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Dialogue

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Cover: (left to right)
Top row: Aaron Breland, Detail of Self portrait, Acrylic on Canvas;
Gabriel Travis, Detail of Vessel: Separation, Oil on Canvas; Scott Herren Millen, Detail of Fear of your Folly, Woodcut;
Middle Row: Reuben Travis, Untitled, Stoneware; Sara Penninga, Detail of Aunt Mary, Oil on Canvas; Eric Nykamp, Detail of Man of Sorrows Mask, Painted Wood; Bottom Row: Eric Nykamp, The Guardians, Acrylic on Canvas; Jeannie Merkel, Self portrait, Woodcut.
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A young girl lived with her mother and father, both of whom were woodcutters, and though she loved them very much, in as many ways as she loved them, she also knew that she didn't want to be a woodcutter herself. When the time came for her to tell her parents this, her father smiled and her mother said that they loved her and that there were many wonderful things in the world to be besides woodcutters, and that one of those other things might be just the thing she should be. And so the girl prepared to leave her parents' home and find one of those other things for herself. When she left, she took with her a lunch that would last for many days and a sturdy walking stick that her father had hewn from the tree outside the kitchen window. Her mother hugged her for a very long time and her father hugged her tightly. Then she went off into the world.

Never having been quite so in the world before, and being young, and having so much faith, she ate things and met people and saw places that often made her happy. But she was sometimes frightened and other times lonely, and still other times wishing she was where someone loved her best of all. Every night she had the same dream. She dreamed that she was journeying across the whole world to reach the highest mountain, which was made of gold. There was only one way up the mountain, which no one had ever found except for one man, whom no one had ever met. It was said that the view from the top of the mountain was such that when you looked out to the east, you remembered everything that had ever happened. When you looked out to the west, you had an understanding of everyone you had ever met. When you looked out to the south, you could smell and hear and taste peace. And when you looked out to the north, you received all the words and all the ways to say them to share the mountain top with the entire world. The dream enchanted the girl, so even when she was frightened or lonely or wishing she was where someone loved her best of all, she didn't stop wandering.

After the young girl had been travelling for quite some time, she ran into a spell of bad luck. As she was laying down to sleep in a moonlit forest one night, she heard screams. When she sat up and looked around, she saw a band of robbers beating an elderly traveller within an inch of his life. Without thinking, the girl ran to help the old
man, but the robbers were too much for her, and when they left with the man’s clothes and his watch and rucksack, they had also given her quite a thrashing and had broken the walking staff her father had given her. The old man was badly beaten, but not too badly beaten to notice that he had no clothes on. Without so much as a glance in the poor girl’s direction—hoping she would not glance in his—he fled. The girl was so overwhelmed by her bruised body and the old man’s coldness and her broken walking stick that she longed to be near her parents in their warm cabin and to feel what it was like to be loved best of all. She had not allowed herself to think of this for a long time, and it seemed so wonderful and so far away that she began to cry. Cold and miserable, she wandered for the entire night and most of the next day, until evening was about to fall and she happened upon a small cottage. Because she was so desperate, the girl summoned up enough courage to knock at the door, though it looked like a place not in want of company.

In the cottage lived a hermit—neither old nor young—with his dog. He had lived in the middle of the forest since soon after his mother had died. His mother had been woman of royal birth with royal clothes and a royal palace and royal jewels, but she was not a beautiful woman by anyone’s estimate, so no one has ever written a story about her (which is unfortunate, as she was very interesting). When her son was born in a less-royal turn of events, she left the castle and her life there behind, taking with her only the riches she could carry. She and her son lived in a small village, very happily anonymous, until he grew up and went out on an adventure. When he returned, his mind was full of the things he had seen on his journey, but he rarely spoke about them to anyone. Soon after his return, his mother died and the hermit was so grief-stricken that he could no longer speak at all. So he sold his mother’s belongings, gave all the money to the poor, and moved to the heart of the forest, to the cottage at whose door the young girl was now knocking.

When he opened the door and saw her there, beaten and bedraggled, he forgot his desire never to speak to anyone, and felt instead a keen curiosity about the young girl who stood before him. So he invited her in, covered her with a blanket and told her to lie before the fire. His dog, who was the most colorful dog in the world, licked her wounds with its rough tongue. The girl found the hermit so generous and his dog so enchanting, that although they had not spoken, she felt more comfortable than she had since she had left her parents’ home. Soon, she fell asleep before the fire and the hermit went to prepare supper, leaving his dog to guard her slumbers.

Now the one thing of his mother’s that the hermit had saved was a set of silver plates with silver mugs to match, because he loved their
heaviness and the sound they made when he set them on his table. But because he used them every day, they had lost their rich luster and though they were special to him, they seemed too dull and ordinary for the guest who was sleeping on his hearth. As he had nothing else on which to serve her, however, he set the table, but with a heavy heart, wishing he could honor her with something more extraordinary. When he had finished preparing supper, he woke the girl and invited her to the table. They sat across from each other, between them bowls of stew and thick slabs of bread spread with wild preserves and mugs of a thick and fruity homemade wine. The young girl immediately noticed the heavy silver place settings, and since she had not been served a meal in a very long time, they seemed to her the richest and most special dishes she could imagine. She smiled shyly at the hermit and thought to herself, “How kind and generous he is, that he should bring out his best dishes to serve a poor stranger.” And the hermit noticed her appreciation and thought to himself, “How kind and humble she is, to be honored by something so ordinary.” And so they took their supper together and talked until their bottomless bowls of stew had been nearly finished.

It was then that the young girl told the man about her dream. She had never told anyone about the dream before, partly because she wondered if it were childish and partly to keep it her own. But as she stroked the dog’s silky ears, she confided in the man all the details about the golden mountain, about the single path to the top, and about the views from the east, west, south, and north, and about the man who had climbed it whom no one had ever met. The hermit listened intently and when she had finished, he seemed quite far off. But he encouraged her to find the mountain and climb it, for surely it was not too much farther from here, and for such things as memory, understanding, peace, and words it might be worth travelling much farther.

That night the girl slept very soundly and the next morning she hated to leave the man’s cottage, but she felt that her soul would not rest until she found the golden mountain. The hermit prepared her a lunch that would last for several days and gave her this advice: “Be careful, my young friend, and remember that if you see from the mountain top all of what you dreamed, no one more rare than you will exist in all the world. Whether you receive these things or not, may your blessing be in your journey.” Then she went off into the world, and the hermit’s dog followed close at her heels.

After many days’ journey the girl found herself quite unexpectedly at the foot of an incline that disappeared into the clouds, and she knew without a doubt that it was the mountain in her dreams. She began the long climb to the top. It was an arduous journey, cold and steep and made much more difficult without her father’s walking stick. At many times along the way she thought she had no more strength to continue. But each time she thought she might give up, she imagined the view she would have at the top and the dog would carry her on its back until she had the strength to go on. Then, on the third morning of her climb, she looked at the sun coming up in the sky and noticed that it was much closer than it had ever been. And sure enough, before the morning was over, she stood at the top of the mountain. Drawing a deep breath of thin, clear air she
looked out at the world below her. She looked to the east and she remembered everything that had ever happened. She looked to the west and she felt an understanding for everyone she had ever met. She looked to the south and she could smell and hear and taste peace. She was so overwhelmed by all of this that she could barely stand. She wondered how she could ever return to the world, and how she could explain to the people below what she had seen here. Then she turned to the north to receive the words and all the ways to say them. Just then, a fierce wind began to howl and an enormous thundercloud blocked her view. Before she could cover her head, rain fell from the sky in drops as big as waterfalls. The storm covered the world and all she had seen in a cloak of grey mist and though she strained to the north and held her mouth and arms open to receive the words, nothing came. Soon, the wind became so strong that she had to cling to the ground in order not to be blown away. The hermit's dog pulled and tugged at her shawl, and at its bidding she finally climbed on its back and they began their journey back down the mountain, sometimes slipping and sliding for one hundred miles at a time before they could regain their footing.

When she reached the bottom, the girl sadly looked around her. The world was the same as it had been only three days before. She hurried back to the hermit's cottage in the forest to tell him about her journey. When she arrived, she found him waiting in the door, just as he had been when she left. Remembering what she had seen, she tried to tell him the wonder of it: “I looked to the east and I began to remember everything that has ever happened! And I looked to the west and I felt an understanding of everyone I had ever met! And I looked to the south and I heard it and smelled it and tasted it—peace!” Then she stopped. She realized that she was not saying anything at all. Through thickly misty tears she tried to explain: “But when I looked to the north…” she whispered in a choked voice, “the words… they didn’t… I couldn’t…”

“A storm?” he asked, and she nodded, slowly.
“A thundercloud?” She nodded again. And he smiled, such a sad, sad smile. “I know.”

So among peace and understanding and memory, they lived for quite a long, long time. And the words? They came slowly, ever after. ∞
redeeming

The moment I saw you
in Fall on that sidewalk
under leaves falling
and you were dancing
like Spring was just around the next stone
My Winter came
To touch you
Like bone beneath flesh
you melted it away
with breath through those lips
It was then that I knew
That days and seasons
Are living and breathing
Reasons to smile
And dancing is much harder
Than walking
Better than sighing.
You told me
You preferred a challenge
And took away a flake
From my eye
So I could see
The yellow flower
Growing up from the crack
In the pavement
Thank-you I said
As you passed on by
Miracles spilling from your handbag.
a Boy and his Dog

I begged my parents for a younger brother from the time I was ten until they bought me the dog. It was meant to be a surrogate. To occupy my thoughts and to spare my parents from the labors of raising another child. Every time I asked mom and dad for a brother, my dad cleared his throat and gave my mom a look. It suggested they had discussed this before and had reached their decision. I do not think he enjoyed my persistence in the matter, and it was he who eventually took me to the dog pound and said take your pick. There was a problem with his solution: the puppy I had my heart set on was at Verspaccio’s Domesticated Wildlife on Fenessey Avenue downtown.

Instead, my father and I walked the pandemonious hallways of the pound, watched the desperate and depressed animals slide past. There were many beautiful puppies there. They had been given their shots and had been fixed and had been trained to go on the paper and to not jump up on people. But none of them was Alphonse, the perfect black and white Springer Spaniel in Verspaccio’s front window. He had been the goal of the “little brother campaign” in the first place. My dad patiently walked behind me and pointed to the dogs, made comments about color, spirit, foot size, and coat sheen. I paid little attention. These dogs had a comfortable, predictable feel to them. Like a river that had been dammed. The excitement, the rawness, and the roughness had been taken from these animals. They were pets. I wanted a dog.

Before long my father noticed a Labrador pup. Dad knelt and called “here boy” and made a clicking noise with his tongue. The dog trotted over. Dad patted his head, then wandered off to find one of the employees to ask some fatherly questions. I was alone in the hallway, surrounded by barking idiots vying for my attention. They were all so well trained. I put my hand through the chain link and patted the Lab on the head. He took a step back, then came forward and licked me. The first time I put my hand into Alphonse’s cage he had drawn blood.

My father rounded the corner and caught me with my hand in the cage and said something about how he was happy to see we were getting along already. He was still some distance down the hall with a slouching pound employee in tow, walking with a big bounce that made his thinning hair flap up and down like a poorly weighted tarpaulin. I could see from his stride that he intended to buy this pup. All he really
wanted was to get the hell out of there, out of the thick smell of poop and urine and wet dog hair that clings to clothing.

They were still a good twenty feet away and could only see me in profile. I turned back toward the pup and looked him over. Drooling and stupid. A fully trained eunuch. I reached under the warm folds of skin under his jaw and clamped my fingers around his windpipe. His eyes bulged and he tried to yelp, but I had him good. His feet slid on the smooth cement as he tried to back away, then he began tossing his head left and right. I looked at my dad, fifteen feet away and wondering if he should pay cash or check, and gave him a big smile. I shoved my left arm through the mesh and held it in front of the frantic Lab’s mouth, pulled him closer and cringed in anticipation of the bite. I released his throat when the teeth went in, screamed in pain and fell back. I scratched my arm up pretty good on the door, but the teeth marks were unmistakable. I started crying, but inside I was doing cartwheels.

“Son of a bitch!” my father yelled, and ran to me. He knelt at my side and looked at my arm, at the blood that was running to my fingertips and onto the gray floor. There were tears sliding down my cheeks but he didn’t wipe them. We looked into the cage and saw the Lab lick the blood from his upper lip, watched the thick red saliva dangling from his lower jaw.

“JesusChrist oh JesusChrist oh Jesus Christ on a stick!” the pound guy kept saying, his glances bouncing between the dog and me. He was jumping up and down a little and looked like he had to piss or something, but I didn’t dare laugh and my arm was really starting to hurt. Things didn’t get much better when my dad got in his face and started asking him what the filth was going on, and what the foul kind of place was this that the frosty customers get bitten by the froggin’ animals. This, while I was bleeding to death. The pound guy went running for his supervisor and a first aid kit while my father gesticulated.

He had calmed by the time the pound guys returned and was applying pressure to the small holes in my skin. I thought it prudent to make my statement a simple “He bit me, dad. He just bit me.” I said this a couple of times for effect. It seemed to be riling my dad up, but I didn’t want to overdo it. Splashes of iodine set my arm on fire. The pound guy wrapped my arm in gauze while the
manager and my father went into another hallway and talked. I could hear my dad
-tearing him a new one, even though we all knew it was the dog’s fault. The pound guy
was still chanting Jesus Christ like he couldn’t believe someone could get bitten at the
dog pound.

Dad and the manager returned a few minutes later, breathing heavily as if they had been
involved in some sort of physical struggle. The pound guy stepped back and let the pound
manager look at my arm, then we all looked at noticed our stares he displayed his reddened
manager said we could we wanted. Dad glared at take the flaming dog if it could
the hand and led me toward the exit. At the door he stopped and said that if they didn’t put that dog to sleep in the next half hour they would hear from his lawyer.

When we got to the car he asked how I was doing. I had stopped crying and the pressure from the bandage was relieving most of the pain. I told him so. When he asked if I still wanted a dog I said yes. I could tell he didn’t want me to want one anymore. He sighed and said alright, and asked did I know of any pet stores in town. I told him about Verspaccio’s Domesticated Wildlife on Fenessey Avenue downtown.

Mom was concerned about the bite marks when we got home, but she let it drop after dad told her the Lab had been vaccinated and she had seen that I was not in a lot of pain. I even got a dish of ice cream out of her. I shared it with Alphonse. I guess my dad dropped a few hundred dollars by the time we had collars, dishes, food, toys, and A.K.C. registration.

By the end of the first week I had scratches up and down both arms from playing with Alphonse. Our favorite game was for him to jump into my arms from the sixth or seventh step. He had bitten me hard four times. Nipped me a dozen more. I didn’t bother telling my parents when it happened. I liked him wild.

I liked taking Alphonse for walks in the woods near our house. Springers are supposed to be hunting dogs and I had always hoped that he would scare up a rabbit or something. I never leashed him when we walked for fear it would take the wild out of him. I never disciplined him for fear he would get domesticated. It didn’t take long for
him to run the household.

Alphonse barked incessantly. He barked at strangers, friends, family members, other dogs. He barked at cars and at kids and at squirrels and at birds. Shadows, breezes, darkness, light.

My parents let him sleep with me to keep him from barking all night.
Alphonse’s favorite spot to bury bones was in my mother’s garden.
He begged table scraps at every meal. If he didn’t get something he would jump onto my mother’s lap. When dad tried to put him out, Alphonse bit him.
Alphonse preferred the whitewalls on my dad’s Pontiac to trees, bushes, and hydrants.

He pooped in the house, but only on the light colored carpet.
He jumped on all our guests.
He humped our neighbor’s leg.
Alphonse impregnated our neighbor’s two bitches.
He stared at visitors until they acknowledged his presence. Friends left early.
Meals were cut short. Mom developed a facial tic. He didn’t wait to hear his name.
Wasn’t content to be called interesting or a character. He had to be told he was beautiful or a fine specimen. Dad’s fingernails were ragged and short.

Alphonse peed behind the sofa.
If he didn’t like the dog food my mom bought, Alphonse would push his bowls down the basement stairs.

I loved him more with each escapade. He got away with the things I never could. It was like Alphonse awoke each morning and found a new way to affirm his independence from our care. For me, it was like living with a wild beast. He was like a promiscuous lover. He let me in on some of his pranks, but also pulled some on me. He cheated on me yet was completely devoted. Alphonse was not a pet. He was a strange and savage creature that lived and slept with me.

◊

For a month mom put up with Alphonse and me. She cleaned up the messes we created. Apologized for the crimes we committed.
She had the living room carpet shampooed twice and still stank of urine. There was hair everywhere. Her garden was a battlefield.
She reached her limit when Alphonse got into her doll collection. They were antique porcelain. Perfectly painted smiles on tiny
white faces. We came home from the store one day and couldn’t find Alphonse. I looked in the basement while mom went upstairs. The screams led me to her, and I passed my limping dog on the stairs. When I got to my parent’s bedroom I saw why mom had kicked him. Doll heads were scattered across the floor. Tiny dresses were ripped from doll bodies. Innocent eyes stared at the ceiling. White limbs were scattered. It looked like a war zone. Like rape and plunder.

◊

I think the threat was staged by my mother. It came four days after the doll massacre. A piece of notebook paper was attached to our front door. I guess it was supposed to be from one of our neighbors, from someone who had finally gotten tired of Alphonse. The note read: Take care of the problem or I will. It was unsigned. There was no doubt in my parents’ minds that the note referred to Alphonse and his behavior.

That’s why I think the threat was staged. It was so non-specific that it could have meant anything. Mom’s garden was an eyesore. Or maybe the neighbors didn’t like to listen to my parents moaning in the jacuzzi late at night. Our lawn had a lot of dandelions. Dad’s car smoked when it started in the morning. Mom was overweight and had a bathing suit that was way too small for her. Our house was maize with brown shutters. Dad had a lot of tools laying around the backyard. There was nothing that specified Alphonse as the problem, and I found it queer that my parents had reached a decision within ten minutes. They wouldn’t dare take him from me; they knew we were attached. Their solution was even more heinous. Alphonse was going to obedience school.

They even made it my decision. When dad approached me with the note he said that Alphonse either had to go to obedience school or he had to go. I loved the dog, but there’s no way I would be a part of making him a pet. I said get rid of him then. Dad thought I was bluffing, but I wasn’t. It was the Labrador all over again. Dad blew me off. He gave me some line about how Alphonse would be the same dog, just a little calmer and better behaved. I asked if that meant they were going to brainwash him, teach him stupid tricks, and lop his nuts off. Dad smacked me. It hurt, but I think it surprised me more than anything else. He stood, said that yes, if I wanted to be crude, that is exactly what they are going to do with him, then walked away. He said “with,” instead of “to,” like Alphonse had been wanting to cut his nuts off and learn tricks and my parents were just offering to help.

Dad, Alphonse, and I got into the Pontiac the next morning and drove deep into the country. Red barns and telephone poles with silhouette men leaning against them whizzed past on either side. Dad blamed his flatulence on dairy farms, wondered about
buying a house here after I went to college. Woods crowded the road on each side in some places. They were dark and perfect compared to the small stand of oaks that Alphonse and I used to romp in. The dog jumped from back seat to front and again to the back at least a dozen times before we finally came to an enormous white-sided farmhouse. There was a sign by the road that showed a beagle looking affectionately at its owner. I gagged. The place was called Brookland Kennels.

Dad honked the horn until a man in overalls came out of the barn. He was tall and blonde and had most of his hair even though he was a bit older than my dad. A troupe of pups yapped at his heels all the way to our car. Dad stepped out of the car and extended his hand to the Blonde, introduced himself by saying his name was Roland and that he had telephoned yesterday regarding Alphonse. Dad had to raise his voice a bit to be heard over the distance must have Blonde snapped his German command. immediately and tell from the whether this was a greeting to potential was surprised by "Well then. I having a little discipline problem," he said.

"Not for long. Not if you can do that for Alphonse," dad said, motioning to the wind-up puppies. They weren't even looking around.

"I need to have a look at the dog before I can make any promises." We looked and saw Alphonse sprawled across the back seat.

The Blonde called him a couple of times, animatedly, then reached in and pulled Alphonse by the collar. The Blonde was bitten. Dad cursed. I smiled. He tightened his grip and pulled Alphonse out of the car. Alphonse was still clamped on his arm, the Blonde was still clamped on the collar.

"Does he have all of his shots?" the Blonde asked. Dad told him he did and apologized for the bite. The Blonde shrugged and said that it was just spirit, that it was easy enough to break. He and dad smiled. I got into the car and waited for dad. The Blonde leashed Alphonse and walked him to the barn. Dad watched him go, but I wouldn't. I took interest in my fingernails on the drive home. ∞
Finding An Earth-Careful Way
A conversation with Lionel Basney

Lionel Basney is an English professor at Calvin and the author of the recently published book *An Earth-Careful Way of Life*, in which he discusses the spiritual and cultural roots of our "environmental" crisis, and the links between our natural and cultural despair and the post-industrial, high mass-consumption society in which we live. Also notable is that as a writer of books, maker of tests, submitter of poems, and sender of memos, Professor Basney does not use computers. Doing fine without Word Perfect, conversing without e-mail, and beyond the insidious trolling of the "Net," Professor Basney offers the following succinct observations on technology, responsibility, and living carefully.

One of the major points of your book, *An Earth-Careful Way of Life* is that we must recognize the link between our own personal lifestyle choices and the destruction of the Earth. So our reliance on our telephones has to do with global warming. Could you flesh out the connections you see here?

The only thing you need to do to see these conditions is to admit their possibility. Then they jump out at you. What keeps your desk lamp burning? Electricity. Where is it coming from? A generator. What keeps the generator turning? Oil—whose combustion heats the atmosphere, whose discovery destroys rain forest, whose spilling fouls the estuaries, and whose dominance distorts every economy on earth.

*Far too many of us not only miss this implicit connection, but are defensive and resistant when we consider its possibility. So changing our lifestyles and admitting our guilt is much more threatening than the vague idea of an energy crisis or another bankrupt farmer.*

Of course. One thing I should have said in the book, but didn't, is that we "backdrop" the environmental crisis itself: that is, we hide it from ourselves in stereotypes like the suffering, noble farmer and lies like the "energy crisis." With some of us this is ignorance; with others it is the effort to avoid responsibility.

*In your book you also dwell extensively on the role that communities play in establishing relationships, both with land and with each other. It's much harder to raping someone whose family you know intimately, or some place whose stream irrigates your vegetable garden. How can we re-establish the communities that were levelled by industrialization and commodification,*
which are now so firmly entrenched?

In fact, most rapes occur within families or circles of friends. You are more likely to be harmed by someone you know. We backdrop this with the stereotype of the anonymous predator (usually of a different skin color).

Which means that “community” by itself is no necessary help. In fact I’m getting tired of the word. What we need is mutual undertakings. I mean by this both work-in-common and the acceptance of obligation (“I undertake to pay...”). The consumer culture destroys communities of work with the principle of the division of labor; it destroys moral communities with the principle that the world exists to serve private satisfactions. As long as we accept these principles we will never have communities.

On the other hand, if what we are looking for is mutual undertakings we can see that they are not all that mysterious. We could make one tomorrow that would last for generations—for as long as the common need we were working on (hunger) or the common obligation (tell the truth) existed.

What about Christians who drive luxury cars two minutes to campus, or throw away a plastic fork, spoon and knife at lunch six times a week? We often appear the worst of the bunch, augmenting irresponsibility with hypocrisy. Did we lose the principles of stewardship with Eden?

Of course we lost the principles of stewardship in Eden. The command to subdue the earth and so on was given to humanity before we sinned. We ceased to be “natural” or willing stewards the same instant we ceased willingly to obey God or willingly to conserve what we didn’t understand.

Most Christians I meet are not Christians at all about their economic and material practices, not systematically. We are normal post-industrial western consumers.

Your eschewing of computers is an interesting phenomenon on a campus that has computerized itself by leaps and bounds since my first year here four years ago. Can you elaborate on your reasoning?

It’s hard to elaborate briefly on so elaborate a question. But look at it this way: a personal computer is a device for tailoring knowledge to fit the model of a commodity. The computer increases your access to data and promises that you can choose what you want to know and thus increase your freedom to do what you want with the world.

But I don’t think knowledge works this way at all. True knowledge is of what you are compelled to know. You can’t take it or leave it. It’s a matter of need. We need to know God, our families, our specific physical places, our own bodies and their commerce with the world. Computers can be of only limited and incidental value with any of this.
What about the ways in which environmentalists defend computers, say, because they eliminate paper waste, or use resources efficiently?

Environmentalists like this are thinking superficially. They are in danger of abandoning the only premises that will let them make their case. And anyone who thinks the presence of computers encourages thrift should stand for half an hour beside a public xerox machine.

What about personal responsibility? Even if you don’t use computers yourself, when you require students to write papers, you can bet they will. And the publishing companies to which you must submit your manuscripts are the ones who demand clear-cuts. How far does responsibility stretch?

It stretches as far as I can see and do at the moment. My responsibility changes—increases, decreases.

Anytime we strive to live by a principle, we are bound to be inconsistent. So though you grow all your own vegetables, you may be forced sometimes to buy supermarket rice that was likely exported from a third world country. How do you keep from being overwhelmed by “imperfect principles”?

It’s not the principle that is imperfect but my practice. (Of course the practice of apprehending or defining principles is also imperfect.) This disparity is to be expected. It is what we mean by depravity. The only people never embarrassed by the imperfection of their practice are those who have given up on all principle. Embarrassment is the condition of trying to do right.

I live in my culture—one for which I am partly responsible. I live here under violent protest and try to enact this protest in unstupid ways.

As someone committed to earth-careful living, not only personally but for the world, how do you teach and correct others earnestly without being authoritarian or patronizing? As a gadfly of sorts, is there any way to gently bite people’s butts and still effect change?

It helps to have been born a show-off. Which means both dramatizing myself and being ironic about my own drama. I try to accompany every lecture with a confession.

What normally happens is that one gets more and more general about one’s denunciations, until one becomes undistinguishable from a politician or a CEO. (“We must be aware of the environmental crisis . . .”) It helps, therefore, to point your finger at some specific thing or activity and say, “I am against that.” A computer, for instance; or a zoning exception for a suburban development; or a poisoned creek; or a smug investment. Of course there will be a person within range of your finger: you cannot avoid that, and you would be condescending to try to ignore it. But until you can name a particular thing you object to, and oppose, your moral principle amounts to very little. ~
Backbone Love

Sleep, eye, baby blue.
Your tiny orange mouth
Drips colored talk.
Sit rocking, unknowing.
I creep under the shadow
Of your tall, arced back.

Face away, sorrow-girl.
Words drip from him down
And off your tender back
Edging up against his.
He cannot feel you, flicks
At you, a lingering fly.

Cry and cry, flesh-doll.
Faint vows from the mist and blather
Come through you,
Envelope your spine and gut.
But hands hide still your
Broken face.

Slumber, great father.
You do not see me or feel
Space seeping
Between our spines,
As I crawl off, scraping
Along the gravel of your gifts.
Bedroom Window

Oil on Canvas
The Guardians

Acrylic on Canvas
A Poem for Claude About Claude

I met you inside the church
  You’re thin
(I like birch)
  You’re thin
I could tease you
I’d rather be your friend
Boys don’t hold hands
Claude

The end
Your Skin and Mine

We are light tasters
in the window
panting homebound dogs.
We hang from fishing line
shine.

I sort.
I separate
stripes on walls
tossed
a shimmer, a glimmer
on my tongue
and gone.

You swallow.
You digest
brown,
rainbow’s thick
deep sleeping in your skin
so warm
almost baked
steam streams in colors ears can see.
Bread.

You are woven,
rich tapestry.
Me, unraveled,
spinning yarns.

We are ready for shattered glass,
light’s sharp slicing
and sagged tongues
bleed for glee.
February is Black History Month. March is Women's History month. The need for their observance is similar to the need for Earth Day, a day in April set aside to recycle, plant a tree, and ride a bike. If everyone respected the environment consistently, there would be no need for an Earth Day.

Similarly, these historical observances exist because the African American heritage, and the woman's, and many others, have been denied their fundamental role within the narrative of American history.

American history, traditionally written by white, Protestant males, also ignores the stories of Native Americans, Chicanos, religious minorities, and recent immigrants. Perhaps each group deserves its own month. But the ideal is integration into the larger narrative.

History which includes all the actors in America's past teaches its students how to live in a diverse society, offering a sense of self and insights into the formative experiences of others. As moral, responsible citizens of a society whose democratic principles claim to include all of its members, it is our duty to understand the struggles and achievements of those around us. We cannot live with the differences without trying to understand them.

As Americans, however, we rarely reach beyond the traditional telling of American history we received in high school. We don't question how Europeans could discover a "virgin" land inhabited by Native Americans for 20,000 years, or how one fourth of a "free" nation's population could be enslaved. Nor do we ask why the Declaration's rights of man were not also the rights of woman, or how the Mexicans felt when American Texans claimed Texas as their own. As the primary source of American's historical knowledge, high school history must transcend the traditional to accurately depict society's diversity and challenge students to seek understanding of differences.

Critics of a multicultural history curriculum including the many racial and ethnic narratives which comprise the entire American experience argue that diversity mostly causes conflict. Bosnia, Chiapas, the Middle East, South Africa, and South-central Los Angeles are more
By teaching the complexity of cause and effect and recognizing the diversity of the narrative, history develops our capacity for analysis and judgement.than enough proof. Accentuating the differences of groups in history only deepens the ethnocentrism by which most ethnic groups define themselves. How are teachers to help students develop empathetic understanding of diverse ethnic groups by teaching differences which cause conflict?

This criticism underestimates the abilities of students, teachers, and history itself. Traditionally taught history deceives with its narrow narrative. American history from the Puritans’ landing to the Cold War is a story of good versus bad in which the good always wins. Such a numbingly simple tale does not challenge students to confront reality’s ambiguities. No group has a monopoly on truth or value, and no actions are without consequence. By teaching the complexity of cause and effect and recognizing the diversity of the narrative, history develops our capacities for analysis and judgement.

Diversity in history is not divisive. It is honest. Diversity has and always will exist in America. History must mirror this diversity to realistically depict the roots of what divides today’s society. Honest history is often painful. It hears the weeping of a husband slave sold to a distant plantation, smells the sweat of an Irish immigrant woman in a New York textile mill, and aches with the pain of a Cherokee woman’s swollen feet as they march from her ancestral home. But it is not meant to divide. Honest history is the many different narratives and their combined whole. It distinguishes between different traditions to acknowledge their existence, validity, and their relation to each other.

Political agendas simplify issues into false dichotomies. Politicians and preachers step through the television into our living rooms to tell us what or what not to believe. Our passivity is assumed. We don’t evaluate what we hear. We just register the loudest voice in the shouting match. Or we don’t listen at all. We merely follow the Democrat or the Republican, the man or the woman, the black or the white. Life is black and white, cut and dried, a piece of cake, a pile of beans, an open and shut case. Just like the history we learned in school.

But teaching honest history is

Honest history distinguishes between different traditions to acknowledge their existence, validity, and their relation to each other.
essential, its lessons manifold. Complex issues like affirmative action and California's Proposition 187 require historical knowledge for an informed opinion. They also require us to break free from our cocoons of individuality. We must look past our own interests to see how our actions affect others. We Americans rarely do this, and we all suffer as a result.

Diversity in history teaches how, as Martin Luther King, Jr. articulated it, we are all part of one garment of destiny. Our actions' consequences return to us in the end. This is still an appeal to self-interest, but history carries us further. Honest history develops our capacities for analysis and judgement. As Nietzsche emphasized, we gain not only the courage of our convictions, but the courage to attack our convictions. This generates understanding and appreciation for our strengths and weaknesses, which, combined with such knowledge of others, allow us to abandon narrow self-interest and seek the common good. ∞
Creating

Dreamers must learn to smoke
And if demon faces
Appear in their breathing out
They must learn to quit
But if angels flicker
In lighter fluid flame
And their wings fall like ashes
From the fingers of dreamers
And walking away on feet
Angel become human
Then smoke fills this tiny room
And dreamers can fly
As through clouds
And know that creating
Is breathing
Deeper and deeper death
Until dark lungs
Hack out origins
And cough away despair.
Two Southern Towns

Port Gibson, Mississippi: Festival

In the delta of the Mississippi, just off the Natchez Trace, Port Gibson sinks, swooning in the Southern heat. Languishing in hollows of hills. Still.

Twenty-five hundred people live in Port Gibson. About three hundred of them are white. These reside on and near Church Street in tremendous white houses with sprawling, pillared porches fringed with fuchsia azaleas and frothy dogwoods; front lawn cast iron plackets indicate the historical significance of their homes. They still talk about “the war”; they mean the Civil War. They attend the Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian churches on Church Street. A hand, nine feet tall and gold-plated, an eternal index finger to heaven, tops the steeple of the Presbyterian church.

Once a year Church Street rouses itself. The women create elaborate dresses, attaching ribbons and silk flowers to polished satin bodices, loosing them to flow over bloated skirts. Men and boys don Confederate uniforms of crisp, clean grey with red sashes and brass buttons. People come from miles to relive the days of the South’s holy war. This is called the Port Gibson Pilgrimage. They come up the Trace from Natchez itself; they come down from Vicksburg, past the sign on the north side of town that declares, Port Gibson—“too beautiful too burn.” Ulysses S. Grant.

This idyllic street, and these thick, tumbled hills—you could gorge yourself on it; you could forget to breathe. Travelling to Port Gibson across the flat-as-a-washboard stomach of the States, across the unbearable space of Illinois and Missouri and Arkansas, where if you are not careful you might lose yourself looking for the edges of earth and sky—this is a little like breaking a lengthy fast with an entire pecan pie.

There is Church Street and then there are ghosts of people, living in shadows of houses. Or these dark, weathered people are the real ones, and Church Street is populated by spectres, mock-ups, housed in facades. Whichever world you choose, you deny the other.
Walk two blocks from Church Street, to the north or south, and you must not look in the eyes of the Negro women settled on their porches, or their wiry children scrambling through the dirt of their yards; you must not answer the calls of the men outside the barbershop, and if you do, then give them a cigarette, light it, and walk away.

But look. Johnny Thomas lives a few miles outside town, on five acres he owns himself. He built his house during the last war, when lumber was rationed, so he built it with whatever he could find. Old barn boards, found plywood, wood cut from the trees on his land—he put it together well, for it stands yet. Johnny leans against his orange Ford pickup, watching his granddaughter as she plays. Anyone who drives past honks and waves; everyone around here knows Johnny and his people. His face is smooth, his black skin firm, except for the creases which deepen around his mouth and eyes when he smiles. He is quick to smile, but his eyes never change.

The hub of the Church Street festivities is Oak Hill, an antebellum mansion set back from the street; its outbuildings and an iron fence line an expansive green. Girls in hoopskirts and Confederate soldiers pose on the mansion's balconies, surveying the activities. On the lawn are two maypoles, an exotic fortune-teller's tent of draped mosquito netting, staged swordfights, singing, and game boards for the children. Church Street people mill about stiffly, self-conscious in their costumes. Gawking, spectators press against the fence. They buy souvenirs and postcards from the table by the front gate. They step inside to be led around the house by old women with soft accents and high collars. This is the entryway that is pictured in Great Historic Landmarks of the South. This is the parlor where
they say Robert E. Lee was entertained. Here, the
gold-plated chandeliers, see? And the brushed
challis drapes? Upstairs we have the well-appointed
bedrooms of the present residents. Observe these
magnificent stairways that curve to the great hall
above. Off the hall, here, is the master bedroom.
Beautiful, and let’s look at this other, with the canopy
bed draped in pink silk. And downstairs, that’s the
door to the slaves’ quarters, and here, the solid cherry
dining table and sideboard and china closet and the
china set on the table is valued at eight thousand
dollars.

North of town, just off the Trace on Marbra Road,
several shacks flank a levelled lot and a basketball
hoop. There are cars everywhere, gutted and
rusting, and parts of cars, amputated and strewn
among the carcasses. There is a ’91 Corvette parked beside a satellite dish near the first
shack. Cora lives here with her two daughters and seven granddaughters. Last year a
wind flattened their house to the ground; now it is propped up with bowed two by fours,
no sturdier than the houses you made out of refrigerator and washing machine boxes
when you were a child, and hardly bigger. You cannot walk upright inside the house.
You cannot breathe. Cockroaches scuttle across the floor, but Cora will tell you not to
mind them; they won’t bother you. Into the four tiny rooms she has wedged two queen-
sized beds, four couches, two coffee tables, three televisions, a dining table of glass and
faux brass, and seventeen chairs. Every surface is covered; baubles are everywhere,
along with shiny statuettes, crochet coverlets, bright prints in plastic frames, and
paintings of pallid Christs. Smoking menthol 100’s, her pink robe wrapped around her,
Cora watches a soap opera on two of the televisions. Her daughters still sleep. Her
grandchildren hit plastic things against the coffee table and wiggle. Dat’s ‘nuff now.
When yo’ mamma wake up, mm-hmm, you gone get i’.

The next event is the maypole dance. Everyone come to the lawn to see the maypole
dance, to be performed by the eleventh and twelfth grade girls of the Methodist and
Presbyterian Sunday Schools. As the girls gather around the poles, everyone rises to
sing “Dixie.” The girls join hands and circle the pole. Next song and the girls are
winding the ribbons, skipping jerkily, turning, abrupt, out of sync as they wander in tangled rings round and round.

At the black Pentecostal church the service is stretching into its third hour. In front of sequined banners, purple and red and green, to the modulations of an electric organ, the pastor paces the stage with his microphone, sopping his brow with a towel. At the back of the sanctuary, a suited man and a lean woman in red and brown polyester shout the language of the spirit. Lama shaback, lama shenigh, lano heerock shinah shaback. The pastor shouts people of God, carve away the flesh, carve it away and be all spirit, praise God. We are not of this world, nama hee nama han. Let the world fall away, naba hook ya shina. Three women stage left sing amens into microphones, hands raised. A woman in the center of the swaying congregation wails in her mountainous body; she is trembling off blankets of flesh; she is flaying the world’s flesh loose from her, so she might float bloody and be cleaned by antiseptic air. Four girls dance, stage right, rolling heads, eyes closed. Lama shenee, shanowa la hoynena lano sheneecka duhoya nahoo. The pastor achieves a frenetic pace, the congregation is staggering in place, nodding, frantic. The girls convulse, grounded, but their arms flap like ribbons in wind.

The dresses are spinning, satin glinting in the sunlight—yellow, plum, emerald, carmine, magenta, ocher—all garish against the girls’ pallid, leaden faces. The crowd is entranced, torpid; the girls’ mother are in a stupor. The girls clutch their Maypole ribbons dully and dance.

**New Orleans, Louisiana: Carnival**

I went to New Orleans to find a lover rumored to be hanging around the corner of Iberville and Royal, her fingers wrapped around a street sign, she hanging off the street sign like a flag, actually, all tangled up in plastic beads and with gris-gris on her mind. I dreamt of her often; I was still young enough to think: she was a fair elf queen who braided the night rivers deep into her flaxen hair. She was always just beyond but there, I knew, stretching
crosses above her head, and lighting candles in her boat of silvery spider webs. I followed the trail of her in the black water by way of the spun-out thread of her voice.

I followed the trail of her down the Mississippi and heard about her whereabouts as I was paddling through the swamps to Louisiana; I was stopped by a man who lived in one of the stilt-house swamp villages and when I told him who I was looking for, he told me that if she was anywhere she was at the Big Easy. The specifics of it must have been speculation because all I found at the corner of Iberville and Royal was a bunch of Yankees who said the sun's ablazin', the party's just beginning and your lady has left you for a frat boy with a keg in a cart. They said they could show me where she was; they said Blazon himself had informed them as to her whereabouts. They were sons of his. The hems of their trousers soaked in urine and beer, they walked like a disintegrating parade float, all hooked together by their fingers in each others' beltloops. I followed.

They took me to Canal Street, a street so wide that by the time we crossed it night had come and so had Endymion, preceded by blazing flambeaux and floats entitled “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles”, “Garfield”, “Sylvester and Tweety”, and “Small Cuddly Things” and a court that included a lady I thought I recognized. The Queen of Endymion, resplendent in oyster tones, caked in plastic, sequins and silk, trembling under an albino peacock's mane of bejeweled cardboard, feathers and fur that stretched five feet above her head—there was something in the way her mouth fell open, not quite gaping, as she struggled to hold her collar piece upright and twitched against the wire harness encasing her shoulders. But I could not see her eyes, and by the time I had seen her mouth I could not catch her. As for Endymion, he was distributing fertility and eternal youth like they were plastic baubles.

To dodge the floats on our way across the street we waded through refuse up to our ankles. It was broken plastic beads of all colors, empty beer and soda cans, flyers, wrappers from hot dogs, hamburgers and pretzels, cigarette boxes, transparent glasses that had held Hurricanes, and the ghosts of the krewe that had passed down Canal so far: bright plastic doubloons and drinking cups bearing the emblems of Freret, Thebes, Pegasus, Saturn, Babylon, Hermes, Iris, and Tucks. We were following the parade route down to the river, someone shouted, and so we bowed our heads and pressed through endless bodies resisting and giving way again and again. Finally the Sons o' Blazon pulled me onto a darker street and we walked through sticky yellow puddles under wood and iron wrought balconies. Only three days until Lent and already every house is prettier than the last and the next, and the bargaining balcony girls are overflowing
onto lampposts and telephone poles, their faces distended as they hang over us, trying to keep their heads up against the weight of thick purple beads, beads like Christmas ornaments and the heads of voodoo dolls—shiny green, red and golden ballast that bows their necks as they clutch edges of houses and try not to fall.

Oh, my love, I am scattered over this city to find you and the streets are crooked; should I glimpse you again, I am not sure I could collect myself in time. For you I would try. I would go out gathering in the gutters and the bars, and for you, press all into tight, smooth curls. For you I would dress all in love, and may the buttons someday button or a zipper package all this of me into a that for you.

The Christians are here in the crescent city, bearing wooden crosses, extra-large, and tricky flyers—party invitations or beer advertisements or money—so you’ll pick them up to be informed that the party’s over, kid; your time is almost up. There’s more to this life than feeding your desires. First your liver will go, then your heart, and soon your flesh will rot away, and then where will you be? Can you hide in your bones? They process behind their crosses and set up random barricades, singing. One of them is almost naked, a cross twice his height chafing his shoulders. Robed friends thrash him with yarn, screaming insults. They are the voices, the flyer tells us, of what we are doing to Christ. Christ falls down and they shout get up and take it some more.

The Sons o’ Blazon took me down Bourbon Street, which was occupied by one very tall naked woman who lay across the width of the Quarter, from one end of the street to the other, and laughed. I could tell right away she was not my lover. We pressed against her flesh, the sweaty thousands of us, and crawled over her to see the other side, though her skin was barely strong enough to hold us and made for wobbly footwork. To cross her breasts we gave her beads, which we all had lots of though we could not remember where we had got them. We had to hold our breath, we sank so far into her. When we got to her head I whispered in her ear the question, Why are you laughing? I am, she
said, in a jungle of war machines, combatant pumps, air grinders, and every sort of enemy lever. I carry out commands and, on mission after mission, amidst the cold, frantic workings of the machines, amidst the stinging leaves and lurking teeth of the jungle, I find myself naked. I am tired of all these machines and of being naked. Why don't you get dressed, I said. I can't, she said, I am naked. And she resumed laughing. I found her to have an absurd and disturbing sense of humor and I was glad to feel a tug on my belt loop as the Sons o’ Blazon moved on.

I was strutting down to the river when I found my lover at last, in a dim, between-scenes place, chanting gumbo mantras and strumming a banjo for an empty banjo case. It was him: there was the glint of his eyes under a black felt hat and those familiar, shrivelled canvas trousers. He was watching me in the way only my lover would. He was watching me, indeed; watching, mocking eyes in cold dry sockets as I swaggered, restless, trigger happy, swinging my hips and dancing at balance. Grinning, I pressed his hand against my chest and pulled the bone-loosed skin of elbow but he could not touch me. He watched me with eyes in cold dry sockets as I swayed away. I have a quiet swagger, and a tightly buckled belt. I am only laughing softly, thumbs hooked firmly. Still, still, he shifted his dry gaze away. But I can prance like the pertest baton girl in the Rex parade, so I danced on toward the river bank, mindless.

We got to the river on Mardi Gras day and I stretched on my back in the muddy grass. It was pouring. The Sons o’ Blazon said goodbye and wandered back toward Iberville and Royal to meet someone. I have not found my lover but I can make it home without her. I pressed my fingers into the mud and spread it on my forehead, my elbows, and my stomach. I’m too much of a dreamer. From now on nothing but my hands will do the work—I will make days out of my skin, blood, lungs, heart, and bone. I will be safe; I can make it home without her. They were so distant, anyway, her candles on the water. So far beyond.

Still, a glow on the water keeps me mindful. I remember all the places where I glimpsed her. I cannot, in fact, remember any place I did not. And I find, of all things, that it is my own hands, burning with wax, that light the water. My arms ache but they are strong; I have held my crosses high for so long. My lips move with murmurs braiding day and night, and I laze on the river bank, spinning out my voice in threads that anyone might catch and hold. ∞
Youthful Freedom Photograph
Are You Game?

Rules
1. roll dice.
2. choose answer.
3. move.

Object
The fun is in the process. Y

CALVIN: a retrospective
(or... what goes around comes around.)

Hey, are you at the start? or the finish? What!? Are we just going in circles?
Do you wanna play a