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AGORA 1989

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"Birthplace of
democracy, the Agora
dozes at the foot
of the Acropolis.
Athenians thronged
here to discuss,
harangue, litigate,
philosophize."

*Greece and Rome:
Builders
of our World*

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THE BOOKS

Even in tragedies, salvation
corrupt, the victor failing,
honor shines like the sweat
on a dead king's brow. Stunned,
our bodies are lowered by emotionless
bearers into a common grave, and
yet we rise and walk upright,
awkward with knowledge.

Only the common farce
will drag us down to stay,
ignorant of our own crooked
destiny, wed to the day too young
and the dumb show of getting on
with it. When the books are gone,
where will we go to get lost
from ourselves, to be met
by blind circumstance, beckoning
with empty sleeve, always, before us.

—Russell Fowler



ABBAY CHURCH
Pen & Ink

—Deborah Howard

CANTERBURY TALE

Up footworn steps,
sagged flagstones, I
go with you
to the spot where top of Thomas Beckett's
head,
like the dome of a hardboiled egg
got lopped off
neat.

Down through sunwilted glass
stain rains holy jewels:
shards of ruby, emerald, sapphire
drizzle our heads.

Falling on my knees, my lips begin
to move in soundless prayer.
Have Mercy Upon Me O Lord!

Have Mercy

Upon Me O Lord!

Have Mercy Upon Me

O Lord!

like that orthodox Hesychast in "A Perfect
Day for Bananafish," Have Mercy Upon
Me O Lord! I am praying

Have Mercy

Upon Me O Lord! without ceasing.

—Grace DiSanto

REMMY GAITHER TAKES ILL

"He was a very valiant man who first adventured on eating of oysters."

—King James I

Walking through the congested lobby of the Hilton, I heard someone call my name. Although I hadn't seen him since high school, and in spite of the full beard and pipe dangling from his mouth, I recognized him immediately. It was Remmy Gaither.

We had been best friends in the early grades, but later, without much notice, he had quietly dropped out of my life. It was as if he had gone underground. On occasion, though, he would surface at school, and I would notice him with one or two of his friends standing uncomfortably on the edges of the adolescent social whirl.

Remmy's parents were religious. There were ceramic praying hands in the middle of their diningroom table and one of those studio portraits of Christ on the wall in the front room. They tried to make Remmy stick to the straight and narrow, but he resisted in private ways: like rolling Indian ragweed in newspaper and smoking it behind the barn, peeping through a small hole in his bedroom closet to watch his older sisters undress in the next room, and muttering curse words when he got bullied on the playground.

What I remember, though, when I think of him was what he did the time we went fishing on opening day, a cold, dreary morning in March. While I was casting from the bank, he had taken considerable pains to crawl over the root ball of a fallen cottonwood to drop his line from the over-hanging trunk. He was nearly obscured from my vision by brush, but as I moved downstream, I could tell he wasn't fishing. Instead, he was pulling his pants over his shoes, being very careful to keep his balance on the log. Then he lowered his skivvies, stepped around them, and, grabbing the waist band, spun them over his head several times before he let fly. They hit like a rock and disappeared from sight, sinking to the silty bottom.

Jostled by the throng of conventioners, my hand slid from Remmy's grasp. I noticed his eyes taking everything in, shifting over the top of his beard. "It's been ages," he said, adjusting his pipe. "Let's get out of this snake pit. I've got some ten year old Scotch upstairs."

On the way up in the elevator, we were tightly pressed in with a dozen other bodies. Remmy nodded to a couple of distinguished professorial types. "That's Franklin More," he whispered. "He's got another book coming out from Oxford. The other one is *Jeremy Straw*."

I had, of course, seen Straw's composition test, *The Conscious Writer*, which had gone through more than ten editions and was still popular with more traditional instructors. He looked cadaverous, the life squeezed from him in close quarters.

Once we were in Remmy's room, he poured us both a stiff drink. "Take a look at this," he said, "while I make a quick phone call."

He threw a book across the bed, and it landed beside me. "My publisher wants to meet me for breakfast tomorrow to discuss a second edition."

I had looked through a copy of Remmy's text, *Writing, Writing, and More Writing*, when it first came out a couple of years ago. It was, for the most part, a rehash of what everybody else was saying, but apparently Skinner and Sons thought it would float through another edition.

Remmy was on the phone to his wife, speaking in hushed tones. "Yes," he said, "I'll take care of that when I get home. We can pay it next month if we have to. . . Yeah, yeah, I know. Don't worry. . ." His voice trailed off. I continued leafing through the book. "Sure, put her on. Hi, sweetheart! Are you minding mommy? Uhuh. . . uhuh. . . that's good. . . No, I won't be home for supper. Daddy's in New Orleans, but he'll be back before you know it. Okay, love and kisses, bye-bye. . . Yes, put her back on. Yeah, in three days, right. Look, I gotta go. . . I will. Okay, I love you too, bye."

He hung up the phone, took a long pull on his drink, and then dug his wallet from a back pocket.

"This is my little girl," he said. "She'll be eight next month."

The picture showed a small blond child wearing a blue sequined swimsuit. She was shading her eyes from the sun with one hand and holding a baton with the other.

"The world is going to be this kid's oyster," Remmy said with some animation. "She'll be at the head of the parade. Not like me, held back." The ice knocked against Remmy's glass as he took another drink.

"Look," he said, "I've got some people coming by in a few minutes to help me plan a little strategy for the rhetoric position at Wentworth. I'm one of the finalists, you know."

I didn't know, of course.

"That's wonderful," I said, trying to sound appropriately enthusiastic and keep envy out of my voice. I had seen the notice in the fall jobs list: an endowed chair, a sixty thousand plus salary, a ridiculously light teaching load, time for travel and writing. And now Remmy planned to sneak into the big time on a marginally successful textbook and a handful of second-rate articles. But his chances were probably better than most because he could play the role—the beard, the pipe, the elbow patches, breakfast with his publisher, the studied academic casualness. And he knew useful people.

There was a soft, conspiratorial knock at the door.

"Here they are now," Remmy said with a touch of excitement in his voice.

He ushered two older men into the room. They looked remarkably alike.

"This is Byron Withers," Remmy said, "who works with me at State, and this is E. Harris Talbot who's now at Old Miss."

We exchanged pleasantries.

Then Remmy began to edge me toward the door. As I glanced back at Withers and Talbot, who were now in the shadows of one corner of the room, they were talking furtively, one in the ear of the other.

"It was good to see you, old boy," Remmy said, resting one hand on my shoulder and the other on the doorknob. "Let's be sure to get together before this thing is over."

He didn't mean it, but I nodded anyway.

"Well, take care," he said.

I slipped from Remmy's second handshake, happy to be out of the room. Remmy's Scotch had dulled my brain and given me a headache. I left the hotel, looking for something to eat.

* * *

After dinner, I walked through the French Quarter on my way back to the hotel, happy not to be in the throng of impatient fun seekers or among those searching for adventure in the tawdry bars and strip joints. I was tired and wanted an early night.

As I rounded the corner to Bourbon Street, however, I nearly ran into Remmy. His eyes were dancing, almost a little wild, his pipe incongruously drooping at the side of his mouth. Standing next to him was a dazzling woman. She was as tall as Remmy, who was over six feet, her skirt was slit on both sides nearly the full length of her thighs, the v of her blouse dipped below the mid-point of her full chest, and there was gold glitter around her eyes, which were dramatically set off by the long dark hair framing her face.

"This is Margaret," Remmy said. "She teaches technical writing at a girls college in Texas." I mumbled something, but it sounded like someone else had spoken.

"Come on," Remmy said. "You might as well join us."

I protested, really wanting to go my own way, but Remmy insisted. It was then, having taken my eyes off glitter woman, that I noticed Withers and Talbot, both looking like latter-day versions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, lurking in the background.

We continued down Bourbon Street, Remmy taking the lead with glitter woman swaying close by his side. At the door of every strip joint, Remmy stuck his head into the darkness to survey the action for a few moments before we went on. Then at one particularly dark hole, which featured a nude mannequin mechanically swinging in and out of a porthole above the entrance, Remmy took glitter woman's hand and led us through the doors.

Inside, an aging woman, whose skin was made even whiter by her dyed-black hair, had just finished her routine. In spite of her years, the drunken, half-crazed adolescents sitting around the raised dance floor were stuffing dollar bills into her g-string. What had caught Remmy's eye, though, was the small blond woman suspended in the "holding tank" above the bar. The tank was about the size of a coffin and open at both ends. It was where the next performer waited her turn.

There didn't seem to be anything special about this woman, but Remmy followed her intensely as she backed out of the tank and walked to the stage. Did she remind him of someone—an old girlfriend, his wife, a sister perhaps? The waitress brought our drinks, but Remmy didn't touch his. He stared straight ahead, the stem of his pipe now jutting rigidly from his fixed jaw, as the stripper shimmied, dipped, and gyrated through her routine.

After discarding her sequinned blouse, lacey blue bra, and short black skirt, she began teasing off her g-string, revealing another g-string below the first. This one with a row of short tassels. She then plucked a tassel from one side, throwing it into the audience, and then one from the other side, until all the tassels were gone. The young men in the front row reached high for these favors as they floated like small white doves over their heads into the rows behind them. One of the tassels landed in Remmy's lap.

Taking the pipe from his mouth, Remmy let the tassel fall to the floor as he stood to get a better view of the stripper, for only the band of cloth which encircled her waist remained. He was perspiring noticeably. If Margaret had released her hand from Remmy's arm, he surely would have groped his way to the stage, and pulled the stripper down to him. But a very strange thing happened. The woman pushed the waist band over her hips, removing it with a fake *mons veneris* which had been attached to flesh-toned pantyhose. Underneath, she was wearing another g-string. The crowd, after being momentarily stunned, laughed and cheered wildly. Remmy, however, was cursing viciously under his breath. Still standing, he chugged his glass of beer, and we left.

After walking the length of Bourbon Street, we stopped at the entrance to Felix's Oyster Bar, where Remmy whirled glitter woman around once and with his hand cupping her left buttock swept her through the door. Even before we were seated, Remmy had ordered for himself a dozen oysters on the half-shell. After the first round of drinks, he demanded a second dozen, and then a third. Withers and Talbot cautioned Remmy to stop after two, but he was having none of it. Glitter woman sat closely to Remmy, sipping her beer and stroking his thigh unobtrusively.

That was the last time I saw Remmy. Two days later, while I was waiting for the shuttle to the airport, I read in the paper that several people were critically ill from eating tainted raw oysters. The oyster beds had been polluted by untreated sewage and the resulting virus, the paper said, could be fatal. In fact, one person had died from the virus.

It was Remmy Gaither.

—Mike Hood

EXIT, ORCHESTRA TO SP, 1988

It's dismal out. See how
the frozen blades droop
forward? Like an old
man weary with age,
attacking interminable silences,
grieving patchwork, a
sometimes thing. Winter
is here. It seems oblivious
to its own approaching end,
controlling hours, minutes,
temperatures. It does not
care that it will be replaced.
I look from the inside out
enviously noticing moisture
on the pane. Water sprints
to the sill, dissolves, and
is chased by still more
trickles, streaking placidly,
each leaving its impression
for slight moments before
disappearing. The Tulips them-
selves are dead, oxygen even
scarcer.

—Pam Newton

MELODRAMA'S LA-Z-BOY

Tylenol tastes like candy and I eat it like I
eat chocolate, waiting for its sweetness to take
control while grandma watches Dynasty.

Daily tragedies are a pain in the ass.

Hospital waiting room phones ring incessantly
with well-wishers on the other end, too busy or
too indifferent or too far away to come. Thank
God for telephones; they allow you to really care.

The son of Mr. Cancer nods off after spending an
unusually long night weeping—awaiting finality.

Children are on the floor with crayons,
painting pictures of a happy family ("Mommy,
when are we going home?")

The eleven o'clock news spills frightening
information of wars, drugs, poverty, illiteracy,
and death until I must sponge it off my floor.
I fade in and out, feeling the weight of combined
agonies, popping more candy down my pipe.

—Pam Newton

HASKELL'S HOUSE

Solo me now
but he lived here fifty years ago.
Creaked these same upward stairs,
Perhaps broken down shotgun like
Similar Fescue met his uniform
Snatch around these fences.
There was above all though
This love of air as his roll
And loop filled these running walls
ruptured with age and settle.

Call this my home then,
Courtesy of F.H.A.
Here I am walking the same
Atmosphere knowing he had thrown
His voice through the old neighbors
At the streetcars that had paused
Out front.

Heard his chuckle, dug in the basement
As if on impulse,
And found lead newsprint plates of he
And Blue Angels
By their planes then they were
So obviously young he obviously past
His... I saw his face stare
At the sky through me through goggles
Found in a shoebox

Crowfooted eyes of optimism
In the knowledge of skill and daring
I smell his propwash on my face
Yet when I unearth on weekends
His heaped backyard treasures -
Hubcaps, naked baby doll
Child discarded -
What fate urged me
To this mortgage before I am dead
Something tells me something must be carried
On the air -
Something must connect his living here

While I was still pre-embryonic
Floating through liquid space
Sucking my thumb as his last biplane
Touch and bump might have popped
Me from those depths.
Might have involved me in all the maneuvers
that led to a dotted line.
Vectored me to his crabby plumbing.
His chipped roof leaking.
His soft ghost
Flying.

—Alan Hodge

THE NORTH

El Norte sears like the sun
there
driving down
muteness
to that screaming land.
It's been three months.
Three months and still
I cannot tell of it
three months of having watched the sun
terrify the streets... the plains.
Once, walking with eyes to the ground.
I heard music from a cantina.
I lifted to catch the melody—
and stumbled over a child,
sleeping on the street.
Back home, to take the edge off
that barbarism.
I fashion love thought (lying in the sun)
and I sleep at night, too
but dreams of tornadoes
bring the hot land back: tornadoes sweep away
whole persons, every day
as I eat and drink the sunny fruit
of that land.
(I am the tyrant's red eye.)

—Mary Ellen Weir, RSM

WATER HAS KILLING HOLES

"Guadalupe!

—Guadalupe!"

his friends cry
(as Guadalupe is drowned)

Who would have thought?

In this tobacco dust
shimmering fields, heated sun

Guadalupe had worked, fingers full of dirt.

Mexican mother: my Guadalupe is best—
the one who got out.
Guadalupe gone north, to work the seasons.
Apples here. Tobacco there.

Guadalupe makes good. Gaudalupe will come back—
educated, aware, rich. Yes. . . my
Guadalupe.

Suddenly, she feels a stirring.

in the northland, (Guadalupe is drowned).

—Mary Ellen Weir, RSM



JULIE SABATINO

THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

"Thank you so much for letting me come over here," said Tracy. She was in Anna's apartment getting ready for her second date with a new guy, Robert. "I couldn't believe it," she continued. "No electricity in the whole complex! I mean, how are you supposed to manage with no hairdryer, no curling iron — and can you imagine how awful it would be to have to put on your make-up by candlelight! Really, Anna, thank you so much. You are a real life saver. Robert would absolutely die if he saw the natural me — you know, not fixed up or anything."

"No problem," said Anna dully. It really hadn't been an inconvenience, but she found herself hoping that the evening would pass by quickly. Tracy was an old friend from college with whom Anna had never enjoyed spending much time alone, since the two had very little to talk about. Since Anna had known her, Tracy's life had revolved around men; beyond that there was not much else to her. Anna remembered days when she had been forced to listen to Tracy for hours — talking about her men, her clothes, her hairstyle. . . . Every woman could endure and even enjoy these kinds of conversations at given times, but to hear Tracy speak of these things with the reverence and seriousness one would give to a discussion on the meaning of life was not only boring; it was also depressing. Anna hoped that this guy — was it Robert? — would arrive soon.

Tracy, who was standing in front of the dresser in her slip, towed her hair dry casually. Her carefully painted red fingernails stood out against the white of the towel, and it occurred to Anna that they were the color of fresh blood when it is at its reddest, when it almost looks fake. "Anna," Tracy said as she shook her long wet hair. "I cannot wait for you to meet Robert. He is so sweet. I mean, we've only been out once before, but I feel so close to him already. We're almost like soul mates, you know?" We know everything about each other without even having to say a word. We even told each other "I love you" and everything." She held her head down and began to brush the underside of her hair. Droplets of water flew from her head as she brushed, and Anna, who was sitting on the bed, felt a few of them land on her knee. Tracy reached blindly for the hairdryer and turned it on. Anna watched as she dried her hair artfully, carefully, almost religiously. She was beginning to feel hot and sick, and she wished she hadn't consented to let Tracy use the apartment.

Nevertheless, she felt an obligation to be polite. She decided to make an effort to relate to her friend. After all, it wouldn't be too much longer; Tracy would be leaving for her date soon. "So, Tracy," she said. "I'm glad you get

along so well with Richard. He sounds really nice."

"Robert," said Tracy.

"What?"

"His name is Robert. You said Richard."

"Oh, right." Anna decided it would be in poor taste to mention how difficult it was to keep up with all of the many Roberts, Richards, Johns, and Bills in Tracy's life.

Tracy turned off the hairdryer now, and flipped her head up dramatically as if she were copying a model's poses. She glided over to the closet and picked up her white cotton dress. She slipped it over her head, found the right holes with her long arms, and twisted the dress around and about until it was on correctly. Then she moved to stand in front of the full-length mirror that hung on the back of the bedroom door and began to make different poses, checking her appearance from the front, back and sides, tilting her head, swinging her long, black hair, and putting her hands in her pockets or on her hips or in her hair. She opened her brown eyes wide and practiced facial expressions as well — several variations on the routine smile, and various looks that said "serious," "thrilled," "interested," "shocked," "sad," or "delighted." "What do you think of the dress, Anna?" she asked, and she turned to face her friend.

"You look nice."

"Just nice?"

Anna groaned inwardly, wishing she had the nerve to tell Tracy how ridiculous she looked, primping in front of the mirror and making faces that didn't belong to her.

"An-na! Just nice?"

"Well, I don't know. Try that red belt."

Tracy followed this advice and looked back to Anna, her big brown eyes asking for approval like a child who is asking for an ice-cream cone.

"That looks better," said Anna, actually meaning it. "The belt looks really good."

"Are you sure? I have to look good for him. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes, really! Don't change." The irony of that statement "don't change" suddenly struck Anna, and she laughed out loud.

"What? What?!" asked Tracy, thinking the laugh was some sort of reflection on her dress. Her face showed genuine concern. Anna wondered if this was a practiced "worried" look.

"Trace, ease up. I was laughing at something else - not you. The dress is

really pretty. Rich - I mean Robert - will love it."

"You really think so? God, I hope you're right. I just want tonight to be perfect. I love him so much."

Anna wondered how anyone could be so deeply in love after only one date. Watching Tracy and listening to her speak was turning out to be a strange experience. It was truly incredible that someone could actually be *this* concerned about her face and could speak in such flat, overused statements. It was beginning to bother Anna. She saw that Tracy was standing at the dresser now, putting in contact lenses. "I didn't know you needed glasses, Tracy," said Anna.

"I don't," Tracy answered, and she turned to face Anna. Her eyes were now a vivid blue. "They're not prescription. I always wanted blue eyes. Robert doesn't know they're fake." She giggled like a little girl who has a special secret.

Anna didn't understand how anybody could sincerely believe this was a natural eye color. This was insane - just ridiculous. She was experiencing a feeling like claustrophobic panic, and she wondered if she could endure another half-hour with Tracy.

"Tracy," she said abruptly, knowing that if she didn't make idle conversation, the frustration inside of her would worm its way out in the form of a cruel statement or an unplanned scream. "What do you and Robert talk about?" There was sarcasm in her tone, but she didn't think Tracy would recognize it.

"Well, what do you mean?"

"Well, is he intelligent? Where did he go to school? What does he do? What do the two of you have in common? You said you know everything about him, so tell me something."

Tracy put on make-up as she talked. "Well, Robert didn't tell me where he works. But he is so sweet. The first day we met, he just walked over to me and handed me a bunch of flowers. He said they were like me - soft and beautiful and special." Her bright blue eyes looked away dreamily as she recalled this wonderful moment. "It was just like those perfume commercials," she continued. "You know - 'when a man you've never met before suddenly brings you flowers...'"

Tracy stopped talking here because she had turned all of her attention to the lipstick she was putting on. She was applying it with the care and skill of a gifted painter. Anna noticed that the lipstick perfectly matched Tracy's belt, shoes, and fingernails. Amazing, Tracy blotted the lipstick with a tissue and went on. "Well, anyway, we went to dinner that night, and he said the most romantic things to me. He said my eyes were the color of a cool, placid lake, and that my hair was the most beautiful thing he had

ever seen." She touched her hair now, running her fingers through it gently. "Did you tell him that it was a perm, thousands of bottles of hairspray, and false contacts that do the trick?"

"An-na!" Tracy whined. "That's not fun-ny." She was smiling coyly like a 13 year-old girl flirting with a high school boy.

Anna, who had not intended it as a joke, was aware of a person inside of her, gnashing her teeth and jumping up and down wildly, screaming out obscenities and cruelly sarcastic comments about superficiality, insincerity, foolishness, artificiality, and embarrassing conceitedness. She could feel the anger inside consuming her like flames. She felt a dull pain in both hands, and, looking down, realized that she had been clenching her fists so tightly that her long nails had dug into the skin on the palms of her hands, leaving painful imprints there. She cleared her throat. There was a dam inside her holding back all of the words that she wanted to release. "So, uh, Trace, what else do you discuss besides how wonderful he thinks you are? You two must be very close."

"Oh, we are," Tracy responded. "It's really strange, but I really feel like I've known Richard forever."

"Robert."

"What?"

"It's Robert. You said Richard."

"Oh, my God, did I? I can't believe I just said that. Robert would absolutely die if I called him by the wrong name. And I wouldn't want to hurt him. He is so sweet."

Anna smiled weakly. She thought that if she heard one more time how sweet Robert was, she would scream. She got up from the bed and turned on the television set, hoping to escape Tracy for at least a little while by losing herself there. The blackness of the screen melted into the face of a renowned plastic surgeon who was explaining his great call to help people feel better about themselves. Anna immediately turned it off and decided to put on some music instead. She walked over to the stereo and deliberately chose a tape that she knew Tracy hated, although she equally knew that Tracy would pretend to like it. She went back to sit on the bed, waiting for Tracy to comment on the music. A few minutes passed as Tracy brushed on mascara, put on more lipstick, plastered her hair with hairspray, and smiled brightly at her reflection in the mirror. "What tape is this?" she finally asked, and Anna rolled her eyes knowingly to herself.

"It's the Cure."

"Oh yeah, I've heard this song before. It's pretty good."

Anna had been expecting this, but it still infuriated her. "Tracy," she said,

"I've heard your reaction to this tape in the past. You and I both know that you don't like it. You hate it, don't you?"

"No-ooo! I'm trying to be open-minded. If you like it, then so do I!"

"God! That is the most ignorant thing I've ever heard. Why can't you just be *real*? Don't say things you don't mean just to impress or please me. I hate that!! Just tell me how much you hate this song. Just say it!!! Would you please restore my tiniest faith in you by showing me that you have a mind of your own and at least a small capacity for sincerity?!" Anna walked over to the stereo and turned off the music angrily.

Tracy stared at her with a new expression of genuine shock. The stillness of the room seemed to swallow them. Anna could feel her heart pounding violently in her chest, and in the dead silence of the moment, she was sure she could hear its beating.

Looking into that astonished face, Anna suddenly realized how beautiful Tracy really was.

The phone rang, breaking the silence but not the tension. Anna went to answer it. It was Robert calling for Tracy. As soon as Anna told her who it was, Tracy's expression changed from shock to one of her best smiles. She carried the phone over to the dresser and stared at her reflection as she talked, twisting her hair with her finger and beaming brightly throughout the entire conversation. Anna, realizing that nothing she had said had registered with Tracy, now regretted her outburst. The angry monster inside of her had gone to sleep. Tracy's reality was too far removed from her own for her to even begin to understand her. And if she didn't understand Tracy, she had no legitimate right to judge her. Anna turned off her thoughts and picked up bits and pieces of the phone conversation - at least Tracy's end of it - "Yes, I know, sweetie," "Oh, bay-bee!" And finally "I love you too. Bye."

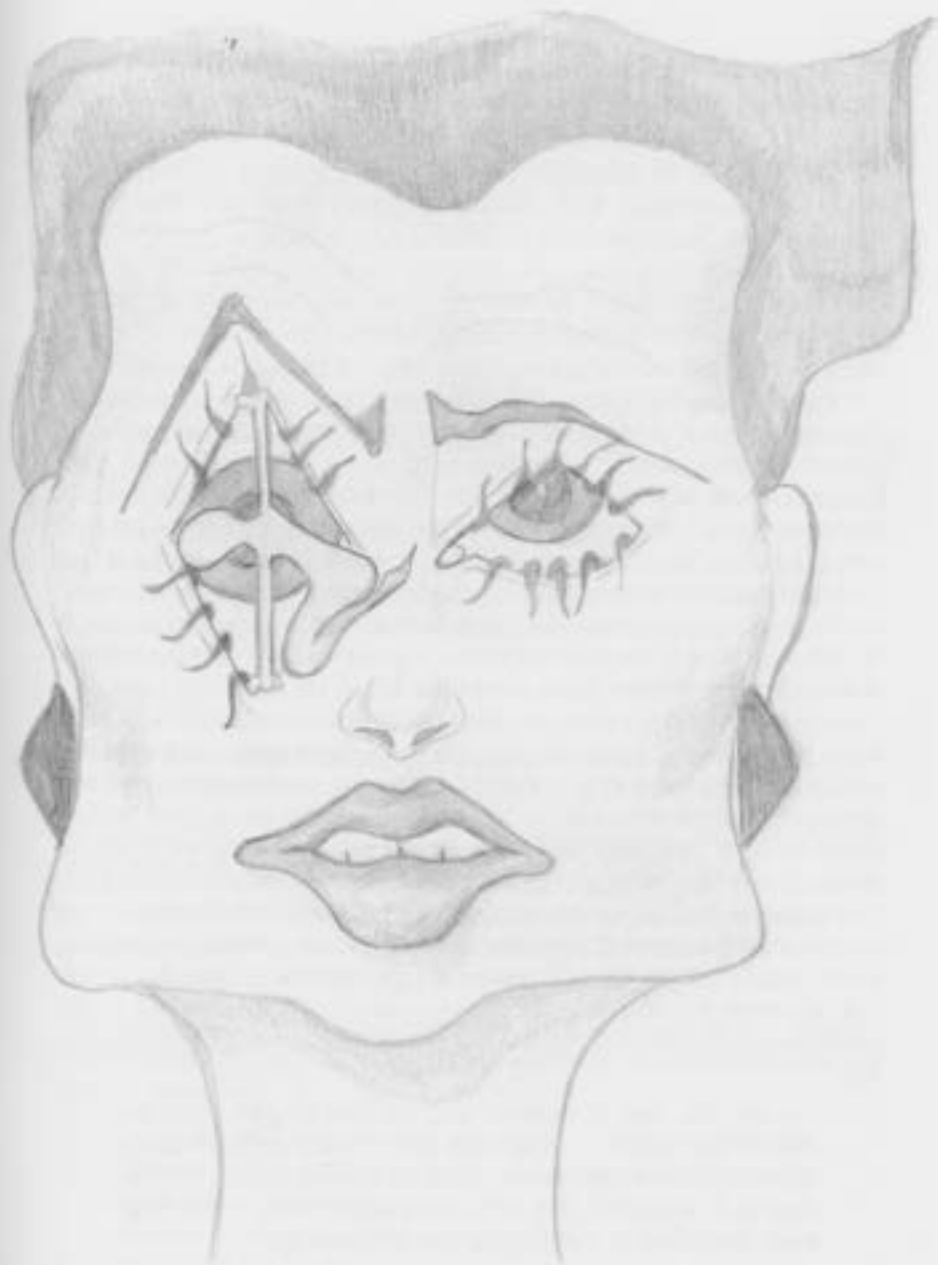
Tracy hung up the phone and turned her attention back to Anna. "Robert will be here in about ten minutes," she said. Her tone was hesitant.

Anna didn't know exactly what to say. "Tracy, I'm sorry that I blew up at you. I don't know what happened, but I shouldn't have done that. I apologize."

Tracy smiled brightly. "That's okay sweetie!" she said. "Now, do I look okay? Maybe I need a little more eyeliner. God, Anna I cannot wait for you to meet Robert. He is *so* sweet."

Anna thought for a moment. "I can't wait either," she said, and she smiled ironically.

—Margaret Brown



JULIE SABATINO

KURTZ: CONRAD'S PERSONIFICATION OF FREUDIAN AGGRESSION

Sigmund Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, says that civilization exists as a controlling force meant to protect man from the innate aggressiveness that drives him. If this is a valid statement, then it follows that man, taken away from this restrictive, protective force will act with unrestrained aggressiveness. Removed or taken away from culture, which is what Freud means by civilization, man will have no internal system of checks to balance or control the indestructible force of his aggressiveness.

It seems, in reading Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, that the character of Kurtz, as recounted through the character Marlow, serves as a proof that such humanistic ideals as justice and love are left behind, even forgotten as one begins his trip into non-civilization, in this case the deepest part of Africa and the deepest parts of the human psyche. For the greatest part of the story the reader is not allowed to meet Kurtz, but learns of him indirectly through the statements of other characters. The reader is allowed to see the disassociation from civilization that Marlow experiences during his trip from Paris to the heart of Africa. It is safe to draw from his feelings and apply them to what Kurtz must have felt as he made the same trip. I base this supposition on the fact that Marlow associates himself with Kurtz when he says that he has chosen "the same nightmare"; Marlow leaves civilization, describing it as sepulchral. When he reaches Africa, his first descriptions of the natives are expressed in animalistic terms. They "moved about like ants" and wore loin cloths from which "the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails." The fact that he unconsciously describes them thus indicates that he realizes, although perhaps subliminally, that he has entered an area in which the inhabitants live by and are motivated by instincts, which civilized people normally regard as unacceptable. He specifically says that he prefers the natural, instinctive expressions of aggressiveness to the pretentious expressions of the unnatural, inhibiting force of civilization. He says,

I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire. . . . these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils that swayed and drove men. . . . But as I stood on this hillside, I saw that I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.

In this setting, the white man's pretensions at control are ineffectual.

His first intimations of Kurtz are positive expressions of an exemplary ideal

of civilized man. He is reported to Marlow as "a very remarkable person," "a first-class agent," an "emissary of pity and science and progress". During the first part of his trip, Marlow feels the pull of both the forces of civilization and the jungle. He says, in what is a foreshadowing ironic statement, that he "was getting savage" and then he says, of his response to the clerk at the main post, "I became in an instant as much of a pretense as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims".

As he travels further upriver, his feeling of disassociation and alienation from the control that civilization holds over man becomes more pronounced. he says,

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world . . .

and then,

. . . you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once—far away—in another existence perhaps.

Later he says,

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was quiet there.

He feels cut off from understanding of his surroundings and they become more alien and unknown. He says,

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free.

That these statements, literally spoken in description of the physical surroundings, are also statements about a journey into the psyche can be seen in these lines:

. . . if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise. . . And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future.

At the same time his feelings of disassociation from civilization are becoming

more and more pronounced, his is becoming more accepting of undiluted, instinctive feelings and actions. He is unshocked by the fact that the natives onboard his steamer want some human flesh to eat. Interestingly, while this would be disgusting and inhuman in civilization, Marlow sees these cannibals in a more understanding light. He says,

Yes, I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity.

So while he has rejected conventional, civilized ideas, he has become more human in his reactions to others. I should state that this primitive, instinctive behaviour is not idealized. Marlow realized that it is dangerous and mournful. Also, the further Marlow goes, the more he learns of a deeper, darker side of the mysterious Kurtz. He is seen as an exploiter of the worst kind, both of people and nature. He is a man with an incredible ability to sway people to his will—both people like the natives that worship him as a god, and to people like the Russian agent that lives near Kurtz in the jungle and who worships his ideas and eloquence. He has used his abilities in a horrible way, setting himself up as a deity. I think this is the ultimate end of the aggression instinct. He is a man who has lost all restraint; he has gone beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations, he has entered, or become, an impenetrable darkness. This is a legitimate response, in the Freudian theory of innate aggressiveness. Freud would say that this uncontrolled aggressiveness on the part of Kurtz is as natural as any body function. Give the fact that Kurtz is in a place

...Of utter solitude without a policeman...where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion...

Freud would say that Kurtz is acting not only naturally but predictably. To Marlow, Kurtz has gone over the brink of uncontrolled aggressiveness into madness. He says,

...the wilderness found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know...and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating.

I think this is the best statement in the story about the results of uncontrollable aggression on the psyche; it tells the person things about

himself that he didn't know, in Kurtz's case things horrible and frightening (I feel that Conrad feels that anyone who seeks to reach the depths of himself will encounter dark and frightening things). For Kurtz, the final result is a terrifying moment of self-realization in which he sees clearly the horror of his actions. I think, based on the fact that Marlow understands the situation but would still rather talk to Kurtz than the representatives of pretentious civilization, that exploration of the psyche is still more acceptable.

Based on these textual examples drawn from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, I believe that Freud's ideas on innate human aggression are explored and proved as a legitimate theory. The character of Kurtz can be seen as a personification of unadulterated aggressiveness, uncontrolled by the modifying forces of civilization.

—Beth Snipes

THE HUNCHBACK OF FASHION AVENUE
(In Memory of Julius Rosenthal)

I thought you'd have given every dollar
of your millions to get the hump
excised, iron your back flat
like your theater friends
who hired plastic surgeons
to press out their wrinkles,
tuck up their sags, nip
unwanted flab.

I thought you'd swap your genius
to be average, even dull, rather than
keep the title: The Beast Who Wed
Beauty—Jean, the elegant blonde
who gave you a daughter, then left:

that you'd have chosen stone not flesh
to be a gargoyle on Notre Dame,
not play the Quasimodo-angel
in exchange for B starlets draped
on your arm.

But now at your coffin I know
you would have altered nothing.
Somehow you had always glimpsed
the last tradeoff—
that in death the hump transformed,
would unfold wings.

—Grace DiSanto

THE ANGELS

Miss Emma tossed on her great bed in the center of the darkened blue room. Tears ran along the wrinkles across her cheeks and soaked in the crumpled pillow. "What a horrible thing to do," she sighed desolately. "How could I have done such a vicious thing?" She plucked at the old-fashioned feather bolster she still insisted on using, and weakly clawed it into place under her pillow.

She thought of how it had all started, although even the beginning seemed vague and jumbled in her memories now. She had been sick for about three months. The great-nieces and nephews had stopped their daily visits by then, but she wasn't sorry. She knew they were there in the house if she needed them, and her maid took all the care of her that she needed. The family all seemed to speak a different language that she didn't understand. Not couldn't, didn't.

Miss Emma was of a constant disposition, and had kept her friends for half a century; only they were all dead now, every one, and she was lonely with nobody even to write to. "Meg!," she said thoughtfully to her maid one day. "Do you remember when I had the measles - in this very room - when I was nine?" She threw up feeble hands. "Oh, but how silly of me - you couldn't have been born till I was over 60- But do you know, Meg, I had a bird cage with three magpies in it. The doctor himself brought them to me as a gift, when I was feeling very low. Good psychology, those birds, I suppose, but it was just plain kindness back then." Miss Emma turned her head towards a tiny dent under the wallpaper near the bed. "That was where they hung the cage, Meg. A big, golden cage with little swings in it. Yes. And the magpies talked to me all day, it seemed. I used to pretend they were a little three-piece band - even then I loved music - and they played all my favorite pieces for me. I used to sing with them." She sighed and looked up at the dent on the wall. "I do wish I had those magpies back again. I wonder whatever became of them. . . ." Meg smoothed the bed covers.

"Oh, birds don't live forever," she said cheerfully. "That is, I mean, they don't live nearly so long as - people," she added.

Meg repeated the conversation and less than a week later Miss Emma's great-niece Barbara brought her a golden bird cage holding three magpies. She hung it on a hook and attached it to the wall at the same mark left by the first cage seventy years earlier.

"I thought I'd never find them, Aunt Emma," said Barbara. "The man swore they could talk, too, but so far they won't for me. Maybe you'll have better luck."

"Cool it," said the fattest bird in a droning squawk. "Cool it. Cool it." It wagged its head. "So long. So long."

"Well, listen to it!" laughed Barbara. "I'll leave at once."

Miss Emma lay propped on her bolster and looked at the magpies all day long. She felt suddenly young and light-headed. "Shall I call you Johann, Wolfgang, and Franz again?" she mused. "Will you stand up in your little black tuxedos and play for me like the others did? You look so very much like them." Meg came in to remove her dinner tray.

"Don't cover the bird-cage yet Meg," said Miss Emma. "Two of them still haven't said anything, but I think they're beginning to feel at home now."

"So long. Cool it, cool it," squawked the fat bird.

Before she left, Meg turned out all the lamps except one beside the bed. The sick old woman lay and watched the dim light reflect on the shiny feathers of her trio. "What will it be tonight?" she invited in a soft voice. "Liszt? Brahms? Or how about some Schubert?"

"Franz or Iggy?" asked the fat bird.

"Why, Franz, of course!" Miss Emma replied, startled.

"Who's Franz? Iggy's brother?" asked the second magpie, sitting down with a plop on the cage floor.

"Shut up. He was an old-timey songwriter," said the fat one, jerking the other's wing out of his beak. "Stop biting your feathers."

"I don't dig Franz," complained the third member of the trio, leaning against a swing in the center of the cage. "Let's give the old dame like some of Thinsy Wilky's latest."

"Please don't!" cried Miss Emma. "He can't be the least bit well-known. I've never heard of him."

"You're kidding! He'll blow your mind," shrieked the third magpie. "You musn't live another second without making the acquaintance of Thinsy." He swung across the cage on his perch.

"Right," cried the fat bird. "Stand up, man. I'll introduce us proper fashion. Old lady," he said, addressing Miss Emma through the bars of the cage, "this is Bix. A slob, but cool on the bongos. Bix, stop biting your feathers." Bix scowled and sat back down on the floor, putting one toenail reflectively in his beak. The spokesman pointed towards the swing.

"The guy on the merry-go-round is Luther, our brain," he continued. "He does all our thinking for us." Miss Emma gazed with interest at Luther, who swung past his fat friend with a wide grin. "And myself, I, am the mouthpiece. I am Bodo," he bowed, "so named because I was born in a tree."

"I don't follow," said Miss Emma. "Born in a tree? But what...?"

"You don't follow, I can't explain," said Bodo firmly. "Now how about the Humoresque Tribal Jump?"

"Oh, Dvorak!" cried Miss Emma, clapping her hands weakly. "I'd love that."

"Who?" asked Bix.

"Never mind. Play!" Bodo gave the downbeat and the cage was filled with wild sound. At first, Miss Emma knew she had misunderstood. It was not the 'Humoresque'. Then she thought she detected a phrase here and there with a familiar sound. The cage rocked madly on its hook and the magpies gave abandoned squawks of joy as they played. When the piece was over, they all dropped to the cage floor on their backs, waved their shiny feet in the air, and applauded wildly with their wings. Bodo stood up finally. "Man, that was great," he panted.

"That was simply terrible. It gave me a headache," complained Miss Emma.

"You don't like it?" cried Bodo, surprised. "Hey, the old lady don't like it."

"Well, said Bix, rising with the air of one seizing an opportunity, "all is not lost. Do you dig poetry?"

"Poetry?" Miss Emma said, catching the last word. "Oh, yes, I love it. I could recite you every verse of Patmore's *Angel in the House*."

"Who?" asked Bix.

"Shut up and give," said Bodo, slapping Bix's wing out of his beak. "Give us 'Wail, Bix. That'll send her,'" suggested Luther. Bix but both wings in his beak and stared vacantly at the ceiling. Luther prompted him: "I have been sad..." Bix nodded and climbed onto the swing.

"Brothers," he recited, waving his wings. "I'm saved.

"Saved by the demon ad-men's sacred slogans."

Bix mouthed through the choppy verses in a shrill falsetto, ignoring Miss Emma when she rammed her fingers into her ears.

"Those slick fine-grooved keys" he squealed,

that slide the locking jaws

and slake paralysis phobias

inflicting sadist souls!"

"Oh, stop," interrupted Miss Emma, releasing her reddened ears. "That doesn't sound like a nice poem to me. It doesn't even rhyme. It's... it's ugly. Why, that's not poetry."

With an enraged squawk, Bix flew onto the swing and sat with his back to Miss Emma. He stuck both feet through the bars of the cage and chewed one wing.

"Now you've hurt him," said Luther. "That happened to be his own poem."

"How could it be? You had to prompt him," Miss Emma pointed out.

"Soo what?" shrugged Luther, scratching. "He's absent-minded is all."

"Well," Miss Emma sighed. "I am sorry if I hurt his feelings. Does he write about anything else?"

"Bix really shines in erotic love poetry, but you wouldn't dig that," said Bodo.

"Oh, come now!" Miss Emma bridled. "In my day Swinburne was very... In fact, so were all the pre-Raphaelites, if you want to know."

"OOOoh, Algernon!" Bix screeched, falling into a mock faint on the cage floor.

"See? He knows who *he* is," said Bodo, defending the prostrate Bix.

The door opened suddenly and Meg came in to settle her patient for the night. "Did the other two birds talk yet?" she asked as she covered the cage. Miss Emma held her breath as she saw Luther's beak push through the cage cover where it overlapped.

"Hey babe, got a joint?" he squawked. "Got a joint?"

"Oh, listen to it!" cried Meg laughing.

"Got a joint?" Luther repeated, watching her walk across the moonlit room towards the door. "Psst, fellas," he whispered. "Get that ball-bearing action!"

After the door had closed, he turned beady bloodshot eyes on Miss Emma. "Hey, old lady!" he called hoarsely. "Next time swivel-hips sashays in here, tell her to bring up some beer."

"I will not!" Miss Emma said firmly. "Go to sleep now."

The next day Meg uncovered the cage and shook it gently. The birds were sleepy. "Got a joint?" squawked one.

"So long. Cool it. Cool it. So long," said another flatly.

"Well, two of them are talking," said Meg.

"When's breakfast?" asked Miss Emma, with a revived appetite.

"When's breakfast, when's breakfast, when's breakfast," the third magpie croaked monotonously. "When's breakfast?"

After Meg had brought the meal, straightened the room, and left, the trio played some more of Thinsy Wilky's arrangements, unasked.

"Oh, stop, stop," cried Miss Emma in agony. "If that's all you know, don't play anything." The birds went into a huddle.

"Bix is going to play the bongos for you," announced Bodo proudly. "You don't realize it, but this is a rare honor."

"Oh, how nice," she said, relenting. "What song will he play?"

"No song. Just the beat," explained Bodo. "Bongos are drums, old lady."

"Well, in that case, no thank you," said Miss Emma. "That's not *my* idea of entertainment." Ignoring Bix, who sat down on the swing with his back to her bed, she continued: "Can't you do anything else? How about readings?"

"Well, O.K.," said Luther, scratching his head. "What you like to read about?" He took a well-thumbed paperback from under one wing. Miss Emma thought for a moment.

"I like historical novels best," she decided.

"Good. This is historical," said Luther, waving the book. "It starts back during the Korean war, and . . ."

"No, no," she cried. "I meant books about the old times - when ladies wore crinolines and hoop skirts, and men were men."

"When was that?" sighed Luther.

"Oh, it was back when - well, I don't know exactly when. But those are the times I like to read about," Miss Emma said crossly.

"Girls still wear hoop skirts," commented Bix, turning round. "Once this girl I had a date with wore one of those things to a Halloween party, and when she . . ."

"Shut up," cried Bodo. "This is a nice old dame."

"No such thing," growled Bix.

"Oh, really!" said Miss Emma, vexed again. "You're all completely impossible. You can't play one thing worth hearing. You've never heard of anyone important. Your postures are terrible and you bite your nails. You don't think about anything but guzzling beer and . . ."

"That does it," yelled Bodo. "You've knocked everything we've tried to do. You're nothing but a rude, cross old woman. You use being old as an excuse to be bad mannered. Spring us and we'll leave."

"You ungrateful little pests," cried Miss Emma, incensed. "You - you ought to be baked in a bird pie. That's how a lot of people would treat you - eat you up."

"Man, let's go!" squawked Luther, alarmed.

"Go on then, go, before I eat you," she threatened, reaching up with one thin hand to open the cage door.

The trio fluttered out onto the foot of the bed, muttering angrily. Miss Emma turned her back to them. "Where are we going?" asked Bix.

"San Francisco, where else?" said Bodo defiantly.

"Don't let's go," Bix whined. "We live here. This is our pad."

"Well," said Luther, "you can stay and let the old crow eat you in a pie if you want to, dope." He flew towards the windowsill with Bodo. Bix followed, glancing back once towards his cage as he disappeared through the window with Luther. Bodo paused on the sill and turned beady eyes towards the huddled figure in the bed.

"We did our best," he said shortly. "We did everything we could. Being old is no excuse." He followed the others through the window, and there was silence.

That night Miss Emma lay alone with her remorse. After a miserable day, she tossed half the night in the empty darkness of the blue room. She lay with her back to the window where the trio had last been seen, and Bodo's voice was still in her ears. "We did our best. . ."

It was almost dawn. With tired eyes, Miss Emma stared at the reflection the moon cast across her damp pillow. Was it possible she could see three small shadows across the spot of light? She lay tense and listened.

"She's asleep," whispered a hoarse voice. "and our pad door's open. Come on."

"Wait, man," came a cautious squawk. "Hold it. D'you think she really will go for that Soul stuff? And Luther's yogi exercises? And my laments? Or the imitation of Reagan? You really think so?"

"How do I know, dope?" the first voice rasped.

"Hey look, fellas," cried Luther's voice, "our supper's in the pad. Come on." Miss Emma relaxed her weary eyelids as the cage creaked.

There was a long silence except for the sound of food being swallowed and Bix muttering. "Man, oh man." Miss Emma turned slightly and risked opening one eye. Luther looked straight down at her with eyes like bloodshot beads. He leaned forward through the bars.

"Hey, old lady," he whispered hoarsely. "Why don'tcha ring for old swivel-hips and get us some beer."

—Jean S. Moore

SOMEDAY

there will be joy in the spookhouse.
All the ones who aren't really there
either will be there or won't.
Shouters will sing or shut up.
All the veils will tear at once,
catching in the chandeliers,
blowing through the trees.
Some of it may not be pretty,
but all of it will be clear.
Those who live by illusion
will find something better to do.
All the bright souls will pop up
from the dark brown boxes, nailed
so carefully shut. No more processions.
No more games. The war of shadows
will dissolve in light and the
hidden will all come home free.

—Russell Fowler

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