Cottonwood 50
Scott Heim

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

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Scott Heim

Cottonwood Magazine and Press
Lawrence, Kansas

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Artwork by Stan Herd

Editor's Note

Cottonwood has been publishing quality fiction and poetry since 1965. We are especially happy to begin our thirtieth year of publication with fiction and graphics from two Kansas artists who have attracted national attention. Scott Heim is one of the writers featured in a *New York Times Magazine* article on the most promising young artists of this decade. Stan Herd's work in Kansas, New York, and other fields is presented in *Crop Art* (Abrams), with superb color reproductions of some of his works and an illuminating discussion of how he produces them. Those who attended the last event of the River City Reunion will recall that during the performance at Liberty Hall, sunflowers mysteriously attached themselves to parking meters in the vicinity. A clutch of these by-products of one of Stan's projects was carried on stage by Allen Ginsberg for his reading.

Over the years we have been privileged to publish later works by writers like Scott, whose first publication was a poem he wrote while still an undergraduate at KU. Bob Day, one of our founding editors, has become nationally known as a writer and teacher of creative writing. Such past editors as Tom Averill and Denise Low, both featured in recent issues, are widely known. And other contributors have gone on to publish first books after their appearance in these pages, most recently Phyllis Becker, whose *Walking Naked Into Sunday* (Wheel of Fire Press) includes four poems that first appeared in *Cottonwood* 38/39. Another dear friend of *Cottonwood*, Patricia Cleary Miller, has published a collection of poems, *Starting a Swan Dive* (Bookmark Press). The current issue was much too full for appropriate reviews of these books, but we plan to include reviews as early as possible. Our next issue will feature a selection of works from the last thirty years.

We survive, principally, on subscriptions, grants from the Kansas Arts Commission, some assistance from the English Department, and occasional grants from the University in support of a particular issue. Private donations, through the Alice Carter fund of the KU Endowment Association, have provided timely support for some projects. With the likelihood of decreasing support from government agencies, contributions to this fund and increased subscription are our best hope for continuing to offer early publication for young Kansas writers and their peers across the country. Contributions to the Alice Carter Fund should be made out to the Kansas University Endowment Association with a notation that they are for the English Department Development Fund (Alice Carter) and mailed to *Cottonwood*. We acknowledge, with deep gratitude, a contribution from a former staff member that included a matching grant from her employer. It has helped considerably to make our thirtieth year possible.

—*George Wedge*

COUNTRYSIDE · NEW YORK · ONE ACRE · HERD ·

Poetry

Julie King

To Mary at Thirteen

You taught me to bake
cookies when I was ten,
to measure into the oversized
blue bowl, to squeeze
dough through my fingers.
Nothing since has matched
that smoothness, that aroma
of sugar, butter, real
vanilla, the combining
of ingredients that had stood
alone in tin canisters
or bottles, pure and neat,
into something sliding
over my tongue. Nothing
since has matched the strands
of red hair escaping
your barrette, clean sweat
on your freckled nose,
as you silently concentrated
on your task, rolling
that dough into perfect glossy
balls, placing them two
inches apart on greased
sheets, criss crossing
with our old, yellow-handled
forks. Nothing since
has matched Bobby Sherman
singing on the phonograph,
flour floating in oven-
warmed air, and your hips
swaying in silky, slow circles.

Julie King

Living with Martha Stewart

Every Saturday morning, I watch
Martha Stewart's "Living."
My husband works on his power
book, eyeing me, suspicious
of my gray sweats, warmed-
over coffee. I trust Martha.
I must. Trust belongs to anyone
with guts enough to call
a show "Living." As if she has
the formula. As if she knows
the score. She does. Herbs cure
gout, sweeten wardrobes, color
pasta. Turkeys can not only be
baked but grilled or deep-fried.
Anything that grows does. Nothing
that exists empties. I want
what she has, that easy confidence.
I want who she is, all grace
and manners. I lean forward
on the couch, breathing in her
gospel: the more pots you have,
the more plants you'll nurture,
the happier your house will be.
It's as simple as that.

Walter Griffin
Corvus

For a long time I loved the things
that grew beside your grave,
long lines of dark tracks where crows
flailed away at ice crystals, their beaks
frozen to the ground where you lay with
your hands folded like birds across your breasts.

The crows are sleeping inside my head,
dotting the snow with black wings,
opening up cavities, spilling out bones,
their sharp claws ripping the green funeral tents
that continuously flap in my dreams;
digging in the soundless soil past vaults,
picking at eyeless sockets, propping up heads.

Now I wait for the evening with the .22
clean and long in my hands, dreaming
of your eyes and raven hair and sight one
by one the featured skulls hunched in ice,
place the small of the stock against my cheek,
squeeze the trigger and send the slender
bullet cracking in winter air.

S. Hind

Eyes Like a Lizard

"I'm not special enough to run out of ideas."
—William Stafford

Some men can't choose surrender.
They ride along in the car singing
out with each glance, until worlds
shine with their delight.
Ansel Adams
saw Hernandez, New Mexico, like that
at 4:00 P.M. on October 31st in 1941.
He had sought the secret of a stump
all day as the sun displayed possibilities,
the suspected particular stump never there.
So now Adams
was driving back, a day's pleasure
unfinished, when he glanced out and saw
the grave markers glowing, the whole
bright little city on the twiggy sand,
and he hurried after that radiance,
in retreat even as he fumbled memories
for the right setting: 250 candles
per square foot assembled in the moon's
stolid face, he recalled. And in that
second's recollection his camera
opened on enchantment.
And the man
drove away with the secret of who had
won, Adams or the sun. Heads or tails,
he had tomorrow and the stump.

Lynn Plath

The World Remade

Edward Hopper, Room in Brooklyn, 1932

Walls emerge from darkness,
sunlight becomes a room in the city,
an angle of windows, a bar of gold on the floor.
In a white vase on a table in the corner
flowers open, pulling the day into themselves,
into the rush and flutter of yellow petals
the way one body draws another body into itself.
The single occupant of this room sits in a rocker
watching the building opposite hers thrust its red
wall against sky. She knows that at any moment
the hard blue will burst panes of glass,
that a small bird on the street below will be cut
by falling diamonds, a pedestrian's lung pierced
by a sharp, transparent jag; time will slow
to a gradual positioning of objects—
nothing will move for seconds, for years.
Then pieces again will mend without seam,
shattering the stillness, remaking the world.

Michael Smetzer

Tequila / Pulque

Agave worm in the bottle,
you're *crema de la worm.*
Ebony knob on a divinity stick.
Who could swallow a prettier fellow?

But what has cream to do with Tequila?
With wormy agave drained to death
by sweaty men in a desert?
With its juice brewed for pulque,

distilled for bandits to heat themselves
before stopping the bus from the border?
Hey, perfect worm, you look
gringo clean tonight!

Give me a glass of pulque,
where a real worm might be,
mottled and smashed, cut to bits—
a worm of the people.

Pass him round in a bottle
born of broken bottles
¡Salud! to the approaching lights—
el autobús de las turistas.

Mary Winters

Suggestion

Parents: teach your children how to
dig holes. Let them practice at the
beach with plastic pail and

shovel, by scooping with their
hands; in the backyard under the
catalpa tree with serving spoon and

baking pan, a sharp stick and an
old shingle; give them the book about
Mike Mulligan and his determined

steam shovel, Maryann; when they are
older, the film *Great Escape*. The
future's uncertain: your children will

thank you if they must dig a grave or
latrine; take cover in a foxhole,
tunnel out of prison; store

potatoes in a root cellar; hide their
last coins and the jewelry you
gave them; search a desert for water, a

field for turnips and carrots, under
bushes for acorns the squirrels
buried; stop a fire with a trench—

Kurt Leland

The Man Who Read Too Much

"The poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully."
—Wallace Stevens

His criterion for keeping a book was simple—
did he recall *anything* from what he'd read:

line, image, title? He was amazed at how
many poems resisted not the intelligence,

but memory. In the last year he'd filled
a grocery bag with soon-to-be second-hand

books, thinking: *This is the review that*
no one will write. Or *was* there a value

in seeing the many ways to do it wrong:
Formalism's high-concept greeting cards,

the syncopated music boxes of Free Verse
winding down? He wanted something between

the obvious and the unscrutable—a little
work to do, but not too much, the feeling

that his understanding was worth the effort:
no verbal confections, and only one felicity

per verse. It didn't take him long to learn
that *soul* tops the academics' list of four-

letter words, that to say something new about
love requires being graphic or gay. Could he

find a poem that would last a day or a decade,
something to remind him that there was more

to life than shopping malls, the office,
mowing the lawn? He was curious to know

if there were other men who had escaped love
almost successfully, and women who hadn't;

whether his children's plush toys might once
have been animals, actual and wild. Was it

too much to ask of his contemporaries—that
chorus of me, myself, and implacable I—what

suffering and death might teach besides
the fact that they happen and people feel

bad about it? He hoped to catch a glimpse
of imagination's Other World—or *this* one

whole and clear—led by a trustworthy guide
whose rhythms, both lucid and inescapable,

might drill into his bones and bring up
the marrow in a gusher of salt and iron.

Jim Daniels
God's Stopwatch

Kevin Hinman asked Sister Beverly
in seventh grade science
how sperm got to the egg.
She blushed. *They swim,*
she said.

*

In Catholic school then
that was the closest we got
to the truth. I said
to Patty Flanigan
my sperms want to go swimming
with your eggs. I thought only
of Patty's polka-dotted panties.
She raised her skirt.
Oh, what alliteration!

*

The nuns were losing their habits
though the older ones hung on,
beating us with their black rosary beads.

*

Lynn, Patty's best friend,
met up with a strong swimmer
that spring and disappeared
only to return the next fall
looking the same, only quieter.

*

I'm married to God, Sister Beverly
told us, wore a ring out in public—
without her habit on, men
couldn't tell. We snickered—
her green dress
looked like the library curtains.

*

Larry Warren's little brother collapsed
and died on the playground. Bad heart.
Larry started stuttering. We gave him
the ball more often.

What could we do? Father Davis
talked to us about death.
What did he know; he was alive.

*

Father Davis talked to the boys
about sex. What did he know.

He told us don't do it.
Don't do it alone.
Don't do it with a girl.

The clock circled lazily.
He pulled at his collar.

*

At first, Lynn walked home alone
after school. It was like
she died. But most of us came back
to her—she was one of us, the opposite
of immaculate.

*

Patty and I smoked cigarettes
and coughed, then stopped
coughing. Her skirts were too
short—she got sent home.

Kneel down, Sister Beverly said,
Your skirt should touch the floor.

*

We were tired of kneeling
by then. Larry looked pretty pale.

*

Where did they put
all those old black habits?

*

Nothing made me happier
than holding Patty's sweaty hand.
An invisible host melted between us.

We never swam together, together
like that. It was tough then
to get beneath each other's habits
and see what was there
and touch what was there

so we could be true believers.

*

Lynn's invisible baby replaced
Larry's brother. Somehow.
It was all we could figure.
We tried to create our own math
but it didn't work.

*

The host was a sign.
We swallowed.
White and tasteless in our dry mouths.
We wanted moist color, tongue
on tongue.

*

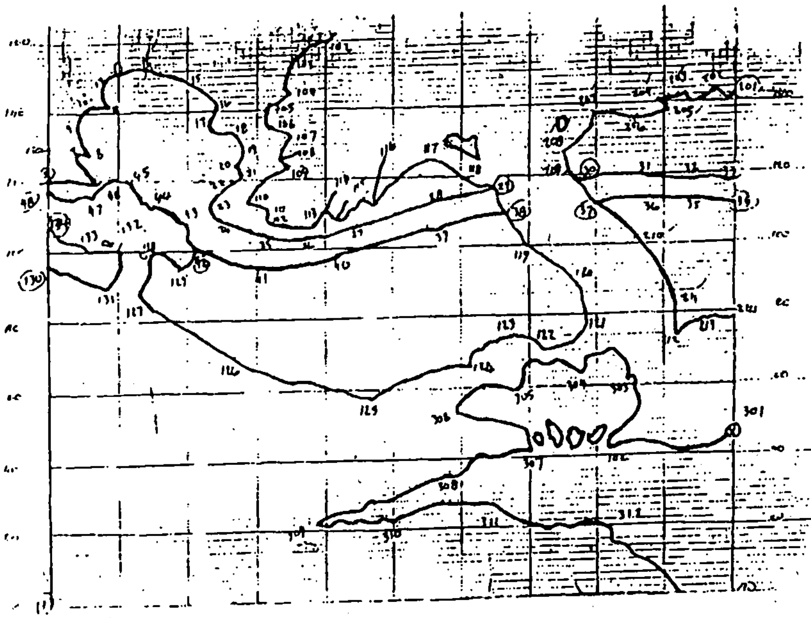
In second grade, we liked the nun
who gave out candy. In fourth,
we liked the one who sang sweetly,
laughed sweetly.

In sixth, we learned faith meant
if you asked why too many times,
they hit you.

*

Sister Beverly told us kissing
passionately for more than five seconds
was a sin. At lunch that day,
Patty and I headed right to the closet
and started counting, started
sinning.

You be a priest and I'll be a nun,
Patty said. *Let's talk*
in tongues, I said,
and we did.



Fiction

Dobby Gibson

What the Silence Holds

One-hundred-and-one-year-old Edie Jonsen sits down slowly, hanging her cane on the chair's wooden arm so it balances carefully like a mobile, then scoots back a bit and feels her bones fall comfortably still. It is a relief to be at rest after walking all the way from the car, through the lobby of the country club, and across the dining room to the table where she presently sits. Edie knows all too well how she looks when she walks: how her ankles wobble, not much stronger than a toddler's, and how through her thinning skin the parts of her that once made her so strong—her veins, muscles, and bones—are now vividly apparent, loosely wrapped in a murky cellophane skin, showing everyone their signs of wear and decay.

"Happy birthday, Great Grandma Edie," little Eliot says, on cue from his mother, Lanie. They are seated on either side of Edie, Eliot's hair combed down so straight and wet it might snap. What remarkable creatures they are, Edie thinks, this little Eliot and his mother Lanie, both of them more than seventy years younger than me, yet made entirely of the same tissues and organs. How quickly they will age; how soon their human forms will begin to fail and decompose.

With a smile, Edie says, "Thank you, my darling," but Eliot isn't listening. He has a model car on the table, and he drives it away from her while blowing through pursed lips.

"Do you feel a year older today, Grandma?" It is Lanie, Edie's granddaughter, speaking to her from the left. Lovely Lanie. Lovely Lanie who has never seen a hard day in her life. But she is lovely, and she is good to her husband, who is still at work, and good to little Eliot, and that is what is important.

Edie leans back a bit and laughs and says, "Do I *look* a year older?"

"No," Lanie says. "You just look elegant and beautiful tonight. Like you always do." Her hair is as straight as little Eliot's, but not so stiff. It bobs pleasantly on either side of her smooth face in two enormous blonde swoops, each one making a J.

"I quit aging years ago," Edie says.

Lanie raises a loosely-made fist. "Yes!" she says. "That's the spirit."

Edie looks over at Lanie, half of Lanie's face dropping down behind the menu she is holding. Moving like a sleigh over smooth snow, Edie's gaze travels pleasantly across Lanie's pale skin, pausing only to notice the kindness her features emanate. It is a natural kindness that Edie suspects she herself may have lost to age. She wants so badly to feel like that again, so warm and attractive, like a candle. She wonders if she can remember what it feels like to be inside a skin that fresh.

"I don't think I can get any older," Edie says suddenly, but Lanie doesn't hear her; she is still lost behind her menu. So Edie takes a drink from her water glass, carefully watching the crushed ice swirl around as it gives off a quick snap. So sharp, that ice, so cold. She feels it pelting her face.

It is whipping across the southwestern Minnesota plains now, right through the town of Cannon Falls, then through little Vasa, and then right through Edie herself as she rides in the horse-drawn sleigh on the snow-covered road to church. The ice is finding ways in through the folds of her scarf, stinging her smooth, young skin like so many insects.

Next to her, in the front seat of the sleigh, sits her husband Lars, young and solid at twenty-five, holding the reins motionlessly with giant mittened hands. Behind them are their two children, quiet as the cold itself, huddling beneath a heavy quilt.

Why can't the team move any faster, Edie wonders, the poor frozen things? The snow is not all that wet, for heaven's sake; the road surface is certainly as firm and hard-packed as it could ever be, even in the summertime.

"Lars, use the switch, dear. We don't want to be late for Christmas service," Edie says through a mouthful of scarf. But her husband Lars doesn't respond; he's just as cold as she is, lost underneath a parka, a scarf, and a woolen lap blanket. What is that look on his face? Edie wonders. It is a look that shows far more than just the pain of winter—why isn't he listening to me today?

"Can't you hear me?" Lanie is leaning across the table and speaking to Edie quite loudly.

Confused, Edie responds, "Sorry, dear?"

"Do you need to turn up your hearing aid, Grandma?" Lanie says, mouthing the words with exaggerated lips.

"Oh no, I can hear you just fine, dear," Edie says, quickly busying herself by adjusting the napkin in her lap.

Lanie opens her eyes wide, hoping for comprehension. "We need to order now, okay?"

"Yes, of course," Edie says. She looks down slowly and begins to read her menu.

They order drinks and food from a friendly young waiter, Lanie ordering for Eliot, and then Edie looks off around the dining room. She can't believe how comfortably she fits into the country club's opulence these days, how much this place has become a part of her: the elegant mahogany furniture, the faces around her all as striking as Lanie's, the servers saying "Right away, Mrs. Jonsen," and "You're very welcome, Mrs. Jonsen." It's an existence she would have never dreamed of, not even in her wildest days as a young flapper—the days when she really would have enjoyed it.

How strange, this life, Edie thinks. How strange to eat my first meals grown and picked fresh from seemingly virgin soil by my parents' own hands, then cooked in a little prairie house made of nothing but wood and sod; and then to eat my last while being waited on, looking off at a snowy parking lot full of cold, steel automobiles and a skyline of buildings so high they can slice clouds. How strange, to have a husband and two children and outlive them all by decades.

Edie remembers herself as a young schoolgirl when they built the railroad from Cannon Falls to Minneapolis, two magic steel rails that tethered the farmers to the big city—a lifeline—the trains roaring through town as loud and mysterious as terrible storms, carrying friends and relatives away to new worlds.

Is that railroad remarkable any more, Edie wonders, even for me? Certainly not for anyone else. Not when there are people among us who have walked on the moon. Not when we have found a way to hurl a spacecraft carrying Leonardo and Bach all the way out of the solar system, a device searching for strange creatures that aren't even supposed to exist. In time, Edie decides, a future generation will finally stretch technology far enough to see what has always been out there. But it won't be considered all that extraordinary. By then there will be no room left for wonder.

For Edie, wonder is often the only emotion that a woman a century old can bring herself to feel. She is too tired to feel anger, and she has lived too long and seen too much to feel joy. But she can look down at the Earth and up at the stars in awe—a child once again—seeing everything through the strange and wonderful lens of one hundred and one years of living.

Even now she looks on in wonder as little stars stream across the dining room—a handful of white diamonds, each with a comet's tail. A birthday cake is being set down in front of her, and she can feel the peach glow the candles are casting up onto her chin. How darling, Edie thinks, Eliot and Lanie sitting around the table here with me, just like my brother Erik and

our *Moder* and *Fader* Jonsen would do at the farmhouse on my birthdays. Three smiling faces, all of the same flesh and blood. *Oh my dear grandkids, my dear family, if you only knew what secrets each of these candles is whispering to me. I would wear mine like medals if I could, so you could both see them and know just what each one meant.*

And there are so many candles now, maybe two hundred of them, lining the aisles of the church and illuminating the pews, dancing on their red and green stands like little angels, making the wooden church look warmer than it actually is. The flames are trying so desperately to melt the frozen faces, faces all showing the hardened Swedish grimace of winter. *Look at Lindgren Persson, for heaven's sake, he has an icicle hanging from his beard!*

Even the organ, as it signals the start of the service, makes Edie feel warmer. And when Father Olsen begins to speak—it has been so long since she has heard Swedish fall so beautifully off someone's tongue, like honey off a spoon—Edie wants to cry. Listening to him is taking a taste of something sweet: Edie has to roll her tongue and purse her lips right along with every syllable. There is so much to remember here, Edie thinks, so much for everyone to remember.

"Lars, are you going to remember your lines for the Christmas program?" Edie says. "Our district is second to perform in the program this year. We're right after Vesterbotten, dear, and you know they are going to be flawless."

Lars gives her a tired smile, barely bending his blond handlebar-moustache straight. He is usually her big candle, glowing on even the coldest day, but today he is flickering. What is wrong with dear Lars? Edie thinks—if only he would brighten up. Edie wants to stand proudly next to him in front of the congregation, listening to him recite and sing in a Swedish rich and deep as chocolate. And then afterwards they can watch the children gather around the tree near the altar, opening their bags filled with candies and apples.

Little candles, both of the children. Once they return home, following the service, the children will smile and eat Edie's dry and salty *lutfisk,* just like they do every Christmas. And they will fight over who gets to spread the butter, cinnamon, and sugar on her *lefse,* always licking their small hands despite being scolded. Maybe the best part will be watching them sit around the fire after dinner, stiff and tired, cracking chestnuts from the big bowl her brother Erik will bring—dear Erik, how could she have raised the children without dear Erik—Edie's little candles finally coming to rest with the adults.

"Grandma, blow out the candles," Lanie says. "They're melting onto your beautiful cake."

"Make a wish," Eliot says. "Birthday wish."

Edie opens her mouth and lets cool air fill her soft and tired chest like a bellows. She closes her eyes, hoping that this isn't all there is to her journey. She wants so much of it back again—most of all, the love she has felt. So she closes her wrinkled eyes tighter and wishes for love. The air pours smoothly out between her lips, and the flames all sputter to smoking wicks.

Lanie's car is choking, struggling to find oxygen in the iron-cold air. Edie is warm in the front seat, crossing her arms, fists wrapping a wool coat snugly to her torso. She squints and watches in comfort as tiny barbed flakes of snow scoot across the car's windshield. The snow is frozen so hard it is crunching under the tires, making the sounds of breaking shells, as Lanie drives slowly up the driveway to Edie's apartment building.

Lanie helps Edie out of the car, softly clutching her by the right arm. Through the tiny clouds of her breath, Edie watches each of her feet swing slowly in front of the other, heel first, then toe, while stepping gingerly across the slick sidewalk as if it might suddenly start moving. The winter's ice has always been both a terrifying and comforting obstacle to Edie. Like her it is fragile and brittle, but every year returns and endures just the same.

"Did you have a good birthday dinner?" Lanie asks when they reach the warm glass lobby.

The walk has Edie out of breath. "Yes, dear, I did," she says, looking back towards the car.

"Now, I know you must have something good to read tonight, is that right?" Lanie says.

"Oh, will you look at what Eliot is doing," Edie says. "How darling." Lanie turns to see what Edie is looking at: a stick figure that Eliot has traced in the frost on the rear window of the car. Lanie and Edie watch as he licks his hand warm and then erases it with a smooth sweep.

After kissing Edie gently on the cheek, Lanie says, "Well, you call us if you need anything. Otherwise, I'll call you day after tomorrow. We'll go get you some groceries." After a pause she adds, "Make sure you're keeping yourself warm, okay?"

"Goodbye, dear," Edie says, softly patting Lanie's arm.

Edie stands and looks around her sparsely furnished apartment, finally letting her eyes rest on the picture of her parents taken right after their wedding. It is a slightly yellowed plate of a very young *Moder* and *Fader* Jonsen already looking as old and weathered as Edie can remember them. Their sharp chins appear cold and hard, so much like the steel plows they

used to till and maintain their land, while their foreheads appear as soft and furrowed as the land itself. Wouldn't they love to see what they helped to create? Edie thinks. Imagine the wonder they would feel to see how I've survived—to see how their own son saved me and my children—and to see how we all still live on in little Eliot.

She looks away from the picture and stands in the middle of her living room as if she is lost, looking out her window at the snowfall, now wafting to the ground in larger, gentler flakes.

Edie looks up to the sky as the snow falls softly on her young head, nestling into the folds of her scarf. Outside in the sleigh once again, ready for the ride home, Edie can tell that it has warmed up considerably since the start of the service; even the team has warmed, both horses dancing restlessly in the harnesses Lars is tightening. Edie turns in the front seat to look at her children, happily trading candies on the quilt that is spread loosely across their laps. There can be nothing more peaceful than those children right now—nothing will be that peaceful again.

When she turns back around in her seat, she just barely catches sight of Lars collapsing off to the side of the team, a blurred flash of motion that Edie has watched happen so many times in her memory. His single holler, the hollow and strangely rhythmic sounds of excited hooves pattering in the snow, the crying of the children, and the gasps and shouts of the surrounding congregation members outside the church, all follow each other in close succession like a series of gunshots. And then Edie leaps out of the sleigh to see Lars for the last time, fallen and crumpled, hands to abdomen, his head in a bank of snow, the crystals near his mouth melting into a warm shade of scarlet that she never wanted to remember but never has been able to forget. But this time—for the first time, the day of her one hundred and first birthday—she quickly turns away. Edie refuses to look again at what she has seen too often, and in moving her head, her weary eyes fall on her maroon leather recliner. She decides she needs to rest.

Edie sits, slowly rolling her backside down into the recliner, then covers her lap with a knitted blanket. The chair has been hers for a long time, and its form reaches around and holds her tight. She spends most of her time in the recliner now; she hasn't even slept in a bed in twelve years. And about three hours a night is all she sleeps, that is all her quiet old body needs. So there she sits, patiently reading her days away, letting the chair fall back another notch when she wants to nod off.

Edie is tired now, much too tired to read. So she eases the recliner down towards the floor and closes her eyes. There is an absolute silence in her apartment, one that hides many voices these days: *Moder* and *Fader* Jonsen, her brother Erik, her two children, and especially Lars. Sometimes Edie

tries to be as still and quiet as she can, covering her heart with open palms and holding her breath, thinking that she just might be able drift off into the silence herself, joining all the voices once again, if only for an instant.

Where are my children? Where is my husband? Where have they gone? Edie can't remember; she is exhausted and has lost the strength to hold onto her memories. And so they all begin to leave her, seeping from her head slowly like air. She relaxes and starts to let them go.

Her head fills with an empty blackness stolen from the winter's night, and it leaves her with nothing but the dry road from the little church in Vasa to the farm, winding out under a sky lit up with a bone-white moon. It is summertime again, Edie is fresh and young, and she walks down the road without feeling the ground, like a fine dancer. Her lungs fill with warmth, driving out the stale cold air, each breath full of things in bloom: oak, laurel, sumac, lilac, and black-eyed Susan. The smells of new life make her smile.

Coming over the Velander's hill and letting the church disappear behind her, Edie can now make out Lars's peonies and Queen Anne's lace spread like a brightly colored quilt from the old farmhouse to the north woods, clinging to the little hill like magic. In the doorway to the farmhouse stands a healthy, young Lars, illuminated from behind by a wavering curtain of light falling from a stubby, flickering candle in the foyer. He is holding out for her a peony and a gathering of Queen Anne's lace, just like he used to when they first courted; and she reaches for him, tucking the Queen Anne's lace back behind her ear, as they walk inside. Then Edie watches calmly as the candle's final, solid remnants drift slowly across the flame, dropping her and Lars down into a blinding darkness, swallowing them into the florid smells of a sweet, waxy smoke.

Debra Di Blasi
Drowning Hard

I once told Joey I wasn't as pretty as he wanted me to be, and he said, "It's the inside of you I care about." Well, I thought he was referring to my heart, its kindness and generosity, but what he really meant was my sex, its tightness and generosity.

I am a big woman with big feet and square hands. My sex is a contradiction. It's small. Joey says it's like a virgin's. A 15-year-old virgin's, to be exact. How the hell would he know? The first time he had sex was with a 28-year-old female truck driver he met at a roadside honky-tonk coming back from a skiing trip in Aspen, and she sure as hell was no virgin. In one night she taught him more about a woman's body than most men learn their whole lives, sad but true. Joey was just 19 then and slumming, something he could do because he grew up not rich exactly, but very comfortable. His dad's a successful ob-gyn, a fact which makes Joey think himself an expert on vaginas by way of genealogy.

I've never had the luxury of going slumming since I grew up not poor exactly, but semi-deprived. My dad was a plumber who worked only when he damned well felt like it, and he did not damn well feel like it very often. If I were the poetic type who trusted the validity of metaphors, I might say my father's occupation would make me an authority on male plumbing. But I am not poetic and therefore do not consider myself a penis expert. I only know what feels good and what feels right and that only half of the goodness and rightness is directly attributable to a penis's length or width. The other half is the result of what's inside. And *I* mean the heart, its kindness and generosity.

You'd think that a man who tells a woman all he really cares about is her sex would lack that inside half which excuses whatever may be lacking in genital endowment. But that's not entirely the case with Joey. His heart is okay, though you can't see its okayness if you're looking at him straight on. Straight on he's too handsome for his own good. His handsomeness is the first and last thing you notice about him if you haven't learned to look elsewhere. I've learned. Joey taught me.

On cloudless, moonless nights we go out and lie on our backs in his yard, counting stars. There are millions. And there's this phenomenon that makes some invisible unless you look at them obliquely because they're more distant, their light dimmed by the brilliance of closer stars.

"But that doesn't mean they're not burning just as brightly," says Joey, "relative to their place in the cosmic scheme of things."

Like me, he implies, *distant but still shining.*

Sure, Joey shines. He has his moments. And most of them are in bed. Actually, there are two things Joey does well. One is screwing, the other is swimming.

I've seen him in an ocean where the waves were too high, too fierce, the water breaking hard onto the shore, swallowing gluttonous bites of beach with the foamy teeth of its ebb and flow. And there'd be Joey: floating like a new bobber, turning backward somersaults and flinging his arms up unafraid as the waves rolled under him and raised him high toward the blue ceiling of heaven. Sometimes they'd swallow him too, taking him down into their angry depths, tumbling him head over heels far below the surface while I'd watch, not breathing, waiting for him to emerge. And he'd burst through the surface, laughing hard, that confident shit-eating grin on his face that says water is his element, that he will always rise to the surface, come out on top, no matter how rough it gets.

In bed it's the same.

As I said, I'm a big woman. I can roll him like an ocean beneath the convoluted sheets, flipping him over onto his back and holding him under with the strength of my thighs, enveloping him in my own salty wetness. The difference is, I can drown him. I can make him gasp for air and cry out to God and Jesus—not for mercy, but to let Them know he's coming.

When I have rolled him from one end of the bed to the other, sometimes rolled him onto the floor, flipped him this way and that without once letting him slip out of me so that I grow hot as a car seat in summer, I grab hold of his shoulders and push him down, clench his loins with my knees and ride him slow and easy, while his eyes glaze over like just before dying, watching mine, waiting for them to glaze, too, narrow to slits, roll up inside my head which tells him he can stop holding back, aim for that divine destination deep inside my sex and notify God or Jesus that his moment has indeed arrived.

I do not wish to imply that our relationship is purely sexual. We talk. We wax philosophically about a hundred different things, none of which include love. Love is not practical for us. It complicates things. Unlike lust, which is straightforward and easy to accommodate. The problem is, I don't fit into Joey's world the way I fit into his bed. I know this. Deep down inside, Joey knows it, too.

Not so long ago he was blinded by lust, made incredibly stupid because his brain was concentrating all of its efforts on his penis, which is not a particularly rational part of the male anatomy. Blind and stupid, he invited me to a party at the Country Club. I said no. He asked why not. I said, "Look at me, Joey. The size of my feet, the squareness of my hands."

"The tightness of your sex," he replied.

"Who the hell's going to see that?"

"I will," he said, "even when you're wearing clothes."

Temporarily made blind and stupid by his confession of desire, I relented.

The party was being held in honor of his parents' thirtieth wedding anniversary. A hundred people showed up. Doctors, lawyers, bankers. And their wives whose vaginas had been examined at one time or another by Joey's father. And their children who had plopped out of those vaginas and into the doctor's hands. They were all remarkably pretty, remarkably handsome, like Joey. Their hands were not square.

Joey's parents rushed us the moment we stepped through the door. His father looked at me and said, "Well, well!" His mother nodded, "So *this* is the girl who's been occupying my son's life."

Your son's bed, I wanted to say, but I just smiled.

Joey smiled, too, like he was actually proud to have me with him, though it was most likely the pride of his penis smiling.

It was a long night. People asked me questions. They wanted to know what my father did for a living. I told them, "Nothing." And when they blinked their eyes once and slowly, I added, "He's dead." They wanted to know if I was related to so-and-so of such-and-such fame, how Joey and I had met, how long I had known Joey, where I'd gone to school, if I had trouble finding stylish shoes in my size.

Joey did not hear the questions—or the answers, which were not the ones I wanted to give but the ones I gave for Joey's sake. He did not hear them because he was always half-way across the room at the time, cornered by some old fart slapping him on the back and talking non-stop in his face while Joey nodded and drank, looking at me over the rim of his glass and winking.

I'd drunk plenty myself, so when I went to the bathroom and heard one woman who was pissing ask another woman who was pissing, "What in the world does Joey see in her," I answered, "My sex. Its tightness and generosity." Their pissing abruptly stopped. They did not speak or quit squeezing until they were sure I had walked out of the bathroom. But I hung around outside the door just long enough to hear them say, in unison, "The little slut," just as they let go of their pee.

I walked back to the party and straight up to Joey and pressed my lips against his ear and whispered, "Dance with me."

He said, "But no one else is dancing."

I said, "I know. That's the point."

He smiled at me and gave me that look of his, the one he gives me each time I reach for his zipper that cages the wild beast of his excitement. He slipped his arm beneath mine as if I were a princess and led me to the middle of the dance floor, wrapped one arm around my waist, laced his fingers through mine and brought the square clump of my hand to his cheek. Our feet did not move, but we swayed side to side, groins pressed tight and growing hot against one another, some old tearjerker tune playing in the background, and Joey and me staring into each other's eyes like two characters in a black-and-white movie.

For a long while everybody just stood there watching us, their drinks held in awkward incomplete gestures, their mouths still gaping from unfinished sentences. Then the women began to stare at their husbands with squinty eyes as if searching for something they'd left behind, something that the distance of time had made small and thus hard to see when they looked at it straight on. And the husbands turned to catch these searching stares and were for a moment bewildered, until they looked again at Joey and me and understood and perhaps also remembered because they set down their drinks and smiled at their wives and took hold of their hands and slowly led them out onto the dance floor.

Since that night, Joey has asked me to every party that comes along, even though I fight the stupid blindness of my libido, and win, and always tell him no. He eventually heard about the questions I answered that night, heard I'm sure a lot of other questions from his father and mother who shook my square hands as we were leaving their party and said, "Perhaps we'll see you again," hoping they never would.

It took me a while, but I finally convinced Joey to take other women to those parties, pretty women with slender hands and small feet, who do not mind all the questions because they have all the right answers. So he takes them to the parties and afterward he takes them home. Then he comes over to my place and we screw like it's the last chance we'll ever have. Which it will be, someday.

Joey had a party just last night. It was his birthday party. He's 28 now. After midnight came and he was officially a year older and everyone had kissed him and slapped him on the back, he waited a half-hour, then pretended to feel sick and sent everybody packing. Fifteen minutes later, he was at my place, diving into my steamy waters. Though he was pretty drunk, it didn't affect his performance any. He stayed hard for a whole hour

while I rolled him especially fierce since it was, after all, his birthday—my gift to him. But this time when he came he didn't call out to God or Jesus, he called out to me: flailing his arms over his head, bucking against the tide of my heat, screaming out my name like a drowning man drowning hard, going under for the very last time.

Afterward he lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. I raised myself up on one elbow and looked down at him and said, "You know, it doesn't bother me that I'm not as pretty as you want me to be."

And he said, "I've told you before, it's the inside of you I care about."

"Right," I smiled, "my sex. Its tightness and generosity."

He looked up at me and frowned, then grabbed hold of my hand, yanked me to my feet and led me out onto the deck of my apartment, the old wood already cool and wet with night. He pointed at the big sky above us and said, "Tell me how many stars there are."

"Millions," I replied.

"And how many of them are shining?" he asked. "How many of them burn?" His voice was hoarse and low like he'd spent the whole day and night yelling at a football game, and I knew he was crying.

I had never seen Joey cry before and did not want to see him cry now because the thought of it made my heart drop inside my chest like a stone cracked and falling. So I looked down at my hands—at my big square hands that maybe were not pretty with their rough palms and short fingers and chewed nails but were strong and useful nevertheless— and I laid them on Joey's shoulders to stop the awful trembling there and pressed myself tight against his back and leaned my head in close to whisper, "They all shine, Joey."

He gasped a little, a pitiful kind of sob, and then sighed. "Do we?"

I nodded and smiled. "Sure, baby. Relative to our place in the cosmic scheme of things, we're all burning."

Elizabeth Stuckey-French

Doodlebug

One January evening, the husband steps into his house and sees his wife kneeling in the middle of the kitchen floor. Her eyes are red, and she stares up at him in that vacant way that means she has just stopped crying. She is wearing his purple sweater, one she knitted for him when they were first married, ten years ago. It looks better on her, he thinks. He goes over to her, squats down and tries to hug her, but she ducks under his arm.

"I hate them," she says in an angry burst.

He knows she is talking about their daughters. "You don't mean that." He gets to his feet and stands there, in his heavy overcoat, trying to adjust to being home. The gleaming white surfaces and fluorescent lights, the purple sweater, the sound of her harsh words, the pungent smell of beef stew, are a shock to his senses.

"Look," his wife says, extending her arm. Three tarnished silver beads nestled in her palm. "Look what they did. This is all I have left." She thinks of swallowing the beads, popping them into her mouth one by one.

Her husband sits down in a wooden chair and tugs off his wet rubber boots. "Maybe I can fix it," he says. The beads are from an old necklace he's seen in her jewelry box, one in a tangle of other old necklaces she never wears.

She looks up at him. The sight of his round, earnest face calms her.

"Or we'll get you a new necklace," he says.

"It's not just that." She closes her fingers tightly over the beads. "At least you get out and see people."

He shrugs off his overcoat. "Believe me, I wish I didn't," he says. He works as an associate dean at a large midwestern university. He had a counseling session that day with a freshman, a Jewish boy from New York who was complaining about the fact that none of his teachers would call him by his chosen name, Little Eagle. He thinks of telling his wife about this, because he knows she would laugh, but she speaks first.

"I'm taking the evening off," she announces. "Can you keep them out of my hair?"

All afternoon he's been thinking of the moment when he will pull back the covers of their bed, slide down and extinguish himself in sleep. "Let me catch my breath first," he says.

Later, after supper, he ushers his daughters into the living room. Still in his work clothes—white shirt, red paisley tie and gray wool trousers—he settles down on the couch, shifting on a loose spring. His daughters, Jessie and Magda, wearing their pajamas, sit at his feet, subdued and solemn.

Outside, snow is falling, and the limbs of the oak trees are already white. Wind sings around the corners of their old frame house. Tomorrow, when Jessie and Magda wake up, there will be a foot of fresh snow on the ground, and school will be canceled. The girls will pester their mother all day about letting them make snow-cream, which she will finally agree to.

His wife has retreated to the bathroom for a hot bath, but her husband feels her presence as if she were sitting there in the dining room, judging him. "What should we play?" he asks, more of himself than his daughters. He hasn't played with them in a long time. Nowadays, since they are both in school, he prefers to help them with homework or read to them.

"What would *you* like to play?" Jessie says. She is feeling benevolent, because today, at school, she was named "Scholar of the Week" by the principal. Jessie is seven, the older daughter, serious-looking in her tortoise-shell glasses. Her first words, her parents proudly told her, formed a complete sentence. Jessie's dark hair is waist length, and her mother fixes it every morning in two plaits—fat and luscious at the top, narrowing toward the end in an ugly way that Jessie doesn't like, but says nothing about, because she doesn't want to hurt her mother's feelings.

Her father is in his late thirties, still trim and agile, but tonight he sags back into the couch, feeling like an old man.

Jessie studies her father's tired eyes, the way his shoulders droop. His new haircut is too short and emphasizes his receding hairline.

The father recognizes a worried look on Jessie's face, and he is reminded of himself as a child, when he worried all the time about everything. He spent most of his childhood in an orphanage. He would lie on his cot at night, in a soggy-smelling cavernous room full of other cots and other boys, and just as he was about to fall asleep a worry would snatch him awake—suppose his father had a wreck next Sunday on his way to the orphanage for visitor's day? Suppose the floor beneath him suddenly collapsed from the weight of all the beds?

The father gropes among his boyhood memories, searching for a happy one. He leans forward. "How about we play Cowboys and Indians?"

"No thank you," says Magda. She is five—round faced and pouty, with a dark blonde pageboy and an air of self-absorption that her sister envies and her parents fear.

"Come on, pie," the father says to Magda. "Be fun."

Magda shakes her head.

Jessie tries to look interested in his game, but she is disappointed. She and her best friend have recently invented their own game, one which involved staying outside for as long as they can stand it. They tromp through the snow, arm in arm, chanting, "Accustomed to the long, cold, Siberian winters. . . ." Jessie glances outside now, at the snow whirling around the bay windows, icing the ground, transforming the familiar woods and ravines around her house into a fairyland. This, she thinks, would be a grand night to play Siberia.

The father sees that his girls will take some convincing. "I used to love Cowboys and Indians," he says. "Doodlebug Clark and I played every day after school. It was our favorite game."

"Doodlebug?" Magda pulls up one leg of her pajama bottoms and pats a scab on her knee. Magda listens carefully to everything, although she appears not to. She frowns at her scraped knee, her tongue peeking out between her lips. She thinks of Doodlebug as a large, scampering ladybug, a giant version of the one she kept as a pet in a matchbox box last summer.

"Doodlebug was my pal at the orphanage," the father says. "I can't remember his real name. He only stayed there one summer."

"Why was he called Doodlebug?" Jessie says.

"I've no idea," her father says. He hasn't thought of Doodlebug in years. The harder he tries to remember Doodlebug, the more elusive Doodlebug becomes. He can only catch a glimpse of him from the corner of his mind's eye—a thin child with a blond crewcut, slightly bulging eyes, a blue and white striped shirt. Much more vivid in his memory is the long, dusty alley he and Doodlebug played in, the heat and intensity of the sun on his face, the scratchy leaves of a holly bush near the back gate of the orphanage. He remembers himself and Doodlebug running, laughing, leaping for joy. Those were the happiest moments of his life, he thinks. It feels very important to him to play Cowboys and Indians now with his daughters.

Jessie smiles back at her father, although his smile makes her nervous. She thinks about last summer, when her father took them to Little Rock, and they drove past the old brick orphanage where he used to live. It has been turned into a nursing home. Jessie saw mostly black faces on the street, so she pictures Doodlebug as a black boy, fierce, shiny, and wild in an Indian costume. Her father, looking like he does today, only smaller, swaggers along in a vest, chaps, and a Stetson hat. Did Doodlebug carry a knife? she wonders. The idea excites her, then frightens her. "Let's play," she says clasping her hands in front of her. "I'll be the good guy."

Her parents expect Jessie to become a teacher, like her father, and she will. One afternoon, years from now, in a city far from home, she will do a project with her kindergarten students. She will have them dip their feet in paint and make prints on a roll of shelf paper. The students will be delighted, the little Jasons and Andrews and Samanthas and Ashleys, by their own individual marks, lifesize and important, autographed underneath. The project will have the opposite effect on Jessie. She will be overwhelmed by the sight of the little blue, yellow, red, and green feet, one pair after another, insignificant and interchangeable. She will have to go into the hall for a minute, to collect herself, to stop herself from wandering what she has done with her life.

Magda squeezes her father's ankle. "If we play Cowboys and Indians, do I get to be Doodlebug?" she says. She's still thinking of her pet ladybug. She only had him one day, but she loved him all the same. She stuffed a raisin in the matchbox for him to eat, and named him "Quelle Heure" after something she heard her mother ask her father, when they were all riding together in the car. Magda thought the words must be magic, because they caused her father, who was driving, to answer in French, and then lean over and kiss her mother on both cheeks. Her mother laughed with delight. In the back seat Jessie and Magda hugged their dolls.

When Magda was training Quelle Heure to sit on the tip of her finger, he flew away. She chased him across the yard and watched him disappear into the summer dusk. For a long time she stood there, in the middle of the lawn, at the spot where he'd vanished, holding out her finger, in case he wanted to come back. "Daddy," she says now. "Let me be the Doodlebuggy." She cuts her eyes at him in a way she knows is charming.

He winks at her.

Despite what her parents think, Magda will not grow up to be a flirt, because she is not able to withhold or be deceptive. She becomes a woman who flushes easily, a woman who stamps her foot at the world's unfairness. A natural mother, she will never have children. When she is forty years old, she will sit in this same room, on the couch, and read British mystery novels, waiting for her married lover to call her on the telephone. It will be impossible for her to leave her parents and this house, with its high ceilings and tall windows and walls covered with oil paintings, this house which even on a bright summer day will feel to Magda like it does now—a spot of cozy lamplight in the darkness.

Magda turns to Jessie. "I'm buggy, see?" She flops on her back, kicks her arms and legs in the air like a bug.

Jessie is irritated by her sister's silliness. "I'll be you, Daddy," Jessie says. "Were you the cowboy? Were you the good one?"

"Cowboys can be good or bad," says her father, updating his game for the sixties.

He hears his wife moving about in the next room—the thud of logs as she drops them into the fireplace. "Nobody's good all the time," his wife calls.

"I am," Magda says.

"You're bad all the time," Jessie says, swatting at her.

The father is annoyed by his wife's intrusion. He grips Jessie's knee and then Magda's. "You can take turns being the Cowboy and the Indian. That's what Doodlebug and I did." He is pleased at remembering this tidbit about himself and Doodlebug, the mysterious boy who was once his best friend.

Jessie bounces up and down. "Will you be on my side?"

"He's on mine," Magda says, and sits up, serious again.

The father looks at his daughters, at both of them wanting him. Suddenly he feels twenty years younger. He gets down onto the floor on his hands and knees. His red tie hangs down, touching the carpet.

"I'm a horse," he says. "Doodlebug and I never had a horse. Y'all are lucky. You can take turns riding me." He shakes his head like a horse, and he sees a silver bead, one from his wife's necklace, glinting under the couch. He decides not to say anything about it then, because he doesn't want to interrupt their game.

"My turn!" Magda jumps up and clambers onto her father's back.

He paws the ground and whinnies. "Breeeeee."

You must be kidding, Jessie thinks, but she says nothing. She is disturbed by the sight of her adored father, so willing to go down on his hands and knees. She hopes her mother will come in and put a stop to this nonsense.

The father flicks his tie over his shoulder. "Grab my reins," he says.

Magda pulls the tie from side to side. She spurs her father's ribs with her slippered feet and shouts, "Giddy up, go on."

"Dear Miss Jess," her father says, aware of her discomfort. "You can be the cowboy. Let Magda set up camp in the kitchen and then you come after us."

"I don't want to," she says. "It's a stupid game. What's so great about it?"

"You're being ugly, Jess," Magda says, imitating their mother.

Her father pouts in an exaggerated way, feeling like he couldn't stop himself from acting silly if he had to. "Come on, kiddo, don't disappoint me." He crawls over, with Magda hanging onto his neck, and nuzzles Jessie's chest. "Don't disappoint Mr. Horse."

Jessie jumps up.

"Is you my pardner or isn't you?" he says.

"Yes. I am." She folds her arms on her chest.

"All right then," he says. "We're off, Pocahontas."

Magda makes a whooping sound and rides her father into the kitchen.

Jessie stands still, staring at the carpet, not knowing what to do. Her father scares her. His nuzzle seems like a shameful plea. He has just shown her a flash of his need for her, a need they would both become more aware of as the years go by. Even now, it feels like a burden. She wonders if her mother can relieve her of it. She turns, walks to the living room and peers around the corner.

Her mother, fresh from the bath, her smooth hair brushed out around her shoulders, sits in a rocking chair in front of the fireplace, soaking up the warmth of the fire she's just made. The room smells of cedar.

Jessie wants to go sit in her mother's lap, but something stops her in the doorway. "Mama," she says, even though her mother prefers to be called "Mother."

"What, honey."

"Do I have to play with them?"

The mother closes her eyes, and tilts her head back. Her daughters are lucky, she thinks, having a father who wants to spend time with them. "You don't have to," she says finally. "But it would be nice if you wanted to."

She looks up, but Jessie is no longer there. The mother suspects that, once again, she's said the wrong thing. She hears Jessie walking, heavy-footed, toward the kitchen.

The fire crackles, shooting a spark out onto the brick hearth, but she can't bring herself to put up the screen just yet. She's wrapped herself in an afghan and still she's cold. She is sick and tired of winter, of living up north, on the "planet zero," as she calls it. She misses her hometown of Dumas, Arkansas.

While rocking in her chair, the mother has been trying to write a letter, but she can't concentrate on it. She is listening to her husband and children in the next room, and she feels like a stranger in her own house. She has never heard her husband mention Doodlebug, and wonders if he's invented him to entertain the girls. Better that than something he's never shared with her. She knows her jealousy is absurd, but this is the way she feels. All of her emotions are boiling together in a small pot.

She has been thinking of her sixteenth birthday, a warm day in late May. She sees her parents' house in Dumas—a white stucco house with a red tile roof. She is sunbathing in the back yard, wearing plaid shorts and a sleeveless blouse, lying on her stomach on an old quilt, reading a fashion magazine, one knee bent in what she imagines is a sophisticated pose.

Suddenly her own Daddy, just back from a long business trip, comes out of the house and into the backyard. The screen door slaps closed behind him. He is wearing his usual felt hat and chomping on an unlit pipe. He walks over and gives her a necklace. A beautiful silver necklace from Mexico, like nothing he's given her before, or will ever give her again. He doesn't wrap it up, and he doesn't present it to her ceremoniously. He drapes it from her dangling bare foot and says, "Merry Christmas, glamour puss."

Now, at the fireplace, the mother looks down at the letter in her lap, the one she's been writing to her own mother. In it she is saying the things she wanted to say to her husband. She has written: "Today I lost the last physical link I had with Daddy. While I was at the grocery story, one of the girls (probably Magda, she's had her eye on it) took the necklace Daddy gave me, the one with the hollow silver beads, out of my jewelry box. I think the two of them must've started fighting over it. Anyway, they broke the chain and the beads scattered. When they were collecting the beads, they stepped on and crushed most of them. I know they didn't do it on purpose, but I was so angry I couldn't see straight. I wanted to kill them."

She reads her words over, through her mother's eyes. These words will upset her mother, who now lives alone, and to whom family harmony means everything. Her mother, a southern lady, has a platitude for every occasion.

She imagines her mother's reply. "Don't be so hard on yourself," her mother will write back. And then, in her delicate, barely legible handwriting, "Remember, love is not a feeling. Love is an action."

The mother sighs and scoots her chair closer to the fireplace. She has heard these platitudes all her life. What she hates most about them is the splinter of truth they contain.

She crumples up the letter, tosses it into the fire, and watches as the edges start to glow. The entire ball of paper burns red and quivers, then turns black. Just two more hours, the mother thinks, and we'll all be asleep in our beds. Two more hours, and this day will be over.

Michael Martin

Kansas

The first book I read after my mother was murdered was *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote. Call the book Jim gave me a gift. I think it's what he meant it to be.

I was fourteen when my mother died. There was a sister and a brother, both younger. The three of us were gathered up by our father, a man we hadn't seen for many years, and taken to his home in Omaha, Nebraska. We left Dayton, Ohio, in autumn, but in Nebraska it was already winter; a particularly cold and brutal winter, I was told by the people who lived there, but having never spent a winter in Nebraska before, I had nothing to compare it to. Omaha, Nebraska, was where my brother and sister and I began the work of starting over, of forgetting.

In Cold Blood is based on a true story about an entire farm family in western Kansas murdered by two drifters. These two men were caught and killed too, by hanging.

Reading Capote's murder story so soon after my mother's death did not disturb me. Instead, I was comforted. I could see that I was like the people in that small town in Kansas; I too had lost someone I'd loved; like them I had been broken apart and put back together in a new way; like them I knew what evil was. But I didn't become preoccupied with feelings of anger like some of the people in Capote's book. Perhaps I was fortunate to have my grief and hatred postponed, because that winter in Nebraska an easy sense of God emerged. This too was a present.

My new house in Nebraska was like the other houses around it except it was at the end of the block so I had an empty field for a backyard. The winter came from past that field and over a line of bluffs, away from everything I could see.

The storms swept across at night. The winds pressed against each side of the house like heavy hands, like the winter was going to squeeze the house out of the ground and carry it off. But the next day I would wake up in the same place. The bare trees above the field would be tangled into new

knots; and there would be more snow, on the roofs and hiding the cars; hills of it against the curbs, and if it wasn't frozen into mountains it was coming out of the sky.

Every morning, with a boy my age named Jim, I caught the schoolbus at the end of the street. Jim was over six feet tall, straight like a pencil and the tallest person I'd ever seen. His skin was gray and bumpy and only his nose turned red from the cold that was always blowing. His fat and blurred eyes looked bigger than they really were, sort of free-floating behind the thick eyeglasses I never saw him take off. Jim wore a hearing aid in each ear; the old kind, big like corks and impossible to hide. Little blue wires twisted around each of them and if Jim forgot his hat he'd cup the sides of his head with his gloves so the wires wouldn't freeze and make him completely deaf. If you have in your mind a picture of a tall and awkward boy then you know Jim.

Jim and I waited for our bus each morning in the dark, circling around the stop sign with our arms crammed inside our coats, crunching ice with the tips of our wet shoes. Bits of snow would flitter between us, light and special, floating around us to their special places. The gray boy and I never spoke to each other, even when we got to the back of the bus where it was warm. One day at the bus stop I began telling Jim where I had lived before and why I was now living with my father in Nebraska. It was an easy thing to do, like I wasn't the one talking.

"My mom was murdered a few months ago," I told him. "She was strangled and found in a ditch. A farmer on his way to work found her," I said. "The police were waiting for me when I got home from school."

Jim tried to make like he couldn't hear me, looking away, but he heard okay. "What?" he said, fingering the hardware in his ears. He zipped his parka up around his neck and played with the cap on his head. Jim's cap had "St. Louis Cardinals" printed across the front with a bird in the middle; a red bird hanging on a branch over one of Jim's fat eyes. I stared at that red bird for a long time while I finished the story I'd never told anyone before, not even myself. Jim only stopped me once.

"No," I said. "They never found out who killed her."

The door of the empty schoolbus opened and we lumbered to the back like we always did and dropped into our seats. We pressed our shoulders against the windows and stretched our legs out along the seats as far as they would go. Jim was quiet, and after awhile, so was I.

The next morning I got to the bus stop first. Across the street I saw Jim shoveling his driveway. When he was done an arm slipped out the front door and took the shovel and handed Jim his book satchel and after Jim crossed the street he pushed two handfuls of dirty paperback books against my shoulder. "Here," Jim says, "These are for you."

That night I began reading *In Cold Blood,* and many nights later when I finished it I started reading the mysteries and detective stories Jim gave me too.

The next day was a Saturday and Jim came to my front door with a grocery bag tucked under one arm. The bag was lined with record albums that he said he'd borrowed from the library. I took the bag and Jim followed me in. I moved the crystal vases into the kitchen and Jim picked up the brass candle holders. When there was nothing left on it I lifted up the top of the stereo cabinet and Jim stacked the records on the turntable at the bottom, twisting the volume knob as far as it would let him. Hours later, after the last album dropped and played out, I turned the records over and we listened to the other sides. After that, I put on the radio. The hum and crackle came into the room slowly, and it was loud, and I think Jim noticed it first and when he did he stood up and reached into the cabinet and fiddled around with the knobs but he only busted the speakers more, which is maybe what he wanted to do, I don't know. The cabinet trembled and all the noise made Jim start squeezing his head. And I backed away and laid on the floor and the music kept breaking and breaking and I stared at the ceiling and that was the first time; the first time I thought about my mom being dead, and what that must be like, to be away from everything, falling alone.

Mark Walters

Violent Love

When Morton sees Judy she is walking toward the car, is almost upon it, walking with short powerful strides, staring at him through the windshield. He is at first startled, as if she has been caught at something secret and shameful. Only after she smiles and waves does he relax.

"Sorry I'm late," she says, settling into the passenger's seat and placing her briefcase across her lap. She does not offer to explain and Morton decides not to ask about her tardiness, even incidentally, as a way into conversation, because he fears he will not be able to control his tone, that it will suggest a possessiveness he does not intend.

"That's fine," he says.

They are going out for dinner at a Mexican restaurant to celebrate Judy's promotion. She has just been named an account executive at an advertising firm which three months earlier refused to interview Morton for an entry level position. He now spends his days lying beside the swimming pool of their apartment complex, reading novels and checking the answering machine for messages. He has grown indolent and brown and fleshy, given to sexual fantasies involving the young mothers who escort their toddlers to the pool and then sit beneath sunglasses, their faces tipped toward the sun, oblivious to the cries and gleeful splashing within the shallow water. Morton feels that he is somehow responsible for these children, that it will be he who saves them from drowning.

"So where do you want to go?" he asks.

Judy turns to face him. "I thought we were going to eat Mexican," she says, and Morton hears the edge in her voice and is frightened.

"I know. Do you want to go to Manny's or Dos Hombres or do you want to try someplace new?"

"I don't care. Manny's is fine."

But Morton suspects that already a small tear has been made in their evening. He tries to repair it with small talk, comments upon the traffic, the heat.

They have not made love for three weeks, and before that, five weeks, and before that, four. And even these encounters were awkward and hurried, Morton feeling patronized but unwilling or unable to distance himself from Judy, from her body, which he had anticipated for he last month, visualizing it, making of it something new and strange and forbidden.

He had once read in Ann Landers that married couples made love an average of three times a week and he had felt betrayed. So much sex going on about him and without him. Those pool mothers, wide-hipped and long-legged, smooth faces tilted toward the sun, waiting for their husbands to come home and the children, fed and bathed, to fall asleep.

The restaurant is on the east side of downtown, set next to railroad tracks and thrift shops and blue-collar taverns. Morton feels daring when he comes here to eat, as if he risks harm in the parking lot at the hands of shadowy men who lounge in clusters along the storefronts.

Judy leads the way into the restaurant. They are seated by a short, thick woman whose brown cheeks are dotted with perspiration and creased by heavy strands of black hair clinging to the flesh in the heat. Horse hair. Morton wonders if she is Manny's wife, or maybe a sister.

He orders a Corona and Judy orders a strawberry margarita, asking specifically for Rio Grande Gold tequila, as though, Morton thinks, she can possibly taste the difference in all that salt and icy fruit. She slides around a little bit on her chair, settling in, and purses her lips and stares off into the restaurant as if she's to be photographed. Her affectations at once embarrass and excite him. Eventually she turns and looks at him with what, Morton imagines, is surprise and disappointment that he's still there.

"What are you going to have?" she asks.

"I think the chicken parrilla."

"Right," she says.

Morton has never ordered anything here other than the chicken parrilla, but he still wonders what exactly she meant by "right," and he replays her saying it in his head a few times, trying to recapture the inflection. She once told him, after he had worked himself up enough to complain about their sex life, that his method wearied her. She said it as if she had practiced saying it, as if she had said it before. Morton wondered if she had repeatedly delivered it in her head or in front of her mirror in anticipation of that grand moment or if she had confessed it to some secret lover.

"I'm going to try the pollo chimi," she says.

Morton studies the menu and, not wanting to be responsible for the silence, notes that the pollo chimi sounds good.

There. Now she can pick up the ball.

But she doesn't. She just stares off into the restaurant with her lips pursed. Silence doesn't bother her like it does Morton, who needs things articulated, clings to voices as lifelines. After hours of not speaking to one another he would try to prompt Judy into exchange by remarking certain commonplaces—a stray cat in the yard, a sale on coffee at Dillons—or he sometimes hoped for a catastrophe, for television footage of a killer tornado, as if disaster might bring them together, as if the root of people's interest in car wrecks and killing was the desire to reclaim relationships among the living.

The short and thick woman takes their order and picks up their menus, the coves of which, Morton notes, feel cool and oily. Thousands of fingertips moving sloppily across their surfaces, fingertips of the hungry.

"So how was work?" he asks.

"Fine."

"Anything happen?"

Judy looks at him as if he has just spoken in Gaelic, or Swahili.

"Anything interesting or exciting?" Morton asks.

"No. Just work."

Morton wants to ask her why they don't have sex more often. He wants to lean over the tortilla chips and salsa and touch her hand and ask her why.

After she told him that his methods wearied her he tried to jazz up his approach, recapture the recklessness of their first encounters when their bodies were unfamiliar, when there was the testing of pleasure. He did not like to think that such experience must of necessity cool, that one had to move from lover to lover to maintain a certain pitch.

The waitress leads another couple into the dining room and seats them at a table across from Morton and Judy's. The woman wears her hair long in back, but teased and shellacked and tall in the front, wavering ominously blonde just short of the light fixtures; the man wears thick sideburns and a moustache; he stares at Judy as he sits. Blue collar, Morton thinks, their lives filled with anger and violence and betrayal. They both order Coors and sit back and light up cigarettes.

When Morton first met Judy she was sunning herself, lying on a beach towel next to her sorority sisters, lying on her back, speaking in low tones, her eyes closed, a cigarette burning slowly down between her oiled fingers.

"Judy, this is Morton," the girl to her right had offered. "He's a Sig Chi."

At first he thought that she might not acknowledge him, and then she opened her eyes and ran her fingers slowly through her hair and took a long drag on her cigarette. "Hello, Morton," she said, and closed her eyes and tipped her face to the sun again and Morton knew that she had been posing for him.

That evening they saw each other in a bar just off campus. Morton watched her as she sat and talked with three girls, their bodies leaning toward a shared center, their faces close, conspiratory, their fingers folded over and playing upon clear glasses of beer. Her hair was thicker and lighter than it had been that afternoon. Washed clean. Morton imagined her showering, standing beneath the rush of warm water, her lathered hands moving with aching familiarity over her flushed body, over secret boundaries to pale flesh. He realized that she was looking at him from her table, smiling, as if amused, and he smiled back, raising his glass in acknowledgement, and then warming, conscious of the stylized gesture.

They began dating the next weekend, and three months later Morton moved out of his fraternity house and took an apartment so they could spend the nights together. Judy bought a cat and watercolor for him. She would go to the apartment after her classes and make dinner, have it waiting when he returned, be standing in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, brown legs crossed, sexy and domestic. They would eat and then he would lead her to the bedroom, leaving the dishes on the table, the lights still blazing, the cat delicately picking her way between the plates and bowls.

The following year, their senior year, they decided to marry. They had not discussed it before; they just moved toward the decision and the ceremony as if they were inevitabilities, knowing that graduation signaled change, demanded a commitment to or abandonment of their relationship. They decided that they would marry, that Morton would go to graduate school, that Judy would find a job, that they would eventually buy a house and raise children.

Sometimes during that year Morton felt as if he were part of this great onrushing crowd, a mob, hurrying with collective volition toward something he couldn't quite make out. Between the bodies, over the heads, he would catch glimpses of beautiful women moving in the same direction, some who would return his gaze, helplessly, momentarily, and then disappear into the welter.

The restaurant has become noisier. Two waitresses work the floor, the new one tall and thin, coltish, with braided black hair. A daughter. Or niece. She moves with careful haste between the tables, balancing enormous trays upon her palm. She is strong, has grown up battling cruel brothers, fending off the neighbor boys. Morton smiles as she passes but she doesn't see him.

"This is ridiculous," Judy says. "If our food doesn't come in the next five minutes I'm leaving."

She will, too. More than once in the last few months Morton has watched in horror as she pushed her chair back and stalked from a

restaurant when their order was late, leaving him to argue with the waitress, the manager, while she waited in the car, the engine running. One evening after she walked out of a restaurant and passed by on the sidewalk in front of their window table without glancing at him, he decided to stay. He ate his lasagna and half of her spinach tortellini and drank a bottle of Chianti. "She was called away," he told the waitress, gesturing to the empty chair across from him. "This is delicious." After paying the bill he phoned for a taxi.

Judy is checking her watch and drumming her fingertips on the table, as if in parody of an impatient customer. The neighboring couple is on its third round of Coors; they have filled their ashtray and are tapping their cigarettes into the empty cans still standing before them. Morton imagines the stubs dropping to the bottom, the hiss, the quick, wet scent of flat beer and smoke.

The short waitress comes from behind Judy with their order. "Chicken parrilla?" she asks Morton, waiting for his confirmation before setting the plate before him. "And pollo chimi."

Judy smiles sweetly as the woman warns that the plates are very hot. Hypocrite. Would she like another margarita? Yes, please. And another Corona for him? Of course.

The man with sideburns is staring at Judy again. Who is this guy? Morton imagines the blonde, in a pique, driving her fork through his oily heart.

"How's the chicken?" Judy asks.

"Fine," he says. "Pretty good. How's the pollo chimi?"

"Fine."

Morton sees her glance over at the man and smile. Good lord, he thinks, don't encourage him. The man smiles back and shifts his weight in their direction, as if he might get up and join them. The blonde is oblivious, busy rifling through her purse, searching, Morton imagines, for cigarettes or a nail file.

"It's getting pretty busy," Morton says, trying to recapture Judy's attention. He looks toward the entrance, toward the knots of people who stand waiting, watching the diners with hunger and hostility.

"I wish they'd put them in another room," Judy says. "I feel like I'm in a stinking zoo."

Morton nods in agreement. He and Judy will bond in anger. He dips a tortilla chip in salsa and eats it happily.

"Any calls today?" she asks.

Morton slows his chewing, his crunching, feels ashamed. "No," he says. "But IBM is supposed to get back to me this week. I thought they might call today."

Judy stares at her hands. "It's been eight months," she says.

Morton knows that it's been eight months. "The market's tight."

"You've got student loans to pay."

"I know that," he says.

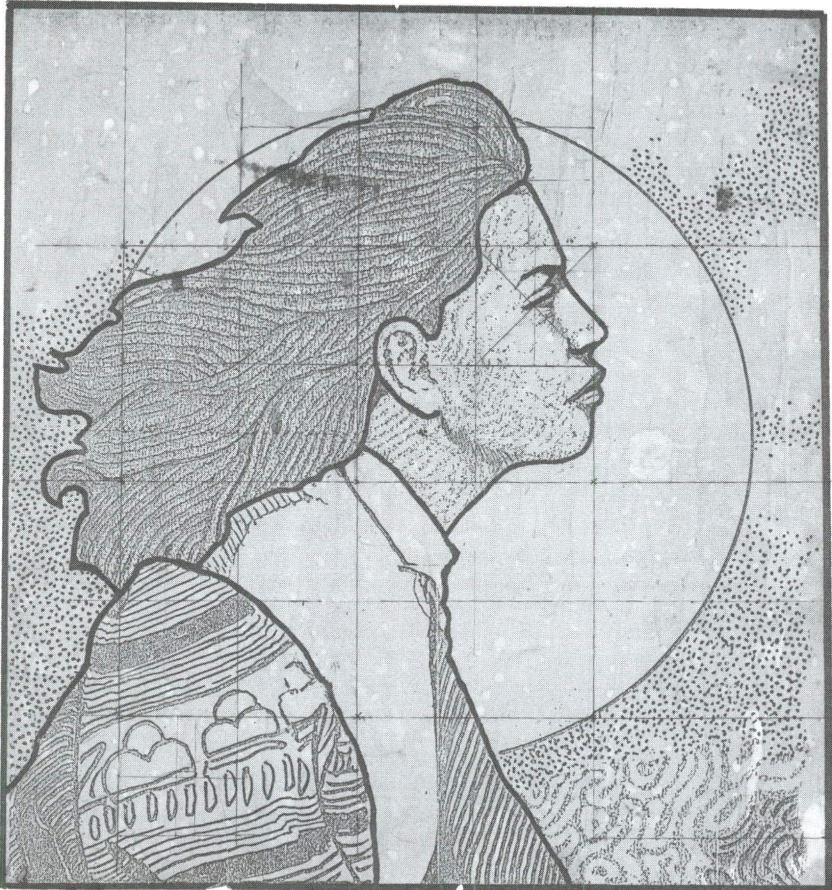
"I want to get on with our life." She watches her plate, prods her rice, moves it about with her fork. Morton sees that when she looks up she looks not to him but to the man with sideburns, who is staring, smiling.

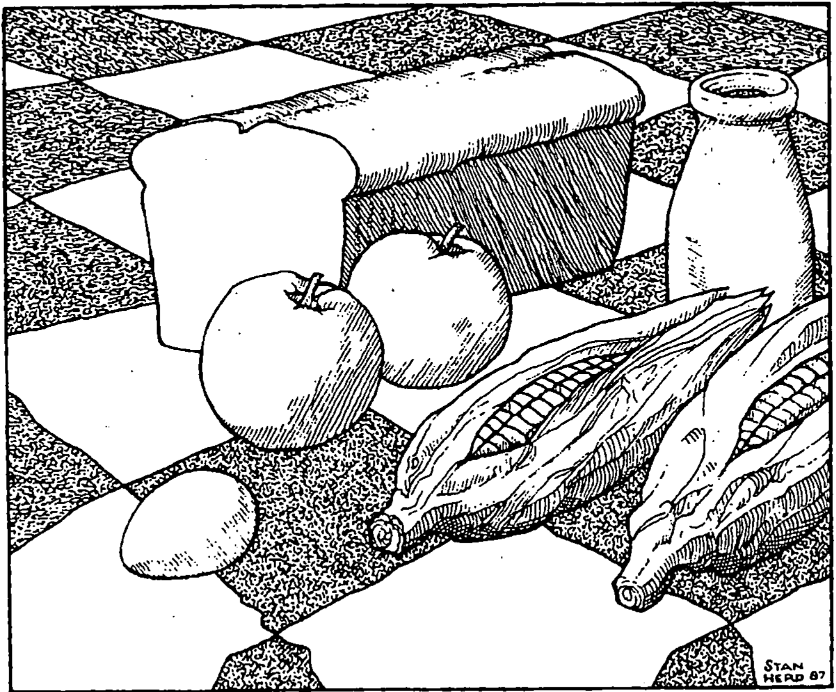
And then something happens, some spasm in the man's face, a tic, a wink. Morton isn't sure because he has been distracted by clattering plates, a slash of color at his side. He looks to Judy but she is intent on her rice again. He looks to the man who looks back at him, returns his gaze, only smiles.

And rage swells in Morton's chest, rises to his throat. He wants to smash the man's greasy, smirking face. He wants to go over and grab him by the throat and lift him from his chair and say "Did you wink at my wife, you stupid piece of shit, you stupid red-necked bastard." Morton's hands are trembling and his face feels hot, flushed, as if sweat is about to break upon his skin.

"Where's that bitch with my Corona," he says aloud.

And Judy looks up and Morton sees pure dissimulation in her face. It occurs to him that this man might very well be her lover, that any one of the dozens of men at her job might be, that she has secrets he will never learn and a heart he will never know.





Scott Heim

An Interview with Scott Heim
Conducted by Christy Prahl

What follows is an interview conducted with Kansas University graduate Scott Heim shortly after a reading from his critically acclaimed debut novel *Mysterious Skin*. The novel, which has already amassed an impressive record of reviews—one of which appears in this edition of *Cottonwood*—traces the histories of two boys, Brian Lackey and Neil McCormick, as they endure the long-term effects of molestation by their little league coach. The boys' antithetical responses to this experience prompt powerful and often disturbing questions regarding the nature of sexual abuse. Accordingly, the novel makes important interventions into the arenas of mainstream literature in general and gay fiction in particular.

Christy Prahl: I want to start out talking about *Mysterious Skin*, for obvious reasons. I was interested in your process of writing the novel and what you identify as its greatest challenge.

Scott Heim: I think the greatest challenge with this novel was so much of it is internal. There is a lot of physical action, but a lot of the progression of the plot and the progression of the central theme of the novel takes place in the characters' heads, especially the character Brian. And that was the hardest for me. When people have asked me which character was the hardest to write about, I always answer Brian. Whereas Neil's progression is so fueled by his sexual drive, Brian's is more what's taking place within his dream-states and his mental state in general.

I found it very hard to make things believable in the sense, first of all, that he truly believes for a while that he's a victim of the UFO abduction. A lot of people are skeptics. That's going to be hard to believe.

CP: Right. I was interested in the UFO episode. Did you do a good deal of research? Or did you already have an interest in UFOs?

SH: That was one thing I didn't really have to research, I guess. In the first chapter, when the family sees the UFO, that's really true to life. It's how it happened with my family and me. Yes, it's something I was always interested in when I was a kid. My parents were the type that when their kids showed interest in something, they would press it even further. With me, I showed interest in UFOs and ghosts and Bigfoot and things like that, so my dad was always bringing home more books about those subjects. In the book, when I talk about specific UFO incidents or something that the character researches, I didn't really have to go research those. I was able to pull it out of my memory.

CP: That leads me to a question I was going to ask you later, but I might as well ask you now. I know you grew up in Hutchinson, Kansas, and I was wondering to what extent personal experience generally informs your writing.

SH: Well, to a pretty great extent. I think with the novel, people assume that a lot of it's autobiographical, especially with a first novel, and I think it's just common belief that someone's first novel is based on their own life experiences. That's true to some extent, but I'm also of the mind that that in a way takes away some of the power of the creative process. I think people tend to belittle a book that's completely autobiographical; they might think you aren't as creative or you aren't as good a novelist if you write from complete experience.

But the fun thing about writing this novel is that there's more than one lead character and there are five narrators, and so I was able to fracture my personal experience into my various characters. A lot of people who knew me when I was younger will read the book and say, "Well, I saw you in this character, but I also saw you in this character." I think that's fun because it adds to the enigma of the novel, so I can always say that a lot of me is in there, but a lot of me is in there exaggerated, and then there are many things that aren't me and that may have happened to other people. With some of the more difficult things in the novel, like the sexual parts or the more personal pieces, it's kind of fun to hold back on telling someone what's true and what isn't. In a way, it adds to your mystery as a writer.

CP: Yes, exactly. I was really interested in the multi-vocal strategy of the novel and I was wondering if you could talk about how you approached that shifting narrative.

SH: I felt like I was a sort of split personality when I wrote this, like I was Sybil or the Three Faces of Eve or something, because I didn't write just one at a time. I knew early on that I wanted to make it a multiple narrative because I really like that technique in the sense of showing one character through his or her own eyes and perception of the world. With the multiple

narrative, you can give a really well-rounded version of a character by showing his or her own perceptions and then, say, a family member's or a friend's. I had fun with that.

CP: Do you envision there being a protagonist of this novel? Or can you talk about the extent to which one story may take precedence over another?

SH: I think it's almost equal between Brian and Neil, but for the most part, I would say Brian is probably the major core of the book. Even though the book ends with Neil's narrative, it's still very much a book about Brian coming to terms with what really happened to him and at the same time maybe becoming a more whole person as he is reaching adulthood.

CP: I was really struck by something you said last night at your reading. You said that you were intrigued by the ways childhood experience can affect people throughout the course of their lives. I was wondering if you could comment on that in terms of Brian and Neil's characters.

SH: With the Neil character, the molestation is something that happens over the entire summer. He sees it as a positive love experience, but in effect, it changed his life completely. The outcome for him was much different than [for] Brian. It took away his childhood and made him a sexual being at the age of nine. Just a few years later, he's prostituting himself.

I didn't want to say in the book that because of this child molestation, he became a hustler or became gay or something like that. Some people have come down on the book a little bit about that. I hope it's very clear to people that before this even happens, he's a very sexual person. He lives with his mother, who treats him more as a peer than as a son. He watches her having sex. So he's naturally more than curious. He's already experienced the sights and sounds of sex at this early age. When this coach is on the path of seduction, he runs with it. But he knows what's happening to him; he knows he's being seduced. He's sexually attracted to this man, so he almost jumps at the chance, although he's nervous at the time. When he finds that loophole, he edges his way into it.

CP: I was wondering if one of your intents in the novel was to get your readers to reframe the way they think about molestation.

SH: The more I think about it, I was very much wanting people to think differently about not only molestation but also childhood intelligence and childhood sexuality. Many children are sexually curious at a very early age, and I think people underestimate children to a great extent. I think when people think of child abuse or sexual abuse, they tend to see the participants as stock characters. There's always the villain-monster character and then there's the victim. That's true in a sense, but there's so much more to it than that, especially in terms of psychology.

I wanted to portray the molester not as a stock character but as a very human person up to the time of the molestation. I wanted people to see that yes, he is seducing this boy and he's molested other boys in the book, but there's more to him than just an evil, demonic figure.

CP: I noticed that one of the primary absences of the novel—and it seemed to me a very deliberate absence—was Brian's own sexuality. I was wondering if he took root as a character not yet ready to confront his sexuality, or what thought you gave to that issue.

SH: I have different feelings about that. Someone asked me if I thought of Brian as gay or straight. I see Brian as straight, but so confused about sexuality and so backwards based on how he's brought up and his fears and his bookishness, that even at eighteen, sex is something that's pushed farther back in his mind. I didn't want to make both the characters gay, but I found it hard to write about Brian as a straight man or as a sexual being, a straight sexual being. I felt it betrayed his character. I'm gay and so I feel I have much more sympathy or insight writing about gay men or women. I grew up completely around women. In high school, my friends were all women. Now my friends are mostly women or gay men. I guess that's just a personal thing, but I find that when I write about straight men, it's harder to write about their sexuality because I don't really have a keen insight into where they're coming from.

In the new book I'm writing, the three lead characters are a younger gay man and a woman in her thirties and a woman in her sixties. It's funny, but I guess when I tend to write about male characters that are straight, I don't give them as much attention. Maybe in the future I will. I guess it's back to that same idea of writing about what you know so that it can ring true.

CP: Who would you identify as your primary influences?

SH: The people that I'm interested in now were influenced by people like Burroughs and even earlier, like Genet and the surrealists and a lot of the modernists. I guess at the end of high school, when I started reading the literature that I'm still interested in, I started with the surrealists. That sparked my curiosity and made me interested in formal innovation and experimentation.

Then when I started college, I was lucky enough to stumble upon writers like Kathy Acker and Dennis Cooper. That's still who I'm most interested in. They're still writing today. In some ways, they're the mother and father of the younger generation of writers who are interested in exploring things like sexuality and violence and formal innovation—the things that are taboo or going against academic literature. I was also highly influenced by Flannery O'Connor and some of the Southern gothic writers.

CP: The elements of the grotesque.

SH: Yes. And I think that although the book is set in Kansas, when I think of it, there are a lot of elements of the Southern gothic in it, in a way. But I was also strongly influenced by poetry and some of the confessional poets—Anne Sexton especially, and she's still my favorite writer. It's funny, I see that book by Joy Williams on your desk; she's one of my favorite writers. I like Cormac McCarthy, especially his earlier works.

CP: I guess I want to talk now in more general terms about marketing and promotional concerns. How do you see the marketing of your novel in relation to the recent explosion of gay fiction? As a secondary question, are you inclined to see gay fiction as a genre unto itself, or do you favor a more strongly integrationist approach to what might be called mainstream literary fiction? Do you think some separation is necessary?

SH: With my book, it's being marketed first as literary fiction towards a general audience, but then of course there's also the focus on gay and lesbian literature. Actually, I couldn't be happier with that. I love the fact that my book is in all the Barnes and Nobles and Borders and everything. But I also love the fact that say, independent literary bookstores or independent gay and lesbian bookstores are really paying keen attention to it. So I think sometimes it can be a hindrance if the book is so ghettoized. I think with my book, it's a universal subject. Some of the characters are gay; some aren't. There is a lot of gay sensibility in the book. But I think and hope that the book is something everybody can relate to in one way or another.

CP: In what direction do you see gay fiction moving in the next few years?

SH: I think it's a really good time right now because for a while, gay fiction was so pushed under the carpet that most of the books being written were just about the idea or the state of being gay. Those are the books that had to break the ground. Then, with AIDS, there was a huge onslaught of books on that subject. AIDS was the main character—the whole of the book. There were some great, great books written in those years, but some of them you think about only in terms of AIDS, and not so much about specific characters.

In the last five or six years, the field has really started to open up. Now, I think people tend not to think in terms of gay books or coming-out books or AIDS books, but as novels where the situations have gay and lesbian characters. Finally, the bigger publishing houses are really starting to focus more. Ten years ago, it was more like there was a small handful of independent gay publishers, and now they're really starting to break out. There are so many books that have come out that have really blown me away that I don't think could have made it with a big publisher ten years ago.

CP: It strikes me as you're talking, I think about the way let's say the mainstream media has capitalized on the American public's fascination with homosexual experience. I'm wondering, just by extension, how you feel about heterosexual writers representing gay experience, either at the center of their texts or at the periphery.

SH: I have mixed feelings. There are some gay/lesbian people saying, "How can these straight people write about us? They don't know." It's the same thing with, say, a Japanese person writing about an experience by a Brazilian or something. I think it's all relative. If someone has had experiences with a side of life that isn't their own and therefore they know that experience, then it's going to ring true when they write about it. But if someone hasn't, you're going to be able to tell it in their fiction. That's when I tend to say, "This is wrong. You shouldn't have written about this. You should write more about your own experience."

With literature we need to start on a personal level first. I don't think it's right to please the masses. For me, if I write a book and I get a fan letter a year later from some kid whose life it has touched, that is so much more important to me than if I write a book and politically, it pleases a whole group of people.

CP: How has your recent celebrity affected your life, if at all?

SH: I think a lot of times, the media's hungry for a first novelist. People perceive me as this under-thirty kid from Kansas who moved to New York and published this novel. Of course, there's so much more to it than that. I'm not this fresh-faced youngster. I like playing on that. I like the fact that the media is playing on that, because when I do interviews or when they do read the book, it subverts their idea of what I should be like.

CP: You can transgress their romantic ideals.

SH: Exactly. That's a good way to put it. Before I moved to New York, if someone had told me I would publish a novel and it would get a fair amount of attention like this, I couldn't have seen it. Back then, I didn't know any writers or anything, so it seemed like another world to me. Living in New York, I gradually met a lot of people, and now that the book's come out, I know so many people who before I had just read and admired. It's sort of overwhelming, and I haven't had time to stop and take a breather and think what my life has become in the last year because it's happened so fast.

CP: I just have two more questions. One has to do with having grown up in Kansas. Do you see that kind of geography or that sensibility as profoundly influencing your work? To what degree has it been influential in your literary sensibility?

SH: I think to a really, really great degree it has influenced what I write. I feel that's one of the things that sets me apart from the crowd, in a way, that I grew up in Kansas and I have a sensory overload about the

geography of Kansas. Not many novels are set here, whereas a lot of novels are set in New York. For this book, Kansas for me acted as a juxtaposition of extremes. When people think of Kansas, they have this Oz image or they think of a kind of idyllic, beautiful landscape. So when I set the plot and the experiences of the book against that, I wanted them to play against each other. I think powerful things are made more powerful when they're shown against their opposite or the other extreme. Like in film. I'm a huge horror film fanatic. There's this Italian horror film director named Dario Argento, and his films are among the most violent things you'll ever see, but because of his music and his cinematography and even things like his use of color, they're really beautiful. When people see them, it's jarring for them, this emotionally disturbing experience, because they're seeing these people get murdered but there's something beautiful about it. It's that philosophy that I like playing on or working with in what I write.

CP: Do you see any danger in that philosophy at all? Making violence elegant, for example?

SH: I don't know if I would say danger, but I guess in a way, that's what I want to do. I think people see so much violence every day. People have this argument: why should we read about violence when we can go out on the street or turn on the TV and see it every day. So I guess my purpose in writing about things like child molestation or violence is to show them in a different light or to use them to fuel my fiction, but to have a different take on them. And my take is to use a lot of poetic imagery or have a beautiful backdrop for it or something to set my scenes of sex or violence apart from the average writer, or from how they would be written in the genre novel.

CP: That's interesting.

SH: Does that make sense?

CP: It makes perfect sense. I was remembering back. I was teaching a class in women and the mass media and I showed *The Accused.* We read some materials on *The Accused* and one of the great criticisms of the film—actually, there are a number of very warranted criticisms of the film—but one of those charges I remember most vividly is the eroticization of the rape scene, which inscribed it in [a pretty standard straight] matrix of the dominant man and the dominated woman. So this has always been an interesting question for me.

SH: That gets into a whole other area that I'm really interested: what the filmmaker or the writer's purpose is. I also think about the relationship between the writer and the narrator, especially when people say, "Since you wrote about a boy enjoying his molestation, or since you wrote this really violent rape scene, aren't you in a way promoting that, or aren't you in a way saying that this is good or making people immune to violence?" I think so

many people want to be told how to feel. I think one of the bad results of the whole PC movement is people taking that idea and not being able to think for themselves. If you do see *The Accused* and you do find something sexually arousing about it, okay, great. Think of what that means to you as a person. Why are you feeling those things? And think of what the filmmaker's purpose may have been. For me, it's more important to take it step by step and deconstruct it and think of it in almost mathematical terms, like what about this scene made it sexual to me or made it arousing for me? What about the camera angles or the music or the acting did this for me? To me, that's almost more interesting—to look at it structurally and in terms of technique—than the whole almost boring political aspects of it.

CP: And also for the spectator to start rethinking his or her own consciousness in some way.

SH: But those are the things that really piss people off.

CP: Yes, that's true. I said I had only two more questions, but one thing occurs to me now as we're talking: do you ever envision any sort of film adaptation of your novels, or this novel in particular? Do you ever find yourself writing toward visual representation?

SH: Well, yes, I do. I think that if I weren't a writer, I would probably pursue film because there are a lot of parallels: here's a story to tell, how are you going to tell it? When I write, I don't think in terms of, okay, here's the character, here's the actor I would want to play this role. But I do think the way I write, the way I see things, is very filmic. I guess when I write a scene, I have it playing out in my head, kind of frame by frame, in a way.

This book is in the process of being shopped around for options, and my agent has pitched it to a lot of people and a lot of people are interested in it. One out of every eighty options or something actually gets made. I think one of the problems is that although it's a very visual book and in some ways can afford itself to film very easily, also–going back full circle—it's very internal, and that's very hard for Hollywood to create.

CP: It seems also that some of the scenes would be highly vulnerable to censorship. You'd wonder how they would handle what to me are some of the most powerful scenes in the novel. I could see a conservative film board saying, "This just won't fly for the American public."

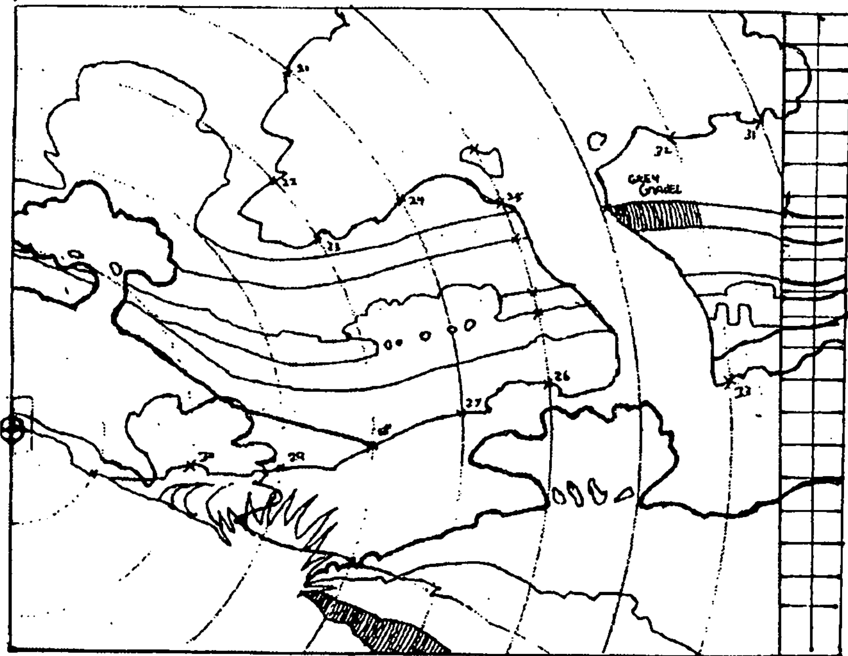
SH: I agree. I think Neil's story would be easier to film. And with Brian, some of the things in his story are easy and maybe some of the dream sequences would be cool to film, but I think in terms of his progression from believing he was a victim of alien abduction to his realization that it was really a child molestation. That would be hard to do on film.

CP: Last question: I was wondering if you could talk about how your experiences on *Cottonwood* affected your writing.

SH: Strangely, the first thing I ever published was with *Cottonwood.*

CP: I understand that.

SH: I was probably, what, nineteen years old. I had been writing poetry for a while, but I hadn't really started sending out my work. Then the first poem I published was a poem called "Pumpkin Eater," which is about a hundred and eighty degree difference from what I'm writing now. But you know—there's something nostalgic about looking back at the first poem you ever published. Then a few years later I started reading on the poetry staff. That was important for me. I guess it was a step in knowing what was good and what was bad and being well-read in poetry and seeing a complete variety of voices from people who send their work to literary magazines. It was fun being in a position of power, in a way, and being in a way the first step towards an editorial position. I think a literary journal at a university is a great place for people to start in terms of reading other people's work and publishing.



Scott Heim

Wendy Peterson

Chapter 4 of *Mysterious Skin*

Neil McCormick was a scruffy, moody stick of a boy. I developed a crush the same day I set eyes on him. It didn't take long to discover my crush was doomed: he was one of those queers.

The kids at Sherman Middle School realized this fact during an afternoon recess séance. It was September 1983; at twelve, I'd begun to slip into the antisocial skin I've never slipped out of. The trends my Hutchinson classmates followed seemed foolish: neon rubber bracelets, nicknames in iron-on lettering on T-shirt backs, or illegal lollipops made with tequila and an authentic, crystallized dead worm. But when some other sixth graders became interested in the occult, I joined them. "Finally," I told Mom, "they're into something cool." Groups of us traipsed through graveyards on dares. We bought Tarot decks; magazines devoted to telekinesis or out-of-body experiences. We gathered at recess, waiting for some small miracle to happen.

My mom claimed she was observing a change in me. For my upcoming birthday, I'd requested albums by bands whose names sounded especially disturbing or violent: The Dead Boys, Suicide, Throbbing Gristle. I longed for the world that existed beyond Hutchinson, Kansas. "You, Wendy Peterson, are looking for trouble with a capital T," Mom had started to warn.

In my eyes, that trouble equalled Neil. I'd noticed him, but I doubted anyone else had. He always seemed to be alone. He was in fifth grade, not sixth, and he didn't participate in the daily half-hour soccer games—two disqualifications from what most everyone considered cool.

That afternoon, though, he fearlessly broke the séance circle. Two popular girls, Vicky and Rochelle, were attempting to summon a blond TV star from the dead. Sebastian So-and-so's BMW had recently crashed into

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Mysterious Skin, HarperCollins 1995.

a Hollywood brick wall, and my classmates were determined to disclose whatever heaven he now hovered through. "Aaahhhmmm," the girls groaned. Hands levitated in midair, attempting to catch this or that spiritual vibration.

When Neil interrupted, his sneakered foot stomped squarely on a Ouija board someone had brought. "Watch it, fucker," a séance attendee said.

"You shitheads know nothing bout contacting ghosts," Neil said. "What you need is a professional." His voice sounded vaguely grandfatherlike, as if his brain were crowded with knowledge. Eyes opened, concentrations broke. Someone gasped.

A few tall boys' heads blocked my view. I tried to peek above their shoulders; saw a mop of thick black hair. A breeze blew it. To touch it would be like touching corduroy.

Neil picked up the valentine-shaped beige plastic disk from the Ouija board. It looked like a tiny, three-legged table, a gold pin poking through its center. Sun glinted off the pinpoint. Only moments before, Vicky and Rochelle had placed their polished fingernails on the disk to ask about the coming apocalypse.

"My father's a hypnotist," Neil said. He waved the disk in front of his face like a Smith & Wesson. "He's taught me all the tricks. I could show you shitheads a fucking thing or two." From Neil, all those *fucks* and *shits* were more than just throwaway cuss words. They adopted some special meaning.

Neil slipped off his shoes, sat on them, and pretzeled his legs into a configuration only someone that skinny could have managed. The crowd blocked the sun and shadowed Neil. The air felt chilly, and I wished I'd worn a jacket. From somewhere behind us, a teacher's whistle shrieked. Some classmates chanted a brainless song, its words confused by the wind.

"Who wants to be first?" Neil asked. He excited me to no end. Maybe he'd expose their infinite foolishness.

Vicky volunteered. "No way," Neil said. "Only a boy will work for the kind of hypnotizing I'm going to do." Vicky pouted, planted her tequila pop back on her tongue, and stood aside.

Neil pointed toward Robert P., a kid whose last initial stuck because two other sixth graders shared the same first name. Robert P. could speak Spanish and sometimes wore an eye patch. I'd heard him bragging about his first wet dream. Some girls though him "debonair." Like most everyone else in school, he seemed stupid to me.

People made room, and my view improved. Under Neil's direction, Robert lay on his back. Random hands smoothed the grass, sweeping aside

pebbles and sandburs, and someone's wadded-up windbreaker served as a pillow. Roly-poly bugs coiled into themselves. The more nervous kids stayed on the circle's outer edge, watching for teachers, unsure of what would happen.

Neil sat beside his volunteer. He said, "Everyone, to their knees." We obeyed. From where I knelt, I could see into Robert P.'s nostrils. His eyes were shut. His mouth had opened slightly, flaunting teeth that needed braces. I wished for a spot at the opposite side of the circle. Being near Neil McCormick would have satisfied me.

Neil touched his middle and index fingers to Robert P.'s temples. "Breathe deeply." The fingers rubbed and massaged. I would die, I thought, to be that volunteer. Neil's voice lowered: "In your mind, begin counting backward. Start at one hundred. One hundred, ninety-nine. Keep going, counting backward, slowly." Everyone else's mouth moved in synch. Could he hypnotize an entire crowd?

"Eighty, seventy-nine, seventy eight. . ." His voice softened, nearly a whisper. My eyes darted from Robert P.'s face to the back of Neil's head. I was so close to him. "Sixty," pause, "nine . . ."

By the time Neil reached sixty-two, Robert P. looked zombieish. His chest moved with each breath, but all else remained motionless. I figured he was faking it, but wondered what Neil would make him do or say. I hoped for something humiliating, like a piss on Miss Timmons's shoes or a brick demolishing a school window.

A girl said "Wow," which Neil seemed to take as a signal. He crawled atop Robert P., straddling his stomach. Belt buckles clicked together. "Fifty," Neil said. Robert didn't move. Neil gripped his wrists; pinned his hands above his head. The circle of kids tightened. I could feel fingers against my skin, shoulders brushing mine. I didn't look at any of them. My gaze fixed on Robert and Neil, locked there as if I were stuck in a theater's front row, its screen sparkling with some beautiful film.

Neil's body flattened. He stretched out on Robert. The buckles clicked again.

Clouds crawled across the sun. For a few seconds, everything went dark. Another whistle blared. "Recess over," Miss Timmons screamed, but no one budged. We couldn't care less about the whistle. The silence grew, blooming like a fleecy gray flower. A little voice inside me kept counting: thirty-three, thirty two.

Then it happened. The lower half of Neil's body began grinding into Robert's. I watched Neil's ass move against him. By that time in my life, I'd seen some R-rated movies, so I knew what fucking looked like. Only these were boys, and their clothes were on.

Neil positioned his face directly over his subject's. Robert's eyes opened. They blinked twice, as beady and inquisitive as a hen's. A thick line of drool spilled from Neil's mouth. It lingered there, glittered, then trailed between Robert's lips. Robert coughed, swallowed, coughed again. Neil continued drooling, and as he did, he moved his face closer to Robert's. At last their mouths touched.

Vicky screamed, and everyone jumped back. Kids shouted things like "gross" and "sick." They sprinted for Miss Timmons and the classroom, their sneaker colors blurring together. I stood and stared at the separated pair of boys. Robert P. wriggled on the grass like a rattlesnake smashed by a semi. A chocolatey blob stuck to his chin: dirt, suffused with Neil's spit.

One of Robert's buddies kicked Neil's ribs, then hustled away with the others. Neil didn't wince, accepting the kick as he might accept a handshake.

"Queer," Robert P. said, plus something in Spanish. He was crying. He kicked Neil, too, his foot connecting with the identical spot his friend had chosen. Then he ran for the school's glass doors.

Neil sprawled there a while, smiling, his arms spread as if he'd been crucified to the earth. He struggled to get up. He and I were alone on the playground. I wanted to touch his arm, his shoulder, his face. I offered my hand, and he took it.

"That was great," Neil said. He squeezed my fingers and shuffled toward the school.

Something important had happened, and I had witnessed it. And I had touched Neil McCormick. I waited until he departed earshot. Then I pretended I was a character in a movie. I said, "There's no turning back now." A small spit bubble lay on the dirt at my feet like a toad's gleaming eye. I bent down and popped it. If I could make Neil my friend, I figured I wouldn't need anyone else.

The séances vanished. By the end of that week, the kids who'd brought their Ouija boards and magic eight balls had jumped back to four-square and soccer. I watched them and wanted to scream. I longed to approach Neil again, this boy I saw as my doorway from the boredom I wanted to escape.

That Friday, a team of bullies gathered on the soccer field. They found Neil standing by a tree and cornered him. "You're one of those queers," a kid named Alastair yelled. Neil flew at him. A crowd formed, and I joined it. Arms and legs darted and windmilled, and the ivory crescent of Neil's fingernail sliced Alastair's chin. There were tears and a few drops of blood, all of which turned out to be Alastair's. At twelve, I'd seen more tornadoes

than blood. Its red looked magnificent and sacred, as if rubies had been shattered.

When the fight was history, Neil stood beside the same oak. He wore a hot rod T-shirt, a real leather coat with zippers like rows of teeth, and matching boots. Animals had died for those clothes, I thought. He would be perfect holding a switchblade in one hand, and me in the other.

I took a deep breath, collected the gumption, and tiptoed over. I tilted my head heavenward to look cool. The sun rebounded off the steel plates of Sherman Middle School to reveal the roof's slant. It had been littered with toilet paper, a yellow ball some vandal had sliced from its tether, and random graffiti. GO STRAIGHT TO HELL was all someone could think to spray paint. I stared at the jagged red letters and kept walking. Around me, brown five-pointed leaves fell like the severed hands of babies. I moved through them. Neil heard the crunch, crunch and glanced up.

I leaned against another tree, feigning nonchalance. "You *are* a queer, aren't you?" I said the *Q*-word as if it were synonymous with *movie star* or *deity*. There was something wonderful about the word, something that set him apart from everyone else, something I wanted to identify with.

"Yeah," said Neil.

I felt as if I were falling in love. Not so much with him, though, as with the aura of him. It didn't matter that he was a year younger than me. It didn't matter, all the distaste I detected in teachers' voices when they called his name during recess. Neil McCormick, they barked, the fence is there for a reason, don't cross it. Neil McCormick, put down that stick. I had eavesdropped on Miss Timmons in her office, as she whispered to the school nurse how she dreaded getting the McCormick boy in her class next year. "He's simply evil," etcetera.

To me, "evil" didn't seem all that bad.

Neil's long hair frayed in the breeze, as shiny black as the lenses in the spectacles of the creepy blind girl who sat behind me on the morning bus. His eyebrows met ominously in his forehead's middle. Up close, I could smell him. The odor swelled, like something hot. If I weren't so eager to touch him again, I would have shrunk from it.

I breathed again, as if it were something I did once a day. "But you're a tough queer, right?"

"Yeah." He examined the blood smear on the back of his hand. He made certain I was watching, then licked it off.

In my room, I fantasized miniature movies starring Neil and me. My parents had okayed me staying up to watch *Bonnie and Clyde* on the late-late, and in my Neil hallucinations I assumed bloodred lipstick and a platinum

bob that swirled in the wind, à la Faye Dunaway. I clung to his side. We wielded guns the size of our arms. We blew away bank tellers and other boring innocents, their blood spattering the air in slow-mo. Newspapers tumbleweeded through deserted streets. MCCORMICK AND PETERSON STRIKE AGAIN, their headlines read.

In these dreams, we never kissed. I was content to stand beside him. Nights, I fell asleep with clenched fists.

Weeks passed. Neil spent most recesses just standing there, feeling everyone else's fear. I wasn't afraid, but I couldn't approach him again. He was like the electric wire that separated my uncle's farm from the neighbors'. Tough it, Wendy, my little brother Kurt would say. It won't hurt. But I couldn't move toward it. Surely a sliver of blue electricity would jet from the wire and strike me dead. I felt the same way about Neil: I didn't dare go near him. Not yet.

Zelda Beringer, a girl who wore a headpiece attached to her braces and who wouldn't remain my friend much longer, teased me about Neil. "How in the world can you think a queer is cute? I mean, you can tell he's a freak. You can just tell." I advised Zelda that if she didn't shut up, I'd gouge out her eyes and force her to swallow them. The resulting look on her face wouldn't leave my mind for days.

For Columbus Day the cafeteria cooks served the school's favorite lunch. They fixed potato boats: a bologna slice fried until its edges curled, a scoop of mashed potatoes stuck in its center, watery cheese melted on top. They made home fries, and provided three squirt bottles of ketchup per table. For dessert, banana halves, rolled in a mucousy marriage of powdered gelatin and water.

Fifth graders sat on the cafeteria's opposite end, but that day I was blessed with a great view of Neil. He scooped the boat into one hand and devoured it in a single bite. If I'd had binoculars, I could have watched his puffy lips in close-up.

I remember that day as near perfect, and not just because of potato boats. The yearly sex-ed filmstrips arrived. All afternoon, teachers glanced at clocks and avoided our gazes. We knew what was happening. We'd been through it before. Now we could view those films again, together in the room with the virgin fifth graders. "We're going to see cartoon tits and ass," Alastair said, the slightest hint of a scratch still on his chin.

Grade five lumbered in. Neil stood at the back of the line. For the first half of the process, the principal, Mr. Fili, separated boys from girls. The boys left, and Miss Timmons dimmed the lights. The room felt stifling, as if some killer had snuck in to poison our air with a noxious nerve gas. I rested my elbows on my desk; planted my chin on my fists.

Miss Timmons hesitated before reading the film's captions. "Sometimes, at this age, young men will want to touch certain places on a young lady's body." She bit her lip like the section of an orange.

When the filmstrip was over; Miss Timmons handed out free Kotex pads. Most girls popped theirs into purses or the back shadows of desk drawers. I examined mine. It resembled something I would hold over a campfire or take a chomp from.

After ten minutes, the boys returned. "Find a seat, men, somewhere on the floor," Mr. Fili told them. "This time, try to keep quiet. If you feel the urge to make some capricious outburst, please hold your breath. And no commentaries. This is serious stuff." When he said that, he scowled at Neil.

Neil moved toward me, as if following a dotted line to my desk. I swallowed hard. He sat, his knee touching my calf.

Part two of the birds-and-bees rigamarole was special: a film instead of filmstrip. Kids oohed and aahed when they heard the projector's buzzes and licks. Perhaps this meant we would see real, live sex action.

Some fool of a filmmaker had dreamed up the idea that humor was the best way to teach sex. Tiny cartoon sperm wriggled and roller coastered toward a bulging, rouged egg. The egg licked its lips, eager and lewd as an old whore. The music—*The 1812 Overture*—swelled, and the quickest and most virile sperm punctured the egg. "Bull's-eye!" the voice-over cackled.

Some kids clapped and cheered. "Shhh," said Miss Timmons.

Neil looked up at me. I swore I could smell bologna on him. A smear of ketchup had dried on his shirt front. He smiled, and I smiled back. He mouthed the words, "This is total bullshit," moving to lean against my legs. When he shifted, I felt his backbone move. No one was watching us.

On screen, drawings of a penis and the inside of a vagina flashed on and off. A couple of fifth graders giggled. Penis entered vagina, and white junk gushed forth like mist from a geyser. More giggles. Miss Timmons shhed again.

"Ridiculous," Neil whispered. "Not everyone fucks like that." Some kids heard him, glared and sneered. "Some people take it up the ass." One girl's face reddened, as if scratched.

As the credits rolled, Neil's hand rested on my sneaker, resulting in goose bumpy feeling that lasted three tiny seconds. I wiggled my toes. Lights clicked on, and his hand moved away. "Let's go, fifth grade," Mr. Fili said.

"How fucked up," Neil said to me. He was speaking to no one else now. "Why don't they teach us something we don't already know?" Disappointment amended his face.

Neil waved as they filed out. Kids' heads turned to stare at me, and I felt as though it were Neil and me versus everyone else. It was a good feeling. I let my classmates gawk awhile, then shook my middle finger at them.

That evening, I upped the volume on the stereo to drown out the TV my parents and brother were fixed in front of. Even with the bedroom door closed, I could hear televised trumpets blaring "America the Beautiful." A newscaster said, "Happy Columbus Day." I lifted the needle from my Blondie album and started side one over again: "Dreaming," my favorite song.

My geography book toppled off my bed. I was just beginning to effectively imagine myself as a singer onstage, a cluster of punks bouncing below me, when Mom rapped at the door. "Can you hear in there?" she asked. "You'll shake the house off its foundation. Anyway, you've got a phone call. It's some boy."

I ran to the kitchen's extension. Mom had just finished drying dishes, and her set of knives lined a black towel on the table. By the time in the fall, it was starting to grow dark by six o'clock, so the room looked like some kind of torture dungeon. I left the light off.

The music on the phone's other end sounded cool. I listened for three, four, five seconds. "This is Wendy."

Someone stuttered a hello. Then, "You might not know me. My name's Stephen Zepherelli."

My eyes widened. Everyone knew the notorious Stephen Zepherelli. He attended class in the adjoining building at school, one of the Learning Disabilities trio we occasionally saw delivering messages to Mr. Fili or bending over water faucets in the hall. The LDs, we called them. Stephen Zepherelli was the most severe of the three LDs. He wasn't retarded, but he was close. He drooled, and he smelled like an old pond.

Then I realized the absurdity of him calling me. I'd heard Zepherelli's voice before, and this wasn't it. "Okay," I said. "Not funny. Someone's got to have at least half a brain to know how to dial a telephone. Who is this really?"

A laugh. The new-wave song paused, then began blasting a guitar solo. "Hey Wendy, this is Neil McCormick." I couldn't believe it. "I've called three Petersons in the phone book already, and I finally found the right one. What are you doing?"

I forgave Neil for the Zepherelli joke. "Nothing," I said. "As usual. How about that film today?"

We chatted for ten minutes about people we despised most at school.

While Neil spoke, I handled the knives, arranging them on the table from longest to shortest. "I'd like to stab all those fools," I said, my back turned from the direction of the den and my parents. "Make it hurt. Stab them in the gut, then twist the knife real slow. I've read it really hurts that way. Or I'd cut their heads right off."

When I said that, Neil laughed. I pictured him throwing his head back, his mouth open, his teeth gleaming like an animal's.

By Halloween I stopped riding the bus home and began walking with Neil. His house was only four blocks from mine. Sometimes we carried each other's books. We tried alternate ways home. Once we even went the opposite direction, heading toward the prison on Hutchinson's east side. Neil stood at its gate, his shoelaces clotted with sandburs, breathing in the wistful smells of the rain-soaked hay and mud, the raked piles of leaves. "Kansas State Industrial Reformatory," he read. "Maybe I'll end up here someday." A guard watched us from the stone tower. We waved, but he didn't wave back.

Neil lived with his mother, and had no bratty brothers or sisters to deal with. And his father wasn't a hypnotist at all. He was dead. "Killed in a war," Neil said. "He's nothing but a corpse now. I know him from one picture, and one picture only. He looks nothing like me, either. What should I care about the guy?"

Mrs. McCormick drank gin straight from the bottle. On the label, a bearded man was dressed in a plaid skirt. The first time I visited Neil's, his mom slid the bottle aside and took my hand in hers. "Hello, Wendy," she said. "It's not often I see a friend of Neil's. And such vibrant blond hair." Her own hair was as black as her son's. She had pinned it back with green pickle-shaped barrettes.

A bookshelf in Neil's house was piled with paperbacks with damaged or missing covers. Neil explained that his mother had a job at a grocery store, and her boss allowed her to keep whatever books the customers vandalized. Many concerned true kidnappings and murders. Mrs. McCormick saw me eyeing them. "You can borrow whatever you like," she told me. Soon I stopped reading about the tedious exploits of that ignoramus Nancy Drew. Within days I knew all there was to know about Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, two teenage fugitives who blazed a trail of murder and mayhem across the Midwest a few decades ago. They weren't that much older than Neil and me. They even hailed from Nebraska, our border state. In two grainy mug shots, their grimaces couldn't have been more severe if their mouths had been clogged with thumbtacks. If I thought hard enough, Neil and I almost resembled them.

I had decided that '83 would be my last year as a trick-or-treater, and I wanted to dress as something special, I considered a gypsy, a freshly murdered corpse, an evil nun with a knife beneath her habit. Then I decided Neil and I should go as Charles and Caril. On Halloween night, I stared at the criminals' pictures and tried to change my looks.

Neil stretched out on his bed. "It's not working," he said. He tossed a baseball into the air, caught it. "No one will get it, so why bother?"

I wiped the lipstick on a Kleenex and watched him watching me in his bedroom mirror. When I peeled off the fake eyelash, my lid made a popping noise.

Mrs. McCormick dragged two spider costumes from her closet. She and a date, Neil claimed, had gone as "Daddy and Mommy Longlegs" to a party last year. "She lost that boyfriend around the same time," he said. "Sometimes she can't handle anything. But she's my mom."

We mascaraed circles around our eyes and thumbed black blobs across our mouths. Before we left the house, Neil gave me three yellow pills. "Swallow these." The box in his hand read DOZ-AWAY. I wasn't sure if that meant we'd grow sleepy or stay perky, but the box's cover pictured a pair of wide-awake eyes.

By that point I would have done anything Neil told me. I popped the pills in my mouth, swallowing without water.

Neil handed me the telephone beside his bed. He told me to call my parents and claim his mom would be escorting us. When I lied to Mom, it didn't feel so scandalous. "I'll take Kurt around the neighborhood without you, then," she said. "Call back when you want me to drive over and get you. Don't stay out too late, and remember what I told you about those perverts who prey on kids on Halloween." She laughed nervously. I thought of her stories of razor blades wedged into apples, stories that never ceased to thrill me.

Two hours came and went. We wandered around Hutchinson as spiders, our extra four legs bobbing at our sides. The rows of our eyes gleamed from our headpieces. The shadows we cast gave me the creeps, so we shied away from streetlights. Neil hissed when doors opened. One wrinkly lady touched my nose with a counterfeit black fingernail. She asked, "Aren't you two a little old for this?" Still, our shopping bags filled to the top. I stomped a Granny Smith into mush on the sidewalk. No hidden razor.

Neil traded his Bit-O-Honeys for anything I had with peanuts. "I'm allergic to nuts," I said. That was a lie, but I wanted to make him happy.

At Twenty-third and Adams, a group of seven kids walked toward us. I recognized the younger ones from school under their guises of pirate, fat

lady, and something that resembled a beaver. "Hey, it's you-know-who from school," Neil said, and pointed to a green dragon in the crowd's center.

I couldn't tell who it was. "It's that retardo," Neil told me. He was right. Even under the tied-on snout and green pointy ears, I could make out Stephen Zepherelli.

"Hey," Neil said. Their heads turned. "Hey, snotnoses, where're your parents?"

The beaver-thing pointed west. "Back there," it said. The words garbled behind its fake buck teeth.

Zepherelli smiled. The dragon snout shifted on his face. He carried a plastic pumpkin, chock-full with candy. "Let's kidnap him," Neil said to me.

I'd witnessed Neil's damage to Robert P. and Alastair. Now, some dire section of my brain longed to find out what twisted things Neil could do to this nimrod, this Stephen Zepherelli. Neil checked the sidewalk for adults. When none materialized, he grabbed the kid's left hand. "He's supposed to come with us," Neil said to the rest of the trick-or-treaters. "His mom said so. She doesn't want him out too late."

Zepherelli whined at first, but Neil said we were leading him to a house that was giving away "enough candy for three thousand starving kids." Zepherelli didn't seem to mind the kidnapping after that. We stood on each side of him, gripped his scrawny wrists, and pulled him along. Mahogany-colored leaves spun around our rushing feet. "Slow down," he said at one point. We just moved faster. He stopped once to retrieve a handful of candy corn from his plastic pumpkin, and once to find a Zero candy bar. His painted-on dragon's teeth shone under street lamps, as white as piano keys.

We arrived at Neil's. "Is this the house with the candy?" Zepherelli asked. He rummaged through his pumpkin, making room.

"Good guess."

Neil's mom snoozed on the living room couch. Nearly every light in the house had been left on. Neil pushed Zepherelli toward me. "Hold this little bastard while I'm gone." He trotted from room to room, flicking switches. In seconds, darkness had lowered around us. Neil slid aside a record by a band called Bow Wow Wow and slipped another LP on the turntable. Scary sound effects drifted through the house at a volume soft enough to keep his mom sleeping. On the record, a cat hissed, chains rattled, crazed banshees wailed.

"Neat," Zepherelli said. His snout showed a smudge of white chocolate from the Zero. He nibbled the tip from a piece of candy corn.

I heard Neil pissing. I suddenly felt embarrassed, standing there with our victim. Neil returned, carrying a flashlight and a paper sack. He opened the latter. Inside were firecrackers and bottle rockets. "Left over from Fourth of July," Neil said. He winked. "Lets take him out behind the house."

The McCormick backyard consisted of overgrown weeds, an apricot tree, and a dilapidated slippery slide-swing set. Behind the swings was a cement-filled hole someone had once meant for a cellar. We walked toward it. The rotten apricot odor permeated the autumn air. Stars glittered in the sky. Down the block, kids yelled "trick or treat" from a doorstep.

Neil pushed Zepherelli toward the stretch of cement. "Lie on your back," he said.

The yellow pills had done something to me. My skin tingled like I'd taken a bath in ice. I was a hundred percent awake, and prepared for anything. I adjusted a loose arm and stood above the victim; Neil spilled the bag's contents onto the cement. "Bottle rockets," the dragon said, as if they were hundred-dollar bills. I could smell Zepherelli's breath, even over all those apricots.

Neil told him to shut up. He pulled off the dragon's snout. The string snapped against Zepherelli's face. "Ouch."

I watched as Neil took three bottle rockets and placed their wooden ends in Zepherelli's mouth. He pinched Zepherelli's lips shut. He moved briskly, as if he'd done it all a thousand times. Then he straddled the kid. I remembered that séance, Robert P.'s still face. Stephen Zepherelli's resembled it. It looked drugged, almost as if it really were hypnotized. It didn't register any emotion. Its cheeks had been smeared with green makeup. Its eyes were cold and blank, not unlike the peeled grapes we had passed around during the inane Haunted Hall setup at school that day. "These are the dead man's eyes," Miss Timmons had told us in her best Vincent Price voice.

"Keep these in your mouth," Neil instructed the LD boy. "Do what we say, or we'll kill you." I thought of Charles and Caril Ann. Neil's extra eyes caught the moonlight and sparkled.

From the effects record inside the house, a girl screamed, a monstrous voice laughed. Neil turned to me, smiling. "Matches are in the bottom of the sack," he said. "Hand them over."

I fished out a book of matches. The cover showed a beaming woman's face over a steamy piece of pie and the words "Eat at McGillicuddy's." I tossed the matches to Neil. "Be careful," I said. I tried not to sound scared. "Someone could see the fireworks." I still thought this was all a big joke.

"Tonight is just another holiday," Neil said. "No one's going to care." He lit the first match. The flame turned Zepherelli's face a weird orange. In the glow, the rockets jutted from his lips like sticks of spaghetti. His eyes were huge. He squirmed a little, and I sat on his legs. I felt as though we were offering a sacrifice to some special god.

Zepherelli didn't spit the rockets out. He made a noise that could have been "Don't" or "Stop."

Neil touched the match to the fuses. One, two, three. He shielded me with one of his real arms. We skittered back like crabs. I held my breath as tiny sputters of fire trailed up the fuses and entered the rockets. Zepherelli didn't budge. He was paralyzed. The bottle rockets zoomed from his head, made perfect arcs over the McCormick home, and exploded in feeble gold bursts.

The following silence seemed to last hours. I expected sirens to wail toward the house, but nothing happened. Finally, Neil and I snuck toward Zepherelli. "Shine the flashlight on him," Neil said.

The oval of light landed on our victim's face. For a second, I almost laughed. Zepherelli resembled the villain in a cartoon after the bomb goes off. The explosives' dust covered his dragon snout, his cheeks, his chin. His eyes had widened farther, and they darted here and there, as if he'd been blinded. We leaned in closer. Zepherelli licked his lips and winced. Then I saw what we'd done. It wasn't funny at all. His mouth was bleeding. Little red splinters stuck through Zepherelli's lips, jammed there from the wooden rocket sticks. Bubbles of blood dotted the lips.

The victim's eyes kept widening. I remembered thinking blood beautiful when Neil had punched Alastair. Now, from Zepherelli, it looked horrible, poisonous. I turned away.

Zepherelli made a mewling noise, softer than a kitten's. My heart felt like a hand curling into a fist. He whimpered again, and the fist clenched. "Neil," I said. "He's going to tattle on us. We're going to get it." I wondered if my parents would discover what we'd done. For the first time, I wanted to slap Neil.

A look spread across Neil's face, one I'd never seen there. He bit his bottom lip, and his eyes glassed over. Then he shook his head. The glassiness left his eyes. "No," he said. "He won't tell. There's things we can do." He spoke as if Zepherelli weren't lying beside us. "We'll get him on our side. Help me."

I didn't know what to do. I gripped the flashlight until my palm hurt. Neil wiped dust from Zepherelli's cheek. When their skins touched, Zepherelli trembled and sighed. Neil said, "shhh," like a mother comforting a baby. His left hand remained on the kid's face. His right moved from

Zepherelli's chest, down his stomach, and started untying the sweatpants dyed green for Halloween. He squirmed a finger inside, then his entire hand.

"When I was little," Neil said, "a man used to do this to me." He spoke toward the empty air, as if his words were the lines of a play he'd just memorized. He pulled the front of Zepherelli's pants down. The kid's dick stuck straight out. I swung the flashlight beam across it.

"Sometimes I wanted to tell everyone what was going on. Then he'd do this to me again, and I knew how badly he really wanted it. He did it to some other kids, but I knew they didn't matter as much to him, I was the only one whose photo he kept in his wallet. Every time he'd do it he'd roll up a five-dollar bill, brand-new so I could even hear it snap, and he'd slip it into the back pocket of my jeans or my baseball pants or whatever. It was like getting an allowance. I knew how much it meant to him, in a way, and after a while, it kept going further and further. There was no way I could tattle on him. I looked forward to it, for a while it was every week that summer, before the baseball games. It was great, he was waiting there, for me, like that was all he ever wanted."

Neil's voice sounded lower, older. It wasn't spouting nasty words or giggling between sentences. Then Neil shut up and leaned beside Zepherelli.

Neil buried his head in the kid's crotch. The dick disappeared in Neil's mouth. I watched the spider arms bob as Neil hovered over him. I slid back. The flashlight flipped from my hand. Its column of white illuminated the apricot tree's branches. Up there, a squirrel or something equally small and insignificant was scampering around. Already-dead fruit tumbled to the ground.

Stephen Zepherelli moaned. His breathing deepened. He didn't sound scared anymore.

The shadow of Neil's head lifted. "That feels nice, right?" The shadow moved back down, and I heard noises that sounded like a vampire sucking blood from a neck. I wanted to cry. I tried to fold myself into my dream of Charles and Caril Ann, those teenage fugitives. What would the blond murderess do in this situation, I wondered. Neil and I were nothing like them. I heard another chorus of "trick or treat"s, this time closer than before, maybe right there on the McCormicks' doorstep. I thought of Neil's mom, sleeping through it all. Where had she been when the man from Neil's past had put his mouth on her son like this?

I lay on my back until the noises stopped. Neil retied Zepherelli's sweat bottoms and handed him the dragon snout. "It's okay."

When Zepherellis stood, his eyes had resumed their normal luster. He was drooling. A comma-shaped trickle of blood had dried on his mouth.

I got up, carefully pulled a splinter from his upper lip, and dabbed the blood with my black sleeve.

Neil patted the kid's butt like a coach. "I'll walk him home," Neil said. He smiled at me, but he was looking over my shoulder, not at my face.

We tiptoed through the McCormick house. In Neil's bedroom, I could see his tousled sheets, his schoolbooks, his baseball trophies. The scary record had ended, but the needle was stuck on the final groove. "Scratch, scratch, scratch," Zepherelli said. I faked a laugh.

Neil's mother was still sleeping. She snored louder than my father. I shone the flashlight on the bookshelves above her, making out titles like *Monsters and Madmen, Ghoulish and Ghastly, All the Worst Ways to Die.* Only days ago, I'd wanted to read those. Now I didn't care.

"I know the direction home," Stephen Zepherelli told Neil. He seemed anxious to lead the way. "I can show you where to go."

We left the house. The cool air smelled like mosquito repellent, barbecue sauce, harmless little fires. When the air hit my face, I ripped my headpiece off. A single beady spider's eye fell to the sideway. I bent to get it. In the weak street light, that eye stared back at me. I saw my reflection in its black glass. Instead of picking it up, I stood and ground it beneath my shoe.

"See you later, Stephen," I said. It was the first time I'd said his name, and my voice cracked on the word. "And you too, Neil. Tomorrow."

And I knew I would see him tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. Neil had shown a part of himself I knew he'd shown no one else. I reckoned I had asked for it. Now I was bound to him.

Neil led Zepherelli down the block. I watched them shuffle through the dead leaves, moving farther away, until the shadows swallowed them up.

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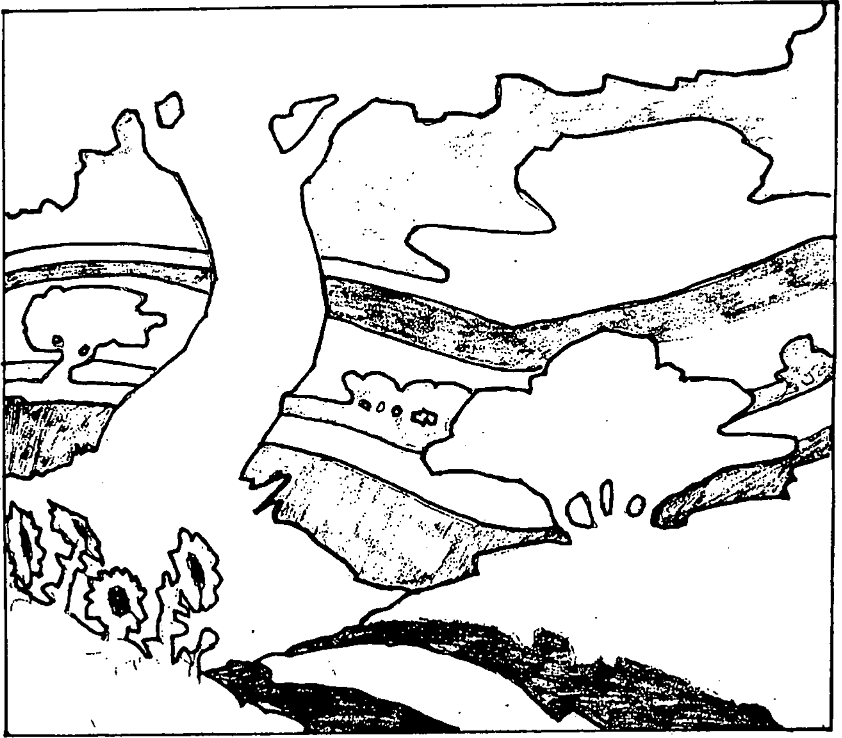

Reviews

Pigeons in the Chandeliers by Judy Ray. Kansas City, MO: Timberline Press (6281 Red Bud, Fulton, Missouri 65251), 1993. 75 pages. $10.00 paper.

This collection of poems from the Executive Director of Kansas City's Writer's Place is beautifully presented on vellum. Clarence Wolfsholh's tri-color linocut designs designate the text's structural divisions. This book is pleasurable to hold and to behold.

Structurally and thematically, the text is a little more difficult to get a hold of. It has three parts: "Letting Go," "Miracle Fish," and "No Owls on the Wind." I'd like to say that the first part deals with where we've been and how those places form and inform the people we've become; that the second section offers commentary about the places we go and how those places widen and change our way of seeing; and, that the third section deals with the places where we are. That's how I'd like to describe the structure of this book, but I don't think that would be entirely apt.

Look more closely at the poems grouped in the first section, for instance, and a theme emerges that strongly suggests the poetic powers of memory—memories that have formed us, that bind us, can destroy us, yet can transform us when we "let go." In "Dream-Time," for example, Ray borrows the image of the collective imagining of the Maori to demonstrate the transformation of personal histories into poetry, songs imbued with a transcendent sense of self to become representative of a culture:

> These words we [poets] offer like the pillars
> And lintels which a Maori wood-carver
>
> Shapes with the spirit of his ancestors,
> Great eyes of abalone gleaming.

In "Forgetting," Ray incorporates images of a splintering self unable to see her reflection in a darkened mirror—the consequence of "not-remembering." Ray likens this self-hood to "the pain of childbirth / falling away in wonder"; should she shatter the smooth mirror of herself into "screaming fragments"? From this juxtaposition, the reader is left to extrapolate that from the pain of childbirth comes a new wholeness, life; likewise, from the shattering of an illusory self, come shards that perhaps could be re-formed into a new sense of self.

And how so? Ray's answer arrives in the last poem of the first section, "Meditation." The solution is to "let go," a tired old platitude nowadays, but rather pleasing, nonetheless, in the gentle cadences, the respirating structure of the lines: "Let go your breath, your spirit— / into waterfall roar,

/ windy rush of pines." The poem concludes: "let go your sons, your sons / that they may lead you / where you had thought to lead them." When we let go, Ray reminds us, we are strengthened through the very process of loosening our holds. Walk around for a bit with your fists clenched and you'll soon see how you grow weary by grasping and clenching onto things, to your expectations of the way things ought to be. Ray advocates good deep breathing to strengthen and invigorate, to clarify and renew. Ray uses the metaphor of breathing to conclude her first section as she has used the metaphor of memory throughout it: memories form, and inform, each of us, and can transform us when we have the living power to breathe beyond them.

The second section, "Miracle Fish," in many respects is the strongest of the three sections of the book. If the first section is, at root, about the search for self-identity, the second develops the perspective that exposure to other cultures lends to one's view, frequently jarring one to re-evaluation, to reassessment. Readers of Ray's *The Jaiphur Sketchbook: Impressions of India* should particularly appreciate this section as it evokes a strong sense of India with admirable yet sparing use of concrete detail: "From far off the wind / Lashes a storm, transforming the desert/ Into an unbreathable haze . . ." ("The Desert") or "red-faced langurs leap in games of tag / On the tap-tin roof at dawn" ("The Hermit"). The title piece of this section, "Where are the Miracle Fish," is especially vivid, and also clues the reader into Ray's Brechtian ambition of jolting her reader from complacency (if possible) as she asks in its opening stanza if the stage of what follows has been set by the dramatist. Ray first describes a crowded colorful city bazaar, people "puls[ing] through the city gates." The richness of sound, textures and the wares of the bazaar are in sharp contrast to the material poverty of the beggar woman who confronts her there, or later the beggars at a bus station—beggars who swirl and twirl through the dust upon her as though directed by stage managers. To the beggars, as they swirl past, their open hands outstretched, she is inarticulate, as so many of us are in the face of what is too frequently the unfamiliar face of poverty; to the reader, she asks now in retrospect, "Did I miss my cue? / I do not know this language / And I have forgotten my lines."

In the final section, "No Owls on the Wind," Ray appears to move from the introspective mode of the previous sections to a more socially critical stance. While this section is not as strongly thematic as the ones preceding it, it seems to strive less for effect. This section offers up a wide array of topics from kleptomania, militarism/nuclear war, swimming, widowhood, to sculpture; and Ray scatters throughout names of or allusions to social critics from the last couple centuries—here an Orwell or a Roosevelt; here

a Reisman, there a Blake. One could argue that the diversity of topics, appeals to authorities and allusions, parodies the crisis of coherence within our own culture.

In "Moments," Ray's final word, she writes: "There are moments / that shock the mind open / to an eternity / of Blake's visions." She continues: "The whole world / turns for us, for itself. / And the satellites have sent God, / too, into the TV. . . . It was a face holding things together, / yet the eyes looked only outward, / and Medusa's snakes / swarmed around the caverns."

I'm not sure, exactly, what the postmodernists might have to say about any such telecommunications visionary, but I am somewhat reassured by a contemporary poet who aims at an integrated and cohesive view of things, even if her view is not so comforting, nor her aim always so true.

Jane M. Holwerda

Hard Freeze by Philip Miller. Bookmark Press (University of Missouri, Kansas City, MO 64110-2499), 1994. 64 pages. $9 paper.

Hard Freeze is, as you might expect, a cold book. When I picked up the book for the first time it *felt* cold: the ice-blue cover art, by Conci Denniston, depicts a middle-aged couple staring out of their window at winter. Miller's poems create a cold emotional landscape, though there are surprising patches of warmth to be thankful for.

The first poem here, "The Beginning of the End"—with an epigraph from Hardy, "And a grin of bitterness swept thereby / like an ominous bird a-wing . . ."—is appropriately chilly. At Eliot's "still center of the turning world"—symbolized in Miller's poem by the hard freeze of winter—two people must face up to each other, to themselves:

> So there came a time
> we had to stop
> and turn to each other,
> facing ourselves
> as for the first
> and last time,
> and in that moment,
> a thin smile cooled on your lips
> and I could feel my eyes—
> as they adjusted to the dark—
> widen then narrow.

Though there is no resolution, Miller does offer at least the *possibility* of it. In a later poem, "In Our Season," a couple "trapped inside" by winter must "finally face [them-]selves." Though the wintry scenery reflects the freezing of emotions, Miller is also suggesting that in bare winter it's possible to see clearly, which is the first step towards the resolution of estranged partners.

There's an Oriental tone to *Hard Freeze*, especially in the stark images of nature and in recurring words such as "still," "silence," "rain," "snow," "shadow," "stranger," "ash," "bone," "haunt." Though this sounds like the lexicon of W. S. Merwin at his most gnomic, there's no mistaking Miller's rich, knotty language for Merwin's spare poetry. For the most part Miller's poetry is swift free verse, with the reader propelled through each poem by the near-absence of end-stopped lines.

Set against the wintry backdrop of Miller's poetry is the bric-a-brac of the cluttered lives of his characters. Does this bric-a-brac give any protection against encroaching winter? Perhaps. Losing oneself in bric-a-brac, knickknacks, gewgaws seems to provide temporary shelter. In "Catalogue," for example, a consumer's dreams are indulged as the character orders "one of everything" from the catalogue of exotica, though the ambiguous ending of the poem suggests that such self-indulgence will likelier destroy than satisfy:

> You can see yourself on crowded streets
> sweeping past in a pure silk kimono—
> ruby-eyed gilt dragons woven on the back—
> a walking catalogue of what dreams become,
> passers-by gawking, flirting up so close
> they can almost touch the hem of your garment,
> can almost drag you to the ground.

For Miller, the knickknacks of our lives are "small comforts" which "with proper care / survive our slippery hands, / with luck, outlive us all" ("Small Comforts"). Like poems, perhaps. The danger of these "small comforts," however, is apparent in "For the Moment" as the couple contemplate items in their "museum" and recall their past: ". . . for a frozen moment we become / one with our own furnishings, / two more lovely artifacts." This ending is tantalizingly ambiguous: though it's delightful to lose ourselves in such memories, to do so one approaches death by becoming, if only for a moment, no more than another knickknack.

And yet many of the poems concern the little we can save from ruinous Time. "Houses" starts, "I've lived in a dozen domiciles, / but not a one seems home." Nowhere is home, nowhere is safe. On days when he's struck with "some half-remembered loss," Miller's persona tries to see himself as

> . . . a child crawling up
> the old backstairs of the very first house
> I lived inside, stunned by something
> I have no words for, sitting down and staring
> into some dark corner where every shadow
> in the house has gathered.

Throughout *Hard Freeze* Miller tries to articulate what this child had no words for: what might be saved from the gathering darkness. Such a mission lends a melancholy tone to the book. In "Photos of Dead Relatives," for example, the persona is looking at the "stagy expressions" of "relatives in stern Victorian poses." He does so as though *he* is more real, less *staged.* The poem ends with an unusual display of self-confidence which is belied by the wintry tone of the book as a whole: "Grinning like children we turn away, step back / on our own ground, permanent, solid." So much here suggests evanescence rather than permanence.

In Miller's world, snow—and art—give order to disorder, though there's a price to pay for stilling life, of course. "A Winter Afternoon" begins:

> This afternoon invites one more allusion
> to Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow,*
> the way snow makes a symmetry
> of stray, half-covered things . . .

Symmetry, yes, but the touch of death too, as the poem ends, ". . . our own shadows ahead of us, / grown long and lean against the snow." Again Miller shows how clearly one can see in this stark landscape: the two shadows are as prominent as white tombstones on a green hill. And again his characters seem on the verge of confronting their alienation, and perhaps embarking on a crossing of their divide. But here as in so many of the poems of *Hard Freeze,* Miller abandons his couples on the tundra and demands that they find their own ways back. In "Redefined," for example, Miller's couple welcomes the "relief" of winter, which narrows options, but narrows them to such a degree that the annihilation of death is suggested at the end of the poem:

> The furnace bumped off and on,
> wheezing dry air
> as we dreamed of snow

lying plush and undisturbed
by human tracks.

Miller's couples don't do much of anything: they sit around, read magazines, contemplate knickknacks, stare, think. There's a cold comfort in this lifelessness. But though winter turns us in on ourselves and on those we live with, it provides limited space for evasion. So Miller's couples are pushed toward confrontation, and, we hope, toward resolution.

In an interview in the *New Times*, Miller said, "I see two couples in the poems. One of the couples is my age . . . . The other couple older, about my parents' age." The latter couple, whose relationship is the main subject of the later poems of *Hard Freeze*, see their marriage reflected in the garden they tend. In "The End of October" she plans to spend the day

cutting back old foliage, resettling
bricks, wintering, poking around
what's dead or dying, to rescue,
before the cold comes down,
a little semblance of garden.

I think of couples in retirement with time at last to clear the deadwood of their shared lives, rescuing some "little semblance of garden." In the final poem, "A Firefly," the intimate strangers are reconciled, to some extent, as frozen years of silence begin to thaw (though the poem's slight celebration is undercut by the wry epigraph from Yeats, "Bodily decrepitude is wisdom . . ."). He brings her a firefly and laughs as it crawls all over his hands, and she laughs to see it fly "twinkling across the yard, a spark of green": they laugh together, "cackl[ing] like decrepit children" before sitting on the porch to listen

to the stillness of summer,
to the clicks and rustles of the night,
like the silence of half their lives.

In the context of *Hard Freeze* this tentative resolution of division is the equivalent of Fourth of July celebrations.

My fingertips are still tingling from Miller's chilly collection. But Miller tells us that with the clarity of vision in winter we should be able to see at last our difficulties and move towards resolving them. There is a slight thaw in the tundra which Conci Denniston (in the cover art) and Philip Miller depict in exquisite detail.

Brian Daldorph

Wool Highways and Other Poems by David Ray. Helicon Nine Editions (P.O. Box 22412, Kansas City, MO 64113), 1993. 90 pages. $9.95 paper.

Kangaroo Paws: Poems Written in Australia by David Ray. Thomas Jefferson University Press (Northeast Missouri State University, Kirksville, MO 63501), 1995. 145 pages. $12.50.

Wool Highways by David Ray calls to mind the opening of Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations,* in which Greenblatt suggests that people study literature out of a desire to communicate with the dead. As in previous volumes of his poetry, Ray communicates with the dead by addressing and echoing his literary forebears and by remembering his son Sam, who died in an accident at age nineteen.

Welcoming in the voices of old masters almost always has a salutary effect on these poems; such inclusion helps to keep the lines taut and focused on detail. Consider, for example, the two poems "Station" and "At the Home of James K. Baxter, New Zealand Poet." Both are poems of place, but while the former remains rather prosy and too aware of itself as a poem, the latter has much more to say and to show about this bay where one encounters "gulls, the tussock butterfly, / the great charm of sea, the occasional drifters / called swagmen." Furthermore, the other Baxter poems in this volume ("Toward the Smile," "A Day with Baxter: His Home in New Zealand," and "Hemi") breathe with a confidence and liveliness absent from many of the other poems. This liveliness opens up space for a little ironic distance from the poems' subjects, as in "Hemi" (the title of which is the "Maori name taken by James K. Baxter"): "And wasn't it quaint how he [Baxter] strolled / Dunedin *sans* shoes and with hair / flowing like Christ's"—though even more irony could be refreshing here.

Another major literary presence in this book is a sort of companion in Ray's grief, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose own son Waldo died of scarlet fever at age five. In "Grief Is Not for the Game of Wits," Ray reflects on the depth and extremity of his own grief, as well as Emerson's:

> I wonder anew why grief is so sharp.
>
> It is not that I have not been reproached,
> told that I should be ashamed of my tears,
> counseled not to rage. It is not
> that I do not know

> that two years is far too long
> for a son. And yet did not Emerson
> keep the apple because little Waldo
> had bitten into it,
> his precious teeth marks left?
>
> It is hardly a failure of news. We all
> know how morbid and sick is such idolatry.

Emerson's presence helps keep the thought moving and allows some necessary distance from the sheer sadness of the subject matter to allow the poet to wrestle with the irony of his predicament: that, in the midst of his all-consuming memory of his son, the poet feels he must move on with his life, and yet the letting go he feels he needs to accomplish also feels like betrayal. Certainly, however, the choice is not between making his grief end completely (how could one expect to?) and being crippled by it. The more human response is, of course, to move on with one's grieving, as the poem entitled "Grief," which also features Emerson, begins to show, first by displaying the unreal, indifferent response, illustrated by a statement of "Thoreau to Emerson, a few days / after little Waldo's death: 'You should mourn / no more than for a sere leaf.'" Ray goes on to assert the human need to mourn: "We all have friends like Thoreau, / and Emerson said he would as soon / put his hand on an elm's bough / as take the arm of that friend. We all / have friends who are elm boughs . . . . / And their judgements / should thus be light as dust, as ash upon us."

When Ray loses contact with such companions as Baxter and Emerson, or when this contact becomes minimal, his voice is liable to slip and become maudlin or otherwise self indulgent, as happens in "The Cross in New Zealand." The lines here tend toward prosiness as he reports details of a man who has been carrying a cross "with a wheel at the base" around the world. The worst moment of the poem comes at the end: "And I think / of my own cross, how I've lugged it through Spain, / Greece, India, New Zealand these past months—but no wheel." There is no use, no good use, in this sort of gesture toward comparing one's pain to someone else's. Ray is a better poet than this, and I cannot help but think that, given more time and attention to this poem, he would have changed it.

A more successful poem that both grows out of Ray's loss and proceeds without explicit reference to an old master is "On the Steamship Earnslaw." Here the poet takes up the common experience of thinking, for a passing moment, one sees the loved one who has died, except that in this instance the moment is eerily protracted. The poet sees his son in danger of being

thrown overboard by a woman who turns out to be the boy's mother, who of course has no ill intentions for her son. Nevertheless, for the moment the poet feels he has the opportunity to save the boy, as no doubt Ray wishes he could have saved Sam, but he succeeds only in scaring the mother and child. As a result, he goes to sit by himself in the lounge, "where a man could hide tears; watch / the black smoke roiling, uncoiling." Thus, the poem becomes a meditation on the persistence of grief and its power to alter one's perception of reality.

The poems I have discussed so far tend to work best in their lyrical moments. Accordingly, while many of Ray's poems tend toward narrative, I suspect that his real talent lies with the short, meditative lyric. My favorite poem in the book is a paradoxical piece of only fourteen lines, "The Law." The law he reflects on here is a law that is not law in the sense of a text or canon, but a law of the deep nature of things, encompassing laws of light, energy, and growth:

> Amazing how the least shadow
> obeys the law,
> creeping across the snow up high
> where none can see.
>
> And down below, every tree
> knows precisely what it's doing.

This is a law of knowing by unknowing, a law of the tree that grows and seeks the light and bends to accommodate itself to its environment and continue growing without rumination or reflection or the need for them. Applied to humans, this law becomes a kind of faith, both a nondiscursive kind of knowing and a trust in the events and places and movements of history:

> Anyone who somehow arrives here
> on the distant island
> below ten peaks and has not at least
>
> half the faith he needs
> has broken the law. These mountains
>
> have outdone all museums.
> Awe is a part of the Law
> and even the brief shadow obeys.

This is a law of dynamic growth and creative movement with spirit, into the reckonings of awe. Here Ray accomplishes what elsewhere in the book he expresses anxiety about being able to do—let go of his son and move on with his life. The law that this poem articulates reassures, in fact, that such moving on will result not in a loss of memory (letting go does not mean forgetting or ceasing to feel), but in a kind of fulfillment of that memory in a creative and affirmative life.

I find this little poem, "The Law," successful also in its technique—the taut phrasing, the easy movement among ideas and details, and the occasional rhymes. Such play of technique is often helpful to these poems, whether it is the syllabics of "Karma," the mixture of iambs and anapests of "Two Dreams," or the rhymes at the close of "Three Sacred Beings Near Curio Bay." As with the use of voices from the past, these techniques help to keep the poems lithe and on the move.

David Ray has taken his art seriously, in part, as noted above, by working to bring the voices of his forebears into his poems. Note his rather witty echoes of Eliot and Shakespeare in "In the Mountains":

> You can let go here in the mountains
>
> where the lifts take swaying chairs high
> one by one to the dizzy brink,
> here where we are such stuff as lichen,
>
> lupin, moss and gliding birds are made of.

The first line quoted echoes "In the mountains, there you feel free," from *The Waste Land*, and the last two lines quoted echo, of course, Prospero's "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" speech in *The Tempest.* Both echoes work to emphasize the grandeur of human experience as well as "our little life" which is "rounded with a sleep." I find Ray's poems to be at their best when they combine this embracing of the literary past with the sort of humility that is able to affirm, "We are such stuff as lichen."

As in *Wool Highways*, many of the better poems in *Kangaroo Paws* engage with voices of the literary past, such voices as those of Henry Handel Richardson, "Pseudonym of Ethel H. Lindesay Richardson" (in "The Unmentionable"), and Francis Webb (in "Lunacy Tribunal: the Poet Francis Webb pleads for His Freedom" and "Francis Webb Reflects on His Failure"). In particular, the Webb poems show some verbal agility of the sort I find helpful to poems, an agility that comes, no doubt, from Ray's imitation of Webb's marvelous verbal torque.

However, I am struck by how many of the poems in this volume get their primary energy not so much from voice as from the sheer tragedy, delight, despair, or quirkiness of the stories they tell. Witness, for example, "The Knowledge" (about living for three weeks beside a police morgue in Sydney), "The Pedestrian Subway" (about walking among the beggar/ performers of the underground), "The Microgardener" (about a man meticulously grooming his all but barren yard), "A Moment in the Bush" (in which a man talks of his relationship to the tree in whose shadow he was born and under which he plans to be buried), "A Moment Shared in Australia" (in which an Australian recalls his trip to America in which he encountered W. D. Snodgrass leaning against a wall, weeping over the recent suicide of John Berryman), and "Elegy for Grace" (about an encounter with an Australian poet who tells about her father's work as a prison doctor). There is a wealth of interesting and at times moving detail here; the poems work as a sort of lyric journalism recounting the author's experiences in Australia, as many of the poems in the previous volume do the same for the author's experiences in New Zealand.

Usually, given my tastes as a reader, I tend to look for a poem to do a little more than tell an interesting, quirky, or even moving, story; I want the poem to say and do more—to work up language and detail into luminous and surprising moments, and several of the poems do just this. While there is some strong narrative in the volume (such as that in "Greenmount"), the best poem I found was, as in *Wool Highways*, a short lyric, this one entitled "Early." This poem plays with the childhood fear of darkness, transformed and expanded in adulthood fading as daylight comes:

> There's a moment when the sun's diffused light
> has talcummed the valleys, and the weeping willows
> hang low but do not weep, and the dangers
> so manifest and lurking in darkness are harmless
> as sheets thrown over a chair in a boy's room,
> no longer the feared ghosts of midnight.

The repetition of "weep" reminds us that, even though the weeping willows "do not weep," the weeping is not far away; and there is a stunning aptness to the line about the "sheets thrown over a chair in a boy's room" because of the way it calls up the fear, relief, and embarrassment of that dark night in childhood followed by the dawn in which what was horrific becomes again merely familiar. The speaker of the poem experiences the fear now, not in the relatively safe enclosure of home, but in the large world, the landscape where one may nevertheless derive comfort from "spider webs

/ on the box elder bushes glistening with dew." The images of this poem are clearly drawn, the language evocative and precise.

Some of the poems of this volume tend to become flat, and some tend toward rather easy statements. Certainly, I do not mind a poem thinking out loud, but if it does, I prefer it to deliver more than, say, the rather clichéd notion of "the Concorde—supersonic plane // that flies every day / a few wealthy fools over an ocean // with wanton damage to ozone, / skin of the earth" ("The Wonders"). This is rather familiar stuff, and it bothers me that the speaker shows no knowledge of who these "fools" are or precisely where they are going and why they are going there. Thus, the criticism comes across as too easy, as does that statement at the end of "A Stroll in Sydney, After Reading Schweitzer." After the speaker tells us that Albert Schweitzer was laughed at for "saving palm trees," and after the speaker talks with a woman "whose one mission / in life, it seems, is kindness to dirty pigeons," the speaker says that he "would save these old ladies of Sydney" and that he "would save palms in the midst of a jungle." There is no indication in the poem that the speaker *is* doing these things, so what good lies in asserting that he *would* do them?

Even facing these limitations, however, I come away from the book with a sense of a haunting and beautiful place. With his lyric journalism, Ray traces his sojourn through this rich and strange land he compares to Oz (see "Sunday Morning in Oz" and "Leaving Oz"). This land that has long supported the Aborigines, who have undergone terrible injustice and even slaughter (see "The Arrival at Western Shores, 1830," "Paradise at Dusk," and "A Chat Regarding the Next Water Hole for Miners"), and a land of the "Dreamtime" ("the mythological past of Aborigines"—see "A Sunday in Dreamtime") and the "Bush" ("the forest or country areas," which can be "the focus of primal fears and dark energies, and of immeasurable distances and confusions of direction"—see "Homesick"), a land with the terrible memory of Gallipoli (which comes up in "Anzac Day in the Antipodes"). Furthermore, this is the land of the eerie and comforting sounds of the didgeridoo, and the land of such creatures as the koala, the quokka, and the kangaroo. Finally, as Ray takes us through this haunted and lovely place, we again encounter, in gentle and passing moments, his son Sam. Ray is moving on with his grief now. And he tells us, "We give up our griefs like dead grass / yielding to wind" ("The Exile at Midmorning"). I look forward to seeing where David Ray's journeys will take him next, even if he does not leave his home in the Midwest to make the trip.

Jerry Harp

Mysterious Skin by Scott Heim. New York: Harper Collins, 1995. 292 pages. $20.00 hardback.

Scott Heim loves skin. In a previously published short story, "Imagining Linc," two adolescent boys, Ned and Lincoln, explore their newly discovered passion on the floor of a womb-like sno-cone igloo where the latter works. "Skin should be a flavor," Linc tells Ned as his tongue explores his lover's body. In the course of their love-making, Ned asks Linc to mark his body, to gently bite and bruise the flesh, to leave traces of their mutual desire on his skin. The mind's longing must be written on the body's surface; the union of flesh must also be a merging of minds. At the close of Heim's short narrative, Ned leans back on Linc's bed, confident in the knowledge the two share, needing no mirror to see the line of hickeys Linc has kissed into his skin from neck to navel, the "perfectly shaped exclamation point" that punctuates their desire.

Heim's first novel, *Mysterious Skin*, ends on a similar exclamatory note, the "wounds and scars" of its two young male protagonists illuminated by a flash of "light so brilliant and white it could have been beamed from heaven." The final scene of Heim's novel is dazzling, both literally and figuratively, perfect punctuation to a multiple-voiced narrative which delights, disturbs, and compels, forcing us to confront the ways in which memory and desire inform one another, leaving their marks on both the body and the mind.

Mysterious Skin is a dangerous novel, unflinching in its mapping of the treacherous terrain between what the body knows and the mind remembers, a landscape as vast as the rolling Kansas plains which the author describes with such evocative and understated precision. By turns comic, lyrical, and terrifying, it follows the divergent paths of two young men, Brian Lackey and Neil McCormick, linked by their membership on a Little League baseball team and the coach who uses their eight-year-old bodies to satisfy his own sexual desires. While Brian blocks the childhood incident from his mind, unable to cope with the memory of touch that connects him to Coach Heider, Neil, invigorated and empowered by the attention he receives, immerses himself in the older man's adoration. A decade after the affair has ended, the memory of Coach still lingers like a bruise that refuses to fade. "Sometimes it's all I think about," Neil says, "the times spent with him. It's as if he and I were all that mattered. My best dreams feature him, no one else, the two of us suspended in his sugary-smelling rooms, alone, as if God had positioned a beam on central Kansas, and Coach and I had stepped haphazardly into its light."

Heim's willingness to explore the dynamics of childhood sexual desire, to investigate the ways in which pre-adolescents understand themselves as

sexual beings, marks the boldness of his narrative. He is fearless in turning a high-intensity spotlight on the dark recesses of sexual desire, on all those things we'd rather not think about, tirelessly challenging our assumptions about power, consent, and sexual identity itself.

The novel's form compels. Even when the voices of assorted friends and siblings don't match the strength of Brian and Neil's narration, Heim's attention to detail and his solid pacing is worthy of considerable praise. The novel's plot is so tightly constructed, its conflicts so deeply embedded within the emotional and intellectual truth-seeking of its protagonists, that the last half of the novel demands reading in one sitting. Heim's construction of a multiple-voiced narrative is sound strategy, for it keeps us anxious always to return to Brian and Neil, whom we know are headed for an inevitable collision with both one another and the truth of their triangulated relationship with Coach Heider.

The novel's plot moves relentlessly forward in its mapping of the radically different ways in which Brian and Neil make sense of the sexual coercion at the heart of their childhood; the ways in which they construct an identity out of what they understand as the defining moment of their youth. Neil's affair with Coach gives shape to his desire for other men, launching him into the world of sexual experience. And while Heim's presentation of Neil's proto-gay consciousness is startlingly bold in its honesty and simplicity, there are moments when the author strains our suspension of disbelief; when, for example, eleven-year-old Neil simulates sex with another boy during recess and then embraces the verbal and physical abuse of his classmates, "smiling, his arms spread as if he'd been crucified to the earth." While Neil's studied bravura is engaging, the trajectory of his sexual career, from junior high "queer" to adolescent hustler, covers fairly familiar territory. Neil's motivation, his spiraling lower and lower to new depths of sexual misadventure, can be explained, perhaps too tidily, as an attempt, repeated over and over again, to recapture that seminal moment with his adult lover/abuser. He is a rocket arching out into the cloudless blue sky, drawn inexorably downward by the pull of Coach's memory.

Even as Neil sinks into his inevitably brutal degradation in pursuit of Coach's spectral embrace, Brian, having blocked the traumatic episode with the older man from his mind, looks heavenward in hopes of explaining the "lost time" of his childhood. Brian comes to believe that he was abducted by aliens who left him, in the opening scene of the novel, terrified and bleeding in the crawl space beneath his family's house. His interest in extraterrestrials eventually leads him to Avalyn Friesen, a thirty-year-old woman who claims to have been abducted by a UFO as a child. Midway

through the novel, Brian and Avalyn meet to examine the carcass of a slaughtered calf—the victim, Avalyn claims, of alien experimentation. "'The aliens experiment on cows, because animals can't complain, they can't voice themselves like humans.'" As the woman speaks, Brian grows increasingly distressed, the repressed memory from his past beginning to surface. She continues: "'Us, on the other hand, they can't kill. But we have to live with the memory of what they do. And really, it's what they do to us that's worse.'" Heim's metaphor is striking in its originality, effortlessly linking the truly bizarre and the disturbingly mundane. The alien who swoops down from the skies is the trusted adult who abuses the innocence of his voiceless victim, implanting his knowledge beneath the surface of the skin, where it lingers, mysterious and horrifying. After Brian's encounter with the gutted calf, the novel gathers speed, hurtling both its young protagonist and the reader toward a devastating climax where past and present are ripped wide open, exposing their dark secrets in the blinding light of truth.

Mysterious Skin is a daring book. It challenges and compels, horrifies and delights, questions boundaries and explodes them. It burrows beneath the skin and lingers long in the mind, questioning the ways in which we order experience and construct identity. It asks us, again and again, what it means to be touched, what it means to desire, what it means to be human.

Karl Woelz

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Artwork Acknowledgment

Cottonwood 50 features the work of Stan Herd. Herd's crop art works have been constructed in a variety of locations, from fields outside Lawrence, Kansas, to a plot of land by New York's Hudson River. The works range in size from the 160-acre "Satanta" earthwork to the one-acre "Countryside." The front and back covers of *Cottonwood* reproduce photographs of Herd's earthworks. The interior art consists of preliminary sketches, designs, lithographs, and gridded field sketches in the process of becoming crop art. In *Crop Art and Other Earthworks*, Herd writes of these grids, "Artists, especially muralists, have long utilized a basic grid to project a smaller sketch to larger dimension. . . . the scale I usually use is one inch on the sketch representing one hundred feet on the field." Herd carries the gridded field sketch with him on his tractor to monitor the progress of the work.

Front Cover: "Countryside," New York, 1994. Photographed by T. Parker.
Back Cover: "Sunflower Still Life," near Lawrence, Kansas, winter 1986. Photographed by Daniel Dancer.
5, 19, 60, 77: Designs and Sketches for "Countryside," New York, 1994.
48: "Little Girl in the Wind," gridded field sketch for earthwork outside Salina, Kansas, 1990.
49: "Satanta," gridded field sketch for earthwork in Southwest Kansas, 1981.
50: "Sunflower Still Life," gridded field sketch for earthwork near Lawrence, Kansas, 1985-87.
51: "The Harvest," lithograph of earthwork in Lincoln, Nebraska, 1986-88.

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