

The Alembic



Spring 1991

THE ALEMBIC

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ON THE FRONT COVER: Melissa Danchik's photograph, untitled.

ON THE BACK COVER: Version of Sappho with a nod to Evan S. Connell

THE ALEMBIC

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POETRY, PHOTOGRAPHY AND FICTION

Edward Van Buren

Cosa Nostra

It's the heat of heavy breaths slapping
against a chest of falling water
and a trembling, frantic stretching
of elastic and tearing of cloth.
It's the chicanery in the whispered cheers
that proclaim Love in the voice of a distant crowd
and a gagging sound after a finger
and thumb pinching a hair off a tongue.
It's the arcs of red crescents
your fingernails dig into my skin.
It's the weight on a metronome sliding up
and down from adagio to allegro
to a life-size, unavoidable wet place
being slept around on a twin bed.

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Her swollen lips drag on her cigarette.
She sees the red ring around the filter
and thinks of her mother.
Men are like a new language.
Passionate and strong,
their backs are prophetic gestures
snaking around her sides
like wet poetic tongues.

She rests her head on the back of his shoulders
and feels like she has her ear to a jukebox.
As his chest hums, she wonders
why she has spent so much time
trying to capture a perfect sunset.
There are no open horizons in a city.

She can still see her mother now
following her to the car, asking her why she has to leave
while her mother didn't even notice
how loud the crickets were in September,
how they seemed to chant an orgy
celebrating September's swollen fields.

Ice Cube

I think of you when I freeze
ice cubes, so you are always at my mouth,
all wet and making my tongue numb.
You slide from the bottom and hit me
in the nose, and sometimes an eye,
but I like to have you around anyway.
Store bought, I need your cool
released with a crunch.
I think of you, melting.

Spirit of the Heart

"If Elvis is still alive, how come he was never on 'Love Boat'?"

"What?"

Zack raised his voice in an attempt to cut through the din from the rest of the bar. "How come he never appeared on 'Love Boat'? Every has-been, washed-up, overweight, out-of-work yahoo who ever claimed to be famous appeared as a guest on 'Love Boat.' If Elvis were alive, he would have been there." The other men at the table nodded reluctantly. Zack sat back feeling quite pleased with his apparent victory.

Roy, however, held fast. "Why the hell would Elvis need to be on 'Love Boat'?"

Zack, although upset his triumph was not complete, quickly responded. "Are you kidding? How could he refuse? First of all, everyone knows those cruises are floating feasts and the King never met a morsel he didn't like. And, couldn't you see him waddling up to old Isaac at the bar and ordering a double vodka on the *Jailhouse Rocks*?" You're on a roll now, he thought. "Can't you see him stalking Julie and crooning, 'Hey, baby, why don't we go back to my room and you can *Love Me Tender*'?"

Through the chuckling, Keith joined in. "She could get him good drugs too." At this the table broke into a fit of laughter which brought suspicious stares from the people at the surrounding tables. Tracy enhanced the joke by doing the obvious: he took the plastic mini-straw from his Manhattan, brought it to his nostril, leaned over and began to snort imaginary lines off the beer-soaked table. He sat back quickly and began hacking and trying to blow his nose.

Roy immediately jumped all over him — "HA! The ghost of the King strikes!"

"Roy how can the King have a ghost if he's still alive?" giggled Keith.

"You know what I mean, asshole. I'm telling you he's out there somewhere."

Zack resumed his good-natured attack. "Roy, if he's out there, why didn't Warhol mention him in the diary? Every other pseudo-famous person is mentioned at least six times. Don't you think ol' Andy would have found time for Elvis? How come no entry like: 'The King stopped by today for drinks with me and Bianca. He told Bi he liked Mick's stuff but thought he needs more rhinestones in his outfits. Made feeble pass at Bi and was rebuked. He may be getting up there, but he can still put away the martinis.'"

They were trying to catch their breath when the barmaid appeared and asked if they needed another round.

"Sure," Roy replied, "but I need you to answer a question. Do you think Elvis is still alive?"

She flashed a smile and replied, "Nah, but his ghost is still around. So many people loved him, he's gotta still be around." She pivoted and made her way toward the bar.

"What an air-head!" Zack snapped.

"What a rear-end!" drooled Roy.

"Ghosts. You've really lost us now Roy, trying to get support from the waitress. What's next, are you going to channel for us?" Zack mumbled before draining the backwash from his bottle.

Roy rose to the challenge. "Do you have 'eternal cynic' embossed on your business card, Zack?"

"No, I have Elvis' picture on it!" He paused to laugh. "Ghosts, have you lost it? You've got a college degree for crissakes, we all do for that matter, and you're trying to sell us on Elvis and ghosts." He paused to take a deep breath and realized he had to piss. "Man, this shit's going right through me. I'm going to the can. I'll tell Elvis you said 'Hi' if he pulls up next to me. Don't drink my beer when it comes, you drunken bastards."

Zack rose slowly and a bit wobbly from his seat and surveyed the room. Finally he spotted what he was looking for: a long line of men looking anxious and irritable, a sure-fire indicator of a men's room. Cautiously he made his way through the crowd, twice staggering slightly. When he reached the promised land, he found himself sixth in line.

"Elvis," he grunted softly as he leaned against the wall and looked out at the rest of the bar. Typical neo-yuppie decor, he thought. Plenty of brass, plants, and athletic jerseys on the walls. Ten feet away he noticed the only line longer than the one he was in: the line for the ladies' room.

Inspecting his counterparts, his eyes came to rest upon a short, thin, dark-haired girl wearing a denim skirt and white sweater. He took special interest in her legs, which were very muscular for a petite girl. Must be an athlete, he reasoned. When his inspection reached her face, he realized she was aware of his attention. Zack smiled and nodded his head in an attempt to look mature.

When she returned his smile, her face exploded with devastating dimples and white teeth. The smile hit Zack like a small, thermonuclear device. His jaw slacked, his eyes widened, and his neck tensed and extended slightly towards her. He'd seen the smile before. Not on this person's face, he was sure, but he'd definitely seen it before.

Long submerged emotions and memories surfaced with the subtlety of a fleet of submarines. Zack shook his head and slumped back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Kathy McGuire...Junior year in college...Legs up to her chin, smile framed by two enormous dimples...First love...first broken heart...swimmer...long talks...good friends...first kiss: good-bye for the summer...long letters...summer apart...sent flowers... phone call: nobody's ever done anything like that for me before..."Holding Back the Years"... "Get Outta My Car"...back to school... new, short hair-cut...lunches twice a week...balloons for winning meet...longer talks...ready to become more than friends...don't want to risk friendship...Christmas Formal?...sorry, I can't go, I have a swim banquet that night...O.K. call you later...disappointment...frustration...confusion...forget Christmas Formal...friend asks me to go...what the hell...zipper on pants breaks...cut shaving...should have seen it coming...get to Formal...glitter ball...terrible band...missed a belt loop... into men's room...should have never come back out...across the room...KATHY MCGUIRE???!!!!...impossible...make

sure...heart shatters...eye contact...her look of utter horror...confusion... rejection...depression...drunkenness...find her date...geek...asshole...why did she lie?...why him?...does he know...does he care?...do I care?...more drunkenness...confusion...rejection...REVENGE!! hangover...hangover...sobriety...pain...confusion...call her?...don't give her the satisfaction...see her... avoid her...pick up the pieces...confusion...try to forget...

"Hey, pal! You're up." Zack's torment was interrupted. Still entranced, he performed his function and left. He ventured a cautious look toward the line for the ladies' room. She was gone. He was about to scan the rest of the bar for her but thought better of it. Shaken, he returned to the table.

"...of course he is, I've seen his grave in Paris. Isn't that right Zack? Zack?"

"Huh?" Zack asked as he sat down and took a long pull on his beer.

"Morrison's buried in Paris, right?"

Preoccupied, Zack looked across the room for his past and nodded, "Yep."

Keith noticed Zack's vacant gaze. "What's up? You didn't run into ol' Hound Dog himself, did you?"

Zack looked at his friends and raised his bottle. "To the King..and ghosts."

The shadows receded stretched. There is something about this night — it lasts, it aches, it grows—claws stretch outwards towards the empty void of space, outwards towards the home, dark and dim, towards secret pain and longing unfulfilled. Searching for a resolution.

We have all walked the desert, we who have been startled by our own presence, and the full awareness of memories forever receding towards the empty past. The desert exists in our minds. It is the place where dreams are born sending branches out into the waking world.

The rose-flesh of desire — pangs of birth

All seeing the magnificence of two restless points—suffering to see all.

Suffering to see both worlds. Each a Tiresias unborn.

Blame the suggestive.

I will seek out again the flower and the root. Stealing beauty out of life.

Mock transcendence. Tear the devil and Godhead from their burnished thrones.

The touching the feeling of the root.

I vow—

bought each other
rounds of scotch.
I drank mine on-the-rocks, he
straight.
From what I could tell,
that was the only real difference
between us.
For the most part, things went
smooth. Actually,
I found myself
comforted by the finding
of such a kindred soul.
Then, came my one faux pas.
I called him by his first name, Herb.
"Justta minute, we're friends,
but not that good friends," he said,
with a glower.
I could've sworn, I caught
a glint of something coming off
his left canine.
Anyway,
I apologized, and before we knew it,
we were back to swapping
howlers.

Dieter Weslowski

I Always Say,

my wife's too quick
when it comes
to having me kill
spiders.

Recently, I gave her a spiel
about the web
of karma,
she's spinning for herself.

"Karma, shmarma," she said.
"Just get your ass over here
& kill the damn thing."

I am the daughter of the cannibal.

The following I write with only you, my reader, in mind; I have no personal gains involved, no journal to be filled. So unlike my mother in that respect, but in that respect alone.

My mother mated with and then killed my father. She did not consume him right away; rather, she preserved his body for me. He was my first taste of solid food, delicately prepared so that I, as an infant, would have little difficulty digesting him.

Only recently has Mother joined my father. She indicated only two wishes in the hand-written will she left for me: first, that I publish one of her journal entries, #126, and second, that I eat her. I am pleased to say that now Father, Mother, and I are quite a close family.

I am young, in my twenties, and lack the finesse that accompanies age. Mother made it strict policy to be as open as possible with her Treats, her intentions clear and direct. I, on the other hand, rather enjoy playing with my food.

Growing up I was always a finicky eater. Now that Mother is gone, I do not follow a balanced diet. I consume men and only men. Women's bodies contain too much fat for my taste—even in the leanest of figures, much goes to waste. Men, on the other hand, are far more muscular and tough; however, with the right spices and tenderizing, they practically melt in my mouth.

Although Mother made sure our home was fully equipped to defend us, I do not use her technique of luring them into our home. Her system, hiring a selected man to murder a particular woman, requesting him to bring the body to our home, then killing him, is too detached for me. I choose to share the company of my future Treats. I walk among my peers, shrouding a secret that none of them can imagine. I do not keep a record of how many have been killed. Mother and I joined forces until her death, and since then I have lost count.

I have occasionally wondered if, were it not for Mother, I would still hunger for human flesh. I tested this theory only once. I tried cheeseburgers, bacon, lobster, and lamb—but I surprised myself by experiencing a moral dilemma. I was sickened by the thought of eating defenseless animals. Gentle, innocent creatures, unknowingly led to the slaughter, without a chance or hope to alter their fate. I realize what I do can be viewed in the same terms; however, by my standards, the kills could not be more completely opposite.

The men I hunt are far from innocent. I lure them to secluded places with the promise of sex. Those who follow me only do so because they believe they are getting "something for nothing." It doesn't work that way. Ever. I do not desire to cause suffering; in fact, I'd even venture to say that, up until the second I slit open his throat (it is absolutely essential to sever the vocal chords), the significant other has extremely pleasurable thoughts permeating his mind.

I am always armed with more than one weapon. My personal favorite, a knife, is strapped to the front of my thigh. On a few occasions it has been

discovered, but the men, blissfully incorrect, assumed it was a sado-masochistic toy. If the knife should leave my possession, I have a pistol and a switchblade disguised as a lipstick in my purse. I take calculated risks, yes—but never blind chances. Even when I'm not hunting I carry mace because the world is full of crazy people.

* * *

I did not feel like going out tonight. It was not any sort of psychic warning to beware—I was simply tired and bored. Life, as I had structured it, held no promise for new excitement. I did not bother fussing with a wig, and dabbed only minimal color upon my lips.

The night oozed with a hazy drizzle. My face absorbed the cool moisture which softly colored my cheeks pink. Perfect. I approached Admiral's Pub, its neon sign glowing before me. I had reached tonight's destination.

I entered, slowly pushed through the crowd by the bar, and ordered a beer. With drink in hand, I carefully shuffled by the throng of rowdy students and seated myself at a corner table. I was still not in the mood to be in that dark, smoky place. And who would I have to be tonight? The buzzed, giggling twit who doesn't know she's being taken advantage of? The drunk, who after several drinks, spots the star of her favorite fantasies and decides to see if he's really as good as she imagines? Who indeed? Not willing to produce the effort, the extra energy needed for a quick seduction, I realized I should have sat closer to the others. Perhaps someone would have joined me. Ah well. Too late for that. Let natural selection run its course.

I scanned the scene in hopes of finding an "easy target," a vulnerable-looking man who showed signs of insecurity, a man who would do anything to hold an attractive woman's attention. My eyes fell at last upon a picture-perfect specimen. His narrow shoulders barely supported his lowered head. He was peering deeply into his glass, delicate white fingers caressing the rim. He froze immediately, as if by my very observing him, I controlled his actions.

He raised his eyes to look across the room at me, slowly lifting his head as he did so. He blinked once or twice, but never shifted his eyes from mine. And I, almost transfixed by his gaze, held on until its stillness became asphyxiating. Realizing he was not going to approach me, I picked up my drink and walked towards him.

From my original spot I could see his hair was very dark and both skin and eyes were quite pale; however, these extremes intensified as I drew nearer. And those eyes, framed behind silver-edged glasses, were the palest blue I had ever encountered, almost washed away by the surrounding sugary white.

Adopting a "shy girl" persona, I cleared my throat and in a quivering, breathy voice, asked if I could join him. In my best awkwardness, I sat down, and with shaky hand, tucked wispy curls behind my ear.

"You looked like you weren't having much fun," I began, "so...I thought you could use a little company."

He smiled slightly, and said nothing.

I looked down at the table and sighed. This choice was going to be much more difficult than I had anticipated.

"I'm...I'm sorry," he stammered. "You look like someone I used to know..."

"You don't know her anymore?"

He shook his head, then half-laughed. "I guess I never really did. We were going together for over two years, practically engaged, then I told her I needed some space. She said she thought it'd do me good, and she'd wait for me. That was a few months ago. Now I hear she's already seeing someone else, and doesn't want anything to do with me. She claims I walked out on her..."

His eyes were glazed with tears, though none fell. I smiled to myself. What a line! And the near-tears—nice touch. One thing I have learned about men: if they can't dazzle and impress women, they'll act like a wounded kitten and play upon them for sympathy. I was becoming more content with tonight's selection. He was doing half the work for me. Better yet, for a while he would think he were actually seducing me. What a wonderful frame of mind he would die in.

Assuming the role of dutiful consoler, I pushed my chair next to his and put my arm around his shoulders. I gently kissed his cheek and whispered, "I'm so sorry...but it seems like she's the one missing out on a good thing. Not you."

He turned his head towards me—our faces were just inches apart. He leaned even closer, then slowly his tongue slid between my teeth, and before I could react, he kissed me again. That was it. He was mine.

We planned to meet in the alley. He would join me there in ten minutes, after granting me a few minutes to stop in the ladies' room to freshen up. I adjusted the knife and loaded the gun in my purse out of habit although I did not think I would need a back-up tonight.

I was outside the building for only a few moments before he appeared. The whole area was deserted—it was definitely a night to be indoors. I licked my lips and smoothed the front of my short skirt. He approached me, removing his glasses. I stepped towards him as he pulled me close, his arms locking me in his embrace. For a second I could barely breathe—his kiss sucking the air from my lungs. With my fingers I reached up to his lips, separating them from mine.

"What's wrong?"

I didn't know his name yet. Normally I find out before I get them alone, but this time, for some reason, I hadn't. It is absolutely essential I know because I want to correctly mark the packages in my freezer.

Pretending to be in a swoon by his kiss, I gasped, "You never introduced yourself..."

He laughed a little, took a few steps back and bowed.

"Hello," he said, pulling out a dagger, "My name is Kelley, and I kill people."

"Hello Kelley," I said. "I eat them."

*

*

*

Kelley and I agreed to put down our knives and go to my home for coffee. I was very interested in what he had to say about himself, and determined I should kill him there, after our discussion.

When we arrived, I gave him a short tour of the cottage, which consists only of five rooms. The kitchen is the main room, a bedroom and bath off to the right, extensive library to the left, and Mother's back room, her gas chamber,

directly ahead.

I explained how mother hired men to kill women and bring them here. She would direct them into the backroom/gas chamber and slowly kill them, asking only that, in their remaining time, they write an essay about their experience with death—as its cause and victim. She adored genuine, heart-felt literature, as our library proved, and Kelley was in awe of her collection.

With the coffee brewed and poured, we sat opposite one another at the kitchen table.

“Whatever happened to this mother of yours?”

“She died a few years ago. It was silly, actually. She choked on a Treat’s fingerbone. I wasn’t home when it happened. I just came back and found her in this chair, all blue and slumped over. Suffocation is similar to strangulation, which is ‘the best way to go,’ she always said. So, she died the way she wanted to.”

Kelley’s expression shifted to disgust as he began to form what was for him an unspeakable question.

“Did you...?”

“She wanted me to eat her. I ate my father too.” I patted my stomach and laughed. “What about your family?”

“I don’t remember my mother, and my dad, well, him I’ll never forget. He was the first person I ever killed.”

He stood up abruptly, and began to pace.

“It was an accident, really. The son of a bitch was drunk, beating up on me ever since I can remember... ‘Kel, pick up your garbage!’ Smack! ‘Kel, you burnt my dinner!’ Smack! ‘Kel, you stupid idiot!’ Smack! ‘Kelley, I hate the sight of your ugly, filthy face...’”

He dropped back into his chair and caught his breath. He quickly sipped from his cup, wiping the corners of his mouth with his thumb. Slowly, he continued.

“I was fifteen—fifteen years old and never fought back once. Not a word to defend myself, either. Nothing—I just took it all. Then one day I was upstairs and heard him unlocking the front door. I stood there, at the top of the stairs, waiting to see what he’d do, what he’d accuse me of...He began yelling about something the second he saw me, but I didn’t hear it. Something in me burst, and I was ready to fight back. He had gotten to the top step, and I just pushed him. That was it. He fell backwards and his head crashed onto the floor. Dead. Dead and staring at me, but this time he couldn’t scream at me and call me a failure. No—I’d beaten him, destroyed him. I’d won. I liked that feeling...”

He paused, considering what he had said.

“So, you kill to experience victory?” I asked.

“I kill because I can succeed, so, yes. I could never do anything right, or anything at all, for that matter. Nothing I did counted for anything until I killed him. The moment I caused him to die, I made a difference. I made an impact on his life because I brought it to an end.”

“I work in a mailroom. My life has no effect on anyone else’s. Big excitement is putting a memo in the wrong mailbox. But killing someone—that does accomplish something—I create a ripple effect touching dozens of people.

One murder creates the loss of a daughter to someone, mother to another, wife, sister...Hell, even Great Uncle John's second cousin will be a little more careful in this city 'cause of me. An employee is gone, a position vacant, hundreds of applicants wanting the job...If I kill the right person, I can affect almost anything. What I do, when I strike, is alter the future.

"After a day of nothingness, I question whether or not I exist."

"Your hobby answers this, I assume."

"Yes."

"And I'm the one who's supposed to give your life meaning tonight?"

"Yes."

I smirked, knowing his intentions were still as unshaken as mine.

"Well, Kelley, killing me won't accomplish very much; in fact, it would go completely unnoticed. No one but you and I know I'm alive."

"You're responsible for the deaths of others. With you gone, think of how many lives would continue, completely untouched, unaffected."

"I would accomplish the same if I were to kill you. Plus, I wouldn't have to hunt again for quite some time. I'd satisfy both your craving, by causing a ripple effect, and mine, by filling my freezer."

"So if you want to rationalize this, you think you have more reasons for killing me than I have for killing you."

"It sounds that way."

"What makes you think you can actually do it? I don't look really strong, but I know I'm stronger than you."

"Why do you think I brought you here? Would I allow a killer into my home with no means whatsoever to protect myself?"

"The whole place is rigged?"

"Precisely."

I wanted to put him on the defense rather than allow his thoughts a chance to turn aggressive.

"Did you set up traps in the alley before I got there?"

"I suppose I could have. I had a few minutes to myself before you got there..."

I was startled to see his eyes shift to my purse. I knew I had made a fatal mistake. Mother's cardinal rule was to never let the Treat know we were one step ahead of him. Undoubtedly, if he knew, he would do everything he was capable of to close that gap.

My purse lay on the counter, equidistant from both of us. There was a gun strapped beneath the table within my reach. Should I grab it, or my bag? We would both have weapons if he got a hold of the purse. I couldn't allow that—

Kelley dove for the bag.

I yanked the gun from beneath the table and fired twice. The first bullet missed, the second hit his chest, directly above his heart. He lunged forward, shoving me into the backroom. He slammed the door before I could get back on my feet. Through the heavy door I heard a soft rustling.

A click.

A gunshot.

Then all was silent.

Kelley had won.

I looked around the tiny, steel-walled room. Hundreds of men perished here, the room was inescapable. Mother had structured it that way. It could only be opened from the outside.

I looked at the grid in the ceiling, the tunnel through which the carbon monoxide used to filter in. The desk and chair in the corner were layered with dust. Pens and neatly marked papers were stacked on the right side, just as Mother had left them for her Treats, and I had left them in loving memory of her.

These are the events which transpired in the past two hours. Mother would be happy that at last someone correctly followed her simple directions, writing about death and personally dying. I used only two bullets on Kelley. Four will be more than enough for me.

You just never know about some people, that's all there is to it. One day they seem all normal and happy and smiling, the next they're holding a knife to your throat and threatening to cut you from ear to ear. It's crazy. But the world's gone crazy in my opinion. I mean, would a normal society allow douche commercials to be shown on T.V.? I don't think so. Hot dogs — the creation of hot dogs began the demise of the world as we know it in my opinion. The things they make them out of, and people eat them! No small wonder that things are falling apart like they are. All those hot dogs have to have some effect on people. And microwaves, it's my feeling that microwaves are a big part of what's wrong with the world. It isn't natural for food to be done so fast. My parents didn't have a microwave when I was a kid. My mother stayed home all day making things for us to eat. And cleaning the floors on her hands and knees. Not with some instant floor/window/hair/laundry cleaner. No siree. My parents represent what used to be good about the world.

So I think it must be hot dogs and microwaves that changed the way things were. Before that people spent time with each other, not this press a button and BING!, dinner is ready stuff. Supper used to be a pleasurable event, a time to relax and enjoy the company and conversation. Now everything is so hurried. It feels like a race, like you're being tested on your efficiency. Does your dog bite? I've had a masectomy, you know.

It wasn't too bad, the masectomy. I didn't feel any real sense of loss like the doctors said I might. I didn't even know I had it—cancer, not the surgery; I knew about the surgery of course. I read in some women's magazine about an actress who had cancer, I think it was that woman on the show "Dallas". So, being an aspiring actress myself, I decided to go to the doctor and get myself checked. And he said I had it. Cancer. I wasn't scared like I thought I might be; in fact, it was sort of fun. I liked being in the hospital with all the food and the beds and people. It was like being on vacation. My mother used to bring me tea and toast in bed when I was sick and let me watch T.V. for as long as I wanted until my dad came home. Then I'd have to read and be quiet so he could relax and have a drink. My clothes fit different after the operation. I could see my right foot if I looked straight down. The scar looked like the letter T.

My husband had the false breast ordered before I left the hospital. I have to wear my bra and T-shirt whenever we have sex. I should resent him for the obvious pettiness, but I don't. He's stupid and shallow; I knew that when I married him. He's an actor. We met when we were doing a play together. My parents hated him from the very beginning, and he thought they were "interesting in a rural way." We married so we could be starving artists together, like it was a romantic thing to do. Since then, he's become popular and I've faded from the limelight. We rent this house every summer while he's doing summer stock productions. I usually stay around the house cleaning and reading. I used to go to the beach, but he seems to think I embarrass people with my illness. I don't think it's so obvious as that.

My lover, Tom, doesn't mind when I wear my fake breast. He asks me not to wear it in fact. It turns him on in some weird way I guess. After we make love he lays his head on the empty space and plays with my left breast. He says from that angle it looks like a volcano rising from the flat surface and calls it Mount Mammary. We read the paper together and make spaghetti when my husband is away. And sometimes when he is still around. Tom is a student at the university in our town. We met in a liquor store a year ago and no one knows about us. Except you. I don't think you'll tell anyone. I can tell that you think I'm crazy. I'm lonely and make these things up. That I'm not really married, and I don't have a lover, and my father didn't drink too much. You probably think I just go around talking to strangers, telling them a made up story. That I've lost all control over my life and I'm reduced to stopping people on the street to ask for money so I can get something to eat. But I haven't lost control, I haven't been reduced. I'm not eating hot dogs yet, like the rest of the world. I think that makes me better than the rest. Want to see my scar?

From our angle (the ground) the asphalt in the play-yard is rounded and convex and the grey black that goes on so far that it makes a roaring noise looks like the earth rising before the sun in a Bible movie. It roars like God's feverish drunken-on-his-back, heat-in-his-nostrils exhale and also...

an ocean

but that's a cliché.

It's so hot, everything is in slo-mo and at an angle, wilted/wilting, supposedly.

The roar beneath the water (the pool at the Y) that fills your ears and is so supremely suffocating that you feel your head/lungs/chest should burst like a blowfish, a ripblurst that leaves a jagged shape like a G-Clef and shoots air forth in the form of a frothing dose that soon floats off, vanishes.

Back at the asphalt, the sense of suffocation remains while the relief of the water lifts from the ground as steam, hissing and sticking your hair together into a plastic flexxi-mass to run your fingers through and (eventually) play with.

Steam sticks and rides up your ass.

The viewpoint bounces off of ground level with metronome like a barbell hitting the floor.

A boy with a red shirt that adheres to his back and armpits and whose boredom is made to headache by the heat spins a glass Coke bottle on the ground.

No matter which way it points when it stops, no-one's getting kissed.

No matter which way it points, the glass Coke bottle is going the way of the dinosaur.

Couch

This week on **America's Favorite Family**, I decided that I was going to shoot my wife. I was going to hide behind the sofa (the grey one) and when she walked in through the door (the kitchen one), I was going to jump up and say something and then I was going to kill her. Just like that. Justjustjust like that. I was probably going to light up a cigarette afterwards and throw the match at the screen to make it more interesting for **America's Favorite Family**. The match will get bigger the closer it gets to the screen.

I watch **America's Favorite Family** on a black-n-white TV. I don't know what they watch me on.

* * *

"...Instead of you watching **America's Favorite Family**, **America's Favorite Family** watches you..."

-SSS Brochure

* * *

They just sit there, usually. There's five of them. There's the man who always sits at the far end of the couch and has a can of beer that he never touches balanced on the arm rest. There's the woman, she wears a lot of make-up. And there are these three kids (two boys, one girl) who are continuously crawling over one another in this big knot. Sometimes they roll off the cushion and fall on the floor. When that happens, you really can't see what they do because it's going on below the line. Maybe once in a while somebody gets up for a few seconds and leaves the screen, but they're generally doing this every week. (Thurs. 9:00-9:30 est. stand. 8:00-8:30 cent. mount.)

And they just sit there and stare at you. Last week I fixed my lawnmower. They probably thought it was funny.

* * *

Larry's wife is going out on him every Tuesday, allegedly to go to the bridge club. His zany neighbor, Carl, insinuates that she may be having an affair with an effeminate hairdresser. Larry decides to spy on her. He follows her out on Tuesday night to a house in the wealthy section of town. He falls in the bushes, gets chased by dogs, and gets doused by an in-ground sprinkler system. The laugh track crackles at appropriate moments. Finally, he barges in, embarrasses his wife (who really was playing bridge) and confesses his undying love for her. They laugh and hug.

* * *

I follow my wife to the drugstore because maybe she's having an affair. She sees me and asks me what the fuck I'm doing. I tell her I don't like her going out night after night. She says she's going to CPR again and that I should relax. I ask her if she's having an affair. She cries and calls me a hurtful motherfucker.

* * *

Agent 5 aces his girlfriend who has been selling plans to The Servants of H.A.R.M.M. He shoots her between the eyes and she falls down in her white dress.

* * *

My wife walks in during the second commercial of **America's Favorite Family**.

What the hell are you doing? Hang on Hang on. No! Really! What are you doing? HANG ON HANG ON.

(They're up to a soap advertisement. The lady has nice hands)

What The Fuck Are You Doing?! I'm Gonna...I'm...

(**America's Favorite Family** slides back onscreen after a lengthy segue. The whole family's there.)

I pop up and I lift the shotgun which is really front-heavy and sort of prop it against my shoulder. My wife smiles and points at me. She's about to say something. I pull the trigger and there's this big smoky sort-of kaboom.

I wake up and I'm on the ground behind the sofa and my left collarbone is broken. I can't move and there's something that feels like it's dripping out my ears.

I have this really painful ringing in my brain, like I was hungover almost. A real loud hang-over. My wife apparently got thrown through the kitchen door, because if I move my head far enough to the left, I can see her. Kind of. She looks all crumpled. I don't know if she's still warm, but she looks like she's lying there, all praying. Her back is to me, so I can't really see where I hit her. Her robe is turning all black.

My neighbor, Mr _____, is pounding on the door and yammering hysterically. I think I hear a fire truck.

On TV **America's Favorite Family** just sits there as I fade out.

Poem

Squat over...say,
this footprint.
Cup your chin in hand,
and study the mud.
A mere impression
while you stood,
it is now a pit—
filth for floor and walls.
This is a place below the world.
Anything in it
must rise forward
into the warmth
or it will be dead
and almost buried.
From this close,
we can see it
as the trap waiting to drown the small
criminals. They prove
through their falls
their own guilt.
Stand up. See?
It's a footprint.
It can be filled.

"I need a haircut," the girl said. She slid two fingers along a piece of her dark hair and examined the ends. She and the young man sat across from each other at the kitchen table in the young man's apartment, studying.

"I hate going to the hairdresser's," she said. "You tell them what you want. Actually, you *don't* tell them because they act like they already *know*—or maybe you just want to think they know—then they chop off eight inches when all you wanted was a trim! Or else give you some new style that doesn't suit you one bit."

The young man turned a page. He sprawled over his open book like a farmhand digging into a meal. The hair on the top of his head swirled adorably. The girl sighed and looked out the dusty window. Historic homes painted easter egg colors leaned against each other along the narrow streets below. Around the corner, just out of sight, stood the ice cream shop where they met last summer.

"Then they make you feel like an idiot if you don't like it—like something is wrong with you!—so you pretend it's what you wanted, meanwhile feeling sick because you know it's all wrong." She pressed her forehead against the cool glass. "I just hate it!"

It was a Saturday in late September, a bright, shiny whistle of a day. College students rode bikes, teenagers crouched and jumped on skateboards. The girl's breath began to fog the window. Through the mist she watched a young couple push a baby in an expensive looking stroller.

The old-fashioned radiators pumped out too much heat, so the kitchen was stuffy. It smelled of ten years worth of spilled and sloppily mopped up beer. A while ago the young man tried to open the window next to her, but it wouldn't budge. "Must be painted shut," he said, shrugging. He sat down again and resumed reading. She was *baking* inside her sweater, which she wouldn't take off because the shirt she had on underneath had a gaping rip in the neck only partially hidden by a safety pin. She saw the young man was able to ignore the excessive heat, put it out of his mind. It annoyed her that he was able to do this. Or that she couldn't. Or both. She wanted them to feel the same things.

Above the cracked porcelain sink piled with greasy dishes hung a pair of lovely old cupboards with glass fronts that would have made a perfect display case for crystal or china. What they displayed was a Ricotta cheese container and a furled-shut bag of corn chips. The girl's eye wandered from the window to the linoleum floor, stained the shade of old tea bags; she thought she might scream.

"And the really strange thing is you always end up going back. Maybe not to the same person, but a hairdresser, like you forgot or something, and put yourself in their hands all over again—*hoping*." She continued to examine the hair in between her fingers, pretended not to see two split ends, then turned again toward the window.

girl? They would go back to his apartment, the sugary smell clinging to their clothes, their skin.

Now his clothes smelled like the dusty pages of old books. Hers didn't smell at all.

The shop was nearly empty the last night they worked together, on Labor Day Weekend. The young man's classes started the next morning. She said she wanted to try the special ice cream she heard him describe that one day. She hadn't seen it the whole time she worked. She thought maybe because it was so special it was brought out only on certain occasions. "It's our last day," she had said. "I want to try something really...unique!"

"What special flavor?" He was stacking sugar cones.

"I forgot what it's called. A whole bunch of different names. It sounded so good. It had bubblegum in it, I think. Oh, and tangerines."

His mouth smiled but his eyes didn't. And there were no dimples. "Right," he said. But made no move to get it, just added another cone to his tower, which stretched above her head and teetered dangerously. She kept waiting for the whole thing to tip over.

Scooping ice cream seemed like work after he was gone. He went to classes and studied all day. Nights. Weekend nights! If she showed up at his apartment with fresh baked brownies or wine coolers he might take a half hour break and they talked. But he wouldn't remember what she said to him the day before about her friend or her mother. And his roommate, back from summer vacation, was always around.

Sometimes when she called, after he'd told her he had to study all night, he wouldn't be home. The next day he said he was at the library. But she suspected he was out with his friends, some of whom included girls, some of the girls who worked with them that summer. A few times she went to their parties. She couldn't see the fun in drinking sour wine and arguing over whether *The New York Times* was pro or anti-labor. She wanted to be next to him in bed. She always smiled, but she knew a startled, almost panicked expression appeared on her face when she was around his friends. She suspected she had the look of a person trying to walk down a mountain top in high heels while her companions, in sturdy hiking boots, strode easily ahead. She felt herself slipping, falling behind.

She enrolled in the community college. It was so much easier than she expected. She didn't have to take a test, and they didn't care about her high school G.P.A. She paid the money; they let her sign up for Elementary Ed. Now she had to study too. They had something they could do together.

A bird with a strip of pink tissue in its beak swooped within inches of her face on the other side of the glass. "But I really do need a cut," the girl said. "I mean it's not something you can do for yourself." In a corner of the kitchen the radiator clunked and sighed.

"I cut my own hair," the young man said to the insides of his book.

"You do?" She could not imagine being able to do that.

"No big deal. How about if I cut yours?" he said. He looked at her and grinned, fingering the pages.

"Oh yeah?" She smiled archly.

"How hard can it be?"

"You tell *me*," she said and they both laughed at the other meaning. "No, seriously...my hair...I mean, unless you do it right — You really have to know —"

She saw his interest receding. "Want it cut or not?" He glanced at his book. Any moment he would return to it.

"Do you have any scissors?"

Her heart jumped when the young man stood up. She watched him lope down the hall toward the bathroom. He was slim as a teenager. Blue jeans, striped rugby shirts. His mother sewed all his shirts, and they had a slightly clumsy, home-made look. His father died of kidney failure when he was in junior high. He was on full scholarship, and his mother lived in an apartment in Hondale, Illinois, with his mentally retarded brother. He hated to go home. Knowing these things about him filled her with warm, maternal thoughts.

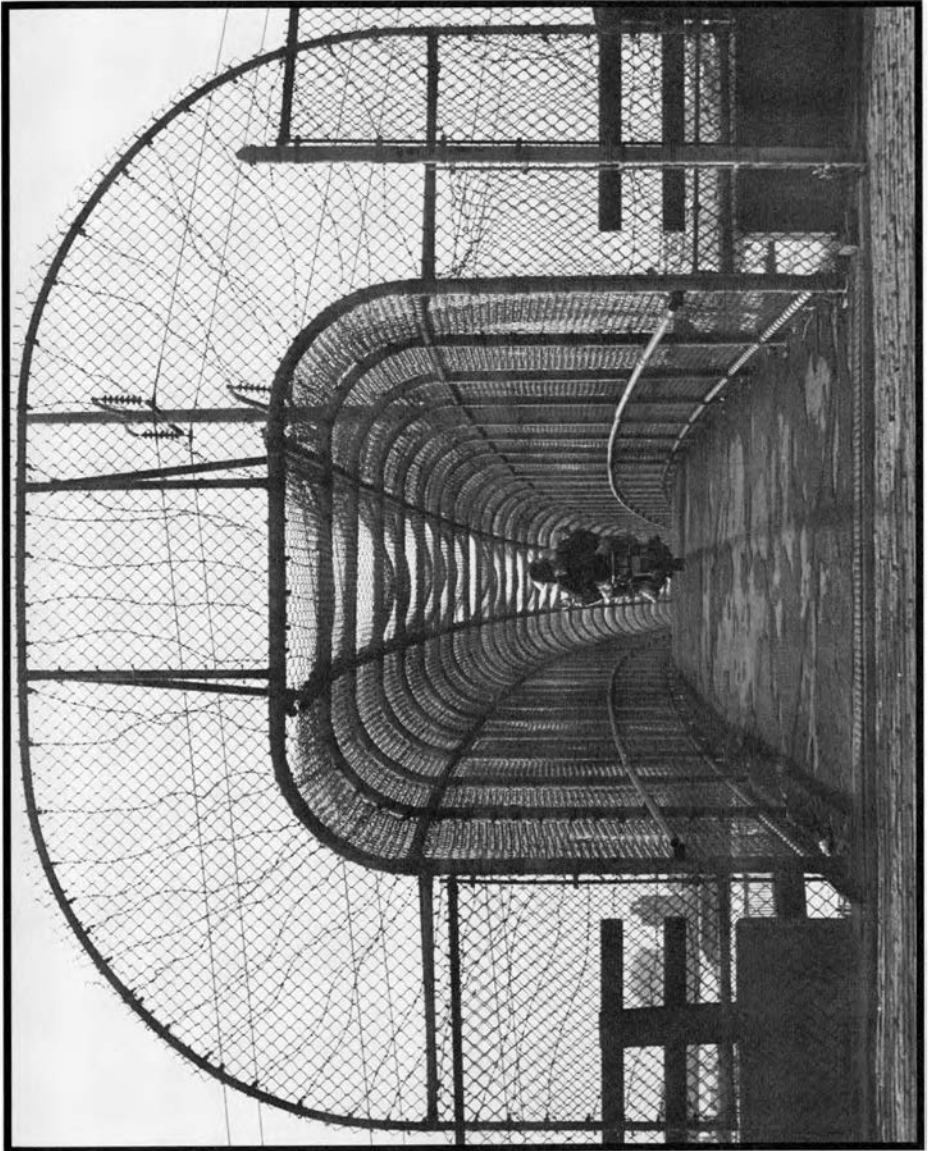
"Okay," he said, standing over her. "I'm psyched." He lifted a bunch of her hair and started to cut. The black-handled scissors snapped.

"You have to wet it first!" she blurted, then wished she hadn't. He probably knew that. If he wasn't wetting her hair, he most likely had a good reason. But she was thinking of the movie where Robert Redford and Meryl Streep were in Africa and it was hot and dusty and he washed her hair. She wanted the young man to peel off her shirt, tip her head back gently while over her head he poured pitcher after pitcher of cool river water.

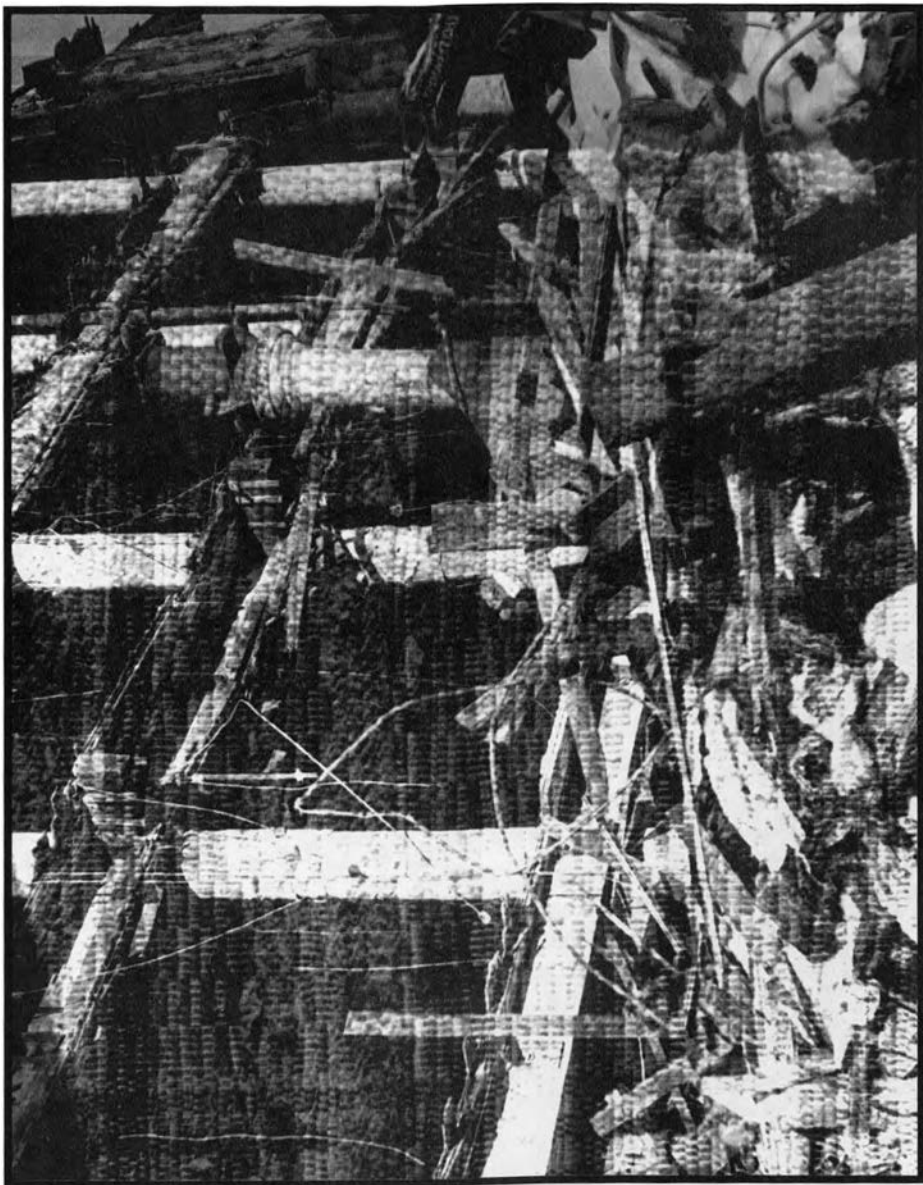
Instead he stood in front of her and aimed a plant mister at her head. The plastic bottle wheezed as he squirted, and she stared at the faded seam on the fly of his jeans. After only dampening the surface he began to cut again. You have to pin it up and do it layer by layer, she almost said, but didn't. Where would he have hairpins? No, it would be asking too much.

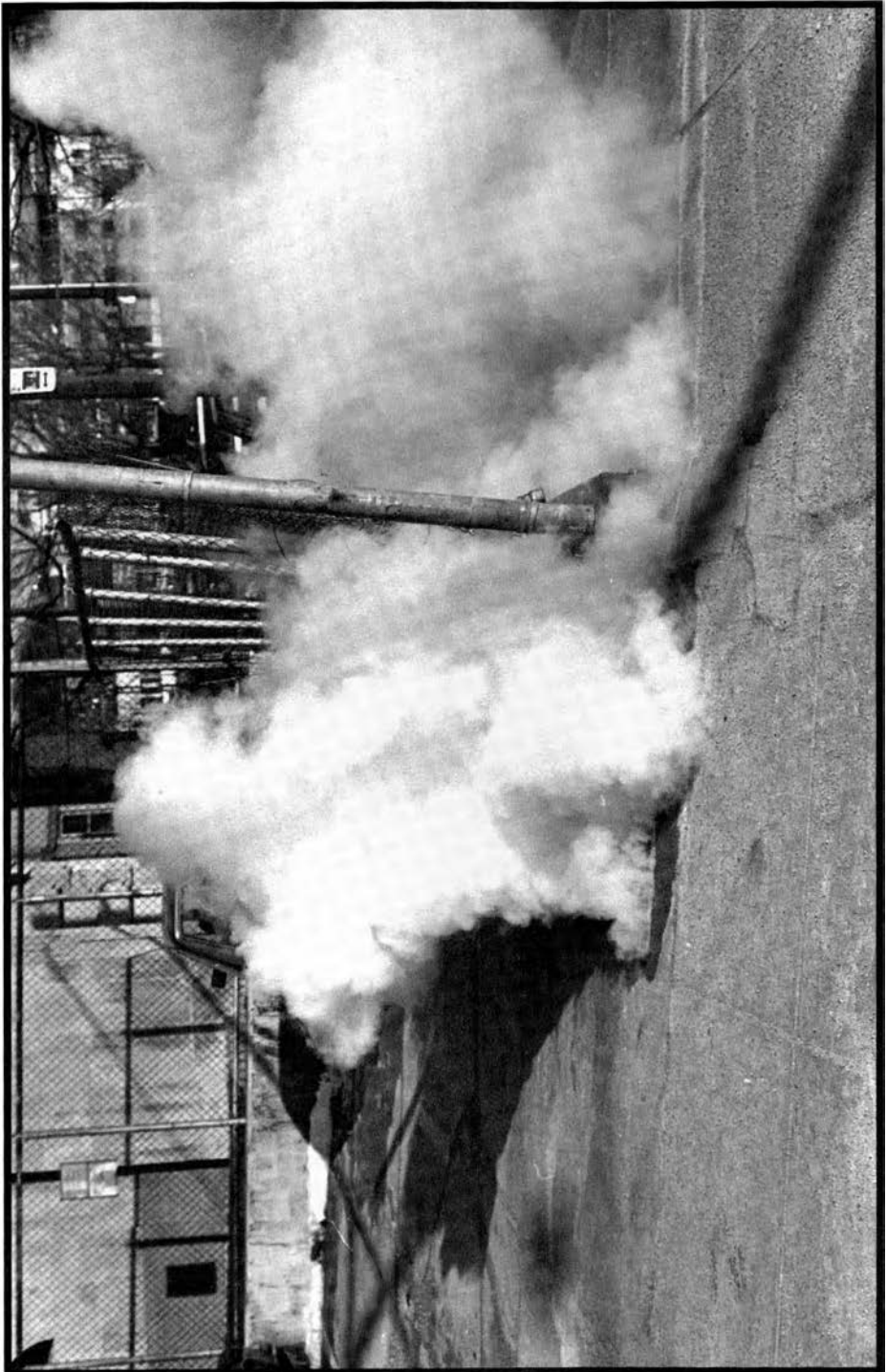
He was behind her now. One of his hands held her head firmly while the other maneuvered the metal jaws. His fingers pressed into her temples. She closed her eyes so as not to see the clumps of hair drop on the floor in random patterns.

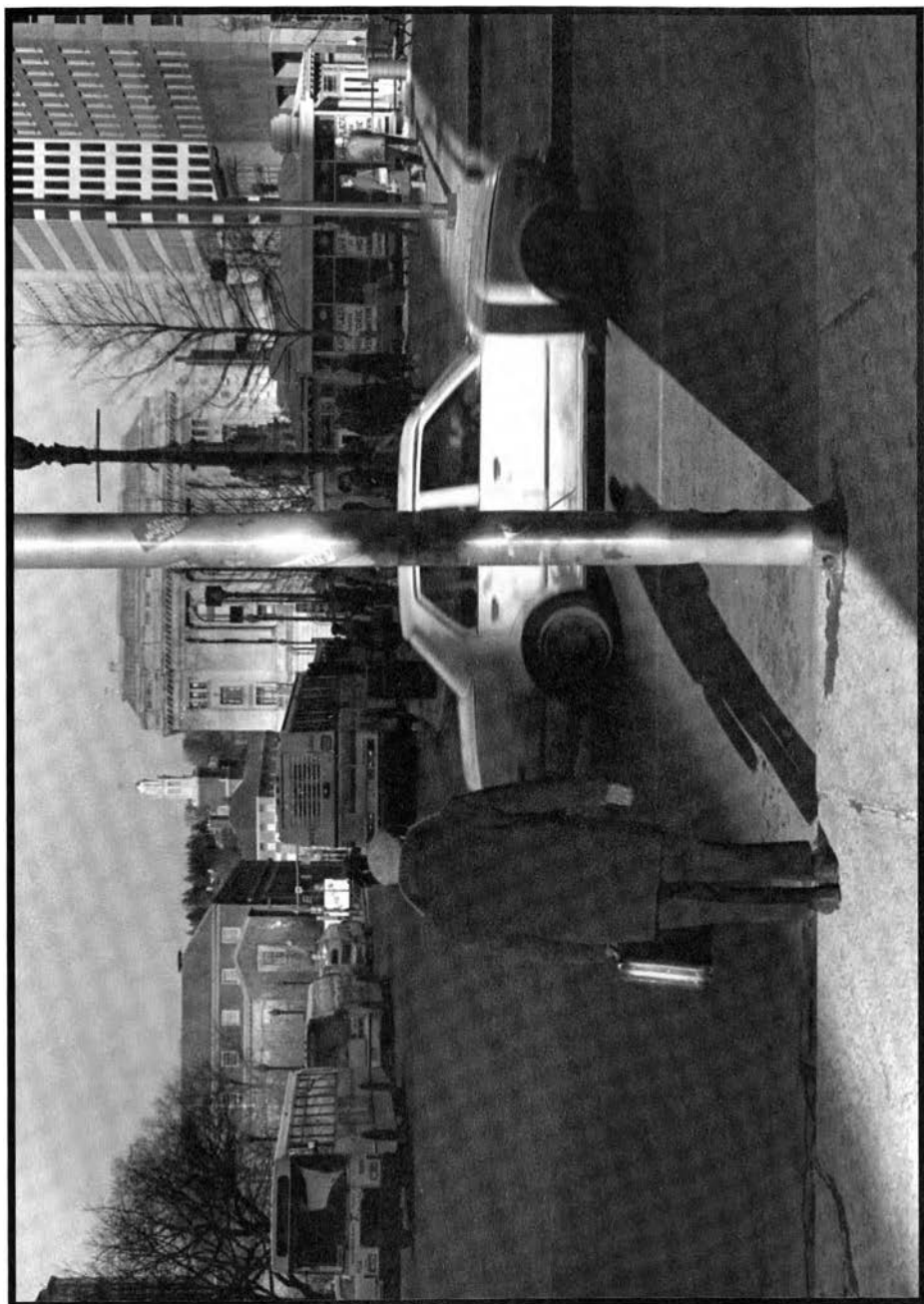
Metal grazed her ears. Not too short, she started to remind him, but stopped herself. He knew what he was doing. She was in good hands. With his strong hand on her head, she closed her eyes. Ignored the cold prick on the nape of her neck and thought of the summers-off life of a professor's wife, and of a brown-eyed baby girl named Noisette.

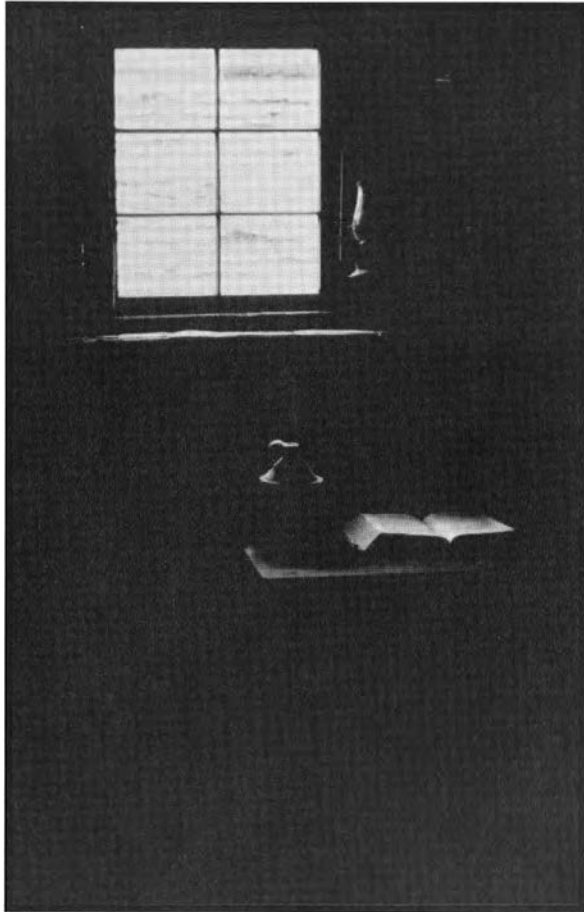


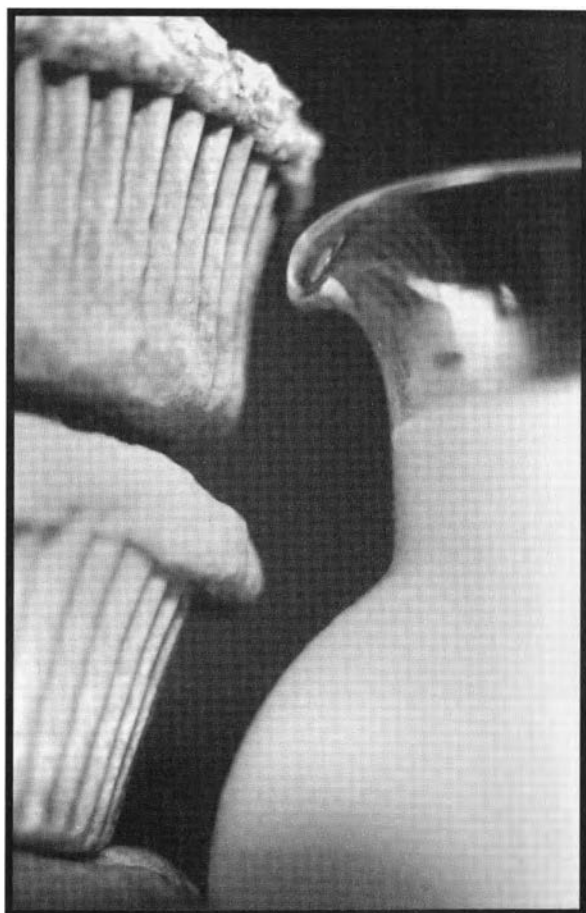














Forrest Gander

Talk in the Dark Pantoum

Many days here immured and remote.
Who knows how bad I must smell?
Give me a piece of your coat
for I'm cold with a story to tell.

Who knows how bad I must smell
since my brothers shoveled this pit
for I'm cold with a story to tell
and cannot keep track of it.

Since my brothers shoveled this pit
I starve and think of the time
and cannot keep track of it.
From the wall flows a rank, green slime.

I starve and think of the time
when your eyelids might brush my face.
From the wall flows a rank, green slime
to show me my dreams are a waste.

When your eyelids might brush my face
you would ask of my colored robe
to show me my dreams are a waste.
I don't have the patience of Job,

would you ask of my colored robe?
I'll tell you it's coated with blood!
I don't have the patience of Job,
I'm broken and sick of this mud.

I'll tell you it's coated with blood!
Give me a piece of your coat,
I'm broken and sick of this mud
many days here immured and remote.

Robert Toole

Career Hopping

You're beautiful and I wish
I could quit my job and
become the mirror you
look into every
morning

Maria Pavao

Boogie Men

the rooms are blackened now
strangers have roamed through them
the same strangers who are here now
invisible haunts that have entered
our mouths, swum through our lungs,
and strangled our hearts while
we were still alive

I took one puff, and down it came. All those years high up on the balance beam came down. Down it comes, sweet nada like a blanket. It rises like a fog of multi-colored television snow. My brain falling through an hour glass and reconstituting. I recall a stained glass window in all its colors which I haven't seen since I was four. I recall Four. I am obsessed with episodes of the Flintstones. I hate Fred. I like Dino. I laugh fit to kill. When asked, the reason for humor vanishes like smoke. Everyone stares at me as I make my way through the mall. People I hardly know come and talk to me and look at me so strangely when I answer.

There's more.

The street is cold in winter. It is exquisitely painful to walk up the street alone. To me, it's like a movie where the tragic hero gets his just desserts. I recall the one who took the day off to get high and go fishing and how he lost his job. He's still over by the pond panhandling. I recall the intellectual who, after a number of years, would dance back and forth from foot to foot as he spoke to you so slowly like someone with Cerebral Palsy. I recall one who jumped off a building in a synthesized depressive state. I recall one who shot himself coldly and soberly in the aftermath. I recall the child barely out of high school who told me the most transparent lies, and he believed them like they were the gospel. I recall the pregnant mother who said, "I know when my baby has had enough."

These thoughts chase me back up to the balance beam to live among the others who have no idea they are walking on balance beams so high above the ground.

"Won't You Be My Baby" played from the pet store's cheap Realistic stereo. I used to love that song. The kittens seem to enjoy it. The black one is for me; he looks so soft and helpless seemingly swaying to the music. I'll call him Shawn. My Shawn would have loved him. It was uncanny how he used to know when I held Tabby. I often wonder if he was trying to pet her. The doctor said that it was just a response to heat sensation. I don't know.

I got a kick out of it sometimes. More often than not it made me cry. I kept having the same dream that entire last week. I dreamt he was trying to escape, clawing his way along with little cat eyes. He hated me; at least in the dream. The more I'd cry, the more he'd claw. In my semi-consciousness I'd think it was actually happening. Afterwards, I'd never be able to get back to sleep. I would just lay in horror until the sun rose. I'd pray before I slept to be spared the dream but there doesn't seem to be much mercy up there.

Four months earlier I had another dream. Shawn would sleep with his face against mine. His breath was warm. I was happy, just laying there with him, resting. That was before I had acknowledged that he was actually alive. I knew but somehow he just wasn't real.

Now he's dead.

I desperately want to see him. When it happened I couldn't conceive the finality of death. I cry myself to sleep very often. He is kind in my dreams, though.

The doctor had made it sound so clinical and stale. It was like getting your tonsils taken out. In and out, drop off the library books and have dinner with mom. He smiled so much I couldn't help but feel right. You could see the silver dental work along his gum line. He said he understood my situation and that he'd seen it hundreds of times before. "This much education really shouldn't be wasted!" he had said with his permasmile face. I had agreed with him.

As I went in for the real visit, he struggled violently, like he knew. His last protest.

Then he was dead.

pack it up
pack it up
lob the silhouettes into a pile,
appall the paper dolls
see how the dust bunnies rummage?
they must be stopped
before
they hatch a new crop
of flop-eared cotton-tails
this room is not a bunny trail
the dust chokes thick
films the floor in filth
flies
onto the furniture,
a crawl with
flies
take the sofa too—
it hums in its sleep
fur elise
fur elise
and like some godawful fuhrer
the origami swan
i've pasted onto the bulletin board
bites swastikas
into the tapestries
that dribble down the walls
pack it up
i don't want it
the phone rings
all i hear is breathing
it might not even be the phone at all,
the desk's being such a perfect ventriloquist
once it made my mother talk
it may even make me talk
when you came
you brought the stalactites
that was okay at first
but then the closet spewed monsters,
the sock drawer sprouted mushrooms,
the spelunkers came to chain me up
under the watchful glare of the brobdingnag window which,
if i may add, is the eye of god
last night the beanbag tried to suffocate me

more shocking, the stove has begun to vomit flowers—
gas-violets,
alarmingly purple
i breathed them in last thursday
until my lungs tasted of gas, my throat tasted of gas
and i could see the purple darlings
trickling out my nose
you've got to leave
i keep tripping over the moleholes,
getting my feet snagged in the mousetraps
all the warmth is gone
this place is an icebath
the hubbub
the chaos
are yours
not mine
PACK IT UP

behind fenway park
standing in a line to buy
tickets and then see
a show at landsdowne street
club while looking and seeing
the net of the green
monster and thinking of the
lost series and my
father who brought me to the
park as a child and now there
with him dead and my
mother dying slowly in
a hospital where
she has a phone and constant
attention and oxygen
and tells me to have
a good time in the city
with my lover who
stands beside me in the cold
waiting to buy two tickets
as we're both dressed in
black wanting to get inside
to hear this poet
sing his songs of forgetting
because we really need that
as we hear the crowds
groan from the landsdowne street line
wondering if we'll
ever win as my father's
spirit flies like a baseball
as the line starts to
move like a functioning lung
and i am the man
who holds the ticket money
near the woman who loves him

she said something about
her pap smear
not being right
& that it could be
anything from a mistake
to a wart on her cervix
to cancer
& that she needed
further tests done
& was curious
about her
health insurance
so i told her to
make some calls
the next day
& asked her what
she wanted to
do about dinner

The wind was too much of
a decision maker in her life,
its window rattling,
a trumpet to action,
its stifling stillness,
incentive to crawl into
cool shadow, barely moving
or breathing.
Even her writing was
about the motion of air,
delicate as its content,
ethereal, unable to be
understood, only inhaled.
Sometimes, it was the
power of the gale,
the speed and bite
of a westerly,
or the languor of
weather's unintelligible
summer depression.
She was never able
to grasp what she had done,
why she had done it.
It was as if the praise
should ride like dust
upon those other forces,
adding a little color,
tiny miracles of shape,
to what comes and is gone
in an instant,
or stays forever
without making itself known.

As if he gathers his image
from the cold, steel blade.
As if a sharp, driven insanity
had retrieved his soul from
the silver sacrificial tray which
rests now beside his bloody feet,
and crystal savage glances which
drive the forest children further
into his silk, black dreams.

Funny, how between the soft, heavy
breathing lingers a silence which
reshapes him, the cut wrist which
whispers the pulse will no longer
hold, warming tears which twist like
rivers down past his quivering lips
as the white men, dressed for death,
sound their savage rhythms all around
him in the unobservable distance,
successful in the hunt but denied the
forever pleasure of this kill.

If you hadn't had your head buried in the laundry basket you probably would have seen, rather than smelled, the entity that sauntered into the elevator behind the Rosenbergs. Then again, it really won't make much difference; you had little doubt that the mental picture forming solely on the advice of your olfactory was going to match whatever your optic nerve was soon to toss into your noggin. But since the only way you were going to get a look at it was to check Ruth or Gustave into the wall, you resumed the fruitless search for the teddy bear boxers, a gift from the ex worn only on the most funereal occasions. You would have been psyched to lose them anywhere. Anywhere, that is, but in the basement of a building where most, if not all, of the tenants spoke of such things as the Teapot Dome scandal as if the story just hit the news stands yesterday.

"Good evening, young man," croaks Mrs. Rosenberg. "Lose something?"

"Nothing that can't be replaced, Ruthie," you mumble into the warm clothes. By now you've given up the hope of recovering them without forfeiting what little dignity you have left. You can picture it now. One morning, stepping off the elevator, you're greeted by the toothless grin of some antediluvian couple standing there with your teddy 34's at arm's length saying something like, "We found these in the laundry room, thought you might want them back." Never once asking you if you were in fact the happy owner. All is assumed by the aged. Giggles ripple through the elevator. You graciously accept the all cotton offering, stash it into the hollows of your trench, and hurry into the bustling city streets praying to God that some hapless motorist plows you down, sparing you from the greater embarrassment of having to return home. By evening the geriatric pipeline will have tried and convicted you of the most devious sex crimes known to man. In a place where a single song played on 7 was considered an out of control party, teddybear underwear was a bellwether to whips and chains and bizarre, unholy rituals involving a haruspex and large amounts of guacamole.

The entity shifts from one foot to the other, releasing another disturbing smell wave. She is visible now between the old couple's heads and you can see the big hair and large hoop ear-rings that, for the last few moments, you had only imagined existed. Give that man a ceegar! Did you call it, or what? Now if she only has a boyfriend named Joey who speaks in monosyllabic grunts and drives a high performance American made sports car.

She shifts again and the air is cloyed with the odious rank of floral decay. Whatever it is, she bathes in it. And it isn't cheap either, that's for sure. If it wasn't so offending you could probably guess what it is. Only your nose is reeling in the corner begging someone to throw in the towel.

The elevator stops, with the customary screech and jolt, at the second floor. The Rosenbergs wait passionately while the woman moves the two bags she has set down only moments before. The larger of the two is a cream colored

duffel bag with a wet spot on the bottom corner. The other is filled to the brim with foodstuffs, and as she slides it into the corner it spills, sending Marie's Sour Dill and Pickle dressing rolling through everyone's feet.

You smile, watching as she scampers around trying to retrieve the wayward goods. Stepping to the front of the car you depress the 'OPEN', keeping the door ajar. "You're not in any hurry, are you?" you ask in an off hand way not even looking at her for an answer. The smile reappears as you watch Ruth amble down the dimly lit hallway, her Gustave doddering as close behind as he can manage. When they safely disappear into their apartment you release the 'OPEN' button, immediately realizing what you've done. "YOU'RE STUCK IN HERE, WITH HER!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" your brain screams. "Oh, great; OH, great; OH, Great; OH, GREAT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

You feel the corrosive effects of the perfume as it begins to blister your skin. You know that by the time you reach the fifth floor you'll be nothing but a mound of powder and bones. Your heart races as the door closes in your face, sealing you in this sarcophagus of Shalimar. The cables groan as they begin to lift the car and then, and then, and then nothing.

Absolute nothing. No upward momentum, no lights, no sounds. Just pitch black, silent nothing.

"Danger, warning Will Robinson, danger," you sputter in a mechanical voice.

The emergency lights flicker on. Turning to your right you look directly into the eyes of the olfactory abuser. The eyes are blank; blank, motionless and empty. Through those portals you peer into a petrified mind. She remains in this stupor a few seconds then, passing through terror, she awakes in trepidation. She opens her mouth,

"What seems to be the trouble, Robot?" This comes out in what only can be described as pneumatic twitter. Nice job, you say to yourself. She's scared out of her wits and you're quoting "Lost in Space." You imagine your head transmogrifying into a donkey's and letting out this horrific 'Hee Haw' just like in the old Bugs cartoons.

"I'm sorry," you finally manage to spit out. You wonder if she bought it. Come on, really now, who's afraid of the dark at her age?

"It's alright, I'll be fine," she says, and this time it sounds like she's working on two lungs. Having gotten her breath back, she unfolds.

"It's just that I hate elevators and I've had a horrible day and this bum crushed my perfume and I haven't eaten all day and I left work early and had not time to change and, and, and..."

Having made absolutely no sense of this prattle, you have but little choice to accept the fact that you are stuck in this elevator, between the second and third floors, with a raving psycho-bitch from hell (or maybe Jersey City). You imagine that sooner or later she'll wig-out. Perhaps unsheathe those ruby Revlon claws and gut you like a trout. When the maintenance men finally pry open the doors they'll be treated to a sight not unlike what Yossarian witnessed when Snowden spilled his grim secret in the back of Dobb's plane. You are happily rescued from this line of thought by a bellowing voice from above. The two of you simultaneously look up into the yellow neon lights embedded into the fake mahogany ceiling panels.

"Hello? Is there anyone down there? Do you need help?"

You recognize the owner of the voice as the scraggly assistant sup. The fact that he has a small wind capacity due to his frame (and years of relentless smoking) is compounded by the echoing of the elevator shaft manipulating his questions, giving to them an eerie, flutish tone.

You shift your gaze to the grated maintenance hatch. "We're alright, Harry."

"Hey, paisan! Is that you? What does this make, four times in two years? Some people have all the luck! No need to worry, we'll have you out in a jiffy, you know the procedure. How many people are down with you?"

"Just two this time, Harry. Me and...," you look at her inquisitively.

"Miri, Miri Anderson," she says in haste as if it leaves a bad taste in her mouth. You kind of think she would have liked a more formal intro, say in a hallway with a handshake.

"Me and Mrs. Anderson," you call up the shaft.

"Miss," she chimes in.

You send up the 'Miss' and Harry repeating it, adds that he's going to get the ladder.

On this last word her eyes bulge out. "What does he mean, ladder?" she asks.

"Oh, it's nothing big. He's just going to lower a ladder down from the third or fourth floor doorway. Then it's up onto the roof and...," you finish this sentence by miming the act of climbing.

"Why can't they just open these doors?" she asks, pointing to the entrance as if the second floor was on the other side.

"No dice. Has something to do with crotchety old buildings like this one. Believe me, I've done it before, it's no big deal." Even as you say this the look on her face gives away the fact that it is a big deal. A very big deal.

"OK, guys, I'm back. You ready down there?" says Harry.

You watch in her the return of trepidation. "Ah, Harry? Harry, what seems to be the trouble, I mean, is it the building again or something else?" You keep your eyes fixed to hers watching for the vacancy sign to go up.

"It's got nothing to do with us this time. I heard over the scanner that some nutcase was out 86'ing utility poles with a chain saw."

You look directly into her face. "You don't want to climb the ladder." This is not a statement, not a question. She slowly moves her head from side to side. "You want to wait it out in here, no matter how long it might be." She nods. Great, just great, you say to yourself. Hell, you don't have anything planned for tonight anyhow. "Hey Harry? Harry, I think we're just going to sit this one out, if that's alright with you."

"Whatever floats your boat. I'll check in with you every half hour or so, how does that sound?" His voice is emotionless. It is as if he is glad that he didn't have to do tiresome paperwork and is trying to suppress his glee. "You kids don't do anything in that elevator that would necessitate a trip to the confessional," and with a giggle, he is gone.

"Thanks, you didn't have to do this," is all she can muster.

"Don't worry about it," you mutter as you turn in circles looking for a spot to sit much like a dog in front of a hearth. After finding the ideal location,

you slowly slide, with your back against the wall, down into a sitting position for the first time gazing fully at your fellow cave dweller. She is short, with a waspish figure, wearing an awkward looking hand-me-down dress and a pair of genuine, first-class, fuck me pumps. Her appearance is deceiving, for she moves with a certain grace that is uncommon with the Ginas and Maries (i.e. Jersey girls) that you have so often observed. Deciding that the chances of her starting a conversation are slim and none (slim, as in very slim), and not wanting to spend the next two hours in Dullsville, you turn towards her and open your big—fat—mouth.

"So let me guess, you work in a department store selling perfume?" Her mouth droops at the corners. Man-o-man, you got to be the smoothest character that ever tread upon this earth, you say to yourself. You figure your time to apologize was running out so you offer a sincerer, "I'm sorry," than last time. You follow this up with, "If you wouldn't be too offended I'd like to eat my foot right now."

At this she giggles, and says, "It smells pretty bad, huh?" pointing to the cream colored bag. "This drunk guy on the subway took a face digger, landed right on my bag, smashed my perfume bottle to bits."

"Sucks to be you."

"Oh. I don't know. It's not that bad, considering."

"Considering what."

"Considering he booted on the guy next to me," she simpers.

Now you're the kind of guy who can talk about anything under the sun, from classical music to children's books. All you need is a little push, a hint that the listener is receptive, and that simper gives you the go-ahead. She wants to talk of drunks on the sub, fine, you have oodles of stories of drunks on the sub.

"I was riding the sub once," you begin, pulling your knees up to your chest. "It must have been right after rush hour, say 6:30-ish, and sitting across from me was this real executive type. You know the type, crew cut, suit and tie, leather satchet. He must have been in his fifties. Anyhow, he's sitting there with a 1/2 pint of Smirnoff in his bare hand, with another 1/2 pint at his feet, empty. We rode that train from the Village up to around 52nd, and the whole way he never flinched. Didn't stir, didn't even blink. Hell, I wasn't even sure he was alive. He just sat there, staring at me and the girl I was with. Let me tell you, it was creepy. Either he was a total alkie or it was one mega bad day at the office."

"That's really sad," she says, tugging at her dress.

"That looks rather uncomfortable," you say, pointing at her dress.

"It is. This thing must have been taken in and let out again about thirty times. I think everyone in the entire company has worn it at least once."

"Do you have anything to change into?"

"I did, until it got contaminated," she says, motioning again to the duffel bag.

"Well, it's your lucky day! I've got a basket of clean clothes. Can I offer you some sweats and a t-shirt?"

She looks at you, resting comfortably against the wall, and you watch her contemplate the offer. You're puzzled by her hesitation, and when she

says, "Sure, why not," you're left wondering what she was thinking about. You are far from making a pass at her, that is obvious. You hold the articles and, accepting them with one hand, she makes a circling motion with the other. You respond by standing and executing a military about-face.

"So, you're an actress?" you ask, staring into the even faker mahogany wall paneling.

"More like 'aspiring' actress," she says, her voice coming from wild directions as she unbuckles, unstraps, steps out of, hooks, shifts, tightens, etc. After a minute or so of this ruffling, she says, "All set."

You turn around, slide back onto the floor, and watch her as she strains to comb out the industrial strength hair gel some two-bit stylist had glopped on her head. She looks odd in your clothes. You wonder how many times you saw Diana dressed similarly. But this is different, Diana at least knew your name. My name!! You bonehead!! you say to yourself. At this you extend your hand and introduce yourself. She responds by re-telling you what you already know is her name. This time, however, it comes in a less hurried manner.

And so it begins. For the next three hours the small pseudo-mahogany clad elevator is filled with the chatter of two people coming to know one another. You tell her of your first impressions and she laughs, adding that she has become disenchanted with her big haired, mealy-mouthed character. You talk of work and of family. She gives and takes suggestions for books and movies and restaurants. You have a tongue-twister contest in which her four-lined "Moses supposes his toes are roses, but Moses supposes erroneously. For nobody's toes are poises of roses, like Moses supposes his toes to be," beating out your infamous, 16 line, "Betty Botter bought some butter." It is not strange that the conversation skims only the surface of things. This is mere chit-chat to fill the time. But as the hours wear on, you begin to feel yourself open up, divulging thoughts and memories that lie deeper and deeper. You wonder how long it will take for the ripples of this palaver to rock an already unsteady boat when she asks, at a particular lull in the conversation,

"Do you ever feel alone in this city?"

With this question, she tips the boat. You want to evade the question, to avoid the imminent pain, to drown. You withdraw into yourself waiting, hoping to greet the water as it floods your lungs. What you meet there, however, is something you never expected. Something you never dreamed of. There, grinning in the hollows of yourself, is the will to survive. It is a friend that you thought you had bailed out long ago, a friend of broken dreams and transient shadows. You start the emotional equivalent of treading water.

"If loneliness," you begin, "is eating in deserted cafes, eaves-dropping on the hired help as they flirt and joke while they set the tables. If it means knowing where one can find aerial photographs of Pacific bombing patterns during WW II simply because you have nothing better to do than roam in the library. If it's staying up late for no other reason than to watch the street cleaners, then yes, I know what it is to be alone." Your mouth stays open. It wants to go on further, to talk of the lonely dreams, of life after Diana. It never comes out. The signals from your brain to your vocal cords don't make it. They are diverted, shunted past the throat and traveling down your spine, exiting through one of your legs like in the old electricity films they used to show you

in grade school. You're left sitting there with a mouth full of air. Leave that corpse in the grave, you say to yourself. Besides, anything in the ground that long will only be putrid; the dank smell of memories too long suppressed. This line of thinking makes you wonder when you started likening Diana to a corpse.

You look at the woman sitting across from you, and in the moments before the power is to be restored, something passes between you. Something small and incomprehensible, yet it is there. Perhaps it is transferred eye to eye. It is a sort of basic human communication that runs along the lines of:

I'm lonely

It's alright to be lonely

I'm lost

You need only to open your eyes to see

where you are

I hurt

We all do

and then it is gone.

d.d.m. reynolds

Erased Wordsworth

e b s s e e a t u r e s , I h d h a l l
Y t o e a c h o t h m k ; I s
e h a v e l a g h t h y u j u b i l e e
y h t f l ,
M d h i t c o n a
h f s s f y u r b l i , I f l — I

n

In a thousand valley

ines warm,

An B

Field

gon

Whit er i fl visio
Where is it now, the glory ?

I am in Kindergarten and I Know

I know that if you drink from a fountain you
are in school and you can only watch the
sun set from your own bedroom at bedtime.

I know the tall cup always has more milk
so I make sure Pop, that's Popeye for short,
gives me the tall cup and the most pancakes too.

I know that if you get shot by a bad guy
you get buried. God won't make you again.
He's busy working on Batman and Robin.

I know when your blood pin-tingles in Boston
you can see the Empire State Building.
Bring a sleeper bag when you go there.

I know to say thank you. Pop said to while
I was asleep and old Moses saved me
from the tornado that killed Mommy.

I know snow looks slow but, it is not slow
because it blows down and up from the sky.
From planes you see snow is not slow—it's fast.

I know if you go to the moon the world
goes round and round and you can see God parts
like the bones of Jesus in a snow flake.

I know on spring days grass and leaves explode green.
The whole world explodes, blows round all alone, and
whirlwinds blow snowflakes up buildings—fast.

In the lunchroom women sit,
Crunching their way through salads
And discussing their children. How
This one does and this one doesn't,
And that one gets sick
As most children do.
And the fat girl
In the corner by the door
Watches TV, and snuffles when the
Diaper commercial comes on, and the
Women complain: "Pampers don't protect
Your child from wetness."
"But they do," the fat girl protests.

"And how would you know? You're not
A mother." "But I was, once."
And the women are shocked. "How could
That be? You never told us about that."
"There are no pictures of your child
In your office," one says. "I'm sorry,
What was it?"

"It was a girl with blonde hair
And blue eyes that devoured your heart
And your mind. They had a power all
Their own, those eyes, that stole what
I had to give without asking."
"And what happened to the baby? I'm
Sorry; I don't know her name."
The fat quiet girl turns back to the TV.
"I don't want to tell you now."

And the women turn to the themselves, and
Murmur, "I wonder if she really was
Married." "Probably never had a kid."
"I always thought she was a little crazy."

"I was, once," comes the voice from the corner.
"It was four years ago and I went crazy and
Attacked my husband and my daughter and they
Had to bring me to the IMH.
I was there for two months.
In that time my daughter began to hate me

And my husband cheated on me and I had
Nothing left."

"Why didn't you tell us about the baby?
I'm sorry, I don't know her name."
"Because my baby is dead and there's
Nothing you can do about that, now
Is there?" And the fat girl gazes
Calmly out the window and doesn't cry.
She thinks only of the peace she feels
With the baby dead and gone.

No one says nothing about anything for
Such a long time, hours it seems....
Then the pregnant girl asks, gently
and with feeling, "How did she die?"
"You don't want to know."
"I do. Really."

In the Ten Commandments, the fat girl thinks,
Killing is forbidden. In state laws, people
Go to prison for killing.
"I don't want to tell you," she says.
And she remembers how the baby never cried
As she was lowered into the tub that was
Half filled with warm water. Those eyes,
Taking all the will and life from her,
Stared in distrust and sorrow at the fat
Girl's face until they finally closed.

For days the body was kept in a plastic
Trash bag under the bed, and tossed out
With the next week's garbage. And no
One ever bothered to find out what had
Happened to the baby. The eyes followed
Her throughout the house; she could see them now.

And in the middle of her thoughts, the women
Leave the lunchroom with a backwards glance
And whispers of wonder. But the pregnant girl
Stands back and stays near the door.
"I want you to know," she says. "Whatever
You did, I understand."
And the fat girl turns away and cries.

The Mud of the Streets Covered With White

for Rich Morey

Days like now when dusk's snow twists its subtle clicks
against lamp-posts and gets caught in my hair
like the car in the mud that night, I think
of how far you've gone and how my tires still spin
layers the color of moss onto my thighs.

You've made a future, while I've waited for the past
to come back to me—faithless but unable to escape
the hope your success breathes into me.
Even when the thickest clouds eclipse the moon, there is still
that delicate glow suggesting a lighted place in the sky.

Someone has offered you her hair, allowed a solid hold,
and pulled you to the light of a warmer world
where clothes-washers and dryers hum. Every click
your jeans' buttons sound against the metal wall
washes away more of the filth of experience and leaves.

Making Returns

I

Leaves crunch like popcorn beneath our feet as we walk
Our way through rows of headstones. This day reminds me
How gray October is in New Jersey, reminds me of playing
In leaf piles as a child one town from here. I know you
Are wonderful for coming out here with me, to see by my side
My father's grave, to face certain ghosts swirling
About the granite marker jabbed in the ground. I will know
Soon if I've been avoiding them, hiding them like a refugee
In a German attic. Five years. I have not come to raise him
Or absolve anything of his, but to draw some line
Prohibiting further comparison.

II

You knew everything when I was ten, and that was the only
Thing I thought everyone knew. When you took us fishing
By Tom's River, my brother and I couldn't bait our hooks.
He let you help him, but I tried to do it myself. I had
The wet purple worm ripped until you took another, with smoke
From your cigarette stinging your eyes, and slipped it easily
Onto the barb. It was then I wanted to be like you.

III

The stone has dulled since mother described it after her last
Visit. I am surprised at her strength that she could ever
Leave you here. I remember when I was here, the pull of her
Arm on mine, the way I didn't budge, the umbrella held above
Us by your brother. It rained hard, with an appropriateness
One sees in black-and-white films. People stood like teeth,
Upright and still, around your ground, but only you could have consoled her.
If I am now to be your father, I would scold you
For your lack of timing.

IV

The sky was gray as it is now, seventeen years ago
In that cemetery in East Orange. Everything, even the grass
Seemed gray and chalky, like the dull gray of the tombstone you
Knelt at. This was your father, stubborn, unmovable, who reared
Four boys through the war. Six years old, I didn't know how

I should feel—perhaps embarrassed, if that was possible—as you
Knelt, laying a wreath and crossing yourself. I did feel
As if I was being watched by grandpa, as if he was telling me
I shouldn't watch you.

V

I am a different man now than when you died. I am a man,
And there are things I understand, even more I don't.
This woman with me, she knows me, likes having me around.
She is nothing like any woman in our family. You would like
Her for the way she has made this day hold the potential
To be warm as the summers you haven't seen me in, or the summers
I feel coming on like moods washing over me in turns, like analogies,
Like the memories I leave here among these headstones with you.

Frank Carnevale

in my pocket
i carry
a razorblade
i'd like
to make
a papercut
slice
underneath
your eye
and watch
it bleed
watch the color
wash out
of your eye

then i would
touch
the cut
and stick
my finger
up into the
empty socket
and reach
deep
into your brain
pulling it
out
thru the papercut
slice
underneath your eye

The Parable of the Soda Pop

Looking through the bright, red case with the glass window (there were all sorts of bottles!), the girl searched for the perfect can of soda. She grabbed the one waaay in the back because that would be the Freshest, most Cool, most Tingling and Effervescent can of all.

So she grabbed at it. She took it out, put up a few worthless silver coins and left the store with it.

She got outside and she blocked the raging sun from her eyes with the soft palm of her alabaster hand. Quickly she popped open the cap, but you know what? It was just too warm for her taste. It seems that that particular can had just been placed there by the stock boy and he put the new ones in back while bringing the icy ones toward the front.

So, dissatisfied, she knelt down on one knee and poured the warm, syrupy stuff onto the steaming sidewalk for some lucky ants to feast upon.

Turning fast upon her burning heels, she rebounded back into the little shop. She walked haughtily up to the big, red, shiny soda case and slid the door open. She grabbed for the front one, the one that had been there all along. Some other customers commented amongst themselves that she had just been in there buying a can of soda. Then she paid for it.

She stepped outside and guzzled the crisp contents greedily. It was such good soda!

Then she got her alabaster hands and crushed the empty can, threw it next to the curb and kicked it down the sewer. With her thirst finally quenched, she began to walk home.

*They would tell us a battleship is glorious,
that a wave of armed boys
snaking through the desert
is a beautiful thing; illumination
rounds, the dark horizon's most glittering
gift. Listen to me:*

*it is the myth of every country
that its wars are defensive.*

*God is a pure longing, but longing
for war is monstrous.*

*Are there monsters inside you?
Are you easily convinced children
should break for two men to posture?
The only irresistible impulse
is love . . .*

. lightly

. which is why

I am remembering Anaktoria:

time pours into her absence.

*But seeing her! her sexy walk and
growling eyes, the shadows pooled
above her lovely collarbones. I ache
to see these. Your fighter jet
show indeed! Your metal men bleeding!*