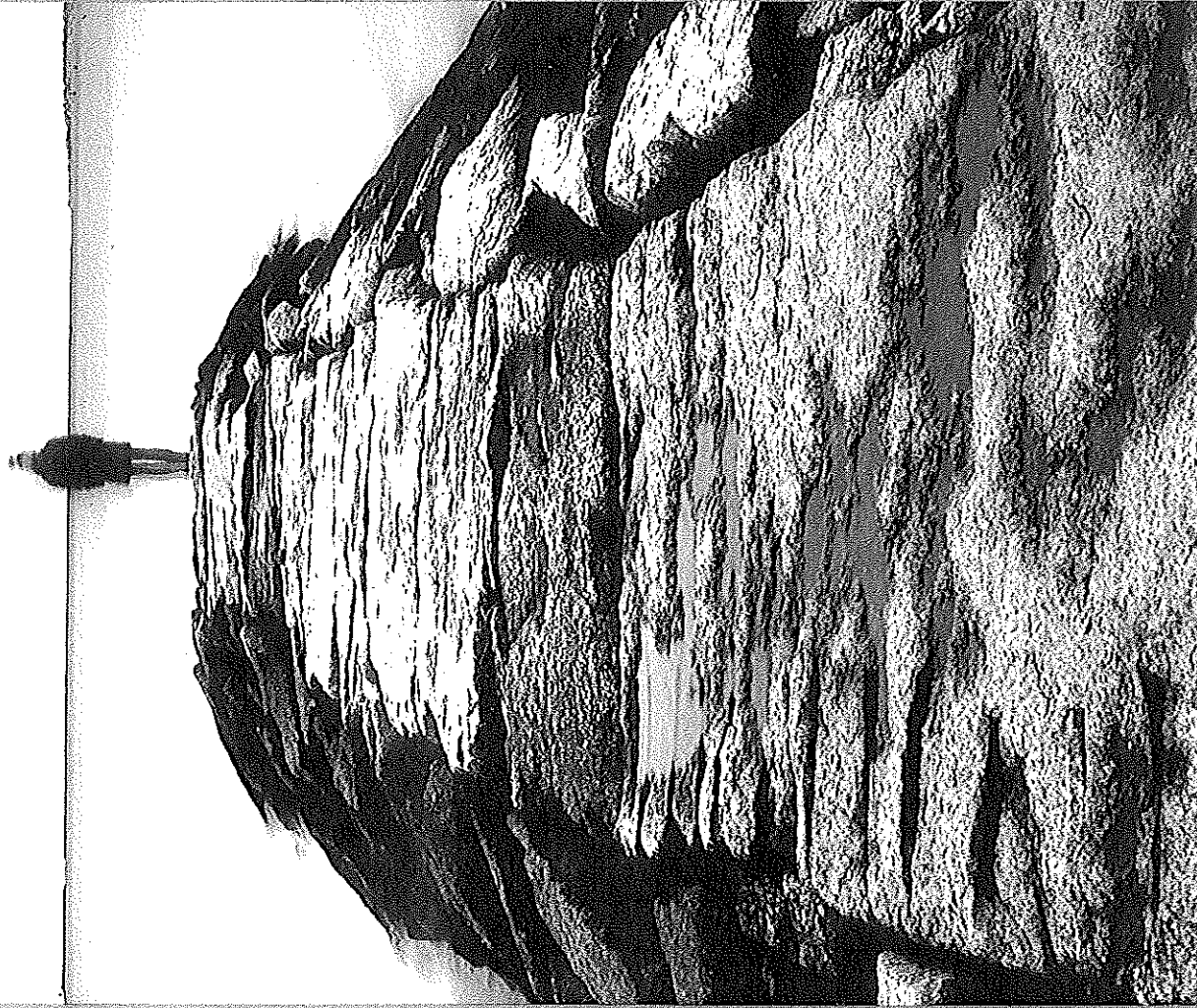


THE ALEMBIC



at the pain like an alchemist. The lotion,
I remember, was coconut mango.

Allowing the memory to recede, I bow
* my head for a garland of plastic
plumaria, take my first step onto
a long stretch of whitesand

carpet, and slowly wade out into a circle
of strangers, every one of us naked
from the ankles down.

DEPTH OF FIELD *Julie Wittes Schlack*

"COLEMAN...COAL MAN." The mustached man in the big round glasses sighed worshipfully, holding an LP jacket up close to his face. "Tra-la, tra-la, tra-la-la-la: now is the time to dance to the bend-me yeah," he crooned. "Tripping, tripping, balls kicking..."

"Who's the poet?" Jack asked Lenny, owner of Lenny's Contemporary Music Mart on Bleeker Street.

"Gene Smith—photographer extraordinaire, drunk, Benzadrine fiend, and my best customer," Lenny murmured. "That Body and Soul, that's a good one, Gene," he called across two rows of records.

Holding the record jacket up to his lips, Gene gave it a loud, smacking kiss. "I'm yours." He tucked it under his arm and kept browsing the bins.

"What's the shutterbug take pictures of?" Jack—Budapest-born and raised, a New Yorker and English speaker of eighteen years—loved to speak American. He collected slang, and used contractions whenever possible, explaining to his wife Lilian, "They make me one of the boys."

"Your old stomping grounds, for starters," Lenny said. "Hungary?"

"No, Spain. He did a layout in *Life*—it must have been five, six years ago—of a Spanish village. I still remember a couple of them—this one of the Fascista in their stupid hats, and a Shiva for a dead padre—powerful pictures. You'd like them."

Jack imagined he would. A Loyalist veteran, he read everything about Franco's Spain that he could get hold of, despite Lilian's imprecations to *Look ahead, Jack. Why torture yourself?*

"And from what Gene tells me, it damn near cost him his life. He had to smuggle out film in his boots, and prints struck in the lining of his suitcase."

Jack nodded approvingly. Having smuggled arms into Spain and the families of fellow Communists out of it, he understood the story.

Lenny turned and lightly tapped the side of his head. "You just never know with Gene. One second he's clear as a bell, the next he's out of his mind, weeping or blathering nonstop like a machine gun." He sighed, then smacked Jack on the back. "So how's the jukebox business?"

"Booming. These new rock-and-roll records are selling like pancakes."

"Hotcakes. They're selling like hotcakes."

Jack looked around the store. "I'm telling you, you want to get some kids in here, you gotta put Sam Cooke and Fats Domino and Elvis albums in the window."

"Kids, shmids. I want real music aficionados."

"It's the DJs calling the shots now, my friend. The DJs and the record labels who grease their hands."

"What?"

"I'm talking about bribery, filthy lucre." Jack, a tall, once lean man with a chronic stoop, bent over still more, suddenly lowering his voice to a whisper. "The guys getting lots of airplay, it's not just because the kids love 'em. It's because the DJs are getting bribed to play 'em." *Payola for the Rock-Ola*, Jack's partner Morris had quipped earlier that day, rubbing his hands together.

"Not something we've got to worry about. We don't have to pay DJs to play jazz. Here we've got to pay people to listen."

"Hey Lenny!" Gene held up Gene Ammons' *Jammin' in Hi-Fi* with a questioning look.

"Oh yeah, that's a good one—all the best session men. He's got Jackie McLean, I think, and some other hotshots. Lemme take a look."

Lenny threaded his way through the thin aisles flanked by wooden bins of LPs to stand beside Gene and study the album jacket. They were quite a pair, Jack observed—Gene with his hollow cheeks, close-cropped hair, and intellectual's wire-framed glasses; Lenny half his height and double his weight, with wiry gray hair sprouting from and around his ears, and pouches under his eyes big enough to each hold a shot of whiskey.

Not that you're exactly Clark Gable anymore either, *boychik*, he heard Lillian say in his head as she had last night, when, exhausted from two weeks on the road, he'd practically fallen into bed. Lying next to him, leaning on one elbow, probing and critical, she'd studied his face as if it were a music manuscript or a cut of brisket. "The pace, it's getting to you."

"It's not the pace," he'd answered, "it's the people."

"Morris? It's Morris, isn't it? I told you not to take him on."

"What choice did I have? It was play with his friends or get out of the business entirely."

"Play," she answered scornfully. "You're not a child."

"Right, I'm not a child, just a father and the guy who brings home the ham. Like it or not, sweetheart, I'm a businessman, and dealing with some characters who don't smell so hot, that's what it means."

"But where's it getting you, this *partnership*, besides lying in bed like a dead man with heartburn?"

Jack threw off the covers, suddenly too warm despite the cold air leaking in through the window. "It's getting me a hundred more jukeboxes in the last two months alone!

It's getting me very favorable prices from the labels on these new forty-fives! It's getting me a counting crew so that you and me and Ruthie don't have to count and roll up the nickels and dimes ourselves on our shmecky little kitchen table at all hours of the night!"

"Yeah, but whose nickels and dimes are you counting?" she muttered darkly. "I mean let's be honest, Jack. Not all that money's coming from your jukeboxes, from the fingers of crazy, bored teenagers. It's coming from Morris's friends, and God knows where they're getting it from. Not from anywhere kosher, that's all I know."

"That's not my business," Jack roared. "Getting the music out there, that's my business. Period. Now for God's sake, can I go to sleep? Finally? In my own bed?"

So now, today, he was on a peace-making mission, rifling through Lenny's small but smart opera selection.

"Anything I can do you for?" Lenny called over to him.

"Yeah, I'm looking for the new live recording of some opera with Maria Callas, but I'll be damned if I can remember the name of it."

"I should know this, but I don't. Gene, you're an opera buff. What's the new Callas?"

"Is she a gypsy cigar salesgirl? A starving Bohemian?" Gene asked.

"No, no, nothing so interesting. She's a queen or a countess or some damn thing."

"*Anna Bolena*," Gene announced triumphantly.

"Recorded live at La Scala." He noted Jack's quizzical face.

"Italian for Ann Boleyn, one of Henry the Eighth's wives." Jack still looked puzzled. "And La Scala is an Italian opera house, very fancy."

"Yeah, that sounds right. Thanks. Thanks muchly."

Lenny went to the counter to ring him up. "This for you?" he asked.

"No, it's a present for Lilian. My die-hard Communist wife just loves bourgeois operas about kings and queens."

"Don't stick an ice pick in my head for saying this, but art transcends class."

Jack guffawed. "You lousy Trotskyite! Your secret's safe with me, brother."

That night after dinner and dishes, when Lilian was curled on the sofa listening to the endless shreying and rumbling of her opera singers, Jack went burrowing into their daughter Ruthie's collection of old *Life* magazines stored in the hall closet. Now a photo editor herself, Ruthie had been collecting picture magazines since she was a child, and Jack's best and easiest conversations with his youngest—a girl whose seriousness and need for privacy made him nervous—came when the two of them were leafing through the pages, talking about the world.

He carefully untied the blue ribbon binding each year's worth of magazines, and finally, in the 1951 stack, he found what he was looking for. *Spanish Village* was the title on the cover of *Life* magazine, and as Jack leafed through Eugene Smith's photos and captions about the village of Deleitosa, he found himself churning with a rage he thought had finally been extinguished. There were Franco's henchmen on the cover, the Guardia Civil in their shiny hats that sat perpendicular on their heads like upside-down frying pans, their small, unnatural mustaches shaped to emulate the Generalissimo's, squinting against that brutal Spanish sun. The villagers—mostly women—were still living 19th century lives. Their faces were pale and pinched, the walls of their homes little more than carefully stacked rubble. They wore long black dresses, as if in perpetual mourning for their own hopeless lives, made from fabric they'd spun themselves while kneeling on sheep's wool mats on stone

floors. The tableau of stricken but luminous faces at a wake for a village elder was horribly gorgeous.

This Smith guy, Jack thought, he's got something burning inside him. He's a true artist.

Then he carefully replaced the magazine in its chronologically correct spot and put the bundle back into the closet.

The next morning he once again hit the road, this time just for a daylong swing through the bars, diners, and bowling alleys in the burgeoning Queens and Long Island suburbs.

As always, he found the dim, stale interior of Ray's Rotunda strangely cheerful. At ten in the morning, the only patrons were a couple of Bayside firemen still saluting the end of their shift and a rancid-smelling man blissfully resting his bearded cheek on his forearm, but the joint still felt lively.

Ray stepped out of the kitchen, murmured some instructions to the silent Negro woman mopping the floor, and gave Jack a warm handshake. "How are you, my man?" "Top of the charts."

"So what's my top ten gonna be today? No wait, let me guess." Ray held his fingertips to his forehead and furrowed his brow in mock concentration. "Elvis," he ticked off on one finger. "Elvis," he ticked off on the next. "Fats Domino, Elvis, Pat Boone, and Elvis."

"That's only six, wise guy."

"Okay, I give. Who else you got?"

"I got some Andy Williams."

Ray wrinkled his nose.

"Okay, how about some Sinatra?"

Ray smiled approvingly. "Now you're talking."

Jack unclasped a large, hard-sided black case containing 45s, sorted by artist and title, and pulled out one of the small discs. "Now this guy, Tab Hunter, he's a pretty boy like Ricky Nelson, but I'm telling you, 'Young Love' is gonna get a lot of spins."

"Did someone pay you to say that?"

"Not to my friends." Jack smiled gamely, but it cut him like a knife, this question that had never been asked and had never been true until Morris became his partner and majority investor.

Pulling the jukebox away from the wall and unplugging it, Jack asked, "So what's been hot?" He slid the coin acceptor out of its slot and poured a cascade of nickels, dimes, and quarters into a flannel Crown Royal bag on which Ray's *Rotunda* had been written in slanting black letters.

"Some Elvis schmaltz. From 'Hound Dog' to 'Lovin' You,' I don't know what happened."

"He remembered he was a white boy," piped up one of the firemen. "That's what happened."

Ray smiled tightly, then murmured to Jack, "Just for that, give me something wild, something you stock in the colored bars."

"I've got just the thing." Jack liked Ray, even if he couldn't give himself a clean shave and was wearing the same yeasty-smelling shirt every time Jack saw him. "Young Blood." The Coasters. Play that enough, you can set up a nice business on the side selling rubbers."

Stepping back behind the bar, Ray questioningly held up a beer stein.

"Just a glass of water is all I need right now." Jack took out a wallet and a small ledger book from his inside jacket pocket and, after checking the amount next to Ray's name, started counting out bills. "Half for you, half for me."

Ray lay his palm over the earnings and swept them into his other hand, which instantly sank into his pocket. "Not bad for two weeks, I guess. Considering it's February."

"I bet the next time I'm back, it'll be at least \$20 higher, and \$18 of it will have come from that 'Young Blood' song. Mark my words, Ray, mark my words."

Jack felt a twinge in his right shoulder as he carried his record case and bag of change back to the car. And it only got worse as the day progressed, as did his mood. Bar after bar, diner after diner, the towns looked alike and his conversations were always on the same topics. Who's hot on the charts, white kids dancing to colored music, Ike's golf handicap, Ike's heart, the Knicks. Normally he liked schmoozing, took pride in remembering and asking about something unique in the lives of each of his customers, and liked to believe he was opening eyes and hearts with the records in his case. But yesterday's encounter with Gene Smith and those pictures from Spain had taken him back. In those days of his exodus—from Budapest to Paris to Madrid, then back to France, huddled in the concentration camp of Prats-de-Mollo with thousands of his Republican comrades—he'd had no concept of just shooting the breeze. Every conversation was urgent, fueled by the certainty that the fate of the world hinged on the actions of the few who had to rally the many. And look at me now, Jack thought, driving around with velvet bags of nickels and dimes in my trunk, my car sinking into its springs from the weight of them and shooting a pain up my back with every pothole.

By the time he got to the snack counter at the gleaming Games and Lanes in Mineola, his arm was almost too stiff to raise in the salute he routinely offered the bowling alley's owner every time he saw him.

The coin acceptor was so full it practically jammed as Jack pulled it out from the back of the Wurlitzer. He could see why. Though it was still early on this Thursday evening, the rumble of balls, the dinging of the cash register, and the triumphant shouts of bowlers created a din loud enough to overwhelm whatever record might otherwise have been playing. And just as well, he thought, replacing a scratchy

copy of "Chances Are" with a new one, pulling out the still-pristine "C.C. Rider" and replacing it with "Wonderful, Wonderful." Hell, if they liked Johnny Mathis, he'd give them Johnny Mathis, take the money, and run.

But first he needed a cup of coffee for the road. As he sipped the "Ten-Pin Brew!"—black as the fresh tar in the parking lot, and about as tasty—he studied the names embroidered on the shirts of the bowling teams. *Mid-Island Heating and Cooling*, *Costello Landscaping*, *Mosca and Sons Construction*, and *Hoover Foam Interiors*—whatever the hell that was—these were the types of new businesses he'd noticed lining all the industrial strips in suburb after new suburb out here on Long Island. They were creating these neighborhoods out of squares of bulldozed farmland separated by strips of concrete, lined with almost identical little houses that had plenty of windows and their own thermostats. It felt like a different America out here, not the dense and noisy New York City he'd loved the moment he'd set eyes on it from the harbor, but something molded, like the small round discs in his record case. No wonder Pat Boone, gleaming and two inches deep, did so well in this flattened landscape.

The next morning in the counting room, a drafty loft on Broadway, Jack decided that after he and Morris and the boys rolled the coins and tallied the week's take, after they recorded the earnings from each jukebox in each venue in their ledger sheet, after they assembled in a tightly jostling huddle and lugged their bags of change two blocks to the bank, after they traded in their pounds of coins for bills and doled out the proceeds back at the office—after a morning of grimy, metallic money handling—he would take the rest of the day off.

Too restless to go home, he walked back to Lenny's, determined this time to buy some music for himself. When he got there, Gene Smith was also there, looking as though he'd never left.

"So I got no money," Gene muttered as he rifled through the jazz LPs. "Tomorrow I need money. Tomorrow is a day and the living will be a lie and the defeated will be lost, will be as dead as the dead they are."

Jack looked quizzically at Lenny, who circled his index finger around his temple.

"He's having a bad day," Lenny murmured.

Gene looked up, his gaunt face clouded by panic. "I don't have the cash today. Today I'm centless, senseless, down in the drought. But you know me," he implored, clutching a record album to his chest, "I'm good. I'm good for it."

Lenny pressed downward with his palms, as if by tamping down the air, he could also calm Gene. "Don't worry. It's okay. Consider it a swap—you just keep making great pictures. I know art doesn't pay."

"Oh, they would have paid," Gene answered, suddenly lucid. "*Life* and *Look*, they would've paid, but the price was too high. Their layout and not enough pages. I couldn't do that."

Lenny shrugged. "Hey, if it pays the bills..."

"I've made *Ulysses* and they want *Reader's Digest*," Gene muttered, walking toward the front door, The Rite of Spring and Hank Mobley: Quintet clutched to his chest. "They want to give me eight pages? I'm offering Beethoven, and they want, what, Perry Como?"

He paused and looked out the door, then helplessly back at Lenny. "Where the hell am I?"

Jack lightly touched his arm. "Where do you live, Gene?" "Over the Rainbow."

"Come again?" Jack asked gently.

"Sixth Avenue, 821 Sixth Avenue. That's my home now. There's no place like home."

"How about if I walk you home? I'm in the mood for a walk." He admired this man who seemed to have hung on to his integrity at any cost. Crazy, yes, but uncompromising, a man who was still true to himself and what he believed in. If Jack was no longer such a man himself, he could at least help someone who was.

"Yeah, sure, yeah. One foot, the other foot."

Jack tipped his hat to Lenny and followed Gene out into the damp gray air. He had to practically trot to keep up with him, until finally, at Fifteenth Street, with a cramping calf, he hailed a cab.

Gene violently shook his head. "I can't pay. Guggenheim dollars are ga-ga-gone."

"It's okay, buddy," Jack reassured him. "I got it."

Gene smoked silently in the cab, tapping his white and wrinkled fingertips against the back of the driver's seat, until just past the corner of Twenty-eighth Street he suddenly yelled, "Stop!" and frantically rolled down the window. "This is my stop. Heart-stopping hard stop, home is where the heart is now. Right now!"

The cabbie pulled over. Gene got out and stood on the sidewalk, impatiently gesturing to Jack as he paid. "Come on, this is the place."

As Jack stepped out, Gene grabbed his elbow. "Come on in and let me show you around..." He put his hand to his mouth. "Jesus. I don't know your name."

"Jack, Jack Stern."

"Well please, come on in, Jack Stern, and rest your feet, have a scotch, let me show you around."

Gene led them through a peeling, windowless maroon door between the Rainbow Restaurant and Paris Dry Cleaners & Tailors. A virile, well-hung cat playing a trum-

pet was drawn on the landing wall, surrounded by scribbles. "Anger (the form) has no real drama," some tenant had observed. "GOYA" was boldly lettered next to a rendition of a clear magician's box, the "G" bifurcated by one arm of a broken music stand up against the wall.

A clothesline hung over the second-floor landing, and more lines hung between the walls all the way up to the fourth floor. Strips of film negatives hung from the clotheslines, forming a dark, cloudy curtain that whispered and sloshed and swayed as they brushed up against it.

"It's like walking through a car wash," Jack said and chuckled nervously. "How many negatives do you have hanging up here?"

"Oh, hundreds, thousands, three years, seventeen thousand pictures....it doesn't matter if I can't get the truth out." As they climbed, Jack heard music—drums on the second floor, piano and sax on the third, more piano on the fourth. Gene pointed to one of the steel doors on the fourth floor. "Hall Overton lives there. Teaches at Julliard, orchestrates big band arrangements for Monk. Down there," he pointed toward the third floor, "Ronnie Free, drummer extraordinaire, rhythm man for Zoot Sims. I'm surrounded by genius. I'm recording them all, every day, every hour." He unlocked the other steel door on the fourth floor. "Voila."

Already winded from the stairs, Jack gasped when he stepped into Gene's loft. Here the walls were papered in photographs, and pictures hung from clothespins on lines spanning the length of the loft, several rows deep. Many of the images were hellish. Emaciated men lost in large aprons or overcoats; muscular men whose goggled eyes protruded monstrously from their sooty faces shoveled coal into flaming pits, poured molten liquid from buckets, strained and bent in clouds of smoke.

"Pittsburgh," Gene said, gesturing offhandedly at the black-and-white carnage. "Steel mills. Some of these prints take days and days," he said fretfully. "Many moves, over a hundred moves for some of them."

To Jack they looked like war and camps, and he had to quell a sudden upsurge of panic.

"Moves?"

"Techniques—burning, dodging, cropping. See this?" Gene asked, pointing to the whites of the eyes in a man's face that were the most luminous element in the picture. "I burned his eyes in, made them completely black, then applied bleach with a tiny piece of sponge to get the effect I was looking for."

"Is that kosher?"

"Kosher?"

"You know, allowed? What do you call it—factual?"

"I call it true." Then he turned his back and began rummaging through a box sitting next to a hot plate in what Jack assumed was the closest this place got to a kitchen.

"Are you from there?" Jack asked, trying to lighten the air, which had suddenly turned electric. "A native Pittsburghian?"

Gene seemed not to hear him as he unpacked a cup, a few dishes, a half-filled jar of jam, and a bottle of Old Spice. But then he answered, as though he'd asked himself the question. "I ain't nothin' but cold, gray, and fogged, and bitter without sweets."

"Did you live in Pittsburgh?" Jack tried again, hoping that if he persisted long enough in sane, normal conversation, Gene might respond in kind.

"Three weeks, three years. I have lived my day, tried my trial."

"Come again?"

"I am the storm and I war with eternity." Gene spoke with barely contained exasperation. "There is no goddess as prize, and I would protect the emptiness from the fiery dragons. I would—aha!" He extracted a bottle from the box and held it aloft, suddenly calm and radiant. "St. George, fourth floor, inside room, and a bottle of gin!"

Hands trembling, he poured a shot glass and handed it to Jack, then took a long, loving swig from the bottle.

"This is some photo," Jack said, pointing to a damp picture of a car, a road, and a hillside lined with roofs and windows. "Those houses on the hill, they look like plates of armor, you know, like something mechanical growing out the side of the mountain. But that Plymouth, she's a beauty. Creamy, white, all soft and round compared to the houses." Gene stood suddenly erect, poised, all ears. "Do you notice anything else?" he asked.

"Yeah, the guy walking up the hill, walking right down the middle of that gravel road, the only person in the picture, so small. It's kind of sad."

Gene beamed. "*Ballads of the Alone*. That's the section of the book this picture will be in. And after that—" He grabbed Jack's elbow and steered him to a bulletin board sitting tenuously on a giant easel. "After that, the section called *Marry Togethers*." He pointed to a wide, almost panoramic view of a long line of people at a bus stop, their white umbrellas budding like carnations. The dark, damp stone walls of Mellon Bank loomed behind them, stretching up well past the borders of the image. "You see? It all makes sense. I just need the space to tell the story, the whole story of their beautiful wretchedness."

"Oh, so you're putting together a book?" Thank God there was at least a purpose to this jungle of negatives hanging like vines and pictures crawling up the walls, the crazy leaves of images blocking out the dimming daylight.

"A book. No publisher, but yes, a book. Later." Gene walked to a large window with a cracked pane and waved Jack over. "For now, right now, come here and look."

A tripod sat on the windowsill, with its camera pointing through the crack and down toward the street.

"Take a deep breath," Gene instructed. "What does it smell like?"

Jack inhaled deeply. "Garbage. Garbage and flowers and snow coming."

"Perfect." Gene smiled approvingly. "Every morning, seven days a week, the flower merchants unload their trucks down there, and then the street vendors, the little guys roll up with their station wagons and carts and buy their day's supply from the wholesalers. This," he gestured grandly out the window, "this, my window, is a proscenium arch. The street is tagged with all the humors of man, and of weather too."

"So this is theatre?"

Proscenium arch? Beautiful wretchedness? Enough already. Don't you remember what's real? Jack thought angrily. There's nothing beautiful about wretchedness. For this man here, maybe, suffering makes for good pictures. And okay, he even cares enough about good pictures that he suffers himself to create them. But where is his family? Does he even have children? And if he does, where's the virtue in making them captive to his own crazy vision? Maybe Morris is dirty, maybe I'm dirty for associating with him, but at least my family is fed and has a roof over their head and I can walk down the street, side by side with anyone, and know I'm doing my part to keep the whole lively show going. Me, I don't want to go back to Spain, Jack realized, not to show how broken it is, not even to fix it. I want to live with the living.

SEPARATE BODIES *Dzvinia Orlowsky*

It is an illusion that we are in separate bodies
— Albert Einstein

Drug-punctuated veins, your hands resting,
driving, not admitting to be tired,
we've taken on similar illnesses: sand-bag face,
trees burning in each other's dreams.

You'd stand at the living room window
gazing out across a field

thinking how you loved to run, warm muscles,
cold showers, books kept under the bed,

saved for the one day they'd be read.

What are the questions we could've asked one another,
stirring our words into small fires?

Twenty years after your death, I still look for you,
drive toward the water's edge,
past November's vacant rooms, boarded windows,

my arms like branches wrapped
around the steering wheel.

I was always listening, Father, always there.
I've stopped listening.

But tell me there is more
than the color of our eyes.

"No, no, no," Gene said impatiently, "it's the truth, and it's my job to get the message out. You see? You see?" He jabbed at photos taped to the wall all around the window.

They were all taken from this window, photos of the tops of heads, shapely women's legs emerging from taxi doors, umbrellas flaked with snow, looking like roadstools against the rippled, icy sidewalks. There were the backs of women pushing strollers and shepherding children across the intersection, fins and grilles of the sedans passing through it, the smooth-billed cap and waving arms of a policeman directing traffic. They were genius, yes, art constructed out of real people and things. They were pure and brilliant and shot from above, from a distance, from a broken window-pane, by a crazy artist in a congested loft that smelled of garbage and flowers.

Rubbing and tossing the grimy change in his pocket, Jack warned the coins that so many other people—drinkers and dancers and bowlers from miles around—had touched.

"I've gotta go," he said. Back to the street, he thought, not looking down on it.

Gene, squinting into his viewfinder, didn't hear him leave.