

present

I yanked from the garage a cardboard ^{see the box} box filled with memorabilia. I pawed through the stuff, which ex-
 uded a musty odor. But more than that, it all bore the scent of sad-
 ness: the get-well cards from friends, newspaper clippings carrying ^{the smell}
banner headlines like HUNT AXE ATTACKER OF SUBURBAN COED; the ^{Memory}
 few items of camping gear that I'd saved, like a fluorescent orange
 handlebar pack, the tiny camp stove, and the aluminum mess kit in
 which I'd cooked what was nearly my last supper. ^{reliquary - where bones are kept}

flashback

I had reduced my somber reliquary in 1990 when I moved from
 New York to California at the age of thirty-three, and I regretted it
 now. I had divested myself of the bloodstained mummy sleeping bag. ^{horror}
 I sent it on to its next life by ditching it in a plastic garbage bag and
 heaping it in the alley. Then I posted an ad in the neighborhood deli
 to sell the Bicycle of Doom. I remembered the day a woman of about
 my age arrived to look at it. I wheeled the battered red-and-white
carapace out of the closet (so that I might preserve one keepsake
 from the bicycle, I had removed its old leather saddle). She paid me
 forty bucks, and as she wheeled it away, I felt guilty. I considered that
 I was doing a very bad thing, a downright immoral thing, passing on,
 with no disclosure, this object of weighty provenance.

present

Sleeping bag and bicycle were gone forever, but I had very con-
 sciously preserved the flashlight I'd saved my life with. Now I opened
 the bag that contained it. The flashlight especially emanated a scent
 of something strong. I fit my hand around the plastic handle, de-
 formed after melting on a hot radiator in my New York City apart-
 ment. The flashlight's associations connected me to a trace of a wild,
rushing emotion, which disturbed me. I quickly put the flashlight
 back into its plastic bag and tied it up tight.

packing emotions back up.

Something about the contents of the cardboard box, all these
 items with their charged memories, cooking for fifteen years, min-
gling their juices, brought to mind something my father told me
 about Abraham Lincoln when I was a child. He read somewhere that
 the corpse of this poet and president, whose deepest desire was to
 keep the Union together, was exhumed several decades after his
 death. An American flag had been draped on his face, and the dyes of
 the flag, stripes of red and white, had stained his skin. The contents
 of my box had mingled a bit like that: they had congealed into a
tangy essence of that night in 1977. I couldn't face up to looking
 through the artifacts thoroughly. The box lay in the middle of my
 living room for weeks, untouched. All traffic had to move around it.
 The disinterment could proceed only a little at a time. But the glacial
emotions that had surrounded the attack for years began to thaw.

Free association

a box holding one night

box as a portal through time.

It was the summer of 1992, and I was trying to think up stories for
 movies that might touch people. But no story I could imagine had
 any guts or soul whatsoever, let alone any authenticity. Mostly what
 was missing was an attitude of compassion, an author's tenderness
 for her characters and their fates. Then one day an old idea resur-
 faced. An idea shot through my head so electrifying that the fog in
 my mind dissolved and the bougainvillea outside the window turned
 a vibrating color of pink I could describe only as hallucinogenic. It
 was a kind of seizure: I would write my own story.