

Orpheus

1 9 8 9 / 9 1 E D I T I O N

Orpheus

CALIFORNIA • STATE • UNIVERSITY
b a k e r s f i e l d • c a



**This issue of Orpheus is dedicated with sincere appreciation to the
1970 Founding Faculty Still Affiliated with the University**

Homer Chaney
Jack Coash
David Cohen
David Cooke
Dan Detwiler
Roy Dull
Fabian Fang
Ray Geigle
Jim George
John Hardy

David Hinds
Jim Horton
Gary Kessler
George Ketterl
Janice Kirkland
Ed Laskowski
Carlos Lozano
Charles McCall
Bernie Michals
Carl Miller

Homer Montalvo
Dale Moody
David Ost
Ken Secor
Jim Segesta
David Spencer
Steve Suter
Dick Swank
Forrest Wood
Glenn Wood

Orpheus

C O N T E N T S

Poems

William Adams	3-6
Armando Aranjó	7-8
David K. Chenot	10
Robin Lee Dixon	11-12
Edwin Drew	13
Jade Elms	14-15
Marsha Engelbrecht	16
Javier Espana	17-21
Frank Falero	22
Debra Lea Fergerson	23-25
Hugh Hancock	26-29
Kelly J. Hoeltgen	30-34
Solomon Iyasere	35
Sarah F. Lewis	36-37
Stan C. Mintken	38
K. Kohler	39-42
Jeffrey McMahon	43-44
Gary Miranda	45
Nancy Nikkel	46
Ernesto Padilla	47
Brent Palmer	48-51
C. Paradise	52-58
Sean Parlaman	59-63
Rob Passons	64
Rose Marie Pavlicek-Stish	65-67
Clint Pearson	68
T.O. Redman	69-77
Rita Scanlan	78
Joanne Schmidt	79-85
B. Jordan Schmoll	86
Deborah L. Stephen	87-89
Hazel J. Turner	90-93
Christine Lee-ching Williams	94-97

Stories

Gregory S. Berg	101-103
Stafford Betty	105-109
Carlos Lozano	111-115
Jeffrey McMahon	117-124
Kendra Northrop	125-129
Ernest Padilla	131-136
C. Paradise	137-143
Sean Parlamen	145-147
A. D. Reed	149-151
Gina Ross	153-157
Dean Walker	159-163

P o e m s

Orpheus •

A Suggestion for a New Calendar

I would like to say goodbye, November,
A month that I will long remember,
Deep inside my heart of hearts,
At least until December starts.

One good thing came November's way,
My eldest daughter's wedding day.
Beyond that obvious claim to fame,
November hardly rates a name.

In general, months in such profusion,
Create much chronolog confusion.
Years are all we need, full of days,
Numbered in consecutive ways.

Days with numerical appellations
No more number/name equations.
In with: One, Two, Three, and Four
Monday, Tuesday out the door.
No more recalling silly rhymes,
Handed down from ancient times,
That, every month, we all intone
Separating thirty from thirty-one.

It's enough to note the year alone
To indicate that time has flown.
Or in case there is some mystery
About Tomorrow, Now, and History.
There are no Gods we must appease,
Nor Emperors that we must please.
So down with "-arys," "-unes," and "-embers."
Reduce the calendar to numbers!

Filling Out Forms

Each time, upon some printed line,
I describe myself and re-define,
Again, the truth of me,
I'm urged to ask my inquisitor—
One small self in one large store—
If there is some thing that he can see
Upon my face: A rude disguise,
Something evil in my eyes,
Some latent villainy.
And ask why his eyebrows are up-raised
As my answers are appraised
As per his store's policy.
And why it is I must present
A photo bearing document,
Or two, as further testament
Of truth, so he can see
That I am, truly, who I am
And not, perhaps, 'Omar Khayam'—
Who lives beneath a date-palm tree
In some far-distant, desert hideaway—
Where, all day, I scheme and plot to play
False with all humanity.
How I long to answer each line wrong,
And call myself Muhammed Wong
(A name I'd bear most doubtfully).
I'd live on a street in Timbuktu,
I'd bank at a bank in North Peru,
I'd work in a bar on Waikiki,
Just to see his baleful stare
And his eyebrows really crowd his hair.
And, as he searched geography
For truth within my web of wit,
I'd tell him, 'Sir, I must admit
That Muhammed isn't really me.

He lives beside another man
Whose name is Pierre Gustav Chan—
Another whom I pretend to be—
And I am sorry for your pain,
But, I would hasten to explain
With all humility,
That, 'after the latest Wall Street drop,
I can only pretend to window shop.
But now, to save some dignity,
I fill out forms across the land—
Like tiny footprints in the sand—
That save my place in history.'
Then, turning on my heel, I'd leave
And find someone else to disbelieve
That I am no one else but me.

Brevity, Sweet Brevity

It is best to say a lot with grace
And say it in a little space,
But Sweet Brevity, the soul of wit,
Is sated long before I quit
Enlarging on each child of mind,
Exhausted ere I cease to grind
My syntax to a razor's edge.
I analogize, extrapolate, and hedge,
Illuminate, inflate, and then reprise
Each thought into an epic size,
When I would better do my best
To conceive, express, and then digest.
Sadly, my works of literature
Are rooms too full of furniture.
Displays of my failure to be terse
Are crowded into every verse.
The poor conceits my mind invents
Become lexical accoutrements.
These prolix sins to expiate,
I propose that I redecorate,
And paint this one supremely terse
Comment on the universe.
With one, rhyming, dactyl meter
Describe the vast perimeter—

Myriad.

I Thought of You Today

A drop of rain whispered on my shoulder
"Love," it sighed and slid away silently.
"Love," I answered.
I have no time.
She has none for me.

I wanted to forget that voice.
Heaven help me, the war I raged,
churning and delivery finality.
I raised my hand to mete the final blow . . .

Another drop fell.
"Love," it breathed. Then
another
and others until
I fell.
Sputtering, I raised myself.
I am thrown earthward by the courage of the rainfall.

Morning.
I see hewn beams and their secrets
fading with the sunrise.
My woman lays a cool towel on my face.
I grab her hand and hold its fingers to my mouth.
"Your fever broke last night."
"Hush," I say, tenderly brushing my finger across her lips.
"You were so hot and you thrashed and cried out so . . ."
"I love you"
"I love you"

Momenta

The river plots its course
oblivious
to the rock behind the bend.

It strikes the rock
fingers washing the uneven face
and its paths change.

Its body keeps firm hold of the rock
but the rock is everpresent
causing sharp pain.

The rock is a scab
a backwash of fate.

J. M. C.

This is what I remember
Petite heart-shaped lips
Ease into an affectionate smile
Reflecting glow of happiness

When we're apart

This I remember
Soft lips slightly
Growing up, smiling
Blossom of comfort

When we're apart

I remember
Translucent lips
Reaching smiles
Echoing delight

When we're apart

Remember
Beautiful
Smile
Joy

Naked Fingers

Naked fingers show me
You care about me
Naked fingers mock me

A new voice must be given
A symbol needs to shine
A new voice with golden tone

One will show you
How I feel
One will sing to you

Ring finger. Silence the others!
Strident voices muzzled
Ring finger is dressed to whisper

"I love you"

God's Jewel

In the moonlight such a twinkle.

In the morning sun a fluid treasure. Thy jeweled back a
beauteous stream through the dark blades of jade-green grass.
Thy plated breast fording through silently, magically, without
footprint.

They told me thou art Earth's token of evil from the slimy
bowels of Hell. But I overcame my fears, as thou overcame
thine; I learnt that only the one who borrowed thy form in the
Garden was evil, not thee.

Scales delicately meshed, each a work of art, and, as I
dared to touch, smooth and dry as any polished twig. Only living,
and soft as thou twined about my wrist and tickled my palm with
thy feathery tongue.

Thou didst not flee but explored the little hills and valleys
formed by my skirts. When the high noon sun hastened me
home, I sent thee on thy tedious way.

I spied thee once more before now. My little brother,
late home, proudly produced thee once that he was in the door.
Now limp, without that beauteous life.

Rescued from where they tossed thee. Thy tiny shields a
moonlit rainbow. Here is where thou shalt lie . . . in my tiny
garden . . . with me forever . . . there. Now I cannot see thee, but I
know thou art there.

I weep for thee, God's Jewel.

My Father

When
I look into my brother's face
my sister's face
my mother's eyes

I see you there

Where the wind rushes across the water

I see you there

When there's a cry in the night,
a need for fear to be dispelled

I see you there

Standing on the Cornerstone
defending our Home
Strengthening our love

I see you there

I Cry For Them All

Out of the earth, I cry for them.

For the lonely, I cry for them.

For the poor, I cry for them.

For the jailed, I cry for them.

For the sad, I cry for them.

For the abused, I cry for them.

For the hurt, I cry for them.

For the people mourning, I cry for them.

For the hospitalized, I cry for them.

For the troubled, I cry for them.

For the unsatisfied, I cry for them.

For the illiterate, I cry for them.

For the sick, I cry for them.

For the mentally ill, I cry for them.

For the whole world, I cry for them—too.

For when I cry, I cry for them all.

Untitled

I'm in love with life
and with love
and with myself
for a blessed change
Rather jealous
because I don't want
to share me
with anyone else just now
But then I forget
and I look for
comfort without
and have to learn again
to look within

rainfall
phonecall
empty hall
brick wall
very tall
red ball
goes sailing over effortlessly

Loneliness evaded

Blue Flames

what can I do
but watch the yellow flame turn blue
where can I go
to find the sweetest love I know
when will it end
this emptiness, please tell me when

blue flames
 reflecting warmth
onto my face
 illuminating
tears in paths
 they've traced
blue flames
 love child
can never take your place

Haiku

That look in the eye,
Older than ten million years,
Fresh as this heartbeat.

Haiku

Finger on raw egg—
Cold and slimy reminder—
Life as we know it.

Untitled

—Mother
Mother

Get piss
Get pissed off.

Mother Earth
They are killing you.

Shake them off
Your back

Shake them off . . .

—Son, forgive them
For they know not
What they do.

Self-destruction . . .
Self-destruction . . .

Untitled

Today
I stripped off my clothes
And I ran to the east
From where the sun sets.

I ran and ran, fast, fast
Carrying the universe
In my arms.

I climbed up
The highest mountain
To its peak.
There
I held the universe in my hands.
And I offered it to the east, the south,
The north, the west and upward and downward.

I lit the universe
And I breathed
in and out its life—
It permeated my soul.

There
I talked
with the four winds,
Father Sun, and Mother Earth.

They all blew on my face
And took me far to embrace
The Eagle's wings.

There
They told me:
You won't die soon.
You won't die soon.

La Muerte

La Muerte
Dressed nice
Looking beautiful
Like a lady
With a voluptuous body
Ready to please.
She knocks on the door
And asks
To come in.

But

Sometimes
La Muerte
Just creeps in
And rapes
And kills
And then
She leaves.

And that's the end.

Untitled

Images, images
Beautiful and nightmarish
Flash through my mind.

Images I can't grasp
go by fast.

My vision
And thought
Are stifled.

My insincere
Forced thought
Is dead.

My hand
Is numb.
My pen
At rest.

My Spirit is asleep.
My truth is at rest.

'til the end

Until the end

We fight and cry

Until the end

We run and hide.

And until the end . . .

Only then

When death beats us

WE LIVE AGAIN.

A Personal Lyric

I am Hispanic. I am proud. You? You try to categorize me. But you do it badly. You see me as brown. And I am. But I am also black, white, yellow, red, and a variation of beautiful shades of cafe-au-lait. You think I am Catholic. And I am. But I am also Moslem, Hindu, Animal Worshiper, even Jewish, to say nothing of a variety of Protestant denominations. You think I am Mexican. And I am. But I am also Spanish, Philippino, Puerto Rican, Peruvian, Portuguese, Cuban, Brazilian, and two dozen other nationalities, to say nothing of American. You think I speak Spanish. And I do. But I also speak Quechua, Guarani, Portuguese, Tagalog, and a variety of other languages, including English. You think I am Macho. And I am. But more than half of us are Hembra. You laugh when I say "share my chair," but you can't say "llama al burrito." You think of me as being familiar with a switchblade and a machete. And I am. But I am also familiar with a scalpel and a mouse. You think I pick grapes. And I do. But I also Profess at the University, Preside over the Bank, and Represent my district in Congress. I am what you think I am. But I am much more.

Being Hispanic doesn't mean I speak a particular language or that I practice a particular religion or that I am a particular shade of brown or white. Being Hispanic means having one or more of my Cultural Roots in the Iberian Peninsula, in the Iberian Culture. A culture that knew the Enlightened Administration of the Arabs, that felt the suffering created by the invasion of the Germanic hordes, that was devastated by the Tortures and Tests of the Inquisition, that was shocked by the Rise and Rejection by Spain of the Reformation, that participated in the Renaissance, that led the world into the Age of Discovery and the Brutality of the Conquests of Mexico and Peru, that fostered and assisted in the Wars of Revolution and Independence in America, that was very nearly destroyed by the precursor to World War II, the Spanish Civil War, that is blossoming with the Restoration of the Monarchy and Spain's Entry into the Common Market. That culture. That is what makes me Hispanic. And Proud. I wonder if you can remember that?

A Simple Reflection

I thought that I had achieved a greater love,
But, alas, I was mistaken.
For my love came and went
Like a fleeting summer breeze
That cools for a moment in time
And then vanishes,
Leaving its victim longing for the next
Respite from the nighttime heat.
Stillness surrounds me.

Now I sit,
and wait
For my emotions to reveal themselves.
Remorse, Despair
Confusion, Doubt

Oh God, can it be that I am alone?

Question of Beauty

I ask myself,
Just what is a poem?

A moment
in time?

A sparkle
of imagination?

Do we need to see a poem
To feel its energy, its emotion?

How do we touch the sky?

We live.

Aspirations of Youth

A little girl in satin clothes
A miniature Ginger Rogers want-to-be
Standing before the crystal mirror
Gliding to the left
Gliding to the right
Fantasizing
Dreaming

The image in the mirror
laughs
to see me,
a crippled child,
aspire to be the goddess with the two golden feet

Beach Parade 11-20-88

Sling-shot from the beach
w/no money,
the pair conceive another day
of doing one's own harm.

Words on a blank page,
etched on thin paper—
reads about the same flatness
(so it seems).

Seeing words
that don't exist—
hoping for long hours
of fog pressed
between pages

Pot in Dorms

4-2-89

This is Hell's Parade: close-net skeletons
locked in cages inside the men's dorm,
fingered through keyholes, tickled
by touching their musical ribs, nurtured
and fixed by degrees of touch,
by flavors, by suitors.

This is the soft wave: the fruit of the plant
grows veins inside the scalp,
turning bodies into ancient fountain pens—
heads are suddenly detached.

Hugh Hancock

Family
6-19-89

The World
is falling apart.

We are
quietly sitting around the dinner table
listening to the world news
while munching corn on the cob.

Hugh Hancock

Dear
11-25-89

The bayline sky streaked
orange and red

like the child's legs
licked by tips of switches

beneath the hand
of the artist.

Killing Antigone

On a stage set by night
to the steady music
of the laboring breath of a Traitor
(the sound of peace),
I crept carefully upon Innocence, who lay softly on the air,
and I stole away with her young breath
over-ripe and sour though it was.

Innocence in her treachery
turned foul.

Lost I was, though never was I loved,
And Antigone's ghost turned and shook a finger
directly at me, how did she
know where I was? She had no eyes.
Dead, she stood tall, a finger
pointing at the sky,
and she fell slowly,
so slowly that the Traitor thought Antigone stood still
until she lay pointing at me
Antigone accusing me.

Untitled

Forgotten how sad the sun looks
setting on a deserted stretch of beach
wallowing in self-pity
in a nest of pastel colors posing as clouds
Summertime singing
for the young ones only, please
Why not keep them happy?
They have so much left to lose.
when leaves grow bright, then die
filling Earth, a communal grave
with their crumbling bones and sultry looks.
Forever lost in fading sunshine
The days grow colder, shorter, too
and nights are long and warm,
so easy to rest in the night
until the sun sleeps softly
Forever

Love and Breath

When the rain has stopped, I can begin to breathe
Breathe again.
Yes, I know you thought I had forgotten,
but breath is cold
Colder than the dark fog where we hide our hearts
Colder than the abyss of our reason
I could not forget to breathe.
And so you laugh, but I know that sound
In my dreams it is more like the howling wind
screaming at your injustice, at your folly,
at your betrayal
You think yourself the victor, a warrior on the black plain,
the earth strewn with blood and rain, my blood, the rain flowing
from my eyes
and you see the maggots clinging to my flesh,
crawling into the depths that were my eyes,
But still, I see through the rain
I see your laughter better than you do
I know what it means, I know you
You haven't won the war, nor even the battle
they say "no one can win"
and while you sit upon ashes howling at my rotting corpse,
I see the bombs, the bombs pointed at your head
and when they hit, you,
you with the laughter, will disintegrate.
But I, I still see
and I have not forgotten how to breathe

I Will Not Walk

No.

I will not walk with you, no.

This is not a question

of will you? won't you?

You don't understand that

want is not the issue here.

Want

can never be the final

the is.

Want can be what you make of it

but I choose to make nothing

and instead, I hunker down to

the is.

Never is there room for the

other.

And so, no,

I will not walk with you, no.

Against the Pavement

Desert skies always turn to sun
when I much prefer the grey
while I writhe and struggle under these
halos—they are much more a burden
than any cross of wood and nails

No Lord ever walked this green earth
and gave His life so I shall have mine
Man and god alike die not for each other
but for themselves (while we delighted
spectators fill the Colosseum)

A squirrel lies, shoulder crushed into yellow rocks
and dust fills his lungs as the sun bears down
his final sense of self-preservation
tells him hysterically he will die
as we all calmly drive by
watching his tail beat against the pavement

Watch me beat my tail against the pavement.

The Blood Burning Moon

The discordant music rose to the fifth
movement;
As empty rattling saucepans crashed
from the
Withered hands of the Night Sleepers—
That's the hitch—
Rhythmically, halting footsteps broke
the longish silence
To police their lives.

The old men, women, children in grey
overalls,
Hugged their belongings overflowing
the borrowed
Supermarket carts,
Wheeled onto the shining marble
floor,
Shuffled to the dark deserted street
to face
The blood burning Moon
To return again to Beethoven's
Heaven's Gate.

"Honey, they made a mess of the
evening for us."

Growing Up

Young and I thought myself a woman,
I loved and questioned not,
Now a woman and I find myself young,
Why do I now ask of love?,
I need and I find myself lacking,
Then I love and I find myself hurting,
I hurt and I find myself hating,
I feel myself growing cold,
Insensitive to pain and not caring,
Or I try and convince myself so,
Others are so adept—why not I,
My life as it is means little,
No one trusts me for my abilities,
They mistrust me for my inabilities,
And they decide what my inabilities are,
My inabilities by their standards—are strengths by mine.

Now I know why I ask of love,
Because love DEMANDS of me.

Subtle Sins

Time has erased the hurt and pain,
Only to remember and relive it again,
The years go by and new troubles take the place of old,
Each one taking a part and leaving me cold,
I yearn for feelings to feel again,
And commit to myself a mortal sin,
My life once fresh and lived with zeal,
I bury my feelings and learn to conceal,
No good, No bad, constantly indifferent,
I don't rock the boat—it seems irreverent,
Though in life there are many games to play,
No one really has a say,
Today we play the games this way.

Marriage

Marriage is the institution which God created for two
loving people

Always realizing it is sometimes hard to stay together
but living for the

Rapture it brings as they hold each other during the
night feeling the

Relief that they are lying at each other's side the next
morning saying

I love you honey and sharing

All the trials and tribulations of the day before as

God is blessing them each day for their promising love
till the

End of time.

So Loftily High

Like birds we drifted up into the sky,
Pulled by a yacht on a cable which rose
Above the ocean so loftily high,
Awesomeness seldom is like this, one knows.

My mind felt peace which was light as the air
As billowy clouds hugged hillsides around.
Sun stroked my face and wind tangled my hair;
Fantasy dwells in this space above ground.

The cobalt-blue ocean glistened like glass
As surf tumbled forth like pure fallen snow.
Bobbing black dolphins would surface, then pass;
A prideful spectacle they add below.

Aura of beauty and blissfulness brought
Diminished, descending downward to yacht.

Of Love and Hate

How does the ocean know once more
When time is right to kiss the shore?
Why does Diana choose to ride
At night across the sky so wide?
Apollo opts to ride by day,
His chariot gold, in daytime play?
How does Spring know time to bloom?
Why does Autumn shed leaves with gloom?
How does Summer know when to parch?
And nature obey Winter's death-time march
Causation of events unfold
Devoid of reason to be told.
Nature is the ruler true
Of earthly functions old and new.
But what explains abstracted whims
Of love and hate, of truths and sins?
Most of all what can explain
The reason why two thoughts can twain?

When?

From the fine yellow down of softness
She grew.
Mastered yesterday's waivering steps,
Today's precision steps
To pink ballet shoes
Adorned with satin ribbons.
Sways gently as a breeze
In summer
Sturdy as an oak
In winter.
Reminiscence clutches my heart
I cling to emptiness of yesterdays
And wonder
When?
She transformed
Once a tender rosebud of spring
Now a beautiful blossoming rose of summer.

I Hear the Deafened Music

When spirit empties
the soul
Like a hopeless vacuum,
Empty room beckons.
Like oblivious sleepwalker,
I enter.
Nothing changes:
Red and white tennis shoes
Obediently remain by bedside;
Brass framed awards cling stubbornly
To brown and white wall paper.
Grey dust gently shrouds
Black plastic container for compact discs.
Shh . . .
I hear the deafened music;
I feel his presence.
As the oak clock's golden pendulum
Moves methodically to
The beat of my heart
Reality stirs,
Awakening my ethereal senses.

Goodbye, Integrity

A certain voice
She speaks to you
A warm tingle
Goes through and through
You pack the rules
Unleash the lies
To integrity
You say goodbye

Farewell,
I'll see you on the sly

Embrace one moral
A feat that always proves to overwhelm you
Heart shaped molecule
Too small to let the pangs of conscience make it through

No ethos that might work
No good deeds to inspire you
Inclined to endure
A baseness life imparts to you

Goodbye, Integrity
Goodbye

Debauchery rings her bell
Chastity can go to hell
You pack the rules
Unleash the lies
To integrity
You say goodbye

Farewell,
I'll miss you even more

Can't be blamed for your fall
It was predetermined long before you ever knew
Soothe your wounds
Show your gall
Augment the stubborn vices lest they fade from you

No ethical debates
No quandaries to confound you
Conscience agitates those scruples which you well eschew

Goodbye, Integrity,
Goodbye.

The Boom!

When twilight came pouring upon this sweet town,
And mother was talking to all those around,
I spied through the window some alien sight,
That moved 'cross the glitter and hid in the night.
But my attentions were drawn back to the others,
Who listened with rapture to the words of our mother.
Her sounds were like songs that played in the room.
They listened, I listened, then suddenly . . . the Boom!

The bell from a heaven at last had rung clear,
Releasing a wail of panic and fear.
This world tore screaming in far echoing pains
And billowed forth torrents in firey chains,
And in the red room I saw in a flash
The lives of the others relinquished to ash.
I fought, all afire, to keep open these eyes,
But there was no nothing, no whispers, no cries!

I was caught in a dream, ensnared in a lie!
Why did I linger? Why didn't I die?
Naked and burning, I howled for no more,
But got only silence, then fell to the floor
And caught I the sight of the window . . . and knew,
For through it I saw . . . fat red men that flew.
In that long moment I could painfully tell,
There must be a god . . . for I'd made it to Hell.

Untitled

Ah, heedless wonder heart
That moves beneath the turgid sac
The clasp a burden, pursue the chance
And move steadily within my body's course
The neverending legacy of hope
To a life, boundless in measure
Shall I follow and know the wisdom
Or deny the rhythmic solicitation —
Will some age-old knowledge be mine,
Will a folly ever resound within my ears
If I ever acknowledge that physic
Mystic mother force that drives me
And calls his name to me
Even at the depths of sleep?

A beat stirs at my temple, calling
Into my mind's shrine his image,
And I know not the answer.
But I heed the pulse, and quicken
Because the wonder of my heart,
A beloved cast long before a time
Marched within my veins,
Is nigh.

Leaning on the Lamp Post Since Passover

I once asked for help
but was mistaken for a lamp post
and have been here, silent.
eversince passover

spying

1975

Normal You

Nothing was more perfect, tonight
than the lights turning, cycling
down the street, the wheels of Ezekiel's god
(often thought to be from an alien world)
twirling like gold rings on their sides, in the street
the dance of headlights and neon angels
sang to me. Your back as straight
as the black street, the dance of lights
a fire, a controlled fireball moving easily
down you, around you, like kisses.

And when you told me you were normal, I saw
the white, glowing, straight snake in your back,
in your eyes for a second, and that damned
toothpick in your mouth, the angle outside
of angles, the angel cast out, jutting
out from between your lips, the angel
of the unseen smacking out against the
blasts and cannons of light from your lips.

The angles of the weeds cluttering my back,
the web of invading, awful strands sucking
at my inner world, the multiheaded snake
of devotion which looks at cars and sees
the spheres and cycles of atoms and systems,
the system of lights and eyes and snakes:
these stretch me out and pull me flat.
They move in a fast, organic dance and I
see my hands moving easily down you,
around you, like kisses, and the night
falls back to the points of one offshoot
of the network of crystals and webs,
to before and beyond, blasting
whatever Eden was.

Never to, to never touch is like the lights,
the perfection of the movement, the
sky of light, the back streets of my
back world, backing night like stock.
The touch of your hand would shatter
a hundred systems of worlds, a hundred
lights would explode, and all the crazy
angles would move up parallel and
all the cycling rings of light would
move slowly, then faster until all
was a flash, a thunder, a dark road,
a flash of fire, a whirlwind of light,
the purging of backs bent up, back
and down into one flat plane of light,
stacking up and up forever, random light,
angel patterns on each plate, the blood
of their celestial colors, the universe
recreated in that act I want as I
want lights to forever turn as smoothly
and as I want lines to form out as
irregularly and as I want blasts and
lights and a pure shaft of sound and
you and you flat, and you light, and
you, normal you.

Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie
wrote a book on Monday
got it published on Tuesday
was threatened on Wednesday
went in hiding on Thursday
was killed on Friday
was buried on Saturday
got a check in the mail on Sunday
Poor Salman Rushdie.

Pastoral Three: Call to Worship

A boy should lose his virginity
someplace dark.
He ought to find a church basement and
a long pot-luck table;
he ought to knock over several folding chairs.

A boy should lose his virginity
in a holy place,
where potato salads and fried chicken and molded Jell-O
congregate,
where ladies' prayer groups conduct their affairs.

A boy should lose his virginity
with Jesus watching,
while shaking the crosses off the walls,
shivering in a basement at night,
while Jesus is listening, and nobody cares.

A boy should lose his virginity
with God and all his saints watching.
A boy needs to know that the pews
don't fall through the ceiling because
a boy entertains angels unawares.

A boy should lose his virginity
someplace dark, seen
only by the unseen, yielding
flesh to flesh to
only the girl who followed him down the stairs.

A boy should lose his virginity.

Untitled

To Kurt, in memory of the storm

You could, I'm sure, turn water into stone.
The belief that pours out of
the top of your head wanders like
excess bodyheat,
circling the spines of
all those around you, and tightening them.
Sit up straight you bastards.
And then shazam,
you've turned water into pebbles,
skipping them back over their
mothers' liquid breasts.

They are changed by your touch,
and different now.
These stony pearls know how to
sink and how to
cut the sweet flesh of
unsuspecting feet.
They are strong and they are like
the thin-hard fingers of Jesus.
Who was once a rock himself,
and who waved his beacon
hands over water,
even on his off days.

When did you forget?
You crouched beneath a slab
of gracious and gray-angry rock.
Your mouth was chilled, your tongue
seeking sand crumbs from your teeth.

Focused only on the lightning
that stung the trees
and stung again,
You let the sky's cruel
liquid laughter taunt you.
Next time you'll turn it into stone.

Untitled

If I live long on this
green place, beside
the colored horses
I will see Damon,
which will make my mouth long for fruit.
I want to peel it
in slices with my teeth,
to watch him in
summer silence while he
sleeps, his brown skin pressed
to the grass, between the pears.

In the heat his
breath is lined with peaches.
When he twists his neck
to laugh at my
hands and the way they
pull at my skirt
I smell the carts
and the golden kiss of olives.

Damon, aren't you the son
of a gypsy? The laugh
of a frantic color-hot dance
in the night is always
just at your throat.
You would steal my
unborn children
if I stared just once
past your face.

Poem to My Ugly Silver Box

You, little silver box
with such a
red red smile,
you were found at Goodwill
monster face.
We've shared the thrift store
aisles; we've sat, still
and smiling through our
weird lives, and loved all
the leering weird folk
that pass us by and poke.

A couple dances, ugly
on your lid, happy, their greenish
palms pressed for eternity
(to no music).

You are a monster of a
box, a cavern of an
empty silver place. You
will not be thrown away
like all the pretty crystal
others.

To A Study Partner

Coiled seduction lays tense
on my every white page;
a coil so tight that it
 makes the air shake
 and bumps the pale evening angels.
 The book now swims heat white
 and scalds my brain
until I blink.

When you close your straining
eyes the logic flees, chased
 by the sting of your longing palms
and the sudden consuming hard
presence of your skin.

Where did that skin come from
I ask my books, and to what
does it lead? But I've studied
how it points in glowing lines
 to the soft of your
 electric lower lip.
(How the answer thins our angels).

Your tongue is moist, you stop to
notice, and you've seen how
 my own is so like
 the sensual steam from
 a summer hose. It washes
 my teeth while I read the air
above my book.

We cannot find out thoughts
We breathe in ether
packed with feel, and even
the angels are gone, pressed away.
My skin is awash with tiny
spills of your glare
that you must taste.

The Thesaurus Writes of Jesus

Gardens, now imagine them
Cool night, calm night, indifferent,
unemotional, self-possessed and placid
night of all betrayal Don't Betray O
my Father in Heaven Amen.
In this garden there are people asleep.
Their lashes are pressed to their cheeks, forced
to their cheeks while they dream the dream
of exhaustion, a no dream; black sleep
Coma midnight. Coma my Father
bring midnight bring starlight
Bring my saving flight But O They
Woebegone Amen.

To bind is to obligate. You were under obligation
Thy will be done
To strike is to lower. You came down to dust
and lower still to fire You came down
Spiralled downward spinning lower
and then, like a spark, you shot up.
It is finished
You shot out
To crucify. No one deals with crucify.
It is agony, it is our ecstasy
It is splintered and mocked and
nailed reality, but for a moment.
And this moment dropped
down, a stain from your brow,
fell into a cup of your blood
as large as Him
and then mingled with eternity.

November Party

My mother had told everyone
That thirty-nine was all she would admit to,
So this party marked
The first one that didn't count.
It was a grey Torrance day,
And the faded crepe-paper
Party decorations hung limply,
Tattered from previous use.

The room was full of crewcuts
And pushed up hairdos;
Plaid shirts, white shorts, Lucky Strikes,
The sound of martinis in a metal shaker.
Children darted between the couples,
Yelling loudly, being hushed;
Plastic machine guns rat-a-tat-tatting,
Stealing Milk Duds from the snack bowl.

When you're five years old
Rooms are like caverns
And people like giants;
Their language mysterious, their words strange.
But the figure that raced
Through the front door
To the television set
Severed the ties of conversation.

The black-and-white screen
Drew the room into it.
People sat and stared, gasped.
Something had happened in a place called Dallas.

I sat on the floor before the set,
Shifting my eyes from the picture there
To the mascara running down my mother's face
And my father drinking his beer angrily.

One-by-one the people left, saying nothing,
Staggering to their homes like zombies.
Those that remained were all crying,
Crushing handkerchiefs in knotted fists.
No one had turned off the record player —
Chubby Checker blared a twist song.
I didn't understand, but I started to cry too.
I only knew it was a time to cry.

Dans Le Noir

Comme une nuit,
Le coeur récele le paysage.
Comme une vie,
Je jour révele le mensonge.

Dans le noir
Lame ne parle pas mais écoute,
Pour la lueur
Qui peut transporter l'espoir partout.

Entre le crépuscule et l'aube,
Entre la volonté et la voie,
Désir arrive en trombe
Et tu reviendras a moi

Cramponne-toi au reve cette nuit,
Au sourvenir et a la douleur.
Demain nos coeurs nous donneront appui
Comme le soleil dans le nouveau jour.

Comme la lune,
Notre amour croit et décroît.
Comme tous les jeunes,
Nous sommes dans notre droit.

Bien des étoiles,
Nous faisons un chute brillant parfois.
Mais de la course si vive et éloignée,
Surgit le message d'amour que j'envoie.

Running

Morning,
running in a Portland winter rain,
Trying to block the pain
Of not having you here with me.

Cold rain,
Streaming down my face,
Along the lines that teardrops trace
Late at night, all alone, in bed.

Wondering,
Why things happen the way that they do,
When I only want to be with you —
To hear your laughter and see your smile.

Sometimes,
When life is cold as steel
The only thing that seems real
Is the way that I feel
For you . . . for you.

Hoping,
That the path I'm on is right,
That I can carry on this fight
To leave loneliness and trouble behind.

Working,
On promises yet to keep,
And the benefits I could reap
"With sixty seconds worth of distance run."

Dreaming,
Of the years we still could fill,
With a love that fear can't kill
Step-by-step, everyday, in the . . .

Morning,
Running in a Portland winter rain,
Trying to block the pain
Of not having you here with me . . .

Untitled

There are two queries which seldom know truth
 one for the aged, one for the youth
Ask an old soldier, 'Ever kill in a war?'
Ask a young Rambler, 'Ever do this before?'

There are two parts which cannot be
A dead man's heart, a live man's eye
Where is no sound be no deceit
 and through the eye the heart doth beat

Draw not the truth through what is mentioned
 nor the honor through good intention
Listen quick to words unspoken
 and hearts that beat for yours unbroken

Gentlemen of the Press

Gentlemen of the press—
is there any such thing?
As they dig through life's garbage can
searching for each apple core,
they seek not the fruit of man's tree
but desperately grasp. . .
for portions tossed away.

A God's Butterfly Eyes

The child's view of a butterfly
is mine of this man's eyes,
as a bright, joyous sight
almost holy in inspiration,
heavenly in direction,
yet earthly in delight;
They are unattainable to man.
The Gods alone must know—
of a child's butterfly
and of this man's eyes.

Life's Washer

The sorting,
separating,
and organizing by need
the gentle, the sturdy, the wrinkle free,
and the whites, which need the strongest bleach
to remove an older more visible stain.

Then the shove
in we go
with others like ourselves
in structure or purpose,
yet different in color or design;
we crowd together so sure we are alone.

The water falls up
bringing soaps, softeners, and bleach,
as we swirl together
learning of each other's stains and of our own,
preparing for the next life,
becoming purified, refreshed.

We swim in life's joys
and toss in its troubles
then spin to remove the remains
as our time in life's washer prepares us
for the heat of the dryer
or the glory of drying in the sun.

A Piece of Furniture

Hypnotized by a Cyclopean eye,
We live adventurous lives.
The endless car-crash scene
Catches our pulse and carries us to
The border of heroism.
The enlightening cliché holds
Life's deeper meaning in
A Vision. Black and white perception
And non-fragmentary thought.
Pain, love, longing, tears
All flow through the years in
Entrancing imitation.
We do indeed live!
Blissfully medicated, we watch the
Days of Our Lives passing by between commercials.

Untitled

In lurid g-string, she offers it all to yahoos of her
world: at last she

s
t
r
i
p
p
s

off the g-string
and throws it to the
almost-innocent
in row 2.

Then coyly, covers loins and chest and greets the
darkness of obscurity.

Stripper 2

had frosted hair,
blue panties,
no bra.
the smile was forfeited in sweat
and dread.

Stripper 3

had yellow panties
and long ago stopped praying to
either drape or darkness.

Stripper 4

may have been before

Stripper 5

wore pink and white,
talked to herself,
and moved a beat ahead of the music.

Stripper 6

focused on the red-faced man in row 1,
gave him her underthings
and memories of a night on a foreign town
her grin was waxen and depraved.

Stripper 7

began as i left . . .

She may have danced before.

Untitled

to life:

my name is fantasy, she said, what can i do for you?
Hold me very tight, let me feel so alive.

you are alive, we can see to that.
But no, a friend just died and I want my spirit to
drink deep from the wellspring of vitality, and
to coat the pain I cry.

mmmh, she said as her arms took in my back and ribs
and the press of her breasts stirred my heart.

I want . . .
shh, she whispered, and kissed me—warm, dry, softly
so that the taste of her became a part of me
and bathed my sores and memories
and cleansed the tart reflections

But, I need to say . . .
once again, she kissed my lips, but this time lusty, wet and deep;
stole my cool breath and limp words,
and taste of her called my hibernating man
and I kissed eagerly back.
We felt the sweat on each other's neck and I knew
that I was alive.

we kissed tenderly, after that
letting the passion ebb and bob,
giggling as first one, and then the other touched
a leg or breast, or kissed, or smelled
or smiled.

the rustle of her skirt scattered my funeral pipes
as I wept frustration on her breast,
she stroked my neck to expel
tension there.
hugging, consoling, touching the life in one another
we passed the afternoon and drank the wine-life

i'm done, she said at last.

But I want more, I cried, and reached for her waist,
deftly, she slipped my hand into hers, and bent low to kiss
me on the forehead.

while I smelled, she whispered, to life,
to life.

twirling, she walked away leaving me with memories
of red petticoats, sweat-sweet perfume and the
taste of her lips on mine.
and a friend who lived, then died.

to life, to life . . .

Untitled

Pain, pain, pain, . . .

I fear and loathe the pain I bear . . .

In consternation
dismay
apprehension
timidity
dread
panic and alarm I greet the burning
in my knee.

I fear and loathe the pain I bear,

In slow feeble steps,
watching
sitting
waiting
wishing
closing
and walking
unable to run, jump
leap, play.

I've lost a portion of my dignity
to this damn distress,
and joined a battle I
gladly should have missed.

I've met despair and and mercy there.
My pride's been ripped from these strong legs
and replaced by stiff timidity.

I've lost sleep and
jogging
camping
hiking
kneeling
and confidence.

Yes, I fear and loathe the pain I bear.

Untitled

white

alone i stand
on ice floes.

adrift from
walls, white dresses,
carpets and people.

alone i am, naked
in freezing solitude . . .

Untitled

killer kern

In the arid hills
this river kills—

Blue skies and cool air
call to the family, and sportsman,
and swimmer,
and diver
to re-creation.

In timeless second
the strong, lusty swimmer is taken,
—a broken day of play.

Blue on black,
brown hill hosting
green and yellow and red.
white

Diamonds dance on water,
reborn when dashed by rafts, tubes, swimmers and rocks.
black

Diamonds sleep on sand and silt,
nursing fish, and death.

She calls to swimmers, fishermen, families,
dogs, divers, drivers,
canoists, techies, liars,
priests, hookers, truckers,
bikers, drinkers and poets.

Perfumed air hints of Colorado, Canada (Cool!)
re-generation, re-creation,
re-fresca, re-life.

Swimming, tubing and the other water dances
diminish the sterile, impersonal signs:

"137 DROWNED."

Her caress is fun and invigorating.
-makes me feel alive, whole.

White diamonds reflect dark brooding boulders
shaped by time, water,
stones & bones.

In a few timeless seconds
she can set her embrace and mortal kiss
of rocks and water and current
and death.

Anticipation

It will never ring.

Watching the shadow of the day
creep its way across my bedroom wall,
pensively, I sit.

It will never ring.

Darkness floods the room and my heart
as I think.

She forgot-

lost the number-

got tied up at work-

She got ran off the road and is stuck under some pile of broken up
machinery

screaming . . .

for me.

Oh no . . .

Rrrriing . . .

Christine Aya

Caressant l'agile ombre de tes tempes
Humant l'eau fraîche sur ta joue
Recevant le souffle de ton regard
Imaginant les nuances de ton cœur
Sachant le bleu-calme de tes yeux
Touchant les bords de ta reverie
Imaginant le lustre de tes soupirs
Nommant ta lune et ton étoile
Entrant dans ta lumière délicate . . .

Abordons la blancheur de nos pages
Y écrivons la trame de nos jours-nuages
Allongeons-nous, deux devant une Autre.

Abuela for E.B.L. de M. (1892-1926)

I have only heard of you sweet Abuela:
word of mouth that made your life so vivid.
At 34 you died close to the steps of a hospital
in San Juan, Puerto Rico
strangling your eighth child in your womb.

Abuela, you wore a corset during your eighth pregnancy.
You were tired of being pregnant and
there were practical reasons involved:
pregnant women were not allowed
in public circa the 1920's in San Juan.
Abuela, you wanted to be able to go out
in public, so you hid your pregnancy
from the fifth month on.
This tactic you devised to cope
with your eighth pregnancy
had disastrous effects for you
and your eighth child, a girl
who died in utero.

Abuelo sealed you and your eternal womb-child
in a tomb above the ground
at El Morro
where your bones dried
and were picked clean by the air.
And where you held your infant beside you
ad infinitum
A mother, a woman
extinguished by motherhood
your weary body
assaulted for the last time.

Madre, Que Falta Me Hace

She always let me love her in the most detailed way.

At siesta time in our Bronx apartment
I would slip into your bedroom
where you lay resting on your side
tired from a housewife's hectic morning.
And you would say to me:
"Dame un sobo, Yoannie,
dame un sobo en mis pies,
pedacito de miel."

And I would kiss your warm arm
reach for the witch hazel
and cottonballs,
as you would shift on your back.
Then I would wet one cotton ball amply
and gently stroke the bottoms of your feet
repeating the process over and over again
until we were both satisfied.

I would rub and clean each toe in the most detailed way.
Never tiring of your pleasure.
Never tiring of your calm relaxation.
and you would thank me saying:
"Gracias amor. Eres una buena hijita."

I always relished this occasion.
When just the two of us
could love each other.

"Madre, que falta me hace."

Battered Women's Shelter Charlottesville, Virginia 1979

And you Lillian with your pregnant belly
busted eye, and cut up knees.
Did you just trip by accident?
Or were your tears
beaten out of you?
And that husband of yours
who had to be removed by force
from the emergency room.
How come he's still
out there a free man -
and you're here
in our shelter,
a terrified woman
with beatings vivid
in your head and
evident on your body?
You sit, head in hands,
recounting and reliving
the fear of fists
that drum themselves
on your brain
and pound harder
each time, and drum
down on your pregnant belly.
You knew the beatings
were getting worse.

and you Eileen
with your screwed-up eyes
and frantic nerves.
How did you take it
for 16 years
with an alcoholic husband
who beat you
when you were asleep
in bed at 1 a.m.
and didn't hop up
to greet him from
his night with the boys.

"Where's my dinner?"
How many times did
he kick you in the head?
How long did it take
to knock 6 of your teeth out?
Did that 9th beating before you left
make something finally click
in your head?

And you Debra
with a one-year old child
and another one on the way.
How many clumps of hair
did your husband
pull from your head?
How many times did he threaten
you with a knife?
Where do all those hickies
and bruises end?

And you Sharon, a secretary
for five years
a married woman for just four.
How did it feel to be dragged
on the grass in front of
your friend's house
thrown down
and almost choked to death?
And how did it feel to be clocked
when you went shopping
and beaten if you
returned one minute late?

Possession is a dangerous word.
Submission is a dangerous feeling.
And fear is a psychological debasement.

Now women, what have you done here?
Lillian left it all behind
and moved to another town.

And Eileen, a Catholic
is legally separated
but doesn't believe in divorce.

And Debra
you went back to your husband
and somehow we are all sure
that we'll see you again.

And Sharon
is a free woman
in her own apartment
who says:
"I know what I know
and no one can take that from me."

Love Train

A train
but this time a love train
traveling the tracks
in a local fashion
stopping in towns
we haven't chosen
shuttling along
in time
with out hearts:
gradual, swaying
rocking, staying.

We are on our way
we decided.
We're taking a local,
taking it easy
keeping in rhythm
with all the stages,
all the nuances
of progression,
looking forward
to our arrival.

"And we all ran away to enlighten what was already light"

Maybe it's not so bad a day when I drive down the street at 3:30
See white high school boy with black high school girl
Maybe they're learning what we taught wrong.
And maybe the world will get better yet, if we drop what's outside, and
look for more.
But for now my hair and my clothes are me—that's just the way it is.
Maybe the children are right to play, regardless of race, holy order, or
vow.
Or maybe we further should separate the whites from the blacks,
protestants from priests
Or maybe this world isn't big enough, and we who are small should be
asked to leave.
But maybe in heaven we'll be one lovely shade, and judgment
will lose in this whole human race.
And maybe one God meant for one kind of child, and we all
ran away to enlighten what was already light.
And maybe there still can be love in this world as I look in her
eyes, smile, and tenderly weep.
And just maybe her name's on the tip of my tongue till I cough
and it's out, the whole world there to see.
And maybe one God meant for one kind of child.
And maybe one god meant for this kind of child,
and we all ran away to enlighten what was already light

Janitor

in the back of my mind
behind the stacks of notes
and bottles of life's colours, racked
on shelves, dust covered;

i believe you'll find
kind thoughts, once fresh
and white as new daisies, now
preserved . . . graffiti

each smudged note
once graced the tongue-tip.
soul quotes placed so carefully
to feed love's early spark.

each heartbeat
(now dust-wrapped) awaits
a new lover's light and eager heart,
or the janitor,
cleaning.

Untitled

little words in whispers
 of massive thought
 but tiny sound
Spill from my hand, my heart, abrupt, alone

once out, they're on their own
like you and I as we
 lay our hearts upon the ground
Before each other

Deborah L. Stephen

Haitu

Voyagers
upon life's sea
bail out loneliness
with laughing buckets

Violence

Night stalks the day
Restless children ready
themselves to fight
Screams of terror echo
through graffitied tenements
Blood runs freely over young
bodies not yet matured
Sirens scream
Mothers lament
Bagged bodies lie in line
Politicians pocket dirty money
Society groans
No-one has an answer!
No-one cares!

War

Charred lands of burning flesh
guns erect like a boys first trip
into manhood
a child's cry from the pain of death
half-starved babies the breast is dry.
Bombed scarred homes now shells of what
once was
faces etched with fear of bullets
touching their flesh
the stench of death now fills the air
and
then no more.

Homeless

Running naked through the streets

Tents on a city block

Bench laden bodies covered in newprint

Shopping carts cradle life-long dreams

Hands outstretched in want

Crying babies clinging to their mother's breast

Crowds of empty faces look at

Fat Bellied Politicians with closed minds and
backs turned

Hoping society will take care of itself

or

Die away silently!

A Friend

Images of silence
quiet thoughts of papers due
brown eyes search for the answer,
no watch to break at the arm
time passes too quickly
jewelry has no place in this one's life.
Kind, thoughtful, determined to succeed
She will!

My Brave Student Warriors

Holding a glass of wine
It pours into a pool of blood
Cutting me inside when swallowed

Smoke-rings in the room
Suddenly break into wandering souls
A chilling song of June 4th
Floods into the room from all corners
It says:

"Mother, tell my little brother and sister
about how I died
My friends, tell the young generation of the students
about how I was killed

I remember the last moment . . .
Facing vicious oncoming tanks and armed soldiers
We held on to each other's hands tightly
while our tears were dripping down on our cheeks
None of us stepped back
But my mind was shocked and puzzled:
We're only asking peacefully for democracy
why are you answering us with fire and the death penalty
Oh, we did not even carry any weapons!

Mother, tell my little brother and sister
about how I died
My friends, tell the young generation of the students
about how I was killed
People, tell others about how I was sacrificed"

Oh, my brave, brave student warriors
They ran over and destroyed your bodies
 but they can never erase the hope you have left behind
You sacrificed your lives
 Just to make your country a better place for people to live
Your spirits have flown across the ocean
 sending us the message of your firm belief
Your blood has written a very tragic page in world history

When it is quiet at night
I can hear people's moaning and crying from all over the world
I can hear vigorously enraged ocean waves sent by the students afar
I can hear the groaning of the infuriated souls

As long as the blood massacre is vividly remembered
As long as the people there are still struggling
The blood will never stop flowing
My suffering will never end
My eyes will never dry

Illusion and Dream

I woke up from a distant dream
Crying over a fading rainbow
Helplessly landing on a confusing time zone
I kept turning around and around
My colorful past had then drowned in the whirlpool of my turning

Slowly riding my guitar into a crystal dream
I strike the strings
Breaking the dream into a million brilliant stars

Turn around . . .
I find myself dancing in the Milky Way with tunes of reminiscence
I am drinking the breeze with a thousand-year desire

Turn around . . .
Clouds break up in a stormy way
Losing me in the myth of loss
Reality has deteriorated my spirit
The fear of unknown drives me to the corner of darkness
I struggle through the night just to meet the dawn
I laugh around the places just to break through my hidden tears

Turn around . . .
I am a thinker
I am a member of a Lost Group
I am a veteran of an Insomnia Club
I see a mirage in the dark
I see rain in a song

Illusion is how I survive
Dream is the answer to my escape

Please
Don't wake me up
I can't carry on

Melancholy

Melancholy is your name
You're floating silently to the edge of my bed
in the night
Eroding my heart
Accusing my soul
Awakening my dream

Strolling about the path on a day in October
Tramping on the dreams that you broke
Counting off the thousands of fading sighs
You're crying when the sun's sinking
Bathing me in an endless sorrow

Although someday
Somebody might read out your story from my eyes
How do they know
that your misery is my life

S t o r i e s

Orpheus •

El Greco from Teronto

"Thank God she's all right," I thought as I tried to read an article on El Greco from Teronto. I read two lines then re-thought the events of the night. A phone call put us here. We were laughing. I don't remember at what. My dad answered the phone. He knew something was wrong. I could tell by the look on his face. The phone call was for Kathy, my girl friend. I knew her mom was dead. Car accident was all we could get out of Kathy before she broke down in tears. My mom held her as she cried. Kathy's eyes were closed, and I knew she was wishing that she was holding her own mom. Maybe she was holding onto what she had before the call; crying louder as it faded away.

My dad drove us to the hospital. The night snow slowed us down. It wouldn't stop slapping the car windshield. We knew the snow was probably the cause of the accident. It seemed to be laughing at us as if to remind us that it could take us too if it wanted. I looked over at my dad and Kathy as we drove down the small, uncrowded highway. Dad said nothing and tried to concentrate on the road. Kathy looked like a frightened, timid animal left alone in the snow covered forest. She shook from more than the cold. I held her hand. She said nothing, but I knew what she was thinking. Her hand shook from the images. She stared straight ahead, but she wasn't looking out the windshield. She was concentrating. Maybe she was trying not to think. It was a long trip.

We walked into the emergency waiting room. Kathy almost ran. We stood in a white square room with old blue chairs and a coffee table with a pile of scattered magazines. We waited at the front desk which was really a small separate room with a window. It reminded me of a ticket booth. "The two swinging doors to the emergency room must lead to the show," I felt guilty for thinking such things. I never was very good in a crisis. I seemed to fade out. I pretend everything's O.K. or think of something else.

The nurse in the booth typed as we stood. We nervously waited. When she finished, she looked up at us. She spoke through a small hole in the window. "Yes, what do you want?" Kathy explained who she was and asked how her mother was doing. The nurse told us that we would have to wait until the doctor came out before we could ask questions. So we sat and stared at the white walls. It felt like an hour before the doctor walked in. He was young and wore tennis shoes. He reminded me of a television show I sometimes watch. I felt guilty for

thinking that. He explained to us that Kathy's mom was fine but must remain in bed for a few weeks. She had a fractured leg and some sprains. The doctor allowed Kathy to visit her for a minute. I thanked God she was all right. I thanked God for Kathy's sake. I felt guilty again. I love Kathy and knew if her mom died, she would fall apart. My dad and I rummaged through some old magazines. I found one with lots of pictures.

I tried to get back to El Greco. I managed to read a page when a young couple walked in the room. The man had his arm around the young woman who wore a thick blue robe. He guided her to the front desk. She must have been in too much pain to have changed clothes. I knew she would have changed if she could because it was about twenty degrees Fahrenheit outside. Her eyes were closed and her hand was next to her left temple. Her body was stiff and still except her hands that trembled. She made small moaning noises. I read a sentence of the El Greco article. The nurse said, "Just a minute." I re-read that sentence. The nurse pulled out some files. I couldn't remember what the sentence said.

"What's the problem," the nurse asked as she looked for something; a pen I think.

"I," the young woman paused, "I."

The man holding her broke in, "She has a severe migraine."

"All right," the nurse pushed out a form and pen through the small hole in the window, "You'll have to fill out this form."

The young woman moaned as she tried to grab the pen. She dropped it on the floor. The young man leaned over and picked up the pen. "Please," he asked, "Can't you treat her now?"

"Not until she fills out the form," the nurse's voice was cold and business like.

"Well, what if I filled it out for her," he asked.

"Are you married or related?"

"No."

"Then she must do it."

"But she can't!"

"Well." The nurse paused in disgust. "I'll fill it out for her." She grabbed the form and pen. I gave up trying to read the article. I looked at the pictures of El Greco's paintings. "Your name, address and phone number," the nurse asked. The young man started to answer but was quickly interrupted. "No, she must answer!" The young woman managed to mumble her name but had to concentrate a little on the address and phone number. This seemed to increase her pain. Her hand shook more and her moans became louder. I tried to concentrate on the paintings as the nurse asked for her social security number, place of employment, address of employment and income.

"Can't you get the rest later," her boy friend asked.

"If you would stop interrupting me, we could finish."

"Please hurry," the young woman pleaded. The nurse asked how much life insurance she had and was it paid up. I stared at the paintings without looking at them.

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Your age?"

"I'm twenty-three. Please, please hurry." She leaned against her boy friend.

"Ethnic background?"

"Canadian."

"Are you a U.S. citizen?"

"Yes. Please." Her hand pressed against the window for more support. The nurse asked who to contact in case of problems.

"What could go wrong with a migraine? Well, I guess anything's possible in a hospital," I thought to myself. I wondered how Kathy's mom was doing.

"Your religious background?"

"It hurts!" she cried.

"What does religion background have to do with anything," her boy friend asked. "Can't you get that later?"

"Your religious background?"

"None." She started to cry. The painting of a saint handing his cloak to a naked peasant began to fade from view. I kept hidden behind the magazine. The nurse typed the form out while the young woman cried. The banging of the typewriter echoed in the small room.

After the nurse finished, she told the young woman that she could fill out the rest of the forms later and that the doctor would be out in a minute or two. The nurse went to notify the doctor. I tried to read again.

I can't remember the article.

The Desecration

It was Vance's car. Vance. There was a split-second of misgiving as she asked herself, "What is he doing here?" Then she thought that Monica, her roommate, must have borrowed his car, as happened once before. But no, there was music. Through the cracked window she heard Mozart, the *Clarinet Quintet*, the piece Vance most enjoyed making love to her by. Vance was certainly there. Nancy must have called him and told him she had canceled out, told him something was wrong, and he had come over to comfort her. She remembered how his arms felt when they closed around her in bed. Greedily she dug the housekey out of her purse and inserted it into the lock.

She pushed the door open and caught a whiff of marijuana.

"Vance?" she called out to her lover in a voice not much louder than a whisper.

But the living room was empty. She listened through the music for voices, her heart beginning to dither. What was going on? No sound came from the kitchen. Then she heard Monica's laugh. It came from her bedroom but was muffled.

Sylvia realized that the door was shut, and her breath came fast and shallow. No, it could not be. She looked at the stereo; the Mozart was the last of several spinning records piled on top of each other. At that instant the second movement ended, and she took advantage of the silence to listen to sounds from behind the door. Vance was talking in a purr; he was saying something about his home, something about his family, his mother. All innocence. She would knock on the door. No, she would not. But if anything was happening, she had to know. She tiptoed across the carpet to the door, her heart rising in her throat.

The last movement of the *Quintet* had begun, and she couldn't quite make out what Vance was saying. Another gale of laughter from Monica. They were just smoking, that was all. They were smoking in the bedroom because they knew she didn't approve of pot and hated the smell. She held her breath, put her hand on the doorknob, then took it back. She would knock first. No, she would go outside and take a walk. But she was exhausted, and this was her house. She would sit down and wait. She would read. Just as she had made up her mind to creep back over to the sofa, the door opened.

"Sylvia!" It was Vance. His eyes were blood shot, and he was naked. The room was close with the smell of smoke and flesh.

Sylvia gasped and tottered backward. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Monica pull the cover up around her bare breasts and turn away.

"I—I thought you were—Oh my God"! Vance turned around and reached for his underwear, which was under the bedcovers.

For an instant Sylvia felt like shrieking, striking out at something, but instead she turned around and hurried soundlessly out of the front door. She did not feel the grass under her feet or hear the owl hooting out of the cool, moonlit silence. She felt only a kind of black numbness. She was like a ghost making its nightly, mechanical walk to the scene of its murder a century before. Her mind was like a snowy TV screen with the volume turned up to a roar. Nothing of any specific content stood out; there was only the blast of shapeless noise.

The taste of a tear rolling down her cheek jolted the screen, and the memory of Vance standing naked before her appeared. Her breath rushed into her, and she sobbed convulsively. It seemed as if the next breath would never come, but she bent over and it did. She forced herself to walk on, still bent over, wrenching. She found the solid wooden bench next to the stone wall under the ancient maple in the front corner of the yard, out of sight of the cottage. She sat down, pulled her feet up against her buttocks, put her arms around her legs. She was a little ball, no bigger than a brown nut.

For some reason she turned her head sideways and looked up at a few stray stars through the young new leaves. "Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti." Suddenly she hated these lines of Sylvia Plath, the poetess whose poems she knew by heart, but more lines swarmed at her out of the dark. "The heart shut,/ The sea slides back,/ The mirrors are sheeted." She hated the line "The mirrors are sheeted" especially—a line Vance admired. Her mind hopped back into reality, and she heard the owl hoot for the first time. A month ago she and Vance sat in each other's arms on this same bench and listened to that same owl. They had talked about children—their children. They would be brought up as good Catholics. She gasped, and a lineout of C. S. Lewis drilled at her brain like an air hammer: "Reality, looked at steadily, is unbearable."

She saw headlights point up the driveway. Vance. Vance in his old blue Chevy, a graduate school special. She had dubbed it the "Mormal"—a name out of Chaucer that meant an infected, oozing sore—for the car was old and rusted out and you could actually see the road roll by through a crack in the floor. Vance had loved the name, and it had stuck. She loved the Mormal, loved the things they had done in it. Oh Vance! Vance who had just had his first article accepted for publication in a major journal, Vance on his way to the top way ahead of the others. On his way without her. Vance who listened to her rhapsodize about Teilhard de Chardin in excited whispers in the corner of the Fordham Library, and in whose eyes she had seen tears. Just a few weeks ago!

Vance who took her out to Jones Beach on a chilly April day and made love to her under a blanket as seagulls screeched overhead. Vance! Her mood changed, and she thought of Monica and imagined herself clawing those witch's blue eyes out of their sockets. She unwound out of her ball and sat up straight on the bench. She found herself feeling the tips of her nails, digging them into her flesh. She decided to go back into the house and confront the bitch. *Confront*, that's what people were always telling her to do. By God, this time she would! That's what Vance would want her to do, that's what he would do himself. The thumb of both hands traveled sideways across the sharp tips of her nails as she walked to the house.

She got to the door and realized she didn't have a key. She knocked hard. She waited. She knocked less loudly, beginning to lose courage. Monica opened the door.

"We need to talk," Monica said, giving Sylvia a furtive, guilty glance, then looking away.

With all her might Sylvia slapped Monica in the face. Monica cried out and fell backwards against the wall, her hand raised in defense. For an instant Sylvia thought she might actually gouge out those sluttish eyes, now wild and frightened.

"You f-f-!" Monica spit. "Get out of here!"

"You get out!" Sylvia said in a hiss, then walked into the living room and sat down.

"You had it coming, you zombie!" Monica screamed. "I don't know what he saw in you!" She picked herself off the wall and rubbed the tears out of her eyes.

Sylvia picked up *The New York Post*, which Monica read daily, and fumbled through it. The she dropped it and covered her face with her hands. "I'm sorry," she sobbed pathetically.

"You ought to be!" Monica sat down on the chair opposite Sylvia under a Bosch print. Her face was puffy and red. "You're nuts!"

"But I love him so much," Sylvia said, not noticing the insult. "You don't understand. You don't understand!" Her face was screwed up in pain, and her voice quivered. She seemed lost in her own agony; Monica might not have been there.

Monica softened a bit and lit a cigarette. "Look, Sylvia, I'm sorry. I really am." She tried to continue, but what could she say? Her hands acted out a confused pantomime in front of her face, the cigarette accentuating the movement.

Sylvia looked up and stared through her bloodshot, vague blue eyes at Monica. "You're a slut."

"Thanks," said Monica with a disdainful toss of her head.

"First it was that priest—"

"That was ancient history!"

Sylvia again buried her face in her hands and shook, now quietly. Then, looking up quickly, she added on impulse, "I don't know what he sees in *you*!"

"Look, Sylvia, I don't—this isn't going to go anywhere—!"

"Don't use that patronizing tone to me!" Sylvia's eyes were flashing.

"All right. Then let's just cool it!" Monica said, holding her hands forward, palms out.

"Why did you do it, Monica?"

"Why did *you* do it?"

"Me? What are you talking about? He didn't *belong* to you!"

"He does now, honey!"

Sylvia seized Monica's newspaper and began tearing it to pieces. Then she dropped it, coiled up into a ball, and lay on the couch with her hands over her face, quietly shaking.

"Look, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that," said Monica, her voice entirely different, no longer brassy and tough but soothing and caressing. "Vance is not—oh I don't know—maybe it's not my business—oh all right—Sylvia, he's just not, he's just not right for you. You wouldn't—he wouldn't make you happy."

Sylvia raised herself from her fetal crouch and sat up as if skewered. "Yes—he *would*!" she said, spitting out each word as a distinct unit.

Monica's hands began their crazy dance again. "What I mean is," but she stopped mid-sentence, and so did her hands.

"What you mean is, I wouldn't make him happy!"

"He would—yes, that's what I mean, I guess—he would—oh I don't know—he just needs someone to—"

"To what?" said Sylvia. She couldn't stand the way Monica stammered and drove when she smoked dope. She consoled herself with the thought that if Vance chose Monica over her, then good riddance. But the consolation evaporated as she thought of Monica in his arms, and her heart congealed.

A spleeny, tough look settled over Monica's face as she said, "Look, I'll tell you the way it is. Vance Elkins would walk all over you. If you married him, he'd be—oh I don't know—having affairs inside the first year or something. He needs someone like his sister Glenda, glamorous Glenda, not someone who'll worship him. You worship him, Sylvia. He's got too much—you need someone more—oh I don't know—more bookish, quieter, more like you. Your personalities just don't fit. You're so opposite. You'd be the odd couple or something."

"Is this what they teach you in psychiatric nursing?" said Sylvia sarcastically, referring to Monica's graduate school major.

"Look, I'm trying to say—that Vance Elkins—"

"—That Vance Elkins and you would be just right—is that what you're saying?"

"That's *exactly* what I'm saying, sister!"

"You make me laugh," said Sylvia without conviction.

"Laugh all you want. But if you don't believe me, ask Vance."

It was as if someone had hit Sylvia in the head with a pile driver. "Vance told you all this?" she said in a soft, vulnerable, quivering voice.

"Ask him."

"You are saying that—"

"Look, just ask him! I shouldn't have brought it up. I'm sorry!" Monica appeared flustered and got up to go into the kitchen.

Sylvia remembered how disenchanted Vance had seemed for the last two or three weeks. Had they been—had he and Monica been—? If someone had come up from behind and scalped her, she could not have been more shocked. The thought of Vance going from one bed to the next, trading secrets first with her, then with Monica, then again with her, filled her with revulsion. She felt desecrated.

"Greasing the bodies of adulterers/ Like Hiroshima ash and eating in./ The sin. The sin." Plath's lines rose like swamp gas in her turbulent, unnerved, literary brain. She was a turtle being batted about by a family of jackals.

An Excerpt from Un-Chimera

Fully awake, alert, he leaped out of bed and turned on the light in the bathroom. His eyes, shocked by the sudden incandescence, refused to open fully and focus on the face peering out of the mirror. With a sweep, they took in the exotic, outrageously expensive lotions and after shaves arrayed like mute tin soldiers on the counter top. The eyes met the face once more in the expanse of mirror. It came into focus slowly. They saw that, somehow, it was not quite the handsome image that the photographer had succeeded in fashioning by means of the magic of the trade: softening of lines, eradication of scars and blemishes by diffusing, bending, and refracting unkind lights. The eyes, for the first time in many years, not only saw but actually *looked* at the face. There was not mistaking it. The lines were deeper about the mouth, and the folds under the eyes more pronounced; the neck, especially about the throat, no longer possessed the former firmness; the grey was gradually conquering the black of the curly hair, particularly at the temples; the streak of stark white along the part down the middle lent the well-shaped head an arresting, almost aristocratic air.

The man smiled in amusement at the thought of his friends calling him handsome. Ah, *Vanity!* And in a man his age. He had come almost to believe it, nay to hope it. For his vanity was unstable, and could easily turn into doubt and insecurity. The smile on the face broadened as he recalled that friends insisted that he did not look his age; that he moved with the grace, ease, and agility of a man in his forties, late forties—maybe early fifties, some were willing to concede. His answer, more recently tinged with a bit of anxiousness, was that he did not feel sixty-four, whatever sixty-four was supposed to feel like. He realized that, in reality, he was not fooling anyone, that it was a game played by his friends, an affectionate conspiracy designed to cushion the inevitable ravages of time. Oh, play the game, he did—even by himself and willingly.

However, there were periodic reckonings, usually late at night, during some party when he had drunk more than his wont, and fled into the sanctuary of a bathroom whose lights, together with the truth of alcohol, stripped him of all pretense, of all make-believe, and he saw the face, naked, with every line, wrinkle, and blemish glaringly, brutally revealed. It never failed to have a sobering on him. At such times, he used to chastise the face in the mirror, that other him: "You are a scoundrel and a fake. Your youth has fled; you are ugly, vulnerable and emotionally susceptible to any show of affection. You are at the

mercy of your own insecurity." He ended those confrontations with the face in the mirror by shaking a finger at it and telling it: "Go home. You are bored and boring. You have had too much to drink. If you remain, the mask over the mask will come off. You'll turn back into the ugly duckling you really are. Don't expect the miracle of Dorian Grey to befall you."

Nonetheless, the man consoled himself by remembering that his features were not so bad, that his teeth and hair were much admired. Why someone had even wanted to know if his teeth were his very own, they were so perfect. A chuckle punctuated this thought. Then he recalled that he was, after all, the same handsome lieutenant in that extraordinary photo in his study. But he had difficulty matching that face with the one in the mirror. A cruel chasm of thirty years separated them.

Somehow, tonight was different. The disheveled bird of memory was rustling its wings once again. Apparently, it was to be an occasion for taking stock, for settling spiritual and psychological accounts, for truth—without the stimulus of alcohol. He gave in, surrendered to introspection. It was lucidly clear to him that beauty of person was a harmonious blend of the inner being with the outer protective shell, the carapace crowned by the face, that revealer of the inner-self. What if he had not been the only one of seven brothers and sisters who caught it, and was disfigured by the pustules, one of which had almost cost him an eye? Would he have been spared the years of embarrassment, years during which he considered himself the ugliest being alive? He recalled with a quickening of the pulse that he would storm off a streetcar one stop after boarding it, if there happened to be another pockmarked person aboard. Blind with confusion and shame, he used to alight with the imaginary accusatory collective finger of all on board pointing at him. When he dated, he was relatively witty and happy, provided he did not catch sight of his face in the inevitable mirror. When he did see that wretched face, panic would set in and his entire personality underwent an abrupt change: he felt naked, disarmed, helpless, abandoned, vulnerable.

"Look, those two girls are walking to the dance. Let's give them a ride. I'll take the one in the picture hat."

"O.K., but let's see you get out on the dance floor for a change. You always get cold feet. Don't be timid."

"Hi! Going to the dance? Like a ride?"

"Oh, yes; we're tired walking in these heels."

The band was playing. Ghost-couples moved about on the dance floor in the eerie light, a low, soft, bluish light that seemed to gyrate as though reflected off thousands of revolving pieces of mirror. He led the girl in the picture hat onto the floor. She glided easily into his arms, the hat blocking her face. It was magical, a dream come true. He, dancing with a girl who must be at the very least a princess out of a fairy tale, to judge

by the dress. She seemed enveloped, lost in yards of the soft material. The lights changed, became brighter so that the faces of the dancers became discernible. As he and the girl pivoted, she raised her head off his shoulder and the brim of the hat fell away from her face. It was horribly pitted, grotesque, a mirror of his own, he thought. He came to a standstill, unable to move or speak, in utter misery and panic. He ran out of the ballroom, leaving the poor startled girl in the middle of the dance floor. He ran as if the devil were after him, the face of the girl dancing insistently before his eyes, mocking him, turning into his own face.

The man scrutinized his face once again. It was true. The pockmarks, except for one on his right cheek, had almost disappeared. How, he moaned, could he have allowed himself to bathe in self-pity all those painful years, years of self-torture, of embarrassment, of dreaming of waking up some wondrous day to discover that his scars were gone, his face magically smooth, to discover that he, also, had turned into a magnificently beautiful swan? The irony of it. At basketball games, he recalled, sitting in his favorite spot in a corner so that he had a full unobstructed view of the entire court, high enough to see the basket at the opposite end, the basket at his end but a few feet away. Among the basketballers was an All-American guard—his name now in the limbo of his memory—who had a bad case of acne that covered not only his face, but also his shoulders. Yes, he had actually prayed to God for an even exchange: the scars for the acne. He understood now vaguely why. Smallpox had a stigma attached; Mexicans had it, not Americans.

American! How restrictive the word sounded even now in the recesses of his mind. Mexicans were Americans, and Eskimos and Patagonians at the tip of South America.

And in the part of the U.S. where he had grown up, being Mexican meant ignorance and filth. What was it someone had said to him patronizingly one day? "Mexicans are dumb, but if you get a smart one, look out."

It had taken him years to realize that mere physical beauty was not enough, that true beauty was a reflection of the inner gifts, of the endowments of God. What was it his mother used to say about a man having to be "*feo, fuerte y formal*" (unhandsome, strong, and have integrity)? It had been Grace, gloriously blond, soft Grace—his heart raced, beat furiously, as he recalled the incredible expanse of loveliness that was her geography, and that no woman since had touched him so profoundly, reached so unerringly the very fibers of his being,—Grace who had begun to rid him of his hang-ups. He had come upon her one day as she described him to a friend as "about five-seven, with curly, almost black hair, and a smile that makes my heart skip a beat. And, oh, those eyes and the dimpled chin." when he reminded her that she had forgotten to mention his scars, she had said "Scars? What scars? You have no scars."

That had been the beginning of the triumph over himself, the start of the change of self-image. Often he had wondered how a woman as beautiful as Grace could possibly love him. He was always so unsure of himself, so afraid that some big, handsome rival would steal her away. It was she who had given him such a totally different image of himself, one that in time would annul, destroy almost completely the one he has fashioned for himself out of insecurity, out of loneliness, out of fear. In any case, he finally concluded that he was behind his face. If others chose to think him handsome, to view a different him, that was their business. The secret of Anderson's swan lay in forgetting one's outer-self, the carapace, and in focusing on the gifts within. That, probably, was what *Elena*, the Hungarian countess, had perceived earlier, when she caught sight of him for the first time. He was walking away from her, so it must have been the ineffable anemic afterglow that we leave behind us as a wake that prompted the sculptress in her to exclaim "I want to do that head. Who is he?"

It was about then that *Nadia*, the Russian ballerina, came into his life. Nadia who used to consume him, to sap his strength with her voracious hunger. Poor Nadia. He has been her *Daragoi*, yet she had died alone, unknown, in a tubercular ward of a Los Angeles hospital. Mozart and Rachmaninoff, and love, mad, violent, insatiable. Her memory made his heart pound furiously, almost reach the bursting point. Across the years, the notes of Mozart's 23rd piano concerto dropped diamond-sharp, singly into his hungry soul, the clarinets, oboes, and flutes in measured pursuit. Years later, he had found out that Nadia had been having an affair simultaneously with one of the football players. He hurt that he was unable to find out where she had been buried. He owed her so much. She had confirmed him in his manhood. Unlike most women he had known, she had been generous to a fault. While driving her car one evening—he had never had a driver's license, had never owned a car—he had smashed into the back of a parked car while going twenty-five miles an hour. She had lost a front tooth, suffered a cut cheek and a broken nose, but she refused to let him go into debt in order to pay the doctor and hospital bill. He had gotten out of that scraped by the grace of God. Dr. McGovney, who had practically adopted him, had come to his rescue at the hospital and had spirited him away from the police who wanted to question him by insisting that he was not in any condition to be questioned.

He supposed that the business of his face had not been solely responsible for his pitiable state of soul for so many year. What about the poverty years in the tenements of El Paso, Texas, and the discriminations he had experienced because he was Mexican? He had to laugh every time someone talked about "barrios." Nothing in this world could possibly compare with the "vecindad" at

Fourth and Florence Streets. Some other time he would have to explore that part of his life. Children, usually so protective of the less fortunate, the halt, the lame, and the mentally retarded, had made fun of his scars. As a consequence, he later had come to relate it to Quasimodo's face when on that poignant Fat Tuesday it had been chosen as the "most original mask;" to feel some kinship with Hugo's wretch. He remembered, not too happily, the occasion years, eons before when he and his brother Albert, with the whitest of skins and with hair as blond as his was black, were registering for the second grade. Asked for name and nationality, he had given his and said that he was Mexican; Albert gave his and said that he, also, was Mexican, only to hear the teacher say that it was impossible, that he was *too white*. Subtle, that teacher. And racist. The stereotypes! Would people ever learn that Mexicans came in all sizes, shapes, tints, and persuasions? His mother had been blond, as were two of his brothers and sisters.

The memories were coming in a rush now. He turned on the hot water in the shower and exclaimed aloud to the face in the mirror: "Enough of that crap. I've got to shave you, but first I'll shower." With that, he stepped into the shower and let the jets of water sting the memories out of him.

In Heavy Training

I

The night before my first day as a high school student, I agonized over which turtleneck sweater I should wear. The mauve cashmere was my favorite in terms of color, but it did not accentuate my muscular girth. I therefore opted for the beige pullover, though this one, I feared, was beginning to develop a tear under the left armpit. It also showed the rings of perspiration more than the darker garments. As it happened, I ended up wearing a yellow short sleeve shirt because the sunny morning indicated weather too hot for a sweater.

I lived on Greenridge Road, which is in the hills of the east Castro Valley suburbs. There used to be deer and bobcats in the small valley behind my backyard, but they disappeared with the ever increasing housing developments. To get to school I walked down a trail of hemlock and eucalyptus trees. Proud of the knowledge that I was the only high school freshman, apart from my obese classmates, who wore Extra-Large clothing, I strutted from the base of the trail towards the Canyon High School campus. As I always did in public, I bit my cheeks, making my round baby face appear as if it were endowed with extraordinary jaw development. I believed at the time that this affectation gave me sex appeal, that it somehow made me look European. Long hours of practice in front of the mirror had helped me develop the skill of biting my cheeks and engaging in conversation simultaneously.

As I approached the front of the registration building I recognized a group of boys who I knew from Earl Warren Junior High. The boys saw me and jeered, calling me "Squats." It seems, I thought, that my reputation for being a weightlifting fanatic has already been established. And for good reason. While in the eighth grade, I had become the United States Junior Olympic Weightlifting Champion for the 148-pound class.

It was quite an accomplishment. But why did it seem just now that my classmates were deriding me? Were they jealous of my strapping physique? Or did they find my muscular bulk laughable? Maybe it wasn't my body that they were ridiculing, by my personality. Or perhaps the combination of both. Whatever the case, part of me did not mind their mockery. In fact, part of me enjoyed the attention.

Besides, not all of them were making fun of me. Only Jamie Banks, the tall blond who had picked on me last year by hitting my hand with the sharp bristles of a hair brush, showed real signs of contempt. But I had gained considerable weight over the summer, and that alone would discourage Banks from engaging in any more hostile behavior. At least this is what I hoped. I hated the idea of actually having to fight someone, for I was nonviolent by nature and found physical discord repulsive. Yet I feared that if antagonized enough, I would erupt and inflict irreversible harm upon my foe.

After Banks finally stopped calling me "Squats," Mike Hewitt asked me how the weightlifting was coming along. Shyly, I shrugged my shoulders, indicating that I was progressing satisfactorily. In truth, however, I had over the summer switched from weightlifting to bodybuilding. It was the muscles, far more than strength, that I really wanted. But I had not told anyone—including my parents—because I harbored a secret shame for being so infatuated by my own physique. Besides, most people didn't know the differences between the two disciplines, and it was not worth the time and energy to explain the distinctions. Quite simply, in weightlifting one is concerned with lifting as much weight as possible in two different maneuvers. In bodybuilding, one is interested in attaining maximum muscle mass and minimum body fat. There are also, of course, cosmetic considerations, such as having tanned, hairless skin.

I felt partly relieved that the group's attention was diverted from Mike Hewitt's question, as a more important concern was now raised: which boy was wearing the most impressive pair of shoes. I noticed that many of the boys were wearing tan suede footwear, the most famous brand being named after an Australian marsupial. The brand was so popular that it had become the generic name given to other makes of similar design. But, Jamie Banks happily pointed out while beaming at his own genuine make, you could tell the real thing by pulling on the nylon shoelaces. Their elasticity could endure severe stretching, and as one unfortunate bystander discovered through Bank's demonstration, the shoelaces of lesser brands tore with a vigorous tug.

No longer the focus of attention, I felt no motivation to remain with the group, and I sauntered towards my first class. My self-centeredness made it difficult for me to make friends, and I had already concluded that there was no one interesting enough at school to bother knowing.

Yet it was during lunch that day that I heard of someone who intrigued me. I was standing in front of the cafeteria, listening to Rick Chevalier warn a group of fellow freshmen about the "King of the School," Maurice Balzar. According to Chevalier, Maurice entertained his friends by eating flies in exchange for small amounts of money, and had once dented someone's car with his head. He was also somewhat of a clown, doing Ed Sullivan imitations in class and fooling

the teachers into believing that he was speaking in his normal voice. It was even rumored that he had once come to history class wearing nothing but a jockstrap and cowboy boots. And yet my curiosity in him was not fully aroused until Chevalier mentioned that Maurice was also an avid bodybuilder. I wanted to meet him at once, but Chevalier warned me that the King was not a friendly person, especially towards freshmen. He then pointed towards Maurice who was standing next to a couple of lanky, tough-looking boys in the center of the crowded plaza. Wearing a red varsity football jacket, he held his arms away from his sides as if he had a cantaloupe beneath each armpit. He was much shorter than I, but wider. As if he sensed that I were watching him, he rotated his expressionless face towards mine, giving me a perfect view of his black mustache, which grew horizontally beneath each nostril like two mouse tails. There was a sinister quality in his bushy high arched brows and brown, fearless eyes which reminded me of a silent movie I had once seen with my grandfather about a Czechoslovakian butcher who did, among other things, leer at frightened virgins from behind his chopping block.

"Oh, shit!" said Chevalier. "He's lookin' right at ya. I'd start prayin' if I were you."

But displaying no sign of intelligence, I walked directly towards the foreboding Mediterranean goat and asked the first thing that came to mind: "How do you gain weight?"

His friends smiled slyly at each other, as if they both were expecting their comrade to throw me across the plaza like a paper airplane. But the King seemed impressed with the formidable size of my physique, and he began to divulge his secrets for "bulking up." One of his favorite practices, he revealed, was eating steak fat while throwing away the meat, and drinking the heavy syrup of fruit cocktail while throwing away the diced fruit. "You get big off of it," he said.

For the rest of the lunch period, we discussed our bodybuilding techniques with the seriousness of diplomats at a United Nations meeting. We spoke with such convincing importance, that a crowd soon surrounded us, listening with awe and silence. Maurice, who had a tendency to ham it up in these situations, exaggerated the length of his workouts, telling me that he spent three hours on his biceps program alone. I did not want to disappoint Maurice or our audience with a less zealous attitude, so I told him that I swallowed a hundred desiccated liver tablets after every meal. And for good measure, I added that I was taking natural steroids, derived from the testes of the Congo gorilla. The expressions of the onlookers indicated that they believed everything Maurice and I were saying. After the bell ran, we shook hands and made arrangement to meet in the same place the next day.

I soon began to doubt the prudence of the relationship. I had heard many girls refer to Maurice as being "gross." At the time there was a rumor that he had recently gone on a rampage after Tami Agizon turned down his offer to take her to the movies. He was apparently so upset, that he connected one end of a chain to the bumper of his Barracuda and the other end to several traffic signs which he then uprooted from the streets. Could I afford to be associated with someone of this reputation? I had enough girl problems. And quite frankly, Maurice frightened me. I felt that I had to watch what I said when I was around him, or else he might lose control. Yet out of curiosity or perhaps because I had at last found someone with a personality as extreme as my own, I continued to see him. In a rather obsequious manner, I pretended to be his disciple as we strolled regally across the campus during lunch. Usually we discussed such important matters as whether or not it was beneficial to drink milk. "It makes ya as smooth as a baby's ass," Maurice would say one day. But then a day later he would change his mind, saying that you had to bulk up with the milk first, then worry about refining the muscles later. These profound issues occupied a large portion of our daily conversations, and it was not infrequent that a small band of curious listeners would follow us with the hope of obtaining scraps of wisdom along the way.

One thing I learned during these strolls across the campus was Maurice's intolerance for physiques which were lacking in muscularity. Every time he walked past a boy who was markedly skinny or fat, he would look at him in the eyes with utter disgust and say, "You look like shit!" Explaining his contempt, he would often say, "How could someone go through this world looking like a tomato with toothpicks stickin' out of it? Look at 'em all, walking around with their little, flabby asses. A man should have an ass he can be proud of. It should be big, round, and hard as a rock—the kind of ass you can show to a woman with pride."

"But don't you see, Maurice? If everyone looked like us, you and me wouldn't be special."

"I suppose you're right," he would say with a heavy sigh.

Maurice was indeed special. Once he ended a full-scale food fight by merely walking into the cafeteria. It was apparent that no one wanted to be responsible for so much as grazing his body with a morsel of food. Much to my astonishment, Maurice even extended his authority over people's bowel movements. Once while standing in the high school locker room in nothing but an oversized pair of red poco dotted boxers (he claimed that this underwear was given to him by his four-hundred pound uncle, the owner of several bakeries throughout Texas), Maurice glared at Ron Steidlberger who was sitting on an

unenclosed toilet, and said in the voice of a Marine sergeant, "Steidlberger, don't you got any pride?"

Maurice's self-righteousness in these situations made me laugh uncontrollably. And this was quite an achievement, for I had been excessively melancholy since my youth, haunted, among other things, by the inevitability of decaying flesh. Unwilling to face the reality of death, I had spent much of my childhood fantasizing of inhabiting the celestial regions with The Mighty Thor, a comic book hero I had idolized since my youth. For me, it seemed, attaining the perfect body was a way of possessing eternal order, a way of becoming a god. For Maurice, on the other hand, the perfect body was a way for him to become more of the beast he already was. He often told me about his longing to be a wild man, running barefoot through the woods and killing deer with his bare hands. Other times he would talk about lifting weights in a cell day and night, and once a day having someone throw a piece of raw meat under the door. "I wanna be a gargoye," he would exclaim. "Grow gills like The Creature from the Black Lagoon!"

II

Maurice and I were "in heavy training." This meant that we often cut school so that we could spend more time working out. A truant officer, Mr. Bryant Gillis, once followed us into the gym. "Get the hell out of here," Maurice ordered him while he was doing his barbell curls. "Can't you see I'm gettin' big?" Mr. Gillis was afraid of Maurice, and he left us alone. He didn't even tell our parents.

I was happy. I was gaining more and more weight, and I like the way I looked in the mirror. But most of all, I felt uncommon. I felt like Maurice and I were on some special kind of mission that elevated us above our peers.

There was one problem, though. Maurice kept pressuring me to join him on his ventures to brothels, orgies, and X-rated movies. While I was as lustful as any other healthy fourteen-year-old, such methods of sexual initiation seemed destructive to my orientation towards women, so one afternoon after a grueling workout, I tried to suggest marriage and commitment as possible alternatives as we were sitting inside his car, a bright red Barracuda.

"Marriage is a big hoax," he said.

"It isn't if there's love."

"Love? There's no such thing. People get married either for money or because they want an easy piece of ass—and don't you forget it."

"What about your parents? They love each other."

"I doubt it. My mother married my father because he had money—it was a business deal."

"You don't believe that."

"Yeah! My dad will even tell ya. It's all business. When a woman wants to marry you it's because you got a lot of money. She doesn't care how good looking you are or what kind of personality you have—what she's interested in is money. You understand that, Nathan?" Maurice put his hand in front of my face and rubbed his thumb over the tips of his fingers. "Moola is what makes the world go round."

My discussions of love had no effect on Maurice. He was soon frequenting brothels every week. In order to conceal from his parents the true nature of these excursions, he would stage them as fishing trips, dressing himself in knee-high galoshes, green, baggy trousers, and a gray cap covered with dangling fishing lures. Eventually, though, his parents discovered what he was really doing, and to their credit, they managed to resign themselves to their son's implacable libido. In time, Mrs. Balzar showed even greater acceptance by driving Maurice to Reno in her purple Cadillac, dropping him off at Glamour Puss Ranch, shopping at a nearby department store, and picking him up three hours later.

I declined Maurice's continual offers to accompany him on these adventures, yet one evening after driving home from The Gladiator Pit Gym, Maurice turned his Barracuda left on A Street, instead of making the usual right turn towards Castro Valley.

"What are you going?" I asked.

"I just remembered. Gerard's workin' today at The Ritz. We get in free."

"The Ritz! I can't be seen in that place!"

"Nathan, my boy, you worry too much about what people think. Besides, you gotta do it. It'll warm you up for Glamour Puss."

"I already told ya. I'm not goin' to Glamour Puss. Pick up a disease there."

"Couple of penicillin shots in the ass, you'll be all right."

"No, I won't be all right. A lot of those diseases are incurable. Doctor Shriro told me."

"Who in the hell is that?"

"He's my urologist."

"What are ya doin', wettin' the bed at night?"

"Not exactly. I've been pissin' a lot, though. Thought I'd better get my prostate checked." A few days earlier I had been examined. Trying to feign nonchalance while Dr. Shriro stuck a gloved finger up my ass, I pretended to be engrossed in the reading of Erich Fromm's *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*. "Shriro thinks it might just be my anxieties that are causing it."

"What am I gonna do with you, Nathan? You're already seein' a shrink. Now you gotta see a pee doctor."

"What can I do? I'm like a goddamn Italian sports car. I gotta be serviced all over the place."

The Barracuda turned right on Mission Boulevard and passed what seemed like endless blocks of car dealerships. My bowels felt loose as I started to think about what my biology teacher, Mr. Holbart, had said about pornography during a lecture on human reproduction.

"*Hustler* magazine and the rest of that ilk," he had said, "do the great disservice of taking away the sense of wonder, the sense of mystery that can never again be regained."

"Maurice, I just remembered. I'm not old enough to get in," I said hopefully.

"Gerard will let you in. Besides, you look over eighteen."

"To tell you the truth, Maurice, I'm not really up for an X-rated movie at the moment."

"You gotta do it. It's educational."

Maurice parked the car. We stepped outside and saw Gerard sitting behind the glass shielded ticket counter. Leaning back in his swivel chair, he was grinning, his blue eyes moving enthusiastically over a book titled *Beat the Casino*, his tongue moving with the constancy of a windshield wiper over his lower lip. Greased blond hair had been combed back so that he looked like a movie star from the Jazz Age, and his white long-sleeves had been rolled up so that one could see the bulk of a purple coiled cobra tattoo on his left upper arm.

"It's show time," Maurice bellowed. "I brought my buddy along. He's joining me if you don't mind."

"Oh, yeah," said Gerard, leering at me. "The kid who's always suckin' in his cheeks. Come all ye who are heavy laden . . . Ha! Ha! Ha!"

We approached the entrance which was draped with string of pink plastic beads. Covering my face, I ducked and went through the beads quickly, for fear of the many germs they might carry. Inside the semi-lighted corridor, I then saw a small pine tree-shaped deodorizer—the kind that hang from the rear-view mirrors in cars—tacked to the wall. Its ingredients, I noticed, had mingled with what seemed like the scent of popcorn and male secretions.

"Let's go, Maurice. It smells like a lethal chemical spill in here."

"Shut up."

In the darkness of the theater the audience was fortunately unrecognizable, the people scattered an equal distance from one another. This is a good sign, I thought. Maurice and I then sat in one of the middle rows. Soon the screen lighted, accompanied by the marked reduction of coughing and throat clearing. The movie began with a white-hair woman with tired eyes sitting in a doctor's

office. She was being told that she had only two weeks to live and that she should fill the remainder of her life with as much sex as possible. The next scene was very brief. It consisted of a huge bearded fat man dressed in genie garb, including the tiny slippers that are curled upward at the ends. With a maniacal smile, he looked into the camera. Then in slow motion, his fat rippled as he swung a club against the golden gong behind him, making an incredible bash. This, I observed, is a transitional device that will be used throughout the entire movie.

The next scene showed the tired, white-haired lady inside a drained swimming pool with about ten naked men and women, moving frenziedly on piles of overlapping foam pads. As the camera got closer to the group, it looked like the bodies were hurting each other. I felt as if I were watching the incessant attack of machine-gun fire; the bodies seemed to be convulsing, their motions failing to show any sense of genuine sexual pleasure. I then remembered what Mr. Holbart said about pornography, and I imagined his voice, wrathful and thunder-like, booming through the darkness of the theater:

THE LOSS OF MYSTERY—FOREVER!

I started to cry—at first silently, but then in loud uncontrollable sobs. Sitting in front of me was a stout gentleman with a cheap toupee and an expensive three-piece suit, who turned around and motioned for me to be quiet.

"What's wrong with you!" I shouted, standing up. "You worried you're gonna miss out on the goddamn plot?"

I then rushed towards the aisle and passed through the plastic beads. Gerard was still sitting behind the ticket counter. Wiping my tear, I slowly began to walk past him, hoping to do so without notice.

"Hey, kid!" Gerard shouted. "One of these days you're gonna bit a big hole in your cheek!"

Shortly after, Maurice strolled through the clattering veil of beads and into the moonlight. Holding his heaving belly, he laughed loudly and triumphantly. I could see only the whites of his eyes, and I was scared of him then. It was as if it had been decided at that moment that he had been right all along. Sex, romantic pursuit, marriage—these things weren't mysterious or sacred—they never had been and never would be. For Maurice, it seemed that this knowledge was the secret of all his joy, while for me it was the basis of all my sorrow.

Great Expectations

Knock, knock, knock, "Hurry up, Nick! Come on, we're both gonna be late."

"Go away Squirt."

"What are you doin' in there? You're takin' as long as Shelley."

Swinging the bathroom door wide open Nick sticks his face right in front of Drew's and says, in a calm, stern tone of voice, "I'll be ready when I'm ready. Now beat it Freshman."

The door slams in Drew's face, "God! I hate being the youngest. At least Shelley's going away to college at the end of the month," Drew grumbles to himself as he turns away from the bathroom and heads toward his bedroom.

"That little Freshman . . . doesn't he understand how important this day is to me? The first day of my senior year. I have to look just right too . . . just right for Kim Hunt. God, I haven't seen her since the last day of school last year. I sure have been looking forward to this day for a long time," he talks to himself in the mirror as if it will talk back.

Squeezing toothpaste out of a tube, from the middle of course, onto his toothbrush, Nick's mind is flooded with thoughts of Kim. Last year he had worked in the front office and gained access to confidential school records. He knew it all about Kimberly Diane Hunt. Her birthdate was June 10, 1972, she lived at 1103 Camino del Oeste (an upper-class neighborhood in the southwest section of town), she was born in Houston, TX, she was a cheerleader for two years before her parents moved to town, her G.P.A. was a perfect 4.0, she had one older brother, and her father worked for Occidental Petroleum. Without looking at the records he knew that she was just the right height for him. He being five feet eleven, and she being about five inches shorter was just right. Once he had heard Shelley, his older sister, remark that a five inch height difference between a man and woman was perfect. She had long, straight brown hair that curled under at the ends, and large, bright blue eyes. She was petite, but not skinny like Dawn, his last girlfriend. She drove a cool Ford Mustang. Not to mention, she was in the right crowd. Some of her friends were snobs, but somehow she was a little different. "She's so hot!" One thing for sure, Kim Hunt had been at BHS for one semester and that was the best damned semester of Nick's life.

Taking one more look at himself in the mirror, Nick noticed something on his chin, "Wouldn't you know it . . . I've got a zit the size of Mt. Everest on my chin, I'm gonna have to make sure to keep some distance between me and Kim today. Distance, right. I've never even talked to her. This semester's gonna be different though. I don't care what happens to me as long as I meet Kim."

Knock, knock, knock. "Come on! Mom said to tell you to get a move on."

Once again, swinging back the door, "Wait a minute, okay?"

"I've waited for more than a minute already!"

"You just better calm down or I won't give you a ride to school."

"Oh yes you will. Mom and Dad said you had ta'."

"Goddamn Freshman! I hope you understand that I'm doing you a big favor by taking you to school. And I hope you know that you and Kevin are laying down in my back seat, and I'm dropping you two off at the 7-11 down the street."

"Good! It's not like I wanna be seen with you anyway . . . especially in that old clunker of yours that you call a car."

"That 'old clunker' has taken you from point A to point B many times."

"Yeah, well wait until I get my first car. It's gonna be sweeeeeeeet."

"F YOU!" bursts out of Nick's mouth before he can think. Stomping back to his bedroom, thoughts of how to get out of taking Drew to school went through his head. Slamming the door behind him, Nick picks up a pair of bermuda shorts off of his floor and put them on. In his closet he found his favorite tennis shoes and a t-shirt without holes in it. So that he wouldn't ruin his freshly moussed hair, he slowly and carefully pulled the t-shirt over his head. Leaving his room and walking down the hallway, Nick knocked on the bathroom door and yelled "Ten minutes Freshman." He then continues on down the stairs and into the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator door and pulls out a bottle of milk, pouring it into a tall glass. He then opens the box of donuts on the counter and takes out a chocolate covered one. Sitting down at the kitchen table he opens the Sports Section and reads an article about Sunday's 49er vs. Rams football game.

Drew enters the kitchen looking like a typical freshman on his first day of school. From his head to his feet Drew is the model freshman. Nick noted this right away. He had a new, much too short hair cut, his shirt was stiff with newness, his blue jeans, also stiff, were the dark blue color of never-been-washed indigo, and his new white high-tops shone brightly. "How do I look?"

"Fine," answered Nick, the whole time keeping in his desire to laugh, "like a freshman."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothin'."

"Shut up."

"Hey, I was just lettin' you know that you'll fit in just fine. You might be a little hot but you'll fit in okay. Now get your stuff ... we're outta here." The brothers walked out of the house and hopped into the car. Nick, taking pity on Drew, allowed him to sit in front until they picked up his best friend Joey. He slipped his Ray-Bans on, rolled the windows down, and sped out of the driveway. Drew changed the radio stations until he found a song that he liked. Nick didn't seem to mind. The brothers sang along with the radio as they headed toward Joey's house. When they pulled into Joey's driveway, Nick honked the horn several times and then turned to his brother, "Okay, get in the back."

Drew didn't move to the backseat as quickly as Nick wanted him to so he gave him a nudge, "Quit it! I'm gettin' out right now."

"That's right you are."

"You're such a jerk. God, sometimes I can't believe you are related to me."

"Yeah, the feeling's mutual Freshman."

Just then Joey and Drew's friend Kevin walked out of the house. Kevin too was garbed in his new school clothes. Once more Nick had to stifle his laughter.

"Hey!" yelled Nick as he waved out the open car window, "Hurry it up!" The two passengers got into the car and exchanged hello's. An air of excitement filled the car as the boys began discussing their expectations for the upcoming day at school. Drew popped in his new Jane's Addiction tape and his favorite song, "Changes," came blaring out of the six new speakers he had strategically placed in his car. The two older boys sang along with the song as they sped down streets until they reached the 7-11 market, Drew and Kevin's final destination.

"This is it Freshmen," Joey said in a snide tone of voice as he opened his car door to let the two younger boys out.

"Yeah, make it quick so nobody sees ya'," the insensitive Nick said.

"Don't worry asshole," came out of Drew's mouth as he jumped out of the car and ran toward the sidewalk.

The two older boys laughed uproariously and skidded out of the lot. Once on the streets that run through campus, the boys sank down in their seats and turned up the volume a few notches as to draw attention to themselves. They waved and nodded back and forth to other teens walking and driving through campus. Being the first day of school, everyone was there early and congregating in the parking lots surrounding the campus. Nick and Joey pulled into their usual lot and landed the second-to-last available parking space.

"Geez dude, I didn't think you were gonna find a decent place to park. Ya' sure did luck out."

"Yeah, I know. Look who's over there," he pointed to a small group of girls about twenty yards away, "Mindy Smith, Liz Marshall, and the gang. Do you see Kim anywhere?"

"No man, do you see her car?"

"Nope. She probably drove with one of the girls. You know how they always stick together. Girls . . . they can never go anyplace all by themselves."

"Isn't that the truth?"

"Yeah, Shelley would rather die than go somewhere by herself. I can always tell when she really has to go somewhere and has nobody to go with, she bribes me or Drew to tag along."

"Sisters . . . the worst kind of women!"

"One good thing though, I won't have to put up with her and her geek friend this year. Thank God they're all graduated and going out of town for school."

"I wish my sister was outta here. She still has one more year left at BC though. Why couldn't she be smart like Shelley and go to a 'real' school. One out of town," the two boys begin laughing and agree simultaneously with nods.

"Hey, let's get out and mingle. I see the guys over there," says Nick pointing to a rather large group of young boys standing within feet of the aforementioned group of young women.

"Yeah. Let's do it."

As the boys exit the car, Nick mumbles to himself, "Okay, where's Kim?"

Once standing with the guys, Nick and Joey exchanged summertime "war" stories. All the while Nick is looking around for Kim. A while later the ten minute warning bell sounds and students begin to wander toward the tall, old buildings on campus. Nick and Joey left their group and inconspicuously walked by the girls that they had noticed earlier. "Hey Joey," came from one of the group members.

Joey and Nick turned their heads to face the girls. "Oh hi Liz."

"What's new?"

"Nothin' much, how 'bout you?"

"Oh nothing except going out with Richard Newman, you know the BC football player."

"That's nice."

"Yeah well I thought you'd like to know," said grinning widely afterward.

"Who cares?"

"Well Joey, we did go out for four months last year, and we did go to the prom together."

"Big deal. Look Liz, we're gonna be late. See ya' around. Oh . . . and good luck with Dick," the two boys burst out in uncontrollable laughter and continued, walking away from the group of girls.

"Women . . . God sure screwed up when he made 'em!" Joey insisted.

"I think a better word would be girls."

"Oh hey, you guys, there's one more thing . . . um, Nick, are you listening?"

The boys stopped and turned once more to face the girls. "What now Liz?" asked Nick.

"Just thought you'd wanna know that Kim Hunt moved back to Houston last week. Now you'll have to find someone new to drool over," once again Liz grinned, though this time she strutted off in the opposite direction.

The two boys turned toward each other, both shocked. Nick was turning white. "That bitch, wait until lunch time, I'm gonna give her a piece of my mind," stated Joey.

"No man, she doesn't matter."

"I just don't like the idea of her bitchin' at you because I dumped her this summer."

"Girls," Nick said quietly, and then as if he was struck with lightening he yelled, "Liz Marshall is a bitch!" then he began laughing, as did Joey.

"Look man, I'm gonna have a talk with that girl anyway."

"Who cares . . . come on, we're gonna be late."

The Emperor of Backwards

Santiago's eyes blinked open, rolled around from dark to dark. He reached over to his father's gold watch. It hung on a heavy, white string which he knew was not white. Stubbornly, he stared at the watch with confusion, blinking for a minute or two as if "willing" it to yield up time. Slowly, the confusion beginning to dissipate, he turned the dial toward the window and thought that he could make out that it was 4 a.m. He opened his jaws, closed his lips to the tight shape of an "O" and bonged the drum tight skin on his cheek with his fore-finger, opening and closing his jaws while maintaining his lips in the "O" shape, running through the range of notes. This drum song had become his ritual of accompaniment to the beat of the train that inevitably passed with its usual shaking and trembling, the whistle inevitably far off into the distance by the time he awoke. He always imagined that the tumble down houses of his dusty barrio moved around with the shaking of the train, so that his house must have by now, after many years, inched its way across the street to Ramon's house. He liked that. Ramon, a year older, had recently become the leader of the "Q" street gang, a group of older kids that was slowly coming to accept Santiago. The train had gone far into the night and was now shaking off the dust of the endless barrio. Its whistle announced that it carried with it nothing of the barrio, and Santiago's inward eye had to, once again, let go of the far off.

He slipped out into the intense cold, not wanting to leave the warm bed, careful not to wake his father and stepped into his levis. Remembering his top and, "oh yes," his yo-yo, he grabbed his work boots, red flannel shirt and levi jacket and cracked the door.

Outside, beneath the fig tree, between the floating leaves, he saw a majestic sky, a dark, moon-less sky that confused him, confounded his present intention. He sensed the immensity of existence, the infinity against which he saw the smallness of his own being. The heavens spoke silently. Abuelito had told of rebelling at the thought of being included in all that lay beneath that sky. His imagination fought the present imperative, carrying him to a cellar door upon which he lay, floating among a sea of stars, his father floating beside him on the same summer door, his abuelito's profile formed by bright points of light. The reverie possessed him. Santiago's inward vision perambulated across the endless canvass of infinity.

The only thing of earth that disturbed this state of grace was the barely audible but clear toned, shrill pitched train whistle which seemed to cry "shake off the b-a-r-r-i-o, shake the b-a-r-r-i-o . . ."

Slowly, however, the noises of the earthly night brought him from his reverie to his present purpose. While still looking up, ambulating in the direction of Ramon's house, half dreaming, traveling an imaginary line inward and backward. He awoke to find himself walking across the front lawn, his mother's precious "garden," a garden of grass. He froze to the sound of crunching. He realized that there was frost on the ground, perhaps even a thin layer of snow. He walked backward in his tracks, trying to step perfectly and p-r-e-c-i-s-e-l-y into the dead impressions, but he lost his balance and fell.

His stubbornness had turned five hurried steps of broken grass into a frightfully large area of dying grass. He leaped to his feet with anxiety. His mother had gotten expensive grass, dark green dicondra, from the family whose house she cleaned. This patch of front lawn and the tall rose garden were her pride. Even now on cobblestone walk-way he continued to back away, finally stamping the ice from his feet, dusting his hair. He recalled with a shiver several years ago. His mother had stung him with the razor strap, "walk on the stones, not on my grass." But what did it matter? His mother died last autumn, and now he was the keeper of the grass and the rose bushes.

All of this happened quickly. Within ten minutes of the time he had awakened, he had jumped on his Schwinn bicycle and crossed the street to wake Ramon with their special whistle: two short hyperactive followed by three long, lilting, melodious bursts.

Ramon, already up, came out quickly to quiet the dogs. "Richard coming?" asked Santiago.

"No, he's sick. Let's go 'fore we wake everyone. We'll take 'P' Street. Less dogs. Ride down the middle of the street."

"Why the middle?" laughed Santiago who was invited to the creamery for the first time.

"The dogs. Sometimes they come from the left, and sometimes on the right. We wan'ta ride far away as possible from both sides."

Silently, they glided beneath the black ocean of silent stars. The only noise in the night was the euphoria of friendship measured by the pounding of Santiago's heart. "Look, Ramon, there's Cindy's house. 'Member in seventh grade how you were in love?"

"Yeah, 'til her older brother came home from Korea with his spit shined shoes and wouldn't let me see her anymore."

Santiago remembered how he too had been in love with Cindy, how he always ate something before going with Ramon to see Cindy, so that her mother

wouldn't think he was always hungry like Ramon, and, for the same reason, he always carried change in his pocket that he would jingle.

"I guess most of us were in love with Cindy!" Santiago finally blurted out.

"Orale, cabron! Que pues?" responded Ramon, pretending to ram Santiago's bike.

"It's been almost a year since they moved to Delano. She probably has a gabacho boyfriend by now," said Santiago, remembering that Cindy had sent him her freshman picture, and he, loyal to Ramon, had immediately given it to Ramon.

"Yeah, tha's true," chimed Ramon, apparently shaking off the thought of ownership. "I can't believe they would buy a new house with the ten thou' they got for the death of her other brother in Korea."

They rode through the barrio, four blocks up "P" Street, Ramon leading, instructing Santiago on what was expected of him. They turned on Inyo along the back side of the Campo Santo and over to Tulare Street.

The creamery was lit up, an island of light and cleanliness. Two men were unloading a bright white truck which was polished like a piece of furniture. "Hey, Fats, here come the ice-cream kids. Get ready for some fun."

"Cowboy, just unload the g-a-w d-a-m-n-e-d ice-cream, and we'll give them the waste as usual," said the fat man, his curly hair fastened back in a pigtail. The boys drove up and stood quietly out of the way, almost at attention.

"Hey, these are not the same kids! That curly haired one's new. O.K., I told you not to tell the whole goddam' barrio. This is Carnation Creamery! The best in Tulare, the best in the San Joaquin Valley! We don' wan' the whole sorry Meskin barrio here, chief!" Ramon and Santiago shifted and squirmed silently. "O.K., Coronel," continued Cowboy, "take your apprentice and have 'em do tricks so's . . ."

"Shush, cowboy," interrupted Fats, "you're slowing down. Don't forget, I'm Spanish, too. We're giving those kids all the waste and tha's that!" he gesticulated to the man on the hydraulic tail-gate without looking up at him. It appeared as if he were looking and speaking to the disheveled cowboy boots. He turned to the boys with a smile, "you kids don' hafta do nut'n ta get this ice-cream," a smile in his eyes.

But the other man insisted, "Coronel, le's see wha' yer side-kick kin do."

"O.K. mister, I trained this bato myself," responded Ramon. Both boys did various routines on their bicycles: picking up their ski caps from the ground while riding fast, jerking their bike high in the air as they came up to the curb, drawing up on the rear wheel and staying up while continuing to pedal for twenty to thirty yards, and coming to a dead stop while maintaining their balance for fifteen to twenty seconds. The two men slowed their work in

admiration of the carnival show until Fats recalled himself, "C'mon, c'mon. Give this ice-cream to the kids. Le's get to it, Cowboy!"

"Shet-up, Fats. I'm the supervisor here. General, come here. Take this, yer prize for yer Meskin rodeo. Did you bring me your sister's picture?"

"Yeah, I got it, but you haf'ta give it back," responded Ramon.

"Yeah, yeah, presidente, give it here," snorted Cowboy, spitting on the street. "Not bad! I thought you said she wore boots?"

"She does, and dances cowboy!"

"Give that back to the kid," broke in Fats, swatting at the photograph. "He tol' you, she's only fifteen."

"If they're old enough to . . ."

"Shet up, bastard!" interrupted Fats. "You are sick!"

"O.K., Fats. Look'ee 'ere, gov'na," turning to Ramon, "you git back your picture and enough ice-cream to be king of the barrio, but first you haf'ta compete. Le's see ya make yer bike jump side-wise."

"Ah, my favorite!" thought Santiago, as they scampered to their bikes.

"I can stay up two hours and travel two miles," squealed Ramon.

"I can do the same, plus make mine grunt," challenged Santiago.

It must have been five minutes that Fats and Cowboy were doubled over with laughter and awe at the antics of the two barrio comics who augmented their tricks with body gestures, always about to fall but salvaging balance at the last minute. Santiago scraped his tires as if they were grunting: "this is how my dad grunts with pleasure when he has three aces," scrape, scrape, the tires grunted and Santiago let out two happy grunts between his teeth in accompaniment. "And this is how he grunts when they've heard him grunt and drop out of the game before any bets have been made:" scrape, scrape, scrape—the tires accompanied by grunts of exasperation by the boy.

Holding his gut, Cowboy declared that Santiago was the new king, "I, I now name you the emperor . . . No wait! No one can be the emperor without they ride backwards in slow motion!"

The competition became serious. Ramon ordered Santiago to go first, "Orale, cabron, le's see you win this one."

Santiago made two quick passes, riding backward easily enough, finishing with a braking skid. "Tha's it. Tha's my best."

"But ya' didn' go slow. You're not the king after all," Cowboy gleefully pointed out.

While Ramon was making his warm-up passes, Santiago explained to the swamper that he could do better, but he wanted Ramon to "try 'n top me first." And Ramon did precisely that. He slowed to the pace of a walk, maintaining balance and at one point almost completely stopping.

"Tha's fantastic, captain, fantastic display of backwards. Who can top backwards? But I believe that Sir Curly here has saved his best for last," bragged Cowboy with a swagger. On hearing this, Ramon's drawn out swan glide stuttered. He bumped in the curb, spilling onto the sidewalk.

Santiago, having secretly practiced for weeks, swung onto his bike as if it were a horse and, turning backward in the saddle, proceeded to do many of the previous tricks but this time sweeping in a backward direction. His bike skipped, came to almost a dead stop, and finally grunted against the asphalt, all with a grace and bravado of an Olympic gymnast.

"Ya hoo," hollered Cowboy, greedily saving the experience and slobbering into Fat's face, "only the kings, only the lords, no, the emperors of the barrio, come to Carnation, kabron!" And turning to Santiago, "C'mere, young'un." He took up a large two-gallon tub of melting ice-cream that had been set aside and turned it up-side down on Santiago's head, "I crown you the kind of ice-cream, the emperor of backwards!"

At this, Ramon angrily took the tub of oozing ice-cream from Santiago's head, "c'mon, brother. Le's go home." They agilely hopped on their bicycles and left the brightly lit Carnation circle in the direction of the red streaks of the fast coming sun.

After having found a front yard with a hose, and after a goodly number of expletives launched to the West with much gesticulatory emphasis, the shivering boys found themselves walking precisely down the middle of "Q" Street.

"Why did'ja haf'ta give him your sister's picture?" asked Santiago.

"It wasn't Ana's picture. It was Cindy's, idiota," retorted Ramon with renewed anger and jealousy. "I always knew that she liked you, but it wasn't 'til the picture that I knew you liked her. Why did you ever haf'ta give it ta me.

"Ramon, that was two years ago. I tol' you, everyone was in love with Cindy. Doan' mean nut'n'."

"Lis'n, king of ice-cream, Emperor of backwards, if you doan' wan' me ta kill ya', take yourself into that cellar of yours and stay there. Stay away from me." Both boys climbed on their bicycles and took to opposite sides of the street.

Arriving home, he walked between the front hedge, and passing between the silent, frozen rose trees recalled the rosebush aroma and what Aunt Ester had said to Jessie Hooker, "Chil', you been beat to yo' socks." Jessie Hooker had moved to New Orleans, but Santiago never forgot the love in Aunt Ester's voice. It was mixed with the smell of many colors of roses, just as his mother's love was mixed with the summer smell of softly moistened earth, he could still hear the patter of water on earth that preceded a moment of family talk beneath the giant fig tree. "I'll be damned if Aunt Ester's house is haunted," he recalled the

anger he has expressed to abuelito as they had driven past the house in their 1953, four door, blue Chevrolet on the way back from his mother's funeral.

"It's haunted by poverty," spoke the wisdom of a thirteen year old, six months after the death of his mother. As he glided down the cobblestone walk-way. Moments later, cold and sleepy, Santiago let an orange dawn seep into the darkened bedroom where his father, that gentle man with the bright and smiling white teeth, with the rough hands lay warmly beneath a mound of wool blankets, forming a circle of warmth. Close to this protective man, there would be no need to compete, no humiliation, no anger. The pumping heart slowed. At precisely 5 a.m. the emperor of backwards had crawled into the circle of warmth in a laborer's shack on "Q" Street, at 819 South "Q" Street, and crossing happily over into oblivion, thinking of the ice-cream he had set out to get, heard the far off train once again coming to pummel the barrio, its whistle far in advance intruded his deepening dream, seeming to announce: "the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream . . . The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream . . . the emperor of i-c-e c-r-e-a-m . . ."

Red Silk

Old Andy sat at the bar, watching the two boys as they worked like meticulous scholars, plugging the black boxes with the endless wires that coiled like snakes all over the stage. Tap hovered his hands over each of the instruments, tuning them, placing them just so, and grinning out at Old Andy when he carefully propped the guitar. Tap, who was careful in all things, was particularly tender with the old man's guitar. There it stood, in its metal holder, waiting for the night. The stage lights made it wink at Andy and he winked back, cleared his throat, and spat on the floor. This made Junior's face an ugly knot. "I just waxed this motherfucker. Get you a napkin and wipe that up or something. Don't make me get nasty with your old black ass."

Old Andy offered Junior a gap-toothed grin. "Boy, what do you know about floors? I waxed more floors in my life than you ever even walked on." Junior frowned at Andy through the glass he was spit-cleaning.

"Well excuse me for being young and black and stupid and poor." He then excused himself to Jesus for ever working in such a shithole with the old ugly man and the righteous brothers and went on excusing himself, looking through the glass and wiping, while Old Andy stood up. Andy could feel his bones clank like pots in an angry woman's hand. He tried a crooked stretch and walked up to the stage, spreading his arms wide while he looked around. The stage floor was shiny, like the streets of heaven. The gleam made his heart jump, made his mind race, forward and back, but mostly back—to days of skinny women in little clothes, to other stages, other nights, but always the same guitar. Old Andy's guitar, fattened with years of rich music, was his legacy.

Tap smiled down on Andy, one foot in a snake coil of wire, the other propped on an amplifier. "We're gonna do it tonight. It's gonna come from everywhere. I got everything hooked, and these fingers are ready for the raw." Tap was as white as they came, his face angled and white and as pretty as a girl's. But his eyes were dark as a black man's and filled with music and sex and pain. They made him look lonely and wild, told the crowd about all of the things women wanted to hear. From the first time the old man saw him—saw that beautiful, pale face reflecting a wild soul—he knew Tap could sell any song to a crowd. And better than that, Tap knew the music. Andy shook his head sometimes, watching Tap's white fingers on the strings, listening to his soulful voice toss out some ragged piece of life. Andy would yell at him to slow down or speed up or

feel more, just because he saw that as his sacred duty, but none of his words really mattered because Tap could already stroke the crowd and the guitar like a lover.

Old Andy leaned his hard elbows on the stage, watching the boys do the last of the fixing. Tap sang little bits of songs that floated up like pretty pieces of cloth, while Billy, glum as a dime store Indian, cussed at every inch of wire. Andy ran his finger along the smooth of the guitar, pulled on a string and listened to the single note. He felt it like he felt love, knew it like he knew the two on stage—like he knew his own reflection in the mirror. "Billy boy, get a move on. You're as slow as spring. This old body's gotta eat and while you're pissing around with them plugs, I'm just about disappearing."

Billy shrugged. "Then disappear. I don't think me and Tap would much miss your skinny behind." His face was square and Indian, his life hard and unnatural, and all of it came out in the plugs. Nothing went in right, all of it got twisted, the sound never worked just so. And always, Old Andy had to come along behind, unplug and replug and fix. But the boy could play; there was nothing to fix in his music. His fingers on the keys, and all hell would listen. Eyes pressed shut, his long hair tossed back, and Billy's dark soul would jump on each key with clever madness, like a woman possessed, dancing down the ivory in a flaming red dress.

Andy sighed an old wine sigh and plucked another string. He knew Billy like he knew the clouds, and he'd been watching them all his life. You could lay on your back and name the clouds, find their shapes and watch, possessed, while they changed and shifted again, but you always knew they were there. If he thought about it—and he often did think about it—the old man knew these boys deeply. And he was sure he taught them more than anyone else had—how to roll their cigarettes just so; how to make the last beer as good as six; how to say no to women or yes to women. He certainly looked after them more and cussed at them more frequently and with greater vehemence. Maybe it wasn't too much to hope for, after his hard black life, to have boys who could carry the music into a hundred other nights, as if on the back of a cloud.

Tap turned his pockets out and counted a few skinny bills. "We better bust a good one tonight, 'cause starvation is just around the corner." Old Andy laughed; he knew her personally, knew she was a coward. "She been hanging there all my life. I'll kick her skinny ass any day. That's why she stays around the corner and doesn't come poking in my business. Now come on, let's find us some sleep and some food,

'cause we are going to move them tonight." He slung a thin arm around each boy's shoulder. He had to reach up to get to Billy, big as a ladder. The three

wandered into the night, looking like odd shaped bottles all in a row, each one filled with liquid electric.

At the Camly restaurant, three perfect stools were waiting, shining red through the window. Tap saw them as they walked past; Old Andy's eyes were buried in the sky and Billy's on the flounce of a pretty green skirt. Tap pressed his palm to the pane and grinned. "Here's the place. See, our names are right there." He led the way, picking the center stool and giving it a few careful spins.

Billy sat heavily on his and reached over the counter for a menu. "So we're gonna blow our last few skulls on this place?"

Tap laid the bills on the counter in a careful line. "Why not? We might as well go out in style."

Clarise came up, pencil in her mouth, eyes wide pretty and full of young angst. She looked at Billy, at Tap, at Billy, at Tap again, and then carefully smoothed her stained red apron. Old Andy raised his eyebrows, felt like a young Romeo, felt pleasure. "These are my boys, and ain't they a pair?" Clarise grinned like a foolish peasant girl and asked for their orders, strongly recommending the special. Old Andy ordered a beer for everybody, asked Clarise could she have one too—join them in their little drink, 'cause it was good luck for music men like themselves to drink beer with a pretty little thing before the show. Clarise didn't think her boss would approve—he was a bear—and she giggled a lot at this very funny metaphor. Tap gave her his slightest smile, Billy gave his best James Dean, and Clarise floated on clouds into the kitchen. She was out in fifteen seconds with their beers.

Old Andy downed a smooth golden swallow, admiring how it almost mirrored the gold of Clarise's swinging ponytail. "What do you think, Billy, think you could get us a free meal?" Billy watched Old Andy's wrinkly mind at work and had to laugh. "She's got to be fourteen, Old Man. What—you want me in prison?"

"Nah—but you could find you a woman sometime, so Old Andy could teach a grandson how to play and how to plug up the wires. I'd even teach him how to sing." The boys found the singing part very funny, which Clarise found very nice. She memorized their laughing faces from across the restaurant, wrote down an order wrong, and generally ruined her hope for a tip from table six.

"The key is, boys, finding a woman who'll love a music man for the rest of her days. No, it's even more than that, 'cause she's bound to love you, but she'll learn to hate you too. It's finding one who'll balance it all out—who'll let you keep the guitar on the kitchen table and who'll keep herself from wiping up the coffee stains with your music when you come home too drunk and too tired too many times."

"That's an awful lot to ask, Old Man." Billy gave his Indian frown. "And who ever said I was a music man anyway. I'm everything but that—maybe I'm even a college man, or a lawyer, or a scout for the army."

Old Andy felt the beer make his eyes fuzzy, his thinking tired.

"The army don't need scouts no more. That was the cavalry, and they wouldn't've let your Indian behind in there no how. Besides, the piano told me who you were the first night I saw you. That's what you are, that's what you always will be. Just like Tap'll always play like heaven and sing so smooth that the women fall off their chairs and buy us all beers." Old Andy's eyes misted up, so profound were the memories of Tap's ragged angel voice caressing all the women, and of the many beers. "Billy, I got one thing to ask you. Is the music in here?" He tapped Billy on the chest with one finger, like he was playing the same note over and over. Billy watched the dark finger, fascinated. "Cause if it's in here, ain't no woman, no job ever gonna be enough."

Tap tried to answer for Billy, smiling his angel smile. "He's an Indian. Everything's in his soul, right Billy?" Billy looked at Tap, as fascinated with his face as he had been with Old Andy's finger.

When Clarise brought their meals, Billy couldn't eat, and Tap picked at his in deference to Billy. Andy ate as much as he could, knowing about starvation. Clarise came back frequently, bringing water, beers, more napkins, more salt. She offered very pretty smiles to all of them, even Old Andy, who grinned back at her through the potatoes and the ketchup. When it came time to pay, she loaned them three dollars, pressing it carefully into Tap's hand. He thanked her with a kiss on the forehead, as gentle as the waft of a cloud, and she promised Billy and Old Andy that she *would* come hear the music, that she didn't mind loaning them the money, and it was just her tips, so it wasn't like real money as far as she was concerned anyway.

The threesome wandered the few blocks back to their room for a fitful rest. Old Andy had a dream about drowning in a sea of pretty red silk, reaching up to Billy and Tap, and watching while they tried to pry him free. Billy didn't sleep, but stared out the hotel window at the colors in the blinking electric sign. Tap, in deference to Billy, smoked a cigarette and, with his dark ocean eyes, watched Old Andy's painful snores. When they finally appeared back at the bar they looked like the ragged blues, sung from a bleeding soul.

Old Andy cleaned up after Billy, plugging and replugging the wires. Tap sat on a stool, singing to himself and telling sweet secrets to his guitar. While his bent fingers worked, Andy thought about the music and how pretty it was, but how you couldn't ever touch it like you could a woman or the hard things in this world. The thought made him feel alone until Junior began begging Billy to help him unload a crate of booze from the basement, since his feet were just too

tired and he "wasn't born with the back of a mule no how." Then Andy could do something else but think. He watched while Billy lugged the awkward box up the stairs, his feet keeping time to Tap's slow song. And as he watched, the crate seemed to rest on Billy's shoulders like the world. Billy put the box down with infinite care, the bottles inside kissing together in a little musical way, and Old Andy felt his eyes mist up again.

The night began the same, dipped in the noise of thirsty people. When the bartender hadn't shown by 6:00, the owner called down for Junior to fill in. He broke into a cat grin, puffing about the extra money he'd make and marching around to show everybody how fine he looked in the bartender's apron. After the first round, nobody ordered mixed drinks anymore, but Junior was too happy and busy to notice. The music floated through the crowd like rain sometimes; other times it was jagged and bright. Old Andy drank too many beers, caught up in Junior's exquisite bartender joy, and watched the boys from behind his guitar. His own music was sweet and made memories in the crowd, but theirs was life itself. Tap's dark eyes bored into each woman with his songs, Billy's hands flashed and pounded, making ragged hymns to everything. The two together were everything, and Old Andy's sounds became ever sweeter and quieter in the background.

When Clarise came in, wearing a dress that was too tight on her little round frame, Old Andy had to rouse the boys from their passion.

"It's time to break," he told them, watching the sweat flow down Tap's neck like a river. Clarise offered a tiny wave, coloring just a bit as Billy winked back across the crowd. The threesome made a path to Clarise's little table, Tap stopping to smile with each woman who tugged on his shirt along the way. Old Andy put his arm around Clarise and yelled at Junior. "Bring this pretty thing the best three dollar drink you got—something to match with these green eyes and this pretty green dress."

Billy, high on the music, leaned into Clarise's face, "Now whenever did those eyes get so green? Were they that green today, Tap?"

Tap flashed a crooked grin, "If I remember correctly, they were as green as a wide, pretty yard. You just don't believe the finer things in life, my man." Tap and Billy shared an electric smile. Clarise held her chin just so in her hand because she knew it looked coy, but mostly to keep her jaw from dropping open.

Old Andy's eyes were hazing over with the gold beer, the gold of Clarise's sweet hair, when the woman came in. She was as fair a Tap, her hair dark and wild, and she seemed to stare at Old Andy with a cool stare while she floated right up to their table. Clarise, who had been leaning ever closer to Billy, sat upright and smoothed her dress. "This is my cousin, Angeline. I told her I met some musicians and she wanted to come see. I hope that's okay." Old Andy

squinted at Angeline through the golden haze and noticed for the first time the color of her dress. It was as red as a mouth, shiny like a jewel. His heart felt sweet pain.

As Andy watched, Billy leaned into Angeline, his eyes alive in the glow of her dress. She talked at him with her round lovely mouth, and Billy absorbed every word. Tap, in deference to Billy, toyed gently with Clarise, who's face was aglow and smiling at every woman in the bar. Old Andy stood abruptly, jiggling the glasses on the table. "Music pays the bills, boys."

When they played again, it sounded louder to Andy than ever before, and his fingers grew tired of trying to keep up. Angeline sent drinks to each of them, paying happy Junior extra to put little colored umbrellas in Billy's. The umbrellas seemed too bright and somehow evil to Andy, and the drink tasted old. He cursed at Junior over the microphone about stale drinks and bad drinks and everybody laughed, which only brought a sadness to Old Andy's face. Tap told Junior he liked his just fine, which made the women look sweet and misty, and Junior sent him another one, boasting to all the bar how he and Tap played poker together most times, and how he taught the boy everything he knew about poker—Tap could play some music, but Junior, he was the man to see for good drinks and mean poker.

Billy called the next break, spending it pressed to Angeline, and everything began to blur for Andy. There was more sweet, sultry music, but it seemed much too early when Billy decided to end the set for the night. Old Andy felt robbed of an exquisite power. Tap commented that he looked tired or maybe drunk and took special care to help him down from the stage. Andy slumped on a stool, watching Junior wipe glasses, while Billy helped Angeline to the door. Tap gave Clarise a kiss just dipped in passion and let her go off into the night behind Billy and Angeline. Junior worried that she might run into a wall, laughing about this to Tap, who only smiled quietly and began to clean the bottles off the stage.

Billy didn't come back for another hazy, long time and when he finally did, looking both worn and fresh, Old Andy had his chin down on the bar. Tap and Junior were smoking and playing cards, but they were all waiting. Junior crowed about the mysteries of women in general and of white women in particular and wondered loudly why such a pretty thing would leave with big ugly Billy when she could have had a truly good time with Junior or even with Tap, who sat smiling his quiet angel smile. Billy's face was pale like a cloud, as if Angeline's fresh white skin had joined with his, and his eyes were touched with bits of painful gold. Andy spat on the floor; Junior didn't look up, intent on his cards. "It's a good thing they beat my ass to a pulp around here so's I have to clean that

up tomorrow anyway, otherwise I'd have to wipe it up with your old skinny self."

Old Andy watched through narrow eyes while Billy approached the guitar which was poised in the center of the stage and rubbed a finger along its finish. He looked out at the old man and then at Tap, a careful knot of control in his jaw. "My soul is wider than this." He picked up the guitar, holding it high like a sacrificial lamb. "I've got a hundred things in here, and they aren't all music. I can make money if I want to. I can dance with women instead of always watching."

He was on the stage with the stretch of one hard leg, and he dropped down at the piano, staring at the keys with a look of desperate horror. His hands moved over them, and the music started. It made Old Andy see a red dress stretched tight on a young girl's behind. She whirled around the room, heat shooting from the balls of her feet, and just as she came up to Andy, lightning in her eyes, a hungry laugh at her mouth, the music stopped. Billy stared at Tap. "You come with me. You could do it all. Women'll follow you anywhere and men love you for it. You could have anything you want, with a paycheck, real hours. We could take care of the old man."

Tap's snowy cheeks were hollow, his eyes on the coiled wires all over the stage. "My soul isn't strong enough to be that wide Billy. It's got nothing in it but us... and this." He walked over the strummed a chord that started a rushing in Old Andy's ears, like the rush of water, and while Andy watched, Tap and Billy shared a look as if they'd known each other since before music existed. Billy finally glanced away, poking a lone key. The sound was infinite in Andy's ears. "I gotta start looking around. Something'll come for me tomorrow or the next day and then it's time. I got dreams." Tap gave Billy a sweet smile—the deepest smile—and Old Andy could feel waves wash over him.

He ran to Billy, and the clanking of his bones sounded so loud that he was sure they could hear them through his skin. He clambered up on the stage and pressed his guitar at him, the strings shining like gold in the lights. "Then you take this when you go. This is all of it, this is all we have left. I couldn't have you out there without something." Billy's dark hair fell over the guitar while he studied its old smooth face. Looking up, he gave Old Andy a soft electric gaze, the kind that got them through every long dark night, but the old man could only feel how cold his bones were and how long life had been to this point.

L'AN 1968

L'an 1968—c'était une époque suffisamment difficile pour tout le monde aux Etats-Unis; c'était peut-être le moment le plus sombre dans l'histoire du pays. J'avais dix ans cet automne-là, et j'avais vu deux grands hommes—Martin Luther King, Jr. et Bobby Kennedy—mourir par les balles des assassins. Deux autres leaders nobles et honnêtes—Hubert Humphrey et Edmund Muskie—avaient perdu l'élection présidentielle à des politiciens qui plus tard seraient demis de leurs postes en disgrâce. Plus de cent jeunes Américains revenaient chaque jour dans des cercueils provenant du Vietnam. Pendant presque un mois entier cet été-là, la ciel au-dessus de chez nous à Torrance était noirci par les nuages de fumée émanant des émeutes à Watts. J'étais en cinquième à l'école élémentaire. Je commençais à m'intéresser aux événements et à l'avenir du monde. Mais le monde qui m'importait le plus était mon voisinage.

Comme dans tous les quartiers où il y a beaucoup d'enfants, existait dans la 181^{ème} Rue un univers complexe et indépendant pour les jeunes. Nous avions nos propres règles, nos propres affaires et, bien sûr, nos propres héros. Il y avait les héros feints comme Zorro et James Bond et les héros réels comme John Glenn et O.J. Simpson. Mais pour tous les garçons de notre voisinage, le héros le plus important était Mark.

Mark était l'unique jeune homme dans notre quartier. Il avait presque dix-neuf ans alors, et nous pensions qu'il était l'adolescent le plus "cool" au monde. Il portait souvent des blue-jeans et un tee-shirt blanc avec une veste en cuir et des bottes noires. Il avait un vieux camion qui ne marchait pas. Le camion était souvent garé devant la maison de sa famille, et Mark passait presque tout son temps à le réparer. Il était couvert souvent de lubrifiant de moteur et de sueur. Il fumait des "Camels" sans filtre qu'il gardait dans un paquet enroulé dans sa manche. Quel homme! Jamais bien Mark parce qu'il avait dit à mon frère stupide de ne plus me tabasser. Et l'ordre réussissait jusqu'au jour où Mark est parti à Vietnam.

La vie dans les banlieues de Los Angeles était assez tranquille et heureuse alors. Tous les enfants rêvaient d'un avenir passionnant et parfait, en dépit des événements dans le monde autour de nous. Pour la première fois, j'ai embrassé une fille à une danse scolaire, et j'ai découvert "Robin des Bois," "20,000 Lieues Sous les Mers," "Le Seigneur des Mouches" et "Benis les Bêtes et les Enfants." Et

dans nos jeux de "Guerre," j'argumentais, comme tous les garçons, pour faire le portrait de Mark.

Le matin où la mission d'Apollo VIII a décollé pour la lune, une voisine a dit à ma mère que Mark reviendrait du Vietnam. Cet après-midi-là, tous les garçons sont venus à la maison des parents de Mark. Sa mère a ouvert la porte. Ses yeux apparaissaient fatigués et rouges. Elle a dit que Mark reviendrait dans deux semaines, mais elle a dit cela sans émotion. "C'est fantastique, non?" j'ai proposé. Elle a fait un signe de tête avec un sourire frele et triste. "Vous savez que Mark était blessé," elle a dit dans une voix forcée. "Il aura besoin des amis pour lui rendre visite." "Pas de problème!" "Bien sûr!" nous avons crié. "Promettez-vous?" elle a demandé. "Vous n'allez pas l'oublier?" "Mais non!" nous avons dit, assez étonnés. Elle a fermé la porte alors qu'elle fondait en larmes. Très confus, nous sommes partis en silence.

Pendant les deux semaines suivantes, nous garçons discussions avec excitation le retour de Mark. Chaque personne avait des projets et des idées pour aider Mark, sans se soucier de la sévérité de ses blessures. Nous faisons beaucoup de signes et de cartes pour accueillir Mark à son retour.

Le grand jour est arrivé, et chez Mark tout avait été décoré avec les signes et les bannières. Quand nous avons vu la voiture de ses parents s'arrêter devant la maison, tous les garçons ont couru là-bas. Les autres voisins étaient arrivés déjà, et l'air était plein de rires et d'excitation, jusqu'aux parents de Mark qu'il ont aidé dehors de la voiture. Nous jeunes enfants avons lutté pour voir Mark à travers la foule des voisins et des camarades de Mark.

Nous nous attendions au fauteuil roulant, mais nous n'avions pas prévu ce qui serait dans le fauteuil. Mark avait perdu son bras et sa jambe du côté droit, et sa tête était brûlée et défigurée. Il ne pouvait pas parler. Je me sentais comme si j'attendais toujours le retour de Mark. À la fête, nous tous flânions nerveusement; nous avons mangé des "Milk Duds" sans appétit. Un par un, nos parents nous ont exhortés à dire "salut" à Mark et à bavarder avec lui. Nous avons parlé inconfortablement et d'une manière gênée avec lui. Nous avons regardé le sol et nous nous sommes regardés. Mais nous ne pouvions pas regarder Mark.

J'ai quitté la fête tôt, et je suis rentré chez moi par les trottoirs de mon voisinage—pour une raison ou une autre, un voisinage plus petit et un univers moins indépendant. Plus de 58,000 américains étaient tués dans cette guerre, et un grand nombre était blessé pour toujours. Mais les statistiques ne disent jamais l'histoire complète. Beaucoup de blessés n'étaient jamais partis des banlieues. J'ai frissonné pendant la promenade chez moi, en dépit de la température douce de ce crépuscule en décembre. Je ne lui ai jamais rendu visite de nouveau. Pas un garçon ne l'a fait. Quand le vieux camion de Mark était remorqué à la décharge publique, l'événement a passé dans le silence honteux

dans notre quartier. Nous ne pouvions pas nous occuper d'un Mark brisé parce que nous ne pouvions pas nous occuper de nos rêves brisés aussi. Bien sûr, cela blessait Mark mais cela nous blessait aussi. Cela blesse encore.

True Grits

“Orville! C'mon, the grits is ready.” Vern set the cast-iron skillet on the burn spot in the middle of the old, pine table.

“Vern, why is it you always set that skillet there?”

“‘Cause that’s where the burn spot is, Orville. Any fool knows you don’t put a hot skillet on the table ‘cept where the burn spot is.”

“Oh, Vern, when we gonna get some meat? I’m tired of grits and greens.”

“Orville, I been thinkin’ on that very thing. If it snows tonight, tomorrow we kin track some game.

“Yeh, I bet I could eat a rabbit raw if I could ketch me one. I don’t know why critters been so scarce around here.”

“‘Cause we been killin’ and skinnin’ ‘em for the last twenty years, that’s why. Jesus, Orville, cain’t you think of nothin’ that I don’t hafta tell ya?”

“Vern, you always was the smartest; finishin’ fourth grade, and all.

“Yep. I done right well in school ‘til Pa got killed when the still exploded.”

“Aw, c’mon Vern, you aint goin’ to bring that up again, are ya? How was I supposed to know that firewood we stole from ol’ Mister McHenry had been drilled and plugged with dyn-o-mite?”

Orville and Vern both knew how crafty Mr. McHenry was. Once, when they was helping theirselves to his watermelons, he’d put a laxative in some of ‘em with a hyperdermic needle. They didn’t go far from the outhouse for a week. They’d figured to get even with him by stealing a couple of the old man’s chickens. Then Orville figured out that stealing his firewood was better, since ol’ Mister McHenry had to work so hard to get it. They had hauled off nearly a cord before Mr. McHenry hit on the fact that somebody was into his woodpile. That’s when he cut a hole in the end of one piece and put a stick of dynamite in it.

People said, when that still belonging to Orville and Vern’s Pa went up, it was like nothin’ anybody had ever seen or heard before. All that was found of their Pa was the bottoms of his boots, and a couple of his gold teeth, which Vern wore on a leather boot lace around his neck. Vern figured to mount them on a gold chain, when he came into some money, so he could show his Pa proper respect.

Well, it snowed that night, after all. Orville and Vern took off early the next morning to try to get meat so they could get through the winter. As they

tromped through the snow, they talked about all the different shapes that the snow made.

"Hey! Vern. Lookey thar. Thet looks just like a white rabbit, don't it?"

"Whar?"

"Over yonder, by them bushes, under thet forked oak tree."

"Orville, you idiot, that is a snow rabbit! Now hush-up so's I can get a little closer for a shot."

They inched closer and closer. Finally, Vern eased the rifle up to his shoulder. The click was louder than Hoot-Owl at midnight.

"Orville! Didn't you load this thing?"

"Well, gee, Vern, I figured you did. Besides, you shot it last."

Vern was on Orville like bees on honey. All through the fight Orville kept saying it weren't his fault. He said if he got to carry the rifle, he woulda' checked it out.

Well, that rabbit just hopped away, easy as you please, and Orville and Vern headed back, three miles, to the cabin.

"Look, Vern, I'm sorry, but it weren't my fault. You been tellin' me to leave that rifle alone ever since I dropped it in the creek last year. I jest been settin' traps since then. Hell fire! I don't even know where you keep the bullets."

Vern poured himself another shot from the jug and just sat there.

"Orville, that was dinner wot your stupidity let get away. That was meat!"

Vern took another swallow from the jug.

"Look, Orville, I'll forget your stupidity this time 'cause your my only brother wot lived and kin has got to stick together. Besides, if we take a lantern with us, we can get some hunting in even after dark. Here, have a pull offn' the jug and let's go."

"Say, Vern, kin we take the jug? It's a mite cold, and it shore do warm a body's innards."

"Okay, but you carry it."

The sun was settin' fast as they rounded the top of Kee-Chaw Mountain. That's when they spotted the big ol' buck. It seemed to glide across the snow, not even touchin' it. Boy Howdy! This was meat for the winter. Orville and Vern crept in closer. The first shot was perfect. Orville congratulated Vern. Vern thanked him and said it weren't much any good-ol'-boy couldn't do, and then he took another pull on the jug.

That night they feasted on fried deer liver, onions, and greens.

"Vern, that ther was the best meat I ever et. You shore do know how!"

"Thankya, Orville, it was might tasty, ifn I do say so myself. I reckon we ought to tan that hide so we can sell it come Spring. Yet, that's wot we'll do. Say, Orville, did you happen to notice anything peculiar about that deer?"

"Nope. Tasted just fine to me."

"Not that, stupid, I mean it was strangely marked."

"What do you mean, Vern?"

"Well, it's the damndest thing I ever saw. It had a red nose."

When Russell Turned Thirty

The year Joslin was ten the MaCallister family moved in three doors down with their son Russell. He was twelve. A month later Russell wrecked Joslin's bicycle. She got a new ten speed. Russell got grounded for three weeks. The year Joslin was fourteen and Russell was sixteen he bought her a six pack of beer. They shared it in his new car after a football game. Joslin threw up on the dash.

When Joslin was seventeen and Russell was nineteen he escorted her to the homecoming dance. Joslin was nominated for homecoming queen. She lost, and Russell let her cry on his shoulder.

The year Joslin was nineteen and Russell was twenty-one they got married. Joslin thought Russell was particularly handsome in his tuxedo with his tobacco brown hair brushed back from his temples, his shoulders wide and strong. Two weeks after the wedding they went away to college. Joslin majored in business. Russell majored in economics.

When Joslin was twenty-four and Russell was twenty-six they got divorced. It was a most difficult year.

Joslin's mother immediately removed their wedding picture from her bedroom wall and replaced it with a picture of Jesus. Then she began harping at Joslin to be absolutely sure that she got back all the presents her family had given her at the wedding. With all the stress she was under, Joslin wondered how on earth she was supposed to remember after all these years which gifts were from her family without rereading the guest book—frankly a rather painful prospect.

Russell's brother counseled him to keep the house and he did for a time, but later he told Joslin it held memories that haunted him. For instance, sometimes when the house was still he would swear he heard Jo's distinctive footsteps in the hall, and once he thought he heard her clear, singing laughter in the den.

Almost a year passed before they tentatively began to reach out to each other again. Having had a relationship for so long they found it impossible to remain apart. They decided a divorce was not sufficient grounds to end their friendship. So for two years they drifted into bed together when it suited them and out when it did not.

Until Russell remarried. Joslin rather liked Sonia. They were about the same height, both had mousy brown hair cut short and tousled, and they were both

Republicans unlike Russell who was a Democrat. Joslin found it interesting that Russell would marry someone so like herself.

Naturally Joslin attended the wedding. She joked that she had attended Russell's other wedding so it seemed right to attend this one also. However when Russell's best friend Howie (demoted from best man to usher this time in favor of Sonia's brother) tried to seat her in the front row with the family, Joslin whispered in his ear that perhaps it wasn't really appropriate for her to sit with Russell's parents. Then she sidled back three rows to sit between Howie's wife, Camille and Joslin and Russell's mutual friend Karen.

Russell and Joslin saw each other infrequently for a time. He was busy settling into married life again. Until Russell turned thirty. Joslin thought she understood. She too was rapidly approaching thirty with some discomfort. Thirty was a hill to be plodded up because the descent down the other side was far too swift.

Hadn't Karen suddenly become paralyzed in her right arm two months before her birthday? The doctor ran innumerable tests until Karen mentioned to him one day that she was almost thirty. The doctor recommended a psychiatrist. The paralysis disappeared in three visits.

Russell and Joslin were having lunch at a restaurant half way between their offices when Russell first brought up his own just turned thirty problems.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, Jo," Russell said as he rolled his tomato in dressing with his fork. "I get off work. I go home. I lie on a raft in the pool for hours. Not doing anything, not even thinking. I just lie there floating round and round."

Joslin stabbed a leaf of lettuce and munched thoughtfully. When they were married Russell was always doing something—tinkering on his car, doing paperwork at the kitchen table or playing with the dog. It drove her nuts. She could sit for hours snuggled in the cushions of the overstuffed chair in the living room, reading, stroking the cat or just daydreaming. But not Russell.

He was staring at her, his green eyes clouded and troubled, as though she should have some magical answer for his problem. Joslin felt a sudden irritation at Sonia. Wasn't this her problem? After all she was his wife now. "I don't know Russ, perhaps it's just a phase you're going through. I read this book once. Let me see . . . I can't remember . . ." her voice trailed off.

Russell had that "Oh Jesus, not another book" look on his face. "Well maybe you should take a vacation or switch jobs," Joslin offered hopefully.

Russell's fork clattered on the plate. He leaned across the table and hissed at her. "For Christsakes Jo, I just got a promotion. Sonia and I cruised the

Caribbean last month. This is serious. There's something really wrong with me."

It was two weeks before they had lunch again. This time they got hamburgers at the drive-in. Joslin didn't have any appointments that afternoon so she indulged herself with onion rings. She leaned back against the seat of Russell's Cadillac savoring the crusty coating.

"Jo," Russell gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles were white. "I have these visions."

"What kind of visions?"

"I see myself getting my gun out of the drawer and putting the barrel in my mouth. Then I pull the trigger."

Joslin choked and the onion slithered down her throat. "My God, Russell. You aren't actually thinking of killing yourself?" She grabbed his shoulder and tugged until he turned and looked at her.

"Russell, this is more than I've got the 'turning thirty' blues. You have to get help."

Russell stared out of the windshield, his jaw set.

"Russell, please!" she pleaded. "I now how you feel about psychiatry, but I'm really worried about you. What does Sonia say about this?"

"I haven't told Sonia. I don't know . . . I just can't talk to Sonia."

For a week Joslin jumped every time the phone rang. Had Russell . . .

They had drinks the following Friday. Joslin had finished her first drink before Russell got there.

"You know Jo, your ideas are just as stupid now as they were when we were married," Russell announced as he shrugged out of his jacket, flung it across the back of his chair and loosened his tie.

Joslin looked at him blankly. "What are you talking about?"

"I called the Mental Health Association. They gave me the name of a doctor."

"So what happened?"

"He was a damned sex therapist. I spent ninety-five dollars trying to tell this guy I don't have a sex problem."

Joslin shook her head sympathetically. She of all people knew that Russell had no sex problem whatsoever. In fact sometimes, late at night, when she tossed and turned in her bed alone she envied Sonia that.

For a month she didn't talk to Russell at all. Until the night she got home from Sacramento. The phone was ringing when she threw open the front door and heaved her suit case into the hall. She stubbed her toe on the dining table racing to the kitchen.

"Jo, this is Karen. Where have you been? I've been calling for four days."

Kicking off her high heels, Joslin rubbed her wounded toe against the calf of her other leg. "I've been up to the Sacramento plant. Union Negotiations. What's wrong?"

"Howie's dead."

Joslin sank into the kitchen chair. "Oh my God. What happened?"

"He was at his Twenty-Thirty meeting. Dave told Ben he was sitting there eating his lunch telling one of those stupid jokes of his. Then all the sudden he clutched his chest and keeled over face down in his chicken. Can you believe it. Thirty years old and he drops dead from a heart attack."

In her mind Joslin pictured Howie. Short and muscular he always made Russell appear taller and more slender than he really was. "Howie's birthday is the fifth and Russell's is the tenth," she said softly. "Or vice versa. I never can remember. When we were married we always celebrated their birthdays together on the weekend that fell in between. I never can remember whose birthday is on which day."

"The funeral was this morning," Karen went on briskly. "Camille was hysterical of course. I don't think the kids were there. I didn't see them. Russ looked terrible."

"Oh, Russell. I guess I should call him. Thanks for calling Karen. I'll call you tomorrow."

She called Russell but he was totally noncommunicative. No, it didn't occur to him to call her. He was too busy. No, it didn't occur to him that Howie was her friend too. No, he wasn't going to do something stupid. "He's upset," Jo thought as she hung up the phone. As she trudged down the hall to bed tears dripped down her cheeks.

Two months after she and Russell decided they weren't compatible and Russell moved out, Joslin had a miscarriage. Lying on the bed in the hospital emergency ward she watched the blood gushing between her legs turning the sheets to crimson. She had thought to herself I'll call Russell. He'll come down here and make everything better. She repeated it to herself over and over. But she never called Russell. There was a tiny voice inside her head that said maybe he wouldn't come. Maybe he would tell her he was too busy. So she laid there alone in the hospital hurting and crying.

It was almost a month before Russell called Joslin again. They met for lunch at Heritage House. Joslin was a little surprised. As a rule Russell didn't like expensive restaurants unless he was entertaining clients and could put the receipt on his expense account.

She was even more surprised when Russell strolled in with a blond. Not just any blond. This one had a model's face. She was tall and willowy. Her golden

hair twirled and rippled down her back. She had breasts like cannon balls. "Jo, this is Rita."

Joslin managed to stick out her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Russell and Rita sat down in the booth across from Joslin. "I wanted you to meet Rita."

"Oh, I see." But she didn't.

"I met Rita at the Golden Drum."

Rita giggled and wiggled her breasts. "I'm a waitress there."

"How nice," Jo nodded to the cocktail waitress. She felt the definite need or a drink.

"Actually I have to be at work at one. Russ just wanted me to come by and meet you." Rita slid out of the booth. Russell handed her his car keys.

"You can give me a ride to the office, can't you Jo?" he asked.

Joslin nodded numbly. Together they watched Rita's rearend sashay out of the restaurant.

Russ turned back to Joslin, a huge grin on his face. He leaned across the table. "I can't believe it. Rita's the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm going to marry her."

"Gee, I'm so glad you're happy. But how does Sonia feel about this?" Joslin asked through gritted teeth. All this time I thought he was in a state of suicidal depression, she thought to herself. How silly of me. Why didn't I just find him a bimbo to begin with.

"I haven't told her yet. But I will. You know I really think it was Sonia that was dragging me down. She never understood me. Are you ready to order?"

Russell called her five weeks later. "Jo, could we have lunch?"

Joslin made a notation on the file in front of her and shuffled it into the stack at her elbow. "Russ, you sound depressed. Is everything all right?"

"Rita dumped me. She says she's only twenty-one and she's not ready for a serious relationship. Thank God I never told Sonia."

"Oh, Russell. I'm so sorry. How about twelve thirty?"

Highlander Melody

Sub-Standard 1

This land was green once. The hills rolled and flourished in the sweet sentient air where the wildlife had only to worry about itself and the small everyday nuisances of life that broke the harmonious monotony of time. Each stream tumbled blissfully down their paths, bouncing over the rocks and the stones and carving the pathways even deeper so they would be able to return year after year as the winter snow dissipated from the jovial springtime sun. The trees were once alive. Alive with the sound of squirrels playing on the branches, of birds garrously squawking amongst themselves, of the wind making the leaves sing a special song of peace and contentment. The ground was once alert. Colors streamed up and moved through the air form the iridescent groves of wild flowers and shrubs that blanketed the fields of the land. We sang with the wind once, we moved with the colors, we once felt for the land. In the highland you could hear the pipes blow out a melody, the Highlander Melody, which called to the land with the great Celtic pride and gave its respects to the land. As the fogs slept on the hills of green, the song would play on and the land would sing back in silent harmony. We knew the land, and we were one with it.

But now this land is no longer green. It has been corroded, poisoned without reason and without a fair fight. Ignorance because of purity and gentleness is the land's flaw. The land is almost dead now. The land has been infiltrated by idealism, theology, pragmatism, spontaneous corruption, a warped sense of values, deceit, politics, pain, self centered ideology, and worst of all, our beliefs.

Our beliefs is why the land is no longer green. We are now at war with the land. The land has its own set of beliefs. We have our own set of beliefs, and the most intelligent of all beings is not able to believe like the land any more. We, the "great" race, can't even believe like one another. So the land dies, and soon after, man will die because he cannot even believe in himself. Are all of the beliefs made on lies? How can we believe in ourselves when we know that we are part of the lie?

This land is no longer green, we will soon die, and the Highlander Melody plays no more..Spacing=2

Standard 1

Rain again. Damn. It just seems to keep raining. The local forecasters keep expecting snow, but I guess God doesn't listen to the weathermen, so He decided to drench the city until our clothes stuck to our bodies. Takes a sick mind to want to actually see how thin Ireland really is. The water keeps flowing down the window pane, where I sit for the last time. My bags are almost packed, but I'm not ready to leave.

I walked down stairs earlier to get the morning Times. I guess it is a ritual now, because I don't need to read the paper because the news is always the same. Take today's for example: "THREE MORE JUMP FROM DUBLIN TOWERS." Nothing new. They're always jumping off the Towers. Poor bastards, though. Probably changed their minds half way down, but it's too late to change it at the pavement. I tried to stop in mid-air the time I fell off the roof of our house at Drogheda while throwing rocks at McMaley's cows across the field. Couldn't stop then, probably couldn't stop now. Nobody like McMaley, that old bastard. My brother Pete had good reasons for disliking him, especially after Pete caught McMaley's walking club in the back of the head when Pete sent his ball over into the sheep pin. Pete never saw it coming. Knocked him for a loop.

Pete was the greatest kid I knew. No fooling. The kid was a sheer genius. He found everything interesting. Pete could sit for hours and watch the Counterill Beetles tumble about the ground, and he would grin the whole time, like it was some sort of sideshow at the town carnival. Pete was really alive. He was only eight when he began reading Yeats, and the best part of all is he really got into that stuff. Only kid I knew that could actually enjoy the stuff. Pete was killed three months ago. An IRA bomb got him while he was at school. Pete was the only one killed. What a waste. I cried like a damn baby when I heard about it because I knew Pete probably didn't mind. He's the only person I miss now when I'm alone. Probably why I flunked out of the University. Who could concentrate after that?

I had to catch the 2:00 train home. God, my mother was going to kill me. That woman had all of the fighting Irish in her, and her fire red hair was every indication of her temperament. I threw on my rubber and grabbed my bags. Slowly, I glanced out the window again like it was a brick wall. I walked to the door, and dully swung the door shut and left my room for good. I walked with my head buried in my chest watching the puddles swell like a grand ballroom dance as I walked down the sidewalk straight to Smithy's Pub in order to grab something to eat before the endless train trip home. Smithy's was my favorite place to go in Dublin because it was just like the pub at home. There were no fancy lights, no loud speakers, no wild bands, just a piano, some tables, the

kitchen and the bar. Me and Pete always used to go to the pub with dad on Thursdays after the rugby games, and it was our favorite place in the world.

Being 11 a.m., the pub was understandably vacant. Only the serious alcoholics are at the pubs during early hours. But Old Joe was there. Now there was an old bastard for you. Nobody knew where he came from, what he did, what his last name was, only that he was some crazy, senile coot that mumbled a lot about how he hated the Protestants. It was a real kick to listen to Old Joe ramble on. That bastard was out there. But the more you listened to him, the more you began to think a little like Joe. I guess even though he seems crazy, there be a method to his madness, (that's about as literate I get). Talking to Joe during the last couple of months has kept my spirits up somewhat.

I went over to Jane, keeper of Smithy's. Greatest tapper in Dublin. Always gave a damn about everyone's problems and never came in without a smile on her face and a twinkle in those emerald eyes. I told her I was leaving and she immediately made me promise to come back and visit and made me my lunch on the house. I almost cried. Damn, I hate getting emotional over these things.

Joe was just sitting at his usual table with an ale in hand, mumbling away while staring out the steam covered window. Joe had to be at least eighty years old, even though he looked about a hundred and three. He always had on his wool beret that had definitely seen its time, and his traditional Celtic kilt. His nose looked oddly like a overdried fig and his face was crocheted with thousands of wrinkles that never seemed to change. Old Joe wasn't exactly overweight, but he sure wasn't thin. Joe peered through his wire rimmed glasses as he slowly mumbled out old Celtic songs and smacked quietly at the rotting teeth that sat in his mouth. I figured it right that I should have my last conversation with Joe before I left that day, so I headed over and took the seat next to him.

"Damned Protestant hags," he bellowed out right when I sat down. Nearly sent my heart right onto the table. I really got into that stuff.

I tried to get his attention by greeting him in the same manner. "Good mornin', Joe."

"Look at 'em. Damn Protestants. Goin' oe'r run the blimie country. Bad as the IRA. Who are they? I'd whoop the living tar outta all of them."

I had to laugh a little. I mean, it was really great to hear him rant and rave, and if I didn't let it out, I would explode right there.

Joe finally looked at me and actually took notice that someone was sitting there. It took him a minute to put the pieces of his memory together, but he did figure out who I was. "Danley, me boy. Came to see the ol' man again, eh?"

"That's right Joe, came to say goodbye."

Joe looked back towards the rain and coughed. "Where you going boy?"

"I'm going home, Joe." I lowered my eyes quickly, as if I was really ashamed. "I flunked out. I guess I wasn't ready."

"Posh, boy! You just didn't give a damn anymore. The country goin' to the Protestants, damn bastards. They're trying to take away the ower. Bastards don't even know what power is." He turned his head and spit on the floor.

I didn't know where he was going with this conversation, but I really didn't care. So I said to Joe, "But how can we have power when..."

"Power is in the land, boy. The highlands are full of power. Back in the early years the Druids, they knew power. Knew how to get it from the land. Always gave it back, too. Never needed the damn crap we got today. Just the land. Damn Protestants can't figure that out. Too damn stupid, that's what they are. Could never handle Stormbringer or the Celtic magic. The land, me boy."

Boy, he was on a roll. He was just throwing his arms all around and getting all into it. But if I wasn't confused. I said to him, "Joe, I don't understand."

Joe just stopped and got a real glassy look on his face. He moved his eyes from the window onto me. He slowly leaned forward and in a sullen rasp he told me, "And you don't need to understand and you don't want to understand. The more you understand the closer you are to dying. I'm goin' to die soon, just watch, and the damned Protestants can't do nothin' about it."

I just sat there in awe. I just couldn't get what he was trying to tell me through my thick skull. I looked up and tried to ask him, "But I don't understand what the Prot..."

He yelled, "Good, boy! Now you're gettin' the idea. Just sit around in a pub and you'll be around a long time like me."

Old Joe didn't say anything else to me after that. The rest of my stay at the pub was rather uneventful, other than Joe throwing his walking stick at some tourists which he thought were a bunch of Protestants. I kinda got a kick out of that one. As I ate, he sang his old Irish songs and slowly hummed out part of a faint melody. Maybe the Highlander's. I really couldn't tell you. I finished up and hugged Jane and said goodbye. I took my bags and turned to tell Joe farewell, but he just peered out the window at the rain and the Protestants dashing through the streets. So I just left him there to his thoughts and went out into the rain to catch my train.

Sub-Standard 2

The dogs are in heat again. You can smell it in the air, feel it in the land. Everyday they sound out and their barks scoff throughout the countryside and the dark city streets, laughing at the inadequate while crying about the cold and the heat. They are cursed by cycle. Birth, innocence, lust, hate, aging, and death.

No true complexities, only a reoccurring nightmare that each new canine player must try to endure. No choice and no hope. They just walk around with their tails hidden away in a four legged chasm while trying to figure out what the rest of the pack smells like in lost places.

And the bastard pups will be born to the pack soon. Bastards to be brought up on the heels of a bitch, and then sent out to put more bastards on the land. No glory. They end up dying with no pride, just a bunch of disgruntled bastards and bitches, killed by age or by another bastard. There is no glory in dying as a bastard. Just ask anyone.

Standard 2

Old Joe died about a month after I left. Died just the way he probably wanted to, right in his chair at Smithy's. I guess he finally beat the Protestants. A victory he probably carried to his grave. I heard that hundreds of people turned out to say their final good-bye's to Joe. For some reason I didn't go to Joe's funeral. Didn't seem right. I'm not cold hearted or anything, I just felt that that rainy day in Smithy's was all that Joe wanted from me.

I did decide to visit his grave once, just to satisfy my curiosity. I found out from Jane that Joe's last name was Cahey and that he was buried in a country cemetery about two hours outside of Dublin. When I found it, I knew it was perfect for Old Joe. The trees stood tall and herculean over the grounds, fervent with greens and pollen. It was built into a valley of rolling hills, surrounded by only the gentle breeze that whispred through the leaves and the grass. Usually I hate cemeteries. But I felt at home here. I must have walked around for over a hour and I couldn't find where Joe was at. I went and found the caretaker and he politely led me up a small hill covered in clover.

He pointed me to Joe's grave site and left me to myself. I walked over to his tomb stone, I think the smallest one on the place. As I looked at the stone, a smile broke out on my face. On it, Joe's final message read: "MY KINGDOM FOR A VOICE." I kind of laughed. The old bastard was one step ahead everyone again.

