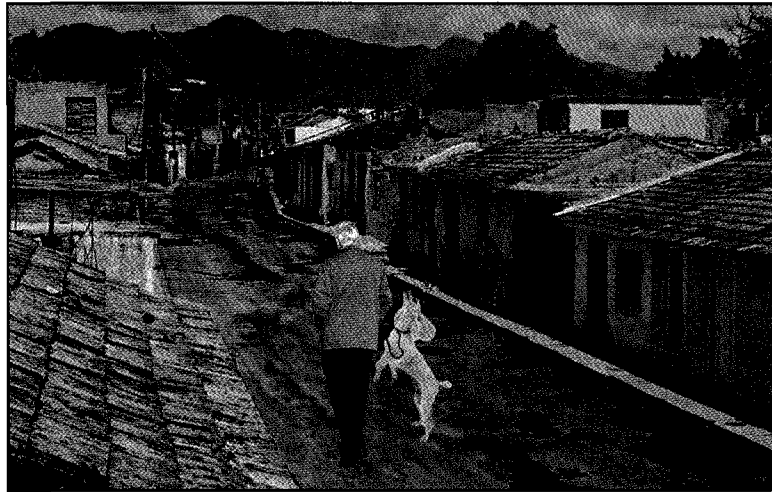


The Fortune Teller

An Excerpt From *Mexico Way*

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.



Melanie Anderson

"I don't want to be married any longer."
 "What does that mean?"
 "What I said."
 "You don't love me."
 "I don't love anybody."
 "You loved me. Or said you did."
 "Nobody's responsible for what they said twenty-five years ago."
 "I love you."
 "I wish you wouldn't."
 "Am I so tough to get along with?"
 "Not tough."
 "What then?"
 "I think you are the most boring human being I've known ever, in my entire life. But that isn't the reason why I'm going to leave you."
 "What is the reason?"
 "I don't want to be married any longer."

Two weeks before his wife announced her intention to sue for divorce and ten days before she moved out leaving him the furniture, the toy poodle, her wedding dress, and several pairs of worn-out shoes at the back of the closet, Samuel Adams White, retired inspector with the United States Customs Bureau, had returned from a trip to Wyoming where he'd signed the closing papers on a forty-acre ranchette. The property, a yellow log house

built twelve years before from a kit and surrounded by a buck-and-pole fence enclosing a sagebrush meadow stretching below stony peaks streaked with snow, was meant to realize a dream conceived by the inspector as a boy of fourteen when his father had taken him to see *The Virginian* at the moving-picture cinema in Spring Valley, in those days a dusty farm town of a few thousand people drowsing in the California sun fifteen miles east of San Diego. After quitting the realtor's office the inspector had walked down the main street where late-season skiers gawked before the false fronts of the frame buildings and entered a western-wear store, where he purchased blue jeans, three candy-striped shirts with yoked shoulders and pearly snap-buttons, a canvas duster that reached below his ankles when the buttoned hem was dropped, a pair of tooled boots with undershot heels, and a broad silver-belly hat with a curled brim and a silver ribbon circling the base of the crown. Next he'd driven in the rental car to visit the local horse-trader recommended by the realtor, with whom he left a one-thousand-dollar deposit on two quarter-horses and a pair of well-used roping saddles the trader happened to have on the place. The inspector was reconciled to writing off the horses, but hoped to rent out the property for the summer until he could make up his mind what he wanted to do with it in the long run. Wyoming, the ranch, horses—they belonged to the dream from which he'd awakened not to reality but into limbo. Faced by the destruction of the new life even before it commenced, the inspector had seized on the spectral form of the old one before it could evanesce. Back in Nogales now, he drifted like a ghost among scenes familiar

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to him from nearly thirty years of his professional and personal life, waiting to assume corporeal form among the flesh-and-blood shapes that jostled and sweated in the heat of the desert spring, although six weeks had passed already since his return to Arizona and Gloria's departure for California.

The turnstile spun silently in its barred cylinder as pedestrians passed back and forth between two sovereign nations, staring at the broken concrete pavement as if they'd dropped a dime or peso there. Once beyond the gate the Americans walked away briskly in the direction of the *agencia de turista*, while the Mexicans, losing their momentum rapidly, eddied against the high concrete wall where they stood watching their compatriots follow them through the turnstile. Beyond the auto checkpoint, traffic from Mexico was backed up under rusty palm trees as far as the bazaars where street vendors hawked rugs, leather goods, and trinkets in the sour-smelling *calles* between the drab gray buildings. On the plaza before a small gray church, two men with machetes on a step-ladder hacked branches from a tree above the head of a Tarahumara woman squatted with her three children on the pavement as she attempted selling Chiclets to the tourists. Dirt streets descended precipitously among *barrios* strewn with garbage and prickly pear cactus on the two sides of the cañon forming a vent through which a southwesterly breeze carried the odor of mesquite fires, blending with a haze of leaded petrol fumes. Beyond the narrow pass in which the old town of Nogales, Sonora, stood, a vast metropolis of plywood and cardboard shacks, populated by several hundred thousand migrants and refugees arrived from the south in hope of entering the United States, spread itself over the plain that lay behind the hills. The inspector, after three decades, had never strayed beyond the twelve-mile limit past which the *carta de turista* was required of all foreigners, nor had he any intention of ever doing so. Marooned on the concrete island between opposing traffic flows, he held the poodle on a tight leash as a southbound station wagon, crowded with college students on spring break from the university in Tucson, eased by him. For thirty years the inspector had listened to the tales told by tourists returning ashens-faced from Mexico: hair-raising stories of ambushes by armed bandits, pursuing lorries filled with men in anonymous fatigues and wielding automatic rifles, minor auto accidents resulting in the arrest of American citizens who were promptly thrown into prison and never heard from by their families again. He'd never been able to comprehend what reason or business Americans had to go traveling abroad in foreign countries, where history clung with pervasive tendrils like some poisonous tropical vine and where the God of nations still refused to show His face.

The dog strained forward from his knee, and the inspector stepped off the island and crossed among the cars halted in the southbound lane toward the loitering Mexicans who, as it seemed to him, gauged his approach with feral eyes. Familiarity had left him mostly indiffer-

ent to the Mexican people, but indifference in his case was not exactly neutrality. For the first time in many weeks the inspector was aware of himself as an object of human attention. Approaching the sidewalk he drew the poodle against his leg and for the next several blocks held her tight above the collar as they passed by the *Mayoreo y Menudeo* stores with their trays of cheap goods—flip-flops and tennis shoes and cowboy shirts and hats—obtruding onto the sidewalk to be picked over by Mexican nationals carrying stuffed shopping bags through a blare of Latin music. He took close hold again a block farther on as, beneath a retaining wall rising to the tall stuccoed church on the hill above the street, an Hispanic woman came toward them guided by a German shepherd in a leather harness. At the precise moment that she passed before the stone steps going up to the church the woman crossed herself, proceeding past the inspector with the blank, oblivious, otherworldly stare of the totally blind. As far as the end of the block he wondered how she'd known with such accuracy when she reached the church steps.

The walk was part of a daily routine by which he expected to reenter the familiar rut that would guide him unswervingly for the rest of his life, though at present, rather than walking, he felt himself to be floating above it all like a moonwalker. Around a curve in the street the inspector caught sight of the hotel, a wide building of white painted brick surrounded by palm trees and fronted by an expanse of tarmac crowded with expensive cars. Here tourists and retirees from the north joined the prosperous local businessmen of the city who lunched daily in the restaurant and the lovely, leisured Latin women lingering in the cocktail lounge adjoining it. It was the inspector's custom to buy the morning paper in the lobby and read the news over breakfast in the air-conditioned dining room where, in spite of the many years he'd lived in Nogales, he knew hardly anyone to speak to beyond the retired import man who would repeat over and over the history of the produce business in Sonora and whose name the inspector was usually unable to recall.

After breakfast and the paper, the inspector returned to the rented bungalow (his house, already on the market, was confidently expected by the real-estate broker to sell within weeks) where he worked crossword puzzles and read until noon, when he took the dog for a briefer walk in the midday heat. He read the works of Zane Grey, Jack Schaefer, and Walter van Tilburn Clark, but Louis L'Amour's were his particular favorites. In these books the inspector recognized the America his father, a San Diego police officer, had taught him in his boyhood and in which he'd lost neither faith nor belief since: an America that won its battles, solved its problems, brought enlightenment and progress to the world, and had God on its side. By one o'clock the house, thick-walled and shaded by palm trees but equipped only with a swamp cooler, had become unpleasantly warm, and the inspector drove to a truck stop on the edge of town for lunch. Because Mexi-

can or any kind of spicy food hurt his stomach, he invariably ordered a cheeseburger, french-fried potatoes, and a milkshake. After leaving the restaurant the inspector stopped by the supermarket for the few things he needed for his supper and a can of horse meat for the dog, and by three he was home again rereading Louis L'Amour, who being deceased was no longer writing books. At five he mixed and drank two gin and tonics, put a frozen dinner in the microwave oven, and ate his supper in the kitchen while doves called softly from the rooftops and wide Mexican women perambulated with their broods along the narrow sidewalk.

The house was fractured adobe covered by a tin roof on which the palm fronds clashed restlessly, fronted by a porch of warped planks at a second remove from the street above a concrete retaining wall surmounted by an iron fence and located in an old and seedy neighborhood inhabited mostly by Mexican and American hippies. In the second week of his occupancy the inspector had discovered a five-ounce packet of marijuana when he tripped and almost fell over a loose board in the hallway, but the deputy sent by the sheriff's department to take possession of the packet seemed unimpressed. The previous tenants, he explained, had been suspected of receiving smuggled drugs. However, the county lacked sufficient evidence on which to arrest them. The property was run-down and dirty enough that the inspector felt no shame for the lax housekeeping standards he'd allowed to replace a lifelong standard of cleanliness and military order.

Every evening after supper the inspector put the dog in the car and drove north on the interstate to an exit leading into a two-lane road that shortly became a dirt track climbing west into hills covered by Johnsongrass, live oak, and yucca and surmounted by red battlements of volcanic rock mottled with green lichen. Some miles beyond the pavement's end he stopped the car, let the dog out, and threw sticks for her to retrieve while he walked slowly in his new cowboy clothes over the thin grass growing among the cholla, watching the sun drop toward the steep black canyons cutting up from Mexico. They returned to the bungalow before dark, and the inspector, after locking the doors, securing the window fastenings, and changing into his dressing gown, worked another crossword and was in bed by ten o'clock. Since he'd neglected to have a telephone installed in the house, he was never disturbed by callers.

Returning from the hills somewhat later than usual one evening, the inspector spied through the dusk an indistinct figure on the sidewalk beside the iron gate, which he saw had been pushed partway open. He parked the car against the curb and stepped out, shutting the door against the dog who sat up on the front seat growling and showing her teeth through the windshield. The woman was small and dark, with a wide Mexican face. She wore a pale blue dress with a colorful Indian shawl over it.

"You are Señor Wilson?"

"No I'm not."

"You live here?"

"Yes."

Pinned by the car lights like a butterfly on velvet, she seemed confused. "Will the dog bite?" the woman asked.

"Not if I don't let her out of the car."

"I come twice now," she explained, "looking for Señor Wilson."

"He used to live here?"

"Yes, Señor."

"Then my guess is he's probably in jail." Watching her closely, the inspector thought he observed her mouth tighten at the corners as he spoke. "You had business with this fellow Wilson?"

"I am a fortune-teller," the woman said, and he could see her mind working rapidly behind her eyes. "For Señor Wilson only five dollar. For you also, five dollar."

"I don't believe in superstition."

"For the alcalde in Nogales, twenty-five dollar. I have many wealthy clients in México."

"You have much business on the American side also?"

"Oh very."

The inspector reluctantly extended his hand. "All right then."

The woman glanced nervously at the car, from which snarling sounds continued to come. "What about the dog?" she asked.

"She'll be okay until we're through."

"She is your special friend—yes?"

"I suppose she is."

"I will hurry," the woman promised, "so she will not be left alone for very long."

As she bent above his palm, the inspector looked over her head and up the street for the car he expected to see waiting in the darkness. "The lifeline is good," she said approvingly, "very deep and long. You have had a happy life already?"

"Average, I'd say."

"Your wife is no longer with you."

"We split the sheets last month."

"I do not understand."

"We were divorced in March."

"I am very sorry."

"I'm not."

"Perhaps you will meet somebody new in your travels."

"I don't like to travel." He wondered if she would suspect his motive if he suggested they continue the reading in the house.

"But you enjoy to travel in México, yes?"

"I've never been down there."

"Ah Señor, but you will go. Soon!"

"I doubt it."

"I see a trip," the woman insisted. "I see a long trip. México is very nice place for the Americans, señor. I am sure you will enjoy very, very much. There is very much to see in México."

"I don't have money to pay for a trip now."

"Is very cheap for the Americans to live in México—al-

most like you are our guest. Give your hand again, please, the reading is not over yet.”

The inspector considered as she continued to pore over his hand, reciting her grave nonsense. Supposing that he found a pretext to detain her, on what ground would he be justified in summoning a law officer? Anyway he had no telephone. Though a pretty woman still, she had the worn look common to poor Mexican women past the age of twenty-five. He imagined her living in a shack of cardboard or sheet iron, warming herself and a large family at a mesquite fire and sleeping in a plastic bag on a hard dirt floor. The real mystery of her dark homeland was the ability of the human spirit to survive there at all—insofar as it *did* survive, he thought. The inspector felt relief as she finished the reading. He was retired now. What came and went across the border was no longer any business of his. He took five dollars from his wallet. The woman folded the bill into a tiny square and deposited it in a change purse she took from under her shawl. “Señor Wilson was your friend?” she inquired.

“He was not.”

“So interested in the occult. A good customer of mine, very.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he was.” The thought occurred to him that Wilson might have been purchasing something in addition to marijuana and fortune-telling. She was just pretty enough, and apparently competitive in her pricing.

“So many customers to see tonight,” the woman told him, replacing the purse under her shawl. “Your friend, she cry for you. Muchas gracias, señor.”

His interest dwindled with her receding figure as it blurred into darkness beyond the headlights’ reach, but he watched it out of sight before returning to the car where he released the panting, yapping dog, which leaped from the seat and ran her leash out, jumping and twisting like a fish on the line. “Shut up, Darlene,” the inspector said, and gave the chain a hard tug. “She isn’t your worry, or mine either.”

At age fifty-three the inspector was beginning to understand that what people call life is actually a sequence of lives, each separated by a small death after which the soul exists for a time in limbo before moving into and taking up the new life. How long this limbo lasted he had no idea. While hoping that it might end soon, he was unable to imagine the contours of the life to follow, as he felt incapable of summoning the energy to embrace it when it finally arrived. For the present lassitude wrapped him like a shroud in which, though hating it, he was nevertheless content to lie.

The heat was partly responsible, he believed. He’d never given a thought to temperature before, driving to work and back in an air-conditioned car, sitting all day in the manufactured blast of the cooling outlets. Now, though it was only the beginning of April, he was continuously aware of the white caloric glare of the sun emanating from

a galvanized sky. When the swamp cooler broke down and the landlord was unable to get a repairman to fix it immediately, he began waking at five to read in the cool of the pre-dawn morning, napping through the midday, and lying awake until nearly midnight with the front door ajar on the latch and the windows open to thresh the cooling air passing stealthily in the darkness out of Mexico. Although he considered taking the house off the market and moving into it again, he gave up the idea for good after driving past the place one evening with the dog. The sight of the home he’d shared with his wife for thirty years gave him an appalling sensation of viewing his own mausoleum.

As the spring days lengthened in the premature heat, the inspector took to whistling up the dog at the conclusion of his siesta and heading immediately into the hills where he remained until evening and returned after dark, navigating the narrow trail with headlights set at high beam through clouds of flitting insects while the dog snapped at moths crawling on the inside of the car windows. Although more people were arriving to camp on the live-oak ridges and in the canopied creek bottoms, the little traffic on the road was mostly pickup trucks trailering bulls and saddle horses, ancient Mexican sedans bottoming out in the washes, and the pale-green four-wheel-drive vehicles of the Border Patrol looking to intercept mules backpacking their contraband through the steep canyons cutting north from Mexico. The patrol agents, well acquainted with the inspector, saluted him as they passed and often stopped to ask whether he had noticed anything suspicious along the road.

Headed for the freeway one afternoon the inspector stopped at the supermarket where, along with horsemeat, he bought a can of corned-beef hash, a loaf of bread, a pint bottle of whiskey, and matches. He hadn’t camped since his days as a Boy Scout from which he’d learned little about the out-of-doors and forgotten most of that little, but this day the insufferable closeness of the adobe house spurred him to something like adventure. As a substitute for a tent and sleeping bag he carried an Army blanket to spread on the back seat of the car, and he recalled having seen much dry wood lying about under the live oaks. Somewhat intimidated by his own boldness, the inspector assured himself that if the night air grew intolerably chill he could be back safe in town again within the hour. And he had Darlene for protection.

The produce sheds at the north end of the city were silent, awaiting the midnight arrival of fruits and vegetables from Sonora in transit to the greengrocer markets of Tucson, Phoenix, and Flagstaff. Off in the hills feathered with mesquite and on the graveled alluvial fans spreading out from the mountains, vacation homes for snowbirds escaping the snows of Kansas City and Minneapolis were going up beside ranchettes owned by locals fleeing the crime and congestion of a Mexican-American border town. The inspector also felt the need to escape. He left the freeway and continued west through the low steep-sided hills gripped by single-story ranch houses surrounded by sat-

ellite dishes, horse corrals, and power boats berthed on tow trailers and covered by a patina of the red desert soil. Shortly before the pavement ended he passed a turnoff to the man-made lake that, in thirty years, he'd never once visited, nor thought to.

The inspector drove for twenty minutes against the steep beneath the sandstone battlements before he reached the familiar meadow, where he steered the car across hummocks of salt-grass and prickly pear to the edge of a live-oak stand. He let the dog out to run in circles with her nose to the ground and trailing her leash and brought out the supper things, which he placed carefully under the trees on a patch of bare ground. The afternoon heat had subsided, and already a light breeze flowed down from the broken pinnacles of rock. Keeping a close eye on the dog, the inspector gathered chunks of sandstone lying scattered around and placed them in a fire ring. Only after he'd begun to sweat from the effort did he realize he'd neglected to bring water and an ice cooler from town.

Yucca bloomed on the steep slopes, the pale clustered flowers exuding a sweet perfume from the tips of graceful stalks the height of a man, and higher. The inspector walked among them, dislodging rocks from the pressed beds that exactly fitted them and brushing the ants and cocoons from the undersides. When he'd gathered nearly enough rocks, he was out of breath and his hands were chafed and sore. Returning to a rock pile he had discovered, he bent and lifted a red flat slab. The deadly buzzing commenced as he began to raise the rock, and before his brain could signal his hands to drop it he'd uncovered the whole of the coiled snake colored a motley brownish color, with a forked black tongue and diamond yellow eyes. The inspector staggered backward clawing behind himself, tripped over another rock, and turned a reverse somersault in the grass. He felt himself already up and running as he untangled his limbs, looking back over his shoulder as if he feared the snake were pursuing him. He kept running, and Darlene came gamboling from another direction and followed him back to camp with the leg of a Coues deer in her mouth for him to toss.

They ate, he and the dog, as the sun, a fire encased in a globe of red glass, sank through the evening haze among the sinister bergs of Mexico and brightened the fortress of sandstone above them to the redness of blood. The inspector sat on the backseat of the car with the door open and his feet in the grass to eat while Darlene, tied to the trunk of a live oak, bolted horsemeat from the flat rock he'd set out for her for a plate. With the suddenness of a wall switch the sun shut off the lingering warmth and the desert cold struck, causing the inspector to reach for his jacket and pour himself a second drink. Perhaps, he thought, the blanket would not after all be sufficient until morning.

Night followed quickly. In the darkness the inspector could find nothing further to do. He satisfied himself that the fire was out, untied the dog, and signaled her onto the

front seat. Under the dome light, he read Louis L'Amour until he developed a crick in his neck. Then he closed the book and went and urinated at a short distance from the car. Since before supper no traffic had passed on the road, and the stony wilderness around him was sunk in a profound gloom unrelieved by any human sound.

Somewhere an owl called and was answered by another and from the opposite side of the canyon a pack of coyotes broke into an insane cacophony of whoops and barks, causing the inspector to shiver beneath the thin blanket before, all at once, he fell asleep.

He awakened instantly and completely, almost in anticipation of the dog whose frantic barking he confused at first with that of the coyotes. The inspector threw off the blanket and lunged across the seat back for the glove compartment before recalling that he'd taken the pistol into the house to clean it several evenings ago, and forgotten to put it back. Now faces pressed dimly behind the window glass. They came at him from both sides of the car, and from the corner of his eye he saw the dog snatched up and her neck wrung like a chicken's. The blanket he had tossed away came back at him and slapped him across the face, wet and laden with a sweet overpowering smell that watered his eyes and agonized his nose and throat. For several moments he continued to struggle against the smell. Then, satisfied that danger had passed, he relaxed and succumbed gratefully to sleep again. <◇

On The Anniversary of a Natural Disaster

by Jennifer Reeser

I found an infant alligator floating
in Perkins' Bayou yesterday, between
Louisiana iris and the green
of blighted summer reeds, its stomach bloating
with harsh, bright, glaring sunlight, without fault
or scale, as crocodiles would have; its head
chin up and oblong, grimacing, as dead
as mausoleum marble, white as salt.
Delight in a discovery so exotic
could not be lost on me, however grim.
Mosquito larvae harbored in a scrim
of water on the western bank, hypnotic
and circling with the rise-and-falling rasp
of locusts at the cypress. In my grasp
a camera—in the case some killer storm
destroys this haunt tomorrow, everything
familiar, safe, replaced by suffering—
chaos projecting fatally through form.

Art in the Loo

Christie's, the auction house, took a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to publicize the record sale of a painting by a living artist, Lucian Freud, to the tune of \$33.6 million. Thirty-three million greenbacks for a portrait of a horribly fat woman lying naked on a misshapen sofa. The mind reels. It is a dreadful painting, but it does tell us something about the corrupting power of money and one man's contempt for the female sex.

Lucian Freud is not a sympathetic character. I have met him twice, and he is thoroughly unpleasant, an 86-year-old man who specializes in picking up young, impressionable women and making lotsa moolah with his relentlessly drab, ugly, and static paintings. The horrid images of the human body that he specializes in reflect his subjects: old, fat, ugly men and women. The modern hucksters who run the art world have declared Freud a genius, but in my not so humble opinion, he is nothing of the kind. He is a very minor painter who has never evolved from all the flaws of drawing and construction, using tricks, quirks, and mannerisms to hide his lack of talent.

Freud was born in Berlin in 1922, the grandson of that other fraud, Sigmund, and came to England in 1933. His brother Clement, an ex-member of Parliament, and he have not spoken for years, which in a way makes me like Clement, a man I know better than Lucian although he, too, can be quite unpleasant. I suppose unpleasantness runs in the family, but let's not get Freudian about it.

Lucian Freud has to be among the worst draftsmen ever, disguising his artistic flaws by pouring the paint on ugly and contorted female nudes and even uglier male pachyderms. Sorry, but now I *will* get Freudian. Whenever I see one of his deplorable paintings, I can't help but think that it must have been executed by someone who

hates the human race. And he gets worse as he gets older. As his hatred of people and his prices grow, so does his peculiar obsession with the paint. He pours it on as if trying to obliterate his subjects. But enough of Freudianisms.

The sad truth is that Freud is an emblem of our times. The art world is in the forefront of the dumbing down of our culture, along with movies, rap music and the lewdness of language in the novel. Money, of course, is what the art world is all about. How, otherwise, can one explain the success of such phonies as Damian Hirst or Tracey Emin? Behind all the modern crap that passes for art nowadays is Mr. Big, the marketing expert and advertising executive Charles Saatchi. Saatchi is an Englishman of Mitteleuropa extraction, a man who began collecting conceptual art for its shock value. Remember the brouhaha in Brooklyn some years ago and the painting that insulted the Virgin Mary? Rudy Giuliani managed to shut it down, but Saatchi got his pound of flesh during the controversy surrounding the exhibition. His collection skyrocketed in value. Headlines bring in the loot. Saatchi knows only too well that the contemporary-art-collecting scene is not dominated by aesthetes or students of the beautiful, but by investment bankers and businessmen who want to buy into a lucrative market.

Freud is also aware of this, and although his style is not conceptual, his representational "art" plows on in his essays of hatred and his fleshy advertisements of how much he hates the human race. Of course there is room for the dark side of human nature. Goya and Picasso have made sure of it, as did many other great artists of the past. But it's Freud's repetitive and self-indulgent canvasses selling for millions that somehow rub me the wrong way. Sue Tilley, the model



for the picture that sold for more than 33 million big ones, was paid 6 dollars an hour to pose for Freud. In real life she is hardly a beauty, but a pleasantly plump lady of some 60 years of age who has not paid attention to her diet. In the Freud picture, the artist dwells upon flab and folds with sadistic contempt for his subject. Morally, the work is worthless.

So there you have it. We live on a visual junk diet of soaps, smut, and vulgar language, and the most expensive painting by a living artist turns out to be as ugly and as disheartening as a porno shop on a rainy Sunday night. Why are we allowing our society to be shaped by the lowest standards of decency and by the nastiest people? I think I know who the latter are, but if I wrote it I'd be accused of things I am not guilty of. The love of money is of course first and foremost. It is the insanity of our money-worshiping age. It is the lack of education, the lack of civic responsibility, the lack of moral seriousness by our leaders, the lack of restraint by so-called freedom-loving shysters and defenders of the First Amendment, and many, many other things.

It is too depressing for words, hence I leave you with the following depressing scene that took place many years ago in London. It was a glittering ball given by an aristocratic family. We were some four friends, all young, and hiding in the loo in order to take drugs. I saw a man's head rise above the separation. It was Lucian Freud. He looked fascinated. I screamed for him to scram, and he did. Is it any wonder he paints the way he does?