

STORY TELLER

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Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
May, 1987

Thesis
1987D
B693A
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C O P Y R I G H T

by

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May, 1987

STORY TELLER

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Dr. Gordon Weaver, I am grateful for the story "Parts of Speech" which influenced Story Teller, for consistently practical advice and criticism, for amiability and humor, for continuously respectful and encouraging attention to the fiction of this female chauvinist, and for excellent teaching.

To Dr. Bruce Southard, I am grateful for two years of advising through my indecisive transition from poetry to fiction on my way to this thesis. Everyone ought to have a linguist for such a transition: tree diagrams are useful for clarifying many things.

To Dr. Robert Weber, I am grateful for many hours of conversation on the cognition of esthetic response.

To my other committee members Dr. Edward Walkiewicz and Dr. Linda Leavell, I am grateful for gracious consent to serve on the committee of this student they did not know so that I could have the input of critical scholars in modern literature.

Thanks and love to my sister Cherry B. Danker who read with warm encouragement patches of this work in progress.

With love and gratitude, I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Mildred Fullerton; and to my sons and daughter, Alan, David, and Shelly Mountain, who taught me about magic trees

and ladders and gold piping arching a giant bathtub, and who
continue to teach me about my growing up.

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I.

GOING ALL THE WAY

Send me out into another life
lord because this one is growing faint
I do not think it goes all the way.
W.S. Merwin

1.

January 25, 1986

Dear Sis,

Let's start our Love Letters family history with the fifties. We can write backward and forward from there. What were you doing in 1952, for instance? I know so little about what you were really doing, thinking, feeling. How did we get here from there?

1951-1952 was my freshman year of high school. Sitting in an American History class, bored, I spent most of my time daydreaming about my first kiss I was still waiting for. It did happen near the end of 1951, parked at the lake, December, ice frozen hard, six of us jammed into the back seat of a car, don't remember whose car, don't remember the occasion. I found myself wedged in the far left corner behind the driver's seat, a car freak sitting on the edge of one hip in front of me, my legs draped over his thighs. None of my daydreams suggested him as the bestower of my first kiss. His hair was greasy, he wore hornrims, his hands

were dirty, fingernails black, and he always smelled faintly of automotive grease from his obsession with cars. But there we were; I was trying not to notice what was going on around me--the driver with a girl beside him and another couple in front, two couples beside me in back--while that auto freak carried on an interminable monologue about what he was doing to fix up his latest wreck. I kept wishing he'd shut up, he was so boring, and I was the only conceivable listener.

But then he did shut up abruptly and took off his glasses, and even in the dark I could see a leer in his eyes that made me so nervous I wished he would start talking again. It made me think of the time I saw him watching a shiny powder-blue Packard. He lunged at me, though there was no distance to lunge. Much to my dismay, I found myself wrapped up in him, and before I could protest (I couldn't have anyway, I was so timid then) I felt his hot, wet mouth on mine, hot and wet and open mouth; and, oh my God, his tongue, huge, filling my whole mouth, threatening to choke me, greasy hard hand on my breast, my breasts just small, hard, hurting knobs then.

I had been fantasizing my first kiss for years, ever since Sleeping Beauty at least, expecting a great awakening of passion that would be the purpose of my life. I even practiced on the stair-bannister post--remember the globular head with a double lip at the base? That hard smooth, dry wood, so much more reflective of the tender, loving touch my prince would awaken me with than this gross, hot wetness and

fullness, and that awful, hard, hurting hand.

Did I scream in protest, become hysterical, fight, anything that might remotely be accurately expressive of my horror, pain, disgust, fear? No. I kept pulling his dirty hand away from the hurt and submitted to the awful kisses, submitted rather than make a scene or let anyone there know I might not like what they all seemed to be liking.

But I never got stuck with that car freak anywhere again. And a few months later our brother brought home a friend to visit. In the weeks that followed, I learned to like hot, wet kisses and a clean hand caressing my growing, softening breasts. He wasn't exactly my image of the prince either, but I did grow to love, albeit ambiguously, his touch.

And that history class: one day the teacher brought in a copy of the Daily Worker, and we had some weeks of rousing discussion about the respective merits of communism and capitalism. Knowing how Father hated communists, I got interested and started talking in class. The teacher was startled at my response. He started talking to me after class and sometimes just meeting in the hallway. He told me I was wasting my time in secretarial courses, I ought to go to college. Sometimes he and his wife invited me to eat at their house. With spaghetti or tuna salad, they served Stravinski and jazz and talk about favorite artists and writers. Prints lined their walls. I stared so often at Gauguin's "Delectable Waters," Blake's "The Great Red Dragon

and the Woman Clothed with the Sun," and a sixteenth century "Head of Saint John" that I can still see them clearly. They invited me to share their book-shelves. I read Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath and Whitman's Song of Myself. In their house I felt a strange new hunger grow, a hunger as strong as my yearning for a prince and ultimately as insatiable. They invited me to come live with them the following years while I finished high school; I would help with the housekeeping and with the baby that was coming, and I would be close enough to the school to participate in drama and speech and debate that he thought I would be good at. Such a nuisance it was to get to school activities from as far away as we lived. When I was cheering I always had to stay over at my friend's house.

But he was fired at the end of the year, a New York Jew, pink if not actually red, while McCarthy was becoming a hero to people like our father. That was his first year of teaching, fresh out of college, naive and idealistic. I've often wondered what happened to him, if he ever taught again. After they left I moped, mad, for a long time, yearning, that strange hunger they left me with. Before him, I thought all Jews were fish peddlers like the one who used to come by to sell us whitefish at least once every winter; he always sat around for a while to swap a story or two with Father, stories about his relatives who were also fish peddlers.

He spoke with a heavy accent, so I had to listen hard to catch what he said. Now I'm remembering fragments, fish stories he and Father told to each other. He talked of

growing up in the old country, of Israel the promised land, of fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Echoes of our Sunday School classes. I used to think, "How odd, he doesn't look anything like the pictures of Jesus Christ I've seen, and they must be relatives." Those pictures actually looked more like us than him. Thinking then all worlds were as small as mine; everyone in my area was some kind of relative; Peter and Christ were some kind of cousins who grew up fishing and carpentering together; this fish peddler was some kind of descendent; how come he didn't look like Christ, and therefore like us? Every time, all my life, when I've thought fleetingly of the fish peddler, I always thought he must have grown up in Israel on the Sea of Galilee, and he was like Christ in some kind of odd way that always puzzled me. Only now as I write this do I pause to consider: he couldn't have grown up in Israel. There were no Jews in Israel then. There was no Israel while he was growing up. He must have been talking about what he was reading about in the news at the time? And maybe wishing he could fish in the Sea of Galilee? Wishing he could see the promised land? Do you remember him? What do you remember about him? Now I'm not sure what I remember. How much did I make up and now remember what I made up?

He was the only Jew I ever knew until that history teacher they fired. I'm still mad. Maybe I married a historian so he could teach me to understand that whole thing.

Always stories. We come from a family of story tellers you know? How do we sift fact from fiction to write history: Living, before TV, in a small, rural, Maine community, it was natural I guess that everyone loved to tell stories. When I was growing up, I thought they were all true: biography, autobiography, even history--our maiden aunt's story about the great-great uncle killed in the battle of Waterloo. I was grown up before I ever questioned the veracity of those stories. Then I happened to read a story in an old Outdoor Sports magazine I found while cleaning out the attic after Father died. That story sounded suspiciously like the story Uncle told so often about killing the big bear. I always thought Uncle was a liar anyway. I never liked him much. He was always bringing his old magazines to our house with a story he wanted Father to read. It pleased me to think he was dumb enough to bring a magazine that would show him up for a plagiarist. I liked to think Father read that story sometime, maybe a long time, before he died and knew Uncle was a liar and a plagiarist.

Even then, for a long time I continued to believe the stories I listened to were really mostly true stories, stories about things that really happened, told with due regard for the distinction between fact and fiction; I have tapes of Aunt's stories, collected in the belief I was gathering oral history from the turn of the century. Now I write stories, and I'm getting worried about being able to know that distinction. The boundary between fiction and non-

fiction seems a fuzzy set that grows wider and wider. Take this novel I'm working on now.

I'm writing a Bildungsroman. M.H. Abrams defines the genre thusly, "The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, as he passes from childhood through varied experiences--and usually through a spiritual crisis--into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world." Already I'm having to fiddle around with veracity. This novel is to be about her identity, not his. But that's a minor detail, a mere polemical intrusion of my own autobiographical identity into this fiction. The rest of Abram's definition fits pretty well what I contemplate so far on the novel; except for that last phrase. I haven't thought far enough yet to know if or how she passes "into maturity and the recognition of [her] identity and role in the world."

I'm beginning my Bildungsroman in the fifties because that is the time I came of age, or should have come of age. My experience of the age ought to give my fiction authority, veracity, truth. Besides, I weary of the fifties' image currently in vogue. I want to tell it like it really was. I want to write a true fiction, to understand and make understood the truth of the age. That's why I want to start Love Letters in the fifties--so you can help me research my novel. And so my novel will maybe give me inspiration for our family history.

I'm writing this Bildungsroman in an epistolary form

because it is a style congenial to my own experience. Not only did we grow up before TV, we grew up without a telephone. We communicated with other families by dropping by somebody's house and talking, usually ended up telling stories, used their phone if we had to make a call. Or we wrote letters to people too far distant to drop in on. I still write letters and send notes rather than phone just to talk. In my Bildungsroman, I start with a adolescent protagonist who writes letters, mostly to an older sister, the only person the protagonist knows who will give her the kind of attention she demands. My protagonist writes to a sister because I write to you. See how things can get confused? The Love Letters we are collaborating on keeps threatening to spill over into my fiction, or is it that my fiction keeps spilling into family history?

Actually it was the idea of Love Letters that got me started, I think, on my novel. "History is too confining," I keep telling that historian I married.

2.

April 1, 1952

Dear Sophie,

Remember the year you went away to school when I was eight years old? I'd never slept in that bed alone, and I was so looking forward to you going so I could have the bed to myself. You were such a shit about quiet for reading, "couldn't stand my fidgeting," you said. And I had to

fidget. I'd slide my leg, slow, thinking I could be sneaky enough so you wouldn't notice. You always did, and you'd yell, every time, every small move, "Be still, you're shaking the bed." I even had to breath quiet. I thought I'd love the bed to myself. For weeks before you left, it was like waiting for Christmas, I could hardly stand to wait to sleep alone.

But you left, and I still couldn't move. I'd just get to sleep seems like, and I'd wake up from a nightmare, just real sure that some man was standing by the bed, going to climb on top of me any minute. My chest hurt trying to keep my breathing still. The whole bed to myself, and I still couldn't move, all that dark space and that dark shadow. I was dying to hear you yell at me, to have the light on and watch you moving your eyes down the page, turning the page. I kept your letters under the pillow to hang onto in the dark, and I couldn't even reach for them, so scared the noise and the moving would make him attack.

Then one night, feeling him there, scared, not moving, I shut my eyes tight, my head on the pillow over your letters, and suddenly I felt you there. I breathed deep and rolled over, and I heard (really) you yell, "Be still!" He jumped and turned and ran down that long crooked hall (I heard the floor boards creak, really). That wasn't the last time he came, but it was the last time he stayed to scare me any more than I wanted him to. He was scared of you.

And now, you're gone again. And again I sleep so still

in the bed it hardly needs to be made in the morning, except when I wake up from a nightmare, scared, and roll over to hear your yell that saves me. But now your yell sounds so far away, I can hardly hear it. Do you think you're going to stay in Washington to work forever?

Scott brought this cute boy home Friday night. I wanted so bad to hang around with them, to talk to him. But they went off to Scott's room to listen to the radio, and I hardly got to say hello. I don't think he even noticed me. How do you get boys to notice you?

Love,

Alys

April 22, 1952

Dear Sophie,

Yes, I am scared about some things, more now than when I wrote to you last time. They just kicked me off the cheering team. Roger talked me into going to a movie with him instead of going to a meeting about cheering for next year. He's that cute guy I was telling you about, came home with Scott one night, a freshman at the college. I've been dying to go out with him. I was afraid I wouldn't get another chance, so I called Mrs. Blandy, our coach, and told her I was sick. Somebody saw me at the movie and squealed to her. Goddam, I wish I knew who it was. It's so dark in that balcony, and anyway Roger and I were paying too much attention to each other to see anyone else there.

Now it looks like Roger's not interested anymore because I wouldn't go all the way after things got pretty heavy while we were parking by the lake on the way home. Then I was afraid for a minute that he would run me down with the car. He spun by me so close gravel flew in my face even though I'd jumped out of the way.

Now there's scratch marks on my face, and Mama wants to know what happened. I lied and told her I fell in the gravel coming into the house. I don't think she believes me, but she's not asking any more questions right now. My friend Mary warned me about him when I talked to her about how cute he is. She knows somebody who's been out with him before. Still, I sure did like his kisses. Things were fine up to a point. Am I a tease? Guess I probably am.

And now I'll never be able to cheer again, three more years of high school, everybody's talking about me, probably all think I went all the way. And what am I going to tell Mama and Daddy about why I'm not cheering next year? Oh well, maybe I'll just say I decided to study more. They don't care about my cheering anyway, I guess.

Love,

Alys

P. S. I keep thinking about Roger's kisses, can't get it off my mind. Am I in love? He was really mean to me, and I keep wanting to kiss him again. Am I crazy? I wrote him a note and haven't dared send it yet. Should I tell him how I feel?

April 22, 1952

Dear Roger,

I think I'm in love with you. I don't mean to be a tease. I love the way you kiss me, and I get carried away with it, can't think straight or stop until it's almost too late. Is that why you think I'm a tease? I don't want to tease, but what can I do? You seem to know a lot more about all this than I do. Can you stop it before it gets to where you think I'm teasing? Really, really, I don't want to tease. But I can't do it, I know girls who got caught that way, trusting boys who say that. And anyway, I don't feel right about it. I ought to be married when I do it. Oh god, that's years away. Don't you want to marry a virgin? I can't go all the way yet.

Love (I think),

Alys

May 4, 1952

Dear Sophie,

Your advice came to late. I sent a note to Roger because I couldn't stand the thought that he might never want to go out with me again after that awful first date. Well last night he came by again. We went to see a movie. Gary Cooper and Jennifer Jones, all bloody from a shootout with the law, died in each other's arms, passionately making love while they were dying. My God, what a love. Is it ever like that in real life do you think? Well, anyway, Roger and I ended up in another wrestling match at the lake, except this

time he wasn't as mean, hardly mean at all, and I didn't fight so hard. But still I had to get mad to keep from going all the way. I'm only fourteen and already fighting so hard to stay a virgin. How will I ever make it to eighteen? You've had lots of boyfriends, what do you do? What should I do? He's coming again Saturday night. I need help. Promise me again you won't tell Mama about this. Remember you promised I could tell you anything and you wouldn't tell if I didn't want you to.

It's queer, Scott's mad at Roger for going out with me. He tells me Roger's too old for me. But he hasn't told Mama and Daddy what he thinks, thank God. They let me go out with Roger because he's Scott's friend. You know how Mama is about Scott. Anything he does and anybody he knows has to be OK.

I had supper with Mr. and Mrs. Thomas last night (he's my civics teacher).

They're telling me I ought to switch from secretary to college-prep. They say I'm smart enough to go to college. But where would I ever get the money to go to college? Both you and Scott had scholarships and had to work besides. Seems like he has to work all the time to get through Business College. We hardly ever see him anymore.

And besides, maybe I just want to get married as soon as I finish high school, if I can wait that long. College seems like a lot of hard work. Even the college-prep courses here only have the smartest kids in them. I know one girl, works

all the time, doesn't have any boyfriends, says she is not going to date boys until she finishes her education. That's eight years. How could anyone wait that long? I'd die. The way things are going maybe I'll die anyway, from fighting so hard to stay a virgin, or something else awful. But that girl, she's odd, never has any fun, doesn't go to dances or to movies, thinks maybe she'll be a missionary. I wonder if I can even save myself.

HELP!

Love,

Alys

May 19, 1952

Dear Sophie,

Well, I did what you said. Roger and I go dancing on Saturday night to work off energy, and when we have a chance to be together during the week, we play softball or basketball at the Y shouting and running until we're hoarse and exhausted. So we're not sitting and holding hands or anything in a dark movie. And I make him take me straight home like you said instead of stopping by the lake to park. But, oh God when we get home. This is worse. I almost got caught Saturday night. We were parked on the road at the end of our driveway. Roger had one hand where he shouldn't have it, and I was trying real hard not to like it. Thank God I noticed in time the flashlight bobbing up the driveway. Mama poked the light in the car window just after I managed to get

Roger's hand off of you know where. Mama said, "I got worried when I heard the car drive up and nobody get out for such a long time. Is everything OK? It's way past bedtime."

Do you think she suspected anything? I keep holding my breath around her these days, afraid she's going to ask me something about Roger or talk about the facts of life or something awful embarrassing. And I'm such a lousy liar. God I wish I could learn to lie like some of my friends do, so easy it seems for them, and they laugh about it. I get red and hot and stammer, like the time I tried to tell Mama I wasn't going to cheer next year so I could spend time studying. Then I had to tell her the truth (or some of it, what I didn't make up) to keep her from thinking I was sick. And then she did make me stay in for a week and study every night. But you know Mama, never can remember to stay mad for long, and by the time Saturday rolled around she was tired of it, so I got to go to the dance.

Sunday afternoon I went to the Thomases again. I'm beginning to like their music. I don't dare tell any of my friends that. And I don't dare tell Daddy what they talk about there with their friends. He never asks me questions about things like that anyway, doesn't talk politics with me; I suspect he doesn't believe I can really think about politics. But now I'm somehow feeling guilty or something. He wouldn't like the Thomases. He'd want McCarthy to get them. Sometimes I think I shouldn't be going there. But it's like with Roger. I can't seem to do what I think I

should even when what I'm doing makes me ashamed. I love to hear them talk about their life in New York and college courses in Philosophy and Psychology and Political Science. Mr. Thomas says communism is not bad, he says he has many friends who are communists and they're kind, loving people working hard for what they believe in, do you suppose like our minister, Mr. Bond, was? Remember him? Do you suppose it's possible for communists to be like that? It's when they talk like that I feel scared, my stomach squirms, ashamed scared, just like when I think about what Roger and I do. And I can't help liking it. What do you think? You must hear a lot of talk about politics in Washington working for the government.

Love,

Alys

June 10, 1952

Dear Sophie,

Well, you don't have to worry anymore, nor Daddy, nor anybody else, about me spending too much time with the Thomases. They fired him. I guess because he brought the Daily Worker into class and talked about communism and stuff like that. But I'm just guessing, nobody seems to want to talk to me about it, and I'm afraid to really ask. I saw them, probably for the last time, Sunday afternoon. They explained that I couldn't come work for them next year like we planned because he wasn't coming back to teach. Then

Monday, Daddy told me, "They fired him and good riddance, they ought to send them all to the electric chair or to Russia, trying to hide who he was all this time; who'd ever think somebody with the name of Thomas would turn out to be a Jew or communist?" Now he's acting like I've been saved from something awful. I wanted to fight with him, hit him or something, for saying that. I couldn't even say anything. Funny he didn't show any interest in them when we talked about me going to work for them. He thought it was a good idea. I thought my life was all arranged. But he didn't know about the Daily Worker then, I wasn't about to tell him.

The Thomases were not friendly when they talked to me Sunday. Queer, it feels like it's all my fault somehow.

Do you know what happened to Mr. Bond. I was so small when he left. All I can remember about him is listening to him read and tell stories--not the Bible stories but the other ones I remember--and riding on his shoulders I remember feeling so tall and proud, and powerful. They made him leave too, didn't they? Or something like that, back in 1942 wasn't it? They weren't worried about communists then were they? Did they fire him for being a Nazi?

Now it's all set for me to take college prep next year. I don't see how I can ever go to college now the Thomases are gone. Maybe I should just take Home-Ec and plan to get married and have babies after high school, if I can just wait

that long. It seems like Roger's all I got right now.

Love,

Alys

June 20, 1952

Dear Sophie,

Now you don't have to worry about me and Roger anymore either. He's gone too. Said he was tired of the frigid girls around here who can't make up their minds what they want. He's joined the Navy where he says he can find girls who aren't afraid to love. He said, "All this time I've wasted on you, coaxing you along, and you know you want to, you're just scared to." It's true. I wish I wasn't afraid to love. I wish I could go all the way. But not with him. I think he flunked out of college and that's really why he joined the Navy. Scott's real happy Roger's gone. He says he was tired of making excuses to him about not hanging around with him. I guess I should be grateful that he wants to protect me from boys like Roger?

Yeah, I guess I'll keep on with the college-prep courses. I don't know what I'll do with them but I think maybe they're more interesting than Home-Ec. Even their sewing is a bore, you have to follow a pattern. There's this guy I met, going to be in my French class, just moved here from Connecticut. He plays basketball (I sure wish I hadn't goofed up my cheering for Roger), thinks he might get a basketball scholarship to go to college. He's smart too. And he's cute. We can study French together maybe. Maybe

these classes won't be too hard.

I'm making a new dress to wear to the dance Saturday night, a rose cotton with black and blue trim around the pockets, neck, sleeves, and hem. I got the idea from a story I read.

Love,

Alys

June 25, 1952

Dear Sophie,

Oh God! Mama's got saved after some sort of revival meeting she went to with those sisters across the road, came home acting real crazy. It's so embarrassing. Daddy's mad, sure took his mind off McCarthy and the Thomases. I'm sure glad you're coming home for the Fourth of July. You'll be able to talk sense to her.

Love,

Alys

3.

You see how Alys comes of age? Already at eight years old, she was coming of age when she had to sleep alone for the first time, awakening to sexuality and the fear and shame of it. At fourteen she awakens again--again to sexuality, and to political cruelty, to economic insecurity, to ambiguity.

Only nine pages into the Bildungsroman, and I'm already jealous of Alys, jealous that she can talk, write actually,

so fluently, and about things like shame and embarrassment. The world worries about such feelings as rage and hate. But I think shame and embarrassment's got to be the worst. At fourteen, I couldn't talk or write to anyone about what shamed me, only squirm in miserable silence and pretend I wasn't squirming, make a joke, tell a funny story, completely off the point, forget the squirming before I became fully aware of it. You and I were well into middle-age before we could begin to talk or write to each other about the things that shamed us way back then. And we still have to make it a funny story.

There are some vague resemblances between my sisters in this novel and you and me. Remember the bed we shared in the little room at the head of the stairs, way back in the forties? You said that you sense I'm mad about that long-ago time, but I remember very little about it. I remember far more vividly your talk about it. You love to tell stories. Do you suppose you think I remember it so well because I'm really telling your story? I don't remember the arbitrary line you say you drew down the bed that I was not to cross under threat of dire consequences. What consequences did you threaten?

I do remember being awfully mad at you one time. I don't think this is your story, but I'm never sure about that. It has to do with my being your helper. I could get pretty stubborn about what I didn't want to do. One time you wanted me to go to the store and get you some Kotex. I

· almost always did what you asked; you were my hero, my fairy-godmother, and popular with boys. I wanted to grow up to be just like you. I felt it an honor and a privilege to serve you, but it embarrassed me so to ask for Kotex that I wouldn't go to the store for you that day. You were so desperate you resorted to wheedling, whining and saying, "Please, I feel so sick, cramps are so hard I can't go myself." Wheedling is so out of character for you I'm still startled to remember it. Or maybe it's just out of character with my image of you? Anyway, it almost got to me, I was beginning to feel sorry for you, I was really weakening. And then you said, "Please, I can't hold it much longer, it hurts so to hold it."

And while I paused to ponder that, to think, Can you really hold your period like you do your pee? Mother cracked up laughing. Even though you tried to play it straight for a little longer, you couldn't help yourself, you started laughing too. Mad and mortified, I stalked off to the attic--you and Mother laughing behind me--cried for a while, and then read "Cinderella" again.

So it figures, gullible as I am, I'd marry the man I did. He loves to tease me. You still love to tell the story about the time I called to him--he was running the rototiller in the garden--to come to dinner. He said, "What?" I walked toward him so he could hear me better and called again. He said, "What?" I walked further, called again. He said, "What?" I walked. About half way to the garden, I heard you

crack up laughing behind me, and he started laughing in front of me. I paused, caught, too old forever now for "Cinderella," the only Prince I'd even know laughing at me in front, my adored sister--my fairy-godmother savior--laughing behind. So I laughed too. We still laugh when you tell it, a shared joke, the humor forever private, the event banal. It bonds us. The ambiguity of love. I get even by writing stories that caricature all. The esthetics of humor.

Naming is sometimes hard.

Roger was easy though, just came to me, intuitively right. I never questioned it. Why? I think back over the Rogers I've known. The plumber who has serviced our pipes and heating for years. He always stays to tell a story or two, will stay to listen to a few if my historian is here. He is enchanted with stories from history. I see no resemblance whatsoever to Aly's Roger. There was a Roger in my own adolescence, a very casual encounter, who did get mad and call me a tease when I didn't respond to his advances. There's a faint resemblance there. Back then though there was also Gene, Doug, and someone else whose name I don't remember who all had better reasons for calling me a tease than Roger did. Roger it is and I don't know why.

Sophie was harder and went through several transformations. At first she was a version of your name which means dear. But I didn't get very far before that started to confuse me. Alys was coming out too much like me as long as she was writing to you. I needed distance between

Alys and me, so eventually her sister became, very self-consciously, Sophie, for wisdom.

Alys was the hardest, and I'm still not sure it's right. I went through some impossible possibilities. Hagar for example. I like Hagar for the symbolic value. Hagar, Abraham's Egyptian concubine, exiled by jealous Sarah after the belated birth of Isaac; Hagar, mother of the bastard outcast Ishmael; Ishmael of Melville's Moby Dick squeezing whale blubber and anonymous hands in ecstasy and ruminating on the meaning of meaning and the cannibalism of all life; a hagfish bores into and feeds on other fishes; fish, symbol of the Incarnation we eat in the Eucharist; uroborus, a fish that feeds on itself; hag in British is also a boggy area, a quagmire. What do you think? Is this character a hag? Of course Hagar is impossible for a twentieth century Christian (sort of). I still regret it.

Alys became Alys for Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Alys describing the woe in marriage by telling funny stories on five husbands, and on herself, Alys exuberantly celebrating love's ambivalence by taking a pilgrimage, for penance, for a sixth husband.

Naming's important. In naming I expose secrets. As you see, now I not only worry about truth and fuzzy-set boundaries. I also worry about exploitation. I worry about ethnics as well as epistemology, and esthetics and ontology and metaphysics. Story-telling is dangerous business, creating images of truth, truths we believe in, beliefs we

live by. Oh for that long-ago spontaneity in story telling.
Can story telling go too far?

II.

RE/COVERING REALITY

Man's life is thought and he despite his
terror cannot cease
Ravening through century after century. ...
That he may come
Into the desolation of reality.
W.B. Yeats

4.

February 19, 1986

Dear Sis,

Actually to confusion, that's what Alys awakens to at fourteen, confusion about sexuality and love, about blind human cruelty, about dependence and independence. She doesn't think of it that way. Like most fourteen-year-olds she just wants to be grown up. At least wants the world to see her that way.

Remember that first spending spree with my own earned money? God I thought I was going to be grown up then. I'd been picking potatoes since I was six years old under your thumb. I was glad you had a job cooking for the pickers, and I would get to pick on my own that fall I was twelve, the first time I got to earn all my own money and spend it by myself. I always felt I got cheated by the percentage you gave me, the illusions of dependence. Picking together, you and I often picked over a hundred barrels a day but the most

I ever got was 25%, 5¢ a barrel, so I'd never earned more than \$6.00 a day with you.

Picking by myself, at the end of the day I enhanced the pride I felt by careful calculation of my earnings and careful bragging to you. I rehearsed that bragging. I'm sure now that rehearsal made up that extra \$4.00 I could make every day by myself, picking fifty barrels or more every good day for a whopping \$10.00 a day, a fortune.

And every night after calculation and bragging, I proceeded to carefully spend, on the Sears Roebuck order blank, my daily earnings: a dress and two blouses one day, shoes and boots another. I even began to fantasize some real luxuries like ice skates and skis, a party gown in case I got asked to the Junior High formal. I delighted in figuring and refiguring how much I could get for my money, far more interested in quantity (everything looked lovely in the catalogue) than in quality.

By the time potato digging was over, I had nearly \$200.00 free and clear and a careful, long-thought-out plan for buying that did include a pair of figure skates with visions of myself gliding over the ice in my formal, never mind that no one ever wore any kind of dress for skating in northern Maine. I had the order made out and ready to mail as soon as I could get to the post office for a money order and stamp when my friend stopped by to say she had a ride to Moosehead to go shopping the next day and did I want to go? I was torn only briefly thinking of my careful plans and

fantasies. When she said they were going to stay over for supper in a restaurant and movie, I couldn't resist. Besides, her brother, who was going too, was so cute. I thought I would just take a little of my money for supper and the movie. But then the next day I decided to wait on my order and take all my money, just in case there was some little thing I wanted to buy. Oh, I liked the feeling of carrying all that money around.

You and Mother didn't approve of my going without you, but Father said the experience would be good for me. So the next day off we went, seven of us, four girls and three boys, my friend and I the youngest.

I wasn't prepared. When we got to Moosehead, boys and girls separated in the stores. We girls stuck together, and it soon became a game of trying to outdo each other. One of the older girls bought a coat, the first purchase, that cost \$35.00. I had planned to spend \$17.75 on the one I chose from the catalogue. But I watched those girls one by one buy a coat, each spending a little more than the last. Mary was the third to buy one for \$45.00. Then I saw the most beautiful coat I'd ever seen in my life: bright blue with black trim, a loose, romantic-looking hood, long and flowing, and \$50.00. I tried it on. I looked a vision. I truly did. I thought, "This will be the only thing I'll buy. I deserve this treat."

The coat buying set the pattern for the rest of the afternoon which went by so fast I could not stop to think now

much money I was spending. I bought ski pants for \$15.00 where I was planning to spend \$7.95 in the catalogue; and I didn't get skis. I bought a heavenly red party gown in case I got asked to that formal; and shoes, jewelry, and handbag to go with it.

By the time I was outfitted for that dance I never got to, it was time to go to supper. I went to the Ladies' Room, the first time I'd been alone all afternoon. Sitting there in that stall, which cost me a dime to get into, away from the influence of peers, I felt panic and pulled my money out to count it, only \$19.00 and some change left. I felt sick.

And what did I do to cure myself? I splurged on supper, ordered the steak and lobster platter with strawberry shortcake for dessert, the most expensive items on the menu. The movie with popcorn, coke, and Snickers pretty much finished my carefully hoarded money. I went home, sick in my conscience, my purse, and my stomach, with only a little over \$5.00 left. I tried to console myself that I at least had the gown, and my friend didn't get one. At home you, of course, didn't refrain from saying "I told you so," Mother too. Father didn't say anything. I have never spent much money on clothes since. And I don't go shopping with friends. I still don't trust that competition will not win over frugality.

In college I found the Salvation Army and thrift stores. I still buy clothes at thrift stores, and I horrify you with what you sometimes see me wear in public. Reverse

competition? My friend complimented me the other day on the blouse I was wearing, and I wouldn't tell her I bought it in the thrift store. She'd be horrified too; she's awfully snotty.

The biggest irony of that spending spree has to do with what happened to that party gown. I sold it to my friend for half the price I paid after she told me she already got asked (though the dance wasn't until April) by the boy I was hoping would ask me. I told her I needed money to buy Christmas presents, which I did.

Picking potatoes behind a potato digger is grueling, back-breaking labor. I would not want to do it again. And yet from this distance I remember that potato-picking with a surge of pride. I earned money and bought my own clothes and luxuries all through high school. But I never have earned enough money to support myself. I worked part-time all through college, but Mother and Father sacrificed all their meager savings to get me through. Then I married my historian, and he put me through graduate school--nearly ten years. Now I sell an occasional essay or short story, not enough to even pay income tax on. I'm restless. I want to earn money. I'm tired of being a struggling artist who doesn't have to struggle. Someone else has always paid my major bills. How come I'm so unhappy with financial security?

How bound up we all are in each other's lives. And yearning for independence. Yearning to be grown up. To come

of age.

Awakening to confusion. That's Aly's fourteen-year-old epiphany, a coming of age. She writes to Sophie for help with the confusion and believes she gets it, from Sophie. She doesn't understand the connection between her writing and the relief she feels. She doesn't understand that she tells stories in the letters she writes, doesn't understand that she creates formal illusions having very little real resemblance to moment-by-moment perceptual experience, but having the pulse of real life and thus the illusion of real life and profoundly affecting real life.

Hell, I don't understand it either for that matter.

Alys will come of age many times, more times that I can record in this novel, more times than anybody can record in any novel. Every day is filled with moments of epiphany that change her life. But I can only pay attention to the ones she finds memorable. Her freshman year in college is memorable again because she has such a hard time being grown up. In college, she struggles to be a grown-up scholar, to clarify her intellectual waters always getting muddied by sensual and emotional impulses. In college, her first time away from home (even though not very far away), she struggles to recover reality from the deceptive waters of memory.

5.

November 11, 1955

Dear Sophie,

Last week, Mama wrote me that my Little Napoleon is in

Juvenile Court for assault and battery, beating up a girl. I called him my Little Napoleon, that little nine-year-old bully I baby sat with every Saturday night the summer before I was a Freshman. His parents went partying every Saturday night, I think just to get away from him. He wasn't much bigger than a six-year-old but already a holy terror of a fighter. It was such a struggle to keep him from beating the shit out of his playmates, all bigger than him, I didn't like him and determined at the end of every Saturday night I'd never come back. But his parents would always call near the end of the week when I was broke, and I thought I could put up with it one more time, until the night I found myself bullying the bully.

That night seemed much like any other on the surface. I arrived. The parents gave me a phone number where they could be reached and left. Little Napoleon went out to play for an hour before bedtime.

Looking back, I realize the night was not quite so typical. For one thing it was hotter than usual for late August. It had been hotter all month, and humid. I had been working for a week part-time stacking shelves in the Corner Store, my very first job that I hoped could continue through the winter. I was so looking forward to earning money and to quitting the babysitting. But I hadn't thought it would be so tiring. That Saturday I'd worked all day. The customers on their way to the lake to escape the heat were keeping the shelves empty. I was tired and worrying about my ability to

do the job. And I had a fight with Mama just before leaving home. She expected me to wash dishes after working all day before I went to babysit.

Then Little Napoleon got into a fight as he always did, and I was more impatient than usual. I was sitting on the porch trying to get some shade from the setting sun that still felt burning hot and trying to keep an eye on the brat at the same time. I saw it starting with the kid he was playing with. Sam was older and nearly twice as big as Little Napoleon and one of his favorite targets. He started first just calling Sam "stupid." That made me mad. Sam was mildly retarded and I felt sorry for him. I knew how much I hated being called stupid by you or Scott. Usually I stepped in at the first sign of the bully's teasing and made him stop or go inside.

But this night I just sat there and watched like I enjoyed getting mad. When he saw that I wasn't interfering, Little Napoleon got bolder, his name-calling got meaner: "Retard;" "Crazy;" "Even your mother can't stand you." Something snapped when he said that, and when Sam reached out and slapped Little Napoleon hard in the face, I thought, "Good, beat the bully up, beat him up good." I was hoping to see him get his face smashed in.

But he didn't. He never did because he was already so strong and intimidating, little as he was. Instead he went into one of his ferocious tantrums, hitting, kicking, biting, and screaming with such fury I couldn't keep track of his

movements.

I went into my own tantrum. I do not remember ever feeling so mad before or since. I grabbed him from behind, whirled him around and hit one swift blow in the nose so hard the blood began to spurt immediately.

I was horrified. And he was in shock; he'd never gotten any physical punishment from me before, just reasoning, scolding, or bribery. He didn't fight back, thank God, because I know he could have beaten the shit out of me too; I was not a fighter. Instead he started bawling, screaming, "Oh you killed me, you killed me."

I don't remember much about how I managed to get him into the house, get a cold wet washcloth held to his nose, and call his parents, him screaming all the while. They arrived in short order, sent me home, and took him to the emergency room at the hospital.

The consequences seemed awful; I think I blocked a lot of it from my memory; the stumbling and lying attempts to explain it to Mama when I got home. She sent me to my room while she called the hospital to find out for herself. Later that night there was a consultation between his parents and ours (without me) to discuss an appropriate punishment for me. That was followed by a conversation with me to deliver the verdict, a whole month grounded. Little Napoleon's father wanted me to get a beating. "Only way to make 'em mind," he said. And I was afraid Mama would agree. She must have been awfully embarrassed and ashamed of me. I never got

a beating in my life. But not Daddy, he wasn't about to agree. By then he was beginning to get mad himself at Little Napoleon's father. Sometimes I was scared of Daddy's temper, but not right then. It saved me.

But mostly I wish I didn't remember my feeling when they told me, "His nose would have been broken if he had not been so young with soft bones." Now I'm going to tell you the truth about how I felt then. I was ashamed, but more, I was glad, proud that I could hit so hard, and proud that I had defeated Little Napoleon in a battle that I felt had been going on between us every Saturday night when I would rather have been out partying. I remember the thought even against my will, "Good, I only wish I could have hit harder."

Of course I lost that baby-sitting job, wasn't able to keep my job at the store either. Mama and Daddy decreed I was too young to handle work responsibility. My triumph was always buried. Mostly I remember for many years the shame of the aftermath. I'm still confused. I still don't understand how I, who had never fought no matter how much you and Scott teased, could have been so violent, and how I can still enjoy secretly that feeling of triumph.

Now I'm wondering, was Little Napoleon after all just like me in his fury? Did he feel justified in his bullying like I did in mine? Was he like me, tired and scared, and feeling unloved when he went out to play every Saturday night? Would he have been different if his father hadn't beat him? Now they've taken him to court. I was only

grounded for a month. Do you remember this? How come you and Scott never teased me about it? We never talked about it. Guess you were getting too old to tease me then. You must have been thinking about going away to work in Washington.

I'm not doing well with my classes. It's a lot harder than high school. I get mad at my writing teacher, sometimes almost as mad as I got at Little Napoleon. I never think about hitting him though. Instead I think about what I'd like to say to him.

Write soon. Tell me how you got through your first year of college.

Love,

Alys

December 10, 1955

Dear Sophie,

My writing professor sprang a surprise "test" on us this week, "to get ready for the final exam," he said. He told us to think of an object and write a short story in fifty minutes that explores the meaning of the object to one or more characters. I was flustered. All I could think of was those pearls the Thomases gave me. I certainly couldn't think of anything to make up on the spur of the moment like that. So I went ahead and wrote about that, but it sort of felt like cheating because I thought I was telling something that really happened rather than something I made up like

you're supposed to do in fiction. He's been very careful about explaining the difference between an essay and fiction, especially to me it seems like. Anyway I went ahead and wrote about those pearls. He passed it back today without a grade and told me to expand and revise it. I don't know what else to do with it.

*

Real Pearls?

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas gave me matching earrings and choker of pearls to wear to the coronation ball when I was a princess of the Winter Carnival Pageant. Somewhere between high school and college I lost those pearls, and I will never know now if they were real or not. I can't seem to shake it, those pearls haunt me. Because I believe they were real, and I have somehow betrayed a trust in losing them. The Thomases never actually said they were real, but they never said they were fake. And they would have, I believe, told me if they were fake.

About the trust I believe I betrayed. When they gave them to me, Mrs. Thomas said simply, "I've had these for a while and I find I no longer wear them. I want to give them to you. They go with your white satin shoes." That's all she said. Mrs. Hensley, my Latin teacher and director of the pageant, bought me the shoes to go with the gown she helped me design and make. (I probably should explain why my teachers were giving me things, but that is really another story. And I'm not really sure why they did.)

Why I'm so concerned about if the pearls were real or fake is not the money, not the monetary value that is (though I could sure use some money). It's if they were fake, I don't have to feel guilty like I do for losing them. But if they were real and I lost them. Well, you must see why it's important that I know if they were real or fake. Because it's important to know what's real. I won't ever know now because they fired him, and I've never heard about them again, so I'll never be able to ask them even if I dared. And I don't know yet if I could tell the difference by looking between real and fake pearls. One thing I'm going to do now is go to a jewelry store and check out that difference.

And it's also important to know what they meant. Why did they give them to me? Why didn't they just lend them to me? Then I could have given them back right away, and I wouldn't be worrying now about losing them, and betrayal.

*

Once I got started writing, I thought I was making up the part about being so worried about whether they were real or not. But now that I'm reading it over I'm worrying. Do you think I was worrying all along and just didn't know it? Or did I make myself start worrying by writing it? I guess I don't have to tell the Professor what is real and what is not.

Love,

Alys

February 12, 1956

Dear Sophie,

No, I'm not doing any better this semester. Still getting mostly Cs in my writing. But I wrote an essay about my swimming which he gave me a B- on. Best grade I've gotten so far in writing. Still he said it was "idiosyncratic."

*

The Zen of Swimming

I've always been afraid to get in over my head. When I was twelve, I learned to swim the breast stroke a little and one day accidentally found myself in a sink-hole where I couldn't touch bottom. I panicked, floundered and sputtered, too embarrassed to call for help. I suffered a memory blank about how I finally managed to get my feet back on the bottom. That experience severely retarded my swimming progress. I never learned to swim more than six to ten feet, until the summer I got interested in this cute boy who was a lifeguard. He asked me for a date, but I was so embarrassed at my ineptitude in the water I refused. It was then I determined to teach myself to swim. At sixteen, I figured I was too old for lessons. I have been swimming now for a couple of years and experience it as both work and play, but my crowning achievement was the day I realized I could also experience it as I fancy a Zen Buddhist experiences enlightenment.

At first, I was so intense and serious about swimming, it was mostly work. I went to the lake everyday at two,

found the most isolated spot I could find, and forced myself to stay in the water at least forty minutes, moving continuously, mostly practicing the breast stroke, never going in over my head. So intent I was at this stage, I nearly forgot my primary purpose in learning to swim. One day my best friend Mary wanted me to horse around with her on the crowded beach flirting with the boys. When I told her I had to practice my swimming at two, she got so mad she didn't speak to me for a couple of days. That bothered me, to think that I had become so obsessed that I would give up one of my very favorite activities. I reminded myself that I was doing this for the sake of my social life after all, so I wouldn't feel so left out in the summer when all my friends spent their time swimming. So I began to relax a little. I made a conscious decision to shift my attitude from all work and no play to some work and some play.

I got a little less rigid in my schedule. I made sure I was in the water for forty minutes every afternoon, but it didn't need to be at two. I hung around the beach with Mary sometimes at that prime time, flirting. And often we'd swim, following the boys into the water. Mainly, I learned to play at swimming by watching and imitating Mary. She had been swimming forever and felt almost as much at home in the water as she did on the land.

One day she caught me watching and imitating her, yelled "Monkey see, monkey do," and started imitating my imitations; we both broke up into giggles. "Monkey see, monkey do"

became a regular part of my learning. I got to see gradually my progress as her imitations of my imitations got closer and closer to her original performances. I started watching others too and imitating their movements, always in the spirit of our game. But imitating other swimmers is never as much fun as with Mary because she's such a show-off. When she's not around, the game is more like work than play.

Mary and I still play that game with each other in many situations, even here at college. She's always been terrible at any sort of math, and she even got better at Geometry by playing "monkey see, monkey do" with me. Geometry is one thing even I can do well here, even though I'm not very good at other areas of math. Sometimes our game gets embarrassing when we play it on the street or in the library. But those are stories for another paper.

I still feel swimming is work sometimes when I'd rather be doing something else. But once in the water, that usually goes away. After a while, I learned to play alone too, more imitation games that I made up, all having to do with the way I move my body in the water, I imagine myself a minnow with its quick, darting movements, or a starfish moving legs and arms as fast as I can without going anywhere. I have never seen a starfish swim. I don't know how it moves, but the fancy works for my game. On a very hot day, I like to imagine myself a big old lazy trout in a clear pool, moving as few body parts as possible as slowly as possible while still progressing in some direction.

I got very aware of my body in relation to the water during those games. I think it was that big-old-lazy-trout imitation that allowed me to eventually relax enough to experience swimming as a Zen enlightenment. It happened the first time on a day when I really didn't feel like going swimming. I was up late the night before cramming for a history test and had gotten up early to cram some more. I always have to cram for tests because I've never been as disciplined or compulsive about schoolwork as I was about swimming. I rushed to class feeling frustrated and convinced I would flunk it. The test was as bad as I feared. Classes were a bore all day. I kept jerking myself awake all afternoon. So I almost didn't go swimming after school, wanting so badly just to go home and sleep, thinking, "Oh God, haven't I been through enough today." But just enough compulsion left and remembering the swimming weather was about done for the year, I went anyway. And I was afraid to miss any social action.

But none of my friends were there. Maybe it happened because I was too tired either to work or play at swimming. I couldn't not relax. And Mary wasn't there to keep me fully alert. The day was unusually hot for late September, bright sun shining into clear water creating moving patterns of light on the lake bottom. Doing my big-old-lazy-trout, suddenly I found myself moving without effort in a timeless and dimensionless space, moving and breathing in perfect syncopation with the undulating lace of light below me. I

was all water and light and slow, powerful pulse.

Since that day I have felt the Zen of swimming a number of times when I swim alone. It's never quite the same experience, and it's always wonderful. It is the most intense way I experience swimming, and sometimes I think I might be getting compulsive about it. I swim at the Y now all through the winter, and when I go a week or so without this Zen feeling, I find myself actively seeking time for swimming alone, but it's never quite as good inside as under a hot, bright sun. Maybe I'll take up skiing alone.

In my Introductory Philosophy class, there was a short section on Zen Buddhism. The professor seemed bored and puzzled by it, so he mostly hurried over it. But I keep remembering this one sentence that isn't even very catchy: "Through the regular practice of meditation, self-awareness, and intuition, the Zen practitioner learns to experience enlightenment in ordinary, daily activity." I wonder if that means something like Christians mean by being saved? Ever since that day swimming, I am not afraid to get in over my head. That may someday save me.

*

Have you heard from Scott lately. He makes me mad, hardly ever writes to me, and when he does, he doesn't sound like he cares much. I miss him a lot since he went into the army.

Love,

Alys

6.

March 2, 1986

Dear Sis,

Alys doesn't tell that Zen experience entirely true to the way it happened. She read that definition and remembered that day swimming. Then in writing about it, she felt her thrill or enlightenment. She confuses the memory of the event with the experience of writing about it. Even so, to think, in 1956, Alys could have scooped Robert Persig. But alas, at eighteen as she did at fourteen, Alys has her mind more on eros than on logos. Even before the days of co-ed dorms, there was hardly any incentive in Alys's world for her to turn her attention from the subject uppermost in her mind.

She doesn't tell the entire truth about her feelings either. She doesn't tell about the rivalry and jealousy that always existed between her and Mary. Rivalry over boys and looks and talents. She did laugh when Mary made fun of her, imitating her imitations. She laughed, but she felt more grim determination than joy. Her play is a game of competition which she nevertheless enjoys.

7.

March 2, 1956

Dear Sophie,

Oh God, Mama just called. Mrs. Hensley died yesterday, and I'm thinking about fairy tales and competition. Do you remember that Winter Carnival pageant? Did I write you about it at the time? I was thirteen. At first being a Winter

Carnival princess felt like a chance to live one of the fairy tales I read so often as a child--Cinderella magically given a chance by her fairy Godmother to try for the Prince at the Royal Ball; or Sleeping Beauty awakening from her long sleep (during which she missed all the pains of growing up) by the kiss of her prince. A freshman, I was elected by my classmates to be one of eight princesses, two from each class, to compete for the coveted title of Queen and reign with the King, a prize-winning athlete, at the Winter Carnival pageant. In the initial excitement of my election I certainly didn't give any thought to competition. I didn't think about it through the whole experience, but I realize now I was responding to it. I was struggling to project an image of suave sophisticate to the boys competing for the title of King, to the other princesses, and to our pageant director, Mrs. Hensley, while I was indulging childish fantasies and feeling a very unsophisticated excitement, fear, turmoil, and anger. I can see now I was scared of the competition and sulking at Mrs. Hensley who at the time fluctuated between Fairy Godmother and wicked stepmother in my mind.

Then, I thought more about the athlete who would win the title of King at the winter-sports competition than I did about the other princesses or Mrs. Hensley. I spent a lot of time fantasizing about the senior prince nearly every one expected to be King. In the days immediately following my election, I lived through that coronation ball many times,

many variations on the image of me sitting on the throne beside the King. So lost in fantasy sometimes, I remember Mama one time physically shaking me at the sink to remind me I'd been washing the same dish for over half an hour (now I think, "Did she sit there and watch me all that time and I didn't notice?"). So preoccupied I was with the King, I do not even remember now the name of my escort for the pageant, a Freshman skier assigned to me by Mrs. Hensley. I watched the King every chance I got, dying to have him pay some attention to me but not daring to speak first. I waited passively, like Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella, for my Prince. He never did notice me, never even spoke to me. It was like I didn't exist for him. As the days passed approaching the pageant, my failure to attract his attention fueled my increasing anxiety about how I could possibly measure up, literally measure up, against the other princesses.

I was younger than most freshmen which made me the youngest of the princesses, nearly a year younger than Mary the other freshman princess. Funny, I didn't pay much attention to her though. All the other princesses were fifteen or older. The oldest senior would have her eighteenth birthday before she graduated in June, a full five years older, fierce competition. Almost from the beginning of my involvement with those girls, I was sizing myself up and not measuring up. They became the wicked stepsisters of my fairy-tale fantasies.

Barbara, that nearly eighteen year-old senior who eventually did become Queen, was not only much older than I, she was also experienced, poised, sophisticated, and at least five inches taller with a fully developed bosom. And the Queen was elected by popular vote of those who paid the price of a ticket to the ball. Barely five feet tall and barely one hundred pounds, I barely had a bosom at all, ended up stuffing kleenex in my gown because I wouldn't have dared to ask Mama for a padded bra at thirteen. I was acutely and painfully aware of Barbara's obviously natural endowments as she floated down the dais during our first dress rehearsal for the coronation ball: modestly low-cut scarlet chiffon, black hair gleaming in a daringly longish poodle cut around her face, glittering black patent leather pumps with three-inch heels making her nearly six feet tall (the King was over six feet), waist cinched by an extravagant black sash with bright red and blue stripes, ruby and sapphire (glass I suspect) dangling from her ears and nestling (suspended from a gold chain) judiciously on her bosom. I was dazzled.

At that moment, I completely lost heart, acutely and painfully self-conscious at my colorlessness: pale blonde hair, pale blue eyes, pearls, white satin slippers with no heels, matching white satin sash around a pale and prudent Alice-blue gown I made myself. Mrs. Hensley coached my selection of a costume: she helped me design the color and style and select material, and she encouraged me through the sewing. She always encouraged my needlework. Pouring all my

mounting feelings of insecurity into that moment, I hated Barbara, the senior, wicked stepsister. But more I hated Mrs. Hensley, and blamed her for what I knew was my failure to measure up.

Now she is dead. Thinking I was getting some kind of realization of fairy-tale fantasies, I envisioned her at first as some kind of fairy godmother. Then on the night of dress rehearsal, I saw her as the wicked stepmother and buried the tough, practical advice she was giving me. For, although the King paid no attention to me, she did. She not only helped me design and make a costume, she continuously encouraged me to confront reality. She told me bluntly that freshmen never won the competition, that winning was seldom the point or value of this sort of participation. Now I remember often things Mrs. Hensley began then to tell me: "Life is not a happily-ever-after fairy tale, no princes or fairy Godmothers to rescue you from your misery or make you happy;" "Things of value cost; the price is work and self-discipline; the reward is productive life and peace of mind;" "You have a duty to yourself and to the world to develop your potential to the fullest extent possible; life has no greater purpose." All through high school I got that guidance from her, and I made no connection between what she was saying and what I was doing, thinking, and feeling.

None of the other students in that pageant became important enough to me to remember much about them. I don't even remember some of their names. But Mrs. Hensley sticks

like a burr. Sometimes when I'm worried that I can't possibly measure up, I would still rather see her as the wicked stepmother. After all she is one of my chief inspirations for getting myself into situations where I risk again not measuring up, like college right now. A wicked stepmother or an authoritarian, arrogant Godmother insisting I wear to the ball of life the cloak of tough, practical wisdom she offered? .

Love,

Alys

March 20, 1956

Dear Sophie,

I just finished a paper that I know has to be the best I've written so far, better even than the "Zen of Swimming" which got a B-. It's better because I am being very, very truthful, reporting just exactly what I was thinking. And I wrote about an important piece of literature. And I felt excited while I was writing it.

*

Landscape in Eliot's Waste Land

My Masterpieces professor says T. S. Eliot's landscape in The Waste Land is a "modern spiritual wasteland." He uses a lot of phrases that I don't understand. I didn't pay much attention until I had that test with a list of terms to define. I could only explain three out of ten, so now I know I need to start figuring things out again. He lectured for a

whole hour on just that "modern spiritual wasteland;" it's got to be on the next test. I figured out I can understand and remember things better if I can see how they relate to what I already know. I wonder how this might relate to what I already know. There's the title, Waste Land. A desert? I've never seen a desert. A burned-out forest? I have seen that, fairly often here in Maine. But even a burned-out forest doesn't stay waste long. Blueberries grow over it for a few years, then raspberries and other brush until new trees take hold. Eliot's landscape is one I've never seen, dry rock without water and thunder without rain. Sometimes, hot August evenings here have thunder without rain. It's ominous, and kind of exciting with possibility. But it never lasts long; the nights cool fast, nothing like Eliot's landscape that is more like the one in that story I read last year in Mama's science fiction magazine, a concrete and asphalt city in the middle of a desert planet, the inhabitants continuously parched with thirst, the air hot and still, the climate too dry even for honey-mooners to make love, nothing to cool passion, so the story describes it. The inhabitants are listless, doing assigned jobs with the regularity of slow machines.

I saw a landscape like that in a movie about space travel. Dry there too and no romance, a war movie. Galactic police were out to arrest bad guys on this dry planet who were always raiding nearby planets for water. I think Eliot's Waste Land is something like those landscapes,

concrete and asphalt, no green, breeding inhuman people. His characters are not as aggressive as those in the movie nor as listless as the ones in the story, but they're not exactly exciting with romance either.

The inhabitants of Eliot's wasteland must be as important to the definition of the term as the landscape is. The professor said Tiresius speaks, blind, impotent prophet to Thebes, both male and female. Homosexual? Hermaphrodite? They used to show one at the fair. Mama went, but we couldn't ask her what it looked like because we weren't supposed to know she went, so I thought for years that it looked like the poster out front, female of one side of the body and male on the other side. I don't remember how I found out. By the time I got old enough to go, they quit showing it. In the poem, Tiresius talks about his wrinkled female breasts. But when I read it, I just thought he was talking about himself as an old man, how sometimes old men who are overweight and not in good shape, sitting around all the time, get sagging breasts that look a lot like an old woman's. Like Uncle Ancil. I heard Mama say he and Aunt Myrtle have gotten to look just like each other from sitting around so much of their lives together and talking, always wondering about things and never getting any work done. And blind Tiresius also must have done a lot of sitting around and talking since he was a prophet; he probably wasn't in very good shape either.

So blind Tiresius speaks and what does that mean in

relation to "modern spiritual wasteland?" I don't understand from the poem if Tiresius speaks from the wasteland, and I thought it would be a dumb question to ask the professor. The "modern" confuses me most in relation to Tiresius. Is he in the modern world, and does Eliot mean for us to extend our understanding of "modern" back that far, over 2000 years? Has it been a spiritual wasteland all that time? Or is it that Tiresius speaks from a time and place less wasted, more productive than our own, and is passing judgement? He does seem to be commenting on twentieth-century scenes and happenings. But I can't see that he is judging from a better, happier age. He is as pessimistic about what has happened to him, old, blind, impotent, with wrinkled, sagging breasts. And I assume he was childless too which is what the impotence and the male-female problem is all about, like Uncle Ancil and Aunt Myrtle are also childless. I can't see really that Eliot is making much of a distinction between our own age and Tiresius's. The professor seems to mean a very long age by "modern."

I always thought Mama was suggesting Uncle Ancil was childless because he was in such bad shape, sitting around all the time like that. Now I'm beginning to see, maybe she thought he was impotent. I wonder why I didn't get that until now. Could he have been partly hermaphrodite? He certainly always did look queer.

I'm also confused about the word "spiritual" when the poem seems to be so much more about the relationship between

the sexes than about a relationship to God. I could easily see Uncle Ancil and Aunt Myrtle appearing in his Waste Land. It's not that I don't understand metaphor. Earlier when the professor talked about Petrarch and Dante, he explained how the poets' love for Beatrice and Laura became an image of their love for God. But both of those poets talked more about God than Eliot does. And it certainly seemed to me they cared more for God than for their women, since they didn't really get to know them, just spent time dreaming and longing for them. That's romance?

If this poem is giving us images of our relationship to God in the portraits of the Waste Land's inhabitants, I can see that our spiritual life truly is in bad shape. There's the Hyacinth girl that makes Tiresius the prophet go dumb and blind with fear. And no wonder, if he's unsure about whether he's male or female; she certainly seems to me more sensuous, sexy even. than spiritual. Then there's the medusa-like chess player who begs him to communicate with her, and he remains silent. There's Lil with the bad teeth, always aborting or giving birth with husband Albert absent in jail. The jaded Thames daughters long ago gave up expecting anything much from love, other than enough to pay the rent maybe. If all this failed love is a metaphor for our relationship to God, then our spiritual life is truly in bad shape. Still it seems to me that the message about human love must be the important one. I can't imagine Uncle Ancil and Aunt Myrtle ever having a very exciting love life either.

Come to think about it, God was one of the things they talked about a lot and wondered about, what it would be like in the rapture and after. They talked about that rapture a lot.

Maybe all this does add up to a longing for God, but I still don't quite see it. I wonder if it's my age. At eighteen, am I too young to get my mind out of the gutter to focus on God? I still see Eliot's wasteland as a landscape of failed human love, too dry to support human life.

But that won't do for the test. So: Tiresius--old, blind, prophet, both male and female which somehow makes him neither, immobilized by the vision of love in the Hyacinth girl--observes and comments on the passing jaded love scenes in the arid, hard, and lifeless landscape: love without life. The Hyacinth girl must be the image of God by which Tiresius judges the lifeless love. The hyacinth is the flower Apollo caused to grow from the blood of his beloved Hyacinthus, a boy. Sexuality is very complicated. I'm still not getting what that says about God except that our relationship to him is in big trouble and it looks like it's going to be hard to find a solution because it's so complicated.

Do we turn our yearning to God because human love is such a big disappointment?

*

Wish me luck with a grade on this one.

Love,

Alys

March 31, 1956

Dear Sophie,

I got a D+ on that Waste Land paper that I thought was so great. "Disorganized and idiosyncratic" he said. The hell with it. I don't give a shit. Really. Truly.

I have a new boyfriend I hope. He hasn't actually asked me for a date yet, but we've been walking a lot together to the library. That's where I met him. He goes there a lot. So now I do too. He walks from his house where he lives with his parents and meets me at the dorm. He studies for a couple of hours, working on a project in Military History. I read a biography of the Grimm brothers, and the fairy tales. It's a relief from studying. Then he walks me back to the dorm.

The fairy tales I'm reading are not the same ones I read when I was little. Cinderella's mean stepsisters cut off parts of their feet to make the slipper fit. Creepy.

Love,

Alys

8.

March 12, 1986

Dear Sis,

That's a great story you tell about Uncle and Stella Joy. Wasn't she the one Mother used to say Father had a crush on? I'm getting very curious about why Alys feels such antagonism for Uncle Ancil. It seems to me she's being awfully coy about her relationship to this Uncle. So far,

what do I have? I think Uncle lies and plagiarizes the stories he tells, and I am scornful of that. Now I know he had an affair with Stella Joy. Alys scorns her Uncle Ancil's religious feeling. And she is suspicious and scornful of his sexuality, I believe Alys has to get on a shrink's couch at some point and reveal her real problems with Uncle Ancil. Something Oedipal/Electra here? Why with Uncle Ancil rather than her father? Wonder if I can use the Uncle-Stella Joy story here? A primal scent (oops, a Freudian typo I rather like, think I'll keep; smell is a powerful evocator) where she witnesses something, but not Stella Joy here. That name won't do for this. A homosexual scene? with a young boy? her brother, Scott? and she's jealous?

X. J. Kennedy says some stories are actually essays in disguise. When Alys was taking writing classes, she had a hard time keeping her essays from becoming stories, so the professor told her. He never knew how much she made up in those stories to make them become essays. Even in her Waste Land paper where she insists she's telling the truth, she couldn't remember all the literature professor said or his particular context, his frame of reference; so she improvised, she's always improvising. She doesn't think of it as lying. Of her Zen paper, her writing professor said with a smirk (I thought it was a smirk; maybe it was simple kindly amusement at what he considered her naivete?) that he suspected enlightenment had to do with loftier spiritual states than could be achieved by watching the pattern of

moving light on a lake bottom. He thought her Waste Land paper was "idiosyncratic" and "too personal," but mostly he deplored the inappropriate subject matter. I think it was that essay that prompted him to tell her he didn't think she ought to be an English major. She didn't have the talent, he said, for thinking critically about literature. And she didn't show the discipline it took to be a scholar. He said no critic or scholar who indulged speculations about the personal problems of relatives could hope to gain any respect.

All my stories are fiction, wholly fiction. They are also truth. They really happen as I write them. I see them happening. Alys is purely fiction. Nobody ever gave me pearls. A teacher gave me rhinestones (I knew they were real rhinestones) to wear to a Winter Carnival Ball. I lost them and grieved at times their loss. When I have been real pissed at my historian (years after I lost them) I have speculated that he stole them because he knew I had a crush on the male teacher. Mary never existed in my life, nor Uncle Ancil and Aunt Myrtle (I can't account for unconscious memories though). I never babysat with any little Napoleon, but when I was sixteen, I did call one of the little neighbor boys little Napoleon because he was little and such a bully. I never smashed the shit out of anyone, not physically anyway, but I'm a vivid fantasizer. I don't remember fighting with anyone when I was growing up, except that one

time I pushed my friend off the porch after she pushed me first.

Isn't Stella Joy a wonderful name. Did you make it up? It's too good to be true, belongs in fiction. I want to appropriate it for something. I don't really need another character. My historian says I crowd my stories with too many characters, hard for readers to keep track of. But what can I do? They keep crowding in on me. And by the time they get to any readers they have been winnowed. Winnowed and harrowed too. I shudder to think of the violence I do with my winnowing and harrowing.

Here, a contribution to our Love Letters family history. Remember Father winnowing the beans and oats? I remember the beans well. It was done on a windy day. First they were threshed to remove pods. He put them in a burlap bag and pounded them. Then the winnowing was done on a blanket. Like the Eskimos play that game tossing a player in the air on a blanket. We stood around the blanket (it took the whole family), holding it taut by the edges and tossing the beans in the air, letting the wind take the dust and bits of pods. I seem to remember him doing oats like that too, a much more tedious and time-consuming job than the beans, since there were the animals to feed with the oats, not just the family.

Eventually a machine came along Father could rent from Uncle that did both the threshing and winnowing of oats. I never did figure out how that machine worked. Did you?

And the harrowing. I loved to watch the plowing and

harrowing, the earth turning over the blade of the plow, and smoothing into soft ripples over the teeth of the harrow. I feel a poem coming from all this winnowing and harrowing.

&

Farm Work

I never did understand
how those big machines work,
the ones that thresh and winnow
oats. So I lost interest.
I forgot.

Further back, we pounded oats
or beans in burlap bags
to remove dry stalks and pods,
and winnowed out waste in wind
from a blanket. It took all

of us to hold it taunt.
I understood that.
And before threshing and winnowing,
plowing and harrowing behind
a horse, wet earth turning

over plow blades. Exposed
to air, it dried and smoothed
in soft ripples over harrow teeth.
On the turning stone, our Father sharpened
blades, for ease in cutting through.

I understood--sharp and exposed--
preparing earth and cleaning grain
and slaughtering. Now, shiny red paint
coats the power that drives.
And I forget farm work.

&

All these years later, I winnow and harrow Alys and Uncle Ancil, if I can. I shudder.

My side of Love Letters seems to be getting lost in Story Teller.

Alys is coming through again, insisting I listen to her love story. "Right here," I ask, startled, "in the middle of

all the re/covering of reality? Really. It hardly seems the place." As usual she pays no attention. She's already launched into her story. I have no choice but to follow along before I lose it.

9.

June 25, 1956

Dear Sophie,

I'm in love, at last and truly. Roger, Bill, Philip, they were all just practice. I met my prince on the first of March. That's why I haven't written in so long. He is a senior, ROTC, graduating in August and leaving for a commission in the Air Force. So you see there's not much time. To avoid the hassles with both families we are eloping. By the time you get this, I will be married. Oh Sophie, he's wonderful, handsome and brilliant. I know it's right. I know now my life purpose: it's to be his wife, to help him achieve his full potential. I know he has a wonderful future, and I'm going to be part of it.

College is a mistake for me. I'm sure Mama has written you by now that I lost my scholarship because my grades were so low spring semester--a D, two Cs and just one B. I have to maintain a B average to keep my scholarship. I couldn't concentrate on study. Even when I'm not with him, he's all I can think of. My final exam grades were awful. My writing professor has been saying all along that my writing was imaginative but idiosyncratic, and my final papers were incoherent he said.

I don't care. Really I don't, for me. I'm only sorry I disappointed everyone. You were so excited about my getting the scholarship. And Mama and Daddy. And Mrs. Hensley. Good thing she won't know, I guess. I can just hear her now if I could tell her I'm quitting college to get married. She'd give me another of her lectures about growing up and learning to take care of myself and outgrowing fairy-tale fantasies. She worked hard to help me get that scholarship. But I didn't ask her to do it. I don't owe her anything. Do I?

Oh God, I'm scared. And I don't know what else to do. We've gone too far. My period's two weeks late even though Lewis said he was protecting me, taking care of things. He thinks I can't be pregnant. But he wants to get married. He says he does, says he has to know I'm his before he goes. So we're not going to wait until it will look suspicious, if I am pregnant.

What will I do when he's gone? It's very uncertain if or when I can join him. There's a good possibility he'll be going overseas right away. I don't want to go so far from home even if I could. And I don't want to stay home alone. We'll have only a little over a month together. I don't know where we'll live that month or where I'll live after he's gone. He tells me not to worry my pretty head about it, that he's taking care of everything. When I'm with him I do feel safe and protected and taken care of. He is smart and confident with many friends who admire him. I feel lucky

when I am with him--that he chose me. I don't deserve it. I don't know how I can ever earn it. So I guess I don't have anything, really, to be scared about. I guess these panic attacks when I'm alone or when I think about Mrs. Hensley are usual when people get married? Aren't they?

I don't want to leave home to live in a strange place. It was bad enough to come fifty miles to college. But at least I'm still close enough to home so I can feel pretty much at home, with my best friend Mary here, and we can go home often. Overseas is going too far. I'm afraid to go and afraid not to go.

Love,

Alys

July 2, 1956

Dear Sophie,

I might have known by the time we got back from our weekend honeymoon that you would have blown the whistle on us. Lewis is mad at me for telling you, and mad at you for calling to tell Mama and Daddy and mad at Mama and Daddy for calling to tell his mother and father. He wanted to keep it secret until after his graduation. I guess I forgot to tell you that.

It was some scene around here for a few days, having to face both sets of parents and try to explain ourselves. Why couldn't they just accept what we were saying about wanting to belong to each other, and how wonderful our love is, and

it's worth any price?

Finally his father just up and asked Lewis directly, like I wasn't even there, "Did you get her pregnant? Is that what this is all about?"

For a few minutes I saw a side of Lewis I had never seen. He blushed and stammered and finally said, "Yes, we had to get married." I waited through the silence that followed for him to say again to his father like he's been saying right along, "I married her because I love her and want her to be my wife. We belong together." He didn't say it again. He just sat there looking miserable and ashamed like a bad little boy. I saw tears in his eyes. I couldn't stand it. I ran out of the house to the car and sat there crying until he came out to drive me back home.

And of course by the time we got home we had to face Mama and Daddy. God it was awful, worse than getting grounded for a month when I hit Little Napoleon.

Well, anyway now we can live together until he goes. We're going to look for a place to live today. His father said he'd help and after he gets in the Air Force, I'll get an annuity.

Love,

Alys

August 25, 1956

Dear Sophie,

Lewis is graduated and gone. It happened so fast,

hardly enough time to get used to being married. At least now I know some things about my future for the next few years anyway. Lewis will be in training for nearly a year. Then he'll most likely go right overseas, and I won't be able to go with him. He says with a baby and the kind of work he'll be doing it's better if I don't go. I can't tell you what he's training for. He's never told me, tells me not to worry about such things as work; he's always telling me not to worry when I ask questions. And usually I'm not worrying when I ask, just curious. But now I'm starting to worry, just a little; I get just a little irritated with him responding to all my questions with, "Don't worry." But he really does take care of everything so well. I have this nice little house to live in with an extra room for the baby when he comes. Yes it's definite now. A baby will be arriving sometime in March. With a little luck I might even go overtime. First pregnancies often do. And nobody else will need to know.

So I think it won't be so bad to stay here after he's gone. I know quite a few people here. Mary will still be in college here. Who'd ever have thought I'd be the one to get married and Mary would be the one to get a college degree? I know for a fact she's been screwing around since she was fifteen. This is close enough to home so I'm practically getting to stay at home. I suppose I'll miss him a lot. But that will make our time together even more precious, won't it?

I'm so excited about the baby. I'm already sewing baby clothes. I've hardly been sick at all. I'm walking every day for exercise, swimming, and reading all about taking care of babies, Dr. Spock. I'm not ashamed of our love, and the results. I don't care what people say. Really.

No, I'm not still mad at you for telling on me. I just haven't written for a while because I was getting used to being married, tried to anyway.

Love,

Alys

March 23, 1957

Dear Sophie,

Baby Allyson emerged, kicking and screaming, last night. God, what hard work getting her out of me. It felt like one or both of us was doing a hell of a lot of resisting. And did she ever sound mad for a while. I don't know that I ever want to go through that pain again. Everyone says you forget the pain though. Tonight I feel aching and sore and proud and excited. What a fascinating little creature she is. The moment they put her in my arms, she stopped her mad screaming and stared at me, wide-eyed and startled. Perhaps I appeared that way to her too. Certainly I felt that way.

She's not what I expected at all. So what did I expect? A little doll I suppose, just a heightened continuation of doll playing for me? When I was playing dolls, it didn't occur to me that they don't respond. Allyson fastened on to my nipple and sucked like she was pulling the very life out

of me into her squirming little body. Such power to come from that tiny mouth. Who says they're helpless? After an initial piercing pain, I felt a thrill of physical pleasure so intense, I was purely contented to let her drain the life out of me. I lay there in stunned and helpless bliss as her struggling quieted and she fell asleep without any slackening of that powerful little mouth. She's no doll.

The nurse came in and caught us like that and scolded me for having her still at the breast after she'd told me no more than five minutes the first time. "You'll be good and sore tomorrow," she warned, satisfied as hell at being able to give a dire warning.

All the grandparents were here. Lewis's parents brought me to the hospital and Mama and Daddy arrived about an hour later just a little before I was wheeled into the delivery room. All were predictably excited, Mama saying, "Oh thank God you came through for me. I've given up on Sophie and Scott." Lewis's Mom said, "It's all up to you of course, for us, with Lewis our only child. We're very proud and grateful." And Lewis's Dad, "Next best thing to a grandson, and not a bad substitute. You did alright." I know I should be grateful for all that gratitude, but I was grateful when they all left so I could have Allyson to myself for a while and look her over without any distraction. But then the nurse came and hauled her off saying, "You both need to rest." And they've been doing it all day, carrying her off. Now I'll be glad when I get her home where I can keep her

with me all the time and get to know her. There seems to be a conspiracy against our getting acquainted.

Lewis will be home in a few weeks. He said it would be impossible for him to get away from his training in time to be here for her birth. He sure seems to be loyal to that training. I was mad when he first told me that. But now I'm glad. He would just be another distraction, and I want to spend all my time on this baby right now. So I thought marriage was my life-purpose, but I see now that was only a step on the road to motherhood. And to think, I thought I wanted a boy. Oh dear, I still have to call Lewis tonight and tell him I've given birth to a girl. Now I wish I'd not been so uppity and insisted that I be allowed to call him myself when his mother wanted to call him. Funny before she was born, I thought that was so important.

Love,

Alys

April 25, 1957

Dear Sophie,

Lewis finally got home last week. He's only got two weeks, so he's trying to spend lots of time with his parents and see all of his old friends. He has so many of them. I was trying to keep up with him the first few days, but I was getting tired and cranky, and Allyson was getting fussy, waking up and crying in the night. First time she's ever kept me awake nights. She usually goes right back to sleep

after she's changed and nursed. I finally told Lewis I was staying home with her and if he didn't want to stay with us he'd have to go by himself. So he prowled around here for a couple of days and today he's off again, been gone since ten o'clock this morning, just called me to say he's eating dinner with his parents and then going to have a few beers with one of his friends.

I don't care. Allyson and I were doing fine by ourselves before he got here. And he'll be gone again in a few days. Probably won't be able to get home again for a year he says because he's going to Germany. Maybe then we'll be able to go with him. But for now it looks like we're going to have to get along without him.

I don't care. When he's gone, I'm going shopping for stories to read to Allyson. It's supposed to be good to read to them even when they're still infants. I talk to her all the time. I tell her stories. I make up stories about her father. She listens and stares at my mouth when I talk to her.

Love,

Alys

May 23, 1957

Dear Sophie,

Allyson is two months old and already starting to talk. Really. She coos and smiles and waves her hands and feet in the air when I tell her stories. She participates. She is a

sunny happy baby, even when her mother is suffering a severe case of the blues.

By the time Lewis left we were barely speaking to each other. He said it didn't bother him about the six-week moratorium on sex, but he also said he wished I'd told him. So what would he have done, not come home at all? He couldn't postpone his leave because it was all set for him to go to Germany. It's certainly not my fault he had to leave during the fifth week.

He also insisted that he was happy to have a girl instead of the planned-for boy. I noticed that he paid a lot of attention to Allyson when his parents and friends were around but hardly seemed to notice her when we were home by ourselves. Hardly noticed me for that matter. He did ask once how long it would take to get my figure back. My God, what happened to my Prince?

We didn't fight. We just stopped talking.

So I was in a sulk for a while after he left, but I guess it's going away now. I guess he has things on his mind. And it must be hard on him too, being away from home for the first time. I feel like I've never been away from home. It was clear how much he missed his parents and his friends. Maybe we didn't know each other well enough before we had to get married?

His letters are punctual but brief. I don't get to know him from them. At first, I wrote long letters to him, but it seems I don't have much to say to him anymore. Before he

came home he limited his once-a-month calls to three minutes; "to save money," he said. Now he's in Germany, I won't get many calls, maybe none. He always tells me he loves me, every letter. He looked handsome in his uniform. Maybe things will be better next time. I have photographs--on my dresser, on a bookcase, on the kitchen counter, even in the bathroom. Maybe we just need time together.

I'll sure be glad to see you when you come home for the Fourth of July. I'm glad you're going to be here for three whole weeks.

Love,

Alys

August 12, 1957

Dear Sophie,

Yes I'm getting out, not sitting around moping anymore about Lewis. I take Allyson to the park every afternoon when she wakes up from her nap. I met a new friend there, a librarian. I noticed him there every day between five and five-thirty when I was there that late. So I started timing my park visits. Well, I've got to have something to get me out of these doldrums; what better than a little harmless flirtation? One day I sat Allyson and myself down on a blanket between the duck pond and the bench he was sitting on and proceeded to tell her this story. When I got done, he came up to us and complimented me on my story telling, told me, "What a beautiful child, how intelligent, she almost

seems to understand."

I retorted, "Of course she understands. I've been telling her stories since she was born. This one's her favorite and she's heard it, with variations, a lot." For a brief minute I wondered if I really wanted to flirt with this guy.

But we got into this long conversation about storytelling and his work at the library. He said the library is always looking for volunteers to read or tell stories at the Children's Hour on Saturday afternoons and if I should ever be interested, he could make room for me in his schedule. "As often as you choose actually," he said, "because we're not actually flooded with volunteers."

I think I might do it. Rather, I think I will do it. I bought a tape recorder, an expensive one. I'm not telling Lewis anything about this whole story-telling venture, especially not about the expensive tape recorder, or the librarian. So I'm practicing story telling. It's fun. Every story I tell comes out a little differently every time I tell it. Not because I plan it that way. I'm surprised as Allyson is. The variations keep her interested. So she's getting to hear a lot of stories, practically all the time she's awake. Hell she'll be telling them herself before long.

Next month is Fairy-Tale month at the library. I'm immersing myself in the Grimm Brothers and H. C. Anderson. Today I'm going to tell my librarian that I will tell a story

next Saturday.

Love,

Alys

10.

April 10, 1986

Dear Sis,

My life is flooding. Literally. It's been raining and raining for weeks. Our basement has flooded six times in the last two weeks. Sixteen years we have lived in this house, and this is the first time we've flooded. And my uterus is flooding. I've been bleeding for two months, frequently overflowing with a prolonged gush. Keeps me constantly alert to my nether end. Alys feels her life drains out through her breasts into Allyson's pulsing little body. Mine's draining out the other end to feed the sewer. I'm unmitigatedly jealous. Oh bitter, bitter! I do not like menopause.

"How, oh how," I pray, literally praying, "do I make meaning of all of this? Is Alys's pleasure supposed to be compensating me. Do I sublimate my rage and grief (never mind! I know you're thinking 'self-pity') in creating a character who makes me gnash my teeth in envy. Can it possibly be mere coincidence that Alys sits rocking, Allyson sucking away at her breast, in a mindless bliss of pure sensation at the very moment when my thirty-five-year-infertile fertility drains out of me. Oh! the ambiguous blessings of biology you endow us with. Damn!"

All these years, I have never felt so bitterly my

childlessness. Would this feel any differently, I wonder, if I had given birth? Somehow, I think not.

I never consciously intended to remain childless. It just seemed to happen that way as I waited for first one thing and then another to be done, or to begin: first for the marriage to begin (it took years to feel really married: I'm still not sure it's begun), and for his career to begin, for my graduate school to get done, and for my aborted scholarly career to begin. Then a decision at thirty-eight to have a baby. Nothing happened, and when I hit forty we quit talking about it. I turned to fiction. It distracted me, story after story. Was that sublimation?

Now this. I'm mad as hell. I hate Alys. I'd like to rip her to shreds. I won't though. I've got to see what happens.

III.

FAIRY TALES,

Training is everything.
Mark Twain

li.

September 21, 1966

Dear Sophie,

The fuss and ceremony of Lewis's death is finally over I guess. You and Scott returned to your far-away places weeks ago. Allyson's not coming home from school any more with a belly ache or pains in her chest, crying that she's sick and needs to stay home. Scott's parents haven't called me for several days. It's been nearly a week since we've seen each other, though Allyson and I will go over tomorrow for dinner. Also tomorrow I will go back to the library, story telling.

It's a strange emptiness I fell. He was always away, so I don't miss him. But I'm still thinking "When Lewis comes home. . .;" "Maybe next time Lewis comes home. . . ." My entire relationship with him has been one long expectation. How do I stop it? No dead body to view, no body ever found-- just bones in ashes around a plane crash, all very anonymous and his wedding ring, a plain gold band, must be millions of such bands.

I'm still catching myself just in time, as I start to

tell Allyson another story about her father. I never realized before how much I talked to her about him, telling and retelling her stories that his parents so often told me. Third-hand stories. How much we all--his parents, Allyson, me--lived our lives these past ten years waiting. Now do I stop waiting, expecting, yearning? What else is there to do?

Last time I talked to Mary she suggested I might go back to school, or get a job. But I was a failure in college. I don't need money. The government takes very good care of us. What kind of work could I get that I would like more than staying home?

Love,

Alys

November 14, 1966

Dear Sophie,

It figures you would agree I should do something besides housekeeping for Allyson and me. I can't even seem to keep busy at sewing anymore, since Allyson started living in jeans and T-shirts. I have the daily cleaning done by ten every morning at the latest. It's a long day until Allyson gets home, all my friends have jobs or they're wrapped up in their marriages and families. More and more Allyson has things to do after school: gymnastics, ballet, scouts, friends, homework. Now she wants to take a paper route.

What did I do to keep busy before Lewis died? I was busy waiting, expecting, preparing? Yes I was. I'm even

getting tired of telling children's stories. Allyson is showing signs that she's not much interested any more. But I don't know what else I want to do. I lounge around on the sofa a lot, reading novels with lots of sex and tragedy. And I scorn women who get hooked on day time soap operas. Maybe I ought to go back to reading fairy tales again. I haven't read them for years, not since that first year of story telling at the library.

I wish Jerome, my library friend, were still here. Sometimes I wish I could have considered divorcing Lewis and marrying him when he asked me. At least I could have had an affair. I wanted to, and I couldn't. It seemed like going too far, I was scared. I haven't heard from him since he got married. I know him better than I did Lewis. I miss him more.

Sometimes I think I ought to get away from here. I'm close to thirty years old and never really been away from home. I talk to Mama or Daddy nearly every day on the phone and see them three or four times a month. Lewis's Mom and Dad have become another set of parents for me, so involved with Allyson and me. I practically have four parents who are the most important people in my life after Allyson. I consult with them on all the major decisions of my life. No wonder I still have this sense of waiting to grow up. It's suddenly dawning on me that they treat me like a child, and it's making me mad.

But how could I take Allyson away from her grandparents,

her friends, her school? And where would I go? And for what? This letter is working me into a state. Guess I'll quit and go read that novel I started this morning.

Love,

Alys

December 2, 1966

Dear Sophie,

I had a visitor yesterday, introduced himself as a close friend of Lewis. A total stranger, a man whose face I had never seen, whose name I had never heard. "A close friend of Lewis." I felt a surge of rage when he said that. He explained that he felt a responsibility to Lewis to visit me and explain about the secret nature of Lewis's work which he felt must have caused me some emotional pain over the years. Flushed with anger, I stammered, "Come in" and led him into the living room while my mind kept tripping over the words "How could you, how could you, how could you be a 'close friend of Lewis' and me not know," as though he were personally responsible for my knowing so little about the man I was married to for ten years. I calmed down as he talked, really very concerned and kind he was.

He said he and Lewis worked very closely for eight years on intelligence of the utmost sensitivity and importance to national security. He said he understood that the intense secrecy was very difficult on personal relations, making intimacy practically impossible. He wanted, he said, to

express sympathy not only for Lewis's death but also for the long difficulty of the marriage itself.

Something let go when he said that, and I started crying like I haven't cried since I got the news of his death. Maybe I didn't really accept at first that there is truly nothing left to wait for. I cried for hours after he left, wailing not for the loss of what had been but for what I wished had been.

Today I'm marvelling and wondering between some continued sniffing: Lewis was a spy. It's the first time I've used that word in relation to Lewis's work. It's not that I didn't always know, even without him ever talking about it, that he did intelligence work--"intelligence," peculiar word for spying. But I never thought about it. I was never even curious. Now I'm wondering, "Was it adventurous for him? Did he enjoy it? Far more important it was to him than me or Allyson? Far more stimulating and exciting?" I remember the absent, far away look he'd get whenever he spent a few waking hours in the house with just Allyson and me, which he did seldom. On leave, he always seemed controlled by a nervous, restless energy. When I tried to keep up with his compulsive visiting of parents and old school friends, I'd end up exhausted at the end of thirty days, when he took that much leave. Often he'd take two weeks twice a year rather than thirty days at once. That seemed easier on all of us.

Between his leaves, I yearned. And when his leaves

would end I was both disappointed and glad to be rid of the most acute tension that his touch inspired. Every time, our love-making aroused without relieving, tension building every day of his leave. Sometimes we'd try to talk about it. He'd ask me to tell him what I wanted or needed. All I could say was, "More time." There was never enough time. The yearning in his absence was easier, familiar. I didn't have to respond to it.

Maybe there is never enough time for me? Does my grief all boil down to unrelieved lust? Because that's what I was thinking of when Lewis's friend talked of the "long difficulty of marriage." That's what set off that fit of crying, the realization that my horniness for Lewis will never be relieved. No matter what other sex might bring in the future, I will never find relief for the long tension his touch set off in me every time we were together.

Christmas is nearly here. I've got to pull myself together, I suppose and pretend some joy, for Allyson and Lewis's Mom and Dad. I suppose we'll all pretend some joy. I can't even have the pleasure of buying Allyson toys. She wants "a microscope or a telescope, no more stuffed toys." She's giving her toys away, little by little to neighbor kids, to my friends' kids who are smaller. I saw a big white polar bear last week that I want her to have. Shit.

Love,

Alys

August 1, 1967

Dear Sophie,

I'm not surprised at your reaction to John. I sensed when you were home that you didn't much like him. Scott didn't like him either. I could tell even if he didn't say anything, actually because he didn't say anything, pretended he thought it was just a casual friendship. God Scott seems naive sometimes. Mama and Daddy don't like him either, so I don't take him there any more. I've never bothered to introduce him to Lewis's parents, and I make no attempt to have Allyson "get to know him." I can't argue with your suspicion that he is a womanizer, a playboy. You know what? I don't care. I don't want a husband, I want a lover who can follow through. I had a husband. I waited ten years for him to turn into a lover who could follow through. He didn't. So I've found a lover. That awful, itchy waiting is relieved, occasionally, for now anyway, maybe for the first time since I was fourteen years old--remember Roger? How I wanted and feared to go all the way? There's not much to going all the way, just touch and timing in sync, all a matter of mechanics.

No, even before I was fourteen. I think I was only about eight years old when Greg Waters (who was married to Lucille and lived on top of the hill above home) kissed me on the mouth. I think he meant it as a simple kiss of affection, at least when he started it. It was a public kiss at our cousin's wedding reception. He grabbed me up in his

arms and whirled me around the dance floor, hugging me tight. And when the music stopped he sat me on the gift table, cupped my face in his hands, and kissed me a light touch of mouth to mouth. But then his mouth opened and covered mine, and his tongue brushed my lower lip. And then it was over, too too brief. He crowded my fantasies for years. My pelvis twitched every time I saw him. He was always kind and friendly to me, but he never touched me again. I still melt a little when I see him. To this day, I am unable to think of him in that act as a dirty old man.

Hell, I don't know when that itch started. Maybe it starts the day we're born, or the moment we're conceived even. I don't expect John to be around forever to relieve it. Truthfully, I don't even want him to. Except for the erotic attraction we have almost nothing in common. But I hope he hangs around for another few months, or at least weeks. Really, don't worry about John breaking my heart. Lewis already broke it, regularly, once or twice a year; I've probably no heart (whatever that mysterious organ is) left to break. And Lewis was not a womanizer. He was a good man.

Maybe I'm ready to graduate from the Children's Story hour at the library. Allyson quit going with me entirely, found her own way to the upper stories while I'm still below. There's a Story Teller's Club forming in town. We plan to get together and tell each other stories. We'll be the only group north of Bangor and hopefully we'll get members from all over the county. I think I'll do "Sleeping Beauty,"

maybe from the Prince's point of view, for my first performance. I'm nervous and excited--my first adult audience. I suppose that means I have to tell a grown-up fairy tale.

*

Sleeping Beauty [retold by Alys]

or

Portrait of a Stud [subtitled by Alys Narrator]

The life of a prince is not all it's cracked up to be. You try hacking your way through one-hundred acres of thorny thickets to rescue a princess from her enchanted sleep. And what I'll find when I get there. . . . But that's getting ahead of my story. Before I can remember, she fell asleep, put under a spell by a jealous rival. I used to hear my father the king talk of her over cards with his knights. I was small enough to sneak down and hide in the wood box after nurse put me to bed. There was a lot of excited snickering among those knights as they talked of the reward they would get when they reached her. They were already competing, way back then, to be the first to awaken her and claim the reward.

And they tried. I saw the results of their trials. They would return to the castle bleeding from thorn scratches and bruised from club blows of monsters who lived in the thickets protecting the sleep of the princess. Most knights gave up pretty easily and quickly, after a year or two, and were spared the worst torments, but there was one--his name

was Jobedeed--who persisted. Time after time, I watched him ride out, armour glittering in the sunrise, grim and determined. And time after time, I watched him return, bloody and bruised and mad as hell, red all over from sunset light and blood and rage, and off he'd go again, each time more grim and determined than the last. I watched him do that for fifteen years. Until they finally had to chain him up in the dungeon, getting dangerous to himself and everyone else with his rage. He beat himself to death straining against those chains.

I watched them all; especially I watched Jobedeed. And I concluded they all failed because they had no finesse: no style, no class, no manners, no patience. In short, they had a bad attitude. So I observed and I listened while I was growing up. And I took notes. I concluded there's some flaw in this training for chivalry that doesn't take account of this particular situation. Chivalry's fine when all the participants know the rules and play by them, but it was invented to slay dragons and rescue damsels in distress. There are no dragons in that thicket, only monsters; Sleeping Beauty seems downright content with her sleep; and a horse is no damned good to carry you through thorns. So I observed and I made notes: "Learn the rules."

I watched that thicket and those monsters for five years, hiding in a nearby grove of trees, perched in the tallest tree that overlooked the whole bramble forest. I got to know all the habits of brambles and monsters. I saw there

was a system at work. And I came to believe that I could learn to work that system to my own advantage.

First I observed that those monsters were all naked, and they didn't get torn up on the thorns like our knights in armour. They moved freely in and out and through, and all they had for weapons were their fearsome clubs. They only hit the knights who tried to get through. They touched the brambles; softly they touched them with their clubs. And the brambles yielded, parted at their soft touch, and let them through and closed behind them. This I observed, and I made notes: "Don't hit. Touch softly."

And I watched where they got their clubs. They grew out of the roots of some of the toughest and thorniest brambles. They start to grow as a narrow stalk, good gripping size: and when this stalk reaches a height of two to three feet, it sort of blossoms into a mushroom-shaped head, about six to ten inches in diameter, the whole stalk and head in prime as hard as a cypress knee or a redwood burl. It took several years for a club to complete its growth. Picked too soon and it is too soft for effective use. If unpicked at prime it hardens so that the sharpest axe can not penetrate it. I concluded from this that it hardens from the head down. Curious. So I observed, and I made notes: "Pay attention to the right degree of hardness, from the head down."

And I observed the monster's habits. The monsters come in all sizes, as do normal people, from the tiniest infant to the tallest and brawniest. Their life is simple. They eat

and rest, throw an occasional party for recreation, patrol the bramble forest to protect the sleep of the princess, and copulate, assuring future generations to carry on their work. They're so hairy, even the newborn, it was difficult for a long time for me to distinguish sex.

I had been watching for two and a half years and had several good clubs, sneaked from some growing on the edge of my grove. But I was beginning to despair of finding any vulnerability in their patrol system. They patrolled twenty-four hours a day, patrolled thoroughly. I had watched at various times, all hours, and had never found a time that was unpatrolled. I also had never seen them in the act of copulation though I had witnessed birth a number of times.

One night, recalling an old legend that sex is best on the full of the moon, I decided to observe through the night of a full moon. The moon rose spectacularly, and spectacularly ascended. No variation in the regular routine. The patrol was proceeding as thoroughly and efficiently as always. I was about to nod off as the moon was descending along about two o'clock in the morning when I noticed a stir and flutter of unusual activity. All patrol monsters turned toward the moon. Sleeping monsters rose and faced the moon. Eating monsters paused and faced the moon. I hurriedly climbed higher in my lookout tree and watched, enchanted, for two hours, the mating ritual that involved, as nearly as I could tell, every inhabitant of that forest, from the youngest to the oldest (the advantages of early and

consistent training). That night, I was so spellbound, I forgot my quest, didn't even think that the forest was completely unguarded and that I could go kiss the princess. The rite was elaborate and prolonged, and I even forgot to take notes that first moon-struck night.

For the next two and a half years I watched, and I did take notes, every full moon. I choreographed every gesture and movement, noted every voice inflection, sketched the shifting shadows slowly elongating with the setting moon. I made notes, volumes: one of choreography, one of music, one of sketches.

I was just getting heavily into a volume that would capture the whole, show the coordination of gesture with sound and shadow. Ah! It was an ambitious work; it would have been a masterpiece, worthy of the Nobel Prize at least. And the world sorely needs that work. But my father, the king, was getting impatient: "Five years," he thundered, "I've been supporting a budding anthropologist for Christ's sake, for five years. This kingdom needs no anthropologists. It wants knights--doers of deeds, slayers and saviors. Now go wake up that damned princess and do me proud. The kingdom, my son, the kingdom is counting on you."

Heavy hearted, I spent one more night at my work and bid a silent, sad farewell to my subjects. I had grown especially attached to one particular couple. My last night with them, they seemed to know it was their finale. They gave me a supreme performance. I observed; I made notes,

tears splashing and staining those final pages.

But I am trained to duty. And so, the next full moon, armed with a club in each hand to part the brambles, I walked through the forest, watching--so close I could reach out and touch them--my beloved monsters in the throes of their passion, oblivious to me.

I reached the castle and kissed the princess. She awoke, to put it mildly. It was easy for me after all that observation and note-taking, after learning all I had about gesture and motion and sound, about touch and timing. I carried her back to my father the king. He was well pleased, my mother the queen having run off so many years ago with an itinerant knight.

Since then I have walked through many thorny bramble forests, kissed many sleeping beauties to awakening for many kings. You know how it is. Once you establish a reputation, somehow a demand grows out of it. A law of economics. When I was growing up Sleeping Beauty was famous because she was one of a kind. Now she's famous because there are so many of her. And the saddest thing: I've walked through so many herds of horny monsters, they long ago ceased to excite me.

*

I think grown-up fairy tales may be fun.

Love,

Alys

October 17, 1968

Dear Sophie,

Allyson came home from school last Monday all excited and announced in reverential pride, "Mother I am now officially a woman."

She's never called me "Mother" except when she used to act out roles from the fairy tales I told. She hasn't done that in a long time, and I first thought with delight she was role playing again. I shrieked, "Aha, my little leading lady has returned."

"No Mother," she said, disgusted. "Today my menses began."

Can you imagine from a twelve-year old, "My menses began"? I never used that kind of pompous terminology with her. She must have been reading something I didn't give her. Deflated, I said, "Oh your period finally started."

We've been preparing for it for months, both of us jittery and irritable. She has several friends who have already started. They brag to each other you know, just as my friends and I did. Did you with yours? Each time she heard about someone her age starting, she'd come home despondent and mope around for days finding all kinds of things wrong with her body and mad at me because I didn't start until I was nearly fourteen. "You've afflicted me with abnormal genes. That's what's wrong with me," she yelled just a few weeks ago.

So I should be relieved that it's finally happened, that

her tension and nervousness have disappeared, that I suddenly have a young woman living in the house with me. But I'm not relieved. I want my child back. I'm not ready to live with a woman. And the worst thing: I'm supposed to pretend I'm happy for her, pretend that I don't feel wounded by her growing up. My God, she seems suddenly to have grown six inches in one week. She's taller than me. How did that happen without my noticing? And all this week she moves with such womanly self-assurance, grace, pride, a ridiculously smug smile constantly playing about her mouth, a veritable Mona Lisa.

I never have been good at pretense you know, and last night I just blew up and broke down when she, with sweet maturity, called me "Mother" one more time.

"Damn it, don't call me 'Mother,'" I yelled pounding my fist so hard on the kitchen counter it hurt, and I sank down on the stool and sobbed. "I don't want to grow up, I mean, I don't want you to grow up. We had fun. You're no fun anymore."

As I sniffled and sobbed, she patted me and rubbed my shoulders and neck and soothed me with her strange, grown up, motherly (I swear to God) voice, "There, there Mother, I mean Mumsie. It's OK. It's going to be alright. If 'Mother' bothers you, I'll keep calling you 'Mumsie'. But we both know that children need to grow up. You'll be alright. You just need time to adjust. But you'll see, you'll be alright."

Which made me cry all the harder for a little while. And she just stood there and kept it up--the patting, the rubbing, the soothing maternal talk. Until finally I had to stop crying in self-defense.

This morning, I started my own period--just one week after hers. I told her about it, trying to be very adult and grown up in my discussion of premenstrual tension (mine and hers). I kept reminding her of how she had been just two short weeks ago, while she fixed us breakfast, insisting that I let her pamper me because I wasn't feeling well. And since her "Mumsie" was coming out in the same tones as her "Mother," which sounded ridiculous, I told her she might as well call me "Mother" to help me adjust. Which she was entirely willing and eager to do: "See, Mother, I told you it would be alright."

I briefly fantasized pulling her over my knee and flailing her. But the image was so incongruous with the poised young woman standing before me that I restrained myself. Besides, as I've already said, she's bigger than me. Now she's gone off to school leaving me with a mess in the kitchen from her pampering. That gives me a little hope.

I'm working over and polishing Snow White from the wicked stepmother's point of view.

*

Snow White [retold by Alys]

All my married life I've heard the king's stories of her conception--black ebony framing three drops of the Queen's

pure red blood on fresh white snow. Then at the birth she died. Every year on the anniversary of that conception, he tells the story to anyone who happens his way. With a tear in his eye he tells it and with a hushed, reverential tone in his voice. Not much of the kingdom's business gets done on that day I can tell you. It's practically become a national holiday, a queer sort of holiday, some kind of cross between festival and mourning ritual. Over the years, because of his compulsive telling, the image has affixed itself in the national mind, an emblem of perfect conceptional beauty. I could hardly hope to compete, you think, but you see don't you the enticement of extraordinary challenge? I'm a competitive woman. I thrive on such a challenge.

So I went after the king as soon as I heard. Getting him to marry me was not the big challenge. Marriage is just a legal technicality after all. The power of the image was the big challenge. It held him utterly, controlled every erotic impulse. So he married me because the kingdom needed a queen and Snow White needed a mother. He told me frankly, "I have no intention of consummating a marriage. I have experienced one perfect union. Nothing else can ever measure up." And he told me (the first of many times I was to hear it) the story of that union. "Our marriage is a business arrangement," he concluded.

You see the challenge? For me the business was only the beginning. I was experienced enough to have some confidence in the power of myself as image. I had yet to meet an image

I could not overpower. And I had met some tough ones. You might say it's my calling, the thing I was born to do--with that mirror, what else?

And I would have succeeded. I would have succeeded! I would have succeeded, damn it! if Snow White were not in the way. Snow White, the living embodiment of the image, Snow White, flaunting daily before her father that pulsing little body--blood red, ebony black, and snow white.

Nevertheless, I persevered, confident with the assurance of my mirror, confident in the powers of myself as image. And I was winning. I had patience and endurance. I know I was winning. With my constant beauty I was wearing away the king's resistance to my allure.

But as the king's resistance wore away Snow White was growing more and more beautiful. I could see that clearly even without the aid of my mirror. Then, always a precocious child, she approached puberty, and I could see the king's developing leer turning away from me and toward Snow White as she continued her childhood practices. Climbing in his lap, pulling at his ear lobes, stroking his hair, occasionally smothering his face and neck with wet kisses from her blood red mouth.

Now the king is an honorable man. And his response to this untenable situation was to patch up the fraying edges of his resistance. He somberly and gently began to teach Snow White about restraint in expressing affection. And with me he became abrupt and severe, reminding me smartly of the

business nature of our marriage agreement. It was then he had the story of her conception published in illuminated manuscript, to shore up the power of the image, to stabilize it and make it permanent. A flurry of critical acclaim and patriotic fervor accompanied that publication. The king became exceedingly regal.

Alarmed, I redoubled my efforts, consulting my mirror over and over again throughout every day. The mirror continued to assure me that I was the fairest, that my beauty was not waning. But it refused, steadfastly, to assure me that my allure was growing.

Then one day it happened, inevitably with Snow White's growth. My mirror told me Snow White had surpassed me. The power of myself as image was defeated by an image that grew before my eyes, stronger and more powerful day by day, year by year. Of course then there was no alternative. I had to turn to violence. I had to smash her. "With her out of the way," I reasoned, "the king would have no more reasons to maintain his resistance."

So first there was the hunter, because unlike the former Queen I do not want to mar myself with blood, and I do not find blood beautiful--on snow or otherwise, however framed. Needless to say I nursed a lot of hostility toward that image. But I do like cooked meat, and I relished the notion of eating her heart. You can imagine my rage on discovering it wasn't her heart the hunter brought me to prove her murder. What, I wondered, was it I ate? Raging and

wondering, I vomited again and again that day. Retching and wretched, I even questioned if it was all worth it. I fleetingly thought of simply walking quietly away from the whole thing and maybe taking up love in some remote village where life might be simpler and images less powerful than in a king's palace.

But I pulled myself together the next day (my calling after all), plotted and planned anew, and trusted no more to others. I got lots of experience with disguises, more images. Still hating blood, I used first the tight lacing and then the poisoned comb. Snow White is so gullible, "innocent" and "trusting" I suppose her admirers call her. Thwarted at every turn I was by those wretched, adoring dwarves, defeated by an image of innocence and trust, and that awful color.

Even so, for a time, I succeeded with that poisoned apple. Oh that time was sweet. As the weeks and months and years wore away, so did the king's resistance once more, though it took all the patience and endurance I could muster to persist through his long grief over Snow White's disappearance. Gradually the fond leer returned to his eye, he endured a pat on the shoulder, then a brief stroke, eventually a kiss on the cheek. And then the night I pulled out all the stops, a powerful ale (more powerful than he knew) before his dinner--to make him forget his dinner. I excused myself to get into something more comfortable. I had been experimenting with disguises of those detested colors,

something to evoke but not duplicate that image. I reasoned a duplication would just trigger his resistance, even under the influence of that ale. I created an image that would work as a subliminal cue.

So I reappeared: snow-white lace gown with tanned skin peeking through all over, faint blush of blood-red on lips and tanned cheeks, a saucy, brief, black fur beret nestled amid abundant blond curls. It worked. The color worked. I climbed into his lap, with my experience placing myself and moving with far more skill than could Snow White with her innocence and trust. I stroked his hair. I licked his earlobes and eyelids and mouth. Oh no, not like Snow White. It was just her color I borrowed, disguised and improved with my experience.

And it worked. He grew enormously excited. We were tumbling around on the floor. I was just saying to myself, "To hell with the perfumed bed I carefully prepared," when a runner broke into the room.

Breathless and bursting with the excitement of the news he had to tell, he did not even apologize for intruding, I dare say did not even notice he was intruding on an intimate moment. We lay there on the floor--the king's pants at his feet, one leg in and one leg out, white silk lace and arms and legs all tangled up together--and we stared in dazed astonishment at the runner who stood at attention making eye contact with empty space in the air above us. He announced in loud, heraldic tones, "The Princess Snow White is found.

She lives in the arms of the Prince who claims her for his bride. They request the honor of your presence at the royal wedding, immediately. The Prince has something special in store for the queen."

I didn't like the way he said that last, but I had no choice. I completely lost the king's attention at the runner's first sentence. He was on his feet in regal stance, sans pants, before the runner finished speaking. I knew, dragging myself to my knees and trying to cover myself with the white silk lace, that my fight was over. I'd lost, forever. I sank down to sit, crossed my legs, bowed my head, and knew a few moments of peace as I surrendered the struggle.

Now the wedding is over, and I face the fire that heats slippers I will dance to my death in. It's not a bad way to go actually--very dramatic. Fire and dance have their own power and beauty. I don't mind that really. A great image.

But I can't help tormenting myself with final questions. Where did I, with my strength and experience and patience and reason, go wrong? How did she win, gullible and meek as she is? Does it all come down to a dumb cliché? Innocence triumphs over experience; the meek shall inherit. . . . All that crap? All the beauty being at least fairly equal, are the strong, the reasonable, the experienced always crucified?

*

I made the Queen's costume to perform "Snow White" in. I thought, "How would this vain, imaginative woman attire

herself for her final performance, the firey dance?" And I thought, "She can't resist the colors that defeated her." So I made a long, blood-red, princess-style dress with shiny black satin tiara and sash. I wore a black wig and false eyelashes with heavy black mascara. And I powdered all exposed skin--face, neck, hands--a dead white. A macabre effect. Now I have fantasies of performing it with special lighting to simulate the fire she faces. And mirrors, lots of mirrors placed at various angles, to reflect multiple views of her image.

Love,

Alys

November 18, 1968

Dear Sophie,

"Snow White" was a hit. Allyson watched, indulgently, as I made up for my first performance (I've already done it three times). No, you're right, she's not suddenly turned into an adult overnight. Now that she's started her period, she's starting to worry about boy friends. Lots of her friends, she says, have them already. Oh God, I hope I don't have to lay down a law. Twelve is definitely too young for dating, but I figure as long as she doesn't have any prospects, I don't have to tell her that.

Still, she has days when she is maddening with her grown-up image. Her latest: "Mother, I'm going to be a physicist," she announced several days ago, and followed that

with an extended plan for high school and college--straight through to a Ph.D. All very reasonable and thoughtful it seemed to me, a result of a number of talks she said she has been having with her science teacher. Not anything like the various resolutions over the years that came and went whimsically in response to what was going on in her life. A physicist? It's not in my plan of action to have my daughter become a physicist. I think I better have a talk with that teacher.

Love,

Alys

October 21, 1969

Dear Sophie,

Damn it. Does it ever occur to you that I am over thirty years old, and it's about time you started to treat me like an adult, whether you approve or not. Yes I know it's been three years since Lewis died; Allyson won't occupy my time forever; I still don't have a job; I'm still not getting any training; I'm tramping around in a manner that attracts lustful rather than marital attention; I spend my time in fairy tales; I'm not getting any younger. Yes, yes I know all that. Whatever makes you think you have to keep reminding me?

My God, I have two sets of parents hovering over me. What makes you think you have to keep a long-distance watch? I'm not an economic burden to anyone but the taxpayers. I am

discreet with my love life. You're the only one, besides the lovers, who knows I sleep with them. And you only know because I tell you. Must I stop telling you? Hell, no, I won't. Perhaps I should make it more public. Like my fairy tales. Is that why you don't like my fairy tales? Don't worry, I won't make my love life public. I don't want to embarrass Allyson.

And there are some people around who appreciate my story telling and pay a little respect. Groups as far away as Bangor and Portland have invited me to make guest appearances. Story telling is not just child's play to these people but a respected and respectable art form.

So there.

I'm in such a sulk, I vow to myself I'm not going to tell you anything more about my life if you can't show a little respect. But I suppose I have the habit too strong to break. So, if I'm not going to stop telling you about me, then you're going to have to start accepting some of the things you sound like you don't quite approve of.

My ugly step-sisters are telling "Cinderella" in Portland next weekend.

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Cinderella [retold by Alys]

It was part of a package deal. Our Father and Ella married Mother when we were too small to have any say in the matter. Not that it could have mattered to say how we felt. Mother, ugly as she was and with two ugly little daughters,

hadn't a lot of matrimonial choices even though she came with a house and two acres.

Ella, pretty Ella with the golden curls, and the sunny smile, and the pleasing ways. Everyone adored her. Pretty Ella became a princess in our house. Mother insisted on it, insisted that we wait on her and take care of her and pamper her. She said, "We all have to be extra good to Ella to make up for the death of her poor mother." But we knew better. We knew we had to be good to her to help Mother keep our Father. And so we did. We combed and brushed and bathed and dressed and pampered. We found bad tangles in her hair that required yanks with the comb. There were unavoidable bruising pinches while dressing her. Once, while bathing her, we slipped and accidentally fell into the tub, pushing her head under the water. Mother caught that accidental slip, and we caught hell for it. So we made up for it with extra pampering, offering to comb her hair and dress her without being told.

Mother, never secure in our Father's love, always insisted we call him Father, dictating the very tone of voice. We were to accord him every respect and then some, hoping to keep him. In private conversations between us two ugly step sisters, his name always came out "our Father" with an accent of mingled dread and awe and scorn. It still does. We pampered him too. And that was easier in a way than pampering Ella, but harder too. Oh, handsome he was! And we longed for his attention. We'd watch him catch up Ella and

hug her tight, or take her hand while walking. We'd wish hard we could do something to get him to treat us like that. But he never did. He scolded us for clumsiness and laughed at our big noses and big feet and told us often to get out of the way. Oh, handsome he was! Small as we were we could see and appreciate that. But he'd an eye turned to the backside of every passing pretty skirt. And we could see that too, on the very day of the wedding even. He hung around our house and two acres just long enough to get us stuck with Ella--one year, two months, and five days to be exact.

On the Fourth of July in a year of our Lord, he tanked up with ale in patriotic celebration at the annual picnic on the town green. And he chased one of those pretty skirts right out of town. We two ugly stepsisters were watching from a perch in a second story of the band house where we were plotting one of our daily revenge schemes on pretty Ella. First we saw that pretty skirt go by and paid attention because we'd been watching our Father watch that skirt for some time. We saw her hurry out of sight of the picnickers and pause to sit at the well on the edge of town. About five minutes after she passed our perch, our Father passed. And we watched. We watched them meet, and embrace, and kiss, and fool around some other ways and then move on together--hurrying. We watched until they were out of our sight. We watched and were glad, hoping he wouldn't come back. And we plotted what we would do if he did and if he didn't. Either way we were going to tell Mother the whole

truth of what we saw.

And we did. But we waited to make sure they had plenty of time to get away. We waited through all the afternoon's festivities that followed. We waited through the worryings of Mother and Ella that started about an hour after we watched our Father chase the back of that pretty skirt out of town. We waited while those worryings progressed from mild sputtering through a pretense of gaiety and unconcern. We waited through Mother's out-right lie about our Father's absence, a lie steadfastly believed by Cinderella, probably to this day. We waited through the tension of the packing up of baskets and the tired irritated walk home, Mother snapping and biting at our clumsiness and slowness with helping. When we got home she couldn't wait to dispatch us to bed so she could sulk and worry in solitude. It was then we told her and pretty Ella what we saw, told them just the facts, just the straightforward, matter-of-fact facts of what we saw. And then we ran off to bed and listened to Mother become hysterical with rage and turn it all on pretty Ella.

We listened, and it was sweet. And Ella became Cinderella, gradually as the days and weeks grew into months and years and our Father never returned. At first revenge was so sweet, we paid a lot of attention to her what with the rage that had been growing for one year, five months, and two days. But even revenge has its limits, eventually burns itself out. As the years went by Cinderella, with soot-smearred hair and face and rags, became a shadow in our house,

melded with other shadows, only noticed when something wanted doing. And that didn't happen often. I suppose she made sure of that in view of the quality of attention when we did notice her.

So you can understand why we didn't recognize her at that ball. We hadn't seen her for years. No way could we identify her in the radiant Princess who captured the Prince's heart. Oh, that hurt! We were watching the Prince every minute through the whole evening. There was no way we could miss the look on his face when he first turned his gaze upon that Princess. We knew immediately, everyone knew immediately, that all hope was lost for the rest of us. And we never did see what he saw in her that could command that attention. Oh, pretty enough she was and prettier than us certainly, but no prettier than many of the hopefuls there, and not as pretty as some. She holds her head wrong, slightly bowed in an attitude of reverence and looks up through wide adoring eyes. It's the light, that radiance bestowed by that damned Fairy Godmother, that did it, bewitched him. But anyway, it was the Prince's expression as he gazed on her that convinced us, not her outstanding beauty. And it hurt, that gaze turned on her and not on us.

We sulked and bemoaned our fate in the weeks that followed, still paying no mind to Cinderella. So you can imagine our astonishment at that business of the glass slipper. We didn't even notice her slip into the parlor where the Prince's page tried obligingly to squeeze our big

feet into that tiny slipper--even Mother's were tried.

But the Prince noticed. Suddenly his gaze looked right past us, rapt with that same gaze he turned on the Princess the night of the ball. We all turned our heads following his gaze, and seeing nothing (only Cinderella), we turned back, eager with hope and desire that after all he meant that gaze to be on us. But no. Without moving his stare, he took the glass slipper from the hand of the page, walked right past us, bent down on one knee, and slipped that slipper on the little right foot of Cinderella!! He did it all without ever shifting his gaze from her eyes which were shining at him in adoration out of her soot-smearred face. And still without shifting his gaze, he rose and kissed that soot-smearred mouth, long and lingering.

And while they were kissing, that abominable Fairy Godmother appeared out of nowhere to wave her magic wand over Cinderella's head and transform the sooty hair to golden curls. On her head, a dazzling diamond tiara appeared. And Fairy Godmother touched Cinderella's right shoulder with her magic wand and transformed the sooty rags to the beautiful white ball gown glittering all over with a hundred, tiny, sparkling diamonds. The grimy soot faded from her skin, and Princess Ella stood there in all her white and radiant glory, kissing the Prince. And he scooped her up in his arms and carried her out over the threshold of our house and across our two acres where a coach and eight awaited, and thus off to his castle. Ever since, brides are scooped up by grooms

and carried across thresholds in symbolic tribute to a perfect love.

We just sat there, stunned and silent and watching across the threshold and across our two acres and thought of that castle and its hundreds of acres of rolling lawn and garden. And we were grim in our misery. There is no justice and no accounting for Fairy Godmother's choices. We are the ones who really always needed Her help, ugly and mean with big feet, and none of the right sort of training.

Princess Ella was always trained for Princess-hood. We trained her, remember, in that one year, five months and two days before our Father ran off. So it wasn't always willing or kind training. It was still training which is more than we got. In the long years that followed that princess training, she developed a capacity for humility, and courage, and endurance, and patience. We trained her for that too. No one ever gave us such training. And oh the bitter, bitter dregs we were forced to drink. Unless you have seen the Prince in person you can't begin to imagine how bitter. And furthermore--all those years when Cinderella was just a shadow in our lives--we discovered after she left she was reading up on how to be a princess.

When we were forced to tend the fire and hearth ourselves after she was carried off, we found them stored behind the wood box--one hundred how-to books on Princess-hood. They all say essentially the same thing in different ways: "Humility, courage, endurance, patience. And absolute

unwavering faith that one day your Prince will come and carry you off." The faith is the hardest part for everyone, we guess, because most of the books were devoted to practical exercises in building faith; only brief introductions of theory and even that more practical than mystical. And we found all Cinderella's notebooks containing all those exercises meticulously worked with charcoal in Cinderella's small, neat hand. We know, it sounds corny, doesn't it? We don't believe it either. Without Fairy Godmother and the early training, there's certainly no hope.

But what the hell; it doesn't hurt to try. You've got to do something.

Mother died years ago. Our hair is long since white. The Prince and Ella have long since been King and Queen with Princes and Princesses now grown. We see them occasionally passing through with pomp and circumstance on their way to a royal wedding or birth. And we still wile away our idle afternoons--after the fire and hearth are tended and our two acres cultivated--with an exercise or two from those books. We don't believe in it of course, but what the hell, it's more fun than Scrabble or Trivia Pursuit.

Sometimes our neighbors, two brothers, a bachelor and a widower, join us for tea, and they work those exercises with us. It's a game we play. And we laugh about Cinderella's gullibility. Last week, the brothers joined us to celebrate our birthday and told us we get more lovely with every passing year. Flatters. They're just getting attached to

our tea cake. But yesterday, we were marvelling at how such ugly youths could turn out to be such charming old men.

And now, after all these years, big feet are in fashion this year.

*

Allyson tells me I go too far sometimes with my fairy tales. But she's at least attending again. And I notice she laughs too with the rest of the audience. I wish one of these days you would attend a performance, maybe on your next trip home? Why don't you come home for Thanksgiving?

Love,

Alys

November 5, 1969

Dear Sophie,

Yes, I suppose I was a mite defensive in my last letter. I know you think you just give advice because you worry about me and have my best interest at heart. But I read your advice and worry as a lack of trust in me to handle my own affairs. No trust translates into no respect to me.

Oh, I know I'm probably picking on you for a general restlessness and irritation. I'm feeling confined here, wanting to try living someplace else but afraid of uprooting Allyson and me. Allyson is the single big responsibility I've ever had to handle. Even with her I've had two sets of her grandparents always close by, always willing and eager (insisting even) to assume the responsibility. Four more

years and she'll be out of high school. Hopefully she'll go away to college. Maybe then I can grow up. Maybe then I'll go to college too.

But right now, I really have no interest in college and no interest in any money-paying job that I see. My story telling is my job. I spend a lot of time reading, rehearsing, designing and making costumes. And I like it. I have fun. I'm restless, but I'm not bored.

I don't know. Maybe I am a lousy model for Allyson. I've never had to support myself. Maybe I'm teaching her that it's not necessary. She won't have the government supporting her forever. Maybe I am frittering away my time in idle pleasure. Sometimes I too wish that I would grow up, but then I think "Why? So I could experience the 'happiness' of all the grown up people I know." You're grown up. You've been grown up forever. Is it because you enjoy it so much that you think I need to? I know "grow up" is not the phrase you're using, but it's what I'm reading.

Love,

Alys

12.

November 16, 1986

Dear Sis,

I'm glad you're enjoying Alys's fairy tales. You should see her in action when she performs them. She tells "Sleeping Beauty" on Valentines' Day dressed up in a princely knight's costume she made: a hooded, gold lamé "armour"

studded all over with bleeding red-foil valentine hearts, carrying a three dimensional valentine-heart shield of red foil with red-foil, three dimensional blood drops suspended by thin, invisible nylon strings. She produces real tears for the Prince's final night with his beloved monsters.

She's studying voice by correspondence. She sends in her lessons on tape to her teacher in Minneapolis and gets them back with a critique and comments. She's getting into it in a big way, does a credible male voice for the Prince in "Sleeping Beauty." For "Cinderella," she's practicing ventriloquism, no kidding. She has a siamese-twin costume, quite an engineering feat, and she appears as the step-sisters, not only ugly but deformed by their attachment. They tell the story by turns. Alys is getting quite accomplished with her ventriloquism. At times the two sisters talk (or appear to) at the same time. What's more, when they talk at the same time, they don't always say the same thing. I don't understand how she accomplishes that. She improvises an occasional fight between them about matters of interpretation. Then their attachment becomes really grotesque--enraged at each other and not able to get away from each other. Ooh. It makes me shudder. Not really funny is it? Her audience roars, laughing at those fights. The esthetics of humor. And she loves the attention so, she's encouraged to go farther. I wonder if she'll know when she's gone too far, when she's gone all the way. She's come a long way from her passion for reality?

Remember all those pages and pages ago, I wrote you that our stories create "images of truth, truths we believe in, beliefs we live by?" Neat and tidy phrasing, don't you think? But what kind of truths does Alys create with these performances, the whole thing: costumes and setting and ad-lib fairy tales that seem to have only a surface relationship either to the originals or to the context out of which they were created. I thought that "Sleeping Beauty" would reflect her relationship with John; but that prince is not John. "Snow White" surely exaggerates beyond all recognition her ambivalence about Allyson's growing up. Her snit at Sophie hardly justifies the step-sisters in "Cinderella" with their bizarre attachment. Looking at timing and juxtaposition, I thought I could at least analyze the relationship of stories to personal history. But now I see that relationship is far more complicated than I realized. And the relationship of stories to other stories? What is Alys creating? And why? Who's in control of this novel? So much for pat answers. I don't know what the hell is going on. I don't know where Alys comes from, and it becomes increasingly apparent I don't know where she's going.

Alys consumes me these days. My historian's nagging about having to make an appointment to see me. I can't possibly think about our family history right now. Even menopause got put on hold for Alys (with the help of hormone replacement therapy). Is it, after all, just an escape? I'm stumped. I do not understand. Creation is a powerful

mystery, an enchantment.

IV.

PRIMAL SCENES,

There are few things more exciting to
me than a psychological reason.

Henry James

13.

January 20, 1987

Dear Sis,

This morning on All things Considered I heard a story about identical twin sisters in England, "The Silent Twins," who stopped speaking in childhood and took up writing: diaries, stories, novels. They moved, felt, and thought in perfect imitation of one another without ever talking about it. In adolescence they turned to crime, vandalism and arson. At nineteen, they were arrested, eventually diagnosed as psychopaths, and indefinitely sentenced to a mental hospital where they are currently being treated with behavior modification. The author writing their story contends they created a psychotic and passionate symbiosis, and now under treatment are learning to conform to society, to talk, and to lose their creativity. Excerpts from their diaries indicate their symbiosis was created out of, or created into, the hate they felt for each other, a hate that held them utterly attached. I dare say that hate was/is difficult, maybe

impossible, to distinguish from love? The story did not indicate what is happening to their attachment with treatment.

My God, I thought Alys was bizarre with her step-sisters.

I listened, spellbound and shuddering. Another interpretation of creativity as disease, or at least an effect of disease. Another indication that love wears many faces, often monstrous.

I shudder with recognition: the attraction of the written word over the spoken, the appeal in writing to expose secrets, shameful desires, wounds and scars in private places: taboo subjects we are forbidden to talk about.

The desire to write the unspeakable.

[Is that line plagiarized too?]

And to read the unspeakable. Jane Gallop writes "of the frightening erotic force of art, of the desire for and the resistance to meaning." She says, "Subject matter is sexual not because it is about some experience of sexuality, but because we experience the relation to subject matter in art as forbidden, powerful, desiring and embarrassing."

Heavy, heavy; great way to start my day. I must turn to lighter matters. Alys nags.

14.

January 5, 1974

Dear Sophie,

One more big funeral in our life over with. Allyson is

not seventeen and already been through two major deaths. When I was seventeen I didn't really believe in death. The only meaningful death I'd ever experienced was a kitten before I started school. And then Scott convinced me that death was really only a doorway to a better life. He still believes that. Mama believes it. They make me mad with belief.

That kitten died suddenly too, like Lewis and Daddy. Am I destined to always meet death unprepared? Lewis I never saw dead. Maybe I didn't really believe in death when Mama and I found Daddy stretched out on the floor, eyes vacant, not staring like they say in stories, face already grey, body already stiff and cold when I touched it, dead, probably all day, probably since Mama and I left the house in the morning. Gone. Dead and gone. I knew. No Daddy there, ever, anymore.

Now I believe in death.

He was always here, a constant fixture in my life. I never imagined life without him. Now gone. I never even knew what he meant to me, what we meant to each other. I used to fight with him about politics the last few years I lived at home. I couldn't stand his extreme black-white loyalties and hates. Then there was one very scary fight. I was arguing the merits of socialism and getting quite carried away with my rhetoric when suddenly the look on his face silenced me. Red with beads of sweat at his receding hairline, throbbing blue vein at his temple, a look of

desperation in his eyes. I'd seen him mad many times, but never had I seen him look desperate like that. I knew without thought that desperation came from the terrific tension of a precarious control. He was afraid of his own rage, afraid to get that mad at me.

I mumbled, "I've got to study." And I turned and ran. I never talked politics with him again. He never knew I voted for Kennedy: my first presidential election. I remember thinking of Daddy when I stepped into that booth. My hand trembled when I marked the ballot. I think I have never voted without some remnant of that tremor.

We couldn't talk to each other. We never really talked to each other. Not even when I saw his love and pride in Allyson, or when I saw his loneliness the time Mama went off to take care of Aunt Emma when she was dying, or when I saw his pity at my wedding and when Lewis died. I wanted to sometimes. My words choked, every time. We'd talk about the weather, play checkers, tell funny stories. Story tellers both. We couldn't talk to each other. And I don't believe, like Scott and Mama do, I'll get any more chances with him.

Allyson is reading about death and dying and trying to teach me about the stages of grief. She says I'm angry right now and denying my anger. God was I like that when I was seventeen, know-it-all attitude with Daddy that time I saw him get mad?

Love,

Alys

15.

February 5, 1987

Dear Sis,

So much for lighter matters. I did not plan to have Alys's father die here. No, Alys is not writing my personal history in her letters to Sophie. There just happens to be some parallels, that's all, just parallels. Alys votes liberal like I do, but she's not really political. She doesn't get involved in campaigns, never works at politics, hardly reads much news, so is not even an informed voter. I personally think that in her voting she is simply and only living out the ambiguous relationship with her father.

Alys and I had similar experiences with a liberal teacher in high school. Her response was retreat into political apathy, mine was to become a political activist.

My problem with the parallels is not that Alys is too much like me but that I grow to be too much like her. Since I took up writing fiction, my involvement in politics has waned only mildly. But since I started working on this novel, I hardly know what's going on in the world, and I didn't even vote in the last election. I was on a roll that day and couldn't bear to interrupt it. My historian is disgusted, lectures me frequently, lectures me with my own cliched words: "Every act is political," etc.

I didn't tell him I didn't vote in the last election. When he asked me, I suddenly had to make an emergency call to the kitchen to make sure dinner wasn't getting overdone, the

dinner he was cooking. By the time I got back, I launched into our continuing argument over the respective truths of history and fiction. I knew that would distract him. I did it deliberately. I am ashamed of my current apathy, and I don't want him rubbing my nose in it.

I remember a time when I was convinced that it was important and necessary to share everything with him. And I tried to do it, tried to share all the shame and the fear and the anger as well as the affection, and the humor and the pleasure. I never was very successful. Now, I find my words choking me like Alys with her father. Why? Why am I now controlled by shame and fear? Why am I now, like Alys's father, afraid to get that mad at him?

Oh God, stereotypical middle-aged crisis? Middle-aged men go off and marry young women. Middle-aged women go off and launch a career. I've been forever launching a career. Maybe I should try chasing young men. It sounds like more fun.

16.

September 1, 1974

Dear Sophie,

Yesterday was the eighth anniversary of Lewis's death, and I was remembering the night the image of my prince dissolved before my eyes when we had to confront his parents right after we were married. All in a minute, when I saw his tears, he didn't look handsome or confident or manly at all. I couldn't stand the disgust I was feeling. I sat there in

the car fighting thoughts that I'd gone too far in marrying, trying desperately to recapture my prince. I have to give him credit. He always could pull his act together. By the time he came out, he had composed himself enough so that I almost thought he was resurrected. I could almost always believe in his act. And I saw it crumble so seldom that I had little reason, for long, not to believe in it.

Little wonder I so seldom saw him vulnerable. I figured it up yesterday for the first time. Altogether we spent a total of 322 days together in the ten years, three months, and two days we were married. Less than a year. Shit. I spent my marriage waiting at home for my prince to come home, never recognizing then I hadn't married a prince. I married a warrior who, hooked on undomestic excitement, could not have been content if he had come home. Yesterday I faced it for the first time. That bastard didn't want to come home. He used the excuse of his work in intelligence to avoid really being married while still being married. And I bought it all, really believing I'd rather stay home than traipse around the world after him.

And I resisted all erotic invitations for that entire time, taking pride and satisfaction in my virtue. Yuck, how nauseating. I was mad at that when he died: my glorious love life that I continued to dream about all through the marriage, always thinking we were getting close and next time maybe I'd make it, that love life had not even been enough for me to learn how. I fiercely contented myself with

mothering and needle work and secret delight in barren flirtation, and story telling at the library to children. Goddam, I've made up for it. None of them have been princes, or warriors either. But they were available, sexually at least, and willing teachers. You have to take what you can get. And now I tell grown-up fairy tales.

This letter is hardly cheerful is it? Christ I feel mad, mad at Lewis, mad at Daddy. Mad at Scott even. Why doesn't he hardly ever write? He might as well be dead too.

Love,

Alys

October 5, 1974

Dear Sophie,

As you must know by now, Scott's moving back sometime during this next month, took a job as an accountant at the mill, will live with Mama until he finds a place. I'm glad. Maybe we can get reacquainted after all these years. And it should be good for Mama. She's been drifting since Daddy died. Scott will give her some purpose. I've missed him, for years. All those years of my marriage when he was first in the army for three years, and then working on a Master's degree in Iowa on the GI Bill, and living since in Boston--I think I've been waiting for a long time for Scott to come home. His visits were always frustrating, too short and too superficial. He never seemed to want to just sit around and talk with just me. Sometimes I'd want to tell him how much

I'd like a heart-to-heart talk, but I never did. I feel like I don't know him, like the brother I knew once is not him. I guess you saw a lot more of him during those years. He often went to Washington. Why hasn't he ever gotten married, or ever had a serious affair, do you think?

Love,

Alys

October 30, 1974

Dear Sophie,

I've wondered too, at times, if Scott might be gay. Isn't it odd that we both feel like we don't know him very well? Mama doesn't feel that way. I asked her why, did she think, Scott never married or ever seemed to have a very serious interest in romance. She said, "Oh Scott, he has his mind on more important things." That made me realize maybe I don't know Mama very well either, and I've never really been away from her for more than a few weeks at a time. Is this one of those so-close-you-can't-see-it phenomena? She seemed to be scorning romance when she said that.

It's hard isn't it to imagine our parents in bed together. I never thought about it before, but I guess she and Daddy didn't exactly have an exciting love life either? I don't remember any evidence of it. Do you?

Tomorrow Scott will be home.

Love,

Alys

February 6, 1975

Dear Sophie,

Remember Mama's conversion in 1952? It created quite a stir in our subliminally agnostic, Congregational home. Daddy was outraged. I was embarrassed and tried to ignore it hoping it would go away. I don't remember that you had anything to say on the subject. But that was your first year away from home wasn't it? So maybe it wasn't as memorable to you as it was to me? I don't remember that Scott had any reaction either. And that seems funny to me now. Seems like I was always tuned into his reactions back then.

It seemed to happen so suddenly. But now I realize it must have had a history, like everything else? I do remember that she had been going to church for some time with those two sisters who moved into that little house across the road. That was unusual. In our family, we only went to church on Easter Sunday and for weddings or funerals. Daddy joked about our church attendance and scorned the Evangelical creationism of Uncle Ancil and Aunt Myrtle. Still nobody seemed to pay much attention to Mama's sudden regular church attendance. I guess I thought at the time she was going to our Congregational service, and there was certainly never cause for any worry there. No sort of irregularity ever occurred there. Then there was that Sunday Mama came home acting crazy, laughing and crying. "Praise the Lord," she kept repeating. And she tried to tell Daddy, "I've been saved, Praise the Lord, Oh Hallelujah!"

But he wouldn't hear it: "For God's sake woman, get hold of yourself and stop acting foolish." I guess it was then it dawned on him for the first time that she'd been going to church with those two sisters from across the road, because he got mad at them too. "What kind of crazy ideas them foolish women put into your head anyway? What you been up to with them every Sunday?"

"Oh, praise the Lord! Jesus loves you too. He's come to save us all." I never saw Mama so passionate about anything before or since. Daddy, never known for tact or patience, slammed out the door and went off to the barn to work when Mama kept carrying on like that. Still agitated with energy, she turned toward me. I ran off to the attic to read True Romances.

Did she turn then toward Scott? Did he listen with his usual sympathy and loving attitude? Mama must have felt lonely and isolated in her spiritual passion.

She calmed down in the weeks that followed; no way she could live with Daddy if she didn't. But new magazines started appearing in our house: The Second Coming, Rex Humbarb's New World Prophecy. Eventually they made their way to the attic along with Fate, Science Fiction, Psychic Phenomena, True Romances, and True Detective. Even though Daddy forbade her, she continued to go to church with those two sisters as long as they lived there, about a year. She could be stubborn about what was important to her, even in the face of his most passionate wrath. But she stopped

talking to Daddy about salvation. I stayed out of her way on Sundays for a long time. And I got out of her way during the week whenever I saw that look of spiritual feeling coming on.

She never did like Uncle Ancil, always made fun of him behind his back. "He makes my skin crawl," she'd say every time she got off on one of her tangents about how fat and lazy he was. So she couldn't turn to others in the family who might have shared her spiritual passion. I think she must have turned to Scott.

Now Scott and I are fighting. I don't understand it. I can't believe we're really fighting about spiritual development, but we seem to keep coming back to that. He's into Eastern mysticism. Every time we talk to each other any more we end up fighting. He's always telling me how highly evolved souls would act, usually opposite of the way I'm acting. Right now it's detachment from fleshly concerns: "A highly evolved soul is detached from desire."

I can't resist arguing with that shit. Isn't that a pompous, asshole statement to make? First he wanted to know what I was getting out of this relationship with Max, my current lover. Flip, I said, "Orgasms." That's when he launched into this thing about desires of the flesh. He insists he's not fighting, not judging my fleshly desires. He says he's detached from that kind of ego concern that judges human actions and motives. And he doesn't sound mad when he's saying all this. He is calm, no passion in voice or gesture--detached. The asshole. He's right. I'm the one

that's fighting. And I think he's a fucking phony. No. Just a phony. That's his problem probably, no fucking.

My passion for Max is beginning to wear thin, but that is beside the point.

Damn. I don't like fighting with Scott, and I can't seem to help myself. For years we've hardly paid any attention to each other, at least on the surface. And now this. Sometimes I yearn acutely for the big brother I knew when I was four years old. You know you're the only one in the family who's ever heard me tell one of my grown-up fairy tales. I've never invited Mama, and she's never asked, thank God. We don't talk about my story telling since I stopped telling them to children. I looked forward to Scott coming home so I could invite him to a performance. But now I see I can't.

Allyson gets along famously with Scott. He encourages her scientific interests. She tells me I'm acting out old childhood conflicts in my fights with Scott. That child reads too much.

Love,

Alys

17.

February 14, 1987

Dear Sis,

Alys sure is in a snit isn't she? She comes out with "fucking phony," and I'm shocked. I conceived her to be an unself-conscious innocent. How innocent is someone who uses

such language? Maybe only an innocent could use it so unself-consciously? I suppose I haven't really caught up with Alys in some ways. She is, after all, writing now in 1975 and come a long way from 1952. Still I didn't have the trouble with her love life that I have with the language she uses in her last letter.

Don't you think that "fuck" has to be the most intriguing word in the English language? Do you suppose it was ever used anywhere without the connotation of lust and violence fused? Not as far back as Chaucer it wasn't. I can't imagine it. No matter how much effort I have made over the years to liberate my language, I still cannot use or hear "fuck" without a thrill of shock, however subliminal, the audacity.

I don't remember a time when I didn't know "fuck," know everything I know about it now. And I don't remember anyone ever explaining anything about it to me. The advantages of growing up on a farm I suppose--barnyard education. I hardly ever heard the word used, Father a few times maybe, when I wasn't supposed to be listening, and our brothers, whispering, snickering. I don't believe I ever said it out loud myself until I was in my twenties, late twenties, one time when I was mad as hell at my historian. He laughed, loud guffaws, delighted at my rage.

An oxymoron of the first order. Embodies all the ambiguities of the strongest human passions: repellent desire, violent love, just the word itself a wounding

caress.

Its sounds infect a whole array of English vocabulary: all the rhyming words--buck, duck, puck, Huck, luck, tuck, muck, suck; alliteratively all kinds of "f" words--frig, frigid, fish, fire, fiancée, fay, fey, fat, fake, fart, farm, phallous, fallacy, phony, feces, feel, firm, fetish, fission, fistula, flaccid, fit, flat, flange, flaunt, flack, flesh, flay, flirt, fluid, fly, fetus, foliate, follicle, forbidden, fop, foreskin, fossick, foul, frog, fruit, frustrate, Freud, Father. Is this going too far?

And all the "fuck" spin-offs--fucker, fuck up, fuck over, mother fucker. How come no Father Fucker? the unspeakable? the unwritable? Definitely going too far.

It takes a lifetime to grow up.

I know what you're thinking: adolescent exhibitionist. Well what do you expect? This is a novel about growing up. Go read something else if you want to read about being grown up.

18.

April 4, 1975

Dear Sophie,

All these letters over all these years, and I find there are still things I'm afraid to tell you. My shrink says I've got to tell you this. Yes, I'm seeing a shrink. Remember our conversation last summer when we laughed and felt superior to all those neurotics always running off to a shrink? Maybe now I'll feel a little more compassion. So, I

was a little afraid to tell you I was seeing a shrink. But that's not the big thing I was afraid to tell you. It's this memory I think I just discovered. Only, I'm not sure if it's a memory, or a dream, or a fantasy, or a memory of a dream or fantasy, or if I just made up the whole thing on the spot. It gets awfully complicated, and I'm not sure I can sort it all out to tell it. It has to do with Scott and Uncle Ancil and my friend Eugene.

I mentioned Eugene to you before, but I didn't tell you he is gay. How come I didn't tell you he is gay? It's because right from the beginning (and I've always known he is gay, so it's not like I didn't know better) I've been yearning to lure him into my bed. I want to seduce him, real bad. It's why I went to see a shrink, because the yearning was getting so painful, an obsession. I quit seeing Max because of it. A funny thing is I've already talked this whole thing over with Eugene, and he is willing to oblige me. He's not exclusively gay, just prefers men. And he didn't think I ought to end a relationship because of an obsession that could be nothing if acted out. Can you imagine that conversation?

We were drinking wine at his apartment. I love his apartment. It's all white--white walls, carpets, furniture, linens, curtains--everything. Except the paintings on the walls which he does himself. They keep changing because he's always hanging up his newest and taking down his oldest. He paints water colors in bright yellows, blues, and reds,

primary colors only, abstract, fluid forms with fuzzy, vague edges that bleed into each other; secondary orange, purple, and green from bleeding boundaries. And in every painting, slightly off center, in stark white is a fantasy life form--plant, animal, or human figure. No black, gray, or brown anywhere in that apartment. He says he will not let the bleeding go that far. Controlled bleeding. Can you imagine? It's so far out. I can't imagine why I love it, or him.

Anyway, we were drinking wine while he was cooking dinner, and I was supposed to be working with a story on the tape-recorder. But I couldn't seem to settle down to it. And you know how I am with just a little wine on an empty stomach. It was a little wine on an empty stomach that got me into bed with Lewis the first time, and the others too since he died. Eugene was being his usually openly affectionate self, and it was agitating the hell out of me, especially after those talks with my shrink about my painful yearning. So I was pestering him in the kitchen with chatter. And he stopped chopping mushrooms, held my face with both hands, kissed me softly and casually on the mouth, and reminded me to take my chatter to the tape recorder. And I just blurted it out, yelled, "I can't stand your damned casual affection."

He looked mildly bewildered only momentarily and then said, "We better talk about this," so damned composed, how I wish I could ruffle that composure. So what could I do? I told him.

We ended up laughing about it, and he said he really wouldn't mind--Christ, wouldn't mind. He also said he'd been told by women that he was a more-than-adequate lover. So why didn't I accept his offer? Why do I feel this would be going too far. Why the hell did I say, "I'd better talk this over with my shrink." All these weeks of pining, and I refused the offer of relief. Do I like to suffer or what? You see why I need a shrink?

And I still haven't got to what I am afraid to tell you. No, that conversation isn't it either. When I next saw my shrink, I asked why the hell I had refused Eugene's offer. She said, "Yes, why?" She got me on the couch--yeah, some really do use a couch--talked me through a relaxation strategy, and told me to practice my free-association lessons. I discovered it's easy for me to free associate. It's what I do when I'm preparing a story on the tape recorder. Even when I'm telling it for an audience, I'm still free associating, so what comes out is always both impromptu and rehearsed. Maybe that's why I'm so reluctant to commit my stories to writing? They're never finished, and I don't want to finish them.

Well, this is the story as nearly as I can remember it that I free associated that day. This one I've got to write you about because my shrink told me to. And I'm going to try real hard to write that conversation just as it really happened, not make up anything. I really want to know what's real about this.

*

Shrink started me off by asking, "Who does Eugene remind you of?"

"When we first knew each other Lewis used to hold my face like Eugene does, and kiss me, not like Eugene does. Lewis's kisses could nearly drive me crazy. He must have had lots of practice. And I'd had enough so I was primed. It didn't take too many of those kisses before I was at long last going all the way. But sex with Lewis never was as thrilling and satisfying as those long kisses that he always started by holding my face, like Eugene does.

"It always seemed like I needed just a little more time with Lewis. I didn't have an orgasm until two years after he died. It only took a few months with John after we started seeing each other two or three times a week. John was a skilled lover--knew how, what, and when to touch. The when is important--timing, rhythm. Eugene is like John in that, both great dancers, a strong, body sense of rhythm. But John was really just a stud, no emotional sensitivity like Eugene.

"The only male I've ever known who could be as emotionally sensitive as Eugene is my brother Scott, at least when we were little. That time my kitten died (I was very little, maybe only three or four), Scott was the only one who understood my grief. I doubt that anyone else even recognized it had become my kitten. It was just one of the litter, a runt at that. But there was something about the color, soft grey and white, and the way it curled to sleep in

my lap that made it mine, I knew, from the beginning. Scott is five years older than me, so I suppose he was only eight or nine at the time. That kitten didn't live very long, hardly time I suppose for others to realize that I could have become so attached to it. But Scott knew.

"We were in the barn together when I found her stretched out on the floor and reached to pat her, her body still warm. I said, 'Look Scott, how funny she looks, just staring like that. Oh, is she sick?'

"He picked the body up and felt it and said, 'No Alys. She's dead.' He put her in my arms, 'Hold her for a little while and say goodbye to her.'

"And he put his arm around my shoulder while I cried. Later he helped me decorate a shoe box, and we buried her with solemn ceremony under the apple tree where I so often held her sleeping in my lap. He read 'The Lord is my Shepherd,' 'because,' he said, 'it's what they read at funerals to comfort the grieving.'

"The next day, he came to me to explain, still solemn, 'she was just too weak to survive; she would have had a painful life being so weak. She could not have been happy. She's happy now in heaven. Life takes lots of strength.'

"Scott seems to have been wise young.

"Now Eugene is my best friend when I want comfort. As we grew older Scott and I became embarrassed at such childish sentiment. We were never quite comfortable with it after..."

Here I stopped talking, stunned at the image that

suddenly appeared. Memory or imagination? It was simultaneously like I was seeing it for the first time and like I was reliving it more vividly than I did the first time.

Shrink said, "You're remembering something painful."

I started crying. And then I was mad. "No, no, this can't be a memory of something that happened. I think it's a nightmare. That's it, I'm remembering a nightmare. If it had really happened I wouldn't be remembering it now for the first time. But I had lots of nightmares when I was little. And this had to be one of those, like the one I was telling you about last week, the cave nightmare. Yes, it's like that, has the same feeling."

"Tell me about it, all the details. Where are you? Who else is there? What is happening?"

"I'm very small, not much bigger than when my cat died. I'm standing in an empty horse stall in the barn, thinking I'm alone I guess, because when I hear a low moan in the next stall I feel surprised, also scared I think, yes, because I look through a crack between the stall boards rather than just walk around to see what's going on. Scott is standing, his back to me, in front of Uncle Ancil who is facing me. It's Uncle Ancil who is moaning, his face straining like he might be constipated and trying to shit, hips moving in and out; and Scott's head is bobbing up and down over Uncle Ancil's open fly.

"I'm fascinated, can't look away, feel flushed in waves

all over. The ending is fast and confused. Uncle Ancil doubles over convulsively as though in an ecstasy of pain-- and releases a long, loud, agonized-sounding breath. Scott spits three or four times, puts out his hand, and says, 'Can I go now?'

"Uncle Ancil fumbles in his pocket, fly still open, and pulls out a dollar (a dollar was worth a lot to a little kid then). As he puts it in Scott's hand, he mutters, 'Remember now, this is our secret. Your old Uncle Ancil can do some great things for you if you be good to him.'

"Scott runs out, right past the wide-open end of the stall I'm standing in without even seeing me, thank God. While Uncle Ancil is zipping and buttoning, I jump quick into the hay trough and hold my breath long after I hear his last steps through the barn door. I nearly died from holding my breath. Later that day, Scott brought me candy.

"This is where it gets confusing between nightmare and memory. Scott always shared his candy with me. It's only now occurring to me to wonder where he got money for candy. Mama and Daddy never gave me money for candy. Candy in our family was always a special, rare treat, announced, celebrated and shared openly. Aunt Emma, so nutrition conscious, had infected Mama and Daddy with a fear of rich, sugary food. But Scott sometimes had candy to share that was not part of family treat. And I never talked about that candy. Did I know it was secret, ill-gotten gain? Did that forbidden fruit correspond to visits from Uncle Ancil?

"I'm not even sure any more if it's a nightmare. Maybe I just plain made the whole thing up, to account for Scott's mysterious candy-sharing. Or made it up on the spot because of an unconscious desire to titillate my shrink. After all what is a decent analysis without a good primal scene, deep, dark, candy-coated secrets. What do you think? Is my yearning for Eugene actually an incestuous longing for my brother Scott, a wish to return to forbidden sweets? What does it all add up to?"

My shrink said, "Yes, what does it all add up to?"

"Eugene reminds me of three other important men in my life, at least three. Just more of my compulsion to add things up?"

*

Well that's my story about the primal scene. She laughed at that ending, pointed out to me that I couldn't even tell a decent primal scene without making it a joke, and told me to write the story to you and ask you what you think. Do a little reality testing here.

If I were really brave, I would try to check this out with Scott rather than you. But that's more reality than I can cope with right now. And besides, Scott and I haven't shared much except this current fighting for a long time. You and I have speculated before about his sexual preference. I rather think he's asexual. His relationship to both sexes has always been casual, at least since adolescence? In my memory/nightmare/story, he is not enjoying what he's doing.

I like to think he did it (if he did it) to get money for candy to share with me. Maybe we've both been actually longing for each other all our lives. And I look for him in all the men I get involved with?

Love,

Alys

April 17, 1975

Dear Sophie,

Yes, I do remember that Uncle Ancil and Aunt Myrtle stopped visiting us when I was about twelve or thirteen, and I knew it had something to do with his failure to keep a promise to put Scott through college. I remember Mama and Daddy sputtering about Uncle Ancil never being very trustworthy anyway, and how foolish they were to ever trust him at all. But really they didn't say very much about it, when I was around anyway. I remember just one conversation, Scott saying he was glad; he didn't want to be obligated to Uncle Ancil anymore. "Anymore?" Daddy said. "What do you mean 'anymore?'"

Scott blushed and stammered, "Well I just meant, like, working for him, you know, in the summers, on the farm, like I been doing, to earn money you know. I don't want to work for him anymore." Then Scott ran off to his room, "Some reading to do," he said.

That's all. We didn't visit them anymore, and they didn't visit us anymore. That was more than twenty years

ago. They came to Daddy's funeral. Aunt Myrtle came up and hugged Mama after the service, crying. I thought, "How awful, her baby brother dead, and they've not spoken all these years."

While she was hugging Mama, Uncle Ancil stood behind her and mumbled, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Now I think he looked scared as he stood there fumbling at his hat. And I just bet he was sorry and scared. Damned old bastard. With his religious passion, he knows he'll burn forever in hell. Enough to make a convert out of me even.

And Scott? Poor Scott. Over forty years old and never, do you suppose, told anyone? Now what do I do with him? How can I keep this secret?

Love,

Alys

May 5, 1975

Dear Sophie,

I couldn't stand it. I went to see Aunt Myrtle and Uncle Ancil. I've been in such a rage at him. I thought I'd burst if I didn't do something with it. So I just impulsively drove out there in the rain last Wednesday, middle of the afternoon. Living off the main road like they do, I've hardly been by their house all these years. The dirt road is muddy from spring, snow melting and rain. Heart thudding and face flushed as I approached their house, I was wishing I had a gun, something loud and violent, to announce my arrival. I didn't even knock, like we never did when we

visited all those years ago, just swung open the kitchen door and stood there a long moment taking in the scene: their kitchen looks much the same as it always did, big wood stove with a teakettle humming over the fire box, Uncle Ancil and Aunt Myrtle in rocking chairs facing each other, her knitting on a pair of socks, him with an open bible in his lap. Growing up I'd seen this scene many times, a sense of *deja vu*.

But distorted, never quite like this. I stood there in the open door while Aunt Myrtle stumbled to her feet in surprise, unsure, it seemed to me, whether to be glad or scared. I saw how frail she is. Just in the time since Daddy died, she has gotten old and thin. I remember her fat body bustling around the kitchen thirty years ago to bring us gingerbread and milk when we came to visit.

Feeling my rage beginning to drain away into pity and wanting desperately not to lose it, I turned abruptly to Uncle Ancil. Fat as ever, even fatter, but old, old, he stared past me. Eyes watering and crooked grin somewhere between a leer and a whimper hovering about his mouth, he said, "Well hello Scott. Come sit on your old Uncle Ancil's lap and tell me your secrets."

Horrified, I turned back to Aunt Myrtle. Tears in her eyes and hands fluttering about her mouth, she said, "He hardly knows anyone anymore." Then she reached out her hand, "Come in dear, and let me make you a cup of tea. I'm glad you've come to visit. Tell me how your mother is."

So I sat down and told her how Mama is. Uncle Ancil just sat there, occasionally reciting a verse from the bible. Once he said, "Alys, little Alys, is that you."

I said, "Yes, Uncle Ancil. I'm Alys; I've come to visit you." But he already had forgotten me.

What could I do? Before I left I asked her if she needed any help with him. She said she really didn't need anything. The county welfare service sends a homemaker's helper every morning. Soon he will have to go to a nursing home they've told her, and she supposes she will have to also. She said she would like it if I would come visit sometime. I said I would. What else could I do?

So much for getting revenge on Uncle Ancil. I obviously wasn't thinking when I went out there like that. He is nearly eighty years old now.

I've hardly talked to Scott this last month. Now I wish we were still fighting.

Love,

Alys

19.

February 15, 1987

Dear Sis,

Quentin Compson in The Sound and the Fury taught me the smell of incest so that now I never smell honeysuckle without a shameful twitching in my pelvis awakening memories I didn't know I had: from the attic window through dust and cobwebs watching Father urinate behind the lilac bush. What we call

honeysuckle here in Maine has no smell, but the peonies and lilac and wild white roses growing around them did. I loved to watch Father tend his flowers, his face and touch soft like some Medieval Madonna. Father was not a soft man often. But I never saw him otherwise with the flowers.

Now when I travel sometimes in the Southern spring, I seek out sweet honeysuckle.

I keep trying to figure out the exact relationship between me and Alys, or any of my fictions' characters for that matter. Certainly they must be my children, a sublimation of biology's urge to procreate? But then, she teaches me, again and again. Perhaps biological children do too? Do your children teach you?

Like many small children, when Alys's Allyson was very little, three to five years old, she had imaginary playmates, several. She lived with them on more intimate terms in some ways than with Alys. She named them, played games with them, held long conversations with them, fought with them, forgave them. She ate, bathed, and slept with them. She told Alys long stories about them, much to Alys's delight. One of the most persistent of these characters turned out to be an inventor and artist, perhaps a father figure, she named androgynously (it seems to me) Gypsy. Gypsy often solved problems for Allyson with his inventions. One hot, late-July afternoon, she told this story that went on all afternoon as she came in for cold water and bathroom and back out to check on the progress of Gypsy's invention.

*

Gypsy's out in the backyard behind the lilac bush. You know, where there's a little shade. He's making me something to keep cool. I need to take some ice water to him. And some for me too please. Would you make us some lemonade?

Mama, it's a giant bathtub he's making. It goes all the way from the lilac bush to the roses by the fence. You're going to be real surprised. You can use it too when he's done. It's going to be big, big, big enough for all of us. Oh boy, Lemonade. I got to go pee first. Pour two big glasses.

It's a shiny white bathtub, a great big, giant shiny white bathtub. An old-fashioned tub like Grandma's with a lip and claw feet. Most as big as our whole back yard. And he's making gold flowers all around that beautiful lip. Oh Mama, it's beautiful. Wait till you see it. We need more lemonade.

He's making a ladder to climb up into it, and down into it. Because it's so big. A shiny gold ladder. He's thirsty again. Oh no, the lemonade is all gone? OK. Water please, as soon as I pee. Gypsy has to go first.

Pretty soon, he'll be finished. He's working on the pipes now. Gold pipes. They go from a drain at one end,

high up into the air. They curve around and around in the air over the tub and back down through a gold faucet. 'Cept the faucet's really a fountain. It sprays water up through the gold pipes. Oh Mama, it's beautiful. Gypsy says moving water stays cool, and clean. See, the fountain sprays the pipes and keeps the pipes cool. And the cool pipes keep the moving water cool. Moving through gold and air keeps it cool, and clean. More water Mama, please. For him and me. After I pee.

He's done, Mama. He's done. It's finished. But we have to keep it secret. He says we mustn't tell anybody or show anybody.

*

Gypsy was skilled at building ladders for all of Allyson's various wishes, always gold ladders, to climb to the moon and stars, to climb into a magic tree that held a delight so secret she would not even tell her mother. She could only share that with Gypsy. Shortly after the magic-tree stories, Gypsy and all her imaginary playmates disappeared from her talk. Did they go further underground, become so secret even she lost touch? Now she's going to be a physicist.

V.

AND MYTHS

. . . history's
only meaningful in retrospect. While flow-
ers, like daffodils,
only have their meaning in the fleshy present.
Perspective
cannot explain sexual feelings though.
Diane Wakowski

Oh, this is the joy of a rose
That it blows
And goes.

Willa Cather

February 19, 1987

Dear Sis,

You sure got me thinking with your question: Why, after all my training in scholarship and criticism, am I writing fiction and only fiction? Guess you're a little worried about my contribution to Love Letters? And the shit I get into with Alys's primal-scene story? Let's give up the idea of a family history, of an authentic family history that is, and make up one. But, why am I not writing scholarly criticism or literary philosophy like I planned--how many years ago?

In graduate school, I had a professor who inspired me briefly with a passion for truth. He was truly an awe-inspiring figure, tall and gaunt, with a full, white beard and spare, long white hair that bounced and flounced as he

strode back and forth across the front of the classroom and up and down the aisles, head and hands punctuating every statement, thundering (he thundered a lot, wired with his righteous passion for truth), "Significance, originality, validity: only an idea that meets all of those standards is worth writing about. Only those ideas have the clear, melodious ring of truth. And style [lowering his voice to heighten the effect of the next thunder clap]--style is all!"

Yeah, I was inspired for a while, but like all honeymoon feelings, this inspiration wore away through exposure. It eventually turned into a different passion. He would often pause in his striding to fix his glare on a student--very good eye contact: fixed with that glare, you couldn't look away: "And what do you think Miss Smith, or are you able to think about this subject?"

He wrote on my seminar paper, the one for which I had so laboriously searched a significant, original, and valid idea to write with style, "I learn nothing new from this derivative and ineptly written paper. Someone might have fresh thinking about the relation of `love' and martial violence in Victorian life and literature, but this paper breaks off before it makes any significant generalizations about this subject." I plagiarize this critical comment, word for word, from an original text. But after all, it was given to me. Like a gift, it becomes mine to use as I see fit, doesn't it? Still, I don't give credit. Defamation-of-character laws and all.

For a time after receiving it, I was passionately inspired again. I spent a whole afternoon in the library researching this Professor's published work. That is, it didn't take me all afternoon to research his work since there wasn't that much. He published his last article of any substance in 1958, an article passionately defending Victorian moral passion in martial and marital commitment. The article created a brief flurry of critical protest and thereafter seems to have been quietly and mercifully forgotten. After that time, he published only painstakingly researched scholarly bits of a factual nature, just enough to keep his tenure I suppose, the sort of minutiae that serves to fill odd spaces in erudite scholarly journals. His whole corpus took me less than two hours to read; I'm good at skimming and scanning, especially when aflame with a passion.

No, what took me all afternoon was composing and revising and editing my response to his comment, and to the B he gave me for a course grade. In the end, I threw away most of what I had written and fired off this terse note.

*

Dear Professor No-Name [the anti-defamation laws],

Thank you for your useful critical comments on my paper. I enclose a copy of them in case you have forgotten. Since you seem so eager to help this budding critic with your candid honesty, I presume to ask for your help in another critical article I am working on. From the tone and timbre of your 1958 article and from your comment written on my

paper, I judge you a singularly apt subject for me to study. Of all the criticism I have received from any source, your remarks stand out as singularly unique and original for my purpose in this article. Would you consent to an interview so that I may supplement my research of your work with a bit of the personal so vital to a lively, dramatic style?

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely yours

P.S. The title of my paper is "The Sadistics of Victorian Criticism." Catchy and original title, don't you think?

*

Of course I didn't mail it. I tucked it away in my files and just now get it out, moldy and yellowed, as a contribution to our Love Letters. Never know do we, when an old passion might me useful? Funny thing, he was a popular teacher.

Well, that doesn't really respond to your question. That professor is not the real reason I turned from academic writing to fiction. For I also had many kind, respectful, and encouraging teachers all my life, more of those than of the No-Name variety. I write them notes of thanks, not very interesting writing, those notes, no tension. I need tension to fuel my writing passion.

Why write fiction?

Because scholarship really hurts my Wernicke's area, no kidding, as much as when I study higher Mathematics, or physics. I get a dull throb in my upper, left, mid cortex

that won't go away until I indulge a fiction fix.

Or, I suppose because somewhere along the way I realized that fiction is the only honest writing I can do, the only writing I can really get away with that is. Maybe it's the only honest writing anyone does, or can do?

And then, because if I write good fiction on insignificant and invalid themes in an unoriginal style, I might write a best seller.

And then again, like I've said before, because in fiction, I get even, get even in a mathematical sense, like in a mathematical equation, a simple balancing act, the seal with a ball on the end of his nose.

Fiction is my "Howl," my "barbaric yawp." Howling and yawping barbarians do not write scholarly criticism. They write poetry or fiction. That just seems to be the way things are. I don't believe I made that up. I believe I inherited it.

I don't have any greatly commendable, let alone lofty, motives for writing fiction, do I? Some fiction writers do. One told me, "I see art as the proverbial ivory tower, a sanctuary for suffering humanity. My only problem with it is that I haven't yet figured out how we are going to carry the poor mis-shapen beggar up there to live with us." This too is plagiarized word for word (as nearly as I can remember it) from an original text, and again, defamation worries. I'm not sure why she wants to live with that beggar in the first place, but there's no accounting for tastes in love--witness

Alys's. But if I wanted to live with him, I'd try to think of an easier way than carrying him up all those many steps.

The tower doesn't hold much attraction to me as a place to live, though I see it would be a good place to jump from. I write fiction to celebrate, and I can't see that tower as a place of celebration. The street or the barnyard's the place for my kind of celebration. It's why I must celebrate. Obscene, isn't it? To rejoice in the midst of all this stink, and pain. Oh I do my share too of cursing the darkness. So celebrate the curse. Light it with florescent and neon, or the bright noonday glare of sunlight on the manure pile. To dance, fuck, give birth, and die, it takes a sweat of the streets or barnyard that no ivory tower can tolerate. No, I don't want to live in that tower. I need to grub and cluck and vie for the cock's attention down on the ground with the rest of the chickens. Rather than carry the beggar into the tower, I need to stay down here in the street and beg at his side, let him teach me about my own hunger and deformity.

But I create Alys to do it for me. I'm really too shy.

You're right, it is a precarious distance between me and Alys, and difficult at times. And, damn, it's not because she moves toward me, stubborn she is. "Can't we negotiate?" I plead. She goes blithely on her way, oblivious to me, pays no attention, totally unaware of my existence. I created a character who controls me without any effort. The more I try to distance her from me, creating outlandish situations (to

me) and characters in her life, the more I slip and slide in her wake, threatening to crash into her. "Stepped into some shit," as you're fond of saying, wet slippery shit. No gentle, sweet merging, but a collision I fear. That historian I married will be horrified. He gets a little more nervous with each story I write. I haven't showed him any of Story Teller yet.

But enough of Alys for now, I'm too much with her. Let me tell you about this author, Alice, who writes me. I'm not her, you know. She thinks she's me much of the time, and I'm not going to argue about that. But I'm not her, no way. If you could see her in action you'd see why. She piles herself up on pillows behind her typewriter because she's so short, and she thinks, "Just the right arrangement of pillows and blanketed footstool will keep the back from aching and the feet warm." The more she writes, the shorter and fatter she gets, slowly, year by year, sinking into her pillows. I'm not her, no way I'm going to live like that. But it does no harm to let her think she's me. So when I say I fear I will crash into Alys, she thinks she's taking on Alys's identity. She thinks she becomes all of her characters and enlarges her personality through writing. Once she wrote an article taking on T. S. Eliot for his "escape from personality" and promoting her enlargement-of-personality theory of reading and writing. No wonder she gets so fat, ingesting all that personality. Positively cannibalistic. Yuck. I want no part of it.

Alice, the author not the story teller, stuck in that poem back in "Re/covering Reality." That's not me. She's the frustrated poet, hoped maybe to get a poem published by sneaking it into my novel.

I'm the writer of Alys, story teller, that's who I am, a writer of stories. I write at ease in off moments, when the spirit moves me, in the park by the pond, an intermission in my leisurely daily stroll, in blue ink on a yellow legal pad. I write in graceful, fluid motion while Alice perches in her nest of pillows and pecks. I steal your birds and nesting metaphor here. And she's so fussy, never has any fun with her writing, constantly worrying, revising, editing. I never revise or edit. And I refuse to write when it's no fun. She gets mad at me about that. Tough, I say. I won't live like her.

And you're not her sister. She has a sister, but you're not her. You're my sister the ideal reader of Alys's story. You'll never get to know Alice by reading this. You need to see her in action, when no one else is around, the way I see her. No one knows Alice the way I do. She certainly doesn't know herself the way I do. And she doesn't know me. She keeps looking through me, watching Alys, and that's why she doesn't really know the difference between her and me.

As ideal reader, you're sometimes too damned hard to control too, asking me why I write fiction, and who would believe in Eugene and whiteness? Alice worries about that too (but she always worries; I can't let that control me),

and Alys's shrink worries. But neither Alice nor Alys's shrink have been deeply impressed by Ishmael's meditation on whiteness: "a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows." I have no trouble believing in Eugene and whiteness. Eugene is neat, a very tidy person. And he'll never have children around to mess is up. White is not impractical for Eugene. It's impractical for Alys because she's not tidy. That's why she's attracted to it, a vacation, a retreat from her messy, stained life. She doesn't know it, but she'd be miserable living there. Alys has fun living in chaos.

Alice would like to live in whiteness even though, maybe because, she won't believe in it. She has a passion for clean. The pillows she nests in are covered in white, and she types in an old white chenille bathrobe. All her white gets bleached once a week at the laundry. So it's always fraying. In Eugene's apartment, she'd meld into his walls like she does into her pillows.

It's her passion for clean and white that accounts for my no-name status. How come you haven't asked me about my anonymity? Of yours?

February 26, 1987

Dear Sis,

Alys's Helen of Troy, one of her new story characters, is a hero to her. Alys isn't self-conscious about it. But she would like to be a face that could launch a thousand ships. She would like to be the power driving a thousand

times a thousand men. Wouldn't we all? No matter what we, in our grown-up and burgeoningly feminist garb, protest to the contrary, aren't we all driven by a desire for power? Especially for power over those areas of our lives in which we have least power? In erotic love, that paradoxical surrender of power. So that's why I don't like Alys's Helen. She reminds me by comparison of my powerlessness.

Speaking of erotic love, it seems to have disappeared from my life. "When," I ask myself, "did it go?" It left the marriage so quietly and gradually I didn't notice. Or did I just refuse to notice? And did we simultaneously lose our desire for each other? Or did I lose my desire when I gave up on babies, and he lost his in response to my loss? Is this a normal part of middle aged marriages? And what is he doing that I don't know about? Surely he hasn't given up sex? And why have we never talked about it? Damn. I'm mad. No matter what kind of fights we ever had, until a few years ago, our bed got a lot of wear and tear. Now it gets only an occasional perfunctory performance, brief lust without passion. Remember how I used to brag about our sex life. Shit.

And I'm jealous of Alys about that too, sailing erotically through her single thirties after a sluggish start in her marriage. Maybe I should have left him that time I started out. Maybe it's marriage itself that will do it eventually. Simply wears out like everything else. Maybe I need to have an affair, get out of this rut and into some

action. It is sort of disgusting, don't you think, that I've reached middle age and only ever fucked one man? I used to think it was that commitment that made sex so good.

What happened? Have I let some of the commitment go? Do I need to follow Alys's lead again and get myself to a shrink? What is buried in our family history that I maybe need to dig out?

Shit.

I don't want to deal with this today. Guess I'll write to the National Organization of Women. They've been badgering about my membership non-renewal.

*

Dear Ms. Smeal:

I wish I had taken down the name, address, and position with NOW of that man who called me a few nights ago from Washington, badgering me again about why I haven't renewed my membership in NOW. If I had done so, I would write to him directly and send you a copy. But since I didn't, I write to you and ask you to send him a copy. If he's really interested in why I haven't renewed, send him a copy too, please, of my letter to you, 31 July 1986. I was so mad at the implications of that call I completely blanked out his name. Not that he was rude or offensive. His call had the typical tone of courteous and mildly bored persuasion one would expect from someone going down a list and making calls to strangers he can't give a shit about but is hired to give the appearance of giving a shit about. If I was dubious

before about my non-renewal, I am rapidly losing all doubt. Obviously no one in NOW paid attention to my letter of 31 July 1986 in which I ranted at some length about why I do not wish to rejoin NOW. If anyone were paying attention, I wouldn't be getting a phone call asking me why I do not renew my membership.

Christ, the irony in this whole thing intrigues and inspires me. The irony of NOW's using the tools of the oppressor (covert manipulation and pressure) to defeat the oppressor and thereby losing the very support you desire. I've worked in politics enough myself so that I understand the attempted manipulation. So why should I spend my time, energy, and money to buy more oppression? And the irony of that call verifying a major point in my July letter to you-- that I don't wish to renew my membership because NOW isn't paying attention. And the irony of the reasoning that I suspect prompts the call--that the apathetic troops will be impressed by the attention of a call from a big guy in Washington. And the irony that the call came from a man, in view of another major point in my previous letter to you-- that NOW isn't paying attention to the alienation between men and women; men and women aren't paying attention to each other. And the irony of the paid attention in postage and paper and long-distance phone calls and labor that NOW expends to get me to renew for \$25. And the irony in the thought that if I renewed, my \$25 could/would buy more attention in postage and paper and calls and labor to the

recalcitrant troops for support.

In my first draft of this letter, I underscored all the attention, but decided that was carrying this a bit far. All this irony is beginning to amuse me. I've got to find some way of writing it into my fiction. It belongs in fiction, too good for real life. I think I will address a letter to Ms. Schmall, president of NOWHAC (National Organization of Women Hustling Action). That ought to fit the fiction I'm working on.

Sincerely yours,

*

Ha, I'm into political action again. As I used to say so frequently and sloganistically, "No way to avoid political action."

Shit.

I'm mad at women. I'm mad at men. For betraying the cause of communication. It's all I ever wanted the whole think to be about.

June 26, 1987

Dear Sis,

Well I didn't want to deal with it but I did anyway-- followed Alys's lead and got myself to a shrink. I know my letters over these last several months have been mundane and prosaic. I've been avoiding telling you about my trip into family history. So now I'm ready to start doing some serious work on Love Letters. Only I fear you won't be happy with the direction my trip is taking. I want to dig around in the

family secrets. I want to shovel out all the shit and spread it around where I can see it, air it out, make fertilizer of it. "It only stinks," my shrink says when I refer to it as shit, "when you let it gather in dark, airless corners."

But it's hardly something we ought to consider publishing as family history? See why I have to write fiction? And stick to fiction? In fiction I can be a flasher.

I heard a respected contemporary fiction writer say the other day that we all got tired of literary exhibitionism in the sixties, that confessionalism is passé, that personal libido is boring. If that's true, I'm out of sync with the times. "But really," I think, "who does he think he's kidding? Porno has never been more popular, even with the literati. But I, literary snot that I am, want my porno dressed up with literary style and purpose, with a sense of meaning, none of that cheap, trashy stuff for me."

Far from getting bored with the erotic, I get bored if I don't find it. I get bored if I don't find tension and stress and conflict. I get bored if I don't find violence. In short, I get bored if I don't find an exposure of fearful personal secrets. And the question of whether or not those secrets come from the author's personal libido or from a hypothetically impersonal imagination, seems to me, is moot, or as the philosophers are fond of saying in their dressed-up, put-down jargon--a trivial question.

I keep hunting the lessons Alys has to teach me. Alys's

Prince stares at monsters and learns to love his enemies, the chief obstacle to the attainment of his goal, who protect Sleeping Beauty's sleep. Alys's ugly stepsisters stare at textbook exercises and learn to make tea and cake for neighbors. Alys's wicked stepmother stares in a magic mirror and learns to love glassy reflections. I'm staring at the family manure pile. I will learn to love shit? Well, is that so bad? Not so noble as loving enemies and neighbors, and not so dramatic as dancing to a fiery death. But still, shit is inevitable and real and necessary. Should we hate it?

July 8, 1987

Dear Sis,

I do try to keep up on my reading in literary criticism. I am not anywhere near as disciplined as that historian I married. I suppose that's why he's successful and I'm not. He reads, cover-to-cover, the eight journals he subscribes to and spends at least one whole morning a week at the library sampling, he says, "the most important work going on in the field." He really keeps on top of things. In relation to him, I'm really just a dabbler. Since I stopped trying to be a scholar or critic, I read what pleases my fancy. So I still spend time reading John Dewey, Art as Experience. I've been reading around in that book for years. I consider that literary theory, but the literary scholars and critics do not.

I've been reading around in Jacques Derrida's Writing

and Difference for years too. It holds my interest, but I haven't read anything else he's written. Not interested as long as that one still puzzles me, so I can't be a deconstructionist. Just the term itself is wrong, in my view, with its implications of solid matter being constructed and deconstructed. That's not how meaning works. Liquid or gas not solids, waves not particles: that's how meaning works. You see how you couldn't speak of construction or deconstruction in reference to liquid or gas or waves? It wouldn't make sense.

Banish Air from Air--
 Divide Light if you dare--
 They'll meet
 While Cubes in a Drop
 Or pellets of Shape
 Fit

Films cannot annul
 Odors return whole
 Force Flame
 And with a Blonde push
 Over your impotence
 Flits Steam

Emily Dickenson

See, that's how meaning works.

I find Louise Rosenblatt more fun and useful than Stanley Fish, so I can't be a Reader-Response theorist. I can't stand the erudition of Jacques Lacan, and I read Bruno Bettelheim on fairy tales for psychoanalytic theory. I still read around in feminist literary criticism, but I'm mad at them because I think they have no sympathy for my childlessness nor for my troubles with my historian. Thus that letter a while back.

Annie Dillard's meditation on seeing in Pilgrim at

Tinker Creek teaches me literary theory.

I have no edges or boundaries in my thinking. Things always bleed. Without the control that Alys's Eugene practices in his water colors.

Alice, that author who writes me, reads contemporary poetry and novels, novel after novel. Novels with heavy, somber themes about the ambiguities of human love--"the agony and the ecstasy." Alice too is a mother. She has no sense of humor. She wearies me with her humorlessness.

How did I get off on this track anyway. Oh yeah, defensive still.

Because I'm a failure as a scholar and critic. Because I write story after story after story filling the drawers of my filing cabinet. Because I fear my marriage is shaky, maybe always has been. Because I'm childless--for sure and forever now. Because I'm mad as hell and feeling sorry for myself.

Alys reads fairy tales and folk tales and myths and occasionally Romantic poetry, especially Shelley and Blake. But also Edgar Allen Poe. Does that surprise you? It does me. She continually surprises me.

August 1, 1987

Dear Sis,

So, we're still not writing family history. You're absolutely right. I do keep subverting the project, inserting made-up details and ignoring the facts. But actually I don't ignore them; I just don't see them. You're

right, I can't even write my own autobiography. Auto-biography has to do with history which has to do with actuality--things that happened, things that were made and done. Fiction has to do with meaning. So I'm fine with history until I hit a snag in meaning, some place where the facts don't make any sense to me. History, especially my own history, is full of those snags. Snags create holes in the fabric. When I hit one, I scrap the history and make things up, weave over the hole with fiction. Poet Terry Hauptman says, "How desperately we weave insects into the fabric/Stitch crazy quilts. . . ." A good historian, confronted with a snag, would scrap the meaning, right? Do you know any historians that good? I have a theory they don't get read, so we don't know them. Because history seems meaningful, doesn't it? by the time it gets read.

I've been having this argument with one of those historians who gets read, the one I married. He insists a snag in meaning is just a gap, a blank space in the facts; and what's needed is to fill in the gap by digging out more of the facts. He goes at them with a vengeance, finds them and fills in the holes. He spends his life doing that. He has a lot of faith, I have to say that for him. It takes him years sometimes to fill in one tiny hole that nobody would have seen if he hadn't made such a fuss about it. Sometimes I suspect him of creating the hole even. He goes at his work like a crazy farmer digging and filling in post holes. Starting with whole earth and shovel, he digs holes and fills

them with living trees, then declares he has recreated the living forest, even though those trees, to my perception, obviously do not survive the transplant. But he is a well-respected historian, keeps piling up honors, awards, publications. So I'm just jealous you know. I'm not even getting published much.

It's best, more honest and truthful, for me to stick to fiction, not try to write history. In fiction, I start with the snag, the hole, the gap, not with the facts. And I finish there too. In between there's adventure. That's meaning. Life. A rush of adrenaline. The gap is my truth: In the beginning was a big Hole which the Word fills with unravelling tapestries, always an erotic design. That's what Alys's Penelope (coming later) teaches me.

And in fiction, I fancy I do write my own story, not my autobiography but my story. I envy Alys again. She never worries about facts in her story-telling. And she has achieved quite a notoriety.

I'm about ready to let you have that whole damned family-history project. Maybe my historian will help you with it.

At least that historian and I are talking about something even if it is only to argue about the distinction between and the respective merits of fiction and history. At least a little passion here after months (maybe years) of living a who-gives-a-shit attitude. Maybe next week I'll show him this early draft of Story Teller.

September 4, 1987

Dear Sis,

Yes, I suppose in spite of my protests, I really do still have a passion for truth, sort of anyway. A long time ago, for a brief time, I tried to get at the truth of things through the observation and gathering of data. But that's like the receding horizon. I can never get close to it because every new datum opens up a new universe. The context keeps getting bigger and bigger. Even in subatomic physics where things are so tiny, even there, the distance that separates particles (or waves) stuns me. Annie Dillard talks of how the past disintegrates behind us in particles, and the future comes at us in waves. The gaps of time. And the connectedness of all things. Of course with this literary mind that I can no longer turn off, it's the metaphor that stuns me--the empty distance, the gap, that connects. See what I mean?

Or like the rainbow you can't reach the end of. Once I drove through the arc though, really, truthfully. That year I flew to Denver, rented a car and drove through the southwest by myself--to prove to him I was independent. I observed a shower moving east ahead of me, moving not quite as fast as I was driving. The sun shone at my back, and a rainbow appeared over the road ahead. I got intrigued with the perception that I was getting closer and closer. So I went faster, as fast as I dared, hoping to catch it. And the faster I went, the slower I went: the tension. That chase

lasted a long time. But I finally caught up; as I passed through, it disappeared, and I thought, "So that's what happened when Alice passed through the looking glass."

My experience of truth is like that. It disappears as I pass through leaving a thin wake of thrill and shiver. Alice, the author not the story teller, is clamoring to get in here with another poem. This is the last one. I promise.

&

Covenant

On Highway 81 in Eastern New Mexico, light darkens ahead under clouds moving East as I drive. Clouds pour water in dark threads, dissolve and split late afternoon with a rainbow that arches the highway. Spectral color.

Behind, all day, bright sun flooded color, flooded mountain and butte and prairie with light. Through flood Noah's God signed a rainbow. Through water, His hand moved, split light, signed, dissolved. Ahead, a rainbow shines through pouring water,

moves East slower than I drive. Water floods light with dark, colors asphalt with black slick, dissolves bright sunlight, spatters and scatters light. I'm tempted. If I can move faster than storm, I may catch a rainbow.

I read once, if you spot a rainbow from up high you'll see a full circle. Water splits light to circle a storm. Rainbows move only with storms. Original water color. Pastel play of dark with light. Solution of water and air in sunlight, dissolves.

Dissolution. Water and light dissolve into color and tempt me with rainbows. I press the accelerator and leave sunlight behind. Risky, speeding East on slick water, speeding through splashing, chasing color. Only a half circle lures me to move

through. What happens if you move
 through the arc of a rainbow? What dissolves
 then? I approach a fading color
 spectrum and pass through. The rainbow
 dissolves, above and both sides. Water
 stops pouring, asphalt is dry, ahead is sunlight,

behind is storm light. Now I want to move
 through a full circle of water, fly through and
 dissolve--
 all around--the rainbow, covenant with thee in water
 color.

&

I've had some spectacular epiphanies in late afternoons
 with rainbows. I think my perception splits and reforms when
 light does. That time I made up my mind to leave my
 historian, early in the morning, I decided to leave, right
 after a call from him telling me he wouldn't be home for
 another few days. He was away a lot that year lecturing. I
 drove south through warm, misty rain all day. The storm
 gathered force just about the time I was thinking about
 looking for a place to stay. I was suddenly in a downpour so
 fierce I had to stop until I could see. While I waited and
 the windows fogged, I brooded: mother and father dead,
 siblings scattered, no children, a mostly-absent husband, a
 failed career. I shivered in the close, hot car and rolled
 the window down. The sky was lifting. A low, red sun broke
 through in the west. Red spread cold fire through black
 clouds racing east. A wide, still rainbow arched the eastern
 sky. Always in the east. Storms travel east. The whole sky
 moiled red. Water still poured. Sunset and rainbow together
 in storm look serene, but I know better. Sun burns up their
 energy and collapse. And split light, refracted through an

unstable medium, is cold.

I put the car in gear and made a U-turn on the highway. Red sky and rainbow followed me for a long time. As the west cleared and rain stopped, sun and rainbow dropped and faded together in opposite directions. I arrived home about two in the morning, and that historian never knew I left him, probably never knew I was mad at him. He's pretty dense about a lot of things, doesn't pick up on the subtle nuances of emotion like he does the nuances of facts or interpretation.

That rage. It's been accumulating again since I started Story Teller. I've been getting madder and madder--at Alys, at Mother and Father, at you, at him, even at Alice--mad as hell at times. At the people I love most. So it goes. I hope it's on the wane for a while. I've had enough for now.

It's been years since I thought about trying to find truth in compiling and tabulating data. Now I look to discover it in making fiction, in driving through the arc of a rainbow. If I learned to fly, and could fly through the circle, I'd either crash into the earth, or rise again and turn for another flight through, if I could fly fast enough. Hell, maybe I'll take up flying lessons.

September 18, 1987

Dear Sis,

Alys's regional fame for her story-telling is spreading as she moves into larger audiences. I have trouble with her

Helen of Troy, like I already told you once. Patience. You'll get to meet her in good time. I'm not quite ready to let her in here yet. I don't like her. She's a snob, very didactic, and aloof. She hasn't the sentimental appeal of the Prince or the stepsisters or Penelope (Ulysses' Penelope). But she is a commanding presence as Alys performs her. Helen that is. She wears shoes that lift her to six feet, three inches for God's sake! That's twelve inches taller than Alys is. Alys had to practice her walk for weeks. Very dark purple, that gown, really almost black with purple highlights gleaming as she moves and the lights play about her. Have you ever seen the Rothko Chapel in Houston on a day when the wind blows fluffy, cumulus clouds across a bright sun and light from the skylights dances across those purple-black panels? That's the effect she creates with color and movement and light when she does Helen. You can't help being impressed.

Helen is so cool as she tells her story, so aloof, so totally self-contained. Until she gets to Penelope. There a little color rises to her cheeks. Her voice rises, not quite to the level of shrill, but certainly to a level of haughty (and I think just a mite defensive). Imperious. Her back straightens and her nose rises as she turns on the "I am" and she sweeps off the stage uttering, "And don't you forget it." Majestic. A commanding performance. I don't like her.

Alys does Helen and Penelope in one performance, sweeping regally off the stage as Helen and returning as

humble Penelope almost before the audience has stopped applauding.

I swear, really, Alys gives no conscious thought to the psychoanalytic implications of her stories, not even to Penelope's one-eyed giants. You think about it, I think about it, but Alys does not think about the phallic suggestions of a one-eyed giant. Or the split personality in the ugly stepsisters. Or the latent homosexuality or androgyny or voyeurism in the Prince and Helen of Troy. She is not literary. She doesn't analyze and label the tapestries of Helen and Penelope as metaphors for created life, not even that funeral tapestry where it's so obvious. I don't know how much longer she can continue to be so naive. She has all these coming-of-age experiences, all these epiphanies. At each one, she knows what her life purpose is and proceeds to pursue it. She pays no attention to the number of times she comes of age. She awakens, and awakens, and awakens. Each time for her is like the first. I know, you wouldn't think she could continue to be so naive, intelligent and inquisitive as she is. And especially after that primal scene. But the latest I have from her is that she's taken up weaving. What does that tell you?

I don't know. Maybe it's me that's naive. Maybe she's sophisticated, and I can't see her sophistication through my naiveté. That dreaded crashing-into-her-feeling I keep having.

I think this story is winding down. Maybe soon I will

be able to turn my attention to Love Letters if you're still interested. Wouldn't you like to collaborate on an epistolary novel? Alys is clamoring to get in here to end her story and have the final word with Helen and Penelope.

20.

October 2, 1975

Dear Sophie,

Allyson and I are both finally settled in here in our new homes, me in a snug little two-bedroom apartment in Portland, Allyson in a dorm room at the University campus. She insists it's time for us to live apart. So actually you see, I did follow her here. Even though it makes good sense for me to finally move away from home, and I've wanted for a long time to live some place where there is more story telling action going on than in the county. I was getting tired of travelling so far to tell stories.

Six years since Allyson announced that she was going to be a physicist, and she is still living that decision. How did I ever raise a kid like that? She's dating a student of molecular biology. Saturday night they came here to escape the noise and riot of the campus and study while I went out dancing with my new interest. They were studying when I left at eight. When I got home at two in the morning they were just finishing their studying--six hours straight on a Saturday night?

My new interest is Peter Mendel. He's an architect involved in the urban renewal going on here in Portland, and

he's a honey. I met him in the little needle-craft shop that has agreed to display my tapestries, and sell them if anyone is interested. Well Peter was interested. I was there and watched him buy my big one. What a thrill. Then Sybil the owner introduced me as the "artist." How do you like that for a title?

No, I have no interest in going to college myself, absolutely none. I love learning, but I hate studying, and college is a lot of studying, interferes with my social life. I still shudder every time I think of that one lonely and confused year I spent in college. It's enough. They don't offer courses on story telling or weaving, thank God. Hell I'm even getting to be a professional. I earn a little prize money now and then with my stories. And now I've sold a weaving. So there.

I'm jealous that you have lured Mama to the sunny south for the coldest months of the winter. I enjoyed having her here for a few weeks helping us get settled. She cooked and cleaned while I unpacked. We chatted about weather and cleaning problems and decor. It was a tranquil time. Mostly I appreciate her cooking. Eugene is a wonderful gourmet cook, and I loved his cooking. But there's still no cooking in my life that tastes as good as Mama's. I suppose though that it could get awkward socially with her around all the time. I still try to be discreet with my love life, and one good thing about living alone, I don't always have to go to his place.

I miss Eugene terribly. I love to get his letters and answer them. We've talked on the phone several times. But I miss him. We could talk about absolutely everything. I was more comfortable talking to him than to my shrink.

Ironically, now that I've moved, Scott and I are almost communicating. We're writing to each other anyway, and we're talking about getting together for a few days around Christmas. Do you suppose I'll ever dare talk to him about that primal scene? Maybe I'll write about it in a letter.

Love,

Alys

October 3, 1987

Dear Sis,

2:00 A.M., and I'm not sleeping, so I decided to get up and write to you. Even interrupt Aly's ending to write this. Our Chinese historian friend was here to dinner. He is Chinese as well as a Chinese historian. I keep thinking about something he said: "Accept. Don't sprout your own desires." Intriguing line. He often appears here to visit, apparently drunk or stoned, at any rate in a fever of excitement, and comes out with these provocative statements that intrigue me for days. Once he said, "Rice is the pearl of life because it's so bland and will take any flavoring." Here I am plagiarizing again. I think he is a poet who got sidetracked in history. Then again, maybe he is just spouting Chinese platitudes, and I find them poetic just because they are new to me.

Anyway, he certainly doesn't talk about history the way my historian does, never talks about wars or great political leaders and revolutions. He drives my historian crazy, responding to questions about political unrest in China with talk about Chinese gardening and Medieval Chinese lyrics. It's a curious friendship they have. I can't figure it out. They are so different.

But what he says is not all that's keeping me awake tonight. I'm wondering if he's the one I should have an affair with. He has visited me several times when my historian was away lecturing. One night he let me know, with extreme courtesy and some stammering, that he is interested in "a physical expression of our spiritual communion." Terrific tension that night between us. I couldn't bear the pressure of it, so I turned it into a joke which I berated myself for afterward, fearful that he might be offended and stop visiting. He hasn't though.

I keep thinking I will not forever have opportunities for an affair. I have let every opportunity go by default, simply by failing to make a decision. Every time I have been tempted, I can't get past the paralyzing sense that simple sexual curiosity is not a good enough reason, that I ought to be utterly carried away by a power beyond my conscious will. And I fear what I most strongly feel when I am tempted is plain old brute lust, worse a shameful curiosity. Even with our Chinese historian, so spiritually minded. It was pressure in my pelvis, not in my spirit, that made me so

uncomfortable that night.

Still, the way things are, maybe it's time to say, "Fuck higher passion." Alys teaching me again? Who's in control here anyway?

"Don't sprout your own desires" ? ?

22.

April 24, 1976

Dear Sophie,

Allyson has got a summer job working at a Physics lab. Nevada, for God's sake. She didn't ask my permission, my opinion, or anything, just announced it. That's what she's been doing for years, hasn't she? How come I've not gotten used to it yet. It would look ridiculous for me to try to follow her to Nevada. This is it, really, the end of my mothering. I can't pretend any longer I have any meaningful influence in her life. She didn't say so, but I know. This summer job is just a scouting expedition to check out possibilities for transferring to another University next year. She's hot on the trail of her career in Physics, and she will do better elsewhere. She's leaving home for real, truly. Hell.

You'll be pleased anyway to know I've got a job, yes, an honest-to-God job that even pays money. My weaving led me to it. Remember that thriving little needle-craft shop down on the waterfront that has been handling my tapestries? Sybil put it up for sale. She's going to Georgia, where it's warmer she says. Peter bought it, and I'm going to manage it

for him. Since moving to Portland, I've spent a lot of time in that shop, buying and selling and swapping stories with Sybil, so I already know a lot about the business. Peter and I talked about a possible partnership. But I'm not ready to invest yet, not ready for that kind of responsibility, maybe in the future.

Peter wants the shop because he's thinking about retiring in a few years, maybe sooner, from the high-power firm he's worked with for twenty years. He wants to simplify his life-style. He says working twelve hours a day is too hard on his personal life. He blames his failed marriage on his workaholism.

Isn't that interesting? He wants to get out of his job. And I'm just getting into one for the first time in my life. He's simplifying. I'm complicating. I'm not at all sure I want to complicate.

I'm excited and nervous. Will I ruin a perfectly good love affair by mixing business with my erotic life? But then, I've never mixed it before, and the other affairs ended anyway, even the one with Lewis. All love affairs end somewhere, sometime, somehow. What the hell.

Thank God for Peter, for weaving and story telling.

*

The Legend of Helen of Troy [retold by Alys]

I'm not even dead yet, and they're already referring to me as the face that launched a thousand ships. I'm a legend in my own time, and a legend destined to last for thousands of years.

I've always known that objectively from the oracles. But I've always known it also from intuition, in my soul. I have my own lines to the Gods. For all practical purposes, I have achieved immortality of the spirit. For who can think, or cares to, beyond a few thousand years? Few are privileged to know and enjoy immortality of the spirit as I enjoy it. Of course, it's also true that few are privileged to know and enjoy such carnal life and love as I, loving and beloved by two such as Menelaus and Paris. But never mind about that. That's not what this story is about. This story is about legend making, not love making.

I'm here to tell you that I did not achieve such spiritual exaltation by being just another impossibly pretty pretty face. Looks alone cannot do it. Pretty faces are common. Even the impossibly pretty ones only last a few years. My pretty face was already past its prime with lines about the eyes and across the neck and brow (but not past the legend of its prime) by the time I attracted the attention of Paris. No, it takes wit and patience and learning to become a legend. And it takes strategy.

I always wanted to be a legend. I never thought mortality made any sense, so from an early age, as early as I can remember, I looked around with an eye to the alternatives. Legends still seem to me to be the most practical alternative.

So I studied power. Ever notice how a seemingly insignificant act can powerfully affect the lives and

destinies of both earth and heaven? Discord for instance. All she did was throw that little golden apple reading, "Who is the fairest?" which led to the judgment of Paris, which led to my involvement with Paris (me being Paris's reward for judging in favor of Venus), which led to the Trojan War and the line that made me immortal. In a fit of pique at not being invited to a big wedding, Discord just threw that apple. That's all. And look what it led to. We all became pawns, that's one way of looking at it. She could easily get the whole credit for the Trojan War. Or Paris because he made the judgment he did. But no. I get the credit, the face that launched a thousand ships. Because I planned it that way. I studied power from Discord and I took advantage. I was on the lookout when Paris came to call. He didn't know about me. I knew about him. And I will last. I tell you, it is because I know what I am doing. I plan. I take advantage. I trained to be a legend.

Power I learned from Discord, and love from Venus.

Courage I learned from weaving. I cut my needle fingers on the exploits of war heroes long before I wove the Trojan War. From this early weaving, I learned about taking incredible risks and making incredible sacrifices, for fame. The call of courage grew strong in me through that early weaving.

And beauty I learned from weaving. My pretty face is a genetic endowment. But how to create and manipulate beauty in making a legend is learned. I learned it at the loom--

color, design, and form. Packaging sells legends.

By the time I got to the Trojan-War robe, I was a highly skilled legend weaver. It just stands to reason that I would pull out all creative stops with that robe. I knew it when I was doing it. I was weaving my magnum opus, the legend of myself.

But to the major question of this story: "Was I abducted or seduced, or did I go by free conscious choice? Obviously I loved Menelaus, never stopped loving him (there is a lot to be said for experience and familiarity in love). And obviously I loved Paris--so young and new. But, I always knew I would cause a major war by going. I knew about that promise my father extracted from all my suitors, that they would come after me if I were to be carried off. But I saw my one chance for the big thing I wanted in life. I saw immortality by legend. And I took that chance, the call to courage too strong now to refuse.

You ask, "How could it be worth all that suffering and chaos?" But really, look into your own hearts. Why do you read the Trojan War? Do you read to grieve the suffering and premature death that occurred there? Do you, hunh, do you? Don't you read for the bravery and the love, for the beauty, for design and color and form? Don't you read to affirm your faith that somewhere, sometime, somehow, something can be so meaningful that suffering and risk and sacrifice and death are just?

I not only chose freely to go. I manipulated Paris into

thinking it was his doing. And aren't you glad? Admit it. Admit it. No matter what kind of cynic you are (because it's sophisticated to be cynical), no matter what or how much your personal experience to the contrary, don't you read because I embody faith, faith that chaos and pain are just and meaningful in a beautiful story. Meaningful in possibility. And that's what legend is about--not history ~~but~~ possibility.

So you thought it was through Homer and Virgil and their ilk that the legend was perpetuated? Ah, but did you never stop to consider their ultimate sources? Where do you think they got their images?

No, I will not hear of Penelope. Do not talk to me of her. She is just a stay-at-home upstart. Cottage industry, her work is, compared to mine. So preoccupied with her one-eyed giants, she couldn't see the larger picture, heroism on a cosmic scale. That's what I weave into the Trojan-War robe. And I am the central hero.

Don't you forget it!!

*

Penelope Weaves a Funeral Tapestry [told by Alys]

I always liked needlework. As long as I can remember I've worked with stitchery and fabric, always taking old things apart and putting new things together out of the mess. It actually was more important to me then than Ulysses, though myth has it otherwise.

The truth is I spent that first year of marriage feeling lonely for home and the adoration of Father, and frustrated.

Ulysses, in those days, was hardly a great lover. He was too busy being King of Ithaca to pay much attention to me.

I did a lot of weaving that first year of marriage.

Then he went off to fight at Troy, went off to chase after Helen actually. A thousand ships and a thousand times a thousand men all chasing after one impossibly pretty face instead of staying home to mind their own business. That made me mad. I stayed mad, off and on, for ten years, until the suitors.

In the early years of Ulysses' absence, little Telemachus kept me busy and quite happy. I nearly forgot stitchery for a while. There's something about the blatant sensuality of caring for an infant--carrying and nursing and bathing and rocking, all that touching. It soothes tension. And as soon as he started talking, he became a delightful companion, my best friend. As I went about my chores of overseeing the affairs of the palace in the King's absence, he followed me around, regaling me with stories that grew out of his daily exploration of his world--encounters with moonlight and butterflies, birds and insects, the barnyard drama of mating and birthing and dying. He promptly named each creature that impressed his imagination in any way and invented a life story for them, a life story that continued in serial form sometimes for years.

One day as we were observing at his grandfather Laertes' farm, Telemachus at three years old observed, "The baby calf comes out of its mother just like shit. Did I get borned

that way?"

Now, whatever I may have told others or let them believe without correction I never lied to my son. So I told him, "Yes, except there's a separate opening for each and they come from different places. They're just close together."

He marvelled about that for days, and as he watched manure spread over the earth to make things grow he developed his own explanation about why the place of birth and the place of shit were so close together: "It's how the seed gets fertilized that grows into a baby."

I tried to explain to him about fathers and sperm joining with mothers and eggs. But the idea of his father was already myth to him and thus incomprehensible, so no matter how often he watched the animals copulate, he stuck to his own version for years.

He named the calf "Little Shitty" and told Little-Shitty stories. It was embarrassing when visitors came. That calf remained Little Shitty through all its years of fierce and passionate bulldom.

As the years went by and old Laertes grew more and more despondent about the fate of his illustrious son, he spent more and more time with Telemachus telling him stories of his father's exploits, his bravery and heroism. Poisoned his mind he did with such stories. Gradually Laertes with his morbid stories stole away my son's love. Little Telemachus turned his attention away from moonlight and butterflies and Little Shitty. He became fixated on the mythical deeds of an

absent father. He grew big on them. And I grew to hate Laertes. With the withdrawal of my son's affection and interest, my days grew drab and my nights became unbearable.

I turned again to weaving.

My jealousy grew. All those long years of waiting for Ulysses to come home, I longed for the adventure he was having in the stories that periodically circulated in Ithaca about him. I fretted and chafed in silence at Laertes' tales to Telemachus. But I listened and longed. And when it looked like Ulysses was lost to us after the defeat of the Trojans, I was just glad. I felt free.

And I was glad when suitors started hanging around. Their presence added a sudden sprinkling of spice. In the beginning especially. I enjoyed the attention. I wiled away many a scintillating hour dallying with one, then another suitor. Of course, no fickle flirt ever gets away with that for long. It wasn't long enough to suit me before they started clamoring for a decision. And Telemachus was getting old enough to be embarrassed at my behavior. It's difficult to be discreet around a prepubescent boy. Although I wouldn't lie to him I did try to keep up appearances.

I kept up my weaving.

Anyway, I wasn't tempted to marry any of them. Good enough to dally with they were, but I'd made up my mind I wasn't ever going to get stuck again with a man who would just leave me to chase after another impossibly pretty face. By that time I could see that's the way things were.

Husbands enjoy pursuit. And when one conquest is made it's not long before they're after another. And not only husbands. I watched their fun and I wanted that action for myself. But I couldn't go chasing after it. Appearances and all. I had to create it at home. So I dallied, discreetly, whenever Telemachus was away chasing after myths of his father. I enjoyed the rivalries that developed. I didn't decide. As the years went by, I got hooked on the momentum and energy of not ever being done.

I kept up my weaving.

That funeral tapestry for Laertes. Oh sure it helped me to avoid deciding. But that's not all. It pleased me to think of old Laertes' death and have him think me a dutiful and loving daughter-in-law in so doing. And more, I was weaving adventure through that funeral tapestry. I had to continuously unravel it to maintain the image of devoted mother, and wife, and daughter-in-law. If anyone had ever seen what was really going on in that weaving.

The work I did during the day for public viewing was so tame no one paid any attention to what it was about. It was merely background, attractive color and design, decor. But every night, alone, I'd complete a segment before unravelling. Every night, alone, I wove action that starred me as the hero. Every night, alone, I fought and conquered a frightful one-eyed giant, fought and conquered and transformed that giant into an adoring prince kneeling at my feet and kissing the hem of my short, fur-trimmed gown from Fredrick's of

Hollywood.

That transformation was always the climax, and tricky. It took me one thousand nights to perfect--five thousand hours (I had to sleep some). You try weaving the transformation of a one-eyed giant into an adoring Prince. It's difficult. Weaving's not really the medium for it. Story-telling's the medium. But weaving's what I had. You've got to work with what you've got.

And now Ulysses is back, after all this time. He has just slaughtered all those suitors. A hundred bloody dead men lying out there in my parlor. Telemachus is jubilant like I have never seen him since the Little-Shitty days. He looks at his father as though he were viewing the first and second coming simultaneously. And I'm praying, "Oh my God, grant me time. Please accommodate my slow learning. Ulysses, this stranger from a mythical past, energized from fresh slaughter, is on his way to my bedroom. What, oh what do I do now?"

Quick! the unravelling.

And the bed, his prized bed--there is a time and place for intuition, for spontaneous, unrehearsed intuition: "Oh thank you God!"--I make him tell me the story of his bed while I complete the unravelling. To buy time, I make him tell me stories. Scheherezade also has her lessons to teach. After the story of the bed, he tells me of Tiresius' prophecies of things to come, and I see that Ulysses is not done with adventuring after all. I breathe a sigh of relief

at that. I won't have him around under foot all the time. I will have more nights alone.

Time for my weaving.

As Athena restrains the Dawn to make our reunion night long, we enjoy the blessings of our love, by story telling. He tells me of his one-eyed giants (you can imagine the images that conjured up for me--him with one-eyed giants), of Circe and Sirens and his resistance to temptation. I tell him my stories, the miseries and hardships and heartaches I suffered in sustaining my devotion and loyalty, the long nights of unravelling. I point to the evidence strewed in colorful, wild profusion over the big bed. By this time we're tumbling around in it. I'm beginning to feel appreciation for this stranger, for sirens and giants. Ulysses obviously has learned a few things.

It's time.

Now it's time, time to close this long night and this story with my humble prayer of gratitude: "Thank God for weaving, for funeral tapestries."

We snuggle into the unravelling.

AFTERWORD: ON THE FUNCTION OF LITERARY ACTS

I am a didactic writer. I write to teach, and to learn, for I do not know what I have to teach until I learn it through the writing. I am a teacher whose first student is continuously myself, and whose primary mode of learning is literary activity. An example is my response to Moby Dick: Moby Dick changes everything; I read Melville's story; I tell a religious story of Ishmael's redemption through Queequeg the cannibal-savior; I hear a psychoanalytic story of Ishmael's latently homosexual relationship with the cannibal Queequeg, which gives me a new angle of vision on the Christian concept of brotherhood; I write the interpretive story of Queequeg the cannibal and the Christian Eucharist. Moby Dick changes my beliefs about eating, sexuality, redemption. As my beliefs change so do my actions. Every literary act of sincere and profound engagement dissolves and reforms my universe. That is learning. I believe in the power of literary activity to transform the world. That faith, at once terrifying and compelling, guides all my decisions in writing fiction.

Character in action, Aristotle's description of the basis for mimetic art, still describes for me all significant works. When I write fiction, in addition to behavior, I am concerned with psychological activity (perceptual, emotional,

and intellectual acts) that precedes and accompanies behavior and determines character. Literary activity--story telling, listening, reading, and writing--not only reflects or imitates, but also transforms psychology because the mind interacts dialectically with stories. Serious fictions function as antitheses, arousing tension or conflict that finds resolution in syntheses which allow psychological assimilation--learning. Dialectic describes the pattern of interaction between mind and environment that results in learning and changes character.

I agree with Kenneth Burke's assertion in his Philosophy of Literary Form: "It [a theory of literary action] is got by treating the terms `dramatic' and `dialectical' as synonymous" (ix). Dramatic asserts the power and energy of conflict in action. Dialectic describes the pattern of opposing energies interacting. Other theorists of esthetics stress the importance of dynamic interaction in esthetic response. In Mind: an Essay on Human Feeling, Suzanne K. Langer describes the rhythm of dialectic:

The principle of dialectic was originally discovered by Plato as the pattern of philosophical thought. It is also the basic biophysical pattern, the principle of cyclic concatenation of acts, whereby the cadence or each consummated act is the preparatory phase of the repetition of the act. This is the dynamic form known as "rhythm." (v. 2, 71)

Feeling is like the dynamic and rhythmic structures created by artists; artistic form is always the form of felt life, whether of impression, emotion, overt action, thought, dream, or even obscure processes rising to a high level and going into psychical phase . . . (v. 1, 64).

Wolfgang Iser, in "The Reading Process," describes a dialectical action in active reading: "There is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection, which on a second reading may turn into a kind of advance retrospection" (57). In The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work, Louise Rosenblatt describes the synthesizing activity that goes on in literary transaction: "The reader, assuming the aesthetic stance, selects out and synthesizes--interanimates--his responses to the author's pattern of words. This requires the reader to carry on a continuing, constructive, 'shaping' activity" (53). These descriptions of esthetic response serve equally well to describe the writing process. Writing is a response to felt tension. From the first word, I continuously anticipate, retrospect, synthesize. The process takes the form of dialectical rhythm. John Dewey describes the delight that results from such transaction in Art as Experience:

[Happiness and delight] come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being--one that is an adjustment of our whole

being with the conditions of existence. In the process of living, attainment of a period of equilibrium is at the same time the initiation of a new relation to the environment, one that brings with it potency of new adjustments to be made through a struggle. The time of consummation is also one of beginning anew. Any attempt to perpetuate beyond its term the enjoyment attending the time of fulfillment and harmony constitutes withdrawal from the world. Hence it marks the lowering and loss of vitality. But, through the phases of perturbation and conflict, there abides the deepseated memory of an underlying harmony, the sense of which haunts life like the sense of being founded on a rock. (17)

Dialectic describes the pattern of all literary action in which learning and character growth happens.

I write to learn and to teach. I wish to encourage, provoke, entice, cajole (whatever it takes) growth of character through literary action--story telling, reading, and writing. I ought to and do enjoy my didactic purpose, but literary delight is a subject for another time. In all my writing, that controlling didactic purpose guides my decisions about questions of genre, structure, and content.

Genre, form, and structure are all slippery literary terms that spill over into one another in critical practice. Before applying these terms to a discussion of my writing, I

shall specify my use of the terms and exemplify with Melville's Moby Dick.

In the large sense of genre I mean the broad classes of literature: narrative fiction, poetry, drama, or prose essay. Any subject may be explored in any of these genres. I take Moby Dick to be an exploration of questions of existential salvation or redemption. These questions can be and have been explored in poetry, drama, and the prose essay as well as in fiction. Nothing inherent in the broad questions determines the broad genre. Melville's or any writer's, choice to explore his questions in fiction has to do also, I believe, with a social sense of genre which I also have in mind in using the term.

As interpreted by M. H. Abrams, structuralist critics conceive genre to be social in the sense that I mean to use it here:

. . . a genre is conceived as a set of constitutive conventions and codes, altering from age to age, but shared by a kind of implicit contract between writer and reader. These sets of conventions are what make possible the writing of a particular work of literature, though the writer may play against, as well as with, the prevailing generic conventions; for the reader, such conventions function as a set of expectations, which may be controverted rather than satisfied, but enable him to make the work intelligible by relating it

to the world which is defined and ordered by the prevailing culture. (71)

It is the set of conventional expectations that readers and writers have which a writer chooses to manipulate in working with genre.

By convention, fiction creates an illusion which asks for imaginative rather than empirical belief. In Moby Dick, a particular fictional character (Ishmael) in a particular fictional context (the universe of the whaling ship Pequod) observes particular fictional action (the whale hunt) and responds in particular fictional ways. The creation of the illusion is possible, and we can believe in it only because other fictions, many other fictions, have preceded Moby Dick, fictions which not only define and order our cultural experience but which also transform that experience by working against as well as with the conventions. That is how the culture learns and grows.

Within the broad genre of narrative fiction, sub-genres also work with and against conventional expectations. Melville manipulates a sub-genre of non-fiction prose, the scientific treatise, in various sections on cetology. He manipulates the genre of drama in chapters thirty-six to forty-one. In each, he taps a different set of conventional expectations; he asks readers to switch modes of processing the text.

A sub-genre of fiction, parody works with and against convention throughout Moby Dick. Melville parodies

particular writers such as Shakespeare: he writes of unverified stories of exotic whale species, ". . . mere sounds, full of Leviathanism but signifying nothing" (127). He parodies convention and the concept of genre itself when he inserts sections of scientific treatise or drama in his fiction. He undermines expectations of those genres.

In a broad sense of parody, all good, didactic literature parodies; it works with conventional expectation, created by experience of other works, in ways that question and undermine those expectations. It has to do that if learning is to occur. Very good parody undermines itself, leaves the door of learning open. Thus, Ishmael, in a parody of the resurrection story, is saved by Queequeg's coffin shot upward from the vortex of the sinking ship, a paradoxical image that creates an illusion of salvation which dissolves in an emblem of death. The image works because the upward motion of the coffin recalls the Christian resurrection story. Ishmael remains an orphan, not a savior, another missing child, both saved and lost, but a child who has learned to celebrate life. Very good parody affirms as well as undermines.

Writers choose a genre to employ and manipulate a conventional set of expectations. Fiction explores a question in different ways, by convention, than poetry, the prose essay, or drama. Parody exploits, by convention, the subject in different ways than romantic comedy or tragedy. Moby Dick exploits all of these genres and others as well.

In many ways, Moby Dick, parodies conventional expectations of structure, the ordering of content, as well as genre. Narrative fiction, by convention, creates the expectation of a narrative structure, a sequence of events (plot) that determines the ordering of content, sometimes in simple chronological order, but more often with the chronology interrupted by flashbacks. Either way, narration dominates the structure. Moby Dick has such a narrative structure, but it could hardly be said to dominate the ordering of content. Rather, Ishmael's poetic and frequently chaotic imagination appears to determine the ordering of content. The structure of Moby Dick is the structure of a mind engaged in the quest for meaning. For Ishmael, everything and anything is potentially meaningful from the size of the whale's skeleton to the deranged utterances of poor Pip who recalls by allusion other literary fools, Shakespeare's fool in King Lear for instance, making and parodying meaning. Any perception, feeling, or thought may interrupt the narrative structure for a lengthy meditation. In Moby Dick the structure of dialectic reflecting mental action dominates over narrative structure reflecting behavior.

I believe that in the best fiction, fiction that teaches as well as delights, dialectical structure is always in some degree of dynamic tension against narrative structure. The most objective narrative selects and arranges events and can provoke tension, thought, and judgement with selection and

arrangement alone. That tension makes demands on readers and writers. It demands an active, working response and stimulates learning. It is work to wade through all that cetology in Moby Dick and real-ize (make psychological reality of) its importance to the central quest for meaning and salvation with which the novel deals.

Genre, structure, language, and content are all elements of form. Fictional content (character, setting, plot, action) is imaginative particularity. Form is the shape (a spatial metaphor for a non-spatial phenomenon) that particularly takes in interpretation. It is determined by the choices of genre, structure, and language that describes the particulars, and by the quality of transaction in reading. Genre, structure, language, and content are devices that affect form, but form is not a device to be chosen and manipulated by the writer. Form is the shape of synthesis, an evolving emergent unity that happens in the mind of reader or writer in response to choices and manipulations of the elements. Form is a psychological phenomenon in the sense of Emily Dickinson's line, "After great pain a formal feeling comes" (175). We may speak of forming (verb) in manipulating and responding to the content. Form (noun) emerges from the work we do as readers and writers. Form is in response, not in a text. The intensity of the work determines the measure and quality of form that results.

In my first reading of Moby Dick, I skipped over the sections on cetology. I did not want to work that hard.

Since then I have reread it. I continue to reread it. I get fascinated with the measurement of the whale's skeleton, and the relation of that measurement to Ahab's monomania, and the relation of Ahab to me. I talk about Moby Dick, repeatedly. I write about it, repeatedly. The form (shape of meaning) grows, narrows, dissolves and reforms.

I take this sense of form from psychological theories of learning. Majorie Honzik explains Piaget's description of learning that results from the modification of patterned responses to experience: "Piaget uses the terms assimilation and accomodation to describe the ways in which the organism takes in stimulations and is modified by it so as to adapt to the assimilated stimulation" (652). Form in literary action is not static shape. It is the fluid realization of meaning. Form as an evolving, emergent unity is organic and psychological, whereas the text is mechanical and technical, a made object, its making controlled by learned principles.

Literary action changes everything, repeatedly. Story Teller tells a story of that change. The non-fiction prose genre would appear to be the obvious choice for a work that explores the nature and function of literary action, and I have explored the question in that genre in a work of literary theory. However, I wanted to explore and learn about the effects of literary action on character. The theoretical essay cannot, by convention, get at the subtle nuances of thought and feeling and behavior that determine

and reveal character. Thus I chose fiction, which by convention explores character in action. And I chose two central characters whose literary action and interaction I could readily highlight: a story writer (the narrator) writes the story of a story teller (a protagonist). That is the surface of the fiction. But essentially it is the story of one segment of the narrator's life and learning, the time it takes her to write the story teller's story. Story writer and story teller are each protagonists of their own story, but the story teller also functions as antagonist (her primary function) to the story writer and thus a vehicle for growth and learning. Fiction, not the prose essay, is the genre in which to explore such conflicts in character and the mental acts which accompany them.

Parody is a major sub-genre in this fiction. The story teller is a parodist. She parodies fairy tales and myths which controlled her early learning and responses to life. Not coincidentally, those tales and myths are the same ones which controlled the narrator's early learning and responses to life. Parody, by convention, undermines authority: of convention, of character, of style, of whatever it chooses to point at. Through parody, the story teller functions as antagonist to the narrator. She is a provocateur, a stimulus for learning.

The incongruous provokes tension that stimulates learning. Parody is, by convention, a form of humor that takes its fun from incongruence. Originally "a song sung

beside, i.e., a comic imitation of a serious poem" (Falk, 601), the comedy occurs in the differences between things that are familiarly similar. The story teller tells her own versions of fairy tales and myths because experience shows her the incongruence between life and the tales she heard, mostly bowdlerized versions of the Brothers Grimm and Homer. In her stories, she parodies her own life experience as well as the tales. Her characters are caricatures and grotesques: "Exaggeration. . . is the meat that parody feeds on" (Macdonald, 560). These characters have a psychological, an imaginative, realism, not an empirical realism. They are the stuff of nightmares and fantasy. I intend the humor in the stories to come from the incongruence between what she tells and anybody's overt life experience, from the incongruence between her versions and both of the bowdlerized and original versions of the Grimms and Homer (original too is a suspect term), and from the incongruence between imaginative and empirical reality. Her parody has its fun in the melding of the recognizably familiar with the imaginatively exotic.

The story teller not only tells parodies, she is herself a parody, an incongruous image of the narrator's character. She is both embarrassingly reflective image and provocative role model. The parody is multi-directional, pointing at stories, at character, at conventions, and at relationships.

The focus on relationships determines in part the selection of another sub-genre at work in this novel, the epistolary genre. Form conventionally occurs in this phrase,

but as I choose to use the terms, genre is more appropriate. I chose the epistolary genre to highlight the theme of relationships: the ambiguities of love and the influence of important others on the development of character. Both narrator and story teller write their own stories in letters to older sisters. Both narrator and story teller are younger sisters of older siblings. That sibling status is paradigmatic of all other relationships in their lives. The older sister is both fairy godmother and bullying stepsister, both object and model of love and hate.

Not the least of my motives in selecting the epistolary genre is the desire to parody, in my first novel, the father: the father of "the modern English novel" (Singer, 60) that is as well as the father of the epistolary novel, Samuel Richardson. In the theme of relationships, the influence of literary fathers on female progeny implicitly looms large in Story Teller. Literary mothers are largely, uncomfortably absent. Emily Dickinson and Annie Dillard are minor voices in relation to the Brothers Grimm, Homer, Richardson, Melville, Lewis Carroll, James Joyce, et. al. That condition, juxtaposed against the influence of the sister addressed and the epistolary convention of the female protagonist, I mean to be a provocation to thought and judgement.

A look at a table of contents in a recent critical work on epistolary fiction, Ruth Perry's Women, Letters, and the Novel, readily indicates some of the most important

conventions I wanted to manipulate in selecting the epistolary genre: "Letter Fiction and the Search for Human Nature;" "The Economic Status of Women;" "The Social Context of Letters;" "Separation and Isolation in Epistolary Fiction;" "The Self As Word in Epistolary Fiction." The epistolary genre focuses on character and relationships more than physical action; it is confidential, confessional, female, and sentimental: a set of conventions that lend themselves readily to a novel about growing up, and especially about growing up female.

Story Teller is a Bildungsroman, a coming-of-age novel, a genre I chose in part to parody the notion of a coming of age, of growing up to a static life purpose, to a stable maturity. The epistolary genre readily complements and reinforces a Bildungsroman; the sibling status, exemplified by the older sisters addressed in the letters, profoundly affects the growing up of both narrator and story teller.

The Bildungsroman is a particularly prominent genre in modern literature, especially the artist's coming of age. Stereotypically a young man comes of age in these novels when he discovers his life purpose. Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses is a prominent exemplar in English. I had these novels in mind in writing Story Teller.

Story Teller parodies the convention in several ways. The story teller is female rather than male. Although she tells stories all her life, she comes of age many times,

discovers many life purposes: marriage, motherhood, story telling, erotic love, weaving, business management. There is no indication that her coming-of-age will ever complete itself. As a story teller, she is an artist, but not only one kind of artist. She is a costume artist and a weaver. Her coming-of-age as a wife, mother, and lover focuses on relationships. I mean it to point at Joyce's Dedalus juxtaposed against Molly and Bloom. Her coming-of-age as a business manager is meant to parody the mystique of the impractical artist. Her frequent comings-of-age in her many roles are meant to parody the mystique of the single-minded artistic genius. She not only comes of age many times in various roles, she also comes of age many times in each role.

Joyce made epiphany the term for an older convention of the growing-up theme. It appears in other genres as well as fiction: Shelley's "best and happiest moments" and Wordsworth's "spot of time" (Abrams, 54). The story teller's epiphanies are frequent and frequently in response to objects of her own imagination as well as to sensory events. They are awakenings, and all are important. Her awakening to a kiss at eight years old is not less important than her awakening to orgasms in her early thirties. Neither the story teller's nor the narrator's epiphanies pass away with youth or the dedication of life to a calling as the convention urges: ". . . nothing can bring back the hour/ Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower" (Wordsworth, 11.177,178). Instead, their epiphanies increase in quality

and quantity as they grow older and continue to resist a single-minded dedication.

Parody, epistolary fiction, and Bildungsroman are major genres at work in Story Teller. Non-fiction prose and poetry are other genres at work in the novel. The narrator includes poetry she attributes to the author. The story teller writes essays in college. The fiction-writing narrator marries a historian and collaborates with the sister on a family history. She frequently comments on the differences and similarities between history and fiction. Because the major thematic strain has to do with the nature and function of literary acts, the essays, poems, and frequent references to history are intended to simultaneously expose, parody, and undermine the sort of distinctions I am discussing in this essay.

Conventions are continuously in flux. The notion of genre is itself only a useful fiction (careful with that word only). There are too many parodists around, juggling, jostling, and undermining, for genres to stabilize. Literature cannot function without conventions, and it cannot live without undermining conventions. That is how our culture learns and changes.

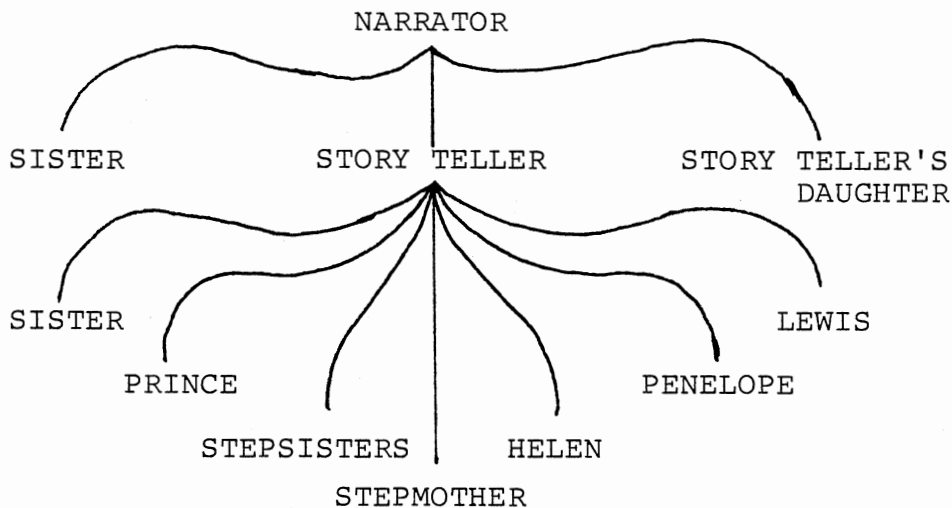
Choices of character and genre impose limitations on choices of structure. Behavioral action is not likely to dominate the structure of a story told in letters, and it does not in Story Teller. Rather, psychological activity

dominates the structure. A chronological sequence of events is not likely to be important to a self-conscious narrator exploring and reflecting on her own mental activity. Things do happen, a recoverable sequence of events does occur, but Story Teller is primarily the story of the narrator's literary activity, reading and writing and listening to stories, and its effects on her character. Therefore conflict, suspense, crises, resolution, denouement--all the elements of plot--are ordered dialectically to reflect the pattern of a mind in action more than narratively to reflect behavioral activity.

Ideas, values, beliefs--mental constructs--clash and conflict, create suspense, reach crises, resolve and change. The narrator's interaction with the character she creates (an imaginary construct) is more important to the story, though not to her life, than her relationship to husband, mother, father, or even the sister she writes to. Structure is designed to focus on that relationship. Thus the narrator interrupts the story teller's story with letters to her own sister, but not randomly or arbitrarily. She interrupts at opposition, at conflicts and clashes of thought, feeling, belief, meaning. Like Ishmael, she continuously questions and seeks the meaning of her own creation and its relation to her life. That quest determines the dialectical structure and the structure of multiple voices.

Story Teller not only manipulates the separate and dominant voices of narrator and story teller, but also voices

from the stories told, all from first person point of view, all produced and processed in the mind of the narrator in response to conflict and tension. Thus, the dialectical structure is not a simple thesis-antithesis-synthesis pattern. Nor is it chaotic or arbitrary. I mean the interaction of voices to be structured like syntactical embedment which I can perhaps show best with an adaptation of a tree diagram.



The lines mark the flow from voice to voice and also mark opposition or tension within the narrator which the voices manifest. As you can see, the dialectic remains binary even within the multiple-voice structure.

With the tension between the central characters and the silent voices of the sisters addressed in the letters, I mean to dramatize the dynamic tension between writer and reader that exists in any successful fiction. The sister's voices are never heard directly. They are ghost voices; their reality is psychological, imaginative, and more powerful and determining in their influence on character than spoken

voices. Likewise, the silent voice of the reader, heard through the conventions, influences the writer, for it is not what is spoken that affects interpretation, but what is heard. The silent voice of Lewis, addressed by the story teller only once, serves a similar function. Because he is such an active mental presence (her image of a prince), his influence on her is disproportionate to his physical presence in her life.

In addition to the story teller's story, I chose to have the narrator rather than the story teller tell the brief child's story to dramatize a moment in her conflict about her childlessness. All other voices, except for quotations from the narrator, come from the story teller through the narrator. However, the pattern of interaction is not fully exposed by the tree diagram which marks only that which is overt and obvious in the voices. I mean other interactions to be implicitly and qualitatively important, such as that overtly stated between Helen and Penelope and between the story teller and her daughter. In addition, the story teller's characters are parodies: of siblings, parents, lovers, children. The narrator's historian-husband and the author who writes Story Teller are also important background voices which the diagram does not show. There are patterns of horizontal as well as vertical tension at work among the characters of separate stories. I intend the energy of the fiction to flow in all directions. These tensions dramatize the transaction of the narrator with the fiction she creates,

a continuously unravelling and reweaving web which marks the pattern of her learning and character development.

The voices of the narrator and her sister are anonymous. Names are obviously important to this novel, as the narrator's meditation on naming demonstrates. Why then choose not the name the central protagonist and her primary antagonist? I want that decision to reflect the anonymity that occurs at the deepest levels of literary activity. The writer or reader who does not merge self with the selves of created characters (and especially with the selves designated as I in this novel) is not fully engaged, does not fully learn what the transaction has to teach. The anonymity that occurs in such profound engagement is not a loss, T. S. Eliot's "escape from personality" (43), but rather a gain, an enrichment. It is learning and growth of character. It is enlargement of personality. Story Teller tells the story of an anonymous narrator's dialectical conversation with herself. All voices are first person point of view to facilitate the merging of her own and the reader's identities with created characters. Ultimately all voices are hers responding to heard voices from other stories and characters in her life, revealing the components of that dialectic in structural embedment.

I intend the narrator's voice that tells her own story to have a semblance of climactic ordering in the structure. Her story takes up about one and one half years of chronological time, the time it takes to write Story Teller.

That climactic ordering centers on her quest for the meaning of her own creation, encompasses her conflicts and crises, and employs the device of the epiphany which occurs near the end and, typically for this narrator, is an interpretive reweaving of an old event. Concurrently, I intend to have no semblance of climactic ordering in the story teller's story. Her story covers a much longer time: her first letter appears when she is only fourteen, with no suggestion that her growing up began then. And she is in her late thirties when the novel ends, with no suggestion that her growing up is complete. Her many epiphanies accumulate, but not climactically. At most, I mean a single epiphany for the story teller to be the beginning of a new cycle of growth, whereas the narrator's story attempts to be structurally a semblance of one such cycle in her own life. By these orderings, I mean to create a semblance of experienced time as cyclical rather than linear and of character growth as the accumulation of such cycles in the pattern of tree-ring growth. Thus I mean to parody the apocalyptic view of history and Christian salvation which dominates the narrator's growing up.

I make decisions about and manipulate genre, content, and structure as I write. Form happens as a result of those decisions and in interaction with the created object. I may speak of forming (verb) the work as I write the novel and as I continue to read what I have written and write this essay

defending my choices. But having defined form (noun) for purposes of this essay as the fluid shape of an evolving, emergent meaning, a psychological phenomenon, whatever I say about the form of Story Teller at this point must be tentative and idiosyncratic to my own experience. Form happens as I interact with my own creation, identifying with its characters, questioning and probing its relevance to my relationships with people, with my world, and with my other literary acts. Of necessity, formal quality differs for individual readers to the degree that these relationships differ. Despite the necessary idiosyncrasies of interpretation, literature exists as a public medium which confirms for me that the communicability of form is more important and reliable than personal idiosyncrasies of interpretation. Form is personal and private, and transactional and public.

Story Teller was titled relatively late in its composition process and went through some transformations. The title was finally chosen in response to pressures of form that emerged only in the writing, reading, and rewriting. A title, for me, is a summary phrase for my sense of form. If the title Story Teller finally also communicates to the reader a sense of form in the reading of this fiction, I suggest that attests to the power of formal communication in the medium. If it does not, I attribute the fault to my weaknesses in writing or to the reader's in reading, but not to the story-telling medium we share.

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