

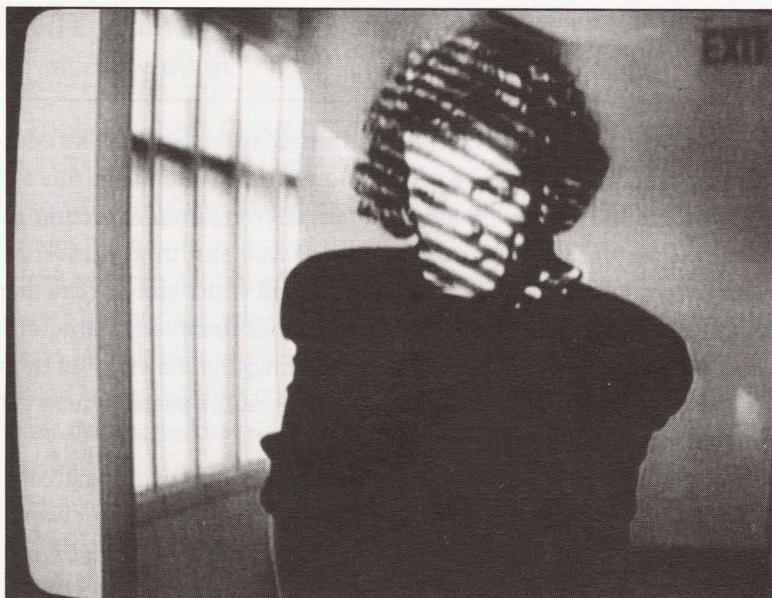
**THE HOUSES THAT ARE LEFT** by Shelly Silver*review by Jason Weiss*

*The Houses That Are Left*, a video narrative, establishes its equilibrium through words on a screen. Between life and death there is an intermediary, pure message, a narrative fulcrum asserting its own voice. Words appear by ones and twos and threes, intercut with two other visual strands: the black and white story of the four friends, the life episodes; the color story of the dead characters, cooped up in a few rooms together, watching the life story on their televisions. The words exist in the margins, at the seams where the stories are joined.

Screens act as the constant passage from life to death and back, for if the dead can watch the living and think back on what it was to be alive, the living can also receive messages — threats and warnings mostly — from the dead. EVERYONE HAS A TV SOMEWHERE. AMONG THE LIVING IT IS INSIGNIFICANT, KEPT IN THE BACKGROUND, BUT THE DEAD HAVE THEIRS AS THE FOCUS TO EACH ROOM (I wonder if they can turn it off; they never try). There is a mystery unraveling on their screens, and the dead share in trying to solve it. However, they only know a small bit more than the characters living it do. What they know is that one of the four friends is supposed to die. So the dead puzzle over it (at their TVs), trying to figure out how and who will be the one to go. Of course, things are always more complicated than they seem, just as in life.

While screens may act as windows, they also serve to block the lines of sight, to conceal intimacy, to distract with other designs. The intertitles punctuate the story so much that they sometimes become the story, the internal voice accessible only to us as viewers: a voice which comments ("What is Patty up to?"), anticipates ("a cage/went/in search of/a bird"), supplies us with narrative cushions to make the ride easier ("Later/that/night," "another day"), repeats questions for us ("Has/Bob/been/acting/differently/lately?"), even waxes lyrical ("It is quite enough to live,/to hate,/simply to feel,/and right away/the spirit of dreams/overcomes us..."). The voice is our guide, closer to us for that very reason, nudging us as we watch the dead watch the living. Strangely, because we know the rest is a *story*, the words on the screen — this voice that is pure message — end up feeling more

**Still from**  
**The Houses**  
**That Are Left.**



real to us than the narrative they weave through.

The voice of written words, then, seems somehow more flexible, more able to change and to react, than the visual images which are ruled by the fixed fate of their story. Sometimes the words are redundant or intrusive, telling us more than is necessary, amplifying what is filtered through the screen. From the very start they compel us to “Pay attention/or not,” for the messages change quickly, as do the threads of the story. We too are engaged in solving, or rather guessing, the mystery of who is to die. But the answer comes like a punchline at the end, when the newly deceased arrives in the room of the dead. This death occurs by an accident, which even the dead had not imagined, and it takes them all by surprise. Much earlier the intertitles had said: “because/the possible/has become/impossible/I let myself/Imagine/that the/impossible/must become/possible.”

Who is this “I” speaking in the written words? That is the one instance where it appears, and there it may reflect the recently dead woman, unwilling to accept her death, who is busily plotting revenge on the friend who stabbed her in the back. At the end when she is disappointed in her efforts, she screams: for its part, the screen says simply “No.” Typically stoic, this voice that guides us has no fixed identity, keeping one foot in and one foot out of the story, as it were.