

**Fiction Through the Looking-Glass**

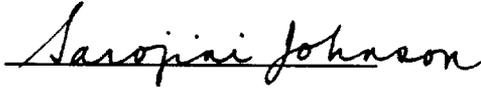
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

**Maia S. Kingman**

Thesis Advisor

Sarojini Johnson



Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

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# Fiction Through the Looking-Glass

Visual Interpretations of Fiction



A Collection of Prints by Maia S. Kingman  
At the Daily Planet Sunday, April 17—Thursday, April 21  
Reception Monday, April 18 6—8 P.M.

## Purpose of Thesis

This creative project represents a union of art and fiction. I have found, in my work as an English major and printmaking minor, that the two areas can be closely related. Fiction can induce vivid images in the reader's mind; this project is an experiment in which I allowed these images to materialize and become works worthy to be contemplated themselves.

The works enclosed are not illustrations—they do not necessarily represent the action in or the intentions of the fiction with which they correspond. I did not wish to limit the fiction in this way. Instead I chose to create images that were very *personal* responses to the work. This allows the art to be appreciated in itself. Both the fiction and the art intertwine, but are each separate parts of a whole.

The fiction I selected includes two of my own pieces and several others that became important to me in my studies in English. In both cases, it was the words which inspired the art. Someday I would like to attempt to reverse the order and create fiction based on visual images, but for the sake of continuity, I considered the stories first.

Part of this project was a show of the art, held at the Daily Planet, in the Village, Sunday, April 17, through Thursday, April 21. There was a reception Monday, April 18, from 6 to 8. Enclosed are photographs of the show.

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### Art

Listing of the order of each slide according to its corresponding story

Slides of the works

Photographs of the show

## The School

by Donald Barthelme

Well, we had all these children out planting trees, see, because we figured that . . . that was part of their education, to see how, you know, the root systems . . . and also the sense of responsibility, taking care of things, being individually responsible. You know what I mean. And the trees all died. They were orange trees. I don't know why they died, they just died. Something wrong with the soil possibly or maybe the stuff we got from the nursery wasn't the best. We complained about it. So we've got thirty kids there, each kid had his or her own little tree to plant, and we've got these thirty dead trees. All these kids looking at these little brown sticks, it was depressing.

It wouldn't have been so had except that just a couple of weeks before the thing with the trees, the snakes all died. But I think that the snakes—well, the reason that the snakes kicked off was that . . . you remember, the boiler was shut off for four days because of the strike, and that was explicable. It was something you could explain to the kids because of the strike. I mean, none of their parents would let them cross the picket line and they knew there was a strike going on and what it meant. So when things got started up again and we found the snakes they weren't too disturbed.

With the herb gardens it was probably a case of overwatering, and at least now they know not to overwater. The children were very conscientious with the herb gardens and some of them probably . . . you know, slipped them a little extra water when we weren't looking. Or maybe . . . well, I don't like to think about sabotage, although it did occur to us. I mean, it was something that crossed our minds. We were thinking that way probably because before that the gerbils had died, and the white mice had died, and the salamander . . . well, now they know not to carry them around in plastic bags.

Of course we *expected* the tropical fish to die, that was no surprise. Those numbers, you look at them crooked and they're belly-up on the surface. But the lesson plan called for a tropical-fish input at that point, there was nothing we could do, it happens every year, you just have to hurry past it.

We weren't even supposed to have a puppy.

We weren't even supposed to have one, it was just a puppy the Murdoch girl found under a Gristede's truck one day and she was afraid the truck would run over it when the driver had finished making his delivery, so she stuck it in her knapsack and brought it to school with her. So we had this puppy. As soon as I saw the puppy I thought, Oh Christ, I bet it will live for about two weeks and then . . . And that's what it did. It wasn't supposed to be in the classroom at all, there's some kind of regulation about it, but you can't tell them they can't have a puppy when the puppy is already there, right in front of them, running around on the floor and yap yap yapping. They named it Edgar—that is, they named it after me. They had a lot of fun running after it and yelling, "Here Edgar! Nice Edgar!" Then they'd laugh like hell. They enjoyed the ambiguity. I enjoyed it myself. I don't mind being kidded. They made a little house for it in the supply closet and all that. I don't know what it died of. Distemper, I guess. It probably hadn't had any shots. I got it out of there before the kids got to school. I checked the supply closet each morning, routinely, because I knew what was going to happen. I gave it to the custodian.

And then there was this Korean orphan that the class adopted through the Help the Children program, all the kids brought in a quarter a month, that was the idea. It was an unfortunate thing, the kid's name was Kim and maybe we adopted him too late or something. The cause of death was not stated in the letter we got, they suggested we adopt another child instead and sent us some interesting case histories, but we didn't have the heart. The class took it pretty hard, they began (I think, nobody ever said anything to me directly) to feel that maybe there was something wrong with the school. But I don't think there's anything wrong with the school, particularly, I've seen better and I've seen worse. It was just a run of bad luck. We had an extraordinary number of parents passing

away, for instance. There were I think two heart attacks and two suicides, one drowning, and four killed together in a car accident. One stroke. And we had the usual heavy mortality rate among the grandparents, or maybe it was heavier this year, it seemed so. And finally the tragedy.

The tragedy occurred when Matthew Wein and Tony Mavrogordo were playing over where they're excavating for the new federal office building. There were all these big wooden beams stacked, you know, at the edge of the excavation. There's a court case coming out of that, the parents are claiming that the beams were poorly stacked. I don't know what's true and what's not. It's been a strange year.

I forgot to mention Billy Brandt's father, who was knifed fatally when he grappled with a masked intruder in his home.

One day, we had a discussion in class. They asked me, where did they go? The trees, the salamander, the tropical fish, Edgar, the poppas and mommas, Matthew and Tony, where did they go? And I said, I don't know, I don't know. And they said, is death that which gives meaning to life? And I said, no, life is that which gives meaning to life. Then they said, but isn't death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of—

I said, yes, maybe.

They said, we don't like it.

I said, that's sound.

They said, it's a bloody shame!

I said, it is.

They said, will you make love now with Helen (our teaching assistant) so that we can see how it is done? We know you like Helen.

I do like Helen but I said that I would not.

We've heard so much about it, they said, but we've never seen it.

I said I would be fired and that it was never, or almost never, done as a demonstration. Helen looked out of the window.

They said, please, please make love with Helen, we require an assertion of value, we are frightened.

I said that they shouldn't be frightened (although I am often frightened) and that there was value everywhere. Helen came and embraced me. I kissed her a few times on the brow. We held each other. The children were excited. Then there was a knock on the door, I opened the door, and the new gerbil walked in. The children cheered wildly.

**Fat**  
*by Raymond Carver*

I am sitting over coffee and cigarettes at my friend Rita's and I am telling her about it.

Here is what I tell her.

It is late of a slow Wednesday when Herb seats the fat man at my station.

This fat man is the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat-appearing and well dressed enough. Everything about him is big. But it is the fingers I remember best. When I stop at the table near his to see to the old couple, I first notice the fingers. They look three times the size of a normal person's fingers—long, thick, creamy fingers.

I see to my other tables, a party of four businessmen, very demanding, another party of four, three men and a woman, and this old couple. Leander has poured the fat man's water, and I give the fat man plenty of time to make up his mind before going over.

Good evening, he says. Hello. Yes, he says. I think we're ready to order now, he says.

He has this way of speaking—strange, don't you know. And he makes a little puffing sound every so often.

I think we will begin with a Caesar salad, he says. And then a bowl of soup with some extra bread and butter, if you please. The lamb chops, I believe, he says. And baked potato with sour cream. We'll see about dessert later. Thank you very much, he says, and hands me the menu.

God, Rita, but those were fingers.

I hurry away to the kitchen and turn in the order to Rudy, who takes it with a face. You know Rudy. Rudy is that way when he works.

As I come out of the kitchen, Margo—I've told you about Margo? The one who chases Rudy? Margo says to me, Who's your fat friend? He's really a fatty.

Now that's part of it. I think that is really part of it.

I make the Caesar salad there at his table, him watching my every move, meanwhile buttering pieces of bread and laying them off to one side, all the time making this puffing noise. Anyway, I am so keyed up or something, I knock over his glass of water.

I'm so sorry, I say. It always happens when you get into a hurry. I'm very sorry, I say. Are you all right? I'll get the boy to clean up right away, I say.

It's nothing, he says. It's all right, he says, and he puffs. Don't worry about it, we don't mind, he says. He smiles and waves as I go off to get Leander, and when I come back to serve the salad, I see the fat man has eaten all his bread and butter. A little later, when I bring him more bread, he has finished his salad. You know the size of those Caesar salads?

You're very kind, he says. This bread is marvelous, he says.

Thank you, I say.

Well, it is very good, he says, and we mean that. We don't often enjoy bread like this, he says.

Where are you from? I ask him. I don't believe I've seen you before, I say.

He's not the kind of person you'd forget, Rita puts in with a snicker.

Denver, he says.

I don't say anything more on the subject, though I am curious.

Your soup will be along in a few minutes, sir, I say, and I go off to put the finishing touches to my party of four businessmen, very demanding.

When I serve his soup, I see the bread has disappeared again. He is just putting the last piece of bread into his mouth.

Believe me, he says, we don't eat like this all the time, he says. And puffs. You'll have to excuse us, he says.

Don't think a thing about it, please, I say. I like to see a man eat and enjoy himself,

I say.

I don't know, he says. I guess that's what you'd call it. And puffs. He arranges the napkin. Then he picks up his spoon.

God, he's fat! says Leander.

He can't help it, I say, so shut up.

I put down another basket of bread and more butter. How was the soup? I say.

Thank you. Good, he says. Very good, he says. He wipes his lips and dabs his chin. Do you think it's warm in here, or is it just me? he says.

No, it is warm in here, I say.

Maybe we'll take off our coat, he says.

Go right ahead, I say. A person has to be comfortable, I say.

That's true, he says, that is very, very true, he says.

But I see a little later that he is still wearing his coat.

My large parties are gone now and also the old couple. The place is emptying out.

By the time I serve the fat man his chops and baked potato, along with more bread and butter, he is the only one left.

I drop lots of sour cream onto his potato. I sprinkle bacon and chives over his sour cream. I bring him more bread and butter.

Is everything all right? I say.

Fine, he says, and he puffs. Excellent, thank you, he says, and puffs again.

Enjoy your dinner, I say. I raise the lid of his sugar bowl and look in. He nods and keeps looking at me until I move away.

I know now I was after something. But I don't know what.

How is old tub-of-guts doing? He's going to run your legs off, says Harriet. You know Harriet.

For dessert, I say to the fat man, there is the Green lantern Special, which is a pudding cake with sauce, or there is cheesecake of vanilla ice cream or pineapple sherbet.

We're not making you late, are we? he says, puffing and looking concerned.

Not at all, I say. Of course not, I say. Take your time, I say. I'll bring you more coffee while you make up your mind.

We'll be honest with you, he says. And he moves in the seat. We would like the Special, but we may have a dish of vanilla ice cream as well. With just a drop of chocolate syrup, if you please. We told you we were hungry, he says.

I go off to the kitchen to see after his dessert myself, and Rudy says, Harriet says you got a fat man from the circus out there. That true?

Rudy has his apron and hat off now, if you see what I mean.

Rudy, he is fat, I say, but that is not the whole story.

Rudy just laughs.

Sounds to me like she's sweet on fat-stuff, he says.

Better watch out, Rudy, says Joanne, who just that minute comes into the kitchen.

I'm getting jealous, Rudy says to Joanne.

I put the Special in front of the fat man and a big bowl of vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup to the side.

Thank you, he says.

You are very welcome, I say—and a feeling comes over me.

Believe it or not, he says, we have not always eaten like this.

Me, I eat and I eat and I can't gain, I say. I'd like to gain, I say.

No, he says. If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice.

Then he picks up his spoon and eats.

What else? Rita says, lighting one of my cigarettes and pulling her chair closer to the table. This story's getting interesting now, Rita says.

That's it. Nothing else. He eats his desserts, and then he leaves and then we go home, Rudy and me.

Some fatty, Rudy says, stretching like he does when he's tired. Then he just laughs

and goes back to watching the TV .

I put the water on to boil for tea and take a shower. I put my hand on my middle and wonder what would happen if I had children and one of them turned out to look like that, so fat.

I pour the water in the pot, arrange the cups, the sugar bowl, carton of half and half, and take the tray in to Rudy. As if he's been thinking about it, Rudy says, I knew a fat guy once, a couple of fat guys, really fat guys, when I was a kid. They were tubbies, my God. I don't remember their names. Fat, that's the only name this one kid had. We called him Fat, the kid who lived next door to me. He was a neighbor. The other kid came along later. His name was Wobbly. Everybody called him Wobbly except the teachers. Wobbly and Fat. Wish I had their pictures, Rudy says.

I can't think of anything to say, so we drink our tea and pretty soon I get up to go to bed. Rudy gets up too, turns off the TV, locks the front door, and begins his unbuttoning.

I get into bed and move clear over to the edge and lie there on my stomach. But right away, as soon as he turns off the light and gets into bed, Rudy begins. I turn on my back and relax some,, though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly fell I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all.

That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn't know what to make of it. I feel depressed. But I won't go into it with her. I've already told her too much.

She sits there waiting, her dainty fingers poking her hair.

*Waiting for what?* I'd like to know.

It is August.

My life is going to change. I feel it.

## Duets

*by Maia Samille Kingman*

Harmony glanced around the room making a last-minute appraisal. She had been coordinator of the local recital hall for almost a year now, and each performance went more and more smoothly—last minute remedies now down to a minimum. She enjoyed her job—enjoyed seeing individual pieces fall together into some sort of order, and besides, she knew from trial and error that she was much more comfortable behind the scenes than on the stage.

And Harmony had orchestrated tonight's show nearly perfectly. The small-town recital hall was full of people. Two local pianists were making a rare appearance together, playing and singing a selection of numbers that a composer from the area had written in the 1940's—mostly "show-tunes." This sense of community history and the coordination of two fine musicians had coaxed the locals out of their homes on this clammy March night.

The pianists walked out onto the stage as the lights dimmed. They were wearing their performance accouterment—tuxedos complete with slicked-back hair and "I'm-so-happy-to-be-here" smiles. But these two were genuine, and everyone knew it. They were performers through and through—it was what they did well, and it was what made them happy.

Harmony stood crowded to the back wall—she had had to bring out folding chairs right up until the performance began, but that was good. She squeezed them in around the edges of the room, and no one seemed to mind. And they seemed pleased as the first number began. Harmony was just tapping her toe to a song that was something about "loving to be seen with a girl like you," when she heard a rustling in the doorway—someone arriving just a couple of minutes late.

Harmony turned to the door. She knew she could squeeze in a few more chairs if she needed to, and she prepared to silently welcome the late-comers. It was a couple. She recognized them, they were well-known about the town. Both were music teachers—he a highly respected instructor at the college, and she organist for the church, giving lessons on the side. They were active in the community, promoting the local arts, sitting on committees, donating money, etc. They were quite a team, loving parents of five lovely children, each now successful in their own rights. They were, all of them, well liked and highly respected.

As Harmony moved to greet them, she could see that they had not yet seen her—they were bustling about in the embarrassment of being late. Even in the dim light of the hall she could see a halting in their manner—Harmony was surprised that she understood so well. They were facing one another, each with an accusatory look. She could hear hushed punctuation in their exchange, though she could not make out their words, and it was all so transparent. He was tall and magnificent—she, tiny and so elegant, both neat as pins. They lived together, worked together, played together, pulling it all off without a hitch in the public eye (we really must thank you for all that you have done—it was simply lovely, and you both are so very lucky!). Neither of them could hide their fetish for perfection. And tonight they were late (if only you hadn't taken so long with your hair! if only you had filled up the tank this morning! and you see that this could have been neatly avoided, don't you? and we'll talk about this later—and oh god, there's Mrs. Wilkins, smile, for heaven's sake!). Harmony smiled that she knew—it was really no great mystery, just a whisper of humanness.

She moved into the light and helped them with their coats. The performers had moved onto their second number now, a song about dancing near the moon-lit ocean. The late-comers protested as Harmony brought two more chairs out of the entry, but she insisted. Unobtrusively, she made them space, and returned to her sentinel along the wall, and watched them sit quietly down.

The music poured down from the stage, immersing all alike in its ebb and flow. They were part of the crowd now, Harmony thought, taken in by the whorl and eddy of the current of melody coming from the stage. They would still be upset with one another for some time, but for awhile, the anger would be suspended in the liquid distraction that had joined the two people on the stage for one moment in history; for this night they were something the same, brought together at a point just above the heads of the crowd, and filling the room with themselves, floating together there.

Such a simple thing, the late arrival, Harmony thought. No need for it to have caused a wave. But still, it made her smile, and she thought of the year that she had tried to sing blues tunes in a bar in the next town. She had sung about heartache, and had given it up because, in the end, it felt hollow, and because she herself had almost drowned. But she knew now, that major or minor, the songs were really equally as beautiful in the end.

## Rendering a Woman and a Squirrel by Maia Samille Kingman

It was like someone had taken a bucket of blood and splattered the room with it; it was everywhere. I had just gotten home—Paul wasn't home from work yet, and I walked in and turned on the lights same as every day, and there was this blood—oh god, it was awful, and all I could think was the children, oh my god the children.

Barbara had spent the day running errands for her children and for her husband. She was tired from staying up late the night before, cooking for Bobby's bake sale that was tomorrow. Maybe tonight I will rest a bit, she thought.

On her way home, Barbara noticed that at least it was a nice day, and it was pleasant to be out. She parked the car in the driveway, collected her things, walked up to the door, opened it, turned on the lights, and screamed.

The squirrel sat on the table, exhausted. It wasn't so much hurt as it was scared, and it wasn't so much scared as it was tired from running around the house in a frenzy, looking for a way out. The house had looked like such a pleasing and desirable environment—had the squirrel known how hostile it could be . . . ! If only it could get outside, where there were no sharp objects like glass lamps for it to trip up on and break. If only it could get free—up in a tree somewhere, if it could get up in a tree anymore, after cutting up its left paw the way it did.

The kids ran inside when they heard me yelling, and we all found the squirrel at the same time. They laughed so hard—a squirrel on the dining room table—they thought that was the funniest thing. I looked at them, and their faces were twisted with laughter, teeth exposed, red mocking eyes. Their laughs hurt my head, and I tried to catch my breath.

Barbara looked away from her children, who seemed strange to her, and she looked instead at the squirrel, who looked straight back at her. It was frozen, not sure of its options at the moment. Barbara knew the squirrel was scared, but when she looked at its eyes, she saw something she recognized there. She wasn't sure what it was.

She got back down on her hands and knees. She had gone through four buckets of bleach water already, and she wasn't even a quarter of the way done. She dipped her gloved hands into the cool water, grabbed the sponge, and wrung it out. Her hands hurt from the repetitive motion, but she had to get it now, or the blood would never come clean from her home, which looked so different to her. She worked there, on all fours, exhausted—almost delirious—the sound of screams and laughter filling her head, blood and blood and blood on her hands, arms, legs, face. She scrubbed.

Paul walked into the living room on his way to the kitchen for the evening paper. The kids had filled him in on the excitement, and Paul had gotten a few good chuckles out of the story. He had tried to joke with Barbara about it, but she had been unresponsive—well, that was typical. She didn't seem to have much of a sense of humor lately. On his way in, Paul saw her on her knees, rubbing her wrist. He stopped in the doorway, hidden from her view, just looking at her. He squinched up his eyes and tilted his head. He was thinking that, in the light of the window, and in that position, his wife almost looked like a squirrel. He squinched up his eyes a bit more to envision a nut in her mouth. Paul thought this was funny. Maybe he would call her *squirrley* as a joke. He chuckled to himself, and walked into the living room, brushing past his wife on his way to retrieve his paper.

## Las Papas by Julio Ortega

He turned on the faucet of the kitchen sink and washed off the knife. As he felt the splashing water, he looked up through the front window and saw the September wind shaking the tender shoots of the trees on his street, the first hint of fall.

He quickly washed the potatoes one by one. Although their coloring was light and serene, they were large and heavy. When he started to peel them, slowly, using the knife precisely and carefully, the child came into the kitchen.

"What are you going to cook?" he asked. He stood there waiting for an answer.

"Chicken cacciatore," the man answered but the child didn't believe him. He was only six, but he seemed capable of objectively discerning between one chicken recipe and another.

"Wait and see," he promised.

"Is it going to have onions in it?" asked the child.

"Very few," he said.

The child left unconvinced.

He finished peeling the potatoes and started to slice them. Through the window he saw the growing brightness of midday. That strong light seemed to paralyze the brilliant foliage on the trees. The inside of the potatoes had the same clean whiteness, and the knife penetrated it, as if slicing through soft clay.

Then he rinsed the onions and cut into them, chopping them up. He glanced at the recipe again and looked for seasonings in the pantry. The child came back in.

"Chicken is really boring," the child said, almost in protest.

"Not this recipe," he said. "It'll be great. You'll see."

"Put a lot of stuff in it," the child recommended.

"It's going to have oregano, pepper, and even some sugar," he said.

The child smiled approvingly.

He dried the potato slices. The pulp was crisp, almost too white, more like an apple, perhaps. Where did these potatoes come from? Wyoming or Idaho, probably. The potatoes from his country, on the other hand, were grittier, with a heavy flavor of the land. There were dark ones, almost royal purple like fruit, and delicate yellow ones, like the yolk of an egg. They say there used to be more than a thousand varieties of potato. Many of them have disappeared forever.

The ones that were lost, had they been less firmly rooted in the soil? Were they more delicate varieties? Maybe they disappeared when control of the cultivated lands was deteriorating. Some people say, and it's probably true, that the loss of even one domesticated plant makes the world a little poorer, as does the destruction of a work of art in a city plundered by invaders. If a history of the lost varieties were written it might prove that no one would ever have gone hungry.

Boiled, baked, fried, or stewed: the ways of cooking potatoes were a long story in themselves. He remembered what his mother had told him as a child: at harvest time, the largest potatoes would be roasted for everybody, and in the fire, they would open up—just like flowers. That potato was probably one of the lost varieties, the kind that turned into flowers in the flames.

Are potatoes harvested at night in the moonlight? He was surprised how little he knew about something that came from his own country. As he thought about it, he believed *harvest* wasn't even the correct term. *Gathering? Digging?* What do you call this harvest from under the earth?

For a long time he had avoided eating them. Even their name seemed unpleasant to him, *papas*. A sign of the provinces, on more shred of evidence of the meager resources,

of underdevelopment—a potato lacked protein and was loaded with carbohydrates. French-fried potatoes seemed more tolerable to him: they were, somehow, in a more neutralized condition.

At first, when he began to care for the child all by himself, he tried to simplify the ordeal of meals by going out to the corner restaurant. But he soon found that if he tried to cook something it passed the time, and he also amused himself with the child's curiosity.

He picked up the cut slices. There wasn't much more to discover in them. It wasn't necessary to expect anything more of them than the density they already possessed, a crude cleanliness that was the earth's flavor. But that same sense transformed them right there in his hands, a secret flowering, uncovered by him in the kitchen. It was as if he discovered one of the lost varieties of the Andean potato: the one that belonged to him, wondering, at noon.

When the chicken began to fry in the skillet, the boy returned, attracted by its aroma. The man was in the midst of making the salad.

"Where's this food come from?" the child asked, realizing it was a different recipe.

"Peru," he replied.

"Not Italy?" said the child, surprised.

"I'm cooking another recipe now," he explained. "Potatoes come from Peru. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, but I forgot it."

"They're really good, and there are all kinds and flavors. Remember mangoes? You really used to like them when we went to see you grandparents."

"I don't remember them either. I only remember the lion in the zoo."

"You don't remember the tree in Olivar Park?"

"Uh-huh. I remember that."

"We're going back there next summer, to visit the whole family."

"What if there's an earthquake?"

The boy went for his Spanish reader and sat down at the kitchen table. He read the resonant names out loud, names that were also like an unfinished history, and the man had to go over to him every one in a while to help explain one thing or another.

He tasted the sauce for the amount of salt, then added a bit of tarragon, whose intense perfume was delightful, and a bit of marjoram, a sweeter aroma.

He noticed how, outside, the light trapped by a tree slipped out from the blackened greenness of the leaves, now spilling onto the grass on the hill where their apartment house stood. The grass, all lit up, became an oblique field, a slope of tame fire seen from the window.

He looked at the child, stuck on a page in his book; he looked at the calm, repeated blue of the sky; and he looked at the leaves of lettuce in his hands, leaves that crackled as they broke off and opened up like tender shoots, beside the faucet of running water.

As if it suddenly came back to him, he understood that he must have been six or seven when his father, probably forty years old, as he was now, used to cook at home on Sundays. His father was always in a good mood as he cooked, boasting beforehand about how good the Chinese recipes were that he had learned in a remote hacienda in Peru. Maybe his father had made these meals for him, in this always incomplete past, to celebrate the meeting of father and son.

Unfamiliar anxiety, like a question without a subject, grew in him as he understood that he had never properly acknowledged his father's gesture; he hadn't even understood it. Actually, he had rejected his father's cooking one time, saying that it was too spicy. He must have been about fifteen then, a recent convert devoutly practicing the religion of natural foods, when he left the table with the plate of fish in his hands. He went out to the kitchen to turn on the faucet and quickly washed away the flesh boiled in soy sauce and ginger. His mother came to the kitchen and scolded him for what he had just done, a seemingly harmless act, but from then on an irreparable one. He returned to the table in silence, sullen, but his father didn't appear to be offended. Or did he suspect that one day

his son's meal would be refused by his own son when he served it?

The emotion could still wound him, but it could also make him laugh. There was a kind of irony in this repeating to a large extent his father's gestures as he concocted an unusual flavor in the kitchen. However, like a sigh that only acquires some meaning by turning upon itself, he discovered a symmetry in the repetitions, a symmetry that revealed the agony of emotions not easily understood.

Just like animals that feed their young, we feed ourselves with a promise that food will taste good, he said to himself. We prepare a recipe with painstaking detail so that our children will recognize us in a complete history of flavor.

He must have muttered the our loud because the child looked up.

"What?" he said, "Italian?"

"Peruvian," he corrected. "With a taste of the mountains, a mixture of Indian, Chinese, and Spanish."

The child laughed, as if he'd heard a private joke in the sound of the words.

"When we go to Lima, I'll take you around to the restaurants," he promised.

The child broke into laughter again.

"It tastes good," said the child.

"It tastes better than yesterday's" the man said.

He poured some orange juice. The boy kneeled in the chair and ate a bit of everything. He ate more out of curiosity than appetite.

He felt once again that brief defenselessness that accompanies the act of eating one's own cooking. Behind that flavor, he knew, lurked the raw materials, the separate foods cooked to render them neutral, a secret known only to the cook, who combined ingredients and proportions until something different was presented to eyes and mouth. This culinary act could be an adventure, a hunting foray. And the pleasure of creating a transformation must be shared, a kind of brief festival as the eaters decipher the flavors, knowing that an illusion has taken place.

Later, he looked for a potato in the pantry and he held it up against the unfiltered light in the window. It was large, and it fit perfectly in his barely closed hand. He was not surprised that the misshapen form of this swollen tuber adapted to the contour of his hand; he knew the potato adapted to different lands, true to its own internal form, as if it occupied stolen space. The entire history of his people was here, he said to himself, surviving in a territory overrun and pillaged several times, growing in marginal spaces, under siege and waiting.

He left the apartment, went down the stairs and over to the tree on the hillock. It was a perfect day, as if the entire history of daytime were before him. The grass was ablaze, standing for all the grass he had ever seen. With both hands, he dug, and the earth opened up to him, cold. He placed the potato there, and he covered it up quickly. Feeling slightly embarrassed, he looked around. He went back up the stairs, wiping his hands, almost running.

The boy was standing at the balcony, waiting for him; he had seen it all.

"A tree's going to grow there!" said the boy, alarmed.

"No," he said soothingly, "potatoes aren't trees. If it grows, it sill grow under the ground."

The child didn't seem to understand everything, but then suddenly he laughed.

"Nobody will even know it's there," he said, excited by such complicity with his father.

*Translated by Regina Harrison*

**There's a Man in the Habit of Hitting Me on the  
Head with an Umbrella**  
*by Fernando Sorrentino*

There's a man in the habit of hitting me on the head with an umbrella. It is five years to the day since he began hitting me on the head with his umbrella. At first I couldn't stand it; now I've grown accustomed to it.

I don't know his name. I know he's an ordinary man, with a plain suit, graying at the temples, and a nondescript face. I met him one sultry morning five years ago. I was sitting peacefully on a bench in Palermo Park, reading the newspaper in the shade of a tree. All of a sudden I felt something touch my head. It was this same man who now, as I write, automatically and impassively keeps striking me blows with his umbrella.

That first time I turned around full of indignation (I become terribly annoyed when I'm bothered while reading the paper); he went right on, calmly hitting me. I asked him if he were mad. He seemed not to hear me. I then threatened to call a policeman. Completely unruffled, he went on with what he was doing. After a few moments of hesitation—and seeing he was not about to back down—I stood up and gave him a terrific punch in the face. No doubt he is a weak man: I know that despite the force generated by my rage I do not hit all that hard. Still, breathing a tiny moan—the man fell to the ground. At once, making what seemed to be a great effort, he got up and again began hitting me over the head with the umbrella. His nose was bleeding, and I don't know why but at that moment I felt sorry for him, and my conscience troubled me for having struck him that way. Because, after all, the man was not hitting me very hard; he was really striking me quite soft and completely painless blows. Of course, such blows are terribly annoying. Everyone knows that when a fly settles on a person's forehead a person feels no pain; he feels annoyed. Well, that umbrella was a huge fly which, at regular intervals, kept settling on my head. Or, to be more precise, a fly the size of a bat.

At any rate, I could not stand that bat. Convinced that I was in the presence of lunatic, I tried to get away. But the man followed me, in silence, without once letting up his blows. At this juncture, I began running (I may as well point out right here that there are few people as fast as I am). He set out after me, trying without luck to get in a whack or two. The man was gasping and gasping and panting so hard I thought if I kept him running like that my tormentor might sink dead on the spot.

For that reason I slowed to a walk. I looked at him. He face registered neither gratitude no reproach. He just kept hitting me over the head with his umbrella. I thought of making my way to a police station and saying, "Officer, the man is hitting me over the head with an umbrella." It would have been unprecedented. The policeman would have stared at me suspiciously, asked for my papers, and begun questioning me with embarrassing questions. Probably he would have ended up arresting me.

I thought I'd best go home. I got onto the Number 67 bus. Not once letting up with his umbrella, the man got on behind me. I took the first seat. He stationed himself beside me, holding on to the strap with his left hand while with his right he kept swinging at me with his umbrella, implacable. The passengers began to exchange shy smiles. The driver was watching us in his mirror. Little by little, a fit of laughter, a growing convulsion, seized all the other riders. I was on fire with shame. My persecutor, completely unaffected by the uproar, went on hitting me.

I got off—we got off—at the Puente Pacifico. We continued on down Santa Fe Avenue. Everyone foolishly turned around to stare at us. I felt like saying to them, "What are you staring at, you idiots? Haven't you ever seen anyone whacking a man on the head with an umbrella before?" But it also occurred to me that they probably hadn't. Five or six kids began to follow us, shouting like a pack of wild Indians.

But I had a plan. Arriving home, I tried slamming the door in his face. I didn't manage it. With a firm hand—anticipating me—he grabbed the handle, there was a momentary struggle, and he entered with me.

Since then, he has continued hitting me on the head with his umbrella. As far as I know,

he has never slept or had a bite to eat. All he does is hit me. He accompanies me in all my acts—even the most intimate ones. I remember, in the beginning, that the blows kept me from sleeping; I now believe it would be impossible to sleep without them.

Nevertheless, our relations have not always been good. Countless times, in all possible tones, I have asked him for an explanation. It's never been any use; in his quiet was he has gone on whacking me over the head with the umbrella. On several occasions, I have dealt him punches, kicks, and—God help me!—even umbrella blows. He took these things meekly, as though they were all in a day's work. And this is exactly what is scariest about him: his quiet determination, his absence of hatred. In short, his inner conviction of carrying out a secret and superior mission.

Despite his apparent lack of physiological needs, I know when I hit him he feels the pain, I know he's weak, I know he's mortal. I also know a single shot would free me of him. What I don't know is whether when we're both dead he will go on hitting me on the head with his umbrella. Neither do I know whether the shot ought to be aimed at him or me. In any case, this reasoning is pointless. I know full well I wouldn't dare kill either him or myself.

On the other hand, it recently occurred to me that I could not live without his blows. More and more frequently now I have a horrible premonition. I am distressed—deeply distressed—to think that perhaps when I most need him, this man will go away and I will no longer feel those soft blows of his umbrella that help me sleep so soundly.

*Translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni  
and Patricia Davidson Cran*

## **Listing of Slides**

1. *It Sure Looks Good!* influenced by The School
2. *The Kiss* influenced by The School
3. *Ode to Mary Cassatt* influenced by Fat
4. *Digging in the Dirt* or *A Reflection on the State of Being* influenced by Fat
5. *Box I* influenced by Duets
6. *Box II* influenced by Duets
7. *Still Dressing up in Momma's Clothes* influenced by Rendering a Woman and a Squirrel
8. *Catching Jennifer in my Life* influenced by Las Papas
9. *To Restore my Life: My Roommate and Pie* influenced by Las Papas
10. *The Angel on my Shoulder Certainly Hurts my Head* influenced by There's a Man in the Habit of Hitting me on the Head with an Umbrella