Kansas Women Writers

Mel Farley, Editor

Kansas Women Writers

AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND FICTION

edited by

Mel Farley

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Cottonwood Review Press

COTTONWOOD REVIEW
SPECIAL ISSUE

COTTONWOOD REVIEW welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, graphics, photography, translations, and reviews of small press literature from both regional and nonregional writers and artists. Poetry submissions should be limited to the five best. We are unable to return submissions which do not include a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

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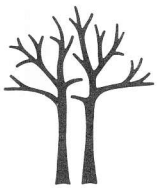

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The reason for compiling an anthology with both a sexual and a regional limitation is simply that this group of talented, largely unrecognized writers needs to be introduced to the reading public. In fact, only one of the poets appearing in this book has had a chapbook printed by an established press (although some of the poets have published their own work), and none of the fiction writers in this collection has had a book published.

A predominant purpose of this anthology is to encourage women writers--not only those included here, but unpublished writers as well. Publishing has long been the domain of men, and this fact has inhibited and intimidated some writers. In recent years, however, women have become better represented in anthologies and small press literature, and this is due to several changes: their improved level of writing, more frequent submitting for publication, and the relatively recent encouragement received from editors of both sexes. It is my hope that writers will be further encouraged by this anthology.

This selection of writings by women who are either Kansas natives or immigrants shows similar traits in the works--clarity of images, precision of details, and in general, a comfortable disposition toward sexuality and nature. In addition to these shared characteristics there is a great variety of subject matter. My concern with presenting an assortment of subjects may seem antithetical to the notion of "women's" anthologies, which are usually feminist or traditional in viewpoint, but I believe the realm of interests of midwestern women needs to be shown. The real justification of the book, then, is the competence and diversity of the individual poems and short stories.

Several groups of people have made this book possible. I am grateful to Mike Farley and Erleen Christensen for their support and help with typesetting, and to Denise Low, Erleen Christensen, Brad Denton, Mary Davidson, and John Carter for their opinions on several manuscripts. Mike Johnson of the KU English department and Hannes Zacharias of the Kansas Arts Commission were generous with their counsel and support. My special thanks to Denise Low for proofreading assistance and for her unwavering inspiration and good advice.

Mel Farley

Poetry

Patricia Traxler

NUMBER SEVEN LOVE

He is sitting
three seats ahead of me
on the number seven bus
I have fallen in love
with the gymnastics of his hair

I can feel him reciprocating
though he hasn't turned around yet
love is springing out of his hair
triple-flipping onto his shoulders
and making for me

I will be back tomorrow
one seat closer
and the next day
two seats up
and maybe the third day--my eyes
pulse at the thought

omygod another woman
has climbed onto the bus and is taking
the empty seat by his side
he looks up as easy as butter
and smiles at her
making room

all the love that was headed for me
has regathered on his shoulders
and is howdoyoudoing like crazy

I should have guessed this would happen
he was always three seats ahead of me
we didn't have much in common

he is remarking on the weather
to this total stranger
when I ring for my stop
and exit the back door

forever

all over the city in buses
my empty seat will follow him
relentlessly

THE ROOMER

Grandmother is
dying in the living room, dying
at the supper table and
in front of the evening
news, dying in the halls, she is dying
in every room of our house. I can't find
an empty chair. She is
dying in slow motion, taking years,
and with a clamor that makes whispers
of ordinary words. 95 pounds,
89 pounds, as she dwindles
she becomes gigantic. We lock her in
a home for people who are dying
impolitely, and driving back
we take the long way. At home we find

the walls are papered
with her life. She's in my teacup
reciting Shelley's "Skylark," she's singing
Toorahloorahloorah at the clothesline, she's on
every talk show dying. Neighbors stop
by to see how her death is doing. It is doing
fine. We will let it
come home for the holidays.

Patricia Traxler

THE LANGUAGE OF CROWS

The language of crows
is everywhere tonight
on rooftops & bridges & clotheslines
between the toes of old men dozing

it creeps out of ordinary inkwells
and insomniac poets finally
stun themselves to sleep

it locks itself in the mouths of mutes

the language of crows
stretches out
long & luxuriant in the dreams
of traveling salesmen in Bakersfield
& Des Moines

it pulls the small murmurs of old women
out bedroom windows & takes them
to the moist tongues of young girls sleeping
it chills the flanks of alley dogs
inches toward bare wrists on pillows
& rushes the blue veins of junkies

you can't turn on enough
lights in the house
all the crows in the world are uniting
you know it
for one mighty Caw that will rise up
and shake night's dark heart at its roots

Jeanine Hathaway

EGYPTIAN BRIDE VANISHES
WHEN SIDEWALK OPENS UP

> A pretty young bride dropped from her husband's side when a sidewalk in Alexandria gave way, and disappeared without a trace. --Cairo (AP)

i
Alexandria stands on the lids
of underground cisterns.
Thick-finned creatures, translucent
with age, swim below the city.

ii
Slender hands of ancient blue fish
peel back the sidewalk at dusk.
His white eyes stare, dull discs
bobbing on the concrete horizon.
Instinct throbs just under the water,
pushes the fish, pushes him higher.

Girls walk home, loose garments
tangling around their ankles.
Old women shift with the weight
of green figs.

Mervet, a bride, is distracted
by the dark eyes of young men
in the street. She feels arms
gliding through the folds in her robe.
Pale hands curl around her legs,
scaly strokes reaching higher
through wet cracks in the pavement.
She slips under the crowd, her mouth
opening, closing; her whole body
floating.

Diane Hueter

LULLABY

we wake dreamless
mute
we brood in the dark corners of houses
we never light candles
as we did when we were young
and made love
to rock and roll music

tired and hollow as owls
we hoot and hoot
this night the moon is covered by snow clouds

I dream of mice
creeping up the sleeves of my nightgown
their cold noses
and damp paws in the white
hollow shell of my elbow
I cradle them as if they were my children
I cradle them as if I were ready to sing

POSSUM

slow man possum
eats eggs in the hen house
snotty nose and ratlike tail
Mama pokes him with a stick
saying go
slow man possum
go leave the hen house
and the eggs
find some slow man possum hole far away
under a tree
or in a pile of scrub brush
where slow man possum
can be happy
with possum children
and possum wife
snow white rose red
hit the possum on the head
Mama's in the kitchen
baby's in the bed
Mama bakes a pan of good corn bread
Papa's in the garden
shovel in his hand
snow blood blossoms
slow man possum
move along
move along

Diane Hueter

VISION

someone folds the blanket down
but leaves the white sheet
beneath my hands
I am not so warm as before

it is just morning
and my daughter has not slept
and my husband is not here
and my son has not been told

I kept my quietness
my dying was my blanket against the world
what I could not really see
I could not tell

they were all so dense
they smiled, thinking I could see
they spoke, thinking I could not hear

they caused each other so much pain
seeing and hearing all.

Ruth Moritz Elliott

BLUE RACER
(for Janet)

Do not hold your breath too long.
It is only quick water
through the grass
getting away with you
even though you do not see it
that way

your eyes large as oceans
and as blue
that fearful something
unwinding to the surface
like a message from the deep.

We stand a pasture apart
and I find it
catching in my throat
my love for you my sister
escaping with me

a long cool shiver
through the hot afternoon.

Ruth Moritz Elliot

TRACHEOTOMY

On me so often I feel for it
the pulsing hollow in my throat
where your thumb fits perfectly
where my heart reaches the hands
its beat the distant tattoo
of someone lost in sleep.

Severing the thin skin
only an inch you will find it
like a rip-cord
the slender filament
that carries wind and promise
and song.

Pluck it
the night rushes
held too long between lowered wings
they rise and spread
moving the trees again
weaving stories our children could hear
in dream and I toward dream
slipping

your arms losing me like a fog
the moon's cold silver halfway
around my neck
the air escapes me.

I am falling through
your own gasp of choking fears
into your fields
that soften
like a throat
opening

as my breathing floats free.

On days your scythe slices clean
the throats of mustard or yarrow or gayfeather
there will be the tonic of breeze
to your disappearing face
and my voice will return
a sound that has never left me before.

Emanuela O'Malley

QUESTIONS FOR AN ISLANDER

Tell me, does water still run
after rain in the brook bridged over
with timber a young father brought
as pay for having his first born
laid alive and howling, yet
bloody-drip wet on the kitchen table?

Does the eager old woman who swabbed
and swaddled after a night of labor
still sit, adorned with haloes of flies
in morning sun under the sycamores?

Tell me, have you seen my father
dazed after hours of waiting
for an infant's glide into day?
Have you met him walking in early haze
his stride youthful and certain,
his hands white with morning
after the bowl's dark ablutions?

Have you seen him stop where corn flowers
sway near the pawpaw thicket?
If you have, did he say, oh did he say
he was picking them for my mother?

Emanuela O'Malley

THE KEENING

At first, the only sound was the crunch of steps
on shells whitened by sun and sea to crumbling.
Then silence for the space of a wave's furl
on snail-pocked rocks was broken by keening
that startled the birds at Benibra.

In the cave
of the Black Hag, it burbled against wet stones,
while at Portacoolia it shrilled through grasses
fed by flesh now fallen forever.

The shore
was heavy with dying left by the tide
as the woman willed the wind to bear her voice
past Boffin to Omey, island refuge of her people.

No one was left there to hear, or listen:
alien hands that in sunlight had lifted wine
poured in kindness, at midnight plundered and killed.
Owen O'Flaherty, chief of Belclare and Cliara,
man from the womb of Granuaile, lay dead with his men
and their women and children unburied beside him.

From the Calendar of Elizabethan State Papers of Ireland, July, 1593. Granuaile was an Irish sea queen who opposed the Elizabethan conquest of west Ireland.

Carol Hebald

LILITH'S CRY

This dark, moonless zeal of sin--
This cruelty: I want to be cruel.
Fury flicks the tip of my whip,
Inimate with madness, teasing the want--
Love flees, love flies,
And he no more remembers me
Down curd and whey skies.

Mary Ruth Herzon

FOUNDATIONS

Insistent and beautiful,
elm shoots, walnut trees and thistles
have blurred the rectangle of stone,
reclaimed the elevation
when people left it
for a moment.
A certain dusty hardness,
unlike forest loam,
traces patterns valid for a short time only.
Older trees show where the forest waited
in a vigilant circle
needing only -- a death, a departure,
the merest accident or relaxation --
to begin its quiet surge --
sifting through the dust,
carried on a possom's fur
or running underground till it thrusts up in a
crack in the foundation.
At one end of the stones
is a shallow pit.
We bring the children here to dig for bones.

Mary Ruth Herzon

Bird with Detachable Wings and Tail
Late Chou Dynasty 5th to 3rd Century B.C.

TOMB FIGURE

Did you expect to fly?
Is that why you sprouted wings?
It is impossible for you.
I know your smooth mass,
have held it coldly in my hand.
Though your clay is pressed,
polished and fired,
though it's scraped like a black
moon,
I know by the stout curve of
your neck you will
not rise.

Yet when I tried to sketch you
(I lacked the skill)
I couldn't get your heavy
curves. On my page your neck
lengthened
with desire and strained
to take off.

Darlene Criss

AT THE BEAUTY SHOP

"I want, " she said as she settled her rear in the chair,
"to look like Loretta Lynn. "

Honey, you ain't never going to look like
Loretta Lynn and
I ain't never going to look like
Bo Derek and
the sooner we quit thinking about things like
that,
The sooner we can get on with the business of
dyeing.

Celia A. Daniels

OSKALOOSA

A mile or two beyond the turn off,
  where the road dips down,
  we hit the oriole.

We went back
  placed his brilliant body
  in a paper bag and took him home
    to bury him.

I still remember his warmth
  through the bag against my leg
And the silence as we drove on.

Sally Allen McNall

MARY MOSS

I have found your photograph
hidden under Mother's scarves and gloves.
Because no one else mourns you.
Her mother.

In the photograph
you are seventy-three.
The next year, when I was nine,
you died
and I hid wherever I could
from Mother who was red and swollen
whose noise and trembling
and stories
I understood.

In the photograph
your glasses are kept on
white braids
wound tight together
firmed lips
flexed upward.
The half-closed eyes
hold only curiosity.

No face I ever studied
told me less.

You are the secret, the riddle
the stranger who lived with us
fed me
kept me quiet by reading Longfellow
sent me on errands to your garden
calmly tended
my illness, my sleep, and my rage.

Reserving your judgment
reserving your love,
You never explained.

Mother's face was full of explanations.
Hurt, jealous eyes
eager, embarrassed nose.
She judged and adored
she followed me to where I was hiding
stretched mouth
telling me
her bewilderment.

At the last
she could hide nothing from me.

Except your photograph.

DRAWING SOULS

I don't want anyone to do us
but Disney, or Blake

Last night I dreamed you
had folded wings
hidden under the hospital sheets

Now flying north to you
I think there is a third woman
there, with you

She is not yet born
she is Tinkerbelling
around the ceiling of that yellow room

She will listen, learn
how we talk, or keep still

The line is strong
it draws us all
it will not break

Nan Geary

GROUPIE

I am a gash of worship
a warm envelope offered
in place of what I long to be
instead of be I have
but not really

I fell down before
the fine chiseled features
of his pre-Raphaelite face
his sheer beauty moved my blood
and the wild elegant contrast
with his greasy jeans

I had to have him
and to have I must be had

So I put on my best sequins and frizz
and laid before him
the gold, frankincense and myrrh
of my package, adoration
and Kama Sutra mirrors

Who says there is no love
among us? I loved
his face, his moves
with tilting, melting love
to this day I'm not clear
if his sweetness came from him
or from me
for he was hard as rock
and smelled,
strange, uncomfortable, egotistical
and sad
he hurt me god so many times
I lay in bed and cried
and dreamed his face soft and tender
as I never saw it
the closest he came to it
was when he was not aware of me

and sat brooding
angry, baffled and hurt
because he was down
but mostly he sang and stomped
and ripped chords
and audiences off
his laugh raped me one last time
and finally I left

Presently I am a seedbed for a drummer

and he is dead from downs
and drains my sleep with whys
which are worse for me knowing
the answers:

I had to have him
and to have I must be had

I am a gash of worship
a warm envelope offered
in place of what I long to be
instead of be I have
but not really

VENUS IN CAPRICORN

When you enter a room
and I jump to illusions
I sit back
calm down
consider you gone
weather the sorrow
and endeavor to love you
with one hand tied
    behind my back.

Jane Hoskinson

THE WILD SKY

the wild sky
goes flying across my window
raindrops leap at my eyes
with every southwind gust
I lie still
my mind pressed against glass
a spiderweb
hung with beads of rain
a tapestry flung wide
enough to catch the flying sky

VALERIE

the lips of her womb
stretch and yawn
loosen slowly open
slowly the mottled
molded head descends
recedes descends.
she strains within her body
isometric energy
of a carven goddess
of a growing tree.
in impatient counterpoint:
her partner
the insistent
pounding
unborn
child

BEFORE COMPLETION
(I Ching Hexagram no. 64)

Clear and precise
the skin of the world
drawn tight almost translucent
the words are very near.
I cannot write them.

Solid, vigorous
the child moves in my body
birth is very near.
a page to be turned.

Magic moves with reality
I am waiting
for parallel lines
to converge.

REDSHIFT

it's snowing in the Rockies,
the radio says.
the cold front sweeps across the plains
out of the west,
first storm of the autumn, line storm
slicing the sky.
the light is blue a moment longer, poised
at the future's edge.
thunder echoes in the distance. time
shifts down to red.
the rain begins to fall.

Kathleen Johnson

TORNADO WARNING

Around front porches,
neighbors pace.
Women with arms crossed
cautiously press
bare feet to
cool cement.
Their husbands
brave out
a few steps
into weed-gnarled lawns.

Chilled
by the sudden stillness,
a young mother
shoos her children
back into the house,
ready herself
to scramble
under a bed,
cheek to unswept dust.

Grey clouds
loom overhead
as trees stand
motionless;
telephone wires hang
expectant.

The whole town
is still
as a sketch of a town
done in charcoals.

In a moment
leaves will begin
to stir;
screen doors will slam.

Susan Jordan

ON THE USE OF PARABOLIC REFLECTORS

Baffled,
my skin
stretches bonehard,
surrounding
the source of sound
and light.

Lines form,
eye through bone
battened breath
pushes back
grief's
sheer white space.
Hands
that once held time
in sunslatted rooms,
become restless mimes
searching out
your touch
on my face,
then lock arms
kneeward.

Caught,
castback in
endless arcs,
images intensify,
each passing through
a shrieking drone
horizon note of pain
honing higher,
finer,
the raging tenderness
of eye and ear and skin
which,
if left,
unreflected,
could ease out
dreamwise.

The manufacturer
warns that
due to the
intense level
of energy transmitted
by the parabolic reflector
you have just purchased,
damage to
the user's faculties
can result
under conditions
of prolonged usage.

Susan Jordan

STRING GAMES

I knew a man
whose slender fingers
pulled string games
through the air,
as easily
as smiles into the room,
caressing the slightest knot
towards the tip
of his finger
as the next game
emerged in the space
between
his laughing cool hands.

Jacob's Ladder,
slip-slip twist
and under
the Cat's Cradle
as we watched
in still delight
that extension
of string and hands
into patterns now familiar
in their simple intricacies

Space and string
and hands tensed
in play--the between
is the game
as lovers apart,
yet held,
discover.
Meanings must be made
to fill the space
between the lines
of feeling, love
once carried
full-wide and grinning
in a glance
goes anxious in
installments of questions
on the nature
of the knot
and will it slip?

T. Mildred Wherritt

When the bird has flown
toward the sun
and sung to the stars
from the treetop,
he does not willingly return
to dwell between bars.

He screams
when the lid comes down.

BIRGER SANDZEN

He dreamed in colors
nature never dared to dream:
Blue horses, golden clouds
and rocks so multi-hued
they scream their brightness
at the sun.

He layered the oils so deep
the fingers of your eye
can feel their texture.
You move away, the pigments blend
and trees leap from the canvas.
Then distance brings you close
to understanding.

Sue Ann Fredericksen

HER GRADUATION PICTURE
Independence, Kansas

Vivan Vance smiles
below a satin ribbon,
crisp white lace
on her pale gown.
Posed at her side
a dark-haired girl
to remember.

Narrow roads snake
through pink
and yellow roses.
Two golden lions guard
the gates,
the velvet eyes
of Garnet Dobbs.

Marilee Mallonee

AT THE PARK
(for Scott)

I want to put my children under glass
like polite cheeses

So watching you climb
to the topmost rung of the jungle-gym
I am stitching up gashes
swallowing warnings by the heart-beat
mixing Plaster of Paris
mid-air

How can I ever trust you
to a brown-eyed girl who will tell you lies
There are griefs worse than gravity

Marilyn M. Mann

INTO THE CAMERA

Brush the dust from the photo
on our parents' walnut bureau pulling
us back to two and six years old.
I'm the older, skinny one with knobby
knees and elbows in a splotchy-
figured skimpy dress. You're
the lapable one in peach
with lace insets. I stare straight
into the square camera while you
turn your plump blue eyes just beyond
to the curve that smiles back for you.

Kay L. Closson

ALL OF US HAVE MOVED THIS WAY

the rope is frayed
at its point of greatest wear

when the final strand
gives way

the rope will break
in two and be useless

for its original purpose
it is possible

to splice the rope
and it may even be

stronger, but
it is tedious

it involves a clean
separation, the removal

of frayed ends, the
bringing in of new strands,

undoing both ends
of the broken rope

weaving and winding,
tying knots,

a great deal of patience
the simpler solution

would be
to throw it away

to get a new rope
knowing the inevitable

that it too
will break

SUMNER CO. JAIL

By the time I leave this sheriff's office
I shall know all there is to know
about this particular room

The sheriff's very own day books
numbers 25-30 lay expensively
on the top of a bookcase
in back of the secretary's desk

Does she write all those entries
herself in efficient impersonal lines
or does Sheriff Jerry Wiley
grace the pages with his own hand

The good sheriff's candid photo
decorates the corner of the desk
proclaiming his lusty enjoyment
of food to each visitor

There he sits on a couch
sausage legs spread wide
mouth cavernous to accept
the greasy food on his fork,
the plate in his other hand overflowing

Repha Buckman

TRILOGY

It was not from my father
which I came:
he was but a gentle thought
lightly playing the harp strings
of the wind.

It was not from my mother
which I came:
she was but the groin which
heaved and pushed me upward
from the earth.

It was from myself
which I came:
I was a striking
of lightning cleaving
their surface.

Carol Barrett

ALONG THE BANKS OF COAL CREEK

you hover in my mind, a moth
in the car I am driving.

The white breast of a hawk
glides to a post. I listen

for his eyes moving. Around me
hay falls, no farmer in sight.

On these hills horses wait.
The hour is summer and winter.

Under the earth shoots of grass
feel for the safety of the surface.

They do not hear me passing, nor you
beating against the windows of hope.

Cynthia Pederson

SEPTEMBER

held a crackling stance in the fields.
Dried corn stalks surround their sentinel
as his sun-bleached shirt waves surrender to the breeze.
Tall stands of summer weeds edge the road
whispering the password back and forth.

KANSAS ROADCUT

limestone layers
striped with mineral colors
(reddish iron, jade-green).
exposed shale, sedimentary slabs
the eroding ocean bed
of an inland sea
teeming with crinoid stems,
shells and carbon skeleton imprints
of tiny fish.

marine mud
hardened by eons
bitten by the jagged jaws.
chunks of prairie
eaten out for an interstate;
now a weathered, weed-covered part
of the landscape.

Barbara Shirk Parish

AFTER AWHILE

friends fold up their faces
and go home--
the mailbox is nailed
shut--the phone cut loose
from the wall . . .

I am no longer taller
than my shadow--my mind closes
for a season;

dust numbs the window sill--
the screendoor slaps
the house on the back--
somewhere a stiff dog barks
and forgets . . .

lifting a curtain, I look outside:
nothing between me and the sunset . . .
only a secret
asking

Anita Skeen

BUD REDMOND COMES FOR GRACE WILKIE

There are no longer students idle
in the t. v. lounge of Grace Wilkie Hall,
sprawled on bunk beds writing
letters to boyfriends off at KU
Iowa, and East Tennessee State,
or still at home on the farm,
riding combines. No young women
in bathrobes, slippers flopping
down the halls, head for the bathroom
with toothpaste and shampoo.
Students have been absent
for over a year, and today I notice
the north wall is gone, exposing
a cross-section, a giant doll house,
squares of pink, yellow, green
three floors high, three rooms wide,
a tic-tac-toe game waiting for players.
Bookcases cling desperately to the walls,
paint smiles down at the onlookers.

Below, where I stand among displaced
bricks, wire fencing, and tire tracks
engraved in the soft mud,
Bud Redmond Construction Company
trucks yawn in the spring sun,
their faded skins shielding their private
parts, bored with old noises
and perpetual destruction.
Three men prowl about the clutter.
One stands with a clipboard,
apparently making notes.
Another drinks coffee
from a long silver thermos.
A third forces tools
into tight fittings.

What has become of Grace Wilkie?
Is one of these men, orange hat
like a warning light flashing
against the green wall, Bud Redmond?
What would the two say
over tea, she handing him a glass
plate piled high with cookies, linen
napkins in her hand; in a collision of carts
at the Safeway, her mushrooms crushed
beneath his Manhandler soups;
in the formal office, walnut desk
and chairs dustless, where she writes
silently on a clean white tablet as he rocks
on his heels, his small hands turning
a child's fur cap in nervous circles;
or in a metal shed, where he lifts his eyes
from the blueprint, finger still in place,
as she closes the screen door
on her way out?

Catharine McKaig

BIRTHDAY

What happens when they drop the bomb and it's your
birthday?
Right in the middle of the ice cream and cake
and you haven't even gotten to the presents
You're sitting there with the knife in your hand
and some sort of silly hat on your head
Dead so fast that you have no chance to play your pensive
self
An expression on your face like a difficult six year old
pouting stubborn disappointed

Beverly M. Matherne

VIOLET

Violet was tall
With high cheeks.
Thin cigarettes
She made herself
Hung from her lips.
Her broad arm
Churned ice cream
Under the pear trees
During tobacco harvest
In July,
When we thirteen children
Lost at least fifteen
White pounds a piece.

Beverly M. Matherne

PERIQUE FARMING

The Ford dump truck,
Old Yellow, we call her,
Winds and grumps
Like an old tanker
Through Daddy's tobacco field.
Over solid turtle-humps,
Vestiges of last week's plowing,
We bump high and bounce back.
We squint at the June sun
Through heavy lids
And brown hair
And our breasts
Hurt from the jolts.

Erleen J. Christensen

THE MIRROR IN THE ALLEY

The old wood fence
along this Kansas alley
draws me like Alice's looking glass.

I know that upright lilacs bloom.
But how can wood play mirror?

Surprised by wisteria
hanging like mirror lilacs
against the wood,
I step through time
and stand, air-letters away
scrubbing Chinese-blue clothes
under a purple arbor
while my mother reads a letter.

Her mother writes that
downside up, in Kansas,
the lilacs are in bloom.

A NIGHT'S TALE

I
We sit cross-legged on the sheepskin
drinking brandy
while the music trucks its way
across Arizona.

The door stands open
as if the party
might change its mind
and return.

II
We lie naked on the sheepskin
the music gone, unnoticed,
the door kicked to,
the party private.

III
I sit on the sheepskin
with coffee and sunlight
trying to remember the transition--
liking the story because
I can't find it.

Erleen J. Christensen

THE NEIGHBORS

i
A furtive badger crosses
the yellow road at noon
erasing partridge tracks.

ii
Geese fly in late, complaining.
The corn's been picked.

iii
A circle of raccoon prints
around a bowl patted in the snow
bits of oriole feather and bone
left over from dinner.

iv
Owl shitbombs plop on the creek bank.
A beetle hurries toward breakfast.

R. K. Weldon

THE MAN WITHOUT LEGS

maybe it was world war one
or from hopping freights,
but where his legs should have started
his slacks were folded flat and neat.
he got around in a black golf cart
with zip-up plastic flaps for rain.
you'd see him driving around town
or parked in front of Perry's five and ten
where one of the clerks
would bring free coffee,
sometimes stay to chat.
people said he couldn't get out of that cart,
slept in it even
lived in a little garage
with an automatic door
and everything inside
rigged up on strings and pulleys.
he liked talking to kids
and would stop them on the sidewalks downtown,
but I'd always walk by without speaking.
they say he just sort of died one day
alone in that garage.

I imagine it
as a place without windows.

Marlis Manley Broadhead

HOLE IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

bare catalpa trees
drape across the sandbar
my hand burrowing into
the grainy moisture below
grasps the ocean
waves rise from the hole
whitecaps foam around my arm
knees, thighs
sucking me down
through a trail of seaweed
to coral city, Santa Monica
where I am always nine, tan
braver than the tidal wave
that one day washes me up through
a hole in Kansas sand
beached and breathless
salt scales spraying into the wind
as I climb the bank
cradling a handful of wet sand
twelve hundred miles across the pasture
to the house
where I shake the scent of seaweed
from my hair
the ocean still whispering
in my argonata ears

Denise Low

PAINTING OVER SHELVES

His widow sold me three bookshelves
just this morning,
then showed me cardboard boxes
stacked against the garage wall
full of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Hawthorne.

On the porch sat furniture
cast in aimless groups:
her chair, reupholstered,
will go in the apartment;
his chair to her niece.
A man called about the mahogany table.

In the garden
we talked about what to dig up
for the small apartment yard,
red coral bells, two peonies,
some iris her sister likes.

I brush on milky white enamel,
think of what books of mine,
what room, which corner.
Inside my husband lies asleep
still as the children.

Denise Low

TREE OF LIFE

"This is the tree of life. The angel is guarding the apples so we can't live forever." --Samuel P. Dinsmoor

1. Sycamore

it drops bark over the grass
and huge-handed leaves

after the tree cutters go
a new silence
the sky presses into the fence
and unfamiliar houses
appear in the distance

the sun practices new angles

2.

their deaths are slow and deliberate
sap thickens and curdles for days
leaves fade and roots blacken into dirt
fungus and insects arrive for a long feast

3.

the sky they reach towards
spews sudden enemies

northern winds crack their joints
and push the young over
storms yank out elders by the roots

soft clouds hoard water
or lick with tongues of ice

the trees stand motionless
while deer and rabbits chew their bark

they spread their branches to insect hordes
borers and termites for the wood
aphids, beetles and root maggots
coddling moths for the fruits

invisible diseases curry through their leaves

4. Riverfront Park

we walk the riverfront trail
a narrow muddy line in weeds
through the old Kansa half-breed lands

the river runs broad and brown
to the left
glinting through the brush

mud gullies gut the trail
draining newly dug fields
we lower ourselves into them
to dark river level and back up

wild grape vines grip willows and elms
ancient horsetail ferns rise together
sumac and pokeberry and wild carrot
tangle like snarled morning hair

past the third bend the trail stops
an old female black willow
lies scattered over the ground

the trunk and broken limbs fall apart
stiff gray leaves murmur restlessly
wind tugs open
fingers of ripe brown seeds

SPRING GEESE

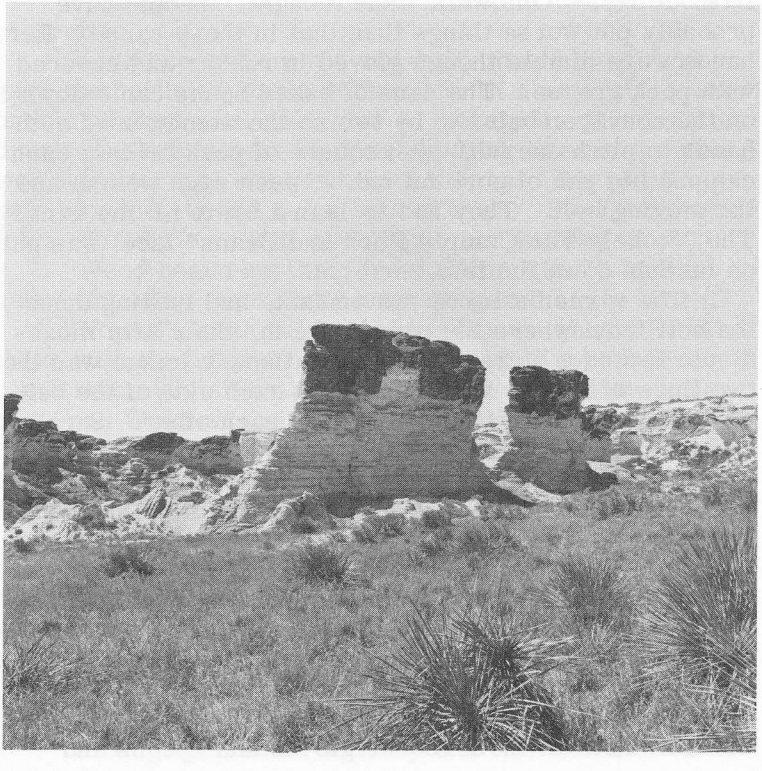
not one tidy vee
but a whole complex of angles
branching off each other
like the genealogy
of man

spring, not fall
and this is Kansas
not the northern woods

not a magazine cover
of migrating geese

but their honking chorus
spread across the southern horizon
stays in my ears for days

Fiction



Melissa Nolte

BEAN BELT WOMEN

"Come on, girls, move it along," Johnson shouted as he walked the narrow pathway at the backs of the line of women. "We've got a hundred and sixty-five more cases to get out before quitting time and you're fawning over these cans like pigs in a poke!"

Maria grunted. "Is that how Pokey's got its nickname?" she yelled at Johnson, not taking her eyes off her work. The women around her giggled out of fatigue and boredom.

"You're funny, Rhodes," Johnson yelled. "So funny I forgot to laugh."

Sarah yawned, and then noticed in vague horror that she'd sprayed saliva over the open cans running by in front of her. "Oh, well," she thought, "people have probably put worse things than that in these cans." Her hands were nimble though gloved in rubber and covered with pork grease. The cans of baked beans came down on the conveyor belt two by two so the women used both hands to pitch one half-inch square of pork fat into each can. A big pan of pork fat sat between each woman and the moving belt. They had to lean a bit to hit the cans. The "Stokely Van Camp's Pork and Beans" label was put on farther down the line.

The women's hands moved fast, and looking down the belt from where the cans came in, their arm movements looked a blur. The only stationary image was the two lines of intent, weary faces on each side of the belt.

Maria and Sarah stood next to each other. Sarah had only been working a couple of weeks. Maria, a veteran of many months, had trained her on the bean belt. Sarah cried all through her first night. She wasn't fast enough. Her pork fat hit the belt or her overalls or Maria--everything but the cans. Maria told her it would get easier. And it did. Each night that went by was another victory. Sarah was proud of herself. By the end of two weeks, she was thinking she could do the job indefinitely.

The screaming break whistle sounded, and the women threw off their rubber gloves and aprons and

scrambled out of the bean belt room toward the break room.

Maria was a big bony woman and Sarah had to jog to keep up with her. "It's a slow night," she said breathlessly.

"You're telling me," Maria said.

In quick, timed movements, the two women punched their cards out for dinner, got sack lunches from their lockers, and headed for the parking lot. It was four-thirty-three a.m. "Three minutes!" Maria beamed. "Not bad."

They climbed into the back of Maria's Chevy pick-up. Then they both sighed as they pulled out sandwiches. They didn't talk as they ate. By that time of the shift, they were ravenous and ate like wild dogs. Then for the next twenty minutes they passed a pint of whiskey between them and smoked cigarettes, talking wildly, chain-smoking.

"You got the hootch?" Maria asked, breaking out a cigarette.

Sarah brought out the whiskey, took a gulp, and gave the bottle to Maria. Then she lit a cigarette. She hadn't smoked until she came to Stokely's. She hadn't drunk whiskey either, or done anything in excess. She was a twittering, slight-framed woman. She had fine pale blonde hair and large spooky eyes. She clung to her job at Stokely's as if it were her moor in life.

"Weed heard anything from Color Rite?" Maria asked, blowing smoke rings as she gazed at the stars.

"Nope," Sarah said, shifting her weight. "He sits there with the baby all messy and doesn't even notice. I came home yesterday and Cooper had shit all over the bed--and Weed was sitting there reading the newspaper."

"Jeez," Maria said, "I didn't think the strike would last this long. Color Rite needs the ones they spent so much time training, don't you think?"

Sarah said she didn't know what to think.

"Well, kick that man's ass, girl!" Maria cried. "He should at least clean up baby shit if he's gonna be at home mooning and jerking off!" They both burst into laughter. Maria's strong white teeth flashed in the moonlight. They heard someone playing a clarinet in the distance. The whiskey was calming them down.

Sarah gulped some whiskey and it trickled down her

chin. "You know, men can be a real pain sometimes, but if you got a good one--"

"There aren't any," Maria said flatly.

"I think Weed's a good man. He's just lazy, that's all. He doesn't like his hands to stink."

"Oh God," Maria said. "I'm not going to touch that one." They both laughed again. "Hey, next break, let's get up on the cat-walk. I want you to see it."

The end of dinner break signaled them like a prehistoric bird squawking. They took their time walking back, heaving the empty whiskey bottle into a trash can.

"Don't know what I'd do without that hootch," Maria said, wiping her mouth.

At the next break, the sun was just tinging the sky with pink dawn as Sarah and Maria climbed the ladder to the cat-walk above the bean vats. "The clean-up crew is off at four, so no one's up here now," Maria said back over her shoulder as they climbed.

They sat with their legs dangling, smoking and staring down at the bubbling beans. The cat-walk was above the light fixtures, so they couldn't be seen. They were about fifty feet above the vats. "Here's where they cook the little suckers," Maria said.

"I know," Sarah said. "They gave me a tour when they hired me." She smoked and coughed a bit. The whiskey was wearing off, and she was cranky.

"You know, I really hate this place," Maria said. "But when I climb up here, I feel like I've got more of a perspective on it all. I mean, it's just beans!" She sputtered, and laughed.

"How do you keep from feeling like a robot?" Sarah asked.

Maria looked at her. "Well, let's see--I think about where each little can is going. I think 'this pork fat's going to Grandma's for Sunday dinner, this pork fat's gonna feed the kids with weiners, this pork fat's gonna be eaten cold, straight from the can in the Belmont Hotel by some wino who thinks he's being good to himself.'" She stopped short. "You think I'm weird?"

"No," Sarah said. "I think I'll try that."

The break-end buzzer sounded and Sarah jumped. Her cigarette fell from her fingers straight into the bean vat. She put a startled hand to her mouth and looked at

Maria with wide eyes. "That's nothing, honey," Maria said as she stood to go back, "one time I was dangling my legs here like we were doing tonight, and my shoe fell off."

Sarah giggled all the way back to the bean belt, her crankiness gone.

"I told Johnson that they should make new labels for the cans," Maria said, " 'Van Camp's Pork, Beans n' Shoe'--but of course, he didn't get it."

A couple of nights later the conveyor belt broke down. Johnson told the belt women to take an hour for dinner, but to be discreet about it.

Maria and Sarah sat in the truck, leisurely enjoying their food and whiskey.

"Who do you suppose is playing that horn?" Sarah asked drunkenly. The clarinet music floated on the still air to them, sweet and solvent with their mood.

"Probably some jazzhead who can't sleep. Could be a block away. Summer carries sounds like that." Maria smiled. "I was laid by a sax player once. He really knew how to play me."

Sarah stiffened. "What do you mean?" Her cheeks burned.

Maria stretched and took some whiskey. "He had good hands, strong fingers. He knew how to push my buttons."

Sarah coughed. "Do you like sex?"

Maria didn't answer for a while. Sarah felt embarrassment stinging her ears. The clarinet played relentlessly on, hotly melancholy. It slithered up and down their bodies.

"Do I like sex," Maria said finally. "It depends. I don't like pump off, jump off, which is probably what you're getting from that man of yours."

Sarah gasped. "That's not true!"

"I'm sorry," Maria said, "I didn't mean it that way. But who asks 'Do you like sex?' Hell, everybody likes sex, unless they're unhappy, or somebody's just sticking it to them."

The two sat quietly and absorbed the faint music, passing the whiskey.

"I'm not very happy," Sarah said. "But it's not Weed's fault. It's my fault."

"It's nobody's fault. It just is."

"No. I expect too much."

"Don't matter," Maria said. "Do you wish you had big tits?"

Sarah was startled. "Why, uh, yes, sometimes."

"Who's fault is it that you don't have 'em?" Maria leaned forward.

"No one's," Sarah said quickly. "But that's different. That's something physical. I'm talking emotional."

"It's all the same. I learned that years ago." Maria capped the whiskey.

The clarinet stopped when the dinner-end buzzer sounded. "I wonder how that jazzhead likes Pokey's music," Maria said. They both laughed.

"Maria, do you have anyone you're dating now or anything?" Sarah asked.

Maria lit a cigarette. "Nah. I had a thing going for a couple years but it didn't work out."

"Why not?"

"We weren't made for each other. Too much fighting, you know. It gets old."

"Yeah," Sarah sighed. She looked at Maria's full head of dark wavy hair, her olive skin, her robust body crushed beneath a pair of tight overalls, and wondered what it would be like to be her. "Weed still hasn't heard anything," she said.

"How'd he get that name 'Weed?'" Maria asked.

"Well, our last name is Grasse. And he smokes a lot of dope. Too much. His real name's Arthur," Sarah answered in a soft whiskey drawl. She felt good.

Maria breathed deeply. "You know, I never wanted to get married, never wanted kids."

"You're smart." Sarah laughed. "They ain't much fun."

"I guess I was afraid more than anything," Maria went on. "Now I'm more afraid of being alone."

Sarah shuddered. "Sometimes I wish to God I was alone."

"You chilly?" Maria asked. She handed Sarah an old blanket that was in the truck bed.

Sarah put it around her shoulders. She wished the clarinet was still playing to ease the light tension. It felt like they'd been to dinner too long.

"Well, you asked me if I liked sex--how do you like

being married?" Maria asked, starting in on the whiskey again.

"I don't know," Sarah said, looking down. "At first it was real nice. I saw Weed like a saint or something. He looked beautiful and smart, like no one could touch him."

"And how do you see him now?"

"The baby came, and he didn't like the noise. He didn't like me being on edge, and he didn't like not being able to go anywhere at any time. Things aren't so great now." Sarah sighed, and pulled the blanket closer a around. "But they'll get better. I don't like working. I'd rather be at home with the baby."

"Hey, you two," Johnson yelled. "Get in here. The belt's going now."

Maria hopped out of the truck and offered a hand to Sarah. Sarah thought it was a strange gesture and ignored it. They walked silently back to the building.

The next night Johnson moved Sarah from the bean belt to the bean table. There women sorted through beans to make sure rocks or bugs or other foreign substances weren't in them. She asked him why he was moving her and he said that since the belt was moving slower, they didn't need as many workers on it.

A woman named Sherry trained her on the bean table. She had sharp lemur-like features and wore a tee-shirt that said "Foxy Chick." She wasn't as warm as Maria and didn't have as much patience. She would cluck her tongue when Sarah asked questions or made a mistake. Then after about an hour, Sherry leaned over to Sarah and said, "I thought I'd tell you this for your own good, you really shouldn't hang around with that Maria. People are talking."

Sarah blushed with anger and embarrassment. "What do you mean?" She felt her eyes fill with tears as she tried to rake through the beans.

"She's funny. You should stay away from her," Sherry said, not looking at Sarah.

"What do you mean?" Sarah asked again, her voice quivering.

"Don't be stupid, girl. She's, you know, funny." Sherry looked around, and then leaned forward and whispered, "And if you hang around with her much more,

people will think you're funny, too."

"What do you mean by funny?" Sarah asked.

Sherry clucked. "Are you retarded, girl? I didn't know Pokey's hired retards." She exaggerated her whisper, "It means she likes girls.

"So what," Sarah said.

Sherry gasped. "Well, I don't know about you--but if my man caught me hanging around with one of those, he'd whup me for sure."

"That's your problem," Sarah said.

Sarah told Maria she thought it was too cool to eat outside. She ate in the break room by herself, missing the whiskey that came after dinner. The room became hot and stuffy with smoke and agitated conversation. Sara avoided all eyes and wished she were outside.

The next break, she stayed inside, also. She couldn't stand the noise and stale air, but she couldn't stand to be laughed at, either. She had fun with Maria. But she had to face people's eyes wondering, and she'd rather be alone.

Maria didn't ask for her company. Occasionally, she'd glance at Sarah with humor in her eyes. But usually she loped out to her truck as quickly as possible. And when she came back from breaks, she'd be glassy eyed from her hootch.

Sarah watched her constantly from the bean table. She watched Maria's arrogant stance, how she'd switch from one hip to the other, her wild hair fuming around her head in a dance. Sarah wanted her to come begging for her company. She wanted to be wanted.

But for days, they barely acknowledged each other. The other women around the bean table had become friendly with Sarah, and started including her in their conversations. There were several young mothers, and they talked about their babies and lazy husbands and which pre-soak worked best, and what was on television last night. Sarah joined in, as she had for years, but something was different. Now she was aware of that presence across the room, and all the talk seemed silly.

Sometimes she'd dream about Maria at night. Then she'd see her when she went in to work at midnight, sleepy eyed from an evening nap, and all sorts of warm curious feeling would arouse her. One time when Weed

was making love to her, she imagined he was Maria.

Johnson put Sarah back on the bean belt. It was moving faster and needed more workers. Sarah stood next to Maria again. "Hey, Sarah, how ya doing?" Maria asked.

Sarah smiled and said fine. She told her that Weed might be going back to work soon.

"Then you'll get to stay home with the baby?" Maria asked, almost mockingly.

Sarah sensed this and only nodded.

"You want to go up the cat-walk with me?" Maria asked.

Sarah felt her breath quicken. "Sure, next break?"

They went directly to the cat-walk at the break buzzer. Maria was chattering about some stunt she said Johnson had pulled on her, making her work overtime because she had knocked over two pans of pork fat.

They were breathless after climbing the ladder and immediately sat down, swinging their legs over the bubbling beans. "Maria, I'm sorry I've been such a snob lately," Sarah said. "I've had trouble at home and just wanted to be alone."

Maria smiled. "No sweat. What's the problem? Weed been down?" She looked away, as if preoccupied.

"I guess you could say that," Sarah said. She swallowed hard. "Maria, I have to tell you something." Her face was hot and it made her pretty, covering her sallowness with vitality.

Maria looked at her. Her eyes danced in merriment. Her mouth was drawn in an almost smile. "Yeah?"

"I dreamed about you," Sarah said. She was looking intensely at Maria, but saw a man walking down the cat-walk behind Maria's head. "I dreamed we made love," she said. Then the man arrived and stood behind Maria, covering her eyes with his hands. He asked Maria to guess who.

Maria laughed like a child and struggled to get the hands from her eyes. "Ron!" she cried. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked at Sarah. "This is Ron, he works on clean-up crew," Maria said, her eyes flashing.

"Hello," Sarah said, feeling tears of embarrassment.

"I came up here to get my clarinet," the man said.

I hide it up here."

"You're the jazzhead who plays for our dinner!" Maria said with delight in her voice. The man nodded. "Why don't you join us in my truck for dinner tonight? I'd like to hear that clarinet up close," Maria said.

"I'm shy around strangers," the man said.

"Don't matter." Maria looked at him over her shoulder and smiled.

"I play the piano," Sarah said weakly. Then the break-end buzzer sounded.

When Sarah and Maria started work at the bean belt, Maria turned to Sarah after a few minutes and said, "No shit, you play the piano?"

Sarah nodded and continued throwing fat.

When the dinner break buzzer sounded, Sarah was paralyzed about where to go. The thought of eating dinner in the stuffy break room made her feel like crying. But the thought of going to Maria's truck and pretending she hadn't just made a confession made her sick to her stomach. She walked slowly to the ladies' restroom and laid down on the plastic couch in the foyer. She put her forearm over her eyes and whispered to herself, "Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ."

"Hey," Maria said, touching Sarah's arm.

Sarah sat straight up. She was alarmed and looked at Maria with angry, frightened eyes.

"Hey, you want to come out and eat? Maybe have some hootch?" Maria asked.

"No," Sarah answered. She stared at the floor.

"Listen," Maria said, "about what you told me at break-time, that's okay if you want to have fantasies." She scratched her head and shuffled her feet. "But I'm really not very into it."

Sarah stared at her with an open mouth. "But, but they said you like--women."

Maria blushed. "You know, that rumor's been going about me since I got here."

"You mean, it's not true?" Sarah felt her eyes begin to tear.

Maria frowned. "I like women, sure, but not for sex." She looked at Sarah and her face got hard. "Women like you--they haven't got anything in the world. Except--except lard-ass husbands and squalling babies. They, they think I can take them away. They want me to

ride up and charge them away, for Crissakes!" Maria was yelling. "You're the third one who's come on to me! The third!" She switched from one foot to the other rapidly, almost in a dance. "Don't look at me with tears in your eyes and expect me to save you! Don't!" Maria stood still for a moment with her last words frozen on her lips. She turned around in a circle, looking for something to kick. "I'm the one who should be mad. You want me to be something I'm not so you can be happy. I'm the one who should be mad! You have no right to be mad at me! She kicked the wall in a quick fierce movement, then she went out the door, saying "Hootch" under her breath.

Sarah rested her face in her palms and cried. After a few minutes, her cheeks began to ache from being screwed into a grimace, and she felt a renewed anger which she had to release.

She walked to Maria's truck and found her with the clarinet player. He had his instrument and was just starting to play. Sarah braced her hands on the sideboard of the truck and glared at Maria and Ron. "I'm sorry I'm not good enough for you because I'm married and not very pretty," she spat. She hardly knew what words were coming out of her mouth. She only knew they made sense to her. "But if you gave me a chance, you might really like me."

Ron looked shocked. Maria just shook her head.

"This is my last night," Sarah added, smacking her hands together as if she was ridding them of dust. She turned and walked back into the factory. Johnson was in the doorway waving her time card in the air. She had forgotten to punch out for dinner.

She heard Maria say, "What do you think this is, an Andy Hardy movie?" She looked back over her shoulder and saw Maria standing in the truck, waving her arms. "You can't expect people to be how you want them in your head!" she yelled at Sarah through cupped hands.

Sarah took her card from Johnson and put it in the time clock. "You girls don't bring your fighting to the belt. Take care of it outside of work," he said to her and winked.

"Yes, sir," Sarah said as she headed for her fat bucket.

Jane E. Garrett

CALCOOZIE THUNDER

Calcoozie, Kansas happened when the Watonia Indians came down the Nicodemus River and snagged their canoes on the branches of a fallen tree. "Calcoozie!" they shouted. "Tree down!"

The Watonia left their tribal markings on the limestone rock that lined the east bank and just as the current brought them in, the current took them away, making room for white trappers and traders, a saw mill. Prairie became farm land. Prairie become roads and shackhouses and the Sante Fe railroad. A hundred years later, farmers were still telling their Tulsa kin, "We're just a stone's throw from the Oklahoma border." And farmer's daughters--they spent Saturday afternoons on the Calcoozie Rock of Nicodemus River talking most privately with the boys their fathers forbade them to see.

The story of the brief visit of the Watonia did not interest the modern-day Calcoozians. They looked ahead far beyond the Nicodemus River, far beyond their wheatfields, far away to some other land--land they believed was more fertile than their own.

One truth was known about the Calcoozians--they were survivors. But they were nothing more than survivors and, like the granddaddy oaks that separated their houses, it would take more than one good wind to blow them down.

The Coozies seemed all along to be waiting for a good wind. It seemed that what they had was never what they wanted so they sat hard on their haunches and waited for something else. They waited for the drought to end. They waited for rain. They waited in the small town that came to be known as the half-way marker between Kansas City and Tulsa.

The Calcoozians waited for the Sante Fe. They watched for the brakemen who would give them their Friday paychecks and tell them Kansas City was a big-time place. "Big-time, huh?" Coozies would say, squinting their eyes, looking Northeast toward Kansas City and then they would look down at the clod-hoppers on their feet and march right into Roxanne's Tavern

where they would sit and wait. With pool cues, beer mugs, and "damn this drought" conversation, they would wait there for some action--some big-time action from those Kansas City railroaders.

Calcoozians were a hard lot.

They were car lot and gas station. They were all-night diner. They were Roxanne's Tavern. They were fields and farms. They were streets. They were bricks in the streets. They were grass that grew between bricks in the streets. They were seeds of grass that grew between bricks in the streets. They practiced adultery. They called it something else. They divorced. They remarried. They settled down. They hated being settled down.

Still, they were a hard lot--as hard as the limestone of Calcoozie Rock.

They owned Calcoozie and they had the parking lots and factories to prove it. Those factories where they clocked in at seven, where they clocked out at five. They put their flesh and blood, they put their souls into every fiber-glass luxury boat and suitcase that came off their assembly lines. And they said "bye-bye" as they watched their day's work being stacked on big trucks--boats and suitcases stacked one on top of the other. And they said "so long" as the trucks backed up and drove away.

Calcoozie was a poor town and Coozies worked hard to be poor. Some were lucky enough to give their houses a new coat of paint. Others fought just to keep their blood rich and running to and from their hearts. Money was rare stuff for Calcoozians, but they knew where it wasn't so rare. They knew where there was lots of it. It came from the Northeast like thunder, fast like wind--fifty-seven box cars pulled by an engine, trailed by a rusty red caboose. Kansas City railroaders had the bucks. Kansas City railroaders got paid on Saturdays--got scrubbed up and came into town on Saturday nights. Those nights were holidays in Calcoozie's only tavern--that tavern owned and operated by the most beautiful and most adored three times divorced, once jilted, once widowed single woman in town. Her name: Roxanne-Born Stettsburger, Robbed-My-Cradle-Riley, Broke-My-Ribs-Morgan, Another-Woman-Watson, Left-Me-High-And-Dry-Saint-John, Killed-In-A-Crash-Calhoun. Her friends

called her "Rocks." Jealous women called her "Bitch." Railroaders called her "Hop-Up-On-My-Lap-Honey," and twenty-one-year-old daughter, Eleanore, did not call her "Mother" or anything else.

Friday nights were Eleanore's nights to serve beer. "I ain't gettin' any younger," said Roxanne. "Just give me Saturday nights so's I can mingle with the fellas. You know I'll work every other week night for you."

Around the tables they sat--boy, girl, boy, girl, with railroaders in between, shoulder to shoulder. "Come close and we will tell you the story of Kansas City," the railroaders said. And there was a closeness, and there was a meeting of Calcoozie minds and "cadillacs on the plaza," said a brakeman, the tallest of the bunch.

"The Raddison Meuhlbach Hotel where men can't step foot in 'cept if they're wearin' a tie, and ladies can't step foot in 'cept if they're wearin' one of them diamond broaches and kid gloves and smell like fresh-picked lilacs and have french-rolled hair and nylon stockin's--which you can't see anyhow's 'cause their mink coats goes all the way down to their toe nails." Roxanne's eyes turned big and black as she fingered the pearls around her neck--the pearls which only she knew were fake.

"And," the brakeman continued, "the man with the thinnest black tie holdin' on to the elbow of the frenchiest french-rolled brunette don't necessarily have to be her husband. She could be his high-paid mistress and nobody but nobody would dare say 'boo,' for fear that a one Cleo 'Killer' Ciccotello from the Mafia would excuse himself from the billiard room and go crazy with a silent but deadly Italian imported custom-crafted life-time-guaranteed sawed-off shot gun. That's why every little piece of carpet in the Raddison Muehlbach is the deepest dark red. Ain't no way even the sharpest cop can see the blood stains."

Blood stains. Coozie's neck veins stopped pulsing, turned powder white. Someone breathed. Roxanne dropped to the back of her chair. Fuzzy Ramsbottom eased up on his lower lip. Fuzzy's brother, Ramsey, whispered to himself, "An Italian imported, custom crafted what? . . . I'll be damned."

A cold screech from a bar stool broke the silence. Only Roxanne's daughter could create such a noise. By bearing forward to one side, twisting with both feet,

twice around, Eleanore gave backbones a good jangling. All along she had had her back to the crowd. Suddenly she faced them. She faced that tallest railroader who had managed somehow to talk fast with his mouth filled half with beef jerky, half with chewing tobacco. She stared straight and square at his face. The railroader stared back but it was he, that time, who was captured. Eleanore kept her eyes on his eyes as she took little sips from a tall glass of beer. Then, as if she were spitting acid: "Last call!" she shouted. The crowd began to wake.

"Please, no more," a young just-filed-for-divorce woman pleaded with a just-filed-for-divorce-myself railroader. But the handsome brakeman held tight her dishwater hands, called to Eleanore for two more.

Closing time. The Railroaders helped their lady friends out of their chairs and helped them out the front door. They gave them fifty dollar bills for new dresses an and whatever else they needed to be available. Fives and tens were passed along to the local men. "Buy yourself a bottle of good bourbon." And the Calcoozie men straggled out with the leftovers--heavy hips, husband seekers, virgins.

Eleanore stacked the chairs on the tables and called out to Roxanne, who stood in the back alley sobbing into the shoulder of a Kansas City man--the railroader she'd just made good friends with. One switch of the tracks--he'd be gone by daybreak. Roxanne told him just how badly her heart was breaking. The Kansas City man made many attractive promises. Eleanore wrung out the bar rags. A good-bye kiss for Roxanne. The railroader walked away. Eleanore unplugged the neon lights. Eleanore woke up old man Crawly Potter and pointed him in the general direction of his home. Eleanore drew herself a beer. Eleanore had had herself a day.

The next Saturday came rising up over the rock bank of the great Nicodemus. That Saturday was Collection Day. The third Saturday of every month was "Collection Day" for Roxanne's credit customers.

Eleanore took Roxanne's old Rambler out with two lists. One, her mother called "Good Customers." The other: "The Turnips." "You cain't squeeze blood from a turnip," Roxanne would say, "but you can damn well try for dollar bills."

Crawly Potter was first on the list. Crawly Potter was the king turnip of the bumper crop.

Eleanore took a cash bag to the front door of the Potter home. She knocked, waited for an answer.

"Won't do no good," Vernon, the neighbor man yelled from his lawn chair. "He and the bootlegger are out to the river."

Eleanore remembered Crawly Potter and the river.

I hated the heck out of collection days. It was one Saturday in August--I was twelve--when Roxanne had discovered that Crawly Potter had run his bill up to eighty-two dollars. Not since that May had one dollar come from his working-man's pockets. "Ain't that jist like a god-damn turnip," Roxanne said as she sent me out on my bicycle with a cash bag strapped around my waist.

Crawly was first on the list. Nine ten Birch Street and eighty-two dollars could darn well buy us an aisle at Walker's Grocery. Chocolate milk on corn flakes on bananas on top of raisins over more corn flakes and corn flakes and corn flakes. All along the aisle and back again until my belly would pooch out as far as Crawly's beer gut.

"Crawly ain't home!" Vernon, the neighbor man yelled from his porch steps. "He and the missus are out to the revival meetin' at the river!"

"Well ain't that jist like a god-damn turnip," I muttered, turning my bicycle around.

Smooth pavement turned to brick streets. Red bricks.

Broken bricks. Bricks stickin' up like jagged teeth--and me and my bicycle wheels felt ever' hard jolt. I leaned low over the handle bars. Elbows stuck straight out. Teeth a grittin' jist like I was cruisin' fast on a motorcycle.

Bricks turned to a dusty old river road that wound around and around until I spotted the tent--there at the bank of the Nicodemus River.

"I'm a comin', Crawly Potter! I'm a comin'!" My legs began to pump faster and faster with the gospel music growin' louder and louder from the tent. I could hear them singin' "Shall We Gather at the River."

There must have been a thousand folks there. I heard the preacher spittin' "p's" into the microphone. "Put put put your trust in the Lord. . .And Jesus said. . . And I believe. . .And so it is. . ." I wasn't far from the tent. "Christ is comin' brothers and sisters. Won't you come forward to the altar."

I hopped off my bicycle, stood and searched the crowd for Crawly. Had to find Crawly.

"Won't you put your all on the altar, brothers and sisters. Christ is waitin'. Won't you give your sins to Christ." One by one folks was gettin' outta their chairs--hangin' their heads low, stumbling forwards to the altar.

And there I was in the middle of every shriek of the chorus; the thrusting upward of arms forever wavin'; the

clappin' and hootin' and foot stompin' and that bad smell of hot straw and canvas. "Won't ya'll come forward," the preacher pleaded into the microphone. "Christ is callin' on you now."

And darned if Christ hadn't called on Crawly Potter. I knowed that buffalo-butt anywhere.

"Jesus loves you, Crawly Potter. Accept Jesus into your heart."

Crawly hunkered up to the preacher.

"Won't you accept the Lord into your heart?"

I couldn't stand it no longer. It took only one "Amen brother" and I was back on my bicycle, flyin' down the middle of the aisle careening 'round feet and chairs, whizzin' past God-fearin' faces, arms reachin' for the sky. I slid just inches from Crawly's toes, jumped off my bicycle, stuck the cash bag under his nose, and screamed "Pay up!"

Suddenly, all was very, very still. The singin', the hootin', the clappin' --all of it stopped. Stopped and all of it seemed to settle deep into Crawly Potter's bosom, for the pounding of his heart was all I could hear.

"Eighty-two dollars and fifty-four cents!" I yelled. "That's how much you owe us at the bar."

Crawly's mouth dropped open big and wide like a fox hole.

"Mr. Potter may owe you money," the preacher bent over and whispered into my ear, "but he's right on the

verge of acceptin' Jesus Christ as his personal savior. Why don't you take care of this when the service is over?"

I looked straight at the preacher man makin' the ugliest face I knew how to make. Then suddenly it come from my mouth: "Preacher, if there really is a Jesus Christ you'll let me share this here altar with you and Mr. Potter."

The preacher drew away from me like I was Christ, Himself. Then I began to speak.

"Crawly, Roxanne's fixed you up with an itemized account. You'll see here for the month of May, alone, you drunk sixty-eight cans of Schlitz beer. Roxanne said she wouldn't charge you for them beers you up-chucked in the john mainly 'cause she felt sorry for you and also 'cause you mopped it up yourself. You also charged three cartons of cigarettes nineteen beef jerkies, and sixteen pickled eggs. . .No wonder you went and hooped your guts up, Crawly."

I stopped--waited for him to say something like "I was sick" or "I jist couldn't he'p it." But there was nothin' there but a dead-pan look and three rotten teeth in his mouth.

"June and July," I went on, "them months was about the same. Lotsa beer, lotsa smokes. Everything's wrote down here, fair 'n' square. So now, if you please, give me your eighty-two dollars and fifty-four cents so's I

can go home."

The turnip's face began to crack. "But I ain't got no eighty-two dollars. . .look here," he said as he pulled his pokets inside out. "Not one dime." It was all I could do to stare at them pockets. All of a sudden I covered my face and began to cry.

"Come, come, little girl," the preacher man said. "How's about givin' me that cash bag." Then into the microphone: "I'm sure when Mr. Potter, here, accepts the Lord, he won't be goin' into no more taverns. How about that, brothers and sisters? What you say we take up a collection?"

I peeked out from behind my hands. The congregation was standin' again. Arms thrust out again. Halleluias again. Clappin' and hootin' and singin' again. And Crawly Potter was askin' Jesus Christ into his heart and I was about to be the richest person in the world, and wouldcha look at that cash bag. The preacher passed it right down to the front row. I turned to see how Crawly was holdin' up. He wasn't. He was on his knees, sobbin' his eyes out--head buried in his beer belly. The preacher man was knelt over him recitin' "Thees" and "Thous" and poor, poor Crawly--his empty pockets hangin' limp from his pants like puppy dog ears.

I had seen that man put away beer after beer from mornin' til closin' time. Seen him stumble over himself

out the door. Seen him cause a car accident from fallin' flat on his face in the middle of the street. Seen him bust a pool cue over a fella's head. Seen his face turn ever' color of a bathroom wall from too many shots of whiskey--chased with cough syrup--and then them buckets of beer. And there that same man was with a preacher a kneelin' at the altar. Crawly was drunk all right, but that time not on a bottle of hooch. I didn't know exactly if it was all Jesus Christ or the eighty-two dollar bill that made him cry. I didn't know. It troubled me bad. "Crawly," I said on my knees next to him, "I wish it was all free."

The preacher went out to the congregation, brought me back the filled-up cash bag and taking hold of my shoulders: "Jesus said 'Verily, verily, I say unto you. He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.'"

It stung bad. I took the cash bag and rode away fast. No bumps did I feel, did I feel did I verily, verily what did it mean? Verily, verily what did it mean? Robbery, robbery, calling me robbery. Around and around and goes like the spokes on my bicycle wheels.

"Hey there Vernon," Eleanore yelled, still standing on Crawly's porch steps. "I want you to tell Crawly Potter that Roxanne Calhoun from up at the tavern is huntin' for him. And then I want you to tell Mr. Potter that Jesus Christ is hot on his trail too."

"Will do," Vernon yelled back, waving his hand.

"Yep, I'm quite the shrewd businessman, these days," Crawly said to Roxanne at the tavern cash register. "Don't tell nobody, but me and Bootlegger Bob have got us a little business franchise goin' down at the river, right there on the rock. Don't breathe a word to nobody, but we got fellas comin' all the way from them dry counties in Okie and Bob told me not to tell nobody but we're doin' near ten cases a day. River keeps the brew nice and cool and here's what I owes you, Roxanne--sixty-seven dollars even. I'm as honest as the day is long. Honest as they come. You know that, Roxanne. Don't you dare tell the missus, now. I be in a world of trouble if the missus ever found out. The old gal would leave me for damn sure. Here, count it--sixty-seven smackers."

"You ain't paid your bill for three months, Crawly."

"I know, I know, but what's the difference. I'm payin' it now ain't I?"

Eleanore appeared at the door with the cash bag. "I've been looking for you, Crawly."

"Looks like you found me," Crawly said, trying to laugh.

"Collection day."

"Had it circled on my calendar--and you'll be glad to know I jist paid your mama sixty-seven dollars. And don't tell nobody, but me and Bootlegger Bob's got a little franchise goin' down at the river. I'm a rich man now, Eleanore. Rich as the day is long. I'm goin' to buy me a new fishin' rod and a pair of them rubber waders and I reckon I'll buy the missus a new Sunday hat and I'll still have 'nough left over to paint the house and pay cash tonight for all my beer drinkin'."

"Someone else is lookin' for you, Crawly," said Eleanore.

"Who's that?" Crawly asked, grabbing for his wallet. "Not the sheriff!"

"As a matter of fact, it was the sheriff," said

Eleanore. He stopped me when I went to collect from Bootlegger Bob and Bob weren't there and Vernon done told me that you and Bob were down to the river, so that's what I told the sheriff."

"Golly cripes!" yelled Crawly. "Why'd you go and do that!' I've gotta get myself out there. Bob might be in big trouble." Crawly ran out the door, screeched away from the curb in his pick-up truck.

"You never talked with the sheriff," said Roxanne. "He's right across the street. Had breakfast with him at the diner. Says he's been spending most days there in front of the air conditioner, catching up on last year's paper work. Besides, he knows better than to get out in this heat and chase after a couple of old bootleggers."

"Sure 'nough," said Eleanore, poking her head through the door. "That's his car there, all right."

The Saturday night crowd was thick as roadside briar bushes and twice as wild.

Wheat gone. The wheat had died. Farmers were there cursing the heat with damnation, hell-fire. No luck at all at hearts and spades. "Cow's a starvin'. Ain't got no feed." Ranchers consoled one another with hard times stories and pinches of scotch snuff at the men's room door. Points and plugs. "Just another god-damn valve job." The mechanics wound down with stogies and shop talk and beer. Saddle-sore from thirsty old sway-backs, the cowboys slapped the dust off their Stetsons and shuffled up the poker cards. Hardware to hardware. Latches to bolts. For factory workers it was pitchers full of beer. One for the assembly line. One for the overtime. And one for the cupcake, smiling up a wall crack, fighting with a bra strap, wondering if she'd ever go home. Construction boys checked the welts on the palms of their hands, worked the dirt from the palms of their hands. Hard hats and welding burns and sharp eyes out for women, single or otherwise. Farm girls. They sat together for their very first beers. With sour balls stuck against the insides of their cheeks, they took one sip, held it in their mouths. Sharp bite on soft tongue. Then, holding, holding, holding "all to-gether now"--let it go.

There was trouble in the air as plain as the dim-pled hips on four local whores. Cowboys tossed "mother

fuckers" like quarters on the black jack tables. There at the pool table--the rackin' and smackin'. "The eight ball's in trouble. The eight ball's in trouble." A mechanic was getting awfully hot over a little gum-cracking platinum hanging over a pin-ball machine. Tilt! Her husband was honking the hell out of the car horn out in front. The whores rubbed their bare shoulders together, gathered in the ladies room for a conference. Fuzzy Ramsbottom and the rest of the cowboys downed their beers, left their poker winnings, and gathered at the men's room for a conference.

The construction boys made plans as they talked softly among themselves. Secrets--"keep it down, Johnny"--secrets. They had their eyes on a table full of married women--young mothers who had kept their good figures, who talked kids and kitchens and meat and potatoes and "Jesus Christ, Lou Ellen, divorce that son-of-a-bitch!"

All of a sudden the hard-hatters were sitting right next to those married women telling them their eyes were so blue and would they care for another beer. They thought that maybe they would.

The whores had joined the crowd, cheeks pinched pink, hair let down forefingers and thumbs toying with blouse buttons and how they sashayed right on up to the pool table--to the pool table where the cowboys, having just joined the crowd, stood waiting. They had already made their choices.

No one noticed the black cloud that was rolling low in the evening sky--not even the three factory women who stood--like night guards--looking out the west window. All they could do was bite their fingernails and holler "This ain't right!" One by one the married women drew away from the construction boys. "You're right. It ain't right. Railroaders should be here by now." The whores twisted their hands from the hands of the cowboys, ran to the window. Roxanne dashed to the pay-phone. Eleanore drew a beer for a farm girl and gave her two quarters for the juke-box. "Play something fast and raunchy," she said.

"This ain't right!" yelled the factory woman.

"Johnny Cash!" Eleanore yelled. "A-five!"

"Where's them railroaders?"

"Elvis! B-seven!"

"It's nine o'clock. That brakeman promised me!"

"Play 'Hound Dog'!"

"He promised me!"

"Here's another quarter. Play it again!"

Roxanne vaulted from bar stool to the top of the bar. "Derailed!" she yelled. "Sante Fe's went and derailed itself just south of Topeka!"

All the women in the tavern who had ever gotten so much as a "howdy" out of a railroader dropped their beers and screamed their faces scarlet--screamed Elvis Presley right off the juke-box. Even the farm girls who'd never known a Kansas City brakeman held each other and cried. The local men poked one another with elbows. "Hot damn," they said, and not too loudly. They gave the fellows next to them private smiles, winks. And Eleanore--Eleanore blew the head off a fresh-drawn beer.

Roxanne stamped her foot, whistled with two fingers in her mouth. "Y'all shut up!" she yelled. "No one killed. Only injury was two broken legs to the engineer. Dispatcher says they'll be back on the line come next Saturday."

The news brought shouts and whistles. And rain. The summer-long drought had ended. Farmers' rumors were true. A gully-washer would save them all late in August.

Farmers who had never danced with their daughters picked them up like babies and swung them dizzy--took them out into the rain and danced them all the way home to their wheat fields.

Eleanore sat behind the bar and stared out the window at the storm. Rain and branches came crashing against the bar-front bricks. Oak trees bowed down to fire hydrants, sidewalks. Limbs hung on by threads. Elm branches gave way. Drainage ditches overflowed, heaving up a muddy river. Cars stalled. Sirens. A cop car spun around the corner.

Then the lights went out. The music stopped. Pinball machines binged and banged to silence. There was hooting and hollering, the sound of pool cues splitting like firewood. Chairs and tables toppled over. "Make room!" someone yelled. Harmonica. Someone was playing a harmonica. The whores' voices. "Step, step, kick." Tap dancing. The whores were tap dancing. The whores were taking their clothes off. Blouses, skirts

Where the hell is it?"

"Where's my mother's skirt?" Eleanore asked the man.

"It went out the back door," he said.

"Who stole my mother's skirt?"

"Who has no skirts, but those which are rags?"

Eleanore smiled at the man. Eleanore felt good to be smiling at the man--to see that he was smiling back at her.

"Want a beer?" she asked. "I'll give it to you free."

"Thank you, no," the man said. "I'm filled to the gills with rain water."

"What's your name?" Eleanore asked.

"Henry."

"Henry, what?"

"J. Starkly, Jr."

"You from Kansas City?"

"Born and raised."

"You ain't going to feed me no line on that Muehlbach place," Eleanore insisted. Done heard it all."

"Every man's a liar," said the man.

"Blood stains?"

"Again, every man's a liar."

"Will you be stayin' long?" asked Eleanore.

"No, I'm going to leave now."

"Where you headed?"

"South," he said. "I'm going south and it would give me great pleasure if you came with me."

"With you!"

"I've got my fishing boat tied up on Coozie rock."

"I cain't jist up and leave."

"You don't want to be here."

"Who ever told you that?"

"Divorced from those who this very night went too far into the floor. You are not of them and by that--it was you who told me."

"I don't understand you. You make me afraid. You're a stranger. I won't go."

The man picked up his lantern and started for the door. "Then remember me to old man Potter," he said. "He and I go way back."

The man was gone before Eleanore could say "so long." Down the street he walked, lantern swinging at his side--its light shooting beams into the pitch of a star-

less Calcoozie night. Eleanore followed the man as he walked through the many broken elm branches. She kept behind him--a distance of a street block until all she could see was the lantern light--a pinprick in the dark--beyond the railroad tracks, beyond the meat plant, beyond the water tower. Eleanore stopped at the corner of Twelfth and Birch watching the man going away. And she stood there watching the lantern light fading away to nothing at the south end of town.

When there was nothing more for her to see she turned around, walked back to the tavern. Everyone was gone except for Crawly Potter who was waking from a heavy sleep. The old man wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve.

"Where did ever' body go?" he asked.

"Home," said Eleanore.

"Guess I missed a fair amount of the night."

"You missed your old friend, Henry Starkly."

"Don't know no Henry Starkly."

Eleanore helped the old man out of his chair. "Your home is thataway," she said pointing to the door.

"Starkly, you say?" asked Crawly. "Henry Starkly?"

Eleanore led Crawly by the arm. "He says that you and him go way back. Way back, Crawly. He says the two of you go way back."

Crawly shrugged his shoulders. "The only Henry I ever knowed was a def'nite Hank, but Hank's name weren't Starkly--it was Duganberry. And that's the sheriff. Hank Duganberry. Sheriff Hank Duganberry!" Crawly bent over into Eleanore's face and began to speak. "The sheriff weren't never lookin' for me and Bootlegger Bob today, were he? He weren't, Eleanore, were he?"

"I know, Crawly," she said. "I reckon every man's a liar. And I reckon every woman is too."

Carol Hebald

LAST EVENING AT PITZER'S

Mrs. Pugh marched in twenty minutes late to our Great Books Discussion, flopped off her hat, glanced quickly at her watch, and without ceremony, began:

"Whatever we know of Hamlet, of what can we be sure? she asked: "One at a time, please."

No one spoke.

"Come, come: Of what can we be sure?"

"That character had problems," yelled Catharine.

"Good: What were they?--One at a time."

She lit up her cigarette.

"Too intellectual," someone muttered.

"All right," conceded Mrs. Pugh, a little uncertainly: "Rather too general, but all right. Another?"

"He was too intense."

"In a sense, he was dense."

"That's true, too," said Mrs. Pugh.

"He also thought too much," someone added.

"I'll buy that!" cried Mrs. Pugh. "Another?"

"It was all Ophelia's fault," sighed Arthur.

"What's it?"

"Excuse me?"

"Did he have only one?" asked a shy girl.

"One what, dear?"

"Problem."

"Basically? . . . Yes," breathed out Mrs. Pugh. She flicked her ash. Then: "What was it?"

"Having a mother like you," yelled Catharine.

"That's only part of it, dear.--Someone else?"

There was a silence.

"What did he eat for breakfast?" pursued Catharine.

"When?"

"The morning of the murder."

"Whose murder?"

"Polonius' murder?"

"What has that to do with our discussion?" squealed out Mrs. Pugh.

"Whatever you like," replied Catharine: "I offer it to you."

"You figure it was something he "et?" asked Arthur.

"Wut?"

"Well, shall I?--Shall we all?--Take umbrage at this?"

"Sure," shrugged Catharine. "Why not?"

Mrs. Pugh drew in her belt:

"Okay: What was it?"

"What's it?

"Hamlet's problem."

I raised my hand.

"Yes?--And what does the erudite Miss Pibble think?"

"Well, I think--" but I burst out into giggles.

"Yes, Miss Pibble?--Continue your thought, please."

"Well, I think--I can't--" and I continued laughing...

"Make an effort--please, Miss Pibble."

I caught my breath. --"Well, I think that madmen--like Hamlet and we here--"

"Say 'mad persons,' sweetie," urged our Stephanie, slim sophisticate.

"--That mad creatures like Hamlet and the rest of us--go crazy protecting the consciences of the sane."

"That's a truly original thought, Miss Pibble."

"No, it isn't, Mrs. Pugh."

Dinner chimes rang.

"Thank God!" breathed out Catharine.

"Thank God," I echoed. "What are we having?"

"Chicken Gucci."

"That's wonderful!"

We assembled in pairs for the dining room.

"Know what she talked about last week?" I asked. "--While you were sick?"

Catharine was given a hysterectomy last Tuesday. --Says she got it for no children.

"What?"

"Pocahontas' problem."

"What was it?"

"An impenetrable hymen."

"How does she know--!"

"She must have heard it somewhere."

"Did she have only one?" asked the shy girl.

"Who?"

Catharine, like a walrus, slapped her buttocks down to eat.

"Someone on this floor is constantly crying and she

won't stop," she began. "You are repelled?--I want to speak."

"Speak, Catharine."

She picked up her fork and began to eat. In her large, kind flesh, in her thickish flesh, Catharine was eating. Again she'd forgotten what she had meant to say . . . She tried to look up at the rest of us, but had not the courage. Briefly she did manage it; she neither discerned nor considered what she saw. One object put another out of sight. She was busy eating. She took another bite.

"Speak, Catharine; --no one'll steal your food."

I didn't mean to say it! --I didn't mean to hurt her: Did I hurt her?

"Do you understand me?" she asked me simply.

"Yes, Catharine--I think so . . . I have something to tell you--later."

"All right."

Usually, she arrives early and circles the tables--like a caged animal eager to eat. She steals the bread; she isn't ashamed. She prowls quietly around, steals a slice, and with her back turned, jerks it apart and stuffs it into her mouth: like cotton. She just keeps circling round quietly and eating--a penitent watchman left back by Time.

"How many trunks does an elephant have?" shouted out Mrs. Blue, our new social worker, who stayed on to join us tonight at table.

"One!" we shouted back in unison.

"Not in Catharine's play." She winked at Catharine, folded her arms, and grinned.

"Why is she torturing me, Miss Pibble?" asked Catharine.

"She doesn't mean to torture you, Catharine; she's trying to encourage you. Ignore her, she'll stop . . . You didn't tell me you were writing a play!"

"I'm not."

"Then what the--?"

"I haven't even begun it," she sighed.

"Watch it!"

"Watch out!"

"Watch it! --Arthur's going to throw down his fork."

Arthur's our real author. He's got a new novel; --not only a commercial success, he says, the public likes it as well. And we like it--all except Stephanie, that is. She hasn't read it. Steffie's different from the rest of us; --downed a heavy underdose of Seconal and came here, she claims, "just from intellectual curiosity."

"Watch it!"

"Watch out!"

Mrs. Fine, on my left, ducked her head and poked me with the salt:

"Listen, Miss Pibble," she said: "Never lose hope. My niece--you remember she visited? --She has trouble, too. Like you--all her life: too fat and thinks too much. A highly-educated girl, studying now for her Master's --to be a schoolteacher just like you! --Had a terrible problem all her life--pulling her ears."

"She stopped?"

"Yes."

"What do you suppose she's pulling now?"

"Catharine!"

"Watch it!"

"Watch out!"

"Arthur's going to throw down his fork."

Arthur's fork sailed into the air, and landed in slivers of plastic on the floor.

"Nurse, Arthur threw down his fork--again," called Stephanie.

"Arthur, why do you do that?" asked Mrs. Blue.

"You really interested, Mrs. Blue? --I'll tell you: The whole goddamned world is raving about my book, but my doctor complains: 'It's too depressing,' " he snarled.

"You can't win 'em all, Arthur," I said softly.

"Oh, don't you think so, Miss Pibble? --You want to fight?"

"Sure, I want to fight."

"Then stand up and put up your fists."

I stood up and put up my fists.

"Now what am I supposed to do?" I said.

"Punch me." He gulped down his string bean.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm not mad at you."

"Nurse, she's crazy," he hollered.

"Arthur, why are you so mean?"

"How old are you Miss Pibble?" asked Nurse Hanni, rushing to my rescue.

"Gee, I'm not sure, Nurse, --but I can tell you where to look it up."

"Tell me now," demanded Catharine, "what you have to tell me --I can't wait."

I sat down, took a deep breath--began:

"Catharine, you know--Catharine?--Listen, I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Again leaving?" --She looked at me. With an instinctive gesture, I grabbed her hand. Instantly I withdrew it. I didn't mean to do so--oh no!--But a look--something had frightened me: Her eyes, the mirrors of her soul, shone on me--blind as a beached whale's.

We resumed eating.

"When did you find out?" she asked, a moment later.

"Last week: I was called before the Assembly . . . "

"Would you like to change your dress, Miss Pibble?" asked Nurse Hanni, ten minutes before my scheduled appearance. I'd chosen to wear the red one that morning--for spite . . .

"No, thank you."

"Don't be nervous," she warned me in a hushed tone, by the elevator.

"What about?"

"Come in, please, Miss Pibble," urged Dr. Olvin, our chief resident, ushering me before a seated assembly of twenty-five doctors, some of whom I dimly recognized: Stout, gentle Dr. Steiner--Catharine's resident--in the back row . . . I saw also Mrs. Pugh and Mrs. Blue, side-by-side in the second, and to their left, my own resident, Dr. Stinta, with whom I'd remained, those last two months, in virtual silence. He seemed to be staring a little beyond me now with that slight sneer of complacency I'd first noted in his sympathetic glances at us along the corridors: a sympathy tinged somehow with superiority--of the well for the sick.

"I suppose you're all wondering why I've gathered you together here today," I began quietly.

There was a long silence . . . I shifted my weight.

"Have a seat, Miss Pibble," said Dr. Olvin, finally shoving over a chair.

"Thank you." And I sat down.

"Miss Pibble, will you begin by telling us exactly why you think you're here--at Pitzer's?"

"I am here," I replied.

He paused briefly: "I see; --And why were you sent here?"

"I had a tendency to kill myself," I muttered quietly.

"Can you elaborate on that?" asked a slender young intern, pencil poised high.

"Hold it, Stingle!" intercepted Olvin sharply. And then to me:

"Do you feel yourself progressing toward any general goal or particular goal?--or any general goal in particular?"

"Which?"

"Whichever."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The goal you came in here for," he explained, "or any other general goal?"

"I'm sorry;-- what goals was that?"

He sighed deeply. "Have you been making any progress toward conquering your difficulties--with suicide, for example?"

"I made some intellectual progress right after my last attempt," I replied wearily. "Or I hope I did; I don't know, doctor."

"How would you describe your relationship with Dr. Stinta?" he continued. "Do you find it problematic? --More problematic perhaps than therapeutic? --Or basically perhaps more therapeutic than problematic?"

"Where does the basically begin--and end? Clarify that, perhaps."

"How do you feel in your relationship with Dr. Stinta?" he barked.

"I feel that he is persecuting me," I answered simply.

"And why?"

"I don't know, doctor. Perhaps you'd better ask that of him."

There was a pause. Dr. Stinta crossed his legs.

"What have you learned here?" queried Olvin in a thoughtful tone.

"I've learned--that we're all human.

"Didn't you know that before?"

"Only intellectually."

"And now?--That is, what altered your intellectual assumption into--sheer conviction?"

I leaned forward: "It was you fellas," I began. "And you, too, Mrs. Blugh: You drummed it into me."

All pencils started scratching.

"Drummed what into you?" pursued Dr. Olvin.

"--That because of the terrible work you do--in that you use real feelings when relating to us--you too are vulnerable, and occasionally, --even culpable." I took a deep breath. "Therefore: if we patients expected less of you, you gentle creatures would relax more. --And perhaps it follows also in the outside world: That if we expected less of ourselves, and of others, people would like us better, too. --Perhaps even as well as you!" I drew another breath. "It is this insight in particular that's helped me, in developing my 'social skills' to 'act more spontaneous' --I quote Dr. Stinta here--which I sincerely hope I've begun to do." I paused. "Finally, I have learned under your tutelages--respectively--" here I crossed my legs and leaned back--"that what is appropriate to propriety must also become appropriate to me, --though my heart throws off smoke every time I say so."

Dr. Olvin smiled broadly, displaying a set of slim, gleaming incisors.

"You are most eloquent, Miss Pibble."

"You're more than kind, Dr. Olvin."

I put down my fork.

"Catharine, I won't forget our walks in the Garden; I promise."

"You promise?"

"I won't forget."

How could I forget? --Always I've marched with Catharine. We'd collapse sometimes--from medicinal fatigue--onto the hard benches and start laughing, dream of balancing our fat babies on our fat knees in a real park somewhere . . . then drift over to the high bars, stare beyond them at the moving cars. We'd count them by color to pass the time of day . . . till chimes rang for Occupational Therapy, Recreational Therapy, or snacks.

I poked her:

"Know what skinny Stephanie did this afternoon down

in the Garden? --While you were resting? Tried to squeeze herself through the bars--in an attempt to escape: so she says."

"What happened?"

"The nurses didn't take any notice, so she came upstairs and told everybody all about it."

"It was my fault," Catharine confessed softly: "I did something terrible to her."

"You didn't! What? --Tell me."

"Well," --she tossed off her milk: "I felt hungry this morning--again before breakfast. So I got up--hoping. To find something, I mean. A roll, an orange: anything. I was becoming very nervous. I snuck out along the corridor . . . Then, I spied a box of sample chocolates on the floor of Stephanie's room. So I wandered in--looking neither to the left nor the right. 'What are you doing in my room?' she asked. 'I'm not aware of being in your room,' I replied, and stole her chocolates."

"Catharine, that's terrible," I said, and began laughing. Then Catharine began too.

"The hyenas are laughing again," said Arthur.

"Yuk-yuk."

"Catharine, what does your elephant do?" asked Mrs. Blue over coffee.

"Do?"

"Yes," echoed Stephanie: "What does he do? --With his excess trunks?"

"How many trunks does her elephant have?" asked Mrs. Fine.

"Only two," replied Catharine: "One tenor and one bass."

"Nu?"

"And what does he do?" pursued Mrs. Blue.

"Do?"

"Yes--with his two trunks--in your play?"

"He emits blares," answered Catharine.

"Oh," said Mrs. Blue, and bit delicately into her apple.

"Why does he do that?" asked Stephanie, a moment later.

"Catharine, why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying--it's you."

"No, Catharine--it's you."

"It is not I, Miss Pibble; it is you."

I was silent.

"I want more cake," she admitted, a moment later.

"It's made with Ajax, Catharine,"

"I still want it."

"Well, they won't give it to you: rules, remember? --One dessert."

"But why?"

"They want you to understand that in life on the outside, you won't get too much of a sweet thing."

"She gathered that," commented Stephanie.

Chimes rang: Dinner was done.

"Golf on the green?" asked Arthur, rising.

"Golf on the green?" I echoed vaguely.

"On the green carpet," he explained: "The nurses are setting up in South Lounge with balls and broomsticks.

I tossed and turned in my blankets. Usually sleep came so easily: Not tonight.

I would never see Catharine again . . .

"Catharine isn't--well, dangerous," advised Stephanie, when I'd first arrived. --But be careful: don't steer too near, or accidentally to touch her; --she's apt to lunge out and strike you with her bare hands."

"Please!" I cried. "She's listening."

"Don't be silly, she doesn't listen. Anyway, she's standing at the other end of the room."

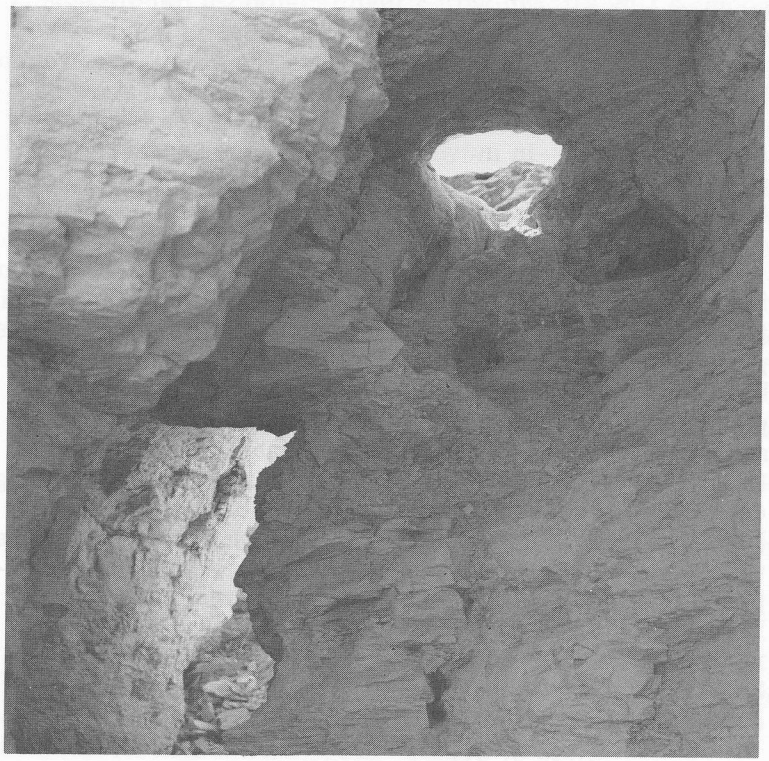
Then it came: The Invasion of Hell upon her spirit--came as a lifeless buoy that sank her quietly into a soundless sea, where she lay unable to speak or move, in which she grew rigidly compelled to stay, and finally from which she could not emerge: the waking death of the catatonic stupor.

"Can you understand that?" carped Stephanie. "--With all your concern?"

The nurse bustled over to Catharine with a shot of Thorazine.

4 a.m., still I hadn't slept . . . I thought I heard someone crying. Someone seemed constantly to be crying. I rose from my bed and looked into her room: She lay as always with her knees drawn up and her face

covered--fighting an ever-losing battle with longing. Longing so intense that in itself it is madness. Longing of so fierce a nature that it had the power to turn her into a maniac. A lifetime filled with fierce wanting.



Jane Ciabattari

HIDING OUT

After I escaped from my husband I found this place on a street with no name. Luigi the landlord calls it his street. He plays village headman, doling out advice and anisette from his kitchen with shrewdness and devotion. Luigi was suspicious at first when I showed up in the middle of a snowy night with the baby and two suitcases, but when I pulled out the money he veiled his eyes and chucked the baby under the chin, asked his wife to loan us blankets and helped me get the heat going.

Luigi's place is a renovated whorehouse, cut into twelve distorted apartments. Mine has two bedrooms with high-riding beds and no partition between them; a narrow aisled living room lined with chairs like a dentist's waiting room; a tiny kitchen with a formica-topped dinette set, electric stove and Frigidaire. The house is bordered on one side by a neo-colonial motel, on the other by a frozen lake dotted with glassed-in summer cabins, all deserted now. It's the coldest spot for miles. Across the narrow street is a drive-in movie, closed for the winter. The wind howls across the bare plain, rattles against the deteriorating movie screen, then whips around the corner of this old house.

I measure my state of mind against that eerie screaming wind. Ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum, whoosh. Baby crying, fix bottle, mash banana, ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum, whoosh.

The first morning here I went out and scooped up a bowl of snow, brought it inside and ate it with sugar and evaporated milk for breakfast. It slid coolly over my shrieking nerves. The baby crowed and laughed in an improvised high chair and I poured a little on his morning cereal. We laughed together and I let myself relax a bit. I had escaped. Laid the plans, all alone, hidden away the things we'd need one by one in my lingerie drawers, prepared one last complicated Christmas dinner for the in-laws topped off with sherry and dainty cookies--six varieties, all his family's recipes--before the fireplace. Sid's mother had smiled at me over her second sherry, and as she left with his father she took me aside: "My

dear, you haven't looked so well in months. You seem to be doing so much better." Mistaking my hysteria for good humor, my sparkling eyes for good will, missing the core of my mood. And all the while I was thinking, this will be the last goddamn Christmas dinner they'll get out of me, the very last, and laughing inside.

Most of the people around here work in a reconstructed colonial village across the highway and down; they wear long linsey-woolsey skirts and six-button trousers and work at obsolete crafts: making pewter, blacksmithing, tinsmithing, spinning thread, weaving by hand, baking beans in brick ovens or stirring stews over the fire in two hundred-year-old houses. I call them the colonials. They move back into the twentieth century gingerly each night, slipping back like shades of the past, and quietly await the next morning. Some of them have lived this way thirty years or more; they know little of the outside world.

It's a hiding out, deserted place--no mail delivery, no sidewalks, no garbage collection or maintenance; you can't even see the house from the highway. Rumor has it the man in the apartment next to mine is hiding from the C. I. A. He sits behind closed venetian blinds with a loaded rifle. Sometimes I hear him pacing, or his door slam in the middle of the night, but I've never seen him.

Yesterday with a light snow the fear was weaker, and I thought we might be safe, but at dawn my husband broke in the front door while I was sleeping (I sleep on my stomach, even when I was pregnant) and took a butcher knife to my back, slicing all the way down my spine neatly, exposing the layers of pink and white, trailing red across the frozen lake and all morning my nerves kept me from sleeping off the memory.

And later, drawing a bath for the baby, a gush of dark reddish brown from the faucet erupted like old blood and stained the water. Even forewarned by Luigi, I was startled, disgusted.

But I feel free inside this place. There's a radio, my coffee mug from home, the baby, deadly quiet. He can't find me here. Last night the cards foretold sudden misfortune, calamity, quarrels but happiness in the future (the snake and lightning striking) and a warning: someone is going to steal something from you and you will never get it back. But I am immune to all that. I have brought my own misfortune upon myself. I know it well.

One night the first week walking with the baby I took a wrong turn after leaving the post office and wandered into a sprawl of drunken retching youths, covering the forest floor and leaning toward me with gaping jaws and foul breath. I was nearly too frightened to move, but finally, clutching the baby to me, I waded through the bodies, all in utter silence with racing heart. I reached a darkened church and entered, climbing winding stairs into a tower. A sudden draught of organ music startled me and I looked down upon a Mass. A random thought crossed my mind: Looks like Pauline to me, wouldn't that be funny. But how was I to get out? I stood undecided, still cradling the baby, then I knew: Run down the steps and genuflect at each altar I see. Did I remember how? My life could depend on it. I practiced, and it came back, awkwardly. Would they be able to tell the difference?

Racing, all I remember is wine velvet and dark shapes and candles and forgetting to cross myself at the second to the last altar because I was so excited to see the entrance door and then being overcome with sickening fear that I would be exposed at the last moment, but they were all inclined in another direction, intent upon the pulpit, and didn't see me. Outside the door near a trellis trailing icy thorns I stopped to catch my breath, then rushed down the road, slipping on the ice. Several blocks later we were locked into the warmth of Luigi's again, huddled together under the blankets in my oversized bed. Now I'm careful where I go, and by what route.

I shop for food at a supermarket in a neighboring town. It's called the Big Bunny. I wrap us up in heavy coats, mufflers, boots, even furry red ear muffs, before we venture out. When we drive past the giant bunny holding the week's specials--CARROTS 2 BCHS 39¢, CHUCK STEAK $1.19 LB. --between its gaudy paws, I choke with laughter. Furry big bunny, I point out to the baby and he laughs with delight. His laughter is young, pealing; mine hurts my ears like the icy air. There's an edge to my voice which brings back our worst fights.

Today it is warmer--close to twenty degrees, the radio says--so I finally take the baby out to walk on the lake. Or around the lake. I am frightened to walk on it at first. I can't believe it can hold my weight. And I feel so responsible for the baby. THIN ICE: MOTHER AND

CHILD DROWN. It would be my fault.

But then I notice Luigi has a bonfire going right in the center of the lake, and men are standing quite safely around it. A lake freezes at the edges first, where it is shallow, and the center, the core, is the last to give in to the cold. I calculate potential depth, days of sub-freezing temperatures, the heat of the bonfire, and convince myself it must be frozen solid.

So we step off the shore and onto the lake itself. I hold my breath at first, not trusting. But it supports me, and I let the baby toddle after. My boots make a peculiar rasping sound. I want it to be beautiful--the snow, bare trees and people bundled up in red and blue. I show the baby the tiny bird tracks in the snow and he coos and chuckles, but I am too cold to enjoy it. My feet feel like blocks of ice; I'm grounded in utter chill, and my hands are stiff and painful.

I talk to the baby in a low, soothing voice, proud of myself that the fear doesn't leak through. It's like a recording, a calm, rational voice. I tell him how water freezes into ice in the winter, how in the summertime the lake must be lovely; if we stay until then we can picnic by the side of the lake but we won't be able to walk onto it. He doesn't understand much, but water is one of his words, and he seems to like the talking better than silence. I try, but I can't imagine the lake in warm weather. I can't visualize spring or summer here. It seems cold forever, the cold is so overwhelming. And I can't imagine myself in six months. Where I will be, what I will be doing. I can't stay here forever, frozen in time, but it's the only place I feel safe now.

I tell the baby about ice skating. That when he's older he might learn how. Then I realize that's absurd, we won't be here when he's old enough to ice skate. Surely we won't. I tell him how my mother used to make us cocoa and peanut butter crackers in the winter and then I flinch at how normal that was, growing up in a family with brothers and sisters and having a mother at home when you came from school, a soft mother waiting with peanut butter crackers and cocoa. And he won't have that. Surely by what I've done I've denied him that normalcy.

But he's oblivious, scraping up snow with his mittened hands, a little square padded creature trailing footprints across a frozen lake, red muffler around his face, falling

down and laughing, struggling against the bulk of his leggings and parka to get back on his feet. For some reason he seems far away from me, like he isn't mine. I feel responsible for him, and guilty, and that he's beautiful and charming, but he has nothing to do with me, really. And I don't remember when that started, that distance. But I take good care of him. I swing him around in the air to make him giggle, and take him back inside because his mittens and seat are wet, and strip him down and give him a hot bath because I know it will feel good, and feed him cocoa and peanut butter crackers and put him down for a nap under several blankets and kiss him sweetly on his chubby cheeks. But I'm somewhere else while I do it. It isn't the same.

I have a phantom lover who comes to me each night after the baby's asleep, creeping into my tall bed. He wears different faces and has a sure intimate knowledge of each inch of my body which is capable of pleasure. I call out his name in my sleep, but I can never remember it in the morning. I think of putting a pad and pencil by my bedside to write it down, like I used to write down my dreams, but decide I don't really want to know. And these days my sleep is too precious to interrupt.

The baby's been sick. He woke in the night screaming with pain, rubbing his ear with tiny knotted hands, burning me when I touched him. I called every doctor in town but not one would come here on a subzero night and I refused to drive a sick baby twenty miles to the nearest hospital in a car with a broken heater, so I accepted the last doctor's refusal, forcing myself to be civil, and took down his instructions for bringing down the fever: 104, 103, 102, a degree at a time. I coaxed the baby to take a tiny piece of aspirin in apple juice, then I took his feeble flushed body into the bathtub between my legs and sponged him with lukewarm water. I found myself sobbing, remembering his birth. And now he was limp like a stuffed doll, so frail. His eyes had withdrawn to another place; they were glazed, delirious. Finally he slept, still whimpering off and on, and I sat up the rest of the night smoking and drinking tea and wondering why we can never really feel another's pain, and crying for all of us alone. And feeling helpless.

That's my favorite word, right now. Helpless. Helpless to keep my baby from feeling pain, helpless to fix my life, or start a new life, to do the things I have to do. I don't have the sort of family I could go to and admit defeat finally and be soothed. No friends here. And I'm afraid to approach people--afraid that in the middle of a casual conversation a seam will split and inadvertently, uncontrollably, I'll spill out all my miseries in a rage that won't stop and they'll have me locked up. Afraid it will all show in my eyes, on my face, the crimes, the sick, self-indulgent excesses, the failures, the hidden weakness.

There are lines on my face I didn't have six months ago. In the mirror my eyes look bruised, demented. I smile at myself, testing for normalcy, but I can see it all behind my eyes, like maggots under a rock, all the ugliness and shame. He said I was sick--hysterical. Maybe I am. I'm a master of self-delusion. For ten years I told myself I had a good marriage. I would not allow myself to fail at anything.

I sit here at the table trying to remember. I know I am terrified, so afraid inside, but I can't really remember the horrid fights, the unforgiveable things we said to each other. They've been burned out of me. Too shocking? I don't have the courage to face them? I don't seem to have any control over my memory. Sometimes I try very hard--set the scene, what I was wearing, where he was standing, where we were going that day, what I fed the baby for breakfast. I can remember it all. But not the subject matter of our argument or the thrust of our words. Meaningless curses and threats going nowhere. I can see his back stiffening, and hear the tone of my voice, how shrill and out of control it was, but I can't remember what I meant. Or why.

I think if I could remember I wouldn't be so afraid, so helpless. It seems important to figure it out, so I can start something new for myself, face being alone, but as much as my mind races it just goes in circles and ends up at the same point. I have left and I am alone and I don't understand why it was so horrible but I couldn't bear being in the same house with him anymore and there must be something terribly wrong with me. Not necessarily in that order. And I hate myself for allowing it to go wrong, and I hate him for not trying to figure it out

and fix it. I can't believe it couldn't be fixed, with effort. Why couldn't we fix it?

That's not fair. We could have, but I couldn't do it alone, and he blamed me for everything. I can feel it now, that urge to annihilate, that overwhelming hatred for him. I can remember the feeling, if not the context. He would say something, never mind what, the details are not important. To me, it would mean, you are worthless, you are ruining everything, there's something wrong with you and I am blameless, a victim of your vicious hysteria, and I would see red. One time I picked up a chair and would have broken it over his head if he had not stepped aside, horrified. I remember feeling a great sense of release in that physical gesture. The strength in my arms as I lifted the chair, swung it over my head and toward him; the jarring thud as I brought it down on the floor hard. The fear in his face. My power. And the terrible--no, excruciating--guilt I felt when I realized what I had almost done. That I could have injured him badly, and the anger had been so powerful it had short-circuited my senses. I could not see the consequences of the action at the time; it was irrational. He said that. Irrational. Dangerous. Hysterical. And he said he didn't know if he could trust me with the baby when I got violent like that. He used every lever he could to dig it into me, his moral indignation. How could I stay with him?

But I didn't see that for years. So how can I know if I'm not deluding myself again now. I just can't figure it out.

It's snowing again. Maybe it will warm up. For days it has been so cold it could only spit ice crystals. I sit at the window watching the birds dip down to pick up crumbs around the garbage cans before they are encased in ice. And listen through the wall to Luigi's remedies for heartburn, frozen carburetors and rust in the pipes, and imagine his healthy eyes sparkling at the challenge of each new problem and narrowing in judgment of each new member of his court and hope we are safe. Any sudden car sound, bang on the wall, or grotesque vision sends a jolt of panic through me.

Sharon Oard Warner

THE "TODAY" SHOW
--for Diana

Jeff is nudging her in the ribs, and she knows the alarm must have gone off. She rarely wakes at the sound of the electronic buzz, but he does. After waking her, he rolls over and sleeps for another hour. Sometimes Jeff stays up until two or three in the morning studying and drinking coffee; he sleeps lightly and doesn't remember his dreams. She goes to bed methodically at eleven and gets up at seven. It's not that she has to get up so early. The elementary school where she teaches is a mile from their apartment and she doesn't spend much time in front of the mirror. She enjoys getting ready for work slowly while she watches the TODAY show. Her feet search blindly for slippers, and then she pads downstairs, crossing the living room, switching on the heat and the T V.

She has timed it well. The music that announces the show has just finished, and the camera pans in on two smiling faces. They are anchorman and anchorwoman, a priveleged pair. Yes, they're the lucky ones, she thinks, but what goes on behind the smiles? Could they be as happy as they look? Surely not. Everyone has problems, even those with money, good looks, and pleasing personalities. She would bet her life on that.

It is Friday. She and Jeff have invited a few couples over for the evening, something they do most weekends. Nothing special, just conversation, Kahlua and cream, maybe play a little cards. When a commercial comes on, she goes to the refrigerator to check and see whether Jeff has remembered to pick up the half-and-half. No, he has forgotten. A head of lettuce on the bottom shelf is wilted; a small brown puddle is forming beneath it. She closes the door quickly. Looking at the rotting lettuce makes her feel queasy. She promises herself to get rid of it when she gets home.

A hot shower revives her, and gathering her clothes, she goes to dress in front of the television. She is sitting down, a shoe in one hand, when Jeff comes down the stairs. "Coffee?" he asks. Damn, she got engrossed in the news and forgot to put it on. "Sorry, babe," she calls out to him.

Because there is ice on the streets, she drives slowly, hunched over the wheel. Cars swish by on either side of her; sometimes they honk as they pass. She ignores them, keeping her eyes trained on the road ahead. A few months back they bought a new car, a compact that gets good gas mileage, but she feels vulnerable in bad weather. When driving in a heavy rainstorm, she fancies that the car is almost tossed to and fro. On icy days, it seems light and flimsy. She wishes for the old tank Pontiac she and Jeff had when they first got married. Now that was a car you could feel safe in, she thinks, stepping on the brake. The light turns suddenly from yellow to red, and the car swerves sideways before coming to a sliding stop. Feeling the eyes of the other drivers on her, she flushes red and glances down at her watch. It is after eight, and her class is already assembling. They will be waiting for her, a bad way to start the day.

On the way home she stops at the grocery store to buy half-and-half. There is a line at the checkout counter, but she doesn't mind. It gives her a chance to browse through the magazines. She picks up one for the "new woman." A bright cover promises solutions to problem hair, problem hips, and problem marriages. After flipping through it absently, she puts it back on the rack. Such magazines have lured her before with promises of change, but all they do is gather dust in a basket beside the sofa. Although she intends to, she never gets around to trying the illustrated exercises. She has read the articles on improving your marriage. They all seem to recommend openly discussing sexual needs with your husband. She has tried that more than once, but it doesn't work. Jeff listens, but he goes on doing things the same way. She has learned to enjoy what they have and not worry about the rest of it.

Leaving the store, she pulls a green wool cap down over her ears. It will ruin her hair for the party, flattening it against her head. Only a few years back she would have risked an earache rather than ruin the perfect symmetry of her hair. Those days are gone, perhaps forever. And Jeff didn't even notice their passing, she thinks. He's oblivious to almost everything except his studies. He has promised her that when he gets his PhD things will be different, but she has stopped trying to

imagine the future.

Jeff is late getting home from school, having spent the afternoon at the computer center. Coming in, he drops a hefty stack of green printout paper on the sofa. Beside the desk in the study there is a three-foot pile of the same stuff. It unfolds like a fan and is covered with neat black letters and symbols. Just looking at them makes her feel stupid and sullen. Jeff breathes them in and out like air. He has a sack in one hand and heads for the refrigerator with it. He has brought home the half-and-half. "Didn't you ask me to get this?" His words are muffled because he speaks them into the refrigerator, but she knows what he's said. "Yes," she tells him, "but I didn't think you would remember." The lettuce is still on the bottom shelf, and he picks it up, holding it out to show her. "What's this crap?" he asks, but she doesn't bother to answer. Jeff walks with it to the trashcan, and she follows behind, wiping the floor with a paper towel. "Sorry," Jeff says, apologizing for the dripping and his tone-of-voice. Quick to forgive small pricks, she kisses him on the back of the neck. No use starting a fight, she thinks.

Turning, Jeff kisses her, his tongue slipping past her teeth and flicking across the roof of her mouth. She presses against him; even with so much time spent studying, his body is still hard. When they first met she was fascinated by his thighs. They did not give. It was as though there was solid bone beneath the skin. Relaxing, she lets him guide her to the bedroom. They undress quickly--it's a dance they've done countless times, but part of the pleasure is the ease with which they move.

Afterwards they sleep for half an hour, and then Jeff dresses and goes out to get hamburgers. On party nights she doesn't cook. It puts her in a bad mood to try to fix dinner, eat, and then clean up before their guests arrive--too much rushing. They sit at the bar eating burgers out of pale yellow styrofoam boxes. She dips each french fry in catsup and brings it dripping to her mouth. Jeff eats a whole handful at a time. He is finished and in the shower before she is half-through. She enjoys eating alone and takes her time. Sipping coke through a transparent plastic straw, she sighs.

The people begin arriving sooner than she expected. The bathroom fan is on, and she doesn't hear the doorbell. Jeff yells from the study. Will she get it? Taking

one last look at the flatness of her hair and the new silvery eyeshadow on her lids, she moves away from the mirror. It is Ron and Clara Issacs. They've brought their six-month-old baby; he's wrapped up in blankets. Not even the top of his head is visible. She is surprised that he doesn't cry or struggle to get out. Why isn't he suffocating? Clara says that he will probably sleep through the evening as they climb the stairs to the bedroom. She stands watching as they lay the baby carefully in the middle of the kingsize bed. He stirs as they unwrap him, exposing his face. His eyes are closed, and his skin is a delicate pink. At times like this her decision not to have children breaks down a little. She wonders what she's missing and whether she will regret the choice when it's too late. Going over to the bed, she leans toward the baby and reaches out, running her index finger across his cheek. The softness of the touch twists inside her, knife-like. She pulls away and smiles with effort. "Wait 'til you taste the clam dip I made," she says.

The party is a success. The trashcan is full of half-and-half cartons and cigarette butts. She cleans up after everyone goes home, and Jeff is already asleep when she gets into bed. He always asks her to wait and straighten up the next day, but it depresses her to wake to a mess in the morning. Her moods are fragile. She doesn't like to confront any more ugliness or disorder than is necessary.

When Jeff pokes her Monday morning she is in the midst of a pleasant dream. She is someplace she's never been before with a group of people she's never met, but she feels at home. "Can't you hear the alarm?" Jeff grumbles. Groaning, she lurches out of bed and makes her way downstairs to the living room. All the while the dream is fading. By the time she backs the car out of the garage it will be gone from her mind altogether. Switching on the TV, she rubs a toe over the new stain on the rug. Stupid, thoughtless people. After every party she finds a new cigarette burn, a splotch on the furniture, or a stain on the rug. She points them out to Jeff, but he only shrugs. What he doesn't seem to realize is that all these things add up--in a few years their surroundings will be noticeably marred and used-looking. It depresses her to think of it.

The anchorman has gotten a haircut; he looks younger and less sophisticated. Peering at the screen, she studies his features closely. He's attractive, but the most alluring thing about him is his voice. It's deep and smooth and rolls easily over words like invasion, Iran, and inflation. All of it sounds like dinner conversation. He must have women crawling all over him, she thinks. When there is a break, she moves away, going to the freezer to uncover a frosty waffle box. She always wakes up hungry. Jeff gets up and drinks three cups of coffee while she eats. He sits hunched in the barstool, taking cautious sips. Looking at him she feels nothing, no love, no hate, no anger, not even frustration. She is empty inside. Taking a syrupy bite, she wonders what the anchorman does when he gets off work. Does he go home and take a nap, or, more likely, does he meet some leggy blonde for tennis?

The class is antsy. They fidget in their seats as she writes numbers on the board. It's one of those moments when she wonders why they mind her at all. They could just get up and walk out, couldn't they? That's what they want to do. Turning to face them with a stern expression, she goes on with the lesson. One after another they look up at her with wide eyes. The moment has passed--she is in control once more. When they finish this problem, they can work on art projects, she promises.

Another Saturday and another party. This one is a little more elaborate. Jeff has invited most of the graduate students in his department, and she has asked some of the teachers and their husbands. Early in the evening she realizes that the two groups are not a good mix. It is only an outward indication, but the students either look shabby or a little overdressed. A few are too loud and agressive, while others are obvious introverts. Odd that she hasn't noticed this before. The room is smoky, and her eyes search out Jeff. He is not in the living room so she wanders through the house, finally making her way to the kitchen. He is drinking a beer and talking to a woman, one of the other graduate students. The woman's hair streams down her back--it's a golden blonde color--and the turquoise leotard she is wearing clings to her breasts. She is laughing at something Jeff has just said. Standing in the doorway watching them, she is certain that Jeff is

thinking about what it would be like to make love to the blonde. It doesn't matter--she can live with the fact that he wants to sleep with another woman. What bothers her is the woman's extreme prettiness and Jeff's unconcealed lust. Anyone who walked in the room would know what he had on his mind. The stereo in the other room switches off, and no one bothers to put on another record. They are waiting for the host or hostess to do it. Even with the loud voices and the laughter she senses an emptiness in the house that the music covered up. Forcing herself to move, she goes over to ask Jeff to take care of the record. "Would you like another glass of wine?" she asks the woman lightly.

The teachers leave early. Most of them have young children and are paying a babysitter. On the way out they talk about the expense of having children. Clara mentions spending forty-five dollars a month on disposable diapers. With Jeff in graduate school they can't afford to have children, she explains. Inside, she knows that money is not the reason. The question in her mind is this: how does one know that a marriage will last? She wouldn't want to raise a child alone. Her mother had to do that. One hazy summer evening they waited at the dinnertable, but her father never came home from work. All his clothes hung ironed in the closet for years. She can remember playing hide-and-go-seek among them. Closing her eyes tightly until the blackness is pierced with red, she wonders whatever became of him. Vanished, she thinks. He just vanished.

On Monday morning she wakes with a sore throat and a dull pain reverberating in her head. After glancing over at Jeff, who is huddled under the blankets with his back to her, she pushes herself up and goes in to flip on the T V. There he is, the calm, competent anchorman. Sitting down on the rug, she pulls her gown over her knees and wraps her arms around her legs. He is interviewing a foreign ambassador, and the camera pans in on his profile. There is an intentness in his expression that she admires. As the anchorman begins the news, Jeff comes in and stands behind her. She can feel his breath as he leans over her shoulder. "Are you going to work?" he asks. "Don't talk to me now," she replies without turning. The anchorman's voice washes over her. He is smiling, and she smiles back.

Marlis Manley Broadhead

TROPHIES

Lorien strained forward in the crowd at the concession stand. She could hear the engines revving and back-firing as the super modifieds were started for the A-feature, and she didn't want to miss any of the race. Squeezing ahead of a man who was still reading the menu on the back wall, she ordered the hot dogs and Cokes for her mother's friends, then bought a Baby Ruth and a pack of Juicy Fruit with her own money. She tucked the gum into her purse and hurried toward the grandstand.

Some of the cars were already in line by the time she got back to her seat. Her mother passed around the food and change while Lorien studied the cars at the starting line. She was looking for number twenty-six, but L. Ray wasn't on the track yet.

Her mother offered her a drink of Coke. "Looks like Hal drew the pole."

"Great." Lorien knew that her mother would watch the whole race only if her step-father jumped into the lead. When Hal had to come from behind, fighting his way through the pack where the cars were tight and skidded into one another, her mother always sat quietly with her eyes down, fingers crossed on both hands.

Helen, the new mechanic's wife, leaned across Lorien's mother and tapped Lorien on the thigh with a quarter. With the cars warming up, she had to yell to be heard, "Here, Sweetie, you're a good kid."

"Thanks." Lorien took the money and slipped it into her pocket.

Helen tapped her again, smiling broadly, and Lorien could see the pink wad of gum that worked from one side to the other of the woman's mouth. "You're gonna yell for your dad, aren't you? Blood's thicker than water. L. Ray will just have to settle for second place." She winked, then leaned her cotton bouffant close to Lorien's mother's head. "She still ga-ga over the new kid?"

Lorien didn't hear her mother's reply, and she concentrated on unwrapping the candy bar. L. Ray was one of the last of the drivers to pull onto the track, driving around most of the others to get to the open slot that was

left for him. She counted him five rows back on the outside. That wasn't too bad.

Three weeks earlier, Lorien's step-father had asked L. Ray to eat with them after the Tulsa race. He'd sat across from Lorien, leaning over to dip his french fries into the glob of ketchup on her plate, and he'd winked at her. Her step-father didn't seem to notice and went right on talking about an engine they ought to have a look at. On the drive home, she had pretended to sleep so that she could be left alone with her thoughts, and she'd experienced a disquieting stirring in her chest and abdomen when she heard Hal say that L. Ray was sharp and would be a top contender someday, once he had more experience and learned to keep his cool. Her mother said that Hal probably took to L. Ray because he saw himself in the younger driver. Hal was already the local favorite during those post-war years when the national appetite for heroes was still keen. But he had seemed rugged to a fault to Lorien's grandmother, who had looked on her first son-in-law as the boy she'd never had, and she had grieved long and bitterly, even after Lorien and her mother had adjusted to life without him. Crossing her arms over her chest, Lorien pressed them lightly against her breasts, noting the slight swell at the scooped neck of her blouse. She wondered if L. Ray knew that she was five years younger than he was; she'd been told that she looked old for fourteen-and-a-half, especially when she wore eye-shadow and had her hair done at Coiffures de Lili An.

The cars began to move up the track, gaps appearing, then closing up as the drivers paced themselves. Lorien could feel the rumble of the engines in her chest and she listened to the octaves they reached before the drivers changed gears. She had already finished the Baby Ruth, and she thought about opening the pack of gum, but decided to save it intact until after the race.

The din of the engines drowned out the voice that crackled and repeated the line-up over the P. A. The cars clustered in the fourth turn, like the body of an inch worm catching up with itself, then snaked out as each machine accelerated coming into the straight-away, roaring toward the flagman who waited, poised, at the edge of the track. His arm swept down, waving the green flag in tight figure-eights as he danced away from

the apron. A sheet of dust rose in front of the grandstand and drifted over the spectators. In the center of the pack, cars bounced into one another as they jostled for position going into the first turn. L. Ray rode high on the bank, but held his place. Hal broke free coming out of the second turn, with number eighty-six on his tail. The field opened up on the back stretch, and L. Ray gunned around two slower cars, then skidded high on turn four and slid straight across the track, his rear-end jarring the car that was in fifth place as he cut it off.

Lorien held her breath as L. Ray's blue and yellow hood nosed under a maroon car in the turn, then she let the air out slowly as the four cars opened up in the stretches. Hal's cut-down coupe eventually pulled away, eighty-six close behind him, leaving the other two to battle for third. The cheering and moaning of the crowd crescendoed as favorite drivers challenged the cars ahead of them, or spun out and came to rest on the edge of the track. The yellow caution came out while a stalled car was pushed clear of turn three, and the noise in the grandstand settled to a drone as fans turned to talk to one another. Lorien heard her mother comment about the track being dry and slick, and say that Hal had been prepared for it. Lorien wondered what tires L. Ray was using and crossed her fingers more tightly, turning back to the cars that were speeding up in response to the green flag.

She had lost count and had to start over, figuring there were at least forty laps to go. It took two complete circuits around the track for Hal to put two lengths between himself and the others, leaving L. Ray in a tight race for second with eighty-six and the maroon car. The muscles in her stomach and calves began to ache, and she had to change her position in the seat. She could feel her body strain forward as L. Ray edged a little ahead of eighty-six in the turns before they straightened out and pulled even again. She bore down, her feet braced on the bleacher in front of her, as L. Ray hugged the groove in turns three and four, his tail-end straining toward the wall. Straightening out, he had gained enough of an edge to pull clear when the driver of the maroon car, who had been crowding from behind, lost it, his left front tire jamming into the rear of L. Ray's car, lifting it onto its nose and slamming it into the half-buried tires that

marked the inside of the turn. Suddenly, L. Ray was in the air, flipping end over end toward the pits, the racing crews at the north end scattering like billiard balls. She counted one, two, three revolutions before the car fell heavily to the ground, rightside up, settling into the cloud of dust that lifted around it.

She could hear again, see the red light turning on top of the ambulance that waited at the edge of the track, its siren shrieking along with the voices of the fans who were on their feet, straining to see. A dozen men had run back to the car and were peering into it, some climbing up on the sides and reaching for L. Ray through the open roof. He was limp at first, his helmeted head sagging heavily to one side, but as the men braced him on the roof, preparing to hand him down to those men standing next to the car, he lifted one arm in a weak salute to the stands. The crowd went wild before settling back to the rest of the cars that had slowed to a crawl. The ambulance was let through before the green flag came out once more, and Lorien watched as the ambulance pulled alongside L. Ray, who was carefully lifted between the open doors.

Lorien felt her mother's hand on her arm. "He was probably more shaken up than anything."

Lorien nodded without taking her eyes from the ambulance. She opened her mouth to steady her breathing, flinching as a woman in the next row shrieked, "Come on, Grady, you got 'em," as the maroon car barreled past eighty-six on the outside and slid down to the groove. The next time Hal's car came by, she began counting laps again, still watching the ambulance and the men milling around the doors at the back. She was up to twenty-two before L. Ray emerged with a patch of white gauze over his right cheek. He walked over to the pit wall where he stood watching the cars come down the front straight-away.

Lorien's eyes were burning and she felt nauseated. Then she saw L. Ray look up at the grandstand and she straightened her back and stared fiercely, hoping he could see through the glare of the flood lights to make out individual faces. He turned his head as one of his pit crew tapped him on the shoulder, and they walked back to the truck where his car was being loaded onto the trailer, and she lost sight of him.

Most of the spectators were on their feet as the cars took the checkered flag, the announcer calling out the driver's names. Hal came around again to pick up the checkered flag and make his victory lap, holding the flag over the top of the car for the fans to see. Lorien wanted to go down to the gate and wait with the crowd that was pressing at the fence, anxious to get into the pits, but she hung back, waiting for her mother.

She looked over to see if the women were packing up and watched as Helen took a damp cloth from a plastic bag and wiped her face and hands, grimacing at the dirt on the yellow terry cloth. Lorien's hand went to her own face, and she rubbed at the grit that had blown up from the track. She looked into the cup that her mother had set between them and saw that there was still some ice in the bottom. She dipped her hand into it, letting the ice melt a little, then ran her wet fingers over her face, repeating the motions several times while she watched Hal and the winner of the B-feature receive their trophies.

She stepped up on a bleacher to get a better view and saw L. Ray by the flag stand, shaking hands with the track owner as flash bulbs continued to go off. The announcer called him an up-and-coming young driver, and said that he was the fifth driver to be awarded a roll-over trophy that season. He asked for a round of applause for the "lucky young man who was able to walk away."

By the time she and her mother had crossed the track, Hal was back in his pit, talking to the people who were standing around him. He kissed her mother and handed her the first place trophy, then hugged Lorien, the smell of oil and dust thick on his neck and racing jacket. He handed Lorien his helmet and goggles. "Here, Punkin, you want to put these in the car for me?"

She hurried over to the open trunk and dropped the things into it, then went around the car and slipped into the front seat where she looked at herself in the rear-view mirror and forced a comb through her hair. By the time she had worked her way back into the circle of people milling around her step-father, L. Ray was there, congratulating him. "Good race. I thought I might get a shot at you for a while. Your rig was really movin'."

Hal, who had taken out a handkerchief, blew his nose hard. "It was handling better in the heat, before the track got so slick. What happened in turn four?"

L. Ray took a bottle of Coors out of his jacket pocket and an opener, and held them out. Hal took them and popped the cap off the bottle, then clamped his mouth over the top to catch the foam.

"That son-of-a-bitch. He's been squirrely all year. My car was running great, too."

Hal handed him back the bottle opener and turned to autograph an eight-by-ten glossy of himself taken at the state fair.

"Jammed the axle good. Hell, the whole frame will have to be worked. Can't tell about the rest, yet."

Lorien edged into the circle and L. Ray nodded down at her. "Looks like your old man's gonna need some more shelf space. Me, on the other hand." he held out the trophy he'd been cradling in the crook of his arm. "This how I looked?"

She reached out and grasped the small block of brown plastic on which a brass car balanced on its nose. It was surprisingly heavy.

"Sort of." She looked from the trophy up to the bandage on his forehead. "Does that hurt very much?"

"Only when I lose." He grinned at her, deepening the lines in his cheeks. She reached into her purse and drew out the Juicy Fruit, then held it out to him.

"Thanks." He took it from her and opened the pack, nodding at something one of his crew called to him. Lorien looked at the trophy, running her fingers over the contours of the miniature car, then she reached out to take the package of gum when he handed it back to her, his fingers lightly brushing against hers. She was still looking at his hand when he reached around behind himself to take a bottle of beer from a woman who had come up to the circle.

"How much longer you gonna be? They've got everything loaded." The woman had slipped her arm through L. Ray's and was leaning against him. Lorien was struck by the black lines drawn around the woman's eyes, her face unsmiling in its frame of reddish blond curls.

"Tell 'em I'll be along."

"What are we waiting for?"

L. Ray clamped his hand over the woman's shoulder and turned her around. "Go on back to the truck. I'll catch up with you."

Lorien watched the woman walk away, studying the

fullness of the pink shorts as the hips swayed from side to side. Turning back, she watched L. Ray slap Hal on the back, and say he'd catch him later--that he had some business to take care of. Then L. Ray started across the pits, toward the maroon car.

She climbed up onto the tongue of the trailer, trying to follow his progress through the maze of people and vehicles. He was gesturing toward the fourth turn as he talked to a man in a dark red racing suit. The man stood facing him, shaking his head. Some of the people milling around stopped and looked at them. She saw L. Ray move forward, his hand on the man's chest, then all at once the other driver stumbled backwards, scattering the people behind him, and then they both went down, the crowd surging away, then back in, swelling as other men knocked together in their attempts to separate the two. The woman in the pink shorts rushed over and danced from one foot to the other at the outer edge of the commotion, a lug wrench clutched in one hand.

Lorien's stomach grew hard. She had to grip the tail-gate of the truck to keep her balance. She heard someone yell "There's a fight!" from behind her, and she watched as curious fans and drivers streamed by to swell the crowd around L. Ray, and then his yellow jacket wasn't visible any longer.

Hal called to Lorien and her mother, telling them to get into the car, and went over to help his crew finish loading up.

"Lorien, come on down." Her mother tugged her arm to get her down from the trailer. "It'll be all right." Her mother's voice was calm, but Lorien noticed the strain in her face as she busied herself with the blankets and sweaters in the trunk. Every few seconds her mother glanced over at Hal, who had stopped working and had moved closer to the fight, where he was talking to some of the other men. They kidded him about not joining in.

He grinned and faked a punch at another driver's midsection, patted it instead, then raised his hands in mock surrender. "Too old for that stuff," he said.

Lorien tossed her purse into the back seat, then leaned against the car door, rubbing her forehead. It felt clammy and cold. She tried to catch glimpses of the fight between the cars and trucks that were pulling out of the pits, but there was too much movement and confusion.

She squeezed L. Ray's trophy with both hands and clamped it to her chest, aware of her heart pounding in her throat. She wanted to run to where his car was parked and wait there with the trophy, but her legs felt wobbly. The lump in her throat grew suddenly larger. She pushed herself away from the door, her hand going to her mouth as she moved around to the front of the car. The trophy scraped against the bumper as she braced herself, bending over from the waist. Tears filled her eyes as she felt the sourness rising. She turned her head to see if any of the fight was visible from there, but the sourness was moving, rising up through her chest and into her throat until her cheeks ballooned and she opened her mouth to let the sourness out, each heave triggering another longer one.

"Lori!" Her mother came up behind her and placed her palm against Lorien's forehead. "Hal, come over here!"

He strolled up from behind them. "Looks like they're getting it broken up. Punks. What's wrong with her?"

"Never mind. Just get me the box of kleenex out of the glove compartment. And see if the stand has any ice left."

Her mother gave her a handful of tissue to wipe her mouth with and helped her into the back seat, where she curled up on her side.

"You lie here for awhile. I'll be right back. I want to get the trunk closed up." She pressed her cool hand to Lorien's flushed cheeks. "It's all over now."

Lori nodded and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her mother was gone and the track lights were going out in sections around the oval, giving an eerie cast to everything. Lorien could hear the remaining cars heading for the gate and she fought the urge to sit up and see who was left. She pressed the cool surface of L. Ray's trophy to her cheek, then she slowly moved it away and held it up to the light that was coming through the back window. Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes, making a halo for the small brass car.

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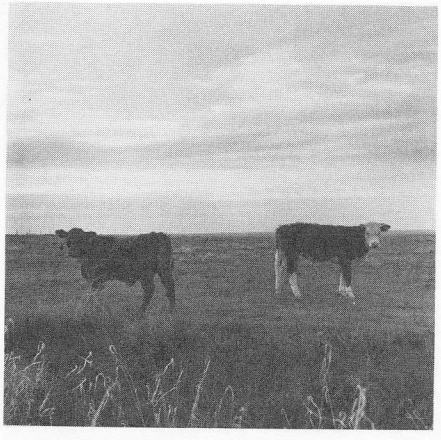

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