

Cornfield Review

An Annual of the Creative Arts

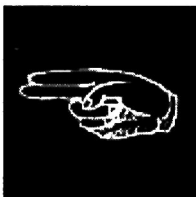
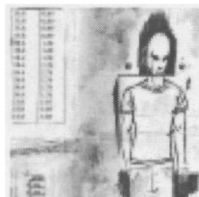
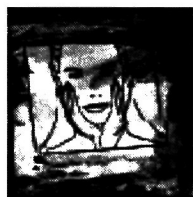


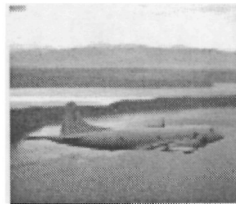
2003
2004

The Ohio State University at Marion

Cornfield Review







**The Ohio State
University**

at Marion

**Cornfield
Annual of the
Review**

Creative Arts

Volume 21

2003 - 2004



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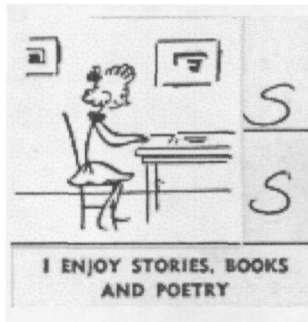
Faculty Advisor

Note

In these days of social and political conformity, the power of literature to startle and subvert is as necessary as ever. In February, a group of selected poets turned a White House invitation into a national protest against the invasion of Iraq. Throughout the country, poets and writers are risking arrest and ostracization in their efforts, through poetry and fiction and the personal essay, to dismantle the rhetorical absolutes that we hear at alarming rates in the news and from our fellow travelers. More than ever, editors seek stories, poems, and essays that show us new ways of seeing and believing, for what we see and what we believe are today confusing and suspect.

As editors of the *Cornfield Review*, our goal has been to carefully select contributions that speak truthfully of the world and of our lives. We have sought literature that is in tune with today's shifting notions of truth, literature that uses language with muscle and conveys a courageous voice. For this issue, we have selected poetry, fiction,

and creative nonfiction from submissions of OSU Marion students only; this issue marks the first in the twenty-seven-year history of the *Cornfield Review* to be produced by and solely comprised of contributions by OSU Marion students. We also pay tribute to Dr. Stuart Lishan, an early editor of the *Cornfield Review* and a beloved professor, in whom we see inspiration at work. In this issue, we reprint already published work in order to thank Dr. Lishan for his approach to literature and to hear his inimitable voice in the lines of these poems.



This publication would not be possible without the continued support of our deans, Dominic Dottavio and Greg Rose. For their ongoing encouragement, we thank the faculty of the English Department—Linda

Behan, Anne Bower, Jessica Cornelson, Marcia Dickson, Pete Dully, Stuart Lishan, Mike Lohre, and Matt Zambito. For their help with promotion and design, we thank Ellen Shaeffer and Lynda Todd. As witness to the mayhem, I attest to the dedication of the editors who firmly held contested ground and carefully sought integrity. And this year, we thank our two Summer Interns, Justin Bell for his vision and his ability to create, and Shawn Young for his collaboration in molding and polishing Issue 21.

—Jacquelyn Spangler



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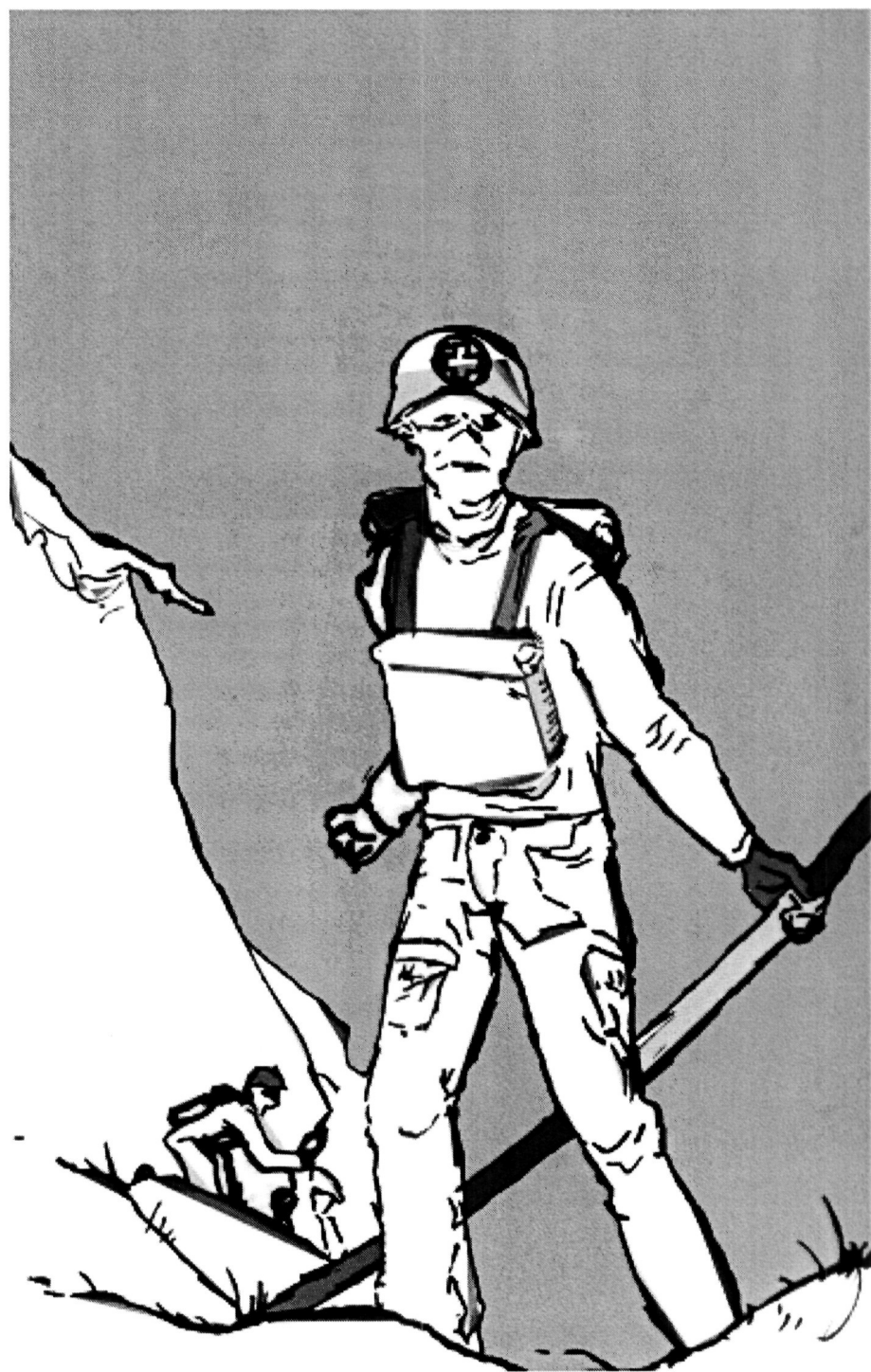
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Feature





Randall Barnett

That Takes the Reason Prisoner

He buttoned his travel orders, trip ticket, and the little, white envelope of pills into the pocket below the campaign ribbons. A staff sergeant gave him a brown envelope that contained instructions for his care if he needed treatment. At dawn, the corpsman handed each man a prophylactic kit as they climbed the steps of the bus to go to the train terminal in Cleveland.

The Terminal Tower was busy with traffic leaving for the holiday weekend; Memorial Day came on Monday this year. Another train had to be made up for non-priority travelers. He waited two hours and twenty minutes past his scheduled time of departure. An egg-salad sandwich he bought was stale. The orange soda with it was too sweet.

The train south was delayed by many interruptions. As he stood waiting to leave the train, the web strap of his barracks bag jerked. It wrenched the muscle beneath his right shoulder blade when the brakes hissed. The scar there itched.

Floor plates clicked and shuddered beneath his burnished, brown boots. He stood just inside the door of the third car. The other passengers, waiting behind him, were jostled as the car screeched and lurched.

The coach was gritty. Its dark, red upholstery was redolent of thousands of travelers, their cigarettes and secretions and sleeping bodies. The narrow window before his eyes misted. Then the door folded open as he pulled its handle.

R Barnett

When he stepped between the cars, slanting sunlight made him look down. He hesitated. A forbidding, rust-pitted, steel angle edged the concrete platform. Then a burly, florid man elbowed him aside: "Damn it, soldier, move your ass!"

He stepped awkwardly down onto the platform and thought, more than three years since I've eaten at home. The depot looked the same as when he left. He had finished his embarkation leave then. He remembered in a recorded speech he heard at Fort Leonard Wood, President Truman said something about home cooking. He saw the glaciers of the Rocky Mountains when they flew to Tacoma and Fort Lewis. In the ASCOM hospital, he heard President Eisenhower, as promised, had come to Korea the year before. From debarkation at Pusan to departure from Korea, he had been in the combat zone thirty months. Time was the difficult thing.

At the ASCOM hospital, they had taken the fragments out of his back. The scar had healed again, but it continued to itch sometimes. He had been four months in the hospital at Brecksville.

Tateh and Mama brought a birthday cake when they came to visit in February. Last month, they had come before Passover to visit him again. That was when he was getting therapy. His appetite was better now; six hours had passed since he threw away the remainder of the sandwich.

He shifted the barracks bag through the double doors into the empty waiting room of the passenger depot. The ticket agent looked out through the grill on his window.

"You want a cab?" he asked. "I got to telephone to get you a cab if you want one."

The letter he had sent to Mama and Tateh last week told them he would arrive on the earlier train. He answered, "I guess you'll have to call a taxi for me. Can I check this bag here?"

"Just shove it behind the door there, son," the ticket agent said. "I'll watch it for you. Ain't nobody going to mess with it."

If he could keep in mind the sequence in time, the other things were easy. The hard thing is time. "I used to live near here, but I've been gone," he said. "There was a tavern on Ohio Street; can I get a cup of coffee over there?"

"Sure, take your time. It'll be forty-five minutes or so before a cab gets here anyway. Not many folks come in on the three-forty these days. Are you stationed up north?"

"I've been at the Army hospital in Brecksville."

The brown envelope was stuffed into the top of his barracks bag. The ticket agent could not know what the instructions for his treatment implied.

"That's where they keep all them loonies that was brainwashed by the Communists, ain't it?" asked the ticket agent. "You seen any of them?"

The answer to that question was studied frequently at Brecksville. "They don't look much different from you or me. Does Linus Wheeler still run that tavern?"

"When Linus ain't laid up with arthritis or a hangover, he runs it, but his old lady runs it mostly."

At Wheeler's Beer & Eats, the spring whined on the screen door as he opened it. He closed the door gently behind him when he entered. Sudden noises startled him, and slamming doors sometimes caused him to contract painfully.

Linus Wheeler's daughter was bent over the deep sink behind the counter when he slid onto the leatherette covering a bar stool. Her dark hair was bobbed now, and she wore bangs like Mamie Eisenhower's above her arched eyebrows. Red, plastic cherries embellished her earrings, and red arabesques embroidered at the neckline of her peasant blouse made her skin look very fresh. She had been in the class that followed his, and he recalled she had worn Bobby Foltz's basketball letter.

When she looked up at him, he said, "You're working too hard, Dixie."

"Now ain't that the truth!" she said. "Omigod! It's Mayer! We all thought you was killed in Korea. Omigod! Dad talked to your father at the American Legion last week, and he never said nothing about you. We saw in the *Citizen Gazette* that you was reported missing more than a year ago, and we thought you was dead."

"No more dead than most folks around here," he said. "Can a ghost buy a cup of coffee here?"

"Folks here are as much alive as everybody else, Mayer. I don't believe in ghosts, but I'll give you a cup of coffee."

"Thanks Dixie. It's nice to find respect for the dead."

He thought he had lost the art of sociability, and he blushed in

embarrassment. Mention death and murder conversation; and so he accepted the coffee with tacit gratitude. The strong, hot coffee in the heavy, stoneware cup helped him slough off the lethargy of the tedious train ride. Dixie passed the telephone to him at the corner of the counter. No one at home answered his call.

He was perturbed when he returned to the depot to meet the taxicab. He told the driver the address and rode in silence. Cinderland's peaceful streets were shaded by trees in new leaf.

The taxicab stopped before the Dutch Colonial on Chestnut Avenue. At the end of the gravel driveway, he heaved the barracks bag off the pavement and trudged around the east corner of the house to the back door. Mabel Doubleday's climbing roses beside the neighboring house were as fragrant as he remembered. No one came to the door when he knocked.

He found the key in its usual place beneath the milk delivery box and let himself into the kitchen.

The familiar kitchen seemed strange. It was still, and the measured tick of the regulator clock quietly repeated on the wall above the samovar. The air was heavy with its rich Friday aroma. He opened the oven door of the gas range. A pudding of grated potatoes and onions and eggs was warming there. A roasting pan filled with slices of brisket of beef in brown gravy and a casserole containing carrots with prunes and honey perfumed the house with a savor

of Sabbath evening.



That Takes the Reason Prisoner

Beneath his combat boots, the scrubbed kitchen linoleum looked fragile. The starched ruffles of Mama's curtains were translucent in the dwindling sunlight as he looked out the west window above the kitchen sink. His sister, Bobby Foltz, and he had studied their homework here after school. The room seemed smaller now; the ceiling looked lower than he remembered. Remembering was his problem.

Two weeks after leaving Cinderland High School, he had received greetings from President Truman; he was ordered to report for induction. Then this kitchen was the secure center of his life. Now there were too many blanks in the time that had passed. He was damaged goods. The Army did not want him. Broken soldiers were not selling well now in a buyer's market. The problem was time.

Much that his friends in Cinderland had experienced in the blank time was obscure. He had never owned a car or gone on a vacation trip or worked at a daily job. He had never paid rent or written a check or intimately known a woman. When his friends in Cinderland entered college, he was in advanced infantry training. When his sister, Rivka married, he was reported missing in action.

Now he could not remember clearly; his secure center was lost. He thought he could be sure and safe if he could remember. Was the sureness taken from him? Was it consumed in anxiety or wasted away by dysentery or scorched by fever? It seemed that his assurance had fallen away as his nails fell out when his feet were frozen on a barren Asian

hillside. Was his confidence mired in the tidal flats of the Yellow Sea? Was it in that concrete box in the cave at Camp Nine near Kangdong?

He took one of the pills from the little, white envelope and swallowed it with a cup of water. He sat at the kitchen table and rested his elbows on its bleached, oak surface. He trembled. The sinews tightened in his neck. His head down upon his forearms, Mayer closed his eyes so he would not see the place that had made him safe.

In the stillness, the quiet repetition of the clock is amplified. With the rhythm of the clock's reverberation, he withdraws to the close, concrete box in the cave at the side of a muddy road along Taedong Gang. His knees draw toward his chest. His book heels on the stretcher of the chair, he feels as he squats on his ankles. He seems to press the concrete opposite the sliding door in the sheet iron ceiling.

He covers his ears to mute the hammering sound. The flesh throbs under the scab beneath his right shoulder blade. Gray light from holes in the iron ceiling pulses through his tight eyelids. Trying to breathe shallowly, he feels faint in the suffocating miasma of his filth. The fetid stench of the pail in the corner intrudes its reek to every neuron.

At dawn and before nightfall, when the hammering noise stops, the door in the iron ceiling rattles. He scuttles to raise the pail and cup and bottle above the door, and he turns his face to the wall. The cup of cold, cooked millet is put down beside the track of the door, and the bottle of water is against it. After he takes the cup and the bottle, the emptied

pail is dropped inside. The door slams; the bolt scrapes. The hammering noise begins.

When the hammering noise stops again, the wire-recorded voice, ringing in the iron-covered box, repeats its command: "No sleep," the voice says. "No sleep, no sleep. You have brought this contagion to us. You have infected our children. You will not sleep until you confess it. No sleep, no sleep, no sleep."

The voice has a cultivated accent and timbre. It is the resonant, modulated voice of Lieutenant Lee. He meets Lieutenant Lee in a warm, clay and thatch house. Lieutenant Lee is behind a table, and he stands before it. Lieutenant Lee tells him he is a probable progressive at Camp Twelve before he comes to the cave.

Lieutenant Lee sits on a chair in a country where chairs are curiosities and smokes Players Navy Cut Cigarettes. The Lieutenant shows him photographs of sick children, of dead women, of trenches filled with corpses. Lieutenant Lee surmises he is not a reactionary; that he is turning to the light of socialism.

He meets Lee dispassionately. He says: "Nathanson, Mayer A., Sergeant, US 52 404 731."

Then Lieutenant Lee sees him looking at the B-29's as they fly down the Taedong Valley to bomb P'yongyang. The men in tan, quilted clothes and black tennis shoes put him in the box in the cave. He is taken out to see Lieutenant Lee again after forty-two cups of grain, and again he says his name, rank, and number. Now he hears Lieutenant Lee's

recorded voice but does not heed it. The hammering contracts his cramped body, and he oscillates in its rhythm. In the meter of the hammering, he repeats the last words of his night prayer: "The Lord is with me, I shall not fear."

He curls his legs beneath him on the slippery floor in a space too small to lie down or straighten his neck. He contracts in spasms but does not listen to the hammering noise. His consciousness subdues the voice. In the daze of fever, he loses count of the cups of grain.

A day came when the door rattled too early on its track, and it was left open after the pail dropped. When he crawled out of the box, he was unable to raise his head. He looked through encrusted eyelids at his blackened fingernails in the sodden clay. He twitched convulsively and did not feel the lice.

An American gave him clean water to drink from a canteen. He was taken to the Neutral Zone in a truck and washed. There, progressive Americans gave him additional political indoctrination to take the light to America. The "Big Switch" was made in June. He was exchanged for four men in tan, quilted clothes and black tennis shoes.

It is eleven months since they took him to Freedom Village and the hospital. He is startled yet by sudden sounds and jerks painfully. The hated, pounding rock'n'roll music is ubiquitous in America; it abrades his nerves. In traffic he feels impelled to cover his ears and hunch his shoulders. The air is sweet in



R Barnett

the strange, familiar place, but his safe center is lost.

He heard tires on the gravel driveway behind the kitchen and the plosive closing of two doors. Keys jingled outside; the door latch rasped. Tateh reached inside to press the light switch beside the door. Mama stepped abruptly into her kitchen. She glanced at the clock. She stared when she saw him sitting at the table. Stricken, her face blanched. "Mayerleh!" she gasped, "*A klog i mir!* You frightened me!"

He stood and stepped past the corner of the table. "I look different in uniform, Mama. When you saw me last month at the hospital, I was still in pajamas."

He had forgotten how much his appearance had changed. He had lost a quarter of his weight, and he would never again be upright and healthy. The angularity of his head upon his neck had altered. The flesh and skin at this throat lost its tone. His eyes were much deeper in their orbits and shrouded by eyelids always swollen. To Mama, he appeared a wizened, stooping man who imitated her son.

Mama took the closely-trimmed temples between her hands, and she kissed the left side of his face and then the right. She pulled his face to her shoulder so that he could not see her tears. "You are safe now," she said. "We can keep *Shabbos* in peace."

Mama went into the dining room to dry her face with her handkerchief. Tateh patted Mayer on the cheek as he had when Mayer won a swimming race in sixth grade. He went to comfort Mama.

When Tateh returned to the kitchen, Mayer scented his familiar emanation of witch hazel and tobacco. The tactile welcome of Tateh's warm, strong grasp came to his hand. "Nu, Mayer, you made your Mama cry again. When you didn't come on the noon train, she was very upset. Then we went to make a condolence call; Max Rosenblatt died at mid-week. His family is sitting in seven days of mourning now. Mama feels tired out from cooking for them."

"They made you take a later train, didn't they? Soldiers are just marching freight for the railroads. Do you want a little schnapps?"

"No, Tateh, I can't drink. The pills that I take to keep me from cramping make me sick if I drink anything strong."

Tateh sighed as he surveyed his son's thin, tired face. Thirty-seven years before, when he was with the American Expeditionary Force, Tateh saw the men coming out of the trenches after the Meuse-Argonne offensive. He saw the look of men who anticipate the next noise, and he knew his son's remedy was beyond the practice of medical doctors.

"Help your Mama now, Mayer," Tateh said, "she needs you. You know you are the only son she has to care for. Since your sisters married, this house has been too empty for her."

Mama came back into the kitchen. She covered her hair with a linen napkin. She said the hand washing prayer and washed her hands at the kitchen sink. Tateh filled and lighted the spirit lamp beneath the samovar, and with a pitcher of water from the tap, he filled its reservoir so tea could be made for breakfast.

The table was set. Two braided Sabbath loaves were covered with a napkin, and the tiny wine glasses were filled for the prayers that blessed the interval from sunset to the next sunset. Mayer said the blessing and washed his hands for dinner.

When they were seated at the table, Mama lighted the Sabbath candles. She moved her hands above the flames, covered her eyes, and whispered the blessing that separated the Sabbath from the week. A new soul replaced the careworn, weekday spirit in intense quietness.

Tateh said the blessings for wine and the heritage of the Sabbath. He tasted the wine in his little glass and then he said the prayer for bringing bread from the earth. He touched a piece from the fresh loaf to a saucer covered with salt and tasted it. Some distress left Mayer's family, and the assurance of safety began to heal the breach of the blank time.

Following the soup that started every hot meal at Mama's table, Tateh filled the plates with potato pudding and beef to comfort them. The honeyed carrots and fruit was Mayer's favorite dish. Mama had baked a flaky pastry roll of cherries, *kirshen shtrudel*, for a special dessert to celebrate his homecoming.

After dinner, Tateh asked, "Mayer, how much longer will you be at the hospital in Brecksville. If you want to do it, Hosea Sutton will be glad to have you work with him again at the fair grounds. He said you had the best 'natural hands' on the reins he's seen since his cavalry service."

"I don't know what I'll do, Tateh. The doctor told me that I'll be separated from active duty by the fourth of July. I'll have to take medicine for a while after I'm released."

Mama said, "Tell Mayer about the car, Ahvrom. Tell him what Leah Rosenblatt said about the car."

"Leah wants to sell you Max's fifty-three Chevy, Mayer. It's a convertible with a V-eight engine," Tateh said. "Leah thinks it's *tsu oysgeputst*, too ostentatious for her and her girls. She said Max didn't drive it after he had the stroke in December. I told her I would talk to you about it. You'll need a car when you come home to stay. If you want it, we'll buy it; and you can pay for it with your Soldiers' Deposit account after you're separated."

"I don't know if I can drive, Tateh," said Mayer. "The doctors told me I shouldn't drive or operate machinery while I'm taking the medicine. I don't have a license to drive now; it expired while I was away."

"Mayerleh, I sent the dollar and seventy-five cents to the state bureau," Mama said, "and I have your new driving license. You don't have to drive now, but you should have the license for identification when you finish with the Army."

"Now tell us," Mama asked, "was it in a bad place that you stayed in Europe?"

Mayer knew that Mama had little formal education and limited knowledge of geography. She knew America was good, and that when she was a little girl, she learned that Europe was not as good. Mayer thought Mama did not know about the United Nations or their police



That Takes the Reason Prisoner

R Barnett

action and the cruel struggle for private enterprise in Asia. She did not know where he had been for three years.

"It was a hungry place, Mama, and cold."

Tateh said the grace after the meal, and Mama was on her feet with "Amen." Mayer helped her take the dishes to the sink for washing. She put the food in glass containers. "You can't do the dishes yet, Mayerleh. You can't separate the dairy dishes from meat. Go with Tateh."

While Mama washed the dishes and put them in the appropriate places in her kitchen, Tateh and Mayer sat beside the mahogany table in the parlor. On the table, the lamp had a large, ornamental base of Czechoslovakian red crystal that Mama prized, and beneath its fringed shade, its bulbs shed light from the table's pie-crust edges to the pale green walls. It would remain lighted until they went to bed on Saturday night.

Tateh carefully read each of the wonders and marvels published in the evening's *Cinderland Citizen Gazette*. The front page displayed a photograph of Marilyn Monroe leaving a limousine assisted by Joe DiMaggio. The lead article told that Emil Turner, who had lived on Dorian Street, had stabbed himself in the back five times, and then thrown himself into an abandoned cistern. His insurance company, of course, had refused payment to his widow because his death was self-inflicted. Eleven United States soldiers were imprisoned in Communist China on charges of espionage, and it was likely they would remain there because the United States would not arrange their release while its government refused to

recognize the Communist Chinese government. Roger Bannister, pursued by no one but his ego, had run a mile in fewer than four minutes. Howard Hughes, outbid by no one, purchased RKO Pictures Corporation. Racist bigots in Arkansas had burned effigies of Chief Justice Earl Warren when, only ninety years after emancipation, the Supreme Court at last ruled that racial segregation in public school systems is unconstitutional. Wondrous and marvelous things happened in the spring of nineteen-fifty-four.

Mayer perused an old play written in odd verses. Two soldiers going home from the war met strange women and occult portents in a cold, windy place. The skeptical one said:

Were such things here as we do speak about?

Or have we eaten on the insane root?

That takes the reason prisoner?

Then he went home to meet his family. It was not a cheerful story, so Mayer put it back into the shelves with Tateh's collections of Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

The shelves contained Tateh's threadbare prayer books and the Talmudic commentaries he reread on Saturday afternoons. They were packed beside Mayer's paperbacks and children's tales: Crusoe and Huckleberry and Tarzan and Lancelot. Saturdays were for happy reading.

After Mayer climbed the stairs to his back bedroom above the kitchen, he took off his uniform and found a flannel robe. In the bathroom, he was the face

in the mirror above the sink. The eyes that looked back seemed worried. He went back to his room and lay down in his boyhood bed. It was quiet.

Before dawn, Mayer awoke in the quietness. He lay entirely motionless and closed his eyes again in the darkness. It was the time of visions, and the vision of a lost Eden returned to him.

On Corinthian Street, behind Rosemary Harrigan's house in autumn, some of the apples fell and rotted amidst the thin grass and sparse weeds at the roots of both trees beside the graveled alley. Coming through the alley after school, Mayer saw them scattered, half-green and crunchy under foot except, or course, in the brown, rotten places.

Rosemary's soft, auburn curls and laughing, hazel eyes caught his attention when he heard the slam of the screen door on her back porch. She saw Mayer pull himself up five feet onto the bottom branch of the apple tree.

"There you go!" she said.

She turned to go into the house and then reappeared with a glittering object carried above her shoulder. On an overturned, galvanized bucket abandoned by a wistful harvester, Rosemary boosted herself to the bottom branch. She reached out her hand to pass Mayer the salt that could sweeten the green apples. Then she hooked a knee around the bough. Leaning back, she showed a patch of white cotton beneath her dark, green, woolen pinafore.

Rosemary yanked her elbows with practiced skill to drag both shoulders above the bough. Her laughing eyes

bobbed toward Mayer. The hazel irises, flecked with gold, stared directly into his own eyes as Rosemary swung onto the bottom branch. So just after school on Thursday, the third of October in nineteen-forty-one, Mayer fell in love.

Among the cobwebs and the twigs, the musky, sweet pungency of tempting apples captured him. His left elbow crooked over the third branch, and the glass salt shaker in his left hand, Mayer hung completely enthralled. Beyond his control and of its own volition, Mayer's right hand grasped Rosemary's right wrist. Mute with the intensity of his adoration, Mayer was breathless and dizzy.

Rosemary pulled her hand away to reach the second branch. Mayer seemed ridiculous to her. She was older than he was. She was nine.

Mayer stretched down to kiss Rosemary's hand on the branch below. With a wrenching, ripping sound, the seat of his corduroy knickerbockers separated at the seam. The salt shaker fell softly into a tuft of buckhorn between the apple tree's roots.

"Oh, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! You pillock! You dropped my mother's salter!" squealed Rosemary.

Irresistibly, Mayer fell. His chin struck the bottom limb of the tree snapping his jaw shut and jerking his head. A ridged, projecting root jammed below his ribs. Panting, whirling purple-red engulfed him. His *neshamma*, the spirit leapt from his wracked body beside the tree trunk. He heard the screen door



That Takes the Reason Prisoner

R Barnett

Mayer rolled to his knees. The cold draft chilled him where his trousers gaped. His head hurt. Down-cast and sorry, he climbed the rickety back fence into his yard and skulked in the kitchen door.

"Schlemiel!" Mama scolded. "Bumbler! You play the monkey in your school clothes in the back alley with that vulgar girl. Like a common person in denim dungarees to school I should send you! It is a shame and a disgrace before the neighbors, Mayerleh!"

The vision that had returned became a paradigm in Mayer's experience. It was a pattern of each of his encounters with those who attracted him. He remembered the experience in the dark quietness. The memory was not pleasant, yet neither was it cruel. He had remembered an entire sequence of the time before the jarring noise and filth of the concrete box in the cave beside the Taedong. He thought if he could put his remembrance in sequence, he could overcome the problem of time. He could begin to think of a future.

The Sabbath peace wrapped home in soft pleasure. Mayer took a leisurely bath. Mama gave him a steaming glass of tea with a piece of loaf sugar and a warm bagel spread with cream cheese for breakfast. He prayed the Sabbath morning service with Tateh. He found the collection of I.L. Peretz's stories and read through the day, delighting in his native idiom. A casserole of beef, beans, barley, and root vegetables that had simmered all night in the un-extinguished oven was ready at lunch. The hot *cholent* was strengthening, and

the opened valves of memory began to flood with recollected experience.

"I think I'll walk over to Bobby's house," Mayer said. "We haven't had a talk since nineteen-fifty. Dixie Wheeler gave me a cup of coffee after I got off the train yesterday, but she didn't even mention him."

"Don't go there yet," said Mama. "You don't know about Bobby Foltz."

"We would talk every day when we were in school, Mama. I'll just be at his house a little while."

"Bobby didn't come home like you did, Mayer. He went to the Army in the same draft that took you, but he was killed over there and was buried in Cinderland Cemetary two years ago. You shouldn't go to see his mama if she doesn't know you're coming. It will hurt her too much."

Mayer's vision clouded. He sat suddenly on the kitchen chair. He felt pressure behind his nose and burning tears. A great hand squeezed his chest, and then from his strained lungs and tightened throat, a hoarse cry erupted. He tried to force the sorrow down, but tremulous and quavering, it burst from him in hard, keening sobs. Nothing, he knew, would ever be as it had been.

Mama put her arm about his shoulders as he shuddered and wept. She tried to comfort him as she had when he was small. As when he was a child, his overmastering grief became exhausted and left him tired. Passion washed away with his tears.

Mayer lay down upon the sofa in the parlor. He slept and did not dream. He awoke when he heard the evening

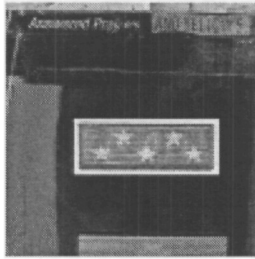
newspaper smack the front door. He pulled on his shoes and went into the kitchen to take a glass of tea.

In the afternoon light from the west window, Tateh spread the newspaper on the kitchen table to examine it with his usual thoroughness. Mayer moved his glass of tea aside to make space for the newspaper. Words from the day before came to his mind: "Damn it, soldier, move your ass!"

"Tell Sutton I'll come to help him train the pacers when I'm discharged, Tateh. Thanks for talking to him for me," Mayer said.

"A man has to work," said Tateh. "You may find happiness in your labor."

"I'm going to see if I can begin at Cinderland College next fall. Congress extended the G.I. Bill benefits to help soldiers get an education," Mayer said. "I'll go with you to Leah Rosenblatt's house to say the mourning prayers when the Sabbath is over, Tateh. Maybe we can look at that Chevy."



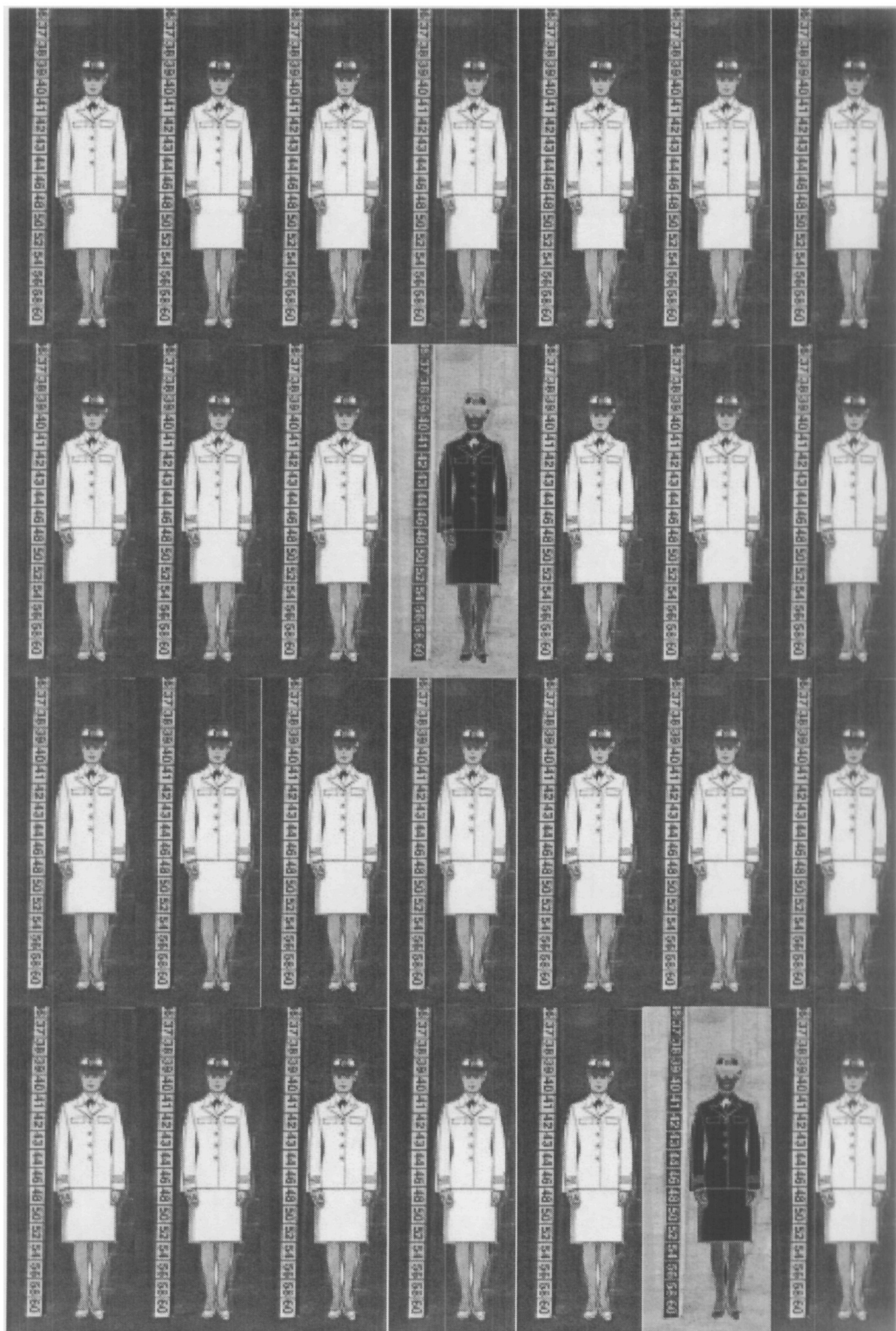
"Now you're beginning to sound like a *mensch*!" Tateh said.

Mama heard them in her kitchen, and she looked in to assure that they did not put butter on one of her meat dishes. "I'll have to take in all your trousers at the waist, Mayerleh," said Mama. "Those soldiers in the Army don't know how to give you proper food."

The scar had healed; the memory healed more slowly. At dusk, Tateh said the blessings that marked the separation from the Sabbath. The twisted candle that was lighted to begin the new week

was extinguished in wine. The bouquet of the spice box lingered to recall the quiet sweetness.

That Takes the Reason Prisoner



Kristin Crump

Fading Light

The telephone's insistent ringing could be heard in the laundry room where Marcy Crawford stood, ironing her uniform. After several moments the machine picked up the call as she waited to see who was on the other end of the line. She hated telemarketers. Hearing her husband Jim's voice, however, she sat the iron down and sprinted for the kitchen. He didn't call from Diego Garcia often, and she didn't want to miss a chance to talk to him, even if he was coming home soon.

"It's me. Thought I'd catch you since you don't have to be to work for a while. Anyway . . ."

"I'm here," Marcy said, picking up the receiver.

"I thought I wasn't going to get a chance to tell you the good news in

person, so to speak," Jim said, laughing at his own joke.

Marcy half-smiled at his humor. He always thought he was funnier than everyone else did. She could picture him in the tropical setting, tanned and muscular, dark hair and green eyes. It wasn't why she had married him, but she enjoyed the envious looks she received from other women.

". . . I got the go ahead yesterday evening, but I didn't want to call you then, because of the time difference."

"What are you talking about?" Marcy asked.

"Haven't you been listening? I'm staying on for another deployment. VP-22's short on first classes, so I asked if I could fill in. My CO approved it. They're going to put me in Maintenance Control.

Krump

This could be just what I need to put me over the top for the Chief selections this year."

Marcy heard the excitement in Jim's voice, but all she felt was an emptiness in the pit of her stomach. She hated being alone and she couldn't help thinking about another six months by herself. He'd already been gone for eight with his own squadron, since he'd been on the first crew to leave. She'd even been planning a surprise party for his return, which should have happened next weekend.

Then, in the background, she heard a feminine giggle.

"Where are you?"

"Over at the barracks, sitting outside, watching the sunrise. It's beautiful here."

"Someone with you?" Marcy pressed.

"No. Why?"

"I heard someone in the background."

"What are you getting at?" Jim asked, an edge to his voice. He didn't like being questioned.

"Nothing."

Neither of them said anything for a few moments.

"Gotta go. I'll call you again soon. Bye." The line on the other end of the phone went dead.

I should have known, Marcy thought, staring at the receiver in her hand. It wasn't the first time. She knew he'd had affairs before. It didn't bother her too much. If he was discreet. She'd married Jim for companionship, not love. She understood when he found someone else to occupy his time and physical

needs, since she wasn't enthusiastic about meeting them herself. They lived separate lives, each taking care of themselves, but they both knew when the workday ended they had someone to come home to. They had a good life together; they shared the same goals.

She'd always been focused on her career. Within the Navy she'd found the family she hadn't had growing up. She'd found acceptance and people who believed in her. The feeling of belonging was the most important aspect of her life.

The insistent beeping of a disconnected line finally brought her back to the present. Hanging up the phone, she pushed thoughts of Jim to the back of her mind and headed down the hall to finish her ironing. She had Captains Call this afternoon. They were giving her a letter of commendation. She had to look her best. Not that she ever left the house in anything less than a perfectly pressed, starched and creased uniform. She always tried to make a good impression. Appearances were the most important aspect of life in the Navy.

The stillness of the house surrounded Marcy as she crept around the living room. She had found everything but her keys. They were not in her purse or lying on the counter in the kitchen. Carefully moving cans, bottles and papers, she prayed she wasn't making enough noise to wake Julie, sleeping in the far bedroom.

Marcy been invited to a party the evening before. Julie Holbrook, a second class AT in her shop, had thrown a get together at her house for people in the squadron. Julie lived on the other side of

the island. Marcy had been reluctant to go at first, since she didn't like driving at night, but her friends finally talked her into it. That, and the loneliness she'd felt since Jim had called last month, combined to convince her to get out of the house for a while.

Between the music, playing loudly in the background, the drinks and the conversation, Marcy found herself having a good time and laughing with the people around her. At the end of the evening though, she'd realized she shouldn't drive home. Instead of getting a ride with someone, she'd taken Julie up on her offer to stay the night.

After long, tense, minutes of searching she finally found her keys hanging on a hook beside the front door. In her rush to get out of the house she'd missed them until, looking out the front window at the pre-dawn fog, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. Julie must have hung them there last night so they wouldn't get lost or mistakenly picked up by someone else.

Pushing aside the voice inside her head whispering she was a coward, Marcy reached for the door handle. At the same time as her hand closed on the cool silver knob, she heard the creek of floorboards in the hallway. A few seconds later, Julie came around the corner, bleary eyed and naked, her short hair tousled from sleep. Taking in the scene in front of her, Julie gave Marcy a small smile and headed for the kitchen.

"Making a break for it so early in the morning? Don't you even want some coffee first?" Julie asked, opening a

cupboard and taking out the filters and a bag of beans.

Julie was a true Seattleite when it came to coffee. She never bought the already ground, mass produced cans of Folgers or Maxwell House Marcy always kept stocked in her pantry. Instead, she preferred to buy small bags of gourmet beans and grind them herself. Coffee had been one the subjects they had talked about last night, along with a variety of other topics.

Marcy didn't reply, standing by the door with her fingers still resting on the handle. Silently she debated with herself about whether to run out of the house and call Julie later, or to stay and settle things face to face. The smell of freshly brewing coffee finally helped to make up her mind. She took her hand from the door and set her purse down.

Walking into the kitchen, Marcy pulled out a chair at the table and sat down, watching Julie as she moved around the kitchen, taking out cups, sugar and creamer. On one hand Marcy was shocked by Julie's nakedness and the fact that she didn't seem in the least embarrassed by it. On the other she admired her for it.

"Am I embarrassing you? I'll go put on a robe if you'd be more comfortable?" Julie asked.

"It's your house," Marcy replied, looking down at her hand playing with the edge of the placemat in front of her.

Julie laughed, "I'll get my robe," she said, leaving the kitchen.

Marcy heard a closet door open and close at the other end of the house, and



when Julie reappeared she wore a brightly colored oriental robe. The red silk, etched with threads of gold in the pattern of dragons molded itself to her body, the large flowing sleeves emphasizing the delicate bones of her wrists and hands. Marcy guessed she'd bought the garment on a deployment to Japan, since she'd seen them there herself, but had never purchased one. They had always seemed too daring for her, but on Julie, it seemed appropriate.

Marcy had thought seeing Julie clothed would help to quiet some of the uneasiness she felt, but it hadn't. Thoughts of everything that had happened between them the night before still ran rampant through her mind. The image of her hands on Julie's body, and Julie's on hers, made her heart race and her legs weak. Marcy kept repeating the words, "It was a mistake," silently to herself, but she knew they were a lie. What she had felt last night had been more powerful and right than anything else she could remember. Especially when she contrasted them with how she felt when with her husband.

Marcy's thoughts were suddenly interrupted as Julie set a cup of coffee in front of her.

"You said you liked cream and sugar, but I didn't know how much," Julie said, taking the seat across from Marcy, her own cup in her hand.

Marcy reached for the sugar cubes and creamer, her mind racing, trying to find the right words. She knew she had to explain that last night could never happen again. If anyone ever found out, not only would it end her marriage, it

could end any chance she had of reaching her goals in the Navy. Homosexuality, though passably tolerated, still wasn't completely accepted, especially among the upper ranks. But Marcy wasn't gay. Was she? No, she wasn't. She was sure. It had been an accident. An experiment. Lots of people did that.

"You're awfully quiet this morning," Julie said, breaking into Marcy's thoughts once again.

Marcy didn't reply. She knew the words she should say, but couldn't get them from her mind to her tongue.

"So, how many women have you been with?" Julie asked, watching Marcy's face.

"None. I'm not gay," Marcy blurted out before she could stop herself.

Julie started to laugh.

"Damn it," Marcy said as she angrily pushed back her chair and stood up. "Don't you realize what could happen if Jim finds out, not to mention what people in the squadron would say if they knew."

Marcy stood staring at Julie, her fists clenched at her side and tears in her eyes. Her whole body shook.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have laughed," Julie said, rising from the table and coming around to Marcy. Gently taking her by the arm, she led her into the living room.

As Julie settled herself on the far sofa cushion, her legs tucked under her, Marcy gazed out the front window. She could see the fog turning from a dark gray mass to a lighter opaque, telling her the sun was making its appearance. She knew if she left soon, it might still be thick enough to hide her return home from the

prying eyes of the neighbors. Usually she hated early autumn, finding the dense mist that covered the island depressing since it reinforced her loneliness and insecurities. For the first time she saw it as her ally.

"I really am sorry. It never occurred to me that I might be your first. Have you ever thought about doing something like this before?" Julie stared at her, her head tilted to the side.

"No." She continued to gaze out the window.

"Do you love your husband?"

"We have a good time together and we rarely argue. We stay focused on our careers."

After a few moments of silence, Julie said, "You know, I think that's just about the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"Lots of couples have marriages like ours. It doesn't make us bad people."

"Of course it doesn't," Julie said, "but going through life without being in love?"

"I never said I didn't love Jim. Besides, I guess you're an expert on the subject?"

"Not an expert, no. I've been in love though. Twice. It didn't work out either time, but still—"

"I guess we have different ways of looking at things."

"Maybe, maybe not."

The calm, collected way Julie responded to her comments made Marcy even more frustrated. Why did she have to be so logical? Why didn't this situation bother her, too? Marcy knew she needed to leave. This was getting her nowhere

She was only becoming more confused by the minute.

"Last night was a mistake," Marcy said.

"Was it?"

"Yes, it was. It can never happen again. There's too much at stake," Marcy replied. "I need to get home. Jim might call and he'll wonder where I am if I don't answer."

"Really. How often does he call?" Julie asked.

Marcy couldn't help the guilty flush that crept over her face, and she couldn't bring herself to meet Julie's eyes. Jim didn't call. She hadn't heard from him since he'd called to tell her he was staying six months with another squadron. She'd tried to call him a few times, but he hadn't been home.

"I thought so," Julie said.

"It doesn't matter. I still need to go."

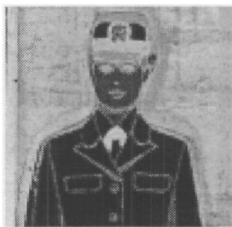
Julie swung her legs over the edge of the sofa and sat up, her elbows braced on her knees.

"Be honest, last night was great. We both know it. It's not like I'm asking you to move in or anything." Julie stopped and took a deep breath before continuing. "Jim's not coming home for another five months, right? Why don't we just give it a chance and see how it goes? No one will find out if we're careful, and I'm not going to tell anyone. Are you?"

"I don't think so. It's just too risky," Marcy replied.

"What are you so afraid of?" Julie asked.

"Are you insane? This could end any chances I have of future advancement for one. It would definitely end my



marriage. Do I need to go on, or is that enough for you?"

"All right. Why don't you stay and finish your coffee? There's no harm in us sitting and talking is there?"

Marcy didn't want to leave and return to her empty house, with only the television to keep her company until Monday rolled around and she could go back to work. Putting her misgivings in a dark corner of her mind, she smiled at Julie for the first time that morning.

"No. There's no harm in that," Marcy said.

Through the passenger window of the car Marcy watched the ordered chaos of activity on Naval Air Station Whidbey Island while Jim expertly guided the car through the maze of white cinder block buildings containing living quarters and administrative offices. He drove as though he hadn't been gone for over a year. He'd returned the previous weekend. She hadn't bothered to meet his plane when it landed at the base airport.

As Jim swung the car onto the main avenue separating the bulk of the base from the hangars, large battleship gray Quonset huts came into view, dotting the asphalt of the flight line. From between the buildings small specks of blue could be seen as they hurried about their daily activities. At the far edge of the base, A-6's were practicing landings and take-offs on the runway, probably preparing for carrier maneuvers. Outside the confines of the car she knew the smell of JP-5 aircraft fuel, salt from Puget Sound, the whining of jet engines and the throaty hum of turbine props would be in the air,

combining to form the unique atmosphere she loved. Inside though, the mutual silence continued as they neared the security gate leading to Marcy's squadron. They'd limited their conversation on the drive to the base to occasional comments about the scenery.

As Jim pulled into a visitors' space and parked, he turned to look at her. "Do you think you'll be getting a ride home tonight after work, or should I come and get you?"

"I'll ask one of the guys for a ride," Marcy said.

"It won't be a problem for me to drive down," Jim said, staring intently at her.

"I'll be fine. It's hard to tell how late I'll be," Marcy said, reaching for the door handle, anxious to be out of the car.

"I'd really like you to come home as early as possible," Jim said, putting his hand on her arm to stop her from leaving.

Marcy didn't respond, or look at him. She didn't need to ask why he wanted her to come home. She knew he wanted to talk to her, to find out why she'd been avoiding him since he'd come home. He'd also want to know why she'd come in last night and gotten drunk, finally falling asleep in a recliner in the living room, instead of going upstairs to their bed. She wished she could have a cigarette. She didn't smoke in her house or car. Jim was an ex-smoker.

When she didn't answer him he turned to look out the windshield. Just inside the security gate Julie stood talking to the young airman standing watch outside the guardhouse.

"Isn't that second class in your shop?" he asked.

"Why?" Marcy noticed the look of distaste that crossed his face.

"Nothing. I just don't think her kind have any business in the military," Jim said.

"What do you mean, her kind?" Marcy asked, her shoulders tensing and hands balling into fists.

"Homosexuals."

"How the hell do you know she's gay? You've only met her a couple times."

"You can tell," Jim replied. "Look at her uniform for Christ's sake."

Though Julie wasn't completely within regulation, with her too long hair, wrinkled coveralls and unpolished boots, she loved the military as much as Marcy did. Just in a different way. Julie enjoyed fixing the airplanes, figuring out what was wrong with them and then following her reasoning to the end. She was one of the best technicians in the shop. Just because she didn't go along with all of the bullshit military life sometimes entailed it didn't mean she wasn't dedicated to her job. Julie just didn't understand why you had to play the game in order to get ahead. Marcy understood it all too well.

"There's an old saying you might not be familiar with. 'Don't judge a book by its cover,'" Marcy said with a slight smile that held no trace of humor.

"I'm also friends with people in your squadron, in case you've forgotten. I know what they say about her," Jim replied. "I know the law says we can't do anything as long as they aren't blatant about it, thanks to Clinton. I just don't agree with it. You can't count on them if

it comes to a life or death situation," he added, shrugging his shoulders.

"You can be such an ass," Marcy said, again preparing to get out of the car.

"What's your problem?" Jim asked. "This used to be something we agreed on."

"Things change. Especially after fourteen months."

Jim didn't reply. They'd already had this argument. He'd tried to convince her his reasons for staying in Diego Garcia were completely career motivated. She knew better. She'd heard the rumors. He'd fallen in love with the woman he'd been seeing; he'd even contemplated asking Marcy for a divorce so they could get married. Then he'd been dumped.

From what she'd heard he'd taken it pretty hard, but she hadn't been able to feel sorry for him. When he'd come home he'd expected to fall back on her and have someone to soothe his wounded pride and ego. She'd asked him about the divorce.

He'd denied it too quickly. After that she'd spent as little time as possible in the same room with him.

"Look, I have to go. We'll talk about this later," Marcy said, stepping from the car and slamming the door behind her.

Approaching the entrance to the security gate, she heard Jim backing out of the parking space and gave a sigh of relief as he left. Julie and the young airman stopped talking as she neared them. Julie smiled at her.

"Hi, Julie. Hi, Josh," Marcy greeted them, fishing in her pocket for her ID.



"Hi," Julie said.

"Hi, Marcy," Josh said, looking at her, then at Julie.

"What's up?" Marcy asked, sensing an undertone passing between them.

"I've been on watch since nine o'clock this morning. Do you think I could just go home when I'm done in a couple of hours, or do I have to work tonight?" Josh asked.

"I haven't been in the shop yet. Let me see what's going on. Stop by after you're relieved, and I'll let you know. If there's not much to do, I don't see why you can't."

"Okay." Josh made an attempt to give her a smile, but it fell short.

"Are you on your way into the hangar, or over to the smoking area?" Julie asked.

"Smoking area. I've still got about half an hour before I'm due in for pass down," Marcy said, consulting her watch.

"I'll join you. It's hard to tell what they'd find for me to do if I went in now. See ya," Julie said to Josh, before turning to walk away.

Marcy looked at Josh and noticed his eyes moving from her to Julie. The look on his face made her nervous. She had seen it too often lately.

"So, what were you two in such deep conversation about?" Marcy asked heading for the alley separating two of the hangars.

"He was asking me if I thought you'd let him go after his watch."

"Why was he asking you?" Marcy demanded, a note of panic in her voice.

"How should I know? Ask him."

Marcy didn't reply. As they walked, she ignored the members of her squadron

they encountered. Julie called out greetings and witty comments, but Marcy's stride and purposeful attitude didn't encourage stopping for conversation, so the two of them continued walking until they reached the end of the hangars, then veered right.

The smoking area sat between the back of a small gray storage building and the security fence. With the use of expectedly military logic, someone had decided it would be a good idea to place three wooden picnic tables in the space. Unfortunately, since the climate in Whidbey Island tended toward rain ninety-percent of the time, and there was no shelter over the tables, they were usually ignored in preference of huddling under the overhanging bit of roof the small building provided.

Today, however, the sky was uncharacteristically clear so Marcy walked over to the farthest of the tables. Sitting near the corner of the tabletop with her feet resting flat on the bench seat, she finally lit the cigarette she'd been craving earlier.

Julie took a seat on the table next to Marcy. They were close enough so they could talk without being overheard, but far enough away to avoid suspicion.

Marcy didn't feel like breaking the silence between them yet, so she turned to look out at the flight line instead. The beautiful landscape in this area of the country had always fascinated her. From where she sat she could make out the Olympic Mountains in the distance, their jagged lines etched into the sky. The sun had just started its descent toward the horizon, but since they were so far north and the sun set so early, it wouldn't be

long before the skyline would be a fiery combination of reds, oranges, and purples. If the sky stayed clear tonight, and there wasn't much work to do, she knew she'd find a few minutes to go out away from the lights of the hangars and watch the stars. She always hoped to see at least a few shooting stars as they made their rapid descent toward the earth.

Marcy knew the main reason she loved it so much here. The towering mountains and lush green of the trees were nothing like the flat brown state of Texas she had left behind at eighteen. The same age her mother had been when she had given birth to a baby she neither wanted nor cared about. Most of Marcy's life had been spent with her grandparents. A couple that weren't any fonder of the idea of raising a child than their daughter had been. They saw it as their duty though, as good Southern Baptists. A fact they had enjoyed reminding her and others of as often as possible. She hadn't spoken to them since she left and as far as she was concerned she didn't have any family in the civilian world.

"Why didn't you just let Josh go?" Julie asked, finally breaking the silence. "Damnit, I've got responsibilities," Marcy said. "There are plenty of times I've stood watch in the middle of night, then gone straight out to an aircraft afterward for an o'five hundred preflight. I know his type, and one of two things will happen to him in the future. Scenario one, he'll get out when his enlistment is over, take the college money, go back to school and after graduation, find a job in which he'll be as lazy as he is now. Scenario two, he'll

get some girl knocked up, and have to stay in to support his new wife and kid. He'll probably end up going back to the barracks and drinking half the night away with his buddies anyway."

"Not everyone fits neatly into the pigeon hole you put them in. Passing judgment on people really is one of your worst faults," Julie said.

"I know. I hate all the changes I see going on around me, though. I love the Navy. It's the only place I've ever belonged. It's just not as disciplined as it used to be."

"You have to admit some changes are for the better," Julie said, reaching over and laying her hand on Marcy's.

Marcy didn't say anything as she quickly removed her hand from Julie's, glancing around to make sure nobody had seen.

Julie sighed and decided to change the subject, "You and Jim seemed to be having a pretty heated conversation in the parking lot."

"He knows something's going on," Marcy said, getting up from the table and starting to pace.

"When are you going to tell him?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are going to tell him the truth, aren't you?" Julie asked

Marcy took a deep breath. "Julie, can we talk about this later?" It struck her as odd that this was twice in the same day she'd posed that question to someone.

"No," Julie said, staring at her.

After a few moments Marcy stopped and faced her. "Julie, I'm sorry. I know I said I would, but I just can't. I've agonized over this, believe me, but it



could mean the end of my career. You know it's a 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. If I told him, all he'd have to do is report it and I'd be finished. Even if they didn't kick me out, any chance I have of making rank or getting into an Officers Training Program would be shot. I'd never be more than what I am now, a 'first class' running the night shift in an AT shop."

"What the hell are you going to do then?"

"I love you, you have to know that, but you can't expect me to be willing to give up my career. It's the only thing I'm sure of right now." Marcy shook her head. "I knew you wouldn't understand. You've never had to make this kind of decision."

After Marcy finished speaking, they both remained quiet for a while. Marcy went back to staring out at the flight line, and Julie stared at her.

"It's a wonder your eyes aren't brown instead of blue, you're so full of shit," Julie said quietly. "So I haven't been married, and I don't see the Navy as the end all, be all of my existence. At least I don't pretend to be something I'm not, making myself miserable in the process. Let me tell you something I do understand. I understand what it's like to lie awake at night, wishing sometimes life wasn't so hard for the person you loved. Trying to figure out ways to make it easier, and knowing you can't. You can try to lie to yourself and say the first time we were together was an accident, that we both drank too much, but what about the last five months? You want this as much as I do. You just don't want it to cost you anything." As Julie finished speaking she turned her gaze to her hands, which were clenched together on her lap.

Marcy heard the hurt and anger in Julie's voice as she spoke. She knew she should get up and walk away, leaving things as they were, but she just couldn't do it. She loved her too much. She had to try to make her understand.

She walked over and stood close to where Julie sat. She wanted to reach out and touch her, but didn't. "Do you think this is easy for me? If you do, you're wrong. I hate this as much as you do. I know this wasn't an accident, or caused by a night of drunken carelessness. Well, maybe in the beginning I thought it was," Marcy said with a slight smile. "I've come to realize though that I needed you. Hell, I still do. That doesn't change the fact I have to make a choice. I know it's not what you would've done. Please try and understand. The Navy is my home, my family. It's the only thing I've ever been any good at. It's all I know. I can't give up everything I've worked so hard for. Not for something I can't be sure will work out."

"Are you so sure the color of your uniform or how many ribbons you have on your chest will be enough?" Julie asked as she stood up to face Marcy. They were so close it would have only taken a step to bring them together.

"No, but I do know I have a future here. Can you say the same about us?" Marcy asked.

"I could, but would you believe me?"

"Probably not," Marcy said, as she reached out to take Julie's hand without thinking.

Before Julie could reply, Marcy heard the sounds of someone approaching the smoking area, but she wasn't quick enough to respond, as Jim came around the corner of the building.

"There you are. You forgot your gloves in the car," Jim said, the scene in front of him slowly sinking in. His steps slowed and the smile died from his face. Marcy watched his hand holding the gloves clench around them.

Marcy dropped Julie's hand and stepped away from her. As she did she knew it was the one thing she could've done that could never be taken back. Until that point, if she had wanted to, all the words that had been spoken could be undone. Hurt feelings could be mended, and decisions changed. Now, things were severed forever.

Out of the corner of her eye Marcy could see Julie square her shoulders as she stared at Jim, almost daring him to voice the thoughts they both knew were going through his mind.

Julie finally broke the silence. "Guess I better get inside and change to go home," she said before walking away. She held her head high and didn't glance at Jim as she passed him.



Marcy watched her go and felt her heart break. This was the way things had to be. She stared at Jim a few moments longer and then turned to look out over the flight line, hugging her arms around her.

She'd been wrong about the sunset. It wasn't a colorful, brilliant display, but instead just a whisper of fading light as the darkness forced the sun back behind the horizon where it belonged.

Megan Simmermon Eclipse

Lidless Night
Bare eyes gaze into Oblivion
Ebony stretches boundless
Engulfing infinity

Scorched stars
Crackle and pulse
As close vastness frames them
Holding them tensely and contentedly

The ladle dips into blackness
Its belly full of water
It is pulled but never drawn
Forever in darkness it sets

Elusive Night, the charmer
Charming its Persephone
With cold wispy arms and
A cloak of silver jewels

The eyes fade unto gold
Saturated shield of Morning
Like water soaking into baked earth

Like the capricious eclipse
The shield is cast aside
And the glory of Night
Returns afresh and terrible

A Day Out

The Music is like feet
Soft and Bare
Walking through dew-filled, morning grass.

It is comfort the continuity we seek
The melody dances as spring leaves dance
On the backs of winds

T
w
i
s
t
i
n
g
and flipping with poise.

The flute singing honey dew melon
It is sweet, subtle, juicy green

The violin lyrical voice of morning
It is clear as Irish air and as idyllic in charm

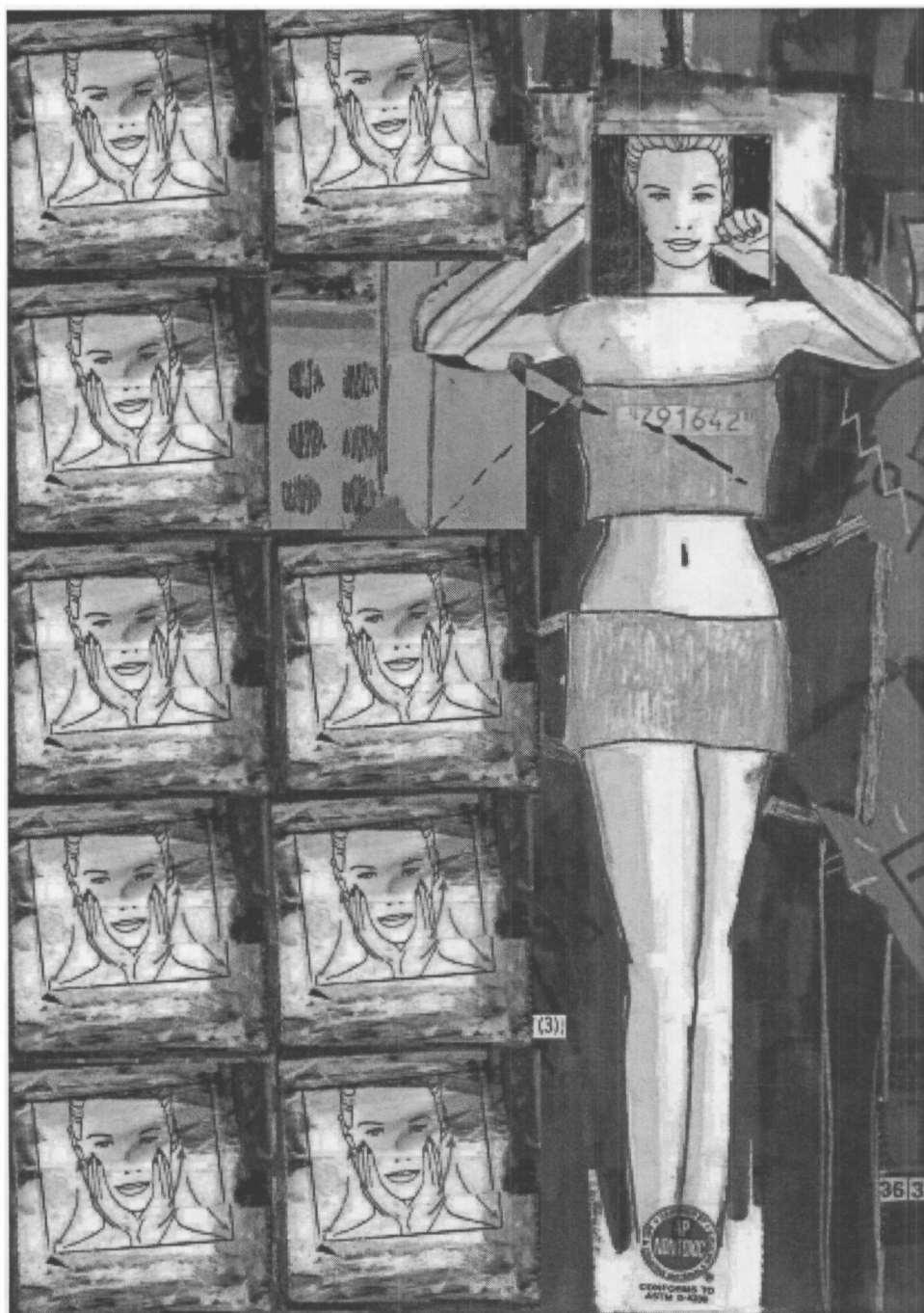
It walks you through sun-filled days
Strong in hand and gentle in touch
Smelling of mellow meadows
And of sweet peas and apple blossoms

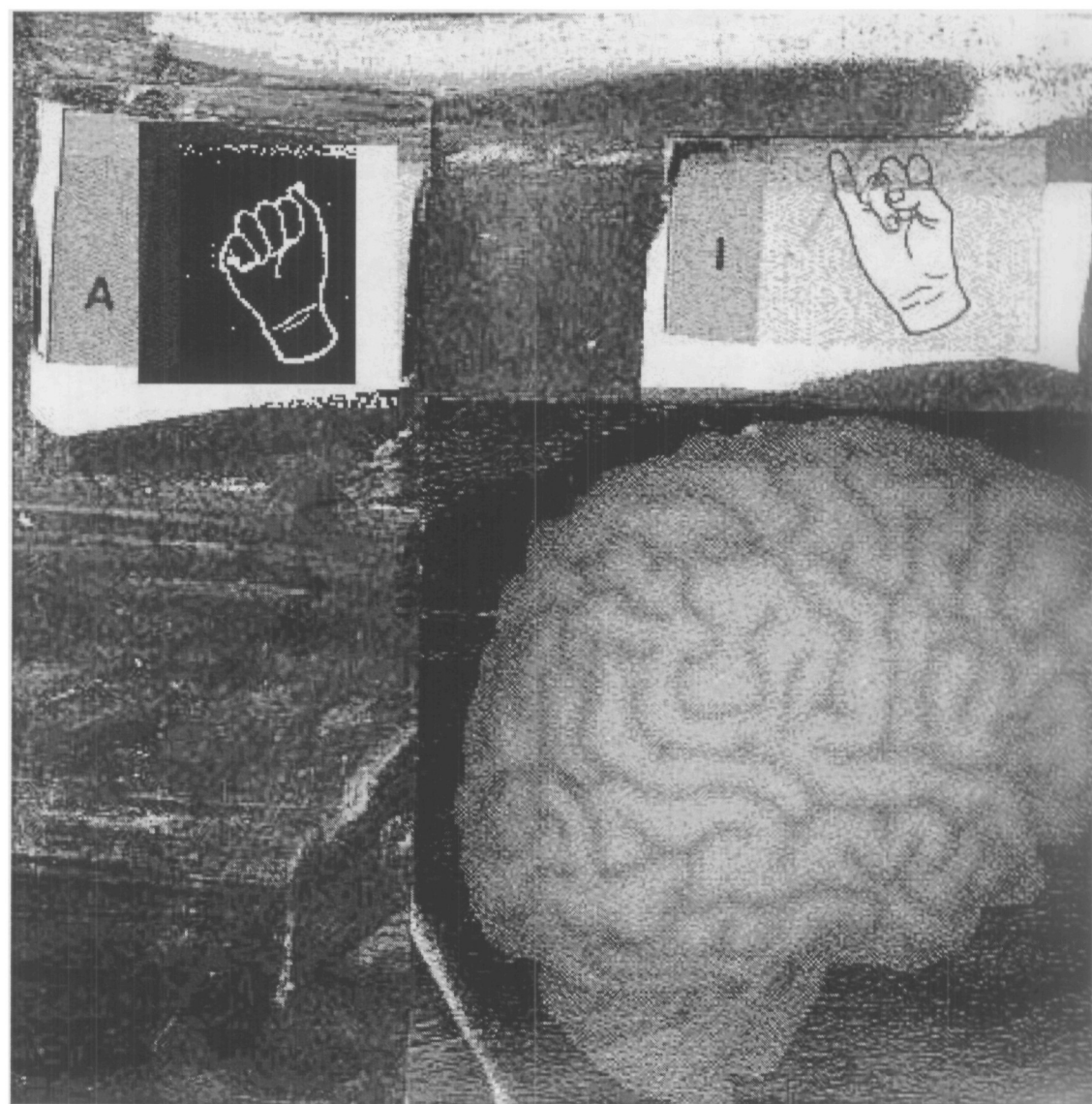
The music like spring drenched air
Touches flippantly
Like a feather that tickles the toe
Like the pear juice that fills the belly

Adam Issler Have You Ever Felt Like Job?

Pain thrust your way,
made to feel like a hot-thunderbolt in your lap. Seeing pain
Feeling anguish and toil.
Things taken without justice,
without reason.
Accumulation of torture
thick as ice.
Is this my soul being played for like a game?

The ultimate prize to be tested,
the goal of redemption or the payment of darkness.
Just accepting,
accepting the torment.
Trying to keep the faith steadfast,
clinging to it for everything.
Digging fingernails bloody,
into the Rock cleft for me.
Have you ever felt like Job?





Laurie Wise

On Being Human

Breech *n.* 1. the buttocks.

I was a breech birth, which means I'm not an ass, I just look like one. Awkward and idiotic scenarios are stepping stones across the muddy waters of my life. I have often searched for reasons as to why I am able to look ridiculous with such ease, and excuse myself by declaring to be a victim of sensory overload and exhaustion. I have spent the last twenty years as a nurse, working twelve hour shifts, raising three children and one husband, going to school, and meeting the needs of the universe and all those who reside therein.

fatigue *n.* 1. weariness from exertion.
2. *Mech.* the temporary lessening of

function of organs, tissues or cells after excessive exertion or stimulation.

The 3 – 11PM shift was a difficult one for me to work, because as a wife and mother, I had already put in a full day before I reported to work. By the time I took report from the nurse going off duty, reviewed my charts and meds, set up my IV's and made rounds with the doctors, I was into sensory overload. Then my work began. It was on one of these 3-11 shifts, that I made one of the most embarrassing blunders of my career as a nurse. On a typical day I am assigned to six or seven patients I have never taken care of before. It is difficult to learn everything about all of my patients in a fifteen minute report, so I focus on the critical elements of vital

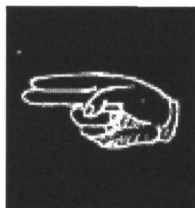
signs, diagnosis, and when did she or he poop last. I entered the room of the first of my seven patients, and found her up in a chair fully dressed in slacks, shirt and socks, and surrounded by 10 to 15 family members. They appeared fairly settled in, but I needed to do a quick head to toe assessment, so I continued with the family in the room. It would be a quick listen to heart, lungs and pulse check, and the usual "having any pain?" assessment. Visitors who are chatting away, always seem to be stricken mute when a nurse enters the room. This time was no exception. They could have continued their conversation while I listened and prodded, but instead chose to burn holes in me with their eyes. I bent down to check Mrs. Smith's pulse in her left foot and was unable to find it. The genius diagnostician in me was alerted, and I was considering deep vein thrombosis (blood clot) verses arterial insufficiency, when I became aware of hissing remarks coming from much of the kinfolk. "What exactly are you doing nurse?" asked the daughter icily. I didn't like her smart ass tone of voice, so I put on my, "I'll blow you out of the water with my medical jargon attitude," and proceeded to explain the importance of pulsations in the dorsalis pedal pulse. She stopped me in mid sentence with, "my mother has a wooden leg, I doubt that it has a pulse, dorsalis pedal or otherwise." Shit. Busted! OK Laurie, you can do it, quick wit recovery --NOW! Nothing. My brain was fried from fatigue. The only thing I could come up with was, Hey, ya never know, Pinnocchio came to life! Better not, I thought, judging from the look on the kinfolks' faces they would

not find this amusing. I simply apologized, finished my exam and slithered out of the room.

distract *v.t.* **x.** to divert, as the mind or attention.

Occasionally I worked the general medical floor, which was nice because I was able to care for patients for a longer period of time and establish a rapport with them. Mrs. Pitzer was a 56 year old patient who had suffered a severe stroke that left her paralyzed and unable to speak. She had the most beautiful, luminous brown eyes, and I communicated with her through them. Occasionally she would make sounds that I came to understand as affirmative or negative. I was fiercely protective of her and was very aware of the responsibility of her care. One day I placed Mrs. Pitzer in her wheelchair to take her to X-ray for a brain scan. Tucking her flaccid arms gently into the wheelchair, I explained where we were going and why. She looked at me with those beautiful expressive eyes and I sensed she understood, but I also saw a look of apprehension, perhaps at having to leave her room where she felt safe, to go out into the hospital and be seen by the public. "Don't worry," I assured her patting her shoulder, "I'll be with you all the way." I wheeled her down the hall to the elevator and pressed the down button. Luckily, no one was around so I hoped that alleviated Mrs. Pitzer's self consciousness. "*Ding*," the elevator doors opened, and I pushed Mrs. Pitzer in, banging my leg on the door which

knocked my pen out of my pocket. The pen hit the floor with a *tink* and rolled out into the hall. I stepped out into the hall, bent over and picked up my pen and heard a *swoosh, click*. The silence was terrifying. *Vroom!* I straightened up, snapped my pen in half, and silently screamed “OH MY GOD, NO! OH SHIT! DAMN! I fell upon the up button, tapping out a frantic Morse code, “G-O-D-P-L-E-A-S-E-M-A-K-E-I-T-C-O-M-E-B-A-C-K-O-R-K-I-L-L-M-E-N-O-W.” I thought of poor Mrs. Pitzer riding up and down on the elevator as helpless as a potted plant. Fear welled up in me: “What if Doctor Hunt is on his way in to make rounds and finds his patient, alone and frightened, riding around on the elevator?” My career was over. By tomorrow I would be wearing one of those stupid Burger King hats, telling everyone to have it their way. I leaned my forehead against the elevator door which was as cold as the blood coursing through my veins. Gradually I became aware of vibrations. “Oh God, I think it’s coming. *Ding. Click. Woosh.* There was Mrs. Pitzer sitting in her wheelchair, mute and motionless, the elevator sentinel. “Thank you God!” I was relieved no one else was around, and falling to my knees, I begged her forgiveness for what I had done, rambling on about how I’m usually more responsible than this, but distracted by my damn pen I had let her down. I gazed up at her face searching for forgiveness, and found those beautiful brown eyes dancing with mirth.



wear y adj. **1.** physically or mentally exhausted, as by hard work.

Often, twelve hour shifts would turn into fourteen hour shifts once new admissions were settled in and all my charting was done. I would unwind after one of these marathon days by going to the fitness center and floating languidly in the pool. On this particular night, I had just finished working 7AM to 9PM and my mind was numb. I arrived at the fitness center and could not even remember how I got there. I wearily changed into my bathing suit, put on my swim slippers, removed my glasses, rendering me almost blind, and put on my goggles to protect my eyes from the ravages of chlorine. I dragged myself from the locker room out to the pool area, which was dimly lit, giving it an even more peaceful air. Not a soul was around, one good thing about showing up so late. I rounded the corner and there was the pool, water crystal clear as glass and not a ripple. It was so inviting, I just wanted to run and dive in, so I put down my towel and started to run toward the deep end. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the sign, “Absolutely No Diving.” Being the geek I am, I stopped right before becoming airborne, not wanting to risk being thrown out for rule breaking. I trudged over to the steps that led into the shallow end, grasping the rail as I descended. I left the last step and realized—I was standing on the bottom of the pool—there wasn’t any water in the pool! I felt the blood drain from my face as the horror

On Being Human

of what I almost did, dawned on me. That dive would have killed me! Or worse yet, it wouldn't have killed me, and I would have had to spend the rest of my miserable life answering questions from my motorized wheelchair: "You can tell me Laurie, was it a suicide attempt?" Better to have died and left unanswered questions: "Do you think she actually dove into an empty pool, or do you think she drowned and when they drained the pool, there she was, the suction of the draining water causing her to flatten out spread eagle?" The sound of voices brought me back to reality. "Shit!" The jazzercise class was over and all the skinny bitches were headed this way to use the showers. God what an idiot I must look like, standing in the bottom of an empty pool, goggles, swim slippers and nose clip on. Could I pass myself off as the pool inspector? "Just checking for cracks and structural defects. Looks OK, we can go ahead and fill her up." No, they wouldn't buy it. I figured the best thing was to back up the stairs; somehow I felt that way it wouldn't look so much like I was coming out of the pool, rather I was just standing there looking at it wistfully, longing for the day I could swim again. I managed to pull this off, then dashed for the sauna, just as the bitches came into sight. I pretended to shut the sauna door so it looked like I was just coming out. They wouldn't question the bathing suit as it was appropriate to wear a bathing suit and slippers in the sauna, and I quickly removed my goggles and nose clip. I walked with an air of nonchalance I did not feel, back to the locker room, dressed and wearily slunk home.

tired *adj.* **x.** exhausted, as by exertion.

I don't always get to eat dinner during a twelve hour shift, so I usually stop for fast food on the way home. One night, I stopped at a Wendy's, my mind preoccupied by the events of the day. I got into the drive thru lane, grateful no one was ahead of me. I pulled up, rolled down my window, and yelled out, "I'd like a cheeseburger and a biggie iced tea with lemon." Waiting for confirmation, I glanced in my rearview and noted several cars had pulled up behind me. "Got here just in time." I was becoming agitated at the amount of time it was taking to confirm my order and tell me to, "pull up to the first window." Tired, hungry and cranky, I yelled out the window, "I SAID I WANT A CHEESEBURGER AND A BIGGIE ICED TEA WITH LEMON." I realized everyone in line could hear me but I didn't care, I was getting pissed. As I glared out the window towards the box and what I thought was the speaker, my eyes focused on, "Mental Patient Apprehended And Returned To Doctors West." I glanced into my rearview and made eye contact with the patron in the car behind me. "Asshole," his gaze read. With overwhelming embarrassment I realized I had just tried to order from the newspaper vending machine. I pulled forward a few feet to the speaker and ordered. As I pulled up to the window to pick up my food, I could have sworn everyone in the entire restaurant was looking at me and laughing.

I learned a lot about myself over the last twenty years. I learned to forgive myself for being human. The mistakes I made were the result of trying so hard to be everything to everyone. Along the way I have met some very remarkable people, and I would like to share some of my experiences and wisdom with others. I am currently teaching Health Technologies at a local high school. I hope that my students carry something away with them from my class. I hope they can see the humor in situations, and laugh a little as they go through life.

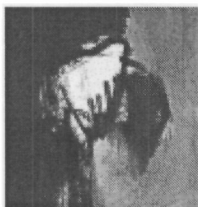
The other day I was up on the maternity floor with my students. One of the labor and delivery nurses informed us that the doctor was getting ready to deliver a woman whose baby was in the breech position and she wondered, "Would one of the students like to observe?"

"What's a breech position?" one of my students asked.

"That's when the baby is born buttocks first," I instructed.

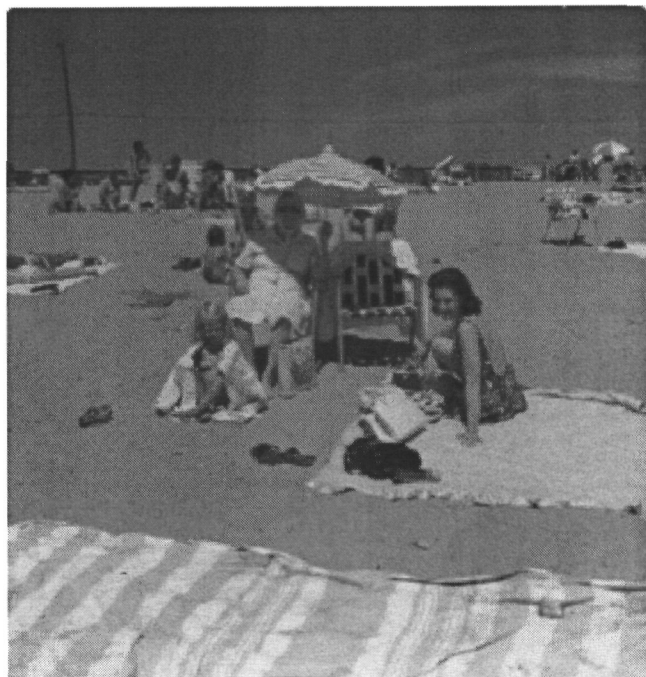
"Whoa! That's messed up," the student replied. "Is that what 'butthead' means?"

It's rough work being born butt first. After the breech delivery, the newborn baby girl cried vigorously at the injustice of it, then fell asleep, exhausted, in her mother's arms.



On Being Human





**An
Appreciation
of the
Poetry
of
Stuart
Lishan
Nine
Poems**



The Breeze Fluttered Tapestry: April

“Inward”; “Cold!”; such is the pared speech of blossoms,
Which is their bent attitude of blame
As April rain congeals to snow; like lost suns
The daffodils curl on themselves, and I, in the same
Bowed speech, remember that far off summer
When you were gone, that night at Sweet Springs,
When you were gone, by the tide-swelled marshes, where star-
Light cantilevered through the water rings
Past the frog songs, past the caterpillar
Spinning her silks into the fog filtered moonlight—
These breeze fluttered tapestries of my years—
So they seemed that eucalyptus scented night
As the dew fell, and the caterpillar’s silks glistened;
“Come,” they shone, “Begin here; closer; listen. . .”

Originally published in *Mudlark* No. 16 (2001).

Where I Introduce The Antagonists: The Duchess of Moisture, The Empress of Waterfowl

The Duchess of Moisture streamed from her castle;
Deep in her mitered soul she was enraged;
She arranged her forces for the battle;
It was a drear morning; in the village,
By the tall volcano, near the rivers,
And in her houses, her anger began;
Her sea witches were sent to claim us; the oars
They rowed with were golden; far inland
My muscles were tired; buoyed by the dead horses,
The Empress of Waterfowl, her purple
Pennant raised, cried out to the marshes,
To the curlews and sheldrakes, the supple
Formations of swans; the moon showed what was left;
No quality of language would spell our grief. . .

When the Grape Became Purple: The Aged Genii Recalls the War of His Kind Against The Moisture Duchess

“. . . Then the mother genii’s belly opened;
 Then, disgorging their arrows and their armor,
 Her babies, slithering like cobras, were siphoned
 Into the light; The Duchess began her war;
 Her clouds arced over us, like dinner plates,
 Exploded , and the shards massed into black skeletons;
 They climbed towards us over the walls of burial plots;
 Then her hot rain burst into our scalded bones,
 And we climbed onto wolves and rode away, cowards;
 It was autumn when finally we felt safe;
 The grapes were shiny and ripe, unbled, uncolored
 Still by their shame of us; we slid their soft
 Skins back, like the shut eyelids of dreamers, and in
 We curled, stunned, waiting . . . for the world to be naïve again . . .”

Originally published in *Mudlark* No. 16 (2001).

S Lishan

Why

We

"I'm a fiend in high school, like dead-sky, man;

Sometimes

Like in the shake line my hair gathers like fur;

Don't

Like when I climb the bleachers during gym
And hooch for hours, Coach says, 'Save it for
Friday';

Say

like things swim in front of me
(Like when a Harley starts I think 'lion').

Anything

Like that ROTC kid kicks me, says, "Say yes
Sir, YES SIR!"

in

Like eat my heart for dinner, man;

Dreams:

Like I give Felisha grubs in study hall;
Like my dick is crawling with larval flies;

Monkey

Like trees trees trees they're fucking beautiful;

Boy

Like there's this thing in my head and there's wires;

Like Doctor Kramer says, 'Sit back, try not
To breathe' so I don't, and it's like . . . so I don't . . ."

Originally published in *Mudlark* No. 16 (2001).

Aegisthus

After /

Some

Definitions

*Still there drips in sleep against the heart
grief of memory*

*Justice so moves that those only learn
who suffer*

—Aeschylus

Def. of courtship: "To court for advantages."
That's not to say we hadn't any needs
(Who hates to fuck?). In fens where such love breeds
One can feed on what is bred from rage's
Courtship. Our wombs grew fat with her dead daughter,
And my memories of sibling slaughter.
Hadn't we good reason to carve through skin?
Didn't more die for less against the Trojan?

Justice: "To get off with murder if you can."
Def. of murder? Not if you define through spin.
In 2,500 years, from then till now,
What fun to see conscience grovel, then bow.
Anger's a toilet. When you piss, it sings,
A practice refined by peerages and kings.

Originally published in *La Petite Zine* (2000).

S Lishan

after

oral

surgery /

a

meditation

on

the

tongue

"A huge half moon, a monstrous cantle out"
—*Henry IV, Part 1*

There was cold in my left lung.

Tongue remembered this.

*

Wound that tongue loves, shaped
of whimper. A rat's tail.
A finger lake. A night trail.
A Stillborn, four teeth long.

By the grafted blood,
by the suture's grout,

The neighbors whispered, "let her out."

*

The hospice of space:
Tongue's occupied country.

She can't float through enough.

*

Once, I was cold in my left lung.
Tongue remembered.

In the beginning: Speech. Begun,
it shot out. Bullets of vowels lodged in teeth, snowbound
bushes, roots like grass shoots,

Their voices ground
against their likenesses.

The whole of their shapes:

Baby birds' head buried face down
in the muck, beaks spread, as if speaking.

"Why don't she stay wi' her own,
mind her own business.
Look at her, poor rag."

Tongue floated above them all,

a streamer attached to a louver
waving in the breeze, like an angel
attached to love.

*

Once upon a time tongue was

a slivered moon near bees laying in honey,
while butterflies sized their zig-zags out,
and tender longer near the elm,
and echoes let in fierce barks form the further away houses.

*

Meanwhile, nearby,
diving from the maple, a worm
eating warbler darts out,
in, princess atoning
for names of things,

like tongue.

Originally published in *CrossConnect*.

The Perseids Suite

Meteors #1

We've been apart
so long

our hearts' embroidery
has torn.

Let this meteor
be the thread,

our love
become the needle.

Meteors #2

I am so happy in these seconds

I watch this meteor this freight
of light hurry with such purpose
across the night it seems nothing
can replace it.

Meteors #3

Stroking
Your soft hair
Meteors

Unzipping
Night's
Dress

Meteors #4

Such child joy with you.

Meteors: Stitches
In our sides

From laughing.

Meteors #5

We're hung
to death
with nevers,
Love.

Let's
this once

shine
anywhere
in the sky
we

please.

Originally published in *ForPoetry.com*.



Eurydice

55

&

Lover

Boy

Hades is beautiful. We've our flowers, too,
in the weave of we've, in the blew of dark blue.

Lover boy! Look at you, spirit like dew,
even still, so self centered in your view.
Now your bones are dirt, the compost of my sky.
They live in a place where your flowers die

—it's a hard truth your flowers come to know,
each autumn when their petals let them go.
Not even men outlast themselves. Their wives
can, and do, go on, happy with their lives.

Is Lover boy depressed? Does his heart feel black?
Well, just follow me, hon; I won't turn back.
Hades is beautiful. We've our flowers, too,
in the weave of we've, in the blew of dark blue.

Originally published in *La Presse Review*

S Lishan

**How, in the
Season's
First Snowfall,
Frog
Came to Leave
His Pond
in Quest
of the Sea**

Voices like a wounded language— like pins
 Of ice in trees they pricked into his skull
 As the pond's edge froze; that sunset, the bay's thin
 Necklace of tides shimmered, until snow fell;
 It whipped into him; it made our bones ache;

And as I listened, each voice seemed as lost:

“... It begins
 Like a scythe that cuts
 From the swath
 That is her flesh
 To remake us. . .”

“... There is a sound
 That whispers
 That empties
 Like waterfalls
 It begins. . .”

“... The sea makes
 Her healing loosened
 From a shell of sighs
 Surrendering. . .”

Frog heard the voices rise

Like mists of breath on cold days surrounding
 him, as tides fingered the marsh grass like a lyre,
 As he set out to make the sea his lover.

Originally published in *The DMQ Review* (2003).



Elizabeth

59

Dye

HIM

Appreciate his presence
very being
became my life
my reasoning.
Without I would not be.
Power

every move
every thought
engulfed.

Love.

Life.

The way he

moves
speaks
lives

my heart beats.

His is mine

happiness
weakness.

Sharing life

hand-in-hand.

Each

breath
heart beat
kind or hurtful word
tear
smile

is ours
only ours.



Elizabeth Dye

Superman

“I run faster with no underwear on!” said Jack. My brother, who could not have been more than four, looked at the boy with a bit of wonder.

“My mom says that I have to wear a clean pair of underwear every day,” Joey said. Jack began to run back and forth from his house to his garage door.

“You are weird,” said my brother as he began to walk back into our yard.

“Janey, Jack says that he doesn’t have to wear underwear ’cause it makes him run faster. Does it?”

“What are you talking about? He said that?” I looked across the street to Jack who was still running around his yard.

“Stay away from that boy, Joey, he is a little different.” Joey gave me a disappointed look but ran back to our

swing set for a round of seesaw with some of the babysitting kids. The ‘babysitting kids’ came Monday through Friday. Sometimes there were even extra children at our house during the week. Mom not only fed them and cared for them from 7:30 A.M. until their parents got off work in the evening, but I feel as though she raised them. She was the first to see them walk and the one to potty train each of them. She gathered up their lost teeth to keep in a baggy until their mothers arrived, to put under their pillow for the Tooth Fairy that night. Mom had to deal with all of their questions about life, sex and growing up. When I was little I thought she was crazy for wanting so many children around her all of the time.

I made my way into the house to find my mom in the kitchen still slabbing peanut butter on the twenty some sandwiches she was making for lunch.

"Uh Mom, Joey just told me that Jack, next door, is running around with no underwear on," I laughed.

"Oh yeah, I know that. He says it all of the time. I think that he wants the boys to think that he is cool. Just as long as no one here is running around naked, we will be fine," she said smiling.

"Okay, just thought you should know," I said walking out of the kitchen.

"Hey, Jane, could you round everyone up for lunch please? I think that we'll eat outside today."

"Sure, Mom. Okay guys, lunch time!" I yelled out the back door. All of the kids instantly stopped their seesawing and swinging to run for their favorite spots at the picnic tables placed throughout the back yard. I made my way over to sit beside Joey. He looked up and smiled at me with his goofy grin as he wiped his mud-covered hands on his overalls. He had lost his first tooth on Monday in an unfortunate Big Wheeling accident. Although we have eight years between us, I have always had so much fun with Joey. We were always game partners, and he insisted that I take the role of his mother during our marathons of house playing. When our mom is not around, I am the first person Joey insists on being with. I am his "big sister." We understand one another. I prefer to talk with him over any other family member. I don't tell anyone this, but he is my favorite.

Mom brings out lunch and we all chow down on our peanut butter and jelly

sandwiches and macaroni and cheese. Summer is almost over; I can feel the temperature change in the air. School will be starting soon.

School shopping: this was always a trip that my dad preferred to pass on. Mom would load up all four of us in our mini van and drive the thirty minutes to the Southland Mall in Marion, Ohio. We would make our way to Sears first; this is where we would find our "school shoes." School shoes were worn only to school. If we were caught playing in the backyard or wearing them on the weekends we would be punished. These could be various types of shoes; pretty much anything new would fall into the sacred category. All four of us were bought new sneakers. Joey and I were thrilled with our new Nikes. Joey's lit up on the bottoms when he walked. I preferred plain white and blue stripes alongside mine. Jenny, our sister who is closest to my age picked out a pair of Smurf blue and white cartoon sneakers. Marti, our youngest sister, also chose cartoon sneakers, but preferred Barbie. After the shoes, we made our way to the boys department where Joey would need new pants. Mom chose several pairs for him to try on.

"Jane, take your brother to the dressing rooms, while I find Marti some socks," she instructed as she walked toward the girls department.

"Okay Joey, lets find the dressing rooms." We made our way across the store toward the "fitting room" sign. Joey was still too young to accurately try on new clothing. He needed a big sister's opinion. I chose the handicap room with bars on each wall. I knew that we would

need the extra space for two people. Joey began making faces into the mirrors while I organized all of the pants on a wall hanger. After he sat on the floor, I removed his cowboy boots that he had insisted on wearing shopping that day. I grabbed the first pair of corduroys to try on and went to unbutton jeans. Giggles filled the entire room.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Um, Janey I didn't wear any underpants today," Joey said with his little hand covering his mouth full of giggles. I knew this would not go over well with our mom. I had to find a pair of 'undies' somewhere in order to complete our task.

"Okay, we had better find you some so that we can try on these new pants."

"No, I don't want to wear underpants. They slow me down," he said.

"Where were you planning on running today?"

"I dunno, I run a lot, Janey. I am a little kid, remember?"

"Here is the deal, you have to try the pants on with underwear, but then you can take them back off, okay?" Joey looked satisfied with my plan. I made my way out of the dressing room to find the boys underwear. I found a rack of size small Super Man undies and figured they would do the job. I knew that I had better pick a pack of underwear that was on sale, because our mom would have to buy them once we were done with my plan.

Once inside the dressing room, I ripped open the package and attempted to make Joey put on a pair. He insisted on only putting on the red pair with Super Man on the front (at least I had chosen a

suitable package). He cooperated and we found three pairs of pants that fit. Joey insisted on ripping the undies back off before putting back on his own pants. He threw them in my lap as I gathered up our items and went running out of the dressing room and back into the aisles.

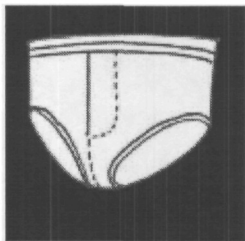
Once outside the dressing room we saw Mom. Joey and I had taken longer than I thought trying on his pants.

"Where have the two of you been?"

Joey looked at me with eyes that pleaded for me not to tell. I couldn't bear to share our secret. Joey trusted me to keep it.

"We just had a hard time finding pants to fit," I lied. Joey looked thrilled with my response, grinned at me, and then took off running full force toward my sisters in the girls department. Mom looked at me and smiled as she took the open pack of underwear and Joey's new pants from my hands.

"Is it just me, or is Joey running a little faster today?" she asked.



Superman





Steven Wilson A Million Miles

I saw you in the morning once
before the Costa Brava
before the Coke and lemon muffins
before the books were kept
and way before the drinks were mixed

you said your father bought you a big bed
to keep you out of backseats
but I brought them to you
I dressed them up and they were charming
but I brought them all the same

This is not an accusation but,
I think you fractured me
I think your cracks ran into my foundation
we shed tears to fill a bucket
as youths, for Christ's sake

I never found anything wrong in you
I never saw anything but the shape of an unbridled breast in a T-shirt (the
bouncing curve),
the soft thickness of a thigh carved out of light blue cotton,
It was Great

And now I'm really wondering
I'm thinking maybe I slipped up
I wonder if you saw me
because I should have let you see me

I wish you would have seen me

in the morning

I wish you would have seen me in the morning



Justin Bell one in non

I know it hasn't been easy."

That might be the most beautiful thing he'd heard her say. So much nicer than any compliment on his new hairstyle or the clean T-shirt that he unearthed from the knee-deep stratum of clothes on his bedroom floor. He shaved this morning, but no one could tell. Next time he'll comb his hair for their meeting. Today he's done enough.

The waitresses say "Hello" to him today when he walks in. Usually, they just ask "Smoking or non?" and he'll want to say "Smoking" but then he'll notice that she's already been seated in "non."

"There's the person I'm meeting right there," he says to the waitress and she proceeds to ask "Anything to drink?" and he wants to say "Coffee" but she's already ordered an iced-tea for him,

decaffeinated it turns out. "No thanks," he tells the waitress, "looks like I'm set" and he sits down to her left at the round table designed to seat six.

It's about that time when the waitresses will be going from table to table collecting the syrup containers in their wire carriers. "That's okay," he thinks. "Didn't really want pancakes anyway. Iced-tea doesn't really go well with pancakes anyway."

"You look good," she always says.

"Thanks, so do you," he always replies.

She's wearing that orange T-shirt again. The one with the puffy blue fish and the puffy white bubbles. He thinks that it's funny how she always asks the waitresses if they know who is singing the piped-in music. Sometimes they know

and that's funny too. But the funniest part is when they don't know and they act like they care and they go and ask the grill cooks in the kitchen. Someone in the kitchen always knows. That's funny. That's great. And when that happens, he thinks, it's almost worth it all coming here to meet her and telling her about how he's making slow progress.

It has always amazed him how many people in this town walk with noticeable limps. He's sure that it's not just a coincidence. He might go along with the coincidence idea if it were different kinds of limps, but everyone limps along in the same manner, like they've all had their lower backs go out on them. "It's all got to be connected," he thinks. "Something I'll find out, I guess. Maybe after this is all over."

And there are a lot of fat people in this town, too. *A lot*. It's more than noticeable. It's distracting.

He's not a very good-looking man. He's not fat, though, and he doesn't have a limp, so that makes him somewhat extraordinary in this town. There are good-looking people in town. Not a lot of them are men. Of course, this doesn't bother him at all, but it does make things complicated because he feels like he should have a good shot at these good-looking women with the level of competition being so low. The crappy thing is that he really doesn't have a shot at these women because he is so not-very-good-looking. None of them are about to settle for not-very-good-looking guys, even an extraordinary not-very-good-looking guy in a town full of limping obese people. He thinks that's funny, too.

Something else that's funny (not so much funny amusing as it is funny peculiar) is that a man like him who finds so much about his surroundings to be funny doesn't really laugh all that much. That's noticeable to this woman he meets every Tuesday afternoon in this restaurant. That's a fact that's even more noticeable to her than the unusually high population of fat folks with limps. She doesn't pay much attention to physical features. That's why she says "You look good" to him when he sits down and leaves it at that, never anything specific, just generalities. Good and bad, anything else is beyond her capability. She's a good listener, though. A great listener, actually. And she's good at synthesizing ideas and explaining to people who and what they are.

There's something that she is looking for in him. Not looking, listening for. Feeling for. He's trying so hard to make progress and she knows it. That's why she's kept coming here to meet with him long past the assigned time.

He gets confused sometimes when he thinks about her, not because he's in love with her or because he's even slightly interested in her and her life. He's confused by her because she looks so much younger than she is. He's confused because she looks like a Native American princess who's been kidnapped and forced to wear beach clothes and smoke long white cigarettes. He's confused because she sits in "non" when she goes to a restaurant but she smokes all the time when she's not eating. He's confused because her hands are so elegant and willowy at the ends of her

thin strong arms. He's confused because she chews with her mouth open despite her grace and beauty. He wonders if he could do for her what she does for him.

"Okay," she sounds tired today. The long exhalation of breath, a sigh that signifies either that she is recovering from a sleepless night, or something else is occupying her thoughts. He won't ask her what's bothering her. Something tells him that if he did, all of these meetings, all of the progress that he has made, will go for naught. "Okay," she says again, "what do you have for me today? What's new? Any developments?"

He pulls a ragged notebook out of the left rear pocket of his worn gray corduroys. "I had this dream last night. When I woke up, I wrote this down:

My God. What is happening? November 7th, 19...no...2002. God, it's so damn hard to remember that I made it to the 2000s. Almost 36 months into it and I'm still writing 19_ _ on my checks. Will I ever get past the twentieth century? It seems to me to be more than just dates. It's surrounding me, this envelope of days, months, years passed. Can I punch a hole through it to see a new day? A new millennium?

"Wow," she said. "That must have been some dream. I think that you are really starting to grasp the possibility that you can move on from the past. I think that you're almost there."

"Yeah. But then I wrote this:



I've put all of my faith in a man who does Jimmy Durante impersonations (or are they impressions?) for television commercials. "Pet commercials," he tells me. "For some reason, I get a lot of jobs doing pet commercials." Maybe people just associate Jimmy Durante's husky, breathy voice and its somehow perplexing ethnic qualities with dogs. "And women's products," the man says to me. "A lot of different kinds of women's products. Don't ask me why." I didn't ask him, but after he told me about his involvement in the marriage between the voice of Jimmy Durante and feminine hygiene products, Leggs pantyhose, and International Flavored Coffees, I could not help but wish that I had not heard of that. At least I could purge myself of the sadistic mental images of Jimmy Durante lounging in the late morning sunshine of a Sunday in spring, reminiscing with a couple of girlfriends about a trip to Paris while they were in college. I see him in a popasan chair with a steaming cup of creamy café mocha carefully cradled in the wrinkled, leathery catcher's mitts that are his

ancient hands while he hypnotically kicks back and forth his bedroom-slipped foot over the edge of the chair's bamboo frame. His white fluffy terrycloth bathrobe glows and makes him look comfortably warm and pleasantly cool and clean all at the same time. One look at him tells me that he has just stepped from a sudsy, steaming bathtub. While his friends, who are dressed similarly, chatter and giggle and sigh while throwing back their beautiful, soft, perfectly Pantened and conditioned hair so it cascades down the backs of their respective comfy/cozy chairs, Jimmy pulls a half-smoked Dutch Masters' cigar from a pocket disturbingly close to his genitals. He lights it with a flourish, a snap and a click of an ancient

Zippo lighter. The lighter clicks once more and is replaced into another pocket, this one also much too near to his drooping testicles. I want to throw up, but I can't because I know how ridiculous it would be to simply vomit for no other reason than the fact that I am daydreaming about a dead Vaudeville star with a nose the size of his coffee cup. If something this stupid makes me want to release my most recent meal, how should I expect to be able to get through any day without becoming nauseous? I leave this scene of Jimmy lounging on his throne engulfed in a miasma of cigar smoke and memories of a grand European vacation. (Mickey Rooney is somehow involved. I don't know how. He is a symbol of anger and resentment in this vision. Maybe he's angry because he feels forgotten. Maybe he's jealous of the coffee commercials. I don't know. Maybe he is just an aphorism. Some kind of basic collection of anger and malevolence, densely packed into the small stature of an elderly former superstar which has long since fizzled and now feels cheated of yet another popular revival, a rebirth from the womb of kitsch. Maybe this is the supernova of his stardom. A sneer spreads across his face and I can see his burning, acidic, predatorial soul effusing from his dull eyes. Buried deep inside is a cauldron of lust and unfulfilled sexual anger. The demons that have possessed this body seethe with a primal hunger for subservient young bodies of starlets. Young, frail, moist women who are consumed quickly and returned to their lives without the innocence they took for granted. And I see this in the eyes of this devil that has taken the physical form of Mickey Rooney, and I recognize it because the devil has stared at me through my own eyes in this sterling looking glass stapled to my forehead of which I can never be rid. It is my

conscience. I am aware that I am not in control. I am aware that to try to gain control is pointless. What will be done, will be done. I am now, simply, going along for the ride.)

The look on her face lets him know what he suspected is true. He has taken one step forward, and two steps back.

"You know that this is not good, right?" she observes.

"That's why I read it to you last."

"I see. Well, this means that we are going to have to extend your treatment yet again," the exasperation in her voice is plainly evident.

"So I have to meet you here for another six months?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"Well, I guess you have to do what you have to do. At least let me pick up the check."

"Oh please, let the county pay for it. I'll write it up as a business lunch like I always do."

The two of them do not leave together. Her pager whistles, and he watches her slight body glide out of "non" and out of the restaurant. He sits for ten more minutes, quietly sipping the iced tea so graciously bought for him with taxpayer money, the whole time smiling. He thinks that it's funny just how much he can accomplish by talking about a dream that he never had.

"Lemme guess," her significant other was balancing the checkbook at the kitchen table. He didn't raise his eyes

from the rectangular black digits on the pocket calculator as he spoke. "Another six months?"

There was a hint of derision in his voice, not that it was uncommon for him to subtly criticize his wife without actually saying something tangibly derogatory for her to contradict. He was cautious never to do such a thing because he knew she had a reservoir of knowledge in the realm of emotional analysis, the slightest amount of which he could not hope to comprehend. And he was aware that the most painful retort she was willing to utilize was one with which she would hone in on his tender ego and strike with an interpretation of his tendency to criticize her as a flaw of his own making.

"Mm-hmm." She pitied herself that she felt it necessary to reply at all. Not answering her husband would have nearly been the equivalent of her gentle "Mm-hmm," except that he would have taken no reply at all as a "Yes," and that would have been a signal that she felt it necessary to explain the situation further. "Mm-hmm," implied that his assumption was correct, just maybe she was as disappointed about it all as he, and there was nothing left to say.

He flipped through the pages of that month's bank statement and inserted numbers into gray and green shaded boxes on the backs. A stack of returned checks with panda bears and sperm whales and spotted owls on them, and of course his omnipresent calculator, comprised the table setting. Upon his completion of the task before him, the checks would go back into the tiny box from whence they came,

and the calculator would settle snugly back into its place in his shirt pocket. Everything with him was to be in its right place. The numbers, it was always by the numbers with him. The numbers had to be balanced. The bank statements reconciled and filed. The ballpoint pen clicked. The calculator replaced close to his breast.

The calculator reminded her of the last time they had sex. She straddled him while he sat in that same exact kitchen chair, preparing to balance last month's bank statement. She caught him before he could take the calculator from his buttoned-down collared, navy blue pinstriped Van Heusen shirt. She pulled his brown-belted, khaki Haggard slacks

down below his knees and sat upon his lap. He was annoyed, but not as much as he was aroused. That made her feel good, and they fucked for four minutes. The radiant green digits on the microwave recorded the duration of their copulation:

4:13 PM: Commenced fucking.

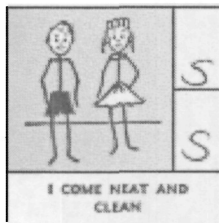
4:14 PM: Continued fucking.

4:15 to 4:16 PM: See above.

4:17 PM: Ejaculation.

4:18 PM: Breathing slowing down, various dripping.

He leaned back as far as the kitchen chair would allow, and she stayed on his lap, the bones in his hips digging into her thighs, his slithery manhood collapsing upon itself. The digits on the microwave clock froze at 4:18 PM, their eagerness to change during the previous four minutes was abruptly gone, the rapid



pace dwindling at the same rate as his member.

He was motionless, and his stillness betrayed a discernable twitching motion in his shirt pocket. It was the pounding of his heart that jostled the calculator enough for her to take notice. She observed this motion for the duration of that otherwise frozen moment, the entirety of the kitchen dead-calm other than the calculator in his pocket twitching on his heart like antennae on a dying insect.

Watching him press the keypad on a confusing symbol of their sexual miscommunication seemed to her like watching him masturbate to a pornographic magazine. She associated the calculator now with self-indulgent sex and indicative of the true desires within his heart. Its rigidity, its simple purpose, its calculating nature seemed in contrast to passion and love, but then again so did their sex-lives. He turned another page of the bank statement and she realized that in the nine years they'd been married, she had never caught him masturbating to photographs in magazines. Something told her that if he did do such a thing, it probably would be with a computer magazine.

The laugh that burst abruptly from her throat surprised her, but not as much as her husband failing to ask her what she found so funny. She waited just a moment, long enough for him to register one more total on the bank statement.

"I was just thinking about what he wrote today," she volunteered, and she lit one of her slender white cigarettes with a plastic disposable lighter that was the same day-glo orange as her shirt. It

was a rare occasion when she smoked inside the house, and that caused her husband to look at her for the first time since she had returned home. He sat up straight and placed his ballpoint pen on the stack of endangered species checks. His left arm stretched out at full-length, hand grasping the metal edge of the table. His right elbow rested upon the corner of the table, index finger pointing straight up along the side of his skull, remaining fingers curled like a soft pink clamshell in front of his puckered lips. He did not ask what it was that amused his wife. He just sat there as if to say, "Well? Go on."

"He had this dream about a guy who imitates Jimmy Durante's voice for pet food commercials," she explained through a listless cloud of white smoke and sunlight. "And Mickey Rooney was the devil or something." She laughed again and leaned against the counter where the kitchen sink could serve as her ashtray.

Her husband watched her snap ash down the garbage disposal. He bit his upper lip and snorted, "At least he's dreaming about impersonators of dead celebrities and not the real thing. Quite a breakthrough I should say."

Again she was aware of his subtle derision. He found her interest in this man to be an annoyance, a failure of his expectations of her competency as a counselor. She had spent over a year of Tuesday lunches with him, and apparently no resolution was in sight. He had not met this character, but he felt that his own life was somehow being influenced by this man's problems, and this was not according to his wishes.

"He dreamed about this Jimmy Durante impersonator's testicles, honey. I hardly consider that a breakthrough," her smoke-hushed voice replied.

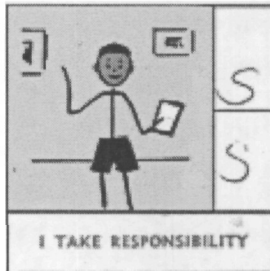
"You know what I think?"

She didn't say yes or no. She remained leaning against the kitchen counter, cigarette dangling from her soft ochre lips, her slim, copper arms folded across the puffy blue fish swimming in an orange sea as if she were attempting to return his previous "Well? Go on."

"He's making this all up."

That evening, she consulted her notes.

The subject was ordered to have weekly meetings with a counselor for a period of six months and to remain at least five hundred feet away from the grave of Mr. William Holden. The subject was arrested for trespassing, loitering, and public indecency at the site of Mr. Holden's grave. The subject had erected a makeshift campsite at the gravesite. The campsite consisted of an eight feet long by eight feet wide green tarpaulin nailed to the headstone under which the subject slept for an undetermined number of nights, no more than ten. The subject was asked on three separate occasions to leave the premises and willingly complied on each occasion. The subject gathered his belongings and left the cemetery grounds quietly, only to return after dark. Caretakers at the cemetery eventually contacted police following an incident in which the subject "slept in" one morning and was discovered sleeping in the nude beneath the tarpaulin. Police officers arrived and found



the subject sitting cross-legged upon Mr. Holden's headstone, still in a state of undress and eating a large bag of Doritos. When questioned about his reason for being at the cemetery in such a condition, the subject explained that he was there to verify that "William Holden was still dead." The subject also stated that ever since his television "began to only show classic movies on every f—ing channel" he had been unsure of his "place in time." The subject was subsequently charged with the aforementioned misdemeanors and then released into the custody of county mental health services for psychiatric evaluation.

Preliminary evaluation of the subject revealed possible severe depression and schizophrenia, the extent of which was not determined. The subject explained that he happened upon the gravesite of Mr. Holden after he "watched Sunset Boulevard for the seventeenth f—ing time on channel nine." When it was explained to the subject that the William Holden on whose headstone he was sitting was not, in fact, the famous film actor of the same name, the subject responded "Hub. How about that?" and promised that he would not return to that site. The subject was released on condition that he appear for his court date.

The subject was arrested one week later when he was discovered asleep upon the grave of Ms. Lauren Bacall. He was returned to the custody of county mental health services and detained at General Hospital until his court date two weeks later. The subject explained during the hearing that he located the gravesite of Ms. Bacall after "watching The Big Sleep for the twelfth time on channel f—ing five." It was explained to the subject that the film

J Bell

actress Lauren Bacall is not buried at that site and, in fact, the famous actress Lauren Bacall is still alive. To this the subject replied, "Well then whose grave is that?" It was explained to the subject that the grave was that of a different woman named Lauren Bacall. The subject replied, "How do you know that's not the Lauren Bacall I was looking for? Don't jump to f—ing conclusions. You don't know me."

He looks good today. The collar of his shirt is flecked with tiny dark hairs that the barber failed to dust off this morning. The hairs slip down between his shirt and flesh, between his shoulder blades, and that is the cause of his incessant scratching this afternoon. The waitresses cast their usual dismissive glances at him as he steps through the front door, one arm contorted at an angle above his head and behind his neck, his hand scratching where a hair digs into a spot on his spine. The change in his hairstyle attracts a brief glare of unfamiliarity from the waitress who rises from her seat at the counter to greet him.

"Smoking or non?" she asks. No "Hello" today, but that's okay. He walks on through her greeting, smiling politely at her, tossing his head in the direction of the table for six in "non." He thinks that the woman he is here to meet has probably ordered a decaffeinated drink for him already as is her custom, but when he turns to verify his expectation he sees that their table for six for two is empty. She has not yet arrived. He stops dead in his tracks.

"Meeting someone?" asks the waitress as his head swings from side to side, scanning the restaurant for any sign

of a recognizable face. Many are faces he has seen before, most of them overweight and gimpy, of course.

This is not the first time she has been late for their meeting, but he so wanted to walk in and see her reaction to his fresh new appearance, his closely cropped, clean hair. He is disappointed but not disheartened, and he knows that she will still be surprised when eventually she arrives and sits next to him at their usual oversized round table for two.

"One in non right now," he says to the waitress. "I am expecting someone, however. Could I have that large table right there?"

The waitress says nothing and leads him to the table he requested. She lays a menu on the table and asks what he will be drinking.

"Do you have decaffeinated iced-tea?"

"You know we do. Your friend is the tall pretty woman, right? With the dark complexion?"

"Yes."

"I'll bring one for her, too."

He sits and waits and looks over the notebook in which he concocts strange stories to keep her interested in him, to keep her coming back. Over the weekend, he carefully crafted a scenario involving a Marx brother and Olivia de Havilland in which the two of them moved into the apartment below him and kept him awake all night by playing saxophones and what he assumed was screaming while making love. In the end of his story, he pounded on the door to their apartment at 4:30 in the morning after a night of tossing and turning, and

heard a gentle “help me, help me please” come from within.

There is little more to his story than that. His plan is to reveal only this much to her and save the remainder of it for following weeks. Her tardiness provides him a chance to look over his journal entry one last time to find any inconsistencies that might give him away.

She arrives before he can finish reading the entry. She appears harried, unready for their meeting. She is wearing a lime green soccer jersey with a shamrock on the shoulder. He smiles at her, and she removes her pack of cigarettes and sets fire to one with her day-glo orange disposable lighter. He looks around sheepishly, his head pulled down between his hair flecked shoulders. He waits for the sky to fall. They are seated in “non.”

She grasps the sweaty glass of iced-tea before her and gulps four times; the ice swirls and settles as she replaces the glass upon a paper napkin. He stares at the amber light trapped inside the cubes and a sensation of loss tingles in his cheeks and burrows like a badger into his temples.

“Did you make up that dream?” she asks and slides her cigarettes into a turquoise beaded purse he has never seen her carry before. “The one with Jimmy Durante and Mickey Rooney?”

He closes the tattered cover of the notebook and leans far to his right, raising his left buttock off of the chair just enough to slide the little journal into his pocket.

“Don’t stop coming to see me,” he says as though he believes that she won’t

put an immediate stop to this uncovered charade. He scratches at the little hairs that seem to be multiplying all around his throat, digging into his neck until they bring up spinal fluid.

“So you did make it up. How long have you been doing that?”

“For a while.”

“Why? What happened that. . .? I mean. . . why?”

“You said something to me that made me want to keep having our meetings. I knew that I was getting better. And the court order was coming to an end. But I wanted to still know you.”

“Listen to me. No matter what you may think, you are not in love with me.”

“I know that.”

“Are you sure you know that?”

“Of course I know that. That’s not what this is about.”

“Well, what I think this is about is that apparently you’ve gotten over your problem. That’s what I think is the important thing. You are over your problem, right?”

“With the old movies and stuff? Yeah. You know, this all happened because my old Zenith television broke and the guys at the repair shop said they had one just like it that I could have if I wanted to take it. Turned out that it was black and white and I didn’t know that. I suppose I was on the edge of losing it anyway. When all I could get on the set was black and white movies it just pushed me over. I thought I was out of time.”

“Out of time for what?”



one in non

"Just out of time. That's the best way I can describe it. You wouldn't know what it's like unless it happened to you. Like, all I could think of doing was to try and prove to myself that these old movie stars I kept seeing were dead, that they weren't still in Hollywood, out there making movies. It doesn't make any sense, I know. I wasn't exactly here in my own head. I wasn't sure where I was."

"Well. That's...hmm. I'm not sure what to say about this."

"Yeah. So, we're done with this I suppose."

"Yes. I should think we are."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"I guess that's the right thing to do. You've got other stuff to take care of, I'm sure."

"Yes." Her head sinks, her forehead pressed against the soft dark hairs on her forearms. All she can see is the grainy photograph of breakfast meat on the paper placemat. It turns her stomach, and she thinks about her husband and his subtle digs at her, his neat little packaged life, his calculations. She is sure that she is a failure at innumerable things. She feels that she is running out of options, running out of endeavors to undertake at which she may actually succeed.

"You know something, what you said to me also applies to you."

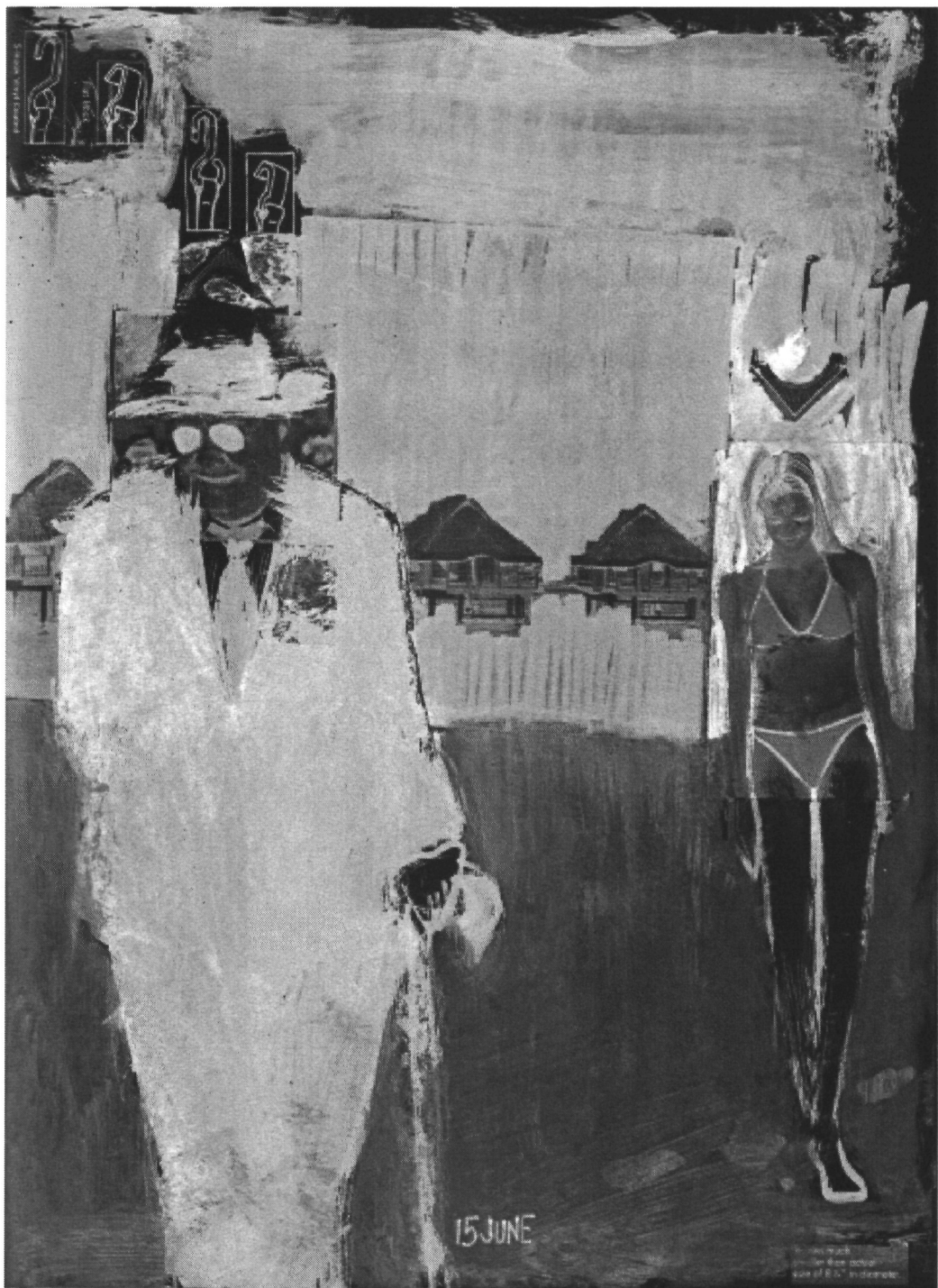
"What I said?"

"I know it hasn't been easy.' That's what you said to me. There are so many people in my life that should have said that to me before you did. So many of them knew that about me. No one said that to me until you did. Someone should say that to you someday."

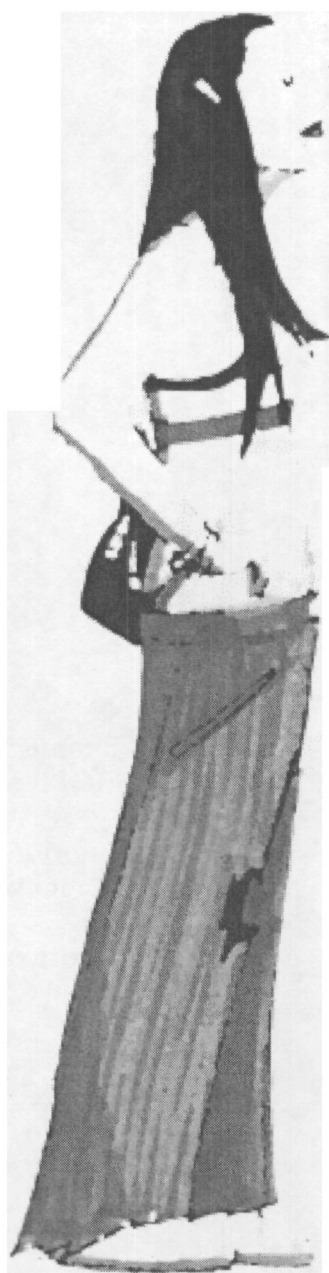
"Thanks. . . I guess."

"See you 'round."

She sits there for ten minutes after he has left, her forehead still pressed against her left forearm. She is chain smoking through the crook in her arm, looking at her copper legs in a ray of sun burning through the darkness beneath the table. The waitresses do not bother her. They let her sit with her head down thinking, smoking one cigarette after another. They won't say anything to her, but they know, even the limping fat folks know, what it's like when you are smoking in non.







Amanda Walters Passing Remark

In summer I like the snow.
In life I like change.

In emotions I like loudness,
and in music I want rhythm.

My brother, a shy boy with no friend
says, "Then how can you love me?"

Loudly I say in rhythm—
There are so many things admirable
people do not understand.

Dawn

The dawn breaks
like soft pigeon feathers.
It rises slowly
over the fog and sky
on unsprung wings
and then disappears.

what are little boys made of, made of?



every
thing
cuckoo.

should have taken
more care affixing to
page.

(badly glued
down)

Daniel Bradshaw

Missing the War

“Hey, sport! Let’s go!” George motioned toward the back door with the football he held. “Let’s see if you’ve still got that varsity quarterback arm.”

John gave his mother Donna a glance, begging for an excuse to stay in the house. She gave him a light nudge toward the door with a grin on her face.

“Go ahead. You can do it.”

John Parker didn’t feel right being at home again. He’d left for the Vietnam War a week following his 19th birthday. Now, one year later, he found himself in the backyard playing catch with his father. He couldn’t even remember the trip home.

The back yard wasn’t very long but decent enough for tossing the football around. Donna stood just inside the screen door watching the father and son

team she’d feared would never be together again.

“Let’s try some warm-up tosses.”

George threw a loose spiral at John’s chest. His young hands received the impact, and he turned the ball, finding the stitching on its front. He gave a slight grunt as he released the pigskin. The spiral of the ball was tight and precise, just like back in high school. It hit its mark squarely on George’s chest.

“You’ve still got it,” George chuckled as he motioned for his son to come closer. “Okay, time to run some routes. How about a basic post pattern?”

“Dad, there’s something we need to talk about,” John said in a low tone.

“Well, you can talk and catch at the same time, can’t ya?” George replied, playfully punching John in the arm. “Post

D Bradshaw

pattern on three. . . set. . . hut. . . hut.
". HIKE!"

John bolted across the yard as he was commanded, his lungs filling with the cool fall air. He cut to his right, looking back for the ball to be thrown when his feet came out from beneath him. John fell hard to the ground.

"Parker! I'm going over top! Cover me!"

John opened his eyes and looked around. He was lying against a trench wall. A machine gun sat in the mud beside him.

"Parker! Give me some cover, dammit!"

John obeyed the voice and grabbed for the gun. He turned over the trench, pulling the trigger back. His body shook with his weapon as is sprayed bullets not really aimed anywhere. John fell back down against the trench wall, trying to reload. His grimy hands shook as he positioned the new magazine and locked it into place. It was hard to keep his footing on the jungle floor, and his head was ringing from the explosions and gunfire that seemed to get closer and closer. John didn't dare pray for silence. Everyone always told him, "you never hear the one that gets ya." Between the explosions he heard the cries for mothers, for fathers, for God, for death. He looked across the field to put faces with the cries. Hutchinson and Smith were either dead, or close enough. John wasn't about to join them in their status. Just as he raised himself to the top of the barricade he heard the closest explosion yet. His eyes burned with a flash of yellow and white, and he fell to the ground clutching his face.

"Johnny! Johnny! It's ok!"

The back yard. George was on the ground, holding his son's arms.

"It's alright, son. You're home now. It's all over. It's all over."

Donna stood beside her son, fighting back tears as George helped John up from the grass. John stared into his eyes as if he didn't recognize his own father and pulled away from George's hands, storming into the house without a word. He could hear the screen door slam behind him as he made his way into the bathroom. The water was cold as John splashed his face and looked to the mirror. He searched his own wide brown eyes trying to decide what was happening to him. John pulled the hand towel from its usual place and dried the drops of water and sweat from his face. He hurried down the hall and into his bedroom. Not even bothering to turn on the light he threw himself onto his bed and pulled the familiar pillow over his head.

The whole house smelled of ham and sweet potatoes when John woke up and came out of his room that evening. Nobody in the house had spoken a word since the back yard, and the silence was unbearable at the dinner table. The scratching of fork and knife against the plates seemed to echo in the small dining room.

"So, what is it you wanted to talk about?" George broke the silence.

"Huh?" John asked, not looking up from his nearly empty plate.

"In the yard you said we needed to talk. About what?"

"I'll go ahead and clear the table," Donna said, stacking the empty plates and silverware. George put his elbows where his plate had been and leaned forward, waiting for a reply from John.

"Okay," John sighed. "Dad. . ." *Crash!* The plates fell from Donna's hands to the hardwood floor.

"Ambush! It's an ambush! Get down, Parker!"

John dove under the green folding table, trying to take in his surroundings. The ground was covered with half-eaten rations and tin plates. Gunfire, sirens, men running and screaming orders. Bill Stevens ducked into the tent behind them and returned with a couple of guns and grenades that he dropped in a pile on the ground. John helped some other soldiers flip the table on its side like a barricade and scrambled for the small stockpile of weapons. He pulled the pin on one of the grenades and heaved it over the edge of the table into the direction of the gunfire. It didn't seem to help at all. Stevens jumped up from behind the table and opened fire, screaming and cursing at the enemy until his voice gave out and was merely emitting a high-pitched squeal. When his bullets ran out he reached to his belt for a grenade. The left side of his chest burst open with three or five bullet holes, and Stevens fell limp to the dirt, his hand still clenching at his belt. John crawled over to Stevens' body and grabbed his hand.

"I'm right here, Bill. Can you hear my voice? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me, Bill."

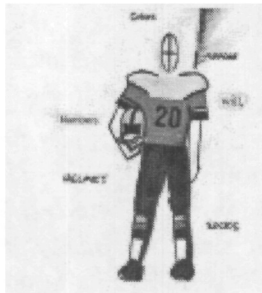
John felt a slight pressure from a few of Bill's fingers. They twitched a little and then slowly released their grip.

"You're gonna be just fine. We're both gonna go home soon. Our lives aren't over yet! Don't leave me here alone!"

Bill didn't listen. His blue eyes stared upward in a fixed position and his breathing slowed to a complete stop.

"Johnny, can you hear me? Johnny?" George stood over his son once again. John looked around at the disheveled dining room. The oak table was on its side and food covered the floor. A chair was lying in John's arms and tears ran down his cheeks. He could hear his mother trying to hide her own sobbing in the kitchen. John got up from the floor and helped his father lift the table upright.

Late that night, John sat on his bed, absorbing the surroundings of his room.



It hadn't changed since the day he left it a year ago. The football trophies stood on his dresser with the small bronze figurines on top in a frozen state of motion; his high school diploma hung in its black frame over his desk. Below it, pictures from

homecomings and proms with girlfriends he'd kept for maybe a month or two each. Those were times he'd suffered through, not knowing himself yet. Not sure of what he wanted. He knew very well what he wanted now. Telling his father what he wanted was the difficult part. His father, the proudest man John had ever known. How could he bear telling him how he felt? It would crush him. He'd never speak to him again, probably put him out on the street.

"Your mother said you wanted to talk to me," George interrupted his son's thoughts. John jumped, startled by the intrusion.

Missing the War

D Bradshaw

"Sorry, I didn't hear you come in." John got up from the mattress and walked toward his desk at the foot of his bed. He pulled out the thin wooden chair and motioned for George to have a seat. John paced for a moment, wringing his clammy hands together.

"Dad, I learned a lot about life and death during the war. I grew up really fast in some ways and... well... I learned a lot about myself, too."

George leaned forward in the chair intent on hearing every word his son had to say.

"Dad, I'm gay."

John looked to his leaning father's eyes for a response, but found nothing.

"Your mother said you wanted to talk to me," George repeated just as before.

"Don't do this, Dad. I know you heard me. I'm gay. You know that guy Bill that I always wrote home about? Bill Stevens. The man who died in my arms during an ambush? I loved him and he loved me."

"Well, if you're not going to tell me what you want to talk about, I guess I'll go back to watching TV."

"Dammit, Dad! I'm gay! Say something...anything."

George stood up slowly from the chair, his eyes staring at the floor. His voice was quiet but tense.

"And just what am I supposed to say to that? Huh? Do you want me to tell you how proud I am? Ask when the next parade is gonna be?"

"Tell me you love me. Hell, call me a faggot, I don't care! But don't ignore me! I'm still your son!"

His father's face was turning red as he began to push the chair back toward the desk. George kept facing the wall, refusing to look John in the eyes and his tone was no longer quiet, but booming.

"My son left a year ago for the war. My son was a star on the high school football team. My son was a good man who went to church every Sunday and had pride and dignity. My son is still somewhere in Vietnam!"

With that George threw the chair against the wall knocking the prom picture to the floor and breaking a leg of the chair. A splintered piece of the wood rebounded and hit John's right temple.

"They're everywhere! Parker, get down! Quit daydreaming about home! We're under fire!"

John stood again in the jungle of Vietnam hearing that commanding voice. A soldier beside him pulled the pin of a grenade and reeled his arm back to throw but was shot in the process. The live grenade fell from his hand down to the mud, and John turned in vain to avoid the inevitable. He collapsed to the ground repeating to himself..

"I'm your son. I'm your son. I'm your son."

He never heard the explosion.



Stephaine Horner March 10th

Swallow you
Devour you whole
Like Cronus did to his offspring
Through my umbilical you sustain me alive
Extract and pollute your flora
Hunt and eradicate your fauna for sport
Cut you open to see your insides and assume your meanings
Sever by any mean I can think of to take up and leave you with my mess
How worthy I think I am
How I write divinely of my subduing of you
How I assume I am the pentacle of your natural processes
How just I think my self for my deed toward you for the greater good

Today, my sphere is bright
The grass is brown in recovery
Demeter is letting go of her vengeance just for today
So I close my eyes and breath in the infancies of spring
Silver from ice hanging on to the ground
Yellow breeze warm in dormancy and bitter in action
Green smell of life mustering up the nerve to pop on through
Red watermelon that I know will soon be in season and I'm gonna buy
What is the secret to your wind
What is it that makes the sky's shade blue
What made you pick apes and not rhinoceroses
What will happen to us if you become ill of our wickedness

Artemis keep your moon
 Let's go to your hangout and hide
 Keep your quiver close for play's sake
 As we watch the kids with their ladies escape their houses
 Walking from the library to the car
 Running for the exercise with very little on
 Dancing in the backyard during a family barbeque
 Skipping on chalk games sketched by the neighborhood
 When is the best time to vacation
 When should we start working on the deck
 When will the snow finally melt so I can start planting
 When did the birds start chirping and the violets grow along the sidewalk

Gaea, mother
 Don't swallow us too
 Where will we go
 Gaea, mother
 Don't submit to your offspring
 Who else will harbor the ungrateful
 Gaea, mother
 Don't surrender your secrets, keep us guessing
 Why can't we remember the things you've already told
 Gaea, mother this is what I will do
 Teach my children to be respecters of the fields and the life it harbors
 Teach myself to appreciate all cycles, even the one I fear, but will return me
 back to you

A Man's Song

Wet wind kissed locks
Sun shines on brawn mortal flesh
He arches, puffs, flings and sprays
Stripping away boot soles, mold, and backs
His brain is taken, while his body is stuck
Brook, ponds, eddies, and health
Scent of generous wheat fields
Filtered prayers, holy-bibles
Loitering, coaxed, un-encouraged genitals
What he loves has passed,
He puts his hands on different paths

A Memory

Fresh, sweet
Rain soaked lilacs
Purple as the second
Draining of cut red cabbage
Smell as delicious as taste
On wind perfumed with growth

Fresh, sweet
Rain soaked lilacs

S Horner

Roman

How I love you in the morning
 A sweaty bouquet of curls
 That I loose my kisses in
 Is putting my arm to sleep
 So I readjust and squeeze you
 Close to me.

Cold, dirty piggies
 Have wiggled their way
 Between my unexpectant calves
 "Well if I wasn't awake before"
 Boy you have the most
 Girliest eyelashes
 Long black-brown and curled up
 Like your head
 Round cheekies like short cake
 Parted by a buttoned nose
 And soft sweet red lips

How I do love you in the morning
 You're the only one that
 Cries when I leave
 You're the only one that
 I cry when I leave you
 Oh it used to be that
 I'd pass into darkness
 With a chest heavy in tears
 With the dread of the dawn
 Making me linger until afternoon

Oh my little darlin'
 Loving Jah unwrapped
 That black cloak
 And twirled black-brown locks
 Around my fingers instead
 He must have slipped
 Peanut butter colored arms,
 With familiar hands,
 Under mine without me knowing
 That in the morning I'd wake up
 To find you

How I love you, my little one, in the
 morning

S Horner

Daughters of Zion

Bow your head
And keep your mouth shut
Woman
Avert your eyes
Do you not see that God's own image
Is before you
 Is always before you
Your man don't want you
Less you be his vision
Less you be his hearing
Less you be his advising
Less you be in his image

Cover your head
And keep your mouth shut
Woman
You should be seen and not heard
Do you not know that God's own first
Is first to you
 Is first in everything to you
Your church don't want you
You may not preach
You may not teach
You may not go to Heaven
You may go to Hell

Bury your head
And keep your mouth shut
Woman
Anguish and tears are yours alone
Do you not feel God with you
Though they say he his filtered for you through them
 As all things are filtered for you through them
Your God don't want you
Less you be untouched
Less you be property
Less you be fertile for the seed
Less you be not woman

Look up
 And speak up
 Woman
 Feel sun on your face not on your neck
 Do you not know God is with you
 Has been with you
 Has always been with you
 Doesn't matter if your man don't want you
 You be your vision
 You be your hearing
 You be your advising
 You be your own image

Stand up
 And gird yourself
 Woman
 With the armor of empowerment
 Don't you know God wants
 This for you
 Has always preferred you this way
 Doesn't matter if your church don't want you
 You will preach
 You will teach
 You will go to Heaven
 You will face Hell

Get ready
 And prepare
 Woman
 Today you ascend the hills of Zion
 Don't you know God is
 Genderless
 Has always been
 Doesn't matter what they say God wants
 You are untouchable
 You only belong to God and you
 You are worth more than the field or the seed
 You are Woman
 Be free

S Horner

**I
Would
Like
to
Give
a Shout
Out
to
Walt
Whitman**

Wrap up
In you,
Tasty dish

Run my fingers
Over your
Worn Creases,
Lord I wish

Putting you
On top
Of my list

Run my eyes
Over your
Body of text,
Hit or miss

Sing to
 Your songs,
So sumptuous

Run my mind
 Over your
Love of diversity,
 Like a brushing of lips

To be
 Man or woman
Mr. or Miss

Run your lives
 Over one
Another,
 Don't make sense

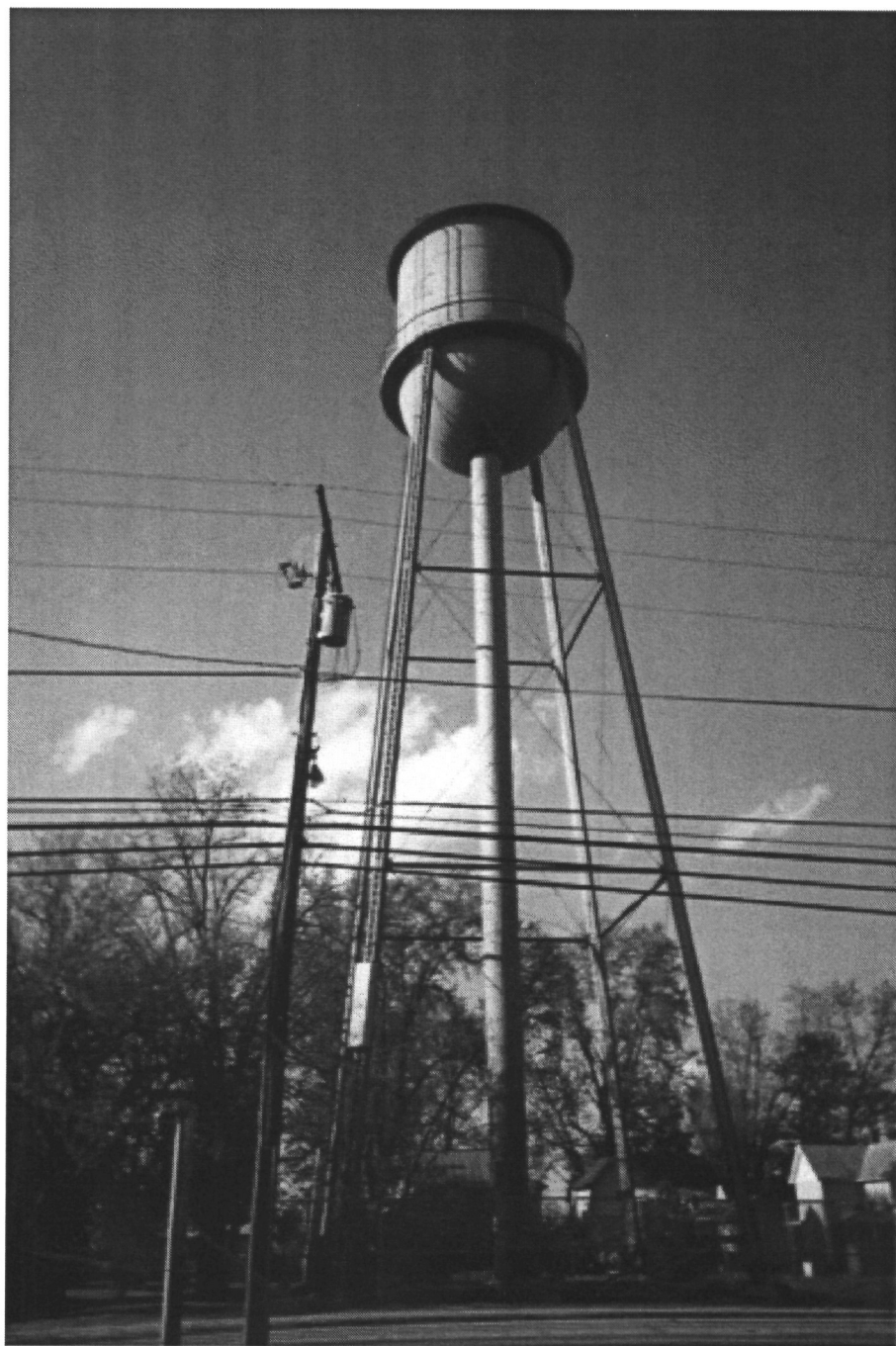
Be born
 Checkered
With leopard prints

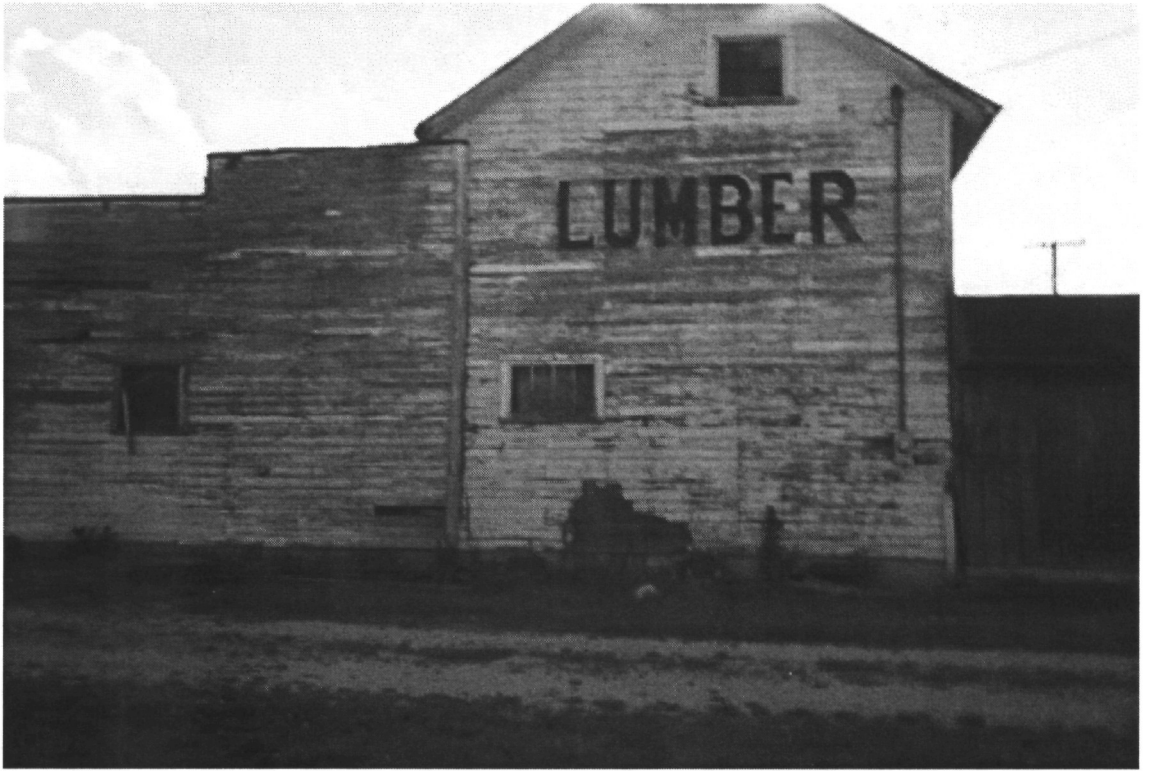
Run your hospitality
 Over to your
Neighbor's often
 High fence

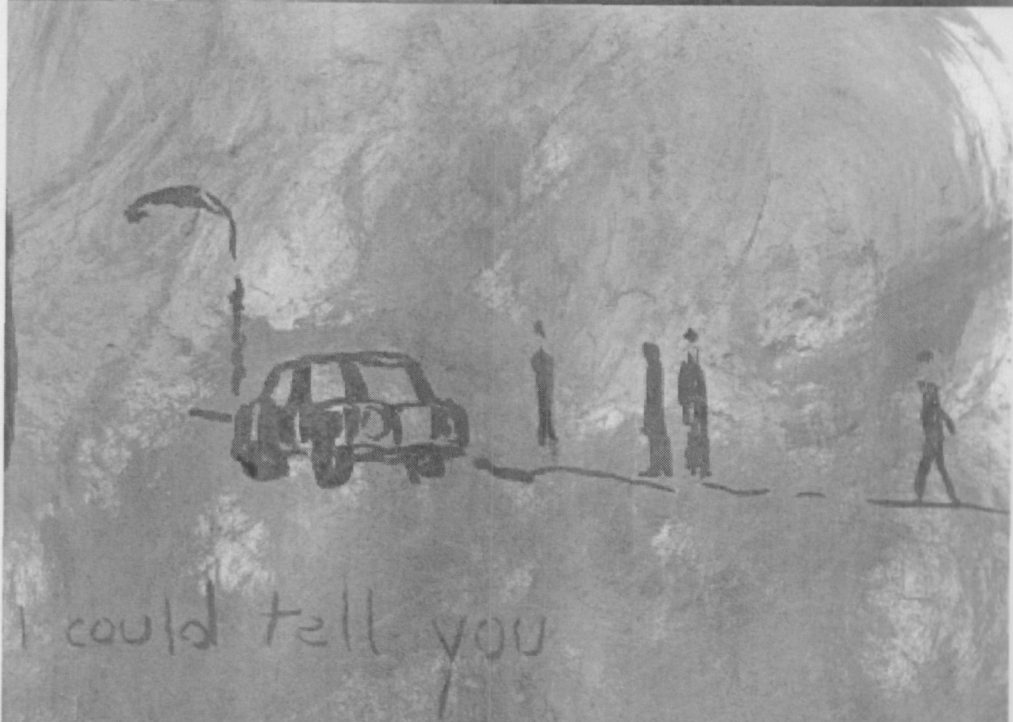
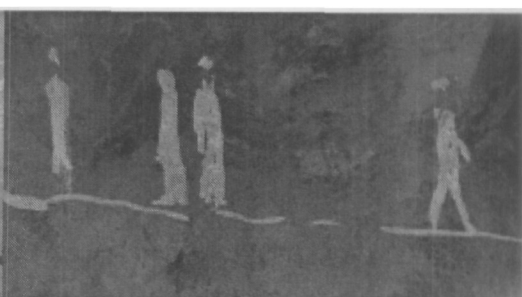
To love
 Is at best
Something immense

Run your soul
 Over into compassion
That is love's
 True intent

S Horner







Tim West

Don't Say A Prayer

This is what the world is, I think, these roads out here in the open desert that don't demand that you define yourself in a box. These roads that aren't Dad clomping down the hallway in his work boots to kick open the bedroom door, factory smell drifting in: the smell of grease and metal coolant. Bellowing as the door slams against the closet behind it, "Where the hell were you tonight?!"

"I was. . . ."

Pow! He never gave me a chance to speak. He reared back his angry fist and released all his frustration in blows to my back and face. My ears filled with the humming of blood rushing to my head. I could barely make out his, ". . . went out on a limb for you. . . you're not going to

embarrass me. . . tired of all this bullshit. . . !

He used to want to be an artist. He showed me drawings of cars and sketches of places that he'd been before he met my mom, once. They reminded me of something inside of me, a driving, raging, destructive impulse to create, that could only be followed to where it would lead. Every time that I'd try to write all that would come out would be endless descriptions of my father and me, showing up in restaurants and speaking through characters that had nothing to do with him and myself. He'd be gone within a few minutes and I could lie there and bleed.

Some nights I'd be lying on my bed when he got home, and he wouldn't even get angry that I'd skipped work. He'd

T West

knock twice and then casually push the door open, looking sullen and worn-out, and say, "I admire you, I wish I'd have gotten out of it when I was your age."

Dad's memories of what he once was, memories of the mother and wife that walked out on us one day, would sit there in the room like a waft of rude cigar smoke and choke back our words. His eyes focused dully on some ancient regret, on the primitive past of everything that he could not let go. Then he would turn away and walk out the door, slowly closing it as he left.

He had found letters in my bedroom last week and had stayed calm through it. He just laid them carefully on the table and said two words, "Get out."

His eyes had faded from their normal chocolate brown to gray. He stared through me and into some translucent past. I'd like to think he remembered me, at age fifteen, hitting the game-winning homerun in the County Championship game, he and mom taking my team out for pizza and cheering just as loudly as the boys on the team. It's possible that he thought about me sitting on his lap at age three, reading *Captain America* while his whiskers brushed my face. That was all another day.

It was hard to not say, "Fuck you!"

I didn't know who I'd be saying it to.

Right now I'm disappearing into a bottle of brown liquid. Grainy, like looking through the lens of an old time movie camera, a home movie of me, the sad wanderer, having a beer at a dirty wooden bar next to a Texaco station in

Godknowswhere, New Mexico where my car has died.

I'm wearing the same white dress shirt from a few days ago. Unbuttoned at the top and ringed brown with sweat on the collar and under the arms. It looks like Hades here. Back home I had belonged to a gym that had a sauna, but when I open the door here the heat doesn't disappear. A heat that concentrates your mind so that all you do is think and sweat.

"We don't get many visitors in these parts."

The man speaking was a beautiful Mexican with sorrowful brown eyes and a small mouth. His nametag said James, and I pictured him bowing at a small altar in Mesoamerica. Felt his life and livelihood coursing through him as he continued to smile at me. He knows me, I thought, I know he knows me.

"I've always wanted to come here," I said.

"Well, have fun with your stay. There's a bar over there if you want to have a drink," he replied.

I'm not sure how many nights and days passed while I was on the road. White-shingled farmhouses with basketball rims nailed on barns turned into open fields of grain and barley turned into small, middle-class North Texas football towns. All of them places that I passed through seeing images of youth and families picnicking under shade trees.

Now I'm getting drunk. The car should be ready at three o' clock, and I think of how much money I have and how much I will need. I see a cactus and two wrinkled Indians in Hank Williams

cowboy hats, colored western shirts, and tennis shoes. I tip my beer to them, and the one in a purple cactus pattern nods his eyes and looks away. I'm nothing but a pale face, I think. They could probably care less. They're discussing John Wayne movies. *The Green Berets*, where the sun sets in the east. "That's something you don't see every day," the purple shirt one says.

A girl I used to know said that I was always eavesdropping. I was seventeen years old and she was the most beautiful girl at our high school. She had short brown hair and a sweet smile. She used to bake me cookies and invite me on family outings to the Great Lakes. I was a loner, though. Kind of a dorky, serious kid with an interest in keeping things tidy and to myself. She'd tease me and say that I did it so that I could always be eavesdropping. "Maybe you're a spy," she had said.

One time when we had been making out in my car after a movie she told me that she could picture herself married to me. "It'll never happen," I had said.

Dad had liked her, had smiled his big smile that he saved for strangers and company every time that she came into our house. She represented some kind of preservation for him, and he'd show her pictures from photo albums and hang out with us on the living room couch.

After that, I would sometimes dream that her and I were standing in a small, Methodist church in our wedding clothes. My Dad was there, and he was so proud of me. Proud of this beautiful girl being in love with me, and proud of

the fact that I was everything that a good man is supposed to be. You could see it in his eyes that I had achieved his dreams. An image of the face of God would appear in my curtains and ask me if he could forgive me. "I want to be a good man, Father," I'd say, but it always turned out to be just a dream.

James from the Texaco station comes in just then. "Evening fellas," he says to the Indians.

He's smooth and elegant and they both tip their hats and say, "Evening, James."

He sits down on the stool next to mine and orders himself a whiskey straight with a beer to chase. "You pay," he says smiling. "I'll get the next round."

I'm smiling back, touching my face to find a connection, to stay awake, to focus on what I'm doing here beside this man who knows me. "Beer six, señor," I say to the bartender.

"It's seven, guy."

Everything's obsessively seven, I think. I face east out the window and begin to sing under my breath while James taps the metal sides of his barstool. Our souls feel meshed here in this smoky, grainy place, and I've put a few beers in me. I picture a minister preaching about the Holy Trinity. "I love you," I say.

"Whatever you say," he says smiling.

Everything is swimming and surreal and the bar is turning on its side and fading in and out of my vision in conscious streams. What could happen, I think. He knows me, I know he knows



Don't Say A Prayer

T West

me. I lean next to his ear and say, "Take me back to your place."

I want to go away with him. To swim naked in a pure spring and fall asleep with my arm near his face. Be alive, James says in my mind, that's all it takes. He understands me. Understands that I had white picket fence dreams once. Dreams where I didn't feel like I was constantly catching my breath. He understands the mornings when I stand in the scalding shower and scrub my body so hard that my skin bleeds. Understands why I keep the patchy scabs as reminders of what shouldn't be me, and he forgives me.

I'm sloshing drunk and don't really know what I'm saying. He looks disgusted, his nose curled up and his eyes narrow and disbelieving.

"Thanks for the drink," he says as he turns away from me.

The wall of the bar has a poorly put together shield with buffalo horns tied onto the top. More than one thousand miles away my dad works sixty hours a week in a factory. Three years ago my high school girlfriend got married and finished a pre-law degree. Last week in the local newspaper there was an entry for a same-sex union in the Lifestyles page. Two months ago my former lover Lee contracted HIV. Two days ago, I drove all night and wound up in the desert.

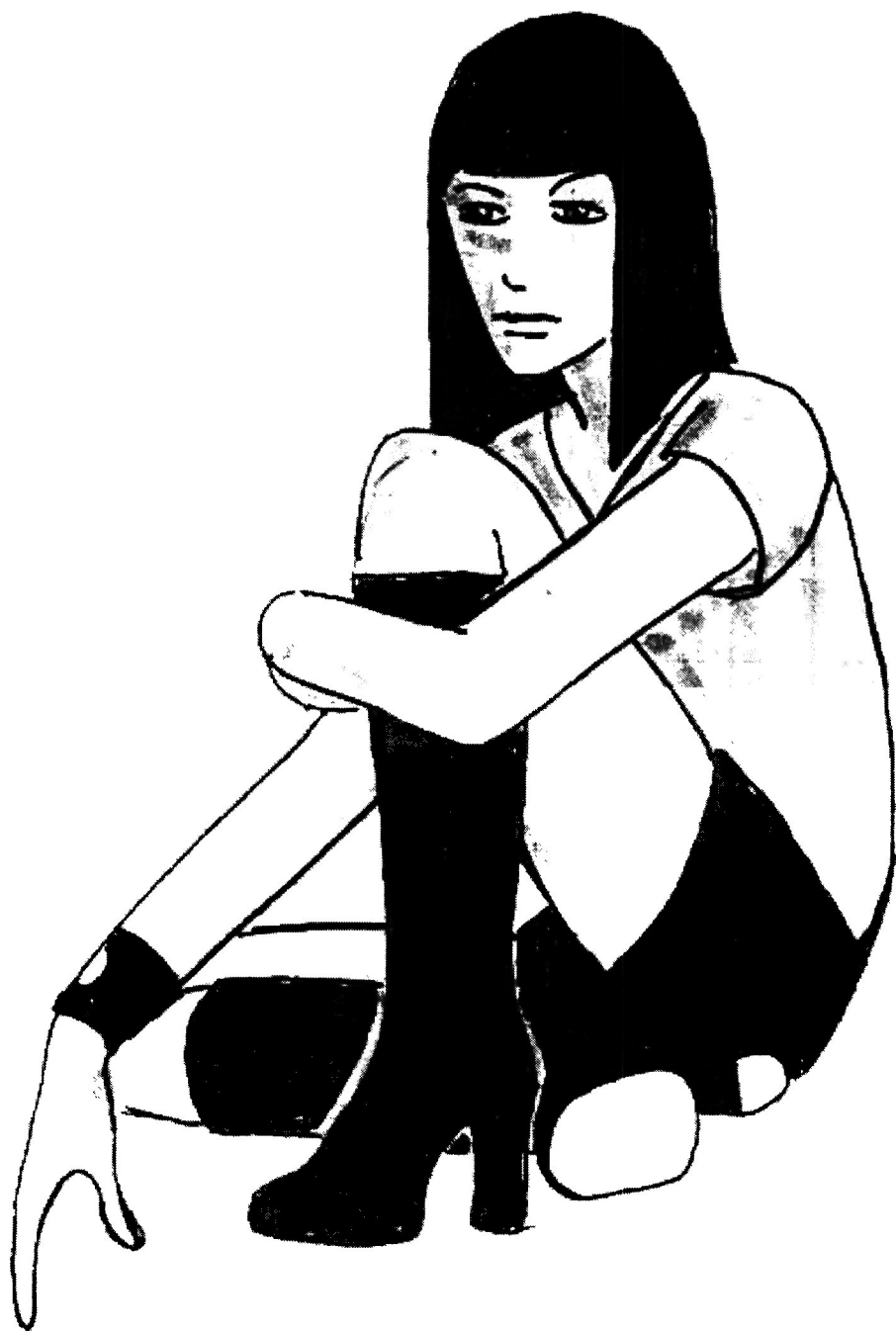
I remember one time when I was sick with the flu my dad sat up all night with me. I was coming in and out of consciousness and don't remember much of anything about the first couple of days.

Once, though, I remember waking up and seeing him just sitting on the chair

and looking at me. His eyes were small and sad, the way that someone looks when they can't control life. "Feeling any better?" he had asked.

"I feel really sick, Daddy."

"I wish it was me, son," he had said.



Kelly Krider Cycle

Thirst—
drawn on water
Drink—
shed off years
Dance—
feel them lengthen
Cry—
run down tears
Hold—
tight as swallow
Mark—
burn in kind
Heal—
grow to sorrow
Die—
close the bind

Mandy

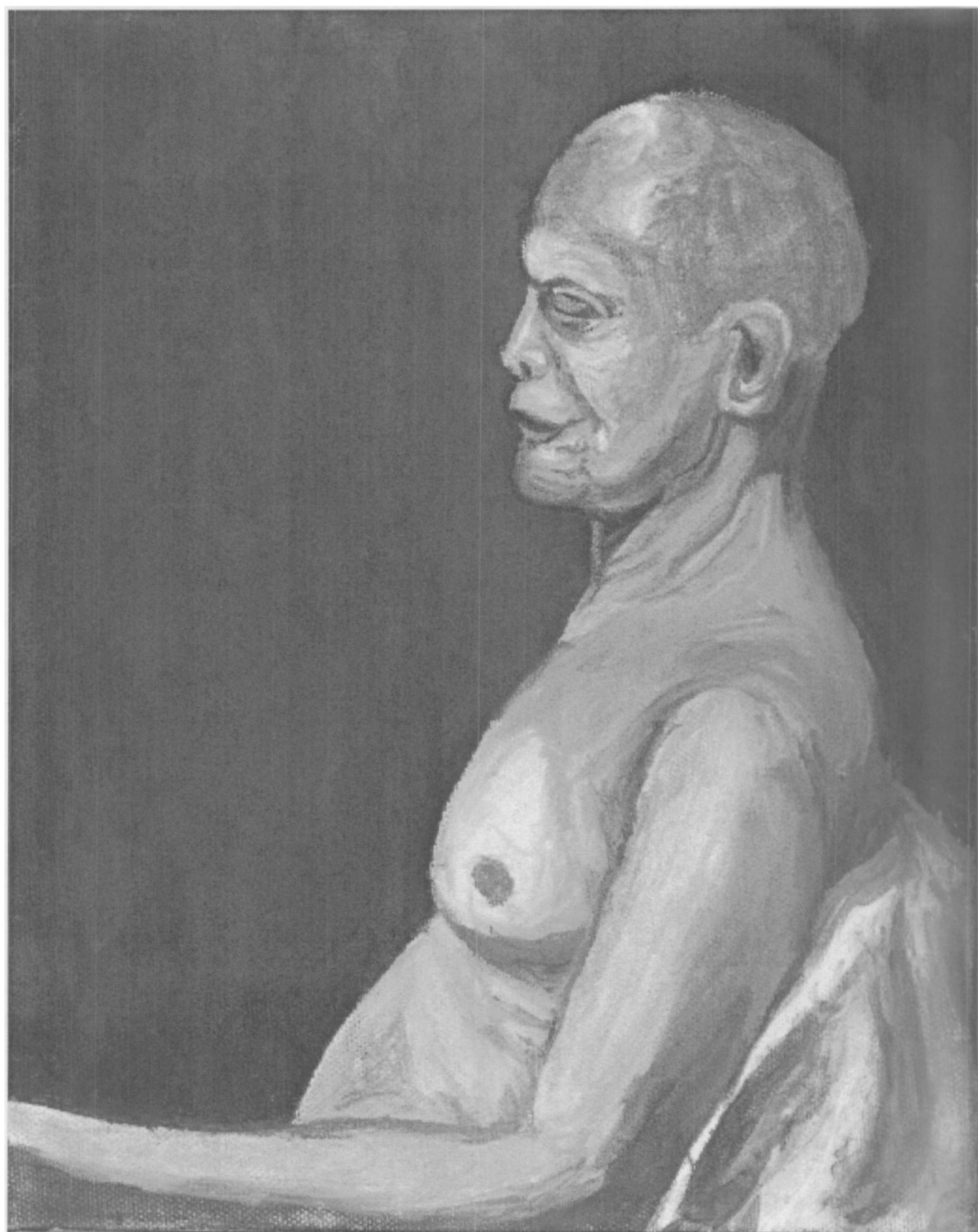
109

Lewis

Where Do I Go from Nowhere?

Incandescent dreams that fly from nowhere don't know where they're coming from.

I had direction once and lost it to the wind. I knew the way out of my childhood prison, but found out I didn't even know what jail I was in. Fairy tales can come true, but not the ones you were told as a child. . . The ones you write as you go along, making up the story to match the pictures long before you even know how to read the words. I needn't be what you want me to be nor what you thought of me before, for I was me long before you could see nothing that you're looking for. Dreams of fantasies never had, and visions never found, of things that usually I can't see let alone tell you about. There it goes, to the flight of destruction, another falling cloud. . . we'll be safe here, so long as we're near from every raging crowd. Insanity grapples me with its tentacles of madness, freeing in me what I really could be, a step above the crowd. How can you look but never see the beauty you gave me, the love that set me free. I close my eyes. I close my eyes. I close my eyes and slip away to a place I've never heard of, where dreams are metaphors and reality a joke that no one ever gets. Eyes in the darkness of truth cannot see their well-being. Sins in the sight of yourself in vain. If I close my eyes I can hear your heart beating steady in my comfort of your love. Forever as a verb. . . as a truth. . . as a possibility beyond what is taught? . . . we need a bigger language.



John Shumate

The Pygmy Kingfisher

The Pygmy Kingfisher's blue head sparkled under the intense observance of the afternoon sun. It waddled and chirped over the dust and pebbles that composed the dead soil, then heaved its yellow chest, expanded its tiny wings, and flittered into the air. Beneath the Kingfisher, the scrolling landscape was vast and silent, unconcerned with the lack of wind and rain. A natural, wordless unity permeated the trees and shrubs and insects and reptiles and even the Pygmy Kingfisher so high above. There was no confliction or worry in the eyes of the crocodile, as it searched endlessly for its next meal, or in the grunts of a dozing zebra, as it fought for maximum comfort beneath the shade of an ancient tree, or in the subtle fluttering of the tiny Kingfisher, as it carelessly flew to a shining tin compound a few hundred feet below.

It landed on the hot surface with a tiny squawk, and searched for the little invertebrate morsels that were destined to not appear. The Pygmy tapped about on the roof of the compound in playful delight. It took no notice of the tall, simian creatures that stalked about on the ground, with wooden clubs and clanking engines. It had no conception that beneath his tiny, vibrantly orange feet, a man, immersed in a sea of pain and darkness, listened to every chirp and every click the bird's feet made. It was a heavenly sound for the man. The prisoner. The slave. Locked in a cell only three feet in width and twelve feet in length. Locked in a cell without food for three days at a time. Yes, to that man,

J Shumato

the senseless action of that beautiful King of the Skies, scuttling about with so much energy above his head, was a holy chorus. A transcendental sonata, incomparable to all the chants and musings of his entire clan. There, on the roof, his only link with something sweeter, something purer than all the madness that surrounded him. His name was Jareth, and this was his last day on Earth.

If the thick black cloak that immersed Jareth's cell could be lifted for a single second, laying beneath would be a man of pallid complexion, depleted in muscle and constitution to the extent of complete morbidity. If Jareth could see himself, there would be no recognition, as changed as he was from his imprisonment. His hair was thin and frail, and fell in clumps about his calloused feet. Dried and cracked skin was the only protection his bones had—it wrapped loosely across his form like a cheap blanket. A cheap blanket. Such a commodity would be a dream come true for Jareth. The only company Jareth had was the dirt floor that scraped his naked body.

He would often spend the long, sleepless nights in a state of detached confusion, never sure if he truly existed, or if he had died long ago, his soul only waiting for the door to open for release. The door seldom opened, of course. A scrap of meat was occasionally thrown in, which he would eat ravenously. A small pile of bones sat in the back of the dark cell. Jareth often contemplated how alike in form and function he and the heap of bones were. Part of him envied those bones—he knew it was his

fate to become one with them, to bask in their dusty peace.

Jareth summoned enough saliva within his blistered mouth to wet his lips. He then whistled a desperate plea to the playful avian above his head. The tune was shaky and pitiful, a melody Jareth had once hummed during better times, with his children or on his way to the market. The Pygmy halted when the sound reached its ears, and as Jareth ended his melody, there was a tense moment of silence. Jareth waited breathlessly for the bird to heed his call, but no answer came. Instead, the Pygmy left when it was frightened from its perch. A rattling din shook Jareth's cell, and for the first time in four days, the door was opened.

As was his habit, Jareth immediately crouched into the furthest corner, near his collection of bones, and closed his eyes. Sunlight was torture for his mole-like eyes, and he avoided it at any cost. The battered tin door screeched open. A few thumps. A few coughs. A few grunts. The door closed. Jareth could hear heavy, panicked breathing that was not his own. His captors had given him a cellmate.

"Who? Is someone here?" A voice called out. "Please, let me know. Are you there? Anyone? Is somebody in here with me?" Jareth could hear the newcomer shuffling his feet across the earthen floor, and sliding his bare back against the hot walls. "Where? What is this place? Please, speak, whoever you are!"

Jareth cleared his parched throat. "I am here, my friend. What is your name?"

The stranger caught his breath. "You're fooling yourself," he began. "Names have no meaning here. But if you must know, I am called George. And you?"

"I am Jareth. I have been here for many months."

"Shut up!" George shouted. "I don't want to hear your sob stories! I don't care how long you have been here, I only want out! We all have tales, don't we? I'm sure mine is no different from yours. If only you could see through this darkness. My scars are many, old man. As are the scars on my daughter's face! I refuse to linger in the past. Now is the time to plan our escape. Have you not considered escape?"

Jareth did not know how to respond. George was so full of an energy that Jareth had long forgotten. The spirits of rebellion and Cause were alive and well within George, but Jareth was only a vague echo of the man he once was. Should Jareth speak of the endless nights he had spent, fantasizing about tackling his oppressors—



banging their heads against the cold cement and running off in search of their families, who he would torture as well? Should Jareth invoke the nobility and virtues of the Cause that had led him to that cell, to die as a worn and shriveled man? Should Jareth recall the last kiss he had given to his wife, before that fateful day? The pain and worry that saturated her tearful eyes? The final, disconsolate moan that escaped her lips as he turned to leave? But Jareth remained silent. He crouched down next to his bones, and chewed on his dried lip.

"Well, speak old man! You are an elder, are you not? I hear the sound of wisdom in that raspy voice of yours. Certainly you have something, anything to lend to this conversation. Something you know that may have use, to help our escape."

Jareth hacked and cleared his throat once again. "Occasionally, they will throw a bone or two in here. That is the only food we get—the leftovers that the dogs did not eat. Water is even less frequent than food, and you will learn quickly enough to save your energy. The more you perspire, the more you are likely to die. That is all I know, my friend. That is all there is to know."

"Nonsense," George hissed. "Have you lost all hope, old man?"

"It is not about hope, my friend. Hope. Hope I have plenty of, but I fear that my time here is almost through. I am a tired man."

"Heh. Tired, eh? And why? They never tire of beating us. Of raping our wives and stealing our daughters. They never tire of—"

"Please," Jareth moaned. "As I say, I am a tired man. I feel that your arrival here is more than coincidence. These cells have been known to house more than three people. Such a small space, but they manage to keep three. But I have been alone since my arrival. I once thought that as a sign of luck. And so now, in my last hours, they have brought you. I fear that you are a replacement. My post is nearly vacated, and you are here to take my place, friend."

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George snickered and crouched onto the soil. As he played with the dirt and hair and pebbles, he thought of the tiny bird he had seen on the roof of the cell. "You were whistling," he said.

A few moments of silence passed, and then Jareth cleared his throat for the last time in his life. "Yes. There was a bird. He brought you to me. Thank you. Thank you for coming."

George sensed the finality of Jareth's statement, and he crawled near to the old man and took his hand in his. He wet his lips and whistled lively into Jareth's ear. If a knife could be used to slice away the immense darkness of the cell, Jareth would be seen smiling, as his breath slowly became labored.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, and an intense wave of dry sunlight drowned the prisoners. Two tall shadows stood at the opening, holding a thick fire hose. The valve was released, and the stinging force of a thousand gallons of propelled water surged into the small cell. George tried to block the barrage from Jareth, but his strength was not enough, and he was thrown against the back wall. He gargled out a few screams before he passed out from shock.

For the first time in months, Jareth opened his eyes to face the sun.

The Pygmy Kingfisher was weary from a long day of hunting and mating. It found much solace in the shade of the branch it rested upon. The cool early evening breeze sifted through its luminous feathers, and the Pygmy chirped out a song of relaxation.

Twenty feet below, a few simian creatures were finishing their toil for the day. They put down their shovels, and

patiently stacked six bodies into the mass grave they had created. It was ten feet deep, three feet wide, and twelve feet long.

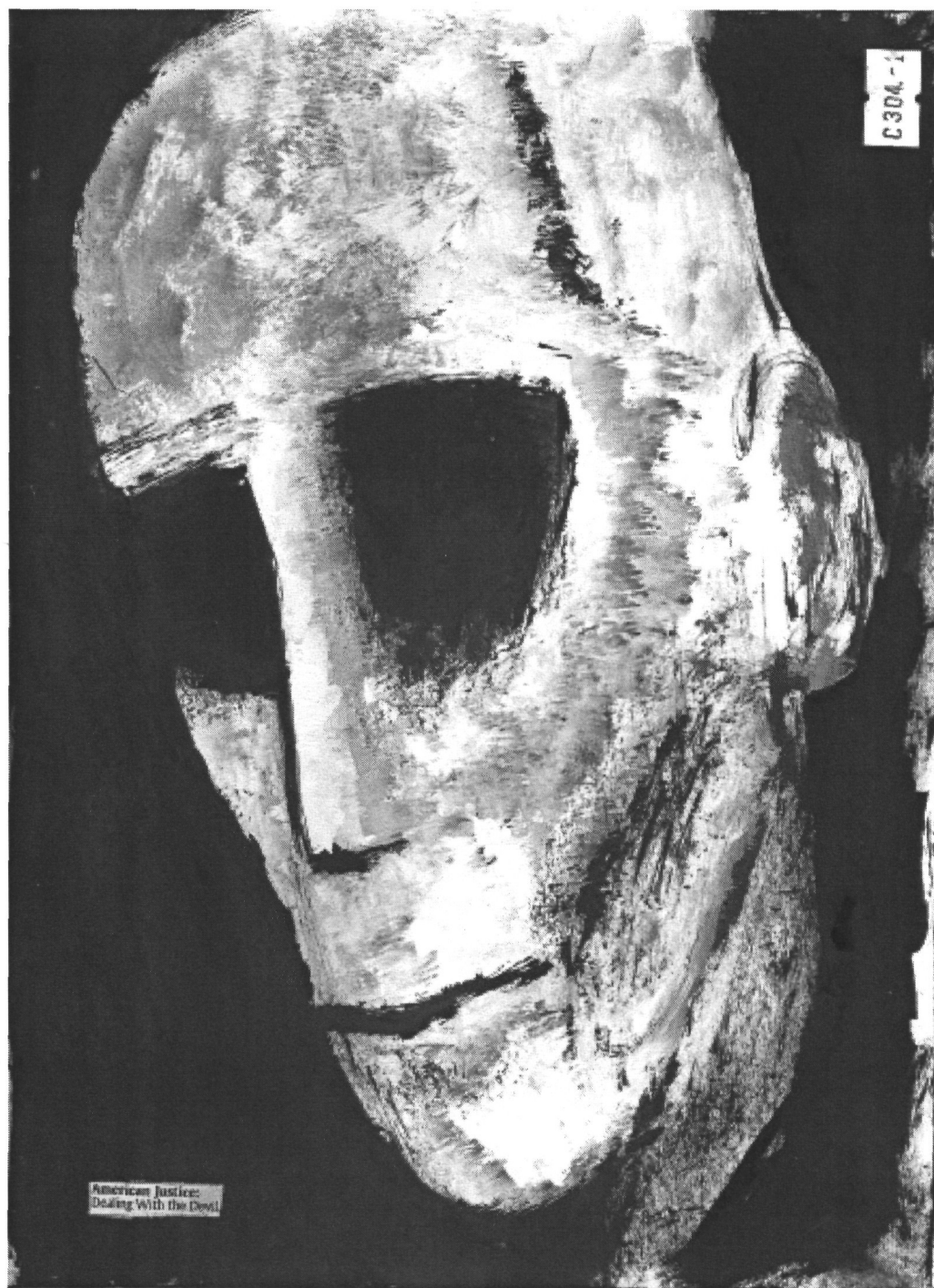
Like dominoes, each body was placed on top of the other. The first body was a man named Homer, who was murdered the night before while on his way to his grandmother's hut for dinner. The second body was a man named Jason, the cousin of a renowned medicine man. The third body was a woman named Hope, who was eight months pregnant on the night she was raped for the last time. The fourth body was a child without a name. He was found dead in an alley, the product of the sick desires of a man with high official rank. The fifth body was a man named Hector, murdered in his sleep because of his political beliefs. And the sixth body was that of a man named Jareth, killed by an extended stay in a prison compound.

As the simian creatures heaved dirt into the grave, the Pygmy Kingfisher cocked its head. It heard a musical sound coming from a short distance away. It shook the sleepiness out of its tired wings, and took flight. As the sound grew stronger, the Pygmy Kingfisher became excited. Perhaps it was the calling of a mate? The sound was so familiar to the little bird. Finally, it centered in on the source of the whistling: it came from beneath the tin roof of a compound. The Kingfisher slowed its approach, and made a perfect landing onto the hot surface.

EVENING



a = b = c



John Shumate

A Tragic Account of One Man's Journey to the Other End

I.

I have a pipe dream. The goal is not a tangible entity. It is not found in the weekly classifieds, or buried at the bottom of a fast food slogan. No—the material realm has little significance, quite truly. My destination, if you can call it that, is a nebulous scar that plagues only a select few. I am not alone, of course. Of course. Of course there are the filthy and shriveled inhabitants of the Basement. The Basement. But we seldom take note of each other, lost as we are in a shaft of despair, so profound that our screams never reach the outside world.

On this particular evening, the Basement is scuttling about with a generous helping of wasted vermin. The

scarred echo of a social worker wanders around the room, opening and closing his split fists. A mother of four and grandmother of two mumbles to herself about the price of french fries, as she nibbles the flesh from her fingers. A boy no older than twenty screams at nobody in particular, and busies himself with punching a brick wall until his hands are mounds of kippered flesh. There is a scent of immediacy in the air that is not unfounded. The Sacramento left a few hours ago, and so the inevitable sweats and shakes and moans replace the somnolent malaise we all love.

A few release their tension with random gratuity. A hectic swarm of humping ensues, with whom and in what position does not matter. The once-woman I fucked last night casually rolls

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over beside me and spreads her legs. I decline. She shrugs and crawls to the next junky in line. This is the way of things. There is no emotion. No sense of loss or commitment. Our flesh is a disease that we pierce and neglect. Our sex is a frivolous absurdity that we pass off or covet, according to our whims.

I enthrone myself within a dark hole, completely dejecting every facet of the blood and semen that drowns my life. I must focus. Tonight is different. When the Sacrament arrives, as it inevitably does, I will begin the end of my journey. My journey. I am no longer afraid. I know what must be done.

The journey I speak of began two years ago, with no small amount of melodramatics—tears and sympathetic faces. Tissue paper. Cliché bouquets. Sealed coffin, of course. After the funeral, I walked home, much to the confused derision of my bland in-laws. The coffee and donuts politesse of a formal wake was in preparation. I refused to take part in such a morbid display. I could imagine the huddled convent of black veiled misers, crying and sobbing and the whole bit, about a woman they seldom called upon or ever truly loved. The food, of course, was the magnetic force that drove the careless to such a charade. Deviled eggs. Pumpkin pie. The inevitable tray of bargain meat and sour mini-pickles. Celery and carrots. Dip of every sort: blue cheese, salsa, French onion, nacho cheese, ranch. And all the while Aunt Maude can barely stand, so wracked with misery, of course. And Grandpa So-And-So sits and wonders about who he is and what the Hell they're all doing there.

And Father Joe of the local parish sips his black coffee and nods politely to this or that relative. He is so sorry for their loss, of course. She is in a better place now, though. Step-Mother hasn't paid him for his eulogy yet. He'll leave quietly when nobody is looking.

I needed time to think. I needed time alone.

I knew something had happened, quite monumental, that would change the course of my life. I was immersed with a sense of global banishment. The pedestrians and consumers that I stumbled past had somehow lost the relevance they once owned. Did I belong to this clan? Were those blank faces, mumbling to themselves and flicking cigarette butts into the gutter, part of my destiny? A casual friend stopped to offer condolences, but I did not heed. I could see the relief in his dim eyes as I side-stepped around him—nobody wants to display remorse if they have none. A bum shook a filthy Styrofoam cup in my face—I didn't even consider fishing for change. Holy Bean loomed around the next corner—the coffee shop I frequented every morning before lectures. I would merrily jingle the change in my predictable tweed jacket, and order the same twenty ounces of steaming sludge. I craved that warm comfort as I passed, but I passed all the same, and continued my walk forward. My vision blurred and all the busy frivolity before my eyes vanished. Molded. Became a slimy cacophony. A taxi, street vendors, prostitutes, cops, students, businessmen, their secretaries, screeches, whistles, clicks, clunks - all meaningless. I felt as though I was in a

tunnel. A sort of wormhole where only the thunderous echo of my footsteps resounded. Asimov would probably claim that I was on my way to an alternate, mechanical universe. Thoreau would claim that through my current state of detachment, I had come closer to God. Huxley might argue that my adrenaline gland was working overtime, and that I was subject to an unprecedented case of transmethylation. Personally, I just wanted to get home.

The world I formerly adhered to and respected became a phantom. A lifetime of humble labor and scrutiny sped unchecked in my brain. The college degree I was so proud of, ensconced above my mantle under the veil of an expensive frame, seemed like nothing more than a sheet of paper beneath glass. The moderate yet respectable figure that rested in my checking account (which I would soon alleviate) was the pretentious scribbling of a jaded math professor. And the strange



variety of mechanical beasts and plastic idols in which I once found solace were the disgusting heaps that cluttered my conscience: television, washer, dryer, indoor plumbing, silver cutlery, plastic milk cartons, Teflon frying pans, rubber bands, paper clips, computers, processed meat, chemically saturated TV dinners, telephones, refrigerators, ice cubes, candy bars, cars, stereos, compact discs, videotapes, that artificial scent spewing forth from the air conditioner, individually wrapped servings of sugar and cream, credit cards, ATM cards, identification cards, phone cards, playing cards, chess boards, night stands, shower

curtains, toxic bleach cleaning supplies, rubber gloves, knife sets, spice racks, book shelves, books, condensed soup, kool-aid, lemonade, iced-tea (long-island), Jim Beam, Jack Daniels, Jack Russels, Basset Hounds, Scottish Terriers, German Shepards, bills, accounts, checks, money orders, pillows, blankets, vaporizers, humidifiers, dehumidifiers, furnaces, lapels, ties, penny-loafers, elbow pads, black socks, horn-rimmed spectacles, electronic shavers, shaving cream, hemorrhoid cream, sex cream, ice cream, whipped cream, cream of wheat, creamed corn, popsicles, swings, desks, book bags, doors (open and closed), windows (unbroken and gleaming clean), fresh air, stale air, clean air, smoky air, air, oxygen.

What did it all mean? As I sit here in my Hole, I still don't know. Doubt I ever will. Doubt I ever cared. Or did I? Perhaps. I will know soon enough.

I was an alien. The monsters that crowded around me were a species I could not identify. For the first time in my life, I had lost the reigns. I had no sense of myself, at least, the self I had nurtured and fought to maintain for so many years. I recalled the swarm of stale dinners and cocktail parties I frequented for the sake of professionalism. I would mill about, Carta Blanca in hand, all the while nodding and smiling to this or that professor or department head. Yes, yes that is quite true. The current student body does have a general lack of enthusiasm about that particular era. Perhaps adding the class would renew interest? Oh, yes, yes I do agree, my good

A Tragic Account of...

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man. Certainly one might speculate. . . oh, you're such a card, Grumbo, really. . . yes of course. . . I'll see you at squash this Saturday, then? Good show!

And on and on. Never ending. My world was the sum of clinking china and social politics. A sham. And now that She was gone, I could find no reason to continue. I'm sure my absence was noted as early as that first weekend, when I failed to appear at the charity banquet the Dean of Student Affairs had arranged. The invitation was mailed to me a month in advance, wrapped in a flower-embroidered envelope and smelling of musk and cigar smoke. I tacked it onto my bulletin board—it was on the top of my priority list, of course. I could imagine the astounded jibes that my colleagues would direct toward my absence. The little card with my name calligraphically inscribed by the aching hands of a grad student. The shiny cutlery placed in perfect order, waiting for my use. The silly jazz band hired for the occasion. The giggles and laughs. The lipstick and cologne and satin gloves and bow ties and dainty desserts.

There was a sick freedom to the new identity I acquired. I knew not how to behave; in fact, I questioned every conceivable notion I once took for granted. Mundane entrapments such as appearing for work and bathing and brushing my teeth lost all meaning. I gained an experimental temperament that was more atrocious by the day, but liberated as I was, I never stopped to reflect upon my actions.

For two consecutive weeks, a casual observer might have seen me naked on my front porch, idly counting the blades

in a handful of grass. I stumbled home at all hours of the dark morning—hand in hand with the disreputable men and women that freely molested my body. The cold shrapnel of sexual promiscuity provided me with a certain amount of masochistic relief. I walked everywhere, especially into the ill-lit corners of the world that mothers warn their children about. The Other End. The place that my kind love to ignore. But no longer. I had no affiliation. No sense of brotherhood. No sense of belonging. Not that I wanted all that, in fact I avoided it emphatically. The occasional crack head would strike up a conversation after sex, but I averted all that nonsense with a sturdy gaze and a handful of dollar bills. Sleep was a commodity I dreaded. My dreams were cached with the beasts of my tortured conscience. I complained about this malady to anyone who might listen, and one evening a fat whore from thirty-second street offered me a small bag of shiny chemical shards.

Crystal Meth. Glass. Window. Pane. Tweak. Speed. Whatever the slang sobriquet, I maintained a healthy regimen of the drug in the days that followed. Speed replaced caffeine. Speed replaced my somnolence. Speed replaced me. It was the first of many drugs I would try on my journey through Hell. Shortly thereafter I acquired another addiction: cutting. My arms played the part of a butcher's block. My weapon of choice was the cheap pocket knife, nice and dull, that Father once gave me as a graduation present. There was an inscription on the faux-gold face of the trinket: If a problem

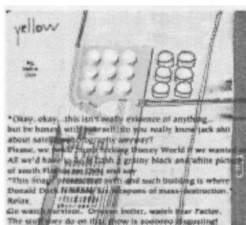
cannot be solved, enlarge it. -Dwight D. Eisenhower.

However, I did have a redeemable lull in my abhorrent behavior. I made it a point, for two tortuous days, to seek an answer in that ink stained ancestral realm I once admired. I paced around the hallowed halls of academia. I explored the nature of faith with Tolstoy, I traveled the depths of Hell with Dante, I joined the League and headed East with Hesse, I hit the road with Kerouac, I committed myself with Kesey, and I ate the Last Supper with King James. But I left in exhaustion on the second day, finding no comfort in the tomes of my collegial past. I felt more confused than ever. To my surprise, the greatest minds humanity ever produced were filled with rubbish. For all their wisdom and insightful perspectives, none of them could explain what had happened to me, or why. I went home defeated, stripped myself of clothing, and committed self-flagellation with the vicious delight of a thousand maniacs.

I lived in my closet, quite literally, for three days. The purpose for such self-mortification is open to translation. I only knew, at the time, that whatever might occur past the plywood portal of my cell was inconsequential. I sat on an indefinable heap of fuzzy remnants—trinkets of a past I no longer understood. I stared into the darkness and warmed my naked flesh within a sweet bubble of impunity. There was something about the Void before me that was irresistible. Something immaculate in the utter intangibility of it all. I spent what I assume was the first evening in a

wasteland of hysterical laughter. I laughed at myself. I laughed at the world. I laughed at the ticking clock that screamed from the World Outside, its persistence a dull clogging on my brain. I laughed at the empty crack sacks that scattered the closet floor. I laughed at the stinging chemicals that rotted and burned my nasal cavity. I laughed at nothing at all. Somewhere outside, a phone rang incessantly and a continuous thumping resounded above my head. I imagine such noise occurred throughout my isolation, but I was oblivious to it the next day, when I forgot about myself.

From that point on, my detachment was so immense that I swam in an ocean of comical surrealism. The meth had run



out hours before, but the effects remained strong, like the steroid-induced Zen of a marathon runner. My eyes were alight with catatonic frenzy, and my jaw constricted with such conviction that my

teeth ached. Sweat dribbled in pools that collected near my feet. Time lost meaning. Thought was released from my mind's prison, and projected instead into the blackness before me. My mind manifested itself in swirling, convoluted goo that frolicked around my flesh. So many colors. Sensory deprivation gripped my conscience, which desperately reached out for any tangible evidence of the Outside World. Having none, my mind created its own reality, much more beautiful, like the Land of Oz, or Wonderland, or the Shire. I strolled through a sunlit path that vibrated with alien life. Out on the moors a shadowy legion of bipedal beasts

... One Man's Journey to ...

J Shumate

made their way to another war. In a garden to the right, an old man dressed in flashing silver told his grandchildren an ancient yarn, of a world with cement towers filled with glass, where four-wheeled carriages took their passengers to Broadway musicals and cheap diners. Two miles down the road was a tavern, established two million years ago, where all the dead intellectuals went to ponder the nature of existence over a cup of steaming latte. Humphrey Osmond was there, arguing over the nature of schizophrenia with Huxley. Tolstoy sat in a booth by himself, twirling his beard around his wrinkled fingers. Plato and Socrates were at the bar, there togas draping loosely over their stools. Van Gogh was there, with easel and palette, of course—he quietly observed the portrait he was working on, as Andy Warhol posed under the burning scrutiny of a halogen lamp. I did not want to leave this place. This place where sunset was a glorious sight, unblemished by industrial fog. Where the only concern for the day was what path to travel. Where death and life coexisted and talked with one another. Where cityscapes and factories did not hinder the sky, which met so beautifully with the earth on every horizon.

I left my cell on the third evening. I can't recall how I vacated my closet. Surely, I had locked myself in with the intention of rotting. Had a force intervened? Did the bearded stink known as Maintenance Man free me? Did I pound the door open in a blind rage of some sort? Whatever the case, I fell out all sweaty and broken, like the slimy remains of a back-alley abortion

gone terribly wrong. A larval film of bodily fluid encased my frail form. I was the Moth in a blinding world of Butterflies. Consciousness took hold, and with it, a plethora of presumptions I scarcely remembered acquiring. In all simplicity, the Basement is the inexorable result—a ruin shared by the bastard children of a callous nation.

I left my house that evening, clad only in a pair of soiled slacks. My bare feet kissed the gravel and broken bottles of dim alleys. I stopped to sip a fifth of Mad Dog with a crazy bum. I peered into his toothless grin with the strange ideation that my true home lay somewhere in his maw, on his blistered tongue or further in against his cancerous throat. I was sloshed within an hour, and Bum became my best friend. A friend of friends. He was so very jolly, like a bizzarro Santa Claus he roared with guttural laughter at my nonsensical comments. It didn't take long before we were singing through the chorus of All you need is love. I was part of the sick spectacle I once gazed upon from across the street, in another world, with my briefcase and expensive watch. No matter, I was replaced easily enough. A small audience of business suits and high heels gathered around the mouth of the alley, watching us as we invoked Lennon's soul and made a mockery of it with our terrible singing.

That was when she arrived. A shadow emerged from the guts of the alley, and slowly clanked and cursed its way towards me. I stopped singing and watched her approach. For surely it was a woman, or at least used to be. She had the sickly form of a supermodel, and in her movement, in spite of the trips and

shakes and staggers, was the hint of a previous grace now lost. I knew her purpose as soon as her ghostly thin face appeared in the dim light. She was the Keeper of the Boat. Charon. She would lead the way to my destiny. We made eye contact. Nothing was said. She helped me up, and I followed her into the shadows.

My fellow travelers expunge their diseased sex and lapse into karmic obscurity. They shake their barren bodies—back and forth back and forth to the rhythm of their chemical oppressors. Liberators? In a sense, the Sacrament is both, of course. In the extent of my tenure, I have seen and experienced the duplicity of our chemical pilgrimage.

The ambience of the Basement, I would say, has a greater impact here than the Sacrament itself. The Basement is sentient, and in constant flux. When supplies are low, then so is our temperament. The less verbal interactions, the better—the Basement enjoys silence. No matter—most intentions are easily spoken through the body and the eye. Physical concerns, such as hygiene do not worry the Basement. This fact is evident in the layer of mystery secretion that is smeared over every surface, the stacks of used needles which land wherever they choose after use, the occasional half-eaten dumpster sandwich that rests in a prescribed corner and befouls the vicinity.

My veins ache and growl. I know, as sure as death that I will be comatose within a few hours—curled into a fetal Hell of cold sweats and spasms. The far-

off stony gazes of my cellmates center on the rotting corpse near the front door. They fear, as do I, that they may soon join him. His name was. . . his name is irrelevant, of course. He was just as thin and sick as the rest of us. Nobody special. A few missed him for a day or two, but that passed. Some are almost there, right next to him, rotting and stinking in a corner. There are the brave wanderers and the squeamish beginners and the terrified deniers. We wait for the door to creek open. For the Sacrament to arrive. The Sacrament will show us. The Sacrament will take us. The Sacrament will ease our pain.

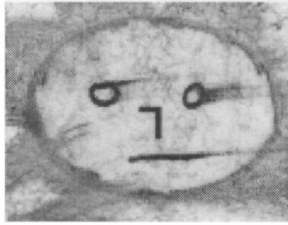
Tonight, I end my journey. Nobody knows this. Nobody ever does. It is my sacred right to withhold this knowledge. My arrival will catch them all off guard, and it will be their problem. This is the way of things. Road kill comes with the territory, of course—a curious teenager, a banished doctor,

dead babies born as addicts. Every crusade has a few sacrifices. The signs are rather obscure, since most of the depraved creatures here have no idea where they're going, only that they'll know when they get there. For those of us that Know, that Feel, well, salvation is only a matter of time. I, for example, know exactly where I'm going. She is waiting for me there. She has already ordered our drinks. She smokes a cigarette to kill the time. I won't be long.

The Sacrament arrives—sweet powdery rocks, snuggling in cellophane blankets.

I'm the first in line

... the Other End



J. Shumate

I take more than my proper share. By the time they notice, it will be too late. I crawl off to my favorite corner, and I slide into my walking boots.

II.

Next please! The bearded man in the booth says. His nametag is all plastic and corporate with a big yellow smiley face. It reads: A. Ginsberg.

I step up to the window—just another rotarian with a light wallet and a cheap briefcase full of lies. I squint and look past the fiberglass. He wears a red uniform with imitation brass buttons. A quaint bellhop cap rests squarely on the top of his mop.

Well? Ginsberg asks. He is impatient. I can see that he loathes his job. His breath steams up bull-like against the cheap barrier between us. What? I ask. What? Your ticket? He fumes.

My. My. Oh. I say and notice that a ticket is indeed scrunched into my left hand. I slide it through the little crescent near Al's belly. He snatches it up with a flourish and presses a red button the size of two severed heads. A buzzer screams in frustration and a black door creaks open in response.

Move on now! The bearded prophet says and wags his head toward the door. The portal. The opening. The answer? The problem? I light a stale Lucky Strike, inhale, and walk. I walk. I walk through the door.

A red room with a nine-foot tall mirror. I look at myself. Short.

Anorexic. Baggy eyes. But the suit doesn't fit. I'm dressed like a square. Like some meandering salesman praying for a commission. Cheap blue grey suit with matching hat. I notice the penny loafers and immediately avert my gaze. Haven't worn a suit in ages. Not since the Funeral. A million questions float to the top of my fevered brain, but there is no one to answer them. I know this is a solitary excursion. I raise my chin and look at my reflection with a bit of morbid pride. The road has been long. The mirrored wall whooshes aside with the cold precision of a Meijer's entrance.

A cloud-infested sky explodes onto a vast space. A courtyard. People everywhere. Married couples, of course. Mothers smiling, dads laughing. Hand in hand. They're all content and calm and courteous—I hear the buzz of a million excuse me's and pardon me's. Polka dot dresses and old lady panty hose cover the wives. The men wear the same suit—my suit—and carry the same briefcase. I look down at mine: imitation leather with gold painted steel latch. No combination or keyhole. If there's a meaning behind all this well-choreographed inanity, standing here gawking won't discover it. I walk all zombie-like into their midst.

The courtyard is extravagant. It pulses and breaths with the lost hopes and memories of an entire generation. Faux cement fountains and plastic flowerbeds and shiny trashcans (recyclable and perishable, of course). Through the haze of suits and beehives, I see a row of corporate domiciles flanking me. Coffee, donuts, burgers, baseball cards, magazines, clothing,

music—it's all available here. I read the signs and commercials as I stumble on:

SUPER SALE SLAM! BE THE FIRST ON YOUR BLOCK and WE MUST BE CRAZY to GIVE YOU SUCH A SOOOPER DEE DOOOPER DEAL!!

I stop in the center of the huge square. The suits merry-go-around me, never stopping, always grinning. A resonant sound crashes through the sky. Jacked up jet fuel and ponderous machinations, like a B-52 with the volume cranked to eleven. A shadow falls over the scene. The moving suits and briefcases and polka dots stop. We look up—it is a B-52! It hovers ghost-like above us. The hatch opens—whiirrrrrr **CLANK!** And now a flag, monumental in size, scrolls out and dips hundreds of feet down, almost touching the cobbled stone ground. Gargantuan. Amazing. It is the largest photograph of Dwight Eisenhower I have ever seen. **"LIKE IKE!"** A slogan shouts above the ex-president's wrinkled brow. Everybody kneels.

Kneel you fool! They'll raise interest rates on us! Someone hisses behind me. I obviously don't want to cause a stir with these freaks, so I do as I'm told. Silence. Only the thundering of the War Machine. I look up.

What are you doing?! Lower your damn head! Says a voice beside me. I slowly turn my gaze, and from the depths of a dime store hat, I see my father's face. He is kneeling beside me. They are kneeling around me.

Lower it now, you disrespectful nothing! Dad shouts and slaps me on the back of the head. I look to my right. Behind me. How could I have not noticed that my father surrounds me, with mom sprinkled throughout? A twisted legion of dads.

You're such a disgrace!

But. . .

You're such a disgrace!

I had it together Dad, honestly! Degree and job and house and car and all. But then. . .

You're such a disgrace!

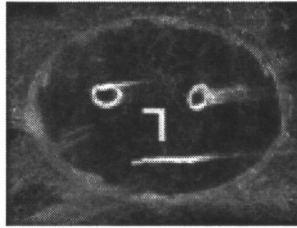
You were proud of me once.

Disgrace!

I look away to hide my tears. Bastard. Bastards, I should say. Of all the filthy corners of the subconscious, I have to pick the one that houses a legion of cloned parents. The stone beneath my hands is freezing. Numbing. It reminds of a place far away, in the glossy pages of some other when—a cold slab in an empty morgue, awaiting my return.

I inspect my briefcase. Click. Click. It creaks open. The fake leather furrows. Inside. Inside. Inside is a letter I wrote Her long ago. I remember the words without reading them. I know them by heart. This will come in hand when I get there. I wad up the stationary (pink with purple flowers, of course) and shove it into a random pocket. I cower forward and touch my sweating brow to the ground. I feel sick.

I lose myself in a deluge of vertigo and nausea. Kind of car sick with a touch of colitis. I fall into the first opening I



A Tragic Account of . . .

J Shumate

see. Take breaths. Slow breaths. Keep breathing. But why? I just roll with it.

Hi there! A uniformed stooge chirps. He is sincerely glad to see me—almost exploding with anticipation. What does he peddle? What product does he endorse? Doesn't matter. They're all the same to me. I can focus now. I straighten up and smile and say hello.

Why, it's not a uniform at all. I say. Uniform? What are you blathering?

You know. Your outfit.

No I don't know you stupid prick! Snap out of it!

It isn't a uniform. It isn't anything. It's father. Father.

PHOOSH! Ice water. At least two gallons of it smacks my face. Are you fuckin' here now? Jesus! A girl shouts from somewhere far away. Somewhere in front of me or maybe beside me. She is beside me. She is bald. Nose pierced. Lip pierced. A studded leather collar around her neck. She has the parched slate complexion of a methamphetamine casualty. She is the once-woman I sleep with. One of many, of course, here in the Basement.

Fuck. I says. I'd say. Get your shit together, man! She spits back. No. Going for it this time. Can't see you, anyways. No light.

There never is here. Only candles and matches. You know that. What did you fucking do to yourself? I told you to ease up for a few weeks. Then you pull this shit on me. I swear to God if you shut down again. . . . She is whimpering. Sniffing. Does she hate me? Did she love me? Impossible. More faces surround my view. Dark. Skeletal.

Empty. Of course, only candles and matches. Light is a curse here in the Basement. It sings our eyes and invites the cops. The only light we ever need is the intravenous holy vision we embrace. We embrace. We embrace whenever we can.

Ugh. Yeah. Whatever. What. I feel moisture all around us. So cold. This place is a dungeon. A dungeon, I mutter in an attempt to prove my point, whatever point that is.

Don't you fuckin' pass out on. . . .

The void eats me again, harder this time. I'm hungry. If only I could find a hot dog in this place.

Here you are—nice and crispy, just the way you like it, yes? She clinks a small plate in front of me. It's a Ballpark. My mouth waters. We're sitting in the cheap cabin we rented for our honeymoon. In the middle of a tourist community filled with all the commodities that make camping a national irony. Fully flushable outhouses, gas powered campfires, mechanized hearth, electric lanterns, bug zappers. Small. Dark. Only the fireplace to light the dinner table. Cozy here. I never want to leave.

She sits across the doilies and discount cutlery and she smiles. So lovely. So beautiful. Her eyes are green and her hair is brunette. She wears a typically conservative dress, fresh from the bridal shower. She is the perfect homemaker. She is the perfect lover. Dad is so proud. Married with a corporate job! What else is there? But She is pale, with only a bit of color. She has the chapped and blue lips of a fresh corpse. Her eyes drown in their sockets. Blood crawls out of her left nostril and she licks it up. She is only

one crushed chest away from looking exactly the way she did two years ago, when they scraped her steaming remains off the pavement. When I went to the morgue to identify her, they would only show her face, but I pushed Mr. Coroner aside and pulled the sheet off. Amazing how a single impact can mangle a body so thoroughly. A generous slice of windshield had split her bosom in twain.

How was work today, honey? She asks. Just fine, thanks, I say. You know how it is. Damn crack whores on every corner, trying to steal our game. Yeah, I know. Really is a shame. And when is the last time we had some fresh needles in this house? The Clinic run out or what?

She stops sipping her processed tin can coffee and stares into my soul with her radiant eyes. I used to swim in that x-ray gaze. She was my lifeblood. My greedy arteries devoured Her beatific energies, and pumped pure bliss into my heart.

I choke down a half-chewed chunk of frankenfurter and look away like a scolded child. I'm sorry. I'm sorry the Needle replaced you. It's not as though I had a son to latch onto—you were still pregnant with him, remember?

I'm sucked out the door and through a Hoover hose—into a pit of dust and neglected pennies, where the white picket fences of American Dreams sleep.

Thunk. I hear more than feel my body slam onto cold cement. Footsteps. Guttural orders. A gurney. Administer two cee cees of such and such. Off in the distance I hear squealing tires and police

sirens. I know that I am close. Close to the very bottom of the Other End. I have been unceremoniously dumped. Dumped. Dumped like so much garbage on the Emergency Room's doorstep. I doubt they'll find a vein that hasn't dried up. If Dad could only see me now. Cheers, Pops.

Hey!

Hm?

Hey! What. . . why am I handcuffed to the bed?

Big orderly in white fatigues. Muscles. Scars. An ex-con struggling through community college. He stares at me. No—he stares through me with the time honored indifference of the medical profession.

You see the gentleman out there? Mr. Orderly asks. The one all decked out in blue? He's here in case you get healthy enough to go to jail, see? You straight now? Not looking too good, man. Damn, I don't get paid enough to see this shit.

I smile. He cringes. I know my teeth are rotten—a side effect from too much junk.

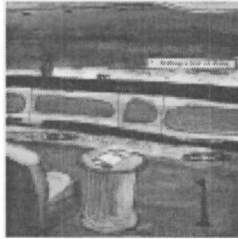
Don't worry. I says. I'm sure they'll bill me.

Doctor!

Darkness.

Light.

Later, the orderly will tell a reporter that my last words were "gotta piss." But I don't remember saying that at all. I thought I said something like "Fuck this nickel and dime shit! Where's my Twinkie?" I know not exactly Tolstoy,



J Shumate

but much more interesting than gotta piss. But they're welcome to print up whatever lard they choose. Nobody will read my obituary anyway—the people that might are too far down in the Basement to consider resurfacing for an editorial memento.

I float away, into an eternally cheap lounge, filled with has-beens and wannabees and straight cracked out losers like me. I shouldn't be surprised that the scum of the Earth are shipped to a Vegas lounge when they die. Could there be a worse torture? But I don't care. I get up on stage—I paid the owner for the privilege. I reach into my pocket. The stationary is still there. She sits close to the stage. A table for two with a corny red candle burning in the center and our happy-hour brews off to the side. She wears the dress I bought her for prom. I wink and I smile. She is already crying before I say the first word:

We leave our bodies behind. We burst through the plywood and insulation and we kiss the Sun. We feel the bewildering power of that Star as it warms our incorporeal flesh. The Sun loves us. The Stars and the Clouds and the Galaxies look upon us and They see the triumphant product of the only grace humanity has. Saturn sees us, from so far away we illuminate His face. He smiles at us, and a ten-gun salute of meteors fires off in recognition of our union. We, together, answer Their cries and pleas to produce a single redemption for the human race. Our hands and hearts dissolve and spill into the true mold of Prosperity. As the world crumbles around us, we know we are safe. We are safe. We are safe because we leave

our bodies behind. Up here, the physical world below us is cosmically hilarious. We goof and laugh at the waste and futility of it all. We are able to laugh because we have each other. Reality is a torture I have spent years avoiding—and now that I have found you, I know I will never return.



Brianna

J.

Patrick

To Shame:

For Shame:

By Shame

I stand sheeted in seething visceral air, the grass hunches over as it succumbs to the heavy layers of ice crushing every one of its protean, organic, chromaplastic, entities.

The gales like spikes pierce through every layer of my soft cotton overhangs. I am merciless to its unrelenting sorrow as I stiffen, slowly turning blue.

My moist eyes tighten and pull inward and around themselves for comfort wanting shelter from the ill complacent cold, like a paper towel misplaced in the bottom of a dripping sink, these eyes sog and sag; who would want to see on a day like today?

Not flowing—
 Not through me,
 Just a rock in the way of its foreseen future;
 It puts me to shame,
 I am just an obstruction.

Its fury surrounds me, tunnels of sick torment swirl madly beyond me, I know
 you're in charge. . . I know you can pull me here or there, I know I am at your
 mercy—your pawn.

The trees scream as they lean and touch for the ground mechanically, they too
 have been molested by the hazel skies and the frozen translucence, burrowing
 winds—you.

They bend and retract,
 they scream and react,
 they hang their head in shame,
 they are listless to blame,

They thrive when you are absent; they open up beads of warm dew and
 frolic in the gushing warmth of the sun—

Helios the God.

You could never be such, I could never dream—I have never dreamed of
 anything other. . .

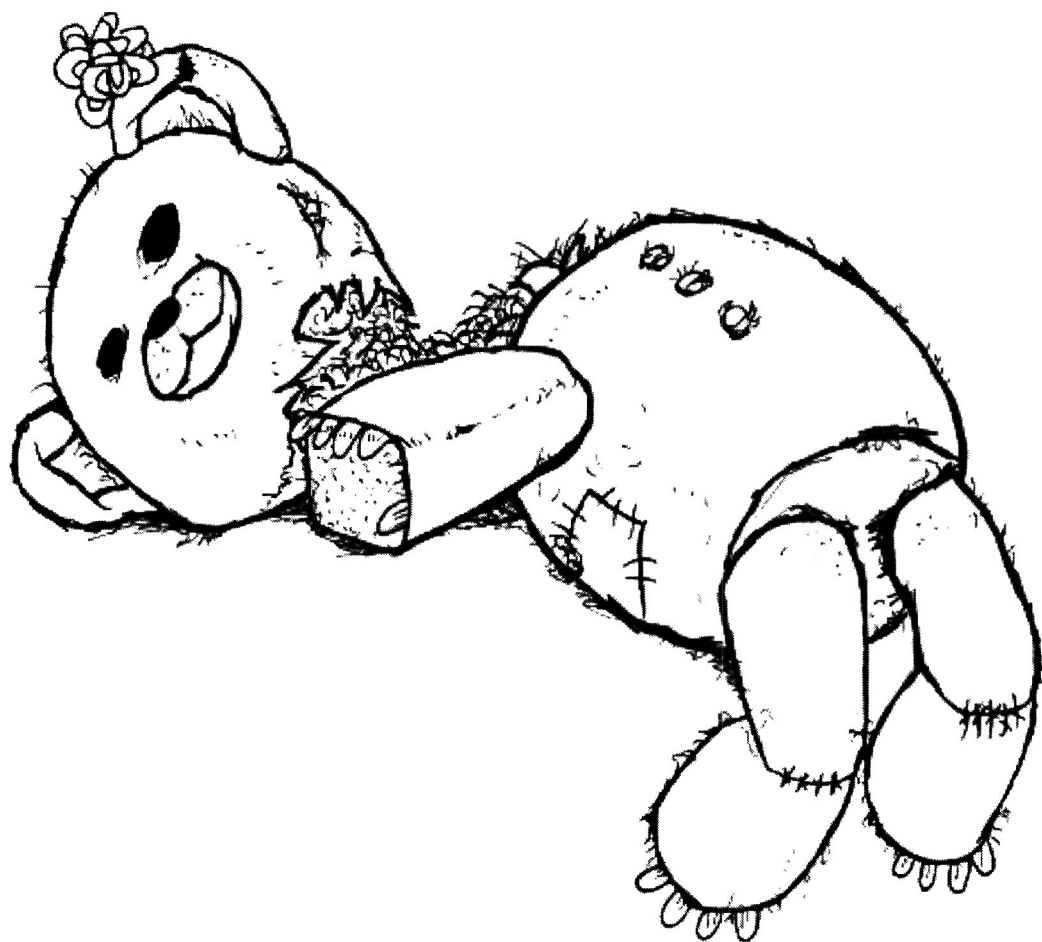
Frozen limbs. . . a white room void and unpremeditated in stature holds me
 hostage, bleeds me of every color except its own. Eyes fixated on the heavens, I
 weighed them in tons as they lay heavily upon my caved in chest. Voices reverber-
 ated as time ended and was encompassed by murmurs and whispers. The heart
 that I own became frigid like the shadows that draw me in and out of visions. . .
 You were there, you are always there. . .

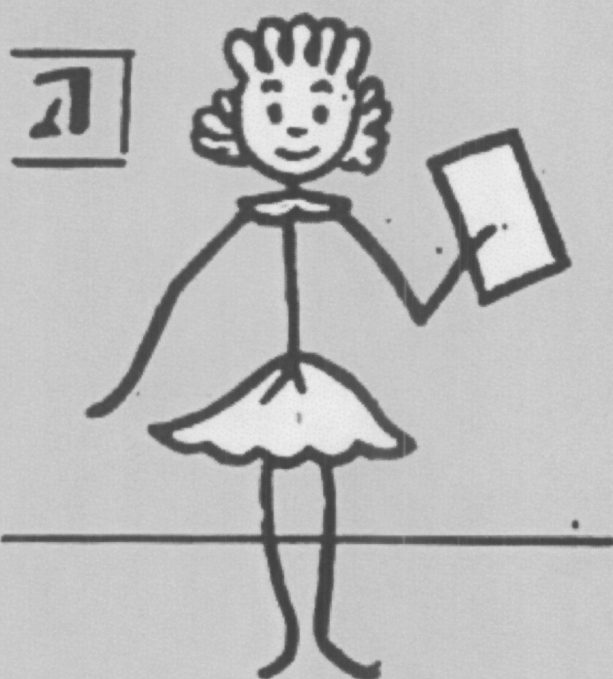
There is nothing to deliver me
 from the pain that you have instilled in me
 so zealously and cowardly. . .
 the life I own has slipped away from here
 I fear;
 it lay naked and decomposed on an interstate highway covered in Styrofoam
 cups and cigarette butts,
 flies pick at those pink little ears, buzzing, only buzzing, buzzing, buzzing,
 buzzing.

What matters most matters least,
what I say should be is far more than this
disease! I rapture and quake at the quotes of a fake!
I spat venom on your grave that still awaits you!
I smile at it and it to me,
and we sit and mock you religiously,
we await you in red and veils of baby socks,
the ones you would use to clean off your cock.

Grave and I are in quite the circumstance
Burrowing our way out of your unbuttoned pants
Even so, even then, we would never be the same again—
So is life! So it goes! This is what life so chose!

Be still my voices full of shrill,
Be still my trembling lip until,
A warm soul of sooth will calm and tire,
The will and need for you to be a liar.





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I BRING IN WORTHWHILE
MATERIAL

Contributors'

Notes

Randall Barnett

is an adolescent septuagenarian who lives in a kosher little cottage in Marion with a yellow dog. He has survived marriage and child rearing and more than thirty years attempting to educate other people's offspring. Now he contents himself with telling stories of a vanishing civilization.

Justin Bell

is a student of English at OSUM. He tries to keep a low profile.

Daniel Bradshaw

is in his third year as an English major at OSUM. He works for the La Rue United Methodist Church and is a professional musician as well. He enjoys any creative outlet he can find.

Kristin Crump

is a senior English major who will reach the end of a very long road when she graduates on June 13th (until she goes to grad school, that is). She sees it as her mission in life to educate the "inmates of

academia" to the fact that all writing should be viewed as having merit, whether or not they consider it "literary."

Elizabeth Dye

is currently a senior at OSUM, suffering from a horrid case of senioritis. This condition will clear itself up June 13th.

Stephaine Horner

enjoys long walks in the rain and porn.

Adam Issler

is a senior English major. He enjoys studying the Bible, spending time with his family, and the Chicago Cubs.

Kelly Krider

is an English major and enjoys reading and writing poetry.

Mandy Lewis

is a junior at OSUM majoring in Photojournalism and English.

Brianna J. Patrick

is professionally unemployed. She once worked around cancer patients, but found this to interfere with her smoking habit, so she quit—the job, obviously. She thinks she is a history major, or an English major; maybe she is both, or one. Her interests include smoking cigarettes and indecision. Occasionally she writes

and reads. She is looking forward to receiving her education (college). She is currently a junior.

John Shumate

"I'm a professional starving artist and full-time channel-surfer. I live in a static wasteland somewhere between *Jeopardy!* and those infomercials for spray-on hair."

Megan Simmermon

is a junior at OSUM majoring in English. She enjoys reading, writing, and walking in the park.

Amanda Walters

is a junior at OSUM and is majoring in English. She wants to be a high school English teacher when she grows up. Her favorite color is green, like grass.

Tim West

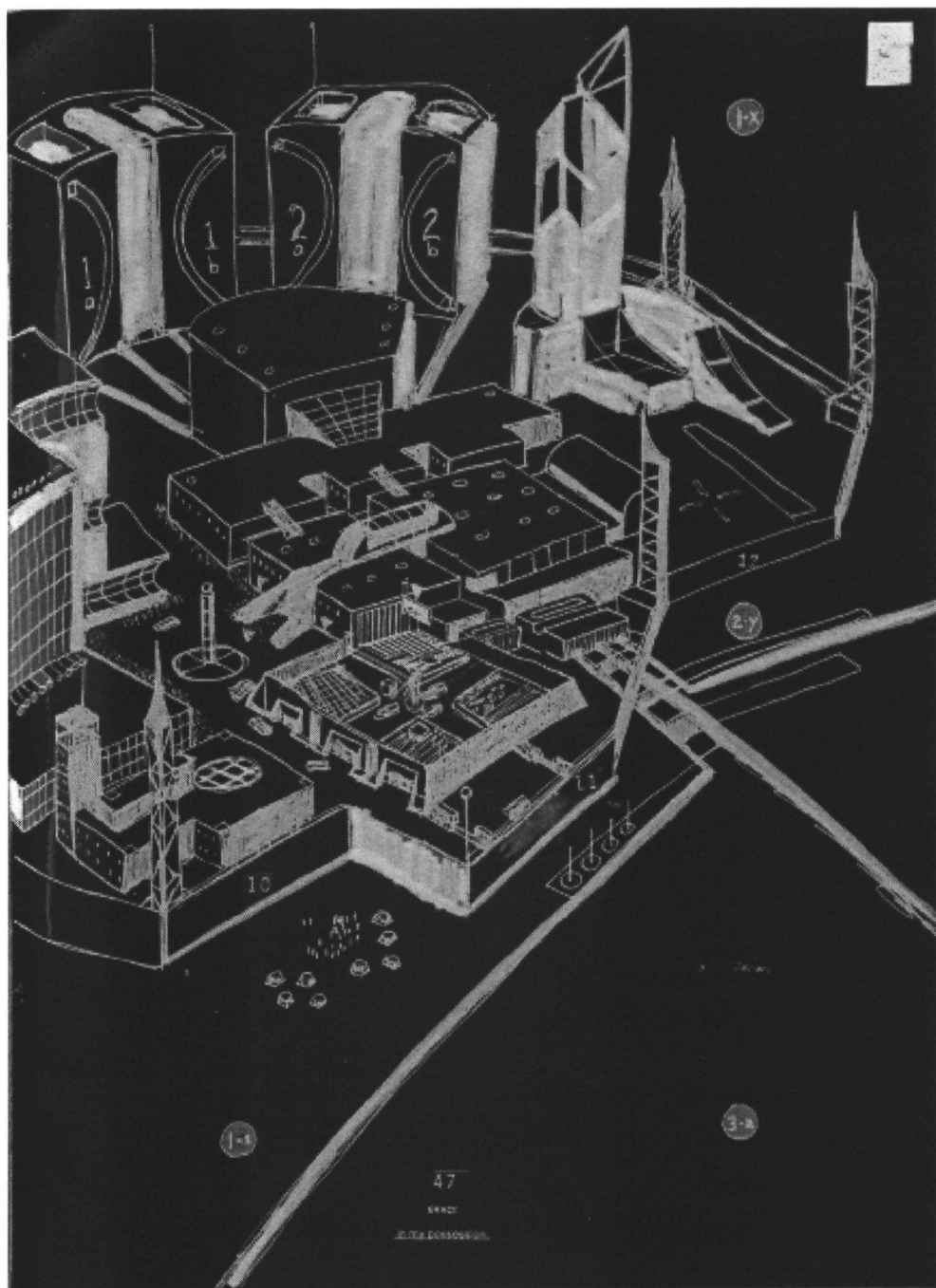
lives in Edison, Ohio with his dog, Nikki, and his suitcases.

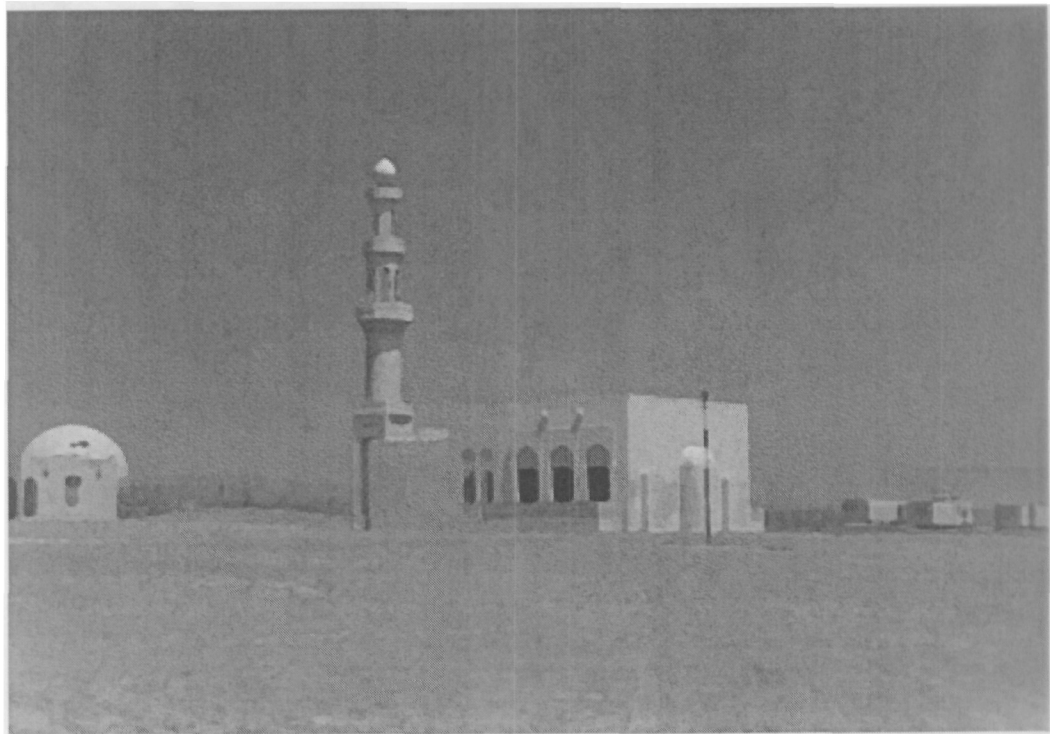
Steven Wilson

is a student at OSUM.

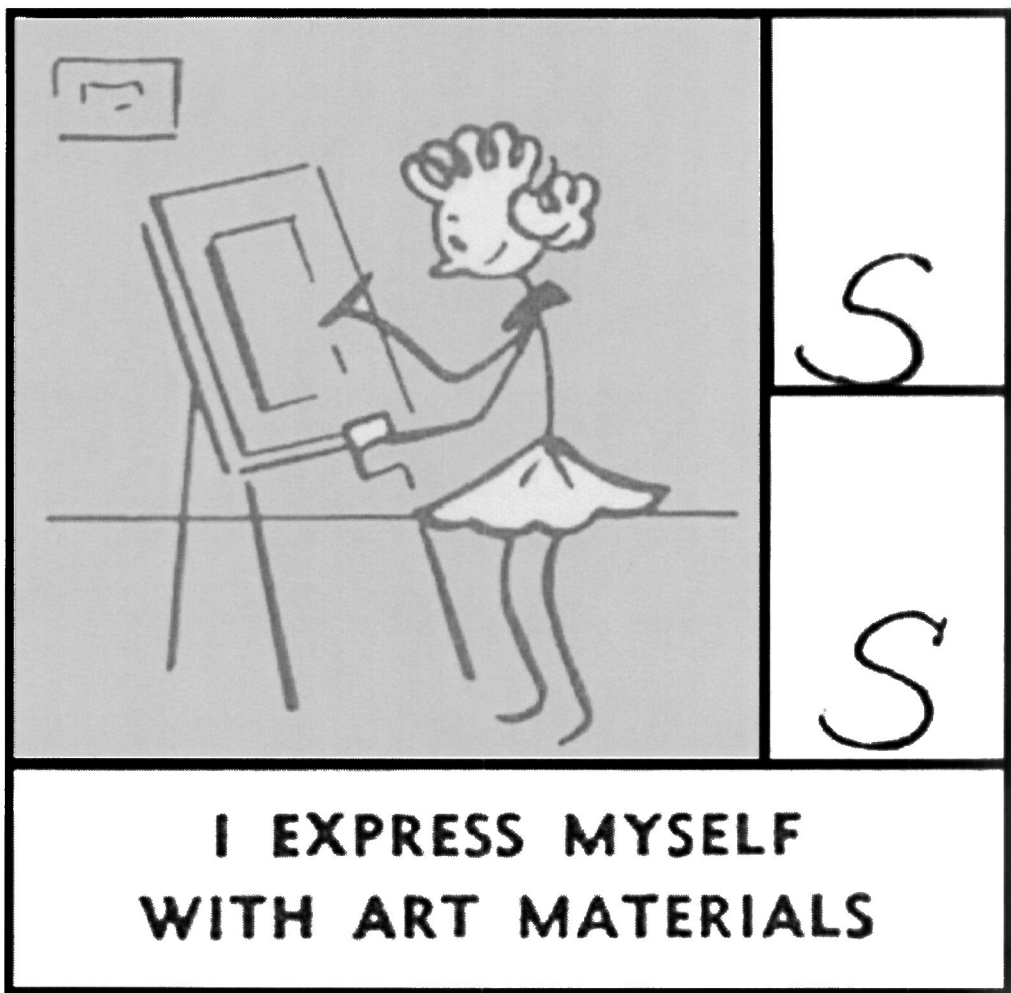
Laurie Wise

has been a registered nurse for 22 years. She currently teaches Health Technology at Harding High School.









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**I EXPRESS MYSELF
WITH ART MATERIALS**

Photo & Art Credits

For *That Takes The Reason Prisoner* by Randall Barnett:

Pen and ink drawings by John Shumate on pages 8, 11, 13, 15, & 17.

For *Fading Light* by Kristin Crump:
“G-Specific Issue” by Justin Bell on page 20.
Photographs by Kristin Crump on pages 27, 29, & 31.

Page 35, “791642” by Justin Bell.

For *On Being Human* by Laurie Wise:
“A I” by Justin Bell on page 36.

Photographs on pages 42 & 43 courtesy of Daniel Bradshaw.

For *An Appreciation of the Poetry of Stuart Lishan*:

Pen and ink drawings by Justin Bell on pages 44 & 54.

Photograph on page 58 courtesy of Daniel Bradshaw.

For *Superman* by Elizabeth Dye:
Photograph on page 60 courtesy of Daniel Bradshaw.
Pen and ink drawing by Justin Bell on page 63.

Photographs on pages 64 & 65 by John Shumate.

For *one in non* by Justin Bell:
Pen and ink drawing by Justin Bell on page 68.

Page 79, “15 June” by Justin Bell.

Digitally manipulated pen and ink drawings on pages 80 & 81 by Justin Bell.

For *Missing the War* by Daniel Bradshaw:
“Propaganda May Serve a Good Cause” by Justin Bell on page 84.
“American Football Player” by Justin Bell on page 87.

Photographs on page 89 courtesy of Daniel Bradshaw.

Photographs on pages 100 & 101 by Daniel Bradshaw.

For *Don't Say a Prayer* by Tim West:
Digitally manipulated painting “I could tell you” by Justin Bell on page 102.
Pen and ink drawing by Justin Bell on page 105.

Pen and ink drawing on page 107 by Justin Bell.

For *The Pygmy Kingfisher* by John Shumate:

Painting by John Shumate on page 110.
Photograph by Kristin Crump on page
113.

Page 115, "*Bird of Evening*" by Justin Bell.

For *A Tragic Account of One Man's Journey
to the Other End* by John Shumate:
"*Dealing with the Devil*" by Justin Bell on
page 116.
Photograph by Daniel Bradshaw on page
119.

Digitally manipulated pen and ink
drawing on page 129 by Justin Bell.

Pen and ink drawing by John Shumate
on page 133.

Page 137, "*Grace in My Possession*" by Justin
Bell.

Photographs on pages 138 & 139 by
Kristin Crump.

Pen and ink drawing on page 143 by John
Shumate.





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Poetry and Prose from

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And Photography and Artwork from

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and

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