

## Gideon Ofrat The Shew Bread Of Affliction

In 1923 in Tel Aviv, Reuven Rubin executed his painting "Sabbath Eve": set against a Galilee landscape, a Jewish woman in traditional clad seems to proffer us two "*challeh*" loaves on a serving dish. The risen convex shapes and hues of the "erotic" *challehs* echo the sensual hills in the background, symbolizing the crucial choice that Rubin confronted at the time, in regards to being and identity: the course of the soil, of the barefooted Arab kneeling to the woman's right, milking a goat; or the course of heaven, the course of the Hassid at his devotions, his form towering to the left.

With the new millenium marked in the lands of affluence by a galloping inflation in the varieties of breads set out to tempt gastronomic hedonists, bread can no longer function as a symbol of a substantive life-course. Orit Raff would certainly observe that mass industrialization has stripped bread of the unique human energy it has embodied since antiquity. I would say: bread has even been dethroned from its metaphysical, virtually sacred, status, to become bread bereft of charity. In the words of the Passover Haggadah: "**the bread of affliction**".

Some comments on the sanctity of bread: Every observant Jew is familiar with the ceremonial Sabbath eve blessing over the *challeh* and its apportionment. The two *challehs*, the "dual loaves" of Sabbath depicted by Rubin, oblige a Jew to partake of three Sabbath repasts, in commemoration of the manna the Children of Israel gathered in the wilderness on the sixth day. He may also recall the two "wave" loaves brought to the Jerusalem Temple for the Shavuot festival. But above all, he casts his mind back to the sanctity of the "shew bread": the twelve loaves customarily set out on a gold table at the Temple as an offering to the Almighty. Baked at the termination of each Sabbath, they were shared out among the priests upon their removal from display.

The Talmud tractate "Brachot" affirms: "**So long as the Jerusalem Temple existed, its altar atoned for Israel, and now, a person's table makes atonement**"; this is a

reference to the substitution of the domestic table for the collective altar. But all the same, no bread in modern secular society can stand in for the shew bread. For nowadays, as Orit Raff's photographs tell us, our daily bread is different and its message points to our anti-altars. And even if the largest Jerusalem bakery goes by the name of "Angel", the wry truth is that **"my sighing cometh before my bread"** (Book of Job, 3:24).

I contemplate Raff's baking ovens, and it is evident that I am regarding graves. Two white weights resemble a pair of commemorative candles, and the manufacturers' names on the oven doors evoke tombstones bearing the names of the departed. And as the gloom of the round earthen oven opens up an abyss of darkness (enclosed by the flaps of the other ovens) our terrified imaginations transport us back over a generation to the historical ovens of death.

Inescapably, the title "Gershon Feiglin Ovens" recalls Amihai Feiglin and the crematorium he installed at his family factory, for the purpose of cremating the corpse of Adolf Eichman. We find ourselves between baking ovens and the ovens of the Holocaust.

Now, Raff's photographs have transformed white baking aprons and bright dough cloths into burial shrouds, and the bakery into a funeral parlour's cleansing chamber. The sterility of white on white, remembered from Raff's photographs of the nineties (the untitled series of photographs dating from 1996 – 1998 that focuses on a wash bowl, a soap dish, a toilet bowl,<sup>I</sup> a bathtub etc.) envelops in nothingness and numbness the vital sensuality commonly associated with bakeries and baking products. Thus, our minds rapidly transform photographs of the bakery's cooler into a morgue, likewise connecting with the freezers Raff photographed in 1999 – 2000.<sup>II</sup>

Whatever became of good wholesome bread? What is the curse hovering over the sacred shew bread, echoed in the morbid chill of nothingness in

Raff's photographs? Whatever happened to the photographer, no longer in the role of temple "priestess" appointed over the chamber (bakery) of the shew bread, instead transformed into traditional Jewess in the funeral parlour's cleansing room, or ghostlike "Muzelman" hovering between the ovens of death?

The biblical Book of Leviticus states: **"And the priest shall burn it upon the altar the sacrificial bread made by fire unto the Lord"**, **"the sacrificial bread of a sweet savour"**. Numbers adds: **"... the sacrificial bread made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the Lord; it shall be offered beside the continual burnt offering"**. The Hebrew reader may be forgiven for mistaking "esheh" ("shewbread") for "isha" ("woman"), until he grasps that the reference is to the sacred bread baked over glowing coals. But all the same, the affinity between "bread" and "woman" finds broad affirmation in human cultures, resting equally upon woman's traditional role as baker (**"ten women shall bake your bread in one oven"**, Lev. 26:26) as well as the common association of bread with pregnancy, and the attribution of organic (quasi-magical) life force to yeast. Any wonder then that in days gone by, flour mills were associated with prostitutes? Now, our historical associations take us back to Israeli art: to Efrat Nathan and her feminist body work of 1974, when she attached a loaf of bread to her back, or Motti



**I** *Untitled (Toilet Bowl)*, 1997, C-Print, 20x20 in.  
Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY;  
Collection The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX;  
Collection CU Art Museum, University of Colorado  
at Boulder



**II** *Untitled*, 2000, C-Print, 40x50 in.  
Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY



**III** *Burnt Pot (rice)*, 1997,  
C-Print, 20x24 in.



**IV** Installation view of *Möbius Strip (Apt #14B)* at the  
Baumgartner Gallery, NY, 2000, C-Prints, wood, sheetrock,  
white paint. Dimensions variable

Mizrachi's 1975 performance art video where he had a sexual romp in dough with his girl-friend, or even to the provocative mother figure in Meir Shalev's novel "Esau": "The customers stared at her, at the same time fondling the bread and squeezing its meat."<sup>1</sup> And before plunging into the Christian association of bread and the hallowed body, or noting that the word "lechem" - Hebrew for "bread" - signifies "meat" in Arabic, we should pay attention to Raff as she makes her own connection between metaphorical bread and the nourishment of the female body: "The association with a 'nursing axis' takes us back to the late fourteenth century and to the figure of Mary nursing the baby Jesus (Maria Lactans, or Madonna del Latte, the "milk Madonna"), an image underlining the role of human touch, particularly woman's role in nourishing and feeding, by virtue of her physical involvement, i.e. in nursing." (from Raff's article about her "Insatiable" series of bakery photographs.)

We revert now to Raff's serving dishes. Dishes serving up offerings, further "silver platters" transformed into trays of scorched iron (formerly, it will be recalled, golden tables), serving dishes at the wedding banquet of Nathan Alterman's "girl and boy" who fell, enveloped in shadow, at the feet of the nation (from the renowned poet's "Silver Platter" tribute to the young Israeli fighters who fell in the war of 1948) arising out of the alarming verbal connection between "lechem" (bread) and "milchama" (war).

Regard those serving dishes, bearing the scorched remnants of two loaves of bread, resembling the imprint of a couple of corpses, or X-rays of malignant lungs. Be that as it may: a dead coupling, a bloody wedding, sexual urge transformed into death wish. The puffy dough cries sex, its scorched outline proclaims death.

The death urge. Raff's photographs are an interspection into the depths of hell, into everything repressed within the photographer's psyche. Her resort to the scorched black is merely a phase in her striving for the white, for emptiness.

Her reversal of bread and dough is a reversal of the body into absence, a spiritual progress inwards, moving away from life to non-life. At this level of nothingness, the level of self-annihilation, self-sacrifice, the erstwhile shew bread - turned in the Temple to face West and East, according to Rashi - is now turned inwards. In Raff's photographs, the shew bread has become the no-know bread of the interior. \*

The scratching of the serving dishes thus goes beyond cleansing and reduction, as it involves scratching the bases of the dishes, i.e. an obsessive persistence and a desperate need to reach the repressed base. The photographs make the serving dishes resemble gashed surfaces where a sharp implement tries to remove the cinder residues, signs of the fire which is, in fact, the primordial creation, existence in its essence. The ban, imposed by Jewish religious *halacha*, on employing iron utensils on the altar, no longer applies, for the altar has been replaced by a serving dish.

The Temple has been demolished, God is in exile, and Raff's table - in other words, her serving dish - cannot render atonement.

The marks of the two scorched loaves resist removal from the dish, however much the photographer scrapes the base of her psyche. She is

doomed to “ashes”, to a “trace”, and her photographic odyssey is doomed to the nothingness of a living, formless source, whether that source is her own life or the presence of God. That is her daily bread, our daily bread.

For years she has been taking photographs of the burnt remainders of foodstuff – sausages, rice,<sup>III</sup> pasta – residues of “ashes”, to employ Derrida’s term. Circles made by a coffee mug, marks that a piece of furniture has left on a rug,<sup>IV</sup> a footprint in a bathtub etc. – all signifiers of an energy that once existed but is now departed: signifiers of absent objects, of an absent body, of a faded life. Now that she is in the baker’s domain, the photographer is doomed more than ever to the baking mold, the matrix (from mater, mother); but what do the photographs prove unless that the molded image – the imprinted residue – is the loss of the original, being secondary, a signifier proclaiming the vanished signified. And what is the imprinted mold if not an epitaph imprinted upon a gravestone.

Raff’s photographs proclaim a bold introspective analysis, penetration of the burnt matter, a hopeless attempt at catastrophic contact with the flame of the oven, that which is the source. But, as Derrida would put it, the flame is beyond access, it burns out and becomes ashes (cinders) at the precise moment it is ignited: “The

fire flickers and goes out [...]. If you wish to burn everything, you must burn the conflagration, to prevent its continued existence as presence. It is vital to extinguish the fire, to preserve it for the sake of its annulment, or its annulment for the sake of its preservation. [...] If this is the movement of the spirit, and the truth, the task of the intellectual is clear: to ensure the duality of the fire and its extinguishing (ashes).”<sup>2</sup>

At this level, Raff’s bakery is an industrial plant manufacturing “bread of truth” (the term from the Jerusalem Talmud): the illusory promise of human awareness, which produces “bread of falsehood” (Book of Proverbs).

The mourning rites in progress in Raff’s photographs are a requiem to a truth that is simultaneously primal, personal and universal. A multitude of mould-baked standardized loaves resembles a human language of moulded signs, dooming the lingual expanse to the graveyard of the primal, the unique, the vital. Regard the photographs of the trays with their multitude of rising loaves they resemble a breeding ground of benign promises, echoed in her other photographs of crumbs and soot.

This is the moment when Raff’s bakery photographs become a metaphor for the very act of photography. The oven compartment is a camera imposing darkness (obscura) on every fire, every light, and its sole products are baked forms, that is to say, burnt forms. The lifegiving loaf has been cast aside, like the bread of Eros, likewise even the holy bread. It leaves the photographer, and us, with the dead likeness of absent objects, with ghosts, which are the essence of photography, as Roland Barthes put it in 1980: “The Photograph [...] represents that very subtle moment when [...] I am [...] a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. [...] Photography is [...] a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead. [...] Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death. [...] It is because each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death ...”<sup>3</sup>



Raff agrees. "My preoccupation is with the concept of the 'present-absent'. A study of the signs we leave behind becomes a typological lever, using the concrete to produce a metaphorical statement. Observation of the stains left on the white aprons contains the person who had used them [...] Alternatively, it recalls the photographic act which focusses upon the presence of the absent, or the search for added value in the stains. A similar presence may be found on the trays carved with knife marks caused by the act of peeling off the baked loaves of bread: an absence that attests to the existent, and to the act that preceded the freezing of the frame." (from her article "Insatiable").

Such is Raff's inner bread; a visit to the domain of the dead and a painful acknowledgement of loss. "For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping." (Ps., 11:9). "Thou feedest them with the bread of tears; and givest them tears to drink in great measure." (Ps. 80:5) Pain: English for "anguish", French for "bread". And forever the connection between bread and offering, sacrifice. It would appear that the loaves offered up on Raff's serving dishes are a sacrifice of self. We recall the baker in Meir Shalev's *Esau*: "...All his limbs drip tears into the dough [...] 'For him, the yeast works on pain,' it was said."<sup>4</sup> Another figure, that of a Jezreel Valley baker - a realist artist of the fifties by the name of Tushek, who would bake cheerful dough figurines for the children of Kibbutz Mizra - seems to belong to a world gone by, where dough proclaimed life, and art proclaimed existence and hope.

Raff's photographs portray the burial of existence and life. Let us recall "mourner's bread" (Hosea 9:4).

But beyond negation for its own sake, Raff's photographs convey the religiosity of the search for the absent. For here, in Raff's bakery, the rite of the inner bread is her desperate quest after the lost shew bread.\*

Gideon Ofrat,  
Jerusalem, October 2005

Translated by Peretz Kidron

<sup>1</sup> Meir Shalev, *Esau* [Hebrew], Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1991, p. 109.  
<sup>2</sup> Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, [trans. P. Kidron] Syracuse Univ. Press, 2001, p. 97 <sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1981, pp. 14, 32, 92, 97 <sup>4</sup> Shalev, p. 36 \* Word play on the Hebrew "panim" and "pnim", terms referring respectively to "shew bread" and "interior" - translator

## Drorit Gur-Arie Fair-Stressed Demeter

Aprons spotted with dough hanging on a white tiled wall, chubby golden bread loaves in a blazing oven, lumps of dough covered with plastic sheets swooning on huge trays, dough-stained fabrics, burnt baking trays, used rubber gloves, an oven's dark interior, an empty industrial freezer – and, yes, a black flour bag lying like an abandoned corpse: Orit Raff's bakery.

Bread – a word that inhabits a basic existence, a metonymy for hunger as well as satiation; Bread and Circuses – the Emperor's bribe to the masses in ancient Rome; in western hedonistic society, where culture and gastronomy habitually flirt with each other, industrial bread is upgraded with mixtures that improve its taste infinitely and it spreads its aroma in prestigious pastry shops, a spectacle of inspiration and grace; at the same time, it is displayed on the news as the sign of an intense social struggle in the Jerusalem "Bread Plaza" in front of the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset; in Judaism, bread's power is strengthened by dipping it in salt before saying *Hamotsi* (the blessing over bread), and in former times bread and salt were presented as a peace offering to all those who came through the Jerusalem gates; and yet, it is no coincidence that in Hebrew the same letters form the words bread (*lechem*), salt (*melach*) and war (*milchama*).

In religious rites and according to folklore bread is an icon with magic powers. In the Bible it represents a caring Providence, providing manna to the hungry people in the desert (Exodus 15:15), while according to Christianity Jesus said the dividend-carrying words: "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger" (John 6:35). The Greek Demeter is one of the most well-known mythic goddesses of grain and fertility, a maternal archetype that is realized in conception and nourishment. The Homeric Hymn *To Demeter* describes her as the "fair-stressed awesome goddess [...] of the bright fruit and golden sword",<sup>1</sup> and her narrative – tales of seduction and of the twists and turns of desire, death and resurrection – was accompanied by secret, mysterious rites of purification.

“For me’, said Dulac, ‘there is more to bread than mix and bake, mix and bake. [...] Bread is something that is alive; we must take great care with it’”.<sup>2</sup> A bakery is often pictured as an infernal place of fermenting yeast, heavy smells and burning furnaces, a volcanic space of soft, sensual dough lumps awaiting their turn in the oven while others swell in the fire like demons. In contrast, Raff’s photographs of the bread bakery are immersed in coldness and darkness. The groups of monochromatic images bring to mind death or purification chambers. The white aprons hang on the white tile wall like exhausted corpses, and the light baking fabrics, hanging like washing, also resemble shrouds awaiting their dead. In the past, Raff made several white on white photographic series, dealing with cleanliness and sterility: photographs of white laundry (1997-1998),<sup>I</sup> a series of sparkling bath fixtures (*Untitled*, 1998), and an installation of bathing soaps (*The Pot Calling the Kettle Black*, 2002).<sup>II</sup> In another work (*Untitled*, 1996)<sup>III</sup> the artist herself goes through a personal purification rite, immersing her naked body in a white bath that suggests a sterile facility or a narrow burial casket. The obsessive preoccupation with cleanliness and dirt removal is also evident in a humoristic ready-made installation of empty rubber gloves, of the type used for cleaning (2002),<sup>IV</sup> and in the series of photographs *Dis(located) Land* (2001), in which Raff isolated spaces, mapped them and took photographic samples of intimate body remnants – hair, skin, nails – that have been defamiliarized and were left as unidentified post-mortem evidence.

In her works, Raff favors the implicit over the explicit, and her images intensify a past that seeks clarification. Like an act of detection, the artist follows with her camera traces and signs of a place or a time, findings by means of which she wishes to breath life into a frozen memory and construct a narrative from vague fragments, left behind as a present absence: the markings of furniture in an abandoned house, signs engraved on school desks or ice accumulations in an empty household refrigerator. Now the evidence line-up is augmented by dough crumbs that cling to walls and charred baking trays, extinguished

ovens and rows of stainless-steel trays on which dough lumps covered in batter are stretched out, looking like rotting corpses. Raff’s observation of the bakery’s walk-in refrigerator uncovers only empty cells, referring back to the morbid, splendid glacier-scapes in her photographs of old freezers (*Untitled*, 1999-2000).<sup>V</sup>

Writing about Andres Serrano’s series of photographs *The Morgue*, Stephen Bann describes, following Hubert Damisch, how the Ovidian myth of metamorphosis is visually depicted in Poussin’s *Echo and Narcissus* (1629-1630), where the body of the hero, Narcissus, is seen alongside the flower that perpetuates his name, the narcissus: “thus the painting is representing both death and resurrection — cold and pale flesh, and a crown of spring flowers”.<sup>3</sup> Bann points out a similar metamorphosis in Serrano’s glowing cibachrome surfaces, where the photographic plate adheres to the flesh of anonymous dead bodies, victims of murder and disease, and the mythological flower is nothing but the vivid presence of pink and red death wounds. The proximity of the terrifying and morbid to the spectacular and enchanting is also evident in some of Raff’s works. There is an unresolved tension in her photographs between potential vitality, beauty, and nullifying restraint. The radicalization that is fundamental to Raff’s photographic staging neutralizes the vitality





**I** *Untitled (Laundry)*, 1998,  
C-Print, 24x20 in.  
Collection The Museum of Fine Arts,  
Houston, TX



**II** *Untitled (from Nine Promises)*, 2001,  
C-Print, 16x20 in.



**III** *Untitled*, 1996,  
C-Print, 20x20 in.



IV Installation view of *The Pot Calling The Kettle Black - Glove Series* at the Julie Saul Gallery, New York, 2002, 13 C-Prints, 15x15 in. each



V *Untitled*, 1999, C-Print, 40x50 in.



VI Installation view of *Palindrome* at the Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, 2001, 16 mm color film transferred to DVD, 5:30 minutes (projected in a loop)



VII Still from *The Moon Tastes Like Letters*, 2004  
Left screen, 7:30 minutes (projected in a loop)



VIII Still from *The Moon Tastes Like Letters*, 2004  
Right screen, 7:30 minutes (projected in a loop)

implied by the image of turning live dough into bread, converting it into a clinical presence. The glowing fire that breaths life into dough as in an act of creation is stamped onto the singed limbs of Raff's floury "death victims" like a decisive seal.

Like the photographs, the video *A Roundabout (Fertility/Futility)* (2004), depicting a female figure in the midst of a strange bread ritual, also puts bread back in its mythical cultural contexts, where it is associated with ritual acts. Associations of fecundity, conception and birth, impurity and lust, death and resurrection flow into the bread-stomach kneaded by the woman, who is dressed in white like a priestess. "He wrestled a gobbet of dough to the table and began massaging it [...] This could be a woman. Thighs, buttocks. Deep, soulful flesh. He pressed and kneaded, using his hips. [...] It tensed, relaxed, grew fragrant with its pleasure. It stretched [...] then contracted into a shuddering, swollen mound. When he cut the dough into pieces and gave it over to the fire, it was very nearly a human sacrifice."<sup>4</sup> The presence of bread dough as an erotic entity that combines sex and death was common in pagan rituals that sought to appease the Spirit of Grain by means of human or animal sacrifices, eaten in unbridled gorging feasts at first harvest. Some of the rituals were overtly sexual: bread loaves shaped like young girls were eaten in public feasts, as well as

different types of grain, identified as male and female, symbolizing a union that yields golden sheaves.

The woman in Raff's video, shaman-like, frantically strives to bring a stale loaf of bread back to life. Her hands tear the bread's flesh, ravenously digging into its guts, Beuys-like, Sisypically trying to restore the shriveled bread crust, to heal its dry skin with sandpaper, but the bread crumbles in her exertion-reddened hands. The ruptured fruit of the womb is dispersed, and the agonizing process starts all over again. A desperate act in an endless loop was also evident in the video *Palindrome* (2001),<sup>VI</sup> where Raff stacked thick felt squares inside a frozen arctic igloo and wallowed in them like an animal as she attempted to heat her body and preserve her life. She also challenged the boundaries of personal space in a repetitive attempt to realize the female body's desire in *The Moon Tastes Like Letters* (2004),<sup>VII,VIII</sup> this time with the reflexive image of a moon caught in a bucket of water that is placed in a home territory – the kitchen.<sup>5</sup> Raff explores the affinity between instinct and necessity, between sexuality and urge, and in her present video her ongoing preoccupation with femininity, obsession and compulsion presents itself with archaic urgency: the manic bursts accelerate and seem to seek fulfillment of a physical hunger, a sexual hunger, an insatiable creative process.

Drorit Gur-Arie,  
Petach-Tikva, March 2005

Translated by Einat Adi

<sup>1</sup> "The Homeric Hymn To Demeter", *The Homeric Hymns*, translated by Helene P. Foley, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 2. <sup>2</sup> Paul Hond, *The Baker*, Random House, New York, 1997, p. 226. <sup>3</sup> Stephen Bann, "Death and Metamorphosis: a propos the Morgue of Andres Serrano", *Andres Serrano – The Morgue*, exhibition catalogue, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1996, p. 62. <sup>4</sup> Paul Hond, *The Baker*, p. 270. <sup>5</sup> "Moonlight vision", the way of seeing attributed to the moon goddess Artemis, is interpreted in psychological theories of femininity as enabling access to deeper levels of consciousness and widening the boundaries of perception.



## A Conversation between Orit Raff & Lauri Firstenberg

### The Moon Down to Earth

In Orit Raff's film *Palindrome* (2001),<sup>I</sup> the artist performs a repetitive and cryptic task, rolling a mound of felt inside the confines of an igloo - an atmosphere that is foreboding and oppressive. This footage is sutured with appropriated images of a coyote in the natural habitat of a winter landscape. *Palindrome* is part of a larger project *Hunt-the-Slipper*, in which the artist utilizes various media, from photography to video to architectonic installation, in order to re-enact fractured memories and encounters. Memory and myth are central to the creation of a cultural anti-narrative in which operations of defamiliarization create a circuitous reading of dislocated coordinates of identity.

Raff's larger project is based on the recounting of a privatized history, translated into ethereal visual terms. Her engagement with a unique mode of minimalist photography marks a distancing from corporeal representation and speaks to the over-determination of the figure in the visual field. Raff has invented a kind of portraiture - or anti-portraiture, that does not rely on the body, but indexes subjectivity abstractly. Photographs of faint bodily trace<sup>II</sup> - the white interiors of vacant freezers, stained linens,<sup>III,IV</sup> scarred pots and graffitied desks - serve as specters of the absent subjects. In the case of her *(Dis)located Land* series (2001), the bodily surrogates are dust and detritus from the artist's apartment, aesthetic and abject materializations of the uncannily unnamable individual subject.

Raff engages with questions of culture and subjectivity as forces of flux and proliferation resistant to a controlled order of meaning. In a range of media and conceptual strategies, Raff addresses identity, language, history, memory and place as mutable, plural and generative constructions. Raff's work dwells on the pressures of translation and interpretation within a field of multiplying perspectives. Her work attempts to elide easy appropriation into established categories of cultural identity and aesthetic values. Raff's production addresses the collapse of cultural boundaries, examining the paradox of an infinite spectrum of cultural specificities and the ambivalent desire for absorption into a network of globalist logic. A model for the examination of indistinct spaces, temporalities, subjectivities, Raff's work is representative of a young generation of international artists negotiating a web of complex and politicized propositions, vacillating between local legibility and global alliances.

The work is self-conscious in its refusal to reconcile international style with regional, national or other vectors of cultural subjectivity. Under the mantra of globalization, Raff seeks aesthetic models that dislocate or obfuscate a singular, totalizing or fixed cultural position, rather invested in contrary moments of assertion and accession of meaning.



**I** Still from *Palindrome*, 2001,  
16mm color film transferred  
to DVD



**II** *Untitled (Wet Rag)*, 1999,  
C-Print, 20x24 in.



**III** *Untitled (Shirt)*, 1997,  
C-Print, 24x20 in.  
Collection Tel Aviv Museum of Art,  
Tel Aviv, Israel



**IV** *Untitled (Blanket)*, 1999,  
C-Print, 40x30 in.





V Installation view of *Hunt-the-Slipper* at the Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, 2001, 16 mm film transferred to DVD, 1:20 minutes (projected in a loop)



VI *(Dis)located Land #22*, 2001, Lambda C-Print, 40x30 in.

**LF** Do you view your work in terms of a kind of poetic abstraction, in tension with your representational and quasi-narrative approach?

**OR** The poetic and abstract aspects of my work are essential. I do not want my work to remain in the realm of the abstract but rather to hover between the spaces of the abstract and the representational, creating conflict and collision. This negotiation marks an attempt to achieve a “slower” viewing pace when confronted with multiple and contrary points of entry. There is a political dimension to my work but I approach it quietly, through metaphor.

A continual thread in the work is to question memory as well as the processes by which we remember. The work encourages a certain jolting of perception. I am interested in moments of misrecognition, followed by apprehension, which I associate with the action and behavior of memory.

In my early work (1992-95), I photographed miniatures or elaborately detailed sets that I would construct in the studio of domestic spaces, rooms, outdoor spaces such as playgrounds, forests, the people in the sets would engage in various activities such as bathing, playing hide-n-seek, urinating. This work was inspired by Fairy Tales, Israeli Folk Tales, and imprints (psychological

and physical) on the body. I then decided I want to explore narrative in a different way, to focus on the trace itself. I experimented with notions of index and absence that implies presence. Could these impressions contain and relay a narrative? I have engaged in an ongoing exploration of how marginal details, and later, peripheral spaces that inflect our daily routine, reveal to us personal, cultural and political meaning.

**LF** How do you see your engagement with moving images in relation to your photography? For each series, it seems that you work on a body of photographs and a series of related videos concurrently. Where do you begin?

**OR** I have always been interested in film and video. For several years I have focused only on photography, which suited my ideas at the time. The reason for using both mediums is that I can't really help it – I see and feel in both. I try to create a multi-layered experience, a space that transforms. I want to achieve a restless physical and visual experience that tests our sensual boundaries.

Another factor for this choice is my strong longing to return to the figure. I have wanted to do this for some time and could only find access to the body in video. The question of time is crucial. I visualize the body in constant movement, performing, leaving a trace of life. Even in videos where the figure does not actually appear, an implied presence participates in the performative with which I am preoccupied.

When combining the two mediums, or for that matter also thinking of my architectural sculptures in space, I try to create several pitches of representation and experience. Through video, I expose questions that are slightly veiled in my photography such as dislocation and transformation, as in the *Hunt-the-Slipper* (2001) project.<sup>V</sup>



VII Installation view of *Dynamic Equilibrium*, a SITE Santa Fe satellite exhibition, New Mexico 2002, DVD projection, C-Prints, styrofoam & plaster sculpture, sheetrock, metal partition. Dimensions variable



VIII *Staying Balanced But Not Still*, 1999  
Still from digital video

LF How do you think this shift in strategies of “story telling” succeeds in the context of the 2001 body of work, *Hunt-the-Slipper*?

OR In *Hunt-the-Slipper* I use videos, a floor structure and photographs to create an environment. Each component conceptually addresses issues of memory and place, and share a similar language, based on quiet minimalist gestures. I hope by working in multiple languages that certain ideas are punctuated, surface, retreat and collide with others. The *(Dis)located Land* series<sup>VI</sup> was composed of my attempt to collect all of the dust in my New York apartment. The accompanying installation element, the “dust catchers” *Island (Mount Hermon #13)*, displayed on a formica and glass floor structure, were all obsessively crocheted by my Grandmother in Haifa, Israel. I wanted to articulate this dialogue between our two hands. Our process is anchored in real space and time but I am interested in imposing distancing effects onto the work, to incorporate an element of fiction to the work as well, to mirror memory.

The videos from *Hunt-the-Slipper* also emphasize the obsessive nature of trying to capture and save something that is elusive. The protagonist, the role I inhabit, performs a Sisyphean task in an endless loop. This idea of creating an archive, a collection of obsessions, memories, fictions were satisfying by means of experimentation in concurrent mediums. The series shares in a vision of domesticity that flips from the space of the familiar to the foreign. This dislocation is understood at the level of the uncanny. My interest in making strange is an approach in creating the overarching experience to the discreet works. I am invested in playing with any given space in an effort to create a place where viewing and moving intersect; where distinctions between inside and outside, vertical and horizontal dissolve, pushed to a point where our experience of Euclidean space is challenged.

LF This is a crucial element that you bring up here. Your photography tends to approach its subject through surrogates - space, object, trace. The filmic element turns back to the body in its totality. Why this distinction? You broach the subject of working with the figure fluidly in a time-based medium in order to place your performing body in a space of action and transformation. Could you elaborate on the articulation and formation of the subject in your video work?

OR Many of my decisions are intuitive but I think the distinction I make grows from the very nature of the medium. We make assumptions in approaching video versus photography, and I play off of these presumptions. Photography bears a quality of the eternal by means of its stillness. In freezing a moment in time, it is preoccupied with the present-past. According to Roland Barthes, photography is proof of presence, of being, that which was there. I play with the indexical nature of photography; strip it down to its most basic act - the transcription of light on a sensitized surface. The traces that I photograph mirror the photographic act as scratches on the surface. I photograph the trace, that which is no longer there, a representation of presence, of an inhabiting body. By photographing these marginal details; stains, traces, dust, dirt, I bring them to the center of vision, allowing them to exist and



prevail. The signs of life that I capture, such as strands of hair, dust in an apartment, furniture imprints on a carpet, are incredibly personal in their connection to the body. It is impossible to identify an individual connected to these markers creating a more universal dialogue between personal and collective memory. Time is inherent to video and therefore the qualities of change, transformation, temporality and performance are at the core of my practice. In my filmic work I focus on the body performing, slipping, adapting. The body is fragile in that it tries to accomplish something futile. I am interested in the failed pre-occupation of the subject. Tasks such as warming up in a freezing environment, leaving a trace on the carpet by jumping, making a loaf of bread into something else but destroying it in the end. In earlier videos the body is present, as in the photographs, through a trace, breath or movement. For example in order to make the video *Thirty Times The Length Of My Breath*, (2000),<sup>VII</sup> I focused on the drain in the bottom of the deep-end of an Olympic-size swimming pool. While holding my breath for two minutes I videotaped the drain as water and air make their way into the pull of the drain. The body is present through my lack of breath, the breath of the drain itself and the swimmers above me. Subtle transformation takes place, thus emphasizing how movement in space mimics the movement of narrative.

**LF** Let's take up this issue of the "performing body" further, particularly because the body in question is yours. What discourses of performance are you gesturing to regarding autobiography via memory and fantasy as well as the more literal gestures of self-insertion? Your new series, *The Moon Tastes Like Letters* (2004), harks back to a childhood memory, mythology, literature and visually enunciates an imprint of your presence as a specter of the near past. Can you speak about the genesis of this project as well as how you see it expanding upon your previous work? What new direction do you see this work taking, particularly regarding your interests in personal, architectural, institutional space, femininity, domesticity and notions of the uncanny?

**OR** The works and writings of Mary Kelly, Laura Mulvey, Butler, Luce Irigaray, Cixous, Eva Hesse, Joan Jonas have informed and inspired my work. Ana Mendieta is also a source of inspiration. What I identify with in her work is the exploration of the body as woman, and the investigation of the body's social and political implications through performance. She also deals in her performances and films with things that are temporal and ephemeral. I am interested in the things that vanish from us but we persist in trying to capture them. It made great sense to me that I use my own body, to explore the body's potential and limitations (lack of breath in *Thirty Times The Length Of My Breath*), to insert my body, to be part of a public space but experience it differently (*Out Of Order, Staying Balanced But Not Still*).<sup>VIII</sup> Private memory intersecting and blurring with public memory, the individual body intersecting with the social body represents crucial concerns to my work, and therefore I become the suitable subject. I test the waters to see if my own personal experiences and stories connect with a wider, collective heritage. I think that coming from Israel and being raised as a child in the United States inflects my work.

Identifying with a young country of immigrants, with culturally assimilated European grandparents serves as the point of departure for my work's preoccupations -- dislocation, memory, transformation, repetition, self insertion. In the video *Able was I ere I saw Elba - Palindrome*, I deal with those issues and also create a dialogue with Beuys. I was interested in the idea of transformation as a human and as an artist, how he erased his past and created a new life, but I wanted to transfer his gestures to the domestic space, have them less epic, more human. I am trying to warm up in a space where I will fail to do so.

Both the new project *The Moon Tastes like Letters* and the *Insatiable* project expand and continue to explore notions of trace, but I am increasingly interested in public engagement entering and blurring with the terrain of the personal. In both projects language has been a starting point from which to work. In *Insatiable*, the words bread (lehem) and war (milhama) share an identical root in Hebrew l-h-m. In *The Moon Tastes Like Letters*, the genesis was a story my grandfather told me as a child.

Cecilia Dougherty recently responded to my work and struck a chord:

"...your themes of presence/absence and of activity/evidence really seem to guide and shape your aesthetic. The work seems mysterious and minimalist, but it isn't that at all - its beauty comes from your interpretations and observations of the natural and symbolic qualities of everyday materials. I think the work is also very sad, but it's hard to pinpoint directly how/where that happens - maybe because it seems to equate human history with loss, and lives and communities with traces of existence rather than what we usually are taught equate with tradition - richness, fullness, security, validity etc. An interesting take on tradition."

**LF** Since you shared this intimate reading of your work, I would like to ask a question I normally would not dare to ask. During your pregnancy your work

on bread - baking bread, eating bread, vomiting bread, destroying bread - decidedly reverberated of what was the forthcoming birth of your daughter. I hate to impose a kind of literal biographical reading on such poeticized work, but would you be open to speak to the experiential and conceptual encounter that informed your work at that time?

**OR** The *Insatiable* project consists of two videos that work as one piece and a new third video, which I am in the midst of producing, and will talk about in the end. While producing the two videos I was thinking about ceremonies involving bread. How these ceremonies, beyond their frequent religious signification, are acts of unification and formation of social and cultural connections.

Similar rituals may be found in my video pieces. The first part of the video titled *A Roundabout (Fertility/Futility)* shows my hands crumbling an old, dry, stale and hardened loaf of bread. The loaf of bread is held close to my stomach and I continuously sand the hard crust and tear through it. A lot of physical effort is involved. The second section, *A Roundabout*, shows dough baking and rising in an oven. It takes the same amount of time for the bread to bake and for me to crumble the stale loaf. In this work I wanted to emphasize the many metaphors bread takes on.

I have been thinking about several ideas while making this work that all tie together; bread as body in conflict, bread (lehem in Hebrew) echoing the Arabic word (lachim/meat), bread as a site of conflict, bread as home, the magical qualities of bread and the relation to woman as creating life, the action of trying to make something better, "repair it", bring it to life but ruin it in the end, bread and salt/sweat, a childhood memory of bread/dough being one of the first materials we use to make art. It is true that I was pregnant while finalizing this video and though I am very nervous to connect this work in such a direct way with it, and though I have been thinking about this project for some time before being pregnant, there is of course a connection that can't be avoided and ignored. The beauty of art for me is that it connects with life, it adds another, new dimension, makes you look and think about things in a different and challenging way but still connects with life. This major and exciting change in my life made me think about certain ideas, some are personal - fears and hopes, that are echoed in the work. What does it mean to bring a baby in such fragile and unsettling times and though it sounds cliché it was also for me an action of hope.

**"And he also lay on his back and put a stone in his mouth, and the stone was also a boy once and the boy was once a stone. Dizzy. And meanwhile this**

**stone is getting a bit of life and it's not quite so cold and hard anymore; it's become wet and warm, it's even beginning to stir in your mouth and gently return the tickles it's getting from the tip of your tongue"**

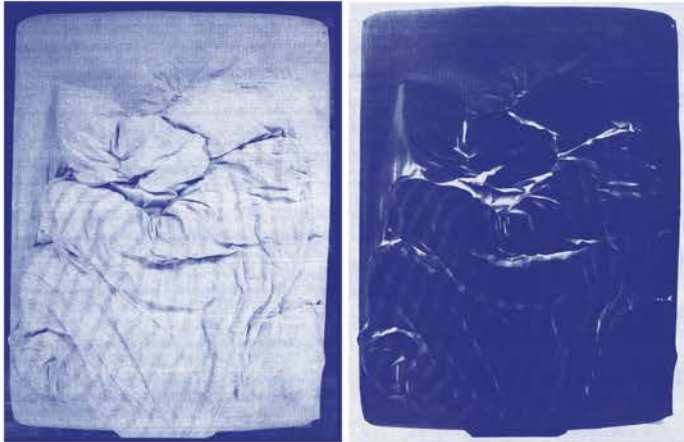
(Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, trans. Nicholas De Lange, Harcourt Inc., 2004, p.244)

The linguistic aspect of this project is very important for me. It was my starting point, and this is where the third video comes in – functioning like a footnote. The video will be projected horizontally and will show a tray filled with salt. I will draw in the salt Hebrew words that are all spelled from the same three letters just in different order. I will start with bread (lhm) which in Hebrew is spelled the same way as fight (in war)/wage war, wind will erase the word and I will then write bread spelled backwards mhl (forgive), then salt (mlh), then salt spelled backwards hlm (dream).

**LF Regarding your newest series *The Moon Tastes Like Letters*,<sup>IX</sup> can you speak to the introduction of the medium of the blueprint in the work? Imprints of your body from your bed mattress are recorded as diagrammatic maps of each day, a spatial and temporal record of an anonymous subject, later revealed as a series of self-portraits, if you will. I particularly like the multiple points of entry to this corpus of work, via mythology. Multiple myths are at play here – personal, cultural and art historical. The ghost of Yves Klein also lies in this bed. This confluence of multiple points of entry to your work creates a climate of irrationality, friction, and often failure of legibility.**

**OR** The project *The Moon Tastes Like Letters* consists of a series of thirteen pairs of vertical blue prints (sun prints, 100x75 cm each). These images accentuate only the contours of sheets and the traces of bodies. The bed is a metaphor for hunger (not necessarily physical), passions and dreams. The blue print, which is a line print, (different from a photograph which is tonal), is used mostly in architecture. It is used as an architectural drawing showing floor





IX From *The Moon Tastes Like letters*, 2004. Pair of blue prints, 100x75 cm./each

plans, sections etc. I wanted the blue print to invoke this association with architecture, with floor plans and the home - to retain a feeling of a diagram, as well as invoking a visual affinity with the sea, with tide charts. I also wanted to achieve a moon lit, powdery quality, something ephemeral, temporal, and fragile, as a blue print fades with time. The quality of the blue print, reminiscent of a Xerox copy, blurs and erases the fine details that usually appear in photographs. In this way, the work speaks of erasure not only documentation. The bed, which is familiar, becomes strange. Each pair of prints features the positive and negative of the same bed, a metaphor for the moon that shines at night, and sometimes during the day. Each pair represents one month in a leap year. This duality is also an allusion to the 'blue moon' - the second full moon in a calendar month, a phenomenon that occurs, on average, once every two-and-a-half years.

I wanted this work to take the viewer on an imaginary journey that crosses borders, places, cultures and societies. To address the phenomenon whereby general myths are rendered private property, so to speak - collective memory with a trace of personal memory. This link is made through the image of the moon and the connotations and phenomena associated with it. This work addresses this intersection between private memory and collective memory. The starting point for the project was a story my grandfather told me about the princess who wanted the moon, echoing various versions of this story. The work relies on Greek mythology, specifically Artemis, and the video soundtrack (the second part of this project) draws on a rich world of literature, citing female protagonists and writers such as Virginia Wolfe, Margaret Atwood, Lynne Tillman and Banana Yoshimoto that share connections to the moon.

**A Conversation between Orit Raff & Lauri Firstenberg**  
Los Angeles / New York, February 2005

## Lynne Tillman *The Recipe*

— Sadness, that's normal, it goes with the territory, but becoming bitter, bitterness is to be avoided, he said.

— Be a saint instead, she said.

Instead, he'd live from the largesse of a common madness, not just his own, not just from his sadness, he'd lament and move on, lament and move on.

*My lament, can't do it, my way.*

Clay wouldn't ever want to relinquish internal rhyme, rhyming was a mnemonic device, too, and venerable for a reason, and, along with that, he relied on the beautiful histories meshed inside the roots of words.

— We don't determine what words mean, they determine what we mean, Clay said, later. We don't determine much.

Cornelia was a film editor and also translated documents and titles for a movie company, she also plied her insightful eye as a photo researcher and archivist for a wealthy eccentric, who never left his house and liked to know what was going on, but only in pictures. The eccentric hated to read.

— It would be great if pictures told a story, Cornelia said, but they don't. They tell too many, or they don't tell any.

— Words, also, he said.

— Images are easier to misread, she said.

— I don't know.

Subtitles crowded the image, she explained more than once, they changed the picture, even dominated it, and, besides, reading words on a screen disrupted the cinematic flow. He wasn't sure that was all bad, but then he was suspicious of images, which he didn't make. He was wary of

words, too, which he used and tried to re-make, so he had reason for anxiety. In her business, they talked about "getting a read on" a script, on meaning, sort of instantaneously.

A place for words, orphaned, wayward, no words,  
no images, what then.

The lovers argued about the small things, cleaning up after themselves in their apartment, as responsible adults do, supposedly, and petty problems, at work and with relative strangers, and also the large things, love, politics, history, friendship, art, poetry, which he wrote, when inevitably inconsiderate matter that had earlier settled in words and sentences extruded layers of their pasts, lived together and separately

Code, just for now, when you mean its opposite,  
bright lust of sullen night.

He'd been stunned by an obituary: "To my dear friends and chums, It has been wonderful and at times it had been grand and for me, now, it has been enough." The man -- it was signed "Michael" -- had had the presence of mind to write and place his own death notice, it resonated a unique thoughtfulness, sad and mad, was he a suicide? And, on TV, a Fuji commercial declaimed a new longing for the fast- escaping present: "Because life won't stay still while you go home and get your camera."

Writing death, perpetual, language like a  
house, an asylum, an orphanage. In a dream I  
wasn't, argued with someone or myself, so lost.  
Perpetual death of words, writing.

He wasn't his dream's hero, but there are no heroes, just cops. Clay stopped to watch two beat cops, surreptitiously he hoped, while they canvassed the street for errant civilians, ordinary or unusual, and the cops, they're ordinary and they're not, and, out of uniform, they're nothing, or they're nothing just like him, dumb mortals compelled by ignorant, invisible forces, which happened to be, in their case, part of the job. A police car sped by, like a siren, in time or too late to stop it, the robbery, murder, the robber, murderer.

He asked the butcher for stew meat, but studied another butcher at the blood-stained chopping block who expertly sliced off a layer of fat, thick and marbled, from a porterhouse. Fat enriches the meat's taste, his mother taught him, and also she warned, it's better to be dead and buried than frank

and honest. She said she knew things he didn't that she hoped he'd never know, it was the part of her past she wouldn't tell him.

— At the end of the day, everyone wants someone to cook for them, a woman, who was probably waiting for the porterhouse, announced to a man by her side.

The man appeared to understand and nodded his head, a gesture that presumed a semblance of understanding. Clay wondered if giving the appearance of understanding was actually understanding, in some sense, and if duplicity of this sort was necessary for a society's existence, maybe even at its basis or center, and not the ancient totem Emile Durkheim theorized. People regularly don't understand each other, but if that were constantly apparent, rather than gestures of tacit agreement and recognition, a stasis, punctuated by violent acts everywhere, would stall everyone for eternity.

"Security has now been doubled at the stadium, but people's enjoyment won't be hampered, officials say."

The radio announcer's voice sounded out of place in the warm, yeasty bakery, where he now was, doing errands like a responsible mate. The baker tuned the radio to a station that gave bulletins every few minutes, which some people listened to all day long, so they knew the news word by word, and Clay imagined they could recite it like a poem.

An epic, way to remember. A gesture, song, war,  
a homecoming. Fighting writing my death,  
persistent oxymoron. Perpetrator. Victim. Terror  
to fight terror. Fire or an argument with fire.  
Firefight. Spitfire. Lawless, Elliot Ness,  
childhood. Fighting against or for terror, lies  
in mouth. Can't leave home without it. Get a  
horse instead.

People expected the unexpected, unnatural and natural disasters, a jet crashing in the ocean, all lost, hurricanes beating down towns, all lost, bombs doing their dirty work, lives lost and shattered, houses destroyed, and attentive listeners needed to know, instantly, for a sense of control or protection, and for the inevitable shock of recognition: I'm still alive.

The baker's son Joey, dressed in white like a surgeon, the skin on his florid cheeks dusted with flour, asked him what he wanted, and then bantered with him as he always did.

— Sun, Clay, ever see it? You're pasty faced.

— You're flour-faced. I want a sourdough loaf, and the recipe.

— Forget about it, Joey the baker's son said. Family secret for five generations.

— I'll get it.

— You're just like your mother, Joey said.

His mother had played the violin, and, when he couldn't sleep at night, to quiet him after a bad dream, she'd stand in the doorway to his bedroom and pluck each string with adoring concentration. A lullaby, maybe, some song that consoled him for having to leave consciousness at all. He was attached to her concentration, like the strings to her instrument, and this specific image of her, mother violinist bent and absorbed, resisted passing time's arbitrariness, its uneven dissipations. Her face, for a long time now, rested only against walls or stood upright on tables in framed photographs, and he scarcely remembered a conversation they had, just a sentence or two.

Here, waiting. Can't leave home, without a  
horse. Get a read on. Long ago, here, a drama  
with teeth, reneging, nagging. Cracked plates,  
baseball bats, stains on home room floor, same  
as before, stains like Shroud of Turin.  
Jesus bled, writing death, fighting terror.

He hadn't moved away from the old neighborhood, waiting for something, teaching English and American literature in the high school he attended, while he grew older in the same place, without stopping time, though he found his illusions encouraged and indemnified by traces of the past, like the indentations in the gym's floor, and, more than traces, bodies, like the baker's and the butcher's, and their children, who would replace them, and stand in their places, in a continuity Clay wouldn't keep up, even by staying in the neighborhood.

Cornelia believed the cult around the shroud demonstrated that people do appreciate abstraction, an image instead of a body, though it wasn't exactly an abstraction but close enough. Even if the cloth had once rested on a body, theirs was a reverence for an impression, drawn from but not the same as the body — even if the body wasn't Christ's, since scientists carbon-dated the cloth much later than his death. The cloth was just matter, material separate from and attached to history.

Not the thing, the stain, palimpsest of pain.  
Life served with death a sanction.

Sometimes Joey the baker's son let him go into the back of the store to watch other white-coated men knead dough, their faces also dusted in white, their concentration, like his mother's to her violin, complete, and he viewed



them as content, absorbed in good work. Their hands knew exactly how much to slap and pound, when to stop, every movement was necessary and required. Then Clay ruminated, the way he always did in the bakery, about being a baker; in the butcher shop, he thought about being a butcher. He wanted to be like Joey, they'd gone to school together. If he were, he'd know simple limits, why an action was right or wrong, because the consequences would be immediate, and as usual he rebuked himself for romanticizing their labor and imagining an idyllic life for, say, the old baker and the baker's son he knew since he was a child, with a life better than his, because, he told Cornelia that night, the work was what it was, nothing else, its routine might be comforting, his wasn't. In the moment, as he watched their hands and smelled baking bread's inimitable aroma, he also felt that the bakers dwelled, as he did, in fantasy, that it enveloped them daily, and that what they did might be something else for them, too. Joey thought he was funny, but Clay loved the way Joey treated him, he felt Joey appreciated him in ways no one else did.

— The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, Cornelia teased.

— Cut it out, Clay said.

— Your heroes might surprise you someday, she said.

— I'd like that, Clay said.

— I bet you wouldn't, Cornelia said.

He told her about a distressed woman in the news who had found out she'd been adopted when she was twenty-one which made sense to her, she was even glad, because she had never felt close to her parents, who were like aliens to her, and then the woman spent years searching for her birth parents. When she was fifty, she found her mother, who'd given her up for adoption because she'd been unmarried and only fifteen. But the mother she unearthed wasn't the mother she expected or wanted, so the woman was very disappointed. Also, her birth father was disreputable and long dead.

— Do you think people have the right to know? Clay asked.

— A constitutional right, Cornelia said.

— OK.

— What about the right to privacy?

— Maybe some rights kill others.

If Clay turned violent, deranged, on the street, the cops would subdue and cuff him, take him in, interrogate him, or they might just shoot him on the spot, if he charged them menacingly, resisted them, or appeared to be carrying. The cops waited to arrest him and others from doing things they didn't know they could do or felt they had to do or did because inside them lurked instinctual monsters. He didn't know what he had in him, but he knew restraint, and he

recognized, as Max Weber wrote early in the twentieth century, that only the state had the right to kill, no one else, and that fact, and it alone, defined the state. But where he lived everyone had the right to bear arms, to answer and resist the state's monopoly on power. It was the original idea, anyway, but if Clay carried a gun, he might use it, because he didn't know what he had in him.

Better to be dead and buried than frank and honest, his mother had said. His father ghosted their dining-room table, his tales gone to the grave with him and now to his wife's grave also. One night his father hadn't come home from work the way he always did, Clay was seven, and his mother's face never regained its usual smile, she smiled, but not the way she once had. When little Clay walked into the butcher shop or the bakery, he felt the white-clothed men looking sympathetically at him, prying into him for feelings he hadn't yet experienced. The fatherly baker gave him an extra cookie, even two, and in school, even on the baseball field, Joey the baker's son didn't call him names anymore, even when he struck out. But his mother clutched his little hand more tightly on the streets, and he learned there was something to fear about just being alive. He learned his father was dead, but it didn't mean much to him, death didn't then, and soon it became everything.

— It's why you're a depressive, Cornelia said. Losing a parent at that age.

— I guess, he said.

— It's why you hold on to everything.

Clay didn't throw out much, like matchbooks and coasters from old restaurants and bars that had closed, outdated business cards, and with these he first kept his father with him. There was dust at the back of his father's big desk that he let stay there. There was hair in his father's comb, which had been pushed to the back of the bathroom cabinet, so Clay collected the evidence in an envelope, and wondered later if he should have the DNA tested. What if his father weren't his father? Maybe there was someone alive out there for him, a father, but his mother disabused him of the possibility, and played the violin so consolingly that Morpheus himself bothered to carry him off to a better life. Now, scratches on a mahogany table that once nestled close to his father's side of the bed and his mother's yellowing music books, her sewing cushion with its needles tidily stuck where she'd pushed them last, marked matter-of-fact episodes and incidents in their lives, when accidents occurred or things happened haphazardly, causing nicks and dents, before death recast them as shrines.

How long has this scrap been in the corner of a bureau drawer, he might ask himself, did it have a history. He could read clues incorrectly, though it didn't matter to him if his interpretations were wrong, because there was no way to know, and it wasn't a crime, he wasn't killing anyone. Cornelia's habits were different, heuristically trained and developed in the editing room, where

she let go of dialogue and images, thousands of words and pictures every day, where she abandoned, shaped, or controlled objects more than he felt he could, ever.

At last. To last. Last remains. What lasts  
remains. What, last. Shroud of Turin, Torino  
mio, home to Primo, Levi knew the shroud.

In Clay's sophomore English classes, in which the students read George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* and Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, his charges contested the rules for punctuation and grammar and argued for spellings and neologisms they used on the Internet and in text-messaging. They preferred shorthand, acronyms, to regular English, they wanted speed. He argued for communication, commonality, and clarity, the three Cs, for knowing rules and then breaking them consciously, even conscientiously. He attempted to engage them, as he was engaged, in the beauties and mysteries of the history that lives in all languages. It's present, it's still available, he'd say. And, by tracing the root of a word and finding its origin in Latin, Greek, or Sanskrit, and then by delving into its etymology, they could find how meanings had shifted over the years through usage. A few students caught his fervor, he thought, and who knew what would happen to them as they grew up, maybe they'd discover that love, that attachment. Curiously, there were many more new words each year, an explosion added to recent editions of dictionaries, more proportionately than had previously entered editions of the tomes he revered, and yet he remembered, always, what the words once meant, their first meanings. Cornelia told him it was another way he hung on to the past, and grammar countered his internal mess.

The problem is proportion, Clay thought, how to live proportionately. He passed the bakery on his way home, maybe he'd buy cinnamon buns for him and Cornelia for breakfast, and, with an image of the pastries and her at the table, so that he could already taste morning in his mouth, he entered the store. It was busy as usual, and Clay waited on line, listening for the casual banter of the bakers, and, when he drew nearer to the long counter, he overheard Joey the baker's son.

— I'd kill all of them, nuke 'em, torture's too good for them.

Clay continued to wait, suspended in place, breathing in the bakery's inimitable perfume, when finally he reached the front of the line, where the baker's son smiled warmly, the way he always did.

— I got you the recipe, you pasty-faced poet, Joey said.

He always teased him, since they were kids. Clay thanked him, smiled, and asked for two cinnamon buns, and then Joey handed him the famous recipe

for sourdough bread, which in their family's version was littered with salty olive pieces. The cinnamon buns were still hot, fragrant. Fresh, Clay thought, fresh is a hard word to use, fresh or refreshed. There were suggestions, associations, and connotations always to words, he should stress this more to his students, because the connotations of a word often meant as much as its denotation, sometimes more, and there was ambiguity, ambiguity thrives, because words were the same as life.

Traces, stains, call it noir, in the shadows,  
torture for us. And the child, the hooded  
childhood. Fresh ambiguity to contradict  
contradictions, refresh what remains  
somewhere else.

The beat cops stationed themselves on the same corner, at the same time, so in a way they made themselves targets or spectacles, Clay thought, or even, by their presence, drew enraged, desperate civilians to them, the cops like a recipe for disaster.

Walking home, passing but not seeing the familiar, Clay looked over the ingredients. A teaspoon of balsamic vinegar, that may have been the secret the baker's family treasured for generations. Or the molasses and tablespoon of rum, that might have been their innovation. Cornelia wasn't in the apartment when he arrived home, she was the one who wanted the recipe, and the rooms felt emptier than usual.

He boiled water, brewed tea, opened the newspaper, couldn't look at the pictures or read the words, stared at the cabinets, they needed fresh paint. He'd cook tonight, a beef stew, because at the end of the day, he remembered the woman saying, everyone wants someone to cook for them. He stood up, and, without really thinking, opened a kitchen drawer and tossed the recipe in the back.

Lynne Tillman  
New York, March 2005