PASSING SALT TO A DEAD MAN
Excerpts from
ARTHUR 33, *a solo performance*

Mike Geither

About this same time my Aunt Rose was passing salt to a dead man. She was my great aunt who married Leo Fahmer whose first wife, my great aunt Louise and Rose's sister, had died and whose son was living in trailer parks all over the country wherever there was good weather. Rose had made salad, put part of a loaf of bread on the table and butter, made corn on the cob and pork chops and Leo Fahmer had just finished his salad and was drinking some lemonade when he asked

Ro, can I have the salt?

and Ro turned and reached down the table a little way. She was going to use the salt too—today, tomorrow and in three days at the little food party after his funeral—and when she turned back she said,

Here, Leo.

and he was dead, just slumped over without enough time to have even had a heart attack and from that point on she always thought of herself as a woman who had passed salt to a dead man.

*

Rose was teaching herself to use a new blender, a curling iron, lipstick and a car. The curling iron and the lipstick came from my grandmother Connie, my father's mother and Rose's sister, who'd been curling her hair for the last two years and for a woman in her late

seventies in the late seventies did a good job of putting a young-girl curve on her head and painting her lips pretty accurately. The skills transferred over to Rose who was younger and looked probably the best she ever looked in the week after Leo died.

The only thing Rose couldn't understand was why Leo bought the Torino right before he died. Sure the other car was old and worn out but you buy a new car and then you die? Come on. Connie had told her that it might be hard to make sense of things after someone you loved died so she put this into that category even though she knew that calling Leo someone she loved was stretching it. She had thoughts that went something like this too:

> *Leo bought a car and then he died. The new Torino and the old man. A car that had a young face in the garage and a man whose old face under six feet of dirt. Oh the irony she was thinking. I feel like I'm in a play.

These were three other thoughts she had that week:

> *Sometimes things happen not how we want them to happen.

> *If Florida is half the place it seems like on the dish towels I got from Connie then I might want to live in the real thing.

> *You push the one on the right to go faster.

*

The problem was she couldn't get the cat away from the door and Leo always drove. It was perfectly legal she was sixty-four and it was 1973 Leo couldn't have known that of course because he was dead but she'd been in the front seat plenty of times and remembered what Leo did like when he wanted the car to go left he turned the wheel that way and if he wanted to go faster he pushed the one on the right and if he wanted to go slower he pushed the one on the left and she could stop all the trees and houses from moving by altogether if she pushed hard enough on the one on the left and he did this little prayer with his hands in front of him to get it started and every now and then he had to stop and talk to a man at a gas station so he could keep it going and she thought how wonderful in talking to the men at the station must be if they could keep the cars going that way and if she was going to make Florida, the state on the dish towels Connie had given to her, she was going to have to talk to a lot of these men and she was happy about it because she didn't have a map and if she asked which way Florida was

the men would point and she'd just turn the wheel that way and be there in a couple of days.

And the problem was that she couldn't get the cat away from the door and she felt funny about just leaving Leo's ashes on the mantle and she'd have to make sure Kitty had enough to eat so she opened a forty-pound bag of cat food and poured it into the little bowl near the sink and turned on the cold faucet so she'd have water and she just emptied the litter box yesterday so that was all right but Leo's ashes were still on the mantle and Kitty was still by the door and then she remembered sunflowers.

Sunflowers existed and she had their seeds and they grew in things like dirt so she took the lid off Leo and put him in the sun in the living room with one of her seeds, the unsalted kind, and poured a lot of water on the two of them—Leo and his seed—and thought that maybe when she got back from Florida Leo would be somebody different, not really able to drive a car of course because he was dead but at least changed in some way, he wouldn't just be driving her around and talking on the phone and listening to music all the time by himself or driving to places selling parts of machines even if he did make a lot of money doing it. So she planted the seed in Leo and Kitty was still by the door so she put her coat on, packed a few sandwiches in a bag, found her hat, felt the keys in her pocket, threw a cat-treat into the kitchen, watched Kitty disappear, said "Be good" and opened the door to her brand new 1973 green Ford Torino, men who spoke wonderfully at gas stations and Florida, the state on the dish towels Connie had given to her, the state with an ocean and flamingos, where Leo had told her you could cook fish just by burying them in the sand on the right days and the state where she was determined absolutely that she was going to get some oral sexes.

*

There was a woman in room fifteen. Rose had seen her earlier in the day painting by numbers on the beach. She was dressed in a one piece bathing suit with her legs showing all the way which Rose thought was very sexy and there were patches on both cheeks of her behind where the material was nearly worn through and you could see the color of her skin starting to show but she didn't care she just looked forward and matched the # 7's with tea red and the 4's with deep oak brown and Rose thought that maybe that was something she could learn from this woman—look forward all the time, think about the future, be here and now and put the colors where they might belong and not think about your bathing suit and just stand in the sun with what you love and she got carried away there in the hall thinking about what a divine future she could have if she kept all she was learning

from this woman in mind, this woman who she'd nicknamed the floating woman earlier in the day because she had watched her from beneath her umbrella and sun hat eating corn chips and imagined that at any moment the poetry happening between the woman's beautifully large body and the cardboard suitable for framing on the easel might just lift her up above the crowded beach and out over the ocean where she belonged with the seagulls and the clouds, all Rose would have to do is keep in mind what she was learning and she could be anything she wanted she could be a sharkologist when she knocked on the floating woman's door and even if she was asked questions she didn't know the answers to she could just trust that things would come to her to say "Oh yeah they have three rows of eighty-seven teeth no kidding" or she could be a rock band or a palm reader or a priest or maybe she'd just quit the nunnery and was here in Tallahassee to reflect on things and okay these things could happen they could happen and the door opened and the floating woman was standing there in her bathing suit and Rose didn't know if she'd knocked or not.

Were you painting on the beach today?
—Collies.
Did you ever get done?

and they went into room fifteen. The painting was on an easel in the corner of the room.

—Sometimes I change what the box says. You know, do a couple of 7's with the color they got listed for three, whatever comes to me, you know. I haven't broke on this one yet though, I'm just going to let a lot of the lower numbers ride until I get up around seven or eight and something'll happen. The puppy might end up with red paws I don't know.

And Rose was pretending to understand what the floating woman was saying. She nodded and hmm and looked back and forth between her eyes and the painting trying to imagine what it was she was throwing around. She squinted when the woman told her about other paintings—barns she'd painted blue instead of red, brown daisies, fruit that made no sense whatsoever and a little boy playing in a sprinkler she'd just done with nail polish.

—Do you paint?
Uh, watercolors.
—Oh, you know I just love watercolors but it seems like I can never get good water, you know. I did this light house once

and blah blah blah with just one word she'd given herself a history.

—What kind of water you use?
Hot.
—Oh, I never thought of keeping it warm

and blah blah blah it was working she couldn't believe it and before she could stop her mouth from happening she had a color picture put on a calendar when she was in high school and won a contest with a picture of a sparrow on a bird feeder and

—no kidding well then these collies probably don't look
like much to you.
Oh, no. They're beautiful. That's what I wanted to
tell you . . . I just didn't know how to say it.
—Well, thanks.
They're beautiful.

*

The expectations of how the floating woman would fuck fell far short of the experience. Before she'd entered room fifteen, in fact back on the beach where she'd first pictured the woman out over the water with the gulls, she imagined her floating like the moonwalkers she knew were coming, somersaulting over the bed performing the most lithesome of acts with her tongue and fingers but this was nothing compared to what actually happened. She'd received three oral sexes in the two hours they'd been naked and had given out two and a half. It was what she would come to call the single most exciting sexual encounter she'd ever had and left her with a feeling that maybe she'd peaked in life and might have to go downhill from here. It was strange, she knew, that her brother had a birthmark the shape of Ireland on his arm and was living there now and that this excellently large woman next to her on the bed had one that reminded her of Saturn.

—Where you from?
Ohio.
—What brings you down here?
I want to get a few things—towels and belt buckles and
little things that you shake and make it snow on the
flamingos and take them back for my friends and family.
—Is that all?
Well, the reading light's not so good in Ohio.
(pause)

—Why are you really here?

And Rose never could have known what was about to happen but she knew it was going to happen in her throat and her eyes and her chest and she was thinking that she hadn't bought dish towels yet or found anything different like a little flamingo for her rear-view mirror and that nothing with the exception of the woman had surprised her and she wanted the unthinkable to happen and she cried right then and the floating woman rolled over and gave her the kind of comfort that she knew could only come from breasts and a mouth.

And after a while Rose stopped crying and told the floating woman,

> I just don't get it with marriage. I mean it's supposed to be all about trust right? So what do you do find a group of people you can trust and then it's just a matter of whose genitals you want to put in your mouth the rest of your life?

*

Up until today I've been pretty much a flaming heterosexual-except for once when I was thirteen with my next door neighbor and when I was seventeen working at a grocery store and I met a lot of women. And then for my summers too when I was twenty-four up until forty-eight, winters too. A lot of the summers ran late-October, November and then after the hysterectomy it was only women for a long time up until you. You're a woman, right? Other than that though just a real flamer. Men all the time.

It was five-thirty in the morning and the floating woman had reservations on a charter for her and a partner she might find and was just planning to say her husband got sick if she didn't find anybody and then she'd probably be the only woman on the boat and wouldn't the men like her but now she had Rose and good sun block and a partner for breakfast and the rest of the day and maybe much much longer it didn't matter it maybe really didn't they were going for grouper and marlin and wahoo and barracuda and sea bass and it was the ocean too so you never knew what the heck you might bring out of the water like octopus maybe and afterward they'd all stand around a barrel and smoke what they'd caught and hold hands and they might be too tired to screw again because of the sun and being out all day but they were going for breakfast first and she'd have toast and eggs and a milkshake like a kid and Rose'd have an omelet and cereal and pick up the whole thing.

There really was something in the air. Rose knew that the floating woman had a Plymouth Fury and that that didn't mean her car was bad it just meant that it was big and it wasn't big enough for shuffleboard or anything even in the trunk but it could give you that feeling if you stayed in it long enough like you've been in the ocean feeling waves and here comes another one even though you're standing in the parking lot and it was red which didn't mean anything except that it looked good and it had that feeling too that you could say "they don't build them like this anymore" even though it was only a year or two old, I mean like if she could be near it in ten years she'd say "nope, not like this" but she was doing it then. She could just look at it and know.

And everything was going fine when they got to the diner by the dock. Rose was saying "I really mean what I said about your hair. It's . . . crinkly or not really crinkly but something like that. I don't know-straw like straw or strawy. If I can't think of the word I might have to make one up" and the waiter was filling out their fishing licenses while they ate and bait enough for twenty-five people was already on the boat but then the floating woman's eggs didn't taste exactly right and she said

Ro, can I have the salt?

And Ro reached down the table, past the ashtray the floating woman was going to use when she was done eating, past a brown mark, a discoloration in the table that seemed right for the place they were in and stopped. And the magic disappeared a little and she knew what was happening but it wasn't just the salt was it? It was what happened in Leo's heart, that thing that broke off a vein in his shoulder about ten seconds before he asked and maybe the magic was disappearing a little more right now and maybe a new magic was taking its place and that's how life usually works isn't it and she had a quick thought to just pass her the sugar but she knew she'd say "salt" and she'd have to do it anyway so she made the decision to pass it one of those decisions you make without any words or thoughts in your head like one you make while you're out jogging and you feel you can do twice what you ever did before and you do it and she handed it to her and watched.

God, they should put some butter on the grill here, you know? but I guess you can't get everything you want.
—I wouldn't know.
But we're going to try. Wait 'til we hook into some grouper.
And Rose said, Grouper.

*

Okay listen up you bunch of fucking losers, me and my woman got fifty bucks here says we're going to catch the biggest grouper on the trip. (aside to Rose) Can you believe it? I've got a megaphone *and* I'm screaming and on top of that I called them all losers.

And Rose started to see what she called a spark in the floating woman—something in her nature like a different species would have only she was still human, this force that made her know the floating woman was going to be doing big things real things physical things the rest of her life and maybe she could be there with her always moving always feeling even if it was some boring time in life when you're just waiting around in a shitty job or on hold on the phone she'd feel this sort of excitement or awareness that something was happening anyway or was about to and not that something wasn't happening all the time anyway that she was a part of but I mean here they were about to take over the boat and they were going to win the bet and even if they didn't they were going to be all the better because they felt like it was small potatoes and she just remembered the word for her hair.

—It's strawy.
Hold on.

We gonna squeeze the eyes outta anything under twenty pounds.

And she started to laugh and the floating woman started to laugh this debilitating laugh that'd find them only a couple of times in their lives but was settling in now, one they felt so good for so long and even though it was only fifteen minutes they could roll around on the deck with that sandpaper they have glued down so you don't fall and let it rub on their faces and hands and make everything feel real and let them know they were leaving little pieces of themselves behind here where they laughed so hard that they rolled around on the deck for fifteen minutes and rubbed their faces on the sandpaper that they had glued down and when they were done laughing they got rods and bait and all kinds of looks and took up fishing on the left side of the boat and stood there caring and not caring, fishing and not fishing with their lines in the water and not in the water about to have the one thing she'd always wanted or was it one thing or not a thing or just wanting or wanting wanting or it didn't exist like a thing but it was there with hands that moved them around on the ship and on the ocean and maybe it was under the surface too putting grouper or squid or god only knew on the end of their lines.

*

They only caught seven fish. Rose got five and the floating woman got two and there was no bet and nobody got fifty bucks because no one took them seriously and right at the start of the trip when they were leaving the dock the captain of the boat got his megaphone back and announced that betting was illegal in the state and even though he knew and everybody else knew it was just an excuse that was the last time he left his megaphone laying around he's got a wife to feed and what if she drops it over the side that's fifty bucks for a new one and after he announced that betting was illegal he said sorry to the floating woman and they both knew what a failure he was but it was his megaphone and his boat.

And all that happened when they got off the boat at the end was they gave the fish away, looked up, said yeah it's raining, got into the Fury and drove back to the hotel and plopped down in the bed drained from the sun and the laughing and the other people on the boat and they were going to screw once just to prove they could do it and fall asleep and on the way home Rose who was once a woman passing salt to a dead man said to the floating woman

Marsha, rain in your face, wind in your face, you know?

and the floating woman nodded and watched the road dodge along the ocean side

Bugs too. Magic.

and the floating woman nodded and watched the road dodge along the ocean side where she was sure of things like horse shoe crabs and sand dollars and she barely noticed Rose who'd climbed through her window and was crawling out on the hood of the Fury. Her face was pressed against the sheet metal and she was thinking of taking a nap it felt so wonderful or maybe just holding on and lifting her head in the rain every now and then but maybe not they got laws and from here Marsha could probably see up her dress and she was feeling just like a woman who'd caught five fish and whose lover had caught two on a boat owned by a guy who worried about his megaphone and who'd just crawled out on the hood of the Fury and thought about lifting her head in the rain and she knew it wasn't the greatest metaphor but it was exactly how she felt all the same.

Oh, and she was making a sound that went something like this

(I make the sound.)

End