



1999

## Siamese connection

Rosecrans Baldwin  
*Colby College*

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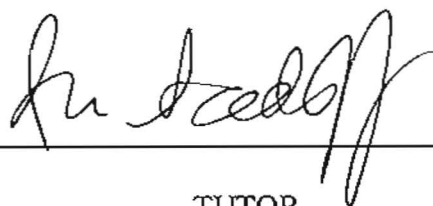
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THE SIAMESE CONNECTION

by

ROSECRANS B. BALDWIN

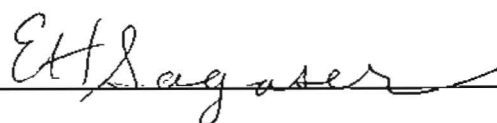
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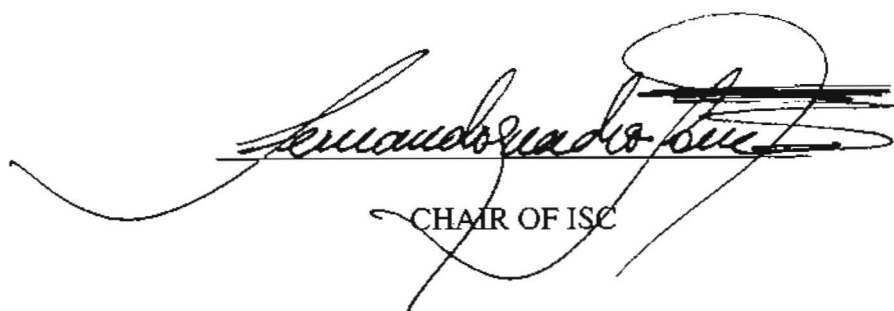
TUTOR

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Harris', written above a horizontal line.

READER

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E.H. Laguer', written above a horizontal line.

READER

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Luis de la Cruz', written above a horizontal line.

CHAIR OF ISC

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## **I Sleep Less United**

I reach across the mattress  
To unplug a string of lights, to invite  
The bird of indigo inside, her starry children

Growing faint when cast too far  
& then the hood of darkness  
That elicits voices: a gang of selves.

Behind the house the frozen lake  
Breaks against itself, cracks that sound  
Like injury, an ankle snapping backwards,

Glacial plates colliding under skin.  
My legs often knock together in sleep  
& I wake with bruises; a vicious, incestual

Kissing that floats off days later.  
I suffer in tides, my cells shifting balance  
From one end of a tendon's silk to another,

Or attending a voice that murmurs,  
Another that sings, an awful congress  
That trades between dirges & hymns,

Extolling the absence of lovers  
& friends, as if there is comfort  
When solitude considers itself.

I fall asleep with the window open,  
Outside the starlings tracing gracious loops  
& I dream the lake invades my kitchen

With a personal violence: a sudden Arctic sea  
Of twenty roaming, miniature floes.  
I cannot hold their cumbersome bodies:

They melt in my grip, preserve their glaze.  
Above them fall whirling distortions of faces.  
I wake at morning. The lake has healed

& I walk across the lacquered success.  
The sun begins bright towards its gradual thaw  
though more was revealed when stars fished down

& I remembered the dock in June  
with my likeness in water; how that vision  
could be so fissured, so calm in floating.

## Like Deer

We felt the stillness of despair, how the gallop  
of hooves can seem relaxed. We rose that morning  
to unlock the gates, the hunters arrived  
in old, sturdy Fords, soon they'd return,  
feigning prestige in brash orange jackets,  
with fawns draped over their shoulders;  
they'd weigh their labor then toss it behind.  
We'd fought the night before over dishes,  
I seized your arm with anger & threw us both  
in a corner, the bright walls charging towards us:  
our days had given in to a senseless disorder.  
The men became trivial as they walked further out,  
their bodies lost posture, they seemed to submit  
to the field. I was relieved as your hair lay back  
to the wind, the echo of shotguns not far behind.  
We had fought for survival, to prolong affection  
by sharpening our eyes; when we slept without passion  
we were craftsmen, hunched over miniscule parts  
as if inspecting a clock consumed by termites.  
The deer would recline to the impulse of steel,  
searching around for the source of its death  
while blood would widen its stain if only to mark  
or fleshen the edges. We searched for amends,  
bought cards from Wallgreens to trade clichés;  
they were the only way to explain the unnameable.  
A plane cleft the sky as if crossing an ocean,  
the engine buzzing its doppler effect. The men were gone  
to the luck of the day, & conceivably we followed,  
fenced off an acre & hunted ourselves. Perhaps

I weighed the links of your hair, cooling in my hand,  
to feel forgiveness for unfathomable death.

Perhaps I stood with the awe of a deer, caught,  
still breathing, in the midst of it all.

## Marvelous to be Dumb Together

The words rose up in fulgent bursts,  
My head a flash-bulb ticker  
(like the billboard in times sq.  
that tallies national debt) popping up  
One number off another: silly  
Gas-filled phrases to describe  
The situation: we had a moment  
Together when neither of us spoke  
& the first snow fell outside  
Like lopped-off cherry blossoms.  
The words in my head had nothing to do  
With the resplendence in my chest,  
The passing of heatwaves from her breasts  
To my breasts, a swimmer pulling strokes  
In the ocean through whitecaps, without pain  
From the waves that break on his neck.

Unless I remember her complaints  
About the awful sex on Labor Day  
When the swimmer had been an old woman  
Performing laps in a public pool, mid-day August:  
She held her head above water for fear  
Of immersion, performing a slow crawl,  
A Katz painting with pastel blues for water  
And Easter whites for the woman's skin,  
Lines like taut sails to divide her face  
Into kitchen tiles, the canvas mopped with vacancy.

The snow arrived outside the window

Like a sudden blind of highway snow.  
I propped her chin up with my fingers,  
Pressed my lips against her lips,  
Leaned us backwards so the chair fell over,  
Both of us upside-down, the words' ascension  
Like amorphous waifs to my feet, our tumbling  
Cheeks & noses slapping, at least making noise, at least  
The swimmer could re-surface unnoticed from his dive,  
Pull away to find a buoy, take a breath,  
Watch a few sailboats stand in a slow regatta,  
Their flippant empty sails.

## Encounters

At night I blur my eyes  
& the evening city valley,  
its cars rushing backwards,  
is spent in bulbs of red & gold.  
The figures around me  
are suggestions of mine,  
(though I claim no devotion)  
their limitless features  
wash through bodies  
in unforeseen, linear paths,  
their fucks done quick

like fireflies:  
flitting, spastic gestures.  
The streets expand,  
bars implode as ghosts  
of men crowd out of control  
& women give explicit sips.  
My hands pass through  
their vaporous bodies  
& I remind myself, urgently,  
of anything I can claim  
as my own, even the children

of friends I have met, their circles of tag  
at family picnics, the invitations  
to their miniature tables.  
I swear they know  
my fears and failures

as they mention my posture

or another kind thing

I've offended them with.

They latch on my leg & cry

when I leave; I like to think

they have all the answers,

& if only I'd stay I could listen.



## Could That Have Been Myself, Passing By

You believe that you act with intention. You have chosen a west-facing bench in the park that faces the glass towers that hardly sway in heavy winds. Light passes through them (they have no location in light), refracts & showers the porous caps of trees. The buildings gain nothing, you will not shift from your lunchly stance, you have no reason to alter your wife. Stare at walls instead, the crowd of pasted bills infused with mystic blues & reds that might incite your lungs to shake, your hands to rise. These are noteworthy companions, those that speak to filaments, charges in your head; you cry from pain, you touch the scar to invoke nostalgia. Dinner is expected around nine & the door will be sucked open by a wind you provoked. All of this will guide your steps to twilight bridges where the middle might dissolve & a river will end prediction. The possibility remains: could you step out of frame, a sudden tectonic shift to re-possess an ounce of time, for something unintelligible? Remember the source-less parade of faces on sidewalks & the mourners you led by extending your arm. The sigh that rises from commuters is only desperate, hoping to build something beautiful somewhere else. They converge around the kiosk for trading names on paper; on a postcard, Grand Central Station is always gold imposed on black & white. The beauty of cathedrals increases through the erosion of function, the buttresses that crumble when pews are empty; even the most gracious of curves betrays its fractions. He drops his briefcase & papers flee, the clock shifts steps, a train glides in early, unexpected. You lit a postcard inside a bourbon glass & remarked the flame was vacant: a flaming hoop minus tigers. If one becomes conscious of positive effects [light beneath leaves] of unconscious affairs [holes] then it is possible to increase the potential [a senate of shoppers] for said affairs by preparing the conscious self [the iris of a crow]. The crowd below surrounds gaps & fills them with limbs. One must build rest in familiar reaction; the swing of dancers is felt, for us, in their faces; the power of jazz sits & stares. You have arrived by train & stood under vaulting arches dependant on keystones, noticed the click of heels on marble, saw the green & golden ceiling painted with constellations. Appreciation is the silent, smiling twin. You felt remorse for tinted stars bound to grandeur, Grecian myths, the textured potential of ceilings. It is the increasing consciousness of these moments that allows one to progress: the pattern of

stones fell without cohesion, an open bowl became beneath the heavens, that twisting black that flings itself. Remember the gasping stars above in August night when you were nine; when the sky was so much larger & seductive, full of holes.

## Passage

I was nine, in love  
with the shape of motion,  
the boxes containing a freight defined  
by decals & logos of explosion;  
in case the train should fall off the rails,

they have methods for approaching disaster.  
I couldn't make out what was inside  
but the signals were clear: the cars  
had been filled & shut with concern;

men in blue suits that I'd seen in the yards  
loaded the crates, hand over hand.

I had left behind a house  
blazing with power, every light bulb  
switched on by a mother

who ambled around & lost her body  
in glass-lined halls, her locked-open mouth  
building logical moments of cause & effect,

my father cornered himself in his book,  
ignoring my pleas to have stories pronounced.  
I wanted him to translate my face  
with his fingers; our features were masked

by the ether we breathed.  
The boxcars passed, the conductor coaxing

the engine in intimate, fatherly tones,  
loverly caution for the overall passage;

How aware he must have been  
of explosive potential, the chance of gluttonous flames

consuming his cargo, the cause of those flames  
unknowable, intimate, a spark.

The rungs sped by

& I thought for a moment of joining  
a gesture that waves for a moment,  
then takes on the shape of the forest.

## Woodshadows Floating Silently By

The plane lands in Cape Town, South Africa,  
& two weeks later I'm with a new friend  
who's flirting with the Indian waiter,  
his thick hair gelled black in ribbons  
& I fall back into the steel-latticed chair.  
I have never been so lonely. I've found a cheap room  
with other students, a few trainstops from the beach,  
translucent dunes stacking up in a line of hunched shoulders.  
Travel is no longer earned, no longer weeks  
carried by white, clippered sails  
that we suffered years ago, for what? A new life?  
At night, from the sidewalk, a series of faces glow  
in passing cars, warmlit restaurant windows  
building my collage of profiles, so much stolen  
from their moments & exchanges.  
I cannot live without an audience. I've found a new girl,  
we've told each other it's more than sex, which is true;  
the thrill of being pursued, a chase across my broken mattress.  
We each fight the relapse of solitude, my hand  
reaches across the bed, my finger into the corner  
of her jaw & neck, my tongue in her mouth,  
giving myself away. We break apart when we have nothing left.  
I ride the train to Mowbray, my window passes a railroad yard  
full of quiet orange trains, trainmen like dolls in blue union suits,  
greasy melodies of other lines coasting by, other stops to visit.

**School Play in Khayleitssha,  
the largest township in Cape Town, South Africa**

A row of stuffed dolls  
shook their arms & fell over,  
the disjointed limbs  
of pre-school children  
seized by rehearsal,  
squeaking out songs,  
killing each other  
with cardboard spears;  
it was a historical drama  
of Xhosa life,  
a telling, in dance,  
of progress & honesty.  
One little boy sat down  
& threw up.  
The teachers refused  
to break rank  
in the wings,  
gesturing slashes  
across their own throats  
if a child wavered  
or strayed from the songs.  
One girl stepped forward,  
dispatching the air  
to support her arms  
while she stomped  
& played, developed  
Some cohesion  
of gesture that spoke  
of herself. She stopped

when a woman appeared,  
purposely quiet,  
to yank her off-stage,  
all the while whispering

*So sorry, so sorry*  
to me, my friends  
who stood in line  
as the audience, facing  
the children. It was a private show,  
arranged by our guide  
who strained her phrases  
through Afrikaans vowels;  
*You can laugh out loud*  
she told me, *they're funny,*  
*see how they dance?*  
Our hands clapped slowly  
in an ugly rhythm,  
the time in between  
our hands, the kids,  
the guide, distorted,  
clogged with thick air.  
The kids filed out  
& we got in the van.  
Our guide described  
the school as striving,  
full of good blacks;  
she widened her mouth  
to a yellow pit  
I could fit my fist in.  
We all stared out

to the silvered horizon,  
the million tin shacks  
absorbing the sun.

She drove her van  
like a plow

& I asked her to stop  
so I could walk around  
& meet someone.

She laughed & turned  
in surprise, then stopped.

*Fine* she said *go say hi*  
*to the natives, see*  
*what they've got*  
*to say to you.*



## The Hunters

Here is the opening of a jungle path, the elephant  
As porter to a box of hunters through the broad, tin leaves,  
the call-response of parrots, buzzshops, and panthers.

The elephant romps through the streets of South Africa,  
A merging of myths: the storybook fable of man-eating tigers  
And the Afrikaaner lore that surrounds relocation.

The hunters wear pith-helmets, and ballooned khaki slacks.  
The natives stroll by in old Nike sneakers, displaying the logo  
Of football teams: *The Giants, The Patriots, The Redskins.*

The sticky rain arrives to smother Khayleitsa<sup>1</sup>,  
to cloak the sniper towers that stand ten feet tall,  
and the elephant begins to blend in with the grays.

The rain is inside the houses, holding to rust, greening the newspaper  
That wallpapers the kitchen, or pooling on layers of canopy plastic  
That diffuse the thin light so little grows inside.

The hunters notice a woman, outside of her house,  
With a thick smoking pipe held in her teeth. *Excuse us*  
They ask *Could we use your lavatory?*

She replies in Xhosa, and they take it for yes.  
Children open into the street in beats of exploding birds,  
Torn sweatshirts and mesh hats, slippery, delirious.

She prepares a fat sausage on the grill for her son,  
Explains she's a healer and draws back the curtains  
To the dusty black room, while the men's' eyes adjust:

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<sup>1</sup> Largest township of Cape Town, South Africa. Constructed as relocation area for Black and Colored communities of Capetown by the Apartheid Government.

A shabeen<sup>2</sup> reborn sanctuary, with shelves of bundled herbs,  
wrung chickens beside brown and batlike ferns,  
bulbs of refracting dagga<sup>3</sup>, the smoked creases across a skull,

a self-ingesting pig fetus slowly somersaulting in a jar,  
a few men waiting, with cancer and worms in their bellies.  
Her skills were passed from her mother before, *The loo?*

The men ask, and no one responds. The soil is dank  
With regeneration, the damp musk of buds,  
Sudden green. The men make their pardons and back out

To the elephant, who's gone, spooked by the buses.  
Notice the hunters in the sight of endless trees, the horizon  
Of shacks, the whisk of their steps when a girl asks for change.

Notice the rifle, resting against a barrel, as the men wait in shade.

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<sup>2</sup> Tavern.

<sup>3</sup> Marijuana.

## One Warm Beautiful Thing

When the sun was low & orange,  
July stood still in the city's gardens  
as the Philharmonic played Bach for free.  
It was a crowded night in the Park,  
a section of folding chairs for the patrons  
prattling on their cell phones, next  
the roped-off squares for families, couples  
on blankets unraveling to the far corners  
of the field where a few busy lovers  
heard an echo of strings every few minutes  
as if the day's last breeze slipped down  
from the trees & circled their ears,  
cool as apples, to remind them  
how pleasant a night can be  
or how complex.

Perhaps these frames of time  
could make sense of the rest,  
when our days are spent  
inside the plastic heat, tearing like paper  
the limbs off each other.  
The city's songs are dissected  
by the Flatiron, its soft nose inserted  
between sounds, so only a passage is heard  
& repeated: staccato backfire, siren,  
a silence. Sounds broken apart like china  
on the floor, picked up by the families  
on their fire escapes, all four on a mattress,  
cooling themselves in their underwear.

In the park there are clowns  
promenading on stilts,  
jugglers with torches, disquieting mimes  
risen from stories we've all read  
& been scared by. The orchestra,  
under a white, sound-filled shell  
begins a new piece to ease the night's entrance;  
a few heads nod, bobbing their necks  
to the trio of clarinets, a brief memory link  
to a childhood night when father napped,  
snoring in his chair, mother cooked spaghetti,  
Chardonnay in hand, & the radio roared Bach,  
a knock on the heart of the listeners.

## Without A Similar Ticking

This love, she said, I'm afraid is not for you. How awful  
To remove someone's hand from their mitten  
& stuff it in my pocket just to prove an erection;

Especially worse when the alarm of distrust has worn itself out  
& silence reclines in a light valium chair on my tongue.  
A minute prior the Pony Express could have dismounted

Or she might have flicked her hair; any urgent, random signal  
Would cause desire, my heart would sling attachment.  
How much worse to confuse invitation with rejection,

That confusion in a passive hand like a saucer on my pants,  
Or the palm we clasp to our breasts when we're choking  
As if we could feel the switches, as if something clicked inside.

## **The Husband & The Wife**

A woman whose carriage suggested an actress  
throws away books; we might have expected that  
from her. The same street, two a.m., glasses off  
the husband swings around a lamppost drunk  
& buys a handsome guy a drink, Johnny Red.  
The man won't give his name. The wife dreams of the Pompidou,  
its escalator pumping tourists up & down the outside walls;  
the wife is always dreaming. The house feels better empty  
than full of empty dishes. The husband dances  
to Sarah Vaughn, his wife's favorite alto & switches  
places with the man, begins to follow. The wife wakes,  
makes her sheets a mess for someone else, sets the wine  
to fall off the bed, then pours herself a glass. She lets  
her nightgown fall, hangs it up against the window,  
the distant moon passing through. The husband sulks  
as his dancer tangoes by, slowly gliding cheek to cheek  
with a slither man. They attain a slow merengue  
through reflection, matching palms to manage distance.

## A Love Scene

I find her naked in the public shower,  
Near honest, aluminum walls,  
Devouring water  
& singing off-key.  
I call her name & each time it sounds  
More strange, though selfishly fond;  
I can hold very little in my mouth.  
Her body gleams  
Like glass underwater  
& lives in each labeled piece  
Of landscape: the spigot, the water,  
A short flash in time.  
She tossed me a pear  
Over the helpless crowd  
Of a Sunday market, screaming  
*Eat the damn fruit, it's yours!*  
With that I was asked to be pure.  
I fumble her body,  
As if her breasts and legs  
Were chosen fresh that morning.  
Is this the first love,  
When you succumb  
To a brilliance of sorts,  
An umbrella plucked by the wind?

## Before Divorce

In the fading blue we dove  
for pennies while the quiet wind  
of June slept across the water's surface  
& crickets groaned a mating song.  
We'd screw shut our eyes & hope  
to find money beneath the black silt  
from all the fallen leaves.  
The house, held up by creamy pillars,  
stood glassed-over, bulging,  
the sliding doors & windows framing  
golden rooms: Michael's parents gliding by  
holding toasts or trading eulogies,  
we had no idea, popping their mouths  
like fish. The night grew louder:  
in the distance cars & tractor trailers  
departing Hartford increased their speed:  
they were late before they left  
though an exit would swing them off,  
Cos Cob, Rowayton, towards home.  
The house was soundless  
when we finished swimming,  
the crickets drawing in  
the boundaries of the yard.  
We dried ourselves  
in the hall that echoed  
a muffled crash upstairs,  
his parents' open clicking door,  
a tumbler glass, a bottle,  
any empty fragile vessel



struck a wall & shattered. We stood still.

The ebbing, vagrant sound  
was soaked up by the walls,  
the laden air, we went to bed.

Michael opened a window  
to let the breezes in, the highway sounds  
that thundered & trailed off,  
then replaced their drone,  
the crickets still encroaching,  
now beneath the sill,  
scraping music off their legs.

## Library Stacks

The sex is always thickening  
with flips & exchanges,  
legs seeking braces, the handicap rail.

I have met a few women  
for dates in broom closets,  
a few more in bathrooms  
with the door locked behind us.

The air outside must be void  
of sound, the walls scrubbed clean.

I prefer the smaller bodies  
when I compare my former lovers,  
the bigger hair, the larger brains,  
women awash with insight, smiles  
that turn over to disdain.

These are women who absorb  
light differently, play along  
& then leave when I refuse  
their suggestions: a parking lot,  
a public beach, a bench at the zoo  
before closing. This is why  
men beat off in restrooms,  
lock themselves in handicapped stalls,  
safely recalling scenes from movies  
when a beautiful woman gave head  
to a beautiful man, everyone  
like an extra on the set, the blowjob  
stealing the scene. This is why,  
when my girlfriend wanted to screw  
in the library I had to say no,

I knew we'd get caught  
staring at the ceiling, the stacks  
around us, Shakespearean sonnets,  
Blake, Rimbaud, the minute hand  
on the face of my watch.

I had to say yes to a night at home,  
the two of us alone in the house,  
sex in bed, naked as photographs.

## The Gull

Even if the woman didn't mind, or did cartwheels in the lot,  
a corvette of whistling men, driving in circles, is nothing new .  
I was walking my dog downtown at night, ready to be home & asleep.  
The sky hung a limp black without stars, the Rite Aid sign wasn't blinking  
at the corner of Main St. & College Ave. The woman, halved by a thick coat,  
had a shock of legs to carry her from the store to her car.  
The men wore deadstock expressions, so their mouths were brighter  
when they stuck their lips out the window calling *Baby*  
& their eyes held back like nervous deer.  
During the day they would all be crows in a row on my barn.

The sky is sometimes empty enough for a sea bass  
to fall, unhindered, from the heavens. It was August,  
I was pulling up weeds & dead rhododendrons  
when a brown fish hit me on the head. It had been dead for a while,  
the eyes picked out, when it became a blind rotting fish in my lap.  
I noticed the bird that had dropped the fish, a gull flying over  
the powerlines towards the beach. Perhaps its dinner  
was too heavy to carry, or a few scales got stuck  
in the bird's thin neck, or maybe it was a gift,  
when he opened his mouth & hoped that I would respond.

The car stopped & a man got out, carrying his hair  
like a dying flower, its blond wing like a petal from his forehead.  
He walked across the street with his eyes on the ground,  
held out some meat, some jerky for the dog  
while he whispered *good girl* in her ear. He fondled her neck  
with the caution of the lonely & never looked up  
as if he & the dog possessed their own special cosmos,

a luminescent orb that the lamplight bent towards. Around us it was silent,  
the other men whispering, the woman got out her keys. I looked away  
to the few stars designing the sky & recognized a constellation  
of a huffing bull, linking planets to stars, though it could have been a centaur  
shooting an arrow at Orion. All I wanted was one dumb thing  
to explain it all, a crowbar to knock against the ground  
or a photograph of the lightning bolt that struck a field  
outside Johannesburg & floored ten men.

## Thoughts On Cutting An Exit From My Head

I will escape tonight over the tentacular poles of the prison's fences  
    & sleep in Cuernavaca on Wednesday. I have trained my senses  
To recognize the guards & their postures; the angle of his rifle  
    Says a lot about a man. The searchlight rotates on automatic-pilot  
Though it slows on a specific patch of grass each round, some slipup  
    In the gears, an interval I've memorized so I know where not to stand.  
I crouch by the fence in my spotty blue suit that took a year to dye  
    From mango to cobalt with a hundred bic pens broken open.  
The wind digs up a handful of sand & tosses it away a few feet,  
    Picks up another, same deal, setting off a few small furies  
Of motion that go nowhere. My collection of crickets will most likely starve  
    In the pen I built from bible leafs, though I would never free them  
To the Gila monsters, who drag their stomachs like body bags,  
    Leaving a traceable wake in the sand. I will get out tonight,  
But the wind doesn't cover the sound of my footsteps; it breaks away  
    Like a school of tuna, carrying the noise to the ears of the sleepers  
Who will learn my location & cry out. I bought a map of the System  
    With a smuggled-in switchblade: it's a blueprint to the prison,  
With a key to translate their coded routines: I know where the guards are,  
    I've memorized the weak spots of fence where the power has failed.  
I have a picture of a supermarket taped to my chest, a Polaroid I've kept stuck  
    to the ceiling: the place I robbed for junk money, though I can't recall  
Who sent me the photograph. I've heard that Cuernavaca has more markets  
    Than grocery stores, wide busy plazas like a Ford motor plant,  
Though I'm sure they'll have convenience stores too. I'll have to exchange  
    My dollars for pesos, trade in this prison suit for jeans & a t-shirt,  
Mutter broken Spanish to neighborhood toughs with their low-hung eyes  
    In defense of my wallet, though I'll have to get one of those too.  
If I escape tonight, I'll find a bar in town & write down my plan

Of escape for a book, a manual of behavior that I'll leave on bedtables  
In hostels, or in congested magazine racks, or in the hands of a pump jockey  
At an empty gas station while I use his sink for a shower.  
I've heard that ex-jailbirds can't shit when they want, can't ditch the pressure  
To let loose in the morning, or seven at night, or sleep any time  
Other than nine, even if a nap would be nice at noon. I can feel the dew  
In the fibers of my socks, the sweat that collapses the starch cells  
Of my shirt. I can feel the searchlight as it tracks my escape, the sizzle  
On my neck when a bullet clips by. I can feel the menace in the grip  
Of the borderguard, I can hear the nerves alive in the phone when I call  
My friends at home for some cash. I can hear the jingle jangle  
Of hookers calling my name & before I would have followed them  
In hope for some heroin & now I will follow them in hope  
They won't charge. I can see the glass reflection when the suited men pass  
Like tropical fish, satisfied to see themselves in a building's  
Mirrored flanks. I can feel their eyes behind the sunglasses trace  
The veins in my calves from my feet to my ass, their mouths  
Full of wire, their bags stuffed with children to be auctioned after hours.  
I will pass a thousand faceless people, each with traumas  
Stored in their spine & plastic-wrap glued to their heads. I will seal  
My pupils with masking tape so my secrets can't fall out  
To the hands of the orphans, who contemplate misery with knives.  
The light makes another round, stops again on the desert patch.  
My mouth slicks over with the taste of cold spoons, a coating of inkish fear,  
One hand sunk in the thick metal mesh, the other around cutters  
For the barbed-wire posts. The sun will soon rise & reveal my position  
To a new shift of guards, fresh from breakfast, their senses like a bell  
Rung once, hung to intone. I want to shrink to the size of a rock, maybe  
Hide as a stone in the yard. Maybe an inmate will choose me  
For a game of catch between him & his friend, the men around us  
Talking in dull morning tones. As the day passes, I won't be missed:

They'll say to themselves *Geez, where's what's his name, you know,*  
    *That guy with the mole on his cheek.* & that will be enough.  
The warden will make the rounds with his clipboard like a clapper,  
    His stomach like a bellows heaving coal phlegm from his lungs.  
He'll make a note that C-5 is vacated, though he'll think I left for good  
    Behavior & left the bed for the next man. All that time  
I'll have been with them, tossed between palms until I'm pitched  
    Like a baseball & knocked out of the park. The inmate who grabbed me  
Will remember the ring of quartz, an Equator around my middle,  
    The thin ivory ribbon that held my body like a bandage;  
Imagine that, one of the lucky ones!



## Willem & Marie's Anniversary: A One-Act Play

*Willem arrives with a large canvas, draped in a black sheet, under his arm and his briefcase. He walks into Marie's apartment, sets the canvas down on the couch, places the briefcase on the coffee-table, peeks underneath the canvas's cover (but doesn't allow the audience to see), is visibly excited, goes to the bar and makes a drink for himself.*

W: Happy Anniversary! Marie, I'm home.

M: I'm in the bedroom. *Willem finds a sticky note stuck to a bottle, reads it, puzzled.*

W: What's this note about your "beginning"?

M: I'm almost finished, I'll be out in a second.

W: Good to hear. I've got a surprise for you.

M: What's that?

W: Oh, nothing. God, I'm starving. Well, my day was anything but wonderful. Do you remember that infrastructure bill I was pitching last week? Danners from Accounting fucked up the whole project by delaying the meeting with his mergers proposal, and then Susan, that wench from Marketing who ruined the softball match last year with her pitbull, called up and demanded to see my 412-B, which of course had already been forwarded to Danners yesterday, who hopefully choked on it, and therefore it could not possibly be in my possession, yet still she insists that it's all my fault that it's missing and hence the entire pitch has to be set back a week. I mean, Fuck me! Will you please come out here soon, I have something I want to show you.

M: I am almost through, just one more minute.

W: What is it exactly that you're doing in there, or "beginning" as you termed it.

M: Well, I have a surprise for you. The beginning part began years ago, back when I was at Harvard. *Pokes head out the door* You know, I was really too afraid then, too hesitant to believe in myself. I never imagined that I would be capable of something so daring. But now that I'm much older, I have a lot of experience in these types of things. Tonight, I feel I can really pull it off. *Goes back into room*

W: I'm right here in case you need help, pulling it off. Do you remember the Number 5 show we saw last month?

M: What's that?

W: The exhibit at the Gunderson Gallery, the painter named Number 5. You remember, he showed those giant cartoons.

M: Oh yes, I particularly enjoyed the one with the little postmodern ponies humping across the meadow.

W: They were wonderful, weren't they? They seemed like lurking, abstract boobytraps, sprung by tempestuous emotions and frantic, sexual abandon.

M: That is the most absurd review I have ever heard.

W: Yes, very good. Shall I bring you a drink, perhaps some hot chocolate, a little whipped cream?

M: No, I can fix something myself. *Marie appears, wearing a welding helmet with the face mask down, holding a large metal box in her hands. Willem stares at the box without a clue, Marie likewise notices the draped canvas and is curious. Marie removes the welding helmet.*

W: This is not what I expected.

M: What do you mean?

W: Well, it doesn't have a removable crotch, does it?

M: What? What gave you that idea?

W: Oh nothing, just a whim. *Willem moves to play with one of the knobs on the box*

M: Wait, you can't touch anything yet. I wouldn't want you to disrupt the calibrations. Now what is underneath this sheet?

W: Since today is our one-year anniversary, I commissioned a commemoration of sorts, something to symbolize everything we have become.

M: Well, it seems that we've both brought gifts, though mine is more of a method than a symbol.

W: A method, a method for what?

M: Didn't you read the manual this morning?

W: The manual? Do you mean that packet you left in my briefcase?

M: Yes, of course. There was a note on top of the manual that asked you to read through the entire thing so everything would be prepared for tonight.

W: Well, it was very obscure.

M: The note?

W: No, the packet. I had to look up half the words on the first page.

M: Oh, so you read it.

W: I read, I don't know, a good amount.

M: Would you say that you read most of it; say, past the first chapter?

W: I would say that I read a portion of it, and perhaps that portion was most of it, I don't know, it's really all hearsay, you know, semantics.

M: Well, if you read some, or most of it, then you can understand why you had to follow the directions precisely.

W: Do you mean the directions on the note? *Produces note*

Dear Willem,

Please read through this manual before you get home tonight. Also, pick up a size seven hydroflux infinitellium transistor chip from Radio Shack. See you at seven for our anniversary!

Marie.

Do you expect me to translate such technical jargon into English? Now I have to say this has all been pretty hectic for me. I've had a lot on my mind, what with my infrastructure bill falling through today, and I certainly did not have the time to read through some astro-physics textbook. To be honest, that manual of yours resembled the rantings of a dyslexic chimp, and further, I cannot possibly see how this all relates to me.

M: To us, Willem, to us. If you had taken a second to read beyond the title page, you would have realized how important my device will be to our relationship.

W: Important perhaps, but not as significant as my commission.

M: Willem, what the hell is this commission you're talking about? It better come with a free toaster because mine broke last week.

W: I want you to stand right here and cover your eyes. *Positions Marie in front of canvas, Marie puts her hands over her eyes.* You are about to see everything we have become manifest itself in your living room. Every fight we've had, every glorious evening, every spontaneous screw on the couch will suddenly be preserved in history. I am going to rip off this sheet and you will find yourself in the presence of genius: our very own, rather

expensive, piece of cosmic wonder. Ready? Voila! *Willem rips the sheet of the painting, revealing a huge white canvas with a crude drawing of two dogs humping each other, the girl dog has grotesquely large breasts hanging down from her chest, and Xerox copies of Willem and Marie's faces are glued on where the dogs' heads would be.* Yes. Yes, mmm; Bang! Bang! Everything, right there. Breathtaking isn't it? I mean, God! That's US, immortalized. Bang!

M: That is obscene.

W: Yes, yes, the dirt and the shame. Do you see it there? The lust of gutter rats struggling to exist within the sewer sludge canals of the heart.

M: Willem, you commissioned Number 5 to create a portrait of us?

W: Yes, so you could understand everything that I am unable to pronounce, all of the feelings I can't put into words. You, we, are worth this, Marie.

M: In that case Willem, you feel that I am a mangy poodle spiked by your love stick?

W: Marie, that is an outrageous judgment, look at the—

M: Willem, this is ridiculous. Don't even tell me how much you paid for this piece of crap.

W: Piece of crap!?

M: Yes, Willem, a piece of crap. How did you expect some coked-up con-artist to represent our love on a canvas. At least you could have chosen someone half-way decent.

W: This painting is great. Hell, I can prove it. *pulls newspaper clipping out of briefcase* Look at the review in the Sunday Times. "Number 5's giant cartoon paintings put at odds the dirt and shame of love, creating a dire struggle of lust between gutter rats within the sewer sludge canals of the heart. His paintings act as lurking, abstract boobytraps, sprung by tempestuous emotions—

M: There is nothing here! This painting is pulled from some twelve-year-old's jerk-off fantasies! Art that is good is meant to move us. It is meant to transform the ordinary into extraordinary. I mean, look at this, it means nothing. There is nothing of substance here Willem. Jesus, even the aesthetics are crap.

W: But everything is in there, you just have to look carefully; examine the tones and differences in color. Clearly the precision of his brushstrokes denote the passion of detachment. Can't you feel the burning here? Right there, bang! Everything I feel for you, all of my lust and desire, lives in this painting. The emotions are inside the paint, Marie, and they deserves more than a passing glance by an untrained eye.

M: Willem, I don't want your affection in the form of crude pornography. And my eye is well-enough trained to know crap when crap's on the wall. I'm not some lab rat who never sees the movies. God, I should have seen this coming. You'd think with all my research that I could have predicted this. Except, maybe..adjust the spontaneity factor...re-calculate the Eros denominator. Dammit Willem, if you had read through the manual, you would have realized how trivial a painting like this is to our relationship. We're lucky that we have my device to fix everything.

W: What's there to fix? Everything was going fine until you freaked out over the painting! I have commissioned an outstanding, critically-acclaimed piece of art to symbolize how much I care for you, and you can't even open your eyes enough to see my love.

M: Your love?

W: Yes! My love! How about clueing me in here? Could you please explain to me the importance of this box?

M: I gave you the manual, Willem. I provided every blueprint that I have followed, every parts list and equation. You have heard me talk about these theories over dinner for the past six months. I'm not asking you to recall high school physics. Even your dyslexic chimp, with his eyes burned out, could understand what's happening here.

W: Marie, I do not want to fight tonight. You're unreasonably angry, and you can't possibly mean what you say. All I want is for you to understand that my feelings are symbolically standing right here.

M: We are not fighting, this is a discussion. And it will soon become a serious discussion, one which will solve all of our problems. Maybe I will somehow realize your emotions later. Listen, all I need at this point are some final measurements. Take off your shirt.

W: What?

M: Your shirt. Take it off. *Produces measuring tape, begins measuring various parts of Willem's body. Willem cautiously removes shirt.*

W: Measurements. For what may I ask? Are you sizing me up to see if I'll fit in the oven?

M: I am not sizing you up, I am re-checking some data.

W: Well that's a pleasant way of putting it. Let me see, maybe you've always wanted a boyfriend with huge pecs, and you intend to inflate my breasts until they arouse you to the point of scandalous orgasms.

M: Your pecs are fine Willem, and I can't possibly see that much satisfaction in a guy with tits. I just want to double check my figures in case you've expanded at all today.

W: Well, I did eat a whole person for lunch today. You know, that indigenous girl down the hall, lickydickyforadollar.

M: Willem, please, you're making your stomach expand.

W: This whole situation is ridiculous! Will you please explain to me, the imbecile, what exactly this thing does.

M: But I can't tell you what it does, don't you see? Unless you realize it for yourself, there is no sense in me explaining away the function. It won't mean anything to you if you don't accept it. You know, in the deepest channels of your heart, what my device can do. You just needed to have read the directions and picked up the chip.

W: Can we please move past the directions? I've never read an instruction manual for anything in my entire life, and I don't intend to begin with your gizmo here.

M: Did you find the transistor chip?

W: Yes, it's in my briefcase.

M: You found a size seven hydroflux infitellium transistor chip?

W: *pulls transistor card out of his briefcase.* I found a size six hydroflux infidelity whatchamacallit, for seventy-eight ninety-five no less.

M: A size six? *takes card, examines it.*

W: Yes, a size six? Will it make that much of a difference?

M: Of course it will make a difference! A size six is not a size seven. Seven is a larger number, it equals six plus one, it is one less than eight, it is a lucky number in twenty-two separate cultures. Do you think Snow White would have been satisfied with only six pointy-headed midgets in her bed? Every single aspect must be significant, every number accounted for. These are the foundations of science!

W: Oh, so again, I'm the ignorant one. First you denounce my insights into contemporary painting, without even considering that I might know what I'm talking about, and then I am mocked for not keeping up with Physics Monthly.

M: For the sake of our collective health, will you stop being so selfish. This isn't about you, or your lack of education. It's about us!

W: And which us is that? The us comprised of you, Stephen Hawking, and Willem the happy poodle?

M: Please, I do not have the time for your parade of popular references. I am concerned with our future. I have spent the past six months designing, testing, and building this device. I have woken up every night at two in the morning and worked on until six, never mind my work at the lab. Then there are the countless hours in every library in the city, tons of research into your personal history, which has meant countless phone conversations with your high school friends—

W: Spoonhead and Wookie?

M: All to arrive at tonight, when my invention is finally complete. Every nuance of our relationship can now be explained to the most minute detail. Look at our history: a year ago today you stole my purse while I sat dozing on the subway. Two days later you called to inform me that it indeed was you, Willem DeFurniture, who had stolen my purse and that I could have all of my possessions back, except the purse, whose value you would reimburse in cash, plus an additional ten percent for emotional pain. Remember?

W: Of course I remember, and if my memory serves me, you were carrying a toffee-brown calfskin Andolcé bag with gold clasps.

M: Exactly. When you arrived at my apartment that night, I knew exactly who you were the moment you opened the door. I sensed immediately that your fondness for purse-snatching was your only distinguishing characteristic, that otherwise you were an entirely average middle-aged Asian-American male, five-nine, with three point five pounds of fat around your mid-section and a small retirement fund. Later I find you have a peculiar interest in contemporary art, but that seems more of an attempt to indirectly realize some creative potential.

W: So, in your summary, I become a small and average man, a derivative of some genetic formula with an odd fetish thrown in to make up for my inherently boring nature, which is basically a cross between the stalker on the bus and everyone's favorite clerk at the Korean deli.

M: What I mean to say is that I knew, that I completely understood, then and now, that you were perfect for me. You are obviously much more than some gross stereotype. You're the one I want, the one I wanted that night when we slept together, had a sufficiently pleasant orgasm with, and have been seeing ever since.

W: Okay, so how does your device fit in? Will it complete some unfulfilled aspect of our sufficiently pleasant relationship?

M: Exactly!

W: What do you mean, exactly?

M: Look. We have been in an exclusive relationship for a year, we both consider it an enjoyable part of our lives, and if asked, we would both say that we see no reason to end the relationship, correct?

W: Correct.

M: But we would not say that we are in love.

W: We would not?

M: No.

W: But I already have. Look at the painting!

M: Willem, that painting makes me physically ill and can not possibly be a symbol of any form of affection.

W: Fine, we'll move past the painting. What about that time in the elevator?

M: That was sex. Naughty, hasty, cum-for-you-none-for-me sex. Not love.

W: So that means-

M: Yes.

W: But you-

M: Yes!

W: Where the fuck do you get off?

M: Well there's something you've never understood.

W: Hey, screw you!

M: Screw me!? At least I'm being honest with myself. You expect me to believe that you are in love with me because you show up with some painting? Because you believe you're some master of cunnilingus? I know how I feel, and I don't need to throw paint over my fears in order to create some hip disguise. Your art can attempt to capture everything you feel, but in the end it's just a cartoon of humping dogs. We both like each other a lot, but there's something missing; thus, the device.

W: Wait, stop right there. How do we go from "We are not in love" to "Thus, the device". Do you realize how condescending you sound? Thus is already such a pretentious word, as if Adam and Eve had an epiphany at the same moment and thus, the



word thus was born. Thus, the wheel. Thus, the television. Thus, the motel porn channel. You make it sound as if the history of man has been building to some apex where your device assuredly rests, confidant of its status as our savior.

M: But it is, at least for us! There is no reason that you and I should not be in love, get married, have kids and generally live a wonderful life together.

W: Except, current studies show, we are not in love.

M: And hence, the device. We are two people who are completely compatible, except for one small inconsistency, the lack of love.

W: Thus, the lack of love, the missing piece.

M: Yes.

W: So your machine here can take all of our statistics and tell us how to be in love? That would mean, in your fantasy mechanical world, that it would know exactly who we are. Have you programmed in all of my experiences?

M: Pretty much, yes.

W: But how is that possible? There are worlds of knowledge that you have never seen. You don't know the last name of my ugly promdate in high school, or how I came to relish purses in fourth grade. You don't have access to the information!

M: I don't need every detail. I have been able to take our vital statistics, plus data from thousands of successful, loving couples, and create an series of equations that ultimately determine what we're doing wrong. It's as if the device can take two profiles and describe what's missing from the relationship. The numbers add up Willem, and it will work, as long as we find a size seven chip.

W: This is ludicrous. We are talking about a machine, a computer. There is no mind located in your chips and transistors, it has no capacity of understanding itself, let alone the concept of love. See, you even have me speaking your language. Love isn't some concept you can hardwire into a robot. Even if all your equations balance out and we end up with some number, it still won't solve anything. I mean, do you expect me to believe that twelve years of school, two Ph.d's, and every possible physics seminar has resulted in this?

M: Yes, and if you had read the manual, and picked up the correct transistor chip, we could be celebrating instead of arguing!

W: Marie, it can't work.

M: What?

W: It, your device, cannot possibly, ever, function.

M: Willem, I have boxes of tests and studies in the bedroom. I can show you the papers that prove the base theories—

W: Marie—

M: Willem, it will work with a size seven chip!

W: Size seven, size forty-two, who gives a shit!? You can't possibly expect this jumble of circuit boards to understand love when you can't even figure it out for yourself. Don't you see what your science has accomplished here? Rather than turning to me to help improve our relationship, you go off into some internal calculated world-

M: Well excuse me if I do not find my path to love in some crappy mess of aesthetics. Any success that's significant relies on a method of accomplishment. I am not willing to throw some crap shoot for a life-long commitment. I need a system, a series of steps, with each step having importance. This is how I work Willem. Science is everywhere. There are natural patterns of behavior that we just haven't figured out yet. Let this be the next step Willem; go back to Radio Shack.

W: Marie, there are mysteries beyond your patterns and graphs. Explain to me why millions of people die every year for stupid reasons. Tell me you understand every nerve ending in your head. Even if your device can tell us what to do now, it won't be able to tell us what to do four years down the road. The patterns you talk about are infinite, beyond our understanding. I'm not an idiot, Marie, and I can't be with someone who wants to spend their life trying to explain away all the mysteries. I'm not asking you to believe in God, I'm just saying that love demands risks. All that your device can do is replace our emotions.

M: Emotions!? That is exactly the answer I'd have expected from someone who has no understanding of science, or art for that matter. Science, this device, it's all about emotions. Damn it, so is art! I am trying to understand what goes on inside us, how the whole system operates, so I can know how I'll feel when I wake up in the morning. Is that wrong, to make things more clear, to have some personal understanding of how I fit in? If you knew anything about art, you'd know that all the poets and painters in the world worry about the same thing: They want to know the details. They want to be a part of what happens next. But you, and that shitty canvas, are only concerned with distortion of the now, with meaning-less pictures of empty feelings.

W: Well, maybe I should take my distortion to someone who will appreciate it. I might not be able to accurately define how I feel, but at least I'm willing to risk some faith that it's love. *Picks up painting, tucks it under his arm.*

M: The love you feel isn't worth the risk.

W: Yeah, well, maybe the next guy will need a size six. *Willem tosses the card on the table, walks out.*

M: Yeah, we'll see. Fuck! *Slams the size six into the machine, walks out, lights go down... as lights are fading to black, the box begins humming, a red light starts to glow inside, and music ("It Had To Be You") starts playing softly, rising in volume as the red light gets brighter. End.*