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Orpheus

1985 EDITION

Orpheus

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Orpheus

A LITERARY JOURNAL

volume • XIII

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Orpheus **is an annual literary journal produced by the Department of English and Communications, California State College, Bakersfield. All submissions must be typed, double-spaced, on 8½" x 11" paper. There are no restrictions on subject matter, length, or theme; however, poems over one hundred lines are rarely published. Any use of profanity must be pivotal to the understanding of a work.**

At the present, those whose works are published in Orpheus **receive a current issue of the journal.**

Orpheus

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Poems

Orpheus •

Cry for Me

Mother, Mother cry for me.
For the river has taken my tears.
So that is why I can not cry
To purge my soul of fear

Sorrow

I cried today,
Tomorrow will be fun.
But today I will cry.

Row on Row

The clouds pass by
Like soldiers marching
Row on row.
A cold wind blows
as they too passed by.

Haze

Dark and dreary haze
Dampened my days—
Light became a memory.

The pulse of life had stopped,
Or so it seemed
In gloom so grey
It took all warmth away.

I gazed up with surprise,
For in my eyes
A light had shone.

The trees took on a hue
So clear and new
It stirred my dormant heart to life.

I realized
That nature never died,
It only slept,
And so I wept.

The Secret

Ever flowing water,
with life eternal,
Do veil a solemn secret.
Will it be revealed?
to you? or to me?
What ominous secret could it be?

Oh, ageless waters,
Reveal thy self, and proclaim thy wisdom.
Utter the words that'll release my torment,
or further enslave my existence.
I plead with you . . .
. . . "bequeath me thy life!"

Someone

To know that you love
is a blessed knowledge.
To know someone so close
is truly precious.
To have that someone
is a tremendous blessing,
To lose that someone
is sheer affliction.

Canyon Flights

I

Soft quail tracks
now cover my prints
since I have last walked
this trail . . .
alone

II

Red-tailed screams
that leave me dangling
from invisible talons . . .
above

III

Fertile canyons
wide open . . . waiting
into their embrace . . .
ecstasy

IV

Quaking Aspen flit—
ter through
the not quite motionless
drift of leaves . . .
leaving
the lonely days
falling
one
by
one
. . . into my hand

Bangnis

O mein Liebster, gib mir die Kraft,
dass meine Fusse dir folgen
auf den schmalen Pfad der Angst und Verzweiflung.
Gib mir die Kraft, dass meine Augen
dich weiter durch die Trannennebel
von Schmerz und Trauer sehen;
und gib mir die Kraft, dass mein Herz
dir dabei empfindsam bleibe
in den Wirrsalen dieses Lebens,
in den dunklen Gangen der Erniedrigung und Enttauschung,
in den dusteren Schatten der Pforte des Todes.

Getrud Dachselt

O my most beloved, give me the power,
that my feet might follow you
on the narrow path of fear and despair;
Give me the power that my eyes
still see you through the web of tears
of pain and grief;
and give me the power that my heart
might persist in openness to you
in the perplexity of this life,
in the dark halls of degradation and disillusionment,
in the gloomy shadows of the gate of death.

translated by Gene Clark

I Wish I Were Somewhere Else

Do you ever feel like vanishing—
  off the face of the earth?
Just as a flame flickers—
  it leaves no traces of life.
It's just gone!
Just as quick as it came.
Sometimes I wish I were a flame.

That's him
Mr. STEEL, untouchable
Without leaks
Without a way in.
But your weakness is
Me.

Tears

Tears—appearing to be crystal-like droplets
consisting of only water?
If we could only see and understand
the contents
making up the tear

Daydreams

If I close my eyes I can
see things as I want them to be
It's so easy to get caught up in
my ideas of how things should be . . .
The world doesn't fit in to my plan
Nor does it try; instead I
have to conform to its plan
But I can still close my eyes
and see things as I want them to be!

Pain

Pain—the thief that so often
comes to steal my joy away
He silently sneaks up at moments
when I'm just beginning to think that he has
forgotten the path to my home
Sometimes his visit is momentary
but other times he
settles in and stays
I try so hard to ignore his presence
but he so often requires my all
One day this Pain
will pass right by my house
Leaving me only with a lingering
of his presence

Destination

Try staving off death with blind superstition
(Warhead Deterred by Omaha Scarecrow)
All roads meet their end, but there's no relation.

"There ain't no truth in witch tradition
(Ten days more life from ten sweat swabs of toad)
Try staving off death with dark superstition."

Pink rabbit's foot paws at the ignition
of mustang turned turtle. EMT's know
all roads meet their end, but there's no relation.

Sleep stiffly, time-clock congregation
member. Service to God: ass, shine the pew. (No
use humoring death with this superstition.)

Bad luck to step on the graves. Fruition
of funeral is thin tears, black shoes. So
all folks meet their end, but there's no relation.

Good Gods forget for good. This slow nation
crosses shamed fingers behind the cross though.
Try staving off death with your superstition.
All roads meet their end, but there's no relation.

Dachau, 1985

in the space between the smoke and the fire.

Time stretches to pinted intervals along
the wire; a slow music of long seconds twis-
ted in the stained
teeth of hunger, the gelid palor of metal.

Pain takes you
where the rain can break your shoulders, pain
grins.

Hope frosts thin
exhaust piping the familiar shriek on a rifle-nostril.

Death is a dry rag they stuff in your mouth.

My Little Sister

My little sister,
Freckled
Like a spotted butterfly,
Bare legged,
Scraped knee,
skipped away.

My little sister
Clothed in silk
Like a chrysalis,
Fair haired,
Fluttery,
Slipped away

Into womanhood.

If Birds Were Meant to Walk

If birds were meant to
walk, then why don't they run when cats
stalk.
If man was meant to
fly, then why doesn't he soar instead of
die.

If birds think
thoughts, then why don't they teach man a lesson to be
taught.
If man really has a
heart, then let mourners in peace
depart.
Why so many "if's"
for a world where an answer makes the
diff.
Why so many questions
at a time we need answers and
suggestions.

Man flies to survive and to
carry on ...
Yet why are we like birds of prey picking at
carion.

Memory at the Beach

Sunset approaches, I approach the shore.
The ocean speaks its steady language,
"This happens every night," said calmly.
Not for me. The chill in my body overcomes.
I am not cold for my mind is warm.
The large orange sphere approaches
    its cool destination.
The sizzle can be heard as the fire
    is doused.
The sea accepts its sun
As a mother accepts her babe.
I only wish I could share this
    standing arm-in-arm.
But I smile, looking at heaven
For I know the sun will return.

Al Ciprés De Santo Domingo De Silos

Surges como pajarera
hacia el azul.
En tus entranas
no hay silencio,
sino locos trinos locos
de alabanza.

Simétrica jaula de gorjeos,
rítmico enjambre de alas, roces, murmullos,
verde oración elevada,
enramado candelabro,
fervoroso canto enarbolado,
gorjeante enrame,
panal de aves,
verde abrigo de ruisenores,
ramaje místico,
melódico verdor,
ramillete de ayes,
arca espiral de suspiros,
cándido canto verde,
aspiración arborescente a la claridad divina,
asceterio alado que acaricia los cielos.

Símbolo de Silos,
cuyos ruegos, ayes!
y ansias de amor divino
al infinito ascienden
hasta alcanzar
el esplendor supremo.

Tarde En Soria

El viento piafante viene
cual potro que tromba y huracán reúne.
por muelles campos de verdor cabalga
fugaz estela de terciopelo surca
hasta ganar montes de gris veteados.

Vertical, raudo el halcón fulgura

rasga el azul, rayos despide
y su presa alcanza.

Amapolas, trémulos testigos.
Indiferente, la impúdica cabra
la desnudez de su trasquila ostenta,
y plateando prados y oteros
a su majada llega.

El viento vuelto caballo vuelve
y su loca carrera emprende.

Lejano, el Duero dorado duerme.

Phi (or Cups)

Memories are like cups
Filled to the brim
With sparkling water.
When a drop or two or three
Strike the quiescent liquid,
It overflows,
Sending more drops
Into other cups,
Until waves cascade
Over the edge,
And the mind is deluged
  with memories.

Yours has a narrow opening
But a deep and wide bottom,
Dark red in color;
I keep drops from hitting
  most of the time.
But every now and then,
One gets by,
And I'm overwhelmed
  by the flood
That wells up until
All I see is you.

Beta

Coffee at midnight,
After a bout of carousing,
Drinking carelessly until dawn.
The days whirl . . .
into madness.

Freedom and a careless love
Were her gifts,
A wind child,
Hurrying here and there
But never staying;
Delighting with cool caresses
That at a moment's notice
Could rage and shred
The very soul with searing emotion.

Yet Fool I,
A grinning Yorick,
Knowing no better,
I gave all;
The wind took . . .
but didn't return.

Still, what matters that
I was the dust
She danced and played with;
The wind shaped a form
That, though discarded
  At a whim,
Still tingled to the electric
Touch of her turbulent time;
I was given birth,
Awakened from inert matter
  To joyous life.

Contradiction

Marriage,
Asks
Responsibility,
Receives
Ignorance,
And
Gives
Empires.

Divorce
In
Violence
Overrides
Responsibility,
Corrupts
Emotions.

"this too shall pass . . ."

The goulish face of keen despair looms large this day—
I am no stranger to that contorted view;
Her visage has haunted me before this day's bleak dawning.
Yet, today's profile seems somehow gentler-edged.
Today's blackness is riddled with hope's flickering flare.
Like stars that crack night's darkest hue, promises peek through.
Daniel knew.
    . . . mene mene tekel upharsin . . .
    wrote an aweful hand upon a kingly wall,
    and Daniel read:
    "this too shall pass, this too, this too . . ."
The comfort is cold, it's true, when the night's so long.
But morning's light has always come before and could once more.

So when that nightmare face appears, I run, but not away.
First I attack: With splintered sticks and fragile stones,
With passion's words and sorrow's weeping prayer, I fight.
But finally, with manufactured faith, I force my arms into embrace.
And, if curse I must with every step, so be it. Remember:
From first to last, naught else exists save love and hope.
Love and hope alone. Hope and love, love and hope.
No other paints can change the face of that old whore, despair.

Lament

Ancient pocketbooks treasure these shelves,
Luring bag ladies' glazed eyes—
Rich loot inside Salvation Army's doors,
Piled high at rummage sales and Goodwill stores.

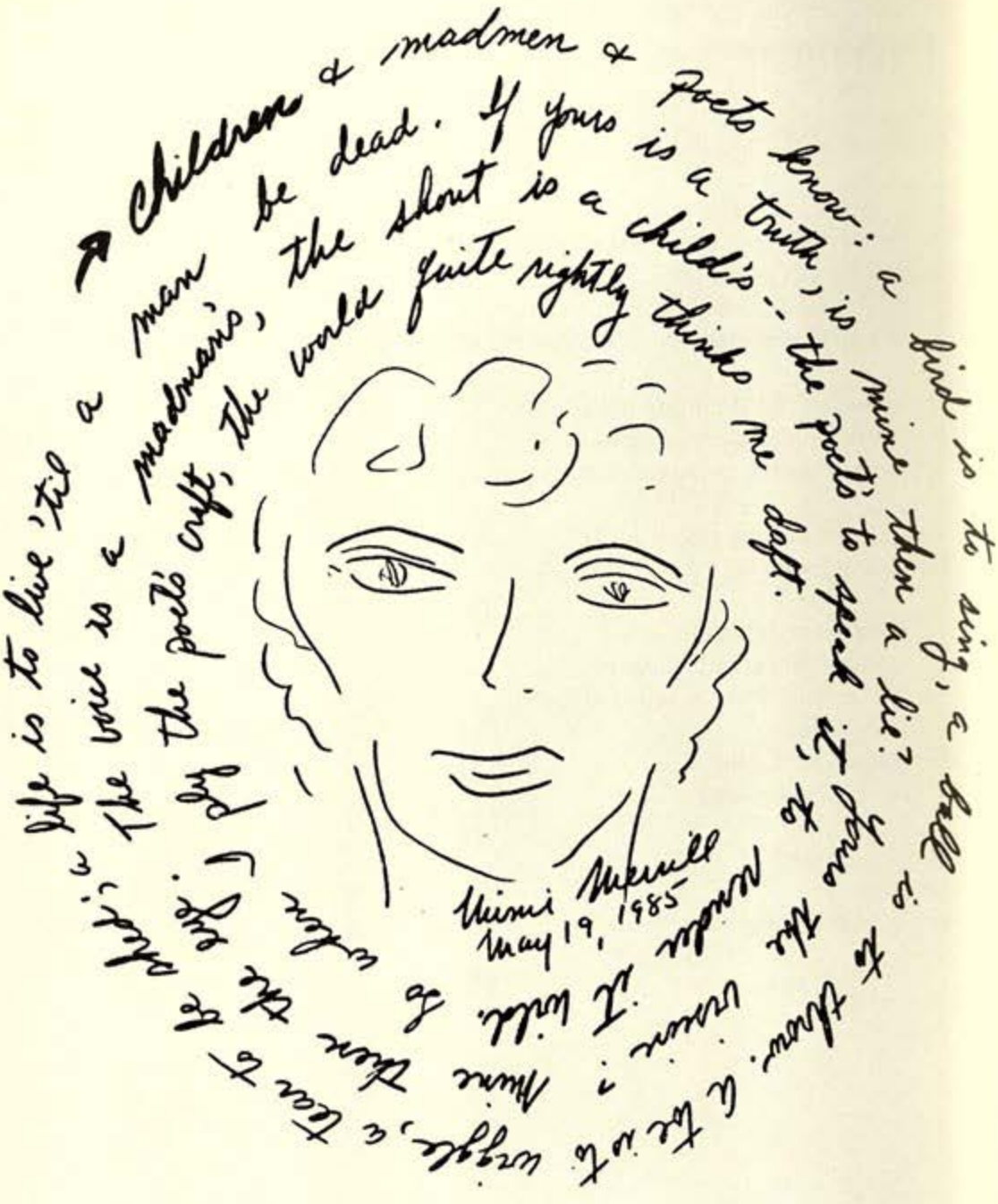
Here, too, lie old shopping lists,
Burrowed, mole-blind, amnesiac,
Nestling forgotten in ragged leather graves.

Today I cleaned my oldest purse
and found therein my listed needs:

aspirin & bisodol
onions, carrots, olive oil
lemons/limes & tubed Ben-Gay

Completed with a line I left — how long ago?
"Citied eyes grow scales—"

And, yes, I say,
And sigh,
And give my purse away.


Children & madmen & poets know: a bird is to sing, & bell
man be dead. If yours is a truth, is mine then a lie?
madmans, the slout is a child's -- the poet's to speak it, yours to
the poet's craft; the world quite rightly thinks me daft.
life is to live 'tis a
the voice is a
Mimi Merrill
May 19, 1985

Tale of a Lonely Man

With deadened hands he slowly made his way,
fumbling for any warm thing in the air.
His blindness was, in fact, a fog of gray.

There was no picture on the nail he watched all day,
(his painted people looked too happy there).
With deadened hands he slowly made his way

around the echo room. He spoke, and the delay
in sound was like a ghost of smoke that brushed his chair.
His blindness was, in fact, a fog of gray.

He couldn't seem to find the door. To stay
would make him miss the whole affair.
With deadened hands he slowly made his way
and poked the crying mirror, felt the thing there spray
thick darkness out, and in its mouth it held his prayer.
His blindness was, in fact, a fog of gray.

He sat and rubbed his feet; he would not pray.
The reflection could no longer talk or stare.
With deadened hands he slowly made his way.
His blindness was, in fact, a fog of gray.

Church

The sun crawls through this stained glass,
sluggish, and slopping a weak saviour to the floor
in purples — a soft and watered royal hue, (like babies' lips).
The reverend is fat and reverent and what
he says we soon forget or never remember.
Or never hear.
We watch the clock and the cross and the pretty pretty
window where a quiet fly is trapped, begging saviour's
lavendar hand to let him go.

Jesus,
You were loud purple. You were so loud that you
squeezed my throat and streamed the truth from my eyes,
laying it like deep water
on your deeply punctured palm.
You were death purple too, a drowned man and bloated.
All this and more.
Let us raise the dead together, let us scatter
dusty pilings from the floor.

Spring

Sunny petals wide and open
reach out to be warmed.
Dainty little cups
it's time to wake up.

Hills and valleys beam with pride;
speckled patches here and there—
daisies, dandelions—everywhere.

Life is too short—
why must you die?
Every winter I sit down
to shed a tear for you.

October

October is all seasons:
October is cool with the
scents of coming winter,
and hot with the lingering
summer.
October is alive with
apple harvest smells,
burning fires, bundled
up children and popcorn.
October is alive with
sleeping trees, blossoms
decayed and leaves on the
ground.

I Don't Understand Men

I don't understand men,
but I want to look at them,
but if they see me look
I am afraid they will know.

I don't understand men,
but I want to touch them,
but if I touch them will they know?

I don't understand men,
but I hope they will always stay
and even if I know they know
my heart will wink before it turns away.

If I Should Die First

If I should die first
do not be saddened by
my departure.
Remember those things that
I loved and look for me
there:

I will be the crystal clear raindrop
that you see fall to the ground.

I will be the fresh crisp scent
that follows a storm.

I will be the starlight that
you see your way home.

When you wake, you will
hear my song sung by
the bluebird.

But most of all, I am the wind
freely blowing light kisses
in your memories.

Starlight

Starlight is the compass.
It guides me through the night.
The sprinkle and the glitter
illuminates my heart.

I search it for memories
and find them there.
Each twinkle and flash
is as close or faraway
as I choose.

No Heroes

As I bent down
to sleep at night
cold where I lay
a sad frown appeared
in the moonlight
gloomy without life

They walk this land that's yours and mine
they walk this land without a mind

My day is here
I can't turn back
their day isn't near
I can't turn back

Sometimes I wish we were dead
and this world would stay back
for my soul seemed to have left

This world is
full of filth and distrust
life here is so cruel

Friends I thought to be good
truthful and bold
are blind

You hear them say
"Mama, Papa, I love you so"
you hear them say
"I fooled them again"

I wished to God
for his wrath . . .
the wait is too long
the wait is too long

I have waited for the years to pass
I have waited again for the green grass

There is a lonesome tree
all carved with names



Untitled

I don't remember much
Except your face
When you told me,
Later, that is, when you could catch me
Caught up in my world, unconcerned with ours
And I felt bad . . . well, sort of . . .

I don't rememeber much
Except the guilt
When he told me,
Much later, about the chickens
How he twisted their necks, chopping their heads
And I felt bad . . . well, sort of . . .

I don't remember much
Except your face
When I told you,
So much later, when I could catch you
About the chickens.
And my guilt.
It is far more painful to twist than to chop
So I loosened my grip and severed the ties.
Good-bye . . .
And I felt bad, but better . . . well, sort of.

Don't Go High Rider

Where did you go High Rider?

Did you turn to see the
sad and shallow face
you left behind.

Why did you go, High Rider?

When you were young
and just a pup I
held you tight and
kissed your soft warm fur.

No dog had any other boy
like you, to me you
were the happy earth
and dancing clouds above.

Don't make me cry, High Rider.

You left me only
yesterday, or so it
seems to me today.

You were my dog with
laughing eyes, you
chased my flying
sticks and always brought
them back.

So long ago it was
and as I sit now
writing I cry for
my High Rider.

Where did you go High Rider,
will you come back
again to me, how I
long to see my dog
High Rider.

Death

Death is nothing.
The only thing you see
Is what is in your view.
No sound is heard,
Only that of fate.
Now or later,
It's up to him,
He decides.
It was not my time,
Only he knows.
Death is gone—
'Till he comes again.

Portrait

Petals of indifference rest on her throat.
As she breathes her necklace softens
And her face melts in and out of shadows.
She awaits the hour of her rushing moon.
Sipping wine from shapely glasses
Her eyes become nectar
And a light sweat circles her forehead.
These beaded drops are her love;
She has seen them fall through her lashes,
Moistening her fingertips into motion.
Her clock strikes a chill through her ears
And she begins to focus.
A bottle of ink crosses her view.
She reaches for a tool, a pen to fashion visions;
Her pen, a chisel to a page of marble
And she must shape her sadness.
Lifting her wrist into position
She feels the stone for its smoothest surface.
And there where her hands
Shimmer in the light
She chooses to begin shaping.
In search of even lines
She presses her lips to the stone
And begins licking its sleekness.
She has tasted the silence of stone
Her fingers trace her meaning
And now the form of her sculpture
Has become the phrase of her being.

The War For the Will

Time passes . . .
Solace.
Once you and I reigned in unity;
Now I've exiled you,
Ending your childish power play.
I read through your schemes and treacherous plots —
Those that so tortured my mind and soul!
No longer can you poison my heart;
I heal with Merlin's mythical potion . . .

O how I yearn to be with you again,
My naive and precious young princess!
I lurk round you always,
Even in the very air surrounding your kingdom.
I am the infinity of your seas and stars,
Ready to seize hold of your fortress at any moment.
We shall share the same castle again someday . . .
Soon.

A Feminine Danger

The lost lioness weeps alone;
Hot deceptions roar inside her.
The flames of passionate lovers burn deep,
Welding her to an endless void.
Will it ever stop?
Who can it be . . .
To purge from her the fire
And free the feline
From the volcanic abyss?
Only time will tell . . .
And for now the cat cries alone.

Stephanie

I used to look at her with shuttered eyes,
Staring away, unable to touch;
I used to see her in a different light,
I'm shielded by a looking glass.

I used to look at her with clouded eyes,
Looking now, able to reach out, but not touch;
I used to see her in filtered light,
I'm standing in the doorway, but unable to enter.

I used to look at her with colored eyes,
Staring now, able to touch, but still afraid;
I used to see her in faded light,
I've a foot on the path, but a rope on the waist.

I used to look at her with squinted eyes,
Gazing now, reaching out, but pulling back;
I used to see her in bright light,
I'm running now, but stuck at the broken bridge.

I see her now with open eyes,
Loving now, reaching out, not pulling back;
I see her in my light,
I'm standing now, holding her.

Nothing

Standing in a crowd
Watching the empty, unsmiling
  fares go by.
Wishing for a change
But knowing that wishes
don't come true
At least not for me.
I see a smile and hear
  my name being called
And there is hope
But hope dies
Because the smile was
  not for me.
Feeling sad—but not sad.
Lonely—but not lonely
Knowing that all there is
Is Nothing.

A Last Goodbye

As I stand here by your side in the bitter cold
Memories of your brief life begin to unfold.
They bring me pain but are a solace to my grief
Because in eternity I have a belief.

I recall the sunny August morn
T'was the day that you, my son, was born.
Such a tiny babe with hair so white
To your family you were a true delight.

You were full of love — mischievous too.
No prank or deed was missed by you.
But after, you'd always express your sorrow
And promise to be better on the morrow.

I fondly recall your sunny smile
Every present and even while
Inside you were feeling sadness and pain
Your cheerful face remained the same.

You weren't afraid to express your love
You always knew there was a God above.
But now, my son, tho why 'tis one of life's mysteries
He has called you home — and I am left with your memories.

A Decision Made

Shall I be free
and remain alone,
should I climb the tree
or find a home.

Shall I dig deep
or bury whole
all that makes me weep
and hide my soul.

Shall I try love
or cringe in shadows
calling to the olive dove
and feed it to the gallows.

Shall I be me,
I feel I should show
I want to be free
at least I think so.

Me More Than You

Is there light through the trees?
You can only hope with your eyes coated with goo.
Does that giant shape really care?
Of course, that's all you know.
Those festering, replenished wounds that adorn you
are they the way love is shown?
Of course . . .
that's all you know.
That's all we'll ever know.

Raindrops and Teardrops

It was raining that evening and so dark it seemed
no one saw the shapes on the sidewalk of life.
"Where is my Mommy?"
Lonely echoes, dripping hours
A wall of water, an opening door, and a rush of warmth.
Mommy, smiles and a twinkles, a blanket wiggles in her lap.
A brand new puppy licks the rain from his face
and the kid cries all the way home
while the puppy, squirming
loves without asking.

Druids

When sky is black and moon is gray
and stars rise in the sky, we go
to sing in ancient ring of stone,
to kill the goat, to burn the bone,
to spill the blood on fallen snow,
and to the gods we kneel to pray.

We kneel in robes of stainless white
to offer goddess Moon so high
the sacrifices we have made
that theirs, this new god, has forbade.
Then packing robes as white owls cry,
we turn and fade into the night.

Nuclear Winter

Electric knives cut into the sky which cries its pain.
Even the auroras are ugly tonight, or today,
whichever it is. Tape recorder
pours out soft organ tunes,
Quiet Riot and Twisted Sister,
as dirges for the fallen man. Into the pit he goes,
With the rest. No need to cover him; the wind will do that.
No tears — not one. Just return to the
quonset hut, waiting for the sun.

LIII (nota social)

Careta de meretriz trasnochada
inquietos párpados pintados de antimonio
fragante a mirra a canela a azafrán
Antonino el Impurísimo
a quien cien generaciones llamarán impunemente
Heliogábalo
(sacerdote del sol invicto)
coquetea desde la memoria de delirantes noches
de odisea fálica
ramera de fabriles prostíbulos
dios hermafrodita de los lupanares
inventor excelso de una salsa de pescado que copia
transparente y verdinosa la apariencia
del agua de mar
saboreando guisantes aderezados con granos de oro
lenguas de ruisenor sesos de avestruz
entre lluvias sofocantes de flores frenéticas
guirnaldas los cabellos de amaranto
(cuyo perfume, se asegura, neutraliza
al abrir los poros los efluvios del vino)
actor de anfiteatro
vestido de púrpura cual reina persa
insistiendo en ser llamado emperatriz
toma por marido a Hierocles
conductor de carros en el hipódromo
esclavo liberto joven atleta fornido
para su deliete y disfrute eternos.

Amén.

XLVIII (en Bakersfield)

Si las estrellas fueran puntos
en el papel carbón de noche a dos espacios

si las tardes de plomo esparcido
pudieran contener la monotonía bicolor del paisaje

si la hierba y las palmas secas
fueran comas
entre la interrogación de pocos árboles sin hojas

si los largos caminos asfaltados
fueran alternativas
en vez de posibilidades remotas

si estos pueblos de madera y alumino
ciudades de chatarra humeantes de fábricas de hojalata
desaparecieran en el destello fatal de una mirada

si el polvo lograra cubrir
la huella de todos los latidos
de todos los borrones de todos los olvidos

quemaría el celofán de la vida diaria
abriría los ojos como almejas imprecisas
bebiendo el zumo de carnes hostiles
expondría los cientos de transparencias
borraría las millas de celuloide
encintas de pontificaciones
entonaría un tedéum en papel de hilo
una cantata en pergamino.

Earth Crystals

In Spain, sheep are out to pasture—
cropping short grasses
in dunged green fields
high on winded hills.

Hear them—ba-a-a-,
see yearlings spring.
Watch wool-white lines move on slopes
Feel deep elegance pastoral.

In Roma, Agatha cooks artichoke hearts
to top pasta Italiane
garnished red with whole tomatoes
hugging deep black olives
skewered to brown croutons.

In Damascus, horses feverishly kick mud
from pounded tracks—
stinging flanks of flying mares—
driving studs—
heads worked in hackered nods—
ruled from above.

In Jerusalem, lilies drape bells
white on Easter morning
hanging clean—as
scenting sweet memorials of
brutal crosses—
rammed firm into bitter soils.

In Bonneville Northwest, grey generators hum—
sluiced active by ancient Columbia
rushing liquid to seas
where silversides flash salted deeps
and plankton knot delicate chains of food.

In Iowa, Philip picks a common daisy—
shy with plucking petals for his love—
seeking prophecies of care
born from geometry of flowers.

In Hawaii, excited polynesian islands
rouse volcano-sparked eyes
to light luaus—
sensuous in joys
of ancient recreations—
worn simply as old diadems.

In my quiet garden, daily moments turn dramatic—
lifted sheer against intents
to be polymorphic mysteries—
challenging my memories.

Stories

Orpheus •

Jesse

Jesse crumpled the empty beer can and tossed it into the fire. Sparks flared, then returned the night to the crickets. He stretched out his long legs, enjoying the solitude, and wrapped himself tight in Pa's old jacket. The sheepskin lining was worn thin, but still provided more warmth than the old man had ever given.

Jesse felt the presence of a visitor. He relaxed and let him enter.

"Hi, Jesse." Roy's familiar voice came as a surprise.

"I'll be. Roy, I didn't expect it to be you." Jesse reached out to shake the cool hand. Roy scraped his boots in the dirt, a bit embarrassed. "Car accident?" asked Jesse.

"Yeah. How'd you guess?"

"Not much else can take a man your age."

"Can I sit a while?"

"Take a load off." Jesse was used to visitors. The first had come when he was about five. He felt her in his room, touching his hair. "What you want, Mrs. Graham?" he sputtered. She just wanted to say goodbye.

Jesse lay back, basking in the heat of the fire. He always let the visitors alone, waiting for them to talk.

"Damn truck. You warned me the tires was getting smooth."

"Too much hooch?"

Roy laughed. "Never could fool you." He lit a cigarette, then grew serious. "Will you help Maryann at the funeral?"

"Don't worry. Me and Ruthie will be there."

"You always seem to know the right thing to say. I watched you at other funerals."

Jesse smiled to himself. "Most of the spirits visited me. They tell me what's important."

"I never did like funerals. I remember Pa's. You told me and Ma that Pa was ready to go; that the cancer hurt him too bad. We appreciated that."

"Your pa was a good man, Roy. He visited me, too." Jesse winced as he thought of his own pa, liquor breath, willow switches. "You were lucky to have an old man like that."

"I know, Buddy. ... I wish you came to your pa's funeral. I stood up for you there, with your ma. He wasn't such a bad guy when he wasn't drinking."

Jesse turned away. "I don't like to talk about that. ... I thank you for helping

Ma. Still can't see why she stuck with him all those years." A vivid image of Ma's bruises and bloody face filled his mind. Jesse shook his head, trying to dismiss it.

Roy stared at the fire. "Life is awful short. Damn. I'm only thirty-seven. Never even had a kid of my own."

"You're right, Roy. But life never seems long enough, 'cept for someone like your pa. Hell, old lady Graham was over ninety; and she bitched about not finishing the quilt she was making."

"But you've still got time, Jesse, to do those things."

"You mean make a quilt?" Jesse deliberately misunderstood his friend.

"Hell no. I mean like have some kids; Jesse Junior."

"Just ain't ready yet. Don't know if I'll ever be." Images of his own unhappy childhood surfaced again. "You're as bad as Ma and Ruthie. Ma's after me all the time to get married and have kids."

"I can't imagine Ruthie bitching about nothing."

"No, she's a good old gal. But she's like all them others; the way she coos over every baby."

"And what's so bad about that? I wish me and Maryanne had a kid or two." Roy began to fade. "Jesse, I got to walk. Will you come with me, 'til the end?"

"I tried that a couple times. Almost went over myself. Really had a fight to stay in my own skin."

Roy stood up, wiping the dirt from his jeans. "Tell Maryann I love her."

Jesse shook his hand. "I'll do that." Jesse watched Roy walk off, gradually blending into the darkness of the surrounding trees. Roy had been his best friend. When they were boys it was Roy who hid him from Pa. He realized how selfish he had been. "Wait, Roy! I'll walk with you!" His call went unanswered.

Jesse felt alone. He already missed his old friend and wondered if he could bring him back. He stared into the flames and chanted, "Roy, Roy, come back," half afraid of messing with something that had always happened on its own before. When this didn't work he closed his eyes and pictured Roy as he had been: the worn-out jeans, old red jacket, smiling face. He grew panicky as he realized he had left his body and was floating above the campsite. He fought to keep from drifting in Roy's direction, toward a bright light in the distance.

"Hi, Jesse." Roy's voice broke the trance. Jesse fell back into reality and opened his eyes. He was still at the campsite. His body was cold and shakey. Roy was hazy, like smoke with light shining through it.

Jesse grinned. "Glad you're back. Where'd you go?"

"Walked a piece. It's funny. I should be scared, but I'm not." Roy stared at his old friend. "You called me back, didn't you?"

Jesse swallowed, then looked at his feet. "Yep. Guess I did. First time I tried that. Wasn't sure it would work."

"You son of a gun. Guess I picked a good man to haunt. Maybe you can call me back later, let me know how Maryann's getting on."

"Maybe so, Roy. I'll certainly try."

"Got to go, Jesse."

"I know. I decided to walk with you."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Jesse stood up.

Roy's eyes noticed the shaking hands. "You scared?"

Jesse looked straight at Roy. "Maybe a little, but I got to do this. You're the best friend I ever had."

They walked toward the forest. Jesse struggled to keep within his skin, each leg barely carrying the bones with it. Finally he gave up, stepping out, almost floating toward the horizon.

Roy stopped. "You got to turn back, Jesse. I'm okay now. This is farther than I got before, and I don't want to take you with me." They hugged. "I love you, Jesse."

"I love you, too, Roy. And don't you worry about Maryann." Roy helped Jesse turn around, gently shoving him back, away from the magnetic draw in the distance.

Jesse woke to the dawn. He vaguely remembered finding his body, straining to reenter it, fainting in the attempt. He wiggled his fingers and stared at them, laughing out loud. He stood up slowly, stiff from lying on the cool ground.

He stumbled into camp and threw his gear into the pickup. Still a bit dizzy, he almost ran it off the road. He worked hard to concentrate on the chore he knew he had to do next. He pulled into Ruthie's front yard, parking on the dry grass in his usual spot.

Ruthie answered his knocks and joined him on the front porch. Tears were in his eyes. "We been looking for you, Jesse. Got some awful news."

"I know, Honey. Roy's dead." He held her and rubbed her back, waiting for her breathing to become regular. "I need to talk to you, Ruthie. It's important."

She started for the door. "No, outside. I don't want no one to hear." They walked toward the woods behind the old house. Her tennis shoes left small footprints next to those of Jesse's large boots. He led her to a fallen log, wondering how he was going to explain it to her.

She sat down and looked up into his eyes. Her light brown hair was pulled back into a loose bun. Jesse admired her simple beauty. He held her hand; it was small, but rough from farm work. He nervously cleared his throat. "I need your help."

"Jesse, we've been friends a long time. What you need?"

"You know how I got a sense about people?"

"Sure. You even had it when we was kids. If someone got hurt or was in trouble, you was always the first to know."

"Yeah. I can kinda read people. Not their exact thoughts, but how they feel. If they're happy or sad or hateful or loving."

Ruthie blushed. Jesse grew even more embarrassed. "I got something else that's special. You know how sometimes I got to go off by myself for a while." Ruthie nodded her head. "It's cause I got visitors."

"Visitors? What you mean, Jesse?"

"I know this is hard to believe, and you're the only person what knows this, 'cept for Ma. People that are dead sometimes visit me." Ruthie looked away. Jesse gently grabbed her shoulders. "Roy visited me last night." He could feel her fear. "It ain't the devil, Ruthie. Ma says it's the devil, but I know it ain't." He felt her relax.

She looked at him with her cool grey eyes and touched his face. Jesse pulled away. "No, don't feel sorry for me. It ain't a haunting; it's just a visit. Probably half the people what died in Cameron in the last thirty years visited me."

"What'd they want?"

"Usually they just wanted to say good-bye. Some thanked me for being their friend. Some asked for favors." He felt her curiosity. "Like Jim Whittaker's dog. He asked me to take him. 'Fraid his kin would shoot the old thing."

"I always knew you was special, Jesse. But I never would've guessed how." Jesse felt grateful for her laugh. Then she grew serious. "Why you telling me all this, Jesse?"

"I was afraid to tell you before. I didn't know how you'd take it. Ma told me never tell no one."

"Jesse, I know there ain't no devil in you. I'm proud to be your friend." Jesse felt her sincerity. "Now what kinda help you need?"

This was going so much easier than he had feared. He told her about Roy's visit. "And what I learned was I can conjure them up. I don't have to wait for it to happen." Jesse paused to think it through. "You know what it's like when the wind is humming and the branches scratch at the window? It's like someone's out there, trying to get in, but you know they can't, 'cause of the window, so you just go to sleep and ignore it?" Ruthie nodded. "I'm like that window. The visitors can't come unless I open up and let them in."

Ruthie nodded her understanding.

"Sometimes I won't let them visit me. Like Tassy James; I felt her coming visiting, but I wouldn't let her in. She was like that branch at the window, but I ignored her and she went away."

"I see, Jesse."

"No, Ruthie, you don't see. It's Pa, Ruthie. I wouldn't let him in."

"I can't blame you, Jesse. Your pa never gave you nothing but hell."

"But he was my pa, and he wanted to visit me." Jesse shuddered, controlling a sob.

"My poor Jesse." She soothed him, holding him, rubbing his back and neck. "What you gonna do?"

"That's what I decided this morning." He grabbed her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "I want to conjure up Pa."

Ruthie tried to hold back a shiver. Jesse realized that she was scared. "I'm asking you to do this, Honey; but I won't hold it against you if you say no." He looked at her, pretty and fragile-looking even in her blue jeans and flannel shirt. He felt her heart quivering, then the strength of her decision.

"It ain't gonna be easy. I almost got lost conjuring up Roy; Pa is gonna be harder. He's farther back. I need you to be there; just so there's a living person with me. ... I may leave you for a while, to hunt for him. I need someone to keep me warm." Jesse hesitated, testing her emotions, then went on. "And, if I don't come back ..." He swallowed. Ruthie nodded her understanding.

"How about your ma? Shouldn't she be there? It's her man you'll be conjuring."

"No. Ma can't know. She don't understand." Jesse thought for a moment. "I'll see if we can borrow Wayne's cabin. It'll be quiet there."

The old screen door slammed behind them. Ruthie's ma offered her sorrow over Roy's death, then left the kitchen. After a brief phone call the arrangements were made. Ruthie packed a picnic basket and threw a quilt into the pickup.

The one-hour drive was quiet. Jesse rested his hand on her knee, filled with warmth and appreciation. Ruthie unloaded the truck as he lit a fire. "Let's eat first," she suggested. "You'll need your strength."

After lunch Jesse cleared his throat. "Guess it's time to start." He was disappointed that he couldn't keep his voice from shaking and was grateful that Ruthie stayed calm. He sat cross-legged on the folded quilt she gently laid on the floor.

"I have to concentrate. I conjured Roy by picturing him with my mind. Don't worry if my spirit travels for a spell, or if I start talking to him." She knelt beside him. He hugged her and kissed her cheek. "Don't be scared, Honey." She was calm, reminding Jesse of a trusting child.

He let his mind wander, willing Pa's image to enter. He slowly felt the room recede. Resisting the vacuum drawing him away, he probed for Pa, inviting him into the cabin. Pa's image appeared in the distance, unfocused, but the lanky frame and sandy grey hair were his. Jesse wrestled it nearer. "I'm ready for you now, Pa." The spirit beckoned him to follow. "No, I ain't going. You got to come here." Jesse concentrated, more intense than he believed possible. The faint image grew, coming closer.

"Jesse." The deep voice echoed through the small cabin. Jesse opened his eyes; the blackness slowly cleared. Ruthie was holding him. "I did it, Honey. He's here." Ruthie shivered, then helped him sit upright.

Pa was even paler than Roy had been. He mingled with the rising heat from the fire, his body blending with the shadows. "I've been waiting a long time for this, Son."

The voice was clear and sober. Jesse didn't know what to say, now that the spirit had been summoned. Pa looked straight at him. "You're looking good. How's your ma?"

"She's okay. Little arthritis; not bad." Jesse became angry. "What you care anyway?"

"I know you had it rough, Boy. I don't blame you for feeling like that. I wasn't real happy myself."

"But I was just a kid, Pa. I couldn't make you happy."

"No. Your ma tried. She even helped me forget sometimes. I loved her." Jesse began to speak. "I know, Jesse. I was awful hard on her. I loved you, too; though I know I wasn't much for showing it." Jesse was cut off again. "I wasn't always like that; ask your ma."

"I know, Pa. She says before the war you was a loving man. I just don't know how you can have a woman and kid and treat them like you did."

"It wasn't me, Jesse. It was the liquor."

"Don't give me that shit, Pa. No one made you drink. I laughed when you died. When Ma told me your liver went bad, all I did was laugh. No more beatings. No more screaming at me and Ma."

"Maybe you'll understand some day. I hoped you did when I heard you call. You got the gift, Boy. Just like me. Just like Grandpa." Jesse didn't know; he thought he was the only one. "No, you're not that special. I lived with it, even enjoyed it sometimes. Always got to say what I wanted; never mourned over what could have been."

"I know, Pa. It ain't a curse."

"If I stayed in Cameron, it might have been okay. But, I got drafted. Can you imagine what it was like at the front? Boys I played poker with at noon would visit me, crying over their mothers and girlfriends, cursing the Goddamn war, the Goddamn flag, the Goddamn guns. These were good boys, Jesse; dead in their prime. Some had babies at home. All had messages. 'Please,' they'd beg me. 'Tell Martha I love her.' 'Please,' they'd beg. 'Tell Pa I died a man. That he can be proud of me.' I'm not talking three or four; I'm talking hundreds, day after day. After a while I'd shut them out; but they'd be scratching at me, day and night. And even when the ghosts weren't bugging me I couldn't turn off the sensing of all the fear and hurt of the guys around me. I couldn't eat or sleep."

"Pa, I didn't know."

"Your ma's a good woman, Jesse. But she wasn't no help. She said I was cursed, that I had the devil in me. I tried to drink him out. I wanted to die, rather than have another ghost come in."

Jesse was crying. "You got to go on living, Pa. You can't hide in a bottle."

"I know that now. But it's too late. I remember when you was born. Right before I got drafted. You was the damn near prettiest thing I ever saw. I counted your pink toes. Your ma would scold me to leave you be; but I played with you anyway. She didn't really mind."

"Maybe I'm only remembering the bad times, Pa. There was good times, too. The fishing trips."

"Remember that big striped bass you caught? It was almost tall as you."

"And you helped me clean it. Ma cooked it up."

"And you sat at the head of the table that night. I was so proud of you."

Jesse's smile faded. "Then you kept toasting my health, 'til you got too drunk to stand." Jesse remembered his mother pleading, "Leave him be, Harry. He's just a boy."

"I've thought about that a hundred times, wishing I could change it." Pa floated toward Jesse. "I do love you, Boy. I tried to quit, but I'd feel your fear and your ma's pity, or some ghost would come scratching at me making me sick. I'd get angry and drink to swallow my shame, just to make it all go away. That's what I wanted to tell you, but you shut me out."

"Maybe I could have helped you. Maybe I was just a might too spirited for you to handle."

"No. It wasn't your fault. Don't never blame yourself." Pa glanced at Ruthie, noticing her for the first time. "You got yourself a pretty gal, Jesse."

Jesse looked at Ruthie. "Sure do." He gave her a reassuring smile. "Pa likes you. Says you're pretty."

Ruthie glanced toward the fire. "Thank you, Sir."

Pa looked at them both. "Any kids?"

"We ain't married yet, Pa." He noticed Ruthie blushing.

"Will you call me again? Let me know how things are?"

"I promise, Pa."

"I got to go back. Call me after the first grandbaby, so I can add my blessings." Jesse nodded his agreement. Pa's spirit mingled with the smoke, heading up the chimney into the cool air. Jesse looked at Ruthie. Maybe it was time to get Ma off his back about a wedding.

L. Stafford Betty

Ride Into Oblivion

On the flight down to Madras, Vance Elkins' legs had dug into the cracks between the seats in front of him like the ends of a giant clothespin. This time it was much better: the authorities had asked him if he "wouldn't mind" sitting in first class. They had explained that the plane was full, and so forth. So he gladly found himself in the first row, aisle seat, of an Indian Airlines plane headed for Bombay.

"I am a date merchant," the chocolate-colored man on his left had said in Tamil English as the plane took off. The merchant's face with its hooked beak eclipsed the sun as it hung over the silver cloudscape far below. The monsoons were on, not a break in the clouds anywhere. Vance wondered if it would be raining in Bombay. He closed his eyes...

Tanjore. His mind drifted off to the raggedy palm-reader plying her trade under the sleeping-tree near the train station. Vance had the habit of worrying about the world's destitute—probably a carryover from his Catholic schooling when the nuns solicited his lenten nickels and dimes for the poor—or so he told himself when he felt cynical, as he often did. Anyway, he always tipped heavily, gave rupees instead of paise to beggars, and let the rickshaw drivers cheat him out of a rupee or two.

He engaged the services of this wrinkled black lady because she looked pitifully forlorn sitting by herself under the tree. Or so he would have told himself. The real, the deeper reason was an obscure, irrational hope that the woman might really know something. It was as if a voice in the void inside him had asked the question, "Can this strange culture lead me through human doorways into worlds beyond?" Vance of course did not consciously hear this question. If he had, he would have instantly concluded that it was a bunch of horseshit and turned forcefully to thoughts of his successfully completed mission. In any case, he sat down on the baked earth in front of the fortune teller, held out his hand, and waited for her to tell him that he would marry an Indian woman—although he was already married—have sons, get rich, etcetera. But it wasn't that way at all. She said instead, "You will die in India." At first he hadn't believed his ears. "You will die in India," she repeated, her strangely bright, unblinking eyes staring up at him. When he asked her to go on, she said she couldn't see anything. Was she telling him there *wasn't* anything more to see? "Goddam!" he had thought to himself. Then he asked her when he would die, but she lowered her eyes and said nothing.

In the Madras airport Vance had been aware that he was a little nervous. A Tamil terrorist's bomb had blown up thirty people there three weeks before. He had looked for the airport bar, hoping to buy a double shot of whiskey straight. But there was no bar. Now, sitting comfortably in the plane, he remembered how the fingernails of fear had scratched at the dirty window panes of his soul. Suddenly his mind lurched far back into time, and he found himself thinking of Sister Fidelia, the oracular Irish nun whose insight into life could be measured by the squint of her eyes. "In a hundred years half of you will be burning in hell!" she had said triumphantly. Vance was twelve at the time, and he didn't even know what masturbation was, but he knew what it would do to you for all eternity by the time Sister had finished. As for adultery, such a sin had been inconceivable then.

Vance allowed his mind to drift back to Tanjore again. He was bent over low in a motor-scooter rickshaw so that his head wouldn't bump against the roof of the carriage. He was looking for a non-vegetarian restaurant that was not too filthy. He was sure there had to be one, but to his surprise he found the lighted stalls of the main street giving way to a shadowy row of dingy apartments. "Stop, turn around, we've gone too far," he had said, tapping the driver on the shoulder. Then, as the driver swung the rickshaw around, Vance had noticed in the twilight a woman dressed in a beautiful green-and-gold sari. She was alone and looking modestly—at him. She did not smile, beckon, or in any way forfeit her dignity, but she did not look away either.

"Prostitute?" he asked the driver, for he had read somewhere that many of India's prostitutes are difficult for an outsider to recognize. "Over there," he pointed.

The driver studied her for a moment. "Yes, Sah'b," he said.

Vance stared at the woman for what seemed to him a long time. Then he got out, payed the fare, and walked, or rather moved puppet-fashion as if attached to strings being manipulated by another, toward the woman. Their eyes met, and she understood. They did not speak other than to set the price. She beckoned him to her room with a subtle tilt of the head. Once inside, she studied him with a long, unfathomable look. All her movements—disrobing, massage, sucking, the sex act itself—were deliberate rituals performed with priestly solemnity. He thrilled—for the first time in his life, and without embarrassment—to the manipulation of his nipples. When they coupled, her movements were slow, smooth, and tidal. Through it all there was a sad, rich, gentle mystery in her eyes, which looked into his almost without blinking. They parted as silently as they had come together.

What made him do it? He never before had taken a woman in this way, for he hated the idea of buying sex. Was it the challenge of her excessively modest dress and impersonal reserve? Was it the lure of the exotic—the jasmine wreath in her long pinned-up pigtail and the tiny nose-ring in her nostril? Or was it loneliness? But he'd been lonely before. He remembered that he had been ashamed as he walked up to her, ashamed because the rickshaw driver *knew*.

He remembered how, after they had coupled and were lying quietly beside each other on the bed, he had felt contradictory sensations taking shape in the fog of his mind and dissipating before the shapes were discernible. He remembered feeling the void—undeniable, inescapable, wide—and he, and she, and her room, and all Tanjore had been floating at its mouth. Then he remembered times more distant: autumn sunsets, spring rains, summer nights at the end of the wharf on Mobile Bay: the same void. He remembered how he used to feel after he had spent himself in intercourse with his wife and lay awake staring at the ceiling; the libido had subsided, the intense feelings of love had died: the same void. Then he remembered an absurd story told him by an unctuous clergyman when he was a sophomore in high school: a boy was found in the back seat of a wrecked car with a telephone pole up his crotch and his date's blood-spattered breast still cupped in his cold, waxen hand. "Waxen": that was the very word the priest had used. He remembered still further back in time: how he had hoped that some day he would feel the call to be a priest. But it hadn't happened that way. Instead he had rebeled, rejected the Church, and locked into a worldly, materialistic track. He had forgotten all about a priestly vocation and all about Sister Fidelia's hell. Yet they had left a trace in his heart, like the faintly visible track of a snail.

He was jolted out of his reverie by a sari-clad stewardess serving him tea and a snack. As she bent over him to serve the date merchant, he smelled her perfume, and all the memories of the prostitute—that mysterious, almost mystical quality that had made her seem almost holy—rushed back into his mind. As he played with this memory, the void, like a cobra rising out of a basket, slowly reared its head. Jerking in his seat, he redirected his attention to material goals: he mentally rewrote passages about arson and murder in Sri Lanka, juggled budgets in his head to accommodate the cost of aluminum siding for the house and a vacation in Hawaii. Then he tore open the cellophane protecting his crackers and devoured his anxiety with macho-neurotic gusto.

He pushed his seat back and closed his eyes. He congratulated himself. Everything had gone more smoothly than expected. The fighting between the Tamils and Sri Lanka's government forces had been at its height when he arrived in Colombo, and his Jaffna sources were eager to talk. He had taken some superb pictures, and he had already roughed out his story. And who would have thought there would be three days left over for travel? Tanjore—her great temples, her undiluted Hinduism, the real India. He was glad he didn't go home early. Tanjore...sleepy, timeless Tanjore...

"...not ready to leave this world. If I were to die now, I would want to come back." An Indian's voice speaking very proper English woke Vance.

"But you are sure you *come* back?" said another voice in the unmistakable accent of an Eastern European struggling with English.

They were sitting directly behind Vance, who began consciously to eavesdrop.

"It is the teaching of the *Gita*, so I do not doubt it. And there are so many cases of little children who remember their past lives," said the gentle voice by the window.

"I am—how you say?--an atheist," said the other man (he pronounced it "ah-tee-ist"), "so I not believe that."

"You believe this is the only life, then?"

"Yes, yes," the other man said—he chuckled as if he were a man kindly indulging a boy.

It was strange. For although Vance agreed with the other man, he found himself rooting for the Indian.

"I am a Brahmin," said the young man's voice.

Vance stole a look at him through the crack between the seats. He had delicate features and light brown skin—very light for a Tamil.

"I believe that we keep coming back until we are free of the Great Illusion," said the Brahmin.

For a moment the other man said nothing. Then he asked, "And you are free of it?"

Imperturbably the young Brahmin explained: "No, I love the world too much. Someday I might be like my father. He does not want to come back. He loves Shiva more than this life. There is nothing holding him here."

There was something about the point of view of the Brahmin's father that triggered in Vance an unaccountable, faint, suppressed, but definite longing for spiritual peace. He was not consciously aware of it as he eavesdropped, but it was there nonetheless. It grew like a graft out of the void within him.

The young man continued: "He says I will someday be like him. I must only look death in the face, then the insight will dawn, he says. Then I will see that life and death are only two acts of — he calls it the Cosmic Drama. Someday the Drama will end, and then eternal life, Reality, begins."

"Eternal life, Reality." The words beat against, bounced off the tight-drawn shell of the void within Vance like drumsticks kicking back off a drum. As they rebounded, they splintered, scattered, vanished — as if they had never existed at all, as if what they represented were as insubstantial as the void itself.

"But you not want eternal life," said the other man.

The young Brahmin was silent for a moment. Then he said, almost wistfully, "Yes and no; I want it, but not quite yet."

"You should be born Russian like me!" laughed the other man, whom Vance was beginning to like. "Then you not ashamed of your — your desire!

Vance got up to go to the toilet. Actually he just wanted to see what the Russian looked like, and he decided he looked a lot like Khrushchev. He scanned the other passengers as he walked back. He noted especially a woman of classic Tamil beauty with a long-lashed baby boy in her lap, a bloated man with weary, sagging features whom he took for An American, and a distinguished looking Muslim traveling with a woman whose face was veiled except for her eyes.

Vance had just gotten back to his seat, from where he couldn't resist turning around and stealing a look at the beautiful Tamil madonna. She was absent-mindedly kissing her baby on the forehead, and Vance suddenly felt a rush of desire for the woman, whose regular, youthful features reminded him of the prostitute. In the next instant a cameo scene of his wife holding their baby girl flashed across his memory. He was too uneasy to let himself think of how he had betrayed them, but he understood with a shudder of disgust that the "spirituality" of his encounter with the prostitute was a gross self-delusion, a sham. "Oh God," he whined to himself as he realized that the woman's mysterious demeanor had been nothing more than the routine of a professional going about her business with calm social efficiency. He looked again at the madonna loving her baby and again thought of his wife. They were real. Their reality forced itself on him, and he felt humiliated.

His thoughts gravitated back to the conversation between the Brahmin and the Russian, and he tried to figure out why he wanted the Brahmin to be right. Did *he* want this, or did the impulse rise spontaneously, like swamp gas, out of some mouldering catacomb of his soul? What could it mean?...

By now the plane was more than halfway to Bombay, and the bright orange ball of a sun threatened to dive beneath the unbroken clouds below—when it happened. There was a faint thud—Vance couldn't tell from which direction—just a thud, not even a jolt. It barely registered on his consciousness. A minute later the door to the cockpit burst open and a crewman asked in English with peculiar urgency, "Are any of you a doctor?"

"Yes, I am," said an old man off to Vance's right. The man got up as everyone in the small compartment stared in surprise. At that moment Vance remembered the odd thud. Had anyone else heard it? "What happened up front?" he asked the crewman in an undertone. "I thought I heard something."

"A minor accident," he said abruptly. But his face, which showed tiny pocks of blood like buckshot on the left side, was puffy and shaky, and his eyes seemed dazed.

"What kind of accident—?"

But the crewman ignored Vance and held his arms out toward the doctor while his foot held the door ajar. "Come on, come on!" he urged.

Vance took this opportunity to bend his body to the right and look through the unguarded passageway leading into the cockpit. A crewman with his hands over his eyes and dripping blood was being propped up in the pilot's seat. Another man was frantically looking through something—Vance thought it must be a toolbox. Then he saw the twisted metal, the shattered dials of the instrument panel.

"A bomb?" he whispered to the crewman as he led the doctor into the passageway.

"Nothing to worry about!" the crewman called back in a shrill, chastising whisper.

Then Vance heard from the cockpit, "Bombay GCA, this is Indian Airlines

174, come in, come in please. Bombay, come in—"

The door slammed shut.

At first Vance could not believe the testimony of his own eyes. "Nothing to worry about!" the man had said. Well, then there really must be nothing to worry about. But his next thoughts were very different. They were those of a crack reporter who has made a successful career of grasping events almost as soon as they happen. "The clever bastard! It had to be someone on the inside, a mechanic maybe," he thought. "Why didn't he just blow the whole damned plane up? I can't even smell any smoke. The instrument panels, the controls—one lousy little plastic bomb. Nothing but a little glass in the face—"

Vance stuck his head in front of the dozing date merchant on his left and looked back through the window at the engines. He saw nothing out of the ordinary, and the engines' steady purr told him they were running normally. "Nothing to fear, nothing to fear!" he told himself.

"Fasten your safety belts, extinguish all cigarettes, pull your trays into the upright position"—it was a man's voice, first in English, then in Tamil, then in Hindi. "My God, the intercom is even working!" Vance thought. "What could be so wrong?"

Meanwhile the passengers in first class were appealing to the two stewardesses who were rushing up and down the aisle with towels in their hands. "What happened? What happened?" said the passengers.

"...come in, Bombay, come in," said a voice up front as the door swung open again. "This is 174, mayday. Exact location unknown, somewhere around Narayanpet. Come in, Bombay. Over."

Whoosh went the door as it shut.

So it was real. It was really happening. As a very young man he had always prayed on takeoff that the plane would not crash. Long ago he had given that practice up. And now? A picture of an Indian cow tethered to itself, one end of the rope around its neck, the other tied to one of its forelegs, flashed across his memory. "Like the cow we'll limp home," he told himself. "We will!"

Then his thoughts started tumbling one over the other. "Indians can fix anything, they're geniuses at fixing things. My broken shoe, the cobbler on Mount Road in Madras, the hundred filthy little thingumajigs spread out around me on the ground. Three minutes, one rupee, good as new! And that toolbox in the cockpit. What do they have flight engineers for anyway? Indians can fix anything."...He thought of his wife—he saw her face light up as he got off the plane and little Anna's shiny golden curls and her delighted greeting, "Dad-*dee*!" with the accent on the second syllable. No, there was simply no way, no way he could—die.

The prostitute and the rickshaw driver, the leper he gave twenty rupees to, the ferry to Rameswarum, the burned-out houses in Jaffna, his office in New York, the girl he jilted when he was a theology student at Fordham and who subsequently committed suicide, the, the—like Dracula in his black cape she loomed up batlike: the palm reader in Tanjore. And the words "You will die in

India" bore and tore under his skull.

The door to the cockpit opened. Man in a uniform.

"Sir!" Vance said.

The man pretended not to hear and walked by.

Vance almost unlatched his seatbelt and ran after the man. He imagined himself grabbing his arm, spinning him around, and saying, "We have the right to know what's happened! We have the right to know if we're going to *die*!" He imagined the man falling back as that last word was said and then slithering away beyond the thick curtain into second class.

But of course he did no such thing. Like everyone else who knew, he sat paralyzed in his seat.

Then Vance turned the other way back toward the cockpit. The door separating it from the passengers was locked, and he imagined himself beating on it until it opened. He imagined himself shouting at the man who opened the door, "Either *you* tell them what has happened or *I* tell them. I know there's been an explosion; I know you've radioed a mayday. The people in second class don't know anything. They have a right to know. *I* have a right to know. Either *you* tell them or *I* tell them!"

Vance didn't really give a damn about the people in second-class. He just wanted to know if he, Vance Elkins, was going to die. It was a matter of unusual importance to him.

Then a voice over the intercom said, "This is the co-pilot. There has been an explosion in the cockpit and we have momentarily lost control of the aircraft." There were gasps and screams. "You *must* stay calm," continued the voice. "Keep your seatbelt fastened. Obey all instructions from the stewardesses. We are doing everything we can to regain control. We are a long way from the ground, about 28,000 feet. Still—you—you should prepare yourselves." The microphone clicked off.

Now there were more screams. Or rather wails. The veiled Muslim woman took up the death knell—her own. Her cries provided an unbroken background to the spasmodic shrieks and oaths of panic. Her moans reminded Vance of the *tambura*, the Indian instrument which, when strummed, hums the sound of the eternal Om.

"The eternal," thought Vance. "Yes. This is it. It really is. Oh God!"

A new sound, ugly, ridiculous. "A million, a million dollars if you land this plane!" it said. It was a shrill, gravelly shellburst belonging to someone stupefied with terror. "GODDAM IT! I WON'T DIE!" it exploded. It belonged to the American that Vance had noted earlier.

Who was he talking to, this man who sat chained to his seat, catatonic, rigid, shaking violently, screaming about his million dollars, like someone in the electric chair? Who was he talking to as he stared into space? Meanwhile the plane had tilted slightly downward toward the dense clouds, and the sun forced out its last rays before it sank behind the same gray curtain.

Suddenly Vance had an impulse to play the comforter. It was more than an

impulse; it was a compulsion. He must tell everyone that all was well, death was not the end, God was waiting for each of them. He wanted to play the savior. But then he remembered: the theology student at Fordham had died some time ago. He felt some strange horror that he had never felt before zing through his intestines.

An eerie quiet permeated the little cabin. Even the date merchant, who a moment ago had been whimpering as he huddled against the window, was shivering silently with closed eyes oozing a tear.

"Oh, God," Vance heard himself think. "Quiet, you coward!" the real Vance answered. "Die by your convictions! Die as you have lived!" He repeated the words, "Die as you have lived," again and again, like a mantra. Surely they would deliver him. Surely they would save him. "Oh, God!" he cried out within himself.

An audible gasp, his own, called him back to the cabin. He despised himself, but what else could he do? He exhumed the long, complicated train of thought that had delivered him of God four years ago. Piece by piece, argument by argument, plank by plank he reviewed it, with unbelievable speed. He saw the inescapable conclusion blazing like a laser beam into an endless void. He heard the voice of Lucretius: "Nothing to fear. The actual moment all there is to fear, then it's over, over. Just everlasting sleep, sleep of nothingness. Nothing to fear, nothing to fear." But then some other voice, some mean-spirited demon inside him said that the whole argument was just a device, yes, just a device, with no more truth value than an opera ticket or a two-iron. He heard the voice of Benson, his once dear friend who was studying to be a Jesuit, recite the Psalm: "The fool—the fool has said in his heart there is no God." "Brace up, man! Brace up!" Vance told himself.

Then he heard a voice not in his own head, but behind him, and he almost gagged. "Teach me your God," he heard the Russian behind him say to the Brahmin in a solemn voice. "What I do at this moment?"

"You must think only of God at the moment of death," said the young man.

"But what is God?"

"He is infinite wisdom, infinite power, infinite bliss, infinite good, infinite beauty," the voice carefully intoned like a bishop celebrating High Mass.

"And infinite love," something very ancient in Vance said by rote.

"Think of God, desire to be with him, that is all you can do now," exhorted the Brahmin. "Make this your supreme desire, be absolutely sincere if you can." Suddenly Vance felt sick to his stomach at the hypocrisy of it all.

He looked back down the aisle. There was the beautiful woman with the wide-eyed child in her lap. He was sucking his thumb, unaware, content. The mother's face was upraised, her eyes closed, her lips moving, her brow beatifically rapt in total concentration. Vance remembered how he had just wanted her. "Oh, God!" he thought.

He looked back one seat. There was the American. His arms rigidly grasped the arms of his seat. He looked like someone in a dentist's chair when the drill

has struck a nerve. He too had closed his eyes. A hundred wrinkles creased his flaccid, sweating face. Had he too found a prayer, a means of deliverance? Would he be the good thief on the cross? *Him*? "Spare us!" Vance told himself.

The Muslim. He was droning some tract in Urdu. He was calm, as if he had long ago prepared himself for this.

All through the cabin the various names of God—Shiva, Ganesha, Krishna, Devi, Allah—could be heard; not in chant, but in fitful, fervent ejaculations. Only the date merchant next to Vance seemed faithless. The date merchant and Vance himself.

The plane had now turned more steeply downward toward the vast cloud bank, which lay like a thick pall between Vance and extinction. Suddenly he hated the man who planted the bomb. He hated the man because he was about to take from him the only life he would ever know. He hated him because he didn't blow the plane up into smithereens and save everyone all this agony, this hypocrisy. And because his story would never get written. And because the best part of it was *him*, the bastard!

Vance looked around one last time. All these Hindus and Muslims united in one simple thought. A stupendous superstition guaranteed to deliver them safely into the presence of God or a better life. The Brahmin had spoken of the Great Illusion. "*But this, their expectation, this is the great illusion*," Vance screamed at himself. Then he thought of his life in New York, the values and dreams of the fashionable set he ran with. And he asked himself what was real, this or that? Suddenly he realized he didn't know. He wondered if he had made some—horrendous miscalculation. "Didn't I reckon with death when I made the original choice? Didn't I? Didn't I even pride myself on being something of a philosopher?" he asked himself. "Yes, I'd thought I was a philosopher!"

He looked out the window. A minute? "Two minutes at the most," he decided. Suddenly his brain seemed to explode with preternatural energy. Heaped layers of images broke out of their prison, and he saw them all simultaneously. He heard and saw bamboo stalks creaking in the wind, crashing into each other, scarring each other. He heard the haunting whoops of the koel set off against a cacophony of crows' caws. He saw monsoon clouds racing each other to the northeast, the ones overhead scudding faster than those more distant. He tasted the bitter leaf of the neem tree and saw birds riding on the rumps of cattle. India was rushing by him in a hundred images, none excluded, all registered. Then events out of the more distant past began to vie for time, and, as before, nothing was excluded. He was an amazed but helpless spectator as he relived Anna's birth, his Tamil classes at Columbia, the putt he made to win a junior golf tournament, the ecstasy he felt long ago listening to the Mahler Second, his First Communion. "Oh, God!"

"This is the pilot speaking." Vance jumped in his seat. "Prepare for a possible crash landing. Lower your head behind the seat in front of you. And good luck." In three languages the pilot uttered this—this obscenity—"landing" he called it!—as two-hundred fifty souls cowered, not behind the seats in front of

them, but in front of the august thrones of their various gods.

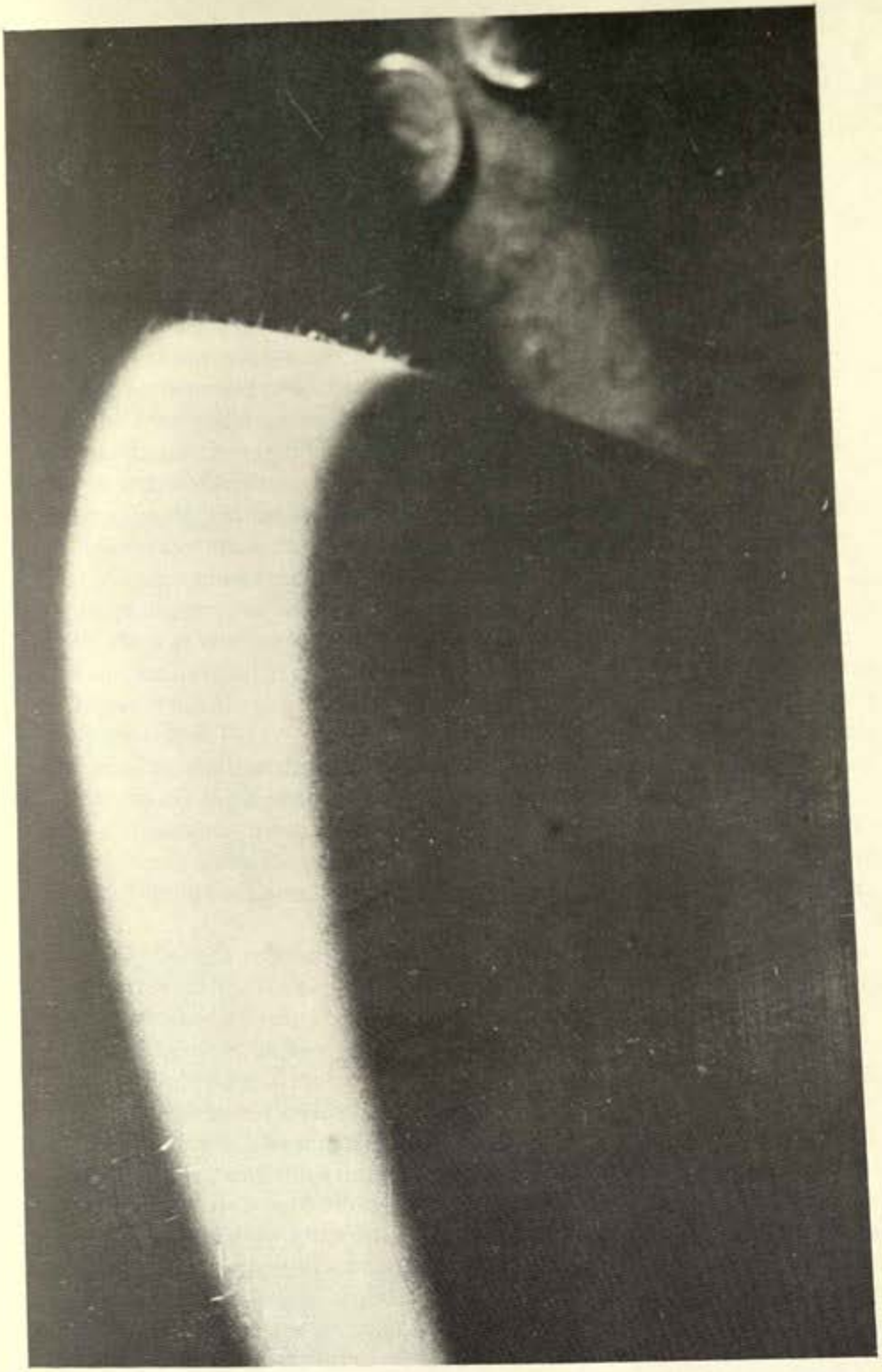
Then the great truth of Vance's life blazed before him like a hundred suns. He realized that he envied the trustful God-fearing men and women who reared him, who taught him, who surrounded him at this moment, and that he was terrified by what he had become, even as he realized there was no escaping what he had become. He had pumped all spiritual convictions out of him. His soul was like the vacuum inside a light bulb or a TV tube, and the materialism and worldliness that had ossified around him were like the shell, the glass of the tube.

He took a deep breath, and suddenly all the things he had been putting off converged on him at once. He had wanted to tell Mama, just once before she died, that he loved her. He had meant to get some more life insurance. He had meant to write a recommendation for Susan Tucker. He had always intended to see Plenny Money on his visits home to Alabama. Old black Plenny Money—year after year he had put off seeing him. Plenny Money. Plenny Money would never know...never know that he cared. He again thought of his wife. He thought of her devotion and love—and his betrayal. Then it occurred to him that his whole marriage had been a long series of betrayals—she had been nothing more than a consort who met his social and sexual needs. What would she have to regret? What had he ever given her of any real value?

Suddenly he was seized by a crazy impulse. He reached for his briefcase, opened it, ripped off a cover of a hardback book on temple architecture, and wrote on the inside, "Dear Monica, I am thinking of you and Anna seconds before my death. I love you. I'm so sorry, so very sorry for everything. Forgive me. Vance. P.S. Get Anna baptized." He closed the briefcase full of notes, books, undeveloped film, the hardback book cover.

By then the plane was hitting the clouds at near terminal velocity. It shook as it knifed through. It vibrated as if it would disintegrate before it hit the ground. And there, suddenly, in the misty twilight, lush grasslands, rice paddy, fields of millet—Vance's eternal resting place, five seconds away. He heard people whimpering, calling out, muttering, praying, chanting, groaning. He looked out the window. Death horrified him as it stampeded toward him. "You will die in India." How did she know? He dug into his seat like a foxhole, clung to it, dissolved into it. He took a last glance back at the cabin, dug deeper into his seat. So solid it seemed! He turned his eyes and glanced out the window. The ground zoomed toward him—zoomed at unbelievable speed. He closed his eyes, and suddenly, in the last screaming moments of that ride into oblivion, the hard shell around the void in his soul cracked, cracked ever so slightly, and a voice began drumming in his head.

"God have mercy," it drummed. "God have mercy, God have mercy have mercy have mercy have mercy have mercy have mercyhavemercyhavemer—"



Virginia Frizzle

Only A Second

I went to see Barbara today. I was a little ashamed I had put if off so long. We have known each other since grade school. We both loved horse back riding. Even though she was smaller built than I, she was the better rider. It was amazing to see her small tough body astride the enormous thoroughbred racer she used to train and exercise. We spent the entire summers together at the beach, standing at the edge of the water and talking about boys, while the sand slowly covered our feet up to the ankles.

Barbara's mother called me two weeks ago to tell me about the accident. She was a little sketchy about the details. Barbara was coming home from dinner at her fiance's when some drunk came out of nowhere and in a second, hit her car. Her mother broke down over the phone, crying and repeating over and over, "'If only she was wearing her seat belt. If only..." I promised I would go see Barbara in the hospital as soon as I could.

Barbara did not like to wear seat belts. I was the same way. I hate the feeling of being restricted. They cut off my circulation and rub against my collar bone on the left side. Putting them on always reminds you of the possibility of an accident and driving is nerve wracking enough without thinking about that. Besides if it happens, it happens. It's really a lot like fate. If we are good and careful drivers, accidents are pretty rare. Barbara was a good and careful driver. If it hadn't been for that drunk driver she would never have had an accident.

We took driver's education together. I remember how we sat patiently through the lectures. We couldn't wait to drive. Once a really cute Highway Patrolman talked to our class about safe driving. He said when a car is traveling 55 mph the impact of a collision will decelerate the speed of the car down to 30 mph, then 20 mph and so on. If the driver is not belted to the frame of the car, he will be hurled forward at the 55 mph rate of speed even though the car is slowed down. The major injuries occur not from the initial impact but from those second and third impacts which result from the unrestrained body striking the dash or windshield at 55 mph. He showed a film where they did a test demonstrating how some dummies were distributed throughout the car in a violent manner when not belted in. Finally, he read an account of what happens during the actual second, when a car going 55 mph hits a wall. In the first 1/10 of a second, as the vehicle hits the wall, the front grill crumbles. In 2/10 of a second the rear of the vehicle lifts off the ground. At 3/10 of a second

the unbelted driver is propelled forward hitting the windshield and at the 4/10 of a second mark, the engine of the vehicle is slamming into the dash. Five-tenths of a second later, the steering wheel is ramming into the drivers abdomen. He is violently pulled out of his shoes and by 6/10 of a second the driver is impaled on the wheel which is tearing into his body expressing blood onto the interior of the vehicle. In the 7/10 of a second the dead body of the driver is catapulted out the windshield and the rear of the vehicle shutters back to the ground in the final 9/10 of a second.

The nurse led me along the pale green hall to the room where they had put Barbara. She was by the window in a wheelchair. Her head was flopped over at an angle. I thought she was asleep but as I moved closer I could see her eyes were open. I talked to her for a while but I don't know if she heard me. I kept my voice pleasant and stammered a few stupid things about my classes and how Bob and I were getting ready for the wedding in a month. I couldn't help it. No matter where I directed my eyes they always came back to the place where her right foot used to be.

I sat in the hospital parking lot for a long time. Finally I reached over my left shoulder and pulled the strap across my body and clicked it into place. It only took a second.

Virginia Frizzle

Danny's in Alameda

I walked through the massive grey door and waited for my eyes to adjust to the dimly lit bar. There was a smell of cold beer and cheap rose perfume. Two women perched on barstools, stopped talking and glanced disinterestedly over their shoulders. I could hear the sharp clicking of cue balls coming from a pool game going on in the back. To the left, the mirrored wall behind the bar was cluttered with gawdy signs advertising liquor and beer. Underneath was a ledge displaying upside down bar glasses, a vintage cash register and various oversized liquor bottles. The cigarette machine and juke box stood guard at the left of the door and above them was a small porthole window decorated with tiny black velvet curtains. Squat, green formica tables and vinyl padded, chrome chairs lined up along the right wall. Past them was a doorway leading to a darkened room where they kept an extra pool table. The restrooms were at the rear, behind the two men playing pool. I looked down at the dirty brown linoleum floor half expecting to see sawdust and peanut shells.

A small rodent-like man scurried under the hinged counter top from behind the bar and approached me. He had dense grey and black hair which had been carefully oiled. He squinted his eyes behind thick tinted glasses, assessing the new job applicant. His name was Danny and he was the owner.

I could tell I wasn't what he had in mind. Nevertheless, he began telling me what was expected of the 6pm to 2am bartender. It was important to check the bar for stragglers before closing, the money was placed in a canvas bag behind the beer, and dial 911 if there was any trouble; the cops were always near by in the neighborhood. He then introduced me to Dorothy, the day girl. She waded up to us, her shoulders bulging from the tight armholes of her T-shirt, and nodded. I smiled, she didn't, and she returned to her customers.

For someone who was desperately in need of a job, I wasn't overly elated when Danny said he would try me out the next night. I left with the thought that at least I could gain the experience I needed to get a better job.

I never saw Danny again after that day. We would talk on the phone or Dorothy would pass on messages as she was going off and I was going on.

The next few weeks I gained plenty of experience. That is to say, I had plenty of "colorful" experiences. The clientele that came through Danny's bar door exposed me to a new and uniquely different portrait of Americana.

I learned most of their names, but to pass time, I would sometimes give the regulars, those that frequented the bar nightly, nicknames. There was Popeye

and Olive Oil, for example; they kept me thoroughly entertained. Popeye would always arrive first. He would do a little jig up to the bar, wink and order his 50¢ beer. He liked to call me "sweet cakes." The shrinking tattoo on his bony little forearm and the glint in his eyes told a story of a man who had sailed the "Seven Seas." After a while, Olive would come tottering through the door. She was frail in form but her gestures were lively. She would wear these little nylon flowered dresses and carried a pocket book which she would place neatly onup in tidy, dusty blonde curls which never moved even when she would bob her head admonishingly at Popeye for some tasteless remark. Their relationship was somewhat mysterious. He was her caretaker, I think, and lived in the lower half of her house which was nearby. By the way they would fight, I knew they had been together for a long time. When Popeye would make one wise crack too many, she would give him a good whack with her pocket book. I often wondered if he ever called her "sweet cakes."

Another group of regulars were the Leighee brothers; three banty weights who would rather fight than drink. Joe, the youngest was the tallest. He had an arm cast on which he told me he got after being injured in a fight. I had it from the older brother, Pat, who could talk a chicken into laying multi-colored eggs, that his little brother broke his arm falling into a trench in the army basic training camp. This was reaffirmed by Mike, the middle brother, who was the more thoughtful of the trio. His only tragic flaw was his need to appear better, faster, or smarter than Pat. I could picture them as kids, playing "King of the Mountain."

One night a guy came into the bar, looking for trouble. I had already refused to serve him and had asked him to leave. I watched him wander over to the pool table where the brothers were playing. As he reached out to maliciously grab the end of Pat's pool cue in the middle of a shot, I flew under the bar, took firm hold of his elbow and deftly escorted the 240 pound man out the door. He didn't seem to appreciate the fact that I was saving his life. It wasn't easy maintaining order some nights, but somehow I managed.

One character etched forever in my memories was Tony. He came in early one night when it was just me and Lopez, the little gardener who would bring Danny bags of avocados. Tony wasn't fat big, he was huge boned and built like a towering tree. His wrists were the size of an ordinary man's leg. His hair was shaved close to his giant head and his face was expressionless like a carved figure which wasn't finished. It was evident that he had been away somewhere a long time. He kept repeating his name over and over as if he needed to hear it. "Hi, my name is Tony. Give me another shot of VO, sweetheart."[1] After the third shot he was out of money and left. Tony came back the next day but this time except for me the bar was empty. He repeated the same ritual only this time he wanted to tell me why they sent him to prison. I stepped back next to the large, heavy Galeano bottle and tried to change the subject. It seems Tony lost his temper in a bar one night and knifed some guy. He came in one more night but after that I never saw him again. That was the night twenty dollars

was taken off the bar where one of the Leighee brothers was sitting.

Before long I developed an increasing sense of anxiety about working at Danny's. I would be walking down the street and hear a fragmented conversation about a robbery or a mugging. It wasn't just the crazy people or seedy neighborhood I was surrounded by, but a growing realization that there had to be a job out there better than this. It was time to leave. I gave Danny two weeks notice over the phone.

Everyone came in to say good-bye last night. In fact it was one of the most profitable nights the bar had seen since I got there. They were sorry to see me go, but I sensed they were not too surprised.

The next morning the phone woke me up. It was the police calling to say that someone had hid in the bar when I was closing up last night. They had stolen the money and escaped by breaking down the massive grey door.

Tom May

Dreams

He awoke with a start, a scream trying to claw its way out of his throat. For a moment, the rockets and mortars that had been streaking across a night sky still echoed in his head and he looked around wildly for the enemy. But there was no enemy to be seen and the only sounds he heard were the faraway wailing of a siren and a slow moving car making its way down Lacey Boulevard. The October night once again grew quiet, and he relaxed. He was home in Olympia, safe in bed with his wife Sue.

Glancing over to see if he had disturbed her, Robert was startled to find that Sue wasn't in bed. He turned to the nightstand and snapped on the light. The alarm clock read 2:10 a.m. Sue's shift at Pete's Truck Stop ended at midnight. Maybe she stopped to have a drink with the girls. Or maybe that siren had been meant for her and she was lying broken and mangled in a car accident. Maybe, he thought, he was a slight bit paranoid.

Robert put on his robe and went to the kitchen. He grabbed a nearly full bottle of Jim Beam and a glass, and while walking to the living room, he poured himself a shot and drank it down in one gulp. He told himself that he was starting to drink too much, that it hadn't been this way in the beginning. He used to drink only once in a while, and then just a couple of beers. Had it been the war, he wondered, or Sue?

Robert called the truck stop to see if Sue was still there. "No, Sue's not here," the voice at the other end answered peevishly.

"What time did she leave?"

"Early, at nine. She said she was sick."

"Thank you." Robert wearily dropped the phone back into its cradle. He massaged his temples with his fingers and started to get up, but then decided it would be useless to try to find her. Pouring another drink, he settled back into the armchair and proceeded to get very drunk. "Well, Jim, old boy," he said while holding the bottle up to the light, "I wonder where it all went wrong." Thoughts of Sue filled his mind and he remembered when he met her. He had just gotten his first car and it had broken down in front of a little corner grocery store near where he lived. Not knowing much about cars at that time, he had gone into the store to use their phone. A girl his age had handed over the phone, and after calling home, he had struck up a conversation with her while waiting for his father.

"Didn't this used to be Knight's grocery?"

"Yeah," the girl said. "My father just bought it a couple of months ago."
"You from around here?"
"No. We just moved here from Spokane."
"Oh . . . I didn't think I'd seen you around here before. My name's Robert."
She hesitantly smiled. "Mine's Sue."
"You going to Jefferson High next year?"
"Yeah, I'll be a junior," she said.

"Me too." A horn sounded outside. "I guess that's my Dad. Maybe I can show you around sometime."

"Sure."

That had been the start of what he had always believed to have been a good relationship. They had been married only three weeks when the war came along and there had barely been enough time to get Sue this house. Robert looked around the room. He could see traces of Sue, but none of him in it, just in the clock against the wall. The old grandfather clock, an heirloom and marriage present from his Uncle George, solidly ticked away the minutes and hours as he waited for Sue. The bottle was soon empty. As he fell into an uneasy sleep, the dreams began again.

The night sky was full of clouds and a light rain began to fall. He hated these early dawn raids. His company was in position, waiting only for the support fire to begin before they moved out. Robert glanced over at his buddy Cliff and saw that he was looking at that picture again, even though it was too dark to see much anything.

"Aren't you tired of looking at that damn picture?"

"Fuck you. You're just jealous."

"Not me. I wouldn't want a bunch of rug rats crawling around under my feet."

"The hell you say . . . But tell me, aren't these the most beautiful kids in the world?" That must have been the thousandth time that Cliff had asked him that question, and he'd only gotten the letter yesterday that told him he was the father of twins. Robert took the offered picture.

"Look too good to be yours. You sure you're the father?" He dodged a kick aimed at him.

"Fuck you, you son of a bitch."

They were interrupted by the sounds of rockets exploding far ahead of them. They stopped horsing around, their faces suddenly solemn under the dark green camouflage paint. Cliff carefully tucked the picture into his front pocket while Robert picked up their M16s. Giving each other the thumbs-up sign, they started out ahead of the rest of their company. They moved cautiously through the dense undergrowth towards the battlefield. Explosions ripped apart the village ahead of them and created a false sense of dawn that seemed to rise in the North instead of the East. Robert started to move ahead when they came to the little path leading to the village, but Cliff put a restraining hand on his arm. "My turn to take point," he whispered. Robert was all too willing to let him

pass and he waited a few moments before following him. They had only gone a few feet when he heard the snick. There was a bright flash of light and Cliff was thrown backwards into him. He anticipated the sound of the explosion to reach his ears, but it didn't come. Glancing down at his chest, he saw that he was covered with blood and that Cliff lay twisted and mangled on his lap. He struggled to get up, but he couldn't seem to move. A piece of white paper lay next to his left hand and he slowly picked it up. It was the picture of Cliff's twins. Other members of his company came gliding silently up to where he lay and then suddenly the boom of the explosion sounded in his ears.

He found himself on his knees, his guts heaving foul-tasting liqueur through his burning throat and onto his legs. He stayed that way for a moment, until the dizziness of his puking had subsided, and then he shakily made his way to the bathroom. While washing out his mouth, scenes of the dream played over in his mind. Cliff had died without uttering a sound, and he himself hadn't even been scratched. All the blood had been Cliff's. He kept telling himself that it wasn't his fault that Cliff had died, but scenes of Cliff's death and his own guilt caused him to start dry heaving into the toilet. Resting his forehead against the cool porcelain of the toilet bowl, Robert began to cry. Why had everything gone so wrong?

He thought he heard the front door close, so he quickly jumped up and wiped his face clean of any tears. Weaving down the hall to the living room, he found Sue on her hands and knees, cleaning up the mess he had made on the floor. She glanced up at him hostilely as he entered the room, but didn't say anything, just lowered her head and concentrated on the mess in front of her.

"Have a *hard* night?" Robert expected her to answer, to make excuses, but she didn't. All Sue did was pick up the soaked towel and walk past him towards the bathroom. He grabbed her arm and the towel slammed against the wall with a sodden thud. "I'm talking to you," he rasped.

She just looked at him and then at the hand holding her arm. He let her go and she shrugged out of his grip and walked on down the hall, not bothering to pick up the towel. Robert followed. "Well . . ."

"Go back to bed; you're too drunk to talk."

"Oh, yeah. I wasn't too drunk to find out that you left work at nine. Real sick, huh?"

She did not reply.

"Who's it this time? Some trucker from Seattle? Or maybe a salesma—"

She whirled and the slap caught him high on the cheek, with one nail drawing a ragged gash just under his eye. He instinctively shoved her forward with his left arm and she stumbled back into the bedroom. He would have followed with a blow from his right, but his drunkenness caused him to fall after her and before he could grab her, she scrambled out of his reach and around the bed.

Robert tried to get up, but the room reeled and he sank back down, suddenly too weary to continue. She glared at him from across the bed. When she saw

that he wasn't going to get up, she straightened and tossed her long blond hair out of her eyes with a flick of her head.

"You-drunken-son-of-a-bitch!" She gestured with her right hand at the top of her head. "I've had it up to *here* with your slobbering suspicions and accusations. You're a worthless piece of shit and I'm through, through with you."

Robert lowered his head and just lay there, having heard this, how many times? It was just another dream, another nightmare to add to his collection. He heard Sue move around to the closet and the floor vibrated to the thud of it being slammed open. He turned his head to watch her, seeing only her legs as she moved about the room. "Damn," he thought, "she has such pretty legs."

He closed his eyes and thought of how good it used to be before they were married. Late nights at the drive-in, the hours spent exploring each other's bodies. Those long, beautiful legs. He started to doze, but the double snick of a suitcase being snapped shut brought his head up with a jerk. With a groan, he rolled over and pulled himself up into a sitting position and he leaned back against the wall. Sue had a suitcase in her hand and she started around him toward the front of the house.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I told you. I've had enough." Her voice was flat and emotionless.

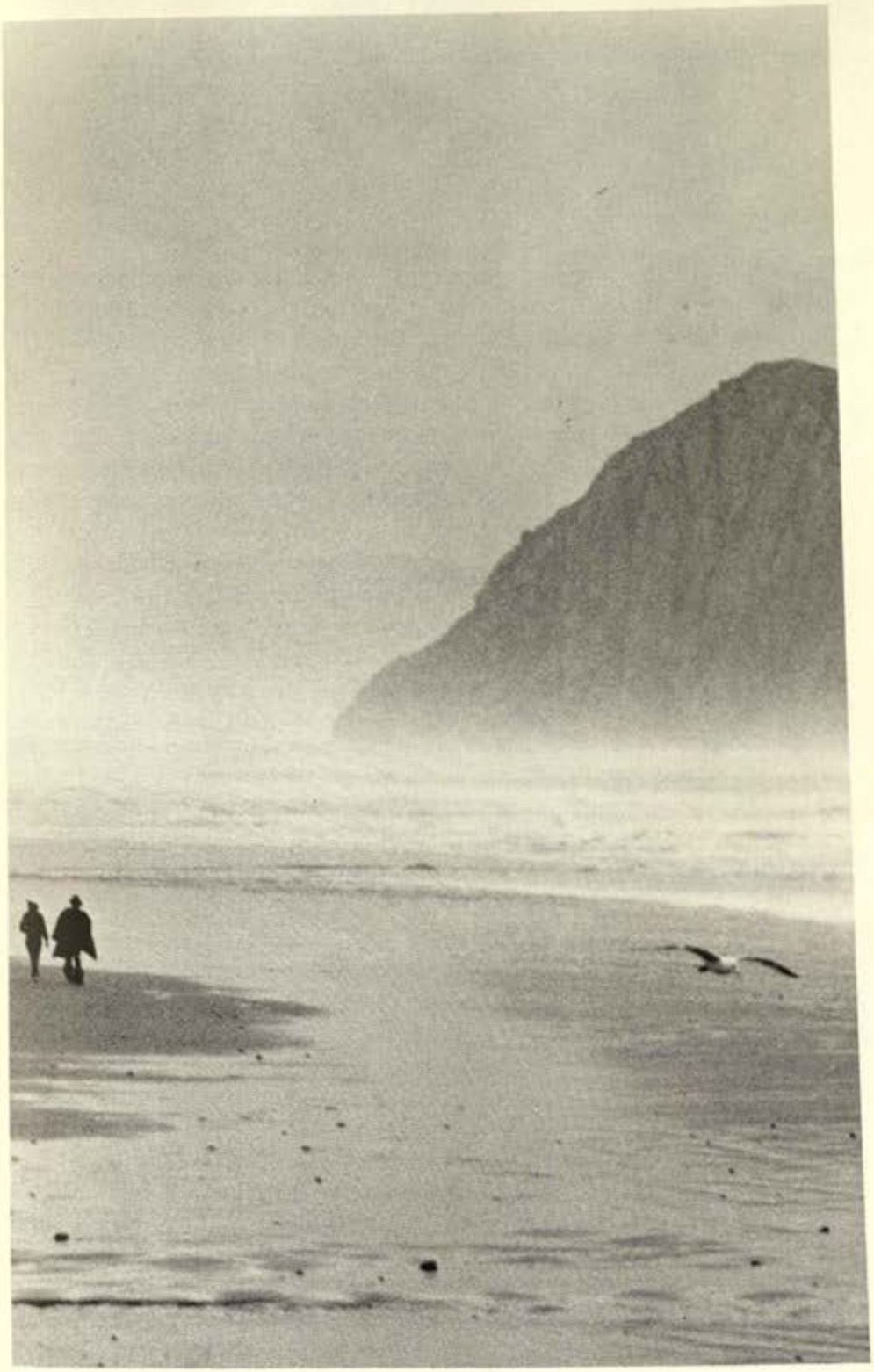
"The hell you are." He reached for her, but she fended him off with the suitcase. She strode past him down the hall. Robert struggled to his feet and staggered after her. She paused at the door to toss the car keys at him.

"Go get another bottle; it's the only company you'll have now." Then she was gone; her footsteps sounding oddly muted through the open door.

A few minutes later, Robert was at the door and the cold air slapped him like Sue's hand, bringing tears to his eyes. With surprise, he noted that it had started to snow and the flakes whirled and danced in the light from the doorway.

"Come back here, you bitch," he yelled. He heard the slam of a car door and suddenly he was bathed in white light as its headlights came on. The car started up and quickly backed out of the driveway. Robert ran out into the yard, but he couldn't see anything but bright specks and he fell on the slippery grass. Was it a man driving the car or a woman? "Sue," he screamed, "Sue." The cold seeped into every part of him and he tried to get up but he slipped and fell again. Finally he righted himself and he stumbled out into the street.

"It's not my fault! For God's sake, Sue." His voice sank to a whisper and the only reply he got was the soft murmur of the wind. A shiver ran through his soaked body and he turned to go back to the house. Nearby a train sounded its whistle and it echoed weakly from the building. As he entered the house, a folded up note on the endtable by the easychair caught his eye. Robert walked over to it and stared down at the neat handwriting of his wife. Turning away, he looked for a moment at the liqueur cabinet before he stumbled over to it with outstretched arms.



Anne Passel

Landing Right Side Up

The monotony was deadening: the sewing machine's whirring, the old refrigerator's wheezy rattle, the inconsequential chatter of the neighbor's lawn mower. Was the combined purpose to launch him on a guilt trip? Jim hoped not, hoped there was no intent behind the overlapping noises, hoped that for once everybody, foreign and domestic, intended to leave him alone. It was enough that the body shop filled his weekdays with unbearable sound. Let Sundays, for Godsake, be peaceful.

The sewing machine stopped suddenly. "Jimmy?"

"Yeah?"

"I just wondered if you were still here."

"Now where the hell would I be?"

"I wish you wouldn't swear all the time."

"Oh Christ, Alene, forget it."

She was not going on with her sewing; he might have guessed. She came into the sitting room — that's what she always called it — and lowered herself awkwardly into the painted wicker armchair. He did not move his feet from the pillow at the far end of the cluttered couch or make room for her next to him.

"How're you doing?" He wasn't just being polite; he really wondered. The non-stop changes inside her must seem like torture.

She smiled faintly as she patted her expanded middle. "As long as she's OK, I'm OK."

"Suppose she's a he?"

"You gotta have faith."

He grunted — what else was there to say? He squinted over her direction and took a quick look at her face. He knew her well enough by now — didn't he just? — well enough to know that she was going to have a serious talk with him. Again. He beat her to the opening.

"When does your dad get here? Tomorrow? The day after?"

"He promised noon today. Don't worry so. Just act calm and regular. I know he'll be pleased about the baby in the end. He'll try to get us to make up, but I'll work it so's he'll take me home without getting sore at you."

"That'll be the trick of the week."

"I know my own Daddy. Just relax." She had that look Jim was wary of: sentimental, and as though this was all a story out of a paperback romance. "Jimmy, I'm sorry how it had to turn out."

"Yeah."

"Believe me, will you? Honest, I didn't know I was pregnant when we got involved. I mean it. It's really true."

Same old talk, same old dialogue. "Yeah, sure."

"But be fair with me, too. You didn't really want us to shack up like permanent live-ins, did you?"

"What do you mean? This is real life, not some soap opera. Why would I get this committed if I didn't want to?"

"I don't know. Honest I don't know."

All the irritating outside noises had ceased. The heavy Sunday quiet settled over them. She got up and opened the fridge, causing the rattle to start again. When she came back she put a cold can of beer in Jim's hand.

"Thanks." No point in his being surly. "You've been straight with me through all this. I really hope somehow you can work it out about the kid once you get back home."

Her voice was low, as if she was saying what she hadn't wanted to admit before. "Since it's all just about over, I got to admit — I really hoped, back at the start when I first found out about the mess I was in, I really hoped you'd keep me and the baby. You know — like a ready-made family. Well, sometimes people do. Like we were actually married, not just pretending. Like for real."

"God, kid. I wish I could." How would it be to just accept what was dished out? To give up, give in, just as though there isn't any decent way for life to be, no plan, no chance of landing right side up. As though this is as good as it gets. "But things are complicated for me too."

"I know. All along you always went off a lot." She wasn't charged up about it now, not the way she had been before. "I thought — you'll laugh — but I thought you had a real wife and kids of your own somewhere that you went to see."

He certainly had no intention of telling her. Why drag all that up to be looked at and moaned over even one more time? "It wasn't like that."

"No?"

"No. It's true I did go off because of someone —"

"Some other woman?" Alene's tone turned thin and icey.

"Yeah. A woman I'd been living with right up to the night before I met you."

"And you left her — just like that? How could you?"

Of course she didn't get it. She could never understand. "I didn't leave her —she left me. Just like that. She died." He didn't want to talk about it, but now that he had started, he couldn't turn it off. "Norma her name was. She was older, an older woman, too old for me you'd say. To most people she wasn't even very beautiful anymore, sort of tired and laid back, and frankly she was drunk most of the time. But God, she was really something. I mean, I'd have done anything she asked me to do. Anything."

Now the condo took form all around him, blocking out this miserable room. He felt soothed by the quiet colors she had made him roll on the walls, lilac and

a silvery gray, splashed all over his jeans and under his fingernails for a week. And white shag everywhere. The low croon of the hi-fi, the sound of Norma's chuckle, the purr of her contentment. Jamie, she called him — and she called him, called him in the night, in the early morning. Insatiable, unquenchable—

"How did she die?"

"That's the kicker. The cops think she was murdered."

Going in with his own key, whistling even, kicking back the paneled door, the hall oddly dim, the kitchen in half-light with the slats still pulled down over the window. Not flicking on the lights because his arms were full of books from the seminar and groceries: deli ravioli, sourdough rolls, kosher pickles, lettuce already wilting, and a new Cabernet Savignon they'd been threatening to try. Then to find her note on the kitchen table. And to hear through the lavendar-painted bathroom door the sound that would never go away, never stop echoing, the sound of the whirlpool bath.

"And you don't"

"'Don't . . .?"

"Think she was murdered?" Alene's voice was hardly above a whisper.

"No. She did it herself — drowned herself in the bathroom whirlpool. I know. I know because she left me a note, telling me what she was going to do." As though a scrap of paper could make everything all right again.

"The cops didn't believe the note?"

"I never showed it to them. I couldn't. She told me not to." Whatever you say, baby, whatever you say. "She begged me to take my things and get out. She had them all packed in the carry-all, everything I'd arrived with. She said — she said there'd be cops and reporters and pictures in the press if they knew about us. She just wanted a quiet forgetting . . . a quiet last remembering . . ." As though her voice spoke — husky, throaty, even a little slurred, breathing a secret between them, a private laugh that didn't need explaining. And even when the words didn't come out right, he'd known what she meant. He always did, didn't he?

> *Darling Jamie — You said you'd do anything for me. Well, here's the hardest thing of all: I beg you — just fade away —*

"What did you do?"

"Hmm?" He forgot what he had been saying.

"Did you break down the bathroom door? Did you call the cops? The paramedics?"

> *The pain is getting horrendous now. It's all that booze and coke and sex I suppose. All that living —*

"No." Naturally this poor pregnant kid would have to miss the point altogether. "I just did what she asked me to do. I picked up the groceries and the duffle and went out to the car — her car — and drove down to a special place we knew on the beach. I left the groceries there, then I parked the car

where the cops would ticket it, put the keys in the glove compartment, and walked away." And dusk began, after the red unfeeling sun dropped into the Pacific, and nobody was alive on the whole face of the earth and there was no sound anywhere except the unnatural persistent never-ending surging of the captured water in a lavendar whirlpool bath, no longer soothing, no longer a substitute for the unconquerable sea, the unquenchable lover, the unreachable womb.

"Oh Jimmy." Alene was weeping softly. She cried all the time lately. "Where did you go?"

He walked. He walked away, out of life, out of everything he thought would last forever. He gave up. He submitted to facts he couldn't reject, accepting what had happened, led to the edge of the world as he knew it, without giving a damn about himself or anything more complex than the finality of death. Where was there to go?

"That's the part you already know. I got a bed in my ex-brother-in-law's pad. And he was just getting set up for a Saturday night bash."

"That's where we met. Right?" She was brightening now.

"Right the first time. Here I thought I was on the narrow edge of complete disaster and you breezed in, young and fresh and innocent, laughing and wiggling, with a mouth to be kissed and tits to be nuzzled and buns to be patted."

Like a mail-order delivery. Like: things too complicated? Here's an instant solution. Innocence. Fun. Cute kid, no strings. Happily ever after. Whole grain, no preservatives. The promise of life at its best.

There was silence between them, heavy silence and only the breath of disappointment which whispered around them.

He went on. "Christ. I really thought nobody had ever touched you before."

She caught her breath. "Even then, even that night, I wished it was true."

"Well they're wrong, you know. Wishing won't make it so." Wishing doesn't change anything, not one damn thing.

"I know." She rubbed the swelling that was her baby. "So where did you go all those nights? After. After you knew how I was. After we knew this wasn't going to work the way the stories say it works out."

"Well I felt really lousy about you tricking me, and I had gotten around to feeling really sore at Norma for dying and leaving me, so I used to go by her place to see who's living there now. Who's turning on in her whirlpool, who's getting high on her balcony. I never could see who. The lights would come on or go off and I'd just wander away. I used to go down to the cliffs, to our special place and sit in the dark and drink a little beer. Then later I got to where I'd go to the bar where I picked her up in the first place, and I'd talk for a while with an old babe she used to hang out with. Joyce. She thought we'd get something going, but I couldn't be like that. Sometimes I'd let her buy me a drink or even dinner. And one night I went home with her, just to try to get up that old feeling, to wake up again to what I used to have with Norma, but — my God I

felt foul."

He downed the beer and tossed the can through the door into the closet called a kitchen. It made a hollow racket as it rolled across into the far corner.

"Oh Jimmy." Her voice was weak with compassion.

"Don't pity me, for Christsake. If you've got to weep, weep for yourself and that bastard kid of yours."

"She's going to have your name." It was a challenge.

"I couldn't care less."

"Well, I care."

Now he wondered, and he asked himself why he never wondered before. "Whose name should she have?"

"Yours, yours. I'm like your wife and I'm her mother."

"Who's her father?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to speak but no sound came out.

"Who?" He persisted.

"I thought it was really only fair. Like it's all in the family. That used to give me a kind of comfort back in the beginning."

"What do you mean, in the family?" When she didn't answer he went on. "I've got no family — just me and my crazy sister —"

"And —"

"My cruddy brother-in-law."

"Ex-brother-in-law."

"That slime." But it figured. "What'd he say? You told him, didn't you? What'd he say?"

She made it sound as though it didn't matter. "He said, 'What makes you think it's mine? Did you say: eeny, meany, miny, moe?'"

Jim hadn't felt this close to her, not since that first morning-sickness morning when she decided not to try to hide it anymore. But sympathy would lead to commitment, and he had no time for any such self-indulgence. "Listen, give the kid my name, that's all right by me. Tell them at the clinic that I'm the father — it's no skin off my nose. I owe you something for putting up with me. I won't forget you. I'll keep in touch. And if you need anything, you let me know — OK?"

"But you won't change your mind? About taking me and the baby? We'll keep out of your way."

"Can't." He got up and went to her, leaning over the chair to give her a sweet and gentle kiss, the kind he had thought she needed, back there at that first bash.

"Listen Jimmy, I changed my mind. I want you to go away now. Don't be here when Daddy comes — it'll be easier on all of us. I'm going to tell him right away that the baby isn't yours and he'll understand why I'm leaving you. But let me handle it all by myself. That's the best way."

Jim scowled, resisting her revised plan. Direct action always works best.

Straight to the point.

"I'm not afraid to face him — you're the one he might lace into. You might need me to protect you."

"Honestly! This is Daddy we're talking about. But before he gets the whole story into his head, he could act up. I never said, but Dad's an oil man, a rigger. He can be tough."

"I'll wait."

"Please. You did what Norma asked in the end. Do as much for me."

"You mean it?"

"Believe me."

So by noon Jim was across the street, leaning on the radiator of some neighbor's car, when the pickup pulled up in front of the old place. There followed no screams or broken windows, no sign of a pregnant girl running from a furious old man, just the usual Sunday lull which seemed to be going to stretch on into the afternoon. Finally the door opened and a burly figure began carrying suitcases and loaded grocery cartons from the flat to the truck.

Jim stood it as long as he could, then he crossed over and called to the girl.

"Moving? Want some help?"

"Gee, thanks. This is my Dad. Daddy, here's one of my friends come to help."

"Name of—?" The voice was a growl.

Jim glanced around for help. A moving van parked down the street gave him a nudge. "Ace. Just call me Ace."

"Well Ace, I'm not as young as I once was. Gimme a hand with the sewing machine and the last coupla boxes."

They moved in harmony, toting, lifting, wedging in. She sat on the front steps while they finished up.

"Want a beer?" Jim kind of liked the old man leaning there against the truck.

"I wouldn't say no."

"So?" Jim turned to her, like always. "Get us a couple of beers, OK?"

There wasn't much to say. When they finished the beer she took the cans back into the kitchen and came out wiping her eyes.

"Well." He wanted it to end well. "So long. Take care of yourself and let me know about the kid."

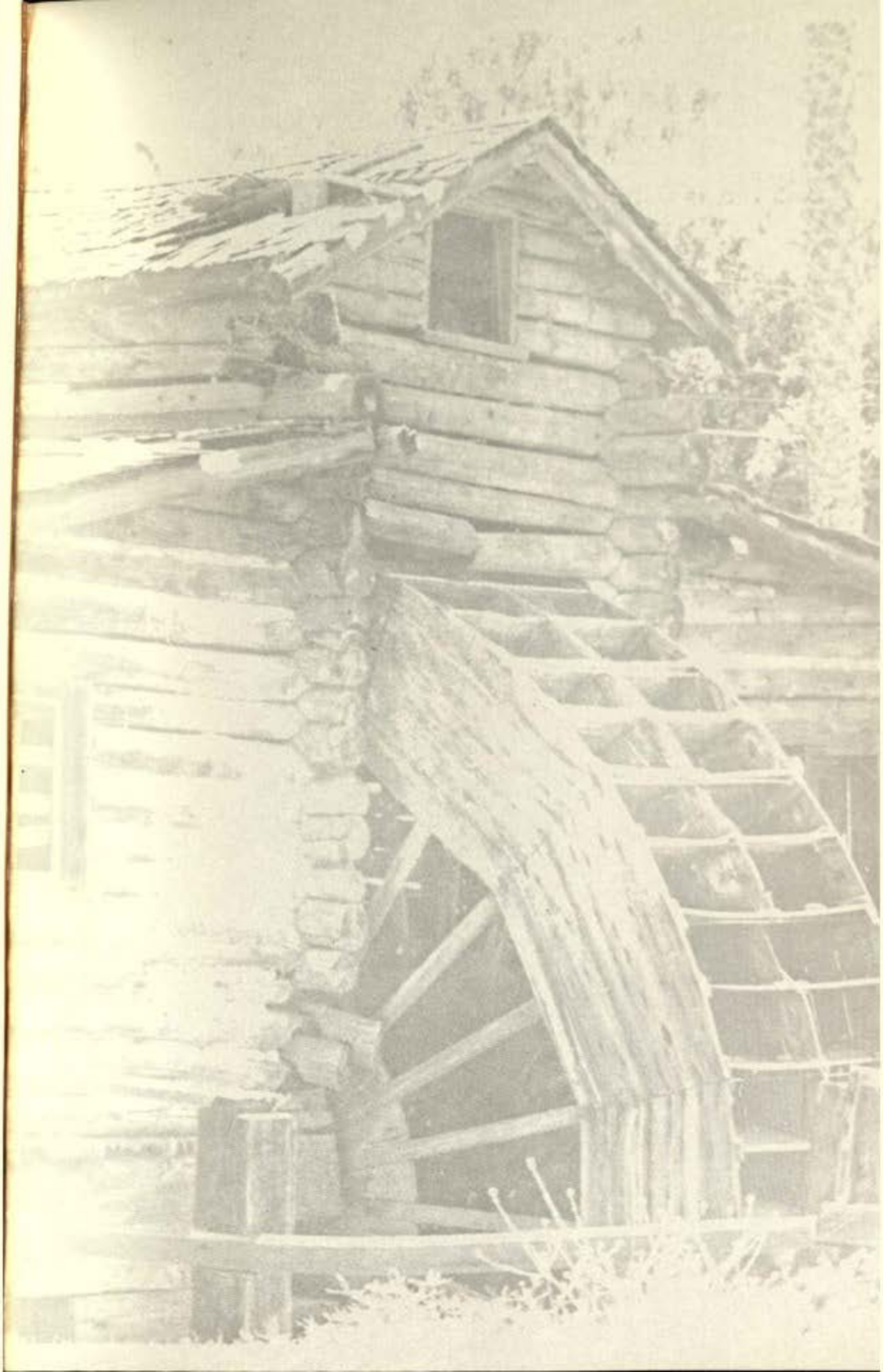
"Where'll I write you? Here?"

God no. "I'm going back to college somewhere. You better give me your address. I'll let you know where I end up."

She found the gas bill abandoned in the mailbox and wrote her Dad's address on the back of it. "Goodbye Jimmy."

"So long, Alene. Good luck." Another sweet kiss, too late now, too late from the beginning.

The old man gave him a long look as he went around the truck and hauled himself into the driver's seat. The truck shook a little as it started up the hill, but nobody looked back out the window. Nobody waved.




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