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The Alembic

Spring 1996

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They sold their diamonds for bread
and when there was no more
bread they starved
to death with
trinkets under
their pillows.

They sold their diamonds for bread and when there was no bread left they starved to death with trinkets under their pillows.

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They sold their diamonds for bread and when there was no more bread they starved to death with trinkets under their pillows.

They sold their diamonds for bread and when there was no bread left they starved to death with trinkets under their pillows.
Sold diamonds bread
starved death
trinkets to pillows.

No bread more bread left starved They They They
Under.
JANE LUNIN PEREL

Zelda

Zelda sits on the back porch under the lilac tree. It is spring. Blue and purple flowers float on her apron. Her feet are swollen in black shoes. Her stockings are knotted above the knees. She is humming a yiddish tune. The wet winged smell of lilacs smothers us. I admire her large hands, her big boned body seated, a ship anchored in a wide berth.

What will I buy Aunt Rose for her birthday? Can I keep the party a surprise? Yes, Nana, I can. Cheesecakes are rising in her oven like baby’s breath. I will buy Aunt Rose stationary with blue flowers, pay for it with my allowance. It’s a “mechiah” she says, a blessing, the fresh air washing us, cooling her down from her baking. I would be her dog, her slave, one of her hair follicles, just to be near her and hear her heavy breathing. Her eyes are going, but still she drives the green ’52 chevy. Nana, there’s a car coming at us.

Thank you, darling. The pear tree opens its white blossoms. My mouth biting into the soft white center of the cheesecake. Sweetness rising inside and in the air. She, Commodore of three worlds turning eggs into custards, flowers, into how a woman holds herself even in old age.
The rose-purples of the spikenard
printing her clothes, the aroma
of cinnamon and butter
sweeping her cheeks,
who never complained over
her widowhood, only stared into
the open window of her days savoring
memory like candied ginger. Her polish-yiddish
accent braille to my ears of all that went before,
all she withstood. My grandfather conscripted into the
Russian army, eight years before he escaped, returning
to marry her sister, found that woman long
married and her little sister, Zelda, all
grown. She consented to marry him
only when they would arrive in
America and her mother
would also come
with them. So
it was. And
Samuel made good
went into coal and ice
after horse feed petered
out and bought the huge victorian
house from a Boston Brahmin banker whom
he tricked by spreading the rumor that if he
did not buy it, African Americans would. And there
amidst the pear trees, apple trees, he grew his own peonies.
He built a tennis court and a chicken coop. He heated
it all with his own oil and the children grew tall
and strong. My father, Louis, was the oldest son,
a sister, Ida before him. Then the twins,
Irving and Rose, and the baby, George.
Zelda ruled them. Her roasted
chickens threw them into
obedience. Her cabbage
soup settled disputes.
The cheesecakes were
the closest we ever got
to easter eggs or Christmas
stollen. And all we wanted. When
Sam died she cut the huge home into
four apartments. She and Rose in one, Irv
and his family in another, the Greenfields and
we had the entire first floor. Sunlight flooding
through the six foot windows casting shadows
over my rocking horse in the nursery, I
rode that black and white pony through
those shadows into the plains of
morning where no one told me
No. I stored my tiny
animal figurines
inside its neck
in a secret opening.
The tiger, the bear, the
elephant, my beasts with the
sun coming down like honey, the
smell of baking wafting from upstairs.
There was no liberty like this galloping over
mornings silent except for the rhythm of the horse
cutting its small run in the floor. And when I dismounted,
ordered to wash my hands or scolded by mother for a dirty face, I knew Zelda
was in her place without
admonition. I climbed the immense staircase
and opened the door, the swirling Persian
carpet laced with blues and reds
bled across the floor.
Is that you, Janie? Yes, Nana,
it’s me. And that was all
we said. I watched her
kosher the chicken,
soak the blood
out, the water
turning chrysanthemum
pink, the yellow flesh whitening
with its golden pores giving in. She
cut the celery like a conductor batoning
a score. Little people lived on her shelf, a man
with a broom, a woman in a red apron, a rooster and
a hen, too. I watched them for so they began to move.
They danced with the dust motes to Glen Miller’s
“String of Pearls” gliding from the Philco
radio in the corner with the steam
rising now from the soup. I drank
milk, ate cookies no matter what
the time of day. She demanded
nothing of me, just that I grow
and be. Her cut blue crystal
candy dish was a shrine
that fired when the
sun hit it. She
was both goddess
and priestess to me,
torch and keeper of it.
How do I live in such
sordidness after knowing
wordless love, after having Zelda
be Zelda for me? Not only the weight
of her wide hewn bones remains in me, but
also a lack of treachery. That we went into the
ovens made for human flesh, and those who were left
did not speak of it but abided with their
families, feeding children.
So Zelda fed me.
MEAT

We’re in bed, doing it.
Even the dog is excited
and he trembles,
wet-eyed, coughing
softly like a butler—

Oh yeah, baby, do it like that

—then the dog throws up
a part of something
maybe a thumb, you whisper,
or is it an index finger?

Thumb? Index finger? Thumb? Index finger?

Your mother comes home
The thing is in
the toilet. We can’t
flush it until we know!
Your mother gives it a long
hard look. Some kinda meat
she says.

II.

FIRST MENAGE A TROIS

As they say,
it was pure
chemistry:
French kissing
  Peter while
  Jim worked his way toward
  level ten--
  D&D.
The little elevator of pleasure slid up and down. We ate the whole box of hos and fell down laughing.

III.

BATTLE REPORT

In the army everything is rank and a colonel’s kids don’t play with just any old body.
We lived near the vault. Twelve houses twelve dads twelve lieutenant colonels.

The creek behind our neighborhood was always full of trash and we played there all the same. Donald and Shirley, Manuela and I. We used to smell each other’s faces and hands and feet: Delightful, we said. Divine.

We could hear the tanks in the hills and the soldiers marching on Main Street.
A bit of a voice, *hello*.
Flesh grows less and less
dense, after the invocation.
No need to kneel;
you won’t get out anyhow
without setting off those bells.

This is not yet sleep:
you could count the words,
though you couldn’t name
the place or paint the chairs,
and *face* does not apply
in the absence of stars.

You might think *No one in*
as you observe the insistent
blank awaiting your answer.
But just as you’re drifting
in, or is it out, your mouth
silently echoing *o,* there

they are again, wrapped
in one funny skin or another,
a houseful, rarely the same
voice twice, though they don’t
disagree, and one inflects
your name in a way that’s familiar.

Mostly they’re no one you’d meet
on the street, and as for you,
the exposure, a little dark,
blurs the edges but does you good.
Maybe you’ll speak for yourself
next time, once and again for all.
There’s no question I’d do
this to, but look, there isn’t
a question, there never was

a man like that,
what makes you think,
I mean whatever you mean

to say that line could get
us both in deeper
trouble, nobody knows

nothing is what I think
you said, but who cares
enough to send the very
daylight out of there,
skedaddle now, it’s high
time in the wild blue

tonight the stars are falling
down falling down the well
well well, look who’s here.
I was letting the lining wear out
I was willing to let the sleeves
Rip to open
To show to the empty
Air all the places
The body in time
Tries to break
Out

The pockets were already useless

Admitting I couldn’t stop

The collar fraying
Where we turned to look
For what
Failed to appear
Or vanished
In our vast
Disappointment

In the cavernous
Library’s draft

You leapt up
You grabbed the coat
And flinging it on flung yourself
Out into the night

Thin where it moves against
The body opening
Where the satchel full
Of books rides and the body
Tries to compensate
Worn transparent

I thought it was time

Letting the threadbare
Cuffs leave themselves
On the tables
They swept
Turning pages the wind
Shifting the leaves
Of notes

Daylight
A ragged hole
Left
In black silk
Western Civ

For the Mice

1.
I can't go into the kitchen for fear of disturbing them at their feast.

Each sound attaining new
Meanings.

Are they dying behind the walls yet?
Are they dying on the roofs? Where
Are they dying?

(Still air inside the cupboard
War, and fetid as a breath.)

Are they decaying as sound "decays": in a linear
Narrative, in a "progress"?

Because I can't see it.

I have thought.

Will they come out and teach me
Something about this
Dying, will I find out?

Too late? (As always, too late?)

Something somebody said once
Set out
Appetizingly, in a torn box
(That hot, light greeny-blue — the pellets —
To what does their vision turn it?), something
About there being something
After this . . . —
Something else.
(Beyond regret?)

What?

(I wait and watch.)

I wait — alone
And far from you —
And watch.

2.
What do I want?
Not to have accomplished
What I set out

To accomplish?

To have been the agent
Of nothing, really,
Intolerance: just a little,

As we say, “fed up”? Easy to talk
Of the bad taste left
In my mouth.

3.
“They have eaten all of the poison and gnawed
On the box; frustrated,
Wanting more death, feeling
They haven’t yet had enough
Death.”

Oh, they want it all right: rushing towards,
Fighting for, their punishment,
And yet?

It’s a cheap trick.

“\textquote{I threw the empty poison container away,}
The torn box, half afraid they might seek it,
Even empty, in the garbage — so great
Is their lust.\textquote{”}

It’s a cheap trick to turn a hunger to this.

(I know that. But.)

4.
Do they turn upon each other
In the dark — as we did darling — is there
Some dim sense of fault?
Do they need that? Can they afford it?
Are they frightened, does it hurt?
Can you keep the wall from turning
To glass, and looking glass; leave some corner
Of the building dark, respect
The difference? Where they are dying,
As we say, ‘like rats’ —

Can you manage that?
Because no matter how close you get

To understanding; sticking your fingers
Down your throat as though to eat
Yourself, trying to call back up
The food you wanted so much
To refuse in the first place; trying to make yourself
Thin enough to fit the enigmatic
Space behind the walls or under the roof
Come out, come out . . . —

They will not hurt less,
Or live for one more second.

(But you struggle alone with your conscience.
Isn’t that great.)

5.
You probably didn’t know what I meant.

Probably not.
Probably not.

I meant a bad job:
The blade dull,
The head crushed.

And then the invention of speech.

6.
(But the sticky pages left open
And waiting stayed blank.)

On one of these (failures) a lonely
Sign set down in the field of light —

The blue-green only slightly dulled
By its passage through the absent . . . :

A bitter laugh. You still don’t get it.

7.
They came out for me,
Finally, oh yes,
Sick with what I'd given them
To eat, but they didn't
Die — or they didn't die
Fast enough: trapped
Between broom and dustpan,
As in an awkward parenthesis,
And dropped into the toilet, to be
Hauled away in the water's grasp.
Still 'lively.' Desperate. How
Small they became there,
And yet my feelings were not
Tender. Only, I was horrified
By this, by my . . . capabilities
Shall we say? The present
Seemed endless: there wasn't
Apparently, anything else
But this . . .

8.
The dust-colored bodies of time's
Secret agents. Squeak, squeak, squeak.
These professors finding their way
To the heart of the dry
Subject at last: footnoting toothmarks.
The torn-open, ragged subject,
The empty subject, death itself?

Or something (pause)
Like death itself?

That stack of memoranda —
"You like to call your unhappiness . . ."
(Hurry, hurry) — famous for its music's finished
Elegance . . . These crrrriitics . . . :
Are they nibbling the edges?
Are they making it worthless?

What happened
To the movement?

Trapped in the forest which turns and looks back.

9.
(And then I began to see how it could be
A kind of insanity: yes, a mad voice,
And me listening to that.)

Walking back
From the party: the conversations
Breaking up into sentences, words,
And then nothing, but I was thinking
I felt almost human for once —
Since we talked.

Should I tell you that?
Should I try to tell you that?
Across the necessary distance?

10.
The curator explained
The stack of T-shirts — white
Lettering on black: “Always
A Bride,/Never a Bridesmaid,”
A thin gold ring stitched
To the cloth — were not
For sale, but the trace
Of an on-going project:
A woman, “marrying
And divorcing as many
People as possible."
I think she said "people."
(And then, behind her hand,
Hissed, "I think conceptual art
Has gone as far as it can.")
But my parents, I laughed,
With their several marriages,
Hadn’t known it was art . . . —
I just wanted one, to try
To wear the meaning out.

11.
Listen, darling . . . —
I was seeing myself like that:
Waiting for the crumbs,
*Hiding in the dark* — I thought I was
Dying, yes, and that that sound I was hearing was also
The sound of my teeth — at the edges
Of the apparent domestic
Success: controlled space not, obviously,
So well-defended at night.
(They got in, meaning out
Of place.) *Longing for death?* What
Dreams I had! "Darling," And for months
Something moving out of sight
Just out of sight (my turning and turning
To look too late). *Jealous?* I was haunted by what
Could have happened and hadn’t, or had
But I’d missed it. Or I was missing it. Now. And the house
Like some wretched zoo or laboratory: stinking
Of cages and experiments.
EPILOGUE (The Tent)

How the whole
Structure vanished or became
Something else.

What was that dream we had?

Heal thyself? Come back
Up? And walk?

So that:

Poison seeping into the very
Pages of the books.

Colorless, odorless . . .

What was that dream we had?
(Drifting past — homeless — at night).

Whatever the cost?

Dark blue against the dark blue
Sky the fastened plastic — billowing —
As though inside something struggled,
Still, to lift or escape.

What was that dream we had?

Somewhere a light left on: softly glowing
Place in the heart of the almost invisible shape.

And the signs posted warning us off.

I was (outside) seeing
This (because inside was death).

"The war had just ended, and I was trying to forget."

Coming back in the daylight: dry
Sound of the skins undone sliding down
The apparently unchanged
White side of the house — time passes —
The workers, in their other language,
Calling out, and the blue pouring down
To wad in stilled waves at our feet.

We stopped for awhile, and went on in silence.

"Today," blank sheet,
Shaking hand, "we go back."
The last entry: "To what?"
WILLIAM MATTHEWS

_Bird Lives, or So Say Thousands of Graffiti_

Who scrawls in spray paint that he augmented standard chords with related higher notes, then used _those_ as a new source of melody (no more miraculous than calculus, despite how fast a practiced wizard thinks), and wryly detailed the little-engine-that-could rhythms of the swing bands in which he learned his trade? Who thanks his mother Addie, who lavished love and a charwoman's dole on a feckless, charming, driven child? Who writes _Dear Phoenix, Don't Come Back. Nothing's Forgiven. (signed) Ash_? What about the body he hastily shucked off, and with it years of music we'll not have — who leaves a sign to mourn or curse such waste? Why deify his pain? Why not take all of him? To heart, and to oblivion. Oh, one more thing: about that "Bird?" It's Mr. Parker to you.
Abundance

Lord, You have given me many gifts.
Some I have tended, some abused,

one from whom I am divorced, a good companion. Therefore
I open these gates slowly: inside them is a people of dreams.

I know to Your saints is given to know the future in fire,
surpassing language. But look: You and I know I am no saint.

May I have a different gift, instead? If I could, I would choose to
know the past in mercy. Though it would be a thunder in the heart

I would honor it, because it is what I have,
and Your gift — almost that above all —:

and these words, dazed in the raw light, stumbling forward
and slow to say change, being themselves memory and a form of exile.
At the Last Judgement

At the last judgement, when the blind angel winds our lives back slowly on her spool,

I will ask her to stop
for a moment here — it is years since — because

I do not understand, and surely I will need to explain:
how, afterwards, I woke and dressed, leaving her

sleeping, walked out into the orchard and down
the shining road. For hours the rain had continued,

and now the cold had tightened it, in glares.
The hawthorne had begun its first extensions. It was April,

I was young, and each pale bud was sealed, intact and perfect,
in a bullet of ice with a bluish diffidence I recognized.
STEPHEN TAPSCOTT

Oysters

In natural light
at the bottom of the garden
a moth
opens its wings above the buddlea.
Waits, lifting
a slim ankle. Shuts its wings.

A great ship
founders at sea.
Storms rip the riggings, and
the ponderous cargo shifts.

Drowned
sailors restlessly
drift toward the silt.

In the attic
two pale girls
have lifted their petticoats.
The bold one is touching her tongue
to the other’s rosa
and the world does not end.
Salty, she informs
her trembling cousin. Oysters.
EDWARD KLEINSCHMIDT

Triage

Scarcely have I written a word and the world
Is lost to me. Like taking someone away from
Someone, giving that someone to someone else.
There is one sun to see each morning. I want
The most words to go to those who have
The least words, fewer than the fingers
On both hands. The only way to walk
Around this stupid battlefield
Is with all our pockets turned inside out:
Show the bloodred linings of our hearts,
Show that our souls need replastering
Show that our eyes are sick in their
Sockets, that our mouths have evaporated
Like the water in the glasses we can’t drink from.
O Words of Abundance! Scatter
Those you love to those you hate. Make
All the branches of all the trees in this world equal.
Better to love than not love, to love than not love.
Better to love than not love, to love than not love.
you who have beaten me to death
    you who have smashed out your cigarette into my face
you who have cut off my writing arm
    you who have made all the hair on my body reverse their directions
you who have destroyed a few last things I thought weren’t worth destroying — a

fabulous jar of urine, moss from a favorite tree in my childhood, my father’s
fingerprints on the kitchen doorknob

you who have erased my eyebrows, put x’s where my eyes were, an imperfect
    circle for a mouth

you who have thrown the bone bag on the pile of rock
you who have said that if God weren’t dead we’d have to kill him
you who have hollowed our wombs
you who have booed at angels no one can see
    you who have inherited the map with directions to hell

you who have unfurled the sheet I was buried in and use it as a flag
you who have worn the latest news, the blizzard of hate, the hurricane of hurt
you who have chopped thought to the bone then chopped the bone

you who have harmed, have armies of harm, who have the last words of everyone
    memorized, who live to die, who die:
for nothing and the nothing lasts, who sell the trinkets of time for the trinkets
    of space, who hath not wrath nor meaning, who doth not think of legs

tangled with other legs in quarry pits, head with eyes jellied, hands with fingers
    uncrossed, minds no long carrying what could and what could have and
what did not annihilate you
GERRY CRINNIN

Final Exam

Is the diction
of all pebbles on the beach
correct and clear?

Have I checked the moon
to see if
there's a comma?

Is all the punctuation
euphonious as
haberdasher?

Have I avoided eternity a notch or two?

Does my theme contain an old
dirty dress, a large green bug
settled on the torn leaf?
GERRY CRINNIN

Night Photography

Here are worlds under the floor:
Intricacy rife with shy termites you'll never know,
Roadhouses for solo centipedes, plump slugs,
Sweaty mice gnawing at dew (the wood was good).

Sometimes when the Up Yours is too loud
I pull the plug and settle at the bottom
Of every writer's dream word, goodbye,
Smoothed out on a garment of lawn,

Delighted to emcee the worm rodeo or
Listen for night's freight of crickets
Parked under the stars at Moonhenge,
Oblivious to my b.o. and neck dirt.

From down here, people look like themselves,
Not ants, millions of dark whiskers
Moving magnetically on the barber's face
Guided by stubbornness and faint aftershaves.
Rumors of spring — they last from dawn till dusk —
All eyes decipher branches for blossoms.

Your legend now equals our thirst, Beloved —
Your word has spread across broken nations.

Wherever each night I’m lost to myself,
they hear from me of Her — of Her alone.

Hope extinguished, now nothing else remains —
only nights of anguish, these ochre dawns.

The garden’s eyes well up, the flower’s heart beats
when we speak, just speak of O! Forever.

So it has, and forever it should last —
this rumor the Beloved shares our pain.
A Jazz Festival Couple, 1995

A big fat man
and his zaftig woman
(large but proportionate) —
all that flesh!
Haitian? So lightly
dark, like an obligation worn
gracefully, even the walk,
lumbering but — what? —
musical? sexually
charged. Her wide wonderful rump
rides after him, the whale
upon the land, looking around
for the first time.
DIANE GLANCY

Sketchy Goings

I am warm. I have seen fire.

Isaiah 44:16

There was Abraham. His toy son, Isaac. In the space behind the dollhouse stairs. Maybe a tiny desert on a table. A mountain maybe on it. The back of the house open to give them room. Upstairs, Sarah, the dollhouse mother, reading a story to her girl.

She had twigs for toes she fingered
little holes in the ground she made
a scaffolding of branches with her
voice she made a woods.

The dollhouse daughter listening with a placid look on her face as if she had openings in her head.
Elizabeth

for Elizabeth

The eye is looking for a thing, like a pine, yes, a pine, with similar things around. Pines complete the picture, along with a pizza sign, a cement sign, and a real sign. Come in, the mouth opens to say, even before the bell stops ringing. An empty glass, from France, dries in the cloudy room. The trusted room. Relax, the dust says, the eye sparkles but can’t invent. All of what is in this life is in this room, the place itself hides no actions and holds even less. And the pines, like kids’ voices in another yard, have experience which the eye follows. More signs appear, and the glass dries.
Apology Two

The wind chimes make a good image in court, but you, you are better than the wind attached, the corpus colossal strength, putting out feelers.

Also, blessed to see the turkey vulture doesn't come this far, just misses us, and the black vulture won't come up past Maryland, the place you lived, but were not born.
At the back of what we need sits an old cobbler howling, cackling with his sweater unzipped, his apron muddy, his moments chained to the worn black shoes he waves in his prosthetic hand. Easter is coming, even though no one believes in it here. I would bet, though, that some are envious and would accept the offer of throwing off the rock after only three days, throwing it like a duffel bag into a stream over which your life has always been hanging, throwing it and feeling like you've slept deeply for once and then asking for clothes, and putting them on without too much thought, and asking what else there is you might be able to seek, and then seeing it, fairly simply, and then . . . to forget. Yes, there may be time for that as well.
when I was ten I loved to buy little plastic dolls from Japan about a dime each

baby dolls ready for the imprint of my love
a Tinbergen mommy gull and her chicks

learning to return an acknowledgement yes I know you
I used Kleenex to wrap them up as carefully as the Babe

in their swaddling clothes they smiled back at me
their Kewpie grins always intact always there for me

add a couple of years and many ice cream cones
plus the car that knocked down my Schwinn bicycle

my hands were shaking afterwards thinking what will my parents say when they see the dents oh boy will I catch hell

the guy who saw it happen and me sprawled on the street pulled over to see if I was okay tried to straighten the bike

told me he had a girl my age
are you sure you’re okay he asked

my brothers and I played pioneers
with westward hopes Ward Bond forever circling

our wagons into a DNA ellipse that liberated us
into imagination to fly yet we remained forever locked to Earth

while our cat watched us a little Phoenix
with her invisible wings folded over her back just so

as she licked one pure white paw and then the other
the little plastic dolls applauded silently
my father would walk home in the warm summer night
smoking a Camel and probably thinking what is the meaning of it
all he had some
talents you know like building furniture and fences
carefully painting them white

but not painting a future no he was not so good at that
but one night we were walking home it doesn’t matter where
we had gone but always we will be walking home and look up
at the deep night sky and seeing the Midwestern stars

and the falling star the falling star so clear overhead
like a diamond look Dad look Dad and then too soon he gestured
 idly toward
the jars of medication the pills look at all this crap I have to
take to keep alive
he told me and he looked so sad in his tiny office

he gave me a wan smile and I was full of youth in a new coat
with a bottle of champagne for New Year’s Eve under my arrogant
arm and I
announced I intent to celebrate and he said you go ahead you go
ahead
thinking probably he would rather opt for summer

he would choose summer nights anytime
with carpentry to think about or walking home from the movies
when we once upon a time shared the stars overhead and did not
have to
look for them now
roaring
like some watery
sea monster
an enormous scroll
unrolls
its icy green
crashes against me
swallows my body
in its swirling riptide
sucks me down
to the sandy bottom
in its frenzied moment
of insanity

sometimes at night now
eyes shut tight
deep in a dream
I am sucked back
drowning in blackness
fighting to breathe

gasping for air
struggling upward
I emerge

sunlight waves
ripple over me
In
a
silence
notable
for
the
amnesia
so
often
accompanying
shock
or
sudden
interference,
mocko
jumbies
stride
on
stilts
that
grow
like
a
dead
man's
hair.
The
known
run
between
bearings
versus
the
bone notion of growth, as if one makes touch the thinking of.
Through a hole in the fence
a rabbit slips and disappears.

Invisibility sticks to whatever brushes against its barbs, as does a theft.

Gods in our own way, we think we exist.
IMPORTANT: IT IS A VIOLATION OF FEDERAL LAW TO USE DEATH IN A MANNER INCONSISTENT WITH ITS LABELING.

EASY DIRECTIONS
1 Cut out DEATH of your choice. Skin should be clean and free of oils.

2 Remove clear, protective top sheet.

3 Place DEATH face down on skin.

4 Wet back of DEATH generously with water . . . press down.

5 Wait 30 seconds . . . (don’t hurry). Slide off paper backing, wipe lightly with water.

6 Your DEATH will stay for 3-5 days . . . even while swimming and bathing. You may wash lightly with soap and water.

To Remove: Scrub with alcohol or baby oil, especially under the rim, the hard water ring, and below the water line.

Notice: Do not apply to sensitive skin or near the eyes.

HAVE FUN!
Ram and deer are cake figures from the Ostroleka District. Who shares the tilled-soil shares their beneficent aspect.

Rum cake, deer cake, song sung through the throat.

*Babka* is a round cake because the old woman’s dress was round, wore it when she made that reindeer cake.

Bells jangle the dress she wears she sewed egg shells on her cape. (Each time the doll is opened another, inside, appears . . .

1 quart scalded milk
2 dry yeast, 6 eggs
1/2 lb. butter, sugar, raisins, flour & salt.

Don’t forget she was a mid-wife, grandmother. Don’t forget to add one seed of rye.

Don’t forget “to let it bake for a while.”

In Ostroleka, some say that ram got drunk on sweet Hungarian wine. Some say, “Reindeer, keep yourself out of those fields.”

Or *Babka* just might bake you.

*Babka* (Polish): a bread
When she holds her lover’s book in her hands, his end notes flutter her loins like thumbed pages.

She feels his forefinger trace her face like a frontispiece. She swoons for bibliography, for the jewel-backed volumes where ideas begin. His primary sources press fingertips to her wrists and spine. Copyright encircles her waist. His eyes are inland as he studies; she can almost walk there reading titles. She longs to toss printed type confetti, feel it tumble around her, feel him rub words into the skin on her neck whispering this is what I know, my love.
ANNE GILES RIMBEY

Medusa

Her hip bones snap and she widens her gait for the heaviness in her womb, stepping carefully over stone men, stone women, stone children. The newest glows like a banked coal. She brushes serpents from her forehead; they nip her fingers. Even her wings feel weighted. All for the heaven of coupling with a god.

What young goddess resists the kiss of a deity? How classic to be cursed. Women can be so hard on each other.

Last night she dreamed a man slid his back along her flank, face averted. Her scales crumbled to gold powder. Particles sparkled his shoulders like mirrors. She never did see his eyes. Now sun warms her scales. She leans on the arm of a petrified man, hands open-palmed before him. The babes shift within her. She feels a mother's second chance with the cosmos. By the breadth of him against her belly, one will have her wings.
With green vision she attends to Mozart's
Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, that dark art,
And feels it woven with fresh-fathered seas,
Breathes its beats as her heart bears repeating.
A whole note's but a quarter of her past —
This keeps her married to the summer grass.
She recalls how rhythm can ripen, compose
To apocalypse and how Mozart flows
As natural as breakers breaking to
Sunrise with a looking-glass. In this mood
She beholds a blue sensuousness, a
Cascade of sound, seas that season both ways
Sound keeps feeding, reflects, and weighs her soul
And makes listening fields, the world’s blood, show.
A danger in easy friendliness is you may cotton to a fool, especially if you’re happy in your attack and don’t listen. Certain protozoa have killed more people than all the wars in history, e.g., the trypanosome hopping from fly to cow to you. Pretending to be something else you may get screwed (trypan equals screw). Midgut and salivary gland, the lecture is full of juicy terminology. Metaphor is as translucent as the vitreous humor; you don’t even notice it’s there. You can neither advance unimpeded nor retreat to where you were. Where you were is gone; where you will be isn’t yet. Just as the colonial powers came to native lands, fell asleep and stayed, so bacteria colonize your health. The pornography you sent for arrived from England. The box was marked, “Erotica — Open Only If you Can Read the Language!” Rich thatch, thatch mat. Just as the colonial powers came, parasites poop in your blood stream and the colonists, eager not to die of endemic diseases, invent cures that work on native populations too and improve the sanitation for the whole area by draining swamps, issuing hammocks and poisoning the rats organically. Improvements in horticulture follow. Diet becomes a matter of choice. Exercise provided by work on the new crops gives everyone nice calves, and the idyll is over.
RUSTIN LARSON

*Imitations*

A bit like the cellophane used in plays
to imitate the surface of water
the skin of the river glimmers —
a bit like birds that hover, lost in the power
of flight, the wavelets flash —
or like a glade ignited with lightning,
or like a handsome man
rotting in maximum security, with the glazed
tiles of the wall reflecting the single bulb
and reminding him of the diamond-like river
he used to swim in as a boy — how his
wet body flamed on the shore — a child
of living light — something like the hole
in the cloud from which Jacob's ladder beams
and imitates the spray of a garden
hose set on fierce, out of which arc jewels
the daughter he murdered once caught
in her open hand.
Twenty women wade in this river, 
bags of clothes floating 
beside them, half-submerged, 

each stone worn smooth 
by grit, soap and cloth. 
Their wet sarongs are knotted 

around breast and waist in thick, 
concealing layers; the exposed skin 
is plump with moisture. 

They rub and rinse; they talk 
about their homes; this isn't new. 
But I am, sitting to the side, 

pale, sockless feet dipped in, 
legs bare to thigh. I'm here 
to soak up local color, something real. 

It isn't rude to stare — 
the opening of my bag discussed, 
the pack of gum (a conspiratory laugh). 

At river's edge the water stills 
the image of their mundane scrubs, 
my idleness, reflects their smiles on mine.
The children here know English
enough to greet, to ask
for chocolate, biscuits, and pens.
From the lip of the dark khaki pool
of shared water where they fill
their metal tins, their mothers frown
and stare, starved into the exotic
beauty of models. They do not answer
attempts to be polite; covering their faces
from the side with a swath of shawl,
they nod and pass, their eyes
locked on yours with no hint of shyness,
as if to say Everything expected
we can accept.
Prowess Endless, the wipe boy, angry at himself for not living up to his Christian name, tossed an ice cube in the deep fat fryer at Hardee's with the hope that he would receive a punishment that fit his crime. Immediately the ice cube cracked, spraying all the wrong people with hot oil. The girl he had a crush on. Nice manager Stevenson. Friend Twick, the empathizer.

Before emptying the dishwasher of the clean dishes Darcey dipped her hands in the bucket of cold chicken gravy on the kitchen counter. It made her feel better to get the plates dirty again right away. Just one more thing she wouldn't have to worry about later. One more circle completed.

After middle-aged Milton made middle-aged Tetonilia a yearning adolescent again by caressing her pituitary gland he was over there every night at seven sharp, bearing a bottle of strawberry wine and the cordless blow dryer of her dreams.
Sacrifice

Bedded in the center of the wide pasture they pop their split eyes.
Something moving by the fence . . .
sliding along the wire.
The lead ewe drops her ears, her head;
all return to sleep.

In the morning, as I walk to their shed
pistol in palm, pail full of apples,
I think they are sheared dreams,
headed for the Coldspot humming in the basement.
Arctic clouds rise when I lift the lid;
it’s little light casts shadows among the packages.

Understand, they are like rabbits puttering,
sunset glowing through their leafy ears, animals baffled by soft wings, soft as their own breathing . . . the great horned owl at dusk

that miraculously hit the powerline last week.
My dog sniffed its still, electrifying form where it dropped beside the pole.
I put some breast feathers in a vase where afternoon sun warms them,
releasing a light musk of skunk, that good soul
digging worms on the lawn snatched up, twisting in the talons beneath the sharp stars.

The sheep clatter into the shed,
baa, nose the pail, baa for me to do something . . .
covered with an ice-disk.
Neither could I leave the owl alone.
I chopped off a foot, big as a child's hand,
pulled the tendon with pliers and tied it off,
cinching the talons on a white beach stone.

Like a kid I keep it around,
to signal my flock to step forward
wide-eyed at my hands, the frost-soft fruits
shoved one by one into their mouths
that drip sugar and spit,
unamazed at what I must deliver precisely then
with my other hand, willingly.
Breaking the ceiling law
our neighbor wags his red and white Piper
over our house, mowed fields, green
'71 International pickup and orange tractor
to let me know he will be thinking of us,
then drops over the ridge
to circle his mother’s place goodbye
before becoming that gull-speck
westward, beyond Corn Hill.

Speaking of getting smaller,
as grief does, I still see Jo Ellen,
striding in her yellow jacket
from Shop-n-Save, men
fumbling their groceries.
Her boy-lover hovered the coffin,
worried her last words (my wife was there)
as if they were rats.
May he jog all night in a dangerous park.

Another one poemed the acrid glads,
cardinal and white, leaning in from urns,
solicitous, in every corner of the room.
Ironic . . . any victim’s language.
Hell, we all wanted her.

So what has this to do with overflight,
except to downplay speculation?

A tiny, aged mother hanging wash
waves a red sock at her fly-boy son.
A town’s water tower stands
like a teed golfball. A small,
blue and green planet
gets worshipped by astronauts through a sulfurous gauze.

Or, looking up, half-blind, inspired by the drone, God’s yawn, there’s his cute plane, my pal buzzing among the aimless gulls.

I want to yell, “Hey, I’m here, getting smaller! Here are my toys!”
In a field of fallen gold.
Her hair.

Loopy thoughts. None of them land. She was a real heart attack, diving out of the noon sun over all the sitting ducks quacking on the marsh below the chapel where the Machias turns salt as any wife.
She had grown from the bulb of a sea flower, from warm waters and salt into hot spew and froth. All manner of steams, ballads and wave shapes her domain.

And he?

He was taken full made from a granite egg, hatched in secret in a cold, icy cave. The seasons dressed him with their motions and time and its measure were his lot.

One was frost, the other froth.
One was blood, the other skin.

Where did this begin?

In the place of equal agreement. The zenith of each stitch, in the line above the eyes where the scalp etched its sign;

in the wave and in its curve, in the shore of mustard sand, in the cave and in its mouth, limned with ice.
At a black mine, a hole filled with salt. Night time sparkles with moon, the mineral eats at people's skin. Where we fill with choking at the gray white. But the walls are black and rough, wet with puddles of last week's rain. The way our rains puddle at the base of our bodies when we have been fighting or eating or smoking. We speak and hear echoes. It is the night time and hands rough with working look for one small flower.
KEN WALDMAN

The Den, February

A grizzly cub
lies dreaming
of August heat,
green brushy
tundra between
salmon creeks,
blueberries sweet
as fish eyes,
bushes prickly
as fish bones,
hills easy
as meat.
My aunts' names rolled
from my father's tongue in greeting: Lucia,
Celestina. And their eyes
genuflected before we feasted on rituals
of linguini with sausage, red wine, antipasto,
and prayers for people marrying or dying,
people dead. Around their necks, thin chains
suffered the prominence of the tarnished crucifix
either wore, suffered summer's sticky heat,
suffered their church bulletin.

Their wrists grazed
the surface of Grandpa's long table, their hands
spired like the steeples we made
during catechism: thumbs arched,
fingers touching tips before
unfolding faithful in the pews
of our palms.

They offered psalms
from that morning's mass,
confessions for the church's congregation
who lifted sacred hearts with their sins
to the god they preached in capital
He. And my father's voice rose
into homily for that day's work
blessed by his body's strong sermons.
They prayed in hymn
he would find one day to rest.

Only Italians
had names when they spoke: Santori and Santilli,
Petrarca, Pastore. Any others were
reduced to Frenchman or Polack, Irishman,
Portuguese. Their immigrant village rose again with its mills and tenements, the train which led away twice daily, the families extended by how they prayed.

And dusk grayed

the chains on their necks, their wishes confessed in their prayers of goodbye: they prayed that our whole family might find communion; they prayed that all their children might find prayers to extend our family name.
With one swing of a club
I lost my sons:
one so dreadfully still,
the other a wild beast,
the bringer of murder into a world
whose every morning was once
a soft wind in my hair.
God would call this latest crime
of our first falling away.
Blessed be the wisdom of the Lord.

Why couldn’t Cain break Eve
to the ground instead?
She’s past the age of bearing sons,
of our groping in sinful pleasure.
She grows smaller each day,
a taunting mouth, and skin
turned to leather in the wilderness
the Lord has settled us in.
Praise Him for this gift.

The Lord’s gifts make my head ache
with their spidery complexities.
I am worthy only to lower my head
and tear my cloak
when His hand falls upon me
with a fraction of its full strength.
I deserve every ounce of His crushing,
for crawling after Eve into sin —
curse the beauty I still see
in her serpent’s curves.
ROBERT COOPERMAN

Chocolate Cake

After the funeral she was ravenous from months of nursing her husband, his appetite gone with his eighty-five years.

She watched him shrink, like a balloon puckering as it loses air; no delicacy could entice him from disappearing.

At the grave, she dissolved tissue after tissue. Then with her daughters, she returned home and when one of them asked if she’d like something to eat, she beamed, “Chocolate cake,” and gobbled it as if someone would take it from her.

The second slice she savored like the ice cream cone on that summer day of her first date with Joe. He had marveled at her tongue, elegant as a tigress.

Later, she and her daughters would cry tears bitter as years of famine, but now, they ate and ate, life adamant in its hunger.
Lost in the melted folds of earth,
Liquefied in fondling waves,
I stroke through spiral epitaphs,
Recognizing names — of sister
Minus swimmer’s wings, swings
That float like souvenirs
Through forgotten layered air.
What shall the rain remember?
Whatever intersects this foam
Like dreams of liners and the floor
The passengers pretend to dance.
While every level of the ship
Shivers in convected wind,
She fills the final void; the sky unfolds.
Quick strums of the gypsy’s guitar soothe, while visions of horse hooves echo. Strong odors of spices permeate the senses and the subtle scent of foreign cigarettes seeps through, like dirt castles and withered flowers with wine petals drooping like the shoulders of a sagging willow wondering if its time to weep, the dispirited two are enticed by the uncertainty of returning to familiar faces and a land with dismally gray butterflies.
The Cheater

So simple, so seductive
like the slinky black dress that hangs in my closet
the man is who loves to be loved.

Sincerely sinful, satisfaction guaranteed
like lonely nights gulping gallons
of mocha swirl ice cream which leave a faint white rectangle
on the table where there used to be only coffee stains.

The subtle twitch alongside his eyebrow just above his strongly
defined cheekbone is barely noticeable as it moves nervously
at the thought that he will never be found out.
BRIAN JOHNSON

Self-Portrait with Thunderbird (1976)

The countryside. Rushes and grass. Charming notes of birds. So we sit up and enjoy it. We pour the margaritas: one smiles, another recites. Beauty comes to dominate our mood, and how beautiful it is, the craggy hills surrounding our bedspread.

Then comes the shade, a time-elapsed drapery that moves without moving. You sit like a tiny statue on the grass. Nature, instantly still, registers our mood. Crickets regale and bore us. As do leaf-colors and leaf-notes. The river is darker; the moon bigger, and steadier.

These forms lying on a rock. This valley. Admiring the dormant car, I think of you. In boots and a raincoat, furious, one of the great baroque masterpieces. How can I say such things? Are you not the muse? I know. A broken trumpet does not lie.
Self-Portrait in the Tub, or Gloxinia

The tub is seven feet long, bone white, and shifts and rocks in the sand as a midsummer wind comes off the bay. The warm, foam-crowned waters of the tub, where no one can reach me, where I close my eyes to the disciplined world of my father, grow cooler as my kids and their ships and sandcastles drift away, barely noticing my failures. I should be at my desk, writing, but the poem that I loved Friday, that described the deer and the poplar in one word, fills me with shame on Saturday. So it must go on like this, the work and the uncertainty, until I am no longer conscious, or conscious in a way that eliminates all the statues from the world, and all the battles. Then I will find Gloxinia, the muse of water, who sleeps on a bed of pennies and changes her body, from violet to postal blue. Then I can stop crushing my body and my youth, and love Gloxinia. Her game is silence, the silence a one-legged heron orchestrates for the moon. The silence of the feeds and the fog and the woodland snow. The silence I can never possess, though I write until my hair turns silver and no one recognizes me, not even my son. As I close my eyes, I feel the skyline and Gloxinia's endless sheets of rain.
The Bridge of Sighs

The 16th century Ponte dei Sospiri connects the Ducal Palace with the Venetian prisons. Its chamber is divided lengthwise by partition so that persons going and those coming will not meet.

— Sturgis’ ILLUSTRATED DICTIONARY OF ARCHITECTURE AND BUILDING, 1901

Hanging vertically from the capstone above the thirty-odd-storied building our country’s flag seems just the flag for a prison: its rust-red bars and the narrow night-blue window that contains the stars. In the jurors’ waiting room I’m looking out past the rain over to Franklin Street where, on about the fifteenth floor, a walkway covered by thick fish-tank glass connects this courthouse to the prison. From time to time the glass-distorted lawyers and prisoners appear, suspended in watery limbo above Manhattan. Trapped in the jurors’ room, dozens of us, judged unfit to serve because we were victims of crime, are returned here like repeat offenders day after day for yet another judge to try us.

If by lunchtime I’m not picked I’ll visit Trinity Church again. Yesterday an organist was playing a fugue,
pipes bellowing fire and brimstone.
Such a harsh, resounding lesson
might have woke the dead

but the men and smattering of women
asleep in the pews
held fast to their sleep.

One man pulled his soiled
woolen cap down over his face
and shifted closer to the wall.

I walked to the empty chancel, where I could turn
and look up at the player,
wondering if he knew his ‘audience’
might be dying — or dead. He went on.
They seemed to go on, too,
despite the pipes’ booms and heralds,
as though each sleeper were beyond
the ordinary range of earshot,
isolated gods
drifting in free fall though a silent
universe, their sickly sleep
message enough
that they wanted to live.
I remembered, the night I was held
against the stairwell,

how I prayed my silence
would keep me alive.
I remember thinking, calmly,
the silver gun protruding
from his unzipped jacket
might have been a spike,

like the ones that secured the criminal
to his cross.
Maybe I pictured this because he

wore a cross around his neck
which he sucked on
as he told me what to do.

The bad dreams came later, the sweats,
paranoia so fierce I couldn’t look at a man
(even the one who lived with me)

without feeling my flesh tighten
as though I were packed inside a cell.
If I could meet him again, if we could

redeem one another — but its chamber divided
so that persons going and coming
will not meet — I’d tell him:

gods of division pace the bridge between our
actions and who we’ve forgotten
we are. On and on

they play their irrelevant music
while the boy you were burns
along with the rest of us.
ERIN PIOREK

Sunset in Monterey

My mouth was a desperate land
where thirst was misunderstood
and cups were lined with rabbit hair.

My lips burned with the lingering taste
of a sour year
in which the birds of these mountains
had turned to wrinkles.

It was late June
the sea beside us as we drove
through that brilliant amber.

And for a time
I heard singing again
and my pain fit
comfortably in a shoe box.
i drank thread
(because i could not swallow
rope) to strangle
the deafening hiccups
that used to echo
sweetly from the black
angora well where
you lived
until November.
MEGAN SOUTHARD

Lament

I tried to take to her
my emptiness
but found her
empty-palmed, empty-wombed.

I don’t think she ever made it
out of Nazareth —
in those days they stoned a woman
for that kind of thing.

Her bride-groom never heard the voice,
he probably threw the first rock.
Son-of-Man, Son-of-Man,
we nailed you in the womb.
Dirge From Liberia

for John Moor

This year the earth will yield no children.
The unsown mother stretches her broad, dusty arms outward towards the questioning horizon, "Where are my golden fruit???

A honey sky, whose clouds poured their sugared tears onto fallow fields, answers him with silence.
This season, there are no loving hands to bring the birth.

Even in America, he could hear the raging song of the bitter unrequited sky, sending her angry wind under his still, unswung door.

At her he shook a fist "How dare you ask me this? With your wide gray eyes you stood by and watched those booted cowards bind my legs, and I fed the earth with my own blood . . . .

I haven't any yams for you."
When word did find its way, as he knew it would intrude in a cracked bell across the hovels of the city, he collected his pots and paints. This time he did not wheel his stuff into another flat, nor did he invent his name again, for the hundredth time, as when he cut his stone for that final disappearance of Old Man Mad with Drawing.

When the mighty shogun called, he brought to him a rooster, a caged old bird, uncaged to put action into art, to daub with fresh red claws a flowing floor of exotic blue. He pockmarked his way across a space of watery illusion while the court nodded and smiled and tittered. He evoked for them autumn littering the river: red maples paring down, spare dogs bleeding and guts of fish freckling the current.

After holiday on the water, behind the mats of mandarins the rooster was chased down by servants of the court and taken by the neck. Then petted. Then fed.
Waking up like any other day
Opening your eyes to the city's wasteland

Hands that grow and conceal themselves
Bones of shadows in the surroundings

His image reflects a sleepwalker's gesture
He fixes his tie and goes to embrace the air
of others  Daily act which is neither his own
nor anyone else's

An awakening like any other
Opening your eyes at the wasteland suffocating
inside

You remember what is not possible to remember in a
flash of lightning  Facing the sea that surrounds your memory
invaded by bland boats  Without leaving
footprints you walk along the dock of the Cote d'Azur
As always the water trembles under the skin

You wrap yourself in your childhood coat
to roll through the winters between gentle
knees  Doves or pigeons would fall from the
trees  The cats in full cry at the flight
But this shipwreck is nothing new . . .

Biblical parks to be conceived out of sin
Bones of shadows among the branches breathing
eucalyptus  Head split to the unique night

That fugitive presence

Where I was there was a desert sown with
stones I waited for the visitor growing in spite of me within me
So liminal and forbidden
I knew how to make myself rubber in my dreams to bounce off every precipice
Opened my window looks out to the city onto that secret place to the dock for my little tie

An awakening like any other this gust of images leaves me hanging on the plains
Our condition can be modified
pulling one's head and turning it into a top
spinning towards the center of the earth

Let us scare away the formulae in forms
to allow contact with living flesh

It is not about naming
visited places
but of altering them with biting looks
so that they cannot sleep
and open basket-like pores
receiving fresh fruit

Our condition
is to make thin-air-tops
pursuing our own faces
I imagine you alone, building a silence against the world, a space where you devote yourself to deciphering these lines which hope to find you.

You are the secret reason for my thoughts. My life is only an extension of your own; my words aspire to assemble before your eyes, they run to meet you like little shadows, as the road meets the traveller's footsteps.

If I search my memories for the living water that runs between your hands, it is because I sense nothing of mine exists but that it reaches you.

An accomplice penumbra wraps you up. To draw near me, you retreat from the world, you exchange it for this labyrinth which names you, lies in wait for you. On some of the walls, there are sentences fashioned strictly for you.

You and I look for the same thing. We search the same bodies for some primordial magic.

Attentive, your eyes make signs that invent me, invent us.

You live in each accent, each penstroke.

You are constantly in me, reader of silences, reader in shadow, inquisitor of my darkness.
Around the barren whiteness of the page
time rehearses its music
dream inhabits the desert
an occult writing reveals
little green lizards
rehearsing the rite,
incessantly dancing
penstroke, calligraphy
paradise-inferno of bodies
Everything awake
the blood's tom-tom
feast of the senses
which sing in silence
Green lizard, stone reptile
unlikely symbol
dark squib of ink
A kind of inaudible music
opens the way and strips us
from within
of whatever we've come
wearing. Am I blind
or do I for the first time
behold these marvellous trees?
The fruit distills the colors,
shining.
powder blue sky, red
and white hurricane flags in the Gulf of Mexico, grey
car in the drive, pink sheets, yellow
painted walls, black and white
photographs
and the end of the last cigarette in this pack
burns
orange-red

and this is October.

he says (rather romantically) that the leaves are tomato colored
today.

I tell him there is a green
vacancy
that occupies the center ring
in this circus
of Indian Summer.
Tonight the house is alone.
No one interprets
the washings of the stars,
or the thick-lipped silence
of a fingernail moon.

Snow banks against
the corner window.
An aladdin lamp
slightly hisses.
The stove gargles
red-eyed coals,
ruby beetles puff
ringlets of heat
throughout the house.

A rocker, empty-hearted,
stares ahead.
Nods cautiously,
as a sudden wind
tells the door
to open.
Her red poppies quiver in their jar, as if frightened, as she was yesterday risking fence and field. She had had to have them, their petals were tissue.

The girl wears a yellow blouse. She hurries to compose words, hurries before a knock on the door. The birds temporarily are silent. A bell clangs in the valley. How many days remain? How many before she sees her friends, they share her stories?

Outside the window her mother walks in the garden carrying a basket. She brushes the poppies with her fingertips. Even her delicate hands cannot feel the petals, they are too light to exist.

A black cat circles the house. Her store of bad luck has turned so inward, she scratches away her own hair. In a shape signifying what? The cat could be herself.
She hears her father’s falling easel, hears a ripping canvas, his curses. For her, the mountains opened. They invited her to see them. She tastes the cigar in his mouth, his Cuban breakfast, strings and ashes.

Yesterday she petted the dog, against all good advice. What a lonely little animal! She saw the red ticks gorging inside its curved ear.

Here was a real lesson, a lesson of life. Her hand on its warm belly, grazing between rows of purple teats.

Empty chairs surround a table beside fig and olive trees. Perhaps a party will take place, perhaps already has, her party, each boy traveling alone for a single chance at her company. She agrees to meet them only as a group.

Beneath her room, the sisters who clean their house prepare today’s meals, which her mother will praise. The muffled voices could be
laughter, the women joking
of their husbands, of the night
before, of what great and
needy gentlemen they became
after the wine was served.

The girl closes the volume
of private verses. She presses a
hand onto her skin.
Her palm feels cold, her
chest hot. She is irritated by
the fear of interruption.
All this time to herself, and
no solitude. Look at the sky!
What would she do today?
It is too gray to walk
the beach. Deep in the house,
a door closes. She hears
footsteps. She yearns for
them to turn in her direction.
Notice the legs of the chair thrust upward at the school desk, as if horns in attack, pointed threats like the now of Lorca’s dream. That’s the language he was raised with. The boy knows the romance of bulls and art.

He has studied the Bronze Age sculptures, the Picasso sketches. They concur that the modern world begins as Pedro Romero saves an aristocrat fallen from horseback, distracts the bull with his own hat.

Or perhaps it was Romero’s grandfather who brought an era in on foot. Well, stories differ, but so does truth from what happened. The boy knows of Romero’s greatness. Killing six thousand bulls without a scar,

his death at 84 in his birthplace of Ronda, which boasts the world’s most ancient ring. An arena of stone. The frown of Belmonte, the long-limbed grace of Joselito, the return at sixty of that national rogue El Cordobes. He has learned. Veronica, media veronica, breast pass. Puntilla, a dagger stabbed into the bull’s head when he refuses to die, sits with a black tongue out, pissing himself, shiny in his own blood.

He knows a country so enamored of duende, a term he comprehends only by sound, that no one separates the real from the dance. He knows this last especially, sometimes feels
he has lived his whole life that way.

The fear in his heart he doesn't speak of. Unable to divide instructed passions — attacking horns, photos of victory or shame, the arc of a human scream — from a submerged reverence for life. *Six thousand bulls.*
I inhale all air I have ever taken, exhale February
warmed into a balloon of the girl I might have been.
    A magnet pulls me to finish; crowds are a neck
arched as I break tape after tape. Gloves stripped
from my hands, I float weighted by blue ribbons.
    No gold medals ever dripped off my breasts.
The boy who ran the anchor leg of the quarter mile
thrust a silvered loving cup between them. Shifting
    my roses, I kissed him on the cheek and edged
onto the platform to reign over the meet. No sweat,
    my legs were dried petals, half curled with calves
tight and thighs tense. Still conscious of their size,
I cannot breath on the hall mirror and finger a profile
    or outline what I could have been. I do see the woman
    I am, pulling hair back to tighten skin around my eyes.
Your words, reruns of prisoners in a pirate film walking the plank, you jumped in San Francisco, hand wrapped in your own blood bandana, your father’s blood pushing out to air through pores that could not deny you. At ten, you were lighting up Camels without filters, knew that a jacket didn’t leave the same marks as a belt. Dope sick at Thanksgiving, you ranted about nine months of signing in on a yellow pad printed in black: National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The night watch belched you down white tile threading a beige corridor, your hands in jeans to stop the shaking. On paper sheets that ripped with weight, your father would be holding a Dixie cup of orange juice for his pills, his arms once pythons now stems leafed with scars latticed over crosses and death unit insignias. He would begin with the skin, then the helicopter droning like the West Haven VA ventilation system, the elephant grass, the necklace he wore of yellowed ears beaded with kidney stones. Always ending with the tiger cage, he’d boast about earning his blood bandana again, then again. A gallon of Dewar’s every two days didn’t drown drums beating the funeral march for him you sounded out on a xylophone of bones he had brought home to you from the razor mountains of Pleiku, South Vietnam.

Some days sitting on the rocks at Morgan Point, your words would lift; caught in the down draft, you would be drawn back by a chalky bird lying undissolved on the wave’s tongue like
the pill you found too bitter to chew: your father stalking, spearing shadows, leaving holes for eyes. Unerring as a gull breaking a mussel, you would probe until you found veins you could rip open.

Like the yellow beaks flipping up strips of grey popcorn into the light, wings dissolving to air, you kept plunging to feed the pain you needed to keep Charlie at the wire, to keep you from sleep.
Visiting with James Merrill
at his Grave

In Connecticut, when the Latin King Arsomo Diaz from Fair Haven was gunned down, his street name Ra-Ra was spray painted in red to cover the spot. No chiseled letters mark your ashes, just a wood cross, handmade from two sticks streaked in green and thonged by maroon leather. A sign reads: Stonington Cemetery Incorporated 1849. Diamond rectangles pattern two wrought iron gates which have been left akimbo. At the Hyde granite obelisk, I bear left; at Erskine M. Phelps' Greek temple, I go right. Paths are not human ones rutted out by hand but by the years giving in to natural contours of land. There's been no rain for twenty five days and only a four wheel could get through to you when it comes. In spite of the drought, a brushfire consuming Long Island, moss blanketing your grave is green, sheltered as it is by two oaks. I have no need here for clouds buoyed like prayer to give me intermittent shelter from the sun. Hanging over the geranium and dusty miller crowded in plastic clay bracing the cross, three low branches of the closest oak are barren. I'm too heavy, too old to monkey up the trunk and break them off. I find a fence I can climb over to come back with a pole saw after the caretaker leaves at dusk because the sign at the entry reads: Any person desiring to plant or remove other than flowers shall obtain the approval.
of the Superintendent. I know cold will numb the living
oak, hammering dead limbs to spears of ice that could
unhinge to pierce your grave. I’m concerned not about
the surface or that your spot will be forgotten but that
shoveled from the flames, your body which left so much
behind in this world, rest in sun that lights Sandover’s end.
Sunday morning, nose burnt by soot, 
he leaves Otel Tunali, buttoned up 
in a taupe suit, infirm bent, fast 
shuffle of a twig broom, beret red. 
Acacias dangling fuzzy shoestrings, 

kebab frizzling on hot rotisserie, 
at a curb he enters a mosque blue 
as Deb’s eyes. A foreign service 
wife, she wanted a different way, 
her potted roses in a same foyer. 

A shopkeeper’s squeaky squeegee 
strokes windows aflame with gold 
 jewelry worn to an embassy soiree. 
A Barclay lit, gauzy smoke hangs 
his reveries. Pretzels steaming 
on skull trays at a soccer match 
are chewed by saucy couples clad 
in stonewashed jeans. Bathroom 
scales on a rug by a spice stall 
weigh his chances to settle down.
Make-up

i place mascara
on these eyes

brush blackness
over the lashes

trace the liner

and smudge the blush

so there are no
divisions so no one
can tell

there is a difference

between this rouge (a top coat)

and the foundation.

i roll lipstick
over these lips
like a blue tune

fit shiny earings
into the holes

muster a pose.

but this face
in the mirror
is a protest
against liquid facades.
these eyes are missing you.
this face is strained.
and a smile shakes in the corners waiting to come down like a loose slip.
i have always known
my many dependencies on you:

the extra laugh after
a tough day

the way
you cook food making magic
with a sparse refrigerator
and an old stove

and your big hands
always generous with a hug
a kleenex

your widowed fingers still wearing
the diamond wedding-band
IRENE JORDAN

Bolshoi Petroleum

This afternoon while walking over Red Bridge, an oil slick on the water below vaguely resembled Mikhail Baryshnikov doing his barre.
People come a long way just for this.
A kiss
from the coldest water fountain in the school:
A stand-up model with a foot-pedal, as well as
the traditional
thumb-knob trigger,
It is absolution.

Ice strobes in a crystal arc, and I
feel guilty intercepting
it. Numbs
the insides of my cheeks,
swirls down
my throat,
charges my temples to
cool electricity,
soothes my
stomach with sighs.

Its stream is hollow like a
bendy straw, it breaks
on the tin pan and
retreats
down the drain like
mercury might.

I stick my tongue out
to pant, and hope
that my teacher doesn’t think
that I’m taking a poop right now.
The coldest water fountain in the school is way too
far away.
Mother said “Once it’s done, it’s done.”
There’s no going back.
Trapped between tile walls and a glass door.
Hot water rinsing shampoo streaming down a face with eyes clenched closed.
Pondering the braveness necessary to take the first step.
Such a tiny space for transition.
Momentary breaks then wonderment wins, movement is made.
Leaving the nest, pushing forward both eager and scared.
Finally emerging from the steaming cocoon with smooth, scented, shaven legs.
Two drops of peppermint oil
on a cottonball tucked in the closet
freshens the air. A swipe of its ointment
anointing the brow relieves a headache.
A smear of its balm on the chest
-clears a path for breath.
But straight on the tongue, it burns —
like the hot sauce used at day care
to punish my son.
It was years before he told me.

One Christmas, making candy,
my mother touched my tongue,
her finger wet with peppermint oil.
She wanted me to know how some things burn:
flavorings, chlorox, the undiluted sun.
Even a woman’s feelings.
That’s why they charged her
with electrodes — to thin tears
she wouldn’t hold in.
There is a vast number of people in my mind and they all ask me the same questions. It gets quite trying. Nerve-trying. I have little stamina when it comes to patience. They ask me, "How long till we get there?" They ask me, "Are you sure you want to do that?" Very hazy. Very vague questions for made-up people in my mind, you know? What can I tell you guys . . . . Open your eyes. You know as well as I do who's a bastard and who's a king.

The mind of a thirteen year old is like no simile found. The blood of teenagers is not just thicker than water, but thicker than all other aged blood as well. When I was thirteen I flowed in such an interrupted state, from baseball game to highway rest-stop to mass on Sunday. The continuity of a mind recognizing life while being dragged through suburban killing fields is slightly more staggered than connecting dots.

Some refer to that realization stage in children's minds as coming of age or maturing, but it is not these things. And it is not the funeral of innocence, or the farewell party for all that was ever pure and good. Metamorphosing minds of pure honey bliss — struggling. Definitely struggling. The struggle is a form of freedom, and that is all we will ever know about what exactly these teenagers are turning into. Kids. Lumped-up children in age groups. My God, quit dividing children into age groups — that's why there aren't any more Mozarts or Einsteins, 'cus they aren't allowed to even learn those names until they are in the 10-12 bracket.

So quit asking me questions. We'll be there in 60 to 70 years and "Yes," I know what I am doing. Grow up.
Beyond a child’s ken:
urban restrictions
on pets, landlords
nixing kids, paydays
blown by alcohol’s
short fuse. In her kitchen
fragrant with baking bread
aunt persuaded me my cat
would never make it
in city traffic.
“Let her stay here
on the farm.”

I could respect
the argument for safety.
Didn’t fight to keep her,
for the last time spoke
gibberish of cat
into her exquisite ear.

It could be a mercy
the shock of first hearing
escapes me. The letter

three months later.
Learning how she died
nowhere near a car —
a cow crushed her
in the barn — did I cry,

or float an inch or two
above my body,
wishing her back,
scratching halfway
up the Christmas tree
as she had that winter,
invisible, shaking
ornaments and tinsel
so hard my aunt
a believer in ghosts
crossed herself.

Is it ever
a child's fault?
My fingers shake
lighting a cigarette
in this smaller kitchen.
laundry day August basket
dragged, the bent antenna tilts
off base (never straightened).
sweat dots
her nose, upper lip
arms weary, the water-soaked
clothes heavy, heat.
dry grass and prickly.
bugs clot mid-air.
weeding and tomato
season. lawnmower drone in the field familiar
raspberries yield
their quilted velvet,
overflow my brother’s bowl,
pleasure borrowed from the plant.
pliant stem
sacrifices them
to our afternoon outing.
this crazy wire’s
almost lying down.
she lifts the sheets,
clothespins clenched
between her teeth
labor killing her by degree,

killing time:
pitiful excuse of a laundry line

like everything
disintegrating before our eyes.
ALLEN MAHAN

Adventures in the White Room

“In a white room with black curtains is a station...” — Cream

4:45 A.M. Walk in, double-file, past security
Check point number 1), thru two electronically sealed
Windowless doors (that open via sensor) with
My fellow inmates: Amerasian, Mexican-American,
Native American, Armenian-American, Iranian-American;
I’m C.I.A.: Catholic, Irish, Alcoholic. There are
Women, too, mostly housewives, but some single
And young. It’s fifteen-minutes to the White Room.
Up camera-cornered elevators, down soundproof halls,
And after you’re in, that’s it; can’t split. There’s
No going back thru to the outside. Time clock’s fast
In the morning, slow at night. Hurry up and wait.
Thirteen hour shifts. Don’t like it? Can’t take it? Tough Shiite;
Quit. But you can’t, so you don’t, ’cause you’re hooked.
We wear white smocks and white gloves; blue masks and
Blue boots’ a white or blue pith helmet; they
Give us a choice. Upon dress-down I immediately search
The methanol supply to make absolutely certain that
The night crew hasn’t wasted it all. (I’ve ordered them
Countless times to push the acetate!) I’m a super: one of two.
My inmates hate me. I hate myself. This is how it is
Written — this is how it should be. We make insane
Amounts of money (an inane number of benefits)
For doing the exact same process over and over
In the same exact sequence in the same exact span
Of time. Everything is structured; everything is ordered.
They gaze thru microscopes (the only chaos is that
Which I create) checking “wafers” for imperfections
With a splotch of ink before slicing them into circuits
To be shipped to Nippon headquarters. It’s a living
Death, worse than any rivet-head in the ‘50’s on a Detroit line.
But the money makes it almost worth it. See? That’s how
We get them hooked. After the 1st order from Q.C.
I handed down was ignored and refuted by more than One pee-on I began to get an attitude. I went back To the methanol and had a snort, in hiding, I began locking people out if they were thirty seconds late. I fired a widow whose three daughters had moved back; Like a bouncer in a bar room fight, I tossed her out. I canned a man who’d been here eleven years, just four short of pension. He lost his benefits immediately And died of cancer earlier this year. I celebrated with two Snorts of meth. I relayed order number 2) “There is to be No more talking,” I told them. “Production’s lower Than low.” When some refused to obey I ordered glass-plate Masks painted black and welded onto their helmets. It was Weeks later (and innumerable bottles of meth) when Order number 3) came down: “No more eye contact! Don’t even fuckin’ look at me anymore!” I ordered sets And sets of square-steel blinders and strapped them Onto everyone of those sorry bastards so that They couldn’t even glance at one another! Not even At the plebeian next to them! I began to think that There was a problem when I started using a rubber-tipped Dropper to place the meth ever so gently onto My right eyeball, but then I came up with number 4) “No hands Anymore! Anyone!” It was brilliant! There wasn’t a whimper In the cage. I had conditioned them well. They’d learned. They followed directions and obeyed and were hooked. Oh, sure, a few restraints and handcuffs had to be applied, here And there, but generally the consensus was able to continue Staring thru their scopes and spurting ink-blots with their Right toes. Production tripled! I received an anonymous and secret raise and celebrated by introducing 6 milliliters of Methanol to my blood stream with an ink applicator. Oh, what a rush . . . The power! The images! The insightful orders! It was true pornososophical philotheology. I was a god and Everyone knew it. I could hardly breathe. I cranked
The pure recycled airstream and became lost in
The frenzy of the stainless-steel whirl. I could barely wait
Till 5 A.M. to catch my daily dose of death the very next day
In this crystal-clean palace of a White Room.
IZZY WRIGHT

Nightmares of a Man Asleep on a Couch

it is only in a small town where this sort of thing could happen:
  a boy in his room
  drinking from a tin can,
  resting his shoulders
  on a meat hook
  hung from a trapeze;
  freely floating above the floor,
  thinking of diamonds for ear plugs.

as for the weather,
  there is no rain.
  there is never any rain
  only clouds that dot the horizon
  like rosary beads.

he is naked now
  his clothes boiled off
  in preparation for the sun’s rising
  when a sliver of gold
  will play with his eyelids,
  prop them open
  to see his shadow
  cast long against the far wall.
Special Section
When you shacked up with Samantha on Schermerhorn
she walked around in the buff
and it turned you off.

Sexual harassment.
We were mere roommates.

And prior to that, classmates.

She knew you’d spent the worst part of a year
looking for a place to live
and when you turned up for class
utterly ashen pale and hoarse
muttering about the waste of life
she said she lived in a house with four
other women in Brooklyn and if it was
all right with them for a man to you know
break the semi-random symmetry
she would share with you her top floor
apartment though you should understand
it was really too small for two people
who weren’t really intimate
but she’d be willing to do it if
she could do what she always did
like walk around naked

“If it’s not a problem for you.”
I started to say “How could it be” and said “of course not.”

And of course this thought that she and I might have it off did flicker for an
instant in my brain and of course I switched it off . . . — not because I feared she
might get the wrong (or right) vibe, but because
something about Samantha made me wary.

Like a fool at a smorgasbord, I ignored my unease and agreed to the usual "split household expenses down the middle."

Samantha came and went in this or that stage of undress and I didn't look twice — proud of my reserve,

(a welcome respite from a life spend in ardent pursuit);

and spring had come to Brooklyn; Hoyt Street paraded its magnolias; the year's tensions began to unravel as I drowsed, book in hand, on Samantha's couch, while the smell of flowers wafted up from the garden below and the sunlight poured in through the window,

and each particle of dust danced, lit up like fireflies — sparks striving to maintain altitude.

*Spirits inhabit the flames; each swaths himself with that which burns him.*

~

Until Samantha opened the blinds that morning I hadn't known what grandeur lay beyond the fire escape's transparent weariness and dust,

what magnificence the anxious season kept under wraps until now, and how wonderful it was that she had placed the couch in an incongruous nook — a pure unnameable space —
(that would have confounded the most unscrupulous landlord's attempt to call it a half-room, or alcove . . .),

blessed with the grace to let light shower in, pour, flood
the area, without blinding us, without the hot house
effect that leaves you in a sweat and sends
you reeling toward the shadows or the deep
recesses of the cave . . . — .

*Why bring that in?*

*Sweating it out?*

She and I were both wrestling with Plato
in the heat of the seminar room, glistening with sweat,
sitting tight as we tried to think — to reconcile:

the ancient Greeks, the riots in the sheets,

street

dialectics, wave particles, the phenomenology of mind

as contradiction, as

embedded in Rameau's infantile antics

in mimicry becoming other ingesting selfless

mirror stage everything permitted scarcity "no longer a problem," praxis slow
to evolve.

I could not want someone so avid in wanting to be wanted —

Immeasurably less pain if money had been the source of our tensions!
Samantha flaunted herself.
You averted your eyes, rather gazed
upward, toward the floor above,
where Martha the librarian
lived alone
with the Collected
Everyone
in paperback
and, confess, your yearning for her brought back
ever earlier torments.

You roused in her a kind of fear.
You didn't have to lay a hand on her
for her to register the other
message: sheer
want; unsheathed desire.

In pure form, the distillate —

And you were too young —

Age has nothing to do with it —

To know —

You never know —

That terror is part

Inexorable —

Inseparable —

Of what you feel

In beauty's grip

"I lived at the end of beauty's reign . . ."
Sex with the librarian would have been
like a conversation in tongues, the best
kind!

We talked about books.

No, you talked. To cover up your nervousness. A tactic that . . .
don’t remind me . . . I’m still embarrassed . . .

You didn’t behave badly. You behaved terribly. Samantha was thrilled to discover that you were revolted by her and waited, panting, for the librarian’s footsteps on the stairs.

Women are divided.
In body.
Men.
In mind.
The simplism of that terrifies me
the silence
of bound horizons makes me feel
hemmed in
the world is a prison
when I am far
from what I love . . .

I'd find myself innocently flipping through . . .

There's nothing innocent about anything you do . . .

But I wasn't looking for . . .

Aware of . . .

A lingerie catalogue came in the mail —

addressed to you no doubt —

No. To my —

Then why did you feel compelled to look through it?

I like to.

But if you found yourself in that section of a department store
you lingered . . .

to maintain that tingling, the roots-of-your-hair sensation.

The dry air empty again without her.

And if someone you knew were to call your name
you'd jump — . . . guilty, unfocused, distracted —
as if caught committing a crime.

No, but it was the single intense
focus of this catalogue:
that women feel this pressure
to attract men. And keep them.
   A force every inch as
predatory as the male gaze.

The catalogue has women in poses
   more erotic than in
magazines meant for men's consumption,
where the model parts her vulva
   as if asking you to look
through it as through a keyhole
which it does not resemble
   unless the top
of the keyhole is parallel
to the hood of the clitoris.

Road-weary, I paused at a truck stop.
The women's magazines on the crowded rack all had

lingerie features — .

Generational?
The girls I knew in high school
and college and grad school
wore so little underneath
their skirts and shirts, little time
was spent on the time between
becoming intimate
and becoming — more — intimate . . .

And after years of that
the integer of children
made time stand between ourselves
and these “mature” ecstasies.
No — lingerie — no — lingering
No — whiling hours away —

Pining

Love-
sick

And the mannequins talked back.

~

PROMPTER

Then the volume of erotica arrived. Was it a sign? The woman

doing so many things to the other woman, finding her way into one

hole with her tongue, another

hole with her finger when her lover

called out ah, ah, (deep

sigh of release, momentary suspension

of pain and plunder, war and hope,
of kitchen chores accruing, of am-

bivalence dissolving, the knot

itself dissolving), the woman

on the chair, the standard issue

Samsonite they drag out
when the congregants exceed the pews over Easter and Passover,

begging now for her not to stop, (skirt yanked to hip,

no time to strip) and I understand even though I'm a man, I feel the same

longing warming me in being about — to come — the same

suffusion of self-forgetfulness which love is.

It was one of those parties where the older people who had all done interesting things talked together awkwardly, muttering ephemeral phrases, and I found myself — balancing my buffet supper on my lap — across from the boyfriend of the granddaughter of the guest of honor. (She was elsewhere being ogled.) He had just taken a course on cross-dressing and while real-life experiments were not required she thought he should try it anyway. At this point she rose from where she sat on the white sofa between two dignified presences in dark blue suits and joined us. "I rummaged through my closet and laid my clothes down on the bed for him to try on." And he said: "It was something to put on her dress. I could never have guessed how exposed and vulnerable I'd feel."

The whole notion of opening your legs endlessly, and letting another body into your body is so wonderfully intimate —:

why are there so many women alone? who can bear to leave them alone?

Women are mortal: every minute their bodies are reminding them of something to be done.
"No," the student continued, (having read your thoughts?), "my chest. I didn’t need breasts . . ."

To feel how women feel.

Like a gorge which surprises itself with its own immensity.

Pushing through the questions of dimension.

~

Stealing a glance at her looking at herself in the mirror.

"Can’t I ever walk around naked in my own home without you — or take a shower without you — or slip out of my pantyhose without — your love

The mounded tuft packed down and in behind the diaphanous nylon gear women wear.

Tee shirts, jeans, straplessness, ankle-length or mid-thigh skirts.

*One is no less erotic than the next.*

Dryness and tingling,

Wandering Sunset — alone —

Let down and down

By the barren hollow facades —
The celeb emptiness —
The characterless structures
Thrown up overnight
Asked to stay forever!
Ciro's and The Brown Derby
Like diarrhea
In the light
Of day, the lusterless
Gravel, and acned attendants
Suiting up in white
On white
For the night,
Impassive, anonymous,
Like the wrong woman.

And Samantha was so put off you didn't
want to watch her take a bath she said,

"This isn't working out. I want you to leave."

And so it was back to the Chelsea Hotel.
Everyone on acid.
Pinwheel eyes.
Art
Fictions
JOHN HIGH

Morning Baptism

The one walking the circle carries the child. “Pay attention,” she warns the boys gathering around with stones in their hands, already attempting to enshrine her. A small ceremony in this circle, a ceremony where the animals on the hill will speak our story she had once told them. Now she curses the crowd of them, falls silent again, aware of the apparent rivalry between these boys, each one ready to claim the kill. This is their chosen part after all. The horses on the road pushed aside to make way for her passage, yet there are other things to consider as she pulls the child closer inside. So much mirth among the drunkards, these thrilled by the sight of her and the bundle of broken bones. The younger girls start to take notice, become particularly merciless as they study the pride of the woman’s gait, her harsh words and darkened eyes. They begin to put aside their games to more skillfully taunt her along with the boys, spitting on their own dolls as a first sign, later biting off the plastic heads and laying them on the road as she passes. “She’s holding it,” one of the girls cries. “Look!”

She walks on through the first circle of boys, her hands trembling around the bundle of bones in a manner which resembles grace more than fear precisely because she continues to go forward, ignoring this hurried mass which will eventually fear even its own hurrahs. Her body trudging toward the blue grasslands out beyond them, toward the white birch trees, the fuchsia and the magnolias that shelter the lake’s burning water.

The stark white birds she notices, knowing she had decided to take on the child’s body in order to prepare for this journey, to better bare the pain since birth is no simple matter and there’s this preoccupation with love as a monumental event when one considers love. The animals had known this all along, though she hadn’t understood it herself at first. A telling of his story, she’s become a part of him now and won’t let them dissuade her. No, not after all of the dreams of their eventual reunion in another field. Let them all laugh she thinks, or prepare their stones, what do they know?

Their chants humming as a kind of music while they blithely follow, pulling at the hems of her skirt from time to time, touching underneath with crude hands. The boys’ hoarse jeers. No difference though, the sky’s open enough and there might even be rain she thinks. Today she loves him in a way she can’t explain, his deformity so clear that it reaches inside the woman she once
was. Yes, she loves him even more today as she walks past them with a closed, tight mouth, forgotten eyes. "There are lakes in this part of the country, places to swim," she tells him. In a haunting pristine air a cool wind, not pretentious. "No. You can't have him," she reminds the lovers who are gathering along the road—though they cannot hear her words.

"Fill the pants with blood! Fill its pants with blood," several of the former lovers shout as they fall in behind her.

"Bastards," she whispers. "But they're innocent in their own undoing," she whispers to the sky that will hear.

She won't let them have the boy though. Not for themselves or their mock religion. No, she'll carry him alone in spite of their lack of will. Such is her own untold history of continuance, having laid with each of them in the winter. The months she spent learning to love him hold up against the slaps to her rear, the ones to her face too as she turns and curses in a low voice each of these earlier lovers. She listens hard for a truer direction, perhaps even one from the sky and water, from God—one beyond and yet still within the reach of her language. The cry gropes its way out of her mouth. She considers the men's bodies for a moment, the longing and intimacy she's possessed with each of them, each man holding a piece of the child's mystery but she will no longer grant them entry. Not in their mockery of love, their mockery of its consequence. Perhaps that is the source of their hatred she thinks, why they call me whore. "But no longer will you address me in this way," she sighs. O sky. She smiles. "No longer will you address me."

Their oldest sons are the first to throw the large stones, as if they too are aware of the distinctions between the woman she was and the spirit she has taken on, the metaphor of the child more apprehensible to their imaginations than the actuality of his birth. Indeed, the distinctions between time and space ignore us all, she whispers in the child's ear while the sons reach the unfoldings of her skirt. But tuned to the finer nuances of her own speech today, yes—these utterances she can speak to the boy—she strides to the left of them and their fathers while considering the rule of chance numbers, the stones of their fate. Her gender lost to them now, sex an unknown vision in the lost quantities of love. "See," she says, leaning again into the child's ear. "They can only recognize that which surfaces the body." She's had them all and will not deny it—birthing this child into the crowd, this child who is part of an older narrative, not theirs, not even her own. "One day they will see, she tells him. One day they will understand."

The fields blue on the other side of the clearing in the woods. That's where she is going. She's decided to walk the whole distance to the water if for no other reason than to prove that she can. The elders and priests divided along the road according to their own expectations as they too watch on, silent even
though they find her revolting. They understand this journey, its repetition throughout the ages, its jurisdiction of need among the men, the violent syntax of yearning that succeeds it. They lean toward their own daughters and sons, the clean ones with faces erased by the ambiguity of inner doubt. How can she not die, after so belligerently refusing the proper code? In this act, a sacrifice is called for, why must she pursue betrayal they wonder. “She should have dismissed the child,” the eldest nods, “as we have dismissed her.” The elders mumble between themselves, sipping from their cups of tea, some drinking more seriously from the goat skins of red wine. Once again they begin to ponder the questions of love, the bundle of bones she cradles in her arms—this boy conceived in the form of their own sons’ image. Having brought about the living themselves, the younger men gaze and shout, laughing as they begin to kick at her because their stones are not enough to hinder her. The men’s wives fall back now, shifting about with a sense of unease since they are aware of her deep love, but not of it. And perhaps this could have happened to one of them after all? Still, they know this has to be part of the story’s ending. A sacrifice, the purging for all of their own misgivings and doubt.

Comparison she thinks, observing the changes that have taken place in her organs, her once huge breasts, her feminine appearance that so sensually alluded these lovers before she began to shrink in weight and height and her earlier body gradually over the months came to resemble more of that of the child itself.

The sky brilliant, thistles and callalillies along the road. “My God,” they yell more belligerently now, threatened by the movement of shadows in the trees as she goes on. The animals on the hill will speak our story. “How can you!” they yell back. A choral of traveling voices. Yes. She stumbles under the weight of stones, falters. The child dead in her arms and what is left of forgiveness shoots forward in her blood because she knew this, knew longing itself couldn’t give her the strength to take on such suffering. The tired disciples dancing beyond the small horizon of her earlier womanhood by the lake. The animals on the hill will speak. Hearing these voices she could care less about what the others think, for her secret can’t be divulged that easily. Love no easy matter. Why do they continue to follow knowing our transfiguration can’t be deceived, she wonders? The frenzied gaze of men and women who are beginning to fall in back as the sun’s heat burns their skins—some having already put away their weapons, some just beginning to show the blind faces of awe. Maybe it’s the child’s muted cry still going on in another ear, a mirroring the crowd witnesses in its own abandoned face? She smiles. Like Bosch’s blind trudging on, even the hecklers stop for a sudden prayer as she now approaches the water. Their former lover falling once, though she stumbles to her feet without dropping her bundle.
“They are ours too,” she whispers to the boy, pointing at their covered eyes, holding her own hand over the boy’s mouth, as if she could again take away and retrieve the already gone breath from his lungs. And she momentarily questions herself, questions whether this child’s body is one she’s inherited or chosen in her own spirit—the boy’s aberration in birth, the mutation she recognized immediately as he came out of her womb. She remembers the day when while trying to resist the urge to slap him for crumbling in his weakness by the corner near the stove, the elders and priests had stared on in dismay. Didn’t they know he was theirs too she had wanted to ask? But she had hated him as much as they did then, despised the boy’s deformity of crooked arms and legs, despised him for the memory he conjured of her own seemingly failed life. Now she realized she had not failed. No. She had loved him and loved him still. The elders’ voices rising up as they beat him that day and her own tortured bowing down in shame afterwards.

No matter. He was still hers. And they were not entirely alone. She would complete what was begun. He would be baptized. She would oppose the random violence and doubt contained within it.

What should we call you? she now asks the boy, stepping forward more resolutely and together they enter the lake. The beating more than what she should have had to imagine in the passing of love, but it’s over now, even forgiven, as she’s refused to surrender to their insults and laughter, their solemn promise of death. The crowd’s chant as they begin to surround the water too—the elders and priests, the men and boys, even the young wives chanting almost in unison as if celebrating her arrival all of a sudden—this act to be studied for subsequent description in the annuals of their communal histories. A circle of hums as she places her boy on the wooden raft, grips her own arms around its bow and begins to swim. A singular story mounting in the hush of grief and finally this yielding to another preface for a love’s beginning. She too is amazed, watching the crowd wade behind the raft, their wetted bodies floating along the water’s edge while the wooden vessel sails into the fire at the lake’s center. The wonder of this gift she had given to the body, to the boy, to the bundle of bones on this last day of each silence to come. The water springing forth from the child’s open mouth.
Brennan slept on his face. When something small and alive crept up against his cheek, he cried out.

"Sh," his wife said in her sleep.

He was on his elbow looking into his little girl's face.

"Daddy, you scared me."

"I scared you?"

"Daddy, you promised to take me to church today."

Brennan blinked. "You'll miss the cartoons on TV."

"I don't care."

The warmth of his pillow radiated to his cheek. His eyelids drooped.

"You promised, Daddy."

He sighed. "Okay. Okay. Unless you'd rather see the cartoons."

"No, I want to go to church."

Twenty minutes later, adjusting the knot of his tie, he looked into the living room where his eight-year-old boy sat before the TV. "You want to come to church, too, Davey?"

The boy didn't turn from the screen. "You kidding me?"

Brennan swallowed a laugh. "Watch your mouth there, huh?"

Out on the deserted Sunday boulevard, Brennan and his daughter walked hand in hand. Celia had dressed herself and braided her own hair. She wore a little white pillbox hat.

"Brush your teeth?" he asked, and she tugged him down so he could smell the Pepsodent on her breath.

"I want to be Catholic like you, Daddy."

"I'm not really Catholic anymore, honey. Look at the leaves. Aren't they pretty?" The air was chill and damp, edged with the sad, bracing smell of fall.

"Well, you were. When you were little."

"I had no choice." He thought for a moment. "Course, it was nice, too, in a way. But it's different now."

"I want to anyway."

"We'll see."

At St. Jude's, the Mass had started, and they took a seat in the back. Perhaps twenty people sat scattered amongst the pews. The priest reminded Brennan of an undertaker, a jowly man of fifty with heavy-rimmed eyeglasses.
The acoustics were so poor that Brennan had trouble understanding the litany, even though it was in English now. The priest's mumbling annoyed him. When he was a boy, the Mass had been in Latin so he hadn't understood it then either, except years later when he learned the meaning of a few phrases which still sounded in his mind on occasion, struck by some subliminal memory or aroma or light: *I will go to the altar of God/To God the joy of my youth... And, Lord I am not worthy/That Thou should enter under my roof/Only speak the word and my spirit shall be healed.*

A couple of late-comers arrived, stopped at the little table in the center aisle to tongue wafers of unleavened bread into the little brass pan for the altar boy to collect.

Celia tugged his sleeve and whispered, "Daddy, what is that stuff?"
"Bread."
"God's bread?"
"Yeah. Sort of."
"Can I have some?"
"You have to be Catholic. And you have to be seven. And you have to go to Confession first."
"What's Confession?"
"That's where you tell your... where you tell the priest if you've done something naughty or unkind so he can forgive you."

A woman two pews up glanced back at them. Brennan made a placating sign with his palm. He thought of something then and bent to whisper in Celia's ear, "Well, it's not the priest who forgives you. He forgives for God, if you see what I mean. I mean, they teach you that, but of course, nobody really knows..."

The woman turned again and stared at him. Her face was powdered like death. He nodded curtly and shut his mouth.

The priest faced the people, raising both palms and chanted something Brennan couldn't understand.
"Daddy," Celia whispered. "When is it over?"
"Sh. We can go right now if you like."
"Will everyone else go, too?"
"No."
"Then I want to wait until it's over."

At the part of the service where the congregation recited "The Lord's Prayer," Celia prayed along, and Brennan, surprised that she knew the prayer, listened to the words and thought of all the times he had mouthed them without thinking about what, if anything, they meant. He remembered the hymns, too, one in particular, where the people rose and sang loudly, "Holy God, we praise Thy name! Lord of All, we bow before Thee!" A joyful hymn. Funny
how the words came right back to him. He remembered Holy Communion, too, years ago, and saw himself as a boy returning from the altar, host in his mouth, and kneeling, face bowed, a sense of warmth expanding in him, a sense of, well, Grace, of nearness to God.

As they walked home beneath the yellow and red leaves of the chestnuts, Celia’s warm small hand in his, she said, “I definitely have decided to become a Catholic.”

Brennan thought a while, remembering his meeting with the principal of the Catholic school where he had considered enrolling them. Even his wife had agreed: “At least they’ll get an education there.” But the principal, a layman with cool blue eyes, sat at his desk puffing on a yellow pipe and asked, “Are they baptized?”

“I baptized them,” Brennan said before considering it. “At home. At bedtime one night when they were sick, I just, well, sprinkled water on their foreheads and, well, I baptized them. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Just to be on the safe side.”

“Well,” the man said, “in an emergency, you could baptize someone like that. You could even do it with Coca-Cola. Well, no, with club soda perhaps, it would have to be unflavored and uncolored . . .”

“How about Seven-Up?” Brennan asked. And that ended the whole thing. Coca-Cola indeed.

In Venice, on their honeymoon, he and his wife visited a cathedral with an altar dedicated to St. Catherine of Siena. At the center of the altar, in a glass cylinder, was a human foot, a tiny white-as-marble human foot, one toe gone black as a toasted marshmallow, but the rest of it in reasonable condition, with nicely trimmed nails, considering that it was supposed to be several hundred years old. Brennan and his wife stood before the altar, staring at the foot. “Do you see what I see?” he asked.

“I might barf.”

“Let’s go get a Campari.”

Now, on the quiet boulevard, he stopped to pick up a large yellow leaf. “Look at that, Celia. Isn’t it pretty?”

“Mmmm,” she said, her thoughts clearly elsewhere.

Brennan rose again. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I can’t get it all to hang together anymore, all that Catholic stuff.”

“I can, Daddy. God is the Father, and he made the world, and Christ is the Son who came to give us love, and Mary is his mother. If you commit sins, you tell the priest, and he forgives you and then you eat God’s bread on Sunday, and you’re well again.”
"Let's go on home now and have some breakfast."

His son and wife sat at the kitchen table over breakfast and the Sunday paper and funnies. Places were set for Brennan and Celia, too. He poured coffee, buttered a slice of toast. "Celia wants to be a Catholic."

"No way," Theresa said without looking up from the magazine section. Theresa had had no religious training as a child. Her father was an atheist, and her mother called herself a Christian, which meant she went to the Presbyterian service at Christmas.

Brennan reached for the jam. "Well, I don't know what to tell her." Theresa looked into his eyes. "I do. Who is she getting these ideas from anyway?"

"From myself," Celia said.

Davey smirked, staring at a Beetle Bailey strip. "She'll get over it." Celia said, "That's not very polite," and Brennan was struck by her reasonable tone, her calm manner.

"I can't get it to hang together," he said, "All the Catholic stuff. I just can't."

"Remember the foot?" Theresa asked.

"Yeah, right: The foot."

"It's just a phase," Davey said.

"David," Brennan warned.

"Let's hope he's right," Theresa said. "I would definitely prefer not to have any mumbo jumbo in my house."

"I think you're being kind of unfair now."

"Don't tell me you want to go back to mother church, too?"

"No. I told you, I can't, but if Celia has some genuine . . ."

"Celia is six years old. She doesn't know what she wants."

"Oh, yes I do. I want to be a Catholic."

"That is not possible, honey. You can take ballet instead."

"You'd have to change schools," Brennan said. "Or take special religious instruction and your friends couldn't come with you, not even Elizabeth."

"I'll talk to Elizabeth. She might want to be a Catholic."

"No, you won't," Theresa said. "No evangelists in my house."

Celia sat silently for a moment, face lowered. Then she began to cry.

"Celia," Theresa began, but the little girl looked up in fury and shouted, "You all stink!" She scraped back her chair and stamped up the stairs to her room.

"We didn't handle that too well," Brennan said.

"She'll get over it," Davey said, turning to Andy Capp . . .
"Maybe we could get her one of those children's bibles," Theresa suggested. "The non-sectarian kind."

"I don't know, I think she's attracted to the mystery and ritual and all."

"Mumbo jumbo. Tell her about the foot. See what she thinks about that. A human foot on an altar. Christ. Tell her about the Pope and the Vatican banks and South America and birth control . . ."

"She won't understand that."

"You shouldn't have taken her to Mass."

"I thought it would cure her. I thought she'd be bored and want to come home and have toast and jelly."

"It's probably your mother's influence."

"Theresa, give me a break. My mother is dead."

"All the same. She used to talk to the kids about Christ and all. And you baptized them once. You actually baptized them. And you told them about it! You're the one who put this in her head. You actually still believe in it. You baptized them cause they were sick and you thought they would go to hell if they . . . What kind of religion says a child, a baby, goes to hell if they die unbaptized?"

"Not hell, limbo. They go to limbo. Where in fact they have it pretty good except that God is not present. They are only denied the presence of God. Funny how that just came back to me."

"You fanatic," she whispered, half rising, staring at him.

"Take it easy, relax, you know I don't believe in it. Even if I wanted to. It's just when I was a kid, there was something about it." He remembered again walking from the altar, host on his tongue, kneeling, face in his palms to pray, Please, dear Jesus let it always be let it always be let it . . . He didn't know what he prayed for, only remembered that sense of expanding warmth, light, something he had not experienced again, and he didn't know how to get it back, where to look for it. There was a time he believed that truth resided in the church despite the Pope, despite the hypocrisy, bad politics, bureaucratic rules, narrow-mindedness, the indifference to certain kinds of human misery and pressing of money from the poor. But he could no longer believe, even when he tried. "There must be something," he said.

She shrugged. "Who knows."

Brennan rose, walked out to the hallway, saw the dead yellow leaf he had laid on the telephone table. He took it by the stem and climbed the staircase to Celia's room. Her door was half open, and he heard talking inside, listened, heard her reciting The Lord's Prayer. For the second time that day he listened to the words and felt a sense of relief, of submission to something greater than himself.

He leaned against the doorjamb, twirling the dead leaf between his fin-
gers, saw his daughter make the sign of the cross — he had come further than he had realized into this thing — before she rose from her knees and turned to see him there, behind the half-opened door.

She smiled at him. "Come in, Daddy. It's okay. You can come in."
After The Shot

Jimmy was eight years old when the United States saw the crack of his bottom. Mrs. Stagno reasoned with her husband that it was only a painting. This rationalization was not understood by Jimmy’s schoolmates; he received more de-pantsing tortures than anybody else in the history of bus-ride bulliedom because of it. Before the Shot, a depiction of him, standing on a chair in the doctor’s office, pulling down his pants while looking at the doctor’s diplomas, haunted him throughout the better part of his most formative school years.

The instant fame also altered things at home. After Mr. Stagno had been persuaded to look at it as a work of art, and not kiddie-porn, he began to see his son’s bottom as a marketable commodity. Mrs. Stagno could see the dark brainstorm hovering above her husband’s head. When any ideas about commercials were suggested, Jimmy would run upstairs and punch his bed for hours.

Mr. Rockwell had certainly given them enough money to get by. Now they didn’t need the extra wealth, and Jimmy couldn’t afford the extra embarrassment. His older brother Rob would smack his rear-end with his school books and say, “I just whooped a hundred dollar ass!” and his jealous younger brother Harry would stand in front of the mirror pulling down Jimmy’s pants until a little coin-slot crack was showing. Both acts were equally painful.

And his schoolmates were relentless. Every time they grabbed his waistband and heaved downwards, his stomach would drop at the same rate, and his face would burn like it felt swollen. It happened at least twice a day; he was de-pantsed at recess, during school plays, and once by an opponent in a little league game. He didn’t dare try to scale the greased pole at the County Fair anymore for fear that somebody would de-pants him in a possible moment of glory. The adults didn’t do a thing about it; they thought it was cute. They were proud to have a hometown hero like Jimmy. To see that famous anus was a privilege, one which Jimmy and his mom felt was abused.

Old Mrs. Delman, the Stagno’s neighbor down the street, baked some cookies for the family, which were shaped like Jimmy’s derriere. Dr. Meany, the adult who appeared with him on the cover of that Saturday Evening Post gave Jimmy a friendly little goose every time he saw him, whether around town or in his office. Jimmy wanted to elbow him in the nuts.

Jimmy’s rebellion officially began when his father tried to take him to the
barber shop the next year. His hair had grown out from the whiffle-length at which it had been idealized, and were he not so well-known, he wouldn't have been easy to recognize.

It wasn't that Jimmy didn't appreciate being appreciated, he just didn't understand the form of flattery which the folks of Wickingham awarded him. The decision to grow his hair longer was part of his plan to detach himself as much as possible from that stupid painting. Maybe if he grew it long enough it would cover his bum entirely.

When Jimmy's father came to fetch him to go to the barber, he clung on to his rope swing until his hands were blistered. Although his fight was valiant, Jimmy's head was shaved. He continued to be sheared every few months for the next few years, he continued to punch his bed for the next few years, and he continued to have his pants pulled down by fans who didn't really know how to express their affection for him for the next few years.

The beginning of high school was especially rough for Jimmy. Trying out for the football team was a decision which, in Norman Rockwell's world, would have recovered some respect, and given him an identity other than the "ass kid." However, he was cut from the team. The coach noticed that the team's wedgie-schemes and nickname-think-tanks only distracted them from their game. Some of the older girls commented to one another that he had a cute butt. Boyfriends got jealous and the committees devised new tortures and unoriginal nicknames. Jimmy's high school experience was not entirely unbearable, though. He did make one friend.

It was the summer before Junior year when Derrek Delman and his mom moved in with old Mrs. Delman. It was 1967, and Derrek realized that Wickingham was a little behind the times. This realization required no particular breed of brilliance. The radio station in town, the only one they could pick up, had just begun to play "Runaround Sue" on heavy rotation. Many phone calls were placed to KCAC to request the discontinuation of its airplay.

Derrek's grandmother needed permanent care, so he and his mother moved back from San Francisco a week after they realized the necessity. Derrek left his band, The Shots, without a rhythm guitarist or singer. He was the only one who knew how to play chords, although he couldn't do it at the same time he sang.

Since old Mrs. Delman had forgotten about Jimmy's butt on the Saturday Evening Post cover, Derrek and Jimmy met with only one pretext. Derrek saw that Jimmy had long hair, and Jimmy saw that Derrek had long hair. When they hung out at school together, the same committee that dubbed Jimmy "ass kid" came to the ingenious decision to call the two friends fags. Somebody made a connection somewhere, between Jimmy's nine-year-ago butt exposure and Derrek.
When the two would hang out after school, Derrek would play Jimmy selections from he and his mother’s shared record collection, and Jimmy would share the bourbon he had hawked from Mr. Stagno’s liquor collection. Jimmy had never heard anything like Cream before. Ginger Baker’s drums sounded almost like the sounds his hands made when he would slap his mattress, except they were showered with cymbals, too.

When Jimmy first sat down at the drum set that he had paid for with money made from Before the Shot, he was terrible. He was also wasted, but neither of those two adjectives could describe the way he felt when he tried to accompany Derrek as he played the riff to “Sunshine of Your Love.”

The two practiced every day and eventually learned to play together pretty well. They would drink booze together afterwards, and talk of how they could turn Wickingham around. When Derrek suggested they play at the school talent show and moon the audience after their performance, Jimmy was forced to admit why he thought it would be a bad idea.

“C’mon, don’t you wanna shake shit up?” Derrek had asked.

“Yeah, but I just don’t think this would be the way to do it,” responded Jimmy.

After a few more minutes of arguing, Jimmy took Derrek to the family room of old Mrs. Delman’s house and showed him the Saturday Evening Post cover, which Derrek’s grandmother had framed.

“That’s not you,” protested Derrek. He spoke with a curious interest that was not quite disbelief.

After Jimmy convinced him, Derrek had a laugh and asked, “So that’s why all those people are all mean to you?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“That’s pretty stupid,” concluded Derrek.

Jimmy realized that Derrek was right, and it all came down to that one phrase. It was pretty stupid. It was actually really stupid.

The concert performance never materialized; Derrek’s grandmother died within the next month. The two Delmans moved back to San Francisco, and Derrek rejoined The Shots. He promised Jimmy that he’d have a place in the band if he ever made it out to the bay.

The kids bullied Jimmy about missing his “bum chum,” but the de-pantsing was never resumed.

By July of 1968 Jimmy’s hair was down to his shoulders, he was an okay drummer, and people had practically forgotten about the March 15, 1958 issue of the Saturday Evening Post. People were speaking of a war going on in some other country he had never heard of. He saw that everybody in the town seemed afraid, sad, or both. The values were changing, and the radio played “Sympathy for the Devil.” He missed his friend and was planning on running away...
from home soon.

Jimmy shaved his head the morning of the annual 4th of July County Fair. He downed a fifth of some honey-colored liquid and went to the parade. The eerie familiarity of his goofy posture and estranging view of his little boy haircut on a drunk pubescent silenced the buzz of the crowd. Confused and reduced to an alcohol-induced innocence, he walked around like nothing about him had ever changed in ten years time. He walked over to the greased pole with the ten dollars nailed to the top and decided to give it a chance. Some noticed that he was wearing the same style of jeans in which he was immortalized in *Before the Shot*, as he approached the colonial-fair challenge.

The drumsticks had given him callouses on his hands, and he had a clueless confidence that nothing was going to stop him. He clutched the pole and heaved his awkward body upwards a few feet. He heard someone snicker, and it was as if that one little laugh stood for everybody who ever laughed at him. He reached higher than his first reach and pulled himself up a few more feet. The front of his white, tank-top undershirt was covered with grease. His senses were blurry, but his intentions were clear. He barely heard a classmate say, “Isn’t that ‘ass kid’?”

As he neared the top, he could hear only his breath. He grabbed the summit and hoisted his chest onto the ten dollar bill. There was not a single person in town who wasn’t there. There was not a single person there who wasn’t totally transfixed...

He was able to position one foot on top, and he perched the other on top of that. He looked around at the faces and realized how magnetic his presence was. Finally atop the pole, he took down his pants and displayed his feeling towards all who were ever unkind to him.

After a second of feeling betrayed when the crowd cheered, he realized he enjoyed their adoration. He had all along, he guessed, he just never knew how to appreciate being appreciated. He actually smiled right before he plummeted fifteen feet to the ground.
Earl Weekly is home alone with his wife’s grandchild. He is babysitting for two hours while Jane and her daughter, Emily, shop at the local mall. This is only the second time in twenty-one years that he has been alone with a human being under the age of twelve.

The child, Kate, is one year old. He watches as she pulls herself to her feet on the kitchen floor and begins moving about the room, holding onto drawer handles and doorknobs. She stops then and turns, smiling at him, her beautiful, innocent face bursting forth, like a sudden, lifelong revelation.

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He is, as Jane described him five years ago, a month after they met, a profoundly childless man. He has never had a child, never wanted one, never even dreamed of having wanted one. This childlessness, more than anything else, struck his wife when they first met. After all, who could imagine a person, even a man, never wanting a child? The fact literally sent shivers down her back at the time, she said. And even though she got over it as the months passed, he knew she still thought that there was something appalling about this part of him.

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Kate sits down in front of a row of kitchen drawers and begins opening each, testing, peering inside, searching, it appears, for something which immediately strikes her fancy. He watches her for a moment, then begins to shut each drawer one by one after she has finished. He shakes his head, wondering how he ever got into this position.

***

He had always been unusually rigid, even as a child. Routine and order obsessed him. Perhaps it was simple rebellion; after all, a reaction to his par-
ents’ looseness, their laissez-faire child-rearing habits. He was an only child, born late, when his parents were in their middle thirties and totally focused on the details of their own existence. His father was a bookkeeper for the hardware store in their small, Western Minnesota town, and his mother did volunteer work for the P.T.A. and the Daughters of the American Revolution. They spent the late afternoons and early evenings drinking manhattans and smoking cigarettes in the Elks Club with friends, dreaming of having more power and influence than they had.

So they had simply let him run, to take care of himself as he deemed fit. When he turned fourteen, his parents had even gone so far as to tell him that he was totally his own person and responsible for his own actions. All they asked of him was to call and let them know if he was going out of town. Call the Elks Club, of course.

As he entered high school, he was not a loner, exactly — he had friends — but he developed no lasting friendships. His books, his studies, his routines, took precedence. He studied five hours every day, from precisely three-thirty until six, and again from precisely seven until nine-thirty, Saturdays and Sundays included. He loved being alone every afternoon and evening in the silent, rambling, white house on their elm-tree shaded, dead end street. He especially liked the evenings, when the only light was the circle of his desk lamp.

He received two $750.00 scholarships to the University of Minnesota after high school, one for valedictorian, one from the Elks Club. But they weren’t nearly enough to cover his college expenses, especially since he planned to continue on directly into graduate school for his Ph.D. So he worked for five years after high school in a successful tire recapping plant on the edge of their small town. He loaded trucks from six in the morning until four in the afternoon, to save enough for college.

He lived in a room above the bank and saved every penny he made, other than expenses. He came home to his room every evening at five, scrubbed his entire body with Lava soap, washed his clothes in the bathtub, and dried them on the silver rod above the tub. Then he laid his next morning’s clothes in a neat stack on the one chair in his room, a dark varnished, wooden one from someone’s former dining room table. He laid his underwear and socks on top, pants on the bottom, shirt draped perfectly over the straight-backed chair arms, shoes next to one another under his bed. Finally, he sat down to a meal of cold canned vegetables and cold canned soups, before sliding into his

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bed and entering the world of his books. He planned to attend the university on his own terms.

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Kate has opened a bottom drawer and dumped the contents out onto the floor in front of her. She gingerly selects a spatula and begins beating the side of the refrigerator door. Though the mess and the noise upset him, he watches her closely. He wonders suddenly at what an absolutely striking child she is, unusual in her beauty — even he knows this. She turns to him and laughs as she hammers the spatula, as if they are in collusion. She shows him five teeth, three on the top and two on the bottom. This five-tooth arrangement makes her look slightly top heavy, but she seems about to pop another tooth on the bottom any second, simply to reclaim the perfect symmetry of her face. Her nearly white hair is fine and swirls in endearing disarray around her small ears and down her neck. Her bangs are short and wispy to the right side, shaking slightly as she continues to work on the refrigerator door.

***

In college he crawled with relish inside his books, into the academic world, and revelled in the necessity of routine to achieve. He went from class to class, day in and day out, the same. A social life of any kind never entered his mind. He was thoroughly content, climbing steadily and successfully through college and on into graduate school.

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Then, one afternoon, he and Jane met after an 18th Century English Literature seminar, the last class for each before their preliminary examinations.

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Kate moves to the pots and pans cupboard and clangs three out crashing onto the floor in front of her. She literally screeches with joy, outdoing the crows, he realizes, which circle their large backyard each morning.

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The afternoon Jane and he met, she stopped him in the hallway after the day’s seminar and asked him his opinion about a fine point of the text, which
he readily gave. Then he noticed her smiling at him often during the next class meeting. And there was another question after that class, and finally, they decided on a cup of coffee in the student union.

Jane was five years older than he and had had a child when she was sixteen. She had raised her herself — Emily now worked as a secretary for an insurance company in California and was doing just fine. And now here Jane was, her own deferred dream about to come true. She hoped, of course.

As Jane talked that afternoon, he was struck by her incredible paleness — everything about her was pale: her skin, her yellow blouse, her washed jeans, her huge blue eyes. And at first he made the mistake anyone might, that the paleness signaled weakness. But they were both aggressive, competitive, brilliant students, and eventually they fell in love. And once she discovered his unwillingness to have children, she seemed finally, to accept the situation. But her acceptance came after much discussion, discussion which made him squirm in his own inevitability.

***

Kate crawls from kitchen to fireplace room, where she gingerly negotiates a rather high step down. She leans her tiny body forward, plants her hands on the lower level, then swings her legs over behind her. He follows her into the room and sits in his armchair, amazed and impressed by Kate's resourcefulness.

***

After they received their degrees, were married, and began teaching, Jane did everything possible to indulge his need for routine. She ordered the house as he wished and her plans to fit his schedule: reading an hour and a half until nine-thirty bedtime, rising every morning at six A.M., Saturday and Sunday included. At first she shook her head and smiled every afternoon at precisely four when he prepared his martini. She watched him pour the exact amount of gin to the barely perceptible white line on his martini pitcher, add one-half capful of vermouth and spear two olives exactly in the center. The olives were specially selected for size and firmness at a gourmet shop, and his glass, chilled one-half hour before serving, German crystal purchased at an import store. Eventually, however, Jane just let him be as he was, without comment, even without shaking her head.
Kate sits on the floor in the fireplace room and pulls handfuls of soil out of one of Jane’s potted plants, dumping dirt on her pants, on her arms, over her head. She shakes the dirt away and repeats the process over and over. He has a strong urge to go to her, pick her up, clean her off, sweep and mop the floor. But suddenly she stops and points at him, cooing, giggling. She is wearing pink suspended pants over a pink and white slipover shirt. The pants have snaps up the legs for easy diaper access. He realizes that, without being aware of it, he is becoming cognizant of some of the fine points of child rearing.

Then recently, after they had been married for three years and Jane turned thirty-nine, she asked him again, what he thought of the “baby question.” Perhaps their falling in love changed things? It had, hadn’t it? Ok, he had never wanted a child, but now that he was in love for the first time. Didn’t their love make him want a child? Didn’t it make him want one with her, the love of his life?

Yes, he did feel different, he said, but he wasn’t certain precisely how. His love for her was great, greater than he ever dreamed he could feel. It surprised him and even distressed him at certain moments. He looked at her sometimes, in a chair across the room, reading, or next to him in bed, her blond, nearly white hair, covering one eye in a sweet, endearing way. And something would well up in his chest, like a huge chunk of his essence, and nearly break free. He felt uncontrolled then, even a little frightened.

But a child? Well, yes, perhaps had they met ten years before, he might have agreed to children. Because he loved her so much. Only with her, of course. He would never have considered such a proposition with anyone else. But a child? Now? No, certainly not.

And he hadn’t lied, really. It was different with her. But how could he explain to the woman he loved that a child could never be a part of their love, not for him?

But then Emily had gotten married and Kate had been born a year ago in California. And now the two of them had come for a three-week visit. It was the first time he had even met Jane’s daughter.
Kate crawls over to his armchair, pulls herself up and begins pounding both palms on the chair arm. She smiles into his moustached face with such delight that he shocks himself by wondering where all the children have been in his life. He puts her momentarily on his lap and she reaches out and grabs the fine hairs of his neatly trimmed moustache. The feeling of her small, fragile body is comfortable to him.

Kate finally releases his moustache and moves to his pen, his glasses, the buttons on his shirt. Then she crawls back down off his lap and over to the fireplace across the room. She sits down, leaning forward, picking at the protective glass front.

The only other time he was left alone with a child was when he was seventeen. His cousin was visiting with his wife and their three-month-old boy, and he had finally agreed to babysit. He had been convinced that the child would sleep the whole 45 minutes they would be gone. And if by some miracle he didn’t sleep the whole time, his mother had said, Well, if Earl just gave him his rattles, he’d be content.

But the child awoke the second their car left the drive and screamed for 45 minutes straight until they returned. Earl paced with him, he cooed, he nearly went insane with the screaming. He rattled every rattle in the house. He could still remember the red hole of the child’s mouth, the crab apple squint, like babies in Little Rascal cartoons. And just as he finally thought he could no longer bear the screech coming from the child’s open mouth, they drove back into the drive.

He nearly threw the baby into his mother’s arms and stalked out of the house. He climbed into his immaculate ’50 Chevrolet, and did not return to his parents’ house until seven-thirty the next morning. As he drove, he seethed indignantly. They had all known better than to subject him to such a thing. Why had they done it to him? They, who had never, ever, tried to force him to do anything against his will?

He finally fell asleep in his car on a country road and awoke with his arms folded and his neck stiff. His mouth had been open while he’d slept and he clamped it shut at once, carefully wiping the spittle from his chin with his
handkerchief before heading home.

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Kate looks over at him from the fireplace and actually laughs, a sweet, happy noise rolling off her tongue. He says her name aloud and she continues to laugh, squinting her upper lip to make her top teeth more prominent. He says her name again and again. She is somehow enthralled with his voice: whenever he speaks, her ears perk. She cocks her head and smiles, even laughs. Now she grunts loudly and paddycakes. Then Kate coos, sticks out her tongue, giggles, and paddycakes again. She is content, but he decides to give her a bottle because the time is right, precisely three o’clock, as Jane instructed. Jane also left instructions for him to change her if necessary. He shakes his head. She obviously thought she could trust him to perform these duties which are so foreign to him. She had simply said that the bottles were on the kitchen counter and the diapers were in the bedroom, as if he had performed these tasks hundreds of times — an expert.

He picks Kate up and begins to head for the bottles, but as he does so, he feels her bottom and realizes that she needs to be changed first. They head into the guest bedroom, which has been arranged for Kate and her mother. There is a single day bed against one wall and a pink and white port-a-crib in the middle of the floor. A pink package of diapers lays on the daybed, as well as a pink and white striped blanket. Kate’s port-a-crib is filled with multi-colored stuffed rabbits. Jane and Emily have recently developed a mania for rabbits.

He lays Kate on the blanket and looks down at her. She begins a grunting noise, her face suddenly serious. He unsnaps her bottoms, removes them, and begins to change her diaper. But she rolls around on the bed, tongue out, hands above her head, obviously enjoying the feel of nakedness. He powders her bottom easily, but as soon as he captures one leg and begins to bring the diaper together, she rolls in the opposite direction and he loses his grip. He grins at her cleverness and allows her to play the game until she tires of it and he is able to get the diaper into place. He is taken with how simple diapers are to operate, two adhesive tabs and that’s it.

He picks Kate up and returns to the kitchen for her bottle. He is thoroughly pleased with himself. But Kate seems to sense that the time has come for food because she begins to wiggle in his arms, throw herself up and down, and cry. He brings her up to his chest and pats her back lightly, cooing her name over and over until she is content. Then he begins the bottle operation.
And as he does so, he thinks in passing how many parents that very second are balancing their children, like he balances Kate, trying to prepare something essential, something truly necessary in the world.

He measures the milk into the bottle. Then, with a wooden chopstick, he mixes in a small scoop of powdered vitamin supplement from a tin container on the counter; he has watched Jane and Emily perform this task many times in the last two weeks. He microwaves the contents and tests the temperature on his arm — a perfect lukewarm. He wonders why he has paid such close attention to the procedures involved. But he continues on quickly with the duty at hand.

The two of them move back into the fireplace room where he sits Kate down on the floor. She has her back to the fireplace wall, allowing her to negotiate the bottle on her own. She tips the bottle up and begins to drink as he returns to his chair to watch her.

He feels great emotion well up in his chest as she drinks carefully on her own, this blue-eyed, bird-lipped, honey-cheeked Kate. He feels himself drawn to her — love welling tightly in his chest — to this sweet child not even of his own blood. He smiles at her, says her name aloud. Kate. She is so new, he thinks, beginning life, so alive.

He crosses his legs and folds his arms, then immediately uncrosses and unfolds. He says her name aloud again. Kate. Finally, he shakes his head. He knows full well that he is being taught the secret of life by a one-year-old girl. The books he has read, the writers and philosophers he has poured over. He laughs aloud, though softly, so as not to upset Kate’s drinking. Then he leaps to faith, in her, in this child’s miraculous, precarious being.

Kate stops drinking and sets her bottle purposely down on the floor next to her, but off to the side, out of her way, a child of blooming precision, he decides. He smiles at her, immensely proud of this sweet girl not of his blood. Then suddenly she pushes herself to her feet and begins to walk toward him. She takes the first unaided steps of her life, face open and searching for his love and protection. She walks four complete steps until she reaches his leg, then lays her head down on his knee. He places his fingers lightly on her cheek, that beautiful face, and something finally does break free, all the love within him flowing to her through his fingertips.
All along the sidewalk, we built the miraculous ideas of our youth. The suburban playland was a 50' x 50' ft. cube of grass with the sidewalks and driveways as the barriers between familiar and lost lands. And the infinite was down. You could never dig as far as you needed or wanted — your nails hurt and Tonka trucks were too versatile to simply dig for two hours. There was also up. When you were tired of pushing things into the ground, removing the ground, and replacing the ground — the eyes tended to float up. Lay down after finishing a bunker and a foxhole and watch the clouds until someone had the idea of building something. “Up” was good too. And one kid would run to his garage because his father hardly threw out anything — my God, there’s a solution to pollution, let the kids build with whatever they want. There would be little dumping, and constructions of plastic, wood, and rag would line the streets: images from the genius minds of the shorter and more conscientious.

I knew a girl named Bell. She rang of precise placidity. Carefully planned calm. Breaking out of the home was a task that only fell on the least tolerant, and the ones with the least foresight — which is probably why they rarely get caught. But the moon was always a guidance that never went without due thanks. You always knew that Mom couldn’t blame you for leaving the moon on. As the song goes, “By the light of the silvery moon” I would scurry along the line of woods, through the garden (before the fence was put up) and across the street. Only an idiot would run across the center of his lawn: Dad would see sock prints when next he mowed the grass.

Back to Bell, why did I go visit her? For that placidity she was known for, and feared for. Everyone thought she was weird, but I thought she was mature. She knew how to be quiet — simple as that. I didn’t know any other kid that knew how to be quiet voluntarily.

It seemed that no matter what the time of night, she was on her front steps. I just figured she heard me get up. I once asked her what she would do if her parents found her out there in the middle of the night. She sighed and said, “They know I’m out here. I tell them every morning about which street lights went out, and about the little shadow that goes into your Mother’s garden and shops for tomatoes.”

And I believe that to this day, Bell’s parents still think that she was telling them about her dreams.
Randy Cole had been the best driver in America. He messed up, once, everyone messes up once and it shouldn’t have been the end but in his mind it was and he never drove again. The only time it bothered him was at Quantico on leave he was having a beer in a local tavern and saw a picture of himself of the wall. Unsigned. He never signed photographs. He had joined the US Navy because all of the men in his family had put to sea at one time or another and he didn’t want to stand out as the son who couldn’t take the heat. And he messed up there, too. Everyone messes up that’s life but no one could ever tell Damage Control Chief Petty Officer Cole that—he was Little Jesus and every human being on earth suffered because of his lack of vigilance.

He received his honorable discharge May 27, 1990 and the first thing he did as a free man, a civilian, was to launch his duffel-bag overboard the carrier U.S.S. Enterprise, deep-sixing uniforms, citations, operations manuals, and shaving kit. Into the cool, malodorous, puke-green Pacific with another decade of being something that didn’t work. Ex-DCS Randy Cole was a free man.

He rubbed his crewcut (he would have given a finger joint, like the Apache women mourning their war dead, to have had long hair immediately: abracadabra poof! a shoulder-length mane) as he lined up with other short-hairs at the Bremerton Naval Credit Union to cash his final pay ($1437) and travel voucher ($318.27). Randy stood behind a lovely small-waisted blonde (Samantha Stark, GS-9 auditor) who smelled wonderfully of Chloe perfume and who wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, and since he looked smart and handsome in his dress whites with his combat ribbon and Navy cross, he asked her out to see a movie. She said no and made a big production of ignoring him.

Stinging with self-orchestrated humiliation, Randy stepped forward to get his cash, his nose full of Chloe. The teller, who had heard and witnessed everything, treated him coldly. Randy held up the line counting his cash. The dollars were old, reeked of oil and sweat. The amount was correct and he stalked off to give the blonde a piece of his mind, but as he came out of the credit union, she drove by in a dented BMW. After that Randy walked into the base NCO club, bought a bottle of Johnny Walker and drank it.
He gulped a tumbler of ice water to cool his throat, tipped the bartender fifty dollars, then bought the only bottle of Hennesey's and was half-through it when he was engaged in conversation by an intelligent and beautiful brunette who introduced herself as Yvonne. She told him she was tired of drinking Marine beer and that Randy's cognac would do nicely. The Marines took offense to this. Their Gunnery Sergeant, the only man in the group with rank as high as Randy's, came forward and harsh words were traded. The brunette offered to return to the Marine table. Randy encircled her waist with his arm and remarked that a woman of her mental and physical caliber fraternizing with Marines was unthinkable. The whole bar came to its feet. The Marine swung. The little sailor completed some fancy footwork and several deadly combinations at the wall of green coming down on him before blacking out.

Randy came to when the bartender threw a pitcher of ice water in his face. His first words were “Hey! I put five bucks in that juke box! Where’s the music?” His jaws felt numb, slack under his fingers, the skin as nerveless and spongy as cold putty.

“Party’s over, Chief. Shore Patrol’s on the way. Lean on me, there that’s it. I already called you a taxi. I was a squid myself, you know. Gunboat. Mekong and Song Hong. Pretty rivers, very pretty, but deep shit getting through them.” Randy pressed an ice cube over the oozing cut above his left eye, squinted over his raw, swollen knuckles. “Thanks. You’re okay.”

“Why shouldn’t I be? You sure dumped a lot of cash in my tip jar.”

It was seven o’clock but the dying sun outside had power remaining to crash into Randy’s pupils like another fist. He groaned, shielded his eyes until the painful dilation ceased, walked more or less steadily the two blocks to the bowling alley where the bartender had said the taxi would meet him. The shock of the ice water after several roundhouse punches to the skull had made him an alert drunk, and he glanced side to side for the Shore Patrol. He tucked in his shirt tails, patted and smoothed the polyester fabric of his tunic into its proper shape. He had lost a brass button and his Navy cross. He scraped at a spot of blood on his trousers. It was no use. His whites were ruined.

“Hey!” a tall brown man in a Harley jacket waved to Randy. “You the guy who wanted a cab?”

“That’s me,” said Randy. The taxi, a battered Galaxy station wagon painted yellow with white checkers, idled in a cloud of blue smoke. The Taxi light was broken.

“Your car’s seen better days,” said Randy.

“So have you,” replied the cabby. “Shikata ga nai!”

“Shit,” said Randy, falling drunkenly into the cab, “are you Mexican or American or Japanese?”

“First two. I’m Jimmy Perez. Born in Seattle and can’t speak much Span-
ish. Picked up the Japanese lingo driving the SeaTac strip. My mother was born in Chihuahua and still can’t speak fluent English. She can say ‘Hi’ or ‘bye-bye’ or ‘thank you’ or ‘2 pound hamburger please’ but that’s about it. It made for an interesting childhood, man. Once she dialed 911 when my father OD’d and said ‘My husband too happy’ and they were going to hang up on her until the line was transferred to a Hispanic crisis counselor. Isn’t that a scream? Hey, how’d you get that blood all over your monkey suit?”

“Fought a bunch of other monkeys,” said Randy. “You always this quiet?”

“Yeah, so I talk too much. It’s what’s called gregarious, dig? Where you want to go?”

“Seattle. The highway route.”

“Seattle? Man, why you want to take a cab all the way to Seattle when you can ride the ferry? You’ll be bored to tears. You’ll be broke.”

“I’ve spent the last ten years on boats,” said Randy. “I want to enjoy the drive.”

“The drive? Gorst? Bethel? Tacoma? Someone must have hit you on the head real hard, man. The eyes, too. When you get to where you’re going you should have an EEG or PET scan to find out what bruise inside your brain makes you ever want to see Tacoma again. Hell, I bet you been all over the world, right? Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Seoul?”

Randy was snoring. Jimmy shook him until he came to, mumbling, shook again until the sailor was fully awake. “What?” Randy shouted. “What’s wrong? Zebra, assemble!”

Hey, take it easy, man. Nothing’s wrong. I just need to know where in Seattle.”

Randy went through his pockets for his cigarettes. He gave a cigarette to Jimmy who then lit both their cigarettes. Randy stretched out on the back seat, blowing smoke at the ceiling. “I haven’t decided yet. Just wake me up when you get there.”

“Look man,” said Jimmy. “Are you sure? I mean I don’t feel right about this. The fare will cost you a hundred bucks. You got that kind of cash? Look, I can take you up through Poulsbo and down to the Winslow ferry for twenty-five bucks. What do you say?”

Randy handed him one hundred-forty dollars in twenties. “I say drive, amigo.”

“You got it,” said Jimmy. He roared onto Highway 304, nearly sideswiping a van covered with a coyote mural. The coyote was howling, its snout pointing through a white, cratered moon the size of a hubcap. The van swerved, horn blaring.

“Jesus Christ,” said Randy. “You trying to kill your own people?”

“Lowriders,” said Jimmy. “Fuck ‘em.” He guided the cab onto the over-
pass, then turned south onto Highway 16. He looked into the rearview mirror and Randy was staring back at him.

"Amigo, you ever watch *Taxi Driver?*"

"No way. I don’t like violent movies. I like the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers stuff. I like *The Sound of Music* and *Oklahoma* and *West Side Story*. Shit, my girlfriend took me to *Scarface* and I walked out halfway through. Garbage. I mean, why not just pay five bucks and sit still while someone throws a bucket of blood in your face? That’s what it’s all coming to."

"That’s a very good cultural analysis of the decline of US cinema," said Randy. "You in college?"

"Costs too much to learn nothing. I like what I do."

"Yeah? That makes you a rare bird." He stuck his head out the window into the night wind to feel the rain. The spring storm sprinkled across the city an irritating drizzle that soon metamorphosed into swollen, diaphanous drops snapping against the taxi’s windshield like high-speed bursting insects. "Ah, the Pacific Northwest," sighed Randy, "I’m home at last."

Jimmy switched the wipers from hi to low and sang "Eres tu."

"I thought you said you couldn’t speak Spanish."

"Anyone can sing ‘Eres tu,’ Jimmy replied. ‘It’s taught in grade school. I guess it’s more politically correct than the *National Anthem* or *God Bless America*."

"Maybe," said Randy. He was sleepy again. The cab was warm and the soft hiss of radial tires sluicing through road water mesmerized him. He nodded an exaggerated yes then lurched forward so violently he tapped the back of the driver’s seat with his head. He slumped back and closed his eyes.

"In case you drift off," said Jimmy, "where do you want me to take you?"

"ShurGard," said Randy. "The big one by Steel Lake."

"The one off old Military Road?"

"Yeah. That’s it."

Jimmy watched his passenger from the rear-view mirror. Randy slept in fits and starts with half-opened eyes. The white glare from halogen street lamps strafed the sailor’s face and occasionally he would stir, suck his lips, groan. He seemed to experience not wakefulness but trance-like consciousness. The naval officers Jimmy drove home from the Bremerton nightclubs often looked like that—their slack, booze-ravished faces struggling against sleep and sickness, perfunctory gifts clutched in their hands: the dozen red hothouse roses wrapped in green cellophane or the overpriced mink teddy bear with the tag still protruding from its ear or the heart-shaped box of Russell Stover chocolates. *Hello, hello, I remembered, they’d slur once home, thought I’d forgotten, huh?* Jimmy exited I-5 onto 320th, exited again onto Military Road and carefully drove the remaining three miles to the 288th St. ShurGard. He drove cautiously because the road was always full of drunks
and speeding tractor-trailers comically overloaded with logs for the Weyerhaeuser plant. The grinding collision of the old Galaxy’s salt-rotted muffler against the steep concrete embankment leading up to the storage facility jolted Randy awake. They crashed again, bounced their heads on the taxi’s ceiling. The muffler collapsed with a shriek of tearing metal and scuttled away under the cab like an iron crab.

“God damn it,” Jimmy swore, “Who the hell laid this grade?”

“Keelhaul!” Randy shouted, “Man overboard! Repair party! Lifelines aft!”


“No. I’m awake. I’m okay.” But he was not. Randy pushed out, stood stretching his legs. Jimmy handed back twenty dollars. “You paid the fare and then some, Man. You need drinking cash, don’t you? Can’t leave you broke.”

“Believe me I have plenty,” said Randy. He displayed his wad of bills. “In that case thanks,” said Jimmy. He jerked the shifter to reverse, accelerated into a half turn, facing the highway. The unmuffled engine coughed, popped, backfired, roared. Jimmy listened to the noise with some pleasure. Antonio “The Fuck” Fucellio would surely give him hell about the repair costs, but at that moment Jimmy was unconcerned. The sailor’s money had made possible the new microphone, sheet music, and guitar strings he wanted. “Adios!” he shouted as Randy waved. “And remember, man, with this new world order, Bienvenidos doesn’t mean WELCOME!”

“What did you say!” shouted Randy. “I thought you couldn’t speak Spanish!”

“Watch your ass!” The taxi cut off a mini-van which skidded, brakes locked, to the muddy edge of a deep culvert to avoid collision. “Good-bye!” Randy called. He could hear the screaming of the van-people and Jimmy’s high-pitched laughter.

II.

Randy Cole walked the hundred feet to his ShurGard unit and stood in front of the door for the amount of time it took him to smoke three cigarettes. From the direction of Poverty Bay he heard sirens—fire, police, ambulance—and the staccato detonations of pistol shots. As he stood smoking, two cars—a Camaro and a Mustang—raced past neck to neck, the passengers shouting obscenities and flinging beer bottles.

Randy looked down at his wet shoes. “Everyone seems to me to be going crazy,” he told his feet. “I guess it’s a good time to get out of the Navy. Now I can prepare for the end times by building myself a small place in the moun-
tains. Okanogan, maybe, or the Cascades, someplace secluded but with electricity so I can watch movies."

He pulled a jangling nest of keys from his pocket and selected the one, walked up the lot’s main avenue to his storage unit, B-29, and forced the key into the aluminum sliding garage doors’ lock. Randy fiddled fifteen minutes with the rusted lock before kicking the door. The key flew out of the lock and onto the ground. Enraged, Randy sparred with the slider, kicking and punching until his anger diminished. The echoes of his fury resounded through the ShurGard like roils from a kettle drum. An old woman walked out from the main office and over to him, scrubbing her mouth nervously with an edge of her multicolored shawl as she moved. "May I help you? What are you doing? Are you a patron? What was all that noise?"

She worked her lips noisily and rubbed them up, down, across, with the shawl. She wasn’t eating, Randy noticed, and the corners of her small, pinched mouth were raw, chapped, flecked with tiny black moles. She tilted her trifocals in the poor light to bring Randy into focus. She scowled, moved her nose up and down through the air, jangling the chains which secured the rhinestoned horned-rim glasses to her face. Somewhere beyond the smelly dark which bordered the ShurGard a guinea fowl cried. A loon answered. The guinea fowl cried out again—a strange, plaintive screech like a cat steamrollered slowly—a cry of pain and fear, of eternal ambient loneliness.

"I’ve been gone awhile, ma’am," Randy told her Navy-polite. "I’ve been gone defending our great country from communist hordes. Now, I’m a civilian again and I’ve returned to claim my civilian belongings but this lock is stuck, rusted shut."

"I don’t remember you," she said.

"I don’t remember you," he said

"I’m the new manager. They fired that horrid negro because of all the complaints and police raids against this place. Why, we were almost closed down! Drugs! Everywhere drugs! The DEA found four hundred pounds of marijuana here baled up just like hay! All those bales stacked in A-43, and it turns out it was rented under a false name, of course. Imagine!"

"Maybe he was a gerontologist," said Randy. "You know, cancer patients smoke pot because THC blocks pain. Also elderly politicians are rumored to smoke marijuana to neutralize the effects of senility. Don’t you read Rolling Stone?"

"Why, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Who are you?"

"I rented B-29 in 1983," said Randy. "Can you close your eyes right this moment and visualize the location of Beirut, Lebanon on the world globe? In 1983 I’d just returned from Beirut where I was a crew member on the ship that brought the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit ashore so that most of them could
be blown to pieces or crushed under falling debris when one Muslim freedom fighter crashed the check-point and suicide-bombed their bivouac. And that horrid Negro you mentioned was an ex-Vietnam Ranger hero. He was at the Fort Lewis Madigan Hospital a long time, then at American Lake VA psycho ward and then the Spokane outpatient clinic for what is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He got two Purple Hearts, a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, the Soldier’s Medal, the nomination for the Medal of Honor, and a big-titted white wife who can cook the best lasagna you ever tasted. His name was Bill Mallory. I bet the FBI set him up.”

“Oh,” she said, “oh.” Jingle-jangle went the chains as she looked Randy up and down. “Oh. You veterans are all trouble, aren’t you? My first husband was a veteran. All he did after the war was drink, crash cars, and fight, so I left him.” She turned her back and headed for the office.

“Well,” Randy called, “what about the rusted lock?”

“Stay here! I think I’ve got a can of WD-40 in the storeroom.”

He waited for her, lit another cigarette with the pale blue flame from his Bic and coughed the harsh, phlegm-rich cough of a young chain smoker with a head start on lung cancer. The old woman returned with a tall yellow can of Pledge.

“Jesus, lady, this is furniture polish,” Randy told her.

“Well, so it is, young man,” she said. “I don’t have WD-40. Ron never bought it like I told him to. But this has silicone in it, just like WD-40. Read the ingredients. I couldn’t find the WD-40. I told Ron to buy more. Young people these days! You aren’t at all dependable, any of you!” She scuffed the shawl across her lips with her free hand, scraping and boxing at the irritated flesh. Randy lifted the Pledge from her other hand, disgusted with how she tortured her mouth, hacking with the corners of the shawl until the skin was bloody raw, the edges of material wet from rain and spittle. He turned from her, the bile rising in his throat.

She shifted her weight to the other foot, waiting for him to do something. He placed the nozzle of the Pledge can against the barrel of the lock and depressed. White foam squealed into and around the frozen lock, swelling, billowing until the lock disappeared into the fluffy mass. The night air around them suddenly stank of artificial lemon. The aerosol bubbled over Randy’s hands and dripped onto the ground and the tops of his black dress shoes.

“Enough!” the old woman cried. “You’ll empty out the can! Lord, think money grows on trees?”

“Know what this stuff looks like?” said Randy. “It looks like what we call in the Navy PSF, which stands for Permanent Smothering Foam. Know what that is, Ma’am?”

The ShurGard manager shook her head. Jingle, jangle.
"We use it to snuff out Class-B fires," Randy said. "Class-B fires are the worst—ignited gasoline, fuel oil, lubricants, diesel, paint, and hydraulic fluid. Anyway, I was a DCS, Damage Control Supervisor, about the U.S.S. Enterprise and I'm talking about the carrier, ma'am, not the spaceship. Hahaha. We put out big fires all the time. You wouldn't believe how badly even the best Navy pilots can fuck up and when you fuck up the deck of a carrier you put fire everywhere, man it's unbelievable! The worst is when those F-14 Tomcats and F-18A Hornets crash on deck hard enough to rupture their fuel tanks and hydraulic lines and the pilots fry so crisp they look like little black crickets. It takes them a while to die, too. They try to crawl out of the wreckage into the cold, refreshing foam we're laying down, but we're talking 1000 Fahrenheit, ma'am—jet fuel fanned by ocean winds. They fry and I watch them burn until they just quit trying to crawl and assume a fetal position or what the coroner calls a pugilistic crouch and begin to crackle. No kidding, the juice just bubbles and boils out of them, ma'am."

The old woman rubbed and tore at her mouth with the shawl, spotting the wool tufts with blood. Her hand shook as she daubed her chin; the eyeglass chains jangled. "Young people! So much trouble! Now if you're done with my Pledge then give it back!" She snatched the furniture polish and backed away shaking her head, until she reached the door to her office. "You veterans are all trouble!" She went in, locking the door behind her.

Thunder rumbled lightly. The clouds threw down egg-smelling drizzle, effluvium from the pulp mills, mud flats and Asarco smokestacks. The tiny, polluted droplets went zzipft! impacting the glowing tip of Randy's cigarette. He re-inserted the key into the lock and it turned slightly. Randy felt his scalp prickle. He turned quickly to catch her watching him from the window. Her angular face, shielded by the trifocals, regarded him for several more seconds then the curtains slid shut and the CLOSED sign lit up.

Randy smashed at the lock with the heel of his foot. One inner wire of the electrocuting buglite suspended by the office window contacted a Japanese beetle. Crack! The beetle flared as it fell to the bottom of the pan, charred and blackened. A huge Gypsy moth, fascinated by the immolation, fluttered in. The buglite snarled zzzzz! and the moth launched itself back out, spiraling down in flames. "Condition Zebra!" Randy shouted. "Attention, attention, Zebra! Boundary Setter and Foam Man, follow me!" He ran over to the moth and stamped the corpse into whitish paste. He knelt, trembling as he covered the charred remains of moth with a handful of damp maple leaves. "Fire out, P-K-P Dry Chemical applied to fire, fire contained!" said Randy. "All hands remove OBAs and stand down. I repeat, stand down, Zebra!"

Go away!" the old woman shouted out her window. "Get away from here or I'll call the police!" She pressed her sharp nose against the foggy pane,
trying to see clearly through the grimy layer of glass separating her eyes from the lunatic ranting and raving outside. “Hi there ma’am,” Randy said, waving at the face. She didn’t see him so he stepped away from the buglite and knocked on the window, tapping with his knuckles just above her nose.

“Ah!” she shrieked.

Randy nodded. “If you were aboard a ship, ma’am, you would be much safer. However, you are domiciled in one of King County’s notoriously high crime districts and I estimate police response to take about half an hour in these parts. In that half an hour, ma’am, any frenzied psycho could rape and dismember you.”

“Go away! I have a gun! I’ll shoot! I’ll call Ron! He’s got a gun, too!”

“Call anyone you want, shoot anyone you want,” said Randy. “It’s a free country, right? Isn’t that what I served for?” He walked back to B-29, rattled the lock until it sprung. He turned his face to keep the cigarette from being ground out into the metal as he hunched down and grunted against the slider with all his force. Smoke curled from his nose, his eyes rolled back, and heralded with a thrash-chord skree! the aluminum door bucked upward, steel rollers grinding through the rusted metal track. Inside the shed the monster crouched—silent, waiting.

“Street monster,” Randy whispered. A rattle followed by scampering, scuttling movement beyond the piles of paint cans and tools signaled to him the stirring of life, a rat. A bright shaft of flash-light stabbed around the far darkness of B-29 then broke into a halo as it dead-ended on Randy’s back. His vision dimmed as he turned into the glare. “Leave us alone, damn it!” he cursed.

The ShurGard manager leaned from the stoop, flashing the idiotic light at him. With her other hand she teetered against the long barrel of a shotgun as if it were a broom. She kept dipping her head like a feeding bird, trying to see beyond him into the shed.

“What have you got in there?”

“None of your goddamn business! Don’t you believe in privacy?”

“Is it drugs? I called Ron! He’s on his way over!”

Randy flipped the electric switch, flooding the shed with fluorescent light. He grasped one corner of the green canvas tarp and swept the covering from his masterpiece. God, she was beautiful—every waiting inch of her. He toyed lovingly with the chrome necklaces looped through titanium bolts hung from silver hood-retained pins. He traced his palm across the metal-flake candy apple finish, up and over the black enamel hood scoop.

“What on earth is that?” the old woman cried.

“She,” Randy corrected. “What on earth is she.”

She was a 1969 Ford Cobra Jet-Powered Mach I Mustang: solid steel body full, smooth, sleek, dangerous, feminine. Randy had rescued her from a
junkyard and two years twenty thousand dollars later had returned her to the street in triumph and grandeur. His faith and love had never wavered, and she had garnered every honor, taken best of show in every meet. “A car?” the woman croaked. “You stored a car? Don’t you know that’s against fire code, you idiot? You could have burned us all up! I’m calling the police and the fire inspector!” She slammed the door.

Randy inhaled deeply the hydrocarbons, toluenes, and xylenes. The storage room was crammed with tools, boxes of spare parts, and drag racing tires. From every noon and cranny something balanced, was stacked, or jutted out. The atmosphere stank cleanly of gasoline, octane booster, STP, and Gunk. A grimy 351 Cleveland—the car’s tine original pulse—poked out from an engine stand pushed against one corner. Randy unsnapped the retainer-pins which held down the hood, pulled off the hood, sprayed the carburetor with starting fluid. He filled the radiator with Prestone and added another quart of Havoline to the crankcase. As he connected the cables of the Diehard battery to its positive and negative posts, a clanking pickup, its idle racing, drove up behind him, honked twice and killed its lights.

A door slammed.

“Hi, Ron,” said Randy.

“Hi yourself, and good guess.” The grotesquely man-shaped bulk advanced in dirty coveralls, hair and rolls of fat pushed through the red v-neck t-shirt he wore underneath. Ron weighed four hundred twenty-seven pounds. He had, for such a huge man, tiny feet (no more than size sevens, Randy guessed) encased in scuffed black cowboy boots. His face was mostly obliterated by chins, cheeks, and jowls and a dense black growth of beard bristling from his chops like quills. His shaven head gleamed pink with grease, rainwater, and perspiration. He stood before Randy with a .45 Colt Goldcup Commander in his right hand and a 16 oz. can of Oly Gold in his left.

Randy pointed to the gun. “You going to shoot me?”

“Probably not, unless you don’t behave yourself.” Ron tucked the .45 into his belt. He had to pull up a flap of stomach to do it and when he let go the fat holstered over the pistol. “What in the name of hell is that thing?” he said with awe.

Randy smiled. “A spotless ’69 Cobra Jet-Powered Mach 1 Horse. Seven coats of candy apple sterling-flake enamel, black leather interior, Pirelli radials, and one King 428 Cobra engine rebored to 514 insane cubic inches fed by a Holley 1150 carburetor with custom Ford Motorsport intake. Can you dig it?”

“Hell yes I can dig it,” said Ron, smacking his lips. “You did it all yourself?”

“Every inch. Every bolt, brush, dent, hose, pipe, and screw.”

She's street legal?"

"She used to be, before the nitrous oxide injector. How about your gun?"

"Used to be,\" said Ron smacking the Colt against his paunch with a meaty bear's paw of a hand. "Now it's hot. Bought it off a Blood on K-street who stole it off someone. Paid fifty bucks to a crackhead for a weapon worth six hundred retail.\" He pulled the pistol ejected the clip and handed the Colt to Randy. "The first thing I did was re-machine the slide so that ejection spends twenty percent less gas. I filed the trigger sear to one pound, breathe on it the fucker goes boom! Don't like walnut grips they get slick with sweat in a firefight so I switched to the black rubber Pachmayr and tritium sights fro night shooting. You see the aluminum carriage I installed there in front of the trigger guard? That's for a Kwik Point laser sight I carry on my cartridge clip. I load 230 grain copper jackets Teflon coated. Will punch right through fucking boiler plate, they will. Anyone wearing a bullet proof vest has no chance against me and this baby."

"Wow,\" said Randy.

The old woman banged out onto the stoop again with her shotgun. "You watch out for him, Ron!" she yelled. "He's a crazy veteran! You should just shoot him. Shoot his leg, son! Shoot his legs out from under him!"

"Stay out of this, ma. He's okay. He's paid all his rentals, right?"

"He's an arsonist and a peeping Tom! He looks like the Green River Killer! I'm going to call the police! I'm calling the FBI and the Green River Task Force!"

"No, ma. Just go inside and watch TV. Take your pills. Let me handle this. Ron bummed a cigarette from Randy. "Don't mind ma, she gets a little over-excited at times. The doctors call her hyperextended or whatever the hell it is that makes old people nuts. Her arteries are clogged and she's a manic-depressive. She takes tons of pills. Blue Pills, pink, white, yellow, black, red, more pills than any junkie.\" He drained the last gulp of beer, crushed the can against his hip, tossed the empty container behind the Mustang.

"Tell you what,\" said Ron. "You can take me for a spin in this thing. We'll get some beer and come back. I guess I trust you enough now to hang out with you. You may be some kind of crazy car-artist or something, but I don't think you're the Green River Killer. Hell, you don't look very dangerous to me."

"I'm not,\" said Randy, "I'm just a crazy car-artist or something."

Ron helped Randy re-secure the hood retainer pins. He commandeered his bulk into the passenger seat, belched wetly and sat puffing. "To the 7-11, boy."

Randy keyed the ignition switch and the primed engine roared to life, ether exploding out the dual exhaust pipes squirts of blue flame. As the Mach idled, lapping side to side like a boat in water, Randy checked the oil pressure gauge and tachometer before easing out of the shed and around Ron's dilapi-
dated pickup. A Boeing 747 roared overhead, red lights flashing through the gloom. “Are you going to leave your truck there, Ron? Why don’t you park it out of the way?”

“nThe hell. I don’t care.”

“What about the shed?” said Randy, “Why don’t you hop out and lock up?”

Ron wasn’t going to be that easily ditched. He scratched his crotch. “Naw, the old lady will take care of that. It’s good for her to walk around. She’ll poke around in your stuff and then close the door. When things are kind of slow she takes the keys and opens up the sheds and pokes through all the junk. Drives me crazy. She’s loony.”

When Ron and Randy had gone the ShurGard manager opened her door and moved cautiously into B-29, scraping her mouth with the shawl, wrinkling her nose against the stench of gasoline. She sidestepped a puddle of oil, made a face at a high stack of *Hustler* magazines, and backing around the engine stand knocked the top from a large brown plastic garbage can. She retrieved the lid, lifted it up to the top of the container and froze. She blinked several times. She dropped the lid and pushed the shawl to her face, biting the filthy cloth to contain her screams. Floating in the gallons of formaldehyde were three remarkably preserved human heads. One head, that of a white male, stared at her with unlidded milky eyes. Then she screamed. She fell in the puddle of oil, regained her feet and ran across the wet asphalt, screaming for refuge, her brightly lighted hut. She clutched the shotgun and yelled at the 911 operator “Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

Randy parked at the 7-11, whistling softly. He handed Ron a ten dollar bill. “Buy anything you want.”

Ron snatched the bill. “Bud’s fine by me.” The Mustang rose on its gas shocks as he thrust himself out and walked almost to the door. He stopped, patted his waist, quickly turned back. “Oops, nearly forgot this,” he said, pulling the .45 from his waistband and stashing it under the passenger seat. “I don’t have a concealed carrying permit. Besides, why take a chance of scaring the shit out of this gook? This 7-11 is owned by a crazy gook. He thinks everyone’s out to get him and he keeps a sawed-off 12 gauge under the counter. He’s killed two niggers and a Mex so far.” Ron straightened up with a grunt and entered the store.

Randy reversed until his chrome dual exhaust pipes growled less than ten feet away from the glass doors and inched forward, slowly, revving the motor. Ron emerged with the twelve pack of beer underarm, chewing a wad of Red Man and scowling as two Bloods sauntered up and offered vials of crack. “Twenty bucks for two rocks. Best shit in town, home. Twenty bucks.” The fat
man pushed past to curse and shout at the lunatic in candy apple Mach 1 Mustang. “Come back, you sonofabitch, you got my gun! Get back here with my gun!”

“You got my beer!” Randy yelled, “and your life. Enjoy!” He tromped accelerator, timing the green light at the intersection of Military and 272nd but bracing himself for the incredible collision of glass, fire, and twisted metal as it went to yellow, in case he was off, in case he was once again nowhere and burning. The wide back tires spun, bit tarmac, and Randy flipped the red button of the nitrous oxide injector taped to the stem of his speed shifter. An orange ball of flame lit up the parking lot. The fire ball grew and grew, swelling with fury until the conflagration consumed the tail of the dragster. The column of smoke, burnt rubber, hot asphalt, and flame flew from the rear of the street monster with the concussive force of two hand grenades and blew Ron and the coke dealers through the convenience store’s double glass doors.

The 7-11’s night manager, forty-six year old right leg amputee former Saigon ARVN Major Phan Dhin, grabbed his cash box and shotgun and dove for cover. War. All the time, with these Americans, war! Phan Dhin peered over the top of his counter. The fat white man the the two Bloods were groaning, rubbing their ears. The magical Mustang was gone — only the smoking strips of molten rubber left to mark its passage.

III

The Neon Duck hadn’t changed. From the rat-infested debris of deserted wharf, concrete pilings, and illegal hazardous chemical dumps known as Zone 47 blinked the graceful green and purple loops of electrified neon gas:

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Same old place, Randy thought: panhandlers, drug dealers, whores, killers, poets, novelists, playwrights, perverts, saints, arbitrage bankers, homicide detectives, insomniacs, and maniacs like himself. The air smelled of brine and violence. He tucked Ron’s .45 under his tunic, right hand side for quick-draw.

The club was packed with what Randy called the zoo-crowd - the clean-
cut artificially bad college kids slamming elbow to elbow with the real leather
loons and societal dropouts, all of them doing the egalitarian blues at three
dollars a head. Iron Miasma finished their opening act and left a smashed gui-
tar on-stage. Roadies for The Dead Fetal Pigs began to kick the mess around,
making room for their master’s sound system. Randy found a table, collapsed
with his head on his arms to catch his breath and bolted upright as a heavy
hand bore into his shoulder. “Get the fuck off me!”

“Whoa! Easy! Damn, Rad, I knew it was you!”

“Mikey!” Randy felt so weary he thought he’d fall over.
Michael lightly touched the gash on Randy’s chin. “What happened?”

“Just bullshit, Mikey. I’m out now, I’m a free man.”

“The war hero back home! Stay this time — I’ll give you a job.”
Randy shrugged.

“What the hell, Rad — you’re home! We’ll figure out all the other crap
later. The important thing is that you’re here! All your drinks are on me okay?
I’ll take off at one and we’ll hit some old spots, okay? I got to get back, Rad.
This place is really crazy tonight. Full moon. Bartender robs me blind but I
can’t kill him because he’s my brother in law.”

“Mikey! I love you, man!” They slapped hands, their palms stinging from
the force. They hugged with the awkward intimacy of men. Michael went over
to the bar and within minutes a pretty waitress brought Randy a double Kami-
kaze. Her hair was straw-colored and braided into thick pretzels which reached
the back of her knees. Randy had never seen such a striking head of hair.

“Hi, princess.” His voice seemed far-away, a high-speed dub.

“Are you really Rad Cole, the racer? Those are your pictures on the wall?”

“Not anymore,” he said.

She set his drink down carefully on a purple Neon Duck cardboard coaster.
“They talk about you all the time. About how close you came in the Grand
Prix, about that wreck you survived. I’ve seen the videos Mikey plays of it
every Friday night. You mean you’ve never done Friday’s Race Nite? Oh, it’s
great fun. Half drink specials and free beer for the ladies. You’ll have to bring
your significant other and do it sometime.”

“Sometime.” Randy knocked his drink into his lap.

“Oh, I’ll bring you another, don’t worry about it! You know, Mr. Cole,
there’s something about Michael’s video that has always bothered me. There’s
a man in an orange jumpsuit trying to get through the flames to the car where
the guy is burning to death but the heat drives him back. Michael say that guy
was you. You saved two but couldn’t get the last one. You’re all he talks about
half the time . . . no, put your money away, it’s on the house.”

“You need a tip,” Randy said. He threw down some bills. “You need
something for being so nice.”
“Would you like something to eat?”

“No. A double Cuervo.” She nodded and left. He was beginning to feel that anything clean, real, beautiful had been burned to a crisp years ago. But life was still fun, perhaps—all the death, pain, and betrayal had meaning, at least as much meaning as love, tenderness, and self-actualization. He’d have to find a job and a place to stay first to rest and clear his head—he knew that—and then sort out the rest later: the bad, bad dreams that became wakefulness; the very special Someone who would trust him with a formula car, winning big money, big trophies. Get himself back in the program, prove he still had it.

Heat sprung into Randy’s eyes and he brushed away the water, smiling, because he had never felt better in his life—never more happy, satisfied, normal, free, as that drunken moment seated before the lighted stage’s howling musicians and slam-dancers. The water kept welling up, he kept pushing it out. Up, out, up, out, like fire hoses and artillery shells.

“Out, Out.” What did that mean? Randy pushed ice into his mouth, shook his head angrily until he remembered. It was a poem, and the day had been clear, the classroom slightly scented with vegetable beef soup and the odor of boiled hotdogs from the cafeteria. “Out, Out.” Randy remembered the poem because it was about a kid who had cut an artery with a crosscut saw and sat waiting to bleed to death, thinking of the youth he’d leave behind, the young lover he’s never be able to touch again. What was that moral: Love is weakness? Devotion, peace, goodwill, mercy, are no good? Those are worthless words, empty ideas, Rad. Don’t you remember? Well, Rad, don’t you?

The pretty waitress brought his drink. Randy gulped it, asked for another, reached into his pocket for the envelope of Librium and Stellazine and Sertraline the Navy psychiatrist had prescribed to stop sudden face-heat. Tear-dryers, that’s Librium—good ole chlordiazepoxide—hold the tiny black and green capsules under the tongue until they dissolve into a metallic slurry as bitter as nitroglycerine. Follow with a sky-blue Stellazine and a yellow Sertraline for happy sunshine. The water stopped pouring from Randy’s eyes and he sat there, happy in the smog and din. Someone came up behind him, a woman (Karen? Yvonne? Dixie?) from long ago. She raised something in her hand: gun? grenade? blade? Randy laughed but didn’t defend himself as she leaned over him, kissed his lips, snapped an amyl nitrate popper under his nose, and left him to dream. “Later, honey,” she said in his ear. She imprinted a smudge of lipstick on his throat.

“Bienvenidos,” Randy called after her. He couldn’t remember where he’d heard the word. The table top was littered with broken glass. Randy didn’t know how the glass got there. He swept the shards to the floor but instead of the crystalline tintinnabulation of broken things it sounded like guitar strings.
“Mikey!” he screamed, but when Michael drifted by he didn’t stop; his handsome face blurred then refocused into the head of a braying jackass, the square white teeth shining purple in the strobe light. “Rad!” he brayed, “Drink up Rad!” The entire bar took up the chant: “Rad! Rad! Rad!”

“Mikey!” he cried, pulling the big Colt. The blurring of his eyes stabilized and of course Michael was right there and the band had stopped playing because six men from the Washington State Patrol had their guns drawn and cocked and were screaming at Michael Step away from the table! Step away from the table now! Michael, drying, hugged Randy tightly against his chest and refused to step away because he had been the first man Randy pulled from the burning twisted mass of cars all those years ago.

“Gun!” an officer screamed.

“No!” Michael screamed back, “no, no, no!”

The Washington State Patrolmen took careful aim at ex-DCS Chief Petty Office Randy Cole — a man seemingly at peace, bloody left hand fondly tilting a double tequila to his lips, smiling Christ-like at everyone and everything, for all his own reasons.
worked from 2 A.M. to noon both days. At that point I still thought it was fun to lay down the “NO PARKING’ and “FIRE LANE” stencils. I wasn’t going to college, and I was happy about my premature freedom.

“So, what’s this Peter guy like?” I asked Chuck, above Frankie Avalon’s “Venus.” I think it was the second time the radio station had played it that morning.

It was still dark out, but when Chuck looked at me to respond, his face was illuminated by the orange cherry of his Kool cigarette. He chain-smoked them so much that their smell was already routine to me. Working with Chuck was all oldies, and menthol smokes, and I didn’t seem to mind.

He squinted his left eye, when he smiled, and furrowed his brows in a way that said, “Woah, you don’t know what you’re in for, buddy.”

“Peter,” Chuck said, catching his breath and searching for a nice way to explain, “is a real character.”

I contemplated saying, ‘It seems like you were groping for a euphemism, Chuck. What do you mean?’ but instead I said,” “Whaddaya mean?” so he didn’t think I was some smarty-pants-pussy.

“Yull see,” he responded.

“How old is he?” I asked, authentically interested.

“Peter is about thirty-two, I guess, although he acts about seventeen.”

‘Awright!’, I thought to myself, ‘this guy is gonna be a cool dude.’

The rest of that night/morning was very similar to the one before. I set up cones to block off the entranceways to the parking lots, and Chuck drove the machine over the fading yellow lines on the asphalt. The night before, at about 3 in the morning, some guy crushed some of the cones, and ran over a still-wet line. Chuck was pissed; shaking his fist and yelling at him, “You fuckin’ dipshit, I’ll tear yer neck off!”

I thought it was pretty interesting that the word “dipshit” was in his vocabulary. The line that the guy drove wasn’t that bad, but then again, I had never noticed a smeared parking lot line in my life before.

No such incidents occurred on the second night. We did eight big parking lots. When I went home at noon and went to bed, I had dreams of painting those lines, pushing the machine back and forth on thin strips, like some selective lawn-mower.

I woke up at about 10 P.M. and had some cereal. It was pretty confusing to think about people preparing to go out for the evening at this time, while I was getting ready to go to work. I thought about the relative situation of people going out drinking at 9 in the morning. Watching prime time T.V., the first thing when you awake is also strange. I don’t know if the Cartoon Network
would have helped me feel more at ease, but it didn’t matter, because we didn’t have cable anyway.

I was to wait for Peter outside of my house at midnight. My mother expressed that she hoped he didn’t beep when she went to bed an hour before.

I heard the sound of stones spreading under the tires, as the dirty red van came clearer into view. His two rude honks sounded like a flag of rebellion. Stars and bars and a big middle finger to the sleeping neighborhood. I saw the light in my mother’s room turn on before I opened the door of the van.

Peter had a butt in his mouth, and classic rock blaring in the gasolinesmelling van. I shook the fat hand that he offered me, and he assaulted me with his name. “Pee-dah,” he said, introducing himself without the customary ‘Hello, how are you? My name is . . . ’ in front of it.

“Hey, I’m Rel,” I responded.

“What the fuck kinda name is that?” he asked.

Every time I received that response, I would turn my anger towards my hippie parents. My younger brother got to be Paul, but I had to be Ariel. The flack I got growing up was not that bad, until that “Little Mermaid” movie came out, and they used my name for the girl, and pronounced it differently.

Since my name is pronounced, “R.E.L.,” some of my friends thought to start calling me Rel, which I didn’t mind, but now that I had to explain this whole tale to this stranger, I got mad at my mom.

As I told him the origins of my name, I was able to get a good look at him. His greasy hair was receding, and the street lights shined in the pockmark craters of his face. ‘He’d be a great character for one of my stories,’ I thought, ‘Maybe one of those journals would finally pay attention to me.’

After I was done explaining and observing he said, “Whatevah, dude.” He had total disregard for every ‘r’ that ended a word, as he did for the ‘g’ on all ‘ing’ words.

Our first job of the night was at a Mister Donut place. We were supposed to meet the owner there at 12:30, and he didn’t show.

“Whew’ the fuck is Mistah Donut? We’re supposed to meet Mistah Donut here,” Peter said.

I did one of those embarrassed, quiet laughs where you tilt your head back, and smile, lazily, because you don’t know if what the person has said is intended to be funny.

“You eva meet Mistah Donut?” Peter asked.

I did another one of those laughs, because I didn’t hear exactly what he said, and I didn’t want him to repeat it. I wasn’t aware that he was asking a question.

“I’m askin’ you a question” he said.

“What?” I asked, and realized, before he could answer, what his question

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was. I guess I had heard it, but forgot to listen. "Oh, no, I've never met Mister Donut."

"He's a fat fuck," said Peter. He had a way of rolling his head back when he talked. Every time he spoke he looked as if he was winding up to vomit.

We waited for a half hour, but that fat Mr. Donut never showed up. Peter's jokes were bad, and the topics of discussion which he chose stunk. "That part in Taxi Driver, when he blows everyone away? That's fuckin' awesome." He said, almost from nowhere. I did another fake-laugh head nod, and we headed for the next sight.

"Wanna see where I work?" he asked.

I said sure, and he pointed to the T.J. Maxx on our left. He told me that he was a cashier there, as well as a stock boy.

It was an hour drive to get to the next place, which was a mall in Hyannis. Peter must have smoked a whole pack of Marlboros by then.

On the way there, "Late in the Evening" by Paul Simon came on the radio. I thought to myself how appropriate it was, it being almost 2 A.M., and all. I found myself really listening. I never realized how well the horns fit over that bass line. I found myself singing quietly to myself and not minding anything. At the point in the song where he sings about going outside to smoke a jay, I sang a little louder. Yeah, this song is what I'm all about, hanging out late at night, not wasting any time in college, just living.

Peter looked at me when that line came on, and sang it as well. "Yeah you and me both know what that's all about, huh?" he said, and laughed. When he laughed, his chin sunk into his neck, and he hunched over the steering wheel.

I did another laugh-nod.

As Peter talked some more, I began to recognize a pattern in the things he'd say. If they weren't autobiographical anecdotes, like the fact that he had a second job at T.J. Maxx as well as painting t-shirts on the side, it was about sex. He seemed to have an equation which he plugged into anything that was said. He would choose a word or two in whatever was said, and make it sexual.

The woman on the radio commercial said, "Come on down to the Lobster Hut for fine dining," and his response was, "Yeah, I'll come all ovah ya fuckin' face." My neck was getting tired from all the fake laughing.

His specialty was the two-word twist, which he plugged into any phrase that he could. He would take one of the words and make it stand for either the male or female genitalia, and use the other word as a synonym for screwing. About the mini-golf course called, "Pirate's Cove," Peter said he'd stick his pirate in her cove, nodding to the girls who were coming out of the bar next to it.

Peter could even take one word apart to make his formula work. There was a bar called "Pufferbellies," which when we passed he said, "Yeah I'll
puffer your belly.”

My fake laugh had a trace of authenticity, but I hoped he wasn’t talking about my belly.”

When we got to this place, I laid out the cones and made sure no cars could enter. When it came to working, Peter was not a very patient boss. He would get mad if I couldn’t understand his pukey mumble, and mad if I wasn’t speaking loud enough.

“Get the handicapped stencil,” he said, but I thought he said, “You’re handling this well.”

I effortlessly nodded my head, and stood still, appreciating his praise. Then he said it again, but furiously. I didn’t understand him until the third time.

When I asked him where it was, he didn’t understand me either. “What?” he yelled, obviously pissed.

I finally found it, centered it on the ground between the line, and he turned on the yellow paint. This spot was about a hundred yards away from the door, and was not particularly convenient for a handicapped person. For this mistake, he said, “Fuckweed. That’s what I’m gonna call you for the rest of the night.” Luckily he forgot after about three times.

We finished at about 3:30, and headed for our next destination in Dennisport. I asked for a cigarette on the way, but he showed me that he only had two left.

This job went quickly, and there were no mistakes as great as the handicapped stencil. We did two more jobs between Dennisport and Yarmouth. At that time it was about 7 o’clock, and we were looking for a place called Center Street, where they had some good coffee.

There was a woman in a jogging suit walking down the road, and we pulled over to ask her if she knew where it was.

“Hey,” Peter said, slowing down and opening his window, “How’daya get to Centah Street?”

“Centah?” asked the woman curiously.

“No, Centah.” he said, correcting a mistake that wasn’t a fault of her own.

“Centah?” she asked again, even more confused.

“No. Centah” he said, extending the second syllable a few seconds more than the last time, to accentuate his frustration.

I don’t know how she finally understood, but she said, “Oh, you mean Center Street?”

“Yeah, Centah.”

She told us the directions, but I didn’t listen. Nor did I listen when Peter said, “We shoulda taken her into the back of the van and fucked her.” He was
probably just trying to make me laugh.

As we sat in the parking lot, drinking our coffee, I could see the flies bouncing at Peter’s head, on the shadow he cast on the gravel. As a favor, he handed me his half-smoked, slobberly cigarette, and offered me the rest.

We went to a job in Osterville, at some newly-paved library. We had to measure distances, and snap some blue string to mark where the lines were going to be. The owner of the library came out and asked if we could put a fire lane on the left side closest to the building.

I asked him about his job, and he told me how wonderful it was, being able to read all day. I told him how I just liked to write all day, and didn’t really care what other people wrote. He asked me about college, and I told him I thought it was a waste of time. He said, “Stay in school kid,” and walked away.

My legs felt the way that they used to feel in second grade, after sleepover parties: tired from staying up the whole night, and sore from growing. No matter how hard I stretched, I could not elasticize myself enough to feel revived.

Whenever I was close to convincing myself that this wasn’t bad, Peter would make another joke. We passed a sign at Burger King that said, “Burger bundles 99c,” and he plugged it into his equation, to make sure it still worked.

The small digital clock that was velcroed to the dashboard read 10:30. I appropriated the action in my ‘when I get home’ ambition to sleeping. I finally found some sort of content disregard in Peter’s company. I wouldn’t bother him, as long as he didn’t bother me. I was going home soon, and I could quit forever, tomorrow.

Either he received my telepathic pleas to shut up, or just wasn’t talking much because he was tired. He had told me earlier that he had to work at T.J. Maxx from noon to 5. “Aw, fuck it,” he said from nowhere, “Chuck can suck my dick if he thinks we’re gonna do another fuckin’ lot.”

My laugh was a tired shake inside my stomach, and wasn’t connected to any smile, when I entertained the idea of Chuck accepting Peter’s ultimatum. I got angry at myself for thinking such a gross thought. The inward anger was brief though, because I knew of the outward fact that I was going home.

As we turned down my street, he said, “Y’know we’ve only worked togetha for one night, but we do good togetha.”

I lifted my head in another lazy nod of recognition, and closed my eyes like a stoner might. I said, “Yeah” in the same exaggerated tone, and didn’t care if he knew I wasn’t really agreeing.

“Though we’ve only worked togetha one night, I feel like you’re my best friend, and I’ve known you my whole life, y’know?” I opened the door at my
house, shook his hand, and said goodbye.

I called Chuck that night, and lied that my mom was sending me to college, and I couldn't work for him anymore.

That was the last that I saw of Peter, until now. His face was still, in the open casket, and his chin was sunk into his neck, as always. It was not like he was going to belch at any second, but like he might smile. There was a certain passivity to him now, that he never had during the nine hours that I knew him.

I guess it's the stillness of death that people respect so much, and the somber vibe that the ones who loved him give off: live maybe they receive part of his spirit.

It's really no wonder he had a heart attack; he was always doing something. I bet he's mad that he's been stopped, mad that he can't keep working. I never do anything, I just sit around and write.

If I said to him that first day, that only day, as I got out of the van, "I'm quitting today, so the next time I'll see you is at your wake," he probably would have figured out a way to plug his equation in. It might've even made me laugh.
A Dancer’s Bequest

All the unhappiness of [wo]man stems from one thing only: that [s]he is incapable of staying quietly in [her]his room — Pascal

My niece Rae dances among half-painted canvases in my small studio. Her hands circle over her head. She performs a perfect split. Her dark hair sweeps the carpet as her back arches, hands raise, and fingers open wide in a dramatic finale. When she stands up and bows, a grin crossing her sweat-shined face, I applaud her accomplishment. I will miss her when she leaves for college in the fall.

She plops on the sofa and leans her head against my shoulder. “Can I take the picture you did in Greece to school?” she asks, so out of breath I can hardly understand her.

My niece is never on one track. Her mind works too fast. “Isn’t it too psychedelic for you?” I ask.

The drawing is the only art work I have completed and framed and will not sell. I don’t show it to many people either. That’s why it hangs in an unlit corner in my bedroom. I’m not ready to discuss parting with it or maybe am reluctant to tell Rae its story. She’s only seventeen. We share good times like jaunts to the Keys. I’m a second mother to her.

Before Rae answers, I try changing the subject. “Is that dance one of your company’s numbers?”

She ignores me. “I love how it looks kind of like a bird-person. And the orange-yellowish coils remind me of snails.” She smiles. “I really want it.”

“It could get ruined,” I say.

“I’m responsible, but if I can’t take it, then at least will it to me.”

“What’s your fascination with that picture anyway?”

“I know it means something to you. Like my journals. I keep them hidden because they mean something only to me.”

“And you think I keep the drawing hidden?”

“I know you do,” she says.

Sometimes Rae wants to talk about boys and asks for my opinion. She thinks too much about boys, I first tell her, later admitting that I am not the one to ask about love matters. I don’t go into details, only revealing that I’ve made some poor choices and lately do better alone.

My niece’s longing for this picture takes me back two years and ten thou-
sand miles from home when I lived in Greece with Panos, a man I had met while traveling through the Peloponnese. I decide to tell her this story, perhaps for my sake more than hers, but I also want her to see each color and line that I had felt during the picture’s creation, and so I begin.

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“Panos’ share of his father’s house in the mountain village of Sofiko consisted of one room, painted a deep uneven turquoise. After living there for six months, I felt a familiar discomfort with every corner. The door bumped open into a bulky closet containing our clothes. On the other side of the closet was our kitchen — a two-burner gas stove and cabinet covered with a faded red curtain.

“The bed and vanity, a strip of mirror and a large concrete brick that served as a stool, completed our home. I had cut out pictures of Greta Garbo and other movie stars from old issues of Life that I found at an Athens bookstore and glued them across the top of the mirror. My attempt at American funk mixed well with Panos’ haphazard sense of order.

“My drawing pad, a reminder that I wanted to create my own image to arrange among the others, leaned against that small wall space. Except for a sketch I had drawn of slaughtered lambs hanging in front of the taverna on the hill, the book remained empty. Across the top of the drawing, in chilling purple, I had written, “Creo (cold) in Sofiko,” a reflection of my mood.

“Now I had just returned from a week alone in this forested region called Pelion. Tourist season had begun over a month before, and Panos’ past as a kamaki (shark), a man who prowls train stations and cafes seeking tourist girls for company, made his commitment to our monogamous relationship unreliable. Before the summer, he had really been trying. We lived in the furthest place from temptation of any sort, and he stayed away from the friends he used to run with. We were together, really close, still new lovers. But once summer started, I saw that he wanted to go to Korinthos, where there were a lot of tourist places, or to this friend’s campsite in the nearby town of Almiri. We began to fight, and I thought about leaving him.”

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I look at Rae to see if she’s listening. Her labored breathing from dancing is even now. I get us some iced tea.

The moment I set the glasses on the coffee table, Rae asks, “So why did
"I thought Panos had grown tired of me. I figured that if I left for a while, he would miss me, try to change and show me that I was the only woman he wanted. While I was away, I had decided to try to behave more civilly around his friends, not act jealous, be more agreeable. Mostly, I would not be so serious. I had chosen to live in Greece, not only for Panos, but also to experience the country’s life and light.

“I arrived at the door armed with food and my new attitude. ‘Are you happy to see me?’ I asked when he answered the door. He looked as though he were ready to leave.

“He said, ‘I am working full-time at Camp Poseidon now,’ the campsite his friend Spiro owned. ‘You can stay here while I work.’

‘And at night?’ I asked, incredulous he hadn’t hugged me the second he saw me.

‘I will come home in the evenings.’

“I agreed to this arrangement, believing that I could take long walks in Sofiko, and make elaborate dinners for us.”

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“I can’t believe you agreed,” Rae interjects.

I move paintings back into places cleared away for her dancing, and survey them, not sure if I should continue. Finally I ask, “Why wouldn’t I?” I look at her face, eyes wide open. She waits for me to answer my own question. “Okay,” I say, “it wasn’t my best move. In fact, I was angry with him. Up until his new plan, I went with him everywhere.” I discard used tubes of oil paints I notice in a corner.

“So why did you agree?”

“Part of me wanted solitude. I could be whoever I wanted, with all my days alone. I could be a housewife or the artist in a foreign land. I had never decided what I wanted for myself. This was a perfect place to find out.”

“Too lonely, if you ask me.”

“You’re right. It was.”

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“During the first few days, I realized I missed the beach at Almiri, but
mostly I wondered if Panos still played the kamaki. And then, he didn’t come home on the third night. With no phone, I couldn’t check on him. After nine p.m., the buses stopped running. All night I waited to hear his motorcycle while I smoked a pack of cigarettes. Every sound, even night bird calls, was magnified by my fear that something had happened to him or by my anger that he might be with a tourist.”

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I look at Rae whose face reflects confusion and concern for me. Also a look of “You had it coming.”

“I thought about all of you here, and how grandma and grandpa, your mom, and you, especially you, were excited about my adventures. I got so many letters about how glad everyone was that someone cared about me, how it wasn’t good for me to be alone.”

Rae remembers she sent me a letter then, asking for a sketch of the sea, olives, anything. “I’ll write to you no matter how awful school is.”

“I’m sorry,” I say “but even writing was an effort. I felt deceitful to you, and to myself.”

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“The first light, the special rosy light of a Greek dawn, came into the room through the back window. It appeared harsh now at five a.m. I looked out to see our neighbor saddling his donkey and heading off for his farm. More waiting, more cigarettes, and finally three hours later, Panos walked in the house.

“I stood by the stove facing him. He looked as tired as I felt. My voice shook. ‘I am leaving, going back to America. You can’t treat me like this. I went away to Pelion so this kind of thing would not happen.’

‘Panos lit a cigarette and put his clothes in a duffel bag. He said, avoiding my eyes, ‘You can leave forever. I’m going to stay at the camp.’

’ ‘If that’s what you want.’ I looked at him half expecting that he might soften, change his mind, then continued, ‘Remember, when I go now, it will be forever.’

‘After his motorcycle roared down the dirt road, I packed my belongings, and easy task, having done this a few times during the month before my trip to Pelion. I would plan to leave, then change my mind after making love or his convincing me to stay by promising he would treat me better. Or I’d think how once I’d leave, how hard it would be to return. It had taken years for me to make this trip, to go off on my own. I always thought if I left Greece, it
would mean more than leaving Panos. It would mean I was a failure.”

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Rae asks, “Why couldn’t you have stayed in Greece?”
“I thought about staying. But it would have been too sad.”
“But not lonely. You were already lonely. So what happened after Panos left?”

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“I took a bottle of ouzo from the cabinet, poured a small glass halfway, and added water. When the liquid turned milky, I drank it in one gulp.
“I thought about the times Panos and I would go fishing, and ride on his motorbike into Korinthos where his sister lived. We’d drink ouzo in the tavernas. Panos would ask me to go inside and get the owner. I loved doing this, to belong in this world completely by knowing how to ask for something. And the proprietor would come out, fill our glasses, and bring us little platters of smoked sausage, hot peppers, and steaming octopus. And he’d keep filling our glasses until we were drunk. We’d eat until we were satiated, and then we’d stay at his sister’s. I’d wonder if she knew how drunk I was and if she might think I wasn’t suitable for her brother.”

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Rae says, “Oh, he was perfect?”
“His family thought so. He was the only son, the only brother.”

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“Now, in the house in Sofiko, I had nothing to eat but didn’t care. It was too early in the day to make plans. I carried in the table outside and wiped down the plastic tablecloth. I laid out my felt markers, picked up the drawing pad, and opened it to the clean white page after the sketch I had drawn.
“I played a tape of bouzouki music on Panos’s tinny tape player. The room filled with a false gaiety. I began to draw, feeling a sense of purpose as if I were a dancer, moving my hands across the open page, doing something on my
own, of my own, for the first time. While I lived in these corners, the parameters of this room, also the villages and towns, I was the outsider. The attempts the local women made to be friendly had only made me more aware of my differences, not speaking enough Greek, not being interested in crocheting. Their gestures were nice, I had told Panos, but I didn’t belong in sewing circles. I needed to paint, ’make my own life,’ I had said. And now I started.

“My head was buzzing as the paper filled with circles and strong lines of color. In several hours, I only stopped once to take blankets off the clothesline, as if I should have cared if they became soaked. I needed a break. The neighbor, an old woman who dressed in black and who Panos said was a meddler, waved. I smiled and returned to my project.

“When I finished the picture, I emptied the bottle of liqueur, looked at the drawing, powerful with its bright blues, reds, yellows, and porcupine-like edges, and I felt strangely victorious and sad. I couldn’t remember if I had ever completed something for myself. Maybe when I was a child, I finished art projects with the teacher hovering over my shoulder, or made satisfactory science projects with the help of my father.”

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Rae asks, “Grandpa?”

“Yes,” I answer. “He was great at science projects.”

“I know,” she says. “He helps me all the time.”

“My career as an artist had been half-assed. I thought traveling would inspire me, or else I was just avoiding the work it took to be good. I had always wanted to do something on my own.”

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“Now drinking the last of the ouzo, I laughed at the irony of having to be over thirty and thousands of miles away from friends, family, and teachers before I made this creation.

“I drew more spirals of all sizes, mostly in orange and yellow, then I swirled those colors randomly across the paper in strong strokes, but I was tired now—and finished, so I packed up the pens. I dressed in a gauzy yellow shift Panos had bought for me the first weekend we spent together.

“It was almost dark out now. By the light of the single bulb, I applied makeup. I ran a brush through my hair. I tore off the strip of pictures on the vanity and threw them in my travel bag. After almost no sleep and all the drinking, my actions were effortless. I left the table inside, and closed the door behind me.”
Rae asks, “Where were you going?”
I answer, while pulling back my long hair and remembering how short it was in Greece, “I was leaving the room, the house, to make the last bus to Almiri. I couldn’t stay there another minute.”
“I could see why,” Rae says, now doing stretching exercises, “but why would you go to the camp?”
“I had to say goodbye in my own way,” I tell her. I hesitated. “After all, how it was, he left me alone in the house. I didn’t feel like I walked out on him.”
Rae says, “I get it. You wanted to be the one in control.”
I wanted to feel as if I were leaving of my own accord. I guess that’s control.”

“At Camp Poseidon, I saw Panos sitting at a table with two campers from Poland. I had met them before my trip to Pelion. One, a pretty blonde, about ten years younger than I, and twenty pounds lighter, had her hand on Panos’ arm. I ignored his shocked expression as I walked past and joined Merle, the Englishwoman who lived at the camp year-round, who had acted as an ally when I needed one.
“Merle whispered. ‘Your bloody fool is unnerved. He’s told everyone you left this time for good.’
“I said, ‘I have left for good.’ I pointed to a bus driver who drove a group of French teenagers around Greece. ‘I’d sure like to be with him. Maybe tonight since I seem to have lost my Greek boyfriend.’ I hoped Panos or a least some of his friends heard me. I leaned back and put my feet on an extra chair. ‘Let’s have some Metaxa, Merle. I like to celebrate endings.’

To Rae I say, “Yet inside I felt the hurt of this ending with Panos. I said things I thought would make me feel better. I did things I thought would make me feel better.”
“It doesn’t sound like anything would have helped.”
“Sometimes nothing helps.”
"Panos came over and said, 'I thought you were taking a trip. Shouldn’t you be in Athens by now? Or on the plane?'

'I wanted to scream at him, yet I had drunk enough to be past that stage. Even though I was angry, my voice sounded calm. 'You didn’t waste any time sitting with that blonde whore. Did you lay her yet?’ I poured a glass of brandy and drank quickly, hoping to stay in control.

"'I am only talking politics with them,' Panos said as he moved my arm off a chair and sat down. 'Can I sit here?'

"I believed that Panos could not make a claim on me now. I said in his ear, 'I think she’s missing you. Go away. Far away.' He stayed and poured Metaxa into our glasses, holding up his alone for a toast."

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Rae stretches out on the floor. "Was it worth going to that camp?"

"No one is worth going through all that drama. No one is worth losing yourself over."

She asks, "Is that why you’re an artist?"

I laugh. "I don’t think you need that kind of pain to create art."

She says, "I meant because you finally found yourself. But don’t worry, I know what you mean. You can go on now."

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"Panos’ friends talked about going to a disco nearby. When he left to join them, I sat on the back of his motorcycle, wrapping my arms around his waist, and thinking about the times I had held him like this with love. As tired as I felt, I wasn’t finished or satisfied yet. I hadn’t said goodbye. Or maybe I hadn’t decided to leave. I don’t think I even know what I wanted at that point. In any event, I couldn’t go back to Sofiko so late.

"When we stepped into the disco, I stood by the covered bar and watched Panos’ eyes wandering to the Polish woman. Then I saw the bus driver sitting alone at an outdoors table facing the empty dance floor. I joined him and dragged out a charade of getting a light for my cigarette until I was sure that Panos and his friends noticed. My head pulsed with the disco sound and from all the ouzo and brandy I had drunk that day. Strobe lights played on the floor. The cool air sobered me, and I heard and felt the disco music change to Greek music."
“I stood up slowly and started to dance around the tables, carefully at first, then kicking up the loose gravel. I flung my silver green scarf around my head until it had an action of its own. Panos, his friends, the Polish girl blurred. I was with myself, dancing for myself, from a power tapped into earlier in the day when I had drawn my picture alone in the room. Both creations freed me from pain, and now as I danced, I forgot about Panos.

“I felt his arm encircle my waist as he tried to lead me away. I didn’t struggle, just continued dancing until he felt my control and followed me. We both laughed and passed the scarf back and forth.

“In Greece, only the men can dance alone. I didn’t care about traditions then. I didn’t care about anything except doing what I wanted. At that moment, nothing mattered to me anymore except the dance and the music.

“Afterwards, when it was two or three in the morning, as I joined Panos on his motorcycle, I was aware of light and life as part of my being. My yellow dress billowed around me. Night air cooled my sweat as we circled along the curving road.

“When we returned to the campsite, we sat in the dark silently for a long time. I felt drained.

“Finally, Panos, turned to me and said, ‘I hate you. I’m tired of being with you, making love to you. Why didn’t you leave like you were supposed to instead of embarrassing me?’

“I looked at the moonlit outline of his face, and realized I didn’t hate him. I couldn’t really believe he hated me either. Maybe only because he was with me still.

“I said, ‘I don’t care if we ever make love again. You’re not there even when we do, probably thinking about all the other women you could be with.’ Was there more to say to him? I wondered, thinking how he seemed to be listening to me though I knew it was too late for us to be together again. I added, ‘I will leave, when I am supposed to.’

“We walked hand in hand to his tent where he fell asleep immediately. Releasing myself from his hold, I walked outside to get more air. For hours I looked at the stars until I knew, this time for sure, that I had to leave Panos soon. And more, I also knew I had to leave Greece.

“The next day Panos accused me of going to bed with Nikos, the young Greek boy who rented wind-surfers. For days while he was convinced of this and spoke of nothing else, even forgetting about my staying at Sofiko, I enjoyed the beach and other people’s company. In a way, I was saying goodbye slowly. Finally, Panos stopped talking about my supposed infidelity. In those days, I became stronger, and at last resolute, I left Greece.”

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Rae asks, "Well, can I have it?"
I get the picture from my bedroom. Her leaving home for college, another difficult leaving, is worth the picture.
When I hand it to my niece, she hugs me. "You didn’t fail, you know;" she says.
"I guess not." I smile, a little weakened by the recounting, a little stronger for her helping me to understand by her questioning, by her listening.
My story has not traumatized her. Rae can handle hearing almost anything I want to share. When she places the picture on the floor and dances around it, then embraces it, I see that this picture is something of passion, something sacred that only another artist should own. I already can see it hanging on the wall in her dormitory, no longer hidden away in my bedroom.

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JOHN NUGENT

Letter to Asher #3:

Gumpisms are for Wusses

So I've been paying attention lately to things. The state of things some would call it, but I just call it things. For instance the Buckeye State of things is a decrepit old man with annoying habits. And when people wax lyrical or wax anything I don't tend to agree with anything they are saying. It is strange that content of a conversation does not and has not come first for me. It is the tone and the word-choice that can make or break a dandy of mind-meeting. And this is strange to me because up until now, it was exactly that part of the essay question that said describe the tone and discuss the WC that really pissed me off because I just assumed that it was slave to content. That content was too related to tone and WC to separate the two, oh well.

Aaron Freehole damaged his trunk. It was no use staring, he definitely fucked up his trunk and we would all have to wait for him to collect his strewn life that to me looked like wayward sheep. The airport was an echo-ey loud, not the kind of loud that comes right after you ingest the massive volume and it echoes in your head like singing . . . but not as pleasant. Like when I was shorter and living in another part of the United States, after I dismounted the Snapper lawn mower, my body was still in shock from the two hour vibration marathon, my ears were no longer meant for hearing. The door slamming on 32 Tall Oaks Drive would filter into my head as the laser sounds from Star Wars, or something quite the same, this is not an easy experience to sculpt.

Anyway, I know Aaron was hearing lasers. He didn't have anything to do with mowing but he sure wasn't the same the few minutes after that trunk accident. Brian knelt like a wanna-be saint and swept with his arms as the rest of us straightened our ties and smirked a bit to the travelers that went right or left around the “accident.”

Now all eight of us stood erect as we were taught at one point in our lives. Lenny Macini, whose father is an architect, selflessly lent Brian a piece of rope for his broken trunk. Lenny had been saving that rope for the right moment so the offering was by no means menial. There was this sixth sense that Lenny shared with his father — for instance, as we were leaving for the airport this morning, Lenny had to run back to his garage to get a piece of rope. I knew
what it meant when he bolted South from the crowd because I had been walking behind him. His head snapped to the right and his pace slowed down — I just got the hell out of the way. The rest of the guys insulted him as he ran, but I knew. Lenny's kind of corny . . . but he'll use the rope.

I've heard things about crowd mentality, but I'm not sure if that applies to groups of eight. However, I can't think of a better reason to account for the performance of our group. I always walk a few steps behind for one reason or another. This time I was pretending to be Moses leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, but from behind. I just figured that would be really odd if Moses insisted on leading from the back with Israelites always yelling "Right or Left!!? Hey Moses RIGHT or LEFT!!!!" And then Moses yelling back up to the front, "Everyone slow down, slow down, I have to check with god for a minute." Station Wagons are that way. People of all different ages and creeds yelling from the back to the front, from the front to the way-back, and from the way-back to the cars outside. It is my opinion that Station Wagons are gonna be worth something one day.

How queer it is that I capitalize Station Wagon and I don't capitalize god. But I guess I write god a lot more and it saves energy not to use the upper-case.

Anyway, on second thought, it would be fruitless to describe the actions of the pee-wee brains in the group, they simply centered around two disciplines; one was the comedy of old people, and the other was the female behind. Long legs and a visible ass — that's all it took to make eight mouths cease to spurt, and eight heads reel to the scene. Puberty ended a few years back but the mental side of it still reigned over the body. And if there weren't a visible ass in the distance, there was an elderly person who walked funny, spoke loudly because of loss of hearing, or a number of other things that middle school humor inhaled as prime material.

Drop me a letter shit-head. I'm getting tired of these games. I'm hungover and I've been living out of a backpack for 3 weeks. Being back in Dublin cured a bit of the homesickness, but I need a letter from ya. Hope all is well, however I get a feeling it isn't perfect. I know two pages double spaced about you in the last 4 months, I don't handle withdrawal too easy, and I'm not hearing stories about your travels in Rhode Island from other people here in Dublin so send me an Asher Newspaper.

Dotingly yours,

Me
Blood is Thicker than Water

The first reading is from the book of Genesis.

I know about the beginning of the book of Genesis. It talks about Adam and Eve and a serpent, Satan. Satan kind of reminds me of my grandmother. I remember a time when I was about eleven and my grandmother baked a batch of cookies. She didn’t just mix the dough for the cookies; she pounded on the dough with a power that made you think she was seeking its extermination. Her hands were strong, and her blue veins peered through her skin as she mixed and prepared. She offered me one, and then another, and then another. I was in fifth grade and eating cookies is what fifth graders did. So I ate one, and then another, and then a few more “others” until she accused me of being a glutton. I didn’t even know what it meant. But she scared me and said I would die without God because I had committed one of the seven deadly sins. I was so confused. At that age I still believed your own grandmother wouldn’t tempt you towards a sin. She was like the devil to me; she would tempt me and then reveal that my choice was sinful. I didn’t want to die.

“Abraham, Abraham,” He called. “Here I am,” he replied.

“Here I am! Here I am!” I yelled from the field. My grandmother’s voice pierced the air as she called for me to come home. It was still early, but I dragged myself all the way to the door and then I stopped. I had to take off my shoes and bang them against the stairs. My grandmother didn’t like dirt in our house—everything had to be immaculate. I stomped into the kitchen where she stood waiting for me. She circled me slowly as I stood somewhat paralyzed. I was so afraid of her at times. She was like a vulture hovering and waiting to attack.

“I know what you’ve been doing,” she said.

“I stood barefoot before her, and I thought, “Yeah, so do I—playing basketball.” Her eyes were glassy, and her face was the color of my brother’s when he was born with jaundice. She was changing as I stood perspiring before her. My breath was labored, and my eyes were searching for my mother. Her pocketbook wasn’t on the counter—she was out.

“Look at your red face. Listen to the heaviness of your breath. Do you take me for some kind of fool? I know what you were doing when I decided to
call you home, but obviously I didn’t get to you in time. How dirty you are! How filthy! Who did you prostitute yourself to? Who? Tell me! I demand that you speak now! Speak!” she screamed in a rage.

My tears mingled with my perspiration, and I felt as if I were drowning. I was only twelve. I wanted my mother to hold me and make my grandmother go away. Instead I watched the old woman approach me. I stood quivering and cowering as her black shoes closed in upon me. Her steps were deliberate and they sounded in my ears like the pounding of a great hammer upon wood. I was cracking, breaking, and she tore me apart. She stood shaking me, and I closed my eyes. Colors entered in and out of my vision. Bubbles of red and green, bold splotches of yellow all played upon one another as I waited for that time to pass. Taking me out to the backyard, she made me strip. Off came my shirt, my shorts, and my underwear. In my nakedness I stood crying; she turned the hose on me. The coldness beat my skin. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph forgive her,” she prayed. Ashamed and frightened I waited until she was done.

“Take your son,” God said, “your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you.”

My mother was an only child. She lived alone with my grandmother for years after my grandfather died—my mom was only fourteen when he passed away. Everyday my grandmother would clean, run errands, sew, and still find time to help my mother with her homework as she prepared the supper. My mom always remembers how wonderfull the smell of my grandmother’s potato cake was when she arrived home on cold afternoons. Things have changed now, but my mom still says that sometimes she walks through the door on some days and expects to smell them from the oven. But my grandmother doesn’t make potato cake anymore. Back when my mother was a child, after my grandmother had my mother fed and settled, she would get ready for work. Sitting on the edge of her bed she would slip her nylons on over her toes and slowly see the pale whiteness of her skin be transformed to a tan color that was a shade too dark for her. On with the old checkered dress, navy blue coat, and wide brimmed hat. When my mother was little she use to swear that grandma look like the man on the container of Quaker Oatmeal. My grandmother would laugh at the comparison—she laughed a nice, pretty laugh. I never heard it.

Night after night my grandmother would trudge up the street like a tired old race horse. She worked the graveyard shift. The sound of her heels rang out against the pavement. She would arrive punctually every evening, turn on the lights, fill up her bucket with soap and water, and on bent knees scrub the
black and white tiles. Tile by tile she worked through the night. Black to white and white to black; it was right around that time that she developed a taste for a certain brand of scotch. To pass the time while she worked in the lonely office, she would say a rosary for my grandfather’s soul.

Rising early next morning he chopped wood for the burnt offering and started on his journey to the place God had pointed out to him.

This morning I didn’t rise from my bed when I heard the sound of her cries. It was about 4:30 in the morning when her voice awakened me. She had been calling my mother, “Mary, Mary, Mary.” It was as if her voice peeled my flesh away and gnawed on my bones. I pretended not to hear, even though I knew that something was wrong, or maybe praying that something had to be wrong. She called to my mother and I listened silently in the blackness of my room as guilt crawled into bed beside me.

“Medical please. Yes, my name if Mary Murphy and I need a rescue for my mother immediately. She is having severe bleeding from her nose. 58 Ingleside. No, I-N-G-L-E-S-I-D-E. It’s directly off Park Avenue.”

Everyone was awake and I heard them all. But I was selfish and I preferred the warmth of my flannel to the coldness of the blood that ran from her nose. No one had to know my secret, and I had begun to believe that my silence would keep my thoughts hidden—even from myself. But my heart knew, and so did God.

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering, loaded it on Isaac, and carreid in his own hands the fire and the knife.

The lector’s words are practically being eaten by the microphone. I’m only hearing words here and there, but even if I could hear everything I don’t know as if I would want to listen. God doesn’t seem to be listening to me.

Sitting here in church, I’m recalling how the flashing red light of the ambulance found me this morning even though my shades were drawn shut. I had opened my eyes but pretended to be asleep. “This is just going to be one of those dreams that seems very real,” I thought. As the scarlet light probed my room I felt as if my fingers were touching the naked body of my dream. But my dream was horrible; the silent prayers I had uttered were selfish. While everyone with a good heart would have prayed for God to bring her home to us safely, I prayed that He’d take her away. And then I smiled at the thought that He probably wouldn’t want her either.

When they arrived at the place that God had pointed out to Him, Abraham bound his
son Isaac and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and seized the knife to kill his son.

She had clutched a butter knife above me, but I was oblivious to her presence. Sitting on the floor of my bedroom, I had felt a sudden sharp pain in my back. The room was dark, and the only light to be seen was the little red power light on my radio. It was the door that had hit me. I looked behind me to see who had opened it; I thought it was my brother. He always thought it was funny to open my door and then run away—a kind of in-your-home version of “ding-dong ditch.” But when I turned to look I found her standing and shaking above me. She was dressed in her white nightgown, and she appeared like an angel. I focused on the shine of the knife. My little red power light had stained it by reflection and made it appear to be glazed with blood. She was shaking and unsteady. But at first I was too shocked to even move. I thought that she was going to kill me. I saw her plunging the knife into my flesh and then crying by my limp, lifeless body when she realized what she had done. But she hadn’t moved. She stood like the statue of an ancient warrior who was about to kill his victim; she seemed to glory in her moment. I wondered what it was that I had done and then remembered that I had forgotten to dry the dinner dishes. But I did that all the time, and she had never been this mad over wet dinner dishes before.

“You mean, ungrateful child! I know that you don’t love me. I know that you wish I were dead,” she began. When I tried to protest she continued, “Don’t think you’re fooling anybody. God knows how I’m treated. He knows the lack of respect you give to me, your own grandmother. After all I’ve done for you. All the money I’ve helped your parents save for your education. And you won’t even kiss me. You think you’re better than me—don’t you? All I’ve ever wanted from you was love.”

“I do love you!” I screamed in desperation and hoped that I wasn’t going to die. Slowly I began to move, but my movements felt mechanical and forced. It was as if I were in a dream where I was being chased, but my legs weren’t able to carry me away fast enough. I had just managed to bring myself to my feet when she took the knife in her two hands and then plunged it into her thigh. I screamed for my parents—for anyone. “Mom, Dad help me! Somebody help me!” She lay on the floor of my room, and her blood formed a small pool around her. I felt so alone even as my
parents ran into my room. It seemed as if my mother had become used to these scenes.

*Then looking up, Abrahma saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. Abraham called this place, “Yahweh provides.” This is the Word of the Lord.*

“Thanks be to God,” I answer as I rise to leave. People glare at me and are probably wondering why I’m leaving after the first reading. Some woman with a red hat on attempts to stare me down as I pass her. I don’t care. They can all go to hell. I receive no comfort from the scripture. I receive no comfort from God. My grandmother is in the hospital, and she’s not dead. But what if she were? As I walk out of the dark church I breathe in the elixir of life. What freedom my family will have. What joy and happiness.

What days that will belong to me and my family. Days when we will not have to worry about hurting again. I breathe a quick prayer that life might be long. I run the rest of the way home. The car is in the driveway. They must all be home. I clasp the handle on the door, and ascend the stairs. My mother stands smiling in the kitchen. “Go take a look in the living room,” she says. And I do.

My grandmother sits in her chair in the living room. As I see her a flood of tears pours from my eyes. They had packed her nose, and allowed her to come home. Everyone stands around her smiling. All I can do is cry. My mother says, “Oh, look at how happy Rose is to have you home, Mom. And you’re home now for good.”

“Amen to that,” she replies.
A modern day Pythia, she sat at the kitchen table impassively, tilting her chipped mug and gazing down at the coffee grounds that rested on the bottom, dripped through from a torn filter.

Her teenage daughter wept heavy, wet sobs and spilled salt tears on the plastic tablecloth, her head resting on a crumpled napkin, her hair trailing in a dollop of egg yolk and burnt toast crumbs.

The mother, her eyes cold and dismissing, remembering perhaps the scene twenty years ago in which she had been the supplicant, searched the grainy dregs of her cup as if they held the divine, the future.

“It will ruin your life,” the mother said, an oracle’s words of indifference, claiming no responsibility. No answer there, just foreboding of disaster, of Oedipal consequences and eye-gouging despair.

The girl raised her face, wiped her nose with a slow hand, her eyes swollen and red and desperate.

“What am I going to do?” She wailed again helplessly at her mother’s enigmatic face whose closed features seemed to speak of babes left alone on mountains of stone.

The oracle was believed, the words translated into action by the perspiring and hand-wringing girl. The girl did not know that an oracle was never capable of diverting disaster: only in trying to avoid the fateful words did the parents secure the outcome of the delphic prophecy. She entered the starched white office alone, sat down, patted her stomach once in farewell, and flipped blindly through a glossy magazine as she waited for the knife of a kindly doctor.

Yet no epic disaster occurred, no patricide of the reckless boy who sipped beer from aluminum cans as he watched television and ignored the frantic calls of his cast off lover, no chance of an incestuous bed, no Olympian plague wreaked in this small town of dirty streets. No swollen feet, no child in the wilds with his heels pinned together.

Those who sought the oracle’s advice, in awe of their mythical knowledge, never realized that the progeny, discarded, always returns to fulfill the worst foretelling. No disaster prevented, no disaster guaranteed. Only the lurching awake in the middle of the night, clutching a flat belly, hearing the far-away cries of a baby, lost.
It was a very grey day. The sky was grey. The buildings were grey. A lady sat on a park bench. Her hair was grey. Grey is a color that is sometimes used to convey feelings of desolation, dreariness, or maybe complacentness. Her legs, pressed tightly together, complemented her rigid posture just as she did the composition of that grey day.

She used to tour the countryside with the circus when she was much younger. They called her “The Bearded Lady.” A freak. There used to be one at every circus. That made her wonder why she was still a freak. Her beard fell out during menopause, which, in case you are wondering, happens to most bearded women. That made her happy.

“Do you own a cat?” asked a man standing closer to her than the curb. He was wearing a turquoise polo shirt, collar pulled up. What he really meant by his question was, “Are you going to eat that cat food?”

She clutched the cans of cat food, her leathery skin folding over the edges sexually. She’d been asked that question before.

“If I get real hungry,” she retorted flirtatiously, forgetting what had originally been asked.

“Oh . . .” he said slowly, trying to keep his cool, raising his eyebrows just the slightest.

She was put off and so decided not to bat her eyelashes at him. It wasn’t the first time that she’d run into his type, having toured the countryside with the circus.

“Excuse me, but do you always wear your collars up?” she asked curtly while she tucked the cat food behind her butt. He fidgeted a little. What she really meant by her question was, “Excuse me, but are you a fag?”

It wasn’t the first time he’d heard that question, having spent the healthiest years of his life working in the gay porn industry.

He smiled politely, saying, “Look, I’ve been out of that business for a while,” a response to the wrong question. His left hand slowly sank into his pocket, sexually, down to the wrist. He felt sexy. He hadn’t been with a woman before.

“Why are you sitting on this bench?” he asked. And she heard, “Where have you been all of my life?”

The wind quietly blew by them as the grey clouds above slowly moved.
along their solemn path. She tipped her head down a little, her hair looking splendid.

"I was waiting for a bus," she said. And he heard, "I've been waiting for you."

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," she replied.

She invited him back to her place for dinner. It was the best damn dinner he'd eaten in a long time. When he asked her what was in it, she just smiled modestly. And then, when he asked her for seconds, she agreed to marry him. She had lost her ability to have kids when she lost the beard, so instead, they had a quiet and peaceful life together.

Eventually they did get a dog, though, because she couldn't stand cats.
July 1995, Montgomery County, Alabama

It was a sticky southern morning, laughing in the Bible Belt, five hundred years from home. Haze hung over the field and settled on deer as they munched. Just past dawn, already near 80 degrees, weatherman calling for a scorcher. A rickety pick-up truck tumbled down the road, its bed full of manure, its driver red-faced and unshowered, leaving the gravel upturned and the dirt to re-settle after falling down out of the air. She felt proud not to wear a bra under her tee-shirt, dangerous and rebellious, like a preacher’s mistress on Sunday morning, winking through the sermon. She liked to run through the wet grass then tumble spontaneously (it was planned) into it, pretending she didn’t think he was watching. Not him the truck driver or her sister’s husband, but him, the one who couldn’t have her. She closed her eyes, smiled, and stretched like a cat in the sun, territorial, bored, and arrogant.

He would wonder where she’d been all night. He’d yell and demand to know who she’d gone home with. He’d grab her upper arms and shake until she spit in his face, then she’d get the back of his hand across her cheek, and maybe the force would knock her over. He’d say she was a whore. He’d threaten to throw her out. And then her mother would come in and he’d tell her to shut up, and she would, after agreeing that children need discipline.

So she opened her eyes and saw the house and never thought of walking out to the main road. Then she shut them again, and thought of him, not him her step father or the truck driver or her sister’s husband, but him, the one who couldn’t have her. She sat up, her shirt wet with dew, sticking to her back, the smell of cigarettes and beer, and him, still with her. She took a deep breath and held it, aware of how beautiful she thought she was, feeling the goosebumps raise and multiply as that thought came back. The thought that kept her coming back, to him, the one who couldn’t have her.

She had cried the night before, alone in the hot stillness, knowing how far away he was and how little he cared. Now, in the bright humidity she was composed again, tough and ready, focused on her skirt as it clung to her thighs and the tense energy of the day as it built but couldn’t come, it just hung in the air, aching with ripeness and a hot, sweet shortness of breath.
This was her chance. Maybe he’d come back. Maybe they’d go to Galveston again and this time he wouldn’t hold a revolver to his head and threaten to shoot them both. Maybe they’d actually go to New York City and San Francisco and Washington, DC, maybe he’d take her to the lake in the mountains that was in the picture he said his mother gave him. Maybe he’d come back and take her anywhere but back into that house.

Now she did think about running. Through the field and up the street and past the gas station. The old lady would tell her where he’d gone. So she did, she ran, bare feet pounding into gravel, but halfway down the dirt driveway she stopped, saw the boards on the windows and the dead grass where the station wagon was always parked. Was it Sunday? Had she gone to church? Where were the bikes? Where was the car Billy had been working on, it hadn’t run in three years, had he finally gotten it to start? And all the toys, had the twins finally picked them up? That junk had been there since they were eight, nobody ever put it away. The shed was empty and the big ceramic turtle was gone, along with the key she hid in its back for emergencies.

The picnic table was still out back, with its one lopsided bench, ketchup caked in the cracks and green heads swarming where the dog had been tied. The tire swing was wrapped way up on its branch, twisted and knotted like no one was ever going to climb in and spin until their head hurt again. Strange that someone hadn’t fixed it, the twins would want a turn after church. Maybe the old lady was tired of scrubbing dirt out of their good clothes.

The walk back seemed longer. The truck driver on his way back for more manure beeped his horn at the girl with the wrinkled skirt whose stray ponytail hairs stuck to the sweat on the back of her neck. He accelerated and left her to wipe the dirt out of her eyes. The hazy film still hung in the air and now it made her cough. Church bells announced the nine o’clock service, half the town rolled their eyes and the other half rolled over.

He still didn’t know where she was. No one did. She could keep walking straight out of town and no one would be the wiser, she could walk straight out of her life, but where would she go? Who’d come rescue her? Besides, he’d be back, not him her step-father or him the truck driver, but him, the one who couldn’t have her, and what would he think if she was gone?

Maybe she’d start packing when she got home, after she got her beating, so she’d be ready when he came for her. She could wear the flowered pin he’d given her for her birthday, back when she was ungracious and swore it would never put holes in anything she owned.

The field was drier now, clearer. Uglier. She looked up at the house and felt her knees give a little. In a ball on the ground she felt the tears and fought to push them back. Her hands clung to her head and pulled her hair back tight, straightening it. He wouldn’t tolerate her looking all a mess. She stood quickly

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and smoothed her skirt, then took the discolored piece of silk out of her pocket and slipped it on under her shirt, arching her back to fasten the hook by herself.

The shouting began before the screen door bounced twice. The lines were old, cutting, and loud enough for the neighbors to ignore as they read the Sunday comics. Blood dripped on linoleum and an old lady bent to wipe it up. Stairs creaked under footsteps and a bedroom door slammed. The man with the sore hand packed his pipe and complained that his coffee was cold. And damn, they had missed church again.

From the upstairs window she watches two boys with fishing gear push each other into the road, then jump back as a jeep and a sports car race to a high school baseball game. She smiles at their immaturity and returns to her suitcase, pulls off the crocheted pom-pom and identification tags, tucks her grandmother’s cameo under her socks and counts her money. The bag is half empty, easy to zip, so she smiles again as she slides it under her bed and goes back to the window.

An empty field at high noon, grass browning like skin on a beach, quietly, with a slow burn. A flock of black birds rises from one end, makes a wave across the sky, and settles in the trees at the other. The truck driver wipes sweat from his eyes and pulls over to eat lunch. And she, she turns the blinds, undresses in the dark heat, fans her hair on the yellowed pillowcase, and goes to sleep.
The reason I am not in the weight room right now trying to rehab my left knee via the quads is: A. I’d rather be here at the Garden Lounge drinking gin and tonic; B. I embarrassed myself last week trying to bench press a mere 140 pounds; C. the weight room is too crowded again this afternoon; D. I hate the weight room, body builders, and that big lug who works at the desk and smiles at me as if I was a 140-pound weakling, which, as it happens, I am; E. all of the above. Well, of course it’s “all of the above.”

Ellen says, it’s all my fault. I have no business at age forty-something playing soccer in a men’s open league, even if it is just a second division team. When I was twenty-something, she likes to recall, I had a severe concussion while playing rugby, a sport that Ellen considers too dumb to be worth a platitude. At age thirty-something, having switched to the ostensibly safer and saner sport of soccer, I suffered a broken ankle. Ellen said it served me right and she hoped I’d learn something from it. Then last fall this crazy guy blew right through my tackle and took my knee, or at least all of the cartilage, along with him. I did manage to stop him from scoring, I pointed out to my grim wife. But the woman has no compassion when it comes to athletic bravado.

She will not even go to one of my soccer matches. This, she says, is because soccer is: A. confusing; B. unexciting; C. boring; D. stupid; E. all of the above. Well, of course it is “all of the above.” When I suggested she sign my ankle cast along with the guys on the team, she said, “Ha.” When the orthopedist wiped out all traces of the cartilage in my left knee, she said she thought I had more sense, but she could not for the life of her think why she thought I had more sense. “I’ll lead with my right knee next time,” I quipped. “Ha-ha,” she said. The woman has no sense of humor.

For about two weeks after the surgery I visited the weight room at the B-Yr-Best Fitness Center, but then the trial membership lapsed, and the knee was feeling okay (not great, but okay), and I hated going there, so I faded. I developed a Byronic bit of a limp, but when I played soccer I could still run at a fast lurch, and since I’ve never been all that fast anyway, I rationalized that the step or two I’d lost would be overlooked by all but the most discriminating oppo-
nents. A really good sport, I told myself, would think twice before taking advantage of a gimpy guy aged forty-something with a sharply receding hairline and a symptomatic slackness at the waist.

So it turns out this league is plagued with bad sports. All these guys are out trying to prove something; for instance, how they can hold onto that dim vestige of the athletes they were at age twenty. Pretty soon I was getting burned left and right. I’m a defender, so when someone beats me you can see it right away, especially if you happen to be the goalkeeper. Midfielders can get burned with impunity — they get lost in the shuffle — and forwards are the ones that are doing the burning, so it’s us defensive backs that catch all the crap. Pretty soon Don Price, the team captain, was just subbing me in, and sparingly at that. That’s when I returned to the B-Yr-Best Fitness Center.

“How much?” Ellen said.

“Not that much,” I said.

“How . . . much,” she repeated emphatically.

“Hundred or so a month,” I mumbled.

But as usual Ellen had the last word — silence.

Is it good to have a non-aggressive spouse? In the parlance of guidance counselors, I suppose Ellen would claim to be Passive. She’s that clever. She knows, (as we all do), that it’s best to be Assertive, but few of us are, and if we were, there would be little work for most psychologists. Men, of course, would mostly prefer to be considered Aggressive, no matter how Passive they might be at heart, and I am no exception. My wife, however, is that most perilous of all behavioral types, the Passive-Aggressive, a demure and submissive demeanor concealing a carnivorous soul. She stood there in castiron silence.

It is true that despite my aggressive linebacker proclivities, I hate the weight room and have hated it since high school days, when weightlifting was becoming popular. I can vividly recall my first awareness that guys like Buddy Crisafulli, who actually was a linebacker, were hefting iron. Guys I had thought of in my Little League days as chunky or even a bit fat were suddenly bulked out, their shirts tight across hulking shoulders, their hands and arms dangling like those of a beefed-up scarecrow. My best friend, Frank, a tall ectomorph who was destined to graduate in nuclear physics from M.I.T., intro-
duced me to the sorrowful mysteries of weight sets one afternoon in his ga­
rage. I must’ve weighed about 120 then, and I remember pressing 75 pounds
and feeling much the worse for the experience.

But weight rooms are more daunting than Frank Lambert’s garage. It’s
all sweating and intimidation, metal and mirrors, inordinate flexing, the noble
look of socially approved masochism. The women are worst of all for me. I
sidle up to the leg extender, lower my reluctant body, and discover that the
willowy blonde has been pumping a hundred pounds, while the best I can
manage is sixty, maybe eighty on a good day. It’s that sort of thing. How I
handle this potential public humiliation is that I lower the weight to the appro­
priate tonnage and then, before I leave the infernal machine, I slip the pin into
the one-twenty notch so that if she returns to it (the willowy blonde, that is),
she’ll think I’ve been right up there. This sort of thing is damned bad for one’s
character. Ghosts of my integrity haunt the weight room of the B-Yr-Best Fit­
ness Center.

And I haven’t even accounted for the big lug who sits in 250-pound splen­
dor at the desk and checks my card. “You need a belt?” he always asks, know­
ing darn well I don’t. You have to be lifting some serious iron to deserve the
status of a wide leather belt to brace up your back. “You sure?” he says.

“You leaving already?” he always says as I limp toward the showers. He
wonders how anyone could accomplish anything worthwhile along the line of
quads, biceps, and pecs in just a twenty-minute workout.

But it wasn’t the big lug who caught me in my inept effort at bench press­
ing a mere 140 pounds last week. In fact, the good folks at B-Yr-Best had
replaced the big lug, temporarily at least, with a slender brunette who
looked as though she’d have a hard time pressing a loaf of French bread. She seemed
cheery and friendly, a mood totally out of keeping with the weight room, where
dolorous groans and clanks punctuate the sweaty air and where images of
Dante’s Inferno come to mind, if you’ve read it before. (If you haven’t, it’s not
worth the effort just for this, not when you can experience the real thing by
visiting your local S&M fitness center.)

I sauntered toward the weights and slapped on the usual 120 pounds,
and that’s when I caught the brunette looking at me, or at least I think she was.
Maybe she could tell I was not like the rest of the iron pumpers. Believe me,
there’s not one narcissistic bone in my scrawny body. She could probably tell
right off that I’m the sensitive intellectual type, the kind of guy who listens to
classical music, hates heavy metal (which is what they play most of the time at B-Yr-Best), and can name at least two living poets. I slapped on another 20 pounds, straightened my shoulders, cracked my knuckles, and then added another 20. Flat on my back under the rack, I could see the cobwebs on the ceiling so well that I knew I should probably take off my glasses. With my glasses off it's all a blur, but I look a little more macho and feel a little more muscular. I inched my glasses back up my nose, slapped my hands together, and grabbed the bar.

Slowly I eased the bar from the rack and lowered it across my chest, sucking in a deep breath in the process: inhale when it’s easy, exhale when it’s hard. Then I exhaled vociferously as I began to push the bar upwards. But just a few inches above my shuddering chest the motion stopped. It was as if the bar had moved against the ceiling and now the ceiling was pressing it down against me. I was fighting the weights and the ceiling as well, even the cobwebs. I gasped in another quick breath and blew it out in a second effort to heave the weight back up to the rack. I tried to think the bar back into place, and the ceiling and cobwebs along with it. I tried to will it upwards, but it would not budge, except to drop another inch or two.

Nervously, I glanced left and right, half hoping one of the studs, maybe even the big lug himself, would come to my rescue and half hoping they would stay away and let me get ignominiously crushed. I could see the headlines: “Local Man Ignominiously Crushed at Fitness Center.” Sub-heading “Wife Says ‘I Warned Him.’”

In the mirror I could make out the cheery face of the brunette at the desk, and indeed she did appear to be watching my little drama, though the happy expression on her lovely face did not change. I could feel sweat pop out on my forehead, and soon it began to wash saltily into my eyes. My glasses blurred and began to slip down my nose. I wrinkled up my nose, but the glasses slipped even farther. I blew out an anguished blast of air and tried once again to shove the bar away from me.

“You need a spot?” It was a woman’s voice, one of the Amazons, probably a member of the local women’s rugby team. “It’s okay, Chris,” she called out as she eased the bar from my desperately clenched fingers and raised it without a hitch onto the rack.

“You okay?” she asked.
I nodded weakly.

“He’s okay, Chris,” she bellowed to the brunette at the desk. I sensed the eyes of innumerable linebackers staring at my limp body. “You gotta take it easy,” she said.

“Thanks,” I gasped. She was wearing sky-blue Spandex, so tight in its conformity with her superb musculature that it seemed to be a surreal blend of paint, silk, and flesh. When I picked up my card at the desk, the attractive, cheery brunette did not look up. “Adrienne Rich,” I was tempted to say. “W. S. Merwin, and I know lots of other living poets, too.”

Of course I did not bother telling Ellen about all of this. She would only worry and get poetical: “If the cartilage goes, can the ligaments be far behind?” “Where the hair goes, there go the pecs.” Lines to that effect. Ellen knows even more poets than I do, living or dead. “Get out of it,” she says ominously. “Your body is telling you something.”

My wife is a walker, a stroller. She gets calls at odd hours of the day or night from her friends, Louise, Janet, Heidi, to take a walk the next morning at six. They’ll walk for miles, talking, I suspect, about books and movies, their children, their husbands, and how childish husbands can be. They do not wear metallic blue Spandex that molds to every curve, but sturdy blue jeans and bulky, oversized sweaters. Their bodies are broadening and drooping, falling into middle age, and they have accepted that sober and unflattering destiny.

My wife is not running away from herself behind a black-and-white ball. She is not gasping and groaning, straining what is left of her muscles, in a world of iron and sweat. How easy it seems to be for her, this yielding, this compliant with nature. I think of whatever it is I’m trying to do, somewhere between the weight room and the soccer field: A. To show the world I can beat it at its own game; B. To prove to myself that this far past forty I can still do it, whatever “it” is; C. To demonstrate to my wife (Freud might say “to my mother”) that I can still cut the mustard as a man; D. “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (Alfred, Lord Tennyson); E. To accomplish all of the above.

Of course, I tell myself as I order another gin and tonic, it is “all of the above.”
Essays and Reviews
In the opening lines of the first poem in her collection *The Forest*, Susan Stewart invites us to “lie down now and remember the forest,/for it is disappearing,” an intriguing call into what I found to be a world of disenchantment. Her forest is one of fragmented memories, and the theme of remembering and forgetting that pervades the pages of this book is what effectively binds it together.

The first of two parts in this book, and incidentally the part I enjoyed most, is appropriately entitled “Phantom.” Immediately I conjured up images of ghost-like figures lurking in the shadows, just barely visible yet haunting nonetheless. Stewart opens the section questioning “why the phantom fades . . . /there on the threshold/of our seeing” and in the end answers by concluding that the phantom is “the minister of our forgetting.” The presence of her phantom is felt throughout each poem as she struggles to fill gaps in her memory, always taking us with her. Her poem “The Forest” represents one way in which she does this.

You should lie down now and remember the forest,
for it is disappearing
no, the truth is it is gone now
and so what details you can bring back
might have a kind of life.

Not the one you had hoped for, but a life
— you should lie down now and remember the forest —
nonetheless, you might call it “in the forest,”
no the truth is, it is gone now,
starting somewhere near the beginning, that edge,

Or instead the first layer, the place you remember
(not the one you had hoped for, but a life)
as if it were firm, underfoot, for that place is a sea,
nonetheless, you might call it “in the forest,”
which we can never drift above, we were there or we were not,

The structure of these three stanzas and the following eight that make up the
poem is such that the first and third lines of each stanza become the second and fourth lines of the stanza that follows, so we cannot help but remember what has just been said. By using this pantoum-like technique, Stewart overcomes the phantom of forgetfulness. But one could say that the phantom gets back at her in another way because she does not always “remember” the repeated lines in quite the same way they originally appear. She may put the line in parentheses or in italics, or change punctuation. One drastic change is seen in the third line of stanza eight:

stained. A low branch swinging above a brook

It follows the pattern by “reappearing” in the fourth line of the next stanza, but with an ellipsis, a new word, and parenthesis:

( . . . pokeberry, stained. A low branch swinging above a brook)

The ellipsis suggests that there is even more missing from Stewart’s description than “pokeberry,” but the poet can’t quite seem to remember what should be there and we cannot get at it.

Stewart also mentions “flecked birds of the forest” that “sing without a music where there cannot be an order, / as layers fold in time.” I felt her searching for the “order” in the “layers” of her language, forming a pattern with her lines, but she does not find it every time. In fact, she has nearly lost it by the end. The fourth line of the final stanza was “recalled” from the previous stanza with one word changed and two missing. This stanza also differs from the other ten by having six lines rather than five. As this poem progresses we can see the process of forgetting. By the end it reminded me of gossip heard eleventh-hand. I loved it.

Most of the poems in the “Phantom” section have dates as titles or attached to the ends of titles to mark passage of time and what prove to be fading memories. Reading these poems, I saw myself flipping through a photo album of pictures that Stewart had taken from 1931 to 1956. She points out the wide variety of the subjects in the pictures including slaughtered animals, factory workers, war veterans, Adam and Eve, and rape victims among others. The poet explains their stories, but never completely. Each poem has a way of leaving something out. For example, in “Slaughter,” the forgetting is represented by seemingly unnecessary gaps between stanzas, perhaps to emphasize the gaps in Stewart’s memory. (I must admit that I would not have minded if Stewart had left out more of the alarmingly graphic details of the animal skinning in “Slaughter.” If that poem had been a scene in a movie, I would not have been able to keep from covering my eyes until the gore ended. That’s
This section is tied together well by the final poem, “The Spell,” which finally fills in some of the blanks. This poem takes the six lines of a previous poem, “The Violation 1942,” that were initially meaningless to me, and expands on them by using them to head each stanza. Also, it is in this poem that the phantom is actually recognized by Stewart when she refers to it as “the minister of our forgetting.”

Part II of The Forest is entitled “Cinder.” Stewart includes a note that tells us that this title “comes from the Anglo-Saxon poem recorded in the Exeter Book on the ruin of the city of Bath.” This is another appropriate title, as “ruin” is apparent in this set of poems which I found to be very depressing. The long lines of “Holswege” and “Nervous System” proved tiresome to me, and although the memory gaps are displayed in still more effective ways, I was ready for something new with a new section, such as answers to some of the questions evoked in “Phantom.” No such luck. If Stewart was becoming a little forgetful in part I, I’d say she had full-fledged amnesia by part II, and was quite bitter about it too. The wordplay keeps the stream of consciousness language interesting, but the poems do not seem to tie together quite as efficiently in this section. Perhaps the difficulty in relating the poems to one another near the end of the book is intended. If her goal is to show more fragmentation here, she has been successful. I see much of the world of “Cinder” falling apart.

“The Meadow” is the poem that closes “Cinder” and the collection. The structure of “The Forest” at the beginning of the book has given way to lines running one right into the other, without separate stanzas. In “The Meadow,” the poet proves her earlier hypothesis that the forest “is disappearing.”

... no, the snow had no leaves to hold on to," as it did, of course, when it fell in the forest that was there in the distance. And he said that nothing was alive now that wasn’t the color of grasses. He hadn’t seen the tree or bird or snow, was sure he hadn’t seen them

The forest is out of sight and the singing birds are nowhere to be found. Did I already use the word “depressing?”

But I will in no way let my lack of enthusiasm for “Cinder” take away from my overall enjoyment of the book. This part may not have been as fun for me as “Phantom,” but the effect was equally powerful. I am impressed by the many ways Susan Stewart takes us through her forest of memories, and I do not regret accepting the invitation.

On The Verge caters to an audience concerned with the most prominent issues of the times. In fact, many readers who fail to recognize the corruption in today's world may find themselves shocked by some of the harsh realities introduced by many of the poems in this collection. Ellis and Lease have pieced together various poems to cover topics from abortion to rape to one man's oppression in the work place. Featured in On The Verge are poets who are just beginning their careers as well as more widely published poets such as Thomas Sayers Ellis, Gabrielle Glancy, and Carl Phillips.

Although the majority of the poems that appear in the anthology attack the way society deals with modern issues, the layout of the book distinguishes the poems of raw straight-forward language from those that bury messages for the reader underneath symbolism and allusions. Both Ellis and Lease include their own short essay to the reader to set the stage for the work that is to follow. Ellis' "Windows, Open Homes, A Sense of Community" invites the reader into the journal as he considers it "a home" for himself in which he may grow. He hopes that this home he has worked on will contain rooms that "exist to comfort more people than [Ellis], democratic by design, open." As his home analogy has structured his own writing, he strives to create that feeling in his readership. "Start From Where You Are" by Lease, discusses the flexibility in the poetry of On The Verge. He addresses the fact that the poetry is not structured in that it has to all begin at the same place. Instead, the poems are searching out "the extremes of voice and experience."

The comfort that comes from the experimental poetry in On The Verge gives a reader courage to go beyond the norms that society has established to repress our own human feelings and to take a stand when it is time to speak out. Kevin Young, a poet out of Stanford, describes his experiences at an amusement park entertainment production as something that evoked a sense of outrage in him. His poem, "Reptiland in Allenwood" expresses a kind of suburban nightmare, presenting scenes of crying children who, are at the point where they have become obnoxious, along with "identical blond children in the front row," who are intimidating and irritating, and the final suggestion that the reptiles attacking them would make him feel much better. Young's poem sets a true-to-life tone in which the action within the poem becomes a vivid reality.
for the reader. The speaker in this poem longs for more meaning in life beyond all the noise and commotion. He wants to see the essence of what the reptile does to keep alive rather than the flash of how far it can expand its jaw to intimidate the rest of the world. Such introspection is what the editors are aiming at. In today’s busy and flashy world where everyone is concerned with impressing another person, people tend to lose sight of everything that goes on when the show is over.

Emotion carries through into many of the poems. In fact, it is interesting to read the poems and to listen to the voice of the speaker telling us how to react to a particular situation. Arnold J. Kemp, both a visual artist and a poet, takes on the experience of rape from a woman’s perspective in “Like Sabines.” Although the act in itself would most likely be considered by the general public among one of the most violent, the young girl who is the victim in the poem tries to focus on something other than the crime while it happens. She reflects on the way her rapist smells like a drugstore and channels her thoughts to what she could find in that drugstore:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Aisle one is for deodorants} \\
\text{Aisle ten is for toilet tissue and laundry} \\
\text{Detergent she thought as she tried to freeze,}
\end{align*}
\]

She continues to avoid her thoughts about the rape and to deny the act itself by thinking of ways to get at her perpetrator’s conscience. However, she continually comes back to what has actually happened to her. In order to avoid making light of the crime, Kemp closes the poem with the profound picture of the girl after the act:

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots \text{So she lay there with the rocks} \\
\text{At her back and his hands on her breasts} \\
\text{And from the wooded ground she thought} \\
\text{That this was at least better than death.}
\end{align*}
\]

The collection of poems continues to appeal to the emotions of the audience throughout, but the visual layout, the language and the breaking of lines in some of the selections are what give the words deeper meaning and make the poem successful. Paul Beatty’s “That’s Not In My Job Description” is a masterpiece of the forementioned techniques:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{despite that I overslept} \\
\text{and set a Guinness book world record for coming in late} \\
\text{it’s still time for me to take my 15-minute break}
\end{align*}
\]
pull off my sweater vest
talking shit
cross my sneakers on my desk
threaten to call my union rep
if these fools

don’t stop lookin’ at me crazy
whisperin’ lazy
under their breath

This type of cynical voice and broken, random thought process gives the reader a perspective on where the poem is going and what type of response the author is trying to evoke from his audience. In one reading of this poem, any reader can feel the anger building inside the speaker that is causing him to give in to what he thinks all the others perceive him to be. Beatty continues with a description of the work environment and then opens up to the readers and hits them with the true meaning behind all of the hostility:

all you can do is wait for the chain reaction show of ass

when one of em
looks me in the eye

and decides

to say something to the colored guy

it’s
all systems go
the white folks start actin’ like they know

*hey bro or uh bro-ham*
I happen to be a big rap fan
went to see Ice Cube and Michelle
at the Hollywood palladium
and I was the only white person in the place

*ain’t I soul brother*

The lack of punctuation, capitalization, and proper grammar aid the poet’s message to the reader that the common contemporary perception of blacks in many work places is less than that of white men in the same position. The
controversial topic is thrown at the reader in an in-your-face type of manner. Some of the outrageous things that take place in the speaker’s day are so exaggerated that the point comes across very clearly. The break in the lines makes each individual stanza more powerful.

Ellis and Lease include many works that split the actual event from what the person is thinking. The format appears quite frequently in *On The Verge*. The message comes across to the readers as they witness the event, but they hear the subliminal message like an echo. Another type of breaking the text up is in James Bland’s “Five Verses” in which he gives the story of a Greek myth and then juxtaposes it with the meaning tied to the same mythical figure today:

I.
Ajax only addressed Zeus as Sir,
Now Ajax is a toilet cleanser.

The break in the lines emphasizes the clear juxtaposition between ancient and modern ideas attached to Ajax. Furthermore, Bland connects another Greek idea to it in the same poem, but gives it its own emphasis by separating it from the first one with a separate Roman numeral:

II.
Though the Trojans were gullible,
and the Athenians won,
Don’t enter another’s body
without wearing one.

All of the breaks in the passage lead the reader into deeper thought about the importance and meaning of each of the separate ideas. In addition, the change of tone from serious to humorous makes the statements even louder than if there were no sarcasm.

The colorful variety of poetry in *On The Verge* makes each poem enjoyable to the reader while the serious subject matter draws a connection between all of the poems. The issues raised in the works are both controversial and delicate subject matter to deal with. However, the poets in this journal have discussed them as an art form rather than an attack, an offense, or a lecture. There is a mere suggestion of what is happening and what should be happening in today’s world from which conclusions are formed in the mind of a reader. That is what a good artist does: suggests in order to affect his or her audience. *On The Verge* is a collection that challenges the reader to examine the world during the reading and continues to evoke emotion after it is back on the shelf.
Charles Wright is a man with a question and too many answers. Memories lay thick in his mind as he reconciles meaning and remembers the sharp drone of a cicada as it hums through the rainy Tennessee morning. From his back yard to the cafes of Italy to the philosophies of the ancients, Wright takes us with him on a quest for truth and a search for peace in his book of poems, *Chickamauga*.

Wright writes with an uncanny ability to take the largest questions of man and bring them into the sharp light, not of a microscope, but of an eyeglass, of what we, ourselves, today and forever, might look at and try to know:

Open your mouth, you are lost, close your mouth, you are lost,
So the Buddhists say.

They also say,
Live in the world unattached to the dust of the world.
Not so easy when the thin, monotonous tick of the universe
Painfully pries our lips apart,
and dirties our tongues

With soiled, incessant music.
Not so easy to do when the right front tire blows out,
Or the phone rings at 3 a.m.
and the ghost-voice says, “It’s 911, please hold.”
They say, enter the blackness, the form of forms. They say,
No matter how we see ourselves, sleeping and dreaming see us
as light.

These lines come from “Watching the Equinox Arrive in Charlottesville, September 1992“ and epitomize Wright’s skill in being able to shrink the answers and mysteries of the universe into a microcosm every person can identify with.

Wright’s language seems to follow the theory that less is more. His words are simple, his phrases clear, yet the result is poetry with an unmistakable power, one exemplified in “The Silent Generation”:

Afternoons in the backyard, our lives like photographs
Yellowing elsewhere,
in somebody else’s album . . .
... What was it we never had to say?  
Who can remember now-

Something about the world's wrongs,
Something about how we shuddered them off like the rain
In an open field,

    convinced that lightning would not strike.
We're arm and arm with regret, now left foot, now right foot.
We give the devil his due.
We walk up and down in the earth,

    we take our flesh in our teeth.
When we die, we die. The wind blows away our footprints.

The words here are clear, coherent and strong. They remind us of times we've forgotten, realities we've pushed aside. They show us that in our endless struggle for whatever it is we desire, something is real and will always be true, even after we're no longer around to see it.

The title poem “Chickamauga” is characteristic of the collection in that it contains five segments that appear unrelated, yet are woven into one pattern larger than the sum of the parts. The mid-morning in the late-century light that fingers us beneath the peach trees, the cold waters of self-contentment on which we drift, and finally the catechism of syntax and grammar: “Their words what the beads say, words thumbed to our discontent.” This almost sacrilegious picture of a rosary works to bring us a step closer to the higher purpose of the individual stanzas, to a greater meaning whose light shines back on us and onto our magnolia trees.

The collection as a whole works as a cycle, one that parallels the varied ideas of the universe that Wright describes. The book begins with “Sitting Outside at the End of Autumn,” a title that bluntly sets a common scene, followed by a poem which establishes his uncommon search for a pure and ultimate reality. At the end of the collection, we are back in his yard, seeing clearly what he has quietly proven throughout the entire book, that the nuances of daily existence are the greatest reality of all.

After a series of poems that question and quote all that is holy and claims to be true, Wright ends with his superb subtlety as he brings us back to the essence of truth with the succinct microcosm, “My job is yard work — I take this inchworm, for instance, and move it from here to there.”
KRISTIN MILLER


*Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen is an actual account of the author’s horrifying two-year “rest” in McLean Hospital, a psychiatric institution located in Massachusetts. Although the novel focuses on her bizarre experiences with her fellow patients and the chilling conditions in which they lived, it also leaves the reader wondering whether Kaysen really belonged there. The novel’s impact lies in the fact that it is an autobiography, and the person who wrote it actually experienced being plucked out of society and thrown into a mental institution after a half-hour interview with a therapist. I was also captivated by the fact that McLean Hospital has been the setting for *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, not to mention other famous clientele such as James Taylor and Ray Charles. Even though Kaysen’s experience occurred over twenty years ago, these memories are forever etched in her mind and only recently did she decide to tell the general public of what goes on behind padded, locked doors.

Kaysen’s style of writing is both effective and concise. For instance, throughout the novel, she uses short, attention-grabbing phrases such as “One girl among us had set herself on fire.” This style of writing kept me in suspense. Also, she breaks the novel into several chapters which consist of only a few pages each. Every chapter is given an appropriate title for the story it tells of. Mainly the chapters contain frightening tales of the girls who Kaysen befriends. For instance, in the chapter titled “Fire,” we are introduced to Polly, a girl who had set herself on fire with gasoline and who was now grotesquely scarred for life. What is so mind-boggling about this story is that all the girls thought of her as courageous. Finally, one day Polly begins screaming “My face!” over and over again and at last Kaysen realizes that “we might get out sometime, but she was locked up forever in that body.” She ends the chapter with this sentence, which is so thought-provoking that I feel like crying for Polly each time I read it. In fact, most of the chapters end in this dramatic, carefully planned manner, which makes every tale unforgettable.

Along with describing the intense situations that go on in a mental institution, the novel also explores the definition of “insane.” When Kaysen was admitted to the hospital in 1967, she was diagnosed as having a borderline personality disorder, which is “what they call people whose lifestyles bother them.” In retrospect, Kaysen asks, what seventeen-year-old is not uncertain of who they are or what they will become? Aside from her struggles with perceiving reality, she didn’t seem any different than any other teenager I’ve ever
known. But because her symptoms fit into a category of a disorder, Kaysen was a victim of generalization. Also, judging from the others in the ward with her, she was by far the most "normal" of them all. Although, at times these tales are comical, I have to wonder if being in such a place did more harm than good to Kaysen in the long run.

It is extraordinary that the same person who has experienced so much madness can sit down, twenty years later, and recount it in such a calm, concise manner. To me, this novel is more than just Susanna Kaysen’s autobiography — it is everyone’s most horrible fear coming to life: to be told that you are crazy. Kaysen makes it clear that she feels that there isn’t a person on earth (especially during the teenage years) who hasn’t wondered if there was something wrong with her mind. I agree with her, and she has put my mind to rest.
Not long ago, in a novel entitled Head Hunters, the Canadian novelist Timothy Findley forecast a not-too-distant future in which pollution darkens the sky and marauding bands of white skinheads crawl the urban landscape with a terrifying lust for violence and inarticulate rage. American novelist Tom Grimes’ third novel, City of God, explores similar prophetical territory, but with an important difference: Grimes isn’t writing so much about what might happen to the metropolis of the future, but, rather, what inevitably will happen; this, because a large number of the sorts of horrors Findley can only imagine in his book have, for the most part, already taken place and continue to take place in Grimes’ native United States today. Which only goes to show that you can’t write truly visionary literature if your primary source materials are CNN and the Sunday Times.

The basic plot of City of God is the stuff of the big-budget if slightly cerebral action movie. Inspired by the apocalyptic gangsta rap of Coda, an unidentified black militant, a formerly directionless black youth by the name of Do-Ray suddenly uncovers a meaning to his 19 years of urban suffering and executes two white policemen, thus setting off a wave of inner-city revelry and chaos that makes the Rodney King riots seem like a three-day garbage strike on a humid week in the suburbs. As the city burns and more policemen are murdered by the hour, Do-Ray’s life crosses with the lives of other citizens of the city, all of them of various racial, social, sexual, and economic dispositions, yet all of them united in their individual and too-often isolated attempts to try and make sense of not only the murders and Coda’s increasing enigma, but also—and most importantly—the simple mystery of what it is that their lives have come to mean in what the dust-jacket of City of God describes as “an all-too-real and unreal city on the brink of the millennium.”

More unnerving, however, than the unremitting violence of the novel; more disturbing than the crushing poverty of some and the debauched opulence of other; more dispiriting than the religiousity of the consumerism of the populace; even more defeating than the wasted landscape and the deadened sky, is the spectre of television station, XXN. Rich or poor, black or white, XXN serves as both the primary source of information for the city’s inhabitants as well as the unshakeable foundation for what is seen as right and wrong, ugly and beautiful, truth and fiction. One character muses: “Some people have God or love. I have TV. But twenty generations from now it will seem as if television always was. God will have
vanished from vocabularies like myths of the Earth Mother. Then the notion that television is existence won’t even require the slightest leap of faith.” Inevitably, this is the real terror at the heart of City of God.
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