CONTENTS

2 Willoughby Johnson

HOLLIS

Diana Senechal

NOVEMBER LOVE LETTER

26

7 charcoal

LISSA MERRITT

photograph

EDDIE HARTMAN

28

8 Cathy Jacobowitz

CATHEXIS

Yoav Grunstein

THE SEVENTH DAY

29

8 Lee Deigaard

UNRHYMED SONNET

VICTORIA KOSTADINOVA

etching

34

9 Andrew Rossi

AND I WAS SILENT

A POSITION IN THEORY

35

10 Michael McCullers

CLOVE

photograph

JANE JOHNSTON

40

13 photograph

MALCOLM DICKINSON

photograph

JANE JOHNSTON

41

14 Nathan Sayre

DOUBLETHINK

Caitlin DeSilvey

THE GARDEN

42

19 Adam Schnitzer

PRIDE COMETH...

Jeremy Bendik-Keymer

SECTION URBAINE

43

23 woodcut

SISI PALMER

Willoughby Johnson

NORTH

44

24 Carrie Iverson

GROUND

photograph

EDDIE HARTMAN

47
A hot Saturday morning in May I got a response from my Uncle Baker. I left the other mail where it lay on the porch, carefully tore the envelope and unfolded the thick paper. The letter had been typed on an old type-writer, so the lines of words didn’t lay straight.

When you think of someone who has died, do you recall odd things? My grandfather, George Hollis, whom the family all called Papa, is dead now. I don’t know about much of that, and I don’t know much of what Papa’s life was like. What I do recall is Papa telling me once about the market gunners along the Chesapeake when he was a boy, how they had guns that were small cannon and how they tied live geese out to bring in the flocks. And I remember a picture, which I or my mother still have, of a hundred young men in a Norfolk yard, dressed in suits, doing calisthenics, and the face, unrecognizable, that Papa pointed to as his own.

Papa did not go to college. Out of high school he went to work supervising stevedores on the Norfolk docks. And he lived with his family in a large house near the shore in a neighborhood that my mother’s cousins in Norfolk today say has gone “bad.” This means black people live there now. When Papa told me his family had all lived in that house I didn’t really understand.

When he said his family he meant his parents and grown brother and his brother’s young family, his grandparents and servants and for some time his great-grandmother. She, Papa told me, grew up in north Georgia and would spit and rinse her mouth, this is true, would spit and rinse her mouth if one of the grandchildren managed to trick her into saying “Sherman.” It was a big house but must have been tight. And Papa lived there many years, until married at age thirty-five. He had been in love much longer but his mother forbade him to marry: he was the younger and she needed him she said. So he and his bride, my grandmother, waited fifteen years to marry, waited for his mother to die so they could marry. Papa was the first Hollis to move away from Norfolk since they came over in the 1640’s. He must have wanted to be away after fifteen years waiting to get married.

None of his line ever returned for more than a visit.

He got a job at a cotton brokerage in Greenville, South Carolina which was where my mother was born, and then he moved to Greensboro, where she grew up. They had a big house built there, a colonial on a couple country acres, and servants and my grandmother—whom I do not remember—traded sugar sent by a friend in Barbados for meat ration stamps during the war. My Uncle Baker was born in Greensboro, and my mother remembers the sit-ins.

After my cousin Baker Jr. died Papa came to live with us in Fort Smith and then he got very ill—he smoked you see, and drank, not in excess for his day, but quite exceptionally for ours—he got sick and was in and out of the hospital, then insisted on going to a nursing home so not to be a burden. This angered my mother but what could she do? He was an adamant man and he was her father.

I remember some of this time. I remember Papa hokking violent and how long his
toenails got after weeks on his back. He had always taken long walks and now on his back with inch-long horns growing from his toes. I remember leaving once so he could urinate and coming back too soon and seeing his penis. A strange sight for a grandson.

But it did not seem then, as it does now, a sad time.

After the death of my grandmother, Papa moved to Chicago where Uncle Baker and Aunt Dally lived. Dally had had little as a child, my mother tells me, so Baker Jr. was spoiled. He got most anything he wanted not just materially but they let him do most anything, including abuse me. So I cannot call myself impartial.

Though there were good things too, like the day Baker Jr. taught me to light the spray of a Lysol can. He was good teacher of mischief.

When Baker Jr. was thirteen he was hit by a car one night riding his bike and killed. Much later one of my mother’s cousins in Norfolk (they are all women) bemoaned his death, the death of the Hollis name, in her Tidewater voice that says “about” as “a boat.” I could say nothing at all, but I wanted to say the name was lucky to die rather than live on in Baker Jr. But I didn’t say this because I didn’t know if she could see that sometimes a name should die.

After Baker Jr. was killed Papa moved to Fort Smith to live with us. My father was a professor there and Papa moved down with us. On the way home from the airport, he told me how he had scared the stewardess by asking for her name and the address of the airline. He smiled when he told me, confiding to a nine-year-old, he was going to write a nice letter about her. That was how Papa was. He gave you hell and left a massive tip.

My brother Tommy moved to the basement and Papa into Tommy’s room. Papa lived for quite a while there in the house with us, taking walks daily, smoking cigars, polishing his shoes or brushing his suits, drinking scotch. And he sickened and died finally and we buried him in a cemetery not two blocks from the house, a few hundred miles from his wife, in the cheapest coffin money could buy. Papa thought funerals were a waste. I don’t know if he thought this before Baker Jr.’s funeral, before the limousines and the masses of flowers and the closed, polished-walnut coffin. Or if it was a result of that Egyptian affair. But Papa did not, my mother told me, put much stock in funerals. And this was the reason for a coffin covered in grey cloth to hide the particle-board beneath.

When I was very young, our families, my family and Uncle Baker and Dally and Baker Jr. and Papa and my Grandmother, would meet summers at Topsail beach in North Carolina. We stayed at the Jolly Roger hotel. I know the name of the hotel, and was able to recall one day at Topsail, from letters I found a year or so ago. My father sent letters to the Jolly Roger the summer he hunted in Africa, letters to all of us which call me by a nickname I no longer have, and contain coded messages for my mother:

Holly and Tommy, your grandad killed a big Kudu yesterday (Therese: and damn near killed himself, tripped on a rock and shot his own hat off!) It’s horns are big as you Tommy!

Those messages (Therese:...) were to be kept from myself and Tommy. And Baker Jr. But I have to wonder now if there were secrets even then between my parents and Uncle Baker and Aunt Dally, if there were things to be kept from them. I don’t know.

Tommy was four the year dad went to Africa. My memory of Topsail is of the
three of us, Tommy, Baker Jr. and me on the beach, a hot, sunny day with a pink plastic mold for sand castles. You like to think you were once innocent.

But our families were there together for three or four running summers, I guess, and you know mom introduced Baker and Dally. Oh yes. Mom was working in New York in the early sixties, waiting for dad to propose, and Baker was at graduate school in New Haven and would come down to the city weekends. Mom and Baker were close, very close—which makes me fear sometimes for Tommy and myself—and Dally worked in the office there with mom, and Baker was a good-looking guy.

A thing which has simply disappeared is a composite of photos of all the Hollises which sat by my bed as a child. I was raised my mother’s son, and there was large picture of Uncle Baker in the composite, taken at the time he was courting Dally, and he had sharp intelligent good looks and, my mother told me, a green Alpha Romeo. “None of ‘em dumb and none of ‘em ugly” was what Papa used to say about the Hollises and it was basically true.

This seems unimportant to you no doubt. But it is all so strange for me. The tenuousness.

Afternoons after Papa moved to Fort Smith, I would come home from school, and there he sat in his chair in the front room and I would drop my books and say hello and go downstairs and watch TV.

Sometimes I ran errands for Papa, and maybe this was my parents’ first inkling. Or maybe they thought it was just Papa, that is how he is. And maybe it was just Papa, maybe all of it was nothing more than that and has all been blown from proportion.

You see, Papa wanted to pay me and Tommy $20 a week to go to the drug store for him every once in a while, buy him cigars and pipe-filters (he smoked his cigar ends in a pipe) and toiletries. My parents would hear nothing of the $20. Why was he doing this, they asked? Well, it was what he had always given Baker Jr.

And maybe that was their first hint. I do not know. But if you think on it, it is a little much for a Grandfather to pay his grandson to go where his grandson is going to go anyway, to rot his teeth and peek at the magazines on the high rack.

But he had paid Baker Jr. $20. Maybe for no reason other than he was Papa. The big tipper who paid his own way. I don’t know and we do not talk about it now. If my parents had had their way I never would have known any of it, but we live in an old house and voices carry.

There are two large closets off either end of my parent’s bedroom. One is used as a closet and the other we have always called, rather optimistically, dad’s study. The study always talked a good game as a study; it had a fine walnut desk and certificates, shelves of books, a zebra skin on the floor. But dad rarely set foot in there. I went in there sometimes to be alone and a year or so after Papa’s death I overheard my mom telling someone, some friend or other, the whole thing:

She and dad had gone over Papa’s accounts and they were full of rather large checks written to Uncle Baker and Dally. Three or Four hundred dollars a month. Papa wasn’t a rich man but had some money. But Baker and Dally didn’t need the money. Papa didn’t eat anything anyway. And it was theft as far as mom was concerned on the phone, and maybe it was, maybe there was more damning evidence I don’t remember. I was only eleven.
Or maybe it was all Papa, the big tipper, paying his own way.
I don't know.
I did know from my mother's voice what she thought and I had to believe her.
After she hung up she heard me crying and opened the door to the study and looked at me.
Pitying and tender she said, "You should not have heard."

The accounts were the last straw for mom. Well, of course, after Baker Jr. died, Papa had to write a new will—I do not want to be cruel but it must have been a relief, Papa must have understood that frozen day in Chicago when they laid Baker Jr's coffin in a mausoleum to await burial after the spring thaw, the coffin of the last person to hold Papa's name, Papa must have known sometimes it is best a name dies.
Papa's new will was the first straw between everyone, that and Dally washing the old Hollis china in the dishwasher and my mother remarking after each visit how the delicate purple flowers had faded since last we were there. I wonder did she know she was giving away the china when she introduced Baker and Dally? Papa changed his will and left to us much of what he would have left to Baker Jr.

All of us were there in the nursing home when Papa signed the new will, a notary public too and Papa's roommate grimacing funny at me with his toothless face, unable to speak, and the smell of ammonia and decay and Papa very comprehending and giving me a wink and a hit after he signed the will and I guess he knew he was dying, though I did not.

So the fight over the will was the first straw. Or maybe it was before. Maybe for Baker and Dally the first straw was Papa moving away because I think they loved him and here in a short year they had lost both ends of their connection, they were set adrift so quick on both ends, unmoored from above and below.

Then, of course, the will and all of it, much of Papa's stuff taken from Chicago to Fort Smith. Can you picture them? Sad, sad people, drunk—that is a true thing that my uncle always had a smell I loved and did not recognize until first I drank bourbon. That is not to judge, but it is true—drunk and lost of father and son and us too, they had lost us and we them and Papa was the man who had the particle-board coffin because he didn't care about things at all. He would have had it all—the bed I now sleep in, the corn-shuck chairs, the side-board, the china—he would have had it all burned had he known. I know that. But he didn't know and he didn't have it burned so we were enemies with my uncle.

Sometimes as years passed, I wondered about Uncle Baker and Aunt Dally. Does he still build the fine, painfully-detailed ship models he once did, the Danmark I remember in his living room, a fine ship with exquisite rigging and a green hull? Did I maybe have a new cousin, unheard of?

I sent a high-school graduation invitation to Baker and Dally. I did not expect them to come, and they did not. I wanted to get some contact, though, see if they were still there. He had been my favorite uncle. (Do not take that badly if you read this, Uncle Dan, remember I did not see you so much then.)

A week or so after sending the invitation, I received that letter from Uncle Baker:

Dear Hollis:

Congratulations on your high school graduation. I am sorry your aunt
and I will be unable to attend. I would very much like to hear how you are in the future. Sincerely,

(signed) J. Baker Hollis

So that was it.
That was how my grandfather went from Norfolk, Virginia where he and his had always been, to South and then North Carolina, to Chicago to Arkansas where he died. That is how his name died with him, or will with my uncle. That is how our family split over money and things, over what may have been Baker and Dally’s greed, or my parents’ suspicion, or parts of both. That is how I tried to re-connect and could not.

The same old story.
I have heard you do not belong to a place until someone has died, so I guess as they lowered Papa’s coffin, my father from Virginia and my mother from North Carolina (and for 300 years before that, Virginia) and their children, I guess we began to belong to Fort Smith. We might as well. We don’t belong to anyone else.
charcoal

LISSA MERRITT
Cathy Jacobowitz

CATHEXIS

1
You’re having trouble aiming for your food.
Or at least no trouble aiming, but some hitting.
Too bad, because it’s sitting on your plate
A good deal calmer than both of us.
Don’t let’s lose our nerve and prove ourselves
Less rational than beans and lettuce.

2
Last night I went to bed and dreamed
I tried to call a friend of mine in town.
He lives right around the corner.
I must have dialed half a dozen times
Or even more in my sleep.
Something kept going wrong.
This morning I woke up and thought
How kind phones are to me in waking life.

Lee Deigaard

UNRHYMED SONNET

For you, the wild relief of a banjo waltz
a rising, rocking dance of ocean waves.
For you, the cloaking peace of trees in the rain
a hush which muffles like the distant sea.
For you, the easy whistled song in the stairs
so gentle, sable warming like the sand.
For you, this cobalt blue October sky
wide as mountains, plumbless like the sea.
These are your cathedrals, here your awe
of all the stubborn unevenness of hope.

The water in the air can make it hard
to see the mountains, hazy blue and distant.
But laugh, for it condenses that which obscures
into a puddle which reflects the sky.
AND I WAS SILENT

The Recoleta was full of families
And sunlight,
And I was happy,
The waiter served the tea and
Brought the lemon,
And I was warm.
A cloud passed and the light went
And my eyes closed and a fork fell
And I was silent.
And I was silent, and someone picked
Up the fork, and the sun shone,
And I was silent.

A beggar came to the table with her
Baby asking for unos pesos,
And I offered my heart.
She said she could not accept,
But that she appreciated the gesture.
And I was sad.

I rose and walked toward the
Center of the plaza and blew
Kisses to a dog tied to a tree.

She said she could not accept,
But that she appreciated the gesture.

A pretty young girl ran across the
Recoleta carrying a red balloon
And she tripped on a brick right
By me and her balloon flew up
Into a tree.
I helped her stand and offered
My assistance, and she said,

¿Cómo no?

And I was happy.

I returned to the table and
My tea was cold and the waiter
Said, “You are silent señor?”
And I said, “Si.”
Clove

Clove was what you called yourself, your younger self, in those poems you read to me one day after everyone else had gone. They were dusty small-towned, green-pastured poems, wide-eyed innocence trying to be slit-eyed skepticism poems, adolescent vertigo and inertia poems; they were about girls who wanted things.

You stopped writing when your daughter was born. You always read and read and read; varied, beautiful, and dangerous things. Your appetite for sound and meaning was voracious, but at some point you decided to limit yourself to the role of consumer. I remember you said to me "there's no distance like the great chasm between desire and talent." You stopped writing decisively and gracefully, but not without regrets; most of the people around you put it down to a change in priorities.

You read your poems to me from a book called Women Writers of Alabama. I looked for a copy of the book, but I think it was published among friends for friends. There couldn't have been that many women writers in Alabama, I guess, but you were in print, unchangeable and undeniable, and I think you were at least a little proud. You read to me softly, sitting on your desk, your legs hanging too short to reach the floor. You held the book open in one hand and moved the other one, cupped towards the ceiling, up and down to the steady sad beat of your verse. As usual you pushed your floppy auburn hair up and back, out of your face, but I think I saw you wipe your eyes before your bangs fell back over them; it was the only time I saw you cry. They were about growing up in Selma, not the Selma of TV news, but of Appalachian foothills, sentinel pecan trees, and original grace. All I remember is your describing your cousin, willow-limbed and hollow-cheeked, tan, with three breasts. I'm sorry I don't remember them better Clove, someone should. I remember that as you read to me your voice rose and sank with cool inflection, the round vowels hollowed by your slow sadness, and the consonants dulled in your languorous cadence.

I was uncomfortable with your memory at the funeral Clove; the church was rank with the smell of incense and close-packed bodies, and it spoke with unfamiliar echoes. I can only guess that it was a concession to your parents, your grayed, faltering father losing his senses, and your mother crying for not understanding you better. I even smiled once, because my friend said something funny; I thought to myself that you would have gotten a kick out of that.

The one good thing about the funeral was the man who did the eulogy; he at least acted like he knew you once. He told us about a time when he was with you in the Medicine Wheel, some funky sixties commune. Even then you were a poet among politicos. You wrote their manifesto - "O Mother, Father, Soil, Son, Love...", it started something like that. I can't believe you ever wrote like that, you who were such an enemy of sentimentality in all things, especially in writing. I can just see you Clove, part of you excited, desirous, thrilled at the new and the untried, but with an untouchable part of you always holding back, knowing organizations fail, letting the words roll out of you and smiling for their sake.

He didn't try to paint a pretty picture of you or your life, or to gloss over your rough spots. He talked about your endless wandering and your sharp skepticism, your desire and your fear. I wondered if he were ever in love with you. Sometimes I would come to you in a panic about what to do with my life, and you would say "why not wander?" You'd give me calm advice between sips of coffee, and I never could figure out what made me feel better, the things you said (which were simple really) or the way you drank your coffee. "Keep looking," you said, "enjoy the process. Find things that are hot, find things that are hot and bump against them, then watch the sparks."
I have a yellow scarf, a yellow silk Chinese scarf that I stole from your house. It's sheer and paisley, with several small holes - probably from your cigarettes. I wore it around my head one day after I went swimming in the muddy little lake across the bridge from your house. It was where all the kids from school used to go swimming; there was always someone around tanning or drinking or fucking on the beaten wooden raft. That day you were coming with your daughter down the road, you in a blue cotton sun-dress that hung loosely from your shoulders and touched again at your hips, her in a white bikini, contrasting with the new tan on her still-uncertain breasts and hips. You saw me with your scarf on my head, asleep in the sun with my back to you, but you let me keep it. When you left us there an hour later you didn't bother taking your scarf back. I tied it back in my hair, letting the sun shine warmly though the silk, drying my scalp and lighting up the scarf as it drifted with the breeze, and then we swam again.

We were on a school trip to France together, in one of those gardens you see in books. It was a terrible tour, but the garden was very soothing; everything was immaculately sculpted, and you didn't have to guess at what was beautiful. It was high on a hill with broken stone walls around it, little chipped statuettes were scattered like grass clippings in the paths. The wind blew my hair the wrong way and I had just bought flavored-ice; I was annoyed and trying to tie my shoe when a guy on the trip came up to me. I had roomed with him two nights before and I didn't like him. He leaned into me, dipping his shirttail into my flavored-ice, and described your breasts, which he had just seen as the wind blew your shirt away from your body; smallish and dark, nipples the color of apricots resting on their slow downward slope.

I did something a few days ago you would have liked, I stripped the paint off the trim of this old house we just bought. The paint was scarred badly by cracks running like spider webs through it, it was unevenly faded, mostly to the color of dirty vanilla ice-cream, and big flecks were missing like bald spots on a man's head. I sat on the dusty hardwood right between the living room and the dining room, my legs stretched straight out in from of me across the empty floor. It was soothing, even beautiful, to see the paint peel off in long even strips under the knife. There were these big soft bubbles in the paint, some popping like soap bubbles, only infinitely slower because of their consistency, and some were already burst, their broken seams revealing the grain beneath. I started with those - the new paint was bright white, so you know you're doing it right if you see the white, then the old vanilla, and then the bare wood grain of the original trim.

I was supposed to meet you for lunch because you needed to talk to me; it was only a few months after you got sick then, and there was still some thought of your recovery. We were to meet at our favorite bookstore, the one you introduced me to. I was nervous when I opened the door, and I didn't see you right away. Once inside this place you had to wade through waves of books, heaped haphazardly on the shelves, on display tables, and on the floor. None of the fiction was alphabetized; the original owners, two white-haired ladies now dead, always said that anyone looking in fiction must take the time to browse. If you were really in a hurry, and they liked you, they would give you their nephew, a ponderous, confused young man with glasses to show you where your Lawrence was, or your Lessing.

I finally saw you in the fiction aisle, flipping through a hardcover. You couldn't see me from where you were standing, but I recognized the book as The Idiot, one of your favorites. I could guess the passage you were looking for, pushing your thin-rimmed gold glasses up on your nose every 5 or 6 pages. You were looking for the part where Russian somebody says to Russian someone, “pass us by, and forgive us our happiness.”

I'm not sure why you wanted to talk to me, we hadn't seen each other in a while. It couldn't have been to give me some sort of farewell advice or anything sentimental, that wasn't your style; you must have found out about your daughter. It's true I was with your daughter once Clove, but only once. I try to separate what happened with her from my
thoughts of you; but you both turn your heels out every time you take a step, you both say ‘wadduh’ for water, and you both have the same dark skin and small bodies.

I turned away, I couldn’t speak to you; maybe it was guilt about your daughter, but I don’t think it was just that. You are my secret Clove, my one private thing. I cannot separate what I think from you, I can’t read except what you read, I can’t think except through what you have taught. I held you too tightly, even if you never knew it. I had no right to do it, yet I’m still doing it, using you to avoid a certain self-will and self-decision that must eventually come.

I looked back at you then, leaning curved on an old oak table, your elbow resting on a stack of Updikes, and I saw the first pale flicker across your face. I noticed the hollow places in your cheeks, the bags under your eyes, and all the tendons and veins sketching maps of illness under your sallow skin. Your skin that was once so thick and dark and strong.

I saw everything then, everything that I knew about you, and everything that I was about to lose. I saw demons and harpies, exhalations and evil issuing from their mouths, clutching at your eyes and mouth with their scaly white hands. I saw the warm orange light from the ground below, the warm-earth glow of your health and beauty battling for the privilege of your life. I saw the book in your hands almost fall before you snatched it back up. I saw in the wrinkles and tendons of your stretched hands traces of the weak, scratchy handwriting of your last letters. I saw in your sloped body and slow gestures the shadows and echoes of your throaty-hollow voice and willow-blown grace; I saw you moving your hand up and down to rhythms forever; I saw a yellow scarf waving in the wind forever; I saw paint peeling from walls in long even strips forever; I saw your breasts sloping to apricot nipples forever; I saw a teacher and a friend who taught me what was beautiful; a girl, and a woman, who wanted things, forever.
photograph
"Kristina and Abigail Wilson, 1991"

MALCOLM DICKINSON
Doublethink: Reflections on a semester reading Rousseau with my peers

Quand nous nous mettons à la place des autres nous nous y mettons toujours tels que nous sommes modifiés, non tels qu'ils doivent l'être, et quand nous pensons les juger sur la raison, nous ne faisons que comparer leurs préjugés aux nôtres.

—Rousseau

I am simply going to stand under this street light; then you will be unable to see me, and invariably one is embarrassed only to the degree that one is seen, but invariably one is seen only to the degree that one sees.

—Kierkegaard

Self-consciousness is a paradox. Since “know thyself” was inscribed on the temple at Delphi, western philosophy has idealized the self-conscious agent. But at least since Plato it has also doubted the adequacy of this vision of responsible, considered agency. In Hegel’s philosophy, for example, the goal is at once to make people self-conscious and to make the patterns of behavior characteristic of the self-conscious agent habitual, that is, un-self-conscious or “second nature.” There must be a double movement—simultaneous encouragement and discouragement to think—because self-conscious decisions always involve pairing up affirmation and negation, good and bad, the option chosen and the option rejected. Implicit in the idealized moment of the choice to do the right thing is the choice not to do the wrong thing, and when the two sides of a decision stand side by side in one’s mind the line between them is always vulnerable to appearing arbitrary (that is, merely conventional). This subverts all manner of “rational” arguments, raising the threat of self-conscious but non-reasonable action at precisely the moment when reason ought to prove its superiority to non-reason. This threat scared Hegel as much as it did Plato, causing his State to resemble the latter’s Republic. Both decided that perhaps the un-self-conscious habit of doing good is more reliable than self-conscious action (at least for “the masses”).

I suspect that Plato and Hegel (among others) exaggerated the practical, social importance of the paradox of self-consciousness. Even the most cerebral of personalities does not turn easily from the aporias of the philosophy of the mind to iniquitous, destructive immorality. Dostoevsky understood this: The power of characters like the Underground Man or the philosophe in The Devils who reasons that the only free human act is the act of suicide is precisely that they ought to be more common than they are. After all, they reason just the way we all do, and their arguments make all-too-much rational sense. But these characters appear ridiculous, rather than normal, because they take their thoughts too seriously; they think so much that they become complete buffoons. And those few who do manage to act in defiance of conventional morality are likely to find themselves, like Raskolnikov, unable to sustain their resolve after the fact. To fear, with Plato and Hegel, that the paradox of self-consciousness will rend the social fabric is
surreptitiously to overstate the importance of rationality to behavior.

Not that the paradox does not have serious practical effects. But these effects are cumulative and chronic rather than absolute and acute. Self-conscious reflection only rarely results in homicide; it routinely disrupts the ability to feel at home in the world, to act comfortably in the presence of others, to be oneself. Dostoevsky's characters demonstrate this as well.

Schematically, we can understand the problem as emerging from the intersection of two dichotomies: thought vs. action and self vs. other(s). Instrumental thought can judge among possible actions without difficulty so long as the only person involved is the self. But thought can also carry one outside of the self, such that one sees oneself from the perspective of others. This entails non-instrumental criteria for judgment, because action in the presence of others has the extra-instrumental effect of disclosing who one is. In this way, actions constitute the self. Austin's concept of performative speech acts is so fertile because it corresponds to this aspect of action in general: All actions are performative insofar as they give observers a sense of who the agent is, distinct from the "constative" effects of his/her actions. (I suspect, however, that the paradox applies equally well to this issue, such that the self-conscious analysis of the performative qualities of all action only makes it more difficult actually to perform, to disclose oneself through action. What would it mean, for example, for J.L. Austin to say "I do" at his wedding? The act no longer seems performative if it is understood as such; the significance of the action lay precisely in its being performed without the residue of doubt inherent in self-consciousness.) From the point of view of the self, the problem is that instrumental reason cannot control the performative element inherent in action. Thought can assume the perspective of others and thence look back on the self, but this transition is always subject to doubt; it follows that nothing can guarantee that others will receive the intended impression.

Because thought can impede action, and action is necessary to disclose the self to others, the paradox of self-consciousness contains a threat to self-identity. If one self-consciously attempts to impress upon others a certain notion of who one is, the hesitation and doubt latent in thinking too much becomes, all intentions notwithstanding, the impression actually communicated. Or worse still, when observers recognize that an action is self-conscious, they may suspect that it is dissimulation; like the thinker who, holding both sides of a decision in her mind, begins to see the opposition as arbitrary, the observers will perceive both the action and its opposite and suspect that appearances mask a diametrically opposed, "real" who. (Does J.L. Austin really mean "I do," or is he just saying it because he knows that's what he's supposed to say?—or maybe he's only saying it because he's so intrigued by the unique qualities of the speech act.) The self may seek preservation in isolation, but this solipsistic impulse goes too far. In attempting to abolish the threat of being misunderstood it abolishes the entire realm in which understanding is possible, and it thereby destroys the condition of possibility of self-identity. Ultimately the self can only exist in interaction and tension with others, whose judgments determine who one is.

Rousseau was acutely aware of the paradox of self-consciousness. At the end of his life, if we take his Reveries at face value, he pursued the solipsistic course because he felt that others had shown themselves unable or unwilling to perceive him as the person he believed he was. The stories he tells in the Reveries, even more than those in the Confessions, consistently demonstrate the ineluctable gap between Rousseau as seen by others and as seen by himself. In the Confessions this gap bothers him less; indeed, he
often glories in the space it creates for him at once to manipulate his appearances and to
disclaim responsibility for others’ perceptions of him. This is Starobinski’s point in “The
Interpreter’s Progress.” By the time of the Reveries Rousseau’s aloof playfulness has
passed into whiny despair. Both attitudes, however, appear to emphasize the aesthetic
dimension of human existence—the former in a context of interaction with others, the latter
in radical isolation.

Is there any necessary connection between the paradox of self-consciousness and
the turn to judging human life by aesthetic criteria? The Rousseau of the Confessions
appears as a manipulative aesthete, willing (and quite able) to mislead and connive others
in order to create an exciting or otherwise pleasurable effect. The self-imposed exile of the
Reveries, in which deceit has been replaced by extreme denial of others, seems only
slightly less reprehensible. Manipulative aestheticism responds to the sense that the
difference between good and bad, accepted and scorned is mere convention; denying,
solipsistic aestheticism responds to the threat posed by self-consciousness to self-identity.
But these two attitudes contain a crucial difference: The first refuses to let social
convention inhibit action and acts in defiance of others; the second capitulates to society
and refuses to act at all. In this sense, though the latter emerges from the former, they are
diametrically opposed positions. We might re-name the two as active and passive
aestheticism.

But active aestheticism need not be aestheticism at all. In the retelling (and
particularly if retold with the eloquence of a Rousseau) it cannot avoid appearing to the
reader as aesthetically motivated. But this appearance may be a residual effect of the
retelling, rather than an essential quality of the actions of the young Jean-Jacques. To
demonstrate this I will digress...

Yale students are self-conscious, and this explains, I think, why they are so timid
and obsequious in classes. Some worry exclusively about what the professor thinks of
them, others concern themselves with their image in the eyes of peers. Questions are
either too hard or too simple—in either case one risks looking stupid if one answers. So
silence reigns. I will return to this below.

I have only once at Yale seen this dynamic effectively overcome for more than
sporadic moments. The first meeting of the class began with the instructor writing four
lines in an African language on the board and approaching each student in turn, hand
outstretched, asking “E fua?” There followed a tricky handshake, which few students
executed correctly. By the end of class the students were in a circle, each facing another’s
back. Stooped forward slightly, hands on the hips of the person before, twenty students
danced—right, right, left left, right, right—around the room. I looked up and sideways and
scanned the circle and to my surprise found no eyes greeting mine to exchange sheepish,
self-conscious smiles. The dynamic that characterized the class for the subsequent
semester began that evening. And when each drummer played a simple pattern steadily
through time, the combined effect—a complex, syncopated rhythm—lifted everyone from
the level plain of everyday individualism to a sense of accelerating interaction.

This dynamic, in which action in a group overcomes individual self-consciousness
and the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, is rare enough in our society to
have fallen in among experiences deemed mystical, inexplicable, irrational. Very likely it
is for the best that it remain there, since classification and analysis, by the principle of
self-consciousness, would destroy it. I use it here simply to illustrate that one need not
follow Rousseau into ethereal self-absorption to elude the paradox of self-consciousness. The example of the drumming class suggests that two conditions must be met to disrupt self-conscious silence: something unexpected, preferably a self-disclosing action by an individual, must challenge expected norms, and people must feel a mutual obligation to a group purpose. Unexpected actions call the self-conscious thinker out into a public space of self-disclosure by demanding that s/he act (or at least react). Thus the instructor, by disclosing himself through an unusual greeting, created a space into which each student was invited (comfortably compelled?) to act in turn. (Contrast this to an unexpected event, like a fire alarm, which, though anomalous, fits easily into established categories and patterns of behavior; indeed, such events often cause a moment of extreme group self-consciousness, followed by routinized behavior.) Provided that this space is truly public—that it does not disadvantage or neglect some with respect to others—these acts will disclose the agent(s) in a free and mutual manner. This dynamic enabled the class to make music together. (A friend of mine claims that it lies at the heart of most great bands.) But its importance extends farther, into almost any group context. (Common parlance calls it “teamwork” or “cooperation.”)

Our society, especially here at Yale, is probably even more dependent (at least in functionalist terms) on strict adherence to the expected than was the high society so criticized by Rousseau. Moreover, it inculcates solipsistic notions of success. These things make it difficult to create a space of good faith and mutuality. But it is not impossible. Self-consciousness may inhibit action, even preclude it, but it need not do so. (Conversely, action may require an un-self-conscious courage, but it need not destroy all thought.) The unpredictability of action crippled Rousseau, who found that others consistently perceived the inverse of his intentions, but it contains a spark capable of igniting interaction. I am not trying to redeem Rousseau by claiming that he intended, throughout his youth, to create such a public space by disrupting established patterns of interaction. All I am trying to show is that the paradox of self-consciousness can be overcome without capitulating to purely aesthetic criteria of existence.

To realize it in our lives requires, inevitably, a certain kind of faith in ourselves. As agents we must be courageous enough to act before our peers, to say and do things without stopping to ask if what we’re about to say or do is consistent with some internal image of who we want to be. We cannot control who we are the way we can make dinner or write a paper; we must act and see what happens. And as observers of others’ actions we must cease to categorize everyone, to make them fit into preconceived molds. Yale inculcates solipsistic standards of success, encouraging us to view ourselves as commodities (or repositories of commodities). Fierce (though mythical—look at the grade inflation) competition strengthens these tendencies. We objectify each other and ourselves by the very manner in which we conceive of education. Self-consciousness is self-objectification.

...The distinction between an active, public attitude and manipulative aestheticism is thin but sharp. Within the Confessions the issue cannot be resolved. But something has changed by the time of the Reveries. Rousseau has become the prototype for a generation of Romantic Prussians, but he also resembles, I think, the buffoons in Dostoevsky’s writings. All their differences notwithstanding, the Underground Man and the Solitary Walker share an obsession with their own thoughts; they take their thoughts too seriously. This contrasts to the Confessions, in which Rousseau demonstrates an ability
to take everything and nothing seriously at the same time. This tense balance between seeing things as important and seeing them as unimportant suggests a mechanism for extricating oneself from the paradoxes of self-consciousness. Some sort of trick is necessary, by which to short-circuit the endless stream of thought and force oneself out into (thereby creating) a public space. The logical contradiction involved in telling oneself that everything is as important as it is unimportant can do this. One can tell a story in which the most minute details assume tremendous importance, either as links in a causal chain or in absolute terms (the latter usually draws on a self-centered notion of importance).

Inversely, by narrating from a transhistorical, Archimedean point one can reduce one’s existence (or even the existence of the earth itself) to the status of the trivial. If one can hold both stories in one’s mind at the same time...

Repeated attempts to write the next clause have failed. After all, the point is precisely that the results are unexpectable. No metaphor seems able to express what I wish to say without suggesting an aestheticized obscurantism: Dichotomies “explode,” the residue of self-doubt is “washed away,” relativism “dissolves.” The only consistent conclusion is that it must be tried.

The act of writing is itself inconsistent with the project of un-self-conscious action I have outlined, and it makes sense both that Rousseau’s autobiographical perspective should lend an aesthetic hue to his actions and that this paper should short-circuit at this point. The retelling of past actions transforms them into events, moments in a temporal progression which assumes some sort of coherence. One cannot look back on the past and tell a forward-moving story without implying that one thing followed from another, that everything contributed to arriving at the present. The forward-looking unpredictability of action flies in the face of this, being essentially at odds with the ordered universe of written narrative. Rousseau persistently attempts to break out of this pattern by contradicting himself, hoping to illustrate that it can be true (for example) both that his stay at Mme de Vercellis changed him completely and that it changed him not at all. Is this blatant self-contradiction or rhetorical coup de main? To my mind it is neither, since the opposition implied by the question only makes sense if one has already assumed the backward-looking, rational mindset characteristic of writing (particularly writing about writing).

The same type of argument by false opposition underlies the question of whether or not the Rousseau of the Confessions is a manipulative aesthete. We cannot say for certain, and the more we struggle to do so, the further we move ourselves from the answer. Starobinski opposes irony to nostalgia and portrays Rousseau as rapidly alternating between the two. True enough, but Starobinski misses the point by implying that the spirit of Rousseau’s writing does not apply to him. In Rousseau’s ironic moments, nothing is important; his nostalgia elevates petty details to the level of the sublime. To hold both perspectives at once, I think, is the most important (and it is equally unimportant, really) point of Rousseau’s writings. To write with pedantic seriousness (and Starobinski does move away from this towards the end of his essay) about Rousseau is to make him into an aesthete: It emphasizes the self-consciousness of writing, implying that Rousseau employed contradictions, juxtaposed the serious and the unserious, irony and nostalgia, with the fully conscious intention of creating a certain rhetorical effect. From there it is a short step to the claim that his actions were self-conscious, manipulative exploits conceived of for pure aesthetic pleasure. What if he just was like that? What if that was who he was?
It is difficult to begin a response to “Doublethink,” perhaps because the possibility of a response is in fact pre-empted, in true doublethink nature, by the essay itself. If we write anything, we are pedants. Or worse, we are self-conscious buffoons, trying too hard to achieve too little effect. By the same token however, we might turn the tables, and ask whether or not “we” (as Yale students) just “are” as we are portrayed — in which case Nathan is guilty of the syndrome he describes. But the argument presented is engaging not only because it challenges our notions of who we are and what we do in class, but because it does so by challenging our conceptions of what it is that we were reading in that class. The reading offered by his essay is perceptive in what it regards as the differences (and the engagements) between two key autobiographical texts of Rousseau; not wishing to let this go, we shall begin at the point of textual engagement, and hope we can redeem ourselves in the sequel.

The explicit engagement between the two texts is the following: “The stories told by the Reveries, even more than those in the Confessions, consistently demonstrate the ineluctable gap between Rousseau as seen by others and as seen by himself.” We know from the close of Nathan’s discussion that the Confessions are the sort of sense-making machine that enforces a causal chain regardless of whether or not one was “really there”; but we would do well to investigate what it is about the Reveries that is “even more” effective in setting their author apart. Whereas in the Confessions there was some essential connection to others — for which his project (and his life) might serve as examples (hence Rousseau’s rather unabashed proclamation: “Behold the lone portrait of a man ... which may serve as the first piece for comparison in the study of man,” etc.) — in the Reveries Rousseau plainly refuses even to recognize the society of others. If we accept Rousseau’s word, the Confessions are manifestly undertaken as an attempt to engage an audience and to relate a personal narrative, whereas the Reveries intentionally close themselves off from any outside reader and are undertaken solely that their author might relate their content: “...I am writing down my reveries for myself alone ... I shall recall ... the pleasure I have in writing them and by thus giving birth again to times past I shall, so to speak, double my existence” (34, translation modified, emphasis added). In fact, Rousseau does not even need the written pages of the Reveries; only the act of writing itself is important, and Rousseau consistently returns to the joy in writing that cannot cease but with his death. Rousseau gives a mysterious primacy to the act of writing itself. As such, there is no distance from the event, rather, the task of writing is meant to join the event to such a degree that there is no experienced or experiential difference.

In one respect, this alleviates a key ethical problem of the Confessions, and this also is noted in “Doublethink.” Any excuse he might offer is without ethical consequence, for he is entirely removed from the social atmosphere which engenders and necessitates ethical concerns. But the ethical burden is doubly lifted in that there can no longer be even the possibility of inaccuracy, for the writing is in some way entirely correspondent to the event — which is for Rousseau, the subject of the writing. And this relation to himself as subject is the only one of importance: he surely cannot accuse himself of lying. In
theory, then, the Reveries are a removal of the excessive nature of the performative aspect of the Confessions which Nathan emphasizes. There is neither excuse nor crime. That “instrumental reason cannot control the performative element inherent in action” is not the problem but the point. The Reveries are a retreat, but a retreat into pure action. That is to say, the writing of the Reveries is for their author an instancing of the event. Rather than a performance that outstrips the representation, there is no representation as such, merely performance: “rather than describing them I was reliving them” (36, translation modified). The writing is (as) the phenomenon itself.

This pure performance escapes the double bind of the “genetic” (or sequential, causal) narrative Nathan describes in the final segment of his essay. The narrative of the Reveries is not such a sense-making machine at all. In fact, the “chronology” of this work is singularly flexible: as the meditations roam from subject to subject, they pass in and out of specific times. There is no simple history being recounted here, as there is in the Confessions. However, it is somewhat intriguing to note that while time seems in no way anchored in the Reveries, the entire project is predicated on and originates from a single specific moment, the moment of a particularly nasty fall, from which the author wakes, his new project having miraculously materialized in his head. As such, the Reveries—ostensibly atemporal, needing no cause or start, merely the continuous act of writing—have as much a moment of origin as any other text we might imagine, and that moment of origin is, as we can expect, mysterious (despite the fact that it is perfectly specific: Thursday, October 24, 1776, around 6 in the evening); even doubly so, for the fall which engenders the project, as any fall, is itself a moment that cannot be recaptured or recuperated by the subject, he who has fallen. Rather, the fall can only be known upon impact, after the fall, after the effect of the fall has been recorded by the subject: “I felt neither the impact nor my fall, nor indeed anything else that followed until I returned to my senses” (38, translation modified); or, more baffling still, a fall requires a witness to confirm that the impact, felt as if without cause, was in fact attributable to a fall, the momentous/momentary act of falling (Rousseau knows nothing of what has happened except through the testimony of the young men who “save” him). Thus while physically occurring in an instant, the fall as such is not complete for Rousseau even until the next day, when all the symptoms confirming the event are revealed (it is important to note that Rousseau never succeeds in telling all the consequence of the fall; in fact, he cannot even perceive them, because the fall continues for him — but we shall return to this). This hesitation, this complication in the temporality of the origin of the Reveries, manifests itself throughout the form of the text, and the focus of any exegetic effort therefore must be to uncover what is at stake in this attempt to inscribe a moment of origin which itself cannot be entirely accurately known.

The path to take is a circuitous one, for the problem of a fall is first encountered elsewhere in Rousseau, and it would help to discover how it is resolved. In book 8 of the Confessions Rousseau tells of his Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts, claiming that it itself was engendered by a fall: walking his usual route, Rousseau is struck one particular day by the question propounded by the Academy at Dijon, “Has the progress of the sciences and the arts done more to corrupt morals or improve them,” the force of which transforms him “into another man” (327). But Rousseau specifically refers to this instant as a fall: “je tombais sur cette question” — “I fell upon this question.” This first fall is the origin of all the rest (from the moment Rousseau decides to compete for the prize, he says, “I was lost. All the rest of my life and my misfortunes followed inevitably as a result of that
moment’s madness” (328) — he falls, that is, as a result of his fall). In fact, it becomes clear from this account that the Discourse is itself very much part of the fall — he cannot refer to one without the other. In fact, he can recount neither the argument of the Discourse nor the fall itself, because he remembers nothing: “the details have escaped me since I recorded them in one of my four letters to M. de Malesherbes” (328). The Discourse is itself within the fall (just as the story of Rousseau’s awakening and return home, and the many other narrative elements in the Reveries — indeed, the whole of the Reveries themselves — are part of the fall at Menilmontant). The first Discourse is no longer a text on its own, but it represents the moment of his metaphorical fall. Or rather, since this representation is unmediated, it is an instance of the fall, it is the fall itself — for the phenomenal event was not complete until the Discourse had been written. And as soon as he completes the Discourse, the fall is finished, and its consequences follow inevitably.

Bizarrely, the very condition of its being written, of the fall becoming a text that will instance it, is the agency of another: Rousseau is forced to take Mme. Le Vasseur as his secretary, to whom he dictates his text; without her assistance, he notes, he would have forgotten much. And this dialogue is for Rousseau the problem. For the prolonged moment of the fall is itself wonderful — Rousseau is properly ecstatic at the project of the Discourse. It is only after it is written, after the physical fall has been completely inscribed, that his metaphorical fall (and its attendant tragedy) begins. The metaphorical fall cannot be removed from the Discourse, which cannot be removed from the physical fall — there is an infinite promulgation, each fall being inscribed only to produce yet another one. The problem Rousseau will be confronted with from this (originary) moment on is how to refer to a fall without engendering yet another one. Or rather, how to prolong the fall indefinitely, without completing the inscription that will send him tripping forth yet again.

In this light, we may alter our reading of the Reveries. They are at once an effort to inscribe their origin and an effort to fail, to be incomplete, to fall short. Rousseau’s project, fully realized too late in his life, is to write continuously. For in fact, as Nathan notices of the Confessions, the material occurrence which prompts the project can only be known as it is narrativized (thus Rousseau’s vexation that the story has been misapprehended — the narrative is what carries the full effect). And it is only when the tale is fully told that the fall can genuinely said to be over — it does not definitively end until the narratives are closed and finished, and some completion can be argued. Thus Rousseau’s project must by necessity be solitary, for as soon as he enters into a proper dialogue, as soon as he engages with another, the possibility exists that the moment can be fully inscribed. The solipsism of the Reveries thus undoes the aesthetic machine of the Confessions in that there can be no complete (and therefore rending) inscription: the Reveries are not, as we had assumed, an attempt to refer to a fall, nor are they properly the result of a fall. Rather, they are comprised by the fall; they are an attempt to prolong the fall that its effects need not ever be felt: we would do well to remember that Rousseau’s description of the effect of the Reveries is more specific than to simply relive his experiences and thoughts — rather than describing events, he was repeating his fall: “j’y retombais.”

Now, perhaps, we can more adequately respond to the most damning reflection of “Doublethink”: “To write with pedantic seriousness about R is to make him into an aesthete.” If we accept Rousseau’s text as it is given, as it is written, this is not the case. To think, or more properly, to talk — that is, to engage — would be to create the causal narrative that would turn Rousseau into an aesthete. But in the Rousseauiste model, to
write in solitude is rather to act (and to act without intention), to defer indefinitely the elaboration of aesthetic thought. Thus when Nathan says “The act of writing is itself inconsistent with the project of un-self-conscious action I have outlined,” this is in fact his fall, as it is Rousseau’s. It is Nathan’s because Rousseau’s project is to in fact demonstrate the opposite of this statement: only the non-engaged act of writing (pure action) affirms the possibility that “that” is the way things “are,” because such writing bears the relation of absolute identity with the subject/object. Writing is the only act that escapes the “backward-looking, rational mindset” characteristic of self-consciousness. Nathan cannot read this, however, because it would dissolve the false opposition he establishes between action and refusal to act. Nathan falls before the aporia he himself opens up: he falls into the break from “genetic” or sense-making narrative history that the Reveries instance — a break he fails to notice.

Instead, Nathan maintains that a “refusal to act” is passive, hence negative. What forces this dichotomy is, paradoxically, the fact that this refusal is nothing but continuous action or phenomenon — the refusal is not enclosed in a sensible, sense-making narrative, and therefore, as Nathan argues, it has no status as an “event,” it can not be “explained.” It cannot be called “action” because it cannot be narrativized in the genetic manner we are warned against: we cannot speak of it as we speak of action. Nathan’s fall, however, is to label it then as the opposite of action — in truth, it cannot be called anything except the Reveries, except a fall, a re-fall. If Nathan collapses this distinction between inaction and fall it is because if he doesn’t he himself will fall, and he will never get to the end of his argument (whereas there is no proper end to the Reveries, they are temporally continuous, and Rousseau died, as he wished, writing them, continuing their fall).

If we then circumscribe this discussion, and claim that any writing is by definition aesthetic, regardless of its status as action or fall, we then claim the reverse of Nathan’s thesis — that is, that the aesthetic is here the absence of any intention whatsoever (for in the fall, one’s intentions are all lost). (All that is then left is to speculate on the relation between this and the aesthetic ideology, say, of Schiller — a “romantic young Prussian” for whom sheer action and the lack of self-consciousness will take a particularly frightening turn.)

Ultimately, however, what we cannot deny is that the flavor of this discussion fits perfectly the accurate description of pedantry Nathan gives us. But I am writing this way because I must — there is no other way to record these observations, they cannot be written in a linear, conventional manner. But then, neither can the fall upon which I reflect. The fall and the text of the fall are (and must be) the same. Or: they are as much alike as they are not.

Carrie Iverson

G R O U N D

We fall into old ways. Certainly the bathroom door is open, towels draped from the door, the floor uncarpeted. Writing by candlelight, papers become a convenient blur, falling like skin, stacking as neatly as nail clippings, yellow and aging. Other words, of music, make these words halting; the shadows sharpen their edges.

So, why listen at all? Yesterday’s soliloquy comes pouring out from dead tongues, and the ground looks frozen solid, hard enough to be invincible, hard enough to swallow words. This solidity is an early morning illusion; it later steams beneath the sun with the same disparate languidness of these people stretched out, somewhere, in rows on a blistering length of sand. This kind of ground, filled with unforgiving stones, makes other scenery seem as illusory as smoke. Ground that brings concreteness to shovels, makes each shovelful feel its weight, pushing the soil back. Also, it is ground as it is painted, beneath glass, swathed in with a strip of grey. Grey, that here has suddenly become real, glass paneled into a window, people entering, moving on the other side, back and forth, unheard but speaking, mouths clicking open, shut, like keys. That shovelful that takes all of everything to lift, and falls with a soft thud.
It is not quite afternoon
but it is hot enough for the air to engulf
in waves one after another
after another.
The curtains blow hesitantly, but the air
sticks and gasps, hitting
with inevitable solidness.

It is yesterday or it is a part of today, the
one has dragged the other hopelessly intertwined
and outside there is a murmur but no real sound
only a swinging and heaviness of the curtains.
In the grass, the softly moving blades turn
whiplash, the branches swing down with
sudden possessiveness and scrape skin.

You have moved too close into a sanctuary, you have
moved toward the something that pushes down the boards,
the walls, the air, that swings around you,
twisting its song soft and high
into your confusion, into your eyes,
leaves sticking to your cheeks, the ground a mass of greyness
the sky a mass of greyness,
the solitary dark of trees cutting into this,
and your skin, and you moving backwards, looking toward
the ground.
Diana Senechal

November Love Letter

The plumbers woke me up this morning. If you think a visit from the plumber is a routine matter (an hour and a few quiet gadgets), you're plumb naive. It's a few days of banging and clanging, chaos and fury. Since pipes tend to be arranged vertically (so that the water can go down), it requires at least three plumbers to remove a clog located between two floors of an upright building. One plumber on each floor, and one running back and forth. They drill. They yell. They brandish their snakes and dandies (tools like you've never seen). And, despite all that, they're a pleasant bunch. What's more, they look like your friends. You think to yourself: if my friends had decided to become plumbers, that's what they would be like.

So when you are woken up by a rowdy team of victory plumbers, the resemblance deceives you, and you imagine that all the guys you have crushes on have decided to barge in on you while you are still in bed. You gaze into the blurry faces of these get-up-carly-and-hit-the-road types. Then you think: no, that's not quite Jason, Jason's not as husky, and his beard is more diffuse. That can't be Juan, because Juan's cap is more goofy. But you invite them in, just in case. Then they storm into your room, bang the wall in, and start up a ruckus that cannot be equalled.

So then they start yelling at each other through the hole they just made in your wall. “Hey Juan! I'm sending the snake down. Ready to cup? There's shit coming down. It's like rock. Cupping? There's water! Don't let it down the drain! Got it?” I think of poor Juan cupping his hands, ready to receive the spoils, and I want to save him. I want to grab him by the grimy hand and say, “come on, let's get out of here, no need to take this shit.” But poor Juan seems quite happy with his lot. He gets paid a buck, and that's more than I can say.

But is it the same Juan? I know this question sounds a little trite, so I'll leave it aside for the moment and talk about something different.

Roses. It's hard to believe in them. You see so many of them in the stores, dead or alive, “for that special occasion.” But see, no one I know has had anything like a special occasion for the longest time. Who buys the goddamn roses? I almost bought some for myself once, but the person at the counter scowled so much, I got scared and ran away. It's all part of a big conspiracy. Think I'm paranoid? Well listen to this. When was the last time you got a rose? OK, if you have one now, you're part of the conspiracy, so shut up. But what about the rest of you? How about Valentine's Day? When was the last time you enjoyed Valentine's Day? Elementary school? So here's the deal. Some people got together and decided to make everyone else feel miserable, and make money in the process. You ask: how can you make money off of misery? Well, they team up with the cosmetics and health spa industries. They convince people that the reason they didn't get a valentine is that they wear the wrong makeup or haven't used the right equipment to tone their abdominal muscles. But I could go on a tirade about this and bore myself silly. Let me talk about something else.

Mutations. Now that's a great thing. Vowel gradations. Plink, plank, plunk, blueberries in a pail. Bells of various color and pitch. Think, thank, thunk. Now, of course, you recognize that “thunk” isn't a word (except in Alabama). But it sounds like a thud with a metallic clang. Now here's something wild. Take off the “t.” You get hink, hank, hunk.
Here you see that “hink” is the oddball, a lonely alien in our lexicon. Now let’s just go all the way and take off the “h.” Now you have ink, ank, unk. “Unk,” of course, is short for “uncle,” and “ank” doesn’t mean anything. So, you see, a remarkable permutation results:

- think, thank, thunk (1 and 2 are words)
- hink, hank, hunk (2 and 3 are words)
- ink, ank, unk (1 and 3 are words)

But, you protest, “ank” could be a word just as well as “unk.” It could be short for “ankle” or “anchorman.” It could be the modern E-Z spelling of “ankh,” the Egyptian word for an ansate cross (see the dictionary). Some fudging has occurred in arriving at this pattern.

Of course. That’s the point. In order to arrive at a pattern, whether in physics or in language, you have to fudge a little. That’s the lesson, the moral of the story.

When it comes to resemblances, you usually have to fudge some. These plumbers, they don’t look like my friends at all. They’re nicer. They talk. They actually come over. They spend all their time in my bedroom, playing with snakes and dandies. I’ll be sad when they leave. I think they’ll be sad, too. You know, you spend a few days in a new place, and just when you’ve started becoming attached to it, you have to move on. Thank you, Hank. Is the pipe clear, dear? Let me think. Thunk. Now it is. Great! Can I offer you a hunk of cheese? Sure, but why me? See, you remind me of my unk. Hink, hink, hink (stifled laughter). Careful now, there’s a mess on the floor, red as ink. Don’t slip and hurt your ank. Enough! All language is a play on words!

That’s why I bought a rose for each of them. To make them remember their sweet sojourn. Yes, life does have its occasions, and it takes a lunatic like me to seize them. Side by side we exist: the cheesy word, sentimental and false, and me, roaring along, seizing roses, seizing words and turning them into fireworks. Valentine’s Day? A great thing. Fireworks every day, forever, wherever a word’s tossed. And so let me tell you that I love you madly. I don’t know you yet, but that doesn’t matter. I won’t change. Or if I do, it will be for the better. So let’s go! Let’s plunge into each other, let’s burst through each other’s pipes! Let’s roll over and over together, churning into music like an organ barrel! Amen.
For the seventh day in a row, Dan walked down the narrow, sun-baked streets that led from their guest-house to the Mohit hotel and, as usual, he carried an empty plastic mineral-water bottle in one hand. Ana did not have a bottle, she had told him days before that the bottle only made it worse and he had just said "Sure, sure" and continued carrying it with him. She walked beside him now, her eyes even redder than his, feeling and looking stale as they both came down from the Ganja of the night before. The sun was high in the bright brown sky and the street was already full of dark brown men wearing dirty, white cotton clothes and black moustaches, and women wrapped in pink or yellow or orange saris. The sun burned strongly and brought out the contrast between their dark Indian skin and their bright clothes, and they moved with an urgency that had once made Dan laugh but no longer did. The usual smells and sounds and sun in the street had overwhelmed Dan today as soon as he left the guest-house, and he suddenly longed to return to their dim and quiet room, with its dirty but cool, light blue walls. He was ashamed at this thought and forced himself to concentrate on the familiar streets he was weaving his way through.

The streets were filthy with litter, stagnant puddles and rotten fruit, all trampled into the damp dirt by the dark, skinny legs of the crowds. Small, cluttered shops lined the street and flies sat on the piles of yellow fried food outside the small hotels. Despite the business of the locals; shouting, pushing, hurrying through the noisy market-street, Ana and Dan each seemed to move slowly, from within the numb and unhurried laziness that eventually envelopes long-term travelers. Neither of them knew what time it was. They had long ago lost the reflex to glance at their watches, and time seemed not to pass so much as to change. Instead of glancing at his watch Dan continuously looked down at the bottle in his hand.

Ana was walking slowly, looking into the shops and the fruit and vegetable stands that she had looked into for the past seven mornings, but this time without interest. Her mind was in a different place and her eyes were tired and her face was empty and beautiful. The crowds seemed to part for her as she walked bare-footed along the dusty street but she did not notice. She also did not notice the men in the shops, grinning yellow-toothed grins, whispering and pointing in her direction, or how, long after she had passed them, their wide eyes still ran along her skin and into the openings in the loose, man’s undershirt she wore. Dan noticed this and watched the expression of every man she passed with a tired disgust.

"Horny bastards."

She looked at him when he said this, and then towards the Mohit hotel without changing her blank expression. He felt the familiar edginess crawl into his stomach and began tapping the plastic bottle against his leg as he walked, eager for a chance to use it. He was months and miles away from home and half of his money was gone so half of this trip was over. He remembered how, in the beginning, they had rushed from town to town feeling that they had to see everything. Now the only thing he looked forward to was sitting outside the Mohit with his plastic bottle of mineral water in his hand. This seemed absurd and arbitrary to him and he suddenly became overwhelmed with the same sadness he had been feeling for the past few days. The days were all so similar and the routine made him feel, beneath the numbness, that he was wasting time.
His young, unshaven face was shining with sweat and squinting, and he cursed, now under his breath, as he pushed his way past the dark sweating faces that all seemed so familiar, and past the bloated cows lying exhausted in the heat. He felt the vague feeling that he could not stand these streets anymore; the heavy sun, the hot smell of boiling, week-old oil, the stares that followed Ana, the lepers and cripples wrapped in rags who thrust their mangled limbs in his face as they moaned “Baksheesh, Baksheesh”, and especially the small street children who begged and almost cried as they pulled on his shorts and then ran off laughing. More and more he longed to be lying alone, motionless under the wind and the hum of the ceiling fan in the room, he did not want the day to begin.

He was thinking about this and about all the time that was passing by unused on this trip, when a young beggar, small and skinny with rotten teeth, ran up to him. Before the boy could open his mouth Dan smacked him on the head with the empty bottle, which made a hard hollow noise as it bounced off his head. The boy laughed an unsure laugh but kept his distance, watching Dan pass from the other side of the street. Dan looked quickly at Ana, who was shaking her head to herself.

He knew that he would never have another chance to travel like this and could feel his chest slowly filling with a distant but sharp regret that seemed to come from somewhere beyond his twenty-one years, regret about the way his time was passing. Last night, high on Ganja, he had felt it strongly and had told Ana about it, and as she sat curled in one corner of the bed crying, he had lain awake on his stomach, confused until the morning came. Now, he still had not said anything to her because he did not have the strength to talk about it again. The routine of their conversations aggravated him.

As Ana sat down silently at the only empty table outside the Mohit hotel, he looked into its dim, green interior to watch the two moustached waiters rise from a table and casually walk outside to look at her. Every day for the past seven days they had followed the same routine, staring at Ana and then looking up or sideways each time he caught them looking. Once, long ago, this had amused him slightly, and Ana had laughed and blown them kisses, but now even ignoring them seemed to be too exhausting an effort. He looked absently at the Mohit hotel, trying hard not to look at the waiters.

The tables outside were full of other barefoot, shoestring travelers and the tables inside were empty as soon as the two waiters walked outside to look at Ana. It was too hot to sit inside and even the bony, white-haired cook and his gas range and his crusty pots and pans were out on the street where the air flowed a little more.

The other travelers disgusted him. Most were alone but they hooked up at the tables outside the Mohit. Many wore corny Indian clothing and silver jewelry, a few Germans who had met at the Mohit a few days ago were covered with tattoos, some had long, matted hair like the sadhus. They all seemed so phoney, thinking they could wear a few trinkets and say they had been to India. They knew nothing about the country, he thought. When the little beggars came they gave them rupees and food, not realizing that this would only encourage them, and that the kids were making asses out of them by joking about them as they counted their money. He thought to himself that if he were in their place, he would be out crossing India by train spending time in Ashrams, finding yogis whom he could spend time with, learning their wisdom, learning about the country and not just sitting here smoking and being hassled by the locals.

Ana was unaware of the waiters, and now the cook as well, staring at her breasts and uncovered arms and short-cropped hair for the seventh day in a row. She sat with the
same distant expression on her face and looked out at the street in front of them. When Dan placed the empty bottle of mineral water on the table within easy reach, she shook her head to herself.

A warm wind blew against their faces, and although it brought with it the smell of urine and of rotting sugar-cane, it reminded him of a distant morning, lying on the white sand of the beach near his home with an open atlas on the sand in front of him, its pages fluttering in the breeze that came in over the low, purple sea. He remembered the warmth of the sand against his chest, the warmth of the breeze on his skin, the emptiness of the beach on that early weekday morning, and the free and indifferent happiness he had felt as he flipped through the pale blue and green and pink pages of the atlas. He remembered running his finger along the pages, from country to country. He remembered being unable to choose between continents—South America, Africa, Asia—and finally deciding that he would do all three, and would spend half a year working in the wheat fields in Australia or teaching English in Japan or working in an Alaskan fishery if his money ran out. He had been alone, the beach had been quiet and empty, and he could see its curves to the north and in the south as it met the Mediterranean. He remembered running alone into the sea and floating on his back, tasting the salt, shutting his eyes from the burning white sun, imagining what all those countries would be like. At that moment he had no longer cared about his friends or his family or about the three years he had just finished wasting in the army or even about the future. At that moment he had known that his life was limitless and unrestricted and that he would do everything. Lying on the waves, he had imagined walking through dark, narrow streets that smelt of cardimon and incense. In his mind he had met other travelers drifting, as he was, all over the world. He had hooked up with some and traveled with them to the more remote parts of the atlas. He had not pictured New Delhi and, although they had ended up traveling together, he had not pictured her with him back on that day on the beach.

Ana continued staring out across the street, never once looking at him. He saw the shopkeepers across the street move out of their dark, cluttered shops into the sunlight of the cluttered street. He watched them smile at each other and joke and raise their eyebrows in Ana's direction.

“What do you want to drink?”
She shrugged and shook her head without removing her eyes from the street.
“A lemon-soda?”
She shrugged again.

Again he felt his stomach tighten as one of the waiters approached. The waiter was tall and very thin with black hair atop a head too large for his body. Dan ordered for himself some french fries and a few chapatis, the only food on the menu, he had learned in the past seven days, that did not violently disagree with his stomach.

“What do you want anything?”
She did not answer.

“What do you want anything? Ana.”
“No! No, I don’t want anything! Oof!” She turned back to the street and began biting her fingernails. He looked up at the waiter and then at Ana.

“Two lemon-sodas,” he told the waiter.

The waiter wobbled his head from side to side in acknowledgement, looked at Ana, and slowly returned to the cook, looking back into Ana’s undershirt as he walked and bowing his head down to see under her arms. Dan stared at the waiter with contempt, his
face twisting into the bothered expression he was so tired of repeating over and over, until the waiter noticed and turned his head, smiling to himself and to the cook.

The street was now, for the seventh day, a moving mass of people and he observed it absently, as though waiting for something, but he knew that nothing unexpected would happen today. He was not focusing on specific people or objects as they had when they first arrived in New Delhi, only taking in the flow from one direction to another and back again. The constant, directionless movement hypnotized him as he stared. The air was thick with dust and with smells that all seemed dirty. Above the low, shuffling murmur of the crowd and the high-pitched shouts rose the ringing bicycle bells and the constantly blowing horns of motor-rickshaws squeezing through crowds that did not seem to go anywhere. He remembered the joke he had heard the day before, or maybe the day before that, about how in Indian cars the horn was connected to the gas pedal. He did not laugh now any more than he did when he first heard the joke and the noise in the street irritated him so he began playing with the mineral-water bottle and when he saw the small bony group of children, barely clad with rags and dust, he smiled and hid the plastic bottle between his legs where they would not see it.

Ana saw them too and she looked under the table at the hidden bottle.

"Don’t. Just leave them alone for once."

He did not answer, just watched the children go into their routine at one of the tables. Some made the usual faces that were considered pathetic in India; grimaces they had learned in the street and could snap into instantaneously. Others looked around without interest, bored. All of them held out cupped hands and sometimes mimed holding food to their mouths and whining “Baksheesh”. At times they all ran around chasing each other, laughing and shrieking. Their small, almost naked bodies were all elbows and knees, and when they caught each other they would laugh and shout and pound each other and Dan could hear the thud of bone on bone. They were covered with dust from the street, their hair was knotted and oily, and their smiling faces seemed haughty to Dan.

"Can’t you just leave them alone? They’re miserable enough already."

He did not answer and continued to hold out the coin, whistling to the children and smiling a stale smile. A tiny girl, wearing only a greasy piece of sack around her waist, saw him and walked up to their table. She stood under Dan and reached up to take the coin and at the moment he felt her fingers fumbling on the palm of his hand, he closed his hand around her wrist and pulled her to him. The girl began shrieking and flailing her free arm, tugging in an effort to break free, Dan grabbed the bottle from the neck.

"Let go of her!" shouted Ana, standing up. He turned to her.

"Look, don’t stop me from enjoying myself. It’s been like this from the beginning, this is exactly what we talked about last night, if you’re not having a good time then just go back to the room or something.” This came out mechanically, as though planned, and loudly, over the wailing of the young girl who was still jerking and trying to break free from Dan’s hand. The jerking irritated Dan and he turned his head back to the girl.

The first time the bottle came down on her head, she stopped screaming for a moment and looked up at Dan, but when she saw him swinging it down on her again she became hysterical. The bottle did not hurt that much but Dan’s furious movements and the expression on his face were what terrified the child. He swung hard, enjoying the way the bottle recoiled off the child’s head, and it was only after a while that he raised his head to look around at Ana and the other travelers watching him. He was smiling a smile that he
knew looked stupid when he looked back down at the screaming child. The screaming bothered him so he began hitting again and as he hit, he was again struck by the funny hollow sound the bottle made. He began pounding out rhythms and pretending to dance but none of the travelers laughed because the high-pitched shrieking was too irritating. Some of them were shaking their heads.

He looked up at Ana, making a great effort to maintain his empty smile.  
“You begged me to come with you, remember?” she cried desperately.

Dan did not reply, nor did he do anything to stop her as she walked back in the direction of the guest-house. As he watched her he noticed that most of the movement in the street had stopped to watch the Westerner hitting the beggar on the head with a plastic mineral-water bottle. The sounds of the bottle and of her screaming carried far in the still warm air. He now continued only because he did not know how to stop. He was bored and disgusted with the child, who was now screaming hoarsely and had given up trying to free herself. The other children, who had laughed at first, were now shouting at him from a safe distance. He stood holding the girl’s small hand, looking down at her because he did not want to look up at the eyes of the people watching him. Occasionally he clubbed the girl on the head in an almost mechanical way, his mind was somewhere else.

One of the waiters finally walked up to him and said politely “Please sir, stop hitting”, and he had a sudden impulse to club the waiter as well but he knew that it would end badly. So instead he told the waiter to tell the girl, who was now gasping in between sobs, to stop begging and harassing the people in the street. But as soon as he let go of her hand she was gone. The waiter walked back inside and Dan was left standing alone at his table until the waiter brought out two lemon-sodas for him. The street was still quiet and people were still watching him, whispering and pointing. Only the flies seemed to move and one hovered around him, never landing on his sweaty, shiny skin.

As he sat at his table, sipping one of the drinks and looking straight ahead, he again felt the tightness in his chest, that by now had become as much a part of his daily routine as the Mohit was. But now he also felt a naked loneliness he had never felt before. Again he wanted to lie in the darkness of the room, to see nothing, to feel nothing, not even hot or cold, just to lie without moving for a very long time. The street had started moving again, slowly, like a machine that takes time to warm up before it reaches full speed, and only a few dark faces continued to watch him but still he alone and far from anything familiar.

When he finished his food he started down the street that led back to their blue room, where he knew he would spend the rest of the day lying with Ana. His body felt heavy and tired as he walked, tapping the empty bottle against his leg.
etching

VICTORIA KOSTADINOVA
We might rethink present positions at this time: The student of African-American literature who writes today has both the privilege and the obligation to address major works of contemporary criticism. To redress theory, here, is to interpret it as a proposal. No theory is more beautiful than its form reveals to us the task of our action, the truth of our involvement in the world and of our relationship to others. Theoretical returns consist more in a reorientation of our vision, a shift in how we are to imagine a world, than they do in setting things aright. “Theory’s relentless tendency . . . to go beyond the tangible in search of *metalevels* of explanation,”¹ though harnessed for the purpose of a theoretical return, elides the connection of this purpose to the world in which theories are woven and worn.

To what end do we choose theory in African-American literary study as a means for recovering an understanding of ourselves at home, when the journey through theory points in the direction of a beyond? Perhaps theory has been conscripted as a method for ascendancy within the academy, and so when we seek a return it is from the status of having been “always already co-opted.” But then, in the study of a marginalized canon, are we not talking about another kind of theory, one which resists academic constraints upon the willfulness of a method? Perhaps an elsewhere has always been the intended destination of such a theory, calculated from the nowhere—from the non-place—of a black American perspective in American society.² But this dream of somewhere else can only be realized in the will to achieve home where we stand.

The “temporal middle distance”³ of an American home can no longer be presupposed, after historical movements of migration, urbanization, middle-class achievement, and higher education have stratified the black community. Scholars face a crisis of representation whereby academic indoctrination has given them a language to codify, but not a closeness through which to comprehend, African-American literature as cultural production. The task of scholarship and of pedagogy is paid to an institution and to the institutionalization that grants a tradition’s legitimacy. But the task of theory is a lesson that we have not yet learned: No one can see to the end of a promise, though it is the purpose of our togetherness that the student promises himself to.

Contemporary black American literary study abides by many theoretical positions. To address “a position in theory” is to address a preposition, an ideological vantage point, secured within the institution. It is furthermore to address a proposed position—one which, in theoretical terms, is to be followed through—through which study follows to some end. For the child who runs an errand around the block, it is no mild journey, full of surprises, queries and satisfactions. Though it is a journey that he makes for others and upon the business of others, it holds for him every possible personal significance, actual and imagined. The student runs an errand that, like the child’s, has two parts: a departure and a journey back. The place where we re-arrive is not the place we knew, but, perhaps, finally the place in which we are known.
THEORETICAL EVASIONS AND RETURNS

What has Beauty to do with the world? What has Beauty to do with Truth and Goodness—with the facts of the world and the right actions of men? “Nothing” the artists rush to answer. They may be right. I am but an humble disciple of art and cannot presume to say. I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable.


If we privilege theory within the academy as a pedagogical tool for eliciting from literature aspects which anthology and literary history cannot raise to the surface, this must be because theory underscores a relationship between the beauty of the work of art and the truth of our world. But before we undertake a theoretical return to truth, we must first attend the relationship between theory itself and the truth we are after. For if a theory “cannot be made to suit the ‘truth’ of its object,” 4 then we may find that the truth becomes consigned, or suited, to the theory.

Both the “Introduction” and “Theoretical Returns,” the first chapter, to Baker’s recent Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing, argue for the ubiquity, and the necessity to be cognizant, of theory in terms of an artistic production and of a subjective stance. A theory, according to the first chapter, is to begin where “common sense or mere appreciation ... end or at least where these modes fail to address questions that require for answer more than enumeration.”(38)

Where theory indulges its own form, in the solipsistic fabrication of “beautiful theories,” Baker accreditation its detractors with a rightful criticism. However, he ultimately concludes that African-American detractors of theory take exception not with theory itself, as a method, but with the “politics of theory,”(44) in a conflation of the two entities. Nevertheless, when black intellectuals—and particularly black women writers and scholars—have argued against theory, it is not so much for its failure to explain a product as to represent a subject position: the position of black women in African-American letters and American culture.

Each of us has learned so much about him or herself from stories heard from a young age and characters read about in books, people we have been and known. The contribution of the theorist to an understanding of American culture and to the meaningfulness of black literature includes his or her own critical position within a literary heritage, and it reads as a commentary that retraces the lines of the literature's most poignant agreement with the theorist’s social observations and ideological prospects. In African-American literary study—recognizing that theory must be made to suit the truth of its object—the object is bound to the same subject who asserts him or herself through theory. So theory devolves an overwhelmingly personal prospect, and must be made to suit us.(Workings of the Spirit, 45)

It is curious, however, that those theories continue to be called “beautiful” that turn in upon themselves and obscure the phenomenological positions of both the subject who employs them and the object upon which they are employed. This association of beauty with disinterested solipsism is antithetical to DuBois’s plea for a politically engaged “Negro art” in which Beauty staks a relationship to Truth and “the right actions of men.”
An earlier version of "Theoretical Returns" has been published in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, under the title "There Is No More Beautiful Way: Theory and the Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing." How are we to interpret the implications of the original title against its revised emphasis in *Workings of the Spirit*? We may wonder whether the "beautiful way" refers to black women's writing or to a decidedly theoretical assessment of it. But I take it that the use of "beautiful" in the original title is a play against Elizabeth Bruss's "beautiful theories," such that it restores the relationship between beauty and truth, by suggesting that black women's literature has always negotiated metalevels of understanding and yet there can be no mistaking its to a lived experience.

That a theory about black women's writing should share apriori in the immediacy of its truth, however, is a dubious claim. Theory already fits itself to the models of an academic forum. To say that the practice of theory is corroborated by "theoretical," meta-commentative passages in black women's texts is a tactic of evasion, pre-emptively defending the theorist's own position against the contest of a skeptical readership. Because the theorist considers himself a spokesman within an academic forum, his commentary comes to represent, or replace, the literature there. From the disjuncture of the theorist's ties to the community—and, in this case, to the particular context of black women's literature—arises the question of who exactly has lived this experience, and how can "the suppressed story of an-other" be integrated into the theorist's own position of disclosure.

Notwithstanding Baker's conceptualization of theoretical metalevels as a beyond, a return through theory must envision a return to something about us. That it is characterized as a beyond means that it is a place that we have never yet known, that has not yet been, but has always been emerging. So the return must have something to do with memory and remembering: that in fact what we remember is never completely what we knew but more something about the possibility of meaning in our present life.

If we privilege theory hereafter in African-American literary study, it must be because theory promises a meaning, or truth, emerging within the text and within the phenomenal context of its origination. Baker's privileging of theory derives from a belief that the negotiation of metalevels has always been implicated in African-American discourse, especially autobiography as "a form of African survival." As such, theory is a remembering where Africanism extends through a persistent revision to the African-American. Baker tries to shake our memories with photographs of African-American women's head-portage and other quotidian rites which are themselves "workings of the spirit." They are also functions of memory where spirit work, especially in its expressive forms of quilting, cooking, oratory, etc. works through the trauma of Middle Passage and of disjoining themes of departure. Moreover, it is precisely DuBois's phrase "in the world in which I work" that remembers Truth and how it is inseparable from Beauty. Thus, to remember, whether in the sense of quotidian labor or of theory, is to take up a task.

Evasion comes into play when the theoretical framework is woven to justify the theorist's own position within the academy, and so turns its back upon the world. By avoiding the issue of epistemological restrictions in his own theoretical practice, the theorist overstates the scope of what he can rightfully achieve, in a move to justify his own authorial readership. De Man's essay, "The Resistance to Theory," is the consummate example of such an evasion, in which the theorist begins to address the epistemological concerns of theory's relationship to truth, but then moves to examine what is at the heart of a resistance to theory, ultimately concluding that the position of resistance is further
usurped by theory itself. Furthermore, if theory is its own resistance, then theory's detractors have themselves subscribed to its method. Likewise, the following opening passage from Baker's introduction to *Workings of the Spirit* argues that the ubiquity of theory exempts no one from its practice of self-conscious evaluation:

We are always embroiled with theory—even when the word itself is absent. It is an illusion to suppose that a non-theoretical subject position is possible. An inadequately, complacently, or self-deceptively theorized position: yes. But an untheoretical one: impossible. Our lives and works are always conditioned (if not overdetermined) by models that lead to definitions of the “I” who speaks for “me.” (*Workings of the Spirit*, 1)

Dogmatism here replaces urgency (discussed in the missing section above), and Baker clearly closes, in academic and pedagogical fashion, the very debate which he has begun, suggesting that as far as theory is concerned we are always already co-opted. This passage raises many epistemological questions, but does not treat any of these questions as being valid. If we are always embroiled with theory—that is, if every work, insofar as it is a product, originates in and cultivates through its expression a theory—then every text must be transparent and penetrable, masterable to the theory which names it. Such an idea presupposes that a text, as form is transparent to an essence, rather than relinquishing form from presence, to have as its meaning only its expression. This is a dubious idea for interpreting texts, and an even more dubious one for subject positions. Form, marking the absence of an authorial, human presence, is the “I” who speaks for “me”. This passage conflates the identities of artistic works and subject positions with the entities that they represent (since texts often are constructed to represent positions beyond or other than simply their authors') at the same time as it conflates the work of the theorist with the mechanics of a work. What the work, the subject position, and the theorist seem to share, however, is that they all assert something; and so, for Baker, they must hold theoretical positions in accordance with their positions as “spokesman.”

Leaping ahead to the autobiographical conclusion of *Workings of the Spirit*, in an attempt to bring this cursory assessment of Baker's theoretical position to a close, I will address how Baker himself tries to solve this splintered relationship between the speaking subject and the spoken for, in his telling the story of a friend's violation. Maintaining that *Workings of the Spirit* is the final volume of a trilogy that begins with *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Baker claims that the motivation for his undertaking the full project of the trilogy was not “the fathers' proper inscription,” but rather that “the story of the beginning is one of woman's violation—and of my own subject position.” (205) It is important here to note that Baker invokes Ellison's famous line from the prologue to *Invisible Man*—“the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead”—in an attempt to show that it is possible to reverse its logic (i.e. “the end is always in the beginning and lies far behind”) and arrive at something like the logic of how his supposed trilogy can proceed from a woman's violation and yet begin with the first book's dedication to his father, without reaching the story of his friend's violation until the conclusion of its final volume.

In undertaking to tell the story of an-other, Baker has made his friend's ordeal a part of his own subject position as though, at this time, it might validate his entrance into the discourse of African-American women's writing. But we run into trouble sometimes
when we undertake to tell the story of an-other. We confuse it with our own. So Baker concludes that the hypothetical, black American he and she “can only be ONE in their wounding,”(209) but I must acknowledge that the man’s wounding in this case is more accurately the helplessness that he feels as a result of being unable to heal the other’s wound, and maybe even of his not having experienced such a genuine hurt. Thus, when Baker asserts that “WE can speak as ONE out of an-other and brutalized commonality,” what he really means is that we can speak together, and that my telling your story for myself or for others might help us to remember you.

Instead (and unfortunately), he ends with a final question: “Who is it, then, who speaks, finally, here?”(210) The suggestion is that Baker is moving toward a poetics, through the placement African-American women’s expressivity at the beginning of a male dominated discourse, whereby WE can speak as ONE. The theorist is trying to broaden human discourse by collecting voices into his own. The question that he poses is properly read as a re-formulation of Ellison’s question: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” Thus, his own rhetoric is still shaped by an authorial anxiety and a crisis of representation that confounds the scope of the theorist’s work and the work of art.

Whether theory pervades our actions or not, this does not alter the fact that theory is always a contribution. It proposes, or promises, something to and about its object. To understand Baker’s own theoretical project, we must contextualize it within an academic and social dialogue. Furthermore, we must contextualize the theorist’s autobiographical gesture made toward the experiencial and literary worlds predicating the work, as perhaps an attempt to participate in, and thereby disclose, a private discourse and to shake off the bands of a discrediting academic influence.

1Baker, Houston A., Jr. Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) 38. All further references will be noted parenthetically within the text.


JANE JOHNSTON

photograph
Caitlin DeSilvey
THE GARDEN

I.
Opening the streets upon wild pockets,
we find sunflowers bent haloed to the woven earth,
carrots who have come against free stones
in their downward grope, prompted to lovemaking
in passionate orange contortions.
I cannot believe that to sieve the soil clear
would make their passage, though straight, more joyous.
In our fibrous, swollen journey to the center
we have encountered certain stolid barriers
and having formed our thrust in deference to this presence
we felt our spirits channeled.

II.
We are burning the heart out of a stump of white pine;
a vessel so that we may boil roots and flesh from the forest.
The bodies of three children fill the space we have created.
Until our lives are loosened we shall weave the essential
feeding and loving about this kettle. We cannot move the feet of
trees with our own bodies. The winter waits in the steam that rises
from the hot stones, dropped into the water in the mornings before
light.
Jeremy Bendik-Keymer

SECTION URBAINE

Often, later
he remembered what
she'd told him,
like the secrets grown inside their hands
and the days
begun without a word
but fingers crossed...

In the night air
when stillness tells the world
there's still life inside the heart,
we hear the city
coming together,
like the bar I went to
last weekend,
singing,
or the stadium shouting out the match
and the families, even,
more beautiful than
loneliness.

If I occlude the hour,
shift sideways
or smile instead of words,
its only that a subway moving underground
has come and gone.

...yet every face
still holds you...
They pulled off at Chugwater and into a filling-station convenience store, a concrete and neon oasis on the plains. The driver, a tall woman in mirror shades and cowboy boots said “35 minutes,” and got off the twelve-seat microbus carrying six passengers north from Cheyenne to Billings. The cloudless afternoon and the flat, pale surrounding country blinded the passengers for a moment as they got off the bus, and the blast of air-conditioning as she entered the store chilled Diane’s sweaty skin and her shirt felt cool against her back.

Halfway up from Cheyenne the driver had pulled over on the gravel shoulder and Diane’s heart skipped a beat as she pictured them stranded out there in the middle of nothing—nothing but mesas and rocks fallen and rocks precarious close to falling and arroyos choked with cottonwoods and lacking water; scrub grass, brush, oil wells, the occasional antelope and the chalk-line of white highway. In the worst-case-scenario way she had, Diane pictured them stranded out there. For days, maybe. “Scurvy!” she thought, and had to smile.

When the driver had slammed the hood with a grave look and climbed back into the bus, Diane quit smiling. The driver apologized. And apologized again. And told them they’d need to open their windows, no air-conditioning for the rest of the ride, at least to Sheridan. They might be able to get a new bus in Sheridan. Diane had opened her window and the bus had clattered on the tiny stripe of road, north towards a distant horizon.

Inside the convenience store, passing racks of magazines and processed foods, Diane got a diet coke from one of the coolers in back, a pack of gum from the candy rack and stood in line. Two boys from the bus were in front of her. They were drunk when they got on the bus in Cheyenne and had announced to all concerned they were brothers. “You believe that?” one of them had said to the driver and they’d laughed and headed to the back seat.

“Yes,” the driver had said.

Now, each held two quart bottles of Budweiser. There was no drinking on the bus so they were going to use this 35 minutes to do a little refueling of their own.

They sat at a booth.

As Diane stood at the cash register, one of the brothers, a quart bottle to his mouth, gestured her to come over and sit with them. He put the bottle down and smiled a smile she could not tell if it was a welcome or a threat. The smiler had a big straw cowboy hat beside him on the table and a brown, pearl-snap shirt and an extra chin. His brother, a slicked-back rock-a-billy kid wore snake-skin boots and a leather jacket and no shirt. The both of them had put away quarts in twos earlier at a paste-board oil-company town and they had the pale, clammy look of high-noon hot summer drunks.

Diane smiled at Cowboy-hat as politely and coldly as she knew how. She was seventeen and not a beauty, but she had looks enough and lived long enough to have learned the trouble a quick, cold gesture can save you. She wore leather-soled loafers. Ridiculous shoes, she had realized, in this country of practical shoes, shoes that screamed she was from out East or, worse, from Denver. The shoes clicked on the linoleum floor as she walked past the two drunk men to another booth.
“Excuse me, but do you mind if I sit with you?” she asked the old woman who sat in the last booth.

“No, no,” the woman’s brown face pruned up in a smile and she gestured Diane to sit down. Diane smiled at the woman, sat and cracked her coke open. She held out the unopened pack of gum to the women, who shook her head. Where Diane sat she faced Slicked-back, and a whoop storm of laughter erupted from the drunks’ booth as Slicked-back caught Diane’s eye and made a mocking, mournful face at her.

“Are you travelling to Billings?” the woman asked.

Diane blinked. “What? Oh. No,” she said, “Buffalo.” She had come out from Ohio to see her grandparents, first by plane, then bus. There had been a split of some kind, she didn’t really understand it all, so she had not seen them since she was five. She was frightened to meet the strangers, all the more strange since they should not have been.

“Buffalo?” the old woman asked.

“My grandparents are there. You?” Diane spoke softly and respectfully.

“Sheridan,” she said, “my boy is picking me up in Sheridan.” The woman had gray hair in a bun and wet, crow’s foot eyes and dark brown skin.

Diane sipped her coke.

“You live in Sheridan?”

“No, no,” the woman smiled at the suggestion. “I’ve a ranch in the Black Hills.”

“In Dakota?”

“No,” the woman laughed once. “The hills don’t stop at the border, you know. In Wyoming, nearer Devil’s Tower than Dakota. Two miles as the crow flies.” The woman had a very soft but clear voice. She laughed again. Contradicting Diane amused her.

The brothers got up and walked outside, and through the window Diane saw them make their way across the lot to sit in the shadow of the bus, which bus wriggled in the heat rising off the pavement. Cowboy-hat took off his shirt to expose a fat, farmer-tan torso and Slicked-back took off his jacket. Cowboy-hat carefully folded his brown shirt and put it beside him on the pavement. They disgusted Diane, the pale flab of his body. But in a way she envied them. It would be nice to have someone on this trip.

“I’ve a ranch out there.”

“Do you raise cattle?”

“No, not so much anymore. You can’t keep cattle all your life. I’m old.”

“So, what, do you rent the land, then?”

“Yes, to my neighbors. They run cattle.” The woman smiled and took a cigarette and lighter from her purse. “I ride and shoo them around sometimes.”

“Your neighbors or the cows?” Diane smiled and the old woman laughed. They were silent a moment.

“Visiting down in Cheyenne?”

“No.” The woman lit her cigarette and breathed out smoke as she talked: “A friend from Billings, I grew up in Billings with her and she moved to Cheyenne, I don’t know, when she married. Married in Billings but moved to Cheyenne in the thirties. Her funeral.”

Diane noticed only then the woman was dressed all in black, and felt bad for having brought it up. But how could she have known?

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s alright, dear. People die.” The old woman smiled up at her.

The bus-driver called “All passengers...”
The old woman and Diane got up from the booth and Diane said “I’m going to the women’s room, can you make it alright?”

The old woman smiled at Diane with understanding but like she was crazy. “I’ll make it.”

“Can you make it alright?” Diane thought in the bathroom. For God’s sake, the woman lives on a ranch. She shook her head.

Diane walked out into the blast-furnace afternoon, across the lot, trying to avoid catching the eyes of Cowboy-hat and Slicked-Back. They let out a whoop of recognition and and Diane fixed her eyes on the bus door. As she got on the bus she heard herself invited back out to have a drink.

Diane sat across the aisle from the old woman. Slicked-back ignored her as he got back on the bus. His jeans were wet at the waist from sweat, he had crooked teeth and he collapsed in the back seat. Didn’t look like he could quite keep up with his brother.

Cowboy-hat was a little longer getting back on. He had seemed more dangerous somehow to Diane, like being drunk didn’t make him act different, but more like himself. He steadied himself at the front of the bus and then smiling leered at Diane and the old woman. He held a near-empty quart of Budweiser in one hand and walked toward them. Diane braced herself for abuse but he leaned instead on the seat in front of the old woman. He pushed his hat back from his face and said, “You want a drink, girl?”

The old woman looked out the window, though Diane half-expected her either to deck the drunk or take him up on it. The old woman looked out at the parking lot and the gas station and the access road that led west out into the flat-mesaed land and on to Chugwater.

Cowboy-hat looked confused a moment.

“Shit,” he said, “I’m sorry.”

He walked back and sat beside his brother. He removed his hat and slid the brim between the seatback and the back wall so it stood flat against the back wall of the bus.

Diane glanced to the back of the bus and then put her hand on the old woman’s forearm. She turned to Diane.

“They’re just cutters. Come up from Texas who knows where to cut wheat,” the woman said and looked out her window. The driver got in, counted the passengers, closed the door and drove back onto the highway, back north into the scrub. The country began to change, became less rocky and more undulating, sometimes with a sudden smooth cone or random hump of earth, and then undulating again, more cattle now and antelope, and fewer steel-mantis oil wells. Around a bend, lead clouds on the horizon, and then the sun stopped shining and the driver told the riders about a trail had run between the road and the river on the left, and about the decline in antelope over the years.

A little while later, Diane looked over at the black-clad woman.

“No!” The woman leaned forward in the aisle to correct the driver, “it was nineteen twenty-four.” As the country passed and raindrops slid backwards on her window, Diane leaned back in her seat, easy.
THE YALE LITERARY MAGAZINE
AN UNDERGRADUATE PUBLICATION

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Anne Chellas

SENIOR EDITORS
Kathryn Haines, Stephen Rich, Emily O. Wittman

ART EDITOR
Julie Puttgen

DESIGN
Kathryn Haines, Stephen Rich

PHOTOGRAPHY
Eddie Hartman

COVER
Carrie Iverson

EDITORIAL STAFF
Chris Boerboom, Anthony Elgort, Martin Hale, Ki-Wing Ho,
Carrie Iverson, Melissa Levine, Donna Ng, Bo Whong

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