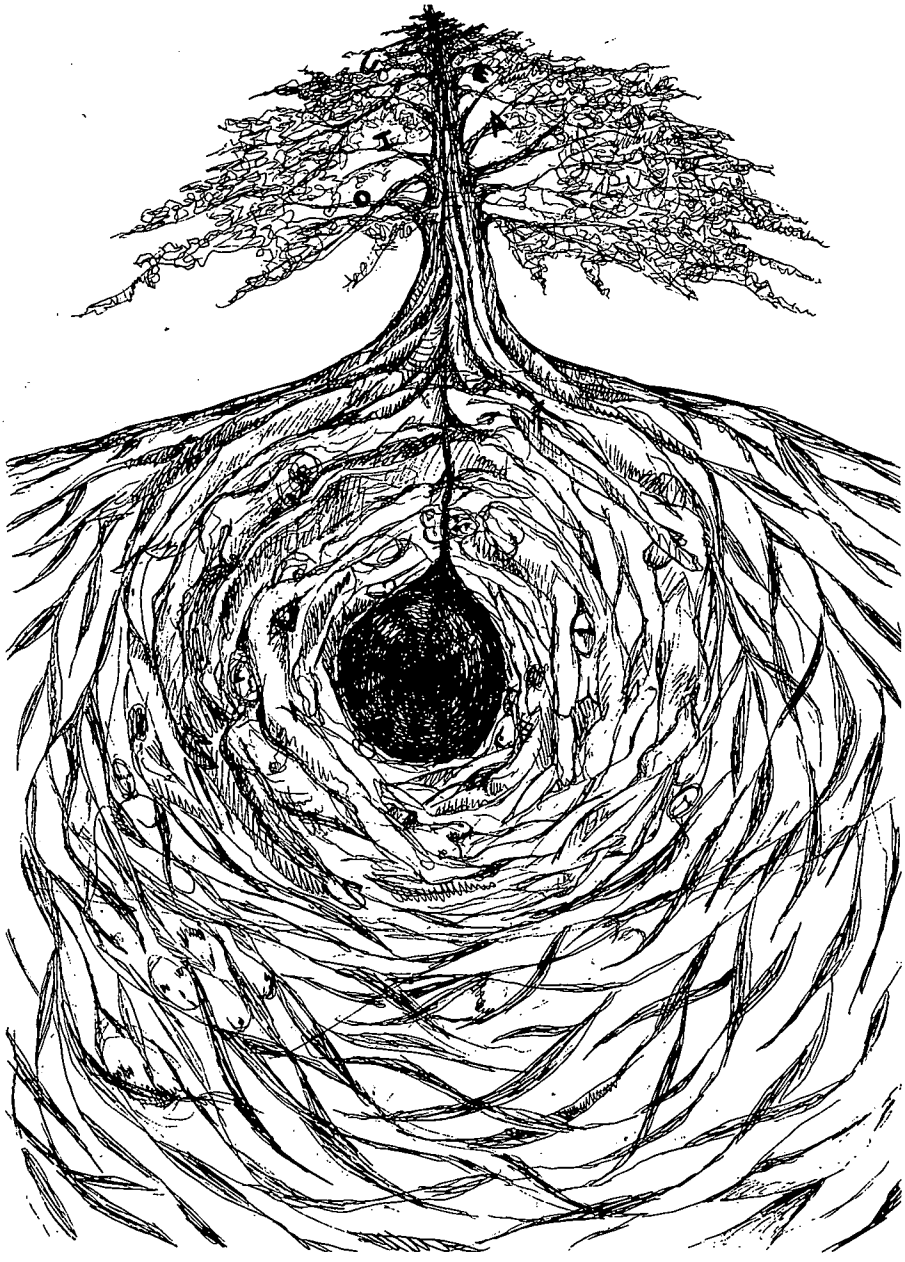

Cottonwood 47
Tom Averill Issue

Cottonwood 47

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.

Since *Cottonwood* has no regular source of funding, we depend heavily on the interest and support of our subscribers. Issues appear tri-quarterly at $5.00 per issue or $12.00 for a three-issue subscription. Although issues are sometimes irregular, three issues are guaranteed per subscription. Subscriptions and submissions should be directed to:

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Cottonwood 47

Tom Averill Issue

Cottonwood Magazine and Press
Lawrence, KS

COTTONWOOD 47

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Editor's Note

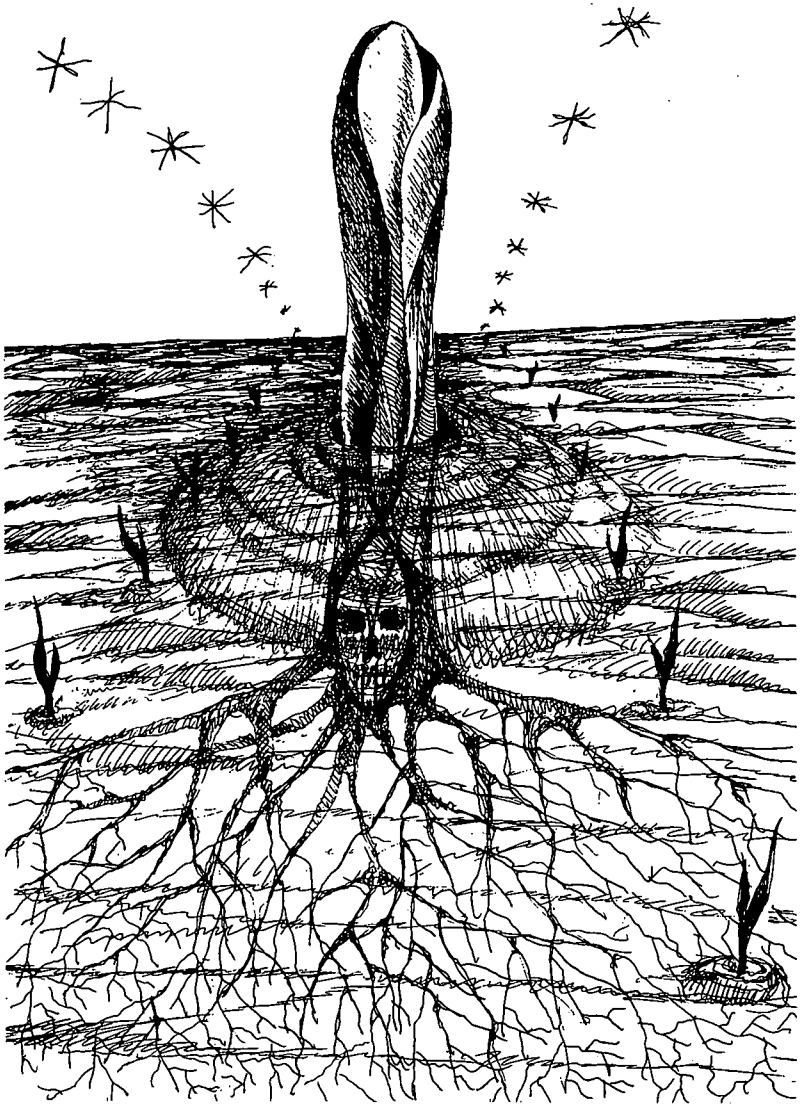
With issue 47, Cottonwood magazine begins its twenty-seventh year of publication. It is especially pleasant to welcome an old friend, Tom Averill, whose short stories and wit are familiar to our long term subscribers. This time, we have as well an interview with Tom conducted by Jane Garrett, who served for a number of years as Fiction Editor of Cottonwood. Tom, who did graduate work at KU and the University of Iowa, teaches in the English Department at Washburn University, just down the pike from KU and may be familiar to our Kansas readers as the professor on a television class in Kansas Literature over KTWU, the Washburn PBS station. His story "Seeing Mona Naked," which was in a recent issue of Cottonwood, became the title story for a collection of his stories published by Watermark Press and another collection is forthcoming.

Among the many students who worked with Ed Wolfe in the KU creative writing program, Tom has also been responsible for a collection of Ed's poetry published by Woodley Press and available from Cottonwood as well as Woodley. The writing of both men reflects a simple and direct regard for people and places and a delightfully warm humor.

Graphics for this issue are by Tony Allard, who also created the cover for Denise Low's popular collection of poetry, *Starwater.* Tony is a performance artist and poet of no mean skill as well as an artist. We are delighted that he supplied such fine material for this issue.

We would like to hear from our readers and to keep up with our ever-moving academic subscribers. Where are you? And what would you like to see us do over the next couple of years? We are always ready to be responsive to our readers.

George Wedge



Poetry

Wanda Coleman

Dream 516

witchin' hour ensues as i cruise a blues neighborhood in my tore down coupe. it's just the kind of spot i'm spooking for. i'm not sure what i want only i crave it. it's a dark south central southwest corner, a two-story apartment complex with tall sliding glass paneled windows and gold numbers on teak-colored pine. in cool-fool fashion i lean into my horn, make two quick honks, the first muffled the second sharp, clear. i climb out to see who happens

the air smells of ham hocks and greens. all doors ease open one-by-one. in each stands a heavy-set Black man silhouetted against gold-lit interiors, each a specter who waits to hear his name. as i grope to find my tongue, a man in his 50s steps thru glass and smiles. his face is a semi-sweet chocolate mask of hustle and jive, a prominent nose and glossy black conked hair. he wears beige slacks and a polished cotton short-sleeved shirt open 3 buttons down. a gold medallion mounts his chest

"who do you want?" he asks
"i don't know?"
"what do you want to score?"
"i'm not sure."
"we deal in anything anytime. but you must be specific."

he turns and waves, a signal as those other-worldly *bruthas*
back away one-by-one and close their doors

confused, i thank him, say maybe i'll return when all comes
clear. he nods and walks me to my car

i wake to find i've left the lights on all night and
am clutching the complete works of
William Shakespeare.

Wanda Coleman

Southwestern Soul

trucker stops. vanishing points. mirages
old smoky honky joints the leavings of lost tribes
ghosts of cattle drive trails rusted rails of
southern pacific remnants of route 66 bleak
skeletons of Burma Shave signs a surfeit of
turquoise arrow heads and calamity janes

road after road after road

white line fever and a haunted longing
rockabilly turbo thrust from Bakersfield to Nogales
open country open heart and a raw dog moon

here a gray-eyed hate as deep in earth
as dinosaur bones
here a lust as greenless as heat-blown
as rattlesnake shed

i am afraid to raise my hood

sun dance on my windshield. Patsy Cline & Johnny Cash
the wind threatens sand storm outside needles
on this drive into the void known as nowhere
heaven is a cow-town cheese burger medium well
apple pie a la mode and steamin' hot java

here a multitude of baked shit-colored bungalow doors

behind each salvation is stranded

Kevin Boyle

Going Back

The dungarees were at our thighs and things
were funny at the start, us laughing

in a kid way at the sky, a circle of blue,
and the corn rows, a half foot of stubble
going sight-wide up the hill. But it was more our being opened
so clearly to November that made those laughs,
with four corners around us rising
into farmhouses that from a distance looked toward us.

The moon rose up as imperfect man beyond
three quarters full as we, on our backs, lifted
our pants back on.

If a combine rode by crazed with some football defeat,
we were doomed, sure
to be sucked in, our teeth
torn loose and pitched to the grain wagon behind, our bodies
only husks left to brown.
That was your idea. Mine was to have sex
with all the wired-in cows watching
as they worked their mouths.

The fields cleared, showing after months, probably
brought us to it. Or the rusted harrow
standing up as fence. Or the thick smell
of cowlife and soil. Or the milkweed seed
we coaxed into letting out early.
Or the talk about failure we drove out there for,
wanting out of the house, needing
a ride into something bigger.

Making love solved nothing we were hurt by.
But still.

Jack D. Mullen, Jr.

Racing Shells

A groove chiseled straight,
then curved southeast like a scimitar,
the Harlem River
carves out a short club's long handle,
the northern third of Manhattan Island,
from the southwest bulge of the Bronx.
The river is ash gray in bottle green,
as slack as old oil in a cold crankcase.

And on that slack oarsmen scull shells
to a coxswain's call of the stroke at each stern.
Some college crew rowing to win the next big race.
Maybe from the college I dreamed in
twelve years ago. Sculling up the curve of the groove
northwest toward the handle, the oarsmen glide
past Harlem projects, junked cars,
and the Bronx Terminal Market
sprawled below Yankee Stadium.

They're making better time than I am
on the Deegan headed south in a packed bus
this early November morning
to an office near the tip of the club.
A man in his fifties
slumps in a seat ahead of me.
A nurse loosens his collar.
He feels a heart attack coming on, says
he can make it to Mount Sinai
if we reach Manhattan soon.

As we cross Madison Avenue Bridge
I look back and see the Marlboro Man
staring from a billboard above the east bank
and the last of the racing shells
receding past him, a streamlined
machine of perpetual motion, of rhythm.
Pairs of oar poles like a set

of V-shaped valves opening when the crew
leans back into the stroke again and again.
Oar blades flash silver-white
breaking gray water, glanced by light.

Antony Oldknow
Wasps

The wasps were building a nest in the false shutters
beside the apartment window and the front door.
A man came with a spray. I took it. I sprayed.
Now there were a dozen wasps bent praying
as they flew up giddily in the pane.
Righteously, I sprayed one after the other,
the chemical covering their bewildered
tottering bodies with dust as their wings
flexed slowly. And they crawled along the sill
as if they carried burdens some master
had tied on their backs, and then they toppled
onto the couch and carpet and among my books
and lay writhing, curling and uncurling,
taking their time to die as if they screamed
silently like troops in a battle,
unheard above the labors of the guns.

Frederick Davis

Saltambiques

Walk the tightrope,
no one should be watching.
Slip, and searchers
find nothing to say.
Balance all the length
and a screaming crowd waits
for your twin to die.

I loved you that way:
high flight those mornings
we took a second time,
erasing the lovers before,
held tight the extra hour
till our bodies sweat
a single satin skin,
scatter of tears goodbye
and outside the crushing air.

Your quick wrists work
to fend away, find a touch
of tricot and another fumbling
at your waist, thighs
tightly bound by morning
and each day a new outfit.
Still I have not strayed,
the days slowed to the mirrored
thin cheek again and again,
sweet gum all autumn waiting
a brocade of innocent green,
and the whole cast laughs
at my good intention.

Perform again:
I make my entrance
tight and dry, spin
like Brancusi's bird
high above the bleachers,

reach for the pale sky;
hollow heat of applause
keeps me aloft
and a thousand masks
of pride would have me
fall once more.

Let me hear in order
not to answer; dissembling
is what we know
in order not to fear.
Rest above me, hand
invisibly in mine
and we shall work
those other cities, stare down
at dawn through thin
rain and be content.
How little the air moves.
To be afraid can be a choosing.

Michael Atkinson

True, Second-Hand Story

Someone had stolen Eileen's wood-&-nylon
lawn sheep. She awoke once in April
and it was gone from her frontyard
like something alive that left looking
for food or company or just
a change in scenery. Months passed,
in which she felt absurdly violated (who'd
steal such an innocent, silly-looking
thing?) knee-deep in the rapid blurrings
of her children, her Albany suburb.
In June, a mid-day knock on the screen door,
and no one was there by the time she'd
dried her hands and come from the kitchen,
except, that is, the sheep,
standing stiffly on the stoop.
She sat next to it in the sunshine
and unwrapped a pouch secured about
its painted neck. Inside
were photographs, of the sheep
at Kennedy Airport, boarding the Alitalia
airliner, sitting in coach,
the sheep poised before the Trevi Fountain,
at the foot of the Piazza de España,
nestled in a Venetian gondola,
amid the Coliseum rubble, surrounded
like a rock star by Florentine pigeons.
The sheep apparently spent a lot of time
before plates of pasta, brooding numbly
over glasses of red wine, in sidewalk cafes,
crouched coolly before dozens
of statues and in miles of museum
corridor. It was last seen
boarding a plane in Rome, sitting
again in coach with a headset on,
and on the runway back home in New York.

I've never been to Italy, Eileen thought.
Good thing I didn't opt
for the concrete Virgin Mary.
She sat in the morning, with coffee.

Wendy Bishop

Brain Techtonics

1.

I might have mentioned the wonder of mouths. When I opened my lips, hieroglyphics slipped out. Large symbols cut the air like rock. Were these mine or my parents' words? Are the pockets of the brain filled with that fabled language-making device or just recycle centers where the crew slams in at dusk, empties its wasteland full of rinsed tincans into aluminum airs? Does imitation precede mutation? Will my daughter's consonants—that she practices on her brother's drumset of determined ears—boomerang back as her own or as distant echo of my years? Engraved profile, archaic mouth, temple of lips: sound, listen, hear.

2.

I wanted to check the photograph. The one I hired taken because I couldn't look to a familiar lens and smile. A turn-of-the-century superstition that the camera would capture the too gregarious soul. I thought if I looked irresolute into those sights I'd be unraveled.

Even the studio's lens delves some truths, from behind the eyes, in a fugitive light. I wanted to check the photograph. All day. See if, not soulless, I'd spread the sign of self too firmly across my self, signal flag upon a barricade of days. I'll stop now. I have to see.

3.

Young, I bent my father's voice to my own purposes, military directives, loose laughing ownership of world, wanderlust, although always

with my own rare timid backpack. Still, I used affirmative and imperative like twin bolts of lightning flung down on life's forehead, waiting to spring forth.

Older, bending myself to children, knees surprising varieties of previously unexamined floors, I fill my lungs with lost power, tune questions, ask—*why, why not, please, please not*—or damn my stylized lot to hell. Sometimes like a hailstorm, sadness grows larger, colder, each time a wish hurtles into the titanic stratosphere.

Sure flatten corn, clear the room, collapse. But melt is so sad and too final. The various floors littered with uncapsuled words fuel family battles between rare bone borders, the wide-awake and fearful skull.

4.

If she was lost would I want her back? Would there be a word that would bait a hook to bring her out to the ether of memory, twisting on the line, clanging great scales of rainbow armor? Would she be as small as I was then, or has she grown, twinned seed in a Jonah stomach, that queasy feeling just her turning over in my sleep? My sleep her sleep?

Maybe an uncanny Magritte monster, half holding to the sea, half beached on the strand, torpedo shaped torso, hair a net, legs a shadow, face someone's I always immediately forget.

I remember singing in water. I remember sitting under lamplight. I remember surfacing where dawn soothes a horizon. I remember, against current, under breakers, praising, foolish, almost glad to leave alone. Willfully lost, would she take me back or would I just lead on?

Dixie Salazar

The Puzzle

My sister is practicing scales.
The rain, a metronome on the pane.
Sioux Foot Slough spills
over the battered oak
in a thousand pieces.
It is early evening.
You can tell by rusty strokes
in the sky. My brother and I
gather it toward us greedily,
separate them by color,
pile pieces of dusk together;
mallard wings stacked
with slender reeds that interlock.
We turn over the autumn-colored
amoebas of a lost twilight
one by one.
We begin to believe
that there is a true equation
that rules the sky,
orders even this musty corner
of boredom and rain,
the cracked plaster
and grease-staccatoed walls;
that pleasure and pain can align,
that if we could find
the right formulas,
step on no cracks,
fit this tongue into
that groove, and collect
the strokes of the clock
to throw down like dice,
then the melody would compose itself
and slide into place.
And the thousand pieces
of water and sky would fit,
and ring-necked mallards lift up
from the perpetual mist of the marsh.
And all this might make
some kind of sense.

The clock taps patiently,
a car door slams,
the scales stop.
Now we need more than
the sky's wet algebra, more
than even a stroke of luck.

Nancy White

In the Country Town

I want that no farmers go to the bank,
no cows founder here,
no fields blight, and no crops
molder in the shed.

No barns lean,
and creak, and fold.
No hills grown over in sumac
and sickly elm.

Children won't drift through the school or
forget their five lines of Frost.
In the flat tin townhall no men and women
vote in the latest taxbill.

No new prostitutes, just the one who knits
by the payphone. No new pharmacist,
please; the same one and his shaky hands
—they don't go wrong—and his blue

minted breath. The same A & P, iceberg
lettuce and eggs so translucent
nobody buys. We'll drive up the road
for brown eggs from Svitag, the same Swede.

The same corner for asking directions,
same women on errands to point the strangers
straight, the same bare blink
of engagement rings, same small but

authentic stones. I want to buy my wine
at the Santerres' place, and this time
I'll get no farther on the road out of town
than Metzgers' field of fresh-cut hay.

The farm inspector in her Oldsmobile,
testing the county's teats for TB, stops

to talk dairy with the Reynolds Bros.,
the same every season,

and dawdling in the orchard until dark,
she, too, wishes she could stay,
the way the sky can stay one
cold cup of stars, immovable stars.

Other Publications of Thomas Fox Averill in *Cottonwood*:

Cottonwood 11	A Burial of the Dead (novel excerpt) ($2)
Cottonwood 16	Jesse Carson's Gone ($2)
Cottonwood 19	Taking Care of Your Own ($2)
Cottonwood 27/28	Helen Singleton and the Dead Cat ($6)
Cottonwood 31/32	A Proposal; On Grandma Layton's Refrigerator Excess Cat—A Sugar Blues (poem) (out of print)
Cottonwood 35	A Personal Reading of the Literature of Douglas County, Lawrence and the University of Kansas (essay) ($5)
Cottonwood 40	How to Grow Old Playing Handball ($5)

Under the editorial direction of Thomas Fox Averill:

The Almond Tree: The Collected Poems of George Edgar Wolfe, with an introduction by Kevin Young. A joint production of Woodley Press and Cottonwood Press. ($5; 1/3 off the original $7.50 price)

Cottonwood and the Raven Bookstore of Lawrence are proud to sponsor a book signing and reading by Tom Averill on Friday, October 30, 1992. The book reading will be at the Kellas Gallery, 7 East 7th Street, Lawrence, at 7:30 P.M. The Raven Bookstore, across the street from the Gallery, will be open before and after the reading, and the book signing will follow the reading. We look forward to seeing friends of *Cottonwood* in attendance.

To Order:

Photocopy this page, fill it out, and mail this form and your payment to *Cottonwood*, 400 Kansas Union, Box 20, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 66045. Please note: Cottonwood 31/32 is out of print and unavailable. We will waive our mailing fee for these items. This special offer expires April 30, 1993.

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Tom Averill

An Interview with Tom Averill
by Jane Garrett

JG: In your introduction to *What Kansas Means To Me*, you talk about your affection/affliction—Kansas taking hold of you. You can't pinpoint when it happened or even why. Is it any way like trying to explain the dynamics of a couple's love relationship?

TA: In some ways, yes. I've been increasingly thinking in my own mind about Kansas, sort of as a family, maybe, and also seeing my own family's relationship to Kansas in the sense that my own parents, who came here—one from New Jersey, and one from California—both of them from families that were not functioning real well, and both of them wanting to find a home, and making a family here in Kansas. I think that probably had a lot to do with my own focus later on with Kansas as home. Then, sort of, what you asked me in the question about the affliction/affection thing, I think the positives and negatives in any relationship you have, whether it's a relationship between two people which has its excellent points and which has its down-side to it that balances out, I think the same thing might be true of the way Kansans often feel about the state. It's how I feel about the state at times. I have a sort of unexplainable affection for the place. And at times it makes me real angry. Just because of the small-mindedness of the state. And also I get frustrated at Kansas' not living up, as much as I feel like it should, to its more forward, progressive-looking, even radical, pioneering kind of past.

JG: What's standing in the way, do you think? Do you think it's the small-mindedness?

TA: No, I think the small-mindedness is just a symptom. I think what's standing in the way of it is a simple lack of vision. It's a sense that I think a lot of people have, that once a place has been sort of pioneered, that there's not that much more to do. I remember one of William Inge's characters says, "Sometimes I think it's harder to live in a place than it is to pioneer it." And I think it is. I think what we need to do is have some kind of sense of direction or some kind of sense of the future that's very different from, well, let's just try to get along, you know, let's just try to keep from going bankrupt. Or let's just try to keep up with other states in the region. I think if we were really forward-looking, we'd be doing a lot more of the

kinds of things that Wes Jackson is doing now, like the Land Institute in terms of doing some real innovations in agriculture. We wouldn't be content to have a nuclear power plant; we'd be experimenting with solar and with wind. We'd be pioneering these areas that the future depends on instead of trying to keep up and compete with other states in what basically is going to end up being a bankrupt system. At least a bankrupt agricultural system.

JG: But we're capable of continuining to pioneer.

TA: We're very capable of continuining to pioneer. If we would set our minds to it and demand the kind of leadership that we need. I don't think that there's any coincidence that this year, more legislators in the Kansas Legislature are retiring and not seeking re-election. I think there's a sense that politics is not visionary; it's not doing anything; one cannot have that big an effect on things anymore, and that it's a kind of failure, really, of the political system to excite and energize people. That may be getting away from the relationship question, but there's a lot of it in the sense that relationships go bad when there's no excitement left, when things sort of settle down and you think, "Now, is this it? For the rest of my life? From now on?" And that's usually when things start getting tired. We may have hit that point in Kansas. We've got this great past, and we've got a lot of exciting things going on, but what are we really doing?

JG: You mentioned Inge. Do you think writers like the Haldeman-Juliuses and William Inge were afflicted with this same affection?

TA: Yeah, I do. I think a lot of Kansas writers experience this same kind of thing—that is, that many of them, Inge for example, left Kansas, or they leave Kansas, but somehow they return to it over and over again in terms of their literary work. Even someone like Langston Hughes, who has maybe a marginal connection to the state—he was born in Missouri and then did live for much of his boyhood in Topeka and in Lawrence—wrote his first novel about a small town in Kansas, *Not Without Laughter,* and then I've heard a tape of him when he came back to Kansas in 1965, I think it was—a couple years before he died—and very affectionate still about Kansas, in spite of all the difficulties that he experienced. He still had a very warm spot in his heart for Lawrence and for Kansas.

JG: What about Inge? When he left, do you think he lost that?

TA: No, I think you see it over and over again in his work. He made attempts to come back to Kansas several different times. I think that he felt he wouldn't be accepted in Kansas. That was mostly his kind of lifestyle. I think at that time he was probably right. He probably knew Kansas well enough to know. If he'd only lived ten years longer, I think he would have been more comfortable coming back to Kansas.

JG: What about image? How do you respond to the bad image of Kansas that Hollywood has repeatedly projected?

TA: I think that for every part of the negative image, there's a kind of positive [image] that lurks in the background of it. I'm reminded of the essay that William Least Heat-Moon wrote about crossing Kansas. He talked about this negative image, and about how people travel across Kansas at night, partly to beat the heat, partly because there's nothing to see anyway. The real negative side of that. He delves deeper than that, and says two things. One is that people do that also because at night, they can imagine the difficulty and the dangers of the crossing. He says if they went through during the day, they'd realize that it was just a fairly normal place where you could stop anytime and get a Nehi if you wanted to, but when you cross at night, it's like a major excursion. Also, when you imagine that it's very difficult, hot, and that any time you might be stranded or overtaken by heat or by Indians or whatever else you might imagine, really, what you're doing there is sort of pretending still that Kansas is the place that it once was—a place that many people had to cross under very dangerous circumstances, and that people want it to be that way because they still want it to be a part of that great Western experience. What he's doing by delving deeper is sort of showing us that for every negative stereotype, there is a positive side there, and that's what I try to do in *What Kansas Means to Me* and so on, and when I speak about Kansas, is to acknowledge the negatives, but turn them on their heads a little bit and say, "Let's look a little deeper into some of these things," and see what's there that people are responding to that really is very positive. I think for every negative, there is that positive side to it. That's what makes it interesting to teach Kansas literature, to read Kansas writers—because it's a literature that's very ambiguous about pioneering, and the costs of that, but also the heroism of it; about the small town, which is friendly and based on real community, a real sense of community. On the other hand, it's devastating when it stereotypes people or knows their business or the kinds of things that William Inge deals with. I think for every one of the negatives, there is a kind of positive there. I've always been a little bit worried about people getting *too* positive about Kansas. Just over the last 20 years or so, I see an awful lot—the rise of magazines like *Midwest Living* and the way country sort of took over the decor of so many little froo-froo shops, and all the films that started being made about farmers and farm life. I always worry when that starts to happen because one of my theories is that as soon as we start paying attention to some aspect of our culture, that probably is a death knell; it's a signal that it's on the way out. We want to explore that, or we want to understand it, or we want to grasp at it one last time before it dies. I worry a little bit about

celebrating too much and honoring too much, because I think it's a sign that things are on their way out; they're changing.

JG: Speaking of changes—what about those great old-time Kansas stories you used to write? Are you still doing them?

TA: Not as many.

JG: Really?

TA: Not as many. Two things have happened to my writing. One is that writers come at their writing in different ways. I think my concentration at first was kind of on Kansas, in a self-conscious kind of way, because I think I found it difficult to write about things closer to me and my own experience. I was also really interested in learning how to tell a story, and that probably comes out of some of my education here at KU, having Ed Wolfe as a teacher for all those years, because Ed really wanted people to know how to tell a story. That's the kind of fiction that I've always been the most attracted to anyway—the kind of fiction that your characters just go rip-snortin' all the way through, with a dramatic plotline. Some people don't respect that all that much, but it's hard to do, and it's hard to do with a sense of humor. You learn a lot by doing those kinds of stories, I think. A lot of my stories were like that—not to say that my other stories don't have dramatic plots, because some of them do. As I've gotten older, I've found it easier to go back, then, and sort of catch up with myself. Now that I'm 20, 25, 30 years away from some of the experiences in my own life, to go back and start using my own life more as material is something that's become much more attractive for me to do. A lot of the stories in *Seeing Mona Naked* and that I've written since then come more directly out of my experiences. That's not to say they're about me, but they're just part of the texture of my life. When I was in my 20s, it was like I had no distance on myself at all. It seemed easier for me to write stories that were set in the past or that were set in a different place, or stories that I researched more. That was a time, too, when I was doing a tremendous amount of research into Kansas literature and Kansas history and Kansas culture and that naturally came into my fiction. Then, as I've done more research into my own life and the place where I grew up—I've incorporated more of those things. In some ways, my stories have changed, at least in the time frame that they're set in and maybe the kinds of characters that they are about. I think maybe that's why.

JG: What about a novel? You mentioned in your introduction to *What Kansas Means To Me* a failed novel. Will you write another one?

TA: Oh, yeah. I wrote a novel when I was on sabbatical from Washburn. It was a short novel, about 200 pages, and it was a very intense novel about a young couple who had one child and they lost the second child through a stillbirth in the eighth month of pregnancy. It was called *The Honeymoon*

Grief. It was just about the first week after [the baby's] death, and going through the process. It was very intense. The characters were going through something I really found very difficult. In some ways, the characters at that point in their lives were not very likeable. I didn't give the reader much distance from them. Their experiences were very intense, and so although I got very favorable rejections from a lot of different publishing houses, almost all of them said, "Who would want to read this? It's too unrelieved. Who would buy it and give it to somebody else? Why would anyone put themselves through this?" One editor even said that it contained some of the most powerful writing about grief that she had ever read, except maybe a war novel. It had that unrelieved intensity. So it didn't do too well. But I felt pretty good because almost all of the rejection letters that my agent sent me said, "If you have anything else by this person, please send it along." I have just finished another novel that's set around Lawrence, Kansas, in 1969. It sort of takes the material of *Seeing Mona Naked*—that sort of situation, and the young people living out on the farm together.

One character in particular is having some difficulties within his family. There's a lot of people at that time—1969—who have brothers in Canada, escaping the draft. His father's a professor at the University in Lawrence. It's really his story—how he comes to terms with being against the war, being proud of that, but suffering some of the consequences. He suffered all through '69, '70, '71. I'm revising it more this summer. But I do have a draft. I had a second draft that I sent to my agent and she liked it well enough to kind of start sending it around. So yes, I do have another novel, and I really like writing novels. I finally figured out how to do it. Almost every writer I've talked to said they had to write a couple of them to really understand the form, and feel like you can really write a novel. I never had written anything really long, because I hadn't had that kind of time. I just decided that I needed to spend the time.

JG: Massive amounts of time.

TA: Yeah. Also, you spend a year and a half, knocking out four hundred pages. You don't know whether it will work or not. Too big a commitment, I think. If you're writing it, you have to have some kind of confidence in it, so even if it's rejected, your writing won't go to hell.

JG: Are you working every day?

TA: Yeah. I write every day, except on weekends. I write every working day. I just get after myself when I write—between an hour and an hour and fifteen minutes. Try to always get at least one page.

JG: A page a day.

TA: A page a day.

JG: 365 pages a year.

TA: Yeah, except for the weekends. A little less. 250 pages a year. And so in a couple years, you've got a novel. Then you have to revise it. Sometimes you can write more than a page. Sometimes you spend a lot of time revising. But I found that when I wasn't writing regularly, I always had good ideas but never had time to write them down. When I had time, I didn't have any good ideas. So I just decided, you'd better just write, every single day that you could. I do sometimes write on the weekends. For a while I was. No matter what, I'd get up at 6 A.M.

JG: Many of your stories appear in little magazines and small presses, which leads me to this: Recently, a member of our senior faculty brought me a short story he had just written. I read it, gave it back to him, and said, "You should send it to one of the little literary magazines." His response was, "No, I'm not going to do that. Nobody reads those things." How would you react to a remark like that?

TA: I don't think *nobody* reads them; I think that there's a very select group of people who read them. You can look in *Writer's Market* and see what the circulation of a magazine is, and then take ten percent of that, and that's how many people maybe read your story. It depends on who you mean by nobody, because one of my stories was published in *Farmer's Market*, a little magazine out of Galesburg, Illinois, which publishes twice a year. I had a couple stories in there. It's a magazine that you might well say that about: nobody reads it. But that was the story, then, that the editor sent in to William Abraham at Doubleday, who puts together the O. Henry collection, and he published it as part of the O. Henry collection last year, and so that probably reached a lot of people. Stories have to have some kind of life outside the writer and a few sympathetic readers. To say, "Well, it's not going to be published in the *New Yorker* or *Atlantic* or *Harper's* or *Paris Review* or *Hudson Review* or *Triquarterly*, I'm not going to bother," I think is kind of silly. When you say "nobody," what you really mean is "nobody important." Nobody who can advance your career. Nobody who can recognize you and commend you as the great writer that you are. I think that you can't ever tell what will happen to a story. A published story is better than an unpublished story in terms of having the opportunity to be read.

JG: Some writers/teachers advise their students and other writers to publish only with the best publishers, or send their stuff *only* to the best publishers, and other writers say, "No, publish anywhere you can get published, even if it's a little rag in Hogholler, Arkansas." What do you say?

TA: I say that the one advantage of getting a story published, no matter where it is, is that you don't have to worry about it any more. I publish in all sorts of magazines all around for exactly that reason. At that point, at which it's published somewhere, anywhere, it's finished. I don't have to

send it out any more. I don't have to worry about maybe if I changed this or maybe if I did this. It allows you to go on with your work. I published my first collection of short stories with Woodley Press in Topeka, because my officemate was the director of Woodley Press and after publishing these Topeka manuscripts that he didn't think would sell outside of Topeka, he wanted to reach more of Kansas. He asked me for some stories. There was that easy publication, really, of a story collection by a very small press—nothing very prestigious about that, in some sense. But that book allowed me to think of myself in a different way. I think even getting a story published in Hogholler allows you to think of yourself in a different way: published writer. And having *Passes at the Moon* out made it so that I wanted to promote that book, so I wanted to get some readings, but I didn't want to read stories out of *Passes at the Moon.* I haven't been writing as much as I should, so I started writing more, because I started getting invitations to read more. Then as I wrote more, I gathered a second collection of stories, and then the same thing kind of happened. I just can't go around with *Mona,* reading stories from *Mona*—I have to read something else. It has that kind of snowball effect. So I try to publish in the, quote, best places, but I have also made a conscious decision a long time ago to publish in local magazines as much as I could, too, because the nice thing about it is, I've had stories published in *Greensborough Review* or *Black Warrior Review*—these are big magazines. Never heard a word about those stories from anybody, except I know the editors like them. Nobody writes to me and says, "Oh, I saw your story in *Greensborough Review* and really enjoyed it." On the other hand, when I have a story in *Cottonwood,* many subscribers to *Cottonwood* know me, because either they've seen my work before or they're from this area. So when *Cottonwood* comes out and I have a story in it, people write me letters or they call me, or I see them and they say, "Hey, I really liked that story," or "Why did you do that?" or whatever. I think that's very valuable.

JG: Yeah, I think that's valuable.

TA: I have something in very prestigious places, and it would never be a part of the community of writers that I'm a part of. I've always been very loyal to *Kansas Quarterly* and *Cottonwood* and always wanted to get stories published locally exactly for that reason.

JG: Of all your work in radio and television and your books and stories, what would you say was your greatest achievement?

TA: You know, the greatest achievement is to keep doing it, because sometimes what you feel best about is not what other people feel best about, and sometimes you never know the life something will have, you know, after it leaves your pen or your computer or whatever. I really have a great affection for particular pieces that I've done that, to me, mean a lot. I could answer that best by saying that X story got the most pay, or X story won a

contest, or X story did more for me in terms of my prestige as a writer or whatever, but really achievement is something that is so nebulous. It's the dailiness of it. I remember David Ray once saying at a writer's conference a long time ago—he was talking about Robert Frost—and he said, "You know, if Robert Frost had not written 'Mending Wall' or 'Stopping by Woods' or five or six other poems—'Birches'"—you can think of them, the ones that really are the great poems—"If he hadn't written those, he would be a minor poet." It's always stuck with me because it's always been my belief that the important thing is that he created *all* those poems. He didn't know that "Mending Wall" was better than some poem that you and I have never heard of. He didn't know that he would be known for these five or six poems, where lightning struck and something resonated both inside himself and outside himself. That's really the way I feel about writing. How can you know? I would hope that my greatest achievement is somewhere down the line, because that's what I want. I want to keep going, and I want to keep trying, because it's interesting to do that. I don't even want to think about it. There's harm in thinking that what you've done already is your greatest achievement. You've had the experience, like all of us writers have, of going back to a piece that you wrote ten years ago, that at the time you thought was the greatest story you could ever write, and thinking, "Oh, God."

JG: It's painful.

TA: And you hope that you always have that feeling about your work, because what that will mean is that you're doing better and you're more conscious of what you're doing and you have more critical background and more distance. I always hope to look back at my work and think, "How should I do this?" Any kind of achievement at all.

JG: What authors did you read when you were growing up, and is there someone in particular who made your hair stand on end?

TA: Well, when I was in high school I read a lot of John Steinbeck. He's always been really accepted by scholars and literary critics. I always loved his work and I've always thought that every high school student ought to read his work, because he knows how to write a story, and he's very interesting—the kinds of characters that high school students love to read about: drugs, that sort of thing. When I was in college, I was particularly attracted to William Faulkner and to Nathaniel Hawthorne and to Southern writers, I think maybe because they had such a distinct sense of place. Hawthorne has a distinct sense of New England. I think even then I was attracted to that working out of a place. I think the writer that I read in graduate school and still have such tremendous respect for is Eudora Welty. I always felt as if I've tried to read her and learn from her as much as possible because she has such a deep respect for her characters and such a love for

language, and such an ability to tell all kinds of different stories, some of them very much like essays, some of them very dramatic, some of them like folktales, like "The Robber Bridegroom." She does a lot of variety in her work, which I am really attracted to and in doing myself—working in a lot of folklore, recounting fairy tales, that kind of thing. She's someone who always makes my hair stand on end whenever I read her. I read a lot of non-fiction, too, because I'm interested in a lot of different subject areas and I like reading travel pieces.

JG: On the subject of traveling . . . If you were trying to convince someone from, say, California, that he should move to Kansas, which of your stories would you send him to persuade him to come?

TA: That's a good question. And I don't have a quick answer to it! I'd probably send him a copy of *What Kansas Means to Me* and say, "Read this!" because it's sort of an affectionate look at the state. As for the fiction writing, I tried very hard in the new novel I've written to really give a positive sense of the place, because place comes to mean a great deal to this young man who's the main character, because he's living out on his grandfather's land, which has been condemned by Army Corps engineers to build the Clinton reservoir. It's sort of the last time that this land will be lived on by human beings. There's a real sense in the book of what is it, and what is landscape, and what does it mean in people's lives. I think that can happen anywhere, but I think in agricultural states it may take on a little more meaning, and I also think in a place where you have to work hard to discover landscape—I think Kansas is one of those places—then it also has a tendency to mean more to people. Some of the descriptions in there I worked very hard to try to give a sense of place.

JG: What's the title of your novel?

TA: I was just going to call it—my original working title was—what was I calling it? THE LONG TIME. Everybody hated it.

JG: Your new pieces are filled with such colorful characters: the couple in "Dear Abby," Rick and Mona, King and Smartass, and the Man Who Loved McDonald's. These are people I grew up with, and they're the people down the street. Dare I say that they are typical Kansans, or should I say they're typical Americans? Are they typical Kansans, or is that even a fair question?

TA: It's a fair question, but the answer I would give is that when I sit down to write a story, I don't particularly think, "Oh, I'm going to create a typical person, or this is typical of this, or this is American and this is Kansan." I don't make those kinds of distinctions. In other words, it's sort of interesting. When you're a writer, you're stuck in a certain place and you're stuck in a certain time. You have to write about what you know. In some ways, it's not anything that you do intentionally. When I sat down to

create the Man Who Loved McDonald's, I wasn't sitting down to make a comment about eating fast food, or sort of comment about Kansas in a bitchy way, or fast food, or any particular region; I was just really sort of interested in what it is about McDonald's that is so comforting, and yet disgusting at the same time. I've gone back and forth on McDonald's myself. I used to never go to any McDonald's; then I had a job, and it's a wonderful place to go sometimes. It's obviously a place that everybody knows and that we all have some kind of feeling about, whether we acknowledge it or not. I always try to figure out what it is about that that makes it so attractive—that sameness. Then studying this man's life, really, as part of that; I just incorporated various things that one might experience in life and in a McDonald's. I was just trying to get a sense of what it would be like to become McDonald's, almost.

JG: That is a wonderful piece.

TA: I don't know whether it's typical of Kansas or not; I did try to include the details that I knew about McDonald's in Topeka, because that's where I grew up and we used to go out to old Number 37, 37 McDonald's in the country, and now they have the sign for that in the Kansas State Historical Society museum. Already it's an artifact of our culture. Many of my stories are attempts to chronicle the feeling of a particular time and place that I lived in or lived through. Since that is in Kansas, and since that is American, I'm always trying to get the place just right, the feel of a place just right. A story like "The Man Who Loved McDonald's" runs really from the '50s to the '70s or '80s, or the "Mona" story, which runs, really, clear back from the early '60s into the '70s—that particular time, when I was an undergraduate and a graduate student in and around Topeka and Lawrence. These aren't my experiences so much as they are the experience of that time and place. I tend to detail that.

JG: You do that so well.

TA: I think my main intent in every story is not primarily intellectual; it's primarily physical. I don't usually think very hard about my stories until they're finished, and then I think about them and revise them according to what I think. The process of writing is just a very physical process. That first sentence is a physical thing, and it leads to the second thing. I always try very hard to keep it very grounded in details, and my stories do have, I think, a density of detail—sometimes too much; I have to get some of it out. I'm really attracted just to the physical nature of the stories. It's like staying in a dream for a while, because it's really interesting to experience it. You don't think about a dream when you're having it; you think about it after you've had it. Writing is a lot like that. Getting to the dream and just being there. Not worrying about, well, what does it mean. I almost never think about what a sentence means until the second draft, third draft, and fourth draft.

JG: Would you say that rewriting is easier than that physical getting-it-all-down?

TA: It's all the same, because the rewriting, the revising, is not like hard work, like sanding a piece of furniture. It's like rebuilding a piece of furniture. It's really the same kind of process for me. I like them both quite a bit.

JG: Really.

TA: I've never minded revising. I don't usually find that all that difficult. I always am ashamed to tell people that writing is very easy for me.

JG: You should be ashamed.

TA: It hasn't always been easy for me, and it isn't always easy every day, but for the most part it's a very enjoyable act. It's not something that I don't work very hard at, because I do, but there's no part of it that I don't find pleasurable. What's easier than pleasure?

JG: Yes, a good point.

TA: If you really find pleasure in it, and learn to find pleasure in all the parts of it, from the original composition to the final tinkering with word choices and sentence lengths and all the tiny revisions that you do over and over again with a manuscript. I think to not find pleasure in any of the parts would probably weaken your writing. It would mean that you had flipped through or that you had neglected the intensity that you should give to each part of the process. Maybe part of writing it and writing a lot, or trying to do it every day, is learning how to have pleasure. I know lots of people who can write extremely well, and who have terrific ideas and terrific characters and situations and so on, but they don't really like to do it enough to do it all the time, and to want to do it more than anything else. I've taught a lot of students in 21 years, and the main thing I've seen in the people that are successfully writing and publishing and enjoying it is that they will do it. They will just do it. No matter where they start, no matter how much you think this person does not have that much promise or something, the ones who are willing to stick with it and find pleasure in it will do okay—almost always. You can have a student that is brilliant and has all sorts of facility and has wonderful experiences to write about, and you get one story out of them and that's it. It's like everything else: the hard work and finding pleasure in the hard work. Once you do, then you'll get better. Not to say that everyone will be great or whatever. I don't really worry about that, even for myself. You have to learn a sort of contentment with the process, and whether or not you get published and whether or not you get well-published or whether or not you get continually published are things that you have no control over anyway. My theory has always been to take pleasure in things that I can control, and to work hard towards the rest—getting published, getting well-published and so on.

Thomas Fox Averill

Scales

I never thought much about my weight until my father gave me a scales for my twenty-seventh birthday. It was a beautiful machine. Digital. Battery operated, and for once the batteries *were* included. White, to match my bathroom. Oval, like standing on a flat egg. I climbed on it right after my family left my apartment. The square red numbers raced up, then slowed down, hovering above, then below my weight. A beep from the scales, and the evening's reading: 162. Birthday cake, I told myself.

Then I remembered the looks of shared anticipation when I untied the ribbon, tore off the paper, and found the scales. My sister and her husband and my brother and his wife *knew* what my father was giving me. They obviously wondered how I'd take it.

I *took* it fine, but 162 *was* ten pounds heavier than I'd been at my annual pap visit nine months before. I threw away the birthday cards, especially the one from my brother: On the front a hippo danced in a tutu, with the words, "A little something for your birthday." Inside: "Isn't it too-too much?" Then I finished the last square foot of chocolate sheet cake.

Before bed, I weighed again: 162. I would not gain weight eating cake, I thought. I slept well, except for a three A.M. trip to the bathroom, where, on the floor, the little red dot on the scales glowed like an unextinguished cigarette, like the eye of some feral night creature.

The next day, Saturday, was my true birthday. We celebrated on the Friday because my father was out of town for the weekend. I try not to take his trips personally. I try not to take anything personally. Everybody needs a scales just like they need a thermometer, or a blender, or a roasting pan large enough for a Thanksgiving turkey. But my father and my siblings were watching my weight, clucking their tongues, wanting a sentinel in my apartment, a little light glowing from the floor saying, "What do you weigh this minute? And this minute? And this minute?"

When my father says "business" trip, he means it's none of *my* business where he is or why. I knew where he is *and* why. He is visiting Stella. "My friend Stella," he said, explaining a perfumed letter addressed to him in

flowery cursive I found on his kitchen counter a year ago; it was postmarked Topeka, where my mother is institutionalized, and has been for the past ten years.

When you are seventeen, you think you know a lot, and then, always, to everybody, something happens to prove you wrong. Maybe you lose your virginity and it doesn't really make any difference to you. Maybe your best friend gets pregnant, or attempts suicide, and you can't care enough to be anything but relieved it isn't you. Maybe your parents divorce or play musical beds. Or your brother joins the Marines and comes back with no hair and a stupid attitude, but a real man, like you've only seen on television before. Maybe your mother goes crazy.

The trouble with going crazy is you never really know when someone else, or even when you, will do it. My mother did not have tantrums, or fits, or mania, or blue-funk depressions. She went crazy so gradually I couldn't really say *when* she did it.

Here's an example of how gradual: When my parents went out on Saturday nights, I waited until my brother and sister conked out on the couch. Then I'd take a few gulps from the vodka bottle in the liquor cabinet. I liked the warmth in my stomach. I could sleep those nights, when I was afraid my parents would never return, or afraid they would. I replaced the gulps of vodka with water. Pretty soon, it took more to make my stomach warm. Then, it was more water than vodka. At some point, it was all water. But when? All I know is, at some point my mother was all water.

So on my true birthday morning my father was in Topeka, but with the wrong woman. I called my brother, but his wife answered. "Oh, Margaret," Karen said. "How are you? Nice birthday. Bob isn't home. He's got Reserves all day. I'm going shopping."

She talks like a child with a message from her mommy, in a hurry for fear she might forget.

"I just wanted to thank Bob for the print," I lied. "I really like it. I'm going to try to get it framed soon. As soon as I can raise the money and get to the Frame-Up."

The print was typical: Bob's gifts required spending more money to make them emjoyable. In high schoôl he'd buy me a movie pass without enough money for popcorn, coke and candy, which costs more than the show. When I was twenty-five, he made the down payment on a new couch, and I'm still paying Penney's fifteen dollars a month. "You get a couch, and at least one letter a month, guaranteed," he joked.

"I'll tell Bob," Karen said. "You like the print. You'll have it framed soon. He'll be glad to know."

I called my sister. "Margaret," she said, "did you like your birthday? Get everything you wanted? Or want everything you got?"

"Mary," I said, pretending she might answer me straight, "I like the scales Dad got me, but it makes me worry what he's thinking."

"What do you mean? He thinks you might like a scales," Mary said. "He asked me what I thought. You didn't have one. Or a full-length mirror. I remembered you didn't have one of those. You don't, do you?"

"No," I said.

"How do you look at yourself?" Mary asked.

"I have a dresser mirror," I said.

"How do you look at *all* of yourself? That'd drive me crazy. Sometimes I need to look at all of me, to see me like other people do. And *I'm* married, Margaret. You're not."

"What does this have to do with it?" I asked, but before she could answer, I said, "Goodbye, and thanks again for the party."

"Have you weighed yourself?" she asked as I hung up.

I weighed 162. Telephone conversations, even with siblings, don't burn significant calories. I went to my bedroom and looked in the dresser mirror. I leaned over the wide dresser top to take a good look at my face, my "complexion," which, like "personality," people insist should be good. My face, revealing the extra chocolate cake, was oily. It shone, though no worse than my father's bald head reflecting an overhead light. I ran a brush through my brown mushroom cap, tried to pull it back behind my ears, as far from my puffy cheeks as possible. I realized I was squinting, and relaxed my eyes to get rid of the creases above my cheeks. My eyes were as bright and blue as when I was a baby.

I backed away to see how much of me I could see. I climbed up on my bed to look at my bottom half. I got down and pulled the mirror bottom towards me, then climbed back onto the bed. I saw all but my head.

Nobody should look at someone without a head. A body is just a body: meaningless, generic flesh. That's why I've never gone on a diet, never separated my head from my body, never let my head tell my body what it would and would not do.

My mother was always on a diet. Always on diet pills: little white things with tiny crosses on them she took before meals to suppress her appetite. They made her nervous, but so did her coffee, and her cigarettes. She took the smallest bites of food: steak like you'd cut for a baby; rice by the grain; a single pea skewered on the end of a fork and held curiously for a moment before being devoured. Then she'd light up a cigarette and let it smolder in front of her food.

"I've got a wife eats like a bird," my father sometimes said. "I shoulda married a pigeon."

"Birds eat *all* the time," my mother would say. "They eat three times their body weight every day or something. I eat like a woman on a diet."

"You eat like a goddamn bird," he would insist, shaking his head.

"You *look* like a bird," I once teased him: "Bald eagle."

He glowered at me. "You eat like a hog," he said. "I've got a bird for a wife and a hog for a daughter."

My mother threw her fork at him, and missed. I slammed my chair back against the dining room wall and ran up to my room.

My father always seemed big to me because my mother was slight, like a blade with legs. He liked to be seen with her, with his several more inches in height (she is 5'4") and his fifty pounds in weight (she weighed 110, always). Once, he brought home a picture of himself with his club. Everyone around him was taller. I was fourteen. "You're small, Dad," I said. "You're the littlest man in Kiwanis." He pulled the picture from my hand and I never saw it again.

Now, I am taller by an inch and heavier by two pounds, according to the new scales, than my father. His new Stella is probably anorexic. He'd want someone he didn't have to climb a stepladder to kiss. He'd want someone to make him look bigger than he really was.

My mother spent a lot of time in the kitchen. Her dishes were legendary at church socials, picnics and pot lucks. Neighborhood kids begged to go in my house and forage for the snacks that my mother made almost every day: chocolate chip cookies, lemon bars, cheese pastries, sweet noodle kugles, exotic sauces to top bread pudding, rice pudding and ice cream.

"I don't know *how* you keep your figure," people said to her. I knew: those little pills. I knew how I didn't keep mine: I ate what she prepared for me. So did Bob and Mary. But I was youngest, my mother's "baby." She fed me her snacks and her elegant meals, and I ate.

Metabolism cannot be controlled. You accept it, and live with it, like you accept and live with your parents. My metabolism is slow, and I live with that; my father is pushy and my mother is deranged, and I live with that. All through junior and senior high school I ate for my mother. I couldn't make my father love her. I couldn't make my brother and sister respect her: keep them from talking back. I couldn't talk to her. But I could eat.

My father said she went to Topeka to learn to live without pills. I thought she'd be home soon. I didn't know how hard it would be to live without her food. I tried to cook, but my meals did not please my father, or Mary and Bob. We mostly ate at restaurants, everything from fast food to smorgasbords.

Once, my father exploded in a McDonald's: "I got a wife who won't eat, and a daughter who won't *stop* eating. Stop eating," he yelled. "Stop!" He threw a cherry fried pie against the wall and walked out. Bob and Mary

smirked and followed him out the door. I ordered another pie and let them wait in the car for ten minutes. It was winter, one of the coldest nights.

I learned to cook, at least well enough to please myself. My family does not gather for meals like some families do. We have coffee, or tea, or desserts. We see each other briefly, then disperse into lives separate and hard-won after what happened in our family with my mother. We keep our private lives from family and strangers alike.

I surprised myself on my birthday. I called Mary back, and then Karen, and invited them to dinner the next day, as soon as Bob came back from Reserves. I left a message after a beep on my father's machine, so when he returned from Topeka he had the option of a meal made entirely from recipes out of my mother's old copper file box.

I spent Saturday looking at recipes, balancing memory against desire, my knowledge as a cook against what I could hope to accomplish. I settled on a feast. I bought scallops, sweet red pepper, crushed red chili pepper, avocadoes and raspberry vinaigrette for the appetizer; for the main course I bought rack of lamb, mint sauce, garlic, new potatoes, fresh asparagus and yeast for the rolls I would make from scratch; finally, I bought the ingredients for one of my mother's chocolate and brandy sauces. I selected two bottles of expensive wine with the help of a man in the liquor store who talked bouquet and breathing, burgundy and Beaujolais.

I hadn't been to a liquor store in a year: I drank a lot to get through high school, to help me quit thinking about my mother. Her diet included three Manhattans at dinner. Those, and the little white pills, left her no desire for anything else. After she left home, my father threw all the alcohol out of the house and drank only an occasional beer. I hate the taste of beer. I stopped drinking.

Just before she left, my mother's face had an odd, disheveled look, like the face of a doll stored away after childhood, then rediscovered in the back of a closet or an attic. And this doll, who once meant everything, stares blankly at walls. Once, you returned those stares in your play, you smiled back at that painted, slightly upturned smile, you kissed those plastic cheeks. But you can't remember doing it, or how you felt when you did.

My mother once gave each of us something to remember her by. Bob's heirloom was her father's gold toothpick, in an intricately scrolled case. Mary took grandmother's pearls. Then my mother tried to take off her engagement ring, with its huge diamond. She struggled against a ridge of flesh swelled around her huge knuckle, which she cracked mercilessly. That sharp snap of bone against bone still reminds me of her. She worked against that knuckle, her distorted face trying for bravery, her hands shaking. Finally, when her eyes begged me to, I reached for her hand and shimmied the ring up, and off her finger. "You see why I diet," she said.

That was the last time I touched my mother. I wear her engagement ring on my right hand.

I wanted everything perfect for my dinner party. At some point my father would listen to his answering machine, and hear my voice: "Dad. I've invited Bob and Karen and Mary and Tom for dinner Sunday. That's tonight when you listen to this. They're coming. It'll be something very good. Come over whenever you get in. We haven't had dinner together for a long time. Goodbye." I didn't know if he would come, but I planned for him.

Sunday morning I woke up and weighed myself: 162. I hate Sunday mornings. When I was growing up, they were frantic: last-minute trips for stockings to the only store open on Sunday; my father and Bob shining their shoes together down in the utility room, sometimes calling for ours; the bath and shower running hot and steamy non-stop for over an hour. Our bedroom doors were closed, mine and Mary's, my mother and father's, and Bob's. But at ten thirty we assembled downstairs, made last-minute adjustments under my mother's watchful eye, and left just in time for eleven o'clock service.

I loved the picture of us in church, the five of us taking half a pew, each washed, starched, and smiling. I saw us then as others saw us: a clean, well-dressed, happy family. Now, Sunday mornings stretch into melancholy.

I showered. In the medicine cabinet mirror the weight I'd gained over the last year showed in my face. It sank under my chin, created slight dimples near the corners of my mouth where I used to smile. It moved my eyes deeper into my head, so I looked at everything from a little more distance. At least my nose, I thought, has not gained weight. Mine has always been flat and flared; it still was, though the skin around it was slightly puffed, as though my nose had been lifted, then forced back down into the dough of my face. No matter what I might look like in ten years, or with ten more pounds, or with twenty fewer pounds, my same old nose would be there. And other parts of my body hadn't gained weight. My hair was the same, in the mushroom cap none of my family appreciated: Mary said Bob described me as a "frog in a top hat." My teeth hadn't gained weight. My eyes hadn't gained weight. My ears had not gained weight. The oracles of my perception were timeless, even if my perceptions changed over time.

I worked on the rolls first, letting the stick of butter soften, melting the yeast with warm water, mixing the flour, salt, sugar. I tried to take my mother's engagement ring off my finger before I put the ingredients together in a large bowl to mix them with a wooden spoon, then squish them together and knead them until my hands, the bowl, the whole room smelled rich with the sharp pungency of bread, ready to cook. I couldn't

get the ring over my knuckle, pull and tug and shimmy as I did against the little roll of fat that swelled between ring and bone.

The aroma of sugar, flour and yeast quickly filled my kitchen like memories of my mother: I saw her hands in dough, thin hands covered with a membrane of food she loved but could not eat; she blew at the wisps of her long hair when it wilted down over her face; her small fists punched down the swollen white dough after its first rise; she rolled it, or shaped it into loaves, or layered it into pastries she filled with chocolate, or fruit or cream cheese; she carried it to the oven, one arm resting on her hip, the other bent slightly with the weight of loaf pans or cooking sheets; then she reached for her pills; took two while the bread rose, baked, turned brown in the oven.

No wonder I don't cook, or weigh myself, or look at myself full length in mirror after mirror all over the house. No wonder I hate to shop for clothes, or go to church, or sit at the table with my father and brother and sister. No wonder we don't think about my mother, or talk about her, or write her letters anymore. Ten years changes everything. Mary said to me: "Marriage changes everything, Margaret. You get married and you work these things out. You *have* to." And Bob: "Karen is everything. I mean, she's my wife, but she's the kind of mother I never had, too. I mean, in little ways. The little ways that make you love someone, that make you know they love you." And my father: "We've all had some big adjustments, Maggie. I'm just sorry you're the youngest. It always hits harder when you're not full grown."

I have grown full: of memories, of body, of living by myself, of the thinking I've put off until now, when it's too late to do what I might have done years ago. I could have visited my mother more than twice.

Three months after she went to Topeka, my father and I drove there to see her. We talked on the way there, mostly stupid things like the weather and what he might plant in his garden.

Except he told me about a trip he took to New York City with his father when he was eighteen, how his father spent two days in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel mostly drunk, reading a guide book, peeling bills off a big roll of cash he kept wrapped in a sock in his front pants pocket, sending my father out in taxi cabs to the Empire State Building, and Radio City, and the Statue of Liberty to have experiences, to report back every three hours or so, when he found his father less and less able to tell him what to do next. He ordered his food from room service and ate while his father drank more whiskey. After two days he took his father's money and called downstairs for help. A young man only a few years older than my father came to the room, helped get his father up and into a cold shower, then dressed and down to a cab. They went to Grand Central Station, where my father bought tickets

home, and home they went. By the time they crossed the state line into Kansas, his father was sober, and, as far as my father knew, he never drank again. "A wonderful trip," they told the rest of the family, and they never talked about it again.

That's what we told Bob and Mary: "A wonderful trip." We didn't tell them how my mother's gray clothes bagged off her so she looked like a little girl playing dress up. We didn't tell them how her face twitched on one side and her hands shook so she held them instead of us. We didn't tell them how she stared at us as though we were someone else's family. We didn't tell them how, on the way home, my father cried, and banged the steering wheel, his purple face swollen, and said, "How did this happen to me again?" And we didn't tell how, avoiding my father's sadness, I went mute, stared out the window and saw my face, black as my mother's, staring back in at me, as though it didn't care if I was there or not. "A wonderful trip," my father said. And since I knew just why he said it, I said it, too: "A wonderful trip."

Sometime, while I was preparing the lamb, cutting through the fat and the beautifully marbled meat to insert half-cloves of garlic, I began to say to myself: "A wonderful meal." I wondered if anyone would come. I'd had the same feeling before, especially with dates: I'd be getting myself ready and suddenly look at myself in the mirror and wonder if I really had a date. Maybe I was confused. Maybe I'd be ready and he wouldn't come. Maybe I'd only imagined the telephone call, the voice of some half-known boy inviting me, out of the blue, to a dance, or a movie, or a night of pizza and television. The feeling came so strongly sometimes that I would quit my preparations and sit quietly on my bed. And sometimes the doorbell would ring, and sometimes it wouldn't.

I prepared the lamb, surrounded it with half-onions and half-potatoes to catch the drippings. I squeezed lemons and limes until I thought my wrist would fall off, then added the scallops to their juice to "cook." I made the sauce of red bell pepper and chilis to serve over the scallops. I double-checked the chocolate-brandy recipe, which I would make at the last minute, while the lamb finished cooking. I called my father again and left another message on his machine, this time including the menu. I took the wine out of the refrigerator and let the bottles sit on my apartment balcony, wrapped in towels; they would be chilled, not cold. Then I straightened, dusted, and vacuumed my apartment thoroughly for the first time in a very long time. I scrubbed and I sneezed and I sweat.

Before I stepped into the shower, I weighed myself: 162. I wondered if my father had figured a way to control the numbers, to make the scales always register the same weight. I wondered what I could weigh after my dinner party, if I could budge this new scales up to 163, or 164.

All this weighing was a bad joke. Two days before, I had not thought about my weight in a tangible way. Now, each turn around the apartment might mean a measurable change. The joke: it was *not* measurable. The punch line: nothing makes a big difference. I wondered if my father was driving back from Topeka, pounding the steering wheel and crying, unprepared for my message on his machine, calling him to his family. I wondered if anything, ever, could make any difference.

When you are young, you think you control everything: when you count to ten, the commercial will be over; if you step on a crack you break your mother's back; if you smile more and try harder your mother will be better.

On the year anniversary of her commitment to the State Hospital, I visited my mother for the last time. My father and I drove up a long blacktop road towards the main building. Frightened, I clutched my grade card and my choral scores from state: I had all ones, with high praise from all the judges. Between my father and me sat a plate of cookies I had baked from one of my mother's recipes. They were a little brown on the bottom. I began to smell my own body, and my father's, both of us tired, cooped up in a warm car, nervous with anticipation. The State Hospital was like a campus, red brick buildings surrounded by lawn and trees; there were squirrels, and a softball diamond. My father knew which building contained my mother, and he pulled the car to the edge of the drive and put on the emergency brake. Then he sat there, both hands still on the wheel, perspiration beading in his eyebrows. He sighed. I looked at him, but he stared straight ahead. I looked toward the building: The windows were covered with black chain link, and I couldn't see inside. I couldn't believe my mother was in there. Suddenly, I didn't want to see her. Since she had been gone, I realized, I had pretended many things: that she was off on a trip; that she was somewhere like a regular hospital, as she had been one time for a hysterectomy; that she was dead and I would never see her again.

But she was in a red brick building. I pulled up the lock on the car door. My father came to life then, and hurried out, coming around to let me out. I still remember how slowly we walked up that sidewalk. I still remember how the walk was stained brown with walnuts the squirrels hadn't swept away. I still remember how my father strained against the oak double doors, so much that he passed gas: barely audible, but it embarrassed us both; I looked down. I still remember how suddenly small his shoes were, his feet tiny, as though not big enough to hold him, as though he might topple over any time and never get up.

We asked for my mother. We went into a large waiting room, nicely decorated, almost like the parlors or libraries in mansions on television, where butlers seat people waiting for somebody important. The room was

furnished with rugs, couches, magazines and books, floor lamps and stillness. I didn't sit down; neither did my father.

I suppose my father recognized her—he visited once a month back then—but I didn't, or wouldn't. I cringed at the woman who came towards us. Her face was swollen, as though she'd been crying the whole nine months since she'd seen me last. I looked to my father and he tried to smile. I tried to smile, too.

My mother was putting on weight. She looked like some circus clown huffed and puffed into balloon clothes: Her flesh pushed out the flexible polyester of her slacks; her blouse made little diamonds up and down the front where her stomach and chest strained against the buttons.

I sat down. She came towards me, trying to match my smile. She gave me her hand, a different hand than I'd ever seen before. It was soft and warm, but as swollen as her face. "Maggie," she said, and when I looked down, she used my childhood nickname: "Magpie." I began to cry. "Sure," she said, "I know it's hard. It's hard for me, too. Magpie, I'm trying to find myself. I'm finding my own true weight."

I don't remember much: how tired I was; how my mother and my father sat for long silent stretches; how the sun slanted through the west window and crept towards the sofa, marking the time until we could leave; how, when I reached for the plate of cookies I'd brought, we fumbled the exchange and they spilled onto the thin carpet, landing top side down, exposing their brown bottoms; how on the way home my father counted the long miles with self-pitying sighs of breath, until, just at our exit, he said, his voice as inflectionless as a computer, "Margaret, I don't think your mother will ever come home." By then, I was so confused I wasn't sure whether her being home would be any better or any different from her being gone. I should have known, somehow, that he had already found Stella.

After my shower I dressed and went back to the kitchen. It was early, so I put the lamb in a slow oven to give it plenty of time to drip juice onto the potatoes and onions, plenty of time to make the apartment smell rich and full. I wanted my neighbors to smell it, and my family to sense even at the door that this evening would be different from any other at my apartment. I turned the scallops in the lemon/lime juice, to "cook" on all sides. I set the table, small for six people, though I could serve everything but the rolls from the kitchen. I punched down the rolls to let them rise once more. Yeast is hopeful; it knows that someday, left alone, it will conquer the world. I washed the asparagus, and tied it into six bundles: I could break my father's bundle if he didn't show up. I would steam it slightly, keeping it green, just as my guests arrived. I took out the ingredients for the chocolate brandy sauce I would swirl over the hard-

frozen vanilla ice cream in my freezer. Everything was ready. I sat in my living room, smells surrounding me. I remember being young, in my mother's kitchen. My family would come and eat together, and after dinner I would budge the scales towards some new number.

During that second sad visit to the State Hospital so long ago, my mother said, not to me, but to my father: "You know, I'm learning. I'm really learning. I thought it was all me, that I was a terrible person, a terrible wife, a terrible mother. I'm not saying I'm not to blame for the way things turned out. But now I've learned I didn't do it by myself."

I turned away, not wanting to hear, not wanting to be included in what she said. She raised her swollen head to look at the cracks in the ceiling. Her hands shook, and she flattened them on the table. She stared at my father. He did not look at her, hadn't since we got there. The silence dragged out until I wanted to scream. Then she hissed: "Thanks for all your help, Frank."

My father twitched, smiled glumly at me, smirked into his hand. He stood up and walked around the furniture. When he returned, he gave her news of Mary, and Bob, and he talked about me, too, in the third person, as though I wasn't there. After she had heard enough, she rose from the edge of an old chair. "I don't care," she said, and we left. "I just can't care anymore."

I sat in my apartment. In the bathroom the little beady-eyed scales waited. I could wait, too. I knew that even the best of batteries drains into powerlessness. I waited for my family.

And while I waited, I imagined their arrival:

I will hear the knock on the door. I will greet Mary and Tom. Mary will try hard to hold back her jealousy: an elegant meal, a clean apartment, and me, doing better than usual. She will say something catty, like, "I didn't know your apartment could look so good," or, "I guess you learned to cook *after* you left home." Tom will stay perfectly quiet, a stupid smile on his face, his eyes and ears storing up things to say later.

Bob and Karen will arrive, Bob just back from Reserves, his hair cut as though he is still in the military, which he is and always will be. Karen will hold onto his arm, something he needs from her, like he needs his cigarettes. "No smoking," I will say, and he will pretend to be on fire, patting himself out, saying, "Didn't know I was." Only Karen will appreciate his old joke. I will be glad I'm single, and don't have to feign interest in the routines of domestic life, the stories and jokes performed over and over.

We will sit in my apartment waiting for my father. And I will screw up my courage. "He went to visit mother, you know," I will say, and the room will freeze. But I will be glad to remind them of her, to remind myself of

her. "I used her recipes," I will say. "Everything we're going to eat tonight is one of her favorite things to cook."

"She doesn't cook anymore," Mary will say.

"I couldn't stand to eat with her watching like she did," Bob will say. "She was always sauced, totally out of it. She was gone before she left."

"She was a good cook," I will say. "She was a good mother, too, as good as she could be." I will raise my voice, tears in my eyes.

And then the final knock. My father will stand in the hall, rocking on his small feet. I will look behind him, and see the woman, Stella. She will look like my mother looked when she was young, the same lean face, the same energy in the lines of her body, the same smile trying so hard to win me over without any work. Before he introduces her, I will slam the door in their faces.

Imagining the slamming door brought me up out of my chair. Suddenly, the lamb smelled bitter. I ran to the stove, and found the onions and potatoes blackening on the bottom. I tried some: crunchy, almost as though they'd been skillet-fried in the lamb-drippings. They were not beyond good taste. I put on the asparagus, opened the wine, and waited for the knock at the door,

At eight o'clock, I called Mary. Her machine answered: "I'm sorry we have to be away from the phone . . ." I didn't leave a message.

I called Bob. His machine answered: "We're away from the phone right now, but if you'll leave your name and number . . ." I didn't leave my name or number.

I called my father and hung up on his machine, too.

I turned off the asparagus. The wine and I sat at the dining table and breathed. I poured a glass and waited. I poured another, drank more slowly, enjoyed the slightly sour taste, the smooth slide down to a warming stomach.

I don't know when I knew beyond a doubt that none of my family would come for dinner: probably between the first and second bottles of wine; probably when I invited them. I ate.

I started with half the scallops. Then I sliced generous portions of lamb, ate the crisp onion and potatoes, ate the pound of asparagus, still a beautiful green. I ate more than I had eaten for years and years, and still I was hungry. I created my mother's chocolate brandy sauce and ate a pint of ice cream. Then I finished the wine. I watched the telephone sit silently on its cradle. I left the kitchen a mess.

Just before I fell into bed, I weighed myself on my new scales. I smiled drunkenly at my feet while the numbers swooped up and down like a bird in a cage. When they finally settled, I weighted 165. I almost shouted for joy. For one moment, I thought, sometime, somewhere, something was just a little bit different.

Fiction

Larry Loebell

My Grandfather's Denver

My grandfather was in the beauty supply business, and his territory was Denver. Denver, in the period between the wars, was barely a city by the standards of New York, where he had grown up. Indians still came to town to trade, and roamed the streets in their native dress. The tallest building was only seven stories, the Metals Exchange, a red sandstone monument to the gold and silver lords of a generation before. There was only one legitimate theater, although there were a number of vaudeville houses, and one other small civic auditorium, used for exhibitions during the stockmen's show in the fall and for the touring opera and an occasional speaker in the spring. Oscar Wilde had spoken there the year it was built, on his famous western tour. Of the six hotels, there were only two where a gentleman would consent to pass the night.

In the faded photos I have from then, my grandfather strikes me as a gentle, serious man. There are no surviving photos of him in which he is not dressed for business. His taste in clothing was conservative, medium gray suits, jackets with moderate lapels, tasteful ties, a chain and fob. In his forties he had all of his hair and showed no signs of graying. He was handsome and compact, but no amount of care in his dress or grooming erased his semitic nose or eyes.

The territory my grandfather covered also included what are now the cities of Westminster, Arvada, Lakewood, Englewood, and Littleton, the outlying towns which today attach to Denver proper and expanded it into a metropolis. They were ranching or farming or mining towns then, hours away on bad roads from his base of operations in one of the two good hotels in Denver's small downtown.

The outlying towns were rough and tumble. In both fashion and amenities, they were even farther behind his beloved New York than Denver itself. These towns were marked by their drabness. Low weathered-wood buildings were bunched together on narrow streets, the apparent logic being that to emulate a city, buildings *must* be crowding together, even though in actuality, there was prairie space enough for boulevards.

Town to town, in his outlying territory, there was a remarkable similarity. There was always a church, more often two of competing denominations. Saloons and general stores were the other most prominent buildings. By the mid nineteen twenties, each town had a gas station. The people, he found, were by turns loud and guarded. Saloon behavior found its way into the streets too often for his taste, yet elsewhere in public people kept their distance and answered a stranger's questions with stingy, colorless speech.

There were not many places for him to sell his goods in those towns. He sold hair soaps to the general stores, but his hennas and expensive curling equipment were city items. Even when there were beauty shops, they were most often one-person operations. Their orders were usually small, and rarely included the best items in his newest lines. Still, my grandfather went to each town dutifully, trying to build up his business and fulfill his obligation to the company that sent him on the road.

Further up the mountains, in the shimmering canyons, elegant hotels thrived, built over hot springs. In these therapeutic places, mineral baths and effervescent waters soothed the neuralgias of the rich. The wives and children of the western societies sneered at the residents of the outlying towns they had to suffer traveling through. They had no time for small town entertainments, the dedication of a monument to the war dead, the mayor cutting a ribbon to open a school, the yearly ice cream social, the July Fourth parade. They were modern, these daughters and granddaughters of lucky prospectors and beefsteak bankers. To them, nothing was worse than being thought of as provincial.

The mountain hotels held the customers my grandfather really ventured through the small towns to reach. Some of the hotels that were built over springs or mineral pools advertised the benefits of their waters in cities as far away as Chicago and New York, and three times a year they placed orders with my grandfather for soaps and restoring creams for use and resale in their salons. One premium line he sold could be wrapped with custom-printed labels featuring the name and a line drawing of the spa or hotel.

But it was always in Denver that my grandfather did the best. By the time my grandfather started his trips, the big money had all been made. The gold and silver booms were long done, and the feuding railroad companies had come and gone bust, or merged into the one company that ran all of the lines to the east, the Denver and Ohio. The main roads for automobiles were already complete. There were still occasional mineral finds and gold strikes, but the city had a feel of permanence. It was not a boom town anymore. It was filled with stockmen and mechanics and

salesmen and small businessmen, and a growing middle class to buy their services and wares.

In those days, Denver also attracted a fringe of nature fanatics. They were drawn to the abundant natural beauty which my grandfather felt inspired a kind of primitive hopefulness. And there was, undeniably, natural beauty. Coming from the east, after crossing the high prairie, the first view of the Rockies was humbling and ennobling, or so my grandfather claimed. But he was wary of the fanatics. He had once seen a photograph of a group of nudists walking in the German Alps, which, according to my grandmother, embarrassed him deeply. The caption called the nudists "naturalists" and said they believed in the power of the high mountain air to cure the diseases of man. My grandfather believed that there were such people living near Denver. He heard stories from the hot springs' salon matrons about how certain people practiced nudism at the spas, under the influence of one or another "celebrated" naturalist who promised his methods would cure ills and halt aging.

To my grandfather, the belief in natural cures was illogical; it flew in the face of science, which he trusted. He assumed naturalists and their followers were people who could not live orderly lives, who allowed irrational passions to induce them to behavior unbecoming civilized people. Civilized people, in my grandfather's view, maintained appearances, did not flout social convention, did not make spectacles of themselves. I do not doubt that in my grandfather's Denver, he saw himself as a civilizing force, bringing style and hygiene and the scientifically engineered accessories of health and beauty to the uncivilized, irrational west.

On his sales calls, my grandfather carried only a small sample case of the latest items. Hennas and combs and curling irons, always a perfume or two, and one or two of the newest fragrant hair soaps. At his hotel, he left his other two pieces of luggage: an oversize suitcase with replacement samples, and a leather valise of his own clothes. He was not a big tipper, but he was not a skinflint either. He calculated the percent to the nearest dime, and always rounded up, a practice my grandmother maintained, as did my mother. He was a careful man, a business traveler, whose aspiration was to be recognized only as successful. Extravagance was not his style.

My grandfather's customers were mostly men, although all of his products were for women. While he was conscientious to visit all of the small shops, his best customers were beauty schools and large shops. In the large shops, as many as twenty chairs would be lined up, and women would fill them from opening until closing.

My grandfather's firm had several product lines. Products were rotated and upgraded and relabeled on a regular basis. They were,

however, often renamed with a sense of poetry that made him wince. He was not a huckster, my grandfather, but a gentleman merchant, and a reader of literature. Venus Flower Bath Oil, Mist of the Western Hills Shampoo, Golden Tresses Henna Solution embarrassed him, so he avoided the names and instead extolled the virtues. He practiced his pitch in front of the mirror in his hotel room, honing and shortening it to get the most information in the shortest space. He did not want to seem like he was lecturing. Friendly and informative, he told my grandmother, was the style he strove for. Between trips, at home in Philadelphia, he practiced his pitch on her or my mother. My mother remembers him calling her mister so-and-so, pretending she was an important shop owner.

My grandfather's sales technique also included giving samples to the shop owners to give as gifts to their wives or daughters. In this way, he felt, his new products were immediately in the hands of the people with the power to buy them. He also always left samples of his newest items for the shops to try in the chairs where their newest girls worked. In large shops there were always one or two chairs devoted to the new girls, girls who had just finished their training at beauty schools and were on trial in their first jobs. His theory was that if they associated their early successes with his products they would become loyal customers. When everyone else was watching and doubting, he was trusting them with the latest lines.

I do not know *exactly* how well his products sold, although my grandmother lived well and my mother said that as children she and her sisters never wanted for anything. My grandfather owned his own house and had the clothing and accessories of a gentleman. He was a generous and conscientious provider. My grandmother claimed to have never had to pay a bill herself because he took care of everything so well, even paying in advance obligations like the mortgage payments that would come due while he was on the road. Their house was filled with overstuffed furniture and department store conveniences. They had the first electric Victrola on their block. And they traveled from Philadelphia to New York twice every year to see the latest plays on Broadway and to shop in the fashionable stores. My mother had seen the Lunts twice as a teenager, and the Marx Brothers on stage. She had seen the plays of Robert Anderson, and Odetts, and had seen Robeson in *The Emperor Jones.* My grandfather taught his children that they could understand everything if they paid attention. He believed that literature "is a window into yourself" and that "even the unpleasant views help you understand your place in the world." I know he said these things because I heard them, repeated as a kind of catechism by my mother, during my own childhood.

What I really know about him, however, I know because he sent penny post cards home, one a day for each day he was on the road, for every trip

he made, for over twenty years. They were his way of keeping his presence felt, of reminding my grandmother of the work he did to support her and their children. They stretch across time and space, a remarkable diary, three sets of cards each year. My grandmother, who saved everything, saved them all.

It is from the cards that I learned the names of the places in his territory, and how he felt about his customers and his work. Each postcard had the hotel name and the town name as the return address, written neatly at the top left in fountain pen. The address of my grandmother's house, which was where I grew up, was larger and centered below. The message, on the reverse side, followed a tight form. The first sentence always began, "Today I am in the town of _____." Next, he would say where he was going on his day's sales call, then categorize the weather, poor, fair, or exceptional. It was usually fair. Next, he would elaborate on how things were going, always in an encouraging tone. "I sold two full repeat orders today," he might say, or "I met with a new prospect today at the salon at the _____ hotel." The penultimate sentences of every card were devoted to the description of town, or a store, or a road, or a view of the mountains from his hotel or a roadside overlook, or a restaurant or a holiday celebration. He was inevitably away on holidays, and though we were Jewish, my mother claimed she and her mother and sisters missed him most on Christmas when every other family seemed blissfully whole. The cards always ended with descriptions of people, sometimes customers or just people he had met during the day. Sometimes he would quote a sentence or two of conversation he heard, or an argument. He transcribed with an ear for the nuances of the local style, and with an affection for people that I believe has shaped me both as a writer and as a man. A typical card reads, "Today is my second day in Arvada. I will be returning to Denver this evening. The weather is fair. My sales concluded well yesterday; two medium shops restocked all soaps and shampoos. I lunched today in a tavern where I had never eaten before. The bar was over thirty feet of polished marble. On the new road between Denver and Arvada, I chatted with a mechanic in a four-pump filling station where I stopped for gas. He was a former ensign. He said, 'I ain't so good with internal combustion as I was with steam.' He adjusted my carburetor. He was polite, and he didn't overcharge. Love, Father."

My grandfather always wrote in a straightforward style, in good sentences; his grammar rarely varied and was always correct. He liked keeping his nouns before his verbs, a reaction, I think, to the German he had spoken as a boy. When my grandmother or my mother talked to other people about him, they would frequently repeat one of his observations, as if it had come to them in a conversation with him, rather than a letter. Long after

my grandfather was dead, my grandmother continued to do this when she talked about him, speaking as if the information in the postcards had come from pillow talk.

In the years the cards came regularly in the mail, my mother has told me, my grandmother had a ritual for reading them. After the mail arrived, but before she would let herself absorb a word, she would get the box where she kept all my grandfather's previous cards. She never read the latest one until her whole collection was on her lap. Then she sat in the chair that, even years after she died, and through my whole childhood, was called "Grandma's chair," and read the new card, turning it from front to back with the precision of a teacher checking the form of an assignment. She never commented or registered expression. Over dinner, hours later, my grandmother reported her husband's whereabouts to his children and took their questions. She offered the latest installment in the story of her husband's life in tiny bits until her daughters, begging, teasing and cajoling, got her to read the card aloud to them. It was a game, her hoarding and parsing out the information, prolonging each discussion, making his absence into a presence.

The cards themselves were off limits to her children; they were absolutely her own possessions, and she was a miser with them. When she finished reading one at dinner, even before the table was cleared, my mother tells me my grandmother would leave the table, retrieve the box and file the new card in its proper place, in order behind all of the previous ones. She laced the latest one into the appropriate ribbon, each ribbon designating a trip, and placed the ribboned bundle in the back of the box, in the correct chronological position behind those that had come before.

The box itself was a wooden glove box my grandfather had brought her from a trade show in New York City shortly after they had gotten married. Meant for under-counter storage of ladies' gloves, the box was the work of a real craftsman, from thin sheets of split cedar, glued and pegged together with mortised joints, then sanded and oiled smooth. The lid was hinged with brass, and a hook and eye held it shut. It was a box meant to hold the beautiful ephemera of an age which believed that things like ladies' gloves were treasures.

I remember perfectly how much I coveted that box the first time I saw it, so much better than the cigar boxes I kept my baseball cards in. But it only became mine when I became an adult. Each year on the anniversary of his death, my grandmother lit a yahrzeit—a memorial candle—for my grandfather, and, in a ritual no less precise than the one she had practiced each time she received a new card, my grandmother took out the box and reread all of the cards. She started after breakfast, sitting in her chair reading and turning them over, one by one, in her lap. It took until nearly

dinner. I stayed particularly quiet if I happened to be home, partly out of respect and partly because that was what my grandmother expected. Through all of those years, she kept the cards sorted by trip, arranged by year, with each year banded neatly together. She read silently but moved her lips to form each word, assuring herself that no word would be missed.

My grandfather died the year before I was born. He had a heart attack. He was home, between trips, when it happened. My parents, who had lived in a small apartment a dozen blocks away since my father came back from the Pacific after the war, moved in with my grandmother and gradually turned her house into theirs. I was raised as much by her as by my own mother, who worked as a court reporter. My grandmother loved me as if I was her own child until I turned 13, and then I became too much for her—my reckless adolescence at odds with her sense of order, my teenage expressions of independence taken by her as defiance. From the time I was 13 until I moved out to go to college five years later, everything I did seemed to anger her. And so I was angry back, not because I had any real cause to be, but because I did not know what I had done to displease her, and her harsh dismissal of me felt completely unjust. Without giving them a chance, my grandmother seemed to dislike every choice I made, my friends, my girlfriends, the books I read, the music I liked, the clothes I wore, everything I did and said. We were simply at war during those years.

As she had declared it begun, it was my grandmother who declared the war over. It stopped as inexplicably as it had started, and suddenly she seemed fond of me again, and considered me all grown up. I was 18 and about to move out for college. One Sunday in late August my grandmother called me to her room. I had been working all day to get packed. I did not know who I would be once I got to college, what books or clothes would be the right ones to have. In my room I tossed things into boxes or back into the closet or onto my shelves in a kind of triage, hoping I was making the right choices, mildly irritated that I had to make such choices in the first place. When my grandmother called me from her room, I remember my irritation rising, sure that something I had done had set her off, and I would now hear about it.

I discovered that what my grandmother wanted was a moment to speed me on my way, to recognize that I was about to be on my own in the world, and to give me a present with her good wishes. For her gift, she gave me a tortoise shell and natural bristle hairbrush that used to be my grandfather's. It was something that she must have known I was unlikely to ever use. I wore my hair long then, which was the fashion, and combed, but never brushed it back into a pony tail. The set, undoubtedly expensive when he bought it, was not the kind of thing I thought I would have much use for. It was very ornate, the traveling brush a gentleman would carry, with a matching shell

slipcase that also held a mirror. I opened and separated the pieces, and then closed them back up, knowing it was destined to be shoved to the back of my dresser drawer along with the broken gift watches and fountain pens I felt I had no permission to throw out. She accepted my thanks by nodding and then told me that she had a piece of advice for me. She told me she knew that when I went off to school and then out into the world I would inevitably fall in love. She wanted me to know that it was her belief that each person found only one true love of his life; she advised that I make my choice carefully.

I had the good sense not to argue with her. If I had, I would have told her that there were already a few people I knew with whom love seemed possible, and college seemed to me to be a place where the world would open infinitely outwards. This was the late '60s. The last thing I wanted to be told was to be careful in love. Friends of mine came back from San Francisco talking about the Summer of Love. Love was the by-word of my high school graduating class. But I didn't argue. I just danced uncomfortably foot to foot in my grandmother's room, holding her morbid gift in my hands, making small talk and plotting my getaway.

In the weeks before she died, my grandmother was in and out of her mind. She had fallen one day while she was out walking, and broken her hip. She was nearly eighty-eight years old. The injury itself was not really serious, and, in fact, her hip healed. But the fall had broken her spirit, and in a short time the family recognized that she was going to die. My parents and I visited her regularly in the nursing home where we had expected her to recover, talking among ourselves about her continued decline, but to her face, always being cheery, encouraging, upbeat. At times, she seemed to accept that she could mend if she just put her mind to it, but at times she raged against what we took to be imaginary or at least exaggerated villains—doctors who hurt her while examining her, nurses who taunted her, crazy women who came to take her jewelry and clothing in the night. We had thoroughly investigated the nursing home, and we grew resigned that my grandmother's symptoms included a form of hallucination. It seemed clear that her decline was going to be rapid, but then she fooled us all and began to behave as if she would be well and home soon.

By the time my grandmother asked me to bring her the box of cards, she seemed nearly well. She had progressed to walking short distances, dressing herself for meals, and talking civilly with her nurses and orderlies. She gave me exact instructions on where to find the box and how to carry it so as not to spill its contents. I had not lived at home for nearly two years by then, and the whole enterprise felt funny to me. I went while my parents were at work, and I felt like a burglar breaking into her room.

When I was sitting with her in her room at the nursing home, the box of cards on my lap, my grandmother asked what about the cards interested me. I answered politely that they had been so important to her that I just wanted to read them. I said that since I had heard her and my mother tell my grandfather's stories it would be great to finally read them. I did not say that I was curious to read the cards in the same way I had been curious to read books I had been forbidden to read as a young teenager, *because* they had been forbidden; at the same time I sensed that I would be disappointed, that they would pale in comparison to what I imagined.

For a moment, there was silence between us as if she expected me to say more. Then, when she was sure I was finished, she broke it. There is, she said, a picture of your grandfather and a woman behind the past packet of cards. Take it out and look at it. I shimmied the cedar top loose and flipped to the back of the cards, and found the picture. Then my grandmother told me that she had found the picture among my grandfather's things after he died. I looked closely at the shot. It was a faded black-and-white, wallet-size shot, mounted in a small cardboard mat, obviously taken by one of those roving photographers at a resort hotel. The date, May, 1936, was embossed under the shot. The woman was blond, as strikingly Nordic as my grandfather was semitic. I looked at the picture a while. My grandfather was wearing a suit, the woman a loose dress. They were sitting at a table together in what seemed to be a restaurant or club, a partially finished meal on the table in front of them. A bottle of wine opened and standing on the table. My grandfather was turned in his seat to face the camera, but the shot favored her.

My grandmother told me the woman's name, and that the woman had been my grandfather's lover. She said it as if she were telling me the time, flatly, without expression. She said that the woman was the wife of one of my grandfather's regular customers in Denver, the owner of a large salon. She was a beautician. My grandmother told me that while she had believed for years that it was going on, it was not until after his death that she had a face to attach to her knowledge.

To avoid meeting her eyes, I stared at the photo. It occurred to me that perhaps she was hallucinating, performing a calmer version of her thieves-in-the-night story from a few weeks earlier. But she went on, so lucidly that she chased away all memory of her recent illness, her voice growing stronger as she talked. She told me she was not angry, nor did she think it mattered much if she blamed or forgave him. It had not changed anything in her life, she said, not what she felt for him, not a single choice she had made. She merely wanted someone to know that she had known all along. She was sure they had met on his first trip, and that he saw her regularly when he was in Denver, for over twenty years. She told me how she believed

they were able to arrange their time, relying on the husband's punctual opening and closing of his shop. She was sure that the husband did not know, or if he did, chose to take the same course as she, and not disrupt the order of his life for the knowledge. Then, with a wave to distance herself from the cards, which now sat like dead weight on my lap, she told me to take the cards and read them. For her, they were ancient history. It was possible that nothing he had ever written was the way he said it was. She didn't know, but she said it didn't matter. Then pointing to the cards in my lap again she said, this is what matters, that he wrote every day.

Aside from not knowing what to say to her about my grandfather, I was immediately worried what my own parents would think about all of this. I wanted to leave, fearing that they would show up for a visit and find me with the box and ask me why I had it. I had no idea if my mother expected the cards or the box to be hers after my grandmother died. I was sure my mother knew nothing of what her mother had just told me about her father. When I stood to go, my grandmother reached out and touched my arm. She said, I want you to know something else. Two years ago I gave you your grandfather's brush, when you were about to leave for college. I didn't think you would ever really use it. If you still have it, go open it and look into the brush. You will find a blond hair, twisted around the bristles. I believe it is her hair. Maybe it will bring you luck in love, or remind you that secrets often reveal themselves. I have tried to imagine how that hair got into the brush. There is nothing as unsettling as that kind of imagining. Perhaps they were motoring and the wind undid her, and he was merely being the gentleman. Or perhaps they had finished a session of love and he was brushing her, sitting behind her as he did with me. He loved her, either way, and I know it because of the care he took to conceal it. From this care, I knew how much she mattered.

I made my escape, that's what it felt like, and took the cards home to my apartment. My grandmother improved for a few weeks until one day she died. My mother mourned, then began to rid the house of evidence of my grandmother, piece by piece, not eliminating but controlling her presence, her influence. My mother never asked about the cards or seemed to miss them. They were gone with my grandmother, as her ritual of reading them was gone.

But I read them and puzzled over my grandmother's giving them to me. Then, eventually, I put them away. What they revealed was all on the surface, in the descriptions and short portraits of the people he met on the road. Other than the picture, and the single blond hair, which I found as she said I would, there was nothing to suggest that my grandmother was not the love of my grandfather's life. No one remembered them as anything but happy. Aside from his absences while on the road, all accounts had him

a doting husband and father. I found nothing more. Within a year I was married, within two I had a child. The box of cards and the brush I stored with the large-gauge Lionel trains I had played with as a kid, which I retrieved from my parents' house when I finished graduate school and my wife and I bought our first house. I put the cards away. I forgot them.

The occasion of my remembering occurred a dozen years later. I am on the American Airlines jet to Denver to attend the wedding of a friend. I sit in the aisle trying not to think about the dangers of flying. My son navigates out of the window, looking at the country my grandfather traveled over to reach Denver for the first time over fifty years before. My wife reads a novel called *In Every Woman's Life* by Alix Kates Shulman. She sits turned in her seat so that the back cover faces me. The blurb promises that the book is about two women, one married but with a younger lover, one single, with a long involvement with a married man.

Ahead of me, somewhere in the night, is the city which descended from my grandfather's Denver. I try to imagine what my grandfather wanted for his life, what hardships he sought to stave off, what balances he fought to maintain. And ahead of me, already in that city I know so far only from my grandfather's descriptions, there to attend the same wedding we are traveling to, is a woman who, for the past several years, has been my lover.

The woman and I have known each other for nearly a decade. She is somewhat younger than me. She is also married. How and where we met are unimportant, only that we became lovers and have remained so.

We have never spent a night together. This is only significant in that it explains the form of our relationship. Once, we spent a long evening making love, talking and touching. But we were apart many hours before morning. Most times, we can steal a few hours, two or three at most, perhaps once or twice a year. Still, there is something between us, on the deepest level of intimacy, that we seem unable to give up. Some attraction. Some need. Not obsession or driving passion. Something else.

As the plane begins its descent, I begin to invent possible denouements for my trip to Denver for the wedding. The first one that occurs to me is that my wife and my lover ignore the propriety and formality of the wedding and do battle, having it out with each other in a public display. This is made more delicious because I am to speak at the wedding about commitment, about how it is more ennobling, if more difficult, to take life's challenges as a couple than alone.

Another outcome I entertain is that they each find a moment to torture me about the other, each seeking a lasting promise of fidelity or commitment and it is left to me to choose.

Finally, I imagine myself, the day before the wedding, driving downtown to the central library to spend hours leafing through old city directo-

ries to find the names of beauty shops which operated in my grandfather's Denver. Six names ring a bell, though it is all fuzzy since it has been so long since I have read the cards. In the late afternoon I take the addresses and visit the shops, talking to the owners. Some have merely bought the shops from previous owners. One woman is the niece of the owner from my grandfather's Denver, but her grandmother was not a beautician. At the last shop on my list, the beautician tells me that the granddaughter of the original owner still owns the shop, and she disappears into the back to call her. I hear the name I have written on the paper I hold in my hand being sung up the stairs in the back, to the house above the shop. Shortly a woman of my own age appears. She is friendly but reserved, though in a short time we discover that both know the same story, that her grandmother was the woman in my grandfather's picture. The conversation soon shifts to us, and we chat about ourselves. At least I do. I want to impress her with my worldliness, show her how well the grandson of her grandmother's lover has done for himself, but she seems uninterested in my television credits and my magazine short stories. She is the descendant of my grandfather's Denver, where there were only two theaters and a single multi-purpose hall. She is a listener, not a talker. Words come from her as if pried out. She is uneasy with the gossipy tone I use to tell the story of my grandfather and her grandmother. Talking to her, I am suddenly aware of him, of how he would have written home about her. I face her, standing in her shop, a child of New York, and know that to her there is no utility in the old story, just a curiosity from a life and time long gone. We have nothing in common but this slim bittersweet connection, deep in the past. In the course of our conversation the one thing she tells me is that as far as she knows, her grandfather never knew about my grandfather, and that even if he did, it didn't seem to have any effect on her grandparents' lives. They were happy, settled, content. They raised children, had grandchildren, lived together in peace. After a while I leave, knowing we will never talk to each other again.

In fact, none of this happens. We arrive, go to the rehearsal dinner and, the next day, to the wedding. Everything is a tremendous success. The guests all arrive on time, the participants in the wedding all get their lines straight. I make my speech about relationships. Afterwards, at the reception, I get mildly drunk. I stand next to my lover for a few minutes. I get close enough to let my hand graze along her leg, to give her ass a single, mild squeeze. I shake hands with her husband. My wife and I go out to a club after the reception and have a great time. We go back to our hotel room and make love to each other, meaning it deeply. No one does anything, no one forces anything to happen, and nothing changes. Everyone is happy with the choices. We are all happy with our lives.

Flying home, I sit by the window and watch the ascent. The plane takes off heading west and flies in a rising arc toward the mountains before turning east and climbing to its cruising altitude. I realize, as I watch, that in a matter of minutes we have flown across my grandfather's entire territory. As we level off, I look back at Denver below me. The downtown skyline of glass and steel vaults skyward, a sleek parody of the mountains. Driving through it on our way from the airport to the wedding, no one had seemed to live there, no old houses clustered near the new commercial buildings. What business is now transacted there is the neat, modern kind, legal and economic and governmental. Food markets and hardware stores and pharmacies and beauty parlors are mostly elsewhere, in malls in the sprawling suburbs, which were the remote towns of my grandfather's time. Aside from the view of the mountains my grandfather saw in the distance from his downtown hotel, there seems to be little surface resemblance between this Denver and the one he wrote home from for all those years. Yet I can't shake the feeling that perhaps things have changed less than it appears.

Next to me, ignoring the view, my wife is finishing her novel. Soon she will turn to me, offer to play cards or suggest we jointly tackle the Sunday crossword puzzle. I study her, trying to decide if she believes I have a lover.

If she does, she behaves as if it is nothing that changes how she and I are together. It is outside of our life. I believe she has had her lovers as well. We do not talk about it, at least not that way. We honor certain long-held agreements not to hurt each other, not to imprison each other, not to ever stop caring enough to work things out. We talk about what we share. We are modern. Life is good to us, and we love each other. We make a ceremony of saying so, and observe the rituals we create. From my grandfather's Denver there were postcards daily, describing weather, towns and people. In our city there are phone calls between her office and mine, there is small talk and people and daily tasks. And there is the weather. These things assure us of our connections, of our civility, of our choices.

A few weeks after the wedding, copies of the photos arrive. I am home to receive the mail. I am waiting to hear about a story I have sent to an editor. There is one shot of me standing next to my lover. I am not looking at her. I am looking across the room to where the bride is dancing with her new husband. In my line of vision in the photo, my wife stands, also looking at the newly wed couple. Like me in the picture, she is beaming, happy for them.

I think about this new couple, our friends, and about the legacies they have received and will leave, and then find my thoughts wandering to my own family. How will my son read the evidence he receives about my life,

about the lives of his parents? Will my wife take him aside one day, tell him a story similar to the one my grandmother told me? What evidence would she provide? One photo? One strand of hair wound in a man's brush? Will he sift my fiction for autobiography? Would he find anything to throw into doubt the evidence of my devotion to him? Or his parents to each other? I think about my grandmother and my grandfather, their intimacy and their secrets. I think about how, for fiction, we suspend disbelief, yet to hold to the course of our life requires we maintain belief. And I think about how, at curious times, one serves the other.

Looking at the picture from the wedding, it occurs to me that it is impossible to read what it reveals about its subjects. We are merely guests at a wedding, toasting a proposition that we hope will work. I take the picture and put it away, in the back of the box that contains the cards sent to my grandmother from my grandfather's Denver.

Lisbeth Kent

The Crossover Effect

I tell the tabloids that I got my first break during that awful cold spell a couple years ago. I was the person waiting for a bus on Hennepin Avenue whose boots froze to the ground. A weather feature which our local station taped was picked up by the network and broadcast all over the country on the six o'clock news. They didn't use my name or face, just the sound my elbow made when it cracked on the sidewalk and a close-up of my boots. Overshoes you'd call them. Black, with big buckles. The fact is, yes, I did buy them at the Salvation Army. Most of my co-workers remarked that they saw the spot and recognized me. For one morning, at least, I got all the attention I could handle. That afternoon I decided to become an exciting star of daytime television.

People in publicity tell me not to stretch my story, just be myself: parttime food taster. I work in the kitchen laboratory of a Fortune 500 company located in a major Midwestern city. Enough said. My privacy is pretty important these days.

To tell the truth I've paid my dues. My first job was as a voice recording Eight Hundred announcements. I had just what the CEO was looking for: pure Minnesota tones and uncorrupted pronunciation. "Act now . . . In Nebraska . . . With the money you save . . . ." My phrases rang with credibility and hope, and the switchboard was flooded with calls for the bonus gift, a 12-inch ceramic *Singin' in the Rain* plate decorated with Donald O'Connor's face.

That role didn't give me much physical exposure—who needs it in the middle of winter?—but it was a stepping stone to greater things the next week. Actually, I was the stone and the job was the slingshot that catapulted me into a dream-come-true assignment. *Weather with Wendi.* I didn't care that Wendi wasn't my real name, or even the real spelling of Wendy. My career was launched!

Wendi's viewing area extends to every soybean field in the state. Anywhere you can plunk down a satellite dish. After I'd been on camera a while our research department cooked up a deal with a public opinion

firm to test a new electronic measuring device. Were they surprised! Audience data showed that a certain point in time at least 57 percent of the rural population believed that Wendi would do a better job representing their interests in Washington than either of the state's two senators. There I was, making news again, and this time right while I was announcing it.

I didn't discuss my show much at the lab. It's hard to know what to say to people, especially when you're not sure if they like you. And after all, what's more banal than the weather? On the day we were eating fritters seasoned with pepper rather than nutmeg—what's called "testing the margin of error"—I made what I thought was a low-profile, yet relevant, remark. "Some of the spices in my cupboard at home are a little stale," I said.

They were all over me. "Wow, Charlotte, that's fascinating. Which ones?" "Have you tried storing them in the fridge?" "Just throw them out, why don't you?" The product supervisor, Kevin Miller, is a tan young man who took over the No-Fry Fritter account last summer just before his divorce became final. He looked right at my face and said, "I bet you're the kind of girl who uses lots of garlic."

I was attracting attention the way a baby attracts politicians. People started asking me when to cover their tomatoes and whether they'd need to wear rubbers if they went out at night. Kevin Miller stuck his head in the door one Friday afternoon and almost pleaded with me. "About that sixty percent chance of rain, Charlotte. I promised to take my kids to Valley Fair on Sunday. They'll tear my apartment apart if we have to stay inside."

I considered inviting them all to the studio on the weekend, but then decided no, our enhanced color maps are inappropriate for preschoolers.

I imagined Kevin's ex-wife lying in bed all morning while those two little guys fended for themselves. Sugar-coated cereal from the box and tussles over who got to push the buttons on the remote control. Just the thought that his children might see me spurred on my campaign for a concept-oriented educational base to routine weather spots. I began to report on glaciers breaking into fjords—right there they learned where the Probilof Islands are located—and aerosol data collected from the troposphere.

In a week the management was ready to gamble on me; I was ripe for KidVid. We created *Wendi's World*, the first juvenile series weather-show-spinoff-not-affiliated-with-a-public station. An Emmy statuette paid tribute to the program.

Wendi's World came up against a couple initial obstacles. One: my reputation was established as a weather maven. How do you dethrone an institution without losing the audience crossover effect? Two: preschoolers today are considered part of the post-verbal MTV-influenced

population. Would we have to go with rock audios? We jumped both hurdles and made it look easy. Flashy weather visuals. The executive producer himself scripted my opening. "Boys and girls, have you ever wondered how to tell when the sun will set?" I asked. "The distance between your pointer finger and your pinky when your arm is outstretched is fifteen percent of the sky. Just count how many hand spans you measure between the sun and the horizon." Of course I cautioned them to look to the side of the sun.

I believe that the rating stats on the pilot were so high because I pitched my delivery to two real children out there, not to a Nielsen box. And also because we offered coupons redeemable for a limited time only for a Wendi doll. The sponsor, sensitive to charges of role model stereotyping, packaged her in an androgynous tank top. The lightning bolt earrings were for continuity.

That was happening in public. In private my ratings topped off the charts. During coffee breaks I often asked the magic questions Wendi wrote on her red balloon. "Can you spot the synonym for angry? Happy, glad or mad? For afraid? Angry, sad or scared?" My fellow food tasters responded with the rapt attention of a live studio audience.

When Kevin tracked down a bunch of us in the cafeteria last week, his interest in me was apparent from his sly smile. "So here's where The Fun and The Breathless hang out," he said. "We've got a fresh batch of fritters in the oven. Back to the kitchen, girls."

His little pun started my wheels spinning. Educational television will never have the cachet of adult programming. Learning isn't sexy. True, Wendi had become a hot commercial property, but what about Charlotte? The posts in those jagged earrings were made of cheap metal and I had developed an infection in my left ear lobe.

Everything pointed in one direction. I needed a legitimate vehicle to showcase my talent. Amelia Earhart, Marian Anderson, Wallis Simpson. They'd found an arena. Open your eyes, I thought. The media teems with women who stand tall. That week I decided to star in black-and-white made-for-TV movies being filmed in the thirties. In each feature I wore a bolero jacket and a single strand of pearls. Makeup shaved my eyebrows and pencilled in skinny new ones that looked like little eyelashes pasted to my forehead.

Just try to fly across Africa in a bush plane and keep the seams in your hose straight. That's what I had to do in *Bantu!*, the last of the dark continent adventures we made. I land in a remote outpost on the banks of the Zambezi River where I expect to be reunited with my husband. He's a stuffy engineer who's been hired to oversee construction of a hydroelectric plant. As soon as I step out of the plane the camera pans to a native whose

eyes bulge out of his head. That gives me a chance to check my stockings. He runs off to find my husband, yelling, "Bwana, Bwana. Big iron bird. Flap flap." By that time I've fallen in love with the pilot. The moral dilemma is resolved when my husband is killed by savages who make frightening clicking noises with their tongues.

The story wouldn't wash today. Not with the emphasis on multiple, overlapping plots and minority hiring procedures. Furthermore, you'd have to be nuts to hang around the river basin now that the equatorial rains have started. I'm thoroughly enjoying my solitude this weekend. I had forgotten how luxurious a long soak in a warm tub can feel.

I am experiencing some modest loss at home. Cost overrun. The temperature's been in the twenties at night for the last three weeks, so yesterday I had the heat on. I bring home as many of the rejected fritters as I want, but those outtakes aren't exactly bankable. High in calories; low in nutritional value. Too bad, since my ear infection persists. If part-time employees received any health benefits I'd make an appointment with Dr. Bob at work. Everyone says our company wellness center is state-of-the-art.

Kevin said I should try one of the leading pain relievers recommended by more doctors. That man's tuned in to my air waves. His remark zeroed right in on my next assignment: Darn right! A commercial! And not one of those chintzy 15-second spots, either. Tomorrow I start shooting for the Qwik-Fry Cruller people.

"You put those things away at a remarkable rate," Kevin said this morning when he collected the evaluation forms on the last twelve fritters I'd eaten. "Is that what makes you so cheerful?"

"Oh, lots of days I wake up happy just because I don't have a piece of dirt in my eye," I answered. Lately Kevin and I never seem to run out of things to talk about.

"Whatever you say," he said. "By the way, Mr. Gardner wants to see you in his office. Now."

If he'd hung around another minute I would have asked him what was up. Something important, I knew. Mr. Gardner is our branch manager. When I got in the elevator I took the pearls out of my purse and put them around my neck. The public is disoriented when I'm out of character.

One thing struck me as soon as I sat down in his office. Mr. Gardner wouldn't film well. He's got sticky-looking yellow hair that gleams as though he shampoos with chlorine. In fact he swims for an hour every morning in the company pool. A body buff. It's common knowledge that he spends more time in the gymnasium than in the board room.

"Well, now," he said, looking at a piece of paper. "Charlotte, is it? Sit down. Sit down." He cleared his throat and opened the folder in front of

him. "I like to think of all of us here in the kitchen branch as one big happy family," he said. "One way to keep things happy is periodic personnel reviews. Rest assured that everything we say today will be confidential." When he shuffled the papers I could see that my fritter forms had been photocopied.

"Production is profit, Charlotte," he said. "It's my job to see that people are productive. Gossip, on the other hand, is unprofitable."

His voice arched across the desk and landed in my lap like a spitball. Why did I have the feeling I didn't want to read the message crumpled inside of it?

"You report to Mr. Miller, Mr. Miller reports to me, and I report to the senior staff," he was saying. "For that reason alone I want you to be honest with me. It's all right here, Charlotte, in Mr. Miller's handwriting." He tapped the folder. "Everyone in the kitchen is talking about your television career. Tell me, young lady, what are all these rumors about?"

Rumors! Doesn't that man read *Variety*? "Mr. Gardner," I exclaimed. "I'd hardly call preliminary projections of an audience of 32 million a rumor."

"Charlotte," he interrupted, "I have a personal stake in getting to the bottom of this. Just tell me the truth." He fiddled with the magnifying glass on his desk. Too vain to put on glasses, I suppose, and too farsighted to read without them. He'd have to tone down the nervous mannerisms before he'd be cast as Sherlock Holmes.

"I'm glad to help you, Mr. Gardner," I said. "What's the question?"

"For starters," he said slowly, "what channel can your program be seen on?"

I could have answered that negotiations are underway right this minute to sell dubbed reruns of my weather spots. There's even speculation about bidding from a foreign market. I'm no novice. Let something like that out of the bag and the competition is likely to stab you in the back. "Not on any channel," I answered.

Mr. Gardner stopped fidgeting and beamed. "Thank you, Charlotte. Thank you. I'm glad to hear you say that. I guess we can put this little matter to rest. Now, back to the kitchen with you." He slapped the folder shut and rolled back in his chair.

"Not on any channel right now," I amended. "Once we finish taping my commercial you'll be able to see me on all the channels in the basic cable tier."

"Your commercial? Tell me about your commercial. Tell me the whole story, Charlotte." Mr. Gardner rolled back up to his desk and squinted at me. I guess he knew that was the kind of invitation an artist can't refuse.

"First of all," I said, "picture two little tykes with those adorable raspy voices all kids have these days. They're in the kitchen with me at breakfast time. I stand with my back to the camera, about to drop the crullers into a sizzling pan, when a man who looks an awful lot like Kevin Miller comes up behind me. He's my husband. I'm wearing a softly draped peach-colored dressing gown, satin, the kind without buttons or a zipper. Just a long sash around my waist. Then Kevin smooths his hands over my hips and nuzzles up to the side of my neck. 'Gee, I hope that's not full of saturated fat,' he whispers. The closeups presented a problem—my ear lobe is still crusty—until we decided to change the camera angle, so now we're a little behind . . ."

Was I ever glad to see Mr. Gardner put his head down and cover his eyes at that point. "I can't—" he started.

"I know. I'm sorry I got carried away," I said. What an error in judgment. As soon as I mentioned the peach robe and Kevin's pressing against me from the rear I could tell he was getting uncomfortable. Anybody with as much libido as Mr. Gardner exhibits probably needs to work out a lot.

His voice seemed to falter. "Charlotte, your, ah, perspective on this commercial thing . . ."

"Mr. Gardner, it's the public who has things out of perspective," I explained. His naïveté was touching. "It thinks of television as a car chase through the woods or double-entendre in the bedroom. Sex and violence. Prime time stuff. But without advertising there wouldn't be any programs. Advertising is the true content of TV."

"Let me approach this from another angle," he said. "Your work here is above reproach. As a matter of fact"—he looked at the forms again and raised his eyebrows—"you seem to be remarkably efficient. So I'm going to do something special, Charlotte. I'm going to recommend that you visit our wellness center. Work out. Use the weight machines. And while you're at it, get a complete physical. Tell Dr. Bob about your television career. Then come back and see me in a couple weeks when I have his report.

"One more thing." His eyebrows knotted into a snarl. "You've had your fun. Now can it. Do I make myself clear?" This man is straight out of the message-heavy fifties, I thought, but I nodded as though he were perfectly up-to-date.

"In plain English, Charlotte, quit this television crap."

On my way back to the kitchen I concluded that Mr. Gardner is a sourpuss. He was asking me to set aside a sensational career when I'm almost at the top. My agent says that when I lose a few pounds he'll get me an audition for the soap opera I've been dreaming about. Those darn ten pounds that always show up on the screen. Mr. Gardner made himself

clear, all right. If I don't resign from the commercial he'll fire me. Just like that. Bing. Bing. Bing. No job, no salary, no fritters for the weekend.

If I do resign, then what? I'm right back where I started. Bing. Bing. Bing. No friends. No attention. No nothing. Jobs are scarce in the Midwest. Besides, quitting isn't in my contract.

Thank goodness I was alone in the elevator. One big happy family, I thought. Spare me your clichés, Mr. Gardner. Before my career in the entertainment industry our kitchen was about as much fun as Cinderella's.

When the elevator stopped at my floor I pushed the HOLD button. I had unpopped all the beads of my necklace and they were rolling around on the floor like so many frozen peas. Even the sight of Kevin Miller waiting in the hallway didn't cheer me up. I stayed on my hands and knees, gathering the beads and stuffing them into the handkerchief I'd been using.

"Got something in your eye now?" he asked.

"Maybe you'd better take the stairs," I answered. I felt as though my long-running series was about to be cancelled.

The rest of the week was just as bad. I went down to the wellness center a couple times a day, but never got a physical. Dr. Bob was swamped. I could see him through the glass door, leaning intently toward the monitor of his computer. Health indicators, pulse pumps, fat calibrations. Someone, namely him, has to insert all the data and review the entries in the text input window. Still, I needed that clean bill of health.

I knew it would look peculiar to lurk around the center as though I didn't have anything better to do, so every time I stopped in I spent an hour working out. Whew! Gave me new respect for Mr. Gardner. I didn't realize how out of shape I'd gotten.

Yesterday the other shoe dropped. I was fired. Not from the kitchen. I haven't seen Dr. Bob yet. No. This blow came from the quarter where it was least expected. The cruller people.

A woman from wardrobe tugged at my dressing gown this morning and commented that it was getting snug. I'll be the first to admit it. I looked provocative. Every time Kevin put his hands on my hips they slid up and toward the front. The kind of behavior that's clearly inappropriate for a family-viewing time slot.

"It's those fritters," I lamented. "You wouldn't believe how many I eat."

Then the script supervisor horned in. "Fritters? You mean crullers, don't you?"

"No, fritters," I answered. "At the kitchen laboratory where I work."

I should have seen it coming. Conflict of interest. I was off the set of that commercial before you could say a word from our sponsor. Sacked.

Kicked downstairs. Wake up, Charlotte, I thought. You've got the peach dressing gown and your principles. Period.

Dr. Bob loved my outfit! Before the exam he asked me to spend a few minutes chatting in his office. Practically the first words out of his mouth were that he'd like an eight-by-ten glossy of me wearing the robe.

"Thank you," I said, "but I can't take credit for selecting this." I knew Miller's folder had preceded my arrival. There was no percentage in being coy. "It's one of the gratuities of my former career," I explained.

Dr. Bob has the sallow coloring of a person who's spent too many hours aborting documents and executing commands. I crossed my fingers when I said "former career" and noticed that his skin turned a beautiful cameo pink.

"Charlotte?" His voice was tentative, yet eager. "Were there other advantages to the business? Were there, uh, any perks?"

I needed to make sure we were talking the same language. "Perks?" I asked. "You mean the special benefits a person might get because she's the exciting star of daytime television?" His tongue moved back and forth across his lips and he nodded. "You mean like limos who take me to the top restaurants in town and head waiters who know me by my first name?" He yanked at his tie and opened his shirt. Red blotches erupted on his neck.

"Yes," he croaked. "Perks."

"Well," I said, "waiters do seat me at the best table in the house. Often they pour complimentary champagne. Autograph seekers interrupt—"

"Let me interrupt, Charlotte," he said. "I have something to show you." His words sounded heavy and moist. His chest heaved. With a decisive gesture he prodded the machine on his desk. What I had thought was a computer monitor turned out to be a television, an ordinary thirteen-inch set mounted on a swivel. "Daytime television," he breathed. "That's the name of the game." A map of Wyoming flashed on the screen; a herd of elk trudged through drifting snow to a single bale of hay. Dr. Bob's screen was damp with steam and the picture was cloudy. "Don't worry," he added, "I leave the volume turned off."

Newscasters wear red ties because studies show that red ties inspire confidence. The viewer believes that innocent bystanders are the victims of a leftist terrorist attack because the anchormen say so and they're wearing red. When *Eyewitness Aerobics* premiered I wore a red barrette in my hair. I needed something to keep it from covering my face. Eye contact is an important aspect of the image exercise genre. Critics applauded our show. About time the public realizes that soft news and surrogate arm curls square with the cool medium of television. Going for the burn is obsolete,

they said. I say success was inevitable once our writers harnessed my imagination to Dr. Bob's understanding of binocular fusion.

Mr. Gardner doesn't know beans about the electronic age, but was he ever impressed with our emphasis on cognitive pictures. We project his favorite visual, the power muscles of my thighs, back and buttocks engaged in continuous rhythmic action, just before the leotard sidebar. I'm no judge of human nature. Two weeks ago I had him pegged as just another corporate wisenheimer. Now Dr. Bob and I include him in our weekly strategy meeting. We're aiming for a loss of those darn ten pounds before the last winter flurry of rescheduling activity.

Talk about human nature. On the way out of today's meeting we saw Kevin Miller shuffling down the corridor all by himself. Poor guy. I felt an impulse to take him aside and tell him that popularity has to be based on something more substantial than good looks. Who does he think he's kidding? A tan like that in December?

Alyce L. Miller

PGI

"Hair," says the Voice.

She says it just for him.

He quickly pulls his hand down into his lap. If he doesn't, she will touch him. She has been asked to remind him of this all the time by the au pair Connie, who says that last year over Christmas vacation he managed to twist and pull his hair out in chunks. By New Year's he was bald, and his mother had informed Connie this wasn't to happen again.

Brian keeps on drawing the Ninjas, two men in black in the employ of an angry warlord who suspects he has been deceived by an enemy. Someone has put a curse on him. The Ninjas are trained assassins, and can slice up the warlord's enemy like a grapefruit before they disappear into the dark mouth of night. There is no forgiveness when you cross a Ninja; their motto is deception, then death. They enter unseen and overpower their opponents swiftly. They fight to kill.

"Brian, please put the drawing away. We are taking a test."

I don't have to listen, because She cannot get inside the castle. She is outside on the far side of the moat. The drawbridge has already been destroyed. I darken the tall Ninja's fighting stick. It is long and pointed, a wicked weapon, something to fear.

"Brian, please put the drawing away—*now.*"

Her shadow falls over me. When Her voice moves against my ear, I feel my mouth curve up, because it means She is about to cross the moat, and I know She will drown or be eaten by poison fish. It is an inescapable trap with invisible Ninjas blocking Her way and a moat full of boiling toxic fluid that will eat the flesh off Her bones.

Zroooooom! The one Ninja has stabbed the enemy warlord. The tip of the spear finds its mark quickly. Blood spurts from the wound. The fighting stick comes back out of the flesh red-tipped.

Before I can stop Her, Her hand comes down and squashes them all. I try to grab them back, but She is crumpling them to death in the palm of

Her hand. With the other hand, She roughs up my shoulder with electric volts from Her fingers.

"Ow!" I jerk away from the pain. A slow burning sensation spreads like fire.

The Voice says, "Brian, please return to your test."

"But I don't want to."

Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Brian, stop rocking."

I find the small inked pond in my desktop, the place I can stab my ballpoint pen tip into. She is so stupid. There are more Ninjas, more pictures, more battles to be won where those have come from. She hasn't stopped anything. She can't keep the Ninjas from coming.

Back and forth. Back and forth. She is very stupid, because I can always draw more. I can create Ninjas all day long, every time Her back is turned, each time She leaves me alone for a second. *Back and forth.*

"Brian, don't rock."

An enemy Ninja behind me says, "*Bri*an," like a tease or maybe even a putdown. And a sorcerer mutters, "Brian's just weird, man."

But they are weirder, because this is a place for weirdos. Boys who cry, boys who have to take pills. *You are like other boys, you just have to work a little more.* She is pointing to the test booklet in front of me. She is jabbering at me. I look straight ahead. I look behind me.

"Turn around, pizza face."

I raise my middle finger under my desk. She has turned away. She hasn't seen.

A huge sign at the front of the classroom announces: NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE SUCCESS. Next to it, the golden rule spelled out in large careful silver calligraphy.

The voice repeats itself like a snake uncoiling. "Brian, get back to your test." The sibilance of "s" is a shiny hiss in his ear. What he hears is "Tes-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s . . ."

Mrs. Beach says it not so much for Brian, but for the other boys, to prove she makes no allowances.

Brian repeats his shibboleth: "I don't want to. Why do I have to do this? This is stupid."

"This is a standardized test, required by the state. Every boy is taking the same test at the same time."

Brian peeks over his shoulder at the sea of faces all focused on him. No one is laughing this time. Only one boy is smirking. Brian stabs his pencil hard and over and over into the ink pond, then swings his heavy head back and forth to see what reaction he has produced.

"Quit smiling, Brian, you're not funny," someone says.

A feverish red color creeps over Brian's cheeks.

Mrs. Malinka, the teacher's aide, quickly begins to circulate with Mrs. Beach to calm the class. Large and maternal, her very presence quiets them. She quietly lays her hands on boys' shoulders, like a blessing, as she passes by.

Mrs. Beach watches Brian pluck a second pencil from behind his ear, gripping it in his fist. He begins circling answers without care. For each question there are five letter combinations in a row: only one spells a real word. Brian deliberately circles any of the four that are nonsensical, though he is an excellent speller. His thick eyebrows, normally knit, have relaxed; his jaw has softened into an expression of amusement. On the fourth question, he selects for his combination, "pgi." Mrs. Beach knows he knows better; he knows she knows, but there is nothing to be done about it. He will test once again well below grade level.

My stone castle is heavily fortified, built by strong masons. My guards are perched around all the turrets, alert, their crossbows ready. My moat steams deadly. I could kill them all with my laser beams if I wanted, shoot them straight out of my fingertips, or pile all the lead from my pencil into their squirming flesh.

Ka-POW! Ka-BOOM!

The Voice and the Hand—they are one—have returned to push my test sheet back in front of me. Steam rises off her white dress.

The test is called the WRAT test, short for Wide Range Achievement. On the cover of his test booklet Brian has drawn a huge rat for WRAT, standing on its hind legs and eating a book, its long tail unfurled behind it for balance. Above the rat he has written in a dialogue balloon, "Spelling sucks."

Mrs. Beach moves up and down the rows until she has stood next to each of the twelve boys. From the back of the room she can keep a good eye on Brian who is scribbling furiously all over his test booklet.

She looks at Mrs. Malinka who has seen it also and gives a cautious shrug. If only he didn't draw such attention to himself! Other boys are noticing, and now they turn to Mrs. Beach to see what will is going to be done.

The Hand is on my shoulder again. I could shoot it if I wanted. I could grind it to mush between my steel gloves.

"Let's go, Brian. You can work in a cubby."

"I don't want to do this."

"Please pick up the test and follow me."

Her face is blurry because she puts it too close. Her eyes are holes in her head, like an executioner's mask. *Back and forth. Back and forth.*

"Stop rocking, Brian," She says. She puts Her other hand on my shoulder again. I shrug it off like a fly. Her face is so close I can smell her skin like pickles.

"I am getting very angry with your behavior," She says. She thinks She has to say this because She thinks I can't tell when people are mad or sad or happy. *He does not understand emotions. He cannot read your facial expressions, so be sure to give clear signals verbally.*

There is sudden static in the air—kryptonite! Electrons and protons and neutrons have all decided to go crazy and misfire, and I hear the buzz of other voices, the voices of the enemy Ninjas saying, "Brian, shut up," and "Aw, man."

There are spies all around.

Brian lets the test flutter to the floor, making it look like an accident. Mrs. Beach scoops it up and casts a knowing glance at Mrs. Malinka. Mrs. Malinka gets up again from where she is correcting papers and begins to circulate as a monitor, looking over the other boys' shoulders. Mrs. Beach holds up ten fingers to indicate the number of consecutive errors a boy can make before he is asked to stop altogether. Mrs. Malinka moves meaningfully behind Brian and looks down at what he has in front of him.

Brian has torn a blank page from his notebook (which is against the rules) and begins to draw the Ninjas again. They are even better and stronger this time. Feeling the air move behind him where Mrs. Malinka has positioned herself, he turns briefly, startled.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Leave me alone," I say, but the enemy Ninjas say to each other, "Listen to him growling. Mrs. Beach, Mrs. Malinka, Brian's growling again!"

"Brian, shut up!"

"God, is that kid too weird!"

"*You're* weird," I say. "It's you."

"Brian, quiet please!" Mrs. Malinka's voice is firm and motherly. Brian bites his lip hard, to keep himself from saying anything more. Mrs. Malinka places one hand on each shoulder and gently, gently slows his rocking down to an imperceptible and silent tapping of his right foot.

"There," she says to the boy it took her so long to want to touch. "There, Brian, that's much better."

I need to know what time it is, but every time I look at the clock on the wall, I just see a jumble. I don't see why they don't throw away that stupid clock. My digital watch is broken, the one my dad gave me for my thirteenth birthday this year, so I'd know what time he was coming to pick me up at my mom's house. My dad doesn't live with me; I visit him every third weekend in the month. So now I have to ask the teacher what time it is and She tells me, "Ten after nine, now get back to work, Brian. Are you working on your Specific Skills?"

I don't have to answer. I don't have to say anything. I'm not learning anything anyway. I don't know why they send me here, it's not to learn.

Mrs. Beach is working with two boys on oral reading at the Reading Table. Mrs. Malinka helps another boy make corrections on this homework.

Brian swings his head from side to side, slow, like an elephant. He is hoping to fool the two women into thinking he is hard at work. By keeping his Specific Skills book open, where they can see it, he leads them to believe he is doing school work.

In actuality, he has pressed his dungeons and dragons graph paper inside, where he marks out new moves. His desk is the farthest away from Mrs. Beach's, so that by the time she walks across the room, he will have turned the page and be working diligently on reading comprehension exercises.

Every day Mrs. Beach writes the assignment on the blackboard. Every day Brian asks her why he has to do this. He doesn't see the point. Sometimes she stands next to him while he's working and when he says, "Help," as she has instructed the boys to do, she sits down almost gratefully and marks hints in his book.

She always tells him, "Brian, you are very smart. You do such good work when you want to. I like it when you say 'help,' because then I know you're working hard."

This week she has given him space stickers and a red pencil grip. Sometimes she thinks Brian is improving, but as she tells Mrs. Malinka, any weekend he spends with his mother, without the au pair Connie to intervene, Brian returns to school as if he's been turned inside out, angrier and more unmanageable than ever.

I have to stay after school for fifteen minutes. Even though it's Friday. No writing, no drawing, no reading. I am supposed to sit at my desk and think about what I did wrong. She says I talked, and She is at the back of the classroom whispering about me with my au pair Connie. Connie is from

England and she wears the color blue on her eyelids. She is eighteen years old and she hates me, Connie does, though she pretends she likes me in front of other people.

At home she won't let me play Nintendo or read my Ninjas books or look at dungeons and dragons until I do my homework. She says, "Even if you sit and do nothing, you will spend the hour you are supposed to be doing homework at your desk." She has taped to my desk at home a contract I signed, written by Dr. King the school psychologist and Mrs. Snap the principal.

"What are you saying about me?" I ask. I hear them using my name over and over.

"Brian, I'm explaining to Connie what homework you have missed all week," says Mrs. Beach.

"Yeah, well, I won't do it."

I hate them both. *Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.*

"He's getting worse again," whispers the Voice.

"No I'm not," I say. "You're getting worse.

They mumble, then I hear Connie.

"I'm working with him at home on establishing a routine. I hope you can see the difference now that I make sure he puts his deodorant on every day and combs his hair."

"The boys still tease him mercilessly about his complexion."

"He won't let me put his medication on. He doesn't like to be touched."

I get up. I start to put my things in my bookbag. I want to leave. But the Voice says I have five more minutes.

"Why?" I say. "Why? Why do I have five more minutes? What did I do? Why?"

Connie says, "Sit down, Brian. Do what Mrs. Beach says. She is your teacher."

"No she's not. No she's not. She's a wicked witch."

They get silent, those two. I sit back down. I tear up the alphabet strip on my desk top into little bits. The Voice says to Connie, "He's been upset all day. We've been doing testing. Maybe he's having a hard time with that kind of structure."

"I'll talk to him," says Connie with a sigh. "Just like I always do."

In Group, someone says somebody in his neighborhood calls him a freak. "I want to kick his ass."

So Dr. King tells us we're all freaks; he yells it at us. How do you like that, he says, standing up over us. How does that make you feel? What are you going to say when other people call you a freak.

"I'll say you're wrong," says Marlon. "I'll say you don't really know me and besides which, everybody's different from everybody else."

"What do *you* think, Brian?" says Dr. King.

"I am sitting on the sofa today. Only four of us can sit there at a time. Dr. King said it was my turn today.

"I don't know."

I use my hand as a machine gun. I shoot at the boys on the floor. *Rrrrrrtttttttaaaarrrrr.*

"What's Brian saying?" says Dr. King to the others.

"He always says he's going to shoot people," says an enemy Ninja. "Brian's messed up, man."

"Do you think threatening people with violence is a good way to respond to an insult?" asks Dr. King.

Yes Yes! Yes! Ninjas like to catch people off guard. They pretend to be a lot of different things, like magic. They can get into any place they want. They appear and disappear at will.

"What are some appropriate ways to respond to an insult?"

Everyone starts talking.

"Ignore." "Don't say anything back." "Walk away." "Don't cap on people." "Kill them."

"Brian, what do you think?"

"I don't know. Why do I have to answer that stupid question?"

"It's not a stupid question and I'd like you to answer it, because it will help you find a constructive way to deal with your anger."

"I don't want to be here," I say. "Can I leave now?"

"It's not time yet," says Dr. King. Because my watch is broken I don't know if he's telling the truth or not.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Man, quit that," says Tommy Serrano. "You're jiggling the sofa."

When Mrs. Beach looks out the window after school at the boys drifting off to the parking lot in the middle of the redwood trees, she sees Brian's mother waiting in her red Saab. It is rare that Brian's mother comes anywhere near the school. It must be Connie's day off.

Mrs. Beach hurries outside to say hello, just as Brian opens the door to the backseat and stows his bookbag on the floor.

Mrs. Beach leans into the driver's window of the car.

"Hello, Mrs. Whitehall, so nice to see you. Brian had a good day today."

Brian's mother is a lawyer by profession, a nervous, silent woman whose unhappiness swims vaguely in the smeary blue of her eyes. This is not the first time Mrs. Beach has seen dark purple circles, shiny as pheasant rings, under her eyes. A small red gash cuts across her cheek. Brian's mother has

tried to cover her skin with peach-colored powder that looks like paste in the sunlight.

"Thank you," says Brian's mother.

"We're seeing a change in attitude. Brian will be playing the part of Dr. Watson in the school Christmas play."

"Oh," says Brian's mother. Brian leans against the passenger door on the other side of the car. He is kicking at the gravel in the driveway and carrying on a half-conversation with Ralphy Martin, a grade below him.

"I think," says Mrs. Beach hopefully, "the sessions with Dr. King are helping."

"Um-hmmm," says Brian's mother. "Maybe Brian likes to talk to Dr. King."

"It's important for the adults in Brian's life to be supportive of the positive changes," Mrs. Beach presses. "I think Brian will make a wonderful Dr. Watson."

"Thank you," says Brian's mother, but she doesn't mean it. She already has the car in reverse and is edging it very slowly over the eucalyptus nuts. Mrs. Beach continues to walk beside the car in a friendly gesture as Brian's mother prepares to make a U-turn.

Dr. King is a joke. Everyone knows he's a joke. His eyes are crossed, and you can never tell if he's looking at you. He's as big as a football player, but his shirts are too small for him. The other day I told him my current event in Group and he didn't even know where Zaire is.

"Mrs. Whitehall, are you all right?" asks the Voice.

"I'm fine," says my mother.

"Did you fall?" asks the Voice.

"No, I didn't fall. Brian, get in the car."

I sit in the backseat with my stuff. The Voice says, "Good-bye, Brian, see you tomorrow, Dr. Watson."

She waves and I wave back.

My mother turns on the radio and listens to the news. I fire my automatic rifle out the rear window. *Rattattattakabam.* I kill over a hundred people on the freeway. My mother says, "Brian, will you please stop that noise?"

Our house has lots of windows and lots of light. My room is upstairs in the back. My mother tells me she wants me upstairs because she is going to be downstairs. Then when I come downstairs to eat dinner my mother goes upstairs to eat hers. We trade floors. Shelia is the girl who cooks for my mother. She always says, "Brian, eat everything on your plate."

When Connie's gone, I can do anything I want. There's no one to tell

me to do my homework. My mother says she is going to lie down and she doesn't want to be disturbed. My two younger brothers play in another part of the house. I get out my *A Nightmare on Elm Street* tape, and pop Freddy Kruger into my VCR. On my giant video screen Freddy looks really huge and he slices people with his hands. I wish I had knives for fingers. Then no one would cap on me at school. I could rip them up, faster than a food processor. I laugh when Freddy slashes a girl's face. Very cool. She deserved it; you can't be mean to people and get away with it.

After the movie, I play with my Nintendo. Shelia comes and takes my plate away. I have a 3-D chess game on my computer. The pieces all make noise when they move. The rooks have heavy footsteps and clank. They eat the other pieces; the bishops skim the diagonals and kill with swords; the queen wiggles her hips and zaps players with lightning bolts from her fingertips. When the computer checkmates me, I get tired and crawl in bed. No Connie to bug me about pajamas or brushing my teeth. Tomorrow I will go to stay with my father for the weekend and he will take me to an A's game. I will ask him for a cap and a tee shirt. He will buy me anything I want.

Somewhere in the house my mother is crying again. I hear her voice, like a siren, like the sea. My father went away because my mother cries too much, especially when everything is dark and we're supposed to be sleeping.

"Hand," says the Voice

"Why's Brian always messing with his hair like that?"

"Cause he's retarded, that's why."

"So he'll have a bald head to go with his pizza face."

I turn around. "Your mother," I say.

The teacher has not heard the others, only me. The enemy Ninjas all yell out together, "Brian's capping!"

The Voice pulls herself down in front of me and comes up next to my face.

"Brian, I want you to pick up your work and take it to a cubby."

"I don't want to."

She starts gathering up my things. I hold on to the drawing I've been working on, but she yanks and yanks until she rips it out from under my hand.

"Let's go," says the Voice. "I mean *now*."

"I don't want to."

Mrs. Malinka comes over with her big key clanging on a chain around her neck.

I ask, "What's the key for? Is that your house key?"

"Brian," she says. "Please do what Mrs. Beach asks."

Back and forth. Back and forth. The two sorceresses stand over me. *Ka-pow. Ka-blam.* Death to the weak.

"I'd like to be able to give your father a good report when he picks you up today," says the Voice. "Mrs. Malinka, will you please walk Brian to a cubby?"

"It's dark in there," I say.

"There's a light," says Mrs. Malinka.

"I can't breathe in there," I say.

"You may leave the door cracked if you like."

I get up and follow my things that Mrs. Malinka is carrying.

"Bye Brian baby," says Joey Ramirez. "Have a nice day!"

He is Sherlock Holmes in the Christmas play. He is next on my death list. I would like to burn him up in a huge fire so that his face melts.

The cubby is dark until Mrs. Malinka turns on the light. The shelf built into the wall is the desk. There is one chair and room for only one person—barely.

"Why don't you try to finish your multiplication tables?" says Mrs. Malinka. "It looks like you got a good start here. If you need any help, let me know."

"I don't want to," I say.

"Remember," says Mrs. Malinka, "if you want to keep your role in the school play, you need to be cooperative, Brian. I know you understand me."

She puts a bunch of numbers in front of me. There are lots of x's with them. 3x8= 4x8= 5x8= 6x8= 7x8= 8x8= 9x8=

"I want to write a Ninja story," I say.

"You may write a story when you finish your multiplication tables," says Mrs. Malinka. She smells like mints.

"Have you been eating mints?" I ask.

"No," she says. "Now get to work."

She goes away, and I look at the sheet of numbers. 3x8. I put 16. 3x8. 3x8. What does it mean anyway?

I turn over the paper and start to write.

> Once upon a time in a large castle overlooking a dark, dense glen, lived a hero warrior Ninja named Brian. His parents had died when he was very young, leaving him to survive on his own. As a result, when other children were learning to walk, Brian was learning to fight. When other children did their multiplication tables, Brian was battling evil warriors. He lived by cunning and skill. He was

stronger and smarter than anyone else, and he inspired terror in the hearts of those who offended him.

In a neighboring castle lived two children, a sickly pale boy named Ron and a lovely young girl with blond hair named Lisa. They wanted to be ordinary children, but their mother wouldn't let them. She was cruel and heartless and very ugly, on top of her meanness. Ron and Lisa wanted to come out and play like other children, but their mother made them stay inside in the dark, unhappy castle . . .

"He's in the cubby."

The Voice is near. I turn the paper over. 4x8=32. 5x8=40. The cubby door opens.

"Brian, your father has come a little early to pick you up. Would you like to go with him now?"

"What did I do wrong?" I ask. "My father never comes early."

My father is right behind the Voice. He has on his tan overcoat. He is carrying the keys to his black Porsche. I make the sound of his car engine: *FAAAROOOOM.*

"It's okay, Brian," he says. "I have to take some computer equipment over to the other side of the Bay. I thought you'd like to come with me."

I get up fast.

"Brian, would you please pick up your materials and take them back to your desk?"

She is holding the multiplication sheet in Her hand. I know She will turn it over and see the story, but I don't care. I can write the story over and over anywhere I want to. She can never take it away.

"Mrs. Malinka has your homework assignment for you. I'd like you to look it over and see if you have any questions before you leave."

"Are we going to the A's game?" I ask my father.

"Tomorrow," he says. "Tomorrow, Brian. Do you have all your stuff? I haven't got all day."

Mrs. Beach has to close the classroom window blinds to keep the other boys from yelling out the window at the retreating figures of Brian and his father. Any change in the daily routine could prove most upsetting. The room is abuzz with speculation.

"How come he gets to go home early?"

"Cause he's weird. Hey, *Brian!*"

"Mark Crosby and Luther Findley, get back in your seats. I mean, *now.*"

One of the boys is trying to pull the blind back so he can see out. Instead he rips it.

Mrs. Beach and Mrs. Malinka look at each other and shake their heads. Mrs. Beach calmly leans over and removes the blind from the boy's hand.

"Please sit down," she says gently. "If you pull on the blind hard like that it's going to ruin it."

The boy says he is sorry and sits down. In a few minutes the room is quiet again as each boy picks up one of many loose threads of the day, all billed as a rigorous, remedial academic program in the school catalog.

Mrs. Beach whispers to Mrs. Malinka.

"I don't know why Brian's father doesn't get the message that picking up Brian early on the weekends he has him is so disruptive to these kids."

"It doesn't matter to him," says Mrs. Malinka who has been there a number of years and has seen it all. "What you have to understand, Mrs. Beach, is that it's more convenient for Brian's father to come early so he doesn't have to make a special trip."

"And yet," muses Mrs. Beach, "they all wonder why we aren't doing more for their children. They send these boys here, like broken toys to be fixed. Sometimes I think we ought to send the kids home and enroll the parents."

In the school play I am Dr. Watson. I have all my lines memorized. Connie makes me say them over and over.

"So, Holmes, what's the latest development?"

"You will see shortly, my dear Watson," says Connie, reading Joey Ramirez' part. "A Mr. Green will be arriving shortly with something that will take you quite by surprise."

"Is that right, Holmes?"

Connie stops. "Say it like this, Brian. *Is that right, Holmes?*"

I say it exactly as she says it and she smiles. She nods and smiles. "Very good, Brian, nicely done. Now you sound like a real Englishman."

"I know all my lines," I say. "I want to practice with the real actors at school."

"You must practice at home too. Mrs. Beach says you missed some of your cues at rehearsal."

"I know all my lines," I say. "I don't want to practice any more."

"Brian, don't give me a headache. Let's just try this scene one more time. You've almost got it."

"I don't see what Sherlock Holmes has to do with Christmas," I say.

"Well, the play is about Sherlock at Christmas time. The mystery rests on the missing tree ornament, the one that's been in Mrs. Chichester's family for years."

"It's a stupid play," I say. "I want to watch Freddy Kruger."

Connie throws the script on the floor. She says to me, "Brian, you infuriate me. Why are you so stubborn? Why don't you ever let people help you?"

Back and forth. Back and forth.

"I get so tired of you!" says Connie and goes away.

I am by myself, surrounded by my trained Ninjas. They live under the cloak of darkness.

"Is that right, Holmes?" I say. Holmes says, "Good grief, here he comes now." Enter Mr. Green carrying a hatbox under his arm. I say, "If that is what I think it is . . ." "Shshshsh, Watson," says Holmes (under his breath). "You must not blurt things out."

"Brian!"

The Voice. I keep on. Mr. Green walks to center stage and sets the hatbox on a small table next to Holmes' sofa. Mr. Green says, "So, Holmes, you've been waiting for this moment."

"Brian, what did you just do to Connie?"

It's not the Voice, after all, it's My Mother standing in the doorway. She is wearing her lawyer suit, and She is carrying a briefcase.

"I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything to Connie."

"Connie says you were uncooperative again. I hired her so I don't have to deal with this nonsense. Why can't you act like a normal person, just sometimes, huh? I've had a bad day and I come home to this!"

My Mother thinks I don't understand anything She says. I've heard her argue with my father about it.

It's why She never bothers talking to me most of the time. When She does talk it's because She opened up a bottle downstairs on Her way up. I can always smell Her warm, sickly scent from the bottle, even when she's across the room.

"I am a normal person," I say. "You're not supposed to cap on me."

"Screw capping and the rest of those goddamned school rules," says My Mother. "I'm sick of having you ruin my life!"

She slams the door. I hear Her and Connie talking together in the hallway, then My Mother weeping and then Connie crying too. I turn on my Nintendo.

"Just keep him away from me! I've told you over and over I don't want to have to deal with this."

No matter how good you get at Nintendo, the game is never over.

Ron and Lisa look out of their window one day and see
a young handsome Ninja warrior traveling at a high rate

> of speed through the dense jungle outside their castle. Downstairs their mother is eating dinner. She eats raw things without cooking them. Sometimes they are even still alive. She has long curved fingernails and yellow teeth. The Ninja warrior says, "Don't be afraid. I am Brian the Good. I am here to rescue you." Lisa noticed that Brian was especially attractive, and she felt her heart skip a beat. Ron was impressed with the Ninja warrior's muscles . . .

Our gymnasium is packed with parents and brothers and sisters. I look out from behind the curtain and see all the people crowding in. I put on my father's tan overcoat and a black hat. I carry an umbrella. My shirt just came from the cleaners. There is a bowtie at my neck. I look exactly like Dr. Watson. Even Mrs. Beach says so. She tells me, "Brian, you are the only boy who remembered his entire costume. I commend you highly."

She straightens my bowtie and adds that I look very handsome. "I'm sure your parents will be very proud."

Mrs. Snap the principal is wearing a huge red flower on her bosom. She wears only two dresses ever—one is blue and one is green. She wears the green one today.

She says to me, "Brian, I'm sure you won't disappoint me."

My parents are sitting together in the third row, with Connie in between. My mother drove her Saab with Connie in it, and my father drove his black Porsche. I am hoping my father will let me spend Christmas with him, but he already explained that he might be too busy over vacation. Connie is flying back to England. I do not want to be alone with my mother because there is nothing to do.

Mrs. Malinka corners Mrs. Beach backstage. "Have you seen Brian's mother yet?"

"Yes, doesn't she look awful?"

"Does that woman drink enough for the whole state of California?"

"Drinks, nervous breakdowns, you name it. She's been hospitalized half a dozen times."

Mrs. Beach peeks out through the curtains. Her eyes rest on the Whitehalls. Brian's mother is twisting her hands in her lap like a child. Even at this distance Mrs. Beach can see the layers of pancake makeup over the purple bruises under her eyes.

Turning back to Mrs. Malinka she shakes her head. "I can't believe they came together—Brian's parents."

"Well, this is the only day a year they pretend to be parents for all the other parents pretending to be parents."

Mrs. Beach pokes Mrs. Malinka in the ribs. "You are an evil person," she jokes. "A very accurate evil person."

Connie sees me peeking and waves and winks. Before I came backstage she told me, "Break a leg," because that's what you tell actors.

"Everyone line up! I want to see Brian, Joey, and Alex right over here for the first scene. Let's go!"

The younger kids are walking off the stage. They did a play called "The Littlest Christmas Tree." Everyone is clapping for them. I straighten my bowtie.

I hear Mrs. Beach on the other side of the curtain saying, "Room Four would like to present *Sherlock Holmes' Christmas Mystery*, starring Joey Ramirez as Sherlock and Brian Whitehall as his sidekick Dr. Watson."

The curtain goes up. Joey Ramirez is on his way to lie on the sofa on stage.

I begin to pace backstage, just like Dr. Watson. I put my hands in my pockets and pace. My fingers close over something in the pocket. I pull out a handkerchief and a string of foil squares.

"Holy shit, look what Brian's got!" Joey Ramirez drops his Sherlock Holmes pipe and comes running back over. He yanks the foil squares from my hand. The other boys start laughing.

Mrs. Beach turns round at the commotion. Joey Ramirez is holding up a string of condoms and waving them at the others.

"I'll take those," she says. "Thank you very much. Now get out there on the stage."

She is trying not to laugh, but Joey Ramirez is in stitches in the corner. Mrs. Beach stuffs the condoms deep inside her blazer pocket, unsure what to do with them next. Brian is studying her in a way she almost mistakes as affection. She realizes he hasn't an inkling about what is in those foil squares, but he realizes she's done him some sort of favor. "Is this your father's coat you're wearing?" she asks.

Brian nods proudly. "Just like Dr. Watson," he says.

"Man, oh, man," I hear Joey chortling to the others. "Brian has *rubbers!*"

Everyone turns to look at me. I look down at my shoes. I am not wearing rubbers, I'm wearing street shoes. I close my eyes and practice my lines. "Are you certain, Holmes?"

I like the stage, all the open space. Joey lies in a dressing gown on the sofa. He is smoking his Sherlock Holmes pipe. I stand behind the door we made in art class. *Knock knock.*

"Come in!"

"Good afternoon, Holmes." I enter. All my lines are in my mind exactly where I can reach them. First it's Joey and me, and then Alex as Mr. Green, and then Rodney, and Phillip, and then Junior Potoa dressed up like Mrs. Chichester. We're all on stage, then some of us go off. I have the second biggest part. And I don't forget a single word. Joey forgets half a dozen lines and Mark Johnson has to prompt him from behind the curtain.

I get up and move around. I pace. I speak. I think. I ponder. I analyze. I form assumptions. I am Dr. Watson. I bring Holmes his violin to play a few bars of my favorite song. I block the door when the villain tries to attack Holmes in his living room. I summon the police.

When it is all over, my parents and Connie have surrounded me, and my father punches me on the arm and says, "Great job, son."

Mrs. Beach comes up and hugs me hard. She has tears in her eyes. She says, "Brian, I knew you could do it. You were incredible."

To my parents she says, "Brian has a phenomenal memory, you know. He should be practicing poems, dialogue, anything that will challenge him in this way."

"Now if we can just get him to do that on his multiplication tables," says my father and they all laugh. My mother just stands and looks at me. Her face is all shiny with oil. She doesn't say a word, she just pulls on her hands like ropes.

Connie says, "I'm so proud of you, Brian. All that practicing paid off."

I drink punch and eat a plate of cookies. Mrs. Malinka asks me to help carry furniture off the stage and back to the classroom. I fold up my shirt and lay the bowtie on top. I put my father's tan overcoat back on the hanger. Other kids' parents come up to me and say congratulations. They say I did a great job. Of course I did. I'm a Ninja warrior. I am death in motion. I am revenge. I am the equalizer. I balance out all inequities. It is Christmas vacation. My father says he is sorry but he has to go away. He will call me after New Year's.

The room gets very big. My mother gives him a dirty look and turns her head. She walks to the other side of the room. She is shaking.

"Don't do this, Evelyn," my father says to my mother. "Don't start in on me now."

My mother calls to Connie. "Connie, get him ready. Do it, Connie. You get him ready."

Connie says, "Come on, Brian, let's get your things."

"I don't want to," I say. "I don't want to."

But Connie is taking my red windbreaker out of my duffel bag and holding it out to me. As if I were too little to do it myself. She's saying, "Come on, Brian, it's okay," but it's not.

Through the window I see my father walking down the driveway to his black Porsche and I picture the engine exploding in a torrent of fire and my father melting in the driver's seat, his face like rubber.

On the first day back from vacation Mrs. Beach calls up Joey Ramirez to staple the numbers onto the January calendar during snack time.

"Did everyone have a good vacation?" she asks. The room is full of rested faces. Michael came back with a suntan he picked up in the Florida Keys. Junior is wearing new Reeboks with neon laces. Joey says he went fishing six times with his favorite uncle.

Most of the boys are wearing new clothes.

"The time just flew, didn't it?" says Mrs. Malinka.

"It sure did!" says Joey Ramirez, confusing the 3 and the 8 on the calendar. "But I got everything I wanted for Christmas and that's all that matters!"

"I think it would be nice if we all took a moment to talk a little about our holiday," suggests Mrs. Beach. "Did anyone go anywhere or see anyone special?"

Waving hands blossom in the air. "I did! I did!" comes the chorus of everyone who wants to be counted first.

"Hair," says the Voice. I almost have Ron and Lisa out of the castle. Their mother is shouting for them. I have brought a long vine up to the window for them to swing down. Ron tells me we must hurry or his mother will shut them away in the closet again. He says it is very dark in that closet and he gets very frightened. He says he doesn't want to go back to the closet. He says I must hurry, hurry, hurry.

"Hair," says the Voice.

"No," I say. "No." You can't stop me now. This is too crucial. You can't keep me from saving Ron and Lisa.

"Hair," says the Voice.

She is right behind me, hissing in my ear. The evil mother has crept up and is trying to stop me from saving Ron and Lisa.

"Brian, why aren't you working on your Special Skills unit? You're not keeping your New Year's resolution."

"I don't want to." I keep my face close to the paper I am writing on. I don't want her to look.

"Brian, quit acting so retarded!" says one of the enemy Ninjas.

"That's enough of that!" says Mrs. Beach. "Lenny, I want you to take your books and go to the back table right now."

Mrs. Malinka comes over and says to me, "Brian, please put your paper away and get started on your assignment."

But the evil mother is putting the children in the closet. She is closing the door. She might not come back for days. She might steal all the Christmas presents. I tell her to stop. The children are screaming. "She is the villain, Holmes!" "Precisely, my dear Watson. You have deduced correctly."

"Brian, you must put your paper away and do what Mrs. Beach is asking or we will have to refer you upstairs to Mrs. Snap."

"Refer me," I say. "Refer me."

Mrs. Beach says, "Brian, come with me upstairs. *Now.*"

Upstairs means Mrs. Snap will talk to me. She will tell me that this is my last chance, that if they have to send me home one more time I cannot come back to the school. Then they will call Connie. She will come and get me. I will go home. There will be no Nintendo, no Ninja books. They will put me in the room without the toys. I will be all alone with nothing. I will sit on the bed and look out the window. I hate the room without the toys. I hate how quiet it is, how there is nothing to see.

"Come along, Brian," says Mrs. Beach.

Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

The enemy Ninjas are all yelling and laughing. Mrs. Beach is saying, "Quiet, everybody, get back to work."

I turn around. "Shut up!" I yell. "Shut up, all of you!"

"That's it," says the Voice. "I am sorry we are starting the New Year in such an unfortunate way. All of you will stay after school and give me ten minutes."

"This class is out of control," says Joey Ramirez.

"It's all Brian's fault," says Michael. "This is supposed to be a school for learning disabled people, not retardos."

Back and forth. Back and forth. I have managed to turn around just in time to catch Ron and Lisa's mother turning the key in the lock. Poisoned spear in hand, I step up from behind. I raise it above my head and bring it down against the back of her skull. Blood spurts from the hole. The poison ignites her head and it explodes. Her brains spew out like liquid gray caterpillars. There is joy in my triumph. But I know all the while that in the summer day shadows, enemy Ninjas lie in wait, masked in trick disguises, subtle as tree stumps. In the silence that follows, their murmurs close in on me: that my heart is dangerous, that they must still its beauty.

J. D. Applen

Bushido

Charlie said that we lost the Battle of the Coral Sea in terms of ships but that the Japanese knew we could go toe to toe with them. That's when they got scared. And that's when we got scared. We all knew then that the war was going to be a long one. Forty years later, we felt the same way about Hodgkin's disease. Charlie is my husband and he is in remission. Remission with Hodgkin's disease. It wasn't that I was unhappy with the seven innings he had had, but I got down when I thought of Andy, our son, looking at all the things that would remind him of his father. There would be shirts in the closet without shoulders to fill them and all of their astronomy equipment that Andy would have to set up and work without anyone to help him.

Without Charlie things would be different. Sure, Andy could get a job. He could be a janitor or something and if he had any problems, social security would help him out. My major worry was that other people out there would tear away at him, that they wouldn't help him grow up, that he would have no one to spend time with. What could I do, sitting in a wheelchair with a mouth that doesn't move? What could I show him? What could anyone do in this situation for a thirty-two-year-old son who still forgets to tie his shoes after he puts them on in the morning?

But some things happen and some things change. My brother-in-law, Bill Finley, who's married to my sister Mary, is a principal with the public school system two counties over. They came by last fall for a few days and told us about a program that had just started up that would allow Andy to finish high school. Andy would have to take a series of tests, five tests, that were multiple choice. They could be taken one at a time and it didn't matter how many times he took them. If he failed, he could go back the following week and take it again. Charlie said that he was sure that we could teach Andy enough stuff to pass the tests, even though it would not be easy.

We were out for a walk by the edge of the irrigation canal that bordered our house, or they were walking and Mary was pushing me along, when Andy came running up from the edge of the water. He was anxious to show

us something he had found down on the bank. He clambered back down the side to Bill and Charlie. There was a cat down there, hiding between two ocotillos. Mary yelled, "Watch the stickers. If you're not careful you're going to hurt yourselves." They couldn't reach in far enough so they had to coax it out. When they finally got the cat, Bill held it up so we could see it. Mary applauded. Then a June bug rattled by and hit Andy in the face. It was angry and vibrating like a windup toy. The bug fell to the ground, got up and buzzed away. Andy didn't know what hit him, he just looked at us with watery eyes.

Later that evening, after they fed the cat and Charlie and I were alone, he started talking. Charlie was excited about the idea of Andy finishing school, just beside himself. He launched into his "space" lecture, full and formal. "You put your head into a *space* and from then on it's yours and if anyone tries to fool with you, to act like they know something that you don't, or if you were just curious about something like the Eiffel Tower, and then gone and seen it like we all did last summer, you'd know what it's all about. You don't have to feel deficient about it, you don't have to feel bad about something because you don't know about it or haven't been there. He's been to Paris, Rose. The kid down the street with the fancy car and all the girls hasn't been to Paris."

Charlie was waving his arms as he spoke. "Now we know that the Eiffel Tower is tall and beautiful and we have seen every rivet and we're going back there a hundred times before we're through. But even if we didn't go back, at least we had it once in our lives and that's all we really need as far as the Eiffel Tower is concerned. Let us now equate Eiffel Tower with high school diploma. Remember when they told us he would never finish high school? Remember that? How bad we felt? He can have that now. That's something they can never take away from him." When Charlie said equate, he touched the tips of his pointer fingers together.

When the war started, Mary and I were in the last year of nursing school. That's when we started to smoke. I remember the way we would sit there in the cafeteria during our internship, taking turns lighting each other's cigarettes. One day she was looking at me real carefully, like she was trying to gauge my mood. Her eyes were squinty and she let me do most of the talking. Then she said after I stopped talking, after about a minute of silence, that we should marry the boys we were seeing at the time. Of course it was Charlie and Bill. They were in the Navy, and worked in the same command. Both were meteorologists. Weathermen. Mary saw it as something more than just getting married. It was something we could do for the country. It was considered a noble act for a woman to marry a man

in uniform, especially right before he goes off to war. Single women were of tremendous importance then, especially in San Diego. They were needed at the USO to dance with the sailors. The message was everywhere you looked. On posters, in the movies, everywhere. "Who are they coming home to?" people would ask. This was an education. It was that kind of time. We were lucky, we did O.K. They are both decent men. I was first attracted to Charlie because he never said "Japs," it was always "the Japanese." We both thought that if we married them, they would be related, that Bill could look after Charlie.

Charlie wasn't stupid, on the contrary. Sometimes he just didn't know if it was A.M. or P.M. Bill said that he was the smartest guy on the staff, but when it was time for inspection Charlie would do things like not look straight ahead. He would watch the CO walk up and down in front of them, reviewing the troops. That was his way of showing that he was interested. He always believed in eye contact. Charlie's letters had more to say than he was healthy and that he missed me. He used up a lot of ink describing the weather. Lots of detail. He also got into trouble with the intelligence people because he thought Mary and I would want to know the exact longitude and latitude of their position, something they regarded as classified, something that Charlie thought of as just telling us where he and Bill were.

Bill liked to say that Charlie had the most accurate grease pencil in the squadron and when it came down to a close call, Charlie would be the final arbiter. He would give them a long digression sometimes that the rest of the staff and the pilots had a hard time sitting through. According to Bill, Charlie would start off a presentation by saying something like, "Now this is a very interesting development. As you all know, the Japanese are here, and the storm front, if it was anything like the one we saw last week . . . ," and the lifers would get this look on their faces like they wanted things chop, chop, but they wouldn't say anything because it would throw Charlie off for about five minutes. So they would just sit there and wait till he was through and then they would have someone like Bill summarize it all.

We saw things on this side of the war also. A few months after a group would leave we started getting some of them back. Mary and I were working at the U.S. Naval Hospital in San Diego. We had it worst because we worked in the burn ward. It was never quiet. Sometimes they would offer us money not to change their dressing.

One day the Andrews sisters came to our ward. They walked around to each patient and tried to carry on some sort of conversation and then they would give them magazines and cigarettes. One of them asked a boy, who was burned from his stomach to his feet, what was the first thing he was going to do when he got home to his wife? He started yelling at her, "Well

what do you think, Maxene, just what do you think we're going to do? What does your husband do when he comes home wearing this kind of uniform? Get 'em out of here, Rose, please." They just looked at each other for a few seconds and asked him if there was a song they could sing for him. When I walked them out of our ward, I thanked them for coming and they told me that they thought we were all doing a wonderful job. They were nice girls, really nice girls. Like I said before, it was that kind of time.

The next day, after Bill and Mary left, we took the cat they found to a vet for a checkup. Other than being undernourished, the cat was O.K. I could have told them that, her ribs showed. We decided to name her Alice.

They also bought some watches. Expensive models, Omegas, and that riled me a little. Charlie explained. He said they were chronographs, which meant that they were highly accurate. Chro-no-graph. They had three small dials resting inside the face of the watch and the figures were coated with radium paint that allowed them to be seen at night. They would not need a flashlight to look at them and that was important, according to Charlie, because glare would not get into the eyepiece as they were sighting their telescope. Charlie said they were a sound investment, that they would last forever. What was more important was that the chronographs would introduce a greater sense of order into Andy's life, a sense of time and responsibility. They had been getting along fine for years with Charlie's old Timex but what could I say? Andy stood in the kitchen with the light out, holding Alice, trying to get her to notice his new watch.

He also showed it to Charlie's radiologist. There was always a lot of fanfare before we started the radiation therapy, our being such regulars. Andy would go behind the wall where the technicians stood and watch them move the machine around. Charlie would lie there patiently, facing away from me, resting on his hip, as the ties on his hospital smock were undone. Andy loped back and forth between the control panel and the table. "Show him where you're shooting," Charlie would say to the radiologist. I could see Andy standing behind the plexiglas barrier, standing next to the technician after she gently moved him out of the way so she could do her work. "All right, Andy, you stand here." On her cue he would say, "Five minutes," and Charlie would say, "Turn it up, I can't feel a thing." Then Andy would confidentially whisper to the technician, "Turn it up." If they were also going to take x-rays, and if it was a slow day, they would let Andy slide the film canister into place under the table where Charlie was lying.

A week after Bill and Mary told us about the high school program, we received a package from them with some books and study guides for the coming tests. Then we got down to work. My part in all this was to time

Andy. He would practice taking timed tests, working at Charlie's desk while I sat beside him. Charlie sat across the room in his easy chair, pretending that he was reading something. He would look at me about three or four times when he thought the test was about over and I would hold my eyes shut when the clock on the wall said it was. It wasn't the best way to do it, but I think Andy felt better that I was helping. Andy kept his face very close to the page when he was reading. He really worked hard on his concentration. When he was finished, when the time was up, Charlie would say, "Let's see how we did," and then the answers would be gone over.

In the beginning, there was a lot of explaining, but progress was made. The first thing he learned was that the first answer was not always the best. "These people are professional test makers," Charlie would say. "They can be very tricky." He was very patient and took the longest time in explaining the answers. He'd use his hands, like he always did, to explain things. He did this to keep Andy's attention going. Sometimes I would sit with an atlas open on my lap and he would point out things on different maps. "Magellan went around the world and you can too," Charlie said to him once. I liked that.

And that's how we worked it, throughout the fall, winter, and the spring. We got together in those sessions, once in the morning and once in the late afternoon. We worked even when Charlie wasn't feeling very well, when his medication made him nauseous. We had two more visits from the Finleys, and they were extremely supportive. In April, he passed his first test. It took him four tries, but we thought things would pick up once Andy got his confidence going. Charlie referred to the event as a milestone, and any fool could see that it was. Bill sent a very official looking proclamation one of his secretaries designed that looked like the governor himself was in on the action.

It's summer now. Earlier this afternoon we saw from the front porch Bill and Mary coming our way. She called last Wednesday and asked if they could see us this weekend. The body of the car was moving steadily and serenely while the tires buffeted crazily over the potholes beneath it. It was like they had a hold on things, as if the concentration and attention of those in the car to more important matters than the road was enough to keep the coarseness of all they drove over from interfering with their thinking.

They slowed down and crossed the bridge, then came into the driveway and parked behind our car. When Bill got out he was wearing some corduroy jeans and a nice sport shirt. He was removing some of those flip down sunglasses from his regular prescriptions.

"Long time no see," Bill said to us.

Charlie walked over to the car and the boys shook hands.

Mary got out of her side of the car. She was holding onto a bowl of something she threw together.

When Bill came over to me he bent down and kissed me on the side of my face. Mary did the same but she held her head next to mine for a few seconds. Then she brushed my hair back behind my ears. I could feel where they had touched me for the rest of the evening.

"How's Andy doing?" Bill said.

"He's doing fine. You should see how much time he spends with the books you sent us."

"Great! That's good for him."

Andy ran up to see them and he was carrying Alice. He acted as excited as he usually does when they came out to visit. He put Alice down and asked about their car. It was a new one. Bob said that it was a Fiat, that it was made in Italy. Andy leaned over and looked inside and then stood up and ran his hand along the aerial. There was a sound coming out from under the hood, a fan that keeps running when the engine is still hot.

Charlie hustled inside and got some cold sodas for everyone. The boys stayed outside on the porch. Mary pushed me up the ramp and into the kitchen, then took the casserole that she set in my lap and put it in the fridge. When she bent over to find a place for her casserole, I could see that she was still very thin at the waist, like she was when she was in her twenties. Mary was always a real weight watcher. She asked me if there was anything she could do for me and I nodded. Then she rolled me into the bathroom.

When we came out I could see that they had gotten some more drinks and were now sitting down out on the porch, slouching forward with elbows on their knees. They were facing each other and Bill was doing the talking. As he did, he never stopped looking at Charlie. His brow was furrowed like he was really letting go of something. Sometimes Charlie would bob his head around like he was saying, "I know, I know." Then they were quiet, and he looked at Bill and gave a decisive nod. They put all four of their hands together and held them like that while they looked at each other. Charlie was wearing an orange t-shirt that was stretched out at the neck.

They stood up and called Andy, who was over in the driveway washing the dust off the cars.

"Let's get the coals going," Bill said.

Charlie and Bill watched as Andy used his hands to place the charcoal around the bottom of the barbecue. "Not too much," they said. He started to spray the lighter fluid into the pit. As he did, he took a few steps back to show that he was being very careful. Bill threw in a match and the flame grew. Then he came into the kitchen.

"Is everything all right out there?" Mary asked.

"Everything is in control," he said and smiled. He glanced at me, then looked back at her. "We're going to take Andy for a drive to the market and pick up some stuff to eat. Could you keep an eye on things out here?"

Then they left.

Mary pushed me over to the kitchen table and sat down across from me. I got the same look from her that she gave me forty years ago when we talked about getting married.

"How've we been getting along, kid?" Mary said as she pulled my hand off my lap and held it in hers.

Then she started. She spoke carefully. "There's been some changes. In Sacramento the State Board of Education has changed the requirements for what you all have been working on. In addition to the five tests, each student will have to compose a letter, a business letter, under test conditions. They have to respond to a hypothetical situation with the letter. That means," she said, "they have to write it all by themselves." She stopped for a moment after she said this so I could think about it. Then she said, "I don't have to tell you that there is a world of difference between this and what Andy has been doing this last year." Her hand tightened around mine. I imagined him poking his pencil around on a computer card and getting the answer correct. I could also see the confused look on his face as he stared down at a blank page, going back to some long-winded question, and trying to start an answer.

I looked back across the table at Mary and remembered the time she and Bill were sitting there a couple of summers ago and Bill was telling us about the war. Charlie and Andy were outside squirreling around with their telescopes and the three of us were staying inside where it was air conditioned. Bill was talking about Bushido, the code of the Japanese soldier. The word means no surrender.

Bill told Mary and me about what happened on one day, during the last months of the war, when he and Charlie were working up on the conning tower of the *Independence*. That's where their instruments were. While they were working, a suicide plane hit another ship, the *Enterprise*, which was about two miles away. The *Independence* and the *Enterprise* were both aircraft carriers. The men had been warned about this kind of attack, but the idea was incomprehensible to the people on our side.

No one in the lab said anything, but they all watched. The fire covered almost half the flight deck on the *Enterprise*, according to Bill. After about a minute, Charlie said, "The Japanese are of the belief that when they die, they are going to meet their ancestors, that they are going home and will be honored for protecting their homeland." Some of the other men turned and looked at Charlie. Bill said that when he heard that, he didn't

feel that there was any difference between the enemy pilot and the American sailors who died there that day, that the war would go on and on and on and that he would never see Mary or his parents ever again. Then Charlie said to the guys looking at him, "There are still things we can do. We can help end this war. You don't want to look over there. You're not helping *any* of those people."

I looked across the table at Mary and she was still holding my hand. They would be telling Andy what Mary told me about the tests as they drove to the store. Charlie would be in the back seat, in the middle, leaning forward to hear Bill explain the situation. Andy would be asking about the knobs on the dashboard, or something like that.

We ate dinner inside on TV trays. I sat next to Mary and she helped me eat. The guys sat on the couch and were watching a baseball game and talking about the dry summer heat. Bill had brought some white wine out with him and Charlie and I tried some. I didn't spill a drop and it settled us all down a little. Charlie was getting a little flushed and saying things to Bill like, "Oh, yeah, I remember him. He was a helluva nice guy. How's he doing?"

We talked some more and then Mary said that in a few years they were going to retire and that they were thinking of moving out to our neck of the woods. Charlie offered to help them look for a place to live. "You can stay here as long as you like. You can sleep on the foldout bed we're sitting on."

"We might take you up on that," Bill said.

It was around seven in the evening when they started back and we went outside to say goodbye. Bill started the car and we sat on the porch and shouted things over the sound of the engine.

Andy was out on the porch with us, waving, when we heard a terrible sound from under the hood. Bill turned the ignition off and pointed to the front of the car and looked at Mary and said something to her.

The first to get over there was Andy. He was having a hard time finding the latch and Bill finally got it. When they opened the hood they saw that Alice was caught between the engine and the inside wall of the fender. She was hissing and screaming and Bill said, "Oh my God."

"What's going on out there?" Mary yelled from inside the car.

Andy reached down and slipped his hands between the metal and Alice. I could hear him crying and groaning along with the angry cat sounds.

"Watch your hands, son, be careful!" Charlie said. He took his shirt off and tried to get Andy to wrap it around his hands. He kept shaking his shirt in front of Andy so he would see it.

Just as Andy lifted Alice up far enough to free her she jumped away from him, scratching his forearms. She ran under the house. Mary got out of the car and got the hose. She brought it over and ran some water on Andy's hands. He was looking over where Alice had gone.

"You did O.K., honey, you did just fine," Mary said to Andy while holding his arms to keep them from shaking. She took him into the house and cleaned him up. When they came out of the house, Bill and Charlie had gotten the cat. Andy held out both of his hands to show us the bandages Mary had put on them. Then he went over and took the cat from Charlie. He stood next to Andy and petted Alice. He whispered, "Yes Alice, you'll be just fine." She lost some hair on her flank but seemed to be all right.

When they were backing out of the driveway, Bill turned his head away from us and looked over his shoulder more carefully than he probably had to. Mary just stared ahead and then, as an afterthought, waved at us like she had a little while before. Bill peered off to the left at a water truck on the other side of the canal and pointed at it. Mary watched it with interest and they both nodded their heads, like they had never seen one before, like it was enough to consume their interest until they were out of sight.

Charlie hadn't put his shirt back on when he came inside. He sat down next to me in his recliner. Never had I seen Charlie's eyes like this. He looked straight ahead like he couldn't touch anything, like he was unable to touch what meant anything to him. I couldn't touch him either. I could only sit there. I'd seen those eyes before, years before, but then they were Andy's eyes. That was when we were forced off the road in the accident that broke the bones high up in my neck and knotted Andy's tongue up down inside his throat and kept him from breathing well. He just sat there with his head over the steering wheel, looking straight ahead and I couldn't do anything for him. Andy was seventeen then. He was a good driver, very careful. It wasn't his fault. If I had been able to reach across and pull Andy's tongue out, Charlie wouldn't have been sitting across from me like he was, shirtless, worrying about our son's education, about his future. And if that accident had never occurred, I'd have been getting things straightened up around the house, thinking about what kind of people would end up in the hospital I worked in, how I might care for them, or what kind of problems would arise. I'd check and see if Charlie had enough medication and make sure that he was comfortable. Andy would be married now. He'd call us on the phone, long distance, and we would talk to our grandchildren. They'd ask how Charlie was and I'd say something like "Charlie who?" or "Charlie's just fine."

Those weren't the eyes he had when I first met him, or that explained away quickly every problem that was set before us, that spoke to me when

he gave me a bath, that looked into the sky at night. "Rose," he would say when he was caring for me, "he's as good an astronomer as anyone I ever knew. He knows what's up there. He knows where we are."

Then Alice padded into the room and jumped up into Charlie's lap. He raised his eyebrows like he was saying, "What do you know, look who's here." He looked down at Alice and said, "That's a good girl, that's a good cat." He sat there for a few minutes quietly petting the areas that hadn't been singed. Outside, I could hear Andy setting up a little telescope. Charlie heard it too. His eyes sharpened a little.

He looked down at Alice and said softly, "He'll do all right, he'll do just fine. You saw what he did this afternoon. He's got a good head on his shoulders. That's all you need." Then he kept talking and his eyes narrowed even further. When he spoke, he sounded more confident with each sentence.

Charlie put Alice on the floor and walked over to the map of the moon they had hanging over his desk. They had gotten it out of a *National Geographic.* When he rose out of the chair I could hear his skin unstick itself from the naugahyde. His back had little pink and white lines and starfish on it that looked like the mountains and craters on the map of the moon in front of him. He looked at a calendar next to the map. He put his finger on it and said, "Hey Rose, there's going to be a shower tonight."

Charlie rolled me over to the window so I could see and ran outside to where Andy was. They were right in front of me. They began fiddling with some adjustments on the little telescope that is attached to the big one. The little scope acts like a sight, allowing the viewer to put the planet in question in line with the larger scope. Both of them worked on it and finally got it going.

Then they were quiet. They sat down for awhile. Charlie was calmly saying some things to Andy. Both of them were looking at each other. Eye contact. They talked for about half an hour and while they talked, it had gotten pretty dark. Then they both stood up and started working. A few minutes later I could see that they were getting excited about something. They moved away from the equipment and just looked up into the sky. It was the shower. I knew this because I could see, above their heads, the arcs of their radium watch dials tracing in tandem the path of a meteor. That's when I had to look away.

Reviews

Urbane Tales, Short Stories by Raymond Johnson. Kansas City, MO: Book Mark Press (University of Missouri-Kansas City), 1991.

Learning to Dance and Other Stories by Sharon Oard Warner. Minnesota Voices Project Number 52. Saint Paul, MN: New Rivers Press, 1992.

There are two kinds of writers: those who approach writing with a vision and know where they're going and those who approach writing with a glimmer of an idea and write to see how things turn out. Neither is a "better" method, for both, if they are successful, produce the same end: a single vision, complete and whole. The authors of the two short story collections, *Urbane Tales* by Raymond Johnson and *Learning to Dance and Other Stories* by Sharon Oard Warner, illustrate these two methods. Johnson's stories are, as his title suggests, polished and sophisticated, the product of years spent perfecting his craft in varied careers as an actor, photographer, and translator, as well as a writer of novels, plays, short stories, radio scripts, and operas. On the other hand, Warner's process is more intuitive; she calls the act of writing an "adventure": "When I begin, it's because there's something I don't understand—a person, an issue, an emotion, an image. My stories are like jigsaw puzzles in unmarked boxes. I start with one piece and trust that when I put it down, another will follow. Eventually, if I'm patient, the whole picture emerges."

Both authors offer characters in moments of crisis whose experiences illustrate universal themes of life and death. However, Johnson addresses many different experiences, and he lifts them from the realm of ordinary life, infusing them with mythic resonances. His settings are international: America, England, Europe, and Scandinavia. In contrast, Warner's stories are domestic and earthy, reflecting a consuming interest in family relationships and one central experience: coping with loss and change. Warner's settings are specific American cities in the South or the Midwest, reflecting her own life settings in Dallas and Austin, Texas; Lawrence, Kansas; and Ames, Iowa. In addition, each author deals with emotion in different ways, reflecting traditional masculine and feminine sensibilities: in Johnson, the emotional intensity is submerged, checked by his light, ironic tone, whereas Warner enhances the emotional intensity, infusing her narratives with an ever-present sense of human caring and feminine caretaking.

The four stories and one novella that make up Johnson's collection are written in strikingly different modes. In "Farewell to the Carnival," a middle-aged man reveals the barrenness of his own life as he dispassionately "studies" a young boy who faces eminent death from cancer. "A trip Beyond the Bay" is a gothic rite-of-passage story in which a young man struggles to conquer pain and irrational fear to establish his identity. These two stories are given mythic dimensions by being set against the backdrop

of archetypal folk events. In "Carnival," it is Fasnacht, a Swiss celebration that marks the transition from pre-Lenten festival to "the somber Lenten attendance on death and resurrection," an apt symbol of the passage the boy, and ultimately the narrator, must confront. In "Bay," it is the Swedish Walpurgis Eve, a night when evil spirits emerge from the nether world to wreak havoc among men, an appropriate "testing ground" for the skeptical young American tourist. In "The Wound, the Sow, and English Beauty," another middle-aged man confronts his own mortality and the emptiness of his present life by narrating and thus re-living a repressed memory, a bizarre story of love and betrayal of his youth set within the historical drama of World War II. In this novella, we see a striking example of Johnson's use of irony: we think we have a traditional story in which the narrator recovers a repressed memory in order to resolve present conflict; however, the bartender's "mocking" comment at the end, "'Come slumming any time—sport,'" casts doubt upon the authenticity of Tony's experience and his attempt to revitalize his life, intensifying the pathos of his alienation.

"Thingummy Soup" and "Club de Paris" are comedies: the former, a light, romantic satire on modern life; the latter, a romantic tragicomedy about the conflict between genders. Mary, the heroine of "Soup," appears to be a "woman of character," but knows she is only playing a role; in her ridiculous efforts to fulfill this role, she creates a conflict between herself and her new husband. Unlike Mary, Agnes, the heroine of "Club," is an authentic "woman of character" whose values are pitted against her love for her new husband when a would-be former lover attempts to break up her marriage. In both comedies, the conflict is resolved in surprising ways, and the wife's pregnancy plays a part in resolving the conflict and affirming the relationship with the promise of permanence and rejuvenation.

Warner's stories, too, involve characters at some moment of crisis, but where Johnson offers a wide variety of characters and experiences, Warner's characters, though they might vary in age or specific concern, are all females attempting to cope with loss. Most are either adolescents or young mothers forced into adult situations by divorce or death. All are in a state of transition; in fact, many of the stories are set in places where we find displaced people: laundromats, airports, hotels, new apartments with the moving boxes still unpacked. All struggle to pick up the pieces of their fragmented lives and put them together again in a meaningful way; in the author's terms, all are "learning to dance." Each story involves the main character's unexpected experience with a stranger; hence, Warner uses Blanche's line from *Streetcar Named Desire* as her epigram: "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." The outcome of this encounter is never made explicit: the "others" go their own way unaffected, having filled the protagonist's need for a temporary "family" in her anxious transitory moment.

This is not to say that Warner's stories are all alike. Even though the main characters are similar in their naïveté and needs, their experiences vary and the "others" they chance to meet are often quite bizarre. In one story, the "other" is a man's face that peers at her over a bathroom stall in a restaurant. In another story, an aging cripple enacts a figure in an Andrew Wyeth painting, and the "other" is none other than the artist himself. Nonetheless, Warner is most adept at taking the most ordinary of circumstances and turning them into significant events. A teen-aged run-away buys a Pepsi for a little boy in a laundromat. An adolescent girl walking home from school stops to give directions to a young mother in a decrepit old Chevrolet.

Warner is especially interested in the relationships between caretakers and victims and how these relationships can be mutually rewarding—or damaging. Each main character has a heightened sense of her role as caretaker; she feels the pain of others intensely, and she struggles to communicate with the inarticulate: a girl with cerebral palsy, a deaf dancer, a child with an inattentive mother. She seeks love, but is often unsuccessful in expressing her own strong feelings, bungling her caretaking role. Over and over in these stories, relationships develop and dissolve; only occasionally, when we least expect it, can connections be forged.

However, making connections is the main device of these narrators in telling their stories. Warner's characters are observant and perceptive narrators, and they use images to connect the various parts of the story and give it meaning. For example, the unnamed, retrospective narrator of "Working Puzzles" uses the image of working a jigsaw puzzle (Warner's own metaphor for her writing method) to show her efforts as a child to find meaning in a world turned upside down by her parents' divorce and to connect with a crippled friend. And in "Birds," the protagonist, while driving home from a session with her therapist, remembers a painful experience with a mental patient; later, she images this memory as something tangible, a bird in flight, left on the highway for her therapist to discern as he drives the same highway: "She trusted he'd be looking, . . . his head cocked for a glimpse of the rare bird she'd loosed on these Iowa skies." It is the characters' ability to create images and make connections that provides some coherence in their fragmented lives.

Both *Urbane Tales* and *Learning to Dance* entertain us while offering us valuable insights into the conflicts of the modern world. Johnson's varied stories portray the sometimes absurd, but always poignant, efforts of his characters to confront their own alienated lives. Warner gives us endless variations on a theme as her characters strive to connect with others in a chaotic world. And both deepen our own awareness of the human condition.

Martha Kubala

The Monkey of Mulberry Pass by Harley Elliott. Woodley Memorial Press (Washburn University, Topeka, KS 66621), 1991. 79 pp. $7.00 paperback.

Kansas plays a central role in Harley Elliott's work, the real countryside, stretching its broad plains from horizon to horizon, and a spiritual, inner Kansas wherein the great expanses of the earth are reflected in the expansive spirit of the poet. Elliott has always looked on civilization from the point of view of an outsider, but in this book he goes one step further; he looks on *humanity* from the point of view of an outsider, Jojo, a monkey in a brothel.

Such a book would be much easier to write if the poet had given the monkey more of his own sensibility, intelligence, and command of language. But Elliott confines himself to a very narrow world in which the speaker has limited mobility (he is kept chained), limited intelligence, and low sensitivity. Elliott remains, moreover, remarkably faithful to the limitations he imposes upon himself. The monkey knows the customers, the girls, the other animals, but only in relation to what he sees from his chained perch in the parlor. He can only speculate about what goes on upstairs, a "moment beyond concern," he concludes, which must be something very special—

> as when my teeth invade
> the first red chamber
> of a tomato.

"The Tail" turns out to be primarily about a monkey's tail with only oblique suggestions of a human penis.

> I picked it free of dust
> leaf bits the random flea
> keep it fluffed and dry
> my rope to monkeyness
> my link to the dream
> of hot green leaves.

Although Elliott gives up much by speaking through such an animal, he gains concentration, focus, simplicity, and humor. Our complex world *can* be reduced to essentials.

The humor works two ways. The limited animal world becomes a parody of the human world, as when Jojo thinks himself the King of All Monkeys and surveys his kingdom while eating a grasshopper. But his world appears superior to civilization when a "civilized" man offers Jojo

some hot peppers as a joke, saying condescendingly, "There you go, Blinky." Jojo eats them, shrieks in pain, and manages to reach out and tear his tormentor's eyelid. A drunken fight ensues in the brothel and the man is ejected as Jojo thinks grimly to himself: "There you go, Blinky."

Each indivdual poem treats a different aspect of Jojo's existence, so by the end of the book the reader has a sense of the brothel as a community. Jojo comes to know the girls (with the possible exception of the succession of Suzies) as individuals: Mary, the serious madam; Matty, who drives men wild; Dora with her pretty teats (Jojo knows because she has displayed them twice in the parlor); Genevive, an older woman with no illusions; and Martha, the black cleaning woman who will not let men use her body and plays the piano when no one else is around. Sailor, the parrot, completes the "family."

Drama in the book comes from the interaction of this family with the world outside. Men pass through; the clerk, the railroad official with the big belly, the English lords, Whiskey Man (the tormentor of Jojo), Big Nose Ed, and Homely James, an Irish farmer with a guitar. Beyond the men, outside the house, waits a world of animals: horses tethered; geese flying overhead; a yellow wolf prowling the night for monkey meat. And beyond these worlds stretch other worlds of which Jojo, chained to his perch, can only dream.

Because of Elliott's strong sense of individual characters, *The Monkey of Mulberry Pass* reads almost like a work of fiction. At the climax of the book, a fire threatens the house. The inhabitants must flee. In the resulting confusion the parrot escapes into the wild, but Jojo remains captive. Then the little community starts breaking up: Big Nose Ed announces he is going to the Black Hills in search of gold. Jojo observes him holding Mary all night in the parlor.

> Dawn finds her
> . . . on the porch
> surrounded already by
> the absence of his arms.

The little world of the brothel may be seen as a microcosm of the great world beyond. The chained monkey may even be seen as a symbol of the poet in contemporary society. But the poet wisely leaves the wider implications of his book to the reader. Jojo concentrates on the immediate, the specific. The poems have a spellbinding, haunting quality, a wonderful balance between outer and inner life—even if the life is that of a monkey.

Once again, Harley Elliott shows that he is *the* Kansas poet of our time.

Victor Contoski

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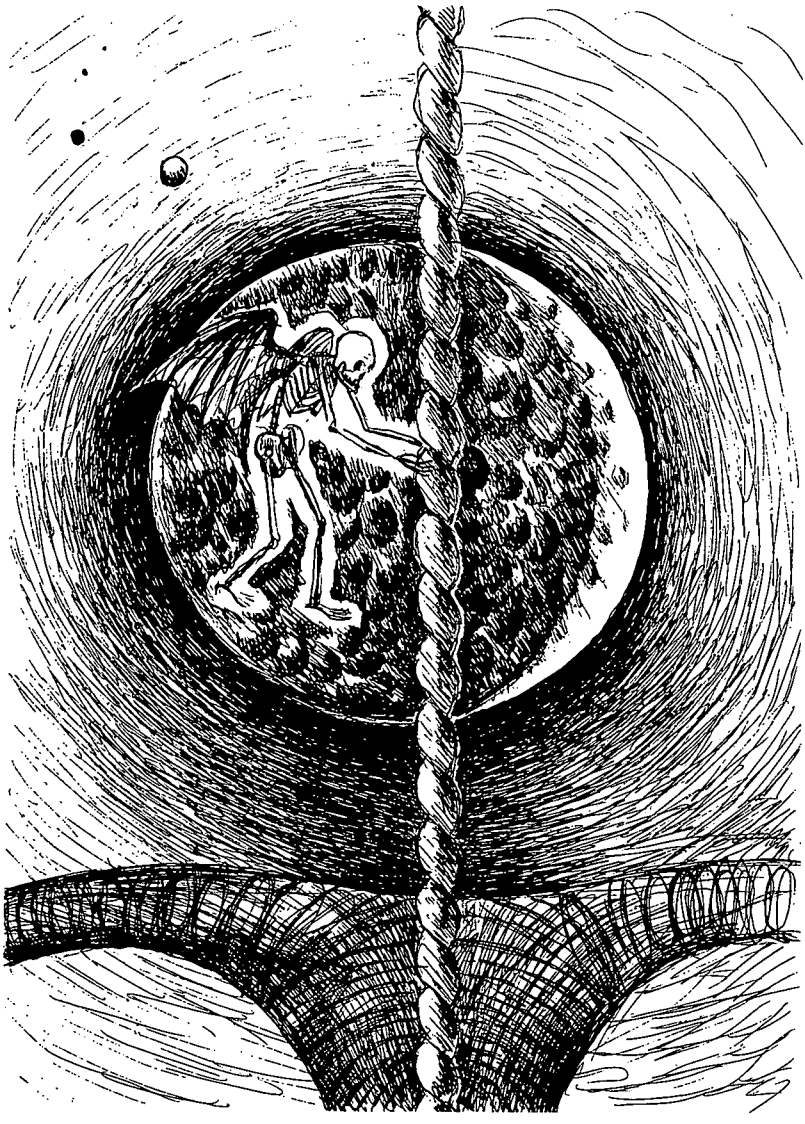

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