

Swimming
(Houston Diaries, 1980s-1990s)

Jack Livingston

Eddie

Eddie was a gulf coast transplant by way of 1980's University of Houston Creative Writing Program royalty. From the get-go, his words fell into place like a drumbeat of endless invention. He was a natural. Born in Chicago he was left by an irretrievable mother who hovered ghost like a malignant migraine. A regular family in cornfield Midwest Iowa is where baby Eddie landed, a little alien, rushing ahead of his new kin, confusing them all. As a kid he haunted libraries and lit fires in open fields with tough girls. Loud mouths and crazy explosion nights from the get-go. Poetry was how he found sense.

His red thicket of hair topped a face swollen from nightly binges. I met him during those first Houston years when he crashed on pine sol spattered motel floors off Telephone Road. Eddie had no drive to be king special but was better than all the writer royalty around who did. *Wasted talent* scolded the Real Famous Poet full of Derrida after he put young Edwin Gallaher in Paris Review for a decade. Eddie adored Cynthia McDonald the plump sweeping elder opera singer writer who looked over the whole school brood, but held Eddie special so close, soothing him over dinners with wine. She became his real mama beaming in the dark. She spoke in a special chorus that helped keep him tethered.

Eddie wrote a poem for me to make something of. I put it in a blue handmade book with images that skittered through wet black gouache. It featured broken clicking lawn sprinklers, the spark of light bulbs, couples embraced their big heads tough in touch. Beneath it all was his familial

rupture, dug for disaster and lit bright exposed. He held it in his arms and rubbed his chin. *You got something rising here* he said *it comes out of the flat, the thorny, the collision, and is about to flower.*

Here listen to the Pixies, he said visiting my studio handing off a new see-through cassette. We snapped it into a beat box just inside the outdoors Texas bloomy night. The Pixies clever dark sound that roars to a whisper and then goes boom again reminds me of him to this day. *This monkey's gone to heaven.*

Once Edwin did a euphoric jig to Naughty by Nature's *OPP* in front of a stunned audience there for his reading, then he stood hunched waving on the lit stage like a woozy boxer delivering a sudden knock-out.

We all hurt hard when the call came in that his heart just quit in the downtown emergency room. It was hard to believe. How could he leave us all gasping? *He could not stop* said Marci who wrote and told me all about that one fraught night Eddie left her frantic messages from joints all over town, spiraling from phone booth to phone booth liquid in the emotional tide of *please love me please*. Everyone who knew Eddie has a Wolfman story too. At his funeral his sister admitted the lifelong fury between them.

It is a crime that today no book cover bears his name. *Wait*, our old friend Henry tells me, there is a mass of crumpled up papers stolen from the floor of Edwin Gallaher's final ratty apartment right after he died. They were *acquired* before his family could rid themselves of potential hurt

and shame. Stuffed in a big duffle bag placed on a shelf in a cluttered suburban garage somewhere outside the 610 Loop are Eddie's voluminous last words waiting.

Laurent

Laurent huddled with tiny brushes over his small abstract paintings full of grid formations and snaky vines. His carefully applied layers of thin colors as we talked. He said *outside there is always something surprising new but in here, there is something even better, it's reflection reborn*. He put his finger right between his thick eyebrows above his long nose. I tipped my chair back and sipped mint tea, tapped my toe to an imaginary beat. *I suppose. I am at a loss these days* I said thinking of my own work. My life was muddled full of break up— a concrete truck rattling grey grit of lost desire and new intent. *I'm a mess* I said. Laurent laughed. *True! But then there is always a day after tomorrow and after that*, he said as he brushed another transparent layer of magenta across a small unperfect geometric shape he had carefully composed in the middle of a square canvas. *And then there is this*. He held it beneath up beneath the light. We both peered down silent our heads bowed in litany. *It works, but somethings missing. Redder?* I said. *Redder?* he said and sat back down. Waiting. He was always this patient. I rushed into my work, making, breaking, scraping. *My work is the result of leaving and revealing just the right amount of damage control*, I said, writing it down on a scrape of sketchbook paper, another bad artist's statement. *Just like your life*, he said looking up with slanted grin. *I have it* he said, *some green then red across then deeper than a flat undulation to each side*. He started back in. Intent. Taking days to finish. It is the little mechanics we loved to share.

As a trained archeologist Laurent had been on some serious digs the previous ten years. Imagine him uncovering old bones bit by bit, laboring in the dirt fraction by fraction, time slowed to thick, all to find a new piece of another ancient puzzle. Then he left it behind when Houston's Rothko Chapel and a second degree in art at the University of Houston had converted Tunisia born Laurent Boccara to spirit minimalism. He was at heart a real cook too. It was related to his painting. His secret tincture of paint goo medium permeated his studio home and many books. Just like his pesto, handmade from hand grown pure home garden essentials. Laurent grew up in Paris with a bookstore owner father then landed in Houston, a Euro expat romantic adopting Texas scale. *Read Rilke* he said flinging copies to all the art kids in the scene younger than us, anyone who might listen really.

Dinners at his place were fun. Everyone's early marriages were over by then, so there was a second chance sense of adventure brought on by new proximity to potential fresh sex. The right couple combination could ignite and flourish beyond anyone's expectations. Laurent found this as entertaining as any other aspect of his life.

From a boyhood of beaches, he was a real swimmer. Gathering at the public pool near the university we dove through the smoldering days. He forever a daft unsuccessful flirt. Evening was reserved for always going out. There was a gang for everything then. Laurent stared at stains on cheap dance club walls or into the glorious pools of algae loading ponds across Buffalo Bayou. *Match that*, he wrote in his ever-present little notebook, one with a fine leather cover. When it cooled late late at night, we both went home to work.

After I met Leslie, I saw him less. Though when we were all together it fit. He didn't have to work to get others laugh. We all sat together to watch the premier of *Wings of Desire* at River Oaks theater. Laurent gasped when the angel descended to become mortal for love.

Laurent's heart blew up too, even before Eddie's. What is it about Houston? He was buried there up on Airline Drive. Someone I forget said it was a good service, the casket fine and minimal, dark with stains like wine bliss. Who was the last to see his sad long face, who put lips on it and said *so long sailor?*

Leslie

Leslie and I sat in a small park that night below the Paradox, a Houston jazz bar. She wore a boat neck patterned thin summer dress that swayed across her in the breeze. She was tall with fine curves, delicious hips. Her thin porcelain hands covered in bracelets wove rhythms in the air as she spoke. We met just two hours previous in a Vietnamese restaurant over dinner arranged by Laurent and their dour friend Marie. Laurent came hungry for Leslie's attention. She asked me for a ride home instead. Leslie and I were then just over thirty — old enough to know, young enough not to care.

Her big hoop earrings dipped below her strong jawline. She bit her lip, then inhaled a Benson and Hedges she had pulled from her yard sale Victorian bag. Her head cocked, she stared down

her fine roman nose at me, her chopped up blonde hair feathered, a bit teased on top, a hungry bird. *My, my, my*, she laughed exhaling, tapping her cigarette in rhythm. The park was loaded with loud toads mating. We discussed their icky excess, and she huffed real cute. Everything was heightened as we stood and walked up Montrose Boulevard surrounded by palm trees. A buzz of cicadas swelled beneath black heat. Huge roaches ran across fanned Palmetto plants. Leslie pushed her hand into mine with an exaggerated, *oh, oh*. My little pickup truck held a dog thick with fur and a new set of small gouache paintings. Leslie won over the dog and poured over the paintings nodding. We traded life stories. Her story was better.

Leslie Adrienne Miller was a former horse girl from Ohio currently committed to a PhD in English at University of Houston after an already storied career in Iowa and an earlier chapter that included a carefully rendered, by her, handsome rakish man she discarded for staggering unfaithful through Johns Hopkins Baltimore. I told you so. Next, she astonished me with writer world gossip while directing me to her place near North Gray Street. *You must meet Eddie*, she forecast right. Inside pointing she said, *I love my big mean cat. Look!* He was old and I admit a real fine monster. He swiped me, warning when I got too comfortable. I have the scars to prove I passed that test. Within the first hot week she laid out her rules. *I am going somewhere. I will always be too busy for you. I will never have children.* Two out of three right.

In various dark auditoriums I watched her deliver astounding poems spot lit. I sighed. The crowd was always with her awash with what I had never heard before either. With Leslie I learned how to listen. I stopped listening on the awful night I staggered through the party we threw for the biographer of Ann Sexton. Eddie and I pissed in the yard, but it was me who was the dull idiot

over dinner, and it was me who Leslie walked out on in disgust that night, back near my bed, as I lost whoever I had been again. I knew she was going, I needed to get there first, I guess.

Now she lives in Minnesota, where she landed two and a half years after our first kiss. The kid stuff was the lie, we both became awed late life parents a thousand one hundred miles apart. We each tell this origin story differently as we get older. When we broke-up I said, *I will sue you if you mention me*. Leslie still laughs at that.

Anastasia

When I opened the letter in my Houston Heights apartment tiny petals fell out. In the photograph Anastasia stood splendid in the fine white sand of Mykonos. She had arrived there two months ago with her Greek born mother for an extended stay. I pulled the letter close and took a deep breath.

For the photograph she had adjusted her sunglasses and put her hand on her hip. Behind her small whitewash homes staggered up the steep island hills. Wrapped in a loose black and white stripe beach shift she posed with a purpose, comfortable in front of any camera. *Picture this*, she had said to the boy she found over lunch that day. He hit the shutter hypnotized. She then paired the photograph with a page she had recently wrote in her diary and sealed them in this envelope aimed at me. In the letter she wrote in elated detail of her life's many new romances there among ruins. After I read it, I placed the photo of her on the small alter in the corner of my living room.

There she is surrounded by other little deities along amid special objects, illuminated daily by Santeria candles from the local shop, scented by incense.

Anastasia and I met the previous year at a dinner party at Melissa's home in upper Montrose. Melissa grew up orphaned in the neighborhood. She was mentored in the mid nineteen seventies, a decade ago, by prominent gay men, mostly artists, then ascending in the area setting its particular bohemian tone. She cut hair and cultivated an art-centric salon. This was my first invite. That night everyone sat on the floor around a red ornate cloth near her abundant garden. The air was full of rice and curry. There were plates loaded with large carmine strawberries from the local farmer's market. I can't remember who else was there because Anastasia Lawrence was. Beneath short bangs her blue eyes connected electric all around as she spoke. Her thick black hair was bowl cut sharp just below her ears. With a round face wide and crimson decorated lips she looked so like 30's libertine actress Louise Brooks that I called her *Lulu*. Delighted she rose and slow danced like a brand-new Salome, drinking straight from a bottle of Beaujolais. *We haven't met, right* I asked quite shook. *Nope*, she said with a shrug swooping over me, her eyes wide in exaggeration. *Where you been* I said serious wondering how I could have missed her around town. Our social scene was a close-knit tiny town of a few hundred within the swamp city. She recounted how she had just returned from LA where she had wandered the wild life of that sprawl the past two years while taking film classes. She left there wondering. *Which side of the camera do I belong* she said, collapsing back into Melissa's sisterly arms on a pile of Mexican pillows. Melissa held her close as we all considered the options, then she sat up and said *you'll find out soon enough honey. For now, it's us*. Melissa reached across me and slid open a side door—a balm filled the room bracing steadying my dizziness.

Soon after dinner we stepped out to make a night of our own carnival. Inside a small raucous zydeco hall northwest of town the heat was amplified with music by a real deal band and a full house of dancers reeling. Between the rub board scratch beat and keyboard wheeze thrills, there were whoops, a roadhouse church stomp Saturday night. The big tent over the rear of the place let the night air embrace us as Anastasia slid up to me and put my hand across the dripping wet skin of her lower back. We swayed locked in—until the band broke. Then we ran out fast with a gang and jumped in an old Chrysler that chugged its way east out to Splendora. Beneath the grand Piney Woods, stars peaked through vivid as we joined the large bash put on by the owner—raconteur sculptor activist James Surls, and his wife Charmaine. It was a Texas kind of Roma deal with a chorus racket of forest creatures amid Surls rising roughhewn sculptures reeking of nature spiritualism, souped up by folk art psychedelia. I sat back into a fine old chair woven of wood and vine. Anastasia fell on me and settled her face on my chest, *who's that* she said, pointing in a broad arch with her bare arm. I told her all about the whole cast—who would go for all night every night—yet work all the time too to make something out of nothing, hoping to change everything. Hoping to see. To be seen. When Jackie Harris punched stumbling Noah in the face, just because their drunk feuding friendship always ended that way, I tried to explain *Luckily, she left her gun home* I said without irony. Someone broke it up, they always did. Jackie lived in a building with a sign over it that said *Jackie's House of Weapons*. She glued plastic all over her old caddie, making one of the first art cars in the city. Later, she gave us a ride back to Houston where we ended up alone entwined at a hidden afterhours hideout near River Oaks Theater where everyone blended away in the purple black light. We left to find dawn, and my truck and headed on to breakfast at the Spanish Flower—where the owner winked at me, a

regular. She was happy I was not sitting all alone for once for my daily daytime visit. After, a few blocks down the street we went up the outside stairs to my ragged cheap place, the second story of an old, dilapidated renter on Northwood in the Heights. When I woke up that afternoon, I was astonished to find Anastasia still there laying to my right— on her side, so alabaster on the futon I kept on the floor. She had her arm around the neck of my thick fur dog, Joe, as if holding a beloved toy.

A week later Anastasia stood me up to hit New Orleans with some hot young band she met at a big concert downtown. They came through from Frisco and were on a rollicking tour, *now in New York* she told me during an excited call. *Good for you* I said relieved. I didn't want to want to have to worry. I had my own life and was on some other route to somewhere. Everybody I knew then were heading towards whatever blast that blew their way.

Though I was older and knew more people, had more experience. Anastasia had immediate easy entry everywhere she went due to her astonishing beauty and sparkle energy. It took me a while to realize this was also her curse. Everyone she met collapsed into desire, fawning over her, treating her more than special, often asking her back for the wrong reasons. This left her cautious. Careful who to trust—she decided then to live her life independent. Anastasia always refused possession. A trait I admired and celebrated. There was no room for control, for jealousy. This bound us far more than if we were ever officially coupled.

I did paint her face. Only once though and not so I could own it. The layers of thin oil paint built up quickly on a piece of fine wood, across a wide frame. It captured her perfectly clever and

luscious. I brought Anastasia to my studio and handed it over. *So everyone can remember you as you are* I said *even you*. She stared at it for a long time, placed her fingers to her pursed lips, then placed them on the painting leaving a small red smudge indent in the paint. She said *shush* with a slight sigh, raising her turpentine hand to cover my mouth. She was right. This was better without narration. Wordless, we packed it safe and drove to her place to put it above where she would soon dream of decades in the future when this will hang over her, the past beaming protective.

A few weeks later we were alone at a small private pool near River Oaks on a ninety plus mid-summer night. She arched off the edge of the lit deep end and streamed distorted straight beneath the wavering green blue surface, then suddenly emerged to pull me in close, giddy fast. Down we went hanging on, holding our breath in muffled silence. We broke the surface to the cicada roar and pulled ourselves out to the side of the pool where we sat, legs in the water moving slow, making small waves that crisscrossed. Anastasia said *listen, what nobody knows is* and she told me her real worries, buried hurts. The things she didn't know she could say. The things I vowed never to tell.

Later in the big expensive house her businessman father owned, we were reading the cautionary oral history of the short life of Edie Sedgwick. Anastasia said, *this is real, real sad*. We flipped through to the pictures of Edie in the center book. We honed-in on one taken well after the Warhol years, when Edie was a wreck, no longer little miss Blonde on Blonde. In the photo Edie's now a tired brunette with a bad silicone job encamped in a Cali swimming pool as empty as her lost life. Though still young, she is near the end, breaking down, sick. *She should have left*

sooner Anastasia said. *That's always the trick* Anastasia said. *Oh, I know* I said, *I learned that lesson long ago*. I started counting out loud and using my fingers. I got to eight, the number of years between us. *You're too funny* she said with a pout, then she started reading the next page out loud, voicing each part as if staging a play. *You're in charge now* I said laying back staring at the high swanky ceiling, *you know you got the power*. Anastasia began improvising revisions as she read, *she's hot, she's back, and now's the time that she's the hero* she said. *Andy who* she said. *Set her free* I said. I did not cry but I tried too.

The night before Anastasia left for Greece, we raced across the city one last time. At La Carafe, crammed in tight we drank wine at the ancient bar beneath walls of historic Houston photos and dull old paintings. Anastasia put her bare feet deep into friend Stacy's lap and kissed her sweet twice. Those two loved trouble. Lucky for me, Stacy stayed behind. At the Commerce Street Warehouse opening we were amazed like everybody else crowded around bug eyed Betty Jamison (yeah—that's rotund James right there, as his other self) dressed in a pristine white dress in lace trim, tight white gloves, and matching church lady hat. Betty had a huge fit while lurching around. By her side, a boney co-conspirator named Jim sat in a small crib and lip-synced a Carpenters song through his week-long ugly stubble. He was dressed in a diaper, which kept slipping down. *You need a bath, bitch* Betty roared helium high speaking some truth. Eddie came up, hugged us tight, and loudly anointed everything right with a big Eddie laugh full of beery enthusiasm.

Outside, Anastasia tilted her head and pushed her hair over her ear, arching back like a wicked ballet dancer as I decorated her face with a fast plucked tangerine flower that smelled of fresh

mint. The flower stayed put exotic until it dropped when she stole the floor at Numbers, all conversation lost in the loud club music. Anastasia moved deep into the crowd, solo, a circle around her. I sat to the side, lighting cigarettes off a teardrop candle in red glass sitting on a rickety table. I poured hot wax out on the inside of my hand and let it settle, then peeled it back, revealing an imprint of my palm that included a long scar that cuts through all lifelines. When she returned flushed, excited we left and rushed over to an old icehouse on West Alabama, back in Montrose. It was near closing time. There all the old timers came alive broke hearted as Anastasia sat on top of the outside bar in the swelter, her left hand high above her drenched head, her right arm waving in front of her for emphasis. She tucked her fine legs beneath her short skirt, while telling everyone new stories. Who knew what was true? It didn't matter. Then or now. Me— I just sat back, the accomplice, the proud loser, the witness to what everyone hopes lasts forever knowing of course it ends sometime, somewhere, always in broke collapse. Anastasia knows this too. It is the effortless sky-high shadow she casts beneath all her fertile excess.

At 3am Anastasia directed me to a nearby store who, by law, quit selling booze at midnight. Bold outlaw Anastasia locked eyes with the young cashier. Easy prey. *We just got married!* she lied with marvelous relish, hanging on me playing out the scene, *please help us out, sweetie. This is our honeymooooon.* Even I swooned inside this theater. The dumbstruck clerk quickly handed over two twelve packs and a bottle and said, *Whoa, it's on me, man, congrats.* I tossed him fifty bucks. Anastasia laughed hugging my neck tight as I carried her out kicking to my ragged truck. We headed to my place to yammer and sway beneath a single blue bulb until the sun broke it all away. It was the last time I saw her. *I miss you* the letter began. *Please don't forget me* she

ended, adding a rain of small inky tears.

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