

CATHRYN HANKLA

TWENTY-FIVE MINUTE EXPOSURE, II

for Claudia Terstappen

Stabs of stars rotate slowly over the flat
Height of Mojácar Vieja.
The light slats might spin faster if someone

Took a corner of the sky and flung
It like a top to tumble through
The Milky Way. No one does this.

At the summit, even a lone dog can
Discover the strange cistern that hovers
Within the solid mountain.

Ghosts and water collect in this font
And siphon to the core of the world,
Reappearing as smears of silent

Music in the sky. Green vines
Wind up the cool cement sides
Of this basin. Shadows conceal

Formulas carved in its belly.
There is a woman who captures the view
Through polished glass. Each night

She focuses on scars and specks, clawed
Coronas like tinctures released. She reveals
The scent of her darkness, the mountain,

By cloaking herself with her fears.
The night is a dangerous place
Only when you resist its embrace.

SEMIA HARBAWI

**RESISTIVE AESTHETICS:
JAMAICA KINCAID'S FORMAL STRATEGIES**

I just write. I come to the end, I start again. I come to the end, I start again. And then sometimes I come to the end, and there is no starting again.

—Jamaica Kincaid

When Nyame, the Igbo sky god, grew incensed with Anansi's deception, the spider-trickster found himself dangling, in limbo, between earth and heaven, a position marked by a resistive indeterminacy, similar to that displayed through some of the formalistic characteristics in Kincaid's writing. The resistive ethos that transudes through her works goes beyond the boundaries of content to translate itself into the formal elements, which complement her aesthetic vision and political sensibility. This is most obvious in *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*. In these works, Kincaid resists the hegemonic, patriarchal white discourse by rupturing the linearity of its classical canon. While echoing the deconstructionist call for the need to dispense with a perception of history that is both teleological and progressive, she proposes a surrogate under the guise of a grid of repetition, a conflicting and complex history predicated upon rhizomic *différance*. This is to be found in Kincaid's writing since she aims at dismantling the Master's House¹ by shunning—true to a postmodernist spirit—watertight compartmentalization and incorporation within an affixed genre.

In "Blackness," the eighth section of *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid's penchant for indeterminacy is expressed when she enigmatically claims that blackness

is visible, and yet it is invisible, for I see that I cannot see it. . . . The blackness cannot be separated from me but often I can stand outside it. Blackness is not the air, though I breathe it. The blackness is not the earth, though I walk on it. The blackness is not water or food, though I drink and eat it. . . . (46)

One of the significant features, which best exemplifies her abiding

by a postmodernist ethos and her embracing of indeterminacy as a guiding principle, is her adoption of a particular category of autobiographical writing. In this respect, she ambiguously claims in an interview that “I write about myself for the most part, and about things that have happened to me. Everything I say is true, and everything I say is not true” (Bonetti 124). The autobiographical form “allows a sort of re-vision, a radical re-shaping of a life, seen and recounted from the inside, which fits in with a ‘problematic’ protagonist’s attempts to define and order reality” (Betty Wilson qtd. in Davies and Fido 13). Trinh Minh-Ha discusses autobiography in terms of a re-writing of history and a “breaking with the chain of invisibility” (191). The genre even gives birth to new forms of subjectivity:

the subjectivity of a non-I/plural I, which is different from the subjectivity of the sovereign I (subjectivism) or the non-subjectivity of the all-knowing I (objectivism). Such a subjectivity defies the normality of all binary oppositions. . . . (192)

Autobiography, no matter how partial it is, is important insofar as it allows for that tidal movement back and forth, orbiting around the function of memory, which breaks with the stern linearity of the Western canon. Though memory might come forward as an apparent cohesive textual element, it provides an efficacious means of fissuring the above-mentioned linearity. Memory unifies as it shatters. It brings together the loose strands, which make up the warps and wefts of “*herstory*.” It also does away with the required objectivity that necessarily accompanies a linear development. For memory becomes both a sieve and a contorting, selective lens that dredges up the hidden, the repressed, and ultimately, the silenced to endow it with a peculiar voice and project it with an objectivity/subjectivity of its own onto the official, dominant master discourse. Accordingly, the autobiographical details, which pervade Kincaid’s narratives, acquire a major significance as an encroachment on “*history*,” a challenge to the notion of the Hegelian void and the incarnation of the return of the repressed. This kind of “ritual return” she engages in makes her the subject of her own history. For what she recounts under one guise or another, most particularly in *Annie John* but also in *Lucy*, finds itself superimposed on details of her own life, especially her tormented relationship with her own mother. Almost all of her accounts have a first-person female voice instead of a third-person male omniscient narrator; a solitary voice, at times cool and detached, at others fiery

and flayed alive. This voice comes to mingle, disturbingly enough, with that of the author given the various coincidences and parallels that entangle both of them in the meshes of one, though, multi-layered story. In *Lucy*, Kincaid gives the protagonist Lucy Josephine Potter one of her names and her birthday. Like both Annie and Lucy, her father was a cabinet-maker and her own mother married a much older man with whom she had three sons many years after Kincaid herself was born (Bonetti 124). She even admits that, when seven years old, she went through the same throes that she depicts in “The Long Rain,” that section in *Annie John* where she recounts Annie’s illness. Like her protagonist, she got up from her bed to wash and powder the photographs (Bonetti 124). Like Lucy, she left Antigua at seventeen for the United States, where she worked as an au pair and took photography courses after having left the family that employed her.

However, Kincaid manages to dodge easy classification since she writes her own brand of autobiography where both history and poetry commingle, thus referring us back to Lorde’s notion of “biomythography.”² In *Annie John*, for example, though it is obvious that the protagonist shares with the author many elements and that the book is couched in autobiographical form, it is still somehow difficult to assign it to one given kind of autobiographical writing. Some would speak of “collection,” others of “novel” or “autobiographical narrative” (qtd. in Covi 350). There might be difficulties in agreeing on one specific label since the book is divided into eight “chapters” that might be considered, syntagmatically as it were, as having as common elements the protagonist and the backdrop (Covi 350). Kincaid toys with this factor in her writing but hints at its possible interpretation in a meta-fictional essay Annie writes in class about her mother and herself (45). In this essay, Kincaid speaks of the necessity of including “lies” in an autobiography when it is destined to be made public (Covi 350).

As is the case with *Annie John*, *At the Bottom of the River* proves slippery when it comes to labeling. In it, the same autobiographical vein exists but it is quite difficult to assign it to one specific generic slot. Suzanne Freeman finds it “quirky enough to challenge our very definition of what a short story should be” (qtd. in Covi 350). It is presented as a string of what might be called poetic prose fragments, quite arcane in their content, which, like the sections in *Annie John*, are loosely linked by some overlapping thematic features. This is all the more important since “the format of loosely connected segments

introduces the idea of the arbitrariness of narrative and the complexity of colonial life” (Ferguson 32). In this “collection,” Kincaid resorts to the postmodernist technique of weaving together in a variegated patchwork different types of writing, thereby appropriating the structural characteristics of the oral story and assuming the garb of the traditional storyteller. In *At the Bottom of the River*, we find side by side the monologue (as is the case in “Girl”—though the girl speaks twice), the letter form (in “The Letter from Home,” which some critics would call an epistolary monologue), and meditation pieces (such as “Blackness” and “At the Bottom of the River”).

Along with an autobiographical form that evades a complete pinning down, Kincaid also employs repetition, which confers on her writing a systematic circular motion, always oscillating between clarity and ambiguity.³ “What I Have Been Doing Lately,” the seventh section in *At the Bottom of the River*, best represents this circular motion: it starts with the ending and almost ends with the beginning. In fact, within a framework of intratextuality, she uses repetition to avoid any formal or actual closure, which makes her different texts echoing chambers, each referring to the other in a perpetual game of negating sterile determinacy and fixedness of meaning. This schema of repetition concerns images, characters, and even whole episodes, which recur, now and again, to rupture the seamlessness of the texts. This technique can even make of two discrete texts (in this case *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*), by virtue of repetition with difference, the two versions of one same text: what *At the Bottom of the River* “encodes,” *Annie John* “decodes” (Davies and Fido 5). The most recurring leitmotif is, of course, that of the relation between mother and daughter; for in each of Kincaid’s works, we never fail to come across, though with slight variations, the same feelings and almost the same characters, those of an angry daughter and a maddeningly-haunting mother. This represents either the repeating element within one text or across different texts. While *Annie John* seemingly obeys a chronological development, it is not really structured on a linear basis: a unique, central element obsessively recurs to punctuate the story, with the different episodes serving as either pretexts, contexts, or both to allow its treatment from various perspectives. Along with this dyad, there are other repeating elements; most prominent among these is obeah, which can be considered as a significant character in its own right. In addition, there is the figure of the retaliating monkey that crops up in *Annie John*, *The*

Autobiography of My Mother, Lucy, and “What I Have Been Doing Lately” in *At the Bottom of the River*. There are also duplicated episodes, such as the one concerning the brother who dies mysteriously after a long, painful illness (Johnny in *Annie John* and Alfred in *The Autobiography of My Mother*). Beside the repetition of textual elements, there is the reiteration of whole phrases and words, which mark her style, creating a rhythmic effect, at times falsely lulling, at others angry, thumping, and quite reminiscent of the jazz tempo.⁴ For instance, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the sentence “My mother died at the moment I was born” recurs at least six or seven times along with the word “love” (seventy-six times) or the disturbingly ever-recurrent phrase “I do not know.”

Always to be interpreted within Kincaid’s efforts to withstand the spell of the canonical tradition is the notion of “semiotic babble,” which can be quite apposite when dealing with some aspects of her works. Moira Ferguson defines the “semiotic babble” as “that hovering space in language where the prediscursive registers, where there are no borders constructed by the West to contain people” (23). The “semiotic babble” is related to Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic,⁵ which is the realm prior to the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order. It is pre-Oedipal and typified by a rhythmic babble, that is, a language that ushers difference in, but is not articulated in terms of the rules of the symbolic. It is a symptom of language destabilization in its heavy reliance on subtending silence(s), even topographical ones, repetitions, and free associations, thus transcending the rationalism informing the language in the symbolic order. In “Wingless,” the fourth piece in *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid alludes to the colonial moment that congealed the colonized in time, and which is quite illustrative of the semiotic in her writing:

That mosquito . . . now a stain on the wall. That lizard, running up and down, up and down . . . now so still. That ant bloated and sluggish, a purseful of eggs in its jaws . . . now so still. That blue-and-green bird, head held aloft, singing . . . now so still. That land crab, moving slowly, softly, even beautifully, sideways . . . but now so still. That cricket, standing on a tree stem, so ugly, so revolting, I am made so unhappy . . . now so still. That mongoose, now asleep in its hole, now stealing the sleeping chickens, moving so quickly, its eyes like two grains of light . . . now so still. That fly, moving so contentedly from tea bun to tea bun . . . now so

still. That butterfly, moving contentedly from beautiful plant to beautiful plant in the early-morning sun . . . now so still. That tadpole, swimming playfully in the shallow water . . . now so still. (27)

It is quite tempting to align the “semiotic babble,” though it is not intrinsically female, with the notion of “écriture féminine” as expounded by Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” because of that kind of sometimes humming, primally pulsating, not easily hemmed-in rhythm. Kincaid’s style is fraught with this rhythm. The notion of “écriture féminine” is all the more significant in this context since it cannot be easily defined or categorized as a specific genre under linear patriarchal structures. It is closer to the female body and its sexuality, to emotions, and to the unnameable, which are repressed. In some of Kincaid’s writing, the semiotic is almost exclusively associated with the language of the mother and her daughter and finds its most eloquent articulation when in “My Mother” the narrator claims that “My mother and I wordlessly made an arrangement—I sent out my beautiful sighs; she received them” (56). The “semiotic babble” is to be understood within the framework of a yearning for a primal harmony. Kincaid’s “Blackness” best exemplifies these aspects, especially in the last paragraph where “the silent voice” she speaks about may be equated with the semiotic in her writing, and ultimately with a pre-Oedipal and pre-Columbian beatitude:

In love, again, I move ever toward the silent voice. I stand inside the silent voice. The silent voice enfolds me. The silent voice enfolds me so completely that even in memory the blackness is erased. I live in silence. . . . I hear the silent voice—how softly now it falls, and all of existence is caught up in it. Living in the silent voice, I am no longer “I.” Living in the silent voice, I am at last at peace. (52)

Another salient feature within the formalistic aspects of her resistance is her flirting with the conventions of “magical realism” in *At the Bottom of the River*. Magical realism, which is one of the major points of convergence between the postmodernist discourse and the postcolonial one, is significant insofar as it functions at the antipode of any centralizing discourse issued by the clear-cut, rational, and contained order, which is the obtaining hallmark of imperialism. It hinges upon the cohabitation between the magic and the real “in

such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed” (Zamora and Faris 163). It is generative of a condition of ex-centricity—since it mainly serves to re-formulate the local—that is most valuable in the case of a counter-hegemonic discourse. For the disruptions and transgressions, which it allows for, pave the way to political and cultural subversion. Stephen Slemon argues that its efficacy lies in the encoding of “a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems,” (10) in addition to the fact that the recourse to magical realism in literature can “signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems” (10). It is all the more important as, formally speaking, it creates a space of hybridity in which the spatial effects of canonical realism and those of fantasy are interlocked. Through its “dual spatiality,” it creates a blend between what belongs to European rationality and what aligns with all that is incongruent with a Western ‘*Weltanschauung*.’ In other words, it is a sort of interstitial space where alternative visions and different realities exist while, at the same time, precluding any traditional notion of closure and unity. It is most liberating from the strictures of a limited colonial space.

Kincaid tapped this source in her postmodernist attempts at eluding the afore-mentioned, all-embracing power discourse with its mania to classify in a bid to assimilate. She mingles realistic details, usually against the backdrop of Caribbean scenery, with elements belonging to the realm of the supernatural, most particularly in the form of obeah, thus specifying the Caribbeanness of her text and proceeding to a “territorialization of the imaginary.”⁶ In “The Letter from Home,” the sixth piece in *At the Bottom of the River*, we find one illustration among others of her specific use of the conventions of magical realism, which can be considered an integral part of the postmodernist edifice. What starts as an ordinary account of milking cows and churning butter immediately gives in to a feverish succession of seemingly disparate elements that fuse into a kind of distorted, disturbing surrealist painting with the images whirling and eddying in what seems like the raving of a, paradoxically enough, dispassionate sibylline, trance-like voice. The whole is rendered in a breathless acceleration with a staccato rhythm that leaves the reader both confused and stunned. The language Kincaid uses is abstruse, almost deliberately so. The linguistic opacity, going hand in hand with the requirements of the magical realist setting, best incarnates her resistance to the dissecting tools of the Western critical discourse

by turning her language into a guarded domain of a woman's personal language and a secret code reminiscent of the Maroons's:

My heart beat loudly *thud! thud!*, tiny beads of water gathered on my nose, my hair went limp, my waist grew folds, I shed my skin; lips have trembled, tears have flowed, cheeks have puffed, stomachs have twisted with pain; I went to the country, the car broke down, I walked back; the boat sailed, the waves broke, the horizon tipped. . . . (37)

In "My Mother," the ninth piece in the collection, there is a magical scene, which comes to graft itself on what started as an ordinary testimony of daughterly love. The narrator recounts, with details referring us back to obeah rites, how her mother and herself mesmerize each other and turn into lizards, the symbols of rejuvenation:

My mother removed her clothes and covered thoroughly her skin with a thick gold-colored oil, which had recently been rendered in a hot pan from the livers of reptiles with pouched throats. She grew plates of metal-colored scales on her back. . . . Her teeth now arranged themselves into rows that reached all the way back to her long white throat. She uncoiled her hair from her head and then removed her hair altogether. Taking her head into her large palms, she flattened it so that her eyes, which were by now ablaze, sat on top of her head and spun like two revolving balls. Then making two lines on the sole of each foot, she divided her feet into crossroads. Silently, she had instructed me to follow her example, and now I too traveled along on my white underbelly, my tongue darting and flickering in the hot air. . . . (55)

In "Wingless," Kincaid uses the conventions of magical realism to challenge the patriarchal and the colonial, rolled into one, through her depiction of the encounter between "the woman I love," a feminocentric paradigm, and the man in the middle of the pond. The man who "put wind in his cheeks and blew himself up until in the bright sun he looked like a boil, and the woman I love put her hands over her eyes, shielding herself from the way he looked . . . she only smiled—a red, red smile—and like a fly he dropped dead" (25).

Even in *Annie John*, a surrealist episode occurs to rupture the narrative. This is when she is riveted to bed, laid low by her illness. At one point, she remarks that

The photographs as they stood on the table, now began to blow themselves up until they touched the ceiling and then shrink back down, but to a size that I could not easily see. They did this with a special regularity, keeping beat to a music I was not privy to. Up and Down they went, up and down. They did this for so long that they began to perspire quite a bit, and when they finally stopped, falling back on the table limp with exhaustion, the smell coming from them was unbearable to me. I got out of bed, gathered them up in my arms, took them over to the basin of water on the washstand, and gave them a good bath. I washed them thoroughly with soap and water, digging into all the crevices, trying, with not much success, to straighten out the creases in Aunt Mary's veil, trying, with not much success, to remove the dirt from the front of my father's trousers. When I finished, I dried them thoroughly, dusted them with talcum powder, and then laid them down in a corner covered with a blanket, so that they would be warm while they slept. (119-20)

Thus, like Anansi's web, Kincaid's writing forms an interweaving tapestry of postmodernist elements with anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial connotations where her specific use of autobiography helps to mould a new sort of language and narrative structure that "decenters all centerers" (Smith 59) and undermines the patriarchal order itself. The different formal stratagems she adopts to skirt easy compartmentalization remind one of a fluttering, tauntingly teasing butterfly of a Caribbean species perpetually eluding the tenacious, critical Western net.

Notes

¹ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing, 1984).

² Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing, 1982).

³ It would be interesting to relate Kincaid's adoption of reconnection and legitimization through remembering, along with the repetitive, cyclic schema which brand her work, with the potentially subversive Caribbean centripetal "tidalectics," a concept coined by Kamau Brathwaite. It is to be understood in contradistinction to Hegelian dialectics with its linear, teleological ineluctability since it hinges on a circular, 'tidal' movement.

⁴ The link between jazz and literary style is explored at length in Kamau Brathwaite's "Jazz and the West Indian Novel," in *Roots* (Ann Arbor: Michigan U P, 1993) 55-111.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine and L.S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

⁶ A phrase used by Amaryll Chanady in "The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms," in *Magical Realism*, eds. Zamora and Faris (Durham and London: Duke U P, 1995) 125-45. This phrase refers to Alejo Carpentier's emphasis on cultural and geographical identity.

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MARILYN KALLET

IT CAN'T HAPPEN

Not now not ever
not at your house, your living room,
your couch, not in the late afternoon
not while my husband is waiting
my daughter's on the phone
not at my house not in the hot tub
under stars
not with wine, coke, or dope
not with Mexican, Colombian, hydrotropic, not
now

Not in my office
on my desk
not in the meadow under stars
not with whiskey or Ecstasy
not in this lifetime not now
not unless
you fall down on your knees
not unless you cry, bleed, beg,
not unless our lips brush
not unless your caress blots out memory
not unless you're bigger than your myth
not unless you've grown braver
not unless your hair is still curly
not unless you write a poem for me
and slam it hard enough to kill reverie
not unless you call me
write to me
not now not ever not unless.

CAFÉ NOIR

I like it hot.
Your face
in my cup, your

mug shot.
You're a wanted man.
Heat too.

It rises,
& I'm sipping
missing you.

One shot, Mister,
I'm wired
to the blues.

Heard you serve it black
& blue—
been in the news.

PAUL RUFFIN

SEARCHING FOR THE TIGHT-ROPE WALKER

On the rutted road, with cotton plants growing right up to and leaning out over the edges so that a man walking down it with his hands outstretched, as if trying to balance, might almost touch them on either side, the car sat idling a few feet from the mailbox that marked the end of the drive, he with his chin on the steering wheel as he studied the trailer across the green rows from him. This he did for a very long time, noting how the rows looked like little waves—and wondering whether to go on or not. Here the road that he had so long been on might end, perhaps for good, perhaps undone, a thing of dust and old dreams. Beside him on the seat lay a crude map an old woman in Corinth had with a labored hand drawn in pencil on part of a grocery sack for him two days ago. He folded it and slipped it into his shirt pocket. Soon he would know whether this would be the end or yet another beginning. He lifted his head and put the car in gear.

* * *

Past miles and miles of flat delta fields he had driven that morning, on asphalt for a very long way, then at a crossroads he turned south onto what amounted to little more than a trail that wound off through broad fields toward a stand of trees at the edge of which he could see for miles the trailer where it seemed to float, small and white, on a vast sea of green, a set of power lines strung out to it on a lone picket of cross-like poles. At first he didn't know what he was seeing, just a white speck that in time assumed its shape against the fields and the swatch of trees behind it. But there were no trees near it. It was as if the trailer had simply bobbed up out of the sea of cotton that grew right to the edge of the small yard split by a gravel drive.

He inched up the drive, passed an old white El Camino that looked like it might have made it that far and simply died, and stopped a few feet out from the wooden landing at the front door, which was open. Behind a screen door, matted by dust and lint pulled into the mesh by a window fan, he presumed, stood a woman in a thin white robe watching.

She did not move, did not speak, as he got out of the car and with

hesitation approached the landing and lifted a foot to the lower step.

“Who are you?” she asked before his foot settled on the next step. She had a hand clutched at her collar, holding the robe tight about her. “And what do you want?”

“I am looking for Mary Anne Hollis. Are you Mary Anne Hollis?”

“No,” she said, “and neither, I suspect, are you. I would like to know who you are before you come up those steps. And what you want here. I have a bad dog in here.”

“Do you *know* her?”

“I might.”

He looked about him and saw nothing but green in all directions. And then the feeling came back, the helplessness that descends on a man when he accepts his insignificance in the great scheme of things, tiny speck that he is, inflated only in his mind by his mad dreams that in all the universe mean nothing at all to anyone but him. But he knew it was fleeting. It came and went like weather or like the euphoria he sometimes felt when he believed he actually might find her.

“I was told that she lived here. Someone even drew me a map.”

“You can’t always trust maps. And people lie. If I knew where you might find her, why should I tell you? I don’t know who you are or why you might want to see her.”

To either side of the trailer there was nothing but a monstrous green smear of acre upon acre of cotton, which had just begun to break into bloom, giving the undulating surface the appearance of little glitters of sky and sun off waves, and beyond it the line of trees, a darker green than the cotton. It was like a painting, a study in green, with the intrusion of the ghostly white trailer and myriad touches of white and gold.

“My name is Davis. Davis Wilson. And I have searched for Mary Anne Hollis for years, for nearly ten years, over half this country.”

He had still not moved his foot from the first step, like it had all come down to this one frozen moment when he had either found her or had not, and he was afraid to know, but down deep he felt belief well up, an almost palpable knot in his chest, already heard the music coming back, saw her far back in his mind’s eye as she glided effortlessly across the wire.

* * *

Oh, Lord, how he remembered her skinny little body so tightly

bound by the silken silver outfit she wore that every bone stood out, ribs and pelvis and vertebrae and high on her back the nubs of her sprouting wings. She walked within touching distance, as untouchable as the angels, her eyes fixed straight ahead, and all he could do was stare and try to quell his hammering heart. That blond hair and pale, celestial face, those thin arms and legs, every line of muscle and bone, chest flat as a boy's, and about her the faint scent of spices. She didn't look at him, didn't have to. It was enough that he was permitted by the gods to see her.

Septembers the carnival came to the little Mississippi town near where he lived, as surely as football seasons, welcomed with an almost frenzy by the kids who were still too young to be swept up in the sweat and agony of the gridiron. And even more by the country kids who rode their bikes down dusty backroads to the glitter and the glare, then back out under the eerie light of the moon or simple stars, penniless, with the sticky sweet of cotton candy still clinging to their faces and the throb of the midway dancing from ear to ear.

It was September and he was there. Mid-afternoon, sweaty from the long ride, he leaned his old green bicycle against an oak at the edge of the fairgrounds and secured it with a double-knotted rope and booth by booth frittered away the hours and precious coins: flung softballs at concrete bottles squatting like stone soldiers, threw darts at balloons that dodged and weaved with every ribbon of air, and slammed around the oval bumper-car court. He kept deep down in his pocket a quarter, sacred and assigned for the Big Top, and waited for the night to come. Finally the afternoon waned, the sun relented, and he joined a chattering band who for all their fervor might well be going that very night to some great stirring revival meeting where angels would be witnessed and miracles and maybe even the Holy Face Itself. For what they were going to see could not be seen elsewhere in their little lives: the magic of the Big-Top, as fascinating for him as what went on under the revival tents, where the lame threw down their crutches and the blind were blessed with dazzling sight. On impulse—he could never have told anyone why, for most of his life in those days was mystery and whim—he broke from the ranks and slipped around behind the tent, in his pocket his only prize for the day, a fuzzy rabbit foot strung on a chain. He rubbed it for luck as he stood at a back flap, hoping no one would discover him and chase him away. And luck it brought him: that shining girl, the tightrope walker.

With a man who might have been her father—a burly chap with

heavy dark hair on his shoulders and back and arms—she descended from a trailer, a burnished aluminum loaf that squatted behind the tent, and followed him through the flap, disappearing into the shadows from which muffled music came. He stood a long time looking at the slit through which she had entered, until applause and children's shrieks brought him back and he hurried around to the front, paid his quarter, and went inside.

What a delight were the elephant and two tigers and one lone, crippled lion who in another tent, under evangelist Thelma Bentley's curing hands, would have sprung whole again, king of jungle, proud and nimble. They gamboled about the single sawdust ring, spurred by two men with whips, until the audience's hands stung from battering applause and their throats ached from yelling.

And then from behind a curtain came the man and little girl, mounting the pole as if gravity no longer mattered. One smooth step off the circular platform, four or five silken strides, and he was across to the other platform, followed by the girl, a nimbus of motion. Back and forth they went, back and forth, until his uplifted head reeled with her silver sheen. His eyes never left her. For a finale she threw herself into the man's arms, whereupon he swept her to the side and up onto his shoulders, and she stood balanced, arms outstretched, as he crossed the wire again.

On his ride home that night he could feel the first lilt of fall coming on even before he had dipped into the night-cool hollow of the low-water crossing on McBee Creek. But it was not fall he was thinking of, not the grinding of his wheels through heavy gravel or their whirl through foot-deep water, not the notion that he still had over two hard miles to go to home and bed. On that moon-bathed lonesome road he thought of nothing but the silver girl suspended against a canvas sky, defying all that we fear.

Often over the years he thought of her, when an uncertain mood settled on him, like the feeling you get in early spring when the earth rekindles with tongueless and indefinable longing, and the music of that September night came back and echoed in his head, that night when to her gravity was a minor force and tugged no more than death, a shining angel suspended above the sawdust earth and their upturned faces that saw in the insect-stirred air nothing but light, light, light.

And when he thought of her there was an ache, an emptiness, that nothing could really satisfy or fill, and he would wonder what might have happened to her, where she was, what perilous balance she kept,

whether time had been gentle or cruel.

And in time, as he grew old, retiring from his university teaching job and divorcing his wife of almost forty years, finding her became an obsession, as if this was what his life had at long last come down to.

* * *

“Ma’am, please, if you know her. . . .”

“You have two last names. That is odd.”

“Uh, ma’am,” he tried. The knot had risen, and his voice almost failed him. Something told him, something said, *You are here*. But he had heard the voice before. “I just need to find Mary Anne Hollis. That’s all. I was told she lived out here. Somewhere.” He turned and again ran his eyes across the great expanse of cotton fields that shimmered in the noonday heat. “Somewhere out here.”

“What do you want with her? I might be able to help you, but you have to tell me why you want to see her.”

He drew his foot back from the first step and leaned against the railing. “I saw her . . . I saw her perform. On a wire. A long time ago. She was a tightrope walker, and I watched her once. When I was a boy. Probably no older than she was. Ages ago.”

She dropped her hand from the collar and crossed her arms. “How in the name of God did you find this place?”

He looked up at her, vague behind the furry screen. “Are you—”

She hesitated and leaned her head against the screen door. “No, I am not Mary Anne.” Then she unlatched and opened the door and reached out a hand. “I am her sister, Margaret.”

“Her sister.” He ascended the steps and stood before her, his heart in his throat. “At least I have found *you*.” He held his hands wide, as if to embrace the fields that the little trailer sat in. “Finally I am getting close. After all these years, all the false leads, the hopes. . . .”

Then his hand touched hers, and he interlaced his fingers in hers, and for a very long time they simply stared into each other’s eyes.

“Before I let you in, I want to know just how in the name of God you found *me*. And what you want with Mary Anne. . . .”

“Does it matter?” he asked.

“All right, then, maybe it doesn’t. Come on in. You look like you’ve been on the road awhile. Besides, you’ve given me a pretty good idea why you’re looking for her. You’ve got something stuck in your head that you’ve got to deal with.” She released his hand.

He leaned and looked behind her. "Where's the dog?"

"There's no dog. That was just to make you nervous."

"It did," he said as he stepped past her. He was suddenly aware of the pale dust that coated his arms and clothes and had surely settled over his face and what was left of his thin gray hair. He must have looked like a ghost too, the way she did to him when he first saw her through the matted screen.

When he was in the room, in the light from the doorway and what came through the curtains, he saw a dining room table in the little kitchen area, with three chairs, and in the room in which he was standing a small couch and end table and in the corner a miniature television set. The paneled walls were filled with pictures of a girl walking across a wire, sometimes with a man, sometimes alone, and in some there was fire beneath, the flames only a few feet from the wire, in others clowns frolicking just below where she walked. In one a great lion stood immediately beneath her, his head up and mouth open, eyes on the girl, as if waiting for her to fall into that gaping maw.

She stood in silence as he moved from photograph to photograph, studying the girl on the wire.

"These are all pictures of her?" he said finally. "Or of *you*?"

"They are pictures of Mary Anne, and they cover about a six-year period, from the time she was maybe twelve until eighteen."

"But she looks the same—the same age—in all of them."

"That's just perspective and costume. The costumes never changed much. They just made them bigger as she grew. Study the chest, and you'll see changes." She laughed. "Very minor ones, but changes."

He laughed then. "Yes. I noticed that. But she never did seem to change much at all. In size. In height."

"It's genetic," she said. "For both of us. I doubt that I grew three inches between ten and now. Neither of us ever had a problem with weight. Our breasts just never seemed to catch onto the idea that they were supposed to grow out."

He turned from the pictures and studied the robe, trying to discern what shape might be beneath it. It was obvious that she was not wearing a bra. He could see the outline of her tiny left nipple.

"Why are you staring at me?"

"I'm sorry. Sorry. It's just that—"

"We could have passed for twins," she said. "It's OK."

“Where *is* she?” he asked.

The woman eased down into a chair and motioned for him to sit on the couch. She fished a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her robe. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“No,” he said. “It’s your house.”

“Trailer.” She lit a cigarette, drew deep, then let the smoke ease out through her nostrils. “Would you like a beer or something? Whiskey? I have a little whiskey here.”

He shook his head.

“Water?”

“No. I’m fine. Really. What I want—”

“What you want to know about is Mary Anne.”

“Yes.”

“Just what do you want with her? Why did you go to the trouble of trying to track her down? I could understand it if you were in your twenties or thirties, maybe. But now.” She shook her head. “Why did you do it? Jesus, why would you want to track down an old woman? Hell, look at me, man. We were one year apart in age. Like I said, we could have passed for twins. Why in the name of God. . . .”

He stared at a picture in which the girl was standing on the wire with one foot, her legs and arms spread like something taking flight. “I—I don’t know that I can explain it. I always wanted to know her. I mean, from that very night that I saw her. She was the first girl to really capture my imagination, the first girl. . . .”

“When did you see her? That show went everywhere, all over the South, from St. Louis down to Key West, from Charleston over to East Texas.”

“Columbus, over on the other side of the state.”

She smiled. “I remember being there myself, at least twice. The whole family traveled with that carnival in those days. Our parents were jugglers. What year?”

“I don’t know. I just know that I was a boy and she was a girl, and she wedged in my memory brighter than anyone I have ever known.”

He pointed to a picture. “She performed with that man. He had hair all over his back. I remember thinking that he looked like a gorilla. Was he your father?”

“Father?” She laughed. “Hardly. That was Billy. And he pretty much *was* a gorilla.”

He pointed to another photograph, one in which she stood on the shoulders of the man he remembered.

“The hairy man. Billy? Who was he?”

She laid the cigarette in an ashtray and stared at the picture.

“He *kept* her.”

“*Kept* her?”

“Yes. One morning our parents just up and left us. We were in a little town not far from Memphis. But across the state line, in Mississippi. I woke up in the trailer we were living in and went in to get some breakfast, and there was Mary Anne sitting at the kitchen table holding a little piece of paper telling us that they were sorry but they couldn’t afford to keep us anymore, that they had accepted jobs with another show that was going to Kansas or Oklahoma, somewhere way off west. And that was that. They were gone.”

“They just left you in the trailer?”

“Yes. It belonged to the carnival. Wasn’t theirs.” She picked the cigarette up and brought it back to life.

“And the hairy man?”

“Well, he had been working with Mary Anne for a couple of years, training her, teaching her the wire, and she was getting pretty good at it, so he just told her that he would take care of her, that she could move in with him. Which she did.”

“And she was how old?”

“Somewhere around eleven, I guess. At least over ten.” She pointed to one of the photographs. “That was her first professional walk.” The girl in the picture looked exactly like the one he remembered, everything about her: hair, lithe body, the shiny outfit. “I was just over eleven then, maybe twelve. I don’t know for sure.”

“Then he became your father?”

She laughed a throaty laugh. “Oh no, no, not father.” She coughed, cleared her throat. “*Lover.*”

“What?” He shifted forward on the couch and studied her.

“Hers, not *ours*. Somebody called our aunt in Birmingham who came and got me the day our folks left, and I grew up with her. Billy talked her into leaving Mary Anne with him. I didn’t have any skills the carnival could use except for doing laundry, and I was plenty tired of that. They could get anybody to wash costumes.”

“And he just *kept* her?”

“Yes. *Kept* her. Within two weeks after he took her in, he was beginning to do things to her. You know. Kissing and touching. Nothing really—no penetration or anything. But in a matter of months it was everything. She told me all this much later.”

“How could she stand it?”

“You stand what you have to, especially when you don’t know any better. He was gentle with her, she said, and she thought that he really loved her. But he let her know that he could run her off from that job anytime he pleased. He had made her, and he could break her. I mean, the owners and managers thought the world of him. And he did bring in the crowds.”

“Still. . . .”

“Still nothing. Lord, she was making pretty good money for a kid in those days, and she loved being on the wire with him, and she sure didn’t have anywhere else to go. And, confused as she was, she said that she loved him as much as he loved her. So she stayed. She didn’t know any better.”

He shook his head and continued to stare at her. “Oh, my God.”

She snorted. “Come on, man. You have to live under those conditions to know what it’s like. It’s easy enough to think of how horrible it looks to somebody living in what you might call the real world of normal people with families and regular jobs and churches and all, but she didn’t know any better. And she said it wasn’t horrible. It becomes horrible when someone points it out to you or when you learn what it means to really be loved by a man. It was at times uncomfortable for her, confusing, but that is all. I told you—she didn’t *know* any better.”

“How long did she stay with him?”

“Until she fell.”

“Fell?”

“Yes. She shattered her hip and several vertebrae one night.” She pointed to one of the pictures. “That was her last professional walk. She fell the very next night after that shot was taken.”

“There was no net?”

“They never walked over nets. That’s part of the attraction for the crowd, knowing that if you slip and fall they’re going to get to see you hit the sawdust like a sack of sand or fall into the mouth of a lion. The sons of bitches—excuse the language—haven’t changed in three thousand years. They are still there to see blood. Or a child lying there with her hip and back broken and blood seeping out of her mouth and nose. I can still remember the sound they made as she fell past him, reached for the wire and missed—it was like they thought at first that it was part of the show, *ooing* and *ahing* and shrieking—and then the awful silence when she landed on that platform, one they had had

lions running across, like everybody in the place had sucked in their breath in disbelief. And I can remember the sound when she hit and the sounds of her bones breaking. I was sitting right in the front row—I always went to see her when the carnival was close—and she landed not more than a dozen feet from me. And the sound of the crowd as she lay there staring up at the wire, where he still stood, poised and balanced. They were screaming and yelling and some of them were even clapping, like they still thought it was part of the show, with her laying there mangled.”

He was watching her intently as she played with her fingers, doing a little dance with her fingers, weaving them in and out of each other.

“She was on his shoulders, balanced on one foot, when he did something odd. I mean, the man was steady as a rock on that wire, but she said he did some sort of twitch with his shoulders that pitched her off to the side before she could adjust, and she fell. She grabbed for the wire but couldn’t get a hand on it and down she went.” She slapped her hands together. “It would have been all right if she had landed in the sawdust—maybe sprained something, but it wouldn’t have been bad. But she landed on the steps of that damned platform, and it almost killed her.”

“Oh Jesus.”

“That was it. She spent several weeks in the hospital in Memphis, where a surgeon did the best he could to put her back together, and months doing physical therapy. Had operations galore. Lord, you should have seen her scars. One ran the entire length of her back.”

He shook his head.

“There was no going back to the wire for her. She missed too much time, for one thing, and she never could regain her confidence. She didn’t even try to go back up there.”

“And the man?”

“Oh, Mr. Billy. Yes, Mr. Billy. Mr. Billy, he took care of himself. He had already been messing around with an older woman. By the time Mary Anne got out of the hospital the first time, he had thrown all her stuff into a corner of a property trailer, which is where we found it when me and my aunt went looking. He was shacking with the other woman.”

“God, that must have hurt her.”

“Sure it hurt her. But what hurt more was realizing that he probably tossed her that night.”

“You mean—”

“I think he literally wanted her off his back, and he made that move to throw her. He got bored with her. I don’t think he intended to hurt her that much, just to bang her up a little so that she would lose her confidence and not go back on the wire, which would give him an excuse for throwing her out of the trailer.”

“Son of a bitch,” he seethed.

“Indeed.” She leveled her eyes at him. “Most men are.”

“So what happened?”

“So in time she got to the point that she could get around OK, and after living a year with me and our aunt she ended up working in a garment plant in Memphis, then met a man from the Delta, who brought her over here. I was already living over here with a carpenter, another sorry son of a bitch, if I may say so. Me and Mary Anne both did all kinds of jobs, including several years with Wal-Mart. Her husband died ten or twelve years ago, and mine just run off, but he didn’t run far—got killed in a beer joint parking lot screwing this married woman in the bed of his pickup. The guy caved his head in with the blunt side of an axe. Shoulda happened sooner. Shoulda used the blade side to make sure. *I* shoulda been there to see it. Eventually me and Mary Anne just lived out here on Social Security and what little money we put away.”

She stood and walked to the door, looked out. “Thought I heard the mailman. He don’t come much.”

“What a sad story.” He glanced toward the door. “Will she be here soon?”

“Mister, most stories about people are sad. The ones about animals sometimes turn out all right, but not them about people. Exactly what were you brought up to believe this life is all about?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s just that I have never—”

“Then count yourself among the lucky ones. Her story’s no worse than most. At least she had those years on the wire.”

He shifted on the couch and swept his gaze across the panorama of photographs. “I guess there are times she really misses it, huh? The exhilaration of being up there, above all those people, just sliding effortlessly along. . . .”

“Oh, Sweet Jesus. Some nights she would lie back there on that bed, and I would hear her humming the music, and I knew her head was full of the lights and noise, that it had all come back to her and she was there again, afraid of nothing, slender and young and pretty,

balanced, every muscle and every nerve in tune with that wire. Oh yeah, she missed it.”

“*Missed*. You used past tense. Where is she? Where is Mary Anne? Will she be here soon?”

There were tears in her eyes now, and he felt them edging into his as the gravity of that awful word *missed* tugged at him. He stood and reached a hand out to her and pulled her to her feet.

She leaned her head into his chest. “No, she won’t be here soon. Mary Anne died years ago.”

“Oh, Lord,” he whispered into her hair. “I missed her. I came too late.”

She nodded, then managed, “I kept her alive with the photographs.” She waved her hand toward them. “You may take some of them, if you like.”

“I am so glad that I found *you*, the closest thing to her,” he said, and then he gathered her into his arms and held her in the quiet of the little trailer. He kissed her lightly on the forehead, and she held her head to his chest while he stroked her back. “She was the first girl I ever loved.” And then the tears came, hard, for both of them. For a very long time they clung, like a man and a woman holding each other on a small planet with just the two of them on it, with neither knowing what to make of it all, while outside the world spun on and the sun bore down as it had to on the little white trailer in all that ocean of green.

“So many years I looked for her. Every summer, when I wasn’t teaching. During spring breaks. Off and on for a decade I have looked. Finally, with the help of the Internet—thank God for the Internet. . . .” He still clung to her.

“Yes,” she said quietly, “I see.”

“Can you tell me where she’s buried? I would like to go there.”

“You are already there,” she said.

He held her out from him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that her ashes are scattered here.” She waved her arm toward the fields and circled it above her head. “All out here.”

“Oh,” he said. “Oh.”

He held her another few seconds, then released her and returned to the couch, and she sat back down in the chair.

“I guess it is time that I left,” he said finally, after long minutes had passed with neither of them speaking. “I am supposed to meet my daughter in Greenville tonight. She has two lovely children, a nice

husband.”

“Neither of us ever had children,” she said. “I’ve wondered whether it was a mistake.”

“They are a mixed blessing.” He rose and stood before her again, then pulled her back to her feet and embraced her. “I am so glad that I found you.”

“Me too,” she said into his chest. “Me too.”

He released her and turned toward the door. It was his intention not to look back, but he couldn’t help himself. She was crying, and he was crying.

“I hope I’ll see you again,” he said.

“Me too.”

“I’ll go now.”

She took his hand. “Take any of the photographs you would like. I would be honored for you to have some of them.”

He studied the rows of pictures for a few seconds, then reached and took down the one of the girl standing balanced on one foot, her face tilted up, her legs and arms spread wide.

“This one, if you don’t mind. This one will do. This is the way I want to remember her.”

She nodded and reached and touched his face with her fingers. “Good-bye,” she whispered.

He stepped through the screen door and descended the steps, walking quickly to his car. He got in and started the engine.

She came down the steps and toward him but stopped halfway. He rolled down the window.

“I don’t want you to get out of the car,” she said. “But I have something to show you.”

“To show me?”

“Yes. Drive up the road until you can see behind the trailer and stop and watch. It will be a couple of minutes.” She hesitated and smiled. Then: “And when you have seen it, promise me that you will drive off and not come back.”

“Ever?”

“I would never say that.”

“Then I promise.”

She returned to the trailer, and he did as she directed, stopping his car a few yards up the road. He could see in the small back yard two sturdy clothesline posts with guy wires bracing them and a single heavy wire running between them. He had not noticed them before.

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“Oh, my God,” he breathed to himself.

In a bit he saw her thin form move across from the trailer to the wire, at first stiffly and slightly tilted from the waist as if she had been snapped in two and pieced back together by someone who did the best he could but did not quite get it right, then with silken grace. She was wearing a silver outfit that blazed in the sun, so bright that it almost hurt his eyes. A few strides and then she leapt and her arms shot up and she grabbed the wire and swung effortlessly around and flipped and landed on her feet, crouched an instant, then rose and turned toward him, her face tilted to the sky, one foot on the wire, her legs and arms spread like an angel suspended above that ocean of green, ready to take flight.

“Oh, my God.”

His eyes did not cease to shimmer until the car settled onto asphalt, and he drove west toward the sun, brighter now than he had ever known it.

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Subversion: The Anglo-Saxon Narrative in the Bayeux Tapestry will be published by the Edwin Mellen Press in 2004.

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