

Excerpt *The Oddity*, UNM Press, Spring 2004

The Oddity

by V.B. Price

For Rini and Wendy

In Memoriam:
Clifford Brook
Roland Francis Dickey
R.W. Buddington
Patrick Chester Henderson
Sandra Rae Greenwald
James Michael Jenkinson
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Florence and Bev Watts
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Dick Forbes
Susie Henderson

“Books lie, even those that are the most sincere.”

–Marguerite Yourcenar, “The Memoirs of Hadrian”

Author’s Note

The following story is an exercise in the fictionalization of everything. It is a Rashomon. Its author and characters bend reality to perspective. Their truths are fictions of view point. I have written a book by somebody else about a world she almost invented, described by people who could exist, and who are, like all of us, confused. Reality exists. But here, only the emotions are real.

–V.B. Price
Albuquerque, 1999

Polishing the Mountain

by Helen Contreras-Robles

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For Morris Wolf and The Moose

Heaven and hell are of this world. They co-exist here. One can be seen through the other. But they are not equal. Hell is an intrusion. It bursts through any context, but always subsides. Heaven is shy, though it always comes first. It unfolds, but is never subdued. Our duty is to find it and reclaim it every day, to dedicate ourselves to its unfolding in our lives.

-Hana Nicholas
Albuquerque, 1949

Polishing the Mountain is Helen Contreras-Robles' first published novel. She is a journalist, poet, and immigration activist living in San Diego, California. Dr. Contreras-Robles' Ph.D. is from the University of New Mexico's American Studies Program. Her dissertation is entitled "Marija Gimbutas and the Civilizing Power of the Goddess: An Existential Study of American Women and the Subculture of Service."

Introduction

This is a novel about meaning and the spiritual sickness that comes from searching for meaning and finding nothing that makes any sense. I have written this book under the spiritual mentorship of Dr. Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy and survivor of the Nazi death camps. His book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, changed my life and empowered me to move beyond my chronic despair and horror of the absurdity of the world.

The frustration of what Frankl calls “the will to meaning” is what this account of the lives of Hana Claude Nicholas and Lowell Patrick Briscoe is about. It is written in the form of a novel – or, as it could be called, a literary docudrama - because so much of what took place between them in the late 1940s must always remain a fiction. Hana Nicholas could best be described as a sage, social pioneer and eccentric who served her community in the North Valley of Albuquerque, New Mexico, with tireless and inspired devotion for more than quarter of a century. Lowell Briscoe was, of course, a world renowned children’s advocate, author, social activist who gained quite a bit more than his 15 minutes of fame in the 1992 multi-race riots in Los Angeles. I have compiled, edited, and creatively reconstructed the story of Nicholas’s and Briscoe’s remarkable relationship and personal tragedies from materials made available to me by the Lowell Patrick Briscoe Archives at the Center for Southwest Research at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. These include fragments of Lowell Briscoe’s unpublished novel entitled “A Nest of Hells,” portions of his beloved Christmas Fable “The Witch and the Star,” and journal entries, letters, and news accounts of the lives of the real people he fictionalized in his novel. This literary docudrama of mine is interlarded with my own fictional speculations derived from these sources and from my personal experiences and introspections as a feminist scholar and journalist working in the last half of the 20th century searching for role models that abolish gender stereotypes in my culture. I have

attempted without much success to substantiate some of the most disturbing allegations made by Dr. Briscoe and have commented briefly on my findings in the Postscript.

My ultimate goal with this novel could be described as an effort to fictionally represent the modern, and to some extent postmodern, struggle to maintain personal integrity in a philosophically unstable world. Ours is an open-ended moment in history which demands the individual find her own way through social, religious, and psychological upheavals, but one which is also still dominated by a rigid emphasis on conformity to the power principle of what I shall call “nice appearance,” or non-troubling appearance. This power principle is characteristic of decadent societies and takes the form of extreme conformism in which competing bigotries directed at women and ethnic minorities as troublesome classes, and at eccentricity as an unpredictable and unsettling tendency, create forces that crush the initiative and terminate the independence of those who think for themselves. Hana Nicholas and Lowell Briscoe were such people.

The action in the novel spreads out over seven decades, beginning in 1925 when Hana Nicholas first moved to Albuquerque, focusing on in the post-war era from 1948 to 1949 and on the events surrounding the 1992 riots in Los Angeles. Although this is a thoroughly fictionalized account, I have composed it as a jigsaw puzzle of different kinds of texts, written by different characters. So as not to encumber the flow of the novel, I have used the device of footnotes to identify the “author” and “source” and date of each chapter entry. If no footnote appears, the text is purely my own informed invention.

Helen Contreras-Robles
Albuquerque, NM 1998

The 1992 Los Angeles Riot

PART ONE:

Diabolical Murder

Lowell Briscoe was listening to the news of the verdict on his car radio, thinking to himself 'They walked. Those damn cops walked. And just 'cause they were cops. How could the jury do that? Everybody in the whole world saw what those bastards did. How could the jury get talked out of it? Wasn't the video absolute evidence? How could they rationalize a savage beating they saw over and over again with their own eyes? The sophistry of lawyers. Racism, racism, racism, racism. It's just horribly true, a poor black man is this country isn't worth the wood on a gallows.'

The suburban jury had found six Los Angeles police officers not guilty of beating Rodney King half to death. The jurors concluded the officers had used "reasonable force" to subdue the ex-con after a high speed auto chase. Lowell Briscoe could feel the cold rot of cynicism sweeping hopelessly over him. 'This is how it must feel to find that your neighbors were dragged out of their house and carted off to a gulag while you were at a movie matinee. This is a bit of how Hana must have felt when she was taken away,' he thought.

Lowell was in shirt sleeves, windows rolled down, cruising through South Central L.A. on the way to the University of Southern California from the coast. He was looking forward to teaching his seminar on "Racism and Xenophobia in the Ancient World." It was a hot, breezy, late April day. His anger was political and abstract. He felt in no personal danger. Traffic was moderate. He slowed to stop behind three other cars at the intersection of Florence and Normandy. He became aware of people milling around in the street, of shouting and the sound of breaking glass. It took him a few moments to change focus from his angry musings to realize that a number of young men were running toward his car, shouting, "There's one, get him, get that fucker, break his fuckin' head."

Insane panic overcame him. Lowell was jolted by dizziness, like a pinched nerve shooting flame up his spine. His head was a dead weight. 'What!? They're coming after ME. Wait! Wait! Wait! Me!? God no, not me. No...'. As he tried to roll up his window, nightmare slow motion seized his muscles. The window wouldn't go up. He shifted gears, grinding into reverse, smashed into the car behind him, trying to turn out into another lane. Then a rock exploded through the driver's side window, hitting him just below the left eye, driving glass into his cheek. "Fuckers, fuckers, fuckers, not me, you

fucking idiots. Who do you think I am? Fuckers! I'll kill you, kill you for this, kill you, kill you, cut your fucking hearts out. Mother fuckers. Mother fuckers...." The rush of adrenaline made his whole body shake with nausea. He gunned the engine, trying to run over his attackers. He smashed into the car ahead of him, backed up again into the car behind him, screaming and swearing at the top of his lungs, "Fuckers, fuckers, fuckers...." Then hands grabbed his arms, tore his grip from the steering wheel; fists cracked his nose, his glasses were smashed into his face. His car was racing, pushing the car behind almost out of its path when the hands finally hauled him out of the car and onto the street. Shoes hit his mouth and nose. Someone kicked him in the chest and stomach. "Sack a shit!" More foot blows landed on his lower back and spine. His face was grinding into the asphalt. 'Jesus god, I'm dying...I can't breathe. I can't... mob's too heavy, mobbed, mass...minded...too heavy, too heavy to breathe.'

He tried to curl up and cover his head with his arms, when another shoe caught him on the shin and another battered him several times between the legs from behind. Someone hauled him to his feet; others hit him in the face, ribs, and stomach. Hands searched his back pockets and took his wallet; someone put a gun to his head. (Images of his mother's silk dress on his cheek; Joel's howls in the hospital; Juliet's milky belly; La Boehme by the pool; Singapore slings on the beach in the morning; pine smell and Christmas candles in Hana's kiva; the back of Mark Spindle's head when the jury found him guilty of Juliet's murder; screaming at Nola, "You killed her. You did it. You did it.") He heard a young, squeaky voice say, "No guns. Too fast. Use this." A claw hammer cracked into Lowell's left jaw. He fell; the hammer came down toward his head again, it glanced off his skull down his ear, practically ripping it off. "Leave this sucker. Over there, over there." The beaters ran to another car across the intersection. Lowell rolled on the pavement, numb, bloody mouthed, aching, his heart pumping so fast he could feel the blood spurting from cuts on his face and where his teeth used to be. 'Can't think; I'm burning up; I'll kill 'em, torch 'em, torch 'em. I'm dying, aren't I?...You're dying, you're dying.' He pulled himself up to open the door of his car. Another shoe crunched into his ribs and kidneys like a sledge hammer. He fell again, the hot front of the left tire smudging down his cheek.

"No, no! In Jesus name, leave him alone; go home, go home, now," the big woman shouted. "Don't do this anymore; go home. Go away. Stop it, stop it." Hands picked him up, a face stared kindly

into his. "You poor thing. What have they done to you? You're OK now. You're OK...." Another voice, "Hurry, hurry Marjorie, they're coming back." Lowell felt himself being half dragged and carried to another car. "Hurry. You're OK, you're OK."

'I'm dying,' he thought. And then he blacked out.

JUNE 23, 1949

“All things counter, original, spare, and strange,” the poet Hopkins wrote. Hana read and nodded in agreement, as she transcribed his words in her notebook. “You either are that way or you are not,” she wrote. “I trust people like that. They have to know who they are. They can’t glide along. They can’t live by rote. It’s too dangerous; it’s too boring. They know what it means to pay attention and polish the mountain no matter what.”

Hana was dreamy and comforted that morning with the living room curtains drawn, secluded in her wing-backed reading chair, safe among her books. For the first time in months she felt protected and invisible. Her camouflage worked, even though she could never quite believe it. Hopkins’ words gave her the feeling of being known. She was still a little sleepy and her mind wandered among images and associations that surprised and repulsed her. “All things counter...think of all the old women, all the ‘spare and strange’ old crones carted off by the Inquisition. Three hundred years of burning women, gray hair blazing. Three hundred years of shrieking and horror and unspeakable pain. What does age and being a woman have to do with heresy? What would they have done to me?” Hana shook herself, trying to focus again on her reading. She leafed through her notebook and found Dostoyevsky’s admonition in the “Brothers Karamozov,” “I think you should love life above everything in the world...love it regardless of logic...it must be regardless of logic, and it’s only then one will understand the meaning of it.” She had quoted those words for years, to herself and to others, in church and at board meetings. She knew it was the truth.

Hana read like this for two hours every morning, taking notes on as many as five books at a time. This morning, along with Hopkins, she was reading again in Eliot’s “The Four Quartets,” comparing the maxims of the Epictatus and Epicurus, and savoring Colette’s little novella “Bella Vista.”

Her living room at Gloriamaris also served as her study, her “thinking room.” Years ago she had painted the walls hunter green, and the floor-to-ceiling book cases were stained a dark Edwardian brown. Her lamps had 40 watt bulbs in them and gave off a “deep woods kind of yellow light,” she wrote once in her journals. The thinking room is cave-like with the curtains closed, she admitted. “Why does that annoy people so much? I never draw the curtains

when they’re here. Why would they find my seclusion so threatening?” she wondered for the hundredth time. “It’s been my habit for years.” After she read each morning, she practiced her piano for an hour, playing mostly the Mozart, Beethoven, Bach and Debussy she still knew by heart.

The cats and dogs and horses were hungry for breakfast when they heard the music stop. The turtles, rabbits, and various fowl needed feeding, and she had to patch the leak in the carp pond this morning before biking to the grocery. ‘Time to rise and shine,’ she thought. ‘This isn’t the 14th century. Why do I think it is?’ She piled her music and books neatly on the side table and carefully capped her fountain pen. As she rose to change from her robe to her overalls, someone knocked forcefully at the front door.

The sound sent a shock of adrenaline burning through her. ‘God, who could that be? This is preposterous. Everyone knows better than to come in the morning. Maybe they’ll go away. No, I’d better see if it’s Lowell. Maybe he’s in trouble.’ She moved to the door slowly, stepping lightly so whoever it was wouldn’t hear her. She gingerly drew aside the edge of the front curtain and saw two sheriff’s officers, one about to knock again.

She froze in horror, paralyzed as if she’d just witnessed a sadistic premonition come to life. She could barely breathe and then abruptly started to pant violently and sank to the floor of the little entrance alcove, sliding on the throw rug so her feet thumped against the door.

“Miss Nicholas, Miss Nicholas, this is the sheriff’s office. Please open the door.”

Hana stopped just short of hyperventilating. She was beginning to feel tingly and knew what that meant. She cupped her hands over her nose and tried to breathe slowly. ‘What is going on here?’ she thought. ‘Pull yourself together, child. Pull yourself together. Get up, get up. Straighten up. There’s nothing wrong. This is not a dream. It’s all right. It’s all right.’

“I’ll be right there, officers. I’m still in my night things. Let me change.”

‘What could possibly be going on? I’ve got to keep myself calm. Be alert. Relax. Stay calm.’ She changed into a work shirt and overalls. There was much to be done in the garden today. So many happy chores. Some of the dogs and cats outside had begun to get nervous. Much barking and pacing was going on under the back portal. She thought for the slightest moment about bolting out the

back door, as she had when she was a little girl, breaking free and riding away into the forest, disappearing forever. But the horses were of no use for escape anymore. And the mountains here were too far away.

'There's nothing wrong. Look strong,' she said to herself.

A harder knock at the door. "I'm coming officers," Hana said in a firm voice as she strode across her livingroom, pausing briefly to open the curtains.

She unlatched the door, turned the knob, and as she did an officer unexpectedly nudged it open, stepping into the alcove before she could graciously open the door. The other officer stepped inside too, and Hana backed peddled into the livingroom.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"Are you Hana Claude Nicholas?"

"Yes, I am. What's happened?"

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Nicholas. We're not here to hurt you. We want to make this easy for you, so don't worry. We have a court order here. We're authorized to take you into protective custody. You're going to be just fine."

"What on earth do you mean, take me into protective custody!? Why? Who are you protecting me from?"

"Yourself, ma'am."

"Myself?"

"Yes, Miss Nicholas."

"Why? What for? Tell me, for heaven sakes. For what reason? What have I done?" She felt like she was about to faint. Her voice had raised to a frenzied pitch.

"Please, Miss Nicholas, ma'am, don't give us any trouble. We don't want to have to cuff you. You're going to be just fine. You'll see. This isn't going to hurt at all."

"Mrs. Dasheller, would you come in now, please," the other officer called out in the direction of the front door.

"Nola, Nola, what's going on here? Who are these people? Why do they want to arrest me? What's going on?"

"They're sheriff's officers, dear. Can't you see? They don't want to arrest you, honey. They just want to help you, take you where you can get some rest for a while."

"Take me for a rest?! What do you mean? What do you mean 'rest'? What is this!? Why are YOU here, Nola? What is this?" Hana said with a livid fury in her voice.

"Honey, don't worry."

"Don't call me 'honey.' What on God's good earth is going on?"

"Don't worry. It's all going to be just fine. Just stay calm," Nola said like a pediatrician. "Do you see what I mean, officers? Just do your job, please, before this gets worse."

"That's what we're trying to do, ma'am," the bigger deputy said as he took Hana rudely by the arm.

"Let go of me. Who do you think you are? Are you out of your mind? I said let go. This isn't Russia....What have I done? Why are you doing this? What IS going on?" Hana's indignation was getting hard as cement. She was enraged, terrified. "I feel like a dog being dragged off to the pound," she yelled. "Let go of me, let go right now!"

"Miss Nicholas, we're authorized to take you with us under state statutes regarding the involuntary referral and hospitalization of the mentally ill," one of the deputies said in an official voice. "Do you understand? A written application has been filed with the district court by Mrs. Dasheller accompanied, as the law requires, by a certificate of a licenced physician, you can see right there," the deputy said, showing her the document, "signed by Dr. Harold Barrows, here, that he is of the opinion that you are mentally ill."

"Mentally ill! Mentally ill! What on earth are you talking about," Hana screamed into the officer's face.

"Hana, my darling, calm yourself, dear, calm yourself. It's all right. It's going to be all right. I'll be with you. Hal will examine you again very soon, and you'll probably be fine. I'll be with you all the way. Just stay calm. Remember yourself. Stay calm, be at peace. This is what you need, darling one. A little rest....Hurry officers, I can't keep her passive for long."

The deputies pulled and pushed Hana out the front door of Gloriamaris. Nola locked it with her own set of keys.

'This is not happening. This is not happening,' Hana heard herself scream inside her head. 'This is a dream. I'm going to shrivel up, melt away like a snail hit with salt. This is mad. Utterly insane. How can they do this? It's insane, it's insane. I can't stand it. I don't understand....The babies.... I've got to feed the babies. They're going to kill the babies!'

"The babies," Hana screamed. "My babies!....I must feed my babies!"

"Come on, ma'am. Come on, come on. There you go...." "Don't worry, dear. I'll take care of them. I'll take care of them, dar-

ling. I'll feed them while you're gone," Nola said through the squad car window.

"Aren't you coming, Nola?" Hana asked like a child.

"Not yet, dear."

The date was June 23, 1949. Adapted from Lowell Briscoe's unpublished novel *A Nest of Hells*.

"DIABOLICAL MURDER": CHRISTMAS 1964

Juliet's old body was still cloud white and cool as fruit, Lowell thought as he tried to comfort her and calm her down. She was sixty and her arms were firm as a dancer's. Her ribs and the curve of her breast were a milky blue. He could see them through the folds of her nightgown as she lay sobbing on the bed, her eyes puffed up and leaking mascara.

"'Diabolical murder.' That's what Hana said to me, Lowell. 'This is diabolical murder.' Then she grabbed me like a child would, begging me not to leave, pulling at my arms, moaning like an animal dying of homesickness and grief."

Juliet turned stern. She got that hawkish look on her face that used to terrify Lowell as a child. She dabbed the tears from her cheeks and sat on the edge of the bed. Her long, red hair looked like Rita Hayworth's.

"Nothing in my life has been so horrible as that moment watching Hana struggle against her fate," Juliet said with a melodramatic shudder. "I couldn't bear it. I was all alone. I felt like a traitor, but I turned from her, turned my face, tried to walk away but she wouldn't let me go. She held on to me and I thought for a moment she was going to fall on her knees and beg."

Juliet crossed her legs and ran her fingers through her hair. "It was so terrible, Lowell, I wanted to take her in my arms and whisk her away, but then the attendants came and pulled her off. It was all I could do to slip through the jail door before she could get at me again. Once I was on the other side, Hana went limp, didn't make a sound. I watched her through the white bars as the attendants helped her back down the hall to the stale little holding cell." Juliet paused, mulling details. "She didn't sag, exactly, but her head hung down; the fight went out of her; and her bigness, that wonderful Clydesdale poise of hers- it was utterly gone. She looked as if she'd had a lobotomy. She scraped her feet as she walked. Her joy was drained; the hope, the optimism, the great shine of her life was gone. When they rounded the corner at the end of the hallway, Hana turned her head and looked at me. Oh, God," Juliet shuddered. "I saw that beautiful weathered face, that dear, innocent Joan of Arc look, those wise philosopher's eyes. But she'd been transformed, Lowell," she said with a strange harshness. "Her face looked monkey-like, like a chimp's. She seemed to snarl silently like a beloved pet I'd betrayed and sent to the vacuum chamber. That's exactly what she was like. It was like I'd left her at the pound to be put to

sleep. I felt so ashamed, so ashamed,” she said, staring into the room. “I could do nothing, nothing. I was helpless. I was the only one of us who went there, the only one who saw her before they took her to the state hospital, the sanitarium, or whatever you call it. Nola was there at the hearing, of course, so was Dr. Barrows, but I was the only one in that jail, in that hideous place.”

“What do you mean by ‘jail?’ Was she in jail? That doesn’t seem right.”

“After the hearing, Lowell, after the hearing in the County Courthouse,” Juliet said with annoyance. “They kept her in the cells above the courtrooms...before they took her away.”

“God, how terrible.”

Juliet covered her face and shook her head, mumbling furiously, “The hearing. A sanity hearing! Can you imagine that? Is that the craziest thing you could think of? What were we doing? A sanity hearing for Hana! That’s insane!”

Juliet started sobbing again. The hawk scowl faded. Lowell watched the familiar metamorphosis of her face, from Medusa to Aphrodite to Little Nell. She curled up on the bed and looked at him as if she were going to suck her thumb. She wept so bitterly she could hardly catch her breath. Her lipstick and spittle stained the peach tinted, satin pillow case. She smelled of gin and White Shoulders cologne and yesterday’s vomit. Her bedroom was hot with dusty afternoon light. It filtered through the blinds and soiled yellow drapes. Hers was a sick room now, an invalid’s nest, no longer the refuge, the chamber of fantasy and escape that it was when Lowell came to live with her. It was a boudoir then, lacy and sweet smelling and dark. In 1948, when Lowell was ten, this room was like he imagined a harem to be in the Arabian Nights, “a private harem, fresh and motherly, voluptuously sanitary - just plain glamorous, designed by the ad departments of Sears and Saks Fifth Avenue,” he’d written in his journal more than forty years later. Now, in the Christmas season of 1964, it seemed like “a secret room in somebody’s attic, a place to die or hide out, in shabby luxury, from the Nazis or the thought police. It was haunted with the stink of illness and old shoes and with the chill of lost delight.”

Juliet is Lowell’s half-sister. In 1964, Lowell was 26 years old. Adapted from Lowell Briscoe’s *A Nest of Hells*.

Religious Skirmishing

[Journal of Hana Nicholas]
22 October 1934–Gloriamaris

The locust trees turned into great geysers of yellow leaves again. This morning a warm wind is blowing through the garden, quite ferociously at times. When I looked out my window a moment ago, the garden air was tempestuous with leaves, golden cottonwood, locust, dark red Virginia creeper leaves. Magnificent. Nothing like Gloriamaris in late Autumn. Nine sublime winters here. Another one coming. I’m completely inconspicuous, despite knowing and being known by almost everyone in this part of the Valley. People here are so delicate about other people’s business. I’ve said this so many times before. But I’m still astonished at their tact and civility. It’s especially true in the winter. We all ‘hole up,’ as the mountain men used to say. And the next great burrowing is just ahead. And Thanksgiving again, Los Pastores, “the” play again - I’ve got to start writing it now - Christmas eve, Santo Domingo dances. What a fine time to snuggle in and be Mr. Badger in his housecoat.

All kinds of little tempests around here. I’ve been reading Jane Ellen Harrison’s wonderful but long out of print book “Themis: A Study of the Origins of Greek Religion” - 1912, I believe. Fascinating thought of a world nurtured and defended by a Great Goddess long before old Zeus and old Jehovah. I mentioned to Nola Miss Harrison’s view of Themis as the guardian of “right living,” the keeper of the pre-Olympian idealism, the goddess of the social order, and Nola became quite distant, almost irritably impatient, implying - if not directly saying so - that there is no past before the God of the Bible, that “He” is all, and has always been “All,” and that all the rest is silly and, I believe she used these words, “dangerous conjecture,” when she really meant to say “nonsense.” I was stunned and put out. What a strange and disagreeable close-mindedness for a scholar and university professor! We’ve spoken of religion many times before - especially Pueblo Indian religion. I remember how she was tolerant of the Pueblos because they had “plowed under paganism” in favor of “the Christ.” They have done no such thing, of course. And Nola should know better, even if she is a relative newcomer. Well, I suppose this will be a fruitful difference between us. Though I feel the subject has been almost sealed off and has become a wall between

us. Is there a whole part of my life that Nola not only can't make any sense of, but thinks she disagrees with too? Certainly there is. I no more want Nola to know everything about me than I want to bare my soul to my mother and father, the cold, deaf demigods of childhood, or even to the great Nanna, grandmother of winter, who now talks to herself in a little room and wouldn't remember anything I said to her anyway. Freedom from forced candor. Freedom from arctic tortures. That's why I'm in New Mexico. So I don't have to disclose. What does it matter that Nola, good friend that she is, knows only a part of me and can know no more? Thanks to God, though, for Thea and George. They might not share my enthusiasms, but at least they don't slam doors of awareness in my face....It's not unusual for someone like me, an outsider everywhere I go, to have no foolproof confidant, no one to completely trust...does anyone? Is there anything, in the last analysis, but prayer?

This journal entry was written roughly nine years after Hana Nicholas' arrival in New Mexico.

Juliet's Purging: *Christmas 1964*

"What do you mean, exactly, by 'diabolical murder?' What on earth are you talking about?" Lowell asked Juliet with the high whine of an irritated child. Lowell could be gagglingly self-important and high handed with Juliet. It was one of his more miserable qualities.

"You know, you know," she whimpered accusingly. "Thank God, you've come. I want to tell you everything I can remember. I cannot bear to hold it in any longer. I'm the last one left, the last one. I just want you to listen to me, Lowell, just listen. Just be my therapist again for a while, will you Lowell?"

Lowell had expected something uncomfortable when she'd made those endless long distance phone calls to Los Angeles, pleading with him to come home that Christmas, but nothing like this. He'd put his suitcase in his old bedroom, which Juliet kept pretty much the way it had been when he was a boy, poured himself a large brandy, sat himself down in a stuffed chair opposite her bed, and tried to appear detached. Juliet still had such a strong effect on him. The scars were deep, like the jagged edges of a half a geode; and Juliet was the other half.

Juliet finished unburdening herself about the dreadful encounter she had with Hana at the County Courthouse and then asked him, "Do you understand what I'm saying, Lowell? Hana was judged insane, or incompetent, or something. The sanest person I have ever known was judged unable to care for herself and a danger to others. She was consigned to a rest home for a while and then transferred to the nut hatch in Las Vegas, that hideous place where you saw her before you left this house and left me to go to Yale. It was Yale, wasn't it? Yes, it was. Anyway, she never raised a finger in her own defense. Those ghastly words - 'diabolical murder'- were her only comment on the whole brutal travesty, and she never uttered them at the hearing."

This was the part of the puzzle Lowell had been looking for since he had been told Hana had died after the Christmas play of 1948. Through great efforts and heroic feats as a boy he'd learned that Hana had not died but had, as one adult told him, lost her mind. He knew many bits and pieces of the story, but didn't remember ever hearing anything about a sanity hearing other than Thea

Pound's blithering tale, or anything about the torture Hana endured. Why didn't she defend herself? Why didn't she take the stand and prove to everyone how infallibly wise and savvy she was? Why didn't she demonstrate her clear-headed humor and intelligence? It was inconceivable to Lowell that someone as self-reliant as Hana could be cowed into silence. Of course it must have been a nightmare. She was stunned, he was sure. And she was in agony. Lowell understood that clearly when he saw her in Las Vegas, sitting in a wicker chair with that monstrous grimace frozen on her face like "a mask of horror," her mouth gaping as if to make a demonic scream.

From Lowell Briscoe's "A Nest of Hells"

"Et In Arcadia Ego"

[Journal of Hana Nicholas]
2 June 1944–Gloriamaris

The war will never stop. Millions of people are being murdered, and we are rationing tires and sugar, safe in our little fortress America, our little paradise, our Arcadia where everyone in the world wants to come, where I came nearly 20 years ago, escaping reality and facts and God knows what, only to find the facts of paradise to be quite different from the facts of hope. All over the world, people are being driven from their homes, slaughtered, left destitute, mangled. And I am about to put on my overalls, my big boots, take my shovel, and let water out of my side ditch into my corn rows and victory cabbage patch. I have seen so many young men in the last three years in hospitals with terrible wounds and mental deformities. I've read them so many stories. I've talked to the German POWs tending the milk cows up Rio Grande at Los Poblanos farm. I've sat some nights like Whitman holding the hands of those who wish they were dying, so terribly do they hurt, so crippled they will always be. Here I am in Gloriamaris, in Albuquerque, in New Mexico, in Paradise, in the American Arcadia, in America's Arcadia itself, in this divine backwater wilderness of the way the world used to be, of the way it will never be again. And even Arcadia itself is dying and changing. Even the present paradise is becoming a thing of the past. When I moved here from MY paradise, from MY Arcadia as a child to this one, I changed it myself. Gloriamaris has changed it, no matter how respectful I am of it. Most of my neighbors still speak Spanish first. Most of them still sweep their yards so the dirt is immaculate. Most of them do a little farming, work at the jobs downtown or on the railroad or in hotels. Many, many of them are in the war; many in the war remember Los Griegos and the North Valley as their heaven on earth, aching to return to what will never be the same. Most of my neighbors are so courteous that they have never said they thought my big house and all the land I have is outlandish and arrogant and way too rico. They treat me not with deference but with kindness and respect, like a nice guest they don't want to embarrass and can put up with for as long as they need to because she's trying hard not to get in the way and to help out as much she can. Everyone is so poor here and so generous. So careful with each

other, by and large. The only thief in the whole area is an Anglo woman over in Los Candelarias. And they excuse her because she lost her husband and drinks.

Et in Arcadia Ego. Even I am in Arcadia. This green island of courtly poverty, of Virgilian solitude, these fields full of corn and oats and apples and Pan. Even I am in Arcadia, companion of beavers and muskrats and kestrels and cranes. Hermes is here, too, in the cool of the shade, in the clarity of the water, in the deceptive grandeur of the shadows. Most of the world wants to live in America, and most of America doesn't know New Mexico exists. And I live in the place that nobody knows and everyone yearns for. And what have I done to it? I have changed it, delicately I admit. But as much as I love it now, I don't totally live here myself. I live part of my life in the Arcadia of my childhood, of my dark forests and secret meadows, my streams of light. I am a refugee from paradise hiding in another paradise. And no one can know who I am. I live now in a place that I am reinventing because I love it, so it becomes for me a lovely dream, as lovely as the dream of the past in which I also live. So I am that person who lives in two dreams and who still walks upon the earth, which is real, and lets water out into her fields, and shops at the little store down the way and passes on gossip about crops and animals and tiny human follies. And all around me, people walk in dreams different from mine. And the world all around us, the great world ocean all around us is on fire, oil burning on its waters, a hurricane of fire everywhere but here. For now.

This entry was written three days before D Day, 19 years after Hana Nicholas arrived in New Mexico.