

she might hear the Sweeneys' nurse. Jim continued to shout at her from the door. The voice on the radio was suave and noncommittal. "An early-morning railroad disaster in Tokyo," the loudspeaker said, "killed twenty-nine people. A fire in a Catholic hospital near Buffalo for the care of blind children was extinguished early this morning by nuns. The temperature is forty-seven. The humidity is eighty-nine."

1953

ANTON CHEKHOV

1860-1904



Chekhov was born in Taganrog, Russia, the son of a despot, dishonest, and rough-grained father—who was nevertheless eager to impart to his children his love for music and art. Trained as a physician at Moscow University, Chekhov practiced medicine only intermittently, although he credited his scientific training with conditioning him to be a perceptive observer of society and individual behavior. While still a medical student he began to write short pieces for humorous magazines; the popularity of these sketches roused his determination to become a serious artist. In 1890 he visited the Russian penal island of Sakhalin and without fanfare or special pleading wrote a moving account of convict life as he saw it there. He was at the height of his literary powers and his fame in 1901 when he married a young actress, but the state of his health by then was precarious. In the short time remaining to him, he was confined mostly to the house he had built with his literary earnings at Yalta in southern Russia, infrequently able to accompany his wife to Moscow to watch her performances in his plays. Those plays—among them *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *The Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904)—established him as one of the great dramatists of modern times, while his hundreds of short stories and novellas have immensely influenced the art of fiction since his death. In tribute to the humanity and responsibility of his work, Leo Tolstoy called him "an artist of life."

Gusev¹

I

It is already dark, it will soon be night.

Gusev, a discharged private, half rises in his bunk and says in a low voice: "Do you hear me, Pavel Ivanych? A soldier in Suchan was telling me: while they were sailing, their ship bumped into a big fish and smashed a hole in its bottom."

The individual of uncertain social status whom he is addressing, and whom everyone in the ship infirmary calls Pavel Ivanych, is silent as though he hasn't heard.

And again all is still. The wind is flirring with the rigging, the screw is throbbing, the waves are lashing, the bunks creak, but the ear has long since become used to these sounds, and everything around seems to slumber in silence. It is

¹ Translated by Constance Garnett.

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dull. The three invalids—two soldiers and a sailor—who were playing cards all day are dozing and talking deliriously.

The ship is apparently beginning to roll. The bunk slowly rises and falls under Gusev as though it were breathing, and this occurs once, twice, three times . . . Something hits the floor with a clang; a jug must have dropped.

"The wind has broken loose from its chain," says Gusev, straining his ears.

This time Pavel Ivanych coughs and says irritably:

"One minute a vessel bumps into a fish, the next the wind breaks loose from its chain . . . Is the wind a beast that it breaks loose from its chain?"

"That's what Christian folks say."

"They are as ignorant as you . . . They say all sorts of things. One must have one's head on one's shoulders and reason it out. You have no sense."

Pavel Ivanych is subject to seasickness. When the sea is rough he is usually out of sorts, and the merest trifle irritates him. In Gusev's opinion there is absolutely nothing to be irritated about. What is there that is strange or out of the way about that fish, for instance, or about the wind breaking loose from its chain? Suppose the fish were as big as the mountain and its back as hard as a surgeon's, and supposing, too, that over yonder at the end of the world stood great stone walls and the fierce winds were chained up to the walls. If they haven't broken loose, why then do they rush all over the sea like madmen and strain like hounds rugging at their leashes? If they are not chained up what becomes of them when it is calm?

Gusev ponders for a long time about fishes as big as a mountain and about stout, rusty chains. Then he begins to feel bored and falls to thinking about his home, to which he is returning after five years' service in the Far East. He pictures an immense pond covered with drifts. On one side of the pond is the brick-colored building of the pottery with a tall chimney and clouds of black smoke; on the other side is a village. His brother Alexey drives out of the fifth yard from the end in a sleigh; behind him sits his little son Vanka in big felt boots, and his little girl Akulka also wearing felt boots. Alexey has had a drop. Vanka is laughing. Akulka's face cannot be seen, she is muffled up.

"If he doesn't look out, he will have the children frostbitten," Gusev reflects. "Lord send them sense that they may honor their parents and not be any wiser than their father and mother."

"They need new soles," a delirious sailor says in a bass voice. "Yes, yes!" Gusev's thoughts abruptly break off and suddenly without rhyme or reason the pond is replaced by a huge bull's head without eyes, and the horse and sleigh are no longer going straight ahead but are whirling round and round, wrapped in black smoke. But still he is glad he has had a glimpse of his people. In fact, he is breathless with joy, and his whole body, down to his fingertips, tingles with it. "Thanks be to God we have seen each other again," he murmurs deliriously, but at once opens his eyes and looks for water in the dark. He drinks and lies down, and again the sleigh is gliding along, then again there is the bull's head without eyes, smoke, clouds . . . And so it goes till daybreak

II

A blue circle is the first thing to become visible in the darkness—it is the port-hole; then, little by little, Gusev makes out the man in the next bunk, Pavel

Ivanych. The man sleeps sitting up, as he cannot breathe lying down. His face is gray, his nose long and sharp, his eyes look huge because he is terribly emaciated, his temples are sunken, his beard skimpy, his hair long. His face does not reveal his social status: you cannot tell whether he is a gentleman, a merchant, or a peasant. Judging from his expression and his long hair, he may be an assiduous churchgoer or a lay brother, but his manner of speaking does not seem to be that of a monk. He is utterly worn out by his cough, by the stifling heat, his illness, and he breathes with difficulty, moving his parched lips. Noticing that Gusev is looking at him he turns his face toward him and says:

"I begin to guess . . . Yes, I understand it all perfectly now."

"What do you understand, Pavel Ivanych?"

"Here's how it is . . . It has always seemed strange to me that terribly ill as you fellows are, you should be on a steamer where the stifling air, the heavy seas, in fact everything, threatens you with death; but now it is all clear to me . . . Yes . . . The doctors put you on the steamer to get rid of you. They got tired of bothering with you, cattle . . . You don't pay them any money, you are a nuisance, and you spoil their statistics with your deaths . . . So, of course, you are just cattle. And it's not hard to get rid of you . . . All that's necessary is, in the first place, to have no conscience or humanity, and, secondly, to deceive the ship authorities. The first requirement need hardly be given a thought—in that respect we are virtuous, and as for the second condition, it can always be fulfilled with a little practice. In a crowd of four hundred healthy soldiers and sailors, five sick ones are not conspicuous; well, they got you all onto the steamer, mixed you with the healthy ones, hurriedly counted you over, and in the confusion nothing untoward was noticed, and when the steamer was on the way, people discovered that there were paralytics and consumptives on their last legs lying about the deck . . ."

Gusev does not understand Pavel Ivanych; thinking that he is being reprimanded, he says in self-justification:

"I lay on the deck because I was so sick; when we were being unloaded from the barge onto the steamer, I caught a bad chill."

"It's revolting," Pavel Ivanych continues. "The main thing is, they know perfectly well that you can't stand the long journey and yet they put you here. Suppose you last as far as the Indian Ocean, and then what? It's horrible to think of . . . And that's the gratitude for your faithful, irreplaceable service!"

Pavel Ivanych's eyes flash with anger. He frowns fastidiously and says, gasping for breath, "Those are the people who ought to be given a drubbing in the newspapers till the feathers fly in all directions."

The two sick soldiers and the sailor have waked up and are already playing cards. The sailor is half reclining in his bunk, the soldiers are sitting near by on the floor in most uncomfortable positions. One of the soldiers has his right arm bandaged and his wrist is heavily swathed in wrappings that look like a cap, so that he holds his cards under his right arm or in the crook of his elbow while he plays with his left. The ship is rolling heavily. It is impossible to stand up, or have tea, or take medicine.

"Were you an orderly?" Pavel Ivanych asks Gusev.

"Yes, sir, an orderly."

"My God, my God!" says Pavel Ivanych and shakes his head sadly. "To tear a man from his home, drag him a distance of ten thousand miles, then wear him out till he gets consumption and . . . and what is it all for, one asks? To turn him into an orderly for some Captain Kopeykin or Midshipman Dyrkal. How reasonable!"

"It's not hard work, Pavel Ivanych. You get up in the morning and polish the boots, start the samovars going, tidy the rooms, and then you have nothing more to do. The lieutenant drafts plans all day, and if you like, you can say your prayers, or read a book or go out on the street. God grant everyone such a life!"

"Yes, very good! The lieutenant drafts plans all day long, and you sit in the kitchen and long for home . . . Plans, indeed! . . . It's not plans that matter but human life. You have only one life to live and it mustn't be wronged."

"Of course, Pavel Ivanych, a bad man gets no break anywhere, either at home or in the service, but if you live as you ought and obey orders, who will want to wrong you? The officers are educated gentlemen, they understand . . . In five years I have never once been in the guard house, and I was struck, if I remember right, only once."

"What for?"

"For fighting. I have a heavy hand, Pavel Ivanych. Four Chinks came into our yard; they were bringing firewood or something, I forget. Well, I was bored and I knocked them about a bit, the nose of one of them, damn him, began bleeding . . . The lieutenant saw it all through the window, got angry, and boxed me on the ear."

"You are a poor, foolish fellow . . ." whispers Pavel Ivanych. "You don't understand anything."

He is utterly exhausted by the rolling of the ship and shuts his eyes; now his head drops back, now it sinks forward on his chest. Several times he tries to lie down but nothing comes of it: he finds it difficult to breathe.

"And what did you beat up the four Chinks for?" he asks after a while.

"Oh, just like that. They came into the yard and I hit them."

There is silence . . . The card-players play for two hours, eagerly, swearing sometimes, but the rolling and pitching of the ship overcomes them, too; they throw aside the cards and lie down. Again Gusev has a vision: the big pond, the pottery, the village . . . Once more the sleigh is gliding along, once more Vanka is laughing and Akulka, the silly thing, throws open her fur coat and thrusts out her feet, as much as to say: "Look, good people, my felt boots are not like Vanka's, they're new ones."

"Going on six, and she has no sense yet," Gusev mutters in his delirium. "Instead of showing off your boots you had better come and get your soldier uncle a drink. I'll give you a present."

And here is Andron with a flintlock on his shoulder, carrying a hare he has killed, and behind him is the decrepit old Jew Isaychik, who offers him a piece of soap in exchange for the hare; and here is the black calf in the entry, and Domna sewing a shirt and crying about something, and then again the bull's head without eyes, black smoke . . .

Someone shouts overhead, several sailors run by; it seems that something bulky is being dragged over the deck, something falls with a crash. Again some people run by . . . Has there been an accident? Gusev raises his head, listens, and sees that the two soldiers and the sailor are playing cards again;

Pavel Ivanych is sitting up and moving his lips. It is stifling, you haven't the strength to breathe, you are thirsty, the water is warm, disgusting. The ship is still rolling and pitching.

Suddenly something strange happens to one of the soldiers playing cards. He calls hearts diamonds, gets muddled over his score, and drops his cards, then with a frightened, foolish smile looks round at all of them.

"I shant be a minute, fellows . . ." he says, and lies down on the floor.

Everybody is nonplussed. They call to him, he does not answer.

"Stepan, maybe you are feeling bad, eh?" the soldier with the bandaged arm asks him. "Perhaps we had better call the priest, eh?"

"Have a drink of water, Stepan . . ." says the sailor. "Here, brother, drink."

"Why are you knocking the jug against his teeth?" says Gusev angrily. "Don't you see, you cabbage-head?"

"What?"

"What? Gusev mimicks him. "There is no breath in him, he's dead! That's what! Such stupid people, Lord God!"

III

The ship has stopped rolling and Pavel Ivanych is cheerful. He is no longer cross. His face wears a boastful, challenging, mocking expression. It is as though he wants to say: "Yes, right away I'll tell you something that will make you burst with laughter." The round porthole is open and a soft breeze is blowing on Pavel Ivanych. There is a sound of voices, the splash of oars in the water . . . Just under the porthole someone is droning in a thin, disgusting voice; must be a Chinaman singing.

"Here we are in the harbor," says Pavel Ivanych with a mocking smile. "Only another month or so and we shall be in Russia. Myes, messieurs of the armed forces! I'll arrive in Odessa and from there go straight to Kharkov. In Kharkov I have a friend, a man of letters. I'll go to him and say, 'Come, brother, put aside your vile subjects, women's amours and the beauties of Nature, and show up the two-legged vermin . . . There's a subject for you.'"

For a while he reflects, then says:

"Gusev, do you know how I tricked them?"

"Tricked who, Pavel Ivanych?"

"Why, these people . . . You understand, on this steamer there is only a first class and a third class, and they only allow peasants, that is, the common herd, to go in the third. If you have got a jacket on and even at a distance look like a gentleman or a bourgeois, you have to go first class, if you please. You must fork out five hundred rubles if it kills you. Why do you have such a regulation? I ask them. 'Do you mean to raise the prestige of the Russian intelligentsia thereby?' Not a bit of it. We don't let you simply because a decent person can't go third class; it is too horrible and disgusting there. 'Yes, sir? Thank you for being so solicitous about decent people's welfare. But in any case, whether it's nasty there or nice, I haven't got five hundred rubles. I didn't loot the Treasury, I didn't exploit the natives, I didn't traffic in contraband, I flogged nobody to death, so judge for yourselves if I have the right to occupy a first class cabin and even to reckon myself among the Russian intelligentsia.'

2. A member of the middle class.

But logic means nothing to them. So I had to resort to fraud. I put on a peasant coat and high boots, I pulled a face so that I looked like a common drunk, and went to the agents: 'Give us a little ticket, your Excellency,' said I—"

"You're not of the gentry, are you?" asked the sailor.

"I come of a clerical family. My father was a priest, and an honest one; he always told the high and mighty the truth to their faces and, as a result, he suffered a great deal."

Pavel Ivanych is exhausted from talking and gasps for breath, but still continues:

"Yes, I always tell people the truth to their faces. I'm not afraid of anyone or anything. In this respect, there is a great difference between me and all of you, men. You are dark people, blind, crushed; you see nothing and what you do see, you don't understand. . . . You are told that the wind breaks loose from its chain, that you are beasts, savages, and you believe it; someone gives it to you in the neck—you kiss his hand; some animal in a racoon coat robs you and then tosses you a fifteen-kopeck tip and you say: 'Let me kiss your hand, sir.' You are outcasts, pitiful wretches. I am different, my mind is clear. I see it all plainly like a hawk or an eagle when it hovers over the earth, and I understand everything. I am protest personified. I see tyranny—I protest. I see a hypocrite—I protest. I see a triumphant swine—I protest. And I cannot be put down, no Spaniards, no Inquisition! can silence me. No. Cut out my tongue and I will protest with gestures. Wall me up in a cellar—I will shout so that you will hear me half a mile away, or will scarve myself to death, so that they may have another weight on their black consciences. Kill me and I will haunt them. All my acquaintances say to me: 'You are a most insufferable person, Pavel Ivanych! I am proud of such a reputation. I served three years in the Far East and I shall be remembered there a hundred years. I had rows there with everybody. My friends wrote to me from Russia: 'Don't come back, but here I am going back to spite them. . . . Yes. . . . That's life as I understand it. That's what one can call life.' Gusev is not listening; he is looking at the porthole. A junk, flooded with dazzling hot sunshine, is swaying on the transparent turquoise water. In it stand naked Chinamen, holding up cages with canaries in them and calling out: "It sings, it sings!"

Another boat, knocks against it; a steam cutter glides past. Then there is another boat: a fat Chinaman sits in it, eating rice with chopsticks. The water sways lazily, white sea gulls languidly hover over it.

"Would be fine to give that fat fellow one in the neck," reflects Gusev, looking at the stout Chinaman and yawning.

He dozes off and it seems to him that all nature is dozing too. Time flies swiftly by. Imperceptibly the day passes. Imperceptibly darkness descends. . . . The steamer is no longer standing still but is on the move again.

IV

Two days pass. Pavel Ivanych no longer sits up but is lying down. His eyes are closed, his nose seems to have grown sharper.

"Pavel Ivanych," Gusev calls to him. "Hey, Pavel Ivanych."

3. The seatribunal of the Roman Catholic Church, established in Spain in 1480 to eradicate heresy, infamous for its cruelty and capriciousness. Joseph Bonaparte abolished it in 1808.

Pavel Ivanych opens his eyes and moves his lips.

"Are you feeling bad?"

"No. . . . It's nothing. . . ." answers Pavel Ivanych gasping for breath. "Nothing, on the contrary. . . . I am better. . . . You see, I can lie down now. . . . I have improved. . . ."

"Well, thank God for that, Pavel Ivanych."

"When I compare myself to you, I am sorry for you, poor fellows. My lungs are healthy, mine is a stomach cough. . . . I can stand hell, let alone the Red Sea. Besides, I take a critical attitude toward my illness and the medicines. While you—Your minds are dark. . . . It's hard on you, very, very hard!"

The ship is not rolling, it is quiet, but as hot and stifling as a Turkish bath; it is hard, not only to speak, but even to listen. Gusev hugs his knees, lays his head on them and thinks of his home. God, in this stifling heat, what a relief it is to think of snow and cold! You're driving in a sleigh, all of a sudden, the horses take fright at something and bolt. Careless of the road, the ditches, the gullies, they tear like mad things right through the village, across the pond, past the pottery, across the open fields. "Hold them!" the pottery hands and the peasants they meet shout at the top of their voices. "Hold them!" But why hold them? Let the keen cold wind beat in your face and bite your hands; let the lumps of snow, kicked up by the horses, slide down your collar, your neck, your chest; let the runners sing, and the traces and the whiplashes break, the devil take them. And what delight when the sleigh upsets and you go flying full tilt into a drift, face right in the snow, and then you get up, white all over with icicles on your mustache, no cap, no gloves, your belt undone. . . . People laugh, dogs bark. . . .

Pavel Ivanych half opens one eye, fixes Gusev with it and asks softly:

"Gusev, did your commanding officer steal?"

"Who can tell, Pavel Ivanych? We can't say, we didn't hear about it."

And after that, a long time passes in silence. Gusev broods, his mind wanders, and he keeps drinking water: it is hard for him to talk and hard for him to listen, and he is afraid of being talked to. An hour passes, a second, a third; evening comes, then night, but he doesn't notice it; he sits up and keeps dreaming of the frost.

There is a sound as though someone were coming into the infirmary, voices are heard, but five minutes pass and all is quiet again.

"The kingdom of Heaven be his and eternal peace," says the soldier with a bandaged arm. "He was an uneasy chap."

"What?" asks Gusev. "Who?"

"He died, they have just carried him up."

"Oh, well, mutters Gusev, yawning, "the kingdom of Heaven be his."

"What do you think, Gusev?" the soldier with the bandaged arm says after a while. "Will he be in the kingdom of Heaven or not?"

"Who do you mean?"

"Pavel Ivanych."

"He will. . . . He suffered so long. Then again, he belonged to the clergy and priests have a lot of relatives. Their prayers will get him there."

The soldier with the bandage sits down on Gusev's bunk and says in an undertone:

"You too, Gusev, aren't long for this world. You will never get to Russia."

"Did the doctor or the nurse say so?" asks Gusev.

"It isn't that they said so, but one can see it. It's plain when a man will die soon. You don't eat, you don't drink, you've got so thin it's dreadful to look at you. It's consumption, in a word. I say it not to worry you, but because maybe you would like to receive the sacrament and extreme unction.⁴ And if you have any money, you had better turn it over to the senior officer."

"I haven't written home," Gusev sighs. "I shall die and they won't know."
"They will," the sick sailor says in a bass voice. "When you die, they will put it down in the ship's log, in Odessa they will send a copy of the entry to the army authorities, and they will notify your district board or somebody like that."

Such a conversation makes Gusev uneasy and a vague craving begins to torment him. He takes a drink—it isn't that; he drags himself to the porthole and breathes the hot, moist air—it isn't that; he tries to think of home, of the frost—it isn't that . . . At last it seems to him that if he stays in the infirmary another minute, he will certainly choke to death.

"It's stifling, brother," he says. "I'll go on deck. Take me there, for Christ's sake."

"All right," the soldier with the bandage agrees. "You can't walk, I'll carry you. Hold on to my neck."

Gusev puts his arm around the soldier's neck, the latter places his uninjured arm round him and carries him up. On the deck, discharged soldiers and sailors are lying asleep side by side; there are so many of them it is difficult to pass.

"Get down on the floor," the soldier with the bandage says softly. "Follow me quietly, hold on to my shirt."

It is dark, there are no lights on deck or on the masts or anywhere on the sea around. On the prow the seaman on watch stands perfectly still like a statue, and it looks as though he, too, were asleep. The steamer seems to be left to its own devices and to be going where it pleases.

"Now they'll throw Pavel Ivanych into the sea," says the soldier with the bandage, "in a sack and then into the water."

"Yes, that's the regulation."

"At home, it's better to lie in the earth. Anyway, your mother will come to the grave and shed a tear."

"Sure?"

There is a smell of dung and hay. With drooping heads, steers stand at the ship's rail. One, two, three—eight of them! And there's a pony. Gusev puts out his hand to stroke it, but it shakes its head, shows its teeth, and tries to bite his sleeve.

"Damn brute!" says Gusev crossly.

The two of them thread their way to the prow, then stand at the rail, peering. Overhead there is deep sky, bright stars, peace and quiet, exactly as at home in the village. But below there is darkness and disorder. Tall waves are making an uproar for no reason. Each one of them as you look at it is trying to rise higher than all the rest and to chase and crush its neighbor; it is thunderously attacked by a third wave that has a gleaming white mane and is just as ferocious and ugly.

4. The sacrament also known as the Anointing of the Sick, or Last Rites.

The sea has neither sense nor pity. If the steamer had been smaller, not made of thick iron plates, the waves would have crushed it without the slightest remorse, and would have devoured all the people in it without distinguishing between saints and sinners. The steamer's expression was equally senseless and cruel. This beaked monster presses forward, cutting millions of waves in its path; it fears neither darkness nor the wind, nor space, nor solitude—it's all child's play for it, and if the ocean had its population, this monster would crush it, too, without distinguishing between saints and sinners.

"Where are we now?" asks Gusev.

"I don't know. Must be the ocean."

"You can't see land . . ."

"No chance of it! They say we'll see it only in seven days."

The two men stare silently at the white phosphorescent foam and brood. Gusev is first to break the silence.

"There is nothing frightening here," he says. "Only you feel queer as if you were in a dark forest; but if, let's say, they lowered the boat this minute and an officer ordered me to go fifty miles across the sea to catch fish, I'll go. Or, let's say, if a Christian were to fall into the water right now, I'd jump in after him. A German or a Chink I wouldn't try to save, but I'd go in after a Christian."

"And are you afraid to die?"

"I am. I am sorry about the farm. My brother at home, you know, isn't steady; he drinks, he beats his wife for no reason, he doesn't honor his father and mother. Without me everything will go to rack and ruin, and before long it's my fear that my father and old mother will be begging their bread. But my legs won't hold me up, brother, and it's the stuffing here. Let's go to sleep."

V

Gusev goes back to the infirmary and gets into his bunk. He is again tormented by a vague desire and he can't make out what it is that he wants. There is a weight on his chest, a throbbing in his head, his mouth is so dry that it is difficult for him to move his tongue. He dozes and talks in his sleep and, worn out with nightmares, with coughing and the stifling heat, towards morning he falls into a heavy sleep. He dreams that they have just taken the bread out of the oven in the barracks and that he has climbed into the oven and is having a steam bath there, lashing himself with a besom of birch twigs. He sleeps for two days and on the third at noon two sailors come down and carry him out of the infirmary. He is sewn up in sailcloth and to make him heavier, they put two gridirons in with him. Sewn up in sailcloth, he looks like a carrot or a radish: broad at the head and narrow at the feet. Before sunset, they carry him on deck and put him on a plank. One end of the plank lies on the ship's rail, the other on a box placed on a stool. Round him stand the discharged soldiers and the crew with heads bared.

"Blessed is our God," the priest begins, "now, and ever, and unto ages of ages."

"Amen," three sailors chant.

The discharged men and the crew cross themselves and look off at the waves. It is strange that a man should be sewn up in sailcloth and should

soon be flying into the sea. Is it possible that such a thing can happen to anyone?

The priest strews earth upon Gusev and makes obeisance to him. The men sing "Memory Eternal."

The seaman on watch duty raises the end of the plank, Gusev slides off it slowly and then flying, head foremost, turns over in the air and—plop! Foam covers him, and for a moment, he seems to be wrapped in lace, but the instant passes and he disappears in the waves.

He plunges rapidly downward. Will he reach the bottom? At this spot the ocean is said to be three miles deep. After sinking sixty or seventy feet, he begins to descend more and more slowly, swaying rhythmically as though in hesitation, and, carried along by the current, moves faster laterally than vertically.

And now he runs into a school of fish called pilot fish. Seeing the dark body, the little fish stop as though petrified and suddenly all turn round together and disappear. In less than a minute they rush back at Gusev, swift as arrows and begin zigzagging round him in the water. Then another dark body appears. It is a shark. With dignity and reluctance, seeming not to notice Gusev, as it were, it swims under him; then while he, moving downward, sinks upon its back, the shark turns, belly upward, basks in the warm transparent water and languidly opens its jaws with two rows of teeth. The pilot fish are in ecstasy; they stop to see what will happen next. After playing a little with the body, the shark nonchalantly puts his jaws under it, cautiously touches it with his teeth and the sailcloth is ripped the full length of the body, from head to foot; one of the gridirons falls out, frightens the pilot fish and striking the shark on the flank, sinks rapidly to the bottom.

Meanwhile, up above, in that part of the sky where the sun is about to set, clouds are massing, one resembling a triumphal arch, another a lion, a third a pair of scissors. A broad shaft of green light issues from the clouds and reaches to the middle of the sky, a while later, a violet beam appears alongside of it and then a golden one and a pink one . . . The heavens turn a soft lilac tint. Looking at this magnificent enchanting sky, the ocean frowns at first, but soon it, too, takes on tender, joyous, passionate colors for which it is hard to find a name in the language of man.

1890

RELATED:

—Richard Bausch on "Gusev," p. 918

KATE CHOPIN
1851–1904

Chopin was born in St. Louis to a prominent Creole-Irish family that prized books and education. On a visit to New Orleans she met her husband-to-be and returned there to live with him when she married at twenty. After her husband's early death, she went back to St. Louis and began to write, largely drawing on the experiences of her years in the Deep South. She contributed to many of the popular periodicals of her time, but her writing career came to an end with the publication of her novel *The Awakening* (1899), which was sharply condemned for its frank representation of adultery and mixed marriage. This book has subsequently been praised for its sensitive portrayal of a woman in quest of her individuality. Many of Chopin's stories were collected in *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1899).

The Story of an Hour

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

They're so young, apologized Pallid, the used-boy raiser. You'd both better go to work, I suggested, knotting the pearl-gray late-afternoon thread. Please put the dishes in the sink first. Please, I'm sorry about the eggs.

Livid yawned, stretched, peeked at the clock, sighed. Saturday or no, alas, my time is not my own. I've got an appointment downtown in about forty-five minutes, he said.

I do too, said Pallid. I'll join you on the subway.

I'm taking a cab, said Livid.

I'll split it with you, said Pallid.

They left for the bathroom, where they shared things nicely—shaving equipment, washstand, shower, and so forth.

I made the beds and put the aluminum cot away. Livid would find a hotel room by nightfall. I did the dishes and organized the greedy day, dinosaurs in the morning, park in the afternoon, peanut butter in between, and at the end of it all, to reward us for a week of beans endured, a noble rib roast with little onions, dumplings, and pink applesauce.

Faith, I'm going now, Livid called from the hall. I put my shopping list aside and went to collect the boys, who were wandering among the rooms looking for Robin Hood. Go say goodbye to your father, I whispered. Which one? they asked.

The real father, I said. Richard ran to Livid. They shook hands manfully. Pallid embraced Tonto and was kissed eleven times for his affection.

Goodbye now, Faith, said Livid. Call me if you want anything at all. Anything at all, my dear. Warmly with sweet propriety he kissed my cheek. Ascendant, Pallid kissed me with considerable business behind the ear. Goodbye, I said to them.

I must admit that they were at last clean and neat, rather attractive, shiny men in their thirties, with the grand affairs of the day ahead of them. Dark night, the search for pleasure and oblivion were well ahead. Goodbye, I said, have a nice day. Goodbye, they said once more, and set off in pride on paths which are not my concern.

1959

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS

b. 1952



Jayne Anne Phillips was born and raised in West Virginia and earned her B.A. from West Virginia University in 1974. Phillips felt "intricately bound" to her home, but she also knew she "wanted to leave." Following her graduation, she embarked on a wandering journey to California, and her various work and social experiences as she crossed America had a significant influence on her fiction. Phillips went on to earn an M.F.A. from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and published her award-winning first collection, *Sweethearts* (1976), consisting of 24 one-page stories, before she graduated. Her first major short story collection, *Black Tickets* (1979), earned her national commercial success and the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction. Phillips' lyric prose, known for its un sentimental focus on love, loss, and lone survivors, is not restricted to short stories. Five years after *Black Tickets* came her first and bestselling novel, *Machine Dreams* (1984), nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and named one of the twelve best books of the year by the *New York Times Book Review*. For her second novel, *Shelter* (1995), Phillips won an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her other works include another short fiction collection, *Fast Lanes* (1987), and the novels *MotherKind* (2000), *Lark & Termité* (2009)—nominated for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award—and, most recently, *Quiet Dell* (2013). Phillips is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. She has taught at numerous colleges and universities including Harvard University and Williams College, and she currently teaches in the creative writing program at Rutgers University.

El Paso

Dude

See I'd met this old dirt farmer in a bar the night before. Said he was selling his truck cheap and I could come down to La Rosa and pick it up. Said three hundred dollars and it didn't run too bad but I'd better buy it now. So I hitched down Sunday morning, mud churches on all three dirt streets ringing their black bells. I found him wringing a chicken's neck in the yard, did it quick and finished before he looked at me. Dark-seamed face under a broad hat and the chicken head a little dangling thing hanging out his fist. I told him, said

It'd come about the truck, did he still want—thinking we were both pretty drunk and he might have dreamed he had a truck, since it didn't look like he had anything but a shanty house that leaned right into dirt. He spat and turned for me to follow him, holding the chicken now by a splayed leg that was bright orange in the rising heat. The nails on his hands were colored that same dull shine as hen's claws.

Us walking in the dust yard past old tires and a rotten bedspring, mule tied to a pump by the chicken shed, and he stands finally by this thing that's a red fifties Chevy with a built-on bed shelved with chicken cages. Crosses and a blackened corn husk doll hanging from the mirror, keys strung on a hair ribbon. I got in and drove around the yard fast, chickens squawking and the old cur dogs snapping at the wheels. The old man squatted where he was, plucked the hen. Feathers flew and dropped as I pulled up. I said the truck ran good and if he had the title I'd pay him now and take it.

He motioned me inside a house somehow dark even in all that light. Smell of wool shawls and vinegar. I stumble blind into a table and voices, Spanish curses, stop and start. I look up and Rita, she's standing there not three feet away, having ripped the curtains off one window, she's screaming in her voice that goes throaty and harsh, and the light pours in all over her. Hot yellow gravy of light, her black eyes, and the red skirt tight, blouse loose old lace ripped at the shoulder. I wanted to roll my hand in her; I could feel her wet against my legs. The old woman stands by the stove, side of her face shining, and when she turns I see she's not crying but one eye weeps. Rita walks past me steaming from her hands, the cheap plastic curtains clutched and dragging.

I watch the old man rummage in a drawer but feel her at the end of the long room. Rita moving, bending over a small chair. Old man counts the money and I turn to watch her. The light rolling now, leaked into the dark, ripples the skin of the dark and flies fly up in loose knots; low slow buzz in corners yellowed and pulled out by the light that rolls across the surfaces of things in yellow blocks. Dust in the light; and her body moving down the long room pulls a white path like an animal leaving water. She bends from the waist; under the cloth her thighs are muscles, long curves. In the chair sits a baby whose head is too big. His legs don't reach the floor; his skin is stretched tight and pale like the light is under it. His hair is white and fine, swirled on his man-sized head, and I know he is a child only by the way he cradles a shoe to his face. Rocks the shoe slow in short arms. Rita has her hands in his hair, her shoulders tensed and curved to him. A sound catches in her throat and comes out low, folding into the yellow room. Thick juice of light circling, curling us in. Child wheezing and rocking, rocking the shoe slow; his mouth on it. It is her shoe and Rita crooms, rocking with him, pulling the shoe away.

Rita

I bought my mother those glasses so she wouldn't have to live in the dark, spent a hundred dollars on an El Paso doctor so she could see in the light without the eye burning. And she wouldn't wear them. Would hide them and move like a bat in the dark, the windows covered. The child in his chair with his sounds, she singing her songs low in the dark, he weaving in his chair. Me youngest of

six, and at near fifty she gave birth to him, his white skin and his head hanging like a heavy bloom on the neck that couldn't move it. His eyes rolling back to see in that head that must have been a field of snow inside. No father, she said, he is what was in me. And the eye in her too, still pouring from her slow. Bringing grain from the store on the mule, she crossed against the light and a truck knocked her down, the mule kicking her face. And so the eye weeps and hurts in the daylight. Pounding meal on the wood table she sings in the dark like she sang then, my five brothers building ears in the yard, and me they called *brujita*, little witch.

At dusk the townspeople came to be healed. Paid her in corn and cloth. Then the corn stacked by the door and tomatoes hung to dry and sides of bacon, their white fat thick as my waist. She in her white shawls and her almost black skin put her hands in powders ground from roots. The villagers knelt, her sound wheeling over them. Their eyes fluttered and their hands unclenched, jerking as sounds came. *Muerte Dios muerte muerte*. They got up and bowed to the witch their children won't touch. Casanets' slow dull clack followed them, their feet going away in the dark yard. From the time I was a baby she gave me a sharp stick and told me to draw them in the dirt to keep their spirits from returning. She made her witching dolls from husks; when I was older she gave me paints to draw their faces. I made them: farmers' heads and goitered women already old.

My father was gone long weeks to Las Vegas, Reno. Sometimes when he came back we moved to hotels in El Paso and bought clothes in stores. Remember, she'd say, cracked voice clacking on her teeth, you ain't no Spanish brats—you got Gypsy blood and your daddy's Apache cheeks. I remember her long fingers on my face. He didn't come back. The house was her power and she wouldn't leave. The town still creeps to her at dusk, women with shawls low over faces. The priest says it's sacrilege, they heaping ashes by the door.

Already I was with men and she was big, her belly strained, and the labor went two days. Women from the town wouldn't help. She cut herself to let the child's head pass and the women, hearing she had a devil, burned candles by their beds. Later the old man came with his shriveled dolls, his silence, and no name I ever heard her say. He built a chair on rollers when the child could sit and kept lanterns lit all night to make the sounds soft.

Now the child's sounds are muffled and low except when I dance. He knows me, holds out his hands for my shoes. My mother takes dried cactus from a wood box and grinds it, sprinkles a powder on his hair. I make the signs and the casanets warm in my fingers; we put the child's chair in the center of the room and my feet on brushed boards start slow thud. The drum, her low voice quavering, my arms high, the clack silver clack and the child's eyes focus, hold me fast, faster, me spinning around him. He holds up his head, and under his skin, I see the pale blue veins. Faster, my feet pound floor, her voice louder, and he whines a high clean whine that holds me spinning. Ceiling twists, floor circles smaller, small. My hands over him stop. Suddenly he sleeps, he sleeps and we lie, all of us, in the hot dark house. Listen to him breathe.

The old man sells his truck, won't take my money. He sees girls grind in city bars, knows how the money comes: my rooms, hotels, the avenue. The child's sounds are whispers, now, he sleeps too long. At the white hospital, us

black against walls, they say the shunt in his head won't drain. He won't eat anymore, drinks from bottles, watches me; why do I come here. She hacks at the naked chicken on a board. Her face, the eye drawn; I moving away through the yard. This dust on my legs yellow as meal is burning, burning.

Dude

She walks out through dirt yard to the road. I run, touch her arm. Her skin bare, dark walnut skin stained milky, and I stand, my hand drenched in her skin, ask her, is she going back to El Paso. In the truck the land goes by us glaring as a lidless eye, sun a high glittering ring. Seeming to whirl in itself like hornets, it throws its heat on land laid out flat to the burning. We glide horizontal on a strip of road. In the tiny room of the truck I feel heavy in the river heat. Between us on the cracked seat a space gets small. Her satin skirt is faded in circles I could crush to my thumb. Under her heavy hair, her damp temples, I want to feel the shape of her skull. My hands are deaf. Eyes stony with light she watches me try to see the road, her opaled eyes seeming to come out at me yet falling back in their deep oil that scalds the side of my face.

I pull over, stop the truck, get out, lean against it. Up the road a café, all night lights still on, runs a lit band of letters around its roof: hamburgers, thick shakes, onion rings fried gold. I walk up there and a woman with her hair dyed brass swabs the counter with a rag. Her wide grin red, her front tooth gold, she lets me talk and counting change she fingers my palm.

Ice cream packed hard melts slow on my hands as I'm walking back. I see Rita hitching by the side of the road. I hand her a cone, get in the truck and start the engine. She climbs in. Motor idling, sweet cold in our mouths, I pull her across the seat and press my fingers hard at the base of her neck. My breath comes out a ragged curve against her eyes.

Watching

He so in love with her it was something to see. Dude so caught up and dedicated like a single eye to his own loving. How she touched it off. I suppose he was about to pack it in before he saw her and thought there was still something to do. Walking up the hill, touching him with her hip and walking, she moved her hip was delicate and blue beside his thigh.

This was El Paso, 1965. She danced in ropless bars, said really she was a painter but she needed supplies. Supplies she said are always hard to get, sometimes you just have to put out and get them and go off with them. It was plain he wanted to go off with her but in the summer in El Paso it's hard to move anywhere except down the street to the bars. I remember there was always dog puke on the sidewalks in El Paso. All those strays get the sweats around noon and bring up the garbage they are in the back alleys of beanerlys at dawn. Think about Texas and there's those skinny fanned ribs heaving.

Dude used to go down to Bimpy's nights and watch her dance. Bimpy was a greasy-kneed old faggot who liked him plenty and gave us free bourbon. She'd come over between songs and do a number with us, wringing with sweat so she'd wet the paper and we'd have to keep lighting it. She danced on this three-foot-square red stage, under two old ceiling fans that looked like little

airplane propellers. She moved under their sleepy drone; always there was something about to break out. From our table in the corner I could smell the old roses smell of her. She was dark-haired and black-eyed though she swore she wasn't Spanish, medium-sized but small-boned with green apple breasts; then suddenly her twisted child-bearing hips that were somehow off-center and rolled gentle to the left when she walked, rolling slow up the hill past the plate glass liquor stores. Dancing, she'd throw her dusty scent past the two old spots Bimpy had and the cowboys threw bills on the stage. Dude hated the dancing; said she was frigid as hell afterward, like loving a wind-up doll except for her mouth and the curves it took on in the dark. She wouldn't even move with the lights on, he said.

After the show she'd stay and help Bimpy sweep up and then we'd walk out the door into the oily night. Everything wide awake and the fat yam-skinned women talking Spanish to their boyfriends, walking with their stemmed words and twined fingers past the blank-eyed 5 & 10's. We'd walk up the hill, they in front and me trailing behind. She talked in her Texas voice about nothing usually, it just being important there in the lit-up black to have her voice with its honeyed drawl and bitter edge; she walking slope slide up the hill, whisper of her nylons brushing and the Mexican boys shooting craps on the sidewalk. They ain't but thirteen, she'd say when they looked up at her heels clicking. Old enough. My daddy made a small fortune at craps. He used to call it dealin with the demon. She'd say that and slap Dude on the ass.

She'd boil those stark black Colombian beans on a stove in their flat and it'd heat up the kitchen so we'd have to sit out the window on the roof. By this time the town was near silent and steaming slow like a wet iron. Always drink hot coffee on hot nights; she'd say, Brings the sweat to the outside and lets you sleep. Dude dozed with his head in her lap and she'd turn to me, ask me, oils are on sale and could she borrow a few bucks till next week. You know, she'd say, twisting his hair in her fingers, Them stars are just holes in the sky after all. And while I'm sleeping in that hot bed everything I ever thought of having falls into em.

Finally I'd go to bed and hear them in the hall going back and forth to the bathroom, him usually drunk by then and tripping at the door. People up and down the hall behind doors yelled at him to shut up. Her arms reaching in the yellow blouse to grab the light string, her hips moving in their funny bumbling slow walk past my door, not quite touching his legs, and the mosquitoes louder than her quiet laughter: this was 4 A.M. in El Paso.

I saw him a couple of years later in Toledo, said he was into racing junk cars, said it was some kick. Said you're tearing around and around under the lights in these things that are all going to fly apart and pile up. Said he heard she was living down in Austin with some dyke. Said cracking up those cars was great; said he was making money and cracking them up was some kick, it was really something.

Bimpy

When I opened the place in '46 I didn't think no one could pull nothin over on me again. I was in the war just like anyone else, ain't no one gonna tell me I got

any debt. I had enough tin food and muddy boots and hair lice to last me. One goddamn big lie is what it was, I figured that out. There ain't no losing or winning anywhere is what I figured out, ain't nobody gonna pitch me into no fake contest again. I sailed into San Fran with a knee like a corkscrew and the salt air made it ache like a bitch. I came back home and opened the place and I figured I was standing ground. Back then the Mexicans used to skunk around at the alley door till I told em to beat it. I can see em now, slinking off in their red shirts under that one streetlamp between the trash cans. My own grandmother was a Mex. She smelled like a rotten cantaloupe and raved in Spanish about the goddamn Church that did nothin but bury her endless brats and the man that beat her. There ain't no losing or winning. These black-eyed thieves and yellow Mex boys think I got something they want, let em swagger in the front door so what. I could tell em if they ask—no matter what they got they got more to get and the thing don't end. Gaining like a squirrel on a wheel, sure. When I saw them three kids I knew what the game was. Her saying what I needed was a dancer, the dude pretty as a rodeo star, and his sidekick one of them hunched-up watchers. I said Listen, I got me a dancer, and she said Try me out. The dude stood there grinding a butt into the floor in his high-heeled boots. I said Well I don't allow no dancers in here without escorts, gets plenty rough in here ya know, this ain't Philadelphia. She said she was from La Rosa, one of them dirt-eating border towns, and I laughed, said You didn't get far diejia. She smiled, her mouth dark pink and those flashy Spanish teeth strong as an animal's. The cowboy finally looked at me, said, rolling the filter of his cigarette, We'll be here at nine. The watcher stood there looking from face to face like he was judge of the whole damn game and I said Suit yourselves.

Dude

Back then I was a carpenter like everyone. I quit school and went down to Texas, air so thick and slow it's like swimming. That flat-out heat comes after you and drinks you up; she'd been there all her life. The steam in her; I lost what I was thinking in rooms thick, full of us; her black hair in the sheets a wound thread, thick black lines of drawings she kept hidden, her charcoaled fingertips. She worked on the avenue, turned tricks in a hotel room with a blue ceiling and one light bulb in a fringed shade. I told her she had to stop it and she said well, she'd dance but she wasn't carrying no slop to farmers in a beanery. The difference is, she said, I say how I'm used.

By noon those days I was a walking fever, my hands cut and sore from tarring feed store roofs, and since I first saw her I come into the heat the place the heat like a bitch dog and lived with it. When I got home it was late evening and she lay almost naked on the roof. Past crooked streets the tracks ran off white, cutting their light and crossing. Sluggish trains changed cars in the hard-baked yard. Beside her on the shingled heat, I smelled her salt skin and she laughed, pulled my face to her throat. We rolled, hot shingles pressed to my back, and later the shower was cold. We drank iced whiskey in jelly glasses and she danced up the hall dripping, throwing water off her hair. In the sri-fled space, window at the end painted over and light through the cracked paint patterned on the floor, her back was beaded and swaying. Water backed

up past the drain spilled cold past my feet onto the floor and in our rooms we wet the sheets, slept in their damp. Her hair looped in my hands dried slow; past us the trains whistled their open howls.

It was too hot to cook and we ate avocados, jalapeños, white cheese. City lights came on, blue and pink neon stood out cool and she leaning into the mirror painted her face for the bar. I forget all of it but her lacquered eyes. And she stepping off the curb in those high-heeled shoes, kids in Chevys grinning.

Sometimes she came back from Bimp's so late the light was coming up. Been with a john: she only did it she said when the money was too good to pass up. She'd come home with a bottle of brandy, get into bed with a pack of cards and we'd play poker to win till the sun was flat on the floor. Cards buckled finally and thrown against the wall, shades drawn, we lay there see, until we could talk. Her face in the white bed, her face by the window: light behind the shade as she stood there colored her face blurred and fading like a photograph. It's all right just come here.

Bimp

Like I said, I had another dancer. She was blond, from the East, up North I think. She had the look of someone didn't sweat much, just burned a coal inside. Ran off finally with some sick Mex to Panama. Could tell easy she was one to leave home over and over till her feet wore down to a root that just planted where she ran out of steam. The men liked that white hair and light eyes and those rhinestone shoes she wore. She had that hard crumpled look of a dame that's been around but don't know why. I knew she was thirty-five but I hired her anyway. Them white blonds is scarce down here.

I put em onstage together the first night and they set up a wheel the whole place was turning on, what with the smaller one and her seventeen-year-old's tits and them hips moving so you knew she'd been used since she was old enough to wiggle. Them border girls start with big brother in the alley, them towns full of female things dropping litters in the street. She moved with that clinched dark face, all of it a fist in her hips, and beside her the tall blond looked like a movie magazine none of em could touch. There was some kind of confusion, smelled like burning rubber. Spilt drinks and a goddamn brawl in the back at the card table. I got em offstage and turned up the lights and ordered everyone out of the place. Was just me picking up broken glass and the girls leaning by the bar and the two men dealing a hand at the corner table like nothing happened. The girls were dressed, the blond fooling with her necklace, talking low. Her blue eyes drinking that Spanish mouth she say soft, Hey Honey, how long you figure on dancing with that swayback of yours and that funny hip—dawn, can you get this thing fastened—no, here—Lemme put it on and you can maybe pinch it with your teeth—She leans over the Spanish, her red lips apart like she's still talking, beer tipped in her hand and dripping all over their stockings. And the smaller one, black hair to her waist hands midway in the air, stands there like a stone saying over and over, I can't fix it, I can't fix it.

After that I had em alternate nights and a week later the blond split. The cowboy and his sidekick was in here nights with the Spanish the two of em

diddling with cards and race forms in the corner. Figure it's been ten years ago. Gave me a few good tips and then same as now—when I hit at the track I blow it all same night, ain't nobody gonna tell me I won nothin'.

The Blond

Rita. She left the avenue, the hotel, smell of urine and spent sex in the halls. We traded Johns and other things: me by her door in blue light, cognac in my hand and my robe open. I asked her low, A toast to the hungry jokers? mouth on my raised glass and she let me in...

She let on like we never knew each other, but them hot nights I told her stories. Like how it was when I was seventeen like her. Ginette Hatcher was my name then, in Maine all the gray years. She born and died in Maine, she dying there still I guess. I took the name the first truck driver gave me, called me Babe and I answered to it ever since. I left my husband that I only saw in the dark after the boats came in or before they went out, that man always cold and fish slime on his hands. I left soon as the baby was born, thinking the best anyone could tell the kid was that Mama took off. There something out there besides that gray wet, that heavy roll. My cousins and uncles was all lobstermen ever since I can remember. My dad too, but he died when I was so young all he is to me is a furred chest and smell of oiled rope. He died of lobster is what Mom said, and she killed hundreds of them. Scratch-clink of those claws against the boiling pot was a woman sound, a metallic scratch round as rings.

Wind and rock and weeds on the beach a gray stink, no color cold; I kept fish eyes in bottles and sold them all summer to the tourists, to the queers and dandies and the painted old things with poodles. Once an old woman with money asked me to come to her hotel and read the Bible to her. She opened it and I started in. After a while I looked up and she was staring out the window like a sleepwalker, her old hat in her lap. She said what a blessed child I was to come to womanhood here by the sea, so far from hear and corruption. I said Yes Ma'am. The fire comes from the feet, she said, from the walkers and the black hair. She didn't see me anymore. I grabbed my sweater and ran home across the hotel beach, the big umbrellas blind and rolling on their sides. I found twenty dollars folded in my pocket and I bought me some red patent leather spike heels. I hid them in my room and only put them on at night and I was the walker walking and the dancer dancing in my fiery feet, and holes in the floor where I burned through.

Tires on the big trucks burn. You smell them in the cab, smell the motor boiling; my suitcase wedged between my knees and the truckers touching my dress. I lived everywhere and been to Mexico. I danced mostly, waited tables, worked in a library once and couldn't feel my feet for the shiny floor. Down in Texas any man on the street would buy me supper. By the time I got to Bimp's those nights I was already loaded. Blur, dark oiled skins past the lights, ice in glasses. Cold melts in a circle, hot whiskey, hot Texas. And Rita shows up, so smooth and so hot; eyes like black glass, sunk in, burned young. Onstage she scared me, made that cold ocean roll in my head... then the lights were on, jeers from the floor, and that little pimp pushing us scumbling into the dressing room. Where I lean against the wall and watch her shaking by the sink,

cold water on her wrists, and we look at each other. They say the world ends in fire and ice; I say it's already over. That hot pavement burns you straight through: that's why I did it, kept moving—no slow cooking and my claws raking walls. These streets, raunchy brass, my feet on fire burns up that dead ice.

I split way south with a rich dude. Red birds and black-eyed men. Been some since then. I'm doing OK, I got it made, and the cold don't come so much now.

Rita

I lived with Dude those months in two rooms, rickety bed on blocks and past the windows the roof steamed between shingles. Long afternoons I cut the thin tar bubbles with my nails, oils warm on the paper, and the tubes heated till their lettering came off in my hands. I drew the trains: red gashes and the tracks black rips underneath. His hands felt furred with dust. When he was roofing, tar smudged the lines and crosses in his palms, left the whorls of his fingers and their black smell on my hips. Some days we stayed in bed, kept the fans turning, buzzing; we had cold wine and coarse brown bread. At night the bars were crowded with drunks, some of them sick in the boat. Dancing, I didn't watch them; I saw the flat brushed land outside the house in La Rosa, looking tawny-colored from the shaded rooms, but out there, walking, you felt hard hot sand and the color spreads into a wasted brown.

I think of what happened and it happens each time the same way. When I go back they are padding the cart with skins. Inside in his bed the child's face is drawn and blue. He breathes faint strangled bleats and my mother waits, sewing pelts to wrap him. At dark she feels his throat and says there's no breath; we leave with the cart. In the skins his face is white and his light hair long as a girl's. The hitched mule swings its head, flares nostrils at the fresh smell and moves skittish toward the hills. The old man bends in brimmed hat, shuffles to low chant, and she walks behind, scatters fine powder on the ground. Cart rocking slow and the child's face in my lap is sunken, lids on rolled eyes tight closed. All night we keep moving on the sloped land. Sand rolls its barren striped bars; the sky is inked and slashed in the foothills where we stop, take bundled wood from the cart, tie it with cords. She knots leather in the dark and the old man's voice is hoarse. At dawn she piles brush and the corded wood; we lift the child, straining, jangling the bracelets on his arms. She lights dried skins wrapped on a stick, touches him, and he starts to burn. The wood catches and through the fire I think I see his face move. It moves again and I throw her back, digging, clawing at the hot wood under him. They watch me try to reach him, now he is all fire. Running around the stench I fall and their old faces over me say I only dreamed it. I smell the skins and his flesh, the incense burning under him.

Mule leading then down the ravine to where the light stretches out on land like a smooth film of egg. I stumble and touch the animal's hide, feel ribs under stiff mousy hair. The old man walks ahead, his back a leathery board under cloth. She strays there by the smell until it is finished, quiet; she waits to take the bones.

Hours walking, sun high and the road a sudden empty strip. The old man waits for me, then turns in the glare and tells me again that I dreamed it. I see

his knife and serape on his waist, know he's not going back for her. I won't go back to her either. Smoke in my mouth, I smell the wheezing birds and the tight white face behind the bristled fire. Old man walking away on the road with his mule and there are trucks, horns, voices, Baby wanna ride?

Dude

I remember the rains had started, blown in off the Gulf. She'd been to La Rosa. Always when she came back she was this hunted dog, stringy and gutted and ready to gnaw its own foot. I came in and she was walking circles in the room, rubbing her hands. I saw her fingers were torn, bruised purple under the nails. The rolled drawings were torn and smoldering on the floor. I moved to stomp them out and heard her moan, turned saw matches in her hands, she striking and tossing them in the air where they'd flare and fall smoking. I grabbed her arms and everything was breaking, chairs cracking on the floor and the light bulb splintering. I saw her hair on fire under my hand and I rolled her onto the bed. All the time she moaned long and low like I wasn't there except that this thing was on top of her. Her eyes were calm and her burned hair broke in my hand. I pulled her down and heard my breath coming high and watered like a woman's; she fell and lay there, her lips moving. She drooled and the spit flecked red where her teeth had cut. I stood over her and yelled for her to see me. Her eyes rolling past me pulled my hands to her clothes and the cloth ripped. I slapped her, kept slapping her and my hands were fists. I looked up and he's watching us—always goddamn watching us—then he is talking quietly and pulling her from under me.

Watching

He was ramming his fists into the floor beside her head but he thought he was hitting her and asked me later had he killed her. The floor was splintered, fine wood in his hands, and she under him stared glazed at the ceiling. Her mumbled Spanish mixed in the room with the sulfur smell of something burned. When I pulled her from under him I saw her hair was burned ragged and her shirt seared in the back. I took it off and wrapped her in blankets; she was shivering. There was broken glass and her fingers were bloodied somehow. She kept talking to nothing, tossing her head from side to side, hands clutched in my hair so tight that when I lay her down I can't move from her. Have to bend over her, my face close though she doesn't see me; I touch her lips, the cuts scabbing and her teeth flecked with the dull dried blood. I smell her breath coming shallow and fast, say her name over and over until she hears me. Almost focusing she slides her hands slow from my hair down my face to her breasts, holding them.

Late that night, Dude sits by the window. Rain spills in; he watches the smoky trains jerk in the yard, moisture on warm soot a fine dust in the air. He blinks like he's slapped when he hears her clutch her throat and turn in her sleep. I talk, Dude smells her on his split knuckles, and the streaked curtains move all night.

Toward morning he paced the room, circling from door to window. Hands held delicate, he looked at me. His eyes I think were gray and heavy-lashed,

the lid of the right one drooped and softened that side of his face. Finally he turned and left; his pointed boots tapped a faint click on the stairs each step down.

She woke up in twisted blankets and raised her fingers to her face. We ate the bread slow, her mouth bleeding a little. I'm seeing her in summer by the stove in their room, sweat clouding her hair and her lips pursed with cheap wine; she smoothing her cotton skirt and throwing back her hair to bend over the burner with a cigarette, frowning as the blue flame jets up fast. On the street under my window she is walking early in the day, tight black skirt ripped in the slit that moves on her leg. Looking back she sees me watching and buys carnations from the blind man on the corner, walks back, tosses them up to me. She laughs and the flowers falling all around her are pale; their long stems tangling. The street is shaded in buildings and her face turned up to me is lost in black hair. She is small and she is washed in grilled shadow.

Fingers too swollen to button her shirt, she asked me would I get her something to soak them in. At the drugstore buying antiseptic and gauze I felt her standing shakily by the couch, touching her mouth with her purple fingers. Walking back fast I knew she was gone, took almost nothing. The ashed drawings were swept up and thrown probably from the window. He left for good soon after, thirty pounds of Mexican grass stashed in the truck for a connection in Detroit. I went far north as I could get, snow that winter in Otaawa a constant slow sift that cooled and cleaned a dirt heat I kept feeling for months, having nothing of her but a sketch I'd taken from where she hid them: a picture of trains dark slashed on tracks, and behind them the sky opens up like a hole.

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain, upon the bleak walls, upon the vacant eye-like windows, upon a few rank sedges, and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium: the bitter lapse into everyday life, the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart, an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a more different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the detail of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedges, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country—a letter from him—which, in its wildly impetuous nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The M.S.¹ gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness, of a mental disorder, which oppressed him, and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said—it was the apparent *heart* that went with his request—which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons.

Although, as boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of

2. Manuscript.

EDGAR ALLAN POE 1809–1849



Poe was born in Boston, the son of itinerant actors who died before he was three years old. He was adopted by a Virginia couple, the Allans, whose name he added to his own. His student days at the University of Virginia were brought to a quick end by his drinking and gambling; but then, enlisting in the army, he served soberly and well from 1827 to 1829. Accepted into West Point in 1830, he quickly ruined his prospects for a military career by more carousing, and that established a pattern he never again escaped. In 1836 he married his cousin Virginia Clemm, then a girl of thirteen, and tried to support her by writing and editing. He was an editor of the Richmond

Southern Literary Messenger, among other publications, and for a time had his own magazine, *The Stylus*. He won a number of literary prizes early in his writing career, but his earnings remained meager, and alcoholic excesses repeatedly cost him his jobs in journalism. After his wife died in 1847, he became engaged to a wealthy widow; there was hope of relief from his long run of misfortune and poverty. Traveling to meet her in 1849, he met some acquaintances and with them set out to celebrate the change in his luck. After this binge he was found nearly unconscious in a Baltimore street and died a few days later. His short fiction, with its effects of terror and its supernatural trappings, made him a household name for American readers, though in fact there are few traces of American experience in his work. Gothic devices and the mood of German romanticism were his specialty. He has been called the inventor of the detective story. His critical writings—including, for example, his insistence on unity of effect in the short story—have deeply influenced literary taste and practice. His poetry has been admired more greatly and persistently abroad, particularly in France, than at home. He is remembered, as well, for the precariousness of his career, for his striking personal appearance, his fine manners, his debauchery, and his poverty—the stuff of romantic legend. His work is readily available in numerous anthologies and collected editions.

The Fall of the House of Usher

*Son cœur est en luth suspendu;
Sûr qu'on le touche il résonne.*

—De Béranger¹

1. His heart is a ready lute/As soon as it is touched it resounds; from *Lz Refus* (lines 41–42), by Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780–1857), French poet.

popcorn and watching a baseball game; there would be cocktail parties and cornfields and a village set among rice paddies and skyscrapers. In a sense, I wrote that story, "Courtly Vision," at the end of *Darkness*. And in a dozen other ways I'm writing it today, and I will be writing, in the Moghul style, till I get it right.

EDGAR ALLAN POE

The Philosophy of Composition

Charles Dickens, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of "Barnaby Rudge," says—"By the way, are you aware that Godwin" wrote his "Caleb Williams" backwards? He first involved his hero in a web of difficulties, forming the second volume, and then, for the first, cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done."

I cannot think this the *precise* mode of procedure on the part of Godwin—and indeed what he himself acknowledges, is not altogether in accordance with Mr. Dickens' idea—but the author of "Caleb Williams" was too good an artist not to perceive the advantage derivable from at least a somewhat similar process. Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis—or one is suggested by an incident of the day—or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative—designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or autorial comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent.

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can best be wrought by incident or tone—whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone—afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

6. Reprinted from *Caleb Williams* of April 1846. 7. William Godwin (1756-1836), British writer and philosopher who wrote *Caleb Williams* (1794) as a mystery novel.