



**F
O
R
U
M**

**1
9
9
1**

***FORUM
MAGAZINE***

Volume 12

1991

FORUM

EDITORS

Maureen Marron
Leslie Pessagno

ART DIRECTOR

Amy Sullivan

PRODUCTION STAFF

Aileen Alteslaben
Laura Fausnaugh
Megan Grigalonis
Andrea Kelter
Tricia Larzelere
Christina Lynch
Stephanie Rein

FACULTY MODERATOR

Dr. Daniel McGuinness

FORUM does not take first publishing rights of any kind: all rights remain in the property of the author. Address correspondence to:

FORUM MAGAZINE
c/o Writing Media Department
Loyola College
4501 N. Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21210

Entries for the 1992 edition will be collected in the fall.

FROM THE EDITOR

"Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it." This quote by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe has been the source of inspiration for me over the past year as I've boldly "learned the ropes" of being editor and have become completely emerged in the "FORUM experience." And what an experience it has been! I wish to extend my warmest thanks to my production staff (especially Christina and her unending patience in dealing with my computer ineptitude!) and to Amy for all her work in bringing her artistic flair to the pages of FORUM. Thank you also to my friends and family who have given me so much support and to Dr. McGuinness who has done the same by teaching me that laughter, even if it is directed towards *oneself*, is indeed the best medicine for the ailments of too fast approaching deadlines, ceaseless proofreading, and difficult decision making.

I hope that you enjoy this year's edition of FORUM. I'm sure it will be easy to see the great talent of these Loyola writers (and artists!). And, although contrary to Isadora Duncan's thinking, you may even find that you *can* understand in print what you have not experienced.

Maureen C. Marron
Editor



TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROSE

<i>Pictures of My Mother</i>	9
Jason Santalucia	
<i>A Puddle Full of Endings</i>	17
Joshua Mooney	
<i>Myth</i>	21
Leslie Pessagno	
<i>Dairy Product Princesses</i>	29
Melissa Grossman	
<i>When the Sky Becomes Full of the Sea</i>	33
Julianna Baggott	
<i>The Penny</i>	43
Barbara Ann Conanon	
<i>Hail Marys and Heredity</i>	47
Christine Canning	
<i>Gliding the Way of the Kite</i>	57
Mark Lee	
<i>Art at the Water's Edge</i>	61
Erin K. Dwyer	
<i>Of Ivory</i>	73
Devi Ke	
<i>Living Lessons</i>	85
Mary Katherine Hoeck	

TABLE OF CONTENTS (con't)

<i>The Quick Hit</i>	91
Brian Meyer	
<i>The Promised Land</i>	99
Eric Maniago	
<i>A Practically Symphonic Life</i>	105
Donovan Arizmendi	

ARTWORK BY:

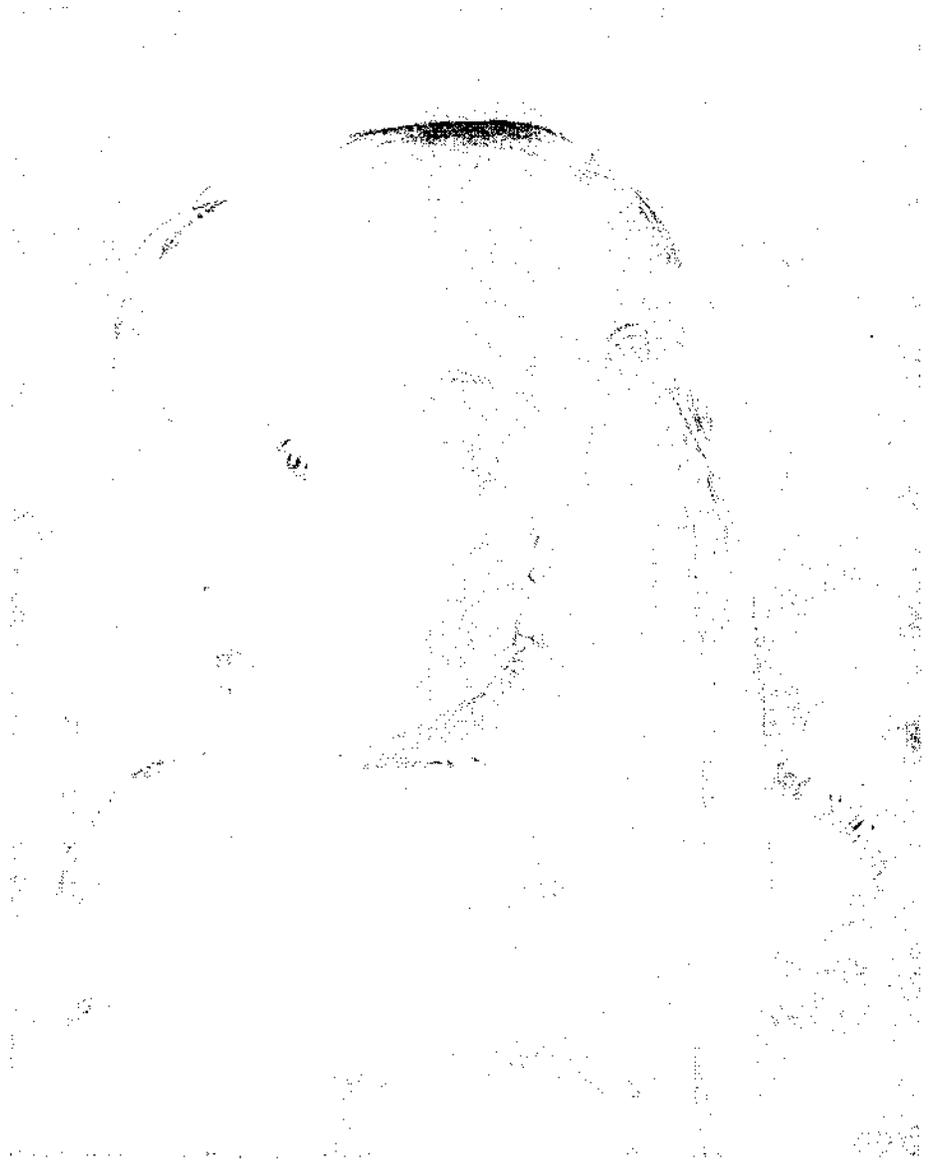
Blaise Karpiak	Earl Schenkel	Dave Mayer
Andrea Poggi	Earl Schenkel	Blaise Karpiak
Andrea Poggi	Andrea Poggi	Susanne Platania
Amy Sullivan	Amy Sullivan	Earl Schenkel
Blaise Karpiak	Andrea Poggi	Amy Sullivan
Amy Sullivan	Susanne Platania	Blaise Karpiak
Colleen Flinn	Chris Ottenritter	Amy Sullivan
Susanne Platania	Susanne Platania	

Cover Illustration Designed By: Kiki Gaffney



*"What one has not experienced, one will
never understand in print."*

Isadora Duncan



*"The childhood shows the man, as
morning shows the day. "*

Milton

Pictures of My Mother

by Jason Santalucia

On this warm October afternoon, I came home from my classes excited about something that had happened that day. I don't remember what exactly, but I wanted to share it with someone, and my mother was the only person home. Setting my bag of texts and notebooks down by the steps, I saw a light under the basement door and walked down to the laundry room where she was sorting clothes into lights and darks, separating them into limp, drooping piles on the cement floor. Her round face was expressionless as she worked in the glare of a naked lightbulb, her tiny mouth shut tight, until she screamed and clawed the shirt she was holding as she finally noticed me. She hadn't heard me come in.

"Hi," I mumbled.

"Don't do that again."

"Sorry." I waited a moment for her to say something, start a conversation, but she didn't, only went back to her business. Thoughts of subtle ways to bring up my news came to my mind, but I finally chose the blunt course and blurted it out. I suppose I expected her to gush over me and make a big deal out of it, the way she had when I was little and would do something stupid like make a crayon picture of stick men for her, or do a cannonball into a swimming pool. Look mom, look! Her reaction was flat, tough, the way I half expected it to be.

"Oh God, how much is that going to cost?" she whined, never taking her eyes from the sock she was pushing into a neat little ball. In one line, she took me from excitement to feeling like a brat and a fool.

"Jesus Christ, Dorothy," I said in a flat tone and walked out. These words had been chosen specifically to anger and hurt my mother because I knew they would cross two lines that exist within her. The first was simply that my mother is very religious and to take the name of the Lord in vain like that, I knew, would infuriate her. Calling her by her mother's name, Dorothy, though, was more cruel than breaking any commandment, and this I knew as well.

"Don't ever call me that," she shouted up the steps after me, but I was already gone.

My mother wears a sad expression in every childhood picture I've ever seen of her. It's the eyes that do it. Huge brown eyes that seem ready to well over, set among pale, delicate features; a sharp nose and pinched, narrow lips. Her head, with its straight brown hair, seems almost out of proportion to her tiny body, always dressed in a plain dress, invariably made by my grandmother. When she talks of her childhood, my mother always speaks in hushed tones and stares, trance-like, across the room, at what I can only guess.

Sarah Suzanne Mentzer was born on November 27, 1944, in a small hospital in the Oakmont section of Pittsburgh. She was the daughter of Walter Mentzer,

F O R U M

a mason, and his wife of nearly twenty years at the time, Dorothy Kreamer Mentzer. She had one brother, Walter, nicknamed Wattie, who was six years her senior, and a sister, Minah Jeanine, shortened to Miney, who was sixteen years her senior. From all external appearances, theirs was a happy, normal life. They lived in a meticulously neat house in a pleasant section of the town, attended the local Lutheran church, and got along well with their neighbors. Inside the house, though, my mother remembers a different reality.

"Your grandfather would come home drunk almost every night, and then it would start," my mother tells me. "It" was the fighting between my uncle, now in his teens, and my grandfather. They would start like children, my grandfather calling my uncle names and making fun of his size, though he was only average at best himself. He knew my uncle's sensitivity in this area, knew how he lifted weights furiously, grunts and strained breathing coming up the basement steps every afternoon, but to no end, he was always a small boy, short and thin with narrow shoulders. Then would come the accusations of laziness. "Why don't you get a job, you're almost out of school and don't know a damn thing," he'd stammer as he bumped his way through the house, following the boy. This was not entirely true, though, because my uncle did have two skills, which he uses to this day. He knew something about cars and a lot about people.

"I doubt if Wattie even knows how many cars he's owned in his lifetime," my mother explains to me. "He used to buy a car, clean it up, sometimes do no more than wash and wax it, and then sell it and make hundreds." My uncle, even as a teenager, could play people. He'd tell them he'd had the car for years, had rebuilt it from the frame up and was only selling it because he was going into the service to defend his country from the Communists. America and red engine paint, the best car salesmen known.

Uncle Wattie also knew how to play my grandfather. "You're drunk and you stink," he'd say, forcing a condescending laugh. Then he'd start to push him, not hard, but just enough to tip his swaggering frame off balance, and send my grandfather crashing into a table or lamp. It was more insult than physical attack, meant to illustrate just how incompetent the old man was. Just as he was financially incompetent. Wattie would ask why my grandmother had to pay all of the bills. "Because you'd piss your whole check away in one night," he'd answer himself, and then push my grandfather, who was struggling to gain his balance, back to the floor. Soon the pushes turned to punches, and the two, locked together, would go spinning through the kitchen or tiny living room as if they were dancing partners. "I don't know how long they'd go on like that," my mother tells me, "but eventually Wattie would usually end up running out of the house and squealing away in whatever hot rod he happened to have that week, then Daddy would start with me."

P I C T U R E S O F M Y M O T H E R

Worn from the fighting and the alcohol spinning in his head, my grandfather would drop himself into his chair and flick on the television, but not really to watch it. Instead he would start making fun of my mother, who, all the while, had been silently curled up on the couch. She forced herself not to cry, not while the shouting and fighting had been going on, and not now as her father sat heavily, telling her she was homely and probably retarded too. She knew that her crying would only give the man, with spit bubbling in the corners of his mouth, another reason to attack her. "He never hit me, though, I will say that, and eventually he'd pass out and lie there, stinking. Whiskey made him smell the worst; it came through his feet."

What my grandmother was doing at these times is not clear; my mother never says. In modern babble, I suppose she was the enabler; cooking, cleaning, and keeping her mouth shut. In fact, though, in its own way, this silence from my grandmother was as painful to my mother as the shouting of my grandfather. "I never felt loved," my mother says, while talking about her mother, "never felt loved at all."

My grandmother is a woman who believes in survival as a purely physical concept. If you have enough food and a warm place to sleep, then you are surviving. Indeed, most of her life was occupied by the work and worry of providing these basic necessities, first for herself, and then for her family. I know little of my grandmother's childhood, only what my mother tells me, which is, that the Kreamer family was quite large and quite poor. There is also a single photograph of my great-grandmother. It is a grainy, brown and white portrait of a large woman, staring dead straight into the camera. Her face is round and plain, just beginning to sag, with the thin hair pulled back tightly. The eyes are tiny, but intense, and the lipless mouth shows neither smile nor frown, simply a severe horizontal slash.

When my grandmother was fifteen, she married my grandfather, and soon after, the Depression hit. When I ask about this period, my grandfather only sighs and shakes his head. "We did alright, though, we're here today," my grandmother adds. Indeed, they did just that, alright. There always seemed to be a room that needed to be plastered or a foundation that needed to be laid someplace, and in this way, job to job, they pulled through. By the time my mother was born, they were becoming quite comfortable. In fact, my grandfather was by then partners with another man, Ted Bothel, in owning a small construction company, which he later lost because of his drinking. Still though, my grandmother found little, if any, time to indulge her youngest daughter. Strictness and regularity were the rules. There were no trips to the zoo or to the movies and no afternoons spent shopping, except once a week for groceries. Clothes were a waste when you could make them yourself. My grandmother's life revolved around main—

F O R U M

taining her household. Every day was assigned a certain task so as to most efficiently accomplish this goal. A certain day was for cleaning the bathroom, another day for grocery shopping, another for dusting and cleaning, and still another for scrubbing the kitchen floor. "Every Friday we had chili for dinner," my mother remembers, "because it was easy, she could just let it simmer all day while she did the laundry. Friday was laundry day." In this way, my grandmother kept herself busy. There was always something to do. So much in fact, that she rarely left the house. To this day, she does not even have a driver's license.

I suppose that from her perspective, my grandmother did everything she was supposed to do to be a good mother to her little girl. Like a checklist, she could have gone down the line to assure herself of this. The child ate well, although quite blandly, strictly meat and potatoes and, of course, chili, had decent clothes, received a clean report from the doctor once a year, and had a comfortable home. Anything else would have been frivolous. Never mind the fact that my mother hated her home and felt no love from her parents. "I can remember never being allowed to bring friends home from school, but I didn't care because I would have been ashamed to anyway."

My mother's relationship with my Uncle Wattie was not very good either. "He used to tease me all the time, constantly, until I'd cry, and even then he'd keep going." One of my uncle's favorite taunts was telling his little sister that she had been adopted. "This made sense to me," my mother explains, chewing her lip. "All my friends' parents were much younger than mine, so I always believed Wattie when he'd tell me this, and he knew it because I'd always cry."

There were a couple of people, however, whom my mother loved and felt love from in return. One was my Aunt Miney. Although she had married my Uncle Bob, a huge, broad man, and moved out when my mother was still quite young, Aunt Miney remained in Pittsburgh and in touch with her sister, for whom she seemed to have a motherly love. I have no solid facts on which to base this feeling about my aunt's maternal love for my mother, only a single photograph, creased and faded. It is of Aunt Miney, in her early twenties, thin and quite attractive in a white skirt and a light sweater, kneeling down, with my mother sitting in her lap, holding a doll. Though there is no sky showing, only trees and bushes in the background, it appears to have been a sunny day as both sisters are squinting out from the picture. Perhaps it is simply their grins or the difference in their ages, I am not sure, but that photo does suggest to me, a bond other than that of sister to sister.

The other person my mother felt loved by was a nurse my grandmother had become good friends with while in the hospital for pneumonia. Pete, a nickname taken from her last name, Peters, was more of a friend to my mother than just an adult. She took time to talk to this little girl, and, more importantly, to listen

P I C T U R E S O F M Y M O T H E R

to her. This is all that I know about Pete, though, because my mother never goes into detail, only smiles slightly and tells me, "I loved her." I suppose that is all I need to know.

To me, my mother seems to have gone from being a little girl to a grown woman, almost overnight, and with no years in between. She never talks of her adolescence, except for briefly mentioning the names of one or two of her old boyfriends once. Even the photographic record makes it seem as though she dropped from the earth during this period. Except for a couple of high school year-book snapshots, the family photos begin with her baby pictures and go up until she was around ten, then stop, and begin again in her early twenties, around the time she met my father. In these latter photos' there seems to have been a change in her. She had gone from a plain, mousy looking girl, to a very attractive young woman. It is the difference in her expressions, though, that is most striking. In the more recent photos, for the first time, I see my mother wearing a full, unrestrained smile in every picture. She appears genuine and quite happy, and I wonder if it is because she had simply learned to fake it and smile along, or if something had changed at home.

When I think of how my grandparents are today, though, I can't help believing that there had actually been a change, or at least the beginning of one, because the people I know as my grandparents do not fit the descriptions that my mother gives of her parents. It is as if a shift of power has taken place between them. Where once my grandfather appears to have been an unchallenged tyrant, today things now appear relatively equal, or perhaps a bit tipped toward my grandmother, as she is certainly no longer one to keep her mouth shut.

I can think of many times when I have personally witnessed my grandmother exert this power over her old and worn husband in the form of, for lack of a better phrase, incessant bitching. They bicker constantly; the slightest thing will set them off. Actually, though, I should have said the slightest thing will set her off, because these arguments are almost always very one-sided, with my grandmother yelling at, or complaining about, my grandfather, who just sits quietly, flipping cards in a seemingly endless game of solitaire, and only occasionally muttering something under his breath.

There is, however, one incident of my grandfather showing his old self, which remains quite clear in my memory. First, though, I should mention that my grandparents no longer live in Pittsburgh. About fifteen years ago, they moved to a small house in James Creek, which is nothing more than a rural postal route along a dirt road cutting across a mountain in central Pennsylvania. I mention this because an eleven year-old boy hacking at weeds with a machete might seem out of place in a city, but in James Creek, this is about the most interesting thing I could find to do. That is also how I managed to cut a deep gash in my leg. The

F O R U M

tip of the blade had gone straight through my shorts and deep into my thigh. It bled heavily, so much so that I was afraid to look down, and instead, immediately limped back to the house where I stood in the kitchen, dazed, staring at my grandmother and dripping onto the floor. At first she thought it was a joke. "It didn't look like blood," she explained later. "There was too much, and it looked black." She soon realized it was no joke. "As soon as I looked at the cut," she tells me, "I knew you'd need stitches." As soon as I looked down at the cut, laid wide open with yellow globs of fat bulging into the gap, I felt sick.

Ultimately, my grandfather took me to the nearest doctor, some twenty minutes away, while my grandmother stayed at the house, in case my parents, who were in Pittsburgh for a wedding, should call. He did not, however, take me straight home after I had gotten the five stitches. Instead, he stopped off at a bar, "just for a minute," and came back almost an hour later, drunk. In those long minutes I spent stretched out in the back of his car in a parking lot, I suppose I experienced for the first, and last, time the man with whom my mother grew up. I had it easy, though, because drinking no longer made him mean as it once did. Rather, it made his shoulders slump and his face sag. It made his eyes heavy and watery and his voice soft. It made him sedated.

That was only one incident, though. The rest of my experiences with my grandfather are much more pleasant. In fact, I can honestly say that he has never been anything but loving toward me. My mother, even, seems to have made her peace with him. It is as if he had never been anything but the perfect father. As far as my grandmother is concerned, I feel the same way towards her. My mother, however, still has difficulties. It is not a matter of my mother not loving my grandmother but, rather, that my grandmother seems unwilling to allow her to do so. It is as though my grandmother resents my mother for some reason of which I am not aware and, because of this, she seems intent on inflicting pain and guilt in her in subtle, but effective, ways.

"I can never talk to her without coming away feeling bad," my mother tells me. By "bad" she means guilty, for not being able to visit my grandmother more often. Even though my grandparents only live two and a half hours away, visits, either way, are rare, and the telephone conversations as they come to this subject, always end up sounding similar. It begins with my grandmother complaining that my mother never visits. "Maybe you don't even want to see us anymore," she'll say in a fragile voice.

"That's not true, we just can't get away," my mother will respond, her head slumping into her hand. And she is telling the truth. My father works all week and only rarely gets a Saturday off, and to drive up and back in one day on Sunday is hardly worth the couple of hours they would have together. From this dead-end, the conversation quickly moves to the next, which is my grandparents

P I C T U R E S O F M Y M O T H E R

coming to our house. At this, my grandmother puts up a wall of excuses; she would have to get somebody to water her plants, she has a doctor's appointment coming up, or her arthritis is particularly bad. But eventually it works its way down to, "This just isn't a good time." And so they go on in their dialogue, talking straight past each other.

Today I sit and wonder if, in fact, I had just been doing the same thing as my grandmother that afternoon, when I called my mother "Dorothy". I have thought about this a long time but still do not know why I would want to hurt my mother. She can be unpleasant, but she can also be kind, and she can be fragile. I understand this now. She worries often about what she is going to do with the rest of her life. For twenty-four years she has been a mother, but now my brother and I are both adults, ready to move out and away. "That is my life," she says, "that is who I am." She worries that we somehow resent her and that we will leave and not come back. "Will you visit me?" she asks. Yes, I will visit you, Mother.



Blaise Karpik
2015

*"All's well that ends well; still the
fine's the crown;
Whate'er the course, the end is the
renown."*

William Shakespeare



A Puddle Full of Endings

by Joshua Mooney

The rain was not heavy; it came down sounding a gentle pit-pat on the black tarp above our heads. The rain was like music, nature's ballad, as the white-haired priest read slowly from the small black Bible in his hands. A sob. I gazed over the shiny blue coffin, which reflected distorted images of myself out into the rain. The rain came down all together, yet each sparkling drop was different, defined from each other. I followed each drop down to a small puddle which formed on the mound of earth. The puddle's shiny surface danced and rippled, as each drop broke the surface, losing its shape, entering obscurity.

Across from me was Paul. Dressed in a black wool trench coat, his eyes hidden behind shaded glasses, I could not follow his gaze. Was he looking at our friend's resting place, at me, or at the rain? I remembered back to when I last had seen him, almost three years before. At times, I had thought that our friendship would last forever, but somehow I had known it wouldn't. Everything ends.

But it is endings which give life its flavor and meaning. What is life, but endings? There are different kinds, and at the funeral I was experiencing two. I was saying farewell to a friend, while greeting another friend I had buried long ago.

When I was young, my father used to take my friend Paul and me to the Bills' games. To me, there was nothing better than a football game in late fall. The crisp cool air, the aroma of cold beer, the steaming hot dogs, the roasted peanuts in salted shells, and the darkening sky—I loved it all. Every week seemed to be based upon whether the Bills won and to see the giant black scoreboard light up in cold white lights. Nothing could compare to the tension and anticipation which knotted me up and wrenched my insides during a close game. "Down by five, with ten seconds to go! The QB drops back; someone breaks through the line!" I feel my heart lurch in my throat. I see Paul flinch. The high pitched screams of girls ring in my ears. I cry out. "But the QB evades the sack! He scrambles! He fires a fourth down pass!" The ball floats in the air; I can count each cycle of the ball's spin. Not a sound is made. I can't breathe. "It's caught! Touchdown!" The tension explodes inside of me, inside of everyone—we all roar at once. The bleachers tremble and thunder under the stampede of our feet, which pound the silver metal below us. Paul and I exchange high fives. My father gleefully finishes his beer. We are all overcome with a rush of ecstasy. "What an ending!" someone yells. "What a game!" But next Sunday will be a different game; this finish will not matter. This win will be in the past.

Endings make life. They divide life into slices. Yet once an ending is passed, it becomes intertwined with life's vigor. Like a drop in a puddle, the drop is no longer a drop, but part of the pool. An ending is no longer a single occurrence, but part of life. I remember when Paul and I entered junior high. We were fresh

F O R U M

from Dodge Elementary, where we had ruled the school. Now the hallways were like caverns, and the older students looked like giants. We went from "who's who" to "who's that?" Our only comfort in those vast hallways was that our insignificance would eventually end.

Days, months drift by, fading into our past. New faces and new teachers—they all floated by and faded back into obscurity. Like a passing ship, they remained a part of our experience for only a short time before sailing off. Only, we were the ones leaving them behind. And though those bonds have ended, they will always be a part of our lives.

Some endings, of course, are more significant than others and are marked with levels of achievement, such as a high school diploma or a college doctorate. Other endings are small, and often go unnoticed, like the end of a song or a relived memory. Endings, like raindrops, gather and form a puddle or pool which we call life. We are unable to see our lives ending by endings, but if we gaze at them, like gazing in a puddle, we are able to see a reflection of ourselves.

The importance of endings was hammered into us from our youth. In the endings of fairy tales, the prince always finds the beautiful, but unknown, maiden. Every ending in a childhood tale finishes with a tender kiss and a "They lived happily ever after." The story is then complete. Time to move on to a different tale. Other endings are not concluding endings, but merely stepping stones to a new tale. In trilogies, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, there is never a final ending until the last book. Sometimes we experience those types of endings—the conclusion of a football season or the saying goodbye to a friend. But most of the time, endings seem permanent, though we long for more.

As a child, I had always wondered how Dopey and the other dwarves lived after Snow White had left them. "It doesn't matter," Paul once told me. "The story is done—there is nothing more to say."

To help us believe life is happy, children's tales always end on a joyous note. The same is true with movies, and we are adults! Movies with sad endings are not liked by the public and generally are not produced. In "The Natural," who would have liked it if Roy Hobbes struck out in the end, instead of blasting that towering home run which won the game? In the book, he did strike out. People do not like sad endings in fantasy because there are too many sad endings in reality. Maybe Paul was right. After an ending, that's it. There is nothing more to say, so people want to leave the theater or close that book feeling happy.

Sad endings make the most ripples when they enter our lives; bitter endings linger the longest. A tragic ending in a story can often stir up bitter emotions felt in life. Like in life, people want to correct tragedies in fantasy but are unable because the story is complete. The only way to correct the tragedy is to go on, but the ending makes that impossible, something which cannot be avoided.

A P U D D L E F U L L O F E N D I N G S

Trying to delay or prevent an ending is like trying to catch rain. When I was young, I used to try to catch the rain. The water would only slip through my fingers; the tighter my grip, the more the water ran.

I remember it was a cool but humid night. Paul and I were sitting on lawn chairs on the lush fourth fairway of the golf course behind my house. The grass was wet, and the earth was soft from the rain that fell earlier that day. I could still smell the rain. The grass clippings stuck to my naked feet and gathered in between my toes. Far off in the trees, which formed a large, ominous black mass in the green moonlit plain, I could hear the breeze rustle through the leaves. Below, the crickets chirped their ballad. It was late August, and we were watching the lunar eclipse. More importantly, we were saying goodbye. Paul would leave for college the next day. We knew our closeness would fade; it had already begun to. We told each other we would write, though we knew we wouldn't. We sat on those chairs, talking of our future, and sipping our beers, as the dark sky quietly swallowed the bright white orb. The area around us grew dark. When we finally parted, there were no tears, no grand farewells. "See ya," was all he said. There was nothing else to say. I grinned and stumbled over my feet. As I walked away, feeling lightheaded and having a lump in my throat, I couldn't help but feel alone.

Unconsciously, I must have realized from the start that our friendship would eventually end. After all, endings are the way in which we live our lives. Happy and sad, our lives would be nothing without them.

Over a year later, I received a letter from Paul. It said he wouldn't be coming home that summer; he had landed a job in Boston and was going to spend the break at his sister's place. It said also that his parents were leaving Buffalo, moving down south to warmer weather. After I set that letter down, I wept. I didn't think I would ever see him again.

The rain slowed outside to a drizzle, and I lifted my gaze from the rippling puddle. I looked at Paul. There at the funeral was the first time I had seen him since that summer night so long ago. I placed my hand on the cold steel coffin and choked out a goodbye. I then reached over and grasped Paul's hand, and said hello.



*"The religion of one age is ever the
poetry of the next. "*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Myth

by Leslie Pessagno

As humans have evolved and changed, so have their theistic beliefs. Every culture's mythology or religion is both shaped by the society of the time and helps to shape society. Human beliefs throughout the world show remarkable similarities, not, perhaps, because of any inherent truth they contain, but because of the intermingling of beliefs. Just as alphabets and mathematical equations have been borrowed from one community to another, so religious beliefs have been borrowed and revised to suit the people of the time.

Prime examples of this interchange are the Greek and Roman myths, often simply termed Graeco-Roman mythology because they are virtually the same. For the Greeks the ruler of the gods was Zeus, for the Romans it was Jupiter. His wife was Hera to the Greeks and Juno to the Romans. There were also Poseidon or Neptune, Hades or Pluto, Ares or Mars, Athena or Minerva and so on. The name of Apollo was the same in both mythologies. Other than differences in names, however, the myths are virtually identical, as the Romans basically adopted the Greek beliefs.

While it may not always be as easily visible, all mythologies have some basic linking threads or some basis for comparison. The Greek religion had some new and revolutionary ideas in it. To begin with, all of the art and thought of Greece revolved around humans. The human body was praised and admired as being beautiful; the human mind was the greatest created. Their myths followed through on this. As Bronislaw Malinowski writes, "The Greeks made their gods in their own image...Until then, gods had no semblance of reality."¹ The Greeks made the gods more recognizable, more human than they had ever been before. Too human, perhaps—in many instances the gods acted far worse than human beings...they were jealous, vengeful, and not even particularly kind to man. For example, there is the story of Pandora's Box, filled with all the horrors of the world—famine, envy, spite, etc. The story goes that Zeus had the woman Pandora created and gifted with insatiable curiosity that eventually drove her to open a box she was told never to open, as a punishment for Prometheus gifting man with fire. Pandora, from whom comes the race of women, was considered to be evil to man and with a nature to do evil. This is one of the first times that women are portrayed as the cause of evil in the world, but, as a case for the evolution of mythology, it is certainly not the last. In light of this, Christianity's creation story, detailed in Genesis, sounds hauntingly familiar, with Eve plucking the fruit of the forbidden tree and causing herself and Adam to be thrown out of Paradise—woman, again, as the source of all evil.

The Greeks were also most likely the first to be able to do something truly radical

¹Bronislaw Malinowski. *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (Westport, 1971), 8.

F O R U M

with their gods--to laugh at them. Zeus' repeated infidelities and Hera's uncontrollable jealousy read like a sitcom, with Zeus changing himself into a bull to woo a young maiden, then eventually coming back to Hera and begging for forgiveness, which she would always eventually give (after blaming the whole incident on whatever young hussy had led her husband away and exacting due vengeance on the girl, whether it was really her fault or not). There are instances of gods being laughable in other myths. For example, the Maidu Indians of northern California hold the Coyote as a trickster figure, as well as being responsible for the existence of work, death, and suffering. This story of Coyote is still told today. "Coyote was walking along a river. He saw a sycamore tree. A leaf blew off from it and came sailing softly down to the ground. Coyote thought he could do the same: so up he went, jumped off, and was smashed all to pieces."² Still the Coyote remains a beast, not a humanized deity, and is only one laughable character among many serious ones.

Malinowski writes that

Magic, so powerful in the world before and after Greece, is almost nonexistent. There are no men and only two women with dreadful old witches who haunted Europe and America, too, up to quite recent years, play no part at all in the stories. Circe and Medea are the only witches and they are young and of surpassing beauty—delightful, not horrible.³

The Greeks had risen far above the terror of primitives, even though later societies still clung to numerous old superstitious fears. Still, the satyrs and centaurs remain, and Hera is often called "cow-faced," a remnant of the change from a divine cow to a humanized queen.⁴ These are the lingering remains of the time of the beast-gods which still remain in this phase of the development of myth.

Graeco-Roman mythology had other souvenirs of more primitive myths. There remained little distinction between what was real or unreal—imagination ran unchecked by reason. Also, as shown previously, the horrors of the forest were not all gone. There was some magic left, as was a great deal of superstitious dread of the unknown.

Norse mythology differed in one major aspect from other legends. It was believed that one day the enemies of the gods would defeat them in battle. Yet even though they knew in the end it was hopeless, they would fight on, and the same was true of humanity. Men and women were eventually helpless before evil. Heroes and heroines would face disaster but died resisting. A brave death entitled them to a seat in Valhalla, and in the last battle between good and evil, they would fight on the side of the gods and die with them—their only pure hope was heroism, which was dependent on lost causes. This belief in the value of

²Margaret Archuleta, *Coyote: A Myth in the Making* (Los Angeles, 1986), 2.

³Malinowski, *Myth*, 10.

⁴*Ibid.*, 12.

M Y T H

continuing the fight against all hope was no more or less than the product of a warrior culture, and it was true to the nature of human beings to never give up and accept the "inevitable." This decree of an inescapable fate played the same kind of part that predestination did in St. Paul's time and in that of his militant Protestant followers—the Norse hero was doomed if he did not surrender, doomed if he did—the choice was between yielding or dying, and it was in his hands. The easy way has never long commanded the allegiance of mankind.

So far I have dealt with more modern, easily recognizable myths and have shown how they were different from previous tales and how their influence could be seen somewhat in modern religion. This time period is a crucial one because it is the time of a major transition. Before progressing any further ahead, it will be helpful to go back in time and look at the earliest foundations of mythology so as to better see the clash between ancient and modern religion.

The first religion of mankind was nature worship. Procreation was not understood, and it was believed that women were imbued with some power which made it possible for them to bear children—men had no role in this concept of reproduction. Hence the first images of creation were visions of a mother goddess. Barbara Walker writes that

...the goddess was the supreme deity long before humans discovered either fatherhood or farming. Men of primitive farming cultures tell modern anthropologists that the planting must be done only by women, because only women know how to bring forth life...in the most ancient cultures it was assumed that women knew the magical trick of impregnating themselves, a trick that men greatly envied for untold millennia and tried to imitate in a thousand naive experiments, ranging from transvestism and self-castration to Tantric sex, where men strove to absorb female fluids instead of the other way around.⁵

This belief in a mother goddess can be definitively traced back to around 5000 B.C. Many female figurines can be found from that period, with overly exaggerated breasts and stomachs, suggesting women's life-giving and sustaining powers. Womanhood was closely associated with a motherhood of nature.⁶

This concept of the earth as a mother can be found in hunting societies as well. To them the game animals came from her womb. In fact, as Joseph Campbell writes

The earliest unmistakable evidences of ritual and therewith of the mythological thought yet found have been the grave burials of *Homo neanderthalensis*, a remote predecessor of our species...200,000-75,000 B.C. Neanderthal skeletons have been found interred with supplies (suggesting the idea of another life), accompanied by animal sacrifice . . .

⁵Barbara G. Walker, *The Skeptical Feminist* (San Francisco, 1987), 7.

⁶Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God : Primitive Mythology* (New York, 1969), 139.

F O R U M

sacrifice...with attention to an east-west axis (the path of the sun, which is reborn from the same earth in which the dead are placed), in flexed position (as though within the womb)...⁷

As birth was seen as an exit from the womb of the goddess, so death was viewed as a return to the womb. Humans are the only animals that know they will die, and one of the most important functions of mythology, besides explaining how we came to be, is to prepare us for that ending.

The image of the mother taking us back at death, however, is not simply the peaceful, happy image it appears to be. This was a primitive world filled with fear, including a fear of the mother who holds her child's life in her hands. For some 600,000 years cannibal mothers were a reality. In Norse mythology Hel was the consumer of the wicked dead—those who had not died gloriously. Campbell writes of the Hindu goddess, "Kali is represented with her long tongue lolling to lick up the lives and blood of her children. She is the very pattern of...the cannibal ogress: life itself, the universe, which sends forth beings only to consume them."⁸ The mother is both birth and death, nourishing and dangerous.

Approximately 3000 years ago followers of the patriarchal gods began to derogate the world's goddesses in order to promote masculine supremacy.⁹ As stated before, this time of transition was during the Graeco-Roman period, where the gods and goddesses were formed from a union of Heaven (father) and Earth (mother). The Greeks still held to a powerful mother-goddess image (Gaea) and had goddesses as powerful as the male gods, even though women had already lost much of their power. Whereas before women were respected and even feared for their life-giving, and conversely life-taking abilities, now they were considered for the most part to be mere breeding machines. Men were still wary of women, however. As mentioned earlier, the last remaining witches were women, evil (and death) was brought into the world by women, and women were the seductresses of men, trying to lure them into sex.¹⁰

Paternalistic religions rose in power. Barbara Walker writes that

The classical writers had already trivialized many aspects of the goddess by breaking them up into bureaucratic pantheons confined to one department apiece, such as the love goddess, sea goddess, moon goddess, earth goddess, and so on, as if they were not assorted manifestations of the same deity."¹¹

From here it was a small step to the paternal religions of today such as Judaism and Christianity.

⁷*Ibid.*, 67.

⁸*Ibid.*, 70.

⁹Walker, *Skeptical Feminist*, 6.

¹⁰Father Thomas McCoog, Class Lecture, Baltimore, 1989.

¹¹Walker, *Skeptical Feminist*, 9.

M Y T H

Judaism was founded in approximately the thirteenth century B.C. It has not, as is a common belief, been around forever. There were centuries before where there was no male god. As with the Greek humanization of the gods, making them up in their image, so the Jews gave up their idol worship and began worshipping God who had made them in his image. Either way, the deity is humanized, with a distinctly male character. He is referred to as the Father who created us. While now many prefer to say that when the Bible says that Man was made in God's image, it means Mankind, and though we call him God, little doubt that a male god was exactly what the Hebrews had in mind. Man thereby claims authority over woman by the use of theology. Eve as the first sinner, God investing man with authority over woman, even the notion of woman having been created from man, are all set out clearly in Genesis.

Christianity drew very little from the stock of Jews when it was formed. Instead it relied on Gentiles to swell its ranks. These Gentiles were often from religions which held the goddess as the creator. Mary held great significance to many of these people and was given many of the roles of the mother-goddess by them. In the "Litany of Loreto" she is called: "Holy Mother of God," "Mother of Divine Grace," "Mother of Good Counsel," "Virgin most powerful," "Virgin most renowned," "Virgin most merciful," "Mirror of Justice," "Seat of Wisdom," "Cause of our Joy," "Gate of Heaven," "Morning Star," "Health of the Sick," "Refuge of Sinners," "Comforter of the Afflicted," "Queen of Peace," "Tower of David," "Tower of Ivory," and "House of Gold."¹² Her roles in life and death were not forgotten by the people.

The goddess was also disguised in the form of Christian saints such as Saint Brigid of Ireland. Other aspects of the goddess were diabolized as the "Queen of Witches" or dangerous spirits such as succubae, banshees, mermaids, or other she-demons.¹³ These were roles that a Virgin could not portray. Barbara Walker writes that

In practice the Mother of God or Queen of Heaven continued to occupy the same position in the Christian pantheon as in the earlier pagan one, even when churchmen officially declared her nondivine (though somewhat mysteriously miraculous)...churchmen declared Mary exempt from the supposed crimes and disadvantages of mortal women. Mary was sexless, sinless, and absorbed in her relational role of mother to the exclusion of all other roles. The God who had impregnated her without pleasure had usurped all her earlier functions, such as creatress, lawgiver, judge, protectress, nurturer, spirit of nature, inventor of the civilized arts. The church insisted that the multitudes who worshipped her as divine were not really doing any such thing simply because the church had forbidden them to view her as a true goddess.¹⁴

¹²Campbell, *Primitive Mythology*, 140.

¹³Walker, *Skeptical Feminist*, 9.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 6.

F O R U M

Eventually, the church moved away from letting the people engage in their pagan rituals and beliefs and moved towards a more dogmatic approach. The pagan sites had stories built around them linking them to various Christian saints. Christian holidays were set up to coincide with pagan feasts; for example, Christmas Eve was once called the "matrum noctem" or "Night of the Mother."¹⁵ Now the church wanted to push aside the pagan images of Mary. The vestiges of the goddess were stripped away. For starters, she had to be a virgin, not just before birth, but after it as well. In Matthew 13:55-56 the Bible says, "Isn't Mary known to be his mother and James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas to be his brothers? Aren't his *sisters* our neighbors?", and in Mark 3:31-32 it reads, "His mother and his brothers arrived, and as they stood outside they sent word to him to come out. The crowd seated around him told him, "Your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you." Whenever one of these sections where it is stated that Jesus had brothers and sisters is read during the Mass, the priest often takes a great deal of time trying to explain it, but the fact is that it is a very real possibility that Mary did not remain a virgin for the rest of her life. Jesus never refers to her as a virgin; the angel Gabriel does not say that she should never consummate her marriage to Joseph or bear other children. She is the Virgin because a chaste woman was considered the best kind of woman. The creating, life-giving free spirit must be destroyed, and the chaste, humble, obedient mistress to a patriarchal God takes its place.

Primitive religions are often ridiculed for their superstition and irrational beliefs in magic. The Christian church believed that the earth was flat, that angels carried messages to earth routinely, that blindness could be cured with spit, and that a virgin could bear children. To question the last three of these beliefs seems heretical, yet it must be remembered that it was once no less heretical to believe that the earth was round and not the center of the universe. Analyzed logically they sound no less bizarre than any primitive beliefs in magic. Moreover, some of these primitive rituals can be seen in the ritual of the Mass. During the Mass one takes the Sacrament of the Eucharist, where one consumes the body and blood of Christ. This can be traced back to a superstitious notion that one could become immortal by ingesting the blood of an immortal.¹⁶ Many believe that invoking the name of a saint can actually make things happen, for example, calling upon Saint Anthony of Padua, the Patron Saint of Lost Articles, when you can't find your glasses. The word "blessing" comes from the Saxon word "bleodswean" which means to sanctify an altar by covering it in blood. Yahweh ordered his people not to eat blood because it was to be made into a sacrifice to himself.

God is sometimes peaceful, sometimes wrathful. At one point He sets entire

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 13.

M Y T H

tribes against each other or causes a flood that destroys almost all the creatures of the earth. At another, He is passing out commandments like "Thou shalt not kill" and being portrayed as a loving father out to save his people. Usually, God is whatever the people need Him to be at the time. In war God is on our side, urging us on to fight for our just and holy cause against the evil enemy. No matter if the enemy believes the same God is on their side, obviously they're wrong. In peace God is the loving lamb watching over his flock, telling us it is wrong to kill and preaching of peace.

In older times, God was the goddess, or many gods, or one male god/one female god, etc. But whatever God was at the time was the true God to the people who believed in Him/Her. Everyone believes that all the previously held beliefs about God are wrong and that they know the truth. A century ago no one questioned the Christian God as being anything but Father, Lord. Now lecturers speak of God as she. Obviously if God is everything, you cannot assign him/her/it any one gender. That wasn't so obvious to the early Christians, and during the time of Galileo such a statement could have gotten one into real trouble. Modern religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Moham-medanism all have roots in ancient myths and primitive fears, and we must ask whether altering and changing the myths to suit the times makes these religions any more valid than their predecessors. We call our various faiths religions instead of myths, because we believe in them, but the ancients believed their myths as well. Modern religions are exclusive, with a "we're right, you're wrong" attitude. Christianity, which I use as a reference point simply because it is the most familiar, preaches tolerance, but has divisions of churches within its ranks, one of which, Catholicism, officially holds that you cannot be saved unless you are baptized. Little things continue to divide the Church within itself, such as whether or not women can be priests. In the Episcopalian church women can...in the Catholic church they cannot.

What is important is to realize where so much of what we hold to be true comes from. At this stage in the progression of myth we can look back and see why we believe many of the things that we do and recognize how bizzare some of it truly is. The next phase of evolution is hard to predict. Some cling to the superstition and dogma. Others renounce any concept of a deity, while others call back through time to a mother-goddess, and still others strike out on their own—agnostics who believe in God(dess) but cannot find Him/Her in any religion. 200,000 some years of evolution seem to have brought us no closer to the truth, but it is doubtful that we will ever stop trying to attain it.

WORKSCITED

- Archuleta, Margaret. *Coyote: A Myth in the Making*. Los Angeles, 1986.
Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*. New York, 1969.
Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Myth in Primitive Psychology*. Westport, 1971.
McCoog, Father Thomas. *Class Lectures*. Baltimore, 1989.
Walker, Barbara G. *The Skeptical Feminist*. San Fransico, 1987.



*"Gone — glimmering through the
dream of things that were."*

Byron

Dairy Product Princesses

by Melissa Grossman

Occasionally, I am bothered by insomnia. It is the flagging energy the next day that makes it unpleasant for me, not the fact that I'm caught by the stillness of the night pouring through the shadows of the window bars above my bed. For it is at such times that my mind is fervently alive, reflective and inquisitive, thinking and rationalizing, and positive that I'm finally finding the missing mate to socks lost long ago, even though they sometimes return rumpled and damp.

Woven at the base of much of this flood of recollection is a subconscious sensitivity to the places to which they're attached. This happened when we lived there...and that happened when we were here...this happened after we left...maybe we should have never left...or rather it was for the best we moved on...

To keep sane, it's necessary to realize that I can think too much, attribute too much, reconstruct a place too rigidly. Even more pressing fatigue is often the result, and I'm apt to regard such an "all-nighter" as a waste of precious sleep time, but this negative attitude is more a reaction to overexposure to the mind's horde of sensitivities and collections of home movies, not a wish to prohibit future delvings.

The places I naturally drift towards exploring can only receive a timid guess as to why they stick to me so fundamentally. But I have discovered it is the places that have maternal associations, that is, ghosts of my mother, that have shaped me. Oddly, I have not ever really experienced these places that are a piece of her legacy. It isn't the locations she's passed on, but intense anger and frustration and sorrow, filtering down from her in secondary forms.

As a child I would sneak into my parent's bedroom and pry into my mother's dresser. In no way were the results of such a risk guilty of teasing me to the degree of fascination I insisted upon them. What finds I considered significant, and worth writing about in a pocket-sized notebook with invisible ink, were materials, trappings, objects, not treasures—a watch pendant, a filigree pin, black leather gloves lined with rabbit fur, a peau de soie evening bag lined with shell pink silk, embroidered celery-colored silk jewelry cases, a mink collar from the first coat my father bought her wrapped in tissue paper, and an orange plastic case of old make-up. The things that I've come to understand as valuable, I cannot feel their weight. Opaque and sometimes seemingly bland are the stories I might have heard, but not the sentiment—the white cotton gloves she wore as flower girl at an alcoholic uncle's wedding, a black and white photo of her dressed in white confirmation finery, strands of hair in an envelope, a prayer written in Polish on parchment, a ribbon from her high school uniform, a hand-

F O R U M

sized stuffed puppy. They were some of the contents of a forbidden dresser in a forbidden room, and although I'm sure my mother never feared we would become familiar with why she kept them, it was threatening enough to her for us to see or to touch them. The danger and the defiance of the exploit was far too attractive to resist, with the threat of the wooden spoon across my behind adding to the adventure. It never occurred to me how seriously I was violating an impermeable barrier my mother had passionately built against her past.

Other insomniac nights when I'm dragging around the family room I pause by her "library" of romance novels. I read the predictable synopses on the back and make note of cleavage accompanying the color of hair (black and red hair seem to have more), despising their existence in the house and despising my weakness of even picking them up to poke fun. I consider the cheapening agent on an otherwise comfortable room. Every night my mother reads one, sprawled on the same spot on the couch. Every night. Those shelves have witnessed years of new romance novels eventually harvested for "newer" ones. I cannot read in that room, for I believe it to be tainted. Instead I have been squeezed out by hack writers onto the less comfortable living room furniture to read of worlds beyond ballrooms and bosomy governesses forced to be vamps. At three in the morning, when my bed is disheveled and uncomfortable, the cable is out, the pantry is bare, and I've no recourse but to read myself to sleep, the situation is expressly annoying.

Somewhere, somehow, I made a strange alliance of romance novels with ruralism. A consequent myopia has developed within me concerning the Lancaster era of my early childhood. It's a myopia, not unlike the one E.M. Forster exhibits sometimes in Dr. McGuiness: *Pharos and Pharillon* towards Alexandrians. There is the tendency to brand people of an area with a generalization, lumping them together for the same fault. My mistake is in pinning non-cosmopolitans as hicks. Forster's error was to suspect every Alexandrian to have the screaming, frenetic cotton merchant within him.

These generalizations aren't reason or cause of dislike. Rather it's often the contrary that occurs. Forster found a lover and a friend in an Alexandrian, and I have some colorful, unjaded memories. As a child I adored living among a patchwork quilt of farms and fields, Mennonites and Amish, housing developments and towns in need of renewal. The basement of the mall used to be a genuine farmer's market. Rusticity covers that part of Pennsylvania like a dewy film through which one can choose to break through or sink into the moistness. Movement isn't out of the question, but it isn't a place to be temporary. Spring promised girls in lavender and wedgewood blue chiffon dresses would grace the mall square like gift shop figurines for the Miss Pennsylvania Dairy Princess beauty contest. White gloves up to their elbows, tiaras of silver sparkle paper, white

D A I R Y P R O D U C T P R I N C E S S E S

satin sashes identifying their home county in black letters, robin's egg blue eyeshadow, and stiffly sprayed hair rolled and teased; carrying trays of butter spread on Triscuits, or wedges of cheese, or Communion-sized cups of milk. I was shy around them, nervous that they would ignore a request from an eight year old, face sticky with orange soda and soft ice cream and bemused by the pastel tawdriness and pageantry out of my reach, satisfied by the thin colors and the proudly worn sashes. The irony is that contest prizes were scholarship money and PR exposure. These girls, contestants of a Miss Agriculture something or other, were stretching for somewhere and something else.

I myself, often search for the perfect, unbruised fruit when reaching back to places. Julys meant that my mother would haul her kicking, screaming, and howling children to pick raspberries for a morning. We detested the labor forced upon us for a few hours in shadeless acres of fuchsia and rich green berry fields. Mother would insist we stay until we picked about thirty pounds of berries she'd create into the jelly we adored on muffins and pancakes. We moaned about the mosquitoes, the nasties swarming in the soil, the lack of soda to drink, the overabundance of lemonade, the pricklers that stained our arms and legs with red, smarting welts, and the way we had better things to do, such as building forts and tetherball. The truth is we were having a marvelous time, throwing worms at each other, perfecting our echoes across the fields, and taking exaggerated breaks to ask questions of the black bearded Amish man who took our half-empty berry baskets and poured them into a splintery wooden crate with Stolfus stamped on the side for the final weighing. Lunch would mean stopping at the McDonald's drive thru on the way home. Our bellies, already bloated with berries, were tortured again with burgers, fries, and soda. Sunburnt and exhausted, we lolled in front of the TV until dinner, while mother sorted berries.

I don't believe it's possible to erase completely the perimeters places have marked around me. I can turn my back on them, yet with one finger fixed on the boundary. I have a fondness for Lancaster, for its backwoods, its homespun web, but that remains only as long as it keeps its footing in the distance, for it is the distance that makes it dear. Perhaps that is why my mother keeps the ribbon from her uniform even though she detested the school and the stuffed dog that was her only present one slim Christmas when my grandfather had been laid off at the Ford plant. She has pressed a certain amount of space between her and these sorrows that happened when she was growing up in Cleveland. Although she keeps her back, rather than a thumb, stiff against the border, it is because that allows her to say she was able to go beyond them, without losing the humanity they molded at the base, at her feet.



E. Scharf '90

*"To understand oneself is the
classic form of consolation;
To elude oneself is the romantic."*

George Santayana

When the Sky Becomes Full of the Sea

by Julianna Baggott

I had pushed through my childhood like the weak waves of a summer lake passing through cool pockets and then sudden warmth as if someone had peed there. I remember pulling up the heat from my sunburned shoulders with washcloths soaked in milk and being stung by the cold on my bare skin when dared to make a nude angel in the snow, but my world was usually neither startlingly hot or cold. It was comfortably luke warm. Growing up in my family had been as soft and slick as the inside of your lip when you cross it with your tongue, and as taken for granted. As every child does, I learned that the moon is not just the sun sleeping and that my parents didn't lock their bedroom door simply because they wanted to wrestle (although that's what it sounded like through the wall), and I wanted to know everything. I demanded it. By my nineteenth year I was restless to live. Like an impatient leaf wriggling and flipping in the wind, I was ready to sail or fall flatly whether the earth was as warm as the summer lake of my childhood or stiff and cold like barefeet on a hard wood floor. My stay in France marked the break of the stem of this leaf from its limb.

My first strong memory is the slick black lines of the train tracks at night in the south of France in September. They ran winding down the coast of the Mediterranean like the garden snake that I saw my father chase with a hoe for my mother who is so frightened of things that slither she once in a panic asked if snails bite. I had grown up near tracks. They laid back in the woods where my brother had me convinced little children were killed by Indians. He told me these stories when I crawled into bed with him in the middle of the night. (I never slept alone as a child. Every night I went to somebody's bed, each one thinking that they were the only one and that it was only an occasional thing.) The train tracks were the most evil things. My mother believed that small children died from eating the waxy edge on bologna, touching dog's flea collars, standing near the exhaust of an idling car, and the chemicals found in bubble bath. So train tracks definitely made a slightly neurotic mother more than a little anxious. Each year a few college students jumped in front of the trains, pregnant freshmen, angry young men, drunken "accidents." My father would read these incidents out loud from the paper along with motorcycle wrecks. I grew up thinking that the tracks were like poisonous time bombs of death, and I loved them, the long cold black iron rails. That night in the south of France they looked wet under the skinny moon, and if I could have laid down between two endless black bars, staring up at the underbelly of rushing trains, the fastest trains in the world, tattering my hair and clothes but being left untouched, I would have.

I remember three tracks and five girls. We had already walked from the houses and apartments of our French hosts for over an hour and still we were not yet

F O R U M

in town. It was a short cut and I said "C'mon" to the others as Teisha and I climbed the fence. Her black skin, like the tracks, looked wet and the beads at the ends of her hair clicked together like impatient nails on a coffee table as we jogged pushing each other to the other side. The Oriental girl from Berkeley went next, alone. Teisha and I had already climbed the second fence and waited watching her. Her hair slid back and forth as she stepped carefully as if avoiding buried mines. I guess she didn't hear the train at first, but we saw it, a small yellow light in the distance. The TGVs are fast, though, and silent. By the time she felt the vibrations, I'm sure she couldn't tell which track it was on. She began to run. Her small Oriental body and emotionless face speeded toward us, jumping and stumbling. Her yellowish hands were flashing like warning lights, waving as if on fire at her sides. The conductor, for an instant, must have seen her like a frightened animal hit by a quick light, something that scampers in front of your car on back roads. As one does after hearing a rattling noise in a stranger's house, maybe he asked if anyone else had noticed the body skimming by like a flat stone thrown across a still pond.

She landed at the other side of the fence. Teisha's forward bent teeth pointed up at the moon. I covered my mouth, trying to press down on my hysterically shaking shoulders, but soon Teisha and I were bent over each other, laughing so hard that we were breathless. Slapping each other's shoulders, we calmed down until we looked at each other and again fell over giggling. The girls on the other side of the tracks weren't laughing. They were pointing out another way around to the other side. Teisha and I were trying to ask if the young Berkeley student was okay, but our concern was not coming across sincerely.

We tried to explain, "You should have seen it from where we were."

Teisha added, "That train sure got you to move your caboose." It really wasn't funny.

The girl slowly climbed the fence. We reached up our hands to help her down gently. She didn't hear what we were saying anyway, and I put my arm around her. "Look, you're fine. Everything is fine." Teisha was calling to the other girls to cross the tracks. I yelled over my other shoulder, "Just cross, for chrissakes! What are the chances of another train almost hitting one of us?"

The Oriental girl looked up at me, startled, and said slowly, "I'm changing my life."

I looked at her suspiciously, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm changing my life."

"You can't stop taking risks, you know. You can't let this make you live a cautious life or soon you'll be too scared to cross the street."

"That's what I mean. I haven't done anything. Running away from that train I felt something. I want almost all of it to be like that. To feel that much."

WHEN THE SKY BECOMES FULL OF THE SEA

Teisha finally convinced the other girls that they were worthless and weak unless they crossed. And we all walked together the rest of the way to town. Every once in a while someone would mention the incredible speed of the train or the odd chances of that having happened, until it grew old. At the bar Teisha would turn to me and make the Oriental girl's face and pump her arms, but soon it stopped being funny at all. (The young girl who had decided to change her life that night drank so much that she forgot where she lived, and after throwing up many times in the sand, in bushes, out the car door of some people who somewhat unwillingly drove us home, slept in my bed and I slept on the floor.)

The sea was beautiful at night. The air was always windy warm carrying distant voices in breaths of each breeze. A group of us walked out a long pier one night I felt quiet and drunk. I was sandy from having sat on the beach to pull off my boots and roll the cuffs of my pants. I brushed off the sand from the soles of my feet, listening to everyone's voices only as background music, the way that we listen to our old and young. I was calm there for a moment, content with the rhythmic patting of the small waves on the rocks around us, until the patting became a beating that once inside of me began to quicken. I stood up and began to walk back to the beach. "Let's swim," I said, confident that everyone would follow me immediately.

The youngest of the group (the last to cross the train tracks), Patience, looked at me with her full white face. Her blue eyes blinked as if coming into the sun from a movie matinee, "What?"

Another girl looked at me disapprovingly like my sister, the one that I could never do anything right for, the one who said that I was supposed to have been a boy, and that my whole family had wanted a boy. The guys looked at each other to see how they were supposed to act, except for Matt who simply stood up to follow.

From the distant edge of the pier we must have looked like slivers of light, like white cracks in the doors of dark bedrooms illuminated by a distant lighted bathroom mirror. The moon was curved and thin, like a reflection of our own bodies, and white like our skin as we peeled off layers of clothes. We ran quickly to be covered by the black sea. Three dim stars clustered at the moon's side like the distant on-lookers at the pier's edge. The conversation that had calmed me until it drove me away was livened probably only for a brief moment and now lulled in to that background of sound. The black sea and black sky met somewhere far away, but the line was undefined. And it seemed to make no difference whether the sky was full of the sea or whether I was swimming in warm, wet heavens. I felt that the world could be turned inside out and that nothing would change.

Matt and I hung from wooden planks under a small dark dock. We lifted our bodies up letting them catch the wind, now cold, then sinking again down into

F O R U M

the black warm water. It was all slowly sobering and when he swam near me I grew aware of my whiteness.

I noticed for the first time as we got back into our wet and restricting clothes, the row of gleaming hotels rising up where the sand ended. They shocked me, and for a second I wondered if I had been entertainment for any one of the hundreds of windows that stared down at us in addition to the group who watched from the end of the pier. This thought excited me a little, maybe the exhibitionist in me, and then I didn't care.

Matt and I didn't go back out to the pier. Lying down we let our wet hair soak up clumps of sand. I don't remember the others leaving, but they did and I'm sure that we said goodnight. Matt and I talked softly so as not to wake the night so soundly asleep around us. Finally, we kissed. Our bodies formed indentations in the sand. His hands felt rough from the sand on my skin, reminding me of my mother's hands, worn and slitted from compulsive washing. Every once in a while we took a break to spit sand from our mouths. (I don't remember sand spitting breaks in "From Here to Eternity.") Eventually we walked back down the beach. While pouring sand from our shoes onto the street, I saw some friends who let me sleep on their stone floor with a blanket. I will always remember Matt, how he looked messy like the wilderness, his slow laugh, how he told me in the arc of a beached boat that his father died as a young pilot caught in an exploding plane.

My three weeks in the south of France were easy. I was an American among Americans. When I was asked my nationality I said that I was Irish or Spanish or Native American or anything that I felt like, the way I always had as a child. It was not until I arrived in Paris that Irish would mean that you grew up in Ireland and Spanish would mean that that was your native tongue. It was not until Paris that I became an American. I filled out forms and circled proudly "American" and when asked in bars responding enthusiastically, "Je suis Américaine." But I didn't know what it meant and never truly will.

Paris mornings woke me up cold that fall. Its old buildings looked gray from dust in the same harsh light that slid through the cracked red curtains of my narrow room. I saw the city's early hours through this light and still do, as if in the present... From my bed I hear Rosa, the maid, tip over a wine bottle hidden behind her cleaning closet door by Alban who now could tell from bed that she had arrived on time despite his parent's absence. In the adjacent room he rolls over naked into his girlfriend, Coco, who only visits when the de Meauxs are at their country house. I imagine Alban's body, too bony and frail, the way that Rosa described it to me after she'd caught him running without a towel from the bathroom to his bedroom one afternoon.

Outside of the apartment, the metro is already pushing people in its tunnels throughout town. The winos are again sleeping upright in their reserved benches

WHEN THE SKY BECOMES FULL OF THE SEA

with their necks folded back so far that their heads seem ready to roll off. The store fronts of fruit stands in Chinatown are not yet filled, and a Vietnamese man impatiently sprays his neatly rowed tangerines with a little water. In the markets near St. Denis fish parts fall to the cement like a slap, and the younger men sweep them to the gutter. The sidewalk always seems wet there. An Algerian woman has already left her own children and now takes the small white vase-like hand of a chatty child in the 16th arrondissement to cross the streets for school. The bare white arch of a woman's foot falls in a sun spot as she finally reaches her own bed. She has passed the night in clothes as thin as an insect's wing in the Bois de Boulogne as a licensed healthy Parisian whore like a small stone monument and is curling like a cat in the light cast from her long bedroom window.

Paris, that fall, was full of dark whores chased from their ruined island homes by Hurricane Hugo. They all seemed to have dyed their hair red to avoid being stopped by the police for being illegal aliens, not to mention unlicensed prostitutes. Rosa's hair was red, too, and messy this morning. It fell in her eyes and brushed the knot at the bridge of her nose. She didn't have a visa to work for the small wages received from these over-extended bourgeois families who paid so dearly to say that they lived in the richest arrondissement in Paris. But each month she stuffed an envelope full of francs and sent it to her home in Portugal.

In describing the flashing images that are to follow, I feel the weight of my generation. We are cautious people, before all else, and I don't know how to describe to my American peers this moody city where people still fall in love. It's not our fault, American men and women in our late teens and early twenties, that we are, in a word, unromantic. Our parents, in the fifties, kissed when their shiny shoe tips met under a well lit porch light, and now half of them raised us while separated or divorced. We watched the hippies of the sixties trade their peace and love for BMW's and earphones to become today's yuppies. And as for the swingers of the seventies who brought foreplay to an art (or, better yet, a scientific formula) of swapping astrological signs and doing the hustle, now might have AIDS. Every other generation had the young soldier going off to war, and there is nothing sexier or more tragic than the image of a young man leaving his home to fight for a noble cause. But we no longer have noble causes or good guys and bad guys. We grew up in the echos of Vietnam. Earlier generations had Bogart and Bécarré to look to, on and off the screen. We have Harry and Sally who are as confused about love as we are. We don't draw on a sexy cigarette, because we've watched so many of our grandfathers die of lung cancer. Politically, we already sound like we're fifty. We don't believe that social reform is possible. Unlike our parents who are angry about broken campaign promises, we never believed in them in the first place. We're too indifferent to be alarmed about anything. And we're skeptical about everything, especially love. So how do I tell you all about these flashing images of my romance in Paris without blushing?

F O R U M

We all sat together (well, sixth grade boys went one period and sixth grade girls went the next) listening to a lengthy description of our own and each other's anatomy and how they fit together neatly like puzzle pieces, given by the same type of bun-headed woman in a checkered polyester suit. And a few years later we were together in the back seats of jacked up Novas figuring it all out first hand. We have basically the same embarrassing stories. And I could tell you about these things qualmlessly. I could describe the seedy hotel room where I lost my virginity. I could use all of the proper terminology and slang as long as it was not too romantic or touching or meaningful. I could even easily tell you about the German guy in Paris who told me that he was a semi-pro soccer player, ex-ballerina, whose mother had just died, whose aunt owned a diamond mine (I swallowed that hesitatingly), whose father had just ordered an almost million dollar car (Now I was definitely suspicious), and then the clincher that he had almost been blind but just recently regained his sight. Although his lies were romantic as swimming with Matt under a pale moon, neither story says anything about love. With Matt I was naked, but my emotions were not. I was still a cautious person, as cautious as the German who hid behind his lies. The seedy hotel room, the once blind German ex-ballerina, and even spitting sand between kisses with Matt are all stories that corroborated my skepticism about the existence of love, but the images of Paris that have effected me the most, the ones that are most vivid, do not. Not only were they romantic for me then, but as time has passed, they have only become more so in my mind. Because of the indelible mark left on me by these images, they have become essential to my own self-definition.

We met in a bar, *Flan Obriens*, that sits in an alley near the Louvre. He told me that he was leaving in less than two months for his mandatory military duty in the South Pole. (I didn't realize until a week before he left that Antarctica was his choice, a decision I still don't fully understand.) So from the beginning I knew I would soon miss him, that he would be stolen by the white. But I didn't realize that the following summer without him, I would be jealous of that dark and frozen snow and the low, hovering sunrise that melts into a sunset without ever touching the top of the sky.

When the de Meauxs went to their country house, he would come to my room sometimes. It was kept at the end of a long dark winding hallway like an outstretched arm, holding with pinched fingers, something that smells bad. (I was never invited to the hearth of the de Meaux's home.) We felt our way, flat and searching palms along the bumpy decorative wall, to my room. The long glass window doors that opened onto the private street didn't seem strong enough to keep the cold outside. Wind caught in the fireplace rattled the iron door at its mouth under the mantle, and it always woke me when he was there. The trips to my room were rare, however. We mostly slept in his kitchen.

WHEN THE SKY BECOMES FULL OF THE SEA

I remember the kitchen washed in blue as if I'm watching from behind stained glass. I can see him in the mornings brushing out the knots in my wet hair for school like a patient parent. I think he believed that my hair was always tangled simply from sleep. We fought in the kitchen one time, mainly about words. We both knew that we were wrong, but after the bed was pulled out and set up in silence, we were still too angry and too stubborn to speak. But soon my elbow touched his rib. His knee brushed my thigh. His stomach rested against my side. And we made up wordlessly. Like the widespread hands quickly, blindly tapping the curve of a bending hallway, our time together felt urgent and precious like the breaths you take when your body is shocked by a rush of cold water. Brooding was a luxury we could not afford.

I watched him more than any other person in my life. When I was with his friends, the words flew past me so quickly that I often ignored them, improving other senses of observation like the deaf. We did have problems sometimes with the language. One day at his apartment I had a pain below my stomach. In French the words for "pain" and "penis" are very similar in pronunciation (and also close to the word "pine tree" which I later realized when I told my French teacher about the lovely "forest of penises" that I'd once visited.) I told him very calmly in French with a pained expression, "Thierry, j'ai un pénis."

He was a little surprised. "Quoi?"

I pressed my fingers into the flesh of my pelvic bone, tightening my eyebrows as if stitches had been taken between them. "J'ai un pénis."

He laughed, "Je ne pense pas que tu as un pénis."

I grew insistent. "Oui, j'ai un pénis."

"Non, Julie, tu n'as pas de un pénis."

This went on, until finally he hugged me and it was explained. But communication I felt was less of a problem in this relationship than in those which had preceded it. I had always had words before to answer questions without answering them, to avoid lying while not really telling the truth, to qualify what was sincere, and to soften anything that was too strong. Suddenly, I was stripped of these abilities. We were both forced to be simple and direct. Everything was easier.

I had been broken by other men before like a branch in a storm, sometimes reminding myself of the child who didn't like to sleep alone, sneaking to different beds in her house at night, each one thinking that they were the only one and that it was an occasional event. But Thierry was different, and I remember writing that he bent me like a blade of wet grass.

On our last night together, we stayed in the blue glass light of the kitchen. There were people in other parts of the apartment and our voices grew raspy from loud whispering and tiredness. Each time he kissed me, as softly as the breath of a hare, I felt instantly desperate, as if I were watching him die or watching myself

F O R U M

die. Sometimes I wasn't sure where one of us stopped and the other began, like the sky and the sea that night on the beach in the south of France, like the difference between sunset and sunrise in Antarctica during our summers. The line between us in the kitchen seemed undefinable, and I wanted his ribs to fall through the crack of mine, locking us together inseparably. He sat up, his back curled against my stomach, wet. We were so tightly pressed together, the way all my memories of France are pressed like distant trees against each sky, arched like the foot of a sleeping whore in the sun, carved into each other like the belly of a beached boat.

I spent my Christmas vacation in Rome. The bathroom ceiling of our hotel room was falling slowly piece by piece into the sink where we washed it down with water. One morning I stared at a red stain. I knew that he was not still inside of me, a stolen good. And I knew that it was the right and happy thing. I turned on the faucet, white chips filed in a circle into the metal hole in the sink. I used the noise to cry aloud.

I was uncomfortable in Paris at times. I often felt like the foreigner that I was. I tripped onto the mosaic floor tiling art exhibit at the Louvre—I was so embarrassed that I left. I locked myself accidentally in the bathroom at a French dinner party—I had to knock to get out. I ordered what I thought would be rice and veal at a fancy French restaurant only to find out the next day it had been testicles. But there was so much freedom in being a stranger, the freedom to reexamine my self-definitions. For a little while, I was no one's daughter, sister, aunt, roommate, fellow student, neighbor...I was my own possession for the first time in my life. This freedom overwhelmed me sometimes, that realization that I was only responsible for myself, that only my own actions decided who I was. It frightened me how easy it was to disappear. The other Americans were responding in their own ways. Some tested their own self-definitions, dating men older than their fathers, or dating men darker than their hometowns would allow, or dating the same sex. A lot went home after a few months. And a couple of others went on weekend vacations and never came back. But the vast amount of freedom laid out before me beneath those dark arches and tall spires that stabbed the sky, and in packed metro cars where I could smell the world on everyone's clothes, seemed to make my self-definitions stronger, because at this distance I had a chance to use them. And as a true American, this freedom to redefine myself made who I was no longer something taken for granted.

While I was in France communism died and Bette Davis did, too. Hungary changed its official name. Poland became democratic. The Berlin Wall fell. In mid-November East Germans poured into West Germany, at one point three hundred per hour, while China was only losing ground. The Free Market Economy of 1992 was approaching quickly. Japan was nervous. San Francisco's earthquake

WHEN THE SKY BECOMES FULL OF THE SEA

killed about fifty people. Jim Baker was sent to jail. The world was changing as quickly as I was.

When I got home, my family and friends noticed that I seemed different. They said that my face looked longer, that I looked taller, and that I was quieter. I felt frustrated, impatient with the seasons for not changing quickly enough. I was waiting. For a while the beautifully colored stamps covered letters that cluttered under my mail slots when the ships came in. But eventually Antarctica froze and the letters stopped. We called and FAXed and waited, unsure. I looked outside my window at night, wanting to walk in it with him. Dogs barked in the distance, a loose shed door flung open and shut in the wind somewhere, the constant sound of an invisible plane buzzed everywhere overhead, and all the while the moon was resting, not full, but not a crescent. I waited all that time for it to change, age, swell, or lessen.



"A penny can do more than it may."

John Lydgate

The Penny

by Barbara Ann Conanon

Exiting the mall, on the way to the parking lot, I spotted a shiny, round object on the sidewalk. Curiously, anxiously, I approached it. Much to my dismay, I saw the copper head of Abraham Lincoln and strolled past it. As I reached my car, I fumbled for my keys, dropping a penny or two on the parking lot. I didn't bother picking them up. Then, on my way home, I pulled into an Exxon station to get \$5.00 worth of gas into my tank. And being the careless gas pumper that I am, I accidentally overshot to \$5.03—Oops! "Don't worry about it," the gas attendant said referring to the extra three cents. I handed him a five dollar bill.

A great man once said that a penny saved is a penny earned. Back in the eighteenth century, to Ben Franklin and the citizens of his day, it was a wise deduction. I remember watching Laura and Mary Ingalls on "Little House on the Prairie" ecstatic and overjoyed when given a penny or two from Pa. They raced down to the town store and, gleaming with excitement, they splurged on mounds of licorice, peppermint, and gumballs. Such was the value of a penny in their day. However, it's a different story today. With the ever-escalating rate of inflation, pennies have decreased so much in value that they are nothing more than a nuisance.

Over the years, pennies have diminished in value and now, finally, have reached the dreaded zone of negative marginal returns. In other words, there are no personal gains with an additional penny in our pockets. Instead, we are troubled with the bulky change that is not enough to purchase anything anyway. Or, in still simpler terms, we don't want pennies anymore.

Pennies buy nothing today. In the span of my own lifetime, I have seen the value of pennies fall into obscurity. I recall a time when I myself could run to the Farm Store and buy three fireballs with three cents and a lollipop for a few cents more. This is not so any longer. The fireballs and Bazooka bubble gums are about a nickel wherever you go, and lollipops are about a quarter. Even at the local grocery, gumball machines rarely ask for a penny to trade in for the candy inside it.

This leads me to another point. Machines hate pennies. The parking meters, the pay phones, the Xerox machines at the library, the snack machines and soda machines all refuse to accept any pennies. If you are brave enough to try to feed a machine a penny, it will either choke on it or rudely spit it out to you again, feeling insulted. Even the change machines, whose sole purpose is to trade your bills with coins, never excrete pennies. They refuse to carry them in the first place.

I have learned that pennies are an effective source for the ultimate insult for people also. A rude waitress who spilled coffee in your lap and gave you the wrong order can receive the ultimate insult if you leave her a few pennies tip. This meager

F O R U M

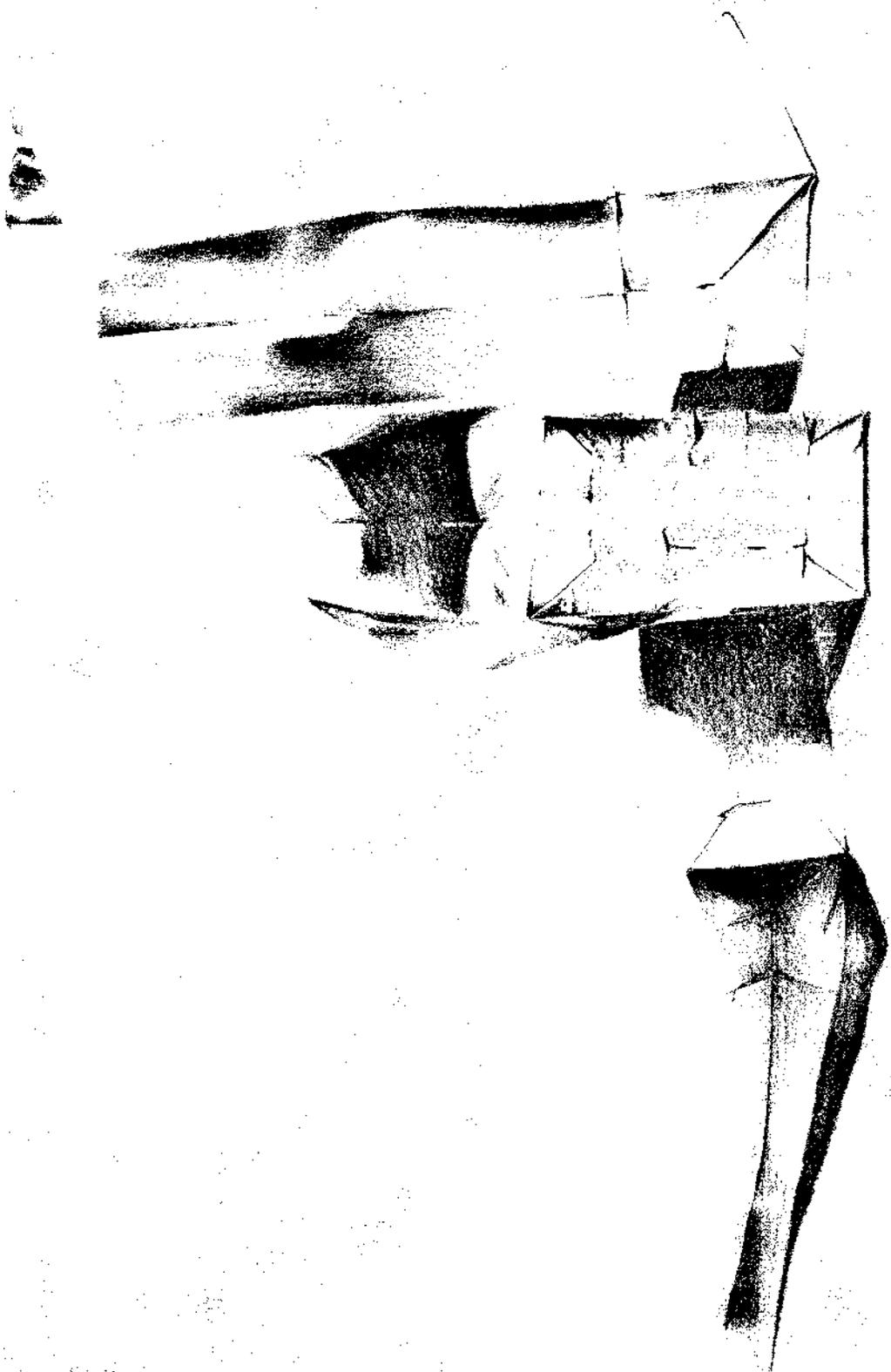
tip will leave her feeling worse off than if you left her no tip at all. This reminds me of the time I was driving in New York City. While I was stopped at a light, a squeegee kid, despite my pleas for him to retreat, continued to diligently work on my windshield. Upon finishing his task, he opened up his palm and all I had was a dime to spare. Angrily, he glared at me and purposely dropped the dime in the street. I shudder to think what he would have done to me if I had given him a penny instead.

People also try to get rid of pennies in their pockets in as many different ways as possible. Working as a cashier, I encounter people daily who dig into the bottom of their purses or wallets to give me their change in pennies where they can easily give me a nickel or dime. And I have found myself doing the same in their situation. Besides trying to spend them, we have come up with ingenious ways to dispense these pennies. Fountains are built into which we can voluntarily toss our pennies. The offertory basket at Church every week provides us with a positive way to get rid of these copper coins. We must face the fact. Pennies buy nothing and are too bulky to keep around.

However, pennies may be good for a few things. For instance, with three of them, you could play hockey on a table top. Or, if you want to know whether you or your brother gets the last cookie, flipping a penny solves the conflict. But both these functions could just as easily be performed by a quarter, a dime, or a nickel. I may point out that many of us have the odd hobby of collecting pennies in a dish or a jar or a piggy bank where they sit doing absolutely nothing for years. This hobby is yet another convenient way of keeping pennies out of the way.

My proposition is simple. Get rid of pennies altogether. Our society will not suffer great losses if pennies are phased out of our coinage system. As a matter of fact, society may very well be rejoicing in the streets. We could feel bad for poor Abe if his copper coin is erased from its existence, but he looks better on the \$5.00 bill anyway.

NOTE: "The Penny" was originally published in the 1987 edition of FORUM. In that volume, however, proper attribution was not given to its correct author, and so it has been reprinted here. We wish to extend our apologies to Ms. Barbara Ann Conanon.





*"May the road rise to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
And until we meet again, May God hold
you in the palm of His hand. "*

An Irish Blessing

Hail Marys and Heredity

by Christine Canning

During the last St. Patrick's Day that my grandfather was alive and celebrating the holiday in our house, I ran upstairs mid-course during corned beef and cabbage. I searched in vain earlier that day to find one single solitary record wedged between a Lawrence Welk and a Peter Frampton album. Once found, I hid the half-warped, half-dust covered forty-five under my bed. Like an archeologist on a dig I retrieved it and placed it on the phonograph in my sister's room. The static gave way to what my fifth grade music mentality viewed as the quintessential Irish ballad—"The Unicorn."

Unlike an archeologist and with enough force to ruin ancient Mayan ruins, I jumped down the stairs singing "green alligators and long necked geese." Returning to the table I found that the occupants (my parents, sister, brother and grandfather) were still engulfed in corned beef and cabbage. I continued singing "Some humpty back camels and some chimpanzees..." and looked straight into the coke-bottled eyeglasses that my grandfather wore for more than three quarters of his life. Inside the golden brass rims, his eyes were magnified like a fish's reflection when caught in the corners of the bowl. He smiled and continued to ever so cautiously chew the tough corned beef. I chewed mine with ferocity—I viewed this as the quintessential Irish meal as well.

That may or may not have been the last Saint Patrick's Day my father's father ever witnessed. He may have spent his last one in a nursing home or in the hospital, but my memory of that time is so blurred that I'm not sure if he died during that autumn or late in the following spring. I do remember wearing a coat, it was cool; but I can't remember if it was cool and getting cooler or cool but getting warmer. The trees were bare, but that's characteristic to them both. What I do remember is licking tears off my cheek after my mother came into the bathroom and told me that my grandfather had died.

My grandfather was as Irish as they get—straight off the boat into Ellis Island and out into the land where the streets were paved with gold. He was from Tyrone, Northern Ireland. His wife, Mary, who died before I was born, came from Fermanagh in the same part of Northern Ireland. My father, because of this, was pure bred, one hundred percent Irish. I had his blue eyes and his chubby apple-filled cheeks, and I assumed I was one hundred percent as well.

I carried this assumption, the building block of my existence, until my freshman year in high school. I sat in the home economics room, revamped for high school biology, listened to Mrs. Maxfield, and placed the little b's and big B's into a criss-crossed, cross-hatched diagram. As we were deciding the outcome of cow's coats and babies' eye colors I realized that the not so modern science of heredity was proving my assumption incorrect right in front of my Irish eyes. I had for nearly

F O R U M

fourteen years carried my Irish descent like baggage. I carried it proudly because I believed that solely because of my father's birth right I was pure. But there was this overwhelming realization—he wasn't alone in my creation. There was my mother, and she wasn't pure. Leaving the classroom that day, I had the feeling that you can only get when you know that your luggage went to CDG airport in France and not JFK in New York.

This was just about the time when I also came to realize that I had a different religion from my classmates. It wasn't that I was ignorant about my own faith; it just never occurred to me that there were differences other than those between the people who believed and those who didn't.

My family was one of those who did, but we didn't go at it wholeheartedly. Just like the number of pictures in the family album of the eldest child as compared to the last born, our visits to church decreased steadily. Every birthday to the proverbial first bowel movement of my older sister and brother was in the family photo album. My life was documented by grade only. I had about eight pictures of myself with my hair combed by a complete stranger. It was all parallel to my family's pattern of church going. The number of my Sunday school visits were virtually non-existent by the time I finished grammar school. In fact, my memories are just three- my lamb's head falling off in our production of the manger scene; my teacher, whose name I cannot recall, wearing his watch on the inside of his wrist; and a substitute teacher in my public school named Mrs. Lemon. In the third grade Mrs. Lemon filled in for my absent teacher. As I handed in a piece of paper, she cornered me—"Your family used to belong to our church." She continued in the scariest cartoon voice I had heard to date, "Didn't you?" Frightened to near death I answered "I guess so" and placed my paper on the desk and ran back to my seat. I never knew we had stopped belonging.

I can't even call the last one a church memory, but then my memories would just be a pair of unimportant trivial instances of something that was probably supposed to be important. We weren't a very religious family—maybe every Christmas and Easter we made that three minute trek to Highlands Presbyterian Church, but soon those visits stopped. However, my education in good Christian values and morals continued.

I learned about those values in my home. Lessons learned there weren't like homework assignments. My mother did not teach me values from a workbook. That kind of education I received next door at my neighbors' house. It was there in the Litchilt's basement that I attended CCD classes. I never thought twice as to why I wasn't actually signed up for these classes. The kids in it were just like I was. They were in my same school and grade and liked everything I liked. It never dawned on me that they were, as I later learned, Catholic. It never dawned on me that I wasn't. And apparently it never dawned on my parents to tell

HAIL MARYS AND HEREDITY

me under what religion I had been baptized or its inherent difference from the others.

What religion I was baptized into had been a controversy in my family even before I was conceived. My mother was Protestant; my father Catholic. When it came time at the beginning of 1959 to stop just keeping company and tie the knot, all hell broke loose. My grandmother on my mother's side wanted the two joined in holy Protestant matrimony, in the Protestant church. After all it was her just desserts. An "Irish Catholic sailor with a girl in every port" was stealing away her only WASP daughter. Oddly enough my mother's mother was married in the Catholic church. When she was widowed and left with two small children, she converted her children and herself back to Protestantism. It was as if one day she left to go to Woolworth's, picked up nylons and Chicklets, and came home Protestant. She has never spoken a word as to why; nothing is ever dared to be brought up concerning her conversion. It is a small fact that has been swept away under the carpet—a family secret just slightly different than those you store away in the closet.

My father's family wasn't exactly "gung ho" about this marriage either. The family priest told my mother that because of her decision to unite outside of the Catholic church, my father was to "burn in hell." But my father loved my mother and despite the singeing circumstances and his only brother's refusal to be his best man, they were married on January 24, 1959. And my father, like all good Catholics, listened to the church and was subsequently excommunicated.

Now as I come ever increasingly closer to the proper marrying age, my mother has, on more than one occasion, told me that the most important planning I could do for my wedding is to properly mix up the families. "Don't sit bride side, groom side like Hatfield-McCoy." My parents mixed the families up and according to my father it was a blast, as if the intensity of the mixed marriage was cooled over hot hors d'oeuvres.

But did those little pigs in those little blankets simmer down that heated battle? Ten years and three children later it was quite apparent that things in my own family had subsided. However, externally, in the world that stretched beyond my parent's split-level home, things were far from tepid.

On January 4, 1969, I was born as the product of fifteen minutes, nine months and five hours work between a Protestant and a Catholic. Also on January 4, 1969 a battle erupted in Northern Ireland between Catholic university students and Protestant extremists. The injury total numbered 136. I totaled 6 pounds 6 ounces. Absolutely no correlation. Just irony. Plain old irony. On one side of the Atlantic the love between two people of those religions produced a life; on the other side of the pond the hatred raged.

This I learned while doing research for a class while I was enrolled in a Catholic

F O R U M

institution—Loyola College. Again more irony—Catholic institution, Protestant girl. Only here I did not wear a giant "P", Scarlet Letter style, on my blazer. That was what I told my grandmother one afternoon on the telephone after she asked me how the nuns in my high school were. "All non-Catholics wear a red letter for whatever religion they are...", I continued, trying to hold in my laugh and hold the receiver so my grandmother couldn't hear my father add, "Then if you're Protestant, they really get you..." Then she said my name in the same way she must have said it ten years earlier while babysitting, when I had wandered off up to the mailbox two blocks away, and she had lost track of where I was. Her voice was two-thirds thankful that I was joking, one-third angry.

I was more than two-thirds angry at my father for sending me to that high school. Not because it was Catholic but because I would be leaving all of my friends. I cried before I went to the first day of orientation at Paramus Catholic Girls High School and answered my parents in the snotty way only an unhappy adolescent can, when they asked me how things went. Every day I put on the brown skirt, the all brown blazer, yellow blouse, and brown shoes and socks and trudged up the bus' steps. I never trudged to the bus, only up the steps. Every morning I would try not to hear my mother's shrill voice as she tried to wake me. I must have naively thought that if I didn't hear her I wouldn't have to go. Soon enough my father's yell, which always had an effect on me, would startle me out of bed. My father, maybe as a sort of apologetic gesture, would drive me to the bus stop that was on the main road about one half mile away from my front door step.

The amount of snotty adolescent remarks I barked at my parents soon decreased in number, but I still had myself convinced that I would leave in three months and return to my public school. This was something I know now was extremely foolish optimism. I almost feel stupid when I think that I would actually have had any say in the matter. The reason for my transition to a regional Catholic school was two-fold. My brother had just graduated from our town's high school and decided, on a drunken spree with his friends, to set a bomb off in the principal's office. They did this "senior prank" as they called it, on the eve of their graduation. The make-shift bomb (a few cherry bombs in an orange juice carton full of gas) didn't go off, but they were caught and arrested at his graduation ball later that same evening. My father did not want me to have to pay for my brother's actions simply because we shared the same last name. The second reason was for athletics. The school I attended was known for girls' sports. Scholarships for basketball were almost commonplace at PCGHS. My father wanted me to get a scholarship to a good college and wanted to increase my chances by playing for a strong, well known high school basketball team. These were two legitimate reasons as I see them now, but when I was in the thick of things, I was far from

HAIL MARYS AND HEREDITY

rational. Things did become much more bearable. I made friends and was actually enjoying myself (a fact kept a secret from the ogre who had sent me there) until IT happened.

IT was the first mass of the school year.

The announcement came over the PA in homeroom. Fear and loathing erupted as we stood to go to the auditorium. As all four hundred brown polyester-clad girls piled into the auditorium like penguins into water, panic filled my head and heart. It may be hard to imagine the pressure that built up in my chest cavity, but as I took my seat I knew it was way beyond normal limits for my sixty-two inch frame. I had attended all of those CCD classes, but I had never put my classroom experience into practical use. The girls all chatted, just like in homeroom, but I could not utter one word. Things grew silent; the mass began. I knew right then and there that I did not have any other choice.

I would love to say that I stormed out of the building, called up my parents, informed them that I was going to live my own life, in my own public school, and that they couldn't do anything about it. But that wasn't what happened; what happened wasn't even close to that. What happened was not so melodramatic. What happened was—I faked it. (When you have 399 girls who knew what to do, you can assume that it might be easy to blend in.) When the girl next to me stood, I stood; when she sat, I sat. When she said something, I moved my lips and mumbled.

Nobody had picked up on it. I was faking it pretty well. I gained even more confidence when the priest started the Hail Mary. This I did not have to mumble. Thanks to a lack of funds at my public junior high school I had to join CYO basketball in both seventh and eighth grades. Like a buried treasure, hidden beneath the body of St. Luke's church, the musty and claustrophobic gym had become another classroom for my religious experience. In that gym I had learned the Hail Mary. Dribbling a basketball and shooting hoops were just about the best thing for me then, and at that moment in the auditorium I thanked God that it was combined with Catholicism.

As I proudly recited the prayer, with much more animated lips than before, I felt a sense of unity with the others. It was like a rock concert when the audience's voice overpowers the lead singer's. I may have even gotten the chills. As the prayer came to a close, everyone said "Amen." Only I continued with, a relatively quiet, "One, two, three, let's go." The girl next to me turned and looked right at me. Apparently I didn't say it quietly enough. I looked down and really started to pray that no one else had heard me.

In blue Adidas shorts and high tops I had learned the Hail Mary. As a CYO team we recited it before every game. But in the service I finally came to realize that

F O R U M

it was more than a battle cry for adolescent girls' basketball teams. From then on, I just moved my lips during the prayers. But to this day I still feel compelled to follow up the "amen" in that same fashion.

The mass continued, I mimicked the girl next to me, who every now and then glanced my way, as if I was some kind of evil being. Communion started. This was another big problem. I was a little curious as to what the potato chip-looking things tasted like, but that was not why I chose to follow the line towards the priest. The reason was sheer and utter terror. Everyone in front and on the side of me had stood up and ever so slowly walked to receive communion. I could not just sit there—everyone would know. So when my row stood up, I did as well. I once again watched intently and mimicked the girl in front of me. I took the white wafer in the palms of my shaky, sweaty hands. I murmured "amen" and put it in my mouth and looked around to see if I should have been chewing. Consensus said no. I held the wafer in my mouth, trapped between tongue and roof, until it was mush. I swallowed ever so secretly.

So there I was feeling intrinsically left out. At home my mother told me that I did not have to go up for Communion if I didn't want to. But out of fear I did continue until I was an upperclassman and realized that a few other girls remained seated during the role call-like festivity. Despite what I had told my grandmother and my battle cry-enhanced Hail Mary, in school my religious affiliation was not an issue. Outside of Mass I sank back into the Catholic woodwork.

I was so camouflaged during the non-mass hours of the school day I even made a few friends. All were Catholic and the majority were Irish. So there I was in the passionate throes of adolescence, and I wasn't exactly like my other friends. So I did what everyone would have done in that situation—I learned to fake not only being Catholic, but Irish as well. And that was not an easy task. It wasn't as if I was Anne Frank and had to mask my religion and nationality for my life. It was merely for social survival.

Even though I had learned all about heredity and her cruel rules, I still wanted to be one hundred percent pure bred Irish. My Gaelic percentage numbered only fifty-one. That put me over the edge, but it just wasn't enough. So as if I was infected with a compulsive disorder, I lied about my "Irishness." Whomever I was talking to was directly proportionate to my own nationality. Though I never went as far as to attach an "O" or "Mc" to my surname, when speaking to an O'Shea or McCarthy I did have an increasing percentage. My madness was mathematical. If the party I was talking to was pure bred, I was eighty percent pure. If they were ninety-five, then I was about sixty.

Sleepovers posed a big problem—especially on Saturday nights. Saturday nights, regardless of what they entailed, would inevitably turn into Sunday mornings. If I couldn't get a ride home before 10 AM, I had to fake Mass and act like I

HAIL MARYS AND HEREDITY

enjoyed Irish sausage and black coffee. There were numerous Irish Youth Dances and Irish Festivals in the Catskill area to attend. At those Irish dances, I would have to dance with my friends' fathers and sometimes mothers. At Irish dances you danced with anyone, there is nary a set of rules. I never took Irish step dancing. I'm sure that Mr. Holmes, the short and as Irish-as-they-get father of my friend Tara, strained his back as he tried to whisk my sack-of-potatoes body in rhythm to the jigs.

I was a poser, but a systematic and practiced one. So, I entered college as just that. But since I've spent three plus years in my Catholic college I've found that I am, for that reason, much like everyone else. I've seen people act like people they are not. I've seen many of those good Catholic students who went to high schools just like mine be far from Christian and even farther from holy. I've seen people go to Mass with the taste of beer still in their mouths. People put up fronts in college; it's like a social disease.

The only people I didn't put a front up for were my roommates. I was distinctly myself for them. I've dropped all those tiny white lies that I once bathed in on a regular basis. Today my high school friends know the truth. I'm not faking part of myself, and there aren't any rifts or even minor tears in our relationships. Things have gone relatively unchanged, but now I am excused from attending Mass, receiving communion, and even eating Irish sausage, which I have grown to like.

Recently I have found out of what nationality my mother is comprised. She labels herself "Heinz 57" and can't spit out the same two nationalities on two consecutive days. One day I'm French, English, Irish—the next I may be Slovak and Bohemian. I can't even think of where or what Bohemia is. As for my looks, yes, I look somewhat Irish, especially when I'm wearing green or plaid. But I can't explain that I was once asked if I was Spanish. A tiny lady from Cuba behind the counter in the airport quickly asked me, in español, if I was of her descent. When she realized I had not the faintest idea as to what she had said, she backed off, handed me my soda, and smiled. I still can't figure it out. Maybe it all boils down to the fact that I'm a mutt.

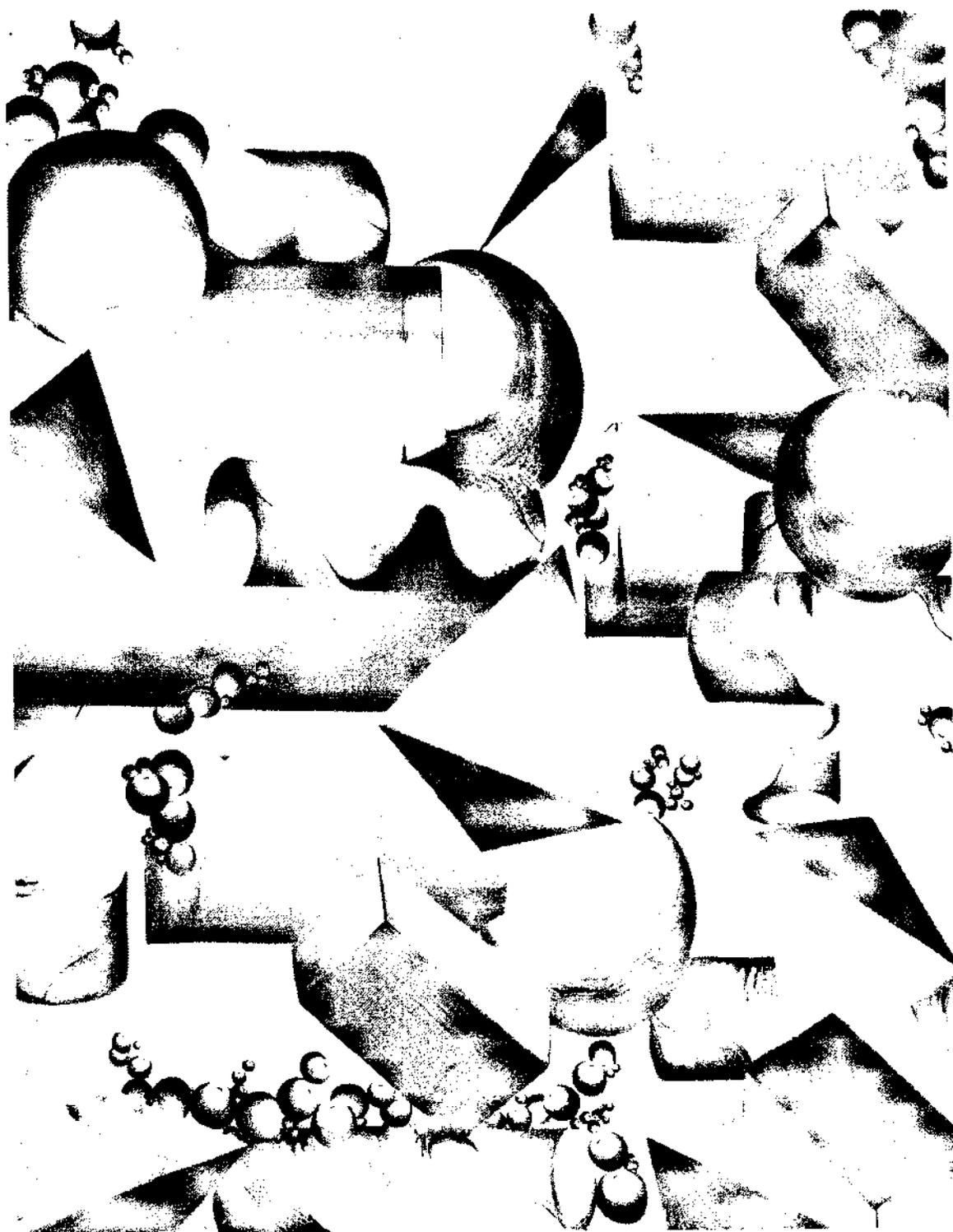
I'm sure there are plenty of people who may think that I grew up without religion as well. But that is not the case. I grew up not atheist, but areligious. I know much more about Catholicism than my own baptized faith but do not truly believe in either. One for dogmatic reasons, the other for reasons I am not even sure I know right now. But I believe in something that's there—and that is God. In my areligious family we've had our problems, and they all have been solved with a strong sense of nondescript faith.

It has been only within the past two years that my father has returned to the Church. He has brought my mother along—she also is getting pretty skilled at

F O R U M

faking it. They go for a feeling of community; my father, possibly for more. It's as if my mother is posing just as I did at one time. She stands when my father does and sits in succession with him as well. Things that go around come around in strange ways.

So what does it all say about me? Maybe as an adolescent I needed to fit in. And that desire went from haircuts to Hail Marys and even to heredity. Whatever the reason I faked the latter two and I am the person I am today. I can be criticized by Catholics and laughed at by the Irish, but I have just as strong of a sense of who I am and what I believe in as any young adult in 1990. And if there is a God and he does turn out to be Irish and Catholic—maybe I fooled him. But then again, He can't punish a girl for trying.





*"He who would learn to fly one day
must learn to stand and walk and climb
and dance: One cannot fly into flying."*

Friedrich Nietzsche

Gliding the Way of the Kite

by Mark Lee

I steal long, distance-grabbing strides along the mall at Loyola College in Baltimore. My short legs have ambitions of being at least six inches longer and play the part.

"Doesn't seem like umbrella weather today, does it?" asks the elderly Jesuit priest I see ambling along the same way every other day. He eyes a folded length of brightly colored nylon I grasp in my right hand and smiles. It kinda does look like an umbrella, come to think of it. Yet I would think that the oversized spool of twine I bear in my left would give away the identity of my kite, which extends almost the length of my leg as I aim my stride toward the artificial turf field ahead.

"Uh, no," I say, "but there is such a nice breeze!" I keep the identity of my kite to myself. I don't want to embarrass my Jesuit father that indeed it was a kite and not an umbrella. Or maybe I didn't want to embarrass myself. There's always a different reaction to my kite on campus. Some of the girls think it's cute that a guy past his teens still has the little boy in him; others simply look at me and say, "What a geek!" Actually, I don't think embarrassment on my part is an issue. I'm quite proud of my kite-toy.

And it's interesting how the uses of some objects such as kites have changed through time. They weren't always toys that one may associate with squealing boys and girls and their little "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" kites. In the Orient, kites were used for serious military purposes. Kites big enough to carry a man were used for spying on enemy forces centuries ago. Perhaps you may be thinking of the dangers of such a venture. Well, the Chinese did, too. Criminals would be placed in kites and flown upwards. Eventually, criminal, kite, and all would plunge to the ground in death. What a way to go.

Perhaps that example may dispel some of the childish connotations of flying a kite, and enjoying it (i.e. not just because the kids have been bugging you to "help" them to do it, and you know what that means). The simple joy of play should be sufficient enough excuse for anyone, yet kite flying can take on loftier purposes as well.

College students, and, let's face it, all of us look for some meaning in our lives. It's just that college students pay tuition to do it and have a more viable excuse. Maybe that's what my kite helps me to do. It's also a very Oriental idea that the most simple things sometimes offer the most to teach us. For me, I think, kite flying is one of those things.

I'm not sure how many people see the magic in flying a triangle of ripstop nylon, stretched taut by splints of smooth, lightweight wood. Perhaps I appreciate it more since it was so difficult for me to get the darn thing up in the first place.

F O R U M

The first time I had a kite was when I was ten years old or so. I possessed a plastic "Boa" kite, which had a menacing likeness of a snake's head drawn on it, with a red tail which stretched fifty feet over a stretch of sand on the beach in Ocean City, Maryland. No, the tail never did stretch across the air. No matter how fast I ran with it, Mother Nature refused to boost up my Boa—God's curse was still upon the serpent—and on its belly it crawled against the sandy surface of the hot beach. I only succeeded in becoming as red as its tail in embarrassment as I tripped into the sand, my Boa biting my behind. Mom couldn't help laughing as she watched over my efforts on the beach. I gave up on kites and Boas for seven years. Just like learning to whistle or to swim, it just wasn't for me.

That is, until I turned sixteen. I was bombarded with freedoms—the freedom to drive, the freedom to go out and leave home for a while, the freedom to do what I wished with my time. I returned to Ocean City and purchased a new kite. Not a menacing "Boa" but a simple, non-threatening "Ripstop Delta." It was tricolored, lightweight, simple, and cheap, fashioned from ripstop nylon.

I didn't try to fly it the day I bought it. No. I had already brought books along with me on how to fly kites, containing experiences I only wished of having fulfilled. I reread sections of them again, for the third time.

No one would believe me if I said I had begun to unravel a mystery of life through that twine rolling rapidly off my oversized spool. I didn't even need to run. I just stood there, alone. Mother Nature blew us a kiss and we both flew. The kite was airborne in the salty, cool breeze, and so was I. Drug users get "high" for several reasons, but most often to experience something new, to escape reality for a little while. As the delta-wing kite soared higher to about two hundred and fifty feet, I experienced that "high," too. Only I didn't escape reality, I flew to it.

I found a wonderful sense of control and freedom in that act of kite flying. As the kite flew free, I felt it too. It was because of me that that piece of ripstop nylon looked down on the other people around me. I gave the kite freedom to fly, and yet I could control it, too. I realized this even more after I purchased my "Stunt Kite," controlled by two spools of twine, each one held in one hand. The kite could be steered, and as I flew to it, it looked as if it were dancing. We did the Dive, Climb, Wiggle, Loop, and new moves which didn't even have names. As I pulled a little more, it would drop into a loop. If I ran backwards, it would rise to tower over me. Running forwards, the kite would hang there, enjoying its new height.

Flying that kite fulfills many of the wishes any man would dream. Almost everyone has dreamed of flying. Man wants peace. Man wants power over nature. Many want to escape reality; some want to discover it more clearly. All men want freedom.

Just wanting to be free is typical of the average sixteen year old. As I go to

GLIDING THE WAY OF THE KITE

fly my kite now, it's more than that. The kite's flight is freedom with control. The kite pulls so hard sometimes, I worry about letting go. If I should do so, nature would take it and dash it to the ground (or worse, to a kite eating tree). The work of an inexperienced kite-flyer is obvious when the kite jerks back and forth and climbs and dives with unbridled speed. It's the difference between Phaeton and his father Apollo at the reins of the sun chariot: the one experiences his unbridled freedom to drive on the day, only to fall in flame, as the myth goes. The other grips the reins, riding the course of the day in the freedom of flight, in the continuity of control.

As I step onto the turf, I realize that the life of the kite is not an embarrassing one to lead. The famous Samurai warrior, Miyamoto Musashi, is the author of a well-known quote, "Seek the way of the water." I think that the connotations of kites at the time may have kept him from saying, "Seek the way of the kite." Today, kites may be seen as toys with which to waste time on a nice day. Yet to look at the lack of discipline, direction, and control, people have unbridled freedom. Perhaps the way of life through the kite's bridle may not seem so odd after all. How amazing it would be to Musashi, I think, that instead of dying the way of the kite, one would live the way of the kite, living in freedom bridled in control. What a way to go.



*"It is the treating of the common place
with the feeling of the sublime that gives
art its true power."*

J.F. Millet

Art At The Water's Edge

by Erin K. Dwyer

When I was six, my ballet teacher told my mother that I had two left feet. Refusing to admit the obvious, my mother ignored the merit of her opinion and moved me to the dance company next door. For three years, I learned foot positions, hand positions, "flying leaps" (grand jetes), and "the bends" (pliés). I knew all along that ballet was not my calling, perhaps because most of my "flying leaps" had me smashing face first into the wall. I endured harsh criticism from my peers (if raucous laughter bordering on maniacal hysteria can be considered a form of criticism) and severe guilt for all of the trauma I was obviously inflicting upon my teacher. She openly bawled as she said to no one in particular that I was the only student she ever taught who could not even find the rhythm in "Jingle Bells." My mother still maintained a sort of fanatical optimism about my talent, until my first recital when I tripped over the record player's cord, knocked down the three dancing flowers in front of me, and rolled off the stage. After my mother wiped her tears of laughter, she took me out of the class.

Dance was not the only accepted art medium I desecrated with my murderous lack of talent. Art and music were the next victims. When I was in third grade, I drew a sketch of a bulldog from a stamp my uncle had given me and gave it to my dad. Looking it over carefully, he decided that I had untapped artistic talent and framed it. Soon my bulldog became his favorite topic of conversation at Thanksgiving dinner and over lunch with his law associates. My father could not stop bragging about the budding Michelangelo he had at home. Unfortunately, that bulldog became the one and only masterpiece of my short-lived career. Realizing that I was not cut out for art or dance, my parents conspired and bought me a piano. In summary, twelve years of piano lessons later, I can play many recognizable tunes with a certain degree of proficiency, but I will never be able to relate to an audience the feeling behind Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

After all of these experiences, it would be easy for me to define myself as artistically disabled, but that label would be a deception because the very nature of art makes it accessible to everyone. As Susan K. Langer said in her essay "The Cultural Importance of Art," "art is the epitome of human life, the truest record of insight and feeling." In this way, art is the slate on which we sketch a portrait of the human character. From the beginning, we are encouraged to partake in the practice of art. Kindergarten teachers hand their students a pack of Crayola crayons on the first day of school in order to establish a means of communication before writing skills are formed. Fingerpainting, Playdough, and building blocks become our first manipulatives through which we express to the grown up world the complex realm of childhood. These rudimentary beginnings establish a foundation of art in our souls on which our future creativities and passions

F O R U M

will build. From that point forward, as we live life, we collect and steal from our experiences images and ideas that define the structure of who we are. Wrought of the toughest iron (our personal passions) and shaped by our most profound need (emotional expression), this structure bends and twists with the human will, but is ultimately expressed everyday in our artistic endeavors. Our loves, hates, victories, and tragedies make up the cornerstone of this structure, while art provides the media through which we express our coupled romance, anger, happiness, and despair. As necessary as our food, clothing, and shelter, art fulfills this unique desire for emotional expression. At the very heart of our beings, we are creators, and our lives become our finest masterpieces.

However, that is not to say that all we create is beautiful or full of classical artistic talent. Once upon a time in Greek history, man defined art as the mirror of beauty. As aesthetically pleasing as beautiful art can be, it is false in that it neglects the full range of human emotion. Beautiful art might define love and respect but would ignore the realm of negative emotions like hate and mistrust. Beautiful art is full of infatuation and self-gratification, but life requires a more stolid and realistic approach, rich with the ugly passions and filthy crimes which fill our hearts as well. Beautiful art is a right arm with strong and well-defined muscles representing power and vitality. We shake the right hand, we make it a symbol of justice, we accept it as good. But we cannot forget the left arm in our attention to and appreciation of the right, even though this withered appendage atrophied by disease makes us ill, for there is a story here too, though it may make us sad or uncomfortable. While the dawning of the age of expression allows the artist to include these more painful emotions in his definition of art, the public outcry over the Mapplethorpe exhibit shows us that as a culture we still have difficulty not only accepting the ugly as an art form, but even defining art itself. This presents a special quandry considering the large role art plays in defining us as a culture.

Culturally, we typically limit art to the fine arts, particularly dance, music, and the visual arts. Our participation in or audience of these arts define our roles in society. Traditionally, the theaters, opera houses, and dance halls are frequented by the white upper class, while society's laborers quench their thirst for artistic stimulation in the church choirs, city streets, and backyard galleries. This closed-mindedness threatens to dissolve the cultural importance of art. Bad enough that society still categorizes art as the fine arts, but we selectively price these art events to insure that only a choice few can attend. As art comprises the very essence of our characters, these insensitivities seem crimes. New avenues of thought must be traversed in an attempt to alleviate these problems. Redefining in this case requires imagination. Murray Ross' "Football Red and Baseball Green" provides the kind of insight that society is lacking. His essay elevates sports to the level

ART AT THE WATER'S EDGE

of art form. With his allusions to baseball's pastoral traditions and football's heroic element, a new concept is being developed that not only provides the reader with an informative sports essay, but a valuable link to the art world that eloquently reworks our old definition. The freedom gained from this revolutionary thinking creates a perception of art that is more personalized and more in keeping with the true nature of art itself. This freedom provides me with the opportunity to redefine my role as an artist even though I lack artistic prowess in the classical sense. With optimism and enthusiasm, I venture on a quest for this elusive quality. After many abandoned efforts, just as my frustration is mounting and my prospects are looking dim, art finds me at the water's edge.

Five o'clock in the morning and even the sun is still asleep. I would like to say that the boathouse is quiet and restful at this hour, inviting solitude and inspiration. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Coxswains bark off commands to the crews who are working in a constant frenzy to prepare the "shells" for launch. Oars must be carried out and laid along the water's edge—red strips below the paddle indicate that these oars are for the port paddlers, green for starboard. As always, it is very easy to be swallowed by the bustle in the boathouse. This morning, however, I am acutely aware of a picture on the wall which depicts two crews after a race. While the picture is aesthetically pleasing in its soft colors and strong figures, it is the faces of the men that elevate this painting from a stop-action picture to a portrait of the human spirit. Some of the men sit proud like navymen afraid to break form, while others lie limp in the arms of their friends, their bodies spent from their exhausting effort. Beneath the picture is the quote, 'Great challenges bring the greatest of all rewards.. How we meet those challenges reveals the truth in all of us.' The picture is labeled "The Fine Art of Rowing" by John Grable and begins to expose the art inherent in this beautiful sport.

At the water's edge, there are many things like crabs, nets, and some thrown-away bottles. Some birds fly overhead, and the crew clubs ready for launch. For ancient Grecian sailors anxious to tempt fate on the high seas, the water represented a frontier. For these young men and women about to row off into the harbor, the water represents nothing less. This element of challenge inherent in both art and rowing unifies these two seemingly opposite things. The challenge in art is to depict one's self or one's emotion in a way that the audience can relate. In rowing, the challenge is to muster the courage to endure grueling physical pain while maintaining rigid mental control. Many times have my back muscles begged me for mercy from the crushing blows I deliver with each stroke, but I am immune to the pleas. Caught up in the mere challenge to keep with my crew, to dip my oar in the perfect angle to effect the most strength, to command all my concentration on the back of the rower in front of me, my body is locked into a physical and mental challenge unparalleled in any sport. Both art and rowing

F O R U M

elevate the human spirit and allow for the ultimate expression of the person. Just like the visual artist will practice a technique for perspective endlessly, so will the crewman practice his form. Like the brush that must sweep carefully over the canvas, so the oar must be manipulated in such a way that it cuts the water cleanly and swiftly. For the oarman, the water is his stage on which to perform. John Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World" enlists a host of characters to depict in one final flash of despair the brutal nature of man and man's personal conflict with the world. In this vein, there is brutal conflict within rowing as well. The rower seeks to challenge Nature herself with his daring on the water, not to mention his own personal conflict within himself over whether or not he will meet this challenge. Neither the artist nor the rower can foresee the outcome of his hard work, but they are both driven passionately by a desire to meet a seemingly insurmountable challenge and win.

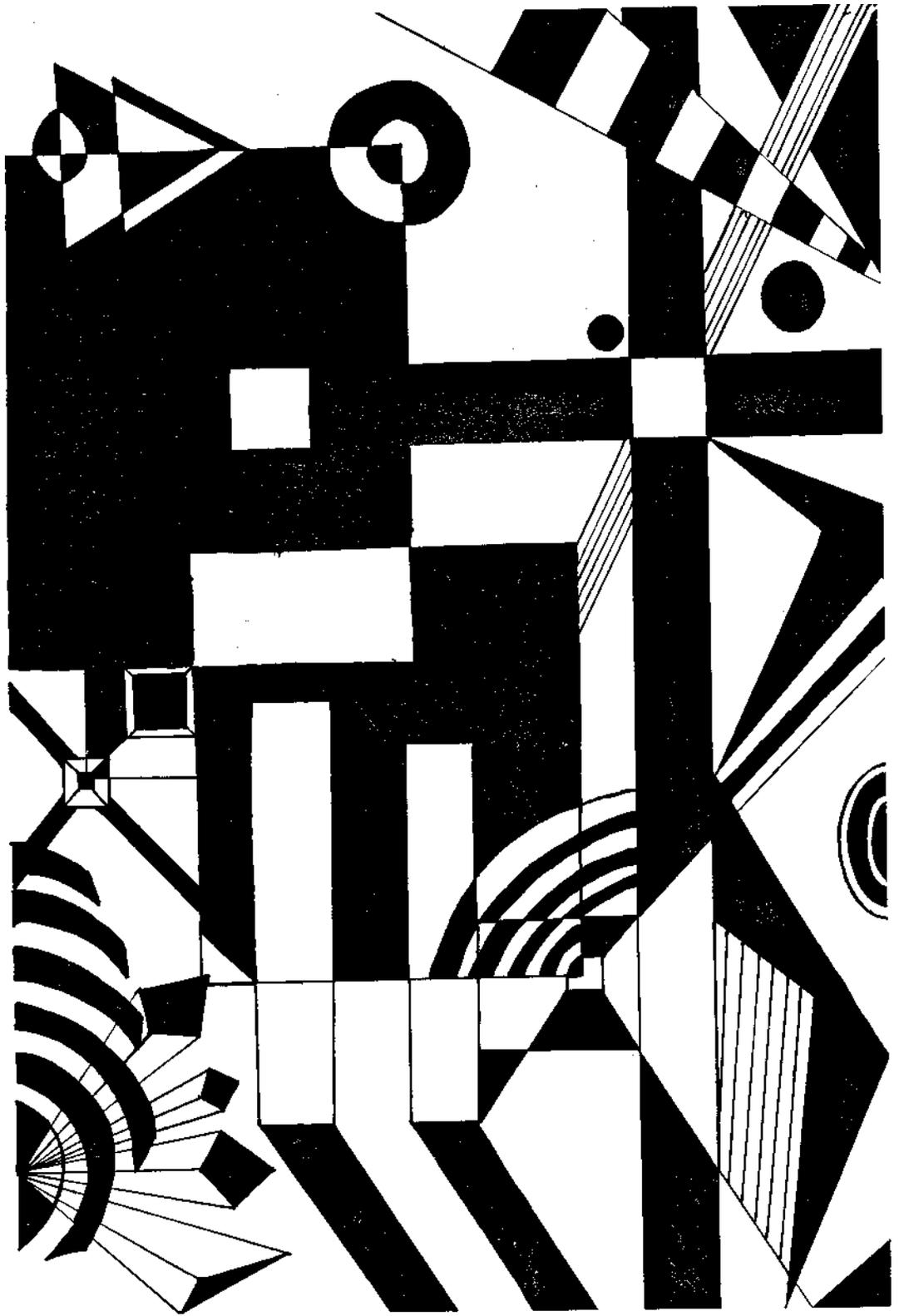
At the water's edge, a coxswain bleats the command, "All hands lay hold!" In a sweeping motion, sixteen hands arrive at the belly of the shell and prepare to set her in the water. The smoothness of the action is sweetly reminiscent of a finely ordered dance combination or a musical movement. Balance separates a good piece of music from a mediocre one, just as surely as symmetry may define a painting. Symmetry creates visual impact, such as when a crew is rowing in perfect synchronization. The grace with which the oars cut the water mirrors the grace of the human form in dance, and both create a feeling of awe at the obvious flawlessness with which these maneuvers are being performed. The callouses on my hands and the bruises on my shoulders remind me that we do not arrive at this effect without some degree of sacrifice. One of the main reasons for this sense of symmetry is the cooperation of the eight crewmen which turns eight individuals into a single entity at least for a while. I can remember no other time in my existence when there was an opportunity for such complete and utter unity in action other than in rowing. It is here that we see the human spirit defined in its most elegant sense as it shares an experience with another.

Because symmetry and balance are for the most part visual perceptions, there needs to be included here the other visual elements indicative of the rowing experience. Anyone who has seen a purple-gray sky with a pink sun melting into it as the morning crawls up to awaken the city is aware of the impact of such an experience on the soul. So is the crewman rewarded for his efforts each morning. The waterside at dawn provides an arena in which to survey the human spectra with artistic perspective. Like Woody Allen's "Crimes and Misdemeanors," images are placed one on top of the other, past and present transfused, in an attempt to offer a statement on human character.

At the water's edge, a sea gull cries above and a shuffle of feet is heard below. No voices as each crewman silently carries a boat back into the house in one joint

A R T A T T H E W A T E R ' S E D G E

motion. Each man is intent on his job, so there is no need for idle chatter. The boat weighs about three hundred pounds, so there is really no way to speak. Acoustically, rowing has a music all its own. Essential to the symmetry of the motions is the tap-count beat which rides under every motion. The rhythm of the beat turns the rowing action into a dance of sorts, while the silence of the early morning practices creates a symphony for the soul. Rowing may be a different kind of art than that which customarily comes to mind, but it deserves recognition for its beauty and drama as well. Perhaps our society would do well to look upon these unconventional arts with fresh eyes. Art is a fundamental part of man that will be recognizable in his every action. I watch as a crew rows past and I am lost in the sight I see. Art has found me at the water's edge.



1990
Writing Department
Prize Winners

*"What I like about a good author is not
what he says, but what he whispers."*

Logan Pearsall Smith



"A foreigner can photograph the exterior of a nation, but I think that is as far as he can get. No foreigner can report its interior—its soul, its life, its speech, its thought."

Mark Twain

Of Ivory

by Devi Ke

From the atmosphere, Africa's skull, resembling that of *Australopithecus*, is forever shrouded by condensing, charcoal-gray clouds. If you submerged yourself beneath this vapor, you would behold a continent of intense allurements—on a physical map, the legend would code the land and its rain forests green; the green green of lushness, of supple tree vines, of coursing chlorophyll, of the life-force that permeates the countryside. As you descend lower, Egypt and the Sudan become the forehead; Somalia becomes the exaggerated projecting brow ridge, the eastern-most region; Mozambique sits on the nasal bridge; South Africa, the mandible. And beneath the occipital lobe, on the west coast, at the site of the cerebellum, reigns La Cote d'Ivoire—the Ivory Coast to you. Beyond its mountain peaks, past the crested storks in startled flight, is its shoreline capital, Abidjan. At length, you alight upon a makeshift handcart, empty except for a half-dozen tubers of sweet cassava, its starchy flesh pulpy from rough handling. In front of you, across the talcum powder thoroughfare reclines Africa's equivalent to the American mall, the Cocody market.

Crude and rudimentary, the market lies supine, as if to laze in the spokes of the sweltering sun, its architectural lines amply horizontal. Even though the marketplace itself is only two stories high, its width encompasses more than one city block. There is no front or rear. Around and around I survey, north entrance, south, east, west—the facade is the same. The ground floor is literally that—calloused earth into which intermittent poles of massive girth are implanted. On top of these squats the second floor which, unlike the open-air space below it, is walled with unrefined lumber, coarse and thrown together with nails; hence, the Midwestern barn loft effect. And for the crowning effect, a patchworking of corrugated iron sheets suffices for a roof.

To appraise the exterior of a throbbing complex is not the same as trying to enter one. The interior has swollen beyond its capacity so that numerous stalls have overflowed outside, the losers of a day-to-day battle for one's niche. Fixed paths are nonexistent here. Simply pick a general direction and attempt to meander between the tables.

Bracelets, anklets, and nose-rings hammered out of copper and bronze line the outer booths. To the right are wallets, purses, keychains, belts of worn leather and peeling lizardskin, woven together by twine or sinewy beast-gut. Deeper in, another stall, wallpapered with tapestries depicting the African way of life impedes one's passage. On one fraying piece, a jug-crowned topless woman leads her brood of naked youngsters to a village well. On another, a mother is nursing her babe while, at the same time, pounding millet into a flour. In yet another, a hunter has bludgeoned an agouti to death. In his right hand, he grasps the rodent prey; in his left hand, he wields a club.

F O R U M

As you actually enter the building, the floor is transformed into one endless supermarket. Here, there, and there, rosy mangoes, raw cacao seeds, tobacco leaves that span two hands, plantains, sugar cane, luscious mangoustan and custard apple. All are beyond ripe in this heat, however. Their fragrance is overwhelmed by the aging, raw meat and fish that surround them. Spastic fowls, pintades, bob around underfoot and are occasionally stepped on, whereupon velvet black tufts of downy feathers explode in all directions. And everywhere there are flies, flies the size of black, seedless olives; flies on flesh, dead and alive; flies on other flies; flies that masquerade as filthy raisins. Is it my eyes, or is the haze I see the result of fumes arising out of the stench and not because of any heat?

Up the dilapidated stairs to the top floor. Textiles and ready-made garments panel the walls with vigorous, technicolor prints, dying the world surreal—a dab of the azurest blue pitted against its complement, a parching orange, and black's infinity combined with red's seething élan. Steady yourself at the booths in the middle of the floor, where malachite is the marble of statues, where chiseled figurines of satiny ebony cry out to be bought, and where ivory rules supreme... but caveat emptor. Not so scrupulous merchants will not hesitate to sell you bone instead! Despite my uncle's prodding, I linger too long scrutinizing the exquisite workmanship of a pair of ebony hippos, their proportions perfect for the seven by five inch stand I have back in the States. The wily merchant behind the booth, sporting a dashiki cut from bayadere cloth worn over large gathered pants of bright blue cotton, just about hurdles the table to begin haggling with me about the price. In this land of entrepreneurs, nothing is unreasonable, everything is negotiable. Thus their maxim, "Découragement n'est pas Ivoirian," "Discouragement is not Ivorian." Hounding, however, apparently is. At my silence, my salesman starts to jabber in guttural French, his eyes misreading what is weakness to be buyer-shrewdness. My uncle, one of those resettled Euro-African veterans, has warned me of situations like this. Deux milk CFA, 1900 CFA, 1800 CFA...1200 CFA...down to the equivalent of four U.S. dollars! Sold, right? Not quite. Eighteen years old, loaded with money, a world traveler, and I still could not utter the decisive "oui" to this sales transaction, something I would have done unhesitatingly if I had been alone, or for that matter, with anyone other than my uncle. My uncle signals his approval through pursed lips, the bottom lip, full and pink, envelops the top, and raised eyebrows—that pensive, pouting look of a bulldog.

It had been four years since I had seen my uncle last—too long ago, considering that he was over fifty then. That time, he came to me. This time, I have gleaned enough money to see him in his African element. That first glimpse of him in the Abidjan airport after an exhausting flight was like rediscovering one's childhood, distant but familiar and sentimental. At first he was a stranger, this

OF I V O R Y

blackened Asian who wore a marigold-yellow T-shirt with Dockers slacks, thongs, shades, and a red baseball cap that made no allegiance to any particular team. He stood there, his skin color indistinct from those around him, looking very much the native among the throng of greeters who lined the balcony-like stairway along the eastern wall of the airport. It was only when he called me by name that I could distinguish him from the others. And even then I recognized first not him, but my auburn-haired, salmon-pink aunt.

I fought my way to a point beneath where they stood, difficult to do in an undertow of disembarkees. It was just like a marketplace, congested and labyrinthized with booths, very Third-World. Without a word, my uncle cast me a lifeline, a crumpled, torn piece of envelope with instructions on how to survive this melee.

In violet ink, "Welcome to Africa. Don't bother with the queue for tourists, get in the one on the far right." I didn't like this. The mob may have been less dense over there but the sign clearly read, "Hommes D'affaires Seulement." Nevertheless, I got behind several businessmen carrying attache cases. One had his handcuffed to his wrist, I believe. At this point, because my own backpack seemed a little too pink for my comfort, I nonchalantly secreted it between my legs, straddling it the way a penguin straddles her egg. Four feet away, an Ivorian soldier stood, rifle at the ready, foppish-looking in his uniform of olive, khaki, and...was that the blood of wayward farers? I looked up to see my uncle. He just winked.

I was processed within the hour, something I could not say for my fellow travelers who milled about like a shipload of refugees waiting for their visas.

On to step two. "Pick up your suitcases first, or you may not get them at all." Okay, done, no problems. "Let one of the boys cart them..." But, all I had was two nylon duffels and, of course, my pack, something a child could carry. Besides, I had adamantly, perhaps a bit rudely, refused two boys already, who had wrenched at my bags most determinedly. Both came back, mercilessly — "Découragement n'est pas Ivoirian." I surrendered my belongings to the least vicious of the two. "They know what to do." My enterprising porter wheeled my bags quite efficiently to certain predetermined stations where he gestured for me to sign this or hand over that, to wait there and do that. The only time he spoke was to ask me, throatily, "Américaine?" It was beyond me how he knew.

After my bags were inspected, my underwear manhandled to my embarrassment, and my countenance eyeballed for composure, I was ushered to what looked like a dark closet with a light bulb, a table, and one chair curtained by a single burlap bag ripped along one seam to open up like a blanket. For heavens sakes, I had seen this in a movie somewhere, and my uncle never mentioned this in my crib sheet. I could see the final gate from where I stood—so close, yet so far. My expression must have triggered something in my porter, for he left me to go talk to the officer inside. Again, the gesturing and more eyeballing. I put

F O R U M

on my dopiest face. "Devi, Devi..." It was my uncle, a sprint away, hanging over the cast-iron gate like a child trying to get a better look at the zoo animals in their cage. He was beaming, and his thumb was up.

There was a nudge at my elbow, urging me on towards the final gate. It was all in the attitude, I reasoned. And in the porter. Behind me, a Latino, a Minolta in one hand, a white fedora hat in the other, was not so lucky. He was alone, and from the sound of it, not remotely fluent in French; he was also hefting a pricey gadget, greatly appreciated in these parts. The burlap fell over him as he was escorted inside.

Before me, my uncle's form was silhouetted by the rich saffron glow of the African sun. How beautiful, I marveled as I hastened towards the exit. Peach coral hibiscus and bird-of-paradise cascaded in profusion over and around the walkways, reminding me more of bloomy arcades found at a Hyatt Regency than the tourist trap the airport was. Uncle disposed of my porter most expediently, handing off to him an undisclosed number of folded bills. "Merci, monsieur," I offered, but my porter was gone.

"Ça va, Devi?" My uncle, the optimist.

"Oui, ça va."

"Ça va bien?"

"Don't push it," I breathed.

He chuckled. A graduate of the New Mexico Highland University (on full scholarship, I might add) and a fluent speaker of seven languages bordering on an eighth, Uncle could rap with the nastiest of gangs in New York, and get by...well, in a time-warped sort of way. After all, most of his American expressions were garnered from bygone college days back when Eisenhower was President.

"Hey, hey, it's my Davieeee, Davy Crockett," he lilted, always the comedian. In French, the "e" in Devi is pronounced "ay," and in France, Davy Crockett is as much a French phenomenon as an American one. The shtick was longstanding. Back when I was seven, and when Davy Crockett wasn't so hip, I had found it ever so vexing. Now, it was just expected, a warm number that was as integral to our hellos as kissing each other on the cheeks. With my uncle, I hug. It's the American thing to do. With my aunt, it's just three kisses—right cheek, left, then right again, done swiftly, as was the French-Mediterranean custom. I loved them both the same but differently.

"Allons-y."

"What's the hurry, Uncle?"

"No hurry." We were half-way across the parking lot by now. And paralleling our strides, step for step, were four youths, African, T-shirted and shoeless, who couldn't have been more than twelve years old each.

OF I V O R Y

"Attend! Attend! Monsieur!" they chorused, hands outstretched, "Nous avons désire de l'argent pour nos..." What was this, they wanted what? For doing what? "...votre voiture c'est bon, non?" Money for my uncle's car, for their troubles? Uncle handed off a second wad of bills to the eldest of the four.

"Uncle?"

"My attendants. They look after my car."

"From what?"

"Why, from themselves," he shrugged and checked the car for damages.

"And if you don't pay?" I watched as the three littlest boys bagged their share from the eldest who held the bills clutched high over their heads.

"Then you get an African surprise," chuckled my uncle.

The little devils were now heading off another poor sap at his car. Young entrepreneurs in the making, I thought to myself, harkening back to my industrious baggage boy, all of them preludes to what was to come—the master himself, the Ivorian market man.

"Allons-y," was all that I said.

We left the airport, or so I thought, passing under a magnificent crimson-boughed tree whose dew-drop foliage spattered over like fiery, smelted iron ore tipped from its kettle.

"The African flame tree, indigenous to this region," explained my uncle matter-of-factly. My uncle was a man of science, a chemistry major in college who became a division manager of one of Ciba-Geigy's tropical out-posts. Botany was his forte. "And over there, the baobab tree. *Adansonia digitata*, from the bombax family, Bombacaceae. Africans eat the fruit you know. And the bark is bitter. We're testing it to see if we could use a derivative of it in our medicine."

"Hmmm...and over there," I asked, "off the side of the road?"

"Soldiers. A check-point station for motorists." Not three kilometers from the airport. So far but yet so close.

Like the officer in the airport, they were armed to a "tee," except more so. These had lemon-sized grenades looped to their uniforms and ammunition strung over their torsos, Rambo-style. A red beret topped off the ensemble. The temperature was forty-two degrees celsius in the shade and the soldiers looked drowsy and itchy. One was leaning on his rifle; the other had set his down on the tarmac to rummage through the trunk of a car.

"Are those weapons loaded?"

"Of course," was my uncle's only reply.

Then he raised his hand and waved at the patrol. Oh God no, I prayed to myself, but they just waved us through.

"Watch and learn, Devi. The driver will give our soldier a gratuitous gift for such hard work earned."

F O R U M

I looked back to see the soldier pocket a transistor radio.

Home was a citadel—a petite villa/Japanese tea house without the stucco or the turquoise tile roofing, with barred doors and windows in the place of sliding rice-paper screens. Like most of the structures here, 26 Impasse J. Cartier was linearly planar, like the airport or the market, a sprawling, sun-worshipping piece of architecture. The house could not be seen from the dirt road. A seven foot cement and lapillus hedge, the Wall, saw to that. And the iron gate to the driveway, the same height, was so laced with fleurs-de-lis that even penetration by sight was impossible.

Beep.

"André!" demanded my uncle.

The gates swept open. A pleasant-looking but awkward young black man held back a peppery dachshund, Suki, as we drove up. A friend of Uncle's?

He rushed over to open the car door for me.

"André is my man-servant, Devi." My uncle gave him my bags.

"Bonjour, André."

"Bonjour, mademoiselle." Soft-spoken and sheepish, he gently shook my hand with his free hand. At any minute, I expected him to toe the ground and slur, "Aww shucks, ma'am."

"Tonight, I'll introduce you to Oumarou, my night watchman," promised my uncle.

The villa was essentially divided into two. To get to the bedrooms, one had to go past a heavy, bank-vault type door, necessary, as Uncle put it, to keep the air-conditioning in, the mosquitos out, and the household safe. I was given a key which I was to use if I ever had the urge to raid the icebox after the door was officially sealed for the night, around eleven. Between this door and the bedrooms was a hallway, uncarpeted, but collaged with hundreds of photographs of Uncle's three children and grandchild. Pictures of Alain on his Yamaha, Anne sniffing a hibiscus, Elaine turning her head away from the camera in disdain, two-year old Olivia "playing the geisha girl," all on a photo album we would call a wall.

My favorite part of the house was the marble veranda, copped by whispering bamboo and passion-fruit vines and punctuated by a low, Japanese-type table which had been Africanized by drapings of georgic woven fabric. From where I loved to sit, I could see a mango tree, my uncle's prize, off in one elbow of the Wall, with epiphytes of orchid and vanilla clinging about its trunk. It was here on the table that I saw a photocopy of a schedule, my schedule, for my stay in the Cote d'Ivoire. Titled, "Program —June 16 to June 29, 1987," it continued to list my calendar for the next week and a half: "Thurs 16.6 Arrival by RK 098. 15:00...Sat 18.6 Beach day in Assouind...Wed 22.6 Shopping at Cocody Market.. .Sun 26.6 Dinner party at Gen, Gomis'...Tues 28.6 Departure by RK 097. 12:00."

OF IVORY

"Well, what do you think?" asked Uncle, in a green and white Ciba-Geigy T-shirt and a paisley sarong.

"Program looks fine, Uncle."

He swatted my big toe.

"What's with this 'Uncle' bit, anyway? Four years and you've forgotten..."

"Ohm." Ohm, Ohm, Ohm. "Sorry." He was right. It was a bit remote, even forward of me, not to remember my childhood nickname for him. In Cambodian, there are several grades of uncles, and "Ohm" is considered the most esteemed.

"That's better." He pursed his lips and leaned over to pluck some lemon-grass from among the bamboo and proceeded to ball them up between his thumb and his forefinger. "Smell this," he ordered. Its scent was organic, acidic, a trace insecticidal, like citrus-fresh roach spray. And we eat this stuff? Uncle, I mean Ohm, took the squishy mess and rubbed it on my forearm, streaking it green. "One hundred percent, all natural mosquito repellent," he winked, "it's field-tested." Then he tweaked my nose, "Don't stay up too late tonight. Tomorrow we start out early for the beach."

Later that same night, I was in the refrigerator, with Suki at my feet and a cloud of mosquitos over my right ear. Beer, Schweppes with quinine, goat milk, more beer, two wedges of "Le véche qui rit" cheese, and yogurt. Not exactly Hagen Daz ice cream. I settled for some mangoustan instead. André had gone home for the night after the dinner dishes had been done, and in his stead was Oumarou, the sentry Oumarou. I peeked outside to see him on the Wall, his arms akimbo, his carriage princely.

"Vi." A murmur.

"Vivi..." Soft serenade.

A tweak on the nose. Another tweak, this time my nose is held until my eyes are forced open.

"Get up, Devi," yet another tweak for emphasis. "Come, there's a parrot in the mango tree."

A parrot!

A parrot. Greenish-brown and wet, it shuffled from side to side on one of the low-lying branches, not much bigger than the fruit that surrounded it.

"It's very pretty," I volunteered.

But Ohm had gone back inside the house to wake up my Aunt Paulette. She came out, her eyes crusty, wearing a boubou whose De Stijl design overlapped each other with each move she made. If she had had a basket of goods on her head and a baby on her back, she could have been mistaken for one of those women I had seen waddling along the side of the road day after day. She peered into the tree, "Mon dieu, so it is a parrot. How about that." She winked at me,

F O R U M

gaped once more at the bird and went inside to help André prepare the picnic basket for our trip to the beach.

Assouind was precisely what its name invoked—a place that was soothing, balmy, and unpeopled. If Africa was a skull, then Assouind would be but a cell near the nape of the neck. It was two and a half hours south of Abidjan. From the sky, it must have resembled a tricolored flag, striped green, white, and blue. I was but a blemish on the white stretch of that flag, collecting cowrie shells and ivory-white cuttlebone whilst all the while, the dynamic green and blue bands, the palms and the ocean, rippled in the wind.

After our picnic, I contented myself by poking my uncle's beer-belly in concert with the slap-slapping of the surf.

"Umpf, umpf, umpf," came from beneath the crescent of his red baseball cap. One yellow eye squinted out at me. "What is it, Devi?"

"Ohm, I was wondering. All the way over here, I didn't see one animal."

He closed his eye. "Mhmm?"

"Well? Where are they?"

He pouted. "Gone. All eaten up." The eye opened. He pushed up his baseball cap with one forefinger. "Africans just about killed everything trying to feed themselves." A silence. "There was a time when you'd see families line up in a row outside a forest and just go through it, yelling, driving the animals out, whacking at anything that moved. Wiped out the countryside. The ivory poachers had a lot to do with it too, of course."

I thought about the parrot from this morning.

"There's a story," Ohm continued, "from up near Korhogo, in the Savannah, where our company keeps some stables. It tells of how one of our horses had died, from a natural death, it seems. The company buried it but came back a couple of days later to find the grave empty. The Africans had eaten it."

Uncle exhaled. "Survival, Devi." He pulled his cap back over his eyes, clasped my hand and held it pressed to his chest.

"Ohm..."

He squeezed my hand. "Shhh, siesta," he hushed, "sleep"

The weekend was over and Ohm had to go back to work. Suki and I would sit for hours on the veranda, her eating passion-fruit blossoms, me rubbing her stomach, both of us waiting for Uncle to come home. When he did, he never seemed weary, only too happy to whisk me off to sample that other Ivorian delight—the African eatery.

"Where are we going?" I asked, after an hour of winding past shanty after shanty in Abidjan's circuitous outskirts.

"We are going to San Francisco..." he lilted. It was his time-warped way of saying that it was to be a surprise.

OF I V O R Y

We passed marketplaces kinetic with life, passed median strip vendors unloading neon-colored snow shovels, passed the lagoon, where I saw a man defecating among the watercress. Three roadblocks and a baobab later, we pulled up outside of the "Bar Le Cactus," a weathered, orange-red adobe hut.

Inside, the walls were filled with ebony masks.

"Try the Kedjenou la Pintade," Ohm urged, "it's as African as it gets."

The menu offered beef, fish—I wondered if they caught them from the lagoon—and porc-pic, which I read to be pork but discovered later to be porcupine.

I ate the "porc" with a red sauce that I found to be rather sublime. Made of palm oil, fresh tomatoes, onions, sea salt, vinegar, and bay leaves, it almost made the chewy dish palatable. I swatted at a fly. "Ohm, how is Elaine?"

"Good. She's in Paris now. Anne is with her. There's a scar on her throat where they operated to get the tumor out, but otherwise she's fine."

"I'm glad."

"You know, the surgery has changed her. A lot. She's not as aloof with me as before." A deep breath. "My children are always like that. I don't know why. They always have to suffer before they can appreciate."

I inclined my head. "Has Herv found a job yet?"

"Him?" Uncle always referred to Anne's husband as either "He" or "Him," never by his name. "No." A pause. "Do you know that he took my daughter to Paris to live in a room no bigger than a box that had no air-conditioner and no heater? They were eating crackers when I went to see them. Crackers, Devi. Anne was pregnant at the time." His words were measured and labored, as if each one chafed at his soul. "That's why I work hard now so that when I die, my children will be secure."

"Please don't." I embraced my uncle's face with my hand. He inhaled. He lifted my hand from his cheek and kissed it. Then he made me finish my porcupine.

The Cocody Market was, to me, where all of my discoveries were funneled. It was the culmination of the Ivorian experience.

I left that market, not only two hippos, ebony hippos that is, heavier, but with a grasp of what the tapestries had meant, of what the merchant had seemed to need. As my uncle and I left the hustling behind us to get to the car, we were confronted by this need. Two boys were leaning against the driver's side of our car, shorted and shirtless, hands outstretched. They weren't any different from the Ivorian market man. It was just that with them, traveling in packs seemed necessary, as opposed to the master, who stood alone. This time it was I who relinquished a wad of bills to the Discourageless.

General Gomis spoke English. There were moments when I wished he did not.

F O R U M

It may have been my last weekend in Africa, but it took everything I had to keep from becoming blasphemous that Sunday night at the dinner party.

"Ah, our host. Général Gomis, je présent ma nice, Devi Ke, des états-Unis."

"Eh bien? Enchante, mademoiselle." Gluttonous and all smiles, the General carried a riding whip, with which he would periodically slap his thigh. "Parlez-vous français?" Slap, slap.

"Nnnn, comme ci, comme ça. Pas assez, je regrette."

"Alors, I shall speak Inglesh, umm?" He chortled and paused to catch the eyes of his entourage, his audience, as if this conversation amused him. Slap. "You like our ville, our petit Paris, non?"

"Very much. Abidjan is very nice."

It wasn't enough. He pressed further.

"Come, come, she is ...uhh, qu'est-ce que le mot, uhh..." he was snapping his fingers now, trying to get the motion to perhaps travel up his spinal cord and snap the word into his brain, "beautiful. The BEST, non?" Slap, slap, slap.

"Yes, she is impressive."

"Americaine," he humphed. "Tell me, Davy, you préfère here to Amerique, yes?"

I smiled and said not a word. I found the General to be a pompous ass, an Ivorian soldier carried to the extreme. I took my leave of him, thinking to myself, I'd rather be shopping.

The day I left the Cote d'Ivoire, I gave André and Oumarou what was left of my CFAs, hoping they wouldn't take it as an insult. We had, during my stay in Abidjan, communicated only through smiles and gestures, things much sweeter than words. They took the money graciously. Uncle, who was watching at the time, was pleased.

"That was the best way you could have ever thanked them, Devi. Now as for you..." He pressed something into the palm of my hand—a keychain of the continent of Africa, a little Australopithecus skull made of ivory.

"Oh Ohm..."

Uncle engulfed me in his arms and whispered in my hair, "Don't wait another four years." He straightened. "Come now, we must leave early for the airport. You never know what we could run into on the way over..."

"Oh that's okay, Ohm." I giggled. "Découragement is not American either," and tweaked him on his nose.





*"A man who is always well satisfied
with himself is seldom so with others,
and others as little pleased with him."*

La Rochefoucauld

Living Lessons

by Mary Katherine Hoeck

The raspy, smoke-scarred voice croaked the words matter-of-factly, "Summit Driving School." A short, terse statement of fact. I knew—very matter-of-factly—that I was trapped. The prospect of spending three weeks of my precious summer nights in a classroom learning the "art" of driving did not excite me. And the intimidating voice on the line did little to boost my anticipation or my confidence.

Again, the voice that was part bullfrog and part-metal-rake-scratching-across-concrete spoke, "What do you need, hon?"

I replied, "I need to enroll in a driving class."

But I knew that my response was a lie. I had to enroll in this class, this mandatory public course that would attempt to educate sixteen year olds on the true and safe way to operate an automobile. However, I knew that I didn't need this class. I was intelligent. I had successfully tackled two long years of high school. It was my opinion that this business of driving a car could not possibly be so difficult to warrant such a drawn-out ordeal. Granted, I had never been behind the wheel of a moving vehicle, but I thought, "How hard could it be?" Countless other people, many of whom surely must have been of lesser intelligence than I, had survived their driver's tests. Besides, I had been riding in a car my entire life; the technique should have become almost instinctual by now. I was certain that this entire process would prove to be an utterly worthless waste of time. I completed my enrollment with "The Croaker" and hung up the phone.

I made up my mind. I was determined that I would trudge my way through these next several weeks and rise above the whole sordid process. My boots would not be dirtied by these messy trivialities. Not even a "Croaker" would frighten me. I set my intimidation aside.

The person who created the name "Summit" must have been trying to convince potential students that here was the ultimate driving school, the apex, the zenith of all driving schools. Or perhaps he desired to impress upon his customers' minds that his school would be the best to guide them to their goal, their own personal summit—the acquisition of a driver's license. However, the actual school failed miserably to instill any confidence in me. I doubted the effectiveness of its teachings as I saw the destruction rendered by an adult student's confusion between the gas and brake pedals—a mishap that propelled her, her instructor, and the instruction car through the front wall of the building and into the office. Boards and supports and a black plastic tarpaulin were all that held the storefront entrance of "Summit Driving School" erect and separated the office from the sidewalk.

The office itself was the lair of "The Croaker." An eerie grayness shrouded

F O R U M

the cramped room, darkened from the heavy, black plastic that was one entire wall. The air was misty with smoke and reeked of the nicotine of countless Camels. A radio, invisible, but perched somewhere near the ceiling, twanged the country-western sounds of WPOC. The woman was tiny and black-wigged, and she seemed as immovable as the beige file cabinets which surrounded her. I poked my head into that office on the first night of class and inquired where I should go. No sound managed to escape "The Croaker's" ravaged throat; she simply waved her claw-like hand, with its long, yellow fingernails, in the direction of the only other room in the building.

One piece contraptions that were both desk and folding chair filled the imitation walnut-panelled classroom to capacity. A pilfered stop sign hung on one wall. More file cabinets and a blackboard. Scattered about the room were a dozen or so other students. In the front row, a "surf rat" stared blankly through his long peroxide-blond bangs at the clean blackboard. This dark piece of slate must have possessed some strange mystique, for another boy, seated in the back, gazed at it just as blankly as the first. His jet black hair, winged at the sides, hung down the back of his torn Iron Maiden T-shirt. Chains dangled from his beltloops. The blankness of their stares unnerved me. I averted my eyes and rested them on a group of girls seated on the opposite side of the room. One was hugely pregnant, and she chattered about soap operas with a covey of hairsprayed-hot-pink-tank-topped-gaudy-eared wenches. I dropped into a seat, as other alien beings drifted in. I didn't want to know anyone. What was I doing here? Me, with my plaid shorts, bobbed haircut, and Tretorn tennis shoes. I attempted to calm myself. I floundered to stay above them. Where did these people come from? What strange tribe was I among?

And then Gordon appeared. Here was the man who, over the next three weeks, would be our teacher, our mentor. He would be, in a sense, our liberator as he was to teach thirty restless sixteen year olds the operation of the automobile and, subsequently, hand us the keys to freedom. I was not impressed. Gordon was a very tall profusion of points and angles. His thinness poked through the loose, plaid blue workshirts that hung from his frame each class. Pale, skinny legs stretched out of his faded cutoff jeans and ended with grotesquely shapen feet strapped into colored rubber thongs. Gordon folded his long legs up behind a great, gray metal desk and, each class, gnawed his way through a bag of rice cakes.

It was from this desk that, every now and again, Gordon revealed to the class some of the more interesting tidbits regarding the workings of the automobile or the methods of driving. But what was more interesting to him was life - his, ours, and that of the world at large. Gordon was an ex-hippy, and vestiges of such, or perhaps more of an aura, still clung to his tattered clothes or was entangled in his long, but balding, frizzy hair. The lecture about the effects of drugs

L I V I N G L E S S O N S

and alcohol on driving ability was secondary to the tales of his own wanderings in the world of hallucinogenic drugs. Gordon's past was no secret to the class. We learned that he had been studying to become a podiatrist, that population genetics had been his hardest class, that he'd fallen ill with liver disease, and that his career had taken the natural turn to that of a driver's ed instructor. He spoke like a prophet, trying to impress into our palpable minds his own philosophies on life. I ingested his theories on the deficit and the failings of the Social Security system, wondering all the while what this had to do with driving. I was not learning to drive. I was taking a class in Life According to Gordon.

Very quickly I became bored, even angered, by Gordon's self-important ramblings, his weak ploy of wisdom. I believed that my doubts about the worth of this class and the entire driver's ed process were reinforced by the unproductive hours I spent each night with Gordon. As I had wondered about the other students, so, too, did I wonder about my instructor. What could I learn from such a wierdo? What could this ex(?)-druggie, college dropout possibly teach me? I could find nothing so far.

Sometimes, Gordon's ramblings were mercifully broken up by the showing of the requisite driver's ed filmstrips. The lighthearted piece entitled "Highway of Agony" proved to be a class favorite with its graphic shots of very red blood on very white car seats and its close-ups of mangled bodies. So, too, was the film promoting the "Smith Driving Method." The entire film featured a chicken-faced man, presumably Mr. Smith, who drove throughout town displaying his overly conscientious driving skills and neurotically honking his horn each time he passed another car. But as I sat in the dark, captive to these films, I was not fooled. Just as I had seen through Gordon's pseudo-intellectual ramblings, I saw through these exaggerated, one-sided attempts to drill a simple message through thick skulls. If these films were supposed to scare me or convince me to honk my horn repeatedly for safety's sake, they had failed. I wouldn't fall so easily. I still believed, stronger than ever, that I didn't need three weeks—plus films, plus Gordon—to master these "skills" on paper. I wanted to put off all these unnecessary formalities, all of these strange people, behind me. I longed for the open road.

Eventually, my time came and I was to complete my course with six hours on the road with an instructor. I had passed the final exam with a score of 113, as handily as I had expected. I was through with Gordon. Now, I faced Miss Carol. Immediately, I deemed the woman as low class, worth little to nothing. She was fat, wore thick glasses, and had hair frizzled close to her head with a disastrous perm. Miss Carol ate for most of our six hours together. I became her private chauffeur, victim to her gastronomical whims. She had me drive her to High's Dairy Store, where, because they didn't sell low-fat ice cream, she bought two Snickers bars. She had me drive to her trailer home, where she stocked herself

F O R U M

with bulk-food Combos. Miss Carol divulged to me the medical histories of both herself and her asthmatic daughter, prompting her to remember that she needed to pick up two prescriptions. Again, I drove her.

She revealed her secrets to me as I tooled along Route 1. She tried to peddle her asthmatic daughter's crocheted handiwork on me as I maneuvered the winding curves of Ellicott Mills. I came to hate her. I hated the polyester tackiness of her clothes, the rolls of fat that cramped her movements and squeezed grunts out of her with each shift of weight, the gritty and grammatically incorrect manner in which she spoke. Even though she knew how to parallel park and to merge and to do a three point turn while I did not, I considered this knowledge to be cheap. I remained superior. How smart could she be? She was only a driving instructor. I had caught on to this driving thing quickly, and this woman was making a career of teaching such a simple art. I breezed through, believing my boots were still shiny and new.

A few weeks passed before I trekked to the Motor Vehicles Administration in Glen Burnie with high hopes of ending this arduous driver's ed ordeal. The MVA building was like a cube of chalk, dry and drab, and so, too, were the papershufflers who worked inside. They were all colorless and smileless as they methodically stamped and signed my "pretest" papers. I was prepared as I waited in my cute Honda Civic, radio off, watching the testers enter the cars in line in front of me. Each car drifted off in turn, peeling off into one of the four driving courses. Do or die.

The man who invaded my car was, like the other MVA workers, barely alive. He was pasty-faced, weak, with horn-rimmed glasses and greasy black hair, somewhat reminiscent of the chicken-faced Mr. Smith of filmstrip fame. With him staring sternly ahead, I cruised into course C, confident. I could stop, I could start, I could parallel park. Not fifteen feet into the course, the robotic wimp beside me expressionlessly intoned the words, "Stop the car." I jerked the Honda to a halt, thinking he wanted me to demonstrate some skill or another. Wordlessly, the man got out of the car, walked to the driver's side, and told me to move to the passenger's seat. Something was horribly wrong. My throat clenched and tears welled as I timidly circled around to the other side of the car and got in. The sudden realization crashed over my head and sent tingles to my fingertips. My stomach lurched. I had failed. I sank into the crush gray velour.

The lifeless man who held my driving future in his clammy hands said, "You do know that a red light means stop, don't you? You failed to stop at the red light. Automatic failure." He put my car into drive and exited the course. I had detected condescension in the tester's words, and I was humiliated. I was mortified. Of course, I knew a red light meant stop. I just hadn't seen the stop at all; it was way off to the side and I'd missed it. So many lunatics and idiots before

L I V I N G L E S S O N S

me had seen that stop light and passed their driver's tests. But I had missed it. I had failed. I was hereafter labelled manually deficient, unable to pass a driver's test. I had been so confident. I had thought I was so infallible. I had been a bitch.

In that moment, with unconscious realization, my tower of superiority which loomed over "Croaker," Gordon, and Miss Carol came crumbling to the ground. Throughout the entire driver's ed process, I had elevated myself above all of those people somehow connected to the "simple" art of driving. Condescension had been my method for survival; not for learning to master the skills of driving (for they were, in reality, not difficult) but for coping with people I had found so strange. Never before in my short and sheltered life had I come in contact with people like these. "The Croaker," Gordon, and Miss Carol were gruesome caricatures of the "sophisticated beings" I had only known. They were not beautiful, graceful, normal. They possessed visible quirks and faults that were glaring against my stark fantasy images of perfection. They were different from me, and so I deemed them stupid, worthless, leading a dumb and meaningless existence. I rose above them, or so I thought, to relieve my fear of their absurdity.

These people were not gruesome; they were human. And they had things to offer, even to me. I had believed that I had been "lowering" myself, allowing Gordon and Miss Carol and the pasty-faced tester to make their sacrifices, to offer their paltry wisdom to me, after which I immediately disregarded their existences. Off with their heads and I was still in power. I was afraid to find any value in their knowledge, believing that in doing so I would be "lowered" to their levels.

Would I have liked Gordon if he had been a doctor, Miss Carol if she had been slender and well-spoken, the pasty-faced tester if he had been strong and handsome? I probably would have. All along, from "The Croaker" to Gordon and on, I had become repulsed by appearance, prejudiced by lack of position. I had wondered how intelligent Miss Carol could be, stuck in a job I deemed to be no-account, and I'd laughed at the sorry sight, and sound, of "The Croaker." But daily, "Croaker" sat in that office and did her job, and daily, Miss Carol rode in the passenger seat, telling her secrets to her students. And perhaps that was good enough for them. Then it should have been good enough for me. There must have been some satisfaction for them in the things that they did, and it was not for me to judge or measure their happiness or capabilities. It was their world and their existence. They need not answer or explain or live up to my expectations for them. In these matters, I was no-account, just as I had labelled them no-account in my world.

For now, I sat in the passenger seat, my face contorted and gruesome with my tears. Now, I was a strange being, a failure at the skills that those other alien beings found so natural. I was not conscious of the things I had done or thought. I was conscious only on my humiliation. Now, I begged for mercy from that pasty-faced man as he lorded over me, as he ushered me out of his testing course.

"Gaming is the child of avarice, the brother of inequity, and the father of mischief."

Washington

The Quick Hit

by Brian Meyer

There's a shopping mall where the Atlantic City Race Course used to be, and it's there that the Atlantic City Expressway begins its stretch run for the city by the sea. The road begins, with a toll plaza, but, aside from that, the casual traveller expects nothing more than the usual three-lane highway. For those who work in Atlantic City, the routine of the daily commute has produced carelessness. Caution is left stranded here in Mays Landing, New Jersey. The rules of the road seem to be these: you pull into the starting gate, throw your quarter down, then accelerate into the left lane where you set your cruise control and race for the finish line at a smooth eighty. Wouldn't want to be late for work. The uninitiated drivers hug the right lane at a cautious sixty, eyes scanning left and right for the hide-and-seek troopers. As the BMWs and Lincolns pass on the left with a haughty disregard for posted limits, you find yourself trespassing on the semi-private driveway of casino big shots. The speed you're not doing, the cops who aren't there, the race you're not running—all conspire to produce your paranoia, your fear that the toll is the border of the normal.

Five miles from the expressway's end, Billboard Row begins. Camel cigarettes...The Sands Casino...Jack Daniels...Trump Plaza...The Marlboro Man... Ceasar's Palace...Benson & Hedges: For People Who Like To Smoke...Bally's Park Place...Smirnoff Vodka...Trump's Taj Mahal: SEVENTEEN ACRES OF PURE PLEASURE! Didn't Mother always remind us to keep our eyes on the road while she fixed her make-up in the rear-view mirror? There are so many billboards that you find you jerk from color to color without registering any message. But there is a simple black and white one you do not forget: "You are here. The mirage is in Las Vegas. Hmmmmm."

Jake McDermott is caught in the middle of an expensive decision. His left, ringless hand is doing the thinking, picking ten chips off the pool-hall-green felt and dropping them again slowly in a ten tier tower. He does it again. And again. All the while staring down at his jack and six. The left hand likes the sound and the feel of the chips. Would it like the sound and feel of ten more? Or none? The right hand is more impulsive, offering Jake a hit of bourbon for courage then tapping the jack with its pointer. The eyes widen at the three of diamonds, and Jake drinks again as the cool, mechanical dealer produces two cards for himself. Jake's jaw drops. The hands pound the table. The dealer rakes the chips. And a pair of queens laughs silently as another loser slides away.

"How much were those chips worth?" I asked as I followed him to the bar.

"A hundred bucks a shot," he mumbled slowly.

"Christ, Jake, how can you lay out a grand on nineteen?"

"Hey, lay off. It seemed like a safe bet. How 'bout buyin' me a drink? I'm

F O R U M

busted."

"Yeah, I know."

Jake is one of the few people left in Atlantic City who live here all year round but do not work for the casinos. He's a bartender at the Irish Pub on St. James Place, and he lives across the street in the Majestic Apartments, right next door to my grandmother's place. We were both alone for the week, and so he agreed to show me what the casinos were all about. I had just turned twenty-one, that arbitrarily determined age when our sensibilities are legally permitted to experience the decadence of this society. Sure, he'd show me around alright, but I had to promise him that I wouldn't say a word while he sat at the black-jack table.

"Why'd they change dealers and cards after you'd won a few hands?" I asked.

"That's just a psychological trick. A new dealer can't change your luck."

"Yeah, I know."

Atlantic City is never what a visitor expects. There are good-time resort towns all along the east coast, but this one shocks all expectations. As the Expressway comes to an end, you'll find the Trump Regency on your right, condemned hotels on your left. The road dies at Pacific Avenue, the main street of the city. Here, you hang a left and head for the heart of the island due east. (Yes, east—the city runs latitudinally; the sun rides the boardwalk like a monorail.) Seedy liquor stores...Caesar's Palace...pornography shops...Bally's Park Place...a pack of vagrants...white limousines...tour buses...more boarded buildings. This is what you see as you pass the familiar names of Monopoly streets. The best and worst the city has to offer lie side-by-side. Atlantic City has no uptown, no downtown; all is condensed onto this strip of South Jersey coastline. Beverly Hills meets Harlem.

Wobbly, capricious capitalism has been quickly replaced by risky, compulsive gambling. Pacific Avenue is its own public casino, a street where a new gamble is offered at every street corner. There are dealers all around you offering a chance to play their game. You can't get from St. James to Tennessee without a proposition. "Yo, ma man, I got some soda, man." "A little whitey for the whitey?" "Feelin' lonely, big boy?" You bet your life if you choose to play or if you "just say no" and walk away. You bet your life just walking along Pacific at night, and all you can think of is making it home—of breaking even.

It's Wednesday night, and Jake decides to show me around Caesar's Palace. We walk through a little shopping mall that leads to the gaming room. Brightly lit shops and boutiques are open but empty. Everyone gambles at night, Jake says. Shopping is for the daytime. Saks and Gucci were the only names that I recognized. Shops like this just don't exist back home in Baltimore. Of course, nothing has a price tag. If cost concerns you, just walk right on by. Jake and I did. He was led by the fever of the quick hit, and I simply followed his beeline for the casino entrance. But I had to look back on Rodeo Drive. Protected by the confines

THE QUICK HIT

of the casino, who would have expected to see such a sight in this town? This capitalism unleashed, the most extravagant display of wealth these working class eyes have ever seen. I had to turn away.

Jake and I take an escalator down into the heart of the Roman orgy. Below is sponge-thick carpeting that absorbs the heels of my jazz oxfords. Above are chandeliers of Austrian crystal that are the size of a Rolls Royce. Everywhere you look, there are lights flashing, bells ringing, dice rolling, cards shuffling, wheels spinning, losers sulking, winners dancing, tax collectors scurrying. There's money to be won; money being lost. Thousands and thousands changing hands every single second. I want to make the night last, so I ask Jake if we could have a drink before we gamble. He motions me over to a pair of stools at the video poker machines. I'm confused. "Just wait," Jake says, "and enjoy." Minutes later, a dangerously short Roman dress with drop-dead legs struts our way, and the brunette who owns them offers to get us drinks—free drinks. I want to stay here all night and let the cocktail waitresses bring me high balls, while I watch their weight shift from hip to hip as they negotiate the thick carpeting in stiletto heels.

"I think I'll stay here all night, Jake."

"I know what you mean. Maybe twenty years ago I'd have felt the same way, but it passes with age. You'll see. C'mon, no risk, no gain. That's what I say."

No risk, no loss. That's what I think.

Jake leads me to the center of the casino where the change booths are. I look around some more. I have to. The slumishness of the city lulled my defenses to the quick hits that such sights swing. I stand between two styles of gambling: Las Vegas glitz and Monte Carlo sophistication. The glitz is the world of mechanized gambling. Rows and rows of slot machines and video poker computers. All the lights and bells are here as well as the little old ladies who have turned away from bingo. The slots are played by my kind of people, middle class folks who are looking to have a little fun with the money they used to spend on cigarettes. Spending money is the real habit. Most of them are lured here by advertisements and special promotions. The casinos grab them with their bus line tentacles and pull them in from all the big cities in the East. There's not enough local business to satisfy the greed of the casino bosses. Believe it or not, they thrive on the social security checks of the bingo players.

The black ties can be found at the tables on the other side, as if the rich alone have the right to gamble with human beings. They have a rather genteel and sophisticated approach to gambling. It's proper English and perfect posture. It's Miss Manners and Bond, James Bond. It's subtle smiles and indifferent losses. The dealers are all the same. They're young men and women who keep their jobs so long as their bodies are sexy, hands quick, eyes sharp, and expressions cold. The wealthy play with machines after all. At a roulette wheel, a suave, fiftyish

F O R U M

gentleman tosses a single white chip onto the board. "Ten thousand on sixteen," said the spinner. I had to stay and watch the wheel whirl. I kept my hands in my pockets; I didn't trust myself. He poured white chips from palm to palm like a Slinky. I waited for one to drop. He lost, casually tossed another chip, and we played our respective waiting games again. And again.

St. James Place is a sore sight for anyone's eyes. It's Godless and barren. It's rotting buildings and broken bottles. It's a bed for winos. It's Condemnation Street. There are fourteen buildings on the dead-end street; only the four at the boardwalk end are still operating.

The game of Monopoly is being played for real, but in a twisted sense. No one buys a property with the intent of building a hotel on it. In buying a deed, investors are staking a bet, waiting and hoping for a new casino boss to buy them out so that the land can be cleared for a new casino. A bet of a few thousand dollars can be turned into a cool million if you're lucky. St. James is a logical bet. It's quite a walk between Resorts International and The Sands. This square block of boarded shacks and empty lots is positioned strategically between the two. It's a casino waiting to happen. It's an ugly bet, however. You can stand on the boardwalk, face away from the sea, and catch a glimpse of Berlin after the Allied bombings. We've all bought that orange deed for a mere one hundred eighty dollars. Right now, that's about all that it's worth. Next week, it might be one hundred eighty million.

The boardwalk is no grand stand either. Aside from the casinos, there really is nothing to look at, nothing to do. The grandeur of the Jersey Lady's past has been buried by the new. The Million Dollar Pier is now a shopping mall. The Marlborough Blenheim, that magnificent pink and white sandcastle/hotel that ruled the beach in the Golden Days, was the first landmark to be sacrificed to the temple gods of Mammon. The amusement-filled Steeplechase Pier was destroyed by fire just after it was purchased by Donald Trump. The world famous Steel Pier is now a concrete extension of Trump's Taj Mahal, perhaps the most monumental affront to visual serenity the world has ever seen. Even the grand old Convention Hall looks weary between Ceasar's and Trump's Plazas. There isn't even a Park Place anymore; it's called Brighton Park now, a common plaza for three casinos. The style and charm that made Atlantic City famous has been buried with the past. There are no memorials, no museums, no monuments to mark the passing. Nothing. Nothing but ghettos and memories.

"We haven't hit this one yet. What do you think?"

"The Trump Plaza?" Jake replied in disbelief. What his intonation communicated was, "Are you kidding?"

"Sure, why not? Have you ever been in there?" I asked, probing for reasons.

"Seriously now, Brian. Do you really think that a casino owned by a man like

THE QUICK HIT

Donald Trump would give a guy a fair chance?"

"I dunno. Do you think the other casinos are owned by priests or something?"

"Nah, lawyers and used car salesmen maybe. They're all greedy bastards I'm sure. It's just that I refuse to give my hardearned money to that ego-driven sonuvabitch."

And so Jake and I passed by one of Trump's four Atlantic City palaces and continued with the long walk to the Tropworld. They have some video poker machines there that Jake likes.

"You can bet from one to five quarters. The odds are always the same, but the more you bet, the more you win. You gotta spend money to make money."

Once I had learned the game, I decided to try it myself. With Jake's guidance, I turned fifty dollars into fifty cents in just one half hour. But I had won a few hands and led myself to believe that a big payoff was due. I would have lost just the fifty, but every casino is well stocked with ATMs just waiting to suck the life out of a compulsive gambler's credit cards. But I'm above that, I thought. I have self-control. I withdrew thirty dollars, twenty of which would take me home. I bought a roll of quarters with the remaining ten. I sat down at the same machine and imposed Jake's rule on himself—don't talk to me, I told him. I've got a job to do.

I emptied the forty quarters into the collection tray and took on a foreign demeanor. I would fight this machine by becoming a machine. And so I calmly played one quarter at a time, thinking about all the possibilities of each hand, weighing the odds, making logical decisions. I refused to play for the big hand. Instead, I went for the simple hands—two pair, three of a kind—then doubled down. The double down feature offers you the chance to double your winnings after you've won a hand. The dealer takes a card; the dealer gives a card. High card wins, double or nothing. It's that simple. By playing for the win and doubling just once, I could win as much as straights and flushes would. With this strategy, I slowly doubled my ten dollars.

As time wore on, however, my mood began to change. It had taken me an hour to get back ten of my lost fifty. My logic began to falter to the long shot. I began making my decisions much more quickly. My right leg began to piston with nervous excitement, and I felt my mouth go dry. One quarter wasn't enough. I began betting by fives. Go for the full house. Settle for three of a kind. Ten quarters; that's only a two hundred percent return. Double down, twenty quarters. Do it again. Beat the easy six. Forty quarters. Beat the jack. Eighty quarters. That's twenty bucks. Not enough. Double on the seven. A queen! One hundred and sixty quarters! One more time. Yes! A four! Beat a lousy four, Bri! A deuce it throws me. Forty bucks gone. I still remember it as a loss of a possible three hundred and fifty Washingtons.

F O R U M

I went betting on five quarters at a time and always doubling down just one time too many. Gambling is addictive behavior. When things were going my way, I could never bring myself to take my winnings and run. There's always one moment when the luck changes, but I never saw the crest of the wave until it crashed down on my head. Jake and I walked out of Tropworld with only the twenty dollars I had left. He wouldn't let me buy anymore quarters if he had to drag me out of there. It was a long walk home, and I didn't know how to feel. The exhilaration of the gambling bug was still with me. There was a certain disappointment in the loss of sixty dollars, but at the same time, I was happy that I could make ten dollars last four hours. As we turned onto St. James Place, I realized that no one is immune. We all have some risk-taking instincts within us that only come out when properly catered to. I thought I was above it. I thought I had control. The damning evidence was on my hands, the silver greasy residue of the thousands of quarters that had passed through my sweaty palms. I felt defeated and wisened and human and alive. For a few hours, my own hands were wrapped firmly around the heart of greed and its intoxicating throb.

Dawn alone has the ability to make everything clear. The air is clean; the light, pure. Our experience is reduced to the bare essentials in the early morning hours, that brief period when the light shines on the sleeping world, between the cover of night and the dust clouds of our daily activity in the modern world. The state of Atlantic City was revealed to me, and me alone, at six in the morning. A dense fog had stolen in during the night and slept soundly on the boardwalk. I would not wake it. I could not. It was part of the story, covering the tops of the tall casinos. The fog was so dense that I missed the sunrise. The black of the night gave way to a uniform grayness. It was lighter, but I could not see any better. There was no color. I was the only living being on the world famous boardwalk, and the city fell asleep with what had become a ghost town. There was nothing at all. Just the gray and the empty and the vision. All was mine.

As others began to appear on the boardwalk, the vision disappeared. A rosy haze could be seen through the morning fog like the faint blush of blood through a gauze. Colors began to appear. The cloak was lifted from the casinos, and the sun shone on their gilt features like eastern temples, towering over their condemned neighbors in shameless mockery. Sleeping vagrants slowly materialized on boardwalk benches and dirty dunes, and the fog lifted still further. The casinos have come to be uncontrollable leeches, sucking the blood from the city, growing large at the expense of the host. Every day, the rich get richer; the poor get drunk and curl up in their own vomit. There are more of them every day. The casinos are closed during these early morning hours, and, while the homeless lie begging for quarters on the boardwalk, the Trumps are inside counting them by the millions. This growing mass of vagrants, the lost chips of a city that bet

THE QUICK HIT

on gambling, are just waiting for the suave casinos to drop a quarter now and again. Each morning, the wheel spins, and again they play their respective waiting games, after they've wiped the sand from their eyes.





*"Nature was free to all, and none were
foes, Till partial luxury began the
strife."*

James Hammond

The Promised Land

by Eric Maniago

A college buddy of mine asked me a question last week that got me thinking. He asked, "What exactly is the Philippines like? I mean is it tropical or what?" I thought about it later, and it dawned on me that most people in the United States do not really know much about my parents' homeland. They know what they learn from the media: Marcos, coup attempts, riots, Imelda's shoes, and a bunch of tiny "chinamen" running about in chaos. A contestant on "Jeopardy" might know that "Platoon" was filmed there, Magellan was killed there, and that the U.S. has two major bases there. That is about the extent of most people's knowledge.

The P.I. is inevitably a different place for me. It is the source of my ancestors, the place of my parents' childhood, the home of my family. I have a huge family in the Philippines. My mom and dad come from families of eight and ten respectively. I have more than a few dozen first cousins, and still more second and third cousins with whom we are also close. Out of all these, my parents were two of the few who made it over to the United States. Getting a visa to the U.S. is like trying to pass a camel through a needle's eye. We were some of the lucky few who reached the promised land. But were we really that lucky?

My parents are both doctors. They have lived in the U.S. for over twenty years now. They live in the suburbs of Baltimore in a beautiful house with a circular drive, a garage, five cars, one and a half acres of land, and four children whom they are putting through private schools and college. They seem very content with their status in society.

My relatives in the Philippines, on the other hand, do not live with the luxuries and money. And yet they also seem content. In the time I spent with my cousins, I found them to be a very peaceful family. They lived relaxed and seemed to have no qualms in the world. It boggled my mind that they could be so happy with so few luxuries.

I remember the time I spent in the Philippines very well. I lived in a place called Mandaue City. Mandaue had its share of civilization, but not enough to call it modern, and not even enough to claim a spot on the map. The city itself had no skyscrapers, no airport, one church, one school, and few paved streets. The marketplace was the nucleus of activity. It was one huge square where people bought and sold for a living. Frantic merchants decked the booths with roasted pigs, sugarcane, and vegetables, as well as straw hats, shoes, and clothes. As I coughed up the dusty air, a frenzied vendor would wave cooked meat directly into my face. "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Dun meeet, pig feeeeet! Eh? You buy, huh? You buy, you buy!"

My cousins lived in a house right across from the marketplace. The house

F O R U M

had no modern luxuries. I slept under a mosquito net surrounded by fans since we had no air conditioning. The toilets did not flush and had to be emptied periodically. For a bath we had a huge bucket and a cup to scoop up the cold water. If you wanted a hot bath you had to boil some water. The small backyard provided a place to relax under the shade of coconut trees. I eagerly climbed these trees for some fresh coconuts from which we drank coconut milk before devouring the sweet, white fruit. The yard also provided grazing for our chickens. I often found myself chasing dinner around in circles. If one had no speed, then one had no meal. The window in my bedroom had no glass, so the shrill call of roosters and the noise of the marketplace would wake me as early as four AM. My cousin and I would run across the street to bargain for mangos and hot rolls for breakfast.

Besides their simple lifestyle, something else about my cousins intrigued me. They had a sense of family and unity that seemed rare in the States. Their values seemed etched in marble. One particular story sticks out in my memory. It was a story my mom told me once. She explained that none of her seven older brothers went to college. Instead, her brothers all worked to put her through medical school. Now she resides in the States as part of the upper-middle class. Her brothers still live in the Philippines. The novelty of this deed is that they sacrificed their time, money, and potential futures, and they did it for their only sister — a woman, to boot. Why would they do such a thing? This kind of selfless action is rare in the States. My brother and sisters and I would never even consider it. Here in the U.S., we have been trained to think of ourselves. They teach us early that only you can decide your future and make something out of it. We quickly learn to become very selfish and self-centered. What is it about the people of the Philippines that makes them think differently?

I finally realized what had separated my cousins from me — our lifestyles. The simple lifestyle of my cousins had somehow kept them innocent. They had no riches to cloud their minds with superficial goals. There were no Mercedes to acquire, no electronic kitchen gadgets to collect, and no chic fashions with which to keep up. Here in the United States, we have centered lifestyles around the obtaining of luxuries; just watch Robin Leech talking about the rich and shameless. We aim for "champagne wishes and caviar dreams."

For me, it began in the fourth grade. We had just started using pens. One day, my friend John brought in an exquisite gold Cross pen. He immediately badgered me, claiming that he had the better pen. That insignificant pen triggered an entire chain reaction. I unconsciously turned over control of the rest of my life to the two supreme dark powers: greed and envy. These powers played games with me and my peers. Our lives became centered around this monumental competition — who had the best clothes, who drove the Porsche, whose stereo blared

THE PROMISED LAND

the most watts. In anything we did, we had to have the best products. Anything less would be considered inferior. We began to believe that material possessions would make us better people in the eyes of our peers.

With greed comes the need for money. I go to college to make money later. I work to make money. Society makes us think that money is the source of happiness. We begin to believe that we can't live happy lives unless we have enough money. I recently watched a mini-series on television called "Blind Faith." In it, a man kills his wife of twenty years in order to collect her life insurance. His incredible lust for money drove him to murder his own wife.

Money has even infested my relationship with others. Being a part of the upper-middle class, I subconsciously make judgements about people based on looks and wealth. My friends and I often jeer at the "grits" hanging out at the bowling alley with their long hair, jean jackets, and Harley-Davidsons. We treat them as inferiors because they are not our "class" and because they dress and act differently from us. Money has created a physical and psychological gap between people of different wealth statuses.

Having been blessed (or should I say cursed) with the fortune of being born under wealthy parents, I became adapted to upper class luxuries. Even though I realize what money does, I do not have the will to let it go. Money is like an addictive drug. Once you taste it, you always want more, and your appetite for it seems insatiable. Taking these riches away would be traumatic. The worst thing you can do to a rich man is to make him poor.

Which brings me back to Mandaue. Amidst the dirt roads and coconut trees, my cousins have never experienced the rich life. In a sense they have no idea what they are missing. They grew up without the desire for money. Money is a source of food and general needs, not a means for acquiring luxuries.

I remember that when I first arrived in Mandaue at the age of eleven, I was shocked to discover that they did not own an Atari system. I thought to myself, "How can my cousins stand living without an Atari?" Looking back now, I see that I was the one who could not live without my Atari. They seemed to be content the way they were.

My cousins never ceased to amaze me. The joy and love they expressed in every action, their carefree manner, and their childlike innocence astonished me. I can still picture my cousin Rommel with his jovial round belly underneath his tight T-shirt. He was always smiling, which made his fat cheeks cover his eyes. He would squat in the backyard, cooking fish over an open fire. He would tell me stories about how some chickens were able to fly over the tall fence to their freedom, and how he couldn't climb the coconut trees — "I only like to eat the coconuts!" Inside, my young beautiful cousin Mylene would eagerly tug me by the arm and sit me down to listen to her play a song for me on the ukelele.

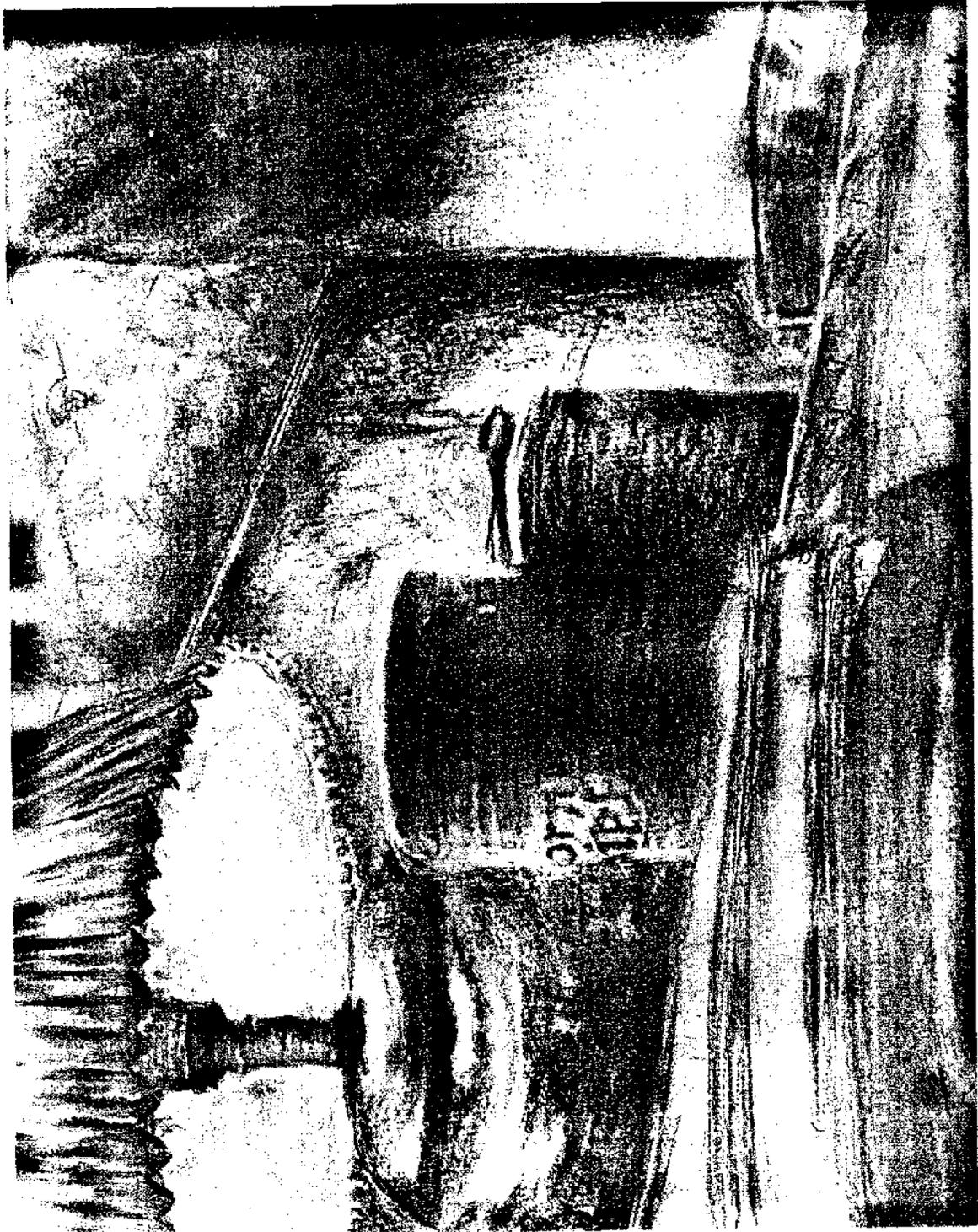
F O R U M

One thing that utterly amazed me about the Philippines was the way they treated the old. The elderly were treated like royalty. At family reunions, all the children lined up in front of the grandparents to be blessed on the foreheads. In the United States the elderly are often forgotten in old resting homes. The sole purpose they serve is to collect their Social Security.

In the Philippines the sacrament of marriage remains a sacrament, an unbreakable covenant. They look upon divorce with disgust. In the United States, one out of every two marriages fails. Terms like alimony and prenuptial agreements fill the court rooms. I have heard more than a few girls say, "I'll just marry a rich guy." The dark powers of greed and envy infest even the sacred bonds of love and marriage.

The power of money is enormous. The only ones protected are those not exposed to it.

With all that, my parents continue to try to get their family over to the States—to the "better life, the promised land." Heed my warning, cousins. You are the lucky ones. The promised land lies right under your feet.





*"God is its author, and not man; He
laid the keynote of all harmonies; He
planned all perfect combinations, and
He made us so that we could hear and
understand."*

J.G. Brainard

A Practically Symphonic Life

by Donovan Arizmendi

About three years ago, the Board of Education in my county was concerned that students were not taking a wide variety of elective courses. Apparently, the Board wanted students to be more well-rounded and to appreciate a greater variety of subjects. To accomplish this objective, students were required to take at least one fine arts course (such as drawing, ceramics, or music) and one "practical" arts course (such as cooking, sewing, typing, or shop). Yet, by classifying all arts as either "fine" or "practical," the Board limited the students' appreciation of the different arts from the start. Even though the "practical" was placed in quotation marks in the high school booklet, the term nevertheless implied that the fine arts were in some way impractical or, one might even say, silly. The use of the term "practical" ignored the merits of cooking and woodworking which can be very fine arts indeed! What does this tell us? Simply, that the use of such words as "fine" and "practical" automatically conveys a value judgement with both positive and negative connotations for each group of arts. Unfortunately, this value judgement partially defeats the purpose for students taking art courses at all.

The example of how art is viewed in the high school curriculum suggests a popular attitude about art, the attitude that so-called "fine" art is a frill or a treat which serves no useful purpose, or that art is somehow fake and divorced from "real" life. Often, we trace this brutish characteristic of the American psyche back to frontier days. We might point to the early settlers whose need, we say, for food and shelter precluded their interest in the arts. And indeed, this proposition seems very probable until we realize that American frontier life did not end with the bare necessities. Only consider the variety of folk art which existed in the woods and prairies: wood carvings, quilting, fiddling, and dancing. As practical as the settlers and pioneers were, they did not want to live without art. They worked hard to create a beautiful rather than an ugly existence—beautiful, in the sense of every family owning its own plot of land and building its own home. This is the kind of beauty that was expressed in folk music and in the simple arts that decorated frontier homes.

That people have always felt the need for art is not surprising, for art provides an opportunity for us to spread our wings and soar about in an atmosphere of intense emotion and fierce concentration. In her essay, "The Cultural Importance of Art," Suzanne K. Langer calls art "the epitome of human life," for it is through art that we experience a more stylized or enhanced version of many aspects of human life: intellectual, physical, emotional, and societal. These are major components of life, and therefore, of art. Let us examine the symphony orchestra—first of all, the experience of playing in an orchestra and secondly, the experience

of listening to one—to determine if this art constitutes a magnified version of the human experience.

Langer states that art is "not an intellectual pursuit." Yet I would say that playing the violin, for example, is indeed partially intellectual. Firstly, the way in which music is ordered and written is very mathematical. Each note occupies a certain space in time—either a multiple or a fraction of the beat which runs throughout the piece. Sometimes the process of keeping time becomes natural, and the musician no longer needs to count out the beats. However, in orchestral playing, where long periods of rest for various instruments are common, the musician must often concentrate on counting and staying with the group. In addition to mastering the rhythm of the piece, the musician must, secondly, coordinate the notes with the technique used in playing them. The violinist, for instance, must determine the proper fingering and bowing. He or she uses knowledge of technique to figure out the best way to play each passage. It is only then that the player can perfect his or her part. During both rehearsal and performance, the orchestra player has a final, and very important, consideration: the conductor. He or she dictates the tempo and the style of the piece. Each player must watch the conductor and adjust his or her performance accordingly. In each of these ways, the artistic experience of playing in the orchestra is an intellectual experience as well. It is a test of the concentration and skill of the player.

Yet, playing music not only involves the mind, it involves the body as well. Hours of practice and rehearsal test the physical strength of the player. During the past few years, I have participated in all-county orchestras. They were one-weekend events consisting of all-day rehearsals with a concert on the last day. Some of my most vivid memories of this experience are of my sore muscles. My fingers became permanently curled over the edge of my violin, and my back ached from sitting on the edge of my seat for many hours. And it is not only the string players who suffer: wind players have to build up great strength in their diaphragms in order to have enough breath for the long rehearsals. In addition to musicians, other artists test the strength of their bodies. Ballet dancers, for instance, endure rigorous training and are on their feet for hours in order to perfect each step. Yet, in spite of the pain, there is an instinctively human joy in pushing one's strength and endurance to the limit. Thus, music, like dance, is not only intellectually demanding; it can be physically demanding—a test of endurance.

Still, playing music is not really like working out a calculus problem or running a marathon, for music involves the sense of hearing and a resulting appreciation of the beauty in sounds. Music is an exercise in emotional sensitivity. Hearing a beautiful piece teaches us to know what beauty is. Once a player has mastered his part and has sufficiently strengthened his muscles, the player can listen to the beauty of the music he creates. In an orchestra, each musician can enjoy

A PRACTICALLY SYMPHONIC LIFE

the performances of fellow musicians. For instance, a piece of orchestral music may open with percussion and a few wind instruments. The remainder of the orchestra can listen first, then gradually join in. Similarly, in the theatre, actors have the doubly artistic experience of performing themselves and of watching their fellow thespians perform. For example, in the Hell scene of George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, three characters sit and listen as Don Juan gives his philosophy of life. Only occasionally do the other characters interact. For the most part, they, like the audience, watch the show. The members of the orchestra, by listening to themselves and to their fellow musicians, can experience the emotions invoked by their art as they create it.

The fact that the orchestra player can listen to others brings us to a final aspect of the orchestral experience which corresponds to our lives in general. This is the societal aspect. The orchestra is a miniature society. This society, however, is governed in quite a different fashion from the American society. First of all, members of the orchestra are by no means equal. Each member knows exactly where he or she stands—or rather, sits. A player's status, symbolized by his chair, is determined by his musical ability and experience. The principal player in each section (that is, the first chair) is the leader of the section. He has the highest status of the members playing the same instrument.

In addition to its rigid system of professional status, the orchestra is ruled by a virtual dictator—the conductor. His word is always final. There is no council, no triumvirate—simply a sole figure on a platform. My personal experience with conductors has shown me that they are almost always excellently qualified but are often ego maniacs. I remember playing under one Czech conductor who would positively roar if the orchestra did not perform properly!

Yet, the tyrannical nature of so many conductors seems rather appropriate, for the conductor is the embodiment of the power of the orchestra to create great music. One preparatory beat from his or her baton and the concert hall is filled with music. At the end of the piece, a signal from the conductor restores silence to the hall. To both the players and the audience, the conductor dictates the action. One might imagine that the powerful figure of the conductor would instill resentment among the musicians. Sometimes it does, but more often, players experience a joy in being led to create feats of musical expression. In this respect, musicians resemble the actors in a play or film who endure an abusive director or the members of a team who put up with the constant screaming and yelling of their coach. Artists and athletes have a great deal of power; they continually transcend mediocrity and excel. Consequently, their leaders—the conductors, directors, and coaches—must be strong and demanding; their followers accept both the positive and negative results.

We have seen how, in the art of music, the players in the orchestra them-

F O R U M

selves experience the different aspects of their lives in an intensified degree. But what of the audience? How does the orchestral music affect those of us who are not direct participants?

Intellectually speaking, there are great possibilities for the audience. The educated listener can listen for the characteristics of the various composers' styles. He might also listen for the organization of the piece: the theme, the variations on the theme, the recapitulation, and so on. But of course, this type of appreciation depends largely on how much knowledge the listener brings to the concert.

From a physical perspective, the audience loses. The conductor can wave his or her arms madly to the beat and come close to dancing on the platform. The string players can bow fast and furiously; the drummers can pound. And the people in the audience? They sit perfectly still and listen politely. Convention deprives the audience of a major part of the enjoyment. They must assume an unrealistic, passive role, and boredom is often the result. I listen to orchestral music over the radio in the car, but I wouldn't enjoy it nearly as much if I was not able to take one hand off of the wheel and imaginarily conduct the orchestra. It is unfortunate that the audience, in order to enjoy the solemn majesty of the concert hall, must be denied a physical part in the musical experience.

The audience's main source of pleasure in the concert is in the emotion which the piece invokes. Partly because of its wide variety of instruments, the orchestra can express many emotions. The bass can add solemnity, the violins can contribute an air of romance or excitement, and the piccolo can pipe out a cheery melody. In fact, we see the use of orchestral music to sway our emotions every day. Think of cartoons such as the "Smurfs" where a classical tune accompanies every chase scene. Or what about the General Electric commercial that uses the Pachelbel Canon to lull its future patrons into a sense (we hope, a true one) of security?

The creators of these and other cartoons and commercials fully appreciate the emotional power of classical music. If it is practical to exercise one's intellectual abilities in a search for greater wisdom, to test one's physical strength, to express emotions, and to experience life in different communities, then art is practical as well as "fine." Music, like all other arts, is a highly concentrated version of all these human pursuits. Thus, art is not only one part of our lives, but also the richest part.

