. The better to encompass my dear. The better to warm my dear, my dear dear Rollo.

Knit one, pearl one. Despise adore. Knit one, pearl one. Shame ease. Knit one, pearl one. Agony relief. Knit one, pearl one. Hate love. Knit one, pearl one. Frog prince. Knit one, pearl one. Despair joy. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one. Fierce alchemic joy. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one. All inclusive joy. Pearl one. Pearl one. Pearl one.

"She's speaking of death. Maybe she will talk to you."

Doctor Sukkal, a whirlwind is coming from the north, a great cloud and a fire enfolding itself. A brightness is about it and out of the midst thereof is the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire—a stone. Mother! Father! Gloria! Gee! Mrs. Bothello! Ralph! Zest! Thelma! Lise! Max! Will! There is Stan! And dear dear little Rollo! A stone is cut out of the mountain without hands, it rolls to fill the earth. Rejoice! There will be death, yet *other* life forms trailing in its wake. I can't square it any more than this.

"You, at the cross hairs of the scope. Don't shoot. You'll kill us all." I'm giving up my measuring rod and line. Willful willing. Babylon is dead. I've found an *other* world.

"Olivia, this is Doctor Sukkal. I'm here. You're safe in the hospital. You have been here for two days. Can you tell me who is shooting at you? Livie? Livie? Who is shooting at you?"

I moved through the bright emergency wearing the only dress that fit, and it would have wrapped around the surprise baby and me another time or two. It was a big black tent; I'd worn it everyday for the last five months. I'd remove it soon, throw it in the furthest garbage I could find. Today was due day; you wouldn't know it to see me rush like I was still in High School dashing down the silent night halls to see my dying dad like he was my first date. Wait for me.

Stan said that he hadn't realized the emergency or he would have driven faster. If only he had known. If only he would have. If only. If.

If if if if if—

If if's and an's were pots and pans

There'd be no need of tinkers.

Dad didn't wait for anyone; not even to die. I'll never know if I could have saved my Dad. Like witnessing the Leafs win the Stanley Cup, my team wouldn't have triumphed without my enthusiasm through the screen upon the waves and microwaves of sound support. "Go, Leafs, go." Perhaps he'd have died even if I'd been right there to cheer him on.

"Father, come with me and help me set the jumping standards in Victoria Park. Come Father, we'll challenge Willow. I'll boost you up and you can ride once more. Take another stab jumping the standards."

We constructed those high wooden booms in the garage behind the house; painted them to look like brick, like brush, like rock, like anything but wood. Painted them with stripes and every depth and color that imagination could think to challenge horse and rider. Perhaps it never would have worked; it was November, minus ten. I doubt I could have fooled him; I really doubt he'd have fallen for it. He hadn't fallen for the Fall. I'll never know if I could have saved him. Not now. He wasn't coming back to paint or jump a standard. Is there any standard could pull one from the gracious grave? I doubt it.

There were tubes down his nose and throat, dials on his chest, a monitor for his heart showing the regular, irregular beat of something, but where was my dad? Where were the doctors? There was no sign of doctors. None. Had they given up before his heart? "Dad?"

"Can he hear me?" A nurse, with one blue eye and one brown, shook her head. How did she know? How did she know my dad? Was she another Mr. Gilbert who didn't believe I could learn French? "Dad? Dad? Dad?" His eyes were glazed with murky gel. They were not green flashing black, they were not keen, they were not watching this world of tubes, this world of frustrations and manipulations. Where was this hellish man whose mechanical breathing exhaled agony into my world? Where was he? Where had he ever been? And why did I want him back so desperately?

We daughters watched impotent. The attendant came from another room, whispered something to Marie and then pulled the cords, pulled the tubes. Bell made it just in time to hold his hand; Gloria tucked the blankets up under his chin. I knew that warming him would only singe all of us at once just like my bird. The peeping of the monitor ceased. In a Father's groan, the whole world halted. And I smelled the foul scent of death.

"Keep breathing. That's the way. Good girl." I looked up from the floor. The nurse, with a blue eye and a brown, was coaching me. I vomited so violently, I passed out. They were worried about the baby. Yes, yes the baby.

"Are you OK?"

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring, -

I'll only stop to rake the leaves away,

And wait to watch the water clear, I may,

I shan't be gone long,

You come too.

Could we really go on living joyously? In this uncertain place? What about the sorrow?

"Marie?"

"Look, Livie, the sun."

People were on their way to work peering fervently through frost scraped windows. Like mail men, they were forging through this wild cold to man their stations at department stores, at cafeterias, at service stations. Amazing. I felt my baby moving and turning, alive and anxious to be born. You can't be serious. How could this be? Aunt Marie's strength permeated the room and echoed down the corridors; the determined look in her tired eyes filled me with wonder. You mean life doesn't stop just because somebody's heart does? Hearts keep beating even when they are broken? I laid down for just another minute. Just one minute. Give me one minute. Perhaps

I hurried up the hall too quickly.

I sat quietly. And like Elijah, I was given respite for the journey is too long. And I saw . . . fish of every description; fish of every prescription, like some old lady's purse pill box, a blue for heart, a green for sleep, a yellow for high blood pressure, a white for arthritis, a purple for water retention, a brown for gout. Blue tangs, lemon tangs, red tangs. Schools of tiny fish, enormous meat-eaters, gigantic plant-snappers. Every shape and every color and pattern of fish. Salt-water fish, a clear aquarium of salt-water fish. A big black fish, a big clear fish. Fish as far as the eye could see. Beautiful, precious, prized fish—beloved as my own children. Dream on . . .

Dad rose early on dark winter mornings, strapping on bib overalls, singing, "Well I go like a lamb to the slaughter...Baaaa Baaa Baa." He was going out to feed the cows. Why? He claimed he bought cows when cow prices were high and sold when cow prices were low. For that reason we ate a lot of venison. He brought it home along with the cherished Christmas tree in late November.

And now November had rolled around again. Only this time she turned over my dad crushing him like a sow rolling over her own piglets. My father was just a baby. How could a mother roll over her own young? The minute we were getting to know him, he died, becoming the young man of ten who was left to care for four of young sisters. Dear Father, you are a wee boy wired to the clothes line, waiting for Grandfather to come home from the farm. Waiting, waiting. All of us waiting. All of us waiting for Father to come home. But you were just a little boy of ten. You sustained six of us through childhood. You buried a wife. Was there no barb could hold you to this world? It is time to unhook you from the tubes; free you from the clothes line; let you go to play in the heath.

The nurses asked us if they could take care of the body. Could we say our good-byes, and let them do their job?

I tried to get the fish to swim into the intravenous bag, but when I looked down, the black and the clear fish were out on the shelf, dusty among the instruments, sucking for watery-oxygen. I had condensed the fish tank down to a clear, transportable jar; I'd thrown away all extra salt water. Where was I going to find salt water for my big black fish, and my big clear ? Where? Out here on the winter prairie? Why did they just lay there wide-eyed on the shelf? My father rose up from his bed of death and asked if I wanted to go home with him. Yes, yes, I did. But first, I had to find a place for my two fishes. Wait. Just wait a second while I find a safe place for these fish. Wait. Please wait. I want to come with you. Wait, Dad didn't wait for anyone not even for a little girl gone up to Gee's to buy glossette raisins. Dad didn't wait for the girl to find safe water for the black fish and the clear . He left without her.

The nurse lifted me. "It's time to take the body away. Have you said your good-byes? Have you?"

Yes. I said my good-byes that day in the closet. That day they left, and went to Lethbridge leaving me whirling with the chihuahua in the Chinese Coffee Shop. I said my

final farewells that day. I didn't need to say them again. My good-byes were taken care of years ago.

But Bell could not be pulled away. She'd never had a dad, not even Dad; he fulfilled all her expectation of the perfect Father the moment she took his hand, and he passed on. Bell wouldn't let go. It was the first Father she had ever known. She was sure to freeze to a November death if she set down the compassionate load of leathery hand. How elegant were his hands and how adept they were at gardening, at figuring math and numbers, at cutting and polishing rocks, at tying flies and most of all at building standards. I watched Bell watch his hands. I watched her puffy face and it was suffering to watch her head on his chest, crooning and caressing.

Dear Bell, let go. Why did this cruel man, who didn't even know one daughter from the next, keep having children? Was he attempting to cripple Mama, kill her like some beached whale, keep her home and out of competition? Was it the thrill of spurting sperm? The adequate month-end child allowance? To keep to Christian standards? Were they trying for a son, but got Rollo? Did he have any thought of precious female child? Who was this man? What were his motives? What? Bell, let go!

Father was playing in the heath when Brother Cheney rounded up a truck load of boys and had them all baptized, dunked, bib overalls and all. He became a Christian that day, and as he said, ever since. What savior could frighten a ten year old to cling to church like it was a home? And who would go to church if Father didn't drive? His father didn't. And why did our Father force us all to march along his weary, driven way? Did he find joy the day he was immersed? Or was this the closest he would come? He was a pious man. But what awe-filled terrors traversed his fond devotion and carried down the troubled lines clear to my unborn child? Where and when would it end? Every time I turned around, life took on ancient proportions.

From God to Adam. From Adam to the Flood. From Noah to Malachi. From Malachi to Christ. From Christ to horse and buggy. From horse and buggy to the '90's.

From '90's back to the Infinite. The eternal wheel. The time, the dates, the climate of Canada, the age of the church, the tenor of his parents all dictated that he be the strong conservative man that he was. Had he a choice? A believer in all that is good-hard work, dedication, and mighty prayer. Who to praise? And who to blame? Adam?

Adam was given two commands: to multiply and fill the earth, but never, never eat of the tree of knowledge. Did I hate a just Father just because of the legacy passed down from man to man to man to keep all command and this above all—to thine own self be true? Or did I resent the man who refused to follow Eve; the man who chose to obey the command to stay in the Garden, discarding all mandates that opposed the choice?

Poor responsible weaklings. Eve figured it out: life is a set up to break down. Someday the two commands converge and fight it out until someone overcome by exhaustion or comprehends, accepts the paradox, eats of the fruit, digests it like the Saints supping on the body of Christ to become different sorts of persons. But Adam is busy naming the animals. Adam is consumed with the family farm. Adam is self-sacrificing to his standards. Meanwhile Eve is driven out of the Garden to bear her seed in sorrow, alone in dreary world.

Where is the salt water of life for these two fish? They forgot to unhook the I.V., there was saline dripping stupidly from a bag into my dad's lifeless arm. Could I fit my big black fish and my transparent fish into that bag, let the fish have Father's water, let the fish drip down his tube, into his inanimate, junky veins? A useless food pyramid. How was I ever going to deliver, as if I were Jonah's whale, to the stranger on top? And I would have to go to Ninevah, back to life.

When mother came out of her brain surgery with her head bandaged and her face so swollen she could only be recognized by the scar on her lip, we all knew the seriousness of the operation. Dad laid his trembling hands on her head and pleaded with God to stay her pending death. Hail Mary. I was there, I heard him promise that he would retire from his job, Full of Grace, and take care of her, Hail Mary, in any condition, Full of Grace, if

only, Hail Mary, she could live. Hail Mary, full of Grace. Sincere, like when I asked God, Hail Mary, for my bird, Full of Grace, Dad begged for more time. Hail Mary, Full of Grace. As Tennyson wrote and Dad was fond to quote, "Life piled on life is all too little."

Like my bird, my mom flew too close to the sun and died. Dad was left to wander without reason. What did he want with life? He slipped back, if he was ever out, into Eden not to eat of any tree, but just to hang around and wait for God to come back. Did he love Mom? Can this fierce dependence be called love? Or is it hate? Self hate, other love? Other hate, self love?

Who cares? Who the hell cares?

What should I do with these crazy fish? The black fish, and the clear? Why did they beckon me? They openly accuse me with thier googling eyes as they grow ever more stiff. Shall I find them a place? What kind of place could I offer? Tap water with chlorine and table salt; fish were meant to swim the open oceans. Glide through the currents, move with the whales and trade winds. But they were stiff now. Could rigimortous come back to this cold life? Perhaps I could do the world a favor and pull the plug, take out the pins, let the ants and grubs dine, let these fishy bodies dry on the wooden shelf until one day some weary one would come along and blow man down like so much dust. The cycle of life.

Why survive the world, fighting dirty? Gardening, by the sweat of the brow. Growing spinach to eat. Eating spinach to grow strong muscles like Popeye. What's the point? Labor the soil with pathetic sweat rolling from every pore, dirt under your fingernails, to leave a humus bed to lie in. From dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return. Dad figured the world ran by arithmetic. Absolutely. Numbers ruled, and he ruled the numbers. Perhaps that's why he had six kids. If they have six kids and they have six kids, and so on, and so on, and so on. A family with children as numerous as the sands of the sea, forever ruled by Whitiker standards. No wonder Willow and I won the trophies.

We were jumping more than painted wood. A stone is rolling out of the mountain. And when we asked for bread, he gave us the only bread he knew. Stone.

"Livie. Livie. Perhaps you should check her in."

No. I was fine. I was thinking about something else. I'd be fine now.

How do we reconcile a wound inherited from a wounded man? *Was* I crazy? Was it environment or genetics. Did I love Dad or Stan or life or anything? And what was I to do now? A baby on the way, the blanket half knit. And I was raving again; standing over the sink with a butcher knife. Gut the fish. But I was too chicken to commit; yet, too honest to bring another child into this place. Standing at the seventh door, what should I do? What would be best? What? Stan?

"Do whatever."

Didn't matter one way or the other to him. At least I knew that the girls at the Cook County Saloon were in the same boat if it didn't matter either way. He didn't fool me. Showering, then splashing up with *Fahrenheit*, to go haul hay to Edmonton. Then the extra loving, "supper was great; there's no cook quite like your mother." Except the cook at the county saloon. Nice try.

The kids. They knew their times tables. They had a job chart. Their sheets were washed. I had to think fast before the baby came. Decide. Stan says it matters not to him. Why would I care, if Stan doesn't? I could leave the Jeep to Lise. Max would like the stash under the mattress. Stan could have my horses. Willy, my computers. I'd give them all my camera, and darkroom hoping that they could use it without quarreling. They wouldn't quarrel if that was all you ever wanted. Would they?

We quarreled because we had a Mother. Mother, making soap with one hand, arranging funeral meals on the telephone while Gloria put curlers in her hair. Doreen and I insulting each other for her attention. Today was our only hope; tomorrow, she'd be gone working with the sick. We quarreled for Dad too, but like a tree falling alone in the forest, he wasn't around. He didn't hear so it didn't happen. He served on town council, Prairie

Farm Assistance Board, an officer in charge of Federal Farm Credit. He spent seventeen years in the ministry. What did I want more? What did I want more from those two?

Why did I say good-bye to them so many years ago? Just because they left me whirling for the coffee drinkers at Gee's. But that night paid off in kind. It's how I met Butter. Butter was there that glosette day. Knowing Butter was better than a solitary trip with Mom and Dad. As if Father would have spoken to me anyway. Was I still resenting these two people because they were not the plurality of Majesty?

Yes, because they pretended to be God. Masqueraded like sheep dressed in the clothing of the Most High.

But I caught them, didn't I? The hungry coyotes. I caught them before they killed the sheep—entirely. Mother's corny feet. Would God have arthritic corny feet? Would God die of breast cancer? God wouldn't have corrupted like this body before me; every time I took another whiff, I gagged. Bodies stink. They were not God. They were not. Take them off their damn pedestal. Drag them down. They were rotten stinking potatoes. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one.

"What are you knitting, Livia? Are you knitting a blanket for the baby?"

Track and Field was Father's specialty. His own father took an interest in it, hauling in cinders for a track and building a sand pit. Here in the backyard, Grandfather trained Dad to vault. Dad and his friends would catch rides to the trackmeets with anybody who would take them, but not his own father. He was too busy separating wheat from tares. Although Father and his friend, Gently, were only juniors, they competed in seniors where they could win cups instead of ribbons. Cups prove worth. He and Harris went to the Highland Games. Without money, and living on tomatoes and bread, Dad got sick. Sick, with the King of Siam specifically wanting to see him vault the pole. The bleachers filled with RCMP in their red coats and the King of Siam surrounded by his retinue. Dad's heart exploded as he used all energy to run down the pole-vaulting track. The jump wasn't high, but in his weakened state, his hand simply slid down the pole. Knit one, pearl one.

He was a boy with dreams. Knit one, pearl one. Dashed dreams. Knit one, pearl one. He never made it to the pedestal.

"We played hide and seek." Gloria spoke up. Dad hid her in a cupboard behind enough blankets that she almost smothered. Then he retired upon some bed. Gloria squeaked through three games of home free till she came out sweating and cranky. Gloria, mellow, across the body of our dad, was smiling like Dad was dear; but was it dear to leave her? The whole evening slipped away without her getting caught. We may not try to be found, but who wants to be lost? Knit one, knit one.

Doreen recalled life on the farm, standing in her pajamas longing to go for a dip in the irrigation ditch. She'd just gotten over bronchitis. Seeing the longing in a little girl's heart, dad picked Doreen up and splashed her into the cool refreshing water. Knit one, pearl one. He knew hot. Knit one, pearl one. And he knew longing. Knit one, pearl one. And he threw my sister into the lovely cool of the refreshing irrigation ditch.

One Christmas Eve after prayers, and scriptures, and Santa bells, and eating homemade chocolates, we were sent to bed. Visions of sugarplums raged in our heads. Doreen soon had me up on the bed dancing with them. We forgot where we were, or how close the ceiling. It was Christmas! In our revelry we leaped for joy, and smashed the ceiling light. Soon we heard the heavy footfalls of Father coming down the stairs.

Hail Mary, Full of Grace

Hail Mary, Full of Grace

Hail Mary, Full of Grace

Father entered the bedroom carrying a broom. Hail Mary. He told us to settle down, and get to sleep. Full of Grace. And then he swept up the glass. Hail Mary, Full of Grace. It was already Christmas. Who cared about Santa. We had a Dad who didn't spank us; yet, he had every right. We snuggled down and let our hearts dance with the sugarplums. Knit one, pearl one. He knew our fear. Knit one, pearl one. We'd broken a light. Knit one,

pearl one. He didn't spank us. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one.

Mom would buy a nice expensive cut of roast and cook it to a Roger family pink perfection. Knit one. Dad, being used to cooking Chuck roasts with black gravy, would sneak the heat up he said, "to concentrate it." Pearl one. He thought he was a cook because he cooked for his sisters. Knit one. He made pie dough and because the recipe said don't handle it, he put it in the bread mixer and beat it. Pearl one. He liked hot lemon pie and if it cooled before the guests arrived, he would heat it for them. Knit one. He was raised, and we were raised on milk toast every morning. Pearl one. Dad liked it on burned toast. Knit one. He liked oyster soup and asparagus, turkey and fish cooked until they were dry. Pearl one. Knit one, pearl one. Knit one, pearl one. Everything must be done just so.

Mom complained, "If I didn't know better, I'd think your Father had been raised by French Gourmet Cooks."

But he wasn't raised by gourmet cooks at all. No. He was raised from the age of ten by a hard working father who never got over the loss of his companion. After school, Dad would scramble a dozen eggs for each of them; four dozen eggs. Knit one, pearl one. They were hungry. Knit one, pearl one. No mother. Knit one, pearl one. Father gone to work.

O, quivering perspective— who can be angry?

Father. Father was an angry man whose fists could double back on you; if you weren't careful, they could beat you to a pulp. Attack from every direction. Attack shoulders, neck, thighs. His hands could yank every hair out of my head. They could pound, and pound, and pound . . .

Mary, go away. Go! Go away! Go feed my bird, or warm my frozen kitty.

Don't watch! Go!

There was no way they'd quit—those elegant hands. No way until they were sick of reaching across the bed to drag the culprit back to the ring. No time out. Just lay and take it. Those lovely hands wounded me for some nebulous transgression, bruised me for family guilt, the chastisement of violence was unleashed. Pearl one. Pearl one. Pearl one. No way this blanket will curl.

No bloody way.

Father. A life tempered by his father gone, his mother gone to rest; four hungry kids. He marched off to church the moment Mother was diagnosed with cancer. He'd lost the flowing center of his world when he was still a boy; how could he face it all again? This genealogy was real with real junk in the lines. If he did anything that caused God's wrath, he'd change it all—keep all the rules. Name animals until he fell, the just man, entering the lone and dreary, this day of our Lord 1994. His bad faith had eaten him alive. The creation story was not buried in text, but embedded in my Father's flesh, and in the flesh of Mom and man—lest corruption seize the text, distort the sum, and the whole world be utterly wasted with one flawed law, with one mis-reading of the holy book.

My baby pressed his head against my aching back. Seven pounds of pressure per square inch on the outside, seven times seven on the in. Elbow in my belly. Sorrow in my heart. The time was at hand. And I had knit a flat, white wool, baby blanket waiting for the day. Pearl one. Pearl one. Pearl one. Blanket complete. As soon as my father was buried, I could go down. Follow him to the seventh hellish door, take off my black tent dress and greet my dark self. But what about the fish? Could I live with their stare down through the centuries? Where was salt water enough for the black fish and the clear? Should I leave them? Should I take them as some fishy prize to Rahab?

Just remove the black dress, shrug off your Father's God, your sweet spirit, your indomitable nature, give up your life—throw it in the closest garbage you can find. Nakedness could never be burden like this sordid, black, dress. Nothing matters. Throw off the heavy yoke. Throw it off! Throw it, between pains. Throw up, and off.

Enchanting, psychedelic, flounders of every size. I have found you in cabinets, in vials, in red cross boxes all over the house. You are my colorful fishy friends. What chemist formed you? What hammer? What chain? In what furnace was thy brain? What the anvil? What dread grasp dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,

And water'd heaven with their tears,

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Little fishes, wash the dishes. Explode this tired body from here to kingdom come. Let my last breath usher in a new born life for Stan and the kids. Quick! Do the dirty deed. Before I deliver. Labor will begin soon. Give this baby a chance to escape hell! Rushhhh!

Whoa! What is this? A belly. A belly full. A belly full of saline. A place to place the fish. The witching styx had struck water. It was oozing out like some wounded jelly-fish with unexpected blood. Should I let it go, stream on and out? Or should I stop it? Deliver the fish from stiffening death. I am gaping at the seventh door unable to move my feet. It opens and gloom settles upon my nude body like some unholy ghost. The darkness is thick like ash. No light could pierce. No kindly light. No virgin's lamp. No stars! No moon! No Dipper! No Orion! No Betelgeuse! I'm committed to darkness.

The cellar of Hell. I'm a tree falling in the wood with no one to hear me.

Jesus! Mary! Joseph!

I am without my golden crown, without my sacred lapis beads, without beads to form a plate. Without breastplate, Come, Man, Come, without forged wedding ring, without measuring rod and line. I've shrugged off hope. Black, hope. I am the blind, the maimed, the halt, crawling to the dead tree stump, bowing low.

Chapter Fourteen

Pinned on a Hook

IN THE COURT OF QUEEN'S BENCH
IN THE JUDICIAL DISTRICT OF THE UNDERWORLD

BETWEEN:

The CROWN — Petitioner: Rahab, Queen of the Underworld

AND

Respondent — Inanna, Queen of Heaven; commonly known as Olivia Whitiker Brown

WHEREAS the CROWN has suffered bodily harm, property harm, and damage to reputation, she hereby files TORT complaint against sister and respondent—Inanna, Queen of Heaven; commonly known as Olivia Whitiker Brown; or in fact, Eve, woman, mother of all living.

AND WHEREAS there has been forty years of abuse namely from birth to the present day inclusive, the petitioner asks the court to resolve finally the differences between Crown Rahab and said respondent.

AND WHEREAS it is the intention and desire that there shall be a complete, final and effective settlement of their respective rights in and to the property of each other, let the court direct the proceedings.

ALL ARISE

Inanna Olivia Whitiker, do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help your God?

I do, but. . .

No buts!

I do.

Ms. Whitiker, were you once a toddling baby, who, on a sunny March day, one thousand nine hundred and fifty four, did, in fact, while learning to walk, trip on the broken sidewalk, scrape your hands and knees, causing them to bleed profusely?

Yes, I was.

Indeed, are you the Dew Drop that fell down on the cold, cold ground?

Yes.

Are you the Dew Drop that had to find a way to stand up and walk with blood trickling down wounded knees, down scraped chin and from infant hands?

I am.

Did anyone see you fall?

I don't think so.

Did anyone help you rise?

Not really. Yes. The sun did.

The sun did. How charming. Did anyone come to your rescue, wipe your hands, or kiss your or stop your bleeding knees?

No.

Did anyone care for you?

No, but . . .

Did you not have a Mother, and a Father? Were they at home? Or did they forsake you, leaving you unsupervised and only a little over one year old, to toddle and tip to the Tin Man for compassion, and a cookie?

I had parents, but . . .

And did your Mother ever pick you up, ever wipe your wet face or ever hold you to her bosom?

Not that I can remember, but . . .

In fact, didn't your mother, who is a nurse, scold you when the Tin Man brought you home? Did she stoop to regard your knees, and broken hands?

She didn't stoop, but I had the scolding coming. I opened the screen door and found my own way to the sidewalk. I was not even two years. I doubt they thought it was possible. They thought I was playing in the potato pit.

Had you been playing in the basement?

Yes.

Among the potatoes again?

I liked it there. Potatoes smell like life. They have a fragrance all their own.

What about your father? Was he around when you fell?

My Father? Which Father?

The Father that showed you how to fight. The father that threw your kittens out to freeze. The father that pulled you back to pull your hair, to beat your face, to knock you with his

fists. The father that taught you that growing up was tough. Did you grow up tough, Livie?

Not really. No. I didn't grow up tough. I cried a lot.

Did you fear your father; never, never admitting the same; always, always finding pardon, risking boundaries, doing almost anything for Father's intimacy?

I didn't cry around him, but . . .

Was intimacy forthcoming?

No, but . . .

Are you not a pleaser, a peace maker, one who has sacrificed all rational thinking and all true feelings for some elusive family peace, and respect?

Someone had to intervene. I understood. I was the only one that understood the time bomb was ready to explode.

Was any harmony or respect forthcoming?

No, sir, there wasn't, but . . .

And is it true that in your search for loving spontaneity, you sloughed off bounds, taking anyone's abuse? Mother? Father? Rollo? Art Fisk? Mr. Gilbert? The guy who ran the Dry Cleaners? Father Denis? Constance Billingsly? Mr. Pops? The security guard? The Dean of Women? The Dean of Men?

I thought . . .

Isn't it true that you repeatedly left yourself open to abuse for want of their inclusive approval?

But, I thought . . .

IS IT TRUE?

It's true. I had to risk it. I risked it because it always seemed that this time 'round, it would be worth the risk.

And were you risking it the day after Sunday School when Sister Constance Billingsly commissioned the class of young women to be good, even to be perfect as Christ? Are you not, in fact, the sweet Merry Miss, the Queen of Heaven, the Levite that accepted the words of an ignorant Sabbath school teacher and split off and then spat on your own dark sister-side, even the great Rahab, our Queen, to banish her like so many sins to drift down the Styx that runs murky waters through the pasture, past the dead tree stump, to fill the town reservoir?

The town reservoir was filled and overflowing with my sins. I had to do something. My evil was being quaffed by the whole town.

Will you answer the question? The court is not interested in your excuses.

I passed my evil to Rahab—I was contaminating a whole town.

You say you abandoned Rahab. By your own admission, you say that you left her to drift down Styx. Then you say that Rahab was your evil. Do you realize that it is Rahab that rules this domain with fairness and honor. She is our Queen. You abandoned our Queen, leaving her bloody and wounded? Did you not look and then leave to pass by on the other side? And all this to gain acceptance from perfect fellow-shiping classmates, perfect strangers who, by then, were not even allowed to sit near you in the event you would taint their minds? So you decided to become perfect, to please them however they demanded. Perfection. The perfect child.

I thought perfection meant . . .

Answer the question.

Yes.

And in this same way, you did allow your brother Rollo to have his way with you; never, never telling him *no*.

Your Honor—are these questions not out of line? In front of everyone?

Over ruled. You will answer the question.

Let me rephrase. Did Rollo lie with you?

Yes.

And have you taken care of this abuse? Or did you bring it into the marriage?

I have taken care of it. It happened years ago. I have all but forgotten it. It's over now.

You say that you have taken care of it.

Yes. Time has taken care of it.

If it's been taken care of, you won't mind if we address it? Whose fault was it that this incest occurred?

Incest?

Yes, my dear, it's called incest. Whose fault was it that it occurred?

It was my fault, your Honor.

Oh, so you seduced your brother?

No! I didn't seduce my brother. Rollo is retarded.

So, you did not seduce your brother?

Yes. No. I mean Rollo is retarded it was my fault

Why didn't you think of that back then? Who would abuse a retarded boy?

I didn't abuse a retarded boy. He abused me.

If he abused you, then why is it your fault?

I let him abuse me. I didn't tell him no. He was my baby-sitter; I was afraid of him.

Then are you to blame for lying with a baby-sitter that you feared?

I thought I had to. At the time, I thought I had to.

Then why are you to blame?

Because I am not retarded. I knew better. Does a retarded boy know it's wrong? I did. I knew it was wrong; I knew it was hideous, hateful, hellish. I never told him *no*.

If it was so hideous, hateful and hellish, why did you continue with him?

I didn't want to upset the family peace. Rollo was already in trouble for being born without brains; I had brains, I was the bright one in the family. What do you think would happen if they knew their retard had lain with the gifted one? Father would have killed us.

But, you say that you told your parents.

I was afraid to tell them until I was fifteen; I told them then.

And up until you were fifteen, for ten years, you let Rahab keep the repulsive truth; you shoved the burden to your dark sister-side. Isn't that correct?

It's correct that I tried to forget between occurrences.

Would it be fair to say that you denied it, assigned it to the underworld?

Yes.

Fair enough. Now, what happened to you after you told your parents?

Father beat us.

I see. And what did that beating tell you?

It told me that I was as dirty as I thought. That I was contaminated. That life was not worth living.

Did it tell you that you were responsible for the abuse to Rollo, and his abuse to you and perhaps even the abuse you heaped upon the marriage bed?

It did.

Believing it was your fault for these many years, you seem to have done rather well. The community esteems you Queen of Heaven. You have four lovely children, you have gone on to Tourism, University, you have respect. How did you manage all of this while holding such a responsible burden? The Keeper of Rollo, keeper of self respect, keeper of the marriage—you are an amazing woman. No wonder they crowned you. Now, how have you dealt with the trauma of it all? Or as you say, has the trauma been taken care of by time?

Yes, time has worn away the damage.

Has it really? Or have you simply denied the maze of it? Allowing your own sister-self to contain the bloody torture, kept it private in her labyrinth of bloody Hell? Never looking down. Isn't that true?

I'm sorry.

And were you sorry when Art Fisk caught you? Were you ashamed, then? Yet you slowed down for his attack; you laughed like a delighted child. And it appeared to those who stood around and watched that you seemed to be enjoying yourself immensely, did it not?

Yes.

Then where did all the pain go? If you knew just how hideous it was. Where is that pain? Did it whirl off to be absorbed into the unconscious cosmos to wreak havoc on the ozone layer for your children, and your children's children some vile day? Or, as you say, has time taken care of it, defused it like some fizzled bomb? What do you suppose?

I don't know.

Do you suppose perhaps your sister Rahab would know something of that pain? Look at her moaning on her throne; look at her body hollow and barren. Look at her quake. See her wrinkled, naked skin. See how her hair hangs down like dread locks upon her sunken cheeks. What color are her eyes do you suppose? Or can she see? Listen to her. This keening goes on down through the eons of Hell frightening both the living, and the dead. Does she look as if she might know something of your pain?

She does.

Does this cause you any grief?

I . . .

Oh, so you are grieved by something that was forgotten long ago. And yet you are the young woman who committed her honest life to find the serpent that slipped down the gopher hole? To Ahasversus, that wandering shoe maker? To Christ, the wounded, wounding one? To Stan, the abusive, good shepherd? To your children, that you love like psychedelic fish? To the unborn, you desire to spare? How is it you have sacrificed at every altar except your own? Love your neighbor as yourself? No one would want your sort of love. Look at the product of it. Look at your sister. Listen, if you can bear it.

I'm a cheat.

Oh, you are a cheat. A cheat who skipped half of high school? And in this same manner, have you not lived the truant life?

I have, but . . .

A cheat who masqueraded in a Crown of Heaven like some Anointed Queen and continue the same right up until such time as you were asked to remove your crown at the first gate?

I guess I did.

Did you, or didn't you?

I did.

Are you the independent one who stripped off her dark masculine sister to see Europe and America first? Fronting and confronting the world with assertive persona?

Yes.

Are you, or are you not the one who threw her sight and insight to the Minotaur using blinders, like some work horse, setting a narrow course straight to the gates of Heaven?

I am.

And did you not sabotage your trip to Syria, taking illegal drugs, when you clearly understood the consequences of such to the point that the University excused you like so many talking heads? Excused you just like you thought they should? The self fulfilling prophetess?

I did. They did, but . . .

Oh, but you saw it all as Providence. You connected your fruitful marriage to the naive, native boy. And I believe that you married dishonestly, did you not? Married Stan because you were kicked out of school, because he was there, and because he was a shepherd. And so you crowned him Shepherd King, deceitfully expecting faithfulness that he was never fixed to give? And did you not push him into wearing that deceitful mask of Christian man, reading from the holy book, and this, in order to please your Father? You married a man you didn't love, and never will, and never could, because you love another who would not play your silly little games; he would not walk through baptismal moat, or storm the Grail Castle. And so you got even with him, and mated with a white sheep. Have you not created your own reality?

Stan was not so bad. He's a good father. He's asleep, that's all.

Asleep. So you want to join him. You decide to take six handfuls of exquisite prescription pills in order to avoid this confrontation with honest duality? All because you'd rather kill both you and yours than face your own dark self? Because you know, and have always known, that mankind is pathetic Sisyphus rolling a sorry stone up a mount where there is no God watching over Israel. And I believe you believe, and have always believed, that the path to God ended at the Rose Window. Lucky you, missing all the trials and adversity that Israel had to learn to know their King. You took their answer and not their questions or their story carved in the fleshy tablets of their heart. It's been down the mountain ever since. Is this not the whole truth, so help your God?

It's true, but . . .

And am I correct in assuming that you have undermined your own life, breaking down whenever things got too tough, checking into the hospital, and into the care of Dr. Sukkal forever trying to forget that he is paid a worthy sum to care for you?

I have.

And do you not fear your children's own loneliness to the point of running from them; leaving them to work out their own desertion while you avoid your own? Doing the same thing to your children that has been done to you and thereby never cleaning up the junky lines—the vain life that was preserved for you from saline bag, to a tube, to a junky vein, to restored eternal life?

It's true, but . . .

And do you not kneel and vomit cosmic retch into the toilet each and every morn?

I feel sick in the mornings. That's all.

Mornings make you sick. Is that it? Perhaps you retch because you married a man that matched your silent father; a man who cared only about standards that care only about themselves. That way, you could go on being silently safe, if familiar is safe to you.

I did.

But do you not fear this familiar silence worse than death? And are you not secretly attracted to the dark closet where you quietly, reverently scratch your harmless legs until they bleed? Never, never showing them to anyone. Always, always wearing long pants to cover the scars upon the scars ever since the glosette day in the closet?

How do you know this?

Will you show the court your legs?

I'm afraid of loneliness. I'd rather death.

Show the court exhibit A — your legs.

They can see for themselves.

Court, take notice of the legs of this contented Queen of Heaven.

And now, how is it that you had enough drugs in the house to take those handfuls to the brim? Do you not relish the regular migraines? Do you not smile when the white lights come?

I smile.

And is it true that you took those beautiful drugs in order to avoid a nasty Brown divorce? Hiding, forever hiding your desire larger than life, to leave the sacred covenant marriage bed?

I did. But I covenanted to God that I would see it through. And now my eyes see nothing. What could I do? I covenanted to Deity. I promised God. Stan would never divorce me; he's a Brown. He is a respected Brown. The fair courts would give me half the bloody Brown land. I had to do something to save the farm.

You traded a life for half the Brown farm? Dear, selfless one. Take a life to save the reputation of the Browns. Inanna, the true Queen of Heaven, dearest of the dear. Christ.

Yet, do you not cringe every time you drink his blood? Do you not forever remember the bloody sister drowning in the town reservoir? Do you not hear her cries welling up from the tap, from swimming pools, from ponds? From everywhere? Every time a toilet's flushed, every time you brush your teeth, every time the ice falls from the ice maker?

There was no life to take. I only acted upon the truth. It was the only honest thing I've ever done. Leave me alone. You have your revenge. You have tormented me since birth. At last you have your way. Now, get away from me. I left to leave this questioning behind.

You hardly left torment behind, as you can see, dear Queen. You came this distance at the expense of Rahab, your shame-filled self. Have you not assigned to her your disgraceful mask of contempt? Have you not hidden her like drugs in every closet in the house? She is not hidden anymore. See her, hear her, touch her. This embittered Queen has earned the right to hang you on the hook, and leave you there to rot as you left her to rot forevermore. Has she not?

She has.

Will you tell this court?

She has.

Speak up.

She has! I know she has! Why do you think I came down? Has this been any treat? Let me rot! Let me fucking rot!

Ladies, and Gentlemen of the jury. You have heard this woman admit that she has consistently, and almost effectively hidden all evidence that she herself is Rahab, Queen of the Underworld; that she has single-handedly denied this Noble Queen a life; that she has destroyed her own life, and that of her unborn child, in a futile effort to contain the truth that she is not only Inanna, Queen of Heaven, in fact, but that she is also Rahab, wife, and

mother in Hell. I petition the court to find the defendant guilty as charged. There is no other course. Let Rahab reign at last. No other decision will satisfy the gods. Hang Inanna on the hook where she can feel the awful pain, the lonely shame, the fatal blame she brought upon our innocent Queen.

No further questions your Honor.

The Annuna, judges of the underworld, surrounded her.
They passed judgment against her.

The dark sister fastened on Inanna the eye of death.
She spoke against her the word of wrath.
She uttered against her the cry of guilt.

Livie was turned into a corpse,
A piece of rotting meat,
And was hung from a hook on the wall.

Chapter Fifteen

Nuts

Strangers in the night, opposites joined in a passionate dance, keeping step to an echo of a distant harmony we must strain to hear. Moving toward and away from each other; two becoming one becoming two becoming one, ad infinitum.

Ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum.

"Livie, you are awake. How long have you been here do you know?"

Ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum.

"Livie, you are in the Kings Crossing Municipal. You've been here two days and one night. Do you remember anything?"

Ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum.

"Livie, your fetus is fine. He's strong and kicking; look I'm checking him now. One hundred and forty beats per minute. Good, eh? May be a girl. You'd like a girl, wouldn't you?"

Ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum.

"Livie, we are all proud of you for pulling this long. You are a courageous woman. Can you squeeze my hand. I'm taking your vitals; your temp is down. I believe you are returning to us. Your pulse is way up. Squeeze, Livie, and then I'll take your pulse. You must be having some awful dreams. Squeeze my hand as hard as you can."

Ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum.

"A pretty good squeeze. How do you feel?"

"Livie, don't pull your hair like that. You'll pull it all out. You don't want to go out of here bald, do you?"

"Stop pulling your hair. I can bring a dish, and we can wash it. Is it bothering you?"

I can't get it! It won't budge. I've pulled half of the hair out of my head, and I'm still missing the one certain hair that lays across my nose. It doesn't even tickle anymore; it infuriates. Whoa! I'll bet this is the hair someone put in my soup, this is the hair I can't pull off my black dress, this is the straw that broke the camel's back. Who put it there? Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman. He's stolen my bags of silver, he's stolen the goose that lays the golden eggs, he's stolen my beautiful singing harp. Somebody's been eating my porridge, somebody's been sitting in my chair, somebody's been lying in my bed.

Be he alive, or be he dead,

I'll grind his bones to make my bread.

A bed I'll feather with my own hair.

Dear, Olivia, there's nobody here but you and your own Rahab; you must be seeing things, feeling things for the first time. Like this hair on your nose. It's been there since I've known you; as big as a turnip. Soon to be the biggest, prize turnip in the land. Run, get the preacher; maybe he can help you pull it off. Ha, Ha.

I always wanted to see God. I wanted to know Him. If I knew One, I'd know them all. The Trinity—One who anoints, One who is anointed and a Ghostly One who whispers the story to the wind. Three distinct beings that are really One. One who anoints Himself and drifts around the cosmos, the very transparent air we breathe. Like the Eucharist, we eat Christ's flesh, we drink His blood, we breathe the Lord's wind. After enough times up to the bar, you'd think that man would become God ringed with a halo.

For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to confess each Person by himself to be both God and Lord.

Rahab, I'll go to the Highest Priest in the land. Anything to get this hair off my nose. I was ordained to righteousness, nobody told me I'd have this turnip on the end of my nose. The priest spoke to me:

Olivia Whitiker, by the authority of the Holy Priesthood I place my hands upon your head and through the desire in your heart for a blessing, I give you a blessing.

Give me thy divine blessing. I am not compelled. I want to serve God with all my heart, my might, my mind and with all of my strength. God who? And what is this Holy Wind? Like the black hole in the center of the halo, an unknown, shadowy creature. Why does he give all credit to Christ and Christ to his Father? Still we know something of Christ and the Father. What about the Holy Ghost? Beloved John, a Trinity One who wanted to be a Ghost? Is he some gentle male spirit? Is she fierce woman? Tell me, teacher. What do you think, Helen. Don't laugh and I'll whisper a secret. I'm going to be the Holy Ghost on Halloween. I told you not to laugh.

She laughed.

Don't kick me out of primary class. Please. I'll be good, I promise, please. Give me one more chance?

No more chances for you, Olivia.

Tell me, God. Where are you? I guess you wouldn't be out here in the cold church halls. Still I wish you'd tell me. If you won't tell me, I won't know how to dress for Halloween.

For you have a glorious mission as one of God's spiritual children. You have been blessed with good parents, with a strong family, with a righteous lineage.

The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Ghost uncreated;

The Father infinite, the Son infinite, and the Holy Ghost infinite;

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal;

And yet there are not three eternal, but one eternal.

But man *is* that he might have eternal joy. Joy?

The scripture said "might." You might, and you might not. Just so happens that your parents are goodly. Lucky you weren't born down the street; you'd appreciate your happy fortune if you only knew, O favored one. Count your many blessings, name them one by one. Count your many blessings, see what God has done. He blessed you with a family of supporting sisters, and one poor retarded brother— that's seven, counting parents. He blessed you with a good shepherd, and four lovely children. That's thirteen, including yourself; and there you have it, a blessed baker's dozen.

A baker's dozen. With Gimbal the Fool pissing in the dough. I've been turning out urinated cinnamon buns feeding them to me and the family for years. I knew something was wrong with them—constipated birdie's feed, mutilated monkey meat. And here we sit like birds in the wilderness waiting for the spudsto cook.

Waiting for the spuds to cook.

Waiting for the spuds to cook.

Here we sit like birds in the wilderness,

Birds in the wilderness,

Birds in the wilderness,

Here we sit like birds in the wilderness,

Waiting for the spuds to cook.

And through your desire for righteousness, your heart shall be filled, blessed with the gift of service that through your loving heart for your fellowmen, you shall become a Queen, a partner with the Lord.

Raising babies maybe? Get married, and bring up children. I will. In the name of Christ, our Savior, I'll sue for loving favor at the break of day.

Sanctify, O Lord, this ring that it may be to these thy servants a token of their solemn vows and a pledge of pure and endless love through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And you were banded like a faithful Canadian Goose in molting season for better or worse, till death do you part.

Rahab, it was the season to nest; I pulled out my downy feathers and nestled in. OK, until death do its part.

"We need a rolling pin. We need a carton of shortening. We need apples. I'm going to make a pie!"

"Wait a minute, Honey. You act like the farm is solvent. You behave as if apple pie comes before the Family Farm. Without the farm, there wouldn't be a home, there wouldn't be these potatoes in the pit, there wouldn't be trips to the church. Make do! My mother knows; I have a farming operation to run here. Try to remember that, Olivia. There is no money."

"No money for piano lessons?"

"No money."

"No money for repairs?"

"No money."

"No money for a baby quilt?"

"No money."

"No money for holidays?"

"No money."

No money. No money. No money. No. And no, no, no, no again. Ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum, ad infinitum.

Teacher! Helen! I believe I've found the Holy Ghost, the powerless black circle whose circumference is dictated by the parameters of the ring! No wonder we don't know Him. We haven't checked the toilet, haven't checked in the dead pile, haven't checked

with the Farm. I see! It's visible to me now. I see the black whole in space. It's the transparent Holy Ghost. I'll wear my black cape and pointed hat. Kick me out. I know how to dress for Halloween. I know how to be for Halloween.

"Damn you, Max. Leave off. I've had a belly full of your shitty attitude. You stop calling your brothers stupid asses. Do you hear me?"

"I hear an angry mother."

And I hear a dishonest mother. You wouldn't destroy the divinity in your children would you?

Maybe I am just tired; maybe I am tired like you. Maybe I am like you. Where do you think I learned this shitty attitude?

I'll be: Stan got sick of you. That's why he decided to live at Gramma's. You've ruined a life and all the children's lives just because you can't live with one good man.

I bless you in your choice of associates to choose wisely that companion—one of God—worthy to take thy hand in love and affection for a sacred union, that your love and companionship shall be sweeter united by the Lord for time and all eternity. Keep sacred the covenants you make with each other and with God.

"I would like to sue for loving favor. I need a divorce."

Olivia, I am your sister and your friend, and I come to visit you. You need to know that the community is behind the Browns; Father Brown is saying that you are crazy. Why won't you tell anyone your side of the marriage story?

The Browns are right. What can I say that might defend me? I don't have a side. I don't have an opinion. Look at my track record right down my legs. And none of it would even bother me if I could only get this turnip off my nose. "Can you see it? I can't see it. Can you see it? Can you? Can you see it? Can you? Can't you? Can you? Can't you?"

"You went blind today? And that's what you get for not wearing your glasses!"

"Just lay down on my bed and everything will be OK."

"Chewing gum in class again. What do you suppose your Father will do this time?"

"Olivia, your diary flipped open to the page and I read about your relations with Heggie."

"You are a Clergyman's daughter. You of all the girls should set a better example."

"Sister Billingsly called to report on your behavior in her class. Seems you have been ruining your Father's reputation. Olivia, you have your free agency in this life; now either be reverent or leave."

"Your thighs make me want to throw up through the eye of a needle. Cover them up!"

"Camp will not go on till we find and punish the ignorant girl who tied Sister Bay's bra to the morning flag. All girls stay in the dorm until the culprits come out. Nobody will have breakfast until sorry amends have been made here. When you come to a Christian camp, you are to act like Christians."

"Ladies, do not listen to Olivia. The minute she walked into the room, I felt an evil presence."

"I knew she'd run away when I saw the dirty milk bucket in the sink."

"I am so pleased that she is marrying a Brown. He is upstanding, practical, quiet; perhaps he can tame our wild march hare."

With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee honor, and all my worldly goods with thee I share. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"No, you can't come out to the barns. No, there is no gas in the truck. No, there is no top soil for a geranium flower bed."

"You've met with a group of women without husbands. I told you so. I promised that they would lead you into trouble in this community and in the church. I told you so. I

told you to stay away from them, Olivia. I told you so. I told you if husbands were not invited, the next thing you'll have is marriage problems. I told you so."

"I'm so sorry to have to report that she is utterly unstable. I've hidden it for years. I've had to do all her shopping, I've had to run all her errands, I've had to take care of all the financial books. She has never even baked the family a friggin' pie. Why would I stay in the marriage? What's in it for me?"

"Olivia, you really don't know how to love. Do you? I mean you really don't know. I wonder that you had children. What does Stan think of you? I could teach you something about love. If you would be willing to listen, I could probably save your marriage."

"I just took out this loan to pay for your tour; I wanted you to believe that your business was making you money. You were in Europe at the time; I signed your name to save you the shame."

"I did everything I could to make your marriage work. I did everything for you. I never spent one cent on myself. I got a private post office box, so I could keep track of the credit cards. Don't change the subject; this has nothing to do with *my* family. I spent your inheritance on bills, on *your* bills. I kept these things to myself because I never wanted to worry anyone."

"No! I don't have a gambling problem. I have a marriage problem."

"You rave at me for the secret bills, but you didn't seem to mind the lifestyle they bought you. Mom and Dad have seen you ruining me since the day we were married. What about your school loan, Olivia? Did you really think it was paid?"

"Course, she doesn't recognize it, but I've had a hell of a time keeping up with Olivia's obsessions. I finished the basement for her, a darkroom, her schooling, her traveling around the world. The farm had a couple of bad years; Olivia didn't seem to comprehend."

"I mean everyone has financial problems. No one would split up a little family simply for financial reasons. Still how could he keep up to her schooling, her hobbies, her addictions, her obsessions?"

"Olivia, I'm going to have to leave you. I can't take your moodiness a minute longer. I need time for myself for a change. I've had enough of your ugly and mean face, enough of your silent accusations, enough fights, enough of your fierce spirit. I'm going to live at Mother's for a while. I need a break."

"So, in other words, your marriage broke down because of financial problems?"

"No, it was a matter of trust."

"Oh I know that, but it is basically financial?"

"Not really, he has had enough of my ugly and mean face, enough of my silent accusations, enough fights, enough of my fierce spirit."

"Financial, it gets a marriage everytime."

"Well, haven't you been on drugs all of your life? I know that you were kicked out of university for drugs, that you were on them sometime when you were thirty, and still now at forty, you are on anti-depressants. I told the court you had a problem with drug addiction. I thought it would be best for the kids to live with me. Why do you continue to enter the hospital if it isn't for drug abuse?"

"Give me the bomb, Olivia. Give it to me. Blow out the match. There's no need to light the fuse. There's no point in fighting. Just give me the bomb. You're out of control again, just pass it to me and I'll give you your pills. Atta girl. Here you go. Now, calm down. Here, here's the whole bottle of pills.- My land, this doctor has given you enough medication to put you to sleep for life. Hasn't he?"

"You never stop wallowing. I believe that you actually like it. You wallow and wallow and wallow. When will you stop feeling sorry for yourself? You have a good marriage. Why don't you go home from the hospital, and be a decent wife?"

"They call you irresponsible. They can't believe that you are going to check out of your wonderful marriage. They just think the world of Stan, that's all. They think the world of you, too of course."

"Oh, Livie, you can't tell me you are really going to divorce him? Don't be ridiculous."

"There is never such a thing as a one-sided divorce. You two will work things out."

"Righteousness is joy. If you are miserable, then pay your offerings, cross for prayer, listen to the scriptures, examine what you are doing, and what you are doing wrong."

"Sue her for the kids. She won't win with her track record. No way! Shit, man! She's in the loony bin!"

And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him. . . . Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment and cast lots.

No one to blame. No one knew what they were doing. Each one took a shot. Each shot hit the mark. "Put it in your mouth or you'll be sorry."

Somebody's been sleeping in my bed— and there he is! And I've been sorry ever since.

Olivia, I seal upon you every righteous desire in thy heart.

I desired the Trinity—man, woman and God. I desired to be snuffed out in the squeeze of a sanctified, unified marriage. I desired to be loved—by Stan—by the gods—by Chris, by someone— anyone. Do you suppose that I wanted any of this other? Do you suppose I like this turnip on the end of my nose?

What happened to the twelve long stem roses, the rose garden, the rose window? A short memory? Or perhaps these things were short-cuts that avoided the whole picture, the picture that included me.

If I am going to be drowned— if I am going to be drowned— if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the seas, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees.

And I ask God's choicest blessings upon thee to keep thee ever in the straight and narrow path— that the Spirit of our Savior shall be with thee this day and always to guide thee.

There's a good one. Did he guide you that day and always?

I was an innocent four year old. Did he guide me to this sorry state? Hooked on a pin hell-bent for chaos? Rotting in a marriage hell-bent for heaven? Putrefying in a world hell-bent for suffering. Did he?

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

And when Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished, and he bowed his head, and gave up the Ghost.

I was the Ghost of God that Halloween. I wore a white sheet. I went all over town in my flying cape; nobody got more candy than the Holy Ghost. It was a bitter cold night. Josephine left me and went home, but I kept right on. It was 8:30; I would catch just a few more houses on my way. I went up the rickety dark stairs leading to Aunt Em's. She took a long, long time to get to the door, and I wondered if I should have run along, saved her the bother of shuffling. She was everybody's Aunt, so she probably spent the whole night up and down. I could hear her chair scrape the floor; she must have needed help walking. I should flee, my toes were frozen, my hands were numb, I was too cold to eat a single candy. Still I waited. By the time she finally got to the door, I opened it for her. She held out her white and withered hand; it had in it— one penny.

She only had one penny? And I had a whole sack of candy? One penny and a sack of candy. "Take my candy," I said as I pushed the whole pillowcase full into her hands. "I don't need it."

She protested, but I was already down the stairs and out into the bitter night hell-bent for home. I was the Ghost of God.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God;

And yet there are not three Gods, but one God.

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Olivia Whitiker Brown. I'm phoning in regards to my brother Rollo Whitiker. He was a client at Deerhome off and on between the years 1952-1968."

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"I need Rollo's health records."

"Is there a family concern?"

"Yes, my father has just passed away, mother died eleven years ago and the survivors are anxious to know more about Rollo's sexual status. We believe he had an operation in the hospital there sometime in the early sixties."

"We can certainly find Rollo's records in the archives, and get back to you."

"The family would appreciate that very much."

I should know; I am the family. And I'm going to find out. Fixed how? What no one wants to know won't hurt them, will it?

"Rollo's case is very unusual. I've gone through scores of records of this kind and I believe that it is the first case of castration that I have ever seen performed at the hospital here. The operation took place in 1968. Rollo was twenty-four. Do you need any other help?"

Yes. Ever since I was sixteen years old. The true castrating bitch filled with passionate butchery. I guess Stan is right; I am the bloody one. Accordingly he has feared this blood ever since the first week of marriage. And he laid down in green pastures and let me do my savage deed— alter the Brown stud. Numb nuts. He's hated my guts ever since. Poor man, consumed with libido; afraid of consummation.

The first week of marriage was my initiation into the male ruse; men resent their dependence on women. They set up the belief that they deserve a wealth of sex, by God. I was a believer.

Hail Mary, Full of Dread

Blessed art thou among women.

I kept the rules. I was never to initiate sex. He preferred entrance in my mouth. He liked it in the dead of night. "Wake up." Sex when I was sick, sex before a baby's birth, sex when we had visitors, sex before a tour, sex when Mother died. Whatever was truly untimely, turned him on. I had no priming that the father of my children would prefer rape to intimacy. I explained mysterious Oneness away with the more mysterious male libido. Can an object be a subject? And satisfactorily the libido came between us. A safe myth; it keeps couples forever coupling— untwained. Coupling every couple of days. Man, it's the only way to go. Can a body ravish itself?

Better to fragment. Adam and Eve. Better to run off to the arms of the powerful Brown Farm. No need of honest intercourse. Run. Break the fields, hoist the jack, man the station. And should she attempt to expose you, redress her with moody silence. Or strip her of sanity, strip her of power, strip her of trust. And if she's still willing to walk naked, just trick her like some whore in need of money. She's nuts about security; keep her guessing. She's crazy about her kids; give her another one. She freaks at guilt; spoil her however you want. Peel her intrinsic defenses, reveal her overwhelming neurosis, tear away her consuming hope. Get even.

And I got more than I bargained for. Life on the Brown Farm. Do you suppose I wanted a castrated man? Apparently so; I transformed him. And now what am I going to do with this bleeding meat? Me, hooked to the ICU, room 127— no barb. And no desire to stay in a life with an emasculated man. Nuts!

Twenty-three furious fragments demanded a divorce. I couldn't hear reason for the din.

"Shut-up a minute." But they won't. And now, I'm as angry as they are. I thought I told those fish to check me out of this tumult. There's no tunnel. There's no white light. No kind voice. All I comprehend are damnable blue lines that mark the nearness of death and the throng of twenty-three hysterical women. "Get me out of this ever-fucking life."

What went wrong anyway? Was it the scriptures? The mythology? The traditions? I've studied all I can get my hands on. I've sweat in Blackfoot Lodges, in twelve step meetings, in depression clinics. Yet still I feel like the woman diseased with the issue of blood who suffered many things of many teachers, and learned all that I could, and knew nothing more, but rather less. I maneuver my children through the driving snow to the First Christian Alliance Christmas Concert in the remote hopes of just one of us obtaining virtue by touching the hem of His precious white garment, but I am forsaken. They are decorating in silver and limp blue celebrating the birth of the baby Christ child as if there was going to be some wedding.

I've been duped. The whore has been tricked. By God, I thought I was being a saint. I carried all my eggs in the Brown basket; no back-up plan. I believed the creation myth; I thought Adam followed Eve out of the Garden, gave up the Brown Farm to homestead a new and fierce land. I heard that he ate the fruit, voted with his wife and kids and left his carefree home. I heard he pitched soft-balls to his boys, feasted on the paschal leg of lamb and belched. I heard he cleared the dishes, drilled times tables, laid with his wife. And the two of them mysteriously became One. Isn't this the order of life? That's

what they taught! That's what they said! And I believed them. *Family Circle*— I've been duped!

Can forty-six be One when twenty-three can't unify? The egg forever waiting for the sperm. But the sperm has long been spilt upon the ground of the family farm, and lies infertile in the holy Brown Garden, forever rejecting the angry faces of Eve.

Faces that not only castrated him, but castrate all humanity. It started with Rollo, spread to his dad, teachers, neighbors, cats, dogs, horses, sheep, boys, men. These faces have left a crimson trail of prairie oysters, and fear of fear of males who fuck to prove they have the balls.

"Help! Help! Help!"

"The babies monitor reading is very unstable. Check the fetus every ten minutes. Ring if there are any signs of premature labor. Stay beside her."

"Olivia, can you hear me? Take this drink. Can you hold the cup? Olivia? Can you hear me? Olivia? Can you open your eyes?"

That's just the problem. I opened my eyes. The one that sees things as they should be won't give up; the one that was legally blind began to see things as they really are. The blind man has mixed mud with spittle, wiped it on his eyes, washed in the pool of Siloam, and sees. Sees the unconscious past, the terrifying future, the dreaded present— this appalling Trinity.

"Yes, I can hold the cup." Burst the bands of death. Melt the gold hoops. Free the Holy Ghost from the parameters of the confining gold rings. Till death do us part. I'll drink it, I'll drink it if it kills me.

"My h h hands d d don't work; if you could just lift the c c cup to my l l lips. What will it hurt more?"

Charcoal, the perpetual drink of the great purge. I am Job scratching his boils on a dung heap. And hey, with all this charcoal, my bowels are bound to move. The good

news— if they do— I won't have to. Who knows, perhaps the charcoal will purify, sanctify, redeem and leave me sleeping like a baby. In the name of the Father, in the name of the Son and in the name of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Chapter Sixteen

Flies in the Face

"Marilyn, look at this monitor. I can't get a pulse. She rallied and then just as quickly left. Marilyn, I think we need to call the family."

"What family?"

"Stan, maybe. He was her husband. This is his child."

"He won't come."

"Call who?"

Our Father

Which art in Heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy Kingdom come

Thy will be done

On earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day

Our daily . . .

Like flies, tiny cherubim slipped through the cracks of the gates. Like flies, they entered the throne room of the Queen of the Underworld.

One of you will sprinkle the bread of life.

The other will sprinkle the water of life.

The bread of Life. Again? It flies in the face of all experience. I don't want the Bread of Life—I don't want any bread. I don't want any life. Don't make me remarry Stan. Don't make me love the neighbors who reject me. Don't make me go back to the Little Brown Church in the Wildwood. Don't make this baby know life. Don't make me need a Savior. Why did I come all this hellish way to rescue Rahab if I turn around and

need rescuing myself. I don't. I knew no traveler returns; I came down anyway. I'd nothing to lose. Let me lose nothing, and be finished with it. Let me rot on this hook, maggots are welcome to worm through my flesh. They fall out in clumps; I reach down and place them back. Consume. Consummate. Consume again.

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life.

But the flies. Swat the damn flies. Blow them off. Get rid of their infernal buzzing, their libidinous mating, their repulsive vomiting. Send them back to Enki. Perhaps the God of Wisdom will redeem their busy body industry. Leave me to mine. I want no more of their hissing or buzzing or whirring as I chase their black and white host back and forth for milking— this scourge forever crawling disrespectfully in the corners of her eyes, climbing in clusters in the folds of her ears, quaffing the slobbery foam from her mouth. Poor Bosco with flies in her face, forever flailing her tail and shaking her head— never a moment of peace. Little wonder she charges, like some crazed mule, through Allred's caraganas. Bugger off! But they never do. They just rise up in a black cloudy huff and noisily resetttle at the end of the hedge.

Bringing Bosco home is my job. I take her to the pasture every morning; I retrieve her afternoons for the evening milking. When I go to collect her, I find that she, thinking that the grass is greener on the other side of the canal, has crossed and stands in the furthest corner of the pasture. I have to walk a thorny block to find a bridge, get through the underbrush, duck the barbed-wire-clothes-eating-fence in order to join the Israelites, having crossed the water on dry ground. And then like Moses, I have to convince the cow that she wants to leave this bliss, and walk home through the wilderness. Like Moses to Pharoah, I use a staff to persuade her. Whenever she goes towards the canal, which she must cross, I walk peaceably behind her, but when she turns back to the dandelion patch, I crack her over her bony tail. She soon learns to walk through the sea. I send her cleft feet sliding down the oozy clay bank, splashing her way

into the murky depths of King's drinking water. I have to dash under the man-eating-fence, through the thistle patch, over the bridge to get to the other side before she does. By then she's usually joined the town on a hot summer's day and taken a long leisurely drink; she's had time to stand in the cool of the swirling waves and muck. She foolishly swings her head to lick away the obnoxious flies nesting on her back; strands of her saliva sail through the warm summer air landing somewhere near the green grainy manure that sails thoughtlessly, carelessly on its journey down to the reservoir. And here is her sacred moment of choice. While I am making my way across the bridge, the cow can turn back to bliss, the dandelion patch, the shady tree, the grassy swamp. Otherwise she meets a rocky trip home, a buzzing barn of flies, knee-deep manure. It makes reason stare for her to choose the latter; who could blame her if she hesitates and turns back? My job is to limit her choices. If you spare the rod, you'll spoil the cow. Get her in the good habit of crossing without thinking— spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch.

Every time Bossy does the right thing, she can enjoy the cool crap in the canal, the blackbirds in the bulrushes, the unhurried trip home. Every time she turns back, or veers into Snow's garden, she regrets it. Bad cow! Look at this snaky rod, and live. At last she arrives at the barn, the Promised Land, heaven. She heads hastily into the stanchion and greedily licks up the grainy corn of life. At last she can meet her master, at last a man's hands to relieve her swollen tits. This bit of grace is something Boss could never have done for herself, without it she would burst. And yet, I had to coerce her into making the right choice for her own good, for the good of society, for the good of the family. She must learn never even to look back to her lush green option. Lot's wife learned the hard way and taught us all by her sacrifice that the blue salt block could be you. Has Bosco, or anyone, free agency? Could she have run back to the corner of the pasture if she wanted to? Yes? Bull. Self-regard or free choice is not part of her world view anymore; she's learned to run straight home, rebelliously veering only slightly at Allreds.

The bullish metaphor of my life: Livie, the cow, learning to live by the iron rod; Livie, the maid, teaching herself to live all rigid standards. Even my expectations were rigid—see the world first, marry a good man, raise hard working children, choose the family a life of integrity. Any veering off that straight and narrow path was met with fury. Blind fury, my fury. The sort of fury that caused a good man to leave me.

"It's seven o'clock! Everybody get up, get on the ramp and enter the Ark before we all drown with the wicked in our unconscious sewers." And I was the most unconscious of all, fearing, forever fearing the blue pillar of salt. For what?

All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves;

I looked for him but did not find him.

I will get up now and go about the city, through its streets and squares;

I will search for the one my heart loves.

Are you my husband? Are you my mother? Are you my father? No. My husband is not my father, my mother is not my mother, my father is not my husband. My husband is husbandman to the Farm. And I have searched for the one my heart loves and have found a flea-bitten tom cat. I haven't even stumbled across me. And when I do, great will be the fall thereof. For I am woman, hear me roar. I am Christian, hear me pray. I am scholar, hear me speak. I am wife, hear me march. I am mother, hear me croon. I am lonely, hear me cry. I am beauty, do you hear me? I am smothering. Get these masks off of me.

Yeah right, take the mask off, woman, you'll be roaring without reason; take the mask off, Christian, you'll find yourself praying to a stone; take the mask off, educated one and see things as they really are; take the mask off wife, and give yourself the freedom you so blindly desire; take the mask off, mother, you'll skip P.T.A.; take the mask off, loneliness, and laugh. Life is a joke. There's an idea you don't want to know. These beautiful masks serve you well.

Rahab, are you here?

I never left.

All this time, I thought I hated you. But look, you are my angel—my guardian angel.

I am. I stand on guard for thee. I am the might in the roar of the woman, the impoverished prompting the prayer of the Christian, the quip from the pen of the scholar, the dictator directing the children. I hide in the folds of a mother's apron, my loud laughter swaddles the child in secret longing. I'm the wrinkle of doubt in your beautiful mask. I'm here. I've been with you all along.

You've been with me all along?

You may have abandoned me, but I have never, ever abandoned you.

In all these years? I remember the black under the white porch. My knees smell worthy. Worm holes invade this home plate. I'll share with them because sharing is a small, good thing. I will do unto others as I would have them do unto me. Digging down I find their swollen nightcrawler homes. I bless them. Sometimes babies worm up along the way; I help them back to the fragrant, dark earth. From dust they came, and to dirt they must return. I return daily; except for the cat-face spider in the corner, I find safe sweet refuge in this dark space. Today Brother Ed is mad at me for tipping back my chair in primary; I could wreck the legs. What would Jesus think of me?

Behold, O Mother of Perpetual Help,

At your feet a wretched sinner.

O Mother of Perpetual Help. Help.

Help the chair not to break. Help Mr. Ed not to hate me. Help Mrs. Redd not to hurt my fingers as she holds them forcing me to tap out the timing of the piano piece. Help my mom and dad in any way you can. Help Doreen let me come along to play. Help.

This is hallowed space. I am omnipotent. Under the porch, I am God. I can see the entire house. I can see the back entrance where wet coats hang to dry, the stairs that lead to my shared bedroom and up again to the kitchen. I can smell the bathroom, sense

the other bedrooms, the living and dining room. I can see the hallway with the bare bulb. Look! we are racing marble horses down the backstretch. Black Beauty is in the lead. Roll! Beauty! Roll!

Rollo.

I witness baby Gloria coming home from the hospital; I'm crouched, knees bent. The crib is prepared for her tiny soft presence. I abide the hour under the porch; today, I am mature.

Rollo.

I'm moved into Doreen's room. She resents the assault. I'm extra now. I lay down quietly. The pillow is thin; but doubled it satisfies. The bedspread is nobby, white cotton. I bite it, suck it; it's a precious thing at least. And I'm close and safe. Mother will soon be singing the morning song. The best thing about tomorrow is Cheerpy will greet me. The best thing is breakfast, homemade milk-toast. The best thing about tomorrow is Mrs. Anderson; she will warm my icy hands under her ample arms pits and I believe she means it.

Rollo.

Rollo sleeps down the cement stairs. I rock under the porch and pinch my legs, foreseeing his plan to visit me. Please, not today. He is coming to my room. Encircled by my warm nobby blanket, I lay in legitimate sleep. But Rollo needs a jolt, Rollo needs a girl, Rollo needs me. He moves past the quiet laundry room. He has plans. He sneaks past the burning furnace. He will finish his interrupted engagement. Through the wooden maze. He will call upon Olivia. Up, up the dark cement stairs.

He walks freely through the black night of the entrance. He is retarded. He is not responsible. Nobody will care. Nobody will even know. He opens the door to my bedroom.

Two beds— one is Doreen's, one is mine. I see the cold tile; I will take a giant step, stretching long legs to reach the scatter rug beside my bed. The spider, I wonder if

she is expectant again and waiting in the folds? O Mary, has she forgiven me yet for killing her wee babies?

Behold, O Mother of Perpetual Help, at your feet a wretched sinner.

O Mother of Perpetual Help. Help.

I can see the closets. My closet where I go. Mom's closet full of shoes. There is a bag of rags that mother calls private. What are they private for? There is a wooden box up high. I look in the box. They are called Ramses. Ramses for what? For what? My father is filthy, my mother's rags. Oh Mary, not this.

Oh, but it is Christmas! A cotton Santa adorns the portal, the dye in his red hat has run down and discolored his jolly face. And now he looks like he's been crying maybe because of the Flood. There is a light that looks like a polar bear, an igloo candle, a frosty decorated evergreen laden with icicles and fake snow. Everything looks like it should be gay— except— Mother and her friend are planning to hang me a new bra in the tree this year. It is a hilarious joke; otherwise wear the padded one handed down by a cousin. I won't do that so I live in terror of Christmas morning.

Oh Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree

How awful are thy branches

A baby was sent into all of this? Not my baby! I will redeem my baby. I will move heaven and earth to steal the fiery torch of the cherubim. I am Buddha under the Bo Tree. "Fear, you don't scare me; desire—leave off!" "Grab some fruit from that Tree, kids. Be quick." God must have heard. Like Prometheus, I paid seven times seven with my own liver. The purge continued. I weakly knelt every seventh day, impure. With no purifier no purity was possible. And every Sabbath I took that bread of life in order to live again and then one day I woke up ashamed of knowing my nakedness. Life? What sort of life was this? Dishonest life of bliss. Heartless life of charity. Faked perfection. Was I even happy? It was years before I realized I'd been duped; by God, it took years!

There are two kinds of heaven in this life; there is unconscious heaven which is heaven, and conscious heaven which is hell. They don't tell us this bit because we wouldn't understand it until we do. And when we do, it's too late. We've eaten the fruit, time to wander out of the Garden, Paradise Lost. And as soon as we reconcile it, Paradise Regained; Hell, they have the bases covered and loaded.

The metaphor swells like the organ at the Stanley Cup—a score! The lie that tells the truth—the Genesis Myth. We are our own first parents, strangers in a lone and dreary place. Pick the fruit. Surprise. The fruit-flies come along as the joker. Not even a dash through the caragana can hedge them off. No way, man, the ovipositor is stacking the deck in the corner of the cow's eye, the damsel settles back down after her close brush with life; to regeneration—mortality—from egg, to maggot, to pupa, to fly; from egg, to maggot, to pupa, to fly; from egg, to maggot, to pupa, to fly.

I'm trapped in a metaphor. Live the commandments until you find out that no one can keep 613 decrees and prohibitions; and if we sin, the law will hang us like the deer hanging from the basket ball hoop. And here I hang unless somebody hangs for me. I wonder who—wink, wink. The dishonest set-up, rise to fall, walk to kneel, ascend to descend. Yet, we were told to be good; we had no clue that the straight and narrow sets an unswerving course directly to this Hell. There must be Heaven. And if the course is straight, then perhaps heaven is further down, yet. If there is a God, there better be a point to this straight suffering because, if there isn't a point, I'll raise Cain.

Where is this inclusive compass of love? Who can resuscitate the whole world drowning in this unconscious, on-going Flood? Why is life ramped to go down into the abyss of the pitch black Ark? Where is this Ark sailing? I want to know! I want to know because I don't want anything more to do with the seventh heaven. I've spent a lifetime sailing to that ethereal place. Ptolemy is dead. Let the body speak for herself.

I am sitting outside the primary class; they advised me to pick up my bed and run along. What else could I do after that? I packed a sack and split. I was the lone Lone

Ranger. I was the invisible Topper. I was Christ in the wilderness. I was the town's first bag lady. I walked to the cow pasture to live for the rest of my life. And I would sojourn alone if nobody came after me. And nobody did. The black sheep had been loosed. The family's shearing would be white now. Worth more. And soon I was out of sight, even if they looked, but they didn't. They didn't have to watch; they knew I couldn't survive the wilderness. I'd be crawling back, begging for bread. Over my dead body. I'd rather eat these stones. I'd rather be devoured by coyotes than yield to their enticings. I was so pleased to hear another voice as clear as my own. You did come to me. Pull out the mustard and the bread. We brought our own supper, thank you.

Who will clean the bathroom now? Who will scrub the tub like I did? Who else will put hands in the toilet to wipe it clean? Who will set the lovely table for the Queen of England? Who will sit in the far corner? And who will dry the dishes? Who will they spank after this? Perhaps they will be the ones crawling like flies after me.

Somebody else will have to be the peace maker. Somebody else will have to heal mother's feet. Somebody else will have to hide Dad's coat. But what if nobody does? And mother lies there unable to get to sleep, and dad comes home reeking of axle grease. What's going to happen? What? They're going to miss me. They're going to see each other as they really are, and they're going to miss me.

Rahab, you are a fine friend. Under the log—remember the fuzzy black and golden caterpillars, woolly bears. Dress pockets of pets. You never told me they stained. Need Cheer, canal water won't budge them, and Mom's going to brain me again.

Sleeping beside the dead tree, in a wet dress, waking all night to watch naked branches reach across the moon. Summer nights chill in a green grass nest. A star streaks; I dream on it for my winter coat. Livie confronting the universe. Who needs it? The silver pasture surrounds my bed. We snuggle together and listen to the silence; you and me, still as an hour glass. Waiting for the moon to make her light escape; at last it is dawn.

Forty years pass away, forty winters without my coat, forty summers come to go; fourteen thousand, six hundred and fifty nights, nobody comes. Waiting still in my caterpillar stained dress, you are by my side and I am crazy about you. Little wonder. Still crazy after all these years.

I sneak into the hospital. I creep back out when I am filled, with drugs, I hope. And pray that no one will discover that they were right and I'd come crawling back. Last time it was a lump in my breast. Benign again; should have known. If life has a point, what would be the point of taking me? I haven't learned anything. Surely I have to master fear or the meaning of life or suffering or something? I mean God is not going to reach down and remove me from this effulgent refiner's fire? Hell no, scrub the tub until you get it clean; I'm resigned. What could His purpose be for us in this place? Experience? Experience alienation so that we'll appreciate his love? Whoa, that's not going to work. Someday you're going to be hungry enough to come crawling back, and then you'll appreciate Libby's beans with pork.

If some sort of understanding, some sort of knowledge, some sort of reason were to manifest itself, declaring purpose—I'd trust this process. Short of that, I'm wasted. Forty years following the bronze serpent round and round the wilderness, wandering. And no kidding, manna molds; can't say they never told us. So the church is true; so what? So pay your tithes and offerings, grit your teeth and rejoice? Rejoice because you have a document that describes the human predicament? But what about the predicament?

Dear, Darling, Rahab:

You've been with me from the beginning. You called me Olivia. You visited me in the closet teaching me the course of suffering. You comforted me when Cheerpy died, shoveling the black sweet-smelling dirt over the tiny white shoe box singing *Abide With Me* and I did, under the old porch. And in the red brick school house, you warned me forever seeking A's showing them legitimate worth. You are the callous on my hands. I

can swing on the monkey bars forever. You kept score in the marriage, silently urging me to victory. You are the Christ in Santa Claus, the Santa in Christ. I love you, Rahab. You never let me down.

You protected me from my father's righteous blows. Standing in my stead, your own eyes bruised for mine. You took my shame and suffered for it, rolling into a ball. You accepted my beating, your cries went unheeded, your hair fell out in pathetic handfuls. You were wounded for my mistakes. You were bruised for my sins. With your stripes, I am healed. Oh, I adore you. You save my life. I am reborn in your loving kindness. I will gurgle for you— my name is Olivia. You are my mother, you are my father, you are my husband.

I am woman, hear me roar. I am Christian, hear me pray. I am scholar, hear me speak. I am wife, hear me march. I am mother, hear me croon. I am lonely, hear me cry. I am Livie. I AM . . .

Let's go back to the dead tree in the pasture. I won't partake of His moldy bread of life, or anyone else's. I refuse to be fed, I refuse to be comforted. And I refuse to bring this baby into this lone and dreary place. I arrest from my labors. There's a Flood going on; I've been kicked in the ass by somebody's soggy boot, I've lost my footing and now I drown. Crazy how long I danced in this water; I thought the Flood was over, the eighth day redeemed. I'd like to make amends to all the persons I have fooled. I'm sorry to my kids. I am sorry to Stanley, I don't blame you for leaving me. I was a bitch for God's sake. I beg forgiveness. I'm sorry, Rahab:

It was a childish dream, a simple childish dream. I've wasted so much time, and so many years. I've taken a whole family down with me, all because I always harbored the hope that He came, He truly came that day in the pasture. That He came. He carefully braided me a dandelion crown and placed it upon my head. And I balanced that crown as I ascended the dead tree ramp, up, up to the branches that reached over the fence. Queen of Kings Crossing. And we sat down, the King and I, in the grass and I dreamed that the

bread of life was the mustard sandwich I shared with Him that fine day, that fine, fine day
in the pasture. I was ten.

Chapter Seventeen

The Soldier in Algiers

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.

Poor old Patriarch Jacob. I bet he was angry. Angry for being tricked to lay with Leah unawares. Ended up sleeping with Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. I bet that was difficult. Covenant man of God— procreating the Levant, Europe, America, the sands of the sea. Wrestled all night long; he was experienced at this sort of thing. Poor man.

Well, this time I got you. Yes! I got you fair and square. You shouldn't have messed with me, you bloody bastard. I have artillery, I have armor, I have nothing to lose. Do you hear me? I have boundaries and you just crossed them. Do you hear? Do you fucking hear me? Take your sacred fearful desire and sleep with it yourself. Pocket your money. I am going to blow you into ten thousand pieces. Let the maggots dine today. Yes!

You have all but won. You have taken the best years of my life. I am wracked with torment. Do I kneel to bless; do I kneel to kill? I am nothing but regrets. I have nothing, but this worn out body, worn from struggling against birth of another child; your child. Populate the world if you will, but not with me. I'd rather stab you. Stab you! Learn to take care of your insomnia another way. Holy Jihad. You won't win here.

A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers;

There was lack of woman's nursing, there was dearth of woman's tears;

But a comrade stood beside him, and he took that comrade's hand,

And he said, "I never more shall see my own, my native land."

O, Rahab, give me a break. A soldier from Algiers is dying?

Yes.

The soldier is from Algiers? He has a home?

The soldier from Algiers is dying. He has a wife and children; the soldier from Algiers has a milk cow, a grassy lane and a pasture.

Shut-up. This excerpt is just a story. It's a story about an Open Boat. In fact, it's a story within a story. Like our millionaire cousin, Traf Rogers, it's fiction once removed. No knowable relation to my flesh.

Isn't it?

Why? Are you saying the soldier from Algiers is a real person?

Yeah, that's what I'm saying.

Who shot him? Who would. He is a man with a wife and children? Who would shoot a man with a milk cow, a grassy lane and a pasture?

I'm sorry.

But the soldiers were shooting at me. Like the British Army, never-ending rows of them. They shot first. They knelt down, and emptied their guns.

And now, the rows and rows of red coats lay a dying.

They lay a dying?

Take off your armor, Athena, and die with them. You are dying anyway.

You mean switch allegiance, switch sides? Fight their miserable, pathetic, human battle? These men crave life.

There are two sides. God's side which is man's, or man's side which is heroic, desperate Jihad— man's holy war. Whose side are you on? Pick a side.

I pick God's side.

Then you pick man's side, woman's side. And so did the soldier from Algiers, so did Father Denis, Mr. Harper, Mrs. Bothello, your dad, your husband, Ritz.

Shut up.

OK.

You believe *they* are on God's side? They act like they are on man's side. They act like they don't need a God. They behave like they are God.

And you are any different?

No.

Then you pathetic soldiers are all on the same side— God's side. He is the captain of the boat. You are all on the waters together.

He's the captain of the boat? Then what is he doing sleeping at the bottom of the boat? Sleeping while the tempest is raging, the billows are tossing high. The sky is o're shadowed with blackness. No shelter or help is nigh. How can he sleep? How can God sleep through this one? He sleeps while I rage with the sea? The sea will o're come us. What is a bucket to the Great Sea. And who are we fighting? Who's on this Lord's side, who? And who's not, so I can lean over the rail, and spit on them. I'll spit on you. I'll even spit on the sleeping Christ. I spit on his war. I will get even for this descent.

Then lean over and spit . Spit on the boat. Spit on the man from Algiers. Every man and every woman is on man's side, hence everyone is on the Lord's side. We're all in the same boat. Spit on us all. Spit on our sleeping Master.

Well, then, riddle me this: why am I wearing this heavy armor? I'm worn out. Why am I shooting my own comrades? I've had it. Why a war? War is frightening. Why an army? Who needs a captain if we are all on the same side?

You are the only one in armor, Athena.

I wear the armor as a shield and a protection; enemies are within the ranks. I'm afraid that God is so bloody innocent and loving that He doesn't even know His own enemy; I thought that I'd help him see that as a kind of double agent.

Double agent against your own army? Man and woman's holy jihad. Go figure.

Leave off . . .

God doesn't need your eyes. He can win the battle with Gideon and three hundred chosen at random. Do you want to be in that three hundred?

I thought . . .

You would have to relinquish a fig leaf or two of shame, your motives, your control, your agenda, a few comforts, an attitude. You have to surrender to be in God's army.

Well, then, I speak to be Jael. I will feed the hungry Sisera a bowl of curds and milk; I will cover the exhausted man with a mantle. The Canaanite will sleep. And then I will pull from the tent an urgent peg. I will quietly enter the chamber of the master Sisera. The desert winds will conceal the falling of my unshod feet. I will kneel to drive the rusty nail through the hero's unconscious head. And he who killed so many men that day will die by woman, by God.

You can be Jael. Jael certainly was the hero that day. She was great; she pulled the peg from her own house; she knelt beside the sleeping Sisera; she killed the soldier from Algiers. And then the house took Sisera and Sisera took her house.

Whose side are you on? You seem to have spent the night wrestling. Whose side are you on? I notice you've been a worthy opponent. If opponent, then why are *you* fighting against me and for whom are you fighting? I don't hear any blessing coming forth from

you. See here, I've got you caught in a leg-lock. Not even Willow could throw me. Just try to get out of that, you self-appointed angel from hell.

All night you've been wrestling, all night you have cursed the God that made you, all night you have pinned me between your expectations, and your experience. You say the universe is a hostile place and yet, intrigued, you descended to know more. You say you are on God's side and yet He is on yours. You say you've heard no blessing and yet my prayers for you have not left my lips.

Well, then, bless my soul, we are practically twins. My prayers never left my lips either.

No more should you be weary daughter of Laben, unloved, tender-eyed Leah, but Olivia—desired, hale, healthy, holy, whole.

I'm at my wits end. Rahab, why do you always work against me? Uncle. Uncle. Uncle.

A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers;
There was lack of woman's nursing, there was dearth of woman's tears;
But a comrade stood beside him, and he took that comrade's hand,
And he said, "I never more shall see my own, my native land.

All the time we bailed out the Sea, we thought we were on separate boats raging the waters to victory. Dear comrade, forgive me. I kneel to hold your hand. I will pull the tent peg from your bleeding head, I'll dress your wounds. Damn you for your wife and children; your cow and pasture. It's too late; I wish I hadn't won.

Chapter Eighteen

A Royal Flush

Blackbird singin' in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly.
All your life
you were only waiting for this moment to arrive.

Blackbird singin' in the dead of night
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see.
All your life . . .
You were only waiting for this moment to be free.

Blackbird fly. Blackbird fly.
Into the light of the dark black night.

Ah, Livia, it's the golden hour. The wheel rolls round at long last. Fortunately, the cards are in the dark Queen's favor! The sun is in Aries. The moon is in Pisces. Yes! Hear the Queen of Diamonds moaning like a gambler at the wheel, like Pasiphae giving birth to a ten pound minotaur. At last her golden curls unwind, straighten, stiffen. Smell the flesh blacken and ferment like distilled wine. The flies have found her, feeding ferociously in her ears and eyes. It's almost comical. At last my Queen of Heaven begins to stink like me. At last my Queen of Heaven begins to think like me. Yes! She knows me now! I breathe in the stench of her rotting flesh; it is a sweet savor to one who has desired it for these forty foul years. Justice is my God. Revenge! She understands the hell of a throne infested with lice; maggots crawl greedily through her infected wounds.

She sits on the dung heap of her wasted life waiting to die. What a pity! She wants to take the fetus with her? Glory! Let her bowels move! My bowels are moved with compassion for the long forgotten Queen of Hell. A royal flush! I rule here; my rules. My solicitude fills the immensity of this God forsaken space. Unlike God, I play fair; for I am truly just. Tit for tat. I keep the books, I keep the score, I keep the gates. No traveler returns!

Round and round and round it goes; where will it stop? Nobody knows? "Step down here, lady luck." "Hey you, Mr. Smart Guy, come try your luck with the wheel of fortune." All bets down? Round and round and round it goes. The toilet of life. Hands off the table. Glorious wheel, stop where you will. The Jack of diamonds? The King of Hearts? The Black Queen! The Black Queen takes it. Sorry, folks; the spade has pierced the side of Christ. The House takes all. Hey, try again. Who knows? This time you may be favored, good chance you'll be blessed.

Dear Mother, Dear Mother,

The Church is cold.

Olivia, you imprisoned me in this labyrinthine hell, this eternal double bind. You fancied yourself to be a daughter of God, crowned Queen before the congregation; and all the while you allowed your sister to rot, forgotten and banished, to reign in Hell. There's an idea! Accept only the good. Screen the holy membership like some exclusive Country Club; exclude the penis, anus, arms, breasts, pubic hair, jock itch, BO, tooth decay. Blame the flesh; keep the soul clean, virtuous, spotless, benevolent, of good report and praiseworthy.

Oh, and Christ, why don't you step down, die for us. Atone for our body odor, our premature ejaculations, our naked shame, our desire for more intimacy, our pathetic swearing, our gainful pollutions, our volatile blaspheming. Pay for our sins. There's a good one. What are you going to do with all those sins? Shove them down here with me and with the devil? Mighty gambler. Exalt Liv for palming her sins to you while you palm them to me? Are you listening, Livia? Does it make any sense? Are you beginning to see?

Time to untie the knots. It's a bleeding setup. Day to day life suspended on the meat hook. The house is in control; the house lets you win a few, by God, a very few.

It's Wednesday—washday. No looking back. The kids need a trip to town. We're out of milk. Lise needs a costume for the ballet recital. I must get on it.

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,

Thaw and resolve itself into adieu!

And all you ever wanted is intimacy? Acceptance? Relief? You and I are One; there is the disappointing intimacy you've been looking for, nothing more. There is no innocence. Ether is not ethereal. There is no physician can give you purity though you repeatedly return to this sterile domain. There is no virgin Ariadne to thread the golden strand out of this labyrinth. No Parsival to ask the golden question and heal the Fisher King and kingdom. There is no Eros to lift the suffocating mask of filched beauty from the unconscious face of the lovely Psyche. There is no Theseus to kill the minotaur, to ease the pain, to check the anger. Christ is dead, Honey. He didn't bleed for you, he didn't die for you. I hate that I am the one to tell you what you dread to know. Christ can't save you unless you choose to save yourself.

Somebody has been lying to you for a whole lifetime. You qualify to know the truth now because you gave up everything to understand. God didn't bleed for you, he bled for himself; he bled so he'd know what it was like to bleed in the closet. He didn't hang for you, he hung for himself; he hung so he'd understand the deer hanging from the basketball hoop. God didn't live for you, he lived for his own reasons; he wanted to know what it would be like to be hungry, sweaty, human. He walked through angry life so he'd understand. He'd believe those sorry times we didn't run fast enough; those times we ran too fast. But he did it all for himself. Don't you see.

It's like your selfless journey to rescue the queen of the underworld. Bullshit. You didn't come here to rescue me. You came to know what I was like. And now you know.

You've eaten the whole apple, Livie. Was it worth it? Or do you cry like God to his own Father self,

Eli, lama sabachthani? My God. Why hast thou forsaken me?

Forsaken? Can you really blame your God for this one? Like the foolish alchemists willing to look anywhere for the philosopher's stone, you consciously forsook all worldly comforts to know this dark secret. Compelling stuff, the underworld. And here you are. You said yourself that life was meant to break down and now it has. A complete breakdown of the lead and still no gold. So, you abort the quest? Don't even raise your eyes to see the miserable Queen of the Underworld, and why not? Look at me. I don't imprison you here; I don't even lift a finger to keep you hanging; your farmed-out life is barb enough. You've been held in the pasture by a single strand of barbed wire. You have given up the ghost, the numinous Holy Ghost, because you're afraid of a pillar of blue salt. You've turned over the rock that covered the frog prince. You've found him; now stop wailing. You've nothing to lose, pitiable princess teeming in the pasture like some maggot plagued cow pie. Kiss him.

Disappointing, isn't it? I'm not at all what you expected? No, I suppose you had no reason to expect rejection. You thought you could redeem a thankful, indebted, appreciative sister. Skylark, you've been rooked. I'm almost sorry.

Mother would get out the wooden spoon and say that it would hurt her more than it would hurt us. Perhaps she wasn't lying. Maybe it is the only truth I've ever heard. Looking at you without the shepherd on your arm, without your crown, without your self righteous beads, without your holy breastplate, without your measuring rod and line, without your royal robe, you know, damn you to hell, I almost love you. Raw, burning courage. It took mighty spirit to come down here for whatever reasons you believed you were descending. You wouldn't have done it if you'd listened to the Fathers.

Remember when we were in England in 1974? We sailed across the channel to visit our Queen. We stood so young and expectant with the throng of mankind outside

Buckingham Palace. Could Elizabeth have had any idea how badly we wanted to see her face? Or even a plume of her lovely green hat? Could she have known that out on the lawn stood one colonist who burned to see her? We watched the crowds of anxious faces as if we were gazing into a mirror. We saw their mouths open, drooling, hoping against hope that the guards would change and the Queen would appear; there would be no more want, no more pain, no more searching. What fair woman-god could look at the tender face of mankind and not change the world? People were strewn like gum wrappers all over the lawns, a baby boy perched on the top of his dad's shoulders, punks with fiery red mohawks, an old crone with a black cape, all eyes glued on the royal balcony— a crowd prepared to wait for their Queen. "Give way! Give way!" And the crowds speedily gave way to a young wench on horseback, careful not to get beyond the barriers, not to get in the way of the magnificent guards, and not to get too close to the crazy old coot carrying a wooden placard that read, "Repent! Repent! for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand." Do you remember?

On the boardwalks in the Everglades, we looked down into the swampy depths to see black green-eyed carp swimming arms length from a quiet old alligator. No amount of fish food could lure them close to the jaws of that sort of death. The alligator floated wherever he wanted to, the carp accommodated him. The bread and fish food slowly drifted to the bottom. The old evangelist at Buckingham palace was the only one with the space to move about. The rest of us were huddled together keeping the rules, keeping out of the way of the magnificent horses, waiting for relief from the magnificent Queen of England. Might as well have taken ENO.

The Queen never did come out. She stayed in the drawing room that day sipping Red Rose with her corgies. The prophet carrying the placard was soon the only one left on the green of Buckingham Palace. "Repent! Repent! Repent! Repent!" Calling like an Old Testament Prophet as if we had to repent before we could see the Queen. A pity we waited for her.

We redeemed our own day with fish and chips at Micks;. Can you remember the taste? Sweet, and sprinkled with vinegar. Momma! We didn't care what the Queen was having for dinner. We sat out of the rain, in the doorway of the hotel, dining on steaming hot fries and halibut fresh from the channel. I loved you that day. But that was before Chartres. Damn you. Damn you for your belief in Other. Sargon, deporting me like I was the very Ephraim you wandered so far to find.

And the Lord rejected all the seed of Israel, and afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight.

Queen of Heaven. Forever intrigued by the Queen of the convulsing Earth. Forever afraid you might annul your own quest for the Promised Land; trade it for profanity. Your worst fears have come to fruition. It's you that needs me now like Christ condescending for a body. The spirit longs for the corporeal. A piece of lemon pie, a cold shower, hot soup, snow in your face. You need me. You need me to understand Rollo, his libido is flesh longing for other. You need me to reconcile your divorce, the betrayal was physical, tangible. You'll never reconcile the spirit of the thing. You need me to embrace your children who can savor, taste, quaff their tender innocence without body. You need me. How does it feel Divisive and Divided One? Pinned to life with one eye that sees things as they are; the other, forever seeing how life should be. Hell, you've come so far to know it. The truth hurts, doesn't it? Truth aches. Claw your sheets to shreds; you deserve to. You believed,

Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself.

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of *Queens, Kings, Princesses, Princes, Priestesses, Priests*, and an holy nation

Who kept the covenants if I didn't? What more was I to do? Yet, could I call this domain of mine a kingdom? Powerful kingdom. I killed my budgie with the swipe of my hand. Robbed the divinity of my children with one mean word. I am as much a part of humanity as my own Father. My children obeying out of undiluted fear of the wooden spoon. Fierceness out of control. Oh, please. Blind obedient children; a dead bird.

My jaw aches. I wish you had never come. You cause me to grind my teeth to stumps. To stumps, do you hear me? Now shut-up! Shut-up your account. I feel sick. Hush, now! O, why did I come down here? My back aches watching you, my bones chafe, my eyes throb with a dam of tears. I have the flu. Nurse! Nightingale! I repent! I repent of all this discord. I have the flu; do you hear me? "Take her away! Take her away!" I hate her guts! Take her away! Get her out of my sight!

"Livie, you are coming out of a real bad dream. Livie, you are conscious. You will be fine. We almost lost the baby, but her little heart did not stop. She wants to live, see sunshine, grass, flowers, shrubbery, trees. She's quite a little fighter."

"Livia, your vitals are up. Your temp is down. Doctor Sukkal believes that you will make it with flying colors."

"Nightingale, take away the naked woman."

"Livia, we can dress you if you stay conscious. Otherwise we need to keep this monitor on your chest and belly. Do you think you can cooperate? Speak to us? Help us to help you?"

"Get rid of the naked woman."

"OK, Livia, I'll dress you. I sure don't blame you. Lying here naked is no treat, but it was the only way we could treat you."

Oh, Nightingale. You came. Thank you. You came. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Sit down. Sit down. Don't leave me alone. Sit down. Oh, please sit down. Sit here. Oh, your cool hands on my forehead. I adore you, Nightingale. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Do you remember my budgie I told you about? Do you think I might have hit her too hard? I wrote to Hartz Budgie Food and described her problem. She'd lost her appetite, her eyes were sunk in, she wouldn't come out to play, or sit on my shoulder; and then one day I woke up and she was lying dead on the floor of her cage. I hit her too hard, didn't I? Her door was open. She died while I was sleeping in my bed; she could have come out and died beside me. Instead, she died all alone in her cage.

I tried to bring her back to life. Don't think I didn't pray, don't think I didn't beg Father to bring me back my pretty bird. I tried to warm her up in the oven. I kissed her cheeks, her head, her wings. I called her my pretty bird. I told her that I worshipped her. Nothing worked. I finally had to give up. Icarus had flown too close to the sun. I lined a shoe box with toilet paper and buried her under the porch. I made a big hole with a shovel. I sang a sweet song. I said a prayer. I placed the box in the dirt and I personally covered her over with the wormy earth. Not even the lilacs could conceal that fact.

I guess I must have cried. Dennis Griffith sauntered across the road to ask me what I was bawling about.

"Nothing. Did you guys buy a new car? It looks different to me."

When Inez died, I willed my bird to her. I wonder what became of my pretty bird? I wonder if Inez ever got her to talk? Maybe Inez didn't even want her. Maybe God never even told Inez about the gift I gave her. Maybe this was just one of those prayers that never made it past the rafters. I never cried at Inez's funeral. I tried, but I just couldn't. I guess she'd have seen that. Unless . . .

Unless there is no heaven, no God, no Beatific Being.

"Nightingale, when you came into my room yesterday, I knew by your eyes that your story is like my story. It's true isn't it."

"Hush, Livie, It's very true. Give me your hand to put through the sleeve. See this? It's a zip lock sleeve. That way we don't have to bother with the intravenous."

"So, you know me."

"Yes."

"What are we doing here, Nightingale? What is anyone doing here?"

"Livie, I don't want to speak about this. I am a professional. I have no right to tell you that I believe we are taking up space."

"As if you are revealing something I don't already know. You have children?"

Including an alcoholic husband, Nightingale had three children. "How do you cope?"

She didn't.

Why haven't we finished it all? Let's make a date. Give our space to some comfortable sleeping one.

"Livie, I didn't know you before you came here unconscious. I have sat at your feet, listened to you rave, toss covers, pull at the tubes; you have been a miserable patient. I never knew if you were going to make it. It hasn't been easy, and yet, in it all, I feel like I can call you, friend. Somehow, I feel like I know you. Perhaps I've watched you do what I've wanted, but been too afraid. Livie, I'm happy to know you. In these days by your side, I have prayed every moment for your recovery. I have petitioned every God in the universe. I prayed for you, Livie. I prayed, I guess, for both of us. I love you, Livie. I'm so delighted to see you back. I'll get some clean sheets."

I said a prayer throughout the night for Nightingale, for Dean, for Inez, for my bird, for Mom, for Dad, for my sisters, for Rollo, for my kids, for my unborn one, for the whole world. I guess that would include me? I prayed over and over and over; around, round, around the wheel of missed fortune. I prayed longer than I slept. This is neurosis?

Nightingale's shift began at seven. She arrived in my room at one minute to seven.

To take my blood pressure. How was I?

"Dizzy." Still in the underworld. How are you? I asked but no sound came. My eyes wouldn't open. Nightingale thought she was safe to confide in an unconscious one. She raged, flashing with anger.

"Who cared about the vagina of a little twelve year old. No big deal. Fuck it." I could see though a slit in the corner of my eye. Her blonde hair, still wet from having taken a late shower, she'd hurriedly caught it up in an elastic. Her white uniform contrasted with her sordid past. She spit her adolescent story in a whisper as she checked my pulse. Pushing her skilled gloved hand into my vagina, she related how she'd spread her long beautiful legs for anyone. Cervix was tight. She had no sense of dignity; no clue where it was sloughed along the way. I was only the third person in the world that she'd told her story. She tried to tell her husband once, but he only wanted to know *who*. "Turn over, Honey." She checked my lungs. She soon learned the shame of it as if she didn't know already. She stared out the window with stony eyes; she was looking back, the blue salt block. Her father was a slobbering drunk; it was when he wasn't drunk that he would come giddy and playful unto her.

Please, no.

I looked up to see her eyes. She moved the table to kiss me. "I wish I could cry; I only want to die."

"Same."

And then I remembered that I was already dead. Died on Good Friday, hung on a hook, attended my own judgement, hadn't I? Hell. Hell! And now on Sunday. I could hear Nightingale moving down the hall taking other blood pressures, other temps. I had returned. I was back in my same hospital bed, same wounds, same anxieties, same mortal coil. Either the church is true and when we die we don't change one whit taking all of our old problems with us or the church is true and I was in Hell or the church is false, reincarnation is true and this wasn't new hell, but it was the same old hell. Old hell in a new body that felt exactly like new hell in the old body which was exactly why not even logic could prove for certain what life is about. How the hell could anyone know if I didn't know? Well, I'd just have to figure this out. Who am I? Where did I come from? Where was I going?

Can a spirit feel itself? I felt like hell, but so did Nightingale. No sure sign of life there. Perhaps I was dead. Yet if it wasn't and I was reincarnated, then I didn't want to know the hell of it until I was at least 90. Well, now, what do we know for sure? Was my bird here? No. Was God around? No. Did anyone ask your name? No. Did you see a shaft of light? No.

There is a bucket of something on the road and I won it, I two it, I three it, I four it, I five it, I six it, I seven it, I jumped over it and you ate it! It was maggots. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Holy Friday, Even, I jumped over Sunday and right into April Fools— right on schedule.

Nightingale came in again. "The staff is talking about you."

"I don't care."

"It's unfair."

"It doesn't matter what they think. Does it?"

"Yes."

"Why would you care? Because to defend me you'd have to defend yourself?"

"Maybe."

"So?"

"So, I don't have a defense. I went out and got even tenfold and more. I took before I was taken. Suckers came to me. And now they come in here with hollow, empty, hung-over eyes and I have to attend them. Save them. Then save me from me. I raged at innocent children; and I still rage. Vengeance is mine. I will get even with myself for this madness if it kills me."

"I got even."

"Same."

"I ran up a score."

"Same. I cleaned my house, put my baby to bed, and held a loaded 22 to my face."

"Why didn't you pull the trigger?"

"My baby woke up, and we cried."

"I cleaned my house, also."

"It killed me to admit that the strongest woman in the world was out of control. I mean I can change oil, spark plugs, drive a semi, lift a hundred pounds of flour. I'm a survivor and I used to be good at it. I'm sick of surviving."

"Same."

"I rode my bike to work. I wasn't thinking how dark it would be when I got out of here. Probably get hit by a car."

"Then you'll be the lucky one, and won't have to put up with this anxiety."

"Don't worry. I won't. I don't work tomorrow. Hope to see you here on Tuesday. Good luck to you, Livie."

"Good luck to you, Nightingale."

"Oh, and Happy Easter, Love."

"Same." It is past midnight— April first. She meant, happy All Fools Day.

"Good night, Nightingale. Seal the door, would you?"

April first— All Fools Day— that's fairly inclusive.

Who are you staring at?

I'm not staring. I was just saying that's fairly inclusive. What makes you think I am staring?

I think it because you *are* staring. That's why I think it. You are staring at me. I'll get my revenge in this. I'm going to stare right back at you.

You blinked.

I did not.

You did so. I saw you, and you blinked.

I did not. I watched and no shutter interrupted my stare at you.

Did so. There! now you blinked again.

So, what if I did?

Oh ho! So you admit it.

You are the mad woman. I am staring at you precisely because you are mad, because you have accused me of being a fool on All Fools Day. You accused me of being a fool by staring. I'm staring at *you* to tell you that *you* are the mad one, and what's more, you are a fool. And for that reason, I can out-stare you.

I was not staring. I was only looking. I might have looked long, but I didn't stare. Nevertheless, stare away. I'll take my judgment and my punishment from you. I already know that I'm mad and as for tormenting me for being a fool, it can only last out this day and then it wouldn't make sense anymore. One day in your court, Honey, is better than a thousand if I end up uniting with you. Be my guest. Stare away. But be careful not to blink.

Why must I be careful not to blink?

If you blink, oh perfect one, you need the atonement, rescuing, deliverance and all. That's why.

You mean to say that because I might blink I need the atonement?

Yup.

That's idiotic. Everyone blinks.

And everyone that blinks needs the atonement.

You mean to say that if I could sit here and stare at you without blinking, then I wouldn't need the atonement?

Sure. And if you could do it, I wouldn't even need the atonement. We'd both be in Hell, and who needs the atonement in Hell? Do you follow? Or do you need a minute?

Who would want to stare at you in the first place? A person would have to be a fool.

And today is All Fools Day. We are all Fools. Today is a perfect day for you to stare. Stare without blinking.

If you know so much, where is my pretty bird? Why did she die?

Well that depends, doesn't it?

Depends on what?

Don't you think it rather curious that Icarus never flew to your side the night she died? She flew up to the sun, knowing that she would disintegrate and plunge to her lonely death. Her cage was open. Wasn't it?

So what?

So, I can't figure out why she would choose to die alone in her cage. What was she doing there?

What do you mean what was she doing there? She was dying. That's what she was doing.

But what was she doing while she was dying?

Oh, hell.

The next morning, when you found her lying at the bottom of her cage, were her eyes opened or were her eyes closed?

What bloody difference would open or closed eyes make? I swear you are the biggest fool of all on All Fool's Day. Do I have to answer a mad woman? Because if I do, then I'm mad. I'm mad at God for life, I'm mad at life, for God. I'm mad at you. I'm mad. Do you hear me?

If they were open, she was probably staring at you, blaming you, and rightly so, for her unfortunate waxwing life, her untimely descent, the blow of life. If they were closed, she was probably staring at you because she thought you were a fool, as I do. Death called her and she blinked. If you caused her death, as some would say, by means of injury or extremity that resulted in cold blooded murder, manslaughter at the least, you need the atonement. If she stared, as I do now, attempting to make your life on earth an early hell, but was distracted by her own death or in my case, boredom, you need it still.

Well, they were half open and half closed.

Oh.

Oh?

Yeah. Oi. I gotta go.

Go then! Tormentor! Abuser! Trickster! Get the devil out of my life, and leave me in peace. Close the damn door!

Oh hell, it's night. Disquieting silence! Come back! Ohhhhhhhhh! Noooooooo! Come back! Bring her back! Rahab, Queen of Hell, come back and redeem me. Don't leave me here to rot. Doctor Sukkal, bring her to me! She stinks like me! She thinks like me! Familiar! She knows me! Accepts me! Somebody bring her back! Icarus is just a lark, a rooky that flew too high. What did he know about sun flairs? Come comfort me. Come. I need a comforter. My back aches. Somebody! Ohhhhhhhhhhh! The white lights of migraine. Horrors! The white shaft of holy light. Bring her back! I want to live! The baby has never flown to Europe. Never stood breathless in Chartres. Never seen the exquisite rose window. Never seen the sun.

The Queen has just stepped out on the balcony! She waves her lovely kerchief! Her pure beckoning arms betray her flesh. Her too, too solid flesh. She has a nose! She has a white, white handkerchief for her nose. And she has ears! Perhaps she can hear us! Help! Help! We are all of us royal subjects. We are diseased and dying. It is truly *morbus reginus*— the King's Evil. With absolute faith, we have come before the Queen this Maundy Thursday for the touch. The Queen! Hears! She has eyes— weeping eyes! She hears us! Tears splash down in empathy upon her royal breastplate, Come Man Come. She sees us; she knows the burden of the human breastplate. Looking into her lovely eyes, I know her. She sees me see and we weep. We weep and the tears splash upon our breastplates, Come, Man, Come. She wipes her attentive eyes. I am restored in acceptance. Her strong bare arms are stretched forth— hale, healthy, holy, whole. Her breasts are bountifully filled with milk,

And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers;
they shall bow down to thee with their face towards the earth, and lick up the

dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord; for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.

Where is my silent underworldly friend? I have waited for her all my life. I will encircle her in the light of my blithe flesh. The same old coot stands with his placard: repent, repent, repent, repent. I walk to him. "Where is my sister, myself?" The carp scatter as if I am a hungry alligator. I kneel at his monstrous, thick-lipped, gray haired altar.

"I beg. Bring Rahab to restore the Queen." I repent of the good life. Please. Bring back Rahab. I take the balm of Gilead and wash— I wash our head, I wash our eyes, I wash our arms and hands, I wash our shoulders and neck, I wash our spine, our thighs, our legs. I kiss our feet. Awake,

Awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, holy city: for henceforth there shall be no more come unto thee the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake thyself from the dust; arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem: loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion. For thus saith the Lord, Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money.

Come up, Rahab. I will towel you in terry cloth. I will robe you in silk. Come up and meet the Queen. Together, we can awaken a Hosanna Shout! We can redeem the house of David with this humble offering of mealy fear. With new eyes we can see the loyal Royalty. Forever the other devoted Colonist. Let us raise the red rose tea cup!

Polly put the kettle on

Polly put the kettle on

Polly put the kettle on

We'll all have tea.

The royal water of life! To the Queen!

Chapter Nineteen

Our Gracious Queen

God save our gracious Queen
Long live our noble Queen
God save our Queen.

Send her victorious
Happy and glorious
Long to reign over us
God save our Queen.

I couldn't see and opening my eyes didn't help. In the ash thick dark I felt a golden canopy being lifted to shield me for the anointing. Four Maids of Honor held my train for the procession into the Abbey—Marie, Doreen, Gloria and Bell. My jewelry and robes were lifted, piece by piece. A simple white linen shroud was placed over my nakedness.

I peeked. The Archbishop dipped his thumb into the stony ampoule of oil received, in the sanctity of dim years previous, from the holy Virgin. He annointed my royal hands, that they might heal the sick; my wholesome breast, that I could nurture the kingdom; my divine head, that I could comprehend true justice. He made the sign of the Cross. In the name of the Father, and in the name of the Son, and in the name of the Holy Ghost.

I was invested with resplendent garments of-holy royalty, given the Royal Scepter for one hand, that I might rule in justice; the Doved-Rod for the other that I would reign with peace. I was crowned with a halo of diamonds, and named by the grace of God:

Queen of this Realm, Defender of the Faith &c.

It was 1:50. The procession advanced from the red-rugged Abbey to begin the traditional serpentine drive through the common streets of London where hundreds of

thousands of people generated an enormous roar. Their cheering pierced the day. The people were heard, their sovereign was declared— Priestess, Queen, Protector, Defender of the Faith. The procession continued, and the people fell in as if God were re-numbering the tribes of Israel. Terribly happy, they took a collective leap of faith sanctioning their sovereign head. The pedestal was hoisted as the rain fell; cedars stood as firm witnesses and all were baptized in the common bath of an earl gray drizzle.

Long live the Queen!

But wait! Gleaming through the glass of a dark jewelry store was an exquisite golden ball; I recognized it. "Might you stop the procession?" I inquired.

The ball beckoned.

"Might you stop the procession?"

The ball gleamed.

"Stop the procession!"

"Your highness?"

"I say, stop the procession."

"Yes, your highness."

"Stop the procession." The message echoed down the ranks.

"Excuse me?"

"Stop the procession." The command was passed from attendant to coachman and finally through the reins of the royal brass harnesses to the front bitted-horses whose delay prompted the horses directly in the rear. The cortege came to a halt.

Yes, yes, stop the caravan! Stop the Church! Stop Great Britain! Stop the world! I sucked my breath in fear, stepped out onto the muddy street as if I were in a dream. Attendants hastily lifted the purple and ermine robes from the mire of the streets though some mud regrettably adhered to the royal train. I quickly entered through the swinging brass door of the dark jewelry store. Footmen stood surprised as their glimmering Queen,

with eyes a-squint, sought the tarnished golden ball unheeding the royal tiara that dripped with diamonds.

Guided by desire to retrieve the mysterious globe, their Queen of Heaven reached out like a child reaches for any shining trinket. But this was no ordinary bauble! This ball was mine. The very ball that rolled, one rainy day, down the banks into the murky canal. With Majesty I lifted the precious ball to my breast. "It's mine. It's my little golden ball." I would need no help from any slimy green frog! And against the protest of the shopkeeper, against the law of the land, I ascended claiming my golden ball by virtue of discovery, by virtue of nobility, by virtue of experience. And I regained my place in the royal carriage, in the royal procession, in the royal family. Praise be! Single-handedly, I retrieved my cherished golden toy. And the keystone cops blundered after the imperial entourage, waving their billy clubs at the unrewarded shopkeeper, the frightened children, the confused footmen and the queue of miserable poor who lined up in order to receive the healing touch from the Priestess-Queen, the Lord's anointed, the head of God's Holy Church.

The lost was found. Innocence regained. And I, the Lord's anointed, waved unmindful of the needs of the hideously human crowd. And while open sores of scrofula wept, so, too, did stoic parents, coughing children, orange-haired punks, girls in leather dresses and ministers of the gospel. Their uproar, their sparkling eyes, their ruddy skins, their dirty clothes eventually ascended to the very ears, eyes and nostrils of their gracious Queen as I gazed at the wondrous crowd, reflected and distorted on the ball, like some frightening night vision that I bore in my royal lap. -

Long live the Queen!

But the shopkeeper did not join this cry. He was not amused! He demanded recompense. Had he not personally retrieved the long forgotten ball? Had it not languished in his sweaty shop waiting, like a green frog, for his ship to come in, for the embrace of some lovely wistfully forgotten princess?

Yet, this perfumed princess plunged from the pedestal to bullishly march into his store taking his only hope of a brighter future? Who did she think she was anyway? Though all of the world ignore the ignominy, veiling themselves, and their Queen from the light of truth, still, he would hold her to the promise that she would see him, lift him, let him live in the palace and finally kiss him. Though all England and her Colonies define their form and frame by Sovereign virtue, he would bring down the whole bleeding Commonwealth if he must. And so he swore by the heavens, for it is God's throne, and by the earth, for it is God's footstool, and by Jerusalem, for it is the great city, and he swore by his head. Yank every tooth out one by one, he would have his honour.

But the noble regent missed the appalling oath for I was lost in innocence; a child again with my favorite toy. What a fair and beautiful child I had been. "We shall call her after her Grandmother." Olivio. Lily! Silly Lily. Lilith. My heart seized. I had been propelled headlong into the Fall the moment I had rolled the ball, so many years ago, into the font; and having rolled it, I laid down in the green pasture weeping and waiting expectantly for a shepherd, a frog prince, God.

But I was Queen. Had I not been appointed this very day? I was Queen of Heaven. I touched the cherished blue bead necklace; I fondled the breastplate: Come, Man, Come. I brushed the majestic purple and ermine robes that covered my nakedness. I was Queen of Earth. I had survived the plunge into the river Styx. I had discovered my dark sister-self; I had examined and confessed every angle of my life. Long live the Queen! Yes! I'd earned the golden ball, fair and square. Lilith.

But it was not fair to Ben the shopkeeper. He peeled promptly after the procession, pushing the throng of the lame, the halt, the blind. "Give way! Give way!" Ben was a big man; he wore a Harris Tweed coat with padded shoulders; he was broad, and he was puffed up, and he was angry. He was one to take on the Queen; if ever one could, he could. He could mount the walls of the Palace if he had to. And, as it turned out, he had to. He showed them that it could be done. Executed while the guards were busy

changing, watching the deep moat with their one eye, the divine beam with their other, they missed Ben altogether. He scaled the wall like some sticky-footed amphibian. Climbed up and right into the drawing room. I looked up from tea, dumbfounded. I certainly did not expect to see anyone entering through the window of the drawing room. In fact, I was just thinking that upon the chime, I would surprise the crowd and wave to them from the balcony. I was awaiting the hour. Now, someone just hopped in through the window! And who might this someone be?

I was wearing a lovely green chiffon dress with matching patent shoes, my green-feathered hat scooped into a perfectly lovely winged crescent over my forehead. I lifted the green net from my surprised eyes. "Who, might I ask, are you?"

"I'm Ben, the shopkeeper. I've come for my reward."

"Your reward? I shall reward you with a life in the booby hatch. Get out of my palace!"

"I shall not. For it is I who wrestled leviathan and retrieved your golden ball. And it is you who took this ball from my chapped hands. Took it, and left as if you had a right."

"That is preposterous. I found this ball by myself in some obscure shop on Oxford and fifth."

"And that, my dear Queen, is *my* shop."

"Oh dear, so you are the lizard that chased the royal retinue. Here to collect your price, are you? Very well. How much do you expect for the old silly toy?"

"I'm afraid it's not so simple. For you, my gracious Queen, have lifted an old silly lily toy. Lifting is a crime, hence, you must appear before the Queen's Bench. If you plead innocent, you will stand before several witnesses who saw you secure what was not, though you be Queen of all the world, yours to secure. If you plead guilty, the least you may expect is a criminal record, a fine, and up to six months in prison."

"Could you tell me, my good man, can a woman with a criminal record be Queen?"

"Well, now, that depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on the mercy of the Court of Queen's Bench. You'd have to plead for a complete and absolute dismissal, beg for the mercy of the court, which is unlikely in this age of rampant shop-lifting, and on what grounds will you plead? That your family needed a loaf of bread? That you were unaware of the law? That you could lose your job while I have all but lost mine for the likes of people like you that leave without paying? I'm afraid not. Every one in your shoes appears before the Crown. Queen or not, you are guilty. Time to face your own music."

"Oh dear."

And at that precise moment Big Ben chimed. One, two, three . . . it was the hour to proceed to the balcony. The crowds grew, each individual longing for a glimpse of their monarch, their sovereign, the head of their church. For shame!

Shame, shame, double shame;

The whole wide world will know my name.

"I can't go out there. I'm a criminal."

"Oh, but you must. You can't disappoint the people; they stand, at this very moment, hoping against hope, that your majesty will appear, see their misery, and simply by seeing, make a difference. And for some mysterious reason, your Royal Highness, you do make a difference."

"You mock me with your name of majesty." I stood wearily. Must I continue? I was truly tired of life. I was dead-dog tired of the whole of it. Through the net of my green chiffon hat, Ben could not help but see tears wash down like an English rain only to fall on the lovely green chiffon tea dress. A veil of tears.

Ben's heart beat wildly. "My dear Queen," Ben kissed my hand. "You'll be alright. Don't be afraid; I'll be with thee. I'll strengthen thee, I'll help thee, I'll hold thee. Your own righteousness shall go before thee; and the glory of God shall be thy rearward."

Ben carefully guided his monarch toward the royal balcony. The feathers from the hat fluttered in the breeze. To the crowd below, royalty must have looked like a tiny bird about to soar.

Although I had an undying love for the kingdom, I hesitated to know this smelly crowd of distinct human beings. I wavered. Had I not left the whole of them in order to make my lonely journey to the underworld? Ben held my arm. Why must I need this common shopkeeper. Yet, it was only with his mighty support, I could stand before the cheering crowd.

"Rahab!" I shouted. "I AM the Queen! Rahab! Look there, I'm your Queen. Queen of the castle. Queen, at last."

The regent of the underworld smiled. Smiled fearfully while gales of approval swelled from the world below.

The Queen wondered at the sight. The awful sight of approval. At the sight of the queue up to the Queen's Bench to be healed of their consumptive misery, the King's Evil, the royal disease. Maggots marked the place.

The queue hailed the Queen, from across the barricades, bowing low. Oh, how was I to heal this queue of humanity lined up in order to receive my unholy human touch? How could I touch such ones as these? Disease knew no royalty. Pox was no respecter of persons. What good an afflicted Queen? A responsible monarch would abolish the antiquated idea of divine physician. What woman could heal these ulcers? What tradition could hold the Queen of Heaven to risk her very life in such a pretense? What nonsense! Was I not just an ordinary woman? A lass who lost her golden ball?

I was only a member of life, no head, nobody that could truly heal. I'd only lived life long enough to taste it, sorrow in it, fight it, wrestle with it. I lived so I'd know how it truly felt to bleed in a closet. I lived only to know how it truly feels to hang on a basketball hoop. I lived so I'd truly understand fear and desire. I'd only experienced it

barely enough to see a reason for it; and for that reason I'd forgiven God. Forgiven Him until now.

I looked over the sea of wounded humanity, and felt their awful afflictions. Was there no balm in Gilead? Was there no physician there? I faced their horrors only to find them still bleeding like a young child's legs in a closet.

I stared into the golden ball; it was as if I were looking into a mirror. But the mirror reflected the people— poverty and shame, joy and awe. And in the golden ball, I saw the incurable scabby carbuncles glistening. These melancholy humors, the swelled pustules and putrefaction cried before the face of majesty, begging for mercy. Yet, the Queen herself needed mercy. Mercy from my own Bench.

I was royally pained. Old, and tired and royally pained.

How I pined for the little girl on the banks of the canal. Where was she now? Could I not join her? "Come home, child. You can be the Queen of the castle. I'll be the dirty rascal." For only an innocent child could govern this realm with virtue, with delight, without fear, without guile.

"Come home, child. I have your golden ball. Please, come home."

Surely the child was not this lass lying before me covered in sores, no, nor the bald one rasping for mercy; certainly not the cursing lads in the corner. Where was the girl with sunlight in her hair? Where was the dandelion crown? Where was the Garden, the Pasture, Bunker's Hill, Sinai? The grass, the thistles, the ants, the canal? Where was the day? Where were the thick mustard sandwiches shared on a dead tree stump with roots planted in an ant hill and branches that reached over the wall? Where was hope?

I was smothering under the weight of the royal green hat. Where were the wings to take me out of this labyrinth? Who would lift the masquerade? Queen? Queen of the dead and dying? Queen of the living, the lovers, the losers? Head of the Church? And how could I be Queen or head of anything. No, I was only a sorry member, a finger maybe,

nothing more, with as much need for mercy as the King of Bunker's Hill. At the mercy of the Queen's own Evil.

Turning the ball in my hands, I saw a small child had scraped her knee falling on the cold, black street. A girl lay in dreadful sleep fearing a visit from her older brother. A youth frantically ran past the bright lights of Vegas. A maiden wept before the rose window at Chartres. A mother knelt before an altar in a little brown church. A crazy old coot stood under an oak tree shouting: "repent, repent, repent, repent". There! A familiar woman in child birth cried for help. A dark sister stood beside her, mopping her brow.

A kingdom of such variety reflected exquisitely in the golden ball. I dared not touch them. For I was only an ordinary woman, a facade, a thief, pretending to be Queen. I was flesh and blood, as subject to corruption as any human. Was I not Lily, Silly Lily, anointed to become Royalty?

Time had taken its toll; the clock struck half past three. Could I step down and touch the crowd? The shopkeeper held me. "You'll be right." I could feel the shopkeeper's forgiveness pulsing through the green chiffon dress, through the royal armor, through the walls and halls of the divine right of kings. "Keep the golden ball, Miss. It was never mine anyway." Ben held me close. I could smell the pleasing sweat of this ordinary working man. He'd taken off his work-a-day coat, and was Atlas in a white T-shirt, single-handedly holding the monarch on her own blessed pedestal. The tower of Babel was undone; the compassionate body of the merchant man communicated to the arms, the legs and the loins of the submitting regent. The dormant serpent was unwinding. The Queen of Heaven and Earth was beguiled by this merciful merchant. I turned to him and pressed my wet lips on his rough cheek, blessed his brown curly head with my hands; his capable tattooed arms with my eyes, his beautiful light. I was the sorry one. Sorry. Sorry. So sorry.

Betrayed by a lover's kiss, the detectives of Scotland Yard dashed through the baffled crowd, up the steps of the palace to apprehended Ben, the burly shopkeeper. They

jerked him off the balcony and escorted him directly to the stockade. Cited him to appear before the Court of Queen's Bench on December third, this very year of our Lord.

Only I remained, turning the golden kaleidoscope, weeping for Ben, weeping for the Queen of the Realm. Weeping for the innocent, too naive for this life. Weeping for the culpable with their guilty lament for mercy. Weeping for the afflicted ones lined up before the Queen's Bench in order to be healed.

I wept for the golden-haired infant who'd just fallen head-long into life. For the child's courageous mother who consciously affirmed his place in a world she knew. For the dark sister who welcomed the cheesy infant into her own naked arms. And they were all there— Father, Mother, Rollo, Marie, Gloria and Bell. They were all there. Teachers, doctors, friends. They were all there. Bothellos, Ritz, Gilbert, Pops. They were all there. Lise, Max, John, Willy, Stan. They were all there. Olivia. They were all there illuminated in the kind light of the golden ball.

A stone is cut out of the mountain without hands, it rolls to fill the earth, it rolls to be the earth.

The weeping Queen held her ball, and the ball held her kingdom in her hands. And there arose from the crowd below a hosannah shout:

God save our gracious Queen!

Grace save our noble Queen.

Chapter Twenty

The Pits

Spontaneous combustion in the potato pit. This is where I begin again. I had been ransomed. The womb opened and delivered psychedelic fish of every description, psychedelic fish of every prescription and Ben, a healthy baby boy, mewling like a black and white kitten ready to nurse, see grass, flowers, shrubbery, trees. I was released from Kings Crossing Municipal, a certified potato mother, with long rooty eyes snaking up, up to the leafy heavens and long rooty eyes snaking down, down to the dark, wet underworld. I peeked. One eye was still looking inward, the other still seeing things as they should be. Committed committed. I looked in and I looked out and no matter where I looked, it was still The Eighth Day.

Appendix: "The Descent of Inanna"

The Descent of Inanna

From the Great Above to the Great Below

From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below.
From the Great Above the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.
From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.

My Lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.
Inanna abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.
She abandoned her office of holy priestess to descend to the underworld.

In Uruk she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
In Badtibira she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
In Zabalam she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
In Adab she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
In Nippur she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
In Kish she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
In Akkad she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.

She gathered together the seven *me*.
She took them into her hands.
With the *me* in her possession, she prepared herself:

She placed the *shugurra*, the crown of the steppe, on her head.
She arranged the dark locks of hair across her forehead.
She tied the small lapis beads around her neck,
Let the double strand of beads fall to her breast,
And wrapped the royal robe around her body.
She daubed her eyes with ointment called "Let him come, Let him come,"
Bound the breastplate called "Come, man, come!" around her chest,
Slipped the gold ring over her wrist, And took the lapis measuring rod and line in her hand.

Inanna set out for the underworld.

Ninshubur, her faithful servant, went with her.

Inanna spoke to her saying:

"Ninshubur, my constant support,
My sukkal who gives me wise advice,
My warrior who fights by my side,
I am descending to the kur, to the underworld.
If I do not return,
Set up a lament for me by the ruins.
Beat the drum for me in the assembly places.
Circle the houses of the gods.
Rear at your eyes, at your mouth, at your thighs.
Dress yourself in a single garment like a beggar.
Go to Nippur, to the temple of Enlil.
When you enter his holy shrine, cry out:
'O Father Enlil, do not let your daughter
Be put to death in the underworld.
Do not let your bright silver
Be covered with the dust of the underworld.
Do not let your precious lapis
Be broken into stone for the stoneworker.
Do not let your fragrant boxwood
Be cut into wood for the woodworker.
Do not let the holy priestess of heaven
Be put to death in the underworld.'

If Enlil will not help you,

Go to Ur, to the temple of Nanna.

Weep before Father Nanna.

If Nanna will not help you,

Go to Eridu, to the temple of Enki.

Weep before Father Enki.

Father Enki, the God of Wisdom, knows the food of life,

He knows the water of life;

He knows the secrets.

Surely he will not let me die."

Inanna continued on her way to the underworld.

Then she stopped and said:

"Go now, Ninshubur--
Do not forget the words I have commanded you."

When Inanna arrived at the outer gates of the underworld,
She knocked loudly.

She cried out in a fierce voice:

"Open the door, gatekeeper!
Open the door, Neti!
I alone would enter!"

Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the kur, asked:

"Who are you?"

She answered:

"I am Inanna, Queen of Heaven,
On my way to the East."

Neti said:

"If you are truly Inanna, Queen of Heaven,
On your way to the East,
Why has your heart led you on the road
From which no traveler returns?"

Inanna answered:

Because . . . of my older sister, Ereshkigal, [Rahab]
Her husband, Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven, has died.
I have come to witness the funeral rites.
Let the beer of his funeral rites be poured into the cup.
Let it be done."

Neti spoke:

"Stay here, Inanna, I will speak to my queen."

I will give her your message."
Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the kur,
Entered the palace of Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld,
and said:

"My queen, a maid
As tall as heaven,
As wide as the earth,
As strong as the foundations of the city wall,
Waits outside the palace gates.

She has gathered together the seven me.
She has taken them into her hands.
With the me in her possession, she has prepared herself:

On her head she wears the shugurra, the crown of the steppe.
Across her forehead her dark locks of hair are carefully arranged.
Around her neck she wears the double strand of beads.
Her body is wrapped with the royal robe.
Her eyes are daubed with the ointment called, "Let him come, let him come."
Around her chest she wears the breastplate called 'Come, man, come!'
On her wrist she wears the gold ring.
In her hand she carries the lapis measuring rod and line."

When Ereshkigal heard this,
She slapped her thigh and bit her lip.
She took the matter into her heart and dwelt on it.
Then she spoke:

"Come, Neti, my chief gatekeeper of the kur,
Heed my words:
Bolt the seven gates of the underworld.
Then, one by one, open each gate a crack.
Let Inanna enter.
As she enters, remove her royal garments.
Let the holy priestess of heaven enter bowed low."

Neti heeded the words of his queen.

He bolted the seven gates of the underworld.

Then he opened the outer gate

He said to the maid:

"Come, Inanna, enter."

When she entered the first gate,

From her head, the shugurra, the crown of the steppe, was removed.

Inanna asked:

"What is this?"

She was told:

"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.

They may not be questioned."

When she entered the second gate,

From her neck the small lapis beads were removed.

Inanna asked:

"What is this?"

She was told:

"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.

They may not be questioned."

When she entered the third gate.

From her breast the double strand of beads was removed.

Inanna asked:

"What is this?"

She was told:

"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.

They may not be questioned."

When she entered the fourth gate,

From her chest the breastplate called "Come, man, come!" was removed.

Inanna asked:

"What is this?"

She was told:

"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned."

When she entered the fifth gate,
From her wrist the gold ring was removed.

Inanna asked:

"What is this?"

She was told:

"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned."

When she entered the sixth gate,
From her hand the lapis measuring rod and line was removed.

Inanna asked:

"What is this?"

She was told:

"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned."

When she entered the seventh gate,
From her body the royal robe was removed.

Inanna asked:

"What is this?"

She was told:

"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned."

Naked and bowed low, Inanna entered the throne room.
Ereshkigal rose from her throne.
Inanna started toward the throne.

The Annuna, the judges of the underworld, surrounded her.
They passed judgment against her.

Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.
She spoke against her the word of wrath.
She uttered against her the cry of guilt.

She struck her.

Inanna was turned into a corpse,
A piece of rotting meat,
And was hung from a hook on the wall.

When, after three days and three nights, Inanna had not returned,
Ninshubur set up a lament for her by the ruins.
She beat the drum for her in the assembly places.
She circled the houses of the gods.
She tore at her eyes; she tore at her mouth; she tore at her thighs.
she dressed herself in a single garment like a beggar. . . .

Ninshubur went to Eridu and the temple of Enki.
When she entered the holy shrine,
She cried out:

"O Father Enki, do not let your daughter
Be put to death in the underworld.
Do not let your bright silver
Be covered with the dust of the underworld.
Do not let your precious lapis
Be broken into stone for the stoneworker.
Do not let your fragrant boxwood
Be cut into wood for the woodworker.
Do not let the holy priestess of heaven
Be put to death in the underworld."

Father Enki said:

"What has happened?
What has my daughter done?"

Inanna! Queen of All the Lands! Holy Priestess of Heaven!

What has happened?

I am troubled. I am grieved."

From under his fingernail Father Enki brought forth dirt.

He fashioned the dirt into a creature neither male nor female.

From under the fingernail of his other hand he brought forth dirt.

He fashioned the dirt into a creature neither male nor female.

He gave the food of life to the creatures.

He gave the water of life to the creatures.

"Go to the underworld,

Enter the door like flies.

The Queen of the Underworld, is moaning

With the cries of a woman about to give birth.

No linen is spread over her body.

Her breasts are uncovered.

Her hair swirls about her head like leeks.

When she cries, 'Oh! Oh! My inside!'

Cry also, 'Oh! Oh! Your insides!'

When she cries, 'Oh! Oh! My outsides!'

Cry also, 'Oh! Oh! Your outsides!'

The queen will be pleased.

She will offer you a gift.

Ask her only for the corpse that hangs from the hook on the wall.

One of you will sprinkle the food of life on it.

The other will sprinkle the water of life.

Inanna will arise."

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