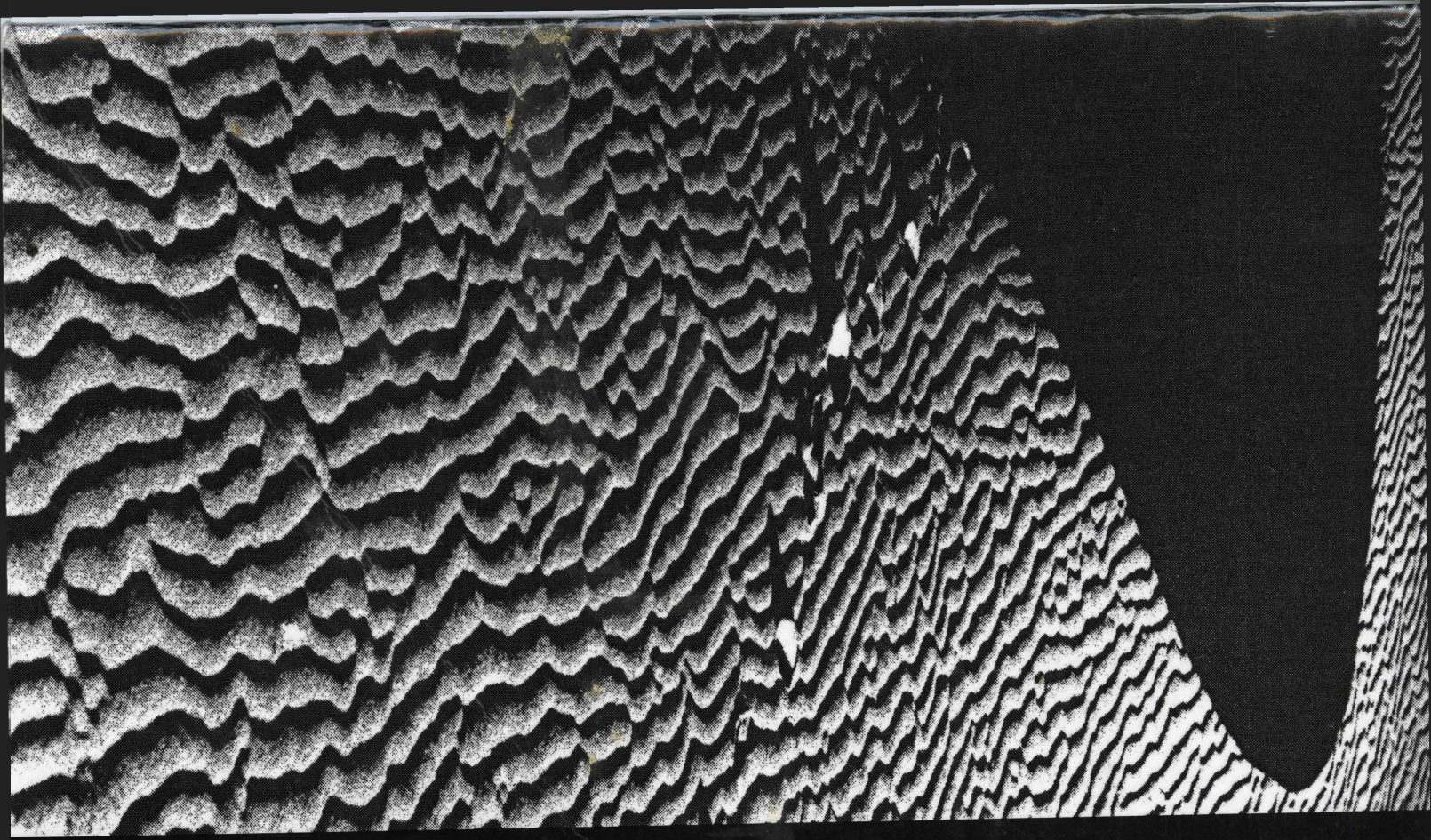

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Thin Air

Double Aught

Thin Air

Double Aught Edition

Volume IV Numbers 1&2 1999
Northern Arizona University

Aught- n. zero (0). Also, anything, whatever.

Thin Air has chosen to celebrate the Northern Arizona University Centennial and the new Millenium by selecting the title, Double Aught, for this commemorative issue.

Cover Art: Björn Brodersen's "White Sands #1"

Thin Air is published two times a year by the Graduate Creative Writing Association in cooperation with the English Department of Northern Arizona University. Our submission period is from September 1st through May 1st. Manuscripts arriving between May 2nd and August 31st will be returned unread. The editors welcome submissions of stories, poems, essays, reviews, illustrations and photographs.

Submissions should be addressed to:
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All submissions should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Submissions from other countries should be accompanied by a sufficient number of international postal reply coupons. Please query before sending book reviews and interviews.

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***Thin Air*, Issue No. 7**

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Thin Air

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Fiction Contest Winner
Kristine Somerville

Judges for the Contest

Fiction Judge
Jane Armstrong-Woodman

Poetry Judge
Barbara Anderson

This annual contest, offering cash awards, is open to all writers and poets. Those works chosen were the best among entries. Winning pieces were selected based on style, content, and originality.

In Which My Mother Vacuums Flat the Budgie

Life's short and loud and scuzzy, but it
can tell a joke. I'm telling my mom about this
tipsy dinner party, years ago, at Ed's, where half of us
had once had parakeets, and were bragging how colorfully they'd
squawked their last. For instance, Mark's, in Cyprus,
the olive groves beyond the open windows
shimmery with heat, housecats
snoozing in the branches, and then the earthquake,
like three quick hiccups--the way Mark's father
staggered to catch the china cabinet as it began to teeter,
how the birdcage sidled along its drunken brink, sashayed out
onto the convenient stepladder of his skull, scooted to the ground
and burped. Out popped the parakeet,
up through the window, high among
the olive trees, to plunge as pink as birthday cake
into some tomcat's throat.
Or Barbara Lennox's, who loved to ride her granny's shoulder,
and watch her clean and cook, and one day
hopped off to the soup pot's rim, to peek
in through the steam, and ***splat!***
Tales I've since thought almost wholly awful, that night
we roared at, rocking in our boozy circle like a bunch of birdbrains
pecking at our reflection in the chicken stew. Of course, I told
the one about my mom and Pixie, our ancient blue budgie,
who sang his name and our address from room to room,
Pixie, 2 Heather Glen, Pixie, 2 Heather Glen,
and nested anywhere. The day he
got under the rug. How mom was vacuuming, and
flattened him. Tonight, I'm plying her with wine, trying
to tease her to a flush of laughter, but I meet instead
the thin resistance of a sigh: *Derek, when*

wa--I don't--Pixie? Her voice is soft and muffled,
her skin recently has feathered to a kind of ashen grey,
she frowns as if struggling to remember or else
struggling not to, I see her hands
tremble as she lifts a corner of her napkin,
to dab the gravy from her mouth, along its silk diagonals
it folds into her plate, I am her little boy again, a little heartless,
a little horrified, I am wagging my finger at the mess death
makes of things, saying, *That's life, mom,* saying, *Mom,*
look, mom, what's that under the rug?

Kristine Somerville

The Flame Shirt

My best friend, Leo Simanski, is cursed. Instead of a sidewalk crack, which would be bad enough, he steps on a drowned boy's back. The body is sunk, face down, in neck-deepwater. He looks like streaks of melted Crayon color: tan skin, red trunks, black hair. The lifeguard's wave-making dive almost erases him. We all move to the edge of the pool to see the details come into focus as the body is brought to the surface. It's the super-skinny kid we call Red Beard for the zits he wears ear-to-ear.

Two other lifeguards lift his limp spaghetti body out of the pool. They set him on the hot cement. He has to be dead. We're all hopping from side to side, our feet burning. He's motionless as his skin fries like the egg we cooked on the ground the other day. In less than a minute the orange yolk turned the same shade of yellow as the blazing sun.

In first aid we learned if the face is red raise the head; if the face is pale raise the tail. Red Beard's face is chalky blue. They never said what to do about that. The lifeguards seem to know. One presses his mouth to Red Beard's cold-looking lips and tries to breathe life into him. The other pushes down on his narrow chest at the knotted bone in the middle. The rib cage crashes under his weight and then springs back. The lifeguard who dove when Leo screamed "Body, help, body" sits on a lounge chair in the shade, his head in his hands, sobbing. I've never seen a guy his age cry—he must be as old as my brother Rocky.

They work on Red Beard forever. His body stays motionless, his eyes wild, locked in place. His face is a shade darker, a solid pool-water blue. He's probably the first dead person we've ever seen. Worse yet, he's one of us. It could've happened to me. It could've happened to Leo. It could've happened to every single kid standing around watching. The thought makes me want to cry,

like the lifeguard. But I don't. I won't. I'm finished with all of that.

"He's gone, man. He's fucking gone," the pumping lifeguard says. His arms stay locked at the elbows; his palms, one on top of the other, remain attached to Red Beard at mid-chest.

The breathing lifeguard's fingers pinch the nose, but he doesn't lean forward to give another breath. "What do we do now?" he asks.

No one answers. We all look around. No one seems to know.

Leo stands next to me. His knee caps quiver like a skittish race horse. Little bumps cover his arms and legs even though he can't be cold; it's been over a hundred degrees all week.

"He's staring at me, Ellie. He's staring right at me," he whispers. He's looking hard at the body. There's a deep frown on his face.

I could lie to Leo, but why? He already knows the truth. Red Beard's eyes are fixed, dead-on, on him. Leo was the one who made up the nickname that stuck instantly. Leo was the one who spread the story that William, his real name, always carried a rubber in his high top, anxious to have sex. Leo was the one who tempted him toward the deep end even though he knew he was a beginner swimmer, terrible for his age. I don't know what happened next. I was at the snack bar buying a dill pickle. What I do know is that Leo was spotted in the crowded pool, talking to him minutes before he went under. Even if he didn't hurt him, he'll be haunted for sure. In the movies and on TV, ghosts always try to attach themselves to their last living contact.

"You're right, Leo. He is. He is staring straight at you. Shit," I whisper back. I push my glasses up and take a small side step to put some space between us. I know all about being cursed. I'm at camp for the terrible things I did at home. But there's no way I can be blamed for Red Beard. I wasn't anywhere near him in the water. I hardly knew the kid. We never officially talked. I'll help Leo out—that's what friends are for—but I refuse to be the object of the dead kid's wrath. Leo is on his own there. He can handle it. Anyway, ghosts are like parents, you don't have a choice.

Hours after the ambulance came for Red Beard, a few camp counselors tried to make the youngest beginning swimmers

get in the water. They stood on the cement steps in the shallow end and screamed so loud we heard them across camp. We thought there was another drowning and came running in a pack. The little kids' faces were as bright as their swimming suits. Some hyperventilated. We had them put their heads between their legs until the camp nurse arrived with paper bags. The little kids stood under the scanty shade of some scrub trees and exhaled boxy balloons that made an odd crinkly noise as they deflated and then refilled with air.

After a long counselor's meeting in the dressing room, all lessons were canceled, free swim closed. They hung a hand-lettered sign from the chain-link fence, above a rustly paddlelock that read "Gone swimmin'." They weren't in the water at all. Like us, they probably already had an unspoken rule to stay away from the pool. The area was tainted, jinxed, hexed, voodooed. Red Beard was a water spirit, looking for a new body to enter.

No one knows how he drowned in neck-deep water. All we have are rumors: an epileptic seizure that froze his brain and paralyzed his limbs, an intense allergic reaction to increased levels of chlorine, an invisible streak of summer lightning electrocuting only him, a suicidal overdose of Dramamine that put him to sleep in mid-swim, or, the most popular of all, someone (Leo's name often mentioned) quickly held him under until his lungs filled with water and he sunk to the cement bottom. We don't really know what's true, and the counselors aren't talking. They seem to have disappeared. No one plays "Reveille" over the loudspeakers at seven A.M. to wake us for the day. There are no announcements about canoe races across the lake, or rehearsals for the end-of-the-summer talent show. Camp's frighteningly church-quiet.

The counselors had been at the mess hall every morning to greet us with their cheerful voices: "Ellie, you doing fine?" "How goes it Leo?" But when we get there around nine o'clock, they've already eaten breakfast. No one dressed in a khaki shirt and shorts is sitting around sipping coffee or reading the morning paper or listening to the radio. We're adult-free.

Leo believes Red Beard's spirit will enter his body while he takes a deep breath in his sleep. He stayed up all night with a flashlight in one hand, a serrated knife in the other, and the mosquito netting tied closed. He kept his breathing shallow. Short

pants like pregnant women on TV in birthing classes. Ha-ha-ha. He-he-he. Now, dark circles ring his eyes, cowlicks swirl his hair. He wears the same t-shirt and shorts he wore yesterday even though he's a neat freak who despises germs. I told him before we parted last night that ghosts work evil in subtler ways, sometimes through others. I hate to admit that I'm right. When we sit with the kids who live in the bunkhouse across from Leo's—the same kids we've sat with each meal—they carry their food trays as far away as they can get. One of them says, "Leo doesn't know when to knock it off. Now someone's dead. Shithead."

Leo loved tormenting Red Beard. Once at this very table, he tied his shoelaces together. When he got up to throw away his leftovers, he fell on his face and taco pie went everywhere. Kids laughed. Maybe things did get out of hand in the pool. Maybe my best friend Leo Simanski is a murderer. Still, I'll stand by him. Mother said when she found out about Paula, "Good people can do bad things." She got it half right. Good people do bad things to bad people who need to be taught a lesson. Mother cried in her bedroom for what seemed forever. Rocky drove me to camp the next day; he had put in a few summers here for crimes my family never discussed.

Leo slams his tin cup on the table. Warm milk splashes all over his hand and my napkin. He looks from one end of the tent to the other.

"I didn't do anything," he yells at campers who stare at him. If their furious eyes were drill bits, he'd be a sieve.

"They know that. They're just being crap holes," I say to him. "You're all being crapholes," I yell at those who keep on looking at us. "Fat, messy crap holes."

Leo stuffs a triangle of toast in his mouth and talks through the mushed-up bread. "I might as well go home. Everyone hates me," he mumbles. He chews fiercely, swallows, and then yawns behind his fist.

"Don't. They just need time," I say, nicely. I bite a piece of bacon in half. "They'll get over it by the end of the day. I'm sure of it.

Old parent-music comes from the speakers hung on corner posts. "Leaving on a jetplane." "Taking the last train to Clarksville." "Riding through the desert on horse with no name." Songs about

travelling, about going places. There's no place I want to go. I'm staying here until the absolute last day. Then I might strike out on my own. I'm in no hurry to return home. Paula's parents wanted me out of the neighborhood. They sat at our kitchen table drinking coffee from my mother's china cups and talked about locking me away in a residential treatment center. My parents negotiated them down to summer camp or a psychologist. I didn't want anyone dredging up weird stuff from my past, so here I am in backwoods, Wisconsin, bestfriends with a supposed murderer. My parents would be so pleased. Maybe I'll bring Leo home with me. He can take care of Paula Rene Zicarelli the way they're saying he did Red Beard. I told Leo all about her perfect house, her professor parents, her brother who plays college baseball. What I did to her was on the tip of my tongue. We became instant friends because he didn't ask. He seemed more fascinated by my description of their house of artifacts. Every time her anthropologist parents travelled to Africa for a book they were writing on a primitive tribe, they brought back painted pots, baskets, stone tools, and wood carvings that looked like they were made by first graders. I always had to hear about their latest acquisition.

Here we have a cannibal, Eleanor," Mr. Zicarelli said of a picture of a loin-clothed native, his skin as coal black as the bark on the leafless tree behind him. Both parents called me Eleanor, not Ellie or Elle like I asked.

"I wanted to get a photo of his teeth. See how they're filed to sharp points. He resisted. The people believe that having their pictures taken robs them of their souls."

He waited for me to ask him how he got the man to open his mouth super wide, exposing his shark-looking bite. There was a long, uneasy silence before he continued.

"Guessing that the man loved to sing, I asked him if he knew 'Bridge Over TroubledWaters.' Everyone loves Simon and Garfunkel. Even cannibals." He laughed. "When he sang the line, 'Your time has come to shine,' he opened his mouth wide as you see in the picture."

"I thought you were supposed to be a silent observer?" He had told me this before. Anthropologists report; they don't participate.

He took my chin in his hand to raise my face toward his.

"And your teeth, Eleanor? I suppose they're little daggers too."

I snapped like I meant to bite him, and he released me.

Mr. Zicarelli mounted the black-and-white photograph in a diploma frame and hung it on the wall of his darkly panelled study along with spears, shields, and masks. I started swiping his less important pieces—wooden spoons, forks, leather pouches, a few beads, an old sandal, pocket-sized stuff like that—as payback for having to listen to his awful endless stories. He owed me. They all owed me. I kept the items under my canopy bed. I had a fantastic museum of my own for a while.

Leo finishes his scrambled eggs. He peers at mine with his beady, close-set eyes.

"If eyes are the windows of the soul, then yours are tiny portholes," I say suddenly. The Paula-like phrase spurts out of me. Her useless information and complaints drove me mad. It's too late to turn back from what I've said. I continue, "You blink constantly, so your eyes are almost always closed. I don't think I know you at all."

Leo thinks about what I've said for a moment and says, "What the hell are you talking about Ellie?" His greedy fingers remain ready to snap something off my plate. "Anyway, no one can possibly see your soul with those inch-thick glasses in the way."

I make my arm a strong stone fence around my food. In my other hand, my fork is a trident ready to gig him if he gets too close. If you don't protect your food you'll starve. One of the few times Paula was at my house she said that starvation is a slow and torturous death. My mother's house plants needed to be watered.

"Don't go getting weird on me. I need you now more than ever," Leo says flatly. He drains what's left of his milk and gets up from the table. "Let's go," he says.

"Yes, let's," I say, and try to smile. He's right; we do need each other.

The camp's lake is a flooded rock quarry. The sun-bleached boulders were lifted out of the giant hole and then left in a triple strand around the water's edge. Most mornings campers and counselors claim their own smooth curved stone for sunbathing or reading or listening to their radios. This morning the shoreline is

abandoned. Maybe it's the weather, hot, humid, no breeze. The canoes and fishing boats sit motionles in the coffee-brown water that looks like a sheet of stained glass.

I strip down to my one-piece bathing suit and set my folded glasses on a small rock next to my clothes.

"Ellie, no," Leo screams. "Don't go in."

"He's trapped in the pool," I say. I wade into the bath-warm water and then hit a sudden cold pocket. Shivers ripple down my spine. "This is the lake, Leo. Red Beard never even stepped foot in the lake. You know that."

A couple weeks ago, Leo had tried to lure Red Beard in by taking his transistor radio. He carried it high in the air as he moved deeper and deeper into the murky water. Red Beard stood on one of the largest shoreline boulders and yelled obscenities my brother would be proud of. He used odd combinations of slang for male and female private parts as if he couldn't decide which was worse, to be a cunt or a cock. The tinney-sounding music came from the tiny radio speaker. "Sky rockets in flight. Afternoon delight" played as Leo's head went under. Bubbles percolated to the surface. The water inched up his elbow, his wrist. The radio went down with his hand, and the music stopped. Red Beard jumped down from the rock and kicked at the pebbles on the beach. He spit into the air. He pulled his own hair. His face was splotched red-white. His pimples were a triple-strand of purple beads, like incredibly tiny versions of the lake rocks at night. Finally, Leo came up, gasping for air. He tossed the silent radio to Red Beard who glared at him as he caught it. He turned it off and on. Nothing. Then he ran into the woods. The branches snapped behind him to conceal the footpath he'd taken.

"What's the worst thing you've ever done," I ask Leo.

I lie down on the floating dock and dangle my arms in the warm water. Leo tugs his wet T-shirt over his legs to protect himself from the hot morning sun. He's a sun-hater usually lathered in Coppertone from head to toe.

I've never done anything bad," Leo says. "Nadda. Not a thing. No way. No how."

"Yeah, right. Saint Leo. You don't have to tell me about Red Beard if you don't want to. I can figure it out for myself. What'd he do, call you a faggot?"

"I didn't touch him, Ellie. I swear. Scout's honor." He gives the two-finger salute, and then folds one finger down to flip me off. For not believing him, I guess.

"Whatever you say."

"That's the truth and nothing but the truth so help me God." Leo stretches out on the warm wood beside me. He plunges his arms up to his elbows, trying to show me that I'm not the only one who's brave. He's the oddest guy I've ever met, not at all like my brother who is all boy. I've seen Rocky fart on a lighter to make a blow torch of orange light. I've heard him brag about wearing the same pair of underwear several times on both sides. And I've watched him smear thin lines of dog shit war paint on his face for fifty dollars and a joint. I told Leo all this. He almost threw up. Sometimes he's tough, even really mean. Other times he's what my brother calls a "wussy." What Rocky tells him is "don't do the crime if you can't do the time."

The smooth warty head of a turtle pokes through the water inches away from our faces. I squint to see it clearly. Yellow eyes flare, and, for a moment, I think they throw light rays at Leo.

"Ahh," Leo screams as if he's been delivered a fatal blow. "Fucking shit. Fucking shit. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." He jumps up and dances around like the dock is suddenly a bed of red-hotcoals. "What the hell?"

"Relax," I say. "Turtle. The lizards of the lake." Another Paula-ism. She knows all about animals. I flop over on my back and tilt my face toward the sun. If she were here, she'd tell me about the ultraviolet rays. She'd describe my skin at fifty, tan, crinkled like a grocery bag. No, she'd correct. More like parchment. She's completely different from Leo who's afraid of everything: the sun, the woods, the water, a zillion different insects. Maybe he killed Red Beard to quit being so scared. Only now, he's more terrified than ever. Things never seem to work the way you plan, even if they start out okay. When I locked Paula in our basement storage room, I felt an unusual calm. My hatred faded as soon as I barred the door. God, she screamed forever, even though she had everything she needed: food, water, a blanket and pillow, a couple books, a candle and some matches.

"How can I relax? This place . . .it gives me the creeps," Leo says. He wraps his arms around himself to stop his trembling.

"If you didn't touch him, you have nothing to worry about."

"But you saw how mean I was to him," he says. He sounds like he can't believe his behavior.

"Yeah. I saw. Why'd you do it, Leo?"

"Why'd you do whatever you did?"

"A million tiny reasons. It was the way she talked. Acted. The way her house looked. It all made me crazy. I couldn't think of anything but Paula. I was supposed to feel honored to spend time with her or something. To get to see how the other half lived. Whatever. I mean our houses are on the same street."

One afternoon, she invited me over to help her family prepare an authentic Scandinavian Easter. We applied fussy diamonds, stars, and zigzags in hot wax with a toothpick to the eggsbefore we dyed them. They came out of the coffee cups of blue and red and yellow color with silvery, snow frosted designs. I should have gone home when we finished. Instead I played a game Paula had invented, a more elaborate version of twenty questions.

Each time I landed on a square that read "reveal another detail," Paula did. The person she was thinking of was male, twentyish, a miniature train collector, a cartoonist, and a superb athlete.

"My brother? Rocky?" He had a caboose he'd swiped from a hobby store on the shelf of his water bed, and he often drew a comic strip of nude women who fought crime. Their boobs shot small torpedoes. He even played softball on Sundays with his friends from AA.

"Your brother? He doesn't do any of those things," she said with a half-smile.

The red-shaded lamp cast a pool of pink light, giving her face a rosy glow. Even her brown hair shimmered. She looked like an image out of a Marshall Field's catalog. I sat across the game board from her where the pink light didn't reach. With my thick glasses and my unruly hair cut short, I looked like a cosmetic "before" shot.

"What do you know about it?" I answered back.

"Lots. Your brother hangs out with David Julian at the park all day instead of working."

"Not always," I said. I took a giant bite of shortbread; I talked with my mouth full. "Anyway, what do you have against

David Julian?"

"He's been to prison."

I shrugged and said, "That doesn't mean he's bad." I had gone with Rocky to visit him. I brought along a roll of quarters so we could eat from the vending machines lining the visitation room. For five dollars an inmate took a Polaroid of us standing in front of a wall painted bright, bright blue with bubbly white clouds.

"Right, Ellie. Going to prison means that you're an incredibly wonderful person. Come on."

"No, you come on."

Paula's trembling Yorkie, Molly McPherson Fry, tried to take one of my cookies. I swiped her away with a firm backhand. She yelped. You could look at her wrong and she'd squawk.

"Don't be so mean to her Ellie. Mother says cruelty to animals is a sign of deviance."

"Well you won't even touch my dog. What do you think that says about you?"

Paula hated Booker T, an Aussie-Blue Heeler-Beagle mix. She said her missing patches of fur and constant scratching was mange. The vet said they were "hot spots" and could be cured. It never seemed to happen.

"The fact that I won't touch your dog means that I have good taste," she answered. She sipped her steaming cocoa, and peered at me over the rim of the cup. She was always gauging my responses, doing fieldwork like her parents.

She asked me where Booker T came from. I mistakenly told her.

"Orphans of the Storm," I said. It was a renovated barn outside of town filled with aisles of dogs and cats in too-small metal cages. Greyhounds and Dobermans and Pit Bulls and Pomeranians and Tabbies and Siamese. I wanted to take them all home; it was impossible to pick only one. I chose Booker T because she has a blue eye and a brown. Depending on what side you see her from, she's wolf or dog.

"I bet you don't even know where that name comes from."

"No, it's just a name."

"A name taken from a D.W. Griffith movie starring Lillian and Dorothy Gish as sisters separated during the French Revolution.

"Very good, Paula," her mother said. She stood in the doorway with a batter-covered beater from her Mix-master in each hand. "Poppy-seed bread," she said, handing one to Paula, the other to me.

"Doesn't matter. Orphans of the Storm is just a fancy name for the pound," Paula scoffed. She licked a thin silver spoke.

"Sort of the pound," I repeated. "I mean, they all need good homes. But there the animals cost a lot of money. Booker was seventy-five dollars." My beater dripped all over my hand.

"The pound," she said flatly. "Brother tried to bring home a stray once. Remember mother? That awful long-haired Chihuahua."

"Oh yes. It looked like a large rat." She wiped her hands on a gingham dish towel, and then handed it to me. She pointed down at her Persian rug as if to say "watch it."

"Maybe it was a rat." Rocky had told me about a couple who had brought home a dog they found in a grocery store parking lot. While they were at a dinner party, it ate almost all of their cat and chewed through the front door. The police told them that it was a super rat. Another family in town experienced the same thing.

"I don't think so, Eleanor. Just a very ugly doggy." Mrs. Zicarelli returned to the kitchen where she was preparing tea for the women's symphony league. "Play nice, girls," she called over her shoulder.

I went home and curled up on my bed with Booker T. I got the fabulous idea to lock Paula away like an unwanted stray. I saw her caged. Her eyes were wide open with concern. Her lips drawn tight. Her hands white as they gripped the thin bars. Locking her away would make her feel insecure. She'd be a better person for it. The next day, I moved my museum of artifacts to the basement storeroom as bait.

Leo swims toward shore in an assertive American crawl. I kick and stroke hard to catch him. We swim side-by-side. He's a lefty and I'm a righty. Our faces appear in the triangle of our arms as we gasp for air. We see each other through a veil of water. Our eyes close again and we're in darkness. Finally, we stop, breathless, at the string of buoys marking the swimming area.

"What should I do, Ellie?" Leo's weight sends his buoy down and mine slightly up.

"All we can do is wait, Leo. Keep our eyes wide open," I

say. I lean hard on my big plastic float to lift him. We ride the buoys like a submerged see-saw. We take turns rising out of the warm water and into the hot air and then coming back down again.

The sun moves from behind the only cloud in the sky. The harsh light ignites Leo's shaggy blond-white hair. A head full of wild fiber optic strands frame his pointed nose and chin, those close-set beady eyes, and then lips. He blinks furiously. Tears form in the corners. The drops trail down his cheeks. They're followed by a steady stream.

"Leo, crying won't help," I say, quickly, wanting him to stop.

"I'm not crying, Eleanor." He gives my proper name the phony emphasis of Mr. and Mrs. Zicarelli, and then pushes me off my buoy. I fall back into the water and use my hands as flippers to float away. The sky looks like an overturned saucer, made of glass as smooth as the lake only it's really blue.

Leo and I see signs of Red Beard everywhere. A sunfish floats on its side on the shore. Leo hooks the pulsing gill with a twig and flings it on the rocks. The fish means Red Beard has power over the lake. He refuses to go back in the water. Outside the mess hall, a crow as big as the wild dumpster cats unravels a birds wormy guts. It haw-haws at us and then flies off with the bloody string trailing from its beak. Red Beard must be in there poisoning the food, tainting the water.

"I have a care package from my mom in my locker. Cookies, candy, beef jerky. I locked it away to keep it safe from the evil spirit. We'll eat there," Leo says. He speed-walks along the cypress-flanked footpath. The bare top branches taper to black points, making a dot-to-dot in the sky.

"Sixty-six," he says. He stops suddenly and we collide.

"What," I ask. I push him out of the way to take the lead.

"It's the sixth day of the sixth month," he says like he can't believe it.

"666 is the mark of the beast. Sixty-six means nothing at all, you simpleton," I say, becoming Paula again. "Sorry. Flashback." I don't explain that I'm afraid of becoming my enemy.

"Just die," Leo says. He pushes me into the lower cypress limbs. Thousands of dry tan needles fall to the ground.

He takes off running. I try to keep up, but my legs sud-

denly feel full of hot sand.

At his bunkhouse, he holds open the door, expecting me to follow. My head hurts, my eyes are wildly fatigued. Inside the cots, lockers, and trunks look hazy around the edges. I blink a couple times and look at Leo before my eyes refocus. He's wavering streaks of color, like Red Beard on the pool bottom.

A couple days before Paula-napping, I described my weird vision to her. She said in her professor-parent voice, I was seeing mandorlas, body halos, a popular feature of early Christian art. She asked me what I saw when I looked at her. I cupped my chin in my hand as if I were concentrating. Despite the vibrant oranges and yellows encircling her, I said the devil doesn't have a halo. She said of course he does; like me he was a fallen angel.

"I'll see you later. I need a nap," I say in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Go ahead. Desert me in my time of need," Leo screams. His face twists in anger. "If he gets me, then he's coming for you next, Ellie. He's coming after you for Paula. I'm sure she's poking pins in an ugly Eleanor doll. A doll with frizzy hair and giant frames."

The slammed door rattles the unsteady bunkhouse frame.

"All we can do is keep our eyes open," he mocks. "Yeah, right." He throws his sleeping bag at me. It unrolls, making a quilted red carpet leading away from the bunkhouse.

I walk so fast my glasses slide halfway down my nose. Looking out over the top of my frames, the half tent, half bunkhouse buildings resemble dark caverns. The arching tree branches are tidal waves ready to crash down. I knock into a trash barrel, and then a picnic table as I run. There's no stopping an angry Leo. He must've lost his mind in the pool with Red Beard. I won't tell. Not like Paula. She told everyone at school I freaked out over her collection of voodoo dolls from her parents' research on a past book. Their young women bodies wore tight floral cotton dresses tied at the waist with rope, but, from the neck up, they had black skull heads, painted green-yellow teeth, and wisps of dry straw hair. I froze when I saw them standing on the shelf above her four-poster bed.

"Mother says only the uneducated are superstitious." Paula grabbed my hand and pulled me toward her bed. She undressed

one of the dolls. "Nothing more than bound straw," she said.

"It doesn't matter what it's made of. It's what it means."

I'd been taught to avoid all sorts of weird occurences. Never step over a person lying on the floor. Never place a hat on the bed. Never put your clothes on backwards. If you do, wear them that way all day. Sleeping under a dozen voodoo dolls belonged among those things.

"You can have this side," Paula said. She patted the half of the queen-size mattress closest to the wall. "Out of reach." She laughed and turned off the ruffle-shaded lamp on the night stand.

When I shut my eyes, the skull-faced women's cannibal teeth chattered like wind-up falsies. They danced around a bonfire, coaxing the flames higher until that was all I saw—fire.

Mr. Zicarelli moved to block my escape out the front door, but his hands were busy, trying to fit together two old bones at the joint. I squirmed past him and ran home dressed in Paula's cowboy-patterned pajamas. I ran fast. The leafless trees along the street looked like taller versions of the voodoo women; I feared they'd turn me into one of them.

A letter is taped to my bunkhouse door. I got to camp a couple days late; I don't have any roommates. The girls' shadows in the bunkhouses on either side of mine reveal what they're doing. To the right, four sit side-by-side on a cot and share a cigarette. A small red coal glows brightly when one of them inhales. The smoke seeps through the window screen and slowly dissipates in the hot summer air. To the left, the girls dance to "Beach Baby, Beach Baby" coming from a portable record player. A girl with long, flopping braids holds her nose, raises her arm, and then wiggles downward like she's going under water.

I sit on my cot, lean back against a hill of pillows, and read what my mother has written: Booker's hot spots have cooled. Paula's performing with a summer orchestra at the local theater. Her brother might go pro. The Cubs and the Cardinals are thinking of signing him. Rocky has a new job installing home security systems. David Julian is back in prison. He violated parole.

David. David Julian. If it wasn't for him, Paula and I would have died. I'm sure of it. I had lured Paula to my house to collect her parents' treasures placed in a box in back of the basement storage closet.

"Go on," I said as she peeked in the dark room. It smelled of ocean brine even though we were a hundred miles from water. "Get it," I said, pointing. My arm trembled. I feared she'd back out. "It's all yours," I coaxed.

Paula ducked to avoid hitting her head on the top of the short door frame. "I don't see a thing, Ellie," she said. "It's too cluttered."

"Keep looking. It's all there." The small room was filled to the low-beamed ceiling with junk: a dress maker dummy, the stuffing exposed at mid-chest, a leaning tower of milk crates, a broken bamboo birdcage, and a couple of air conditioner units, the wire guts hanging out the back. The artifacts sat on the back shelf next to my mother's jars of stewed fruit.

Paula spun around. I saw the glint of her wide eyes, but the room was too dark to see her shocked facial expression.

"Don't Ellie. Please," she said.

I slammed the door, locked it, and moved an old steamer trunk in front, just in case.

Paula screamed for hours while I worked on my stamps upstairs in the kitchen. I affixed the stony faces of dead American presidents to tissue thin hinges and put them in my new book. Next, I alphabetized my record albums according to title and then changed my mind and arranged them by singer. I even made Rice Krispie treats and ate half of it out of the bowl.

Paula started making a god awful banging noise like she was pounding a two-by-four on the ceiling. I needed to make her stop. My parents were in Lake Forest visiting my sick grandmother for the weekend. My brother and David were supposed to be watching me. They partied all night. The last time I checked, they were passed out in Rocky's attic room. But they weren't dead.

David was already down there, dragging the steamer trunk out of the way.

"No. Don't. Please," I said. You don't understand."

"What in the hell's going on?" he asked. "You have someone locked up?"

I nodded, suddenly shy.

"Yes she does. It's Paula. Paula Rene Zicarelli." Her voice sounded raspy but close as if she stood beside me. She must've been talking into the door. I stepped away.

"You're in really bad trouble, Ellie. My parents are going to kill you. My brother will come back from school and kill you. I'm going to kill you. Be afraid. Be very afraid. You're already dead."

"Shut up," David shouted at the closed door. He kicked it to make sure Paula knew he was talking to her.

"What did she do to you, Ellie?" he asked. His hands were warm, dry, soft as he held mine.

"Nothing," I said. "Everything." The tears came in a rush. I told him about her dog, her brother, her clothes, her house, her grades, her parents. Nothing I had was better than hers. Nothing. He understood. His "Paula" was named Trent Webster, a guy who traded stocks on Wall Street, dated a catalog model, and drove a Porsche. He invited Trent Webster to his house when they were ten and shaved half of his head while he slept.

The basement was quiet, except for the faint sound of the radio playing upstairs. "Do you hear the trumpets blowing, Fernando?" a woman sang in a foreign-sounding voice. David removed my glasses. His face collapsed into a swirl of warm colors. I squinted to see him more clearly.

"Don't, Ellie. You have beautiful eyes. You're going to be a real looker. Just wait."

I took back my glasses to see if he was laughing—I was trying to get used to not being pretty—but his face looked soft, his eyes sweet. He meant what he said. He believed my looks would change. I wasn't sure. I told him about Farah Fawcett on the *Tonight Show*. She said people always complimented her big white smile. She confessed her teeth were chocked full of fillings. I told David my eyes were weak.

Ribbons of gray smoke seeped from the slats in the storeroom door. David pulled it open. The ribbons expanded into a thick black plume. Paula crawled out on her hands and knees, coughing. Books and a blanket and pillow blazed in a heap on the floor. The dressmaker dummy's half torso wore a shirt of bright yellow-orange flames. A flame shirt. That was how I felt about Paula. The most important part of me flared with envy. David Julian extinguished the fire. He liked me. He could never feel the same about her.

My mother closes her letter by saying that she still doesn't understand my behavior, but she loves me. She will always love

her "pussy kitty." She looks forward to my return at the end of the month. We will discuss my future then. I'm to take care.

I fold the floral printed stationery in a fat triangle and wedge it under the corner of my locker. Someday, maybe a hundred years from now, someone will find the letter, read it and wonder what Ellie Redding did to Paula Zicarelli and how it all turned out.

I wake up from my nap with my hair and t-shirt soaked in perspiration. Booker T. turned into a rabid wolf in my dream. His foaming jaw latched onto my arm, and he wouldn't let go. My heart booms in my chest from the terror of it. I'm all alone. The bunkhouse windows are the blank gray screens of old broken television sets. The only moving shadows belong to the cypresses and firs. A light breeze stirs the stale heat and sways the bare branches. Mushroom-shaped solar lamps lining the path to Leo's hide their weepy dance behind a wall of light. The air smells of wood smoke, of dampness, of something faintly rotten. His bunkhouse smells even mustier, like sweaty boys even though his roommates are gone.

Leo sits in the middle of his cot with his legs crossed, wearing an old army-green jacket. He ashes a cigarette in an empty soda can. Moths beat against the window screen. A portable black-and-white TV he must've stolen from a counselor projects a cone of silver light. Frankenstein's sad-eyed monster gives daisies to a pretty blond girl. Then he strangles her with his giant clumsy hands.

"You need to apologize to him," I say, not knowing where the idea came from.

Leo turns off the TV. Light bursts across the screen and then fizzles to a single fuzzy point that lingers in the dark.

"You're right," he says as he releases a small blue-gray cloud of cigarette smoke. "I've been thinking the same thing." He no longer sounds worried. He seems at peace.

An invisible string seems to pull us straight to the closed pool where we climb over the chain-link fence. The blue water shimmers as if another pool levitates on top of the real one. We sit side-by-side in lawn chairs and hold hands. Leo's hand shakes, which makes mine tremble too. We slowly say the drowned boy's real name—William, William, William—until it runs together and it

sounds like "ill-yum."

I close my eyes and picture Red Beard's dead body lying on the cement: the concave stomach, the wormy arms and legs, the knobby shoulders. I see a close-up of his face: the hooded eyes, the blue parted lips, the waxy skin. My heart pounds. Boom-boom. Boom-boom. Paula's face replaces his. She has the same heavy-lidded eyes that click open to reveal violet irises filmed over with thick yellow slime. Fireworks go off in my chest like I had wanted for her. I squeeze Leo's hand tight. He lets out an "oh." I don't want to see her anymore. I try to open my eyes, but hers seem to control mine. They're interrogating me; they want to know why. Why?

The thing is I thought fear would make Paula a better person. After my parents were told by hers what I had done, my mother sat on the edge of my bed and asked me if Rocky or David had put these terrible ideas in my head.

"Terror is a great healer," I told her, staring down at my chewed-down cuticles. I couldn't look my mother in the face. She sounded old, tired. Rocky had turned her hair gray. Without looking, I knew I had put wrinkles in her face.

"Where in the world did you ever get such an idea?"

"From your records."

"What?" She dabbed at her red nose with a Kleenex.

I reminded her of the Judy Garland song where she sings about a boy who drops her for a very beautiful girl. "Don't worry about me. Terror is a great healer." A young Judy speaks the line instead of singing it.

"Time is a great healer, Ellie. Not terror."

"Well, terror works quicker than time," I said, embarrassed that I had misunderstood the lyrics.

"William, William, William," Leo chants. His voice increases in volume.

Paula slowly fades and I'm able to open my eyes.

A June bug sizzles on one of the eerie bug zapper strobes housed in a lantern-shaped cage hanging from the tree branch above us. Light diamonds spread across its ridescent wings and then merge to a single lingering spark. Another even larger bug flies between the bars of the cage. It buzzes around the strobe before crashing into the light.

"William, William, William," Leo screams. He opens his eyes wide. His bangs are plastered to his head. He has a V of sweat on his shirt. His lips have gone white from his own private nightmare.

The June bug shoots out from the zapper in flames. The yellow light zigzags across the darkness, and then drops in a curl of black ash at Leo's feet. His body flinches as if he sits in an electric chair delivered the final jolt.

"Leo, are you okay?" I say.

He isn't listening. He tilts back in his chair to gaze up at the ash-white half moon shining directly above the bug zapper's long fluorescent bulbs. His eyes roll up into his lids. He tilts back even farther, his feet coming off the ground as he falls. A thin line of blood trails from beneath his white-blond hair and trickles into the pool.

The woodpecker is believed to call up rain, I read in my field guide as I board the bus headed to Chicago. One goes to Milwaukee. Another to Madison. The camp counselors have already called our parents and told them to pick us up in our respective cities.

Rain drums on the roof, drowning out an early round of "Beer on the Wall." The book is right. Through a porthole I rub in the fogged glass, I watch a woodpecker hammer at the trunk of a tree. In the distance, I see the makeshift stage strung with Christmas lights where Leo and I were to perform our end of the summer skit. The heavy palm tree fronds fan out on the ground. The paper mache boulders are clumps of wet brown-painted newspaper. Behind the stage is the murky outline of the thick cypresses. Leo and I were going to dress as cavemen and lip-sync to "Bare Necessities" from *The Jungle Book*. I liked the idea of dressing like one of Mr. Zicarelli's cannibals. I imagined sending him a picture of me wearing a loin cloth and two coconuts. I'd give him a big, toothy grin. On the back I'd write, "My time has come to shine."

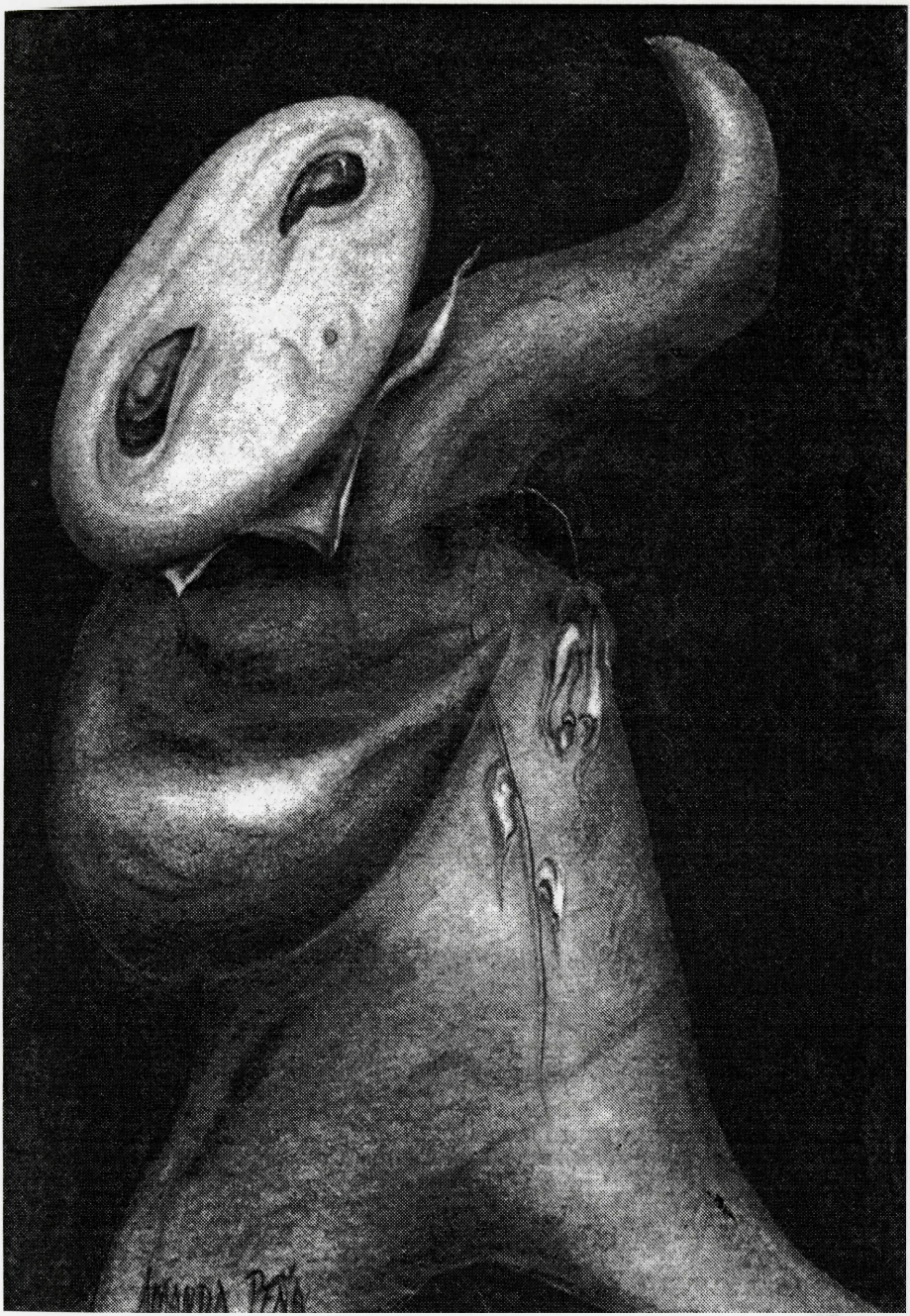
I hold a small stump Leo and I decorated in arts-and-crafts on my second or third day at camp. It's covered with moss, lichen, acorns, and leaves. I'm going to take it to him in the hospital when I get home. After I asked him a thousand times, one of the counselors finally said that he'll be fine. But I heard kids talking while I

waited to board the bus. The rumors are unbelievable: Leo's brain dead and has been sent to a nursing home for life. He has amnesia and thinks he's William. He tried to call the parents and tell them that he's reborn. He has constant seizures that send his body spinning like a dervish. The worst yet. I tried to kill him like they heard I did Paula. I went free because the police lacked proof. The truth is he needs lots of rest like me. If we get some sleep, we'll both be fine.

The bus hits a bump. Two small regal moths sputter up from a split in the stump.

"It's Red Beard's spirit," someone a couple seats behind me says.

The yellow beam of a flash light bounces around the inside of the bus. It finds the moths' frantic spins and follows their twinned flight.



The White Lady

The baby is gone
and I don't have the strength
to continue the search.
I move over to the open doorway
where I can see the moon.
The baby's drowned in the arroyo
and the water is white,
like snowmelt carried in the moonlight,
and I pull myself up
and move over the surface
I know I can never leave.

I told my husband I was tired
of these mining towns,
I needed the ocean where I grew up,
the sound and the islands,
where we see mountains only in the distance.
My shadow leaves so frequently here
I no longer miss it.
Starvation's the calm, the minutes
before the northeastern blows in,
when the world becomes suddenly still
and you enjoy the stillness
because it holds the first few gusts
of maybe the greatest storm
you'll ever move into.
A few moments of clarity.
Euphoria. Stillness and the wind.

But the pain earlier, I don't think
I can ever put my baby through that.

She hasn't learned this is happening,
a growing community of dying children
who haven't the time to doubt.
The waves wash us out beyond the breakwater.
But these canyons never
let the miners who died here leave.
They're with you at night
when you move over to the open door.
They wander up and down
the walls of the river
looking for my baby in the current.

The owners sent my husband in
when it wasn't safe and he died.
Now they're letting us starve
and they won't take no for an answer.
Those who stayed can never leave.
In summer, when the river's dry
I walk the arroyo and listen
for my baby's cry, my only curse
on those who see me
see my pain as beauty.
How did she get in that river?

The moon is setting earlier.
The rock walls that haven't fallen
give me cover so I build
these small fires to light her way.
If she crawls clear, I'll hear her cry.
And then I can take my baby home.
We'll walk the tidelines
that understand when loved ones
return but are careful to walk
in the shadows of clouds moving in.
Small fires mark the narrow channel.
If there's no one left awake
we'll take our places undisturbed.

The passing freighter won't see us.
The moon's setting over the canyon wall.
She's here in my arms and we're going home
where the water is gentler.

Grand Union

Having exclamation-pointed her beauty
mark with an eyebrow pencil and pout,
she stood behind the conveyor belt
which dragged a six-pack from my hands
to hers. We were small-talking,
fumbling with our shyness and fingers
as she was busy miscounting the change.

She tells me she's engaged now
and I say I've just got back to town.
I'm awkward and mumbling like that child
over in the next aisle staring at me
with a fist in its mouth.
And while she is bagging
her ring catches the fluorescence
and that's when I find myself
looking away—but then I think
just maybe she's embarrassed too,
and as I turn back she places
her hands down, stacking one above the other,
covering the commitment she made
against my ever returning.

I think a lot about this sort of stuff
ever since our divorce
in details and images I wouldn't have believed before.
From that red smock she wore
with its ink-stained breast,
to how her hair was parted perfectly
like a scar across her scalp.
And, because of this, I'm reminded of my grandmother,

who from bed would reminisce
towards her childhood, until it seemed
she was again that child. Or like
when the one favorite scene from a movie

reloops resolutely in your mind
until it becomes the length of that movie—
all the extraneous has been removed,
as the spotlight narrows
to center the memory's moment.

And so it is now for me:
how it wasn't until our parting
that I was finally able to face her;
and that there are times, I'm sure,
in the quietness of the dark booth
that the projectionist believes
he too is a liar, that even the applause
among the audience below him
becomes the repetitious act
of two hands separating.

Arroyo

--for Phil Tate

I guess the closest I can come to imagining
one would be a ravine which, here in the east,
banks steeply to a stream where wild grapes
can still graze untouched and the oak trees
balance on one sturdy leg.

Here you can descend on your heels
like a pioneer behind a ploughhorse
where, if the sound of water isn't enough
to lead you, gravity will, until
you've reached the cupped bottom of the U
where the stream's no wider than the arc
of a triumphant piss and the native trout
congregated there stake the claim
as the stubbornest of fish.

Here, too, is where rimless tires,
shopping carts and even an occasional
appliance wedge themselves into unlikely graves.
Yeah, I know, but it's the sad truth
of some peoples' idea of recycling
and not at all how I picture the chiseled
nobility of your southwestern desert.

But I gotta tell you Phil, it's still
some spot and where I'd have a photo

taken to send to you. And as I can
easily picture you there, tan and khakied,
posed with a spiral notebook in hand,
could you imagine seeing me sitting here
cross-legged and baiting a pole, deeply absorbed
on top of a stunned Whirlpool?

At The Desert's Edge

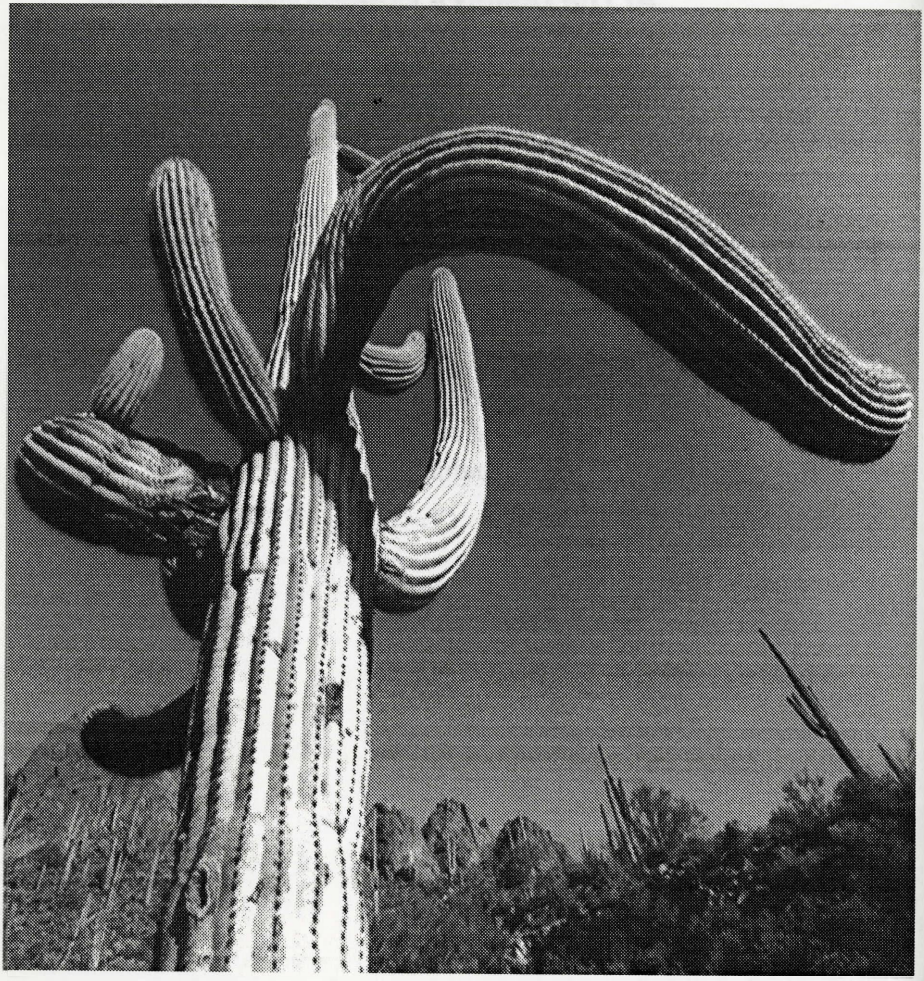
Watermarks burn at the margins.
You wake to the bitter sound--- A stranger
is predicting the weather---

For weeks, it is noon. Light continues turning
on its own wheel, withstanding reflections
as if they were the whole story.

You want to tell everyone your secret---
how much darkness is tucked in the crevice
of noon--- while the sky remains careful.

A stranger cannot read the bones
or prophesy in this silence.
Perfection simply isn't good enough.

Distance, ever after, closes in.
Lovely, ruinous, there will be rain
before sunrise---



Santo Luis, Gardener of Miniature Roses

God knows I've tried
to grow some here
in Tallahassee, like yours,

not a blemish or wilt,
each bud a perfect world,
the way you did on Ever-

green Street, South Gate, CA
but it's not a matter
of the green thumb, knowhow,

of the right fertilizer,
organic or non
of watering

of weeding
of keeping the snails
out of the beds,

of the right dirt mixture.
No, it takes your hands,
the years you sat on the rocker

on the porch, singing & talking
of fertile days in your fertile
homeland, of the smooth touch

of your breath,
kisses on the petals.
Only then can you witness

the plants' growth,
the opening of buds into flower,
like the gift of your hands,

a love for the simple pleasures
we try desperately
to grow.

The Parable of Stones

once the pebble struck
between the eyes--I saw

it come but didn't duck
behind the palm tree in time--

I felt the pain blind the eyes,
the trickle of blood down

the cheek, then the lightness
of the head, a world spinning

and next thing I knew
I was flat on my back

looking up at the faces of friends,
among them the culprit

who'd flung the rock--in his eyes
the fact that both blood and stone

had become one: a weight
too heavy for both of us

to carry our entire lives.

Freewriting, Late September

set down whatever wants to come out
without refining
or expanding
like dust settling into earth

trapping words
creatures that leave
their crabbed tracks in the dirt
of my father's cabin bare now for seven years
timbers rotting one corner sinking
in the swampy tongue of the hill

sit quietly
the page before you
the odors of another autumn
glowing in slender lamps on the wall
only minutes away from the hollow snort
of the dark
start anywhere
the yellow fuzz of the wind
as it sings through the shed with
its ripped out boards
its rusted hammer and cracked bolts
the slugs bunched up by the threshold

keep the hands moving
don 't think
always drawing closer to what you don't know

a space whose points are moved by transformations
not yet accounted for
some object toward which
all trajectories converge

as though anything could be said ...

last year someone kicked the door in
splintered the lower panel the pine
pure in its white seam
(they could have just turned the handle)
took nothing but the house
unbarred and shieldless to every claw

keep writing
begin with the road once smooth
now mottled with pools of stagnant mud

put the words down without judgment
demands
while the porch sags with the smell of cracked wood
pinning the crisscrossed memories
you recognize only long after
you have passed the right place
knowing you shall never come there again

(to begin is to meet one more possibility of silence)

say whatever leaps to mind
all wanderings
all bifurcations of sense
sharp prisms of surprise

a stack of books with moldy spines and edges
shredded by thin teeth

something appears you didn't expect to see

old jars a bottle of green slime
topped with a fine ring of brown froth

don't stop no matter what
(all things were together in a crackling
stew of seeds stirring the dark tang of birth)

the empty fireplace
its ashes caked into dense muck unwilling to burn
the interloper jeep that lumbers into view
with faces peering out of the windows
solemn lumps on the hunt

persist
without analyzing
evaluating
free to sample the dense clot of possibilities
the kitchen crowded with droppings and spiderwebs
dark matter entering the narrow apertures of
every hinge

one picture still hangs on the wall
carefully matted and covered by glass
showing a gate half opened
in a country field the distance blurring
into green and blue

straining

to grasp the whole
to apprehend
the dispersed and disparate filaments
of our constantly streaming flesh.

press on
a flourish of motions

ending with preludes
the words themselves
spinning their urges out on a rag

I nudge the small bones
graying on the floor
and whisper goodbye
to the rats.

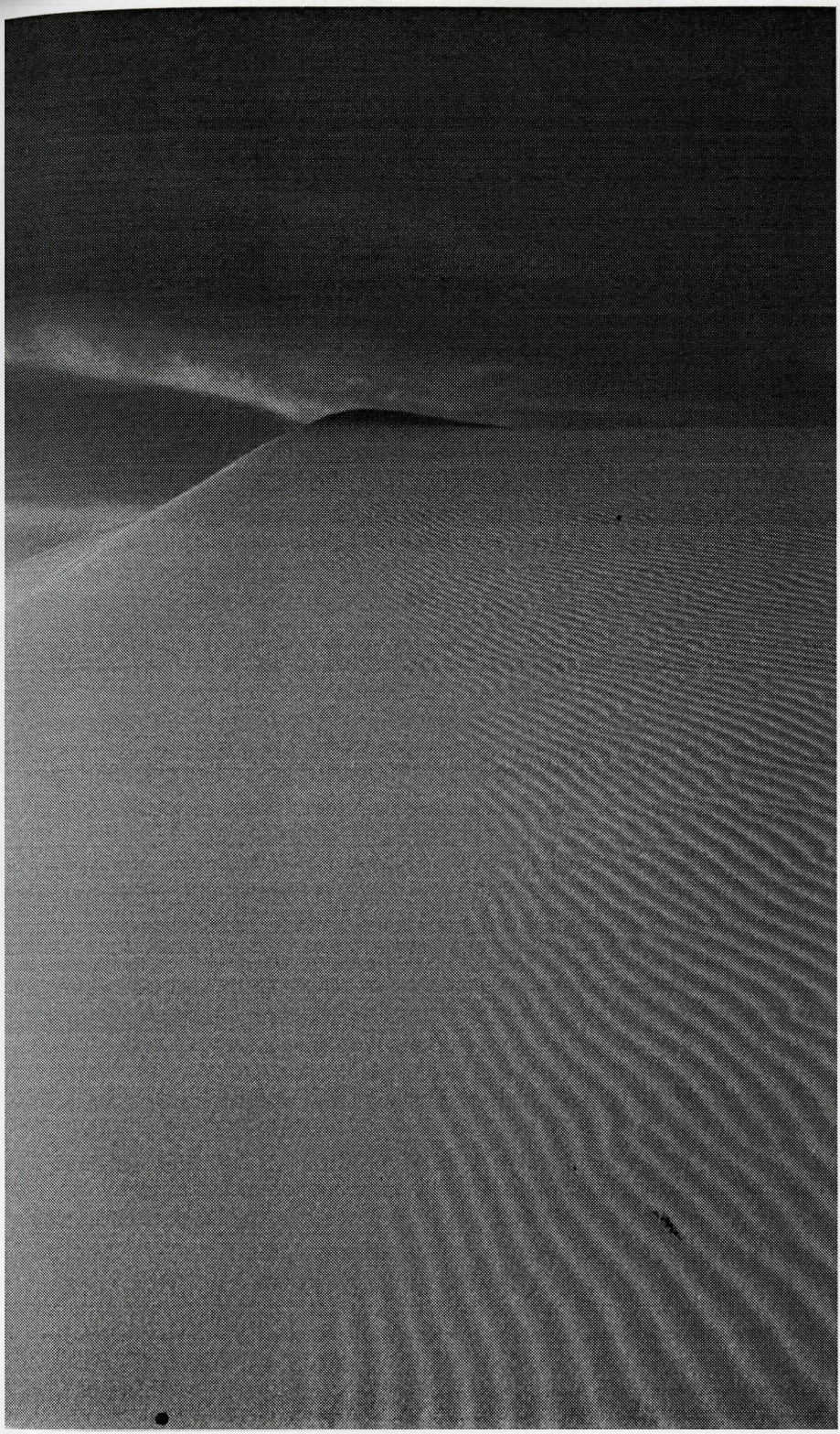
The Transformation of the Hummingbird

The quince are falling like green spiders, slowly from the bush,
your mouth the needle without a thread, I know
if you enter, twilight will enter too, gently as if sifting through
a dusty blind. We come and go, whatever

the old bitch says about carpets on Tuesdays. She's never swept,
and what we've done, she can't say. It's not this transformation
that stole the thistle from her lintel just as it began its web.
Why do I like the moon hesitating, the stars feathered out like birds?

Why do you not notice that women who wear mascara cry carefully,
their tissues smudged, the unfixed night. I see my face,
a cancelled stamp. I open the envelope and find the genuine article:

at my throat the green choker and your name. What else is new,
my old darling? Winter is coming, my whole body is turning
into snow and I turn towards you.



In the Bath, Patsy Cline Has Magical Dreams About Giants

They describe her as "ripe," as if she were a Hunt's tomato swimming in red sauce in its can. They describe her as "vibrant," when no one except me and Momma and my one other sister, too pathetic to mention, have seen her submerge herself for hours in the tub, steam flattening her permed brunette hair, a rosacea from the heat making her resemble a red-and-white patched monster when she finally bedraggles herself out, wraps herself in an acre long white towel and one of Momma's Turkish bathrobes because Miss Finicky's always in pursuit of "the best."

I'm getting used to seeing her in there. The last few times, I've had to pull her out when it's time for her gig at the roadhouse, slide my hands under her armpits, hoist that long white shivering body, towel her from head to toe. Sometimes she gets all sleepy then, bats those long black lashes until I'm so impatient I want to scream, buckles slightly and slips back down into the uppuffing curtains of Miss Sasson's Eau de Cologne Bubblebath and then what am I supposed to do?

I phone in for her. Cancel for her. Baby, I let her go.

Because, hell, I'm just your typical all-American-kind-of gal high school student, or I could say that's the fate I aspire to though, in my family, that'd be dreaming the impossible dream. Everyone in school knows about Patsy's shitkicker lungs, more powerful than any oilrig that goes rattling and shaking and vibrating along our highway. And a few wits at school have taken to calling her "The Baritone," which I don't think is funny at all, and they only say it because that Theda Bara throaty effect makes her sound sexy as hell flaming on Earth and they ache for her, those little boys do, I know it.

They don't know the real Patsy. The real Patsy, the genuine twenty-four-octave article, is only revealed in the bath. It's become a ritual we've refined and polished to a glittery silver sheen since those days we first started the practice as near-toddlers, though now even Momma thinks it's bubbled out of control, has taken to calling Patsy "neurasthenic" out of earshot as if those pearl-shaped little lobes of hers couldn't decipher decibels higher than any Saint Bernard or Basset Hound will ever, ever aspire to do.

Whole worlds have been erected and destroyed in that tub.

And only I know which one is real.

When we were little girls of seven or eight years old (the same age, not coincidentally, as Alice Liddell when Charles Dodgson began to photograph her), soaking in the hot water together, scrubbing each other's back with a bright green sponge Momma'd picked up on discount at Woolworth's, a slice of that world would emerge, layered with ice that shone blue as we examined it and was cracked in strange, brittle, perpendicular seams along its surface, like deep scars roughing an otherwise-lovely face. We were tremendous geography fans in those days and believed that North Dakota was the most exotic locale anyone might ever sojourn to, especially two penny-poor, white-cracker girls without a daddy. So I'd rub Patsy's back in that half-harsh, soothing circular motion she loved under glaring bathroom lights and stare at that ice tip until I could describe it perfectly, until we owned that map-tiny square of terrain, and we'd memorize it and remember it because we loved it.

"Antarctica," I called Patsy.

"Amazon Jungle," she adopted as my name.

"Antarctica, I'd murmur, squeezing out the sponge until tepid water dribbled down her back; smiling, glancing back, Patsy shivered; I tried to sound like my second grade textbook. "Antarctica, today we are journeying to North Dakota. It's a flat land, you know, characterized by a population that's spread out across the state, but it's more highly populated in its major cities, of course, such as Fargo and Grand Forks."

"Boring!" Patsy'd scream, furiously as the Red Queen in Alice; even then she was given to paroxysms of temper that amused me more than scared me; calmly I continued.

"But what is it about this strange, strange place that you

don't find in the textbooks? What is it about--" I paused.

I glanced around. The bathroom looked strange, but in a way I couldn't articulate. I tried again. "What is it about--"

"What?" Patsy asked. She examined me closely; I felt flushed suddenly, enervated, as if all my muscles had gone slack and wiggly as worms. I shoved away from Patsy a little, leaned against the tub back, the cold white porcelain top where we hadn't splashed water gripping the skin of my neck, supporting me, comforting me.

"Amazon, are you o.k.?"

The dizziness lifted and I looked at her to find her very intense eyes boring into mine with adultlike anxiety, concern. What'd happened? Even at eight, I was a morbid child; it occurred to me, just for a second, that I might've had a stroke, but that sounded too farfetched even for me, so I pasted a big fat smile on my face and nodded.

And truly, the dizziness seemed to have gone. Evaporated. Pouf: fini: finis-ville, as one of our artier French textbooks might've proclaimed. "I'm fine," I insisted, "fine," and in an instant I was enjoying again the fading warmth of the bath and sinking down into bubbles popping in pockets of foam under my chin and then I scooted up and resumed my washing of Patsy's back; smiling again, convinced the crisis had passed, she tipped her head forward somewhat sleepily, inviting me to scrub her neck.

Which I did. "But what is it about this strange, strange place that you don't find in the textbooks?"

I closed my eyes and the blackness wedged tightly along the outcurving blankness of my eyelids dissipated, turned scarlet, paled to the whiteness of day-old snow.

And I saw them. The town. The house. The woman. The man. I glanced across the road, messy with scraps of filthy, melting snow, to the field, arcing far away from my vision as any vista I'd ever glimpsed, a gold-red sunset igniting that horizon in bursts of flame that made the field look as if it were exploding under fireworks attacks, as if Roman candles and bottle rockets illuminated each other in a cacophony of gold and russet, emerald and auburn. I smiled to myself because it was pretty, feeling Patsy's back stiffen under the sponge. Studied the tipped-to-the-left sign planted in that field: Hettinger, North Dakota, Population 200.

And somehow I understood that what I was looking at was real.

"What's the matter?" Patsy asked, not turning around. "Earth to Amazon. Earth to Amazon."

And I knew I'd better start describing right then what I saw, or Patsy might start thinking I was lacking a few bottle rockets of my own.

So I told her. I escorted her up the curving driveway to the house, a huge, white, ramshackle affair built squarely as a barn. I led her across the rotten-wooded porch that made crackling sounds like a gently spitting fire beneath our boots when we crossed it. I indicated the clay pot of fat-headed gold and chocolate mums beside the "Howdy, Stranger" mat, a silly, soiled affair with one goose in a Stetson greeting another with a hearty shake of its wingtip. We wiped our feet on the mat, glanced at each other; the screen door creaked open; we ventured inside.

The man was gaunt as a polecat, with the starved, anxious look of some animal that's been trapped out in the cold too long, forgotten how to forage. I liked him, though, despite his downbeaten appearance, and I could tell Patsy did, too. He waved us inside with a palsied arc of his hand: we gazed around, appalled at what we saw: plates stacked with crusted food--old casseroles, hardened oatmeal, bacon that had petrified into something dark and tarpaperish and evil-looking--were scattered around the filthy wood floor of the living room; newspapers sat stacked in corners nearly to the ceiling; coffee cups whose contents were a thick, curdled cream of scum lay everywhere, some of them tipped, the sticky brown contents staining the carpet near the mugs. Glancing beyond the mess, which made me claustrophobic and crazy-scared at the same time, I spotted dishes in the sink stacked pell-mell to the ceiling; my throat seared with bile.

"It's Momma," the man explained, while Patsy squirmed at his side. "It's taken so much of my time, now, just to care for her... I hope you won't judge us on the dirt alone. Oh, here she is now. Take a seat, girls, won't you, please?"

And he shoved a pile of papers and books off the sagging divan, indicated it with a sweep of his oversized, trembling hand.

Patsy and I seated ourselves demurely: I knew her so well I could smell panic wafting musty off her skin, but I was willing to

listen to the man, thinking any weatherbeaten face with a smile that yellow-tooth-engaging must harbinger some fortitude, some incredible strength of spirit, Antarctica and I might learn from. And then I glanced up at the woman hobbling on her walker toward us and all beautiful intentions vanished into the living-room must that threatened to choke me silent because she was grinning like a mentally retarded woman and was filthy as a puppy that keeps soiling itself until its owners have the sense to clean it with a washcloth and her clothes were all crazy, a housedress imprinted with little cows sailing over fat, white clouds, snippity yellow moons.

And the crazy woman kept stumping toward us, slapping that walker down with repeated smacks on the dirty wood floor, as if this were a garden party and she, the gracious hostess, were anxious to receive us.

But the man sensed my reaction. Understood my reaction, no matter how fervently I struggled to hide it, for I was young but I didn't lack compassion and I could tell that this was a hellhole of a life these two people had sunk into, mired themselves in forever.

"Please don't mind Momma," the man said; his voice got all high and flutey, and I knew he was suffering. "And don't get the wrong impression; I'd be so sad if you did...I try to keep her clean, really I do, but she hasn't been right for years and between giving her baths and feeding her and watching her medication and talking to her and running this mess of a farm I seem to have run out of time and I'm permanently out of time and I don't know where it'll ever stop."

Then, to Patsy's and my horror, the man put his face straight down on his open palms and started to cry.

Neither of us knew what to say. And we felt bad that we didn't, but we were just little girls after all. And the man kept crying with his gnarled head lowered onto his hands and the woman, who by this time had found the chair next to her husband, lowered herself into it out of the walker, sat there grinning at each of us in turn while he cried. And Patsy and I glanced at each other and then looked straight ahead, trying not to see that woman's grin, but in a second the man had seized control of himself, lifted his face off his hands, and sat there wiping his cheeks with his palms and struggling, somewhat shakily, to smile.

"I'm so sorry, " he said. "I have no idea what made me do

that. I'm afraid I'm giving you the wrong impression...you see, I learned long ago that the dirt here isn't what's important, or even the way Momma is now. Though you might find it hard to believe, it's quite possible--in situations such as ours--to preserve feelings of-- of dignity, you see, of...hope. Maybe my wife can't communicate with me as she once did. Maybe she can't wash herself so good, or help me clean up this place, or even tell me that she loves me. But who says--who's to say--that the past isn't as important as the present? We think, just because we're living in some now nobody understands, that that's all there is. But when my wife was young--before she got sick--my God, you wouldn't believe how beautiful she was then. Spirited. She used to read all these thick novels I could barely understand, though I took to reading them after her trouble started, to get back a little of what we'd lost...but she'd read these big thick books, *War and Peace* and *Moby Dick* and *Little Women*, and she'd act out all the parts just like she was an actress, just like she was somebody and we didn't live out on a little farm nobody ever heard of in Hettinger, North Dakota.

"So, you see, she's the one who taught me what beauty is. Who taught me, really, how to hope. And what kind of ungrateful fool would I be if I turned my back on her now?"

"Besides, our lives are full of beauty here, " he added, reaching far to his right, seizing his wife's hand, squeezing it firmly while she smiled, a little shyly, and then broke once again into that huge, disarming grin. "I read to her now, and we have lots of records we play on the stereo, and sometimes--sometimes--" he flushed a little, here-- "Momma and I even cut the rug, you know: dance."

"But enough about me. About us. Who are you, you sweet little things, and why have you chosen to--honor us with your presence today?"

"Don't you know?" I asked.

"Why, no. Should I?"

"No," I replied, confused. "It's just that--if you don't, I'm not sure I do, either."

"Well, then, let's just start back at the beginning. What're your names, and where do you all hail from?"

"I'm Elvira Cline," I said, a bit more grandly than I'd intended, "and this here's my sister, Patsy." Patsy ducked her head in acknowledgement then stared, sucking her lower lip, at the scuffed

tips of her boots. "Though sometimes we call each other Antarctica and Amazon Jungle."

The man regarded her thoughtfully. Chewed the inside of his cheek. "Well, isn't that nice," he said, finally. "Doesn't that beat all. That your momma named you that. After--her. As--what? A kind of--homage?"

Patsy and I exchanged looks.

"I'm afraid I don't take your meaning, " I said.

"Why, after the singer! Patsy Cline .Your momma must've named your sister that for a reason."

"Is there a singer named Patsy Cline?" I demanded, more confused than ever.

"Only the best damned country-western singer in the entire world. With a voice, I swear, that'll melt the skin off your bones. Your momma never told you that? I can't imagine why."

Patsy and I shook our heads vigorously no.

"For Pete's sake, then, let's give it a listen, what'd you say? This is far too good for you to miss." Trembling, bracing one hand against his chair back, he stood up, shuffled to the dust-coated stereo against the far wall, slid a record carefully out of its sleeve, placed it on the turntable, edged the needle down. "This is called 'Sweet Dreams.' And you just won't believe how beautiful this woman's voice is."

From the first second I knew. How could I not? The way she yodelled out in the garage, testing out the acoustics when she thought Momma and I'd gone out for groceries. She had a way of caressing a note in that husky buttery voice, holding on until you felt you couldn't stand it anymore, every sinew in your body vibrating, and then diving headfirst into it until the impact, once you felt it, splashed along your body like ice water from the Bering Straits. Could make you cold and hot at once so sometimes you shook, hearing those sounds, couldn't accept that they came out of that little girl's mouth. It was almost inhuman, uncanny in its loveliness, in its power to evoke realms of passion far beyond our limited, circumscribed fields of knowledge. The scratchy record whirled and spun, and when the woman moaned, "I should hate you, my whole life through, instead of having sweet dreams about you," I felt like weeping myself and sneaked a peek at Patsy, who was only listening rapt because she adored a great set of pipes and this

woman could wail with the best of them.

"Isn't that fine?" the man tremored, after the last note had faded into the fetid air of that house. "That woman was an angel, a veritable angel, and oh--how she suffered! Just like Momma and me here. But you see, suffering's not all that bad. You learn from it. Grow. Miss Patsy Cline. Mymymy, what a voice."

I was so strangely affected by then by the song and that woman's way of manipulating me to tears that I missed, completely, the angel reference and the old man's choice of the past tense. And maybe Patsy herself should've caught it but she couldn't, I see that now, just like the voice on the tape recorder never sounds like the person who's been recorded: "I don't sound like myself," Patsy'd always say, when I played back her rendition of "Walking After Midnight," and she'd scrunch up her nose in that superficial way she had and then snap, "Shit, girl, I sound like the bad soundtrack to a B-movie," and she'd laugh and I'd laugh, more loudly than she, because what other choice did I have?

So that day--the day Antarctica and I explored that old man's house in Hettinger, North Dakota--was the day our geographical explorations diverged. She, thinking it was only some beautiful, sublime game we'd created together, swam deeper and deeper into mythical realms of giants and beheaded priestesses and dragons snorting fire from their dark, tunnel cool nostrils and women with flaxen hair that trailed behind them when they walked until some obliging little girl swept it up into a train, carried it for her: Patsy, being the dominant type, always did love fairy tales about submission and subservience.

And how could I ever tell her anything different? How can I tell her now? Although I don't consider myself a conventionally religious person, though I'd love, in fact, to be the anonymous high schooler who carries her sister's books from class to class when she feels too neurasthenic or bone-tired from singing at that roadhouse to do it herself, I'm too wise, maybe, too old in some way I may never understand, to question a vision of Heaven. And though I've seen the side of that mountain, watched the plane move forward logically, precisely, nightmarishly as the progression of any REM dream into that rock that reaches out to embrace her before the plane crumples and explodes, though I've seen all of that while washing her slim pale back, while Patsy murmurs fancifully about

giants lifting her weary body up to some featherbed in the sky where she'll be away from her dreams, away from the striving and ambition and the voice that strikes her as as much curse as gift, though I know she'll meet Charlie Dick someday and buy her white house with the yellow roses and become as revered as any person can before she dies, I keep this knowledge to myself, because I'm not God, I'm simply a lowly gatekeeper who's been entrusted with one small set of keys, and when that door opens someday, and Momma and Patsy and I are forced to move through it, I'll be ready, then, and we will.

Patsy's been soaking too long. Her face, seared crimson, floats just above the foamy surface of the water. I sit on the toilet lid, watching her. The door's slightly ajar, releasing fat billows of steam that halo us both in clouds while she talks, tendrils of her dark hair dripping down into the water, drifting with the sloppy waves she sets into motion with her hands. The slightly ajar door becomes pronouncedly ajar and Patsy and I glance at each other because we both know what's coming.

"Lord, girl," Momma says, straining her creased face, crimpcurled head, through the gap. "Don't you ever get enough of that soaking? I swear you're addicted to that game; I'll have to drag you to a shrink soon if you don't get your act together. You, so young too--with so much to live for."

"I'm just getting comfortable, Momma," Patsy says. "Just sorting the music out in my mind."

"You're sorting yourself into a prune," Momma says, and slams the door.

I grin at Patsy. And she grins right back. Just like when we were toddlers, bouncing in the tub. I swear we can't help it--this deep-running comaraderie that's always linked us. And then Patsy says, "Get into the tub, Amazon Jungle, and wash my back, good and pronto," and I protest with a flutter and say, "What? But, Antarctica, I'm fully dressed!" yet I shuck off my school clothes anyway and climb in beside her, scoop up the sponge from the edge of the tub, start scrubbing that beautiful beautiful back, and, before I know it, staring at the exact center of her spine, I'm nearly overcome with a dark feeling of foreknowledge; I thrust it down, tamp it down, and listen to what Patsy has to say.

"I'm thinking about giants again," Patsy murmurs, smiling

while I scrub; she reaches back briefly; I squeeze her slender fingers. "God, wouldn't I just love to climb up some beanstalk and settle myself on a featherbed that belongs to some big old giant and rest there awhile until I don't feel so overwhelmed, until I don't feel so tired anymore. What'd you say, Sis? Can we play that game today? Or maybe you'd like to carry my hair. Hell, I always did want you for a servant. Servant of the master! Will you carry my hair, just for awhile, so I can relax and then I won't be so tired anymore and I'll tell you when to stop?"

I scrub her back in small, delicate circles, concentrating so she doesn't suspect. "I'll carry your hair for you to kingdom come and back," I say.

And we both know I'd never lie.

We both know I'll always tell Patsy Cline the truth.

Generation XYZ Explicates Hamlet

I. The Hamlet/Ophelia Love Question

Can I tell you this in my own words?

That crazy chick
was *doing* that crazy Hamlet guy
and her dad ended it with one upside her dome,
so she chiropractored Hamlet - - no more back ache - -
cut him off cold,
so Hamlet was dissed and pissed
and kilt her nosy old man
and let that pale little ghosty girl go
ga-ga in the pond,

the two of them staring fishmouthed
his fashion glass on her glassy stream
like two drunk punks in an amusement park
where even the wine pours crooked
through ears and down a throat
so people never truly see or hear
or touch the truth of each other
choking their all on silence.

II. Revealing **Hamlet's** Democratic Sensibilities

Cool.
Some worm
eats through your king's squishy eyeball
then heart-attacks for fear
of the fish what's come to eat him
who gets chewed by the beggar
who poops them all out

everyone pro-gressed through his guts.

Willie's saying
we could eat our parents, you know,
like that dude in *Psycho* who swallowed his mother whole,
scarf our parents' parents' parents too,
even every historical decomposed dude,
woof them down like roach eggs in tuna
all of them, all of us, going down that same final pipe.

Totally collective.

The O.K. Actor

He reincarnates Earps
And Clanton boys impartially,
Fighting the good gunfight
Over and over
On stage, screen, and television,
In four-walled mock-ups complete
Down to the last cockroach
And in cutaway barns
Where the walls go only up as high
As the stalls.
He shoots and dies
And lives to shoot and die again.
He climbs the walls of his corral,
And shoots the khaki-colored
Desert-lands beyond,
And dies again.

Gun Powder

Dream Head Diddler- Q: Can you see her dainty finger, with wee purple and gold nail polish scorpions grip the trigger?

Obsessed Imbecile Under Hypnosis- A; Yes.

Diddler- Q; Can you describe it for me?

Imbecile- A; Not yet, it's still smug inside the chamber.

Diddler- Q; Well, when did you first see it?

Imbecile- A; Before it was born, minted and encased.

Diddler- Q; You encountered it before it was fired?

Imbecile- A; SHHH Quiet. Combustion.

Diddler- Q; Can you describe what you're seeing now?

Imbecile- A; Well, it's out of the barrel or chute if you like.

Diddler- Q; and into the air?

Imbecile- A; Yes.

Diddler- Q; Is it faster than the nude iris?

Imbecile- A; No. It's much slower, like a spiraling football thrown by black and white reel players with leather helmets.

Diddler- Q; Ah ha, How does it look in flight?

Imbecile- A; MMM, I can really admire it's intricate mechanics, stealthy, glimmering and spinning. The Sun reflecting off her like sweat. Quite beautiful really.

Diddler- Q; Does it scatter, like maybe buckshot?

Imbecile- A; Yes.... and no.

Diddler- Q; Could you be more specific?

Imbecile- A; Well, I'd been explaining to myself that maybe it would open up, you know like one of those flags that say BANG! Or perhaps an umbrella or possibly the white banner of surrender or a snow hued gown the shade of cake. Something beautiful. You know?

Diddler- Q; So that was it then, the beauty?

Imbecile- A; No that wasn't it, I'm sure the beauty wasn't the point.

Diddler- Q; What was the point then?

Imbecile- A; Well, it appears that the point was on the front of the projectile.

Diddler- Q; I don't quite understand.

Imbecile- A; I'll never understand, but I've been bracing for this slug for quite some time.

Diddler- Q; Let me clarify this thing. You're telling me that you seen the shot coming?

Imbecile- A; That's right.

Diddler- Q; Why didn't you move out of the way?

Imbecile- A; Gun Powder.

Diddler- Q; What?

Imbecile- A; I Love Gun Powder

WHAT?
I Love Gun Powder
WHAT?
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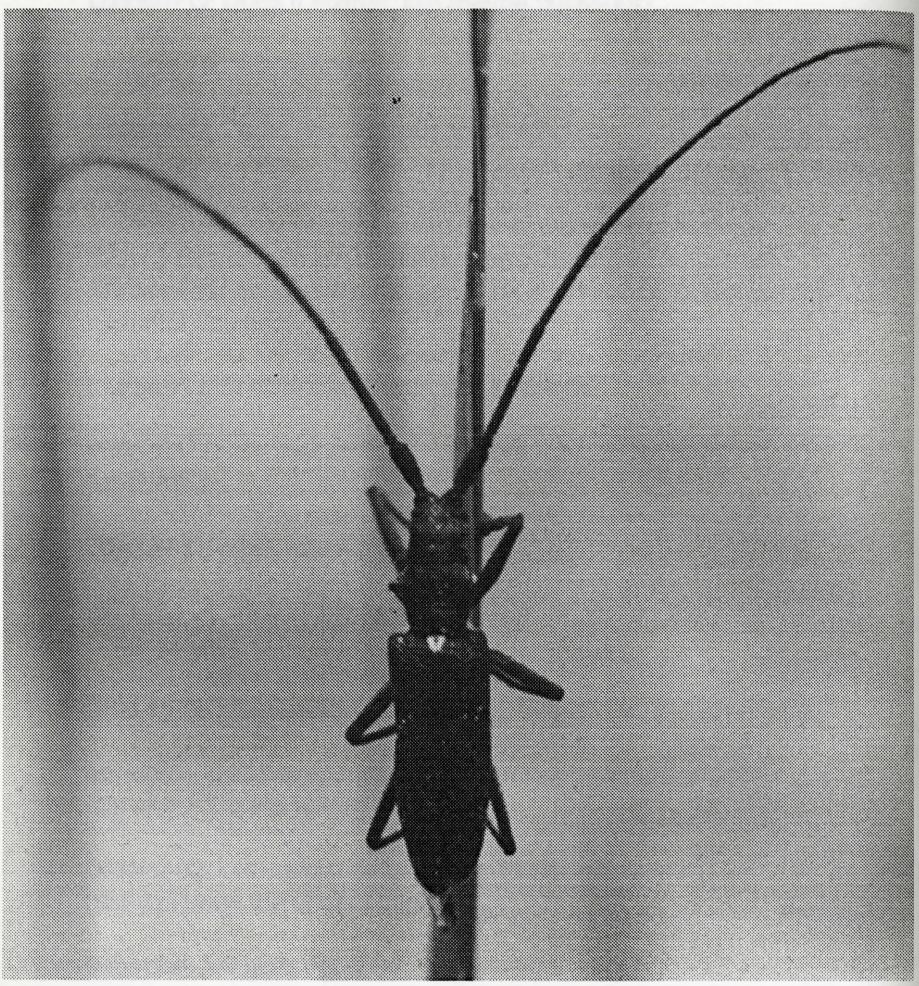


David M. Grant

Locale Wisdom: An Interview With Barry Lopez

Barry Lopez is a striking man. Not because of his stature, clothing, nor even his soft but deep voice. It's his eyes. I can't tell you what color they are, even though I sat barely two feet from him for an hour and a half one afternoon on the campus of Northern Arizona University. I saw his lecture later that night in the large assembly hall and then saw him the next morning in a small conference room at the University's union. His eyes stay with you, though. They penetrate. They look on you with a deep and powerful reverence. In some way, they bring you up to his level. Barry is rarely, if ever, deprecating towards others. They communicate to you that you have the power and the knowledge to be more than you are.

What follows is only a few sections of the talk I had with Mr. Lopez and four other men from the Flagstaff area. In the interest of brevity, I designate all interviewers with "I." I do not mean to de-humanize any of us, but rather to condense each of us to a single, amalgamated persona simply for the ease which it allows in conveying the discussion. All four of us had connections with a magazine or newspaper. When one said, "I'll just hang back for a little while and let these guys do the interviewing so I can talk to you as a person," Barry turned to the whole group with a very deadpan gaze and said, "You guys can talk to me as a person, too." Moments such as this never transfer well to writing and the whole talk cannot even translate to tape. You, dear reader, must come at this twice removed. But if I have done my job, you will not go away empty.

I: Are you on a tour in support of your new book (About This Life)?

BL: No. I don't like that idea that you can go and do the same thing over and over again. The people in the room create the talk and it

happens there. Then, people walk out the door and do whatever with it. They translate it into whatever. You know, it's just like reading a book. When you're finished reading a book, you put the book down and there's your son and you go over and... and you see him in a different way. You start to play with him or you bond or do something and you go out the door together. It's not obvious, but that happens because you read a book. The book wasn't about the boy or what they're going to do; it's about relationships... in such a way that a father can take that step.

It's the same with coming to hear someone speak. So somebody goes out and they say "I heard this guy speak, but I don't remember what his name was." But, that name is not important, you know? You're just feeding a set of relationships. So, to record it and have somebody listen to it... you can't record what happened. You cannot record what happened; I don't care what the technology is.

I: There's always more.

BL: Well, it's deeper. It's much deeper. The tape recorders have a skipper, you know? It just runs on the circuit. It picks up a couple of circuits and things, but there's no deeper operation.

I: Do you have plans for any future writings or travels at this point?

BL: I'm finishing a collection of short stories and trying to get things to fall into place so I can go back to Antarctica. I'm also collaborating with various other artists, musicians, dancers...

For me, the individual is not the genius. The genius resides in the community and it is made manifest in an individual. So, I like to see projects where it is impossible for an outsider to determine who made it. I think that's healthy when you have something beautiful and you just have to say, "Well, I don't know, we all just worked together and here it is."

I: Like the pottery you made near your home in Oregon?

BL: Yeah. The kiln, the big anogama kiln? Is that the piece you're referring to? That anogama kiln is a partner in everybody's work.

You really can't say who's responsible for what. That's exactly the deal.

That story, or a lot of that story, is about these things; about the meaning of community and being local and people like the guy I call Jack, you know, Richard. The genius that I see coming out of Dick/Jack is this awareness of the power of the local and what it means to use local materials, local clays and local wood to make pots that are used locally by local people and that the community just keeps turning on itself.

I: Given your travels, did that piece help you come back and maybe ground yourself?

BL: No, I don't think so. I think that, you know, I'm... some stories, for me, take ten or fifteen years before I can understand where it is going to go. And that was a story where the woman senior to me, the Wasco woman potter, I asked her, "I know you're firing these two big anogama kilns on the Coast Range. I'd like to go see one of those kilns." And she said, "You and Richard should meet." So, we met and I worked there for a couple of years trying to understand how to make the story.

People have said to me before, "How can you write so much about community and be away all the time?" Like I told this class this morning, the answer was right in front of me for thirty years. It was in front of my house. It's salmon.

The salmon, these fish, come up out of the gravel bars in February and they go down the McKenzie, down the Willamette, down the Columbia and then they're out in the ocean for three, four, five, six years and then they come back. That's how I work. I'm grounded in my home and I go a long ways out somewhere and I come back and that spawning is like the creating of an essay. And then I go out again. I haven't written many pieces that are anchored in Oregon partly because I want to remain invisible in my own home place.

I: At the end of Of Wolves and Men you said something like "The wolf doesn't have to be what we imagine him to be." I wondered if you could talk about that in relationship to your work with animals.

BL: Well, they're parallel cultures. They apparently are moving in the same spatial and temporal framework that we do, but that's our conceit. In order to control the world around us, we impose structures on it. That's what imperialism is, or the colonization of any landscape or people. It is the imposition of your own ideas of organization. It could be your social organization, religion, economics: these are all impositions on those who are different from us. You know where it has taken us in spite of the ideas during the Enlightenment such as the components of Western law that comes before the Enlightenment like a writ of *habeas corpus*: a basic understanding of individual rights with regard to imposition of law. We -- it has taken us a very long time, despite the documents that we generated at the end of the eighteenth century which were designed to give people certain, quote, "Unalienable rights." We had to develop language after that fact which said "This will also include blacks. This will also include women." So, we have a slow, difficult history of extending these ideas of the Enlightenment to other people and it's taken a long time to break down the colonial structure. I think we're on the verge of that with animals.

The irony here is that traditional peoples all over the world never abrogated their sense of moral connection to animals. These parallel cultures, world cultures, whatever it might be, are always incorporated into human culture. It's never seen as that which is different or which I have authority over or can control. So, here's our highly industrialized, highly intellectualized culture saying, "We will decide what women do - oh, okay, we can't do that anymore. We will decide what blacks do - oh, okay, we can't do that anymore. We will decide what animals do..."

So, we're right at this transitional stage where we've begun to realize that in order to have a, quote, "healthy" environment, you have to live with the environment - not impose your ideas on it.

I: You've talked a lot about culture and explored the connections between artistic or poetic research and social research. Would you consider yourself a social scientist in some way?

BL: No. People like me wander all over the world talking to other cultures, in essence saying, "What are you guys still holding on to that we've thrown away, that we might need?" The people I trust as

anthropologists who have had long-term contact with indigenous people are distinguished, I think, by two things. One is they do not want to join and know that they can't join. You can't be Navajo. You can't be wolf. You can't be Pindjindjarin. You can not be Yupik - Eskimo. You can't just go do that. You can't just overnight become Kikuyu.

What you can do is apprentice yourself to another way of knowing and then know better what it is you need. So, I see that characteristic jump out.

The second thing I see jump out with anthropologists I trust is that they know that senior people still have something worth listening to about basic human problems, like fidelity. So, I would say, that in my experience with anthropologists if you say, "So what do you think about this people that are not violently disturbed by Western economics," for example, what you see is people who have solved basic human difficulties which have to do with ownership or fidelity to a landscape or to each other. They've got all that worked out.

Now, that doesn't mean nobody makes mistakes. That just means they all know what to do and when they don't do it, they know they've made a mistake.

So, here we are. We're thoroughly confused about allegiance because we're victimized by a history of nationalism; "my country right or wrong." We're struggling, despite our so-called wealth, with very basic issues. We're very articulate when it comes to talking about how to be in power, how to take over, or how to run the show. But, when it comes to "How are you in love?" then all the tittering stops, you know? And you realize you're not talking about romantic love or some silly idea. At the very least in Western culture, you're talking about two thousand years of pretty serious religious history, for all of its flaws. Here comes this guy who says, "I really think there are only two things to pay attention to here. One is being in love and the other is forgiving." That's the New Testament. Whether you're a Christian or not makes no difference. It's a very powerful idea in Western history. What does it mean to be in love? What does it mean to be in love with a place; a reciprocal relationship with a place; to love and be loved with a place, with a group of people and a community? With each other?

Then, if you really understand that, you see that the most

radical thing a person can do today is to be local. It's easy to be international, you know, this business of being part of the world community; the global this, that and the other thing. The only people I ever hear talking about global enterprises are people who have something to sell.

The global village is a Coca-Cola invention. But, people who are concerned about the fate of their children understand what it means to be local and they can't be seduced by the thought that they're living nowhere. "Come live somewhere." They already know they are somewhere. You can't help but travel in parts of rural Africa or Australia or wherever and sense that even though you're out in the bush, somewhere that's remote, those people are right in the center of the world and they behave like they are. They're thoroughly and beautifully local.

I: When you live in a well-defined culture, you have generations of people behind you who have worked out things like how to grieve or to be married or how to interact with your environment and how to die. All these things are worked out for you, so you're cradled from birth to grave in a body of meaning; a mass of ideas about how to live day to day. But, in our American culture, we are bombarded with TV and newspapers, etc. and rather than a body of meaning that is complete and interconnected, we have cultural shards that are thrown at us. We have pop icons, whether it's the right shoes to wear, the latest lingo, or whatever.

BL: Well, that's what a consumer society is. The rate of change per unit of time in the traditional culture compared with the rate of change per unit of time in a so-called advanced culture is vastly different. In the same way that a person on the 461st lap of the track is sucking wind, that is what we're doing all the time, because everyday we have to evolve new behaviors. Not with regard to people, but with regard to products.

Consumer societies, like ours, are based on social disintegration. You can't have a consumer society and social integration. You have to have a high rate of divorce, for example, in order to make the society work. First, you have got to take social units apart all the time to create the consumers for products. Then, you take the family apart by perverting the notion of individual rights to

such an extent that you train young children that their rights are being infringed if they don't have their own TV, VCR, phone and all this. So, that's how you sell them there. Then, you go to the individual person and you create the sensibility about clothing that tells you unless you have this kind of shoes or this kind of thing, you're not valued. So, you subdivide the individual, you subdivide the family, you take the family apart to create these social units while kids ping pong back and forth between two fully equipped houses.

The things that socially integrate like sharing and loving are anathema to a consumer society. What you're talking about is affection for people who love each other and whose culture does not change dramatically over units of time and who take care of the things that create social integration. We don't do that in our society. We create these separate, consuming entities. The society is frantic because all the energy that should be going into being with each other is going into figuring out relationships with a lot of things.

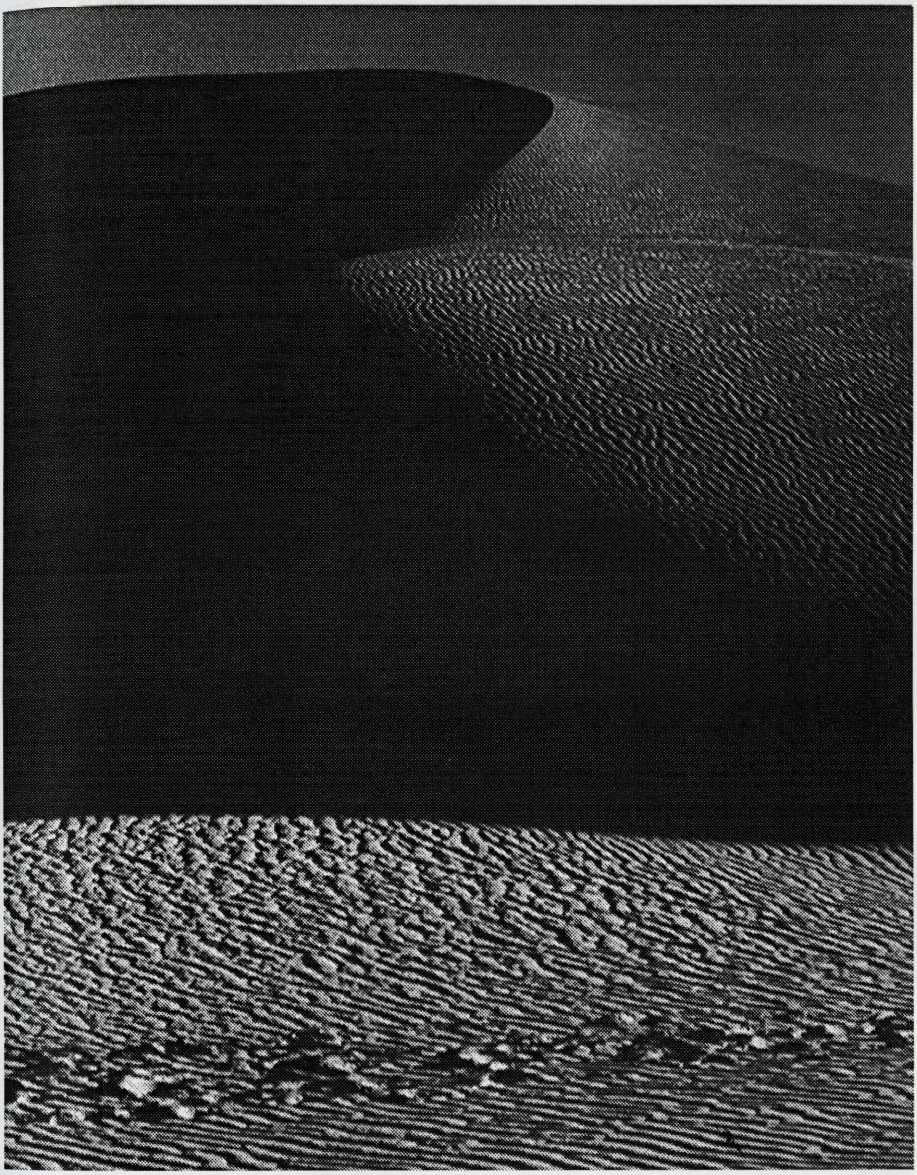
There's a German word, *konsumterror*, which refers to the frame of mind that you have in a supermarket when you're looking at fifty-five different brands of salad dressing. There's a terror that you feel because you don't know which one to relate to. So, at the end of the day, you've spent more time deciding which salad dressing would be the right one rather than about the fate of your soul. So, it's no wonder you think you're going mad and you're angry at everything because you are focused on the wrong things.

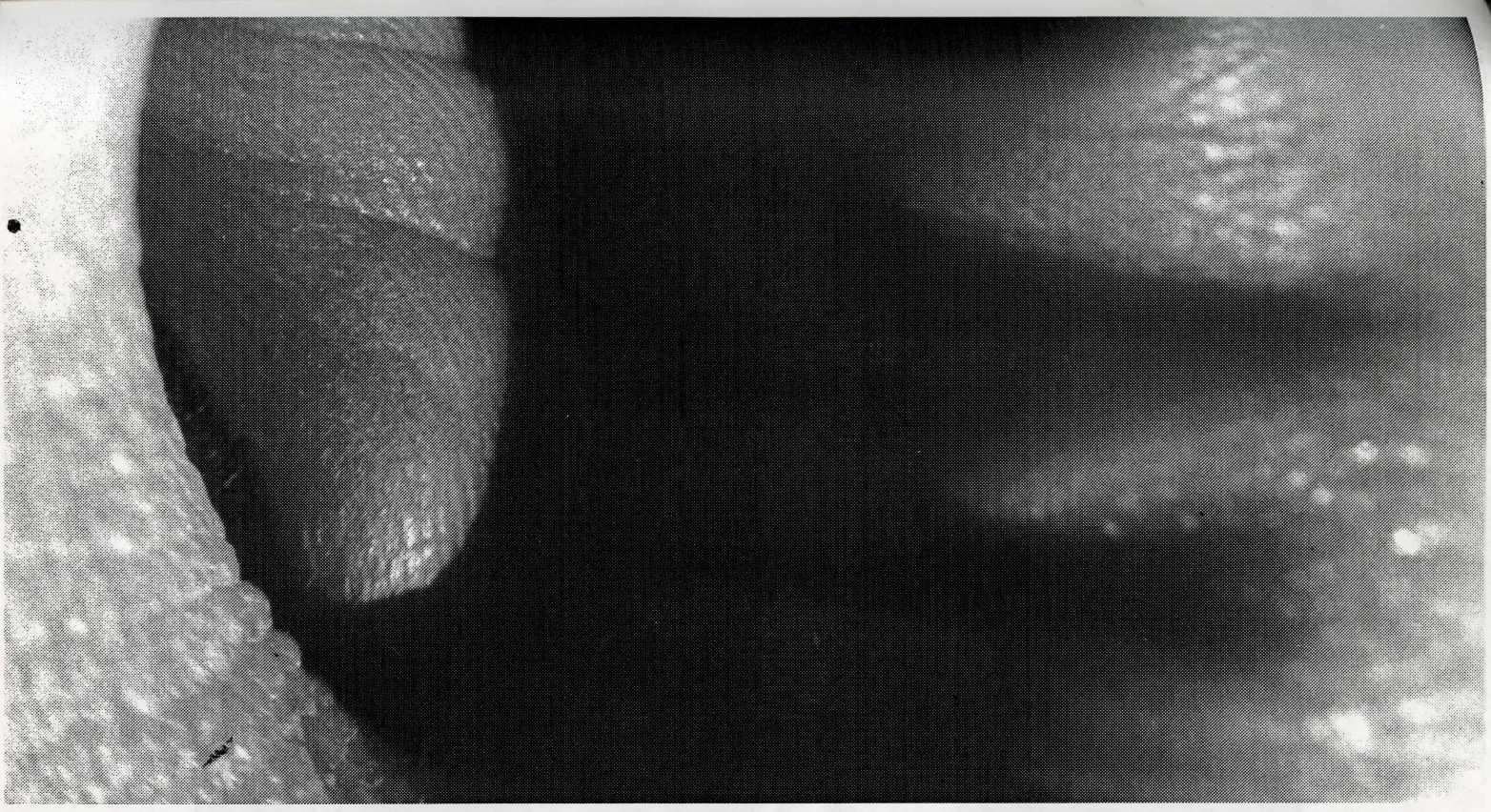
I: Yeah, even though your life is very comfortable, it lacks something.

BL: I would say it just looks comfortable. It's like a television commercial. You know that film, "Thelma and Louise?" There's a scene in there where the police come to Thelma's house and her husband is watching television. He is sitting there in his underwear, watching a football game or something and he stands up when these people come to the door and they tell him that his wife and another woman have killed somebody and are robbing gas stations. The actor does this... I'm sure in the moment, it's why actors are actors... he did not know who he was. He became a character of a situation comedy on television and did an overstated double take to

the information, trying to affect the way that he though was proper to behave in the light of this information. And, here's the genius. Doing it, he stepped backward and barefoot into a pizza that was sitting on the floor. We laugh at that, but what the actor is showing you is that one of the reasons Thelma, or Louise, I forget which, is on the road is because the man she is living with is working out his relationships with other people according to what he sees on a television program.

You can hear this all the time in restaurants. You overhear conversations that are product oriented and they often play out the kind of exchanges that take place on television. There's not the beautiful exegesis of a fragile idea that contains the food and the place and the air. That just doesn't occur.





Thin Air

Double Aught

***Thin Air*, Issue No.8**

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Thin Air

Contents 1999

Non Fiction

Art

Under Many Layers

Today
the cop pulls into the other lane
blind to the male hitchhiker
on the highway's edge.

Yesterday
my sister stuck her thumb into the air
arrest/handcuffs/jail cell.
The same officer,
hands itchy at his sides, watched
two female attendants strip her,
conduct a body search.

Last week
the girl next door
came home her blouse torn.
Half the football team,
their chest hairs hidden
under protective gear,
had to see
her soft new breasts.

This evening
Emergency Room
coffee-jittery doctors
watch a western on TV.
Heart attack victim
two doctors go grumbling
hate to miss Poncho
in the bar scene.
An hour later
a rape

eight doctors rush
to probe the labia
of a terrified fifteen-year-old.
The Cisco Kid draws his gun
shoots the bad guy
in black and white
in an empty room.

My sister and the girl next door
meet the fifteen-year-old
at the Women's Center.
On Sunday afternoons
they sit near the wood stove
wearing too many layers of clothes
trying not to feel
naked.

Take A Rib

If I believed in God
I'd give it back
rather be a hunchback, or even
shorter (if that's possible)
rather be off balance, left
breast bigger than my right,
than owe you something.

You men really take
the cake: never
had a woman inside you
but let me say
I know what it feels like
to have you inside me
even better
I know how to make another brain,
another heart, a penis even
right in my own belly.
My sons are proof
your mothers are proof
so cut the crap
stand in my spike heels
strap on my Wonder Bra
you could use some cleavage.

Jojo's Mama's Son

... and grasped Jojo's Mama's shoulder something like a good doctor should, but not exactly, and she cried and wailed and her fingernails cut into her palms. Those half-moon scars on her hands--I still see them floating in the crumby milk after my cereal in the ties of bony accountants, in the plumpness of my own stomach sometimes. Even when Jojo finally woke up, as they were removing bits of glass from his nose and forearms, I saw them in his face too. Minutes stretched into moments and I paced or pretended to read *Time*, seeing them maybe in Reagan's hairline. Uncle took out a flask and filled her coffee cup. A little spilled on the dirty floor.

They used to get on to me about leaving the TV on but I needed the drone. A year later Jojo still couldn't walk straight; he had a cane that Uncle made from a limb he found in the park. He glued a stolen eight ball at the end, for decoration, to make it seem like a fashion statement and not a cripple's tool. These were the days I first learned to play with myself. There was nothing left to do but take it out and watch it come to life, knowing to be caught was to be called jerk-off. Retarded people do it too much, assholes too little. Sometimes I wished it would go away.

And there are things you can't do with it. My friend AJ didn't know, didn't care, We went to the rink and he would gather the girls ten to fifteen and show them his eleven year old tool and some would giggle and a couple, just a couple of them--would put their finger to their mouths. No one took him up on it when he asked if they wanted to touch it, until one little girl with ponytails and knee socks walked over and rubbed her nail against the tip. Then she mashed it between thumb and forefinger-just the tip. She squeezed over and over to "Another One Bites the Dust"'until AJ had to lean on the table for support and she sniffed her hand and went to wash it.

But I wanted to ask Jojo all about it because he was older and he was supposed to know stuff like that--to know it backwards because he was almost fifteen and I was only eleven. And he had promised me he would tell me all about it. He would read to me from the tattered *Penthouse Letters* he had swiped from B Dalton, his voice steady and smooth until he got to speed bump words like "cunt" or "pussy" or "bush." Even then it seemed he only hesitated to savor the word like it brought back some memory.

He put the magazine down and looked at me. "So, you like girls yet?"

"I think I do."

He looked at me like I had let him down. "There ain't no thinking to it. Either you know you like them or you know you don't."

But he didn't listen as I tried to explain what I meant. He got up and went to the mirror to make sure his hair was okay. He sprayed some Polo on his neck and turned around. I had always wanted to look like him. He had blond hair that curled a little and grey-blue eyes, but I was redheaded with ugly green eyes that only my grandmother liked. He wasn't chubby anymore either, like I was. To put it into baseball terms he was a star center fielder and I was a catcher riding the bench. Except for that limp. He couldn't play ball in school that year. Week by week the limp would get better, only to get worse again for no reason. The weather grew cold the first winter after his accident and he complained about the pain until his Mama took him to the doctor for some pills. He spent the whole winter doped up but still complaining. And when spring came he gave me the rest of his pills–twenty or thirty of 'em–and told me never to give them to him again, no matter how much he begged.

For a whole month he would beg. He offered me not only his tattered *Penthouse Letters*, but all the pornography he owned. Each day he would flash a new skin mag in front of my face and say, "It's yours, they're all yours for just one of those pills. One." It took him three months to stop asking me. I think now he was testing me, seeing exactly what kind of a cousin I was to him. He could've had his Mama take him back to the doctor, but he didn't. He wanted to know how far I'd go to keep my promise.

I wanted to break it, and I would have if I hadn't sold those pills a week after he gave them to me, before the stakes grew so high. It wasn't the magazines either, it was his face, something

about his face when he would get up after sitting for a long time in front of the TV. I never told him what I did with those pills, and once he didn't need them anymore he never asked.

Late at night we'd get together and he'd tell me about which friends of his were doing it with which girls in the school. They were lucky bastards one and all, we agreed. He loved to tell me about Fishhook Wiles who got his nickname in the locker room. He was popular with the girls, but inept.

"I don't know," he told me one Friday night, "Fishhook's mind must be as bent as his member."

"What'd he do?"

"He just can't tell a girl to touch it. He's got to tell 'em exactly how to touch it, with which hand and which fingers of that hand. How much pressure. Charlene Williams told one of the guys it was like backing up a semi: 'Okay, a little to the left. Not so hard. Watch it. Okay, slow down,dammit. Watch it. It's too hard, ease up. A little to the right. Hold on, hold on. Let's just start it again.'"

We laughed about Fishhook but we both envied him. I used to always see him talking with some girl or another, a different one each week. I wouldn't follow girls in my own grade, instead I'd follow him just to watch. I memorized the way he threw his head back when he laughed and tried to emulate it in the school cafeteria. While he got giggles and soft pinches on the biceps, I got weird looks and rolled eyes. But I noticed Jojo too. He was never too far from Fishhook and he must've been learning too. He would lean against Fishhook's car and tap his cane on the pavement. He would talk to his share of girls, but they never reacted in the same way they did with Fishhook. Jojo got loose hugs; Fishhook got soft kisses on the cheek.

Jojo didn't seemed thrilled with his hugs, but I would've died for one--even the noncommittal hugs from girls who didn't want you to think they liked you. I would see one of the girls hug Fishhook nice and tight and I would put myself in her arms, feel her body squeeze into mine with anxiety. My fingers would trace her ribs through the thickest of sweaters. I'd smell her hair as it tickled my face. I'd wind my finger through one of the belt loops on her jeans and lift, lift, lift.

But I was too immersed in my own erotic fantasies to know that my cousin's sex life had turned from gold to shit. I had thought

he would always have the magic. He still had the blond curls and the blue eyes, but he never smiled like he used to. Everyone noticed that. When he had the pills be could fake it, but when the pain struck him he wasn't fun to be around. Our late night talks ended.

I was always stuck at home on the weekend, since Uncle didn't like for me to spend the night at my friend's house very often. I spent the time reading or watching TV. For a while after the accident I would stay up late talking with Jojo. Then he started going out again and aside from an occasional night at AJ's I was alone on Fridays.

One Friday I had snuck into the den where Uncle kept his Playboys. He and my aunt had gone to sleep early and I was restless. I was bored to death of the five girly magazines Uncle had, but the thrill of sneaking a look at them had a hold on me. I was reading the jokes and trying to understand them when I heard the glass break.

I turned off my flashlight and froze. The only way out of the den was to go past the front door, and I could see the eight ball of Jojo's cane poking through. Then his hand reached in and unlocked the deadbolt. Jojo staggered in--Southern Comfort in hand--just in time to hear his father yell, "I've got a shotgun, you asshole!"

I was in the dark so Jojo couldn't see me, and I wasn't going to get myself into that mess. So I stayed real quiet and hid myself behind the rocking chair.

"Jojo? What the hell. . . "

Uncle came from the bedroom. I couldn't see him but I could see the end of the shotgun poking through the doorway.

"Hey, man."

"Where'd ya get that booze? And why the hell'd you break out the damn window?"

"I forgot my key. It's cold outside." Jojo's voice was a little slurred, but the liquor made him sound older.

"You get your drunk ass to bed. We're going to have a talk in the morning."

"I'm fuckin' sick of talkin' with *you*."

Jojo pointed his cane in the direction of Uncle. The shotgun dipped out of sight. They stood like that for an awful long time. The only sound was Jojo's foot scraping occasionally through the glass

on the floor.

The second he dropped the cane his father was on him, beating him with the butt of the shotgun. I could hear Jojo's mama softly begging her husband to stop and he did. But Jojo's face had been pressed down into the broken glass. Jojo's mama wailed again and for a while all I could see were the half-moon scars on Jojo and his mama.

I stayed in the den until the morning came, then I made my way to my bedroom and shut the door. Jojo woke me up about noon, his face pulpy and red. I couldn't let him know I had seen it, I had to let him have his pride in telling the story his way.

"What happened?" I asked.

"My pop whacked me with his rifle," he said, "I came home drunk and busted out a window."

"He whacked you for that?"

"No. He whacked me 'cus I smacked him in the shin with my cane. I would've done more, but he had that shotgun of his out. I was scared of gettin' my nuts blown off, but that's about all I was scared of."

I played along because he had to practice his story, to rehearse it on me so Fishhook and the guys would buy it. When Jojo lied he remembered it exactly. He never got his story mixed up.

After that night the little talks that Jojo and Uncle had became more common. I hadn't paid much attention to them before, but suddenly it seemed they were in the den every day with the door closed. Jojo would come out with a sweaty face and pretend that nothing happened in there, that it was nothing to him. His face would be red, his eyes wide and blank. He'd come into the kitchen where I was sitting with his mother and slap me on the shoulder. I guess it was his way of saying he could take it.

That dinner table become as silent as prayer. Jojo would disappear into his room from the time he got home from school until the next morning. The worry took its toll on my aunt, and she started to drink more and more, earlier and earlier. Uncle tried to keep his spirits up, but he always ended up talking about how great my dad had been to him. When he talked about my dad his eyes always looked up and mine always down. Uncle liked to talk about how dad rode his motorcycle with me right behind him when I was

two or so. And he never forgets to remind me that it was my dad who taught me how to play chess.

But I don't remember him teaching me the rules to chess, it was so long ago. It feels like I've just always known how to play, I feel at ease in front of a chessboard. I taught AJ how to play and we would while away rainy days with a game or two. Jojo never took an interest until after the incident with his father, then he would notice us in the den and watch from the doorway. Before long he was over my shoulder, examining the board with one hand rubbing the beard he was trying to grow. I never knew he understood the rules until one day he grunted as I moved and I realized too late that I had blundered away the game. He never said a word when he watched us, but I would always make a point to say something to him.

AJ and I began to play every day after school and Jojo always watched in silence, always over my shoulder. AJ got a chess computer for Christmas and had begun to improve dramatically. Still Jojo only grunted occasionally when he didn't like my move, twirling a captured pawn between his fingers. When Jojo grunted a lot I lost, but when he was silent I won.

AJ and I were near the end of a game when Jojo grunted loudly, and then knocked over my king with a thump. I stood it back up, but he turned and kicked at the board sending the pieces flying. He went into his room and closed the door until morning.

When he came out he had this look on his face that reminded me of the picture of my father I have by my bed. They had the same eyes. Eyes that had looked at a problem and made some sort of decision. They weren't indecisive eyes. Both he and my father had those grey-blue eyes so unlike mine. Their faces were exclamation points, not question marks. I stopped playing chess, told AJ that I had gotten bored with the game.

The talks between Jojo and Uncle started to last longer, to last late into the night so it was just me and Jojo's mama eating dinner together. She would sit there and smile at me, say what a good looking young man I was becoming. She wasn't the only one who noticed. When I talked to the girls at school, they would giggle. Some I could feel following me with their eyes. It was good to be watched.

So AJ and I spent more time at the roller rink, more time

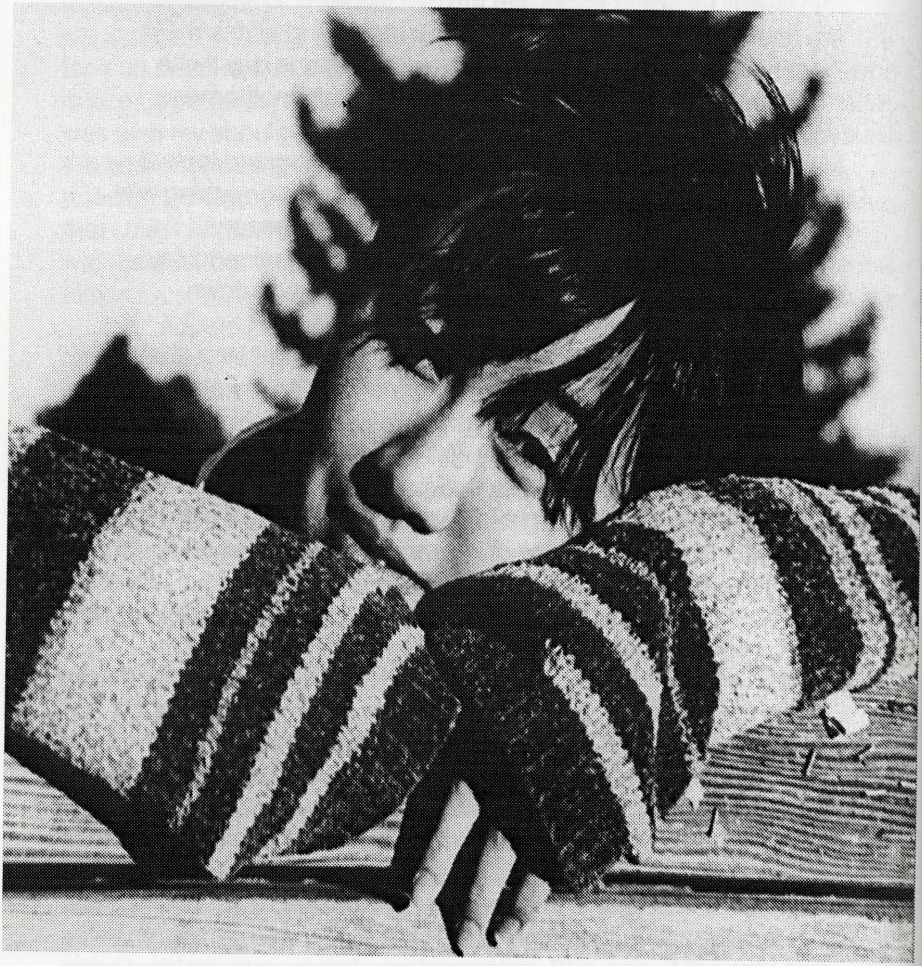
trying to figure out what it was about Missy Kirkman's eyes that we liked so damn much. We started getting our haircuts at the mall because that's what the older kids did. We started to bum cigarettes, and steal our own porno magazines.

Jojo used Uncle's shotgun. He did it in the bathtub because it was the courteous thing to do, I guess. Somehow, in all the mess, I ended up being closer to my aunt. She asked me one day if she could call me her son, and I said yes. There wasn't another word I could say.

After Jojo was gone, Uncle would say something and look at me for a minute. I think he was expecting me to say something that Jojo would have said. But I kept my eyes to my applesauce. Sometimes he'd run his thick hands through my red hair and say what a good kid I was. It was his turn for his eyes to go down whenever Jojo's mama mentioned her dead son.

Fishhook came to the funeral and told a joke about Jojo that made some of the girls smile while they cried. When they asked how I was doing I looked at my shoes and tried to look like I needed a hug. Truth is, I needed a hug then worse than ever.

Poor Jojo's mama. She sat by the casket, her fists clenching and unclenching in rhythm with her crying. Half-moon scars dug by dirty fingernails still fill my eyes, make me think about the night at Methodist Hospital, when the doctor came in...



Sepia

I.
My mother sits impassively
on the green park swing.
Her eyes stare out
blueness
while my baby teeters beside her
on the other swing.

I push her; I push him.

Their hair blows unconcernedly.
When Noah laughs and calls out

"Gramma! Gramma!"

I feel my life revealed

beneath each open palm.

Back and forth

Legs leave ground

Toes point to sky

Grips hold the reins
which free...

Mom's three pairs of socks, layered, scrunched,
torn on each narrow foot
pants twisted, struggled on, inside out

so that her pockets hang naked like muted tongues
unable to open or carry anything.

I watch her swing back and forth

back and forth

as storm clouds threaten
as wind grows thick and sure

and Noah swings back and forth

back and forth

close to me.

I kiss his chin;

he screeches his delight

while Mom's chin cascades

echoes

falling limp

its residue of beauty

once firm and sure, her lips
once full of words for me
now line themselves

with things

unsaid.

II.

I wear the jacket we made together:

simply stitched cotton,
quilted,

patched

remembering lessons
on embroidery,
on button holes
sewn tight;

final solutions of applique;
opacity of yarn
and thread

now hanging
unknotted
worn
barely holding
the cotton
shreds
dirty
old
stained

but I dare not wash its frail life.
I dare not let it fade yet more
for fear the colors' bleeding,
for fear the drowning dyes,
would run and merge completely—

pooling together like mud;

all that color
once bright and bold,

leaving
leaving
a whole world
sepia now.

Hail, and Well Met

My father insisted our family name
descended from *Sieg Heil.*
His jaw jutted and clamped around the words,
hard delicious nuts in a Landgraf's feast.
I winced when his right arm snapped up
like a uniformed trooper in a grainy film.

I shadowed him on his morning walks,
terrified he'd bark the words and, before
I could trap his arm, thrust out his hand
at some astonished stranger who couldn't know
this man imagined Bavarian knights at crossroads
saluting each other with honest, open hands.

But he spoke only to friends, greeted them
with waves and clasps, words I ignored until
one day I caught a familiar salutation:
grüss Gott he'd bade them, trapping the glottals deep
in his throat, rolling each sibilant *s*
and keen *t,* so none could tell whether

he'd blessed them or coughed. He tipped me his secret
smile. I couldn't help grinning back
through their puzzled silence, knowing then
I'd stumble into my own love of strange
words: how, as you practice the tricks of their
saying, you raise a thousand buried voices,

their resonant, undeniable lives echoing
through the bone and supple flesh of speech,
rehearsing murder, murmuring benediction.

Dust Ia Voyage

There are things you do as a boy that ain't never the same. Running into this Rosalyn night is one of them, feeling your legs pumping, the wind pushing in your ears, bare feet digging into this unforgiving soil that's grown more swamps and farmers' gravestones than crop. Good thing Daddy wasn't a farmer; my life would have been really bad. As is, I got seven years. Seven years for the night in the liquor store with Stevie Ray whose eyes never met yours and his daddy's .45. Seven years because I didn't give a damn about the old man, I just wanted the bleeding to stop. Seven years, of the iron bars and rusty pipes of Angola State Prison, stripped of everything, but the green plastic bee-bee maze my Daddy gave me when I was eight. It kept me company for those seven years, as though to remind me of the ring of a .45 casing, echoed off a shelf of Jack Daniel's. Like the limp God left Jacob. Like my father saying I told you so.

My thumb pressing the bee-bee, dragging it through the twists and turns, remembering the first time I felt its cold steel. Daddy was big and I was waiting for the anger to come and the pain to start.

"Keep it to remind yourself of the truth of life, Boy." The whiskey of Daddy's breath thick as swamp moss between us. He said the makers fucked up. Said you could never get to the end, only go so far 'til you had to turn back. Here in Rosalyn, the gravel of its back roads digging into the soles of my feet, I believe him. High grass fields and the swamps stretching ahead and the seven years and Angola behind me, thumb working the confined bee-bee, turning familiar corners, making familiar mistakes. Damn him because he was right. But then how come, there's this comfort edging stubborn into me, yet even that is taint in Rosalyn, like the rot of the porch, that creaking in the night pulls you to dreams of

the swamps.

Walking barefoot, shoes back at the porch, like the boy as once familiar with these fields as the back of Daddy's hand. Toes spread out, knowing the freedom only one can after seven years of prison polished black shoes. Crab grass dragging across calloused feet and the sting of roadside gravel still warm from a Louisiana afternoon. The night wherein some road sign reads U.S. Federal 71, Welcome to Rosalyn, Population 531.

The metal bead slides through the channel skirting the edges. A millimeter or less to freedom, to its own piece of night air. On many nights, in the thralls of fever did I think it would break free, only to awake the next morning, finding it flung across the cell, face up, waiting for me. Always waiting.

"We're leaving tomorrow." I told Jimmy three weeks after his mother died.

"Why we leave?"

"Cause your mamma's dead and I can't find a job."

"Why not you go and I stay?"

"Cause you're a retard and I swore to your mamma to take care of you. So get your stuff." Having Jimmy with me wasn't my choice; he was blood, and there is some weight that goes with that. I told his mamma I'd keep an eye on him, as knowing she was dying. She'd been kind taking me in after Angola.

"Mamma say, I not retard. She say I just slow and to God, wise man and the idiot they no different."

"Well she's dead and what's God got to do with me." The next morning we took his mamma's '75 Ford pickup with a pack of gum and a tape of Willie Nelson singing German folk songs and headed south.

Heading for the gulf that day, we never made it. Rather here I am, a bit outside Rosalyn. A bit too close. My palms are sweaty, the night muggy feeling it covering your flesh with the remains of a short night shower, leaving the air heavy like bodies too close. The dust hangs then settles, caking my cracked-skin feet. My steps kicking it up, the road spring--shower dusty.

"Mamma calls that 'Dus-aw-voi-oge," Jimmy told me on a night we took a walk like this. He meant 'dust la voyage,' cause she was cajun and spoke in broken French. Her accent was thick and deep, like the Mississippi, like Jimmy's eyes. He's my height and

those eyes are so large, sometimes I think nothing will ever fill them, as though I'll be dragged into them like a grand night sky. A sky like tonight, the stars clear and thunderheads far off to the south. Daddy told me even stars eventually lose their light, I didn't believe him 'til the summer I made love to Mary Genkons. The filter moist with the night's perspiration and the sweat of my lips reminds me of that summer. Of her. A good Baptist girl, she sucked me so long I thought I'd die lying there, the stars losing their light one by one. When she was done, I returned the favor.

"I sing the body electric, the armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them," she said over and over, 'til she flowed like milk spilt on the kitchen counter. Slow and constant, that way an old man bleeds. Laying there, holding each other against the night and Rosalyn itself. I told her I loved her and promised we'd leave here together.

The bee-bee spirals back toward the center of the maze, greased with palm sweat. Smooth, like the way Stevie Ray slid around the pool tables of The Crawdad, eyeing your shots as though he'd know everything by the way the nine-ball was sunk or the felt was ripped. The Crawdad, a gin hole with rickety boards, and faded sign sticking from the swamp like it should never've crawled out. Stevie Ray wasn't much better the night he told me "I like you boy." After seeing me lose a five on a hustle of cutthroat. Saying boy, the way Daddy did. I should have known, should have known when Daddy liked Stevie Ray and Mary didn't. And so, I never told her of the liquor store or the .45 he lifted from his father's dresser before he left home for the last time. Never saw the point as both us boys grow up in Rosalyn, both felt the madness of the small town, knew the fever of the walls pushing in, touching our flesh. Both wondered how the street lamps would look from the highway, pinpoints in the rearview mirror. Lining it tended to put the fear of God into people or turn them to a life of crime.

"I'm not one for fearin' anyone, includin' God, 'cause God is the money you got Boy." Stevie Ray said the night he first mentioned the liqour store and how bright the lights of Baton Rouge appeared from the highway, teeth turning pink from the neon beer sign. He'd talked as though it was a sure thing, like walking in, they'd hand us the money in the till. He said it so sure, the way mother told me she'd come back that night when I was four. He had

it set, knew when the money went to bank, and the truck came with stock from Baton Rouge. He showed me the .45, sleek lines as black as his hair. It was like saying 'yes' holding it in my hand, letting my finger brush the trigger. Stevie Ray would carry it the night of the liquor store. It was just for the scare, he said, it'd be empty anyhow and no one would know different. No one. No one in the liquor store. No one in Rosalyn, not even God. And so it was, Rosalyn with its white picket borders, 531 people including the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, all sitting on a short stretch of U.S. Federal 71 without a clue.

Those memories reach out like creeper vines to pull me in, seemin' the closer I come to the main street of Rosalyn. Somewhat like telling Jimmy of this place after turning back south, telling him of the white chapel on Church Street, of Lee High School and Mary, but not those nights in the bed of her father's, or Stevie Ray. It was somewhat like confessing sin.

"Mamma say God love small town people cause Cane made the first cities and he bad," was all Jimmy had to say, chin up like having the right answer. I had nothing to follow, so we drove in silence for the rest of the day, I kept wondering if Jimmy might be right. Finally deciding he was, but with three ones and a quarter shoved in the bottom of my wallet, I figured it wasn't much of a God so it didn't matter.

Many a time, Jimmy seemed to shudder, like fighting an itch he'd not scratch. Four hundred twenty-three miles, only let me know he was crying, thinking that my eyes were on the road and not him. He never cries when it rains, he just sits staring. Watches the drops snaking across the window collecting each other as they touch, until it can't hold anymore and breaks up where the glass meets steel. Calls it his comet game. At night with the headlights on the freeway the drops look like fireflies. Daddy once told me that when the fireflies head south you know it's hot as hell in Roaly. Hot as hell, how fitting. Yet when Jimmy does cry, he does it quiet, like the calm that falls over the lake after the ducks have been flushed and shot. The way Daddy would sit before the anger took him and the alcohol brought him down. But like the storms that'd come off the gulf, there's not much you can trust.

Thunder, off to the south, still distant but closer. I know the storm is coming. Know it will hit before day breaks. Know the way

the tires take to the pavement slick with rain. Like I know the maze, the way the bee-bee moves just a bit faster than your fingers, know the corners, the turns, the spirals. I can feel the moisture in the air, increasing, like Jimmy's comets, soon it won't hold. Like a mind drowning in memories. Tomorrow the dust will be mud, sucking on tires, drowning them like the deep parts of the swamp.

Daddy was like the swamp; his anger was the peat gas igniting in the dry summers and his sorrow the sink mud that could pull a man down. I can still remember the nights, when I'd awake to hear the wailing, the long cries that seeped from the swamp, and I cannot say, even today, if it was the swamp or Daddy. I'd lie awake wondering if he was lost in the swamp or the swamp was lost in him. But soon enough, he'd be home and I'd be bleeding. My Daddy was also the whiskey, the way the pints would rest in his back pocket, the way his hand would strangle the neck of a bottle. That's what lived on after mother never came back. That was the beatings, which left me bloody. That was the grin that came across the courthouse the day I was sentenced, the kind a cat gives after leaving a nest empty. That was my Daddy. He never talked of God except when the car wouldn't start or the whiskey ran out. I don't talk much of Daddy to others cause in memory he is one dark and endless night filled with breathless terrors. So Jimmy didn't hear much of Daddy, nor did he hear of Angola, his mamma said he need not know of such things, but he does. He knows, and for the most part he lets it be. For the most part.

"The place you was before mama's place was bad."

"What's it to you?"

"You always stare off, an' mumbles in yours sleep."

Feeling those soft brown eyes staring at me. The sun high and baring down like those big eyes, super heating the truck cab. We'd only been on the road a day and a half, the gum was finished and the old deck had eaten Willie two miles out of town.

"Your mamma didn't teach you nothing if you're asking something rude like that. Anyhow, it's none of your business."

"No, she teach me a lot. She say a man soul be heavy when they're bad dreaming."

"What do you know? You're just a retard." The radio barely on, I heard the weatherman saying something of building pressure and that small storms shoul break by early evening. The sun so

high, the truck so hot I couldn't think of storms blowing in off the gulf with its fading fog lines and broken divider. Stretching out in its best light, looking well beaten.

"No. No, you pull over."

"What's your problem?"

"You pull over now." Grabbing the wheel, pushing over, sending the truck across a lane of traffic into the gravel side strip, the brakes squealed. The truck stuttered in the gravel sending a thick cloud of dust into the air and once we were stopped Jimmy was out the door. The engine died with the stress and I followed quickly.

"What the fuck, Jimmy? What the hell did you do that for?"

"You not see me. You not see Jimmy, you see retard but me smart too. Me smart too."

"Whatever. Get back in the damn truck. What do you think your mama would say if she were alive?"

"She'd say Jimmy smart too." With that he went dead silent, walked a few yards up the road, plopping down, staring off into the distant field and the barb-wired fence that ran with the highway.

"Come on Jimmy get your ass over here." But he didn't move, staring into the distance like he was looking for something. I even tried to move him, but, being big for eighteen, he just pushed me off. So I smoked a half a pack waiting for him to make up his mind. He sat there for an hour, then got up, brushing himself off and we left still heading south. The silence seemed to make it hotter.

"We're low on gas. The next stop I'll pull in, here's money, get us something." Finding a gas pit, dirt windows and bulky pumps. Jimmy got two sodas and a roll of donuts, and I filled the tank.

"How much is it going to be?"

"Ten even," said a cool drawl from the man at the cash register. Curly brown hair to his shoulders and deep brown eyes. "What you running from?"

"What?"

"Well by the bags in the back and the retard I'd say you're running from something." Those deep brown eyes looking deeper into me.

"What's your problem, man?" I paid him in ones and left.

The rest of the ride I was left with, Jimmy for once was quiet. We drove south a day and a half more. I don't know why I turned back. If I wasn't so stubborn, I might say it was the man at the gas station, the way his cool drawl tangled in my head now lacking Jimmy's babble. And if I wasn't as good at avoiding the truth, I might even say it was Daddy and the letter I got before me and Jimmy left Baton Rouge. After a short stop at his mamma's grave, Jimmy seemed back to normal so we filled the tank and headed west. The drive to Rosalyn was a long one, the old truck only allowed us a hundred miles a day anymore and she'd overheat, but Jimmy filled the time with questions: How does a train run? What does a girl smell like? Where does paper come from? What other time was left, I added in some of my own stories, filling in a few of the blanks, but keeping the rest for myself. Sometimes when there wasn't any thing to talk about I'd let him play with the maze.

For Jimmy the maze was just a game, it didn't hold the same demons that it held for me. He'd try to move the bee-bee around with his thumb, trying to mimic my grim look, but it wasn't as familiar to him. It wasn't a part of him. He'd make the mistakes I'd learned long ago to avoid, tracing along the spiral that led no where, oblivious to the mistake. But each time we'd stop for the night, he'd hand it back to me with the same calm smile.

"Thanks Mac."

"Whatever Jimmy." Taking the small plastic toy back from him and shoving it into my pocket.

We arrived in Rosalyn on a Thursday, and true to character and the season, it was hot as hell. Avoiding main town we made it quick to the old shack out past the Reed farm. Driving up that gravel road the dust rising with the heat vapors brought back so many frightful dreams that found me trapped behind the metal bars of my cell. Dreams of a wood plank creature stretched and distorted with reaching walls and root that dragged back into the deep swamp, feeding it with those things darker that only the swamps could hide. Dreams ending in endless beatings and the drunken anger of Daddy. But the shack was just as I remembered, falling in on itself, as though the absence of the old man was taking its toll, that without its center there was nothing holding the walls in place.

I can just barely make out the shack from here. On a moonlit night like this, it's hard to tell the piled plank boards of the

house from the swamp that surrounds it. Hard but for the smell, the same smell which flooded my head, coming up on the porch, with memories as dead as Jimmy's mamma and as angry as the oily black fist marks in the wall. Jimmy inside, dead to the world is somehow right, calming in a place that echoes with pain that's deaf to him. Ahead the road goes to the right, that path is overhung by long whip willows, I know what's down that way, know what's waiting. But I've never gone that way, always too scared. But taking the right like edging the bee-bee into the turn Jimmy showed me the afternoon of Thursday, taking my hand pressing my thumb into the bee-bee, when the dust of this same stretch of road was settling on the hood of the truck. This path stretches long, like the cellblocks of Angola, dark, unattached, then opens up into the night with the moon bearing down. The gate is a simple, rusted pig iron swing hinged to two rock pillars, unlocked cause no one gives a damn about what's inside. A huge oak stretches out covering the hill in ghost shadow, the moon pushing odd-shaped ways through the long twisting limbs. During slave time they cleared this place real well giving up the land to put their dead, but time and Rosalyn has forgotten it and the grass waist high along the path, pushing in to claim it too. The headstones settled into their places like cats about to pounce, like the maze in my palm.

Digging my free hand into my pocket I find the crease-wrinkled paper deep at the bottom. Pulling it out, unfolding it for the first time since Baton Rouge, Jimmy's mamma three weeks dead, the car loaded and gassed. In the moonlight I make out the words hard-typed like the old machines, on tissue-thin telegram paper.

'Dear Mr. Evens, . . . We regret to inform you that your father passed away at 8:30 p.m. on the evening of the third. His body will be interred in Poppers' Field Cemetery. Our condolences . . . . Sincerely Yours, Matthew Wryly, Coroner, Rosalyn Hospital' the words are as empty as the first time I'd read them.

"Jesus came back from the dead but man can't," Jimmy said when I showed him the letter the Wednesday before arriving in Rosalyn. Peering down at the grave piled with dried turned earth, I hope he's right. The wind is picking up and overhead the clouds are moving in, crowding the sky over the bushy limbs of the oak. The clouds puffy themselves.

Moving down the hill like Jimmy's hand guiding mine

guiding the bee-bee, edgy, uncertain, my own way scared.

"This the way, see Jimmy found it. Me show you Mac." His hand had been firm but friendly against mine.

The grave was nothing, and I mean nothing, no headstone, just a pile of dirt as long as Daddy drunk-dead. The bee-bee stops, my thumb still pushing as though Jimmy's hand was still behind it. Dragging my eyes from the turned earth I look down at the maze as though seeing it for the first time, moving the bee-bee back, seeing beneath it, scratched into the plastic. END.

Then the moon is gone. I look around but Daddy ain't there, he's dead, six feet under with no stone for his name. There's just the clouds, the oak and the dirt. Crouching down, the maze digs into my palm as though it knows what's up. Taking it into my fingers I push it into the dirt. The soil is hard at first, like the bars of Angola, like the road gravel, small stones scrape at my flesh as though the demons of seventeen years won't let them go. Pushing the dirt over the new hole is like burying Daddy for good. I feel the first of the rain falling and realize Jimmy is right; the dead, don't come back. Wiping the dust from the tops of my feet I leave, my back to the grave. The maze three inches down and Daddy six feet under.

Spell for Vanishing

Curl a blank page
Eat its corner

Dissolve a calendar
Drink it

Untie the laces
of a sandal

Turn an hourglass
face down

Say thy name
backwards

Write it thus
Erase it

Place thy hand
upon a stone

Name it bone
Name it gone

Make the light
thy sentry

upon the noon
at high solstice

Sweep thy hand
unto the horizon

Pronounce art
not three times

Then step free
from thy shadow

vanishing
like asleep

Become the dream
of thyself

thou hath
never had

The End of Superstition

Let black cats dance
in my pathway in fear
of my shadow. Let ladders
form a triangular tunnel
leading the way.

May I fall in love
on Friday the Thirteenth,
a rainy day. I will open
my umbrella in the house,
then go outside and step
on every sidewalk crack
to seal my fate.

May I spill all my salt
and drop a hundred mirrors
that shatter, releasing
each trapped spirit to fly
away like an invisible dove
while all the shards turn
into diamonds, falling
to my bathroom floor,
a glittering rain.

David Starkey

Ways of Being Dead

However many ways there are of being alive,
it is certain that there are vastly more ways of being dead.
—Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*

There are, first,
of course, the obvious
ones: moldering
in the hard pan
or alluvium,
preserved grotesquely
in a dry-as-dust tomb
or the tannin-rich
bog soil. Burnt
to ashes on a pyre,
each molecule free
at last to rejoin
the elemental pleasures.
Sailors find themselves
pecked at on the sea-
bottom by big-lipped
fish with dim
barely comprehending
eyes. Earth, fire,
water—the choices,
in fact, seem limited
until we recall
there is always sprawling
on a tattered couch
in the Telephone Road
Motel, the stench
of one's self increasing
exponentially,

while the party
in the next room
rages on for days,
or being boiled and stewed
by savages (yes, savages,
Death has no taboos
against calling names)
who crunch one's bones
between their awful
pointed teeth, sucking
the sweet marrow
for dessert. There are shy
cadavers, skeletal arms covering
rotten faces against
the prying eyes of life,
and bold corpses
that seem to shout,
Look out!
I'm on the move!
even years past their prime.
Above all, I prefer
the story
of the Renaissance
artist who insisted
that his apprentice
shred and slice and grind
every part of him,
then mix the bits
in his tempera.
The resulting landscapes,
especially *Saturnalia*,
with its cavorting satyrs
and couples coupling
beneath willow trees,
are nothing short of breathtaking.

Laurie Rachkus Uttich

Face Down

I didn't expect it to hurt.

I *did* expect the room to be dark. I saw with no surprise the candles that breathed rosemary and jasmine. I nodded at the almond oil, a smooth bottle wrapped in natural brown paper, and barely noticed the red lights of the CD player sleepwalking through the slumber of flutes and harps.

The sink, however, came as a bit of a shock. For me? Do I wash up before or after? What *exactly* do I wash? My hands? My feet? My legs? The two thick cotton towels that sat in silence on the brushed steel rod didn't offer much of a clue. They were too large for hands, too small for bodies.

On the cot behind me was a robe on top of a white sheet and a soft blanket. I stood between the table and the kitchenette-type chair and wondered where to sit. Would it be too forward to wait on the table? Too repressed to perch on the chair?

As the song shifted to the hollow sound of a wooden instrument with a wet reed, I wondered if I should be naked by now. I thought about taking off my clothes and sliding into the robe, but it seemed too much like a date I'd once had in college. I was back in the bathroom trying to find a polite way to say, "Good night and please **never** call me again" while he was taking off his pants and searching the pockets for a condom.

I decided to wait.

Repressed or not, I sat on the chair and took off my shoes. I left my socks on and tried not to sweat. While I examined the possibility that wet palms and damp armpits just might be the reason for the sink, the door opened.

The masseuse was shorter than I thought she would be. Instead of a tunic or an Indian sundress with geometric shapes and spaghetti straps, she had on jeans, a white T-shirt and a "may I help you?" smile. There were no dangling earrings, crystal necklaces, or visible auras. If it weren't for her nametag that read "Sherry, Certi-

fied Masseuse," I would have thought she had just stopped in on her way to The Gap.

She seemed disappointed that I wasn't naked. She looked at her watch, pointed to the cot and said, "Take off whatever you're comfortable with and hop under those sheets." I nodded and looked at my socks. "Right."

She left then and went back out into the "full-service" salon. I imagined her leaning on the counter, lifting rattail combs out of the blue water and snickering with hair stylists about clients who cut their own bangs and didn't know how to dress (or undress) for a massage.

As I pulled off my shorts I thought about just how comfortable I was completely clothed. I took off my bra, left on my underwear (repressed again?) and hopped under those sheets.

I sat with my breasts on my knees, the sheet under my chin, and waited for Sherry. A quiet knock, the kind you hear in a dressing room, and then Sherry stuck her head in. "Ready?"

Before I could answer, she came in, shut the door and said, "Go ahead and lie down." I started to lean back when I heard a small sigh and then, "Put your face *down*." She pointed to a horseshoe-shaped hole at the top of the cot.

I shifted around, one hand holding onto the sheet tucked under my chin, the other trying to shield my Jockey-covered butt, while she asked what sounded like, "Are you nuts?" but was really, "Are you *allergic* to nuts?"

"No," I told the floor and tried to shake my head, now stuck in the horseshoe. "Good," she said, slapping her hands with the almond oil, and I smiled a little, as if my body's harmony with nuts was due to daily positive affirmations and 60-minute workouts.

She moved a blanket over my waist and legs and said, "We're going to begin by opening your back." I imagined Sherry reaching under the sink, pulling out a carving knife and opening my back like my father used to "open" a fish before he fried it. *That* would explain the sink. The image didn't fade when she told me, "If it becomes uncomfortable in any way, just let me know."

I doubted my wedged head would allow me to tell her *anything*, but before I could respond, her feet appeared. Barefoot? At a place where they also style hair and give facials? Is this sanitary? Is it even legal? You have to wear shoes to drive, but you

can strut around the salon sliding on hair and mud masks?

Or did she slip her shoes off when she came in the room, the second my head was stuck in the horseshoe? Was it to make me feel better ("hey, we're all naked here... you on the table, me on the floor") or just to give me something to do, a meditation practice of focusing on short, wide feet that supported small bunions and frosty pink toenails? "It's Zen," I imagined her saying, "the beauty of color, the pain of imperfection."

Sherry began "mapping" my back, an apparent first step to opening it. She traced my spine and shoulders with fingers too slick to open a jar. "My," she said as an oboe began to play, "*someone* needs a lot of work."

"I just moved into a new house," I told her, like a chubby woman says, "I just had a baby." Sherry, unconvinced, said nothing. "And I helped my husband lay sod." It was so quiet I thought perhaps Sherry was engaging in a transcendental meditation practice, leaving only her fingers and feet behind.

I tried again. "Sod's really heavy," I said as I smiled reassuringly at her toes. "You'd be surprised that grass is so —" But Sherry cut me off. "Shh," she said as a harp joined the wet reed. "Silence is good." I bit my lip and gave her feet a dirty look.

But it's hard to be indignant for long, especially when your butt is staring at the ceiling and you can't take your eyes off someone else's not-so-cute feet. So after a few moments when Sherry said, "Brrreeeeeaathe," I went right ahead and did it.

What Sherry didn't tell me - but what I learned as quickly as Pavlov's dog - is that the loose translation for Sherry's "breathe" is, "This is going to hurt like hell." Gasping, tensing, even groaning into the horseshoe is only going to result in a snappy, "*Someone* is really tight," another slap of almond oil, and the Fingers of Pain right back in the spot that tried to scoot away.

As Sherry the Sadist continued, I decided I would not fall into that Lamaze-breathing scam again. I would keep my pain pocketed in the horseshoe. I would not beg. I would not ask for ice chips. I would not say, "This is a bit uncomfortable, Sherry." I would take it in silence. After all, I wasn't sure I was even allowed to talk yet.

But soon my knots were gone, sliding off my back on a wave of almond oil. They slunk out into the salon where they mixed

with perm solution and pedicure nail polish. Only my back stayed behind, a marinated cape that didn't even need to breathe.

My back was open, Sherry told me, and I didn't even smirk when she said my toxins had been released. They had! Of course, they had! This was the back God intended me to have! It is not Sherry the Sadist, but Sherry the Saint! How wrong I had been! I knew, if I could keep my eyes open long enough, I'd see that even Sherry's feet had been reborn.

As I calculated how to work daily massages into my budget (do we *really* need groceries?), Sherry moved the sheet over my back. "She's tucking me in," I thought and wondered if my body had hitched a ride with the toxins. It also seemed to be gone, floating somewhere between the cot and the beaches of the Bahamas where I now slept in the sun and sipped a Margarita.

My back, however, was not the only body part that needed opening. Sherry's fingers moved to the tops of my thighs, the area below the Jockeys and above the saddlebags. The toxins came back. The beach left. Before I could get past that repressed heterosexual, Midwestern stuff about another woman's fingers dangerously close to my butt, not to mention the "other" significant area, I remembered my cellulite.

Now, I was in danger of not just being excited, but humiliated. But surely, Sherry had seen a cottage cheese butt before? She was, after all, a professional. And, those huge, sweaty white guys that left the sauna wrapped in starched sheets were on their way to the massage table, right? Too much feed in my saddlebags couldn't startle her into speaking, could it?

While I was imagining Sherry saying, "My, *someone* is certainly flabby," she began opening my hamstrings. I rolled my eyes when Sherry said to "breeaaathee." I knew the toxins trade off. I was willing to pay it. After all, my Margarita was melting.

Later, after Sherry carefully communicated the company policy ("no, you cannot rent the cot for a three-hour nap"), it was time to slide (I was no longer in the mood to hop) out of those sheets. I sat up, my breasts in my armpits, and didn't even reach for the robe. The beach had become topless, full of women with saggy boobs and loose toxins, and I had just a few moments to wash up before the sun set.

Portrait in Concrete

The basin cracked. Three fingers
gone from the right hand. Here
on College Street, pantlegs
brake perfectly over shoes
of the cherub grown to a man.
He remembers a day. Softly
climbs the landing. Finds a spot.

No longer pissing in snow
long enough to watch algae freeze.
The fountain doesn't flow.
The pipes have been shut off
years since he peed here
or watched steam rise
from a yellow hole.

What is it? What is the need
of this thought?—A stranger
from the middle of his shoulder
blade frowns now. Sunlight
enters the basin halfway.
The water main creaks
like a secret conversation.

Decisions

I couldn't decide whether to masturbate
or pray, so I split the difference,

and wrote a poem instead.
The poem is about how it decided

to be written, and this is it.
Wait a second.
Maybe it should go:

I couldn't decide whether to masturbate
or pray, so I split the difference
and wrote a poem instead.

I couldn't decide whether
to write about Kierkegaard
or Richard Simmons, so I cut
down the middle and wrote
about my neighbor Bob Pickers.

I couldn't make up my mind
whether to describe
Bob's habit of standing on
his balcony nude, or his wife's
recent Thank-God-for-Menopause
party, so I am focusing on Bob's
Hot Wheels collection.

Hard to pick which
of the Hot Wheels to talk
about, or whether to explore
the psycho-social evolution

of men's fixation on hot things,
so I went with the leaf-blowing
gardener, working between our
houses as I write this, and how his huge
afro-head suddenly appeared outside my kitchen,
just as I started to apply the lubricant, which startled me
into a reflexive mid-life crisis, which I resolved by following
Kierkegaard's instructions for fashioning a vacuum cleaner
out of a crucifix.

I can't decide what to write about deciding.
Perhaps my writing group will help me
lose a word here, a stanza there,
throw out the whole second part,
or maybe drop "afro-head" as potentially
offensive. I'm not sure whether I will
present this to them, and if I do, I will
still have to decide whether or not I agree
with their decisions. Oh dear, should
I even go tonight? Metadecisions...

Wolfing Pot Roast

Carl would always start with the potatoes, cutting them into red-rimmed coins,cream-colored in the middle like the buttons of my blouse. He'd do the same with theroast, the carrots, the onions, his fork and knife dancing his food into shapely portions.Next, he'd harpoon a hunk of meat, topping it with a piece of carrot and potato, then he'drun the whole thing through a puddle of rich, brown gravy—wait one, maybe twodrips—then in it would go. A short trail of gravy would slide the corner of his mouthuntil his lissome tongue came out to work the perimeter of his lips. He'd go at it like thisfor the first few minutes without saying a word, barely a breath.

It's only fair to tell you, he's not like this with other foods, only my pot roast.And to be shamefully honest, I like to watch.

Five minutes into it, he'd really be enjoying himself, adding extra butter and saltto his potatoes and carrots, occasionally coming up for a gulp of water. After fifteenminutes of showing me the bald spot on top of his head, he'd rise, the face of satisfaction,and set off for his recliner in the living room.

It's not as bad as you think, though maybe it's worse. Carl and I haven't madelove in nine months. I know because I fix him his favorite once a month, and for everypot roast, without fail, I am reminded. I am reminded of those lustier days when Carlhungered after me instead.

There are a lot of people who say they are not, but I am. I am the type whocomplains. I complain about everything, just not to the one who deserves it. The successof this strategy, I must say, has been less than desirable going on five years now. Taketonight for instance. Thought I'd make something different. Thought it might liventhings up a little. I've been working all afternoon preparing a Mexican feast—margaritas,homemade salsa, fresh tamales seasoned with chili, black beans with cumin and a dab ofsour cream.

Carl's in the living room doing what he always does, reads the newspaper fromcover to cover. He tries to be sweet, though. "Smells good in there," he calls. "What'sthat you're cooking?"

"It's a surprise," I say back. "Can I make you a drink?"

"Got one, honey, thanks," he says from behind the newspaper. He has it strungout before him like a wet towel on a windless day, not a rustle, not a shake.

"How about a margarita," I say.

"A what?"

"We're having margaritas tonight, honey."

"I'd better finish what I have here, thanks," Carl says.

I begin cleaning some of the dishes in advance. There's a window above the sink.I look out on our small Michigan lake, which always gets smaller in summer, crowedcoast to coast with swimmers, sunbathers, and boats of all sorts. It's late afternoon. Thesky is drunk with amber, the color of scotch and water. I am spying on my next-doorneighbors, adorable twin girls named Amanda and Hannah Thompson. They havestrawberry blonde hair and little potbellies which, undoubtedly, will someday be firm andsculpted like their mother's, who, according to certain sources around the lake, posed for *Playboy* only a few years back.

The twins are working on a sand castle down by the water. Construction, itseems, has been delayed due to irreconcilable differences. Whatever Amanda builds up,Hannah tears down. From the corner of my eye, I notice a flash, like a white meteorhurtling from the sky. I lean over the sink to get a better look. I see it again. Calling forCarl, I rush through the dinning room. "You won't believe what's happening," I say.One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi—a short disturbing silence,disturbance in the sense that I feel like one.

"Oh," he half-says, not thinking, not thinking of me anyway. "It smells wonderful."

"No, that's not what I mean, Carl. Outside. The seagulls are—"

"Honey, if you'll just give me five more minutes," he says.

The hell with him, I say to myself. Let him read about it in tomorrow's news. Iwalk out the sliding doors and cross the deck toward the water. Everything has stopped.The jet-skis, the boats, the swimmers. Even Amanda and Hannah drop their fists of

sandand stare slack-faced at the sky. A flock of seagulls are circling above the lake. Mr.Thompson, father of the centerfold, grandfather of the twins, comes out and I meet himover by the girls. Amanda and Hannah, the two of them in the same instant, burst intodelighted squeals as one of the seagulls drops, not casually, from the sky in a backwardsort of descent. It's nothing I've ever seen. The wings catch pockets of air, knocking thebird in cart-wheels toward the water. The seagull plunges into the lake and then, asthough revitalized by its inadvertent bath, the seagull flap-flaps off the surface and rejoinsthe flock.

Mr. Thompson dips into the front pocket of his Hawaiian shirt and pulls out acigarette. Another seagull drops, just drops like a brick. Down it goes and itsuntrammeled glide becomes an awkward tumble.

"Oops!" Amanda says.

"The birdie went oops," Hannah returns.

With hands tied in knots, they spin each other round and round, charmed in a way thatonly six year old girls could be.

"What is this, Dick? What's happening here?" I ask.

"Disgusting creatures," Mr. Thompson says. "They're scavengers, junkyard birds.They spend the whole day at the city dump. Who knows what they get into."

"You've seen this before?" I ask.

"Not quite like this, but you ever see a dog on antifreeze? They can go nutsbefore it finally kills em. Must've got some bad garbage. They're sure sick onsomething."

Another bird falls from the flock, toppling end over end like a wedding cake. Moments later the seagull is on the surface, struggling for flight, a thousand drops ofwater spraying from its panicked wings.

I hear the creak-slam of a screen-door being opened and closed. Jamie, the husband-less mother of Amanda and Hannah, draws my notice. She steps off the deck and walks toward us. There they are, a hair bigger than life and much bigger than mine, the blue ribbon of melon breasts not exactly hidden nor fully supported by a canary-yellow bikini top. The sun dances on her bronze skin and fiery auburn hair. She has thick eyelashes, stunning cheekbones, a slender chin and a swan's neck which tapers between pronounced clavicles. Jamie's wearing cut-off

jeans, her waist like a thimble bobbing back and forth as she walks.

Suddenly I hear a resounding thud. The whole lake hears it. The girls scream out, but the pleasure is lost. I look to see one of the toppling seagulls has landed on the bow of a speedboat. With its neck bent wrong, the bird jostles to one side and jerks to the other, trying for the starboard side of the boat. Jamie scoops up Amanda, then Hannah—in each arm, a red face glazed with tears. The boats pull back and just like that the seagulls shift in the sky and stream off across the land like an unexpected wind.

Mr. Thompson finishes his cigarette. "Well, it's been interesting," he says, then flicks the butt into the lake and follows Jamie into the house. I hurry in to check on the tamales. It seems a flock of seagulls can forget how to fly, but I can't get dinner off my mind. I see Carl on my way through the dining room, still nestled in his overstuffed marshmallow recliner.

"Honey," I call from the kitchen, "the strangest thing." A waft of steam rushes up in my face as I tip the lid on the pot of tamales. With my eyes closed and a mouth full of steam, I say, "The seagulls, Carl. It was terrible. One dropped right on top of a boat."

I open my eyes half-expecting Carl to be standing before me. There's no Carl, not even a hesitated response from the living room. I've had it. I set the lid on the counter and walk right into the living room to confront him. "You know," I begin to say, calm yet immediate, "it would be nice if you'd answer when I call you."

Still nothing. He won't even lay his newspaper down. I'm angry now, enough so to rip the damn paper from his hands and tear it in half. But just then I hear it. The breath. His sleeping breath. I peer over his newspaper. Carl's head is cocked to one side in peaceful sleep. The anger's there, but its different now. I turn away, then back again. I'm just about to, but I don't. I notice an empty crystal glass set on the stand beside him. Only the smell of scotch and water remains. I leave him to his sleep. There's no telling how long he'll hold that newspaper up, a white sheet frozen in time, the two top corners feathered over like wings.

I walk down the hall into the kitchen. The room smells of overcooked tamales and a hint of tequila. I turn off the burners then go into the bedroom. In a full-length mirror I examine my hair, the flat dull texture. I scan the slope of my shoulders, the wide tulip

curves of my hips, all the way down to my feet. With a deep breath, my breasts lift. I undo the top two, cream-colored buttons of my blouse. My papery white cleavage looks like something that wants to sit down, take a load off. I let the breath out and my whole body seems to lose its shape, unforming into a rectangle with rounded corners, a loaf of bread, doughy in the middle, dry and cracked on top. I look into the mirror, scrutinizing my face, this everyday face with small eyes and pale lashes and thin lips drawn like a tripwire between wide cheeks.

I am the judge of unremarkable things and the list gets longer as I go. But I must admit that even I can look at my body—think of my life—and feel a sort of laughable satisfaction. There are a few things I'd like to change, and I would, but there'd always be a few more. It's like pulling at the frayed edge of fine scarf. It's a process, a lesson, a ripping and tearing and building of a life. And eventually you learn to live with yourself, you stop pulling at the loose ends.

You can watch a seagull forget how to fly, plunge into a lake and make a rainbow as it flap-flaps into the sunset. And you can go off dreaming how you wish it would be,but deep down you know, from your head to your heels you know, this is the way it is.

I rebutton my shirt. I can almost laugh as the picture of Carl wolfing pot roast floats somewhere behind my mind.

Carol V. Davis

Alfred Brendel Plays the Piano

1.

He is easily mistaken for someone else,
this tall man in moss-tweed,
the world's greatest pianist.
He walks Hampstead Heath past a duck pond.
Two boys in short pants watch over
paper boats, pushed by faith to the middle.
Alfred Brendel stops momentarily
his gaze beyond this miniature
portrait or perhaps pulled from behind.
Each body of water identifiable by color.
His native Adriatic a blue-green
painful in intensity, like tubes of paint
squeezed together on the pallet
but refusing to mix.

2.

When Alfred Brendel plays the piano
it is best not to watch his face.
His cheeks stretch into a grimace,
jaw kneading like hands in dough,
neck muscles flexing as if somehow
separated from the body.
Sometimes he practices with a mirror
to one side of the piano, hooking
flesh to music to coordinate
how he plays to how he appears,
so as not to alarm or distract.
The score, musician and audience
tied together web-like, strands

nearly invisible, but with a
strength fierce and frightening.

3.

Before Alfred Brendel plays
there is a moment of absolute stillness
like the quiet which descends on
a congregation before the prayer
for the dead when each mourner
resurrects memory: of the mother
in the kitchen washing dishes
and humming as the peach walls
grow dim in the fading light;
of three boys and girls drawing
wild chalky figures on the sidewalk.
Until the mourner is whipped back to the present
to remember why he is standing to pray
and which one of the three has died.

4.

When Alfred Brendel plays
you can never be sure what
will be pulled from the core.
The silence at the center of the music.
Reliable hands like a doctor
coaxing out a baby, a mixture
of pleading and steady pressure,
not certain what harelip or sixth
toe will emerge with the slippery newborn.
You cannot take normalcy for granted.
The notes keep coming even after the last bar
and the audience too spent to notice.

Bulldog Front

Louis started it. I want to get that out of the way first. Louis started it.

The kitchen told the story of the last two weeks. We didn't go into the kitchen too often, and it was way too fucking cold to empty the trash, so two weeks worth of debris swallowed the kitchen. Littered with empty boxes of Hamburger Helper, pizza boxes, Taco Bell trash, everything else you didn't really have to cook first. And, for every empty two liters of RC, there were 1.75 empty liters of whiskey. We'd started on Beam, worked our way through Early Times and Tom Sims, and were onto Old Crow by the time shit started getting really nasty. Or really, Louis started getting nasty.

We all knew the tragedy of his girl. She had herpes, so, on top of normal monthly shit, Louis had flare ups to deal with. Which meant we had flare ups to deal with. And fuck giving the guy sympathy. It was the heart of winter. If there were any chicks in town, they were in hibernation, and if they weren't, you had to admit that we were. For two weeks we'd been more or less snowed in. Sitting around the common room, drinking booze, watching the same old videotapes again and again. Never leaving except to get more booze, more soda, food we didn't have to cook.

The shit started over *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. A seemingly harmless movie. And no harm came from it in the first four viewings, but then, I guess we were all sitting there, watching Jennifer Jason Leigh prone in a dugout, thinking, shit, I was getting more in high school. And Pheobe Cates can be pure torture when you've been staring at the same four dudes for fourteen straight days. My voice added to the problem, too. The Spicoli jokes were inevitable. Louis started those, too.

Started harmless. "Hey, Eddie, do me a favor," Louis said

the first time we watched it. "Say, 'I know I'm in the right place. I see the globe right there.'"

I said it the first time, and the second time, and the third. Snowed in or not, I was still pretty happy about shit in general. My first winter up north, union pay coming in every week that the ground stayed frozen. My bones felt like they were getting stronger, my joints didn't ache when I got out of bed, the calluses were shedding layers. This was the first time since elementary school that I'd had two weeks when I didn't work or look for work. I'd even been picking up an extra twenty bucks almost every time I went to the liquor store by pulling some poor sap out of a snow bank with my truck. No doubt, man, I was loving it. Paid vacation, the two most beautiful words since "open bar." Still, by the fifth generation of Spicoli jokes, I'd had enough, so I told Louis flat out, "Be cool. You're starting to wear on me."

"Come on, dude," Louis said. "Surf's up." I didn't answer. "Say it, Eddie," Louis went on. "Say all you need is some tasty waves and a cool buzz."

"All you need is to shut your fucking hole," my cousin George threw in. Not hostile, though. This wasn't a hostile scene at this point. Small town, working class. It's the only way to talk.

Louis didn't come back on George, though. He stuck with me. I was kind of the outsider of the house. Five of us lived there, and the other four had grown up together. We'd all be sitting around sometimes when George would cut on Louis for kicking Louis's ass in the first grade, or they'd talk about how they were systematically deflowered by Mary Policcichio in junior high, that kind of shit. So when they needed someone to rag, it was only right for them to look outside the circle. And I took it pretty well. It didn't mean shit to me. Louis would be ragging me one minute and buying me a beer the next. Like I said, man, working class.

So I let Louis keep it up a little longer with his, "I know that dude," and "Learning about Cuba, Eddie? Having some food?" I just kept smiling and nodding until George pointed out that we were about to run out of whiskey. Everyone scattered into bedrooms and came out with beer mugs and Tupperware containers full of loose change, but not enough, so Richard, who was another of my roommates, and I split to drive around town until we could find some poor bastard stuck in the snow to pay for a bottle.

Mission accomplished in about twenty minutes. We got back to the place with a one seven five of drug store brown whiskey—they don't even call it bourbon—a couple of bottles of RC and a tray of frozen lasagna. *Fast Times* was still on, just before the dance scene. I had the booze in my right hand and the bottles of soda in my left. Louis sat completely across the room, a basketball at his feet. Richard told the story of the housewife with a trunk full of groceries who was so happy that we'd pulled her car out of a snow bank that she gave us thirty bucks and the tray of lasagna. George and my last roommate, Rocky, threw up high fives to Richard.

Louis, though, threw the basketball across the room, nailing me in the head. "That's your skull, Eddie. You're so fucking stoned."

I put the bottles on the floor and said, "That's enough of your shit."

Louis looked at me with a grin full of teeth and said, "Be cool, Eddie. Be cool."

"Don't mock me, motherfucker," I said. "I'll throw down." And so on. Back and forth, me and Louis, with all that same shit that everyone says when they're trying to decide whether or not they really want to throw arms. During this time, Rocky snuck off to his room.

He came back with two pairs of boxing gloves and headgear, screaming, "We settle this like men!" Obviously, the thought of scrapping Louis had crossed Rocky's mind before. Probably when Louis was ragging his Spanish ass during the inquisition scene of *History of the World, Part 1*.

I went back in my room to get ready. Louis did the same, and everyone else went into the back yard with snow shovels to dig out a ring.

Louis was bigger than me, a good thirty pounds heavier and two inches taller, so I decided to go with a little head game. I took off my jeans and black leather jacket and put on turquoise and green baggies with an Aztec design on them over my long johns. I also put on a Coppertone t-shirt and my snow boots. Motherfucker wants a surfer, I'll give him a surfer.

My other roommates had dug a ten foot square out of the snow, with a border of snow, about four feet high on three sides.

They had three lawn chairs set up on the fourth side. They sat there, passing both bottles down the line and back again. Louis stood in the middle, gloves and headgear already on, punching his hands together. He saw my outfit and said, "What a fucking clown."

I tied on my gloves and headgear and walked into the ring with him. Rocky followed me.

"All right," Rocky said. "No kicking no biting no scratching no hair pulling no shot to the balls no rabbit punches no TKOs. The only way we have a winner is if the loser cries 'Uncle.' Now go to your corners and come out scrapping."

Like I said, Louis was quite a bit bigger than me, but he came out flat-footed. Throwing arms like he wanted to lay me out in one punch. So I played defense, letting him punch the shit out of my forearms. I could hear George screaming for me, and Richard and Rocky cracking jokes about me getting my ass kicked. As soon as I heard Louis breathe heavy, I started working him low, throwing body shots, hitting his ribs. Louis didn't know how to face this. The only fights he'd been in were the ones where you try to knock the man down right away, go for the nose or the chin, then literally kick him when he's down. Or the ones where you try to get inside, get your hands on his inner thigh and neck, and flip him. But no one thinks to throw a body shot in a real fight, so Louis had never thought about how to block one. I kept catching his wind, and every time I did, I went high. Usually with a left-handed jab, so when I threw my big rights, they landed square. Pretty soon, I could see Louis's arms getting heavy from all those haymakers he threw to start off with. I was able to get a full on, wound up right across his jaw, and he went down.

Rocky didn't come back into the ring to ref, so I didn't go back to my corner. I just did an Ali dance over Louis. Every time he tried to stand, I tagged him in the head, saying, "Cry Uncle." Until, finally, face down in the snow, Louis said, "Uncle, motherfucker."

And thank god that he did when he did, because I was beat tired, losing my buzz, and cold. I went straight into the house to put on some warm clothes and fix a cocktail. By the time I got out of my bedroom and into the common area, two shots of Yukon Jack were poured, and Louis was waiting for me. The Yukon Jack was sacred. Louis, George, and I had stolen it from a yuppie bar one

night in a drunken rage we later rationalized as class politics. Since then, the presence of the bottle had developed an aura in the freezer that demanded it not be touched until some undetermined special occasion presented itself. The very presence of it convinced me that all was forgiven, and Louis and I were seeing eye to eye again.

"Come on, Spicoli. Do a shot with me," he said. I walked over to him and lifted a glass. He lifted his and said, "You kicked my ass good."

"Nah," I said. "I just come from a fuck, fight, or drink town. It don't mean shit."

We toasted, drank, and settled in for the encore presentation of *The Deer Hunter.*

The sun came out the next day. Spirits lifted. It was Saturday, so still, none of us had to work. We drove into town and hung around for a while checking out boxing equipment at Sportstown. Then, we went to see if the video store had any choice flicks on sale, had lunch at an all-you-can-eat Mexican restaurant, and caught happy hour at Dugan's. We spent the rest of the evening shooting pool at the Thirsty Turtle. A few local chicks had come out of hibernation, too, so we had our first chance in a couple of weeks to hit on women. And all night, Rocky kept talking about the fight. Louis and I didn't add anything. We were both over it. But Rocky kept it up. Every time he'd take a shot at pool, he'd say something like, "I'm going to drop this ball like it's Louis." Or something to that effect. By the end of the night, we knew the gloves were coming on.

Louis took Rocky. His second haymaker. He caught Rocky off guard and dropped him.

The next day, George and Richard got into a dispute over who was going to clean the kitchen and settled it with the gloves. George took Richard with a lucky shot to the temple. But rather than just clean the kitchen, Richard challenged Rocky, figuring, why clean when I can kick Rocky's ass. Which Richard did. So for the next two days, Rocky had to clean the whole house. Louis didn't think it was right, so he went after Richard. Richard dropped Louis,

so Louis had to do Richard's laundry. George wanted his laundry done, too, so he took on Louis, but Louis won that one, so George had to wash clothes for Louis and Richard, which George didn't like at all, so he took on Rocky, won, and Rocky did everyone's wash in the house but mine. I didn't want any part of the insanity. I stayed out of it as long as I could. My big problem, though, was the list on the refrigerator. The rankings. Rocky was number five. He'd lost to everyone but me. George was four, although he'd beat Richard, because he'd lost to Louis and Richard had beaten Louis. Also, Richard made the list. Louis was three, Richard two, and I was number one. And someone had to be eyeing that title bout.

Then the snow came back. All of us out of work again. Louis's girlfriend still had a flare up, so she'd bought a bunch of pornos for Louis, telling him to work it out for himself. By the third day of snow, we'd exhausted everything else and had the porno marathon. We'd also been forced to the cheapest liquor that the A&P carried: Sunset Tequila. No chaser. Maybe a lick of salt now and then, but that was it.

And after four hours of five guys sitting around, drinking what tasted like paint thinner and watching what looked like everyone else in the world having sex, I knew a bout was coming on. Richard challenged me. He hit me with a slew of Spicoli jokes, but I'd been the champ for the better part of two weeks and had grown immune to voice cracks. I just said, "You ain't a contender yet, Dick. You still ain't beat George."

George was passed out on the old, thrift store, Archie Bunker looking armchair. Richard slapped him in the face a couple of times to wake him up, then challenged him. George raised his head, opened his eyes just enough to see through them, and said, "What the fuck. I'll kick your ass again."

George borrowed a pair of my baggies for good luck and strutted into the ring wearing only the baggies, snow boots, gloves, and headgear. "Only way to stay awake," he said, but his eyes still hadn't opened all the way. I pulled him back inside and gave him some pointers: showed him where to hold his arms, told him to dance around, covering his face for the first thirty seconds or so, just until the blood started pumping, and told him the secret of the body shot. But George went back into the ring to fight his own fight.

And Richard came out swinging. George just didn't have the defense. He went for a few big punches to the head, but they were slow and Richard wasn't having any. It took about five minutes for Richard to drop George. Then it was my turn.

I'd noticed that Richard held his arms low when he boxed, so I kept mine high, sending left-handed jabs to his head, using my right arm to guard my midsection. My jabs weren't hard. More of a lead into the big right than an attempt to hurt him. But Richard caught on quick and with every jab I sent, he sent a right right over, catching me in the head, but at the end, the weak point of his punch. So I faked a left, drawing out his big right, ducked the punch, and caught him with an uppercut to the solar plexus. This knocked the wind out of him, so I delivered a Louis-style haymaker to his temple, and he dropped. And once you dropped in this ring, you didn't get back up.

At this point, the tequila reminded me that I descended from a hot-blooded Mexican grandfather. I took another shot, saw that the bottle had only one more shot left, finished the bottle, smashed it against the side of the house, and screamed, "Can no man take me?"

This reminded George that he descended from a hot-blooded Mexican great-uncle, and he rose to the challenge. He was still half asleep and sluggish, though, and I took him before he hit anything but my forearms. Then Rocky saw his chance for redemption, to rise above household chores, but it took me about three blows to show Rocky why he was staying at the bottom. Only Louis remained, but he didn't want any. He knew he could only win with the big right, and he wasn't going to land the big right on me. "To the bottle of Yukon, then," I said.

"Not me," Louis said. "I'm going to my girlfriend's. She's gotta be thinking by now that I only go to see her to have sex." He headed for his car. I offered him my truck so that he wouldn't have to worry about getting stuck in the snow, but he turned it down.

Rocky turned down the shot, too. He said that he had laundry to do. George said he was going to pass back out. Richard did a shot with me. He didn't say a word just swallowed an ounce and a half of the sacred Yukon, patted me on the back, and went into his bedroom. I put on *Fast Times*, but that didn't bait them. I fell asleep, woke up, went back into George's room and tried to talk

him into another bottle, my treat, but he wasn't into it. I tried Richard, but he told me to drink my fucking Yukon. Rocky kept thinking that everything I said to him was a condescension. I waited for Louis. He started everything. At least he should drink with me. I sat up, drinking Yukon, waiting for Louis, but he didn't come home. I even drove into town and picked up *Stripes* from the video store, thinking, these guys can't sit in their rooms and sulk when *Stripes* is on. But they did.

Finally, I quit drinking the Yukon, put the bottle back in the freezer, turned off the tube, and headed for bed.

The funny thing about it, I thought, is that I can't even fight. Not in a real sense. Not in a bar room brawl sense, in a hit-a-man-out-of-anger sense. Not when you can kick and bite and pull hair and pull out a knife or a gun. Not when it has to be settled by taking every blow and swallowing blood until someone is crazy or brave enough to step in and break it up, or until the cops show, or until one guy hits the ground and he just can't get back up and the other guy kicks him until he's tired of kicking. Really, they all just fell for the same move. Body shots they didn't expect and left jabs. Left jabs they could have let me throw all day without any pain except in my left arm. Then a big right to the ribs and a big right to the head. Low then high. Every time. I just threw them off balance.

Biographical Sketches

B. Chelsea Adams' poems have appeared in *Poet Lore, The Southwestern Review, Union Street Review, Albany Review, Lucid Stone,* and other literary journals. She has also published fiction in *Huckleberry Magazine, Blackwater Review* and *Voices of Appalachia.* Adams lives in Riner, Virginia.

Ruth Berman's poems have appeared in many publications including: *Saturday Review, Asimov's, Poem* and others. She has also compiled a non-fiction WWII family chronicle titled *Dear Poppa*, published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press. Berman lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Björn Brodersen resides in Hamburg, Germany and is currently working as a writer and photographer for the local newspaper. The photographs that appear in this journal were taken during his one year residency in the Southwest.

Terri Brown-Davidson's poems, short stories, and novel excerpts have appeared in more than five hundred journals, including *The Virginia Quarterly Review, TriQuarterly, The Literary Review, The Denver Quarterly, Hayden's Ferry Review,* and *Puerto del Sol.*

Richard Campbell attended the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles, where he majored in philosophy. He was a manager of a healthcare billing and consulting service since 1979 and sold the business in 1996 to pursue a writing career. Campbell resides in Redondo Beach, California, with his wife Jessamine and his two sons, Byron and Spencer.

Sean Carswell currently resides in Florida. He has just published his first novel *Drinks for the Little Guy.*

Carol V. Davis' poems have appeared in *Mid-American Review, Roanoke Review, South Dakota Review,* and many others. She spent 1996 through 1997 as a Fulbright scholar in St. Petersburg, Russia, where her new book *It's Time to Talk About...* was published in 1997. Davis resides in Los Angeles, California.

Lucille Lang Day's poetry collections are *Fire in the Garden,* and *Self-Portrait with Hand Microscope*, which received the Joseph Henry Jackson Award in Literature from the San Francisco Founda-

David Grant currently resides in Minnesota with his fiancee. He has just completed his M.A. in Rhetoric from Northern Arizona University.

Tom Hamilton has published over 30 works in magazines including: *Rockford Register, Dream International Quarterly, Rockford Review, Crimson Leer, Writers' Gazette, Armchair Aesthete* and many others. He has also published a chapbook collection by Alpha Beat Press. Hamilton is an Irish traveler who lives on the roadways of the US and Canada with his extended clan family.

Lois Marie Harrod's fourth book of poetry *Part of the Deeper Sea* was published by Palanquin Press, University of South Carolina—Aiken, in 1997, and her chapbook *This Is a Story You Already Know* was recently published by Palanquin Press in June 1999. She received a 1998 fellowship from the New Jersey Council of the Arts for her poetry.

Gayle Elen Harvey has been published in many journals including: *Poetry Northwest, Willow Springs, Yellow Silk, Yankee, Atlanta Review, Hanging Loose,* and others. Her work has appeared in anthologies titled *Claiming the Spirit Within* and the 10th Anniversary issue of *American Letters and Commentary.* She was also a co-winner of the 1994 Emily Dickinson Award of the Poetry Society of America and was the first prize winner of the Frances Locke Memorial Poetry Award of Bitter Oleander Press in 1988. She was recently a first prize winner in the *Kimera Poetry Journal.* Harvey lives in Utica, New York.

Robert E. Haynes' poetry has appeared in *Poetry Northwest, New Letters, Poet Lore, Zone 3, Atom Mind, Kentucky Poetry Review, Cimarron Review* and *Cape Rock.* He has works in two anthologies and a textbook titled *Important Words.* Haynes lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, where his poetry has been commissioned by the Scottsdale Center for the Arts, in their Art Walk program.

Gary Juliano's work has been recently featured in the *Kansas Quarterly, Painted Bride Quarterly* and *Red River Review* Several of his poems will be published in *The Worcester Review.* and *The Licking River Review.* Before Juliano moved to West Rutland, Vermont, he taught writing composition at Kean College and Passiac Community College.

Diane Lilll is a freelance writer whose poetry has appeared in the *Sierra Nevada Review, Solo, Eureka* and *RE-AL.* She resides in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, with her three children.

Bobbi Lurie has worked as a muralist, printmaker, therapist, art reviewer and essayist. Her poems have been published in *The Licking River Review, Gulf Stream, The Orange Willow River Review* and several anthologies. Her autobiographical essay "4 O'Clock" was recently nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Lurie lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Jan C. Minich's chapbook *History of a Drowning* was recently published by Owl Creek Press, and he has also been published in over 30 magazines including: *Montana Review, Kansas Quarterly, Quarterly West, Cutbank* and *Northwest Review.* He presently teaches literature and writing at the College of Eastern Utah.

Dennis Saleh lives in Seaside, California, as a writer and a poet.

Mark Seidl's poems have appeared in *Parnassus Literary Journal, Antonym* and *Two Rivers Review.* He lives in Poughkeepsie, New York, where he works as an editor and writer.

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Kristine Somerville lives in Columbia, Missouri,where she serves as a senior advisor for *The Missouri Review* and works as a tutorial coordinator for the University of Missouri football program. Her short

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David Starkey's poetry has appeared in *Atlanta Review, Flyaway, Massachusetts Review, Mid-American Review, The Nebraska Review, Sonora Review, Writer's Forum* and many others. In addition, he has published several collections of poems in small presses including: Koan Americana, Adventures of *The Minor Poet,* A Year with Gayle and Open Mike Night at the Cabaret Votaire. He has edited *Teaching Writing Creatively* and co-edited an anthology called *Smokestacks and Skyscrapers.* Starkey is a Fulbright Senior Scholar in American Literature at the University of Oulu in Finland.

Emily Strauss has been writing poetry for 30 years and has been published in over a dozen regional and statewide small-press journals in California. She said that when she isn't teaching college English, she spends time traveling alone through nature.

Virgil Suarez has published four novels including: *Latin Jazz, The Cutter, Havana Thursdays*, and *Going Under.* He has also published a collection of short stories titled *Welcome to the Oasis.* With his wife Delia Poey, he has co-edited two best selling anthologies: *Iguana Dreams* and *Little Havana Blues.* Most recently, Suarez has published an anthology of Latino Poetry with Victor Hernandez Cruz and Leroy V. Quintana titled *Paper Dance,* and he has published a collection of his poetry and memoirs titled *Spared Angola.* His new collection *The Republic of Longing* is due out in the spring of 2000 from Bilingual Review Press / Arizona State University. Suarez teaches Creative Writing and Latino/a and Caribbean Literature at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

Laurie Rachkus Uttich is a self-described 30-something, Colorado transplant, who manages to scrape by on freelance writing for various client types. She lives with her husband, her three-year-old and her dog, Hope, and has more passions than she has time. She says, "I find massages have the same effect as really good red wine-- once you get past the whole 'naked in front of someone

you've never seen before' thing."

Josh Woods is an editor-parking attendant. He lives in Haslett, Michigan. He likes stories and poems and other things.

Frank Van Zant has recently published his first book titled *The Lives of the Two-Headed Baseball Siren.* Other works have been published in *Yankee, Art Word Quarterly, Quarter After Eight, Flyway, Free Lunch, Poet Lore, The Maverick Press* and *English Journal.* Zant lives in Northport, New York, where he said he is an award-winning teacher of near-dropouts, a coach of two high school sports, and a father of three.

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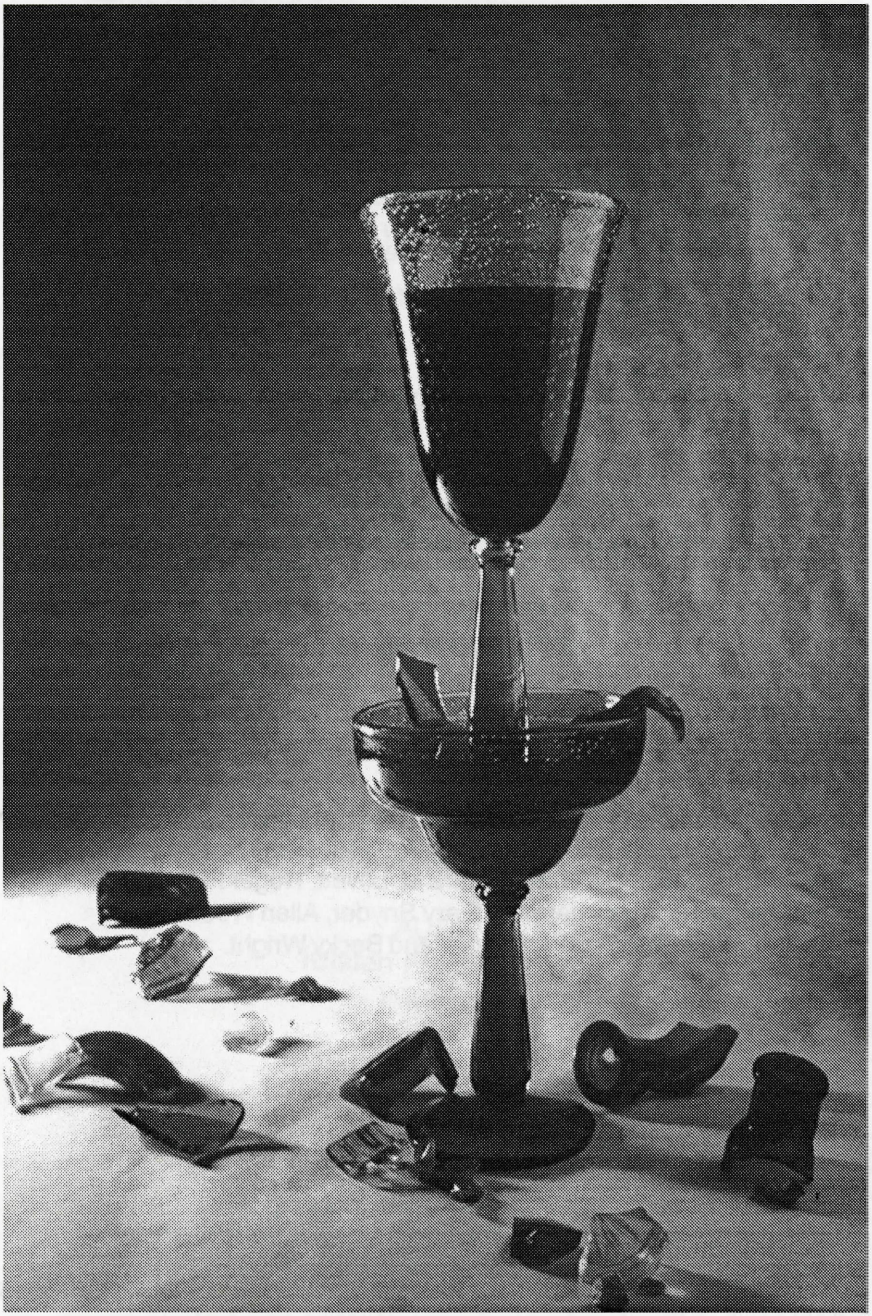

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