

CHICKEN ICARUS

by Carol Emshwiller

I keep thinking there must be some place for me somewhere. I keep thinking of some kind of gelatin land, some puddingly spot all viscous, muculent, where the air is thick and wet as water. I wouldn't even ask to be able to fly around in it I'd be happy just to ooze along the bottom as long as it was nothing like floors or mattresses or pillows. But the way it is around here you can get pretty bored with gravity.

"Down with downness," I say.

I keep thinking about this sticky-slippery kind of land but I think about legs too, a lot more than I think about arms. I don't know why. Maybe because I always hear walking sounds. Around the house I hear the floors creak and thump, accepting feet. Outside, the lady's heels tick-tock, tick-tock, measuring out time in distance covered. Steps per minute about sixty-five, breaths twenty, heartbeats seventy-two. It takes me ten heartbeats to cross my mattress. Rolling. Well, more like five heartbeats or four. Four little bird heartbeats. (I exaggerate myself, but sometimes I feel pretty exaggerated.)

Doorknobs, on/off switches, buttons, zippers, drawer pulls, toe-nail scissors, the little thumb screws that hold my reading stand, the handles on the sides of my mattress, the armholes of my shirt, even birds . . . When they sit along the wires they remind me of feet, robins-red-breasted feet cut off just above the ankle; flying, they remind me of feather fingered hands flip-flopping themselves into the sky, palms down. For them the air is thick enough.

But I have one thing.

When I was young I felt the world two ways, by mouth and by that one impetuous finger (I cannot say between my legs) that would rise up in curiosity at any interesting texture or temperature. Now it seems not so inquisitive. But then, it has already tested cotton, wool, wood, paper, the wall, the floor, the reading stand and so forth. It has ventured, omnivorous can one say? into holes in the sheet. It has examined the interior of a velvet purse (silk lined). It has pushed a toy car. It has entered a shoe. All this in its younger days.

There is, in my world also—well, it isn't really *my* world. As I said, mine would have to be a lot slushier. Anyway, I've got balance, rolling, flopping and the arching of the back. Balance I have never completely mastered. I suppose I should mention other small diversions such as defecating, urinating, the blinking of eyes, the wiggling of ears and watching TV.

And I've got drama too. Down the hall at five o'clock or so comes Mrs. Number One all dressed up like a nurse. I think I must, at some time, have been bought outright, else why does she keep me on like this? She doesn't get paid any more. Who would pay her? And what do I give in exchange for the emptying of bed pans or a lift into the bathroom, for food so considerately cut up so I can feed myself? Why, only what I can give. She likes it with brute force. "Rape, rape," she says, but not loud enough to attract attention outside of my little room.

I bounce her on the point of my one and only (or she makes me believe I do). Actually, I couldn't rape an old glove. At the time I think I would not trade this one for any other protuberance, but afterwards I think two legs are well worth one of these. However, the price is too high. If I had three of them it might be possible to come to some terms, but one, even as well functioning as this . . . No sale!

Rape, rape, to me was Run, run.

That day (the day she locked the door and said, "If you ever tell...") But there wasn't anybody *to* tell. I think I was forgotten the moment I was born.)—that day I thought I knew what running felt like. This was skimming over the earth, rampant, halfway to the ceiling with only the soles of the feet touching bottom. This was one foot, lightly, before the other, the swing of the leg underneath, the body riding smoothly on top of it all (amazing), the counterbalancing arms, back and forth, the toes giving a last push-off, the knee raised, bent, the foot circling upward, pivoting out, falling ahead to catch the ground, then pushing off again, and so on. Hundreds of take-offs, and that's what this was too, a hundred take-offs until I flew into the air, but I came to rest again, flat upon the mattress.

I suppose she was grateful. One of us was.

She has been my nurse since God-knows-when, since before I knew what a calendar was or that time was anything but fresh sheets now and then. I must have been about ten, a backward, slobbery ten when she came, squashing about on her nursing shoes. She squeaks when she

turns. She bites into the floor, squashily saw-toothed, as if she felt as I do about the surfaces of things. Maybe she wanted me to have a better view of those aqueous soles of hers because the first thing she did was to have my mattress put upon the floor. I admit I gained in freedom and that my distances could then be measured. I learned that the wearing down at the heel was a long time.

But Mrs. Number One isn't the only person in my life. There is a Miss Number Two, oh yes, and quite beautiful, too, Miss Spanish eyes, Miss—I wonder if it would make any difference if Mrs. Number One were beautiful—Miss White Gloves (the white gloves just in case she might, by some mistake, touch me). She came to me fresh from racing cars, mountain tops, airplanes, at least it seemed so to me, but I see things from a floorish point of view. Everything may look like that from here.

What she brought first were the ABCs, then *Run, Tom, Run*, then *The Easy to Read Book of Far Away Places*, and all the way up to books-of-the-month and Shakespeare.

I think that Miss Number Two is, most probably, my sister. Not that there's ever been anything sisterly-brotherly between us, but I have a hundred clues. The most obvious, that she's always been around, one way or another, in a sneaky way even before she came to me with her books and that Nefertiti tip of her head. I remember a breezy kid not much younger than myself in a tree outside my window, blue jeans, red shirt, sticking out her tongue at me, and I happy that the gesture was one I could return. Now and again I remember a furious voice from some other part of the house screeching for her to "Get down, my God, get down." I remember an eye, brown, lustrous, like a little mouse nose waiting at the crack in the door, sometimes during my bath. I even remember the knob turning and the door opening to make that crack. Later a decision was made, out of a sense of obligation or out of resentment, and she, or someone else, decided and she came to me, I cannot say with happiness. I think I was happier before, and then, with five o'clock drama, everything might have seemed complete to me. No, it wasn't happiness and she knew it.

And yet I count on her for my salvation. If anyone is going to rescue me I know it will have to be bold Miss Number Two and, even though I first approached Mrs. Number One, it is Number Two I had in mind all the time. I was afraid. I was in such a cold sweat of hope that I didn't dare to go to Number Two and I didn't even mention to Number One what I really had in mind.

What a vision I had then ... I still have. I see myself in a bright and revealing costume, all Harlequin colors and diamond shapes. I am in a stall with streamers, festoons and flags, American flags ... no, flags of all nations. I belong to the world. Loud speakers on the roof send out fanfares interspersed with Handel's Fireworks music and I, highlighted with a pinkish spotlight, perform upon my mattress such movements as I can perform (and many of these require the utmost skill and concentration). After the day's work, and I do think I can call it work, I see myself in a close and comfortable association with the rubber man, the fat lady, the human pin cushion and the half-man, half-woman.

Though I have this grand vision in mind, and really even grander than this for I see myself as a champion of champions, though I have this vision, I decided that I would ask only that Mrs. Number One should borrow a camera and should take a dozen pictures of me from various angles and in various poses. I thought I could not only use these in some way as an advertisement of myself, but also to get some real idea of myself since I had, so far, never seen myself in any way at all. It was from the pictures that I thought I could make my further decisions about my future. It's true that it's hard to be really self-evaluating but I thought I might judge well enough if I detracted a certain percentage for too much self-love and another equal percentage for self-hate. The good thing about photographs would be that any initial shock I might have at my first real view of myself could be gotten over by getting used to the pictures. I felt I might get enlargements made and I would have Number One tack some along the walls and I promised myself I would make no decisions whatsoever for at least two weeks of living with them. Then I hoped to be able to look at myself with a truly cold eye.

She agreed. No arguments. Not a blink or shiver. No ambiguous glances, irresolute phrases or imponderable sighs. "Okay," she said, and yet days passed and nothing happened. Finally I approached her firmly, my eyes as my only weapon though they couldn't even stop her bustling about, swishing away non-existent spots on the dresser front, picking little black threads off the rug. Yes, even at my five o'clock drama she is all business, that busy business of getting herself "raped" by me. Maybe she thinks it's part of her job, and yet now she keeps me all on her own as if I am something she dressed up to amuse herself with, nothing but her backroom dildoe.

Maybe this sex is *my* job.

But suppose I was inherited after my mother's death. Did I come with the house? A condition of its ownership? And I wonder if my mother,

herself, could have paid for that first time? Or Miss Number Two? Did Mrs. Number One really say not to tell?

Impossible to know whose obligation this drama is, mine or Mrs. Number One's. No use wondering. I'll keep on doing my duty, or she hers, and I don't think that I, at least, will ever be able to find out. (But if I had anything more than just this one thing, then I could. One dactylic protuberance more to pit against the other in some way, one threat, one appeasement, one offering, one retreat, one gesture, one decline, one weapon other than this one, then I could find out who is the willing one and who the slave.)

However...

... at this time I said to her that I believed she had no intention of going through with this photography business at all.

What I lacked, she told me then . . . "probably due to your environment . . . you can't be expected ... so naive . . . not like the rest of us . . ." and so on and on. What I lacked, it all came down to, was Good Taste, capital G, capital T, otherwise I would have known that a picture of myself would be an Oh-so-gross violation of propriety and could certainly serve no good purpose either to others or to me, so, she said, she had decided from the beginning not to do it for my own good (as well as for everyone's) but I had been so forceful, so firm, she hadn't known how to argue with me ... at that time, at least. She was, of course, terribly sorry about the whole thing. But, besides, what would the man who printed the pictures say? Chances were he wouldn't return them. Society sees to such things, she said. There are censors at work, even on photos, whether I knew it or not. (Can I, somehow, be lewd simply existing like this? Do I lie here on my sheets, pornographic everyday? But hasn't everyone got his pornographic parts?)

At times like these, grasping at distracting details, I watch her nose point out her line of sight. Look ahead, it tells me, but life surely cannot be as earnest as most noses would have it be. Yet it is from this eager nose that I got the idea of asking to see my mother. I thought I might have more courage to speak out to someone I didn't know as well.

"Your mother," Number One said, "leads a comfortable life. She has surrounded herself with loveliness." (This I understand now much more than I did then, for it was to me that Mother willed many of her nice things. A handsome Louis XVI table is now against my far wall, above it hangs a print of Madame Vigee Lebrun and her daughter [all arms], upon it is a small

statue of Hermes that used to be a salt and pepper holder.)

At this time, however, my room was more simply furnished. The mattress on the floor, the books lined up beside it, each with a little leather pull so I can grab it with my teeth—a slow process, finding one's page—book holder, chest of drawers, eating stand, not a single ornament unless you can call decorative a pinkish little creature Miss Number Two had brought me. She often brings things, all sorts, once a covered glass with three grasshoppers, once a white mouse, once a wounded bird. I suppose for my education, yet they give me great pleasure. This time she had been to the beach and had thought of me and brought back a jar of sea water with a starfish in it (Even though there is no friendship or love between us, I am well aware that she constantly thinks of me. What must it be like to have me curled up at the back of your mind? Seeing everything as though through my eyes? Thinking that I have not walked upon this sand nor felt the edges of these grasses grate against my ankles? That I have not smelled the dried foam on the rocks? And never will? And so she brings these creatures to give me a realization that she herself has already. But I have always wondered, does she do it to torment me, as she may have brought the reading and the *Book of Far Away Places*? Does she do it for the torments of understanding so that I will come at last to *really* know?) The starfish gave me the most pleasure of all.

When I finally did convince Number One to arrange for a visit with my mother (during which Number One would be present, of course, since she feels herself a guardian of Good Taste, but I was ready to be the essence of propriety), this jar lay on the far corner of my eating stand. I would move my smallest pillow to the near edge of the stand and rest my chin there and watch the starfish feel its preposterously slow way along the glass. Note the suckers along the undersides of the starfish fingers. You might say they are the starfish's tiny army. Commands move across them like a wind, a very slow wind, that is, over grass. Move, suck, release, and each starts a little after the one next to it

This was not my first starfish, though the largest, and I have come to know them intimately. I have learned to love them in a way that I have not loved any other creature. I have thought: What if I had this army for my own? If this were my hand? My little suckers all along the palm? I have thought I might button a button, blow my nose, answer a telephone, turn out the light I have thought I might feel my way across the floor, this star on the end of some long radius and ulna. I might risk the stairs, letting myself down, reaching lower and letting myself down again. I could run away, and, even if it took all night moving at a starfish pace, to get as far as the next house, I might find a hiding place to spend the day and set out farther the

next night each day finding a hovel or a thicket to rest in, never discovered, ever onward by silver moonlight.

Later, this same starfish was dried and it is still here upon my low shelf. I once felt it with my tongue and now I know the sea tastes of sauerkraut

I insisted that I be dressed up for the interview in my best shirt and even a tie, though I never wore one; also, I never had the top button of my shirt buttoned, for you can imagine to what uses I have to put my neck. I wished, then, I had a jacket and a pair of real pants for the occasion. I thought they might be stretched out beyond me and a pair of shoes stuck into the pants legs. After all, so much of what we do is for show; why not, out of deference, do a little something extra? But Number One thought not. Still, she arranged a quilt very prettily up around my waist, made tea, brought out a box of pastries, combed my hair, wiped the sweat off my forehead. A pity I had no toes to tap, no knuckles to suck nervously, hardly anything to fidget until she came, but I chewed on my upper lip and posed myself as calmly and as aesthetically as I could manage, twisting slightly in a sort of reclining contraposto.

And so Mother came in. She was wearing one of those basic blacks with a silver necklace and one could see at a glance that she was chock-full of cultivated charm. Sedate, nothing flashy or overdone. She crossed her legs and her little skirt snuggled up around her thighs, bonneting her stockinged, knees, which leaned together like two nuns, a bit of white slip peeping out beside their cheeks. (Could she really be all this and pious too?) I felt quite untidy beside them even in my best expression.

“Tea ... a cake? . . . Disturbing news of Cuba . . . Yes, South America is so revolutionary . . . Cold for fall . . . an early frost... I was wondering . . .”

I remember best her feet (this is not unusual, considering my low position here upon my mattress) in little black pumps reflecting the squares of the window and reminding me of Number One's nose . . . something classical about them both, I guess. I would have liked to press my tongue across the shine of the shoes . . . well, yes and the nose too. (I still wonder what their flavors might have been, the nose, certainly vanilla or apple, the shoes a red-winy taste soured by the sidewalks.)

(I do often wonder if *they* can appreciate flavors as I do, if *they* even know the real pleasures of eating. Certainly they have too many diversions and, though as babies they tested things as I test them, I am sure that, by now, they have forgotten the joys and understandings of tongue and lip.)

Mother, pressing her dactyls into ladyfingers in a useless proliferation, had just said the view from my window was the best in the house and I had just said that I had been thinking about my future and would like to have her help, at least for some of the details, until I could get started on my own. “Future,” Mother said, just at that moment glancing down, and then she saw it. She forgot the studied beauty of the classical smile, the corners of the mouth faintly Ionic but not yet Corinthian and she forgot to watch out for those knees under that tight skirt of hers. Her eyes saw a wound . . . some horrible wound of the genitals, lustrous, blistered, purple. (And yet I suppose exposed genitals, pure and simple, healthily blooming and blushing, would do to describe her stunned and outraged look.) And my starfish was firm-bodied, beautifully turgid and a rosy, tan-pink color.

“What is that thing?” The way she said *thing*, to flush it down the toilet was too good for it, though she would certainly want to dispose of it as quickly as one would dispose of a particularly hairy spider ... Still, nothing hairy here.

The starfish reclined (one might say) near the top of the jar, one finger hidden by the punctured lid, one stretched languidly sideways along the ridge where the glass curved, and three almost straight down. Infinitesimally, one of the lower fingers was edging upwards. I don't believe Mother could have noticed this movement and certainly she couldn't have had time to examine or understand the waving suckers, yet gall touched her tongue and even her knees paled. I saw she saw the world in that jar, caught in that abyss, sour sea water all over it, and she, without wanting to, drinking its juices ... or me. Was it me she thought she looked at? Opposites reflecting each other, he all digits and he of none, or rather one? Whichever it was, I saw, in the shape of her lips, that the taste of death (or life) was on them and I held my breath.

That's the last I ever saw of her; isn't that strange? Those rejecting lips and then the shoes departing in uneven clicks, for though she was hardly half as old as Number One (but I must admit Number One keeps up her strength extraordinarily well, rinses it in, I suppose, with the henna of her hair, or sucks it from me with that avid, other mouth. I do age fast)—for though she was hardly half—as I said—Mother, who refused ever after that to come into my room, died a year later. One could say that she faced her moment of truth with a starfish.

And so, after all, I have been forced into approaching Miss Number Two whom, as I've already mentioned, I really felt to be my only salvation from the beginning, but instead of photographs (I had started with Number

Two in exactly the same way I started with Number One in spite of the mention of a censor)—not understanding what I had in mind at all, instead of photographs, Number Two brought me a mirror, a rather large hand mirror, round and with a blue cast to the glass.

I was surprised to find that I had a handsome, rather noble head. No reactions, no expressions on any of the faces of those that had appeared before me had ever led me to believe that this might be. In fact, I was sure of the opposite and I had only hoped I might be passable. Also I found that I did resemble, to a surprising degree, Miss Number Two, and was, in my own masculine way, quite as attractive as she was, my hair the same matt-black, my eyes, mysterious, my cheeks with a mute, aristocratic pallor, my nose, stark, I had a thick, muscular neck not exactly in keeping with my fine-featured face and, as she held the mirror farther from me, I saw a barrel-chested manatee-thing, certainly ichthyoid, with little wing shapes lumping under my clothes at hips and shoulders as though I could actually, as I've dreamed, swim into the air, and I saw the eyes of Number Two leaning to get the same view as I had of myself. I could see her thoughts reflecting my own! What a curious shape, and is it beautiful or ugly? Has it a meaning of its own? Is it a symbol of sloth or courage or of sex? Or is it a symbol at all?

"I had thought," I said to her eye as it floated languidly at the edge of the mirror—I could scarcely tell mine from hers, three haughty eyes there, moving slightly eastward about a foot under the watery surface, I would guess. I decided to speak to all three. "I had thought," I said, "that I might go on display." Two eyes remained immobile while the other contracted its lid a quarter of an inch. I could see I wasn't getting any sympathy from any of them.

One of them closed for a moment, as though an eye could take a deep breath. Was it exasperated with me? Have you any concept at all, it seemed to be asking me, of what you really are? Does the fat lady, monstrous as she is, have anything to do with you? And the half-man, half-woman?

Ah, but *I* am certainly all male and perhaps nothing *but* male.

I see. Here, in other words, is the flying phallus at last, a truncated Hermes. Are you going on display for that? A little chicken Icarus (cut down, but winged, it is true) doing five o'clock drama in a different sort of back room?

But none of those eyes can know about that drama. They swim

smugly in little back and forth motions, contracting their corners rhythmically in order to maintain their equilibrium. I see I have gone beyond the eyes. I'll tell them that fashions in freaks change; that, just as with sex, what was unacceptable last year is accepted this year. People always accept more as they become sophisticated, don't they? And isn't this equally desirable in freaks as in sex? Liberalize them, I say, and let me be one of those who struggle for this cause, this great opening-out of understanding, this acceptance without censure. The presentation will make such a difference, too. We'll do it with finesse and delicacy. To start, I will take the name Desire. And certainly with my so unforeseen personal beauty ... I saw that the eyes thought not. The two, led by the one most energetic and most opinionated one, fell all over themselves trying to agree with each other. I could see they felt the mirror too small a place for any arguments.

Let me approach them, instead, from the point of view of love. I might ask them: Shouldn't people be taught to love? People don't realize, I will say, how hard it is to love and that it must be practiced daily with some difficult exercise. And / might provide that exercise.

But I'm sure I won't be that hard to love. Everyone loves a winner and I'll be the freak of freaks. They'll come to think of me as beautiful. The details of my body might even be, eventually, exposed on TV. My life story might be written, and surely, if I did have such a life, there would be something to write about, such as how I first decided to join the carnival and the difficulties I had, in the beginning, in doing so; how they all doubted that I would be accepted by the public, for I was, after all, a new concept in freaks. I had, it was felt, carried freakishness to its ultimate degree. I was wholly and utterly the freak, whereas people were used to half freaks. It was felt I might be too startling. I might upset people. They might be more than just disgusted, but shaken to their very bones. But, at last, in some small circus sideshow, someone had had the courage to take me on. At first reactions were mixed. There were letters of protest: This was going too far ... an insult to the public . . . poor taste that I should be where others could see me at all, let alone be on public view. I was even banned in a few cities, but of course this helped in the long run. Still, it was an uphill fight. Other freaks were jealous of my purity, my authenticity. No rubber, no make-up, no mutilation necessary. Yet I had my champions, including the circus owners who had invested in me and also some freaks who were generously able to appreciate someone who was far beyond them. Still it will have taken me, let us suppose, about ten years to achieve any real acceptance. In any field one must certainly count on at least this much time, and I am not asking for a quick and easy success. And so, by then, people would have become used to me. Some would say I had a fish-like beauty, some that my movements were graceful and well adapted to my shape and

to my needs. Some would argue that my achievements in rolling and flopping about had taken at least as much practice and concentration as would be needed by a concert pianist. Films would then be made to preserve my movements for posterity. Perhaps I might have had my body, by this time, tattooed with flowers and the faces of pretty girls. I would go on TV. The book on my life would be written, and in it, also, would be a description of how I came to be married and how I manage in my household with a little electric cart steered with my teeth, my children, normal or almost normal (there is no need for my sort of mistake twice), and there would be something about my beautiful sister who helped me from the very beginning, at the first mention that I might be put on display.

“I had thought,” I said, “that I might go on display. Yes, the carnival, the circus, no matter how small . . .”

But the fisheye had already given its answer.

“I suppose,” said Number Two, “that you would like me to see that a proper suit is made, the beginnings of tights and a brocade . . . vest, shall we call it? Pink or blue? No, let’s make it gold or silver with touches of red. I can sew it up myself out of silk and satin and, if you like, with little white wings to give the feeling of lightness to it all. Would you like them on the shoulder blades or buttocks?”

And she’ll do it. I know she will and it will be better than I could possibly have conceived it myself, luminous as a peacock, gay as Santa Claus. I know Miss Number Two. Somehow, instinctively, she will touch the seed of my inner dream and make it grow into something greater than itself. Such work she will put into it! A month of hours. She’ll hang it upon my wall and, with great joy, I’ll dream of myself wearing it I will grow old, leaning at my reading stand and dreaming. I know I will.

Then one day I will ask Mrs. Number One to put the suit on me. I will try (at least try, but she does have ways ... warm water and such) to withhold all else until she does, and then I’ll know if it really fits or only seems to.