

PRAXIS

A CORNELL JOURNAL OF OPINION & REVIEW

SPRING 1978

\$1.00



PRAXIS

a cornell journal
of opinion & review

volume 3 number 2
spring - summer 1978

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"Praxis" means theory expressed as action. **Praxis** puts undergraduates' ideas into print.

This issue of **Praxis** was funded through subscriptions and sponsorships, and through the monies raised from sales and advertising. **Praxis** thanks Dale R. Corson, David C. Knapp, Professors Richard Polenberg and Harold Brodkey, Carol and Michell Sienko, David Elam, Ron Loomis, the Cornell Council for the Creative and Performing Arts, and the members of the East Hill Liberation Front for their advice and support.

Praxis is published two or three times yearly. Submissions of essays, reviews, short stories, photographs and artwork should be addressed to **Praxis**, Box 20, North Campus Union, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853. Manuscripts must be typewritten and doublespaced. We regret that any submissions lacking a self addressed envelope and return postage cannot be returned.

Supportive subscriptions: \$10.00 for one year, \$17.00 for two years. **Praxis**, vol. 3, no. 1, available for \$2.00 postpaid. Send check or money order to **Praxis**, Box 20, North Campus Union, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 14853. Make checks payable to **Praxis**.

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ISSN 0161-0414

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Cover photograph by **Dale R. Corson**, University Chancellor.
Cover design by **Dori Stern**.

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Institutions

Katie Riley

In the back of the yard behind the house there has been thrown a baby play pen so that it lies upright but at a slant down the hill. The plastic is ripped along the top where a baby would be just able to put its hands when it first stands. Now ice stands out on the bulging string netting, holding it still in the wind. And just now the sun has slipped between clouds and mountains, setting through the trees and through the netting, turning the ice red where she can see it through the frosted windows. She can see snow lying on the ground outside the basement door, blue and pale, though perhaps from the opposite direction, from the sun's angle caught as a plane of light red.

She sits running a finger along the fine, sharp rim of her jaw, following the skin's surface of dips and clefts and small moveable lumps. At the left side of her chin there is a mole which she touches lightly, deftly. The chair she sits in is large and plump with wooden hands and feet. One of her hands rests on the wooden hand, clasping its rounded claw.

She quits stroking her jaw and clasps her hands in her lap. Twelve years ago and one week a man, a homosexual, a student of linguistics was reading palms at a party. The two women who went first had full fates: exciting love affairs at the age of twenty-nine, their lovers would be women or artists or famous. These older women-giggled because they held life in their hands as Claudia thrust her palm toward him eagerly, yet reticently. She was just turned eighteen and she had never heard her fortune told. He was her friend's older brother and though unusual in his gayness he was still an older brother, dazzling and witty and doubly out of reach. Claudia was timid, giggling and awestruck. She sat on the picnic bench, her hands between her thighs, her elbows at her sides. She admired the brother for his out-front approach. She admired the parents for their robust acquiescence in serving this party in their country house by the cat-tailed lake to a crowd of young people.

From between the cole slaw bowl and the hot dog buns in plastic, one hand emerged uncurling over the wooden picnic table, palm open to catch his eyes. Do you mind? Would you do me? He was laughing with the older women who were laughing at their fates, but he took and dragged her hand a little closer (while looking sideways) and spread her fingers farther and then he peeped at it. Well, yes, it's true, there's something here, something will happen to you. When? Maybe between eighteen and twenty, and then let's see, nothing. The line trails off. There's only this break to begin with; then nothing else special. A pretty plain palm. He let her hand slip from his hand to the rough wooden table and her arm stretched too far in front of her when she tried to reel it in.

At this distance in time Claudia feels safe saying that the father was picking the collard greens from his garden more gingerly, the mother was gathering the used paper plates from the table in a state of shrill self-consciousness. Though she lost touch with the family years ago, she guesses she can predict that the gay brother has become a voluble lawyer, married happily within ten years to a successful actress, whereas the two older brothers blanching by their gay brother's brightness have struggled with their professions, doctor and insurance agent respectively, and settled uncomfortably early into marriage. The sister, Claudia's friend, no doubt, has thrown profession to the wind (the seeds were there when she gave up pre-med for English), and has become intermittently teacher and mother and writes a little poetry aside.

That day under a hot June sun she went down to squat by the very edge of the lake, next to the cattails and the saw grass, where the water was olive green and muck brown from the sunlight glancing off the underwater plant life. It made her think of leeches and wish she were in a canoe afloat way out on the middle of the lake. The Claudia of thirty sits way back in her chair resting her eyes on her clasped hands, remembering how she wanted to be famous. She didn't believe in God, she knew there was no absolute right or wrong, and she wanted to be famous. It seemed the most natural thing in the world, to want to be set apart, to want to hold something concrete cupped in one's hands, something distinct that would attract eyes, understanding and layers of truth though one stood on the tip of a steeple, and even though actually there was nothing. Until she was eighteen she took it for granted that all people want to be famous, that it was the state of man's desire, but that only a few make it. The rest are left in unfulfilled anguish to be mellowed out by age or psychiatry or else to become infamous through their blistered egos' misdeeds. At eighteen she began to realize that not everyone searches to be bolstered by the world's attention. She began to meet people who would hate to stand on a pinhead of greatness, and she began to revise her interpretations of friends in her past as she witnessed them inch into the future. She trembled to think they could remain the same and the same forever.

So she tried to imagine for them another way, a middle way, a path of individual cohesion and conclusion for which there needed no audience, just a bird on a branch with peach blossoms in the wind, that — the subject — and a frame. She tried to declare that all anyone needed was a path to walk on, bordered by white pebbles and winding delicately into the mist, which mist would disintegrate as one's self approached it. She and her friends used to sit on the wooden floor of a small apartment in the big city, bending over a thick volume of Chinese paintings, listening to obscure modern music. Her mother would ask what Cheryl and Ben were up to these days and she hardly knew what to say. They took house cleaning jobs to support themselves. Cheryl was taking French lessons so she could go to France. Ben had finally found a composing teacher. And yes, they were still living together, and no, they still kept pretty much to themselves. Is there something wrong with that? Why no, but . . . said her mother's clear, tanned face.

But Claudia herself was still waiting for her grand leap into infinity. She could not give it up. And that, along with this prophecy etched brightly in the back of her mind, were working, fixing the grey plates into parallel-walled alleyways and cul-de-sacs through which truth was let to run. From the age of eighteen she was expecting. She threw herself into all manner of predicaments, expecting, transforming truth into rats that ran haywire in her head, banging their noses up against the hard, metallic plates, scratching their dulling claws against the smooth surfaces, then moving onwards, foodwards, goalwards, blindly.

Claudia had a dream last week, on her thirtieth birthday, of her past college career in which the old, familiar campus was transformed into a carnival ground, where huge bronze statues of bulls got off their pedestals to dance and plunge, ridden by clowns seated on the tops of the woolly bulls' heads, and with reins through their noses

the clowns paraded them through grassy quads and ivy-covered buildings. She and some long-discarded friend from college days were wandering through in some amazement, picking the best spaces to crawl through the barbed wire enclosures. There she ripped one breast as the barbs clung, tenacious, and then suddenly, lightly let go. They discussed in long ago exchanged words their gladness at no longer being freshmen, at no longer being those for whom everything is new and unknown. And she wondered in her dream, as she used to wonder out of dreams, if there would come a time when nothing would be new to her and she would know everything.

She graduated college finally five years ago, but in her mind the walls of knowledge had not quit growing taller. With each fact that she contributed to her store of facts, whole systems of unknown thought would arise on the blurry horizon that she scarcely hoped to reach. She struggled through the fog, the smog, she stretched her fingers over the untold distance, and felt inside, her fingertips on the new thought's system, only to find it mushy, pulpy, invalid, non-viable. No whole and sinuous, pulsating fabric. Its antithesis had crept up behind her back. And in front of her the metal sheets, those ensigns of her confines, kept getting taller, unjumpable, unscalable. The rats ran wildly.

At last at thirty, sitting far back in a plump chair watching the sun set over chill New England weather, she feels the rats are still. Perhaps, caught in a time lag, they have generously given up their search. Their stomachs have shrunk? Their interest in the goal is suspended? So the memory comes clearer as it sits still also in a transfixed space, up on its hind haunches, front paws lifted.

Ten years ago she sat in a chair similar to this one, plumply over-stuffed, in a similar posture after having just hung up the phone. A week before had been her twentieth birthday and apparently (it was the doctor on the phone) three weeks prior to that she had gotten herself impregnated, started a baby, conceived a child. So the phrases had mounted up, the specious titles. Certainly a month old blob is not a child. Her body had produced it (with a little help) but her mind considered conception too big a word. She had not conceived a baby as being part of her life plans. And so it had been obvious: here was the unexpected hinge on which her life would turn. Here was the thing that had to happen to her before twenty (it had just snatched in under the wire but here it was) and here also was her chance to produce in fate a personal quirk, a slap of her hand in fate's face. She had imagined stretching before her two wide, expansive paths, one grassy and soft: she could get married; the other pebbly, exciting: to continue on her hard, individual way. Only alone could she expect to find knowledge, only as a fine, singular point could she hope to sit at the tip of the arrowhead. One week past twenty and she would abort the baby, reject normality, rule her fate. The set-up had been clear, the possibilities infinite.

This Claudia laughs into her cupped hands, curving her back and exposing the ridges of her throat. Hilarious, unhunh, exquisite. Someone had told her once that 20% of all first pregnancies are non-viable, miscarriages in laymen's terms. The doctor had to continue with her abortion, but it was a dead phoetus before he began. What could be more normal than being part of a 20% quota? She went through life hearing people oooh and aaah her miscarriage because it does not happen to everyone. But it happens to enough people doesn't it? More than enough. Far better to be invisible in the 80% masses and find within that a different exception, an extraordinary conception, she considers now.

Still preoccupied with the flower of greatness, she holds her rats still for once and tries for once to look clearly at her mental dividers, her mental definers. Life has been normal now, yes normal, for thirty whole years, and she is interested to see what has made it so.

Who set these walls for her to plunge over, for which she finally conceived a complex plan for tunnelling under? Who set the map in her baby brain, or the plans in

her adolescent mind or the trap in her adult soul that forced her life into a maze of metal walls? Was it her mother, her father, her older brother? Who taught her to make decisions on an either/or basis? Turn left or right, then left or right again. Who whispered in her ear subtly on a dark, stale night that the person who rose above the right and left was unique, incredible, to be envied? Few would rise out of two dimensions and leap with hidden wings. It took inspiration and perspiration they told her, but with luck you might swing it, up out of it, out of the flatlands.

Why, Claudia asks out loud of the empty apartment, did no one mention to her the living possibilities of the fourth dimension? Must she be eternally hemmed in by the walls of her liberal upbringing, offered only the sky as reward on the other side of which lie the taboo older brothers? If she could only forget that marriage suffocates, that the individual is responsible to his society, that change alone brings wisdom; the red emblazoned slogans on every metal wall, but cleft in high up out of reach of the little rat's nose or claws. If only she could stretch up and rearrange the red hot letters and reforge the words: marriages suffocate, the individual (responsible or not) is his society, loneliness changes wisdom, and that is all, because everything is arbitrary, nothing is sure, things are continually new. Claudia claps one first into her palm and holds it there still and crushing. The Claudia who has lived with three men for three years each (she has never been alone since she ran away from Aaron, the father of the miscarried child, nine years ago) eyes the quiet phone beside her uncertainly. The sky has grown a dark, dark grey and the reflection of orange street lamps is cutting crystals out of the snow outside.

Waiting for Aaron to call is like waiting to see a falling star fall. It needs time to find the apt wish for the moment, but being so scared it will fall before you are ready makes you miss it altogether. You're sitting with your eyes in your lap and the wish on the tip of your tongue when it falls, usually. She needs all the time he gives her to know how she will react and just to know how she feels inside of herself, but just the fact that he makes her wait makes her sure there is some reason, some reason he's evading her again, which makes her angry by the time he does call. She feels she has to stretch her mind out to the starpoint of his mind to see what is in the grand plan awaiting her, which makes her forget how she feels, sometimes.

Claudia tries to think how she feels. All she comes up with are circumstances, situations in her life, under which feelings hide.

A moment in Morocco when she had to pretend she was Marlene Dietrich in order to follow a man with a long jaw across the desert. But he left her in New York. He was not Cary Grant. Her third man left her too. Aaron says he dreams through the figures of movie stars and baseball heroes. She only envisions them when she's awake.

Funny how they should be in the same town again for the past couple of months, both at the university; he teaching, she doing chimpanzee research. A different university than ten years ago, but not much has changed. They are together pretty constantly since they met the first day of semester magically (all their meetings are magical, he insists) on the lawn outside the public library in the middle of the town. They eyed each other timidly as they laughed over the familiar coincidence that they should both be avoiding campus on the very first day of classes. He has been married, divorced. He tells her bits of it over eggs and whole wheat toast, the 99¢ special at their local diner as before, and as usual he refuses to tell her much. Her questions are blusteringly inquisitive; but he states his grounds and stands there asking again why she insists on knowing everything. Because she tells *him* so much, is why. She thinks he should be interested. If he cares for her at all he will be interested, just as she is interested in him, in the things that happen to him.

Funny though, he does not seem jealous anymore. Something is different: he seems to be listening without jealousy now. Or perhaps her stories are told without rancor. As he listens her stories grow fuller, more pointed. She has begun to under-

stand herself what she has been trying to say.

Perhaps the rats have been nothing but the substance with which to fill a day, or a year, or years. Perhaps the slogans on the walls are just the stuff to jam a mind or minds full. Maybe the steel walls were erected out of fear.

Institutions.

Insinuations.

Intonations.

Implications.

Exclamations.

Exaggerations.

Execrations.

She wrote that as a poem once. It didn't go over too well.

The woman she spoke to before her abortion, the university's sex counselor with tight lines sketching her face and resolute discussion welling from her chest, tried to explain to Claudia as best she could that the decision was difficult for any woman at this time because there was no cultural precedent set for this kind of action. Nothing in the past had given credence to the possibility that a woman may control the produce of her own body, and the use of her life. This unique position of women today, said this woman, makes of abortion a particularly courageous act. What worried Claudia was that she herself had no qualms. Maybe it was just the new generation, but she believed she had been brought up to know better than to think twice about the matter; she possessed the already made assumption that there were no alternatives. Even the choice of left or right had been taken from her. She tried to explain this to the woman and the care-worn face became jumbled with puzzlement. Claudia robbed this good-intentioned adviser of her voice. Finally, by struggling with her own tongue and heart, Claudia managed to make some sense for the woman, who was trying hard. So she was able to advise at last that perhaps it would be wise for Claudia to think seriously that alternatives did exist. She could have a baby; she might have to drop out of school, go on welfare, but these were all feasible. Claudia walked home in the snow that day trying to force herself to think that considering the possibilities would not be simply an affected, superficial action on her part. Even then she had tried to figure, with sun dribbling down between parted branches to blotch the crusted snow in front of her footsteps, how she had come to be this way about everything.

Claudia remembers with a deep gulf carved out of her belly what no walls can define for her: The forthright rats make way sometimes for elusive feeling.

The day before her abortion was scheduled she began to bleed. She went into the doctor to have the laminaria inserted, the properly sterilized piece of seaweed that, slipped into her vagine, would absorb all fluids, juice and relax the walls of her cervix. Upon arriving she told the Swedish nurse she had gotten her period. The nurse's round grey eyes opened wide: "So you are not pregnant?" she exclaimed. "I don't know. That's what I was wondering," Claudia responded quietly, resting her back against the doctor's bed covered with white coarse paper. So there came another urine test and then the doctor. "So you're not pregnant after all," he said speculatively, slipping on his thin, rubber gloves, pinching them down in between his fingers. So no tests can prove for sure that there's something growing inside, not until the baby arrives? He ducked behind the sheet that was already canopied over Claudia's raised knees and she felt one hidden hand creep over her belly and one probing hand inside her belly, apparently trying to touch and meet. It happened that that precise moment coincided with the most agonizing cramps she had yet had. Nausea opened up inside of her like a deep fen that she tensed herself to keep from falling into. "Unless of course it is non-viable. It certainly seems to be a six week expansion and now the wall of the uterus is stiff. That's probably what it is. But we'll check to be sure. I'll just scrape the wall a tiny bit. It's going to hurt a little." The metal vagina-pryer-open was inserted, then a long thin rod with a hook

at the end. Yes, she felt it there, the rip inside of her, then again, and then once more because he wasn't sure he had any. The sharp pain cut through her nausea. The Swedish nurse stood beside her head and the round grey eyes looked so sad at the Claudia who lay there uttering small gasps, clutching at her breath and her tears. "Yep, that's what it was. Non-viable pregnancy. Here you see." He held in his plastic gloved hands under her eyes on the metal scoop of the vagina-pryer-open a small red and purple blob, mucousy, with almost ethereal walls. His eyes avoided hers because of course, she understood, he did not want to see the hurt there.

No other pain that followed was quite so sharp. But the pain as she drove herself home, and put herself to bed, and waited alone for Aaron to come was long and intolerable. Claudia has not thought of this for a long time, but sitting before the frosted window and the deepening night she remembers vaguely and then less vaguely how she waited for Aaron to come, for the sixteen hours of night to be over and the operation done and the dead phoetus out, for simply the Darvon to begin working. In that small, empty apartment, she remembers not so different from this one now, she groaned, she breathed heavily, deeply as laborers do when they are ploughing through a backbreaking, tedious job, and then she screamed. She called out for Aaron and for Jesus, and then she promised, now she recalls, she blurted out into the dark air over her bed that never would she do anything mean to anybody ever again. And why did she promise that? Claudia stretches back, back into her memory. There was a man in the street as she drove home that evening whom she almost hit, in her pain and her faintness. She hoped she would not let go and collapse; she hoped the wheel would stay steady in her hands and that she would not hit him. But she couldn't count on it. And anyway that was not the root of it. A steady throb has awakened in Claudia's belly, waiting strained because she has not reached the bottom of it. There is the man, any man, whom because of some way she has been made, or some way that she is, she does not really care about: it does not really matter to her if she squashes him under the motion of her pain. So she swore, she even screamed as if there was someone out there, maybe a few blocks away, waiting to accept her oath. It would be hard for her to say that she has kept that promise made under the influence of finite physical pain and guilt.

By the time Aaron arrived that night she had become quiet and drowsy, comfortable at last curled up on her side. And when he lay down beside her a further peacefulness drew over her. Yet with one aching bit left she had to ask if he minded her calling him, if he would mind staying the night next to her. And he answered out of soft certainty in a way she'd never heard before or since that it made him happy she had called him. He stroked her side very gently. She reached her hand out that night and touched his face, the landing planes right under his eyes, his high forehead, and the stiff rim of his ear. In the dim light she saw his blue eyes talk for the first and only time. He asked her if she couldn't stay quiet for a little now. "Let time wash over you and float under for a while. Things don't always have to be jumping, in an uproar for you, do they?" Three months later she left him to dig up Roman artifacts in Morocco.

The phone rings and she promptly picks it up. "Hello?"

"Hello. How are you?"

"OK. How are you?"

"Not bad."

Claudia giggles. They have returned word for word to the phone formula they acquired when they first knew each other.

"Claudia, I'm sorry I asked." Aaron's voice approaches her ear furry and subdued as always.

"What? how I am? No need for feeling sorry." She giggles again.

"Hmpm. You certainly sound jolly. What's up?" His voice, that intractable caterpillar, has tried to change, speed up, grow higher, understand her supposed jolliness

"No. I'm not jolly, particularly."

"Oh. Well, what I meant: You didn't want me to bring that up did you. I mean you know it's not something I bring up lightly. But you, you've been avoiding it so long. You still are, aren't you?"

"It. It? What's this evil It? Aaron, don't run away on me. Don't be too rational." The little rats are squirming, their tails in curly-q's. Hold still, you bastards. "Aaron, I wish I could see your eyes." Her voice has dropped like she is talking to the tiniest of insects on the edge of this receiver.

"My eyes?" he questions unsteadily.

"Yeah. Would you come over?"

"Un-unh," definitively.

"No?"

"Right, no. I want to know who's talking of running away. I didn't run the first time." He states his actions clearly.

"No. But you would have, if I didn't first." She states her assumptions.

"Oh, that so? Afraid to try. Not afraid of anything else. But afraid of standing still?" The phone hangs between them, a still, empty hum of stretched wires and a plastic wall on either end. Does it matter that these are clichéd phrases if they affect her? "By the way, I haven't asked you straight out yet. But. Do you still want to be famous?"

"What would I be famous of, Aaron? I quit writing." She has retreated, seeing the largeness of the gulf hidden by the smallness of the receiver. She notes suddenly the absence of light in the apartment; the only reflections of light come from the street and next door windows.

"I don't know. That's what I always wondered. Seems like you wanted to be famous for living, as if you were the only one doing it. But, Claudia, you're afraid to live. Why're you so frightened of doing anything new in your own way? Or even anything old in a new way? You used to talk of that arrowhead you dreamed of leading. But Claudia, if you're leading you can't always be looking behind you to check on all the things you already know and to plan on all the things you're gonna know as if you already knew them. Even an arrowhead's got its arrow behind it. And anyway, it's not as though this one decision is going to reverse any of your past decisions or suddenly change things one way or another. Maybe it doesn't matter what institutions you have in back of you, holding you, so long as you've got your nose in front like an arrowhead driving forwards through time sensing what you don't know in each moment and not worrying about what you don't yet know." Aaron has never been so blunt in an obtuse way. "Claudia, if you can't make me a commitment over this rotten, plastic contraption, if you have to wait for some warm little envelope to come swallow you up and assure you from all directions that what you're doing is right; then maybe you better just go stuff up your nose, plug up your ears and hide in a corner."

"Hey, wait, don't bully me. Don't get so melodramatic. I was about to say I'd marry you. But now..." Claudia stops. No sound from the other end. "If I say 'yes' now, will you come over and hold me?"

"Yes, Claudia, I'll hold you as long as you like."

"Well, I guess I will marry you." The rats drop their snouts to the floor and pull their paws over their eyes. □