

LOVELY IN HER BONES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

ART

MAY 2005

By
Jacob K. Jackson

Thesis Committee:

Suzanne Wolfe, Chairperson
Frank Beaver
Fred H. Roster

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Plates.....	iii
Introduction.....	iv
Part I	
Lovely in Her Bones	2
You Got to Meet Me by the Knuckles of the Skinny Bones Tree.....	6
Interferon the Grumpinator.....	8
Speed Read Theater.....	13
Slept Through Christmas, Slept Like a Bucket of Snow.....	20
Salt Pool Over Two-hundred Yards of Bones.....	22
On Starvation Ridge Little Sticks Try to Grow.....	30
In the Belly of a Fish.....	34
Flowers Exhibit Their Glow of Life by Falling to the Ground.....	41
Part II	
Ideas and Motivations.....	47
Death, Bones, Aesthetics, and The Sublime.....	54
Nuts and Bolts.....	61
Bibliography.....	66

List of Plates

Plate	Page
I. Gallery View 1.....	67
II. Gallery View 2.....	67
III. Detail 1.....	68
IV. Detail 2.....	69
V. Detail 3.....	70
VI. Detail 4.....	71
VII. Detail 5.....	72
VIII. Detail 6.....	73

Introduction

My thesis is divided into two sections. The first is a personal narrative relating my father's experience with cancer, and the second discusses the theory, motivation, and techniques that were employed in the creation of this thesis show. The narrative illustrates what the work is about and how it was that I came to the emotional state that gave insight to the show. It is, in my opinion, more faithful to the true meaning of the work than theory is capable of being. I did my best to maintain an informal and personal tone in the second half so that my discussion of the more technical aspects of the work would not dry out the intimacy and honesty that I did my best to imbue in the art work. As a reader feel free to choose which parts are most relevant to your intentions and skip what you like. The table of contents should be a sufficient tool in this endeavor.

Part I

Lovely in her bones

Dad told us that he had cancer in December of '95. I had just finished my first semester of college. In a way I was less of a man at that time than I was at the age of twelve. I was still shy around girls, selfish, lazy and basically hedonistic in what I hoped for in life. It is not surprising then that I didn't know what feelings to have or express about my dad's illness. I felt bad for him, but my emotions were spread all over the place. I was sorry for myself too, and felt entitled to whatever brooding and bad attitude time I wanted. The part of me that resorted to pretending that nothing was wrong didn't want anyone to treat me differently; at the same time I felt like everyone owed me a touch of sympathy.

Dad's first surgery came shortly after the announcement. I don't recall Christmas from that year, but I don't think we did much. We didn't sit around at the hospital while they removed the tumor from under his jaw bone. Our plan was to drive in at around the time when he would be coming out of his drug induced coma to assure him that he had not died or something like that...actually I'm not sure what purpose having the whole family there served. Obviously, we couldn't just not go to the hospital at all that day, but I think my dad was more embarrassed by our presence than relieved.

I remember very well sitting in the TV room during the time when the surgery was going on, not actually watching whatever it was that was on. Who knows what stupidity was flashing on the screen when Mike picked up the call letting us know that the tumor was out, but it had been dangerously close to some lymph nodes. Mike was the one who took the phone call and when he announced it to the rest of us his face told us

that he interpreted the news as a death sentence. His voice cracked just a tad when he relayed the message.

The hour or two that passed before we got to Queen's Hospital was palpably thick with tension. I mean, even the sunlight was gristly and angry. I hadn't noticed it much before that day, but Queen's smells like death. It's more pungent every time I go there. Years and years of slow death—vomit, piss, old blood, bed sores, after birth from a still born. It's strongest in the stale-air elevators. I hung my head and tried not to breathe too much while we went up to the floor where Dad was recovering. My eyes focused on a drop of blood on the white linoleum. The dot of expired life had been there long enough to turn black and I clenched up to keep from crying.

I once read an essay by a woman whose husband had died of cancer. She pointed out that during the process the most disconcerting aspect was how banal and un-dramatic it all was, hospital visits and all that. This particular visit didn't feel very ordinary. It was more like normal life squeezed into a pressure cooker.

My dad was way out of it and got motion sickness while being wheeled back to his room from the recovery center. He later told us that when he woke up from anesthesia everything was extremely bright and there were all these people dressed in white around him so he immediately thought, "This is it! I've died and I'm coming out the other side of the white tunnel that people talk about." A moment later he caught a sudden wave of nausea and puked all over the hospital floor. Nice warm welcome back to this life, huh?

We were all sitting outside his room waiting for him to get there while this went down. When he arrived they'd pretty much cleaned him up and we all thought it'd be a good idea to go into the room with him to let him know we were there for him, loved him

and all that stuff you think you should let a person know when death seems to be looking his way. He only half recognized us and after a minute or so he had another violent fit of vomiting. Driven by some desire to protect us from this, my Mom pushed us all out the door. She moved quickly and angrily which made it obvious that she was more afraid than any of us. I looked back as she closed the door, don't know why, and saw my dad rolled over to the opposite side of the bed trying his best to get the contents of his stomach into the trash can. His gown left his white backside bare and little tubes streamed from his hand and nose.

It must have been an hour or so that we sat there outside in the sterilized hallway thinking our thoughts under the antiseptic florescent light. I could ponder on nothing but the vulnerable, weak condition that this man who had always been nothing but virile and bilious in my eyes. His opinions had been a closed fist. His hard foot-fall, as he assertively walked down the hall to wherever it was in the house that I was making havoc, was the law. Now he had less strength and command than a lost child. Nurses went in and out while dusk passed through a window down the corridor. One of them finally stopped and let us know that nausea was one of the side affects of the anesthesia and that it might be better to come back the next day when he was feeling a bit better.

Now it was past dinnertime and Mom came out to take us down to the hospital cafeteria. Every day at around six thirty in the evening while I was growing up Dad came out to the end of the driveway and whistled for us. Everyone on the block knew that particular whistle meant that it was time for the Jackson kids to go home to eat. There was no whistle that day and no going home for Dad. No one really wanted to eat because the place smelled like it doubled as the hospital mortuary. I think I ate a soft-serve ice

cream and some gummy bears while we sat on those old breaking chairs that they had back then. We were all a bit cranky and depressed; Mom sent us home and said she was going to spend the night. How many cold-night-terror-beeping-machine-nurses-in-and-out-medicine-induced-hallucination nights have been passed at that place? This would not be the last for Mom or Dad.

You got to meet me by the knuckles of the skinny bones tree.

-Tom Waits

The next day Dad did feel vaguely better and he joked about how he shouldn't have eaten anything before the operation which is what they'd told him. We all laughed about how he was planning on telling everyone that his new scar was from a shark attack and go ahead and let them think that for as long as it took them to find out the truth. We all added our own details to the harrowing farce that he'd tell at parties and things. He laughed a bit too but only with half of his face because nerve damage resulting from the surgery kept the muscles on the right hand side in a permanent expression of bored anger.

On the way out I took special notice of the trees outside the hospital. Jacaranda, African Upside Down (dead rat tree), and Monkey Pod spread huge roots and branches across every untaken space. Roots pushed up the sidewalk and concrete where it made new speed bumps as if to defy death, or rather to show that ultimately life was unconquerable. I didn't stop to think about it much at the time, but those trees made things seem a little better.

One of my dad's favorite quotes, from I don't know which distinguished scholar, was, "never be afraid to just sit and think a while", usually shared by him in just the right situation. He had lots of time to just sit and think after his surgery...more than enough time to think in the hospital and at home between visits from us and lots of friends who graciously made the drive out to give whatever comfort they could, which was usually not much. He was sometimes rude and bitter, but usually not.

I have to say I didn't really want to think about the whole deal at all. I did as much surfing and hiking as I could, moving and thinking instead of sitting and thinking. You can only keep moving for so long though. One day after hiking an hour or two I

rested beside the pool at Laie falls and scanned the ridge that surrounds it. The shapely waterfall is nestled in a valley that curves to the left after the pool and drops into a long series of falls. The thick growth cuts the stream out of sight as it turns down below. This makes the pool feel like a puddle left in the bottom of a large green bowl. It came to my attention that on the ridge to the right, one gangly tree stuck up above all the rest. It curved and twisted a few times before ending in a sad little tuft. Its skinny-bones bark had taken whatever the weather could give and still had enough strength to shoot out a few leaves. I immediately loved the crooked old tree after that day as if somehow it was my dad standing there, or actually maybe Jesus or the Buddha. It was silly and pitiful holding its bent up body on the sharp ridge, but it was hopeful...no it was hope itself—pure hope (though hope seems too corny a word to describe it), dug in with its sanguine roots like white-knuckled fists clenched tight into the craggy dirt on the spine of the ridge. Emerald water lapped sweet on the round stones at the feet of the pool which was cradled in the valley's green hands, and I had a feeling that for now things would be fine. And it was for a while...well, sort of.

Interferon, the Grumpinator

Summer of '96 I left on a two-year mission in Mexico for the church that I belong to and I wasn't real worried about Dad's health while I was gone. It was just Jill and Mom at home so there wasn't too much drama going on outside the cancer treatment which was this: the doctors didn't think chemotherapy was necessary, but since the malignant tumor was right on a lymph node it was probably moving through his system and some kind of treatment was in order. They prescribed a medication called "Interferon". This was a fluid that attacked the aggressive cells of the body which is more or less what happens with radiation, just on a lower level. So, useful cells that are aggressive for good reasons like white blood cells get killed in the process. This made my dad less healthy than he had been without it. He learned how to inject the junk into his leg three times a week so he didn't have to drive to the hospital and pay the exorbitant bills that would ensue.

"Interferon", In-terr-fear-rrronnn, I always thought it was a funny name; it kind of sounds like the name of an evil robot from a cartoon. I can imagine the announcer saying, "Tune in next week when the Transformers battle their most powerful foe yet, the insidious Interferon!" This would be accompanied by a clip of the black robot with angular red eyes walking unscathed from a cloud of flames emitting a sinister laugh from his mouth hole, "Hah hah hah! Foolish mortals, your weapons are useless against me." His whole title would be "Dark Lord Interferon, the Grumpinator." Why "the grumpinator"? Well actually there is a good reason for that.

Apparently one of the side effects of Interferon is that it makes you super moody. So for the two years or so that Dad was shooting up the stuff he was acting like he was

having bad PMS or something. I didn't catch much of this from Mexico, but I had brief glimpses of it in letters from home:

Jill: "...Dad gets kind of grumpy sometimes. And on Sunday when his team lost he started crying. It was weird. Things are fine though. Keep up the good work."

Mom: "...Sometimes Daddy gets a little impatient with us, but things are OK."

When I got home I found out that it was a bit worse than I had thought, especially between Mom and Dad who had settled into a tenuous relationship of mutual tolerance when necessary and general avoidance whenever possible. Avoidance became my mode of survival after a while too. Once when I asked him to look over a paper I was working on for school he yelled at me because it didn't make any sense to him. When I told him to calm down and stop yelling he said that he was not yelling and then threw his hands in the air and marched off angrily saying something or other about me not listening. He knew he was being rude and that his emotions were out of control but he couldn't help it. I moved out. Not just for that—there were a lot of reasons.

Things got better after I moved into a modest place on the beach with my brother Mike. The musty old house wasn't far from my folks', though it was far enough to avoid unwanted friction. Dad stopped the interferon and it seemed like the cancer would be in remission for a while. He went in to the doctors quarterly for CAT scans and other tests and they didn't show any new activity. But at around the time we stopped thinking about it we got some bad news. Mike and I had just got in from playing sand volleyball in our backyard and the phone rang. I kind of expected it to be Jenica, a girl I was dating at the time and was thinking of breaking up with. Mike picked it up and I could tell by his tone that whatever it was that was being said on the other end was not good. He does this thing

when he's upset where he'll look down with his head cocked to one side and purse his lips together. He was doing this when he hung up and then told me that they had found tumors on Dad's sacral bone and possibly his lungs as well. My first reaction was to punch something. That urge stuck with me for a while and although doors and walls got hit I didn't hit any people, so that's kind of good I guess.

Mike was still doing his tilted head thing and I was kind of pacing around feeling mad when the phone rang again. This time I knew it was Jenica for some reason and in that instant I felt like maybe I didn't want to call things off with her, not just then anyway, maybe in a week or so. Her mood was somber, like she had some bad news for me and before she said anything more than her quiet "Hey," I knew that she was thinking of doing a pre-emptive breakup. I was irritated that she had beat me to it and when she said that she had been thinking that we should stop seeing each other or that we should just be friends or whatever it was she said I responded by letting her know that I had been feeling the same way. I told her about my Dad and she said she was sorry. Somehow her expression of sympathy made me angrier than her beating me to the punch on the annulment. A small part of me wanted to say something sarcastic like "You can't fire me, I quit!" But I was trying to be mature about the whole thing so I just said goodbye. My maturity was at least as feigned and pretentious as Jenica's sympathy, but I guess we were both trying. I sat there for a minute in the perennially damp kitchen that smelled of salty wood brooding over how bad things had turned in the last few minutes. Thinking of it now I really was being melodramatic about it all but at the time I couldn't imagine anything worse.

Shiva, a big black cat that we had inherited from the previous tenants came over to say hello. He purred loud and rubbed against my leg. Shiva was sometimes unwelcome, like when he would wake me up in the middle of the night by licking my hand or plopping onto my chest. Just then though I was glad to see him. I scratched the middle of his head and patted his side the way you would a dog which he loved. I envied his apparent oblivion. He didn't remember his parents, didn't care about any girl cats around and seemed just as satisfied with my brother and me as he had been with his other food providers.

It seems that it is the nature of seventeen to twenty-three year old boys to seek the disinterested world view of Shiva, unconcerned about the eternal cycle of creation and destruction, just trying to get a little fun out of it while they can. A small part of me sought this, while another fought this urge. So again it was with the moody, entitled attitude I had when I was eighteen and the avoidance of talking about it or thinking about it. One more time I was trying to pretend nothing was wrong while secretly wanting to be cared for like a sick child. This time however I was attempting to have a faithful, pious sort of attitude in spite of the fact that deep down I thought that the end was near. Actually, the end was not really nigh at that time, it was only nigh-ish. The end of what though? When "the end" has come and passed it is hard to conceive of it as a true end at all.

My Dad lived with cancer for over eight years which means that at this point in the narrative he had five years left. When we were first told about his illness we had no idea what to think and half expected him to be dead in a month or two. Then after the second set of tumors showed up, we got used to the idea that while he wasn't going to die

in a matter of days he would not live as long as most people hope to live. Then we all kind of settled into the routine of life trying to ignore the occasional minor signs that the cancer was getting worse.

Speed Read Theater

My friend Adam likes to watch movies in fast forward. He's one of the most impatient people I know, but there are certain movies that I have to admit would have been better in fast forward. He slows it down at the parts that seem to be important or interesting, and then he moves on quickly to the next good part. I am going to push fast forward on the next four and a half years of this little narrative because four and a half years is a long time to watch in regular speed, and the last half year is more relevant to my overall point.

Watching the screen while we're fast forwarding, first we see my dad finding out that the tumors on his sacral bone are the cause of his backaches which were actually butt aches. That's him saying "Cancer is a pain in the butt" while rubbing his rump at high speed. The back side rubbing happens more frequently and with less discretion in any imaginable social circumstance as time goes by. The good news is that the spots on his lungs are not cancerous.

There he is in the TV room shifting from side to side constantly because he just can't seem to get comfortable no matter how he sits. He moves side to side a lot, but stays there in front of the television for long stretches of the day. The boob tube, work, and church are about all he does, and all he can do. No wait, now he's trying to do yard work. That's me getting guilt tripped by my Mom for letting Dad mow the lawn in his condition. I respond by saying that he wants to do it and the exercise is good for him. He stops half finished, soaked in sweat, and falling down with clumsy exhaustion. I finish the lawn knowing that I am a bum and a jerk for suggesting that yard work was good for

him and I'm thinking that I should have done the whole thing in the first place. This is not the only time that this sort of thing happens.

More TV watching and shifting around follows that incident, then after a few weeks I've got some friends over and we're playing badminton on the lawn which Mike or I mowed this time. Dad wants to play and he's on my team. He does ok since he used to play racquet ball and tennis all the time before he got sick. He taught me how to play tennis and once when he wanted to show off he served a hard one over hand and I fell down just trying to hit the thing. This day playing Shuttle Cocks, he goes for a hard serve hit by my friend Jesse and finds that his body just won't move the way he wants it to, and instead of returning the serve in heroic fashion he trips over his rubber slippers and makes his way gracelessly to the ground, farting loudly all the while. Everyone present is embarrassed and Dad ignominiously loses any pretense of macho self respect he once had. We win the match just barely and more TV watching and shifting around ensues for Dad.

There we are in Oregon for my wedding. Mike is living there with his wife so we get to see him at the same time. Dad's making a concerted effort at being a good sport and a good father because the whole family is together, including grandchildren. Now he can handle doing a not much more than just watching TV because he's finally consented to taking prescription painkillers; they do make him slightly loopy though. Ok, now there he is trying to be of some comfort for Mike whose wife can't wait to settle differences until after my wedding...that is to say that they finally get the divorce that's been brewing secretly for a while right at the same time as the wedding. Dad is able to be consoling for Mike and congratulatory for me at the same time, but it's weird for

everyone. Fast forward through the reception which is odd and surreal at any speed, past Mariko and I going to Kaua'i for our honeymoon where we both have fun, but have a funny feeling that we're just playing house. Dad and the rest stay back in Oregon and spend what all present agree is some of the most valuable family time since, well, since ever. I'd give more details on that except that I wasn't there. Point is, though, that Dad stepped up to the occasion big time and gave more strength than anyone thought he had to his little flock of Jacksons.

There he is getting chemotherapy while teaching all his classes at the university and teaching Sunday school every week. He jokes about how he's losing weight and will likely lose all his hair. A month or so later he is slightly relieved to find that the chemo has not caused his wiry hair to fall away in clumps as it does for most people. Then he's feeling the opposite of relief a few weeks later when it seems that he hasn't lost his tumors either. He tells everyone that while the tumors are not gone they don't seem to be growing. This amounts to false hope that keeps all our worries at bay until it becomes obvious that they are growing again after a brief stall. This fact is even more obvious in fast forward because he starts taking more and more pain killers and becomes less mobile every day due to the fact that one tumor is starting to affect his sciatic nerve. This is the nerve that controls your legs. We should all know that he has now effectively moved out of the disease management phase and into the pain management phase of his illness, but we don't want to admit it yet.

There are some people Dad met that are telling him that if he eats a raw food diet that consists mostly of fruit, vegetables and whole grains, the cancer will disappear in a month or two. Neither of them has ever had cancer or knows anyone personally who has

been cured in this fashion, but they are more convincing than the guys who sold him the Noni juice (snake oil). As a drowning man will clutch at a straw in hopes that it may become a life preserver, Dad goes on the diet. Several months later Dad is getting way skinnier, feels slightly more energetic, but has not been cured. We used to call him “Big-D” partly because, well, it’s because he was fat, but we still call him that even though he’s skinny now. At this same time a friend of mine and my brother’s named Erick is in the far more advanced stages of cancer. He also holds some hope in obscure alternative cures until he is so out of it on morphine that he finally confesses to his sister that all he wants is “to watch Wonka-vision in my way high up blanket.” We think that this meant that he just wanted to die and not be in pain anymore. Mike is with him and his family in San Diego when he passes away. This is, for us, a bit of a wakeup call with regards to Dad and the “miracle cure that the doctors don’t tell people about.” Now Mike’s moving back to Hawaii to be with Dad and the family since he doesn’t know how much longer Dad will be around and our friend Erick can’t be helped anymore. That plane ride seems very short in fast forward.

Let’s speed through the dieting and, as always, more TV watching to some sweet scenes with Mom and Dad. Their relationship had all but disappeared for a year or so after I got married. There are many details that I will spare, and after having been married for some time now I know that there are thousands of minor details in a relationship that go unseen; a myriad of tiny hurts and trespasses no one else could know about that build up and build up like air in a balloon till the rubber just can’t stretch any further. It soon becomes all too obvious to Dad if not the rest of us that he is not going to get better and he is now spending more and more time trying to focus on what should be most

important. He has decided that number one on the list should be his relationship with his wife, and consequently, the example he sets for his children on how this ought to be done. So there he is with Mom, Mariko and I at dinner at a restaurant and he excuses himself to “go to the restroom.” He takes way too long and we all figure out why when he comes back with a bouquet of flowers for Mom. Mariko doesn’t really go for that kind of thing most of the time but flowers are exactly Mom’s cup of tea, and she is very flattered by the gesture. Dad makes it a habit to think of something nice to do for Mom as often as he can, especially when she unintentionally does one of those things that ordinarily drives him nuts like making them both late for some event, stuff like that.

As we speed through the boring events of every day life with Ronald and Letty (Mom and Dad), flowers show up frequently, little hugs and kisses, more dates together even if they end up going to a later show than Ron had planned on. One Sunday with all the kids that are on the island at the time over for diner, Ron announces ceremoniously that he has asked Letty to marry him again and that she has said yes. It’s sweet and weird at the same time, but even people like myself who don’t like that kind of stuff have to admit that it’s pretty cute. Dad also makes sure to tell all of his kids that he loves them as often as he can and thinks of good, sincere compliments to give people all the time. Even in super fast forward it is obvious to anyone that it isn’t all flowers and compliments with Dad. He is still grumpy and impatient all the time, still rude and insensitive. He is always in pain and doesn’t feel like being nice, but he fights the good fight as well as he can and we can all see it.

Mike appears more frequently in the TV room with Dad, watching sports and talking about whatever. Single now and not too busy Mike becomes Dad’s main man and

the TV room starts smelling like the two of them. Mike does most of the yard work and little chores around the house. He has incredible patience and compassion when it comes to Dad, but not so much with Mom. In fast forward mode their arguments seem insignificant and almost comical. If it was an audio tape they'd sound like chipmunks, but the words would be no less vicious and hurtful. They put up with each other but only for Dad's sake. Dad is sometimes moved to tears over the fighting "between the two people that he loves the most in the world." This he told me once without thinking that it implied that I was not as well loved as others. I will try to explain to myself that this indiscretion is a byproduct of the pain killers, but I'm still not totally convinced.

Main Man, Wife and number three on the speed dial (that's me) are now accompanying Ron to Arizona for the wedding of my youngest sister Jill. This was sort of a goal mark for Dad. If he could just live and be healthy enough to go to Jill and Micah's wedding he could die peacefully, or something like that. When we get there the weather is hot and dry and buzzards circle in the almost white desert sky around the hotel we stay in. It is in the hundreds during the day time and not much cooler for most of the night.

The wedding is fine and so is the reception. Dad is way doped up so he can be cordial and stay for the whole thing. He dances with Jill for like three dances even though he falls down once or twice on the hard wood floor. The morphine is talking during the toast he makes which is too embarrassing and weird to share. The good thing is that we won't ever see most of the people there again. The ones we will see again understand why he is acting like that so it's ok. "Little Jillie Jelly Bean" is the princess of the day and she loves it. Dad loves it too. Mom might love it more than anybody.

Fast forward through me and Big-D going to the Phoenix art museum together which he is thrilled about, past breakfast at McDonalds with the grandkids, and back home again supersonic fast in an airplane. Dad's standing in the back of the plane because it hurts too much to sit. Now he's losing his balance getting off a tram at LAX; Mom is relieved that I'm there to help with the bags and so am I. At Honolulu airport I go home to Makiki and they go back to Laie.

As I get into the car with Mariko I know on a whole new level that time is short for Dad and I want to move closer. By luck or providence Mariko is offered a job teaching at the high school down the road from my folks and we move back to Laie after Christmas, six months after the wedding. Here is where I'll stop the fast forwarding and get back to the normal flow of things; I'll also stop talking in present tense. We won't go as slow as real life, but slow enough that my friend Adam would most likely want to skim instead of read the rest.

One thing that you notice more in fast forward is the curious balance of awful and beautiful experiences that scatter themselves through life, the opposition of the bad underscoring the good and lending it potency. With time and perspective all become beautiful in a way.

Slept through Christmas, slept like a bucket of snow.

-Sam Beam

The Christmas before we moved back to Laie (the one after the wedding) was melancholy for me. We were flying to Oregon that night to spend some time with Mariko's family, but we spent the morning at my folks' house doing all the normal holiday things. I was given a cane for Christmas—not a candy cane, an actual walking cane. The reason for this is that Dad had decided a couple months previous that he ought to start using a cane which was slightly humiliating for him. To cheer him up I would sometimes extol the virtues of having a cane: you can pound it on the ground for emphasis when you are trying to make a point, you can use it to grab at things that you can't quite reach, and best of all you can poke people from three feet away and then pretend that it wasn't you (Dad found his cane to be particularly useful for rubbing his sore back side). I also walked around with his cane from time to time to make it seem like I envied him for getting to have a cane while the rest of us just walked regular. I guess my fake envy was effective because he got me a cane too. So naturally I had to act like I was excited about having it. A worse present was coming though.

Jill, Mike and I were there for that particular Christmas and each of us was given a blue binder which contained a portion of my Dad's extensive journal writings with excerpts that he hand picked to give to us. Jen and Bryan couldn't make it back from the mainland and would get theirs in the mail. I was glad to have the journal for posterity, but I knew immediately after opening it what Dad was saying to us. We hadn't really discussed the cancer thing much since Dad had given up on medical treatment, but we all kind of figured out that he wasn't going to get better. He had been very forthcoming with regards to his other treatments and hadn't hesitated to communicate concern or

hopefulness, but after he had essentially resigned himself to dying he wasn't very verbal about what was going on. The journals were basically him saying, "I won't be here next Christmas...maybe not Thanksgiving either. So this is something that you can remember me by." We all knew it too. It's hard to act happy about anything after you have been delivered a gift with that as the underlying message. We had breakfast and hung out and all that normal stuff, but it all felt phony to me.

It snowed for days in Oregon following our arrival, which seemed about right since I kind of felt like my head was permanently buried in a bucket of snow after getting that journal. The whole world was quiet and white and no one was around outside, so the streets were still and deserted, all of Wilsonville, Oregon, sleeping and cold under several inches of white that seemed like it would never go away. I walked at night by myself once or twice. Colored lights blinked warm from the insides of still houses and illuminated reindeer robots swiveled their tails and nodded their heads in the cold while my feet crunched the snow across the yellow street-light suburb. The full light of day never made it through the clouds even at noon, and by four in the evening it was twilight already. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning." That may have been true for him. My soul was stuck in a cold, short Oregon day with a walk at night for the next few months. Sometimes it was snowing over asphalt, sometimes sleeping evergreens under the weight of frozen water clumps. When we got home we moved out of our place in Makiki to a room in the back of a house on a beach I used to swim at as a kid. It was there that I started a long, slow thaw.

Salt Pool Over Two-hundred Yards of Bones

There's a part in my dad's journal about the beach there by the place we moved into.

Yesterday my wife and I went to Bathtub Beach (sometimes called Long Reef or Little Pounders) for the first time in a long time. We drove onto the property Sione Maile is living on and walked the short distance down to the beach from there. Sione is the caretaker for that property and he had given us permission to enter the beach from there. New houses and fences have made it difficult to find a right-of-way to the location.

It is a beautiful spot about a quarter of a mile north of Pounders Beach which few make the effort to walk anymore. From the rise above the beach it looked just the same... a reef running about two hundred yards long about twenty yards from the white sandy shoreline. About two-thirds the way up the beach is a deteriorating stone and cement pool on the shore that is affectionately called the bathtub. From the beach you could look to the south and see the coastline and green mountains pushing upward all the way to Kaneohe Bay, the thick shoreline vegetation camouflaging any signs of life. To the north is Laie Point jutting out and dotted with houses.

The reef protects the inner beach area from the rougher water outside, forming a long pristine pool within which to swim. A long-time dead Ironwood tree lies grey on the white sand with its finger-like branching pointed out to sea. The sand makes a very gradual descent into

the water reaching a maximum depth of perhaps four or five feet during the highest tides.

All of my children learned to swim there. I can visualize Bryan and Michael bouncing on the ends of the ironwood branches, jumping into the water. Down by the bathtub they would hunt through the black rocks trying to scoop up little fish with their red fishing nets or catch some crabs. They would walk the wall of the bathtub and jump into the water splashing each other or they would sit on the sand building castles or dig holes to place captured critters in.

As the children got older we would snorkel along the inside of the reef looking at the little tropical fish, the red and white cleaner shrimp, hermit crabs, and the occasional scary eel sticking its head out of a hole in the coral. A walk on the slippery reef would yield some tiny Cowry shells from some of the little tide pools or some lovely little piece of coral or shell. We never left the beach without some treasure... a shell, a piece of driftwood, a bottle, or if we were real lucky, a glass ball.

Michael and Jennifer were baptized at Bathtub Beach. Bryan would have probably been baptized there as well but we were in Germany when he turned eight so the ordinance was performed in a baptismal fount in the military chapel in Wurzburg, Germany. It was a perfect place for a baptism except it was getting increasingly more difficult to get to the beach because houses were being built by people from town and they didn't like us using "their beach" or cutting through "their property."

As I was saying, my wife and I went to Bathtub Beach yesterday for the first time in a long time. It was a beautiful day and we remembered and talked a lot about all that had happened there and what a wonderful place it was. We put on masks and snorkeled along the reef like we had done so many times before but it wasn't the same... the reef was dead. The reef was covered with silt and there were very few fish. I didn't see one cleaner shrimp and it was very disappointing. How could it just deteriorate like that? Was it from pollution? Was it from abuse? Could we have inadvertently contributed to its destruction by taking little bits of coral or mollusks from so long ago? I felt disappointed, hurt, angry, and guilty all at the same time. Will the reef come back to life? Is there anything I could do to help? Is the sewage runoff from Laie part of the problem? Is the water polluted? Should we be swimming there?

I had access to this same beach because I was renting a room in a place that a friend of mine bought from one of those country house-building townies that my dad mentioned in his journal. And whether I should have or not I started to swim there often. I did this first closing my eyes and swimming normally, but it was kind of boring and I always swim crookedly when I can't see where I'm going. I don't have ordinary goggles so I started using a diving snorkel and mask to swim with, no fins though. I already knew well enough that the coral was dead and most of the fish were gone so it wasn't a shock for me. I hadn't had any intentions of searching for "treasures" either; I just wanted to blow off steam and I wanted to see where I was going while I was at it. Funny thing

though is that I still saw quite a bit of life and found treasures almost every time. These were sometimes objects and sometimes little epiphanies, less tangible but more valuable.

I swam almost every day before or after driving into Manoa for school or taking care of whatever other business needed taking care of. I was in the mood for brooding at this time and it was good for me to do something to keep my body occupied while I mulled over things. My mind jumped around like a multi-disc CD player set on shuffle, playing a memory from when I was a kid then jumping freely to something from school then to a vision of my dad and his declining health; all the while my eyes passed over rocks and things on the pool's floor that were covered with a thick, luxurious coat of algae. The algae grew after cesspools and organic runoff from the houses on the shore changed the balance of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium in the water. These nutrients are perfect for algae but mean swift death for coral polyps. A friend of my brother's told us that another danger to reef life is free radical oxygen molecules that have a similar effect on ocean life that cancer does on the body. All this turned my thoughts toward my dad and the balance between life and death. To me the pool is like my dad in a lot of ways.

As I paddled myself horizontally over small piles of shells with holes bored out by sharp octopus beaks and broken glass, I remembered the first time I ever got a glimpse of life in the ocean. My dad fitted a kid-size mask over my face and took me out on his back. He called this "turtle riding". His huge body rose and sank as he swam and I held his slippery neck as tight as I could. In my mind I was like a lanky eel riding a Leather Back turtle. I'm sure I was afraid, but I also remember being excited by the fish. There was a flounder that changed colors and disappeared every time it stopped moving, a

cuttlefish that could do a similar trick, Kalas with long unicorn horns and barbed tails, silver fish that must have been mullet, and I think there was a bat ray that looked more like it was flying than swimming. This flashed in my mind while I noticed that none of these kinds of fish were there any more.

By this time Dad had started using two canes instead of one to walk with. He employed his black one in one hand and in his other one was the one he had given me for Christmas which was mahogany red. He was barely mobile and didn't really go to the beach any more. He definitely wasn't going to give any more turtle rides. The high point of his life at this time was TV sports, Sunday dinner with us kids and going to Costco where he could sit on one of their motorized shopping carts and tool around the towering shelves of food tasting the samples and picking up the one or two things he and Mom could actually use.

Another day swimming I thought about how Dad could no longer bend over to pick things up off of the floor. Mike bought him a gadget he could use to pick things up with. He called it his grabber. He would shuffle around the house, cane in one hand, grabber in the other and find little things to pick up just so he could feel like he was still good for something. He'd click the black plastic sucker cups over a clump of lint or a Kleenex on the floor where someone had missed the trash can. Dropping it in the basket he would give a firm slight nod as if to say, "There you go. I did something good." I likewise started picking up discarded objects while I swam. A shell, an interesting fish bone, these I put into my pocket and swam on. I started thinking that it could be good to use some of the junk in my artwork but I wasn't sure how to make them useful just yet. Another of Dad's methods of making himself useful was to give us advice whenever he

could. Usually it was stuff that we already knew and we'd get impatient with him. I started noticing while picking up shells that although the animals that had originally taken shelter in the curving white walls were gone, hermit crabs could still make them into a safe abode. Dropping the hermits and swimming on I thought about Dad's little efforts at usefulness. His advice and his "chores" were not needed but they expressed love, concern and a desire to do some good. In fact when I thought about it, the sentiment behind his action was actually just as important as anything anyone could say or do...and for that matter a hermit crab makes just as good a homeowner as a snail.

On my swims I started picking up all the bones I could find. It was startling how many there were. Actually the whole floor of the "Bathtub" was covered with the remains of dead things: dead coral, vacant shells and animal bones piled on top of each other and covered with cancerous growth. It's a two-hundred yard pool full of salty bones. I was thinking at the time that I'd use the animal bones to make fetish objects that looked like voodoo tools. I'd say that they were to stave off death, specifically my dad's. I made up some junk about how they would express the sensation of helplessness in the face of the undeniable forces of nature. It didn't feel right though and I junked the idea. I didn't junk the bones. I started to notice that, actually, they did have a certain beauty of their own. Almost as often as I found a new bone there was a new event that marked Dad's downhill struggle with his illness; these were unpleasant but sometimes, in a strange way, they were sweet and beautiful.

I picked up a rib bone one morning. It was probably from a baby pig. Green moss grew at one end and the other had been broken, exposing a delicate web of dark marrow. It reminded me of how Dad had asked Jill to give him a massage. She walked on his back

which he had always liked, but afterwards his side hurt for days. He found out later that his bones had become so weakened that the weight of Jill's little feet had cracked one of his ribs. Jill cried when she found out and Dad hugged her as tenderly as he could and told her it was all right.

One evening at dusk I found a long, thin bone from the leg of a bird. It was bleached white and had been hollowed out in the middle by small crabs. The light, thin bird appendage was only slightly smaller than my dad's atrophied right leg. I had always admired the mass and girth of his powerful legs that never got fat no matter how portly the rest of him was. Now the tumor on his sciatic nerve was choking feeling and nourishment from getting to the muscles and he was starting to look like the images of Ethiopians that had horrified me when I saw them on television in the 80s. That's what he looked like from the waist down anyway. He started using a wheelchair to get around in while he was teaching and he had to crawl on hands and knees to get up the steps in his house. I went with him to school one day and pushed him around. I have always been impressed by how warm my dad is with everyone at school. Everyone was anxious to help him. Students carried his books, held the door open for him, and cleared out of the way in the halls. He was slightly embarrassed by the attention, but I know that secretly he loved it. He told me that there was always someone there to help him when he needed it. A colleague made it his business to see that no one else ever parked in the spot closest to Dad's office so that he would have the shortest possible walk. This was a man who usually seemed to the rest of the world to be cynical and callous.

I came across three spinal vertebrae from a fish that were still stuck together on a windy afternoon. Putting them into my pocket I moved on to finish my swim. When I

kicked they scratched at my leg. This minor discomfort was silly next to my dad's. The cancer was spreading up into skinny D's spine which was excruciating for him. His pain specialist upped the dose of morphine as much as he thought was safe but it really wasn't enough. Even though he was always in a lot of pain he did what he could to be nice, but as I'd imagine anyone would, he got pretty mean with some of his students. Once in a while he snapped at us too. One of the bones in my pocket broke away from the other two and I thought about how more pain killers meant that Dad's liver would give out soon. I couldn't come up with an equation to figure out what that meant in real time remaining, so naturally I hoped that it was still a lot, but I doubted it.

I left the bones on the front porch to dry out and hopefully get somewhat whiter in the sun over a few days. I thought about maybe sculpting the most beautiful ones in larger scale, but part of their beauty was that they were at one time a living thing. The scattered bones made it look like a diviner had dumped their bag out at our front door. I was no soothsayer but to me the bones were like little, white post-it notes letting me know that time was short for Dad and shrinking faster every day. Still, I tried to ignore them.

*On starvation ridge
little sticks
Are trying to grow.*

-Jack Kerouac

Two weeks before the end of spring semester I was finishing two long papers and an important oral presentation on narrative in the arts. Dad's tumor had been getting bigger over the course of the semester. These days Dad had been standing in the back during church and either lying down or standing up at home while watching the tube because he couldn't sit at all. His hip area was under so much pain that bending at all at that joint was out of the question. UH goes a bit longer than BYUH so he was through with teaching by this time. The end of that semester marked the last goal he had set out to achieve while still alive and he had made it. Not a day later he was up most of the night because of the pain in his back and hip; he found even lying down to be exquisitely hurtful so he stood for as long as he could, hoping that it might let up at some point. By the evening it was apparent that it would not, so he went in to the local ER. When I got home that evening from school Mariko told me where he was, but I wasn't told why. So of course we took off for Kahuku hospital to see what was going on. I was worried about Dad on top of being overstressed from school but I felt even then that having anything to worry about aside from Dad seemed kind of petty.

When we got there Dad was in a small side room. I went in with Mariko. Mom and Mike were already there. Dad was propping himself up by a sink as best as he could because he couldn't take lying down or sitting. It was obvious at first glance that he was completely exhausted because he had been standing all day on his spindly little legs, not to mention being up all night. Apparently the reason that he was in this little room was because the staff, one nurse and one doctor, didn't quite know what to do with him. They

couldn't give him medicine because his pain specialist was the only one who knew how much he was already on (too much would kill him) and he was not answering his phone. It was two or three hours before Pops was given instructions to drive, that meant sitting, to Queen's hospital where his specialist would give him more morphine. Mike and I took turns holding him up by putting one of his arms over our shoulders and grabbing him around the ribs so he could rest. Even though he had lost a huge amount of body mass over the previous months, holding him like this got to be tiring so we held him up together for a tad until that started hurting him too. He tried lying down for a minute and then went back to standing. Mom told me months later that seeing Mike and I holding up Dad there in that sterile little oubliette was "just one of the sweetest things [she] ever saw." It wasn't sweet for me. This was the biggest road marker indicating the end of the line yet, and I knew it. There was no ignoring the signs anymore.

Mom told me that the drive to Queen's took two hours because they had to stop every ten minutes to let Dad stand up for a moment and let the pain subside even if only a little. They gave him all kinds of drugs when he got there and he got to sleep some. He figured he could leave the next day, but his doctor said no. A day or two turned to three, then four, and he still wasn't going back home. By the fifth day he couldn't walk enough to get to the bathroom, but he insisted on trying to stand for a while every hour or two thinking that the slight slump in mobility would be temporary. He had modest goals that, in his mind, would help him to improve. Somehow it was not as obvious to him that he wasn't going to get better as it was to the rest of us. He envisioned himself going back home in another day or two and, with the aid of a higher dose of pain killers, getting back to the old schedule of watching TV and picking up lint and Kleenex with his grabber.

Before and after school and on days off I went to visit. Mom, Mike, I, or some other friend was always there to be with him. He couldn't bear the thought of being there alone even when he was sleeping and didn't trust the nursing staff at the cancer ward to take care of him. My swims were shorter now because there just wasn't time. Sometimes I had to get into the water early in the morning or sometimes under the light of the moon. Life for everyone was becoming increasingly surreal, most of all for Dad.

Something interesting was going on at the bathtub that coincided with Dad's recuperation goals. One morning that was way too bright for my groggy eyes I swam in the cool water before another long day in town. A yellowish Kala about the size of my hand darted from one crevasse to another and a gang of Manini and Sergeant Majors kept look out while the young Unicorn fish peeked out at me. I don't spear fish anymore so he was safe from me, but I knew that the kids down the beach would have that tiny Kala by the end of the week. Ditto for the flounder I saw later on that same swim. Even the school of needlefish that was virtually worthless as food was not safe from the old man who lives behind me. He catches them just for fun then throws them back, exhausted and broken jawed from where he set his hook. They would all be bones soon enough. So even as the life made an effort to come back to the barren waters greater forces were waiting to squelch it.

Dr. Chu was recommending that Dad stay at Queen's for good by the end of the first week. He never came out and said "You're gonna die", but in his diplomatically indifferent bedside manner he made it clear enough that this was what he would say if he'd just give one straight answer. It may have been later on the same morning that I saw the flounder and Kala that Dad asked me to help him stand for a moment then admitted to

me and to himself for the first time that he was indeed going to die soon. I was the first one that he had this little talk with and it didn't come out as smoothly as he had meant it to. All I could think of to say was, "Maybe, but you aren't dead yet...you have to keep living while you're alive." He decided that I was right and tried to cheer up a bit, but I think he was just pretending...and actually I was too.

In the Belly of a Fish

For the time being, Queen's cancer ward was home for Dad, and home most of the time for Mom and Mike as well. I went when I could, but Dad told me that he thought I ought to stay at home with my wife at nights. He may not have meant it but that's exactly what I did. I still feel like a schmuck for not spending the night with him once in a while. When I visited I would read my papers to him or short stories that I'd done a while back. He gave me trivial pointers that I generally discarded and then he would recommend that I read certain parts of his journal. This I could never get myself to do because it felt too much like mourning his death before it had come. We all got to know the halls, elevator, parking structure, and staff at the hospital all too well. Dad tried to set Mike up with a nurse there. She looked just a little like an awful painting of a hula dancer that was at the entrance right by the wastebasket with the black and yellow bio hazard symbol on it. The hula girl was supposed to be chanting but she looked more like she was about to sneeze, or vomit. Her chant may have gone like so: "Uamau he ea o ka aina ah ah haaachooo...blech!!!" The chanting girl's expression hit too close to home for me so I did my best not to look at it. Dad never saw the painting but he told me that the food sometimes made him want to do the vomit chant too.

I guess the combination of the pain drugs and the lack of sleep put Dad in an odd frame of mind. He was prone to moments of extreme sentimentality followed by callous rudeness. He felt it necessary that he confess to a family friend who came to visit that he had never liked him much and enumerated all the reasons with our whole family standing within earshot. When Mike scolded him for doing this he broke down and cried. He later asked for forgiveness, but that was really just the tip of the weirdness iceberg.

Dad started having hallucinations, some nice and a bit funny, others not. One night around bed time Mom was singing to herself while she rummaged around in her travel bags for toothpaste, lotion and other stuff she'd brought from home. Dad had always detested Mom's quiet singing because it was generally either out of tune or all together atonal, so it came as no surprise when he said "Shush." Force of habit told her to drone on in defiance, but she kindly stopped after the second more insistent, "SHHH!" Then after a moment of silence Dad added, "That was lovely." He later said that to his doped up ears her singing actually was lovely.

My mind went back to this many times while swimming in the full moon or just after sundown. I rolled the scene over in my head while I passed white anemones and feather duster worms that were emboldened by the cover of darkness. It bothered me that although Dad usually couldn't take Mom's singing, certain circumstances could cause it to sound beautiful. If an aesthetically pleasing experience could be simulated by drugs the question begged to be asked, is all beauty just a trick of chemicals in the body and the context of the experience? If beauty is a sham and a trick, is everything else we feel equally false? Were love, pity, sadness, anger, all just a trick of the light? As I swam across the bone pool one morning I wondered to myself if it was worth caring about anything. For a few moments I got a peek at the nihilistic no man's land that easily followed indifference to the world and it made the dead reef look like a pristine wonderland, so I didn't follow that thought to its natural end, but that problem stuck with me for a while.

It was my dad who once pointed out something interesting about the story of Jonah from the Bible. He read that there was a very old Jewish expression that puts a

possible spin on its meaning. According to him, when someone was struggling with a problem, or a conundrum, they would say that this person was “stuck in the belly of a fish”. So in Dad’s mind this could mean that the account of Jonah being swallowed by a fish could just be an allegorical description of him struggling with questions. At the time I pointed out that the expression may very well have come about after Jonah’s experience with an actual fish and the story had become a common part of the Jewish holy writings. Dad’s experience with beauty landed me in the belly of a fish. I was in there for more than a few days too. Dad would find his way into a fish belly soon enough, but in an entirely different way. With the advantage of hindsight I can say that both fish were, in reality, only the product of hallucination.

The hallucinations for Dad seemed only to come at night. One of these was while Mike was staying there with him. Some time after the witching hour Dad woke Mike up by poking him with his cane because he really needed to tell him how much he “liked [Mike’s] Mexican mattress.” Mike was confused about this but humored him unconvincingly. Wanting to be sure that Mike understood, Dad got a little emotional and reiterated, “I just can’t tell you how neat I think that Mexican mattress of yours is!” He told us later that he was a bit fed up with his hospital bed because there was, or so it seemed, a stiff legged cat and dog lying belly up between his ankles and he thought it was a shame that the hospital didn’t do something about it. Later that night Dad wanted to know why Mike wasn’t dancing. Not sure how to ease the situation Mike danced a little, but that was not satisfactory. There was in Dad’s wayward mind a girl on the other side of the room which was now filled with balloons and he wanted very badly for Mike to go over and ask her to dance before time ran out. We all laughed about it under the sane

light of morning, but for Dad this problem with the dance, the Mexican mattress, and the dead animals on his bed were very real.

At the first light of dawn Dad woke up sometimes and had no recollection of being sick or where he was. For just a moment his mind was not focused on the certainty that his time in life was limited. Finding tubes and needles stuck in him he would try and get some bearing on where he was and why he was there. As he tried to sit up he invariably became aware of the pain in his hip and back. This unexplained soreness could only mean one thing. In his fevered state he concluded every time that he was being held prisoner and what's worse, being tortured by some insidious organization. His next objective was always to escape. He once fell down trying to stand on his own; other times someone caught him just as he was trying to free himself of all the tubes and wires. Whoever was there at the time would have to explain to him that he was not in a prison and that the reason that he felt so bad was that he was in the advanced stages of cancer. It was also often necessary to explain to him that he was not going to get better. As lucid thought returned he would drift back into the disappointing truth of his situation and he would go through the stages of anger, sorrow and acceptance all over again. This happened quite a few times. After reaccepting his fate Dad would always realign his priorities and come to the same conclusion. He loved his family very much, especially his wife...but being sick really stunk.

When it became abundantly clear that Dad's doctors envisioned him spending his remaining days there at Queen's we started trying to get them to let us take him back home so that he could at least wake up in familiar settings and we didn't have to drive an hour each way just to see him. Getting him home was more work than it should have

been, but we figured it out and set up a room for him with an air conditioner, a hospital bed and a TV. The most logical room for this was the one that used to be mine which is on the first floor under the stairs. The walls of the room are dark unpainted wood and the stairs cut a harsh diagonal line through the back part of it. The light fixture on the ceiling emits a harsh yellow glow that hurts your eyes but barely makes the room seem lighter at night, and the whole room squeaks and creaks whenever someone goes up the steps or walks around upstairs. While it was my room there was more than one windy night that I had woken up in that musty old cedar room to hear strange noises, but the AC drowned out most of that for Dad. The air con couldn't stop the hallucinations though.

There were times when Dad would ask when he could get out of the "boat" and go home (I guess the room did look a little like the inside of a boat). Or he would sometimes just look at whoever was there with him and say "and?" By this he meant, "Ok, all this food, medication and what not are alright but when do I get to leave? What else have you got?" Sometimes irrational fear would take hold of his infirm mind and turn the room into a cave, a torture chamber or the belly of a fish. One evening with me, Mike and Mom there at his side, he kept asking when he would get to go home and if we could just do something about all the hooks and wires (I don't know which ones he meant). Mom tried to explain to him that he was having an irrational panic attack which we were told was a side effect of the medication, but he wasn't having it. A tide of detached terror was flowing over him and there was no telling him that it was not real. He started shouting out nonsensical orders to us, raising and lowering his mechanical bed, trying to get up while we restrained him.

“Unlatch the latches! Cut down the hooks! Untatch the tatches! Fix the hole in the panic! I can’t, I can’t! Oh! Michael, won’t you help me?”

“Of course I’ll help Dad. What can I do?”

“Here’s what you do. Tear down the wall, climb up on top of the dresser, and yell for help. Jacob you go to the window, break it with the chair and yell!”

We kind of acted like we were doing something while he inspected his blanket for some mystical malfunction as what must have been the cause of all his problems. It was obvious to him soon enough though that we weren’t doing what we were asked, and he became impatient with us and said, “Oh you guys are no damn good!” Then cupping his hands over his mouth he yelled, “Help! Help!” but it was no use. There was nothing that Mike or I or all of the imaginary demons swirling around in Dad’s dark brown cave under the stairs could do. Nothing at all, and I was starting to believe by that time that we really were no damn good.

We stayed with him for the hours that it took for his panic to pass but in the meantime it was more of the same: absurd orders, struggles with his bed and blanket, and screaming for help. At one point I hummed a hymn that reminded me of being a kid at church with the family without really thinking about it and he hummed along a little. This calmed him some so I sent Mike and Mom to bed and sang from the green hymnal that he had there in the room for about three hours, hoping he’d just calm down and go to sleep. He did not sleep. Once in a while he’d kind of try to harmonize with me but his voice was hoarse from yelling and sounded a little spooky. I don’t know what time it was when Mike came in and traded places with me but I know that I was there singing long enough

to replace the childhood church associations I had of those old songs with that fever
dream night in the belly of the fish with Dad.

Flowers exhibit their glow of life by falling to the ground.

-Higashiyama Kaii

As we worked into the right rhythm with Dad's meds and figured out how to make him comfortable, the panic attacks and night terrors faded into little incidences that were easy to deal with. Maybe our expectations of normal behavior changed too.

Honestly though, his energy level dropped so much and so fast that he wasn't really able to put up that kind of struggle any more. His appetite shrank and his desire to stand disappeared. We fed him whatever sounded good to him which was always Cheerios, rocky road ice cream, or papaya. Sometimes he'd ask for gummy bears or jelly beans which we always kept in good supply.

It is not necessary to discuss the full scope of the details involved in caring for Dad in those last weeks. Nor is it decent. Suffice it to say that in a month and a half he went from being a sick adult to essentially an old man with dementia, and finally he became the equivalent of a small child, helpless and confused. His body thinned out to match his legs and his knees and feet became swollen and reddish in color. Only his hands and his face maintained some semblance of his former self. One morning as I sat by his bedside with him while he napped I sketched a picture of him. Afterward, I was a little disturbed by the drawing of him sleeping because I thought it looked too much like he was dead. Actually though, now that I've seen both I know that my assumption was way off.

It had already been a month since we had all started thinking that Dad was worse off being alive. Each new day held little joy for him and almost nothing to look forward to. He usually wanted his wife by his side and no one else. He definitely had no desire to see anyone who was not family. Even though we couldn't imagine him getting worse he

gradually did. When I was a kid we played this game where one person would hold another's arms up while he lay on the ground. The one on the ground would keep his eyes closed for a couple minutes while being held like this and then when enough time had passed the person who was standing would slowly lower the other's arms. This would give the one with his eyes closed the sensation of being lowered indefinitely as the place where he expected the ground to be came and went. It was as though he was being slowly lowered into a deep pit with no bottom at all, then at last his arms touch the ground and he opened his eyes to find that everything was exactly as he remembered it. This is more or less how it seemed with Dad. Each time we felt certain that he couldn't hold on any longer, he did, and just when we thought his health had settled to rock bottom it got a little worse.

Finally one Sunday, things were definitely different. By this time all the kids who lived on the mainland had come to visit and gone back knowing that the next trip out would be for the funeral. Mike and Mom did most of the heavy lifting when it came to taking care of Dad. I did my best, but I never felt like it was enough because it was just the three of us now and I was at school some of the time. On Sunday I came right over after church and went in to see how Dad was doing. His skin color had changed to a yellowish hue and his veins were bright rosy webs that stretched over his thin body. Most striking was the change in his breathing. I was told that one of the signs that he would pass away soon was that his lungs would slowly fill with fluid. This must have been what caused him to gasp for every breath of air. As hard as it tried his body just couldn't get enough air into its lungs. His breath was stale and filled the room with its odor. Mom thought that his skin looked dry so she rubbed lavender scented cream on him and that

smell also wafted and mingled with his troubled breath, but along with these odors was another. I can describe it only as the smell of death, and no one who hasn't smelled it before could know what I'm talking about. It would be like describing the flavor of salt to someone who had never tasted it. Dad's eyes were opened but it was clear that he saw nothing, or at least his mind didn't process it. Eventually Mom placed a shade over his eyes, more for our benefit than his, but I can't hold this against her because she was the only one who could bear to be with him for long periods of time that day. She shooed Mike and I away several times or gave us worthless diminutive chores to get rid of us. I understood well enough that she was trying to protect her boys and I appreciated it.

At around eight that evening I was putting some cookies in the oven that no one really felt like eating. Mike was helping Mom with Dad's meds and things in the house were still. Mike came out, opening the door slowly, and before he said a word I knew what he was going to tell me. "Jake, I think Dad just passed away." I said nothing and we walked into the room together. Mom was still there by his side, holding his hand which still looked strong and able, but did not move. All I could think to do was hug Mom and not let her go. Dad was fine, better than he'd been in a long time because he was no longer helpless and in pain. I couldn't say this for Mom though. The depth and scope of emotion that we felt there at the side of Dad's body are difficult to describe. It was every bit as awful as anyone could expect, but at the same time it was sweet, peaceful, and actually beautiful. Nothing was all right. It was as wrong as it could conceivably be. Dad was no longer present in his tired old bones, but at the same time it was ok. He had died knowing that his family loved him, he had seen Mike and Mom set aside their differences while they took care of him, and more importantly he and his wife loved each other more

then than ever. We were relieved for him and, I am embarrassed to admit, for ourselves too.

Dad's eyes and mouth were still open and would not stay closed the way they do when people die in the movies so Mom covered them again. It rained hard and the drops drummed hard on the wood roof. We didn't know just what to do with ourselves. Mike kind of wanted to stay there with his body for a while. I had no such impulse. Mom set herself about the business of calling up the doctor, the mortuary, family, and all the other business she could think of, but she didn't want his body to be taken away just yet. Somehow the cookies got pulled out on time but they just sat there and got cold. No one touched them for hours. It was the time directly after Dad's death that we had not prepared for and no one was quite sure what the right thing to do was. We knew he would die and that it would be tough, but what do you do in the meantime? After the guys from the mortuary came and took our skinny little broken boy away unceremoniously covered in a white sheet, we sat around the kitchen table together occasionally thinking of some small thing to say that always seemed inadequate and trite. By around twelve-thirty we decided to play hearts and we even ate a few cookies. I spent the night there at the house in case Mom needed anything and because I didn't quite know what to do with myself. I almost didn't sleep at all. I must have nodded off a little by around six a.m.

After the light had started pouring in through the windows I was slow to wake because even being half asleep was easier than thinking about things as they were. I dozed as long as I could but a vision of Dad's still body, eyes and mouth opened wide, and the smell of lavender skin lotion jumped my mind wide awake. There was nothing more to be done and no one would have wanted to do it anyway so I left for home and

went swimming. The sky and water were saturated with the kind of color that drives a painter mad with envy and hopelessness in any effort to reproduce it. Tan colored crabs sidestepped and scurried to their holes while I walked barefoot and shirtless in the sand. The sun refracted through the water which was just-right-cool and clear. In spite of the invisible pollution that may have been present in the water, it looked absolutely clean and light from the rippling surface made a net that bobbed and waved along the bottom. I was almost angry when I saw three boys pulling a gill net across the long pool, but in all honesty there was nothing left for them to take away. I found a white rib bone and a jaw bone that seemed perfectly natural and beautiful in the morning light that made the world clean and fresh.

Part II

Ideas and Motivations

Part one of this paper discusses my dad's experience with cancer. I used the form of a personal narrative which includes a subplot about how this helped me to formulate my aesthetic ideas. I did not start the narrative with a thesis statement because I wanted this to materialize in the paper in the same manner that it did for me. Most of the meaning and symbolism are left for the reader to discover without the author spoon feeding it. What is represented in the first part is a chronologically ordered process of experience and discovery. All events are as true as I could represent them; if there is any false information it is due to a lapse in memory and not artistic license.

I didn't see the point in rambling on and on about process and theory when I could use personal narrative to show you what I really mean. The motto of every creative writer is "Show, don't tell." I think that for this exhibit's paper, showing is more poignant than telling. It is after all the intimate details of experience that motivates this work. Perhaps this sort of writing would not be appropriate in most areas of academics. It is, however, appropriate in this situation because the work is about real life and it would undercut the efficacy of the show if I were to write about it in a dry and detached manner.

I feel that the personal narrative says quite clearly what the body of work in this show is about, but perhaps I still ought to clarify some of the thought behind both the narrative and the art work. The theory and motivation for both the show and paper are the same. The overall point is this: beauty is present even in the midst of the most awful experiences and situations, and it is given more meaning when the two are present simultaneously. I can say it and it makes sense, but it doesn't really mean much until you experience it, or at least read the way I experienced it and think of similar things that

relate in your own life. This is because the death and illness of people who are close to you help form aesthetic maturity.

When I first found out that my dad had cancer I was essentially selfish and only wanted to bask in safe and somewhat superficial beauty. I avoided unpleasant situations and tried not to think about them but after a while I figured out that I couldn't keep acting that way. My dad needed help and I could not run away. This made me frustrated and depressed sometimes. I really wanted to change the situation, but the best I could do was offer assistance.

The original idea for my thesis show was to make pretend-magic objects that combined unfired clay with bones, hair, teeth and other materials that were once a part of animal bodies. This would have been an expression of the frustration I felt when my deepest desire was to cure my dad with the wave of a wand. My thought was that magic and our fascination with it are the result of this same feeling of impotence in the face of nature. As I was getting started with this I had a very clear idea of what it was that I wanted each piece to say. I had sketches, notes on the specific meaning of each piece, and I was gathering research to give social and historical context to my ideas. Though as I did all this, it became clear that the work and the paper were beginning to look less like art and more like a humanities/anthropology research project, and a shabby one at that. So I asked myself a series of questions to see if this was really the right project:

Is this good art?

I don't know...not especially.

Is it right for me to parody objects that are sacred to various cultures which I do not belong to?

Probably not.

Am I getting closer to honest expression through intellectualizing the pieces and process?

Definitely not.

What then is my motivation for doing my thesis this way? Probably to make people think I'm smart.

I decided that my motivations were dishonest and that if done the way I had planned the work would be devoid of real meaning to me. I can't say what other people would have gotten out of my show; probably not much. Most of the preparation didn't really feel like art at all.

I reflected quite a bit on aesthetics. Little thoughts and impressions were bouncing around in my mind but there were a number of loose ends: Was beauty made up? Was an aesthetic experience just the product of circumstance? If it is art's role to comment on life should beauty even be a consideration? As I was contemplating all this I ran through a few ideas for possible exhibition titles. The names sort of illustrate my changing perspective: "Impotent Magic" then "Mystical Realism", "Fatalistic Necromancy", "Stoic Necromancy", and then I put the whole title thing on the back burner. I went through a spat where I was toying with an attitude that fell somewhere between stoicism and nihilism as implied by the last two titles, but both of those outlooks frightened me so I tried not to think about the whole deal for a little while.

The one portion of the preparations that felt right was the gathering of materials for the works that I intended to make. I swim and hike as often as I can because it's a good way for me to work out frustrations and mull over things that are bothering me. When my wife and I moved from Makiki back to my home town, Laie, I found it easier and more necessary to get into the water and mountains. We got a place right by a beach that my family used to swim at all the time when I was a kid. We liked it back then because there is a long stretch of reef about thirty feet off shore that protects the lagoon from waves. Everyone calls it "Bathtub Beach" because the water is as calm as a bath. I

remember my Dad spear fishing along the reef shelf and bringing back spiny lobsters and Uhu (Unicorn fish) in his nylon mesh fishing bag. As a teenager I went back and tried to fish there, but found that most of the ocean life had skipped town because someone pooped in the bath, so to speak. The fish still don't hang around there like they used to, but there were a strange amount of bones littering the floor of the bathtub. This I discovered when I began doing laps in the water nearly every day before going about my other business.

This was all at about the same time that I was thinking I might like to make some voodoo stand-ins out of old animal parts so I started picking up bones while I was swimming. I also came across an occasional tooth or bone when I was out hiking in the mountains or walking on the beach. The bones meant little more than a means to an end at first but after a while they began to take on a significance that was different from their original intended use. Holding the bones in my hands and trying to think of the possibilities, I began to see a strange charm in them. At this same time I was also beginning to see hints of beauty in my family's experience with my dad. His new perspective on what was important and his relationships with my mom and my brothers and sisters were beautiful. This beauty was real. I was also starting to feel that it was all right for Dad to pass away.

As my angst about my dad's illness gave way to acceptance, bones stopped being icky. Of course almost everyone thinks bones are kind of creepy, but if you ever hold, say, the skull of a trumpet fish in your hands and look at the intricate grooves and notches that once made up the animal's long snout, you can't help but be absorbed by the beauty of the object. It is impossible to separate that dead animal from the material left behind

and because of this, a bone is, for the living, a mysterious object. It is a souvenir left by a creature that has lost hold of that precious thing that the living cling to so desperately. It is a reminder of the undeniably inevitable fate of nearly everything we value, yet somehow, this can't be. For some reason we rarely contemplate what it means to be living and what it means to be nothing but bones and dust. The beauty and mystery of these humble objects that persist in the face of oblivion caught my attention. No wonder so many people believe that bones hold special power. I decided though, because I don't actually believe that bones have any inherent power, that it would be disrespectful to go on with my planned works. It was not spiritual beliefs attached to bones that I wanted to investigate; what I was intrigued by instead was the delicate aesthetic quality of the bones and how that related to what I was thinking and feeling when I found them. As for what I was thinking and feeling, as the narrative indicated, my thoughts were often focused on life and death because my father was dying of cancer at the time.

I know that Freud really got into the influence that death has on our psyche. Actually there is no shortage of intellectual and spiritual greats who have addressed death and the dead at length. I have my own ideas on the subject, and as tempting as it is for me to share a few thoughts I don't think I will, not directly anyway. It is the emotional root of what drives one to ponder life and death that I want to focus on. There is something exquisitely enigmatic in death, and bones (for me at least) hint at this.

Bone collecting is not a hobby of mine. I have generally ignored the weird little things, but when I began picking them up I discovered qualities in them that I had not anticipated. I made similarly unanticipated discoveries about illness and death while caring for my father. Since discovery through process is what brought me to the point

where I wanted to create these works, I decided that there should be an element of discovery and spontaneity in how I used the bones in my pieces. I also decided that the bones became boring and depressing when used and talked about in the wrong way. It wouldn't be right to use my little treasures as farcical magic artifacts, and I didn't want them to be spooky looking either.

After my father died the bones took on a new meaning for me. They were an example of the beauty that is present in death. That morning on the beach after my dad had passed on I realized that it was ok. I no longer felt like I needed to change things, and there were redeeming qualities even in the end that I had dreaded more than anything during Dad's eight-year illness. This sensation is what I wanted to bring out in the work that I did for this show. I did my best to use the clay in a way that complemented the bones without ignoring what I find to be compelling about them. I employed a certain degree of formalism to display the pieces. This was done to emphasize the more attractive qualities that I see in my materials. I used the bones in an orderly, logical manner because order sets people at ease and I wanted to help viewers to see what it is that I see in each found object. There were unique considerations for each piece, but there were a few techniques that I used fairly often. With the wall hangings I arranged the bones in a symmetrical manner knowing that this would be complemented by the patterns that the crackled clay makes. I often used the repetition of lines and shapes provided by the various types of bones to create movement and rhythm. In most instances I used bones that came from the same kind of animal for the bowl forms and the wall hanging piece that corresponded with them.

I almost feel as though I am putting on airs while I explain the theory and process behind the work. I would like to keep the real life, everyday tone of the paper as much as I can. This second half is as close as I want to get to an intellectual discussion of bones and death. I almost don't want to do it at all, but alas I must go through with it because the works and this paper are being done in an educational context and talking things into the ground is what we do in academia. So I will talk some theory. Hopefully I can avoid theorizing about death till the subject is deceased.

Death, Bones, Aesthetics, and The Sublime:

I'm going to start by talking about poetry and language. This may seem way off the subject, but it'll all come together soon enough—I promise. The inability of language, written or spoken, to clearly communicate anything has been the topic of much philosophical prattling lately. According to some philosophers (principally Derrida, who was picking up where Wittgenstein, Saussure, etc. left off), each word has numerous possible interpretations and when coupled with other equally duplicitous characters there is such an overabundance of potential meanings that clear interpretation of an exact meaning is out of the question. Derrida and his like-minded associates are right, to an extent. This is an annoying thought for someone who depends on language to talk about how we know what we know or to describe being and meaning on a grand scale. Language is very imperfect. For a writer who is more concerned with aesthetics than precision this is a good thing. Poets make it their business to play in the layers of meaning and textures of connotation that are the philosopher's bane. Aesthetics hides in the cusps and imperfections of communication because it is there that the reader or listener will posit his or her own meaning, personal emotion and experience. Depth and real life relevance are projected on to the rough spots in communication. Mystery is also beautiful, so not "getting it" doesn't necessarily mean getting nothing at all.

If all of this is true of language then it is even more the case with visual expression. As an artist I take the role of the poet rather than philosopher (with this project anyway). I like the multiple meanings of floating signifiers, and in the visual arts there is no lack of these. Bones and clay are loaded signifiers to say the least. I have decided to use them in a loose and expressive manner that I hope will leave a definite

impression on anyone who looks at them, but will not shove exact meaning down the viewer's throat. A degree of ambiguity does not hinder aesthetic strength.

I am a frequent user of the "A" word and the "B" word. I do not apologize for this. Which "A" and "B" words? Aesthetics and Beauty, words so sticky these days that a lot of people in the art community have forgotten how to spell them (thank goodness for the spell checker). There are those who file aesthetics alongside Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, but I don't go for that. Aesthetics, as in the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature and expression of beauty, exists because everyone acts and speaks as though it does. People make decisions based on aesthetics every day. Quality is not objective so, yes, beauty and aesthetics are socially constructed, sort of. The snag is that what we find aesthetically pleasing is influenced by our experiences in life and many of these are fairly universal. These universal experiences are interpreted through an individual's "lenses", as Kant would have put it, and this is where the subjectivity comes into play. In the case of aesthetics in communication it is necessary that there be some room for interpretation of meaning to accommodate an individual's distinct way of absorbing and interpreting information. This is because aesthetic potency exists where information is connected with strong emotion.

A piece of art that is aesthetically powerful reflects our most poignant feelings and experiences. Life and death are perhaps the most universally felt influences on an individual's sense of aesthetics. This is because they are the source of many of our strongest emotions, our greatest angst, our need for meaning, and our most powerful desires. This brings me closer to what I want to say about death and bones, but there is still another issue to cover. Here I am talking about beauty and aesthetics to describe

what I'm trying to accomplish with artwork made of clay and bones. I'll get to the clay later, but first the bones. Many, maybe even most people consider bones to be repulsive, macabre, or even ugly. For them bones represent the polar opposite of beauty. Friends and family were often a little disturbed by all the bones that I had spread out on our front porch, especially the skulls that showed up once in a while. My sister almost didn't want to ride in my car with me once because I had a mongoose skull on the dash board. To explain how it is that I find beauty in bones and ragged clay I need to address the concepts of The Sublime, the Dionysian principle and the beauty of transience as the Japanese see it.

From these three aesthetic philosophies I will borrow some bits and pieces that I will stitch together to illustrate how it is that I see bones as beautiful objects. I do this in much the way that a hip-hop artist would sample portions of several older music tracks and make a song that is distinct from the original. This is a good analogy for how postmodern thought and culture are constructed. In this case there are certain aspects of The Sublime, Dionysian aesthetics and the beauty of transience as the Japanese see it that do not fit with what I am doing in my work. These aspects I will ignore, using only that which I find useful from each of these theories on beauty.

Beauty as we think of it in America has become far too limited in meaning. "Beautiful" is synonymous with attractive, pleasant, lovely, pretty and other such happy words—at least that's what my thesaurus tells me—with the opposite of beauty being ugly, repulsive, deformed and so on. Of course a dictionary or thesaurus would not delve into theoretical discussions on troublesome words to evaluate the evolution of their connotations, but it is my opinion that our notion of beauty has become even more

superficial than what is presented for us in dictionaries. Our functioning use of beauty is roughly that happy equals beautiful and conversely that sad is the same as ugly. There is an overabundance of evidence to support this in our culture: we like stories with happy endings far better than sad ones, tragedy has all but disappeared in popular fiction, we are extremely decadent and materialistic because we believe that therein lies a beautiful and fulfilling existence; every product around is advertised by glamorous people and in picturesque settings that confirm this to be true, and even though many of us have observed this to be the case we can't seem to break away from the spell. It is important to consider other aspects of aesthetic beauty. One is a concept that is slightly flawed, but gets closer to the core of my point: The Sublime.

The Sublime was (is) a feeling of awe and inspiration brought on by the power and majesty of nature. This was most commonly expressed in landscape painting, but also gave impetus to early American landscape photography. These artists were not searching for landscapes that were merely pretty or pleasant; they looked for scenes that showed the daunting power of nature. There was also in these some hint of impending doom, some force that was indomitable like the raging ocean, a massive storm on the horizon or a roaring waterfall. It was the possibility, the constant presence of potential death delivered by a greater power that made these scenes aesthetically desirable. The problem with the concept of The Sublime is that there was (is) an inherent challenge placed before the viewer to go forth and conquer. If beauty is a thing to be tamed, conquered, or colonized, then defeat, death, and the course of nature are inherently loathsome and repulsive. From the concept of The Sublime I want to take the idea that beauty need not be expressed in pleasant scenes and that the presence of potential doom

contributes to the aesthetic value of a piece. Aside from this I'll leave the rest of what makes up the western notion of The Sublime behind. To complete my defense of bones as beautiful objects I will draw upon the Japanese appreciation of change and death as parts of the process of nature and life as well as the Dionysian aesthetic of the Greeks.

Dionysus, the only half-mortal allowed to live among the Olympians, was the Greek god of wine. He was dual natured, on the one hand giving joy and freedom and on the other savage brutality and destruction. He was the most man-like of the gods in that he was in many ways great but ultimately flawed. For this reason he was the god of tragedy. It was the tragic nature of his personality, his humanness that made the art that he inspired beautiful. This is not because of the ideals that he exemplified but because of his proclivities. Dionysus' imperfections were a reflection of man's and his foibles hit home for the Greeks more than any other god. The depth and scope of man's anxieties and sorrow were reflected in Dionysian tragedy and the catharsis experienced in viewing tragedy was (is) among the most meaningful, though perhaps not pleasant, experiences that could be imparted by a piece of art. While much of what the Dionysian aesthetic entailed is not relevant to my work, it has some kinship to my line of thought. From the Greeks I borrow the idea that destruction and sadness hold their own aesthetic value, and there is merit in the portrayal and investigation of these subjects in art.

Most of what can be called beautiful is transient in nature. Death and decay then are intrinsically connected to beauty. The Japanese traditionally have a particularly strong sensitivity to the aesthetic value of transience. Aesthetic taste seems often to have a connection to spirituality and for the Japanese the affinity for delicacy and transience is connected to the Buddhist concept of impermanence. This aesthetic concept does not

separate and put man at odds with nature the way that the notion of The Sublime does. Man and nature are connected by the inevitability of change and eventual demise. Both are beautiful and should be cherished because of their transient nature. What appeals most to me about this idea is its humility and the way that it embraces life as it truly is.

Of the three aesthetic theories that I discussed, the Japanese appreciation of transience is the most consistent with the aesthetic sensibility that I want to express with the works in this show, but it is not complete without the contributions that are given by Dionysian aesthetics and the idea of The Sublime. Simply put my theory is this: Beauty is given depth and meaning by the presence of and implied potential for death. Destruction and death are aesthetically valuable. Sadness and beauty can be present together; they are not opposites. The delicacy and transience of life makes it beautiful and that means that death must also be beautiful to someone who has a healthy and realistic appreciation for life.

You may be thinking at this point that I am starting to sound like a very lugubrious guy. Someone came into my studio the other day and said that my works were very macabre. She then paused a moment and said, "But that's not really what they are about are they? I mean, you don't seem depressed." I had to think about that a tad. Ok, yes, I have been a bit depressed since my dad died. Yes, these works are kind of macabre; bones are somewhat grizzly and unpleasant. The ceramic forms are a hair on the "wampy" side and the wall hanging pieces are fairly reminiscent of a desolate, forbidding desert. I also need to confess that I have thought Georgia O'Keeffe's affinity for skulls to be a bit odd, and the paintings slightly ugly. I am not unaware of the way that my show will be read, and honestly if I were a spectator unaware of the context that the work came

out of I would think the artist to be a slightly disturbed. I will admit that the show and the narrative portion of this paper contain more sadness than beauty. But my point here is that the two are not opposite. An event or a piece of art can be both sad and beautiful.

I guess I am a person who is given to melancholy. My Dad was too, actually. We both love Erik Satie's "Trois Gymnopédies". I can remember very clearly thinking that it was beautiful even when I was in first grade. I think that an attraction to the melancholy is a reflection of my temperament. My sister (the one who didn't like the mongoose skull that was in my car) hates it because she says it is too sad. Actually much of my favorite art has a similarly sweet sadness to it. That sort of art is obviously not for everyone and so there will no doubt be those who don't care much for this show.

My first priority with this show is honesty. For this to happen I feel it necessary to suspend some of my concern for how others will read the work because this could dilute it. I can't give in to the temptation to put a spin on my work that will make people think better of me. It is not easy to let go of the desire to impress other people. My decision to use unfired clay was partially motivated by my desire to maintain honesty. I knew that there would be people who were repelled by this. I can sincerely say that the ceramic forms that the bones were driven into are beautiful to me, that the bones are intriguing and lovely in my eyes, I like the way resin looks over clay and I enjoy looking at the mud puddle like wall hangings (unless I'm trying to eat at the same time). I can also honestly say that I didn't water down the feeling that I put into the works. I did my best to capture exactly what I went through and am going through with regards to my father's death.

Nuts and Bolts

There is some technical information that probably should be included in this paper. First I will say a word or two about the logic behind my use of clay. The clay accentuates the life and motion in the tension that I established between life and death. The death obviously was provided by the bones. For the bowl-like objects I used the material in a manner that showed off its plasticity. To me clay feels more plastic and alive when it is just off the wheel, still sloppy and wet. My decision to leave it unfired and then to cover it with resin was partly to simulate the aesthetic feel of wet clay. The resin on the bones also gives them the appearance of being wet. I like the wet look because that's how they were when I found them. I used the lines and shapes provided naturally by the bones to accentuate the same elements present in the clay pieces. This contributes to the rhythm and movement of the overall work.

I tried to break down my color scheme and use of the formal elements into simple, predictable patterns. The rectangular frames, the dark coupled with light colored pieces, the careful composition of the bones, the red, brown, and white colors used in the clay and frames were all done in an effort to give a simple logical presentation that is easy to relate to. These decisions were a reflection of my acceptance of my dad's fate. In much the same manner that the objects were organized in the gallery there is order in my mind with respect to my father's death.

The bowl forms look sloppy and in some cases asymmetrical. To get this just right was a challenge. I had to learn how to get the forms to collapse and fold in just the right way while leaving a proper working area for the bones. Each piece was designed to fit a specific set of bones which was set out beforehand. This presented a challenge

because the qualities of the different types of bones demanded a wide range of designs that could accommodate the bones both structurally and visually. I destroyed more designs than I kept. None of the forms have a solid, flat foot for the piece to stand on. This design places the form on its side so that the contents are exhibited more freely. Visually, the footless design is dynamic. This accentuates the life and movement that I desired each piece to have. In some cases I threw bowl forms that had no bottom and trimmed away the excess clay. With other pieces I threw a cone shape on to the foot while the body of the piece was leather hard. Some of the bowls were thrown in three pieces and have a double-walled interior.

Since life and death are matters of the body, I wanted viewers to understand the work on that level. We relate to most of the world in reference to our bodies. It is from the body and through the body that we comprehend the cosmos as a whole. Clay forms are especially intimate to the body because of their reference to the everyday rituals of cooking and eating. On a more literal level, raw clay looks kind of fleshy. If a bowl can be seen as a body, then the interior space would reference the interior or emotional content of the body. My decision to place the bones on the inside of the bowl forms was to impress their emotional meaning upon the viewer. I was aware of the natural subconscious reference that we make between clay forms and the body as I worked and tried to exaggerate this. Bones are, or in the case of the artwork in the show, were parts of the body, so when bones are present in a clay form the effect of that form's reference to flesh is heightened.

With the wall hangings I used the plastic and hence transient quality of clay in a different way. I poured clay slip into a frame that had previously been finished and

sealed, then I allowed it to dry so that a web of cracks would appear in much the same way that they do in a dry stream bed or a parched desert floor. These pieces are designed to look like a little section of ground that was placed in a picture frame—a small slice of life and death in your living room. Here the clay is not referencing the earth; it is the earth. I used Redart clay together with red iron oxide for the darker colored pieces and Edgar Plastic Kaolin mixed with 6-Tile clay for the white ones. To create an intimate, homelike feel I decided to work with relatively small picture frames. They are not exactly the sort of frame that everyone has in their house, but they represent a good compromise between what looks good in a gallery and what you may expect in a domestic setting.

I wanted to use clay in a manner that showed off its innate qualities and denied its conventional usage at the same time. For a ceramic purist there is nothing more essential to the medium than the firing process. Such artists will talk at length about the spiritual and artistic qualities of “the fire”. There is often a great deal of mysticism attached to kilns and fire; it can really get to be quite nauseating. In my opinion the fire is no more than a means to an end that is as often a hindrance to the medium as it is an aid. The challenges presented by working with high temperatures can be overcome with skill and creativity, and I could have executed similar work in a kiln, but part of the draw of using unfired clay was to thumb my ample nose at clay purists and their mystical rhetoric. The resin that I used to cover the pieces with is also a way of questioning traditional aesthetic notions while creating work that shows off the better qualities of clay.

There are a lot of reasons why I decided to use resin to cover the works. It is visually a mix between wet clay and glazed pottery. I have always preferred the look of clay in its wet state. This is why I left the resin looking drippy and viscous. The implied

movement created by the resin contributes to the dynamic visual effect that I produced with the clay and bones. The resin also served to bind the clay together with the introduced materials. In the case of the wall hangings the resin kept the clay and bones from falling off on to the floor when I hung them up. Maybe the least important reason that I had for using resin was that it makes the unfired clay more durable. I say that this was low on my list of priorities because to me the work in this show is only improved by its fragility. I used two different types of resin: clear casting resin and sanding resin which was designed for repairing surfboards. The casting resin is glossy and the sanding has more of a matte surface. I used the matte or glossy surfaces where I deemed it to be aesthetically desirable. For example, the wall hanging pieces looked better with a matte surface because there was less of a glare to distract from the cracked clay underneath. The sanding resin also proved to be better suited for the bottoms of the bowl pieces because it is not as sticky as the casting resin.

Theory and technique were always a consideration for me. As I worked I was constantly solving problems where these were concerned. Yet, there was always something more important than either of these, and that was emotion. Theory and technique have become internalized for me and I don't always need to stop and think them over. Feeling and intuition were the most prevalent, the most constant influences on what I was doing. My gut had to tell me what was best. I had to see what it was that I was feeling when a piece was done. I had to feel the prickle of inadequacy that I had when Dad was screaming for help and then the relief when the tempest was calmed by a simple song. Despair and surrender had to feel like they were washing around in the water below me while I swam in the morning light. I had to hear Mom whispering into Dad's cold ear,

“It’s alright honey, you can go now. We love you, but you don’t need to stay here anymore.”

Bibliography

- Beam, Sam. "Sodom, South Georgia." *Our Endless Numbered Days*. Sub Pop, 2004.
- Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology, Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. New York: Mentor, 1969.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *True at first light*. New York: Scribner, 1999.
- Higgins, Kathleen M. *Aesthetics in Perspective*. New York: Harcourt, 1996.
- Kerouac, Jack. *Desolation Angels*. New York: Riverhead, 1965.
- McMichael, George. *Anthology of American Literature. Sixth edition, Volume Two: Realism to the Present*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Palmer, Donald. *Looking at Philosophy*. Mayfield, CA: Mayfield, 1994.
- Waits, Tom. "16 Shells from a 30-06." *Big Time*. Island, 1998.



Plate I “Lovely in Her Bones” installation view.

UHM Commons Gallery, 2005



Plate II “Lovely in Her Bones” installation view.

UHM Commons Gallery, 2005

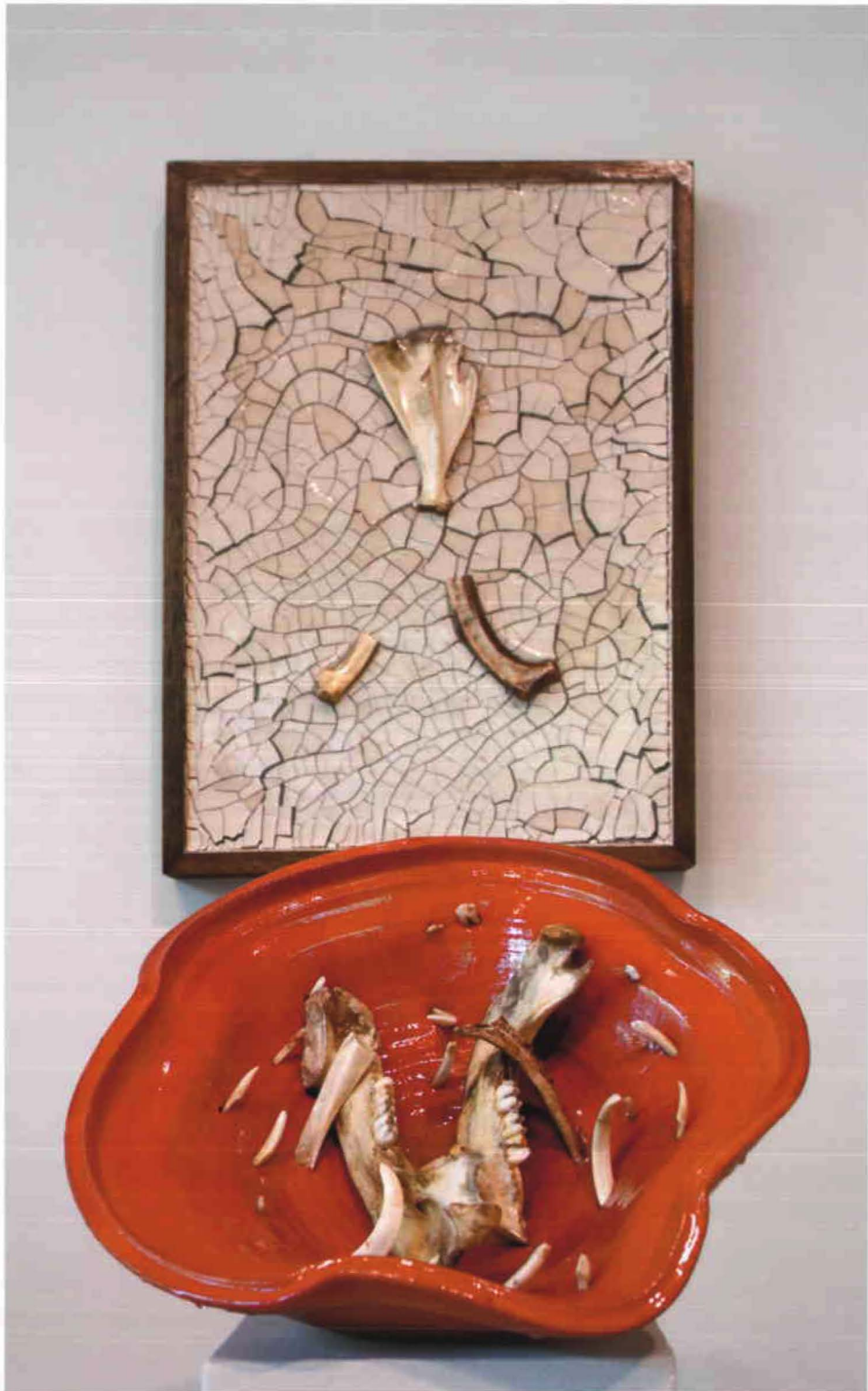


Plate III, Detail 1. Bowl form 12x14 inches, wall hanging 19x25 inches.

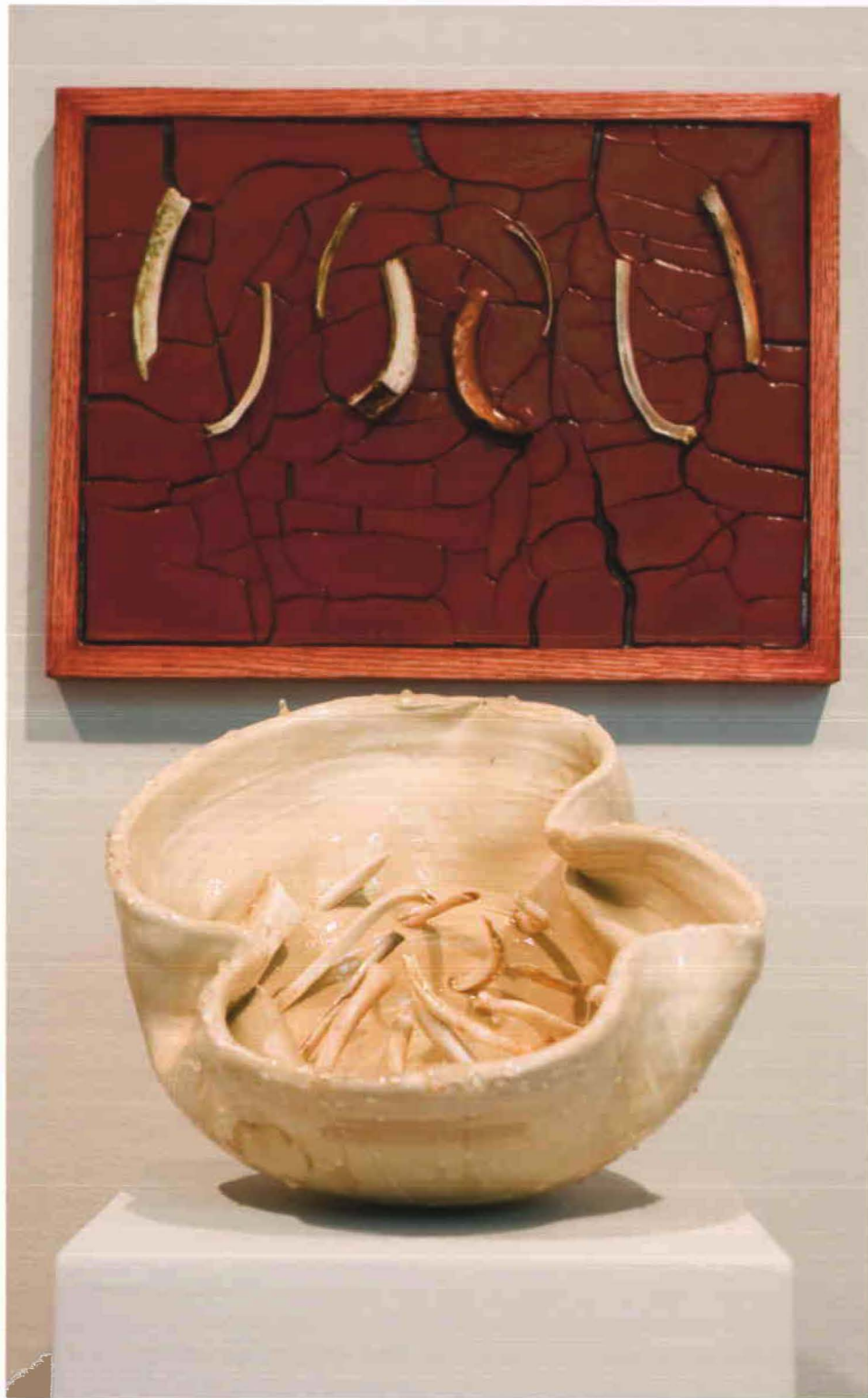


Plate IV, Detail 2. Bowl form 10x13 Inches, wall hanging 15x 20 inches.

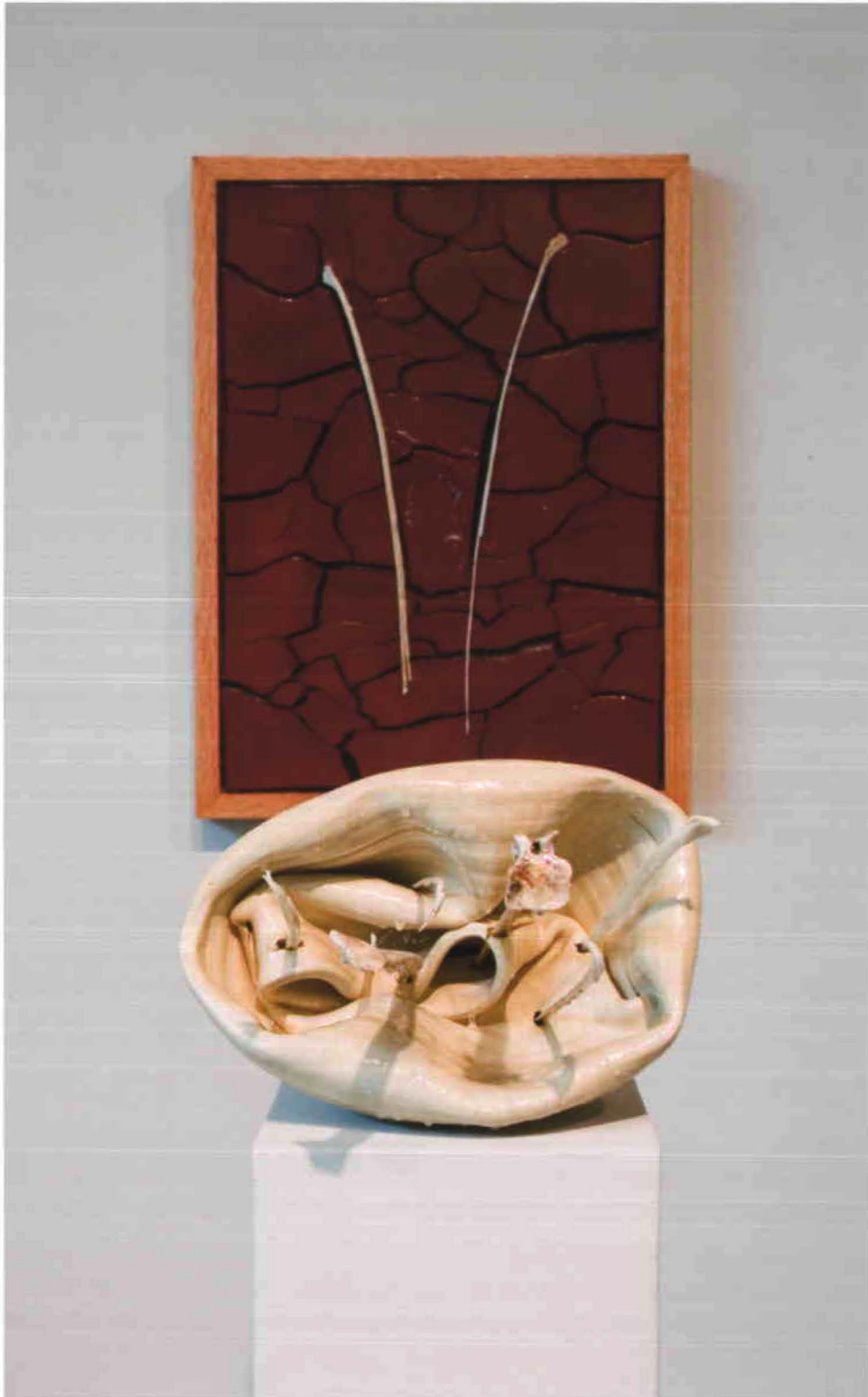


Plate V, Detail 3. Collapsed form 9x18 inches, wall hanging 15x20 inches.

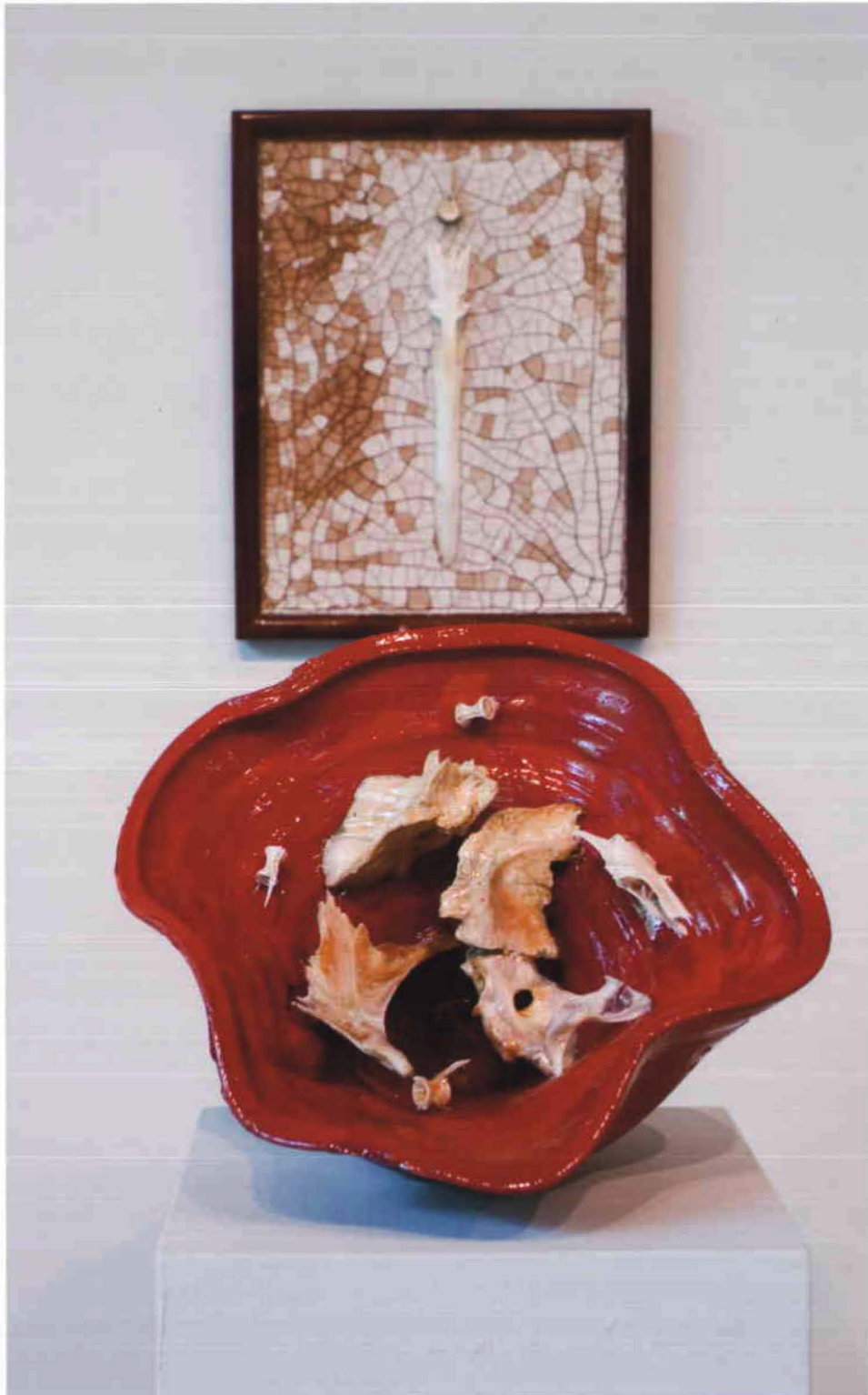


Plate VI, Detail 4. Bowl form 13x13 inches, wall hanging 12x15 inches.

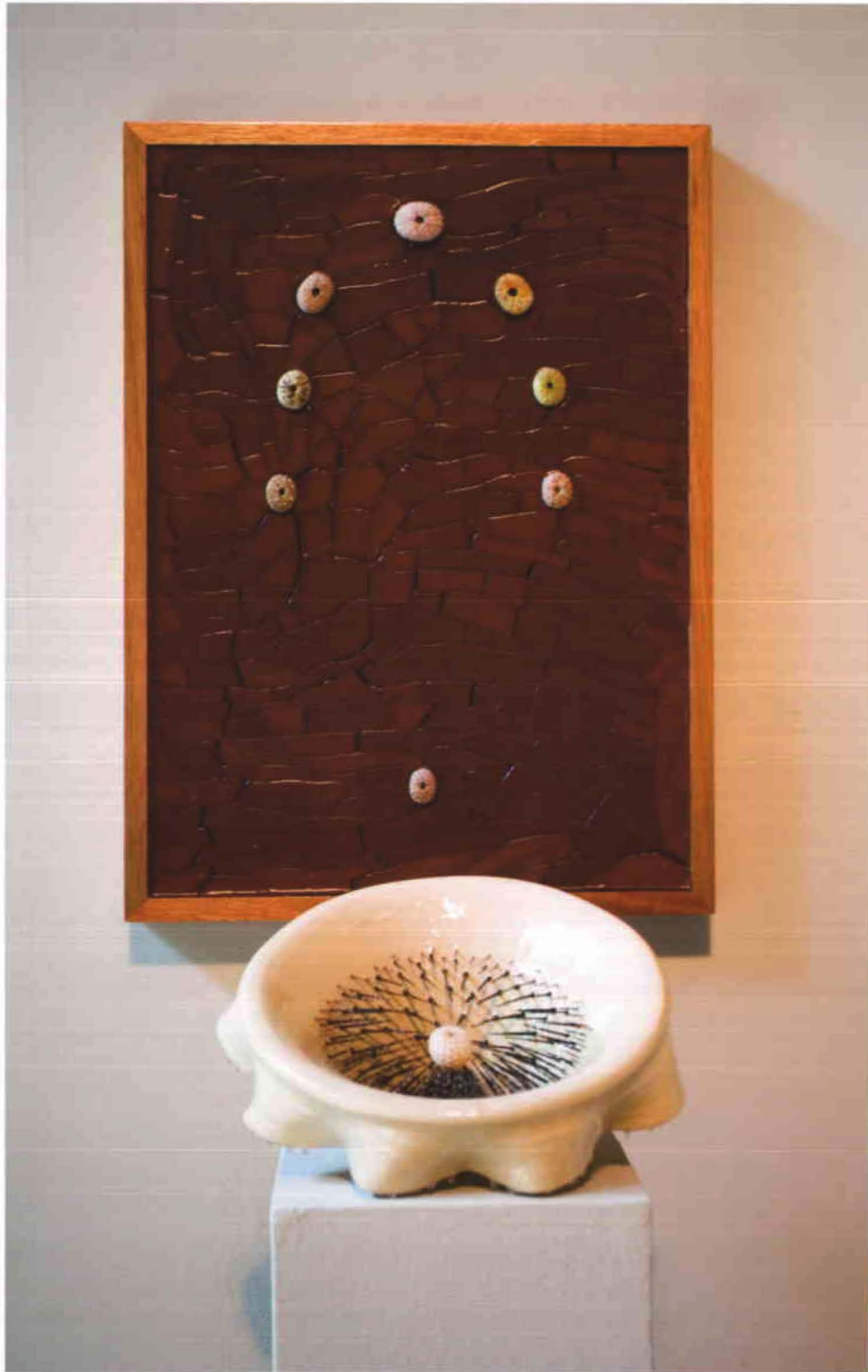


Plate VII, Detail 5. Bowl form 8x12 inches, wall hanging 19x25 inches.



Plate VIII, Detail 6. Bowl form 10x10 inches, wall hanging 16x19 inches.