



Mark Beyer

## What Beauty

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ALSO BY MARK BEYER

*The Village Wit*

Mark Beyer

# What Beauty

*a novel*

Siren & Muse

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*To Asia*

## CHAPTER 1

The shoes give her away. People are otherwise fooled. She can walk the streets in anonymity without the shoes, only there they are. A straw hat, a child's hat, covers the top of her head. She wears the hat in a manner to rival a queen's crown, its brim and crease smeared black, the weaving pitted, torn, warped. Her hair looks worse than the hat, if this is possible. Pigeon-gray with stringy curls. The curls, like metal shavings dropped from a die cutter, spill uncontrolled across her shoulders — and here's a nice bit of added veil — the ends stuck together in pasty dingleberries, reminding me of a low-traveling dog that picks up detritus with its shuffle gait. The hair alone makes her unrecognizable to all but fanatics. Added to this ... this cast ... is an old corduroy jacket fitted snugly over a yellow blouse, its original chroma, dark chocolate, yet visible at the armpits, though now faded to a weak coffee across the shoulders, sleeves, and along the frayed lapels. All for the middling look an Ivy League prof in the Sixties would have liked to affect; a forced, anti-establishment statement straight off the pages of *Life* magazine, standing slack, effete, in front of a campus building, lacy vines in shadowy black & white; a grainy image. Maybe this coat is a twenty-five-year remnant accepted from the charity bin at some Skid Row mission. Or maybe it's been pulled from a dumpster behind a wrecked tenement in the Bronx. Grease stains spot the jacket's lapels like sloganeer badges, the narrow cord ribs are crease-worn inside the elbows, and countless finger caresses have smoothed the cloth behind the buttons to shiny halos. The blouse's collar curls up at the points, high under her chin, something a clown might invent using a lot of starch and imaginative ironing, a trick done to make children laugh (or cry). The linen blouse, a withered yellow found only on beach stones rattled by surf for an eon, disappears into the waistband of canvas trousers stained with white paint, like Christmas tree flock.

All very becoming on a grimy stewbum. But this get-up lacks the gestalt Karen Kosek needs. I'm certain of this; a certainty that touches me like religion touches others. I know this cannot be the Karen Kosek the world knows (or had once known) because she is none of these touchstone fragments. Except for the shoes, and ... something *else*.

Seeming to be a bag lady and *being* a bag lady are not the same. Go look at a bag lady and this becomes axiomatic: there's a sour, rancid odor ten feet around her — the stench of a sort that takes weeks to ferment; hair like matted sackcloth; watery eyes, blurred and vaguely unfocused, or else glaucomatous; pants crotch stained by piss, soaked

and dried a dozen times (the root source of the reek?); green armpit stains of the perpetually unwashed, fading toward the edges and tinged white by perspiration salts; and the filthy skin whose grime penetrates the dermis so deeply you swear you're in the presence of animal hide (no way to forge this look by rubbing fireplace ash like it's a balm).

Yet here she is, in disguise.

Beneath her disguise, because it has to be that, I see Karen's hygiene and vigor. Her skin is bright, not so loose around the eyes and mouth for a woman of her age (fifty? *fifty-five*?) or what, otherwise, you'll find on the indigent, the drunken, the commonly diseased; her fingernails gleam in manicured gloss when she stops to adjust the grip on two plastic bags; when she takes a mere second to look up and into the sunshine, she smiles, and her teeth advertise money of a quantity that has no use for group dental plans.

And then there are her shoes: feminine loafers stylishly designed by a whole team of foot fetishists, with comfortable leather uppers to assuage the walker. Really nice. Karen Kosek is a walker; she displays the dachshund's gait, that meld of temperance and purpose, an instinctive potential for feistiness. Without this dog's pace, whose natural force kicks the cuffs high over her ankles with each stride, I could not see the shoes, and so not notice the woman. The shoes are the luster beneath the rum, the one piece that sets her apart.

That's when I knew who this was, where I had seen her before, the eyes, the chin, the nose. One moment I was watching some wretch of humanity walk beside Central Park's placid lake, giving sideways looks toward the boats in which tourist men rowed tourist women under Tuesday's sunshine, and the next moment I recognized *Karen K*, her face emerged from a Malcom Drummand portrait. We walked towards each other, our shadows ruffled by the uneven spring grass beside the black asphalt lane. She stopped to put down her bags and, exercising her fingers, looked up at the sun and smiled. I found this disguise so incongruous that I laughed to myself. Then she picked up the bags and started her fast walk again. As she looked at the rowers I looked at her shoes; I think she saw me but it was through a blur of movement, feeling the wind of my pace when we passed shoulder-to-shoulder. No one else noticed her. To them, these springtime visitors to New York City, she was just a bag lady. Something to avoid, like dog shit.

Karen K's essays on art and books and photography made her famous among New York literati, and popular with most artists for her support of their ... *what?* ... reason to exist, as I understand it (this

recognition, in a society that had been slowly devolving into kitsch and TV). Newsmen photographed her touring Greenwich Village gallery openings, smoking cigarettes near gurus holding forth in Brooklyn Heights parlors, or stepping from taxis outside the Houston Street art-house cinema, and drinking martinis at East Side cocktail parties. Encomiums were not what Karen Kosek was after, though. She was a prolific writer, and her new essays found spreads in the glossies. Then came a novel or two. In between, ubiquitous speeches and about-town appearances had made her so famous that she never needed to write another word if she didn't want to. And then she didn't want to.

Ten seconds go by, and then I turn heel to follow her. She's on a tear away from the lake, her shadow head now bobbing with her quickened pace. She's headed for the West Side path, a hunter on a scent, the scrounger dog of boyhood books and Lake District romantics. I speed walk to reel in the distance, and feel progress only when my groin aches. The sun bakes my hatless head. When I look at my feet to blink away the haze and glare, I find my clothes are not much different from Karen's — canvas sneakers spattered two-tone by clay and linseed oil, jeans torn at the knees and loosely threaded from a thousand washings, a denim shirt that's too heavy for the day's heat, and showing it under the armpits and across the chest. How telling is this for my own future? I put a hitch in my step to displace the image.

She holds a plastic *Duane Reade* bag in each hand. They hang low beside her calves. The bottoms sometimes scrape the asphalt path. The bags are old, or made to look old, heavily wrinkled and as filthy as her clothing. What lies bulging inside is a mystery, bulky and round. Baseballs or oranges, perhaps, neither of which you can buy at *Duane Reade*.

Foot traffic passes her from either direction. A few lazy bicyclists teeter through the thin crowd, crotch-to-saddle, toe walking their mechanical steeds. Dog walkers crisscross the path between us, as do nannies with children, and shuffling old men. There are too many people in the park for a weekday, I think, but then I remember where I am. Cities with a population of seven million cough people from their buildings on the minute, in all weather. Well ahead, but not too far that if I don't catch up she'll be taken away, looms New York's tonier Central Park West apartment buildings.

Architecturally, they are Old Europe designs mixed with New American bulk bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The immigrants who flooded the shores of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, brought with them new attitudes and

mentality. Their education and religion, nationalism and optimism, helped to build the cities on the eastern seaboard and, especially, this island metropolis. The Kenilworth building is French, of russet brick surrounded by white limestone, and looks like a wedding cake. The Dakota, built in the 1880s, has steep roofs, gables, and dormers straight from Germany's Renaissance. Down the street, 55 Central Park West dominates its neighbors with its Art Deco *brique massif* — tinted purple at street level and rising gradually to yellow on the highest floors. The effect is a façade forever bathed in sunlight. These are the icons of the Avenue. In front of me walks a woman who had spent her best years studying the virtuosi of those immigrants, so she could walk in stride with their first-generation children, and bring alive a uniquely American mosaic. Something tells me, against better judgment, that she's headed for one of these buildings, dressed as one of the dregs that slopped pig shit in the hold of an immigrant steamer for the price of passage.

I have easily called her Karen K because that was her byline; it is how America came to know her, and, later, the world. She chose to be identified with the new pantheon of young writers invited into society from the Sixties' social revolution and Seventies' "let it all hang out" attitude (times I did not know as an adult and got second or third hand from my neighbors' older children, and family — cousins, uncles and aunts — or had to study in books, old magazines & newspapers archived on microfiche, and that era's old-new art fusion striving to ignite a forward-reaching age). It was the era of feminism, too, which showed women's strength in Technicolor along with their range of intellect, which tried to take center stage and would have but for the man's world America still was, which, patronizingly, focused on women's beauty and grace, sex appeal and housewifery; back then, Sixties' feminism wasn't filled with the rage, pissiness, greed, or militant anger that the Reagan-Bush White House has since encouraged in all Americans. Culture Wars. Class Warfare. Washington's political battles bleeding into the nation's living rooms via cable-news. There is much to go to war over, apparently. Karen Kosek, contrarily, wrote about ways to bridge the differences between the reigning perceptions of her day about what art was, and how to accept it on its merits. I imagine she had thought long about the connection her essays had with the larger cultural issues then stymieing America.

Seeing Karen like she is today, it's hard for me to imagine what has happened to her. She easily fits into the body of a character I find

lurking on the edge of a Rembrandt etching that hangs in my apartment. This sepia-toned copperplate, *The Burgermeester*, illustrates the pomposity and excess of a regional bureaucrat among the common people. At the center of the etching, the official is exiting his carriage parked in front of a guild house. The family coat of arms adorns the carriage door, its advertisement a privilege of conceit and warning to plebiscite bystanders. Rembrandt's governor is fat, a fact the artist marks exceedingly well by the angle at which the carriage lists against his, the governor's, girth as he hangs onto the handle while feeling a foot toward the ground. To the side of this large image stands a woman in the street (precisely, in the *gutter*; no allusion was lost on Rembrandt). She is old, hunched forward, forgotten by society – or nearly so. This is Karen K, rendered from a seventeenth century print to the center of New York City.

Whatever is on her mind, now, Karen's mind, I wonder if she is also thinking of her immediate future. Finding a bush under which she can sleep in late spring's cold nights? Is she weighing the alternatives to a life she has chosen, but now thinks it has moved against her? Does she consider what the tourists think of their day in America's metropolis, in Central Park? Up there in front of me, walking with purpose, she shakes her head, a move that, if I were able to betray her thoughts, shows she has made a decision. She steps beneath the tree line and becomes a shadow. I'm losing her.

I wonder also, in the moment I begin to jog after her, what she would do if I were to catch up and tap her on the shoulder for a hearty surprise greeting: "Hey, aren't you Karen Kosek, the writer? I just want you to know that I think your writing is great. Just great! Sorry to have bothered you. Have a *great* day." And *BAM!* I imagine how precisely she would respond: "Thank you, young man. That's kind of you to say." The recognition of this kindness (which is not kind at all, but a simple expression of thanks) will show in her eyes as a twinkle, because she will not acknowledge — not need to explain — why she's dressed in this Halloween-in-the-Bowery costume. And, as a token of her disbelief at my seeing through this disguise, she will nod, a no-hands tip of her hat, then leave me stranded in the sunshine, gushing over my luck and her kindly farewell. The seriousness of this fantasy comes and goes like a child's wish to be on the moon to see if it is really made of cheese.

Fifty feet in front of me, Karen K crosses through the 77<sup>th</sup> Street park gate and catches the "walk" light. I slow up my jog because I don't want her to notice me. I see that I won't make the light because



the blinking red “Don’t Walk” warning has begun to flash as she steps onto the opposite curb. I hang an arm through the iron gate, using its thick, scabby black bars to shield me, and watch her drift away down the street as my racing heart slows to its normal thump-de-thump. Only her hat and the plastic bags are visible, sporadically, through the passing crowd. I walk out to the street to see where she might go.

She does not continue crosstown to Amsterdam or Broadway. As I’ve suspected, she heads south, steadfast in her shuffle, bags bouncing in her clutches. I follow for a block on the opposite side of the street. She stops at a red carpet beneath a green awning that links front door to curbside. The doorman steps outside. He towers over her. I see the silver dollar-size buttons of his maroon uniform shine through the distance and crossing traffic. He smiles, tips his hat up as he looks down upon the matte-hatted, grungy Karen K, and swings open a glass and wood door that would crush me if it fell from its hinges, which it could never do because it has hung on its nails more than a century at one of the most expensive properties in America. This faux rummy woman has just been given the niceties of a dowager matriarch, as if she’d just completed a jaunt around her palace gardens and is dressed as one does who is a member of her class and status. Why? What have I just seen? No one walks into the The Parkview on Central Park West and gets treated like royalty who isn’t already America’s version of royalty.

A woman stands beside me at the curb. She’s short, with a round black face, wearing some red construction jumpsuit. A utility belt that holds a tape measure in a leather snap case is hitched low on her waist, gathering some of her belly fat above the belt. Her eyes reach toward me from her half-turned face. “What?” I ask. “You look like you just seen the Lord,” she says. Her eyes round with an invitation to confession. “Oh, no, you’re one of them,” I think. Her lips peel back to reveal a smile that suggests everything will be okay. “No,” I say, “the Lord is not, certainly not, who I’ve just seen.” Down the block, the doorman stands under The Parkview awning, big in his uniform, imposing in height and build. They hire men for just this sort of job. I look down at the construction worker woman. “I saw a mirage,” I say, “Just another New York mirage.” The bright rounded eyes in the black face on the small body in the red jumpsuit turn away. She hasn’t spoken to someone on the street in years, and look what she gets for saying *It’s a fine day, mister — what’s your story?* The light changes and I’m caught in the crowd, and must jump aside or move with it across the

street.

Then the people change faces and clothes at the same crosswalk, a change that will take place hundreds of times today. I leave, keep to the sidewalk on this side of CPW, and stop when I'm across from The Parkview. I watch the bruiser doorman eye his stretch of sidewalk, the NYC people, the sunshine he blocks by standing under the awning. He, too, has a happy look on his face, a look that praises the day, his city, and his work.

I can only imagine the expression I had on my face, which the lady noticed and tried to draw me out. It comes to me how I must have looked, and why. Now I know, I tell myself, what the celebrity hounds in this city feel, afterwards. Okay, bag lady or not (or rich bag lady), this was my chance to meet that singular someone I could claim was worth speaking to, the words of the servile fan, "Wow, I'm glad to meet you!" The feel of my skin against the rare air through which I've passed makes me draw breath. This must be what I looked like, as a kid, the day I stood outside Wrigley Field with a home run ball I'd caught in the stands, and to Ernie Banks, "Mr. Cub" himself, when he came out through the players' gate to find me jumping up and down. I asked him to sign the ball above the rawhide bruise left by his bat. All of this over a fucking bag lady who is not what she pretends to be. Get a grip, I tell myself. Yet, I can't let this go.

Another long look at the doorman gives me the idea that he could be game for a bribe. He looks terribly happy, a-gee with the joy of life and work, ripe for suggestion. I don't want to get upstairs to her apartment. Nothing like that is on my mind. But a sawbuck-for-your-time, a wink-and-a-nudge question, is worth the money for some information: Karen Kosek's exit and return times. "So I can get her autograph." I would put on a smile as big as his, pull out the cash. Sure. He would say, "Why not, pal?" A quick check through my wallet says this idea (though not a plan) is better than staking out the place.

"Wadda fuck you *aksin* me, Whitebread?"

Henry has that mean look (despite the classic uniform of the heeled footman), the look of murder that sends a signal to your loins for girding, combat, and prayer. Before I can answer Henry's question — my eyes locked on his flared black nostrils, the image of an angry Spanish bull; I feel his breath when he leans close, his height of landmark skyscraper pedigree, afraid I might speak to the nose instead of his murder eyes — a bell tinkers behind him. He strides with easy grace, for such a big man, to The Parkview's glimmering glass-paned

doors which I spied Karen K enter. Its reflection now shows Central Park West traffic passing colorfully behind us. With one hand, Henry (the letters stamped in silver emboss on his breast nameplate) pulls one door open. The reflection is erased, and out of a pale-lighted hallway walks a little old lady dressed in red, with white chiffon-textured hair. She walks along the shaded red runner and stops midway to the curb.

“Good afternoon, Henry.”

“It’s a fine day, Mrs Richardson.” Henry’s uxorious reply is a baritone salve to the street noise. “Spring flowers are smiling like the Mona Lisa. Cabs are running clean gasoline. And Mayor Dinkins claims all is right with N-Y-Ceee.”

“That’ll be the day,” the old lady says, looking up with lucid eyes at her doorman. “Eddie Koch should not have lost that election. Dinkins is a one-termer. Just look at the man!”

“Mayor K will get another chance, Mrs R,” Henry says. He steps forward and waves with a hand the size of a flag. Down the block, the first taxi in a line of four yellow cabs, gleaming under the sunshine but each with dents along their sides, starts its engine. The transmission drops into gear like an axe swung against oak. Henry offers the old lady his arm for the last few steps to the curb. She accepts the gesture like a proper doyen and says, “You take good care of us, Henry. Everyone says so.”

“All in a day’s work, Mrs R.” He looks at the top of the woman’s head, like a benevolent angel. “Happy to serve the finest people in the nation at the city’s finest address. As Chaucer said, ‘Purity in body and heart may please some — as for me, I make no boast.’ ”

The old lady laughs without showing her teeth. The cabby awaits his fare.

“I’m just off to Fairway Foods for soup and crackers. I’ll have them deliver my grocery order later, so please be on the lookout. I may also stop at Zabar’s today.” She stops Henry from reaching for the car door. “Can I bring you back a bagel, Henry? Some cream cheese and butter? You must be a hungry beast from all the portering you do for us feeble widows.”

Henry laughs like an actor from *Showboat*. “Buy the kosher soup,” he advises. “Remember doctor’s orders.”

She wags a finger at him. “I’m sure you’ll check my grocery bags, so I shan’t try to sneak a can of Campbell’s tomato past you.” The old lady suddenly notices me because I’ve followed slowly behind them, off the regal carpeting, unprotected from the sun. I think maybe

my sun-lit face and sweat-stained shirt have made me visible through her cataracts. She addresses me with a nod and says, “Do I know you, sonny? You look like one of the Carmichaels, from seventeen. The Baltimore branch, aren’t you?”

I smile and begin to speak until Henry overtakes my voice with his bass.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken, Mrs Richardson. This man is here to inquire about summer work. Roof repair.” His white teeth envelop the old lady and me, then when his head turns it is only me who sees the homicidal glare. Henry says, “He’s not one to take no for an answer, though.” The glare turns to the promise of Inquisitional torture if I speak another word. When he looks at the widow Richardson again, his face has morphed back into the dotting major-domo, ready to help her into the taxi. But she isn’t yet through with me.

“Persistence, young man,” she says. “That’s how to succeed. Hard work and a don’t-take-no-for-an-answer attitude. It works, if you stick with it.”

I tell her thanks, and my happy face moons for her and Henry. She ducks into the taxi. I wave good-bye when the old lady is safely in her seat and the door closed. The taxi pulls into traffic and Henry looks at me with a little laugh breaking his rose lips that complement his black face — so black it shines purple in the sunlight. Henry’s force of character draws me back to his podium beside the doors. I try to assuage him with a little of the soft soap. “I liked the Chaucer quote, Mister Henry. Do you have another?”

“You hominy-skinned fuck-nut,” he says, slow and low. “Now do you get it? If I let you through these doors to bother Ms Kosek, I’d lose this plum-tree career that nets me four *large* during Christmas week alone. I’d as soon cut your head off to fuck your windpipe in front of a Times Square lunch crowd.” He leans on the podium and it squeaks in pain. His finger points at me, a digit emerging from the two-dimensional frame of an Escher drawing. “You’d better get my meaning, pal, cuz I don’t want to see you again.” He shows me his doctored set of pearl and gold-capped teeth. “Now fuck off!”

Safely behind the wall separating the park from the city sidewalk, my fingernails scrape old stone while I watch Henry move in a bustle. He reminds me of an officious butler attending to a veritable castle keep. He’s the front line of an assault I’m not easily convinced I can make, anymore. I’ve lost. But just for now. Karen K’s story is one I want to know, from her and no one else. If that’s possible.

There’s little room for me to maneuver here, and the half of me that

says, “You’ve got better things to do,” makes the thought of meeting Karen K no more possible than the letter I sent her, way back as a teen, made me think I would get a reply (though I had hoped, and had cared to wonder, if a writer answered fan mail like baseball stars signed home run balls). Why do I care? This is another story.

New York (NY) is a great city, a magnificent city. NY is big; it’s a crowded city. As it is known, New York City (NYC) doesn’t sleep. You’re never alone here. You’ll always find people on the streets, so you must get used to that or risk losing your sense of self. Although, without a friend beside you, NY can make you feel lonely. It is a hard city, like flint. NYC is a great big magnificent city with sharp edges.

Oddly then, from the air New York is much more imposing than when you walk its streets. Flying into NYC, Manhattan’s buildings look too tall to stand on their own. You can’t see the ground from the air because the buildings are so tightly packed together, like pencils in a cup. Without this sense of streets, no people or cars to give proportion, you lose the feeling that life moves below you as steadily as blood through veins. Likewise, the buildings reach up unevenly: black teeth in twilight, bloody fingers at sunrise, gold bars at sunset. Magnificent! The City from up high imposes itself on you, these uneven polygons of steel and glass and concrete. Yet, you can’t see definition in the buildings from the air anymore than you can the streets or people, even when you learn from the in-flight magazine that the Empire State Building used ten million bricks. No system exists from high up to gage the city’s breadth; its mass defies logic.

A hole has been cut in this pencil jar, this flat, unevenly topped rock. If you have a window seat on a plane and are lucky enough to fly over NY Harbor on a landing path to Kennedy Int’l, you’ll see this perfect green rectangular hole cut from moth gray. Central Park saves New Yorkers from going insane.

I can say all of this with measured confidence because I’m a Chicagoan. New York has wonderful tests of survival, though not, as Blue Eyes sings, “If you can make it here / you can make it anywhere!” Fuck that. Try Tokyo, where you don’t know the language. Try London, where traffic flows counter-intuitively to the American mind. Try Cairo, where sand blows through your closed lips and gets down into the crack of your ass, and a drink of tap water can kill you, one diarrhea flush at a time. By comparison, New York is a wonderful warm cocoon, a Petri dish of good tidings.

On the ground in New York City, the *Avenues* are wide, north-south routes. They leave no escape from the island-city for many miles. By contrast, the east-west *Streets* are narrow, cramped, and long; three times longer than the *Aves*, corner to corner. Residents used to warn visitors in the 1970s to avoid the *Streets*: if a mugger demands your wallet, you have far too long a distance to run to the nearest *Avenue* to yell for help (which you wouldn't get anyway). The light, too, is different between the *Aves* & *Strts*: brighter as you walk north, toward the park, or south to the World Trade Center; dim and shadowy between the Hudson and East Rivers. All streets are in constant motion.

Unless you've grown up in The City, you can become nearsighted by its height. Distance is measured differently here than in the Midwest or Dixie or Big Sky country. Those regions' sightlines stretch to a horizon so wide that you notice Earth's curvature. All of that is lost in NYC. New York has a building fifty feet from any which way you look: in Mid-town, Gramercy, Hell's Kitchen, Chinatown, Little Italy, The Barrio, Uptown or Downtown. Think of Wall Street and you get the picture.

You *can* find distance in NYC — by looking up. The buildings give you the feeling of leaning in on you, all around you, which is and is not necessarily an optical illusion. The sense of being a bug-in-a-jar hits you undiluted, and if the sun happens to be overhead, you want to run in case an evil kid kneels over the jar with a magnifying glass. This feeling is almost fun the first time it happens, when you look up at the buildings. Later, I noticed that only tourists and newcomers look up. Looking up is a good way to get run down by a bus. And people, always the people.

~~This~~ New York City.

This man comes to NYC in the body of an artist. What does he seek that hasn't been found in the Prairie State metropolis of his birth? He doesn't know, can't put a name to it. Maybe he has found, as was suggested in the yellowed copy of the Earl of Chesterfield's letters he once carried with him, dog-eared until the corners flared, that the urge to explore is too great to pass by without a sniff; it's the same draw that pulls you into the open door of a breakfast diner. The idea of movement, to wade in and let go of the anchor chains of family, house, neighborhood — even love — is a way to experiment: the idea of art itself retells this story: a trial with life otherwise unknown or not yet found. None of these is redundant.

The artist finds a sliding scale. Chicago was his town, NYC is

the experience; an experiment to look at life from below the rim, over the ledge, atop the table ... the artist will use all the prepositions, some in new, if not unique, ways.

My friend, Zeppo, smokes Canadian cigarettes. He has them delivered to his apartment from a bodega around the corner at 1<sup>st</sup> Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. "In New York," Zeppo schooled me, "you can buy anything and have it delivered to your door. Anything." I trust Zeppo's experience. He's a true New Yorker: born in the Bronx, raised in Brooklyn, sent to summer camp on Staten Island, lost his virginity in a woman from Queens, and now lives on Manhattan (syllable stress on HATT). "Why Canadian cigarettes?" I asked. "Because," he told me, "They taste good." I chewed on this answer. "I didn't know Canadians grew tobacco." He said, "Who gives a shit? I don't care if Bedouins bring it through [something unintelligible] by caravan to some big ship flying a maple leaf flag. I just want my smokes." It's possible his passion doesn't come through in print as well as it had in person.

I've recognized Karen Kosek walking in the park because her photograph covers the rear jacket on the book she wrote nearly thirty years ago, about the time Vietnam was just becoming an American killing field. Too old for me. I have known her through her writing, those essays I read as a youth. No more, yet no less.

I had re-read *What Beauty?* only last year, in an attempt to augment that first youthful absorption (some might say *obsession*) of KK's prose, a way to energize myself in these low weeks following a long winter. So striking were her ideas to my then eighteen-year-old mind. I remember those weeks vividly because they coincided with the Iranian students' siege of the American embassy in Tehran. Karen K had already, by then, pulled herself from the society that embraced her nearly fifteen years earlier, when her book brought her fame in one corner of society, and notoriety in another. After a dozen letters and one wild attempt at self-introduction, I never did get to meet, formally or by chance, the maestro of my art strings.

My name is Minus Orth. I'm an artist. My focus is sculpture. I used to paint in oils, but, several years ago, I misplaced my sense of color on the canvas. At first this seemed to me, and then became obvious to anyone looking at my art, that I was colorblind. Not literally, but in every other way. At about the same time, I wanted suddenly to be in direct contact with my material (which makes me think that one played into the other, although I'll never be certain). Unless I switched to finger paints, it struck me, I was always going to be four inches away

from the art, attached by a paint brush and the hairs of a dead squirrel or ox. To touch clay or bend iron, and to chisel stone and run your fingers through the grooves (things I did in high school and loved), to shape these different earth materials into exactly what I had in mind (hardly the case in painting) led me back to creating art that I believed in. Most importantly, art that I trusted.

Sculpture has made me feel capable again, and I've sold more pieces than yet sit in the apartment I share with my girlfriend, like left-behind guests who expect more coffee before they hit the road. I'm still feeling my way into this rocky genre and, right now, I sense that a crossroads lies under my feet. It's the timeless conflict: what to do next. And this is not the only tension.

Some artists whom I know live from sales alone. I can't yet do that. Last year I had a semi-solo show called *the semi-solo show of the artists three* (lowercase title intentional; not so the irony, I fear in hindsight). For this reason — the make-a-living thing — I don't toss around lightly the term artist, and never with the inflection on the second syllable. In fact I hope never to be so inured by (of, in) myself. The work, though, artistry and sculpting, these you may call of me inured every day, for which I won't mind one damned bit.

I add to the monthly kitty by walking dogs. There's great need for such industry in New York City. We're a select group that won't be displaced by computers too soon. Dogs, too, are a select group: they piss and shit outside, among humans, without shame or even cognizance that what they do is out of the ordinary, by dog standards. In fact, look at dog owners the next time you're outside. These people praise their animals for doing what most of us can only do behind a locked door, with the water running to cover "digestive noises." So I ask you: who's the more balanced between the two species?

Dogs being dogs, they have immediate expectations. Once met, their demands become simple. The six dogs I walk also have keen ears for my palaver, as I fulminate over subject and method. ("I should carve wood like you dig holes, Chief." No response; too busy with paws in a hole. Find China, boy! *Dig, dig, dig!* Good *doooog*.) Some days I feel like the Pied Piper, other days like Elmer Fudd.

Life is much more feeling than action, I've found, even when you act: work, eat, play, think, shit, buy a stamp, bend down to smell a red rose poking between fence posts, make love in the dark while the blue flash of police lights dance across the wall, look at a menu with anticipation watering your mouth, kick a stone from the middle of a path, or stand on a Central Park softball field where the heady smell of



grass clippings creeps up as you wait for the odd fly ball and watch the buildings that surround the park on three sides — 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, CPW, 59<sup>th</sup> Street — each staring over the trees, pressed together like tribunes dressed in cloqué, and where you think, “Damn, I feel ... *something*.”

These indescribable moments are what make us human, and not gods.