Michael Bettencourt

Collected Short Stories

Block & Tackle Productions Press

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A Small Town

PROLOGUE

The warm summer evening coats the town, on the main street crowded with lamplight and cars and chattering people, on the houses where fans whirr and curtains riffle, on windows full or empty of life, on tops of trees and the roots of lawns, on a front porch where a man rocks, the creak of porch boards stuttering against the half-darkness, clink of ice in his glass of lemonade. The humid air hums with lilacs. A thrum of life slips out with half-heard music or the late slap of feet up steps or two people walking in clinging shadow. He lifts the glass to his lips; the ice falls forward, then back, and the porch boards resume their easy mutterings.

Finally, the sounds wane. He goes inside, does not turn on a light. He can feel it now, and he is propelled through the house, his hands running along walls, reading the blackness. He traverses the house until he sits at his desk in the bedroom, looking calmly at the elm outside his window framed by the moon. He can feel it now, and his mind opens to the images of people he has seen and talked to and laughed with and cried for and above all not understood. Their private musings and despairs wash through him until he is full of their smells and privations and yearnings. It is like staring at a mirror in the dark, he thinks, it is like trying to squeeze air. As he sits, the shadows of the elm's leaves etch across the unfurled moonlight on his desk.

HANSEL AND GRETEL

(Concerning George and Mary Cooper)

George and Mary Cooper, newlyweds, came to Tremainsville from Ulysses because a house beguiled them. The house was not especially good, nor was it bad, but it was old, and that was its proper attraction. It was built in 1900, the realtor said, and they both hummed in approval. The foundation was poured and let sit a year before the house was built, the realtor said. George nodded, grinning, and they both respected the sagacity of the old doctor who'd built the house. The inside woodwork was American chestnut, cut from trees the doctor had had on his farm, and there was a barn and space for a garden out back. Of course, Mary pointed out, the stucco needed repair, the shingles needed replacing, the plumbing was old, the electric wiring was original, and the wood needed stripping, but that only thrilled them with the challenge, and they happily closed the deal.

Before they occupied the house, they would drive by it and delight in the chill of ownership that slid down their spines. They had a dream in their heads of how it would look and wear, and they traipsed through scrapbooks of wallpaper and priced paints and bought paint stripper and steel wool in anticipation of the day this clay would be theirs to shape. Mary was for doing a room at a time, but George wanted to defeat the house at once, and when Mary had shown George the error of his way, she herself became giddy with possibility and he, in turn, had to calm her down and get her into proportion. They entered the house in July.

Tremainsville is a small town, and word of their occupancy ran like a synapse up and down the block, especially since they had bought the Riverton's house. Adelle Riverton had been a peg the town had hung itself on for years. As a young girl in the 1890s she had come to Tremainsville with her father and mother, who were looking for land to farm. At that time Tremainsville was nothing but a main street, not big enough to stop wind, and land was cheap. Adelle's father, a burly man who could drive a nail into a board with the palm of his hand, bought forty acres a mile from the village store, and Adelle grew up surrounded by the smell of horse and chicken and winter and cow and wood. Her mother, a heavy-hipped woman who could lug a thirty-pound tub of laundry, kept a rigid command in the house, something her father even bowed to, and the three of them, enlarged later by three boys in four years, lived a hard and satisfying life.

The town followed Adelle's growth, and when she shifted into "ready to marry," the town held three stores, four churches (Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Baptist), three bars a respectable distance from the churches, a restaurant, a gas station for the new cars, a feed and grain store, and a railroad spur that heaved a loaded train into Tremainsville every other night. Her father, now well off enough to marry his daughter away, held a fine celebration, and Adelle Farwell translated herself into the wife of Vernon Riverton.

Shortly after that, after they had moved into the house built by Doctor Kelley, the whispers began. Adelle had changed -- her complexion had waxed more pale. Her public mouth rarely laughed or chatted. Vernon worked late at the gas station, they said, and oftentimes people on MacNelly Street would see him weave loose-legged homeward. People cocked their ears and scanned them over, but nothing concrete came. Later, jaded hints of a mistress got traded, but that, too, turned only on conjecture. Vernon came to buy the gas station, then the grain store, became a large investor in the bank, sat on its board, ran for the school committee and won, ran for mayor and won, and did so for the next sixteen years. Adelle gave plays for the children in the neighborhood, setting up part of the woodshed as a stage, and wrote the local society column for the Day Press. She organized civic activities, held teas, wrote poetry and recited it, and all the women, and their husbands, agreed that things certainly seemed better.

Vernon died in 1965, and Adelle lived on alone in the house on MacNelly Street with her son. By and by, she had her son sell the house to George and Mary Cooper, and she moved to an old folk's home the next town over. She was fully deaf, almost blind, and lame. She gathered a few prizes, sold everything else, and moved off.

Mary Cooper went to see Adelle as one of her first genuflections to the house and brought her some rhubarb from her garden. Adelle received her graciously, constantly saying "What?" to Mary, who felt a bit embarrassed shouting at this diminutive woman. Finally, Mary ferreted out all the oddities of the house, and this knowledge made her feel a more secure part of the house. She left, promising to return, and scurried home to George with her cargo.

The neighbors soon trickled by bearing squash bread or cookies, and Mary welcomed them in her tattered jeans and tied-back kerchiefed hair. George, always self-conscious around strangers, hung on the edge of things, wanting to get back to work while the conversations addled on about What do you do? and What do you do? They found out he was a teacher at the high school. They found

out she was an administrator for the university and had been once divorced. And the neighbors paid their visits and took their tiny scraps of information home, and soon George and Mary slipped into the fabric of the place.

The house soon became their only child. Every free moment was spent working on some project, scraping money together when possible to outfit it so it would shine. In the evenings they would sit on the porch, weary, sipping tea for her, beer for him, and just stare at the setting sun. There was never enough time or money, and they were always anxious and impatient, but what they had done was good, and they felt glad for that.

One evening, as they sat sipping on the porch, and George gazed at the darkening light in the sky, she asked him what he was thinking of.

"Oh, just about our wedding."

"You don't regret it, do you?" Impish smile.

"Of course not." He sipped his beer.

"What do you remember best?" Snuggling down into the moment, her hands warm around her tea.

"The best? I don't know. It was all pretty much a whirl."

"Try. I remember best the look in your eyes when you spoke the vows." She gazed at him, wanting him to smile at her. He sipped at his beer, then finished in one gulp and stood up. "Gonna check that plaster for sanding. Wanna come?"

She sat there, the warm smile on her lips, just realizing that he had not looked at her or grinned back at her, that he was standing up and ready to leave. She stammered a "no" and shuddered when the screen door slammed.

All the next day, and for days after that, she worried the scene in her mind at the same time as she tried to push it away. She began to peer at George, into George, knowing (yet making herself not-know) she was seeking some crack, and she started to find small inattentions, vague but pointed outbursts of frustration, a growing obsessiveness with "working on the house." Small things, and George still seemed happy, but she worried them until they grew large. She resolved to talk it out with him, and that made her feel better.

But she didn't talk. George came home every day and without pause changed into his work clothes and was at one of his projects when she came home from work. He more and more took to working by himself. When she asked to help him, he said no, saying he could manage and why didn't she take

a rest (she sensed the false kindness, had no way to rebut it). At dusk, when he stood in the garden in the midst of the neat rows with their labels, he stared at the house and a spasm of helplessness passed through him. So many things he wanted, so many things he thought the marriage and house would give, but he feared them now because he could feel inside of him the shriveling of his first desires and the cold substitution of duty and responsibility. He could not talk to her about this because it was so much about her and she would never hear it for her fear. And he felt like a thief in his own life. As the sun set and moon rose, he stood in the garden, his fists on his thighs, washed in moonlight, and stared at the dark hulk of the house.

They continued to work on the house, but the more it changed, the more it became completed, the stronger became their walls. His outbursts shaded into anger, and she, sensing his pain but unable to touch it because of her own sorrow, retreated, and the more angry he became, the more her shadows stained her. He took to coming home late, sometimes drunk; she met the neighbors more, became involved in village projects. He continued to work on the house, his alchemy transforming walls and woodwork, but it was a shell he carried. She made the obligatory gestures of curtains and carpet, and together they arranged the furniture. They still slept together.

She discovered his affair almost by accident, some inadvertent letters left in his desk. In some ways she was relieved -- now there was an enemy and perhaps together -- But he, at first overwhelmed by guilt, then heartened by the freedom he'd longed for, would not work toward but only away. He moved out, in degrees, the two of them dancing like children afraid of the dark, and finally they divorced. They kept it quiet, made excuses for the other's absence, but it was over.

Mary lived on in the house, with everything almost completed, and she tended the garden and mowed the grass and dusted the woodwork and paid the bills. George's check came every month, with no return address. At night, under the light of the moon, she sat in the comfortable living room sipping brandy to deaden the silence that greeted her everywhere. Sometimes she cried, and even though everyone now knew, no knock fell on the door or ring awakened the phone.

One day, toward autumn, she made a batch of rhubarb and took it to Adelle. She entered the home quickly and asked the nurse if it was all right to see her.

The nurse said yes, smiled, and pointed to her room. Mary walked down the hall past rooms with old nodding men and women in them. She pushed Adelle's door softly, and when Adelle didn't react, stood there for a moment staring at the wizened woman. Adelle, finally sensing someone was there, croaked "Who is it?"

"It's only me, Mary Cooper. I brought you some rhubarb." Adelle turned up her hearing aid and said, "What? Say that again."

Mary knew she could still outrace this aged woman, but she cleared her throat and repeated herself.

"C'mon in, c'mon in." Mary sat. "How are you? I was just thinking of you the other day, wonderin' how my house was coming along and wishing I could see all the marvelous changes you've made."

Mary buried her face while the old woman's words drowned in her ears.

SUPERMARKET

(Concerning Wendy Jennings)

Wendy was the kind of seventeen that had more sincerity than sophistication, the kind of seventeen who wrote in journals that raindrops were tears on a window and freedom was like a bird. She was not a pretty girl. Squarely built, the goalie for the girl's hockey team, plain-faced and heavy-thighed, she had no desire (and no chance) to compete against the fervent cosmetic personalities of the other girls at school. In any case, she thought them irrelevant. She knew they would fade as soon as the sun of their school career sank into the marsh of adulthood. Instead, like Miniver Cheevy, she cultivated rightness as her heraldry of self, hoping to preserve her childhood through chivalry and knowing the blackness and whiteness of the world. Against the frippery and inconsequence (as she saw it) of most of the human race she placed the armor of her self, her greaves fixed, her visor pointed to the north.

One day Wendy had an epiphany: her parents would not spot her money for the rest of her natural days. In Tremainsville a "job" meant either farmwork or townwork. She opted for townwork. Shucking her usual gym shorts and tee-shirt, she dutifully climbed into a skirt, donned a blouse, eased clinging hose up to her hips, raked her hair, and soon metamorphosed into a presentable young lady. She set off in search.

At the supermarket she found Mr. Bennett, the manager and a friend of her father's, behind the meat counter (he doubled as the butcher), his white coat speckled with blood. He came to the window, meat cleaver in hand. In a voice surprisingly thin and feminine she asked if he needed anyone to work in the store. He stared at her for what seemed minutes, then suddenly blurted out in recognition "Wendy Jennings, right?" and barged off for the backroom with Wendy in tow.

His office was a compact Chinese puzzle. Bills of lading, time sheets, order forms, receipts, magazines, waxed paper, half an eraser, a crumpled white shirt, debris of past snacks, mingled in a fraternity of chaos. The two crowded into this sanctum. He shot open a file drawer and rifled through a stack of paper, finally pulling out a dog-eared application form. "You ever done stock work?" he said, whipping around. Luckily he'd put the cleaver down.

"No," she answered with a sinking stomach.

"Well, I need someone to do stockwork. Somebody strong."

"I'm strong, Mr. Bennett, really. No sweat." She squelched the impulse to flex her bicep for him.

"Yeah?" He was rummaging through the dregs of his desk for a pen. The first three he tried were dry. The fourth wrote in green. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Bennett, I can do -- "

"Here, fill out this application."

" -- just about anything. I pick things up -- "

"George Jennings' daughter, right?"

" -- real quick and it wouldn't take me long -- " "You've got the job. You start tomorrow since one of my boys just quit."

" -- to learn the ropes." She paused. "What?"

"I said you've got the job. One of my boys leaves tomorrow and what with Christmas coming I need someone right away."

"I've got the job?"

"Well, not until you fill out these forms and close your mouth." He handed her the application, a W-4, and the green-ink pen. "I've got chops to do. Give this to me when you're done. Don't leave it here. It'll get eaten up. See you tomorrow after school."

That night Wendy's stomach spiraled as she repeated to herself, Tomorrow I start, Tomorrow I start. After she had joined this army of clerks she had walked through the stockroom by herself, awed by the ceiling-high piles of food. It had seemed to her this one room could feed the entire world, this one room a garden to fill every mouth and stomach. That night she slept like one who was dead and when she awoke in the morning the sun wasn't like any sun she'd seen before. This day started her new job.

At first Wendy ran confused. Her cortex somersaulted as she tried to remember the intricacies of each aisle. At night the grammar of the groceries whispered through her mind. She reviewed even in her deepest sleep the odd conjugations of food, the irregularities of parsed aisles. She had been awarded the coffee aisle, which included the swirled teas of several continents and, at the far end, strata of odd items that didn't fit neatly anywhere else in the store. She pored over her taxonomy like a medieval scholar. All her stock (her "pile" in the backroom lingo) stood in the cavernous stockroom that one of her fellow

workers dubbed the “Garden of Earthly Delights.” With her dolly and box cutter and leather holster with price stamper she coaxed the fruits of the Garden to hang from the limbs of her shelves, her role to replenish the products in an endless cycle of resurrection.

After a while Wendy got cocky, the sure-footed goat among mountains of food. She wore her leather holster a little slid down on her hip and walked in a way that told any customer she knew where the kadota figs were and would lead them there like an Indian guide in the forest at the dead of the moon. When no one was looking she played John Wayne at the shootout, squaring off to a box of grapefruit in the produce room. She would stand, tight-lipped and tense, with her right hand crooked just above the stamper, waiting for the moment when the box of grapefruit would make its move, then rush madly up to the box and stamp it furiously with 89¢ until it squirmed in the dust, never to bother innocent palates again. She was on good terms with all the aisles, especially her own, where the containers stood best ad forward, their edges neatly lined up, not one of them sloppily hanging over like the slip of an unkempt woman. The tea boxes gleamed, Red Rose and Celestial Seasonings and Lipton and Constant Comment, all like the daubed ladies in a painting she’d seen by Renoir, all full of color and good posture. Her aisle was a garden that she pruned and arranged, and at the end of the day she felt wise and confident as she looked down her shelves at just how orderly everything was, how each item had its place and she knew the place for everything.

Then he showed up.

“He” (and Wendy could only call him “he” because she never learned his name) was a tramp. He was wizened and pathetic, a shrunken stump of bones and skin topped by miserly eyes set in a niggard expanse of face, with a head that swayed on a stalk of neck, as if he were positioning himself to strike. When he walked he never swung his arms in the normal fashion but instead kept them at his sides, a sheath of body moving through air, head weaving, eyes dully buttoned to the world. He came the week before Christmas, when everyone was fertilizing their shelves heavily after each abundant harvest was swept away by the customers. Wendy was caught up in the pace. The boxes emptied themselves on the shelves for her, her hands barely directing the flow, and she was filled with responsibility and purpose, a gratifying glow underneath the buying and selling.

On the day he arrived, Wendy was the last to leave the store. Everyone else had slipped their time card keys into the time clock and shucked off their chains. She flew around the corner, battering open the double doors with her dolly, and sailed into the stockroom. And there he was, perched on a load of bananas, his grey body like a hiss of steam, vacancy angling like a fish across his face. It was as if someone had punched her in the chest, her breathing tightened so quickly, and she almost tripped over the dolly that skewed across her path. She wasn't so much frightened as startled. Only when her blood left off pounding did she become scared. She uncleaved her tongue long enough to ask him what he was doing there, but with what was barely the lengthening of colorless lips he simply aspirated "Nice." At that same moment she heard Mr. Bennett yell for her hurry up, he had a wife to get home to. Wendy stood perplexed, rooted to the spot. She wanted to yell, she wanted so badly to strike at this man and rid herself of the pressure inside her, and he must have sensed this because in a single serpentine motion he put his finger to his lips and shook his head no. The impulse to yell withered in her throat and in the moment she paused and really saw his pathetic and anguine face, the pressure of fright liquefied into a seventeen-year old compassion for the derelict. Something about finding his poverty amidst this plenty overrode the commonsensical notion that she should tell Mr. Bennett to usher him out. Charity arched out of Wendy toward the man. One night won't hurt, she thought, and smiled, confident that she was doing right. She stashed her dolly to one side, grabbed her coat off the hook, jammed her card into the time clock, and, price stamper clicking against her hip like the clapper of a bell, hurried out of there.

Mr. Bennett, his big fur coat bristling at the door, shushed her along, asking her what was so interesting in the stockroom this late at night. For a moment the impulse again welled in Wendy's throat to reveal the tramp, the stranger who might ruin all the work they had done, but Mr. Bennett's "Good night" in the parking lot left her in a cloud of snow that hung like lace snakes in the air. She stood there, slowly buried in a promise.

The next day Wendy did not see him and her heart voiced a thumping prayer of thanks, the Good Samaritan's duty easily done. At closing time, when the rivulets of people pushed their rafts of goods to the delta of the check-out counters, when the clerks jammed one more flattened box into their shopping carts and herded them all to the furnace, when the fluorescent lights and Muzak flickered and died, Wendy saw him again, only a fleeting shadow listing to one

side of the Maxwell House coffee boxes, but certainly there. She was alone in the room.

No gesture of recognition as he sat against the wall, no word of thanks, only again the single word, "Nice." She asked him when he would let her be. He shrugged. She asked him what he wanted. Another shrug. "I helped you last night," she hissed, "now you should give me a break. That's the way it goes." Mr. Bennett's voice sirened through the double doors and Wendy snapped away from the conversation just as he stiff-armed his way into the stockroom. "C'mon, young woman, it's time to leave. The customers have all been totaled. I'm hungry and have a virtuous woman at home waiting for me." He barreled into his office and with barely a pause barreled back out, his coat slung over his arm, his limp fedora already perched on his head. "Make it quick," he chucked over his shoulder as he flailed his way back through the doors.

Wendy seized the moment. "Look," her voice sharp, "I'm trying to give you a break. But this can't go on forever."

The man, in response, tucked his knees up under his chin and said nothing.

She danced from foot to foot, knowing Mr. Bennett was waiting for her at the front door. "I can't stay here all night. You've got to promise to leave after tonight. I could lose my job. You could go to jail."

He drew himself closer together, his eyes beads of glistening onyx.

She ran to the double doors and seeing that the coast was clear snatched two packages of baloney off the luncheon meat shelf. She flashed back into the stockroom and threw the packages at him. "This is all you get. After tonight, nothing. Understand?"

She didn't wait for an answer as she hurled herself through the doors, snapping the light off. Just before she was fully through the doors she turned and said to the darkness, "You're not my responsibility." The man sat silent.

Wendy drove the five miles home meditatively and the mood didn't leave her as she trudged into the kitchen, ate her dinner, and went straight to bed. She conjured the tramp as fully as she could. Look at what I have, she thought, and what he doesn't. Through the scrim of her good intentions she visualized the filthy man as he wandered the streets until only remorse passed through the sieve of her confusion.

And yet -- Something about the man interfered; something in his ophidian eyes and waxed face almost sapped the arch of her compassion. He never said thank you for the help, never smiled, acted as if her kind hand had never brushed across his life. Each time she thought about him shifting along on the seas of his poverty, this other image would also appear, like the demons on old world maps. As sleep crept up on her she found herself struggling against the possibility that she was carrying to term a revelation about the world she didn't want to have.

She awoke the next morning shellacked in dreams. As the days drew nearer to Christmas she could not suppress a rising resentment in her which she tried to counter-punch with her charity. With a horror she didn't expect ever in her life to feel she found a hard knot of anger tied around her benevolence, choking it off and twisting it into hatred. As much as she wanted to quash that sensation, to cleave that knot and disown it, she found it nourishing her actions more and more as the man stood there, obdurate and assuming, a beam of wood in her eye.

It is the eve of Christmas. The store is open until midnight and Wendy has volunteered for the overtime and to stay until closing. At eleven forty-five the man appears, niched behind the pile of her goods. Mr. Bennett has gone out to lock up the cash and the assistant manager is on the floor putting up stock. Instead of giving him the food as she usually does, she plants herself in front of him and asks him where he comes from. He doesn't answer, as he hasn't answered the question before, just roosts on his haunches and stares at the ground.

She asks him again. No answer.

She asks again, her posture signaling that she will not move until something happens. No answer.

"What are you doing here?" she shoots at him. No word. "What made you a bum?" The glaze and empty. "What makes you think you deserve the food I give you?" The knees draw up tighter. "Don't you have anybody else to take care of you?" He stands, his clothes unhinging, and makes a motion to leave. To her dismay, as she watches herself from some far distance, she grabs his lapels and shoves him back. His legs buckle and suddenly he is on his knees and for an instant that shoots white-hot bile into her throat, he looks her full in the face

with his glittering ebony eyes. She sees in them an endless blackness that can swallow her up. With horror, she realizes she is seeing nothing but her own self.

But she cannot tamp down the rising anger in her own body. With as much futility as rage she again grabs the man by the lapels and throws him to the floor. She screams how she risked her job to help him, that deserves something. And again, from that far distance, she sees the stupidity and craziness of what she's doing, and blinded by tears of confusion and shame she lets him go.

She backs off against the wall and the man, seeing himself free, does not scurry to his feet. Instead, he unfurls, takes time to clean off what rags he has on, turns, and walks out. Wendy rushes to the open door, his form already dim against the queasy blue light of the parking lot, and aches to cry out that she's sorry, that she deserves another chance, but nothing comes. As she watches him grow smaller and smaller it's as if she is walking across some threshold. As if to seal that feeling, the man, bathed in the streetlight, turns and stares at her, then disappears.

Christmas arrived for Wendy like a tired knight on a jaded horse, too late and too fickle. The food, the gifts, the unfurled love in the house, only thickened the ashes in her mouth. Somewhere, she thought, he's alone. She felt an abyss in her, compounded of black anger and deeps of confusion. She always believed she knew right from wrong, and instead there was now a battered list where doubt and contradiction jousted to a draw. When she conjured his face her body seemed to open and dissolve and the emptiness flowed through her like fire. Scorched, humble, she threaded like a ghost through the festivities, unsecured and vaporous, transmuted and strange. Somewhere he's alone.

The big story in the local newspaper two days later concerned a body found under the ice of the river.

IN 1950, WHEN I WAS TWELVE

(Concerning the man with white hair)

In 1950, at the age of twelve, I was in turmoil over my existence. Minor turmoil, to be sure, unshared by my playmates, parents, teachers, and minister. Nonetheless, my small chest bubbled with that vinegary anxiety that attacks us at what we like to think are crucial, fertile moments. I wanted to know why I was a twelve-year old lad in Tremainsville, New York, and not some rich baron's son scouring the alpine slopes, as I'd seen in some month's National Geographic. The picture, as I remember it, of that brash-nostrilled young aristocrat easing through the luscious sunlight of a clockwork Swiss afternoon caused me no end of delicious jealousy. I began to ponder the unfairness of life and the tyranny of chance. I went so far in self-flagellation as to stay home on a Saturday afternoon, while my friends swam at the creek and drank soda, to wash the car and mow the lawn. I think I was mostly bored then, but at the time I suckled doubt and insouciance for all the spiteful milk it could give me.

The Korean War had just begun, Alger Hiss had been convicted, and my friends and I were ready to play Kill the Communist until the hostilities were over, we were sure, in July. July came and the war still refused to end at our whim. Our games palled and we found ourselves nailed to a dull and common summer. My questions went unanswered, and I spent inordinate amounts of metaphysical time kicking cans along gutters and reading Zane Grey novels (his fifty-first, The Maverick Queen, his best), waiting, waiting, waiting for some deus to descend and lift this orthodox summer off my shoulders.

My parents were no help. In 1950 I secretly loved my parents but publicly sponsored the belief, along with my friends, that we had somehow sprung unaided from the head of the world. For a time I even made myself believe I had been adopted, that my real parents were gypsies or circus bums or railroad riders (the list varied depending on the depth of my angst). Patiently I waited for my real parents to slip over the horizon, make themselves known to me, and whisk me off on the adventures I knew they were having. In the meantime I did the duties of a son to these ersatz parents, they marvelously ignorant of the fate that awaited them. Of course I would be sad when I left, but such were (as I thought them) the fortunes of life.

My father was a salesman, but a seller of books, not refrigerators or cars or toasters, a difference that, for some reason, I was proud of. He worked for Prentice-Hall selling services: books on taxes and new laws and other arcane

information of use to businessmen and lawyers and, as I believed, underworld crime figures. His office was a lagoon where, for short respites, I could tie up the traumas of my life. Ensconced in his huge bird's-eye maple rocking chair with its two flattened cushions, for the rump and back, I would sit for hours and read. Situated as it was on the second floor, his office missed the usual street chatter and possessed that miraculous quiet we often ache to find the rest of our lives. When he was in there working, bringing his books up to date or doing whatever mysterious rituals he had to do, I would sometimes sit but not read, so filled with an exquisite feeling of love and affection that I could barely breathe for the happy thrumming of my heart. There we would sit, unconversant yet inextricably linked, and I watched his hunched shoulders like a priest reading an animal's guts for a sight of the future.

My mother, for her part, made good the alchemist's promise to turn lead into gold. She was not a beautiful woman no matter how much that word was stretched. Her eyes were a pitilessly dull brown -- her nostrils were wide, like chinks in some wall -- her mouth was as thin as the voices of the Sunday choir. She stood a squat five feet tall, which brought her a good foot below my father's head. She was shapeless but not fat, like a dress mannequin. Even time, with all its reagents, had not changed her monochromatic lines and less-than-captive figure. But she had the gift. From a half-acre tract of land behind the carriage house that in the spring resembled Heathcliff's blasted moor she coaxed, commanded, eked, and midwifed out of the ground a splay of creation unrivaled in the neighborhood. She had espaliered grapevines, both concord and niagara, along the fence that bordered our property. Blueberry bushes impounded one end of the garden. Raspberry canes huddled around the feet of two huge unpruned pear trees and they were hyphened by rhubarb beds.

But it was the garden that drew the prize. Out of the lead of wrinkled seeds and clumped soil came the gold of vegetables, from the evanescent lettuce to the wintering-over potato. Basil and thyme and lavender and a score of other herbs and spices were lavished between rows and in odd angles. And in the fall, when my father was away from home most often, she canned and froze her produce into ingots that she carefully and dutifully put in the storeroom downstairs. Whenever in the deepest vice of winter I needed color I would slip into the basement and gaze at the strata of food, and for a time my head would be filled with the smell of damp earth and the hiss of boiling water.

But, in the summer of 1950, I was still famished for action. Gypsy parents and communists had faded with the blistering and humid weather. The first heat wave of that summer brought hundred-degree temperatures and my parents and I retreated to the theater to watch Treasure Island in air-conditioned escape. But by mid-July it was no show. So filled was I with boredom and confusion that I could hardly unreel myself from bed in the morning and, like an English prince, divulge my itinerary for the day. I even went as far as to wish that school would start.

One day, in the rummages of that season, a moving van pulled up to the Parkinson house, an abandoned Victorian mansion just a block down from where we lived. The men, natty in their khaki uniforms and red curlicue name patches, briskly moved the cargo off the truck and into the house. Naturally we gathered to watch. No one had told us anything about anyone moving in. Like some ragged receiving line we waited patiently to see who had taken on the folly of resuscitating this grand but determinedly decaying old beldam of a house.

No owner showed his face to us, but that didn't matter. The moving men entertained us with the most marvelous collection of esoteric junk we had ever seen. Out of that van came oddments and furniture and clothing unlike any we had ever seen. Long silk robes and dresses, etched with delicate filigrees, followed gaudy red lampshades that jingled with white tassels. Small round tables, intricately carved and inlaid with ivory, dogged the heels of massive leather furniture, so massive that the moving men sprouted dark spines of sweat down the backs of their shirts. Several trunks emerged from that Aladdin truck. The trunks were not the usual flat kind, with their cheap lacquered look and skinny locks. These trunks were huge, with arched tops and strong wooden ribs and padlocks the size of my fists. We ached to know what was in them, especially the one with the painting of a dragon on it. A tongue of flame leapt from its mouth across a stark white landscape, barely constrained by the perimeter of the edges, and it had that Chinese look we'd learned about in social studies.

For hours we watched boxes moved by marked books or spices or records. We saw hutches and china closets of dark gleaming wood, flocks of chairs, paintings of everything from beautiful landscapes to what looked like a woman with her two eyes on one side of her head, a brass bedstead, an old victrola with the oversize horn, a loveseat curled into a red velvet S, a piano. We were delighted, parched ground redeemed by a gentle and limitless rain. When

the moving van finally pulled away and the house again took on its superficial gloom, we knew better -- we knew the house was bursting with seeds like a pomegranate. For the first time in a long while the house did not scare us, and we passed it deliberately that night on the way home from our revels, delighted by the secret knowledge we had.

Of course it didn't remain secret for long. By dinner I had lathered my parents with the news, and they acceded to my position of authority with what I thought then to be admirable grace. They smiled, wondered out loud who had taken the house, and then slipped into the stream of their adult conversation. I could not let it go so quickly. To me it was salvation, manna, liniment. I remember lying in bed that night so vividly, the heat finally tapering off to a mild bake, the sweat trickling down my chest. I reviewed the parade of paraphernalia I had been privy to that afternoon. I lingered over each item, embellishing with my own invention where I couldn't quite remember accurately. In fact, so well did I embellish that by the time I drifted into a humid sleep I had translated our new resident into my gypsy father. A breeze came up through my window and cooled the patina of sweat, and I slept laved in a zephyr of dreams.

When we gathered the next morning we expected everything to have been a dream, but it wasn't. Workmen scrambled over the exterior of the house. Scaffolding had been erected and the picture reminded us of the building of cathedrals we'd seen in history books. Groups worked on the eaves and gutters while a small crew chipped out old brick along a snaky crack up the back of the house. Others were busy jacking up the front porch and resetting its aged spine. Men with axes and pruning shears barbered the lawn and bushes. In the next few weeks what had been a gap-toothed spinsterish wreck of a place became a coquettish Victorian beauty, the brick blushing from a good cleaning, the new granite lintels arched like sculpted eyebrows. As much as it could in a steamy July sliding into August, the mystery of the mansion took the village and shook it upside down. Out came all the small change of little boys' conjectures and adults' more considered yet no more accurate conclusions. To everyone, but especially to this cadre of excitement-starved boys, this mystery stirred us more than the ripples of the Hiss case, the slaughter of Korea.

Then it seemed to die, to go into relapse. One night, in early August, unable to sleep, I crept to my window and kneeled at it, my chin resting lightly on the sill. The Parkinson house was to my right, down the street. Suddenly, as if the dark sky was wringing it out of the stars, I heard music, the jangle of a honky-tonk

piano. The only person who ever played music on our street was Mrs. Lavolier, and she had never played anything written after Chopin. My mouth tingled as if it had bitten into a lemon. Nothing else was stirring that night. And there, like that hard star pointing north, was this music slithering through the trees up to my window. I interpreted it as an invitation and for a moment all those notions I had had about my gypsy parents flooded back into me. And then it stopped. I slipped back into bed and slept.

I woke early. Normally I would have curled back into my sheets, but a stiff cool breeze rattled through my curtains and I was struck by how quiet everything was. I popped out of bed and into my clothes and, carrying my sneakers in my hand, snuck past my parents' room and out the front door, with a side trip to the kitchen for an orange. Once on the porch I slapped my feet into my sneakers and walked down the street, snapping the shards of peel into the gutter. I let the fruit, cold from the refrigerator, rail against my teeth, and I especially delighted in the succulent thickness of the juice. By the time I finished the orange I was in front of the mansion, my mouth pleasantly tingling as it had the night before.

Someone was sitting on the porch.

As I look back on it now I realize that I could have been more collected in my reaction. (After all, my parents, natural or not, had taught me the catechism of social graces.) But for being twelve I think I handled myself with admirable restraint. I simply stared. For his part the man failed to notice me. Bathed in the sunlight, the man, resplendent in a white morning suit, sat in a white wicker rocker drinking from a white porcelain cup, perfectly at ease with the fact that he had just, unannounced, dropped like a dart into the balloon of our lives. I turned on my heel. The vision of all that whiteness vaulted me through the kitchen door, careened me off the kitchen table, and down into the basement, where I lassoed my bike and, like Apollo, set out to lighten the lives of my friends with my chariot of knowledge.

By the time most fathers were off to work and the mothers had set out to do whatever it was they did, we had rendezvoused to plan our assault against the mansion. That consisted mostly of riding our bikes like hellions up and down the street in front of his house in the vague hope that he would come out and reprimand us. Our first assault melted with the rising temperature. As soon as the heat posted a few more degrees some began to voice the opinion that I was making up what I'd told them and that they'd be better off sucking down

cokes at Greg's and laying chin-deep in creek water. Even though I bridled at the insult, I half-wondered if my morning vision was concocted out of stray glints off the mica-filled asphalt. I suggested we try one more foray up and down the street. This got mixed reviews and in that twelve-year old tone of voice that always promises more than it can deliver we escalated insults until our voices rattled the thick air. Then someone said, "What's that?"

A voice trilled across the road. "Boys," it said, "would you like some lemonade?"

It might as well have asked us if we wanted to be thirteen.

Leaving our bikes loosely corralled, we shuffled across the street and onto the porch. What we had been so desperately fighting for came the moment we had given up the fight. We waited nervously while footsteps resolutely walked to the front door. The door opened.

I have seen very few truly beautiful women in my life. The woman standing in the shadow of that doorframe was one of them. There was no screen door to dampen her beauty, so we got it full force. There is not much that will bring a twelve-year old to a screeching halt, but she received our sheepish looks with a grace that made us straighten our backs and ache for the lemonade she had to offer.

We walked down the long dark hallway to the kitchen, whispering like peasants in the palace. In the kitchen, with its polished maple floors and high tin-plated ceiling, we saw on the table a brood of glasses filled with lemonade. With a simple gesture she pointed them to us, and, as an added notch on the ratchet of our emotions, she unlidded the plenty of a cookie jar. So there we stood, caught between our self-consciousness and the inestimable pleasure of peanut-butter cookies and lemonade.

"So, is that all you do every day, ride up and down the street bothering people?" The way she said this did not sound insulting or shrewish.

"No," I said, more or less the spokesboy for the group. I was stuck after that. To save face, I stuffed in another cookie.

She smiled down at my embarrassment and for a moment I had the crazy sensation of her fingertips riffling through my hair. I sputtered, "There isn't much to do around here in summer 'cept swim and maybe go to the movies." I looked at my friends for confirmation, not liking to be on the limb all by myself. A few nodded their heads; that was good enough. "So, you know" (that "you know"

made me wince because my parents had tried to beat it out of me and I felt foolish letting it out) "you know" (again!) "we sorta -- sort of -- just ride our bikes around and see what we can find to do. We usually end up swimming anyways." And then I added, with what I thought was marvelous courage, "That's what we we're going to do if you hadn't of called us in for these cookies." For another crazy second I thought she was my gypsy mother.

Overhead we heard footsteps. She looked up, smiled, and said to us, "Let me get him for you. He'll be delighted to meet you all." She left the kitchen. The moment she did we all looked at each other as if we were strangers waiting for the same train. The sensation did not last for long. The kitchen was invaded by a tall but stout man wearing a lavender smock over jeans and pock-marked workboots. Sure enough, he was the man I had seen sitting in the wicker throne at the edge of the morning's light. He was at least a foot taller than the woman, and his hair, white without a trace of yellow in it, fell in soft but ragged drifts over his ears and collar, a pleasant contrast to the stubble that adorned the heads of my father and his friends. "My, my," he said, "the elves are here" and sat down.

At that time we had no idea what he meant, but he seemed pleased with the allusion and we were pleased to eat all the cookies he could offer. The woman came into the kitchen from the pantry with another beaded pitcher and a separate glass for the man. He gulped his drink down with obvious pleasure, occasionally stirring the sediment with a cobra-headed swizzle stick, something we stared at in impolite fascination. When he was done he thumped the glass on the table, slapped his thighs, and smiled.

Just as I was about to say thank you he stood up and said to us, "C'mon." We followed him down the dim corridor and up the spiral staircase with its rail of braided wood. At the second floor landing he took a left; we goslings took a left. At the end of the hall he went through a door and with a momentary hesitation we trooped in behind him, mystified and entranced by possibility. This day had become glorious even if we saw nothing else but a cobra-headed swizzle stick.

The room was an office by the looks of it. He invited us to sit down. The only chair, besides the one at the desk, was one of the leather chairs we had seen the day the movers came. He sat in that. So we all flomped to the floor. It strikes me now that at the time we must have indeed looked like elves gathered around an elder, waiting.

"So," he asked us in a voice that would have gone well with campfires, "for what reason would you want to see me?" At that moment everyone looked at

me, including him, and through a dry throat I stammered out what I had told the lady downstairs. "It was all an innocent game, huh?" He nodded his head and fixed his eyes on me. "Nothing to do?" He swept his eyes across us. "And I thought you all looked so intelligent." He must have known he pricked our pride. "Be here tomorrow morning at dawn. We'll find something to do." That was our dismissal. He got up. From the great height of his purple smock, which we now saw was splattered with gaudy streaks of paint, he looked down on us and smiled. "I have work to do. Go eat cookies." With that, and a few well-placed strides, he was out of the room.

That next morning we arrived at dawn in front of his house, sleepy-eyed, woolly-headed, grousing like soldiers. Out he came in his workboots and jeans, this time with a blue workshirt on. "C'mon" was all he said, and we grumpily fell into line. He set a gluttonous pace, his long legs gobbling up road while our short ones nibbled furiously behind him. When he saw some of us begin to lag behind he turned around and came back to us. "Okay, your strength has picked your classroom for today. The stronger you get, the better our places of study."

He struck off across a field, hopped a wire fence, and headed for a clump of trees about a football field away. We filed after him. When he reached the trees he stopped. "Now, be specifically quiet because I'm going to show you something." A few more feet into the trees' shade he stopped again and told us to sit down. We were only too glad. "Once you've got your breathing under control I want you to be so quiet that you can hear everything around you. Just sit still and listen with everything."

We sat there, at first a little embarrassed to be sitting out in the middle of the woods doing nothing, and we joked and punched each other, but eventually we quieted down. Then we listened. I remember the happy surprise I felt at hearing so much: delivery trucks belching downtown, the wind soughing in the upper branches, my own breathing. But pretty soon we got antsy. He must have sensed that for, without a word to us, he rose and started off, deeper into the woods. In an instant we were off behind him, amazingly refreshed.

He took a slower pace this time and we ambled. At a copse of trees he halted, sat on a stump, and with that congressional smile of his, said, "Well, what do you want to know?"

Each of our trips, no matter how far and wide and long, always followed this pattern of rest, listening, a walking search, and a story about his life. We excavated old house ruins, found turtle eggs, watched the birth of rabbits, saw

a blacksmith work, measured the depth of the lake and the height of the hills around it, created ice cream, visited the old people in the rest home, threw pots, catalogued fossils. It never occurred to us that the stories he told us about Malay and the Middle East and Africa and Greenland might be lies, and even if it had, I suspect it wouldn't have mattered. For my own part all the squelchy doubts I had about my existence dissipated under the accruing knowledge that piled high inside me, like layers of shale. What had been drought and apathy was now an arbor of rioting growth. The grapes of my boredom had borne a good wine.

On the day before school started he invited us to the house. The woman, beautiful as always, greeted us, lemonade and cookies sprouting under her hands. When he had had our fill he had us follow him upstairs. He went past his office and through a small door. We scuttled after him and found ourselves in an airy and luminous attic. His broad back wove around the scumble of old boards and boxes and came to a trunk, the trunk we had all marveled at the day the movers arrived. From this close we could see the chipped paint and barked wood but it still fascinated us like an unopened present. He pointed and said, "For a long time I've been carting this hunk around. Why? Because it contains the secret of life." He pointed at me. "Do you know what the secret of life is?" I shrugged casually, but his question burned hotter through me than he could ever know. All of us shook our heads no. He smiled, his eyes curiously distant, and patted the box as if it were a trusted pet. "Well, when you're ready for it, here it is." At that he laughed and swept us before him with the huge wings of his arms, like a mother does her brood. The next day we plunged dutifully into the first circle of school.

Throughout the year we became, at various times, thirteen, and with this added burden our contact fell away. There were girls and sports and any number of forbidden vices to investigate and we became so busy with being busy that the incandescence of the summer quickly failed. For my part I tried to keep some line open, and infrequently, more out of guilt than real desire, I found myself sitting in the kitchen with the beautiful woman and the man, trying with all the thirteen-year old guile I could muster to seem opinionated and knowing and confident.

As time passed the going came easier. Sometimes he was not there and the woman and I would sit in the darkened front room and listen to classical music, never speaking a word except for the greeting and goodbye. As I got older, as

the mundane nature of life corraded my soul, I kept them like a banked ember in me, a place where I could go and feast my senses on spices and paintings and good food and to whom I could pour out all that was inchoate in me. They listened, they seldom advised, they gave me music and quiet and haven. Their house grew fine around them. The new brick flushed into the honed red of the older brick, grapevines thickened and swelled into hairy veins that coursed with fruit every spring, the trees grew taller, lopped off more of the sun, and those years of my adolescence that sent me wandering rooted the man and the woman more securely to the earth.

College came and we were forced into letters. I sent long turgid epistles of doubt and victory. They answered them, sometimes she with gentle commiseration, sometimes he with unflattering directness. As I wrestled with the new beast of my intellect, they sent me gracious balm. Each letter ambushed me with a flood of memory that racked me happily until I again floated out of my reclusive world.

And one day, as these things happen, I received news of his death. Not until much later, almost a month, when the holidays had come, did I finally make the pilgrimage back to house a block down from my own. She answered the door. I was lost for words, lost in words I couldn't say. But she, confident as ever, took my hand and led me upstairs, past his office with the chair, to the attic, where, in a pool of grey light sifted from the skylight, the trunk with the Chinese dragon sat. She offered me a key. "This is for you since you took the most pains to keep on looking."

The secret of life. He had said it was in there, though for years I'd forgotten it. I quickly knelt and slipped in the key. The lid lifted easily, rattling with the shaking of my excited hand. When I saw what was in there I looked up for her in confusion, but she had descended, and I knelt in the upper reaches of that house fulgent in pearl light, my hands shaking, my eyes dry and knotted, riven by nothing more powerful than a gentle voice saying, "Listen."

ACELDAMA

(Concerning Private John Willis)

TREMAINSVILLE, New York -- July 4th in small-town America, a tradition that thrives despite a "sophisticated" world that views such things as "hokey" or "corny." None of the folks of Tremainsville think of themselves as "corny" as they line up on the street to watch sons and daughters and relatives march grandly through a brilliant blue-sky morning. There are the bands and the fire trucks and the Scout troops and Miss Davenport's dance class and the American Legion with their arms cocked in salute and the chicken barbecue at the Fairgrounds and, at night, the fireworks that will fill the sky with light and noise. It is July 4th in small-town America, a day of festivity and good cheer.

You know, the farthest I've ever gone was to New York City for the Model UN meeting (remember that resolution for world peace you helped me write?), and even then I didn't have the guts to go to the top of the Empire State Building. But look at me now, John Willis, Private, U.S. Army. I have to admit I was scared during the physical -- no, even before that, when I got the notice to show up. And the way they ran me through it, like Dad and you and me doing the hogs at butchering time. I figure now that's how they got my attention, by taking all the fight out of me. Then they filled me up with a whole different sort of fight. I'm not scared anymore, but I don't mind admitting that I was.

But look at me now! I'm on an Army transport out of the States to this Asian country I've only heard of in the news and I'm going to end up in Hawaii and the Philippines and then Vietnam. It's great! Some of the guys say that the only drawback is getting killed, but they don't know what they're talking about. I can shoot a gun, I have muscles I never knew I owned. I know how people are against this war (you've told me enough about it!), but I feel lucky to be here and do my part. It's a great adventure.

The parade twists along Main Street like some antic Chinese dragon. People hug the sidewalks and hang out windows in the century-old brick buildings that line the street. Maybe all parades are the same, but each one carries its own excitement. First come the firetrucks. Everyone is decked out in their gear. Eighteen-year old boys hang importantly off the ladders, trying not to smile too hard, proud to be volunteers. Then comes the American Legion with every

shopkeeper and insurance salesman turned out in military form despite their larger stomachs and aching arches. The band clutters the air with brass and percussion. Then there are the majorettes and the police force (all four of them) and the July 4th queen sitting on a plywood throne decked with crepe rosettes and hauled by a battered Ford pick-up. All of this and more winds through a crowd that smiles and cheers and waves while gaggles of children run and scream, busy in their own frantic world. When the parade reaches the huge parking lot at the edge of the village, it gathers its forces, turns around, and repeats its run, to the delight of the crowd.

Nothing takes a long time here. The first day we arrived we were on patrol. Sitting here now, when things are quiet and safe and I'm surrounded by people I know, I can honestly say I have never been so scared in my life. It wasn't a game this time, no drill sergeants chewing me out, no soap fights in the shower. I couldn't see anything! The damn jungle was so thick, and walking through it was like walking through the barn attic full of spider webs. Our commander kept telling us to keep our eyes open, but there was nothing to see. I'd hear something move, and I never knew if it was wind or a VC getting ready to ace me. Then suddenly, real suddenly, something wrenched inside me and I knew I was being watched and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it except keep one foot in front of the other and make my eyes ache looking for things I couldn't see. I just walked, trying to keep out of my mind that someone somewhere may be right now pointing a gun at my head and there was no way in hell I could ever know. I was hooked to that man just like I was hooked to our mother. I've never felt so helpless. I got numb, sour bile in my mouth. I wanted to scream and wave my arms and yell to him to either shoot me or run away, anything but make me wait. Nothing happened. We returned to base and I sucked down the coldest, best-tasting beer I've ever had. I felt every goddam drop of it. But even after that the bile was still there, and I don't think I'll ever get rid of it. Tom, I've never been so scared.

Every small town on the 4th has its afternoon entertainments. First, the barbecue. A line of people snakes backward while sweating Rotary wives sear ranks of legs and thighs. Juices sizzle and the air is filled with the sharp tang of food and charcoal. Then, after the chicken is downed and the paper plates are picked up and stuffed away, there are auctions and flea markets, horse racing,

with even a demolition derby on the infield of the track. At the log-cutting contest men with forearms as thick as young oak trees take turns trying to beat each other at chopping or sawing a log in half. It is not spectacular entertainment. But it gives people a chance to make contact and that is its real purpose. A small town lives or dies on the closeness of its neighbors, and the parade and the barbecue and the auction all allow them to make the essential contact that gives their lives happiness and meaning.

I knew it would happen. It's a war. But it's funny how easily I can put that out of my mind sometimes. We were told to get out to Fire Base Carolyn. Carolyn is stuck on top of a small hill, like a hat on a skull, a couple of hours from base. Easy Carolyn, everyone called her, since her virtue was that nothing much happened there. We even dozed in the afternoon in the middle of the flies and the trenches and the sound of the camp beggars who followed us. Then at dusk it started. We heard movement. Instantly we were in the bunkers, guns ready. My tongue was so thick I couldn't swallow. Our commander was whispering map co-ordinates to all available artillery in the area. I couldn't see anything, but I imagined I could hear the guys sweat and even worms dig in the dirt. Again, I felt the eyes hooked into me.

Then we heard the VC mortar crews drop their first rounds into their tubes and all hell broke out. The air filled with muzzle flashes and the mortar rounds kicked up dirt and blood and bone. In the light of the explosions and tracer bullets I could see bodies chucked like loose change around the perimeter. All the machinery inside me started squeezing off rounds as fast as I could. I didn't look, I just fired. When I couldn't hit live bodies, I fired into dead ones, just to release the screaming pressure behind my eyes and in my throat.

The artillery started dropping, 105 and 155 howitzers and cannon shot. (I could imagine the guys back at base, laughing about what a barrel shoot this was.) In the silver light of the illumination rounds I could see my hand shove in magazine after magazine and I never stopped and just pulled and fought the need to scream, to stand up in the middle of the hell and scream until my lungs bled. Screams were all around me, screaming from men ripped open, screaming that melted my bones, the scream of bullets and shells and grenades and mortars and men, men, men. And then, as quickly as it started, it stopped. They had pulled away, and the silence of the night was like an animal with the shape of our blistered mouths and fragged hearts. We counted our dead the

best we could, Tom -- it was so dark. I cowered in the dirt until the Hueys came. I wasn't dead. I didn't know why.

The one exception to all the July 4th frivolity was a group of high school students sporting black armbands and carrying placards saying "U.S. Out of Vietnam." They marched into the Fairgrounds, set up a small microphone, and began to read a speech. They of course got a crowd, and as they got further into their speech they got jeers, catcalls, raised fists, some smiles. They didn't stay for long and when they left the celebration went on as if they'd never been there.

Tom, I've learned a lot since I've been here, but it's a lot I don't care to know. This whole thing is crazy, but everyone acts as if that's normal, so it gets harder and harder for me to separate out what I'm really feeling from what I need to feel to stay sane here. Nothing is simple. I hate what I'm doing, but I go on patrol to protect my buddies. I don't like thinking I've killed someone, but I don't want to die, so I kill. Guys around here are hooked on drugs and alcohol, company commanders are fanatic about body counts, the South Vietnamese are stuffing away money as fast as they can empty it out of other people's pockets, people are getting kicked off their land. I can't stand to see the children. Everyone's letters tell me to keep up the good work I'm doing, but I know it's not good work. But what can I say? How can I make them understand when I don't understand? Just once I'd like to figure out the truth. Maybe everything would be bearable if I know I was going to stay alive and have a chance at the truth. But I don't know. It's hard work staying alive and I think that even if I do stay alive pieces of me will never be alive again. There are eyes on me all the time.

It is perhaps the special ceremony before the fireworks, to honor those who have died to make July 4th possible that epitomizes Independence Day in small-town America. The head of the American Legion post stands on the field; in back of him are the fire crews and the hired pyrotechnician. The commander speaks in praise of the men who have died, calling on those still alive to remember their sacrifice. Then he adds that one more name must go on the list, that of Private John Willis, the brother of the police chief, recently killed in action, the only boy from the town so far who has died. He asks for silence. Then with a smile he calls for the fireworks to begin and the first booming explosion brings out a brilliant swirl of red, white, and blue.

TO SHIP THE DEAD LIGHTS

(Concerning Chief Tom Willis)

Tom Willis, sitting in his cruiser, watched the dog in the yard across the street run to the end of its chain until it was jerked on its back -- seventeen times, Tom counted. Thick saliva edged the dog's jowls; Tom imagined, though the distance was too great to see, that the eyes were turned white v with craziness. The radio sputtered around him. It was near dusk, though late, around nine-thirty -- time for him to start his rounds. Just as he reached for the ignition the dog squatted on its haunches, lifted its head, and stared at Tom. For a moment both of them fastened eyes; for that moment Tom lost hold of the familiar background babble from the radio. Then the dog glanced away, tilted back its head, and loosed a long wailing howl. Tom turned away and started the motor quickly, grateful for the prosaic sound of the growling engine. He slipped into gear, called to the dispatcher that he was off to make his rounds, and eased the car into the main street of Tremainsville.

He watched people come out into the cool evening. The old men, playing backgammon, congregated on the small triangle of grass where the highway split off from the old main street. The juveniles clung to the bank wall, their careless hands holding cigarettes; he checked to see if there were any brown bags among them. Farmers dressed in pastel short-sleeve shirts and suit pants sat with their wives, decked out in floral summer dresses, in the air-conditioned front window of the Glen Hollow, pale glasses of beer collaged with the remains of a steak dinner. He pulled his car to a stop at Greg's Deli, across from the Embassy, like a stagecoach driver whoaing his horses. The small man was giving another one of his readings. Tom rested his arms on the sill of his door and propped his chin on his arms, his eyes counting the house.

People, sitting on the sidewalk, curled around the small man; others stood. To get around them a person had to walk into the street. Several people had already complained to him that he should do something, and he listened to them politely, as he was paid to do, but the hippies had never given him any trouble, or anybody any trouble for that matter, so he logged the complaints but let the hippies abide where they were comfortable. Some people in the town told him that it was his business to bleach out every stain, but that was not true, unless he aimed to fill his jail every night, which he could easily do, including sometimes their sons and daughters and relatives, which most people did not care to hear about. He just had to keep the peace. The small man was keeping

the peace. The people who wanted to erase the hippies were not keeping the peace, though they might be keeping the law. The radio crackled behind him.

The poetry meeting broke up. Some of the sodium lights snapped on. The farmers, walking full-bellied next to their full-bellied wives, got in their pickups and took off for home. The old men snapped their backgammon gamecase shut and shuffled off to take the place of the farmers at the Glen Hollow bar. Tom keyed the engine to life and turned delicately away from the curb. He raised his fingers off the steering wheel in greeting to several people, automatically checked the speed of each car on the radar as it ran through town.

He turned up Washington Street and glided past MacNelly and Seneca and Strowbridge, casting a tight gaze into the deepening shadows of the lawns, secretly pleased by the supple squares of yellow light falling from lighted windows. He turned onto Townline Road, away from the family houses and out into the country. The weakening sunlight glowed like foxfire off the dark line of trees. He turned into the parking lot of Joe's Fuel Company, made sure no one was hiding behind the concrete supports for the tanks, where he had found someone just last week after they had tripped the alarm trying to steal the receipts. He took his long flashlight and poked around the coal bins, licking the long tongue of light over the dark mounds. Some rats scuttled away; a barn swallow nest stirred. He walked back to his car, the crunch of gravel underfoot mixing with the faraway trill of peepers and the light growl of the engine. He finished this part of the circuit with a tour around the Agway grounds, then headed out to the Redwood, a restaurant that marked the edge of the village where the speed change downshifted from fifty-five to thirty-five.

He parked his car in the lot and walked inside for a cup of coffee, which he took with two sugars and no milk. He shot a few words back and forth with Sam Tate, the owner, paid for his coffee, though Sam said, every night that Tom stopped in, that he really didn't have to, and slipped carefully back into the car. One-handed, gingerly sipping the hot coffee, he eased the car behind some bushes which allowed him to see the road but not the road to see him. He shut off the motor; the red lights of the digital readout on the radar mirrored in his eyes.

Everyone abided by the law that night. Around eleven o'clock, the caffeine long ago absorbed into his eyelids, just as he prepared to complete his tour, a car came bombing through at forty-five. For only a moment did he hesitate,

more from fatigue than anything else, then flipped on the overhead light, the headlights, and the car engine. The other car, seeing the glowing apparition in its rear-view mirror, meekly braked to a halt. Tom slid in behind it, got out of the car, and as he walked over to meet the driver, who had gotten out of the car, loosened the gun in his holster. "License and registration," he said. While the driver, flustered, searched for the paper, Tom peeked through the rear window and saw a young girl in the passenger side, her hair speckled by the white and red revolving lights. He didn't recognize her profile as she turned angrily to the young man and thrust the needed papers into his hand. The young man sheepishly handed the registration card to Tom, then fished in his back pocket for the license. Tom waited patiently, his eyes occasionally flicking at the girl in the car. The driver seemed flustered all out of proportion; Tom figured he was more afraid of her bad opinion than the traffic fine. Probably trying to impress her, he thought, bringing her up to the Embassy to show her what a strange place it was, how he knew all the places to go. Or maybe it wasn't like that at all. He didn't care. He took the license, which the man finally found, checked it over the radio, got a negative, and cursed softly as he filled out the tedious summons. Occasionally he glanced at the man, who fidgeted while he waited. Like he had hot coals in his pockets. Hot rocks, he thought, a little smile escaping across his face. Finally, he was done.

He anxiously took the piece of paper from Tom. When Tom bent down to look at the girl, she fixed a cold stare on him that, coming from such a young and pretty face, snapped him across the jaw like a good right hook. He still puzzled over the sensation as he got into the car. He glanced at the radar. It said twenty-five. He pulled onto the main street and slowly, professionally, drove the mile back to the station.

When he had stashed his car in the garage, filled out his report, and changed his clothes in the humid locker room, when he had torn down the hundredth pin-up from Penthouse that he had told Mithousen not to put up on his locker, he nodded good-night to the dispatcher, and drove the two miles to his house. He lived in a small house on an acre of land bordered by two large farms so that he was surrounded by black open space. The shot-gun sound of his car door slamming bounced off the stars and over the whispering corn, and he stood there for a moment absorbed in the silence. He could barely see the house, a fist of darker black surrounded by large swaying shadows of maples.

He fumbled with his keyring, knowing exactly where the housekey was by feel, and entered the house. It was musty with the trapped hot air of the day and he went around slamming up windows. He wasn't hungry but, as he took off his jacket, he opened the refrigerator door to see what was available, though he knew exactly what was there, having done the same thing for breakfast, and made a mental note, again, to get out and do a decent shopping. He closed the door, reached overhead to pull the string for the kitchen light. The dishes in the sink, the unwrapped bread on the counter, the crumbs and half-opened cabinet door, leaped up to greet him like a dog on a chain. He filled one of the sinks with hot water, slopped some soap into it, swiped at the dishes, cleaned the crumbs off, threw the bread away, closed the cabinet. It was one-thirty by the time he finished.

He reached into the refrigerator for a beer, turned the kitchen light off, and, in almost the same gesture, turned the living room lamp on. The wet snap of the beer can sounded dully on the early-morning quiet. He shoved two books off the easy chair, promising himself to read that article on counseling in Police Magazine, lowered himself slowly into the chair, and sipped his beer, listening to a cricket somewhere outside his window. Before he was half done with the beer he was asleep; the wilted yellow light from the lamp dropped carelessly over the stubble on his cheek, the frayed cuff of his shirt, the mound of patient magazines at his feet, the threadfine carpet, the dark walls empty of pictures. He dreamed uneasily of the girl's face before he slipped off into the cool darkness of corn and stars.

"But Tom, you're the police chief! You have to do something about it!"

Tom looked over the rim of his coffee cup at Sam Tate, who not only owned the Redwood but also one of the two laundromats, and watched the man's belt buckle bounce as he talked. "What do you want me to do?" he asked the belt buckle.

"Clean them out of the area so that people can get into my laundromat!"

"Are they actually blocking the entrance?"

"Well, no, you know they're not. You told them not to."

"Have the proceeds gone down from the machines?" He switched his gaze to Sam's shirt pocket with the plastic penholder.

"No, no more than usual during summertime." Sam ran his fingers through his sparse hair in exasperation. "But dammit that ain't the point, and you know it!"

"Then what exactly is the point?" Tom brought his eyes to bear on Sam's, and Sam, still spouting, shifted his gaze away.

"The point is, Tom, you are paid to do what the people of this town -- "

"No, Sam." Tom put his empty cup on the desk. "I've said this before. I'm not anybody's mercenary. I protect everybody. Everybody."

"Yes, we all know what a fine upstanding man you are." Sam couldn't quite make the sarcasm cover the respect in his voice. "And my profits haven't sunk, and they're not denying access to my customers, but...but...well, dammit, they're dirty and don't use my laundromat!"

Tom's eyes rested for just a second on the look of frustration and small-boy peevishness on Sam's face before he let out a low diplomatic chuckle to cool Sam down. "I can't arrest a person for not using your laundromat, can I? They've done everything I've told them to do -- they've quieted down, they're not sitting on anyone's doorway, there's no prohibition against them sitting and listening to someone read poetry, no more than there's a ban on old men sitting on a bench playing backgammon. It keeps peace, Sam, that's all I'm interested in, just keeping the peace."

Sam grabbed his hat and jammed it on his head. "You're just a goddam hippy yourself, all that stuff about peace."

Tom laughed. "If I didn't know you better I'd take a swing at you. But then I'd have to arrest myself for assault and battery, lock myself in the jail, and let myself out at night so I could make my rounds. I wouldn't know if I was coming or going."

"You don't anyway." Sam stuck out his hand and Tom shook it firmly. "Just a goddam hippy, you know."

"I know. But if it keeps the peace -- " Tom shrugged.

Sam was halfway out the door when he shot back over his shoulder, "I'll bet you he sells drugs to get his money."

"Who?"

"The hippy. The one who reads poetry."

"I doubt it." "I don't. I bet he even washes his clothes by hand." Tom's smile bounced harmlessly off Sam's back. Reid, the dispatcher, gave Tom a thumbs-up as Sam let the screen door bang shut. "Quite a radical, isn't he? Wants everyone to wash their clothes." Tom filed Sam's last comment away.

That afternoon, Tom, dressed in gym shorts, sneakers, and a tee-shirt, followed a good hundred yards behind the poet as the poet wended his way through the woods just outside the village. The woods, even though they were right on the edge of the village, were fairly secluded, being ten acres given in trust to the village for recreation. Even part of the lake trail went through them. Tom cursed himself for doing this, especially since he was as quiet as a jackhammer, but Sam's last comment itched him. The poet, dressed in his usual array, bobbed along, either ignorant of Tom's presence or just plain ignoring it.

The air was stifling and a dark grey streak of sweat lined Tom's spine and halfmoons appeared under his arms. He was about to give up the chase when the poet reached a large clearing. Tom stopped, still fifty yards away. In the clearing the sunlight poured over everything; dust and moths played in its glare. The poet shook the canvas bag from his shoulder and untied his thick shock of hair, twisting his head to loosen it. Carefully he removed his clothes, folding each piece neatly on the ground, until he was completely naked. Then, to Tom, he did a very curious thing. He raised his arms to the sky and very slowly turned in a circle, his face pointed at the unremitting white light, and did this for what Tom estimated was five minutes. Then, without any other preliminary, the poet began a series of slow movements; they resembled karate to Tom but very slowed down, as if he were doing them underwater. He'd never seen anything like it before. He noticed that the movements repeated themselves, but each time the poet did that he faced a different direction. Finally, the poet, the sweat shimmering on him, put his clothes back on and marched off along the path that led to the creek, leaving Tom sitting there, completely free of the idea that he should arrest the man for public indecency. He sat there until the sun left the clearing in shade, then ran the two miles back to his house as fast as his legs could stand it, collapsing at least into the tub with the cold water running down the shower curtain he'd forgotten to put inside.

That night, on his rounds, Tom sat at Greg's Deli and watched the small man read to his audience. His eyes ran over the motley collage that stuck to the small man like a blind man feeling a horse's face. He thought back to his conversation with Sam Tate, the strange dog chase that came out of it, the lung-numbing run

from the woods back to his house hounded by something that he didn't like to admit was fear but was fear. Sam Tate rolled out of the Glen Hollow, saw Tom sitting in the car but ignored him, and made an exaggerated route around the crowd to get to his laundromat. Tom grinned, threw him a greeting, and started his car.

Tonight he went down Bradley Street, checking some of the small off-roads where the trailers were. Everything was quiet. The heavy summer air pulsed, sometimes with the wheezing of insects, sometimes with the thrum of the big tractor-trailers on the state highway. Tom plowed his furrows, leaving behind sillions of quiet calmness, his eyes harrowing the darkness for trouble, his hands sifting the road. He stopped for his usual cup of coffee, and Sam did not encourage him to take it for free. Even if you do what is right, he thought as he sat inside the net of his radar, no one gets what they want, and that's because everybody either wants too much of the wrong thing or too little of the right thing. And they don't know the difference, that was the problem. People only care about what they don't have. The coffee grated on his tongue, and he impatiently flipped it out the window. There was scarcely any traffic, only a few hay trucks shaking off dust in the light of the streetlamps. The monitor buzzed like a neon sign. Gradually the insects stopped, the stray dogs went to sleep, houselights snapped off. He was glad the night was lazy, but he still felt uncomfortable in the back of his mind. Images of the small man dropped into his boredom like stones into water and in each ripple he saw the face of the girl in the car and a dog howling.

At eleven thirty he was ready to call in. Before he could reach the transmitter, Reid's voice splashed all over the silence in the car. "Tom?" he called urgently. For a moment Tom listened to the voice, and he didn't like what he heard -- something bad had happened. Reid sounded scared. Tom flipped the switch on the microphone and answered.

"Tom, we got a call here." He heard Reid turn in his seat and the words "Please try to calm down. I'm talking to Tom right now." Then Reid's voice shifted back to him. "Tom, I've got Lois Dodge on the phone here, and I'm having trouble making out what she's saying."

"Tell me as best you can," Tom said, his voice turned businesslike.

There was a pause, a dead space. "Tom, she said someone's killed the twins."

Tom shot back, even before Reid's words were done, "Repeat that."

"Tom, she said someone'd broken into the house and killed the twins."

"Is anybody over there? Have you sent anyone?"

"I called you first."

"I'll be right there. Get the ambulance. And tell Joe and Dick to meet me. Keep her on the phone, talk about the weather, but don't let her be by herself. If this be true -- "

"Gotcha, Tom."

Tom eased the car onto the road, his hands precisely at ten and two o'clock on the wheel. Lois Dodge's house was five miles out of town; Tom stuck to the back roads so that he could speed without raising anyone's interest. In three minutes he was there. He checked his watch: 11:45.

All the lights in the house were on. The front door was open, the screen door shut. Tom eased out of the car, loosening the pistol in its holster. He surveyed the front lawn, then the garage, especially the small path between it and the house, but saw nothing out of sorts. At the first touch of his boot on the front walkway Lois Dodge appeared at the front door. Tom could only see her silhouette but the image of her frayed hair and claw hands on the screen ate itself into his memory. He hurried cautiously along the path, his boots chocking evenly on the gravel.

By the time he reached the front door Lois had disappeared. He opened the screen door and edged into the front hallway. Lois was nowhere. He called her name; no answer. He moved along the hallway, one hand on the right wall. She wasn't in the living room or dining room but she was in the kitchen, and when Tom saw her, he felt his face, usually under his say-so, wrinkle in fear. Lois sat at the kitchen table, her hair frazzled, her hands, thickly red, laying on the table like two dead doves. She had a housecoat on that was unbuttoned and she had nothing on underneath. Tom searched her eyes, tried to intercept them. They stared empty as glass at the two hands in front of her. He leaned Lois back in her chair and with gentle hands buttoned up her housecoat. "Lois, speak to me. Look at me."

She swiveled her head instead of her eyes, as if it were all one rusted piece, and stared at him, through him. "Lois, what happened? Where are the kids? Where's Chuck?" She stared at the brass button on his shirt pocket. "Lois, I'm

going to look around. Don't move from here. Do you understand me?" She pivoted her head back to her hands.

He knew where the kids' room was. He leaped up the stairs. Their room was at the top, on the right. The door was closed. He faced the door, his gun in his right hand and, with his left, he eased the door inward. There was no light in the room. He reached and snapped it on. For a second he stared, then slid the gun into its holster.

Two single beds held two single bodies. Blood was soaked into the sheets, the blankets, the carpet, even spattered the wall over their headboards. Tom edged in, his eyes ferreting details while he tried to keep his mind and the crime scene clear. He stepped down the aisle between the beds, not stepping in the blood. Both boys had had their throats slit from ear to ear and their heads, still nestled in their pillows, were cocked at an odd angle. Both boys had their pajama bottoms pulled down to their ankles and their testicles were neatly laid at the foot of each bed. For a moment time hung suspended like a sword over his head, and he was acutely aware of a lone dog somewhere baying at the sky; then the sword broke free and a narrow pain crawled from the back of his head down his spine into his feet. He felt pinned to the spot, unable to move. With a violent wrench he tore himself out of the room and back into the kitchen. Lois had not moved and her breathing came shallow and rasping.

Joe and Dick arrived just as the ambulance careened into the driveway. He told Joe to call Reid and have Reid get Chuck home. He quickly sketched the situation to everyone. He told the paramedics to get to Lois first -- she was in shock. He told Joe and Dick to see the scene for themselves, then fan around the house to see if they could find anything. He walked them all to the house, then marched out to this car and got his flashlight.

There was nothing tell-tale on the small pathway between the garage and the house. He looked up the side of the house to position where the boys' room was. He edged noiselessly into the backyard. He drew the beam of light along the house foundation but saw nothing. He glanced up at the bedroom window and noticed a drainpipe along the corner of the house that ran by the window. Next to it was a ladder. Obviously Chuck had been working on the pipe and had left the ladder up. He caught several sets of prints in the dirt at the foot of the ladder, but they might have been Chuck's. He slid the beam of light up the ladder until he saw what he was looking for -- a large splotch of color about halfway down on the right side. He moved over to the left side and saw several

more splotches, some as large as a hand. On the rungs were more stains, one about seven inches long where the climber must have slipped sideways. Tom peered at the lowest rung and the stain, a dull crimson, glistened up at him. He stabbed the flashlight along the ground and saw places where the grass had been mashed down, as if someone had tried to clean their shoes of mud. The indentations stopped at the back fence. Two bloody handprints stared back at him from the topmost fenceboard. At the front of the house he heard Joe and Dick conversing with the ambulance attendants, then their heavy boots along the gravel path across the front of the house.

Tom emptied his pockets of all his change and anything that might make a noise, slipped his handcuffs into his back pocket where they wouldn't clink, and slid over the fence into the next yard.

The next house over sat about a hundred feet from the Dodge house. The handprints had pointed at the house like an arrow and Tom, his shadow like a raven, ran bent-kneed to the back door. The house had been empty for years; the owner had never bothered to renovate. His shirt clung to him, and the palms of his hands were greasy with sweat. He knew the odds of the killer being in the house were almost non-existent. He also knew he was violating common sense and procedure by not telling Joe and Dick what he was up to. And he knew that if the killer were in there, there would be no middle ground. Only one person would walk away. He dried his hands raw on his pants, then reached up to unfasten the eyehook that held the back door closed. The eyehook was already unlatched. The door sighed inward against the nudge of his shoulder.

He was in the kitchen. On his hand and knees he crawled until he could touch the counter, then used the counter to help him stand up. Some light from the Dodge house spilled into the vacant window but only enough to lengthen shadows and distort the darkness. His eyes adjusted themselves to the dimness. There was no one else in the kitchen.

A long hallway led out of the kitchen into the living room. Here it was dark as tar and he ran his right hand along the wall praying he would not stumble into anything. Sweat slid down his back and sides, and he had trouble breathing quietly through his nose. At the end of the hallway, at the entrance to the living room, he stopped. Outside he could hear the ambulance pull away. The county coroner must have showed up by now. That meant that very shortly they would come looking for him and would remember seeing him go toward the backyard and they would find the same things he found and take the same route he took

and if the killer were in the house there might be one unholy mess. He pulled his gun from its holster, curling his right hand around its grip, and, with his left hand, set the flashlight on the floor. Then, taking a deep breath, he pushed the flashlight on and swung to his right out of the light's way. Nothing.

He checked the dining room and several closets but nothing leaped out at him. That left the upstairs. He paused on the bottom step, his toes gripping the edge of the stair nearest the wall. He raised his weight on his foot, felt the board give, but not a sound. The second stair gave downward but didn't groan. Lead seemed to collect around his ankles and each time he touched, gripped, lifted, he wanted to collapse. When he reached the top he leaned his forehead against the damp wallpaper, the husky smell of his own sweat and the house's mildew thick in his nostrils.

Against the thrumming of his heart and the muffled air in his mouth he heard a low moaning, like a dog's whimper, intersected with snarly chuckles, like someone laughing at a dirty joke. He perked his head up, cocking his ear in the direction he thought it came from. There were only three rooms on the top floor, two that faced the creek edge and were shaded by an old lumpy willow and one that faced the Dodge house. That one was just ahead, on his left. Straining to rock each step from the heel to the toe without a sound, he stalked the entrance to the room. The gun butt bit into his palm and the flashlight hung like an ancient weapon from his hand. The dim light thrown off by the Dodge house framed the doorway to the room. The moaning had gotten louder. When he reached the doorway, he edged across the hall to the opposite wall and sat so that he was facing the room.

He saw a thin profile against a jagged slice of broken glass in the window frame. The profile rocked back and forth, occasionally glancing at the Dodge house and laughing. Tom ran his tongue across his lips, put the flashlight on the floor, raised his gun to eye level with both hands, and spoke slowly in the deepest voice he could muster, "Don't you move one inch."

The profile ceased rocking and the air went deadly silent. Tom kept speaking, trying not to let the tightness of his throat choke him off. "I have a gun on you, I can see you clearly against the window. If you have a gun, put it down. Now." The head jerked to face him and in the dim backlight from the window Tom saw the figure's arm rise and point something at him and in the instantaneous light of his gun's explosion Tom saw the face of fourteen-year old Freddie Jimson dissolve into blood and the gun he had held on Tom fall uselessly to the floor.

Without pausing for a breath, the flashlight beam lancing, Tom stood over the crumpled body. He peered at the gun. It was plastic.

Before the crash of the shot had melted into the summer air, Joe and Dick were at the house, their guns drawn. They clambered up the stairs, skidding to a halt, like cartoon characters, outside the room. They didn't say a thing, just slumped against the door jamb. Tom wept.

The routine paperwork got done, the story eventually came out, or at least something close enough to satisfy people, and life eventually climbed back into its complacency. Some friends of the two Dodge boys told Tom they remembered Freddie and the two boys having a fight one day over some money that Freddie demanded they give to him. They refused to give him anything, and Freddie supposedly said that he'd get them back. No one paid it any mind -- Freddie always talked that way. He had to because he'd learned it at home from his old man who beat him like clockwork. There was no doubt Freddie had done it -- his hands had been covered in blood (it matched the boys' type), and he'd had the knife, a ten-inch shiv, tucked in his belt.

Tom resigned that fall, though he came back in December to do desk work. Reid spread the rumor that Tom kept Freddie's plastic gun in his locker, but Tom said nothing to confirm or deny it. He kept his own lock on the locker and never let anyone see the key.

SIDEBURNS

(Concerning Sean Riley)

When Sean hit puberty (or, rather, when puberty hit Sean), something discovered his face -- hair. At first he felt embarrassed, but at the same time, remembering all the steamy hours he spent behind his father in the bathroom, mock-shaving his glabrous face with an empty razor, he realized that something strange and irreversible had happened -- he'd slipped into being a man.

At length one day he decided to grow his sideburns. His father, a conservative man who scraped his face clean as a licked plate every morning, had sideburns a knuckle's width down from where the top of his ear joined his head. They had never changed. Sean had kept his the same but now he decided to experiment. He was shocked by the reaction. His mother said they looked nice, but if his father didn't like them, that didn't matter. And his father didn't like them. He did everything but threaten to cut them off himself. Sean immediately, bitterly, shaved them.

The battle began.

The sideburns went up and down like window blinds, depending on the moods of Sean and his father. Finally, one morning, when Sean was in his junior year in high school, he left the bathroom with hair rimming the line of his ears. His father glanced up and said nothing. Sean's heart leapt; for all appearances the battle was over. He walked out of the house like a thief with two diamonds.

At school he walked around as if he'd grown a new set of ears. Down the hall was Terry, Sean's good friend and fellow traveler in the world.

"Hey Sean!"

"Yeah?" Sean answered.

"I got that playbook from the coach." Terry reached his side. "We can practice on our own now."

"Yeah, that's good."

"I figure," Terry said, "we could drag home one of those tackling dummies and work out with that. You know, refine our fundamentals, like the coach said." Terry glanced up at Sean. "Hey, where'd you get the burns?"

"I thought I'd just grow them," Sean answered nonchalantly. "You know, just to see what they're like."

"Yeah, well, play it cool, the coach ain't gonna like that, you know. Remember Rico?" Rico was kicked off the team for having his hair show below the line of his helmet.

"Yeah, I know, but -- " He'd run out of words. He hadn't thought about the coach; he hadn't figured on that.

"Look, my old man, just like yours, rapped me across the cheeks for trying to grow mine." The class bell rang. Terry stopped, looked down his nose and said, with a connoisseur's air, "Man, are they gonna look nice. See you later." Sean slipped into homeroom just as the last bell rang.

At football practice he dressed quickly so that the coach wouldn't see the sideburns. He practiced hard. They started out with grass drills, sit-ups, jumping jacks, the usual routine. They split off into linemen and backs. Sean hustled over with the linemen, feeling oddly exuberant. The line coach waited to start West Point drills. Three offensive linemen lined up opposite three defensive linemen to work on blocking. Two tackling dummies were set about ten feet apart and all the action had to take place between the dummies. It was a fierce drill; they had to stand there and slug it out. Sean was on offense with Terry; opposite him was Paul Harkness. At the sound of the whistle, he slammed his head and right forearm into Paul's chest before Paul had a chance to get underneath him. Paul couldn't get his footing and Sean drove him back.

"Hey, Harkness," the line coach yelled, "you gonna let Riley push you back?"

For an answer Paul got back in his defensive stance. Sean got into his three-point stance. The four other guys just stood up and watched. The coach blew his whistle. Paul leaped out at Sean and slammed his right hand against Sean's helmet. Sean, thrown off balance, had to block with his left shoulder and Paul easily scraped off that. Sean waited for the coach's voice. "Hey, Riley, he skinned you there, didn't he? Once more!"

Sean was angry. He settled his cleats into the dirt, set his weight slightly back on his heels so that his arm would be freer for the forearm shiver. Electricity ran through his thighs. His breath echoed in his helmet. He watched Paul get down, badger-like, into the dirt. The coach blew the whistle. Sean shot forward, his head aimed low. His right arm, crooked for the blow, came up with the right shoulder pushing it from underneath. He heard a crack. His forearm and helmet had caught Paul under the chin; the crack had been the sound of Paul's teeth ramming together. Paul flipped onto his back and Sean was suddenly standing

upright, looking down at him. Paul seemed to be choking; he had his hands around his throat. Sean ripped his own helmet off and knelt down to see what was wrong. The coach, taking his time, ambled over and took Paul's helmet off. Blood was running out the corners of Paul's mouth, and his breath rasped and bubbled. "You stuck him," said the coach, and he jabbed at his own Adam's apple. "You caught him right there." Sean looked at the coach, then at Paul, and back to the coach. Someone came up and helped Paul to his feet and off to the locker room. Sean picked up Paul's helmet and gave it to the coach. The coach looked at Sean for a moment, then shouted, "Next group!"

After the West Point drills they went to the sled and pushed it all over the field while the coach sat on it, calling signals. The sled runners dug up the ground, and the field looked like a drunken spider's web. Sean slammed into the sled pads, rolled off, hit the next one, rolled off, hit, roll, hit. His undershirt was wet, his practice jersey was jammed with mud, his cleats pinched, the thigh pads rubbed his legs raw. But the anxiousness was there. As they ran over for scrimmage, he thought briefly about Paul, then forgot him as he huddled with the team, heard the play, and ran out to the line. The seconds were playing defense, and he slammed into them hard. Once the scrimmage was over they did five 100-yard windsprints, got the sled pads, and ran in for the showers.

After Sean had knocked the dirt out of his cleats and walked, barefoot, into the locker room, he saw Paul sitting on the trainer's bench. He'd taken a shower, but his mouth still had blood on it and on the trainer's table Sean could see two of Paul's teeth. Sean suddenly felt sick and turned away. The trainer came over to him. "You smashed him good. Two teeth gone. Some others loose. Tongue cut up pretty bad. You got a damn good forearm." Sean stared at him. The trainer, hesitating when Sean said nothing in reply, shrugged his shoulders and walked back to Paul.

Sean slid out of his pants, hung them up in his locker, and began to slip his shoulder pads and jersey over his head. Someone started the water in the showers. Suddenly, just as his shoulder pads were coming off and his jersey was over his eyes, he was slammed into the open mouth of the locker. The lock catch ripped a searing ribbon of pain across his pectorals. With the shoulder pads jammed into his neck and the twisted jersey over his eyes, he was helpless. As he struggled to get out of the locker, someone kicked him and the breath went out of him. In the locker room he could hear shouts of "Cut it out!" and a

lot of feet scuffling. Hands grabbed his ankles and pulled him out. His right side scraped along the bottom lip of the locker.

Once out he struggled to his knees and shoved the pads off; the scene momentarily startled him. The trainer was doubled up in the corner, and Paul was steaming down on Sean. The other guys in the locker room were either rushing for Paul or sitting to watch. Sean saw the fist coming, could even count the knuckles, but when it slashed across his eye it was only with the greatest effort could he understand he's been punched. He went blind. Paul, mouth freshly bleeding, grabbed Sam and dragged him to the shower. Sean could vaguely hear Paul mouthing something like "you bastard" but he knew that he was saying it in his own mind because Paul couldn't talk. He felt his head slammed onto the tile once, twice, and before he blacked out he saw four guys sitting on Paul, who was crying, and watched the water creep slowly up to his nose.

He knew he was in bed at home. His mother had just left the room. He thought his eyes were open but it was dark so either he was blind or the light was out. He could accept that. He could accept anything about now. He reached up to feel his eyes. His left one was swollen shut but the right one was okay. There was a large grapefruit on the back of his head. He felt as if two furrows had been plowed out of his chest and side. There was too much to think about. In the fog before sleep closed him up, Sean suddenly remembered standing before the coach with his helmet off. He lifted his hand and let it drag over the right side of his face. The morning's harvest of stubble was there, all right, but he could touch the sideburn as well. He smiled and drifted off to sleep.

It was two days before Sean got out of bed. The doctor had come to see him and said that he didn't think Sean had a concussion and to keep ice packs on the left eye. His mother bustled in with caravans of chicken soup, TV, ice cream, admonitions, concerns. His father was stolid. He'd found out the story from the coach and seemed glad that Paul, not Sean, had started the fight. The coach assured him that Paul would be thrown off the team and that Sean would be reinstated. That was his father's concern: that Sean had not started the fight. No one mentioned the sideburns.

It was Sunday when Sean got out of bed. He ran his hand across his face and felt with stale satisfaction the stubble there. He shuffled into the bathroom and, standing defiantly before the mirror, looked at himself. His left eye was

a purple golf ball stuck on his face. He gazed harder at the mirror. The face seemed older to him with the stubble. He opened up the medicine cabinet, took down the razor and shaving cream, and turned on the water. The steam from the hot water made his eye feel better. He washed his face, then lathered up. He shaved slowly, taking care to clean the razor after each pass. Finally there was a bar of cream from the bottoms of his ears down. He slowly brought the razor up and, carefully, shaved the remaining hair so that not only did his sideburns go below his ear but they curved back under the lobes to a point. He peered at them. One swift stroke would lead him back to his father's grace. One stroke would get him out of trouble with the coach. He put the razor down, put the cap on the shaving cream, and placed them back into the cabinet. He went to his room and slept.

Monday morning at the breakfast table he calmly sat in his place and began to eat the cereal in front of him. His mother, coming from the kitchen, saw the sideburns. A small frown escaped over her face, which she quickly trapped. She looked at Sean, then over to his father, who was reading the paper, and sighed. Sean's father looked up at Sean to say good morning, and his mouth abruptly pursed tight. "Go upstairs and shave them off before you leave." He went back to his paper. His mother urged him with her eyes. He sat there. "Sean, I told you to go and shave. They look ridiculous." Sean just sat there. His father got up and threw his paper on the table. "I have to leave. If those aren't off by the time I get home, expect to lose some of your privileges around here." He pecked his wife goodbye and left the room.

Once he was out the door Sean's mother turned to him and said he should do it, just to keep peace in the family. Sean said nothing but thank you for the breakfast, kissed her on the forehead, and left for school.

At school people crowded around him and had two things to say -- Paul was a jerk for sucker punching him and the sideburns were cool. Terry, who helped him out for the day with special permission from the principal, shook his head and said they were outrageous but that nobody was going to let him keep them.

"What the kids think doesn't matter," he said while they shuffled through the lunchline.

"So?" Sean said. They found a place near the windows that hadn't been too messed up by the lunch shift before. The tables were greasy.

"So? We don't matter. You could walk into this school with your name carved on your forehead and someone would think it's cool. No one in this school's got any taste." He tore a mouthful out of his hamburger. "Look at Dawn over there." Sean turned his head carefully. Dawn was a "fuzzy-headed chick" as she called herself. She dabbled in astrology and ate nothing but wheat germ and yogurt and was as skinny as a chalk line. The school had tried to talk to her mother about her but Dawn's mother was either drinking or recovering. "What a burn-out. Her head is so far screwed on wrong that she'll be lucky to survive a strong wind. But she's cool, man. And there's Dino and that group, the dopers. A bunch of space cadets. They're not quite sure what planet they're on. And then there's us, the jocks, who'll kill to get status. And all the in-betweens. Nobody knows about anybody and nobody cares."

"What's your complaint? I'm just growing my sideburns." Sean smiled.

Terry looked at him. "I know you're not a dumb fuck, Sean. I know that. You know what the coach'll do if you don't shave those off. You know how crazy he is about hair. Remember Rico?"

"The coach is crazy. The nerves to his ass got re-routed to his brain."

"We all know that. But you know what you're doing with those sideburns?"

"Yeah."

Terry stared at him. "Yeah, you do. Well, it was nice playing with you." He stared down in disgust. "My lunch is cold."

Sean calmly finished eating his, letting his smile linger over his lips. The bell rang for class. Terry slid his tray to the end of the table, got up, and walked toward the conveyer belt to deposit his tray. Sean followed. Together they walked out of the cafeteria.

Throughout the whole day Sean went through classes with a dogged smile on his face. He was on automatic. Several of his teachers mentioned his sideburns, but Sean smiled on them and slowly moved on. Terry walked apprehensively beside him, wanting him to cool it but at the same time bowing to the strong hand of his friend. After the last class Terry threw his books into his locker, grabbed his laundry bag with this football stuff in it, slammed the locker shut, and started off for practice.

"Well," said Terry, "you comin'?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

Terry shuffled his feet. "Well, let's go."

"Just a minute."

"C'mon!"

Sean paused, then said, "All right, let's go."

They stalked down the hall toward the gym. They collected other people on their way. Sean was the only one without a laundry bag. He walked with his hands in his pockets, his chin up, his eyes sparkling.

They entered the locker room and Terry and the rest began the routine of undressing and priming themselves. The coach was off in the staff locker room getting dressed. The room looked slightly askew through his one eye; everything was pleasantly out of focus. He saw the coach walk out, his grey legs and black track shoes and blue windbreaker slightly stretched out like an El Greco painting he'd seen one time. He walked over to Sean, grabbed his chin, and, moving Sean's head from side to side, looked at the sideburns. Sean didn't put up any resistance.

"Your father called me," the coach said. A shot of bile crawled up Sean's throat.

"Yes?"

"You know if you don't cut them off you'll be off the team. You know my policy about hair."

"Yes, coach, we all know your policy about hair." The coach's eyes narrowed when he heard the emphasis. "I know your policy. If I have these," he said, pointing to his face, "I guess I won't be able to hurt people like I hurt Paul." His insides were as cold as dry ice. He was beginning to shiver. "Coach," he said, articulating each word, "I'm the same ballplayer I was Friday."

"No, you're not. You don't care about this team at all." He turned to leave. "You're off it now until you cut them. And don't expect your place to be open when you get back."

"Coach!" Sean shouted. He was almost quivering out of control now. "I won't cut them! You can take your stinking rules and shove 'em!" Terry moved over and embraced him from behind. "Coach," Terry said, "please get out."

The coach leaned toward Sean. "Your father will hear about this, Sean, and Terry," he smiled sarcastically, "you can let him go."

Sean strained against Terry's grip. "Coach," Terry said plaintively.

The coach turned and left.

Terry let Sean go. The other guys turned to finish dressing. Suddenly Sean found himself alone. He moved out of the locker room and down the hall. His insides were jelly but his hands were calm and dry.

When Sean's father got home that evening the sideburns were still where Sean had left them. He was sitting in the window seat of the living room. He heard the front door shut, the sluff-sluff of his mother's feet as she walked (as she always did) down the hall to meet him, the hall closet open, the hangers rattle, the door shut, and crunch of the evening paper as it was shoved under his arm. The ritual had begun. His father came into the living room and, loosening his tie, sank into the sofa. Sean continued to stare out the window, the grey of the dusk like a salve on his tired eye.

"I talked to the coach today," his father began.

"Yeah?" He remembered at the last instant that his father hated yeah. "Yes?"

"He told me you abused him the locker room." Sean kept his eye on the window and said nothing.

"Is that true?"

"It all depends." He tried to buy time. "On what?" The smallest hint of impatience in the voice.

"On what you mean by abused." He knew this would irritate his father but he couldn't help fighting to get out of the corner.

"Let's not play games, Sean." The formality of the sentence was a clue -- his father meant business and business usually meant punishment. "I want the truth."

"The coach said you called him about -- about my sideburns."

"I did."

"Well, he threatened -- he threw me off the team. So I told him what he could do with his rules."

His father pressed the advantage.

"The coach, as he told me, did not say you said it so politely. What was it you said?"

He knew his father's eyes were riveted on him, his gaze laced with punishment. He was in a trap. His father asked for the truth yet would be offended by it. That would mean a harder coming-down on him. But what did he have to lose? These adults had already sentenced him; truth was secondary.

"I told him he could take his rules and shove them." He enunciated each word. There was a silence from the couch. He didn't know whether his father was amused, which was unlikely, or so angry he couldn't speak. He waited. The sky outside had closed up shop. His eye rested on cold black glass.

"Well," his father said after a while. It had the resigned tone of an unpleasant but true discovery. "I don't understand your behavior at all. The coach is a good man and is working hard, has worked hard for years, to put a good team up. His rules are not arbitrary. He's not out to hurt you." He paused; Sean waited. "What I can't understand is why. Your mother and I have tried to give you a good life, with love and protection -- "

"Yes, I know, Dad, but -- "

"But what?"

"But -- " And even though it was the truth, Sean knew it would sound whiny and self-centered when it came out. "I could never really talk. I mean -- "

"We're talking now, aren't we?"

"You're talking. Not me." He fell silent, exhausted with the effort.

"Well, you've ruined your chance for college."

"I have not. My grades are still good. I don't need to play ball."

"It won't look good on the record."

"I don't care!" He'd never raised his voice to his father and now, after the quick silence of his words, he was scared and thrilled by the act. There was an immediate desire to apologize but he squelched it. He waited for his father.

"Well, Sean, you should care. This sort of thing will snowball. You'll surely lose the respect of your teachers and the principal. That's vital. And all for what? For two strips of hair? I must admit I don't understand."

His father's tone had changed, to a sort of bewildered defeat. Sean wasn't fooled by it. This was only the first round in a battle where his father would dog him and wear him down without ever challenging him directly. That is what made his father so hard to feel for. He was conniving out of love, deceitful out of affection. The fatigue had hollowed his bones. He turned to look at his father.

The room looked thin. His father was paler, skinnier, more dried-up than he ever remembered. He knew it was his eye that was playing the trick but everything looked stretched-out and two-dimensional.

"I want you to shave them off."

"It's my hair."

"Not while you're in this house."

"Then I'll leave."

"Go."

Sean knew it was stupid to go on. His father had him. He knew he'd apologize to the coach, knew he'd shave his sideburns, knew he'd feel humble.

"Stay or go?"

Sean didn't answer.

"You'll apologize to the coach, tomorrow. And tonight you'll shave those ridiculous sideburns off." His father rose, looking for sass. There was none. He left the room, evening paper tucked under arm.

Sean dragged himself upstairs. He could hear his parents talking in the dining room, the soft pliable murmur of his mother bending against the sullen breeze of his father. In the bathroom he carelessly opened the cabinet and took out the shaving cream and razor. As he lathered up he peered at himself squarely in the mirror. The lump was going down. The next day's stubble was already up. Taking the razor, his one eye staring at himself, he raised it and said, "Here's one for you, Paul. I hope I always kill you." Then, with a quick stroke, he attacked his face.

ETUDE

(Concerning Harriet Kolodin)

I hate her, Harriet thought.

What shall I do? she wondered.

I will have to go through with it, she decided.

I hate her, she thought again.

Harriet, seated on Mrs. Smith's lawn, stared as malevolently as her fifteen-year old eyes would let her at Mrs. Northrup across the street. Mrs. N, standing at the entrance of the Masonic Temple, chattered away sociably as she greeted people at the door, her large eyes bubbling behind thick slices of glass, her solid body swaddled in a frail iridescent taffeta. Harriet hoped somehow to wither her to ashes and salt so that her twittering voice would become part of the front lawn, but to no avail. Harriet's blue-violet eyes unnarrowed from their slivers and she slumped into her hips as she exhaled. It was no use. She would have to play that piano tonight. Her hands, nestled together like nervous pigeons, plucked grass and tossed it away.

The whole idea had been stupid to her from the start. For as long as she could remember she had been digesting Mrs. Lavolier's piano lessons, from the time her parents had plopped her on a piano stool in Mrs. L's living room and told her, Mrs. L, to teach her something. Her mother had been concerned mostly with class and grace; her father had simply given in to her mother's strategy. Under Mrs. L's odd instruction (the highly arched fingers, the exaggerated movement of the arms, that croaking, "Do it until it feels as if you are not doing it,") the strategy had worked too well. By the time she had put in the required number of recitals and benefit performances, she had grown into an awkward, thin-thick kind of girl, her slopes and curves never quite balancing out. Always reserved, her shyness misinterpreted as aloofness, she had not magnetized the friends in quality or quantity her mother had wanted her to attract. Instead, she spoke to the piano, learned its tongue, reflected back her own dreams in its embracing tones, and carried, with covetous pride, a small glass secret cushioned deep inside her. Only when she played did the glass shimmer.

And now this! Mrs. N was not a demon, she knew, and she really didn't hate her, but this thing she'd arranged was another of her half-cooked ideas everyone would laugh at. Like the time she invited her artist friends to show their works and the people in the town thought the canvases, filled with feathers, iron filings,

coffee grounds, bits of rope, stuff people threw away in their garbage, was junk. They would all be laughing at her.

And now this! Harriet sunk even deeper into a slouch as she mulled over what tonight's performance would be like. Mrs. N had gotten the marvelous idea that it would be very educational to have a recital where she, Harriet, would bang out a few classical pieces on the piano, and then David, a keyboard man for a local band, would play some modern music, so that the crowd could compare and be simply awed by the exciting changes music had gone through in the past two hundred years. She did not want to play straight man for anyone, especially someone from a rock and roll band. Good evening, Abbott. Good evening, Costello. Let's take a look at the organ grinder's monkey.

She tossed a look at Mrs. N planted opaquely like a Greek statue in front of the Temple, let her hands rest a heartbeat in the folds of her skirt, sighed, got up, and crossed the street. Mrs. N, noticing her, heaved herself down the steps and exclaimed, to everybody and nobody, "Here's our little wunderkind!" Harriet winced when Mrs. N yoked a heavy arm around her shoulders and squeezed her into a bosom that oozed a thick aroma of lavender.

"It's getting time," she said. "Shouldn't you be warming up or something?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I should."

"Go on, then, go on!" giving her a shove towards the door. "We must be ready, mustn't we?"

Harriet stumbled up the steps, Mrs. N's lavender still coiled in her nose. She eased through the doors into the foyer where Mrs. Lavolier was handing out programs. "A lot of people in there," Mrs. Lavolier remarked. "Seems like Rebecca hit something this time." She fanned herself with the programs, wisps of grey hair flicking around her temples. "You do a good job. I don't turn out trash." Harriet's smile froze to her teeth. She walked down the aisle to the stage, trying hard not to look at the crowd. She suddenly wanted to be underwater.

Backstage she saw what had to be David standing in the exit door smoking a cigarette. Tall, at least six-two, and thin, he gathered his hair in a pony tail that hung halfway down his back. The hand holding the cigarette was big, the tendons raised thickly along the back of it. It looked like a hand that had swung pickaxes, not piano keys. He wore a pale blue workshirt, sleeves rolled up, jeans, and sneakers. Suddenly her kilt skirt and frilly blouse felt very awkward and she didn't want him to notice her. Of course he noticed her.

"Well, here you are," he said, crushing out his cigarette. "My name is David, David Braden." His smile lifted the soft ends of his mustache. He held his hand out to her and she timidly took it, unable to raise her eyes off his shirt pocket and meet his gaze. Prickles ran all over her skin. "Your name is Harriet, correct?" She liked his voice -- she imagined that if she closed her eyes it would be the voice of a cultured man, wealthy perhaps, well-read and gentle. He laughed and she leapt up to look at him. "Harriet, right?"

"Yes, Harriet Kolodin." She took her hand back. The silence thickened.

"I hear you take classes with old Mrs. Lavolier? So did I, before you were born." She glanced up at him in quiet amazement. "She taught me everything I know, and she taught me some things I didn't learn until later." Somehow the images didn't go together, the long hair and jeans with the fussiness of Mrs. Lavolier, and Mrs. Lavolier hadn't mentioned his name (out of shame, perhaps?), but there it was. "Of course, I never turned out how she wanted me to." He smoothed the ends of his mustache. "But we get along. I owe her a lot."

"So do I, I guess." She couldn't think of anything more to say, though she wanted to very badly. "I owe her a lot, too."

"Yeah." He glanced over the top of her head to the piano on stage. He nodded towards it. "What're you going to play?"

"Some pieces by Chopin."

"Oh yeah? Which ones? See if they're the same ones she palmed off on me."

"Well, one of the Etudes, number eleven. One of the mazurkas, and the 'Marche Funebre'."

"Yup, the same ones. I must have lived those pieces when she gave them to me. Ate, drank, and slept those pieces."

The silence fell between them again.

"Look, I'm going to take a walk and get my mind set. I'll see you afterwards." She took his outstretched hand and the tingle hadn't left it when he walked out the door into the back alley.

The same pieces. They at least had that in common. Her mind raced back to an afternoon almost a year ago when she sat in Mrs. Lavolier's dusty living room, the piano gigantically sitting in half of it, the air thick and quiet. She was fourteen then and quite proud of her talent. Primly seated on the piano bench,

her skirt spread around her like a fan, she waited calmly for Mrs. Lavolier to begin. She had believed, at that moment, that she could play anything Mrs. Lavolier set in front of her.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Lavolier rummaged in a large file drawer where she kept her sheet music. It was in no particular order except her order; dust motes flew like rockets in the quiet air. Finally, lifting a sheet out, she rammed the drawer back in and toddled over to the piano. "Here, begin with this," she said.

Harriet looked at the name. "How do you pronounce it?"

"Sho-pan. Not Choppin." She added, "He was Polish."

"Was he good?"

"Play him."

She looked at the title: Etude 11. And his name. Nothing else. She flipped off the cover sheet, placed her hands on the keys, straightened her back, and, as she always did with new pieces, squinted at the notes. The first few bars seemed easy -- single notes with the right hand. The chords following were a little tricky but not difficult. She finished the last chord in the measure, prepared to lift her hand for the next note, and stopped. She squinted at the notes even harder. They did exactly what the saw them do -- run up and down the keyboard without any logic at all. Her hands were expectantly frozen over the keys, but instead of bringing them down, she nestled them in her lap and stared at the music. She glanced at Mrs. L. Mrs. L half-smiled and left the room.

She worked for three more hours that night and got through two lines. By the next day her hands had forgotten and she had to re-teach them. Occasionally she played something light to reassure herself that she could still play at all. The lessons went slowly. At times she wished the man's name had not been engraved on her mind, at times she was speechless over his genius. He was a wall to her, one just large enough so that, if she stood on her toes, she could just touch the top to know there was in fact a top to get over. Yet he was also a wall that grew taller with every note she learned. She read biographies of him, pictured in her mind the thin, polished gentleman who seduced the people of Paris and who died sick and disheartened, and wished she could have been there, immersed in the thrill of the crowds, in the dismay and mourning of his death.

One day, in the fall, she sat at the piano in the living room, the November light square and dusky on the windows. Mrs. L had gone out for the evening but had

left the key for her under the mat. The house was still; the only light came from the lamp over her music. It was the etude, the one she had started with. She opened the music and, with scarcely a glance, her hands commenced. Scant minutes later, the final notes reverberated off the polished wood and Harriet sat here, alone, her face in her hands, crying. For a moment it seemed as if he were in the room with her, one of the audience of fashionable Parisiennes, and she glowed in the light of his approval. Then the moment slipped and she saw the heavy piano, the dark room, heard the husky clock in the hallway, smelled the fadedness of the house. She snapped the light off, gathered herself into her bulky sweater, locked the door, put the key under the mat, and briskly walked the halfmile back to her house, imagining a boulevard filled with carriages and gaslamps.

She peeked out the curtains to see how large the audience was. All of the folding chairs were filled and people stood along the back wall. Her hands were sweating, as they always did before a performance. She wondered where David was and suddenly wanted an encouraging word from him, for him to say that everything was going to be fine. Instead, Mrs. N bustled through the door in a cloud. "We're almost ready," she said in a stagy whisper. "Where's David?" As if summoned, he appeared at the exit door, a big smile on his face. "Well," Harriet heard her say, "let us commence."

Mrs. N shot out onto the stage and immediately the hubbub in the audience quieted down; only the rustle of programs used as fans stirred the air. "This evening we are privileged to present something unique for you." Harriet noticed that the more Mrs. N spoke, the more British she sounded, her voice tight and clipped. "In the past we've done some interesting programs and I have appreciated your support. And, as indicated here tonight by your presence, my efforts to bring you something different and good are not wasted. You'll notice in your programs that tonight we are presenting a comparison -- old versus new, classical versus modern. It is the purpose of art to show us where we have been as well as where we are going." She made a sweeping gesture with her arms, as if she were a priest giving benediction, and announced, "Without further delay, I would like to present to you our own Harriet Kolodin."

Applause edged out from the audience, a few catcalls from the boys in the back. Harriet walked resolutely onto the stage and faced the crowd. The glare from the footlights blinded her and all she could see was darkness. She blinked hurriedly, like a rabbit caught by a flashlight, and announced, in a thick voice,

what she was going to play. A few people clapped; that only made the silence heavier. All their eyes felt like a thousand flies crawling across her face. She turned on her heel, shutting them out and away, sat on the bench, straightened her back, and began to play.

The etude went quickly. She was not pleased with it; she felt she was taking it for a walk, not playing it. But, she thought, they wouldn't know the difference, only Mrs. L, maybe David. She suddenly hated them for their ignorance, hated herself for being put in this stupid position; she wanted to slam the cover down and walk off the stage, leave them gasping with their stupid mouths open. A butterfly pinned to the wall and still wriggling looked better than she did. She even made a motion to rise from the bench, but she happened to glance into the wings and David, looking her straight in the eyes, gave her a thumbs-up. She sat back down and before she could catch her breath her hand reached for the mazurka. Her fingers bounced, striking, caressing, clear and crisp and exact. She let the applause drift over her as she peered once more into the wings. He wasn't there. He wasn't there. She played the funeral march just to get it done with.

The final applause was polite, perfunctory. She bowed tightly with her head and shoulders and heard the clapping dies as she disappeared from the stage. Mrs. N grabbed her and hugged her; Harriet went limp, letting herself be jostled. All she could hear was the static of Mrs. N's dress, then she was gone, off to do the introduction for David. David took her hand and congratulated her. "Not bad, not bad at all. You've got it. Not bad." Then he, too, disappeared. Harriet stood there, her hands demurely against her skirt, a lump as thick as a fist in her throat. The light shook off him and the stage was warm with his presence.

She slipped out the exit door and down the side aisle to the back wall where she could stand by herself. His lean figure moved back and forth as he explained what he was going to do. "You just heard some of the best piano music ever written done pretty well, if I might say so." He paused. "But that's not the only piano music." He walked to the edge of the stage. "How many of you are in high school?" Hands shot up, murmurs rose. "Know who Keith Emerson is? Rick Wakeman?" Some scattered applause. "Yeah, they're good, but it ain't classical." He moved to his left. "How many of you out there remember Neil Sedaka when he was first famous? Or Jerry Lee Lewis?" Some people put up their hands, others chuckled. "Quite a while ago, for some of you, huh? How many of you remember Duke Ellington or Eubie Blake or Gershwin?" Fewer

hands this time, a lot of buzzing talk. "It's all piano, but it ain't classical. That's the point here -- keeps changing. Let me show you."

He strode to the piano and sat heavily on the bench. "Way back in the time of the dinosaurs, black musicians started jazz, all kinds of it. Boogie-woogie is a fun kind of music. It starts off with the left hand, a walking bass they call it." The bass notes growled out of the piano. "Now, the left hand keeps going while the right hand plays something light and bluesy, like someone growling and laughing at the same time." The right hand tickled the upper keys. "That's boogie-woogie with a thousand variations. Then there's straight blues," he riffed out some blues chords, "ragtime," the first bars of Maple Leaf Rag, "big band," some measures of Little Brown Jug and In the Mood, "Duke Ellington," some Satin Doll, "and a whole lot more," a crash of chords.

"But more of you remember..." And he paused dramatically, and Harriet sensed the crowd pause with him, waiting for him to lead them on. "Rock and Roll!" He got up from the bench and approached the edge of the stage. "Could we have the houselights on, please?" Someone somewhere flipped them on. "Good, now I can see you. Can't hide anymore. Now, most of you parents don't like rock and roll. Is that true?" Some nervous laughter. "Well, what do your sons and daughters say?" Loud clapping, hoots, hollers. "Parents, remember, you were fifteen once. For some of you, that puts you right back in the company of Buddy Holly, Bill Haley, Little Richard. Remember those crazy screamers? And you loved it! For some of you out there who are hyped on MTV and punk and heavy metal, here is what your parents used to listen to. Microphone, please!" Mrs. N, smiling crazily, brought out the microphone. David tapped it to test it. "Thank you, Mrs. Northrup. Give her a hand." A blush crept over Mrs. Northrup's face, and she hustled giddily offstage.

Harriet plastered herself as close to the wall as she could, upset by the betrayal she saw, wanting to leave and be done with the humiliation, but drawn by David's presence into the circle he had created. She could not make herself leave the tall man onstage who was weaving these people into a crowd.

"Who here used to jitterbug?" His voice shot out of the speakers. No hand went up. "C'mon, I know you can do it." He pointed into the audience. "Mrs. Ticknor, how about you?" Everyone's head turned. Abby Ticknor blushed to the edge of her salt and pepper hair. "C'mon Abby, I know you can jitterbug. What about the time at Mary's wedding? I played there and I saw you dance." Everyone laughed. Her husband leaned over and whispered something to her.

Abby rose, standing over him, and said clearly, “Larry, I do too know how to do it!” Some of the boys in the back catcalled and she blushed again. Sliding into the aisle before Larry could pull her back, she ran up onstage. David offered her his hand. “Abby here is a prime jitterbugger. Watch.” David, positioning himself opposite Abby, gave a gentle tug on her hand. Abby immediately turned into him, then away. Together they twined and untwined and the audience clapped in rhythm until, quite flushed, Abby stopped in a flurry of giggles. The audience’s smile washed over her generously. David motioned for Larry Ticknor to come up; the noise crescendoed. Pulling his sportscoat around him, he walked with a jerky dignity onto the stage. Abby, looking like a young girl, reached out for her husband’s hand. With a sheepish smile he took it, and while David played a dance tune, they jitterbugged to the crowd’s acclaim. In a flutter of final notes, Larry embraced Abby and David pounded the song shut.

David asked for two teenagers. A bustle of bodies in the back row, and then suddenly two were ejected into the aisle. Pushed on by the whistles of their friends, they sauntered onto the stage. David perched himself on the piano bench, played a few bars of a disco tune. “Can you dance to that?” They tried a few moves and said yes. “Go to it then.” Just as if they were a younger photograph of Abby and Larry, the boy and girl twisted, dipped, shuffled, and whirled while the crowd clapped a slightly off-beat percussion. With his left hand still doing the bass, David motioned to Larry and Abby to dance and suddenly the two people blended into four, all doing the same moves with variations, themes winding around themselves and into the audience like a net. When David finally finished the song and the four people stood there in the light, sweat shining on their foreheads and a smile dazzling across their faces, an ovation of hands threw up glory to them and for a moment they were immobilized and giddy.

“That’s what rock and roll’s all about. It’s music for ordinary people, which most of us are. It isn’t for here, like classical music,” he pointed to his head, “but for here,” he jabbed at his solar plexus. “It’s what we feel, not what we think. Who wants to hear more?” They all did. “All right! I’m going to show you rock-and-roll before it used up all its energy.” He looked at the crowd. “Jerry Lee Lewis -- he’s always been in a lot of trouble, but, boy, could he sing. He had a hit song called Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On. And when he sang, there was always a whole lotta shakin’.” He hit a chord and then said, “He rarely sat down.” He kicked the bench out of the way; it skittered off and sat like a patient dog. “Here we go!”

By the time he finished the song and swung into Little Richard's Good Golly, Miss Molly, people were dancing in their seats and in the aisles. As he sang, with his head tilted back, hands chiseling the keys into music, happiness jumped over his face and body. He pulsed with the music and when he dropped his smile into the audience, ripples of energy charged back to him, buoyed him up, floated him away. He slowed them with Fats Domino's Blueberry Hill, and wound them up for the evening with Little Richard's Lucille. When he walked to the edge of the stage and bowed, the acclaim thundered to him. He wished them a good-night and left. Mrs. Northrup appeared, motioned for him to return. He did and danced a little jig with her. She stood there beaming, soaking up his color like a vacant canvas. No one asked Harriet to the stage.

Soon the noise fell, clothes rustled, chairs scraped, conversations were whispered, as everyone moved to the exits. The evening was sultry but cool and the full moon glowed like ivory. The town was quiet. She ran out the door and across the street and slipped into the shade of the huge oak tree on Mrs. Smith's lawn. She watched the people file out of the Temple. She could feel the tears gathering inside her, but she would not let come, not yet. Then she stared at the moon and as its whiteness blurred and streaked, the anger and shame of the betrayal washed over her and she spread her fingers, long and pale, on the dark ground around her. Soon the street was silent and empty except for her, a dim figure underneath the tree, noiselessly running her fingers over the mute ground.

A PERSON OF DELICATE BREEDING

(Concerning Adelle Riverton)

"How are we doing today Adelle?"

She sits perched on her wicker chair. Already dressed. Dressed herself, like she's always done, for almost ninety-two years. The bright blue parrots on her dress chatter in the sunlight. She can't hear the clock tick -- deaf as a rock. Her own clock on the inside, sunup, sundown, years on the farm always gets her up. Trust that. Today is the day Mary Cooper comes.

"Here, let me raise the blinds for you." The nurse fussily slips the blinds up halfway. Doesn't matter, blind anyways. She stares straight ahead, eyes like fork tines. The neck of her dress is askew, her shoes on opposite feet. Like a queen she sits, cane like a scepter. The nurse changes her shoes, straightens her dress, tsking like a metronome. "Nobody can say you don't try."

"What?" Her eyes still at attention.

The nurse switches on her hearing aid, shouts right into it. "I changed your shoes for you, Adelle. You had them on backwards."

"No I didn't." She doesn't clearly remember if she did or not. Been dressing herself for almost ninety-two years. Anything could happen.

"Adelle, your walker is by your chair." No response. Like an Egyptian mummy. "Adelle..."

"I heard you." She flicks her cane at the nurse. "Go away."

When she is fairly sure the nurse is gone (the thud of the door up the stiff bones of her legs), she swings the walker in front of her, cranes herself upright. She hangs the cane by its crook. The hum in the hearing aid...bees in August. The time the bees went crazy on her father. She is only ten. The hum comes, goes. Her father is laid on the kitchen table. She is standing at the door, peeking around the hips of the neighbors, her hair, then long, swishing across her back. The doctor and some other people are bent over her father, tweezing out the stingers they can find. Other women are helping her mother soak linens in clean water for compresses. Her father, his eyes wide, staring at the ceiling. The thick ends of his mustache quiver each time they pull, a short snort of outbreath. The hum comes, goes. The swelling goes down, her father again up and around, again tall and strong. She hugs him around the hips, her fear dissolved into love

again. He doesn't smile, just like him, just tousles her hair. Long hair on a little girl. She hugs his hips, cheek against belt buckle. Cool metal...

Her cheek is against the aluminum bar of the walker. Her hair feathers along the collar of her dress. Her shoes on backwards -- maybe. She stares at what she knows is her dresser, a cane length away from her walker. That day. She rises again, grabs her cane like a rapier. It was her first day here. Her son drives up the gravel way (she knows it's gravel because she can feel the stones through her feet), pulls into the parking lot. Heat ripples over her like water over stones. There is the slam of her son's door, then the open emptiness of hers. She wants to fall out of the car, just to cause trouble. He holds her up, saying something she can't hear anyway. A little too roughly, she thinks. He already has the walker out, has put her hands on it. (Where did he get that? She missed him getting it out of the back seat. She makes believe she doesn't know what it is.) He waits. She waits. He re-positions her hands. Waits. She stares where she thinks his bellybutton is. She doesn't want to go. She has time. She hears the click of her hearing aid. "Mother, we can't keep them waiting." She isn't in a hurry. Like water over stones. She listens to her heartbeat. Let them die and leave her alone. Maybe she should die on them right there, make a real mess, let her bowels go as she keels forward onto her son. New car of his. Her eyes jump to where she thinks his heart is. "I'm not going."

"Mother, we've been over this before. There is no place else to go." She envisions that red spot on his cheek that resembles a thumb when he gets angry. Thumbs-up.

"I'm not going."

"Mother, the house is sold. To George and Mary Cooper. You don't live there anymore." No more. Empty as a piece of white bread. He was born in that house. She looks to where she thinks his eyes are. Born there. So much there. Dr. Kelley, the same one that brings her son into it all, the same one who sells her and Vernon the house. Beautiful house. Red stucco with white trim, solid as Vernon's hips, sturdy as a belt buckle. Carriage house in the back where the Dr. keeps his horses. Space for a garden. Inside, the woodwork is chestnut, cut from the Dr.'s own trees, kitchen wood stove, huge master bedroom. She holds Vernon like she will never have another chance, like he will disappear. He calls her plum bunny and laughs. They make love on the hardwood floor of the bedroom. His hands, lithe, skim over her body, run through her hair down her

spine over her hips....Five years later she cuts her hair and wears grey all the time. He keeps his hands in other pockets.

"Mother, come on. You don't have a choice." She rises to the gentle pull on her wrists, edges out of the way of the car door. He rests one hand on her elbow. She stiffens, grabs her cane and pokes him with it until he lets go. "You just head me in the right direction. I'm not dead yet." Her hearing aid hums; she tugs it out of her ear. Suddenly she knows she can't hear his directions but refuses to put it back in. Let him figure it out. She holds her cane like a lance. He grabs the cane's end and swivels it to her right. She follows the cane's vector, stopping when unsure, wishing she could ask him for help up the incline but I'll be damned if I'll ask him or anybody. She clomps along the porch. Inside, the nurses fly around her. Someone puts the hearing aid back in. Sounds like someone ripping wood. Someone guides her to a room. She senses ghosts round her, stale air, like an attic. Her son is nowhere. When she thinks the nurse isn't looking, she turns the hearing aid off. She's hungry, she needs to pee, she is tired. Vernon, hold me, she thinks, and smells the ghosts.

She swims in silence. Bustle around her, someone's lips brush her cheek. Then emptiness. She reaches in front of her, waves her arm like a dowsing stick, until she hits the walker. She pulls it to her, rises. Grabs the cane hanging on it. Using one hand for balance, she raises the cane with the other. Then swipes downward. Nothing. She takes a step forward, cuts again. A crack that shoots up her arm. Good. Before they stop her, she knows how many cane lengths the room is. For all she can tell, they might have put her in the gymnasium. Then where would she be? A hard knuckle of an old lady rapping her way around just to know how big her last days are. Time to count down....

"Time for your medicine, Adelle."

That much time gone already?

"I won't take it."

The hearing aid clicks off. On. "Yes you will. It doesn't hurt you."

Off. "I don't care. Give it to someone else." She pauses. "I'm a stuffed bird. A turkey." She pauses again. "I'm dead anyway. So are you. Go away."

On. "Adelle, you should be ashamed. Your son gives you the best care and you go and..." Off.

On. “Take the medicine, Adelle.” She tosses two pills into her mouth, tucks them under her tongue, swallows the water and grins. “Did you swallow them?” The grin nods yes. “Let me see your tongue.” She quickly rolls them between her teeth and gum, opens her mouth, wags her tongue. “All right, Adelle, don’t give me so much trouble.”

“If you don’t want trouble, leave me alone.” Off.

When she’s sure the door is shut, the spits the two pills into her hand and tucks them under the cushion of her seat. She finds the pills under her mother’s pillow, too, and she scolds her mother. “Don’t think you can lecture me jes’ because you’re seventeen and I’m sick.” Her mother’s grey face, grey against the overwashed grey pillowcase, quilts gathered like an army around her -- the air stands stale. Her father, on the other side of the bed, his huge hand mute and helpless on the bedsheet, his ruddy face empty. Everything hangs still, still as waiting for a storm. She and her father know the pills are sugar pills; the doctor tells them he can’t save her, she just met her time, and maybe the pills will fool her out of a little pain. “That’s like tryin’ to fool a fence post it’s a tree,” her father says. The doctor agrees. They wait like pigeons on a phone line.

Her father is asleep, his hand still warmly on the quilt, his head nodded forward like a gun trigger. She is wiping a cool cloth over her mother’s forehead. The breathing thins. As she strokes the broad wrinkled skin, as the cloth passes over her mother’s eyes, she sees the color wash out of her face, and when she completes her motion, her mother is dead. She stares at the rag in her hand, expecting to see her mother’s face there. Squeeze it back into her, wring the breath back out. There is no face in the cloth. Her father’s head cocks back as she lightly brushes his hand with the cloth. No tears in her eyes. He takes his hand off the quilt and shoves it in his pocket. No tears in his eyes.

She writes a poem. She can even remember some of it now, has to, since there are no eyes left to her, but only the last verse flares up in her mind:

Like autumn’s leaf, when summer goes
That falls at last to the ground;
Until the snow and warm spring rain
Come once more to their round,
You’ll lie like death at the bottom of my heart
And never make a sound.

Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter a bit. The priest thinks it's morbid. Father dies seven years later. The cloth gets used for dishes again, wipes muddy boots, gets thrown away. It makes no difference. Her son doesn't realize that -- he still wants to give her pills. He will not be at her beside when she dies. She'll see to that. Better to have strangers. More truthful.

Her dresser is one cane length away in front of her chair. Her chair is next to her bed. One length away on her right is a window. One length on her left is the door. She never bothers to check behind her. She grips her walker, sidles to her dresser. The picture on the left is of Vernon -- a picture long after their marriage, when he was mayor. Tintypes in the middle are her parents, faces stiff and wrenched. The other picture, the smallest, is her son. She sweeps the pictures to the floor. She pulls out the top drawer, full of old letters, poems, bygone scratchings, upends it. She doesn't bother the drawers with just clothes in them. Over the dresser is a sampler embroidered just after Vernon's death: "Now comes the mystery." That man Beecher her father spoke of. She jabs it off the wall with her cane. "Clean the crap up," she yells to nobody. She yells it again: "Clean the crap up." There was Vernon, all politician even then, even though mayor was still years off, standing his usual stance, hand in vest pocket, one leg bent, hip out, a swashbuckler, small cigar clenched in his teeth, watching her smash the crystal wedding glasses methodically into two heaps of shimmering splinters and dust with a hammer. Her hair still long, though done up in a benign bun on the back of her head. She wears a grey dress, collar up, cuffs down. When she's done, facing him across the table, the lunchtime afternoon sunlight behind her, illuminating him, he calmly takes the cigar from his lips, and looking at the grey-ash tip of it, tells her to clean it up now that her tantrum is over. She takes a handful of the glass and throws it at him. He flinches, slightly; the crystal dust glints on his lapel. Blood runs from a cut in her right palm, drips slowly off her fingers. She grabs glass with her left hand, throws it. A chip nicks his cheek. Daintily, he dabs the cut with his handkerchief. She bleeds from both hands. "Clean it up," he says, flicking the dust off his suit. "Stop this nonsense." Before he can leave the room, she points at him with one bloody finger and screams, "You clean this crap up. Clean this crap up, Vernon!" He does not look back. "Vernon!" she shrieks. At the threshold he pauses, his hat square on his head. "What's wrong with us, Vernon?" He wipes imaginary dust off the brim of his hat. "It is not us, Adelle, but you. What I ask is not much. All I want is..."

"Clean the crap up!" She is sitting in her wicker chair, wreathed in a cheshire smile, by the time the nurses comes in. For fun, she turns on the hearing aid, delights in their cackle, woodenly oblivious to all their requests for explanation. "What will your son think when he comes to see you tomorrow?"

"I don't have a son."

"What? Of course you do, a fine son."

She lifts her eyes in the voice's direction. "I don't have a son."

A voice behind her speaks. "You have a better son than most people have. At least he cares."

"My son was a mistake. Even he knows that. That's why I am here. Bury me away." She clamps her mouth shut, then adds, as an afterthought, "What does it matter? He's lost anyways." She raises her cane, stabs the air. "Give me his picture."

"The glass is broken on it."

"Give it to me!" Something metal and square slides into her hands.

"Be careful, Adelle, you'll cut your hand."

She lifts the picture up to her eye level and peers at it as if she can see it clearly. What is your face? Whose is it? Her muscles ache. The weight of the baby in her arms pulls on her shoulders, but she continues to hold it at arm's length, wondering serenely how long it would be before she dropped it. The baby, her son, wriggles inconclusively, his face puckering and pouting. "You're so stupid," she says, and gathers the baby onto her breasts, embracing him tightly, her muscles singing with electricity, suddenly so scared and protective. It is grey autumn in the bedroom. Vernon is somewhere, she is not sure. Her son grabs the collar of her housecoat, balls it in his fist, rubs his face on her shoulder. She does not know where Vernon is, but she has his son. Eighteen years after she asks for a child she gets one. She is forty-two. How like him to do that. She will be sixty when he is eighteen. His youth will mock her age. She will be dead when she is a grandmother. If he gets married. Married? The dim light washes out her eyes, his color. Vernon is nowhere, she is sure. She dandles the baby in her lap, vacantly staring out the window. The baby starts to cry. Without hesitation she slaps the baby's face. Her son, delaying half a breath, launches into squawl that she tries to deafen by holding him tightly against her shoulder, rocking back and forth cooing to him that she is sorry, she is sorry, she is sorry....

She lets the picture drop to the floor. No matter. No bitterness now. Vernon's mistress -- skeletons, sour relics, dead. Making her son grow into a nobody because she could not love or hate him enough to make him fight back. No virtuous smell on her. A stone, rolling downhill. Not thinking. Not feeling. Wasting time. The bile sticks in her throat, the dead venom of old thoughts. She revives Vernon's face on the death pillow, the truculence of his earlier days no longer usable. His expiration. The pointless wake and consolations. The two of them -- herself and her son -- living in the big house. Bumping together like flies in a jar. So full of emptiness they choke and cannot speak. Finally, only her. Her eyes disconnect. Her ears disconnect. Within her skull inside her house she digresses, an unusable wraith, more respected as she grows less alive. Until people forget and call her virtuous, a survivor, a good woman, an oracle. No answers, she has no answers. Only quaint bitterness, a lot of cry and no wool. Noise and nutmeg.

The nurses clean up the glass, put the pictures back. Impassively she listens to their bustle. Eyes sheathed. Ears untuned. One of them asks her if she wants anything, but she ignores the request. Two nurses leave. She senses one more in the room, near the door. She waits. The nurse waits. "Adelle," she finally says, "when are you going to act your age?"

"I don't have an age," she shoots back. "I'm ageless. No excuse for me."

The nurse leaves. Mary Cooper comes to today. Mary Cooper. George. She resents the house in their young hands. Too much like her and Vernon at the start. Seventy years later they will get what she did not get seventy years ago. They have a young marriage, room to flower. Why do they think they need her? She senses someone standing in the door. "Who's there?" Her hearing aid hums with someone's voice but she's not paying attention. Images of the red house, the chestnut woodwork, Vernon. "What? Say that again."

"It's only me, Mary Cooper. I brought you some rhubarb."

"C'mon in, c'mon in." There is a sudden lightness in her heart and she yearns to know what they are doing, hungry and anticipating. "How are you? I was just thinking of you the other day," the furrows in her mother's hand, the smell of Vernon's skin, her father's gritty eyes, the touch of wedding lace, "wonderin' how my house was coming along," the taste of hand-milled ice cream, her son at her nipple, a desk littered with poetry, "and wishing I could see all the marvelous changes you've made," the milky darkness of blindness curdling to half-recalled pictures of pain and happiness, a kaleidoscope spinning eagerly until, in a rush

of memory, her hearing drowns and she nods smilingly at her own image fading into the warm emptiness of her heart.

THE POET

(Concerning Greg Snider)

It is November. I have been putting this off much too long. I can see the rain explode off the floor of my porch, hear its cackle on my roof. Difficult to begin; much easier to listen to the rain, become lost in its greyness. I am alone in my study, a single light branching out over my desk, its pearl light making everything else grey-green, like a dark aquarium. Noisy with the binding of books. Silent with indecision.

When he showed up at the post office that day, when we saw him for the first time, we were, to say the least, pleasantly perturbed. I remember him clearly, not so much for his appearance, which was unusual in itself, but the combative kindness he carried with him, as if daring anyone not to accept his generosity and wholeheartedness. He was not tall -- perhaps five-seven or five-eight -- and had an inconsequential build. He dressed in castoffs: khaki pants liberally patched, work-worn boots, a flannel shirt not far from being a polishing cloth, a canvas bag attached to a long strap that crossed his chest like a bandoleer. But what was most arresting was his face. His forehead, like the rest of his features, was wrinkled, like a crumpled brown bag, but the strong healthy skin made his age difficult to tell. His mouth moved gently under a thatch of hair that fell into the disarray of a goatee, but his cheeks were clean-shaven and his sideburns short. He gathered his hair into a thick queue that rode patiently on his neck; the hair itself was newborn fine. But chiefly his eyes held the mixture of kindness and stubbornness we had sensed in his presence -- they were a damp black, like wet earth, shot with specks of a lighter color not quite gold that glistened in certain lights. He was unfailingly polite to the postmistress, filling out the forms for the mail box, handing her his five dollars for the rental fee, but it was clear she did not know what to do with this kindness offered from such a ragamuffin shape. When he had thanked her and left, everyone there watched him go. He did not so much leave an impression as a wake. We all bounced around, slightly jostled by the man's singularity.

This picture is important because so many others will paint their own distortions to satisfy their own fears about who he was. I am telling the truth as close as I can; yet even as I conjure up the images and anecdotes of his existence, they are all faded, like the light of a November afternoon. I am sewing with nearly invisible threads, my bloody fingertips leaving words behind.

Too much mea culpa. Get on with it.

At that time I taught (and still do teach) English at the local high school. When Greg Snider came to town, school had just been let out and I faced, for the first time in my life since puberty, a blessedly unemployed summer. I had promised myself that I would resuscitate my dormant mind and finally get to the book I had been chipping away at for years. Like most of the people in town, I thought Greg was just another of the hippies who hung around the Embassy, the cultural leftovers of a previous generation.

Indeed, he seemed to be one of them. He had rented a room over the Embassy (which, as I found later, had only a plank desk, an old chair, a lamp, and a mattress on the floor) and conversed with the hippies most of the time. No one knew what he did for a living, but he always paid his rent and never asked for credit. Evenings, he would sit on the bench in front of the Embassy and a small group of people would gather around him and he would read to them from a sheaf of papers in his hands. Over time the numbers of people would increase, but in the beginning he had only a few listeners. Tom, the police chief, would cruise by in his patrol car, but as far as I could see no one paid Tom any mind, just paid their attention like coins to the slight bearded figure reading in a single clear voice. He was reading them poetry, I found out, and I learned that the only thing he did during the day was write poetry. Sometimes someone would catch a glimpse of him walking through the forest near the fairgrounds, sometimes he'd be sitting in the middle of the football field or in the laundromat. Some thought he sold drugs for a living and told Tom so, but he just said in his usual gruff manner that the guy was clean. Some people thought Tom himself was frustrated hippie.

Perhaps the suspicions about him started there. I suspected him of nothing more than perhaps being a better writer than I was. My novel was limping along at that point, and I came to listen to him both for some inspiration and to see if his character, transmuted, would revive my work in progress. I suppose I used him like everyone else did, tried to get something out of the words he freely offered to everyone without giving anything back.

His readings were never announced nor were they every night consistently. But like a pheromone the signal went out and people drifted in, and soon Greg would arrive and place himself among them. His seat was always on the bench. Usually without much preliminary, though sometimes he would explain how he got a particular inspiration, in a voice that was at the same time reedy and resonant, he would read and offer his day's crop. Sometimes the poems were

revisions and he would ask his audience if they liked the changes. If someone made a suggestion that he liked, he jotted it down in a notebook and cordially thanked the person for the thought. After twenty minutes or so, the reading was over.

I had been to poetry readings before, nice aseptic gatherings. Everyone was so intent at being at a poetry reading, especially if the poet was someone they had read in college, that they entirely missed the poet's words. But the audience was not the problem -- it was the way the whole thing was put together. There was the poet, no, the Poet, sitting before his listeners, his tie casually unknotted, reading at everyone. No one ever dared -- certainly I never dared -- to raise a hand and ask a question about the meaning of something. Disregard the fact that half the people there hungered to ask the same or a similar question -- it was just not done. So the poet would slip his private visions into our clothes, a reverse pickpocket, and off we were sent.

But Greg had sculpted something different. My first reading was on a beautiful July evening slipping gracefully into sunset. The poem he was going to read, he explained, had come to him while he scanned the bulletin board in the laundromat. A 3x5 card had said (here he rummaged for a piece of paper in his shirt pocket): "Wanted: someone to share nice fireplace, cat, popcorn, and second bedroom. Write to Box 302." "I began the poem," he said, shifting his weight, "with the advertisement itself and then put in some of the things those words said to me." He paused and looked at the people around him. "You can find poetry just about anywhere if you have your eyes on right." He cleared his throat delicately and began. (I have the paper in front of me now, the creases dirty.)

"Wanted: someone to share nice fireplace, cat, popcorn, and second bedroom."

"Wanted":
like a tree wants wind
to remind the branches of their roots:
we are here, we hold fast,
we will remain.

"someone to share"
sun, rain, seed --
share with me the strength of water,

the tendons of green,
hands leaf-catching the sun.

These are the continuities:
ravens chasing play in flight,
the second life chasing the first,
the fight to hold fast
while flying fast --

write to this tree that stands laughing,
cupping ravens at rest, roots knotted in soil,
write to this emptiness,
make it sound,
and curl upward into the sun.

At first nothing much happened. Then someone down front asked him to read it a second time. He looked up for assent. Several nodded yes. He read it again, slowly, emphasizing the relationships between the words. When he had finished, someone told him that he liked the opening image of wind reminding the trees of what it was. Another person asked why he used ravens. Greg said he enjoyed the way they played; they seemed a good image of the way we could allow a little play into our lives. A person behind me asked why he used emptiness if it was a poem about being alive. Greg smiled and said that she had to see "emptiness" with "sound," the idea of taking something that could be empty, our soul, something that too often is empty, and making it sound, making it "solid" ("like a sound dollar" he said) by making it make words or "sounds." The person who had asked him to read it a second time asked him to read it once more and by way of consent the crowd silenced itself.

When it was over the cars passing on Main Street, the general clutter of sound in the air, just did not exist. Everyone was immersed in separate reveries. My rational mind tried to make this just another reading by thinking of the poem's imagery (not very strong, it said), its structure (arbitrary), using all the tools I had been taught to lasso words and tame them. But it didn't work. He gathered his papers and left. One by one the people drifted past me until I had the bench all to myself. The streets were bathed in the sodium glow of the streetlights.

The house is empty around me, an emptiness that is not sound. A single unornamented voice speaking out simple yet touching ideas, a small man shepherding words into people's minds. Maybe he would have been tolerated if he had stayed at the Embassy all his life and entertained the masses -- he might even have been looked on favorably as an eccentric, an amusing kink in normal life. He could have gone that way. During one reading, one of his largest, with almost fifty people, he talked about farming. What was unusual was that Jim Jennings, Brian Little, John Bowers, all farmers in the area, were at the reading. They stood with their beef-red hands stuck in their pockets and listened to this man whom they could have crushed into chaff. Greg did not take special notice of them as he talked about how he was watching the farmers cultivate their corn, about how the corn was finally getting over the cold spell and pushing into the sky, how a man who worked with the earth had the earth in him and that when he returned to the soil he was only becoming a part of what he already was. He added that he didn't mean any one of us wanted to eat dirt for the rest of his life. Jim Jennings grinned at that. He pulled out his usual bouquet of papers, settled himself more firmly into the bench, and read:

HAYING

It's haying time again and
oh hell have to oil that kicker
hope it makes it this year
Get the twine like a coil of sun
ready
The tractor snaps to the hay rake and kicker
moves out like a heavy lizard
growling up the road
The cut hay swells on the field
humps of some old dinosaur's back maybe --
but farmers don't think of that
just how damn hot it's gonna be and
how the hay seed'll itch
when it gets in your crotch
700 bales of hay, 700 square meals for winter -- the sun grinds your head
the heat sucks you dry
(this sucks you say and are right)
and hay dust wraps you in a cocoon --
your ear boils with the thunk! of the kicker,
your nose simmers with diesel oil and dry earth,

your arms burn bale-heavy,
your eyes just plain hurt --
all turned inward into fat off your bones
until you waddle the wagon home
stack the dry goods in the barn
and shuck the cocoon of dust off
standing cleaned and finished
with the colors of the setting sun
dancing over you

Afterwards the three farmers talked with him and shook his hand. It could have been like that, could have remained friendly and slightly amusing.

But a man who puts himself out puts himself out all the way. People came to him because they found in him something they could not find in themselves. When he made his audience laugh with a well-aimed joke, when he netted their hearts with a poem of bitter love or a yearning dream, he made them touch themselves. He gave them each miniature mirrors to reflect their own faces back into their own eyes. At times I had misgivings, accused myself of adolescent hero-worship, tried to get back to that even keel called adulthood -- but it was a summer of poetry.

A man who puts himself out puts himself out all the way. We all knew the summer was going to end -- school machinery was being oiled for another year, new armor for winter was being fashioned -- but we all decided to ignore that fact for a while. By the end of August, teenagers began to slip into the hearing crowd, cloyed by August heat and the routine freedom of summer. We had to move to the triangle of grass where the main highway and the old main street divided, ears open, lounging in words. It was all good fun, even if some parents took a dim view of the proceedings.

The last reading of the summer was on the day before school opened. None of the kids was there. It took no more than five minutes. I have the last poem here, the only one he ever signed:

There are hills
called years --
climb them we can
to find
new lakes and good fishing
on the downside.

There are caves
called words --
tunnel them we can to find
new gold and good salt
on the underside.

There are oceans
called selves --
swim them we can
to find
new depths and good sailing
on the topside.

Climb, tunnel, swim --
whatever world you occupy
remember:
live inside each day,
sleep with your ears open,
disregard the official version,
go like light.

Thus ended the summer. When Greg suggested to me that he come to the school to teach some classes in poetry, I reacted enthusiastically. I told him I would arrange it with the principal and retimed my poetry unit to come earlier in the year. It was with great excitement that I met with my principal to discuss Greg's arrival.

I can remember the conversation to this day almost verbatim. Richard asked me to sit down and even before my rump hit the chair I was explaining what I wanted.

He raised his hand like a traffic cop. "Wait a minute. Who is this man?"

I explained that I really didn't know who he was but that he had been composing poetry all summer and reading it to people.

"Was he the fellow downtown, the one who hung out in front of the Embassy?"

I answered that he didn't exactly "hang out" but that that was where he gave his readings.

"I've heard about him. Some of our students were there, if I remember correctly." I said yes, there had been some of our kids there. "Do you know how I know that?" I answered no, but a chill crept into my throat. "Some of the

parents called me, a few met me on the street, and pretty generally voiced a little annoyance at the man. I guess Tom has been getting flak down at the station, too."

I said nothing.

"You say the man is a good poet and I trust your judgment in that. But you know as well as I do," he said, shifting his weight forward to make his point better, "that when parents get mad at you, being in a beehive is comfortable. Some parents I talked to don't like him because he's got long hair, some because he's got a beard, some because he shaves only his cheeks, some because he disgraces the army by wearing fatigues, some because he's a poet and all poets are fags. You can't win with those people and you're better off not even trying." He sat back in his chair. "And you've not been immune, either. 'What would any respectable person' etcetera, etcetera. You know how it is." He shrugged his shoulders. "One of your saving graces is your willingness to think of the kids first. In this instance, think of the parents first." I didn't speak a word, didn't shift my eyes off his. He opened up his hands as if he were releasing a bird. "Have him in your class if you want, but don't make it for a long time, keep the material clean, and I'll fend for you." He smiled. "You try too hard at times."

I met with Greg that evening and we arranged what I could to do prepare the classes. I told him about the conversation with Richard and he laughed softly, almost to himself. We agreed that three days would be appropriate.

I went through the preliminary material and told them that Greg would be in to give some classes in writing poetry. They reacted routinely, disparaging the activity, even those who had been there in the summer, but I expected that and accepted it as their role to play. I invited other English teachers who had a free period then to sit in on the classes. Everything had been prepared.

The first day of classes sparkled; even my colleagues argued with him. When Greg returned the next day, so did they, and by the third day people were turning out poetry that they voluntarily, excitedly, read to the class. At the end of the third class, he asked everyone to collect all their poems into a booklet and give it a distinctive title. When he said his goodbyes to the students, thanked the other teachers for participating, thanked Richard for letting him come, he had, like Santa Claus, left behind a lot of gifts and a little mystery. It wasn't long before my colleagues, with Richard's permission, got Greg to teach in their classes, and soon Greg had touched, if not reached, every student in that school. Almost everybody carried around a sheaf of personal poetry.

It was not long after this that I got a call from Richard to come to his office on my planning period. When I walked in, three sets of parents, looking militantly serious, were seated in a glowering circle, with one empty chair off to the side for me. I landed squarely in it. Before Richard could even explain what it was I was there for, one of the parents, Bill Bigelow, held up a crumpled bunch of papers and asked me if I condoned the kind of crap his kid called poetry. I asked him for the papers so I could see what he was talking about, but instead he tore a page out of the papers and proceeded to read a poem about how everyone in society was a jerk and that what he, the writer, wanted was to be free "like a pod of whales in the palm of the sea." The rhetorical questions flew thick after that. Could I justify such attitudes? Was that the way I felt about the way things were run? What about my daughter's writing that she wanted to rub her body against the earth? When the meeting was over, Richard looked at me and said, "I've fought off lots more." I thanked him for running interference.

That night, after the first two or three phone calls, I found myself saying that Mr. Snider and I were only casual acquaintances, that I had not known him for a long time, that his poetry was not all that excellent, that he was not a very good teacher, that I apologized for having invited him to class. By the end of the evening I had thoroughly betrayed him, and to top it off, guiltlessly fell into a deep refreshing sleep.

The rumor assembly line began on him. He was a homosexual, a drug addict, an ex-con, a drug dealer -- the variations were all sickening. The last time I saw Greg his smile was unshaken but for the first time I'd known him he looked old. He knew nothing about my treachery, and to complete the act I said nothing about it to him. He deposited his poems with me, saying there were new poems elsewhere, shook my hand, and disappeared. I've never heard from him since.

While we all fear the big sleep, there are smaller sleeps that we take, small deaths that make us fit to suffer the abrasiveness of the world, but leave us strangely numb so that even as we do the best we can with what we are, we are slowly completed until, at the end of our lives, we are as complete as a brick wall. The clock is ticking. My legs hurt. My eyes burn. Once this light is off, once his poems go back into the drawer, I have as good as killed him. I hear the clock ticking. It is finished.

TEETH

(Concerning Jason Bennett)

Though Jason Bennett was sixty-five and a slab of pate showed through his thin web of hair, he was still a youthful man. Life for him had been fertile, spiced, confluent. He had married at twenty-nine, had sired a son, Michael, at thirty. Michael. Michael, now himself thirty-five, was unhappy. He had recently arrived home bearing a divorce. "We were not compatible," he said. "She did not appreciate my freedom." Jason, a widower, mused on the decline of marriage, the state of disunion -- everything was becoming food for the churchyard. "Why did it take you three years to see what I saw on the wedding day?" Jason asked him. "I see things slowly," Michael replied. "I have slow eyes." Jason gnashed his teeth in quiet distress.

When young Jason had been blessed with white and strong and lustrous teeth. He had scrubbed them twice daily. He carefully dug his brush into the back crevices to exorcise any hidden food, diligently flossed his teeth like a shoeshineman over a spit polish. Jennifer, his wife, who died from tuberculosis, had admired his teeth. "I fell in love with your smile the very first time I saw you," she said, grinning in her attractive way. He continued the ablution of his teeth, with yearly visits to the dentist, until he was well into his fifties. Then, in his sixties, he began to believe his teeth had become dull; he was cursed with the sensation that they were all unanchored. The dentist joked with him about his "horse's teeth" and told him that they were as securely moored as tree roots, but he sensed that the gums he had so lavishly tended were nakedly shrinking.

"Maybe the flossing contributes to the loss of my teeth," he told Jennifer. "Maybe I should go instead of every year to the dentist every month to have my teeth cleaned."

"Do you have any teeth in the palm of your hand yet? What are you worrying about?"

"You don't understand. Did you know that half the people in the United States lose their teeth by the age of sixty-five?" He punctuated the air with his index finger.

"It could be hereditary," she said. "You can't do anything about that." She was a slim woman, with auburn hair and small hips.

"So what should I do? Advise me."

"I don't know." She shrugged. "It's a common occurrence."

Each day, as Jason brushed his teeth, he noted with dismay how they felt even more unfastened, though they stood mockingly solid in their upright ranks. Like cemetery stones, Jason thought. Leaning into the mirror he peered as best he could into the corners of his mouth. Jennifer, after inspecting his teeth like a vet would a horse's, doubted anything moved in his mouth except his complaining tongue.

He went to an oral surgeon who told him losing teeth was hereditary, moreso for men ("as usual" he added) and quizzed him on the strength of his family's teeth. After Jason responded "no" to every inquiry, the doctor prescribed a solution to be rubbed on the gums. "You may be experiencing the beginnings of pyorrhea, though I doubt it. This will encourage blood flow to the gums and should help get rid of that tingling sensation you told me about." He also told him to cut any sweets or fried foods from his diet.

"I don't eat those sorts of things," he answered stiffly. He took the prescription.

Jason had Jennifer pry open his mouth and rub a solution-soaked Q-Tip along his gums; she was more patient than he was. She reminded him that he was the one who went to the dentist and was so worried about his virility, so he should shut up and pay his piper. He said that he was not at all worried about his virility; but that thought joined all the other ravens in his mind. He began to hate to see himself, hating to think.

"Jennifer, if I lose my teeth, I will lose something important."

"Men always think they're losing something important."

"What will I do?" he pondered.

Jennifer mused. "Why not try another doctor? The one you go to looks too young. I think it could be nutrition."

"Nothing gets better. I pull the floss through my teeth more carefully, and I brush less often. Nothing gets better."

"What do you think is causing it?" Jennifer said, tapping her head slyly. "Perhaps a trauma when you were young?"

"Perhaps I get it from you. Your father, you know, lost his teeth about this age."

"My father always had good teeth. He passed them on to his children."

"Ah, but he lost them in the end. No guarantee," Jason said. "Maybe it's a man's curse. And he was married four times."

"You must be envious of him," Jennifer said, "or you wouldn't bring him around."

"Who I envy or don't envy is of no concern right now. That state of being gets us nowhere."

"I bet you liked his state of being. I imagine you envy Michael his strange life."

"I don't like to talk like this," Jason stated flatly. "It gets us nowhere."

Jennifer paused. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't know. My hair?"

She paused again. "I'd rather not."

The next day Jason went to a new dentist, a holistic doctor who anointed his teeth with a salve of herbal remedies and flooded him with vitamin pills. He said not to unduly stress his system. The dentist could not guarantee anything.

"I have no confidence in this. Some things," he pondered, "do not have to be experienced to be known."

"Then face it, Jason. If the methods don't work, you can think about getting false teeth. There is nothing dangerous about them. Many men have them."

Jason thought. "I wouldn't like them," he insisted. They'd feel like a second tongue."

"Your first tongue needs help," Michael said.

"At least have respect, Michael," Jason answered. A month later Jennifer died. The medical insurance covered the costs. Michael and Jason looked ashen and twisted.

For weeks after the funeral Jason rummaged around his life. He was confused. He peered intently at his life, his heart and stomach heavy with the burden of memories. He was sixty-five with a son he did not understand. "What have I so terribly done to him?"

One day, after staring at himself in the bathroom mirror, he resolved to do something to bolster his sagging pride. He dressed nattily, even to folding a handkerchief in his breast pocket, and walked to the new styling shop for men. He looked at the toupees, one by one, shook his head and went determinedly into the shop. The owner, a slim young man with reddish-brown hair, greeted him casually.

"May I try," he found he couldn't say the word and pointed instead, "one of those? Maybe two?"

"It can be arranged."

Jason pointed out the ones he wanted, a chestnut brown one from the window and a black one from the mannequin in the shop. Don, the owner, brought them to him as Jason sat at a three-paneled mirror. As he looked at himself, he noticed for the first time that there were two other young men in the shop, both slim-hipped and with thick curly hair. Don glanced at them as he put the toupees on the counter.

Jason thought his heartbeat was audible. He tried on the first one, a drab brown with straight hair combed to the side. Don fitted it deftly, taking out a red comb to straighten it. "There," he said, stepping back to let Jason view it from the front and side, "it fits you well."

"It really feels like a heavy hand."

"It's not all that heavy," Don answered. "Let's try this." Don lifted the first toupee off and settled the second one down gently. In the mirror Jason could see the two young men watching languidly with a half-smile on their faces, and he avoided their eyes.

"What is the material of this?"

Don primped the toupee. "It's made of Dynel fiber and doesn't frizz in the heat or humidity."

"How do you take care of it?" The two men had gotten up and walked slowly over the mirror, behind Jason.

"Wash it with a mild soap in warmish water, let it air dry or blow dry it. Or, if you prefer, leave it with me. I'll style and dry it for you."

One of the men said, "Yes, he's good at that."

"Will it make me sweat?"

"No."

Jason removed the toupee. "What is that one there? The one parted in the middle?" It looked faintly reminiscent of his earlier hair. "I like the style."

"It's made of Vietnamese hair."

"Real hair?"

"Yes." "Oh," said Jason, "I don't think I'd go for real hair."

"Why not?" the other young man said.

"I don't know, but I'd be wearing someone else's body. I would not be myself."

"You are not yourself anyway," Don said. The two men smiled. "You don't want a toupee, you want a guarantee. The toupee has a guarantee. Perhaps that's all you need?"

"I am myself," Jason said petulantly. "And you are a lousy salesman. I came to buy a toupee. I didn't come here to exchange frivolities." His hands began to shake.

"Then," Don said, with an extravagant gesture, "the door is yours."

"Shit," Jason said, regretting it immediately, and walked out of the shop.

In the street he was deeply angered. It took him five minutes to unclench his fists and even then the blood pounded in his temples. He thought of Jennifer and looked at the sun-lit busy street. His teeth ached in retribution.

That evening he and Michael quarreled. As they ate dinner Michael said that he had met a woman and would be moving out to live with her after her divorce.

"What woman?" growled Jason. "Someone at a bar?"

Michael cut into his meat. "She works in my dentist's office."

"Are you going to marry her?" Michael was tapping his finger slowly. Jason knew this sign of his discontent, but pushed on. "Why don't you try living on your own for a while? It does no good to plunge back into the water after you've nearly drowned. You've got money from your mother. Travel!"

"I want to save that. Emergencies."

"What do you see for yourself, what's in the stars?"

"There are no stars. Just ahead of me."

"No goal, no direction?" Jason sighed. "You are thirty-five years old."

"And you are sixty-five. And I'd say we're about even." Michael chucked his fork on his plate. It clattered loudly. He got up to leave.

"Sometimes I feel sorry for you," Jason said.

"And I feel sorry for myself. Pity is all we got." Michael stalked out of the room. Jason was sick in his heart and the food nauseated him. He went to his room and laid down on the double bed.

He wanted to forget the quarrel. Jason rose and went through the treasure box he and Jennifer had kept. Here was a miniature of Jennifer, in a locket. She'd given it to him one night under the moon. Dried roses, an old silver comb, a service picture of him in Germany, 1943.

Among the paraphernalia he found a picture of his father, the original Bennett, taken at the family's annual reunion, surely not more than thirty years ago, just after Michael was born. His father, kneeling on one knee, with Michael balanced on the upraised other, was laughing, and in the tilt of the head toward Michael the teeth were dingy; Jason imagined he could see gaps between them. Perhaps it was the camera lens, the film, the light, but he knew it wasn't. His father, so long dead now, with the betrayal like ashes in his mouth. Jason had never really noticed, and now, when he did, it didn't matter.

Oh Dad, Jason thought, did we ever know?

After a while Jason padded to Michael's room and knocked on the door. He wanted to say he'd been nervous, on edge. When Michael didn't answer, he opened the door a crack and said he would like to apologize. Michael did not respond, but the light was on and Jason pushed ahead into the room.

His son slept, mouth slack, in his easy chair in the corner, the architect lamp from the desk glaring down on his face, an open book on his lap. Jason wanted to put his hand on his son's shoulder but felt awkward and embarrassed at the thought.

"Goodnight, Michael."

Michael didn't move. Jason, standing close to him, saw something he had long ago put out of his mind: the man's gums were slinking away from his teeth. They looked red and irritated and the teeth were an unhealthy yellow.

Michael continued to sleep.

Jason, though wrenched by the sight, didn't speak. The next morning he rose early and scrubbed his teeth with delighted vigor. For two minutes he did nothing but suck the clean morning air in over his now-secure cleansed teeth.

REFRAIN

(Concerning George Cooper)

The room was lit by candles. A few rows of folding chairs patiently faced the coffin that lay, like a wooden hyphen, at the front of the room. Flowers arced in color, their scent thick against the low ceiling. Off in the house somewhere a clock clanged eleven times. All the windows had their blinds drawn. A young man, slightly bald and slightly paunchy, slipped into the room and made a gesture to say something to the smallish white-haired man sitting off to one side, but stopped, his mouth open and hand outstretched. He glanced at his watch, glanced at the man, and slid out of the room.

No one else was there. His eyes clung to the dull wood of the coffin. His face did not sag with tiredness and his body sat upright, not slouched. His hands, brown as bark, arrayed themselves like an altarboy's on his knees. The clock struck the quarter hour. The young man appeared again in the room. "Mr. Cooper," he said in a voice professional with pity, "you have to leave now. The services were over a while ago." The figure of George Cooper did not sway and the young man, daunted, decided to wait another fifteen minutes before ushering him out.

When the young man had left, George Cooper walked to the coffin. There was the face of Mary Sager, no longer Mary Cooper, resilient as he wanted to remember her beneath the undertaker's cosmetics. "You wouldn't have approved my being here," he whispered to her, "but it was always like us to do the right things for the wrong reasons." His eyes went out of focus and the calm rouge on her cheek and the white velvet pillow melted into a candle with a soft unmoving flame. He heard the brisk scuffle of the man's shoes on the carpet behind him. Without a word, he brushed past the man.

The street outside was a mute, shadowed. His hands flew in and out of his pockets like unsettled birds. There would be no sleep for him. He turned right and walked resolutely down the short hill into town. His sparse figure jerked as he hurried, all his parts not keeping the same pace. The Glen Hollow was still open and he headed thirstily for its light. Immersed in the voices and glow of the place he ordered a whiskey, straight. With his drink in one hand and his change in the other he roosted at a small table near the back. Seated opposite him was another old man, his face going blank, five glasses in front of him, one in his hand.

"I have the best wife you'd ever want to meet," George said without preliminary. The man raised his eyes to the knot of George's tie. "Yes, the best." George gulped half the glass, ran his tongue over his lips. "I met Mary Cooper almost fifty years ago. At a high school dance. Can you believe that? Fifty years ago." He wanted to throw the drink into the man's blank face, play loud music with the quarters in his hand, anything to keep his ears empty of lies; but the whiskey prodded his tongue and the words spilled out unshepherded. "She didn't want to dance with me but her sister made her and I was so in love with being in love that I...I even wrote her poetry. Poetry! Me! But you should have seen me then -- and she, she had this long brown hair and blue eyes that would make the sky..." He finished the drink, bought another. "We were young of course you know how people are, we said dumb things, did dumb things, promised a slice of the moon for a kiss, but something real must've been there because, well, because I've got the best wife you ever saw, and that was over fifty years ago." The bottom of the glass greeted him. He quickly bought another, downed it.

"I remember one time, just sitting in the park, holding hands, just sitting. We could do that, just sit and listen to the air hum." Black patches slipped up alongside his eyes and the face of the man across from him elongated, the red of his cheeks like two streaks of fire. "We could! And when we got married everyone said it was the nicest wedding they'd ever been to. And it was!" The patches crept inward, and he though he were looking down a long tube. "We loved each other like nobody ever loved. Believe me!" He saw his hand go out for the hand of the other man. The two streaks of fire jumped up and disappeared and through the curdling in his ears George heard the man mutter "Cain't even offer me a drink". Someone laughed.

"But...but..." His arm shot out, trying to grab the fire, but his elbow knocked his drink over and it spilled full into his lap. Someone in a white apron was there sweeping the liquid away; colors kaleidoscoped, voices burbled loudly, the patches narrowed, the air pressed. With a snap of his body he heaved out of his chair and into the night air, looking for all the world under the candle-yellow sodium lights like an old sot who'd wet himself. With an inarticulate cry he lunged into the darkness and disappeared.

And Other Stories

BIRCHES

Elaine Dewey received the augury of her death at noon, during her lunch hour, when she went to see Dr. Mangel, as he asked. Yes, the results had come in the biopsy showed definitely the eruption of cancer. She had time left, of course, therapy could start immediately, remission was possible, etcetera. She carried the news back to work like a pocketful of string too short to be saved. She left the office at five.

She walked the few city blocks home as always. She passed the time-scummed window of the local Woolworths, the yellowed posters for tulip sundaes blearing out at her. She strolled pensively past the second-read bookstore, the pawn shop, the Salvation Army, the arcade den, the local grocer who groused when she didn't have exact change. In the foyer of her apartment building (modeled on what the builder thought was the open-air style of Venice) she slipped her passkey into the lock, pausing for a moment, as was customary, to notice the missing mosaic tiles in the cherubim overhead. Their eyes were gone. The door slunk quietly closed behind her as she checked the mailbox. No letters.

The boys had already been in. Lakelets of milk blended with the topography of cookie crumbs on the counter. She cleaned them up, silently, her arm as efficient as a wiper blade. Basil would not be home for a while. Briefly she imagined him battling the traffic up from Boston, tie askew, left hand resting on the outside mirror, knight errant astride Route 95. Then the picture faded. The window in the living room framed a small courtyard. Rectangular flagstones circled a struggling birch tree. Miners had gotten in the leaves of the first tree they'd put there. She remembered the famine of that tree, how the leaves bleached to a urine yellow, then curled like baby's fists and flocked to the ground. Basil had spread Diazanon according to the instructions, but finally had to uproot the shivered lance of the tree. Then, this past year, Basil came home with an orphan tree riding in the back seat, the burlap bulb riddled with roots. It survived the winter, but already she could see, or thought she could see, a halo of yellow around each leaf. In the veins, she thought, the miners are now at work.

Basil got home late. He'd paid attention to the air traffic control report on the radio and found himself scurrying through Chelsea at 35. The boys had already eaten. One was reading in his room, the other destroying spaceships. She scooped the warmed-over steak and rice out of the oven and extracted a

still-fresh salad from the refrigerator. She watched his hands as he ate and complained, as he always did, of the horrors of commuting, the abrasion of his job (VP at a cable company he'd wanted a job in journalism), how the general quality of life sucked. She knew that by the bottom of the salad he'd be bellowing at Seth for playing the video games and destroying his mind. So she poured him some Scotch, an extraordinary thing since he rarely imbibed beyond wine during the week, and watched the brown liquid swirl behind his eyes. The blip-blip from the living room subsided.

He paid his respects to the two boys, tousling Seth's hair in a way that she knew Seth hated but endured, mock-boxing with Benjamin, his big hands swallowing Ben's tiny fists. He didn't kiss either of them, instead wished them goodnight from the door. She waited in the bedroom while he read the paper, listening to him fold it and fold it again until he'd bracketed the article he wanted to read. Then the squeal of the recliner, the snap of the light switch, the carpeted shuffle down the hallway, the clothes laid neatly on hangers, shirt, socks, underwear in the hamper. The picture of his slightly pudgy body, the skin always a yellowish tan, hair dark and whorled on his chest, burned in afterimage as he turned off the light and slipped into bed. The deep sigh he took, the way he angled his head on the pillow, told her that if she didn't speak soon he'd be asleep.

"Honey," she murmured, swing her leg over his thighs, her arm ribbanded across his chest and arms, "I need you to listen to something." After she'd told him, he removed herself and waited. Freed for the moment he was as supine as a hyphen in a sentence, a long pause between thoughts. For the first time that day a constriction torqued her throat like the closing of a fist and a yellowish haze hovered across her eyes as they burned with tears. Slowly (so slowly, she thought, and tried not to read reluctance into the rotation of his body) Basil turned on his side and cupped her in his arms, cradling her in the quoin of his armpit. She brushed his cheek with her hand. She wanted him to talk and fracture the silence around them that sounded all too prophetic, but to reject his gesture seemed obscene and churlish. Yet she felt that some treaty had just been settled between them, autographed moments later by Basil's even breathing. She imagined she heard, before she too fell reluctantly asleep, a sound akin to the rapid crackle of melting ice that echoed in every room of the house. Then silence and sleep.

In the morning she constructed breakfast as she always did. The boys got into a wrangle about the plastic power ring at the bottom of the cereal box. Basil perfunctorily told them to be quiet, but she, in a moment she later did not regret but only marveled at, calmly took the ring and ground it under her heel. An acid silence ate their voices. The boys, casting only the briefest glances between them, took the dishes to the sink and with a stubbornness that made her throat constrict again they fussily cleaned all the breakfast plates and glasses. Then, backs still stiff, only their eyes a little unhinged, they gathered their books and broke for school. Basil read the lees of his coffee.

"When will we tell them?" he asked the bottom of his cup.

She looked more closely at the peremptory balding spot at the top of his head, the creeping tonsure that reminded her of his stories about his sojourn in the seminary and the anguish he'd drunk when his call turned out to be no more than a jackal's whisper. "I don't see it as a matter of 'we'," she replied, only slightly surprised as the hint of stone in her voice. When their eyes met she the space between them rattle like a huge screen sifting out grit and fossils.

"Of course 'we' have to tell them. It's a family problem."

She didn't answer at first, then said, "You're right. I'm sorry, I'm not very - "

He rose swiftly out of his chair and cradled her. "Do you want me to stay home today?" She collapsed into his gesture, more than anything needing to feel the yield of his flesh, the starkness of his ribs -- yet the damnable voice in her head, the voice that had sprouted last night out of his breathing and solidity, his "thereness," crackled its witchy static: "He hates the driving. Why does he have to ask? Remember that last night he fell " She choked it off, smelled the sterile manliness of his after-shave, astringent and halting. She pulled her head away, looked squarely at the knot of his tie, the wedge of Adam's apple above it.

"No, you go to work today. I'll be fine." She smiled for his benefit, surveyed his eyebrows, his cheeks, his lips, his forehead.

She followed him out to the driveway and watched him as he encased himself in the car. He turned on the radio, set the car in reverse, and receded, his goodbye wave hardly visible against the glare off the window. In another second he was gone. The summit branches of the birch tree barely stuck over the stockade fence, the almond-shaped leaves waving like green eyes in the breeze.

She spent the rest of the morning furiously cleaning the apartment. By noon, surrounded by a pot of steeped tea and lunch, her hair neat, wrapped in a yellow dress, she began to write, something she hadn't done since the gethsemane of convent school, where the stiffly-bordered starched miss the nuns wagged their fingers at oozed poetry into her diary in the hope that something like truth would distill out. At first she tried to rhyme but the hydraulic pressure of her thoughts tore the meter apart. Memories convened, and relics long forgotten surfaced in the lemon-green light of the afternoon. Only when she heard the ordinary sound of the front door open and close and the clomp of the boys' feet on the stairs did she notice anything. She continued to write even as the boys, as usual, burrowed into the icebox. She smiled at them, briefly, but maintained her silence. They said hello, briefly, hands busy with fruit. They decided to go to the park.

She'd thrown away all the paper by the time Basil arrived, wilted and weathered. Again he asked her when the boys should be told, again she defaulted, trying to save the cleanliness and peace that was slipping away. That night he held her again and for a time, in the silence and twilight, she reveled in his warmth the way she had when he, filled with lust and anguish, had given the seminary the slip and slipped her his seed. Only at the edge of sleep did she, for the first time, give weight to the hungry catalyst at work deep inside her, but the warmth, for the time being, buoyed her.

The next morning found her on the porch of the parish rectory, staring into the sallow face of the housekeeper. "Father Manley does not see anyone without an appointment," she intoned. Elaine politely asked if an exception might be made since she, Elaine, was dying of cancer and might need some spiritual advice. The housekeeper hesitated, not knowing if Elaine was chiding her or not, but then asked Elaine to wait. She disappeared, then re-appeared to ask her to come in.

She walked through the foyer and into the living room, where she was neatly and definitely abandoned by the housekeeper. In the center of her glowed a light calm, but in the extremities she felt the brushing cold she'd always felt in the presence of the priests who had visited the school for confession and conversion. She remembered them as corpulent men with white hair and rouge skin up to the roots, exhaling musty smells of cigarettes and sweat as they walked among the girls at study hours or blessed them in the final absolution of confession. They were her first view of men, and their raven presence, in

their soutanes and pillory collars, clashed violently with the clandestine physical information the girls passed among themselves like wafers. What, really, hid behind their zippers? She realized that that had been, in one form or another, the abiding question of her life.

She had imagined those priests existing in rooms of mahogany and late sunlight, but the living room she sat in now was crowded with the usual furniture and achingly beige, tediously neat, in the morning light. She did not, of course, know why she was here, lapsed Catholic and all. Priest-napper, she supposed she was -- nun-killer, too, for all the ignoring she did of her call. A collection of Robert Frost's poetry lay open on the coffee table.

She had just begun to read the exposed page when she heard the officious shuffle of wing-tip shoes on synthetic carpet. She raised her eyes to see the doorway fill with a slim black plumbline cross-teed by the usual white lifesaver collar. He strode confidently to her and, as she rose to greet him, he motioned for her to sit and shook her hand at the same moment that she sunk back into the cushions. Almost as if she'd pulled him down he landed on the couch, his left leg cocked under him in what she thought he must think is a casual unanxious gesture. She almost wanted to laugh at him: the giants of her youth had been whittled down to males.

"I don't believe we've met, Ms. -- "

"Dewey. Elaine Dewey."

"Dewey. No, the name doesn't cross my mind. Are you on our files?"

"Perhaps on the register of the dead." The neatness of the room annoyed her. She concentrated on the enlaced hairs between his eyebrows.

"The register of the, ah, dead? I'm afraid that I don't "

"Just a joke, Father. I haven't been to confession or church in years."

"What brings you back?"

"I'm going to die and I want to know if you people have learned anything." She squelched laughter. Far back in her head, now feeling airy and unmoored, the voice sat in caustic silence, ready to spear this man. She tried to dredge up some minimum courtesy to shield him.

"Perhaps you'd better start at the beginning."

"It's very simple. I'm going to die of cancer and I want to know if there is anything in this religion I've given up that can give me a reason why I shouldn't go out and kill my husband and children, and then do myself in."

He sat perplexed for a moment, his eyebrows raveled in one long hirsute bar of thought, then rose and started pacing. She noted that his face, screwed in concentration, looked stamped with a cross, the black of his eyebrows pierced by the thin line of his nose.

"How do you know you're going to die?"

"My doctor told me two days ago. The biopsy was positive."

He fell silent again, sitting in a chair across the room. Ah, the voice said, the quarantine has already begun.

"Were you brought up Catholic?"

"I went to the convent school. We learned French. We learned not to touch ourselves."

"You had the catechism?"

"Yes." "Do you remember it?"

"Not willingly. Why?"

"You were taught to accept God's actions, that His plan was beyond our knowledge."

"I wouldn't accept that line of reasoning from my mechanic."

Oddly, in the tight seriousness of the room, he chuckled. "All right. Appeal to childhood faith number one fails."

"What's number two?"

"A much harder version, Mrs. Dewey. Simply believing in God's love and wisdom, believing He cares for you and would not have you die for nothing."

A bleak vision of dry desert at noon cut through her mind, and emptiness tore like an explosion through her guts. "I can't afford that," she whispered. "I'm married to a man who wants to act as if life is simply a piece of garbled communication that will be straightened out if he waits long enough. I have two children who are entirely innocent of who I am and who I can only hope will feel a little remorse when I can't clean up after them anymore." The voice in her head rose to laugh out its venom, but she knocked it back, still wanting to shield this

man she didn't know at all. "I can't have the luxury of a simple faith. I'm stuck in the middle of a tribe of human beings and ready in an instant to hate them. Do you have an antidote for that?"

He walked across the room and sat next to her on the couch. "No, I don't. I'm supposed to give spiritual advice. I aim for the castles in the sky." She liked him immensely for that remark. "Mrs. Dewey, all you can do is examine what your life has been and see if, given the usual imperfections, you've done the best you can to love and be honest. If you're satisfied with your inventory, then you don't need me. If you're not, I've got a grab-bag of confession and absolution that might bind the wounds. In either case, Mrs. Dewey, it seems to me you aren't too concerned about the afterlife. In some way you are going to have to realize and accept your own absence and do it in terms of your earthly life, not some hypothetical summer camp for angels. And" -- and here he paused, a small smile playing on his lips -- "you seem pretty determined to make yourself pay for that information right down to the bottom of the cup." He paused again, playing with the pages of the book of poems, finally letting the leaves close in a gasp. "I'm sorry I can't be of any help."

She knew it was no use to stay, but she stayed anyway over lemon tea ferried in by the dour housekeeper. When she finally left she felt both relieved and abandoned. That night she told the children. Benjamin cried, but Seth, little man that he was trying to be, embraced her knees in silence.

Elaine finally went back to work, having decided to play female troubles instead of cancer as her trump excuse, got the appropriate chewing out, and returned to her desk. The first morning back she worked on filing accounts payable, took herself out to lunch, and in the afternoon filed accounts received. Dr. Mangel had called during her absence and left information about therapy, but she threw the messages away, caring at this point only to be dissolved in peace. The days passed. Basil did not so much avoid the subject as simply classify it in the realm of sex talk and income tax calculations, as problems to be pondered rather than aired. The children adjusted better, and even though she couldn't answer their direct questions, she was comforted by their brief and single-frequency attention. To them, the fact of her disease was in the same arcana as having a grandfather who can whistle "The Messiah" with tissue paper and comb. She knew Basil was handling it in his own way, reading the literature (his term) on it, talking in weighty tones to Dr. Mangel, spreading his concern like pollen, and she loved him for the effort. But she hated the fact that he was too

reserved and too much a stranger to her feelings to come right out and share the misery. He still worshipped from afar, an unbreakable habit of his.

She found herself frequenting supermarket newsstands to read the latest dispatched on immortality in the pulp papers. She dredged the indexes in Moody's and Kübler-Ross's books for hints. She even started eating foods she hated (onions, olives, anchovies) so that she could savor, even in their repulsiveness, their sharp pulsing annoyance. At night, when Basil slumbered, she tried to hear the sound of her own demise. She imagined the cancer as some video omnivore swallowing energy pods as it raced along her veins. Her ears became abnormally sharp until she imagined she could hear the molecular deceleration of the bricks in the apartment house, the unlinking atoms of the wooden floors, the architectural groaning of her skeleton. Smells would invade her, flushing keen memories from her brain's thickets. She believed, or wanted to believe, that these honed senses were pure imagination, not a fact of science. But she couldn't push away the feeling that she was preparing herself, like a space probe falling into the sun furiously pumping out data before it dissolved into a single insignificance.

Given her choice of reading material, her discovery of the Church of the Divine Facet was only a matter of time. After she'd read the information they'd sent her, she booked a flight for a weekend retreat, mailed in the $50 registration fee, and broke the news to Basil.

"This guy's crazy," he said after reading the literature, "and you're crazy if you go."

"I don't care. I deserve it."

"C'mon, Elaine, you know the boys and I can't " The stony look on her face, laced, as even he could see, with a desperation so tight it made his body jump, shut off his words. The silence crept around them like a nesting fog. "Well," he said, and justified the pamphlets against his knee. They weighed like dead birds in his hands. "I'm sorry."

She fronted him, even though every muscle in her head wanted to pull away, and scavenged his face as if it were the first face she'd seen after a coma. The children were asleep. He stood, the papers sliding off his lap to his feet, and reached across the intervening space to touch her hair. She suffered the caress as she should would suffer the rake of dry branches on a walk in the forest.

Then he left, shoulders sloped in his own edition of sorrow, the shuffle of his feet on the carpet dopplering down the hallway.

Then a raspy silence. Outside she heard the wind pick up, the arid grating of dirt and garbage that sounded so much like water swirling just outside the indifferent windows. The flood has begun, she thought. She turned the light off. The birch tree, bartered in half by shadow and streetlight, semaphored back and forth. She peered down at it, forehead against the glass, as if waiting for a dead phone to ring. Then quickly she turned away and ran out the rear door down to the courtyard, grabbing the flashlight always stationed at the top of the stairs. Her hair flared in strands of dark fire. She flicked the beam across the tree and wherever she saw a leaf dried and curled she delicately picked it off and put it in her pocket. When she was done she placed them all at the foot of the tree and watched as the wind devoured them. Satisfied, she went back inside.

She held Basil as they slept, feeling distant but obligated. Seth cried out in the middle of the night and she cooed him back to sleep. Benjamin, thumb plugged in mouth, was earnestly in dreams. All the darkness filtered her and for a moment, suspended and rootless, she distilled peace for herself.

The taxi left her off in the foothills of a mountainous Victorian house, which was surrounded by a lawnful of people talking and gesturing loudly. Traversing the front porch, she entered a large hall. Around the fringes of the cavern were tables piled high with stalagmites of books, manned by bored and obliging people. She threaded her way to the registration desk, picked up her packet and namecard, her name encased in the figure of a candle burning at both ends, and then, without any Virgil, plunged into the crowd.

She circled the book tables piled high by the industry of Death. One table had a series of books, in a recipe style, on how to eliminate oneself gracefully. Other books proclaimed the superiority of Death to life, the self-healing quality of the Big Sleep. (She thought, an old sarcasm bubbling up momentarily, it strange that everyone here engaged to explore the virtues of Death were happily gin-and-tonic'd and vertical.)

As she thumbed through a book explaining the shape of the life to come, a vision of the trinity of males in her life swam upward. Seth had been five at the time, Benjamin three, she and Basil feeling ancient and tired. They had gone camping and a glaze of stifling weather descended on them, making them all irritable. Seth, perhaps to prove his independence, perhaps to keep his sanity, walked to the end of the dock, where he was told never to go, and jumped in.

He couldn't swim, have never been in water above his neck. Basil, packing the car, had caught a glimpse of his fragile body before it neatly disappeared. The rescue was easy (Basil could touch bottom) and with a few moments of vigorous back-slapping and coughing Seth lay limp but sparklingly alive on the weathered boards. It was Basil who'd saved him, she recalled. It was something he would know how to do, being the sort of man who would take a first-aid course just in case something like this happened, while everyone else would trust to blind luck.

Afterwards, that night, when the weather broke and they sat around the comparative safety of a hotel pool, while Seth burrowed into her lap and Benjamin curled into Basil's, they whispered quietly about nothing at all, simply glad for the chance to sit in the quickening twilight holding their sons. For an instant, as she put the book down and stared at its art nouveau cover, she felt as if she were the lead horse on a team, tethered and straightened, except that the reins were composed of something like water mixed with laughter.

She heard a brash cough behind her. "Have you read that book?" a voice asked. She turned to face a not unhandsome man who stood in that nervous casualness common to strangers at a party. "No," she answered, telling herself not to look at the nametag.

"Name's John, John Teck. Been here long?"

"At least thirty years," she replied dryly. He was occasionally staring at her nametag and her left breast tingled with embarrassment.

"Thirty years? Not bad! I'll have to remember that one. No, I mean 'here' here."

"Just this morning." "I guess the big man is going to speak to us this morning."

"The big man?"

"Reverend Jerry Baulm. It's on your schedule." He took her elbow and guided her along the fringes of the crowd. "Personally," this in a conspiratorial whisper, "the man's a fraud. This whole thing is a fraud."

"What 'whole thing'?" She found herself answering in an equally low whisper.

"This guy makes his money off suckers who think they're gonna get a break from death that they didn't get from life." He finished his gin and tonic and

she suddenly found herself guided toward a table marshaled with a sparkling regiment of full glasses. He offered her one. She took it. She'd never drunk before noon.

"I didn't understand your comment about suckers."

"Look, say you've got cancer, okay? All of a sudden everything you thought was okay in life goes to flinders. Husband is lost. He doesn't know how to handle you, probably because he's forgotten a lot and taken a lot for granted. If you got kids they think you're some kind of oddity, like an Uncle Sam bank that shoots pennies into an eagle's mouth. They don't understand and you can't dump a lot of the garbage you feel onto them. Now, what would you do?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice muted.

"One day you hear about, or read about, the Church of the Divine Facet. They promise you an answer. All you got are questions, you're fresh out of answers. Sounds good. You figure that since this life is suddenly worth diddley, you might as well get ready for the next. You take the Reverend's advice, give him his money, and, pfft!, in six months you're gone and he's shelling out free drinks to people like me, and is enjoying the hell out of 'this' life while selling the benefits of something he knows nothing about. The way I figure it," he said around the last of the of the gin and tonic going down his throat, "if life after life, with the 'afterlife entities' (no one's just 'dead' anymore), is so great, why ain't he made the ferry trip himself? Because he's got a good racket on this side."

"What are you doing here then?"

He laughed. "Well, I guess you say I'm a vulture. I'm with that book company over there, the one where I met you. I don't particularly like what's happening, but" -- he shrugged his shoulders and laughed again -- "a man on this side has to eat."

"So you sell people books they don't need - "

"People 'buy' books they don't need. If I had my choice I'd sit under a tree, play the pennywhistle, and drink gin. But as long as people are going to keep looking for their answers in people like the Reverend instead of in things they know about and that know them, I'm going to live off their foolishness."

A carillon, located probably in one of the turrets, pealed out, and the huge crowd moved toward the lecture hall. "Many are culled - "

"Why are you telling me all this?" He moved toward the hall, again taking her elbow. "These death conferences are some of the best places to pick up women. You can't believe how the nearness to death sharpens certain hungers." He glanced down at her, his eyes, though slightly hawking, open and genial. "Are you interested?"

"In many things, but not you. Not this time at least." She paused at the entrance, met his gaze. "Don't you ever think about your own death?"

"All the time. Can't help it in this business."

"Why aren't you afraid?"

His laugh again. "Compared to life, death's nothing. I stick with what I know. Like I said, gin, a tree, pennywhistle."

"And a woman."

"And a woman."

The force of the crowd pushed them through the door. She saw him carried away. She lodged herself in a small eddy at the back of the lecture hall and from there watched the wave of people smooth down into a sheet of heads, punctuated by small swells and undertows of conversation. Then, like some light-quick electric current, the anticipatory silence. Then, the Reverend.

Beturbanned and dressed in white, he came out and stood quietly, periscoping the hall. Everyone waited. She let her eye rove around the dentil molding of the room until she saw, stuck in a corner and strung deftly from block to block, a spider's web, the largest she'd ever seen. She could just make out suspended in the center of the web several egg cases, about the size of marbles. She checked the other corners of the room and in most if not all of them hung webs.

"Death in life," he began, "does not exist. There is no such thing as death. If you let the 'I' go, cauterize the ego, then you will cultivate an openness and passivity that will carry you beyond the fight for happiness and contentment in this world. The closer you are to your own death, the closer you are to the continuation of your life." She heard John Teck's voice full of its specificity and concrete humor in her ears. She tried to see where he was anchored in the hall. Then, for an instant, she suddenly felt as if there were weathered boards of a weathered dock under her feet, the invitation of water in front of her, and an

imminent thrill of rebellion in her guts. She closed her eyes, then opened them on the man who looked to her like an underdone mushroom.

"Our study of Death this weekend," he droned on, "is a study of sources, sources of wisdom that are available to the duped living. You will be channeled to entities that will grace you with knowledge. You will be incorporated into yourself the epiphenal experiences of those who have been close to the borders and returned." She could not stop John Teck's voice from forming the descant to Baulm's dirge and again her feet gripped inside her shoes what she thought were the water-smoothed ends of dock lumber. Slowly Teck's voice ascended until, like a moth, it flitted brightly among so many stone pillars.

She could feel the anesthesia in Baulm's voice, could sense the palpable carnage of acceptance he wreaked in the room. She found herself consciously sending messages along her nerves to determine how much of her was still loyal and unconvinced. All of her so far. She decided to leave, consider the $50 as a sacrifice at the altar of common sense. As she scuttled along the back wall she raised her eyes to the egg cases. With a shock almost as gratifying as it was frightening, she saw the web quivering with frantically new bodies, the egg cases riven. They scampered away on the web's cables, like strings of black raindrops, and then disappeared into the woodwork. Baulm's voice fell harmlessly off her back as she left the hall.

Outside she paused at one of the fountains to wash her face. The incubating heat of the sun pierced the scrim of her dress and runnels of sweat outlined, like a dim negative, her back and sides. She walked the mile back to the hotel. At the hotel, the man at the desk handed her a note from Dr. Mangel and abruptly she was drawn back into the confines of her body. The perspiration chilled in the air-conditioned lobby. Up in her room, the bed freshly made, the blinds drawn against the sun, she sat by the phone and read the note again in the dim light: "Call. Urgent. What the hell are you doing with that pimp?" When Marlene the receptionist answered and told her to wait, she listened calmly to the dim static in the dead phone. Finally, Dr. Mangel's voice filled the earpiece.

"Elaine. There's something you've got to know. You're a damnably difficult woman to get ahold of, you know that. When Basil told me where you were, I just about - "

"What is the news you have to tell me?" Her voice was even.

"The Church of the Divine Facet? Well, I can't blame you. But the news I've got for you is good."

A small animal of anxiety began to burrow in her guts. "I'm not sure I can handle good news."

"You'll handle this. There's no way to apologize for this, so I'll tell it straight. You've got the wrong information. A mix-up in the lab, compounded by a computer error we just got word in today."

"Yes," she answered.

"I can't tell you what was bothering you when you visited me, but I can tell you it wasn't a malignant cancer." He paused. "You there?"

"All of me."

"I told Basil."

"Of course."

"Elaine, I'm not one to interfere in business that's not mine, but Basil - "

"Dr. Mangel, please."

"All right, just get home. I'll have Marlene make an appointment for you next Monday." The phone went mute for a second, then filled with his "Come home".

After she cradled the receiver she couldn't recall how she replied. The animal had drilled her heart and its offspring scampered along her veins and nerves. From out of nowhere came reprieve, a glitch, and suddenly she was whole and empty and lousy with doubt and wonder and time again. She'd had no chance to decide if she wanted life again, but there it was, the vexation and qualms and plausibilities being distributed among her muscles and brain without a thought as to her consent.

She wasn't sure how long she sat in the leavening twilight of the room, but a sharp rap on the door brought her quickly to. She rose to open it. In the hallway stood a porter and in the porter's hands was a large flowerpot with a small thin resilient birch tree lancing upwards. "This came for you a few minutes ago." He stared at her as if she were the oddest person in the world to be receiving a birch tree rather than flowers, but five dollars smoothed out his face.

A card was stuck in the soil. She pulled it out, pulled open the blinds to see it better. "Swinger of birches, come home" it read.

She read it again. Put it back in its holder. Stared out the window. Waited.

CLASSIFIED

She had seen the classified ad before (set in a boldface type that the owner must have paid extra for): “Wanted: Person, preferably handicapped, to count, sort, and classify pennies. Minimum wage.” The phone number followed. The a.m. sunlight hadn’t yet slashed through the fishbowl windows of the laundromat, so it was still cool inside. A few women hustled their laundry in and out of the machines, sure as scouts on a trail. She watched her own belongings tornado around in the dryer, the metal studs and buckles knocking like castanets. She wheeled herself closer, pulled the door open, and stuffed clothes into a duffel bag. Slinging it across the back of her wheelchair, she headed out the door, bumping it open with the prow of her footrest. None of the other women paid attention.

She took the same route home she always took, down the street on the right, cross over at the school crosswalk (the matron stopping traffic for her, mouth in philanthropic smile), and then down the small hill to her apartment. Once inside, she emptied the duffel bag on the bed and quickly but haphazardly put away the clothes. There she was, 9:20 a.m., laundry done, and a whole day of nothing to do. She stared at her apartment: the telephone mute and frog-like on the table -- the overstuffed chair she would never sit in, reserved for guests who never came -- the books in disarray on the shelves -- the cyclops TV. She reached over and turned on the tape deck: Scriabin. Pulling the paper out of her pocket, she found the classified. The traffic on the street barely rattled the windows.

He ran his eyes down the column until he found the ad. Yes, done well enough, big enough to catch the eye. Only it hadn’t pulled in enough responses to justify the cost. The responses he’d gotten were, well, unsatisfactory. People came posing as handicapped, even a blind man! Times were hard, as he knew. Thus, the pennies. Very soon the “wheaties” having sat quietly in their jars for years would be worth a good sum of money because of their scarcity and copper. “If” they could be found. Which meant the tedious distillation process: reading dates, cataloguing the shards. Something which his eyesight and patience did not rise to. Hence, the ad. Which had not worked. Yet.

He finished his breakfast, checked his watch: 9:20. Plenty of time before his first appointment. He rinsed the dishes, filed them in the drainer, did his

ablutions, and stopped to reset his clothes in the hall mirror before going out the door. Sample case in hand, he surveyed the living room, swept his eyes over the pictures, the bric-a-brac, the immaculate furniture, the untrodden carpet. Silt, now that she was gone. Filling up the channel. The ringing phone was too late to catch him as he drove away.

The voice on the message machine was clearly a woman's, but apart from that, revealed only that she was interested in the job and would be over that evening to talk to him. He listened to it several times, wondering what he was looking for, then erased her voice and the number she'd left. So, he was to have company this evening.

As he started his dinner, the evening paper propped against an empty flower vase, he heard a shrill whistle. The children running through the yard again. Then, the whistle again, sharp and frisking. He got up, went to the front door, and was mildly braced to see a young woman in a wheelchair anchored to the bottom of the porch steps. "Hello," she said. "This the right place?"

He said it was. In the silence that followed he finally looked at her, an army-jacketed slender woman with only barely-washed hair down to the epaulets, a flannel shirt and jeans covering two useless legs dangling over the edge of the seat. "You were the woman who called, about the job?"

"Yes. When can I start?"

He stepped onto the porch. "My name is Jordan Riley. I think we should talk first."

"Fine. I can count, read, and write."

"But - "

"But what?"

His tongue stuck in his mouth.

"But what?"

He stared at her in the failing light. He couldn't read the name on the right breast of the coat. She stared back at him. He watched her face curdle, the neutral face she'd worn twisted into an amalgam of anger and sarcasm. "Forget it," she said, and pivoted to leave.

"No, wait, come inside. I'm being rude."

She turned back to him, her face still hinged tight.

For another second, for the space of intake and exhalation, their eyes locked. Then his body jerked, remembering his manners, and he hurried down the three steps. He jockeyed the wheelchair straight, and then, with a sharp jag across his shoulders he hadn't felt since he'd bailed hay as a teenager, he jounced the chair up the three steps to the porch. Sweat popped out like a thousand prairie dogs from their burrows and his breath tasted like sandpaper. She said nothing.

He wheeled her into the kitchen, where his dinner sat like a patient dog. "Something to drink?" he asked, more to himself than to her.

"Water'd be fine." He noticed her nails were bitten and dirty.

"Water it is."

Again the silence settled on them like an old pontiff's hand. "The job," he finally said, "is to separate pennies."

"That's what the ad said. I can do that."

"It doesn't pay much. Maybe a few hours a day."

"When can I start. Tonight?"

This was a little too fast for him. "No. I have guests coming."

Her hesitation was calculated to the second and he knew she knew he had no guests coming. "What time tomorrow?"

"Morning. Yes, morning. 10 o'clock."

"I'll be here."

When the scene had reversed itself, when he'd gotten her down the stairs and watched her navigate the pools of streetlight until she disappeared, he suddenly realized the practical obstacles to the whole enterprise, something his manners and excitement (yes, he had to admit he was excited by her arrival) had obscured. How would she get upstairs to his office? Would he have to lug the few hundred pounds of coins downstairs every day for her? This would not do, and he'd have to tell her, tonight. He suddenly realized he'd erased her phone number. And he didn't know her name. So, a confrontation. His shoulders ached.

Schoenberg. The car lights scarified the darkness of the living room. She watched, hands locked together in her lap. Jordan Riley. She wiped the name off her mind, let the music invade her. Occasionally the lights inflamed a photograph, framed, on her television set, of a group of smiling women dressed in fatigues. The jungle brooded behind them, just beyond the jutting edge of a hut. She was to the left, crouched over two women kneeling next to a fire at which someone was roasting hot dogs. Her hair was clipped helmet-like. Her smile cupped indistinguishable eyes.

She did not sleep until the cars had long left the streets.

By 10 a.m. she was there, posted like a buoy on the shoals of his porch. He'd watched her roll down the street, her arms like the strong pivots of a paddlewheeler. He disliked the idea of this confrontation, had worried it well into the empty hours of the morning. By breakfast his resolve, jury-rigged as it was, seemed willing to hold. But as she canted and jerked through the street debris, potholes, and unforgiving cars, an irrational tide of pity for the woman carried away his determination. Yet clearly the whole situation was unworkable -- he simply wanted to get his coins counted.

As she arrived he let snap closed the lace curtain on the door. Simple abandonment, cold-eyed pickled speech, ahemming apology the options flew in and out like petrels. Finally, trusting in a way he'd never done to chance, he opened the door and walked out.

"Mornin'."

"Good morning." He hesitated. "Very good morning."

Her silence seemed rude to him. He wasn't even getting a chance to run out of civilities.

"I'm here on time."

"Yes, well," and here he hesitated again, having a sudden momentary vision of flowers and piled mountains of crutches and, oddly, her naked body, as, with his steps sounding ominously like muffled drum beat, he descended the stairs to lift her into the house, "right you are."

Once inside he hesitated still again, not used to the improvising. The coins: upstairs. They: downstairs. She was clearly waiting for him to catch up to his

thoughts. He briefly resented the fact that she couldn't storm out in a huff, saw the stupidity of that, accepted his fate, and decided to carry her upstairs.

"The coins are upstairs." As if the executive board of his guts, blood, and brain had miraculously pounded out a consensus at the eleventh hour, and without quite knowing what he was doing, he threw his left arm across her shoulder, levered his right under her vacant knees, and, with sharp amperes of strain racing through his lower back and legs, hoisted her up in swift motion. Unwittingly she threw her arms around his neck, scared by the sudden unmooring from her chair. For a brief synapse, in the mid-morning spring silence of a foyer lodged in a house full of emptiness, they stood like confused lovers. Then, in a fluster, whetstone in her voice, she barked, "Upstairs?" He sidled crablike up the steps, fearfully aware that his arms were already leaden, he was no Fred Astaire on the slippery plastic carpet runner, and the pain in his back made him gulp air in a way he hadn't since his wedding night.

He slipped her into his desk chair, her face now sullenly condensed, as if outraged or, worse, discovered. He explained what he wanted done, embarrassedly aware of the corona of sweat on his forehead. She simply nodded, slipped her jacket off (he didn't avoid noticing she wore no brassiere, the curve of her left breast just visible through the spread collar of her half-buttoned shirt), and began the counting and sorting. Her silence and hunched shoulders dismissed him.

He tried, before embarrassment or vexation prompted him to leave the room, to add apology to his words. "You didn't ask when you'd be paid."

"Friday'd be fine," she said to the pennies.

"I have some errands to do. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

She nodded again.

When he'd gone, when she was sure his footsteps had led conclusively away from her, she sat back and drew a deep breath. Why, she thought, had she been so rude? The man's hands had been gentle, he did his best, and she bit off smiles like tobacco and spit the juice at him. She glared at her legs, angry. Her finger moved among the rabble of pennies, tracing glyphs, then tucked her lanky hair away from her cheeks as she began to divide and compare.

Two hours later he came back, dressed in a three-piece, hair skewed across his pate, and told her that he had to leave. She pushed the chair away from the desk and waited. With a hitch of his shoulders and a determined best-

face-forward stride, he walked to her and lifted her gingerly. With an effort he could not know, she loosely draped her arm across his shoulders and let her body relax into his arms. He felt the yield, puzzled at it, but had no time to ponder it as his body began its tocsin of pain and the adrenalin corps raced to his heart's rescue. Even though tomorrow was Sunday, he agreed to her request to come over. As she steamwheelered down the street, he realized he still didn't know her name. And, despite his aching body, he had liked her arm across his shoulder, like some bandoleer full, not of ammunition, but pollen. His afternoon appointments, he thought that night, went extraordinarily well.

The music tonight was Copeland. She had the photograph in her hands, raised like a chalice to eye-level, and she bored into that immobile face of a woman she'd once been. She had never excavated the memories, hoping they would fossilize and be lost in the sediment of time. But the gentle, if awkward, touch of his hand, his confusion, the unfeigned way he tried to be businesslike and ended up being civil, pried the relics loose and they floated back into the net of her words like those long-forgotten prehistoric fish captured out of the frigid depths of the ocean.

Nineteen sixty-eight, just 21, finished with her LPN training, filled with idealism buffed to a high gloss of patriotism and service. She and four other girls wanted to be nurses in Nam, and over they went. ("Dulce et decorum est") She had known guys who had gone to fight for John Wayne, for baseball, for boredom and beer, for loneliness and the need to be hitched to a cause, and she hadn't been any different. Except that she wanted to release pain, not encourage it. (Children, she thought, all of them children then, the whole war like the Children's Crusades that had used the blood of innocents to gild the fortunes of old men.)

But soon she was adrift in a sea of young bloodied faces, breathing the stench of outgoing life, unable to put in a stopcock, bar the flume, command the waves. And after that night attack, with the mortar rounds belching shrapnel, death meandering like a robber baron among his sweatshop slaves, she could no longer care for their innocence because she was in a pain so monstrous and sterilizing that is burned her compassion dead. She had no surplus anymore, reduced to her five senses.

The night of the attack, the unswerving surgery of the metal in her legs, the brutish evacuation -- then months of lying in hospitals and bearing witness to

the flotsam that passed as people, each cargo labeled “Fragile” and “Not For Re-sale.” (“pro patria mori”) The bile chalked her throat -- the music ended. All because of that man’s arms across her shoulders. The doctors had said the old twat could still sing, that babies were still a prime possibility, and they seemed to think this a coup: though her legs weren’t whole, her hole was. And then that first night, when the orderly had quietly undressed himself and climbed atop her, gently forcing her legs apart, taking her virginity and leaving a wet spot for payment. (He had put her legs together again.) And she didn’t care. And they knew it. And each night someone else made his ritual spasm in her empty gut. Yes, the old twat still worked fine, just like a sewer or rat-hole or a grave filled with quick-lime.

They shipped her home (no parades, just a welcoming party like a wake), and then, suddenly (her parents now unsure of who inhabited the downstairs bedroom), she left them all behind, part of the midden of blasted faces and voided legs and memories stiff with scar tissue.

The music had stopped. The picture had fallen from her hands. She wasn’t even a statistic. Nam vets were men, though there had been thousands of women. She was buried beneath their gutter lives, locked away as if that were the privilege of her sex, a fate devoutly to be wished for, better than wholeness and competition and the angry joy abundance. And here she sat (her only legacy had been a series of greater or lesser thrones: wheelchairs, toilet seats, but no man’s lap, no meadow, no pew certainly no pew) starting her fourth decade, a score and a half almost gone, not quite an old bitch gone in the teeth but a deponent for her own casual desecration, full of an anger that only bred maggots not saints, an anger habitual not ephiphenal.

She snapped off the light, replaced the photograph. The car lights swam in schools. In her head she remembered the skeleton in her high school biology class. She found herself in the vision rewiring the crooked legs to the rest of the body.

He realized, without too much deliberation, that the fireman’s carry up the stairs simply would not do. So he decided to the move the mountain downstairs.

In the attic was a table that would serve. When dinner was finished and he was trussed in his workclothes and sneakers (it surprised him how long it had been since he’d worn the clothes they smelled clean and empty), he went

upstairs to what he called the "reliquary": trunks like the coffins of saints stuffed with his dead wife's clothes and jewelry, her books and knick-knacks. For a moment they called to him but he shrugged them off, unwilling to know again even for a moment the anguish he'd once stumbled through like a drunk in a minefield. He located the table. He cleared away the surrounding debris, spanned his arms across the table, and heaved. His blind feet found their way safely along the softwood boards to the attic door.

"Bang!" The table leg lanced against the doorframe. He staggered for a second, readjusted his bearings, and aimed again. Two legs got through, but the others caught the far side of the doorframe and the table slipped out of his hands to the floor, not without just nipping the tips of his sneakered toes. He stood there for a moment, fighting back the pain careening up his legs, his eyes closed. Only when his breathing leveled and the pain in his feet had subsided to twin bars of red heat across the toes did he remember the distinct "crunch" as the table hit the frame. He leaned over the table top and wiggled the cross braces. They were all loose, but intact. He examined the legs. They were loose, too, but still attached. Unless it was a cruel illusion, the table was whole. He angled it carefully through the door, shut the light off.

The landing outside the attic door was as narrow as a cat's tongue, and he found himself uncomfortably pressed against a railing which felt none too secure against his buttocks. He edged behind the table so that he could embrace it again, squatted, and lifted. His feet squirreled carefully ahead of him, his rejuvenated toes gripping like claws for hidden acorns, until he reached the edge of the first stair, then eased over it, the table legs somewhere spearheading in front of him. He waited for the legs to ram the wall where the quarterpace ended, but he reached the landing without incident, made the 90-degree turn without scraping any wallpaper off, and started down to the second floor.

The second he made his first step his heel caught the edge of the stair and the table tilted upward. Two legs rammed into the sloped ceiling overhead and even as he fell, his legs like a spring gate shooting merrily out from under him, he heard the rain of horsehair plaster join the cataract of his frail body down the stairs. He landed squarely on his buttocks and gracefully slid like an upright otter down to the bottom. The table had taken every opportunity on every jounce to slash his thighs, so that when he came to rest, two legs out, four legs up, his pain was perfectly axial, with the y-axis rising from his rump up the spine, the x-axis shivering along his legs to his hips, the y-axis curling

off somewhere across his thighs, and the indefinite point of his brain hovering three-dimensionally in space. He craned back to see the two dimples the table legs had made, discovered there were four. All things tended to equality, he thought fuzzily, and finally managed to get up, not without knocking a vase of plastic flowers off a small corner Hepplewhite. He didn't even pause to mourn.

By now, as the distance to downstairs got shorter, the pain raced to get larger. His wing muscles blenched from embracing the table, and his various ailments colluded into one generalized carousel of ache. He paced the short distance down the hall to the top of the last set of stairs, and without a pause he started down, feet splayed, toes at maximum clutch, the legs of the table now wobbling like a gossip's lips. Finally, he rested in the foyer, table set upright, his blood knocking like moored boats against his veins. Where to put it? Before him yawned the composed darkness of the living room that had more room than living in it, the one set aside for the entertainment of guests who never came, the one his wife doted on with her plates and mugs and miniature pianos of ivory and glass and onyx. Why not? He flicked the switch, chasing the room into focus, and walked the table into the middle of the room.

The legs were loose -- the table swayed in a rumba as he pushed against it. So down to the basement for tools. After an hour, with wood chips on the carpet and sclerotic patches of glue on his pants, the table was done, the legs rigged, steady and patient. He cleaned the table off, waxed it, and brought out a lace tablecloth whose skirt hung absurdly to the floor. But he liked the dainty texture and it pleased his eye. Then he began the Augean task of bringing down the coins. When they were safely landed, an hour later, he brought in the empty vase from the kitchen, started upstairs to get the plastic flowers he'd knocked down, but suddenly muttered to himself how absurd that whole business would be. Real flowers were in order.

The wickedness of it delighted him. Sneaking down the front porch steps, he slipped quickly, if stiffly, through the darkness across his next-door neighbor's lawn to the flowerbed under their front bay window. And there, with barely suppressed chuckling, he ravaged a dozen flowers, briefly peeking, as he finished, through the bay window at his neighbors stippled by the narcotic light of their TV while just outside their blue cave stalked a fleeting shape, no more than a brief flicker, who could threaten them but instead melts away. The smell of chlorophyll on his hands, the colloidal scent of lawns and damp earth, the brashness of the cool night air he was noticing this night as he had not

noticed so many others, only slightly angry at his own bluntedness, glad to have discovered how sharp he needed to be. He slipped the flowers into the vase's throat, rocked the table once more the check its soundness, and went to bed.

Over the next few weeks they took turns replacing the flowers.

Other bits and pieces collected on the table, oddments that he left for her, or gauds from her own life. They were still cordial, but he noticed that her hair was cleaner, exuding a raven blueness when she lodged it behind her ears. She noticed that he no longer grunted as deeply when he lifted her chair up the stairs, that in fact instead of feeling wrestled she felt firmly lifted. When, in a brief moment of panic, she finished the initial batch of coins ($500 worth), he immediately collected the residue of non-wheaties and turned it in for $500 more. They didn't mention their panic, but they both smelled its scent in the way he chokedly praised her speed and she stupidly accepted the praise. The solid lump of 50,000 proved an odd pillow for their worry, but they accepted its necessity like the belly of a Buddha.

He even built a ramp for her from the driveway. She remembered seeing it as she paddlewheeled up the street, and she instantly felt as if she had just walked through a beaded curtain into a smoky back-room where the ante was in hearts and the chips were blood. She hesitated at its base (he'd rigged a doorbell button), afraid of what ascension would bring. Part came from animal suspicion: no one else had known how to treat her well. Part came from guilt: what could she give in return? what had she done to deserve? Part came from fear: what could he want? when would goodbye come? When he opened the door that day, he couldn't at first understand, did not recognize, the sweating twisted woman on his threshold, and only later understood what the climb had cost her, what chasms had been crossed.

Finally, she brought the picture and put it on the desk and waited. He had of course seen it, but had not remarked on it, studying it when she wasn't there, trying to puzzle it out as if it were some runic cure for death. She knew he had seen it, wondered why the delay. Misgivings tightened like ribbands across her chest. One evening, when the pennies were bewitchingly falling to the floor and the numbers slithered around, and he noticed the humped shoulders and the angular diction of her body, he asked what the picture was about.

As she began to tell him, her words struggling to queue up, her anger broke and embers she'd banked long ago flared in her breath. She told him everything,

from the incense of the rotting corpses hanged and castrated to children clotted with hunger, from the callous that had become her spirit to the callous of the body that had suffered, from the deadness of her life to the unknotted blood she'd found in his house. He listened, listened to it all.

He had no answer to the labored breath and silence that followed. His only shock and despair came from the fact that she had been touched by it at all. That she had been used so. And had seen such evil. But it wasn't surprise that he was feeling. He wasn't just an auditor but a recipient, a sharer, someone, he found himself thinking, who was cared enough about to break pain like bread and take communion. Perhaps that was love he didn't know. But he knew that if, at this moment, she turned and floated away because of her anger and shame and fear, and he did nothing to stop her, an embalming emptiness would fill this house and he would be preserved in his singleness forever.

She caught her breath, struggled to trap it into rhythm again. She wanted to run from him. She didn't want him spattered with her poison, or to have him smile nicely and handle her gently while she knew that in his head was this figure of a spastic marionette. And this fed her anger more, so that she hated herself for being the victim she knew she was and hated herself for hating the only thing she could be. She was a weave of fire, fire consuming itself. She wished only to burn into darkness.

They sat for quite some time like this. Dusk turned to full night. Each waited for the other to move. Finally, he took her hand. She pulled it away. "Please don't touch me." He heard the words, heard no rancor, took her hand again. This time she kept it there. Slowly he turned her wheelchair to face him. He was surprised at how hard his heart crammed against his ribs. She felt the quickening of her own heart. He stood and, coming to her side, yoked one arm across her shoulder and the other under her legs. She panicked briefly, and then relaxed.

He laid her gently on the bed, undressed her just as gently. When he crawled in beside her, she could feel his stiff penis against her hip, something that surprised him mightily, unsure as he'd been if he'd ever need it again.

And for the very first time, the old twat sang.

They finished the batch of pennies together.

ONLY ON DARK DAYS

The letter. Its soft white blade cleverly slices through the epidermis, between the atlas and axis vertebrae, cleaving the basilar and carotid arteries, severing the longus capitis, and on out through the esophagus and larynx, the blade still remarkably white, no pools or spatterings of blood, yet my head neat on the salver of a large oval oak table that broods in the grey dusk of the winter afternoon. I read the letter again just to verify how clean the slice had been. It is very well done.

I sit in a small chair by a large table, in a small room in a large building, that is a small part of the whole place that has, with razor indifference, just told me I no longer have connections, just tender resignations. "Dear Stewart, we regret to inform you..." I drop the letter. "...from all considerations given us by your committee, the dormitory report, and student evaluations, we cannot renew your appointment for next year..." I can hear the letter. I smile, spin the letter on its folds. My committee. All with tenure, that alchemy that turns small-mindedness into authority. I review what they might have said as they knotted the noose -- like a director I set the angle of their faces, the archness of their smiles, their code words: department quality, standards. Etcetera. So now I am out.

A sound in the next room pulls me around. Her room, of course, she of chocolate hue, the one who happily played the blade while the others gladly hid behind her hilt. I am certain it was her poison: black, woman, poet, irresolute and afraid. I hear her door close, her heels clack down the empty hallways. Unmet revenge settles in for its long tenure.

Miriam had called the group meeting for 11:10 in her room, and Stewart arrived just as the 11:10 bell clanged in the Academy tower. He found her alone, posing over some essays, her glasses perched sturdily on the end of her nose, her eyes cast haughtily through them onto the paper in front of her. She most resembled, he thought, Torquemada as he read the charges. Or (a picture he knew would gall her, and he verged on saying it for that reason) a 19th-century Reconstruction librarian, in a tintype labeled "Miss Miriam Looking Into Chapman's Homer." If he'd said it he would have had to suffer "the lecture" about her being a published poet (he knew her present manuscript was still looking for a home), a person more in demand that some just-out-of-school Ph.D. (as he most certainly was), and more vibrant and sexual (a premise

untested by him) than women of that era. The first time he'd gotten this lecture he'd been embarrassed until he realized that she was simply giving him enough information so that he could perform a proper obeisance before her. Since then, obeisance was the farthest thing from his mind.

So, instead of saying anything to her, he plumped his briefcase down on the table, slumped into a chair, and gazed at the poster of small black children in tattered sweaters with a poem by Langston Hughes scrawled in white across their chests. Her ferocious insecurity was like the third rail of a train: harmless when untouched, but will kill the man who embraces it with nothing more than a whisper and an obligatory spark.

She said nothing to him, ignored him, continued to make her spidery marks on the student's paper. The room soon filled. The Academy bell struck 11:20, the reveille for the next class. Hartt, his bow tie neatly pinned like a butterfly to the flower of his Adam's apple, said in what he though was his expansive Oxfordian style, "Well, Madame Chairman, when do the proceedings begin?" She said nothing to him, finished her comments on the paper, and, as she straightened the pile of essays, pulled a manila folder to her. "Where's Brad?" she asked leaning back into her chair, her hands lightly poised on her lap. No one answered as they quieted down. She paused. "We'll start without him."

She had just started her "Today we have a lot of business" when Brad walked in, shambling as usual, grievous sweater and faltering corduroys, shapeless tie, and sneakers, telling something to the newest member of the department about James in a voice sure not to be checked by anything like a meeting he was late getting to. He smiled ingenuously at her as she sat down, and she picked up her interruption. Stewart examined the newest as he sat strictly in his chair, locking onto Miriam with full attention.

"For the benefit of our newest member," here she turned her full high-cheekboned face to his. "We try to get together and share ideas about teaching seniors. That is what these meetings are for," her face still cocked toward his. "I assume everybody has introduced himself to you." She smiled at him. Then, as quickly as she'd netted him, she abandoned him, and he sank back into the arrangement.

The meeting proceeded slowly, most of it beamed the newest member's way. "Now, to the last item - grades."

"Miriam." This from Brad, his hands thrown up slightly in mock despair. "We do this every semester and every semester we get nowhere. I, for one, grade the way I grade and I don't think anything this august group has to say is going to change my mind." All said in a voice smooth and without static.

"Brad," Hartt said, "far be it from our mortal powers to tell you what should be done." A few people laughed. "We have to have these meetings, so let's have them peaceful --"

"I'll remind you both," Miriam said, her voice in ice, "that I've been charged with chairing these meetings and making them useful."

"No one said they weren't useful," Brad replied, "it's just grades."

"Susan." Miriam's eyes followed the dismissive cut of her voice as she spoke to Susan, the teaching intern for the year. Susan, as if she'd been marionetted, pulled a sheaf of papers from a manila folder and passed them around. Miriam then faced the group as if she now though them her entourage and started to speak. "I've asked Susan - "

Brad shot out, "We're not going through papers, are we? That's not an accurate way to -"

"We're not trying to be accurate," Hartt said. "We're just going to grade papers, not do your AP research for you. "He," indicating the newest member, "needs to get a feel for how we think about grading." He paused, then added, with a smile for the room, "And to see how anarchic we are."

"I don't think - "

"Brad, enough." Miriam's eyes launched their grappling hooks in the deadly arc of that three-syllable trajectory. Brad, far from being hooked, made a large "X" across the papers in front of him and turned it face down.

They read the essays. Everyone agreed the second was inferior to the first, and the group had just begun to debate its merits when Miriam, with pointed seriousness, asked why the student writer used "he." The question, oddly, was addressed directly to Susan. It hung in the air. Susan finally stuttered out that the writer was being generic.

"Generic? Why not 'she'?"

Brad leaped to mediate, voice unsheathed. "I think Susan's right. It doesn't need to be 'she' to include a woman's voice."

Miriam, instead of responding to Brad, still glared at Susan. "How did you grade this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you make the writer I assume a boy take notice that he was being racist and sexist?"

"I don't think that's relevant in grading this paper," Brad interjected, "certainly not for your, excuse me, I mean our newest member."

"I have no trouble seeing that narrator as 'she,' and neither should this student. What is the student's name, by the way? After all, we know that the author, Sanchez, lived with Eldridge Cleaver - "

"This is the language," Brad said, "that we should I add 'we honkies'? have been led to think black men speak. It's not erroneous to assume the speaker to be a black male. Indeed, why shouldn't it be a Hispanic hermaphrodite?" The tension snapped into laughter then tightened again as Miriam, her gorgon eyes roving, scanned the table.

Stewart saw that Susan's face was pale. The other members of the group doodled or looked at their vestcoat buttons. "I, for one," Miriam intoned, "would grade this harshly."

"Why?" Brad asked. "Because the writer in this case a writer 30 years your junior didn't launch a diatribe about cultural oppression and the glories of the Yoruba tribe?" Everyone heard the unvoiced "Aren't you just as racist?" in his words. They waited.

Miriam answered, eyes cold and level. "I would grade it harshly because it is badly written."

Brad retreated, aware of the boundaries, abandoning Susan. He crumpled the paper and aimed for the wastebasket. Everyone's face seemed to bear apologies to Susan, though no one said one word.

The 12:00 knelled across the brick like a stone skipped over a pond. The halls outside the room filled with people and the group gathered books and papers together hurriedly. As they left, Miriam pulled out the essays he had been working on and calmly proceeded to read them, the calm, Stewart noted, of someone sated. As he walked down the hall to his own room he noticed the newest member walking back to Miriam's room. So, he thought, the squire's initiation has begun.

My second-semester class on Greek myths had just ended when she appeared in the doorway. Spring had uncoiled and the fulgent light laved the windows and walls. I was still speaking with a few students when she sauntered into the room and sat at my desk, behind me, the whole attitude of her face and body affectedly regal. Nothing changed physically in the room no clouds curtained the sun, no books flew around with poltergeist clumsiness but the air matured considerably, as if we were all suddenly inside a confessional. An errand was in the air, a favor waiting to be hatched, and I suddenly felt snared. The students and I finished our conversation, they left, and with a face as bland as I could make it, I turned to meet hers.

"Stewart, please close the door." I noted, as I walked past her, a large mailing envelope on the desk, unclasped, full of paper. I assumed my fate was listed there. When the door was closed, she picked up the envelope and held it, babe-like, in her arms. "Stewart, I know you have a lot of work to do, as we all do, but I want you to do me a favor."

"What is it?" I answered cautiously, trying to ignore the net.

It was as if she'd not heard. "I am aware of your academic qualifications. You went to Harvard, Cornell, you have review space in several journals. I have tremendous respect for your knowledge." She went on in this vein, but I scarcely could hear her for the shuffling of pawns.

She handed me the envelope, thick as a quahog -- I didn't look inside. "I want you to read my new manuscript over, tell me what you think of the poetry." It was too late to say no, but I riffled through the papers to gain time. "Really, Miriam, I don't think - " I threw up my inadequate reserves.

"Why not?"

"Your poetry isn't the issue." I paused, wondering how to phrase it. "In some sense you are my superior in this department, and I don't think I should be the one to pass any kind of judgment. Surely there are others - "

"I want 'you' to read them."

"I'm flattered. But I don't think I should."

She sat silent for a moment. I could hear the clanking of the siege machines."I suppose you know what the others say about you?"

I tried not to show too much surprise at this jab to my testicles. Of course people talked they talked about everything, including her, calling her "the black hole." But she did have tenured ears was there something I should be paying attention to? I wanted this position badly, wanted to keep it badly. I felt the sappers underneath my "no." "No, I don't know what they say about me. I don't much care."

"I don't blame you. You know how people talk."

"Miriam, I'm not sure what all this had to do with - "

"Did you know the Library of Congress has asked me to read my poetry later this spring?"

I sighed. "No, I hadn't heard."

"My name has just been entered in Who's Who, the headmaster has offered me an administrative post, and I've got a play ready to produce next year, here. Did you know all that?"

I knew all of it. She waited for it to soak in.

"Just read the poetry, to please me." The hour bell rang. "I've got a class. Take your time with this, but please be careful with the manuscript -- you've got the only copy."

She got up and walked to the door. My back was to her and I expected, moment by moment, to hear the slam of the closing door. I didn't. I turned to her and saw her standing there, waiting. She wanted the door opened for her. I opened it. I could hear the scream of tumbling walls.

The rehearsals for this-year's Miriam's play had already begun full tilt and the theater, usually abandoned in the afternoon, was buzzing with the mayhem that characterizes a production in mid-careen. Stewart had come to the rehearsal to see what was going on, and as he sat in the back row of the theater, he saw the newest member, script in hand, off stage right, just out of the circumference of light, watching two actresses on stage stumble through a scene. As Stewart caught it, it was an argument between mother and daughter, the daughter black, the mother white, with the daughter accusing the mother of all species of absent-minded racism. The newest member looked bored -- Stewart commiserated. They finished, the air refreshingly quiet after their shrill

exchange, and the newest member, stepping into the light, went over some notes he'd made. One girl, the daughter, began arguing with him.

Stewart looked around for some distraction, and he found a crumpled sheet of paper in the crook of one of the chairs. He picked it out, smoothed it, and read the heading: For All Cast Members of Black Rainbow. He read through it something about the "quintessence" of the play then crumpled again, sailing it off somewhere into the darkness.

Then Miriam came in, dressed in a coal-black sheath dress, belted in red. She called to the newest member and the actresses that she wanted to see the scene they'd just rehearsed and that she wanted the newest member to come and watch it with her. Stewart leaned forward, in full shadow, to listen closely to what he'd only half-listened to before. The actresses took their positions while Miriam and the newest member sat in the front seats, Miriam regal as usual. They began and were barely launched when Miriam abruptly stopped them. "Why do you sound like that? I thought that we established that you, as the mother, were fighting a battle between your love for yourself and the love you say you feel for your black daughter. Selfish, we said."

The girl, stung just a little, looked at the newest member, then to Miriam, then back again, and the newest member shrugged his shoulders to the girl in a way that plainly said he didn't agree but to go on. Miriam, watching the interplay, just caught the tail-end of his gesture.

This start-and-stop continued through the entire scene, Miriam halting the speeches, asking why the revisions, the other three looking criminal, and then proceeding. Finally, when the scene was done, Miriam asked the actresses point-blank why they'd changed so much of what she had told them to do.

They glanced at each other, to the floor, at the newest member, and one finally said, the mother, "I didn't like the way my character was going. She didn't seem like a real mother. So the three of us talked it out just before you came in."

The newest member added, "I suggested the changes."

"And why?" Miriam responded, the chill in the voice, as small as it was, reaching where Stewart sat.

Now the newest member looked abashed. "It wasn't working. The characters, I mean. We thought the mother was too overloaded, that she just wasn't believable."

"That's right," the girl added.

"So we played with the scene some, trying to bring a little more ambiguity into the emotions. I mean, a mother who has had to fight for her daughter for so long isn't going to throw her to the wolves without some second or third thoughts."

"Really?"

At that point a full ice age descended on the scene -- Miriam was pure clamped outrage. They must have felt it too: all three petrified into silence. Then Miriam, voice level, asked the two girls to leave. Stewart watched them go off stage, where they hid behind a flat. Miriam couldn't see them, but Stewart could.

The newest member, to gain some advantage, stood up. He walked to the stage, turned, and sat on the apron, his face partly in shadow.

Miriam let the silence hang for a moment longer, then asked in an acid voice why he changed her instructions.

"Miriam, what do you want me to say? Your play is good, but not all of it. I saw something that I thought needed to be changed. So I changed it. It's not that big a change."

Stewart could see the young girls trying not to laugh -- one of them, the daughter, mimed a scolding mother, shaking her finger imperiously.

"Why didn't you consult me?"

The newest member threw up his hands in exasperation. "Because that's all you want me to do. I worked on this play, even rewrote parts of it, because you promised - "

"I never promised! You worked on it because you know it's good." The two girls were waddling around like two overbosomed ladies running into each other. "Do you realize what you've done? You've ridiculed me. You've made me lose respect in those girl's eyes because you didn't have the decency to ask me if what you were doing was all right."

"Miriam!" The man's voice leaped out of him and for a moment Stewart, perched above them, watched an intense struggle in the man's body as he fought to restore his voice. Stewart wondered if Miriam were smiling, figured she was. The two girls were boo-hooing into their hands. "The play needs work, more work than you're willing to admit. You asked me to do this play because

you wanted someone to consult. You said you trusted my judgment. So I said yes. But every time I try to tell you something, you get angry. I know how to write plays. I've had them done. This is your first."

Miriam, instead of replying, stood up and slapped him across the face. "Don't you talk to me like that," she said in a whisper that barely reached Stewart. "This play has my blood in it, that's my mother onstage, and you're telling me you know better how to play my life?" She was shaking -- Stewart could see it from the frosting of light on her black hair. The newest member seemed fixed between bewilderment and sadness, seemingly incapable of moving out of her range. The girls had disappeared. Finally, standing up, he conscientiously put his hands in his pockets. "Miriam, I'm out. It's your play, take it as you want it."

Immediately her tone of voice changed. "You promised and you'll stick with it. You have to."

Stewart was struck by how incapacitated the man was, how, with his clean declaration and her slap, he still stood there, hands in pockets, head bowed, as if waiting for the axe. Miriam gradually straightened herself and walked across the stage, the red of her belt slashing murderously across the black dress.

On opening night Stewart noticed the newest member's name under the title of assistant director. The play later drowned with a national troupe.

I sat for what seemed hours peering at the manila envelope as if it were Pandora's box. Part of me saw a labyrinth in it, but other parts of me couldn't resist seeing what was there. Finally, I opened. I worked on the poems every day, bit by bit, writing commentary that splayed around the margins of the page until each poem resembled an illuminated manuscript. I finished them about two weeks after she gave them to me.

I told her that I finished looking at the poems. She made as if she'd forgotten she'd given them to me, then made an elaborate masque of remembering. She invited me into her room. Once away from the crowd in the department lounge, with the door closed, the woman's who'd put on the show of recollection became a woman crassly eager to know what I'd thought. Were they good, she asked, were they good? I removed the envelope from my briefcase, faintly yet menacingly aware that the stakes had just been anted higher. She was convened in her chair at the head of the table and I had to bring the envelope to

her. She pulled out the sheaf of poems and proceeded to read. I retreated to my chair at the other end of the table, waiting for the jury.

She read for half an hour, without comment. I moved from indignation at being made to wait through disregard to boredom. Finally, she slammed down the page she was reading. The pile had been barely plumbed. I made ready to leave.

"So, you don't like them?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then what's with all this unnecessary commentary?"

"You asked me to read your poetry. I did. I tried to be helpful. Some of it's good, but not all of it." She didn't reply to that, and I missed the cue of her silence. I continued speaking. "I thought that's what you wanted. I read them as an editor might, an editor sympathetic to - "

"What do you know about writing?" She spoke with little rancor in her voice, which made me feel an out-of-place sympathy for her. But instead of retreating, I advanced, straight toward that black figure wearing the ebon dress and red belt. "I certainly know enough to do what you asked me to do."

"It's clear you didn't like it." She turned her face to me. "Why?"

My exasperation should have firmly ushered me out the door, but I still felt the need to explain myself to her. The Academy bell knelled the hour on my lack of an appropriately humble sacrifice.

"Have you ever had poetry published?" I shook my head. "I have. I know what goes and what doesn't. I don't need your prejudiced criticism. I know my poetry is good."

"Then why did you ask me to read it?"

The hall filled with students changing class. "We've no more time to speak. Or need. I have a class." She turned away, getting up to pull a folder off her desk. I could scarcely move for anger and embarrassment. I gathered my briefcase and left. My class suffered that morning.

Later that month, in the Atlantic, one of Miriam's poem appeared, one that I immediately recognized from the pile I'd read. Every change I'd recommended had been used, down to the punctuation. I heard later that the manuscript had been published and evenly, if not glowingly, reviewed. I, of course, received no

royalties. Instead, the classroom observations by my committee increased in number, the bad reports sprouted like fungi. I battened my hatches.

It was June, the last unpurposed days of Stewart's sojourn at the Academy. Even the dour brickwork blossomed in the sun. He'd finished his last class for the day and was on his way to the department room for ditto masters when, passing Miriam's room, he saw the newest member seated at the table, with Miriam planted in front of him, her deep-bosomed body bridled with what she was saying to the man. She had a manila envelope in her hand. Stewart backed off, able to see the scene in the reflection of the display case on the opposite wall. She asked him to take it. He refused. She insisted. Stewart heard the scraping of a chair, and, not wishing to be caught eavesdropping, moved toward the department room. Behind him passed the newest member -- Stewart telescoped him quickly: no manila envelope in hand. He felt a pricking jealousy for a breath or two, then doused it.

Miriam walked into the department room, scarcely glancing at Stewart, resolutely slid the envelope into the newest member's mail box, and walked out. Stewart looked at if for a moment with a pleasant sensation of confusion. Certainly he owed the newest member no favors -- everyone had to suffer his (or her) own thorny path. Yet, there was also no need for unnecessary suffering. He let his fingers playfully linger on the envelope, sliding it partly out, then back in, before he finally slipped it out of the box and into his briefcase. He deposited it in the wastebin downstairs. Good deeds go unrewarded, he thought as he walked across campus, guardian angels go unseen, and wondered who, in all creation, would be there to help him tide over the future.

GOOD HOMES

Mary Quinn listened to the washing machine grumble as she watched the children from her washroom window playing in the next yard. They weren't children, she knew, but it was difficult not to think of them so as they spiked the air with their brief grunts of laughter. Her own daughter Myna sat at the kitchen table coloring, the crayons fanned around her like spilled chunks of gemstones. The aurin fleece of her hair fell across the freckled arm that ratcheted back and forth across the picture. The washing machine hissed through its spin cycle and hummed slowly to a stop. Mary tucked her hair neatly under a kerchief. "C'mon, tyro, time to help." Myna, sweeping her hair back in a short but not ungraceful gesture, slid out of her chair and dragged a wicker basket from the corner where it crouched.

"Why don't you use the dryer?" she asked as her mother shoveled the clothes from the washer to the basket. "We got a dryer." She stood politely waiting, sneakered feet set slightly apart, small tummy protruding.

"Because," Mary said, huffing slightly as she guided a long serpentine sheet into the basket, "I like the smell. The air makes the clothes smell good."

"Even with them next door?" She shifted her stance, scratched her arm. A ribbon of hair clung to an eyelash, bobbed as she blinked.

"Honey, where did you hear that? People like them don't make the air smell bad." Mary leaned over, moved the strand of hair back into place. "People like them next door are gentle people. They're different, not bad." She stood up. "C'mon, trooper, grab the clothespins. We a'gonna make our trek out to the wilderness." The girl, neither smiling nor pouting, unhooked a canvas bag and followed the basket-carrying figure out of the kitchen.

Outside, sunlight ricocheted like arrows off the somnolent grass and grey strictness of the stockade fence. Mary heaved the basket to the ground and Myna, knowing the ritual well, stood next to her like a little aide-de-camp, a clothespin at the ready. Next door Myna could see the arc of a ball over the jagged lip of the fence, then hear the unseen thump as it landed like a stone in a pool of babbling laughter. "Hey there, sport, I need more pins." Myna, squintingly reflective, looked up at her mother while her hand rummaged woodenly in the bag. Mary, unfurling the last end of a sheet, neatly lifted it to miss the ground, pinned it home. "What's on your mind?"

The balled arced up again in the opposite direction. “What’s wrong with them?” she asked, a clothespin stuck up in the air, a small image of the Statue of Liberty. “Where did they come from?”

“One question at a time.” Mary flapped a towel over the line. “Hard to say what’s wrong with them, honey. Hard to say.”

Myna, clearly not satisfied, sat down squarely in the fluid dimness of the sheet’s shade. Mary knew what that obstinate motion meant: no more work until the questions were answered. She wondered, in the short descent from upright to kneeling, how to explain to this child the intricacies of failed genetics, how ever to outline to her the reasons for the raised voices in their parlor when the neighbors gathered to talk. The ball looped upward -- Myna watched it fall.

“Honey, these people aren’t like you and me,” Mary began. “They - “

“Well, I don’t know. They talk okay. A little funny, like their noses are stuffed.”

“When did you talk to them?” Mary asked, a trifle too quickly.

Myna didn’t miss it. “Shouldn’t I talk to them?”

“No. I mean yes. Just don’t “ Mary couldn’t finish, already outmaneuvered by this freckled upturned face. “Look,” she said sternly, regaining control, “they have problems. Not problems like being sick or a broken leg, but something else, something inside their bodies --”

“I don’t believe it,” Myna said affirmatively, standing up. Her face was even with Mary’s.

Mary hesitated, debating whether to push the subject, and finally let out a long chuckling sigh. “Maybe you’re right, kitten, maybe you’re right.” She got to her feet, reached down. “Pin?”

Just then the ball, in a wide friendly parabola, sailed into their yard. Mary and Myna watched as the people next door lined up at the fence, the line of the fence cutting them across the shoulder like a gallery of busts. Except that no busts ever shaped for grave and measured purpose resembled this collection. To a person the five of them smiled, sweat from the morning sun shiny on their faces, and they jostled each other like train cars on a siding. But it was clear they were not children. Two of the males had mustaches, thin affairs, and one woman was clearly well-developed, her hair wholesomely intemperate. “The ball,” one of them said, pointing his finger at Myna, “the ball.”

Myna didn't move. Neither did she look at Mary. Instead, in a voice neither shrewish nor mocking, she simply said, "Say please."

The man was perplexed for a moment. With a mixture of pity and apprehension, Mary watched him screw and contort his face as he tried to make the cells of brain connect. Then suddenly, like the first gunshot cracking of ice on the river in the spring, his face unhinged and he shot out, in a clear sharp staccato, "I want the ball, please."

Only then did Myna carry the ball to him. He took it lightly from her hands. Mary, observing all with a bemused yet tender fascination, caught the ball in her gaze just at the pause before it left Myna's hands, and for an odd moment, as if time had lurched a little bit to the side, she saw the two of them, the ball between them, inextricably tangled in the smell of the grass and the brilliance of the white sheets and the uncoiling light of a summer morning. Then the ball was gone and they were gone.

They finished the wash in silence. As they turned to go inside Myna pulled on Mary's slacks. "I heard them the other morning practicing to be polite." Mary tousled the child's hair, her throat tight with love and wonder. They shared a lemonade and colored a sailboat together.

"What're they all looking like thieves for?" Susan asked Mary as she filled Mary's glass with gin and tonic and handed it to her. They were surrounded by the remains of a barbecue in honor of Susan's son Jamie's First Communion. Everyone had been well-fed -- the children, young and not-so-young, played in the backyard. The adults sat in lawn chairs, gin-and-tonics in hand, content and lazy. "What are they talking about?"

Mary said she didn't know, but she knew. It was the one topic of conversation in which her neighbors could indulge themselves without the men retiring to the basement for pool and the women rambling on about diapers and college. When they parleyed like this she tried to be disaffected, gazing at her hands or over the head of her husband who, with ill-concealed impatience, wished she would pay more attention to this "very serious problem." She sipped her drink and put it down: too much gin. She was just about to dilute it when Susan dragged on her arm and pulled her away. "I know. It's the retreads." Mary left the drink on the table.

"Well, here are they are," boomed Carl, Susan's husband. He was a beefy man, mostly bald, solid, like the land contracts he sold. Everyone glanced up and Mary, against her will, smiled sheepishly. Jim, her husband, leaned his chair against the garage door opposite her. She sat next to Susan.

"I think I'd look the other way if one of the kids snuck over there and busted windows. I really would."

"Mark, we don't want to teach our kids to be mean." Carl shifted his weight for emphasis. "This has to be done legally, without violence."

Susan piped up, her gin and tonic precariously balanced on the chair arm. "I don't see what's so bad about 'em. I mean, they don't hurt anybody." Carl rolled up his eyes in mock exasperation. People chuckled.

"Not yet." This from Hester, a mousy woman who everyone suspected of being slightly crazy herself. Her husband Randall stared at his knees. "Every time I drive past the yard there's one or two of 'em gawking at me and waving, drooling "

"They don't drool," Mary interjected.

Hester shot her a look. "Drooling!" Mary was overruled. "And who knows what else they do over there? I don't want my childr - "

"All right, Hester," Carl said officiously, "we've been through that before. Isn't any use to -- "

"Well, I have to live next to them!" Hester protested, and Carl sat back, his chairmanship momentarily defeated, his gin the better part of discretion. Mary wanted to protest again, saying that she, too, lived next to them, that they had been gentle and bumptious and no more harm than an addled dog. But she could sense the palpable anger in Hester's voice, in the group, an anger spawned partly by fear but more an anger tinged with pride at the power of their possessions, their satisfaction at raising children and mowing lawns and complaining about government. Mary knew she could not divert this self-congratulation they passed among themselves, could not deny that she partook of it and benefited from it. All she could was strain to hear the voices of the children that streamed over the garage roof and tumbled unnoticed into their midst.

"The question, it seems to me," Mark interrupted, "is what we can do to get rid of them. I mean, if the state wants to plunk them down here, what's to do?"

Mary, hoping her voice would have more control than she knew it would, spoke. "They have no other home."

"They got the institution, haven't they? That nice place the county built 'em just a few years ago? They belong there."

"I mean a 'home,' some place like we came from."

"I never came from a home," Hester blurted out, "I never had - "

Carl leaned over, his face not quite pitched to her. "They're not like us, Mary. They have to be trained and taken care of and we're footing the bill."

"But they are like us!" Mary could feel Jim's impatient puzzlement.

"Mary, they're not." His tone was like that of an indulgent parent. "They don't produce anything. All they do is take up space. Personally, I wouldn't be hurt if they were quietly put to sleep. Of course we can't do that - yet. But it does them no good to be around people like us and see what they can't ever have."

For a moment the group was silent. The children were in the house now -- the sound of a television crackled against the oncoming twilight.

"Well, we're no further along than before." Mark looked at his watch. "Frankly, I'm tired of complaining. What alternatives do we have?"

Carl sat forward, his face lifted by a small ironic smile. "Jim?"

Jim leaned forward awkwardly, running his hand through his hair, and glanced around at the people slowly receding into the dusk. "Well, I've been doing a little research into the state law that set these people loose and there are some loopholes." Everyone watched him. He shifted his weight. "If we can show significant dissatisfaction with the arrangement, they may have to be moved."

"What is 'significant dissatisfaction'?" Hester shot out.

"The sort of things we've been talking about here, arranged in proper legal depositions, the right language, but I can take care of that end. Then we can file a motion - "

"How much will all this cost?" Carl asked.

"Well, my services are obviously free. The only fees will be for filing papers, court work. Affordable." Again everyone was silent.

Cart stood up. "It's time we got going. Almost dark. Jim, do you have the paperwork?"

"It's in the house."

"Okay. Everybody, let's go inside."

Mary heard the creak of the released chairs and the soft lilt of ice on glass. The people filed into the house. She lingered outside for a moment, saw the first star open out its light. Then the door slowly sighed closed behind her.

The children, grumpy, stuffed, tired, were lumped on the couches and chairs while their parents gathered around the dining room table. On the table were fanned out papers, all a dull legal off-white, each with a single name on it. "There are the affidavits. They must be filled out and given back to me by next week. The court is in session soon." Jim looked up. "Any questions?"

"What about incorporation?" Carl prodded.

Jim shot Carl a glance, impatient, corrective. "We should incorporate as a neighborhood group. It'll give us more leverage and publicity if we need it."

"Publicity?" Randall asked. "Why should we need publicity?"

"To fight this thing in the open," Hester reprimanded him, "if we need to."

"She's right," Jim said, giving Randall a more perturbed look than he had intended. "Studies show that these half-way houses fail if neighborhood annoyance is strong and public. The inmates can't handle the social pressure well." Randall shook his head. "Well, here are your papers." Carl picked up a sheaf, Jim another, and handed them out.

"I can't take this, Carl," Mary said, when he got to her.

"Why not?"

"I don't think it's right. We don't have the authority."

Jim's voice splashed over her. "It's legal."

"I don't care." How far, she thought, from the eloquence of making a stand, with her voice shaking, her hands slick and limp. She glanced straight into Jim's eyes, gathered sound in her throat once more, said, "I don't care."

"But honey," Susan said, "what about Myna?"

"They wouldn't hurt anybody."

"Maybe Mary, but Myna do you want her growing up with that kind of craziness next door?"

"It doesn't matter," interrupted Carl, "if she takes the paper or not. We'll have Jim's."

"They're not crazy."

"Mary, you have to do it for the good of the neighborhood."

She didn't take the paper. She knew they looked at Jim, shrugged, their mute faces saying to him, She'll come around, she'll understand. But she wouldn't. The party dissolved. In the living room she saw Jim take a crystal paperweight, its insides jumping with snow, from Myna's sleeping hands and hoist her gently into his arms. She went out the door. Carl and Susan, on the porch, their Jamie tiredly pulled into his mother's hip, her arm protectively around his shoulders, waved goodbye. And soon the street swallowed them all up.

Neighborhood. That last word wove in and out of the echoes of their goodbyes, in their voices now lost in the dull vault of sky. All along the street, from windows speckled with the same yellow light, from lawns slowly gathering dew, from decks and porches and asphalt driveways, came the same ineffable, tangled yet steadfast magic, as if they had invoked tonight a talisman to ward off forever the eclipse of the sun as it arced its way through their heaven. They would fashion good homes for their children. All she could do was color pictures with her daughter and face the window with hardened heart.

THE MAN WHO LOVED THOREAU

I

Alex first met Thoreau in the person of his father. One of his earliest memories (though he was not sure if he actually remembered this, or if it was merely the accumulation of recollections laying around the house, like dust in the corners) was of the Manuscript edition of Thoreau's works scaled grandly atop his rock maple dresser. His father would, from time to time as Alex lay in his cradle speaking in tongues, read from the Journals, or from the strident economics of Walden, or about the shimmering river in the Week. And according to testimony (though again this was hard to make real), when Alex first rose up in his crib, he faced the morning sun and laughed. His father nodded approvingly and said that it showed the beneficent influence of Thoreau's words, but Alex's mother said it was more likely that Alex's diaper was wet. That didn't matter, Alex's father replied, the stars and the bowels move together.

Alex got to know just enough of his father to realize there was much left to learn about the man. Alex's father died on the eve of the Great War, when Alex was eight. Shadows took up residence in the house -- Alex's mother was a ship without an anchor. He clearly remembered going into his father's study and sitting cradled by the supple leather of the huge chair at his father's desk. Around him was the slow combustion of his father's books, each cautiously placed. Their order mocked his tentative eight-year old grip on the world, and for a horrible instant he felt himself fall through the leather of the chair into a thorough abyss where his father's face, once creased by laughter and girdled with a beard, slowly and agonizingly shed its flesh until the skull gleamed its evaporated ivory. Alex screamed until he was back in his father's study, the spring sunlight thick off the sheen of the desk, the books still orderly, the air cool and calm. Alex swung quickly out of the chair, and as he moved he saw on the desk an open book, the book his father must have been reading when they discovered him, bolt upright, dead in his study. Alex skimmed the page, his heart still battering his ribs, and his eyes lit on an underlined passage: "I perceive that we partially die ourselves, through sympathy, at the death of each of our friends or near relatives." His father's voice, stout yet edged with compassion and civility, skirled through Alex's head like a flute through an apse of pines, and

his heart stilled. Then, in a gesture he only half-understood, he closed the book, all the while peering at the dust in the sun.

After the interment, after Alex's mother retreated, he found himself more and more alone. He spent more time outside the house, often getting up at dawn and rambling through the meadows and fields until the sunset ignited the dusk, when he would return, grimed and steady. And when he had washed and eaten a spare supper, while his mother sewed or sat in the wing chair and stared at the dark panes of glass, he would sit at his father's desk in a pool of saffron light and furiously write in a ledger the events of his day. Page after page night after night branched with his script. Occasionally his mother's silhouette, enclosed by the dark walnut of the doorframe, would ask what it was he wrote about, and he would answer, politely but tersely, about the things he found and the thoughts he had, no more volunteered or offered.

He could not seem to get enough of the woods and fields. Seasons passed. His mother unfurled from grief and took up life again, and he, adding on time and breadth and strength, also unfurled like the clef of a fiddlehead fern. They talked only infrequently, evolving a cryptic language that spoke more than it said, and it was understood that she would not interfere with his travels. Outwardly he was like any other twelve-year old boy. He made friends, played their games, argued with them about America's presence in the war, followed the battles in the newspapers. Yet even they, like his mother, sensed a hardness in him a portion of him fallow and rocky that wouldn't yield to normal cultivation. He joined no clubs at school, sought no honors, courted no one, and while his friends liked him well enough, it was not warm or encouraging. After school, when the games were done, he would head out for his walk, taking any handy bearing, and some of his schoolmates would watch his slight figure dwindle down the road or over the crest of a low hill. They wondered mildly curious what he was looking for, then turned to go their own ways.

Alex wondered as well. He knew the precise location of the wild flower beds, certain trees, freshets that leaped from mossy holes, birds' nests, animal dens. Where he walked seemed so much a part of himself that he felt, though he didn't understand it, as if he were walking across a territory as familiar, yet as full of mystery, as his own heart and ribs and lungs. He noted everything. He watched, scarcely a foot away, while a mud-turtle buried her eggs. He shinnied up trees to watch the progress of chicks, learned to catch fish with his hands, conversed with woodchucks. And he dutifully recorded it in his ledger, driven by some need

to get it all down as accurately as possible. He walked, he scavenged, he sat in the moonlight while he inhaled the smell of sweet clover, he turned over rocks, he read the script on tree bark but none of it yielded. The linchpin he needed escaped him.

One night, in the chill of early November, his mother heard Alex come through the back door. She had been worried, and waited with a released heart for him to see her. Instead, he went straight to the study and closed the door, a signal to be left alone. An hour later Alex came out and, still without a word, clomped upstairs to bed. She stood at the foot of the stairs and listened to him washing, the thunk of his boots as they hit the floor, the squeal of the bedsprings as he eased into bed.

She went into the study -- the light was still on. The ledger, like wounded bird, lay open. She had never looked into his words before, an agreement unvoiced yet binding. She stood a little off and gazed at the jerky script that littered the page. Then, straightening her dress, she walked to the desk, laid the last written page flat. She skimmed the sharp description, invited by the words, and for a moment she imagined the keen sting of wild peppermint in the air. She read on, saw that it was more of the same, and prepared to close the book.

She came to the last sentences, and as she read them her heart tightened and her eyes clouded. "I found today," the words spoke, "what I had been looking for all this time, and now I am not sure if I am glad. Today I finally understood what I had been searching for my father's face. And I understood too that it was all around me all the time. He lives every time I go walking across the land. I am my father. That is all I understand."

She left the book as she had found it, doused the lights, and made her way upstairs through the darkness.

II

Murky Cambridge dusk. Autumn's throat edging toward winter's knife. Alex walked down Garden Street towards the Yard. Hard against the old First Church, the headstones of the burial ground sprouted and bristled out of the damp earth. On a slab of granite near the sidewalk, written in uncial, was "5 miles to Boston." Alex stared at the inscription. Cambridge spilled out in radial dimness from his dark center.

He had arrived at Harvard cleaned, he believed, of all his childishness. His father's school. The train ride here had been a clear prose that Alex had written with the pen of his own being. There he had been, moving freely toward a destiny of his choice, unclasped by parents, toward some congress with all the possibilities of the world.

Sour memory now. He crossed the street to the Yard. Lights breached the coming twilight, and the frowning brick softened. This was a time when there was no time. He felt suspended, floating, even as he clomped noisily on the boards set on the paths in anticipation of the snow. It was time for high table at Lowell House. Cambridge at dusk was a city of spires brindled with electric light. Above he heard the wind weaving in the chimney pots of Grays and Matthews and the muffled living sounds of the uncoined freshmen behind their rimed windows. He saw himself in every room, his every face shadowed by the plane of light as he pressed against the glass to see out, to see through. He passed out of the Yard, headed for the river.

It had not always been this way. He recalled clearly his first day as he hauled his trunk up three flights to his room at the top of Wigglesworth, how his entryway and every entryway in the Yard boiled over with parents and porters, and how the sun battered everything with festive heat. He'd even liked his roommates at first, even though they treated him, as good Exeter grads, with that expansive gentility just shy of rudeness. One of them had had a flask of gin. They'd shared it, sitting on the trunks, their collars limp with sweat, not bothering to wipe off the flask's mouth, and for that moment he felt Eden around him, sharing liquor with people who, for now, pretended to like him, as they sat on the shores of the greatest school in the world.

But soon he drifted away from them, they being more interested in exploring the dens of Boston than Plato's cave. He stuck to his books because, in a real sense, they stuck to him. He had always been a child of words. Soon they started calling him The Monk -- he drifted farther away. The dust of the library riddled his veins.

His cloister was Widener. He searched. He attempted to make sense of all the facts, suppositions, premises, constants, relativities that sieved through him and clouded his mind. He wanted knowledge, and he felt lost in the forest, without guidance and harried by his curious thirst and the sentinel face of his father.

The year ended, but by then Alex had been infected by his intellect. Inside him meaning and purpose and doubt and fear sold his peace of mind on the block every day. He plunged into a summer factory job turning out parts for telephones. In the evenings he went where the workers went and let their gossip and complaining clean him out. He tried not to think, afraid of failing. As the next year started his bookshelves at Lowell House filled and filled with names: Russell, Whitehead, Husserl, Wittgenstein, Aquinas, Descartes, Hume, Berkeley. He juggled his own hot heart, unable to drop it and die, unable to hold it without pain.

No truth. No sure ground of being. His father's life had been as meaningless as his death. But his guts rebelled against that -- but his guts gave him no answers. He felt betrayed by the power of his own hunger for knowing. He felt the knot at his throat, the unyielding knot of mystery and stupidity and darkness. He had no evidence to keep him continuing -- life his life deserved no more attention.

The decision, when made, brought him peace, and ironically life became more vibrant for him, more insistent. His senses sharpened, his body surfaced, and the long celibacy crumbled away. He gloried in his sensations even as he felt sorry that he would have to leave them behind, grateful for the truce while it lasted. But it didn't last for long. It soon came round to surrender.

He finally reached the river. The lights in the houses went on like batteries of irregular guns. He felt impervious. He tramped onto Weeks Bridge, finally stopped. The maculate water, littered with fall's slough, slid under the bridge, under his eyes. Alex watched without comprehension. With a jerk he leaped on the parapet and stood ready to launch himself. He stared at the water, searching its face. It waited.

Alex only faintly heard the sound. He looked up. On the river, just barely visible, was a sculler, possibly the last of the season. The sculler's oars sliced long liquid divots out of the autumn sun that skimmed across the river's surface. Alex watched as the thin sliver of shadow grew larger, saw the thin light dance on its braided wake, and the alpenglow stippled the sculler like a butterfly. The body arched and snapped and let out sharp syllabic breaths like shots.

Alex watched. The sculler raced sun. He raced the present tense of his blood, the friction of water, the unloosening skein of his muscles. He raced the

possibility of fracture against the coming blackness, raced for the dim lights of the creaking dock that signaled end, that signaled home. The sculler raced night.

Suddenly Alex could sense the gnarling cold of the stone through his shoes, recall the rough grating of the rock on his knees and hands. For an instant the world he'd renounced laved over him, and his body filled with a precious hesitation. On the river the sculler honed the darkness that cut Alex's throat until Alex bled words again. In his mind Alex guided the sculler along, shared his breath through parched throat, thought his thoughts. Safely through under the arch of darkness. Clear the oars now, just enough on either side. Careful not to slam the seat forward fight the thighs that ache, these shoulders that knot and crease, this rasped throat whittled to grunts. Hands on sweat-polished handles: Feather! Feather! All is rhythm, all is motion, grace.

Alex jumped off the parapet, ran to the other side of the bridge to see the sculler emerge. No more light was available. Finally, he heard the sculler dock his boat, lift it out of the water, and walk it up to the boathouse where, for an instant, he could see the sculler's silhouette against the framed glow of the door. Then darkness. The floating dock creaked as it swung in the gentle aftermove of the sculler. Alex imagined the waves of that motion washing his feet clean.

Back in Lowell House, back in his narrow room. Spread militantly across the top of his dresser was his father's collection of Thoreau. Alex pulled out Walden and held it tight as he collapsed on his bed and fell into the first impervious sleep he'd had in weeks. In his mind the snow fell and etched the copper beeches in the Yard, the old walls and houses and chimneys, and the sound of it as it fell was a simple flute floating over a pure frozen pond, the sound caught and refracted in the air's web of diamonds.

III

Light covered the man like skin. It was a morning light, in August, not yet crabbed with heat. The insects had not begun to sizzle yet, the birds griped in the trees. His hair was long, below his wing blades, shot through with grey, tied neatly with a leather thong. The room was bare except for the cushions the man sat on, the walls white, the oak floor dull.

The eyes were open, unblinking, unstaring. The wrinkles around his eyes were like the lines of symmetrical decay on a cloud-chamber photograph. His nose was aquiline, altogether too fleshy, and it arced over a mouth and chin framed by a bristling goatee. Where he was shaved, the skin was leathery but not tough, like chamois. His hands rested on his lap, woven like twin knots of rope, and his legs were moored in the lotus position. He was a man supremely at ease in the August morning, eyes charitably turned inward.

He heard the outside door open, then close with the sharp chlunk! where it stuck against the jamb. Melita was back. He roused himself, assembling his senses, and listened as she filled the kettle with water and put it on the stove, then the crisp snap of the lighted match, the grunt of the gas as it caught. He even imagined the bitter sulfur in his nose. Already the heat had risen. He unflexed his legs slowly, stood up, and left the room.

Melita was eighteen -- he was sixty-two. Not that the ages mattered, though many people he'd known would be itchy at the situation (and he knew what the itch would be). He got it up often enough to please him. He wasn't sure about Melita -- he didn't care. If she had other lovers (and if he had been her, he would have) that was no problem. He reached the top of the stairs. In the kitchen he could hear the two mugs slapped down onto the counter (his a large earthenware, hers a thick white cafeteria), then the splurge of water. He could see ferns of steam rising upward, weaseling about her head all she saw was hot water. Poetry was too placid for her tastes -- taking to the streets was in her voice. The poetry of action, she once said, not words. He didn't care. He didn't want her for an audience, not something captive. He liked her because she hated poetry.

"I know you're standing there, so come join me."A smile grazed across his mouth, nibbled at the corner, ranged over his lips. His bare feet made no sound on the stairs.

"I'm glad you're back."

She swung the two mugs to the table, then added a cutting board with sliced fruit and cheese. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

He sipped his tea.

She was putting dishes away, her body flying around the small kitchen. For a moment, for the time it took an eyelid to descend and rise, he drank in the marvelous complicity of her movements, his body remembering the shivering

delight of coming into her, her breasts like unearthed flower bulbs, nipples rising like the almost-explosion of a bud. Frenetic, she gave him peace. Flippant, she gave him truth.

"I never know what you'll do." He sipped his tea again. "Sit down."

"In a sec. I'm trying to get this sty picked up. Did you know the door still sticks?"

He nodded, ate some cheese.

"How many times have you promised to fix it? You've got all those goddam tools in the basement."

"I'll get to it. The door has been doing that for a long time."

"Superstitious bastard," she said without rancor. She sat down. "Alex, I've got something to tell you. I know you won't agree, but I've made up my mind. It's what I want to do."

"Do what?"

"I'm going to Chicago for the convention."

"Why go at all?"

"To get Humphrey nominated."

"Is he going to be the 'new, improved politician'? Better than the butcher in there now?" He finished his tea, perused the leavings in the mug. "What do you really expect to happen conversion on the road?"

She got up, her arms akimbo, and stood over him as if he were a young child. "You've convinced yourself that all true political action comes from revelation inside. You're wrong!"

"Melita." He pointed to her chair and, with just a slight hesitation, she sat down. "We've had this discussion before."

"It's all fine and good for you to sit up there and meditate, but people are starving, workers are getting shit on, and something has to be done."

The steam had gone out of the talk. He knew she was right, and he knew she was wrong as well. What was a person to do? Live as best he could. All his life he had done exactly that, trying to shed as much baggage as possible, trying to simplify himself to where his desires were pure, unmarred. He'd had enough of the world long ago. "Why did you tell me?"

"I thought you'd like to know why I might not be home. Not that you'd notice." She moved her hair off her shoulders so that her face, framed like a madonna's, looked straight into him.

"I'd notice. I'd notice very much."

"Do you need me? I mean, why am I shacking up with some sixty-year old hippie? Am I perverted?"

"To the first and last questions, yes. To the second, I don't know, but then again, I don't know why I'm shacking up with some eighteen-year old wench when I should be a patented grandfather and fearing my retirement. You tell me."

He helped her clean up the breakfast, then they changed for the day's work. There were fences that needed mending around the edges of the alfalfa. She said she'd be leaving in a few days.

With her gone the house became an island, and he saw clearly how his land spread out in productive circles from the hearts and hands that inhabited this dwelling. The house garden came due, and he was thankfully busy canning and freezing. He continued to sell milk and eggs as he always did, without the approval of inspectors, to those who brought their own containers. The alfalfa was harvested and bagged by the man down the road, in exchange for eggs and cheese and rabbit meat. The small orchard's fruit sang its aromatic lieder, and he gave the birds their due while he stored the apples in the root cellar and froze the cherries and made jams. At evening, when the kitchen counter groaned with jars and the crows had gone to rook, he sat on the porch and finally let himself wonder about her. He did not want to feel old, and yet he did, and he knew that when she was here, he did not think about being older, he just thought about being alive. And when the sun went full down and the cicadas inhabited the ear, while the ocean of darkness suffered his one light to glow, loneliness frisked him more strongly than it had in quite a long time, just to see what he had on him. Maybe she was right, maybe he'd worked so hard to find peace in himself he'd forgotten about the world out there. He imagined her, headstrong in conversation, in her endless rounds of petitioning. Perhaps she was right.

One day, not long after she left, he went into the city. When he pulled up to the hardware store, across from the public park, he saw a forest of people collected around the statue of Daniel Webster. One young man, jeaned and

long-haired, spoke to them through a bullhorn. He parked the truck, locked it, and joined the fringes of the group, but he could only catch a few words when the bullhorn happened to point his way. He moved in closer. Someone handed him a pamphlet. "Stop the War! Stop the Draft!" blistered across the top of the page.

The man's words, tinny and slurred, filled the early morning air. "We have to show our unity in the face of this fascist repression by our government. That is why we've gathered here today, to show the leaders in Washington that they can't take young men and use them like fresh meat. Like Henry David Thoreau said, if a law 'requires you to be an agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.' You've got that written in your pamphlet. Remember it."

Scattered applause fanfared the exchange of the bullhorn to a young girl (he imagined Melita) who spoke about sexism and the military machine, but he scarcely heard her. He skimmed the pamphlet and found the quotation from Thoreau. While the girl's voice droned on mantra-like, he descended through a time he'd long since abandoned.

There had been his first marriage. When graduation had come and he and his classmates had been grudgingly admitted into the community of scholars, he was already headed for a teaching career. He had desperately wanted something authentic to do, some outward sign that what he'd done with his four years, what his father had done for him in the years before that, was the ground for some kind of legitimate life among his fellow human beings. He had needed to believe he was useful.

His first teaching job was in a reform school in rural upstate New York, and though he had been frustrated by the low pay and long hours, he was also secretly pleased by them: they reminded him that he was doing his work out of commitment, as a mission. Then he met Kathleen, a woman six years older, with a daughter, Nicole, and he had been smitten by her age, her maturity. Soon they were engaged -- soon the market crashed.

The bullhorn changed to a black man, a gold earring snapping in the sunlight. "Racism," he began. He had not thought of Kathleen in epochs, only a little more of Nicole. The marriage had never been good. His need for order, for respectability, soon evaporated in the heat of the true responsibilities of being a husband, a father, a worker. He could barely take care of himself, much less nourish two other people. Kathleen demanded attention -- she got indifference. Nicole demanded a father -- she got transience. They divorced in 1932, and he'd

never married since. He had always wondered if Kathleen had remarried, had never moved to find out. He still sent Nicole birthday cards, even though now she was close to forty-five. She never replied.

The pamphlet in his hand swam back into focus. The black man was still speaking. He noticed a number of police cruisers around the park, their blue lights strobing palely in the bright morning sun. Mounted police filed through the crowd, ringed the fringes. Thoreau. The linchpin of it all. Even as they married and began to make a life, the shrill flute of that cabin by the pond cut into his veins. What he could not admit to himself then, but which worked at his heart like poison, was that he did not want the marriage and the child and the house and the job, had never wanted them except that he had forced himself to believe that they were the only ways he could be real. What he had truly wanted to do after college, all his life, was what Thoreau had done, purge himself so that he could be free of in order to be free for. So they divorced, both of them totally uncomprehending.

And that is what he had been doing all his life, building his Walden so that he could be free of pain and loneliness and the people who produced such things. When his mother died, with no other husband to her name (divorced as well from the world, content with her memories), the house and land reverted to him. He retired there, worked to feed himself, spent long nights alone with his music and notebooks, and gradually accepted his own singleness, the ripeness and danger of his own freedom. Inspector of snowstorms, surveyor of dreams.

He sensed rather than saw the people around him shuffle. Looking up, he was blinded momentarily by the sun. Then he saw the horse patrols moving among the people and heard a bullhorn's voice say "move on" and "forcibly arrested" and "no right to assemble without a permit." All around the park cruisers were tethered to the curbs. Policemen with riot gear phalanxed on the sidewalk. The first man, the one who'd been speaking when he came to the park, shouted into his bullhorn for everyone to stay cool and offer no resistance. A mounted policeman rode by and grabbed the horn -- the man refused to let go and the policeman fell off his horse. Immediately the other patrols surrounded the young man, billyclubs drawn, while the fallen policeman dragged the young man to a waiting wagon. Everyone looked scared, tight and scared.

He walked to the line of policemen and made to go through it. One man dropped his shield in his way.

"I want to leave. My truck is right over there."

"No one leaves."

"Why all the force? Why can't I leave?"

"Move back."

"Why?"

"Get back."

He saw it was more than useless to argue with the face behind the insect-like visor, so he retreated back into the crowd. Behind him some people were chanting, "Hell, no, we won't go." Others took up the cry, their fists punctuating the air. He wended through the crowd to another point, asked permission to leave. By now it was obvious the policemen were nervous and instead of speaking to him, the officer pushed him back with the tip of his riot stick, jabbing it sharply just up under the ribs. He stumbled and fell into a knot of people. He could smell their sweat, a cheap sour smell of fear and excitement. They propped him up roughly and, still with their hands on him, shook their fists at the policemen and shouted "Is that what the fuckin' pigs do now, push old men around?" He could see from the flexing hands of the policemen that it wouldn't be long before they replied in the brash syllables of riot sticks and tear gas. He peered at them, ached to talk with them, reason out this foolishness, to use best what was best inside them. But only crass power stared back, unblinking.

He melded back to the middle of the crowd in a half-delirium, the day suddenly turning ominous and farcial. He knew what was going to happen. Violence unmuzzled, daring rebel and defender of order. If only he could make them see their exclusion. But Melita was right: no philosophy would work here. Already, along the fringes of the crowd, goaded by heat and humidity and nerves sliced thin, clashes erupted, sticks rose and fell with pendulum accuracy. This was wrong, and that word shot through him like needles.Miraculously he went untouched. All around him he saw heads cracked, arms wrenched, bodies carted off, while others ran for whatever exits they could find. As the vanguard of police swept the park clean, he walked over to a wagon, already crammed with bodies, and asked the officer if he could get in. The officer, puzzled, held the door open for him, and he got in, sat down in the narrow aisle with his hands clasped tightly across his shins, knees up. A few faces he recognized -- most were strangers.

The wagon was stifling, a stew of sweat and bad breath and urine. "Hey, old man, why're you here? This is ain't your war."

"I asked to get in," he replied.

Several people stirred. "Asked?" one black man questioned.

"Yes, asked. Volunteered. My own free will."

"Shit," someone exhaled, "I had to get my head busted."

The back doors of the wagon closed and the gears ground as it waddled away and picked up speed.

"Old man, what's your beef?"

He looked at his questioner, looked as deep as he could in the dim light into his eyes, and from depths he thought he'd long ago sealed off came a rich historical laughter, not scorn or derision, but a freeing laughter, a laughter full of razors and humility. He just laughed and laughed until even those in pain chuckled as best they could, all the way to the stationhouse.

Melita got him out in good time. "What the hell are you doing in jail?"

"Learning. How was Chicago?"

"A bust. In every sense of the word."

"I read about it in the papers."

"You never read the papers."

"You never see me read the papers. I read them."

They found his truck. A few tickets sprouted from the wiper.

"I'm glad to get back home." She said this squarely to him, her long hair behind her shoulders. "Do you really read the papers?"

"Yes."

"What else don't I know about you?"

The ride home was peaceful and courtly.

That dusk he took down one of Thoreau's journals and thumbed through it to a note in the margin, written there by his father. "I am never quite satisfied," it read, "with the meal I offer myself. The effort he made to live must have cost him dearly, contradicting so much of what we are taught, which often amounts to a laziness, a drawing in of resources to save for the dying of the light." The sharp chorus of crows tutored the coming darkness. Melita was sewing. A flute skirled in his head -- the ripples of the sound coiled into a portrait of his father.

IV

March 31

I can find very little on the month of March. I've come across a curious saying: A bushel of March dust is worth a King's ransom. It seems the Anglo-Saxons had a sliding scale for the fine of murder according to the rank of the person killed, £10 for a churl, £60 for a king. Dust. I suppose the price differential was thought a great reflection of justice, though it all came to the same dust in the end: the bones of the murdered, the corroded heart of the murderer, the scales of the judge dispensing sentence, the money itself ransomed into its constituent elements in the pockets of a corpse, the earth itself upheaved by the poniards of returning grasses. In the Indo-European, the original form fathers the whole notion of transience. "The dust of snow." The thing that is, signifies the being that is not. I could blather like this for hours. I wonder how much I would be worth.

I have been blathering like this for days now, I suspect even years. These journals are like the ear bent to the train rail, listening, listening, listening for the grinding herald of the thing you've finally wanted to arrive but hasn't yet come. I'm listening, listening, listening to every slip of my tongue for the omen of when that tongue will die. The mother tongue, that over-zealous lump of muscle that spews out so many wasted words until we can appreciate finally the silence for what it, too, says. This silence far different from all the other silences I've heard. This one comes like the storm off a bay with a bruised sky flecked by lightning washing over all of us tethered to the shore, and just before the storm batters us, a white seagull slips into our view, and for a moment it sails as brutally perfect as it can, then on out to perch in safety. That is the silence I am facing.

Henry, I must confess, I have never given up the ghost as you did. Melita is here, and I am as married to her as I am to my lungs. There were times when I drank, doped, fornicated as lustily and as often as I could, indulged in the material luxuries of my culture (I admit I hate the taste of Indian corn bread), compromised myself in a thousand intended ways. I am a ripe example for your scorn. But don't charge me too harshly I could dig March dust on you if I had to, and we'd sit here like two cackling harridans and chew the moon to rind.

But you wouldn't measure a man by his discipleship. At important times you came to my island in a sealed bottle and gave me a telegram a hundred years old and as immediate as the growth of my fingernails. I have failed, but you kept

me from failing worse. I have been the most accepting of Philistines, but you kept some Samson alive in me.

But now, on this last page, with this last ink, I want to confess my greatest failure. They say that when you died you were serene and without desire, that you missed the children. I am not this way. I fear giving up this life since I have put so much into making it fit and habitable. I am filled with a pain of loss so great, as if that seagull had never flown across the darkening sky. What nepenthe do you have for me now? Didn't you once, ever once, feel your bowels wither with the thought of your own absence, that the world will fare just as well without you, as if your presence were of no more concern than the melting snow in a ditch or the dimple of a young man's cheeks as his father praises him? I am not afraid so much of death, whatever that frisk wants, as I am of losing life, of losing the thrill of my senses and good food and the ability to imbibe pain and worry and despair and laughter. I do not want to stop being human. I have had so much fun being one that I'm reluctant to break the habit.

Why should I even ask you? You were good for living -- you're not much good for death. I'll have to fathom this plumb alone. So be it. "Moose" and "Indian" were your supposed last words. I don't know what mine will be. I hope good sense holds my tongue. Goodbye, Henry. Hello Central.

HESTER

[NOTE: The following documents have a singular character to them. They are now deposited with the Essex Historical Society, along with the account of one Joseph Pue, Surveyor, of Hester Prynne's trial and subsequent penance and sojourn among the people of Boston. Nathaniel Hawthorne had contemplated giving the original Pue documents to the Society in 1850, after publication of The Scarlet Letter, but was persuaded by his sister Elizabeth to keep them out of view to enhance the sale of the book as a piece of "true fiction." The Society received the Pue documents after the death of Elizabeth, who had kept them in safekeeping. The following letters from Hester to her daughter Pearl, until recently, were held by family members. There are only a small number of the total number of letters they exchanged. Unfortunately, none of Pearl's letters to Hester have been found; they are presumably buried with Hester.

The lives of Hester and Pearl can be easily traced after the death of Arthur Dimmesdale. Pearl and Hester left Boston in the summer of 1650; Pearl was eight, Hester, thirty. They traveled extensively in England and on the Continent, Pearl having been made independently wealthy through Roger Chillingworth's will. Pearl married one Gabriel Jouet, a bastard son of Matthew de Jouet, once Master of the Horse for Louis XIII. The Jouets were a noble and ancient family in the Province of Anjou.

Gabriel was born in 1640 and married Pearl in 1660. It was about this time that Hester returned to Boston, though the exact date cannot be determined. Pearl and Gabriel lived in Paris until, fed up with the duplicities of Louis XIV, they traveled to Brazil, where Gabriel established himself as a trader. Eventually, they returned to Spain, in 1700, when the Duke of Anjou, Louis XIV's second grandson, was declared Phillip V, king of Spain. Gabriel apparently hoped Phillip V would fund him with a permanent residence, the Duke's blood being mixed with Gabriel's since feudal times in their common province. The Duke provided a small stipend for Gabriel and Pearl, and they lived in Spain during the War of the Spanish Succession.

The letters, until recently, were in the possession of the descendants of Pearl and Gabriel's son. The letters were found by the son upon Pearl's death in 1727 in Morocco, where, after the death of Gabriel, she had followed one Baron Jan Wilhelm Ripparda when he was dismissed from the Spanish court for certain ambassadorial improprieties. They both embraced Islam in Tetuán and died in the wars there. The small mahogany box her son found containing the letters

was the only possession she had, aside from her clothing. Her remains, mixed with Ripparda's, are still in Tetuán and revered by the inhabitants.]

May, in the spring

Dearest daughter,

I have returned. The house is no different, only older, its face weathered by the trials of wind, the juries of the ocean. I cannot say I return with fondness or anticipation or even joy. Joy what a thin word to attach to our lives, daughter, so pale and hollow beside the thrill of despair we've lived. No, I do not return with joy but with something more adamant and annealed, like an ugly shapeless clay pot baked in fire that endures in the earth for all that is left of time. It does not matter that in the pot are ashes.

Listen to me, rhapsodizing like the very worst of the Puritan ministers! Not like your father, though he had his oratorical unmoorings. I am trying to answer the question you put to me on the pier. I do not know why I return. Perhaps there are no words for it, only that in the midst of the anger and hatred I feel for this place I still bear a flame that is still worth seeing the light of. We have had a good life, you and I, but if the flame does not burn here in me, it will never burn anywhere. I must take care that nothing has been destroyed.

About this place, nothing has changed. These people still believe with as much empty sanctity about their God as they ever did, still prostrate themselves before him, offering up their boredom as the perfect faith. Whenever they are uncomfortable they think they're doing right! And they have such knack for making themselves squirm and suck on ashes. And their attitude toward women has not changed. Just the other day, the day after I had opened the door to this chamber, a woman was whipped for repulsing the attacks of one John Wedg, though it was soon revealed that he'd gotten her with child anyway. Wedg, as far as I heard, had nothing done to him and was deemed not in control of himself; he was fined and excused. She, on the other hand, was punished because she provoked Wedg's attack by her excessive beauty and "attention to lascivious detail." She had done nothing but wear the looks God gave her, yet, in the name of that God, they took her dignity from her. I protested, but it did no good. I am glad I am free of that claptrap, no longer beswayed by their squirrly nigglings with God. My God is cleaner, purer I have no need anymore for the false pride of men.

This epistle must needs be short. I have much to do to get this house aright, not only for my own small comfort but to sweep all the memories of this place into their proper squadrons and give them no more power than they deserve. Much moves within as I sit here. I am filled with you. Much love always.

June, 1669

Pearl,

I have tried to give you, with my poor paint of words, some shape of what moves through me, the fire that tempers my eyes. You were right when you said that I did not have to return. I choose to. There is still some shred of debt to be paid, not to these tight frocked myrmidons but to a knot of ground to which I am laced as hard as a sailor's reef. You have the same fire within you, yet luckily you have been much softened by the love of a good man and a fair child. Women such as we need to feel the sanctity of our deep and strong desires; they must buckle to no man or book or minister. The gift that you have, daughter, is the knowledge of your own self, injected into you by my own dark distress and the words of a dying man. It is hard won; it can not be lost.

I visited his grave today, let the sharp mazed stares of the good drones of Boston slide off my back. Littered with debris, sunken like a hag's cheek, the sungnawed chunk of wood thrusting up out of the ground like a flag of surrender here was all the worldly baggage of the man I loved, still love. I drank the fineness of his death down like an elixir.

His grave is tucked away in a corner of the cemetery. That is fitting, as he would have said. They do not know what to do with him. They never did. Not that it matters to him, but I feel an anger, like thorns in the throat, at their cowardice. Here was one whom all praised. Old men lifted their heavy hearts and found them divested. Old women, their bosoms dry for years, suddenly found an oasis in their nipples when they saw him. Young girls throbbed with such sweetened piety as they listened to him speak. And the other ministers in the town, void as they were of imagination, thought that the very river of Paradise coursed through his veins when in fact his blood boiled like the ferment inside the freshening grape. All professed to love him, all of them spiked their prayers on their voices and lifted their banners in his wind. It does not matter now, but the injustice of men, though foolish and null, always galls my heart.

Do you remember that day? I know we have talked of it, but is there some residue of memory you hold that belongs to you and no other? I hope so. He was a man worth remembering, especially now since he is pleached with the cullet that makes up most of the lives of men. Do you remember that day? Those pious people packed like cordwood in front of the scaffold, gaping at the man's distress as if they had no common humanity with him, their eyes shifting to and from his bosom? The Good Reverend had shown the dull brass of humanness, shown them he was no better than they were, and they kissed him on the cheek and left him alone. All I, we, could do for his torment and pain was keep silent vigil, purge his loneliness with love.

Even now, after all these years of careful armor building around my heart, I reverberate. Out of the columbarium of my heart he appears, Lazarus like. He haunts my thoughts, rales in my blood, and I can almost sense again the taut muscles of his back and thighs against my hands. You may have been made in a dark moment, Pearl, but there was no darkness in the ardor and passion of our time. You were never a child of the devil but of the light, blinded perhaps, but never blind. He is here, and that is why I am here, to keep faith with the faith worth keeping.

I put no flowers on his grave, did nothing to reduce the wild visage of the place. He had betrayed them and they buried him like a beggar, accorded the respect of the holy and the contumely of the damned. He would not have been surprised. No good Puritan cares to have his categories mixed.

Someone might object to my words to you but you know me well enough to see that such embarrassment is not necessary, is no solvent of thought or chastity. The man meant much to me, moreso because you were never able to share in any sort of life with him, or with us. I barely tasted the man myself, but it was enough to slake my thirst for anything else in this life. You and I must continually recognize our nature, that we will not insert ourselves into any creed that disallows our strength and calls our agony retribution. Such are the sicknesses that men anchor to themselves, and that is fine for them, but not to drag the women along. We have much better business to do.

Such a long time between letters. I miss my grandchild. Is he walking yet? Put him on the right paths early or he might get religion and be forever crawling.

Dearest Pearl,

I have received your packet of letters today and have spent the best part of the day reading and re reading them. Thank you for the information on my grandson. Teethed and rambunctious, is he? A hellion, you say? I wonder where he gets that from. Such a chuffy child will prove to be a boon in the coming years. Be glad that he is not bland and anile.

Things are the same in Boston, as they always are, which is to say that nothing much happens. The upstanding magistrates, still thrilling to the spirit of Anne Hutchinson, though she be dead twenty-six years this year, have lately persecuted some wayward Quakers and Catholics, but it is not good sport since there can be no betting and everything is done with such a sour and solemn façade. Even righteousness may not feel ebullient when it is stroking itself. But that is the trait of the Puritan. Even if prayer gives a scarlet cheat of satisfaction, then they think it be done in the wrong manner. What a tiresome people!

I recall often our travels in England and Europe, our meetings with poets and musicians and artists. When my husband first sent me here to this wilderness I felt bereft of all civilization. Everything here was so raw and undigested, corrading a person's sensitivities into the fine powder of senescence. It has not changed at all. They still believe they are on the edge of the devil's garden and must fortify their souls against such canards as dance and music and theater and art. Benighted people. Any glimpse or sensation of beauty they get must either be immediately handed to God on a platter of prayer or corralled into the hypnosis of a hymn. How much they have missed in life. No wonder they moan for heaven so diligently.

In my last letter (I do not know if it has reached you yet) I spoke to you about my visit to your father's grave. There was one other grave to visit here Roger Chillingworth's. I cannot call him by his former name because the man who once had that name ceased to exist long ago, done away on some heathen altar. No one in this town, even the Reverend Mr. Wilson or Governor Bellingham, both of whom executed his will, knew who he really was. Some people, dyed in the rightness of their feelings, would advise everlasting hatred to this man if they were me. I cannot do that, victim as much as devil he was. I have no softness for him, no anger, nothing left at all, like a wide expanse of marsh grass unvisited by anything but storm and the faint calls of geese. His grave is no different from the others around it in the churchyard. There is no sere spot of ground, no bilious flowers blossoming from the turgid heart, as might be expected in

some of those writings you read. Only a headstone carved with the inevitable death's head and a sprinkle of verses about healing the soul. His name has been effaced by the action of the weather. The stone angles dangerously to one side. I left no flowers.

I have not told you about him. There was never time and there was no need. I do not know why I ever married him. When I first knew him he was the scholar, mephitic with the dust of books and cheap oil. But what a light shone in his brain! He could parse the universe as neatly as a butcher's cleaver, then sew it up again into a lozenge to be dandled from the hand and sucked on for the ache of the mind. He had a gift for words, though not the voice for speech, often gravel ridden, raddled with odd pauses and breathings. I remember well his courtship of me, the sprucing he did of his self, his attempt to become like all men. Divigating and maundering, he finally poured his words out on me, lathering me in a frenzy as if he were aware that if he did not say it all at once he would never say it again. Pleased, flattered, intrigued I was, but not moved.

Have no doubt, he did have his attractions. His intelligence was one. All the other men I saw around me fiddled with life like children with their toes, intent on nothing more than being intent on nothing. He, following his own trail through books and learned discourse, sought to dig into the nature of things, unfurl the heliced mysteries into the straight lines of knowledge, and, like most miners, did not care for the fashion of the day. True, that is not the sort of thing that would impress a woman's heart with desire, but, being young and unknowing of these things, I admired his fortitude, it being so much stronger than what I saw as my own untutored soul. Do not laugh it is what I felt.

He was not handsome and was not young and had known only books in his life, but one thing struck me strongly: he needed me. That is a powerful argument a man can give to a woman, she usually raised to believe that if she is not needed, she is worth nothing. I espied in his skeleton of facts and philosophies a fragile architect who hungered for the warmth of a simple human relationship, one far from the cold and austere study of the universe. And he wanted me to be with him. I was powerfully drawn. I did not love him but I did need to be needed, and here was a man willing to assume me into his life. I was assumed, mistake that it was. It was no sin on either of our parts, twining 'round each other. I feel no shame over it now, but I did then.

What little you know of him as Chillingworth will suffice. There is no excuse for hatred, especially hatred drawn out of love, but it is tragic nonetheless,

though forgetfulness, not pity, is the only proper reply. I will never forget him, though I will not remember him either, he being like a piece of chalk leached by the rain until nothing remains except a faint stain in the brightest sun.

I have much to keep me busy here. Babies are born, aristocrats die, brides wed grooms, fancy winning out even against the hangdog looks of the ministers, and my needle eats through thread like a hog through scraps. Almost everybody is different than before. The few who do remember treat me as if I were a fellow warrior of some sort; the young ones only gawk at my letter, thinking it the fine coat of arms of a noble woman. It is, but I don't spread that opinion abroad. The weight of it is familiar, but I do not take it up again out of shame or deficit. It is to annoy and itch those who recall and to herald out that I have no shame to be ashamed of. It is good sometimes to prick these Puritans between their categories, mix their colors up so that their dull rainbows of gray and black and white are blistered with delight and illicit sensations. If the devil wished a perfect disguise to do his work, the Puritan is it. Calm, brutal, righteous, flexed, he can accomplish the devil's work in the name of God, and with much greater efficiency.

Allow me my barbs; I shall soon lose my teeth anyway, though not the willingness to bite. And I will not return to you, not yet at least. There is still much to do here.

March

Pearl,

I find early mornings the best time to write to you and this morning is especially fine. The ocean wrenches the welkin out like a sponge and daubs everything with a thick liniment of rain. All night and all this morning this limber sky has dumped buckets and the lithe soil sucks it down. All water is like thread, from thick yarns of it in wells and underground streams to the tiniest filament in the embroidery of roots. Even a morning as soaked as this is like St. Thomas's thread and will pull the heaviest heart to the surface. (Do you like my imagery? Not quite as clanking as the verse of that man we met, Milton, but I like my imagery more supple. I've been trying to compose my thoughts into some form of a journal, some reminiscences. I don't know why, I'll only have the book buried with me, but it softens the hours to whittle them to words.)

I have not had much chance to write to you at all, but not for lack of wanting to. A curious thing has taken place. One night, while I was sitting before the fire, losing my eyes and thoughts in the flames, I heard a timorous knock on the door. At first I took it for something else, a branch or a stray fist of wind, and paid no attention to it. Again, the sound. My reveries broken, I called out for whoever it was to enter. The door slid open, ever so timidly, and who do you think stepped into the light? Goody Johnson, the wife of the deacon (the deacon long gone to his own dissolution and she has had two more since), one of the women who so churlishly stood in the lane outside the prison and baited me as I walked to the scaffold. You may remember her, not from that instance but from others where she, with the other fine wives and hopefuls, gave us a processional hymn of caustic comments wherever we walked. You would think the woman would scarce want to taint herself in my presence. Yet there she stood, her shawl wrapped like a pentacle around her, her eyes glistering in the low light.

I of course asked her what she was doing out on such a night, puzzled as I was by this apparition. I suspected that she might be the vanguard for some deputation sworn to rid the good town of me and readied myself for a not so subtle onslaught of demands. Perhaps it was because of that that I did not offer her a chair right off, content for her to do her duty and be away. Something in my looks must have puzzled her as well because she asked, in the mousiest of voices (you remember her voice, sharp as a fish knife?), if she should return, I perhaps being busy and not willing to speak. I told her that she could stay if she wished and moved the other chair in the room to the front of the fire. Goody Johnson sat down and without any prelude, even a greeting between old enemies, told me that she had a problem that she needed help with and that I was the best aid available. I bade her speak.

For what must have been an hour she and I mulled her problem over the fire of our words. It was a small problem, not irreducible by any means, and by the end of our time together Goody Johnson left with no small measure of happiness bottled up in her bosom. For myself, I took some pleasure from it, not without my pinch of petty revenge and irony, most unbelieving that the entire episode took place and wondering what it all meant. For the first time in a great while I had connected with a woman, actually shared time that was not embittered and terse, and had been of some help. My stodgy old convictions about men and women were pleasantly upset, I must tell you, though not overthrown. Goody Johnson aside, there is still much to distrust.

If Goody Johnson's visit had been all that had happened, it still would have provided me with a year's supply of thought and analysis. I say "if" because Goody Johnson's visit rapidly became the tocsin for all the other ladies in the village to descend to my doorstep and unburden their donkey hearts on my wharf. I became like one of those sin eaters we heard about in our travels, those people hired at funerals who took upon themselves the sins of the deceased so that he might slip out of purgatory like a gill of ale down a drunkard's throat. Women from all rungs of life's ladder came at all hours to talk about all things, dipping their souls like pens into the ink of their sins and writing them large for me on the vellum of their anguish. I, who was once no better than the floor of any stable, am suddenly the Alexandrian library for all of the ills of the women.

I have listened now to many problems, many melodies played on heart's strings, and I counsel as best I can, not always sure that I can be the sort of help they want me to be. It is always the same for the women in any age: they must bear the brunt of a certain injustice and then are denied a voice to speak out the injustice. One woman comes to me and tells me that her husband's ardor has cooled against her, that his eye wanders among the fresh virgins in the pews across the aisle. What can I do, she asks. I want to tell her to leave him, let him linger over his lascivious meal as long as he desires but without her kitchen help to clean up, but I cannot because I see in her eye that the brutality of his presence is more known, and therefore less dangerous, to her than the rigors of finding her own freedom, and that what she seeks is not release but nourishment to endure the hostilities. What can I tell her? I tell her what she wants to hear, tell her that he will come 'round, that that is the nature of men and must be borne, and she leaves feeling justified and, for a short time, oddly whole. Meanwhile, I steep my thoughts in gall and wonder what I can do to put out his eyes.

And then they ask me, whether directly or not, in their eyes or in their words, about what had happened. So I tell them the truth, as clarion clear as I can, and let them absorb what shocks their flesh is heir to. I tell them that I did what I did out of love. I tell them that no book or code of laws would prove an adequate dam against the waters of what I felt to be right. I do not tell them to be licentious (though, for some of them, the activity would not hurt), but the real shame lies not in the feelings themselves but in the denial of them, in the falsification of their true character. It would be a mean and stingy God who would give us senses to imbibe and understand the wonder of His creation, our bodies and minds being His greatest creation, and then command, through a book written

by a tribe of men wandering in the desert, that everything our bodies and minds do be in fault, be a sin, be anti-creation. I tell them not to be ashamed of what they feel but instead to understand from where those feelings spring. I end by telling them, lest I scandalize them further, that who they are as women does not come from the bowels of some book or the barbed phrases uttered by men but from their own souls that body forth sensations and intuitions full of wonder and delight and mystery. I cannot force them to understand this but until they do they will run in fear from the edicts and invitations of their own natures.

I can never accurately gauge how what I say affects them. Mostly they are silent; some protest. But none ever stays away for long and in our own silent ways we sap the foundation. It will take a long time and many words, most of them wasted, before they find a voice they can speak comfortably and truthfully with.

I am not sure what I think of all this. I am pleased they seek me out. I feel no shame in front of them and most of them are coming to feel no shame in front of me. We speak with a friendliness we could not have had a decade ago. But why do I speak with them at all? I do not know if I am doing them any service by telling them what they will not tell themselves, even though they are well versed in it. I do not counsel them out of hatred for men, for those good magistrates who imprisoned me behind the letter have done more for me than they will ever know or want to know. Neither do I do it out of love, I think, even though I feel a great fondness for the women who enter my door. Perhaps, taking all of this together, I do it for no reason at all, it is just simply there to be done, I happen to be in the time and space to do it, and so the event happens, under no divine plan, with no licit end.

I am tired of all this revolutionary talk, daughter, it is hard work! You have liberated yourself well because you have a man who loves you and a child who knows nothing else but the care that has flowed from your heart. I, too, once possessed that freedom. Perhaps that is what we need, the sort of love that is never corrupted by anger for injustice nor duped by false democracy. I do not know. Each must find his or her own path. All I can do is point; I cannot make the journey for them. That is where Christ was wrong. He should have stayed a fisherman who spoke uncommon good sense rather than a Messiah who tried to do all the sinning for people. They have too much fun doing it to give it up for very long to one man. All they did was turn into Puritans. Enough. My best to all.

June, 1707

Pearl,

There is for me very little time left. By the time this missive meets you I will be fresh in the ground, buried near your father. I expect no great reunions beyond the grave but I find great comfort in knowing that will be near me. Reunions! What good would that do us, bodiless as we will probably be! There is nothing good in being a spirit, no blood to course through veins, no fever to feel in the heat of the night. I only hope heaven is not boring or run by men. Better to be an old grey washer by the ford than an eternally hymning angel.

Imminent death gives me leave to make light if I wish. Make light now there is an interesting phrase. For all of my effort in my life to keep my mind free and clear I find myself sliding into the most trite of superstitions. I wait for his voice to call me. At night, when the moon slices through the sky and the sky's throat bleeds stars, when the darkness slips over me, I wait for him. The women have been bringing me solace by the caravan but I like it, it soothes me and gives them some feeling of purpose. Even the minister has been by to see me, giving me some pious tripe about my letter being a beacon for all. I've become quite the magnet for the souls around here, like some ancient monk sleeping in his coffin. I don't know whether they come for comfort or amusement. I suppose it does not matter they're both the same.

Pearl, I am filled with a desire to pass on something to you, though I have not the faintest notion what. Why is it, on occasions where people are being translated into higher brackets, some of us itch with this indelible desire to appear sage and provocative? You know all my thoughts, you have them recorded. The ones you do not know I have etched into my journal, which will molder alongside me as it should, my thoughts no better than the brain that fictioned them. What can I say that you have not already seen?

I want to pass on a philosophy to you, some organic integration of thought, like a compost heap, that will continue to bleed nutriment into your brain for years to come. But nothing comes. Do I have a philosophy? Only that life is meaningless, even with a God, and that it is important to do something, not just mean to do it. My one great sin in the world was having meant to help your father. It cost us dearly and for that there will always be an abyss in any conscious mind I attain. After that, nothing. It has been good being alive, but it is not recommended for one's health and recreation. Re-creation! Interesting.

I wait for him, there is no doubt I wait for him, though I feel there is no gold in doing that. The older I have gotten, the more I have cut my senses off from this world, drawing into myself like some sapient turtle to chew the cud of my existence. Times my soul has been to other places, other times, while I have been only some convenient port for it to return to, yet I no more believe in spirits or the ancient astrology now than I did years before. I know that no matter what I think I know, it all comes down to this clay infused with breath that will wither in a fragile bluster of pain and then be no more. I cannot dupe myself. I know he will not be there on the other side. Nothing will be there.

Yet my love for him has sustained me all these years, as my love once, very briefly, gave him succor at the hands of the devil. His spirit, even it if does not exist in substance, has so permeated my being that every breath I have taken has been shared by him, every pulse of blood borrowed from him, until through no fault of my own, he has taken up residence, attic to cellar, and no amount of hard boiled scholasticism will evict him into the streets. He has riddled me in more ways than one.

And yet I may be all wrong. He may well be waiting for me to slip on over, young as a buck and fresh as ferns. For my sustenance at time I let myself believe that fantasy, dredging out his picture, the incalescent attraction of his face and figure still strong and bracing, and my old woman's body shivers like the surface of a lake after a thousand geese have left it at once. I may have to answer to a God I've not had much respect for, face the division of goats and sheep (I prefer the sheep), and tremble as He counts the list of my sins in His giant book. I may even count along with Him so that He misses none. I'm sorry, daughter, I cannot take seriously the image of a God spending His infinity as a clerk, morosely dealing out justice like drams of monkshood. In the same spirit I cannot abide by the notion of a heaven and hell, no green fields or lakes of brimstone, no Arthur stag proud against the sun or slathered with flames. Yes, I believe in total dissolution, but a small part of me thrills to the possibility I am wrong. Perhaps he is speaking to me through that, breaching my defenses with the softness of his voice, as he did once before.

I end the letter here, not empty of words but simply knowing that the words I have left are not very important or urgent. I have been reading the poetry of a woman, Anne Bradstreet. She is good, accurate, not bedizened with stuffy piety or empty rhetoric, but she will never be recognized as such, not while men control the means of print. Do what you can for her.

It is hard to die alone, but not as hard as you might think. All my life long you have been my constant companion. At times I rued the fact that you were brought into the world, feeling helpless to help, as ignorant of you as the moon. Then there were times the simple grace and sincerity of your love was like yeast to me, raising my spirits and my confidence to do well by you. I owe you much, daughter, and even though you are not here, I do not die alone.

I give up claim to this life. Cling to yours and those of your husband and son. Much of life is like smoke from a fire, a straight column of ascending emptiness, and then nothing at all. Give it meaning and intelligence.

GEOFFREY IS COMING HOME

By the time the ocean sun edged courteously through Carrie's curtains, she had been awake for hours. Thinking. As she watched the grainy half-tones of her dark room melt into the half-colors of morning, the huge fish of her thought floated tantalizingly, but not complete, into view, then disappeared, as flippant as a May-fly, leaving behind a tangled phosphorescence. Not a great marlin of a thought, but more like a dolphin beached on memory, waiting for something to pierce its vitals and read the signs. But there, it had gone, leaving her stranded in the calm solitude of her room, amazed that she could be so casually visited by her thoughts, then so casually ignored.

She had tried to think before, in this concerted way, when she had been seventeen, before her marriage. She had been sitting on the swing under the huge box elder in their front yard. All the ancient lore of that front yard had been before her, the picnics, the ghost stories told at night, old men sprawled in after-dinner naps like spent blankets, women gabbling like a soft wind among themselves. Especially the women. She knew that soon she would take her place among them, that the world that she had only flitted around for so many years was now upon her, and she felt with a momentary pang of guilt a sense of remorseless destiny, of ropes with her name on them gently but insistently encircling her life. She had been thinking about that.

Especially the women. Her mother had been a high-toned woman, raised by a family of women when her father (Carrie's unseen grandfather) had died. Carrie remembered only her mother's eyes, a green the color of wet fruit. She stirred in her bed, kicking the coverlet down. She was perturbed she could remember no more of her mother, but memories had been dying lately with the regularity of leaves. Her mother's mother, Nanna, on the other hand, skirled like a high-pitched song through Carrie's mind because of her summer peaches preserved against winter's tangle, their bright sunlight bursting on the tongue like a hymn.

There had been others, aunts and derelict ladies of the neighborhood and cousins of a distant vintage, all of them swirling like a placid yet fervent river. Their world, to Carrie, had been as full of voodoo and mystery as any ancient religion, their strange ritual of teas and the rhythmic precision of the sewing and knitting, and she, the young initiate, the postulant, was allowed in only in steps, mastering odd sorts of monthly pulses and fervid decorum, brought up "proper," never told, except in vague whispers, what was not proper.

She had been thinking of that, there, on the swing. Even though she was being married off, being taken away from the bend of box elder and the luscious scents of canned pear and unfurled hay, she would still be one of them, still tangled in their strange anatomy of the world. As she in the gentle palm of the swing, savoring for some last free moments a freedom she had never known she'd had and now was afraid of losing, she had tried to parse out how it would all end. But nothing had come. And she had fallen into the arms of a man who had loved her, luckily, and her jars of preserved memory had canted shelves in her own home, her children nourished on a milk generations old.

The sun caught hold of the threads in the coverlet, then scattered itself across the hardwood floors and down the hallway. Carrie was not finished trying to think, but her body became restless and all the fish of her thought streamed away. It was still early, that much she knew, but she did not care to know the time. She recalled with wonder how her mother's internal clock had been tuned to different rhythms of the world. Time had run differently in her -- Carrie had sometimes wondered if that meant she had aged differently, shedding leaves no one knew about, bursting, like a seventeen-year cicada, into song when everyone else had thought the world had died. She had flowed like a river, Carrie thought, I only eddy. Her body was restless. It was time to be up, for Geoffrey was coming today and things were to be made ready.

Dressed in faded jeans and a flannel shirt that had been her husband's, she took tea into the yard, the morning dew snuffing the fade of her cuff and lacquering her toes. Grackles groused high in the maples and tit-mice and flickers threaded the spruce. Like a Gregorian susurration the sea climbed over the trees. She let the morning lave over her and from the dim coldness of her feet to the warm knot of her brain she felt clean and empty.

She sat in her deck chair near the forsythia, cradling the warm tea in her lap. The dapple shade on the lawn reminded her of her husband and the shy routine he had of approaching her. He would walk down the street, his eyes distantly away on the clouds or in the gutter. She, shelling peas or peeling onions or hanging clothes to dry, would watch him sidle up and it would almost seem that he would pass by when, as if he'd never known she was there, he'd surprise her with a courteous smile and a pleasant blast of laughter and timidity. After the formalities he would ask if she needed help and when she demurred he would gently insist that he help, and together they would shell peas or hang clothes,

their hands gently, accidentally, touching. He had kept that sense of cordial mystery all their life together, treating her as if he'd just found her, an arcane beauty thrown up on the beach of his life, prized but not stifled. And the mystery still clung fast, to this lawn he had sodded and the trees he had earthed and the children he had surprised into the world, all of them tumbling along according to the clocks of their own fashion, fits and spasms in the large, breathing ocean they were tossed on.

Children. Again she had that sensation of a deep line being tugged by a hunk of darkness below. Sons, all of them, pleasing both her and her husband. Two had gone off for their fortunes, like sons went whaling to the occult shores of Patagonia -- one was already dead, oblation of war. Only one remained, nest-attached. She had been amazed by her sons, growing up as she had without men. They seemed to her to be rare pieces of driftwood, embroidered with odd symbols, codes she could not crack but only love, seemingly of her but seemingly sprung out of another time, like flowers that blossom only under the moon.

Carl, the one dead, still seemed to nestle under her arm as he did when she read out loud to him. Michael and Jordan, Ishmael and Israel Potter, sent letters that smelled of bazaars and myrrh, their lives unskeining like a trade wind. At times all the men in her life came strongly back to her, the deep tan smell of their bodies after woodcutting or the briny essence of sun-tousled hair washing over her until, when she let the time go, they were as present then as they had ever been, her men clustering around her with their bouquets of smiles spiced with affection.

And then there was Geoffrey, the last one, the one grown fatherless, whom she had brought up under the collage of memories offered by herself and three brothers, and who, despite all fears, had grown normally and decently, a man with his father's shy tenderness and eyes as grey as an ocean in storm. He was coming to visit today, from college, with friends. Again she tried to think the tugging inside her to the surface, but it darted away. She poured the last of her tea on the ground and scuttled to the house to prepare things.

That afternoon a rattletrap VW pulled down the long rutted lane that led to the house and deposited itself under the huge oak that shaded the north side of the house. Carrie stood on the porch, her jeans traded for creased khakis, her shirt exchanged for a blouse of embroidered cotton. Three young men poured out of the car, stretching their legs and talking animatedly. She saw Geoffrey and stepped off the porch to meet his embrace while the other two men stood

awkwardly behind them. She held him at arm's length, gazing into his grey eyes, his present image fading in and out of images of a young child alone under the hedgerow and a hesitant teenager learning to shave on his own. "It's good to see you," she said.

"Good to see you. You can't imagine how good it is to get here." He swiveled around, eyes caressing house and lawn and sky. "Seems like eons since I've been here."

She hooked her arm in Geoffrey's arm, turned him around. "Who are your friends?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. This is Jim and this is Mark. We share a triple in the dorm."

"You must all be famished after your drive."

"All the way here I could taste lobster," Mark said with a smile. "Geoff's told us all about what a cook you are."

Carrie smiled, pleased that she'd been remembered. She glanced up at Geoffrey. "He's right, I am. And you will be the beneficiaries of the first full meal I've cooked in quite some time. Get your baggage and come into the house." Mark and Jim hauled out two backpacks and a small suitcase while Geoffrey escorted his mother into the house.

Inside she showed them up the stairs, aware of the sound of their voices and the luster in the house that she had not seen in years, then told Geoffrey to finish the honors. When they clattered downstairs again, it was not really Geoffrey and his friends but all of them long ago readying themselves for a day's outing or the tang of hot chocolate heated by the embers. They told her they were going to the beach and would be back soon. The sound of their car disappearing down the drive wound its way among the sights and smells of men, and for a moment, standing in the white kitchen bathed in afternoon sunlight, time had reversed itself and the darkness that floated in her soul seemed ready to pierce the light. And then it was gone, out of thought, and she turned to make the meal.

By the time they'd returned she had pots dancing on the stove, wisps of steam gossamer over their head, and celery and carrots diced, and the house was riddled with a strong scent of meat and potatoes, with a softer dessert fragrance of sugar. They clambered into the kitchen, the ocean wind still in their hair and eyes, and pulled beers from the refrigerator, and as busy as she was,

she reveled in their presence the way a child might rub his face into his mother's skirt. She told them to set the table, then sit down, she was fine, and while they regaled her with tales of people and places and fanciful outrageous happenings she wove the dinner together, set the tapestry before them, and ate from the plate of enthusiasm they held for her with strong talk and gentle laughter.

During dessert Geoffrey talked about the times he had spent here, about the father he had never met, and Carrie filled in when asked, content to sit and listen.

"The best story I like," Geoffrey said with a wry laugh, "was about how my father met my mother." Carrie had told the story many times to many people, it was the best story she knew, and each time she told it in her husband's presence (it was never he that told, he just sat there wrapped in that affable smile of his, satisfied to play his part of the mild fool), everyone chuckled, deep into his own memory of a lovable foolishness, the mood easy and unhurried.

She could have been no older than fifteen, living in the house she was living in now, their summer house at the time. The same rutted path that meandered to her doorstep now was the same path as then. And one day a handsome man, young, still slightly gawky, had wandered down the path, never having been there before, and was impressed by the deep shade and the ferment of the flowers. Being tired, he leaned against the oak, pulled his visored cap over his face, and was soon asleep. They had discovered him upon their return from their day trip, and while her mother had wanted to shoo him away, Nanna told everyone to just leave him alone, that he could have ended up in worse places. They went inside and made the ice ream they had promised themselves, and when he finally woke up, with the women chattering away on the porch, there was a bowl of vanilla ice cream by his hip, only slightly melted, a spoon stuck for the ready.

Sheepishly, in that defenseless style he had, open and blushing, he walked to the porch, planting himself on the lowest step, and listened with a genial attentiveness to the gossip. She had, of course, eyed him constantly, though always at the times her mother wasn't eyeing her, and Nanna had sat there with a half-smile wrapped around her ice cream, though later she would deny it and say that she had had no plans in mind at all. Something that night must have impressed her mother, perhaps the fact that he had the sense not to bluster in the company of women, because she allowed them to see each other, watching carefully that he respect her naïveté and not crush in under his heel.

Their goodnights were brief. Upstairs, in her room, Carrie could hear them shuttle around, sharing the bathroom as they brushed their teeth, their lithe chatter brisk and calming. As darkness settled on the house and their presence soaked into the pores of the walls and the air that they breathed, she watched the moon rise. As its light filtered through her curtains and fell patiently on her coverlet, she could feel, almost like a palpable sheen on her skin, the breathing and the thoughts of the men in her house. Time slowed, the ticking of the house ran backwards, and memories seated themselves on her bed. There had always been men in her life -- they had filled and defined it, given it cause, clothed her shape, and now she was full again. And the darkness that had ridden her soul, that had tugged at her thought, came to surface. She had always been happy. She had been happy. She had been happy.

GLACIERS

I always loved glaciers as a kid. Some kids get hooked on microbes or chemistry or guns or cars or bicycles or any of a thousand globes of fruit dangling from the tree of knowledge. Me, I liked something about the grinding persistent gravity of these "rivers of ice" (as one National Geographic magazine had put it). I couldn't have put "why" to words when I was eight or nine or ten, but I knew that their frigid blue immensity fed me necessary awe about life in doses I could take - just enough to wow me without saddling me with dread or reverence. It was only later that I knew that these rivers moved me, and moved through me, because they were beautiful, because they were so unlike me, because they were wrapped in an aura of a distance and danger I desperately wanted and, as equally, desperately feared. But when I was young glaciers gave me something to hang my developing hungers on, something on which to focus and practice building an attention to the world.

Perhaps it had something to do with where I lived - northern New Hampshire, just through the notch above the White Mountains. Even now the towns are still small, though people with condo money and condo dreams have begun discovering absentee ownership. Large congloms of buildings have been studding the hillsides, stained a rust or weathered grey, and people who had lived like pioneers even in the twentieth century have been forced, by a rise in the temperature of land prices, to move, ending long sprays of genealogy and encumbering them with a fierce hatred of a modernity they already mistrusted. Of course the tourists come, to Clark's to see the bears, to the Flume and the Basin and the Tramway and the Cog, and their dollars salve a lot of hurt. But it's clear where it's going, "it" being history, money, development, peace of mind, a sense of where the morning really is. If there are human-scale glaciers, moving at a human scale of speed and abrasion, then this is surely one. And the condos are the calved icebergs, bobbing in the ancient seas, their fresh water an insult, their crushed blue the color of decline.

Of course it was not like that when I grew up. My parents owned a house they built, on land they'd paid for, producing most of the food we needed to get us from birth to something else. I don't know if we were an unusual family, though "unusual" covers a lot of ground in the North Country, but we did have some quickenings and rituals peculiar to our tribe. We owned our house. We owned it with "sweat equity," as the realtors like to say, but I'm sure that my father didn't really care about equity or anything like it. He and my mother built

the house to get away from urban jobs they hated, from an urban upbringing they believed made them soft and unfit for real life, from systems they believed cut off their circulation as surely as hemp rope tied across their jugulars. And this was in the fifties, before it was fashionable to loathe and defame - though many forget how loathesome the somnolence of Eisenhower was.

They both had had good jobs my mother had insisted on it before they'd gotten married so that she would never be financially dependent on him. My father worked as an advertising copywriter in Boston -- a job singularly given to insights about short-change and contempt for the public, something at which my father was very good and something for which he felt a wash of self-contempt strong enough to tide him north. As with many copywriters he really wanted to write poetry and thought that living "on and off the land" would break the dam that held back the waters of Thalia and Euterpe. He hadn't counted on sick chickens or potato bugs.

My mother -- well, my mother had always honed herself to an unconventional edge. She had favorite stories she'd tell us about herself, but there were a few which seemed to compass her spirit better than others. One which always struck me, the way the sudden shattering thunder of a new iceberg struck me, concerned the tree stump. At the edge of her parents' property was an enormous rampike of an elm tree. It girthed at about 25 feet, which meant that inside it diametered at five or six feet, and stood as tall as a logger. It had been struck by lightning many years before my mother saw it, and the only reason her father hadn't taken it down completely (he'd had most of the branches and cremated trunk removed) was that the story of the blue flash of lightning and the scarifying crackle of the voltage searing the wood (and the eyeballs of the watchers in the house) made a great story over lemondade on the porch, and he needed the car-bonized evidence to provide a proper flourish to the ending. Over the years the insides had melted away, the twisted elm grain punking into sponge, then evaporating into spoors of xylem and phloem. However, the outside, while shedding some bark, remained intact, and a hunk, just about the size of a door for an inquisitive child, fell away, revealing an interior full of matted leaves, earwigs, pill bugs, and sundry other Linnaean beings.

My mother, of course, discovered it at about the age of ten, at the age when she needed someplace between being in the house and playing outside, a kind of foyer where she could hang up some of her thoughts, check her reflection in the mirror of her imagination, and surround herself with something that felt

permanent but not a place that would appropriate her. At first her mother, feminine sensibility shocked at the notion of a female child of hers consorting with dirt, told my mother in strict tones to stay away, laving her with sermonettes on cleanliness and the need for the proper in an improper world. It might as well have been rain on a hot skillet. When threat didn't work, her mother, being more sensible than moral (after all, with nine children, she had to make some compromise with the ideal), set limits: no dirt tracked in the house, cleaning up at the pump before meals, nothing valuable taken out for furnishings. And, to complete the revolution from stricture to love, began to hunt up old curtains and rugs and other appointments to help this strange child of hers comfort herself inside a tree.

Because that's exactly what my mother did. After cleaning out the accumulation of trash and organic sediment at the bottom of the stump and filling the remaining hole with sand, she began moving in. Her father, made curious by her desire and somewhat faintly approving of it, though he didn't know why, cut out two windows, which my mother promptly adorned with yellowed fake-lace curtains. An old braid rug covered the floor pretty much from edge to edge, and her father laid down a mess of old oilskin to keep moisture from seeping into it. Various pictures found their resting places there: battered Currier and Ives prints, sepia photos, stereopticon slides, several severed leaves from a Catholic Bible showing Christ with a bleeding heart and fingers raised as if he were bidding at an auction.

One problem was the roof. My father offered to build a trussed, gable-ended, cedar-shaked chapeau for her "house" (which was the only name she ever gave it), but she rejected that as too mundane. She found what she wanted one day at the back of the garage -- a large, pink, slightly mottled (because of mildew) beach umbrella. Her father poked the pole down through the open top of the stump and with a brace secured the pole inside. Now she had light and dryness topped with pink. And according to her the contraption worked, keeping everything dry during a rain storm (her father had fixed up shutters to go over the windows) and cool during a rash of sun.

She spent a good deal of the tenth year of her life in her "house." When winter and sleet and a prying wind finally forced an eviction, she would sometimes stare at the pink top, gently capped by a wimple of snow, through the rime on the kitchen window, etching her name in her warm breath. Her eleventh birthday came in January. By the time spring beckoned to her to return to her house and

clean it out, she had, in some inarticulate but undeniable way, grown up, and the house became abandoned for a growing sense of flesh, of mind, of preparations for a future that was as unclear as it was insistent. Her father took the umbrella back in, her mother took back the pictures and rug and curtains, and my mother took her leave.

When thinking of icebergs I think of my mother's "house," both cleavages from a familiar world, both carrying the DNA of where they've been, both melting as they float away. I think that "house" was my mother's first attempt to find a world that measured but did not restrict, something she found, with only minor difficulties, with my father. But it took floating away from her family to do it, a melting of perceptions into sense and idea and imagination that only the open waters can give. I always wanted her to tell me about the house because, with only small amends, such as a change of gender for the protagonist, it became my house and my pink umbrella and my finally slaked thirst for place and possibility. And when I finally had to slough off from her and my father and the house we had extruded from the harsh margin of the North Country and take my own drift, I knew that my story, my "house," would move me in its own currents towards shores I didn't know existed and would probably not know how to pronounce when I arrived.

The water in icebergs is centuries-old; drinking it means ingesting bits of mastodon and extinct insects and the inevitable waste products of humans. It's an interesting prospect, this immediate erasure of history, this localizing of crushing weights of time. I think we all look for this kind of chill nourishment against the back of the throat. Sometimes we find it, and feel the crack of ourselves as we hyphenate and swivel new eyes onto the world. Most times we just get to say say "Ahh, thanks" and hand the glass back, thirst momentarily calmed. And even that is not so bad after all.

Our house in the North Country was a log house -- I want to add "of course," but log houses were a rarity in that part of the state. They were just too damn hard to build. A frame house could be slapped up, with the right help (both qualified and sober), in a couple of weeks, not including time for the foundation, and the interior work could be finished over the winter. That's how most of the natives did it. But my father -- probably moreso than my mother, though she concurred -- was urged along by "authenticity." Country equalled log house, log house equalled old crafts that needing reviving, old crafts equalled honesty, and

so on. Since he had given up his job, since he had decided to grow new skin and eyes, he had dived into books about country life, spent long hours at the dining room table with my mother drawing up floor plans and garden plots and budgets. Though I was very young at the time I remember this Yonkers-raised urbanite speaking eloquently, if without a scintilla of experience to back it up, about the virtues of splitting wood and the beauty of eating food grown and killed by your own hands.

If was as if he now believed that city living had been a sin, that somehow writing endorsements for soap and walking with leather-soled shoes on concrete had robbed him of an immediacy of living. I think he felt dead and cheated, in that order, and that moving to the alien planet of the North Country would, in some way yet to be defined, allow him to demand something he believed he never had° life itself, which for him meant (and I know this because I am my father's son© that he could finally straighten out all the disjoints of circumstance and accident and not be at their mercy. It was a matter of power for my father -- not hubris, forcing the universe to have meaning, but more like a confab, so that the two of them, the universe and my father, could coaø delight and accomplishment out of each other. He just didn't want to be at the mercy, though he didn't mind a challenge and could weather setback with the best of them.

As I said, both my mother and father had had good jobs and had saved a great deal of money, through various investments and the simple act of putting away money every week. My mother had also gotten a small inheritance from the death of her parents, small because when the total assets were split among nine children, one-ninth of a modest comfortable life did not amount to much. But it was something to throw in the hopper. I don't think my mother simply went along with my father -- I think she wanted to go just as much as he did, though for different reasons. My father was trying to find salvation; my mother simply wanted to get back to that sense of place her "house" had given her, a latitude and longitude with walls and pictures and windows framed with invitation.

Now that I think about it, it's clear they were both looking for the same thing, though with different tempos and voltages. Inside both of them moved urges barely modifiable into words, thick layered sediments laid down by the freezing and thawing of family life, dreams, reading, biology, and these urges carried moraine that scored them into the people they were and the people they believed they weren't but wanted to be. What they both wanted was some place

where they could know the strata of their lives, take the core samples that would reveal in bands of clear and cloudy deposit who they had been fashioned to be.

And like the good iceberg I split off from them, full of their history but under temperatures of my own and my own pattern of deposition.

The log house. They had bought land which had, opportunely enough, about three acres of tall straight fletched pine trees, or, as my father put it, "an upright house waiting to be laid low." A previous owner of the land had had a penchant for numerology, as well as some kind of Druidic inclination, though for pine trees, not oaks, and he planted pine seedlings at the points of pentagrams he had sketched on the ground. He had died, just as his sketches had been washed away by the rain, leaving a few acres of white pines in almost perfect circles. Standing in the middle of one of these transparent cylinders, a person could, with a few studs, nails, and a good amount of thatch, make a house, the trees themselves already perfectly placed as uprights. What I enjoyed doing was looking straight up into the sometimes blue, sometimes grey, sometimes hybrid sky of the North Country, my vision unimpeded by anything except the fringe of branches forty feet over my head, a fringe that, when I squinted my eyes, was no different than the thick spokes of my eyelashes. And at night in the center of one of those pentagrams I could see into the brisk glint of the stars. The distance their light had to travel made them like ice to me, the universe filled with glaciers of light moving inexorably through the continuum, calving worlds and neutrinos as they sped.

My father wanted to do the house up right, so the summer before the house was actually built my mother, my father, friends of their, some local people he hired, and I tromped into the forest and started cutting. Not one to be wasteful, my father had consulted with the local forester and the co-op extension agent about the best way to harvest the trees, and according to a plan sketched out on a brown grocery bag, with cross-cut saws and axes (my father was becoming an authenticity tyrant, to the dismay and fatigue of those around him), they began to fell trees. We cleared a houselot in the center of the acres, marking with red string and pine wedges where the house was going to sit. We cleared a space for a septic system (my mother insisted on running water; my father was pushing for composting toilets but lost). We knew where the system was going to go because my father had had a local dowser come in to find a well. He'd found water right near where the red string had set off our future kitchen. Sure

enough, when the driller came in to set the well (my father conceded this, though he had been hot to try a dug well, dug of course by his own hands), the water had been found, not too far down and without having to go through too much ledge.

The dowser. Of all the magical things that happened that summer, the dowser came closest to something divine, or at least miraculous. He was an old man but vigorous. The paunch he'd grown in his life was solid, like a ripe watermelon, not flabby at all, and his fingers, from working all their lives as wrenches and hooks and binders, were like thick flexible dowels, blunt instruments capable of tying flies. The pattern of his flannel shirt was faded almost to invisibility -- it looked like a piece of cloth under ice. His pants, a pair of manure-brown corduroys whose wale was rubbed to a nubbin, hung under the eave of his belly, held barely up by a tarnished buckle and a nicked leather belt. His feet resided comfortably inside boots whose leather seemed to have reversed its nature, tending back to the original cow in its pied complexion and shit crust.

It was his face, though, that held the most interest for me at that age. His pate was sparsely haired, his face stubbled with silver flecks of beard, his nose round and large like the knob of a dresser, his forehead corrugated. But his eyes were like cream, that is, a risen visible sweetness that seemed, as he looked around, to spread out into the butter of a blue sky or dollop his audience with a schlag of humor. To me it was a face that a glacier would have if it became a human -- full of blue eyes, washboarded by weather, thick and nimble and capable of shaping the land it surveyed.

He had brought a variety of instruments with him, all shaped like a "Y" with arms longer than the stem. Some were made of various woods, others out of plastic tubing. He selected one, seemingly at random, and started walking a circuit which, to me at least, looked drunken. Everyone was standing around watching, but he might as well have been strolling in the woods for all the notice he gave anyone. Soon, to everyone's astonishment, the upside-down Y in his hand, held up in front of him and even with his forehead, began to swivel downward until the stem pointed straight at his feet. He marked the spot. He made several more passes to verify it, found a few more likely spots, which he also marked, and announced that he was done.

Now, my father had been an urbanite all his life, despite a summer's accumulation of pitch and dirt, and he hadn't been north long enough to throw off the urban inclination toward science. He watched the wood swivel apparently of its own accord and while part of his mind admired the man's craft, another part

was skeptically saying “That’s stupid, and I can’t believe I’m spending money on this hokum.” So he wanted to try it himself. He couldn’t keep the doubt out of his voice and everyone knew that he was challenging the old man. The old man didn’t seem to mind - I’m sure he’d corrected many people in his life.

He took my father’s hands and fit them around a birch Y. He put them up and told my father to follow him. We all followed, my father walking like some high priest holding aloft a sacred talisman, the rest of us the temple entourage.

We walked for about five hundred yards. We saw the foundation for a house, built out of old massive stones. There was no house, just the stone-lined hole in the ground. It was on my father’s property. We had never seen it in our rambles around. He told my father to walk toward the house. My father walked. Nothing happened. He told my father to walk back. Nothing happened. The look on my father’s face was curious -- neither skeptical nor fully concentrated. It seemed frightened and indecisive. I wondered what his arms felt like.

The old man selected another direction just slightly to the right of the first one and told my father to walk that. He did. About ten steps in the wand swiveled down as if it had been iron at the North Pole, quick and punctual. He righted the piece of wood and told my father to walk about a hundred feet away and then cross over the same spot. My father did, and the wood fairly burned his flesh as it dove for the ground. My father protested that he hadn’t moved anything -- it happened all by itself.

The man took the piece of wood from my father’s hand and with the gnarled toe of his boot began kicking away the dirt. An inch down was a rock slab, about the size of a manhole cover. He wedged his thick grappling fingers under the lip and pulled it up. Underneath it was a shaft -- the shaft of an old well. “My grandfather and I put this in almost fifty years ago.” He dropped a rock into the darkness and we all heard the loud clear peal of water swallowing stone. My father laughed, amazement buttered over his face with a kind of gratitude laced in for color. From that moment on, he said later with his characteristic overstatement, he knew that the mysterious had more meaning than the verifiable. And though he never quite believed that, he told the story of the dowsing as if it were a story of revelation and redemption, nature coming up and biting him on the ass and telling him to pay attention.

We did get all the trees down that summer, skinned of their bark and stacked to season over the winter, close to one hundred and fifty trees altogether. Over the winter we began to buy supplies and contract out. The following summer

the house went up, slowly accruing shape and solidity. We didn't move in until the following summer, where we worked fifteen-hour days patching and roofing and electrifying and plumbing. By the end of September we sat in front of the fireplace made with flat stones culled from river's shallows, eating meat cooked on the cookstove and vegetables evicted from the garden. We all agreed it was the best food we'd ever eaten. We had moved north.

During a North Country winter, it wasn't hard to imagine that I was one of those proto-humans figured in some of the books I had in my room, draped in rough furs and standing in front of a mile-high cerulean wall of ice. In the winter the rhythms of life changed drastically. The ripe plenty of summer, stacked in jars in our kitchen and a cord of wood in the shed and a full tank of oil in the basement, had to last -- there was no second chance during the long lock-up of the winter. In that kind of winter, with winds whittling through the notch and the snow bullying its way up to the door, there was very little space between thought and action. No langourous day-dreaming in the winter, no drug of hot humid air to dissolve in the blood -- keeping body and spirit warm was what life simply was.

We thrived on the test, for the most part -- February and March got long-winded and we were tired by then of the frigid oratory of snow on pine and ice on the eaves. But we all liked the directed sense of being the North Country winter gave us. During the day my mother and father would teach me. I was not sent to school. I was never privy to the fights they fought with school officials to keep me home, but I know there were many and I know it was frowned deeply upon. But they won their own way. Occasionally we would have to suffer the visits of a monitor who came to see what they were teaching me and to give me the standardized tests everyone had to take, which I found absurdly simple to score well on.

It was in studying science and history that I came across glaciers, in that book of the rough-hewn humans gazing with futile eyes at the fist of ice in their faces. I'm not quite sure what resonated in me, though now, given the nudge of therapy and the jumbled contents of my own book of life, I can see how my imagination, still bubbling in the dim stewpot called my brain, grabbed glaciers and their sprung-off icebergs as a way to figure out what my word-hoard couldn't yet give me access to: the sometimes abrasive and careless world of adults, rudenesses and inattentions that perked up from lives built mostly of submerged and airless depths, of layer upon layer of resentments and misses. In back of

the gleaming ice-face, underneath the waterline of skilled small-talk and public masque was a weight and a momentum that could, if not checked occasionally by a greenhouse effect or a slight tilting of the earth that changed the address of the sun's arrival (all warmth I came to call love), grind to subjgated blandness all the frivolity and irksome differentness of other people.

They taught me well -- not only the basic skills, but how to think, reason, plan, predict. I learned all the biology I needed from breeched lambs and the hanging guts of rabbits and hogs. My physics came from figuring how the barn would rise for two stories, my math from the monthly accounting from sales of eggs and bread. Since both of my parents worshipped at the shrine of the Great Books, I conversed freely with the ancients and near-ancients. By the time I went to college I had been stuffed full of education, some of it digested, most of it cached in crowded root cellars, from which I would borrow what I needed from time to time.

It was a wonderful life -- even knowing now what I know. To me my parents were the living flesh of happiness. They always gave themselves to me in that way, and I took from their flesh flesh for my own happiness. But they had been skilled icebergs, as I have since become, showing their gleaming turrets of bristling ice-light while dangling below the levels of voice and action tons of doubt and strata of resentment.

When my father died I traveled back north for the wake and funeral. It was September. I was living in Manchester then, in the midst of that city's growing season (money coming in from banking and high-tech). My father had declared for years that he would not be touched by a mortician and made himself and my mother learn how to prepare a body for burial. When I arrived the house was filled with a small crowd -- if nothing else, they had worked hard to cultivate a crop of friends and neighbors (of "community," as may father called it, his way of washing out of his system the anonymity he suffered in Boston). My mother was moving among them, making sure they were all well provisioned. Some of the people there remembered me, though it had been years since I'd seen any of them, and there were moments of counterfeit recognition and welcome, all of us agreeing that at this sad moment we would remember a closeness that hadn't existed for years.

The coffin (built, of course, by his own hands) was in the back storage room -- the guests were in the living room. My mother hugged me warmly, then took me back to see the body. My father hadn't wanted any formal sort of wake,

and so people had visited the body as they'd come in, making my father more or less just one of the guests. The town and county officials had been out to protest, but my father had done his law homework and showed them that in New Hampshire he had every right to a home burial, as long as he paid attention to a few environmental considerations, like not having his grave near the well. My mother had handled them adeptly, and a few had stayed for coffee and cake.

I looked down at my father and for a moment went blind -- I couldn't see anything, as if a blizzard had suddenly snuffed out the light in the window. It lasted no more than a breath, or half a breath, but it was complete, and when I looked again at my father I saw my father dead. Not my father as he had been alive, vigorous and peremptory, slyly fascist and engagingly generous, not as I might have looked at him when I first walked into the room full of ceremony and memory. I saw a slab of broken-off stuff, a knurled shaving whittled off. He would go out into the apple orchard, to be sucked up into the spray of blossoms and ballooned into Empires. All the clatter of his restless electricity was gone. His stored carbon would go into other rounds.

Yet as much as I felt comforted by this stretch of realism, as much as my mind was trying to keep from committing the fallacy of believing that what lay in that coffin was my father, I couldn't help but read in the silvered hair and relaxed ridges of his face the full life we had all led. I had never known such fullness as I had known with them. And now -- I kissed him. And then left the room.

Everything had been provided for. They had been waiting for me to visit with my father, and now that I had done that, it was time to move on. Five of my father's closest friends had selected themselves as pallbearers and I was to be the sixth. We closed the lid of the coffin and screwed it down. Then we hoisted it on our shoulders and ferried it from the house to the orchard, trailed by the rest of the people chatting as if this were the last picnic of the season. I smiled at the unpretentiousness of it all, the way the sorrow had become local and interleaved with all the other concerns people had in their lives. We were burying my father; later we would have dinner.

The hole had already been dug in one of the alleys between the trees, the blond pale sand lying on one side, the heavy brown loam on the other. We set the coffin down on three ropes that had been strung out on the grass, then grasped the ropes and side-stepped our way to the grave. We must have looked pretty comic, and several in the crowd smiled as they watched us, but everyone was

patient. There was no need for a smooth ritual here, no need for the mortician's choreography.

We lowered the box into the grave, setting it six feet down with an even thump. My father's friends had each taken the time to find a short something to read, and their voices, unpracticed and steady, milled the calm turning air of late September into words. When it came to me I didn't have any trouble thinking of something. I remembered Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of my father's favorites, and I said, almost as if his voice were lacing through my vocal cords, "The riders in a race do not stop when they reach the goal. There is a little finished canter before coming to standstill. There is time to hear the kind voices of friends and say to oneself, 'The work is done.'"

The haft of the shovel felt rough and comforting in my hand, and the grick of the shovel against the dirt and stones had the same comforting weight to it. We worked in silence, oscillating like some six-cylinder steam hoe. It didn't take long to fill the grave and pat smooth the small hillock of dirt over the coffin. The wind and the rains and snow would do their best to erase it down, and in the spring pioneer grass seeds would land on the brown patch and prompt it into green.

Later, when the guests had gone and the sun had set, I sat with my mother in front of the fire. I didn't know what to say but also didn't feel that I had to say anything. She was holding a glass of sherry, its dark ruby glint absorbing the fire's bronze. I wasn't drinking, having learned long ago not to give myself that temptation. I was flushed with the day's activities, my mind in a half-doze, weirdly quiescent, weirdly alive.

She took a sip, then announced, "I'm going to leave here. Do you want the house?" She took another sip.

It didn't quite register with me what she was saying, then it did, then it didn't again. Leave? Why? All of her life was here.

The ruby tilted against her lips, then leveled. "I'm going to move, probably out West. I'm tired of the cold." She paused, as if deciding something, then spoke again. She swirled the blood-red sherry in her glass, thin veils of it creeping up the sides of the glass, then draining down. "I have hated the cold for years. Your father loved it, said it made him learn how to live with the right things in his mind. I always hated it when he talked like that, like a book. I told him it made my bones ache. I want to be warm."

Both of us knew the code words here. It wasn't about cold, at least the physical cold. It wasn't about the warmth of Arizona. For the last five years of their lives the tops of their icebergs had been melting, exposing more and more of what had been just a watery blur underneath. Ancient bruises, harbored defeats -- there had been a lot of them in this life between two people who usually refused to compromise with the world, so many that the intense love they held for each other, through the dark alchemy of intimacy, would sometimes yield an exquisite method of torture, finely tuned to vulnerable parts and exposed nerves.

I knew this because they would call me and use me to unload their diatribes and oaths. Of course, being of the generation I was, I suggested counseling, but they didn't seem interested in resolution. They became enemies because it thrilled them in a way. For so many years they had been "partners," living with a plan (mostly crafted by my father) of how to beat the world's demand for normalcy and convenience. It took them a while (my mother felt it first) to learn that such an intense binding was itself a kind of prison, calling for its own self-effacement, and that loving in such a way would eventually destroy the loving.

So they became enemies to stay together, using an almost inexhaustible fund of knowledge about each other to fashion their salvos and stratagems. It was weird, almost perverse to me to see how the breakdown of their truces gave them the same kind of effervescence they had when they first moved north. In their dislike they found a kind of passion that while on the surface gave the appearance of shredded paper to their lives, secretly fed both their needs for an intense kind of living, a need to live against the abbreviations of life, an intensity that had attracted them in the first place because they believed that so much of the world lived without it or in fear of it.

But like love itself, such hatred has its rhythms, and they found themselves, after a while, inextricably addicted to the attacks and strategies because as they dug deeper into their treasuries for funding, they unearthed reserves that had been locked away for a reason. The deeper the stratum, the earlier its imprisonment from light, the more time it had had to perfect its poisons, and before long they had brought to sight such rarified venoms that words weren't even needed as carriers -- the whole atmosphere they breathed was laced with the stuff.

The last year had been the hardest. They had existed in a limbo between knowing what they knew about their love and knowing what they knew about

their hate and finding the hate so present and the love hard to restore. They had also stopped talking to me by then, both realizing I think that they and I were running out of flesh. I never knew if they had managed to reconcile themselves, to come back along the circle to their first understandings and first sheddings of innocence.

I found as I pondered my mother's words and stared at her sherry a desperation rising in me. I didn't know how it had been at the end. Was it possible? Could we wear our original faces again? I stood and walked over to the fire, stirring it with the hooked poker. Sparks like pollen floated upward. I wanted to say that I wanted the house, keep it simple, but I found my words, pulled by an undertow, carried toward my own desperation. I watched the still figure of my mother stare into the fire, her glass full of red flame, and felt both repelled and attracted by her solidity, which seemed to rebuke me at the same time that it promised me a taste of self-sufficiency. I felt as if I didn't know this woman at all, so freed of our lives had she become in her own quiet and resolve.

"Are you all right?" was all I could manage.

"Yes, I'm fine." She looked at me. "What?"

My face, pulled by its own under-skin pressures. "I don't know. I just want to know if you're doing okay."

She sipped. "You always had that look on your face when you wanted to ask a question that was not on the lesson plan." She didn't say "out with it" or anything like that -- she left me my own choice. She would not draw me out, she would leave me the irritation of my own freedom.

"Well, ah, you and Dad -- " There was nothing to do but ask. "What was it like, this past year? I stopped getting phone calls." My throat tightened around the words. "What was it like when he died?"

"Your father died like he did most things, with an edge to his voice and a feeling that the world got in his way just to spite him." Even she heard the judgment in her words and added, "he was greatly inconvenienced, but he bore up well. He hated most how his body was failing him after he'd taken such a long time to keep it intact. He did not go gentle."

"What did you two talk about?"

She must have heard something in my voice because her face softened and the firelight smoothed out its terrain. "You know what we did for the past

year? We decided that spoken words, hurtled at the speed of sound, were too dangerous. So we wrote each other letters. Every day. I saved them -- you can read them if you want. We took pains to make the words slow down. We literally composed ourselves, spending hours over a phrase or a word."

She laughed. "By this time he was mostly bedridden, though he still took himself to the toilet and got his own books down from the shelves. To minimize the possibility of actually speaking to each other, we set up an elaborate relay system that would deliver our letters from my desk downstairs to his study upstairs. It was definitely Rube Goldberg!

"At first we would write several letters a day, and they were usually just written continuations of old arguments. The relay would fairly whizz and burn! But that didn't last for long. The discipline of putting pen to paper made us slow down and sometimes we would spend an entire day on one or two pages.

"I had to do this writing, of course, while I had everything else to do. But people helped -- cultivated the garden, helped me can, chopped the wood. I realized how much your father had done around here -- not that I was a slouch, but he had pulled a lot of reins. That had been a bone for a while, his need to control, which he said was just the need to get things done efficiently." She raised her hand and lowered it, as if to say that whatever heat the argument once had was now gone.

"His handwriting got worse as time went on, and he of course got angry at that, pushing it to where sometimes there was a page of scribble just to defy the creeping paralysis. As he got weaker the writing got shorter. I spent most of my time upstairs with him. We would sit in the room and I would write him something. He would write something in response. I would respond to that. And so on. We would write page after page this way, speaking so much in one or two sentences." I could see her eyes, deep glasses of sherry themselves. "Eventually he got too weak to write. We would sit quietly, holding hands. Sometimes he would sleep and I would write to him, most of which I never read back. It was in one of his sleeps that he died. Actually, he woke long enough to look me full in the face, eyes as clear as January sunlight, and say 'No'."

The firelight danced around the room with shadows. She had stopped talking and his final "No" hung in the room over her head. "We came back," she said, draining her glass. "We came around." She rose and knocked the "No" up to the rafters, where it dissolved like a smoke ring. I suddenly noticed how sweet

the room smelled with the burning oak. She gave me a hug, quick and sharp, and disappeared up into the darkness of the bedroom.

I found the letters in her study packed in a Delmonte brand canned fruit box. Given their penchant for order, they had dated them, and I looked for the last ones, the ones she wrote to him when he couldn't respond. The one I wanted was near the top, in her usual spiderish handwriting. The desklamp burned over my shoulder.

"I wish I could describe the weather to you, this September you always loved. The apples hang on the trees like weights on a scale and already a frost has touched down. The air would raise you, as it always did. It can't do that now.

"I have had the time to think of what life will be like without you. I've already had practice, in a way -- I write these notes to no one who will write back. We haven't shared words in a long time, and I miss that, miss even your stubborn rasp, the gritch of your pencil across paper. Life without you will be life without you. It's a stark fact I can't change. I imagine things will be unbal-anced for a while, like an old steam engine that's lost half its governor. After that, I don't know. The only thing I know is that I don't know what it will be like.

"I don't think I'm scared, of loneliness or anything like that. If I fear anything it will be to miss things about you so much that I will miss my own life. That was one of the risks we took, to see if we could keep our own identity in our shirtpockets yet still wear each other's shirt without ripping the fabric. We made the rounds to every emotion, every possible curse and denial, charm and pleasure. The shirts frayed, sometimes we took them back, but they wore pretty well.

"It's that fullness I don't want to stop feeling. You will not be around to share it with me, but I don't stop needing it simply because you die. There are other ways to get it, and I will. That is how I will keep you alive.

"Willfullness, stubbornness -- the things you accused me of, the things that attracted you in the beginning -- they will feed me until they feed me to the ground. We have had a full life, venom and love, venom because of love. It ends with love."

I could say I spent the next hours going through those letters, but it would be more honest to say that the hours and letters spent me, using me up until my heart pumped nothing but their words. "It ends with love." It was a near

miss, I think -- love sustained them both, a floor of granite under the grinding accumulated cold and fire, but scoured and sometimes thinned to the merest blush of solidity by the velocity of their living. If it was love in the end, then it was love spiky, rough-edged, burred, parasitic at times, full of skirmish and triage, capable of great tenderness and gift, deep bruise and anger. It was not what the greeting cards were about, not what the overused Corinthians text at weddings was about. From their letters I could see that at times other things would have been preferable to this abundant provocative love -- solitude, ditch-digging, defamation, living only with cats and dogs. If love sustained them, it did so sometimes against their will; at times it was an overlong guest, an obnoxious relative who insisted on dragging out all the family photos. It was like the sickle cell, which sometimes made them ill but protected them against a worse disease. It was a near miss, I think -- it could have easily turned to the hatred they sometimes felt, whetted them down to dust.

"We came around." My eyes burned. "We came back." My shoulders ached. "It ends with love." It was said that Iceland rises inches each year, springing back from the retreated weight of the Ice Age. Ridges of gravel, called eskers, accumulated because underneath the impenitent diktat of the glacier's mass rivers of melted ice full of stones flowed, got plugged up, deposited their lithic cargo, branched off, and flowed again. The fire had breathed down to embers. I poked at them, threw them another log, and watched the dry wood smoke until, unable to resist, it spit itself into flame and began its light. This continued to be the house I grew up in.

I stayed for a few days, less to make sure that my mother was all right than to recover some of the country's flex in my muscles and lungs. I knew I had to return to Manchester, but I was reluctant to so quickly give up this haven. But that had always been a problem here -- a "retreat" in more ways than one, an attempt to unmake the world by making another one and in the process falling prey to smugness and stunted monarchy. I not only had to return, I needed to return, or else I would forever be fixed in suspended animation, cryogenically waiting for some cure that would never come for the abrasions and confusions of living, of love, of the usual winding up and down of sharing the human world.

My mother did move, for a while, to Arizona, but she came back, complaining that life out there didn't have enough punch. She died many years later. She did not play the good widow and mourn, by loneliness, my father's absence. She was never one for suttee, however mild the form. She had her companions and

friends, all of whom came when I buried her next to my father in the orchard. It took a while but I eventually moved into the house and garden and orchard and barn. My own land was springing back. When I could afford the time I hiked, and with each step I put my own weight on the mountains, keen to the ancient blue ancestor who had chiseled its way through here once before. I had less weight and a shorter span but I was trying my best to make an impression.

The apples that fall were full, ballooned with sweetness. The applesauce tasted fine in January. In the spring, the last of the frozen apple pies succumbed. Then the blossoms. The years could be good.

IT BEGINS HERE

It begins here.

As people pass by La Iglesia de San Marcelo, in Don Torcuato, just outside Buenos Aires -- that is, "people" as "some people," that is, not all, but enough to make the gesture notable and customary -- they make the sign of the cross, ended by kissing the thumbnail. Not all, as I have said, and there are distinctions. Men wearing white business shirts and mute-colored ties with cellphones clipped to their belts usually do not. Women do, mostly, even a woman shepherding three children, pushing one in a stroller, dragging a second by the wrist, keeping an eye on the third -- she releases the wrist just long enough to get in the cross and the kiss, then grabs back the wrist before the child realizes that he was, for a moment, free and now is not, that is, before he feels any regrets for his missed liberation (there will be time reserved later for that). Older women and younger women -- women with pannier-like purses hanging from their shoulders balance-beamed, right-hand/left-hand, by small cloth bags holding a bit of shopping from the confiteria or the carniceria, or women with hip-hugging skirts and midriff chemises and that curious practice of wearing a brassiere with clear plastic straps as if to say they are not really wearing what they are clearly wearing, that what is being lifted up is not uplifted at all. Years and fashions apart, but as they pass the church, an act as if they are one: north, south, east, west, kiss the thumb, and continue passing. Young boys will do it, even if they look thuggish or are made opaque by their earphones or bob -- knee to knee, instep to instep -- a soccer ball, old men, too, half-hinged forward at the waist by a stiffened back, pants too tightly cinched, open-necked shirts with frayed collars: top, bottom, side, side, kiss. People in the passing busses, people in their passing cars, they do it, too.

Who knows why they do it, why the automatic gesture, even if a long (or even short) time ago some of them decided not to go to the church anymore -- it gives them comfort, I suppose, though I wouldn't presume to say what comfort it gives. It certainly shows how old forms have a hold on us even if they no longer have anything useful to teach us. Whether this is good or bad will never be answered to anybody's satisfaction.

As I said, it begins here.

A young woman and a young man pass by, together, together in that young man/young woman sort of way, loosely linked, not at all embarrassed about

touching each other, where they are is where centers the world. She wears a black chemise, spaghetti-strapped, unbra'd, low-hipped jeans -- Levis -- her hair black and straight, without barrette and tangled. He sports a shirt with Boca colors, cargo shorts, hair black, too, but his is curly. They come from the corner, where they have just crossed the street, and in their shambling intimate way they are talking, tossing back and forth jokes and barbs and gossip. And as they cruise by, they both without hesitation make the sign of the cross and kiss the thumb. Not two steps beyond that, responding to something he whispers in her ear, she smacks him, hard, on the upper right arm -- really smacks him, the report of it jumps off the stucco'd walls of the church courtyard. Her reaction to her reaction is immediate, a soothing gesture, the palm stroking over the reddened skin as if to wipe it away, but she is, at that same moment, fierce in her voice and set in her face, she does not like what he has said, but she continues to smooth his arm even as she lobs her words.

He laughs, laughs it off in that way that while he knows perfectly well that she is right for being offended he is not going to admit that he did something stupid and thoughtless, so he continues to joke with her, which only has the effect of making her feel that what she feels is not important to him at all, which makes her angrier -- but she does not pull her hand away from his arm, she now rests her hand on his forearm, connected to him through anger and skin.

He takes her by the upper arms and looks her straight in the face and for a moment he is not laughing and she is not angering and though the cars and busses brute their way by, that does not in the least make them flinch or glance away and lose focus. His hands do not clench, in fact the fingers hardly dent her browned flesh, and she does not stiffen in reproach but lets her body lean into his grip. Then they kiss, once -- not shallow, not deep, not forced, not unwanted -- then they separate again, arms length, and he cocks his a head a bit as if to say, "Okay?" and she tosses back a slat of hair, refusing to look down and away as young women are sometimes taught to do to signal that the male's gesture is both alpha and omega in the negotiation just done, and instead she leans in to nuzzle him nose to nose then softly, with exquisite calculation, head-butts him, just hard enough to let him know what he needs to know if he is to continue walking down the street with her. He laughs, lets her go, they turn, they walk.

Just as she knocks her forehead against his, just at the moment of loving collision, an elderly lady wielding a cane and wearing a straw sun hat passes them, going in the opposite direction, towards the corner that they have just

crossed. She can not but notice how they treat each other and equally so she can not stop herself from making a clucking noise, often written in novels as "tsk tsk tsk" but which sounds nothing like that at all, since the tongue flicks down from the palate and -- and, well, there is no need to go into a full vocal schematic to understand that the elderly lady does not approve of them, their public display of affection (is this what passes for affection these days? she huffs accompanied by rat-a-tat-tat of mental "tsk tsks"), their blocking the sidewalk, their self-absorption, their standing in front of the church while they -- well, in the half-dozen steps from passing them, cane-end tamping the ground three angry times, to the gates opening on to the church courtyard she has built up a complete head of steam against the young and how the world will go further into hell by way of their handbasket and by the time her dissatisfaction begins to plume outwards like steam from a fumarole, her right hand under the levitating draw of the church has begun to rise to her own corrugated forehead, where the fingertips touch the dry skin, then lower to touch the bony breast plate, then cross to touch the thin scrim of left-shouldered blouse, traverse to the right shoulder, ending with the unpolished lips against the unpolished thumbnail. And under her breath she whispers, as she watches the retreating backs of the young man and young woman, something like "to the greater glory" or "deliver us from evil" (these untethered fragments can float up from anywhere), the prayer to the loving christian god doubling as a pox upon their bodies and their openness.

She pivots her body to aim at the corner to be crossed, not an easy thing do when one is wearing, underneath the thin beige blouse, a half-slip, an industrial-strength brassiere whose reinforced darts and seams uphold the unsung-to breasts that long ago gave in to gravity's legislation, and a corset to grip her osteo'd lower back in a completely unloving embrace. Step, tam, step, tam, she makes her way to the corner.

The traffic being what it is in Don Torcuato, headlong like the bulls in Pamplona, street lights are, at best, a suggestion about how a driver should conduct himself or herself when sharing the road with other vehicular'd human beings -- and like most suggestions, ignored if inconvenient, followed if either helpful or unavoidable. The taxi driver, with his fare in the rear seat, sees the blinking green light and knows, because he is paid to know these things, that the yellow light will pop up, followed snap by the red light, in a period of time shorter than it will take him to make the corner and make the turn and carry his fare closer to where he will get out and pay him some money.

In normal times, no problem -- a red light is nothing much to worry about. But an old lady crossing the street when the walk light is clearly on her side and giving her the perfect right to be in the crosswalk as the taxi driver barrels forward changes everything, and his brakes catch in time (a small benediction of thanks for that because it has been some time, he admits to himself, since he has been able to afford the necessary maintenance to maintain what he should have been maintaining all along -- things as prosaic and resurrective as working brakes).

The old lady gives him a glare -- shoots him a glare, really, since, irritated by the young couple, her head of steam has not lessened, and so she releases her glare at the taxi driver the way an artillery officer would unleash his cannon. He pays the ocular barrage no mind -- if he reacted to every dirty look thrown at him by a just-missed pedestrian, he'd be sick at heart every day and unable to ply his trade. A rubbery hide is requisite for a taxi driver, it acts like a corset, and it also helps to have a snappy clutch-foot and pile-driver brake foot and a penalty-shot accelerator foot, not to mention an arsenal of high-caliber profanities and gestures balanced by a tanguero's facility with the notes of daily conversation. The fare in the back seat had such a one in the front seat.

As they waited, the fare, distracted by something loping through his mind, did not at all pay attention to the taxi driver's assessment of the government's latest stupidity -- there were so many, who could keep count anyway? who would want to? -- and so therefore did not take note of the elderly woman crossing the street or her steely stare or the ribs of her autocratic corset or eventually her dismissive back as she reached the other side of the intersection or the taxi driver nosing forward, inch by inch, into a stream of traffic unwilling to give him an inch, the red light stretched like an elastic by the taxi driver's impatience.

Finally -- finally! -- green, and he slingshots around the corner and the fare, suddenly realizing where he is, taps the driver's right shoulder and bleats out "Here, here," and the pile-driver brake foot and snappy clutch-foot tap dance the car to a commanded stop, in front of La Iglesia de San Marcelo, and the taxi driver half-turns to face his fare, a ready now-it's-time-to-get-paid look on his face -- half-courteous (since it is always important to be courteous before the money is paid) and half-impatient -- that changes, with just the slightest twitch, into irritation -- a half-millimeter drop of the uplifted forehead, a slight droop at the ends of the smile -- as the fare hands him a 100-peso note -- true, he hands it to him with some apology in his face but, because he is distracted, the

fare doesn't spare much apology -- and for the taxi driver the situation suddenly changes because if it had been a few degrees cooler this day (but it was 33 in the celsius and a little humid) and the old lady hadn't laid those accusing eyes on him and he had made the red light (and his family at home had not been breaking his balls, but that was another story), he might have let it go, taken the note (of course with reluctant fingertips to show the fare how disdainful he was of people who came so unprepared), riffled through his own wad of notes and made change. But the "ifs" don't happen and so (without knowing why he is doing what he is doing -- this is really not like him) he says he can not take it, can not make change, that he doesn't carry that kind of change on him, and doesn't he, the fare, have something smaller, after all it was only a five-peso ride, why should he, the fare, expect him to have change --

The fare, distracted, does not catch all of this and still dangles the bill, waiting for the transaction to go forward as it is supposed to, and as he looks around he sees the splotched white front of La Iglesia de San Marcelo through the dust-scrimmed window, and without thinking, that is, in a gesture as autonomic as breath in/breath out or digestion, he brings the hand holding the note to his forehead, to the V-point just where his suit-jacket buttons, to the left-padded shoulder, to the right-padded shoulder, and then the nail to his lips, where the note, for a moment, thumb-and-finger-pinched, looks like a napkin wiping his mouth.

The taxi driver, stopped mid-complaint, watches the fare, lowers his head a bit to see through the dust-scrimmed window that yes, he had forgotten, they have stopped in front of the church, and in a lever-action that equals and comments upon and echoes the other man, makes the sign of the cross. When the fare finally turns his face to the taxi driver, this time with a little more readiness to it because whatever is distracting him has left off distracting him for a moment, he proffers the note again, and this time, still venting a bit of irritation (which goes to show that even in a moment of transformation the taxi driver feels a need not to give up the slight superiority he had when he first refused), the taxi driver takes it, unearths his bankroll (from some crevice in the car, to foil any robbers, he has had those before), and makes the change. The fare thanks him, cranks open the door, steps out, and only catches a faint tang of ozone as the ecologically unsound taxi spews back a plume of grey smoke as it threads into the traffic weave.

The fare, standing on the curb, looks left, looks right, makes no move. He doesn't really see the young man and young woman coming along, returning from wherever they had gone, this time eating ice cream. As they pass behind the fare, the young man mimes pushing him off the curb and out into the traffic, and the young woman smacks him again, this time playfully, not hard, the sting of affection rather than insult, and they smile at each other. And, like choreography, they switch their ice-creams to their left hands and with their right hands touch forehead, solar plexus, shoulder, shoulder, buttoned with a kiss, the burden that had been on the back of Jesus now borne on the fronts of bodies moving forward into their daily grind while eating ice cream.

The fare, looking left (he notices the couple, then forgets them), finally turns right and walks away. He walks as if he is now not distracted, as if whatever he came to do now begins here.

Mister Softee Must Live!

The passage of the noise ordinance sealed it.

The councilpersons of my city -- one of whom I had help elect! -- felt that they somehow had to "honor" an ongoing business -- a legitimate concern, they called Mr. Softee! -- and couldn't completely ban the playing of the jingle from the trucks that lumber summer-long through our streets. Despite the research I submitted during the comment period -- voluminous, I might add, replete with decibel determinations, affidavits from my neighborhood watch group, NOISE (Neighbors Against Noxious Odors, Incessant Sounds and Emissions -- upstanding natural citizens, all of us), dietary studies of the so-called ice-cream products vended by this ear-mongering pest -- despite all this, the council yielded -- spineless sock-puppets that they are! -- when a representative of the company not only distributed samples (shamelessly ravened up by the councilpersons themselves!) but sang the lyrics to the Mr. Softee tune while accompanying himself on a toy Yamaha piano -- "The creamiest, dreamiest soft ice cream you get from Mister Softee" -- even now, I cannot get these words out of my head! -- and rhapsodized about the jingle as part of the summer symphony expected by people and how its disappearance would be just as bad as if songbirds went extinct, leaving our morning empty of the soothing sounds of bird calls --

One could see the people's resistance melt quicker than the sandwich bars he'd handed out. The truck could continue to play its jingle as it trolled for customers but had to turn it off after sitting for more than 7 minutes in a single place. Seven minutes.

Thus, by decree I will never be rid of this horrible, mind-drilling, sonic excrescence -- I will never be able to cleanse my brain of the maddening cortex-liquefying repetitiveness of "duh-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-duh-dee-dee-dee-duh-dee-dee -- " Even now it drives me near to madness, to the lip of the criminal abyss!

And then, one day -- as I knew would happen -- as I knew must happen -- I went beyond.

Seven p.m., up at the park -- round and round its perimeter the truck drove, trolling for customers with the bent focus of a pedophile (for such it was, in a way). I timed it. At each of its stations it stayed six-and-one-half minutes, just below the required turn-off-the-fucking-music point! -- and it made each corner,

and the mid-points between corners, its points of dispersion. Six-and-one-half-minutes, thirteen minutes, nineteen-and --

In the closet I knew exactly where to find it: my Deutsche Waffen und Munitionsfabriken Pistole 08 Luger firing the 7.65mm Parabellum cartridge. The gun weighed in my hand. Had it really come to this? Had I really come to this? Had it?

The gun weighed in my hand.

The Mr. Softee song oozed through my closed windows, my drawn-down blinds.

I closed the closet door and watched myself in the mirror smooth down my silk guayabera over my belt and hips -- my Mexican guayabera, not the dumbed-down Cuban knock-off. I am one who knows where my things come from.

One block to the park -- there stood the demon's chariot. Emblazoned with the macrocephalic portrait of the rippled-headed Mr. Softee himself. And, of course, the song. The omnivorous song. Children waited, adults waited, and from my angle all I could see was a forearm with a hand on the end of it doling out the opium that went by the name of ice cream.

At the end of six-and-one-half minutes, he moved the truck, and I had to hurry to make sure that I would be there whenever he stopped. But he didn't stop, not at the park. He took a left-hand turn at New York Avenue and proceeded down Palisade, and it was all I could do (luckily he rolled along slowly enough -- the trolling of appetite) to keep within eyesight distance of him. And all the time -- the song the song the song --

Each time he stopped the opportunity was not right -- too many people, or I just got there as he finished his stint. But I was determined -- tonight would bring resolution. No matter how my body ached, how I had to drag it through this vale of --

Finally. Finally. An unattended moment -- no children, no parents, no adults, no dogs, not even birds or fleas or cats or moths. I walked into the fluorescent downglow of his serving window. Strangely, in this cone of light, the song softened, went distant, like something brought on a the wings of a -- Trick of physics, I thought, snapping my mind back to my mission. Resolution tonight!

"Habla español o inglés?" Soft voice, familiar Spanish sibilance.

"English," I snapped back.

"If that's what you want. So, how can I help you, señor?" Same softness.

"I want you to shut off that song, or I will make sure that you will shut if off."

He locked his eyes on me -- and damn it -- damn it! -- if my mind didn't slip just a little to the side, and I noticed how soft his lashes were, how black his eyes and his hair, his cheekbones high in a slightly flattened face with skin the color of caramel.

"I can't shut it off -- it's my job. That's a nice guayabera you have on. Mexican, right?"

"Yes, it's Mexican."

"Just like that shirt? Just like me."

I shook my head, hard -- focus! "Turn off the music -- "

"Not while you have your right hand hidden from me. What do you have in your right hand, señor?"

I put both my empty hands on the counter. "Just turn the music off." Where had that note of pleading come from? Because the man liked my shirt? Knew where it came from? Because his eyes were like mine? I had to remain strong, I couldn't let myself be defeated --

"You're sweating. You look sick."

"This song makes me sick."

"People want to kill me all the time, that's why I had to ask."

"I don't want to kill you, I don't -- "

"About the song, about Mexico. It's just ice cream, it's just a country."

"No, no -- but the song -- "

The man disappeared from the window, and from some dim angle of the brain came the thought that I should probably run, that a smart varón would --

Then he was back -- and in his right hand he held a paper plate, and on the plate was a sandwich -- what looked like two chocolate cookies with ice cream in between -- maybe vanilla, but also maybe --

"That -- it's not what I think it is -- is it?"

"It is."

"With the cayenne?"

"The cookie's got the cocoa and also a little cayenne pepper, and the ice cream -- lots of cinnamon."

"Like it's supposed to be made."

"Chocolate and cinnamon with a touch of picante -- like your shirt. Like you, maybe. I keep it in the freezer for special occasions."

He handed the creation to me -- I couldn't help but take it. It floated up to my mouth, and the first bite -- I knew that it would -- the vanilla in it -- took me back and away.

By now children had shown up, parents had shown up with them, and I backed away into the darkness, eating as I did.

It disappeared, I wanted another, but I had enough of my mind back to know what I knew about saving graces.

I sat in the park. The Mr. Softee truck circled. ""The creamiest, dreamiest -- " I still hated the song. But that didn't matter.

About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also look collaborates with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director) -- Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer) -- Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to Maria Beatriz. All his work (including longer versions of these essays and all stage scripts) can be seen at www.m-bettencourt.com

Block & Tackle PRODUCTIONS

www.blockandtackleproductions.com