Cottonwood 42

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River City Alumni

Cottonwood Magazine & Press
Lawrence, KS

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Cottonwood magazine welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, graphics, photography, translation, reviews of small press literature, and literature by midwestern authors. We also welcome articles on the arts from both local and national writers and artists. Poetry submissions should be limited to the five best, fiction to one story. We cannot return submissions which do not include a stamped self-addressed envelope.

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Cover: "Dancer," linocut by Dennis K. Helm, KU '72. The mural "Urania" at Liberty Hall is one of his many contributions to the Lawrence Arts Community.

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Editor's Note

Issue 42 presents a number of alumni who read at the River City Reunion in 1987, complementing works offered in issue 41. By happy coincidence, several other authors in this issue have a long history of association with the magazine. I am happy to see evidence of continuity because I have been reading through all the issues of **Cottonwood** as part of preparing an index to issues 1-43, which I hope will be ready for distribution toward the end of this year. We will be twenty-five years old in the spring of '90.

At the beginning of December, Philip and I went to New York to attend the GE Younger Writer Awards presentation, at which GERALD EARLY received an award for his essays in issue 38/39, the Contemporary Black Writers Issue. Gerald had also served as Guest Editor for that issue, and the three of us had a really wonderful reunion—even got down to Greenwich Village for a fine supper and a long session of Tommy Flanagan jazz. The magazine also received an award for having published the essays. We are devoting this money to Press books, not having been able to publish many books in this decade of rising prices. Two books will be going to the printer at the same time as this issue.

The first, to be released in July, is *The Birds from I Know Where* by Michael L. Johnson, a collection of poems translated from the works of well-known Spanish poets. Johnson's sensitive reading of these poets is as crisp and original as the poems in his previous Cottonwood Press books (*Dry Season* [now out-of-print] and *The Unicorn Captured*).

The second, to be released in November, is *Speaking French in Kansas and Other Stories* by Robert Day, seven short works by a contemporary Kansas author whose work and reputation are deservedly larger than any regional label. This volume started out as a reprinting in new format of the popular Cottonwood edition of the short novel *In My Stead.* It now will also contain the short novel *Four Wheel Drive Quartet* (originally published in book form by Galileo Press of Baltimore, Md) and five short stories from distinguished magazines: "The Macinaw," "Speaking French in Kansas," "Chloe in the Canoe," "It Puts Matters in Doubt Here in Two Sleeps" and "The Sound Snow Makes" (originally "Beaver Dinner at the Eighth Street Tavern"). We are inordinately proud of this book, and grateful to Bob Day for his generosity and his loyalty to our press.

George F. Wedge

Poetry

George Looney

Open Between Us

We said little not suggested by the map
kept open between us. You knew stories
about places I had never heard of.

When you didn't know any true stories,
we made up local histories and lied
about legends. We made love in

every state we passed through. Whenever
we were near a town that showed on the map,
you turned the radio on and searched

for human voices. We kept to state routes
to avoid traffic and drove through the hearts
of towns Hugo must have known, this country

emptier than I ever knew. You were
quick to point to signs of people,
the lights of houses off the road.

We both knew the land was too open,
that for those who kept lights burning
the one source of salvation was the brief

time of touch in dark rooms after days spent
working with things they didn't understand.
Like the man swallowed by the same raised hood

of the same Ford pickup in every town.
We came to expect him and feel better
when we saw him, stripped to the waist

and dark with grease from the engine.
We would wave, and in each town he waved back.
Sometimes, a woman came out of a house

in need of a paint job to bring him
a sweating can of beer. In some towns,
the woman never came out of the house.

Sometimes, a child would be pretending
to drive in the dark cab. Other times,
there wasn't a soul around for miles,

and I wanted to drink coffee with him
and say how good it was to see him again,
how worried we were about him being

alone. He would have told us of the men
he knew by their first names who welcomed him
every night down at the local tavern:

men who were intimate with the hard taste
of the wind: men who had taken home
the bitter ruin of their lives when they were

younger, and less tired. We're tired too,
you would have said. He'd have looked us over
and laughed. Stay out here long enough,

he'd have said, and you will be, you will be.
I would have thanked him for the coffee,
and we'd have climbed back into our truck

and driven as far as we could before
stopping to make love in a different state,
no matter how tired we were. In the next

town, the Ford would have been by the road
with the hood raised as though he'd just gone
inside. You'd have said he wasn't alone,

that he had gone back in to hold a woman
whose lips were receptive, and full
of the kind of local color that could

pull us out of the stories we made up
to pass the time between towns close enough
to send the music you found that led us

to this city by the lake where the air
is wet and failure has signs other than dust.
Against all good sense, I want to go back

to one of the towns he was alone in,
and invite him down to the tavern
to drink with me. He would open up

and admit his failures, and everything
he had lost to the stubborn silence
of the wrecked engine would be recovered.

We'd know each other by our first names,
which would be the same, and after
a long afternoon of pool and drinking

we'd step out together and be stunned
by the difference in light. Neither
of us would be able to say for sure

which of us should stay in town and which
should start the long drive back to the wet
city where we both knew you waited

with the objects of a life you shared
with one of us. We wouldn't care which
of us stayed and which left. It wouldn't

matter. All we would care about was
that whoever stayed would be able to
make the engine in the Ford turn over.

Cynthia S. Pederson

Three Sheets to the Wind

the moon stumbles
into my kitchen
in slurred silence
we stare each other down

he blinks
at the unfamiliar fixtures
bracing against
the dark-grained table

after midnight I find
his once handsome face
a pale trickle of light
passed out on my linoleum

Edward Stessel

First Fruits

Alexander sits, awaiting
his first solid food—
strained pears.
I load some on a baby spoon,
approach his interested mouth
and tilt it in.
It tilts back out.
I catch and reinsert it.
He waves his arms and crows.
Another spoonful and another.
He is goatee'd and mustached with pears,
His cheeks are pears, his nose is pears,
his shirt is pears. He looks
like a shameless puking wino.
His pear-covered hands are reaching
for the pear-slippery spoon.
"Alexander, they may tell you
fancy women are the main thing,
or fast cars, or coke, or houses.
Don't believe it, kid. It's pears.
The one who eats the most pears, wins."
He lunges for the spoon,
spattering both of us with pear drops.
I decide he's had enough.
His cries correct me. "Alexander,
it's not love. It's only pears.
A lot of men make that mistake."
We are almost to the bottom
of the jar. He loses interest.
He leans back in his high chair,
cocks a leg up and with pleasure
slips his toe between his lips
like a businessman's cigar.

Edward Stessel

The Windbreak

My wife and I put in a row of pines
to keep the wind from leveling our house.
Within a year, elm leaves began to poke
out of a pine. I knew just what would happen—
that the elm would grow much faster, overshadowing
the pine and eventually killing it.
I told myself to cut the elm. By fall,
its top was floating just above the pine's.
My wife called them "the couple." God, the couple!
It was Bluebeard and his bride, Death and the Maiden.
The following year the elm was even taller
and the pine was yellow at its needle-tips,
the rest a pasty green. It seemed to clutch
the elm tree by the shoulders, waist, then knees.
I thought of working wives divorced by husbands
now through school, of matrons ditched for someone young.
My wife reminded me to cut the elm.
But I'd been leveled by too many women
and I put if off. Soon the only needles
were in tassels at the ends of twigs, and then
not even there. Its bare branches, like brown fishbones,
crossed the elm tree's leafy boughs. I told my wife,
"We'll simply have an elm tree in the windbreak."
But its unprotected leaves began to brown.
This year it has none, and the leveling wind pours through.

Gerry Sloan

A Predilection for Wings

My grandmother, in her last years,
would flash five-dollar bills at us
like Rockefeller. A victim of inflation,
she never knew we smiled at her
then quietly made up the difference.
Her body rent, we meant to leave
her notions of extravagance intact,
long after Colonel Sanders jacked
the price of her favorite meal.

Sitting in a restaurant tonight,
I think about her preference
for chicken—the taste for neck
and wings developed during hard
times, in deference to the appetites
of children. Involuntarily I take
the wing, sense her presence
hovering above the crowded tables—
our hyper-extended family—her whisper:

"Here's five dollars, keep the change."

Daniel James Sundahl

Rabbinical Legends: III-IV

Simplicity Following in the Steps of Cunning

Note how smoke rises
Straight and plumb.

Never interrupt
To mention the Hittites.

Let the bushes overgrow
The pasture.

Cover your dead
With quicklime.

Leave gaps between
The seedlings.

Interrupt me
To name your children.

When the moon is new
Look for the beginning of longing.

After church,
Linger.

Cunning Following in the Steps of Simplicity

Pick berries when the dew is fresh;
In day's heat, place them on the tongue.
Instead of argument, offer one.

Keep commonplace books; promise her
Fidelity. Once in your life
Pirouette. In winter, walk on ice

To see if fear returns. In summer
Dive completely under, and think
Of drowning in a country lake.

Learn to whistle two notes: one harsh,
One clear. To calm yourself, breathe
Through your skin, thinking of horses.

When speaking, notice the sound of
Vowels. When Spring comes, be wholly
Willing to touch a cow's udder,

To walk barefoot in the mire. Dream
Of boats sailing on the bay, each one
A dancer. Teach boy children

The beginnings of sadness, the practice
Of beauty. In the Fall, if a barn
Burns, jump in, do everything you can.

Remember that evening is wiser than
Morning, that morning is the life
Beyond the body. Glide softly there.

Antony Oldknow

THE SHEEP

(Peterborough, England, 1945)

The sheep come into town with the convoy,
the farmer and his collie driving them along
while a column of ragged prisoners under guard
heads back the way the soldiers and the sheep have come,
armed with spades and forks and hoes for the potatoes . . .
The army convoy keeps on coming down the lane,
inching along between the prisoners and sheep;
the sheep are grubby, rheumy-eyed; one or two of them cough.

A mob of small boys at a corner store
who have been gloating over candy in jars in the window
turn around and watch. One of them, who is bold,
yells out at the convoy, "Got any gum, chum?"—
a thing he's heard from people who go to the movies—
and he keeps on yelling this over the heads of the sheep,
the quarrelsome sheep which keep on trying to thrust up
their snouts in defiance and head off down a side street

until the busy dog rushes up and nips at the ankles
of one of them, as an example, while, in the meantime,
the brown trucks have halted for a slow coal train
crossing over the street ahead, and some of the soldiers,
who are eager, drop down, and race across the road
between the sheep, and hammer on the shop door,
only to find it all locked up and the closed sign
perched discreetly in the window, and they swear;

but the brave little boy, who will go far,
inserting himself suddenly between the soldiers
and the sheep, yelps up gamely again
through spaced defiant teeth, "Got any gum, chum?"
And one irritated soldier, abruptly, to get away,
pulls out some gray gum from his mouth
and gives to the boy a piece he's broken off,
and the boy smiles with satisfaction before he swaggers.

He swaggers before his rivals, dancing about between
the nag and scuffle of sheep, chewing with mouth open,
panting with joy like a furious shaggy upright dog,

while the prisoners limp by sullenly in their column,
herded along to their captive gardens,
and the grumpy sheep under their burdens of wool
surge and panic, clumping their feet,
heading for a slaughterhouse they cannot imagine.

Nicholas Valinotti

The Lies of Spring

Last fall we walked
along the bank of this river.
Somebody warned you
not to come here with me.

We saw our faces, calm and clear
on the surface of the water.
You leaped and disappeared
into the mud below.
I stood, blinded, in the twilight.

I did not jump
because you told me
the water was very cold.

Today I walk alone
on the weathered shore.
A single lily pokes through
mud that is your bones.

You once told me: This flower
is the first sign of spring.

Joanne Lowery

The Station

Where they all waited we wait too.
For the noon train to St. Louis,
for another visit to Aunt Elvie,
for the war to end.
By the time the next war becomes news
this rash under my arm should be healed
and your bald spot will be a wider pool.
For now we sit with twin cups of tea.
The enormous windows are draped with ivory bunting
to spare our eyes the complicated shadows falling
around these wicker chairs. The tracks
were torn up ten years ago in what was called
restoration. I wonder if we could take these half-old
bodies we love so much and turn them back
into smooth pale children. You lift your cup,
blink long, blink slow, and smile.
For a moment I feel somebody's earth rumble.

Joseph Lisowski

A Public Service

I never gain weight
It's impossible
For the scale to measure
Beyond three hundred
No dressing room mirror
Can contain me
Most doorways are too small
I bathe in the ocean
Children gather to watch
Once a lifeguard came for rescue
He told the children of the danger
If I should fall
I have never touched
My back or even
The back of my head.
When I need to travel
I hire a truck
When I walk
My stomach keeps time
To the beat.

Lucky for all I pretend
To be invisible.

Lynn Winget

My Visitors

Sometimes they come to me at night,
trudging across the bridge and down the river bank.
They pause to watch the pale water move,
believing that those movements tell us
the things that happen in the dark, clean depths.
That ripple may mean
the wedding of two eels.
A bubble or a swirl
a minnow war,
a crayfish tragedy.

They enter humbly
through the smallest of my many doors.
I smile.
I serve them thimblefuls of pumpkin wine.
Sometimes a piece of parsnip cake.
Emboldened, they tell me what they saw and
ask me trustingly
whether they read the water movements right.
I cannot tell them that I do not know,
have never known,
probably never will.
And so I lie.

Now they are comforted, reassured.
They nod sagely,
exchange pleased smiles,
seem almost smug.
Yet when they leave,
I see that now they shun the river bank
and choose the long way through the woods.

Scott Heim

Pumpkin-Eater

(1)
Vines twist across the sand
of the red-rocked paths, straining
past the gate. The green
arms are stronger
than stone: they break
through the cracks,
outlasting the early frost.
I watch the fruit
maturing in the sun, glowing
under the autumn moon.
White backs of skunks
move in circles
by the fence walls,
the deep musks from the gourd
thick in the air, upon their lips,
filling their lungs.

(2)
The golden pulp, the yellow juice
line cellar shelves, sealed
in tins and bottles. Jars
house the bitter rind pickles.
The pumpkin butter softens.
Toasted seeds,
sizes of thumbs, pack clear pockets
in the warmth of the attic.
I spend six months
near the oven, my anxious palms
burned from plates, my fingers
spicing the pies.
Neighbors pause
before the crooked path to my house
on their walks into town:
their noses pointed in the air,
their eyes swirling and heavy
with the orange steam rising
from the kitchen chimney
and blowing out windows and doors.

(3)
10:30, nightly, I leave the kitchen.
I tiptoe by the moon-gilded
pumpkins; sneak through indistinct forests
barefoot, down the path
to the round orange
house of my patient wife.
The warm wood air
whistles in mist through windows
I carved with even jabs
of a kitchen knife.
The spice candles glitter
in corners, blinking their yellow eyes.
My smiling wife
curls like a cat in her bed, the light
moving upon her: her lips,
her orange fingernails, the murmur
of her slowing heart. Her arms
open. I slide
beside her; slide into her.
Slowly, the sticky seeds
fall like seconds
from the glow of the globed ceiling,
collecting in my musk-scented hair.

Simon Perchik

*

In those four corners formed
by the wailing and the dead
—we are turned to each other

to the grief in a stone
unable to tell one hand from another
—I stroke your name to reshape

the gray light boxing in these weeds
—all four seasons calling out forever
for decay: your name now face to face

with the moon that knows only Fall
only those nights that still mourn
at right angles to the world

and all that's left from the sun
is this headstone, everywhere
and the long way home.

Lynne Butler

"To Know Beans"

A black bear wanders in from Tennessee
and settles in Beulah Pickens' bean rows
stirring the county to a commotion
of jangling phones and clouds of dust
bringing a crowd of friends, relatives,
reporters, and the sheriff,
who doesn't know beans about bears,
but is keen to fire his new tranquilizer gun.

The bear, baffled by this hubbub,
is denied the prickly shade of bean rows
and is carted off to the state school
of veterinary medicine to be tagged,
catalogued and possibly cured of a wounded snout.

And Miss Beulah, who last year put up
ninety-eight quarts of beans, is bothered
by the dust settling on her Kentucky Wonders
and perturbed that she'll be pictured
in the *Times* in her apron and is beginning
to sympathize with the bear when she considers
the general lack of cordiality and
the vicissitudes of fame.

Ron Schreiber

some place

1. it cuts both ways. finished
with the manuscript, after

working all day yesterday,
I felt light suddenly & wanted

to celebrate. I'd done the
hard thing I had to do:

gone through it again, sometimes
day by day, drawing up new poems

from memories of pain &
utter fatigue. but celebrate

with whom? I called my parents,
tried to call Lisa (she wasn't home).

2. Suzanne & I drove to Arrowhead
Gardens & I planted what we got

before the rain. but I broke
the abelia—stupid, careless—

maybe not. I needed to break
something symbolic—again,

again. & cry with frustration
& rage & grief. what's release

on one dirty hand (the soil sticks)
is pure loss on the other.

River City Alumni

Denise Low

Crocuses Bloom When Matthew Moves to Germany

"Indian languages have no word like goodbye."
Paula Gunn Allen

Last winter I slept long nights
pressed against my husband,
my thigh across his belly.
Outdoors bulbs lay below ground,
crisp white flesh cupped
around and around flowerlets.

Coming through mud and leaf stems
the lavender buds, lips pursed,
do not surprise me this year.
The next full sun will open them.

Frozen ground begets
the lance-sharp leaves
like stored up memories carried
for years and years
dark and silent,
surfacing in their own time.

Nothing is ever left behind.

Vance Crummett

The Statue

is of a bronze horseman
preparing to strike a bearded man.

The bronze of the statue is green.
All the loneliness of Europe has been imported over time.

The bronze horseman rides through all seasons:

> The horse's hooves always coming down
> through clumsy splotches of summer light,
>
> through fall, with dead leaves and rubbish
> swirling around the horse's hooves,
>
> through spring with its
> petals of light,
>
> through winter, black,
> with its petals of iron in the snow.

It is a tableau of horrible drama
in the middle of the afternoon traffic,

violent motion in a stillness
one hears a silent rustling.

Always ready to strike,
he never does.

Looking at him, one's heart aches
to go away somewhere
and find the unknown.

David Till

Driving to School at Dawn

—for Jonathan (and for Williams)

Barely light rain falling for hours
The red dirt cannot hold any more
runs off everywhere in rivulets to rivers
An old green truck at crossroads
three men inside cold and white looking out
through the watery glass waiting
for their lives to take them away again
They are milk and flour pale
flesh of envelopes spread open
in the flattened grass when the floods
recede

Someone else rises from bed
in a room that's sealed leans
above marble or bright porcelain into the steam
watches his neck and his face disappear
feels thick and alive in his skin covered
with cream His razor's as fine as his mind
as dumb as love When the fog for an instant
lifts there's a line an horizon where his head
from his neck was severed and joined
without bleeding pure as a girl
A hand disappears at the edge
of his vision like a wing

We drive
between bean fields
into the slot
of the new sun risen

Jim Thomas

Estate

Ed and Annie Hartman were my brother's
god-parents, faithfully took up a third
of a pew three rows forward of us, lived
on a farm southeast of town; the house
had a front door with a vertical oval
pane of rim-frosted glass; covered with bluegrass,
the yard got shade from tall red cedars.

We lived several miles away, off north
on the Sheehan place; one branch of Pony Creek
began at our spring. We visited them
several times, knew their rooms' shapes, the bulk
of the upright, dark-varnished piano,
oak tables and chairs, scarf-covered bureaus,
two black stoves, fragile lamps, the screened backporch.

Cars lined both sides of the road a hundred
steps from their mailbox. Knots of people drifted
about the yard; the furniture huddled there
under the trees, was grouped by rooms. No one filled
chairs, rested on a bed. I sipped black coffee,
heard the seller's chant, walked once through hollow rooms.
Off to the west far bottomland turned blue.

Michael Smetzer

The Old Farmer

He was lying like a twig in the hay.
Dad and I raised him, each on a side,
and carried him to his kitchen door.

There, at the top of the steps,
we juggled and danced,
trying to enter the narrow passage.
His legs going separate ways
waved apart like vines before us.

The speechless anger in his eyes
was all that age had left
of the dignity of living on his land.

Michael Smetzer

Unwelcome Guests

His mother comes to stay,
her faith a mountain in his room.
He shuts his liquor in the closet,
and they talk of herbs.

Sundays and Wednesdays
her candles burn at church.
Fridays and Saturdays
he candlelights with friends.

*

She admits them
but opens no liquor.
Three years
they have sat in her grave.
Now her thoughts are thunder and rain.

Her ears are canoeists on the river.
She will float through their stories
to the lake.

Erleen J. Christensen

Nature's Going To Do It For Us

Huge migratory herds of bison
sweep toward the Platte,
the fences falling
rotten in their path,
the windmills spin
dry in holes
that do not tap
the Ogalalla.

Here and there
a rotten cabin
where a wild-eyed face
stares through
a night-time window
at the grey ones
waiting, knowing
smelling death.

The race no longer
Saves the Whales
Loves the Wolves
Mourns the Passing
of the Buffalo.

The air is clean,
the forests green.
The fires sweep
the Plains unchecked.

The cockroach herds
that roamed the cities
have fallen to the rats.
The rats grow lean,
the pigeons hungry.

Some few pure,
and spared,
search for God
among the wreckage,
spurning sex.

Others with a hidden
strength to fight extinction
stalk the streets
hating homosexuals,
Haitians, hemophiliacs,
gunning for each other.

Here and there,
an Old One
sits recalling
days of
Zero Population Growth.

For the children,
all the fairy tales
are grim.
So many have eaten
the poisoned apple.
Inside of each grandmother, grandfather,
a big bad wolf may hide
waiting to eat you up
from inside
while you lie awake
watching the yellow eyes
outside,
waiting for the night
the hungry paw
reaches through
the glass.

Thomas Fox Averill

Seeing Mona Naked

Mona lived two blocks up on the other side of the street from Ric the whole time they were growing up. She came to kindergarten as he went into first grade, so all through elementary school they saw each other on the way to and from school, and at recess, on the playground, though the girls and boys did not play the same games after about third grade. Mona had a brother a year younger, and as they grew up Ric played with Bert some. He was always aware of Mona. He didn't really see her, though, or think about her, until he was fourteen. She was thirteen.

He was beginning to observe girls, then, how their awkwardness turned graceful, how their tiny nipples swelled until they were covered forever in foam and cotton, how their narrow hips puckered the sides of their jeans, how their tangled, ribboned hair patterned itself to the new styles, how they, like him, woke up to find great blemishes pocking their chins—only they could cover up with makeup, which made him notice their eyes, their soft cheeks, their lips. Ric saw a magazine ad once for Cover Girl and, without fully realizing it, he swallowed and tried to digest his adolescence: the cover girl was on the cover, alluring, attractive; she was covering up her body, her face, becoming secret, coy, mysterious; and, he could imagine her suddenly on the covers, under the covers, her new skin next to his new skin.

Ric kept these half-formed feelings to himself, of course. He was too young to hand around with other boys talking in some callous chatter about the girls who were turning into women around them. He had only a brother, three years younger, too young to understand. He was alone with his adolescence for a time, the time when he began to notice Mona, the time when Bert made the offer.

"Mona's crazy," Bert said one day on the way home from school.

"Yeah?" Ric said.

"She spends hours in the bathroom."

"I bet lots of girls do," Ric observed, though his mother never did.

"Well, Mom has to yell at her to get her out."

"So?"

"She's weird," Bert concluded as he'd begun. They walked another block. Ric didn't want to, but he was thinking about Mona in the bathroom for hours. "I saw her once," Bert said.

Ric looked down. He'd been seeing her in his mind, and he felt like he'd just been caught doing it. He didn't say anything.

"Plenty of times," said Bert. "It's easy."

Ric was silent.

"I can climb out on the roof at night and nobody can see me. There's always a crack in the bathroom curtains. Always."

Ric didn't know what he thought about a brother peeking at his sister. He supposed he'd do it, too, if he had a sister. The one time his older cousin had scurried naked from the bathroom to her bedroom when they'd visited her family he'd not been quick enough to see anything but her back. He had regretted that. Otherwise, he'd seen only what he could find in NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC and in one of his father's medical encyclopedias that showed people naked, only their either had skin diseases or enlarged and swollen genitals, or they were three year olds with breasts. He had quit looking in there. He thought hard about Mona and realized he wasn't sure how much there might to be see.

"Want to spend the night this Friday?" asked Bert.

"I'll ask my mom."

Mona and Bert lived in a nicer home than Ric's family, though Ric was not at an age to really think much about it. But arriving there after school, he was impressed. The house was across one of those borderlines in Lamar. One side of the street was just a neighborhood. The other side had a name: West Heights. These were the homes of bankers, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, successfully established insurance agents. That's what Bert and Mona's father did. In fact, he was Ric's father's life insurance agent, though Ric didn't know it.

Bert's house was solid brick, with a driveway that wound up a short incline, went through an arch and came through to a three-car garage and a large asphalted basketball court. There was a pool, too, empty, but a cool blue when Ric saw it for the first time. They went in the back door into a kitchen the size of Ric's living room. Beyond, Ric looked into what seemed to be caverns. Ric felt awed, but uncomfortable, too. It was the silence, like entering a tomb. a warm, yellow, sun-filled tomb.

"My mom's probably upstairs," Bert said. "Mona never even gets home until dinner anymore. She's best friends with Sandy Merkel."

They raided the refrigerator and finished a quart of milk along with some Girl Scout cookies. They went through a large dining room, the table large enough to seat a dozen people easily, the chairs set against the wall, their seat cushions matching the drapes, which hung like stiff, buff columns in the thin, ceiling-to-floor windows, then into the hall, with its slate floor, and up the plushly-carpeted stairs to Bert's room.

Bert had bunk beds, two bureaus, a desk, and a huge lounge chair, but the room still seemed empty. The walk-in closet was about as big as Rick's whole room at home, and inside it were built-in chests, a rack of clothes that Ric had never seen Bert wear, and Bert's entire model airplane collection, each of the planes hanging from the ceiling or mounted on the wall. Bert had his own bathroom, too. Ric wondered if Mona had a room like this, one

with her own private bathroom, but he didn't know if that's what Bert still thought he was there to do, and he didn't want to ask.

"I better go check on Mom," Bert said. He disappeared, and Ric sat down in the leathery lounge chair, then a desk chair, then on the edge of the bed. He noticed, on one of Bert's bureau tops, a family portrait. Bert and Mona stood smiling between their parents, all of them dressed for church, Bert and his father in dark blue suits with matching ties, Mona and her mother in cream dresses, each holding a red rose.

Ric stood up and went to the window. Though the room was big, he was feeling cooped up; the longer Bert was gone, the more he wondered what he was doing there. He looked out over the back yard, with its swimming pool, its basketball court drawn with stripes, and saw a trampoline, a small rose garden, and last, in the very back, something that surprised him, a vegetable garden, its last tomato vines, bushes of green beans, corn stalks all yellowing in the cooling fall days. The garden seemed out of place in the yard, and it needed weeding. Ric looked at what he could see of the rest of Bert's house as it curved like a horseshoe around Bert's central room. In an upstairs window to his right he thought he saw a face looking out at him, but it disappeared. He noticed the lip of roof that sat underneath the windows and would allow someone to climb out and walk around.

He wished Bert would come back, that Mona and Bert's father would come home, that they would eat dinner, that it would get dark, that the time would come to climb out the window and do what they would do. He had a hollow feeling in his stomach about it.

Bert did return. He was flashing a twenty dollar bill. "Mom says Dad's going to be late again. We're supposed to just go out and grab something. Want to go to Smaks?"

"Sure," said Ric. Then, "What about Mona?" He could feel his face redden.

"Mom says not to worry. She's got a date tonight or something."

Ric nodded.

"C'mon," said Bert, "let's go to the shopping center and spend this wad."

So that's what they did. Ric was actually anxious, he was so unused to being totally out on his own. He kept thinking he might run into his mother or father down at the shopping center, but, of course, he didn't. They bought some candy at the drugstore, then walked around while they ate it. Bert had to look through all the singles at Quarman Music, in case there was anything new for his collection. They looked at comic books at the bookstore, too, then headed across the street for burgers. Ric had never eaten at Smaks, but he'd seen the commercials for the place all the time: the beefy Kansas City Chiefs football players looked at the camera, grinned, and said "I Smak my wife." It took several of them to make the ad work.

After cheeseburgers, fries and large cokes, they went next door to the bowling alley, where Bert liked to play the pinball machines. Ric didn't mind playing, but he was no good at it, and he kept having to ask Bert for quarters. They quit after an hour and went to the snack bar for some malts. They sat in a deep restaurant booth, surrounded by the smell of cigarette smoke, listening to the hum of bowling balls and the chucking explosion of the pins.

"Maybe we could shoot some pool?" asked Ric. It was the first time he'd suggested anything all evening.

"Naw," said Bert. "You want to shoot pool, we'll go back to my house. We've got a table in the basement."

"Let's go," said Ric.

So they turned around to Bert's house, half a mile away through the dark. Ric hoped Mona was there. He was having an okay evening, but it wasn't what he thought it would be.

Mona was still out. So was Bert's dad. Bert disappeared upstairs to talk to his mother, then came back down and led Ric to the basement. It was really neat, better than the bowling alley, a soft rug on the floor, a lamp advertising Miller High Life just above the cool green felt of the table, a cue rack against one wall with a dozen shining cues, squares of blue cue tip chalk waiting on the table's polished brown sides. Ric didn't play much, but he felt like tonight he could play forever.

They played until both of them were yawning as they stretched over the table. They would have played longer, too, except they heard someone come in the house. Bert cocked his head like a dog does when it listens for thunder. Ric took a last shot, and they both looked up to see Mona's legs coming down the stairs. They were thin, and brown from a summer by the swimming pool. Mona followed them and sat on the bottom step.

"Oh, hi," she said, looking at Ric.

"Hello," Ric nodded, looking away.

"Where's Dad? And Mom?" Mona asked Bert.

"He's working late or something again. Mom's upstairs. She's not feeling too good."

Mona didn't say another word, she just stood up and ran up the stairs.

Bert looked right at Ric, then slammed an easy shot into the side pocket. "She'll talk to Mom for a while," he said, as though to himself, "then it'll be straight into the bathroom for a long bath."

"Let's go upstairs," said Ric. That was the closest he could come to asking Bert to show him Mona.

Bert lit up a little. "Yeah?" he said, "you want to?"

Ric headed up the stairs.

In Bert's room, they set up the commandeers. They turned off the lights and Ric stood by the door, slightly cracked, to listen for Mona's movements. Bert raised the window and pulled the screen out of the storm.

He brought a straight chair over for easy climbing. Ric heard a door open, then slam shut, and saw Mona rushing into a room further down the hall. She closed the door without turning on the light.

"She's in her room," Ric reported.

"Give her five minutes," Bert said. "Then it's bath time. She's the cleanest girl in town."

"Let's go out right now," said Ric. He was thinking that the only thing better than seeing Mona naked might be seeing her get that way.

So they climbed out onto the lip of roof, let their feet get used to the slight slope, and sidled toward the bathroom window, a high, small window right in the middle of the second floor. Neither of them spoke. Under the window, they waited. Five minutes went by, then ten, then, just as Ric was noticing the cramping pains in the bottoms of his feet from the way they clung to the roof, the light went on.

They both went for the window, but Ric was more eager, and bigger, and so he stole the good view. Sure enough, there was a crack in the curtains, small, but big enough to see most of the room, and all of anyone in it. Mona was leaning over the bath tub, starting the water, very close to the window. Ric hoped she wouldn't look up. He was both excited and nervous, his hands sweating, his stomach knotting up, but his desire to see her kept him strong on his perch outside the window. Mona finished adjusting the water and stood up. She reached around and unzipped her dress in back—Ric thought he could almost hear it over the rush of water into the tub.

"C'mon," whispered Bert, nudging Ric's side. "It'll steam up soon."

"Shhh!" said Ric. "She's not even naked yet." He nudged Bert away.

Mona lifted her dress over her head and threw it on top of the laundry basket. The white of her bra and panties was heightened by her brown skin, still tanned from summer sun. Ric almost gasped. She had a lot more under her underthings than he had imagined: mounding breasts and a promising swell between her legs. She reached behind her and unfastened her bra. She threw it away, too, and hard. Her breasts were firm, not big, but definitely breasts, with light brown nipples. Ric couldn't believe it when she actually touched one of them, gently. He thought if they were his, he'd touch them all the time. Then she went for the panties, just like that, throwing them, too, and this time Ric did gasp. She was naked. He stared at her brown pubic hair, that, like his own, was sparse. But it was definitely there, the small, downward pointing triangle. God, he thought, and she was just standing there next to the bath tub, not five feet from him, waiting for the water.

Then, just as Bert began to shove at Ric again, Mona lifted a leg up onto the side of the tub. Ric hunched down a little to try to see even more, to get a look between her legs. He did, but he wasn't ready for what he saw. There was a white string hanging down. She grabbed it and pulled. Ric couldn't

believe it. She pulled out a thin, blood-stained piece of cotton. He knew what it was, but he had never seen one before, and it made him a little sick. Mona threw it into the toilet and flushed it down. Ric turned away. When Mona came back to the tub, Ric looked at her face for the first time. She had been crying. He saw tears in her eyes, tracks of tears on her face. He wondered if the blood thing hurt or something. He gulped and turned away again. This time when Bert shoved, he let him look. "She's crying," Ric whispered at Bert's side.

"She's always crying," Bert answered. "Probably had another fight with Mom." He was at the window. "Pretty neat, huh?" he said.

Ric looked around him, down at the pool again, the asphalt drive that doubled as a basketball court, the huge house that arched around him so that they were in the bottom of a "U" and exposed to anyone who might look out a window. But only Bert's mother might see them. Ric was just wondering about her when he heard Mona's voice through the window, through the wall: "Go away," she yelled, "go away. I hate you!"

Ric grabbed at Bert to pull him from the window. "Did she see you?"

"Nah," he said, "she's talking to my mom. You want to see any more?"

"No." Ric edged back to Bert's bedroom window. After all, Bert's mother might check on them and discover they were on the roof. Then they'd probably catch it. Bert stayed in the small square of light, even when Ric hissed at him. So Ric went on into Bert's room and sat in a chair, staring quietly into the darkness.

He heard another voice, loud, down the hall, and someone pounding on the bathroom door. It was Bert's mom, Mona's mom. Though she was yelling, Ric couldn't quite make out the words. Then, her voice softened, and Ric heard everything, heard more than he wanted to: "I said open up, you little bitch. You will open the door, Mona. You will tell me where you've been and what you've done. Whore!" she yelled, and pounded. "Slut!"

Ric went to the bedroom door and quietly closed it. He wished Bert would come back. He wished Bert's father was there. He wished he hadn't come to Bert's house. He wished he was home, even thought about just walking out and not coming back. But his was afraid of what Bert would say. He didn't want Bert to tell anyone else about what they'd done, about seeing Mona naked.

He heard some more muffled yelling, some more pounding, then Bert appeared in the window. He came into the room and turned on a lamp. He looked a little sheepish. He shook his head. "Boy," he said, "they really get to going sometimes when Mona comes in late."

"Yea," said Ric. "My mom sometimes yells at me." He was lying. "I'm tired."

"Mine's the bottom bunk," said Bert. "You got to promise not to wet the top one." He grinned.

Ric didn't sleep for a long time that night. He lay in bed staring at the white ceiling, listening for the sounds of the house, though the voices quieted soon. He tried remembering Mona, before he saw she was having her time of the month, before he saw her crying, before he heard her mother's voice. He could remember her naked, but he couldn't get any excitement out of it. He wished he hadn't done it, wished he was home. He must have drifted off, finally, but he went in and out of sleep. Once he thought he heard a garage door, Bert's father. Another time he heard a dog. In the middle of the night Bert said something in his sleep, but Ric couldn't make it out.

In the morning, Bert and Ric went out to play ball. Ric suggested they go to his house for breakfast. Bert went inside to ask his mother, and returned with her permission. Ric was relieved. He never did see Bert's mother or father, and he couldn't look Mona in the eye for over a year. He never asked Bert to his house for the night, though his mother insisted it would be the polite thing to do. All he would say was, "I don't like Bert." Which wasn't really true. He was afraid of Bert, his freedom and his money, his acceptance of what his life was like. Bert always seemed strong and tough, and Ric felt weak and indecisive in comparison. They did things together every once in a while, but mostly when other guys were along.

Ric finished high school and moved to the university town thirty miles away. He made new friends in the dormitory. Sometimes he and his friends would talk about girls. Ric was not experienced. He was shy, and hadn't gone beyond making out with a little petting. He was attracted to girls who were equally restrained, though his curiosity about real sex, what it would be like, his desire for it, increased the longer he was away from home.

In his second year at school he saw Mona on campus one day. She was tanned, well-dressed, pretty in the way high school cheerleaders always are—a bubbly, smiling, perfect-toothed, hair-styled prettiness. Her body was much fuller than Ric remembered it, too. They spoke, the usual stuff about home that college kids from the same town find to talk about. She was interested in pledging a sorority in her sophomore year. Ric was in an apartment, living with three other guys. Bert was coming to the university next year, if he could pass the chemistry class he flunked last year. Her parents were fine. So were his. Lots of her friends were at the university, too. He'd seen some of them. That was that.

A year later Ric found himself in an Anthropology class with Mona. He was surprised she enrolled in it: Male and Female in Society. Perhaps, he kidded himself when he saw her there, she thought it would be a guide to being a debutante or something like that. He didn't speak to her much, but he did notice during the semester that Mona was changing. No tan, no make up. She was not dressing like a fashion plate. Like a lot of people their age, she was wearing jeans and T-shirts. He thought what she said in class was interesting. By the end of the semester he was ready to give her credit

for her mind, something he'd never thought about before. But he didn't seek her out after class, though he thought of asking her on a date.

After the semester was over he didn't see Mona again for two years. He was graduated from college and worked at the University Library shelving books. He was living in the country in a commune, gardening, raising chickens and goats on an old farmstead with no running water, no heat source but the wood they cut. He liked the life, saw it as a good break from the world he grew up in, the little suburb, with television and TV dinners, the shopping center and bowling alley, the fast food and the concrete. Going to college had gotten him away from his family, and where he'd grown up; living in the country was getting him away from the way he'd grown up. Everything was new, and he was learning like a kid again, by doing, feeling, seeing.

One fall evening Ric went to another farm commune, just four miles northwest of his, to visit his friend, Jerome, who had built a sauna. Ric wanted to convert an old chicken coop on his place. With no running water, the sauna was the best way to stand the immersion in cold well water: heat the body instead of the water; share the heat, not the water, with friends; turn bathing into a social occasion. It was part of living differently.

Ric looked over the sauna. From the outside, it looked like all the neglected sheds that wait for collapse after their original farm use has been abandoned. But inside, it was insulated, then papered in tar paper covered with tin foil. An old woodstove, standing in the corner on a platform of bricks, provided the heat. The rest of the floor was plywood, and along the back wall Jerome had built a two-tiered bench: the aficionados sat on the high perch to get maximum heat, the initiates sat on the lower bench, which also opened up on hinges to reveal a woodpile of oak and osage orange—hot-burning and long-lasting woods, even if the hedge sparked dangerously. Outside the sauna was a huge round horse tank, which Ric and Jerome filled by hand. They would light the fire after dinner.

Everyone else was at an afternoon concert, but Jerome had promised them a sauna when they returned. So Ric and Jerome smoked some dope and ate a light dinner. They listened to some music and waited for dusk. Then Jerome went to build a fire. "Just half an hour, and she'll be hot," he said when he returned. They went outside and watched a red sunset turn into a bruise: purple, then black. They shed their clothes on the back porch and walked naked into the heat. Ric started on the low bench, Jerome on the high. They had been in ten minutes when they heard the others pull into the lane. Jerome went out, and Ric could hear him shouting, "Toke up, 'cause we're stoked up! Come and get it while it's hot!"

The first person in the sauna was Mona, naked. It was like a dream. Ric didn't know Mona lived out with Jerome. He smiled at her sheepishly, as though he'd been caught at something. "Ric," she said. "Hey, how are you doing?"

Ric looked straight into her eyes. "Fine, I guess," he said. Then he looked away. Then his eyes crept to her body. She hinted at plumpness, her arms moving toward fleshy, her skin pale. Ric thought she was trading the slim debutante for the earth mother: he knew a lot of women who were rejecting the twiggy slimness of advertising. Anyway, she was still beautiful, her breasts large, firm. Ric remembered those light brown nipples. Her body was fuller, richer, than when she was a teenager. And, Ric grinned to himself, he bet she wasn't in her period, either. He looked at her face again and smiled, saw her eyes come back from looking him over. She shook her blond hair, raised her arms, and put the back up onto a pony tail. It was a small gesture, but intimate. Ric relaxed.

"It's real good to see you," he said.

"Same here. Jerome says you live pretty close."

The next person in the sauna was Bert.

"Old home week," said Ric.

"Hey, Jerome said you were coming over," said Bert. He was tall, with long hair and a short beard. He had a joint in his thick hand.

"No dope inside," said Jerome.

"Gosh," said Bert, "it's already inside. It's taken me over, I can't stop it." He began shrieking and whooping, then took a huge final hit and threw the roach out the door.

Another woman, Kim, tall with very long red hair and freckles all over her slim body, and another man, Dan, short, wiry, with a very muscled upper body, joined them. That made six, three on top and three on the lower bench. The sauna was heating up, and Ric's body began to bead. When the beads became rivulets, he started for the door. "How do you take it so long?" he asked everybody on his way out.

"You get used to it," said Jerome. "And listen. Be sure to go all the way into the tank. Dunk your head in. Stay there till you think you can't stand it anymore. Or until you get used to it. Whichever comes first."

"I'm going, too," said Mona, and she followed Ric out the door.

Ric stood looking at a half moon, and let Mona approach the water first.

"Get in while you're still cooked," she said. He watched her lift her leg onto the side of the tank then hop, splashing, into the water. She stayed under for a long time. Ric remembered she had a pool where she grew up.

He want over to the tank cocked one leg over and in, felt the water stab him with sharp coldness. He eased his other leg in, but couldn't bring himself to slide down. Mona came up across the tank, rested her arms on its sides. Her legs were spread apart.

"You have to come in," she said. "All the way. The sooner you do the easier it'll be." She stood up and walked to him. She took his hand, and he let her pull him to her, let her grab his shoulders and push him under. The water was so cold his body spasmed. But he stayed under, after she let go, until he couldn't hold his breath any longer. He came up, sputtering,

the water still awful, knifing him as he moved through it. Mona was right above him, still standing. "You did it," she said, and grabbed his shoulders again.

Ric let her push him under again, felt her weight on him, felt her smooth, cool body slide onto him, her breasts against his back, her arms around his neck, her legs wrapped around his, as though she was riding him. He had a moment of very intense desire, though the cold prevented its physical expression. He was running out of breath, and he gasped towards air. As he rose, she stayed on, and ended up piggyback. Then she let go, splashing backwards into the horse tank.

Dan was standing next to the tank. He remained quiet, staring without expression at Ric and Mona. Then he climbed slowly in, and, just before he went under, he said, "Don't splash all the Goddamn water over the sides." He disappeared slowly like a snake slinking under, and stayed there until Ric thought the man's heart must be ready to burst. When he came up, he took one huge breath, the muscles around his chest expanding, his torso puffing up. "C'mon, Mona, he said. "Let's go back in."

Mona followed him.

Ric came later.

They opened up their pores in the heat three times, then slammed them shut three times before their bodies felt like rubber. Ric was so relaxed he couldn't bring himself to dry off and go inside. Instead, after his last turn in the horse tank, he stood out on the back porch and listened to the crickets, a couple of night birds, the swaying of trees by the creek. Soon, the others joined him, letting the breeze dry them as they languished on the open back porch next to the water pump. Ric felt more relaxed than he ever had. His body tingled, his mind was blank. He felt close to these people, even though he hardly knew them. He felt close to the wind and the sky and the ground. He was very content. He wished he could be naked with people all the time, natural and at ease. Mona asked who wanted tea and went inside. He watched her move, her solid shape strong, sensual.

Better not think about it, he told himself.

Dan left, and returned with a bottle of whiskey. He passed it around, but only Bert took a hit. Kim began to sing very softly, her voice as thin as her willowy body. Jerome hummed along, taking a lower part. Dan drank more whiskey and Mona came back with tea. The warm mug felt good in Ric's hands. The marijuana was wearing off, and he was left with the perfect mellowness of a sauna-relaxed body, warm, still buzzing, like sleep and waking in their best forms, both at once.

Dan stood up and heaved the whiskey bottle out into the pasture beside the house. "Whooeee!" he shrieked, and turned in a circle. Then he looked around at everyone. "Come on, Mona," he said. He leaned over her and pulled her to her feet.

"Dan," she whispered, harshly.

"Oh, come on," he said, putting his arms around her shoulder and pulling her to him.

"No, Dan," she whispered.

"You little slut." Dan's voice turned ugly. "Now, okay?" He wrapped her neck in the crook of his arm and began to squeeze her head down. They walked off the porch and out towards the decaying barn.

Kim and Jerome stopped singing. Bert was looking away. Ric looked down into the darkness of the tea he couldn't drink. Then Bert broke the ice: "They're in love," he said, and tried to laugh.

"It's a wonderful emotion," said Kim. She stood up and put a towel around her. She disappeared inside.

Ric sat for a while, but his fine feeling disappeared. He wanted his clothes on, his own house, his bed. "Thanks, Jerome," he said. "You guys come over and sauna when I get mine built, okay?"

"Sure," Jerome nodded.

"See you later, Bert," Ric said.

"Yeah," said Bert.

Ric dressed and headed to his car. Just before he drove away he saw Bert come off the porch, walking gingerly with bare feet over the stubbled grass. Bert leaned into the window.

"Hey," he said, "don't worry about Mona. She's all right. She can take care of herself."

"So I see," said Ric.

"No, really. She can handle herself."

Ric nodded. "Take care," he said, and started the engine. He drove away, and looked back only once, as he turned onto the gravel road. The house was solid, white, a few warm lights burning in its windows. The farm loomed behind, a dark shadow Ric couldn't get out of his mind.

Ric built his own sauna, with the help of the two men and the woman who lived with him. It was a fine one, double-tiered seating, woodbox inside, with extra insulation around the top half, but plenty of ventilation from below. He divided the old chicken coop in half, so right outside the sauna door, but still in the building, was a huge old bath tub, sunk in the ground, draining into an old cistern. Ric surrounded the tub with a limestone and cement floor he spent many hours laying. With the two rooms, Ric and his commune could use the sauna for bathing all year round, the leaking heat from the inside room keeping ice off the cold water in the tub room. Ric loved to sauna, and he took at least three of them each week, craving, almost, that sensation of total warmth and relaxation. He liked it especially well in the winter, when he had to face a cold night on the side porch where he slept between what could be very cold sheets. He thought saunas kept him from getting colds, too.

He never invited Jerome's commune to share his sauna. Jerome came over once, in December, and was appropriately envious of Ric's work.

Jerome hadn't been taking saunas since the cold weather set in: too much trouble to fill the huge horse tank when it had to be emptied each time to keep it from freezing solid. Besides, Jerome said, things weren't going very well at his place. He was thinking of moving into town. Dan and Bert had turned lazy on him, and he was doing most of the work to keep them warm, cutting wood, splitting it, stacking it on the porch. Kim was keeping the fires going, and Mona was cooking. But Mona was mad all the time. He thought it was Dan, the way he bossed her around, and Bert, who seemed to enjoy seeing Mona off balance. Jerome didn't think siblings should try to live together as adults. Too much baggage, he said.

"I'd like to see Mona sometime," said Ric. "But I can't invite her over here without Bert and Dan."

"The last time she went somewhere by herself," said Jerome, "Dan waited for her in the drive with a tire iron. Flattened the front hood of her Volkswagen like a pool table. Next day, he went to the salvage yard and bought a new hood. It was the wrong color, but he went ahead and replaced the dented one with it."

"Christ, you hear about guys like that, but you never think you're going to meet one."

"Yeah. Well, I'm ready to move on. Probably will next month," admitted Jerome. "I'm going to try to take Mona with me."

"You mean you're interested in her?"

"Yea, I'm interested in her."

"Good luck."

Jerome left and Ric sat inside drinking tea, alone.

A month later, Jerome called Ric with his new phone number. He was in town, living in an old house divided into apartments. He'd taken a job stripping furniture. "I miss the farm," he said, "but I don't miss the people."

"What about Mona?" asked Ric.

"She's not with me. I'm not sure what she's going to do. I think everybody out there is going to split soon."

"Maybe I'll call out there and see what's going on."

But Ric never called. He put if off a week, then a month. He wasn't sure what he'd say, anyway. He couldn't exactly express sincere concern when he hadn't spoken a word to Mona or Bert since he'd seen them out there in the early Fall. But he thought of Mona almost every day, or of Bert, or of their growing up in Lamar and all they were trying to leave behind: the shopping malls, the quick fix of television, the processed food, the compartmentalization of work and play, labor and love. Ric liked it out on the farm, close to his horses, goats and chickens; he liked looking on his home-built shelves and seeing the whole summer of gardening shining back at him from the Mason jars that would help feed him through the winter; he liked the bitter, yeasty taste of the beer he brewed for himself in the dank basement every fall; he liked going to work smelling of wood smoke. His

brother accused him once of being an adult Boy Scout, playing with the past, giving himself his own merit badges for the tedious things he had to do to maintain his life—the wood chopping, garden hoeing, animal feeding, even the commuting back and forth to town. But he didn't care. Enough other people came to town smelling of wood smoke, work callouses newly sprouted on their tender suburban hands. He felt like part of something big, and he was happy.

Then one morning at 6:30, Mona called him.

"Ric, is that you, Ric?" She sounded frantic. "Can you come over?"

"You mean now?"

"Now?" she repeated. "Yes, right now." Her voice broke. "Please, Ric. Soon?"

"Sure," he said.

The December morning was perfectly still. Frost was a thick layer on everything, and Ric quickly worked the crust off his car windows. He drove out into a glittering day, east, as the sun began to rise. He wondered what was wrong, why Mona sounded so desperate. He was glad she called him, but he probably should have asked more questions. He hoped everything would be all right by the time he arrived, that whatever it was could melt away like the frost on his car, leaving it bright in the sunlight. Still, he sped all the way, spewing gravel.

He approached the lane, bounced onto it, braked hard as close to the house as he could get. He went to the back door. The glass in the door was broken out all over the porch floor. The shards in the door frame were tinged with red, like bloody teeth. Through the broken window he saw Mona. She was sitting on the floor in front of the huge wood stove, naked. She heard him and stood up. She turned to him. She was covered with blood. It was smeared on her chest, and on her knees where she hugged them to her, and it ran down her arms. He saw a drop disappear into the speckled linoleum floor, and he caught his breath and fought off nausea. They stood looking at each other, from either side of the broken out window, neither saying a word. Then Mona hugged her chest, spun around, and sat again in front of the blazing stove.

"Mona?" he said. "Are you alone?"

She jerked her head around. "Of course I'm alone. I'm always alone."

Ric tried to open the door. It was locked. He reach through the window and opened if from the side. "You're hurt, Mona," he said. "What happened?" He stood in the open door. The stove filled the room with an oppressive heat.

"It doesn't hurt," she said. "I broke the window, that's all. It's just blood." She held up her arm. Only one of them was bleeding, from a jagged gash where she had raked it against the glass. But it was an ugly cut. The blood smeared on her breasts, thighs and knees was brown and muddy, already caking. Mona turned away again, paced from the stove to the sink,

to the table. She stopped, leaned over, and cleared away a yoke-caked plate and a coffee mug. She carried them towards the sink, hesitated, then dropped them on the floor. They shattered. She laughed hysterically, then went back to the stove.

Ric stood silent. He hoped she wouldn't sit on one of the scattered pieces of plate. He looked for a broom, but couldn't see one. He looked for a towel, and some water, but nothing he saw looked clean enough. "Mona," he said.

She stared at the stove.

"Mona, let me help you. Do you have any towels? Even some clean socks or underwear?"

"Yes," she said, and threw her head straight back. Her body followed and she lay on the linoleum, her eyes rolling in her head. She laughed again. "Clean me up," she said to the ceiling. "Clean me up again."

Ric started going through drawers until he found the one with dish towels in it. He went outside to fetch a pitcher of water. When he came back in, the room was beginning to chill. Mona was lying still. He wetted the towel and kneeled next to her. He started with her feet, the bottoms of them. After one wipe, he changed his strategy. They were filthy. He wondered if she ever bathed. If she wore shoes. If she was always naked. If she ever left the house.

He took a clean towel and started over, this time with the wound itself. As he washed it, gently nudging off the caked blood, Mona stirred. Her eyes opened and she smiled at him. He looked away, concentrated on the cut. Once he finished cleaning the blood from her arm, the gash showed itself to be smaller than he thought, only about four inches long, on the inside of the arm starting from the wrist, a jagged line that looked like a flattened red "M" against her pale arm. He wrapped the towel around her wrist and went for another.

He knelt beside her again and cleaned her up. He rubbed hard to remove the dried blood. Wherever he rubbed, he left her body rose: her breasts, her flat stomach, her thighs, he knees and calves. When he was finished, he went ahead and cleaned the bottoms of her feet. She laughed, and he felt her arms wrap around his waist. He let her pull him down. They kissed, briefly. Her mouth was so sour with alcohol he had to catch his breath. He was trying not to mind. He looked into her eyes. They were still wild, the pupils dilated. Her forehead was beaded with sweat, as though she were in a sauna. She moved her arms over him, his face, his shoulders, his chest, his waist, then back again to his face, her movements more frantic than caressing. Ric realized she was probably coming down from a night on speed.

She pulled him to her again. Instead of kissing her mouth, though, he kissed her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, her hardened nipples. He was excited, and he was guilty. He knew she needed help, and he knew he could

have her. She was so out of it, maybe she wouldn't even remember. Maybe it wasn't any worse than all the other things she'd been through. After all, she had called him, nobody else, that morning. She wrapped her arms around his head, holding him to her chest. He could feel the cold towel on the back of his neck. He was ready to give in when he heard the voice:

"Well, I'm damned. You get rid of one, then invite another in." It was Bert.

Ric looked up, struggled against Mona, who tried to hold him to her. He made it to his knees, but Mona held on until she was sitting up and he was looking over her shoulder. Bert stood in the doorway in a pair of long johns, his hair dishevelled, his attempt to grow a beard blotching his face. He was pale, with dark circles under his eyes. He looked awful, worse than Mona.

"Bring her a robe," said Ric.

"I've seen her naked before," said Bert. "But you know that."

"Get her some clothes," Ric said.

Mona began to cry on Ric's shoulder, short gasping sobs.

"She's hurt," Ric said to Bert, who stood motionless. Ric jerked his head towards the window. "Cut her arm."

Bert smiled, but his mouth turned ugly. "Sure," he said. "And you're playing doctor on the floor, she's hurt so bad."

Mona stood up quickly, knocking Ric onto the floor. She turned to Bert as though to say something, then hugged herself and paced the floor in a tight circle. She stopped by the sink and looked at Ric who still sat on the floor, and at Bert, who still stood in the doorway, looking in.

"You son of a bitch," she said, and she looked from one to the other. "You're just like everyone else. You don't care a Goddamn thing about me. You just want to boss me around, play with me. You just want to fuck me." She stared at Bert. "Admit it," she shouted. "You're just like Dad. Turn everything into a problem so you can quit caring, so you can fuck the whole world."

Bert leaned into the doorway, looked at the floor, looked back at Mona, then back at the floor. In the silence only the woodstove cracked. Finally, Bert drew himself up, shook his fist, and shouted:

"Bitch!" he yelled.

"Slut!" he screamed.

"Whore!"

Mona reached into the kitchen counter and found a bottle of gin. Her right arm was still wrapped in the towel, so she tried to throw with her left, picking up the bottle, spinning her whole body, and letting fly. She missed Bert, but the bottle flew against the stove and shattered. Mona shrieked and went after her brother, landing on him and cracking his head against the floor of the next room. Pinned underneath, Bert began to beat her on the

back. Ric went over and tried to stop them, holding one of Bert's forearms, prying against Mona's shoulder. But he couldn't separate them.

All three stopped struggling when they smelled smoke. The gin had ignited, burning out quickly on the stove. But a pool of flame burned black on the linoleum, and licked up the wall. Ric ran to the towel drawer and soaked another towel. He beat against the flame, but only spread it on the floor as he splashed the pool of gin. Bert ran to the sink, too, for a towel. He followed the perimeter of the floor to the wall and began to gently wipe the flame away. It was not burning deeply, and he scrubbed it out casually, like somebody hired in to clean. Ric continued on the floor. The melting linoleum still smoked, but the flames finally ate up all the alcohol and died away. Ric took a dishpan of dirty water and dumped it. Bert waded to the hall door. Mona had disappeared.

"Hey," said Bert. "Thanks." He looked around, and smiled boyishly. "Kind of made a mess, didn't we?"

Ric nodded, but didn't look at Bert.

"We'll be all right," Bert said. "I'm sorry. Mona gets weird sometimes. She gets over it." Then Bert walked out of the room, away.

Ric stood in the middle of the kitchen floor, surrounded by water and broken glass. He looked at the black-smudged wall, at the dish towels that littered the floor. The flame in the stove was dying down and he was cold. He walked out the door to his car and drove off. He never looked back.

Later, when he talked to Jerome, he found out everyone had moved from the farmhouse that winter. Dan had split for Texas, maybe Mexico. Bert was living in an apartment by himself. Jerome wasn't sure where Mona was, but he didn't think she'd gone far. Ric thought about trying to find her, but never acted on it. Maybe, he thought, he'd see her again sometime.

COTTONWOOD

29

Fiction

Carol Hebald

An Excerpt from the novel,

Three Blind Mice

MADA'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

ELISE

I was the compulsive eater in the red dress. To my left was Jay Brice; opposite me, papa; and to my right, squint-eyed Sam, with a sly grin on his face like the underside of a moonfish.

At the head of the table where Mada and her husband sat, everyone seemed to be in high spirits. But much as all the rest laughed, talked, and joked, much as they gobbled up their Christmas turkey and candied yams, papa and I as newcomers to the group, felt out of place, strange.

I spoke: "I took my Economics final, papa."

"Oh? How did you do?"

"I got a strong C."

Jay laughed: "Where do you go?" he asked.

"CCNY," I answered proudly. "I'm in English."

"Terrific," he said; and then with equal pride: "I'm in music — from Juilliard."

"Jay's new quintet is being performed at Town Hall this Sunday," called out Mada, who'd overheard all. "Why not come with *us?*"

Jay grinned at me. I wanted to yell! — To dance a jig! I felt so happy. — Then I looked at papa. Poor papa. Oh, my God. He was struggling to speak because every few seconds his mouth twitched nervously now on one side, now on the other, giving his face this peculiarly creepy expression. And Mada saw! — those handsome, insolent eyes — saw!

"What is it, papa?" I asked.

"I? — Nothing."

"Do tell us, Henry," insisted Mada, in a loud, drunken voice.

"Yes," echoed the psychologist. "Participate."

All eyes were on papa.

"Well, let's see," he began, blushing in confusion. "I've often wondered . . . Is it unjust to admire people for qualities with which they are naturally endowed?"

"But human love inevitably consists in part of such feelings," said Mada quickly.

"Nevertheless," countered the shrink, "Henry here is posing a question of justice."

"Justice?" bellowed Mada. "For *whom?* The admir*er* or the admir*ee?*"

"Or the unblessed third party?" someone added.

"All's fair in love and war!" chimed out an enthusiast.

"What is just," continued Mada, "about a forty-two year old Jew slobbering in his soup every time his beautiful daughter expressed interest in an — attractive young man?"

Papa looked amazed.

"Not very much," replied the shrink.

"Why? Why not? How so?" echoed round the room.

"What such love inspires is very small compared to what it destroys."

"And what does it destroy, doctor?" queried Mada, poised for the kill. "The young man or the Jew?"

"Neither," he replied. "Only the poor girl who's obliged to divide herself between them. She'll be loyal to neither, and unfaithful to both."

Squint-eye Sam jabbed me in the ribs:

"Smile, honey," he said. "It don't cost nothin'."

"Yes," sighed out Mada. "This is the reality that the Jew—"

"*What* is this reality?" blurted out papa. *"What?"*

"Simply this," replied the doctor cooly. "That his facts seem to play a poor second to his fantasies."

"But how can you know that," shouted papa, "when you don't know what my fantasies are?"

"I don't."

"How do you know I *have* fantasies?"

"Because we all have them."

"What makes you sure mine are worse than yours?"

"I'm not."

"Then why am I sicker than you?"

"I don't know that you are!"

Jay and I, who'd been sitting with our heads bowed, suddenly looked up. "So," shouted Mada. "Will our charming Elise be constant to her father, love him, remain true to him forever—?"

"Tune in next week," someone boomed, "when Ex-Lax will bring you"

"This is insufferable!" said papa, rising.

"What is insufferable, Henry?" asked Mada, with a broad smile.

She had hardly said it than he became conscious of his outburst. But instead of restraining him it only excited him further. He paid no heed to the amused hubub of the guests, but went and sat in a corner of the room. As soon as I rose to follow him, Mada began babbling with effusive politeness to her guests. Papa wouldn't look at me. He wanted to hear what Mada was saying and was waiting for an excuse to attack her. He was conscious that he was going to make a fool of himself, but no power on earth could have kept him from it.

Mada, in a high, falsetto voice, was explaining how pure love exists only in Heaven, that on earth it's always contaminated by lust — didn't the Bible tell us as much? Further—

"Stop!" shouted papa, bringing his fist down on the table by his side, and overturning the ashtray.

Everybody stared in amazement. Mada met papa's yes, paled a little, and said:

"Were you speaking to me?"

"Yes! . . . you bitch!"

He sprang to his feet. "You soil everything good and fine in the world," he went on furiously. "I forbid you ever to come to my house again! Come on, Elise."

We moved toward the door. There was a moment of general confusion. Mada half rose to her seat; then she resumed her careless, drunken attitude. She went on with her remarks as though nothing had happened, but her eyelids were twitching nervously and her eyes blinked as she looked around to see how her guests were responding.

"Come, come, my dear fellow," she said finally. "What's the matter with you? Control yourself. Do you know where you are?"

"I'm damned if I ever set foot in your house again!" shouted papa, and grabbing our coats, he pushed me toward the door and threw it open.

We parted on the street. Papa went to his house, and I to mine. Not a word passed between us.

Jay's music is beautiful. He is beautiful. He has lips like a platypus. He is altogether lovely. But he's not as gifted as papa because he's never been as lonely. Why do I say that?

I've betrayed papa by going with Mada to the concert. In hurting him I've hurt myself. Why? Can't I like a young man? Mada was right! Yes. Despite everything I feel myself drawn to her. I admire her toughness. I want to be a bitch and get away with it. No, I don't.

She sat next to me at the concert. At certain passages in the music she shot meaningful glances at me. During the adagio, she tried to look grave and serious, and posing, turned her profile toward me. She looked out of the corner of her eye to see if I was watching.

I was watching Jay! And if I were a bitch, could I feel warmth for papa? For Jay? Is anyone as lovely as Jay? Who are you, platypus? What are you like in school? Do your gifts belong to you, or you to your gifts? Talk to me, boy, oh lovely boy.

ELISE AND JAY

I entered his house and extended my arm as though to shake his hand and he pulled me towards him and in an embrace and we held each other a good five minutes trembling and kissing each other. Then he ran his hands through my hair and all over my body and kissed me some more until

we got into a terrible excitement and I whispered, "Take me into the bedroom," and he said, "I don't want to wrong you," so I clapped my hand over his mouth and made him take me there anyway where he fumbled, shamefaced and joyful, with the buttons on my blouse until by mistake he tore one off, and I kept wanting to cry out and whisper things in his ear but I kept silent all the while he got my blouse off — and then he couldn't manage to unhook me so finally, overwhelmed by confusion, he said, "You do that." I did and then I started to undo his belt but suddenly got so embarrassed so I stopped and turned my back and continued to undress myself alone. He turned out the light and carried me in his arms into the bed and we made love, we made love, we made love, we made love, and I was no longer a virgin and everything was perfect and nothing was perfect. He trembled so terribly when he was inside me, kept asking, "Am I hurting you?" "No," I said because I liked the way it hurt and did he think I was a whore because I liked it? And all the time he kept kissing my lips, my eyes, my hair, and his heart was throbbing violently and at the very end he gave a terrible gasp and held me so tight I could barely breathe and I wondered, Could I love such a man? Then he said, "Will you stay all night?" And I answered, "Yes, if you want me to," and he started kissing me again, over and over, until exhausted we lay there silent for a long time dreaming perhaps of something . . .

After a while I got restless and pulled myself up and told him I felt a little hungry. So he got up immediately and fetched me his red silk bathrobe and I ran into the bathroom to look at myself. There was a good blood in my cheeks and I looked wonderfully pretty so I stared at myself for several minutes and then followed him into the kitchen. He was wearing a faded blue terrycloth bathrobe and fidgeting in front of me trying to smear mayonnaise on a ham and turkey sandwich and getting it all over his hands and I started giggling because his bathrobe suddenly came undone and he was all exposed and flushing horribly. So he pulled it shut and we both burst out laughing loudly, wildly, till finally I said, "Aren't you going to eat too?" "Yes," he said, and cut himself a big hunk of marble cake which he started to eat immediately, forgetting to serve me my sandwich. And we began laughing again, so I fed him some cake, but took most of it for myself. And I ate the sandwich too.

Soon after, getting ready for bed, he turned to me and asked, simple-hearted and blunt as a boy, "When did you first begin to like me?" "When I first saw you," I answered. "Why?" "I don't know." Then he turned out the lights and I pretended to sleep because I didn't want to talk anymore but he kept snoring and waking up, saying, "Was I sleeping?" "Yes." "Have you been here?" "Yes." "Stay here."—And that made me feel so proud. I mean that he wanted me close to him and he held me so tight I couldn't get comfortable and I wondered, Could I love such a man? And I wanted

to make love again but I was ashamed to ask, I mean I didn't know how—so I just lay at his side and listened to him breathe. We were awkward at breakfast.

At breakfast I said:

"Why are you silent?"

And he replied:

"I don't know sometimes what to say."

Then I began to speak about my own peculiar awkwardness in society, to which he answered:

"When you are invited into society, you must simply step into the house, climb the stairs, and become immediately engrossed in what surrounds you."

"Can *you* do that?"

"Of course not."

And I hugged him then and there and told him I wouldn't mind so much going into society with him, at which he became very solemn, and fearing I had spoke too openly, I blushed as red as any farmer's daughter and said:

"I'm an aggressive woman, aren't I?"

"Oh no!" he cried amazed. "Not that!"

Rebecca Stowe

Dog Bones

"She's licking herself again," I said.

"What?" he asked, nonchalantly, as if he didn't know exactly what I'd said.

"She's *licking* herself again."

He looked up from his accountant's pad: numbers, numbers, numbers—you'd think the only thing that mattered in the world was the New York Stock Exchange. "Making money, dear?" I'd sometimes ask, but he'd just grunt. Unless he was *losing* it, in which case it was all I ever heard about. Like the time he lost $45,000 overnight on those silly pork bellies—my God, you'd think the world had come to an end! He ran around the house, gathering up all the pork and tossing it in a garbage bag, but when he grabbed the hot dogs, I drew the line. "Robert, you're going too far," I said. "What if Donald comes over with the kids? What am I supposed to *feed* them?" "Peanut butter and jelly," he suggested. And then—then!—he took away all my credit cards, as if the whole thing had been *my* fault. He eventually gave them back, when he made some money on a utilities split, but I haven't been able to so much as *look* at a pork roast since.

"Robert! She's licking!"

"Maybe she's got a hairball in her mouth," he said.

I told him I couldn't stand it when she did that: lick, lick, lick, lick—it was disgusting.

"She can't help it, Marion. She's just a dog."

"It seems you have more concern for the dog's hairballs than for *my* ears," I said and he laughed and told me it was just my imagination.

"*I* can't hear anything," he said.

That's because you're deaf, I didn't say. It was something we didn't discuss; it was as if by admitting to having a hearing loss he'd have to admit to getting old, and that he would not do, even when the President of the United States announced that *he* wore a hearing aid. "There!" I'd said, "Ronald Reagan isn't too proud to wear one." But Robert pretended not to hear and when I clipped out something from the paper, he'd crumbled it up and tossed it in the wastebasket. "Ronald Reagan is 75 years old! I'm only 70!" And besides, he added, he didn't *have* a hearing problem. "It's just the wax," he insisted. "I'll get a Q-tip."

"It's not my imagination. She's licking."

He sighed and looked at Ling-Ling, the dirty gray mop, lying curled up next to my thigh. "Here, Ling-Ling," he said, leaning down and clapping his hands. "You can come over here with *me*!"

Ling-Ling's head appeared to turn toward the sound of the clapping, but who could tell, she was all hair. "Go on," I said, nudging her with my thigh, "go see your father."

But she refused to budge. I think the dog knew I didn't like her and sat as close as she could, shedding as much hair as she could and licking as loudly as she could, just to torment me. "Go *on*!" I said again, pushing her closer to the edge.

"Come on, Ling-Ling," Robert coaxed seductively. I wonder how many women he's used that syrupy voice on over the years? A lot probably, but thank God never here, never in North Bay. He'd had the decency to conduct his affairs out of town— "Itchy feet, Marion," he'd say and suggest a trip to Singapore. "Singapore!" I'd say, "We can't leave the children that long!" And he'd go off by himself, my restless husband, and I'd meet him, in Lisbon or Copenhagen or London, for the last few weeks.

He removed a vanilla wafer from his pocket and waved it toward the dog's blind eyes. "Look, Ling-Ling! I've got a cooooooookie for you . . . "

The cookie always worked; all dogs are sluts for food. Robert hates it when I say that, but it's true—you groom them and take them to the vet and clean up their piddle, but what do they know about devotion? One vanilla wafer and they're panting at someone else's thigh.

She stumbled past the coffee table, narrowly missing the legs, sniffing her blind way to the wafer.

"You see how smart she is?" Robert asked, watching as she made her way through the maze between the couch and his desk. "Sometimes I wonder if she can see, a little bit. Maybe we should take her back to the vet."

I reminded him that we'd had her to the vet a million times. "She's blind," I told him. "Her eyes are bright blue! She can't see!"

"Well, it couldn't hurt," he said petulantly and I sighed and lit another cigarette.

"Make her sit up," I said. "Don't just *give* it to her."

But he gave her the cookie without forcing her into any doggie tricks.

"She's blind, Marion. She might fall over or something."

Damnable dog. Damnable licking dog.

She took the cookie from Robert's fingers and carried it to the middle of the room, plopping herself down in front of the fireplace. She turned to me, glaring probably, angry at the suggestion that she might have to *do* something to earn her cookie, and then began to gnaw. She bit me once, the minx. I was just trying to comb some of those hairballs out of her fur when she turned around and *bit* me. "You probably hurt her," Robert said when I complained. "She hurt *me*," I said, unwrapping the band-aid and showing him the tiny teeth marks. "Well," he said, leaning down and patting the dog, "I'm sure she didn't mean it."

Ling-Ling stopped chewing and turned her head toward me. It gave me the willies, having her look at me like that, with those blank staring eyes, blank and blue, like Mother's before she died, like Debbie's when she was in one of her mean, foul moods.

"We really should get the fireplace fixed," I told Robert, "before the girls get home."

He pretended not to hear, hunching over his pad, intently scribbling down his profits. His bald spot reflected the light from the lamp and I noticed he was getting more age spots on his scalp. "Marion, look!" he'd said one morning, "I'm getting *freckles*!" "Those aren't freckles," I told him. "Those are age spots." "They are not!" he'd said indignantly. "They're freckles! They're *cute*!"

"Robert! Robert!"

He looked up, barely concealing his irritation at having been disturbed, yet again, by me, his nagging wife.

"The chimney. We should get it fixed before the girls come home."

"Why?" he demanded. "That's a lot of nonsense. A waste of money."

"But the girls like a fire on Christmas."

"Ugh," was all he said.

Scrooge. He won't fix the chimney, but he'll go out and buy me a new car before the holidays, a fancy long sleek car so I can drive to Detroit in style to do my Christmas shopping. With the pittance he gives me. He'll take me to dinner and not allow me a shrimp cocktail ("Six dollars for THREE shrimp? Marion, are you *mad?*") and when we get home, he'll give me a little gift-wrapped box; a new ruby ring. "Because I love you," he'll say.

I told him I didn't want a new car. "I've got a perfectly good car," I said.

"Marion, what are you *talking* about?"

"The chimney," I said, what else? "I'd rather have the chimney fixed than have a new car. I like my car. I'd rather have a fire on Christmas."

If they came. Donald would come, of course, he just lived a mile away, but every year I started worrying, around Thanksgiving, that the girls wouldn't come home; that they'd become so wrapped up in their lives in New York, in Los Angeles, that they wouldn't come back, wouldn't be sitting in their favorite chairs, unwrapping their presents—Debbie trying to be grouchy to cover her excitement; Sarah, running around the room snapping unflattering photographs; Donald, playing "Santa Claus," handing out the gifts. My babies.

"Of course they'll come," I said and Robert started laughing—the things you think up to worry about, he always says. But they would. They always did. Sometimes alone, sometimes with some man they'd managed to pick up along the way—like that dreadful Italian Debbie dragged home one year, the one who claimed he had telekinetic powers. "And you want to marry *my* daughter?" Robert had said, horrified that she would even consider going out with a semi-literate religious fanatic. "He's sensitive!" she had claimed. "Sensitive to your father's pocketbook," I said, but Debbie didn't care. "He doesn't *know* Daddy has money," she said, but yes he did. They know. They can smell it in a woman, even a woman as belligerently

seedy as Debbie. Even a woman as obliviously unfashionable as Sarah. They can smell it and every once in a while they come nosing around, sniffing like a dog, but they never last. Telekinetic powers indeed.

"I'll pay for half," I offered.

"Half of what?"

"Robert, you aren't paying attention to me!"

He glared at me, clearly nettled by my "woman's thoughts." Something about the goddam house, he was probably thinking, goddam woman's thoughts.

"Half of getting the chimney fixed. So we can have a fire for the girls."

"They don't need a fire. I'm giving them money, that will warm their souls."

"Then I'll pay for it *all*," I said, determined to win one battle, at least.

"Your money's tied up."

"Untie it then! I want a fire for Christmas!"

Oh, God! My heart was beating wildly; these arguments were terrible for my blood pressure. I hate arguments and try to avoid them at all costs, even if it meant having to give in all the time. It was the only thing I didn't like about the girls coming home—they always got into all kinds of quarrels about politics and religion and music and literature and dinner would always end in a screaming match, with me so upset I could barely carry the dishes into the kitchen, my hands would be shaking so. Just the other night, I saw on the news where the Supreme Court was getting ready to decide the issue of School Prayer and I was terrified they'd do it while the girls were here. "Oh, please God," I prayed, "let them hold off until next summer."

"What do you think, Ling-Ling?" Robert asked the dog. "Do you want a fire?"

The dog stared at me and then returned her attention to the vanilla wafer.

"You see?" he said gaily. "Ling-Ling doesn't want a fire."

"Ling-Ling is a *dog*."

He laughed and shook his head. He never had been able to understand my feelings about Christmas. To him, it was just a day when people gave each other presents and watched sentimental movies on TV. But to me, it was a real *holiday*, a joyous occasion, filled with excitement and mystery and hope. There was the decorating to do, the shopping, the baking; weeks and weeks of frantic, happy activity. I couldn't wait for Thanksgiving to be over so I could go up under the eaves and get out the boxes of decorations and ornaments—the bamboo crèche Mother brought back from Hong Kong, the golden angels from Stockholm, the china cherubim from England; so delicate, so precious, three of them, one for each child: two blonds for the girls, the dark-haired cherub for Donald.

"If they want a fire," Robert said, "they can to go to Donald's."

"They can *not* go to Donald's. Mollie's got those dreadful cats. Both of the girls are violently allergic to cats. I told Mollie that, but she got the cats anyway. Sometimes I think she did it just to keep the girls away."

Robert said I was being ridiculous. "The girls are only here once a year. Mollie wouldn't go to the bother of getting cats just to keep them away two days out of the year."

Yes, she would. Robert says it's my imagination; he says everything's my imagination. Like Ling-Ling's licking. It's *not* my imagination, even though she's stopped doing it now, just to prove I'm wrong. The only sound in the room is Robert's pen scraping on his green accountant's pad. Talk to me, Robert!

"I think I'll have a drink," I announced, getting up. "Want anything dear?"

He grunted and glanced accusingly at my glass. "You're drinking too much, Marion," he'd said and started checking the vodka bottle every night, drawing little imaginary lines on the label to see how deeply I'd delved. It was humiliating—did he think I was some sort of drunkard? There were times when I felt like a criminal, sneaking into the kitchen during the news, telling him I had to get more potatoes, just so I could pour a tiny bit of vodka in my Perrier. Yes, I drink, but at least I don't hide the bottle in the toilet tank, like Norma Gilbert does. Or go running around the neighborhood in nothing but a mink, like Shirley Adams had done. "Ah'm nekid," she'd drawl, clutching the mink tightly against her breast, grinning and settling down on the couch, waiting for someone to offer her a drink. It wasn't as if I had a problem; it just made me feel better. Relaxed. Not so afraid. "Afraid of what?" Robert would scoff, if I said that to him. "What in God's name do *you* have to be afraid of?" and I wouldn't know. I wouldn't know.

Ling-Ling followed me into the kitchen. "Don't look at me," I told her as she began to bump blindly against my leg, her doggie way of telling us she was hungry. "I'm not your father. He's the one who spoils you, not me." She shook herself and wobbled away, laying down under the butcherblock table to lick herself. Lick, lick, lick, lick.

"I think I'll re-do Debbie's room," I told Robert when I returned to the living room. I'd been planning to re-do it for years, but Robert always complained—"What do you want to do that for?" he'd say, mentally adding the bills from the paperhangers, the painters, the furniture store, the carpet store. "The wallpaper is peeling off the wall, that's why. The paint is chipped off the windowsills, that's why. The carpet has globs of blue ink stains, that's why." He couldn't see the point, and he laughed when I told him I wanted my house in order before I died.

"Do whatever you want, Mother," Debbie had said over the phone, "I don't live there anymore. Please yourself." "But I want to please *you*. I want you to be comfortable when you come home." "I am comfortable, Mother,"

she said. "But darling, I want you to be comfortable *and* happy. Wouldn't new wallpaper make you happy?" The sigh. The Debbie-Jesus-Christ-Almighty-Why-Me-Sigh. "Yes, Mother," she said unenthusiastically, "that's great. I'd *love* new wallpaper." I wanted to do it in blue, Debbie's favorite color, just like my own room at home, the room in the Grosse Pointe house.

"Sarah refuses," I said and Robert wanted to know what I was talking about *now.*

"Her bedroom. Sarah refuses to have it re-done."

"Good for her," he said, "I'm glad to see that girl's finally developing some sense."

"I picked out those colors myself!" she had cried, over the telephone, "I like it the way it *is*!" She had begun to cry, whimpering in the background, covering the receiver to muffle her sniffles. "I'm going through a DIFFICULT TIME, Mother," she'd said, her voice a million miles away. "I need to know my bedroom will never change!"

I would have liked to do Sarah's room in pinks and roses, but she wouldn't hear of it, claiming that she needed her room exactly as it was, to help her remember her past more accurately. She thinks she's a poet, she thinks it's important for every dustball to be exactly as it was in her childhood. She'd been seven when I took her down to Palmer's to choose her furniture and wallpaper and I had tried so hard to get her to look at the pretty white four-poster beds and the lovely pink bedspreads, with white eyelet dust ruffles: girl colors, sweet colors. But she'd chosen browns and tans, boring boy colors. "Why?" I'd asked, trying to coax her into something bright—if not pink, at least yellow, or aquamarine. "Because they're *silent*," she said. Well, excuse me, my dear!

"Robert, Robert!"

"Ugh," he said.

"Robert, I can't concentrate with that licking!"

"Concentrate on *what*?"

"On what I'm *thinking.*"

He laughed and turned off his calculator. "And what were you thinking about, Marion?"

"I was thinking about how you have pet names for the dog and not for me."

I was surprised to find myself saying that, I had been thinking no such thing. I can't imagine thinking such a silly thing, but it was out in the open now and I'd just have to deal with it. Robert was laughing hysterically, sticking his finger under his glasses to wipe away his tears.

"Of course I have pet names for you," he said through his laughter . . . tee hee hee.

"No, you don't. You only call me Marion."

"Marion, don't be ridiculous. Sometimes I call you 'dear.'"

"Only when you want something. As in 'Could I have some more coffee, *dear*?' You never call me 'dear' affectionately."

"Yes, I do, *dear*," he said, coming over and tussling my hair. He laughed again and then kneaded his back—hard work, sitting at a desk all day, making money.

"I wonder what's on tonight?" he asked as he walked back to the desk to turn off the lamp. "I wonder if there's anything good?"

I shrugged. My turn not to talk. I glanced over at Ling-Ling, silent for once, asleep in front of the fireplace, curled up like a hairy baby.

"I think they've got that Art thing on PBS this month."

"Ummmmm," I said.

"The one from the Hermitage."

"We've already seen it."

"It's a good program."

"I know. But you've *been* there, why do you want to watch it on TV?"

He told me he liked watching it on TV, it reminded him of when he was there.

"But I thought you hated Russia." "I did hate Russia. But I loved the Hermitage. They have some of the greatest art treasures in the world!"

"Well, you go watch it."

"Aren't you coming up?" he asked, suddenly attentive.

"In a minute."

He stood there, watching me, hesitant—what's the matter, darling, afraid to go to bed alone? Or is it that you're worried I'll run out into the kitchen, attack the liquor cabinet and go running around the neighborhood in nothing but my chinchilla stole?

"All right," he said reluctantly, turning his attention to the dog. "C'mon, Ling-Ling, time to go beddie-bye. Watch some tee-vee."

She didn't respond. She just lay there, comfortably snoozing in front of the screen. "Leave her alone, Robert," I said. "Let her sleep."

"Come on, Ling-Ling," he said, pretending not to hear me. "Bed!" But Ling-Ling's head remained firmly hunkered down between her paws. Robert reached into his pocket and pulled out a vanilla wafer—it was a wonder he didn't have bugs in his pants, carrying those cookies around all the time.

"Want another coooooookie?" he coaxed, but she was out, away in doggie-dreamland, cookie or no cookie. A motionless gray dustmop in the middle of the gold carpet.

"Leave her alone," I said again, happy that for once the dog was quiet. Let her sleep, the longer the better. For once she'd stopped that infernal licking, let her rest in peace.

"Ling-Ling!" Robert cried urgently, "C'mon Ling-Ling, here's your COOKIE!"

"Will you leave that dog ALONE, for God's sake?" I cried, the blood rising in my veins like a geyser. I lit a cigarette, praying that the dog would continue to sleep soundly, downstairs, instead of upstairs in our bed. "I'm tired of waking up with hairballs in my mouth," I complained all the time, but Robert thought she was lonely downstairs. "She cries all night," he said. "Well, I *cough* all night, with those hairballs in my throat," I said but Robert said it wasn't the hairballs, it was the cigarettes. "I'll give you a hundred dollars for every week you don't smoke," he'd offered, but I turned him down.

He reached down and lifted Ling-Ling's head. Her blind eyes stared back, more glazed and unseeing than before. "Uh oh," I thought as Robert began to panic. "Ling-Ling! Ling-Ling!" he called. "There's something wrong with her!" he cried, picking her limp body from the floor and holding it out to me like some hairy offering, "I think she's dead."

May God forgive me, I laughed. It started out as a self-conscious reflex, an inappropriate response, but as I watched the horror creeping over Robert's face, as he looked from the dog to me to the dog, I couldn't help myself. What began as a kind of schoolgirl giggle became wild, roaring, gleeful belly-type laughter and even though I told myself to stop, that Robert would hate me forever if I didn't stop laughing at the dead dog, I couldn't.

"Don't laugh!" he screamed, pulling the dog back to his chest, keeping the offering to himself, protecting it from me, the giggling goddess of death.

"I'm sorry!" I cried through my peals of laughter. "I'm sorry! I know it's not funny!"

Robert started to cry, holding the dead little body in his arms, swinging it back and forth like a baby. "Don't die, Ling-Ling," he pleaded, "please don't die," and I sat there, watching him cry and hating myself as I held my face in my hands and laughed uncontrollably.

The dog is dead. The dog is dead. Deader than a doornail.

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Robert tossed and turned, reaching occasionally for Ling-Ling, patting the gap between us where she used to sleep. Dead dog.

I hated that dog. May God forgive me, I hated that stupid dog. I should have felt something, if not for myself, at least for Robert, but I couldn't. I was glad she was dead—glad, glad, glad. How many times had I thought about killing that licking furball—hundreds, probably millions! I'd lie in bed awake, coughing and holding the pillow over my ears to muffle the sound of her licking, thinking up ways to do away with her. Rat poison in her chicken livers. Letting her run out the front door, hopefully into a passing car. Placing holly berries in atop her dinner—a decorative treat!—but she'd eat around them.

Is it wrong, to not mourn a dog? It wasn't as if I were incapable of grief—I'd grieved when Kwan-Li died. But Ling-Ling had always been Robert's dog—following him around, getting up with him in the morning, sitting at his feet while he ate, waiting for her strip of bacon, cooked especially for her. Spoiled dog. Not like her sister, Kwan-Li. *My* dog.

"Jesus," Debbie had said when we'd bought the dogs. "What do you want with those hairy things?"

"They're not 'hairy things,'" I told her. "They're Lhasha Apsos, a rare and special breed."

I grieved when Kwan-Li died, there had been no laughter that morning, the morning I'd found her lying out by the crab apple tree, stiff and cold. Ling-Ling was there, barking furiously, trying to awaken her sister; her blind eyes looking to the heavens for help, her snout nudging Kwan-Li's rigid, unresponding body.

"Robert! Robert!" I cried, running back into the house, and he'd looked up from the paper, angry with me for disturbing him while he read. "Don't talk to me in the morning, Marion," he'd said a thousand times and usually I didn't, although it was difficult. I'd sit at the breakfastroom table, opposite him, reading the "Living" section and I'd find something interesting I'd want to read to him, but he'd growl and grumble and I'd sit there, like a reprimanded child, lacking only a dunce cap and a stool in the corner.

"Robert," I sobbed the morning of Kwan-Li's death, and when he saw how upset I was his face went soft and frightened— "What's the matter, Marion?" he'd asked, jumping from his chair, running to me. But I couldn't talk, for once in my life I couldn't get the words out. It was ironic, I suppose, that the one chance I had to communicate with Robert I ruined with my unending sobs.

And what a dreadful day that had been, after Robert wrapped her body in an old beach towel and took her to the pound. I sat in the living room, alone, while Ling-Ling ran around the house, searching blindly for her dead sister. And how she howled that night, in mourning! A wailing so loud and eerie it had frightened me, made me think of ghosts and spirits and, most of all, loss. It was the way I had wanted to wail when Daddy died, too young, and I was left with Mother and Georgie, alone and unprotected.

"I'm going to bring her up," Robert had said that night, "and let her sleep with us."

"Oh, no," I'd said, "I'm not sleeping with that dog."

But I did. Every night. That infernal licking. Lick, lick, lick, keeping me awake, driving me crazy, lick, lick, lick, worse than Robert's snoring.

"I can't sleep with that licking!" I'd told him but he was deaf, what did he care?

The dog is dead. The silence, the absence of the licking kept me awake now, the guilt of admitting I was glad the dog was dead, glad the licking had

stopped, glad to know I'd awaken with a hair-free mouth. I am a miserable person, I thought as I finished my drink and sunk my head into the pillow, may God forgive me.

In the morning there were two strips of bacon resting on the paper towel next to the stove—mine and Ling-Ling's; he'd forgotten, in his early-morning frying ritual, that Ling-Ling was gone.

I took one of the strips, the larger one, for once, and tossed the other down the garbage disposal. I poured myself a cup of coffee—thick, heavy coffee, made at Robert's neurotic 4:00 a.m. rising time—and sat down at the table. Ling-Ling's bowl, all yellow and grotty and chewed to bits, sat empty on the floor next to the wastebasket. I rose and tossed it in.

Dead dog.

I turned and looked through the dutch door, into the sunroom, and sure enough, the toweled lump that once was Ling-Ling was gone. "Don't put her in the sunroom!" I'd said. "Put her out in the garage!" But no, Robert was afraid the squirrels would eat her, so she had to spend the night in the house, another dead dog to lend its ghost.

He'll buy a new one, I know him. He'll wait a few days, compressed dog-mourning days . . . if one is supposed to mourn one's wife or husband for three years, what is that in dog-time? Seven into three. Point four years. Three months.

He'd never wait that long. Three weeks, maybe, but never three months. How long would it take for him to replace me? Even though he was much older than I, I knew he'd outlive me. We don't live long, we MacPhersons. Daddy died at 42, Georgie at 47. Mother lived the longest, 64, but that was out of orneriness.

"I always liked Georgie better than you," she said on her death-bed, parting words from my loving mother. She never spoke again.

Newspapers. Chewed furniture. Piddle marks on my hand-hooked rugs. Again.

Well, this one would be *my* dog. It was my turn again. No more blind licking furballs, I'd get a Chihuahua, or a dachshund. A little ratty hairless dog. Debbie would be furious— "What do you want with that naked sausage?" she'd say. "Oh," Sarah would say, "A new dog. Isn't it cute?" and she'd try not to wrinkle her nose as she picked it up, gingerly, repelled by its hairless fetal-like body. "Why don't you get a *real* dog?" Donald would demand. "A dog like a Lab?" And Mollie would sit at the table, obliviously filing her spear-like nails, the cat-loving daughter-in-law.

That was it. I'd get a little furless ugly dog, the kind of dog only its owner could love. No one else would want it, it would be my dog and Robert would be happy to let it sleep downstairs—no brown pop-eyed dog-rat sleeping next to *him*, by God!

I took a sip of my mud-drink and lit a cigarette. The newspaper was folded to Ann Landers' column—another abused husband, writing to

complain about his frigid wife, no doubt. More of Ann's wise words circled in Robert's blue ink: "If you don't use it, you lose it."

MYOB, Ann.

"Dear Ann Landers, The dog is dead. Long live the dog."

Brian Yansky

Child Dreams

There are a lot of us out here, and we're all having nightmares. Mom tries to stay busy but I catch her staring out the kitchen window at the east field that should be plowed by now, a puzzled expression on her face, staring sometimes for ten, fifteen minutes. Dad's worse. He never looks at Mom and me anymore. His eyes are bloodshot and his face is always flushed. I think he stays awake all night. I try but after a while I can't keep my eyes open and the next thing I know I'm sitting upright on my bed, sweating, breathing like I've just been running a race.

My last nightmare was about Mr. Harley. It was about Mr. Harley because he came out to the farm yesterday, dressed in a suit, and after he left Dad walked out to the barn and things began to smash and break against the walls. He was shouting and cursing and in between the shouts and the curses was Mr. Harley's name. It went on for what seemed like hours. Mom and I stood together in the kitchen, watching each other, not moving. Then everything got so quiet I could feel my heart beating against my chest like it was going to break out. Mom grabbed my hand and we ran across the lawn and swung open the big barn door. Dad was standing by Henry (I named her Henry even though Dad said it was dumb to name a milk cow Henry) with the axe.

"No," I screamed.

Dad looked at Mom and me like he didn't recognize us. He blinked a couple of times and shook his head. Without saying a word he turned and set the axe in the corner and walked out.

In my dream it's Mr. Harley who is standing where Henry stood and when I scream "no" Dad doesn't hear me. I can see he's going to cut Mr. Harley's head off and it will roll out of the barn and into the yard and everyone will know. I wake up as the blade touches the skin of Mr. Harley's neck.

When I get to school I tell the nightmare to my class. Mrs. Thorton said we should because telling our nightmares will make them less powerful, but even she is quiet when I finish. Eloise Harley is looking at me like her father's head is sitting on our front lawn. I shrug.

"It's all right, Eloise," Mrs. Thorton says. "It was just a nightmare. Bernice didn't mean your father any harm."

"My dad doesn't like men who wear suits," I say, to make Eloise feel better, but also hoping she'll tell her father to watch what he wears if he comes out to see Dad again.

"It's not that," Mrs. Thorton says. "The men are having nightmares while they're awake. We must all help them the best we can. They need us."

The whole class misses a few breaths thinking about that one. We are in awe of Mrs. Thorton's wisdom. We are scared that our fathers might be

seeing what we see at night, in the unreal world, when it is day and they are walking around the farm, their eyes open.

After school Barb, my best friend, says she admires me for telling my nightmare. I shrug, but I can't keep from reaching down and throwing a rock at a tree. I do that kind of thing when my cheeks blush. Barb laughs and calls me a tom-boy. I could tackle her if I wanted and make her take it back, but I don't.

"I admire you because I couldn't tell my nightmare," she says.

I stop walking. "We all agreed we would," I say.

"It was too scary," she says.

"You'd better tell me anyway."

She won't, until I threaten to tell Mrs. Thorton that she has been holding out on everybody. When she does tell me I wish I hadn't thought of that threat.

"There's this big machine or something. It's got these lights on it and it must be miles wide. It's hard to say if it's on the ground or off, but it moves real slow. It moves so slow you think you can outrun it, but you can't. It eats everything in its way. Mom and Dad and I are in the car, but it catches up to us. It sucks us into its mouth and it's as black as a night without stars."

We both shiver and when she turns up the drive to her house I run the rest of the way down the road to mine. I hear it behind me, but I don't look over my shoulder. I run faster. When I reach the front lawn I fall down onto the grass, as if I'm safe, have won. I almost believe the nightmares will end.

Two days later Barb doesn't show up at school. When I go to her house nobody is there and all the furniture is gone. I run home and tell Mom something terrible has happened over at the White's.

"They lost their farm," she says.

I shake my head. "Barb would have told me."

"Her parents probably asked her not to, honey."

"They didn't," I shout. "She would have told me. She wouldn't have just left like that."

I run upstairs to my room and slam the door. I think of the machine, of Barb flying up into its mouth, and I feel myself shaking.

School is hard without Barb. Every few days another kid doesn't show up for class. It's like a plague is taking them one by one. Only, I know it isn't the plague. Does anyone else?

Mrs. Thorton tells us she may be leaving soon. She used to step into the classroom in the morning and say, "Put on a happy face because we're going to show the world a thing or two." Then she would give us history lessons about brave men and women. But she doesn't have a happy face anymore. When she tries to smile it looks like it hurts.

One day, when both Bobby and Amy are absent, I tell Mrs. Thorton I have to talk to her. I want to tell her about Barb's nightmare, about what's

happening, but she says I'd better not. "Some of the parents have objected to our telling our nightmares."

"But this is different," I say.

"Tell your folks," she says, and turns away.

I don't think as much of her as I used to.

Okay, I think, I have to tell Dad. I have to get him to look at me even though he doesn't look at anybody anymore. All he does is sit out in the barn while the tractor stands out in the rain, while the east field grows nothing but weeds. But if he knows, he will do something. It will be like before. He will know what to do.

When I get home I go out to the barn, but when I shout his name he doesn't answer. It's dark in the barn and I walk around Henry, my eyes still not adjusted, to the stool where he often sits, but he isn't there. I'm about to leave when I see him sitting in the corner on the milk pail. I'm so mad I can hardly stand it.

"Why won't you listen," I shout, so loudly I think my voice will shatter like glass.

He turns and looks at my face, his eyes right into mine. I run and he catches me and picks me up into his arms.

"I'm scared Dad," I say.

"Me too," he says, and then I'm even more scared.

He is breathing hard, but I know it's not because of my weight. He lifts hundred-pound feed sacks without any problem. It's another weight I can't see.

"Do you know, too," I say.

"What's that, honey?"

"About the machine."

He's starting to look like he won't see me or hear me much longer, so I tell him about the machine. He smiles, but only for a second, as if that's all the longer anyone can smile anymore.

"Those people weren't eaten by no machine, Bernie," he says. "They lost their farms and moved." I shake my head. "They were eaten. Barb. Everyone."

"Now you know that isn't true," he says, sitting me down on the ground. "Barb called you a few days ago. Your mom said you wouldn't talk to her."

I shake my head. Lies. I know. I know what they are trying to do.

"I don't guess we can stay here either," he says. "They want to make it one big farm from Ohio to Wyoming. No farmers, just company men. I know one thing. I won't work for them."

He looks at me again. "I guess we can stand to move into town, don't you?"

Tears are on my cheeks. I am so tired of crying I want to scream. I push away from him and run out of the barn. Liars, all of them. He knows. I

swear I will never lie to my kids when I'm a grown-up. Then I remember I will never be a grown-up.

"Why doesn't somebody do something?" I scream when I see Mom in the yard.

She calms me down by holding me and telling me I have to be strong because her and Dad need me. She says we're still a family and nobody can take that away from us. We hold each other for a while and then I help her with dinner. When we eat Dad says what I knew he would say. We're moving. Tomorrow.

After dinner I excuse myself and go out and sit with Henry for awhile. I kiss her when I leave. I tell Mom and Dad I love them before I go to bed. They tell me everything will be all right. I let them think I believe them. It's easier for us both.

It comes that night. It's just like Barb said. Bigger than anything I've ever seen. It neither walks, nor flies. It is not a machine though. It looks like one, but it's alive. It sucks up farms like they are pieces of dirt.

Dad and Mom come running into my room. They take my hands. Together we are flying up, up into the darkness that is as dark as a night without stars.

Walter Cummins

Waiting For The Parts Man

To Frank and Jenny

The freeze plug popped, but we didn't know it. Fifteen minutes later at 60 mph, people behind us started flashing lights and blowing horns. One guy drove past making faces at us; but we thought he was just goofing. Then another guy kept pointing at the back end of my Dodge while his wife covered her eyes with her hands like somebody expecting an explosion. So we pulled off to the side, and Martha got out on the shoulder. She knows more about cars than me, once took an engine apart even though she didn't do so good at putting it back together.

"Oh my God!" she said. "What? What?" I kept repeating, but she just motioned me out of the car, with frantic hurry up gestures. We stood off in the weeds the other side of a gully and watched smoke billow up from under the hood. "Oh shit!" I told her. "This is the middle of nowhere."

"Our vacation!" Martha cried. We'd been scrounging pennies over a year for a week at Vero Beach in a free condo that belonged to her cousin's father-in-law. All the sand and surf a person could think to want about two hundred miles down the road. And here we were stranded in a marshland with a million gulping bullfrogs.

What happened, the way Slim explained it later, was that the freeze plug's there for the winter, so the block won't crack if the car doesn't have enough antifreeze and the water starts to expand. But now it was the middle of the summer, the weather a soggy 93. With the plug bouncing somewhere along the interstate outside of Brunswick, our coolant flushed and the pistons kept pumping away while the metal got hotter and hotter. Then the head gasket blew from the pressure. Or at least that's what Slim thought, and he was our mechanic, the guy who towed us in and scattered pieces of the engine over his garage floor while he waited for his parts dealer. We had to believe in Slim. He was the only one who could lay his hands on our head bolts.

But if we'd first seen Slim on the street or, say, had just pulled in to fill the tank, from the local look of him he was the last person we'd trust to check the oil. A tall, skinny, goofy looking guy with big red ears that stuck out sideways from his head and glasses so thick you got dizzy if you tried to look him in the eye. And grease all over his clothes and his hands and his face as if he'd just eaten a grease sandwich for lunch. Slim's garage was a great barn of a place, all dark, damp wood and smelling of mildew that made my allergies wheeze. Inside three bare bulbs hung on long cords from the rafters, dazzling your eyes when you looked at them, but doing little more than throwing a grey haze over everything in that big space. Slim and his

mechanics, Clyde and Roy, dragged clip lamps around with them when they wanted to see an engine.

My Dodge, a 73, one of the last good years for American cars, Martha says, sat back in a deep shadow. I preferred it that way, not being able to get a clear look at its hood wide open and its guts spilled across the cement slab. The grey primer paint kind of blended in with the haze. Martha had worked for weeks covering over the rust spots with body filler and hand-sanding the best she could, still leaving lumps and ripples. Then she put on the primer with a brush. But she knew a guy who was going to spray it a metallic red when she could find out where he was working now.

Slim's garage was crammed with cars, some pretty new, with license plates from all over the country, one Olds Calais from Indiana up on a lift, a white Thunderbird from Vermont with its hood propped against a wall and its transmission dangling from a winch and chain, even a stretch Cadillac from New Jersey with no wheels, just sitting on its axles.

"It's all this long-distance hard driving," Slim told us. "People're putting too much pressure on their parts."

"Why here?" Martha asked him.

"This is about the spot where the metal can't take it no more."

We were in a place called Wallyton where three four-lane highways merged in acres of cloverleaves that used to be some farmer's tobacco field. I didn't see any town, just a cluster of motels, four self-service gas stations with general stores attached, a Wendy's, Slim's garage, and a place that sold yellow tractors.

"How long's it going to take you?" Martha asked Slim.

"To do what?"

"Fix our car?"

He shrugged, Adam's apple bobbing, ears burning redder. "That's up to my parts man. I ain't got the supplies in stock."

"When's he due?"

"Hard to tell. Could be today. Could be next Monday. He's got a lot of territory to cover."

"How long after you get the parts?"

"Not too long. But he might not have everything with him."

"Then what?"

"I fill out an order form."

"So what should we do?" I finally spoke, not liking the whining way it came out. "This is our vacation."

"If I was you, I'd find me a place to sleep." He went through a door into his office, plucking three Pepsi bottles from a cooler with his long knobby fingers and calling in Clyde and Roy as he popped the caps. Martha stormed out into the humid sunshine and kicked a rock. It rang off a loose hubcap and bounced into the weeds.

I went after her, but waited a few minutes while she paced back and forth looking for more rocks to kick, building up a sweat. "What's eating you?"

"You ever see those guys do any work?"

I tried to remember what I'd noticed going on inside the garage. "They do a lot a talking about what needs to be done and drink a lot of Pepsi."

"Then why the hell didn't you say something?"

"Like what?"

"Get off your asses."

"What good'd that do us? They can't put our engine together without parts."

"They'd be practicing for when the parts come."

"Let's get something cold to drink." I wanted to move her out of the sun.

We sat at a booth in the Wendy's with two orders of fries and large 7-Ups that were mostly ice. To surprise Martha, I went next door to one of the general stores and bought a deck of cards. We played a hundred games of war through the afternoon and she beat me in 99 but still wasn't smiling.

"Let's go see if the parts man came," she said when it was a quarter to five.

The only one in the garage was Clyde sitting in Slim's chair with his boots on the desk and thumbing through *Sports Afield.* Slim and Roy, he said, were out working on a cultivator.

"Parts get here?" Martha said.

Clyde shook his head. He looked about fifteen, with a scrawny chest and wispy blond hair that stuck out in a dozen directions. "Might as well get your suitcases out of the trunk."

Which I did while Martha burned. I figured what was really bothering her was that she'd done a tune-up on the Dodge before we left. New plugs and points and changed the oil. "Why waste money on a mechanic." She'd been so proud of herself it made me sorry to see her now.

"Eat big breakfasts," Clyde said. "They give you all you want for a dollar-fifty. But the dinners around here'll cost you an arm and a leg."

"We're leaving tomorrow," Martha said.

Clyde grinned at her back. She didn't see and I didn't tell her.

We tried the Econolodge first because it looked cheapest, just a small glass sign, no pool, and lots of unmowed weeds. I dragged the suitcases across the highway, waiting ten minutes on the island for the semis to whiz by. When we got into the office, a white cinderblock cube, it was empty, a color TV playing some soap opera—a woman in a gown cut down to here moaning about how it would kill Gerard if he knew. Martha saw the price list—$15 for a single, $27 for a double—and started hissing at me. "Get out. Get out."

"What?"

"We have to save money." She shoved me toward the door.

I ducked behind a pickup in the parking area and a guy came in behind the counter from another door. I could see Martha counting out money, one dollar bill at a time. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Then she stepped outside with the guy, him carrying the two suitcases like they was bags of popcorn, all curly headed and muscular. "You going to be settling in with all this stuff?" he said to her.

"You never can tell what a person might need," she said and gestured to me to stay back.

Five minutes later she reappeared, the guy still with her. But he went back inside the office and she crossed over the gravel to the general store on the next lot. I caught up with her inside.

"What's going on?"

"You can sneak in after dark."

"Who's that guy?"

"His name's Rhyne."

"What's he want?"

"Guess."

"Shit," I said. Martha wasn't what anybody'd call beautiful, but there was something about her. The way her mouth pouted, the way she fit into her jeans. I liked to think I was the only guy smart enough to realize it.

"Slim'd better come up with those parts," I told her.

"Let's get some dinner."

The Econolodge didn't have a restaurant, so we went back over the highway to the Thunderbird and waited in line for a half hour. People kept getting up from tables, walking past us out to their cars, and starting their engines to head south. Martha looked like she wanted to cry every time. Finally, we ate fried chicken and fritters so greasy the silverware kept sliding out of my fingers.

When we got back outside, it was dark. Martha went to the motel through the office and around a walkway to the side. After she unlocked the door, she flashed the light so I'd know which room was ours. I had to climb a chain fence to get there without passing Rhyne. By the time I stepped inside, she'd already kicked out of her jeans and was standing in those bikini panties that always do things to my blood. I pulled her down to the narrow single bed, not caring if the parts ever got to Slim, her on the verge of forgetting why we were here too, when the room phone rang.

Martha ran her fingers through her hair and picked it up, just listening and nodding for what seemed like fifteen minutes, me thinking all the time that it had something to do with our parts, when she finally said, "That's real sweet of you, Rhyne. But I can't keep my eyes open. Maybe some other time." She hung up.

"What's that bastard want?" I said.

"He thought I might like some company."

"Why didn't you tell him to shove it?"

"We can't afford a double."

By then the mood was gone, and Martha really couldn't hold her eyes open. I lay awake trying to find some way to keep from rolling off that bed.

It seemed that I'd just dozed off when she started shaking my shoulders. "What? What?" For a second I didn't know where I was. The room was pitch black.

"You'd better get out," Martha said.

"It's the middle of the night."

"It's almost dawn. Somebody might see you."

"Rhyne?"

"Hurry up and get dressed."

I took my time in the shower but decided not to sing. Martha hates it when I sing. Probably blames my singing for making the freeze plug pop.

It was chill outside that hour of the morning, too early even for the birds to be chirping. I wouldn't have minded a sweater and tried jogging along the side of the road to warm up but got winded after a couple hundred yards. So I decided to see when Slim opened.

His garage was sealed up tight, a black Firebird with a spoiler still hooked up to the tow truck. It made me feel good to know that it was just as useless as my Dodge. I sat on a bench with my hands in my pockets looking at that car, hoping it was Rhyne's. The sun was up over the marshland by the time Slim got there in a pickup so old it still had fenders, or what was left of them flapping away on hinges of rust.

"You been here all night?" he said when he saw me.

"Just about. I don't want to take any chances that parts man might get away."

"You didn't have to bother. He's what you'd call a late riser."

Slim was still sitting in the pickup's cab with the engine idling like a washing machine. He shifted into first and started driving away. I jumped up and ran after him.

"Where're you going?"

"Got to milk my cows."

"You're a mechanic."

"One's for fun, other's for work."

"Which is which?" I yelled after him, but he was gone.

By 8 a.m. the day had already turned sultry, the air dripping dampness as if mushrooms would sprout from the back of my neck any minute. Martha was supposed to meet me inside the Thunderbird restaurant then but didn't show up for another half hour.

"I had a long soak in the tub," she told me.

"Anybody offer to scrub your back?"

"Wouldn't know. I took the phone off the hook."

All the booths were filled, so we had to sit at one edge of a big formica table where a bunch of other people were already eating, a red-faced man with a huge belly in a white tee shirt, his wife, a skinny woman who kept clutching her purse, their two little kids, a middle-aged grey-haired woman, and a white-haired woman beside her who looked the way she would twenty years later.

"Slim's got cows," I told Martha. "He'd rather milk cows than fix cars."

"You with Slim too?" the red-faced man said. His name was Jerry and the transmission on his Ford wagon was gone. Everytime I looked at his cheeks I thought of how our engine must have glowed before it popped the head gasket. His wife was Irene and the kids Bobby and Suzie. They'd been heading to Disney World when the Ford locked into first gear.

Martha told them our story. "Your car could have blown up," Irene said, very serious. "You could have been killed." The kids looked at us as if we were ghosts.

"It wasn't that bad," I said.

"You don't know how dangerous cars can be," Irene insisted.

The old lady had been sawing away at a stack of flapjacks. "It's our carburetor," she said, not looking up from her plate. "We have sand in our carburetor."

"Now Mother," the younger one said, "these people don't want to hear about our troubles."

"You with Slim too?" Jerry asked the old lady.

She nodded. "He says our carburetor needs a complete rebuilding. It's clogged with sand."

"Where'd the sand come from?"

"We saw flames shooting out from under the hood, and Lydia, my daughter, stopped on the side of the road to open it. A truck driver hollered to us that the carburetor was on fire and that Lydia should throw sand on it. She picked up an ant hill."

I noticed that both of Lydia's wrists were wrapped in gauze.

"Those little red ones are fierce," Martha said. I wondered where she'd learned so much about ants.

Jerry started to laugh, his gut quivering under the tee shirt. "All of us," he said, "the whole darn table. We've all got to wait till Slim finishes milking his cows."

"And the parts man comes," Martha said.

"You too?"

"We're all waiting for the parts man," Irene said gloomily.

The whole table, the eight of us, decided to meet at Slim's garage to find out what was going on. But first Martha said if she wasn't out of the Econolodge by 10, she'd have to pay for another day. Even though Rhyne wasn't on day duty, I hid behind the general store and let her bring the suitcases to me one at a time. Then we joined the others at Slim's.

"I ain't got a waiting room, folks," he said.

It must have been a hundred and ten inside with a squadron of fat flies dive-bombing our sweaty skin. Mother swatted with a rolled up magazine, missing every time.

"Can't you call the parts man?" Martha insisted.

"He's on the road," Slim said. "Could be anywhere in the state. And it's a big state."

"What about the car dealers in the area?" Jerry said. "They must have supplies."

Slim shook his head. "My parts man's got an exclusive contract."

"But we've got to get to Florida," Mother said.

"Some folks like it around here," Slim said.

Mother and Lydia went back to their motel and Irene accepted their invitation to go with them into the air conditioning, but Jerry and the kids stayed with us in Slim's office. I got out the cards and taught Bobby and Suzie war while Martha explained to Jerry how much this vacation meant to us.

"We've been living together two years, and this is the first time we've gone anywhere."

His red face went pale. "You're not married? Jesus! Don't ever tell Irene." He suddenly whispered and pointed to their backs. "Or the kids."

"We're happy," Martha said. She looked at me. "Most of the time."

Jerry looked at his watch. "I think we'd better get back. Right kids? Mr. Slim'll call us when the car's ready."

Suzie began to cry. "I want to see Mickey. You promised we'd see Mickey."

I gave her the cards. She clutched them as Jerry carried her off but didn't stop bawling.

"Maybe Slim could marry us," I told Martha. "Like the captain of a ship."

She wasn't laughing.

"Then you could flash a ring at Rhyne." I had to say that and then figured I'd better shut up.

I got two Pepsis from Slim's cooler and left fifty cents on his desk. "Maybe we can wait in Wendy's where it's cool."

"You hungry?"

"No."

"Then I'll sit right here until the parts man comes."

Mid-afternoon I went to Wendy's for take-out burgers, letting the cool air dry my skin while I waited. Clyde and Roy sat with us and picked at our fries. All day they'd been coming into the office to chat. Clyde was very curious about the way things were where Martha and I lived, said he'd only been out of the county once in his life. Was it like TV? Cops chasing

criminals through the streets. "Nothing like that," I told him. "For us gangsters' homes are tourist attractions."

Roy had been to Florida a few times. Martha wanted to know all about it, the beaches, the palm trees, how warm the water was. Roy had just one answer to all her questions: "It's great." I don't know why she bothered to keep asking.

"Shouldn't we let these guys go back to work?" it struck me to say after about three-quarters of an hour.

"Don't worry about it," Clyde said. "Slim don't care."

Not long after Slim came into the office with a face-splitting grin and a shiny steel gear in his hand. "Guess what I found in the bin? Just what the doctor ordered for that Ford transmission. Which one of you guys wants to fix it?"

Neither Clyde nor Roy said a word.

"Hell, I'll fix it myself." He went back into the shop.

"He don't like us to mess with the cars anyway," Roy said.

Martha went after Slim. "Hey, you think you might have a gasket for a 73 Dodge in that bin?"

"Ain't had a head gasket for one of them since 78," he called back from the darkness. "But the parts man might."

By nightfall, Jerry, Irene, and the kids came trudging back from the Ramada Inn. Jerry peeled off two one hundreds from a wad of bills and they got into their station wagon without a word, like they were too embarrassed to look at us. But before they drove off, poised at the edge of the highway, ready to merge with the stream of traffic, Suzie rolled down the window and yelled to us, "Daddy says we're going to see Mickey now." Then they were gone.

"Goddamn them." Martha was crying. I put my arm around her, but she didn't lean into me like she usually does.

Not long after, Slim came back into the office with Clyde and Roy. "Going to close up now, folks. One of us," he said to his mechanics, "ought to get at that carburetor tomorrow."

"What about all those other cars?" Martha said, angry. "Aren't you ever going to fix them?"

"The folks what owns them figured out other means to get to Florida. They're in no hurry. They'll pick their cars up on the way back."

"Hey," Roy said, "why don't you two rent a car like them?"

Slim shook his head. "All the rentals in town is gone. Maybe something'll turn up next week when one of them people comes back for their cars."

We consolidated our stuff into one suitcase and locked the other in the trunk so that Martha could get the one case back to the motel by herself without Rhyne knowing I existed.

I waited outside in the dark by the general store when she checked in again. "Nice to have you back," I heard him say, very friendly.

"Didn't expect to be here another night."

"Who's fixing your car?"

"Slim."

He laughed. "You'll probably become a resident by the next election. Maybe run for office."

"He got some people off in a Ford before."

"First time this year. Say, I've got to be here all night, but how about tomorrow?"

"I might be in Florida by then."

"And I might find a gold mine in my backyard."

Before I climbed the fence, I bought more Wendy's burgers and fries for dinner and another deck of cards. At least the room was cool, but when we tried to watch TV, all that came in was pink and green snow. Martha wasn't about to call Rhyne. So we played cards for a few hours.

The next day I was out before dawn and we had breakfast with Lydia and her mother again. Their motel had an indoor, air conditioned pool and cable TV. Martha checked out again, and we waited at Slim's for the parts man.

By mid-afternoon, the pack of cards was ragged, and we were sick of Pepsis and burgers. Slim and Roy actually worked on Lydia's carburetor for five or six hours. In the evening mother and daughter were on their way, Mother insisting on exchanging addresses with us. "We'll get a Christmas card," I told Martha.

"She's tearing up the paper you wrote on right now."

That night back in the Econolodge. I brought a six-pack and Martha was relaxed for the first time since she discovered our engine smoking. "You want to?" I said. She flung the cards across the room. "Why the hell not?"

But just when we were both forgetting all about Dodges and Slim and parts men, there was a tap on the door. "Martha," Rhyne hissed, "it's me."

"I'm sleeping," she called back, grabbing her jeans and putting them on backwards the first time.

"I'm off work, doll." A pass key clicked in the lock.

"Oh shit!" That was me.

"Hide in the john," she hissed. In the dark my feet got twisted in my underwear and I fell on my face, knocking over a chair and the night table.

By that time Rhyne had the light on. I thought he was going to kick me, but all he said was, "A double's twenty-seven dollars."

"I never saw this woman before," I told him. "She picked me up in Wendy's. Claimed to be lonely."

Rhyne held out his hand. "Twelve bucks, buddy."

Martha gave him the money. He left without saying thanks. "Why'd you tell him that?" she said.

"I was trying to save your honor. I didn't want him to think you were the kind of woman who'd lie about a motel room."

She made me sleep on the floor that night. I used a rolled up towel for a pillow. At least I could sleep past dawn.

In the morning another check out and back to Slim's. Martha still wouldn't talk to me even though she dealt the cards. Roy told us all about the shotgun he was saving for and how much pleasure he got from shooting small animals. Clyde turned out to be 24 and the father of three kids. It seemed to be getting even hotter in that office, and the smell of grease was making me sick.

"Let's go to Wendy's," I said to Martha. She just looked away like she was ignoring me. "I'm not bringing anything back. If you want to eat, you'd better come."

She followed me out the door, still silent, and walked behind, me wondering if she was going to sit at the same booth. She did, even picked at my fries.

We were only gone a half hour, but when we got back to Slim's he was flashing one of his grins, so wide this time I could count his missing teeth.

"Parts man just come by," he said. "Two minutes after you went off."

"Did he," Martha said, speaking as slowly as her nerves would let her, "have the head gasket?"

Clyde and Roy were nodding in the background. "Surprised the bejeezus out of me, but he did. I thought we'd be waiting on that part for a good month. Which one of you boys," he said to Clyde and Roy, "want to put these folks' car back together for them."

Of course, Slim did it himself, while Roy told us about how temperamental the parts man was. "You have to ask him real nice, especially when you need something that's hard to get. He thinks people are driving too much these days, always rushing around to get somewhere different." The car wasn't ready till past 10. Roy stuck around till 8, but Clyde left at 6 because his wife was pregnant. The mosquitoes were eating us alive. "What if he decides to quit working?" Martha kept whispering to me the whole time Slim was back in the darkness with his head buried under our hood.

When we paid him, we had twenty-five dollars left. He wiped his right hand on his coveralls and shook ours. "Nice to have known you," he said.

We could be at Vero Beach long before morning and still have three days of our week left. "Maybe we can borrow some money from your cousin's father-in-law," I said.

Martha shook her head. "No. I want to go home."

We headed north, first driving very slowly for fear the head would blow again, but eventually got up to 50. Martha turned the radio on to a station we both liked and slid over to lean against me. I put my arm around her and felt better than I had in a long time.

Kevin J. Burris

On The Night The Squirrel Died In My Wall

This morning I woke to the scratching again. It was gone by the time the fuzz of unconsciousness lifted. But I knew I'd heard it. It returned and I lay there recognizing what it was and recognizing that I didn't care. "Fuck it," I thought. "Let it die."

I immediately dreamed of the mummified mouse I once found under the kitchen cabinet of an old apartment above a print shop. It lay between an empty box of Spic and Span and some desiccated sponges like a skull in a desert. Petrified. Timeless. Almost art.

I am recently unengaged. We're still talking though. We agreed on the phone this afternoon to meet tonight for conversation. Our first in a week. Ambivalent was the word I used to describe my feelings as I sat in the sun at my desk. She called at work; or rather I called her. It was my turn.

She said she wanted to see me but was afraid. No, not afraid. What's the word? Anxious. Yeah. I was ambivalent, she was anxious. Maybe the "A's" were a coincidence. I don't know. We always did have a lot in common.

She asked me if I remembered the horoscope she had found six months ago. Supposedly, it had predicted our break-up to the day. We have less than a week left. I said I didn't remember it. She claimed I didn't want to.

I told her there was a squirrel trapped in my bathroom wall. She didn't believe me at first, but I described the symptoms precisely: the scratching, the chittering noises, the location, the probable point of access. Then I reminded her of the many winter nights we lay together in my bed listening to mysterious sounds overhead, skitterings and scrabblings, occasionally something that sounded like a steel ball being rolled. Mice, we had concluded. Somehow they had found a home between the poured concrete ceiling of my unit and the floor of the apartment above. I told her I'd called the landlord at both his home and office numbers. So far, he had not returned the calls. The management company was next. She wished me luck.

Really, I felt a little foolish bothering so much about a rodent. When I finally got hold of the building maintenance man I claimed I was afraid it would stink after deceasing. That wasn't it at all. I imagined this poor wild-eyed creature trapped between the dark dusty studs: terrified, somehow human, pacing back and forth like a rabid Warner Brother's cartoon. My heart went out to it. I didn't want it to die, but on the other hand I didn't want any dry wall damage either. A questionable balance of priorities, I admit, but one I managed to justify.

I spent my lunch hour with the maintenance man. He examined the bathroom wall thoroughly, tapping along the baseboard while explaining why he thought it was impossible for any animal to be where I said one was. The whole time the squirrel didn't make a sound. Naturally. "Maybe," the old man said as he left, "it's taken off for places unknown." In any event, he told me that he doubted there was anything he could do.

At dinner we talked about responsibility. I drifted. She defined the concept of ownership as it applies to marriage. I told her I wanted her to be my wife. She said no one can own another person.

There is a cherry tree framed by my bedroom window. When I see it in bloom like it is now, I imagine the slopes of Mount Fuji rising mistily in the background. It has that oriental air of balance and natural perfection about it. Delicate puffs of watercolor blossoms. Dark branches poised like the arms of a dancer. Shiva. Shiva of the vegetable world.

Earlier in the afternoon I'd taken a walk outside to confirm a theory. I stood beneath the tree and watched a pair of squirrels play a game of tag high in the branches. Sure enough, it was only a short leap from Shiva's arms to the top of my air conditioner.

I imagined him as he must have been a few days ago, nose twitching, tail snapping like a flag on a windy day. Unaware. Blissful. Making that fateful jump from the sunny unpredictability of living wood to the dark security of man-made concrete. Spying some black chink in the brick. Exploring the wafer of cave between floors and ceilings. Tumbling into the eight-foot-deep pit of my bathroom wall. Finding himself trapped in the dusty coffin-space between seamless sheets of drywall, impossible to climb. Blocked from escape above by overhanging two-by-fours. Growing fearful, claustrophobic. Bouncing back and forth in the hot darkness. Bloodying useless claws against the impervious sheet-rock. Scratching. Scratching. Scratching.

She didn't understand why her feelings were changing. She just said that she now believed she had rushed into things. We talked about her childhood. She had not been planned for or wanted. Her mother and father divorced when she was eight years old, and for years she was shuffled between houses that never quite became homes.

She thought perhaps it was the concept of marriage itself that frightened her, not any deficiency on my part. I had my drawbacks to be sure. She had listed them for me, using a special positive/negative "Potential Mate Measuring Guide" she had found in the April issue of *New Woman Magazine*. I noted that there were roughly three times more of her comments on the negative side than on the positive. She said she knew I'd take it the wrong way.

There were no noises from the wall and she asked me if I thought the squirrel had gone. I told her no; I was sure it was still there. Asleep maybe. Certainly weak. Probably dying. I explained that he spends his strength in

the morning, beginning at dawn, when the chirps and chitters of the new day ignite an initial burst of scratching. Another burst quickly follows, and another. Each grows longer and more intense, his rage rising gradually, with the sun. By six, the scratching is usually joined with his own pathetic chittering; urgent, demanding, ignored by those who woke him. All this continues until well past seven, when the sounds of the awakening building stimulate reflexive caution, disturbing his rhythm, letting exhaustion take hold. He slows then, leaving longer and longer silences between attacks, silences I fill with feelings of helplessness, guilt and morbid anticipation, until I leave for work or any other place.

"Isn't there something you can do?" she asked. I told her there was a time when I tried. It was several years ago when I lived in an old house with a couple of college friends. I was awakened one night by strange sounds in the darkness over my head. Waking this way is not good. I had seen *The Exorcist.* I remembered the scene in which Ellen Burstyn ordered her handy-man to check the attic for rats. That cold night in my bedroom I knew there were no rats.

There were no rats. The audience knew there were no rats. I was losing my soul to Satan.

I said nothing, but the next day one of my housemates mentioned the noises, saving both my soul and sanity. Another day passed and the phenomenon localized itself. Satan was something trapped between the kitchen wall and the wall facing the basement stairway. Not knowing what to do, we did nothing for two more days, two days of incessant, now familiar, nightmare sounds. We decided at last to break whateveritwas by knocking a hole in the basement side of the wall. "What the hell," we thought. "We're renting."

The subject of rabies was raised several times during our rescue preparations. We might have faltered here, but the increasingly desperate scratching weighed on us and eventually shamed us to action. I stood at the top of the stairs with a pellet rifle and covered Rick while he worked on the wall. If the thing charged, fangs dripping foamy viral death, it was my job to stop it with one shot. It was Rick's job to avoid both the foamy viral death and the speeding pellet. I liked my job better than his.

Rick attacked the drywall with hammer and chisel, pounding out a foot-wide circular section. I kept the rifle trained at the very center of that section. We heard nothing from behind the wall, but as the circle of chisel holes closed, the tension increased. Finally, only one small two-inch piece of drywall held the plug in place.

"Ready?" Rick asked. Hammer poised. Body leaning halfway up the stairs.

I opened the door behind me just in case, held my breath and squeezed the trigger slightly. "Ready," I said.

He let fly with the hammer. The circle of plasterboard disappeared into the wall and something, SOME THING exploded out. I had no chance for a shot. It was a blur. A shadow. Instantly a memory. It was every man for himself, and Rick nearly trampled me as we both scrambled for the door. I barely got the rifle through before we slammed it shut and began to ask ourselves if we knew for sure which side THE THING was on.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

"I don't know," Rick panted.

Truly, we were beyond our depth.

We called the office of animal control at the Police Department. The dispatched a young officer who braved the basement with a cage baited with peanut butter. She didn't even wear a gun.

A week later she reclaimed the cage, still empty. "Maybe," she suggested, "it got out somehow." It hadn't. We found it about three weeks later. It was a squirrel. Dead. Stinking behind the broken dryer. I never did fix the hole in the wall.

I think I answered her question. Anyway, the story took a little of the edge off a tough evening. But it was only a diversion. We agreed that a permanent separation was the best solution to what had been an engagement. It seemed crazy to both of us. She couldn't agree to go forward. I couldn't agree to go back. So, for the moment at least, we both agreed to go nowhere.

After she left, the scratching started again. Naturally. I called building maintenance, but no one answered. By the sheer intensity of the sound, the raging desperation within the wall, I knew that the end was close. Probably sometime tonight. The poor thing was being driven insane by thirst. I tried drilling a small hole in the wall and squeezing in a few drops of water, but it didn't help. Nothing I could do would help, and the scratching went on and on and on.

I had to get out. I threw a few clothes in a bag and headed for a friend's place in Milwaukee. He lives downtown above an old bar. According to the Miller beer clock above the cash register in that old bar, it is now exactly two a.m. As I sit here among a gathering army of empty beer bottles I can still hear the scratching. It drowns out the blast of the jukebox, the back-slapping softball celebration in the corner, the drone of late night TV. It penetrates my every thought. Attaches itself to every moment. Echoes in every glass I drain. And though I hate it with all my heart, I listen. I hold it close. Because I know there is a silence beyond it that I really can't bear to hear.

Review

Coming From a Funky Time and Place by Stanley E. Banks. Kansas City, MO: Georgia A. B. Press, 1988. 64 pages. $7.00, paper.

When I first taught Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a young white woman, otherwise quiet but obviously overwhelmed by this novel, blurted out in class, "These women were *never* girls! They were born grown!"

That's what I want to say about the people who populate Stanley E. Banks' world: "The black folk wadn't never *children*. They was borned grown!" *Coming From a Funky Time and Place* is Banks' second volume of poetry; it doesn't take long to tell whom or what is coming and that the "funky time and place" ain't got nothing to do with youth or innocence. Their collective childhood apparently long ago obliterated, not unlike Athena violently spilling from Zeus' head or like the voluptuous Venus riding Neptune's waves, Banks' offspring, no less than the spokesman (and the craftsman?) who sings their songs, are extraordinary adults.

Whatever their background, listeners/readers will admire these "commonplace" blacks because, while the quality of "funky" fluctuates—it is enviable one moment, fear-inducing another—everyone who comes from (or more often, remains in) Banks' world survives some of the worst stuff life doles out. Forced to confront life in the "F T & P," we'd like to believe we could and "deal, baby." We might even fancy by the book's end that we have been where these denizens are coming from.

Eliciting such a response to the downtrodden takes talent. And Banks' talent transforms plain, grassroots folk whom conservatives unthinkingly call hoodlums, whores, and sluggards (Another student of mine once called such people "born losers.") into the "Black and Blue Women" and the "All Around Town Dudes," the sultry boy—"Babes" and the "Hard-Core Women," the "Old Street Pros" and the "High Steppers," and so on with whom Banks' audience is compelled to empathize.

But while the inhabitants of *A Funky Time and Place* lead diverse lives, the voice that describes their experiences is unified, singular. I believe this is Banks' real mastery: his ability to manipulate and control a cultivated voice. For starters, there's something of nostalgia in his. Each portrait-poem is infused deeply with an emotion--no, two emotions; there is both the subject's attitude toward itself and the speaker's feeling about the person depicted. But the nostalgia is never

maudlin, rarely even sentimental. Instead, one senses the speaker's own personal funk devolves from his role as witness, and what he has seen has bothered him. Hence, he is sad.

Conversely, though, while only a fifth of the collected poems—exactly 11 of the total 55—have a first person singular speaker, the other portraits are delineated for us by a third person voice sometimes detached, sometimes impassioned, and ever aware of (1) life's basic contradictions and paradoxes and (2) its own inescapable need to share, to let out and tell about what the speaker's been privy to.

That's not to say, however, that the poems aren't dramatic. In fact, Banks provides us the rare chance to hear from those in the "F T & P." Like the speaker, we become privy to their stories of "The Downside," we hear their "Hopeful Pieces," and we follow their individual searches "To Find Meaning."

Despite the fact that these are many different people's stories, because of the dominance of the third person perspective, we don't often hear Banks' characters speak in their own voices. A poignant exception, though, does typify the kind of dramatic irony of situation and character that unifies the volume. A poem simply called "Stella" (12) in Part I ends:

> In the middle of the street,
> stopping traffic,
> Stella swears,
> "If you fool with mine,
> my mojoe's gonna get you
> in the back and mess up
> your money maker."

Such Southern/rural expression from a Northern/urban woman. Besides, informed "whores in the streets" like those Stella addresses all know that you could get "it" "in the back" with your "money maker" still intact.

Banks apparently likes both word play and irony, for the poem following "Stella," "Proposition for the Suicidal," employs a rather sardonic onamotopeia in its opening lines:

> Your troubled logic led you to
> a bone crushing splat —
> a silent bang,
> a slow bleed.

"At the Mercy of *If*" (49) in Part III, is similarly cruel:

If sent Slick to jail,
gave him hell;
he never saw *If* coming
when he was stealing and running
from himself and everybody else.
If dogged Randy, too...

Most of the poems, though, via words and rhythms, arouse sympathy rather than condemnation. The first two poems in the volume, two of Banks' best, work so well primarily because of the complex juxtaposition of sentiments: the speaker's and the subject's. Moreover, both "A Black and Blue Woman" (8) and "A Door in the Empty Lot" (9) rely on strong, emphatic active verbs for development, and indeed, a lot *happens* in these two poems. In "Woman" especially there is a preoccupation with time, with numbers: "two policemen," "middle of the night," "twenty-four hours straight," "three months," "twenty-five years," "two bullet wounds," and so on; and the specificity clarifies the implicit: the woman is "black and blue" from too much and too many. The initial trope parodies sociological jargon, "She hates being the head/of the house," with its irony; she is rather all heart, battered though it is. The last line's "wailing" away the blues contrasts with the first stanza's "picking them away" and prepares us for the power-packed ending of the second poem. We soon see Banks' last lines are hard-hitting. "Door" has several of the qualities that "Woman" has, but more, assonance softens it. Here's the nostalgia of personal reflection perfected by sound, sense, and a feminine rime:

He yells, "Hey everybody the
kid's home!"
Air answers with a breeze.
He turns to leave.
hears Fats Domino singing,
"I want to walk you home."

There is more to Banks' book than others' lives. Again, an "I" a first person singular narrates a fifth of the poems in *Coming From a Funky Time and Place*. This voice is subdued, abashed even in some instances, for it is confessional and erotic. Training and decorum dictate that one not confuse or conflate poet and persona, but the temptation's great here. Banks discloses himself in a number of these poems. Better than half of these are love poems, poems about the persona involved, frequently entangled, in a woman's life. Or rather,

in wom*en*'s lives; in any case clearly, Banks loves women, for there is The Annihilator, who might or might not be The Kisser, or His Lady, or "Roz", or "The Need", or the "Dream Love", or finally, The Shaker.

This collection makes clear that Stanley E. Banks is a poet of deep sensitivity and social consciousness. Readers will be impressed with and affected by his writing talent and personal idiom, but perhaps more by the commitment he shows in faithfully and credibly presenting the exploits and endeavors of those who come "from a funky time and place," himself included. The poems are terse, tight, scant, memorable for phrase and image; and as one advances past "The Downside" through hope "To Find Meaning," one identifies closely with the cast, one dares dream to emulate the survivors of funk. And one hopes to hear more from Banks in the future.

Joycelyn K. Moody

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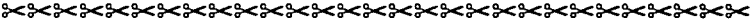

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