

ORPHEUS

A LITERARY JOURNAL

20
YEARS

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, BAKERSFIELD
1992/93 EDITION

Orpheus

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

Orpheus

A L I T E R A R Y J O U R N A L

v o l u m e • x v i i i

Dr. Solomon O. Iyasere, Advisor

Cynthia Paradise, Reader

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

What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The idea of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life.

Octavio Paz
(1967)

Orpheus: The End is the Beginning

But to have done instead of not doing
this is not vanity

To have, with decency, knocked
That a Blunt should open

To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.

Here error is all in the not done,
all in the diffidence that faltered.

Ezra Pound

Orpheus, an annual literary journal, published by the Department of English and Communications, has flourished since 1973. This success is reflected in the enthusiasm the journal has generated among students, faculty, and staff at CSUB. In the TWENTY YEARS since its founding, *Orpheus* has matured in various directions: The number of diverse materials submitted for publication has increased while the quality of these materials both maintains and surpasses the literary excellence usually associated with student publications.

The greatest satisfaction in producing *Orpheus* comes with being able to present a large number of student writers whose works have not appeared elsewhere, especially quivering young writers who for the first time hang around words to explore, define their own anxieties and connect not with the fabricated world that is but the organic world that ought to be. Since *Orpheus* was founded, six hundred students from various social and academic backgrounds have published in *Orpheus*.

It is a joy for me to be a part of these writers' creative worlds, to read what they write, to apprehend the variety of the charged paradoxical human experiences embodied therein. My intimate involvement with these works enriches my life; heightens my own understanding of both the artistic world and the quotidian reality that works reflect. I hope *Orpheus* presents the same liberating moments to its readers.

"One hand cannot wash itself clean, it needs the help of the other," says the African proverb. The gathering up and production of editions of *Orpheus* throughout the years has not been a one-hand affair; rather, it has received generous assistance from many: Associated Student Union for providing the necessary financial support, Vivian Cochrane and Jacki Lawson for typing the manuscripts submitted for publication in *Orpheus*; Nancy O'Kane, Willie Sawyer, and Miguel Salgado for printing each edition.

Finally, to all those students, staff and faculty who have contributed to *Orpheus* all these years: Thank you for inviting all of us into your world. "The world is like a mask dancing, and you have to move closer to see it well," says the Village Crier. You have moved us closer to that world, *to hear, to feel and to see it well.*

We welcome your voices as we continue together in this joyous creative venture.

Solomon O. Iyasere
Advisor

Dedication

to David Spencer

A Tribute to David Spencer

Teaching with David

Charles McCall

It's an election year, and spring quarter approaches. By now David and I would have agreed upon and ordered the novels for Interdisciplinary Studies 377.004: Political Science and Science Fiction. Once or twice a week we would be exchanging ideas about things we might try differently in the course, and I would be working on a syllabus, hoping to persuade our students that there was more organization in it than an objective assessment might reveal.

It is in the Spring that I shall miss David most, for it was through that course, offered in that season, that our friendship grew and deepened. What an experience it was to teach with David! His lectures—those on the nature of science-fiction, on its relationships with other genres, on its history, and on that wonderful circle of authors in San Francisco in the late 1940s and early 1950s—are examples—were well designed and excellently presented. But a student's question or one from me could send him on an unexpected arc almost always entertaining and enlightening!

Yet it was his participation in my lectures which I will most remember; for his remarks would send me on those sorts of tangents too. Indeed, going into a classroom with David was something I always did with great anticipation but also with anxiety. I always knew I had to be prepared for his surprises. He would interrupt with a parallel example from Roman history or from Chicago ward politics. He would interject a witty comment. He would ask a penetrating question, sometimes a riddle. To me, those observations, questions, examples, and exclamations seemed like fireworks. I knew they would be coming, but not their types nor when he would ignite them. Sometimes they were cherry bombs which would make me jump and would generate more heat than light. But most were skyrockets which lit the dark beautifully. They stimulated me and they also excited the students who always enjoyed them.

Enjoying David was easy. His conversations, like his lectures, were liberally seasoned with literary allusion, but he was never pedantic. As frequent in both were ironic comments, jokes, puns, and limericks—often bawdy ones. I loved those, and I admired his understanding of politics and human nature. I came to know him as a man of great feeling—a deep and joyful love of his family, an affection for his students which exulted in their successes, a generous understanding of human frailty.

David gave me a comprehension of team-teaching different and richer than the one I had known. He loved learning, and he loved humor, and he shared both liberally with his students and his friends. Had the Preacher known David, he would have had to write, "In much wisdom is much joy; and he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth delight."

1992

Contents

Orpheus: The End is the Beginning	iii
A Tribute to David Spencer	vii

Poems

Edwin John Barton	3
Janice E. Bondurant	5
Valerie Carter	11
Reggie Cornejo	15
Ray Curnutt	16
Chris Cushner	17
Nancy Edwards	20
Jade Elins	29
Marsha Engelbrecht	31
Sam Gouch	32
Jeff Harrington	36
Jack Hernandez	37
Kelly J. Hoeltgen	42
Dawn M. Jordan	43
Kurt Lewis Keckley	47
K. Kohler	49
Carlos Lozano	53
Tom Masters	57
Steven Mayer	59
Bev Meier	60
Mimi Merrill	63
Julie Morrison	66
David Moton	70
Thomas Orr	71
R. Eirik Ott	72
Cynthia Paradise	77
Lance Michael Parks	84
Patricia Patterson	85
Rose Marie Pavlicek-Stish	87
Chris Perier	88
Dale Reed	89
Kerry Ann Sime	90
Steven Walsh	92
Christine Williams	96

Stories

Lara Crowe	101
Sue Glenn	105
Edwina Harlander	111
Michael A. Maaskant	113
Steven Mayer	121
Jeff McMahon	125
David Moton	133
Beth Menees Rienzi	139
Debby Romanoff	141
Kerry Ann Sime	143

P o e m s

Orpheus •

Complaint Concerning the Oblivion of the Dead (after Laforgue)

Dear ladies and dear sirs,
You whose mother is no more,
Isn't that the gravedigger
Scraping at your door?

The dead, as before,
Lie beneath the ground;
They don't get around
Too much, anymore.

You go out on the town;
You smoke and order bourbon.
Somewhere a pickax claws the ground:
Poor dead, they're so suburban.

There's grampa, lost in thought,
Reviewing old opinions;
Sis crochets forget-me-nots;
Mother folds the linens.

The dead,
Still more reserved,
Sleep cold
And are preserved.

You try the latest restaurant
Then quarrel with the bill.
They say the stillborn never want
To eat more than their fill.

On your next expense account,
For costs as yet unknown,
Estimate the full amount
Of funeral and stone.

Have you hugged your kids?
Have you kissed your wife?
Today could be the first day
Of the rest of your life.

For dear ladies and dear sirs,
You whose sister is no more,
That's the undertaker's drudge
Rapping at your door!

And if you show no pity,
He'll come to set you right
And drag you off, quite listlessly,
Some moonlit night!

Unyielding are these
Winds that whip!
And as for the dead,
Very bad trip.

The dusting of a pale face
Shimmers behind an
Upstairs window

Silent under the stars
He dreads the hunger
The thirst

LeStat doesn't know
Can't understand
And his laughter still rings

Louis must feed
Must take life
To preserve his own

He alights on the
Sidewalk below his
Darkened flat

And embarks on his search
For someone
To appease the churning inside

He spots a victim
And before he can talk himself away
He pounces

The man he has found
Is homeless and has
No one; he won't be missed

Long, shining, pointed teeth
Delve into the wrinkled folds
Of the derelict's neck

The blood begins to flow
And the pounding of the
Man's heart,

Like a drum,
Fills Louis's head
And beats in his own chest

And when the drum
Begins to fade
Louis lets go—

A vampire must never feed on the dead;
He only brings the death
Along with him.

O, cruel Moon
Demurely smiling
On our unhappy lot.
Lying on the feathers
That time has given
To us,
We stare
Up into your face,
Waiting in the coolness
And the still darkness
For the change
To take place.

How can you be
So calm
So unmoved
By the churning
And yearning
Of hearts and minds and bodies
Beneath you?

Anger, frustration, hatred
Breeding and growing
In the souls
Of the lost.
And you
High enough to judge all,
Float with head bent
Forgiving
This world's evils,
Or perhaps taking
No notice.

And when you move on
To the other side
You will leave us
In chaos
To live, die,
Hurt and be hurt
By each other
And ourselves
Under the bright eye
Of your wife,
Who is even less moved
than you.

The December moon
Rose slowly
Over the hills
Sending shafts of silver down
To decorate the land.

I dreamed of your return
Of your strong arms around me
Of your sweet kisses
And I wanted you back
With me, to stay.

Soft fingers caressing
Smooth, supple skin
Natural consumption
Combustion
Flames
Burning desire, enclosed
Encased
Eternal flame
Smoke, heat
Smoldering
Forever
Then ashes
Spread to the wind.

A thousand epiphanies explode
and rip into purple flames
each time I touch your silken skin
leave me begging, pleading
crucified for one more taste of you
I'd bleed for you
suffer the punishment for both our sins
without regret or repentance
Entombed eternity
A single glance
would cauterize the wounds
your indifference has inflicted

Let me be your savior
let me show you how
suffering is pleasure
suffocation is the breath of life
I'll hasten your confession
grant you absolution
Take you into heaven and
make you beg for more
Then we can descend into Hell
together

As she softly wakens from her dreams
she feels his presence beside her
her body freezes in motion
as hatred descends from his sculpted bronze arm
shattering the silence
The voices are screaming again
urging her to run, but she cannot
a thousand grasping hands hold her back
chained to terror

HE found me
always knew HE would
Couldn't hide forever
that's what HE said anyway

She cannot see his face
but she feels the power in his eyes
stretching over her in a seductive caress
She cannot escape the tangled sheets
the smell of passion assaults
and beats her with its sweet fragrance

let me go
please, please
just this once
I won't cry again, I swear

Twisted fate leads her
following the voices in her mind
to the secret places where no one can find her
Except HIM
A ghost in her soul, he knows
always knows
where his prisoner is

Lust is as cold as steel
sometimes
a terrifying blade softly puncturing
fragile skin
leaving victims whimpering for caresses
too few and far between

The soul has known this for a thousand years at least
a perpetual lesson

"All we are and all we seem
is but a dream within a dream"

Reality is divinely indifferent
Laughing at futile attempts
to reach in and grasp solidity
It is the lust we live for
whatever its guise

"God damn the lovers who never showed up
and God damn the wounds that show how deep a word can cut"

It's all in the pretending
Reality is ultimately disappointing

She reaches out to touch the air
 and leaves handprints on the glass
Trapped, she turns to look behind her
Expecting fear
But her hollow, glistening eyes see
Nothing
The thick air is suffocating and silent
The voices scream
The children cry
The unborn lay still
She is not listening
She questions the moon
 but he has no answers
All the tragedies of the world
have gathered on her slender shoulders
and they bend gracefully
 touching the chilling concrete wall
She is the survivor
 of a thousand broken hearts
 a million damaged dreams
She is the chosen one
 the keeper of secrets
 the guardian of silence
She is here because
 they will not let her die.

The Pain

The children laugh and play
A dragon bleeds in time
The tide rolled out today
His hide as green as lime
Where once the spring returned
Dark colors cast their shade
His blood no longer churned
The men begin to spade
The lizard moves in pain
Though man will never care
It slowly starts to rain
The wizard comes to share
Nobody seems to care
A tear released in pain
The tide goes out to sea
It still begins to rain
A child is left alone
The garden fills with thorns
The wizard turns to stone
A world is left to mourn

mid-autumn

on a rock ledge
far up the canyon
from out of my stomach
comes the cawing of crows
meditating, chanting, offering incense
yesterday at the hot springs
reading Whitman
next week, sitting rohotsu

returning on the path
through this gentle dusk
as buckeye spots the shadows with purple
mountain quail fly out my ears
and an ancient oak
strolls through the haze

What is this life?
a woodpecker laughs
driving through the darkness
as the heater warms me
I laugh a little too.

To The Old Man

A long forgotten clock wearily moves its hands
to the beat of an old man's breath.

A spider on the wall captures unaware prey
as does time the old man.

Rustic sounds of a bell play an old song
a rude awakening to the old man.

Time to run the store
although the shelves are bare.

Talking of time gone by
sat the old man and his friends
viewing the future as the clock in the house,
a house that screams with certain poverty
a clock that has but little time.

To the old man comes complaints
from the masses that bow before him
a house belonging to the few had fallen,
occupied for too long a time.

As the clock rounded one last time,
the old man drew in his last breath.

As the house was emptied of a knowing silence
old friends did not longer visit,
for they visited a new house
with a clock that had time to spare.

The Synthetic Nest

I awoke last night cold and strangely dark
from a dream
a frightening nightmare
consisting of the supernatural reality absconded
and eyes that did coldly stare
right through my life and reason
for remaining in this land.
They laughed and played hot-potato with my soul
leaping from their hands.
Mirrors compared longevity with their father
Time
and his black burdened partner
Death
and I, just a mortal lump of flesh,
have realized the presence of my last
breath.
Numbers reaching the end of nothing
have awaited my final request—
Touch the sky and make it cry only a tear
until I have escaped the synthetic nest.
At home
I am a number for all who call
restless
furious
unrecognizable without a number.
Nighttime Thief call me by my name
before I enter this ironic slumber.
Hands abandon the grasp of reality
as I ascend from a world of black
away from the nest,
away from this dream
into the authentic crack.

The Rose

Pressed between the yellowed pages
Of some aging text of old
lies a rose so dark and frail
marking a moment of childish fantasy
long since betrayed.
Remembrance calms the sighing wind
that calls out for the ancient pages
yet the wind has a mist about it
as if your childhood had never left
as if you had never known.
Touching the rose
you cry out
as if you had been pricked by a thorn
only to discover that this rose had none.
A drop of blood drives through the air
spraying macabre artwork on the dusted cover
only to disappear as it had never been.
And you laugh and you cry
as the frail black rose blossoms
into a resurrected beauty
to be placed between the pages of your new book
or given to your lover.

Yearbook

Chosen Estelle on the day of her birth
Choosing to be humble
Friendly, despite her withered right hand
And thick glasses
Thin hair,
She is on page 70 of the yearbook
Called Bearclaw behind her back
Page 70 shows her at the Senior Prom with John Moshier,
Varsity football player
Four-year letterman
All-state halfback
Who nominated Estelle for Prom Queen
Laughing uproariously
In front of the entire class
As he spoke,
"Bearclaw, I nominate her"

He already had every girl he wanted
We all knew that

Now Bearclaw, too,
John paid for this when Principal Dooley heard
About Estelle and no escort
Estelle appearing on page 70 serenely
Holding onto John's arm,
John, her prince, perfect in white dinner jacket
And black bow tie,
Other photos of just the Queen and her Court
On page 71
Estelle radiant with an oversized orchid
Pinned carefully on her right chest,
Looking less frightened
Next to Queen Colleen,
Princess Debbie, and Princess Cheri,

A few photos of the royal couples
Dancing together,
Principal Dooley somewhere blurred
In the background chaperoning
On page 71
Little space for extras,
Just enough space
To capture moments to remember
Royalty and high school
And Estelle.

Father's Poem

When Father died
There were his shoes
To think of everywhere

He bought the best
Leather slick
Black embossed
Reeking class

Not for walking up
Black Mountain
Where I was sent
At fourteen in high school
As initiation

Dirt under my clothes
Biting into my skin
Desert sand burning,
Whitewash spilling
To paint a school letter
That's what freshmen did

Now I am a freshman at death
Father lay shoeless in a satin casket
Sleeplike, finished with his tasks,
His initiations over

Still no one knew when to stop
My brother dressed in a dark suit
Looking important
Like a family head
But he was not
Capable

He bought shoes
The day before the funeral
And worked the yard in them
To break them in
He accused everyone of failures
To Father
Except himself

This time the ambulance had no sound
And the pain had vanished
This time
He was bare against life
A rindless orange

Every winter red berries
Populate a large bush
It is flowering
Maggot like in clusters
No one trims it
Mother says
Since Father's death

Prayer for Departed Flower Woman

You are not going to
be under the snow
clouds this fall

Your hair parted and fell
into place
just right

It was your destiny
To move on
I will burn some incense
To think of you

Jasmine smoke will fill
The room lightly
And for days
Perhaps months
Everything I touch

Will be you
under my fingertips
in my skin

You filling the air
You—I breathe
your breath
I inhale your essence

Even when snow clouds pass
and you have
gone from view

I breathe jasmine
I inhale and exhale you
Your hair parted perfectly
Just right into place

Snow clouds will pass
By the place where
You stood each dawn
Your destiny speaks
So only you can hear

Jasmine smoke will fill
The room lightly
And I breathe
Only you.

Western October

When I felt October
This October
There were thinly
 Spun webs
Across my fingertips
 Tying me to some new faces
 And to some I once knew
 A bright orange sun
 Came clearly
 Into a broad western horizon
 Perfect yellowsky summer
 Fading into pastel early fall
 Colors blending into lovestars
Across a ceiling of low desert dust

I do not remember any other day
Or month
Or moment
Any better
In knowing love's bright star
Than this one
Thinking of love going strong
And thick pastel chalksky
And rich coffee colored hills
And what it means
To believe in love beyond
Destiny beyond
Life itself beyond
In October

Afterglow

I know this land
I am part of what comes from dust
In the bittersweet winter
Heavy with fog and chill
And an uncertain harvest

I know these fields
And these workers' hands
Sore and pained
By handling earth against metal
Metal against flesh
Making this land happen

I know this land
Where bones that lay
Beneath the soil
Belong to faces above
And those that settle
This land who came west
With only a star
To guide them
Out of poverty and hopelessness
Believe that this land is theirs

I know these long spring afternoons
When light holds the air
Like sensuous perfume
And we bathe in the afterglow
Of soft voices
And coastal moons
Which hang back
Like Arkansas fireflies

I know this land
Holding people against its chest
Embracing and promising
Nothing
But tomorrow and a place
To put the roots down
And to call home,
I know this land.

Arrival

Like swimming underwater
holding my breath
until I can't anymore
I break the surface
with a splash
and the cold hits me
awake
and I'm wet
alive
completely aware
I'M IN OREGON
The realization is too much
or just enough
I dive back into the
sliding focus of the water
only one element at a time
The blur intensified my giddiness
and patches of
clarity
I dance, I breathe
I dance, I wonder
I dance in the rain
IN OREGON
is this real
am I awake?
Everything hits me
when I come up for air
or when I come down
for air
from my average levitated
platform of ten feet
above reality

Hey—it all looks so different
from up here. Look!
“Ooops. Watch out for that
ledge, it’s a dangerous one
It’s a test for the honest
swimmers who pretend they
can’t see underwater
but know exactly
how many more strokes to go
before the blow”
Oh.
I’M IN OREGON!
Air and water, wake me up!

Le Moqueur Oiseau

Il se sert de belles fraises précieuses du jardin,
Il goute effrontément aux plus rouges, aux plus mures,
Avant de choisir la plus délicieuse.
Et comme je n'aime pas ce gourmand, ce voleur,
J'ai pensé a une idée tres ingénieuse.
Un grand serpent faux j'ai mis entre les plantes;
Et sans doute j'étais la plus intelligente,
Mais pourtant il voyait ma ruse drole et brillante.
Et hier, au jardin, j'ai vu un reptile vrai!
J'ai crié, j'ai sauté le moqueur regardait;
Et vraiment, je suis sure que, de moi, il riait.

Respite

Youth
is a wave
of slender
darting fish
rushing
vibrant corals
above rippled sand.
Pausing and drifting
they are swayed
by the clear water.
In a burst of silver,
startled by the slow
beat
of massive flesh
moving through foreign
depths,
the school has vanished,
leaving behind —
for a while —
the chill
and shadow
of future seas.

Subtle Moon

I am doubled with laughter
at the moon,
so subtle that
jester.

It provokes
the earth's seas
to new proportions.
It endures
with so calm
and solemn expression
the comic promenade
of bashful lovers.

It mimics
the stars
with its endless
orbital parody.
It spins
a weightless amusement
for the frolicking
of tiny
silvered creatures.

It taunts
the superstitions
of dull men,
snickering
as it swirls
among boiling clouds.

A Woman's Passion Mirrored

I have seen a woman's passion
mirrored in a mother's crazy
fists knuckled white against
the sheets
now damp with sweat,
now damp with tears of
treasured disbelief for
such such
swollen flesh.

A man in woman,
I have moaned
for soothing air,
as I have longed
for throaty throttled
growls of breath
from out a heaving
breast alive with
quenching milk for
such such
reddened flesh.

I have been that
tiny balded monster,
that toothless
scalded face
screaming out
my father's passion
with treasured disbelief
that I would stumble
on his cache of
such such
favored flesh.

Wounded

The steam locomotive
screams
down through the black
of a night-fogged
mountain
like a wounded
whale
sounding against hunters,
hot wisps
of white
blood
thinning in the
dark,
her calves
clacking along in tow,
thrilled and innocent.

Vesper Image

I see the lidded orb droop into the deep,
and wonder at the warmth in a glance.
And when the rosy glow comes with chill caress,
a moment only,
before deserting to foreign hills,
I listen for echoes of a sigh.
For, ere the horizon is sealed in sorrow,
I know the taste of tears on parting lips.

Your Final Note

When I got your final note
Squeezed, like your soul,
On a newspaper margin,
You already were floating
Alone on the river's blind back,
Your voice airless
Your hands writing an aimless wake,
Dead these servants of your insistent words
Like you
Who wrote your last prophecy to me—
Brief, but true.

Bearing West

Sliding through the air
At thirty thousand feet
I bear west, home
To loss and after, to face

My aging. Nothing can
Efface my life so far,
Nothing can predict
Tomorrow's unraveling.

The air is bright and flawless
Here. Below, clouds
Float unbothered by,
Throwing slow, massive

Shadows on brown and scarred
Ground. The jet's constant
Wind lulls my mind
As we try to reverse time.

A white shred of cloud
Reminds me of my mother's
Thinning nest of hair
Perched above her pinched

Back, as she stands
By a wet, unkempt field
Waving my daughter and me
Goodbye, allowing a tear.

Our visit has grounded my daughter
In my past, with photos
Surprising my memory: Mom
Audacious in a bathing suit

And me, fifteen and fluid,
Shirtless, glistening with life.
Hours are gathered around
Our small circle here:

Grandmother, father, daughter,
Three lines traced in time,
One beginning, one ending,
Mine facing both ways.

Time cannot be reversed
For good. This year my son
Died. I cannot undo
That. Cannot stop

My mother's steps to death.
Cannot prevent my daughter's
Encounters with uncertainty.
Cannot make much right.

Out in the Deepening Bay

On your last journey
We escorted you
Out on heaving sea,
Where, on fate's cue,
You were finely scattered
Like breath upon the water.

Our words blew in tatters
While through tears and laughter
We spoke your chromatic days,
A spectrum of subversive moods,
Yellows, reds, dark blues,
Ending in ashen grey,
Like the petals we threw after you
Out in the deepening bay.

24th Street Cafe

My reflection in the cafe door
As I write resembles my dad
Waiting to be fed by mom:
Eager, but puzzled like a lost boy.
His face slack, his hair thin
As his last sifted years.

Beyond this mirroring glass
Two young women bend close
Like flowers. They are wet, glossy.
My waitress has skin smooth
As a child's eyes. She worries
About day care. She fills my cup.

The Hunger

Befuddled and heaped on the floor,
a pile of clean laundry; I
wait for the night-time sounds
to tell me I'm truly alone
Radio in the next room playing
different crises every night
to an audience weaned on
sixty-second news bits.

Beer cans and overflowing ashtrays
outside my door, vying for my attention
No, they're much too subtle to knock
but I can hear them whisper in the hall
and their perfume defies
the wall and the door,
my guardians.

My open window, to keep
fresh air out—and prying eyes in—
yawns, and points to the time.
I not, I know, yet something
sings outside, and I cannot sleep
until I know how the song ends.

Many hours later,
I roll over, into my bed
the ugly red numbers on my clock
yawn, and before I turn away,
I see their fangs glisten
and I know a warm red tongue
must be wetting hungry lips
These are hungry times for all.

These clouds are consuming my flesh
Moving in to smother me with their
Dark oppression of my dreams
I do not want to join in their pain
As tears flow, drenching the cracked earth

Will the flowers be able to push out
To be frowned upon from the black orifice
Of the sky?

It is winter, and I have
become so quiet my breath is ragged
With the fear of the cold, encroaching
What if spring dies, and is never
Reborn?
What if love doesn't
Come back?

I cower in terrified anticipation
To see if this will be the end of all
the color, at last.

Epitaph

One step and you fall, heels scraping
along the rich, black earth—like chocolate
cake mix, I want to taste—but, no
spit it out, it tastes, oh it tastes
like death.

You know the farther down you dig
the crumbling walls will surround you,

they will cascade atop my skull
filtering in dust
it seeps into my eyes, I can taste
it, choking me, filling my throat.

You know the further down you dig
the closer you are
to...

Words, always splintering the silent pane
Of silence between us
Sometimes encased in a fine, incandescent sheet
Of ice, but if you look outside
You can see oranges, yellows, golds
Dancing and splashing about on a sea of wheat

It is fall, I am whirling with the leaves in my confusion
As biting as the chill wind they float upon, yet
I prefer these stormy words to the
Controlled eye of the storm in silence

Epitaph of Life, After Death

Coming here to bury the last thought
I had
The image of a solemn facade
Upon a graven statue of
Christ

This maternal earth is solid,
an encrusted tomb of ice
holds me
Captive
as I march between this grave and life

Etchings of your existence
within this stone marker
are begging me to notice,
but I cannot...

I must kill and rid myself of
this desire
before my flesh begins to
Rot
Upon my stagnant bones

Then It Was Not Incest

cuddled on the ferris wheel
moist lips lock around an exposed nipple
sweat breaks and falls
children nearby
wide eyed
speechless
grab at a parent for attention
to intimacy
shocked
by what they are witnessing
forgetting it was they who
only moments before did likewise
then it was private
necessary
then it was not incest
once beautiful and nourishing
now sinful and disgusting
they watch the penetration
of deep insecurities
with curiosity and disbelief
yearning again for the privacy
of childhood
the only time in life
when it is okay
to be individual

Dead Flowers

you hide behind a black robe
secure in your insecurity
holding me still with compassionate eyes
there is an innocence about you
a deception

i am standing naked
looking at you from a lowered head
embarrassed
for what i have shown you
for who i am
the white robe at my feet lies stained
from blood that runs black down my pale skin

why do you smile at my demise
confessing your hunger
for the suffering of another
eating my intestines
throwing my body on a shelf
for convenience

and why do you cling to me
trying to squeeze out of me what you cannot hear
wrapping your arms around me
feel how i have hardened
not even passion can chew through my shell
of emptiness

yet you persist
ignorantly
love has not planted its roots in my pants
through the moisture of my eyes
its flowers have grown
and wilted before you bothered
to lift your eyes from my crotch

Beauty is Obliterated

Fair as Aphrodite
Sunday smiled on her
Golden tresses curl in wisps
Like honey spun silk
Eyes bright as a full moon
Turn rock into sand
Helplessly sift through fingers that
Gently touch
Angrily grasp
Compress until
Aphrodite dissipates
Do not gaze upon her
Unworthy hypocrite
But into reflection of
Vile hideousness that
Repels, removes
What is beautiful
Beholders have no eyes
Beauty is obliterated
By envy
Lovely little one, prepare life's battle
Against opposing masses
Deceitfully subjecting
Unfair actions upon fair faces

No Longer

Steel gray clouds usurp winter's cold sun
I smile anyhow
A lost child crouching in darkness
Forbidden to escape into self created realm
Blindly I reach for outstretched arms
They're everywhere!
They're nowhere!
I, imprisoned in "Dante's Inferno"
Hear no sighs
Faint, mocking laughter becomes thunderous
Voices assume foggy, familiar faces
I quake, then falter
Sink to nothingness
Hard ground cradles me
Faces diminish into winter's vapor
Voices grow ever so faint
Now silent...
As a tomb—
Mine!
I smile no longer.

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 striped wallpaper
Grey dust gently shrouds
Black plastic carrier for compact discs
Shh...
I hear the deafened music
I feel his presence
As the oak clock's pendulum
Moves to the beat of my heart
Reality stirs and
Awakens my etherized senses.

It Isn't Me

The winter night stopped time
The pendulum moved backwards
Further and
Further...
Is that me?
I viewed the animated young blonde from
Ten feet - twenty years
She looks happy
And I suppose she was...
I know she was
Because it was me...
But it isn't me
Through the dense numbness that
surrounds, penetrates and
Engulfs yesterdays
I yearn to clasp
The happy house, the smiling faces
That are unaware
What lurks in the future
Now past
I cannot grasp
Ghosts of yesterday
They no longer exist
Because...
It isn't me.

Marines

Esprit, a touch of color
and a cocky air,
they passed,
and left behind a song
of Montezuma
in the lambent air.

Esprit on the quick
lends quite a touch,
but sits strange on heads
no longer masters
of bodies robbed of life.

At No-Name Hill
they fell like flies,
the undetected Korean guns
belched forth without muzzle blast
from watered down positions
to mask both smoke and dust.

A soldier, Marine or not,
once dead, cut down,
stripped of dignity, arrogance and pride,
soon becomes a rallying point
for carrion crow and scavengers,
a mere signpost
on death's apocalyptic road.

The Unfriendly Korean Hills

Our GIs lie panting, face up
on cruel and jagged hills,
still vibrant-young
with the fire that is life.

But their life is ebbing,
being emptied out.
Beet-red it flows from them
and the earth is moist and tastes of salt,
like the salt of brutal kisses.

Soon other things will sprout,
new life begin,
the eternal cycle start anew.
Once again, light will follow darkness,
new beings quicken with a love
that should be His.

Tinting rocks that press
against their tortured flesh,
with a carmine red still vibrant
with the smell of life.
Only brooks and streams are friends
lave wounds and dilute
the tell-tale red that tints the rocks.

Death Masks

The masks of death
like flavors in an ice cream parlor,
for one and all to see,
on corpses lie in the blazing sun.

What strange theatrical device,
what cruel jest is this,
that makes of bodies,
recent with the love of life
the stenching home of flies and maggots?

Beyond, with grimace strange
lies one who lately passed
arrayed in bright esprit.
His song is stilled
but in the air yet hang
the strains of what was once a song.

As for him of face half gone,
with mouth agape
as if in song,
what a cruel end was his reward.

The 24th Division

Proudly, combat ready
in olive green and newly armed,
came tyros of the 24th,
naive and brash with swagger.

Now, brash and swagger gone,
they watch as North Koreans in white,
steal by in silent groups
to torture them by night.

Eyes seared as if by flame,
lids that droop with sleep,
GI sentinels stand guard,
tense, expectant in the dark.

North Koreans in white arrayed,
stream down on padded feet
from ever present hills
to fill the night
with cries of anguish and despair.

White-robed, silently as birds
they steal from hills that hide more hills,
hushed, on muted feet,
to tear at flanks
while yet more hills
drink in the anguished cries.

lovesick (why I hate love)

Dad's last unwed son past the age of thirty
now feel time's pressure to start a fam'ly
I'm much out of practice and more out of shape
but from time's ringing there is no escape

two allies I lean on in search of my bride
two trustworthy assets who wait just inside
my heart and my mind had stopped previous woes
yet now they turn out to be conspiring foes

it's not like a fistfight, it's certainly war
a struggle of two wills that leave me lovepoor:
my mind keeps its owner from falling too far
and my heart doesn't know what brakes are meant for

two errors repeat, yes, again and again
to extents of madness that spell out my sin:
my heart streaks for closeness and touching—romance!
then my mind fears the worst and shoots for distance

to find wedded bondage a slave I'm revealed
victim and puppet of whims long concealed
my prayers and my promises all go unheeded
due to the strange ways my dates have been treated

click goes the ticker marking time's passing hand
away drains my patience with the hourglass sand
upset and bewildered that love escapes me
maybe I'm happiest sad and lonely

the part I'll hate most if I find my true love
is drifting from her whom I think the world of
Karen, my friend, if our days come to stoppin'
your phone won't ring, but I'll call your name often

brief fun

outside in my skivvies at dawn's early break
the town is still sleeping, and not soon to wake
I scamper to streetside before neighbors glance
at me fetching the Times in my underpants

my fondest of mem'ries that date back some time
are of Dad reclining in boxers green lime
my mother would kill me to think that her son
makes daily displays of his buns on the run

like father like son I dress with his passions
conducting my business in his brief fashions
my homework and letters and phone calls I field
in comfort which dictates the outer clothes peeled

peace and perspective are found in this setting
I defy you now to challenge my betting:
wager your living without pants, shirt, nor shoe
you'll love to hang out in your underwear too

one word of caution to overweight bodies
whose scornful neighbors would robe you like Saudis
'tis wise to lounge in a view that is hindered
lest a bold witness nail shades on yer winders.

The Smell of Stale Beer

Why haven't your memories of grandpa Jack
Made you a prude or a hater of men?
How can your face simply smile at me when
I touch you with eyes and sandpaper beard
And drink amber beer in the morning like him?
Do ever I smell of Old Spice or fried okra
Or thick yellow toenails in dirty wool socks?
When I come late to bed and my weight settles down
Troubling the mattress and greedy for warmth
Does a child in you tense and sicken inside
In her only defense?

Harvest

We missed the first harvest.
You were gowned in green
And covered with medics and mother.

I wanted to hug sod around you,
But you were covered...

That fruit never licked our tongues.

Coarser grain blew and sprung,
While I always wept for the sweet harvest
...that interred first harvest.

With Expert Badges and dragged debris,
We snuggle soft
To share sketches and journals.

You say my dower comes lovely
...but you view it meanly,
...you refuse rich parts.

The clipping carves me
...and bonsai trees
aren't selling well
this year.

Native

The lusty primal cry
Was drowned by the chant
 the banter
 the bitching
Of the three haggling, haggard, abandoning hags.

Slippery as a seal, Red, white and pink,
You squeezed out of the withered, wasted womb...
Out of the belly of women wallowing
In the gangrene stench of life never given...
 Of life gagged in an after-birth strangle.

You slid through scratchy, wart-covered fingers
Onto the cold, chrome-and-blue floor.

Each snatched you up, in turn,
Bickering, brawling, bantering,
Wanting to feed of you...
While starving you with their shriveled breasts,
 Empty but for cold, curdled, poisoned lactase.

Touch here.

In this soft, generous expanse
There's a plump pond...to snuggle in
And wait,
 To make exit into warm rooms.

Strong, slow, fingered-tulips
 Open, warm and pink, waiting to cradle and rock.

Here, a mouth waits to breathe upon your face...
And to sing a mother's lullaby,
Smiling of you.

Pillows of cream wait to moisten new lips,
And fill your center.
As a true, pumping heart
Welcomes you as Native to Myself.

Portrait

If I say I loved her,
who was she?

Her hair changed,
first black, then grey, then white that hurt the eyes to see
so brightly did it shine.

Wrinkles came.
More. More. The face became a map whose years
I could not comprehend.
I was six, then sixteen, then twenty-six, then thirty-six.
Then she was gone

Her limbs grew mottled as she lay in that house of horror,
trying to die.

I will not remember her so.

She was sometimes a smile shyly displayed.
She was sometimes a voice too loud in my ears.
Once she said my poem was good.

"Did you love your mother?"

I've said no and I've said yes.
What more can I say?

A Variation of a Yom Kippur Prayer

I remember you on this Day of Atonement, mother mine.
I remember the days when you loved me and I did not
understand that love lay beneath your admonishments.
You are gone, long since, mother mine, but I know
today that the bond which unites our souls can never
be cut; you live even now in my heart.
May the merciful Mother God reward you for living as
best you could, and may She forgive me and reward me
when my time with the angels is here.
So be it.

Credo

False gods and devils long since dead,
Visions of sugarplums gone from my head—
What once I knew, I knew no more;
No clue have I to meaning's core.

Yet these axioms I deem true:
I live, I'll die, and so shall you.
If love I give, love I'll receive—
No other facts need I believe.

Then

I was once bright
Then my colors
faded
I was once well-defined
then my lines
melted into each other
then my eyes
saw not so clearly
then the haze
the gray haze
of time
crept upon my shoulder
and bent me with its weight
then there appeared
images
of an old face
in my mirror
and now, I spend
my time
seeing now
but remembering
then
feeling then
living now

The Moon

Who is it on the water that dances
tips of toes
tracing the waves
fingers afire
throwing splashes of glow
in each valley
 of each ripple
reflecting opulence in the fullest
Amber face
framed by a blanket
 of deep indigo
and specks of brilliant diamonds
placed here and there
Who is it in the blackness
who spills milk and gold
on the hillside
casting shadows of lace
underneath the oak tree...

True Colors

My purple patches creep carefully
between layers of logic
here a question — there an almost answer
but — those yellow eyes can't quite make out
what lies between my breasts
there is something They want — They see
pink layers of flesh, rising, to settle again
but shades darker
beneath
creeps swirls of deep purple
beckoning, mingling, rising, settling, to rise again

I am untouchable
not my pinkness
but my deep purple
Those yellows cannot penetrate me
They desire to want what they cannot fathom,
cannot have, haven't the ability to reach
They glimpse at something more, Yet...
They cannot see
me

Leaves

Filtering sunlight
through Autumn leaves
catching russet colors
turning them over
and over
and over
orange, yellow, red
in the hands
of the Autumn breeze
displaying the seasonal glory
of approaching
sleep
telling the story
of summer greens
and great doses of sun
that are gone
and now fade
into glorious death

Serving Up The Past

Another nameless friend
Died this week.
Not a friend of mine,
A friend of my past.

The big football star
Car crash. DOA, DUI.
Big news,
Cancel school,
The hero is dead.

The equestrian honor student.
Not much left.
A hefty bag head in a
Trash heap.
Tragic,
I'm sure she had loads to
Offer the world.

My brother's mother.
Brakes went out.
Crack sale's sabotage.
Hamlet's revenge was petty
Compared to what this
Vengeance will be.

You'll all reach the point
Where death no longer moves you.
It simply serves up
A mild portion of
The past.

The faded wood of an old barn
Colored by time
Whose destiny remains uncertain
In a world consumed with progress...
And decay.

Natural beauty becomes a
forgotten hope
Discolored with age.

truelove

when

her rubberband smile
stretched to snap
peels and cracks
into blue-black shards
that twist and curl
exposing
the bone-white enticement inside
my
pinprick eyes tense
like clocksprings
ready to burst
from darkened sockets
and beckon
with sacrosanct truths
and lies
of love
and life
and death
and all within sight
is sucked inside
to live
in sinful pleasure
or die
in sacred agony

asbestos

itchy
swollen eyes
infected with anger
thicken the air
with bloodshot glares
 inject
squirming blindwhite rage
into the meat
of any host
within reach
i
am helpless
unable to resist
planting larvae
into your stomach
my hate
gestates
and grows
the rotten, acid sting
 empties
into your soul
and I am cleansed
and you are pregnant
with a bouncing, baby parasite
that no condom
could protect you from

i wouldn't have used one
anyway

Glue

two smiling-happy little glazed hams
basting
in their love oven
of moist sheets, pillows, and
discarded clothing
all sweet pork stink
and promising sighs
two piggies in a blanket
sharing the same wet spot
and breathless embrace
as four-in-the-morning sleep
woos and cuddles
their sticky snuggle-bunnied little clutch
and fades them off to the morrow

Darn

Jagged
fingers sew
cruel pattern and folds
into your creased face
RIGHT BEFORE YOUR DIMMING EYES
like some quilt seams
ripped apart and
carelessly stitched
together again
your visage frays
unravels
go ahead DISBELIEVE
if you must
this threadbare hag
is not you
not you with harsh-white hair and
crushed linen skin
THERE! on the SHELF!
on the WALL!
THE TRUE REFLECTION!
in the rosewood picture frame
in the sticky yellow
pages of the high school yearbook
NOT THIS!
heave
your wrinkle-bound
fist through the blasphemous glass
then drape your bones
across an easy chair and
let your wandering mind's cool
breath fill your head
with billowing breeze-filled truth
and smile

and ignore the mirror's lies
as they trickle from between
your clasped old-woman hands
down the insides of your varicose pencil-legs
and puddle in your dirty pink house shoes

Woman I

She stands at the window, blank redness looking back at her,
hands plunged in the water, twisting in the water.
And in her mind she has wings of deep blue and green.
They spread, filling the kitchen, brushing a cup from the shelf,
iridescent and fanning her, lifting her luminous hair,
then closing around her,
wrapping around her.
Tight, so tight, and hiding her eyes in a blanket that smells of wind
not of dust.

A dog, through the window, bites at a flea.
And in her mind she rears on the heavy, hard legs of a horse,
swaying and tossing her solid head,
teeth bared, heels sparking and clicking like ivory on wood.
Her ruby fur cloaking her sex,
protecting her ancient moist sex.

The door slams.
And she is startled
suddenly kicking and flying
just past your arms that reach for her, snatch for her.
The window is shattered.
Her ivory teeth laugh at your eyes, that show pain.

Woman II

She tiptoes through the room, careful
not to bump the universe.
The sun, in a wedge on the floor,
bothers her profoundly.
When did it come in? And,
did it make a noise? A tinkling,
like ice in a glass? Perhaps
a scary crashing like metal into metal
into metal into bone?
She rests her hand upon the table, dead
heavy wood and rich with dust. Her stomach tightens
with the knowledge that this table holds the floor down,
then the earth, then the pressure of all things
beyond.
Without the table she would rush through.
(And maybe things are surging now, striving, like an
earthquake, to thrust this very table
up and out.)
She backs into the kitchen, spine against the heavy fridge.
She hears its humming; tries to sink into the humming.
A quiet tiny ball that nothing huge can see.
Dust floats on rays that stab through window glass
before her eyes.
She hears a scream.

How can I say? That your silence
slaps me anew each day, that all I can hear
is the resonant choir that swells
from your sanctified skin?

That you will not acknowledge
the screams from my eyes
as they search you for
some song of me?

Right at this second I do not fear death
with its sharp, clutching fingers,
its red leer.

Just a fluff in time, minute
as the countless furs from dandelions
blown by my child round mouth;
but rich, nonetheless, and strong
nonetheless.

(Other seconds find me bolting upright,
eyes round, like phantom's eyes
or cannibal eyes,
round and angry
at the dust that will encircle
my own knees, my precious breasts,
at the grime that will climb on my own skin
'til both fall away in strips,
'til even the dirt shuns me.)

But now, right now, I am firm.
I know myself:
time is long and stretching
like a long, loud tunnel
screaming in happiness to no one
that I am here.
I am here for a second.

Letter to a Friend

I never meant to rape you.

But you were laid out
in blue moonlight,
eyes as beautiful as demons,
brows that arched and begged,
a rose mouth that led to caverns
of welcome pounding pain.

I only wanted to thrust you
deep into my soul
so that you could peer from there
and see your
brilliant beckoning paleness
and the holy torture ringing from your
blood gemstone heart.

Goals:

To cleanse you from beneath my skin like a fine sand and borax scrub, like a scrub of pretty glass.

To breathe my own clean air, air that does not swirl with the smell of your gardenia blood.

To not want desperately to dance with your every thought, to waltz with your every thought, to offer them warm wine, bed them with a speed and a heat that will scorch your very soul.

To forever feel the lightness of no thoughts at all.

To be rising up with a push from my hard-man strength, to swell and swell until I am in everyone's throat and they swallow me and taste me for days after. To swell so that I fill all this air with the vibrations and the fullness of my being until you cannot run from it, it folds around you with all the pretty kindnesses and terrors of death.

To forever be maddened by your name. To be locked inside a tiny room, wrapped in white in a tiny corner there, but to always have communion with your wide voice.

To emerge as whole as broken art can ever be. To emerge with my long, strong neck, my perfect breasts, but without my marble arms, if those you choose to take.

A bird dips past my fender, crazed
with the vivid feeling of flight.
It knows each straining move of its wings,
and the wind as it punches its tender eye.
The sheer movement snaps me back.
I've been gone again, driving only
 with my hands; the wet roads
 the buildings full of heavy, warm
 people, the dented sign or
 shifting tree
 all sliding past my deadened sight.

I cannot see the world these days;
love is a howling old man
who offers his bloody eyes
on his quaking palm.

Nothingness

A bird cried my name
Into the morning mist
I answered back into
Nothingness

I to never feel the songs of touch
Your numb hands cannot taste my pain
My light grows dark in eve of day
Cast back ye shadows of my soul

Hidden within the night
I feast on your spirit
Propped before Heaven's Gate
The light died within

Is that you I seek?
Mere food for the heart
Forked tongue poised
I answer back unto me

My men
They are crying in the city
Can you hear them?
Sadness clouds the sunshine from their faces
Chains of circumstance bind them to the perpetual sameness of city
ghetto life
Their courage has been eroded on the path of life

In the city jungle
Snakes abound attacking them at every other corner
Pits downtown, uptown and every other place
Open wide to suck them beneath life into dark death

My men
They are crying in the city
Can you hear them?
Listen, listen
Do you love my men?
The maker of the Universe he loves them magnificently...

Dirt tells nothing

Though we hesitate, complain and "Put on airs" so the old folk were inclined to say—Dust gives off no trace of who it had been
Whatever the color of him who was.

So all men die
Sometime, somewhere
Be they great or small
The King, the (pauper)
The young, the old
Go down, down to dust

And Alas, if I should walk
In Africa, Asia or Europe
I would only see dirt
Plain, pitiful dirt
Bound, bound by gravity
To the ground
Not even a shadow
Of him who was...

The Contented Ones

Cows stand on the side of a hill
neither ascending nor descending
but contented to stand
and chew
on what life provides them.

Pond Scum

Look to me someone calls from beyond
I look to see but there is only a reflection in the pond
Scum is the word I was looking for
This is a bore
They tell me no one has the answers for me
I will look for them for all eternity
Is one of those big words with no real meaning
I am alone screaming
The walls are coming down
All around
Me I see blackness fade to red
The blood drips from the cut on my head
It forms a pool on the floor
Someone is coming to the door
Footsteps familiar they've come to beat on me some more
The questions left unanswered the pounding of my head
I wake up and look around wishing I was dead.

Blue Battlefield, Red Blood

Bloody fields smoldering in lifeless hands
Comrades fade away, aged men cry.
Lifeless armies crashing in the sand,
Young men and old, seasons boys will die.
The battle is complete-the smoke is freed.
Repose attends this sanctified virgin ground.
Forelorned spirits released with swift hot speed
Transcending the rockets, making no sound.
The devil plays in his fairyland.
Abandoned soulless multitudes are his silent pawns,
Accompanied by his malevolent Man
Bloody innocence nurtures dying Dawn.
The devil's aggression cannot withstand
God must erase with unblemished hand.

Yesterday

Yesterday, I wondered and watched her grow.
I played with fragile fingers and toes.
When did the fingers talk?
When did the toes walk?

With endless energy she tumbles and rolls
Always a tomboy with pockets of toads
When did the tumble turn to grace?
When did the tomboy turn to lace?

She took on style with a coy smile.
Boys appeared where there were none before.
When did the smile invite?
When did she become a delight?

Walking wonderously down the aisle.
Wedding bells softly whispering.
When did she grow before my eyes?
When did the yesterdays go by?

Without Him

When he is gone and I am alone
Loneliness takes hold and dims the light.
Struggling with darkness I no longer see
Without him there is no reason for me.

Home again, beside me, he brings the rays
Of life's simple existence to bloom and breathe
Through the light I can now see—
That, yes, there is a reason for me ...he.

The Teacher

The Teacher steps in from the blinding outside
Through the ratchet saloon doors
A hand moves to a mouth, a glow,
Then fingers flick a hand-rolled
cigarette into the grimy spittoon.
The clank of heavy boots
The jingle of blood-edged spurs
He'd been riding long.
The Teacher stepped to the front
of the gamblers den.
Steely eyes penetrating the crowd
Some look down,
Some look at the others who are
looking down,
and some find "Something Else More Important."
A thin veil of ignorance hung in the air like a haze.
But one eye catches his—
an eye that doesn't reflect but
is a window to a deep chasm.
The Staredown has begun.
The Teacher's hand instinctually moves to his side.
His adrenal gland pumped strength into
his nicotine and alcohol laced blood.
the eyes of a madman, eyes that would never twitch,
never blink.
Lungs pump out smoky air
Lungs that are blue with the dust of the road,
the smoke of the "smokes."
Says the Teacher—"Any questions?"
Then slowly, like a rattlesnake approaching it's prey,
a hand rises in the back.
A hand risen from a deep chasm,
A thought that shot through a window of ignorance,
The thought that broke the mirror.
Says the Teacher—"Yeah...in the back."
Says the student—"I thought Antigone sucked."
Says the Teacher—"Draw!"

It walked the same path I would have walked
My backpack, who is my friend, just killed my class
I saw it moving and shaking next to me. I didn't do anything.

You wouldn't have either, so don't play high-and-mighty
All of the sudden it erupted into this fleshy beast of muscle and sinew
At first it was quite small. But after it ate the two women next to me, it began to grow.

It seemed to be an extension of my own mind—something I could not control.
Feeding off my subconscious, a primal breakfast, It ate the teacher (I'm sorry...*professor*).

I say again—it walked the path I would have walked

I never said I was a saint

On and on it ate. Sometimes it would eat the person and spit out the desk. Other times it would consume desk, books, clothes, and all.

It oozed down the hall, shooting out liquidy, sticky tubes that wrapped around the person and sucked them toward the body

In no time at all, it was the size of a Winnebago

And I watched it in silence

I spent all night chasing it. Passing driverless cars, chasing it south.

I used to carry this on my back

Halfway to L.A. it split into two jelly beasts...the second eating just as fast as the first

I kept looting vacant mini-markets. Hey, what was I supposed to do, starve?

At eight o'clock that night, My backpack was all over the evening news. I watched as it ate Tom Brokaw in Washington D.C. They had obviously reproduced over and over again.

They were hungry, I guess

By midnight, the world was dead

All life was consumed by the beasts

Women, children, animals, bugs, were all courses in this primal feast

By six a.m. they all returned and gathered around my house

I stood on my roof and looked out upon a lifeless world

Sure, it was a little disturbing

This once-backpack reformed into a skin-blood-muscle mound of consumed humanity about a mile high. We stood there for a long time, we did. I seemed to be judging it and it seemed to be judging me.

It had walked the path I would have walked

I could not call it criminal

A voice seemed to emanate from my subconscious. It asked me—"What does the mind do when it has absorbed all it can?"

After much conscious deliberation, I replied, "It seeks itself."

I wondered what I was going to carry my books in.

Given the circumstances, I would have to say no
 I don't like you
Prophet or not, the answer is still the same
 I want my car back
You may be some kind of deity or whatever, but you still need a job
 I want you to stop calling my sister
I don't care if you love her
 According to rule, you have to love everyone
Use your cosmic powers to find someone else
 She's only fourteen
With all due respect
 Beat it
I swear to you, I'll call the cops
You thought the resurrection was bad
Feel the blows of American justice
Scram! Blow! Split! Beat it! Out!
 You don't want to throw blows
Save the sad stories
Save your miracles for someone who doesn't have a television
 I want my credit cards back
Let's face it—you're just a vagrant, a bum
 I want you out of my house
 Now!
You're just a loser
 Beat it

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 million brilliant stars

Turn around...
I find myself dancing in the Milkyway 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

S t o r i e s

Orpheus •

A Walk at Midnight

They were a pleasant group of people, richly tan and dressed in bright, sporty clothes. They were wealthy, married and on vacation in a rented cabin in the mountains. They had decided to have a wine tasting party on the first night of their vacation and by midnight they were feeling a little drunk. Around this time, someone said, it could have been John, "Let's walk to the lake and swim in the moonlight." The idea caught on at once. Someone put a few bottles of wine in a tote and they all set off toward the little lake that lay about half a mile away.

It was a pleasant night for a walk. There was the faint scent of spring wildflowers in the cold night air. A half moon shone brightly down, illuminating the road and causing the oak trees to cast dark, cavernous shadows. The group tottered along, warmed by frequent sips of wine and having a wonderful time.

As they walked along the road, someone spotted a long thin shadow.

"Hey, do you see something in the road?" I think I see something. Is it a stick?"

"No, it's a snake! Hey everybody, there's a rattle snake in the road!"

Everyone looked about in a confused panic and the bright moonlight seemed fade into a threatening darkness.

"Where is it?" someone said.

"It's right here!"

"God, it's huge!"

"It's not moving. Is it dead?"

"No, it moved a little bit. It's alive."

"We should kill it. Those things are dangerous. God, just think if it had been hidden in a bush!" said John.

This idea spurred the group into a sense of great purpose. Setting down the wine bottles, they picked up rocks and chunks of crumbling asphalt. They stood back and, at the cry of "Fire!" hurled their ammunition. When the dust had cleared, everyone could see that not one pebble had hit the snake.

"Damn it. We didn't even come close," said John.

"I can't believe we didn't hit it."

"I think I drank too much. I'm not feeling so great."

"You're not going to be sick, are you?"

"No, I'm all right."

"Maybe if we get closer to the snake, we can hit it," someone suggested. For a minute, everyone considered the possibility of getting closer.

"How far can a snake strike?" someone said.

"I don't know. Maybe five or ten feet."

"I heard a big snake can strike as far as fifteen feet."

Looking at the rattler, John said, "It's huge. I bet it could strike at least fifteen feet, maybe even more than that. We should stay back and try to hit it from here."

"You're right. We better not get too close."

They armed themselves with more stones and attacked the snake again but with no success. The snake stared at them with yellow reptilian eyes that seemed to twinkle.

As they began to search the surrounding bushes for more ammunition they heard the rumble of an engine coming up behind them on the road. Turning, they saw a white pickup truck coming to a slow stop. A battered cowboy hat poked out the pickup's window and a slow drawl pierced the air. "Can I help you folks?" Realizing that throwing rocks into the road late at night must look ridiculous, they fell into an embarrassed silence.

"You folks all right?" the cowboy asked.

"Well, there's a rattle snake," someone finally said.

"We're trying to kill it."

"And it's huge. Look how big it is!"

The cowboy climbed out of his pickup and took a look.

"It's a rattler all right," he said.

Shuffling to the back of his truck, the cowboy brought out a shovel. With a slow, even, stride, he walked up to the snake and planted his boots inches from the small, scaly, head. Everyone stepped back. The cowboy must be crazy to get so close to the snake. It would get him if it struck! The cowboy's face was emotionless as he hefted up the shovel and with a swift movement, born from years of practice, chopped the snake in two. Turning, the cowboy gave them a little wink.

"They don't move too much when it's cold at night," he said, flinging the bloody body into the back of the pickup. "They're a lot quicker during the day. You folks have a good night."

Climbing back into his pickup, the cowboy gave them a little wave and started his engine. They watched him go until his headlights were swallowed by the night.

"I don't feel very well. Let's not go to the lake."

"I'm not in the mood anyway. Let's go back to the cabin."

In silence, the little group turned around and started back to their rented cabin, leaving their wine bottles scattered along the side of the road. As they approached the cabin, John started to laugh.

"Did you see that piece of junk that old cowboy was driving?"

"Oh God, yes. It stunk like manure. Talk about a local yokel."

"What do you think he was going to do with the snake? Eat it for dinner?"

They all started laughing and soon everybody was having a wonderful time.

Ghost Stories

The early-April sun finally broke through the clouds to sparkle weakly on the rain-washed street as I collected the mail from the box, but it provided no warmth, and I shivered slightly as I tore open the solitary letter from among the mixture of bills and political flyers. As I unfolded the letter a newspaper clipping fell out and drifted listlessly to the ground. It was Ruth's obituary.

Her death notice was in no way remarkable, just mundane comments on the passing of another lonely, middle-aged woman. No cause of death was given, but I already knew anyway. Ruth's brother had sent me the notice, carefully clipped from the old hometown newspaper, because, he said, he knew how close Ruth and I used to be. I read the obituary twice before I noticed the address given for her. She had moved into her grandfather's old house. I hadn't known about that. I knew Ruth had moved back to our hometown after her divorce, because her letter to me had been postmarked from there, but I had no idea she was living in the house so familiar to me from childhood. I had spent so much of my childhood there that I could still picture it perfectly in my mind.

Surrounded by greenery, the large, ramshackle white house was almost dwarfed by magnificent trees that must have been almost a hundred years old even then. Those trees had sheltered us, Ruth and me, through every crisis of our young lives. My loneliness after the death of my mother seemed less bitter when Ruth and I could climb into the rich lushness of those protecting branches. Even now I can close my eyes and feel the peace and safety I felt there. Ruth's house, with its majestic trees and abundant garden, was a haven for me throughout childhood.

But it was Ruth and her family, especially her grandfather's stories, that kept me coming back day after day, night after night. I certainly spent more time there than I did at my own house one door away, with its empty, echoing rooms. My father worked nights after my mother's death, probably to forget his own loneliness and inadequacy at dealing with a young, bewildered daughter, so I spent my evenings with Ruth's family. Those memories are so vivid still. Her family was large and outgoing, and one more child, especially a small, lonely and quiet girl, was hardly even noticed. It was the stories, though, Ruth's grandpa's incredible stories, that made my visits almost a compulsion. I know he told them year-round, but the stories he told during the long, lingering twilight of our

early summer evenings were my favorites. Those stories both captivated and threatened me, for they were ghost stories.

Ruth and I would carefully spread a quilt on the front lawn, to protect our skinny, brown legs from chigger bites, and lie down on it in nervous anticipation. Sounds of tinkling dishes and glassware could be heard from the house where Ruth's mother was doing the dishes, and a slight, unmistakable smell of fried chicken usually lingered in the air. Ruth's grandpa would settle comfortably in a lawn chair with a large glass of iced tea at his side. He would tease us with silly jokes for awhile, but as soon as a hush settled over the neighborhood and sinister shadows started forming at the edges of the lawn, he would begin. I can almost hear his voice, hushed and eerie, to this day.

"Many years ago," he would begin, looking up at the increasingly darkening sky, "when I was a young man, an incredible thing happened to me that I can't explain. Perhaps you girls would like to hear about it."

He always began the stories with the same words, and though I can no longer remember the exact details of any of them, I can remember the horror and fear those stories invoked in me. His quiet, almost mesmerizing voice droned on as twilight turned to evening, and Ruth and I would lie on our backs, listening to his unearthly words and staring up through the sheltering silhouettes of the overhanging branches at the opaque, sapphire sky. As he talked, the threatening shadows deepened ominously, and Ruth and I would edge closer to each other for protection against whatever lay outside the edges of the protected yard. The silence beyond his disembodied voice was almost palpable, broken only occasionally by the bark of a lonely dog. Slowly and deliberately, the story would build to its dreadful climax, and each story ended with the same words, words that both terrified and fascinated me.

"But I am the *real* ghost," he would conclude, his voice nearly a whisper, and his face almost invisible in the intimate and oppressive blackness of the night.

When I heard those words, a thrill of horror would chill my spine, and both Ruth and I would scream in delight. I would clutch Ruth's hand in terror and hold on for dear life.

"Ruth, time for bed. Tell Judith to go on home, and you come in now." Ruth's mother's practical voice would break the spell, and her grandpa would pick up his chair and glass.

"Good night, Judith," he would say pleasantly, entirely unaware of the fearful effect his stories had on me. "Sweet dreams." He always bent down to help us up from the quilt, but I was always too shy and awkward to reach for his hand as Ruth did.

It was then that the real terror of the night began for me. I lived only a house away, but to walk past that one shadowy house between us in the pitch black of the threatening night was beyond my capabilities after one of these stories. Trees and bushes in its yard seemed to have acquired incredibly ominous shapes; branches become snakelike arms with clawlike protrusions that wanted to reach out and grab a small, terrified girl. An old woman that we had nicknamed "The Witch" lived in the house, and I was sure she was watching, peering through her always-darkened, menacingly blank windows, waiting to catch me alone. I was absolutely terrified to walk home alone through the eerie, threatening vegetation that surrounded her house. But Ruth always came to my rescue. She seemed to know intuitively that I was frightened; there was no need for words between us.

"Mom," she would call out. "I'm going to walk Judith home. I'll be back as soon as her dad gets home." She would grasp my hand firmly, and we would run giggling past the danger zone. When we reached my house, we would sit on the porch for awhile talking until the headlights of my dad's car turned into the drive. Ruth would then hug me quickly, and run back to her house without another word. It never occurred to me to wonder if she was afraid, if her brisk dash back to her house concealed her own terror.

Now, as I read Ruth's obituary for the third time, tears clouded my eyes and a lump formed in my throat. I swallowed it down and quickly wiped my eyes when I heard the unmistakable squeak of the garage door opening.

"Is dinner ready yet, Judith?" My husband walked in the back door, loaded down as usual with briefcase and folders. "I'm starved, and I have a lot of work to get through this evening. Did you remember to call the Cravens about the party on the 13th? I don't want them to plan anything else before the invitations go out." For the first time he looked at my face. "What's the matter?"

"I got this in the mail today." I held out Ruth's obituary for him to read. "Looking at it brought back some strange, unsettling memories."

"Judith, you just can't keep dwelling on this woman's suicide. I know you were friends as children, but that was a long time ago." He opened his briefcase as he spoke, removing more folders and papers. "You can't help it if you grew away from her. It's not as if you could have done anything. We were entertaining the weekend she called. You couldn't just drop everything and run to her side."

"I know. I just feel as though I let her down. She was always there for me when we were kids, and I feel I should have helped her somehow." I turned away so he wouldn't see the tears starting again and began mixing the drinks. "Dinner will be ready soon." I handed him his drink. "Jewel made chicken enchiladas. They're baking now, so go wash your hands, and then we'll eat."

"Well, just don't think about your friend anymore. She's gone, and there's nothing you can do about it now. Anyway, a woman who would kill herself is probably too messed up for any help you could give." He left the room, and I could hear him running up the stairs to the master bathroom. I busied myself setting the table and getting the enchiladas and salad. I had no appetite, but Ray was entitled to a good dinner. He worked so hard to provide a good life. When he came back in the room, he still held his untouched drink in one hand and a folder full of paperwork in the other. He was anxious to finish dinner so he could do some work before bed as usual.

"Let's eat. I really do have a lot of paperwork tonight, and I hope you can get to those invitations so I can mail them tomorrow." Ray drained his glass quickly, with apparently little enjoyment. "This party means a lot to me, and I don't want anything to go wrong. What did you do today?" Ray quickly filled his plate and began to eat as he always did, a stack of papers to read on the table beside him.

Conversation lagged as Ray turned to his reports, and dinner was soon over. He hastily pecked my cheek and went to his study. I knew he would be there until nearly midnight, so I was once again alone with my thoughts. I stacked the dishes in the dishwasher, left the enchilada pan to soak for Jewel in the morning, and poured myself a glass of wine. Feeling very restless, I climbed the stairs to our bedroom, opened the French doors, and sat in a lounge chair on the deck overlooking the pool. Once again, chafing memories of Ruth filled my mind. We had been close for so many years, but our adult worlds were just so different that lately we had drifted apart. That's why I was somewhat surprised to get a call from her.

"Judith," the strange voice had said, "this is Ruth. Do you have time to talk?"

"Ruth! It's so good to hear from you after so long. How have you been?" I was startled at first, but sat down to have a long, friendly chat.

"Judith, I have some very bad news. My daughter has bone cancer. She's not expected to live much longer." Ruth's voice cracked on the last words, and I could hear her muffled sobs through the phone lines. When she had gained control again she said, "I just need someone to talk to right now, and I thought of you. We used to be so close."

"Oh, Ruth, I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, Judith, just listen. I guess. I need to talk to someone who knows how it feels to lose someone you love, and you lost your mother so young. I know you'll understand what I'm feeling."

"Oh, Ruth, that was so long ago I can barely remember. And I've never had children, you know. But if there's anything I can do—if you need money for doctors or something..."

"No, Judith, we're fine. Thank you for the thought, though. It's just that she's so young and innocent. I just don't understand. Why did this have to happen?" Ruth was sobbing again, and I didn't know what to say. I comforted her as best I could, but our conversation was fairly short. I knew Ruth hadn't received the solace she craved.

I didn't hear from Ruth again for nearly a year. I sent a condolence card and a large spray of roses, of course, when her daughter finally died, and I received a brief thank-you note in return, but that was written by her husband whom I had never met. The next time I heard from Ruth herself was a letter postmarked from our old hometown. She wrote that she and her husband were divorcing—they just couldn't seem to make a go of it after the death of their daughter. She would love to see me, she said, could I possibly come to her for a visit? She didn't feel up to traveling herself, but she was lonely and would love to have me come to her.

It was impossible, of course. Ray and I had planned a trip to the Caribbean with two of his partners and their wives, and I just couldn't cancel now. I called Ruth right away—she had given her phone number but no address. I explained as gently as I could that I wouldn't be able to visit her for quite a while, we had so many things planned right now. Ruth seemed a little disappointed, but she said she understood. She asked when we might be able to get together, but I just couldn't say. My life was so full just then, with the trip coming up, and so on. I knew Ruth felt that I had let her down, and I resolved to send her a nice gift, a book perhaps, to make up for it. I never did, though. I was just too busy.

The last time I heard from Ruth was Saturday, nearly two weeks ago now. The phone rang at seven in the morning. We had company for the weekend, a client of Ray's, and I was very busy that morning. I'm afraid I answered a little impatiently, expecting a wrong number.

"Judith, I need to see you. No one else understands me the way you do. I'm nearly desperate with loneliness. My family tries to help, but it doesn't do any good. I think if you could come to me, if we could just talk the way we used to, maybe it would help. I don't think I can go on like this much longer." Her voice was almost hysterical, but I knew it was Ruth. Her words pierced my heart because it was so impossible.

"Ruth, I'd love to see you, but I just can't right now. You have to understand. I'm so busy, I have company for the weekend. My life is simple too full right now. I can't just drop everything and come to you, much as I'd like to. Maybe you could come here next week. I have a lovely, large house, and you can

just sit by the pool and relax—try to pull yourself together again. You wouldn't have to do anything but lie in the sun." I hoped Ruth would see the sense of this plan and agree.

"Judith, please understand. Please help me. I need you." The hysteria in Ruth's voice was almost frightening. But it was so impossible! I couldn't just pack up and leave.

"Ruth, I'll tell you what. Next week, after these people leave, I'll call you. We'll make some plans then, and...." The phone buzzed in my ear as Ruth silently hung up. I tried several times to get her back, but her phone was always busy. By Monday, I was frantic. I called her brother, and he was the one who found her. She had apparently taken pills, but by the time he got there it was already much too late.

Ray's footsteps on the stairs startled me out of my reverie. I was completely chilled from sitting so still in the cold night air. My thoughts had drifted back again to my childhood with Ruth and her grandfather's stories that had so engrossed me. I now realized why the closing words of his stories had frightened and threatened me so. I knew now what I had innately perceived then in those foreboding, ominous words:

I am the real ghost.

Daddy and Chocolate Soda

It was a typical hot, humid summer. The year was 1949 and I had just turned seven years old. I lived on an oil lease with my family in the lower end of the San Joaquin Valley. Those days we could see the mountains on three sides of us. To the north, the landscape was unbroken as far as the eye could see. Bakersfield was northeast of us by about twenty-five miles. Almost due west, thirty miles away, was the small oil town of Taft.

On a typical summer day my brother and I ran barefoot through the cotton fields that surrounded our lease house. We fought and made up and played together and refused to speak to each other the way brothers and sisters always have. The days were long and spent mostly out of doors. No television, no fancy video games, no expensive toys; only our own rich imaginations and the patience of a good mother who taught us to read early and think for ourselves. Still, the endless days sometimes seemed to stretch even our imaginations to the maximum. It was then, when Mama's patience was at an end, that Daddy, Mama, Freddie, and I would pile into the Hudson and head for Taft to do the once-a-month shopping.

This treat was longed for, dreamed about and savored when it happened. But the best part of the trip came near the end, when the shopping was finished and the car headed out of town. That's when Daddy would stop at the filling station to fill the Hudson with gas. That place, with its glass-topped pumps and rich smells, was where the high adventure happened.

After the car was filled, tires and radiator checked, Daddy would always say, "Who wants a soda?" Of course we all did.

Mama and Freddie always had Coke and Nehi grape. But not Daddy and I! Each trip was an adventure.

Just outside the filling station office sat the soft drink dispenser. It wasn't tall and shiny with lights and change maker. It had character. It would sit there, all boxy and square with a little rust near the bottom of the blue and red paint. It took all the strength a seven-year-old could muster to push the heavy lid all the way up until it stayed there, perched like a hawk, ready to fall if you jiggled the box a little too hard.

Daddy and I would stand there and discuss the relative merits of Grape or Orange or Cola. But no matter how good they sounded, we always settled on the Chocolate Soda. Daddy would say, "OK, Edwina, you can get them this week."

I would lean over as far as I could, being careful not to thump the box too hard. The condensation on the outside of the box soaked into my sunsuit as I raised up on my tiptoes and reached down inside. The first touch was the most exquisite! Ice cold water filled the box to the neck of the bottles. There were several rows of bottles, each row bounded on both sides by metal. The bottles rested by the neck, just below the cap, suspended in icy water. I would reach down, grasp the bottle top and slide the bottle along the metal and water canal to the end of the row. At the end, the bottle seemed to swing free. Each time I gave a little tug to see if, just this once, Daddy wouldn't have to pay the nickel. But he always did.

Daddy would hand me two nickels and I would lay one in the little tray and slide it in until it clicked. Somewhere inside that wonderful machine a "ping" would sound, then a metallic click. At that moment, I could free the bottle of chocolate soda. But, try as I did, I was never quite quick enough to pull the second bottle free before a second metallic click closed the row. I would repeat the exercise, then hand Daddy one bottle while I kept the other.

Daddy and I would stand there a couple of minutes, holding the wet, cold bottle in both hands. We would touch hot sweaty foreheads with that wonderful coldness then rub the bottle along our arms. What a delicious treat.

Finally, Daddy would motion for me to open my soda first. My mouth was watering by now for that sweet, cold chocolate taste. We shook the bottles to mix the syrup at the bottom. At last I would bend over the box to the little opening with the bottle opener and the tray that caught the bottle caps. I carefully fit the cap in the opener then pushed down until the lid was off. First Daddy's, then mine...at last the bottles were open.

That first taste was wonderful! In fact, I have never even come close to the way a chocolate soda cold make beautiful music with my taste buds the summer I was seven.

The Pawn's Affliction

"This is unnatural," murmured Aulus Decius Argintia to himself as he ran his fingers through his characteristic, silvery hair. From astride his horse he studied the passively silent crowd of people before him. They were a ragged people consisting largely of women, children, and the elderly. Decius wondered why there were so few men.

Decius had seen much during his tours of duty in the Roman legions. He had witnessed frightening, heroic, and comical scenes. He had even seen a man accidentally impale himself on his own spear in a battle against the Germans. None of this had affected him as much as what he saw now. These people left him at a loss, and even worse, they made him uneasy.

Shaking off his unease he addressed the crowd: "I, Aulus Decius, do hereby reclaim this town, the surrounding province, and its people for the Great Republic of Rome. Resistance will not be tolerated and infractions will be dealt with severely. If you cooperate and submit yourselves peacefully to the authority of the Roman Senate you will "

"We will not cause you any undue trouble," a firm voice from the front of the crowd interrupted his speech.

Decius scanned the faces in the crowd and singled out an elderly man with a short gray beard. The man wore the same damned expression on his face as the whole population of the town. An expression that unnerved him. An expression of grim acceptance. But there was defiance masked by such a controlled calm that Decius could scarcely recognize it.

That they had not tried to defend themselves from the invasion of Decius' legion daunted his sensibilities more than if he had been confronted by the whole Punic army. The reports which had led to his being ordered here had described violent resistance from the people. He had expected a vicious conflict. It never came. Instead the town had reacted to his men like the sands of the shore to the beating of the waves.

Decius suddenly became aware that everyone was waiting, gazing at him expectantly. He experienced an instant of panic as he realized he had lost his train of thought. He tried to pick up where he had left off, but found that the words slipped from his mind like water through his fingers. His tanned skin flushed pink with irritation. His eyes narrowed and glinted dangerously as he

stared balefully at the man who had interrupted him. He had half a mind to raze the town as a lesson, but this passed quickly with his initial irritation.

Deciding to abandon the routine speech of protocol he turned to Antonius, his first officer and friend, "Take a census of the people. I want to know the population, major resources, and all the other routine information. Report to me by sundown." Decius pointed at the old man who had interrupted him, "Bring him with you."

Antonius nodded then barked out orders sending the legionnaires hurrying to carry them out. Decius glanced at the crowd again; their expressions had not changed. His uneasiness was now overshadowed by curiosity. Contemplating the enigma, he turned and rode to where his camp was being set up.

Aulus Decius rarely had difficulty writing his reports to the Senate. In fact, he often enjoyed writing. But today it was tedious going. His mind kept wandering from the job at hand to dwell on the strange reaction of these people to Roman occupation. Heaving a discontented sigh, he moved his quill laboriously across the parchment stretched across his desk. "I have resecured the northern area of Hispania," he continued writing, "Resistance was minimal."

His mind wandered again from the parchment to the people. He entertained the notion that they might be afflicted with some sort of sickness. His fingers had ceased to write and were now toying absently with the quill.

Decius normally would have been annoyed at being interrupted while writing, but was instead relieved when Antonius entered his tent with the gray-bearded townsman following. Antonius gave his report.

"Honestly, Aulus, I don't see why the Senate is so anxious about this area," Antonius commented after he had concluded his report.

Decius gave him a disapproving glance. Normally they were on a first-name basis, but now there was an outsider present. Antonius looked embarrassed and continued more formally, "The town's resources are few, sir. It does not have much to offer."

"Thank you. I will discuss this with you further. You are dismissed." Decius turned to the gray-bearded townsman after Antonius had left and motioned him to sit.

"What is your name?"

"Cannib." The man's voice was even and grave.

"And you are the leader of these people?"

"I am the remaining elder."

Decius gave the man a hard stare as if trying to peer into the elder's mind. Cannib didn't flinch under the scrutiny and remained placid. Neither spoke, each trying to read the other's intentions.

"Dead." Cannib replied to the question Decius had not yet voiced, "The majority of our men are dead."

Decius wondered momentarily if the man could read minds, but quickly dismissed such thoughts, returning to the subject at hand.

"How? What cause this?" Decius questioned, "Has a plague infected your people?"

"Liberating this town from your cursed Rome! That's how!" Cannib's expression betrayed his emotions, but it lasted only an instant. Then his face became impassive again. Decius knew the uprising had been vicious; that was why he had been ordered her, but he had not been aware of how costly it had been to these people.

"If they made such a great sacrifice for you, why haven't you resisted my men at all?"

"We are incapable of resisting you through force of numbers or skill." A faint expression of anxiety showed on Cannib's face. His voice, however, was tainted with hope. "We wish to challenge you to representative, individual combat to determine our fate."

"I've already conquered your town!" Decius said with an incredulous expression. He would have laughed except that he could see by Cannib's expression that he was dead serious. "I've already conquered your town. Why should I agree to this?"

"If you do not agree we will fight you until there is not a single one of us left standing!" Cannib assessed the general's reaction gravely then rose to his feet and spoke, "Let me show you something."

Decius regarded him warily then rose to his feet without a word. He ordered two of his soldiers to follow twenty feet behind them as escorts. As Cannib led him through the town, Decius took the opportunity to get a better look at his surroundings.

The town was not large. The important buildings stood in the center on the edge of a small river. The main street ran down the center perpendicular to it. The various stalls of the town market lined either side of the street. There were few people. Those who were picked through the various stalls trying to find produce. There was little and Decius could tell by the way the people stared at him that they blamed him. Cannib led him across the river over a wooden bridge.

The town was mainly agricultural, so the area across the river consisted primarily of vast fields. As Cannib led him through one of these fields, Decius'

trained eye assessed his surroundings, judging where an attack might come from should this be a trap. It was a force of habit rather than any real suspicion of Cannib's intentions.

Decius saw nothing to indicate a trap, but instead saw two children playing soldiers on the other side. One of the boys feigned killing the other who melodramatically imitated the throes of death. Laughing, the boy rose back to this feet and the two resumed their attacks on each other. Decius noticed that one of the boys was missing a hand.

"That boy," Cannib gestured at the child, "is eight. He watched as his father was killed, then his brother, then his mother. He himself managed to kill two Roman soldiers before he lost his hand to a Roman sword."

"Children fought?" Decius murmured in amazement, more to himself than to Cannib. He was thunderstruck by the apparent tenacity these people had possessed to defend themselves.

"Children, women, the elderly. None of us are willing to let you and your great empire hold sway over us, and we will fight with tooth and nail until we are no more than a memory if we have to." Cannib pointed towards the outlying field, "If you don't believe me, look at that."

A large unfilled grave scarred the field like an open wound. Decius strode to its edge. There was an overpowering stench of decay around the large hole. Vultures scattered at his approach, squawking angrily at the intrusion. He had to suppress the urge to gag as he looked into the grave. There must have been nearly a hundred bodies stacked one on top of the other. Most looked as though they had been killed by crude weapons such as rocks, farming tools, or had been torn at by bare hands.

They were all Roman.

Decius reeled. He felt as if the placid mask the people wore had been torn away to reveal a ferocious passion to resist the intrusion on their way of life. He now understood the full depth of the determination he had noted on the people's faces. It was the determination of those who had resigned themselves to their cause and would face it with an inner peace born of grim understanding.

He walked back to where Cannib was standing. "What do you propose?"

"One of your men would fight one of ours in single combat. If you win, we will submit peacefully, if we win you will leave our town."

"You surely realize your chances of defeating any one of my men are slim." As if to explain, Decius added, "My men are highly-trained soldiers."

Cannib bowed his head as if to recognize this fact. "Our chances are the same either way. This will simply result in less bloodshed."

Both were silent for a long time. Decius broke the silence. "Be in my tent at sunrise tomorrow." He walked away leaving Cannib to indulge in a feeling of unmasked hope.

The next morning Decius was still mulling over his decision. He had no doubt that the town's people would hold true to Cannib's threat of an uprising. Though it would be an easy victory for the legion, it would also be a bloody and hollow one. The alternative was to risk the loss of the province, but possibly gain the peaceful submission of the people. Decius wanted nothing more than to hold this province peacefully. But what if he lost it? How would he explain it to the Senate?

"My mind and heart are in a stalemate!" He appealed to Antonius who had been regarding him quietly from his seat in the center of the tent. Antonius stood and stretched like a cat. He walked to a table and poured himself a glass of unwatered wine. He offered his friend and senior one. It was declined.

"It is a troubling dilemma indeed my friend," Antonius replied, "I have always been one to follow my heart, yet it is well known that it is your mind that has gotten you where you are. I do not envy your situation."

"It could serve to be good for the men's morale," Decius said to no one in particular. He heaved a loud sigh. "Of course, I've already made my decision."

Antonius looked startled.

"I will accept the challenge."

"So, he decides to follow his heart!" Antonius grinned. "Might I submit myself then to you as a champion in combat for Rome?"

Decius regarded his friend gravely. Antonius would fight well for Rome. "I appreciate your loyalty and bravery, but I must decline your offer."

Antonius looked hurt.

"You would do Rome great honor by fighting for her," Decius paused, "but I understand these people, so I must be the one to fight."

"You can not, Aulus!" Antonius was indignant.

"I can! And I will!" Decius gazed sternly at his first officer. "This matter is not open to challenge. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." Antonius appeared chagrined.

"My friend," Decius softened. "I must do this."

Antonius remained silent. The tent flap parted slightly. A soldier poked his head in. "The townsman, Cannib, is here to see you sir."

Decius sighed heavily. "Send him in."

Cannib entered the tent, his expression was one of anxiety. His anxiety increased when he saw the strained expression on Antonius' face. He sat when so motioned, declined a drink, and looked across the map-covered table expectantly.

"Select your man to fight." Decius wasted no time. "Choose him well, and have him ready by mid-day."

By mid-day a small arena had been staked-off. The whole population of the town crowded around one side while those legionnaires who were not bound by duties elsewhere crowded around the other. Many of Decius' other officers had opposed his decision to fight, but they were all silenced by Antonius. Though he didn't understand his friend's decision, Antonius would respect it. Now most of Decius' men watched him prepare for battle with pride and admiration.

Decius examined his weapons and armor with a trained eye to assure its quality. Though he had the advantage of experience, he lacked the vigor of youth. He gazed across the makeshift arena at his opponent. A young man of about eighteen practiced his sword swings attempting to look confident despite the fear that was evident in his eyes. The boy obviously lacked the degree of training Decius possessed, but the boy was large and well-muscled and had youth on his side.

Decius stripped away his clothing as he entered the arena so that he was only wearing a loin cloth. Clothing gave something for an opponent to hold on to. There was a murmur of admiration from the crowd as he did this. Many had not expected him to be in such excellent physical shape. This apparently included his opponent; the boy's face fell at the sight of Decius' well-toned muscles.

Neither opponent said anything as they made the preliminary passes at each other to size one another up. Both were armed with a shortsword and a small shield like those used by gladiators. There were a few isolated cheers from the crowd, but these died off as the battle intensified.

The boy made the first attack. He swung his arm in a wide arc. The blade crashed down on Decius' raised shield. The force of the blow was tremendous. The shock numbed Decius' arm, but he had received blows like that before. He initiated a series of quick counterblows. His opponent was forced to scramble to hold his ground.

Adrenalin coursed through Decius' veins. All thoughts of Cannib, his legion, the Senate, and Rome evaporated in the rush of battle. He could now concentrate wholly on his opponent. This enabled him to land a blow under the boy's defenses leaving a glistening line of blood across his chest. His opponent, however, was also able to land a few telling blows.

The boy charged unexpectedly, barreling into Decius' body. Both tumbled to the ground. Each managed to rise again without receiving any critical wounds. Yet Decius now sported an ugly reddish-purple bruise on his forehead where the boy had used his shield as a battering ram.

Decius lost track of how long they had been fighting. Both were exhausted. Each swing became an effort. Sweat mingled with the blood of a dozen cuts. Both were forced to pass-up advantageous blows in order to catch one's breath.

Neither swung at the other easily, conserving their strength instead for more calculated shots. Decius' surroundings blurred in his vision. His muscles screamed for rest.

In a desperate and lucky move the boy delivered a crashing blow to Decius' shield. Decius was sent stumbling backward. He fell on his back roughly, his shield arm stinging. Seeking to end the fight the boy rushed forward to deliver the coup de grace. His rush was too soon. Decius was able to connect a kick to the boy's ankle, sending him sprawling head first to the ground.

As Decius scrambled to his feet he could see his opponent drawing himself into a kneeling position in order to rise. He paused in this position for only a second, but Decius saw his opportunity in that second. He twisted himself quickly to face the kneeling boy. He brought the pommel of his sword down on the boy's knee. He was awarded with an audible crunch and a look of agony on his opponent's face.

Instinctively the boy tried to rise, but his shattered knee gave out from under him and he fell crashing on his side. His sword fell from his grip. The boy hugged his shattered knee to himself, rocking back and forth and moaning. Decius kicked his weapon out of reach and stood above him, panting from exertion. A few cheers arose from the younger of his soldiers, but the older ones just looked on solemnly.

Decius looked into the crowd of townspeople. Their expressions of grim determination were now replaced by expressions of sorrow and defeat. His eyes wandered to Cannib who wore the same expression, but Decius could also detect dignity there. The soldiers who had cheered were now calling for the death stroke. Cannib met his gaze and bowed his head in submission.

A muffled cry came from the ground by Decius' feet. The boy was trying to rise. He winced from the effort, but defiance blazed in his eyes. He looked crazed, as if afflicted by some disease which compelled him to mad tenacity.

Decius stepped out of the boy's range. The boy stared at him balefully. Decius looked at the defeated townspeople; down at the defeated boy before him, still trying to fight him; at the triumphant faces of his younger soldiers; and the solemn faces of his older ones.

The boy tried again to attack. Decius raised his sword. The boy cried out in a mixture of pain and defiance. Decius twisted his sword in his hand and let it fall. The flat of his blade connected with the side of the boy's head. The boy fell to the ground, and was still.

Decius stared at the boy—unconscious, ineffective. Turning suddenly toward his men, he signaled a soldier to come to him. He gestured to the boy, "See to it that this warrior's wounds are treated properly."

"But sir, you must..." the soldier began to protest.

"Must I?"

The soldier cringed and said nothing.

"See to it that this boy's wounds are treated properly!" Decius repeated, emphasizing his words this time.

He glanced at his men again. The defiant protests and complaints of the younger soldiers died out under his gaze. A look of respect marked the faces of the older soldiers, Antonius' most of all. Decius signaled Antonius to follow, walking briskly back to his tent. He muttered to Antonius.

"Have a physician sent to my tent." His lip curled. "Get a physician for the whole damn town! They're all sick!"

"Do you think the Senate will stay away from them?" Antonius asked Decius a week later. The two of them rode at the head of the column of legionnaires, leading them away from the town. They were bound for a seaport in Southern Hispania to board galleys which would take them back to Rome.

"No," Decius replied. "The Senate doesn't care about quarantines. Diseases in Northern Hispania can't hurt senators in Rome. They will argue about it in the Forum for a few hours, then end up sending another legion to fight the disease itself with blood and steel, if that is what it takes to secure the area."

"What will they do to you when they find that there is no disease?" Antonius looked concerned. Decius smiled ruefully.

"Oh, they will find one," he replied. "They will find a terrible, deadly disease. For that town is surely afflicted."

Right on Time

She sipped her zinfandel, wincing slightly, and thought that the wine seemed appropriate for the circumstances: inky-black, tannic, astringent, a perfect match for this time and place. She had always hated red wine, but tonight it seemed right. She was starting to appreciate the black pepper and briar flavors and now, more than halfway through the bottle, she hardly grimaced as she drank, somehow glad for the quick, straightforward little punishment that accompanied each swallow, each incremental shift toward the forgetting she desired.

She needed the forgetting. As she lightly touched the fingertip size bruises on her arms, she recalled the expression on her husband's face from the night before: Carved and impassable, like a heavy oaken door that had been slammed shut to her. She closed her eyes tight as she emptied her glass again.

As she looked around the new house in the new town where they lived, she saw that everything she had worked for and waited for was almost here. The fireplace was here. The new kitchen was here. This house was here, built sturdily around her.

Why couldn't she love it?

Her hand flew to the back of her neck as she groaned out loud. It was still painful to move too quickly.

"Damn him," she said to the fireplace.

She filled her glass half way and swirled the wine, watching as the viscous liquid hung on the sides of the goblet, creating translucent rivulets that ran like purple tears down the inside of the glass.

She looked up at the antique painting her father had given her on her wedding day. Depicted were a hunter and his dogs, frozen in time at the very moment they had come upon a cornered elk. The elk was magnificent in its wild determination, its head down in defiance, its eyes fiercely oblivious to its fate—it would die.

She had spoken with her father earlier that day over the phone. He was back home—where he would always be—and long divorced from her mother. He told her to "hang in there," to "be strong." He told her that young men sometimes did things they didn't mean.

He told her: be careful.

Of course she would not let herself cry over the phone. She detached herself from the moment and stared at her new off-white walls as her father's deep, familiar voice sounded in hollow confidence across a thousand miles of telephone line. What was it he was saying? About all those years of supporting a husband through school—so much work—so much time spent in preparing for the future—and the future is now, her father had told her.

So this was her future.

She emptied the last of the wine into her glass and walked unsteadily through the house, trying to capture the joy she was supposed to feel. Her face was flushed. She began to throw open the doors and windows in every room. She slid open a window in one of the empty bedrooms, pressed her face against the screen, and sucked in deep lung-fulls of the night air. Holding her breath as though the air inside the house were somehow tainted and unbreathable, she hastily fumbled with another latch, quickly push the window aside, and again, repeatedly and almost hungrily, inhaled the spiced and unconfined air of the outside world.

She splashed drops of wine on the hall carpet as she hurried from room to room. Almost running, she bumped against the doorjamb of their bedroom, causing the wine glass to slip from her hand and shatter against the hardwood floor, spilling its contents and scattering broken glass across the varnished oak and to under their bed.

The jolt emptied the air from her lungs and now she stood, sobbing, as she watched the red liquid wind slowly across the floor. The stream of light from overhead stretched and formed lines as she opened and closed her eyes against the tears, and the puddled red faded to brick-orange against the rich, blond hardwood.

"Oh God, if he sees this mess he's going to kill me."

The sound of her own voice reminded her of who she was. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve and, suddenly sober, bent over and began feverishly picking up the broken glass.

"I've got to clean this. What would he say? He's right. Of course. He's right."

She cradled the broken glass in her hands and hurried into the kitchen. The brown paper trash bag muted the crisp, high sound of the slivered glass as she poured it from her cupped palms. She rushed back into the bedroom with a wash cloth to wipe up the wine.

She thought: We can't have another fight. Quit acting like a fool. Get his dinner ready before he gets home. You know how he gets when his dinner isn't ready—

For the next forty minutes she prepared her husband's dinner, straightening up the house while his steak curled and blackened under the broiler. He liked his steak well done.

She was slicing a cucumber over a bowl of torn iceberg lettuce when she heard his car pull into the driveway. The headlights penetrated the windows and momentarily caught her in their sightless glare. For an instant she froze, like a wild animal. The lights went off. And she smiled.

Right on time, she thought. He was always so good about coming home right on time.

Radicchio Fatima

I

A seemingly harmless enterprise, the growing of a little garden in my front yard, has turned out to be a catastrophe, thanks to a tangy reddish cabbage called radicchio, which I decided to grow for its reputation as being a gourmet leaf, also known as "yuppie lettuce" amid certain glib and supercilious circles. My radicchio, however, extends well beyond the normal heights of snobbish salad to something far more extraordinary, because, you see, it supposedly sings. Its voice is not being compared to such earthly performers as Nat King Cole, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, or Al Green, but to no other than the Virgin Mary herself, her maternal, mellifluous hymns supposedly containing the healing agents of a supernatural aloe vera. Some argue that it really is the Virgin Mary's voice, while others assert that the radicchio is simply imitating the Holy Mother. I have not participated in the debate because after having my ear wax drained by candle flame and resorting to the aid of a stethoscope, I still can not hear even the slightest whisper, holy or otherwise. But this does not matter. My gardener Pepe heard it, as did his wife and children, and their cousins, aunts, uncles, along with their families. I think you get the idea. I've got hundreds of people, cursed with deformities, marital problems, interminable illnesses, and other wounds, traveling from all over to stand around my front yard and listen to the Virgin Mary sing hosannas to the Lord. People looking for miracles. It's pathetic. And I'm determined to put a stop to it.

II

The hysteria began when Pepe pricked the tip of his index finger on a rose thorn. As he watched the blood flow down his hand, he failed to notice where he was going, and he tripped over his rake, falling right into the middle of my radicchio patch. There, he claims, he heard the Holy Mother of God whispering words of succor in the most beautiful melody he ever heard. I was upstairs shaving when the "miracle" occurred. Pepe was eager to share it with me. He rushed inside my house without wiping the mud off his galoshes and

startled me in my own bathroom. "Look, no more blood," he said, holding his finger close to my face. He crossed himself. "It's just like the preacher said on TV," he exclaimed. "In heaven, plants and vegetables will sing praises to God. Palm trees, pea pods, you name it. Your cabbage got a head start."

"Pepe," I said, wiping excess shaving cream off my neck, "I hate to tell you this, but I'm going to have to let you go."

III

Pepe arrived the next day in a brand new chartreuse Cadillac. He honked his horn several times, while I squinted through my living room drapes. I couldn't even tell who it was until Pepe, adorned in a velvet burgundy suit and fedora hat, finally got out of his car and rang my doorbell.

"What do you want?" I asked. I was in a rush. Adeline, a woman I had been coveting at work, was coming over for dinner.

"I just wanted to thank you for firing me. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. As soon as I got home, I found a buyer for my property in Delano. I've been trying to get rid of that wasteland for twenty years! I've been blessed by your cabbage."

"Congratulations," I said. "Is that all?"

"Well, I was wondering if my family could come by a little later."

"What for?"

"To hear your cabbages, of course!"

"I don't know," I said. "I've got company coming over in about an hour."

"Please, just for a little while. We'll be very quiet. I promise." I shrugged and shut the door. A few minutes later I heard car doors slamming, followed by a bunch of commotion. I peeked through my curtains and saw the street lined with old cars, vans, and trucks. People of all ages on crutches and others sitting in wheel chairs were crowded around my garden. Most of them had brought religious candles and huge crosses. My doorbell rang. It was Jim Stroud, my neighbor, a car salesman. He wanted to know what the hell was going on. He thought maybe I was having a garage sale. I told him about the singing radicchio. His blue eyes, glazed with the effects of drinking, shifted toward the crowd, then back to me. "You could make a mint off this. Surround your garden with a fence and charge admission. I'll make the fence myself and take a fourth of the cut. What do you say?"

"It wouldn't be right," I said. "These people are poor. Dirt poor."

"Don't get sentimental on me now. It's bad for the economy."

I shook my head firmly and told him I had to get ready for my date. Jim then took out his wallet and offered me a hundred bucks to transplant the radicchio to his front yard. "I'll charge 'em myself, and you won't have to bear it on your soul."

I imagined Jim marketing the event, selling fold-up chairs, T-shirts, popcorn, pretzels, and soda pop. "I couldn't do that, Jim."

"Okay, but me and the other neighbors aren't going to take this quietly. We can't have a bunch of riffraff running around our neighborhood. So I suggest you clear everyone out before I call the cops."

Shortly after Jim left, Adeline arrived. She has very long silky blond hair that seems to catch men's attention, but if you look closely you'll notice that her large brown eyes are spaced unusually far from each other, making her look rather alien-like. I suppose this is what I like most about her.

She was naturally curious that evening about the noisy gathering outside my front lawn. Just a bunch of insane, desperate people, I told her. Even though the zucchini lasagna was ready, I offered to take her to a restaurant.

"No, you got my heart set on your famous homemade lasagna."

"I would have liked to put radicchio in the salad, but I'm afraid that's off limits."

"Why?"

I explained to her the miracle, told her about Pepe watching some TV preacher who planted wild ideas about singing vegetables. "Supposedly," I said, "during the millennium all the trees and plants of the earth will sing praises to God. If that isn't religious hyperbole, I don't know what is." I laughed, but Adeline sat across from me, starry-eyed.

"It gives me the chills," she said.

"What?"

"It's beautiful, you know, what that preacher said. Could you say it again?"

"You're joking, right? You don't really believe this crap about singing vegetables."

Her dreamy expression vanished and was replaced with anger. "I don't think you're being very understanding. Your garden is providing hope for a lot of good-hearted people and you're making fun of them."

"Look, I realize it's tragic, but it's also funny."

"Well, I don't think it's very funny at all. What if your radishes really are singing?"

"They're called radicchio. And they don't sing."

"How do you know? You're making fun of something you don't know anything about. You better be careful."

"About what?"

"Your soul."
She grabbed her purse and left.

IV

The next morning I drove to the office at Celestial Cellular, where I sell car phones with my partner, Rodney Eckhart. Rodney said he heard about my singing vegetables on the evening news. "I didn't know you were religious," he said.

"This wasn't my idea," I told him. "It was my former gardener, Pepe's."

"You mean you don't believe in the miracle?"

"Of course not. You think I'm crazy?"

"But there must be something to it. All those people wouldn't show up for nothing."

"Power of suggestion," I said. "And poverty. It will drive you to anything."

"Could you do me a little favor?" he asked.

"What?"

"Could you bring me a head of this lettuce? My wife would like to start putting it on my sandwiches."

"Don't tell me you believe in this crap."

"Give me a break. It was my wife's idea. She thinks it might make me more, you know, fertile."

"I can't give you the radicchio," I told him.

"Why not?"

"Because Pepe says it wasn't meant to be picked. It sings. You uproot it and there's no more power in it."

"Okay, okay," he said, pulling out his wallet. "How much do you want?"

"I don't want anything," I said. "I'll tell you what. If you want to pick some, come with me after work and take it yourself."

After work, Rodney followed me home. We got out of our cars, walked through the throng of solemn, candle-lit faces, and I pointed at the radicchio, little red leafy sprouts, now surrounded by prayer requests that had been stapled to stakes and pressed into the soft soil. Little flags of despair all around my front yard. I wanted to burn all of them.

"Okay," I said, "take your pick."

Rodney bent over and placed his hands around one of the radicchio, when an old fat woman in a black dress put her shoe on his wrist. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," she said. "That cabbage is sacred. If you pull it out of the soil, you'll be cursed, you and your entire family."

"Who asked you?" Rodney asked. He pulled the head of cabbage from the soil, hid it inside his shirt, and took off for his car. The fat woman crossed herself, then fainted on top of me.

Later that night, Rodney called me from Mercy Hospital. I rushed over and saw him inside a brightly lit room, his legs elevated above his head. His back was in traction.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"Got beat up at McDonald's," he said. He went on to explain that when he bit into his apple turnover, he found a slowly moving cockroach inside of it. He went to the counter to complain to a petite teen-age girl who had served it to him. Apparently, one of her co-workers, a massive young man who had a crush on her, felt that Rodney was acting out of line, and the burly employee hit Rodney in the chest with a mop, the force being so great that Rodney was thrust backwards into a table. X-rays showed that he was suffering from a herniated disc. "I've been eating apple turnovers at McDonald's for fifteen years," he said; "and not once have I ever, ever bitten into a cockroach."

"It's a sign from God to stop eating that filth," I said.

"No," he said, pointing at the head of radicchio sitting on a little stand next to his bed. "It was that thing. The old lady was right. I was cursed. You have to take that away from me. You have to bring it back to your garden. Plant it back in the soil, put an end to my curse!"

I had to calm him down. "Okay," I said, grabbing the radicchio. "Back into my garden it goes."

When I returned it with the others, the crowd applauded. Some say the Virgin Mary sang with double force that evening. I wouldn't know. I plugged my ears with toilet paper, drank a double martini, and went straight to bed.

V

It started to rain, and when it rained the people stopped coming to my front yard because Pepe had told them that my radicchio is silent in the rain. And just when I thought I would have a brief spell of calm and quiet, I received a petition from my neighbors. They wanted this singing radicchio business to come to an end. They complained about traffic and unsightly lepers loitering around their neighborhood. They threatened to take legal action if I didn't do something. There was a story about it on the news. How I had become an object of disdain in the community. How I had received threatening phone calls. But everyone was afraid to touch my radicchio. They heard you would be cursed if you so much as breathed on it. They heard about my partner Rodney, and later they

heard about another guy who tried to steal some of the cabbage to take with him back to Pittsburgh. No one's seen him since. I knew it was a bunch of superstitious nonsense. But if getting rid of the radicchio would restore peace to my neighborhood, I was willing to uproot it myself. I'd steam it and serve it with corned beef.

That's what I said over the phone to some reporter at *The Bakersfield Post*. This wasn't such a good idea. The next day the newspaper sent another reporter to my home, a Ms. Nadine Turner, all decked out in short black skirt. She is a tall, thin woman whose teeth are too big for her mouth. Makes her look predatory. She was not at all happy that afternoon about my apparent sympathy with my neighbors. "How could you even think of getting rid of your radicchio?" she asked. "Do you realize you would be dashing the hopes of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people?"

"It's more cruel to provide false hope," I said.

"Is that the real issue? Or are you guilty of a double standard?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's okay to have Virgin Mary sightings at the Taco Bell across town, but when similar miracles occur in a fancy neighborhood the community starts to panic. Does this not smack of class bias?"

"What it smacks of is the loss of my private life. I can't even bring a woman over here without a bunch of mustached fat ladies standing outside my bedroom issuing moral imperatives. This is bullshit!"

She shook her head condescendingly at me and accused me of being selfish. "I can see we're not getting anywhere. Let me just warn you that if you touch your cabbage, I'll have hundreds of protesters outside your house."

"It's my property. I can do anything with it I want."

"Your cabbage brings hope. Hope belongs not to you, but to everyone."

She lifted her head high and marched out my door. I followed her and saw that the protesters were already there. They were carrying big signs that showed a man—me presumably—throwing heads of radicchio into the sidewalk, the leafy clusters smashing like human skulls. Things had one on too far. I needed someone influential to help me. I ran into the kitchen and called Pepe. Begged him to help me put a stop to this abuse. I offered to transplant the radicchio to his house.

"Can't do that," he said. "The Virgin chose your front yard for a reason."

"But it isn't fair," I told him. "I used to never get sick. But ever since these ailing people have been hanging around my house, I've caught the worst head cold in my life. And my neighbors are threatening me."

"We all have our crosses to bear," he said. "What you need is a renewal of strength." He offered me the use of his recently purchased cabin in Lake

Isabella. I could go fishing for the weekend, come back with a fresh perspective on things. I accepted his offer. I was on the verge of a breakdown. I needed peace, solitude, a giant gulf between me and my cursed radicchio.

VI

On Saturday I caught nothing. But on Sunday, I caught six trout, five spotted bass, and three bluegill. I brought them back to Bakersfield. It was still raining when I got home Sunday night. Just like Pepe had assured me, no one was standing in my front yard. I played with the idea that the radicchio fad was over. The Virgin's voice could now be heard in leopard spotted sea shells washed up along the shores of Mombasa. A new Mecca would be established, making my home once again my own hermetically sealed universe. But when I entered the house, I could see that my problems had just begun. Someone had broken in and trashed my entire living room. Stereo speakers, cabinets, china, a glass coffee table, all knocked over. Magazines and letters torn and thrown all over. Clothes from upstairs littered all over the house. In the kitchen all my spices had been poured all over the floor. On the refrigerator was a note: "Your cabbage may be safe, but not your home. See the light?" I went upstairs to call the police and discovered that my answering machine was filled with obscene messages. It occurred to me that the police would be able to do little or nothing to help me. I would have to resolve the matter myself. I went to the back yard, pulled a shovel out of the tool shed and marched to the radicchio patch. I was standing in the falling rain, my eyes filled with rage, the shovel lifted over my head. As I prepared to strike a head of cabbage, I saw something move, then heard a whisper. I dropped the shovel, bent down, and saw a little boy partially concealed beneath the patch. He was dressed up as a clown, but most of his white make-up had washed off in the rain. He worked in the circus with his family, he said. They were at the hospital with the boy's older brother who had hurt himself in a trapeze accident. The little clown boy said his brother might be paralyzed. He had come to the radicchio patch to pray for his brother.

"Didn't anyone tell you the Virgin isn't here when it rains?"

He shook his head and said he would just wait for the rain to stop. His family would be coming soon with several other people from the circus. Apparently, the trapeze accident was so bad, the whole circus was in danger of folding. The entire crew would soon be at my radicchio patch to pray for a miracle. It was then that I realized I could never suppress this gigantic, universal ache that made people believe in the impossible, and I imagined all the animals—elephants, tigers, lions—joining the circus members, a big roaring

procession looking for signs and wonders. And me standing in my front yard with a shovel by my side, like some kind of shepherd. "Come all ye who are heavy laden," I would cry out. "Come and trample over my garden and cry all your sorrows below my bedroom. Come, humanity—if you must—and hear my little radicchio patch sing praises to the Heavens."

Good Night

The light layers of sleep inevitably peeled away from Milton like the skin off of a warm, seedless grape. Milton, not quite fully awake, equated the peeling away of his sorry sleep layers to the peeling of thin layers of flesh from his own blue eyeballs, but he usually made such morbid comparisons when half out of his dream state and half into misery. Once the grape-skinned, peeled-eyed layers of dreams departed, and Milton found himself in his bed, awake, he didn't dare move. He just paused to listen for the little night fairies, wishing he could remove his sickly warm pillow from his head. If he did remove it, Milton knew he would have to open his eyes, look at the clock, realize he still had six or seven painful hours 'till dawn, and, as usual, get blasphemously depressed.

Milton felt the ever hot leg of Suzanne shedding a feeble warmth on his freezer-burned calf. He was still afraid to move and cover up his leg (he might disturb the night fairies), but he did think he could slowly creep his leg alongside Suzanne's to mooch a little warmth without disturbing anyone. Instead of moving his cold leg next to his warm lover, however, his mind was overtaken with the agonizing thought of her constant hot flashes that she so loved to bitch about, and he preferred to lie dormant and endure the still night cold.

Suzanne. With her constant hot flashes, nagging smoker's cough, and her white trash jumbo-sized sleeping T-shirts. The guys were right, what the hell was there that he even saw in her? Even the mousy way she would flirtatiously crinkle her sunburnt nose at him when she whispered his name (the first sexy thing Milton ever dragged out of her) was now losing its beauty. She was turning from a princess to a whore. How typical. The story of Milton's life.

Why did he wake up this time? It's not supposed to be this way. Milton thought way back to when he was still enduring his childhood. If the fairies woke him up then, he would simply gather up courage, sprint to his fat mother's bed, and instantly drown in sleep. All this before the fairies even knew he was gone. No more. No more sweet mother's fat to smother himself in, only the ever hot leg of Suzanne the whore.

Finally trying to peel the pillow from his face, Milton felt that he was making as much noise as a mummy prying the lid from his own sarcophagus. After four attempts to muster up the courage to loosen the grip of his pillow,

Milton was successful and could instantly see the tattered rags of his pajama pants that were now nothing more than shredded up shorts. His night vision also focused on the seductive curves of Suzanne's hot flash hooker leg, and Milton wished he had left the pillow unturned.

Once his alienating senses of the night were free from the grip of the pillow, Milton realized why he was awake. It was not the night fairies, it was his loud fucking brother. Every night of their painfully long roadtrip, Milton's brother would get blatheringly drunk on gin, invite brand new bar friends to crash Milton and Suzanne's private motel party (a party which Punchy was never fully welcome to, much less his new, drunken friends), and, ultimately pass out at the foot of their bed. Then Milton would kick out the drunks; then Punchy would snore.

That loud, bed-wrenching snore that only Punchy could produce. Milton and Suzanne often let their cold room service eggs hear new theories and stories as to how Punchy could possibly snore so damned loud and still sleep through it. The couple's snore theories went from Punchy inhaling a small transmission from a '68 Chevy to the snores being an alien transmission sent by Punchy every night to some planet where he told his alien brethren what he learned about earth during the day. At least, Milton thought, the snores always served as a decent distraction from his nightly anti-Suzanne thoughts.

Back in Tucson, Suzanne tried to talk Milton into sending Peter (she always refused to use his ridiculous nickname, Punchy) back home on the train to his fat mother, but a strange sense of fraternity kept Milton from doing so. At least fraternity kept Punchy here three days ago. Currently, the only element keeping Punchy around was Milton's delicate balance between being annoyed by Suzanne then Punchy, then Suzanne, then Punchy, and so on. As soon as the train dwindled off, Milton would be stuck in Middle-America with a whore. But that damned snore! Once again, the snore picked up Milton's train of thought and brutally de-railed it.

How can Punchy sleep through that?

Milton slowly placed his hands on his navel and started to attempt a belly-breathing meditation he learned from Suzanne's younger sister. He focused all of his being on the natural pattern of his breath. Milton's only hindrance was sliding his hands to his navel slowly enough so that the fairies didn't notice him moving during their night. Just breathe, thought Milton, and ignore that land mine of a snore. Slowly becoming his own breath, Milton listened past the screaming chicken coop set ablaze that was Punchy's snore and off into the cool spirit of the night. The city's constant murmur and babble went from a sleep-inducing generic city hum to individual sounds of individual vehicles passing along on the interstate proving the validity of the Doppler

affect. There were also air conditioners with their Freon pumping fans twirling to the night, and trains making their tracks beg for holy mercy from the grinding strain they endure every night.

Behind the volcanic snore, the city's odd tongue, and his own straining breath, Milton heard the clock-radio cooing to a couple in the room next to his. It was some top-pop forty song belted by a soulful (and extremely rich) black woman; the kind of song that seeps into people's memories and then gets played over and over as if it were part of the soundtrack of their lives. People would actually buy into it and believe they were capable of the dramatic love portrayed in the song, and, inevitably, get their top-pop hearts broken. Milton strained his ears for the squeaking of a box-spring mattress next door or the passionate moan of the woman listening to that song and making love to her top-pop boyfriend, but, unfortunately, he heard nothing quite that stimulating.

The layers of sound deepened, and Milton focused on the soft, rented bedsheet which embraced Suzanne (and not him or his cold legs) repeatedly with her every breath. The sheets hugged her legs and her ass in a manner much more loving or attentive that Milton could have. It grabbed all of that flesh free of charge, and the little bedsheet didn't even know the difference. What a waste. The small moles (which she insisted were beauty marks) that dotted Suzanne's lower half often mingled with the peculiar yellow tint of her skin and reminded Milton of a Frito. Corn ground yellow with the occasional black dot of not-so-ground corn pleasantly interspaced. Maybe he would sell Punchy to an Amtrak train. Maybe a private party without all that explosive snoring would take the whore out of Milton's roadtrip queen. Maybe.

Once again, dammit, bittersweet thoughts of Suzanne terminated his breath meditations. With this latest interruption, the night decided to blend back together into one neutral sound, and Milton could not help but notice that he was left alone again with that inescapable snore and Suzanne's Fritos. That skin seemed too yellow to be pure European like she claimed to be. She must have some Chinese in her. Milton never thought about it, but he did go to school with a Chinese girl with the last name of Lam. Maybe Suzanne had an anxious "b" added to her last name by some tired New Yorker at Ellis Island. Suzanne Lamb. What a waste of a "b."

Maybe if he and Suzanne felt more, fought more, fucked more, their relationship would have more depth. Maybe he should really ignore that snore and the conversations he had with the night and his fear of disturbing the night fairies and lose himself in kissing Suzanne's long Frito legs. He could picture worse wake-up calls than your lover kissing you below the belt, but Milton's usual fear of moving during the night forced him to remain comatose. It was as if the invisible fairies of the night would take away one of Milton's gifts if he made

movements that gave away his consciousness. He still felt guilty about moving his pillow.

Punchy's cheap sports watch beeped three times indicating that it was only three a.m. Three more hours of obeying the silent laws of the night fairies—three more hours of Milton's nightly coffin. Well, thank God Punchy's watch beeped. This meant that Milton need not run the risk of being penalized for looking over at the clock-radio, he already knew the time. He was free to just lie there, staring at the ceiling. How nice it would be, thought Milton, to break all the laws and smother himself in Fritos until sunrise.

Milton slowly removed his hands from his navel, opened his eyes, and stared skyward at the ceiling. The shadows of parking lot lights always left him different messages on the ceiling. Perhaps they were a secret code left by the fairies. Perhaps they were the fairies' laws of the night written on the ceiling for Milton. If he could only decipher them, perhaps he would have allowed himself to move, to cover up his poor, frozen legs.

That night, there was only one secret hieroglyph of the night fairies. A simple one: a single bar of light roughly as long as Milton was tall. It looked like a glowing rod of some silvery metal. The type that would power a nuclear reactor. What was the significance of a single bar of white light? The curtain wasn't even cracked open; this light must be of the fairies. They must have been watching. Milton stayed frozen, and his senses excluded every bit of input save three: Punchy's snores, Suzanne's legs, and the fairies' pure white bar of light.

The beeping of Punchy's watch indicated that it was now four (only two hours to go). Perhaps the beeping summoned Milton from the edge of dreamland, or perhaps Milton was never even near sleep, just lost to his three night senses. A possibility dawned on Milton—what if Suzanne had been awake all night, having her hot flashes and staring at the fairies' light bar? Impossible. Her breathing was too regular. Or did she just do a better job obeying the fairy laws of night?

Something changed in the climate of the night. A silence scared Milton, and just as a squid cloaks itself in ink, Milton timed his breathing so the casual observer would simply think him asleep. Punchy stopped snoring. That was the change he felt. No more snore. Milton heard Punchy move around on the floor; the fairies must have been going insane with all of Punchy's movement. As Milton lay still on the bed, Punchy began breaking even more laws by standing up and moving about.

Leaving the lights out and taking Milton to be asleep, Punchy hovered at the foot of the bed. He simply stood there and observed the curvature of Suzanne's very attractive legs (which were by now uncovered from the high thigh on down). Having his brother scope out his girl's naked legs somehow

excited Milton, and when Punchy finally got an eyeful and went into the bathroom, Milton began contemplating the kissing of Suzanne's hot legs while the fairies were busy watching Punchy break night laws in the bathroom.

After several anxious minutes of courage building, Milton realized that his brother had fallen asleep again on the toilet or in the tub. Those legs. Still building up morale, Milton noticed that some movement Punchy had made, caused the glowing ceiling bar to dematerialize. When the front of Milton's brain was concerned with the missing light, he noticed that the back of his brain had reached down with his hand to feel Suzanne's legs. Milton was right about the hot flashes, the legs were so warm they almost burned his hands.

Suzanne turned to face Milton, and he realized that the fairies were probably going nuts with all the movements and broken laws. Face to face, Milton saw Suzanne's train slowly arrive from dreamland. That sly smile graced her face as Milton whispered, "How much do you suppose a one-way Amtrak for one costs from Sacramento?" His question was punctuated by a loud, drunken fart bursting from the bathroom.

Suzanne could only respond with a crinkled nose and a sexy, whispered "Milton." He repeatedly smoothed his hand over the surface of her burning legs, glad to find they had taken the appearance of corn chips but not the texture. When she whispered and crinkled his name again, Milton abandoned all reservations about smothering himself in Suzanne's Fritos. In fact, the sensation of her legs was all that remained of his earlier night meditations.

Another whisper to Milton: "Have you been up since 1:30 again, or have you actually had a good night for once?" Overcome by the heat of Suzanne's legs, Milton was forced to reconsider his impulse answer to this question. Perhaps it was not a bad night at all; despite all of the laws, snores and fairies, perhaps it was actually a good night.

The Game

She often appeared to others as a resilient, flexible, and adaptive person, but her thread to reality was fragile. This was most evident when she played Backgammon. She enjoyed being involved in her friend's favorite game and it truly was a lot of fun to win, but all in all the rhythm and pattern of the game was the most pleasing aspect. The constant mathematical counting had a pleasant drone to it, but she really loved to use her die spots to place the little round disks in pleasingly balanced patterns. Sometimes this aesthetic involvement prevented her from seeing major power distortions and in those moments the end of the game appeared as a complete surprise.

At other times, Backgammon allowed her to exhibit a sense of hopefulness that bordered on the psychotic. This hopefulness often ignored mathematical reality and was most evident when challenged to double. Somehow, she expected herself to overcome great odds. It wasn't that she couldn't count. It wasn't that she didn't see her weak position. The distortion was in her self-assessment. She somehow believed that she had some influence on this game of chance, that she could overcome great odds, even mathematical odds. If there was one chance in one million, it could happen right now and save her in time. The real mystery was that even with years of Backgammon experience she made only minor adjustments in her psychotic hopefulness.

At times, this appeared as an advantage. Overall, she was able to live her Backgammon life with cheer and joy. Even with a hostile boot on her throat, she psychotically believed in herself and her ability to balance the odds. Each time she lost a bloody battle, she believed the next would be different. And besides, it was really the joyful tension during the game, not the miserable end, that was important.

"Sad Sack Sam"

As far back as I can remember, I was nicknamed Sad Sack Sam. Of course, my father assumed it a necessary paternal duty to nickname everyone in the family. Thus, my elder sister was called Henry, my younger brother (skinny as a rail) was called Fats and even our mother was addressed as Flossie. These pseudonyms had no rhyme or reason and although I often wondered why I was the child blessed with the triple nomenclature, the kiss of death was to be summoned by one's *real*, birth certificate name for that could only mean big trouble. Of course, Daddy was always just called *Daddy*, except when reverently addressed as "Sir" during mercy pleadings or special request times. But it was true that, unfair as it may be, I was his favorite child and the burden of that unique place in this heart is one that I have been trying to overthrow or displace by conscious and unconscious acts of rebellion for my entire life.

Contrary to the nickname, I was not a sad child. If anything I was probably more content than most of my companions, because I lived most of my waking hours in a world of books and imagination that was much more enjoyable than the world of "real life." My parents encouraged this, possibly because it kept me from getting underfoot. Several lovely memories come to mind and I can still take them out, like an old worn photograph album, and flip through the "pages" and smile.

One of my favorite pastimes, especially around the holidays, was "Show." Long before Kevin Costner came up with the idea, Sad Sack Sam was writing, directing and (naturally) starring in productions in front of the two toughest critics known—Flossie and Daddy. Of course, little brother Fats was included in the cast—willingly or not was of no importance. I cannot recall the storylines of these masterpieces, only that they *always* brought the house down and I can still dimly hear the cheers of "Bravo" and "Author, Author!"

My older sister, Henry, also encouraged my flights into fantasy. We had a game, she and I, where the Mystery Lady came for a visit. Although she never knew, I was the Mystery Lady in disguise! I would place one of the net petticoats women in the 1950's used to torment and itch over on the top of my head and hold the disguise in place with a pair of those lovely oversized sunglasses. Then, the Mystery Lady would appear in our shared bedroom and ask such fascinating questions as "What do you *really* think of Sam?" Or, "Why do you

wear make-up?" All this was leading up to the real purpose of the visit— a discussion of boys and the unknown world of kissing. The Mystery Lady, in retrospect, received some pretty faulty information. But I can say unequivocally that she never left disappointed.

Then there is the mental photo of the shoe box. Henry had received for Easter from some admirer one of those poor little dyed chicks that had a life span of about two days and fourteen minutes. I loved the little blue ball of fluff and it took me a few minutes to figure out why it was laying on its back in our bedroom with its little legs shooting stiffly skyward. We held a solemn burial in the backyard, laying its poor little blue (now *all over*) body in a shoe box. I was nightly led by Flossie in the "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep" prayer drilled into the brains of everyone I ever knew. It was ritual. It had always been comforting. However, on the night of the funeral it suddenly terrified me. *If I died during the night, what would the Lord have to take my soul in?* My soul could be lost forever, floating out there somewhere in space! A loose, lost soul seemed the worst thing I could imagine. Surely God would accept my help in supplying a suitable container. For a solid week—to school, to bed, *everywhere*—I carried an adult shoe box with me just in case. Finally, Daddy led me out to the backyard and proceeded to exhume the remains of the dear departed. Amazingly, when he opened the box, there was not even one blue feather inside! The Lord works in mysterious ways indeed and my personal shoe box could be discarded.

There were several other incidents, such as charging neighborhood children admission to my backyard to watch the ants do the hula-hoop with Cheerios (no one ever asked for a refund, so they *must* have done it), or saying I was sailing to Hawaii when I had absolutely *nothing* dramatic enough for Show & Tell. But somewhere around seven or eight years of age, the "Real World" began to invade the world I had so painstakingly built. Slowly, but inevitably, Santa Claus left, then in rapid succession the Easter Bunny and even the Tooth Fairy. It was time for Sam to move on and even though I can never go back, I can also never forget or entirely separate it from the world I now inhabit.

Psychologists would certainly say the world of Daddy, Flossie, Henry, Fats and Sam (alias Daddy, Glenna, Lynda, John and Debby), was quite probably dysfunctional and even possibly bizarre. But it was innocent, carefree and sheltered.

Flossie has since departed, not in the way of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, but just as irrevocably. Henry and Fats live in other cities and are rarely seen except on occasional holidays. Dear Daddy is still close by. And Sad Sack will *always* live with me, possibly without her shoe box or performing her "shows," but always with a little bit of the Mystery Lady still alive.

Solidarity

Laying the rake down beside the large pile of fall leaves, I paused to sit on the grassy knoll overlooking the brilliant hills. I looked past the murky irrigation pond, then across the silky meadow, when my eyes came to rest on the white frame church. A tall, slender, open-sided steeple regally adorns the roof. Surrounding the tiny church, like a decorative picture frame, are vivid arrays of fall foliage, painting the backdrop with hues of burnt ambers, buttercup yellows, mellow oranges and scarlet reds. In the lower steeple chamber, three majestic bells descend to ring out in harmony every Sunday and on special occasions. One such occasion had been Saturday.

The event taking place was the much-anticipated wedding of Jack Dalton, son of Oakdale's largest corn producer, and Miss Julie Thorton, the town librarian. On Saturday, this normally quiet country road flurried with traffic, as dapperly dressed men directed vehicles into the church parking lot. The wedding affair had entwined the hearts and spirits of Oakdale's inhabitants.

Our community's cloaked veil of support had once again reached out and touched everyone. An upsurge of pride swelled inside of me, as I reflected on the steadfastness of my home town. In solidarity, Oakdale welcomed joyous new births, celebrated gala weddings, raised many-a-barn, and lovingly buried its dead. Responding to any kind of disaster, the community quickly acts with outstretched hands. There are no strangers or newcomer in Oakdale for long, before the fingers reach out and draw them into the veil of unity.

Neighbors came forward to donate their services and talents, making the wedding a collective effort. Bakery-owner Millie Porter was the first to volunteer, challenging herself to make the largest and most beautiful wedding cake Oakdale had ever seen. The first time I encountered Millie was more than 60 years ago, when she followed her father into my family's new tailor shop. I was the newcomer of 8 years old and she, second generation Oakdale, was 6 years young.

Not to be left out, or certainly not to be outdone, Mr. Joseph Caprini said he would provide three cases of the best red wine from his small winery. The bride's neighbor and close friend, Thomas Chaney, the town's only printer, insisted on printing the wedding invitations, because no out-of-town shop could possibly do as fine a job as he. The celebration continued with a barbecue

reception, hosted by the groom's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jim Dalton, at their Maple Leaf Farm.

After a Sunday evening church service, just weeks before the wedding, I approached Julie and Jack. I held my green and red Scottish cap in my hand and with my head slightly bent, I shyly began to speak. "Miss Julie, I'd be most proud and honored to drive you to the church on your wedding day in my horse-drawn carriage. And afterwards, carry the new Mister and Misses to Maple Leaf Farm."

Overwhelmed with emotion, Julie stepped forward and took my hand in hers and replied, "It would make this bride very, very happy, Patrick. I accept your generous offer." Knowing a tear must be visible, she reached quickly to brush it away.

"Thank you so much, McDonald. We greatly appreciate your kindness, and look forward to the ride," Jack added.

As a small boy, I recalled running through the church courtyard on Sunday, with few cares and no worries. Looking away from the tiny church, I again picked up the rake, feeling glad to be part of solidarity and Oakdale.

