Cottonwood 51

Fiction Retrospective: The First 30 Years

COTTONWOOD 51

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Cottonwood magazine welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, graphics, photography, 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.

Please limit poetry submissions to five best, fiction to one story. We will return submissions that include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

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Cottonwood 51

Fiction Retrospective: The First 30 Years

Cottonwood Magazine and Press
Lawrence, Kansas

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Fiction Retrospective: The First 30 years
Summer 1996

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COTTONWOOD 51

POETRY

FICTION

FICTION RETROSPECTIVE: The First 30 Years

REVIEWS

Artwork by Roger Shimomura

GEORGE F. WEDGE

Editor's Note

Issue 51 marks the passing of our thirtieth year of publication (1995) with a center section that reprints four short stories selected by the fiction staff as among the best published in past issues. A comparable selection of poems will appear as the center section of *Cottonwood* 52. We are pleased that over the years our effort to print contemporary works of genuine literary merit has been recognized by editors of anthologies presenting the work from small magazines; six of the nine poems in our last issue have been requested for inclusion in such a volume. We are even more pleased that a number of authors whose early work appeared in *Cottonwood* have gone on to distinguished writing careers; Antonya Nelson, for example, has recently published her first book, *Talking in Bed* (Houghton Mifflin).

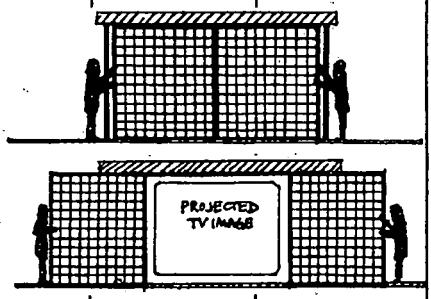
BUT, like nearly all small presses, **WE NEED SOME HELP FROM OUR READERS**. We are grateful for the material support of the English Department at KU throughout our history and for a number of grants from the Kansas Arts Commission, as well as occasional grants for special projects. Local readers gave substantial support to this issue at an April benefit in Lawrence organized by Christy Prahl. But the cost of paper, printing, and binding in our current format has risen steeply. Those of our readers who want to see *Cottonwood* survive beyond its thirty-first year can help by: (1) letting us know what changes in content or format they would prefer—fewer pages? stapled binding? elimination of particular sections? (2) subscribing, if you are not currently a subscriber; (3) recommending *Cottonwood* to friends, libraries, and bookstores as a quality magazine they should know about; and (4) giving *Cottonwood* subscriptions to friends for holidays or birthdays.

There is also the option of contributing to the Alice Carter fund of the Endowment Association (tax-deductible); checks should be sent to *Cottonwood* but made out to the KU Endowment Association, with the notation "Alice Carter Fund."

The next major project of Cottonwood Press is the publication of a collection of poems, *Midwestern Buildings*, by Victor Contoski, author of the earlier and very popular *A Kansas Sequence*. This project is partially supported by a grant from the University.

ISSEI: OPENING SEQ

TIME	VIDEO	AUDIO	SIDE VISUAL	LIVE
	HOUSE LIGHTS ARE LOW – AUDIENCE IS SEATED TO KABUKI – POPISH-SLOW MUSIC. FADE MUSIC WHEN AUDIENCE IS COMPLETELY SEATED.			
0	(BLK)	Boom, Boom (CANNON) (Bomb Sounds SLOW INTERVAL) Boom Boom Boom		
30			YELLOW SPOT ON SCREENS ←	CLOSES 1ST (KURODO #1 TURNS SPOT)
	(BLK)	Boom Boom		
40		Boom	AFTER SCREEN IS OPEN, YEL. SPOT FADES OUT	← KURODO TURNS OFF SPOT + EXITS
45	(BLK)	KIMIKO ROTATES L.M. POSITION STORM OVER. BOOMS	SLIDES OF OLD JAPAN PAINT + SOMET PAINT GO UP ~ THEN QUICKLY OUT TO BLK.	



POETRY

DENISE PENDLETON

Saying Yes, Saying No

At my grandmother's table I say no
to my children after the dinner they have prepared
and eaten with me. I say no to dessert, to their chatter.
I climb the ten stairs to my room. My bed reaches me
just in time, when my breath has almost left me, comes
only in ragged pieces. But I catch it, bring it
back and it stays with me again. I am safe
for a while and I stretch my head to the foot,
my feet to the head of my king-sized bed. It is early
yet and I am listening to the hum of the dishwasher,
the clang of voices and pans, saying no to the dark
that comes soon now, over all of us. One more
day's gone, one more summer and I am closing my eyes,

saying yes, seeing the Shore Road wind through
this season's flame: leaves of gold, rust, tangerine,
giving me the fire that is made out of cold, out of the sap
of oak, birch, and maple, the fire that parts into two
paths around evergreen. I have not had enough breath
to walk that road, to walk to my mailbox at its edge
where the juniper begins, robust and tall, without shame,
its branches woven thickly into each other, impenetrable
stretching the length of the garden beds my husband dug
before he entered them forever in the ash I spread.
The walls of this house rise up, then the walls of each room. Soon
my children will not come. It will be cold and I will watch
breath rise from the ocean,
saying yes.

LAURIE CALHOUN

"Like Mondrians"

she said with a glassy look
in her eyes, then she proceeded
to explain that every millimeter
mattered, had been carefully
thought out. She spoke of
perfect orthogonality,
which readers of Plato
know is only a Form.

On another day she got
the same look in her eyes
while talking about the Portraits
of Dora Maar, and she went on
about perfect displacement
and the perfect imperfect angle,
which readers of Plato
know is only a Form.
Again she used the word
"control,"
and although I had heard
it issue from her mouth,
like soda released slowly from a siphon,
on many occasions before,
today it seems particularly apt.

Simon Perchik

*

That sugar too, should grieve
dissolve and you watch your spoon
being lowered the way all graves
feel at home—it gets easier, you begin

to enjoy the definite place: one chair
becomes a favorite though the ads
want you to be surprised, new

—without thinking, you drink
from the usual cup, by heart
always one spoon while another
exactly alike and the coffee slowly
clockwise to bring the same flowers
the familiar rounded stones

—you are allowed two spoons
and everywhere you open windows
open doors, the small spoons
opened, pressed against the sweetness
that lasts and your mouth.

TED LORD

Big Breath

for Margaret

I. 40 miles from home
when shit

over me, grocery boxes of china,
the shoeboxes of letters from home . . .
shit

this wasn't even mountains
yet, I was still inter-state,
still on cheap Kentucky gas,
but shit

I smelled the fields before me.
Letting up, I slow-laned,
watching myself in
the rearview. Oh that sweet
smell.

II. I moved my mother's hand
to the radio
my father's speed

and last year's country music,
today's weather, began to clear
the bad word

in my ears. I'd come
gone as city wrong
as my dumb cousins

who put all this green,
the smell of cycling
into

four-letter
language;
tongue-tipped

with the ideas of grass
as astroturf. Off this
dead black vision of

highway, I see a dirt road, a car moving
at a cow's pace.

DAVID STARKEY

The Day God Abandoned Utah

I was there the day that God abandoned Utah,
yanked the spike from Promontory,

turned the copper in Bingham Canyon to verdigris.

Cigarettes and coffee blossomed
in the hands of BYU frosh

like Sego lilies in spring.

The Great Salt Lake teemed
with gasping fresh water fish, the air

swarmed, too, with bees forsaking duty

for piss-off chaos, the luxury of anarchy.
But they were a desert people living there,

hardly a one aware their deity had pulled up stakes.

The temple singing went on unrestrained.
Skiers stamped their feet

in perfect powdered snow and leaned into their runs.

MICHAEL MOOS

Summer Rain

I was not ready for the owl to explode from the dark green heart of the small tree,
his wings opening wide like the soul of a painter who has lived alone
with darkness and silence and stars, his heavy hands beginning to move
in the first minutes of morning sunlight breaking at the impatient edge of the earth.
I must have been making plans for a garden again, the stepping stones arranged to perfection,
the roses and the thunderstorms in a chiseled balance . . . .
How much longer my life would be, if I could sleep and wake like the clover,
without the wheels and dust of personal history,
the clear present of the summer rain falling on my peaceful face.

Gary Duehr

Cipher

Once more the world goes white
On black. Shadow of a foot
On a walk. A little piece of paper
Turned ten years under.
Waitress whose skirt performs a whirl

Before the grill; gulls that over a lost pool
Ellipse inland, sensing
Storm—what would you have me do? The defendants
Squat in their makeshift cell.
Fingerprints recall
A notebook stranded in a car,
All the soldiers who were there
Return ill. Light drains from the room.

The fact of our bodies stands out from any hum.
The night goes pale
To whisper. I think of you as you'll
Be hours from now. Your hair falling back. Your voice

Leaning near. Breath, air, light. All that's
Looked for. Found.
Frozen light on branches above heavy ground.

On our thirtieth anniversary, *Cottonwood* wishes to thank you.

What you hold in your hands is the first of two commemorative anniversary issues. This issue's retrospective section features four works of short fiction that represent some of the best work we have ever published. Our next issue will feature retrospective poetry alongside new poetry and fiction. Readers like you are helping *Cottonwood* remain a vital forum for original writing in Kansas and beyond.

The four works reprinted here span the thirty years of *Cottonwood*'s existence. **Greg Janicke**, whose "Silent Children" appeared in 1976, proved a challenge to locate, but detective work found him still living in Kansas, still writing, and thrilled to be included in this issue. **Antonya Nelson** was easier to find. The reprinting of "We Get Along Here Just Fine" coincides with the release of her new book. **George Gurley** proves with "Winter Guest" that newspaper reporters also make fine fiction writers. And **Frances Sternberg**'s "Vising the Ill," quite recently published, was so compelling and poignant that we felt the retrospective section would be incomplete without it.

We are also proud of recent events sponsored by *Cottonwood*, including readings by prominent writers of poetry and fiction and an enormously successful benefit that brought music to the community and much-needed funds to the magazine. Above all, we thank our readers, without whom *Cottonwood* would not continue to exist. Thank you for your enduring support and for joining us in celebrating three wonderful, productive decades of publication.

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_____ Please send me information about Victor Contoski's forthcoming book of poems, *Midwestern Buildings*, so I can be sure to reserve a copy.

_____ I enclose a check for $_____ made out to the KU Endowment Association for the Alice Carter Fund.

Name _____

Address _____

_____

Unless otherwise noted, make checks payable to *Cottonwood*.

(3)

VIDEO FADES TO BLACK

THEN IMAGE OF MAN WATCHING W/BINOCULARS COMES UP.

(THIS IS CUE FOR ACTOR W/BINOC. TO EXIT AFTER TURNING OFF HIS JAM BOX ETC.)

← ON DURING

↓

THEN

"I spent all day at home. Starting from today we were permitted to withdraw $100 from the bank. This was for our sustenance of life, we who are enemy to them. I deeply felt America's large heartedness in dealing with us."

THROUGH (AROUND) AUDITORIUM FLOATS CARTOONS (FLIES) SUPERMAN. WITH OTHER HAND HE THROWS DOLLAR BILLS

VIDEO ON TV CHANGES TO

UPSIDE DOWN

AMERICAN FLAG W/ MELODRAMATIC SUPERMAN MUSIC

(4) IN TOTAL DARKNESS VOICE READS DIARY ENTRY:

DATE:

"I finally decided to do my fingerprint registration since it had been hanging heavily on my mind. I went to the Post Office with Mrs. Sasaki. We finished the strict registration at 11 a.m. I feel that a heavy load has been taken off my mind."

DISSONANT MUSIC - (LIKE HERRMAN STRINGS VERSION) INCREASES IN VOL.

VIDEO IMAGE IS OF 6.M. 8 MM IMAGE (BACKGROUND ROLLS BY).

AT CULMINATION OF SCREECHING STRINGS PAINT-PAINT SLIDE (BY PROJECTOR) FILLS INSTRUMENTATION.

THEN CUT W/VIDEO TO COMPLETE SILENCE.

FICTION

GRETCHEN BOEHR

Happiness

Sabine sat in a window booth at the Skyliner drinking coffee and watching pickups pull on and off the highway, sometimes pulling into the implement dealership next door. Pink grain dust had accumulated in the corners of the windshields of the cars parked in front and even in the dark hair of Sabine's husband, now getting out of a dusty pickup she guessed belonged to Daryl Hoffman, the farmer he'd started working for when harvest began last week. As Lee walked inside, taking his usual long strides toward her booth, everything inside Sabine seemed faint and mingled together, like a clump of trees in the distant twilight slipping off the horizon. And when he was finally sliding into the brown vinyl seat across from her, bringing with him the familiar smell of drying grain, a hint of diesel fuel, she felt she had no pure emotion left.

"How much do you have left to go?" Sabine tried to sound casual, though it was only the second time they'd seen each other since he'd moved in with his father two weeks ago.

"Five hundred acres," Lee said. "They say there's going to be an early frost, so we're going night and day. It's not the same as farming with my old man." His father, Frank, had been known for going at his own pace, keeping one step ahead of the bank. But last year it caught up. He'd had to sell his six hundred acres, the machinery and livestock, everything.

When the waitress came over they ordered the special, which came right away: hot roast beef sandwiches, mashed potatoes with gravy over everything, and tall iced teas. Sabine felt as if people were staring, though when she looked, the men in the front booths and the high school kids at the tables seemed oblivious.

Two weeks ago she'd come home from work to find Lee drinking bourbon in their kitchen with Marlene Engle, an old friend from his horse show days. Sabine had gone upstairs, concentrating on packing Lee's suitcase, neatly folding jeans and T-shirts, so she wouldn't cry, so she could calmly walk down the steps when Marlene left a few minutes later, hand over the suitcase and tell him to leave. It wasn't just Marlene; Sabine was tired of the drinking and sulking, his inability to keep a job that year when working with his father was no longer an option.

Lee closed the plastic menu on the Formica and folded his large hands, the lines and cracks of his fingers stained with motor oil. "So maybe we're ready to iron things out."

"You think I'm blowing this out of proportion," Sabine said.

"You had your reasons."

"This has been hard on me too. You forget that." Sabine ripped open a sugar packet, poured it into the red plastic glass. "Sometimes you act like losing the farm had nothing to do with me." At one point he'd told her she didn't know what it was like to lose a farm because she hadn't grown up on one.

"I was only thinking of myself," Lee said. "And that's why I've stopped drinking, because you were right. I was being self-destructive, but now I'm a changed man."

"And why did you decide to change? Because I nagged you."

"Not really. Maybe I reached a point where there was nowhere to go but up." Lee put down his fork, absently watching a man in a tractor driving off with a new grain cart, then back at his half-empty plate.

"That's all you're going to eat?" she asked, polishing off her potatoes.

"Not hungry lately."

No matter what I do, Sabine thought, it will never be enough. "I'm paying." She reached for the check, but Lee put his hand over it. "Really, I don't mind," she said.

"Well, I do. You've paid enough lately."

"So it's some sort of macho thing." Sabine sat back and tossed her crumpled napkin on the table.

"You're just looking for some reason to be mad at me, and though I'll admit there are many, acting macho is no longer one of them." He stood up and turned towards the register with the check, a smiley faced scrawled on the back though there didn't seem to be anything to smile about.

"I'm sorry." Sabine touched his sleeve, reaching her arm across the vinyl, making a bridge from her to him.

"C'mon," he said softly, helping her up and putting his arm around her shoulders, and they walked through the Skyliner that way, people giving Lee and Sabine supportive glances as if they were survivors from a war who'd stopped in for lunch and were now going back to the trenches.

Outside, trucks and drying fans roared at the nearby elevator, and above the noise she could hear a radio playing, some AM talk show. Lee hugged her and she let him, leaning a little against the sun-warmed car door, wanting to give up and let things go back to the way they'd been.

"Why don't we get together for a movie sometime?"

"Marlene out of town?" Sabine wished she'd stop being childish.

Lee sighed. "Nothing happened. I know that you know that."

Sabine squinted at his face in the sun, and up close she could see traces of dirt that accentuated the lines around his eyes. "You look like Clint Eastwood." She smiled, brushed back his dusty hair, and he kissed her forehead, then pulled back towards his pickup, holding both her hands.

"Then I'll give you a call." He let go and as she got inside and started the car, she could still feel the warm spot right below her hairline where his lips had been. She waved as he pulled onto the highway, feeling sixteen years old again, and as she drove back into town, passing a yard full of lawn ornaments, deer frozen in mid-step, Sabine worried that things between them hadn't changed much since then.

At the Piggly Wiggly on Main Street, Sabine resumed her place behind the cash register, though the store was empty. Lynn's Country Store, a warehouse supermarket, had opened up half a mile from the Skyliner, and the parking lot was packed every time Sabine drove by.

"How was lunch?" Rita asked from the next register. Sabine had told her the story a few days ago, after taking a box of Kleenex from aisle three. She had planned on letting go, having a nervous breakdown right there at the check-out stand, but though she tried, the tears wouldn't come.

"He asked me on a date," Sabine said.

"Oo-la-la. The plot thickens."

Two cheerleaders came in after school and bought orange juice and plastic cups and then piled back into the beat-up Firebird, where Sabine guessed they had a pint of vodka under the seat.

"I wonder if I had goals for my life back then," Sabine said. "I seem to remember teachers asking me to write them down."

"That must have been after my time." Rita graduated three years ahead of Sabine.

"You didn't miss anything." Sabine remembered their guidance counselor saying that life was open in front of them like a blank page, and six years later, she wondered what was written on hers. She hadn't pictured herself working at Piggly Wiggly, but she hadn't imagined anything else either. She'd assumed everything would fall into place, but she was beginning to think that life didn't work that way. Sabine graduated from high school and married Lee the next summer, though her parents hadn't been in favor of the marriage. She wished they would have come out and said so, but they weren't very good at coming out and saying anything. Months after the wedding, they moved her father's medical practice to Omaha, where her mother had grown up, and whenever Sabine dialed the number to their cellular phone, she pictured them driving a yellow golf cart around water hazards at Happy Hollow.

Sabine sadly watched the cheerleaders drive away. Rita lit up a cigarette, though they weren't supposed to smoke, but the store was empty. "Remember when we used to get a mid-afternoon rush?"

"It's depressing," Sabine agreed.

At six o'clock Sabine drove to the two-story farmhouse she and Lee rented from the people who owned Hemlock Dairy, one mile to the west. To her right there was a barn and a chicken house, which she kept open so the cats could come and go as they pleased. They'd planned on moving into Frank's yellow ranch-style with an attached garage after he retired, and she thought about this every time she pulled up to the half-shingled building where she parked the car. Over the years, their marriage and their plans for Frank's farm had become woven together, as if without one there couldn't be the other. The farm had been something to work towards, leaving no room for doubt. She hadn't wondered what might have happened had she not married Lee, had she not stayed here. It was difficult to speculate about another sort of life when your own was still promises unfolding in front of you.

She'd forgotten to feed the cats that morning, so they were gathered around the door. After pouring Cat Chow into the old frying pan next to the house, Sabine went inside and made Cup-of-Soup for supper. After she was finished, she put on Lee's old canvas overcoat, and in the garden, a long stretch of ground behind the house, she began pulling dry weeds away from the pumpkins, then carried the ripe ones to the porch. Lining the pumpkins along the peeling white railing, she admired each one for its size or shape, any slight imperfection. They

added something to the front of the house the way fresh flowers brightened a room, and for a moment Sabine felt the same melancholy contentment she used to feel every harvest, knowing Lee would be back from the field for a late supper, sometimes bringing Frank with him. A pheasant called from the jagged cornstalks, answered by its lonely mate on the other side of the field.

Sabine went inside to get away from the quiet of the countryside putting itself to sleep, the sun silently setting over her shoulder. She'd never lived alone before, and though she had liked the idea of having lonely, dull evenings all her own, the stillness became so intense at times she thought it would be better to share it with someone.

Rita was sitting at the back table in Hellen's when Sabine got there. Hellen's was a long rectangle on the edge of town with a lounge on one side and a restaurant on the other. The kitchen was in between, beside the sign that read Seat Yourself. When Sabine was a child, she used to think it said Suit Yourself, meaning no one cared where you sat. At the square, glossy tables, people who seemed comfortable with themselves sat back in barrel chairs, waiting for their steaks to sizzle from rare to well-done amidst a decor of black paneling and red shag, framed photos of Arnold Palmer.

"I forgot to tell you." Rita smiled and Sabine could see the sexy little gap between her front teeth. "Someone came in today asking if you were getting a divorce."

"Who?" News traveled fast, Sabine thought.

"Gary." Rita took a drink and they glanced toward the kitchen where he worked. "I told him not to jump to any conclusions."

"Thanks." Gary had been in her class, which graduated in 1986, and every year their composite photograph was moved down a space to make room for the new graduating class. She vaguely wondered what happened after they reached the end of the hall, when the photograph had gone as far as it could go. Sabine turned her attention back to Rita, who was talking about her ex-husband. Rita liked to discuss the men in their lives, and Sabine had begun worrying lately that this was all they had in common.

"So he calls this evening and asks whether I had his twenty-two. He wanted to know when I was planning on bringing it back."

"What would you want with his twenty-two?" Sabine picked up the pitcher of beer and refilled their glasses.

"That's what I asked him." Rita brushed her short brown hair back behind her ears, then moved the ashtray so she could rest her arms on the tiny table. "You know, I haven't seen Lee in Hellen's since before corn picking."

"He says he's changed." Sabine wondered if it had only been a month ago she'd paid his outstanding bar tab at Hellen's. They'd sent it to the house.

"Men. You can't ask them to change because they'll resent you for it. Once I realized that, I was able to turn my life around."

"What happened?" Sabine held up one of Hellen's famous curlicue fries like an earring.

"I left Dennis and found a family-type man. One who wasn't married."

"I never asked Lee to change. I just asked him to leave until he figured out what he wanted." Sabine thought about her mother's saying, Pretend you don't care about anything and pretty soon you won't.

"Old friends from the horse show circuit." Rita was talking about Marlene. "The worst kind."

"Do you think I'm stupid to believe him?"

"I think you're brave."

"But would you believe him if you were me?" Sabine moved the fry around in some ketchup.

"Give the guy another chance." Rita patted her hand. "I hate to see you so miserable and for what? Nothing."

"We've grown apart," Sabine said, though this wasn't what was wrong.

"You're living in different houses. What do you expect?" Rita leaned across the table. "Listen, I have something to tell you, though I wasn't sure I should because I knew you had your own life to worry about."

"What?" Sabine was glad for the distraction, anything that might help her understand what she should do about Lee, the rest of her life. She wanted someone to tell her how to feel.

"I'm trying to have a baby."

"That's wonderful." Sabine stood up and hugged Rita. "How did you know you were ready?"

"It's something you decide." Rita was thoughtful. "It's not, Oh I'm hungry, it's more like, What am I hungry for?"

"Like ordering off a menu?" Sabine sat back down, confused.

"Exactly."

Gary, who'd been standing by the bar, came over to stand behind Rita, a doggy bag in his hand. He'd become known around the county for the chocolate labs he raised in a large kennel he'd built to the west of his farmhouse, and there were rumors he was going into greyhounds next.

"How're your pups?" Rita leaned against him.

"Running me off my place." Gary grinned and nodded at Sabine.

"That's because you have too many." Sabine smiled back.

"Then you might want to take one off my hands."

"A dog is something I hadn't thought of." She'd been bitten by a German Shepherd when she was six, and she'd never owned a dog since, but the beer and shaggy red walls at Hellen's made everything seem warm and friendly. She thought about her cats, who seemed bored lately, as if their lives were too easy.

"Why don't I bring one over? You can test him out. No strings attached." Gary waved and moved towards the door, stopping to chat with the mayor.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for the responsibility," Sabine said to Rita and pictured herself pulling the dog out of the neighbor's chicken house, feathers flying.

"Gary always liked you." Rita looked at Sabine knowingly. "If you don't get back together with Lee, this is what you're opening yourself up to. You need to ask yourself if this is what you want."

"I don't know. That's always been my problem."

"What about college?" Rita asked.

"Possibly." Sabine put down her beer. "My parents wanted me to go, but they liked Lee and they were probably right in thinking I should do more with my life."

"You want to stay married." Rita rested her forearm on the back of her chair. It sounded like a prediction.

"I still love him." Sabine sighed.

"Of course you do."

The next evening, when Gary brought over the dog, he also asked Sabine to the movies. They were standing on her porch in front of the pumpkins. It was cold and Sabine folded her arms across her chest, wondering how this had all come about.

"I need more time," she said.

"I guess I'm being insensitive." Gary looked at the dog who was running back and forth, scaring the cats.

"You're a kind person." She knew she should send him away, because he would get the wrong idea, but something stopped her. Maybe it was the thought of him writing her name on his notebooks, counting the times she'd stopped by his locker to say hi, all the things she wondered if he'd done. As Gary drove away, Sabine realized this was the first time she'd ever been asked to the movies twice in one

week, and she suddenly felt very attractive and lonely at the same time.

The next morning, when Sabine walked outside, her pumpkins were gone. She looked over the railing in case they'd fallen off, but it was two weeks before Halloween and disappearing pumpkins weren't unusual, as high school kids were known to steal them for their annual pumpkin-smashing on Main Street.

The dog whined and she ruffled the fur by his neck. "Some watchdog," she said before walking to the car.

As she rang up customers that morning, she tried to seem cheerful. Look happy and you'll feel happy, Rita said, but Sabine was depressed. The pumpkins had been a momentary bright spot, and though she knew it was silly, she felt the house would seem much lonelier without them. Maybe what she needed was a fresh start, and she imagined herself beside a yellow moving truck in a dramatic floral dress, telling Lee she was driving away forever. But she didn't think she had the strength to say she was leaving with or without him. And she knew what he would ask: What are you going to do when you get there?

Paul, who bagged groceries after school, walked in wearing black jeans and purple high tops.

"It's James Dean." Rita pretended to swoon.

"Hold it," Sabine said to him. "What do you know about stolen pumpkins?"

Rita rolled her eyes. Earlier, when she said she was tired of hearing about it, Sabine told her that acting maternal would not make her pregnant any faster.

"You must have me mistaken for some jarhead football player." Paul tied his apron.

"They took my pumpkins and it's not like I live next to the high school. Someone has been casing me out."

"Let me give you some advice." Paul came over to her register. "Don't make a big deal out of this because then they'll really be out to get you. That's how you can control people, by not letting them think they can affect you."

Sabine pictured herself sitting in her pumpkin patch with Rita's ex-husband's loaded twenty-two. "It's always fun until somebody gets hurt."

"There's no telling some people." Paul looked at Rita.

Sabine could never figure out if Paul was really smart or just strange. Either way he didn't fit in here, but she didn't feel sorry for

him. Kids who weren't popular in high school went on to great things after they left. Sabine had been semi-popular, which meant that her life could go either way.

After work, Sabine drove out to see Lee's father, who she felt she'd been neglecting lately. Frank was next to the barn, nailing a piece of fence back together.

"You're working yourself to death," she said. He was too thin and she reminded herself to bring over some of the homemade sweet rolls he liked.

"Nothing else to do." He looked absently at the Goofy watch Sabine and Lee had given him last Christmas.

She stared across the empty field that belonged to someone else now. Frank had taken the loss pretty well, better than Lee. It could have been worse, she thought. There'd been a farmer, five years ago, who'd barricaded himself in the barn to shoot at the sheriff when he came with the foreclosure papers. Two weeks later a psychologist opened a branch office on Main Street, but it was a furniture store now. People passing by admired the blue wingback in the window.

"How's his new job? Tell me the truth. Is he happy?"

"No," Frank said.

She sat down and leaned against the fence. "That's what I was afraid of."

"There's different levels of happiness. He's been spoiled, being his own boss all these years." Frank put down the board and sat down, too.

"I thought you were his boss." She smiled, liking the way he always made time for her.

"Oh, that's right." He stretched his long legs out in front of him, looking at the sharp points of his black cowboy boots. "Maybe Lee will get you two set up farming after all."

"And what do you think?" she asked. The sun felt warm but far away.

"It's never a good time to go into farming. But Lee's not the screw-up I was."

"Don't say that," she said. Frank was a rancher at heart. He belonged in the sandhills where he could ride across miles of bleached pastures and crumbling blond bluffs, only an occasional fence to mar the landscape.

"Lee can be a horse's ass, but he's getting his act together," Frank said. "I like you well enough that I wouldn't tell you that if it weren't true."

At home that night Sabine made hot chocolate and carried her mug around the house in her stocking feet, thinking about what Frank had said. She knew Lee was getting his act together, but what about hers? Sabine didn't want to think about it. Instead she went around looking out the living-room windows, which became blank squares of night reflecting her face and body and the lights from the kitchen behind her. It was too quiet. She padded to the pantry, moved the jars of string beans to reach the bottle of peppermint schnapps, which was next to the Cutty Sark. As their income dwindled, Lee developed a refined taste in alcohol.

Sabine sat down at the kitchen table, pouring schnapps into her mug, and flipped through the women's magazine she'd started buying lately for the colorful horoscope on the last page. Sabine and Lee were both Tauruses and, according to the article, this meant that they were always locking horns. The sex was supposed to be very passionate, and for the most part, it was. Sabine finally tossed the magazine aside, wondering why they didn't just run a headline at the top reading: Can't live with him, can't live without him.

The dog scratched on the screen door, and when she opened it he immediately jumped on the couch, which they'd gotten when her parents moved away. It was mauve, with flowers. Sabine used to yell at Lee when he sat on the sofa in his grimy jeans, but now she did it all the time. She wondered why she'd been so uptight. Then she thought, Maybe it would have been better not to have made a big deal about Marlene. Maybe she should have let Lee go on staring at the television day after day when he was supposed to be looking for work. But she'd only been trying to put their lives back together and the more she thought of it, the more resentful she was that Lee had forced her into that position.

At eight o'clock Lee called.

"I'm frying chicken."

"What's the occasion?" She could hear voices and country music in the background.

"I'm making supper for my dad and his friends. I'll add a plate and you can come over."

"Just fork down another bale," she joked.

"Ho ho," Lee said. "So, what are you drinking?"

"Hot chocolate."

"That's a good one."

"I really am."

"I can tell when you're drinking by the type of jokes you tell," he said. "Who else is there?"

"None of your business." Sabine didn't think he had any right to ask.

"So you're the one boozing it up by yourself now."

"I never told you to stop drinking," she said. "I never did because I knew you would resent me for it. And here you are, resenting me for things I never asked you to do."

"What do you want from me? Is it my sympathy? Okay, you've got it."

"Ha," she said.

"Do you want me to come over?"

"I want you to stop asking me so many questions."

She hung up and took the phone off the hook, but in a few minutes she put it back. The phone rang and she picked it up and held it to her ear.

"Sabine?"

"Who is this?"

"Gary," he said. "Listen, I realized you might not have any dog food, so I put a bag by the barn. Did you see it?"

"Yes," she said, though she hadn't. The dog had been eating leftover Hamburger Helper. "Thanks."

"Rita told me about your pumpkins when I went in for some milk, and I thought I'd tell you that I know where they're keeping their stash."

"Really?" Through the haze of alcohol she felt a plan forming. "Can you take me there?"

As she hung up, she wondered what Lee would do if he found her in the living room drinking up the rest of the bourbon with Gary. She wondered if he would give her the silent treatment or really yell. Finishing the schnapps, she put on Lee's coat and shoved her hair up in a dark farmer's cap, ready to go when Gary drove up a few minutes later.

"Good. You're wearing tennis shoes." She checked Gary's feet as she got into his Chevy 4x4.

"I always do." There were damp comb marks in his hair.

They drove past the feedlot and then the fairgrounds where Lee used to barrel race. To Sabine the sky looked like a huge black sphere encompassing the earth, and the stars were only pinpricks of light leaking in. She thought about explaining this to Gary, but he was concentrating on driving. He turned down a dirt road, which went through a pasture down a small hill, and before he killed the lights, she could see the pumpkins piled at the edge of a deserted corn crib, hidden by some mulberry trees. There were close to a hundred.

"What a trip, huh?" He touched his shoe to a large pumpkin. They stood there for a few minutes. "So what's going on with you and Lee? I hear he's shacked up with his old man."

"We needed time apart." Sabine was getting a lot of mileage out of this phrase.

"It's difficult when there's money problems involved. You need to ask yourself what are your long-term financial goals. Where do you picture yourself ten years from now."

She thought about Lee and his father standing around at the farm sale pretending they didn't care if people were buying up their stuff. Sabine had found the whole thing insulting, which had made her act wooden. Maybe she should have asked her parents for money. But she was afraid that they might give it to her and even more afraid that Lee would have accepted it.

"Do you thing I'm being selfish?" Sabine suddenly asked.

"No one could ever say that about you."

She felt uncomfortable, so she grabbed two pumpkins by the stems and hauled them to the pickup.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea." Gary followed her. "Maybe we should just go to Hellen's. You've had a lot to drink, I can tell." But he put down the tailgate and began helping.

When they had the pickup loaded, they drove to her house. Sabine felt elated and full of adrenaline, as if she'd rescued someone. She opened the window so she could smell the dusty, rotten smell of the cornfields. Some farmers were still going, and she could see the corn pouring into a truck by the light of the combine.

There was a yellow sticky note on the door when they got to the house. "Please call me when you get home." She pulled it off, sticking it to the inside of her coat pocket.

"What's next?" Gary stood beside the pickup.

"They go inside where I can keep an eye on them."

When they finished, there were pumpkins everywhere—in the kitchen, the living room, and the dining area. She'd read a novel once where a man sent a woman ten dozen red roses and there'd been vases all over the house, even in the bathroom.

As Gary left, she was careful to thank him in a cordial way, worried that she'd let things go too far, that somebody was going to get hurt. The look on his face as he walked out the door was one of confusion, and she knew she hadn't handled things very well, which dented the shiny triumph of the evening.

Sabine had a headache and she went into the bathroom to get ready for bed, but pretty soon she heard someone pull into the yard, so she clicked off the light and walked outside to investigate.

"There you are." Lee stood in the yard wearing the Levi's she'd patched. "I was worried."

"Thanks for your concern." The very top of her head hurt.

"I don't like being hung up on. It hurts. You're shutting me out when I'm trying to make things better."

She sagged against a white porch post. "I wasn't the one sitting in Hellen's every afternoon when I was supposedly working at the feedlot."

"I know I've disappointed you."

"You didn't." She sighed. "I'm just tired of you doing things to make me mad."

"I didn't do them on purpose. What can I do to make things better?" He stood in front of his pickup, keeping distance between them.

"Go away," she said, though she didn't want him to and saying it made her want to cry.

He put his hand to his forehead. "You can't just blurt out everything you feel the second you feel it."

"I'm tired of pretending I don't care."

"I know the feeling." His voice seemed very small in the dark. "Why don't you quit Piggly Wiggly for awhile and do whatever you want? Let me pay your bar tab for a change."

"I like my job."

He looked down at his hands, then put them in his pockets like he didn't know what to do. "I'll come back when you're in better shape." As he got in his pickup and drove away, she could tell he was crying, which deflated her somehow, like she was kicking him when he was down. But then she remembered that she was down too.

"Someone's going to find out. This is a small town with very big eyes." Rita was talking about the pumpkins. It was the next afternoon and they were at Piggly Wiggly changing the register tape.

"Where have I heard that before?" Sabine closed the little door on the register and hit the total button.

"I'm worried."

"They were stolen in the first place, so what's the most they can do?"

"I'm not talking about your stupid pumpkins anymore." Rita sighed. "What if I can't get pregnant?"

"I'm sure you can." Sabine worried that she wasn't being a good friend and wondered what she could say to make Rita feel better, but nothing came to mind.

"All those times I hoped I wasn't. And I never was. Maybe I jinxed myself."

"I'm sure you can get pregnant," Sabine said again. "But if you can't, there's things you can do."

"I know. But who wants to do them?"

They grew quiet as Paul walked in the door and over to Sabine, his backpack slung low over one shoulder. "You should have taken my advice, but no, you had to be some kind of desperado."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Sabine started stocking Chicklets.

"I hear that on Halloween night the yolk will be on you, if you know what I mean, Pumpkin Lady." He was wearing the black jeans again.

"Is that supposed to be some kind of threat?"

"I'm just repeating what I heard." He walked to the storeroom.

For the rest of the day, when high school kids came in, she thought they were staring at her. By the end of the day, she started staring back.

After work, Sabine drove to Lincoln like she used to when she needed to escape talk about defaulted loans and chapter eleven. She thought about Rita telling her you need to decide what you want, so as she drove near the university, past softly lit bookstores and gift shops with silver mylar balloons in the windows, Sabine wondered what it would be like to belong here. She'd done well in school because good grades had been something her parents expected. They'd expected college, too, but maybe not. Maybe they hadn't tried to talk her out of marrying Lee because they didn't think she had much potential. All these years she believed she had failed them, but maybe it was the other way around. What do you want, she asked herself, but nothing spectacular came to mind, and she decided that must mean she was fairly content with the life she had. Turning her car towards home, Sabine noticed the city had strung white lights in the elms growing up from the sidewalk and she thought it would be sad and picturesque to sit in the window of one of the bars while college kids in earthy wool sweaters walked by.

When Sabine got to the house, it was past ten. There were lights on and Lee was in the kitchen.

"Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" She'd forgotten what it was like to come home to someone.

"Pancakes." He was using wooden tongs to turn them over and she handed him a spatula. "I came over to talk and I thought you might be hungry. And I wanted to show you I was sorry for last night. You needed me to be understanding and I acted superior."

For a moment she wished he'd stop trying so hard, though she remembered all those months when he hadn't been trying hard enough.

"What are you putting in them?" There was something on the cutting board.

"Slivered almonds. A touch of honey and cinnamon."

"I didn't realize you were such a gourmet." She smiled.

"And I didn't realize you were such a dog lover." Lee looked concerned, as if he'd been there when she was bitten all those years ago.

"Gary lent him to me so I wouldn't be lonely."

"I'm glad you have a friend," Lee said, and she wasn't sure whether he was talking about Gary or the dog.

"He'll eat us out of house and home." Sabine went to the refrigerator and got out the orange juice.

"It's not much of a home anyway. It's more like an orphanage for wayward pumpkins." Lee glanced around. "What are you going to do with them all?" But Sabine was suddenly tired of talking about pumpkins. It was time to move on.

"This is nice. You in the kitchen," she said.

"I came over because I have some news." He flipped over another pancake. "There's an eighty up for sale to the north and I've talked to the bank and it looks like we can swing it. Of course most of Dad's equipment is gone, but it sounds like good old Daryl might be willing to help me out. I think he likes me. He thinks of me as the son he never wanted."

"Ho ho," she said.

He stacked pancakes on a plate. "It's not much to start out with so I'd still have to work for Daryl, but it's something."

"Then we'd stay here." Sabine looked at the cracking ceiling, the old appliances, the worn gold carpeting and drapes. In the five years they'd lived there, she'd never considered this house as permanent, yet it had never been temporary either.

"If you want." He was drawing a smiley face on her pancakes with the syrup.

"Maybe you can move back in soon."

"Maybe," he said, and she wasn't sure if he was waiting for an invitation from her or permission from himself. He came over and put

his hands on her shoulders. "I didn't know you were so unhappy at Piggly Wiggly."

"There are different levels of happiness."

His eyes softened. "I think this is meant to be but I don't want to rush you. I don't want you to feel like you're being tricked into staying with me."

"Isn't that what love is anyway?" she asked. "Some kind of trick?"

"No," Lee said.

After Lee left, Sabine sat down on the porch with the dog, who tried to wriggle onto her lap. "I guess it was nice while it lasted." She put her face in the fur by his neck before standing up and calling him over to the pickup. Once inside, they drove to Gary's.

"I think your dog misses you." She looked at the dog sitting in the car and Gary did too. "I think he wants to live with you again."

"But you can keep him. He suits you." Gary's voice was tender.

"Actually—" Sabine looked down and then up again, realizing this might be harder on Gary than she thought. "Things are changing and I just don't think I need him anymore."

"Lee's moving back," Gary said.

"Yes."

"That's an interesting new development." He turned towards the door. "Thanks for letting me make an ass out of myself."

"No one made an ass out of himself." She awkwardly opened the car door and the dog jumped out and went up the front steps to Gary. "I'm sorry if I led you on."

"I led myself on."

"You don't believe that." She tried to meet his eyes, but it was too dark for her to tell how deeply he'd been hurt, or if he was hurt at all.

"It doesn't really matter, does it?" He walked into the house, closing the screen door. "You lead an interesting life."

Sabine stood there, thinking of something to say, but she knew that would only make things worse. She knew that he was right and that she had used him in some way, and for that she didn't deserve to be forgiven. She wished she could give Gary something that would make him happy, but then she wondered if she'd ever really made anyone very happy.

When she got home, she remembered that tomorrow was Halloween. She went to the pantry and got a stack of newspapers and laid them on the porch, along with a couple of knives and a large spoon. She brought out the pumpkins and began cutting and carving, spooning

the pale, stringy meat in a pile beside her. The cats gathered to watch her work and chew on the autumn-slow bugs that crawled towards the warmth of the house. Sabine didn't stop until she had a jack-o-lantern for each window and six or seven more for the porch. She tried to make them as ghoulish as possible, but when she stood back, their faces just seemed cheerful.

Later, as she rummaged in the pantry for votive candles, she thought about what the house would look like tomorrow night when the high school kids came to pelt her with their eggs, how the glowing pumpkins would stand as silent witnesses, dauntless, proof that someone was home.

ALFRED SCHWAID

Somewhere There's Music

A saxophone hangs around your neck like a gorget. As far as I know there is no other musical instrument that can be described that way. Other gorgets are made of metal or porcupine quills. When my brother was young he used to sleep out on the fire escape on hot nights. One night he peed down onto someone's head.

A woman walked up to the bandstand, leveled a gun at his breast, and fired twice. They were recording the date, and the shots got tagged onto his solo.

A poster in the subway explained that the last buffalo nickel was coined in 1938: it carried no other information.

He used to practice, too, on the fire escape when it was hot. One day a woman knocked on our door and my mother thought she had come to complain about his playing too loud. "Oh, no," the woman said, "tell him not to stop. He plays so pretty."

I used to take the subway to hear him play in places like Birdland, The Half Note and Village Vanguard. He had by that time become something other than my brother. The horn hanging from his neck like brass-colored flesh. He was immobile until he touched it. At one time I saved buffalo nickels but it's been years since I've seen any.

He once introduced me to Topper Collins, his piano player at the time, who was blind, and after the set I heard Topper ask him, "Where's your brother?"

Free jazz was in the air but my brother had heard it long ago. It just took some time before the others caught up with him. "Funny . . . the horn sticks to my fingers. I can't shake it loose." I saw the movie and read the book but can't remember if Dorothy Baker wrote those lines in *Young Man With a Horn* or not.

Some of the early free jazz players were laughed off the stand. I once saw a medal with Thomas Jefferson's image on it that was meant to be worn around the neck. I was not the first one to him when he fell. In those days, on the fire escape, he was still improvising on the changes of "Cherokee."

The story was that his horn got filled up with blood. He was eating a Chinese apple and spitting the pits down onto the street. There was pandemonium after the shots. They laid him out on a long white table, the horn still around his neck. Reggie, his drummer, and I fell into each other's arms. The woman sat down on the floor and nobody dared go near her. That day I had been to the Museum of Natural History to see the Haida war canoe. I had been going there for years to see it.

Monk's principal contribution, he had told me, was to improvise on the melody: this broke you loose from the chords. In those days jazz and drugs were synonymous, and one night, while he was asleep, I saw my mother examine him arms. When I saw him on the stand, he reminded me of those figures in the canoe.

There is only one picture of us together, a posed studio picture taken on the day of my graduation from grammar school. In it, I am wearing a white carnation. No one knew where his talent came from. He had perfect pitch and time. No one else in our family, as far back as anyone could remember, had ever played a musical instrument.

There was a massive intentness about those figures, because they were not actually alive. I loved the music as much as he did but could never learn to play it. The woman murmured that she loved him. The tape was still going, and I can distinctly hear her say that.

Those canoemen are there yet but I always avoid them. Everyone has had the fantasy, I suppose, of being locked inside a museum at night and seeing things come alive. They gave me his horn and I still have it. Reggie, at first, suggested that it be buried with him, but Topper Collins said no, that you don't bury something like that, that I should have it. It was a Selmer Mark VI tenor. In my hands, of course, it was inert, but that didn't make it any less vital. I used to be fascinated by the bird skins in glass cases at the museum. You could see white cotton where their eyes had been. My brother's were always bloodshot from the night life.

She wrote my mother a letter that has never been opened. Her voice is the most incisive thing, after his playing, on the tape.

I used to enjoy the painted backdrops to the animal dioramas at the museum; only the glass kept you from touching and verifying that they were not real. The horn hung around his neck like an amulet. If he had thought in those terms he would have said it had a spirit.

She had not yet been born when he peed down from the fire escape. Jazz is the fullest working-out yet of the art of digression. As many times as I have seen the Haida canoe, I could not describe it to you in accurate detail. A digression of air. I have hundreds of pictures of him playing, all of which I took myself.

I rearrange them each time I look at them. You could arrange a tableau of musicians in a museum, a scene from Birdland, say. One of the Haida wore a headdress representing the raven. My mother snatched him from the fire escape in a hurry and pulled him inside. I wasn't born yet either.

The police came, and then they scrubbed up his blood with steaming water. She was moaning when they touched her. I had never seen her before. Topper Collins had no brother of his own. The canoe and everything in it are authentic; the men are not, but they are real in themselves. He hugged me when my brother brought me to him.

They never moved, although their progress was relentless. I remember when he first started to play the instrument. He began at an older age than he should have. He had never thought about music before and then all of a sudden it became urgent, as if something had descended upon him from out of nowhere. But once he began, he became an icon.

The woman never knew who I was. There was once a man who bought up entire Native American villages, and everything he bought is now in a museum, although most of it is in storage and not on display. During his early forays into free jazz, my brother could not understand why painters were lauded for producing innovative work while jazz musicians were rejected for it.

The serial number on his horn was 27666. His original horn was a Conn that he brought home in a black case with purple lining that had something funereal about it to me. "Blow your horn," Reggie exhorted him sometimes during his solos. They were playing "How High the Moon."

The woman never heard a note. She didn't know I was there, didn't know I was his brother. I asked my mother if I could read her letter but she refused. The thought that I can read it when she's dead should seem odd to me but it doesn't. I have sometimes imagined its contents but that wouldn't be the same thing.

There were people in the smoky darkness, like motions rather than figures, that she brushed by while approaching the bandstand. She saw only him as immobile. I was intent on his fingers touching the mother-of-pearl keys. The tape reveals a clink when a bullet grazed

the bell of his horn. She stepped out as if she had been in the wall, and fired.

No one ran. We all felt safe. She was finished. You can get as close to that Haida canoe as you want to. You can touch it. Unless you've seen a boat like that in the water, you cannot imagine it is lost. I sent her some things in prison. In the hope that she would answer I wrote her a letter. I asked her who she was. In the meantime I played my brother's recordings over and over again.

I heard nothing from her. The recordings pinpointed his exact whereabouts at a particular time. That year he won the Downbeat poll for tenor saxophone, but he was already dead. She must have been startled at first to see his name on a letter. I began it by telling her I was his brother. I imagined the canoe gliding over the killer whale, and the raven flying before it.

I started going to the museum the year he began to study the saxophone. The canoe and everything in it were immured in silence. I never told him about it. The keys were like a string of moons that he touched. One of the things I sent her was the picture of the two of us together.

I told her how much I loved the music but was never able to play it, that my mother had her letter and that I had never seen it, that I remember him practicing the same note over and over again.

My parents resisted when he first told them he wanted to learn to play, but his course was inevitable and they relented. Later on my mother began to believe she could have stopped him, and if she had that he would be alive. She believed it even after I explained to her that there was no connection. The canoe was from the northwest coast. Whoever carved it could not have imagined that I would ever see it.

He was seventeen years old and had only been playing two years when he got his first job, with Jack Teagarden, who was taking a band on the road. My mother was away and my father allowed him to go. By the time she came home, he was halfway across the country.

I took Topper Collins to the museum because I wanted to show him the canoe even though he couldn't actually see it.

"Did you know this woman?" I once asked him.

"She was around sometimes."

"She says on the tape that she loved him."

"Well, she's in Sing Sing now, and he's gone. If she did or she didn't, doesn't matter."

He touched the canoe with his fingertips, then his palms, and I told him it was filled with people. They had been traveling since before any of us were born, I reasoned.

"The first time we played together it was 'How High the Moon,' and he told me to forget the changes and improvise on the melody, and not necessarily in the same time as the drummer," Topper told me.

He could tell by touch that the canoe was a perfect instrument for movement even though it was standing still. I told him that the people in it were immobile and silent, and blind, too. They had no idea of our presence. They were engaged in a concerted effort to row a boat that would never move.

Once my brother started to study the tenor, he had no eyes for anything else. That woman couldn't know, of course, and so she ended something whose beginning had eluded her, and immured herself.

There is a hall in the museum where birds are hung from the ceiling, as if in flight.

"Everyone says that New York ain't the same without him."

He had honed his sound to a dry purity, an incisiveness that bore into a tune as if it were a geode, cracked it and scattered crystals.

"He was sort of blind, too," Topper said. "He was too wrapped up in the music, to where he didn't always know he was with people."

Once a drummer who thought he was too exacting and domineering, and was drunk, pulled a gun on him during a rehearsal. "OK, play it your way then," he told him. It was the only time he ever wavered in his demands, but the guy was satisfied and put the gun away. The woman, though, had come at him from a different level, from an area that had nothing to do with music, that he had probably just about forgotten about.

Robert Burton in his *The Anatomy of Melancholy* teaches us many strange things, but never why he thinks it strange that a man should believe himself dead.

I asked my mother why she didn't just destroy the letter if she didn't want to open it, and she said something to the effect that even though she would never read it, it contained the only justification of his death anyone would ever attempt. Once in a while when he played he would turn his back to the audience.

At his first record session he was so nervous he couldn't play. People who were his idols were there. You walked up to the canoe as if it were something that had to be gotten around, an obstruction in an unlikely place, something so out of place that you had to ignore it, until you realized it was there to be looked at.

He once came close to suggesting while talking to Topper that being blind would have allowed him to concentrate more on the music. He imagined, Topper told me, that he could become music. He did, in a sense; all that was left of him were his recordings.

One of the things I wanted to ask the woman was what she thought of his music. In its own place, where it belonged, that canoe would ride at us, its prow high out of the water, the paddles plunging in unison; Topper said he could hear them singing.

"Why don't you just play, yourself," he told me.

Robert Burton tells us that one cure for a woman who believed she had a snake in her stomach was to show her a snake in her chamber pot.

Today I picked up his horn and blew a few choruses of "How High the Moon." My breath flowed and my fingers touched the keys and everything moved.

CAROL TURNER

Whispers

Brian runs down the corridor. Bright, washed-out scenes flash by—an old man as pale as his sheets, a bearded guy with his leg in a sling, a bandaged face angled up at a blaring game show on TV. Room 9A. He stops in the doorway. The room is dim. Below the window on the far wall, his mother's bed. She is curled into an "S" under the hospital sheet, facing the wall as though she had suddenly learned how to pout. Humming, a nurse sits close, on a chair pulled up to the bed. He watches the nurse's long, slim back, the sharp outline of her spine as she leans forward. She is brushing his mother's hair. The hair is white, long, drifting across the pillow with the motion of the brush. The nurse leans in close, and her white uniform glows in the twilight from the window, as eerie and glowing as the green lines on the monitor. She is whispering.

Brian waits in the doorway, watching the nurse instead of his mother. The curve of her back is familiar, the quiet angle of her shoulders. She looks tender, the way his mother was tender when he was a boy (falling asleep with no more on his mind than the graceful curve of a baseball as it sails through the air).

"Mr. Baker?" A hand on his arm. As he turns, he feels the nurse turning too.

"Yes," he says.

A doctor in green. Aging, red-eyed, pale. He pulls Brian into the bright hall. Briefly, he rubs his temples, frowns. Brian watches the man's mouth. "What's wrong with her?" he says.

"She's 86," the doctor says. "It's old age."

"She's going to be okay, isn't she?" Brian says. Something deep inside his body, his bones coming loose from sockets.

"She could wake up and go home tomorrow, but you should try to be ready."

Brian gazes into the doctor's eyes. They are as blue and faded as the number 7 on Brian's old baseball jersey. The man has lucky eyes. Brian sees him umpiring vast feasts on holidays, with dozens of children and grandchildren and nephews and nieces, all quiet and solemn while the venerated doctor-grandpa makes a sentimental glass-of-champagne speech. He'll dish out some good common sense with the turkey and ham; later, he'll go to bed counting the worthy lives he has saved.

The nurse has appeared in the doorway. She folds her arms. "Here he is," the nurse says.

"Here she is," Brian says.

The doctor turns. "You know each other?"

She nods.

"It's you," Brian says.

"It's me."

"You're a nurse."

She looks at the doctor. She looks thin; she has been crying. "I married him once," she says to the doctor. "I was a kept woman then. I think it was twenty years ago, back when I was prettier."

The old man chuckles and Sharon chuckles too. Brian sees that she is toying with the doctor. She is a step ahead of him. At the end of their marriage, she was always a step ahead of Brian. She and his mother had secrets; now she is with his mother ahead of him. Whispering.

Abruptly, the chuckling stops, as though they both remember the sick woman in the room beyond. Sharon and Brian stare at each other. "Marge may die," she says.

"She'll be fine," Brian says.

She puts out her pale arms. Back then, they were brown from long afternoons in the stands, strong from hearty clapping. They hug. She feels smaller, thinner than he remembers. And cooler. She is a nurse now, has her own life. No need for Brian, or his baseball career, or his increasingly careless attempts to make time for her in his busy schedule. Now, Brian's life is not so busy.

The doctor moves off into the bright yellow of the hallway, turns the corner without looking back.

Brian pulls a tuft of hair away from her cheek, stroking it back behind her ear. She doesn't stop him. "She still talks about you. Annoyed the hell out of my next two wives." He holds her at arm's length, checking to see if she liked the joke. Her eyes, familiar but

foreign, hazel, a little red now, a lot older. Once, those eyes looked at him with love, but he lost her when he was 28, a thrill pounding at him every moment of his life (the crowds and parties, the fans, the flattering letters and phone calls). He was too busy for love, and so she found something else.

They are at his mother's bedside now, standing over her with their arms around each other. Marge's hair is shining, but Brian turns his eyes from her face. He hears the *thwap* of the ball against his glove, smells the turned-up grass, feels the concentration of the players. After the game, his mother's hand rests lightly on his shoulder as she leads him out to the parking lot. She watches him leave the high-school ball park with his friends to drink beer; and later, at the big stadiums, her watching face melts into the crowd.

"Has she been awake at all?" he says.

Sharon shakes her head. "You better make some decisions," she says.

"About what?"

"Marge wouldn't want to be kept alive by a machine."

"Machine?" His mother would go on forever.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Brian? Someone to help you?"

He sinks into the chair. He runs his finger along the sheet, tracing the outline of his mother's arm, until he comes upon her hand. "I've pretty much run anyone who cared out of my life," he says. "Except her."

"You never tracked down your father?"

"I never tried."

She touches his hair. (He'll drift off to sleep, her fingernails moving across his scalp; he'll feel cool air, hear her breath.) "Come on," she says, suddenly brisk. "I need some caffeine."

The cafeteria smells of burnt coffee. Two men in green are having a pointed discussion in a corner booth, so they take their coffee to a table at the opposite end. The men argue steadily, unintelligibly except for an occasional rapid phrase, ". . . he *won't* do that . . .," ". . . you're being *paranoid* . . .," ". . . lose my *job* . . . ." Their voices are hard like rock candy.

Sharon smiles at him kindly, a "nursy" smile she didn't have before.

"Don't look at me like that," he says.

"Like what?" she says.

"Pity. Don't give me that smile."

"Not pity," she says. "Just sad."

"Sad for Mom?" He knows his voice sounds young, childish suddenly.

"Sad for us, actually. It was good for awhile, wasn't it?"

Her hands lie on the table and he resists the temptation to reach. Elegant hands . . . . *That Sharon has elegant hands*, Marge had said. Marge washed tomatoes from her garden for Brian to take to Sharon. "Bring her over for supper sometime," she said.

"You broke my heart," Brian says.

She picks up her spoon and stirs sugar into her coffee. "I won't even answer that, it's such a crock. Tell me about your other wives. How many were there?"

He ignores her tone. "Two."

"Tell me about them."

He leans back, folding his arms. "Okay, ready?"

She dings the spoon against her cup.

"Francis, age 19. She sent me fan mail, including a charming snapshot. Very cute, lots of dark curls and eyelashes. She wrote a love letter, all about how much she adored me and my great pitch. When I was in Chicago, I called her, silly me. She got pregnant, so I did the right thing. Then she had a miscarriage, for which I was not present. Her father's lawyer annulled the marriage and they threatened to sue me for abandonment."

She sips. "How grown up."

"Don't be nasty; my mother's sick."

"Still mad at your mother?"

"I had forgotten about it until I saw you whispering to her today. What were you saying?"

"Nothing, Brian. What do you do now?"

"I have a normal job like everyone else."

"Where?"

"High school coach."

"Interesting turn of events. Do you like it?"

"It's all right. Some of the kids work really hard. They're fans. Mom still says I could have coached professional."

She puts down her coffee and her hands disappear under the table. "You look good, Brian. Now tell me about the third wife. Madeleine, wasn't it?"

"How did you know her name?"

"I know a lot more than you think."

"From the newspapers?"

"Marge didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"We stayed in touch."

"She may have said so; I don't remember." She hadn't. He feels a familiar rush of betrayal. Marge and Sharon loved each other, maybe even more than they loved Brian. "What are you grinning at?" he says.

"It still bothers you, doesn't it?"

"What, that you and my mother plotted against me?"

"No plots, Brian. We were comrade-victims. What was that you used to say all the time? 'Never complain, explain, or apologize?'"

"It's a joke."

"It's no joke," she says. "That's exactly how you were."

"Oh, but I've changed, Sharon, honest. I'm real in touch with my feelings now. In fact, I practically *ooze* feelings, can't you tell?"

"You're oozing something."

They stare at each other again. "Oozing, something, huh?" he says.

"Yeah."

"What would you do if I kissed you?"

"Knock it off, Brian, we're old enemies now."

"That's a harsh word."

"You never grew up, did you?"

"What would you do if I kissed you?"

"Nothing. Tell me about Madeleine."

"Nothing? Does that mean you'd let me, or does it mean you wouldn't kiss me back?"

"I wouldn't kiss you back."

"Not even with my mother dying upstairs?"

"Save your kisses for her."

His hand creeps across the table, but she pushes it away.

"Tell me about Madeleine," she says.

"What terrible stories did my mother tell you?"

"Since when did Marge tell terrible stories about you?"

"What's the big deal about Madeleine?"

"I heard some things—not from Marge."

"Everything you heard is probably true."

"Tell me."

"If you've already heard, why do I need to tell you?"

"I guess I'll tell you; I had coffee with her."

"With who?"

"With Madeleine." Brian sits back. Sharon says, "Marge set it up. She thought I could help Madeleine cope."

"Cope?"

"Why'd you hit her, Brian? She was so . . . small."

"About a hundred pounds."

"I was surprised to hear about it," Sharon says.

"She made guerrilla attacks. Everything's fine, then whee! Screech time."

"I'm sure she had her reasons."

"She never told me what they were."

"Well, she wouldn't look me in the eye. She must have been very desperate to come and meet me like that, though I'm sure I didn't help her at all."

"What's the matter," Brian says. "Can't stand to hear anything bad about me?"

"I'll be back a little later," Sharon says. "Will you be all right?"

Brian sits in the chair by his mother's bed. Briefly, he feels Sharon's hand on his shoulder, feels her warmth through his cotton shirt. Then she is gone.

He leans over his mother so he can see her face. Her lips are purple and she is wheezing.

"Mom, wake up." Marge's face looks calm and pale. He remembers how tan she used to get every summer, how her face glowed in those late afternoons of his boyhood, when she brought out the big pitcher of iced tea and a plate of frosted lemon cookies. He remembers her dark, concerned face that weekend at the cabin up at Lake Isabel, the weekend that was meant to save his marriage to Sharon. But it was Marge and Sharon talking in low voices, Brian off by himself, looking at the water. He was thinking about the party at Enrico's he was missing that night. It wasn't long before he figured out what the weekend was supposed to be about. That they had met beforehand, made plans. That they had probably dug through the self-improvement section of a bookstore to find an appropriate text. *Men Who Don't Know How to Love Their Wives*. But it didn't help. They sat at the card table outside under a big oak tree and ate Sharon's fried chicken and Marge's potato salad and then "Brian's favorite" cherry pie. And then the questions. The lake was like glass, with microscopic white bugs hovering over the surface. Brian was thinking how he'd like to go out in the rowboat, but Sharon and Marge wanted to know what was wrong with him. He was turning into a creep, they said. That was Marge's word, *creep*. It was the only time she ever reproached him.

Sharon had told Marge how she spent her days waiting, how he didn't call any more when he was out of town, how he had slept with

other women on the road. Marge sat at the card table (beyond her, the lake, quiet) and asked her son if he wanted to save his marriage. She said, "This is your wife, Brian, and you are about to lose her. Is that what you want?"

He turned to Sharon, waving mosquitoes away from his face. He knew how irritated he looked. "Did you tell mom about your boyfriend?"

He felt a sharp glow as Marge switched her gaze to Sharon.

"I needed to feel like a human being again," Sharon said. Brian realized that Sharon was worried about hurting his mother, not him. "This man cares about me."

Marge looked up at the sky, across the lake, then back at Sharon. "You have to give him up, Sharon," she said.

Brian watched, no longer part of the conversation.

Sharon waited for a long time. She pressed ridges into her styrofoam cup with a fingernail. "Your son doesn't love me anymore," she said finally.

When Sharon wakes him up, Marge hasn't moved at all. For one terrible moment, he can't remember the color of his mother's eyes.

Sharon puts a hand on his arm and pulls him out of the chair.

Her shift is over and she takes him outside to walk. There is a city park across the road from the hospital, with a lake. It is nearly dawn.

"Is this park safe?" he says, his voice hoarse.

"If anything happens, you'll protect me."

He nods. "Typical."

"Remember that time in the cemetery, when those punks were looking for someone?"

"Yeah, Bartles! 'Hey, you dudes know Bartles?'"

"And you said, 'Who the fuck is Bartles?' These guys are coming at us with their knives and you're going, 'Who the fuck is Bartles?'"

"They were just punks."

"I was scared to death," she says.

"I noticed. You jumped behind me."

"God, how embarrassing; what a coward."

"I fell in love with you anyway."

"And I fell in love with you."

"I guess I didn't quite turn out so heroic, did I?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I did love you."

She has shadows under her eyes. They stop walking and look out over the water. He puts his arm around her, feels her hand creeping around his waist (it's thicker now, softer). He pulls her close. She yields. Her breasts are soft, pressing against him; he tightens his arms around her and kisses her, gently at first, then fiercely as she kisses back. (Up at a waterfall somewhere, they pulled each others' clothes off in the moonlight and made love for the first time.)

Before the kiss is finished, she pushes away and puts her hands in the pockets of her white jacket. Her hair still has the reddish tint, showing now in the dawn light. He sees a quiet gray too, here and there. "That's not for us anymore, Brian," she says.

"I know," he says. "I just had to see."

She looks toward the hospital building. "Will you call me if there's any change?"

"I will."

He watches her cross the road and disappear into a yawning parking garage on the bottom floor of the hospital. He can still taste her. He runs after her, runs into the garage. "Sharon!" His voice is loud, echoing. He hears the clunk of a door, the squeal of tires somewhere. "Sharon!"

"What." He wheels around. She stands behind him, her hand buried in her purse.

"What were you whispering to her?"

She looks puzzled for a moment; then she pulls a key ring from her purse. "I was telling her some jokes, Brian. She always liked a good joke."

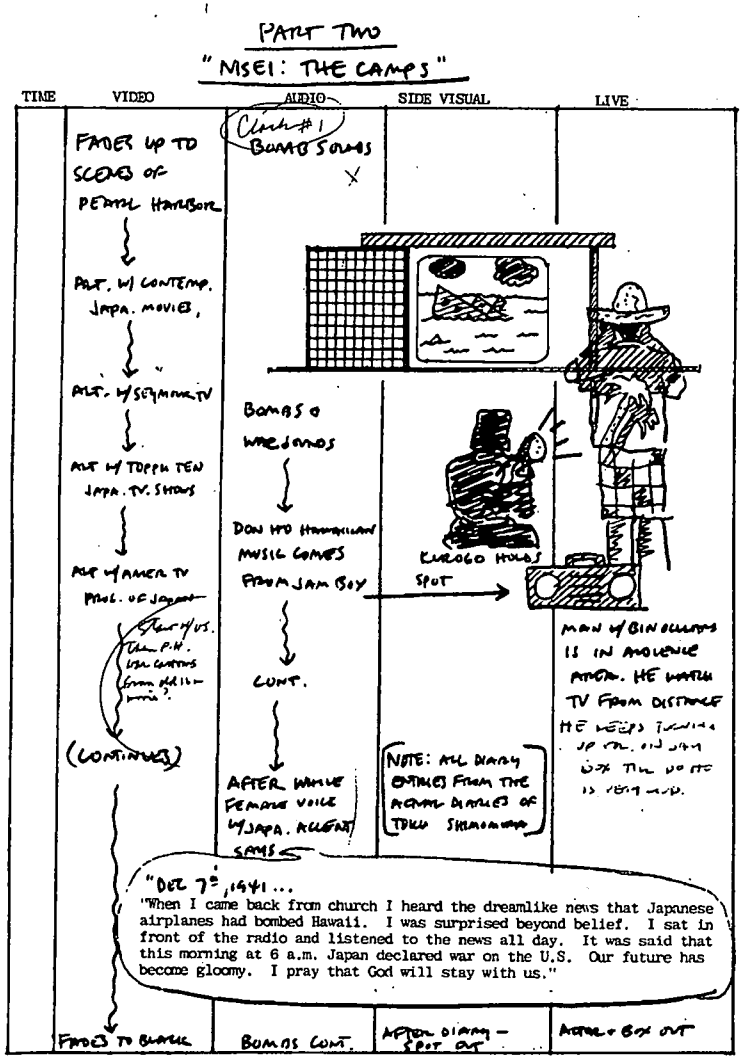
When he gets back, a new doctor and nurse are in the room. They are disconnecting the machines. Marge's face is covered.

This doctor is young and female and just as tired-looking as the old man. Her hands are deep in the pockets of her white hospital coat. "She died at 7:01 A.M.," she says. "Peacefully."

They leave so he can be alone with her. He sits by the bed, touches her hand (still warm, still Marge). "Mom," he whispers.

You're a good boy, Brian.

He'll keep her voice with him, wrapped around his memories of ballgames and supper parties and coast-to-coast flights. And his love for her feels like a baseball sailing through the air, high over the water, above the grass.



FICTION RETROSPECTIVE:
The First 30 Years

G. JANICKE

Silent Children

The landscape, a shimmering blur of hills and honeycolored prairies, swept past us; the gravel road snarled and popped beneath the racing slash of auto tires. I sat up front, between my father who was driving and grandmother, who sat holding a stale graham cracker in her hand. The wind through the open window blew frizzy gray hairs across her face, but the old woman didn't seem to care. She slept, head tilted back.

Joanie was in the middle seat quietly counting telephone poles as they flashed by, watching the strands of cable as they slid past in long concave arcs, her voice marking time to the growling cloud of gravel dust. She was angry with Russell for awakening her at four in the morning. He had pushed the girl through the house, supporting her thin, dazed body by the arms, and carried her outside and into the station wagon where Joanie had been sleeping stretched out across the seat until the car jerked to avoid an accident. Since then she had been doing spiteful things, singing in grandmother's ears, asking Russell how many miles we had to go to the airport. Sometimes she moaned as if kicked in the stomach.

Chubbs sat peacefully, or was more likely resigned to being trapped in a cardboard box in the back seat. He could barely raise his head up over the edge to see out. No one really knew what went on in his mind: Chubbs was mute. There was no difference between the child hurting with pain or laughing—his eyes looked big and watery green, his mouth would open wide but emit only a weak groan. Russell had put him in a box to keep my brother from crawling around and injuring himself.

At home the child had once sat unnoticed in a cupboard under the kitchen sink for hours until Joanie heard strange sounds like an

injured puppy and found him. Russell picked him up and shook Chubbs, to drive some sense into him, to make the boy cry. Father cursed and shouted, said he hated the baby. I did, too. I wanted Chubbs to scream, make some kind of noise, learn how to help himself. Joanie said it was like owning a dog—all he did was eat and make a mess. Once, I was tempted to put a lit match to his fingers and see what would happen—but Chubbs, when he wasn't asleep or involved with his toes or a bag of cat's eye marbles, looked sad: his flat forehead pinched and wrinkled, mouth slightly opened and his tongue resting on the lower lip, chin shiny with drool, eyes squinting, as if afraid that I only wanted to hurt him. Several times I ran tests: threw rubber balls at Chubbs, popped paper bags, dragged him across the front room by his legs, but either he smiled in an ugly, twisted way or gave that pathetic look. Joanie tried a more sane approach with picture books and crayons; she used the glass beads of a broken necklace for counting, but Chubbs would fall on his back, spit, or stare at his feet.

Particles of dust came floating through the car window and stung my eyes. Joanie pushed hair from her face and talked at Russell.

"The baby's smothering in that box."

"No, he's safe back there."

"Chuckie, it's bad for him."

"He'll be all right," I agreed.

Russell was not patient. When Ruth, our mother, was pregnant with Chubbs, her mother had moved in to help the daughter care for us, feed us. Ruth died in childbirth after a horrible, pained pregnancy. The family held together well, we didn't know of any dangers and were told Ruth was on vacation and were too excited about the new baby. Russell announced at supper one night that mother was dead, some foolish euphemism that she had gone on a long holiday. I cried because grandmother did, but the sad feeling, as if I had seen Chubbs fall from a table or Joanie with a deep cut in her leg, was confined to the brief, frail shell of my attention and memory. Joanie kept asking when mother would return, but Russell was silent; grandmother looked down at her plate and mumbled something about the "mother of God"; the baby sat and smeared the orange pulp of crushed carrots on his face.

After a few days we recovered, or forgot about Ruth: it was difficult to remember someone who was away at a factory all day, whose hazy appearance at night before sleep effected slight friendships, nothing else. Not that we were drawn to grandmother, or Russell. Father's business in town, industrial light fixtures, had gone under once; his

time was enmeshed with doubting creditors and legal documents to remortgage the house. His crude talent for business, the fragmented knowledge of handling money, the urgings fostered by his successful brothers or by an insistent spark of wasted hope within him drove Russell to fail and muddle through consecutive failures. But somehow we always ate well; had nice clothes; slept in comfortable rooms. Russell's weak attempts at management were as remote from us as Ruth's "vacation": our lives were confined to the glowing ball of Salda Creek, the town surrounding our young energies. The mysteries of an old, abandoned Baptist church: one small room of dust-covered pews, sheets of music scattered about as if the people had suddenly raced outside, the rotted, useless piano. A wet smell of decaying wood. We explored the school for runaway girls and boys, peeked through dirt-crusted windows in curious pursuit of the rumors that nuns tortured the children in the basement—we saw filmy gray spider webs that trapped the morning sunlight, but nothing else.

Ran experiments on Chubbs: pulling his tongue, moving his lips with our fingers.

Or we simply watched the woman next door lie in the hot sun and suck on peaches.

Grandmother called out "Ave Maria" as we sped past the state hospital, a jumbled array of red brick buildings and gray barracks, out in the woods and surrounded with barbed wire, where old women and men wandered aimlessly, ghostlike.

"Amen," Joanie concluded with a smile. "You're not going there, for sure!"

Chubbs's tiny fist banged at the cardboard. I turned to look, but nothing seemed wrong.

It wasn't until grandmother got sick that the family had started to come apart. While Ruth was alive, grandmother had been quietly earnest about tending to our needs; acted the same toward us as chairs, tables, the desk; we were parts of the house—when Joanie skinned her knee, the woman inspected the cut, washed it, bandaged the wound, but never cheered her up or offered a word of caution. When Ruth died, grandmother's numb disposition failed in an angry, bitter light, her measured movements now impassioned gestures of the arms, hands. If any of us remotely blocked her passage into another room, she would pinch our arms, slap at our heads. She especially hated Chubbs: his tiny body, the quiet little face must have frightened her—he had killed her daughter, she must have thought that. When Joanie and I approached Russell about her, he responded in a vacant, mysterious

way, saying grandmother's crippled old mind, what was left of it, had been prepared to die—but a sudden pain of heart, the loss of her own daughter, had spoken to her like the sharp cut of a knife. Father took Joanie on his lap for a moment, the only moment I could ever recall, looked at the girl, then pushed her aside.

The old woman's condition fell in rapid stages: the animate fight she waged against terrifying secrets only she understood wore her down. On Saturday, the day of her horrible attack, she spoke to us, to me, frightening words that made me want to strike her harder than anything I had imagined for Chubbs. "None of you, no good. You should die." Her ugly face stared at me, she reached to hold my arm. I ran off.

The car moved slowly along the steep ridge of a hill. Father looked tense, as if afraid we would slip off into the trees, his fingers tight against the steering wheel. Joanie tugged at his collar.

"When do we get to California?"

"Florida."

"It's Hollywood, California. Right? Not Hollywood, Florida. Who ever heard of that?" She was not to be outsmarted.

Grandmother wanted to stop, get out: one hand held onto the door handle, the other snapped at rosary beads like a sparrow pecking at seed. While we curved up to level ground she continued to mumble. The woman didn't know we were safe. I almost told her so. But she frightened me.

Our mother had not died—we saw no pained look on her face, no wrinkles like tiny scars—she had merely disappeared from sight, the blink of a dream. But that one Saturday when grandmother had cried out to us in the thick sweep of a hot August night and whimpered until she fell unconscious, that horrid old voice broke the fragile bonds within our family. Joanie and I hid under the sheets, thinking an alley cat had snagged its leg in a fence and was crazy with pain, or that someone had broken into the house. Chubbs slept. I looked out from the covers to see a yellow slit of light appear along the bottom edge of the door; heard the rattle of feet, squeaking of floorboards. My father calling out "Jesus, Jesus Christ." Joanie thought that he might be praying aloud with the old lady. Chubbs suddenly rolled off his floor mattress, crawled to the door, and through the crack of an opening looked out into the hallway brightness—he also had heard the alley cat. I pushed him back into bed, trapped him in a tangle of sheets, and crawled out of the room, down the corridor, to grandmother's room. I saw only her face in the swirls and folds of bedsheets and pink blanket. Father was moving about from dresser to bed, and back. Grandmother's

head was propped gently on a pillow stripped of its case, and she looked calm, too calm—after a night's sleep and silent battles Joanie and I would find ourselves contorted and sprawled across the bed; Chubbs would be lying with one leg bent, another straight, an arm over his face. But never flat on our backs, heads cocked in a position like cold stone. Her neck appeared from a white curl of cloth; the chin, rough and undefined in sagging folds of gray flesh; mouth parted slightly; her long beak of a nose pointed up in the air, as if trying to inhale deeply; eyes shut and lost in hundreds of wrinkles; the forehead shiny with sweat. As if she had been frozen in the middle of a prayer to the Blessed Virgin. But then, in a nervous twitch or release of a muscle, the head suddenly turned toward me. And in the strange, ugly shadows that blended with the childish fears of night and dark illusion of nightmares, I could have believed that her head was a creature, disjointed from the body, which fell to the floor and followed me back through the long corridors to my room.

The next day we had acted as if nothing happened. Grandmother had been taken to the hospital in town. Russell cooked breakfast and left early, leaving us to explore the house and silvery folds of our imaginations. Joanie tied Chubbs to a rocking chair so we could do our chores with ease: clean the kitchen, bathroom, and bedrooms—we avoided grandmother's.

"Chuckie, is grandmother dead and buried?"

"No. She's very sick. A problem with her heart."

"Will she be okay?"

"I don't think so. I don't know."

Which was all we spoke of her. That day we arm wrestled, smoked three of Russell's cigarettes, and celebrated Mass on the roof of the house with Joanie performing as high priest draped in a white sheet. Chubbs didn't realize the importance of the occasion and sat in the kitchen all day chewing on a wooden table leg.

But we lost control over the night. Chubbs kept crawling from his mattress to the door, to be prepared for any frightening reoccurrence; I slept with pillow held tightly over my head. Joanie shivered in the sticky August heat. By morning she had wet the bed, and was terrified—she had never done that before. The woman's old voice seemed to echo though the gray corridors and attach itself to the natural sounds of night: crickets, the rustle of tree leaves, water dripping in the sink, the creaking and unaccounted bangs like pebbles dropping from the ceiling. In the muffled crush of a pillow against my face I heard private sounds, apart from the motions of the house,

shrieking, like the shrill wail of a siren, and wanted to smother myself into sleep.

Blue fields, dark, twisted oak trees, pastures with cows sitting like large black rocks drifted by the car, a flat band of tar whipped beneath; the tires crackled as if on fire. Russell flicked cigarette ashes out the front window, which swung back and stung Joanie's arm like tiny needles.

"Ow, hey watch that."

"I think grandmother's sick."

Russell stared at the road. "I know, Charles, that's why we're taking her south to Florida. So she can heal in the sun."

"No, I mean really sick. Her mouth is bubbling."

"All right, all right. We'll stop in West Appelton. The airport is an hour away."

"How long to go?"

"I said, Joan, another hour."

"One hundred miles? Two?"

"About sixty."

"That many?"

"Be quiet."

We stopped at a cafe in the middle of town. Joanie and I unloaded Chubbs from his box. He smiled for a moment. Russell took grandmother inside for a milk shake; we were left to wander through the neighboring blocks of West Appelton.

Sunday morning. The bright sun was scattered in a lavender haze that seemed to cling like fog to the rooftops. Streets were empty. We heard the brassy clang of a steeple bell down the road, but saw no one entering or leaving the church. The cobblestone streets were a reddish brown, the color of dried blood. We sat by the curb watching a filmy white line of water trickle through wads of paper into the sewer hole. Chubbs was flicking small stones at the station wagon fender, and Joanie and I got up to investigate the town. Chubbs wore that hurt look of his, so we picked up his rubbery little body and hurried him along with us. He wore a pair of red and white pin-striped shorts and yellow sunglasses with a white frame and looked like a vacationer rather than someone taking a sick old lady hundreds of miles away from home for a rest.

"I can't wait until we get to Hollywood, Chuckie. Father says it's a glamorous town and that miracles will happen down there. Grandmother will get better, she'll love being with her son. That's Uncle

Mike. There are palm trees and sunshine and the ocean! Chubbs will be so struck with wonder maybe he'll start to talk about it." She spoke softly, as if afraid of offending someone by raising her voice.

The assembly of buildings, the grocery stores with their meat and vegetable sales, restaurants humming with neon, the taverns with dark, smoky windows, the one-pump gas stations in West Appelton bore little difference to Salda Creek. But a smell of burnt wood, the misty glaze of the West Appelton sky, the odd quiet of Sunday morning made me feel as if cautious eyes watched us from behind curtains, from under the dead husks of automobiles, from the sharp, angular shadows cast by large wooden houses, their porches, jutting roofs. As if we had walked totally naked down center aisle in church.

Chubbs saw a black ball of fur by a garbage can in the alley behind the cafe and poked it with a stick. Two slits of green appeared and the fur jumped at Chubbs: a cat, its small head oddly out of proportion with its large body. Joanie threw a cinder at the animal and chased it away. Chubbs sat in the dirt, hands cupped over his sunglasses. Always so helpless.

"Don't worry, Chubbs," Joanie assured, "it'll be all right in Hollywood. Okay? You can climb palm trees and eat grapefruits. It's where they make movies and everybody loves everybody, lots of hugging and kisses. You'll want to talk about it."

We dusted Chubbs's seat and headed down the alley armed with rocks. Flies buzzed around a brown, syrupy puddle that had oozed from a pile of shattered glass, dried pieces of meat, tin cans, curls of eggshell. Blackbirds sat on telephone wires above, their tiny heads jerking back and forth, watching as we passed below. We felt more relaxed behind the stores, surrounded by flat walls of brick, windows guarded with iron bars, where familiar odors, strong and bitter, shifted to sweet aromas, which again grew sour: rotten apples and vinegar, then something like pine, or burning leaves; dung, gasoline fumes. A wild skunk odor, as if the animal had run the length of the alley. The damp green fragrance of a willow tree. As if unseen flowers, or weeds, were rising up from the cinders in sharp waves of heat and bursting as we stepped by.

Chubbs had forgotten about the cat and squatted down by a garbage can to arrange broken soda pop bottles in neat rows. A tall man dressed in baggy overalls and a white undershirt appeared from one of the walkways between buildings and approached us. He had no left arm.

Joanie smiled and said hello.

"Say, you're a cute one, aren't you? And who have we here? You straightening up the alley, son?"

The man's hair was short and dark, his face looked tight and bony except for the eyes, puffed and black, as if someone had struck him. The right arm stretched to pat Chubbs on his head, fingers curled and looped through his soft brown hair like a tiny flock of birds. In a sudden, white spark of fear I grabbed for a broken bottle. Joanie bent over and took the child by the hand and said we had to go find father, that he would come running if we were gone too long.

"Okay. You kids stay out of trouble, all right? I'll be seeing you." He smiled, right arm dangling limp at his side.

We came back around the front. The man followed behind, half a block away.

Our car was gone.

Joanie ran into the café first and found grandmother by herself drinking a chocolate milk shake in a corner booth. The man stood outside of the cafe window looking in at us, his hand pressed flat against the pane. I felt frightened and alone, as if the dark walls, the roof, the tables covered with red cloths had fallen away and that the stranger and I were the only two people on earth, that I alone had to protect an old woman and two children from his touch.

Before the man entered, Russell walked in with a waitress who sat with us at the table. Her hair was oily, and came down around her face in long, blonde locks; she looked bony and pale, perhaps the sister of the man outside.

"Where were you? Where's the car?" Joanie was anxious to know.

"We took it to the gas station. We're staying overnight here in West Appelton."

"No."

"Joan, grandmother's sick, she needs rest from all this traveling, and that's that."

Ever since grandmother's attack I had lost any sense of understanding in Russell's actions: he spoke to us with failing assurance, as if we crossed the paths of his desperate concentration by accident. Father could no longer afford to keep grandmother in the quiet conditions of a semi-private hospital room, and told his brother-in-law, Mike, in several long, emotional phone calls that he refused to have her "just put away somewhere," said that he might even try starting up business in Hollywood. For moments, I could have loved him for the deep concern he showed for someone, and did not think to question how he suddenly could afford to fly five people across the nation after the litany of poverty he had sung to Uncle Mike.

But he had awoken us from the most peaceful night in a long time, raced across the countryside in the station wagon, and now wanted to spend the day in a hot, half-dead town. Joanie badgered him with questions—why we were staying, with whom, how long—to which he finally responded by slapping her wrists. He had never done that before.

We spent the afternoon in the blonde girl's apartment, a dirty two-room flat on the second floor of an old house with a white face, three pink sides, and dark blue window shutters. Chubbs played with a butter knife out in the backyard, Joanie and I remained indoors, looking through the kitchen window to see if the man from the alley had followed us. Father disappeared with the waitress; Joanie went in the other room and sat by grandmother on the couch, taking care not to touch the old woman. They watched *Mass for Shut-ins* on television. I kept an eye on Chubbs.

The boy had dug several small holes in the ground and smoothed dirt back into them with a sweep of the hand, as if he were at play back home in his own, silent world. Chubbs neatly wiped mud from the knife with pinched fingertips; stood up, waved a tiny arm in the air, shook his head back and forth; moved his lips in a quick, twisted way as if trying to chase a fly from his teeth. And in the burning afternoon light that shone on glowing, abandoned sidewalks, with Chubbs being, perhaps, the only person awake or alive in West Appelton, I could have sworn for an instant that he was talking with himself.

Russell had cancelled our plane flight from Sunday afternoon to Monday night, so when we ascended from the ground we saw not the airport and surrounding city reduced to the size of doll houses but the dark wash of sky and thousands of pinhead lights which formed neat patterns of lines, circles, and curves, a curtain of glass beads floating atop a smooth black ocean. Joanie and I sat next to grandmother, Russell sat behind with Chubbs and was talking with the air stewardess, a nice-looking young woman dressed in a navy blue suit. Being aloft thousands of feet above the earth, drifting in a silvery white airliner for the first time was not as exciting as we had imagined.

We had considered the possibilities of flight many times, standing on the rooftop back home, just shy of the edge. We ran tests by jumping off the porch with an open umbrella, felt the pained shock of impact, and decided our bones were too brittle for a wild leap from the roof. At school Joanie had seen a science experiment, a chicken bone soaked in vinegar until it became rubbery, and suggested that we could do the

same to our bones by drinking two cups of vinegar a day for one week. The smell made her sick and we abandoned the idea.

I overheard the stewardess telling Russell that we would be stopping in St. Louis for an hour, and again in Atlanta. Joanie spoke to me in a whisper.

"Chuckie, are we going to Atlantis? Like in the movie? It's an underwater city. Maybe the plane flies right down into the Pacific Ocean."

"Don't talk silly. We're going to Atlanta, in Georgia. Down south."

"South? No, we're going west. Over the Rockies. There are mountains down below us."

I told her father knew what he was doing, but Joanie was not convinced—she seemed to no longer trust any judgment but her own.

"Father, are we going to Atlantis, the Lost City?"

"What? No. Don't be ridiculous. Go back to sleep."

"I wasn't sleeping. Aren't we going west to Hollywood?"

"No, I told you before Mike lives in Hollywood, Florida. Near Miami."

"Hollywood is in California."

Joanie slid back into her seat and told grandmother that everyone was going crazy. The old woman smiled, her lips struggled to form a word, but she was panting as if out of breath and lost control of her speech. "Not sick" or "I'm sick" was all she said.

Joanie remained silent through St. Louis, through Atlanta, and spoke only to the stewardess when the plane dipped and rose in high tailwinds, as if a giant hand had snatched the jet by its nose and was swinging it up and down. Grandmother was looking out the small window at sudden white bursts of lightning that sprayed across the surrounding clouds. Joanie held tightly to my wrist. The lights over the middle aisle had been snapped off; only a few dots of light, the reading lamps, glowed above the seats. We fastened safety belts. My mind wandered to pictures of the plane falling, cracking in half on the Rocky Mountains, or the dark green and black ocean, wherever we were, until I heard grandmother, or the baby, whimper. I unbuckled the seat belt, stretched around behind to see if father was holding Chubbs close to him: but Russell slept, his mouth dangled open and he snored; Chubbs looked out the window and back at me with that pained expression of fear as if holding me responsible for the motions of the airplane.

"Ave Maria," grandmother blurted out.

The stewardess came by and passed out small white pillows and blankets, smiling as she leaned over Russell to prop up Chubbs and cushion his head.

I wanted to strike her, or somebody—we were heading in the wrong direction and trapped in a rainstorm. I felt warm and sick, as if a hot cinder had burst in my stomach, as if Joanie, Chubbs, and I secretly knew that a crazy, sick old woman and a man lost in a thousand dark folds of sleep would be the last two people we would ever see.

The jet sliced through the bottom layer of cloud and I again saw the glittering brocade of city lights below—yet perhaps we had capsized and I was looking at stars. The rain spattered and cut across the airplane wing in long pins of silver; the dotted red and yellow pattern of landing strip rose up and slapped against the bottom of the plane. Grandmother was still, we thought she was dead, but the rocking of the jet had lulled her to sleep.

As we stepped out the airplane exit the stewardess smiled politely and wished everyone a pleasant stay at Fort Lauderdale.

"This isn't Hollywood? Are we lost? Did we crash?"

The woman told Joanie that Hollywood was not far away. Russell pushed us along. We paused at the top of the metal landing ramp to see where we had set down. A man in a gray raincoat stood at the bottom of the stairway and distributed umbrellas to the travelers. The rain, wind blew in our faces. Russell urged us to keep moving. The airport terminal looked huge; dark, shadowy bodies watched us from the corridor inside; and I heard only the loud drone of jet engines, not Joanie's voice crying out for me to grab the baby, nor the rattle of his tiny body as he slipped and fell down the bottom three stairs, nor his muffled squeak of pain. When the gray man with umbrellas bent over to the ground I turned to see Chubbs on his side, one leg touching the bottom step, Joanie squatted down beside him; my father and grandmother and a cluster of passengers behind them, hovering over us in a swarm of curious faces. Chubbs's eyes were tightly shut, and I didn't know if I was seeing him cry for the first time or if beads of rain were dripping on his cheeks. I looked up and saw a wild flash on Russell's face, his thick eyebrows, dark, squinted eyes, mouth parted and teeth clenched, his large, strong hand tightened in a fist, and it may have been a sign of deep concern.

Or that in an impulse of anger he had pushed Chubbs down the metal staircase without a thought.

We arrived at Uncle Mike's by taxi at one in the morning. The house was dark and quiet; Russell pounded his fist on the door and rang the bell, but no one answered.

"We'll have to wait here. I thought they'd be awake. Haven't got anywhere else to go."

Home, Joanie said, and I suggested a motel, but he muttered something about money and started pounding the door again. Grandmother, Joanie, and Chubbs had seated themselves on the porch lawn chairs and rested their feet on suitcases.

"Father, I think we're going to be arrested. Only spooks and burglars are out this late. I saw one across the street."

"You did not."

"Is this the right house ?"

He ignored her and stepped around the front, looking for a light, or a place to break in. The rain had softened to a drizzle, then stopped. Chubbs was rubbing his ankle.

We waited half an hour.

All at once Joanie sneezed, we heard the door chime, a dog barked from inside the house, and a yellow porch light flashed on. A woman's voice from behind the door asked who it was.

"Me. Russell. And the kids. And grandmother."

"Are you here? Come in." A pleasant-looking young woman dressed in a soft pink robe opened the door.

"I thought you were coming tomorrow night."

"No. I said Tuesday at twelve A.M."

"Oh. I thought you meant Tuesday night, not Monday."

"No."

"Well, come in and we'll get everyone to bed. We'll put the kids on the fold-away in the den, grandmother in the extra room, you on the couch."

"Is that extra bed soft?"

"Like a baby's butt." She smiled.

"Grandmother needs a hard bed. Why not put her on the couch. Or put a board under that bedroom mattress." The old woman was stretched out on the sofa and asleep before any decision could be made.

When I awoke the next morning I was startled by what we had overlooked in the darkness of the night before: the floor was covered with a thick burgundy carpet; to my left was an adjoining room of brick, with a stereo console against the far wall, an energetic painting of sunflowers above it, and a parrot in one corner scratching at its gold cage. To my immediate left was a bulging leather chair and an end table with a lamp in the shape of a naked woman. Chubbs was sitting up and I turned to see what agitated him so much: a huge sailfish with a large aqua-blue fin and long, pointed snout was mounted on the wall.

Its right eye was glassy white with speckles of green and seemed to be looking directly at us. The eye watched us from every point in the room. I told Chubbs that it was not a real fish, and after a time he seemed more fascinated than afraid of the strange creature. One evening he tugged at me and pointed, insisting I pick him up and let him touch the smooth, shining eye.

Uncle Mike, Louise, and Russell dissolved into conversation beyond our interest so Joanie and I took the baby outside to explore the neighborhood and to convince ourselves that we were in Hollywood, California. The streets were as we had pictured them: rows of one-story houses, some pink, light green, yellow, or creamy blue, shingled roofs from which stood the metal spines of TV antennas; sidewalks lined with palm trees, their large gray trunks looking more like steel than wood, which burst at the top into fans of green leaves; banyan trees, with branches that sank into the ground forming extra trunks, a forest within one tree; we saw bananas and grapefruits growing wild; umbrella trees with long, rubbery leaves that shook in the breeze, sounding like rainfall. A lizard that shot across the sidewalk like a small green dart. Chubbs tried lifting a fallen coconut.

The tepid smell of green that blew in the faint trickle of wind.

And Louise said we could swim in the ocean.

The neighborhood seemed warm and inviting. Joanie wanted to see a motion picture studio.

"Chubbs, isn't this exciting? Isn't it everything I said it would be? Doesn't it make you want to talk? Sure." She wiped dirt from his face with her hand; the baby smiled, squinted, shook his head back and forth, and exhaled a grunt; and Joanie, in the stupefied joy of a traveled dream come to life, in the dazzling, fertile world that rose up about her, insisted that he had spoken a word.

For moments we had forgotten that Russell had lied to us about Hollywood.

As we again circled the block Russell came from the house to order us inside.

"Grandmother's had another attack, we have to get her to a hospital. I want you three around where I can find you."

"She's sick? From what? Will she live?"

He did not answer, and left us in a flurry of motion: running in and out of the house; grandmother's body, so small and limp, wrapped in a stretcher, carried away into the ambulance; Mike, slamming doors and starting the car engine; Louise shouted at me to take care of the kids; the parade of two cars slipping away from the curb. The sprawl-

ing, relaxed atmosphere suddenly compressed into a tight ball of fears and confusion by the failure of the old woman's heart.

We sat, in quiet ignorance, through the afternoon: Chubbs played with his toes, or stared at the sailfish, Joanie drew pictures of the naked woman lamp. We waited patiently, while the hot morning hours blended with the white afternoon sky, not for word of grandmother's recovery or death, but in anxious desire to take Chubbs outside and see if, in fact, we could teach him to speak.

"Let's go out back, Chubbs. Uncle Mike's got an umbrella tree and grapefruit tree and the grass is probably crawling with bugs and lizards. Ooh, do you hear that bird singing? Aunt Louise says it's a mockingbird. They have all sorts of great things like that in Hollywood. Not like back home. Okay?"

She took the child out to the backyard, and I watched from an enclosed patio as she gave him a tour of the yard: they squatted down to inspect the grass, the clover; poked their fingers at a cactus plant in the garden; and chewed on leaves from the umbrella tree. Chubbs pointed to the green melons dangling from the grapefruit tree, and Joanie climbed up to pick one, but as she descended with her prize her knees suddenly buckled. She fell through the branches and hit the ground.

My sister was cold silent. Motionless.

I ran out to the yard. Joanie's legs arms and face were scratched with tiny slits of red: her eyes shut, mouth opened wide, stringy brown hairs scattered about her forehead. Chubbs sat and watched as I carried her back into the house; called the hospital; awaited my father, who returned in the wild scream of an ambulance. His eyes looked red and ugly, trapped in the dark wrinkles of surrounding flesh; his face was unshaven. As Joanie was taken away on a stretcher, Russell grabbed Chubbs by the waist, carried him into a bedroom, and shut the door. He turned to me and said he would beat me when he returned for letting Joanie out of the house.

"But I was watching them. And Joanie's a good climber. You let her go up on the roof at home."

"This isn't home. I don't want back-talk. You're irresponsible! Wait until I get back, I'll hit you down when you least expect." His hand grabbed at my shirt, but I pulled away and ran into the bedroom with Chubbs.

Where we sat, for what must have been hours.

Russell had never hit or touched me, but now I felt he might do anything, slap my face in the middle of the night, twist an arm, throw

me from a speeding car. Chubbs, Joanie, and I were lost—our command of the strange, quiet mysteries that left Salda Creek in the deeper shades of memory, our noble response to a new world that flashed by in glittering balls of crystal had shattered in the failing light of sick, injured bodies, hidden deceits—Russell had tricked us, lied and pushed. In cruel faithfulness to shallow dreams of hope which entwined his energies with bitterness, aggression.

I felt small and tight trapped in the room with my brother, too frightened to run and hide, too fearful of the silent, sweeping power that radiated from the dark corners of my father's eyes.

Joanie was recovering well from a slight brain concussion. I visited her several times at the hospital, but we spoke very little, and only in private. She was in the children's ward, a dormitory room of young ailing bodies, victims of accident. A nun in a crisp white dress would hover over Joanie and smile, as if she had arranged for my visit. And then say Joanie was in God's hands.

"How's Chubbs? Oh, I feel sick. Father stopped in earlier today. He said I was stupid."

"That's what he said to me. Said he's going to beat me when I least expect."

"Oh. You know, maybe I just should drink vinegar. Then my bones wouldn't hurt so much. Wonder why the nurse doesn't give me any."

"I don't know. Look, I've got to go see grandmother."

"Sure. Maybe falling from the tree did me good. I don't wet the bed anymore. Not here!"

I left.

Grandmother was strapped in a bed similar to Joanie's, with its back slightly elevated near a shaded window. A thin plastic tube ran from an oxygen tank up into her nose and back again. A trickle of white beads, her rosary, was wound about her right hand. The woman in the next bed was lying on her side, staring at me. Grandmother's face looked grayish yellow. Her lips parted in an attempt to speak, but she gasped for air and the tube in her nose gurgled and popped in a mix of fluid and oxygen. I came closer, stood next to her, and she turned to look: her eyes were gray and misty. The old woman watched me not as if she recognized a friend or an enemy, but as if I were a stranger, or not there at all. I tried to smile but felt it didn't matter. Her fingers fluttered in the air and I took her left hand—she spoke, or perhaps the tube hissed from a tiny leak. The fearful, screaming head that filled our last nights in Salda Creek with so much horror now shivered a bit,

rested back on the pillow, and fell to sleep. A nurse came into the room wheeling a tall white bar from which hung a plastic sack filled with a strange, clear fluid. She poked a needle into grandmother's arm and the fluid streamed down the tube into her. The nurse tended to the old woman with detached authority.

She turned to me and smiled. "It's feeding time. Your grandmother can't chew for herself. We give her glucose."

"But she's asleep. What are the straps around her for?"

"This lady's a fighter—jumps around a lot, sometimes jerks the needle right out of her arm. We have to keep her tied down. For her own good."

"Oh." The bitter smell of medicine and antiseptics made me sick, I said good-bye to grandmother and left.

Joanie finally recuperated and returned to Mike's house but was advised by Louise to remain inside, at least for a while, to completely recover. Joanie would scream and lock herself in the bathroom.

Louise convinced Russell to take Chubbs and me to the ocean—which I still believed to be the Pacific—for a peaceful day in the sun. Father's rapid agreement surprised me, and for a second I honestly felt he was going to drown me in the water as fulfillment of his threat.

We arrived at the hot, white stretch of sand along the ocean and saw hundreds of people, grandmother's age, dressed in swimsuits and wearing sunglasses. Joanie would have called them movie stars. The sand was burning against our feet. Fat, greasy men sucked on cans of beer, tanned women wearing floppy white flats sat in lawn chairs facing the sun and read pocketbooks. A big woman in a one-piece lime-colored outfit warned Chubbs to watch out for man-of-wars, little balls of blue jelly that could sting his leg and poison him to death.

We spread our blanket by the endless trail of shells, algae, and pebbles along the shoreline. Green waves with lips of white foam spilled and rolled on the surface in repeated sweeps, smelling clean and fresh. Russell sat, rubbed lotion on his skin, and left us to get some refreshments.

"I wish Joanie was here."

Chubbs looked at me and smiled. He loved the water.

After fifteen minutes I saw Russell, a few yards away down the shoreline, talking to a slim girl with long brown hair pulled back behind her head with a clip, skin shiny with tanning oils. He touched the girl's shoulder, held her arm.

I wiped sand from Chubbs' mouth and gestured for him to go play by the water. He stood by the line of tiny shells along the beach, took

handfuls, inspected each one. A strong wave slid along the ground, tagged his feet, and slipped back into the ocean. A gull, like a sudden flake of snow, swooped by.

Chubbs collected pebbles, hoarding the multi-colored rocks into a pile as if they were gold nuggets. He grabbed some of the treasure, saw his father standing not far away, and ran, his legs bouncing and rubbery, to present the man with small gifts from the sea. Russell shook his hand at the child as if chasing away a fly. Chubbs ran up to the water and tossed the rocks away with a jerking overhand throw; picked up more rocks, and returned to Russell's side. The girl in the bathing suit patted Chubbs on the head, but father pointed toward the ocean and gave him a light push on the shoulders.

A large black dog jumped about in the water; a fat man emerged from the waves and sprawled out on his blanket. People lay motionless in the sharp white heat. Chubbs went back to his mound of pebbles, squatted over them, and this time carefully selected one yellow rock, holding it delicately with his fingertips as if he had captured a tiny, golden butterfly. Chubbs moved his lips, the insistent spasm we had mistaken for his trying to speak, but Russell ignored the child, turned him away, patted his rear, and pointed at me. In the brilliance of sunlight reflecting on sand, with his eyes, dark and shadowy, on his nose, the lips, cheeks, jutting chin stark in the midday glare, I saw on Russell that same look of disgust as I had seen before; and I suddenly felt the raw urge to strike my father, not await his punishment, or to run wildly down the beach past the old people lying in the sun. But knew I could not run without Chubbs, Joanie, without grandmother, realized the fool's effort in lying to myself.

Chubbs threw the yellow rock into the ocean, but suddenly ran after it, to retrieve it; and his tiny body fell to the pounding force of the waves. For a second, he was entirely under water—as if he had never been on the beach at all—his mute scream blended with the foamy crashing of the tide; Russell stood, his hands locked to either side of the girl's waist, unconcerned—and for one brief moment, I paused before racing into the water, perhaps feeling deep inside how terrifying and wonderful it was to be invisible, nothing.

FRANCES G. STERNBERG

Visiting the Ill

I'm not usually attracted to men with gray hair. But this is different. Prematurely gray and with quite a lot of gold still in it. He's not really that much older than I am.

"Don't I know you?" he asks.

I'm not usually attracted to men with opening lines. But this is also different. In fact, he *does* know me.

"We met at the Gordons'," I say. "We broke the Yom Kippur fast together. You talked about weekends on your farm, the horses. Your wife came on to my husband. And I was sitting next to your wife."

His smile deepens the lines around his blue eyes and reveals very white, very even teeth. He's taller than I remember and thinner, raw-boned but not ungraceful, with a weathered tan. A Jewish cowboy from Kansas via the Bronx, waiting for a table at the East Side Deli—the east side of Kansas City, not New York City.

I smile, too, wondering if I'm taller and thinner than he remembers. In the fall, we curl into ourselves and puff out, taking on a layer of subcutaneous fat, like hedgehogs preparing to hibernate. In spring, we straighten up and fly right, lean and mean, like eagles.

It's spring.

He looks me up and down. "You weren't dressed like this at the Gordons'," he says.

"Of course not."

Then, we'd just come from the synagogue, and I had on what my sons call my Morticia Addams dress—a black shroud with long sleeves and a long sweeping skirt that covers everything. Today I wear an old leather jacket, a leotard, and tight faded jeans tucked into short black boots.

"I like this better," he says.

"In a previous life I was either a ballerina or a biker—I'm not sure which."

"What are you in this life?"

"Still ambivalent."

He laughs. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

Both times we meet over kosher food. Bagels and lox in fall. Pastrami on rye in spring.

"I've just had my lunch," I tell him.

"But you didn't finish it. I was watching you."

I shrug.

"Are you in a hurry?"

I shake my head.

"Then sit with me," he says, taking my arm and guiding me back to the table I've just abandoned. "Have some coffee or a soda." I decline both, but he orders a Diet Pepsi for me anyway.

As he cuts his sandwich into extra wedges, neatly and precisely, he focuses entirely on what he is doing with his hands. Strong hands with prominent knuckles and joints and old calluses on the fingers. Hands that regularly channel great tension and energy and a vast inarticulate life force. The hands of a cellist or a pianist, a sculptor, or, like this man, a surgeon.

"What kind of surgeon are you?" I ask.

"Cardiac," he says, tapping his chest, "heart."

He offers me a wedge of his sandwich. I shake my head. He cuts a pickle into extra spears, also neatly and precisely and with the same focus. This time, he doesn't offer, he just hands me a spear.

"You come here a lot?" he asks.

"Rarely," I say. "Only when I have to be at the hospital."

"Is something wrong?"

"Not really. I'm on the *Chesed* Committee. You know, good deeds. My synagogue. It's a *mitzvah—bikkur cholim*—visiting the ill."

"Dressed like that?"

"Why not?"

"They must be comatose."

"They are," I agree. "It's my first year doing this. They always send the beginners to neurosurgery."

He finds this very funny. So do I, now that I think about it.

"If they're comatose, how do they know you were there?"

"I leave a little pre-printed visiting card." This starts us laughing again. I show him one. It has my name on it, the name of the

synagogue, and an elliptical line from the 103rd Psalm: *Bless the Lord . . . he heals all your diseases . . .*

As he studies it, he stops laughing. "What's left out?" he asks.

"I'm not sure. Something about how God redeems our lives from destruction."

"You believe that?"

"Does it matter?"

"So what happened?" he asks, after a while.

"What happened to what?"

"My wife, your husband."

"I don't know. I didn't ask. What do you think?"

"I think they made it. I think they're still making it—on and off. Your husband's a shrink, right?"

I nod. He certainly is.

"That's what I thought. A mind fuck. My wife goes for that. You go for that, too?"

"I guess. We've been married for twenty years."

"You're kidding. You must be older than you look."

Wicked people don't age. A Yiddish proverb. My mother thinks it's a joke, but it's really a curse. Think about it: never aging, never maturing, doomed to grow up but not out, searching for our reflection in everything, trapped in eternal narcissism. Maybe we're all wicked.

"Much older," I say.

"Ever try any other kind?" he asks.

I'm confused. "Any other kind of what?"

"Of fuck."

"Such as?"

He smiles a wonderful smile right into my eyes. "Not a *mind* fuck."

"Not for twenty years."

He runs a finger inside the neckline of my leotard, letting it rest for a moment at the base of my throat. He can feel my pulse racing. "What do you wear under this?" he asks.

"Nothing."

A soft intake of breath and another wonderful smile.

The husbands of two women I know come in and catch us like this. One of them, a younger colleague of his, winks at him. Affirming the male bond. Way to go, bro'.

"We have to stop meeting like this," I whisper.

We burst out laughing again.

Much later, lying together in the half-gloom. "Are you sure you never—?" he begins.

"Never."

"Then why—?"

"Curiosity."

"Revenge?"

"Not entirely."

"How was it?"

"Nice. Direct. You don't say much, but you're thorough. I like that."

His eye is caught by a faint glow coming from my arm. He grabs my wrist, circling it with his thumb and forefinger. "What're these things?" he asks, touching two flexible plastic bangles that light up in the dark. I forgot I was wearing them.

"Presents from my sons. They won them at the synagogue Purim carnival."

I remove one and hold it up between us. It makes a halo the color of new grass. He takes it from me and puts it on his own wrist. It just fits, but he'll have trouble getting it off.

"Who's with your sons now?"

"Why?"

"It's so close to dinner."

"My husband. They're skiing. It's spring break."

For a split second, he looks surprised, shocked. I wonder what, if anything, he's heard about me.

"Spring break. Right. I forgot."

"You remember my sons?"

"Two sons, eight and ten. They were with you at the Gordons'. I remember other things about you, too. You smile too much."

"So do you."

"And when you don't smile, you look . . . lost."

For some reason, this makes me very angry and I sit up. "Lost?" I ask, my voice rising. "Lost how?"

"Easy, easy," he says, pulling me back down, "I mean like . . . lost in thought."

"Well, I have a lot on my mind."

"Your husband ignores you."

"The honeymoon's over."

"And that's why he screws around?"

"Maybe."

I move closer to him and kiss his chest. Little kisses, like sparks. The hair is soft, silver over the gold of his tan, damp from our exertions, salty and sharp to the taste.

"Why does your wife screw around?"

"She had a bad winter—a couple of bad winters."

"And you? Why do you screw around?"

"Because it's there," he says.

Then, as if to change the subject, he rests an ear lightly over my heart and listens intently.

"I hear a murmur," he says. "Mitral valve?" A point of information, just taking a medical history.

"Yes. Prolapse."

"Inherited?"

"Yes." Along with a pre-disposition to anxiety neurosis, agoraphobia, and sudden death. But I don't say this.

Thoughtfully, with great concentration, he teases my breasts with his tongue until my nipples are tumescent. Then he moves lower and kisses the scar that rests like a faint starfish on my navel.

"Laparoscopy?" Another point of information.

"Two. One for infertility. One to tie my tubes." Same site, opposite terrors.

Lower still, his lips graze the short, curved seam just above my pubis.

"C-sections?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Also two. Matters of life and death." One of each.

"Battle scars," he says. "You're not as perfect as you look." He's relieved, maybe even pleased, definitely not disappointed.

"I also have stretch marks."

He nuzzles my stomach. "I've seen worse. After two pregnancies—"

"Three. The third one didn't . . . wasn't . . ." I can't go on.

"How far along?"

"Seven months . . . a little girl."

He moves lower, swinging himself all the way around and over me. We stop talking.

We sleep. His back curving against my breasts and his hand nestling protectively between my thighs. My arms circling his waist and my cheek fitting into the warm hollow between his shoulders. Such peace. I could sleep like this forever.

But the rasping of his pager awakens us. He swears and reaches across me to jab at the buttons on the phone. "What is it?" he asks. He

swears again. "What are her vital signs?" More swearing. "Who's with her now? That schmuck? He's incompetent. Don't let him do anything. Just get her stable. I *said* get her stable. I'm on my way." He reaches across me again and hangs up the phone. A short distance, but long enough to restore his good humor. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—and me. The three of us kiss. "An emergency," he says, getting out of bed.

"So I gathered."

"You should be used to them."

I shake my head. "There's no such thing as a psychiatric emergency."

This amuses him. "Says who?"

"My husband."

"What about suicides?"

"No. Suicide hot lines are better at talking them out of it. The police are better with jumpers. SWAT teams are better with hostage takers. Everything else requires medical attention first—"

"You mean a *real* doctor—"

"He's real enough, but he only sees them after they're admitted."

"Some racket. Even dermatologists have emergencies."

"Just one," I say. He laughs. "My husband told me that, too."

Although he's dressed and ready to go, he sits down on the edge of the bed and takes my hand. He isn't laughing any more.

"Who saw you after you were admitted?" he asks.

I shake my head and try to pull away, but he won't let go.

"You forged a prescription. One bottle of reds and one bottle of yellows. Spring break of last year. Your husband and sons were skiing then, too. Your housekeeper was away. She came back earlier than she was supposed to and found you."

So he's heard everything. I keep forgetting what a small town this is.

"Your wife isn't the only one who's had a couple of bad winters," I say. "But I screwed up. I should never have taken the pills at home; I should have checked into a hotel. Or I should have slit my wrists or jumped from a window or off a bridge or hung myself or stabbed myself or shot myself or turned on the oven or the car engine or swallowed poison or—I don't know—" I run out of breath and have to pause, "—something unambivalent."

"Why didn't you throw yourself in front of a train? That's unambivalent." I stare at him. "My son. Two years ago. At school. Also spring break. My only child." I begin to cry. He puts his arms around me and holds me until I calm down. "Choose life," he whispers,

kissing my hair. "He didn't understand. You have to *choose* life. Every single day. Over and over and over. I could have told him, but he never asked me. He never asked me a goddamn thing. It's driving my wife crazy."

"That's why she's seeing a shrink," I say.

"And you're getting medical attention."

"And what are you getting?"

"Laid." But suddenly he holds me tighter. "How will you get home?" he asks, after a while. My car is still at the East Side Deli.

"I think I'll spend the night here. It's already paid for." He looks frightened, so I smile at him. "I'm fine. Don't worry. Go. Do what you have to do."

Choose life. Does he know it's from Deuteronomy? *I have set before you the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life, that you may live, you and your seed.* Isn't it just like God to give us a choice that's not a choice?

"I'll come back after—I'll bring you some dinner. You have to eat. You're too thin."

"If you want to."

"I want to."

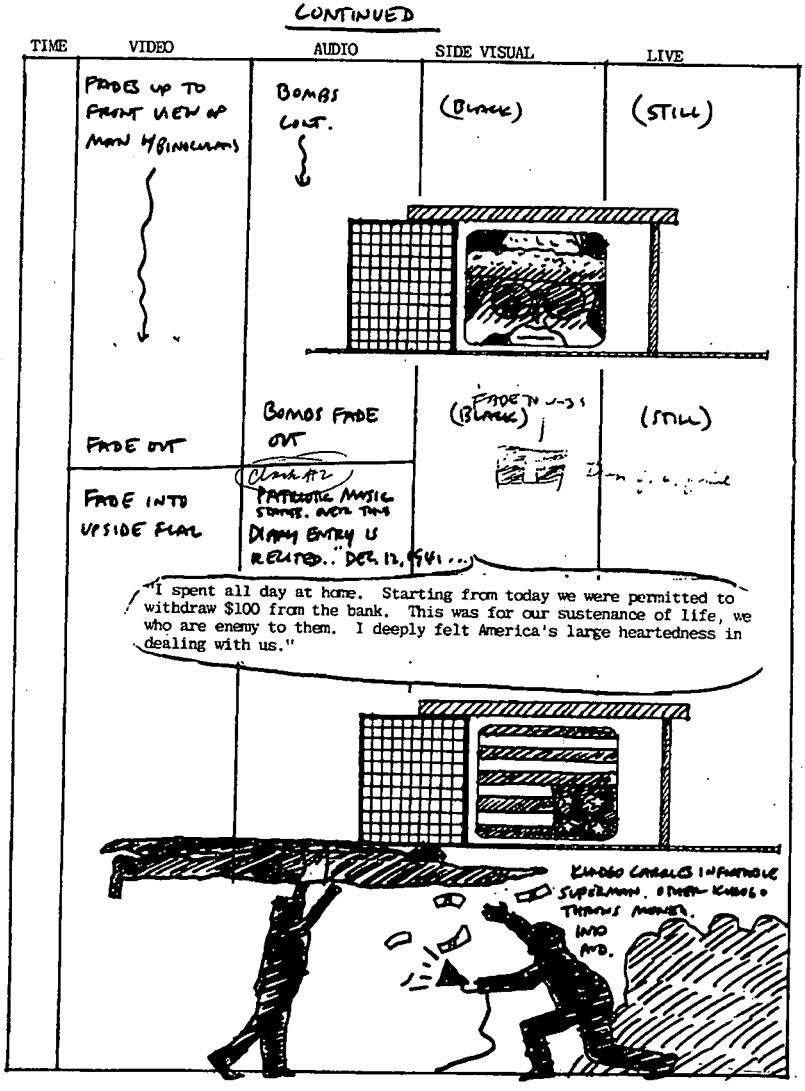
I smile again. "Okay."

After he leaves, I suddenly remember the lines missing from the psalm.

Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all his benefits: he forgives all your iniquities; he heals all your diseases; he redeems your life from destruction; he crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies; he satisfies your mouth with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

I also remember that he's still wearing the plastic bangle from the synagogue Purim carnival.

I fall asleep hugging his pillow.


CONTINUED
TIME
VIDEO
AUDIO
SIDE VISUAL
LIVE
FADES UP TO FRONT VIEW OF MAN W/BINOCULARS
BOMBS CONT.
(BLACK)
(STILL)
FADE OUT
BOMBS FADE OUT
(BLACK)
(STILL)
FADE INTO UPSIDE FLAG
PATHETIC MUSIC STARTS. OVER THIS DIARY ENTRY IS READ.. "DEC 12, 1941 ...
"I spent all day at home. Starting from today we were permitted to withdraw $100 from the bank. This was for our sustenance of life, we who are enemy to them. I deeply felt America's large heartedness in dealing with us."

GEORGE H. GURLEY, JR.

Winter Guest

He was looking around the living room, trying to guess what Preston's impression would be. There were some oriental rugs, but they were faded beyond any suggestion of respectability or success. There was a crystal chandelier above the dining room table, but it was so comically elegant and ostentatiously cheap that it couldn't be mistaken for a sign of pretense. The grandfather clock was a valuable antique, but it had been in the family. Preston had seen it in Reeser's leaner, lonelier bachelor days. He wouldn't be able to suspect it of being a show.

It was true there were tokens of comfort and complacency: the glass-topped table with a stack of *Wall Street Journals*, a crayon drawing of an orange turtle hovering over a field of lollipops, hung in a chrome frame and signed by Ned, their—his second wife's—son, the ubiquitous Swedish ivy, the imitation Herman Miller chair, the collected works of Robert Louis Stevenson bound in red leather, and, of course, on display in the kitchen, the Cuisanart. But there wasn't any affectation betrayed by the worn, soiled upholstery of the arm chair, the stark, spackled walls. What charge of exhibitionism could Preston bring against him with a Sesame Street poster scotch-taped to the window, the portable electric heater in the vestibule? No one was putting on airs in this house. Reeser looked down at his shoes. They wore Hush Puppies, not Guccis. And he was wearing white socks. Wedged between *Dr. Jekyll* and *Treasure Island* was a photo of him standing on a promontory in the Brooks Range with a backpack and staff—evidence that he hadn't sold out. Nevertheless, he removed the *Wall Street Journals* and stashed them in the closet.

Reeser stood on the doorway to the kitchen. He watched his wife move slowly from the sink to the cupboards, whispering reminders to

herself. "I forgot to tell you," he said. "Preston is what they call a 'natural athlete.' Once, he picked up a squash racquet for the first time and trounced the number one player in Kansas City . . . . What do you say to that?" She was sifting flour onto a football-shaped piece of dough. "But he's forsaken sports because he hates competition . . . . I think that's interesting. Don't you?"

"If you're interested in things like that," said his wife. She was ceremoniously chopping an onion north-south, east-west.

"If you're one of those people who's interested in *interesting* things?" said Reeser. She was holding her sleeve to her eyes. "What's the matter, Sarah? What did I say?"

"It's that mother onion," she said. Tears were flowing. "Hand me that towel." Reeser took a terry cloth towel from the oven door handle and gave it to her. She wiped her eyes.

"I thought I'd said the wrong thing," said Reeser. "I thought perhaps I'd offended . . . . What are you making for us, Tiny?" Sarah rubbed her eyes again, sifted some more flour, clenched a tablespoon between her teeth, looked up at the ceiling and closed her eyes. A portly beagle trotted through the kitchen, barked once at nothing, then dropped on a disheveled pillow in the pantry. Sarah shook her head and snapped her fingers at the dog.

"Chien," she said. "Blanquette de Chien." She rolled the dough out to a thin layer.

"Blanquette de Chien?" said Reeser. He studied the dog and the ragged sheet of dough. "I see. Is that something like Pigs in a Blanket? Blanquette de Chien Provençal or Diable?" Sarah held up a sack of dog food.

"Avec Alpo," she said.

"Ah, Blanquette de Chien avec Alpo," said Reeser, making the chef's circle of perfection with his thumb and forefinger. He took the sack of dog food, shook it thoughtfully, then put it back in the space between the refrigerator and the wall. "Well, that'll give it the real meat taste Rover loves so much," he said in an announcer's voice. "Yorick!" He addressed the dog. "How would you like it if we started calling you Rover?"

"And I'm going to start off with Soup du Jour," said Sarah.

"Is there any soup finer than Soup du Jour?" said Reeser. He browsed pensively around the kitchen, turning over a spatula, tasting the rim of a bowl, rearranging some measuring cups. "It has a certain je ne sais quoi."

Reeser wandered out of the room and paced in the hallway. "I'll go get the liquor," he called back to his wife. Then he stood still in the

hallway for a minute. Yellow water stains streaked outward from the ceiling light fixture, a glass ball etched to suggest a tulip. An assortment of garish raincoats hung on a rail. The gloomy hall, with its preposterous wallpaper—daft lutanists with puffed sleeves serenading matronly turtle doves—was Reeser's sanctuary. He thought there was in their house, with its air of improvisation, of using what was at hand, a pleasing quality of equilibrium. It was the quality of life rescued and lived for itself, a patched-together quality which reflected patched-together families. Their first marriages had been billed as something, and there was the inescapable sense of the things they owned as extensions of themselves. The signatures etched in their crystal, the silversmith's mark imprinted in their silverware, the insignia on their bone china—any of the signs which mean genuine, sterling, original—were intended to speak for the marriages themselves. Everything about the second marriage was different. For Reeser, it was like second growth after clear-cutting or a forest fire.

But Preston's visit filled him with some of the old feelings he used to have about marriage. There was no way of getting around it—the paraphernalia of family life seemed to proclaim a certain orthodox and servile stupor. Preston would come unburdened with possessions and he would bring memories to bear—memories of their college days, their idealism and freedom. He wondered if Preston would be charitable enough to see those signs of second growth. He expected to be measured and accused.

Reeser wondered: do we want our old friends to like us, to accept us, or do we want to impress and daunt them? A feeling passed through him—he wished they were rich. He wished they were welcoming Preston into a citadel of success. He would have liked the walls to be plastered with Raushenbergs, Stellas, Frankenthalers, illuminated with museum lights. He would have liked pedestals with African masks, display cases filled with scrimshaw, Boehm birds, and Steuben glass. He would have liked to welcome Preston at the door wearing a burgundy smoking jacket and wolf's head slippers. No, better yet, to have him met by a stooped servant with a name like "Ponder" or "Griffen." "Griffen—show Mister Preston into the study." He wished to throw up the most vulgar and meretricious barriers and to defeat his guest. Reeser imagined himself sitting next to Preston in the car which was right now driving west, and he felt its approach like a scythe. Reeser laughed and shook his head. Then he turned and went back into the kitchen.

"You'll probably like him," he said. Sarah looked up from kneading the dough. "Hell, you'll probably fall in love with him."

"The Good Book teaches us to love, Hank," she said.

"Don't call me Hank," said Reeser.

"All right, Conrad. The Good Book teaches us to love."

"That's what happened to Necker," said Reeser. "And don't say, 'the Good Book.' "

"Who's Necker?" said Sarah. "What happened to Necker?"

"Necker was Preston's best friend. Preston appropriated Necker's girlfriend, married her, and divorced her."

"I think you told me about it," said Sarah.

"They roomed together. Necker didn't have one girlfriend all four years of college. When he got out, he joined the Navy, moved to San Diego, and found this girl he was crazy about. He fell in love for the first time. Of course, he told Preston every detail about it, because Preston was sort of his confessor. Preston arranged to pay them a visit. Necker felt him approaching California like a scythe. He told Heather."

"Who's Heather?"

"The girl, Tiny."

"Told her what?" said Sarah.

"That she and Preston would probably be attracted to each other."

"Self-fulfilling prophecy," said Sarah.

"Ironical, isn't it?" said Reeser. "Ironic and fateful." He picked up the spatula and moved it slowly like a blade through the air. "Preston has an insatiable need to suffer."

"So he cuckholds his friends?" said Sarah.

"You watch," said Reeser. "Preston believes in telling you all his feelings even if it creates a frenzy. He digs himself a hole with people so as to make a mountain. Everything has to be an intense struggle. Because he needs to crawl up his own mountain to redeem himself."

"The Mountain of Redemption," said Sarah. She took the spatula from Reeser and held it gravely like a scepter.

"You laugh," said Reeser.

"Why are we inviting this cad into our house?" said Sarah. "I don't want this place dug up with mountains of redemption. I don't want anyone's damn stigmata bleeding on my oriental rugs. Good heavens!"

"Don't say 'good heavens,' Sarah," said Reeser. "It sounds provincial."

"Don't say 'Mountains of Redemption,' " said Sarah. "It sounds lofty."

"It's a lofty subject," said Reeser. "Besides, I didn't say, 'Mountains of Redemption'—you did." Sarah picked up a small piece of dough, rolled it into a ball, and threw it at Reeser. He ducked and the dough ball hit the wall behind him, flattened, and fell to the floor.

"All right," said Sarah. She began to shape the entire slab of dough into a ball. "You bring a flagellant into my house, I'll scourge you both with dough balls." Reeser slipped quietly from the kitchen. He waited behind the door for a moment and listened.

"I love the guy, Sarah," he said. "So will you."

When Reeser got back from the liquor store, Preston's car was in the driveway. He had always driven some offbeat kind of car—a Citroën Deux Chevaux, a Morgan, a Henry J. But this time, it was a Cadillac Seville, glowing like an anthracite monolith under the light of the street lamp.

Reeser was sorry Preston had beaten him home. He had wanted to have a drink, make a last-minute assessment, and establish a beachhead. This threw him off balance. When he went in, he could hear Preston and Sarah talking in the kitchen, already acquainted. An image of himself, Necker, and Preston on a country road in Ireland cycled through his mind. He straightened himself and headed in, feeling slightly ridiculous behind the sacks of liquor, like an intruder, a delivery boy, a menial.

The last couple of years had passed lightly over Preston, like a cloud of ash from a wood fire. He didn't look older. He looked somehow less corporeal, as if veiled by mosquito netting. He was wearing a shabby Albert Einstein cardigan, tennis shoes (not today's variety with ankle padding and lightning bolts of color, but plain old white canvas tennis shoes with a piece of rubber torn back like a slab of flesh), and a remarkable pair of baggy wool pants with patch pockets the size of catcher's mitts. He looked around as Reeser entered the room, studied him with his ironic, painful smile, and tapped him on the shoulder as if to verify his tangibility or to transform him into another state of being.

"Hi, Henry," he said. "What happened to your beard?"

The three of them sat in the sun room and drank. Preston always had some special, artistic way of drinking, and this night he drank beer from a glass, pouring in little jolts of rum from time to time. He told them about the end of his second marriage. He and Jill had lived together for four years. They had a farm in Connecticut and goats that came into the kitchen and a squad of domestic geese which patrolled the place for trespassers. Jill had encounter groups in New Haven and

Preston had twenty patients in his psychiatric practice. They made precisely the right amount of money to be happy, in other words, not quite enough. They would still be together if they hadn't gotten married a year before. Six months after they'd plighted their troths, they were divorced. The ending had been brutal and abrupt. Preston had flown to Santo Domingo to purchase the most expeditious decree available.

Reeser listened quietly to Preston and watched his agile, athlete's hands play with the glass. Sarah listened too, attentively Reeser thought, and he wondered if she had been touched yet by that strange, oblique charm which had seduced and stung several of his best friends.

There was the thunder of children running in the upstairs hall and down the stairs. Ned charged into the room and stopped dead, skidding the carpet into folds. With his hands on his hips, scowling at Preston, he asked, "Who's this?"

"This is Edward Fardel Preston the Seventeenth," said Reeser. "Say hello, Ned."

"What's he doing here?" said Ned.

"I just got out of prison," said Preston. "I stopped over for a minute to rob your Dad." Preston made his finger and thumb into a pistol.

"He's not my Dad," said Ned. "He's my stepdad." Ned crouched, his hands waving. He gave a karate yell and flew at Preston. They wrestled briefly until Preston got him in a half-nelson. That satisfied Ned, and he settled into Preston's lap. A small, angular girl in leotards appeared in the doorway.

"I wish you would learn how to behave in front of company, Ned," she said. "My name is Lacey," she said to Preston. "In case you're interested." Lacey performed her version of the dying swan, including quacks, honks, and crippled attempts at flight. Ned tried to break up the act with machine-gun fire and strafing runs, and Reeser had to remove him from the room. After lecturing Ned, he puttered in the kitchen. He could hear Sarah and Preston chatting and laughing.

Reeser remembered two guests who'd visited just before the idea of divorce first bloomed in his first marriage. Peter Weslaw had come with a package of his poems and a bead necklace and impressed Nicki, Reeser's first wife, with the life of freedom and creativity. Nancy Souvain had come, it was Labor Day Weekend, and told Nicki she'd changed, she'd given up, and that the two of them didn't have much in common anymore. Nicki had cried hard about her lost life. She looked away from Reeser, and when she looked back, she was talking about divorce.

When Reeser came back into the room, Preston was telling Sarah about the monastery he'd been staying in. "It's Benedictine," he said. "At the most, there's never more than ten people. You have to drive over twelve miles of dirt road to get there. It's in the middle of a canyon in New Mexico."

"What do you do there?" said Sarah.

"Meditate," said Reeser.

"I meditate sometimes," said Sarah.

"What are you looking for?" said Preston.

"Oh, I don't know," said Sarah. "The usual stuff, I guess. Who am I? That sort of thing."

"I don't think that's just the usual stuff," said Preston, "I don't know any other question that's more important."

"What are you looking for?" said Sarah.

"I'm not sure there's a word for it," said Preston. "Maybe bliss comes closest."

"I don't know about bliss," said Sarah. "Is that pleasure, or what?"

"Beyond pleasure," said Preston. "It has something to do with extinction, I think. Being nothing. Conscious oblivion. Memory of the stone. I can't say what it is, since I've never experienced it."

"Then how come you know it exists?" said Sarah. "Don't you run the risk of chasing after something that might not be there?"

"The beast in the jungle?" said Reeser.

"Don't think I'm not afraid of that," said Preston. "I've had a history of wild goose chases. . . ." He went on to tell them that the issue he and Jill had gotten divorced over was children. Jill wanted to have one. Preston wanted to have a child with Jill, but something happened to him which made it impossible. He couldn't put it into words, but it had to do with the feeling that he was being called.

"Maybe it was just your own voice saying, 'Don't get involved, don't get tied down,'" said Sarah.

"Maybe," said Preston. He smiled bitterly. "And maybe bliss is death."

"Maybe it's one of those things that's in the chasing rather than the catching," said Reeser. "You know—getting there is half the fun." His voice trailed off. "When you go Greyhound."

"But the only thing I have to go on," said Preston, looking intensely at Sarah, "is that I've met a few people who seem to have found it."

"At the monastery?" said Sarah.

"There . . . and in India," said Preston.

"You've been to India?" said Sarah.

"Not exactly," said Preston. "There's a monk there I'm interested in."

"You're going to India?" said Sarah.

"I've been going there in a way."

Sarah touched her temples. "You mean this way?" she said. "What's this monk's name?"

"He doesn't have a name," said Preston. "It's possible he never existed."

Sarah left the room without saying anything. Reeser couldn't tell if she'd been moved, threatened, or just annoyed. She might return with some sort of mystical mark on her forehead, or she might come back in yelling that she wouldn't have an flagellants spilling blood on her oriental carpets. Reeser took out his photos of the Brooks Range. Preston's spirits changed.

"God, it's beautiful, Henry," he said. They were looking down the valley of a small glacial stream, banked with sedge tussocks and wild flowers. White fog rolled over the tops of the blue mountains like a great surf. "What the hell are we doing here?" said Preston. "Let's head for the Noattuk." Sarah had come back into the room with coffee.

"What are we doing here?" she said. "Why can't we pack our bags and head for Barter Island? Because next week I'm going into the hospital to have my bum knee carved up. Because we've paid in advance for ten weeks of trombone lessons for Ned, and Lacey's halfway into getting her braces." Her voice was rising and her eyes shone. "Why are we sitting here languishing, consumed by our own crass materialism?"

"Sarah," said Reeser. But Sarah was on her feet.

"Do you want to know why we can't follow you to Tibet to find your guru in his remote, blissful cave? Well, I'll tell you why. It's because Hank here has Rotary on Thursdays and I'm on the Altar Guild of the Country Club Christian Church. That's why." There was a silence. Sarah looked hard at Preston. Then her eyes squinted and she was laughing. For a moment, Preston looked confused. Then he began to laugh hard. "Obviously I've had too much to drink," said Sarah, falling back into her chair. "My jokes aren't that funny."

"You had me worried," said Preston. "I thought I was going to get crucified." He laughed again and slapped his hand on the arm of his chair. Suddenly, his face was transfixed with pain and he yelled.

"What's the matter?" said Reeser. Preston stood up and showed his hand. An upholstery pin fell to the floor and a thin bead of blood dripped from Preston's hand.

"Oh, my God," said Sarah. "It's the stigmata."

They talked and drank. The subject turned to Iran, and Preston said he was interested in the idea of a religious revolution. The Ayatollah wasn't any crazier than the people who were playing with H-Bombs, and the revolt against materialism and consumption, the vehement thirst for a spiritual correlative wasn't hard to understand. Reeser imagined Preston dressed like a bedouin with a scimitar in his hand at the door of the American Embassy. Listening to Preston, it seemed to him that revolutionaries and monks are people who have no responsibilities. They don't have mothers-in-law with broken hips and children who wet their beds. People who don't have cranky kids and monthly payments to worry about are troublemakers. They are alone, and having no one to love and fight with, they want to love, embrace, and devour humanity. Angels in helmets.

"The trouble with the Ayatollah's idea," said Reeser, "is that you can't get back to the thirteenth century from where we are today without the aid of the computer."

"I like your broccoli," Preston said to Sarah. "You're the only cook I know beside myself who can get it hot and keep it crisp at the same time." Sarah laughed and faked a blush.

"The secret's in the microwave," she said. "Reeser thinks it's dog food."

"I'd be happy to be a dog if I got dishes like that," said Preston. "I like to eat. But the biggest high I've had is not eating at all."

"What do you mean?" said Sarah.

"Fasting. I just did a six-day fast at the monastery."

"I thought you looked a little gaunt," said Sarah. "Six days. Wow! How many pounds did you drop?"

"I don't know," said Preston. "I wasn't dieting. I didn't weigh myself."

"It must have been strange," said Sarah.

Preston smiled distantly. "It was strange. Strange and painful. I mean, it was probably the most beautiful time I've ever spent. You can see why fasting is at the heart of any religion."

"If I went six days without food . . .," said Sarah. "God, I bet you weigh less than I do."

Something about Preston's line with Sarah seemed almost effeminate to Reeser. It was like two housewives discussing recipes or washday miracles. He had to check himself from piping in with something like, "How do you two get your whites so white?" He felt out of it. He watched Sarah. It seemed as if she was affecting disdain for

Preston and a certain tomboy air to mask her fascination with him. It was obvious that Preston was enjoying the company of a woman after two months in the monastery. In fact, he was seducing her. He was playing a game—attracting her, arousing desire so that he could test himself and savor the pleasure of abstinence. Reeser remembered how Ghandi slept with two women, so that his chastity would be more rigorous, tantalizing and sublime. *These ascetics are the ultimate erotics*, Reeser thought. *Their fasting is gluttonous.*

"I fasted once," said Reeser. "As the day wore on, I got less and less hungry. By six o'clock, I had no appetite at all. I thought, 'This is easy. I'll keep it up for a few days, have a few visions, lose a few pounds.' Then, about seven-thirty, I had my first vision. It was the image of an entire slab of corned beef, iridescent purple corned beef covered with horseradish lying on a plate waiting in my refrigerator. Without any struggle, without guilt or hesitation, I went to the refrigerator and devoured the entire slab standing up. I ate it with both hands like a piece of pie. I didn't even sit down. By the way, Pres—I weighed over two hundred pounds at the time."

"You don't look it now," said Preston.

"I dropped about fifteen pounds on the Brooks Range trip," said Reeser. "We had our rations scooped out into Sierra Cups, you know. A scoop for breakfast, a scoop for dinner, and a fig and a cracker for lunch. If you're hungry for more, it's tough. Just like Oliver Twist. There's no Quik Trip around, no one you can take your cup to and ask for more. It's easy to lose weight in the Brooks Range. We did have gorp for emergencies. I woke up a couple of times with hunger attacks and crammed handfuls of gorp into my mouth."

The kids came down to say goodnight and everyone played a round of a word game. Reeser could only come up with simple words—'sat,' 'off,' 'it.' He watched Preston deftly manipulate the letter blocks, producing compound and exotic words like a sorcerer—'agony,' 'imitate,' 'drowsy.' Reeser cursed himself as he saw words materialize that he should have caught. He felt competitive, hostile, as if every word were a weapon.

"Don't let him beat you, Dad," said Ned. Reeser felt his mind freeze. He wanted to win so badly—for Sarah—that he couldn't think. He was reminded of the myths where someone's enemy appeared in his house and the laws of hospitality and the inviolability of the guest forced the host to feed and bed him—Hunding finds Siegmund *im eig'nem Haus* flirting with his wife: "My house holds you, Wolfing, today; but tomorrow your weapons must defend you."

Reeser remembered again the two guests who'd invaded his house and sprinkled poison on his first marriage. They had both talked bravely of independence, nonconformity, and mocked the straight life, money, security. Then, shortly after their visits, they had both married—the poet to some girl who claimed a distant relation to the Du Ponts, the girl to a stockbroker with a half-interest in a Lear jet.

Reeser put the kids to bed. When he came back down, Preston and Sarah were having coffee, port, and cheese. *I could go back to living alone,* Reeser thought. *I made it once before. I could find my way back to that cabin on Lake Shrader and live alone. What is it that women fall in love with?* Reeser thought that sometimes when he made love to Sarah, he imagined other women. *Whose home is this?* he thought. *Whose guest am I?* He remembered the story of how Zeus and Mercury came down to earth disguised as beggars, and how everyone turned them away until they came to the hut of Philemon and Baucis. The gods destroyed everyone who'd refused them their hearths, and made Philemon and Baucis immortal in the linden and the oak. "How do you like them apples, Yorick?" he said to his dog. Yorick rolled over on his pillow and snorted without opening his eyes.

The grandfather clock chimed, and Preston got up to go. "I'm just not ready for comfort," he said, looking around the room. It seemed to Reeser that he was saying, "I'm not quite ready to become a slave to possessions."

"About the Cadillac, Henry," said Preston. "In case you were thinking about holding it up as contrary evidence—it's my parents'."

"The thought never crossed my mind," said Reeser. As they walked towards the door Preston reached out and spun the leather arm chair on its swivel.

"Is that a real Herman Miller, Henry?" he said.

"No, it's a fake," said Reeser. "Like all the objects of our senses."

"But it's an authentic reproduction," said Preston.

"Oh, for sure," said Reeser. "It's a reasonable facsimile."

"Well, then it's real," said Preston. "It'll go up in value." He stopped in the hallway and put on a navy knit cap. He pulled it down over his forehead and looked at Reeser with his eyebrows raised as if inviting approval. "Well, Hank," he said. "Are you happy?" Reeser hated that question. It was like an accusation. It never seemed to be asked with good intentions, it was always as if the questioner was hoping for a confession of misery. There is something in the downfall of our best friends which is not unpleasant to us, said some philosophical authority. How can you assert that you're happy without sounding

like you're covering something up? "You have all this—yes—but has it made you happy?" That's what the question meant. Reeser wished the space between him and Preston was stacked with real Herman Miller chairs, fin de siècles, Louis Quinzes, Lafite Rothschilds. *Who the hell is happy?*

"Yes, of course I'm happy," said Reeser. "The Sanitation Department says they may have an opening for me any day. I won my '53 Plymouth free and clear. I haven't blacked out for three weeks now, and my nerves are settling down just great. I have prospects, that's what counts. Am I happy? Gwaan!" Preston laughed and patted Reeser on the head.

They shook hands out by the Cadillac. Reeser thought of the two of them shaking hands over the last twenty years, across the country, the Atlantic and back, in an Episcopal church in New Haven, a basketball court in Columbia, Missouri, a duck blind in the Cheyenne Bottoms, a cemetery in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. He looked at Preston without saying anything and as if he were trying to beam some power through his eyes that would make them eighteen again. He wanted Preston to say something, some statement of recognition.

"You've turned into a real family man," said Preston. This wasn't what Reeser wanted. It made him wince and he felt tension in his sinews. It sounded patronizing. What he wanted was Preston to confess that he envied him, that he realized he'd thrown away his life, he was an outcast from life's feast, because he'd saved himself for some vain dream. Preston looked back at the house. The downstairs lights were going off.

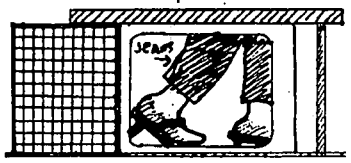
"You have a nice family, Hank," he said. "It looks good."

Reeser looked at him and saw that he was smiling, not his ironic smile, but a transparent, smiling "yes." He knew that this was what he'd wanted Preston to say. That they were both beyond judgment now, that there was no longer anything to prove, but that they simply were, they were forty, they were ready and alive. That was enough. That was what Reeser wanted to hear. No confessions, no accusations, but simply that it was good. He liked the way Preston had said it. It sounded like something a shaman would say. It sounded like a blessing: "It is good."

Preston slipped into the driver's seat and made a jaunty, waving gesture with the car keys. Reeser nodded as if in assent. As he watched the car move off with a silent, almost funereal gravity, he felt as if some shape were leaving his body and following, seated now too behind the wheel of the luminous Cadillac, and that he too was passing alone back

through the long alleys of battered stalks and bent cane and the dead December prairie flanking the turnpike to Kansas City. He turned and jogged up the incline of the lawn, even though he was out of shape and forty, clumsily but with a sense of weightlessness. And he conjured an image leaving the rear-view mirror of the vanishing car, jogging back up the street to catch him, joining him there and entering again as he returned.

(CONT.)

TIME	VIDEO	AUDIO	SIDE VISUAL	LIVE
	(BLK)	(SIL)	B. WIRE CONT.	
	GETTY WALKING ON TREADMILL	SOUND OF RAIN MAY 23, 1942 "IT WAS CLEAR UNTIL THE RAIN STARTED IN THE EVENING ... AS ALWAYS THE ENTIRE DAY WAS MONOTONOUS. DURING THE EVENING OGISHIMA + I PAID A VISIT TO KOBAYASHI SAN WHO WAS ILL. EVEN IF YOU HAVE HEARING IT IS NOT VERY PLEASANT NOWADAYS.	 (B-WIRE)	
	FADES OUT	(RAIN) SOUNDS OF MACHINE GUNS IN JAM BOX TAPE I WENT TO BED LISTENING TO THE RAINDROPS THAT SOUNDED LIKE MACHINEGUNS"	 JAM BOX (B-WIRE)	2 FIGURES + DOLL SLOWLY WALK THROUGH TV + OUT
		OUT	BLK	BLK

ANTONYA NELSON

We Get Along Here Just Fine

We get along here just fine, I tell them all, daddy Hal and me, I got no complaints, but they take him out anyway and Velma's crying and Lilac's trying to look like she's crying and Louis, he's holding my shoulder. I can't believe how big his hand is. I look up and there are those melty eyes I wish were mine, they are so peaceful.

"Ain't nobody coulda loved you more'n him, Erleen." He looks out our window toward those stupid railroad ties, all in a circle without a single trailer parked at them. His pretty eyes are far away, somewhere I can't see, "And nothing you can do about them clouds, Erleen, they just keep a' comin'.

"Ain't no one here but us niggers," he hoots.

"Chickens," I say, "ain't no one here but us *chickens*," but daddy Hal just laughs and laughs. And in'll walk any one of his old friends and drop down in our paisley chair. All of them act like they been trudging plenty of miles to our house and barely made it and say, "Whoo-eee, Halsey, whatta haul I have *had*." Naturally, I bring out something for them to eat on while they're here, but mostly they chew at each other.

I guess you get used to wherever you been set down and pretty soon don't much think about it anymore. That's the way I figure my daddy Hal. He's been living in our old house since he was real little, points at the wax pictures he made under the steps sometimes and says, "Done that when I was only four," and he leans forward, hands closing on his knees, breathing in your face. "Near to burn the place down and I blamed it on my sister." Of course, everybody knows his sister, Velma, and they all get a big laugh out of that. I've heard it a million times. Then he always tells the rest of the stories about being little in

this house, about all the old niggers who lived in the barn with the cows. I learned to call them Blacks, but Hal, he won't listen to that. Once his friend black Louis was over, who has the prettiest eyes, soft and melty as frosting. My daddy Hal was telling about the niggers in the barn and them talking to the cows. They did talk to the cows. My mama said the first time she saw Hal he was disciplining a nigger about talking all the time to those cows, but mama said cows gave better milk when they were talked to, and the best when she sang to them. She said they kind of purred. Anyway, Louis was smiling with his pretty eyes and I was turning red while Hal just went on and on and every "nigger" jumped at my ears, so I couldn't hear anything else, just nigger, nigger, nigger. I thought he was doing it on my account, telling me he knew what's what with black skins. "They ain't neither 'black,'" he would say, "they's brown chocolate, nee-gro. Nigger." Louis is a big man, I knew he could crumble Hal up like a corn husk and sweep him out the door. Right then I wouldn't have blamed Louis a bit, not at all, but he only smiled and rocked, kind of sad, I thought, in our paisley chair. I squirmed in my old wood chair, not looking very often at his melty eyes.

That night daddy Hal got real sick, I knew it because I couldn't get him to tell one story. I threw him all the little hints about starting up a tale and he let those throws land at his feet, which were wrapped up in blankets and resting on pillows. I teased him about his tender feet and he just sighed and I was sorry. The room was hotter'n I could stand it, I felt like running outside with nothing on, but I just opened my window and poked my nose out, letting fresh air in my lungs just to revive them. They felt like they'd sucked all the hot old air they could take. Aunt Velma came over and daddy Hal and me were none too happy. She talks as much as Hal but it isn't pleasing and I can't fade her out. Her mouth goes crooked, which makes her words come out full of o's and r's. Her favorite word is ornery, oornree. Her voice banged on the air around my head that night, and I had to hear it all. And she brought her horrible girl Lilac who I would have had to entertain, except daddy Hal was sick and even Velma could see I wasn't to be pushed too far any direction. Lilac had to sit on the rug by herself, and she whined.

I saw Rooney come up outside while Velma was here, but I knew he wouldn't come in, not a chance. Velma can't stand Rooney, especially now. She puts her lips together all wrinkled when daddy Hal asks where he is. It used to be that Velma just didn't like to talk to Rooney. He stops in the middle of speaking to draw on his beat-up

pipe, finding his next word. Velma likes conversation to go zipping along, with her doing the most of it.

Rooney's the one who had the idea about the trailer campground in the first place. He says one night, after they've been drinking, "Hals, you gots a good piece of highway property, you do." Well, it's good property but the highway's got nothing to do with it. Daddy Hal was quiet, giving Rooney time to collect what's running around in his head. I sit still myself, waiting. He proceeds to go into big detail of a trailer campsite we could set up next to the highway. For recreational vehicles on their way to Birmingham. I wanted to ask why he thought recreational vehicles would be heading for Birmingham and why any of them that were would want to stop just one hundred and fifty miles away from it, especially out here in the middle of nothing, but I didn't. I sat in my corner needlepointing dark blue ducks. I am resolved to be unlike my aunt, and right then I felt a wave of Velma coming over me. So I was quiet, but listening and watching daddy Hal. He kind of perked up. I mean, his head tipped forward and one hand started moving on the rocker arm, tapping a little, while the other fluffed his hair, which means he's thinking. I knew we'd never get our chicken shack built or dig our new well if Rooney convinced him of this lame idea, so I finally asked Rooney if he really thought there were recreational vehicles out in this neck of the woods. It was my big mistake. Rooney even stood up, no pauses, and told us how he'd been out sitting on our hill for a couple of days now counting recreational vehicles go by. Round about four an hour. Well, I did us in on that one. Daddy Hal says, "Four an hour." Still tapping away at the rocker, pulling on his hair. But I've seen those vehicles. They all have little motorcycles on them, probably would tear the bejeez out of my garden and scare all the chickens. "I vote no," I said, but daddy Hal wasn't listening to me. The very next day he bought a bunch of railroad ties and set them in a big circle next to the highway. Now, I wish those vehicles would have stopped here. One, anyway. Morely, I guess I wish old Rooney would have kept his mouth shut and his ideas running around in his own head, or that I had jumped right in like a Velma and said what a lot of foolishness it all was. But that's spilt milk I'm not going to cry about now. Nope.

So daddy Hal dragged in some limestone boulders to make a fire pit in the middle of the railroad ties. I think he visioned a bunch of those recreational vehicles put together end to end like a wagon train with everybody singing around a bonfire under the moon. Harmonicas and coyotes, too. I guess it was a pleasing sort of thought, but not for

real, I knew that. He had to roll the boulders off of our hill, and I couldn't hang clothes for fear of being flattened out by one come banging down. He'd holler and I'd go dashing into the house, yelling for the chickens and they'd come running. They put me to mind of old fat ladies with their skirts pulled up, stepping kind of dainty, but quick. A boulder'd come thunking through, which he always told me about after he pushed it off, barely time to get myself in. The last rock got one of the chicken legs but I made him kill her, wasn't my fault, after all, and we had her fried for supper.

After the pit he put up an outhouse. Just one. I sat on top of our hill smoking and watched him build it that day. He made it out of old KEEP OUT signs from when we were keeping people out, back in hippy days. A keep outhouse. He painted it white but I could still read the signs. The roof was slanted funny; anything that fell on it would roll off one corner. It looked like something the kids in my Sunday school class would make out of popsicle sticks or some such. He worked all day on that little building, so hard I didn't have the heart to tell him he was going to have to make another for the ladies. Maybe out of NO HUNTING signs. But I bet those recreational vehicles got their own stools anyway. Wouldn't surprise me, but I didn't tell him that either.

He and Rooney took to standing out by the highway or sitting on the ties, waving like fools at the traffic and rearranging the boulders around the fire pit. Velma's the one who brought up the fact that we got no wood out there "to build a far with." So Rooney talked my daddy Hal into hacking up trees. They both knew that wasn't going to do a 67-year-old any good whatsoever. I could see the axe handle hang in the air for just a second every time daddy Hal swung up. The blade'd catch there behind his head like it was going to pull him over on his back, and then he seemed to just barely get a hold of it and it'd come sailing down, whack, into the wood.

Rooney says he don't believe in God. No god at all of any kind. But that strikes me like what old Clarence Pink used to say back in school about it being okay to stare at blind folks because they can't see you looking. Clarence Pink has probably been eyeing those blind girls at the Institute for some years, and I think Rooney feels no shame about leading my daddy this way simply for the reason that there is no god watching. But me, I would be in a rotten stink all day, even if there wasn't eyes on me, God's or anybody's. I got my own eyes on me. Oh, I pretend sometimes there are other eyes on me, somebody's. Maybe some boy I don't know yet, and he likes the things I do. He thinks I look

lonely and mysterious when I am sitting on the hill with my arms around my knees, watching the sky and the birds. He thinks it's pretty nice when I am very quiet and the little things in the trees and underground come out even though I'm right there looking. Of course, he doesn't get to see everything, like when I sing out loud or smoke my cigarettes. Doesn't seem he'd probably like that, whoever he is. It used to be Clarence Pink I imagined was seeing me, but then he got too foolish and I didn't want him watching at all, pretend or otherways. I used to get Clarence's papers at school and trace my pencil over his words, try to see how he wrote, I thought he was so great. Makes me a bit sick to think over that again. Well, I am digressing from the main project here. You can tell old Rooney's got no conscience though, that's for sure.

Rooney says four recreational vehicles (he says it vee-*hicles*) every one hour will be pulling into our trailer site to set up for the night. Of course he doesn't say where all those recreational vehicle people will be buying their food to eat around that bonfire, but they'll be buying at Mabel and Rooney Rice's store, across our highway. That place has nothing but Mabel Rice's favorite things, Hershey chocolate and tomato soup. They got four kinds of mustard and not one kind of catsup; Mabel says, real nasty when I ask, use her tomato soup for catsup. I go to Albertville, fifty-three miles away, where there is an A&P run by reasonable folk.

It rained most of July. Every day would start out okay, but by the time the recreational vehicles were coming along, late afternoon, the clouds were piling over. They seemed real anxious to get here, bubbling like gray foam, from the North, gathered above our trailer campground to pour down on us for an hour or so. Then it'd be muck out there and the ties would sink a little bit.

Daddy Hal decided the first of August all we needed was some advertising. He and Rooney painted up some boards to put along Highway 75 and spent a week driving up and down looking at them, seeing if they were effective. Still no recreational vehicles stopped and daddy Hal developed a weak back. He began to stay inside during the day, looking out our picture window toward the campground. Louis and Rooney came over to discuss all their business and this and that and say how troublesome the world and those clouds was. One would say, "Hard to live, it is." And another would shake his head like yep, sure is hard. Then one'd find some cards and shuffle for awhile.

"Game of runner?"

"Nah, don't recall them rules."

"Five-high?"

"Nah, had enough of that."

"Dirty Eight?"

"That's for kids," quiet for awhile, "but that be okay, if *you* want. . ."

And then they played Dirty Eight all afternoon. If I was bored I'd come in and tell them what the others had. Those days got to be more and more, watching the trailer court while the rain ran down the window and made daddy Hal's back ache. I guess that'd have been okay with me, but daddy Hal seemed so tired all of the time then.

His friends all call me Erleens, like there was more than one of me hopping around. Maybe that's the way it seems to their rheumy old eyes. I wish there was two of me out here, we would have a better time.

We had a hell of a night near the last. The wind blew hard everywhere, fall coming, and daddy Hal and me sat here lonely with each other and snapping. I was making some bread with the end of the flour. Maybe my hands were shaking because I was cold or maybe because I was mad at the thing in me that makes me mad, I don't know. But I let loose of the jar of flour and it fell onto the floor, broke into bits. Daddy Hal jumped from the paisley chair and screeched at me. Well, I scooped up the mess and put in the best of what we had, dates and molasses and baked it up. Why I did it I don't know. Maybe all that quiet wind blowing. I waited in the kitchen right by the oven, warm and it smelled good, till the bread was done and then cut me a slice and bit into little pieces of glass. I knew they were there all the time, why'd I go on cooking? The paisley chair kept rocking and squeaking and daddy said bring him a slice. Mean tears were falling off my face and the bread was mushing around in my mouth, and I hollered it's full of glass, daddy, all full of glass and cried till I choked. Daddy Hal brought himself into the kitchen, holding his back, and was about to say something about mama never wasted like that, but he must have had some sense to shut that up. He stood there looking at the rest of the flour on the floor, putting his hands up like he was going to touch me, and then dropping them back at his sides, like he was lost. It was awful.

Later, I crumbled that bread and threw it to the birds. Of course, I decided right after I'd thrown it to them that I didn't want them cutting their throats on glass, so daddy Hal and me went out and gathered up all the pieces in our robes.

Daddy Hal didn't give Velma the pleasure of dying while she and Lilac were there, oh no. He waited till much later, when I was asleep

and the fire was out. Then he just kicked over, and I woke up to no noise, but it was the kind of a quiet that comes right after an important and short sound, too quiet. I knew he'd died. I waited in my quilts and prayed I'd hear something, any old thing. Nothing. Little snakes of cold came creeping up my legs, settled in my stomach. I thought about my mama. She was three round parts, top, middle and bottom like a number eight with a head, but I am surely my daddy's daughter, his bones and all. We are skinny and straight with skinny and straight hair. When my mama died, daddy Hal said only thing to do was to plant. He planted quite a bit that year. Flowers, all of our bud trees, and plenty of vegetables. We buried mama in back, under her mimosa tree and he cut down all the vines that tried to grow around the trunk. I feel like those vines have come back and are growing around my legs, strangling me like they almost did our mimosa. Of course, that's just a dream I had that night.

I used to dream that Mama came back. She always was walking from the mimosa with her head down so I couldn't see her face. Her face was the first thing I forgot, and I used to be so unhappy that my dreams couldn't bring it back.

It was along these paths my thoughts went running that night daddy Hal died. I started thinking about losing his face too, so I got up in the cold and shivered all the way downstairs to his bed by the burnt-out fire. Well, I knew he was dead before I got there, so I don't know why I took to screaming then instead of hours before, but I did. Started howling. I knew I'd get Mabel Rice but I didn't care. There was my daddy Hal's face, clear as clear is, I looked in his eyes to see if there was something in them that he saw last, still reflecting, I've read about that, but there was nothing. They weren't shiny even. While I was wailing I was keeping part of my head unsentimenting, saying remember those eyes and the long hairs around them, recall those busted veins on his nose, get an image of his teeth, one missing, and the slumping shoulders, lower because of the railroad ties, lowest of all when he was drunk. Or asleep. Don't forget his face. And I cried harder yet because my mama's face was lots nicer'n his and if I remembered one it should have been hers.

I always have been partial to morning glories. I like their colors, I like their faces. I can't say they make me happy, exactly, but they look so full of big things early in the morning, opening up and being bright as bright is. They appear to be wondering at all that light, being amazed as little children. But then seems like sometime in the day, about noon, when the sun gets to be just a touch too much, dust's thick, they shut on up. They close pretty fast, I have noticed, like tiny fists.

They've stayed around through October this year, the last of the blues are hanging onto our busted fence. Maybe their seeds'll blow all over this yard. Maybe they'll come up everywhere. I sure would like to wake up one day in the spring, not too far from now, and see those old rail ties sprouting morning glory faces. Sure would be a pleasing thing.

(CONT)

TIME	VIDEO	AUDIO	SIDE VISUAL	LIVE
	(BLK)	STORM SOUNDS BEGINS ('LIGHTNING & THUNDER)	B-WIPE SLIDE UP COVERS ENTIRE SET (B-W REVERSE)	
	CRUMP FUTONS ALT.	AUG. 8, 27, 1992	STROBE	KURUDO STARTS STROBE.

"Storm, what a view! I have never seen such a dust storm. I stayed in my room and looked out the window. It was so dark we were all afraid to move. Pessimistic words came out of everyone's mouth. We were sent to such a harsh place!"

"HARSH" FUTONS (CONT.)	KURUDO SCREAMS "WE WERE SENT TO SUCH A HARSH PLACE" IN JAPANESE	B-W WIPE SHOT CONT.	
ALT.	REPEAT	(CONT.)	
FADE TO BLACK	REPEAT		KURUDO TURNS STROBE OFF

REVIEWS

BRIAN DALDORPH

Starting a Swan Dive by Patricia Cleary Miller. Bookmark Press (University of Missouri, Kansas City, MO 64110), 1993. 60 pages. $9 paper.

Amanda starts a swan dive into Glacier Lake then flies through a rainbow, over Saskatchewan and Thunder Bay, right into the Astors' New York drawing room. She opens a Faberge egg, extracts the "golden embryo," and stashes it in her sleeve praying that "back in Saskatoon / It would hatch into a lover." The vibrant surrealism of "Amanda and the Egg," drawn, it would seem, from the great surrealist artists, is very much rooted in the earthier concerns of life, especially the quest for love. Much of Miller's poetry, divided into three sections in this collection, shows the transformation of the mundane into the meaningful by the intensity of love.

Many of the poems in *Starting a Swan Dive* are concerned with the anguish of love lost or love desired, from the woman's perspective. Thus Miller often writes about distance and separation, as in "Is It Snowing in Strasbourg?":

> Right after I mailed your letter, you phoned,
> Your voice crisp through the satellite:
> "Meet me in Toronto in February."

These crisp, tight lines are typical of much of the poetry here. Miller writes of the ravages of time, of disappointments, using the recurring image of fading blooms: "Before they turn brown / I will dry the petals / on porcelain plates," "The petals will be brown," " . . . The maple tree's fibrous leaves. / Last month I kneaded one / Till all its brown crumbs

knotted." Miller contrasts impermanent gold with flowering love, often symbolized by a yellow rose. In the last three lines of "For Maurice the First Time," Miller combines the two key symbols:

> Should I come here again,
> The petals will be brown,
> But I will want a yellow rose.

Poems in the first section of the book have sparse, uncluttered lines, which certainly adds punch and neatness, but something of the expansiveness of Miller's best poems is lost. There is the danger that concision leads to predictability, with the poet narrowing possibilities, especially for a poet who often uses plain language. This is evident in "Thyme," for example, which unfolds predictably as the persona muses about a distant lover. The poem ends:

> You have not written.
> You are in another country.
> Here it remains spring.

There is not enough happening in this language to make the poem striking.

Though Miller's subject matter is often conventional, her best poems transcend the humdrum material with sharp, often visual, imagery. "For Maurice, Who Moved to Canada" begins with the lover gone and the shards of mirror showing "Limp earlobe, hollow jaw, / Corded neck, white nape hairs, / Black widow's peak. // No face. // My fingers bleed." But love gives coherence and value:

> My Love holds up the mirror
> That reflects back to me
> My eyes like doves.
> I am a rose of Sharon,
> A lily of the valley.
> I am all fair and there is
> No flaw in me.
> I am Velazquez's Venus:
> Rose swirls lighting blue satin.
>
> When my Love leaves
> He drops the mirror.
> The fragments scatter.

With her lover gone, she becomes a Picasso again, grotesque, fragmented: "Red hawk nose, green egg eye, black jaw. / The shards scrape my face." In this powerful poem, Miller combines the emotional energy of love with the striking textures and colors of surrealist art.

Miller ends the first section with "Settling: After Maurice." When the divine intensity of love blows apart, the persona settles for scheduled liaisons with Jordan, swift afternoon delight at the Westin, the first Friday of the month, then "back at the office by two-thirty, max." It won't cost much: she buys it, and settles for "no gifts, no kisses. / No tears," the title of the first section of the book. The yearning of many of the poems in the first section sours to disillusion.

The second section of the book, "Seven Tines of a Pitchfork," begins with "Homage to Saint Theresa of Avila," another Miller woman misled by love, this one sneaking illicit love in the Four Seasons Hotel—"in the harsh light. / Hard cold sink"—before showing up, wrecked and a day late, at a church conference. Why is she driven to act in this desperate way? She considers escaping from earthly desires into a religion where the body is locked up and sexuality emerges as religious ecstasy:

> Oh, if she could be like those nuns
> who never dye or pluck or cinch,
> who stroll over their Japanese bridge
> by twos at sunset,
>
> who talk of the young angel,
> his great golden spear
> tipped in liquid fire
> plunging and plunging
> into the heart of Saint Theresa.

Miller's overt sexual imagery seems so much more appealing than her character's rather sordid little affair in a hotel, though the persona might recognize the work of the imagination in her vision of religious ecstasy.

In one of Miller's longer poems, "Sylvia," Sylvia is in a bind trying to decide between her husband and a lover, but after love-making with the latter she is content, for awhile, and "she could / not figure out how she had changed her mind / so many times that day with such calm grace." There is a "calm grace" about Miller's poems too, which often

complete themselves with a neat click like Yeats's lid of a box. Occasionally as I read, though, I was hungry for something a little more rambunctious, something more disturbed and disturbing, like Plath on a bad day instead of Sylvia's calm, graceful thoughts when her lover speaks to his wife:

"Hi, Agnes," he said

to his wife and turned his face into the bookcases;
so Sylvia thoughtfully went into the living room,
closing the library door behind her. She stared
out the bay window, stared at the willow tree,
thought its leaves looked like bamboo,
counted the branches: three horizontal, three vertical . . .

Miller's Sylvia is no Plath setting fire to Ted's books. No, the poetry here is poised, finely finished, balanced in content, form and organization. For example, there is a neat balance between "Mother Has Stopped Doing Her Sit-Ups," which begins, "Dad travels a lot. / I think he has a bimbo in Mobile," and the poem on the next page, "Everything My Mother Taught Me My Daughter Contradicts." These poems are from the Bobbie Ann Mason territory of sad, wasted lives, shopping malls, *Vogue*, and irritating habits: "She cleans closets: / Wets cotton balls in alcohol, / Swipes at the spots around the door-pulls." In many of the poems of the second section there is a wry acceptance of the way things are. "As I Finish My Laps," for example, shows the stability and tedium of marriage. At the pool, the persona eyes a Greek god rubbing suntan lotion on his girlfriend, then returns to her sleeping husband who, it is suggested, is like one of the poolside men, "fat and tattooed and too married."

In the first poem of the third section, "A Man I Barely Knew," a man gives the persona roses from his "burned-out garden." Throughout the collection there is a sense of aftermath, of sifting the wreckage to see what might be saved. Both the man and woman in this poem are survivors of abusive fathers, drawn together as survivors, though the possibility of love, symbolized in a garden rose bush, is thin cover. The poem ends, "The rose bush shielded us / from the noisy street."

When I first read *Starting a Swan Dive*, I was suddenly snapped out of Miller's physical and mental interiors when, in "A Skull Speaks of the Killing Grounds All Over Uganda," Miller, inspired by fellow BkMk poet Alfred Kisubi, writes of the killing fields of Uganda:

Ten years I have watched
this crossroads in Luwero,
land of green farms,
land my grandfathers plowed,
where my grandchildren sang,
where my grandfathers died,
where my children and grandchildren die.

They die for peace.

They die for no reason.

I watch the killing.
On every hill,
in every banana grove,
in the elephant grass,
beside the school,
beside the clinic,
more piles of bones.

The bones of eight hundred thousand people.

The book is strengthened by this surprising departure. This poem fits not at all in this collection, and fits all the better for that reason. I had felt the urge to tell some of Miller's solipsistic characters to look at the suffering world beyond their own narrow obsessions. "A Skull Speaks" is the first of four "political" poems: "Today We Eat Oranges in Bucharest," "Lonely in Lithuania," and "Friendly Fire." In these poems, she takes more chances, risks lines like this one ending "Lonely in Lithuania": "Shrieks claw the curtains, screams come at me." In the political contexts of these poems, even the plainest language becomes charged.

Miller's final line in the book, "Build your ballroom out over the water," summarizes her best poems, those involving risks, those in which her characters are on the edge, willing and compelled to take a chance.

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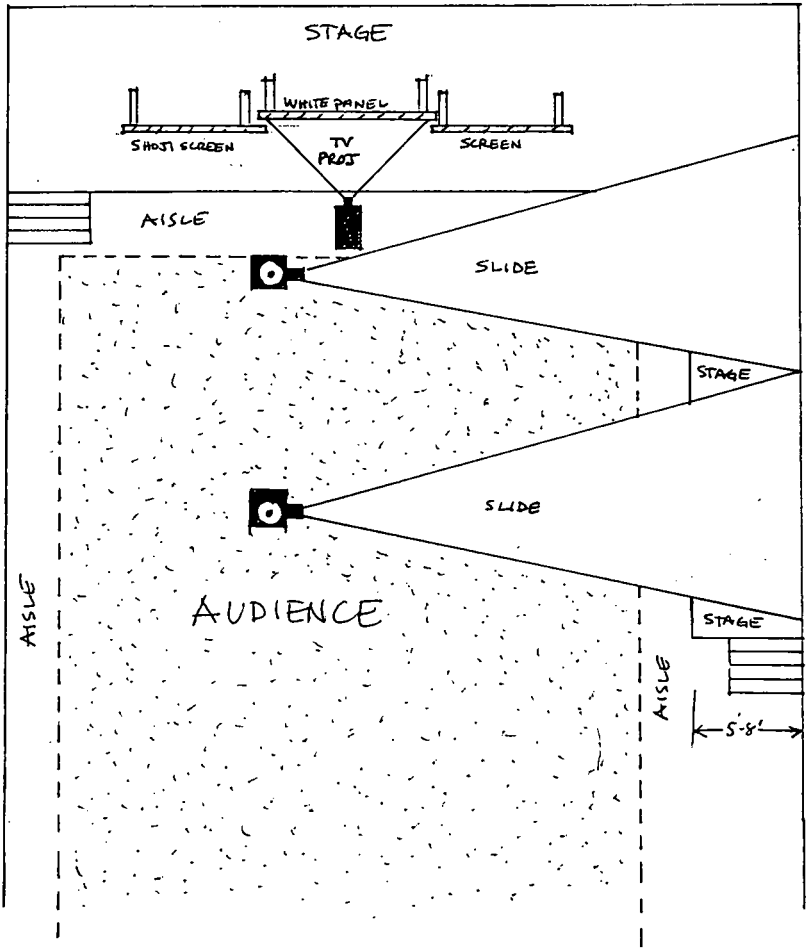
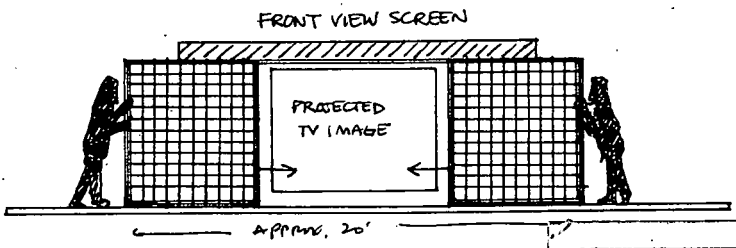
ARTWORK ACKNOWLEGEMENT

Cottonwood 51 features the work of Roger Shimomura. This issue draws material from the "performance notebook" compiled by Shimomura as he was in the process of putting together a performance piece entitled *The Last Sansei Story*. That piece, which draws material from diaries kept by Shimomura's grandmother, was performed originally at the Haskell Indian Junior College in Lawrence, Kansas on April 20, 1993, sponsored by the University of Kansas New Direction Series. One act of the performance, "Campfire Diaries," has been performed in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Washington, D.C.; Boulder, Colorado; Taos, New Mexico; and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The drawings included here provide an audio-visual script for Shimomura's performance piece and are drawn from various stages of the piece's development, including a sketch of the performance space itself, featured on the back cover. The front cover is a publicity still from *The Last Sansei Story* photographed by Pok-Chi Lau. Many of the quotations included in the drawings come from the diaries kept by Shimomura's grandmother.

STAGE ARRANGEMENT
(NOT TO SCALE)





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