

Swann

CAROL SHIELDS



VINTAGE CANADA

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SWANN



CAROL SHIELDS



Vintage Canada

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SWANN



Cover

Also By Carol Shields

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Dedication

Epigraph

Sarah Maloney

Morton Jimroy

Rose Hindmarch

Frederic Cruzzi

The Swann Symposium

About the Author

The rivers of this country

Shrink and crack and kill
And the waters of my body
Grow invisible.

Mary Swann





As recently as two years ago, when I was twenty-six, I dressed in ratty jeans and a sweatshirt with lettering across the chest. That's where I was. Now I own six pairs of beautiful shoes, which I keep when I'm not wearing them, swathed in tissue paper in their original boxes. Not one of these pairs of shoes costs less than a hundred dollars.

Hanging in my closet are three dresses (dry clean only), two expensive suits and eight silk blouses in such colours as hyacinth and brandy. Not a large wardrobe, perhaps, but richly satisfying. I've read my Thoreau, I know real wealth lies in the realm of the spirit, but still I'm a person who can, in the midst of depression, be roused by the rub of a cashmere scarf in my fingers.

My name is Sarah Maloney and I live alone. Professionally—this is something people like to know these days—I'm a feminist writer and teacher who's having second thoughts about the direction of feminist writing in America. For twenty-five years we've been crying: *My life is my own*. A moving cry, a resounding cry, but what does it *mean*? (Once I knew exactly what freedom meant and now I have no idea. Naturally I resent this loss of knowledge.)

Last night Brownie, who was sharing my bed as he does most Tuesday nights, accused me of having a classic case of burn-out, an accusation I resist. Oh, I can be restless and difficult! Some days Virginia Woolf is the only person in the universe I want to talk to; but she's dead, of course, and she wouldn't like me anyway. Too flip. And Mary Swann. Also dead. Exceedingly dead.

These moods come and go. Mostly Ms. Maloney is a cheerful woman, ah indeed, indeed! And very busy. Up at seven, a three-kilometre run in Washington Park—see her yupping along in even metric strides—then home to wheat toast and pure orange juice. Next a shower, and then she gets dressed in her beautiful, shameful clothes.

I check myself in the mirror: *Hello there*, waving long, clean, unpolished nails. I'll never require make-up. At least not for another ten years. Then I pick up my purse-cum-briefcase, Italian, \$300, and sally forth. *Sally forth*, the phrase fills up my mouth like a bubble of foam. I'm attentive to such phrases. Needful of them, I should say.

I don't have a car. Off I go on foot, out into a slice of thick, golden October haze, down Sixty-second to Cottage Grove, along Cottage Grove, swinging my bag from my shoulder to give myself courage. Daylight muggings are common in my neighborhood, and I make it a point to carry only five dollars, a fake watch, and a dummy set of keys. As I walk along, I keep my Walkman turned up high. No Mozart now, just a little cushion of soft rock to help launch the day with hope and maybe protect me from evil. I wear a miraculous broad-brimmed hat. The silky hem of my excellent English raincoat hisses just at knee length. I have wonderful stockings and have learned to match them with whatever I'm wearing.

"Good morning, Dr. Maloney," cries the department secretary when I arrive at the university. "Good morning, Ms. Lundigan," I sing back. This formal greeting is a ritual only. The rest of the time I call her Lois, or Lo, and she calls me Sarah or Sare. She's the age of my mother and has blood-red nails and hair so twirled and compact it looks straight from the wig factory. Her typing is nothing less than magnificent. Clean, sharp, uniform, with margins that *zing*. She hands me the mail and a copy of my revised lecture notes.

Today, in ten minutes, Lord help me, I'll be addressing one hundred students, ninety of them women, on the subject of "Amy Lowell: An American Enigma." At two o'clock, after a quick cheer on pita, I'll conduct my weekly seminar on "Women in Midwestern Fiction." Around me at the table

will be seven bright postgraduate faces, each of them throwing off kilowatts of womanly brilliance, so that the whole room becomes charged and expectant and nippy with intelligence.

Usually, afterwards, the whole bunch of us goes off for a beer. In the taproom on Sixty-second we create a painterly scene, an oil portrait—women sitting in a circle, dark coats thrown over the backs of chairs, earrings swinging, elbows and shoulders keeping the composition lively, glasses held thoughtfully to thoughtful lips, rolling eyes, bawdiness, erudition.

They forget what time it is. They forget where they are—that they're sitting in a taproom on Sixty-second in the city of Chicago in the fall of the year in the twentieth century. They're too busy talking and thinking, defining terms, revising history, plotting their term papers, their theses, and their lives so that no matter what happens they'll keep barrelling along that lucent dotted line they've decided must lead to the future.

2

Last night my good friend Brownie—Sam Brown, actually—aged thirty, earning his living as a dealer in rare books, living in an Old Town apartment decorated in mission-revival fashion, son of a State of Maine farm labourer, dropped in to chat about the theme of castration in women's books. While I was demurring a little about the way in which he arrives at his critical judgments—like a noisy carpet sweeper darting under obscure chairs and tables—he dropped the golden name of Mary Swann. “You know Mary,” he announced, “is a prime example of the female castrator.”

That surprised me, though I knew Brownie had been reading Mary Swann's book, since I had lent him my only copy; and I demanded proof for his conclusion. He was prepared for this—he knows me so well, too well after all these months—and he pulled from his jacket pocket a piece of folded paper. Clearing his throat and holding his head to one side, he read:

A simple tree may tell

The truth—but

Not until

Its root is cut.

The bitter leaf

Attacks the stem,

Demands a brief

Delirium.

“Preposterous,” I said. “She's talking about societal and family connections and you're thinking about crude anatomy. Roots! Stems!”

He smiled, refolded his piece of paper, and invited me for a walk in the park. We set off into the cold, I in my winter things—knitted scarf, woolly hat—and with my collar turned up to my ears. He slipped my arm through Brownie's. Cordially. Affectionately.

I am fond of him, *too* fond, too fond by far, and he may well love me, but with an ardour sunk under a drift of vagueness, as though he's playing through that crinkled head of his scenes of formal conversations and encounters. He's too lazy, too preoccupied, too much a man who dallies and dreams and too given to humming under his breath that insouciant little tune that declares that nothing really *matters*. That is why I'm drawn to him, of course, seeing him as an antidote to my own passionate

seizures. For Brownie, today's castration theory will be tomorrow's soap bubbles. His mind, like little wooden shuttle, is forever thinking up theories to keep himself amused. Being amused is his chief ambition. And getting rich. Dear Brownie.

We walked along in silence for a few minutes, watchful for muggers, kicking the piles of fallen leaves. The cold was intense for so early in October. Brownie gave me a quick hug and, putting on his fake cockney accent, said, "I thought you'd be chuffed that I gave your bird a turn."

I am, I am, I told him. I'd been urging him for two years to read Mary Swann, ever since I wandered into his store on Madison Street, The Brown Study, and found no more than half a shelf of poetry. Inferior poetry. We had an argument that first day. Real money, he told me, big money, was in vintage comic books. He was depending on his Plastic Man collection to keep him in his old age. Poetry gave him pyloric spasms, economically speaking, and he only carried the biggies, Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost and that ilk. Volumes of poetry didn't sell, didn't move. Whereas a first edition of *The Sun Also Rises*.... And Updike. And lately, Ivy Compton-Burnett. I like to argue with Brownie about such things. He shouts. I shout back. An extra piquancy settles on us, a round little umbrella of heat. Still, one can't count on Brownie.

I like to think that my view of him is detached.

This man has serious limitations, I tell myself. I should overlook the cynical addiction to comic books. I should discount that smile, which flashes too readily, too indiscriminately. What is the value of a smile anyway?

Still he has a certain erudition, an appealing, splintery intelligence that, like the holes in his sweaters, conceals a painstaking grasp on the business of reality. Yes, but he is a lightweight; though he denies it, he thinks of a book as a commodity. Yet, a lightweight can be good company at times, especially when that lightweightedness is so arduously cultivated and so obviously a defence. Or is it? That shunting breath and laughter of his ripples with energy. But can he be trusted, a man whose brazen dances and performs and hoists itself on market trends and whimsical twenty-four-hour theories? No. Yes. Possibly.

I keep my objectivity about Brownie polished and at the ready, yet again and again it yields to his unaccountable happiness when in his company. Yes, but he is indolent. Ah, but under the indolence he has ambition. That may be, but it's a scheming ambition. Remember what he once said, that he cheated his own granny to make a buck. He cares for nothing. But why should he? Why should anyone? I don't altogether understand him, but what does understanding between people really mean—only that we like them or don't like them. I adore Brownie. But with reservations. Last night I was close to loving him, even though he dumped my Mary Swann into the same bathtub with Sigmund Freud. He didn't mean a word of it though; I could almost bet on it.

3

For a number of years, for a number of reasons, I had a good many friends I didn't really like. One of them was a fellow graduate student, a downy-cheeked boy-man called Olaf Thorkelson who kept hounding me to marry him. He was young, wise, opinionated, good, and joyful, but weak at the center. What I wanted was a man of oak. My mother had one, my grandmother had one, but at that time I had only Olaf.

I told him that I was afraid of marriage, that it could only lead to a house in Oak Park and the tennis club and twin beds and growing deaf. He said he could see my point, but that at least we could live

lovers. No, I said, that wouldn't be fair to him. He said he didn't care a fuck for fairness. I said the fairness was the rule I lived by. (A fugitive conscience is better than no conscience at all.) This went on all one spring and left me so exhausted that by June I had to go to bed for a week. Oh yes, the indomitable Sarah, slain by indecision.

The sight of me spread weakly in bed moved Olaf at last to guilt, and he urged me to go away for a bit and "think things through." His sister had a friend who owned a cottage on a lake in Wisconsin and since it was empty for the summer he would get me the key and put me on a Greyhound bus.

Two days later I was there, walking on a pebbly strip of beach and admiring the cleanliness of cirrus clouds and bright air. The cabin was a flimsy, friendly affair with wood floors that sloped and creaked and a fireplace so smoky and foul that on chilly nights I lit the cookstove instead for warmth.

I particularly loved that cookstove, the prepossessing way it stood away from the wall, all bulging girth and black radiance. The wondrous word *negritude* formed on my tongue as I opened its door and poked in newspaper and kindling and lit a match. At the top of its heat it shuddered and hissed like a human presence, and I thought how fortunate a woman I was to have such a good, natural, uncritical companion at this time in my life. All month I amused myself by making sweet soufflés—rum and apricot and lemon—and in that black hole of an oven they rose to perfection.

When I wasn't making soufflés I plunged into the singular pleasure of cottage housekeeping. There are rewards in cleaning things—everyone should know this—the corners of rooms, dresser drawers and such. I concocted a primitive twig broom and bashed joyfully at cobwebs and dustballs. A clothesline that I found stretched between two trees seemed to say to me: *Isn't life simple when pared down to its purities?* In the cabin, resting on an open shelf, were an eggbeater, a wooden spoon, an iron frying pan, four bowls, four cups, and a plastic dishpan, which I emptied out the door on to a patch of weeds. Swish, and it was gone.

The cabin had a screened porch where I took to sitting in the hottest part of the afternoon, attentive to the quality of filtered light and to the precarious new anchoring of my life plan. Serenity descended as the days wore on. I absorbed the sunny, freckled world around me. Olaf could be dealt with. His supple sexual bulk faded, giving way to a simple checklist. My thesis revision could also be managed and so could the next two years of my life; that was as wide a span of time as I cared to think about. The distance was the heaving, spewing lake, broad as a small sea and impossible to see across. The long afternoons dipped and shimmered. Flies grazed stupidly against the screen. "Hello, fellow creatures," I said, suspecting I was going blobby in the head but welcoming the sensation.

Seated in a wicker chair on that dim porch I seemed to inhabit an earlier, pre-grad-school, pre-Olaf self. My thesis, *The Female Prism*, and the chapter that had to be rewritten were forgotten, swirling away like the dishwasher. Instead there were trashy old magazines to read, piles of them in a mildewed wicker basket, and a shelf full of cottage novels with greenish, fly-spotted pages. I read my way through most of them, feeling winsomely trivial, feeling redemptively ordinary, and, toward the end of the month, at the end of the shelf, I discovered an odd little book of poems written by a woman named Mary Swann. The title of the book was *Swann's Songs*.

4

At that time Mary Swann had been dead for more than fifteen years. Her only book was this staple pamphlet printed in Kingston, Ontario, in 1966.

There are exactly one hundred pages in the book and the pages contain one hundred and twenty-fi-

poems. The cover design is a single musical note stamped on rather cheap grey paper. Only about twenty copies of *Swann's Songs* are known to have survived out of the original printing of two hundred and fifty—a sad commentary on literary values, Brownie says, but not surprising in the case of an unknown poet. How Mary Swann's book found its way down from Canada to a cottage on a lonely Wisconsin lake was a mystery, is a mystery. A case of obscurity seeking obscurity.

Even today Swann's work is known only to a handful of scholars, some of whom dismiss her as *poète naïve*. Her rhythms are awkward. Clunky rhymes, even her half-rhymes, tie her lines to the commonplace, and her water poems, which are considered to be her best work, have a prickly roughness that exposes the ordinariness of the woman behind them, a woman people claim had difficulty with actual speech. She was a farmer's wife, uneducated. It's said in the Nadeau area of Ontario that she spoke haltingly, shyly, and about such trivial matters as the weather, laying hens, and recipes for jams and jellies. She also crocheted doilies. I want to weep when I think of those hundreds of circular yellowing doilies Mary Swann made over the years, the pathetic gentility they represent and the desperation they hint at.

Her context, a word Willard Lang adores, was narrowly rural. A few of her poems, in fact, were originally published in the back pages of local newspapers: "A Line a Day," "Rimes for Our Times" and so on. It was only after she was killed that someone, an oddball newspaper editor named Frederic Cruzzi, put together and printed her little book, *Swann's Songs*.

Poor Mary Swann. That's how I think of her, *poor* Mary Swann, with her mystical ear for the turn of words, cheated of life, cheated of recognition. In spite of the fact that there's growing interest in her work—already thirty applications are in for the symposium in January—she's still relatively unknown.

Willard Lang, the swine, believes absolutely that Swann will never be classed as a major poet. He made this pronouncement at the MLA meeting last spring, speaking with a little ping of sorrow and sideways tug at his ear. Rusticity, he claimed, kept a poet minor and, sadly, there seemed to be no exceptions to this rule, Burns being a different breed of dog. My Mary's unearthly insights and spare musicality appear to certain swinish critics (Willard is not the only one) to be accidental and therefore, no more than quaint. And no modern academic knows what to do with her rhymes, her awful moon/June/September/remember. It gives them a headache, makes them snort through their noses. What can be done, they say, with this rustic milkmaid in her Victorian velours!

I tend to get unruly and defensive when it comes to those bloody rhymes. Except for the word clinkers (giver/liver) they seem to me no more obtrusive than a foot tapped to music or a bell ringing in the distance. Besides, the lines trot along too fast to allow weight or breath to adhere to the endings. There's a busy breedingness about them. "A Swannian urgency" was how I put it in my first article on Mary.

Pompous phrase! I could kick myself when I think about it.

I live in someone else's whimsy, a Hansel and Gretel house on a seventeen-foot lot on the south side of Chicago. Little paned casement windows, a fairy-tale door, a sweet round chimney and, on the roof cedar shakes pretending to be thatch. It's a wonderful roof, a roof that gladdens the eye, peaky and steep and coming down in soft waves over the windows with fake Anne Hathaway fullness. The house was built in 1930 by an eccentric professor of Elizabethan literature, a bachelor with severe scoliosis.

and a club foot, and after his death it was, briefly, a restaurant and then a Democratic precinct office. Now it's back to being a house. At the rear is an iron balcony (loosely attached, but I intend to have seen to) where I stand on fine days and gaze out over a small salvage yard crowded with scrap iron and a massive public housing project full of brawling families and broken glass.

I bought my freak of a house when the first royalties started coming in for *The Female Prism*. I had to live somewhere, and my lawyer, a truly brilliant woman named Virginia Goodchild, said it could only happen to a person once, turning a Ph.D. thesis into a bestseller, and that I'd better sink my cash fast into a chunk of real estate. She'd found me just the place, she said, the cutest house in a Chicagoland.

This house has been sweet to me, and in return I've kept it chaste; that is, I haven't punished it with gaiety. No posters or prayer rugs or art deco glass here, and no humanoid shapes draped in Indonesian cotton. I've got tables; I've got a more than decent Oriental rug; I've got lamps. (Lord, make me Spartan, but not yet.) In my kitchen cupboards I've got plates and cups that *match*. In the dining-room—admittedly only nine feet by nine feet, I've got—now this is possibly a *little* outré—a piano that used to sit in a bar at the Drake Hotel, and after I finish my paper on Swann for the symposium in January I intend to take a few piano lessons. Brownie says playing the piano is as calming as meditation and less damaging to the brain cells.

I hope so, because I've never been able to see the point of emptying one's mind of thought. Our thoughts are all we have. I love my thoughts, even when they take me up and down sour-smelling byways where I'd rather not venture. Whatever flickers on in my head is mine and I want it, all the blinking impulses and inclinations and connections and weirdness, and especially those bright purple flares that come streaming out of nowhere, announcing that you're at some mystic juncture or turning point and that you'd better pay attention.

Luckily for me, there have been several such indelible moments, moments that have pressed hard on that quirky narrative I like to think of as the story of my life. For example: at age eight, reading *The Wind in the Willows*. Then saying goodbye to my blameless father (bone cancer). At age fourteen reading Charlotte Brontë—Charlotte, not Emily. Then saying goodbye, but only tentatively as it turned out, to my mother, a woman called Gladys Shockley Maloney. Next, reading Germaine Greer. Then saying goodbye to my virginity. (Goodbye and goodbye and goodbye.) Then reading Marcel Schwob and discovering how a human life can be silently snuffed out. Next saying goodbye to Olaf and Oak Park and three months of marriage, and then buying my queer toy house downtown, which I fully intended to sell when the market turned. But unsignalled, along came one of those brilliant purple turning points.

It came because of my fame. My mother has never understood the fame that overtook me in my early twenties. She never believed it was really me, that mouth on the book jacket, yammering away. Neither, for that matter, did I. It was like going through an epidemic of measles, except that I was the only one who got sick.

Six months after *The Female Prism* appeared in the bookstores someone decided I should go on a book-promotion tour—as though a book that was number six on the nonfiction bestseller list needed further pumping up. I started out in Boston, then went to New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, then hopped to Louisville, skipped to Denver and Houston, and ended up one overcast afternoon on a TV talk show in L.A. The woman who interviewed me was lanky and menacing, wore a fur vest and was dangerously framed by lengths of iodine-glazed hair. To quell her I talked about the surrealism of scholarship. The pretensions. The false systems. The arcane lingo. The macho domination. The garrison mentality. The inbred arrogance.

She leaned across and patted me on the knee and said, “You’re not coming from arrogance, sweetie, you’re coming from naked need.”

Ping! My brain shuddered purple. I was revealed, uncloaked, and as soon as possible I crept back to Chicago, back to my ginger-cookie house on the south side, and made up my mind about one thing: that as long as I lived I would stay in this house. (At least for the next five years.) I felt like kissing the walls and throwing my arms around the punky little newel post and burying my face in its vulvular-like carving. This was home. And it seemed I was someone who needed a home. I could go into my little house, my awful neediness and I, and close the doors and shut the curtains and stare at my enduring clutter and be absolutely *still*. Like the theoreticians who currently give me a bad case of frenzies, I’d made a discovery: my life was my own, but I needed a place where I could get away from it.

6

God is dead, peace is dead, the sixties are dead, John Lennon and Simone de Beauvoir are dead, the women’s movement is dozing—checking its inventory, let’s say—so what’s left?

The quotidian is what’s left. Mary Swann understood that, if nothing else.

A morning and an afternoon and
Night’s queer knuckled hand
Hold me separate and whole
Stitching tight my daily soul.

She spelled it out. The mythic heavings of the universe, so baffling, so incomprehensible, but when squeezed into digestible day-shaped bytes, made swimmingly transparent. Dailiness. The diurnal unclouded and soluble. No wonder the first people on earth worshipped heavenly bodies; between the rising and the setting of the sun their little lives sprouted all manner of shadows and possibilities. Whenever I meet anyone new, I don’t say, “Tell me about your belief system.” I say, “Tell me about your average day.”

Dailiness to be sure has its hard deposits of ennui, but it is also, as Mary Swann suggests, redemptive. I busy my brain with examples.

Every day of his short life, for instance, my father pulled on a pair of cotton socks, and almost every day he turned to my mother and said, “Cotton lets the skin breathe.” He also made daily pronouncements on meat that had been frozen: “Breaks down the cell structure,” he liked to say. “Destroys the nutrients.” In the same way he objected to butter, white bread, sugar—“attacks the blood cells”—garlic (same reason), and anything that had green pepper in it.

He was otherwise a mild man, a math teacher in a west-side high school. His pale red hair, the drip of it over his small ears, his freckled neck and the greenish suits he wore in the classroom—all the things kept him humble. His small recurring judgements on garlic and green pepper were, I’ve come to see, a kind of vanity for him, an appetite that had to be satisfied, but especially the innocent meal by which he was able to root himself in the largeness of time. Always begin a newspaper on the editorial page, he said. Never trust a man who wears sandals or diamond jewellery. These small choices and strictures kept him occupied and anchored while the cancer inched its way along his skeleton.

My mother, too, sighing over her morning cup of coffee and lighting a cigarette, is simply digging

in for the short run. And so is my sister, Lena, with her iron pills and coke and nightly shot of Brahmi and Olaf with his shaving ritual, and Brownie with his daily ingestion of flattery and cash. Who can blame them? Who wants to? Habit is the flywheel of society, conserving and preserving and dishing up tidy, edible slices of the cosmos. And there's much to be said for a steady diet. Those newspaper advice-givers who urge you to put a little vinegar in your life are toying, believe me, with your sanity.

Every day, for instance, I eat a cheese on pita for lunch, then an apple. I see no reason to apologize for this habit. Around two-thirty in the afternoon Lois Lundigan and I share a pot of tea, alternating Prince of Wales, Queen Mary, and Earl Grey. She pours. I wash the cups. Sisterhood. Between three and five, unless it's my seminar day, I sit in my office at my desk and work on articles or plan my lectures. At five-thirty I stretch, pack up my beautiful briefcase, say good night to Lois and hit the pavement. The sun's still keyed up, hot and yellow. Every day I walk along the same route, past grimy shrubs and run-down stores and apartment buildings and trees that become leafier as I approach Fifth and seventh Street. About this time I start to feel a small but measurable buzzing in the brain that makes my legs move along in double time. There I am, a determined piece of human matter, but adrift on a busy street that has suddenly become a conduit—a pipeline possessing the power of suction. Something, a force more than weariness, is drawing me home.

There's no mystery about this; I know precisely what pulls me along. Not food or sex or rest or succour but the thought of the heap of mail that's waiting for me just inside my front door.

Among my friends I'm known as the Queen of Correspondence, maintaining, in this day of long distance phone calls and even longer silences, what is considered to be a vast network. This is my corner on quaintness. My crochet work. My apple sauce. Mail comes pouring in, national and international, postcards and air letters and queer stamps crowded together in the corners of bulging envelopes. Letters from old school friends await me or letters from sisters in the movement. Perhaps a scrawl from my six-year-old nephew, Franklin, and my real sister, Lena, in London. My editor in New York is forever showering me with witty, beseeching notes. Virginia Goodchild, my former lawyer, writes frequently from New Orleans where she now has her practice. Olaf, in Tübingen, keeps in touch. So do last year's batch of graduate students and the year before's, a sinuous trail of faces and words. There are always, always, letters waiting. A nineteenth-century plenitude. I tear them open, burn and freeze, I consume them with heathenish joy, smiling as I read, tapping my foot, and planning what I'll write back, what epics out of my ongoing life I'll select, touch up, and entrust to the international mails.

Mailless weekends are hell, but Monday's bounty partially compensates. Every evening I write a letter, sometimes two, while the rest of the world plays Scrabble or watches TV or files its nails or whatever the rest of the world does. I write letters that are graceful and agreeable, far more graceful and agreeable than I am in my face-to-face encounters. My concern, my well-governed wit, my closeness, my kindness all crowd to the fore, revealing that rouged, wrinkled, Russian-like persona that I like to think is my true self. (Pick up a pen and a second self squirms out.) The maintenance of my person and the whole getting and sending of letters provide necessary traction to my quotidian existence, give me a kick, a lift, a jolt, a fix, a high, a way of seizing time and keeping it in order.

Today there's a thick letter from Morton Jimroy in California. A four-pager or I'm an elephant's eyebrow. I can't get it open fast enough. There I stand, reading it, still in my coat and hat with my beautiful briefcase thrown down on the floor along with the mutilated envelope.

I read it once, twice, then put it aside. While eating dinner—a boned chicken breast steamed with grapefruit juice and a branch of broccoli *al dente*—I read it a third time. I've been writing to Morton Jimroy for almost a year now and find him a teasing correspondent.

Today's letter is particularly problematic, containing as it does one of Jimroy's ambushingly suggested suggestions. I'll wait exactly one week before I reply and then—now I'm eating dessert, which is a slice of hazelnut torte from the local bakery—I'll send him one of my two-draft specials.

It's a guilty secret of mine that I write two kinds of letters, one-drafters and two-drafters. For old friends I bang out exuberant single-spaced typewritten letters, all the grammar jangled loose with dashes and exclamation points and reckless transitions. Naturally, I trust these old friends to read my letters charitably and overlook the awful girlish breathlessness and say to themselves, "Well, Sarah leads such a busy life, we're lucky to get *any* kind of letter out of her."

But in my two-draft letters I mind my manners, sometimes even forsaking my word-processor for the pen. Only yesterday I wrote a double-drafter to Syd Buswell in Ottawa. "Dear Professor Buswell," I wrote. "On behalf of the Steering Committee of the Swann Symposium, may I say how much we regret that you will not be presenting your paper in January. Nevertheless, we hope you will attend and participate in discussions." I keep myself humble, am mindful of paragraph coherence, and try for a tincture of charm.

For Morton Jimroy, *the* Morton Jimroy, biographer of Ezra Pound, John Starman, and now Mary Swann, I get out my best paper and linger over my longhand, my lovely springy I's and e's, aglide on their invisible blue wires. And I always do a second draft.

Once again—now I'm having coffee, feet up on the coffee table—I read Jimroy's letter. Though his home is in Winnipeg, Canada, this letter is from California where he's spending a year putting together his notes on Mary Swann. Today's letter, like his others, is imbued with a sense of pleading, but for what?—who can tell? His are letters from which the voice has been drained off, and instead there's a strenuous concentration, each casual phrase propped up by rhetoric and positioned so as to signal candour—but a candour undercut by the pain of deliberate placement. Ring around the roses. How am I supposed to interpret all this? Painstaking letters are born of pain; I must be generous, must overlook transparent strategy, stop sniffing for a covert agenda. But there's something unsettling in the way he's always wringing a response from me. I am summoned, commanded to comment and offer comfort and offer gifts of flattery.

He has one rare quality that I suspect is genuine: an urge for confession, or at least intimacy. We've never met and have no claims on each other, and there's no real reason for him to tell me about the depression he suffered after his book on Starman was published, a long painful depression, which—I told me all this in a previous letter—neither medication nor analysis was able to heal.

My dear Sarah,

I am someone who can understand how Flaubert must have felt when seized with doubt about the validity of art, his terrifying perception—false, thank God—that art was nothing but a foolish and childish plaything. This was exactly the state of my mind when Oxford Press sent me my advance copy of the Starman biography some years back. It arrived, I remember, at breakfast time—forgive me if I've written this before—swathed in a padded envelope. I opened it at once, regarded its gleaming cover and experienced—nothing. The granola and milk in my bowl had more reality than this pound and a half of text with its appendices, its execrable, sprawling annotation, and, worst of all, its footnotes. These footnotes, I realized at that moment, were footnotes on Starman's footnotes. And I could imagine what would occur in the future, as surely as day must follow night: a graduate student would one day construct footnotes on *my* footnotes to *Starman's* footnotes. The thought brought a physical sense of shame. I felt not only self-disgust but the fierce sadness of a wasted life, the conviction that I had done nothing but dally with the dallyings of other human beings. Such a feeling of depression—perhaps you know, though I hope you don't—can be swift and overwhelming. It seemed to me at that moment that not a single man on earth had ever spoken the truth. We were all, every last one of us, liars and poseurs.

Ah, but on that same morning, in the same lot of mail, came the latest issue of *PMLA* (a periodical, by the way, that I often feel contributes to the gastritis of the lit business). On this particular morning I opened the journal to your article on Swann. Who is this Mary Swann? I wondered. And who is this Sarah Maloney? I read quickly through your introduction to *our* poet. And then came to those eight quoted lines from “March Morning.” (By coincidence, it was a March morning, a murky, tenebrous Winnipeg morning.) Reading, I felt a oneness with this Mary Swann. (I never think of her by her Christian name alone, do you?) I felt that same “Iron flower of my hand/Cheated by captured ice and/Earth and sand.” (I have little patience with those who consider Swann a primitive because she didn’t use four-syllable words. She was—is—a poet of great sophistication of mind.) But it was the vigour of the lines that struck me at first, the way they shifted and worked together, cross-bonded like plywood sheets. (You see how she infects me with her colloquial images.) My only disappointment was in finding she had written so little, though one is grateful for what does exist, and there are the love poems to come—if they come, I’ve never trusted Lang—and, of course, the notebook.

About Swann’s notebook, I am wondering once again if I can persuade you to change your mind about sharing its contents, at least partially. My research here has gone extremely well, but I’ve been frustrated by having to rely on secondary and tertiary sources almost exclusively. (Swann’s daughter, whom I’ve been interviewing, is a woman of opaque memory and curious insensitivity—she has, for instance, saved only the most cursory notes from her mother, not the confiding letters that I am sure must have existed.) It seems to me that a page or two from the notebook—I would of course pay for photocopying and so on—would bring our graceful Swann out of the jungle of conjecture and, as she herself would say —

Into the carpeted clearing
Into the curtained light
Behind the sun’s loud staring
Away from the sky’s hard bite.

Do, Sarah, let me know if this request from a fellow scholar is impertinent. I feel, and I am sure you will agree with me, that Mary Swann belongs to all of us, to the world, that is—her poems, her scraps and ciphers, her poor paltry remains.

It now looks as though I will be able to come to the symposium after all, and I will be happy to deliver a few remarks, as you suggest, on the progress of the Life. I am sorry to hear that Buswell has cancelled, though it seems a trifle paranoid of him to think his notes were stolen. Mislaid, perhaps; but—stolen!

I so look forward to meeting you in person, though I know you already as a dear friend. Such is the power and warmth of your letters.

With affection

Morton Jimroy

He’s ingenious, Morton Jimroy. But worrying. Every sentence, the way it shapes itself around a tiny tucked grimace—I feel the weight of it all. (Lifting the paper to my face I inhale the faint smell of cigarettes.) I will have to write him a careful letter. (Now I’m dressed in the old sweatshirt I wear in bed, part of my dark ritual. I’ve already phoned Brownie to whisper good night, and I’ve propped myself up in bed with my reading light shining over my shoulder.) I will have to tell the good persevering Morton Jimroy how pleased I was to hear from him, how warmed I was to hear him assert once again, that it was I who introduced him to the work of Mary Swann. All of this is true. It will flow out of my pen untroubled.

But I will have to say *no* to him about the notebook. Politely. Correctly. But conceding nothing. No, Morton. I cannot. I am sorry, Morton. I regret. I wish. I understand your position. But no, no, no, no. I am not yet ready to publish the contents of Mary Swann’s notebook.

Dear Morton. (I’m sliding into sleep, adrift between layers of consciousness.) Dear Morton. So the prima facie evidence will be in the public domain, available to all, et cetera, et cetera, but now, for

Happiness is not my greatest need. My greatest need is to feel that every part of me is fully in use, *engagé* as people used to say a mere ten years ago, and that all my sensory equipment is stretched nervously as possible between a state of apprehension and a posture of pounce. I want my brain to be all sinew and thrum, chime and clerestory, crouch and attack.

Which more or less describes my condition on Saturday, a gilded October afternoon, when I attended a new exhibition of pencil drawings executed by my extraordinary friend and sometime mentor, Peggy O'Reggis.

I had spent a frivolous morning in bed with Virginia Woolf, lunched on herrings in sour cream, and then taken the bus down to the Dearborn Gallery. By the time I got there the room was filled with a zesty mix of friends and strangers, mostly between the ages of twenty and forty, all of them chatting and nodding their heads, embracing, drinking wine and peering with squinty eyes into Peggy's tiny crowded drawings, which always remind me of snapshots of the brain's prescient vibrations. The colours she favours include a lollipop pink and a rich oily green, and what she draws are ideas. With resolute angular turnings, each pencil line duplicates the way that precious commodity *thought* is launched and transformed. Here there was a calculated mimetic thrust, there a microscopic explosion of reason, here an intellectual equation of great tenderness and, next to it, a begging void exerting its airy magnetism.

As in her previous exhibitions, the drawings were all titled—for which, being part of the work of our culture, I thanked God. Images can speak, yes, but some of us need to be directed toward the port of entry. Yet there's never anything authoritarian about Peggy's titles, just a nudging, helpful suggestion: "Untroubled Night" or "Open Heart" or, the one I most admired yesterday, "Vision Intercepted."

Standing before "Vision Intercepted" with my glass of red wine in hand, I experienced that sharp electrical fusing that sometimes occurs when art meets the mind head-on. Beside me, sharing my brief flight of transcendence, were a yellow-haired woman in a rawhide jacket and my old friend Stephen Stanhope, the juggler. We didn't speak, not even to exchange greetings, but instead continued to gaze at the drawing. The moment stretched and stretched, the kind of phenomenon that happens so rarely that the experience of it must be cherished in silence and persuaded to linger as long as possible.

And so, riding home on the bus, I gave myself over to the closed eye's bright penetration, trying to call back the image of Peggy O'Reggis's circling, colliding lines and colours. A pattern or perhaps a sensual vibration began to dance across my retina and grope toward form. I summoned it, let it emerge, luxuriously let it have its way. But something kept spoiling my satisfaction, some nagging thought or worrying speck at the periphery of vision. I opened my eyes. The sun poured in the dirty windows, warming my arm. A woman with a blanket-wrapped baby on her lap sat across from me, a slender, long-necked black woman with amber eyes, clearly infatuated with her child's beauty. With her free hand she stroked its knitted blanket. The baby made cooing sounds like a little fish and stared dreamily up into an advertisement for men's jockey shorts. In the ad, a man with a bulging crotch was leaping over a bonfire, an expression of rapture on his daft face. He and the small baby and the baby's mother and I seemed suddenly to form one of those random, hastily assembled families that are hatched in the small spaces of large cities and come riding atop a compendium of small pleasures. But today's pleasures, pungent though they were, made me less willing than usual to surrender my earli-

perception.

What was it that was getting in the way? I poked part way into my subconscious, imagining a pen in my hand. There was my usual catalogue of shame. Wasted time? Careless work? Had I forgotten to call my mother?—no. Shopping to be done? Someone’s feelings hurt?

Guilt has the power to extract merciless sacrifices, but it was not guilt that was interfering with my attempt to bring back the voluptuous sensation that briefly enclosed me in the Dearborn Gallery. It was something smaller and less formed, an act of neglect or loss that scuttled like an insect across my consciousness and that, because of the wine or the wooziness of the sunshine, I was unable to remember.

Later it came to me. It was midnight of the same day. I was ready to go to bed, but first I was locking the doors, checking the windows, turning out the lights, listening to the silence and darkness that blew through the house. My thoughts were of Mary Swann, how she must also have performed her night rituals, though not the same ones as mine. I tried to imagine what these rituals might be. Might she have looked out the kitchen window into the windy, starry night, trying to guess at the next day’s weather? Would she hook a screen door or perhaps set a kettle of soup or oats on the back of the woodstove? Perhaps there was a cat or dog that had to be let out, though she had never in her poems or in her notebook mentioned such a cat or dog.

And then I remembered—Lord!—what had been begging all day to be remembered. It was Mary Swann’s notebook, which I keep on a bookshelf over my bed. I had not seen it there for several days.

8

In a sense I invented Mary Swann and am responsible for her.

No, too literary that. Better just say I discovered Mary Swann. Even Willard Lang admits (officially, too) that I am more or less—he is endlessly equivocal in the best scholarly tradition—*more or less* the discoverer of Swann’s work. He has even committed this fact to print in a short footnote on page six of his 1983 paper “Swann’s Synthesis,” naming me, Sarah Maloney of Chicago, as the one “most responsible for bringing the poet Mary Swann to public attention.” This mention of Willard’s part is an academic courtesy and no more.

Ah, but Willard’s kind of courtesy amounts to a professional sawing off, a token coin dropped in my bank to permit future withdrawals. Willard Lang’s nod in my direction—“S. Maloney must be cited as the one who”—is a simple declaration of frontier between authority and discovery, Willard being the authority, while S. Maloney (me) is given the smaller, slightly less distinguished role of discoverer.

In truth, no one really discovers anyone; it’s the stickiest kind of arrogance even to think in such terms. Mary Swann discovered herself, and therein, suspended on tissues of implausibility, like a hammock without strings, hangs the central mystery: how did she do it? Where in those bleak Ontario acres, that littered farmyard, did she find the sparks that converted emblematic substance into rolling poetry? Chickens, outhouses, wash-day, woodpiles, porch, husband, work-boots, overalls, bedstead, filth. That’s the stuff this woman had to work with.

On the other hand, it’s a legacy from the patriarchy, a concomitant of conquest, the belief that poets shape their art from materials that are mysterious and inaccessible. Women have been knitting socks for centuries, and probably they’ve been constructing, in their heads, lines of poetry that never got written down. Mary Swann happened to have a pen, a Parker 51 as a matter of fact, as well as an eye for the surface of things. Plus the kind of heart-cracking persistence that made her sit down at the end

of a tired day and box up her thoughts into quirky parcels of rhymed verse.

~~It was an incredible thing for a woman in her circumstances to do, and in the face of so much~~ implausibility I sometimes chant to myself the simple list that braces and contains her. Girlhood in Belleville, Ontario; schooling limited; nothing known about mother; or father; worked for a year in a local bakery; married a farmer and moved to the Nadeau district, where she bore a daughter, wrote poems, and got herself killed at the age of fifty. That's all. How Jimroy intends to boil up a book out of this thin stuff is a mystery.

My own responsibility toward Mary Swann, as I see it, is custodial. If Olaf Thorkelson hadn't badgered me into near breakdown and driven me into the refuge of northern Wisconsin where Mary Swann's neglected book of poems fell like a bouquet into my hands, I would never have become Mary Swann's watchwoman, her literary executor, her defender and loving caretaker. But, like it or not, that's what I am. Let others promote her and do their social and psychoanalytical sugarjobs on her; but does anyone else—besides me that is—detect the little smiles breaking around her most dolorous lines? Willard Lang, swine incarnate, is capable of violating her for his own gain, and so is the absent-minded, paranoid, and feckless Buswell in Ottawa. Morton Jimroy means well, poor sap, but he'll try to catch her out or bend her into God's messenger or the handmaiden of Emily Dickinson; or else he'll stick her into a three-cornered constellation along with poor impotent Pound and that prating, penitentiary-dragging Starman. Someone has to make sure she's looked after. Because her day is coming. Never mind what Willard Lang thinks. Mary Swann is going to be big, big, big. She's the right person at the right time for one thing: a woman, a survivor, self-created. A man like Morton Jimroy wouldn't be bothering with her if he didn't think she was going to take off. Willard wouldn't be wasting his time organizing a symposium if he didn't believe her reputation was ripe for the picking. These guys are greedy. They would eat her up, inch by inch. Scavengers. Brutes. This is a wicked world, and the innocent need protection.

Which is why I find it impossible to forgive myself for losing her notebook.

9

It's been lost for several days. Since Monday probably, maybe Tuesday.

I'm not willing yet to admit that it is *irretrievably* lost; it is just—what?—misplaced. Any day now, tomorrow maybe, I'll find it under a pile of letters in my desk drawer. It might have got slipped into a bookcase, it's so small, one of those little spiral notebooks the colour of cheap chocolate. It's just waiting, perversely, to surprise me one day when I least expect it. It might be under a corner of a rug. Or right out in plain sight somewhere, only my eyes are too frantic to focus on the spot.

I'm not a careless person, though I remind myself a dozen times a day, as a kind of palliative commentary, that this is not the first thing I've lost. Once, when I was married to Olaf, I lost my wedding ring. I was devastated, almost sick, and hadn't been able to tell Olaf about it because I knew he would see it as a portent; and there it was, two weeks later, in a little ceramic dish where I kept my paperclips. Another time I lost my first-edition copy of *The Second Sex*, which I'd bought at Stanton for ten bucks back in the good old days. For months I'd wandered around like a mad woman wrenching cushions off chairs and wailing to the walls, "Books don't just get up and walk away." In the spring a dear friend, Lorenzo Drouin, the medievalist, found it wedged behind a radiator in my living-room.

About the lost notebook my mother is sympathetic but vague. She asks if I've checked the pocket

of my raincoat or lent it to a friend or thrown it out with the newspapers—preposterous suggestion all, the utterance of which points to her essential helplessness and to how little she understands my life. “It’ll turn up,” she murmurs and murmurs, my comforting plump spaniel of a mother. But I am helpless, helpless.

I visit my mother every Sunday. On Sunday morning in the city of Chicago other people wake up thinking: How will this day be spent? What surprises will it bring? Sunday is a day with a certain lustre on it, a certain hum. The unscheduled hours seduce or threaten, depending on circumstances, of money or friends or on health or weather; but there is always, I’m convinced, an anticipatory rustle, a curtain sliding open onto possibility.

Not for me, though. You might say I’m a professional daughter, or at least a serious hobbyist. On Sundays I get on the L and go to see my mother, who lives in a third-floor apartment on the west side. She expects me at 1:00 P.M. give or take five minutes. She watches from the window as I come trotting down the tree-lined street, slips the brass chain off the lock, and enfolds me in her heat-seeking feathery arms, saying, “Hi there, sweetie pie.”

Immediately the two of us sit down in the dinette to a full dinner, roast chicken or ham with mashed potatoes, frozen peas or string beans, and for dessert ice cream in a cereal bowl. My mother and I talk and talk, and if I stop now to think of those scattered others outside in the streets or parks of Chicago who are freely disposing of the day, it’s with scornful pity. The beckoning Sunday spaces are revealed in all their dinginess. Whatever possibilities had winked and chattered in the morning have by this time dried up, and here sit I, the luckiest of women, brimming with home-cooked food and my mother’s steady, unfocused love.

Nevertheless, I’m full of jumps and twitches today.

“Something’s bothering you,” she divines.

“That idiotic notebook,” I rage. “I still can’t find the damn thing.”

“Oh, dear.” The mildest profanity confuses her. “Let me give you some more coffee. It’ll calm you down.”

My mother’s the only person I know who believes coffee possesses tranquilizing properties. She lifts the coffee pot, holds on to the lid, and pours. Light filters through the Venetian blind. Above her head, on a small shelf, is her row of Hummel figurines and Delft plates. Also a small Virgin Mary, rather crowded to one side, which she was given as a young girl. (I’d be a better woman if I didn’t notice such things.) My mother’s dressed today in a pantsuit, her new coral double-knit, which is generously cut and comfortable around the hips. She never wore pants until she was in her late fifties, then her legs lost their shapeliness, overnight becoming straight and thick as water pipes. Her grey hair is always combed and pinned in place to form a roll at the back of her head; if this roll of hair were pinned a mere eighth of an inch higher, it would be stylish instead of matronly. Still, she takes pains with her appearance. Even when she’s home alone in her apartment, she wears lipstick, a bright pink shade, and a touch of blue eye shadow. She also wears large button earrings; she likes silver; not real silver, of course—she’s never been able to see the sense of expensive jewellery. She owns about twenty pairs of these large round earrings, which she keeps on a clear plastic earring rack on her bureau.

All that stands between my mother and me are trivial preferences of diet and reading matter and decor. I don’t own an earring rack like the one on her bureau, and she has never heard of Muriel Rukeyser. And what else? Not much. A scholarship, a few exams, some letters after my name instead of before. (*Mrs.*—she would like me to be a *Mrs.*)

“How’s that pain in your side?” I ask, to change the subject. “What did LeBlanc have to say about

that?"

"Dr. LeBlanc?" Her sly courtesy. "He just said we'd have to keep an eye on it." She shakes her head, trying hard to look merry. "But you know, I think it's going away, the pain."

"That's good."

"Yes, I've got a feeling —"

"It's not keeping you awake then?"

"Heavens no, you know me, I sleep like a log."

"Last Sunday you said —"

"Nothing wrong with my sleep. I've always been a good sleeper."

"Hmmm," I say, knowing my mother's habits, how she stays up until two every morning watching TV talk shows, and then is wide awake by six-thirty, sitting at the table, her heavy shoulders erect over a bowl of All-Bran, a cup of coffee before her, alert for the seven o'clock news coming out of her kitchen radio, ready to reach for her first cigarette of the day.

My mother has weathered life reasonably well, upheld, my sister and I believe, by her natural inclination toward sadness and turned by it into a kind of postulant, fumbling her way through small, meaningless acts of contrition. She always seems fresh from the country of tears, though I haven't seen her cry openly since Olaf and I announced our divorce. The divorce cast her down, perhaps because she perceived some motive unconfessed. My sister's divorce caused similar alarm and confusion but, except for my father's death and the two divorces, her sadness seems starved for particulars. Like a spider who eats her mate, she has absorbed the sadness of the world into her heavy bones and bloodstream. It's always there, like a low-grade fever.

I'm amazed by how, despite it, she manages. She reads the newspapers, goes to mass, plays canasta. Today she's leaning on the table and talking calmly about the price of baby-beef liver. After that she tells me about an article in the back of the leisure section of the newspaper: how to remove thrips from gladiolus bulbs.

I know what she suffers from: she suffers from "it." The nameless disease. An autumnal temperament. Constitutional melancholy. *Ennui*. *Angst* is close, the word I'd use if it weren't such a cheap scrubbing-brush of a word. I once tried to explain *Angst* to my mother, who said she found the idea of it incomprehensible. But existential anxiety is what she has, a bad case, a suspicion—she would never acknowledge it—of emptiness at the heart of life.

I imagine that my father watched with bewilderment the spectre of this large, perpetually grieving woman. My coked-up sister, Lena, has been driven by it to fits of self-indulgence, new cities, new lovers, and a series of bizarre jobs. And I've been forced into a kind of reckless ebullience; my mother's malaise, or whatever it is, has declared that the regions of despair must be forever closed to me, and that the old Sarah Maloney, dimly remembered even by me, is far behind—that mild Catholic daughter, that reader of Thomas Hardy, with shoulder-length hair and wide pleated skirts. Another Sarah has taken over, twenty-eight, sanguine, expectant, jaunty, bluffing her way. Her awful sprightly irrepressible self appals me.

How does it happen that this giddy girl and tenacious scholar inhabit the same small swervy body? A good question. A *meaty* question. Unanswerable.

I kiss my mother goodbye energetically, praise her cooking, tell her to look after herself, remind her of her doctor's appointment, and then go swinging off down the street. The light, so lurid and promising earlier in the day, is feeble now, and the trees look misshapen, as though they've been recycled from dead brush. Autumn. This is a time of day I particularly like and feel attuned to. The narrow passageway, dilated just for me. The word *crepuscular* pops into my head, then disintegrates.

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