Fall 1996

The Carroll Review, Fall 1996

John Carroll University

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Welcome to the fall issue of *The John Carroll Review.*

As you may have noticed, the *Review* has come under new management. We've tried our best to maintain the high standards that have preceded us, but we've also attempted to stretch the boundaries of this publication by inviting writers from the John Carroll community and the Cleveland area to share their challenging and provocative work with us. We hope you like what you see.

A word of advice when reading this issue: the *Review* focuses mainly on fiction this semster. We suggest that you approach the stories and poems in small doses to fully appreciate their different styles and meanings. By the time you come to the end of this issue, you'll realize that the images and ideas on the last pages are just as powerful and resonant as the image and ideas on the beginning pages.

A special thanks to the staff of the *Review*; it's a pleasure to sit around on Tuesday afternoons discussing great literature, great movies, and great submissions with you. We would also like to thank all of our contributors: your stories and poems have made this issue possible, and we hope to continue publishing quality work like this in the semesters to come.

Melissa Zagata
John R. Panza
Christine Dresch

Eileen Conner

five

boxes of crayons, layers
and rows, undiscovered as of
yet it seems. stay that
way until valentines day.
you are beautiful falling asleep
looking up at me through
blued lids, smiling quiet. your
fingernails arent clean. glee
spills out of you, flooding the
room, liquid light pours from
your mouth. you like other
peoples teddy bears. at 2 am
you turn to me, dim motion
blurred, and never let go.

Thomas W. Stanchak

Negligence of Hygiene

her walls are covered
a film of years and years
a negligence of hygiene
trackmarks
behind her house
in the center of nowhere
all the tracks
lead her back
in perpetual motion
lacking drive
she is driven back
where the tracks begin
she could lift
her head towards the sun
she closes the blinds
and longs for the warmth
tightens the belt
nothing of value left of her life
except this house
her walls are covered
a film of years and years
a negligence of hygiene

no one hears her cry
in a city full of
train tracks and bus depots
every train on time
coming down the tracks
heading for her pain
in the center of nowhere
she lives

His name is Scratch, he tells you, and you ask, "Why? Do you itch?"

"No baby," he answers in a voice way too deep. "Everything starts from scratch, so start with me." His belt says "BAD BOY" on it, and the reason that you notice is his hips bump into tables as he walks towards yours. He walks as if he's straddling a camel.

You do not laugh. It's not that you don't have a fine sense of humor. And while you are wearing a sleeve around your own neck that *looks* just like a scarf, you do have an eccentric, yet keen sense of fashion. It's just that today, you've decided to explore the part of you that wants to be a French femme fatale, even though your sister says you look like a slut. She looks like a gas station attendant, and nobody ever understands what you mean.

"My name's Marguerite," you murmur, in an accent you think is Spanish. Your name is Frannie. You can't mimic French. Scratch tells you he's in a band. You tell him they have good pie at this restaurant. He tells you he sculpted the cowboy in the window out of wire coat hangers. You tell him you had a bra once that glowed in the dark. Part of being a femme fatale, you see, is acting nonchalant and yet seductive. Femme fatales are always acting innocent. And they're always smoking.

You light a cigarette and wink at a boy with a napkin holder shoved right through his earlobe. He stares back as Scratch tells you he's from Jamaica and it took him seven years to dread his hair that long.

"Oh really?" is all you say. It's all you feel like saying. This is the year you've decided to carry out your natural inclinations. You're exploring yourself, and nobody understands what you mean.

"No," you tell your mother when you stopped shaving your legs. "I am not trying to be one of those hippies that goes down to the river to beat their clothes against rocks when their family owns a perfectly good Kenmore washer and dryer."

And your dad slapped the mole right off your face before you came here, making like he thought it was an ugly bug.

Mary, your best friend, thinks you're smoking pot now to be cool, but it's just that more and more, you like the taste.

You and Scratch are silently eating. You take small bites out of your Delaney sandwich, wrapping your lips around each bit of bread as if you've never tasted anything so good. As if you've never tasted it before. As if you don't get a Delaney sandwich every time you come here with your boyfriend Matty.

Oh, yeah, you have a boyfriend Matty, that you don't mention to Scratch because he doesn't do it for you anymore. And also, he's in jail.

He held you too tight. He tricked you into liking him in the first place by pretending a great passion for the theater when what he really loves is other people's cars and that show on t. v. where girls run around half naked on the beach. You're not allowed to see him ever again.

You love the way Scratch eats beans and rice. You love the way he holds the bowl up to his face like a little starving boy, or a humble old ascetic. He holds his bread tenderly and laughs between bites with tremendous white teeth. He really, really enjoys his food. He licks his lips and sucks his fingers. You want to be the bread.

"Let's go," he says.

"Go where?" you ask.

"Home," he says.

"Take me."

As you get up, all the long-haired girls smoking at little wooden tables hold their drinks steady as you and Scratch swagger towards the door. Scratch hugs a waitress with a dragon tattoo on her back who once went down on Matty at a party. You pay the bill.

The two of you are walking, and you grab his hand and wear dark glasses. There is a drum circle on the sidewalk, and you stop to listen and pet a funny looking dog, but Scratch pulls you forward.

A boy with a hackey sack and red curly hair says, "Hey now, aren't you Matty's girl, Frannie?"

Scratch answers, "No man, this is mine. This is Marguerite." You pull him forward and are silent for three

blocks. You wonder if this is the comfortable silence that two people meant for each other are supposed to share. You hope not, because you're not ready for all of that. You don't want to get married until you're at least twenty four, and it would be nice if your husband knew your name. Also, you hate it when guys dote on every word you say, so you decide to test the air. You think you just might say something.

"I had a friend," you begin, "who knew a man who got his kidney stolen while he was sleeping. It was sold on the black market. He woke up bleeding in New York."

Scratch runs his hand down your back and rests it low around your waist. He says, "Yeah baby, that sucks." You think you're safe.

There's a plastic mannequin naked on a porch swing when you get to Scratch's house. He says it belongs to a man next door who's been a porn star before. Your dad told you once never to drive down this street alone.

Inside, things are not the right color. For example, the oven is turquoise, and the table is green like the Statue of Liberty, like it's been sitting outside exposed to weather. There are framed posters on the wall that say in sprawling cursive letters "Smile Mon!" and "You're in Jamaica." There are photographs going all the way up the stairs of children smiling, in really old clothes. You try and guess which one of them is Scratch. You guess at a little boy with giant, bucked teeth.

Incense is burning in his room. The shades are drawn, the lights are out, and Scratch already has his shirt off. He picks up a guitar and plugs it in. He tells you to get on the bed. Now is he going to serenade you with a cover of some hotel-lounge steel drum love song?

No. Instead, he turns on his stereo and plays along live to the Screaming Headless Torsos. You can tell his fish are disturbed by the way they're darting back and forth. Scratch is jumping up and down, screaming. You are sitting there pulling up your stockings. He is furiously shaking his hair with his eyes closed. You are sitting there smoking, studying your nails. You now know how you act alone with a rock star as opposed to when you watch one in a crowd. When you are a

femme fatale, alone with a rock star in his bedroom, you act bored.

The music stops abruptly and you smile. Scratch pulls your outstretched legs apart, and then towards him. He lifts your chin as he bends over you, staring deep into your eyes.

"Oh wait," he says. "I know what." He goes over to the dresser and he opens up a little box. He takes out a pipe in the shape of a snake and asks if you smoke.

"Yes," you say. "All the time. Bring it here."

"It's opium."

You've never had opium but you act like you have. You're not sure if opium's like crack, where you can try it once and become a junkie, but you don't ask. What a romantic addiction anyways. You imagine lying around China with a den of gangsters, each baring tiny yellow feet. Always using chopsticks. Always wearing silk pajamas. Always dangling a pipe between your frail fingers. It tastes like the decent flavored edible flowers they put on salads sometimes. You think you are addicted already. Your body feels loose as you let down your uptwisted hair. You dangle your arms off either side of the bed.

You let Scratch snap off your garters and pull off your shirt as you tell him about all the times you smoked hash with your mom at fashion shows in Paris. You tell him you go to school there, art school actually. In fact, your best friend Pierre is having an installation somewhere, the Louvre, you think it is. There will be a series of nude portraits of you done in egg tempera, posed in front of the Riviera. And you think he has started working with wire armatures, out of coat hangers actually, but Scratch does not respond to this coincidence in medium. Scratch is kissing you all over. Your clothes lay on the floor (except your sleeve; the knot's too tight) as you contemplate how the only hash your mom really knows is hash browns. Scratch seems too infatuated with you to speak, or to even remove the rest of his own clothes. That is until he says, "You have really nice breasts." He drops his pants.

There is a knife strapped to his leg. The kind a diver might use. The kind with a blade long enough to spear a shark with

and wave it around.

You inch towards the window, backed into the wall, as Scratch pulls the knife out and climbs up on to the bed wearing only a giant holster strapped around his thigh.

As you back away, Scratch moves towards you, laughing. His giant teeth don't look white anymore. He pulls at the sleeve that you've knotted so tightly at your neck. He traces his finger down the curve of your body, laughing deeper and harder as you back away.

In a serious voice, he says, "Hold still, Marguerite. Hold right there." He raises the knife to your throat, and with steady, gentle thrusts, he cuts the sleeve right off your neck. At the same time, he pushes you down and settles his full weight on to you. You cannot breathe. You feel smothered, like when you're yelled at by your father or squeezed desperately by your crying mother. You feel as if your brain has temporarily shut down. You cannot move as you disinterestedly watch Scratch enjoy himself tremendously. He is noisy. You are silent. He stays inside of you far too long to be safe, or comfortable, and yet, if someone took a picture of your face, it would be detached and forlorn. It would be in black and white. It would be a shadowy picture of a seventeen year old girl waiting for someone to come. Waiting for the rain, or the war, or the night to finally be over.

It's finally over.

"Man baby, that was some fine sex we had."

"Yeah." You light a cigarette.

You wrap your black shirt around your body, and you lightly leave, off to find the bathroom. Red sink, fuzzy yellow toilet seat cover. You pin your platinum hair back off your neck. You lift your leg up on to the counter and finger the cuts where the plastic straps of Scratch's leg rubbed again and again into yours. There is no soap so you leave it alone. You hold your breasts tenderly, the way Scratch held his bread.

When you leave the bathroom, you hear Scratch laughing on the phone. The door is mostly closed, and the rest of your clothes are outside in the hall. As you dress, you move slightly away from the door, into the doorway of another room. "Yeah mon," Scratch is saying. "I'll be over as

soon as Frenchie books. French. Yeah mon, easy as fuck."

Your natural inclination is to explore the side of you that's prone to violence, but you've done enough self exploration for the day. As you walk downstairs, a little boy and girl come bursting through the screen door, running towards you. They are dressed in really old clothes, green and brown corduroys, V-neck purple and yellow T-shirts. They match the house. The little boy stares up at you and smiles, with his hands on his hips. He has giant, bucked teeth.

"Where's my daddy?" the little girl asks.

"Who's your daddy?" you ask back.

"Scratch. My daddy is Scratch. Is he upstairs?" the little boy asks. But before you can answer, he's gone.

The little girl starts to follow, but she turns around and asks, "Who are you?"

"I don't know," you answer. She shrugs and then she runs away. She doesn't understand what you mean.

Ken Heintel

Invisible Hand Molesting

You work their job, you play the game
you whore yourself to stay alive
you bear the dredge and misery
for days and days they're all the same
a deadly price to just survive
as bobbing head in human sea.
You give yourself for who's on top
they set your sights to keep you blind
they sell you justice, God, and dreams
in case you want it all to stop
defuse the thoughts of ticking minds
cause they don't want the proles to see.
You work hard because you're proud
they said that's how you oughta feel
they process hope to keep you free
they sell it on the streets out loud
you swallow whole, then marry, breed
you've got to feed a family
you're in their trap, now just concede.
They sell you fear and drinks and shots
to keep the haze around your eyes
they numb your mind at five o'clock

while all your youth slowly dies.
The way it is, it oughta be
the way it is, it's always been
it doesn't mean a lot to me
dissent's the greatest sin.

The events begin in a Toronto bus depot. There are three people of importance. There is a social worker, on her way to visit her West Indian grandmother, flipping through the "Food for Thought" section in the Thursday edition of the Toronto Tribune.

Roti, she thinks, lamb and spice, this is what I need.

She has bypassed headlines declaring that Ontario's premier will announce which medical services are to be included in the additional twenty-two percent cut; that the Argonauts have advanced to the semi-finals; that rape in the city (Missisauga, Oakville, Brampton and other outlying suburbs not included) is up by six percent. She sees nothing new, nothing she could not have discovered by going to work and doing her job.

The social worker has just lost one of the clients she worked with at a shelter for battered women. She has lost the battle in spirit. The client clings to life through several intravenous tubes after being strangled by her partner with the very telephone cord upon which the social worker, moments before, had castigated the woman for her repeated foolishness. She had announced categorically that this would be the last time she issued a cab to save the woman from these self-imposed catastrophes. The social worker had hung up the phone, dialled "u-need-a" by rote, and while the phone had rung, cursed the battered woman under her breath.

She, the social worker, has come to believe that the desperate cannot change. She sees, in the paper she is about to throw away, a litany of unhappy endings, a sacrosanct collage of infirmity through which one can be assured that we are only human, after all.

The social worker deposits the largely unread paper in a wastebin. She approaches the lunch-counter looking for a publication devoted to fictional atrocities. She is willing, at this time, to support any paper that will distract her with fabricated dysfunction. This is what makes it worthy, the fabrication. She chooses one she has seen stacked up in her grandmother's house. The stories range from the optimistic, *Home-brewed phermones to drive your woman wild*; *SEX!*

Why it's impossible to have too much, to the bizarre, *Cutbacks Schmutbacks; Siamese twins migrate south for separation*, to the celebrity spoof, *Alien baby born to Lisa Marie!* This last one, the social worker thinks mockingly, may well be true.

There is also, in the depot, a man under a hat, a changeling. The sort of man the social worker encounters regularly. The backs of his hands have seen many a cheekbone, swept them hard for their presumptuous stance. He likes his women pure, fluid. There is nothing more satisfying to him than seeing one teeter, falter and finally collapse into a salty pool in which he can cleanse himself. He feels it is what he was made for. To put things in their right place.

He is alone. His partner has managed to evaporate, taking the children with her. But that was many months ago and tonight he is in the depot passing out pamphlets. He has changed, he says. He is renewed. Jesus has renewed him, he tells the social worker. She sees his hands, his biceps, his shoulders. She knows what they can do, smells untruth on his breath. But I saw the light, the man says. Brighter than the ones he makes in the factory in a town called Ingersoll, to which he must return tonight for the graveyard shift. That's right, says the social worker, go make lights. We need lights. She is laughing inside, her hardened face, and he knows. He knows well this prideful laughter. He knows she will pay. That there is a price on unbelief.

They board the bus and the man sits near the front, continuing his entreaties with those who will listen. The social worker takes a seat as far away from him as possible, next to a large and young woman draped in dark velvet. Her eyes shine with adventure, despite the late hour. She is bound for Detroit, she says to the social worker, who hopes to have a mild-mannered seat-mate who will speak lightly of the happenings in her life. The young woman seems eager but refined at the same time, offering the social worker a mix of dates and pecans and then segments of an orange which she has elegantly peeled with a long paring knife.

The caped woman tells the social worker that she is

bound for Detroit to meet the brother she has not seen from childhood. This pleases the social worker: a story of hope, a victory in the tiresome sea of struggle. She settles back in her seat feeling grateful. How did you come to be apart, she asks.

A long time ago, the woman begins, they were there together, the two of them. Her brother, the eldest, and herself. The father, a struggling businessman who also had an interest in theater, was deeply loved but rarely home. Their mother was kind, the daughter of a minister who enjoyed gardening and good conversation. Each evening, assembled around the supper table, would be the most experimental croppers in their small town, to discuss possibilities: the development of a ruby-throated hibiscus, a strain of purple foxglove with velvet tongues, the hypothetical care and culturation of black rosebushes. Much of it was fantasy, the cloaked woman says, but some of it came to pass. The mother had had a particular type of white camellia named after her, the double blessing, which she never lived to see. She died in childbirth with a third child who turned out to have Down's syndrome.

Oh, says the social worker at this point, what a dreadful thing to happen. And you must have been very young.

Yes, says the woman, that was true but she had her brother and her father, who was still good to them until the small one got older and nursemaids were not enough.

And then, the social worker asks.

And then, the woman continues, we were sent away.

Away? You were sent away?

Just the two girls, says the cloaked woman quietly, to a home where they could provide for the little one's needs.

But both of you? says the social worker, unable to contain her speculation.

It wasn't fair, the woman answers, shaking her head to herself. Highway lights illuminate then recede over her somber profile. The faint smell of oranges hangs in the air. The social worker says nothing, as she often does to create space for her clients, which they are often inclined to fill.

The caped woman readdresses the worker with a brightness that belies her momentary introspection. My

father needed me to take care of her, she says, to let him know what was really going on, how we were being treated. When she was little.

The brother stayed on with the father and continued on with the care of the plants he had adopted when the mother had passed on. For how long were you there? the social worker asks. Oh, says the woman, for a very long time it seemed. Until the little one started having accidents.

Accidents, what sort of accidents?

Small ones at first, the woman says, a cut on the finger, a scratch on the cheek. The first serious one was with her ankle. Broken so that the child couldn't walk for months. The father, in a flowing black coat, wielding a walnut walking stick, his moustache waxed to needle points, stormed the establishment like an enormous bat. The impression of him rippling down the hall, the woman says, stays with her because he seemed so much larger to her then, grand. He breathed fire on the caretakers, demanded an explanation. They had no answer, for the child's speech was indiscernible. She had been playing as usual, they said, in the usual places, the swingset, the wading pool, the dining hall. It is only her sister who understands her, they said, why do you not ask her? Stooping in front of her, his stick hitting the floor with a definitive racket, he cupped the chin of his oldest daughter in both hands and the girl knew, from his steady grasp, his shining eyes, that she was to give the right answer. Whatever she said at that moment would become the hinge upon which their lives would turn.

She says she fell on the pavement, the child said slowly, her eyes beginning to burn. Then, burying herself into her father's black folds she said, She says she wants to come home and rest.

She was only playing and fell, said the nurses, you see? We called the doctor immediately. She needs now only to rest.

For a moment, he embraced his daughter to himself completely and then she felt him stiffen. The relief at having some answer, at having some small sense made of things, had taken hold and he resolved in himself not to panic, not to

throw away the nurturing environment he could never recreate for them. He would leave them there but not without first charging his eldest to never leave her sister's side.

The girl hesitated with her answer but her deep feeling for her father and his seeming torment incited in the child a sympathy for him and a devotion toward her sister that was termed, by the staff, as obsessive. The entire time the ankle was healing, and long afterward, she carried the younger child everywhere. Meanwhile, the only news she heard of her brother was through her father. He went on to high school, finished and came home to dabble in their mother's garden. Finally, he'd left for Europe, seeds and bulbs in tow.

We didn't know where he was for the longest time, the woman says. And then we got out. You got out? asks the social worker. Yes, our father died. He died and there was no money to keep us where we were. Goodness, says the social worker, looking dazed, goodness. You have seen it all. How old are you? The woman finds this question to be too personal, but she answers. So young, says the social worker. She herself is thirty-six and has seen many things but that is different. In her line of work she expects to encounter tragedy.

The woman exchange roles and the social worker speaks of her grandmother, how the only urgent matters will be about what to eat at mealtimes and perhaps some small discussion over the town hall meeting that will be printed in the paper. The grandmother lives in a blessedly small town, says the social worker, where very little happens.

There is a sudden explosion like the sound of a giant paper bag popping and the passengers of the bus are thrown from side to side as the bus lurches onto the shoulder. The driver maintains tentative control of the rumbling machine and when they come to a stop he announces that there is a flat tire. Everyone is urged to disembark, to make the change easier.

Standing in the cold October air, the passengers are mostly quiet, their murmuring is subtle and most are exhausted. It is very dark. Some sit by the side of the road smoking, a few assist the driver in unscrewing the nuts

pinning the spare tire to the bus's rusty innards. The social worker stands next to the woman and notices that, in the dark, she appears not to be so large as ungainly with the thick cape wrapped around her. Shining in the distance are the lights of Ingersoll.

See those lights, says the changed man, appearing beside them. The social worker rolls her eyes without being seen. The caped woman thinks he means the city's lights but he is pointing to the sky. Like the first creation, he says. Made new every evening, just like the song says.

How, asks the woman in the cape.

Through the power of the word, he says, without skipping a beat, the power that bids the world to renew itself daily. Like those bulbs I'm priv'ledged to make, he says. All I do is screw 'em in and screw 'em in and every single one of them is going to make somebody somewhere see. Who knows who's seeing, who's getting the word. The man looks at the social worker and asks, you see what I'm sayin'?

The social worker says no, that in her line of work she sees the very fabric of people's lives and it isn't pretty. She hears the same thing over and over again, people stumbling over themselves; in fact, she would prefer not to even talk about it any more.

The woman in the cape asks the man about what he does and he tells about how he retests the bulbs that have been rejected by the autotest unit and the sorts of things that are being made now. In one part of the factory they're experimenting with lasers. They give off this silver purple blue glow, he says, that's like nothing you never seen before. To the social worker's annoyance, he manages to fit in his own story of revival, to which the young woman listens with eyes shining like when the social worker first encountered her on the bus. That same look of wonder. They are all silent for a time. The renewed man pulls out a cigarette and lights it. It makes a small orange globe in the night.

What's taking so long? the social worker wonders aloud, but neither of the others answers.

The man throws down his cigarette, rubs it out with his boot. Well, he says, I think I can even walk from here faster

than this old bus will take me. He slings a fringed suede jacked over his back and makes to go.

Wait, says the woman in the cape, wait. The man looks at her from under his hat.

How far is it from here, she asks.

About a twenty, thirty minute walk through the bush and fields, he says. At this time the corn fields have been harvested and lay fallow.

The woman looks at him steadily, then like a snake in his ear she whispers, take me. Take me to see the purple light.

He looks into her face. He smiles. Sure thing, he says and he picks up his bag and starts across through the long grasses toward the woods. The large woman follows.

The social worker, appalled, calls after her, what about your brother? What about Detroit?

Tomorrow, says the woman.

But he'll be waiting, retorts the worker.

No he's not, says the woman turning back, annoyed. I was going to surprise him.

In shock, the social worker watches the woman amble awkwardly after the man. She decides she cannot leave them alone, leave them to the inevitable. Quickly, the social worker slings her purse across her chest and follows them at a distance, stealthily. She can hear snapping twigs, the man whistling, the caped woman saying nothing. They go along like this for ten minutes, the social worker stepping only as long as she hears steps. Her plan is to stop whenever they stop.

The large woman is dewy-eyed and breathing heavily from the quick pace they are keeping. The cool air exhilarates them all. The man, turning to face her, says, Want to rest a minute?

Sure, she says, catching up in a few lumbering steps. Certainly.

They sit for awhile and despite her resolve, the social worker feels she must get closer to listen. She sees smoke rising in thin waves by the brown lumps on a log that are their silhouettes. She steps until she cracks a branch and ducks to the ground.

What's that? asks the caped woman.

Probably just a raccoon, he says, they like to forage at night.

As they speak the social worker creeps forward just a bit more to hear. The man tells a corny knock-knock joke and the woman laughs in a way that the social worker finds obliging. They talk on and on, their speech becoming to the social worker a long burbling stream in which she is panning for something of significance.

You know, says the man, it's been a long time since I talked to a woman who understands. The large woman chuckles bashfully.

Nope, he says, hardly no one will believe a person can be one way and then be completely another. The social worker sees his smaller outline move closer to the other. The woman giggles again and then is quiet. Both the social worker and the man await her next words with anxiety. Finally she says she does understand him. She has spent a lot of time being misunderstood herself so she understands completely. She says that she's felt she's had to hide a lot, had to lie, but now she wants to start again, to be new, just like he's been talking about.

They sit still so long that the social worker's legs begin to ache. She sees the man's arm in the air, then down again, around the woman.

Gee, the woman says, I didn't ever expect it to happen like this.

Me either, says the man. The trails of cigarette smoke, the social worker notices, have been replaced by broad clouds of steam, emitting in a frequent pulse. Like a steer in winter, she thinks.

There is rubbing, rustling of leaves and clothes, and then the social worker gets her first glimpse of gold in the brook. The woman says, Wait.

I don't want anything but to hold you close, says the man. That's all.

They don't move. The man slowly removes his arm, lights another cigarette, puts it back. I'm not ready, the woman

says.

Why so scared, the man inquires, I'm not asking for anything darlin' but to hold you. The social worker suspects he is already holding her hard. You ready for us to know each other better or not?

At this point the woman starts to move away but is hindered. Move over, she says. The hatted man fumbles around her, pulling, muttering. Can't get this thing off, he says.

Wait, the woman calls. The social worker takes this as her cue and flies at the squatting pair, grabbing the woman by the arm. By sheer willpower and momentum, she yanks the woman off the fallen branch they've been seated on, hurling her out of the saved man's single-armed embrace.

Come on, she shouts to the caped woman. Come on let's g--

But she is silenced. It is what she sees that prevents the social worker from speaking further. One end of the woman's cape is where it has been all along, caught in the bark a short distance away from where the man is sitting. His cigarette has dropped from his lips and is smoldering in a bed of leaves between his feet. The remainder of the cape lays rippled on the ground like a black lake; the other end is secured to a worn leather harness. In this harness is a leg, a very pale blue underdeveloped leg, like that of a stricken child. With the paring knife in hand, the woman holds the social worker and man at point but it is not the knife which keeps them in place. Before them, uncaped and trembling, is the woman who is not one woman but two. She is the woman they have seen and spoken to and, in the same shirt, is the face of another who looks like her, except the eyes on the second face are sloped with Down's syndrome. She appears entirely worn, desolate. The social worker wants to scream or cry but finds she cannot. The saved man's eyes have gone glassy, neither does he move; it looks as if he may vomit.

You've spoiled it, the woman screeches at the worker, couldn't you butt out? The other face seems unalarmed at this outburst, resting on the short expanse of shoulder between the two necks, peering dreamily through half-closed

eyes. Her sister's face softens as she gazes upon the saved man who is staring at the dirt. I meant it, Dan, she says in a voice that shakes, I meant that I want to be new. But the changed man is shaking his head without looking up, he rises, rubbing his face with both hands.

You see, the woman hisses at the social worker. All you civil servants! Her face has taken on a hardened pallor, as if it is encased in alabaster.

No, the sleepy face abruptly begs, no 'urt. The cotton-tongued pleading continues as the woman repeatedly plunges the knife at the social worker, who dodges the first attempt, then finds herself stumbling backwards into a limp-limbed pine tree. The double-headed woman mutters through teeth clenched like a dog's. A slash cuts the social worker's arm.

Eeny.

The social worker cries out for help, calls on the woods to save her. The knife digs into her left shoulder.

Meeny.

The woman struggles to pin the social worker but she keeps stumbling among the branches. Over and over, the pine needles pierce her back. The woman puts a gash on the social worker's upper neck and in her left eye before the saved man can yank the uncaped woman to the ground. He fights to straddle her chest and then, with a single blow, knocks the woman senseless. He does this and then collapses at her side, breathing hard, petrified. The only sound he hears is that of the woman's twin weeping, crooning like an abandoned baby owl.

The social worker awakes in the hospital to see her grandmother at her side. She has brought with her curried lamb roti. The sight and smell of her grandmother brings tears to the one eye that is not swathed in bandages.

Gran, she says, there was this horrible, horrible woman. With two heads.

Yes, yes, says the grandmother quickly, wanting to stop her from reimagining the events. I know, she says. I had already just read about those crazies.

In the paper, says the social worker, they were in the paper?

Who else could it be, says the grandmother, trying to make light of things. There's only so many people with two heads. Sleep now.

The social worker wearily obeys her grandmother's command. She is comfortable as she sleeps but when the medication wears off she will be in excruciating pain. A few months from now, she will completely lose use of the damaged eye.

The twins, locked up once again, lost any chance of living separate lives. The will exhaust the remainder of their days bound together in an uneasy truce.

As for the man, it was with him as he said it would be. He was saved.

William Pembrooke

Last Tango With Beckett

"Gimme the butter," he said.
"I don't have the butter," she said.
"Gimme the butter," he said.
She did not move.

Jeremy Motsch

Paint Me the Sky

The days are restless
scattering leaves in
the wind. So you want to be
James Dean when are you
going to crash? So fast
so low dressed up and
ready to go
out just like a Christmas tree
waiting to explode.

I never thought it would come to this.
I never thought at all.
You're racing to keep up
amphetamines and falling fast.
Did you want to be a shooting star
taking shots of NyQuil No-Doze
you're burning out it's no wonder
everything's a blur.

Just paint me the sky before
you go so fast so low.
I've forgotten to write
it all seems so long ago
I've forgotten what it means.
These days aren't what they
used to be. They never really were.
You're speeding along quite nicely
are you going to crash so fast so
low on the home stretch racing to
the horizon.

Theresa Keefer

After Work

He arrives home
two hours late,
went to get gas,
or so he says.
She doesn't say a
word,
just puts this hurt
on the pile in her
memory.
They eat,
silence a wall be-
tween them.
Then his mind fuses
with the TV fanta-
sies.
She does laundry
and cries.
Small tremors
before the quake.

Andrew Dobosh

Speed of Life

Lights of cars become
streaking comets under
the veil of night.
Forms of buildings lose shape without
light, and no one is moving.

Yet I speed on.

Toward my destination
known as home where
I sit and think and moan.
A place where I can rest my bones
after a long day is gone away.

Yet I speed on.

Secure in my car of blue
that often makes me think of you.
Whoever you may be.
Now I think of all the yous that sat beside
me. Those yous whom I loved,
those yous who never amounted to
anything.
These are the thoughts that keep me
there
in my place of memory where all is dear
and my mind is free.

Yet I speed on.

And the road melts away until
I'm sliding on a track of time that helps
me see and soothes my mind until I wish

I was asleep.
My mouth is still, my eyes are still, my
gentle breathing calms me.
The radio plays a strange tune,
so strange I want to leave the room
and step outside of my mind and leave the
memories behind--back inside the dark
insides of the car that carries me home.

And I speed on.

Through the streets of a sleeping town
where people are in bed
where the shades are down.
The place I call my home.
It calls to me from the empty streets
and sings a homely song.
A simple song that I know well, a song
that tells me I am there.
I'm in the town that's all slowed down,
and the bars are starting to empty.
Where people get drunk to forget where
they are,
and wake up to the same reality.
Where everyone wants out, but no one
leaves and no one makes them stay.

And I speed home.

Up the hill and make a right
to the street that's seen my face
and felt my feet, and
keeps the houses nice and neat--

and brings a sense of home.
Now I park the car outside my house,
and open the door to cold air and snow
that blows my hair over my eyes
and whistles in my ears.
The door that I open creaks its welcome
as I navigate among the house's
welcoming walls.

And I speed on.

And I write:
I write in this book to remember,
and as I write, I speed on
toward the future, the inevitable tomorrow
that I know will come.
And I write toward sleep
with every pen stroke on the page,
with every word I get closer to a
warm bed and soft pillow.
Home is where I am, like a womb it
protects me, keeps me warm.
Now I long for the bed where I will rest
my head, and wake up to sunshine
dripping through my closed blinds.

And I say Goodnight.

Goodnight to night that took the light and
makes the day seem so bright.
Good night sweet town you have shut
down and you rest until the sun is high.
Then you and I will sing again and we

will wait for night.
Good night old friends who help me see
the errors of my ways.
Goodnight to everyone out there under
this sky; sleeping, dreaming, making
love, crying, dying.
Lighting your last cigarette,
drinking the last of your beer.
Rest your heads, we'll see you tomorrow.
When you wake up, renewed by the life
you're given, and happy to be alive.

It wasn't till they were actually going to the wedding that Sue said Chub might be there. Billy groaned and bitched at first, but figured he could have fun getting Chub drunk and making him puke. Sue's aunt was getting married to husband number two, and Billy was her date. Billy looked forward to constant gin and tonics from the open bar at the reception. Chub being there was just an added bonus. Chub (Jerry to his mom) was Billy and Sue's pet project, in high school.

Billy kept bringing up the night Sue had let Chub kiss her full on the lips with a hint of tongue. It was more or less a kiss between friends; it was a demonstration to Chub of a romantic kiss. When Sue told Billy after it happened he had laughed until his sides hurt and was gasping for air. "I still don't know why you did that."

"I just kissed him so he'd know what it was like. I screwed up because he tried to kiss me every time after," Sue answered sourly. Sue asked if he were going to see Jackie now that they were back in Cleveland. Billy didn't want to talk about it.

He stretched and yawned in the cramped powder blue Dodge Omni, and tried to keep his rented tux from wrinkling. "Shit, she probably got out just like we did," Billy said. "We aren't the only smart ones." His face turned pink. She shouldn't have mentioned Jackie.

"Why are we smart again?" Sue sighed, held the wheel with her knee, passed her fingers through straight long blond hair, and reached for a cigarette. "She'll be around, if you look for her."

Billy rummaged through the stack of tapes on the car floor. "Why -- you want to be alone with Chub? I guess I could find something to do." He jammed a tape in the car's player. "I really should return some of these tapes. Mrs. Ostlander is starting to notice."

"Bay City isn't Cleveland. You lose that job, where will you be?" Sue had decided to be negative.

Billy felt slighted. Billy Benson and Sue Panella had gone to school together all their lives. They had both moved to Michigan and lived together. Sue had gone because of a job with Dow Chemical. Billy had gone on a whim. He had family

there, so he knew the area. It was his summer home as a kid. They had come a long way, but she still got upset by things like ex-girlfriends and petty theft.

He wasn't mad about anything she did with Chub. Chub was a stuffed toy, a straw man, just a friend. Sue could have slept with him and Billy almost wouldn't have been jealous.

"You'd still support me wouldn't you," he asked. He thought she would even if they weren't really together. "Besides, a librarian can get a job anywhere. Ask Gramps. It's good honest work just like delivering the mail, and there's always work." Like driving the bookmobile out to Reese and Munger: it was boring, but he made enough and the work was simple.

Sue didn't say anything right away. She looked at the road ahead, puffed at her smoke, went blank behind her sunglasses. "It'll be good to see Chub again." She smoothed out her dress.

"If he calls me Will, I'll strangle him," said Billy.

The family gathered at St. Francis' before the wedding. Billy looked good, all decked out in rented finery. Sue wore a simple, long black dress. Chub was standing outside the church when they arrived. Chub was still broad, but all the baby fat was gone and he no longer looked like a barrel on legs. Billy hadn't expected that. While Sue smiled wide and hurried to greet Chub, Billy hung back and shambled forward at a leisurely pace.

It had been Billy's job to tear Chub apart, to knock him down. Jerry was pretty smart, but overproud of the fact. Billy hit him on a social level, gave him a nickname that stuck. If Chub attempted a conversation, Billy responded with nonsense. If Chub responded with nonsense, Billy was deadly serious. The only way Chub could win was by losing. The only question now was would this new improved Chub, who managed to lay off the burgers, react the same way.

"Jerry, it's been so long, and you look good," Sue gushed. Sue always stroked Chub's ego. She flaunted herself in front of him.

Chub flushed a little. "Well, I've been working out, you

know. How are you doing, Will?" Chub offered his hand.

Billy cringed at the name, but shook hands vigorously. "Well, since I got out of here I'm doing just fine. Man, nice grip, you sure have been working out. How's your sex life, Chub?" Billy turned a critical eye at Chub's navy blue suit. It was crisp and clean. Billy made a move to smooth out his lapels.

Chub frowned, his face reddened a shade. "Same as ever, Will." He noticed Billy's tux. "Geez, with you around I feel underdressed. Are you part of the bridal party?"

"No, Chub, for some occasions only the best will do, and well, I look my best in a tux." Billy brushed some non-existent lint off Chub's shoulder.

Sue laughed. "Please, Billy would have wore a suit but he doesn't own one."

Chub chimed in. "After all these years, Will, you still don't have a suit? What about work?"

Billy fiddled with the keys in his pocket. "Don't need a suit to be a librarian, Chub." He turned to look at Sue. "Shouldn't you be mingling? I mean, they are your family."

Chub held out his arm for Sue to take, and Billy followed his lead. Together they walked into the church, Billy on one side of Sue, Chub on the other.

In the crowded church entrance Sue slipped away to greet family. Most of Sue's relations were happy to see Billy and Chub. They knew a lot of the wedding guests. Sue's dad, Mr. Panella, loved to barbecue, and Billy and Chub liked to eat. So, they had met the family over potato salad and baked beans.

Matronly great aunts beamed at them. Assorted old people shook hands or hugged them, occasionally asking Billy how life up north was. Some people just remembered them as "the boys" or "Sue's boys." Billy put on the bland smiling face he used when dealing with people he didn't want to deal with or offend. Chub was more animated and remembered more names than Billy did. Billy's reward of an open bar crept closer with each tick of the clock.

The family assumed Billy was Sue's boyfriend. She didn't deny it. It was too difficult to explain why they weren't

together. Sue never said anything about the subject. Billy didn't like blonds, and Sue was very blond, thin, with rare green eyes. In the old days, Jackie Wetter was his style. Kinky black hair, dark eyes, and a body shaped by years of dance and cheerleading.

Billy had once made the mistake of trying to explain to Sue how it felt to hold a dancer. "It's very different from holding a regular girl." Billy talked fast, face flushed. "A dancer is heavy, not fat, but heavy. They have muscle, and muscle weighs more than fat. You don't expect them to be so heavy. They look soft, delicate, but they have strength. You can't see that just looking at them."

Billy craned his neck looking for someone he knew well enough to talk to, besides Chub. His mom was supposed to be there, but he didn't see her. Even Chub was preferable to the crowd of half-familiar strangers around him.

"So, so. Chub, exactly what are you doing here," asked Billy. "Yeah, you know the family, but you're not a close family friend."

Chub smiled wide. "It's funny, Will, but I know both sides. The groom is my boss, and what's more, I'm kinda working the reception. See, the groom owns a catering company, and well I'm his assistant, and once Lynn, Mrs. Panella found out she invited me to everything."

Billy thought it over. "Hmm, pretty interesting." Billy never called Sue's mom Lynn. It made sense though, a former fat man as caterer. "I guess the job suits you, you always were into food."

Chub excused himself, saying he had some arrangements to take care off. Billy smiled contentedly as he watched Chub scurry away. He was feeling all right until he saw Sue's Uncle Sal. Uncle Salvatore could be a real problem.

"So you're still living with Sue," Uncle Sal asked Billy before the wedding. He smiled, showing lots of teeth, and shook Billy's hand. He held it for a moment longer than was normal. "You know she's my favorite niece, right?" Salvatore's voice dropped down low. "Be nice to her Billy." He smiled again, clapped Billy on the back, turned and asked the rest of the family, "Are we here for a wedding or what?"

Normally, Sue would have been near him, keeping some of the pressure off him. He was out of place, and even Chub had deserted him. Billy watched Sue flit in and out of the crowded church entry with fluid grace. Tall, cool, perfectly collected in her black dress, Billy watched her chat idly with people she hadn't seen in three years. The five hour drive and a forty hour week kept her from attending many family functions. She was punishing him. She left him with Chub; now he had to tough it out alone. He'd earn that open bar. When he lost sight of her he figured that she, dying for a cigarette, had slipped out the church doors.

Billy avoided Great Aunt Clara. She was old and crazy and always mistook Billy for someone named Fred. He spotted his mother talking to Mr. and Mrs. Panella, Sue's parents. She waved when she saw him. Billy waved back but didn't go over; he didn't want to talk to Sue's parents right now. And he noticed Chub standing over there. He could only imagine the conversation going on over there.

Mr. and Mrs. Panella, while they liked Billy and were pretty liberal people, regarded Sue's living with Billy as wrong. It's not that they were living in sin, that bothered them Sue had explained, it's just they didn't think it was natural.

Mrs. Benson, Billy's mom, thought that Billy living with Sue was great. She didn't buy that Sue and Billy had a purely platonic relationship. She always gave Billy a sly wink, and asked how Sue was. Mrs. Benson hoped Billy would marry Sue, and she took every opportunity to remind him.

The worst part was that parents adored Chub, probably because he was so inoffensive and polite. A bootlicker. It was the same in high school. When Billy was dating Jackie, Sue cleaned Chub up a little. She introduced Chub to other girls who decided that Chub was sensitive and cute. He became their eunuch. Billy always expressed disgust at Chub's becoming a "chick-friend." It seemed he was "parent-friend" as well.

Leaving Chub with Sue's parent's seemed dangerous. Billy walked over, and butted in to the conversation. The conversation suddenly stopped as Billy approached the little group of parents and Chub. "I hope I'm not interrupting

anything."

"You look pretty snazzy today, son." Mrs. Benson beamed at him. "Doesn't he clean up nice, Lynn?"

Mrs. Panella forced a little smile on her face. "You look handsome today, Billy."

Billy accepted the compliments with a nod. "Do any of you mind if I steal Chub away from you all for a little while. We have lots to catch up on." Not waiting for an answer Billy took Chub by the arm.

The wedding went well. Mr. Panella, Sue's grandfather was dead, so Mr. Panella, her father, walked Aunt Selene down the aisle. Even though this was Aunt Selene's second wedding, she wore a dress that was only a shade off from pure white. Aunt Selene always got what she wanted. Billy sat on one side of Sue, Chub on the other, even though Billy thought it would have been more appropriate for Chub to sit on the groom's side. Everyone cried at the appropriate parts, and Chub offered a handkerchief to Sue before Billy even thought of it.

Billy couldn't understand a word of the Mass. Much of the service was conducted in Latin. Aunt Selene wanted it that way, and she usually got what she wanted. During the Mass Billy leaned over to Sue and whispered to her. "Chub will probably tell us all the mistakes the priest made after it's over."

Sue shushed him and smoothed out her black dress. Billy did his duty, waited for the open bar, and thought of what he might say to Chub.

Chub used to have the annoying habit of finding mistakes in everything. "Did you notice the continuity errors in the film?" Chub asked once after they had seen a film together.

Sue shook her head. "No, I was busy watching the movie, not studying it." She lit a cigarette.

"Chub, does your ass pump like that one guy's did when you're having sex?" asked Billy. It was said in the same neutral tone people use when asking a stranger the time. "Or do you not know because you can't see yourself when you're doing it?" Billy's expression was thoughtful.

All Billy needed Chub to do was say: "Did you notice how

the priest botched the Latin?" and Billy would have his place again.

The reception was in a hall that amounted to no more than a big room with a dance floor, and a smaller room off to the side with a bar. Aunt Selene liked parties and entertaining. She was Sue's favorite aunt.

Sue and Billy found their table. Chub had arrived separately because he had catering things to do, but Billy was sure Chub would be sitting with them. Their table consisted of assorted cousins close to Sue in age, Billy, Sue, and, as expected, Chub. He knew Angela, the one who never smiled, and Lizzy, the really dumb one. Billy headed straight for the bar. He ordered whiskey neat and a gin and tonic for Sue. He'd hold off on the gin himself until after he was nicely buzzed.

Sue left him at the bar with the lame excuse that she had to mingle. "You can come along if you want, I'm just going to go see Aunt Clara and all them."

Billy swigged down his drink. "Hey, do what you have to do. I understand the whole family thing. I just wish your cousins were cuter or something." He motioned to the bartender for another whiskey. "Maybe after a couple more of these they'll look better. Maybe Chub will get lucky tonight. You'll know where to find me."

"Don't get too far ahead of me. And be nice to Chub, for me, please?" She turned and swished her way out of the bar toward the huge mob that was related to her, family she had moved a state away from. Sue probably didn't care to mingle, but she wanted Billy to stew, to pickle, for awhile.

Alcohol loosened him up. Maybe he would dance later. Billy, surrounded largely by indifferent strangers, could afford to be nice. Billy was charming, and handsome. Aunt Selene, the bride herself, had made one of those comments that went something like if only she were younger and weren't getting married he'd be hers.

"I knew you would be here." Chub chuckled and ordered a beer. "So what's shaking, pal?" Chub was in the mood for some male bonding. "I see Jackie every once in a while. Have

you talked to her lately?" Chub had made his first mistake: he killed Billy's buzz.

Billy's insides, already warm from Irish whiskey, got warmer. He groaned. The flush on his face wasn't from alcohol. "Listen, Chub, let me explain something to you. We're at this wedding, okay, there's a bar and we're probably going to be here all night. So, you have to remember the bartender." Billy saw Chub wasn't getting his point. "Tip 'em. He's going to be giving us drinks all night and I want my drinks before everybody." Billy threw a five onto the counter.

Sue sauntered back in, and wrapped her arm around Chub's neck. "Is this where all the eligible young men are hanging out?" Sue held sway here, audience and prize.

Chub chuckled at Sue's wit. "Yep. And Billy's just chastising me for not tipping."

Billy turned back to the bar before the disgust on his face showed. He said the word and three shots of whiskey appeared on the counter. Billy downed all three one after another. He might need them. Billy turned back to the over-actors and shrugged. "I'm just trying to teach the boy the tricks."

"I'm sure i'll know everything about bar etiquette when I get to be an old drunk like you, Will. I'm just a beginner; I'm allowed to make mistakes." Chub leaned on Sue, using her to support his all too sober weight.

Billy ordered three more shots. More whiskey, going for straight Jack Daniels. Chub was a big boy so he should be able to handle it. Of course, he never was much of a drinker. "I ordered you a man's drink there, quit nursing that beer and down it. There's more where that came from"

Chub lifted up his shot glass, blanched at the smell. He turned to Billy, glass raised. "Cheers."

Billy set down his glass and grabbed Chub's arm, stopping him from downing his drink. "Never say 'cheers.' It makes you sound like a pansy." He looked over and saw that Sue had already slammed her drink down. "You jumped the gun, Susie. We'll just have to get you another one."

Sue jumped the gun three more times, before she noticed Billy and Chub were stopping each time. "Billy Benson, are

you trying to get me drunk?" She lost her balance and her ears got red.

Billy, straight faced, said, "Yes, yes, I am trying to get you drunk." Billy downed his own shot. "I think they're serving dinner now."

Chub, slightly flushed, became flustered. "Damn, I'm supposed to be orchestrating some of that."

Billy ordered a gin and tonic and grabbed Sue by the waist. "Let's go eat."

Right before the food was about to be served Sue came to the table and sent Billy to get her a drink. Billy, perfect gentleman and oblivious to food, went with a boozy smile. She ordered for him, gave him her helping of those little potatoes he liked.

Dinner went well. Billy was mildly amusing, her cousins laughed, except for unsmiling Cousin Angela. Chub probably wasn't happy that Billy kept offering him food. Billy would fill a huge plate then suddenly lose his appetite and set the plate in front of Chub. Sue stifled laughs between mouthfuls of food and cocktails.

They sat on opposite sides of Sue. Chub kept trying to talk to her while Billy was busy drawing all eyes towards him.

Sue whispered to Billy to knock it off. "You really shouldn't be so mean to him. He's still really sensitive about his weight."

Billy stopped his little show and started sipping his alcohol quietly. He waited for Chub to lead a conversation.

"Maybe you should make a toast, Sue," Chub suggested earnestly. "Selene is your favorite aunt, right?"

"I don't know. It doesn't seem right for me." Sue tore a roll apart and popped part of it in her mouth. Chewing, she asked, "You're the groom's friend, aren't you? Maybe you should make a toast."

Billy piped up. "Listen, Chub, I've got the perfect toast. Okay, got a drink?" He looked to see that everyone did have a drink. He winked at Sue. "This is perfect, fits in with the whole love, honeymoon thing and everything." Billy raised his glass. "To honor. To being honored. And when you fall to get back on her." He drained his drink dry before he broke out

chuckling. It was an old toast.

Chub paused before he took a drink; he glanced at Sue to see if she was drinking. She was, so he did.

"It's a good toast, Chub. It always makes 'em chuckle. At least, I always get a kick out of it." Billy smacked his lips and stared in the direction of the bar.

Sue rubbed up against Chub like a cat. "Yeah, it goes over great with women." She stared at Billy while she talked into Chub's ear. "But, it's not bad advice." Sue made like she was going to lick Chub's ear.

Chub stood up. His face was flushed, his suit unwrinkled. He offered his hand to Sue. "The bar or the dance floor, Sue? Where shall I take you?"

Sue grinned, placed her pale slender hand in Chub's. "The dance floor, Jerry, if you don't mind."

Billy stifled a laugh, then sulked as they walked out on the floor where the bridal party was starting to dance.

Sue was dancing, and she examined Chub. After the last shot, Chub had just stopped. He sat very still, a half-finished beer in his hand, probably unaware that Sue was leaning in to him, mocking him.

He wanted to laugh at Chub.

Billy hit the bar and started drinking beer. He stood in the doorway and watched the dancers dance. Chub kept a safe distance away from Sue during the slow dances; he had no clue how to dance to anything with a beat.

Several beers got Billy moving toward the dance floor. Loose and pliable with drink, he shambled along, looking for Sue. Fast songs brought about a wild shuffling from him which Sue endured. Slow songs were better. He danced with old ladies, and even the bride. They asked if he was having a nice time. Billy nodded. He had smiled good-naturedly at everyone.

He saw Sue and Chub, and when the current song ended, he walked over and tapped Chub on the shoulder. "Excuse me."

"Oh, you want to cut in, Will." Chub stepped away from Sue.

"No, Chub, you're the one trying to cut in." Billy smirked at

Chub, and drew Sue close to him. There was no distance between Billy and Sue. The music started and Billy winked at Chub.

"A little cryptic weren't you, Billy?" Sue asked. She rested her head on his shoulder.

Billy felt heavy, and boozy. "Not really, Sue. I just know that you'll be going home with me." He was afraid he had drunk too much and might fall asleep on her.

They stopped dancing when it was time to catch the bouquet. Sue stood up front, with her arms across her chest. Aunt Selene didn't throw it over her shoulder like usual. She should have just given the thing to Sue. Instead she tossed it right at Sue's face. Sue caught it and everyone applauded.

Billy was slapped on the back by Sue's relatives for the rest of the night. Selene winked at him.

At the end of the night Billy and Sue went home together. Chub drove because they were both too drunk to drive. Billy, in the back seat of Chub's car with Sue, told him to take it easy with the bumps.

Zia Teresa reads me Dante on I 71:
"*Qual é colui che grande inganno ascolta*
che li sia fatto, e poi se ne rammarca,

fecesi Flegiàs ne l'ira accolta."
All three lanes have braked to a maddening stop.
An accident? Road work? We lean out of our

Windows as far as we can for some sign, sit here
Steaming. It's unreasonably hot for May.
The young make the best of it -- turn off their engines,

Turn up their stereos, get out and dance
In the space between cars. A man opens his trunk
And takes out two cold beers. We lurch forward

One car-length at a time past those who can't make it,
Stalled on both berms, hoods propped up, radiators
Smoking. The green of trees and weeds undulates

Through the air vibrating above hot metal. Fry
An egg? Hell! A two-inch-thick filet well done!
Feeling the motor's heat against my legs, I pull

My skirt to the edge of decency and spread
My knees. The indicator, thank God, is still
Poised between "C" and "H." "Why us?" I rage.

"What did we do to deserve this? We obey
The laws, carry insurance, . . . " At last -- four miles
In forty minutes, still in first gear (Hell,

I could run home faster than that) -- we reach
The bottleneck: a bridge coned down to one lane,
But nothing going on. I fume. Teresa snores,

The opened *Inferno* rising and falling
On her chest. Across the median the southbound
Sinners are backed up for miles. But we've escaped,

Dispersing from the chute like buckshot, vying
For that fast lane back into the world of
Blowing hair and short-sleeved blouses buxom with air,

Ballooning out like windsocks. Oh, if I believed
I could warn those going so blithely south,
If they could avoid their fate -- turn back or exit

Before the cones transform them into helpless sheep,
I'd shout. But knowing they are doomed, I look
Ahead, watching the pointer move rapidly up

And pass the zenith. Teresa wakes and finds her place:
"Like one convinced that he has been the butt
Of gross deception, and bursting to complain,
Phlegyas held his wrath."

My brother Dale calls me a week after Laura and I break up and invites me down for the weekend. His landlord's mother has a tree in her yard that was damaged by a storm and needs to come out. I decide to go because I haven't seen him or his wife Judy and Debbie and Jennie since Christmas, partly because it is spring break and I'm going to go somewhere on general principle. But I go mainly to get away for a while.

I leave Sheffield at one o' clock. It stormed last night, the freezing rain glistening silver and white on the naked branches as it thaws. It's fifty-five outside, the wind wet with cold, but I roll the window down anyway and put a John Coltrane tape in. I light a cigarette as I turn right onto Route 83 south and then I'm off. 83 South to 18 East through downtown Medina, then South over the railroad tracks and a dead opossum, fresh and red, onto Route 3 towards Rittman, then left onto highway 76 East, then twelve minutes until the third Barberton exit, the last one before Akron.

I should be starting my two o' clock "Milton, Dante and Virgil" class at Cleveland State University right now. Yesterday, I went before Dean of Students Carey about the fight last Friday. Laura and I had had it out that afternoon and I was pretty well plowed. I was coming back from the bathroom, when this preppy asshole said something to me, and I honestly couldn't even tell Dean Carey what it was he said that set me off so bad. Not good. After the fight, security got me on the way out of Viking Hall. Dean Carey will let me know his decision on Monday at ten o' clock.

I go right off the exit ramp onto Butternut Ridge road, past two car dealerships, an Arthur Treacher's fish and chips, four stoplights, five gas stations, and two sides of dirty white and brick houses. I turn left into the parking lot and pull into a spot near the center of the "T" of rowhouse apartments. It's ten after two.

Debbie is outside their apartment at the other end of the "T," chasing a furry brown and grey calico cat. Judy sticks her

head out the door and yells at her to come back for her coat. She doesn't see me until I'm almost to their sidewalk. "Getting some peace and quiet?" I ask.

"Hey! You just missed him." She comes onto their porch. "The computers went down, and they needed him to come in and help get them up and running. Debbie! Get away from that driveway!" The cat darts under a blue Chevy S-10 truck. Judy smiles. "Guess who's here, Debbie?"

"Unca Tom!" I wince and Judy laughs. She comes running, blond hair bouncing over her pink sweatshirt, snow pants going zip-zop-zip-zop all the way across the slushy grass. Judy keeps her in snow pants until mid-April to keep laundry simple. She comes up to my left side with her arms stretched over her head. I put my gym bag down, raise my arm and she catches it on the run, swinging like a monkey. Until last Thanksgiving, she had liked to climb up and sit on my shoulders and then hang upside down on my back until my arms got sore.

"You being good?" She jumps down and readjusts her sweatshirt. Her blue eyes dart from side to side and then to the ground and up and then she smiles.

"Yeah"

"You sure?" She isn't. "Who's the cat?"

"Foofer."

"Foofer?" This is a new one. When they lived in Westlake, it was a neighbor's fat white and grey Persian, who all of a sudden stopped coming back for meals.

Judy hurries Debbie to the porch. "He's a stray. Lives down the hill in those woods down there." She motions past the driveway and parking lot to our right. "Take off those boots before you go inside!"

"I am." She sits on the edge of the porch.

"And don't get sassy. Be quiet!" she whispers loudly, "Your sister's sleeping!" We step to the door and remove our shoes. I place my gym bag and coat on the beige flowered chair on my left. We tiptoe over the crayons and dinosaur

coloring book on the brown carpet. Barney, the purple Antichrist, cavorts on the muted television screen on the far wall. Jennie is curled up in a green blanket on the couch, her strawberry blond curls resting on a Cleveland Browns throw pillow. "So how's your mother doing?"

"Same as always." We talk softly now that we're in the kitchen. "Doing ten million things at once, somehow getting half of them done." I shake my head and sit at the table. Mom replaced our father with financial planning. He died of a massive coronary on the operating table at George Washington University Hospital emergency room, three years and one month before Reagan came in the same doors. I was six, Dale was twelve. I woke up at seven for school, and mom got a phone call as I was eating chocolate Malt-O-Meal with orange juice and Roman Meal toast with butter, and then he was gone, just like when he went to Philadelphia or Houston or New Jersey to clean up chemical plants.

"So. They keeping you young?" I motion to Debbie, coloring in front of the T.V.

"Don't I wish," she laughs. "Oh, dearie me. Jennie was up coughing most of the night, so I couldn't sleep, then Dale came in about one thirty, and he took over with her. He finally got to bed about eight, then Debbie woke him up about eleven thirty, so he just stayed up. The usual." She laughs again, then sighs. "Debbie starts kindergarten in the fall, so he's going to try to get on days so he can be here more when they're up."

"The joys of parenthood." I shake my head. Something faint comes from the other room.

"Mommy, Skeeter's up." Debbie gets up in her snow pants, zip-zops to the T.V. and turns up Barney.

"Coming. She's gonna want to eat now." She gets up and goes into the other room, untucking her shirt.

"I'm going to go out back for a minute, okay?"

"Okee Dokee," she sings. I walk to the sliding glass door

next to the table and realize I don't have any shoes on. I walk back across the living room and slide on my shoes. "Just flip the lock up and then slide the door open, then put it back up or you'll lock yourself out."

"Okee Dokee." I take a cigarette out of my coat pocket and open the sliding glass door onto the porch. The air tastes good. Outside on the broken concrete porch, there is a rusty orange bike with training wheels and a much abused maroon grill, tipped over from water and snow collecting in it. Very domestic. Dale got religion about five years ago, officially and for all time ending his hell raising days. He met Judy at church. She was divorced and had Debbie with an asshole who once gave vodka to his six year old cousin. Dale and Judy married three years ago. It was a hundred degrees plus in that chapel, a ripe Saturday afternoon in August. I was the best man and I almost fainted, swooning in that monkey suit of a powder blue tux. I remember wishing for the relative comfort of my football pads at the Junior Varsity game I was missing. Debbie had already been calling him "Daddy" for a year.

Dale and I were inseparable when we were younger, resulting in me getting the nickname "Chip" around the neighborhood, after the cartoon chipmunks, until I beat up George Clarke at a pickup baseball game in fifth grade. In the basement, we watched science fiction and horror religiously on Super Host's Saturday Afternoon Theater. Dale would let me come into his room in the old house on Forest Hill and listen to AC/DC and Cheap Trick and Motorhead or Blue Oyster Cult with him, and he would let me read his books and magazines about history and ships, World War II and science fiction. He didn't mind me going in to read when he was off lifeguarding at the hotel pool. He didn't even beat the hell out of me when I found the magazine that changed my life when I was 10. To this day, I'm partial to brunettes.

Then I think about Laura " . . . seeing other people . . . "

at Ohio State for a second or two and I take a deep hit from the cigarette. "...We're young and I think we should see other people.. " Yeah. Fuck you and your form letter bullshit.

"Unca Tom." The door behind me slides open and Debbie sticks her head out.

"Yes, ma'am." I throw the cigarette into a mud puddle and turn around.

"Are you staying all weekend?"

"Yes I am." I kneel down beside her. "Your daddy needs some help with some work tomorrow, then I'm going home Sunday."

"Oh. Where's Laura?"

"She's at school in Columbus."

"She's not coming this time?"

"No." I walk inside and take off my shoes. "She's not coming."

"Why not?" She turns her head to the side, eyebrows knitting.

"We...we're not boyfriend and girlfriend any more."

"Oh. She was nice." She turns away from me as I close the door, hard. "Are you going to Sunday school with us?"

I stop for a minute. "Sure." I'm an Easter and Christmas churchgoer, but what the hell. "Do you have any other tapes besides Barney to watch?"

"Yeah. We got a lot of scary tapes." She turns and trots through the kitchen, into the family room, and opens a cabinet next to the T.V. after baseball sliding into a sitting position in front of it. I follow and quickly turn off Barney. She pulls out a tape with Roger Corman's "Masque of the Red Death" and several others dubbed on it and snaps it into the VCR.

"Debbie, settle down." Judy says from the couch, gently this time.

"I am."

I remove my gym bag from the chair next to the door and

sit down, and try to not think.

Judy stays up until eleven thirty after putting the girls to bed, and we talk about school and how are things back in Sheffield (fine), how do I enjoy being at Cleveland State University versus Lorain County Community College (a lot more people, a lot of fun; the food is better, but there is a lot of racial shit going on), what I'm going to do when I get out (not sure, work for a newspaper or go to drama school).

After she goes up, I try to work on my resume at the kitchen table. I can't get my mind clear, so I stop and end up looking for patterns in the carpet. About twelve thirty I go down the hill next to the driveway into the woods and smoke a joint, then I'm able to shut my mind up for a while when I come back inside.

I lay on the couch and turn the T.V. on, but I just look at the room. It is as light as day in here even without any lamps on, just from the moonlight. Everything glows in a white blue haze. It is so bright I notice shadows from the lamp on the chair across from me. Behind me I notice the bride and groom from their wedding cake on some sort of wooden fixture with cloth flowers on it below a plaque of the ten commandments. I can read them it's so bright.

I'm happy for Dale. If he hadn't gotten religion when he did, he'd be dead or in jail now. I got most of his records when he got baptized. He's always been a nice enough guy, even when he used to act like my father, but his temper is phenomenal. Especially when he drank and started brooding, good Lord.

Back when I was in high school and Dale was at Lorain County Community College, we did landscaping for extra money. One of our customers was Mrs. Barbee, a realtor we met through our mother who paid us cash to fix lots that she was selling. We knew her as "Iron Ass."

One time in the middle of July, we mowed and edged

three gargantuan yards in the new Britannia Estates development that she was going to show in a couple of days. We break our necks for six hours in ninety-five degree heat, then all of a sudden, she has a falling out with our mother that morning, and she decides she'd prefer one of those lawn companies with spiffy red T-shirts and monogrammed pickup trucks. We never signed anything with her, so she stiffs us. After she and Dale shout for ten minutes on the curb, she speeds off in her blue Volvo. We empty our clippings into each of the three yards and leave.

That night Dale takes me to a bar in Lorain with his friend Dave and their girlfriends. Dale just sits there saying nothing, getting plowed. The rest of us are laughing about Queen Barbee when Dale goes to buy us another round, and his girlfriend Kim goes to the bathroom. At the bar next to Dale is a tall, greasy guy with a ponytail and a leather coat, standing with some black guys. As Kim walks by, this guy says something to his friends, then he laughs and walks out the screen door. Dale is eyeballing him as he puts the drinks on the table. I'll be back in a minute, he says, and leaves. Dave and I follow in a minute to watch.

As we walk across the gravel past the blue dumpsters, Dale is kneeling on the guy's back next to a white car with a shattered window, dunking his head into a ditch. We jog over behind him. Come on, that's enough, we say. Nothing bubbles as his head goes into the water. His eyes are closed. Cut it out, the girls will be out in a minute. Dale stands up and starts kicking his sternum. Muffled snaps hit us, then we grab Dale by the shoulders and jerk him back, then he cocks Dave in the mouth drawing blood, and I pull him back over my leg and trip him onto the ground. As he gets up he catches my arm and whips me into the white car. I hit my head on the door, then everything fades; the last thing I remember is Dave tackling him from behind in a head lock and the girls coming out and shouting. The next morning is the only time

I ever recall seeing him cry as an adult.

Dale comes in at one thirty. I am lying on the couch wrapped in a blanket watching T.V.. The first thing I notice is how much bigger he looks since Christmas. He's been putting on a gut since he got married; now it's spread to every part of his body but not sucking his energy away yet. He's all excited about something, like he's just sold his first novel instead of designing landing gear for Navy jets on a computer.

"Hey, sunshine." He puts his briefcase in the closet next to the stairs after taking a cassette tape out of it.

"Hey, yourself." I sit up. "What's up?" My coat, heavy with mother nature, is hanging on the closet door.

"Same old stuff." He shuts the door. Too late. He walks to the table and shakes a cigarette out of my pack. "Lets go downstairs so we don't wake everybody up."

"She doesn't let you smoke in front of your own T.V.?" I laugh.

"Shut up, Chipper. I'm trying to quit."

"You're so domesticated. What's the tape?" I point from under the blanket at his hands.

"Oh, its just the new Van Halen. I bought it used a couple weeks ago." He hands it to me. "You can have it."

"I thought you liked them." I shift forward on the couch. Van Halen was one of the bands that made the cut. I always suspected that he kept 1984 and 5150 in his glove compartment for driving to work.

"No. I don't need that stuff anymore. Besides, Judy would kill me if she knew I had this."

"Thanks a lot." My latest musical purchases were Ministry and Skinny Puppy, but I pull the headphones out of my bag anyway. After we watch Ed Wood on cable, we go downstairs to inspect his wooden model ships, then he goes upstairs to bed. I put the tape into my Walkman and try to listen to it, but

I don't make it past the second song before I snap it off and throw the tape in the bottom of the bag. I roll over and try to sleep.

In the morning we all eat Cocoa-Puffs, for me the first time in years, and Debbie gets extremely wired. Dale and I leave at nine thirty. We drive down the hill on Butternut Ridge for about ten minutes through town. We go by strip malls and over the railroad tracks past the abandoned General Electric stove factory. The town trickles away with more murky white and brick houses, then we take a right onto a gravel road, the axe and saws clanging against each other in the back of his truck. Five minutes later, we turn left onto a narrow dirt driveway and we climb out of the truck next to the porch of a clean brick ranch house. Dale knocks on the screen door. Nobody answers.

"She must have left for church already." Dale comes off the porch and helps me take the tools and rope out of the bed of the pickup truck. "There's a choir practice this morning, and she's got to unlock everything and get the heater going." Judy had the kids in a mad rush as we were leaving to get up to church by eleven.

"So we can smoke crack inside till she gets back? Cool." It is cool and grey outside. We both light new cigarettes and head out behind her house and get to work.

I still do landscaping around Lorain County, but we both flash back about three years as we talk this out before starting. Dale had taken off all the branches and the top third of the tree last week, so our job is to cut down the remainder of the big oak, fractured down its length by a storm three weeks ago, make sure it doesn't fall onto the house or her garage, then level off the stump as close to the ground as possible, and cut the tree into sections so it can be split into firewood. Dale wants to knock the tree over into the woods to avoid the house and garage entirely, but I say to take some

more off the top so it misses the phone lines on the other side of the garage, and pull it straight into the yard, between the house and garage. We agree on this and get to work.

The first cut goes fine. I climb up the ladder and make a straight cut across with the chainsaw Dale got from the garage. The fractured outer third of the tree falls twenty-five feet to the ground, but the main part stays. I shove it off, holding the trunk for support. While I'm on the ladder, I retie the rope around the top for later.

Dale takes the chainsaw and cuts a wedge out of the bottom of the tree, the fresh burning wood smelling sharp over the thawing soil from the woods. When he's done, I start on the bark opposite the wedge with the axe, my arms aching all the way down to my waist. It feels good.

"Take it easy, Chipper." He always calls me that when we work on trees.

"This is (whack!) therapy (whack!)." I come up for air and prop the axe on the tree.

"So I heard." He smokes and ties the end of the rope to a chair on the porch. "What happened? Just too much time apart?"

"Yeah." I put a cigarette in my mouth and motion for him to throw me the lighter. I block it with my left hand and bounce it off my chest. I catch it in my right and light my Montclair. "We tried 'seeing other people' for a while, but that's bullshit. I tried going on a couple of dates, but I can't rationalize doing that..." I look at the ground. "Plus, she joined that sorority last fall."

"Oh God."

"Yeah. End of story." I pick up the axe. "(Whack!) Gotta land that lawyer. (WHACK!) Shit." I shake my head. "It's probably best, though. (Whack!) It was okay when we were (Whack!) at LCC together. (WHACK!) It was just like high school, (Whack!) then she goes to OSU, and I go to Cleveland State last year, then (WHACK!) everything goes to

hell, you know."

"Forget it. Everybody's broken up with a 'Laura.'" He gets the old look in his eye. "Now if it was a 'D'arcy, ' or a 'Donna,' or maybe even a 'Gretchen, ' then I'd be worried about you. Everybody has a 'Laura' they break up with. And they survive just fine."

Bastard. "Or how about a 'Monica?" I grin and flip the axe jauntily onto my shoulder.

"Don't even go there," he points, then laughs.

"Joost gettin' yer Irish up, broother." I step back from the tree."Try it."

Dale pulls the rope and the fibers snap a little. "Give me a hand." I toss the axe down and jog over. "Just a little bit," he grunts. I grab the rope behind him and pull. Our boots slide at first, then dig into the earth. The tree bends toward us, then the wood splinters and creaks loudly, but it still holds. We stop for a second and look at it.

Dale pants for a second or two, then picks up the rope again. "Ready?"

"Yeah." I grab the rope and plant my feet. "Let's do it."

It groans and splinters some more, then it cracks like a pistol and the grey hulk of the oak is moving down toward us, splintering loudly until it hits the soft ground with a sickening wet splat. I quickly jump on top of it and pose down.

We are cutting the tree into sections when Dale stops the chainsaw. "We might be moving to California."

I drop the section of wood I'm carrying. "What?"

"This guy I knew at LCC in the CAD department, Jay Robbs, I don't think you ever met him." He sits on the tree and stretches his legs.

"No."

"Anyway. He's been at the Columbus Art Institute for the last couple years, and they have this internship program with Disney for computer animation, and he's been doing that out

in LA, and he's got some credits doing background on the last couple movies they put out. So now, he's starting his own company to do it for movies and TV and stuff." He looks at the ground and blows smoke out. "What do you think?"

I sit on a metal chair on the porch. "That's what you've always wanted to do."

"Yeah. The only thing of it is that it's just going to be us and two other guys he's met out there, so it's going to be touch and go for a while, but when it takes off, I'll be a part owner in this thing. I don't see how I can't take this."

"Yeah. You can't be doing this contract crap for the rest of your life."

"Exactly." He looks at the chainsaw, then at the ground. "It's not like I have anything against Ohio, but we've got to get out of here."

"Why's that?"

He stretches his legs out and cracks his back from side to side. "Ray and Sally are really getting on my nerves."

"That's understandable." Dale's in-laws are semi-retired. Ray is on disability and Sally works as a waitress, so they have lots of free time to visit.

"I mean, every time they visit us or we send Debbie to North Ridgeville to visit them, it takes me and Judy two weeks to get her back in line." He shakes his head. "She's so bright it's amazing. When they're here, Debbie will get to pitting us against them, and then I have to be the heavy and put my foot down, then Sally will get on Judy, then I catch hell from all directions. I don't need that, and it isn't fair to Debbie."

"Mrs. Patten can really get on your nerves . . . "

"Tell me about it," he shakes his head. "I mean, Sally was visiting for Judy's birthday last month, right? Ray couldn't come because his back was acting up. Anyway, Sally starts into me about my books and models in the basement, how I spend too much time building my boats and not enough time at church. Which is a crock. I'm there every week for Bible

study Wednesday, I'm the director of the Sunday school, I'm . . . "

"Sunday school! You?" This is the same guy who upon hearing I'd lost my virginity when I was fifteen had given me an expired driver's license and taken me bar hopping till three in the morning. On a school night, yet.

"Yes, yes. Pillar of the community, now be nice." He throws his cigarette away. "Anyway, we're opening presents after the birthday party, and she starts into me, and Debbie's already crying, and then Judy says something to her, then from out of the blue, she up and slaps her like she's a kid. Then Judy leaves the room crying, because she can't argue with her mother, and I just said get out. She didn't hear me. So God help me, I grabbed her by the shoulders, pushed her to the door, and told her to get the fuck out of my house. She hasn't talked to me since. Judy hardly talked to anyone for a week."

"Is everything okay?" He hasn't snapped like that in years.

"Oh, yeah. Judy's fine now." He walks toward the wood and picks up the chainsaw. "I just don't want the kids seeing anything else like that."

"Yeah." I get up and stretch my back out. "Yeah. Whatever you've got to do, man, do it."

"You'll still come and visit, won't you?" He smiles as he primes the saw.

"What, you? Oh God, no. California? Ha! Just hook me up with some lusty nympho for a tryst under the palms. You're going to meet a lot of them. Actress types, you know."

"Yeah. Animated ones."

"Beats nothing." We get up and start back to work. He primes the saw three times, then starts it. I look at his back for a minute, then I turn around and pick up the axe and start to split the wood. The first impact sends a shock up and down my arms, then suddenly the wind feels very cold on my face.

It hurts for a minute, but then it goes away and I only feel the splintering wood.

Everybody turns in early that night for church in the morning. I am laying on the couch watching T.V., wrapped in a blanket. Dale turns his head as he goes upstairs. "You sure you don't want to roll the bed out of there?"

"I'm fine."

"You still going to church with us tomorrow?"

I don't know. "Sure."

"Goodnight." He shuts off the light and the only thing on in the house is the T.V. I start to think of moving them again. This will be the fourth time in three years. Even though they've only been here for two years, this feels like home. Judy was pregnant here. Mom and Sally threw her maternity shower here. This is where we brought Jennie home a year ago, with Sally videotaping everything from Judy's bed to the desk nurse checking us out, down the elevator, the worn yellow faces in the kidney dialysis ward, and five minutes of Jennie's red face sleeping while Mom and I with Debbie hurry up to the parking garage and get the cars. I'm going to miss this place.

I turn the T.V. off about three A.M. and roll over between the pillows of the couch. Laura and I slept here the November night we moved them in. I didn't want to do it at first because of Debbie. We started on the squeaky roll out bed, then folded it back up, her bare naked body glowing blue as she giggled in the moonlight. The couch was too small, so we finally got on the floor and covered ourselves in blankets, her dark brown curls spreading across the pillow. We moved gently, at first keeping one eye peeled on the top of the staircase, then forgetting everything except to put our mouths together at the end.

I roll over and sit up. The moon shining through the curtains has always make sleeping impossible in this room.

You just lie down and force your eyes shut and curse how bright it is this late, then Debbie jumps on you at eight forty five, wired on Cocoa Puffs. "Damnit." I rub my eyes, then grab the blankets over my shoulders and go over and sit in the easy chair next to the window, now a clear white blue lined with grey flower prints.

I don't think I ever completely went to sleep, but Dale comes down about seven thirty and starts coffee. I amble across to the kitchen in my blankets.

"Hey, sunshine." He's wearing dress pants and a white shirt.

"Howdy." I cough and sit at the table.

"You look like crap." He sets out two mugs.

"Coffee. Then take a pulse." He pours, then he hands me one. "I better get going soon."

"You sure? I thought you were going to church with us." He sits down.

"No, thanks." I sip a little bit. "I was up all night, so I'm just going to go home and get ready for school tomorrow."

"Yeah. Nobody could ever sleep here." He is stirring Coffee Mate into his mug, so he doesn't see me wince.

"So when are you going to find out about this California thing?"

"Probably the second, third week of May. You think that's the right thing to do?" He looks puzzled. "I mean, moving so far away from home and all. I haven't told mom yet."

"Good luck." I shake my head and laugh. Dale fears no man alive nor dead, save Jesus and our sainted Irish Mother.

"I think she'll take it all right. After a while, I mean."

I look at him there, stiff backed and sweating bullets, and start to laugh. "Look at you. Would you like me to break her into the idea slowly?"

"No. I'll take care of it."

"How?"

"I'll think of something."

I take a large drink and grin. "Don't worry about it. Like the great philosopher Spanky once said: 'When ya gotta, ya gotta.'" I shake my head. "Sorry. Seriously. If you can find a better situation in California, jump on it. Don't worry about her. She'll kid herself into thinking she's going to land some movie star as a client."

"Knowing her, she'll get several." He shakes his head.

"Do it. You're not going to find anything better than what you're doing now around here."

"Yeah. I'm just worried about seeing you guys only at Thanksgiving and Christmas, you know?" He looks down at the table, then up at me. "Are you okay with this Laura thing?"

"I don't know," I sigh. "I don't know what the hell happened. I do, but I don't understand how it came to . . . It felt like a business arrangement at the end, like it was time share sex." I laugh. "'I'm with Tom in December, May through August, and certain weekends to be named later.' Like a fucking contract!" I shake my head. "I don't need that shit."

"I really thought..." He gives me a sideways look, then stops. "Well. You'll meet somebody else."

"Yeah. I suppose so."

By the time I'm packed and cleaned up, Judy and the kids are up. Debbie gets mad when she finds out I'm not going to church with them.

"You promised." She never pouts; she looks mad and utterly betrayed as well.

"Yes, I know I did, but I didn't sleep a wink last night, so I'm going home before I get too tired. I've got...I've got something important to do tomorrow." I lean over in front of her. "Listen. When you come up to visit Gramma, I'll take you to a movie. That better?"

"Only a scary one." She looks slightly less apocalyptic.

"Well, what other kind is there?" I mess her hair up, and

she kisses me goodbye.

Judy hugs me with Jennie in her arm, who is still half asleep in her white and green Sunday dress. Dale and I walk out to my car. He is carrying a large Shell mug full of coffee. The wind is picking up, blowing grey clouds overhead. We reach the curb of the parking lot.

"You okay to drive?"

"Yeah. Thanks for the coffee. I'm fine after I have a shower."

"Thanks for coming on down. Good seeing you again."

"You too. Thanks for having me. It was good getting away, you know. Looking at things in a different light." I make a frame with my hands, and look through it like Cecil B. DeMille.

"You all right with that?" He gives me an awkward look.

"Yeah." We shake hands, and he pulls me over for a manly hug, all arms and shoulders. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Okay, you take it easy, bro." He waves as I walk across the blacktop to my car.

"You too." I turn around and walk to my car at the opposite end of the lot. Once I get inside, I brace the coffee against my gym bag in the passenger seat, set my tapes out and put the key in the ignition. I start the engine and back up, then swing it around and out of the parking lot.

As I take a right onto Butternut Ridge, I notice Dale still standing on the curb, watching me. Then he walks back to his family.

I pull into a BP station to fill up, my stomach a little queasy. I know it's the lack of sleep so I shrug it off and pump the gas. As I'm going back to the car after paying, all of a sudden it's on top of me, heaving and swirling up from somewhere in my guts, sucking the air out as soon as I breathe it in. My temples begin to throb, and I lean over to get my balance. I walk back around the corner of the station to

the bathroom. After a quick inspection, I splash some water on my face and put my elbows on the sink. I lock my hands behind my ears, then I start to breathe slower.

"Excuse me." I jump as the attendant comes up behind me.

"Yeah." I stand up and turn around.

"Could you move your car? It's blocking off our pumps." He's about my age, and enjoys his marginal degree of power.

"Yeah. I'll be out in a minute." I get some paper towel and dry off my face.

"Could you hurry up? I've only got four pumps." He starts back to the front of the store.

"Certainly, sir." I crumple the paper up and throw it on the floor as I stare at the back of his head. I find myself thinking I could go through this guy like a nightmare, cold cock him and stomp his head in, just like Dale would have a couple years ago. Like I did to that bastard at Cleveland State. I breathe out a couple of times and let it go. I'm really tired.

"Thank you." He turns and goes into his bulletproof grey and white cubicle.

"Have a nice day." I climb into the car and head for the highway.

Eileen Conner

marvelous excursion

i eat chicken noodle soup when i am sick
i am eating chicken noodle soup
therefore i am sick
but chicken soup helps one get better
therefore i am getting better
therefore i am not sick

i shall entitle a poem "philosophical debate"

and it will go like that.

what ho, a contradiction in terms! find
yourself a gettier.

this is my proposition: once upon a time
there were three bears in the middle of a forest
which was in the middle of a great kingdom called america
which was in the middle of a world

in the middle of a universe
always in the middle.
so one day when the bears
went out for their morning constitutional they

happened to stumble, i don't know how, out of the middle.
so the question is:
when they came back, did they bring some sort
of life form with them? or was it simply a group hallucination
that goldilocks happened to be there?
did the outside suck them all in?
prove or disprove.

Marty Hoehler

En Passant

Life is a game, you fool.
Me, I've always preferred chess.
Where black and white compete in realms of logic.
But this game lacks the purity of white.
It holds the same innate evil and darkness of black.
Yes, but goodness is replaced by the burning insatiable
passion of red, and we substitute cold pristine
marble pieces, with tawdry plastic checkers.
Damn, I hate checkers.
All the pieces are alike, and each one holds one goal,
one primary objective, straight ahead, but each
piece will only stubbornly move diagonally.
The rules for this are strange, my friend.
Strangely, the fastest way to your end is by jumping.
Yes, and if it's your ally, you're congratulated as you
use their position to further your own.
They don't mind, of course.
It's all for the betterment of the cause, they say.
Besides, they know they can use you in the next
turn of time.
Of course, to leap over the enemy is expected.
You bound.
Sending your foe to agonizing oblivion.
Knowing all along that the cause will find no ill
in sacrificing you to that same oblivion.
Oh, and to what an end, my friend.
When that hallowed day arrives, and you step up
and shout to the gods,
KING ME!
And suddenly you're twice as tall,
And suddenly you can see in all directions,
And suddenly you realize that the only place you

can go from here Is Backwards...
This is a game, you fool.

As he crouched down, bent at the knees, Marlan Kepner thought about time. He was going to run. He could still hear the sound of laughter ringing in his ears. It was either laughter or the song of a bird. In either case, it was a sound that he was determined to stop. He placed his right leg just behind his left and leaned forward. The tips of his fingers danced right above the warmth of the gray cement. He heard popping as he bent down, in his knees and in his back. Forty-seven, he thought. Thoughts of his age seemed appropriate when thinking about time. A displaced strand of his light brown hair tickled the corner of his eye. He pushed the hair back with one hand. The sweat from his forehead kept the hair from falling back. The sun shined through a haze, as Marlan felt the sun must always shine in Los Angeles, and he felt as though the back of his neck was going to get burnt. Marlan disliked the sun and always tried to put it at his back. Consequently, his neck was always the light, bloody red of a gin blossom. There was a time when, he thought, but stopped himself. He remembered that the smog and the sun both predated his arrival in the city. But, he assured himself, I'm sure there was a time. Marlan closed his eyes and tried to calm his thoughts. One deep breath in. Let the breath out. One deep breath in. -and- Go. Marlan pushed against the sidewalk. He started running backward.

Marlan walked into his living room. Everything was white. Wicker was also involved wherever possible. The whiteness made everything look like stone. "White wicker" rolled off the tongue, his wife had said at the point of their decorating. It was important that the description of the room should carry its own sense of aesthetics. She was a realist. His wife was reading some periodical about world issues as she sat in a white wicker chair. She looked up at him from under the brim of a baseball cap and took a drag from her cigarette.

"What's that look?"

Marlan was giving her a look.

"The studio called," he said.

She exhaled gray.

"And what sort of death defying stunt are you to do this

time?" she said.

Marlan started to say something, but stopped. He started again, but stared at the ceiling.

"What?" his wife asked.

"They want me to run backward," he said. His eyes started to water up.

"Alright," she said and reached for her cup of coffee which sat on the white, wicker coffee table next to the chair. Marlan laughed. A tear ran from the inside corner of his eye to the edge of his lips and then disappeared. He sniffled and then chuckled again.

"Don't you know what this means?" he asked his wife.

She sipped her coffee.

"You don't know what this means."

"No," she said. "Why don't you tell me what it means?"

"I've jumped off seven story buildings," he said. "I've been hit by so many cars that I can't count them anymore." He turned away from her. "Hell, I've even been set on fire."

His wife opened her mouth, but said nothing. Marlan stood up and left the house.

Only later did she realize that the stunt request had made him feel old. When he returned home, she didn't know what to say so she suggested that they make love. Afterward, she walked out to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of lemonade. He's troubled, she thought. She felt cold at this thought, but could not stop from moving ahead. She put it behind her.

At first, Marlan's backward run had the awkward stride of a chicken. His left foot always wanted to place itself directly behind the right foot, causing him to almost trip on every stride. Then, Marlan tried to consciously think through each step he took. He thought, take right foot and bring it up, placing all weight on the left foot. Then, bring the right foot straight back until it touches the pavement. Shift weight to the right foot and repeat procedure with left foot. He was uneasy about not seeing what was behind him, so he lumbered along with his head straining to turn more toward the back than was possible. He stopped. It's supposed to look natural, he

chastised himself. No looking backward. Look straight ahead and move backward. Just pretend like you're pedalling a bike in reverse.

Marlan began to feel comfortable with his slowed down, thought out run when he felt a small pain in his left knee. The pain flared each time Marlan put weight on his left leg. He tried to put it out of his mind. He envisioned the pain to be the beat of a drum. He thought about Mr. Tolliver and thought of each beat of the drum being beaten out on his head. But, eventually even the fantastic must concede. Marlan stopped running. His knee hurt too bad.

Marlan stood, bent over, both hands on his knee. He massaged the knee, but the massaging made it hurt all the more. He stepped off the sidewalk and fell onto the cool, jade grass and looked up into the sky to see only the glare of the shining sun. He stretched his arms out and his body formed a "T" in the grass and then, realizing that he was in the position of the crucified Christ, felt self-conscious and brought his arms back to his sides.

"Why can't I do this?" Marlan asked no one in particular.

"Huh?" no one in particular replied.

Marlan opened his eyes and saw a boy of roughly twelve years standing over him. The boy stood in silhouette due to the bright sun behind him, denying Marlan any distinguishing features save a shallow voice and an outline.

"Are you alright?" the boy asked.

Marlan began to sit up. "Fine," was all that he said.

"You need me to call anyone?"

"No," Marlan said. He started to stand up. The pain had diminished to a dull throb, a tambourine to the earlier drum. Looking down on the boy, Marlan was now able to make out his features. He was a scrawny, fair skinned boy with freckles so thick as to completely cover over some of the natural, ghost-white pigment of his skin.

"What were you doin' running backward, anyway?" the boy said.

"I'm an unnamed barbarian," Marlan said.

The boy stood still for a moment. He looked up at Marlan and scratched his head. "You're a pretty strange man," he

said.

"Am I?" Marlan asked.

"Yes."

"Hmmm," Marlan said. He reached into the right side pocket of his pants and brought out four pennies. Two were shiny and new. One was green. The other was somewhere in between. Marlan tossed the pennies at the boy. The boy did not see this action coming and let the pennies fall around him.

"They're for you," Marlan said.

"What for?" asked the boy.

"Buy yourself some penny candy."

"Why do you say that?" asked the boy.

"Boys need their sugar," Marlan said.

"No," said the boy. "The penny candy stuff. That's grandparent stuff. You know there isn't penny candy anymore. You're not that old."

"Hmmm," Marlan said. He began to run backward again. As he was running away, the boy turned away from him and threw the pennies into a sewer grate by the side of the road.

Marlan sat at the restaurant and waited for Michael to arrive. His table was by the window-front. Marlan felt a cool draft from the air vent above his table. He sipped his ice water. After each sip he would always lick the spot on his lip where the lemon touched to feel what sourness it left. Marlan looked outside. The sun was behind many clouds and the day was the gray of hard clay. He pitied the people outside. The interior of the restaurant was well lighted which allowed colors to show. People seemed cheerier in the light, they seemed to move with less effort. The gray outside appeared thick.

Marlan was surprised to see Michael. Michael had arrived on time, which was uncharacteristic. People will wait, he always said. And they always did.

Michael was a tall man with deep-set eyes and brown hair which receded from his forehead. He wasn't carrying his briefcase. This was strange. Marlan had never seen him without it. It contained things. What things Marlan did not know, but he knew that they must be somehow relevant to

Michael's dealings. Michael stood inside the door and looked around. Marlan raised his right hand and signaled Michael over to the table. As Michael walked toward the table, Marlan rose to greet him.

"You don't have to get up," Michael said.

Marlan remained standing and extended his hand. Michael shook it. His grip was weak. They both sat down.

"How's your wife?" Michael asked.

"Available," Marlan said.

Michael let out a nervous burst of laughter and wiped his upper lip with a hand as though he thought he were sweating, which he was not.

"Come on," Michael said, stiffly sitting back in his chair. "Why so serious, chum?"

Marlan sipped his ice water. He licked away the lemon taste from his lip.

"What's the deal with the running stunt, Michael?"

"The one for the barbarian movie?"

"Yeah," Marlan said. "Running backward? It's a joke, not a fuckin' stunt."

"Look, I figured you'd be upset," Michael said. "But, it's dangerous. The actor could fall, could easily break a leg. It's not as easy as it sounds."

"Don't, alright?" Marlan said, waving his hands. "Just don't. You know as well as I do that this stunt is a slap in the face of my entire career."

Michael sat forward. He spoke low, but firm.

"You don't need to tell me about your career, chum. I'm your manager. I've been there for your whole career. Hell, I've helped make your career."

Marlan interrupted him. "Then why this?"

Michael sat back, again. He held a hand up in front of his mouth and looked past Marlan. The tension seemed to have melted away Michael's nervousness. Marlan said nothing.

"They don't want you doing the serious stuff anymore," Michael said, still looking past Marlan. "They have this influx of new talent and . . . "

Michael called over a waiter and ordered a vodka tonic.

Marlan continued running backward. His legs seemed to be adjusting to the rhythm of the run and, with each step, Marlan gained greater fluidity of motion. The pain in his knee still bothered him, but it seemed content, merely, with aggravation. By seeing the houses around him pass by, Marlan noticed that he had reached his house. He was not nearly content with the day's practice, however, so he told himself he would continue on to the end of the block. As he passed his house, he heard the garage door begin to open. With a nod to both instinct and ego, he turned his head to see if his wife was leaving the house.

The motion of turning his head threw off Marlan's backward-running equilibrium which, along with the help of a slightly uneven sidewalk, sent Marlan spilling onto his driveway. For a moment, Marlan continued his running motion, then stopped. He sat up and rubbed the back of his head. He pieced together what had happened and returned to rubbing the back of his head.

The sound of the starting car turned Marlan's attention, again, toward the garage. He supposed he must have peripherally seen his wife get into the car, but he did not remember it. The car began to back out, speeding toward him. He jumped to his feet and shouted something that amounted to "Stop." The car teased him for a few seconds, by continuing to back out, but Marlan saw his wife's head perk up as she looked into the rearview mirror. He thought he saw her both smile and shake her head as she applied the breaks and stopped the car. Marlan walked over to the driver's side and waited for his wife to roll down her window. She rolled down the window but did not look at him.

"So?" she said.

Marlan said nothing.

"Alright," she said and began to roll the window back up.

"Um," Marlan said.

"Yes?"

"Where are you going?"

"I thought I'd go for a drive," she said. She tucked a loose strand of her black hair behind her ear and then repeated the

action when there was no loose hair to tuck. "I like to go for drives."

"I know," Marlan said. He motioned to the sidewalk and to the place where he had fallen. "I was practicing my stunt."

"I figured."

"Yeah," he said. "Are you going to be near the grocery store at all?"

"I wasn't planning on it," she said. "Did you need something?"

"Not really." Marlan looked at the roof of the car when he spoke to her. "I mean, if you're there at all, you could, you know . . . pick up one of those things . . . "

"One of those . . ."

"Yeah."

"Things we like."

"Yeah," he said. "One of those things."

"If I'm near one I'll try," his wife said. She looked at him.

Marlan reached in and lightly touched her cheek. He pulled his hand back. She tucked another invisible hair behind her ear, rolled up the window, and pulled out of the driveway. As she pulled away, Marlan watched her lips. She appeared to be singing, but Marlan couldn't hear what. Marlan watched his wife go down the road and turn the corner at the first road she came to. He turned his back to her and resumed running.

There was a time in which the day was not divided into a twenty-four hour period. Time was told by the sun. By the moon. By agricultural cycles. These cyclical models of time always held an inherent falseness. Time always moves forward, not in cycles, and the reverse is never seen. Inevitably, over time, this falseness must become apparent. Time keepers cannot keep time when they are not time keepers to begin with. There were sun dials and shadow clocks. These showed time as being shadows, something always dark, something gained through, but distinctly opposite of, the sun. But, time was always a slow and steady progression. Fire gave way to water with the water clock and the passage of time became a drip instead of a ray. Now, the

passage of time was shown through the steady dripping of water. With each drop, time passed. In the interim between drops, there was no passage. Time stopped. Ctesibios, an Alexandrian engineer, designed water clocks that rang bells, moved puppets, and caused mechanical birds to sing. From this design came the cuckoo clock. The mechanical clock had its birth in medieval Europe. Now, round gears turned to show the progress of time. Time was again cyclical. On the Doomsday clock, at the University of Chicago, the time fluctuates according to the relative danger of global cataclysm. In 1991, it was set back to 17 minutes before midnight from 10 minutes before midnight, due to the fall of Communism in the former Soviet Union. According to the Doomsday clock, time moves forward at times and backward at times but is essentially static. Albert Einstein said that time is relative.

This was the world in which Marlan Kepner lived. A jumbled world of cycles, of linearity and shuffling, of fire and water, of drip, stop, drip, stop, of narcissistic relativity, and of ringing bells, moving puppets, and singing mechanical birds. All of these voices overlapped, creating an incomprehensible buzz. Time could no longer be expressed, for its voice could no longer be heard. It could only be experienced.

Marlan sat on a black, leather couch in the waiting room of the studio office.

Look, Michael had said, why don't you retire. Take time for yourself. Get out of this run-around. It's not worth it.

Marlan had said nothing. He just picked at the salmon steak which he had ordered. Whatever sauce was poured over top of the fish had started to congeal. Marlan tore open the skin that formed on the surface of the sauce, waited for it to form again, and then poked it open again.

I'm doing it, Marlan had said.

Look, I know it's an insult, chum, Michael had said. I knew that when they offered it. I thought you'd, y'know, get the hint. I'm getting out of this business myself. Getting into the gears business. I hear it's a great investment. Timely, on my part. Michael had gotten up and excused himself. I thought, he had

said, that it would be a revelation that was best left for you to make. You've got pride, man.

"Mr. Kepner," the receptionist said from her desk. "Mr. Tolliver will see you now."

Marlan nodded. He stood up and walked into Mr. Tolliver's office.

Mr. Tolliver was a short man with curly, gray hair. He rarely stood up when anyone was in his office. He always sat at his desk and made his appointment sit in a chair which sat about fifteen feet away from the desk. This made everyone seem the same height. It wasn't Tolliver's torso that was short, just his legs. He often thanked the Lord for a normally proportioned torso. He often cursed his parents for short legs. In the corner of his office sat a bird cage. The bird to whom the cage was a home had changed many times since Marlan began working in the business. Marlan knew the proper procedure and moved toward the chair. Having done this many times before, he knew it was wise to pull the chair another couple of inches away from the desk. This would make him appear smaller before Mr. Tolliver. Marlan sat down.

"Marlan," said Mr. Tolliver. Marlan thought that Mr. Tolliver looked as though he were suppressing a laugh. He only thought that for a moment, though, soon passing it off. "Marlan, I'm so glad you decided to work with us on this film. Have you done any barbarian films in the past?"

"Yes sir," Marlan lied. "Many."

The bird chirped.

"Very good," Mr. Tolliver said. "I told my people to find me a specialist for this stunt. So many accidents with people running backward. So many accidents. People just aren't used to running that way. They're only used to running forward."

"Most people are, sir."

"Yes, I know," Mr. Tolliver said and suppressed another snicker. "Well, I'm glad to see that you're determined."

"I am, sir," Marlan said. "But, can I ask you some questions about it?"

"Certainly," Mr. Tolliver said. "'It' the movie? 'It' the stunt?

'It' the what?"

"'It' the all of the above, sir."

"Ah," Mr. Tolliver said. "You are an inquisitive chap, aren't you?"

"Not really."

Mr. Tolliver looked suspiciously at Marlan. "Very well," he said. He requested that Marlan get up and feed his bird, making sure to have his back to the desk at all times. Marlan complied. He walked over to the cage. Next to the cage was an stained oak bookcase which had been built into the wall. Down by Marlan's waist, sitting on the third shelf, was the can of bird food. Behind him, Marlan could hear Mr. Tolliver getting out of his chair and shuffling about. He picked up the can and spooned out the proper measure of food. The bird chirped and danced about on its perch when it saw Marlan approaching with its food. Marlan opened the tiny cage door, reached inside and poured the food into a small dish which sat on a carpet of newspaper at the bottom of the cage. The shuffling behind him had ceased. As he closed the cage door, Marlan heard Mr. Tolliver say, "Alright. You can turn around."

When Marlan turned around, Mr. Tolliver was, again, sitting at his desk. Before him sat a large paper, the creases of which made it seem as though it had just been unfolded, and a small, beige model of, what appeared to be, a mountain which, at the top, leveled off to a plateau. Marlan resumed his seat.

"What you see here," Mr. Tolliver said. "What you see here are the details of your particular participation in what we are currently calling *Unnamed Barbarian Feature*." He openned his front desk drawer and brought out a small, roughly twelve-inch, pointer. "Now, are you familiar with Richard Noble?"

"No, sir," Marlan said.

"Well, you soon will. He's amazingly big in Australia, right now," Mr. Tolliver said. "We recently got the word that he has agreed to star in *Unnamed Barbarian Feature*. Well, you can imagine how excited we were. However, the problem is that Richard has recently had his ACL rebuilt. It's made the poor dear ever so immobile, which makes Scene 17, when the

unnamed deity challenges the unnamed barbarian to run backward over the hot coal to free the imprisoned people of an, as yet, unnamed location, a complete wash. That was the scene that I had written. It was my brain child, as dramatic as the day is long. But, with Richard unable to run backward, a complete wash."

Marlan shifted in his seat. "I feel your pain," he said.

"I know," Mr. Tolliver held the back of his hand to his forehead in a display of mock drama. "That's when someone mentioned you. He said, 'If anyone can run backward for roughly ten seconds in a scene that's bound to get cut, anyway, it's Marlan Kepner.' What a stroke of good luck that your name came up, hmm?"

Marlan began to feel hot. Sweat had blossomed on his underarms and his vision took on the black fuzzy quality of one not getting enough air. "You mentioned hot coals," was all Marlan could remember.

"Oh, don't worry yourself," Mr. Tolliver said, lifting up the unfolded paper to show Marlan. On the paper was a sketchy diagram of Mr. Tolliver's proposed coal pit. "The hot coals are going to be neither hot nor coals. The special effects people are thinking of placing lightbulbs inside, what they referred to as 'various coal-shaped pieces of plastic,' whatever that means. They are going to paint the faux coals red, gray and black and hook up the lightbulbs to the power cables beneath the surface of the plateau." Mr. Tolliver pointed to all of these places on the diagram as he described them. "Finally," he said, "there will be a large electric heater also placed beneath the surface of the plateau," Mr. Tolliver was becoming excited, squirming in his chair, "to create the warping effect of heat coming off the coals. All you have to do is run backward." He recognized his excitement and decided that it was either too unprofessional or too feigned. "Do you have any other questions?"

Mr. Tolliver's voice had been reduced to a buzzing sound and Marlan felt as though the opening of his throat had shrunk to the size of a pea. The black fuzz covered more and more of his vision and he felt his salmon steak lunch ready to return. All Marlan could clearly distinguish was the sound of

the bird's incessant chirping. It ran in his head like an alarm, sounding almost human. Like laughter.

Mr. Tolliver slammed a hand down on the desk in attempts to get Marlan's attention. "I said do you have any other questions?"

Marlan looked at him, began to say something, then leaned over the arm of his chair and vomited. Mr. Tolliver dismissed him. Marlan stood up and walked out of the office. Soon after the door shut behind him, he heard the bird chirp. It sounded like laughter.

One leg moved fluidly behind the first. Marlan saw things enter his field of vision from the periphery and move forward. He raised his knees high to his chest when he ran, to avoid stumbling. He kept his eyes fixed on where he had been. Everything came at him from nowhere. The future came from the past and moved into the forefront. It then disappeared and, again, became the past. Marlan believed that for the time that he was running, he was untouchable. He felt no one could see him. Everyone else was still moving forward. He saw the world from a different angle. It followed, he figured, that the world must then see him from a different angle, as well. He began to sweat. He didn't mind. He knew that there would be a time, sometime in the future, when he would, again, not be sweating. He also knew that he could not see this time, for it was somewhere behind him. Somewhere from the past, his not sweating would approach and become present, before disappearing into the future. He also no longer felt old. His youth may be behind him, but it will become present, again, sometime. It was all like a cycle, he thought. No beginning and no end. A circle. Like a gear.

Marlan did not see the woman. The woman did not see Marlan. She had a bag of groceries in one of her arms. Another brown bag was sitting on the pavement beside her. She was bent over and balanced on one leg. In her other hand she held a shoe. She held the shoe upside down and shook it, trying to rid the shoe of a pebble which was hidden within it. Marlan, thinking of time, did not slow down as he ran into her. The woman cried out. They both fell to the ground.

Marlan landed on top of the woman. He groceries lay scattered about the two of them.

"What the hell are you doing?" the woman yelled at Marlan.

Marlan said nothing. He did not understand what had happened. His knee began to throb again, he felt as though his wrist were sprained and he ached all over. He started picking up the groceries, placing them back in the bag.

"Weren't you watching where you were going?" the woman yelled.

"No," Marlan said. "I suppose I didn't. I apologize."

Marlan walked away. He walked forward. He wanted to talk to his wife about his retirement. He thought he might try to get into the gear business with Michael. Gears were all well and good. In the distance, a clock chimed the hour. Marlan recognized the chimed tune and wanted to sing along, but he did not remember the words.

Allison Kolesar

Gone...

Softly, slipping, fading away
Facades so bright and translucent.
Over and over repetition sways,
Swaying over seas. Come, sickly,
The anchor falls out of my mouth
And drags along the coral reefs.
Creating Carousels, come round
Tomorrow, my voice screams
In silent rage of waves,
And drowns, the voice which
Keeps me in a vice, stuck, joints
Kicking away.
Emotion overwhelming out my
Eyes and in my mouth
Transformed to rage...
Willingly I hold on, the only will
I have, blank without future
No one cares about a
Drowning man...
who...
has...
no...
past.

Jeremy Motsch

Take this Room

Take this room, for instance,
closed shut and tight; a prisoner's cell.
The windows barred with curtains and blinds
low watt bulbs glaring
on artifacts and heirlooms
an otherwise empty room.

My brain is a bee hive
insects creepy crawling over my thoughts
spilling over into each other
squirming and buzzing.

I contemplate a box of cigarettes.
Twenty demons; I think I'll have one.
Though I don't want to. Really.

My thoughts entertain themselves
running over old children's shows.

Sesame Street is a dystopic nightmare.
Big Bird rules Sesame;
a malicious bird of prey.
Oscar is elderly and homeless

broken and bitter, remorsing over the past.
Grover is thin and pale
strung out on heroin.
The Count is an ex-mathematician turned
bohemian poet lounging at the coffee house scene.
Bert and Ernie are two refugees from a nearby
madhouse hiding out in an apartment.
Ernie spends his time in the bathtub
never clean enough, can't scrub those germs off.
Bert recounts his tale to his prized bottle caps.

I think I'll have another cigarette.
Though I don't really want to.

Here in this room I have waking dreams
but I know that's absurd.
My mind is squirming.
I think I'm watching the television.

Surfing dead stations
or the evening news.
It doesn't really matter.
I think I'll have another cigarette.

Take this room, for instance.

Mike and I were meeting my parents and Grandma Rose for dinner at NOBU. New York, 1995, NOBU was it, the new hot, hot Japanese restaurant. The hardest place to get reservations in the city. Since it was in Tribeca, the taxi from East 60th Street took forever to get there.

"How were you able to change the reservation at the last minute?" I asked.

"Told them the truth. Long story about out-of-town guests. I think they felt sorry for me. Besides, if they hadn't, I would have called Jerry, he's a friend of Sam's and he could have pulled some strings. I told you not to worry," Mike answered.

My parents had come to town unexpectedly, bringing my Grandma along. Some business, my dad said. Monkey business, I thought. My parents had come to check up on their daughter and how I was doing. They hadn't been in New York in over a year.

"I'm pissed. They could have let us know earlier. This was not how I planned to spend the weekend. I have a pile of errands. I wanted some time with you. Not them."

"It's OK, Ginny. It'll be fine. On Sunday, we'll take the Grandmas out for brunch to the Park Avenue Cafe. They'll love it and get to meet each other," Mike said. "Your parents can pretty well take care of themselves. Let's talk about it at dinner. OK?"

NOBU won four stars from Ruth Reichl of The New York Times. Architectural Digest gave it some award, too. The place looks like a metallic forest. You walk into an arbor with trees of brass, copper and other base metals. The ceiling has holes -- weird sorts of skylights that let in glimmers of light during the day and bits of moonlight at night. And around these holes and all over the place are vines with leaves, metal leaves. Here and there on the walls are simple cloth hangings with modern prints in muted colors. The stools at the sushi bar look like chop sticks. The tables and chairs and booths are plain, made of the palest pine lightly shellacked. It is the contradictions that make it so effective: austere and beautiful, dramatic and simple -- elaborate

chopsticks with stark black pottery and large lush linen napkins -- chino khaki pants worn with luxurious blue silk shirts on top by the whole staff.

The tall, thin hostess greeted us. We kissed and stood in the entrance waiting for our table with the rest of the lucky people. They are always running late, but we got a good table -- near the sushi bar -- not the A-plus section but not Siberia either.

My family arrived. Mike and I disagreed about taking my family here. I was sure it was a mistake. Mom and Dad looked out of place in this chichi restaurant and intimidated by the elegant crowd. But we had a game plan: Mike would deal with my parents and I with Grandma Rose. They approved of him and our relationship. But not my Grandma. She never missed the chance to sink some barb: too charming, too old, not Italian, not Catholic. And now on Sunday she and Mike's Grandma would meet. I had been dreading their meeting. Suppose they hate each other?

"Grandma, maybe, I should order for you," I suggested.

"Do you remember what I eat? What I like?" she asked.

"I can guess. Any grilled fish would be OK if you can recognize the name and no raw fish except tuna and noodles are OK even though pasta is better and any vegetables are fine except for eggplant because only Italians cook it right. How am I doing? Will you trust me to order?" I asked. "But, first, let's go powder our noses. We'll get to see who is here."

On our return from the ladies room, we passed the celebrity section.

"Who is that with the ugly sunglasses? In a restaurant, at night?" she asked.

"Probably, DeNiro, but it could be Dustin," I replied.

As we sat down at the table, Grandma raised her eyebrow, looking at me. She allowed herself a small smile - Big Gin in the big city thinking she's something smile.

"Someone's here. In big black, black glasses. Can't tell but I know DeNiro's in town. You won't believe this. Tony, that's my new hairdresser, was on a roll today. He was fixing my hair and telling me he was off to Long Island City to be in a film. His brother is a bit actor and has a part in the new

Robert DeNiro film and they need a barber to cut DeNiro's hair in this scene and Tony's brother had them call Tony and they liked him and now he has to get his hair cut which is making him crazy but he will be in the movie even though he says he actually loses money because he can't get Equity pay. Anyway, he's so excited and maybe that's why my hair looks so good. What do you think?"

"What I think is how the hell you cannot take a breath. Ginny, am I teaching you nothing?" Mike asked. All of us laughed, except Grandma.

"Ginny, I like your new hair style. And I love your pearl earrings." Mom said.

"Mike gave them to me for my birthday. He keeps bringing me presents, and he always knows what a lady might like," I said.

"Ginny, how's it going?" Dad asked.

I knew my Dad meant work. I have been an assistant to one of Merrill's top salesman since I came to New York three years ago.

"We're busy. With the possible change in capital gains taxes and the market reaching new highs every day and year-end tax planning, Paul and I are hustling. We are trying something new. Analyzing our client's gains and losses and initiating the calls, before some CPA big shot calls us. Working so hard and so much together is a pain. Paul's fair and a great teacher but ..."

"He puts up with your daughter," Mike interrupted. "Isn't that enough?"

Dad laughed. That's so my parents. Dad concerned about my job. Mom concerned about how I look, what I'm wearing, my hair. And Mike is so patient with them.

The sushi arrived, glistening *maguro*, *uni*, *hirame*, *ikura*. I showed Grandma what to do, taking a bit of wasabi and mixing it with the soy sauce. She took her chopsticks and imitated me. She picked up her first piece and dropped it. Tried again and again. Since she was hungry, she gave up and used her knife and fork .

Mike put his hand on top of mine and smiled. Then he gave me a gentle kick under the table. We ate and ate. My

family enjoying it. A salad of seaweed and some other unknown but delicious greens in a sesame-vinegar dressing; grilled cod, the house special; cold noodles in a hoisin sauce; tidbits of lobster and crab meat with the zests of lemon.

With dessert, Mike ordered champagne. He stood up, raising his glass.

"I'd like to do this properly. All of us are here together. A bit unexpected. I don't know how or what to say," Mike said.

We all sat there silently waiting for him to continue. Mike is never at a loss for words.

"Mr. Caruso, may I have your permission to marry Ginny?" Mike asked.

He handed me a blue package. In the box was another box and in that box was a big diamond ring. From Tiffany's. Ginny Caruso with a two carat diamond from Tiffany's. Mom cried. Dad jumped up from the table. We hugged one another. We made a scene in the place. Grandma smiled and kissed us. Was she just maintaining her dignity or was she not pleased?

"This is not the way I had planned to propose," Mike continued. "I presume it's OK."

"Oh Mike," I answered.

"Do you have any ideas about the wedding yet?" my Dad said.

"It will be here in the city -- not in St. Louis," I answered, hoping no one would make a fuss about that.

"Attention campers. We can talk about it later. Right now, we need to get some plans made for your visit. Ginny and I have to go to look at an apartment that just came on the market. It's supposed to be fabulous and I promised Nancy, the realtor. And there's an exhibit at MOMA we were hoping to see," Mike said trying to get us to come to order.

"Mondrian. The guy who paints the lines in blue and red and yellow. You know with the white boxes," I added.

"Campers." Mike started again, sounding just like the camp counselor he had been at a rich boy's camp in the Adirondacks.

At work on Friday the market was moving up.

"Call Joe S. and Joe F. I think it's time to sell their Chemical. Double check their basis. See what they think. Let me know." Paul was yelling.

I didn't answer, just pulled up their files on my computer. I loved Wall Street. The excitement, the pace, the tension, it gets in your blood. The noise of the phones constantly ringing, people talking loud, yelling to be heard. The letters and numbers moving all day long across the tape. The line of guys with their Hermes ties, in shirt sleeves with their jackets flung over the back of their chairs. And the smells. In the morning, coffee and greasy doughnuts. Deli and dill pickle all afternoon. At the market close, the office looks like the back of a takeout restaurant.

"Joe, it's Ginny. Chemical's at 60 and Paul thinks you should consider selling. You paid 48."

"Holy shit. It's awfully late in the year to take that kind of gain. What's my situation. Do I have some losses to take?"

After the call I went in to Paul's office to report.

Paul noticed the ring.

"Ginny, take five. Now tell, tell me about the ring." Paul insisted.

"Mike and I are engaged. No wedding date yet."

"Gin, do you think we could get their business, now?" Paul asked. He went after business aggressively. Making cold calls when necessary, asking his clients to refer friends, volunteering on ten different boards, donating money and time to charities, entertaining those people he liked, and reluctantly and infrequently those he didn't.

"I don't know. My gut reaction is no. I'm not even sure I want to get into it. You know my Uncle Charlie and Uncle Jim started this food business together way back and it was over ten years before they made up and the family was back together. Yeah, yeah, I know this is different, but..."

Mike is rich, of an old German-Jewish family. His family has been here for generations. They came before the DAR came, and are just as proud of their heritage -- only quieter about it. Quiet about their money, too.

Early Saturday morning we arrived at the address on Fifth Avenue to look at our maybe new apartment and Nancy was waiting in the lobby. It looked old fashioned to me, but the owners like it that way. Subdued lighting, heavy brown leather chairs, the look of some men's smoking club. Even, the doorman looked the part -- that blond Germanic look that New Yorkers expect. Keeps away the riff raff.

The elevator man took us up to the 20th floor. When Nancy opened the apartment, Mike and I smiled at each other. It was drop dead. The view fabulous. To the south, downtown, The Plaza and the hotels along Central Park South, straight ahead over tree tops to the Upper West Side and to the north the Boat House and the Metropolitan Museum. Mike got out his equipment: heavy-duty tape measure, computer, flashlight, level, several large pieces of white paper, pencils, rulers. We got to work. We had to measure, to test, to diagram.

Mike started by jumping on the floor. He had to test, to see if there were any creaks. When Columbia built the new building for the business school he was on the committee and now he knew enough about construction to make any workman's life miserable.

"Mike, that's enough," I protested. "It's the weekend and the people below are probably home and maybe still asleep."

"We'll come back during the week, later. Let's measure the ceiling and windows," he replied.

"Nancy, do you think Mike can use this?" I asked, carrying in a chair from the kitchen.

"If he has to," Nancy replied. "But I've got all the room measurements and specs right here."

Not good enough for Mike, I thought. So I held the tape at the floor and Mike stretched the tape measure. Twenty-foot ceilings. I went into the master bathroom. I had to check the view from the toilet and the sink.

"Mike, when you're shaving, you can see down to Central Park South. "

"Not unless I want to slit my throat," he replied.

"You know what I mean."

Mike and Nancy were moving all over the apartment with

tape measure and Mike's laptop computer. Mike was measuring the height of the chair rail in the dining room, the width of the counters in the kitchen, the length of the cord on the chandelier. He was entering all the data into his computer.

Before we left, Mike got a key from Nancy. The owners were out of town for a month or so. We were free to come and go. Mike was not satisfied with this cursory inspection and needed to do much more homework. This place had possibilities.

On Sunday morning church let out late and the worshippers were restless. People in a hurry, time a prized commodity.

Rushing along Madison Avenue, I felt so New Yorkish, so like them. I was late to meet Grandma Rose, Grandma Irene, and Mike for brunch. I hate to be late. And most of all for this meeting. My heart was palpitating. In my head the thoughts I had been having for months were repeating. What would they talk about? What if they had nothing to say? All the what-ifs. I wanted so much for them to like each other. I needed Grandma Rose's OK.

By the time I arrived, the three of them were seated sipping their wine. Grandma Rose had on her Sunday best with a stylish cloche that allowed her one gray streak to sparkle among the dark black hair she wore pulled tightly back. Mike's Grandma looked regal. She can be intimidating if she needs to and is when someone breeches her code of ethics or dress or behavior or whatever she chooses to pick on at that moment. But she can be a charming old bitch, too.

Mike jumped up to kiss me and hold my seat. His manners are better when Irene is watching.

"Ginny, let me see the ring." Irene directed.

I put out my hand to let Irene admire my new ring. I kept looking at it too. It's big and bright and new. Will I ever get used to this?

"Now, I don't want to be presumptuous, but you two know you are welcome to have the wedding at my club," Irene offered.

"Thanks. But we haven't even had time to think about it," Mike said.

"Any other news?" Irene asked.

"Well, we did see an apartment. Would you two like to come see it after we eat?"

"Is it close enough for us to walk to?" Grandma Rose asked.

"Yes. And the four of us are going," Mike said.

The two Grandmas walked along Fifth Avenue arm and arm, chatting away. I eavesdropped. They talked about their husbands, their long marriages, the difficult adjustment to being a widow. They were healthy. They walked each day. They loved to read -- all kinds of books. Luckily, they both still had good eye sight.

When we got to the apartment, Mike and I behaved like two kids playing show and tell. I brought my Grandma into the bathroom to show her the view. Mike and Irene were trying to decide where to put the Roosters they had collected together over the years. The Grandmas were full of ideas about how to redecorate and rearrange. They stood in the kitchen deciding on whether we should keep the gas stoves and add one of those fancy ovens. Their worlds may have been separate, but they were not.

The four of us were late and had to rush to pick up Mom and Dad at the hotel and get them to the airport.

"Where the hell were you? Ginny, we'll miss the plane." My dad fumed as we drove up to their hotel. He and Mom were out on the street pacing up and down with all their luggage and Grandma's too.

"You're never this late," Mom chimed in.

"I am sorry. We didn't realize how late it was. Mike will get you there in time."

It was a Sunday evening and there was little traffic on the East Side Drive or the Long Island expressway. We made it to Laguardia with time to spare.

"You three go on," Grandma Rose directed. "I need a few minutes with Ginny. Check in the baggage and we'll catch up with you."

"Do I have your blessing? I asked.

"Ginny, is this what you want?" she asked.

"Yes. Why are you so hesitant? What is the problem?"

"I really like Irene. It was a lovely afternoon. I can see now where Mike gets his class," she said.

She never answered my question. The plane was boarding. We kissed goodbye. Mike and I stood at the gate waving them off. And I felt safe.

Eileen Conner

miracle #37, patent pending

and the human mouth
how literally consumed
wide open in shock
thoughts hovering about to fall
from the gaping process
the condition is stable until we can
survive until
where has conduction run off to
everythings fine until
the cataclysmic catalyst is
finding out its way
where is the reaction its coming
its coming, coming.

"How good of you to stop by! Won't
you come in? We are serving tea."
This house is barren.
Her smile is full, obvious like the
Cheshire cat. She is mad.
She must be
quite mad.
And he just sits there.
The elderly man doesn't even bat an eye
but sits there in his armchair
smiling so distantly.

There is murder in her glances. The
lampshade is awry, the daily news
balances precariously off the coffee table,
a piece from her fine china
("the finest in town!") so exquisite in
detail, so exquisitely shattered
a thousand times.

"Please don't mind the mess. I
was coming from the kitchen and
I," (Cheshire cat smile, ha-ha laugh),
"I must have just...I remembered the
strangest thing and oh...what was it?
What had I thought? It just slipped."

The tea is bleeding
over and through the fake Persian rug
and he just sits there, elderly at fifty-two
powerless to get up
from his chair, cigar ash littering

his bland sweater, smiling
so far away.

"I think I remember what it was
that I thought...but I'm not sure, I--
I was moving through the hallway
and
I heard the wind under the door.
And I remembered...I was startled and paralyzed
but caught in motion
and the cup...It was only
the wind under the door."
(Cheshire cat smile), "But I don't know
why it struck me so."

This room is a frigid icebox.
There must be a draft;
a broken window,
the crack under the door.
Dust everywhere, a fine film layered
over knickknacks and bric-a-brac
and him.

"So tell us, tell us don't be shy
how was your holiday?"
We will talk without speaking.
"Ed, do you still have that open position at the
office? Maybe our young friend here..."
What do you want, with murder in your glances?

I want to die.

He is just sitting in his armchair.
Are you living or dead
or somewhere in between?
Deaf and blind and dumb?

...um.

Well, look at the time, really
getting late really
must be off
no, no couldn't possibly stay
the time, really
must be off.

Thomas W. Stanchak

Morning Coffee

I was going thirty,
and feeling good about it.
There was some sort of primal craving inside me,
coffee and doughnuts.
Then going twenty-five,
and feeling good about it.
I wasn't sure if it was possible for me to go any faster,
or any slower.
Sheryl Crow was leaving Las Vegas,
a good song at 5:25 a.m.
It really shouldn't be played any other time,
should it?
It seemed at that instant I was driving down Venice Blvd.
I have never been there,
but this was exactly how I imagined it.
The street lights go on and on till China.
Almost the same instant as that thought,
the sign hit me in the face:

Lyndhurst.
It was nice while it lasted.
Now it's just some nostalgic, deja-vu feeling
I know I'll have on the ride back.

I need coffee and doughnuts.
I know the woman at the coffee shop is waiting for me.
I had this feeling like she got up early this morning
just to be there for me.
I feel good about that.
I could drive faster,
but I know it will just be farther away.
I could go faster.
I feel good knowing that.

I might as well have had a shotgun when I walked
through the door.
I had that feeling you get when you break something of
value,
something that belonged to a lover.
There were so many kinds of doughnuts.
I just wanted a glazed and a coffee to go.
There was only one kind of coffee.
That fact was comforting and reassuring.
There was a man sitting at the counter.
He was reading a newspaper and letting his coffee sit.
I could tell he liked it cold.

He was probably reading an article about
a sex offender and thinking,
"That guy should have his balls cut off."
I imagine that's what was happening.
I imagine that's what he would think.
I'm glad there are people that still think
an eye for an eye will fix everything.
If it wasn't for them,
people would get away with so much.
The woman at the counter asks,
cream and sugar?
Yes, real sweet like.
I feel sweet.
I feel like my mother has just kissed me good night.
I sip the coffee.
It takes me back to every time I had good coffee.
Her coffee is like crack and anal sex:
everything ugly that America can't get enough of.
Maybe it's not the coffee.
It could be her.
It could be me.
I know the man sitting at the counter thinks it's me.
I'm sure it's the coffee.
Then I swallow.

That will be $3.81.
I gave her a ten and noticed her.
Her hair was over-styled and combed almost straight up.
She wore a plastic clip right in front,
like on the ends of little girls' pigtails.
Her face had aged so much since I walked in.
It seems as though she was never young.
I still feel I will never get old.
She stood in front of the cash drawer,
a green reflection in her eyes.
It may have been her sweater.
It was aqua blue-green.
It seemed as though it had never been new.
She gave me nineteen cents back.
It took me longer than usual,
but this was only my first cup of coffee of the morning.
I gave you a ten.
The silence really started to creep up on me
like lung cancer.
I was either going to laugh or scream,
but I knew both would have been
completely inappropriate,

so I held back.
Along with the silence,
all at once I saw.
Everything was sugar coated.
It was so sticky in there.
It was the kind of place where
you'd like to have sex on the counter
with someone you don't know.
Someone you don't even think you could like.
You don't even have to be good since
there are doughnuts and coffee afterwards.
The woman gives me the correct change back.
What did she think?
Did she think I gave her a four dollar bill?
I bet she bought that sweater used,
with a four dollar bill.

So I sat in my car in front of the shop
I ate my doughnut and drank my coffee.
Then a man walked in.
He pulled out a shotgun.
He took the money out of the drawer.
He shot the man at the counter and the woman behind it in

the face.
I pulled away.
Now I'm going forty.

I know the limit is twenty-five but the coffee
won't let me go any slower.
I'm not sure it's possible to go any faster.

I wake up to Bobby D. Recker since he gets up more early than me. I hear him now, stomping around our trailer in his heavy boots with lug soles and it's a weird sound, like gunshot only heavier. Like gunshot from a giant's gun, a big old giant shooting away at our little world. I can tell that Bobby D.'s walked back into the bedroom and is looking at me, maybe with his head tilted and blond hair falling over his eyes but I can't tell for sure because I don't look up. I feel him leave after a minute or so, and then the aluminum door bangs shut. No mean old giant could slam it as hard as Bobby D. does on a grumpy morning. Bobby D. revs up his rusty red pick-up truck and drives off, spraying gravel all over the place. Our neighbors say that Bobby D.'s early morning noise is what wakes up not just me but the whole town of Prosperity Hills Trailer Park. Before my baby died I woke up to her crying for milk, which was as loud as Bobby D. but a whole lot nicer and nobody ever complained.

Since I got laid off from my job at Food Lion, I don't get out of bed right after Bobby D. goes away. Instead I stretch out, taking over his sagging side. I touch the place where he just slept, the mattress still warm and a little moist from the sweaty dreams he gets. Sometimes I stay in bed until the sun comes through the little casement window on the one side of our bedroom and hits Bobby D.'s big picture of Jesus on the opposite wall. I lay awake and dream that the sun is a man climbing through my window and that God sent him to play with my hair and touch my face so soft, like Bobby D. never does anymore. I name the sun-man Arthur, because back when I was in sixth grade I had this nice old teacher, a black man named Mr. Wholly, and he told me that Arthur was a beautiful king that was in love with a beautiful girl with my name and I should be proud of my name, not crying about it on the playground like I was. I don't mind my name now, but no one calls me Guinevere anymore, just Gwinnie. Bobby D. calls me Gwench when his temper's up, and sometimes when we make love.

I wonder where Mr. Wholly is now; he was a sweetie, the only teacher that ever paid me any attention. He said I was smart and had a shine in my eye. I think I'll wait for the sun-

man to get here before I wake up. It's not like I've got anything to do today, except go into the city to pay rent. And I have to cook Bobby D.'s meal later on but who's to say he'll even come home tonight. Before my baby died of heart complications, I used to like getting up, liked checking to see if her little lungs and arms and legs were still working okay. I liked cooking up milk on the stove for her and fixing her stuffed animals, propping them up around her head so if she woke up she could see them all peeking out at her and smiling.

I peel back the blanket that's on top of me. It's stained with grease and little balls of fuzz that get in mine and Bobby D.'s hair. I guess he always has little fuzzballs in his hair at work and the other men at the factory all make fun of him and call him Fuzzy. I think that's pretty cute; I wish I could call him Fuzzy without him sulking and yelling all night. There was a time when he could have laughed about it, could have smiled at me. Those times went away when the baby was born and Bobby D. saw right away that she wasn't his. I'd like those days back maybe.

The sun is starting to creep through the window now and I guess I should get up before the heat starts. South Carolina is having a really hard and hot summer. I have to wear my tank tops and short shorts all day and then rush home to change before Bobby D. gets back and starts yelling at me for exciting all our black neighbors and being a sinner and a slut. Bobby D. don't even think it's strange that I'm wearing jeans and a sweater when he comes home while the ground is still steaming hot and the flowers I planted around the front door look practically melted.

It's times when Bobby D. yells and howls that I'm glad I didn't marry him and just moved in with him instead. My mama always said that was just fine, not to go ahead and shackle yourself before it's time. "There ain't nothing sinful about not wanting to get married," she'd say, "and there ain't nothing heavenly about chains." She'd say this while sitting on our peeling white porch and she'd be sipping pale lemonade and her fat white belly would be exposed due to her bikini. I always thought that was the picture that should go

in little kids' books under the word white: my mama on the porch during those dog days of August in the South.

I always liked my mama's ideas about God and how to live life better than Bobby D.'s. Bobby D. just waits for the judgement day and says me and the black people are gonna be the first ones the Lord sends shooting into the fire pit. He says that's where my mama went right after she had her heart attack two years ago and that's where she is now and when I get there we can bitch about the heat together like we never done before. That don't sound too bad, as I'll be with my mama again and she will rock me in her arms and sing me the song about the gypsies who steal children and take them to the moon.

My mama taught me that all people are pretty much the same and most judging that goes on before the actual judgement day is unnecessary and a waste of time. My daddy ran off when my mama was twenty two, my age now, and she never bad mouthed him at all. I wish she could have seen my baby girl, who was the cutest thing ever. My baby girl could have gone into a kids' book under the color light brown, since her daddy wasn't Bobby D., but our old neighbor Charles.

Charles was a fun and friendly man; I liked to drink with him since he always told stories about his great-grandma and old plantation times. He had stories further back too, about times in Africa when little children could fly and women could kill poison snakes with their eyes and mouths. He talked about how far away he was going to get from the South, from Prosperity Hills. Charles moved away before our baby was born, and that was good timing on his part, even though I wouldn't have told and still won't tell Bobby D. about him. I don't know where Charles is now, but I know he is happy and in love with someone or something in that strong way of his.

I put on my clothes and strap up my sandals and figure I'll go into the city today, before Bobby D. gets home and tries to stop me. He says the city is a big devil magnet. I guess he should know, because he's in a Bible group that he joined a year or so ago, right after my baby was born. They have meetings on Friday nights right outside Columbia at Miss

Mary's Saloon where they all read scripture and keep their eyes peeled for sin. When Bobby D. comes home Friday nights giggling and tries to chase me around the trailer, I tell him watching for sin must sure be a lot of fun and that I want to go too. He gets pretty huffy after that, but he's generally in a much improved mood than before he left, so we both get a kick out of Friday night.

Bobby D. says I have the devil in me and that's why I'm not content to hang around Prosperity Hills all day long; the devil wants me to go spread my destruction around. It's not that really, I just don't get along with the women neighbors, and they're the ones that stay around all day. The T.V. broke for good a while back, and reading's no fun since I end up staring at the walls and thinking about stuff. So I like going into the city and watching people talking to people while looking off in other directions and thinking about other things.

My keys are on the kitchen table, hanging from a wheel of the kitchen table really, since the table is the baby's crib turned upside down. The lineoleum floor is bubbling up around the crib; maybe I'll get some new lineoleum squares while I'm in town and put them in. Bobby D. will be pleased if he ever notices and I might even get a backrub out of it. I suppose I'll hitch into the city. No fun taking a bus there.

Prosperity Hills, South Carolina is where I live and it's nice enough. I like to watch the heat rise up in the afternoon and watch the sun go down at night. I like the way skinny dogs slink around buildings and peek out from behind cars. I like the tiny rocks that are everywhere and get stuck in my sandal straps all the time so I have to bend over and examine my feet and the red dirt ground every five minutes. I like the seafood that Bobby D. and I go out to eat once a month. I get the fried clams and he gets a blackened gator sandwich. We share a basket of hush puppies.

In Prosperity Hills, I always get rides real quick on account of my long legs I guess. On the corner where our trailer park meets the road I get picked up by an old man in a Buick. He has a lot of gold jewelry but no hair, except for what looks like a small forest on his chest. Even though the air conditioning is on full blast and the windows are rolled up, his

cheeks are real red so I figure he must be getting ideas.

"The bus station's just fine," I say, staring straight ahead since I'm not in the mood for a pervert today.

"Ah! Going traveling, are you? It's a good hot day for it. I'm sweating already and it's not yet noon, but then I have a bad heart so I always sweat."

"Nope, I ain't traveling. Just stopping at the station since my mama and me loved going there when I was little." I watch the man out the corners of my eyes and he isn't even looking at me, just concentrating on the road and letting people pass him on the left.

"Well you ought to be traveling. You ought to go to India, it's cheap there. Turkey's even cheaper. Lots of spiritual people, that's what you'll find in Turkey." He stops and fiddles with one of his necklaces and I see that he's got long, clean fingers. "Of course, you'll find them in the bus station too. An alcoholic or junkie is one of the most spiritual people you'll ever see. Or a child molesterer. You take your child molesterer and you'll see that he puts his whole heart and soul in selecting the right child, the right park. He waits and puts all his faith into the entire process. That's why he's okay, the child molesterer." He gives me a funny look, a wide smile with his head nodding real fast and I ask to get out of the car, since I'm only a block away.

"Okay, honey, I'm just saying sooner or later you have to start thinking about things. You've got to love the alcoholics and perverts. When you do you'll be shaking hands with Jesus and slapping him right on his blistered back." He touches my hand when I get out and his palm is soft as a baby. Bobby D. and me got some live lobsters once and cooked them at home; that's what color the man is now, like the lobsters right after they stopped screaming and died. I blow him a kiss as he pulls away but he don't notice.

The bus station is just a long tiled white building, no graffitti or nothing. It's not air conditioned so it gets real hot because of all the action: people rushing around to the ticket counters and messy kids going too fast for their mamas to catch them. I saw on T.V. once this show about bees who kill wasps bigger than them by buzzing around real close and

fast and burning the wasp to death. If you've ever been to the bus station in summer, you know a little bit about being a wasp, even though you're really just a bee.

Mama and me used to love hanging around the bus station and watching the people. One time she got us tickets somehow and the two of us went all the way to Jacksonville. We stayed for a few hours and then we had to get one of my mama's man friends to pick us up because we ran out of money. He was pretty mad, but mama and me laughed the whole way back. I still love the bus station now, even though I haven't gone anywhere since the the Jacksonville trip, something like ten years. Maybe I should think about India, but I know I can't take a bus there.

My mama and me used to love the way our shoes stuck to the floor of the bus station, the ripping sound our soles made when we walked. The water fountain still sprays water all over the damn place. We used to play a game where we'd stand in front of the glass cases full of crazy maps and twirl around with our fingers pointed out. Whoever got their finger farthest away from the little red pushpin that's stuck in the map at Columbia to show where we are and where the bus station is was the winner, because they got to get away, sort of. My mama always ended up with her finger on Hawaii and I usually was pointing somewhere around Idaho. "I got pineapples and you got potatoes," she'd say. I twirl around now as fast as I can and close my eyes.

My finger lands on Orlando, so I probably would have lost if I was still playing the game with my mama. Orlando is somewhere though, and if I had enough guts and money I could go there. I know Disneyworld is there and I used to hear stories from the kids in grade school about the teacups and people dressed up as animals. Mama never had enough money then to afford to take me and Bobby D. and I only have just enough to pay our bills each month. Right now I have the rent money in my pocket, two hundred dollars that I must be careful with. There is a smudge of my fingerprint on the glass above Orlando, but when I try to wipe it off it just smears more.

My finger is still tracing circles around central Florida

when I hear a loud buzz and first I think it's because I spun around so fast and then I think it's those bees I saw on T.V. But it's coming from the other end of the bus station, by the doors that go outside and into the sunshine, and now it's more like a clicking noise. A group of people is gathered around something, there aren't any people at the ticket counters. No one is even boarding a bus. I walk up and see that it isn't a group of bees, and no one has died, but everyone is standing around watching a group of people in masks and bright dresses.

"Okay," a man yells out, "we are an African music ensemble and we are going to play for you a song from Ghana called 'Malaika.' We will use guitar and I will sing." I look around when the strumming starts, very low and soft, and a lot of poeple have their eyes closed. I close mine and I hear the sweetest music ever, sweeter than the country stations Bobby D. always has on the radio and sweeter than my mama's singing even, because she had a scratchy voice from smoking three packs a day. Music to remind me of the days back in high school when Bobby D. and I used to go on picnics with mama, as sweet as the cookies she baked in the oven and spread with jelly. Music as sweet as the nights Bobby D. and I went swimming in the ocean, his truck shining light at us in the surf, sweet as my little girl when she clung fast to that bottle during the one short week of her life. I wonder what I have done in my life that I ain't heard this music before, what kind of hole I been in that wouldn't let this music come to me, this music with its steadiness and strength. It's real soft and I am swaying, and then it's over. Every one looks dazed, stopped still like in freeze tag.

"Now we will play a song for Shango, our god of thunder," the lead man says. He and the drummers are the only ones without masks. I look closer at his face and see that it's Mr. Wholly, but then I look again and it's just another little old man, smiling real big and eyes sqinched shut. "Damn, mister," I yell out, "your smile must be so big 'cause you get to listen to this music all day." He winks at me and motions for me to come closer, through the crowd to where the drummers are. They start pounding and I am dancing funny,

picking one foot up then hopping and clapping. I'm leaning over a little and I open my eyes to see the little man staring at me and smiling so wide I could tuck the whole bus station into his mouth and cheeks. The drums sounds aren't matched together exactly and the off-beats are where I jump into the air.

Everyone claps when the song is done and the lead man points at me and the clapping gets louder. It's real hot and I'm real sweaty, but I don't care at all, I just hope they start another song soon. I wish mama could see me now, and Bobby D. too, if I knew he wouldn't sulk. One of the drummers hands me a funny looking iron thing and a stick to hit it with. It sends out a clear noise that makes me shudder. The next song must be to that god of thunder again because it's loud and fast, but I hit the iron thing with the stick each time the rhythm comes around to me and it sounds just right.

"You have the ear of the jungle, of the desert and the echoing rocks," the little lead man whispers in between songs. "Why don't you perform with us sometimes? We travel often. I think you would enjoy the road unraveling before you." I try to figure out what the man is saying, exactly, and I notice a sign I never saw before above the ticket counter. I wipe sweat from my eyes and it reads, in what looks like magic marker: "Disneyworld $140 one way plus hotel." The sign makes me feel funny, like I shouldn't read it at all, and the little man makes me feel that way too, like I shouldn't have met him and been here.

"Well, I have to go get some lineoleum right now." I look at the clock and somehow it's gotten late. "I'll be around again." The man who looks like Mr. Wholly, the little elf of a man, gives me a free tape but I don't have a tape player so I give it back.

The heat has gone away for the most part now, and I wonder where Bobby D. is at. The new lineoleum looks real nice. I got a light green color that goes good with Bobby D.'s favorite chair. I hope he don't yell because his breaded pork chops are cold. I jump when I finally hear his car and feel the door slam. He comes in with his arms spread out and I'm all

of a sudden in them, smelling metal shavings and sweat.

"You're such a beautiful little devil," he says, holding me so tight I can't breathe. I know I can't tell him about the station, and how I'll probably go back there, and the one way ticket. I look up as much as I can from his armpit and see his eyes squinched shut. I remember the morning my baby died and Bobby D. saw her lying real still. He brought her to me and kissed her head for the first time. I guess then she finally looked as pale as he wanted her to be. We never talked much about it, and I won't tell him about the drums and the bus station now, even though our hearts remind me of the rhythms, just a little off but still together. Bobby D.'s all I have in this world, really.