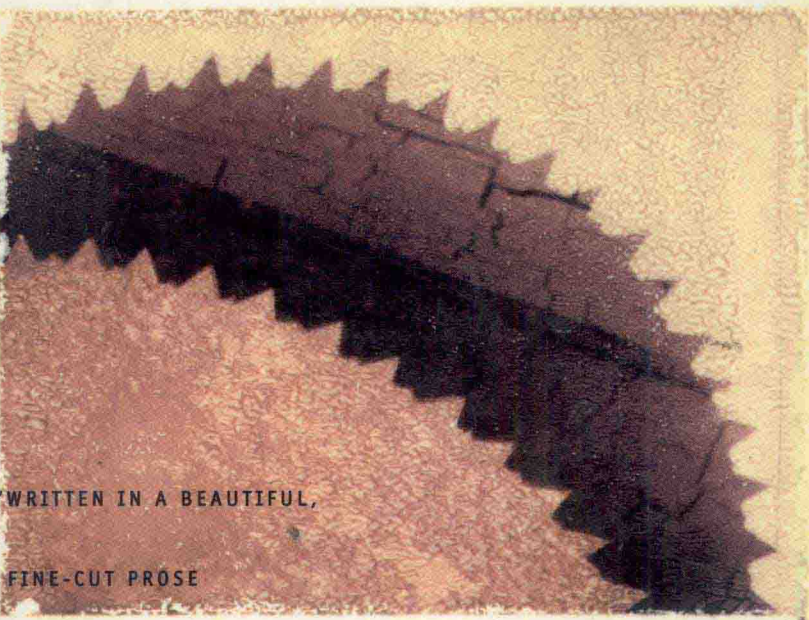


blue spruce



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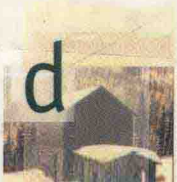
THAT SHINES AND SURPRISES."

stories

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david long



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To Hamilton Cain, Sally Wofford-Girand, Maria Healey, Mary Vanek.

And, as always, to my family.

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In memory
J.H.L., Jr.



Down with the world behind the world.

—Peter Handke and Wim Wenders, *Wings of Desire*

 c o n t e n t s 

ATTRACTION • 13

PERFECTION • 43

LIGHTNING • 63

TALONS • 85

COOPERSTOWN • 97

BLUE SPRUCE • 113

REAL ESTATE • 133

THE VOTE • 155

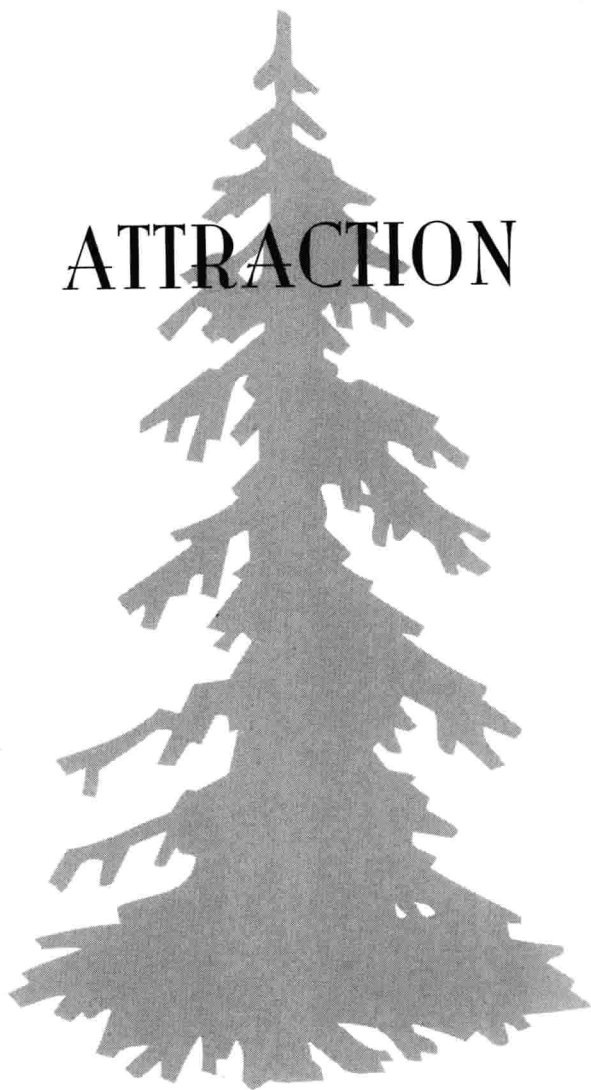
JOSEPHINE • 171

PERRO SEMIHUNDIDO • 179

EGGARINE • 203

THE NEW WORLD • 225

ATTRACTION



S

he was fifteen that summer of 1963, living with her mother in a rented house by a stretch of dead water called McCafferty's Slough. It was only a short walk through a stand of aspen to the back door of the skating rink, a huge, watery-green Quonset. She lugged her own roller skates, in a blue tin case with her name, "Marly Wilcox," stenciled on it in nail polish. In love with nothing else just then, she loved the sensations of skating, the swift cuts, the sweat like a cool metal comb delving into her hair. She didn't paw stupidly at the air, didn't grab her arms behind her back like a showoff—they pumped at her sides, thin, efficient, her fingertips tucked together like rosettes. The music crackled from tiny loudspeakers, out-of-date show tunes and syrupy waltzes, the occasional 45 by Duane Eddy or Chubby Checker or Little Eva. None of the boys pulled at her clothes or whipped her into the rails. She gave off a signal, an aura: Hands off, you'll

get no satisfaction from me. More likely, they just weren't interested.

Charlie Bitterman was there. Willowy, pale-skinned, with his gauzy shirts, his flop of sandy hair. His eyes were the color of cinnamon toast, his smile abrupt, a little toothy. It was the summer he was going by "Chas." He'd graduated from high school in Sperry that June, and was going out East to study engineering. He was the son of Ike Bitterman, the architect. The Bittermans had sent an older boy to West Point, a daughter to veterinary school in California, and now this last one to Rensselaer. Afterward, he would come and join Ike's firm—the way Jamie Shirtliff and Evan St. Clair had come home and breezed into their fathers' law practices. "It's the pattern," Marly's mother, Jeanette, said. "Time-honored. Old as the world." Marly had been watching him, keeping tabs. He was the most interesting thing going, she'd decided. And she wasn't the only one. She'd caught Mlle. Picard, her French teacher, languidly staring after Charles one winter afternoon—a flush rose to Mlle. Picard's temples, but she had shrugged, smiled, shamelessly dragged Marly into the moment with her, so that it was Marly who turned away, embarrassed, found out.

All that year, until spring, Charles had gone out with Cynthia Lumquist. They'd made a famous couple, no question about it. Cynthia was a loopy, smart-alecky girl, flagrantly blond, with a tantalizing gap between her front teeth. It was a romance oblivious of social standing. Cynthia had no parents, as far as anyone knew—she floated, skirted catastrophe, lived with an aunt or an older sister, emerged at school from an amazing array of vehicles. Her hair was platinum, silver-white like a movie star's.

Invisible amid the horseplay, the clattering trays, Marly had watched the two of them dance to the record player in the