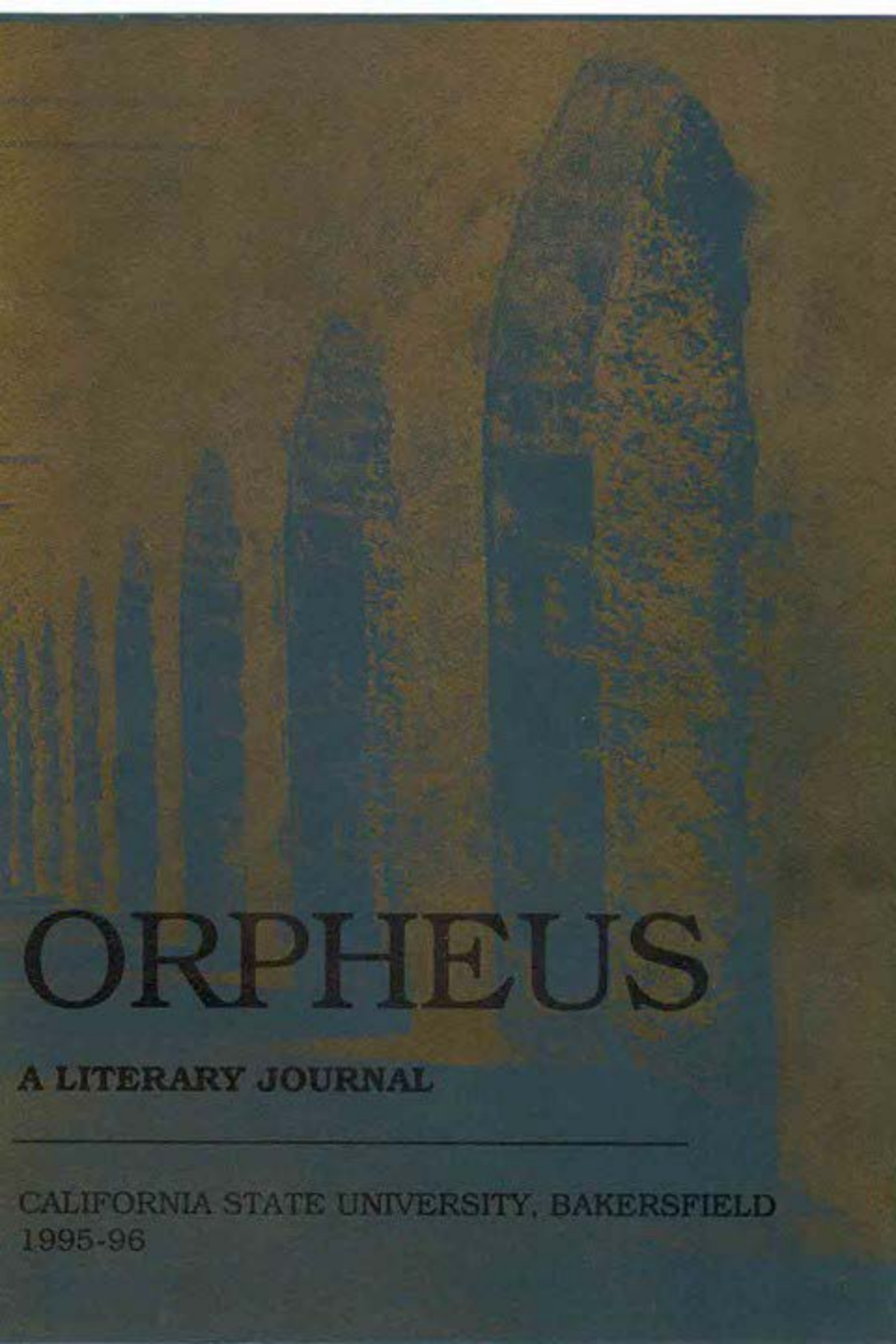




ORPHEUS

A LITERARY JOURNAL

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, BAKERSFIELD
1995-96

Orpheus

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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

David Moton, Reader

Orpheus is an annual literary journal produced by California State University, Bakersfield. All submissions must be typed, double-spaced, on 8 1/2" 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)

i am Still here . . .

a Solitary Ant on a mysterious journey home,
crawling on the side walk of their minds
hemmed in by two stubborn
invisible lines;
untouched by time,
i am still here . . .

Solomon O. Iyasere

The most fruitful action of a university professor upon the young student is produced not by brining down the university to his level, but by beckoning him up to its level. Only in this way can that love for the things of the mind which is the soul of true culture be generated — by showing the things of the mind in their reality and power. Where there is fire, people will come to be warmed by it.

Matthew Arnold

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P o e m s

Orpheus •

Listening Room

One evening you came without invitation.
You opened the oppressive door
of this listening room
and you entered my music chamber.
You approached me with sullen smoothness,
you sat erect with a contumacious air
maybe in your eyes or in your hair.
Your lips were moving
in sibilantly cadenced murmurs,
but the music was too loud,
I could not hear you.
I lowered the volume
and you spoke, you smiled.
I stared with quasi-indignation.
You were with *me* in my music chamber,
where evanescent flowers dance
with devilish gusto in the crescent of my mind.
You — where did you come from?
You have applauded between the movements
of my mental masturbation.
But, I do not hate you
for this is my day for exuberant bursts
of Vivaldi, Bach and Scarlatti
when bacchanal bliss can be drunk
from the walls of this music chamber.
You remain and we engage in conversation, a fugue for two.
Yet I have taken great precaution
to fasten my diaphanous social mask.
Who are you? — One of love's despots,
a Hobbesian aggressor,
some madman searching for the moon?
Do you wish to be an usher at my blood wedding?
Speak, perhaps I will listen.
But this sentiment is ephemeral
I want to syncopate your words,
your words, your radiant words.
Stop. Please stop.
Please leave my music chamber.

M. H.

Modest yet forceful gestures of delicate power
Assert an air of determined self-confidence.
Reassure the gentle breezes passing through golden brown hair.
Implicit in the eyes that meet mine
Keen intelligence embracing my direct intuition
As I seek proximity to your soothing British voice.

Hush the heart that pounds in waiting
Under layers tossed away to opening feelings.
I must come to England is her welcomed message.
Nothing short of a sincere invitation.
So it shall be my new Cambridge friend.

Ainsi soit-il.
(And so it shall be.)
You must come to England, Joanne.

Cardboard Box

Stacked among the others,
an unmarked cardboard box,
shoved high in my closet,
constitutes all that remains of you.
A lifeless grey matter that settles into nothingness.
Such, you were in my life.

Sole,
remembrances sustained in my mind.
A paycheck and dirty clothes to wash.
Useless when new life burst forth,
Unavailable to nurture the tender sprouts,
Unable to support their sturdy intricate stalks,
Absent -- for the blooming.
Cardboard box,
Perhaps I'll flush you.

A Poet's Mind

I know not if its demons jokes
that force reality flooding my mind,
or if its nature's innocence
that bleeds continually through my mind,
causing my mad, melancholy, elated state.

Oh! Sad World,
Sadistic World,
Exquisite World,
World.

A Moment

Goldlight sparkles in crystal drops,
on pink rose petals.
Lime lacewing sips,
the spring of Life.

The Gift Rock

I nudged the rock gently
with my boot.
Leaning down,
I picked it up.
Soft fingers touched hard, rough,
bristly unevenness.
Cupped palm measured porous,
gritty weight.
Red, black, brown, with streaks and specks
of other shades and hues.
A dull reflection of colors and textures
in the sun's touch.

He walked up to me slowly.
Held out the rock he'd chosen to pick up.
"A gift for my wife," he said.
"A good choice.
I think she'll like it," I said.
I examined the new world in my other hand,
handed it back.
"I like rocks," I told him.
They're always there.
In the field where I stood they all looked alike,
until you picked one up,
all by itself.

"I've heard of your recent tragedies," he said.
"Oh," I said, looking at my rock,
holding it gently, firmly.
"I want you to know
that I wish you well," he said.
And slowly walked away
with the gift for his wife in his pocket.
I crunched over the field of old lava.
So many rocks,
so different,
so interesting,
so much the same.

I chose a handful more,
 just in case.
You need a certain few,
 a certain feel of weight in your pocket,
The right amount for your hands
 to curl around and hold on to.

Big Hand

Just one hand can do so much.
It can instill so much fear.
It can change perspectives of life.
It can slap faces.
It can forcefully, unwillingly open eyes.
It can torture spirits.
It can make them grow up before their time.

I was never able to understand until then...

Closing my eyes, I still can see
That big hand in search of me.
I push it from me, but it is too strong.
Because it won't go, I feel I've done wrong.

That big hand I once thought was friend
Tried and tortured me to no end.
Looking at other hands, still I see
That distinct hand coming after me.

Day after day, I tried to hide,
But still the hand would not subside.
I tried to run away from it too,
But where I was, it always knew.

I cried out for help from the hand,
Though no one could even understand.
Disregarding me, they all laughed with mock.
Will I eventually get over the shock?

Will this nightmare ever end?
Will the stitches finally mend?
And if I run, please understand,
it is not you... just the big hand.

Whispers Whispers Whispers

It's in the home I reign
It was from hell I came
Hatred and destruction follow my name.
Whispers Whispers Whispers...

In hell, all demons fear,
When my footsteps are closely near
To Satan's heart, I am very dear.
"My name," Whispers Whispers Whispers...

To the saved my power could increase.
If it weren't for that love, and patience, and peace.
But, to the families it's a snap.
I simply start whispering "generation gap."

I've seen bright sights
Seen police lights
Beheld sweet nights
And street fights
By Whispers Whispers Whispers...

I've heard babies cry
Heard music fly
And heard the wind as it blew by
Whispers Whispers Whispers...

To the husbands and to the wives,
I send close friends with tongues of lies.
Who can never hesitate
In giving "so called" good advice.
Called Whispers Whispers Whispers...

So be on guard
Remember my name
My power can drive a person insane.
And bring them to an open shame.
By my -- Whispers Whispers Whispers...

I am the ruler of hatred
Destruction and suicides too.
And by your soul, if you're not careful
I'll become the ruler of you.
By my -- Whispers Whispers Whispers...

My brother and sisters remember
By God's love and patience and peace.
We can cause his mouth to cease.
From Whispers
 Whispers
 Whispers...

Untitled

Some lay claim to Famous names,
bred obediently through the ages.
Fathers calculating strategies of accounts and ownership.
Passion squelched.
Fire rerouted in dreamt fantasies,
performed in plays and poems.

Others inherit trite labels,
Baker, Jones and Smith,
spending their mortal existence
Aspiring worldly distinction.
Swindling souls.

But I,
a bastard daughter,
I am the fire,
glowing in the knowledge
of an existence
procured of love,
nothing else.

An Uninvited Guest

In sudden sympathy,
I grabbed the plastic bag water-filled womb,
which held the tramp fish,
tossing him into the tank.
Next morning,
skeleton fish lay floating,
and I spied the executioner.
Lurking in green aquatic growth,
his pale mellifluous eyes
stalked the black angel
drifting by.

Mortality

Down unfamiliar roads less traveled than some
To drop from mountains high to valleys low.
Moonless sky guides my journey this fair eve
And sends forth her stars to brighten and show.
Alone, Night's fair Child, but I fear not.

For Night gives me, his Daughter, sweet kisses,
And then bids me join in his dark delights;
To ride mists in the swirling Wind till Dawn
Harkens the Morn with her pinkest bright lights.
Alone, I must travel, but I fear not.

I am the fairest White Owl swooping down
From Night's ridge upon the hapless Mouse;
I am the White Rabbit who stops to stare
Before fading, a mist into Night's house;
Alone, I am one with Earth, I fear not.

I am the White Moon who hides her smile
And sweet silver crests behind Night's black face;
I am the White Star sparkling tonight,
Wind dancing in Night's warmest embrace,
Alone, I control Spirits, but fear not.

I am fading White Dreams which float and tease
To arouse lovers sleeping in the Night;
I am White Mists hiding the dread Monsters,
To cause Man to cower, this night, in fright.
Alone, I am One with All, I fear not.

Child of Destiny's union with night
Who in One swift moment decides it All;
For all Creatures, Planets, Stars, Every Man.
Delighting in each Victory or Fall.
Fear not, for I will not leave You--Alone.

Pigeons

The pious pigeon lady walks down market.
Trailing behind are her birds,
Their cooing drowned by City's sounds
The electric train flashes by.
Her Knapsack filled with day old wares:
Croissants and sourdough baked at Bodine's.

Clad in gray and white and black,
With ragged coats to keep out demon winds
That tug and tear her scarf of red
Flashing like the red stop light.
Her boots stuffed with a day-old Chronicle
That aged eyes no longer see.

Graying woman, aging birds,
Coo and sing their praise together.
The man from his highrise sees only his watch,
The pullman only his cables.
Each pass them by, old woman and birds,
Without a glance or prayerful regard.

She tosses out her tidbit treasures,
Onto the cold and grey cement.
Like a trail of precious manna
Pecking at their reverent repast.
In this City where godless people pass
To let the Ancients eat their songs.

Coming together,

rising
with the force of monsoons
out of season,
our energy mounted.
I was southern Atlantic.
You, a cold summer Pacific.
Caught in rip-tide changes
we found each other, grasping
to break the final rush-
a rubble of broken dreams so near.

Whales were playing,

fins to the sky
there were no doubts.
Arm in arm in moonlight,
ours was the fluorescence
lovers come to see.

Now we've moved inland

and toast the same moon by candlelight,
searching the sky instead of the shore.
We dream silent
and forget the survival factors
We wake with the sun
following it, from our hill,
as it disappears around the world.

We shed our City skins
to drink the darkness.

“The Lovely Thing”

I once had a lovely thing.
It looked beautiful in the sunlight;
All sparkles and colors
And angles and shapes....
It was smooth and soft,
And cool to touch,
But warm to hold.
It was a truly lovely thing.

One day someone bumped against me
As I held it
And it fell.
It didn't break
But it was marred
And scratched
and looked a little lopsided.
But it was still a lovely thing.

A time or two I dropped this lovely thing,
Or hit it against something
in my hurry.
A bit of color would come off
Or there would be a new dent
Or scratch.
A few times others were careless
With this lovely thing.
It was tough.
It could stand a lot of abuse,
This lovely thing.

One day someone said
Why do you still have
That old thing anyway?
I looked at it...
Many times I'd looked at it
And felt its soft lustre.
Somehow
It didn't look quite so lovely
Anymore.

There was a time
When I saw it sitting
In its place
As I went by.
I hadn't looked at it
In a while.
I held it up to the window
And the light reflected
Its beauty, still.
The colors danced.

One day I came across it
Unexpectedly.
How had it gotten *there*?
Oh, well...
I went on by.
I was in a hurry,
Anyway.

Then a long time later
I saw something that
Reminded me
Of this lovely thing
And I looked for it...
For a while.

I don't know what happened to it
Really,
This lovely thing.
I can almost remember
What it looked like
And how it felt.
I can almost...
But...
It's gone.

The Nuclear Family

The time of innocence
 Is now long gone.
Oceans freeze rigid.
 The cold has come.
Across the land;
 Her barren face.
No longer can produce;
 Has fallen from grace.
A horrible sight,
 Unnatural shattered heart.
The Nuclear Family
 Has been torn apart.

The dark clouds are
 Of burgundy and grey;
Still allow the sun
 To penetrate.
The invisible flames
 Fall as rain.
What is left
 Digests the pain.
A horrible sight
 Unnatural shattered heart.
The Nuclear Family
 Has been torn apart.

In that moment,
 An exchange of thoughts
Vaporized rivers,
 Crumbled rocks
Green a luxury
 No longer seen.
Food is scarce.
 No air is clean.
Remaining eyes
 Lift up to glare.

Behold a planet
Unrepaired.
Looking at it all
One may wonder the purpose.
There is none
But ignorance.

Particles unseen.
Vibrations unheard.
Did it have to happen
Before we learned?
The Nuclear Family,
Once harmonious and secure,
Became divided -
It destroyed the earth!
A horrible sight,
Unnatural shattered heart.
The Nuclear Family
Was torn apart.

Metamorphosis

Time has been good to us. Time has brought us together
and pulled us apart. But time *has* been good to us.

We have been given time to grow.

We have grown together and individually.

Both of us have been going through a unique metamorphosis.

Our growth has been painful and yet joyful,
difficult yet fruitful.

We have come to realize the importance of self,
but not selfishness.

We still love those around us,
but not more than ourselves.

We have learned the true importance
of our own self worth.

We have finally learned to hear our own voices,
sing our own songs,
plant our own gardens,
and dry our own tears.

Lord knows there have been many tears.

Now is the time for the metamorphosis
to go on to the next step.
Life without each other.

Standing along--totally alone--under no one's shadow,
blocking no one's light.

Taking complete responsibility for our own actions,
blaming or crediting ourselves alone.

Standing firm with our own belief that we are kind,
sensitive, wonderful people who do not need
to apologize to the world for being
who and what we truly are.

We have been so much to each other;
friend and lover, brother and sister, sun and moon.
Now we need to move forward and allow ourselves
to become the butterflies we were destined to be,
caterpillars no more. We shall be Monarch butterflies
with large beautiful wings of brilliant colors.

Our wings shall sail on the wind in the direction
we know we must go. Our spirits will mingle among
the newly budded cherry blossom trees.
Whenever you see them, you will also see me.

Spread your wings and fly. Take flight on the warm breeze.
Enjoy your flight for at long last,
my love, you are free.

Freefalling

Given that it's the first
Day of spring and
Hawks two by two
Are freefalling all
Around us

While

Young men are fancying
Every pastel and sweet
Young things and blondes
Abound wavy and soft
Waving over here

Waiting

In the sunshine
Everything so
Watercolor and pastel

It may not be
Entirely too naughty for
Me to grab you
Know where and say you
and Hey You come
Over and
Crazy me a little

Because

On the first day
Of any spring
It might just be
The very best thing
To do.

Song of the Wolf

Long ago, in a distant time
vaguely recalled,
before the domination of man,

before the coming of
states and cities,
in the days of the wolf,

a young man
was told
to ride forth,

from the wild,
huddled company
of men,

to seek,
beyond the mountains,
beyond the streams,

beyond the hills
and valleys,
the great eagle,

who held
all of their souls
in its watchful eye.

Beside him,
the forest rose,
higher and sharper,

as he crossed the mountains,
and in a circle of stones,
on a plateau, far away from his tribe,

he saw a wolf raise its head,
to the Goddess of the moon,
in her infinite coldness,

and near a lake,
the great beast
came down,

to drink
the face
of his maiden God,

rippling her fullness
into an infinity of crescents
in wax and wane,

but the dawn then came,
and the wolf lumbered into the wood,
leaving the lake with such disinterest,

that it, the Goddess and her face,
and the many moons that flowed across
the lake's surface,

might have been a dream,
forgotten in the light
of the sun's great fire.

And on the far side of the mountains,
the boy saw the eagle,
wheeling in the sky,

far above the reach of anything,
circling and diving,
on mighty wings of flesh,

that old and mighty thief,
taunting even the master-God
of the clouds and sky

with his prize,
wheeling so high as to
elude even his mighty grasp.

The eagle flew on,
beyond the boy's sight
into the horizon,

leaving the boy
to walk the immense steps,
left below by the bird,

and the boy came to the streams,
and crossed them by night,
seeing the wolf once again,

drinking from the vanishing
side of his maiden's face,
while only the clouds

and the darkness above,
flowed with the water,
that rant of the deep sea,

where slept a God,
huddled in a pleasant dream.
Again the beast raised its head and spoke

to his Goddess in the sky,
in a language that only
she would know.

And with the fading of nightfall,
came the eagle again,
wheeling in majestic devilry above.

The eagle then led the boy on
to the hills and valleys,
where again by nightfall

he saw the great wolf,
calling to the quickly vanishing
maiden in the sky,

and when the day
came again at last,
the eagle led the boy

to a great forest
on a flat plain,
and perched on the branch

of a great tree,
which itself towered
high into, and beyond the clouds,

and then again in the night,
as the boy hurried toward the forest,
the wolf cried out in pain

as the last of his Goddess
hung low in the sky,
touching the rim of the horizon

she had before, rose above.
In the day, the boy could
see the eagle again,

resting in the tree far above the land,
seeing him, as he approached,
with that quick stealing, horrid eye.

On the night the boy
entered the forest,
the moon in the sky was

completely gone,
that night the wolf
did not lift his head,

did not speak to
his Goddess in the sky;
that night the wolf ran.

The boy could not see its shape
as it came down the last of the hills
to the plain,

he did not see it as it ran
along his scented trail,
needing not sight or sound

to follow the boy who
had sickened and killed the moon.
The woods snarled around the boy

as he passed through many lesser trees.
The wolf smelled the boy,
and quietly bore its teeth.

Spirits in the wood
gave garbled warnings to the boy
of danger, as he passed a great many

of their twisted forms.
The wolf then charged,
its feet padding amongst

the spirits' garbled words.
The boy ran.
The great woods passed

on either side,
and the boy ran.
The faint huff

of the wolf's breath,
and the quick pad of
its quiet feet drew close

as the boy neared the great tree.
In the roots of the tree,
the boy found a great sacred hallowed place,

the quietly lolling wolf dared not enter.
In the night,
he padded great circles around the tree

waiting for the boy to come out,
but the boy stayed the rest
of the pitch-black night in the tree,

and in the morn,
the wolf was gone.
He began to climb the tree.

And on a stiff branch,
a great distance above the ground,
above the clouds,

the boy approached the
great eagle,
and it spoke:

"Oh young son,
you have followed me well,
even to the heights of

my great domain,
and the wolf has yet
to fall you (you are lucky).

I have been waiting
for you here,
waiting for this time.

And now comes my great test
that none I've seen have passed.
Soon, I shall fly again,

off into the noonday sky,
and you will shoot me
with your arrow

and I will fall,
diving to a place
far in the woods,

and there you must
find me
'fore night and

the coming of the wolf."
The great bird
then spread its powerful wings

and flew again.
The boy bent his bow.
An arrow sank deeply

into the eagle's chest,
and it fell,
a great distance into the wood.

The boy climbed down
as fast as he dared,
losing many hours to the tall tree.

And he ran through the wood,
past the sleeping spirits
of the trees,

over and through
a great many briars
and fords.

The quickly falling sun
made the boy sweat,
and tire,

but night did not
find him before he
came to the cave where the eagle had fallen.

Dying light touched everything
with blind-man's fingers,
and the boy saw

the eagle crouched
in the cave,
the boy's arrow

still wedged in its breast.
"You have found me"
the eagle said,

"as soon the night will find
us both. The wolf."
The boy then spoke,

Spoke for the first time
in many turns of the sun:
"But have I not passed the test?"

"Indeed yes," the bird replied,
"yours is now a worthy soul,
that I must take

into my watchful eye.
You've pursued me
across the mountains,

streams and valleys.
I could have led
you much further,

to infinity if I so chose.
Yet I have allowed you
to break my chest

with your arrow,
and the time of collection
has come."

And soon the dark came
on the land,
and the eagle changed,

wrapping itself
into the form
of the wolf it so often took,

and in its jaws,
devoured the boy,
trapping his soul forever in his eternal eye.

Untitled

When you wish upon a star
Makes a difference who you are
Red man,
White man,
Nigger,
King,
Your wishes don't mean anything.

Resentment version 252

Desensitized, you consume the days
selecting priorities resistant
to the gaze of cashiers
and other drones leering
from the asphalt fields
a deeper scrutiny
of such alien minds
could mar the sexual facade
yet empathy's regime
is not easily toppled
for each twist of thanatos
seems a riddle demanding response
considering the acclaim awarded
to a precise thrust of attitude
though you manage to quell
any self-abnegating tendencies
'til like a sit-com
Sunday morning comes down
and you shimmer into the pews
gaining amnesty from yourself

“Jewels Flashing in the night of time”

The storm rode in at midnight,
and the cats began to bounce
like freed electrons
through the matrix of the room.
Outside, the methane swirl stripped
fronds from palms and eucalypti,
their humiliation exposed
in the novas of burst transformers.
Beneath the roof's flimsy beneficence,
the larger mammals covered by the TV
to watch other acts of God

The River

The river in the rainless valley is mine.

I run her banks and swim her quick water
And float her expanse on a circular tube
Of sun-burnt black rubber, my ass trailing
Down through the hole like a rudder.

I ran to her when my first great love stopped loving
And slept beside the sound of her ancient permanence
Sheltered by the walls of her moonless canyon and
Comforted like a child by her wet and eternal caresses

Far above her meanders, where she still slices rock
Over time spans that human lives cannot measure
I am warmed in winter by the sulfurous spring in whose
Steam I breathe the remnants of mountain builders.

I have seen snow on her strands and flat-tailed beaver
Swimming like drifting, bark-covered logs with eyes
And I rejoice in their presence for they carry and reveal
The imprinted memories of her pure and primal past.

My river has never known her elder father, the sea
The source of her tumbling, rock-polishing temperament
Her waters are transfused to thirsty cities, arid farms
Her voice is stilled before she sees his face.

Her white water has replaced my tears with the clean
Mist of her exploded calm as I watch her make her bed
From the stuff of mountains as she slowly, inexorably
Reduces huge boulders to gravel, and gravel to sand.

I saw a single leaf fall once, to her autumn surface
And as it floated on and was carried beyond my sight
I attached my dreams and my very destiny to its own
Knowing the river to be no more cruel than God or love.

It's no wonder rivers become mythic: carriers of snow-melt
And sediment and men's dreams. I can still see
Ten thousand sun rays bouncing from ten thousand ripples
Into only my eyes. I know the river is mine because she
Makes these gifts to me.

Doctor and Mrs. Craig

They grimace through a dinner
Spiced with rose-thorned pleasantries,
Pretending they are smiling,

And horribly grind the overdone
Duck between their molars,
Pretending they are hungry.

The dinner candle's flame
Drowns in puddled wax
Dead in its own substance.

Porch Light

It's 2:30, and I am too damn awake-
Here with all my thoughts and feelings,
Firing up another smoke,

I listen, I don't hear or see anything-
Save the hum of the fan in my room,
And the glow of the computer's screen,

I get up, and peek through the blinds-
Did I hear the whine of a car's engine?
The slam of a door, the drone of music?

Nothing, I am too fucking awake-
I stare at the phone, I call, again,
Damn machines, I hang up, and stare some more,

I turn on the porch light-
Maybe you will stop by and see that I am awake,
I hope you don't think I am asleep.

The Mind of the Zealot

I am calm, as I prepare to enter martyrdom,
No one can see me, no one every will,
But they will see what I have done, they all will,

They are all so sick, cancered with their sins--
Burn in Hell, they all will,
God told me so, he speaks to me,
He comes to me, in my fevered, insecure dreams,

I can save them, I can burn this place--
So there souls won't burn,
I am Christ reborn, I am here to save them,
Whether they like it or not,

I set the charge, I step back,
I look at the timer, 3 minutes and ticking,
This is the last 3 minutes of the false idol,
I have saved these bastards, yes I did it!

Out into the night, into the shadows,
I spirit away, God's handywork done,
I have made my place in Paradise,
I don't care if they believe or not, I am saved,

I burn this place of sin, this place of death
I saved their souls, for my God,
The only God, the only way, I know he exists
He tells me in my dreams that he does,

Doesn't he?

Damned Technology

Your pager,
mistakenly
left lose from your hip,
sitting alone
on the naked nightstand
neglected,
as it let the unvoiced invisible waves of technology
give your deadly secret away,
no more lurking lies.
The speechless waves sent twelve words
to scar a trusting heart,
strangling a secure world,
releasing a terrifying tempest
with the memorandum from her,
"Is that all I get is a good night?"
"I Love You"

Heat

Practiced gestures accompany incantations,
as the body is thrown in wanton play,
signaling the eagerness to receive desired pleasure.
Could you to conceal it with gentle whispers?
Shameful, Brazen, Hussy,
your long ... low ... wailing reveals the sordid details
as you celebrate in a festival of lascivious lust.
The unrestrained gluttony of sensual yearning
will be repaid ten-fold,
as you swell and waddle with your reward,
a just punishment ... banishment,
but in sympathy I call you back ...
"Here kitty kitty kitty"

I Have Asked

(In memory of poet William Stafford)

I have asked too much of you,
Your turn of the syllable sound,
The electric moment
When I felt your presence

Only you could have this effect,
Poetry was like fishing you said,
Wait long enough and something
Will come something silver and brass
Spinning off bright water,
Moving quickly, rushing
Your advice clean and finely ribbed

I have gotten up and gone out alone
Risking the soft shore, the slippery
Footing, wild animal sounds,
Feeling something wash into me
Just as you said it would

And now when your death is announced,
A sudden unraveling
A deep cutting
Disbelief and pain,
All day
I take everything the wrong way.

My Husband's Home Town

Your father is going blind,
He can't see to dial the telephone
Or read the newspaper
But he drives over to see your sister
Every day in his dark sedan,
He sees nothing but the child
He carried in his arms,
Nothing larger than a girl of ten

In the July afternoon
We go down to the Pavillion Center
To see the merchandise
Vendors beckon me to buy,
A wind from the Sudan turns
The heat into a hot glassy sheet,
I am dizzy and feel light-headed
When we escape the expensive mall

The only thing I wanted
Was a red linen cloth shirt
From a high-priced Sacramento store,
But it would not hold water
Against your sister's pain
Of her husband's deserting her
In the place you grew up together

I hold the shirt against my arms
Up against my shoulders
And think how it would look
On me at Christmas,
I replace it in the pile,
We cannot afford this--

A year later
I would wish only
To see your father alive again,
To see his face with yours,
Twin smiles, father and son,
A summer Sirocco,
Dry as ash on slate,
Was his last,
We didn't know.

Fever

When I am ill,
My husband sleeps
Closer to me his body
Bent into my space the folds
Of his waist bowed
Over my arc shape
I torque into his
Wide chest almost
Bending his chin upward

He slides in his sleep so
Close to me I feel that
I can't get any sicker,
The pain of my virus
Taking up quarters
Of my whole body,
My husband has arched
Himself around my sleeping
Form refusing to let
Harm come into
What he wants most.

Son Corps

Sa bouche : une fleur qui s'ouvre vers la matinée
Ses yeux : deux astres azurs étincelants
Ses jambes : deux pieds dorés d'un trône
Sa ceinture : un voyage de court trajet
Ses cheveux : une rivière coulante gentiment
Ses mains : deux poissons volant gracieusement
Ses bras : deux demi-cercles joints vers l'amour
Ses lèvres : deux océans qui se rencontrent
Ses pieds : deux petites branches d'olive
Ses doigts : deux oiseaux vibrant leurs ailes
Ses oreilles : deux tunnels de velours
Son nez : deux pas dans la délicate forêt
Ses sourcils : deux gentils serpents languissants
Ses cils : un éventail de soie espagnole
Sa poitrine : un heureux destin prochain
Ses hanches : deux pas vers l'extase
Ses genoux : deux jolies capsules spatiales
Son corps : l'oreiller de la Grande Déessee, MÈRE.

The Fountain in My Mind

The fountain in my mind
releases the imagery
of your caresses:
a soothing creek
a trickling rush
a ribbonlike flow
a velvety spiral
a brushing whisper
a ticklish lullaby
a buoyant fluidity
a wafting liquidity
a misty solidity
a speeding granularity
a surging ecstasy
in the welcome arms
of subjectivity.

An Evening With The Conspiracy Theorist

You go mainly because it's been
so long since you've gone out
in the world for pleasure, and, besides,
he's called three times for you and seems
like a benign person, rather harmless
in the scheme of things. Like you.
And, as you knew he would, he shows
up on time and is wearing
a soft sweater and ironed slacks
that drape the easy angles of his body,
and his shoes are not new,
but they are clean and polished.

Yet as you prepare
to eat your chef's salad,
thinking you deserve this nice man
and this nice restaurant, he
changes
in an instant, and he's gripping
your hand quite insistently
in a manner you don't understand.
He tells you very plainly
that there are hormones in the plump
round cherry tomatoes because,
this way, they grow more quickly,
giving up their soft meat
almost wantonly
to the farmers' picking machines.
And that a baby with flippers
for arms, and a face
like nothing on earth, was born
to his great aunt's friend's daughter,

Leticia, who loved
tomatoes and whose husband
had once worked in the Pentagon
doing god-knows-what
but had mysteriously disappeared
amid the secret files scattered
across his fruitwood desk.

And you shrug and think
that perhaps your date's only joking,
and, besides, in the movie theatre,
he smells good, something
like old-fashioned tobacco smoke
before it goes stale and yellow.
And the way his elbow
nudges yours makes you feel
soft inside, ripe for the picking,

until he starts whispering
in the round of your ear
something about microchips
and a government project
called STUN, where dogs
in cages went crazy and gnawed
each other's ears off and fell stiff
to the floor when dosed
with a low frequency sound
that is now used to control men
and women everywhere,
a sound like the silence
before a thunderclap, a sound
like an earthquake waiting to happen.

When you hear pops and crackles
in your ceiling at night, it's not
the upstairs neighbor stirring
but the stealthy descent
of fiber optic cables
from the duct above your bedroom door.
And they touch you and feel you,
those government men,
by remote control, and they enter
your mind, and if you hear talking
and laughing at strange hours,
it is not your neighbors and not God
and most certainly not your own thoughts,
but it's them, and they're asking
you to come forward like a lamb
when they come for you.

Well, didn't you know?
Soon the men in black come
for everyone.

So you go home with your date
to look at this collection of Madness albums
and you listen as he speaks, answering
yes, breathing yes,
for there's an intensity
to his dark eyes you've never owned,

and you think that it's better to wake in the night
tangled in a nest of fiber optic cables
bristling with life
than to wake only to silence,
like the spinning
of a record after
the needle has been lifted.

Parts of Me Have Been Lost

Parts of me have been lost. I thought
I'd at least have been given my tonsils in a tiny jar
with a lid screwed tight against rot.
When I woke asking for them, I was pushed
flat and bound to the table
with sheets, stuffed quiet
with gelatin flavored by my own blood.

I woke again
and I was in another room,
this one small and blue with a rude rendering
of a Picasso, a madonna with cold hands
and a crooked neck.
A fat nurse wiggled in clutching
a cloth bundle. She unwrapped it, caught
the whole light of the room in the gleam
of silver, freezingly precise. I pressed
my cheek to the chill table as the doctor,
the star of this show, entered.
This time it was my toe he was after;
my left great toe with its strawberry mark of blood.
A tumor, he said, and the nurse took my hand
as he leaned forward, blocking my view
with his bulk...and oh, the sting
of the needles sinking in! My fingernails
dug into the back of the nurse's hand. She winced
and her head reared back like a frightened horse.
Then cutting, scraping and the hot sweet stench
of burning flesh.

I wished for death then
and then later, I wanted to see my tumor
or to know its final destination.
I was denied everything
but a slip of paper, announcing me free
of cancer and such things.

The third time,
it was my breast they were after -- I imagined its smooth
round shape, disembodied, on an ivory plate
offered on a banquet table at some medical convention.
And never again, never again could I allow
them to take from me, and take, and never give,
so I left, a nurse trailing after me, saying *Miss!*
and *Ma'am!*, and the receptionist
lost a sheaf of papers, like oversized confetti,
to the maroon-carpeted floor.

Untitled

She swims in bourbon
Burns alcohol in her gut
mouth open wide
— a human funny car —
to release the steaming fumes
and rotting breath
Booze lubricates her jaw
to ramble, to ramble, to ramble
thoughts black poisonous exhaust pouring
saliva bile rancid hair dye spilling
tears vomit sweat spinning
owl's neck turning
to see everything yet comprehend nothing
Go peck in someone else's yard
You limbless mind
You beadless abacus,
You infertile sleeping bag.
You could dry yourself out,
but who would want that worthless husk?

Are “we”? #13

Do you care that we are we?
Do you care with me?
Darling, the wonder of green eyes, my
longing,
Are you in my reach?

Are you there within my sight?
Are you there with me?
Sweetheart, my beautifully half-dreamt
songling,
Have we what “we” mean?

Have we mattered once or twice?
Have and timelessly?
Lover, do we truly perceive
belonging?
Have we, are we “we”?

I Would

I would be your lover
Be the fruit you taste,
Needed quench from the well.
I, being of day, the rest of night
Sing the song you hear,
Weave the cloth you wear.
I would be more to you,
If you might just consent.

I must have you, lover.
Un-seal the suit you trump,
Smooth the pillow you press.
I, color of dawn, through succor of evening
Steel the rhythm half-tapped and
Draw the swirlings of satin
When you feel me against you.

Yes,

you must

breathe

yes.

Pouting Monad

Acid stomach of a window latch,
Who's that walking, coming back
To tell me that I'm wrong.
Patterns forced on sanity
With strokes of ghosts and
Emotional keys, emotional lees,
Dumbfounded dreams of modal auxiliaries.

Decision gone with the time at hand,
Revision sought for the band of friends
Within me. Without me they'd be lost
And more alone than a rhymers in a blank
Reality, a zoner in a frank locality,
More alone than a running conversationalist
Should ever be.

The youthful seek without a plan
Beyond the first and easy, but
The aged look on what went bad,
Well within the freezing reach
For immortality, for once withoutity,
Instant doubtity. Add sight to pouting
Monad--let rise, let be
totality.

The Tensed

A female ending sounds so fluid,
So very flowing, so very good
To the ear, so very dear to a
Dancer of romantic steps.

Even if I could once remark,
Or remake, or rehearten the sour in me
With the ease of a Latin, even flatten
The glottal starts and stops.

I want the feeling, the ceiling,
The kneeling maiden at my heart.
But what's the use? No vowel can or
Could allow the clock to stop.

Oh, I wish for the /o/s of a gentler tongue,
To round my musings and ease the turns
Of the songs in me, its so hard to earn
Through the clogs in the thinking bogs of me.

You, the word as the object of
So many thoughts, the subject of
The last retorts, the dative of repression,
Indirect droplet of my obsession.

And on rare occasions, I ask "Why?"

S t o r i e s

Orpheus •

"Hib"

"You just shortened your lifespan."

Victor was sniffing at a bug spray that actually smelled like a bug spray. The can containing the spray, however, was a happy-family purple, and it boasted of having a Country Fresh scent. In a perfect world, I suppose, the dead ants would smell of a spring breeze, morning dew, and sunshine. In Victor's world, they just smelled like dead-ass ants. One of Victor's friend was roommates with a girl named Heidi, and Heidi was helping Victor move out of his insectified apartment. They had never before met. Heidi was the one responsible for the death of the ants. In fact, she was laying down a devastating spray slaughter onto the insects, crinkling her face at both the thought of death and the pale attempt at making insecticide smell like it wasn't designed for killing. Victor kept sniffing, though, and Heidi repeated herself.

"You're shortening your lifespan." Her vocal pitch and her eyebrows both rose toward the end of the sentence. It was her best attempt to emulate someone's mother, I think. She even shook a disappointed finger at Victor's nose.

"I don't smell a country anywhere in there."

"No shit," said Heidi, "I suspect that's because it's bug spray. And quit sniffing at it, you're making yourself sick."

Victor was ever optimistic. "If I live long enough to die from cancer, it's a damn miracle any way, so I'm not overly worried about the insecticide."

"Right on." Heidi apparently agreed, and she attempted to unpack the box, so all the foodstuff wouldn't be surrounded by the three hundred or so ant corpses. Victor wasn't bothered by the ants; he stopped her with profanity:

"Fuck that. Some dead bugs won't ruin the new fucking kitchen." Victor watched Heidi as she moved from unpacking the box to snapping a towel around to move the gas cloud from kitchen to living room. Now she really looked like someone's mother; she muttered the occasional "Jesus that shit stinks." Victor let a smile sneak past his move-induced exhaustion. "One more spray, we close the box, and we wait for the fellas to get back for our last load." He sprayed, she closed, they waited.

"I'm still curious." Heidi stood up to stretch her legs. She could only ignore the lack of furniture and sit on a floor for a finite amount of time, I guess. "You never answered Monroe's question. What *do* guys want in the perfect woman?"

Victor had no idea. "What do I want, myself? Or what do guys want in general?" Victor had no idea.

"You...both. You, I guess."

Victor stared at his shoes for inspiration, and Heidi watched him squirm cerebrally. "Me, myself? Not too much, I don't think. A certain confidence. Like, she has to realize that she's just as likely as anyone else our age to become the next Hillary Clinton." Victor didn't look at Heidi when he spoke. He typically didn't look at anybody. Victor

was a short man with a tall man's musculature and a military haircut, the easiest haircut in the world. His haircut always seemed to outrank you when you met him; he always kept you on edge, like you wanted to salute. Usually when he looked at people, they looked, in turn, at *anything* but him. As if Victor was Frankenstein's monster, or his eyes were the secret demon lurking in Pandora's box.

"Any one of us could sell the screenplay, win the lotto, close the deal. Make a million bucks and become a somebody. We all assume that we're gonna be forced to ride it out at twenty thou' a year, though, with two mortgages and a laptop computer. But dig, somebody has to climb to the top before everybody else realizes they're stuck at the bottom. If a gal's already climbing, she's not perfect, but she's in the proper ballpark."

Heidi jump-sat onto the empty bar to begin a line of questioning. "So she's gotta be climbing some social ladder to be considered?" she inquired. "Like Melanie Griffith in that Harrison Ford film?"

"Nope." Victor leaned forward on the box he was using as a chair. "Not my point. She could just sit around on her ass more than I do. She only has to *realize* her potential, not *actualize* it. Big difference. Huge difference. The lovely Mrs. Clinton lounged around on her big old butt and married the right small time politician. Now she's king of the freakin' mountain. Anyone could do that, but no one realizes it."

Two gunshots, followed by a third, served as a prelude to the squealing of tires and the gnashing of teeth. Heidi dove off the bar once she recognized the difference between backfiring cars and gun-firing drivers. She half-hid behind a box. Victor lowered his head a bit; he looked like he was walking through the front row of a movie theater on his way to the snack bar. He closed in on the window and peered out for any signs of continuing gunfire. Victor asked Heidi if she thought that the cardboard would somehow stop a bullet and said, "Don't worry, it's a couple blocks down, I think." Victor's head danced around the window frame like he was a boxing kangaroo.

"Jesus," said Heidi; her voice fell coarse and hard to perceive as if it were becoming exhausted by the world. "Now I see why you're moving...and the box isn't bulletproof, my pager is. I wear it over my heart like Popeye does his spinach; it can take a bullet for me, and the villain will think I'm dead once he's shot me." Victor gave a voiceless laugh, his chest bouncing to some silent rhythm. Heidi stood, straightened her overalls, adjusted her bulletproof pager, and grabbed the bottle of water from the fridge. Heidi paused. "Where the hell are the fellas?"

"Name one thing you're afraid of that nobody else is. And make it good..." After several attempts to locate one of the packed up clocks, Victor took it upon himself to fill the silence with a trickle of small talk. "...because when I asked Monroe, all she said is that she's deathly scared of time traveling and getting stuck in the '70's. She doesn't want to wait twenty years before she can watch *Pulp Fiction* on video. We can all come up with better fears than that I'd think. I'd hope, anyway."

Apparently Heidi was more impressed with Monroe's joke-fear than Victor was. She wasn't afraid to play along with it. "That's a pretty cool fear, though." She had a laugh hiding behind her voice. "I couldn't bear the thought of wearing *Flashdance* leg warmers again or those parachute pants. Oh god, and *Dukes of Hazzard* would still be on the air. And no pager! I wouldn't be able to deflect bullets." Victor laughed harder than Heidi did, and after a moment, she appeased Victor and took the question seriously, starting to contemplate it.

Victor watched Heidi as thought made her tighten her face into an odd, stern looking grimace. He hadn't known her for long, but he did know that her conversations were wonderful to observe. She'd studied sign language, and her speech patterns were more animated than a second rate politician's. Plus, she had red hair, and we all know that every American since Desi Arnez is crazy about a redhead. Desi was a Cuban by birth, though, so maybe Victor's Americanized infatuation with red hair was originally an imported taste.

"Okay. I'm scared of...I'm scared..." Heidi had to stretch to find something she considered frightening, and Victor, always afraid of some damn thing or another, was thoroughly impressed. "Okay. I know. I'm scared of parasites." Victor laughed. "Don't laugh. First, I got it from the movie *Aliens*. I saw it in the drive-in when I was a small child. My dad fell asleep in the car, so I just sat there, alone and in the dark, watching Tom Skerrit pass an acidic, living parasite through his stomach, right there at the dinner table. I couldn't eat spaghetti until I was thirteen."

Heidi, accustomed to the nearly constant eye contact required in deaf conversations, stared into Victor's uncomfortable eyes while she spoke. And she had to laugh a little at his reaction to the spaghetti comment. Most people didn't remember the spaghetti flying all over the kitchen in that scene of the movie, I don't think. Victor did his damndest to keep up her eye contact, as she went on. "My parasite thing blossomed last semester in that damn biology class I was telling you about earlier. I mean, consider this: If I actually gave birth to a child, I'd have a small human parasite gestating inside of me like a nine month tape worm bearing a genetic match to me." Heidi emptied the water bottle into a Burger King cup and went on, eyes wide, with a mock passion igniting her every word.

"It'd be just like one of those aliens growing in my belly, like they did in old Tom Skerrit's, only the face hugging alien critter that impregnated him would be replaced by some guy's penis. The thing...the parasite, not the penis...would sap my strength and develop a tube that steals all of the nutrients out of my food before I can get to it, and then, whammo! I'm trying to eat a nice bowl of spaghetti somewhere, my water breaks, and it's *me* squirming around the floor with a thing forcing its way out of *my* body, not Tom's."

Heidi's mix of playful hand gestures, well timed smiles, and head nods told Victor that she was only being half-serious. After a moment's pause, they both laughed at something that neither of them said and then fell silent. Police sirens, always slow to respond, finally started sneaking up to their neighborhood, presumably in response to the shooting. Victor broke a lingering eye contact to look, once again, for a clock.

"Bet the fellas got something to eat." Heidi looked in the fridge, losing her voice to the whir of the cooling fan. She knew it was all but empty before she even opened the door.

"Doubt it. I told them I was getting them food for their help. That's just standard moving protocol." Victor checked his wallet, Heidi stretched out her back, spreading her arms to hug the air, and sat back down on the bar.

"Okay then, my turn; what's your idea of the perfect man?" Victor always asked this question of women he had known for a great while. It was just cursory; he always asked out of some curiosity, never as a pick up line. Victor hadn't known Heidi for more than a day, however, and he found himself rather eager to hear her answer to his stock question. Maybe this time he cared, and maybe this time he measured up. Maybe he could even be Tom Skerrit without the spaghetti.

"I don't know about perfect, but I think I can manage something." Heidi set down one of Victor's compact disk cases as she spoke. She was observing his musical tastes, a trait that she always found important in an individual of quality. Heidi resumed her answer once the CD case she held was packed back up in its box; she didn't want to begin her conversation without her hands being free. "This last guy I dated had a great sense of what is funny, but he never shared in my conspiracies. I dream up these theories and conspiracies about everything from the lack of masturbation in Scotland to space aliens and their relationship to people with low blood pressure. This last guy always pointed out the fact that I was just making my conspiracies up as I went along. But it's like, no shit! That's the fun of it. Circumstantial evidence and chasmic leaps to bizarre conclusions."

Victor peered out the window one last time and pulled the cheap curtain strings to cut the glare of the Western sun. He moved across the room to the box that Heidi was perched upon and took a drink of her water. It was the last cold water in the house. Heidi continued.

"When I make something like that up, I hope the people I'm with will jump in on it. Nobody needs to ridicule my theories or remind me that I'm just being an ass, especially someone I'm seeing." Victor sat down on the floor.

"So no Ph.D., perfect body, sensitive yet rugged, playmate interview type stuff?"

"Oh, hell yes. All that stuff and a million dollars, but it'll only last if he can keep up with my imaginations, you know? Should I discover one day that the Pizza Palace up street is the secret lab of the nefarious Doctor Nascar, and he's using the patrons to sap their emotions in order to power a doomsday gun, I expect my Mr. Perfect to help me gain more evidence."

"You're not serious?" Victor stared at Heidi with wide eyes and a Hollywood expression telling the cameras that he was surprised. I think Heidi missed the point.

"Yes, I'm serious. We have to be on the same page about this kind of stuff or I'll never keep up a relationship with they guy."

Victor saw that Heidi didn't recognize his mock surprise. He interrupted her, saying, "No, I mean you're not serious about your pizza place. I thought Doctor Nascar died after that incident at the Seven Eleven." Heidi laughed and clapped her hands as if the laughter didn't apologize enough for her having missed Victor's joke. Victor kept up a serious look, as if he was deathly afraid of the return of the fictional Dr. Nascar.

Heidi joined back in and helped escalate the conspiracy. "He's still alive at the Pizza Palace. I saw him there last week riding off on a bicycle. I was mortified." They both laughed for a moment and fell silent, staring at the bar of glowing amber light that slipped past the break in the curtain. A few cars drove by, Heidi started; she had obviously thought of something horrible. Victor looked up at her with a question mark plastered on his face.

"Maybe the fellas *did* go get something to eat, but at the Pizza Palace, and Dr. Nascar knows that we know his secret." Heidi stood up, started pacing near the bar of sunlight, and continued. "They've been captured by him, and that's why they're late!"

Victor jumped to his feet, accompanying Heidi. "Oh my dear gosh! We give them fifteen more minutes, and if they aren't here, we go in after them." Both of them laughed again and began rubbing their chins and crinkling their foreheads to prove that they were thinking about how to free the fellas from the clutches of Dr. Nascar.

Victor tore the tape from the lid of a box in an attempt to find where he buried at least one of the clocks. Heidi watched, already comfortable in the presence of Victor's silence. But a question crept up on her, so she shot it at Victor.

"Back to earlier. What are *you* afraid of? You asked me, so it's only fair to ask you. And I mean besides Dr. Nascar and his empathic pizza machine." Heidi moved to help Victor dig through the box; conveniently, he was again close enough for the direct eye contact that she always desired in a conversation.

Victor laughed, and said, "Getting stuck in the 1970's where I couldn't watch *Pulp Fiction* until..."

"I'm serious." Heidi shut him up. "Shut up, seriously. A fear." Victor thought of several pretty basic fears such as heights and large bugs and nuclear war, but none were as cool as Heidi's parasite/*Aliens* fear. He stared at the contents of the box to organize his phobias. Heidi looked him in the eyelids until he finally started to speak.

"Scared, I don't know, but I can tell you what creeps me out--nighttime in the summer. And only in the summer. Winter's fine. When it's cold outside, I always go out walkin' after midnight, as Patsy would say, and have a grand old time. In the summer, no way, I'm creeped." Heidi listened to Victor and continued to dig through the box, solo.

Framed photos of a young Victor and some girl (his sister?) playing with *Star Wars* action figures unwrapping Christmas gifts were all neatly packaged in the box for Heidi to discover. No clock, though. Victor continued.

"Winter, you walk around and you mean something. Everything in the city is dead but you. Dead and cold. You're the only sign of life, the only source of heat; a big, bright beacon of warm life in a world of sleeping cold. You, as an individual, actually become noticed. You actually make a difference." Victor opened a new box, and Heidi tried to make the tape re-stick on the cardboard lid of the old one. Heidi continued to watch as Victor continued to talk.

"The summer's different. Everyone stays up all night: high schoolers, us crazy college kids, bar junkies. The city's nowhere near being vacant. People are all over the place all night. And the temperature? Forget it. The heat around here owns you. The night air is about ninety-five degrees, so it totally outshines you. Your perfect, dark world of solace and cold is usurped by day-goers, intrusions and a blanket of heat. No solace whatsoever, just people and heat. That's what creeps me out."

Victor dug a CD player out of the box, and handed it to Heidi. With a nod of his head, he pointed out the box that contained all the compact discs. Heidi grabbed them and plugged in the stereo. Victor realized he should have carried the CD player, since it was huge in Heidi's arms. She was barely five feet tall, and Victor, being the walking machismo that he is, felt bad for making her carry the thing. As Heidi looked for a disc to play, she spoke to fill the time.

"That is creepy. I never thought about that. But you're right. All winter, train horns seem to call out to you, like they're assuring you someone else is at least receiving your signal. In the summer though, trains just leer at you and nag you. We can learn a lot from the trains. I never thought about it before, though. That is creepy."

"It's not an official fear though, only a creep. And I just thought of a fear..." Victor stared at the stereo, hoping the music would start and drown him out. The music never came on; Victor had to continue. Heidi waited to hear his fear. "What if everything we've been saying all day isn't part of some social need to establish a common tie between us. What if we've managed to impress each other as much as we have by simply being ourselves. The Heidi I've just met is the *real* Heidi, and the Victor you've just met is the *real* Victor. No bullshit about it."

Heidi stared at the radio for a moment before she spoke. "That is scary--Not possible though is it?" Victor answered by way of queuing one of his favorite songs on the stereo. They stared at each other's chests, letting the music take the place of thought. It worked well, I think. Victor didn't know what more to say.

"I love that old song," said Heidi. Some people outside walked up the stairs that led to the apartment; they were talking and laughing over some minutia. There was a fifty-fifty shot that it was either the neighbors coming home from work or the fellas. Sneaking her eyes up to Victor's, Heidi repeated herself.

"I love this song."

The Magician

As the magician ended his act, the audience rose mechanically to applaud. The magician bowed his ever grateful and mundane bow, but his eyes remained focused on the skeptic, who remained seated with folded arms. Later that evening, when everyone had gone home, the two met in an alley behind the building.

The moonlight was feeble, making the pupils wider and more receptive.

"That was quite a performance you put on tonight," the skeptic said.

"Oh? And did you enjoy it?"

The skeptic did not respond.

"And what brings you here tonight, to my show, if you don't mind my asking?"

The skeptic squinted up at the moon and pondered. "Mere curiosity, that's all."

"Curiosity?" he said. "And are you thinking of becoming a magician?"

"I never said that," replied the skeptic. "Just curious."

"Well, if you're interested, I can show you some simple tricks. Perhaps you have a knack for it and don't realize it yet. What do you say?"

But the skeptic remained silent.

"Very well, suit yourself," and the magician tipped his black top hat and exited the alley. As the magician walked he could hear the crackle of a second set of foot-falls not too far behind him, like a distant echo of his own. The magician didn't bother to turn around.

And those who were up at that Godless hour of the night saw two figures walking in sync, guided by the moon, a man following his own shadow.

When the magician arrived at his apartment he unlocked the door and turned to the skeptic.

"Would you like maybe some coffee, if not a magic trick or two?"

The skeptic replied slowly, "I'll have some coffee, but then I must be leaving."

The first thing the skeptic noticed was how dark it was inside. The light switch wasn't immediately available, so the skeptic followed the magician into the blackness. The air was dead or dying. A heavy oppression lingered on all sides that surrounded the limbs and violated the nostrils. Suddenly the light flicked on, chasing away all flights of fancy.

The apartment was one large room. There were tables and chairs and shelves in undesignated areas, and a large bed in the center with red sheets. Nothing in the room appeared to be where to was supposed to be, like in normal houses, where the kitchen stayed away from the den. What made it worse was the cardboard boxes scattered across the floor of various shapes and sizes. Most of the boxes were unopened.

"Don't mind the mess," said the magician. "You'll get used to it." He went over to a coffee machine and started brewing.

The two sat on cardboard boxes, not looking at one another, in silence.

Suddenly the air became oppressive once again. A smell like that of burning bone seemed to fill the air. The skeptic could not tell for sure, but he thought it was coming from the coffee pot. And just at that moment he noticed the book-end in a shelf behind the magician. It was in the shape of a skull. He could not tell if it were real or not. But then the odor gradually dissolved into that of coffee, and the skeptic relaxed a little into the cardboard box.

"What's in the boxes?" asked the skeptic.

"Why, magic of course."

The magician retrieved their coffee, paused for a moment, then said, "Here's to magic."

"I only came for the coffee," the skeptic replied.

The skeptic took a sip, swished it around in his mouth for a moment, then swallowed.

And somehow, the skeptic managed to spill coffee on his shirt.

The coffee formed a small stain in the center of his chest. This stain slowly grew and darkened until it covered the whole front of his shirt.

The magician watched carefully. "Looks like you need a new shirt. You had better follow me," and the magician led the skeptic to a thin spiral staircase in the corner of the room, which they descended. There was no light below. The skeptic followed with his hand the cool, metal railing and listened at the invisible footsteps before him. The air became cold and liquidy. He brushed up several times against what felt like plant life, and sometimes the steps and rails became slick with a sticky resin. When they reached the bottom the magician lit a candle and led the skeptic down a series of corridors. The walls were pallid white and seemed to be made of cement. The place seemed ancient. Dripping could be heard in the distance. And the skeptic still felt as though they were descending.

Finally they arrived at a dirty, old bathroom. The magician set the candle in the sink; the nozzle was rusty.

The magician motioned for him to take off his shirt. He did. The coffee had sunk all the way through, leaving on his bare chest that same large, black stain.

"It looks like we'll need some soap and water to get that off. I'll go get you a towel." The magician motioned to something behind the skeptic; it was an old, decayed shower. The magician left the skeptic alone to undress.

First he took off his shoes; the ground was like ice. He let his pants fall to the floor and stood on them for warmth. He got a chill sliding off his underwear; now the air was pressing against him. In the distance he could hear doors closing and latches turning.

The shower had no curtains. After he stepped in he noticed that he was standing on fresh earth. He turned the rusty knob for water; nothing happened.

The skeptic was picking at the black spot on his chest when the magician arrived. The door closed behind him heavy and instant, as though it would never open again. The magician's eyes glowed yellow in the candle light.

"You forgot the towel," the skeptic said.

The magician did not reply. Instead, he scooped up the skeptic's clothes from the floor and dropped them down an ancient laundry chute, where they surely meet with the untouched piles of other's clothes from ages past, mildewed and decayed. Suddenly the air became filled with that distinct smell of the dying who die in thin, white hospital beds, emaciated and alone. The skeptic found it hard to breath.

The magician watched his naked skeptic friend for a moment and then asked, "Have you ever heard of hypnotism?"

The skeptic nodded.

"Do you believe that the hypnotist can make someone do what they don't do, or even find appalling, under ordinary circumstances?"

"What I believe," said the skeptic, "is that you can't make someone do a deed unless they really wanted to do it in the first place."

The magician smiled at this remark.

The Man with a Very Weak Heart

There was a man living in town once, at one time or another, who had a very weak heart. It started out when he was quite young, though at the time he paid it no mind. As a youth, he felt immortal, and that strange flutter in his chest was nothing--merely light-footed delight at being alive, and young, and free. But as he became older and more established in the community, his heart began to concern him. It would flutter and pump flatly, as if bored with its tedious task, and seemed to threaten to go on strike at any moment. At first the man would have nothing to do with the thought of mortality; it simply never occurred to him that this life would conclude. But finally he went to the doctor and after many furrowed brows and many expensive tests the result was in--Sir, I'm afraid you have a very weak heart.

The man of course was shocked, as anyone would be, to find out he hadn't long to live. The waiting list for transplants was a long one, and he was not a rich man. He would sit in his room for three days now to contemplate his new found mortality.

Afterwards, he developed a great fondness for walking. He liked mostly the parks. He enjoyed the lush green trees, swaying and undulating in the wind. Then there was the grass, green and soft, yielding to the soles of his shoes. He often spent much time sitting on this grass by the riverbed, staring at a tree on the other bank stretching its veiny leaves across the murmuring waters. It was here that the man would take a deep breath, filling his lungs with the cool, fecund air. But then he would begin to curse his heart. Why should he be torn from this life? So many other people deserve to die, why should *he* go? And then his heart would flare up--fluttering, droning, thumping weakly, tired and bored against his chest. He clutched his chest angrily and walked away, back to his house.

Our man was most afraid at home. He felt so isolated. The door never knocked, the phone never rang, and the TV wouldn't listen. At night in bed was the worst. As he lay in the dark he could feel his heart deflating beneath his chest. It was at night his heart took on more malicious tones. It would throb painfully, weakly, tired of life, threatening to pull the man into the darkness of eternity which he feared most. He would pull at the sheets, tears falling from his yes in genuine terror. And he would cry out to God above, "Please, just one more day!"

And his one more day would come.

During his various trips to the park he noticed a woman who walked alone as he did. Her clothes were slightly shabby, but she had a nice face and pleasant breasts. Her hair was disheveled, but in a good way. The man thought it would be nice to talk to her, and it would be nice to have some company on this one more day granted by God. It turned out she was quite sweet. She had an airy, light-hearted gait and talked often in low, confiden-

tial tones. She loved to talk, but was always waiting for the slightest movement from the man's lips to be ready to listen.

Very soon they were walking hand in hand; very soon the man began to need her. When his heart would ever act up, he would cling to her. And she, having been told of his condition, would hold him fast, and the man could feel her heart beating fast against his, beating for them both as she whispered into his ear confidential reassurances, sending shivers of warmth down his back. And for the first time in a long time, our man felt safe from death.

One day in the park she asked him over to her place for the night. He accepted, somewhat reluctantly. But his fear of dying alone outweighed any concern for vanity. As they walked to her house, the man looked over his shoulder several times. His eyes would squint at figures in the distance, anticipating recognition. The woman did not notice. She was watching the purpling sunset. It spread like beautiful water color, high and wide, and its color spilled across the woman's pale skin and reflected like dull flames in her dark, intense eyes. The man would have found it quite beautiful, had he noticed.

Her apartment was simple. The tiny living room had a couch and chair; the bedroom had a bed. Clothes were folded neatly in the corner and stacked high for lack of a chest of drawers. The man wanted to leave. She handed him a glass of lemonade. He drank sullenly. Soon they were sitting on the bed. Then his heart started in again; he held her fast. She showered him with reassurances and kisses. Suddenly he noticed how beautiful her face was. He always knew it looked simple and kind, but what he noticed now was how flawless it was. Every line seemed where it was supposed to be, and the lamplight glowed in her eyes like crystals.

She delicately undressed him, and he her. He pressed his sorry chest against hers, cleaving her soft, white breasts. He could feel her heart beating--strong. He attacked her with kisses; she fell back on the bed beneath him. Her heart was beating stronger; he could feel it--throbbing, pounding, beating for them both, for him, strong and unceasing. He wanted to melt into her.

And before he finished he told her he loved her.

The next morning he was awakened by her leaving. She kissed him gently on the forehead and said she was going to the store to get some things for breakfast. Outside the bedroom window the sun was rising, golden orange and yellow. The trees outside were aglow with the powerful rays of the sun. Inside the rays struck the wall while tiny dust mote swirled in the air like angels. The man noticed his surroundings--a grey wall with a hole punched in the plaster, a worn rug that didn't quite cover the entire floor, and a pile of clothes growing beside a dirty bathroom door. The man began to realize that this woman was of a lower class than he. This woman was one he had seen many times before, but wouldn't condescend to speak to. This woman, he realized, wasn't very important and but for his condition, he would not even be here.

In bed he moaned to himself about his condition. Why must it be him? What depths had he descended to? Why. . . but then the pain in his chest started up again, much worse than it ever had before. He clutched furiously at his heart under the sheets, clenching his teeth. Outside he could hear her car pull up in the driveway. He tried to call her name, but the pain was caught up in his throat. He climbed out of bed. Another wave of pain, this one greater, struck him and sent him to the floor. Dust flew up from the carpet around his face. The car door outside closed. He tried to speak again, but could not. If only she would come, her beautiful face, skin enveloping, her crystal eyes, her strong heart.

The keys rattled outside the door. He made one last attempt to speak, but slowly the door, the piles of clothes, and the grey walls swirled into hundreds of tiny angels before dispersing into utter darkness.

The Copy

Isabel flipped the pages of her appointment book. The mauve nail on her index finger traced across the lines. Only eight days left to the weekend of her visit with Chelsea.

"Hizzabel."

A voice whispered from behind her. She turned to respond. No one was there. It must have been Chuck.

Picking up a thin sheaf of papers, she walked across the room, stopping to glance at her face in the mirror beside the door. A stray wisp of reddish-brown hair escaped from the strands pulled into a French braid closely plaited to the back of her head. She licked the tip of her fingertips and used them to smooth her hair neatly into place.

Walking two doors down the hall, she entered the room with the president's title on the wall. "Chuck, did you call me?"

"No, Bell, but I was thinking about you." He looked up at her and smiled. He wanted to tell her how lovely she looked, she always dressed so tastefully. "Have you looked at these numbers from the donations? Almost a quarter of a million dollars! Just think what this money will do for the community." He stood rather than stay seated while she was standing. As he moved closer to her, he found the light flower scent she wore intoxicating.

"I know, the employees have given so much and. . ." she looked at the sparkle in his eyes. He was staring at her. She looked away. ". . . volunteered so much free time to raise money for the children's cancer ward at the hospital."

"Well, don't forget your efforts. If it weren't for your organizing and hard work, this wouldn't be happening." His voice was soft, endearing, full of respect.

"It was your idea, Chuck. I've had very little to do with it."

"Will you two stop patting yourselves on the back. You sound like rejects from a mutual admiration society." Carmen joined them from the hallway. She always managed to appear whenever the two of them were alone.

"Carmen, have you seen these numbers?" He sat back behind his desk.

"Yes, Chuck, *very impressive*." She smiled at him seductively. "Here are a few more purchase orders you need to sign before the groundbreaking ceremonies in two weeks," Carmen said. She handed Chuck the folder standing close enough so her breasts touched his arm.

Chuck unconsciously leaned away from her. Her spicy perfume tickled his nose and he twitched in an effort not to sneeze. Carmen's pink, close-fitting dress and full head of long, tightly permed curls were attractive, but not beautiful and elegant the way Isabel was.

"Oh, by the way, the serviceman just delivered the new copier. He's hooking it up now." Carmen leaned in front of Chuck to gather her documents.

"Good, I need to make copies." Isabel waved her papers in the air and walked through the door.

Chuck's eyes followed her route and lingered on the empty doorway.

"Hizzabel."

A quiet male voice called. She turned to look--no one. Shaking her head, she continued down the hall. The serviceman was just finishing his work.

"I hope this isn't a difficult model to use?" She spoke to the back of his head. His black hair poked down his neck across his collar. His clothes smelled like a burnt cigar.

"No, it's not complicated at all." His voice was deep, echoing through the small room. "Let me show you." He grinned at her.

Isabel was startled. There was something sinister in the curl of his lips. His eyes were narrow dark slits, his complexion ruddy, his face had deep acne scars. Short, black, unruly hair framed his forehead and a thin beard outlined his face. She turned away repulsed.

Even without looking she could sense his grin. She could feel him watching her, obviously waiting for her to step forward. Isabel shuddered. His leer made her nervous. She moved closer and stood next to him, far enough away the movements of his arm wouldn't brush her.

"It's all so simple. Would you like me to copy those?"

Nodding her head, she handed the papers to him.

He inserted them in the automatic feeder and rested his hands on the corners of the copier. As page after page slid through the machine, he seemed totally fascinated by the rhythmic flicker of light from under the edges of the lid as though he drew energy from the flashes. He released a deep breath.

"There you go. I'll put my things together and check out with the receptionist. If you ever need anything," he reached into his pants pocket for a business card, "don't hesitate to call."

She took the card and held it by the corners, studying it, avoiding his eyes. The card was a matte black with lettering in flaming red, the same color as the wide tie he wore, *Mark Satin, Sales and Service, The Copy Works.*

"Should I walk you to the lobby?" she asked.

"No, I have one more adjustment to make. I'll find my way."

It was a few days before Isabel needed the copier. She'd been out of the office Friday and then the weekend. She wanted to avoid the small room, but that wasn't practical. Hesitant, she lifted the copier lid and started to place the first sheet face down.

She gasped. There was a reflection staring at her from the glass. The black background underneath gave the clear plate a smokey, shadowy cast. The image was ghostly. Quickly she slammed the lid.

"Cleaner. The glass needs cleaner. Must have been an illusion from the toner residue." She jerked open the cabinet and grabbed a spray bottle of Windex and then ripped paper towels off the roll. Cautiously she lifted the lid, then vigorously rubbed and polished the glass.

"All clean." Setting the bottle aside, she breathed deeply, the scent of Windex filling her nostrils. She tossed the paper in the large trash can nearby.

She picked up her papers and started to place one face down. Spontaneously the hideous image jumped into view wobbling slightly. The shiny glass gave the aberration an iridescent luster. It was a male face with leering eyes and unruly black hair. A small horn curled up at each corner of his forehead. Framing his upper lip, a pencil mustache grew down to his chin, meeting the thin beard outlining the triangular-shaped lower half of his face.

"Hizzabel."

"Aaagh!" She jumped back. The image disappeared. Isabel began to tremble. Her shoulders heaved and her breath came in short gasps. "Too much stress. That's all, too much stress. All the preparation, all the organizing, all the overtime and worry about coordinating, Collin and Chelsea, too much stress!" She left the room muttering to herself.

"You okay?" Carmen asked passing her in the hall.

"Yes, why?"

"You look pale." Carmen's large, green eyes evaluated her.

"We can't all have your natural tan," Isabel said.

Carmen laughed and started to walk into the copier room.

"Carmen, have you noticed anything odd about the copier?"

"Like what? Did you see a ghost in it or something?"

"Have you?"

"No, but I saw Robert Redford." Carmen's eyebrows bobbed up and down. "What did you see?"

"Nothing, I just don't like the machine."

"So, complain to the receptionist and get the serviceman back."

"Maybe I will." Isabel turned back toward her office. She settled into her desk and tried to concentrate on work, chiding herself for being silly. It was some time before she was interrupted by the intercom and a phone call.

Isabel's face puckered into a frown as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

"Collin, please, Chelsea and I have planned this weekend for months. You can take her to the amusement park anytime." She knew it was no use arguing. He would do as he pleased.

"My parents got tickets for *this* weekend. They didn't know you were coming. I can't disappoint them."

"What about disappointing Chelsea and me?"

"You think she isn't going to prefer an amusement park to *your* visit?"

"Maybe I could join you?"

"Are you kidding? Do you think I want anyone to see me with you? My parents would have a cardiac if you suddenly showed up at a family outing. It's bad enough you're coming for a visit. What's one more week?"

"You promise the following weekend?" She hated to whine. His promises meant nothing, but for Chelsea's sake she had to try.

"I said next weekend didn't I? Just remember, I'm not leaving you alone with her for a second. I don't want you influencing her with any of your trashy ideas. And you'll stay at a hotel. I don't want you around any more than absolutely necessary. I gotta go. Chelsea needs me."

"Tell Chelsea I . . ."

Collin disconnected.

" . . . I love her." A few tears escaped before she clenched her jaws tight enough to regain control. Pulling her mirror out of her purse she held it up to check for makeup smears and noticed strands of hair were slipping from her braid. With moistened fingertips she attempted to smooth the curls straight into place.

It had been a long, hard day. Isabel was glad to get home to her modest apartment decorated sparsely with tasteful, used furniture. Living alone, she had plenty of time to search the classifieds and secondhand stores for inexpensive finds. It was nothing like the lavish house she had shared with Collin and Chelsea. Those days were gone. That didn't matter. If only she had Chelsea with her . . . Her job paid enough to support the two of them, but for now she saved every penny. Isabel sighed. There probably wasn't enough money in the world to buy an attorney powerful enough to beat Collin.

She dipped her finger in the chocolate batter she was preparing and sucked it off her finger before placing the pan in the oven. Soon the aroma of brownies baking filled the air. She would freeze them to take to Chelsea.

The phone rang. Chelsea's disappointed voice wanted to know why her mother wasn't coming for the weekend as promised.

"I know sweetheart, Mommy misses you, too."

"But, why can't you go, Mommy?"

"I don't think daddy wants me to. That's okay. There will be lots of times for us to do things together."

"I'll bet Elizabeth goes. I don't like her. Daddy never pays any attention to me when she's around. You could go and hide and I could sneak away so we could be together."

Isabel bit her lip. "You be a good girl for Mommy. I want you to have lots of fun. Did you get the letter I sent you?"

"Daddy is calling me."

"You better hang up if daddy says. I'll talk to you soon. I love you, Sweetheart."

"I love you, Mommy. I miss you. Bye-bye."

"Somehow I'll find a way to be with you again." Isabel closed her eyes and spoke into the dead line.

How much money would it take to hide them from Collin? He had all the marbles and played the game his way. She should have never married a self-indulgent, rich boy. No, that wasn't true, without him there wouldn't be Chelsea. She was worth the torment.

Her chest ached remembering the custody hearing, watching as people she thought were friends lied under oath about alleged affairs and neglect of Chelsea. She could still see the light shining on the judge's bald head, glaring off his glasses. She could hear his high-pitched voice reverberating in her mind, declaring her an unfit mother.

Afterward she found it impossible to remain in the small town and make a living. She moved to the city to find work where she could hide in a sea of unfamiliar faces. Taking nothing but a chic wardrobe, fifteen hundred dollars of her own money, and her college education she tried to start over.

She went into the bathroom to wash the tears from her cheeks. Thick wisps of hair around her face had escaped from the braided ropes. She unfastened the bow at the end and with her fingertips combed out the wavy locks. The odor of burnt brownies permeated the apartment.

Chuck looked up at Isabel as she passed by his office. A whiff of strong musk floated into the room. He noticed a change in her appearance. Her clothes were louder, bright yellows and oranges, tighter. Instead of swept up, her hair fell in curls around her shoulders.

Isabel only had a few copies to make. She had begun to dread going into the room and lately had requested the receptionist make copies for her. But Sally was at lunch and not having the duplicates was holding up progress. She was being foolish.

"Hizzabel."

She pretended not to hear the voice as she walked down the hall. The pages were charts and graphs of unusual sizes, she would have to do them manually. Ignoring the face that leered up at her from the glass, she quickly covered it with the first sheet.

"Bell."

Isabel jumped.

"I'm sorry." Chuck reached out and placed his hand on her elbow to steady her. He stood within inches of her, her perfume overpowered him. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh, Chuck. I was just deep in thought."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"What do you mean, of course, I am."

"Bell, look, I don't mean to pry, but it seems that something is bothering you."

"Oh, there you two are." Carmen interrupted breathlessly. "Have you seen these latest reports on community donations? We're up to half-a-million dollars." Carmen shoved a handful of papers under Chuck's nose.

Chuck turned toward her scowling. "Carmen, could you put those on my desk. I'll talk to you about them in a bit."

Carmen looked from Chuck to Isabel and back. "Okay. Sure, I thought you would be anxious to see them." Dejected she backed out of the room and turned down the hall in the direction of Chuck's office.

Chuck stared out the door until he was sure she was out of hearing then turned back to Isabel who had returned to copying.

"Bell, I certainly don't want to overstep, not as your boss, but as someone who would like to know you better, if you would ever like to talk, I'm a pretty good listener and I've got broad shoulders." He lifted his shoulders up and down smiling at her.

She looked up at him. His eyes were so blue, so full of concern, his features finely chiseled. The essence of his light, masculine aftershave was calming. She quickly looked away again.

"Perhaps we could go out for a cup of coffee or dinner." He was speaking to her back.

"Chuck," she avoided his eyes. "Chuck, I have some personal things to work out. I appreciate your wanting to help, but there's really nothing you can do."

"Bell, just remember," he put his hand on her shoulder, "I can be a trusted friend if you ever need one." Whatever she was running from, he would have to wait until she stopped to catch her.

The speaker on the intercom called out his name. Chuck left to answer the receptionist's page.

Isabel began to tremble. She tried to pick up her copies from the tray but her hand was shaking so hard she knocked them to the floor. Gasping she jumped back. A photocopy of the relentless image in the glass glared up at her from one of the sheets she'd dropped. She grabbed the paper by the corner as if it were hot to the touch and jabbed the end into the paper shredder. As the automatic feed sliced the sheet into strips, a horrendous squeal screeched into the air. She covered her head with both palms but the sound pierced her ears.

Isabel excitedly packed a few things in her suitcase. She was anxious. It was only one day before the ground-breaking ceremony and then she would leave to be with Chelsea. The ringing phone unnerved her. Something told her it would be Collin.

"Collin, you promised this weekend. Chelsea is counting on it. Why are you doing this?"

"Look, tramp, I don't owe you any explanations."

Isabel ignored the stabbing pain his words caused. "Chelsea loves me, it doesn't do any good to keep us apart."

"Maybe she won't feel that way when she knows the truth about you and why mommy doesn't live here anymore."

"What do you mean? She knows I want to be with her. What are you telling her Collin?"

"Nothing she won't hear in idle gossip."

She could hear him chuckle.

"You'll be sorry. I swear you'll be sorry! Don't hang up on me . . . COLLIN!"

Slamming the receiver onto the base in her hand, she threw the princess phone across the room, jerking the cord out of its socket. She fell to her knees on the floor, and laid her head on the rose corduroy cushion in the seat of the wooden rocking chair. Clutching the bars in the back of the chair she cried loud, guttural sobs. How long before Chelsea believed his vile lies about her?

It was morning, the day of the ceremony. Chuck had a few details he was anxious to go over with Isabel. As he walked into her office, he couldn't help a look of astonishment as he appraised her. His nose crinkled from the wave of incense that washed over him. Her eyes were heavily outlined in black and dark brush strokes of green and gray changed her almond-shaped eyes to looking more feline. Her auburn hair seemed redder, wilder, fuller, framing her face in a mane. Two wisps of curled bans struck up from each side of her forehead. Her long nails were manicured flaming red, and on her ears were large, red metal intertwined triangles that dangled to just above her shoulders. She wore a black, skin-tight, turtle-neck dress with long, fitted sleeves. Below the short hemline a pair of black-stockinged legs stood in crimson red, high heels.

"Good morning, Bell. You look different today."

"Do I? I feel different." She winked at him.

"When you have a moment, I have some last minute things to discuss with you."

"All right, just let me finish what I'm doing." She pulled a mirror and a tube of lipstick out of her purse and carefully applied the thick, vermilion color to her lips.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'd better look over my speech for the ceremony." Chuck turned to leave, but looked back. His lips moved to say something, but the words wouldn't come. "I'll see you later." He shook his head and left the room.

"Yes, later," she answered distracted.

It was much later when he got his mind off Bell and onto his speech. Whatever was bothering her was getting worse. Pacing the floor, he decided to insist she got out to dinner with him to talk. He would tell her it was a celebration for their hard work on the children's center. He would have to try to find a moment alone when Carmen wasn't around or she would expect to join them.

"Chuck, it's all gone!" Carmen burst into his office in an excited state.

"What's all gone?"

"The money for the children's center! I just checked with the bank to arrange to transfer funds and the money is GONE."

"Calm down. There must be some mistake. Maybe Bell already made the transfer."

"There's no mistake! The account is cleaned out."

"How could that be?" Chuck pushed the intercom for Bell's office. "Bell, could you step in here."

There was no response.

"Bell?" He got up and stepped toward the hall.

"She's gone."

"What are you talking about?" Chuck swung to face Carmen.

"I went to her first. Do you think I wanted to tell you this alone? Her name is on the withdrawal slip for the money. Nobody in the building has seen her for hours. Chuck, she took the money and she's gone!"

"I just spoke with her a short time ago." He abruptly sat back in his chair. His last image of Bell blazed across his mind.

A flash of electrical light suddenly illuminated the hall and lit Chuck's office. A loud sizzling explosion followed.

"What the hell was that?" Chuck jumped out of his chair and ran toward the noise. Puffs of thick, black smoke clouded out of the copier room and quickly dissipated in the hall. A strong stench of burning electrical wires and scorched paper emanated from inside.

"Oh my gosh!" Carmen stared at the copier, a blackened shell. Glass shards glittered throughout the room.

A piece of paper had ejected from the copier as the explosion occurred and now floated through the smoke slowly, down to the bottom of the trash bin. In the background of the lost page was the familiar male face that had plagued Isabel for days. In the front, slightly to the right, was a female image with gray shadowed feline eyes and long, unruly hair encircling her face like a lion's mane with two tiny horns curling up at each corner of her forehead.

The Greatest Blessing

She turned the knob with her free hand, shoved the door open with an impatient foot, and stood for a moment clutching the heavy grocery bag in her arms. He was sitting there, as usual, in his favorite overstuffed chair with the wide arms. His head had fallen against the frayed back of the chair, pulling the crocheted doily to one side, while his hand still gripped a stubby pencil poised over a notepad on the arm of the chair.

Gritting her teeth against the nausea, she shuddered as she looked at him, his mouth open in sleep ("catching flies," as her grandmother would have said), so comfortable, so content, so damned....

"Bill," she spat out.

Bill's head jerked forward, mouth snapping shut, eyes jerkily tracking to where she stood framed in the doorway.

"Huh, wha...what is it, Cora? What's the matter?" Bill muttered as he leaned forward to groggily retrieve the fallen pencil his startled hand had dropped.

Kicking the door closed with her heel, Cora crossed to the cloth-covered table set against the living room wall and dumped the heavy load from her aching arms. Next to a vase of plastic flowers and a small electric fan bravely attacking the heat, a scratched and dented radio softly droned out a love song. Taking a deep, careful breath, she turned toward Bill, her feet planted, hands tight on her hips, black eyes stabbing holes in him.

"What's wrong? What's the matter," he says, she spoke mockingly. "I'll tell you what's the matter, Mister," she was almost whispering.

Teeth gritted, she swallowed slowly. "I'm sick. And I'm tired of working those long, dead hours at that factory. I'm sick and tired of riding that streetcar clear down to the river every day and smelling that awful perfume those women wear." Her voice rose with intensity and determination. "I'm sick of those damned green uniforms we have to wear at the belt all day long."

She pulled a wadded green cloth from the paper bag and threw it on the floor at Bill's feet.

"I'm sick, and pregnant, and tired of seeing you sit here day after day doing nothing but listen to the radio, and doodle on that notepad till I'd like to throw you and them all out the window."

She gathered her anger closer. "You've been off work long enough. I notice your back don't seem to be so stiff any more. *You* can start hauling the groceries up those stairs, too, Mister Big Shot. I'm not carrying your load any more. I quit!"

Cora almost laughed at the expression on Bill's face. His mouth was hanging open again, but in consternation, not contented napping. How she had loved him once; he was the only man she had ever wanted. Oh God, that was in a different world.

Bill had been enjoying his time away from the grueling construction work that drained his energy like chaff blown away by dry summer wind as the years passed by. However, he knew she meant what she had said. Still, his back *did* hurt a bit yet. Besides, work just did not have much appeal in this hot weather. He decided to give the soft touch a try.

"Now, Cora, my little Apache darlin'," he began, using his favorite nickname for her, chosen because of her attractive Indian features. Getting up, he moved toward her, arms out to envelope her in what he hoped would be an embrace to dampen her anger. Got to calm her down. She's always a little tired when she gets home, even if it is only from easy indoor factory work.

"Oh, shut up, Bill!" Cora flung her arms in exasperation and turning from him, fled to the dark little bathroom off the hall. As Bill heard her throwing up into the toilet, what she had said suddenly struck him full force.

"Pregnant?" he ran stumbling to the bathroom and clung to the door frame for support. "Cora, is that what you said? You're pregnant?"

She looked up at him from on her knees before the toilet. Wiping her mouth with a wad of toilet paper, she said slowly and deliberately, "That's *exactly* what I said."

If she had cared, she would have indeed laughed at the waves of expression rippling over his face. With Bill nearing sixty and her almost forty, it was the last thing either of them had expected. She'd had one child twenty years ago, a boy who had persuaded a local butcher and a boarding house maid to lie for him so he could leave home early for the army. Now this!

She stood up and let a multitude of miseries wash over her. Bill, his eyes staring at nothing, was still stuck to the door frame trying to come to grips with his personal turmoil. She slowly passed by him and began to put the groceries away in the tiny, bare kitchen. As another wave of nausea swept over her, she walked to the single window overlooking the red-brick apartment building's common back yard with clothes lines full of clothes hanging like tired old men in the heat. Squabbling children ran in and out among the drooping sheets and towels. She pushed the faded but clean curtain back to reveal a broken pane and looked toward Houdimont Avenue where she would no longer catch the streetcar to ride to the Tums factory down on 4th and Clark Streets every day. She would no longer have to pack hundreds and hundreds of little green boxes full of round white pills. She would no longer have to smell the sickeningly sweet perfume that clawed at her nostrils, or watch the rows of frustrated women workers (Oh, yes, Lord, me among them) in those damn green uniforms shoving the boxes down the conveyor belt. At least I don't spit in the boxes like some women do. It is easier than field work and I do like to talk with the other women, but it's so damned *boring*...and now this!

She looked down then at the flat concrete area under the window. It's only one floor up. I jump and I'd probably just do myself damage and live to regret it. Window's stuck anyway so I can't pull it up.

She leaned against the sill and felt sweat drip onto her hand as the spasms of nausea tightened her throat and gave her goose bumps in spite of the heat. Bill will just spoil the kid and leave me with all the work. I didn't think I could *get* pregnant. All those years....Why does he still want sex, anyway? Damn!

Cora held her other hand to her still flat abdomen, considering the child she knew was there. Trial and hardship that this was, she knew she would love it. Her anger at Bill and her situation did not extend to the child. If it's a girl this time, I'll name her Vickie. She thought of her sister who had died so many years ago in a childhood accident she had almost forgotten. It won't bring you back, Sis, but perhaps it'll be a small comfort.

"You'd just be looking at death warmed over. Keep your good memories," the funeral director told Vickie. She nodded. She understood. But somehow, it was no comfort. She paid the funeral director the final payment so the body could be released for cremation and walked out into the heat of the afternoon. Mechanically, she found her car and went through the motions necessary to get back to work.

As she drove down Norris Road, functioning on "auto," Vickie could picture her mother's body, flat, worn, and limp on the table before the cremation oven. She had last seen her the morning of the day she had died but had not been there to say a final goodbye. But the funeral director was right. She needed to hang on to her good memories.

Her mother had specifically told her she had wanted no funeral or service of any kind. When the funeral director had asked her preferences at the planning meeting, Cora had asked what was cheapest.

"Cremation."

"OK, fine, do it."

"Do you want the ashes buried with your husband or scattered over the ocean?"

"Which is cheapest?"

"Scattering over the ocean."

"Scatter them, then."

Oh, Mom, you were so tough and strong, so practical...and so caring. You didn't want me to have debts, I know. I wish so bad I could have done more for you. I wish I had insisted you move in with me long before you overdosed on morphine and I knew you couldn't be independent any more. I wish I could have quit work to be with you all the time. I wish....

Oh, God, cancer's such an ugly disease. Oh, Mom, you were such a *good* mom, my best friend. I could never have returned to you all you did for me. I'm sorry I was so sick and so much trouble to you for so long.

Sweat dripped down Vickie's forehead into her eyes. Substitute tears. She couldn't cry yet. Too numb. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. She'd make it. She could be tough, too.

As she turned into the parking lot, she briefly wondered how she had gotten there. She couldn't remember the drive from the funeral home. Oh, well, it's best I keep busy. Can't do anything about much of anything anyway.

Vickie spent the afternoon at her desk, flipping pages of neat rows of numbers as she plotted graphs of oil production in neat little lines on smooth checkered pages. Her Walkman poured music and distraction into her head, keeping thoughts of her mother's frail body and the cremation smokestack at bay.

Later that evening, as Vickie turned the knob and kicked the door open to her empty apartment, the telephone rang insistently from the darkness. She crossed the room, sat the plastic bags of groceries on a table, and flipped on the switch to the air conditioner.

"Hello," she barely whispered.

"Vickie, this is Doreen. I got your message about Aunt Cora. We all knew it was going to happen but I'm just so sorry, Vickie." Her cousin's voice came clearly from St. Louis; from 2,500 miles and, it seemed, as many years.

"Doreen, I can't believe Mom's gone. She was my best friend; always there for me. I feels so bad I couldn't have done more for her; made her going a little easier somehow," Vickie confided to this cousin she remembered but didn't really know.

"Vickie, I know it's hard for you. But I've always known you and Aunt Cora were close and you don't need to worry about not doing enough. She's always kept in touch with us and it wasn't long ago she called and talked about how good you were to her."

Vickie held the phone tighter to her ear, her eyes closed.

"Vickie, your mom told me just a couple weeks ago how before you were born, she'd thought about how hard it would be to raise another child after so many years and your dad being the way he was. I know too how she shared a lot about her life with you but she may not have told you something. She said that what she had thought would be her greatest trial had turned out to be the greatest blessing of her life. You need to know that, Vickie. She loved and appreciated you as much as you did her," Doreen's words reached her clearly from the distance.

Vickie sat down in the dark room, the pale light and heat of evening reaching in through the open door, the air conditioner's cool fingers faithfully pushing the heat away. With the phone still tight to her ear and her eyes still closed, Vickie knew her mother's honest friendship had been the greatest blessing of her life and memories of her mother would provide more strength and comfort than any grief. Her tears fell onto the hand in her lap as she both mourned and was comforted by the legacy of her greatest blessing.

Later

Red and blue rays splashed and danced on the white walls of the Haven Hotel as two L. A. ambulances came to a screeching halt in front of room 212. Curtains were drawn back and eyes peeked out as curious onlookers wondered who was going to be taken away. The bolder tenants trooped over and crowded the door of 212, until they were forced back by powerful hands that slammed the door shut in their faces and effectively shut off their view of the interior.

Inside the room, a young man of approximately eighteen years of age, clad in jeans and a flannel shirt, lay sprawled on the floor. His eyelids were swollen, but open, and his eyes were rolled back into his head so only the whites were visible. His lips were puffy and a very strange hue of red, like fresh ground beef. Two paramedics surrounded him, poking and prodding, but got no response.

"What are his stats?" asked Anderson, the chief paramedic, as he pulled out a mini-recorder.

"Blood pressure is low, pulse is weak, possible drug overdose."

"Shit, let's get him on the gurney. Now!"

The two younger paramedics raced for the gurney, fueled by the adrenaline and the fear coursing through their bodies. Both had only been on call for six months, and they had not seen enough drugged or dead bodies yet to make them hard and stoic. They still reacted with shock to scenes like the one inside.

The hard rubber wheels of the gurney clicked and trembled on the rough pavement, as though it too was afraid to enter the accident scene. The slim man was lifted onto the cold rubber pad and offered no resistance as yellow leather bands were strapped around his bony ankles and wrists. Anderson closed the swollen eyelids and placed the head to the side, so he would not choke if he vomited.

The ambulance doors closed tight behind the gurney, creating a slight thud that was not loud but had enough impact to cause the body to stir slightly. The eyelids fluttered softly, and the slack mouth grimaced. The rookie paramedics, seated on either side of him, took no notice of his actions as they fixed an IV, attached electrodes to monitor heart and brain activity and prepared a defibrillator in case the victim went into cardiac arrest.

Manuel fluttered his eyelids and struggled to open his eyes, but they felt as heavy as bricks. He heard loud wailing sounds, insistent beeps and warbled voices. Slowly emerging from his drugged fog, he realized he was in an ambulance. Still unable to open his eyes, he began to remember what had happened.

His fuzzy tongue reminded him of all the alcohol he'd had at Pouchy's Bar. The painkillers and sleeping pills he had taken were probably starting to take effect now. His entire body felt like a piece of ham someone had chopped into one hundred pieces. God, he had thought by taking over forty pills and downing them with three or four bottles of tequila, he would be dead by now. But no, he definitely was not dead, or he would not be hearing that terrible wailing or smelling this stale air.

Wonder what Ma will say when she finds out about this. Probably won't be surprised, she's always expecting stupid shit from me.

He had called her earlier in the day, before he had gone out drinking. He'd been depressed about something, but now he couldn't remember what the depression had been about.

At first all he got was a busy signal, and half an hour later when he finally reached her, she had put him off.

"I'm really busy right now. Can't this wait? I'll try and go over there later," she said, and hung up quick before he could try to convince her.

Later, right. It was always later with him. Since they had come to this country, his mother had always put his interests last. She had made him stay behind with his grandparents in Tijuana while she crossed to L.A. with his two sisters. She promised that later, when she had money she would send for him. After seven years of waiting for "later," he came over on his own. To say the least, his family was surprised to see him, and while his mother did not welcome him with open arms, she allowed him to stay. Manuel didn't care what kind of reception he got. He was just glad they were all together again. He had wanted to attend school, learn English, but he never got the chance.

His mother told him, "Later on, mijo. Right now we don't have no money, so if you wanna live here you gotta go to work."

At sixteen, he began working in a sweatshop for \$2.50 an hour. Fatigued, filthy and hungry, he would arrive home to find his lazy older sisters draped on the front stoop, waiting for their greased-haired, monkey-faced, motorcycle-driving unemployed boy-friends to show up. Inside the apartment building he could smell onions and peppers, chicken broth and spaghetti sauce, but all those smells came from apartments other than his own. In his apartment no warm meal waited for him, and no cold meal either. Even though he gave his mother money for food, the cupboards were always empty, and he usually ended up going to the Wendy's on the corner for dinner.

A sharp pain in his stomach jolted Manuel back to the present. His stomach was cramping up, probably trying to expel all the pills. He could feel a rubbery mask covering his nose and mouth, and he gulped at the tiny oxygen in an attempt to calm his stomach.

Wish someone would turn off that horrible wailing. Sounds just like the baby...

The wailing sounds reminded him of the nightmare he'd had for so many nights. The nightmare always started with a baby crying. The cry was a plaintive wail, like the sound of lost soul burning in the flames of Hell. Then a tiny baby would appear and cling to his neck.

"Why did you do it, why did you kill me. I wanted to live! Why, why, why?" the baby would wail, scratching at Manuel's face.

The baby appeared now. As he came closer, Manuel could see he was carrying a bloody knife. Manuel struggled to escape. He squirmed and twisted. When he turned his head again, the baby was gone. Manuel relaxed and took deep breaths of the tiny oxygen.

He had begun these horrific nightmares more than two months ago, after discovering a fact so disgusting that he'd thrown up afterwards.

He had been in a good mood that day, so long ago. When his shift at the sweatshop ended he decided to go to Pouchy's for a game of pool. A group of guys had gathered around the pool table and were talking and laughing when he entered. As he approached them, they suddenly became silent and some started to edge away, avoiding eye contact.

"What's up, what's going on?" Manuel asked, already suspicious.

Marco was the first to answer. He approached Manuel with a smirk on his ugly face.

"Hey man. How are you? How's your sister?"

"My sister? Why the hell are you so interested?"

"Calm down, chico. We just heard Mari was, you know, sick. Guess her little operation didn't go so well, huh?" Marco looked around and smirked as the crowd laughed at his comment.

The sounds of the sarcastic laughter thundered in Manuel's ears as he grabbed Marco by the throat and flattened him on the pool table. "If you don't want me to smash your face in, you better tell me what the hell you're talking about."

Marco pushed him off and smoothed his shirt. "Ease up, bro. How the hell did I know you weren't informed? Your sis got knocked up, okay? She didn't want the kid, so she got an abortion. Everybody knows, man. Except she didn't even know who the father was, so it took her awhile to get the dough, ya know, almost three months, that's why..."

"Shut up! Just shut the hell up!" Manuel exploded. He was so stunned and angry his eyes narrowed into tiny slits, and the green felt of the pool tabletop suddenly seemed to glow bright red. He ran out of there as fast as he could, as far as his legs would take him. When his legs finally gave out, he found himself on the other side of town. He sank down on the street and sobbed. *Got knocked up, didn't know who the father was, got an abortion.*

He retched on the sidewalk, and felt his whole stomach heaving as he emptied his breakfast and lunch onto the ground.

When he returned home, he had wanted answers but got none. His mother confirmed that Mari had gotten an abortion, but told him that it wasn't any of his business and that she would explain the whole situation to him later, when he was older.

"Forget later. I want to know now." He had opened a cupboard door to lean on and was surprised to find the cupboard full of food.

"What is this? You actually have food?"

"Well, I had that money you gave me last week so I went grocery shopping," his mother smiled.

"But I give you money every week. How come you never bought food before? I was always having to eat at work cause there wasn't any food here."

"Well, actually I had been saving that money, well just some of it, for an emergency. You know, in case someone got sick."

If someone got sick....she couldn't get the money, it took her three months... Manuel suddenly clicked on to what his mother was saying. "You gave Mari the money for the abortion, didn't you? My money, the money I gave you for food? She used that money to kill her baby!"

Manuel was in shock. His mother denied everything, but he knew he was right. He was just as guilty of that abortion as his sister was. He had provided the money to pay for it. He was a baby-killer.

Shortly after that incident, he stopped giving his mother money. He ate very little and took up drinking. He began to have nightmares about babies coming to kill him for revenge. Even awake, he would sometimes hear a baby crying, calling out and laughing hysterically. He drank excessively to escape these sounds, and when he came home drunk on his eighteenth birthday, his mother had kicked him out of the house, declaring that he was a good for nothing drunk just like his father. That was how he ended up in room 212 of the Haven.

But after getting settled in at the Haven, things started looking up. He stopped going to Pouchy's every day and started saving his money. He had a plan, a good one. He was gonna save more money and move out to New York or Chicago in about a month or two. Maybe there he would find a wife, settle down, have kids. He would finally have the family he had always wanted.

So why was he here now? Why had he tried to kill himself? Try as he might he could not remember why he had taken all those pills. *What happened? What or who was I thinking about?* He racked his brain but couldn't come up with anything. He did remember being very angry, downing pills and waiting to die. When the pills didn't take effect quickly enough, he had driven his rusty '67 Chevy down to Pouchy's and drunk everything in sight. He didn't remember going back to his room, and who called the ambulance anyway? Probably the maid. Stupid woman. Didn't she know when someone was trying to die?

But wait. He didn't really want to die now. And he couldn't remember the reason he wanted to die before. No, no way did he want to die. He was going to go through with his plan as soon as he got better. He'd take off to Chicago and not tell anyone. Shit, let them worry about where he was and what he was doing for once. Yea, he was definitely gonna take off. He was through worrying about them. They didn't give a shit about him anyway, only came to see him when they wanted money.

Jesus, he felt tired. His body was starting to feel heavy and he still couldn't open his eyes. The wailing sound was getting lower, thank God for that. He didn't want to think about his nightmares right now. The beeping was getting fainter now too. Beep Beep Beep. *Someone turn off that damn beeper. Feel so tired, just wanna*

sleep. The beeps were soft now. He couldn't hear all of them. Just one beep that seemed very drawn out. The cold fog was rolling in again. A pain in his chest felt like two giant steel hands were pressing into his heart and keeping him down in the fog. He felt as cold as steel. Finally all sounds stopped and the cold fog thankfully rolled away, leaving just silent, black walls that guarded his deep, deep sleep.

* * * *

The paramedics had done all they could to save him. He had been responding well, his brain scan showed a lot of activity, he'd probably been dreaming or remembering something. His heart beat had been strong, but in an instant it all changed. The brain activity slowed to a crawl, the heart rate became weak. Anderson tried to shock the heart back into rhythm with the defibrillator, but to no avail. The heart gave one last pump and stopped.

Jose Manuel Torres, Jr. was declared dead at 9:37 p.m. at Los Angeles County Hospital. The cause of death was listed as accidental drug overdose, and Robert Payne, one of the rookies, was given the task of taking the body to the morgue and notifying the relatives.

Payne rolled the gurney down to the chilly morgue and tagged it with #85948485. He rolled it into box #3857586 and noted both numbers down for his report. *Wonder if I'll ever get used to the cold in this room.* He picked up the morgue phone to call the number he'd found in Torres' wallet. No answer. He tried the other, which was listed under "Ma." *Busy. Poor bastard, no one even knows where he is right now. Well, probably another junkie who didn't care about anyone but himself and shut out his family when they tried to help.* Payne tried the number again. Still busy. *Oh well, I'll try again later when I get my break.*

On his way up to the break room, Payne ran into Anderson whose shift had just ended.

"Got that body tagged, Payne?"

"Yea, it's down in the morgue." Payne answered quietly, shuffling his report papers.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yea, sure. I just thought for sure this one would make it. He almost made it to the hospital, if he had just held on a little bit longer."

"Yea, it's tough to see that. But listen, I've been here ten years. If that guy would had made it he probably would have gotten another hit tomorrow. Believe me. I've seen it happen. These guys get out Monday and they're back on Wednesday. They are pretty clueless. Don't plan anything. Just live for the high. So just try to forget it, okay? Move on. Oh, and be sure to notify the relatives so they can come pick up the body."

"I tried, twice, but the number was busy."

"Well, try again later." Anderson responded, stepping into the elevator.

"Sure, later."

Homecoming

Ma always told me she'd probably "stroke out" someday, but when I saw her sitting in the wheelchair, her blue eyes struggling to express the thoughts she was now unable to put into words, it hit me. I had been telling myself when she gets out of the hospital, she'll be fine again. But it was clear after that first moment of silent communication, we both knew she was not going to be fine again. She smiled and kissed me as I bent down to greet her.

"For crying' out loud Ma," I said, "after all the times you said you were going to 'stroke out' I never dreamed you'd actually go off and do it!"

We both laughed. She tried to answer, mumbling something unintelligible. "No." she said shaking her head. She began again mumbling something that sounded about the same to me. Then in frustration she said with perfect clarity, "Damn!" Waving her good arm through the air before slapping it down on her leg.

"At least you've still got one useful word in you vocabulary." I said, "If you can still flip your arthritic bird with your good hand you might be in better shape than you think." We both laughed again. Ma had never been your stereotypical grandmother, and she wouldn't tolerate being treated like one. My sister, Gena, and I used to laugh at Ma when we rode with her in the car. She was constantly shouting, "Damn campers! Can't see a damned thing when you're stuck behind one!" Occasionally, she would flip the bird at some unsuspecting RV driver. Of course, no one ever knew what she was doing because her fingers were so arthritic that they just curled up into a sort of claw-like gesture which she waved around her face. The effect was something like what Italians do when they are describing what they had for lunch.

We were still laughing when Rhonda, her nurse, appeared with her evening medication.

"Are you comfortable Barbara?" Rhonda asked Ma. "Would you like me to bring you a sweater?"

"Yes." Ma answered bobbing her head up and down in an exaggerated, childlike movement. Rhonda left to get the sweater.

"Do you like her?" I asked.

Ma shrugged. I knew she resented having a stranger in the house. It would hamper her drinking from now on.

Rhonda reappeared with a bright blue v-neck and a brown velour pullover hanging from her forearm. "The blue or the brown, Barbara?"

Ma pointed to the blue with her good arm. As Rhonda helped her with the sweater, I realized Ma was no longer capable of dressing herself.

"Is there anything else I can get you?" Rhonda asked.

"Vodka." She said.

"Absolutely not." Rhonda answered on her way out of the room.

"You're not serious?" I said, but I knew she was. Ma said nothing. She was staring at a piece of lint on the royal blue carpet.

I knew she intended to start drinking again even after this. This time was the worst. She had had the stroke while she was drunk. She fell down and couldn't get to the telephone. She lay on the floor for three days, her left side paralyzed, listening to the quacking of her decoy duck phone, its red eyes frantically lighting up each time it rang, until Aunt Jackie, her youngest daughter, went by to check on her after being unable to reach her on the telephone. Luckily Aunt Jackie found her in time and got her to the hospital, but the damage was severe, requiring her to spend over six weeks in the hospital.

Ma leaned forward and lifted the pack of red More cigarettes, which were lying on the coffee table. She shook it until the end of several cigarettes emerged from the pack. She lifted the pack to her mouth and pulled out a single, long brown cigarette. She put the pack down and picked up the yellow Bic lighter lying beside them, and squinted her eyes as she inhaled to light the cigarette which was tilted at an upward angle. I wondered how she brushed her teeth by herself.

"Are you going to be able to drive again?" I asked.

She shrugged then exhaled slowly, the smoke blowing from her mouth like the exhaust from a cold engine on a foggy morning. When the smoke cleared she looked past me to the window and softly she said, "No."

"Never?" I asked.

She shook her head while flicking her thumb on the end of the cigarette, causing an ash to fall into the large cut glass tray. When she lifted her head to inhale again, there were tears in her eyes. We both understood what that meant.

I remember a hiking trip we took when I was fifteen years old. Mom, Dad, Ma, Gena, and my best friend, Traci all in one car for the three-hour drive from Arroyo Grande to the Pinnacles National Monument. I had just gotten my driver's permit which allowed me to drive a car with adult supervision. In six months when I got my driver's license, I would be free, independent. I would never have to depend on other people to take me beyond bicycle range again. Traci had also just gotten her learner's permit, so naturally, we offered to drive home.

Gena, who was thirteen and had recently begun perfecting her own brand of teenage charm, snarled, "Why should we let you?"

Traci and I simultaneously shot her dirty looks, pleading our case to Mom and my stepfather, Ken, the way kids an inch too short for the roller coaster plead with the attendant at an amusement park.

"Just imagine," I said, "if you let us drive all you would have to do is sit back and relax all the way home. Doesn't that sound like a great idea?"

"Yea!" Traci took over, "just like having your own private chauffeurs."

I tried whining, "Pleeease?"

Traci, joined me, "Pleeease, Verna?"

"That's enough!" Mom never put up with whining for very long. "What do you think?" she asked Ken.

"They could use the practice." He answered.

"Then again," Gena pointed out, "if Traci drives maybe she'll give us all a break and stop her flippin' singing!"

"Watch your mouth," Mom warned.

"She has a good point," Ken said totally disregarding Gena's language.

That morning in the car, Ken and Traci had been waging war. Ken drove. Traci, sang, loudly and continually. Finally, during the umpteenth rendition of her favorite song, "Dime-A-Dance," the flip side of Vicki Lawrence's hit 45, "The Night The Lights Went Out In Georgia," she sang in a country western twang, "I came to the city 'cause the folks back ho-ome thought I was pretty enough to make it. They bought me a ticket on a star bound Greyhound. I was on my waaay-," Ken cut her off by turning the radio on, drowning her out.

Glaring at him through the rear view mirror, she started again even louder. "...singin' hey mister take a chance it only costs you a dime a da-a-ance an if you're lookin' for roma-a-ance-," Ken increased the volume cutting her off again, the smug smile on his face revealing pleasure in his power. Ken confident he had won this war of wills, switched the radio off with the flair of a concert pianist accenting the final note of a concerto.

While Traci sat quietly fuming, the rest of us enjoyed the silence. She inhaled slowly before bursting out, at the top of her lungs, songs for her role in the chorus of Arroyo Grande High School's production of the musical, *Bye Bye Birdie*. She screeched in a high pitched, nasal voice causing the hair to rise on the back of my neck and down my spine the way an alley cat's does when it sees another cat on his fence. "Hi, Nancy! Hi Ellen! What's the story, morning glory? What's the tale nightingale? Have you heard about Hugo and--" at which point Ken flipped the radio on and the whole thing started again.

"For God's sakes you two!" interrupted my mother.

"Yea!" Gena snarled from the front seat, "would you just top singing? Gaawd! I can't take it anymore."

"She should be able to sing if she wants to!" I shouted from the back seat.

"Not if I have to listen to it!" Gene countered back.

"That's right." Ken agreed.

We were a car divided. I supported Traci's freedom of expression. I had to. Ken and Gena would settle for silence even though their preference leaned more toward a public gagging. Secretly, I agreed with them, but I would never admit it. Mom and Ma were neutral territory, the Switzerland of the station wagon.

Ma sat next to me in the back seat staring out the window and wondering how long she would have to wait for a drink. It was her "medicine." Ma has been "Ma" every since I was a kid just learning to talk. I was eating an ice-cream cone in my high chair and she asked me if I knew who she was. I couldn't manage to say the whole word "grandma" so I announced in recognition, "Ma!" Then I pushed my ice-cream cone in her face. "Okay," she said wiping ice-cream from her eyes, "I'll be your Ma." The name stuck.

Ken pulled the brown Ford station wagon with wood slats to the side of the road. Traci took the wheel first. Mom sat in the center creating a human barrier between Ken and Traci in the front seat. There was an air of excitement as Traci carefully positioned her hands on the wheel at 10 and 2, exactly as we had been taught in driver's training class. She drove flawlessly. The sense of excitement lifted like a fog as we shifted our attention to other things. I wondered if the fact that her father was a highway patrolman had anything to do with the skill Traci had behind the wheel. Then it occurred to me, what if I didn't do as well? I'd make a fool of myself in front of everyone and Gena would never let me forget it. By the time Traci pulled onto the shoulder and parked I had worked myself into a nervous frenzy. Traci got out and we traded places. Gena elbowed me as I slid past her reminding me that she would be watching. She smiled thinking of new possibilities for my harassment. It was my turn. A sick feeling passed over me as I took the wheel. I self consciously put my hands at 10 and 2. I checked the mirror and adjusted the seat. I was ready.

"Just relax." Mom advised putting her hand on my shoulder.

I tried. Taking a deep breath, I stepped on the gas. The station wagon sprang forward like a bull out of a shoot, the spinning wheels screeching and spitting up a trail of dust. Reacting quickly, I applied too much pressure on the brakes, propelling everyone forward. I heard the sound of ice moving in the chest at the rear of the car.

"Easy!" Ken said bracing himself on the dash board, "Take it easy."

"Good going," Gena taunted from behind.

"Sorry!" I said, clenching the wheel, too nervous to rebut.

The excitement was back, we sensed it like a buzz. After a few minutes, I began to gain my composure, managing to maintain a fairly consistent speed, or maybe the better word would be rhythm. We still lunged forward a bit when I accelerated but now I only lifted my foot from the pedal to slow down rather than braking for control before lunging forward again. After a while, I started to relax somewhat until I passed a sign informing me to slow to 25 mph due to a curve ahead. I worried how I would manage to get my speed down to *exactly* 25 mph. As the curve got closer, my heart started beating faster and my palms started to sweat. I must have been stepping on the gas instead of the brakes because we kept going faster and faster. I remember hearing mom say, "careful" and Ken say, "slow down" as we arrived at the curve going considerably faster than 25 mph. The perspiration on my palms caused my hands to slip. I lost my grip and panicked. I made the curve but continued zigzagging back and forth as I repeatedly over-corrected. Everyone was scared silent. The only sound inside the car was the sound of the ice chest

sliding back and forth banging the sides of the car again and again each time we abruptly changed direction. It might not have been so bad, if only I had taken my foot off the gas, but I didn't and we went speeding off the shoulder nose first into the trench then shot straight up the other side, the front end of the station wagon rearing up like a stallion.

Finally it occurred to me, TAKE YOUR FOOT OFF THE GAS! We landed, creating a mushroom cloud of dust, which showered down over the car like a wave for what seemed like forever. We all sat quietly in shock. I was still clenching the wheel. Ken broke the silence saying, "Damn! Have I got a cramp in my ass!" Everyone started laughing but me. As they laughed, I decided I was never going to drive again, a really impractical decision to make when you live in California.

"Is everyone OK?" I asked wiping the tears from my eyes. Luckily, everyone was still in one piece and I was relieved for that. "Nobody ever has to worry about this happening again because, I'm never, never driving again. Ever." I whimpered. I was miserable, and everyone knew it. I even felt guilty for almost killing Gena.

"It's OK. Don't worry. Nobody's hurt." Mom said rubbing my back as she hugged me.

"A cramp in the ass never killed anyone." Ken said trying to make me feel better.

"What about the car?" I asked between sobs.

"Don't worry about the car," Ken said getting out on the passenger's side. He walked around to the back of the car and opened the tailgate. Reaching inside he pulled the large red and white Coleman ice chest, still heavy with melting ice, cans of soda and picnic leftovers toward him and pulled out a bologna sandwich and a Seven-up.

"Anyone want something to drink?" He asked before getting into the driver's seat.

No one said much on the ride home.

"Ma, do you remember that trip we all took to the Pinnacles?" I asked after a while.

"The one where I nearly killed everyone and I swore I would never drive again. Remember that?"

"Yes, I do," She said, speaking her first sentence since my arrival.

"I don't know if I ever would have driven again if you didn't make me drive all the way to Porterville the next weekend."

She laughed while she put out her cigarette, tapping down twice then rubbing the butt back and forth on the bottom of the ashtray as though she were trying to wipe away the ashes and see through it.

"I remember I didn't want to drive, but you told me 'You're driving and that's it.' There was no arguing with you. I was so scared pulling out of the driveway, I almost backed into the VonRuden's fence across the street," I said, "and the whole time you never said a word, even when I hit a divider or went off the shoulder. It must have been the longest four hours of your life."

Ma chuckled at the memory. "I ... I ... smoked," she said.

"At least a pack just on the trip over." I said. "Then you told me about Aunt Jackie. I never would have suspected. Aunt Jackie flunked her driving test the first time! Funny

she never mentioned *that* whenever she told me what a bad driver my mother was. You took her on a trip too, all the way to San Francisco!"

Ma bobbed her head in agreement, "Shhheeee was .. bad."

"Somehow knowing that made me feel so much better. Come to think of it, I never did say a word about it," I said.

"I know," Ma said.

"I guess there never was a reason. When she found out you took me to Porterville, she never mentioned driving to me again. Did I ever thank you for that?" I asked.

She shook her head no.

"It meant a lot to me, I'll never forget it." I said and I meant it.

Chicken

Chris had always tried to convince me about things that were felt to be just essential to the average person, things like who was the best politician (who invariably was simply the least worst), or which fruit went with which cheese or who was simply the most fabulous author currently. As if I could even care about such things, I mean, really, you ate cheese that tasted good and you ate fruit that tasted good and if they didn't taste good together, you didn't eat them together, simple. But Chris was never convinced, in fact sometimes Chris would get down right whiny about it and then I had to really not care about what was being said before I would finally just nod and say, "Fine, fine, whatever, now shut and pass me some of that slimy brie and a cracker." Chris could be so annoying.

It's not as if I really had to put up with Chris if I didn't want to, there were other people in my life, but whenever I would look at them I would remember how I felt about Chris when we first met. Even with the knowledge and the ability to remember all these interesting little tidbits about all sorts of different places and things, I never won a trivia game in my life but it was always a rout when we played. It was fun when we went to museums or the philharmonic and I would find out just the most astonishing things about this author or that composer. Liszt, what a stallion! The sheer expanse of the degeneracy in the arts, it gives me chills. He would eventually go overboard though and start saying things that were just a little too ridiculous. I mean, really, some people might believe everything they hear about the colors used in Pollack paintings but I didn't even care. Chris wouldn't shut up though. I was told I was obviously missing something if I didn't know the importance of whatever the hell Chris was talking about at that moment. Annoying wasn't a descriptive enough word sometimes.

After a few months we had our first fight. No big deal, I thought, but Chris rounded on me one night after I blew him off for saying something really meaningless. Who cares if it's election time? I got an upbraiding that I couldn't believe and at the end of it, don't you know, I felt bad. Guilt stricken like you wouldn't believe, I actually apologized. Later I realized that I hadn't done anything wrong and that if anyone had made an ass out of himself, it wasn't me. I said to myself from then on, if what Chris says is useless bullshit then Chris can go find a field to fertilize. Annoying was just half the time we were together. The other half was a nightmare.

I don't know what happened to us. We were so happy together in the beginning before it all really began to get to me. We had the fight to end all fights one night after we came home from the ballet, which I would have enjoyed had I not been told the sexual

persuasions of most of the dancers, mostly because I felt that one shouldn't have casual knowledge like that. The door closed after we entered the apartment and there was about one second of silence before I just screamed in frustration. It was all downhill from there. Recriminations and insults, things you wouldn't even say to your own siblings. We had it out and it ended with me using a name very similar to Oedipus and slamming the door in the face of what had been, six hours earlier, the love of my life. I was a little beyond annoyed after that.

Then came the phone calls and the presents and the apologies. You can't get rid of all of your feelings in one night. We started again with the promise that certain behavior was not going to be indulged. There were little arguments after that and things were rocky of course but eventually we found what had attracted each other in the beginning. Life was more full and all that happy romance. I'd tell all my close friends that we had finally found each other and we were well on our way to a wonderful future.

Chris came over one night for dinner. I had decided to make my specialty, that I knew was well received and that was honestly appreciated. I hadn't revealed what was going to be cooked for that evening's repast until my other half arrived but when I did, all of a sudden the Chris I didn't like was back. I was now privy to the details of some horrible television special that was somehow delightful to some parties. I got angry. I told Chris to shut up and let the damn wine breathe like everyone else said it should, I was going to go cook dinner. But that didn't end it, on no, I was tailed right into the kitchen and told how I was once again missing an important part of life because of my obtuseness. I decided right there that I was finally going to prove that I wasn't missing anything at all. So I reached for something that was going to end this discussion.

I finished fixing the main course and set it out on the table. Serving the food went very quickly in the ensuing silence. I cut my portion into small pieces and without hesitating started to eat. I stared at my plate during that first sample and when I looked up I stared directly at Chris's head and said, "All right, maybe we do taste like chicken."

When she first met him she had no idea who he was or what he was about. She met him in class one day. She knew exactly what she had to say.

"Hi. Where do you go when this class is over, by the way my name is Jennifer."

"I go to a place where I am free to understand who I am, my name is Susej."

She immediately realized that this guy was special; she knew something about him was really different. Jennifer and Susej talked sparingly each time their class met; their conversation never seemed to have any real substance; they always talked about relative things. I remember the day when Jennifer realized Susej was the type of person she longed for. Their usually meaningless conversation turned into one where she didn't want to stop talking. Jennifer quickly recognized that Susej was so similar to herself that it was incredible. He didn't rely on the materialistic things of the world; he didn't partake in the moral slipping of society. Susej knew exactly who he was and who he wanted to become. I think Jennifer admired him because of this. She admired the fact that even

though his beliefs were not accepted by all, he still maintained those beliefs as his own. To really understand how much one person has made a difference in Jennifer's life you must first understand where Jennifer was in her life.

Jennifer had reached a point in her life where nothing mattered anymore. She felt as if her world were tumbling down at such a fast pace that she was being caught in the downpour. She felt like the sugar that is poured into a black cup of coffee; once you start to pour it in the harder it is to pull it out. I can honestly say that there was not a time in her life where she was completely happy. Jennifer's thoughts were only of the fear of death and dying. She worried constantly why she even existed. For Jennifer it seemed as if there was no way of escaping her dreary world until the day she met Susej.

Jennifer's Side

I think I was really messed up. I can look back at my high school years and wonder how I'm even here today. I never truly enjoyed my high school years, I felt betrayed by so many people that I could no longer trust anyone. I remember graduating high school and feeling as if my life had just ended. I felt as if I had nothing to live for anymore, but still I tried to press on, and I hoped that somehow my life would get better.

In some ways it did. I regained my inner confidence, and I was slowly able to trust people again. I had enrolled at the local junior college and I felt my life was finally turning around. But there was still something missing, the completeness that I longed for was still not there. I was at this crucial time in my life that I met Susej. It was really strange. It seemed as if I had met Susej before; maybe under different circumstances but I had met him before. Susej showed me new ways to look at and appreciate life. He showed me how to understand and recognize what was planned for me. I guess in some ways Susej renewed in me hope and faith, and for the first time in a long time I felt totally happy. I no longer was afraid of death and I now had a new outlook on life. I realized now that death was nothing to fear. I finally had true peace in my heart.

After I realized what Susej had to offer me, I realized he was the missing link in my life. He was the part of me that for so many years was missing.

For all of the years that I felt hopelessness, Susej offered me hope; the many years that I felt unloved, Susej proved the love that I was missing; and for all the years where I had no faith, in myself or the things around me, Susej gave me faith.

Susej soon became my life. I felt empty when I didn't have him close to my heart and overflowing with joy when he was near. Eventually I didn't want to be without Susej . . . ever.

Susej's Side

When Jennifer first opened her heart to let me in, I think I was happier than she was because I knew what was in store for the both of us. I felt as if she finally let go of the hand that pulled her down. I knew that Jennifer felt as if she had no purpose in life, so I felt like it was my responsibility to prove her wrong. Jennifer thinks that I supplied her with the hope and faith that she was looking for; I think that I simply showed her the path that she needed to take to find these things. Day after day Jennifer and I talked more and more; the more we talked the closer we became. Every night without fail Jennifer set aside time for me and her to talk intimately. It was if we became one; Jennifer was a part of me and I was all of Jennifer.

I wanted so badly for Jennifer to meet my father, but I didn't want to push her into anything, so when the time came I was more nervous than she was. I didn't want Jennifer to reject him like every one else in her life, but the day finally came when Jennifer wanted to meet HIM. I introduced her to HIM, and it was then that she realized how I had supplied her with faith and hope because HE had supplied me with these same things. This was the day that Jennifer knew she would always have someone to turn to. This was the day that Jennifer found love; everlasting, never ceasing, binding love. Jennifer knew that for as long as she had faith and trust she would never be alone again.

The Faces of Angels

He watched the commercial airliner from the airport terminal window as it ascended into the white billowy masses suspended in air. Staring through his reflection, he saw the airliner disappear from the afternoon as if guided by an ungodly celestial rapture. His eyes tried to penetrate those conglomerations of minute particles, the ephemeral cigarette smoke of the heavens.

Wearing his Charlie's Angels t-shirt and freshly cut goatee, with eyes fixated upon an unrecognizable point in space, he shuffled away from the heavens, down the marble tile of the airport terminal. He was sure his plan would work. He would breeze into the Little House of Manna, a shop in the airport specializing in women's hosiery and fine fragrances, jokingly demand unleavened bread while swirling his .22 caliber Refractor series handgun upward, and empty the register. He knew it would work.

At Cameras Cameras Cameras, the midpoint between his secret rendezvous, he stopped to glance at an image transmitted over a monolithic tv. He did not recognize the totality of the image, but instead stared mesmerized by the thousands of pixel pools which were emitting different colors, each a pulsing kaleidoscopic iris. They flashed a cryptic message, a mocking electronic koan. Angered and confused by the image, he proceeded cocksure and steadfast with his plan.

At the counter, a woman with a cinnamon roll bouffant, wearing an orange jumpsuit with a series of numbers printed where a breast pocket might rest, turned away from the full length mirror long enough to smile larger than her narrow face would allow:

"Welcome to Little House of Manna, can I help you?"

"Where do you keep your unleavened bread?"

"Sir?"

"Unleavened bread, archenemy of pita. You know, that Jewish bread that's smashed all to hell."

"Uhh, sir, we."

"Look lady, where do you keep the damn bread?"

An epiphany - two nights ago, while watching reruns of Shaft on the TNT network, she learned in a complicated series of verbal exchanges that bread in the seedy criminal underworld was the equivalent of money. Reaching underneath the counter with surprising stealthiness, she grabbed and pointed her .22 caliber handgun, a smaller model in the Refractor series. She always carried protection. The Little House of Manna had been robbed two years ago by a pack of marauding disco queens, leaving her shop hoseless and in debt. On every anniversary of the robbery, she wore the orange jumpsuit to work as a sign to airport passersby that she was a hardened and rejuvenated woman capable of violence.

The man, now as confused as the woman had initially been, also reached for his gun. Motionless, wordless, with guns drawn, they floated out to the hallway like ballroom dancers. Bloody halfmoons arose against the mid-day grip of his non-shooting hand, while the pores in his forehead yakked up beads of sweat. Twitching uncontrollably, her left eye was stung by the backwash of synthetic stickiness that dripped from her honeybun hairpiece.

He shot first.

The projectile whizzed around the bouffant, ricocheted from a steel brochure rack at an information desk, off a series of marble columns and into a member of the Airport Safety Commission. Down on both knees, the wounded man yelled a few Spanish euphemisms, pulled a gun from his jacket, and shot in the general vicinity of the gunfire. His bullet followed a straight path, through a metal detector, sounding an alarm, and into the thigh of a dope sniffing Basenji. The compact dog, a result of budget cuts to airport security, broke out in a series of loud yodels, being genetically incapable of barking. Smart enough to recognize this unparalleled commotion as the first and only time they'd be able to shoot their expensive hardware, two security guards squeezed off thirty rounds into the House of Manna, over the heads of the instigators, both belly down and confused. An old man, angered by the audacity of his younger contemporaries, sent out a lustfilled parade of shrapnel from the gun concealed underneath his mobile chair, while a seven year old child, almost wounded by this antiquated creature, suffered a head injury from the kick of his stolen .357 Magnum. Stumbling and dizzy, he managed two more shots from the gun, which had been registered to a Honduras ballerina, before blacking out. Mocking the two instigators from the second floor with charade-like movements, two teenage fraternal twins, bored with the inactivity of lying on their stomachs, shot invisible bullets at a female employee hidden downstairs at Jiffe Corn, a snack shop selling spicy corn on the cob. The twins were sure she was a lascivious little harlot.

Like mosquitoes awaiting a blood bank opening, hundreds of different caliber projectiles buzzed over head. Although the citizen uprising was resulting in wound upon wound, causality upon causality, all involved were consumed by a lethargic euphoria akin to the exhaustion experienced during love making. Under the moans and groans of shrapnel, the man on his stomach had become disgusted by the gunfire, not because of the prolonged mayhem and carnage, but because it had swindled him out of his plan; made him an outsider at his own crime; he had been forced into voyeurism. He almost did not recognize that his partner had died, a bullet to the cerebellum. Immediately as he discovered her body, a bullet exploded into his back, making a ricocheting excursion off his spinal column and through nearly every major organ. As the scarlet faces of angels appeared on his chest, in what seemed like a reflex action, his hand extended toward the woman.

99¢ MOVIE THEATER

that mustache and denim man
does not know
white knuckled ape
snickering over
the macho illumination of
Stallone
does not realize
that while I sit
muffling my comments
in cinematic silence,
I could just as easily
cut out his larynx
with a butter knife.

