

Island Groves, Saffron Tunics · *Anne Halley*

LORI OPENED THE DOOR, spread her arms to welcome us. From collarbone to the lobes of her ears, tip of chin, her neck was encased in a thick white orthopedic collar. “No, not broken—strained. Putting in the damned light fixture. Praying, God, don’t let me drop it. Something had to give.”

I kissed her carefully. Thought, a premature housewarming. The collar gave her queer intensity, a charge. A victim’s sexual aura, I wondered. Confinement?

“Listen,” Esther said, “I’m sorry it hurts. But you know about heads on platters? It’s not supposed to be yours.”

“I thought, more Alice, you know, Through the Looking Glass. She gets this stretched neck, remember? Why I wore the dress—”

Inside we met Arnold. An excessively thin, concentrated man: skin stretched tight over heavy bones: a tall skull, long lips that tucked in at the corners. So tall he’d dominate even were he to sit down, but didn’t—remained standing. Leaned against Lori’s antique marble mantle while she went to get him a drink. Older friends, we would find our own, informally. But Arnold impressed me: so pared-down, square-shouldered, I might have expected him in uniform in another country: a staff-officer, at once careless and annoyed: gloves to flick the dust from boot tops. The sense of incongruity I got from him startled me, and I felt for a moment the touch of faintness that can mean trouble. I willed it away. A tall man who wore a loose slightly frayed jersey. The rest of us, too, seemed then to mark nothing worse than contemporaneity. I mean, confusion.

Once past the shock of the collar, I deplored Lori’s get-up, in spite of the pretty allusion to Alice. My old friend’s long stride and flat planes of back and thigh should have put her in Arnold’s sweater and cords instead of winged pinafore. I knew the spots she had foampadded and gilded and had to judge that job well done. I knew, likewise, Ross—printer’s supplies, music lover, collector of scores, bindings—host in the half-renovated brownstone. He had leather in likely and unlikely places on his Norfolk tweed, as if he meant to be off a-huntin’.

Esther and I, who had driven in from Connecticut, were peculiar ourselves in caftan, and sensible shoes and bouclée, respectively. Nearly we had quarrelled about it. A young boy, deferentially with and about Arnold, wore a modish suit, vest and tie, to set off coal-black rabbinical curls that fell to the collar. “Filmmakers,” Lori had said near my ear. Then aloud, “*The* filmmakers.” Another couple, parents of young children and chairpersons of the block association, wore identical t-shirts, printed to represent starched shirtfronts and tuxedos, above French jeans.

Early before lunch when I lifted my lavender knit, old standby, from its bag in the closet, Esther had protested. "Dean's tea! I thought we got rid of that number." And I said, "No. Yes of course. With mother's amethysts. Why should you think that?" Wished I had sounded less sharp. Esther is young enough to have described herself in recent years as in *The Movement*. For her that term carried none of the ominous sound it must have for a woman of my age, out of Berlin. Growing up, I can't deny, often dazzled, taken in, by *The Movement*. There was a year I cried, wanted desperately to be allowed the neckerchief, to attend meetings. Now Esther attends more meetings with more brilliantly plumaged young people than I could have dreamed of in my most optimistic ten-year-old days: strange moments when her eyes, the poise of her head, her too-long tangles of dark hair, as she rises—expertly cradling a microphone in her hand—and begins to speak, return me to a time I hardly knew: A Wandervogel Spring, smocks and ribbons to flutter under chivying sunlight, new leaves, my young mother's guitar strumming. The youth before—well—yes. We have telephone numbers for every crisis stacked and pinned messily around the hall phone. I accept the litter, although it offends and saddens me. I straighten lists of names, chewed-looking mimeographs, as I pass, continue to use a single leather-bound notebook. Yet Esther, with her unsorted mass of sisters and intimates and world-wide loves, says she hates a party like Lori's. Prefers to think that we came together, lone kindred spirits, from an otherwise hostile world. Or wants me to feel that. My affection for my former student and friend, Lori, is, in Esther's view, sentimental self-indulgence. And pointing out contradictions is no use: "Look how she treated you: an exploiter!"

So I kept still about caftan and sandals, slave chains, until we were well on the Parkway. A mild generality: that it might be difficult these days to tell who wore the fancy-dress. Esther's answer was predictably emotional, if off the point. "Watch that bastard on your right! You'll get us killed, Magda!" She believes, charmingly, that only Americans of a certain youthfulness are adequate on the highways.

Esther behaved well. She admired the sanded floors, exclaimed over walls moved, and windows put in, the beginnings of a terrace among backyard weeds. Asked intelligently about day-care, ethnography, neighborhood trash-collections. What provisions for the aged, the gay, the maddened and the teen-aged, what crisis-centers, community fairs, block dances? She took only grape-fruit juice, which made Lori give her a hard look. I resolved to take care and nurse my scotch; Lori seemed pretty well swozzled, or on the way: she moved her elbows aggressively, pushing—pushing away—where there seemed nothing to push. She stood with me. Could it be the collar that made her eyes pop, cheeks pale? She laughed and again I blamed the collar for making me hear a sound like tearing across the fibers of closely-woven linen. Domestic, destroying. "Guess, Madge—guess why."

"Not a strained muscle?"

"The house, the mess—why I'm steaming paper upstairs—guess why?"

"You know how," I said. "Unlike the rest of us?"

"He can walk to work: would you believe an office in Brooklyn! So—" she laughed the same ripping sound, pitched higher. "So it suits us both—he tells me. . . ."

I asked her to sit, to tell me, but she rowed away, leaving me the image of an angry smile. Made a fuss of filling the fresh glass for Arnold just when the boy seemed to have been sent on the same errand. They collided: brown sherry spilled over Lori's brave starched ruffles. They both moved to Arnold: one carrying a glass, the other a tray.

Arnold mused at the mantle and did not notice Lori near his elbow; then, finally, turned to accept the glass, her homage, the concentrated attention of the group and, yes, a bit of pickled herring, and Lori's Ross drew me away. Steered me toward the potted plants: a greenhouse would soon fit the south window. Asked, could I picture it—went on lower—he was troubled, needed advice. Certainly. The greenhouse? I thought, more likely sympathy. Ross had grown fat. And Lori's look of energizing confined rage could lead to migraine or murder. Ross and I knew more about each other than we could be sure of: once past introductory matter I would be honest. I hadn't changed my mind.

"Get divorced. You're my age—too old—"

I forgot how fatuous a man in his position will be. Smug. If Lori hadn't thought so?

"Or go back to Annette and your boys. Then rebuild houses."

He patted my arm, squeezed it affectionately at how wrong I was. I was on the wrong track. "Lori needs the house badly." He said, "The marriage thing—just not operative. She's liberated—hates marriage—but tension, witness the collar—no real organic cause, of course. She can't let herself enjoy things. Even—no, she's changed in the most basic ways: unhappy in herself—"

I asked where the money for the house had come from. I suspected that Lori's salary, her small inheritance, savings, supported them both in this stylish venture. His boys at Dalton and Swarthmore, poor lonely Annette in her third year of analysis. Poor Ross too upright to leave them to the courts' tenderer mercies. Poor Lori. Ross said she had job troubles—the usual. Fighting too hard to keep her place: left lacerated at the end of each day. Prettier younger women every September—hordes of them with better training. "Why she needs the house so much—" said sagely. "But talk to her: she should make a change. She trusts you."

I didn't ask what he intended me to tell Lori. Woman-talk, vague comforts, a bit of mothering. Or to come back to her dissertation? Was he beginning negotiations by which he thought I'd work her back into the department, take

her off his hands, who had helped her leave a minor mess—the middle of the semester, twenty abandoned freshmen—on mine before? Years we had all known of each other, when Lori came—unexpected windfall, energy—to our seminars straight from their Nantucket cottage. Still nearly unmarked, because it took several such summers. A strong tanned brightly ignorant *au paire* from Upstate—enchanted by record collection and books and parents who tooted recorders in concert with their children. Nature among shells and sand-pipers: nurture at cocktails, the foreign movie. Next, predictably in love with Daddy, at last seduceable. Ross's wife could never have understood him—not in fifteen years. None of us had counted on Lori's strength of will and delusion; surely not this fat man who now reaped its rewards, his own fecklessness. I felt fatigue: bored with surrogate roles, triangles. I tried to turn—glad to be aware of my need and, oh, grateful to be able to fill it—looking for Esther. Her ideologically breathless voice had been going on at our backs, vying with Arnold's deeper measured rumblings, Lori's screeches.

I said—but shouldn't have—"Let your wife comfort you both"—because he held my sleeve, wouldn't let me go.

"That's not funny Madge—it really isn't. Don't you think I've tried, been to see her? Don't I want to be humane, civilized—do what's best for all of us? But Lori said something—Annette took offense—Hell, I might as well tell you: we went last week to try to work out the money. The house, bills—don't think it's easy! Lori's wearing that bandage because Annette grabbed her by the hair—snapped her neck back and forth—Christ, they went rolling down the hallway: I couldn't believe my eyes—a foul scene! Annette's pretty bruised too—I tell you, they threw me—I'm dithery, wrung-out. And baffled—two furies—"

"Don't tell me—" I thought I wanted no part in it: not comforter, not fury.

Arnold had made the decision to sit in a large leather chair: the one Ross might doze in over *The Goldberg Variations*, come evening. Arnold's long, strong-fingered hands moved as if they had been used to trailing wisps, fluttery patterns of smoky visible air. Hungry lips of a smoker, but he refused. Across from him sat the block-persons, one each side of the youngest man. His pearl-grey vest and smooth tapered shoulders carried on silent discussion with their raucous shirtfronts. It struck me that the trio might be seen as an emblem of birth: the child's prerogative to be the real thing. Or assume that appearance. My attention went to the young women, naturally. They sat on the floor—most of Lori's chairs were in process, desolated, half-stripped. So Esther and Lori sat at Arnold's large feet and sat side by side, a pretty picture. Lori, calm now, her legs drawn up, arms crossed about her knees: her head tilted, estranged, in the ambiguous collar of thick white stuff. Their skirts were gathered gracefully, folded about their knees. I drank, now, quickly, to get the taste of

Ross rinsed out of me, and it seemed to me that Lori's gingham, its smirched front hidden, could remind us of childhood servitude, allude as well to scullery, all backstairs forms of the serving life that she—so unfree—rejected; Esther's sun-yellow caftan, her copper bangles and chains, become the sign of the other seclusion: pillowed tasselled retreats, service performed under canopy, baldachin. Her nearly bare feet—I tried to slow my visions, regain objectivity. Two grown women, no symbols, a man or two, a party: nothing to it. Ross with his vanity, his self-serving, had muddled me.

Esther speaking—"A put-down. Visual, non-conceptual values—bullshit. Everytime they use, say, a woman's body, the use has content, meaning. You reify, call it new perception—"

I would have liked her to stand, mark her point actively. And—"No," Arnold answered her, "you've got the wrong man, dear. But right, say, women. Let's think about them—think of her. Should we—" He glanced past Esther's open upturned face. "Should we, Lori?"

She shrugged, twisted a ruffle. "Be my guest."

Not yet. The wife on the couch seized the moment. She rose, bent to Lori; her husband followed. They had a sitter. Time to split, get home, no help for it. Everyone stood jumbled, mumbled: I thought the patterns broke. Esther and Lori stood shaking their hair, their skirts—waved hands limp at the wrists—leaned, drooping against each other—laughed in unison. "Not like that," Esther said. "Relax, just let go: feel dissolution, feel the flowing. Come I'll show you—" She half-fell to the floor: sank limp and loose before she caught herself. "I'll teach you how to fall—dissolve boneless."

"Bitchy," I heard the boy breathe. "Oh beautiful."

Had they made a film of women?

"Marriage," the boy told me. "So mostly the woman as it turned out. Her thing. And harrowing. We're still exhausted. It may never be released."

"We'll see it soon, I hope," Ross said, and I, would he tell about it?

He would. He told at length.

"—just kept the camera on them—months of it—total immersion: they went in and out of the house, did their bits—loved, quarreled, ate, tried to be people, you know? To think, maybe read the paper, buy something and bring it home, create a little space, shelter together—whatever people do? It all collapsed under scrutiny—none of us had expected—and no comment, just the camera—like silent judgement. Maybe that third eye makes you judge, objectify—maybe it forced them to grow? And ugly in the process—pure hell for sure.

"By the time we're finished the guy's on a third girl friend—he's remarrying, doing better, next month. But the wife, the woman—that's still tough on Arnold—she turned weird, fantastic: can't let go, can't stop the movie—like she fell for the camera, for him—for both together. She pursues him. Uncanny transference: she calls him all hours: wants him to film her suicide for Christ's sake! Begs him.

"And goddammit, it's tempting, you know: she's so crazy, so expressive by now—different every time she shows up—no comparison to when we started."

"Aren't you telling us a dream?"

He allowed the experience might have that quality. "But the line's thin—fantasies, the real—they interpenetrate. Maybe that's the point? Today just before we started the phone rang and when I picked it up I heard breathing. Wrong number, you say? A crank? Maybe. I say, get help professionally—we'll get back to you, have a talk, anything—but this voice—her's disguised—lets out a string of words I couldn't even repeat to you. Down the block I swear I saw her in a phone booth. Way the hell from Jersey and no car of her own but there she was—I'd know that back, the skull, shoulders, anywhere. I didn't tell Arnie—he's so fuckin unpredictable. Just hoped she was calling her shrink. But part of me wanted to go back, get the camera and go for broke: you know, the trip—give her what she's begging for."

"Young? A good-looking girl?" Ross wondered sorrowfully.

The boy laughed. "Arn's not into that—just a short-legged type—the real thing. Breasts, equipment, ass, lungs, tear ducts. To see that become expressive."

"Maybe the police?"

I wondered what Arnold saw, what he had been about to tell Esther and Lori about women. Times I had rested at the feet of men and looked up, questioning. A student of my nature, not their's, but one who aspired at least to growth. Where would I have found it if not in the other's cooler, clear appraising? *Ex cathedra*, for the recording student. Those were other times, another language, a brutal rhetoric gone underground in that other country too. Why should I be reminded?

One had proclaimed the band of comrades whose bond propels them into their future: we share intimations, illimitable distances. We strive together, are called to the heroic, while at the hearth, where woman has her way, is only comfort, limitation. We long for the farthest reaches, the vast unknown: revolution, our masculine desire. Woman holds us back: our impediment; her hopes for fixed dwelling, comforts, happiness, weigh us down and block our progress.

Another had lifted me from the floor, held me between his knees. He told me my longing was for the hand grinding down, that weight on my neck. Down and down. He whispered of descents into caves, the swampy places where fanged unknown beings lurk, of swords and scalpels, Darling. Called that lovemaking.

And the hunters—their grey tunics as stubbled, rough-wrinkled as their faces; their little red eyes slitted, mean with drink and sleeplessness and suffering; that too was a film, a long slow sweeping wide-angled shot the lens in my eye, staring, made lidless by fear, takes in and records. They stagger singing and cursing through cellars and outbuildings at the hour when shots

and explosions cease and everything not yet fallen must wait. Wait for food or death or someone's punishment, for peace, for whatever happens next. When the now is nothing—only between.

Women wait and in the film I see (and did my action shape it?) the girl stands far back against the cobwebbed sweating stone wall of the farthest coalbin. Her mother has told her to smear her face with dust and cobwebs, pushed her out, away, down the stairs—almost falling—to hide. She has pushed her fists to her mouth in a gesture that no one needed to teach her. Down and down.

Much later you gathered patiently the beads that scattered when the cord gave way, crawled through grit and damp—there's one hard and smooth under my bare knee, one gleams wet in a corner: these can be salvaged. Can be strung again, restrung. Yes, close to the ground is sweet woman: better be built for falling. Lie docile, squirrel, quick blanketed rodent. She dreams, if she does, of caves and dark passages—AIIIEEEE—blood smears the lips. Not her own. Have you found your teeth there, Sweetie? Kali Ma, the four-armed. The flipping spinning images of terror—are they Kali's? The skull-trimmed black sleeves, ranks drawn up under streaming bloodred banners, were not called in her name; what the marching columns left behind barbed wire and in the sheds and cellars of chance, was not her service. Yet they go about the work as if she, whom they fear as they invent—require—her, will be held in check: a shred of brown-stained apron, clod of earth and torn necklace, dumb in the rubble. She rises. I met her in myself and had learned enough. I feared her. One of her hands holds a sword; the second holds the severed head of the giant; with the other two hands she encourages her worshippers. Her earrings are two corpses and she wears a necklace of human skulls. Her tongue hangs out: her eyes are red with drunkenness. Face and bosom polluted with blood, the goddess stands, one foot on the leg and the other on the chest of Siva.

When I came out of it—or began to—I was dizzy, ashamed to have so lost myself. Reeled out of the present and lost my focus and bearings. These states when sensations, old images, the speeding race of pictures, outrun reason and the simple present scene, come oftener now and defy my ordering. Defied me. The room, the small group standing near the door, the round table with decanter, glasses, glowing blue, streaked gold, under the Tiffany light, had not changed during my absence. I touched my neck—the amethysts secure on their silken line—felt for my handbag: reassured myself the absence had been short. Although I seemed to feel a subtle watchfulness from somewhere: tonight, if Lori paced her unfinished house, if she moaned and pounded her temples with her fists and twisted against the collar that held her, while Esther might cry out in her childish sleep, wouldn't Arnold—wouldn't his handsome plausible helper, that boy—wouldn't Ross the fat and lazy Daddy, feel in their dreams or passing like shadow behind the curtains, the spirit of Kali Ma and waken,

surprised by their morning's stiff erect readiness for combat and rise, determined once more to feel justified, to defend themselves? I could not know their fear, but I fear where mine will take me one day and I pray to the benigner goddesses that I may not be left to ride it out alone—an aging, crazed woman.

I would have liked now to pretend greater age, a mimic safety: to be led out taking small uncertain steps and resting on Esther's arm. She was not beside me but carrying on lively whispered conversation with Lori. I followed my other impulse: I needed to question Arnold. I thought I needed to face the Warlord in disguise whose physical presence had so agitated me. Reason said I must try for my own sake to see him as he was, let him speak for himself. Demystify—I nearly laughed aloud then—to begin at this late date to use Esther's jargon. But what was it he had been about to say of women?

He bent his large head, smiled, took my hand and held it—longer than I wished. But the eyes sliding past mine; I had not misjudged him.

"Poetry—I remembered some poetry. Specifically—" and here he stopped, smiled again as if we had long known each other, as long as Ross and I, no, long as longer, others—"island groves, saffron tunics, a breakfast of roasted nuts," he murmured. "Ah—I know you know it—"

"Only in translation," I thought to say of Sappho. May Love forgive me.

"We'll get a card for your screening?" was Ross to Arnold.

"Don't forget—" Lori to Esther.

"Just fall—let go— the way I showed you." Esther to Lori.

And already on the steps, the sidewalk, I saw Arnold hold them both for another moment. An arm about Esther, the other hand reaching through the straight spreading fall of Alice-hair and around—spreading—on Lori's high white collar. Measuring or soothing? He spoke earnestly. From where I stood I could not tell to which of them more earnestly, or if he spoke to both of them at once. They were still poised on the narrow stoop in the doorway opened on an air of festive light and intimacies behind them, when someone brushed past me on the street—a woman who might have come from a neighboring house or been walking along the quiet tree-lined block. I had had no sense of anyone's approach. She stopped and stood at the bottom of the steps some yards from where I waited; she put down on either side a rumpled bulging shopping bag on which I read the legend, Safeway. She threw back her head, looked up, asking something I could not catch. I saw the smudge of half-profile, a cheekbone muffled by the ugly net scarf she had tied under her chin. She stood droopshouldered with feet set apart—planted, a passive suppliant. The back of the light coat she wore seemed to me curiously discolored: starting at the shoulderblades and spreading downward, a white-edged irregular water-streaking mottled with darker patches of dirt, as if she had been lying on wet ground.

It seemed to me she stood a long time while the others listened from above; finally I saw Lori make one of her large jagged motions and point away in the direction she had come. Arnold too was speaking. The woman bent, then, towards the bag on her right and I caught my breath—Arnold's young friend pushed past the others. I saw him jump down the steps; I thought he fairly leaped towards the woman. Together he and the stranger stood—both reaching for something; at last she held a piece of paper out to him and he too motioned: he touched her shoulder, gave her a small push and spoke in a voice low and rushed enough to seem purposeful and urgent.

Then the woman had picked up her bags and begun to trudge back the way she had travelled before. As I watched her, swaying on uncomfortable run-over heels, she turned, dropped the bags once more. Our eyes met in a look of wide-open blankness. I thought she might be about to call, but the face—neither young nor old—which seemed to me twitching, working, on the point of utterance, remained silent as she raised an arm. An obscenity? A wave goodbye? Or a fist shaken? One after the other and all together. I could not interpret quickly enough to satisfy my fear—the same fear that had kept me rooted to the spot I stood in as she passed. None of the others were watching as she turned away, walked slowly on.

Esther got into the driver's seat, held out her hand for the keys, in early darkness. Businesslike, she pushed the weight of hair from neck and shoulders, pulled her trailing skirt up over her knees. She maintains we need our wits about us, ought never to drink at parties.

Was she sure of the way? She nodded, don't worry.

Our comedy about the driving, the drink, is bitter earnest. Summers in her old Mustang she's barefoot and half-naked, racing too fast along the shore road. A banal configuration, sunstreaked hair, warm brown skin, the machine of rusted clanging metal: part of the normative landscape that no longer amazes. I expect its banal denouement in obligatory sirens, uniformed pursuers, try to keep my heart from foreseeing the nightmare worst.

That no alcohol feeds those *highs* can't dispel my worry.

To drive in those sandals? Not tie back her hair? Take Flatbush Avenue, the first main intersection, the Expressway. I had all that to say. Had we locked the doors?

She touched my shoulder. "Don't *worry*."

A child of her culture, she drives unreflectively, playfully, as rural children may have mounted unsaddled ponies to ride to water. Nausicaa of Scheria stood in her laundry-cart; white mules pulled her to the river for the washing and ball play. For Odysseus risen.

Nausicaa pouts and frowns, speaks demotic. "Traffic'll be against us," she said. "What's bugging you?"

"Your seatbelt, for one. Your hair will —"

"Like Isadora's scarf? Be the end of me?" She was laughing.

And started up, hair flying, the belt still unbuckled.

Neither the king's obedient daughter nor the pseudo-Greek. Would I not rather watch Anactoria/ moving in her lovely way/ and see her face, flashing radiant/ than all the forces of Lydian chariots/ and their infantry in full display of arms? Oh, if I could.

"The end of both of us then."

That her old car fills up with coffee containers and styrofoam boxes, that soda cans roll from under the seat to meld with ballpoints and xeroxed position papers, sea shells, computer cards, only proves her at home in it. In full display of arms, lipsticks, too, and wrench and screw drivers sort themselves out at her need. Nothing has yet pressed Esther to make a fastidious show of choices. Tonight we had my small neat Fiat, my fussy anxieties.

If she had noticed my earlier episode of estrangement, she would blame it simplistically on the scotch, the company I'd kept that afternoon. Nor would I wish to persuade her differently.

"Just trust me, darling."

And fastened her belt, conciliatory. "Why not close your eyes if you're down?"

I did as she asked, thought, more likely dreamed. The island . . . small, intimate, not so august/ as the Athenian Parthenos . . . may Athené Hygeia be our near/ personal patroness. I had forgotten a phrase—then it came to me: the goddess of health, whose armed splendor and wrath we need not fear, is *feeding a serpent from a cup*. I must have slept; when I looked again we were well on the highway. A radio voice hummed some electronic buzz and Esther, cursing softly, happily, guided the car past a row of fat, swollen diesels, all strung with red lights.

Sang to them, "Fuckers. Blowhards. Move over! Haul ass!"

When I groaned, she giggled, Hello, cut in much too close between the two trucks in the lead.

"Watch this."

The four trucks behind us moved out, roared and belched past so that I felt the suction of their powerful passing. Close. The little car shook with it.

"OK," Esther said cheerfully. "I quit. How's your head?"

"You'll slow down? Let them go? Not bad," I admitted. "In that case, not bad."

"I'm really energized. And glad we went."

I'd be glad to be at home, to forget as I might have been about to. My old friend Lori's screeching and strained, confined struggle, her house-building or determined wrecking. Fat Ross, a proper prize, bone for contention. The opaque, shifting eyes of the film makers, their too plausible voices. That

woman who'd seemed messenger, victim, avenger. My own possible collusion in what had been. Hadn't it been a paradigm of grinding waste, cross purposes, lies, warfare?

"That lost woman at the end, Esther? What was that?"

"City's full of them."

"It is."

"Stoned, clearly. I've been thinking. You know, we should."

I felt the intrusive presence, stifling, between us. That I twisted my amethysts, salvaged from the years Esther knew only as vague rumors and blurred faded past, that I tugged too violently, seemed involuntary. They came off in my hand: the worn clasp sprung.

"Damnation."

I held them out, shining a little in the light from the dashboard. "Broken, finally."

"Oh, your Mamma's—too bad." She took the stones, dangled them on their string as she drove. "Listen. There's a craftsperson—a woman in the group. She'll fix them. Just remind me."

As easy as that. When Esther dropped the stones on the seat between us I let them lie to roll where they would. Is remembrance chiefly a matter/ of twig, leaf, grass, stone?/ that is as far as I see. More, the moldering smell of rot and rags, wet paper, unaired unwashed clothing, the bruised, failed, fallen, misused flesh beneath. The hopelessly undone, not to be remembered.

"Clearly, Magda. We should."

"We can't."

Afraid of what she would tell me we needed to undertake in the matter of the lost, stoned women. Just as well, then, to be misunderstood.

"I'm sure she can. Remind me. But Christ, those walking wounded. It's all out there—all the pieces."

I'd leave the necklace unmended, let it go: perhaps an offering to Athené Hygeia, the intimate and personal. And imagined Esther's mind racing with the car through a landscape of defense leaflets, proclamations, the telephone trees, meetings, workshops, to come. Flowering hopes, likewise, that restored, sought to mend, fashioned the beads and batiks to drape alike over untouched flesh and deformed. Devised sandals for sweet teasing fierce mendicants. She pressed her sandaled foot harder on the gas.

Said, emphatic, "Lori for starters. That fucker beats up on her. He put her in that bandage. I'm sick when I think of it."

Picking up speed, of course. "She'll need support, but there's strength there, energy. Worth tapping. You were right."

I said, "My dear, slow down."

"I'll get on it first thing. Before the *auteur* runs a number on her." She was absorbed, moving ahead as the car moved. "She can come to us for a week or

two. Then we'll see." She'd moved out again into the left lane, prepared to pass the same long line of trucks. "What did you say?"

I raised my voice above the stormy roar of the diesels. "Slow down!" Knew we'd hit eighty, more, if we were to pass all five, that the car wasn't meant for that competition. And shouted into the trucks' blast and motor roar, above our own jangled rush. Shouted, "Make her stay!"

"This time I'm losing them," Esther said.

Lori must stay where and as she was.

Must she?

The trucks seemed already small points of light far behind, lost as the road curved and we sped on first up then downhill. They must have slowed, perhaps picked up a warning signal. We were alone on the road and Esther—determined warlike Athené Parthenos—bounced and stretched without reducing speed, smiled to herself, energized and satisfied. Her black hair billowed, fanned around her shoulders. Neither of us seemed compelled to resume that aborted conversation. I felt passive, a lassitude that longs for home, sleep, cessation of motion. Only occasional headlights flashed by in the opposite lanes beyond the dividing strip of grass; there had been no stations, possible stops, for miles.

One of those sudden, oncoming beams on the other side dazzled, blinded me: then through some trick of reflection or projection, as I turned away, looked into darkness of sky, bulging treetops, I thought I saw Lori's head—face frozen and streaming snakes of hair—floating on its platter, and behind that image in a drizzling ring or fuzz of light I saw the other: the round slope-shouldered as yet dumbly threatening shape still weighted down, yoked, with heaviness dragging on each shoulder.

Moving away, no, coming closer. If she had not revealed herself completely this time, a next phase threatened.

I pressed palms hard against my eyes, thought I must speak to Esther. Speak seriously, eloquently if I could, to clarify, explain or plead, persuade. The willed discord and humiliation, the struggle with a self that chose confinement, Lori's distended eyes and ripping laughter: energy turned against itself, I judged incurable. Or judged myself, more likely, not immune. Then I saw finally that I had been right today at least about one thing. A weird sparking blue light materialized out of nowhere. The patrol car was on our tail, signalling.

"Shit!"

We pulled over, waited for the bearer of lawful authority to come to us.

Esther squeezed my hand quickly, as if I needed reassuring. "I can handle him. Just let me. Don't worry."

"Handle him," I said. "Of course. Why ever not?"

We saw the circle of his torch beamed at the ground, at us—his headlights behind us and the sparking blue signal flare above. Light flashed into our

window, played over our faces and into our expectant, wide-open, lawbreaking eyes. Shone on the tangled mass of Esther's disordered, darkly glowing hair.

She looked up to answer sweetly. Smiled ruefully past the bulging belly and gunbelt, up into the moonface that hovered—its features indistinguishable—behind the glaring torch. Reached down, covered her knees in simulated confusion, handling—

"I'm so sorry, Officer. Was I, really?"

Fumbling to hand him license and registration, her hand looked small, deceptively incompetent; perhaps it trembled. At his request she slid out of the car, stood in her foolish, pretty sandals, her fluttering robe and locks, in the glare of headlights and signal flashings. I got out, too, and we walked a silent threesome, our two smaller shapes and the tall broad one that conducted, back to the patrol car under the blue flare that continued to spark on and off, eerily disembodied, with a seeming life, an energy of its own.

The trooper shone his light over me briefly. "You wait here, Ma'am." Motioned me to somewhere in the vicinity beside the cruiser. "Get in, Miss."

The door closed behind her and without a further look he stepped heavily, broadly, around the car to get in and sit at her side.

I stood near the patrol car on a hillocky strip of dust and bristling grass that straggled down the low slope towards darker bushes, a raw rising bulldozed hillside. My hand hovered near the doorhandle, but some previous experience with law and order cautioned me: any action can be interference and resistance. Yet I kept watch, paid close attention to those two heads bent over documents, engaged in speech I could not hear. Standing alone on that strip of Noman's Nowoman's land, I held myself in present reality, repeated to myself where we were, who, and in what country, what decade of the century. That we had little to fear.

Or everything. This watch I kept, a short enough beginning-to-be-chill vigil under the blue flare and strafed occasionally by headlights that slowed significantly, brought home to me anew my own lonely—our double—predicaments, helplessness, contradictory impulses, necessities, conjunctions.

Esther, my young brave love in her many guises—bedizened dancing girl in her bangles, Nausicaa, Athené the Warrior or the intimate healer, and Anactoria, the one among the maidens, and her other selves, mechanic, familiar of truck drivers, guileful with police troopers, energized in the clash of ambiguities. American. She knew neither Kali nor the Warlord; had not fallen in their dark temple to taste earth and its blood. Not yet. For all her tough young talk and knowing airs, she moved lightly, sweetly, in groves or on the mythic island, among principles and causes not stained and twisted, that had not awakened in her the hunger to possess or be possessed, to feel power and let it take her where it would. Her own or another's.

That she controlled confidently the power of the machine, her innocent birthright, was only one danger. More dangerous: to learn the body's force and weight, its battering out of control, hunger to feel a last blow or inflict it.

The fear and corruption recorded in and on me could not safely rise up again to challenge even a man like Ross, not the film maker nor his henchman. I would do worse. If I could I would offer up Lori's head to either, to both, to all the hungry troops together, and abandon her as I abandoned myself to complicities, survivals, more devious than any Esther might now use to handle her trooper. Only to keep her as she was a little longer? To keep her.

"He gave me a warning. Lectured me. No ticket!" Esther crowed her triumph. She reached out to me. "Sorry it took so long."

The convoy of trucks, her playmates in games perhaps not the most dangerous, passed by in single file, orderly, unhurried.

I covered her hand with mine: willed it to lie lightly, not to clutch. Not rend or tear. Closed my eyes, my lips, to confine and seal away all I had not been able to cure in myself. There may be serpents that can be gentled to feed from a cup if only the goddess sends her aid. The way home to the small, personal Athené Hygeia, the island I wished for, would not be direct or sure. If I felt Kali stir in my redflecked darkness, I thought nevertheless that for this night we had won reprieve.