

← tOWELS →

VISION

vision

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(the more you're dream is dead)

[Vol. 90]

because

BECAUSE

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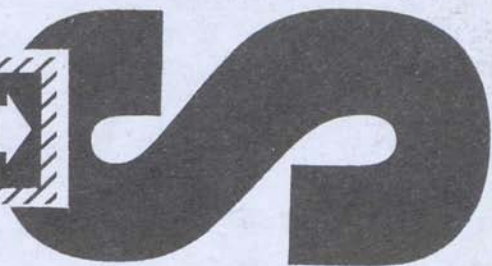
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Editor: Janet Schneider
Assistant Editor: Barbara Owczarek
Faculty Advisor: Joe Gastiger
Poetry Staff: Susan E. Stemont (Editor)

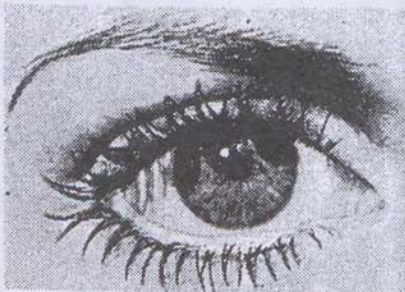
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Lisa Greenlee
Kelly Murphy
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Jeff Senatra

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Phil Doherty
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Danielle Konwin
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Non-Fiction Staff: Kathryn Risor-Heise (Editor)
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Kathy Nowak
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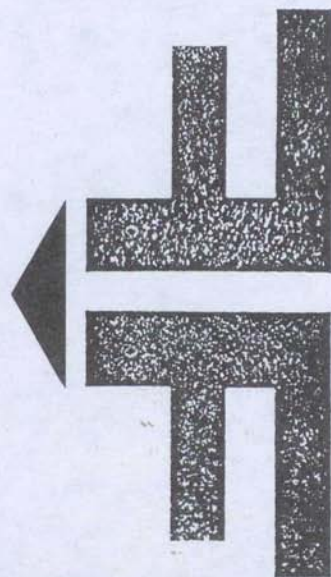
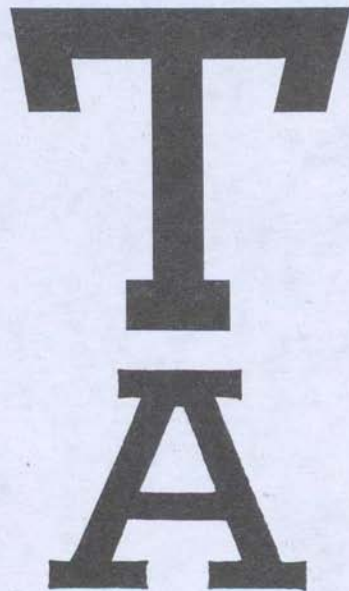
Art Director: Mark Rattin
Designers: Shin Chen
Sherri Lerche
Cheryl Cox

Typesetter: Betty L. DuMont



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[CONT]

LITERARY CONTRIBUTORS

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Andrea Stark | Daniel J. Bingley |
| Mark Kimmet | Russ Needham |
| Cherie Lea Konyha | Charles Schroeder |
| G. E. Colpitts | Sandra L. Moore |
| Tara Moyle | Laura Dollemolle |
| Luke Welch | Keith Nyquist |
| Jennifer Boe | |
| Steve Foldvari | |
| Kurt Hoeksema | |
| Rebecca Anthony | |
| Darole Bolin | |
| Lisa Greenlee | |
| Alison Harcourt | |
| Carolyn West | |
| Joseph Mysliwicz | |
| Julie Stege | |
| David Charbonneau | |
| Todd Davis | |



LOUD LOUDER!!!
BLAH... BLAH... BLAH...

ARTISTIC CONTRIBUTORS

- Maureen Dempsey
- Carlos Amaury Silveira
- Barbara Jo Gustafson
- Jay Harris
- G. E. Colpitts
- Otis F. Richardson

BLAH...



rip tor S.

Editor's Statement

Janet Schneider

This 1990 edition of *Towers* marks the first of a new decade. In general, the arts have been encountering many roadblocks in the past year.

With disputes over censorship and National Endowment for the Arts funding, artists and art supporters have fought gallantly for the right

of expression. As the only literary and artistic publication funded by the S.A. I'd like to think *Towers* has helped in this fight. By publishing

the best artistic works NIU has to offer, we provide a forum for creative expression in our little section of the world.

Towers is a compilation of efforts by many people. I would like to give special thanks to Joe Gastiger, Mark Rattin, Barbara Owczarek, Susan Stemont,

Kathryn Risor-Heise, Lynn Glitto, and Shin Chen for their dedication, hard work, and strong belief in the importance of *Towers*. I would also like to thank

the staff members who make the selection process possible. And, most importantly, I thank all the students who submitted poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and

artwork. It is for you that this magazine exists.

POETRY

of

fruit

turn

solitude

in the

and meditation;

t,

John Stuart Mill

eloquence,

of

intercourse

with the

world.



For Anyone Who Wants to Know

Andrea Stark

I write because I can't afford a camera
 To take the pictures of Indian children
 Walking wind-tented by their mother's saris
 Through South Street Seaport

Or stills of cat faces
 Whiskering Philadelphia florist
 And bookstore windows

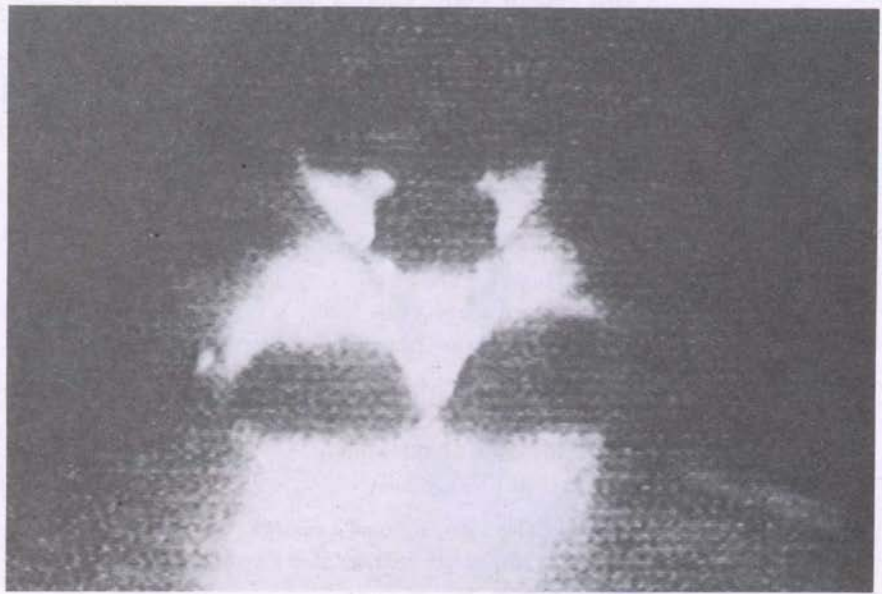
Or the moment faced music woman
 Thimble-fingering blues and bluegrass
 Her washboard accented by feet
 Stomping cymbals on pavement

And the scatter-toothed watchman
 Two stories up
 Shaking his knees in the window
 Following her Chicago beat

I write because I can't afford a camera
 That will separate the notions of my eyes
 In double focus

Or fast enough to catch the girls
 Rolling in layers down the Michigan dunes

For Anyone Who

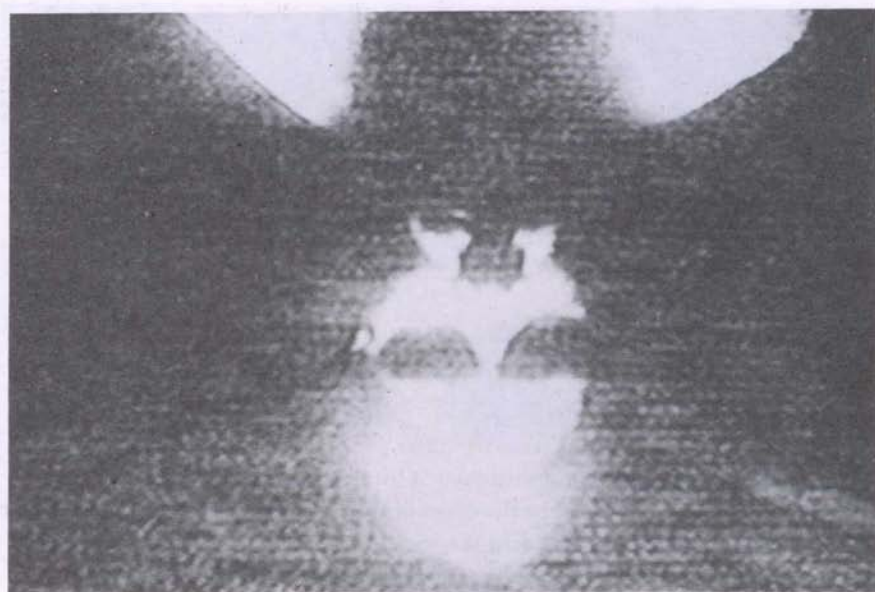


Black and white photo of a white dog, possibly a Bull Terrier, lying down.

Harvest

Andrea Stark

I don't care if the poems you write me
Are only the foot prints of your walk
Over the old tomato patch
Nobody plants there now
And today I feel the hoe pull
Dragging down each row
Making my shoulders tilt and ache
Crossing rocks partially buried by bushes
Cat prints in between stakes
Light in the cool dirt
Nothing froze in winter
Except our neighbor's bird bath
And maybe the edges of the grapevine
Barely shading the back porch
Following the thermometer
And my back today
Tight with ice memory of my old summers
And kitchen baskets tomato-full



John Smith on the
river, 1844. (Smithsonian Institution Archives)

Three Ways of Cycling

Mark Kimmert

I

We fly like flocks of geese
Following in our fellows' wake of air,
Legs beat like wings or hearts
That bear our journey's dreams.
Beneath us lies the lullaby of two dozen wheels,
So smooth it sounds like silence.
The ground glides by so easily,
We hardly have to think or breathe.

II

We ride upon a sea of prairie,
The sun setting with no land in sight.
We are whalers in a rowboat
Driven by the madness of Ahab.
All of us are orphans, though our family is large;
Even this immense sky of red and black and blue
Is our brother and this asphalt ocean
Shimmering with spokes is our mother.
In the distance blows a pod of whales,
And we become a band
Of stallion-strong bastard children

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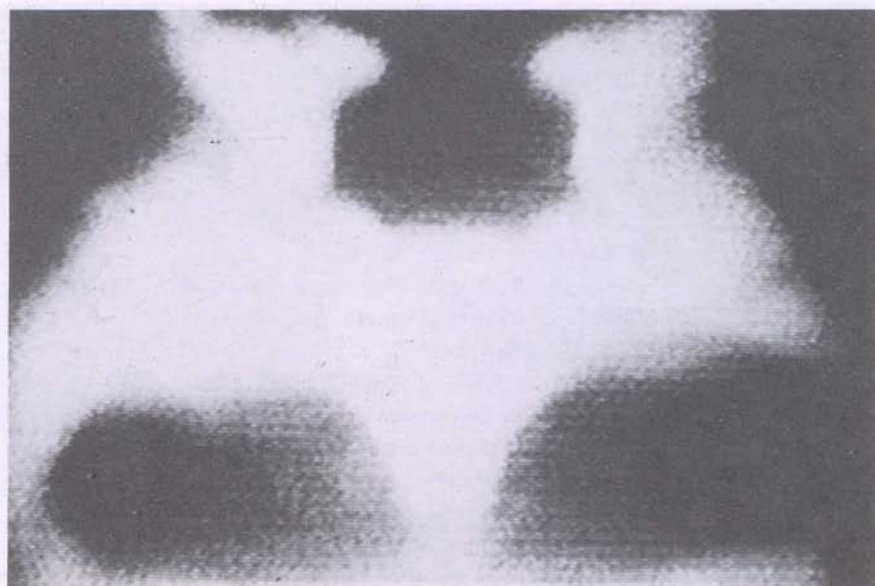


Three Ways of Cycling

Breaking rank on the downhill of a swell,
 Swearing, swerving, sucking wheel
 To save energy for the kill.
 When we close on the Great White Whale,
 We know he is our father.

III

After thirty miles I am dropped by the pack.
 Suddenly I notice all the tiny sounds;
 A deadened wind whispers through September shocks of corn,
 Passing a fence I hear the squeak of my chain.
 What else will echo back?
 The air has thickened and a lone crow
 Flounders slow-motion across the sky.
 The sun perches red, and distorted,
 In a stand of distant trees.
 Tonight the clouds are black and shaped like spears.
 Once I was a warrior.
 Now I coast without shield or sword,
 Unafraid to die.



For Anton, Going Home

Cherie Lea Konyha

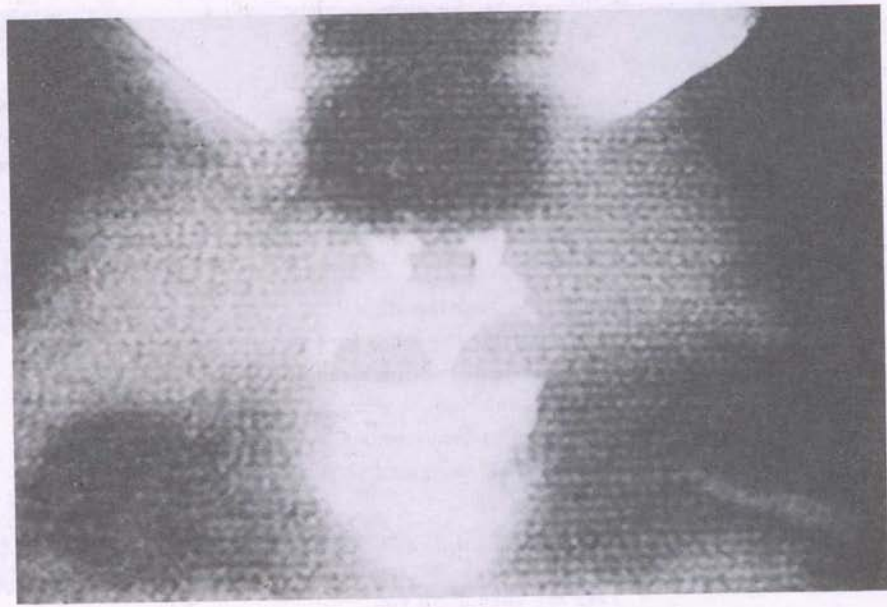
Silent old man
with the land in your eyes,
you carried your burden
in three sacks of grain:

pride,
labor,
and liberty.

On the glory of these you broke yourself—
your ears on the ore boats,
your feet on the furrows,
your heart on the crowned copper
Lady.

But can you hear the child
who sits astride the sacks for sport,
exulting in your Samson strength?
He is of your blood, sharing
the labor of heavy beasts,
the pride of redeemed sand soil.

His name is Love,
and for liberty he's shouting
through thick burlap and chaff:
"Take my yoke upon you,
and play with me,
in the oldest of all countries,
in the land of the truly free!"



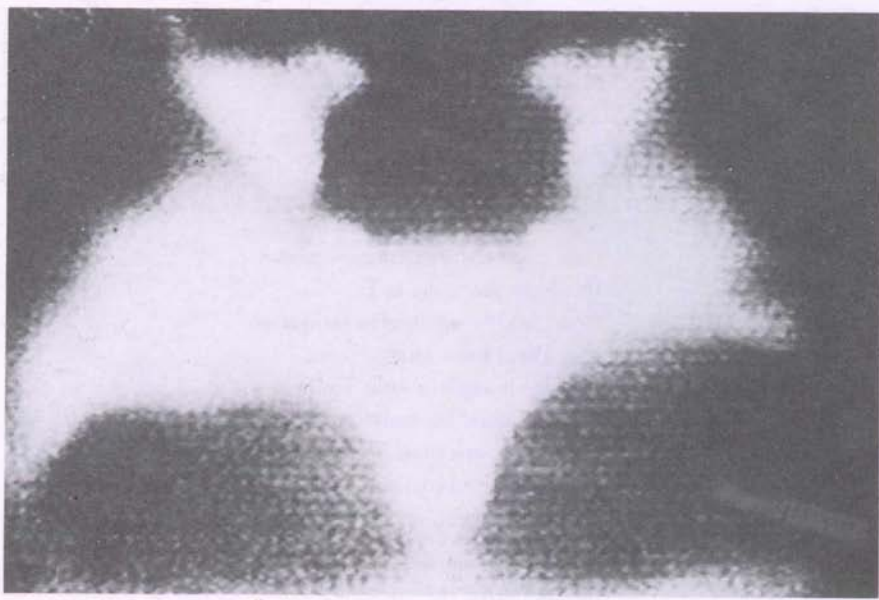
Ringalevio

G E Colpitts

Marriage was a game to her:
She watched out windows, waiting
For us to come, to greet us,
Feed us on her desperation,
To wind the clocks down
Again, to wait.

Her whispers crowd my mind,
A maze of simple instruction:
Don't make the mistakes I made
Don't do the same as I
Don't marry without examination
You should not analyze love
You can't explain your feelings
Men are good for only one thing
You, dear, are their best result
Finish your education
Finish what you start . . .

I am living out the life
She prepared me for:
Twisting on the sheets every night,
Clawing at the darkness
For a face and a name.



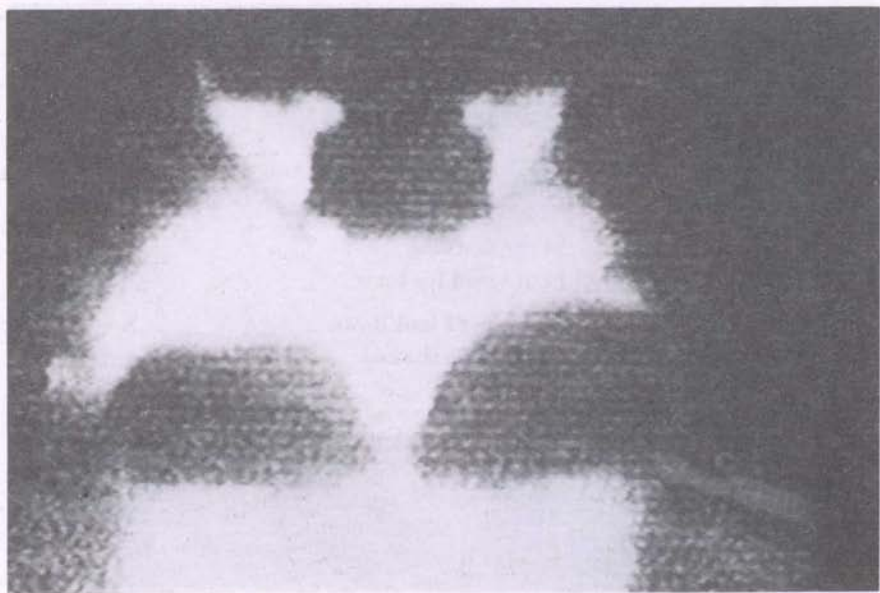
One Night Stand

G E Colpitts

I can't wash the smell of you
Out of my sheets or hair.

In the morning
I cut bread for toast

And when I look down
I'm carving the bed.



sidewalk shows

Tara Moyle

in the summer
with cherry popsicle stained lips
and dirty knees
i would spend
solemn hours at twilight
alone
watching the assortment of insect life
on the outside wall
of my white stucco house.

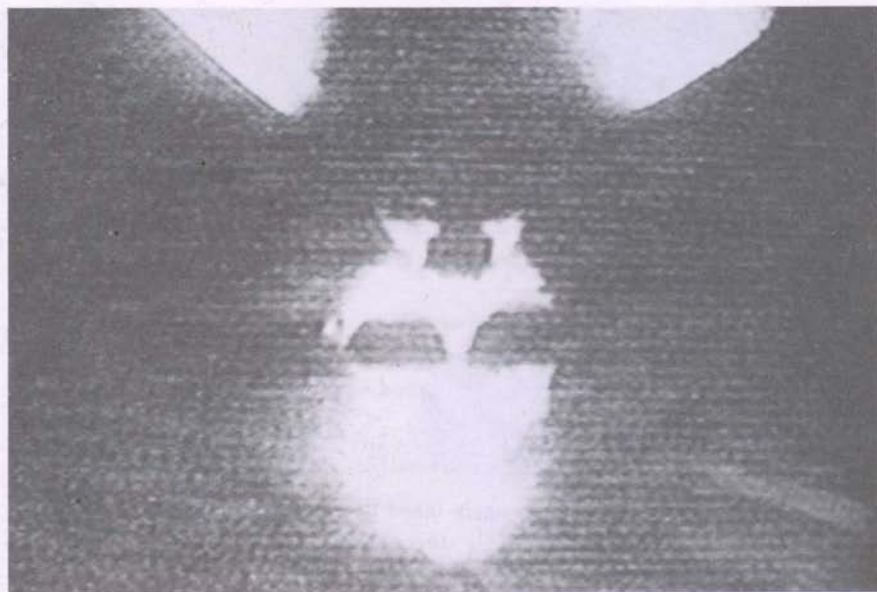
cross legged and barefoot
I picked the insects from the wall
like grapes
and then inspected them
holding them captive
inside my small cupped hands.

with pride i revealed to my mother
the contents of a small jewelry box.

i had once again taken the daddy-long legs
from the white stucco wall
and removed each of their eight legs
leaving
only the small grey bodies
for my white collection box.

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1970



sidewalk shows

the ladybugs, however,
were sacred
and were kept in clear tupperware
containers with air holes in the tops.

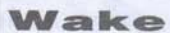
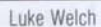
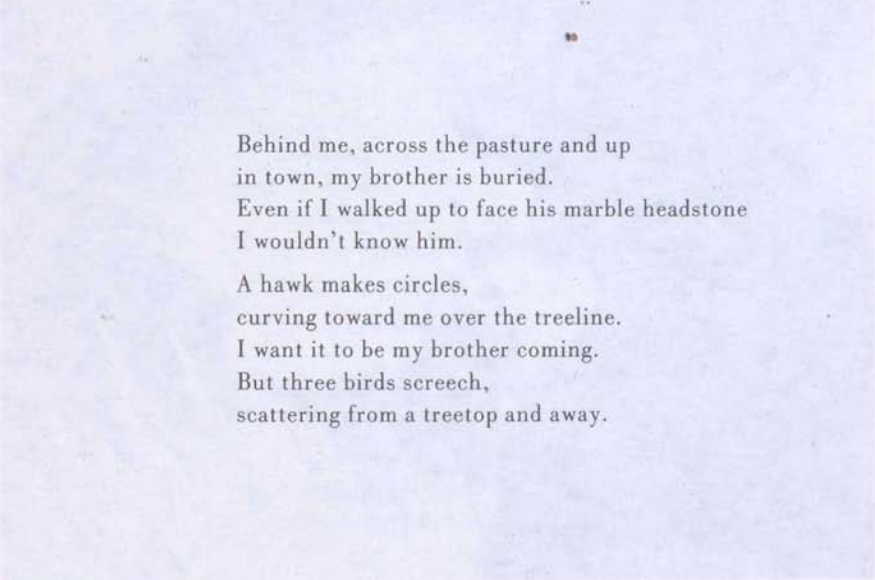
even in fifth grade
i couldn't kill one
for my class insect collection.

nothing went unobserved in my old stucco house.
i found time to inspect every crack,
and there were plenty of them.
i saw the significance of an ant community,
of a ladybug's black dots.
observing was always comparative.

but as i grew older,
the cracks began to close
and life became more narrow.

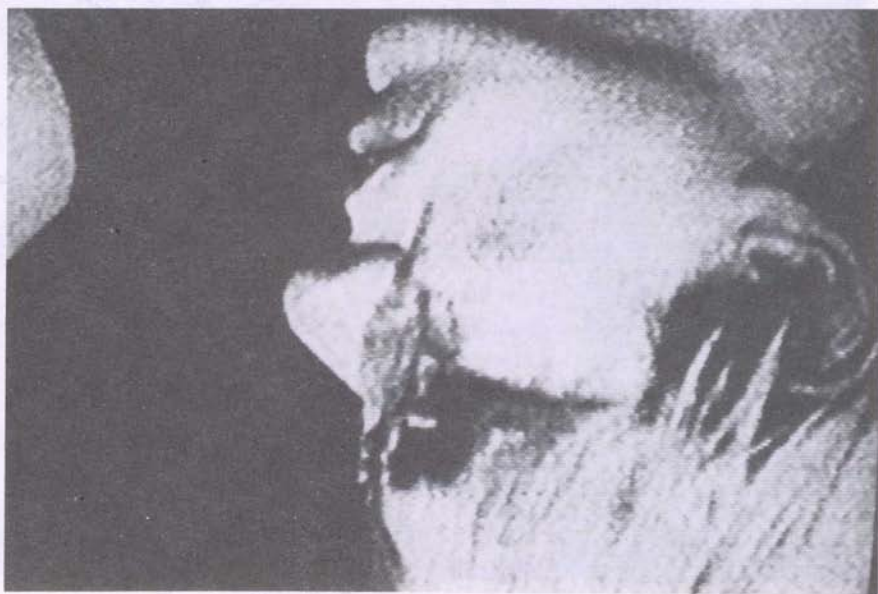
today the new owners
of my old house
put green plastic siding
over the crumbling stucco of my old world,
leaving me with nothing but dust to watch.



 **Wake** Luke Welch

Behind me, across the pasture and up
in town, my brother is buried.
Even if I walked up to face his marble headstone
I wouldn't know him.

A hawk makes circles,
curving toward me over the treeline.
I want it to be my brother coming.
But three birds screech,
scattering from a treetop and away.



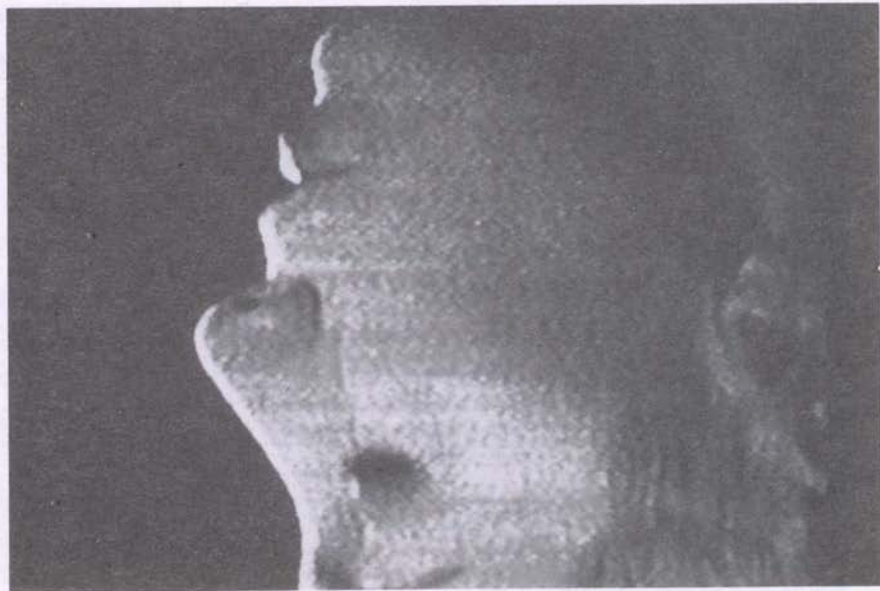
1968-1969

Mountain Hair

Luke Welch

My hair is mountain hair.
I washed it this morning
at the foot of a waterfall.
The wind shaped it like a peak
as I climbed.
Standing high, naked,
the sun turned me deer-brown.
My hair flew wild.

At the end of my trail
I hitched a ride back down
into town. Walking the streets,
drinking red wine with lunch,
I am a small mountain.
A white patch of snow
melts on my neck.



Untitled

Steve Foldvari

So this is all it is, then?

All a life so much

pencils and paperclips and
spare lint in the corner of an
old desk drawer

uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh

Nailed up and sprawling with a
harsh blue light

"You just about ready?"

"You just about

ready."

Not quite autumn or spring

She would wear the black skirt and
and sweater and he noticed her hands
concentrated on her tan hands

and the miniscule indentation just at the base of her hand on its top.

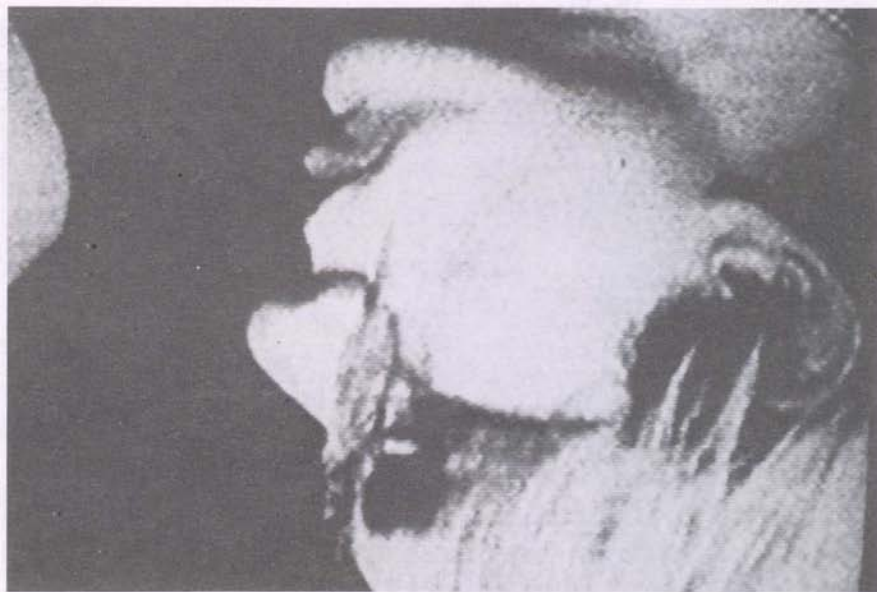
The knobby wristbones and knees of
the old dog in the yard. He
threw a rock at it to keep it

out of

the garbage

The roads all ran so straight

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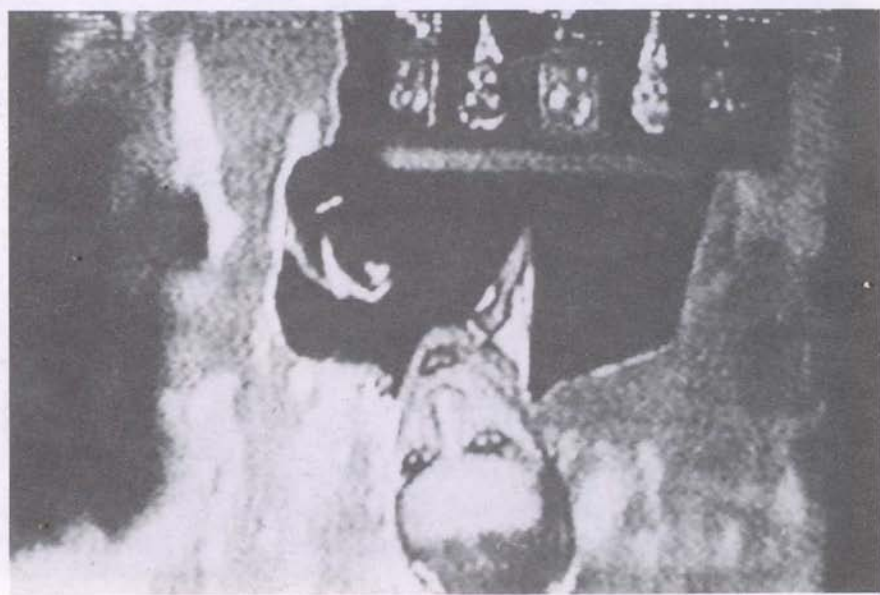
Untitled

and had so many cars
parked on them! They weren't
roads they were
 long gray flatlands
I could feel the long gray flatlands in the deadspot
above my eyes.

Her eyes never closed but
never opened either

And the buildings depressed him
and the flatlands frightened him
and he feared
running endlessly in a circle, all in a circle, all heads down,
watching the red flash of the soles before them.

The taste of the dirt, the taste of the sand
The long full streets on a red burnt land
He would stop now.



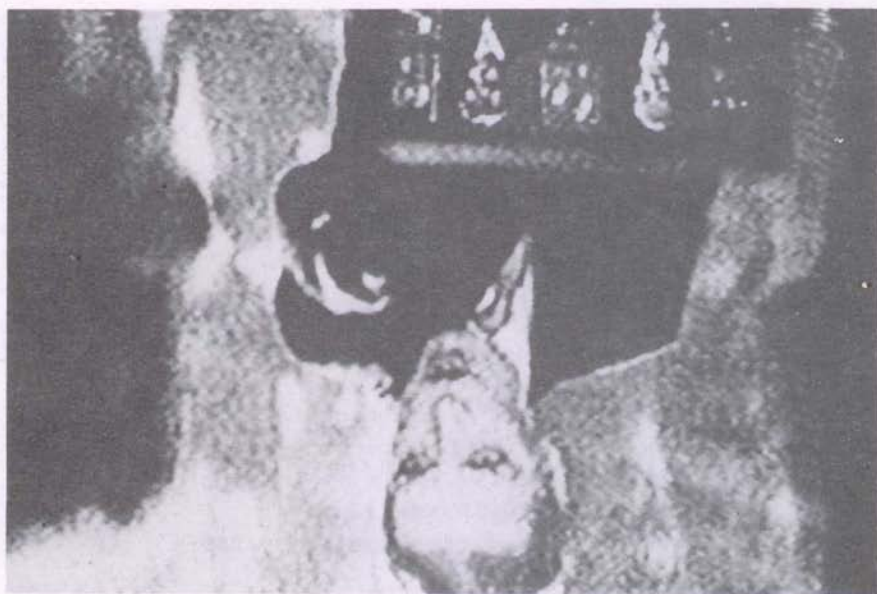
Old Loves for the Old Year

Kurt Hoeksema

Mr. Carlson has gained weight
since his divorce. He learned
to cook on a grill, and now
he eats steak four times a week.
Living alone in an exclusive apartment,
he must make love to women on
this couch I sit on Does he enjoy it?
Living alone, I mean.

Mr. Carlson's daughter happens to be
my ex-girlfriend. The three of us
are here to celebrate her birthday.
Her hands fumble to open one of her
father's gifts. The yellow-specked sweater
tumbles out, and she holds it at arm's length.
Isn't it beautiful her father asks.
She answers yes but you shouldn't have bought
such an expensive one.
As I feel the sweater she has put on,
I run my hand across her back
along the lines of her bra straps.

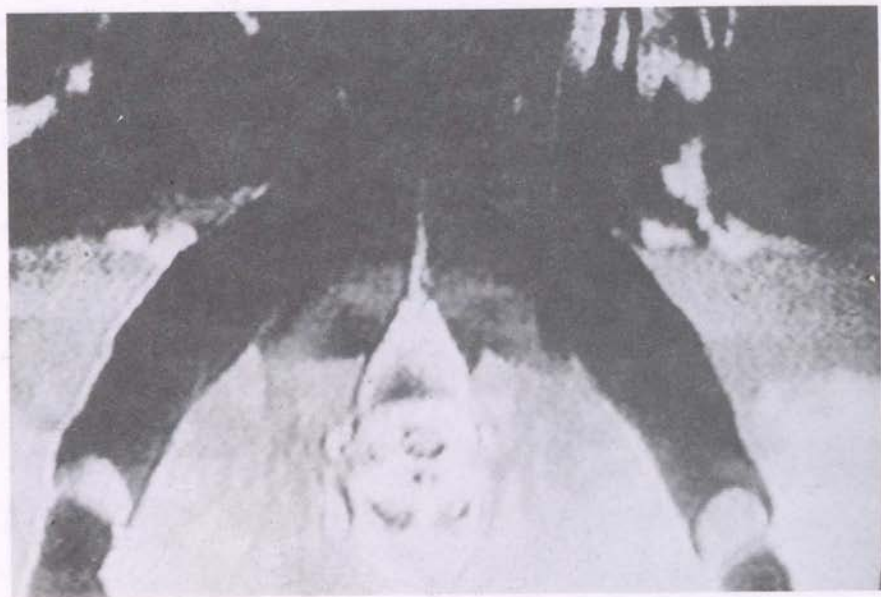
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Old Loves for the Old Year

Does she really love this?
The sweater, I mean.

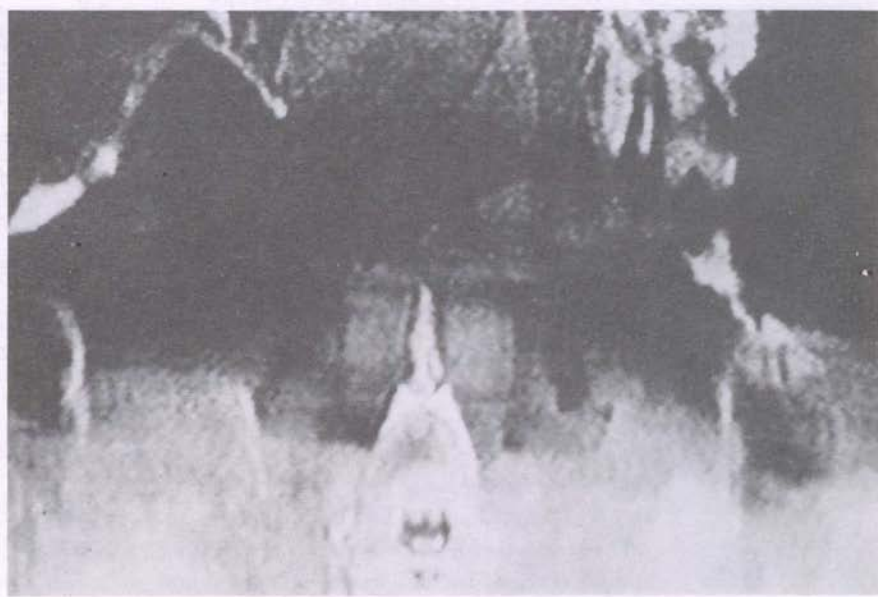
Mr. Carlson, his daughter, and I
sit around watching an old John
Wayne movie. Over the spatter of gunfire,
we talk nonsense. The subject
on all of our minds, we avoid.
After midnight, Mr. Carlson walks
her and me to our separate
but adjacent cars. I open the door,
not wanting to leave.
I won't leave old loves, I mean.



Mental Health

Kurt Hoeksema

If I call I make sure to call at three or four A.M. My psychologist then knows it's me. This time I'm angry, plenty drunk and suicidal—you might know. *Remember*, he says, *to cut the wrists lengthwise. Not crosswise. That's important. The bath water must be warm.* This fu-fucking Judas, who's he to plan my death? *Is the razor sharp?* he asks. *Is it new? Do you have it now?* I feel my wrist then scream at him, *It'll be your fault if I die.* Then I can't tell if he's coughing or laughing before he says, *Not mine. I won't have killed you.* We talk until the morning dawns and then he picks me up. We eat together where he works and I agree to floor number eight—the psycho ward—for as long as that may be. In his office he hugs me like I always wished my father had. When a nurse walks in and I feel shamed—Joe's hands wrapped round me tight like that—he says he has a license for it, not to worry.



Spitak: through the earthquake

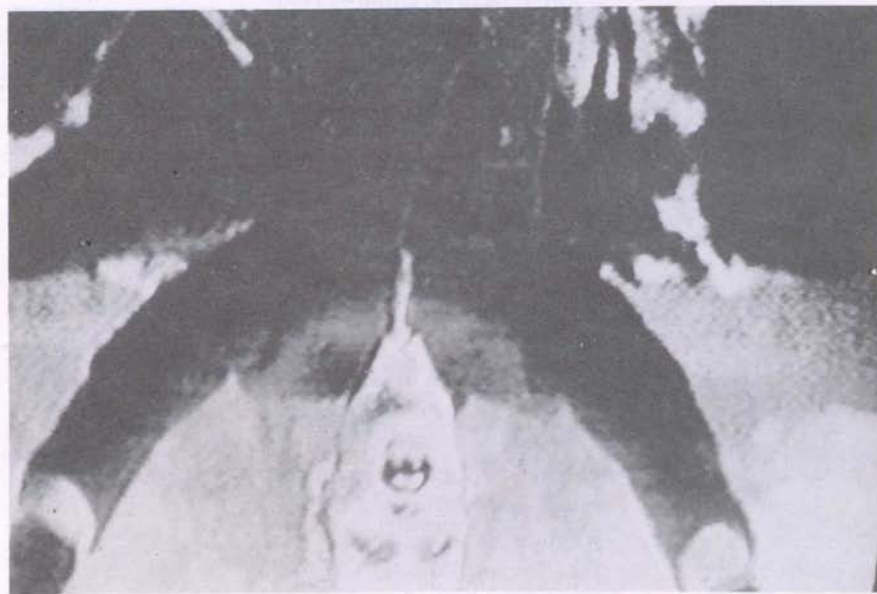
Rebecca Anthony

11:40 a clock tower reads,
11:40.
Silently, in rows, children read,
tell time.
teapot unattended whistles angrily,
"Time for tea! Time for tea!"
Buzzer on the dryer loudly wails,
"It is done! It is done!"
Woman dressed in black,
time for death.

Time for death,
enter on its cue
11:40.

Soccer field alive with silent fury.
Rows of coffins fill the stands,
no second half.
Victor, death, today upon this field
scored up 15,000.
Where's life's Goalie?
Time for tea. Time for tea.
No whistles from the referee
to signal foul

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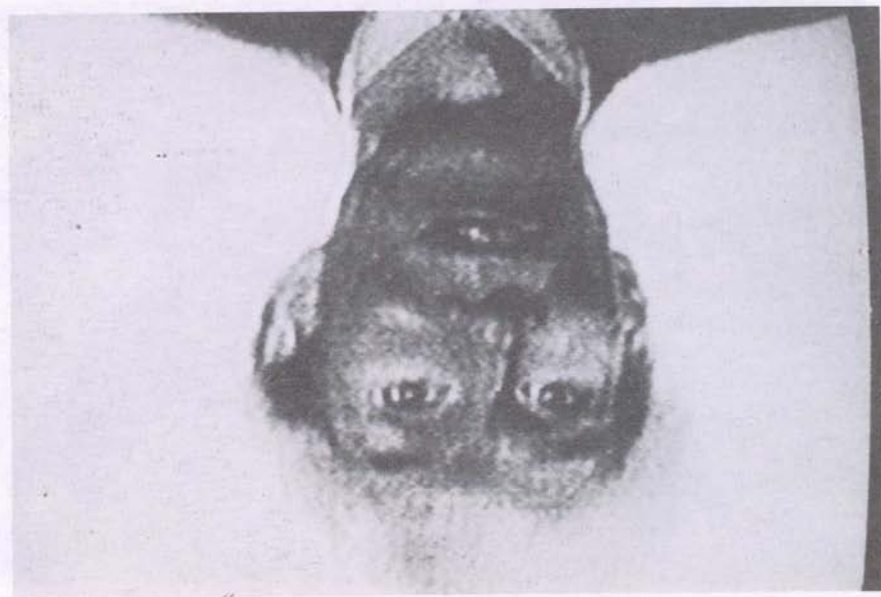
Spitak:
through the earthquake

Women in the school yard
sorting out piles of rubble.
Bloody hand, sweat stains, ripped knees
tear stains.

Find a familiar shoe
and offer to The Goalie
sacrifice,
loudly wail,
"It is done! It is done!"

Woman dressed in black amid stone skeletons.
Time for death.

• Town in Armenia devastated by earthquake. The soccer field was used as a makeshift morgue

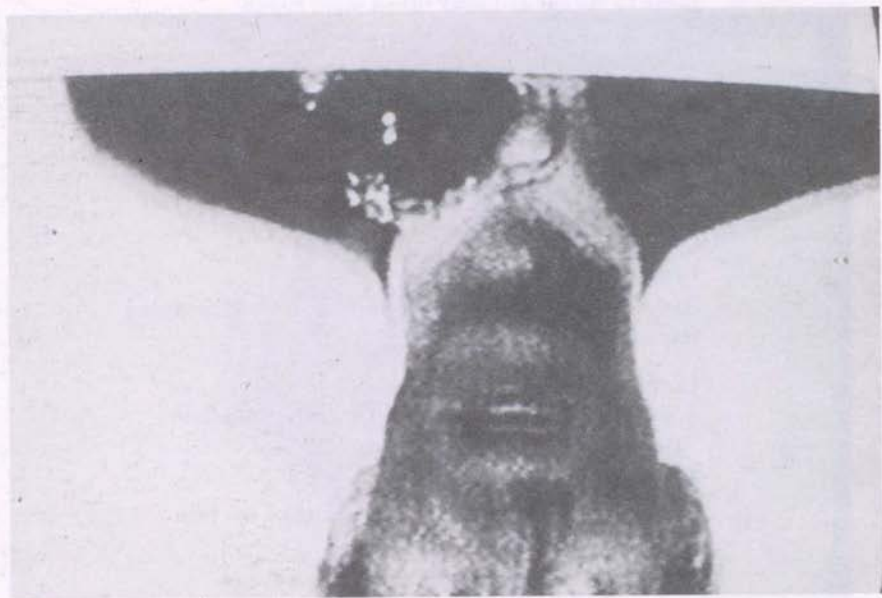


Breathing the Blue

Karole Bolin

Last winter at the old house
 Someone told me about you,
 Close to my ear as I sank into a plaid couch
 And watched you disarm your guests with offerings:
 Something to eat, to drink, to ponder,
 Blue eyes piercing, playful, urgent.
 They told me you quarreled with an eccentric parent
 Back in high school once,
 Then mowed the lawn in the dark wearing a snowsuit
 And marching-band hat.
 I accept a drink
 And a sky-blue pierce that spilled the back of my mind
 Out onto the carpet.
 In spring
 A new coil of clothesline lay on your kitchen floor,
 "To make my sheets smell good," you said.
 The new sun made me squirm
 And sweat in my clothes as you stretched the line
 Between budding trees out back.
 Slow as the sun, I touched open lips to eyelids
 As moist and translucent as new leaves,
 And slowly I breathed
 And remembered

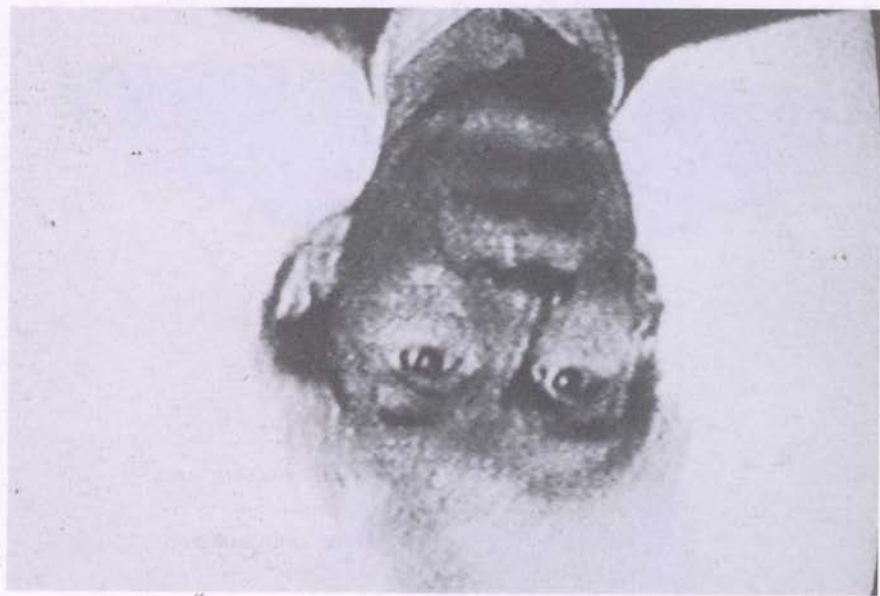
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Breathing the Blue

My sixth or seventh summer,
Alone in a steamy backyard
I try to swing in wet fitted sheets,
But clothespins give way,
So I stand and make a cross of myself
Against cool smooth cotton that molds to my body
And comes into my nostrils and mouth
As I inhale
And taste
The sparkling sky—
Light-headed,
Unable but aching to breathe deeper
And deeper.

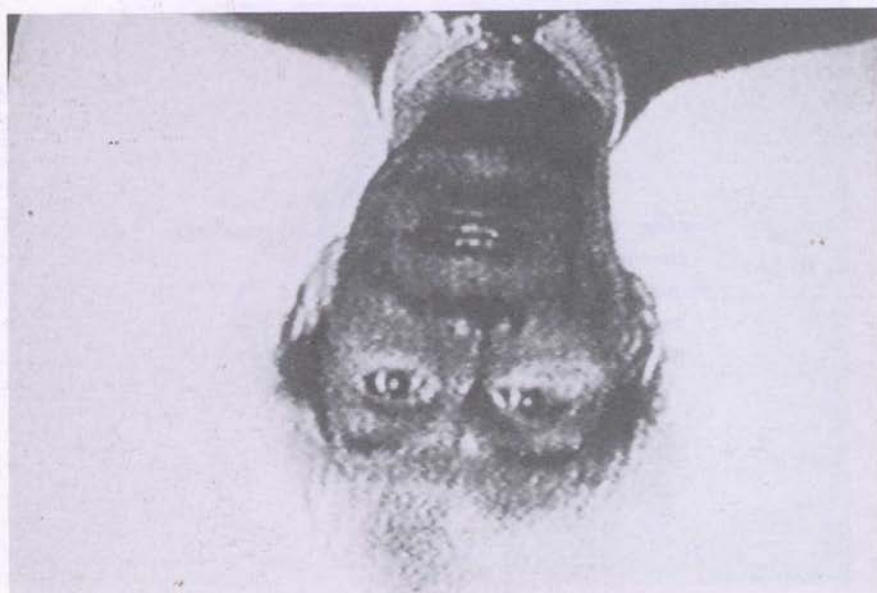
Now, as we lie on your warm roof,
Sky-blue sheets that sway heavily beneath trees
Glow of day in the gray-green dusk.
The breeze carries more autumn than summer,
And I, dizzy from the height, ache,
Longing to breathe your blue deeper
And
Deeper.



Mind Travel

Lisa Greenlee

A warm summer breeze blows through my high school hair
through the open car window
Swimming at the lake
and I feel the water as I plunge in
And I look through the window at
the cold northern Illinois snow.



The Artichoke

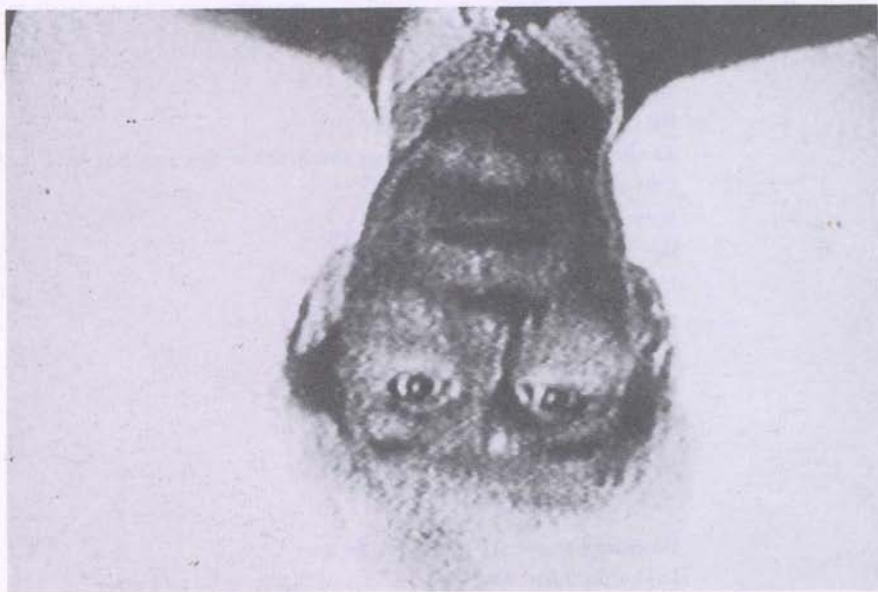
Alison Harcourt

This was it.
He meticulously scrapes away
At the little hairs surrounding the heart of the artichoke.
I sit and watch.
It took a while,
But he finally produces the heart
Unscathed.

He lifts his head.
Oh, those bright eyes!

He hesitates for a second, and then,
To my surprise
Presents the heart to me.
"Try it, you'll like it."

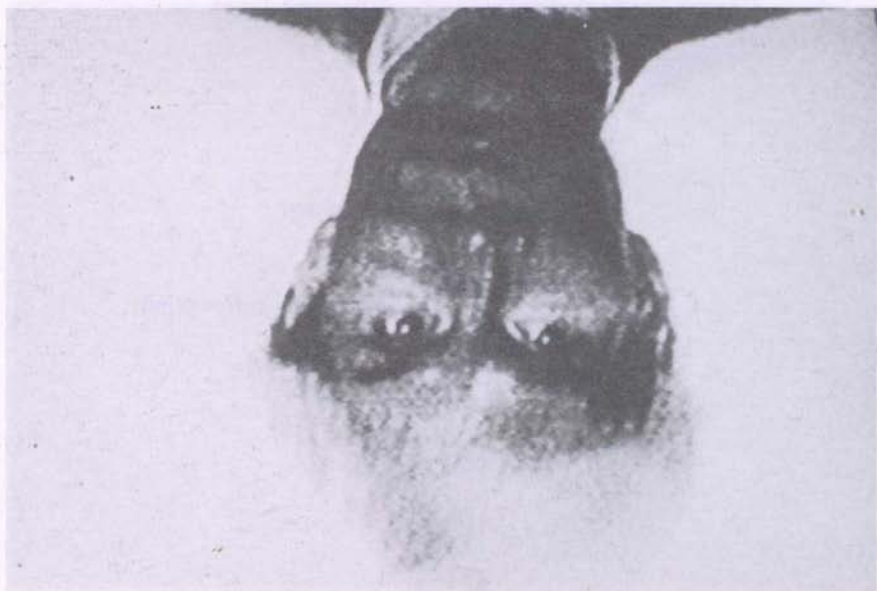
Doubting seriously that I'll like it
I take the heart from his hand and dip it into the butter.
It was good.
Too bad.
I wanted so much to say that I didn't like it.



Some Boxelder Beef:

Carolyn West

Fullbright Scholar Bill Holm
Watched boxelder bugs for a year.
Wrote a book.
Missed the obvious.
Boxelder soup, crescent rolls, and coffee grinds
Satisfy me.



Surface Rime

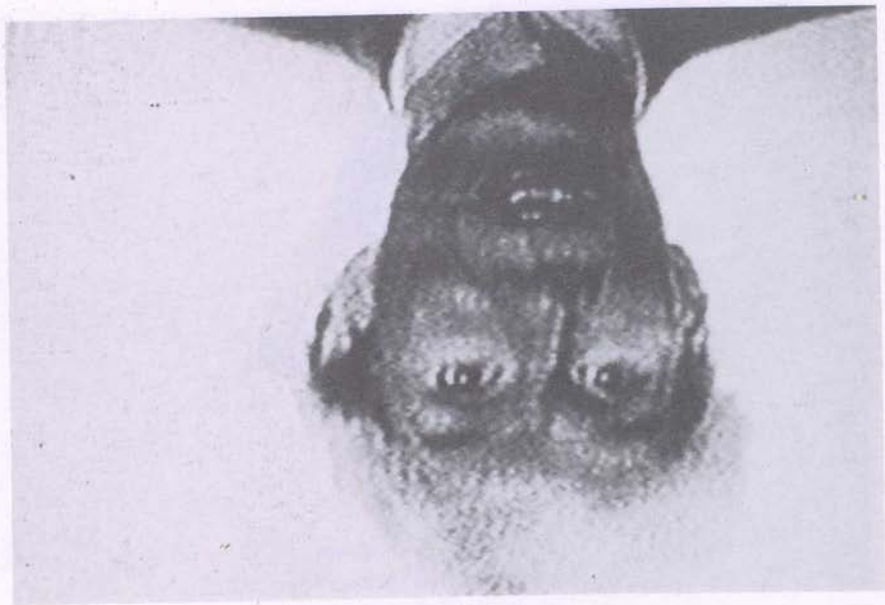
Joseph Mysliwiec

When the fluid white
hit the frozen white
i saw you move
reflected on the
floating crystal cube
alcohol
fingerprints my eyes

listen

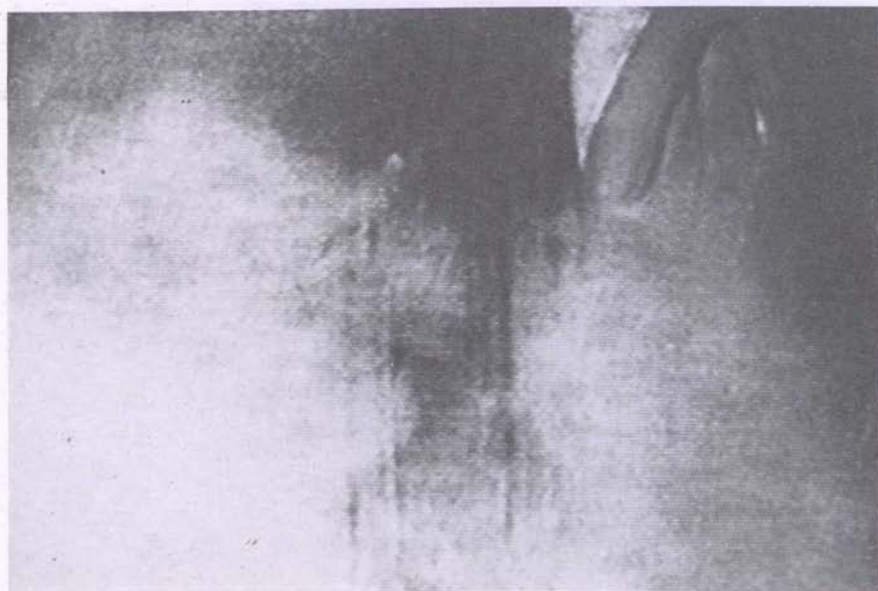
the sound
ice cracking
under your step
it would wake me
move me out of bed
to stand
before fogged window
with quilted corners wipe
outside bled to clarity
and puddled on the sill
mornings

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Surface Rime

mournings
i sat
retrieved in red blanket
redeemed by spirits
sedated in my foreign soul
i stitched dust
and watched
toasters chrome
reflection rippled
in waters walk
we rose
from burned purple
and found white blister warmth
in a coat of
nights sweat wax
to seal
to bind
sifting storms through my hair
i would rock
embraced by nine years of worship
i am bathed
in white motion



Work of Love

Joseph Mysliwiec

My love for you is steel devotion
I have razor understanding
You need me to wrestle your blood

My love for you is marrow deep
I have skeletal sight
You need me to twist your spine

My love for you is lung smooth
I have oxygen motion
You need me to suffocate your voice

My love for you is nerve woven
I have electric persuasion
You need me to drain your thought



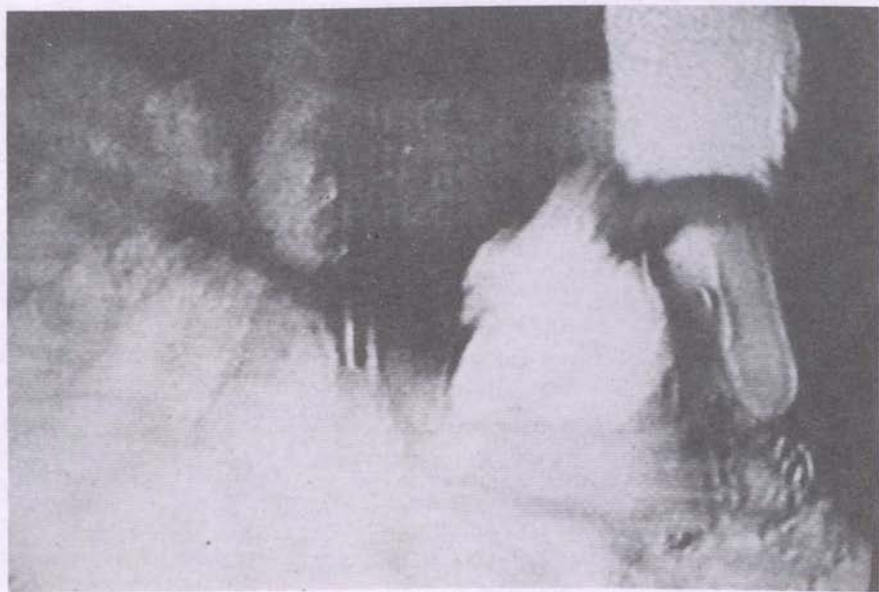
West Indian Rhythm

Julie Stege

Under a tropic moon
 wind presses into palms;
 it whispers with your words
 wanders with your lips to my face
 Carrying West Indian kisses. . .

I look to your silk skin, ••
 black as the sky:
 I see stars right through you
 sending sparks to the bay.
 Below us waves writhe and
 splash island rhythms
 into the pier.

And I am dancing:
 my hair white across your back.
 We contrast and fold
 into darkness
 as you fall into my flesh
 and all I can hear
 is your blood beating
 to the rhythm of the waves
 and wind pressing past palms
 into me.



Untitled

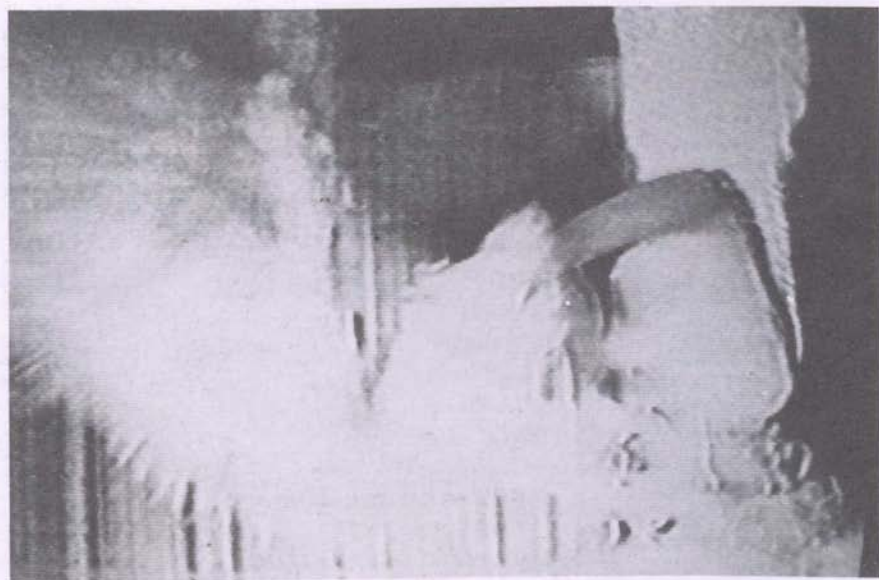
Julie Stege

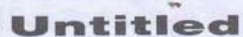
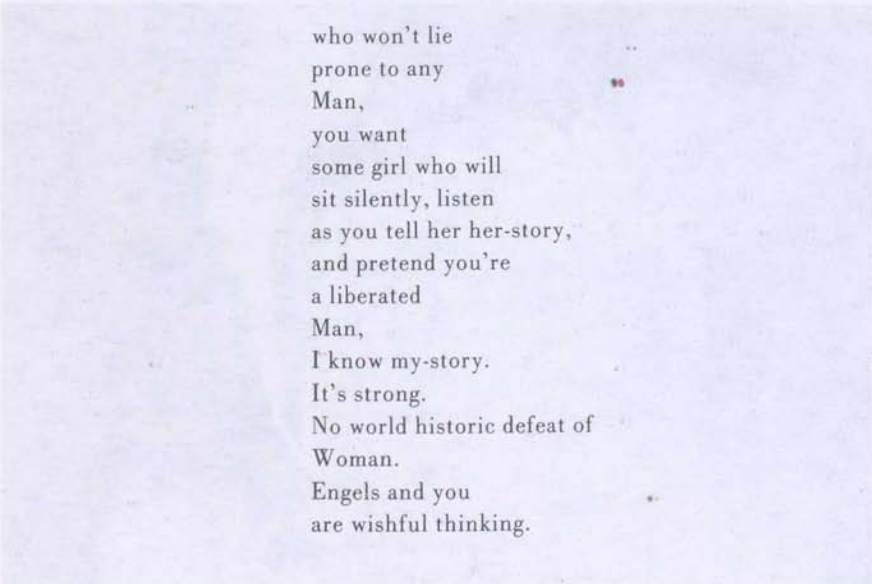
Man,
I stand
on the shoulders of
The Amazon . . .
Abolitionists,
carrying the load of any
Man,
I won't shake,
quiver under your
gaze, your word—
I'm tall
standing on the
shoulders of
*Aba Warriors . . .**
SNCC sisters

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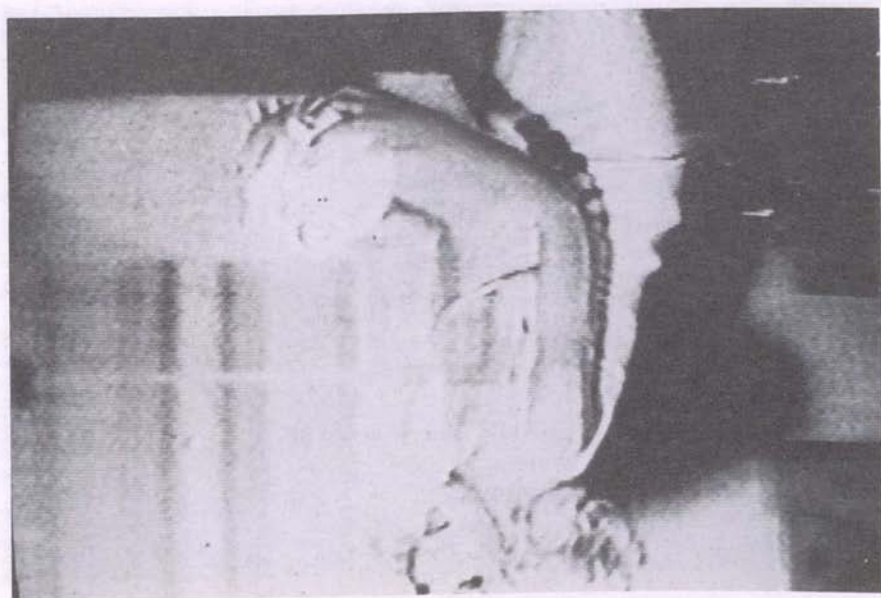
* Women of the Igbo tribe who fought British colonialists and thier own chiefs who were negotiating to tax women.

SNCC—Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee associated with the civil rights movement of the early 60s, from which the
women's liberation movement appeared.



 **Untitled**

who won't lie
prone to any
Man,
you want
some girl who will
sit silently, listen
as you tell her her-story,
and pretend you're
a liberated
Man,
I know my-story.
It's strong.
No world historic defeat of
Woman.
Engels and you
are wishful thinking.



Nightwatch

David Charbonneau

His face sweats above
his pot of potato soup,
bottle nearby.

The folds of his skin
seem tucked and puckered
like the seams on a
ventriloquist's doll.

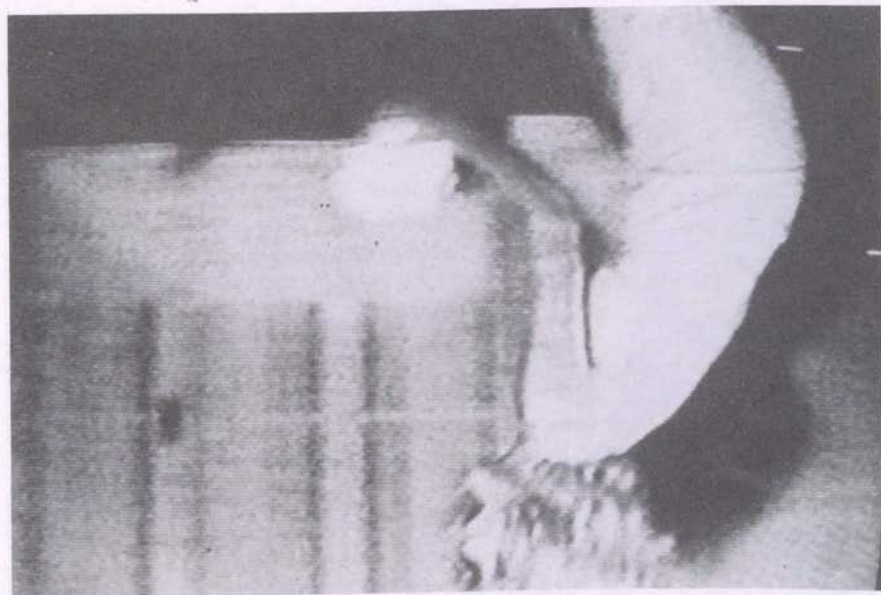
Laced with drink,
he throws his voice
across the room:

"If there is a god, he's proven
by the glory of a mushroom,"
he holds the pearly fungi
up to the light.

This is all for effect, of course,
he's an atheist.

But it tells me one thing:
tonight, we will ride the
slow, hot pig of intoxication
through its appointed stations:
laughter, head rubs, philosophy,
tears, and, at last,
the harbor of this homey hell,
insults.

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Nightwatch

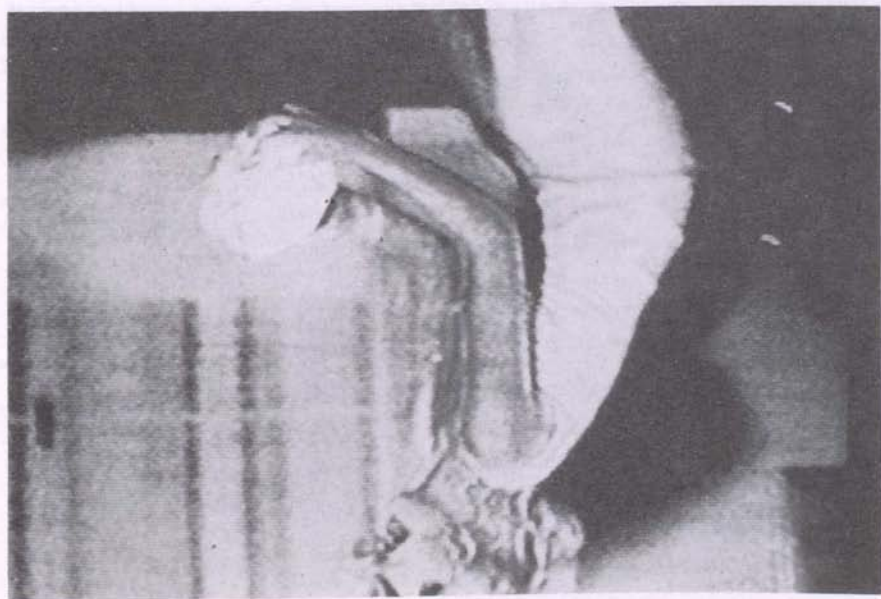
Insults rain like blows
 until early morning light
 stains the burgundy carpet orange,
 the record player wheezing,
 the Scheherazade finally played out
 (he fell asleep to it).

I bring in the milk from the box
 on the porch,
 thinking of a mother gone back
 to the highlands of her birth,
 wondering what to make sister
 for breakfast.

The dog drops the paper at my feet.

As I watch the sun climb over
 the tangled branches of March,
 I remember a reason for joy.

Today, in gym class,
 we start floor hockey.



Going Home

Todd Davis

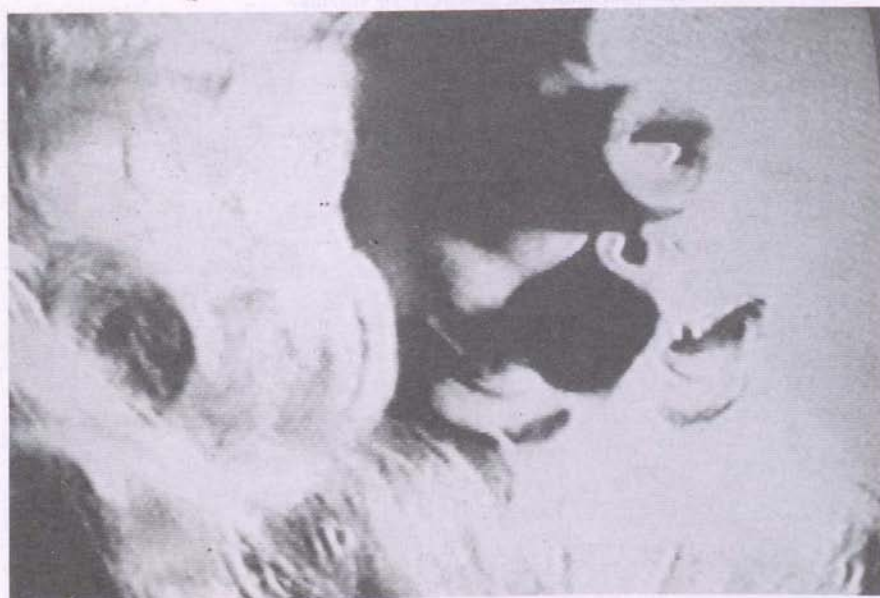
I was dead.
Underground.
In the earth for three nights
lying lonely.
Surrounded by the heartland,
by corn fields and farms.
Across the river, the town church,
meeting God in stained glass windows
while Golgotha rested over me outside,
watched my tomb---
watched for Lazarus rising
on the macadam court,
basketball backboards silhouetted
against crying skies. Their torn nets,
frayed in the wind like temple curtains,
stood silently in shrieking lightning---
cold crosses blinding me.
Crowding congregation,
their iron-edged eyes piercing my side,
placed a crown of thorns upon my head.
Upon my grave they stood,
red rain and steel.
Pushed me back in my tomb
and buried me deep in flooded fields.

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Going Home

They screamed in midwestern storms,
thunder and lightning and driving rain---
screamed for me to walk,
to rise from the grave,
water walker on a sea of washed wheat.
I walked in the grain
and they touched my scars.
Hands to my side,
to my flesh with feeling.
Fed me fish at
the fire department fish fry,
fulfilling the prophets in Times Union talk.
I was tired, day's work done,
rising from the grave.
I turned and blessed them and left the town.
Dirt kicked against my feet,
Old County Road 17,
going home.



Splitting Wood

Todd Davis

Carefully I split wood, dead maples among white birch.
The afternoon sun falling with the splitting maul,
logs placed on the block.

With a swing,
floating to the decaying forest floor,
brown and burdened with grey boulders.

I ache, shoulders slumped, maul slipping,
splitting earth to bone,
soil and stone.

Around my boots, blood rushes from dirt,
wetting the earth like cold rain to the roots.
Precious love flows to white limbs,
now stained crimson clean.

I sit in the night, in the house on the hill,
Bears howl in the meadow, scratching the apple trees,
shattering second story silence.

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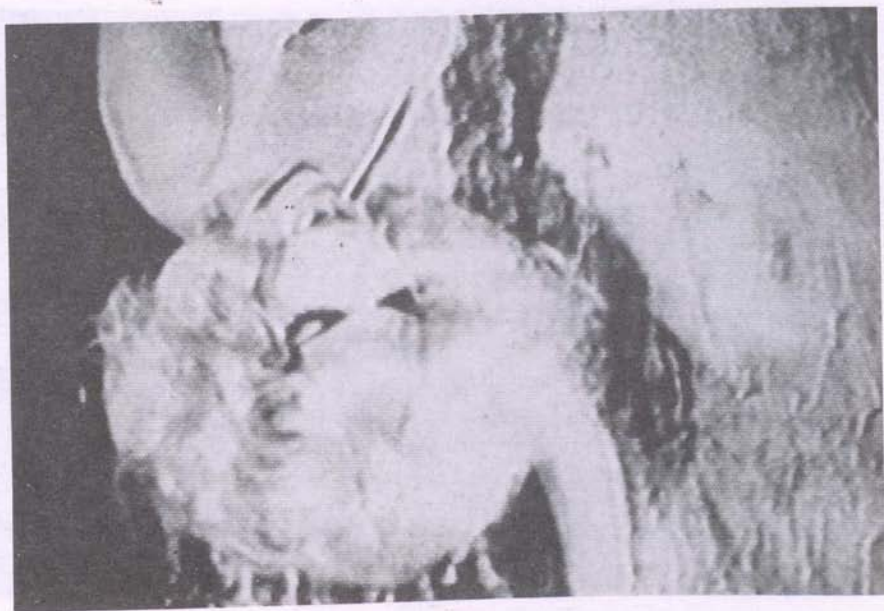
Splitting Wood

November rain splinters on northeastern windows,
bringing early winter to late fall.

Ice storm kisses
like a late night lover moving in the
shadows of morning.

Gentle steps on the roof,
the ice licks the chimney, while around the flue,
the wind blows.

At dawn, I carefully split stained, white wood.
Ice cracks, loosening its embrace to my maul.
Bloody birch, crippled limbs wrapped in glistening love,
touched with sun and moving iron.



F I C T I O N

Just Like Fiction

IT GOES SOMETHING LIKE THIS...

f i c t i o n

We meet

i CRY

We drift AWHILE

We meet ONCE AGAIN

i CRY AGAIN

but this Time i'm SO HAPPY

HAPPY HAPPY WHAT IS HAPPY ANYWAY?



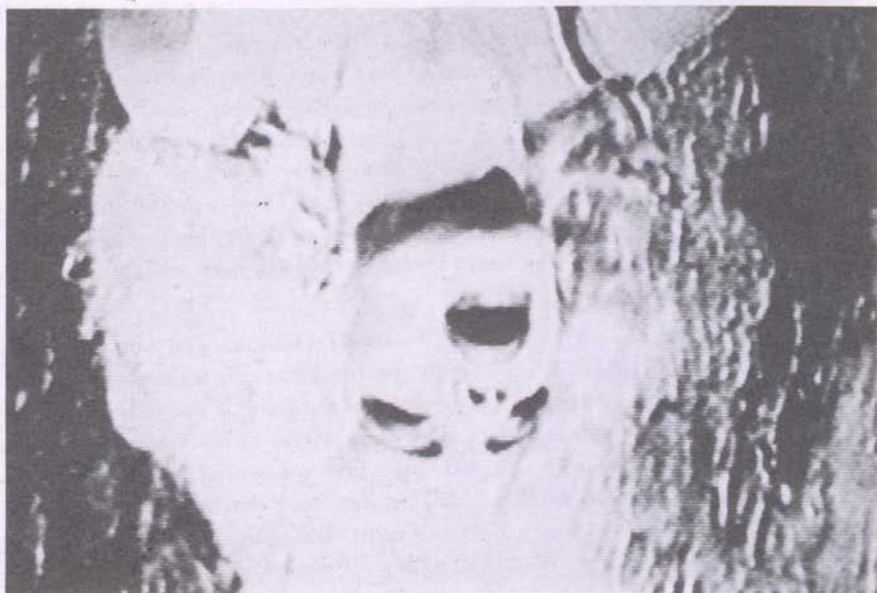
Eclipses and Headlights

Keith Nyquist

Today is my birthday. At least that's what it says on my driver's license, that odd thing with the stupid looking picture and anatomical gift section on back. So I know what they're doing now, back at the apartment. They're putting up balloons and streamers, and poking twenty-six little candles into the cake. It's like this every year. They always throw a little party and I always act surprised. Coming home from work, the windows are black from outside, but once safely in: a blaze of light and shouts. Yes, today is my birthday. Anne will be there, Jack and Tony too. They've never forgotten it. And even though twenty-six is a pretty insignificant birthday, they know about the key hidden underneath the doormat, and they know where I keep my beer. It will be a good time tonight. Friends like that to count on is a good thing.

So, I lock up the door of American Futon by the corner of Fullerton and Lincoln and start walking the twelve blocks home. A good place to work. Right by the Biograph, where they shot Dillinger. It's night, the headlights coming down the street all blinding as the glow of the sodium vapor lamps paints the buildings with a dull orange shroud. To see the white street lights you have to go to Evanston or Oak Park, where in the south of town the dark bungalows push their way to the glowing street as you walk past. Before sunrise I have walked alone, hearing only the tired hum from the lights, and the occasional passing car. Looking down one of the main streets there, towards the city, the orange lamps are visible from two miles away. Like the tip of a lit cigarette, it touches the horizon, burning it at the point where the road vanishes. Closer, it splits into two short bright diagonals hugging the sky. On some nights the orange clouds they make that lie on top of the city can be seen from a hundred miles away. I know. Sometimes I'll pick out a place on the map and drive there, a six-pack in the front seat with me. Last week I ended up in Herbert, Illinois. The town was so small. It didn't even have

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Eclipses and Headlights

a sign. I stopped in front of the First Congregational Church of Herbert, Rev. Al Green, Pastor, to find out if I was there. There were maybe six, seven houses, given a spot on the map because they were all alone. In Chicago they can go lifetimes without mention or notice until someday comes and the landlord decides to find out where that smell is coming from. The city's just an after thought on the eastern horizon out there. But on cloudy nights the orange sky shines like a movie screen into my room, filling it with shadows. So bright, sometimes at night in the country I can turn off the headlights and navigate by the wispy silhouettes of the passing telephone poles. Once, the owner of the TV shop across the street forgot and left the sets on in the display window after he went home for the night, all twelve of them tuned to the same channel. A young man in a denim jacket stood in the glow, watching the silent screens behind the glass. He must have stood there for twenty minutes before he left. Maybe he couldn't make sense of it.

Now I'm at the corner of Belmont and Clark. A few more blocks, I'll be home. Instead of taking the train I'm walking to give Anne, Tony and Jack more time to get ready for the party. There's a Thai restaurant across the corner. Darting into the street, the door handles of two passing cars, one from each way, brush my skin. Bastards. Inside, a small Oriental man shows me to a table looking out into the street. The taxis pass in a long string, the Checker lights on top shining hard like yellowed pearls as they slide past. He pours some water into a cold metal bowl before me. Nice touch. He says he'll be by for my order. Take your time. It's a nice night. It was a night like this last year when I met Linda. She came into the store just before closing and bought a futon. The next day she came for the sheets. It was obvious. I asked her out for a cup of coffee, but we went drinking instead. That morning I woke up on the floor of her room. She was passed out on the futon, the new sheets clinging to her like wrecked drapery. Waiting for her to wake up, I watched my breath on the windowpane as the buildings changed color in the sun. All I could think about was how there wasn't going to be another total eclipse until after the year 2000. When it comes though, the sky won't be black like they say. It will be orange, the sodium vapor lamps tricked by the seven minute night, the burning halo in the sky lost in the reflection. Will the people in their cars stop and look, or will they put on their headlights and keep

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Eclipses and Headlights

on going? It was during an eclipse that Einstein proved light bends in gravity, but he never solved anything practical like that. And would the clouds be brighter than it from a hundred miles away?

"What are you talking about?" she mumbled.

I had forgotten that I was no longer alone, and I had awakened her.

"Sorry, I thought you were listening," I lied.

She rolled over, trying to plant her feet on the floor.

"Ah, screw it. Will you bring me some water?"

I said nothing, but went to the cupboard and opened a cabinet of plates.

"No," she said, "the one on the left. That one." I found a cabinet stacked with metal mugs and filled one. My hands trembled.

"Can I make you some breakfast?"

"Suit yourself. I'm not hungry."

"All right, then."

I put a pan on the fire and found a carton of eggs in the refrigerator. I cracked two and watched them chase each other around the skillet, hissing. She finished the water and, her head resting on the pillow, stared vacantly at the cup. She didn't even try to look out the window. Across the street a new shadow crept up the wall.

"I had a good time last night."

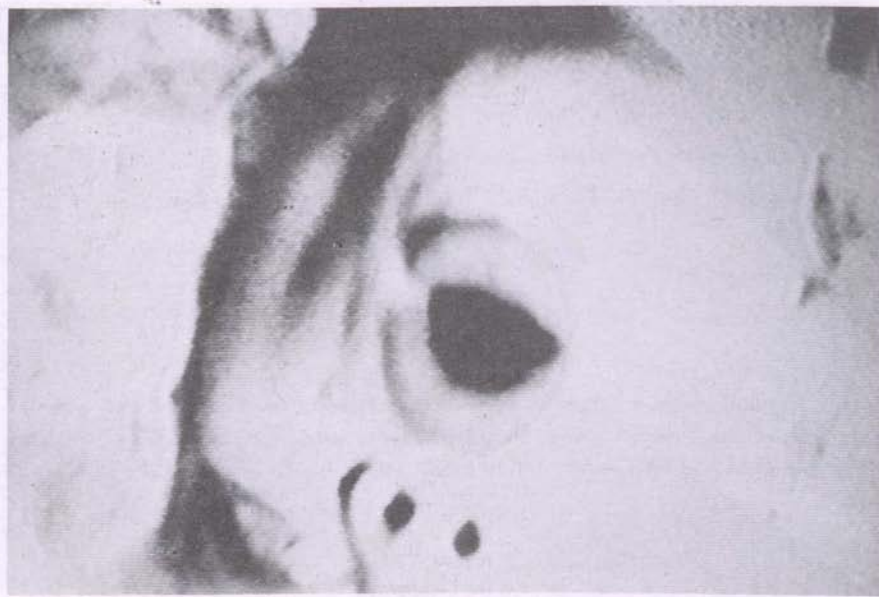
"You did?" She looked at me, surprised. "How'd that happen?"

I looked down and flipped the eggs.

"Hey, I'm sorry," she said. "Really. It's just this hangover. I'm in such a foul mood."

The eggs were done so I slid them onto a plate and sat down at the table. She stood up, tied her hair

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Eclipses and Headlights

back, and took the seat next to me.

"I usually don't drink that much, you know." She rested her hand on my knee, as if to emphasize her point.

"As a matter of fact, I was feeling quite fine when I got to your store."

"Really."

"And I want to thank you for getting me home safely."

"It's okay."

I saw her a few times after that. She'd drop by the store right around closing and watch me clean up. It would always be dark and the neon signs across the street burned through the reflections in the window. We'd go out and talk, sitting by the lake watching the twinkling city sway on the waves. But in time she got curious. I knew it would happen. There were too many questions to answer, even for a liar. You cannot explain the sleeplessness. It began one day long ago when I awoke and had all the answers. The jackhammers had been tearing up the sidewalks all week, things were changing. So I told the landlord I was dying of an incurable disease and that I would have to go. He was all too happy to let me out of the lease. I packed my things and found an apartment above a burrito place on Kedzie. And when I tired of it, I found a new one, another, until I'd amassed a collection of old neighborhoods, saloons, friends, and memories. One year the autumn came early and the trees were bare before it was fully cold. I left and found a new place then, the neighborhoods like separate towns with their people and buildings nothing but the passing scenery. Now I live, strangely, across from the t.v. shop.

"Don't you stay anyplace?"

"You don't understand."

"I think I do. It sounds neat," I remember her saying that, but I could barely make it out over the sound of the waves. It was all wrong, only a matter of time then. The days passed, as did she, like the view from a moving train. It was inevitable. Every odd trail of human scenery crumbles and breaks down into dulled,

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Eclipses and Headlights

passionless moments. I've never told this to Anne. She's waiting for me at home.

"I'll have the straw mushrooms with black oyster sauce, please."

A woman is standing across the street begging for money. Wearing two different shoes and droopy white socks, she looks like a young girl dressed in mother's clothes. The people pretend not to hear her.

"Waiter?"

He turns around. "Yes?"

"There's a woman on the street, begging. See?"

He doesn't even look when I point.

"Yes, but you cannot invite her in."

"I know that."

"Then what can I do for you?"

I hold out my hand and look out the window while the woman walks out of view. In my room at night, listening to Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, I watch the shadows shift back and forth before a vast plain of water, all blue in the sun. No clouds. Then over the land, the valleys, where rivers wind through forests on their way to the sea. By the footpaths of the mountains, the goats. I know the story of the faun, and when I told it to Linda she just laughed and said, you silly boy, you know that's not true. Lying on her floor listening to her breathe, the sound of the swells and Chinese cymbals kept me awake as she slept. So soundly, so soundly, quiet, like the *Afternoon*.

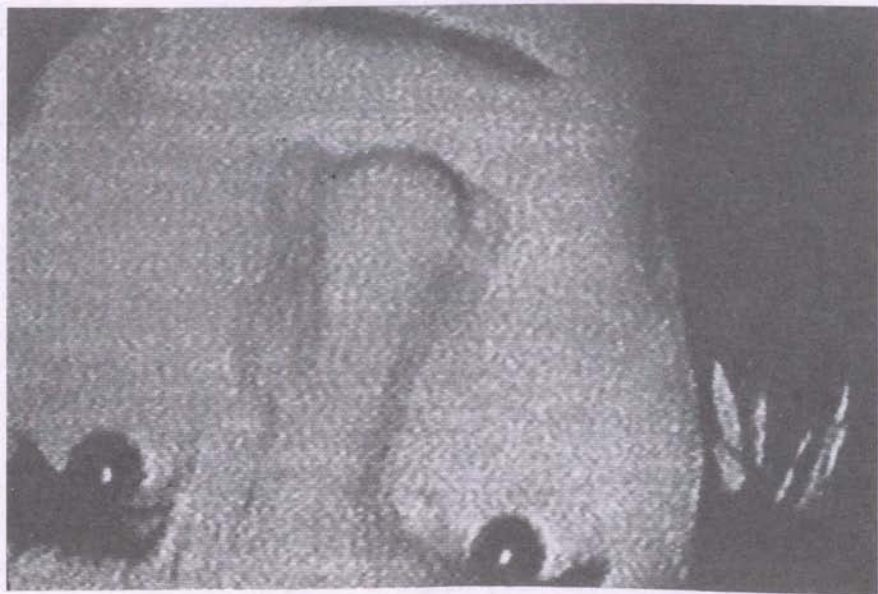
The waiter puts my drink on the table. He rests it on a cork coaster. How strange. I haven't seen one of those since I was a kid, sitting in a bar with my dad, years ago.

"Oh, we've had them for a long time," he said.

"I haven't seen one since I was eight."

"That's very interesting."

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Eclipses and Headlights

He refills the metal bowl and leaves. My food comes five minutes later. The mushrooms and rice come in separate tin pots with lids. Nearby, a couple is discussing a friend of theirs. Seems like their friend is overdoing it on the booze. Seems like they're overdoing it on the concern. Everybody's got their problems.

You're right, she says. They should just leave him alone. Dressed fantastically, her hair is filled with dyed feathers and her sequined dress sparkles in the glow of the taxi lights. She is quite glamorous, even with her two different shoes and droopy white socks.

That's what I always say. Don't let the waiter see you, thought.

Hey, are you going to finish your food? They're not going to wait all day for you, sugar.

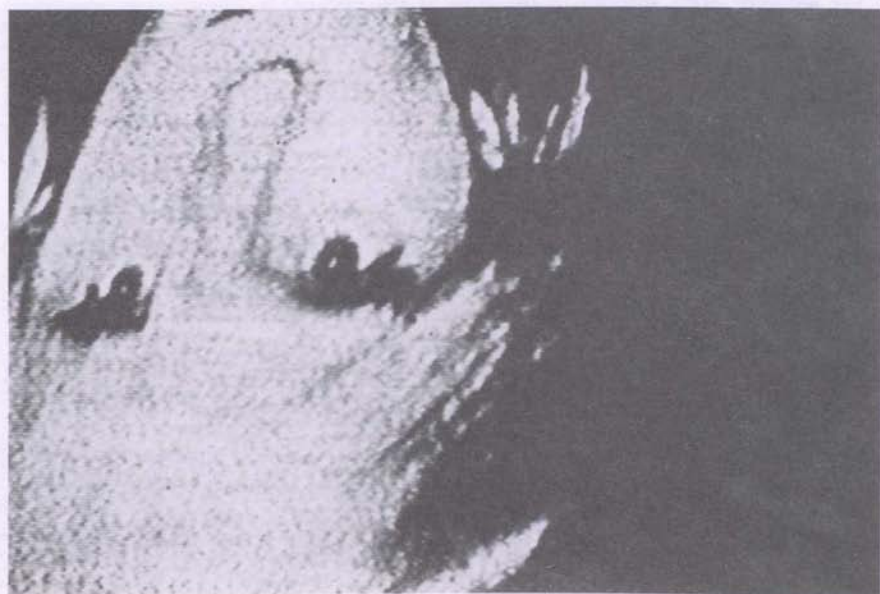
Sorry. I've got to go swimming first, though.

Okay, but they've got jobs to keep. It helps if they're on time in the morning.

She walks out the door past the couple and is gone. I pay my bill and leave. I walk down Belmont past Halsted, past Broadway, under the bridge and to the lake. Boats fill the harbor, their masts pointing up to the skies. I stare out into the cloudless night but there are no stars. The glare has swallowed everything, like the sea. Right before the Titanic went down they say it rose straight up, a hundred feet in the air. There were so many stars out that night that the ship looked like a giant black finger pointing up to God. Then it vanished.

I kick off my shoes and dive in. The water is cold, I cannot breathe. I float on my back and my chest heaves, but my breath returns. The sound of the swells and Chinese cymbals washes over me like the choppy water. Floating, floating, even this far from shore the stars are invisible. Spinning. With my head back, palms up, the water doesn't seem so cold anymore. If I sank perhaps I could spiral down in a lazy arc forever and never touch bottom, safe from the shroud of orange sky. Perhaps. Circles grow tired and distant. It must be time to go. I swim back, climb the wall and I'm back on the sidewalk, curled up and shivering. I stand, put my shoes on, walk under the bridge and up Broadway. I pass the cafes and art shops and glance in as I walk on. Past the stoplights, through a parking lot I use as a shortcut, and I'm almost home. I turn down a side street and I'm flanked by three-flats that bully the pavement. A young woman passes going the

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Eclipses and Headlights

other way, craning her neck for an instant. I saw. But no, I can't, because Anne, Tony and Jack are waiting for me at home. I'll have to act surprised.

I turn up Addison and immediately the sky is different. The giant apartment buildings that stand watch over the lake are all cast in a strange new white light, like lunar cliffs. They've turned the lights on at the stadium. As I get closer the park is crowned by six dimpled panels of glare that for blocks around turn the darkened neighborhood into a moonscape. I had watched from the train in mornings past as the workers put them up in the summer heat. The sun had reflected off their glass, shining through the morning haze like diamonds sewn into the woolen sky. Now they've thrown out the first pitch tonight on this, the new moon. I turn up Sheffield, past policemen and drunks and the curious, staring up at the bath of light from a trillion candles that has opened the eyes of the sodium vapor lamps and silenced their hum. There's a crack of thunder and the rain pours down, bouncing off the light towers like ping-pong balls. The wind whips the flags as they swing wildly from their poles. The curious run past and fill the bars. The street empties as the crowd inside the stadium cheers even louder while the lightning crashes down in noisy peals, rolling heavily over the whitewashed rooftops as I turn the corner to a darkened street and notice I'm alone now on the moon.

I walk back toward my building and see the third floor infected with glare. There's no sign of life from inside, so Anne, Tony, and Jack have seen me coming. Once in, by the door, I fumble with my keys and drop them. The sound rolls through the hallway. I open the door.

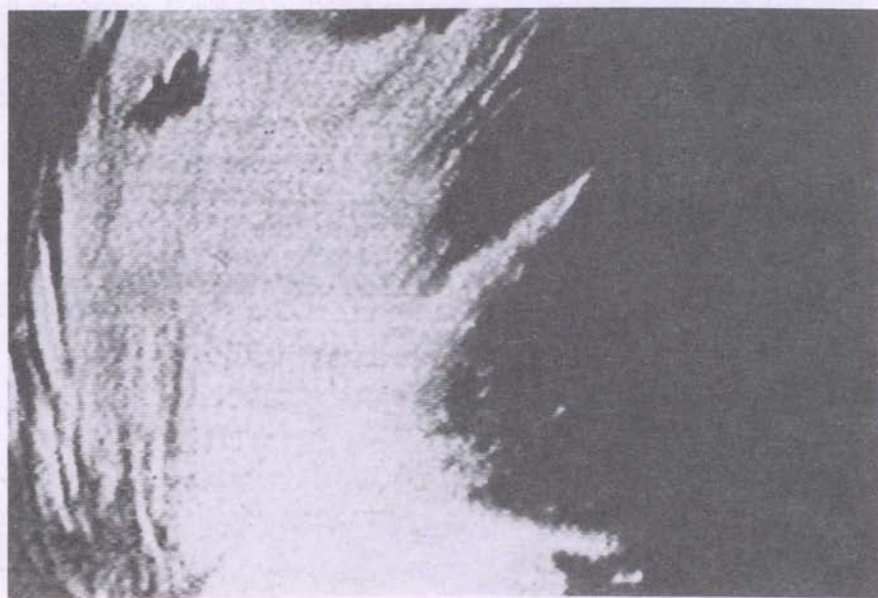
The lights are on.

A cake on the table. Surprise.

"Anne?"

I step to the table to see the candles on the cake all melted away, the wax pooled on top in a solid mass. Her picture is ripped into tiny pieces on the floor.

They've stepped out for a moment, that's all. Oh well. Twenty-six is a pretty insignificant birthday anyway. The cake's ruined, besides. They could at least have put the candles out, but that's okay. I look out and see that the sky has never been brighter or more wonderful, so I turn off the light and watch shadows drift across the room.



The Feast

Laura Dollemolle

I pressed my hands to the delicately clouded windows, and felt the thin layer of ice melt away beneath my touch. Gazing through the frame of my hands, I watched the shadows of my relatives drift past the window. My eyes followed them as they floated towards the mahogany table under the gauzy light of the chandelier. Crimson fabrics and white lacy cloth swirled around them in ethereal splendor as they seated themselves above the tapestry-backed chairs.

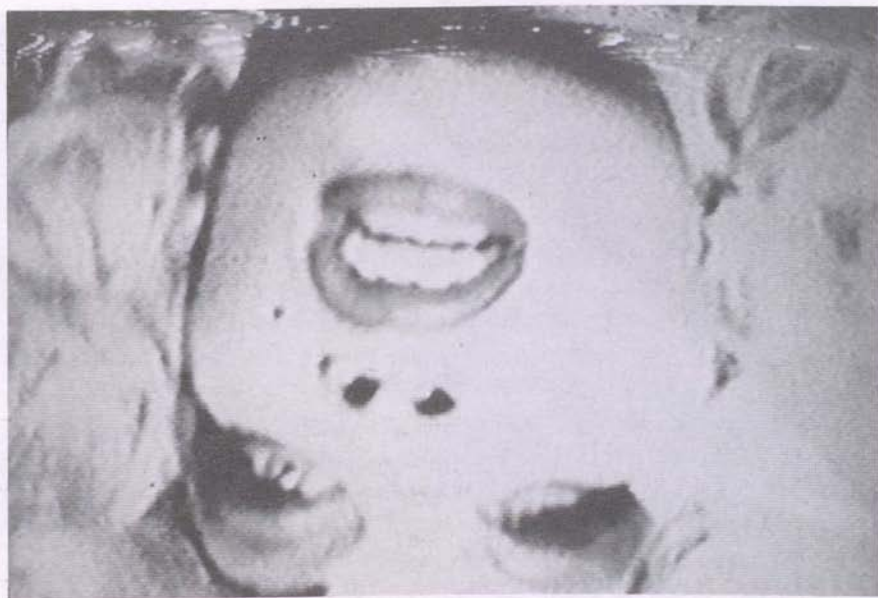
The golden hinges turned and bade me enter as I pushed gently on the crystal door and moved silently into the room. A cloud of warmth enveloped me and melted the crystals of ice on my hair and clothes. The glassy stains of the concerto arched gracefully across the ceiling in an endless stream of subtle emotion that led me to the center of the room. The chick smell of cinnamon permeated the air, and I breathed deeply, tasting the scent on the back of my tongue. I lowered myself into the remaining tapestry chair, and observed with wide eyes the overladen table.

Plates and ornate serving bowls filled the table, and each overflowed with a steaming treasure. Glazed ham shined in deep sugary temptation from an oval filigree serving platter, while intricately cut vegetables blossomed near dainty finger bowls. Bronzed sweet potatoes gleamed in the light of the chandelier, and dark crusted sugar clung to the sides of the silver tray that held them. Pastries and rich custards piled softly with whipped cream rested heavily against one another in a thick pool of chocolate.

Suddenly the feast began as dainty hands wrapped themselves around polished serving spoons. Lean slices of ham and savory mounds of potatoes were placed on every plate, and crisp wine was poured into the open mouths of crystal goblets.

Pink lips softly embraced the tiny morsels of food, and the murmur of silver voices bounced joyfully

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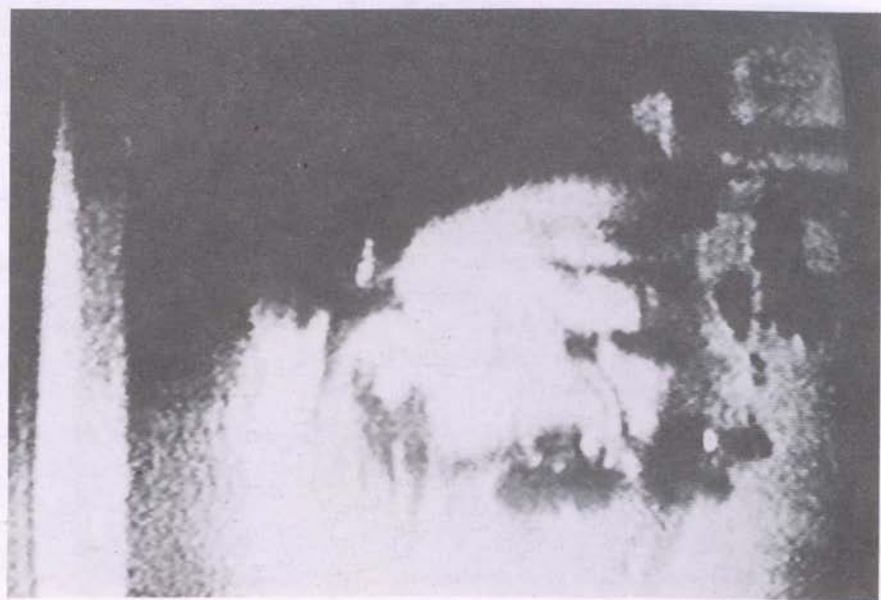
The Feast

to my ears. I signed deeply as I tasted the tangy sauces, and felt the crisp snap of the vegetables between my teeth. Knives and forks scraped urgently across the plates, quickened by the darting movements of hands.

Their voices grew silent as they began eating faster. Milky white hands reached into the open dishes where pieces of food were entrapped and removed with sharp fingernails. Lips parted to reveal thin yellow teeth in hideous smiles that rippled across the surfaces of their reddening faces. Handfuls of meat were clawed from the plates, and red lips foamed and dripped with gobbets of food. As the long fingers retracted and gnarled paws took shape, they clamped their hands on the edge of the table and curling strips of wood were torn away. Broad shoulders hunched in agony, and clothes ripped in jagged shreds as spines cracked and bowed. Coarse hair erupted from every pore and covered their evil grinning faces, as they continued to eat despite the blinding pain. Using their misshapen limbs to fill their mouths with food, they howled and gibbered in delight.

I gazed in disgust as the long rivulets of honey rolled down the sides of the ham like ropes of saliva. Carrots floated in a thick coagulated bath of butter, while the potatoes gleefully exploded from their fleshy skins.

I backed slowly away from the table as their heads snapped around to stare at me with cold green eyes. They moved silently towards me, and the feast continued.



Mock Ceremony

Sandra L. Moore

Steve, Danmar, and I sat Indian-style, in a circle on the splintered wood in back of the theater. It had rained the night before, leaving the ground cool and spongy, but the air was still and heavy with heat. The fuzzy, yellow sun peeked down from behind a few clouds like a baby chick who just cracked a hole in its shell and was afraid to break entirely out.

"Steve," said Danmar, breaking the silence with his slanted grin, "you need a wife."

"Why?" Steve chuckled, lifting his pantleg, "Don't my socks match?"

"Look," said Danmar in his clear, deep, business voice, "You're thirty, almost over-the hill, you've got money, job security, you're good looking, and don't tell me you're not lonely. Don't you think it would be nice to come home from a long day in court and find a nice, home-cooked meal laid out on the table with a beautiful woman, apron and all, standing next to it?"

As I bit the inside of my lip, the salty taste of bitter blood slid down my throat. I looked at Steve.

"Yeah, I guess," Steve said decidedly after only a moment's thought.

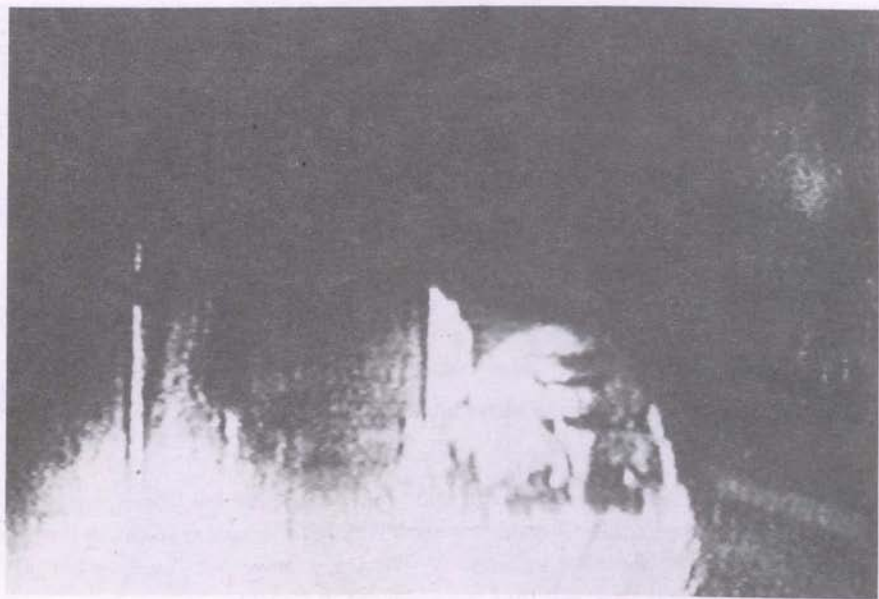
I looked away to see the jagged, black peaks of the Jemez mountains leering from a distance. The snowy tips had long-since melted into cool, blue streams trickling through the aged crevices in the mountainside, leaving them sharply etched on the blue horizon. A white mist encircled the base like a tremendous smoke ring, making the mountains look as if they were floating in mid-air.

"How about this pretty, young thing?" Steve said, putting his arm around my shoulder.

"Sure, why not?" replied Danmar.

My attention snapped back and I stared at Steve for a minute, then laughed.

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Mock Ceremony

"Sure," I mocked. "Why not?"

"Great!" said Danmar with a pleased smile. "I'll be the priest."

Steve and I exchanged glances and broke into laughter.

"Now get serious!" Danmar stammered through his grin. "This is serious business."

"OK," I said, gasping for air, puckering my lips in an attempt to rid my face of the silliness that lingered in my thoughts. "I'm serious."

"Yeah, me too," Steve croaked between convulsions of delight.

Danmar cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and hummed a few bars of the wedding march. When he was through, he took a dramatic pause and began the ceremony.

"We are gathered here today in holy matrimony, and because the matinee performance was canceled and we had a few hours to kill."

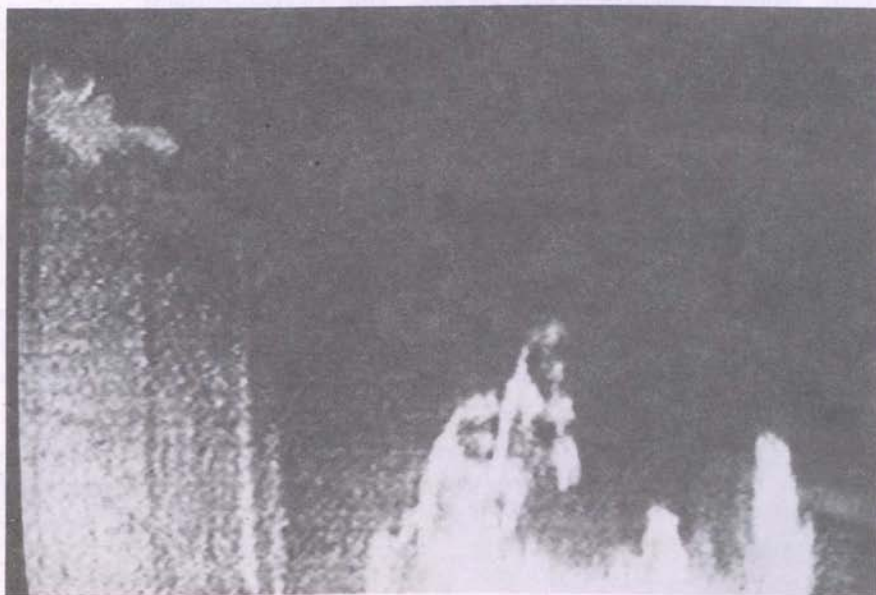
The pontifical tone of his voice was enough to start my laughing frenzy again, causing my whole body to quiver uncontrollably and my heart to flutter like a hummingbird's wings. The broken notes of my voice bounced against the walls of my head, as if a pinball game were going on inside my brain. Danmar cleared his throat again.

"Do you, Stephen Aarons, take this hystical woman to be your lawfully wedded slave? Do you promise to love, cherish and cheat on her? For better, not worse? For richer and let's hope not poorer? In sickness—let's face it, she's already there, but if the time comes—and in health? To have, hold and beat until death do you part?"

"I do," Steve said solemnly.

"And do you, Cassi Burrows, take this scoundrel, low-life, pond scum to be your lawfully wedded master? To love, honor, obey, and do his laundry? No matter how bad things get? No matter how poor or sick he gets? To have, hold, and nag until death sets you free? Remember, he's a lawyer and gets free Counsel should the word divorce ever come up."

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Mock Ceremony

Waves of giggles filled my mouth, allowing no words to pass through my lips. Only barnyard grunts and slurred vowels managed to escape the pool of laughter.

"Well, do you?" Danmar prodded.

His sharp words broke my thoughts into tiny shards of glass, piercing my heart. As Steve looked at me, I expected to see a smile break, but his expression of anticipation did not waver.

His serious manner brought my merriment to an abrupt halt. I looked from Steve to Danmar, from Danmar to Steve. Both looked at me in silent anticipation. It was my turn. I took a deep breath and warm air passed through my lips, rushing to my head and toes.

"I do," I said softly.

Steve smiled contentedly. With a sigh, a puff of air burst out of my mouth. I had said it; I had done what was expected of me.

"The ring," Danmar said giving Steve a sideways glance. Seeing Steve's empty, outstretched hand, he picked a leaf from a nearby bush, tore at it until only the center vein remained and handed it to Steve. "Here. Repeat after me. With this ring, I thee wed."

Steve looked quizzically at Danmar for a moment and then tied the vein around my finger.

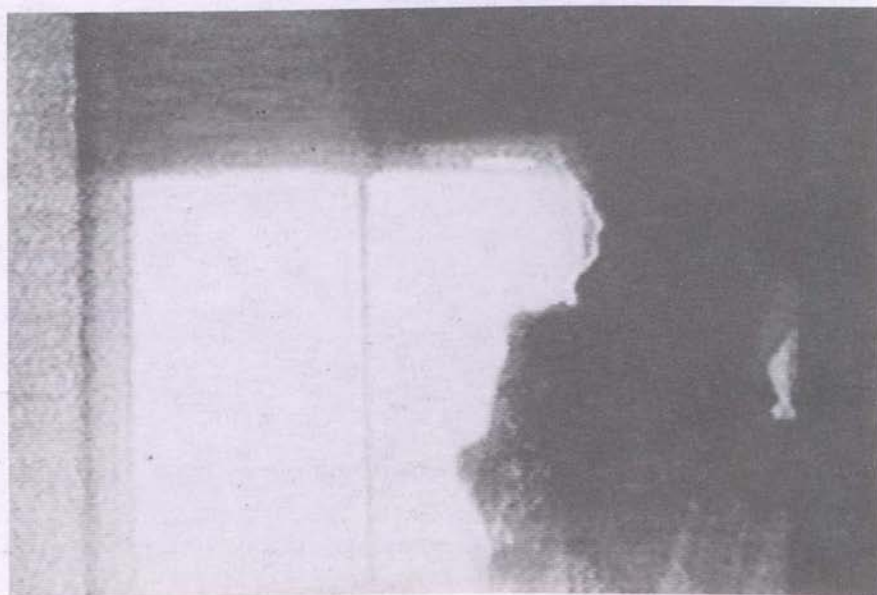
"With this ring, I thee wed," repeated Steve.

"OK. What's next? Oh yeah. Does anyone have any objection to this marriage? Speak now, or forever hold your peace."

Just then, the bush from which Danmar picked my ring shook violently. A crow, flapping his wings, cawing loudly, appeared above the long, slender branches. He grabbed hold of the highest branch and perched on it quietly.

"Sorry, you don't count," Danmar said, looking at the bird. "Well then, if no one here has any reason why Steve and Cassi should not be married, I pronounce you man and wife." Danmar paused. His slanted grin crept back to his lips. "You may kiss the bride."

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Mock Ceremony

Steve took my hand in his, pressing his moist palm against my fingertips. His rough lips brushed against my fingers, making them feel as if sandpaper had been scraped across my knuckles, exposing the ivory bone. The ceremony was complete.

That evening, just after dinner, I decided to see what my father had to say about his newlywed daughter.

"Daddy," I said toyingly, while methodically sponging the dinner plates clean.

"Yes," he said in his strong baritone, while I stared blankly at his soft, brown eyes.

"I got married today," I said matter-of-factly, quickly turning my head back to the dishes.

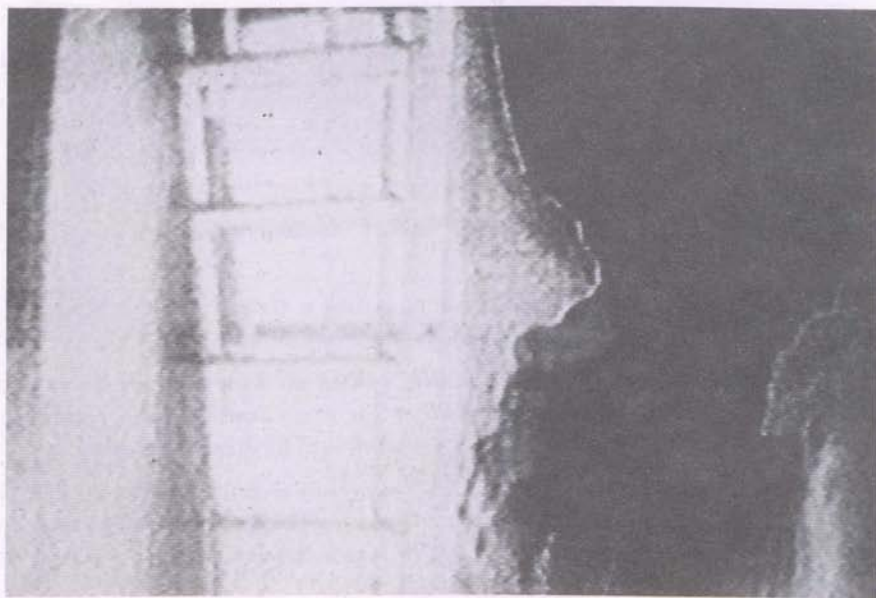
A few minutes of silence went by while my hands worked quickly, rubbing off every speck of food. He laughed a deep, thundering laugh.

"Sure," he said, still chuckling. "And tomorrow you're getting a divorce, right?" With that, his rich, booming laughter sounded again, growing softer as he walked down the hall.

I felt for the plug in the bottom of the sink and pulled. I lifted my hands out of the water and rinsed off the suds that were clinging to my fingers. I watched the soapy water quickly drain from the sink and with a slurp, the ring of suds was gone. The lemon-scented soap filled my head, stinging my eyes.

I looked out of the small window above the sink through the beads of moisture that clung to the window pane. The Jemez mountains were now black shadows connecting the dark, pink and violet sky with the deep, brown Earth. The smoke ring had already vanished with the sun, leaving the mountains firmly rooted to the ground, extending upwards, touching the sky.

"Yeah," I whispered. "Tomorrow I'm getting a divorce."



Cholesterol

Charles Schroeder

"The doctor called," my wife said after I'd walked in, said hello, and kissed her.

"Yeah?" I tossed my jacket on the couch and untucked my shirt. "What did he want?"

"He had the results of your blood test—" She looked at me. I said nothing, looked at her, and waited.

"Do you want to know then?" she said.

"Sure," I said.

"What do you think it is?" she asked.

"I don't know. I suppose it's a little high."

"I don't know about a little," she said. I waited, tried to look concerned. I took my hands in and out of my pockets, ran one through my hair, and blinked my eyes.

"I thought it would be high," she said. "You have to bring it down at least forty points—it's 240 and they say it should be below 200. I think you should bring it down sixty points."

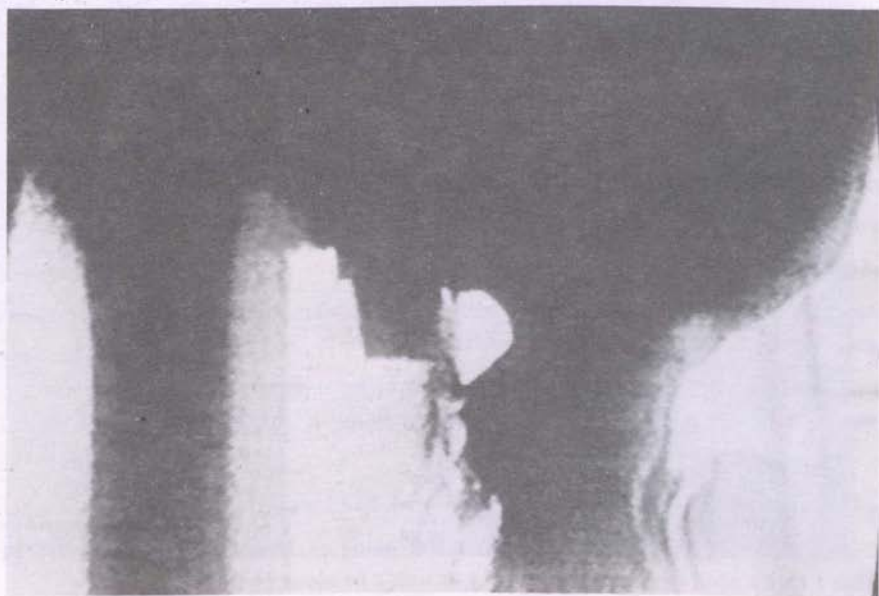
"Alright."

She kept looking at me. I had just gotten home from work and I was tired.

"I've been doing some reading," she said, "and I'm going to start cooking better for you, for both of us—not that I really need to worry. That way you won't be alone in this."

She didn't have to worry. She deliberated over every piece of food she ate, imaging how it would look in the mirror the next morning. She picked over every piece of food she ate as if it were laced with poison, took an hour deciding whether to put butter, margarine, or neither on a muffin. Sometimes

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The first of the photographs was taken by a newspaper photographer who was standing
 in the crowd. It is a close-up shot of the man's face. The second photograph was
 taken by a television camera which was positioned in front of the man. It shows
 the man's face from a slightly different angle. The third photograph was taken
 by a newspaper photographer who was standing in the crowd. It is a close-up shot
 of the man's face. The fourth photograph was taken by a television camera which
 was positioned in front of the man. It shows the man's face from a slightly
 different angle. The fifth photograph was taken by a newspaper photographer who
 was standing in the crowd. It is a close-up shot of the man's face. The sixth
 photograph was taken by a television camera which was positioned in front of the
 man. It shows the man's face from a slightly different angle. The seventh
 photograph was taken by a newspaper photographer who was standing in the crowd.
 It is a close-up shot of the man's face. The eighth photograph was taken by a
 television camera which was positioned in front of the man. It shows the man's
 face from a slightly different angle. The ninth photograph was taken by a
 newspaper photographer who was standing in the crowd. It is a close-up shot of
 the man's face. The tenth photograph was taken by a television camera which
 was positioned in front of the man. It shows the man's face from a slightly
 different angle.

Cholesterol

she got frustrated and didn't even eat the muffin. I decided I'd rather clog my arteries than become neurotic, and had told her so a few times. "Guess I'll be a young widow then," she'd say.

I'd tell her that the life insurance was paid up. Sometimes she laughed, sometimes she sighed, sometimes she hugged me and placed her worried, tight-eyed face on my shoulder. Sometimes she walked away. When I thought about it later, laying in bed at night, I didn't laugh. I dreaded the thought of a stroke, of not being able to move, of having a mind that could not be expressed, of not having a mind.

I stood in the living room looking at my wife and decided I'd give this new diet a shot. It was only forty points, and I figured that couldn't be too hard to change.

I unbuttoned my shirt and sat down in the recliner.

"OK," I said, "what's the plan of action?" I lit a cigarette and waited.

"You know you really should stop that, too," she said.

"Yes, I know."

"And I know I should stop too," she said, "but I'm pretty healthy in every other way—exercise, diet, not too much drinking, no drugs. We should quit together," she said. "Maybe that would make it easier."

"Or else we'd end up killing each other." I smiled, laughed a little, showed her I had tried to make a joke.

"This isn't funny," she said.

"No, no it's not. But let's get this cholesterol thing taken care of before worrying about smoking."

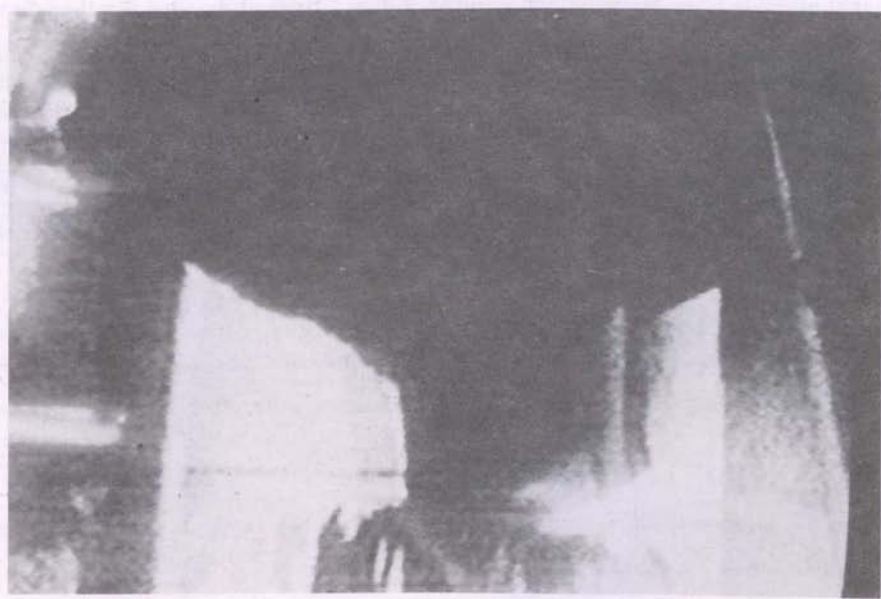
"OK, if you really mean it," she said.

"I do."

"Alright then, here's the plan."

She told me all the things I already knew about what and what not to eat. I had heard it before—grains, vegetables, fruits, . . . I knew I could succeed. But there was something inside of me that made

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Cholesterol

me not want to, something that made me not care.

She walked over to me. "Listen," she said, softly, "I know I can be a nag sometimes, but I'm only doing this because I care about you, because I love you—I want you to always be with me."

"I know," I said, and I meant it.

"I just want you to know that I care," she said. She squatted beside my chair and placed a hand on my knee. "I want to help you." She smiled. When she smiled her whole face changed—her eyes lost their pinched strain and opened wide and deep, and her cheeks rose in blushes beneath them; everything about her became fuller, more alive, and the air in the room seemed lighter and I craved to inhale it in deep gasps and never release it. When she smiled I knew I loved her.

I bent over and kissed her, then she reached up and kissed me full on the mouth, in the mouth, deeply.

"Wanna go work up an appetite?" I said.

She took my hand and pulled me up from the chair, then led me down the hall to the bedroom.

Later we lay in bed, close, and told each other how good it was. I wanted a cigarette but told myself I could wait—I wouldn't be the first one.

I turned and kissed her forehead. "I love you," I said.

She made a little mmm sound, snuggled closer to me and laid an arm across my chest. "I love you too," she said, smiling.

Then she said, "You do know that, don't you?"

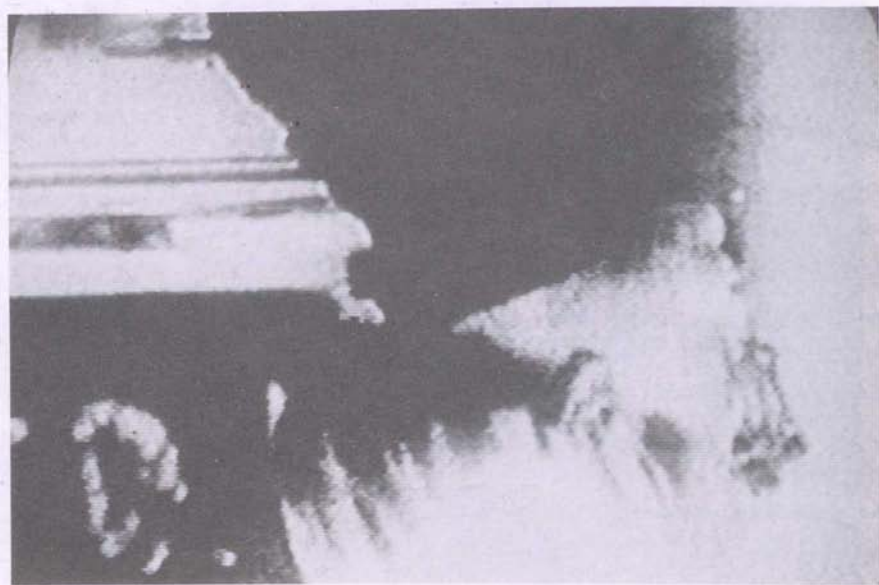
"Yes," I said. "Yes I do."

"Sometimes I guess I wonder why," she said.

"Why what?"

"Why you love me."

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Cholesterol

"Because you care about me," I said.

"Of course I care about you," she said. She wasn't smiling anymore. "Do you really feel that way?" she said.

"Sure I do." I paused a moment. "I know it from how you want to help me."

She sighed.

"Like this cholesterol thing," I said, "I know I should eat better, but I probably wouldn't do it on my own. But you, you show me that it's important, that it'll be good not just for me but for the both of us."

"But I don't want you to do it for me," she said. "You have to do it for yourself. It scares me to think that you don't care about yourself." She moved her face into my chest. "I just don't want to lose you," she said.

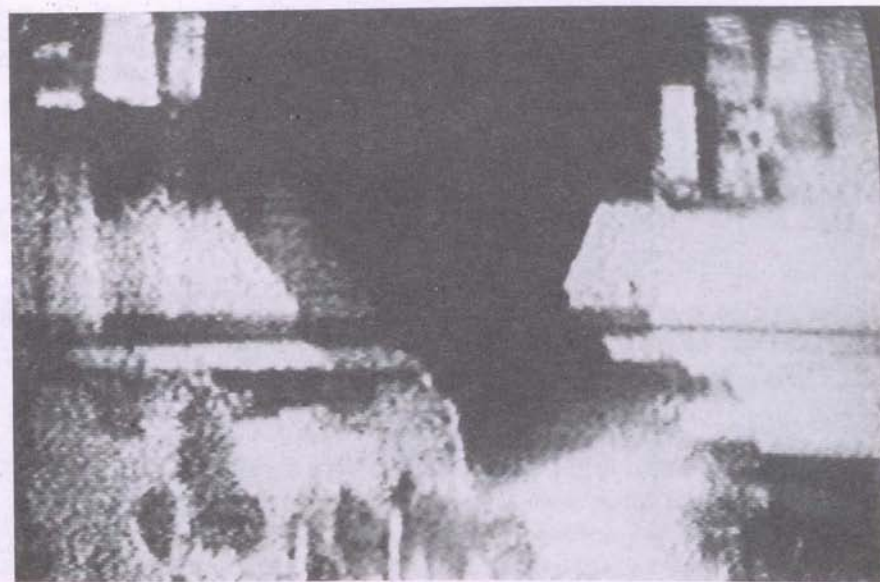
"I don't want to lose you either," I said, "but it can't last forever, you know. Neither one of us can last forever, no matter what we quit."

"Don't talk that way," she said. "Not now. Everything is calm now—it's like the world has spun away from us and we're all that matters."

"It could always be this way," I said.

She didn't say anything. She rolled onto her back and looked at the ceiling, then closed her eyes, opened them, and stared at something above us. Light came horizontally through the window, lost its red evening glare in the curtains and stretched out over our feet and onto the closet doors. But she wasn't seeing it. She was looking at something higher, something more permanent, certain, or maybe it was something more transient. I didn't know what it was—she looked at things differently than I did and as I wondered what she was seeing I began feeling uneasy and the calm she had mentioned earlier eroded. I felt choked inside and became scared, unsure of what was happening, what would happen. I wanted to get up and walk, run—I wanted to reassure myself I was still alive.

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Cholesterol

I closed my eyes and lay still for a moment, told myself everything was fine, then looked back to the light and thought how the evenings were getting longer and how nice it would be to take walks together after dinner. I rubbed her arm, softly.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Don't think," I said. "Don't think about anything. Just look at the light and listen to the birds. Don't think. Let yourself fall away to someplace you've never been. Let both of us just fall away together to a new place and keep us there a while."

"I can't escape like that," she said. "I can't just forget everything like it doesn't exist."

"It's not escaping," I said. I never thought that imagining and sharing visions of a different, better life was escapist, but I hardly ever talked of such things anymore as it only led to tiring discourses on economics and feasibilities. Sometimes I wished I could escape as well and as often as she thought I could, but the channels my dreams flowed through had narrowed, become clogged with practicalities. I wanted to see more in the future than charted numbers and resolutions, but my vision was no longer clear. Once I saw a soft, slow-waved lake, gilded by the Fall afternoon sun, and tall pines and a hammock and a small redwood house and her and me sitting by the water in the slanted light. But now the images were only half-formed, retarded by words.

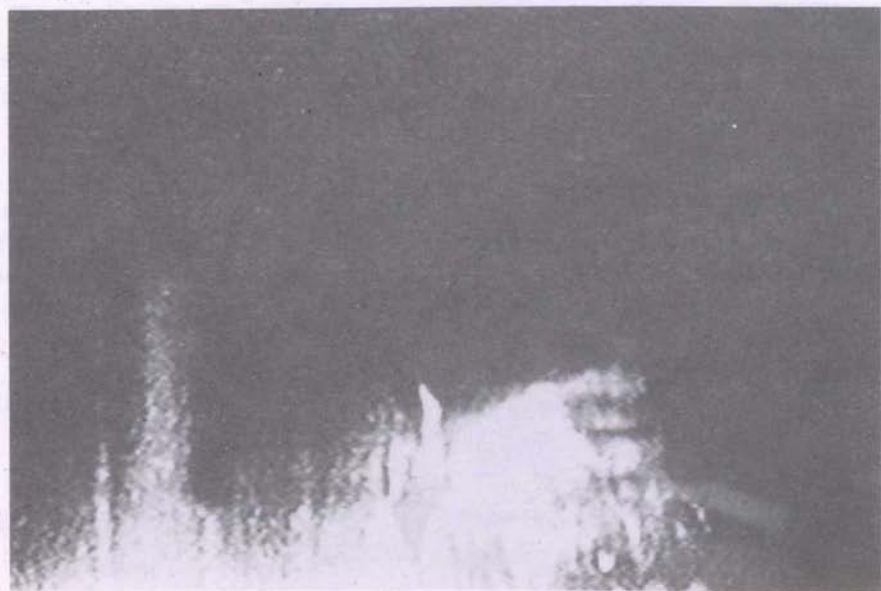
"It's not escaping," I said; "it's just a break."

"I wish I could be more like you," she said. "I wish I could make everything go away that I don't like and put myself someplace where there's only things I do like."

I tried to think of a place I'd rather be, but whenever I tried my vision was immediately blocked by mentionings of responsibility, adulthood—that goddam reality that was always thrown at me.

She pushed herself up onto her elbows and reached to the table for her cigarettes. She pulled one out, looked at it, then let her eyes rise to where they had focused earlier.

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Cholesterol

"Even if I could put myself someplace I don't know where I'd want to be or what I'd want to see." She leaned back, lit the cigarette, closed her eyes, and smoked.

"But don't you ever think of what's out there?" I nodded my head at the window. "Don't you wish for anything?"

Wishing only magnifies what you don't have," she said, "what you'll never have."

I watched the smoke spread over us and wiggled my feet to make sure I could still move.

"Can I have some of that?" I asked, reaching for her cigarette.

She handed it to me and lit another. She put the ashtray on her lap and we both laid back and smoked.

"We both should quit," she said.

"Let's take care of the cholesterol first."

"Alright."

She fixed dinner later—bread, fruit salad, and some kind of baked bean thing—and we ate on the patio. It was nearly dark and the bug candle burned in yellow waves in the middle of the table. We didn't talk. I had told her after my first few bites that it was very good and neither of us said anything more. When we were done we sat back in our chairs and looked at the sky, the high Spring stars.

"I'm sorry about nagging you," she said after we'd been quiet for a long time.

"You weren't nagging me."

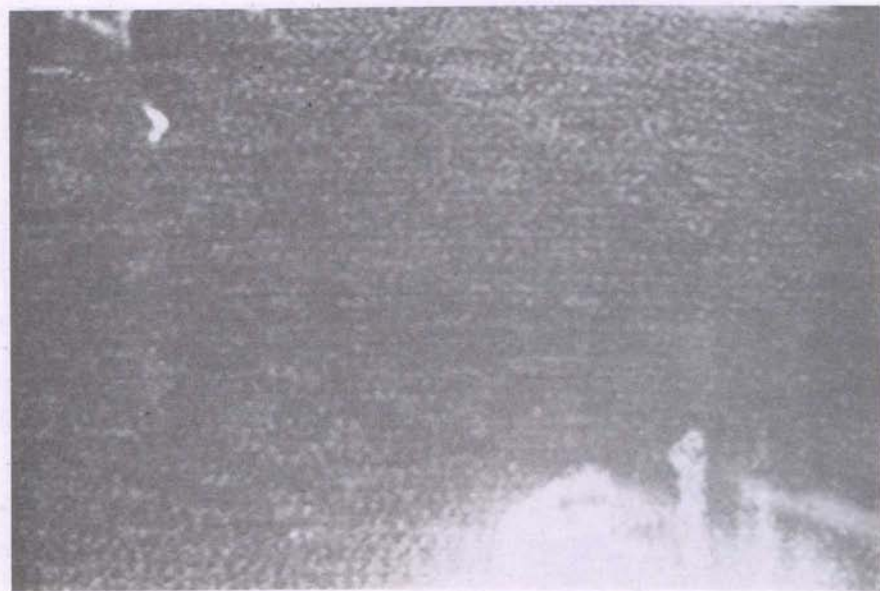
"I guess what I want more than anything is for you to be happy, for you to be happy with yourself and with us."

I lit a cigarette and tried to follow the smoke through the evolving darkness.

"I am happy," I said.

"But I nag too much," she said. "I bitch, You're just too nice to tell me."

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Cholesterol

"You don't bitch," I stopped, hesitated. "Sometimes it just sounds like it, when really you're only concerned and not really coming down on me."

"See," she said, "I do bitch. You just said so yourself."

"I said it sounds like it." I wished everything were quiet; I wanted to sit and look at the stars and not think about anything, not worry about words and sounds and meanings. But she was looking at me, waiting.

"Sometimes it seems that you're just not sure how to tell me the things you want to—" I began, "you worry about bitching and that makes you anxious so that when you do say something it sounds like you're bitching."

"Don't analyze me," she said. "I don't go around telling you why you don't give a shit about yourself or anything else, so don't start with me."

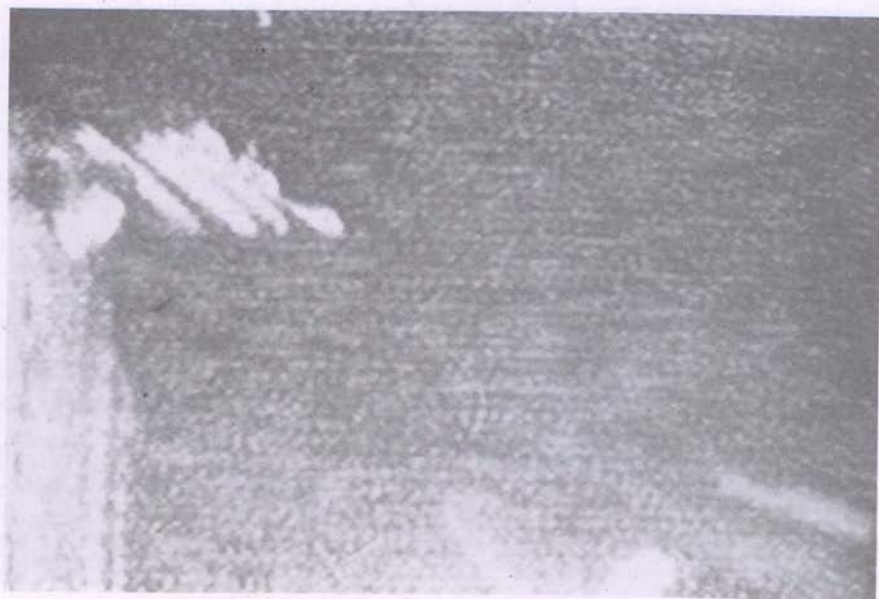
Her voice was quiet and I knew there was more inside of her waiting to seep out at me. I wished I hadn't said anything, but when I said nothing she said I didn't care—if I cared I wouldn't just sit there like I was a million miles away. Maybe sometimes I didn't care. Maybe sometimes I did want to just sit there a million miles away. And maybe sometimes I just wanted to tell her to shut up and look beyond the numbers and the facts to meanings, possibilities, transcendence. But mostly I'd stare at nothing and tell myself not to think, to just let things be, and she'd say I was escaping, not listening, not acknowledging the problem. I always wondered if I should talk or not talk and then I'd fall into a void where it felt like my very blood was denied movement.

"Maybe you don't need my kind of help," she said. "Maybe we're too different for each other. Maybe you need someone else, someone more like you."

"Being with someone like me would drive me crazy," I said. She couldn't see my smile; the darkness had grown and the candle didn't reach beyond the edges of the table.

"You say that," she said, "but I wonder if that's what you really feel. You don't have to placate, patronize, me."

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Cholesterol

"I'm not patronizing you," I said. "Damn it, why don't you ever believe me? Why can't I say something without you always denying it and turning it around on me?" I felt my long-choked veins expand. Something was urging me toward movement, toward a mobility that would take me away, let me go and let me be.

"Why do you always have to make me feel like I have to be on the defensive?" I said.

"Is that how you feel, like you have to defend yourself?"

"Yes."

"Well then I guess there really is something wrong with us."

She waited.

I waited, tried to find a calm. I lit another cigarette, tried to take my time with it.

"Isn't there," she said. It was hardly a question.

I'm always on the defensive, I thought, and I hate excuses. Sometimes I stayed quiet because I didn't want to make excuses. Excuses made me feel guilty. I told myself I had nothing to feel guilty about.

She turned her chair away from the table and lit a cigarette.

Sometimes I wondered if she was right and I should be with someone else, but then I'd tell myself there was no good in thinking that way and I'd think instead about her when she wasn't questioning me and I'd see her smile and the natural strength I had fallen in love with, the confident strength I couldn't find in myself that enabled her to act when a problem arose whether it be an error on the bank statement or news from the doctor—whatever it was she'd fix it and it would be gone.

I wondered if I gave her the things she needed, and realized I didn't know what she needed. I smoked my cigarette and tried to recapture that hours-ago calm.

"I was thinking, earlier," I said, "that the weather is really nice now—flowers coming out, evenings lasting longer—and I was thinking that maybe we could start going for walks again at night, like we

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Cholesterol

used to." I looked at her but she was only an unresponsive shadow. "Remember, after dinner we'd go out walking for an hour or so? The neighborhood kids weren't out anymore and it was all quiet and peaceful. We could do that again."

"Sure," she said. She was smoking and I watched the tip of her cigarette rise and fall and listened to the long breaths of smoke seep out of her mouth.

"Maybe we could start tomorrow," I said.

I waited. The red tip moved up and down. The only sounds were crickets and the smoke as it spread out from her mouth.

"You can't just walk away from this," she said. She flicked her cigarette out to the yard. I watched it burn out in the grass.

"You can't just forget about this," she said. But after that memory something broke free inside of me, something that had been restrained, clotted, for a long time, and I was walking passing trees and bushes of wild berries in the cool imagined evening, hearing the slow rolling breakers of a nearby lake, and telling myself I was fresh and healthy and everything was perfect. Her voice came to me in a murmur, a soft echoing remnant of something that had once been so close to me but was now far away, and it was swept into the shadows behind me by the slow breeze.



Indefatigability

Daniel J. Bingley

"Jesus," he said, his fingers squeezed between the blinds, propping open a slit so he could peer out of their bedroom window. He was crouched over at the edge of their bed, naked, the flab of his belly leaning against his pale, hairy thighs and his eyes squinting into the morning light.

"What is it?" she asked.

"One of our neighbors. One of our little white trash friends." He looked back at her. "You won't believe this Take a look."

She made to pull the cover over herself, but, finding it tucked beneath the mattress and too hard to unattach gave up and rolled to the edge of the bed to join him. He watched the puzzled look on her face as she peered through the blinds. It was obvious that she'd still not understood.

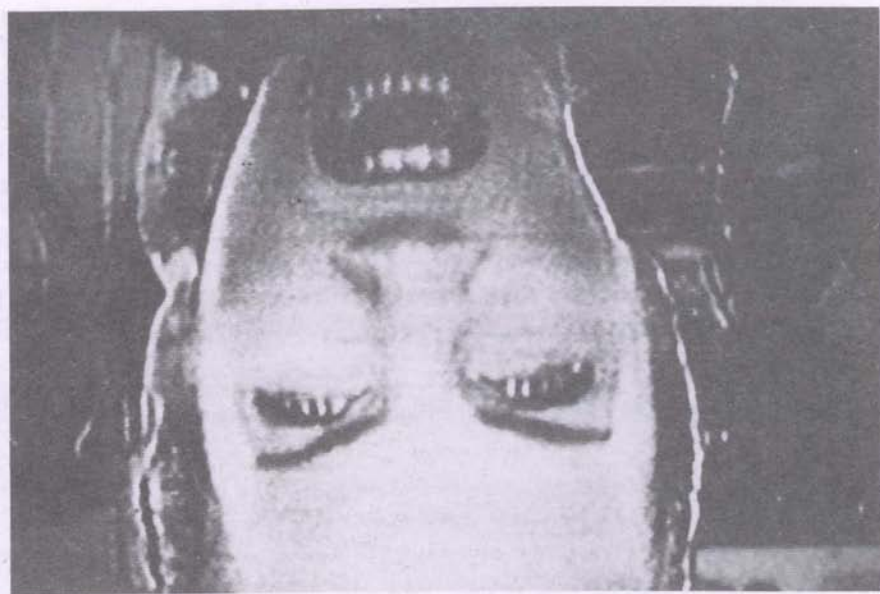
"What is he doing?" she asked again.

"How long has he been doing that?" he answered. "Half an hour? He must have got up early to watch the sparks when it was still dark."

And he leaned forward again beside his wife, the two of them causing the edge of the mattress to sag sadly, and took another look at the skinny boy standing in the middle of the parking lot, swinging an old, bent golf club back and forth across the pavement. He looked about twelve, junior high-aged, his hair matted down on one side and sticking straight up on the other from sleep. Then he watched his wife's sagging buns jiggle as she stood up and walked across their bedroom to the closet, where she stopped to put on a worn, patch-quilt bathrobe.

"Why do they feel the need to reproduce?" he asked.

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Indefatigability

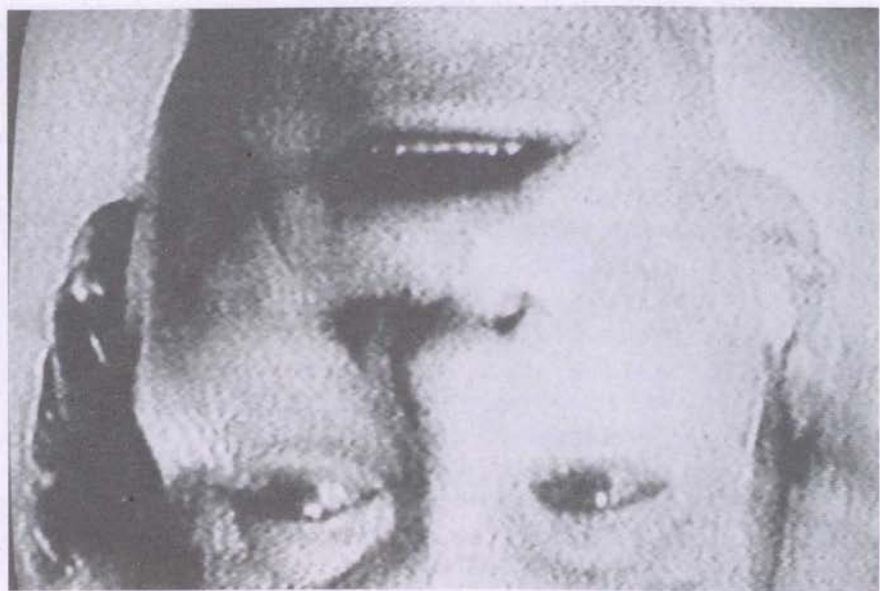
He watched her lumber down the hallway and into the bathroom, her long red hair swinging back and forth as she moved along, and soon the sounds of the young golfer were drowned out by the noise of Selene turning on the shower.

This was his favorite part of the day, he'd decided, because those ten minutes when he could lie in bed daydreaming, coupled with the steady, rhythmic hiss of the shower, he found icredibly peaceful and soothing. He could lie back and close his eyes with virtually no fear of falling back asleep because even if he did so, Selene, as sure as a clock, would rouse him either by thumping around the room getting dressed or by plopping down at the edge of his bed to pull up her stockings. He could lie back and daydream, and his pillow would become Camille, or Luanne, or Denise, and he would be holding any of them tightly and affectionately in any of their beds on a spring morning like this one, in a room of pink or pastel blue, surrounded by stuffed animals and the scent of perfume coming from the bottles on their dressers that mingled with the fresh spring air.

So it had come down to those ten minutes every weekday morning, those ten minutes that he pilfered away from Selene, when he could be alone and yet still secure, and he could have his mind and his thoughts to himself. Their marriage was a new one—five months—a result, he thought, of some divine message of moderation that had fallen from the sky and landed in his lap during his senior year of college, a week after Camille had dumped him. For although Selene hadn't fallen from the sky, she *had* tumbled into his stool one weeknight as he'd been sitting at his favorite college bar, alone, trying to drink Camille off his mind. Selene had been out partying that afternoon, and the early evening hours had found her in transition from giddy and buzzed to stumbling and inarticulate. They'd spent the night together, and the next day he'd awakened to her early-morning organization skills as she'd pattered about her room, straightening books and putting things where they belonged. His own clothes he'd found folded and stacked at the edge of the bed, and he'd realized then that this surely must be the most mature, most together person he'd ever known, and that, given time, he could, or would, be able to fall in love with her.

And so his falling in love had been a conscious decision, just as conscious as the decision to move

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Indefatigability

in and share bills, to store his things on the left side of the closet and to store hers on the right. With all these decisions came too an air of properness, of sensibility, of putting his house in order and bidding goodbye to the Camilles and the Luannes that sooner or later left him anyway, but always because of some much more base, more glandular reason, usually in the form of some taller, thinner boy. And just as Selene had helped to balance and organize the rest of his life, so too had he organized even his daydreaming to the point where he knew he would give ten minutes a day to his ideas of girls from his past, but no more than those ten minutes, because then he would rise and shower and leave those ideas of Camille and Luanne in his bed or wash them off his body and watch them lather and rinse off and swirl down the drain of the shower into a tiny black hole. Because once organized, he'd found, the ideas could be managed, could be selected and distributed every day just as calmly and reliably as those tiny blue birth control pills that Selene took every night at precisely ten-thirty.

But such meditative thoughts were all very far from his mind right then as he indulged in the image of Camille in a silk kimono, kneeling down beside him as he lie on her futon drinking her freshly brewed coffee. He imagined her peeling an orange, breaking it apart into sections and sharing them with him, and he could smell the orange and the coffee and the fresh spring air and her perfume, and he could smell her on his own skin as he lie there naked and slightly excited beneath the loose, wavy sheets of her bed.

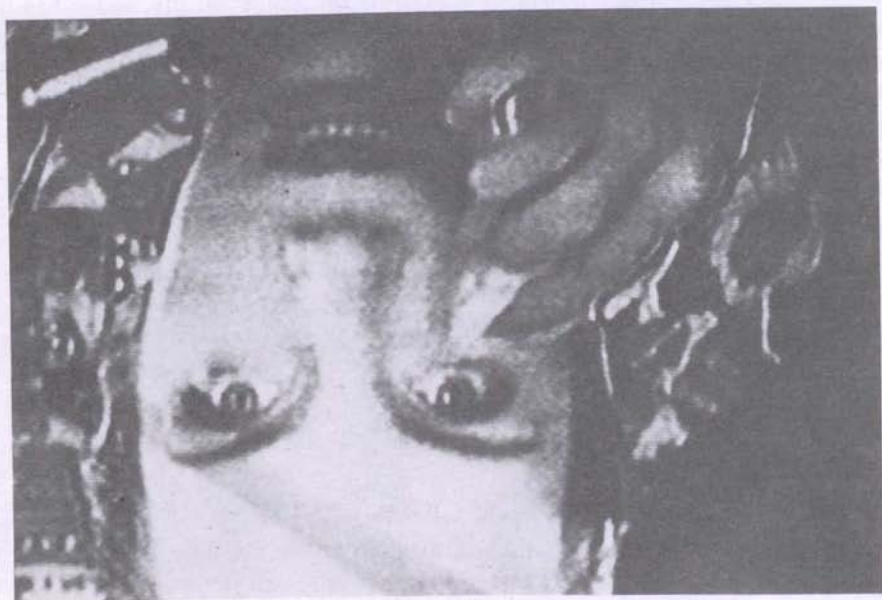
"You getting up, Billy-boy?" He felt Selene's firm hand rocking his shoulder. "Or are you going to be a bum all day?"

He opened his eyes to see her buttoning her white starched collar, her red hair up in barrets and twisted into a tidy knot in back. With her make-up on, heavy and severe, she assumed the role of her navy blue business suit: organizer, conductor, Knower of Facts.

"Wake up," she said. "It's time to beat the kids."

Demanding, yes. Condescending even, yes. Certainly condescending, for she must have know how effectively those comments cut his altruism to the quick and exposed it for the laziness he sometimes realized it really was. Once he had spared no punches criticizing her materialism, her involvement with the crude

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Indefatigability

business world, but lately he'd come to wonder himself just how much he cared about the fate of the world, about future generations, about the Good. Hadn't he planned on changing things? When he sat with Selene at night in front of the TV and talked about their days' work, sometimes he couldn't help forcing the comparison; she had closed an account or trained a new young executive; he had mediated an argument between two students who shared a locker and hated each other. He'd graduated with the vague intention of Helping People, but the intentions had stayed vague, the people not worth the effort. Better to be adult about things. Face facts. Be happy and very careful with those precious ten minutes because if anyone found out. . . .

As he rose and walked towards the bathroom and his rendezvous with the shower, he looked back and saw that already Selene was making the bed, smoothing the bumps and lines out of their bedspread and blankets.

* * *

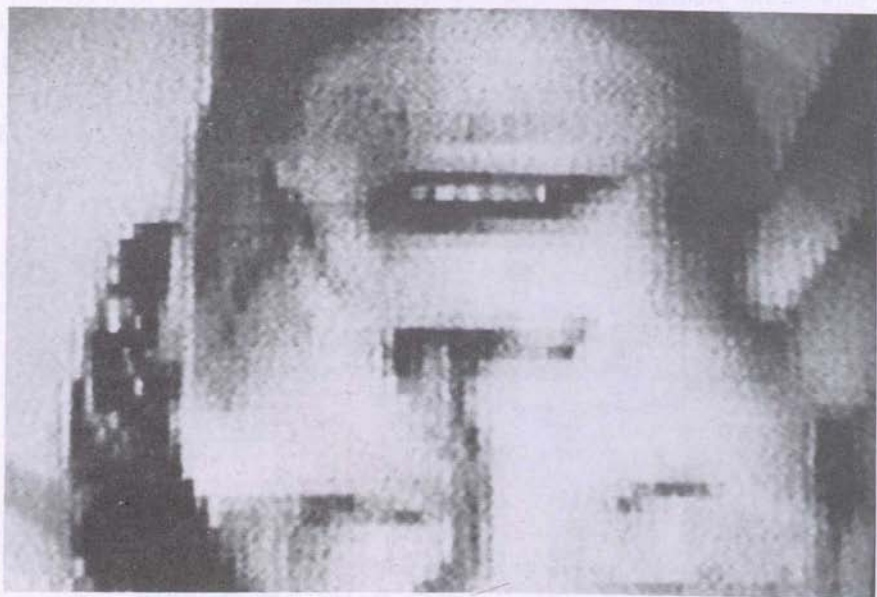
He knew by the way the girl eased herself down onto the straight-backed chair facing him that she was carrying more than just a few extra pounds. In fact he'd known it the moment he'd seen her rounding the corner into his tiny office, not a "fat" girl, but one his mother would've called "healthy," her face and cheeks full and pink and her head held high, her feet shuffling slowly across the quiet carpeting, just beginning to reveal a hint of that peculiar waddle.

"Hi," she said.

"Have a seat," he said.

And only after he'd checked the next name on his conference sheet and matched the name to the face and the face to the belly, which she'd tried to make less obvious by wearing that drooping, oversized sweatshirt with the shoulders where her elbows were, did he remember the talk in the faculty lunch room of this spring's pregnant young girls. He'd been told that this was just another part of his job and he had been briefed on how to deal with them, had read the selection in his *Adolescent Psychology* textbook about the changing sexual attitudes of young women, about the nature of their sexual awakenings, about trends and tendencies and processes of development. But he'd known even then that he would be shamefully unprepared for this.

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"Tina Lipinski?"

She nodded.

He stood and made the short walk to the file cabinet which contained his one-sixth of the student population, letters I-L, and found her name almost immediately under the drawer marked "Juniors" but pretended not to see it briefly while he recalled those comments in the lunch room:

"Pretty girl. Quiet."

"She a blonde?"

"Brunette."

"No, that's not who I'm thinking of then."

"Never noticed her until she got pregnant."

He'd heard, he'd listened, but he hadn't figured on seeing her, hadn't counted on her trusting a new counselor, a man, and a young, inexperienced man at that. She belonged in Judy Milner's office down the hall, or even with Mrs. Chambers, that old, gray-haired, out-of-touch battle axe, but that first letter in her last name had sent her to him.

He took her file out of the drawer and sat down at his desk. He wondered if he should have kept standing, or at least have sat *on* the desk. Should he act like a friend or a father? Would he have to try to explain to her what was going on inside her body?

"Okay," he said, opening her file. "Tina Lipinski." Does she need money? "Junior." Will he marry her? "Now, what can I do for you?"

"I want to drop out."

The words were out of her mouth before he'd even looked up from her papers. Her brown eyes paralyzed him. *Today*, he thought, *you earn your pay*. He shifted in his chair and looked again at her file, at the list of grades that made up her transcripts, and seeing nothing but rows of *C*'s, with an occasional *B*, an occasional

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D, and a single, lonely *A* next to *Ceramics*, he realized that this girl before him had probably floated through the last three years completely untouched, completely unaffected by a single teacher. He looked at her again and could feel the hot flush of redness on his face when he met her eyes.

"You know you have to be seventeen to drop out."

"Yeah," she said. "Today's my birthday."

Jesus, he thought. Happy birthday. He looked at her file again, paged through the sheets looking for a date of birth.

"I've got my I.D. It's written on there."

And again he was staring at her eyes, those eyes which seemed to force him off the passive, noncommittal sidelines of his life to confront his own contradictions. He hadn't wanted her here, in his tiny, cramped cubicle, hadn't asked her to come down to the end of the long, quiet hallway where other counselors walked back and forth quietly in soft-soled shoes, shuffling signed and unsigned forms and documents and complaining about the ones that weren't filled out correctly. He hadn't really wanted to dirty his hands with anyone like her.

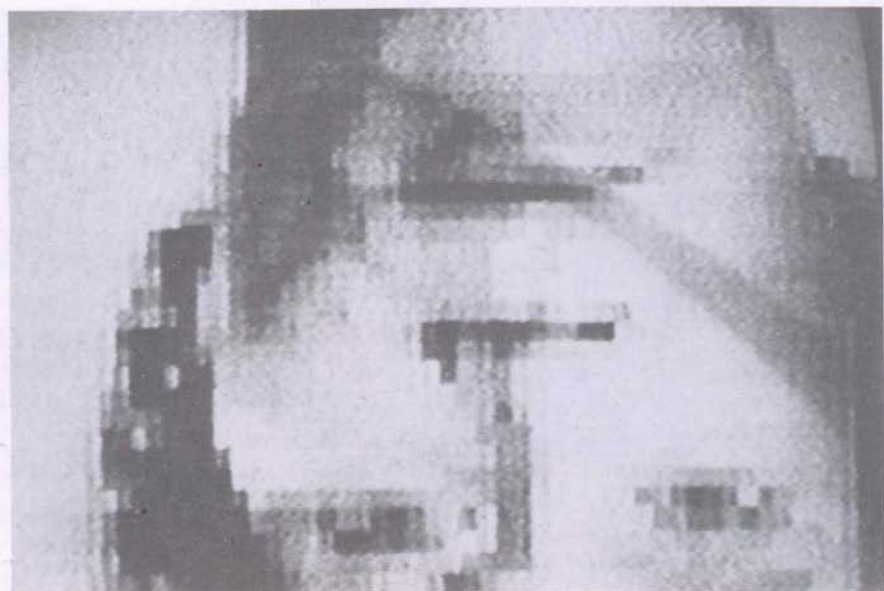
"No, he said. "No, I believe you. I was just making sure we had it written down. Here it is," and he waved a sheet of paper at her. Then the baby must've kicked, because she hiccupped just a little and looked down and smoothed her hand over her stomach, and he looked down there too, expecting to see the shape of a foot poke out from the sprawling sweatshirt. She looked back at him, and he felt as though he'd been caught peeping through her bathroom window.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

"I see."

And now that she's opened up with that, he told himself, it's time to start doing your job. He took a deep breath, as though he were about to speak, but finding that he had nothing to say merely looked down once again at her file. She was too big; she was dwarfing him, this clean, pudgy man with clean, small hands.

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Her presence in the tiny room seemed to be growing, spreading forth from the waves of that great sweatshirt, pressing him further back against those close walls.

"Well?" she asked.

And when he looked up again he saw in her nothing but willpower, nothing but stubbornness and boorishness, certainly no hint at all that would lead him to believe that he could make her change her mind. *But it's your job*, he reminded himself.

"Now?" he asked.

She nodded once.

"Let's think about this," he said, knowing full well that it was he who would do the thinking, that it was within her right to refuse just as she'd no doubt been doing in her classes for the past three years, probably sitting in the back row with that blank expression on her face, not speaking up and challenging her teachers with "Hey, you're full of shit," but doing something worse—doing that which no teacher could either condone or stop—simply sitting there, vacant, eyes wide open and alert but unfocused, her mind somewhere safe and warm and comfortable.

He wished he could think of something to say. But instead of thoughts coming to mind there was only that long pause during which she didn't even twitch or appear to breath. *Why don't you at least finish the semester?* was a thought, but *Why should she?* And he thought of saying *You know, I'll bet in five or ten years you'll be wishing you had that diploma*, but he wasn't even convinced by the tone of his own voice as he turned it over in his head. And *What does your mother think of this?* seemed to him then the most naive question in the world. Because something in her, the way she sat up straight, the way she met his gaze, some narrow-minded indefatigability, made him realize that out of all the students who had faced him from that chair, who had pointed and cursed at him and had even threatened his life, all of those were weak. All were simply tough-talking adolescents who sooner or later, he knew, would break, would ultimately calm down and cool off or simply give up. But here was one who had simply waited for her day. One who had escaped right from under their noises, and they hadn't even known that she'd been there in the first place. Hadn't even known they'd been keeping her prisoner. Whether they'd failed her or whether she'd simply duped them

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he didn't know. But before he knew it he was taking the forms out of his desk and filling them out and, sweat beading on his forehead, addressing her in his kindest, most congenial office voice.

"Sign here."

He watched as she bent forward across her own belly, brushed her hair behind her ear to look quickly at the form, and signed next to his "X" with the pen he'd courteously offered her. It was so quiet in his office then that he could hear her soft breathing and the sound of the pen making the shape of her signature.

"Bye," was all she'd said, glancing once up at him, the hair behind her ear falling back over her forehead as she slowly stood up, straight-backed like a weightlifter doing a squat. And "Bye" was all that he'd answered, courteously, but not friendly. As she turned her back on him and exited he wanted to ask, "When's it due?" to at least be kind, to at least show some small shread of humanity, but already she'd been done with him; already he'd realized that he'd been cowed, and the swishing noise of her thighs rubbing together in her corduroy jeans as she half-walked, half-waddled down the carpeted hallway suddenly reminded him of the boy in the parking lot, less grating this time but just as persistent, just as narrow-minded and reliable, for as surely as those thighs would rub together and swish, just as surely would that golf club rise and fall, rise and fall again.

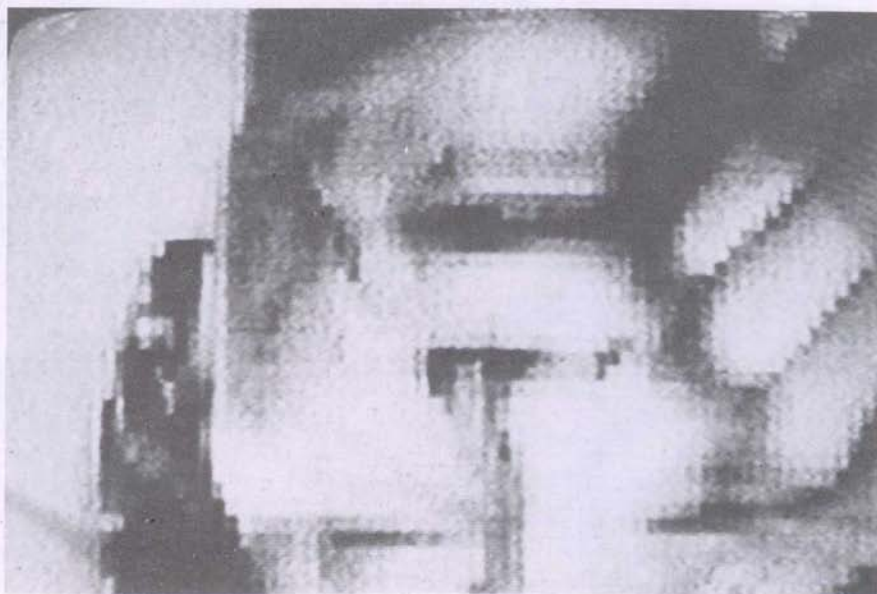
* * *

"What do you say to you and me having a baby?"

She'd been giving him that funny look ever since she'd walked in from work to find the table set with candles and the spaghetti cooking. And he'd meant to build up to it, to bring out the photo albums with their childhood pictures after dinner and sit there with her on the couch, looking through the pages. But midway through dinner she'd dripped spaghetti sauce on her blouse and had looked to him utterly adorable. Just sitting there, looking down at the spot. He'd found himself unable to hold it in any longer.

She looked up from the stain but said nothing. He could tell by her expression that he hadn't upset or frightened or angered her; she was simply confused, for the frown on her face was missing the usual condescending flair, and she sat merely speechless because there was absolutely no disbelief.

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Indefatigability

"What do you think?" he asked again. He was leaning over the table edge with wiry determination, his eyes wide and excited, oblivious to everything but her response.

"This is what the candles are for?" she asked.

He smiled and reached his hand across the table to hers.

"Let's do it," he assured her. "Let's work on knocking you up."

"Christ," she said, standing up. She turned and stepped to the sink, picking up the washcloth that lay drying across the spigot, and turned on the water. But he was up and standing behind her, his hands caressing her smooth, wide, round hips as the water turned cold. With his nose he nuzzled behind her ear; he nibbled on her earlobe as she stuck her hand into the cold stream of water, and above the pinging of the water hitting the stainless steel basin he whispered: "Mommy."

"What do you think you're doing?"

And he was aware for the first time in many weeks that she had addressed him as an adult, as a man even, and he felt a physical stirring all through his body that he hadn't even known had been missing, just like so many of the stirrings and renewed sensations that had returned to him only after that pregnant girl had swish-swished out of his office and only after his fear of acting incorrectly had subsided.

"I'm feeling my wife. You've got a problem with that?"

"What has gotten into you?"

She turned to confront him but merely spun like a top in the grip of his arms, and then his face was only an inch from hers and the washcloth was against his back, dripping wet down his shirt and onto the floor, and his hands were squeezing away rhythmically at her buttocks. Her eyes, he noticed, showed just the slightest sign of fear at this new man standing before her.

"Where did you get this idea?"

He took a step back then and took the washcloth from her hand.

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"From a girl at school. Does it matter?"

"A girl at school? Some little slut with a baby convinced you that *I* need one?"

"She came to me today," he said, pointing at her with his washcloth-holding hand, "on *her* birthday, and I gave her the freedom that she'd been waiting for for the past seventeen years."

She looked at the washcloth and then into his eyes, her brow knitted in what was becoming an angered, impatient expression.

"So what?"

"So," he said slowly, mocking her tone, "She had found, at the age of seventeen, her *womanhood*." And he squeezed the washcloth for emphasis, and they both watched as the water welled up over his fingers and splattered onto the floor.

"What the hell did you do that for?"

She'd reached an understanding of him then and had gained control of both her anger and her condescending tone. But he wasn't budging, either.

"This is like your fertility, see? Cooped up inside a dirty washcloth for so long that it needs to be *wrung* out of you." With both hands then he grabbed the washcloth and twisted it one more time, and this time the drops sparkled down in the kitchen light and landed on her stockinged feet.

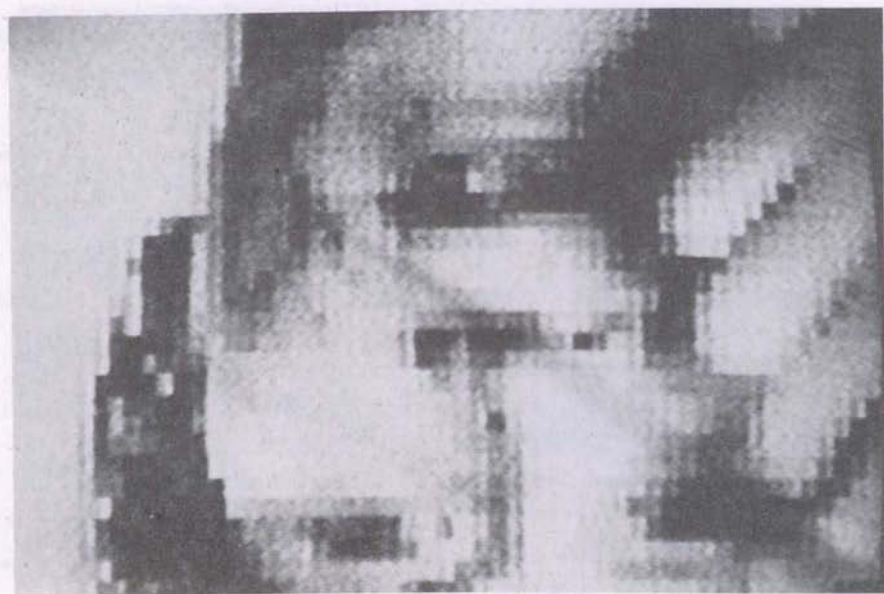
"Thank you," she said, and brushed past him on her way to the bathroom down the hallway. He heard her set the toilet seat down and knew that she had sat down to roll off her stockings.

"I have a job," he heard her beginning from down the hall; "I work hard at my job so we can save money to buy a house and get out of this crummy apartment, this rancid neighborhood, . . ."

Her voice trailed off as she caught her breath, and as he stood there in the kitchen before the shining puddle and the running spigot he caught the reflection of himself in the window above the sink.

"*You*, too, have a job. However, your job does *not* pay enough to support a family, *especially* a family which

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has hopes of one day moving *out* of the rat hole in which they live now.”

It was dark outside and the light from the kitchen made the window shine like a mirror, only better than a mirror because the shadows were highlighted, making his cheekbones and jawbone look much more prominent, and he stood up straight before the mirror, shoulders back and head held high.

“And *I’m* getting a raise, Bill. You know, . . . *raise*? Do they have those in public schools?”

He raised his arms and made muscles in the mirror. They were not bad muscles, for someone who never worked out, he decided. But he would like to change that. And the pot belly had to go.

In the reflection of the window he saw her lumbering out of the bathroom behind him and turn and walk further down the hallway to their bedroom. He saw the reflection of their bedroom light being turned on. Then he looked at the darkness of his unshaven chin and remembered what he’d remembered earlier that day as he’d sat there at his desk after the girl’s swishing thighs had waddled down the hall. He remembered lying beside Denise in her father’s van late one summer night after his senior year in high school. He remembered looking at her in the moonlight that shown through the van’s windows, looking at her chest rising and falling, rising and fall as her breathing returned to normal. He remembered how the moonlight had caught the shine of her eyes as she faced him and how her eyes were wide and frightened and how that had frightened him worse than anything else. Worse than *anything* else, for in her eyes he’d seen that she *knew* and that already the fear had set in, not later or next week or at the end of the month but *right then*, and he felt weak and frightened all over, too, because he’d told himself he could pull out, could pull out, could pull out, but when the time had come to pull out he’d stayed, he’d stayed and stayed because it was his first time and he’d had no idea of what it was to do that inside a girl, and the devil over his one shoulder, he knew, had spoken louder than the angel over the other one, and then the devil had sat there grinning and the angel had had Denise’s eyes. And Denise’s eyes were wet.

But something in that fear, something in those tears and walking fear and in that week of waiting, waiting for the news—“Did it come today? When’ll you know for sure?”—had made her a woman, had made him see her in a completely different light during that very week when he’d come to see her everynight and they’d done nothing but *wait*. They would take a drive in his dad’s car or watch TV or play cards in the

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camper, but what they were really doing, they both knew, was waiting. And everyone else, he was sure, knew, because both had remained so quiet, and they had avoided her parents' looks and had stayed away from friends because there just was not a thing to say, not until they knew. But there was something in that quiet fear, something in that terrified waiting, that had made her a woman and by doing so had made him a man, and in his head he wanted so badly to hear the right news, but there was a voice, too, that wanted to hear the wrong news, wanted to create and bear fruit and bear responsibility—like a *man*—and stand up and be proud regardless of the situation fate had handed him and say, "Yes! I am a *man*! I have *created*!" Something about that felt *right*, too, and it wasn't the devil *or* the angel over his shoulders; it was something inside him that wanted to be fulfilled. And when the *good* right news had come, he'd sighed heavily with relief, but something between him and Denise had died along with the good news, just as he'd guessed that it would, and that something had turned cold because he'd known that when it was over, when it was safe, she would hate him for what he'd done.

"And furthermore, you're forgetting the most important thing of all—"

"What?" He turned off the spigot in front of him and was surprised by the sudden silence. "What? I couldn't hear you."

"I said, 'And furthermore, you're forgetting—' "

"Shhh!"

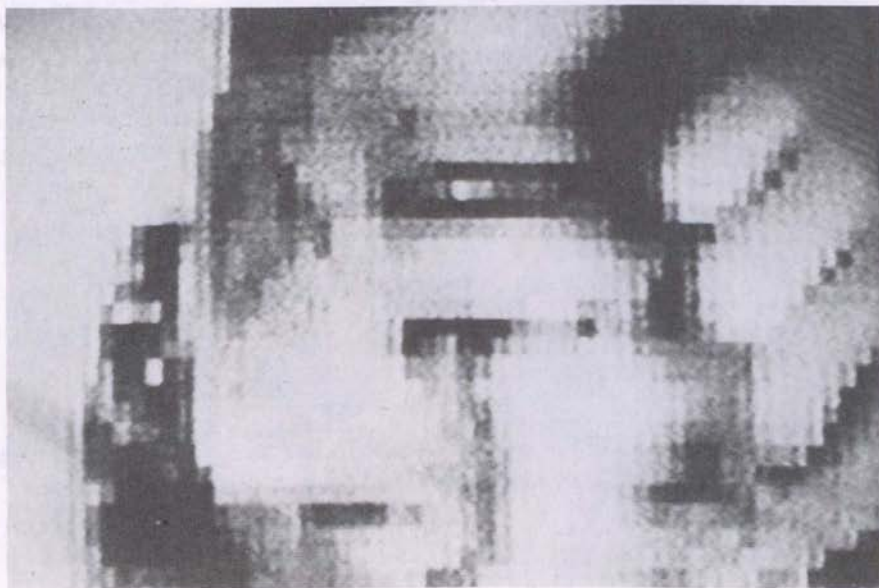
He caught her eyes as she stood down at the end of the hallway, but then he focused on the light of the bedroom itself and the silence and then, barely audible, the faint "scrape . . . scrape . . . scrape . . ."

"What? What are you 'Shhh-ing' me—"

"Shhh!"

Then he was scampering silently across the carpet toward their bedroom. He slipped past her and flicked off the light as she stood like a beacon in her raggy bathrobe, blocking the doorway.

"Listen," he whispered, looking back at her as he climbed over their bed in the darkness, the hallway light reflecting the shine of his eyes. He stood on the bed frozen in front of their window, the blinds closed and



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his forefinger poised in front of his mouth, which made the shape of a "shhh . . ." but was silent. And after the bed stopped rocking they both froze, eyes locked on each other's eyes across the room, and both heard the sounds, and both realized that they'd *been* hearing them ever since darkness had fallen during their dinner: that slow, faint "scrape . . . scrape . . . scrape," as reliable and dogged as a machine.

She stood once again confused, but this time she quickly recovered and understood, and the expression on her face changed from curiosity to weariness in response to his almost childlike determination. He turned and sat down then on the edge of the bed and, opening the blinds, peered through them to see the shadowy form in the darkness and the sparks below it shooting left, then right, then left. . . . They seemed to shoot up from the pavement of their own will, erupting from the darkness of the ground as though some mystic force were breaking free of the earth, some puny, dogged, mystic force, so tiny and insignificant that it could appear one night in the middle of their parking lot and no one would take notice. Nothing would change or alter. Nothing would dispute the fact of the force itself.

"Come here," he said, motioning to her with his hand.

"Must I?"

But he merely motioned to her again, and he kept his hand out to her as he watched the sparks spraying back and forth until he heard her crawling across the bed and finally standing beside him. She didn't take his hand, but he put his arm around her shoulder just the same and pulled her next to him at the window. He watched as she looked down into the parking lot. He could see the reflection of the sparks in her eyes, and he kissed her once tenderly on the cheek, but she merely shook her head and sighed.

"I wonder about you, Bill."

"Look at him," he said softly in her ear, then "Look at him," this time more persistently.

"So what?" she asked, slipping out from beneath his arm.

"So what," he said slowly, then repeated, "*So what?*" and looked at her. "Yes. That's what I would have said this morning. But now I say. . . ."

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She moved further away from him on the bed.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not quite sure, I'm not sure if it's something you can talk about or just feel. But this goofy kid, . . . and that pregnant girl today. You should've seen her—boy, was she pregnant!"

He clapped his hands in sheer rapture, then sprang forward on top of her, pinning her to the bed, which shook up and down with the noise of the box springs. Then he stood kneeling above her, looking down at her as she smiled and broke out in laughter, a laughter pointed both *at* him and *with* him which he'd never heard from her before.

"I'm talking about *living*, about us *living* our lives. Like this kid—he gets up today and goes and makes sparks in the parking lot. And then he does it again tonight, but tomorrow or maybe the day after that he's bored with that and so maybe he does something else. So he does, and he's *living*. But look at *us!*"

He waited for a response, but she simply kept laughing.

"Look at us! We've been so dead!"

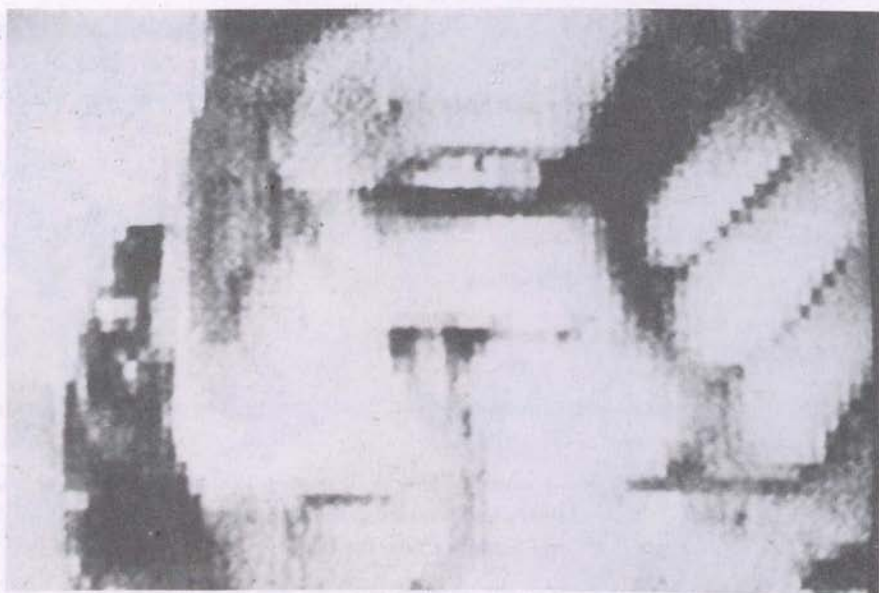
"What do you mean?"

"I mean *dead*. Static. We were. But no more. Tomorrow. . . . Some change. I'm not sure. Something, though, Something big."

She was merely smiling at him then, so alive with her cheeks flushed in the darkness and her hair loosened from its barrets and laying across her shoulders and sprawling red and loose across the sheets. She wasn't taking him seriously, but that was alright. There would be time for that.

"You're gorgeous," he said then seriously, and she stopped laughing and looked in his eyes, her face frozen in a smile until he bent his face down to hers and kissed her for as long as deeply as he could until she needed to catch her breath because of all the laughing. And when she'd caught her breath he kissed her again, and this time she kissed back with just as much desire, her hands caressing the back of his head and her fingers running deeply through his hair. He could tell by the way she kept throwing back her head and pushing his face down to her neck and then down further to her breasts, that she wanted him to take

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control, to move fast, to make love to her hurriedly, but he knew also the strength of his own holding off, knew for the first time that he could control his passion and that for once his holding off, this *teasing*, could be a nice thing, could make her more excited than the other thing. And so for a time he rubbed his nose to her cheek and rested until he felt her breathing once again return to normal.

"What about the girl?" she asked then, startling him.

"What?" he asked.

"The girl—how was she *living*?"

He sat up then remembered, remembered the sound of the pen making her signature as she'd signed her release form, remembered the eyes that never allowed him refuge or escape and never wavered in their demand.

"She was brilliant," he said. "She was the most strong-willed person I've ever met."

"She made some kind of impression on you."

"Yah." He smiled at her and gave her a quick kiss before rolling to the side of the bed.

"Be right back," he said, and walking down the hallway to the bathroom he remembered the girl's waddle and her strong, proud, straight back. And those eyes. They had caught him in the act of moving through his existence like a shadow, a ghost, slipping into and out of people's lives untouched and unaffected in his tiny, claustrophobic room: the Shuffler of Papers.

His eyes constructed and hurt when he flipped on the bathroom light and closed the door, and then he saw himself in the mirror, his hair dissheveled, his face flushed and red, the collar of his shirt bent up at one side and the other side tucked behind his back. He opened the mirror-door of the cabinet above the sink, and finding the slim plastic box, snapped it open and looked at the tiny pills, the tiny, sterile pills in their own separate plastic bubbles on a card marked with dates. He couldn't remember any time before when he'd been so excited by a feeling, something so vague and strong and powerful, and still he couldn't understand what it was. Selene was going to have a fit he knew even as he began squeezing the little pills out of their bubbles one by one, watching them plop into the toilet water, but he was alive with the half-baked idea, alive especially with its half-bakedness. *For tonight* he understood when he finally caught sight of himself in the mirror, his cheeks a deep, virile burgundy, *Tonight you earn your keep.*



NON-FICTION

NON-FICTION

non... this is not fiction

not really a fabrication

fiction

but

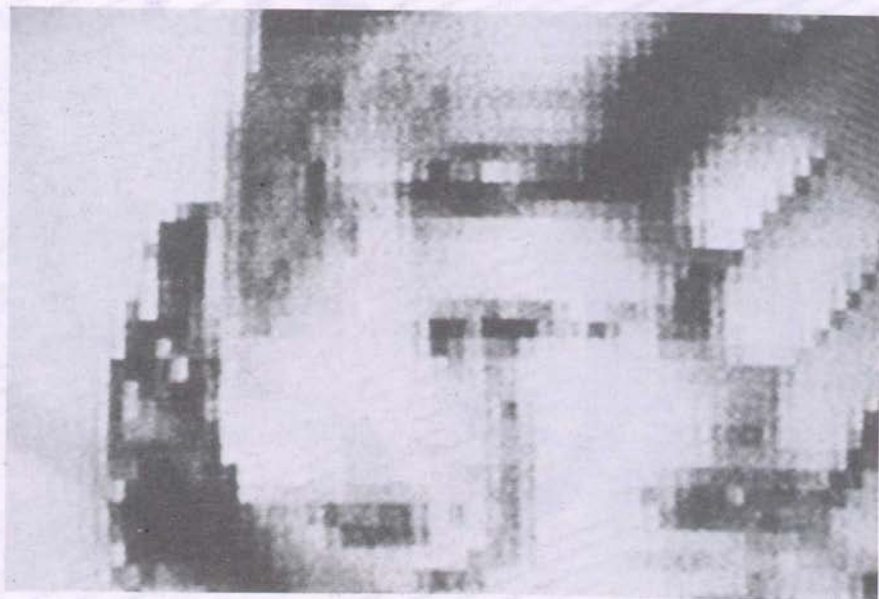
merely

an example

of a truth

as we recognize it.

Video



Excerpt from "Raggedy Annie and Andy"

Otis F. Richardson

A Well-Versed Poet

Russ Needham

"The first poem I ever wrote was about the dial tone. It was a punishment from my tenth grade English teacher, Mrs. Etteson. I had a crush on her and thought she was the greatest thing in the world. So to please her I sat at home and listened to this noise over and over. The more I thought about it, the more spooky it became. I tried connecting it with something, imagining some kind of metaphor. That's how I began writing poetry."

Joseph Gastiger has come a long way since the poet of fifteen. He has had his work published in such magazines as *Tri-quarterly* and *Poetry*, and a twenty-four page chapbook, which was due for publication last year, awaits printing. Gastiger has worked for Northern Illinois University since 1980, teaching creative writing courses before becoming Program Coordinator for the University Honors Program. His office is located on the second floor of a converted home on the south side of campus. A computer sits on his desk, cursor patiently blinking, waiting for a keystroke to be entered. Artwork by a French impressionist hangs on the wall behind his desk. Sunlight beats through the window, illuminating the neatly organized room. Every once in awhile the smell of peppermint candy wafts through the air. His thick, well-groomed beard masks the wide, middle-aged face. He dresses comfortably, wearing appropriate fall hues. And his smooth, understanding voice and manner make one instantly feel at ease. I sit beside his desk as he tells me about his life as a student, as a writer, and as a poet.

Several professors in the NIU English Department praise Gastiger's poetry, which is distinctively real and instinctively human. He writes about "the mute girl some soldiers had shared in a tent up the mountain" and a guy named Musante who "bounced me good . . . By the bleachers sixteen years ago." These people, who respectively appear in "Belladonna" and "For Whoever Drops By at the Mai Kai, The Derby or Pete's," are the result of Gastiger's long journey toward growth as

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F I L M

This is a short segment of a video by

Otis Richardson. The video uses quick

image flashes and jump-cuts. To give

you a sense of its progression, we are

presenting it as a flip-book segment.

So flip these pages and be astounded

by the sporadic, "film-like"

progression of: "Raggedy Annie and

Andy" by Otis Richardson.

A Well-Versed Poet

an author. "I wrote for a bunch of years before I realized how bad I was, which was really lucky because I probably would never have kept up with it knowing how awful my writing actually was. Sure, I wrote on and off throughout high school for the literary magazine, but I didn't know what poems were. I certainly didn't know what *my* poems were. I think my writing has become a lot more my own since I began learning how to sound like myself, how to talk in poems just as I talk to people every day."

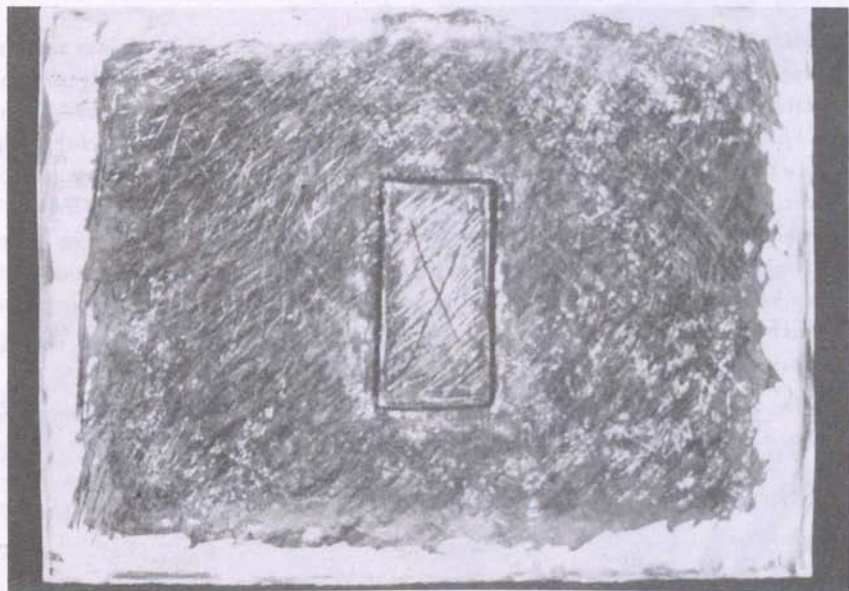
Perhaps one of Gastiger's most notable characteristics that shines through both his poetry and his personality is his sense of originality. He doesn't believe in recreating a writing style that already exists. "Even though I love Yeats, I don't think anyone should try to write like Yeats any more—it would be like putting on an act." Literary anthologies upset Gastiger because they traditionally depict the "good writing" of the canon and are therefore suggesting styles that should be imitated. "If I were to teach a contemporary poetry writing class, I'd never use anthologies." His attitudes stems from his own personal experiences as a writer and teacher. "When I started out—or when anybody starts out—you're trying to sound like somebody. I began my career writing 'bad Eliot.' It seems that most people model their writing after someone they admire." He chuckles as he remembers the struggle to find his own voice. "I finally was reading so much and trying to imitate so many people at once that eventually my writing began sounding like my own."

Joe Gastiger's poetic voice seems to stem largely from his childhood. He retains a very slight Eastern accent, a remnant of his childhood in Westbury, New York, a suburb about thirty miles outside of Manhattan. Westbury was once a rural setting, "with woods and quicksand behind the house," but now Gastiger chides the town in which he completed high school, calling it "the best of all shopping worlds." After silently reminiscing for a moment, he laughs, "I hate New York!"

But late in high school, Gastiger found something he really enjoyed and planned to study in college—acting. Still wishing to get as far away from home as possible, Gastiger attended the University of Iowa. He was just about to declare his major in theatre when he came to a realization. "I remember that suddenly I discovered I really didn't like the people around me who were constantly shrieking and running

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Porcelain Drawing



G. E. Colpitts

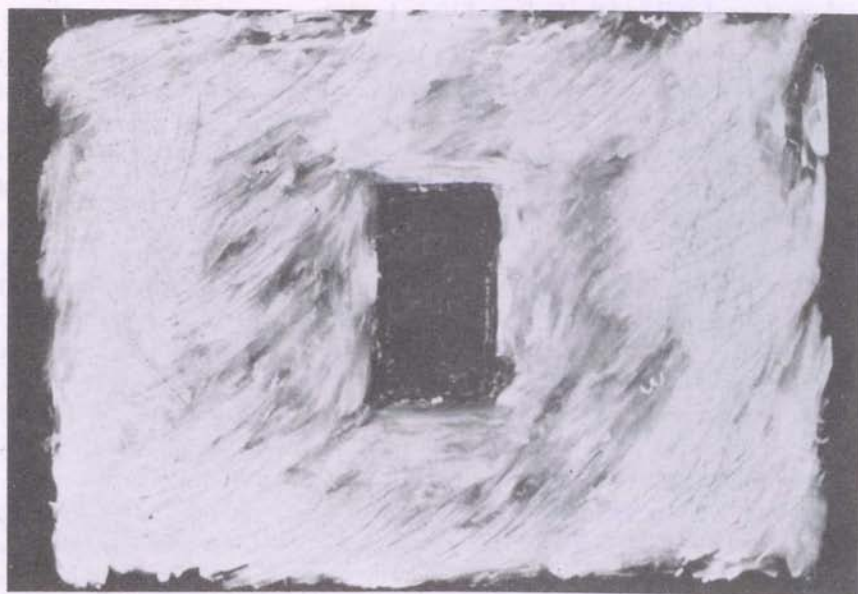
A Well-Versed Poet

about, making a display of their false enthusiasm." He imitates their pretense with a high, silly voice, " 'Oh hi, how are you?' 'I love you!' 'I hate you!' " Returning to a more serious tone, Gastiger relates how he longed for a creative outlet that did not involve working on a committee with people who were apathetic or untrustworthy. "And writing poetry seemed to give me the creative environment in which I could control what I did and when I could do it." Prose, however, never really attracted him. "Every time I wrote a short story, I still had the feeling of 'Gee, I wonder what it's like to write a short story.' "

Gastiger attempted to foster his poetic instincts by enrolling in the creative writing workshop at the University of Iowa. The environment of his study, however, seemed to have had more of an impact on him than the program itself did. "Iowa city is a great town with many literate people. It's really surprising to find waitresses and bartenders having incredible conversations about poetry and literature." He goes on to talk about more characteristics of the city. "You find people hang around Iowa City for years—there seems to be a whole, large community of people getting by on very little money, earning a living on a strange succession of part-time jobs. People hold poetry readings all over town. In fact I ran a reading series in a bar there for a couple of years. But there were a lot of people in the town who detested the Workshop for a variety of reasons. As far as the criticism of student writing goes, it wasn't much harsher than anywhere else, at least as far as I could detect." This was Gastiger's first experience with writing workshops. Although he claims to have learned some important ideas during his study, in retrospect his attitude toward the program is, at best, skeptical. "I don't think it's as good as a lot of people do. I wouldn't recommend it to anybody, to tell you the truth," he says honestly. "It was good for me at the time. I learned some things there that I might not have learned otherwise—technical and structural things, how poems should look on the page. But eventually I rejected a lot of what I learned. When I was there I was very young. I thought I had all these great things to say, but I wasn't any good. I didn't have anything to say." For Gastiger, the Iowa Workshop was a training ground for those who wished to learn the process of crafting poems and essays into pieces that fit the format of the *New Yorker* and *Atlantic*. Gastiger notes the "subtle conformity" present within the workshop. "You would see ten or twelve good poems that you could swear were from the same student, but each ended up coming from a different person. There wasn't nearly as much diversity between each student's

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Porcelain Drawing



G. E. Colpitts

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work there than at other places I'd seen. The Iowa Writer's Workshop was very conformist. It could teach you a lot about craft, showing you how to write a professional, well-made poem that probably wasn't your own.

"I then learned that there really is a kind of star system, a literary mafia, in both poetry and fiction. It's pretty obvious what's going on when awards are constantly given from teacher to student or from friend to friend. You find out which groups of people are in cahoots with whom. Someone once said about English departments that the politics are so vicious because the stakes are so small. And it's certainly true for poetry, which is a pretty little world with not much money floating around."

After graduation, Gastiger moved back to New York, tried to find a job, and ended up working as a bank teller. "Life was really bad," he says. "I had been seeing someone for about five years, then we split up. I really wanted to get as far away from New York as possible." And he did. Gastiger packed up and went to find his fortune out West, pursuing graduate work in creative writing at Colorado State University. Even though he knew noone when he arrived on campus, his experiences there ultimately proved to be better than those at the University of Iowa. "I was very lucky," he admits. "I was in a graduate workshop there with a man named Bill Trembly. He was sort of an ex-football player, French Canadian wild-man from a factory town in Massachusetts. (He isn't very famous, but he has authored a bunch of books and edits what's now called the *Colorado Review*.) I was wandering around town before classes had started, when I stumbled into his office and introduced myself." Gastiger was eager to meet the man who had influenced his coming to Colorado in the first place. From other schools in which he was interested, he received simply an application and information about the school. But from Colorado State Bill Trembly sent him an application and a personally signed business letter. It elated Gastiger to know he was being addressed as an individual. When he finally encountered Trembly, the professor was moving things from one office to another. "He tried to brush me off, but I offered to help him move his things. Actually, I had nothing better to do and I was becoming eager just to talk to someone. We ended up talking for a long time." Gastiger looks as if an imaginary person is sitting across from him, and relates their conversation. "The topic of my poetry finally came up and Bill said something

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Drawing



Jay Harris

A Well-Versed Poet

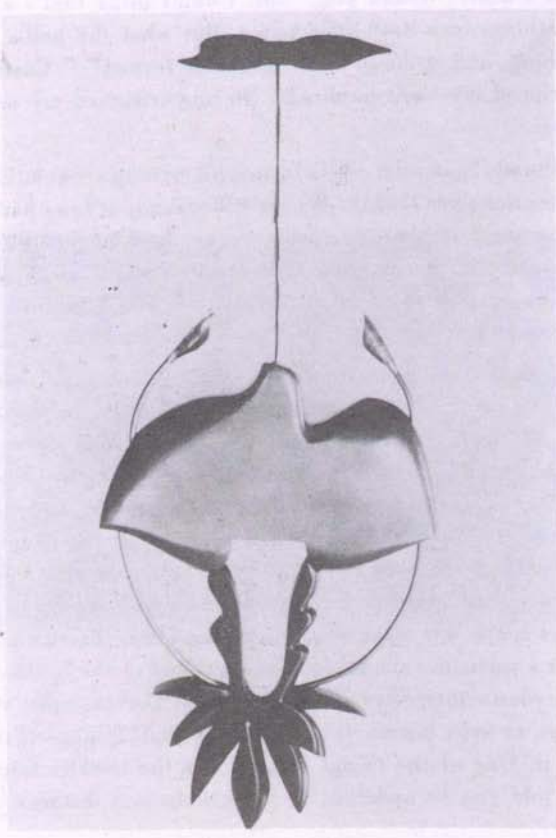
like, 'It's very . . . um, well, very . . . crafty, careful, intricate . . .'. But he never finished his sentence. And at this point I injected a hearty 'thank you.' 'Oh, I don't think that's a good thing,' he told me. 'You're trying to tie these things into neat little boxes. But what the hell's gonna happen when you want to write about something, and it doesn't fall into that format?'" Gastiger now chuckles at the whole situation. "He just ripped my work to shreds! No one criticized my work like that when I was in Iowa—I wasn't used to this."

It was Gastiger's study at Colorado State that really turned his writing around. Under Trembly's guidance, he broke away from the conventionalism that the Writer's Workshop at Iowa had instilled in him. Gastiger learned to appreciate writing as an individual; no longer was he hindered by the need to conform his writing to an established scheme in order to make the grade. "I met a group of people who didn't write at all like each other, but we became involved in Latin American literature and shared many of the same thoughts about Iowa and the teaching of writing. To this day many of us are still best friends."

With a wider view of what goes on in graduate school writing programs, Gastiger shares some of his experience. "One of the problems with writing schools is that when you apply you really don't know what you're getting into. I was lucky to study under Trembly because my writing was unlike his. He didn't try to tell me to write in the political style that was his own. I come from a working class background of factories and factory workers—sort of the wrong side of the tracks. And that's what I wrote about. But there are some schools where the people are involved in something like, say, surrealism. If that's what you're into, then it's perfect for you. But if you're not a surrealist you haven't a prayer. You won't learn anything and you will be spending a couple of years with people who keep asking you, 'Why aren't you a surrealist?' This is the way most writing programs are—narrow and sectarian. And there's no real way to find out what a particular school focuses on. Most of the brochures say 'we're interested in good writing.' Well, everyone's interested in good writing. For example, the University of Arizona publishes a booklet about how to write poems. It's not general stuff either—it tells you what you should write about and how to do it. One of the things I remember the booklet said had to do with writing about a strong emotion. It told you to undercut it, write it from a distance, ironically, and so on. I

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Sculpture



Barbara Jo Gustafson

A Well-Versed Poet

could see writing like that in a sixth grade classroom, but nowhere else. For the people who want literary recognition though, this advice becomes more than just a bunch of suggestions.”

So does Joe Gastiger write poetry in an arbitrary manner, not conforming to any principles or methods? Quite the contrary. “Compared to most of my friends who are writing, I’m much more technically fussy than they are. I don’t use rhyme or formal stanzas, and I don’t like iambic pentameter, sonnet form or anything like that. But I do make up rules in my head for such things as the number lines in a stanza and the number of syllables per line. I also incorporate little tricky devices into my poems. Much of the time the structure of my poems is not something that most readers would notice. I hope that if they wanted to figure it out they could, but I don’t want structure to draw away from the poetry itself.”

Gastiger’s inspirations for his work come from a variety of sources. In addition to a middle-class background shaping his writing, he feels that the theatre has also somewhat influenced his poetry. “I wrote comedy sketches for some radio plays when I was out in Colorado. It was just a college station, but it had a lot of freedom. A few friends and I performed some screwball shows on Saturday nights. I also had time during my last year in graduate school to take an acting class. I did some scenes from a play called *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. It was about Pizarro’s conquest of Peru and the overthrow of the Inca emperor. I played Pizarro. Through studying my character—where he came from, why he did what he did and how he felt at the time—I was able to write a poem about the play.” Gastiger goes on to discuss his persona poems. “In my poetry I do use voices of characters other than myself. About eight or nine years ago, a woman whom I know that lives in town told me about a visitor she had staying with her—a peasant from Lebanon whose name was Habib.” He grins as he remembers the foreigner. “Habib Habib was his name. I never met him, but I knew that he simply hated it here. He visited for only a couple of weeks before going back home. Something about the American culture distressed him so much that he actually felt more comfortable back in Lebanon, which is sort of incredible given the political unrest over there. It seemed like such an unusual, striking event that I was compelled to invent a character named Habib Habib and write some poems about him.

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Painting



Carlos Amaurý Silveira

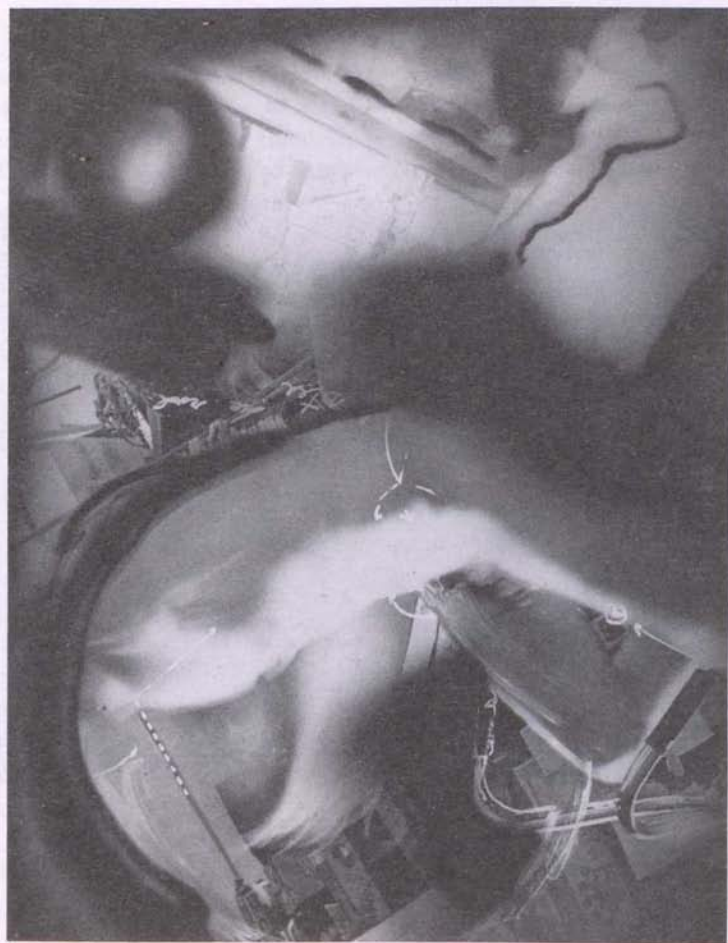
A Well-Versed Poet

"A lot of influence on my stuff comes from writers in different parts of the world, especially Latin America. I love Pablo Neruda very much. Compared with modern American poetry, the Latin American way of writing is more emotional, and there's more sense of who's talking to whom. I read a lot of poetry—I sort of have to—and I don't like a lot of the stuff I see. It's all pretty sterile, with a lot of very dry, very intellectual oh, isn't that clever writing. But who gives a damn? The verse is often too incidental or unimportant, and interpretation becomes a little exercise in deciphering puzzles. I don't think much of the poetry in the *New Yorker* or *Poetry Magazine*."

We began discussing the topic of interpreting literature and poetry and how so many meanings, both valid and invalid, can be drawn from one work. Gastiger remembered one amusing instance that occurred when someone read a little too deeply into one of his lines. "I have this long poem called 'Bit Players.' There was a kid who lived around the corner when I was growing up, and we were pretty good friends. For awhile my mother sold tickets at our neighborhood movie theater, so she would often smuggle my friend and me inside to watch the latest dinosaur or gladiator movies—Hercules versus whatever it was. Since we watched enough of these flicks, we always used to see the same people, the same actors and actresses, appearing over and over again in different pictures; the guy who played the cab driver in *It's a Wonderful Life* is Dobie Gillis' father and is the cowboy somewhere else. The poem is partially about this phenomenon of how people at one time in our lives become recycled into different people at another time in our lives." He goes on to talk about the line which he unwittingly embellished with grand allusion. "There once was this field where they used to train horses, and it was at the bottom of a hill. It was called Salisbury Field. As kids we used to have fun parachuting off swings and landing in the grass. There's a line at the end of the poem that goes something like, 'I was the boy who flew off the swing at Salisbury Field.' I talked about this line with a class that had invited me to share some of my work. The teacher was quick to say that the reference alluded to the Plains of Salisbury where a major battle was held during the English Civil War and also how it related to a scene in *Henry IV, Part 1*. I was sitting there thinking, 'Gee, this is GREAT! I didn't know it was *that* good.'" Gastiger was quite amused by the connection, saying "it was certainly beyond me to make a leap like that." But he realizes the importance of various readings of a verse, adding that he has deliberately made references

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Photograph



Maureen Dempsey

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to things in other poems that could be taken on a number of levels. He admits, though, that "some of those levels are personal jokes which would be almost impossible to discover."

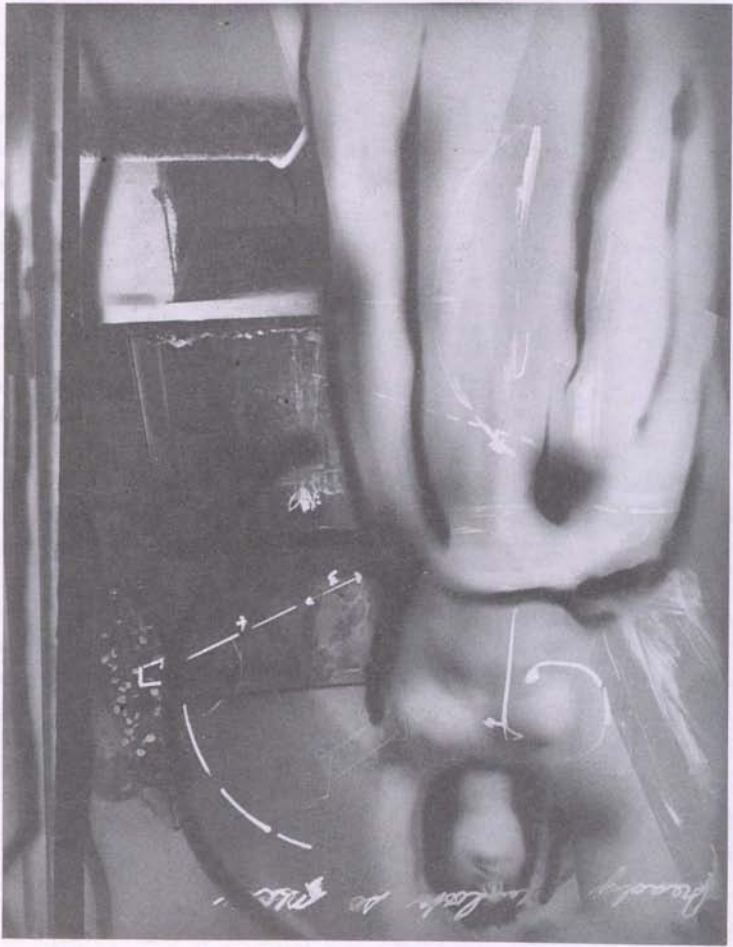
Our conversation turned toward some of the problems an author faces when dealing with getting a piece published. "The delays are tremendous," says Gastiger. "After you write something and a substantial amount of time passes, your work becomes something very foreign to you. Its faults become magnified. When and if it is finally published a year or more later, the piece practically embarrasses you." Gastiger mentions it has almost become a cliché among writers to want to talk about the last thing that they wrote. "And the reason stems from the fact that after a year or two or three goes by, your poem seems like it was written by somebody else. At this point, when someone wants to write an essay interpreting my work, I often say 'fine' because I can't remember what it's about anyway."

Gastiger's gentle cynicism toward the publishing world is not unfounded. For an author of short fiction or poetry, it is especially difficult to have a piece published. "Most of the major publishers have very little or nothing to do with poetry. And this is partly due to their ownership by oil companies—Dutch Petroleum, Gulf & Western, and Shell. The people making the decisions in these corporations want to make money at every turn, and there isn't much money to be made on poetry and short fiction. So almost all of that publishing has gone to the small presses. The problem with these publishers is that distribution is a nightmare. Even if they do decide to print your work, how in the world do you get it around from store to store?" This dilemma has led Gastiger to formulate opinions about the future of poetry and literature. "I see a couple of things beginning to happen that will most likely continue for some time. One is that writing is becoming a much more local and more regional art form. This has to do with small presses springing up everywhere, with very limited distribution capabilities. There could be some poets doing the greatest stuff in the world in St. Louis, and no one would know about it, unless you came across it by accident. There really is no network of distribution, so literature becomes fragmented into little islands, little satellites. Sometimes they're clustered around universities and sometimes not. But we're going to be seeing more regional differences, more distinction between, say, midwestern writers and eastern writers."

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Photograph



Maureen Dempsey

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A Well-Versed Poet

Gastiger took his analysis one step further, describing the “genius of place” that shifts from one geographic location to another. “There are places where, for some reason or other, an incredible amount of literary brilliance happens. And the locale changes quite a bit over the course of time. For hundreds of years, England produced an incredibly rich body of work, but it certainly isn’t doing that now. English poetry today is pretty dry, derivative stuff. The country may again produce masterpieces as it once did, but it’s certainly not doing that now. And I think the same thing applies to American literature. The genius we saw at the beginning of the century—Frost, Whitman, Williams, etc.—is really shifting away from the United States. I don’t think the major writers for the next fifty years will be from the U.S. My guess is they’ll be coming from Latin America and Eastern Europe. I see someone like Gabriel Marquez making more of the lasting impression on society than an author from southern California.”

With this shifting trend in literature, translation from one language to another has increased tremendously. “You’re going to see a lot more of an international sort of aesthetic than you have before,” predicts Gastiger. “Because of translation, a lot more writers around the world have been influenced by the works of T. S. Eliot, Steve Crane, or even Rushdie. Twenty-five years ago, you wouldn’t have been influenced by a Greek poet, unless you knew greek. I think that the better writers of this century will someday become successful because of their ability to translate.”

Joe Gastiger hopes he, too, will publish more in the future. He is very happy with his current position in the Honor’s Program, but admits that it’s not his first love. “At some point I’d like to teach creative writing. That’s what I enjoy the most.” Gastiger understands that being a teacher can be very frustrating sometimes. “Still, I cannot understand why there are so many bad ones in both high school and college. It really is a painful thing to do if you’re not any good at it, especially when you know that you’re putting a class to sleep or when you realize your students still don’t understand something after you’ve explained it for the third time. but I love to teach very much—someplace, sometime, that’s what I’d like to end up doing.”

Joe Gastiger’s eyes glimmer every time he speaks of his writing. “A lot can happen in verse that wouldn’t happen anywhere else. When you can say something in just the right way, so perfectly and so well, you feel that you can make wishes come true. You believe that you have the power to change the world. Unfortunately, things don’t really work that way. But it’s still nice to believe in the power of magic words. And that’s why I often think that poetry is the greatest thing in the world.”

10



WHAT AM I
TO DO WITH
THOUGHTS
LIKE THESE

A R T

In the man made world everything was designed before it was made. Look around you, everything

you see was first seen through the mind of a designer.

The design of a publication is usually nothing more than a clean organization of materials providing

ease of readability with little or no visual stimulus.

Issue 70 of *TOWERS* is different. The design of this issue is geared towards the creation of a

distinct personality. One that challenges the reader, forces you to participate, and makes you think.

TOWERS is for YOUR consumption—react to it, or not.

Mark Ratin

Design Statement

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