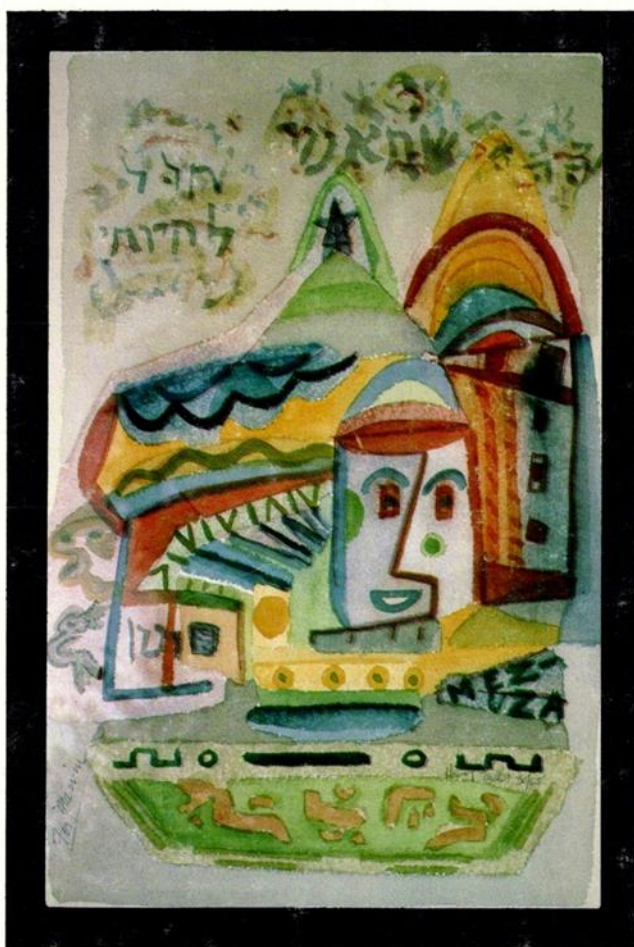


LINOLEUM BLOCK PRINTS BY RICHARD DENNER

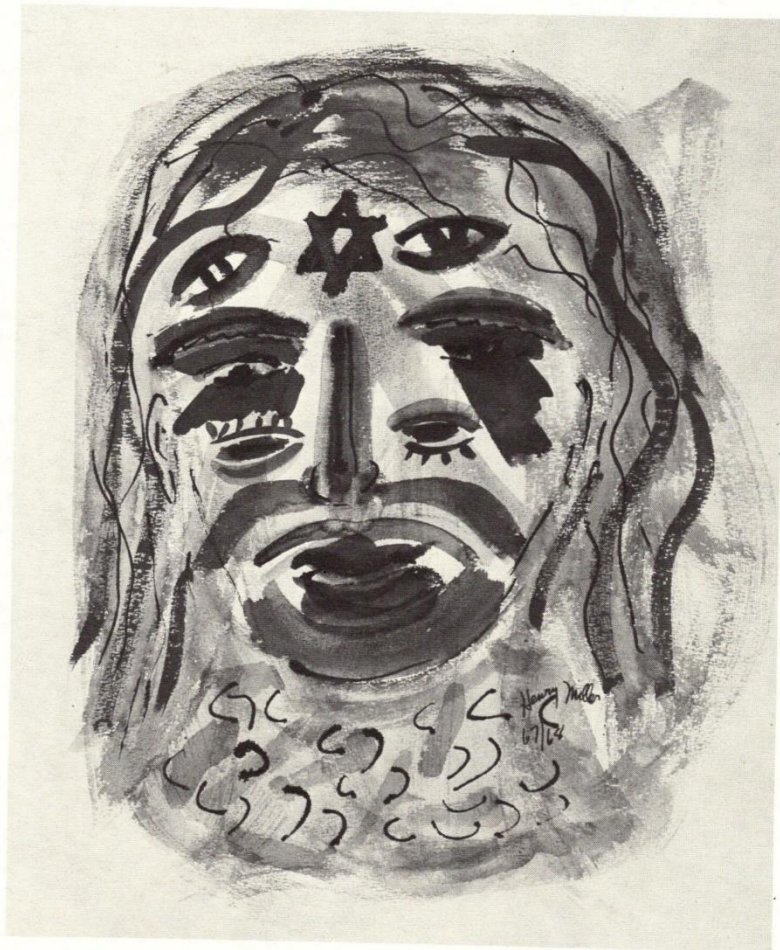
# BLACK MESSIAH



**A TRIBUTE TO HENRY MILLER**



**BLACK MESSIAH**  
**PREMIERE ISSUE**



**VAGABOND PRESS**

1610 N. Water St., Ellensburg, WA. 98926





JERRY BUMPUS

## Wide Open

Sondra bought the crushed silk almost-see-through slacks out of her typing and filing money. Her father hasn't seen them and he will never see them.

She looks back over her shoulder, slowly walking away from the mirror, her expression a small, slightly crooked smile, her eyes half closed, derisive, a coy sneer. Come hither and Up yours, it's as close as she can come to laughing at the slacks, at herself—for staring at her hips and legs sends her into a trance. Not exactly a trance. A sinking down backwards into herself, while simultaneously there's the sensation of something slowly coming up. In these slacks she sees her hips and legs as a man would. She even feels the solid, dense concentration which comes over a man when he stares at a woman, and Sondra is filled with pure and sincere lust for herself. Which makes her wonder if maybe she is 20 or 30% gay.

The question has whispered itself in her ear before, as it has to nearly all girls (she tells herself) and she has entertained the possibility with minimal anxiety and trepidation (she truly entertained it) and decided she isn't even low-grade gay.

In fact the gay question is a trick, a mere diversion, a subterfuge sent up by her ex-mother, the ex-Episcopal church, ex-Crawford High School and Ms. Heckelvik a.k.a. Pickelbuk the psychologist Sondra must go see Tuesdays and Thursdays after school (ha).

In other words it is *Morality*, and when it comes sneaking up in a new disguise, each more ludicrous and transparent than the one before, sometimes Gay, sometimes Dread Nymphomania, who knows what next?—at its mildest it makes her addled and rattled and what you might call bemused, and at its best it terrifies her, because, after all, she is still a kid, legally and actually, she's the first to admit it, and how can she be expected to handle everything at once?

"Everything at once" means her life has come apart.

It has stopped computing. It has .0003 meaning. And in the middle of all the complications of her life coming apart, this unbelievable *you* wouldn't believe it, she doesn't believe it—no one in her right mind would believe it) sexual urge has hit her.

"Urge" isn't right—far too mild. See?—she can't even express herself.

It's as if she's another person.

Or as if the Sondra she used to be is being squeezed down smaller and smaller inside this thing wearing crushed silk almost-see-through slacks walking its ass for the mirror.

Sondra smiles at the hips, the thighs, which pull her along, taking her where they will go. She is smiling because she is secretly in control. She will go with her hips and thighs—she can't stop them. But she will go *on!* All the way through this! She's determined to pass as fast as she can through to the other side, where she will resume being herself.

But she's well aware this idea might be a trick, too, which the thing in the mirror is playing in order to get Sondra as quickly as possible and as deeply as possible into—

In other words, what if there's no other side? What if once in it you're in it forever?

Secret possibilities squirm around with such questions, licking and sucking, while Sondra looks over her shoulder at the mirror, everything running down to an immense simplicity, she feels it inside her mind—actually feels it forcing her to believe she's at last beginning to understand, and that the first and most important thing is to stop *thinking* so life can *happen* and bring its understanding . . .

This morning when Sondra bought the slacks she heard clearly inside herself, "Life has a mind of its own," and she had to agree—at the same time she realized here was something new in disguise, a goat in drag, wearing a mortarboard and gown, and if it got half a chance it was going to spitefully and thoroughly fuck her, and this afternoon she was going to give it all the chance it needed.

#

And as Sondra is standing on the corner of College Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard, a block from her home, on a hot September afternoon in San Diego, watching cars go by, an arm lifted and her thumb sticking straight up as if to say that though she's here to hitch a fuck she's also bound for Glory, she is thinking it through again for the thousandth compulsive futile time and sliding into the rut of a conclusion she has arrived at numerous times before and which did her no more good than that it does now—the theory that pure & sincere lust actually has zero to do with sex.

Black Messiah/issue #1

### EVEN THE BEST

(For Matthew)

And what mantle dreams of  
At night is the way  
The bat breaks and stings  
When a high hard one  
Sings in on his hands  
And the ball dribbles out  
To a baby-faced pitcher  
Who runs it to first  
By himself and laughs.

And Maris walks the street  
Overweight and unremembered,  
With the sun an asterisk  
Next to his 61, always  
A shadow not his own  
Blurring the mark he left,  
Hearing his son say  
You did it dad but  
It's never quite enough.

And Mays gives out  
Greetings to the gamblers,  
Feels his heart beat  
In time with falling chips,  
And curses legs that let him  
Down as they stumbled at Shea,  
Hearing the crowd murmur,  
Watching the white ball bounce  
Around the wheel against his  
Will and away to the wall.

And you, my son—  
I know you dream at night  
On young legs that run  
All day, hear the bat  
Crack the sky of your mind  
Like thunder and smile  
As you lay there sleeping,  
Your life like base paths  
Stretched out ahead of you,  
Hungry for accomplishment.

But think of them, Matthew,  
These old men once stars  
Who look back to a time  
Of greatness before a crowd,  
Locked in a child's world  
With gray hair and wrinkles  
And a wall full of trophies  
To give each new day purpose.

There are other things  
For a strong son to learn  
And do as you will,  
Other moments of greatness  
When your children to come  
Squeal their way into the  
Air or your hands work  
Wood or steel or a woman.

Yes, rage like any boy who  
Dreams and falls his dream  
In the sunlight and the sweat,  
Who tries to be his dream,  
Quivers with fear, excitement,  
Each time he tries,  
And sometimes wins.

If you wake and strike out,  
If hot tears push at your eyes  
Whenever you try and fail  
And a small crowd sighs,  
Learn early to take it  
And come back with the will  
To be only what you are,  
My strong son,  
My prince,  
My star.

Gary Allan Kizer

Gary Allan Kizer co-edits *Gravida* with his wife, Lynne Saritt. His book of poems, *Let a Single Flower Blossom*, is available for \$2 from Greenfield Review Press, P.O. Box 80, Greenfield Center, N.Y. 12833.



he did. In a way, we all make up our autobiographies. He was more of a fabulist than he would have admitted— though the very word would have made him puke. He was "just a Brooklyn boy—doncha know" and if he was the great force that liberated literature (I nearly wrote "liberature") in our age, he knew it in his gut, but did not know it at all in his brain. He desperately wanted public recognition of his genius and in the pursuit of that recognition, he gave far too many interviews, and entertained far too many com- men and *schnozzers*. Thus are even enlightened souls se- duced by the lust for recognition! That we denied him such final pleasures is not only a measure of official literary meanness, but of his own greatness: he still— even to the end—had the power to shock the hypocrite, the faint of heart, the literary panty-waist.

I hope you get your Nobel Prize in Heaven, Henry, sent up on blasts of dynamite.

\*\*\*

*Erica Jong is best known for her novel Fear of Flying, pub- lished in 1973, but she is also an excellent poet. At the Edge of the Body, a book of poetry, was published in 1979. Fanny, a novel, appeared in 1980.*

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Weep and you weep alone! — What a lie that is! Weep and you will find a million crocodiles to weep with you. The world is forever weeping. The world is dranchen in tears. Laughter, that's another thing. Laughter is momentary — it passes. But joy, joy is a kind of ecstatic bleeding, a disgraceful sort of contentment which overflows from every pore of your being. You can't make people joyous just by being joyous yourself. Joy has to be generated by oneself. It is or it isn't. Joy is founded on something too profound to be understood or communicated. To be joyous is to be a madman in a world of sad ghosts.

Henry Miller  
Sexus (1945)



and probably even to you, reader  
it seems harmless and only right  
and even natural  
the way my white mother enrolled me  
in queen mary public school  
in prince albert collegiate and on  
to the university of saskatchewan

to you, dear reader, my protest  
possibly seems silly but  
I acknowledge my white mother  
gave me this white body  
and these white words

but my cree mother  
hannah daniels  
gave me back my  
soul and heart and told me  
showed me  
how we are one fabric with the stars  
the way she lived her life  
and died her death

Gerda Penfold



Done With Mirrors, Gerda Penfold's book of poems, is still available from Yagobond Press in a limited signed edition —\$5.

heard so much about. Though she has seen and known money all her life, she only now, all at once, grasps the reality of money. She understands that sex and mothers and men are nothing compared to money. That a person will remain a fool and victim and slave unless she early in her struggle realizes that all things in human life amount to gravitate to are magnetized to are sucked drawn pulled and ascend to money.

And she is free.  
She puts away her pussy. She will keep it, of course. But she is finished with it. She might let it fuck, later, much later. But for now and for the next five, ten, fifteen years, she can and will forget it—and that will be easy, too.

She stares at the \$50 bill, takes a deep breath, and she tells it she is awake for the first time in her life.

\*\*\*

*Jerry Bumpus' novel, Anaconda, was published by December Press. He has two collections of stories in publication—Things in Place from the Fiction Collective, available from George Braziller, One Park Place, NYC 10016 for \$3.95; Special Offer, available from Carpenter Press, Rt. No. 4, Pomeroy, Ohio 45769 for \$5. Another book of stories, Heroes and Villains, is due this year from the Fiction Collective.*



JACK SAUNDERS

## Interview with Donn Pearce

Donn Pearce wrote Cool Hand Luke. He wrote the screenplay to the movie Cool Hand Luke. His screenplay was nominated for an Academy Award. It contained the line, uttered by Strother Martin, who played the warden, "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

Donn Pearce wrote a book called Dying in the Sun. I thought it was as good a book about where we are and where we're headed as I've read. I saw it remained in the book store in the Boca Mall and bought five copies, which I mailed to friends.

When I first moved back to Delray there was an article in the Sun-Sentinel about Donn Pearce. It said he was working as a private detective in Ft. Lauderdale. Ex-con turned private eye. He had to get a special permit to carry a gun.

I thought at the time about interviewing him. That is, I wanted to talk to him. I didn't.

The other thing I read about him was when they had a made-for-tevee movie on the teevce and he was listed as

the author of the story the movie was based on the local newspaper called him up and asked about it.

He had written a piece on escort services for Tropic magazine, the Sunday supplement to the Miami Herald. Tropic wouldn't take it.

He sold it to Playboy. An editor at Playboy gave it the title Love for Rent. Love for Hire—something like that; the outfit that made the movie bought the title.

They made up a story about a teenaged runaway who gets trapped into white slavery and her teenage sister runs away and saves her. Gets trapped into white slavery—I didn't see the movie.

I didn't read the article.

What I'd like to talk to Donn Pearce about is writing. Why Time magazine gives play to a cooked-up feud between Renata Adler and Pauline Kael, ignores the points Adler made in her review of Kael's book, which was a sledgehammer to kill a fly, which if Kael's book was a fly what were the movies Kael was reviewing, in infinite regress, and Donn Pearce writes a really great book and has to work as a detective. How does he feel about that?

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or later they're going to have to let me kid out. They can't keep him in jail forever for stealing a car and smoking some dope. Sooner or later they'll have to bring him to trial. But first they're going to bludgeon his spirit, Pummel it around. Show him a thing or two. How the game's played. Into his third month with almost no natural light and no exercise. The body begins to deteriorate, the mind becomes befuddled. He never knows what's coming next. One day they wake him up and take him into the courtroom. There he is in front of a judge who is asking him how he pleads. "Guilty, your honor." Back to the cell.

What was that all about? No advance notice. They just drag him out of his cell looking like death warmed over and tell him to enter his plea. His lawyer doesn't tell him anything. His lawyer is court-appointed. He lives in darkness and artificial light. I keep at people from the outside to pry loose a little information, but most of the authorities are hostile and suspicious. No one wants to give out information. No one's really sure what's going on or why, except that everyone is certain a crime has been committed and someone is going to pay. Everyone seems to take it personally.

I get a call from my son. They've relocated him. "Wake up, kid, roll up your gear, you're moving."

"What? What time is it? Where am I going?" (What day is it? Is it day? What night? Is this a cold-day night? Am I going from this holding tank to a real prison? To the electric chair? Is there a war on? Am I bailed out? Is it a hearing? I'm supposed to have a hearing, someone told me a long time ago I'd have a hearing. . . .)

They put him in a car with some other kids. The guy gets on the freeway and starts going 80 miles an hour. On his rear bumper, a sticker that says: 55, a law we can live with. The rear tire starts coming undone. The kids behind the protective mesh screen hear this noise (th-WAP! th-WAP!) and look out the side window to see part of the left rear tire hanging against the side of the car.

"Hey, man! Your tire is unavailing! You better pull over!"

The guy ignores them. He's used to their con games. All they want is to escape. The tire blows and they go swerving all over the road. They come to a stop on the shoulder and the guy changes the tire with the kids in the car. They're on their way again.

The kid gets the call thru from the new jail. "What's going on, Dad? What the hell are they doing? I ask them what's going on and they tell me I'll see when the time comes."

His voice is very shaky. It's starting to get to him. Is this cruel and unusual punishment? Or is this just the American Way? What does this crime have to do with my son's crime, and how do we punish it? I feel the anger whelm up inside me again. "They're fucking with your head, son." I tell him. "You hang in there. Keep doing those pushups and situps. Keep reading the books. Pretend you're a prisoner in Iran and instead of your country doing this to you, you're doing this for your country!"

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JAN KEROUAC

## Baby Driver

Copyright © 1981 by Jan Kerouac. Excerpted from *Baby Driver*, a first novel by Jan Kerouac, and published by special arrangement with St. Martin's Press, Inc., 175 Fifth Ave., NYC 10010.

Was it January or February? The coconut fronds waving, shining like green hair in the sun, gave no clue. I sat in the window of our thatched house in Yelapa, not even a dot on the map below Puerto Vallarta, staring out through puffs of tiny afternoon flies. I patted the turquoise cloth draped over my seven-month belly, feeling the baby move within, revolving now like a restless planet. This hard compact ball was comforting—a rubber bumper to protect me from the world.

Now it grazed the underside of the tabletop. This used to mean it was time to redo the legs, which were of coconut stalks, the only wood available in Yelapa. Every three weeks or so, John would throw out the shivered brown sticks and start all over again with fresh green ones, lashing them together and setting the hardwood top back on. He'd just done it again that morning, chopping the legs longer (this time with the machete, so the table would be higher. But my belly was growing too fast—like everything here in the tropics, growing so fast, and rotting away before you know it. . . .)

I was sitting there, marveling at the renewed solidarity of the table, a heap of Mexican pens before me. I had just finished a chapter of the novel John and I were collaborating on, a fairy tale account of drug trafficking and romance in Mathattan, called *The Infection*. On thirteen pages of children's composition paper, I had gone through five pens. One had died in the middle of the first sentence. Perhaps the jungle humidity had something to do with it. With a sense of accomplishment, I peddled gold paper from a bar of chocolate. *Carlos Cines, Finito Sotero*—my reward for the day.

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He laughs. Good. He's got that much left.

"Keep cooking." I tell him, hang up and go out to see what I can find out.

A big part of the problem here is that we live in an economic system, not a democracy. There are some things you do against this system that are cut-and-dry, and then they level all their guns at you. Anything from smoking dope to killing someone. In New York, for instance, you can get life for walking around with more than an ounce of grass. You can also get ten years for killing someone. What you get depends on how you talk, how you dress, who you are and who you know. If you know no one and are no one, your best bet is to talk like this. Yes sir, your honor. No sir. I wish I hadn't of done it. Yes your honor, no sir. I will, I will. I promise I'll do my best.

They lead you from the courtroom. Ten years in a correctional institution for smoking weed. It beats life. Be grateful. No recognition—weed is not the rich man's drug.

Now I'm cooking. You're cooking when you take a stand. When your back is against the wall and you decide to not say yes your honor, no sir. You're cooking when you decide to fight. When you say this is no way to live out the only life I have. You have to guard against them pulling the plug on your music. You have to take that rig all the way down the hill, take it right up Main Street doing 130 miles per hour. They'll hear you coming, they'll clear the streets. You've got to travel light and keep your priorities straight if you want to cook. If you want to live the life of a good citizen. You can't be expedient. You've got to value something more than money and security, you've got to value sunlight. That's why they deprive you of it. They know what they're doing, they know what you live on. They put you in a place with inadequate ventilation and no sunlight for a few months and they figure you'll crack. Buckle. Give in. All they want you to do is put your shoulder to the wheel and stop asking questions. All they want you to do is stop looking up at the sun.

The sun glints off my carriage arm. My left hand flicks up, slides the carriage back for another line of print. I'm cooking.

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*The Adventures of Achilles Jones, John Bennett's first novel, is available for \$4 from Thorp Springs Press, 803 Red River, Austin, Texas 78701. The Night of the Great Butcher, published by December Press, is available for \$4 from Vanguard Press.*



Baby Driver/Kerouac

away, afraid to frighten him any further, and put the broom somewhere else.

There was Don Pinciano, the man who lived alone in the hut nearest ours, retreating from the hills. He'd caught a cold and gotten delirious. Earlier that morning I'd seen him wandering around with a frying pan full of wet cement, kneading it with his bare hands and mumbling, "Tara las chanchas . . . las chanchas son malas." [For the pigs . . . the pigs are bad.] His pan was empty now, and I feared the worst for the pigs. He must have had a wife once. Probably lived there in that hut all his life. Now there was no one to look after him. I wondered if he'd taken any of that cough syrup, *jabbe para tos*, I'd brought him.

I would have to go get *petateos* for the lamps before nightfall, and maybe there'd be some mail—that would certainly be a miracle. Letters took two weeks to get to the States and two weeks for a reply, if they arrived at all. I grabbed the purple- and green-striped *boles* and paddled on rubber flip-flops down the hill, first crossing the river carefully under a huge ever-present spider whom we'd christened Seymour. He or she was waiting patiently in a yard-wide web in a mango tree. I walked over slippery rocks past women washing clothes in the water, singing at always, their bare-bottomed children by their side. *Soon I will wash down here like them, with my own brown baby-half-Portuguese he'll be, probably look just like Robert. . . .*

Into the *pueblos*, past chickens and goats in the sunny dust-popular Mexican songs booming from the empty cantina. To the general store first—*tienda de Juan Cruz*. Ah! A letter finally! From my mother. Strange markings all over it . . . must have been up river a hundred miles before it arrived. I tore it open right there. My mother was back with Harry again . . . glad to hear that, but couldn't picture her living in Brooklyn. And then, inside was my monthly support check—the minimum of fifty-two dollars, autographed by the famous wino himself. *Someday maybe I'll go back and see him, be drinking *hoolies* together. . . .*

Mother used to buy tea, ravioli, and fabric on First Avenue with the check. Now what did I buy? Bags of rice folded in brown paper half moons, Nido powdered milk, Primavera jungle *margaritas*, sometimes a warm soda at the cantina. And yes, a *bonbillo* for the lamp. I'd broken one the other day—what a mind-splintering crash it had made on the tile floor. *Have to be more careful with this one. . . .* I caressed the delicate crystalline bulb into the straw bag carefully.

Coming home with the groceries and full *petateco* bottle, a long line of people passed me on the narrow manure-paved path, each one saying, "Buenos tardes," without fail. A fixed custom, it must have been uttered more than twenty times ten times by me, as we ducked through (*chubas*) bougainvillea and banana leaves, avoiding pigs and the cliff's edge . . . far beneath which was the shimmering sea. Slimmering just like it had when we'd first arrived—networks of golden sun playing on the sand floor underwater. I could get away with wearing a bikini then, but not now. The Mexican guys always stared so much even then. John and I had lain on the beach down there before we found our house and he'd backed open coconuts with the machete

while I bobbed along with grayfurry old-man pelicans. I could float right up to them, buoyed by the fruit of my womb. Maybe we could do that again, only I'd wear clothes like the native women do when swimming.

Under the darkening canopy of the river I passed Seymour, scaring myself with thoughts of monsters under the bed. As I ran up the hill I heard, "Wow, look at the hair on that one, George. . . ." Unmistakably American woman's voice. A tourist couple had mistaken me for a native. I was flattered. My hair was past waist length, but I hadn't realized how dark I'd gotten, and the handmade turquoise dress I wore probably had Yelapa written all over it. It certainly did have genuine hair slit on the shoulder, from leaving it out to dry one night.

In October, when John and I had gotten here, the temperate clothes we'd brought were all too warm. So we bought fabric and thread and each sewed something to wear. He made a green sleeveless shirt and I made two dresses; a turquoise sleeveless maternity dress, and a red dress with sleeves for the rainy season after I had the baby. We had spread the fabric out on the floor, cutting from sheer logic, and cursed the cheap thread which bunched and tangled every other stitch. He wore his green shirt every day with cut-offs, and my turquoise dress was the only thing I ever wore. The northern clothes were packed away indefinitely in a box—probably teeming with scorpions by now—and my red dress hung alone in the closet, waiting for the rains.

The black star tattoo Paul Orlov had done on my hip two years before was now beginning to stretch ever so slightly with the growing ball. I checked its progress every day. Lucky it wasn't right on my navel, or I'd be an illustrated balloon.

John had been gone a long time. The sun was almost eclipsed now behind dicketing front fingers. Before I filled the lamps, I wanted to take a look at the giant flower behind the house. Crunching warily through the underbrush, past the place where I'd buried my city shoes, where pigs grunted around at night, I stepped softly to avoid sleeping scorpions. That flower was of the lily family, I was fairly sure. It had a huge purple stalk (the color I imagined an umbilical cord must be) and a massive bud that just yesterday had been about to burst open, sending out a few long strands of maroon and white petals. *By now it must be in full mad bloom. . . .* But where? I searched for the spot; someone had *chopped* it! The purple stump oozed with white droplets of sap from a recent machete slash. My head reeling with vague rage, I turned back toward the river again. The women's clothes-washing songs were getting louder. I went up to a clearing from where I could see the beach. John wasn't on his rock fishing anymore.

From the edge of my vision, something came shaking, a mad jerking movement entering the sandstage show. It was the retarded fellow in baggy white shirt and pants, walking spastic as always, with that scrawny brown smile, so sublime. He wore mats of black hair. But what was that, something almost obscuring him, like a sudden growth—a huge spray of white and purple cluttered tightly instead of his gear!

walking stick . . . the flower!

He was shivering wildly with each spasmodic step, and the blossom seemed welded to him. His smile was even a touch wider now. He made a detour, going for the shrubbery—the whole quaking organism of him with the gargantuan blossom, like an extension of his crazy soul. I watched, gladly amazed. The flower couldn't have landed in better hands. His footsteps made strange etchings in the sand, zig-zagging to invisibility behind a wall of green.

I turned to go after a moment, and there was John, right behind me, dangling three beautiful fish. "Oh, you did catch some! Great!" But he was smiling at something else. "Did you see that?" He laughed with mischievous glee. "Ahah, it was you who gave it to him!" I laughed with him, telling of my initial trauma at the chopped stalk. We embraced in the shared vision of hilarity, wondering what would eventually become of man and flower. Then on the way to the house I picked a skittish of wild times.

We made ready for night . . . lampwicks trimmed, *hom-bitas* glowing. I fried fish in *aceite de algodón*, cottonseed oil, while John squeezed the *limones*, and bats and dragonflies began their angular swooping and dipping outside the window. We ate at the celery-legged table as termites sawed away at the plaster wall. After a spell, one of our favorite creatures came out to entertain us. The Fred Astaire spider, we called him. He was brilliant orange with a large pad on the end of each foot—they looked like actual shoes. Right into the pool of lamplight on the floor he would leap, take a sort of bow, putting four of his legs together on one side, and lean over. Then the spider would do the most frenzied, intricate footwork, twisting, hopping, kicking with just one leg, then another. There should have been tiny taps made to order for him! Then he would do another bow and skip away into the darkness, leaving us doubled over with mirth. Who knows? If we had applauded maybe he would have come back for an encore.

Next the moths did their nocturnal death waltz around the lamps, and howling dog choruses echoed in the river valley. I made sure there were no scorpions in the bed, then climbed under the mosquito netting, which was really more of a scorpion net. Their sting could be fatal to a pregnant woman. We'd found fifteen in all since we'd lived there. The machete gleamed by the bed, awaiting the sixteenth. I hoped it wouldn't appear tonight, it was such a grisly spectacle—John holding the knife a few inches away and then CRUNCH, as it curved its tail, trying desperately to sting the blade. I had sent a dead one to Charlotte in a match box. *I wonder if she ever got it?* Once we saw a whole swarm of tiny scorpions running across the floor. They must have just hatched—all perfectly formed, but small as ants.

Confident that the netting was insect free, I settled back to read *Monsieur*, from the *Alexandria* Quarter. But my mind was straying. Someday maybe I'd be in a northern city with libraries again, crisp autumn in the air, a tweed suit on, and I could look up that marvelous flower in a botanical book. *Have to remember the description—thin leaves staring out at the base . . . huge sanguine bud . . .* Yes, maybe I'd live in a cool, temperate place again

with dry bright corners in a house—nothing more dangerous than a little ant or spider, and now that I'd met John, I would no longer have to play my little library game of closing my eyes and picking books blindly. Now I would always seek out Beckett, Durrell, Kafka, Joyce, Dostoevsky—all introduced to me by John. What wonderful gifts they were!

Languorously I gazed at him through the amber netting. He was still at work on a chapter, drinking Barra chocolate and cursing intermittently at the pens. I thought of all we'd been through—the terrifying close call in Guadalajara, where soccer players shouting "*Pelo, Pelo!*" had jumped him with kindergarten scissors, symbolically threatening to cut his hair, but instead kicked him in the chest despite my impassioned pleas, "*No moleste mi esposo!*" We had escaped, clinging to an overflowing bus, and recuperated for a night at flooded Lake Chapala. And then there had been the Federales who called on us that first night in Yelapa. Finally satisfied by my mother's notarized paper, they'd lumbered out of the hut and left us alone with our hearts in our throats.

Just then, through the woven bamboo door came a sound which roused me from my reveries—a kind of cackling. "*¿Quién es?*" asked John, but the voice just cackled in reply—unintelligible—a demonic rap. I sat up, truly scared. What was this? "*Buenos noches. ¿Quién es?*" I called, louder. Silence. Then more rough cackle, so near. "*Could it be an animal, John?*" I whispered hopefully, adrenaline coursing in my veins. And I saw that he too was afraid. Neither of us made any move to open the door. People came around rarely after dark, but then usually to sell things.

John came to bed and held me, so intense was my fear. Finally it went away, silently, down the steps and around the house. I had the feeling that it was just gone suddenly from the door. A Mayan spirit looking for something in the mad Mexican night.

In the morning I woke with strong cramps, like severe gas pains, and soon realized that I was in labor—and only seven months along. This was February 2, my brother's birthday. Now I wouldn't be able to get to Guadalajara and stay with that woman by the hospital. I'd written a formal letter in Spanish and it was all arranged; I was to leave a month ahead of time. But this changed everything. I couldn't run out and hail a cab like my mother always did in New York. There were no cars, or even a road here.

John ran and fetched the midwife, hoping that it was only a false alarm. But it kept on all day. The midwife arrived, a tiny ancient Indian woman who chewed tobacco and spat constantly on the floor by the bed. Everyone in the *pueblo* could probably hear my screaming. It went on for hours, with the old woman holding my legs open and commanding, "*Empuje—empujese, Señora!*" PUSH! I was convinced my pelvis was going to crack in two, and begged John to try and find a doctor or some kind of painkiller, even though I knew he'd already combed the whole village. Through my red blur of pain he looked so worried in the sunfilled doorway. I wanted to comfort him . . . it wasn't even his baby. He ran out again in a panic, hoping to catch some American doctor on vacation when the tourist boat

came in, but just after he left, there was a tremendous pressure, and something that sounded like a water balloon popped from my loins intact.

The straining was over, and my mind went blank. It didn't even occur to me to ask about the baby. The hoarse voice of the old woman came to me from far away, "*¿Es niña . . . y no vive . . . es bebé?*" *A girl . . . she doesn't live . . . your baby.* I lay there insensibly, with no energy to react.

"*¿Estas triste, no?*" She assumed I'd be sad, but I only shrugged and smiled weakly. All I felt was strange relief. As the sun began to set I got up and wandered around in John's old kimono which was way too big for me; the sleeves dragged like wilted petals. I was aware of my acute emptiness, and an odd pain in my pelvis which made it hard to walk. I discovered the baby, which the midwife had placed in a roasting pan, the only container at hand. I stroked the soft skull covered in lanugo, and examined the tiny toes in a reverent trance. The face was similar to my own—a Kerosene face, half-Portuguese though. While I'd been sleeping, someone had left half a giant papaya for a gift. It was larger than the fetus.

At twilight, a long procession of little boys filed solemnly up to our hut. The first carried a tiny empty coffin on his head. I was lighting the lamps as they stared at me in awe and whispered to each other. The sepulchral lull was shattered as John reluctantly drove down the walk. Then they carried her away.

When the rains came I got sad for the first time. I thought of my poor baby in the ground being inundated, under the banana palms where she was buried. With the rains came also an aching flow of milk, and the name Natasha, but it was too late for that. There were no breast-pumps to be had, and for two weeks after the stillbirth John drank my milk. In hour-long nursing sessions every afternoon under the mosquito net, we would both fall asleep to the lull of women singing as they washed clothes down by the river . . . and the roosters crowing . . . dogs howling . . . a wild menagerie of souls all mourning my Natasha, and the rain fell in torrents, a deafening din pounding on every broad leaf and fern.

On February 16, 1968, I cut John's hair for the journey north. It was my sixteenth birthday. I swept the mass of curls out into the papaya trees.

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