

[Vol. 71]

L I T E R A T U R E & A R T M a g a z i n e

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Towers

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Editor's Statement

As I write this and attempt to reflect over the events and dedication that has led to the publication of Volume 71 of **TOWERS**, my mind is overwrought with the TV images of war in the Persian Gulf. Similarly, many of the works that appear in this publication indicate that I am not alone in thought. Therefore, I believe that it is appropriate for me to somewhat relate this publication to the state of our nation in this time of war. We must remember that this literary publication is proof of the creative freedom that Americans possess. We are able to express our ideas and views, whether hostile or peaceful, at a shout or a whisper, written or verbal, as we please. We are able to write poems, paint pictures and tell stories at our leisure. And whether it is right or wrong to send/sacrifice troops for freedom in other lands, we must be thankful for the American opportunity of the freedoms of choice and expression.

Our contributors have made the high quality of this publication possible. They truly reflect a positive light in this nation's future.

I would like to thank the staff, editors, Mike Malone, Joe Gastiger, Mary Schriber, Kiyoshi Joichi, Chris Wielgos, and the NIU Foundation for their patience and dedication.

Lynn M. Shanley
Editor

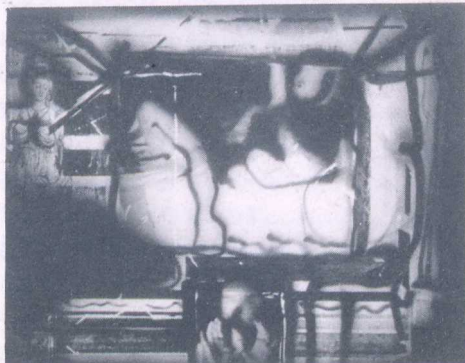
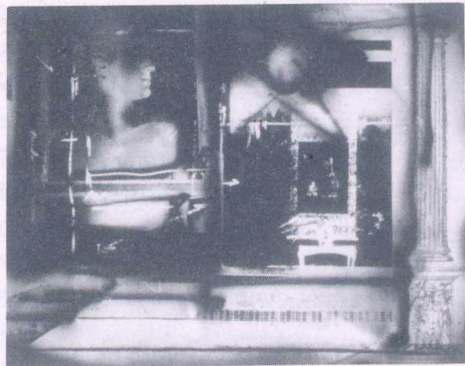
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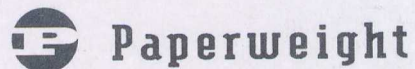
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a Waking Up with the Renaissance Man





Paperweights are on the Senate bills
that keep soldiers gone

They're on the letters
from mothers pleading
for their sons to come home

they're on the speeches
he reads
reassuring
situations are under control

If only the paperweights
were his eyelids
as the teleprompter read
"We've declared war!"



War Ain't Groovy

Man get real angry
Got to go and find
his gun
Johnny got his gun
about three or four
Wars ago
Johnny got his
They got him
Fixed his wagon
real
good
I'm thinking
Johnny going to get
it again
real soon
Probably just put
a big
bomb
right on his forehead
My grandfather
Got all wound up
1951
Hanging out

on a big boat
Smoking Lucky Strike
Flying spitfire
Cruising the 38th Parallel
and doing the boogie woogie
all U.S.O. like

Now

He's sitting it out
on the back porch
beer after beer
watching it all
Roll away

My dad

Got wound up

Real big

1969

Hanging out in the jungle
just doing his thing

Dancing the

Alpha

Whiskey

Foxtrot

All My Lai like




Found out 20 years later
The Orange
Got him
Doing his hair
and pretty much
Just
howling around
inside of him
He doesn't dig
the thunder
or
the lightning
Likes it quiet after dark

Don't go burning
His Flag

I'm wondering
When they're going to
wind me up
Probably
just put
a big bomb
on my forehead
too

M I C H A E L . A . N O V A K

 the faces of communion

a red-gold ring
bodies tight
around the fire
faces
tinted with wine
hands feeding hands
there are some
who glow briefly
and then fade
while others are alight
and constant
the faces shine
with a flame given to each



 **Our Last Friday Night of High School**


That night we stood waist-deep on a sandbar
fifty yards from the shore of Lake Michigan
cans of Old Style bobbing about us
in the cold lake water
like slight white buoys
as the sky and the lake swallowed each other
to the North.
Later we'd walk the curving concrete breakwater
stopping to trade our last few beers
for pan-fried smelt
with tobacco-chewing fishermen out since late afternoon,
the smoky scent swimming through lake breezes
and pausing in tide pools under my nose
And when we reached the breakwater's end
we'd sit with legs dangling
like smelt nets over the edge.
And we'd smoke a joint stolen
from someone's older brother
and tell lies about our sex lives
until the sky began to blush.
Then we'd go back down to the beach
and use an abandoned toy shovel to write
our names in the sand
far from the tide.

a Untitled



Photograph



 **Abandoned**

Hiding in the long grass
of farmers meadow
Where the moon washed
on tips of blades
Moved
like liquid
when windswept
My path
to where my body seat
soaked in earth
Was darker
by deeper shadows
Where my feet
had crushed the pale light
to nothing
My eyes just level
over the flow
To pick the car skeleton
just past the barbwire
Where I had
huddled
summers before



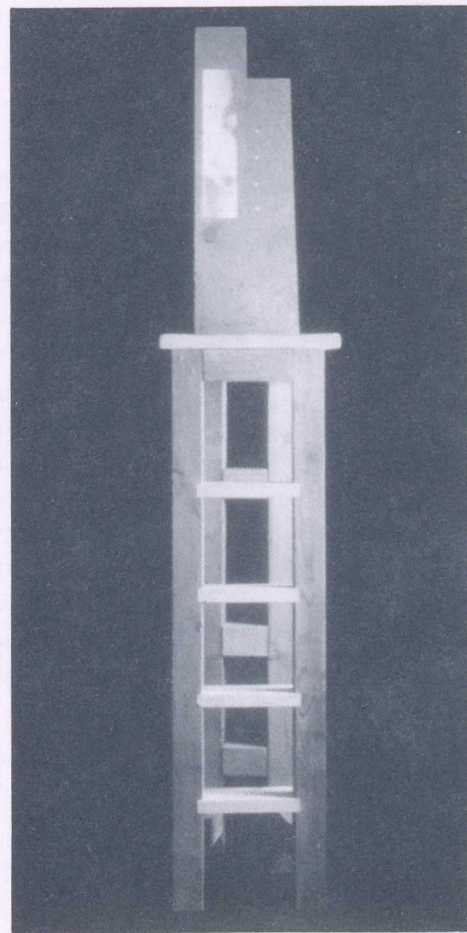
In the rusting frame
the steering wheel
had worn silver
With abandoned
springs of seats
It's cotton flesh
taken to mice
in winter

Three boys
bottled beer
and cigarettes
To dark faces
spilling
on words
and alcohol
and manhood


Or one girl
Backseat spread
bodies
Aching Lips
Twined hands
and promises
to closed eyes

But I remember
alone best
From purple thunderheads
and orange lightning
The shift
then
cold wind
Let the first raindrops
part through my hair
as I ran
Sit to the drivers seat
Listening to the tin
roof
and the
Pound
Then
maybe drive
away

a Modified Throne



Mixed Media


The Interview


She's here."

"She?"

"Yes. They do come in two genders you know."

"Women's lib. I was forgetting." He paused. "Okay, send her in."

"In here?"

"Yep."

"In here? Couldn't you at least pick up the place before you have her in here?"

"I need it this way. I'm writing right now. You know how I get when I write."

She started picking up some crumpled pieces of paper from the floor and throwing them in the waste basket. "Well the least we can do is have the place decent enough so she can navigate her way in."

"Don't do that honey. I don't want her in here any more than you do."

"I want her in here. She'd be good for you."

"Just let her in. Forget about the floor." His wife stood up and exited, reentering seconds later with a young woman with a briefcase.

"Here she is. Ms. Jean Porter."

"Hello Ms. Porter. Won't you sit down? Honey, shut the door on the way out would you?"

"Sure."

He watched her leave as Mrs. Porter picked up some paper off a chair



and set it on his desk. As soon as the door was shut he got up and emptied the garbage pail on the floor, kicked the refuse around until it was spread out in an even layer. "That's better. Now, Ms. Porter. What can I do you for?"

The young woman's mouth hung open but she snapped it shut. She had been told to expect this. "Ah, well, I'm here for the interview. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to..."

"Well it was my agent that gave you the opportunity. I had no say in the matter really. What magazine are you from again?"

"Woman's Annual."

"Ah. Your magazine rejected two stories of mine. It sort of makes me wonder why I'm entertaining you."

"I just work for the publication sir. I don't own it."

"Well that explains everything doesn't it?"

She coughed. "Maybe we should just get on with the interview."

"Maybe we should. You might notice that I'm a little busy right now so we should be getting down to business."

"Right," she said as she opened her briefcase. She shuffled some papers, dug around, found a note pad and pencil. "First question."

"Sock it to me, baby."

"Right. Uh, you were a reporter before you became a writer. What made you change your occupation?"

"I hate reporters. Reporters are extremely rude. They don't care about

people. They ask them questions so they can write a story and make a buck, or keep their job."

She shuffled a little feeling like an amoeba under a microscope.

"I see. So you weren't self-actualized?"

"Spoken like a psychiatrist. You can say that if you want. That's not quite it, but write what you want."

"I don't want to misquote you."

"You will anyway so write whatever you want."

She stopped scrawling, decided she would let the comment slide. "So you became a writer. Was it hard at first?"

"It's hard getting started. Like any other job. You have to show your stuff and even when you show your best, the prospective employers are usually critical. Your magazine was."

"How did you get started then?"

"Someone saw my stuff for what it was and published it. The critics dove in and brought attention to me."

"That was your first story, correct?"

"Yep."

"Why do you write? A reporter has a stable income."

"Why do you write?"

"To make money."

"Precisely why I'm not a reporter my dear. There's more to life than money



Ms. Porter. Some day you'll realize that when you stop being so shallow minded and materialistic."

This jarred the reporter. "Mr. Wallace. I am not shallow minded, and I feel..."

"I guess that just makes you materialistic then."

She took a deep breath and sighed. "Let's just get on with the questions."

"Let's."

"Why do you write?"

"To convey my ideas to other people."

"Why fiction as opposed to editorials?"

"Because what I have to say can't be said in one newspaper column."

"What do you have to say?"

"Read my writing and find out."

"I've read your writing."

"Well then you don't have to ask the question then, do you?"

"I thought I'd like to hear your opinion."

"My opinion is that what I have to say is what I have published. If you have to ask me that question even though you've read my stuff it shows you are not a good reader."

"I'm asking this question for those people who haven't read your works, Mr. Wallace. What do you have to say in your writing?"

"Things that are deeper in life than football scores, politics, etc., those

are the things I write about.”

“Specifically?”

“Ummm... Life in general. The meaning of life.”

“What, in your opinion, is the meaning of life?”

“The meaning of life is relative.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That it varies from person to person.”

“What do you think the meaning of life is?”

“I think that the meaning of life is relative.”

“I don’t think you’ve answered my question.”

“I think I have.”

She decided to change her line of questioning. “How do you think of your story ideas and your novel ideas?”

“I don’t know,” he said, sitting back in his chair. She gaped at him. “Seriously.”

“Would you care to elaborate on that?”

“No.”

“Would you elaborate on that?”

“You know, I bet you majored in English before you switched to journalism.”

Her cheek twinged as she locked her jaw. “How do ideas come to you?”

“I think you’ve answered your own question. They come to me.”

“How?”



"I just kind of live my life and something strikes me as intriguing. Let's say I see a paper on the ground in some park or something. I may start to wonder where the paper came from and form a character in my mind. Why did that person drop the paper on the ground? And I might write a story about the person, or maybe a story about the piece of paper even."

"Ah, so things kind of hit you in the face, ideas just sort of come to you?"

"Nothing gets past you. You have that aura about you, I can tell."

She blushed, irked. "So then you have a story idea. What do you do with it? How do you start writing it? Do you crank it out? Or does it develop slowly."

"It's like having sex when you're not in the mood. You need a lot of foreplay."

"I see..."

"The concept is there but you have to work hard to reach a climax."

She couldn't believe she was asking this question. "What sort of work?"

"You test possibilities, find what works, and go with that. Once things get going you lose control and things take care of themselves. You need spontaneity and originality to get the best results. Otherwise you wind up faking it and your readers find you out."

"Interesting," she said crossing her legs. She took another deep breath. "What do you think was your best accomplishment?"

"When I taught my dog to shit in the back yard. That was a big one."

"What do you think was your best literary accomplishment?"

"I finished reading 'The Last of the Mohicans.' "

"What do you think was the best thing that you've ever written?"

"Mmmmmm..." He thought of telling her about when he forged his father's signature on one of his report cards in junior high. "Hard to say."

"Do you have a favorite story or novel that you've written?"

"Um...No.."

"Why not?"

"Because language is a flimsy mode of communication. There are so many ways to express yourself but when I write, I usually want to express myself in one particular way, and its hard to do that with such a huge variety of words to draw from. I never feel like I do my readers justice when I write. I don't have any favorites because I botch them all up in one way or another."

"You are considered to be one of the greatest authors of this century..."

"Really?"

"Yes. The critics say your works equal and sometimes surpass those of Hemmingway, Faulkner, even Twain."

"What do they know?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, they're not writers, are they? What do they know about writing?"

"Ah... So you don't think you belong up there with Twain, and Faulkner,



and Hemmingway then?"

"On the contrary, I belong up there with them."

"I don't understand."

"That's not my problem."

"Why do you feel you belong among the ranks of Hemmingway, Faulkner, or Twain?"

"Maybe not Faulkner. I really never read about him. But I belong with Twain and Hemmingway."

"Why?"

"Because they just wrote books and stories. They never considered themselves gods. It was the people who put them upon pedestals. The people made them famous. Neither one of them wanted to be that way. As for how my works compare to theirs, who am I to say? Who is anyone to say?"

"You think critics aren't worthy enough to judge your writing."

"That's right."

"You'd put a lot of critics out of work, Mr. Wallace."

"Who needs 'em?"

"Your style of writing is unique..."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know that. I don't read too much. How is it different?"

"You sometimes use sentences that evade standard sentence structures."

"Bullshit."

"I beg your pardon."

"I said, 'Bullshit.' "

"Why do you say 'Bullshit?' "

"Because I'm frustrated mostly. People usually swear when they're frustrated.."

"Do you feel your sentences do not evade standard sentence structures."

"You're going to be a good reporter someday."

"Could you please answer the question?"

"I could, yes."

"Would you please answer the question?"

"Who sets the standards?"

"What?"

"I said, 'Who sets the standards?' I mean, who is to say what standard sentence structures are? There were no standards when oral language was first used. There were just particular structures that were used more often than others. That doesn't mean they are standard structures. It means they are common structures."

"I see." She looked at her next question and smiled. She had been wanting to ask it for some time now. "People say you're eccentric. How do you respond to that statement?"

He pondered a moment, trying to arrange a response that wouldn't offend



her. "Why do people read particular books more than others."

"Because they are good."

"Because they are unique, eccentric, different than what they are used to. People call me eccentric. I'd rather be eccentric than one of the crowd. People aren't known for being one of the crowd. People who are one of the crowd have no identity. They're like books that nobody reads. I'd rather be eccentric and have my own identity instead of being like everyone else. Because everyone else as a group is nobody."

"You've insulted quite a few people with that statement."

"If they don't agree with my statement, they've insulted themselves."

"How do you relate to people?"

"Generally I socialize at parties, that sort of thing."

"Do you get along with people?"

"If they get along with me, I get along with them. If they can't get along with me, then I don't want to know them."

"Isn't that rather conceited?"

"That some people don't want to get along with me? Yes, it is."

"People are curious about your personal life. When did you decide to get married?"

"When my wife asked me to."

"Your wife asked you to marry her?" she asked unbelievably.

"Yep."

She simply had to ask this question. "What did she see in you?"

"She saw me for who I am, which is why I married her."

"What are you?"

"Just another nice guy."

"Uh-huh. Do you plan on having children?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Paula hates kids."

"What was your childhood like?"

"It was like my worst nightmare or my favorite dream."

"That's a contradiction of terms."

"So's life."

"What's your outlook on life?"

"I don't have one."

"Why not?"

"I take things one day at a time. Who's got time to be pessimistic or optimistic in such a short period of time?"

"You said your childhood was good and bad. Why?"

"Because it was good and bad."

"What was good about it?"

"It was fulfilling."

"What was bad about it?"



"It was fulfilling."

"How was it fulfilling in both good and bad ways?"

"In all ways I learned too much."

"As opposed to some ways?"

"Or too little. That's correct."

"I'm confused."

"You certainly are."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That if you'd listen to what you just said you'd understand everything that I've just said. But you're so screwed up, you can't even do that."

"Uh-huh," she said, her patience gone. She decided to give it up. This interview was going nowhere. Her boss had warned her that Wallace was a tough cookie to crack. Her boss had told her that if she couldn't motivate him to talk, she could forget the assignment. "Well," she said, "I think I have enough here to write a column. I don't know what sort of column I'll write though."

"Why not?"

"Because, frankly, I don't know what to make of this garbage Mr. Wallace. You have avoided answering every question I've asked, some of it is only printable in a pornographic publication, and everything else is a bunch of smart-ass one liners."

"I bet you don't like modern art do you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You tell me."

"No. You're the one with all the wise-ass answers, you tell me. What is it? Am I not sophisticated enough to see that every book that someone writes is nothing but some fantastic orgasm? What is modern art? Oh wait, let me guess. It's the product of whips and chains, a new perspective producing the ultimate fuck!"

"Perhaps it is," he said matter-of-factly.

"That's the kind of comment I'd expect from you."

"Really?" he said, elated. "I'm flattered that you think so."

"You would be."

"You know me so well. I feel as though we're best friends."

"Oh! Why you...you...IDIOT!" With that she slammed her belongings in her briefcase, slapped it shut, and stormed out of the study. "Don't bother to get up, Mr. Wallace. I'll see my own way out."

"That wouldn't be proper. Paula see this gentlelady out would you?"

Paula raced after Ms. Porter offering apologies and so on. Tom heard the door shut and Paula's angry footsteps pounding down the hall. She tramped into the room, fuming. "Just what did you say to her to make her act like that?" Her arm, straight as an arrow, was pointing at the door.

"I answered every question she asked and with absolute honesty."

"You do this with every reporter that comes in here. You're going to



give yourself a bad reputation."

"Are you angry with me?"

She sighed deeply. "Just frustrated with you. For you. I just don't want you to ruin your career, that's all."

"I'd like to think that one of these reporters is going to come in here and see me for who I am. You saw me for who I am."

"I'm not everyone."

"Nope. You're one in a million."

Six months later, Paula walked into his study. "Dear? Do you remember that reporter that came in here a few months ago? That young woman?"

"The one who kept talking about sex? Yeah, I remember her."

"You talked with her about sex? I didn't know that."

"It wasn't my idea."

"Anyway, she wrote an article about you."

"Oh yeah? I'd like to read it. Are you done with it? Did she tear into me?"

"I've read it. See for yourself what it says."

THOMAS WALLACE: THE MAN BEHIND THE PEN

By Jean Porter

I visited Mr. Wallace at his home in suburban Chicago. His study was littered with wadded paper balls, little indicators of a mind at work. He very politely told me "You might notice that I'm a little busy right now so we should be getting down to business." It was clear he was willing to

accommodate me as best he could and I was honored for the opportunity.

Wallace was a reporter before he chose writing as a career. But as a reporter, he didn't feel like he was using his talent to his full potential. He said that reporters ask people "questions so that they can make a buck, or keep their job." Wallace needed to leave the field of journalism to write about "things that are deeper in life than football scores, politics, etc...life in general. The meaning of life." He stressed "There's more to life than money, Ms. Porter," and said that some people are too "materialistic" and "shallow minded," something we should all remember.

And just what is the meaning of life in Mr. Wallace's opinion? He says that the meaning of life "varies from person to person." By that we can gather that we each have to find what his works mean to us as individuals, a very astute observation.

Wallace recalls his childhood fondly, saying that it was in some ways good, and some ways bad, and that the good sometimes intoxicated him while the bad awakened him, perhaps prematurely. But he grew up, and married his wife, Paula. As yet there are no plans to have any youngsters.

Of publishing, Wallace says, "Like any other job... It's hard getting started." But, "Someone saw my stuff for what it was and published it. The critics dove in and brought attention to me."

His view of critics is unique. Though they claim his works equal and excel those of Twain and Hemmingway, Mr. Wallace says that it isn't up to any one person to make a judgement for all. Though he skirted the issue of how his works compared to Hemmingway or Twain, Wallace said that he identifies with the writers because, "they just wrote books and stories. It was the people who put them upon pedestals. Neither one of them wanted to be that way." It can be inferred, then, that Wallace doesn't believe in fame, or that he should be famous.

His views on many issues are unique. He said that he would "rather be eccentric and have



my own identity instead of being like everybody else." This opinion serves to explain his peculiar writing style with sentence structures that go against standard English grammar and sometimes create confusing passages. "Who sets the standards?" he wisely asks.

Indeed, who does? Talents work in mysterious ways. He comes up with his ideas in a strange manner. "I just kind of live my life and something strikes me as intriguing." Once he has an idea, he says, "You test possibilities, find what works, and go with that. Once things get going, you lose control and things take care of themselves." He goes on to say that it is necessary to have "spontaneity and originality to get the best results. Otherwise you wind up faking it and your readers find you out."

His seriousness as a writer was evident when he said "I never feel like I do my readers justice when I write." But alas, the time drew to a close and I felt it best to let Mr. Wallace get back to work. I told him I'd find my own way out but he took it upon himself to call his wife to see me out. He is truly a sensitive and thoughtful intellectual and I must say that I shall never forget my interview with him.

"What do you think, Tom?"

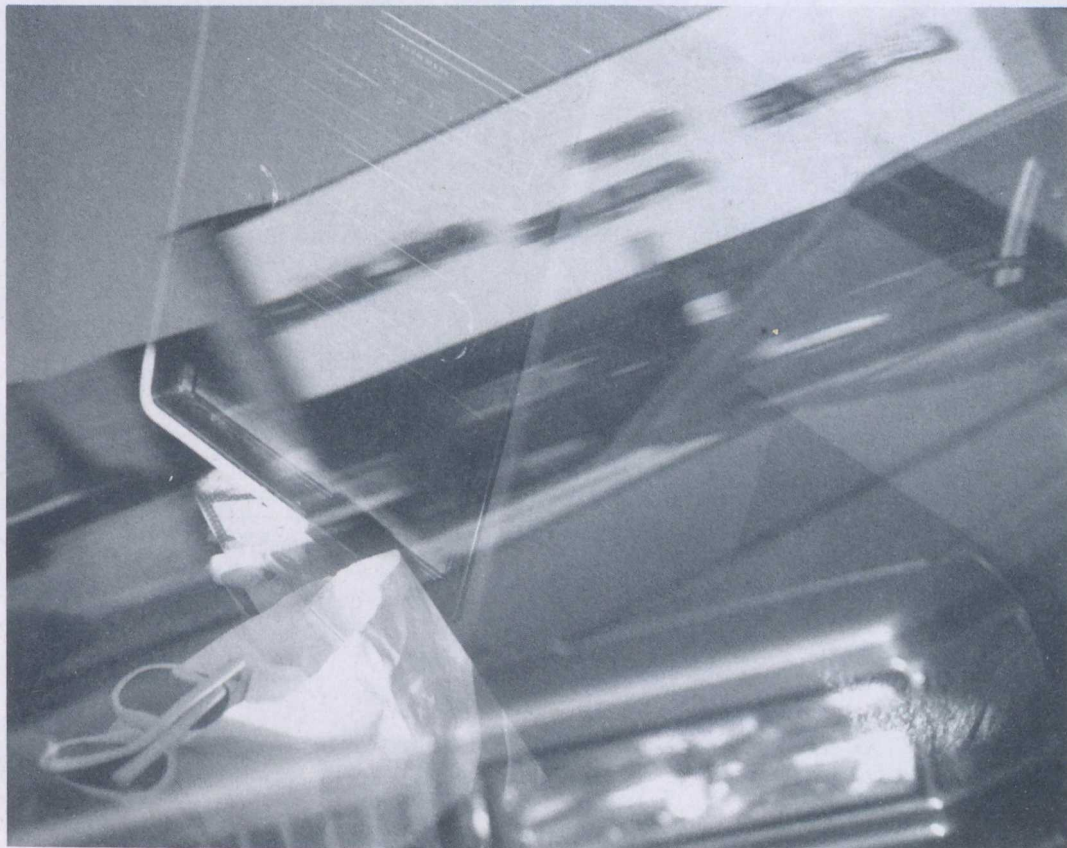
"I think she probably got an 'A' on every research paper she ever had in college."

"So you think she's a good reporter."

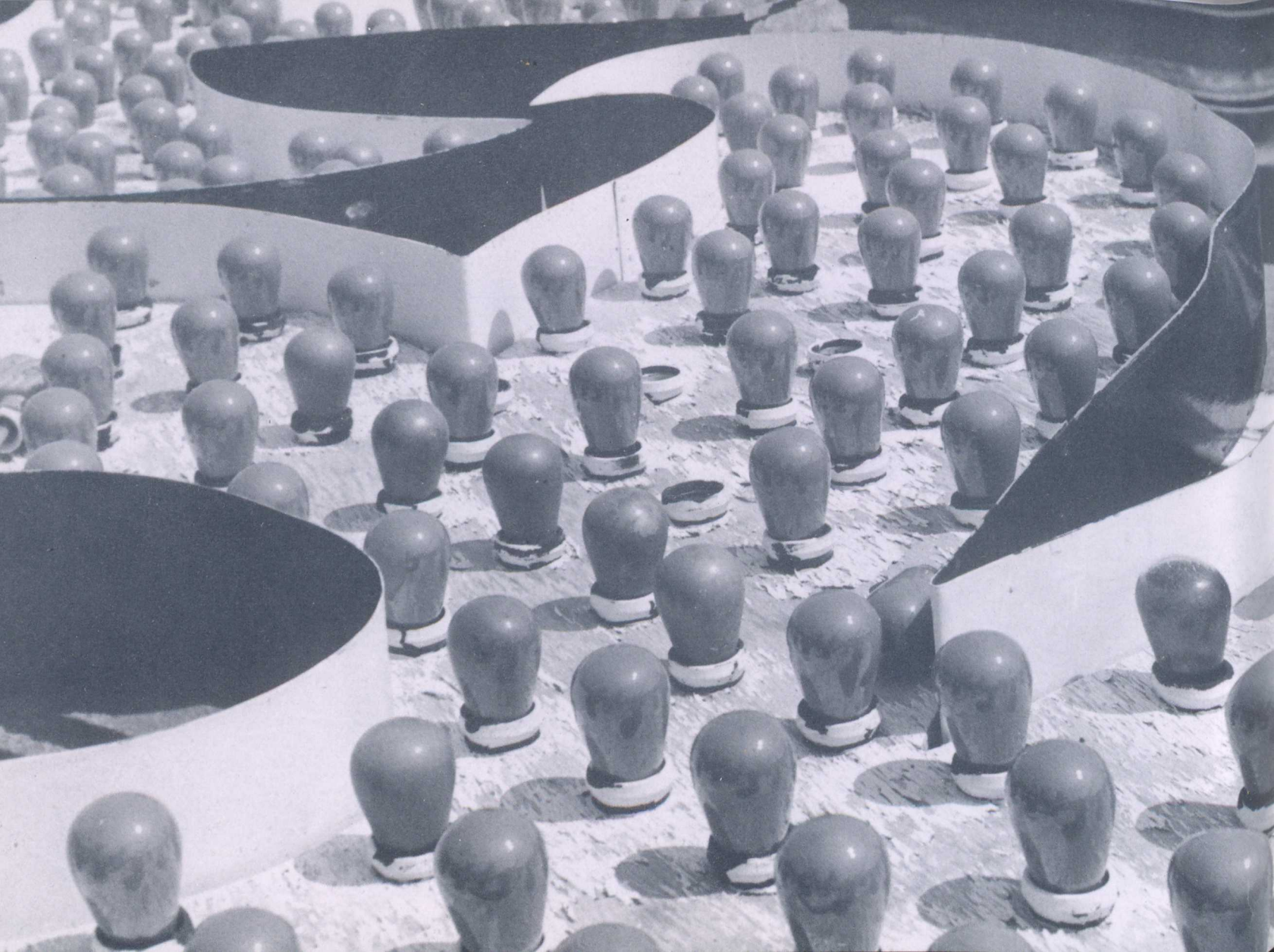
"And she might be a good writer someday too."



a Grama Mobile



Photograph



f A Soldier's Bonfire

I tapped my foot against the leg of the table. It was tea time. We were in the comfortable, softly lit dining room. My grandfather was peeling an apple carefully—leaving the peel in one whole piece. My mother had my baby brother on her knee as she tried to eat. He was fretful. Both my mother and grandmother were agitated. I lifted my tea and sipped too quickly, burning my tongue.

I looked across the table at Charlie Boyle. He was my second cousin. I was supposed to call him Uncle Charlie, but I didn't. His plate was loaded and his glass was almost empty. His glass was always almost empty. I didn't like him. I didn't know why. Last time he was here he sang rebel songs and had grandma up in arms. I didn't understand the troubles in Ireland. I knew about the religious turmoil. At least I knew that the Catholics and the Protestants hated each other. I had learned that much in the short time I had been here. I also heard that the Irish despised the English. I thought it was half-hearted, more of a joke than anything else. My dad was Irish and my mom was English. I was born in England. I felt a loyalty to the crown. Even though we had lived in America most of my twelve years, I was a British citizen.

"I'm not hungry. Can I leave?"

"And go where pet?" He handed me a slice of his apple.

"Out with Caroline and Dara. I promised that I would go see the bonfires with them." My mother put down the baby who now, free, toddled off happily.

"Drink your tea."

I scowled. "It's too hot!" My grandmother poured milk in the cup and dropped a few biscuits on my plate. With unreasoned anger of youth, I glared at both women. They were against me as usual. The look went unseen. I turned and looked prettily at my grandfather. I was shouting a silent please. He winked and nodded his head ever so slightly. It wasn't permission, but it was a promise for one. I swung my legs back and forth. I didn't understand the delay.

Charlie took a deep breath. He was drunk. I had never seen a drunk man before. No one told me he was drunk. I just guessed it. My grandma always referred to his "condition" in the same tone she used when she scolded me. I had the feeling that he was involved with the IRA. He once told me that if I was ever in trouble—just use his name and I'd be fine. Grandpa said if I did, I'd more likely lose my neck.

Charlie stood up with glass in hand. The thick words drifted from his lips. It was a bold melody—yet almost soothing if you didn't listen to the words. Grandmother dropped her knife on the china plate with a loud clink.

"Charlie Boyle for goodness sake think of the soldiers." She jumped up to shut the window. "Especially not tonight!"

My interest piqued, "What's tonight?"

"It's the twelfth, the day of the Orange men's parade. There was a riot downtown this afternoon and undoubtedly there will be trouble tonight."

The words rolled off me. She overreacted to everything. I pushed my

plate forward and dropped my head on my hands. I hesitated to ask the question.

"So, can I go?" As I spoke the words the door bell rang. I looked expectantly at the faces. My grandfather shrugged.

"Surely no harm will come." I looked up at my mother. She smiled faintly.

"Fine, but be in before dark."

"Sure." I gave my grandfather a broad smile and darted out the door. The air smelled fresh—almost like the smell that lurks around just after the rain. Dara and Caroline were standing on the front step wearing impatient smiles.

"Ready to go?" Caroline, the stronger of the two, spoke. She was not necessarily aggressive. Dara was just a follower. We walked down Oakfield road. It was calm. It looked very even—all were small brown, brick houses with low brick walls and creaky, iron gates which were used as swings when we were bored. The three of us turned and made our way up the steep street toward their school.

Caroline was rattling on about this, that, and nothing. Dara was hanging on each and every word, but I was barely listening. I felt adrenalin racing through my veins. There was this strange excitement just waiting to be released. As we passed the park, four older boys staggered out. They had to be at least eighteen. Suddenly one began to sing and the others joined in.

"Old Mount Batton had a boat. EIEIO. And on his boat he had a bomb...with



a bang-bang here and a..." Caroline and Dara smiled and waved to them. We continued on and they burst into convulsions of giggles. I felt sickened. Lord Mount Batton's boat had been blown up by the IRA last summer—killing him and many others. My father worked on his boat as a boy.

My skin felt hot and I was dizzy. I was fuming because they laughed. He died because he was English. I just then realized that they probably didn't know that I was English. I had the thickest American accent. I joined in with their conversation of school and boys. As we walked, I became more and more light-hearted.

The low murmur of voices became gradually louder. The sky was greying and the sun was falling fast. Turning the corner, we found chaos. There were kids everywhere. Not older kids like I expected, but ones my age and much younger. People were shouting all around me. There was a huge fence which the majority of the group stayed behind. We were on the side of the bonfire. It was magnificent. The huge gold flames leaped higher and higher toward the sky. I looked at Caroline.

"Do you know these people?"

"Sure, they all live close by. That's Tommy. Isn't he smashing." I thought it strange to be thinking of good looking boys amidst all the excitement and confusion.

"Look out! Coming through." Two boys rushed forward with a pile of wood. They swung the dry planks high in the air. The wood was swallowed

by the red/orange tongues. Sparks flew from where the wood had landed, but after a few seconds it was impossible to tell which was old and which new. A boy of no more than seven began climbing the bonfire. He had two union jacks in his hand. He mounted them ceremoniously as high as he could on the blazing mound and then leaped off victoriously. The entire crowd shrieked and applauded him—including Dara and Caroline. I stood there and watched the flags be devoured by the ferocious flames.*I was hurting inside. It was a feeling somewhat foreign to me—to hurt so much without being struck by word or fist.

All around me kids were screaming with unyielding excitement. They seemed wild, like an untamed lot of delinquents. Despite myself, I became caught up in the fervor. A song was struck up. It was the one Charlie Boyle had been singing earlier. It sounded bizarre coming out of the mouths of children like myself. Caroline smiled and squeezed my arm. I smiled back somehow. It was definitely dark now., My head was beginning to throb. Part of me wanted to run so badly.

I looked at the fire again. The boys were tossing in a cardboard cut-out of a soldier. They had managed to get hold of a British army jacket and placed it on the mock soldier. When it caught fire a series of triumphant shouts arose. Milk bottles were filled with gasoline, stopped with cloths, lit, and thrown. Crash, smash, boom, bang, and then the oral bursts of joy. The crowd began to chant.



"Burn the bloody limeys!" The words echoed in my head again and again and again. The flags were lost in the smoke and the fire. I imagined my father on one side and my mother on the other. They had not prepared me for this. I wished for neutral territory. I tried to envision the flat land in America, the park across the street from my house. It was futile. The fire had infiltrated those peaceful places with undeniable force. I watched the crowd in amazement. Caroline's Tommy was placed high upon a group of shoulders.

"The Brits must leave or die!" He screamed mercilessly. Fear crept. What would they do if they knew I was British—a bloody limey. Back at home I declared my nationality with pride. I wasn't American. I was different.

Tommy and the others produced another victim. The pretend soldier with a stupid face was held up.

"Live or die? Live or die?" He bellowed the words with vengeance. His face was sweaty and smeared with mud. I looked around. The crowd was captured in a moment of frenzy. He looked directly at me.

"Well stranger, shall he live or die?" Tommy demanded with a queer smile. I felt the crowd pierce me with their stares. My fist was clenched. I extended it. Slowly it turned with my thumb pointing down. The crowd cheered and the soldier was tossed into the welcoming flames. I stood looking in disbelief. My body shook as I watched the fire burn. Tears streaked down my face, but they went unnoticed by the crowd. Caroline tugged at my sleeve and motioned to go. We walked slowly home. Away from the blaze, it was very dark.

 **Illinois Travelogue**

I

We're a one ton white zipper,
closing up Illinois on either side of I57.
The land skips like a broken record
as we slide through the long air of the Midwest.

A burned out barn, black and skeletal,
hunches in the dirt, the fossil of a woolly mammoth
carried here in a glacier's stomach.

A German shepherd lies on the roadside,
bloated like a prize hog,
legs pointed at the endless blue.

II

Right now
I'm crackling through that streaming telephone line
like an electric charge along neurons
looking for your ear.
I'll go in when I find it
and ricochet through your brain
like the Fourth of July.



III

The high tension towers
stand like 300 ft. cowboys.
Bow-legged, Smith&Wesson-colored
giants in single file.

The land has a receding hairline.
Lonely tufts of golden hair
pepper the Earth's tanned leather skull.

A band of birches huddle
in secrecy next to a terminal moraine,
plotting the overthrow of the flatlands.

IV

I still have your pictures.
I brought them along to keep you on my lips,
but it's not working.
Not even the one of you
in nothing but my blue and black flannel shirt.
You're in a 4x5 inch paper box.

V

Five Puerto Ricans stand around
a rusted, shoulder-bound Montego, smoking philosophies
about internal combustion
and its short comings.

The Tri-State Swap-O-Rama is empty.
Tables and workers are put away
behind aluminum garage doors on Sundays
to give the air a rest.

The radio campfire-crackles
until Bob Dylan climbs out of the static
and sits with his feet hanging over the dashboard,
telling a story about being stoned.

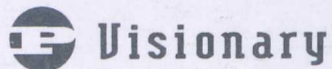
VI

Your face is inside my eyelids
as I drift off.
I'm following the curve of your cheeks
the line of your nose
the wave of your lips.
My flannel shirt is crumpled
in some corner of my head.

a Everlast



Silver Gelatin Print



The weight of the world
is measured in paper
(perhaps I am Atlas)
This is today's pile
(another Everest to conquer)

stamp

Imagine a plowman

fold

turning the same plot

file

for a millennium

again

never planting or reaping

I am rewarded
with more paper
green
and a supervisor's encouragement:
twenty years
and I may sort the papers
that make the world spin.



Because I am Older

American Airlines
 Reduces everything to geometry
 As my eyes fall past the wing flaps
 Uncertainly moving with the wind
 Like my braid in travel
 Crossing Sundown creek
 Hooping over the gray slip rocks
 Running ahead of the shadows
 Before the porch light

 I need a window seat
 Where my head vibrates on the cold plastic sill
 And my fingers tap along the cloud outlines

 At night I need no pure light from my closet
 Across the comforter losing feathers in small pin points
 Pushing through the woven threads
 Indenting the air above my head

 I can drop my hand over the edge
 Sleep by the dark closet bulbs
 In a new black that breeds no larger monsters
 Than I raise in my forehead
 And shake in my fingers tapping the wall





Oh he was sunshine

Oh he was sunshine
My early cup of coffee
Black
Strong
My, my, my
He was classy
Tailored-made suits
Silk shirts
And expensive booze
My, my, my
He was smiles
Jokes, laughter
Knowing glances across tables
And...
My, my, my

He was mine
Then
He was gone
Suddenly
No more sun
Booze
Smiles
Only rain
Clouds
Black clouds
But once
Oh he was sunshine
My, my, my



A Young Man's Fancy

What's Reason for except to
be thrown out the window
when winter's days brighten
and a young man's fancy
spins like a March weathervain
Blushing, I'm full of shame
that my affection
should seem so fickle.
Petrified forest teach me,
whisper
of solidity and steadfastness
things a tree knows.

a Untitled



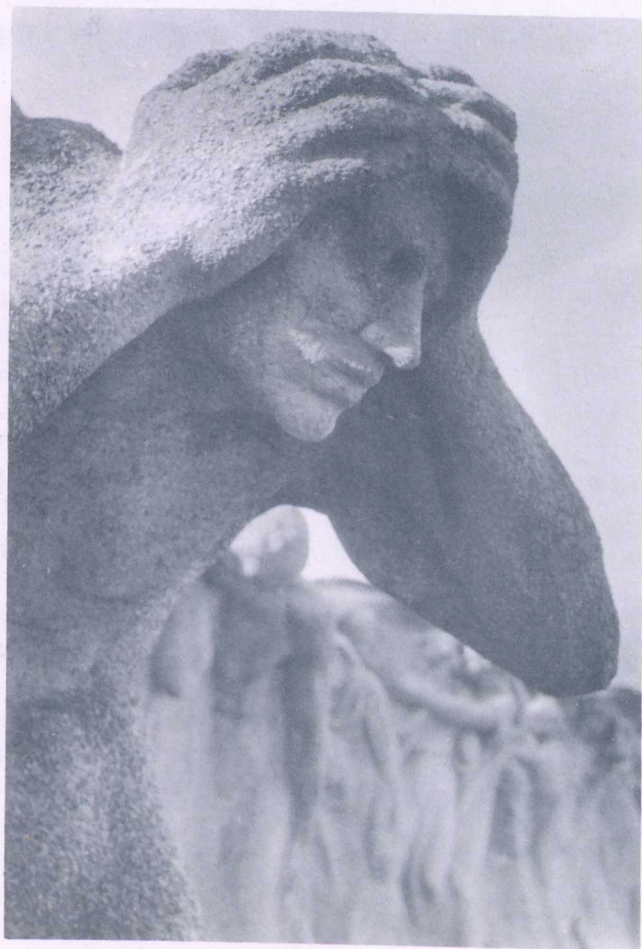


Stretched on Your Body

The Autumn wind
forged your hair
Dust swept
like cornfields
in golden
The pull of your forehead
was coiling my hipbones
I was
Tugging through barbwire
and turned earth
to reach you
Pressing my eyesight
just up your wool sleeves
Traveling your outline
and stretched to embrace
you
With rust stains
and gravel burns
printed in fingers
on your back
and your neck

If we could melt
into forest
Through auburn and yellow
With knees and ankles
bending to moist leaves
We would fall there in sleep
Like children
in orchard
as the sun skeletoned
bare trees
and passed onto evening

a Untitled



Photograph

 **Cold Air**

They said it was the worst cold spell in twenty-five years. It was mid-August and the temperature outside had fallen to the low forties. The summer flowers had wilted, the ball players were wearing long sleeves, and I could see my breath in the air.

"I've got the gun," I said hauling myself up into K.K.'s jacked-up Bronco.

"I've got the whiskey," K.K. said, grinning behind the steering wheel.

K.K. was one of my closest friends. I had met him in high school and our mutual love for guns, loose girls, and speed metal paired with our mutual hate for commies, posers, and fags had made us instant companions. He was a big guy with wide shoulders and long, straight black hair. His family origins lie with the Sioux indians. He was one crazy motherfucker.

His beat-up Bronco tore backwards out of my driveway, paused an instant, then screeched away into the chilly night.

Inside the truck, K.K. slammed on the heater and warm air rushed from the vents on either side of us. I love the feel of artificially-generated heat. It's so comforting. It reassured me that even nature's foul mood couldn't ruin our good time.

The Bronco's headlights blazed a path for our time machine. The windshield was the future, the rear-view mirror the past. Inside, for a while, time would stand still for us.

"Check this shit out," K.K. said slamming a cassette into his customized stereo system. A sinister hiss filled the inside of the Bronco then, as suddenly



as a heart attack, the sound of a grossly distorted guitar ripped into us. The guitar was followed by thunderous drums, then the piercing shriek of a man possessed. The lyrics began: **“AUSCHWITZ...THE MEANING OF PAIN...THE WAY THAT I WANT YOU TO DIE!”**

I glanced over at the speedometer and the needle was jittering just over 70. I nodded my head to the beat of the song and looked out into the darkness. There was a forest on both sides of us. I caught brief glimpses of crooked limbs and drooping leaves before they exploded into a blur and were lost in the past. The road twisted abruptly and I heard K.K.'s tires squeal in protest. The sound seemed distant and harmless. K.K. turned the volume on the stereo up a notch.

“...ANGEL OF DEATH!!!”

The song died with a final power chord. K.K. eased the volume knob down.

“Not too shabby, aay?” he growled.

“I can deal with it,” I replied.

“How many shells you got?” he asked.

The Gun. Despite its presence near my genitals, I had all but forgotten about it. It was a six-shot, .38 caliber revolver that had belonged to my Dad. I had found it up in the attic hidden under some old Christmas ornaments. Ever since, K.K. and I had been making little road trips to an abandoned barn where we'd take turns shooting at cans (and the occasional field mouse)

and taking swigs from a bottle of Jack Daniel's. It was fun—evil, dangerous fun.

"I've got eight shells," I said.

"That's it?" K.K. complained.

"It's our last eight and it's your turn to buy," I said.

"Yeah, yeah. . ." his voice trailed off and the volume of the stereo rose back to an ear piercing level.

"I WILL NOW...REIGN IN BLOOD!"

A stop sign sprung to life by the side of the road about fifty yards ahead of us. I felt the brakes tug for an instant on the Bronco's momentum, then let go completely. The stop sign steadily grew in size and was staring right at us. I glanced over at K.K. and he was staring right back at it. His foot moved from the break to the gas pedal. The engine roared and the speedometer climbed back up to around 70.

The intersection ahead was dark and deserted. But there was no telling what was hidden behind the trees on each side of the road and heading for the same small area of space as K.K.'s Bronco.

"C'mon man..." I screamed over a guitar solo. I felt a rush of fear and anticipation slam into my stomach. He was going to run it, the crazy bastard. I wondered what the odds were. Perhaps God was just waiting for an opportunity like this one to snuff out our pointless, miserable lives. My eyes went wide with fear and wonder. The truck sped onward with the boys in black blaring out of the stereo.



“DO YOU WANT TO DIE?!”

If the stop sign had a voice it would've been screaming at us. If it had arms it would've been waving them frantically. The intersection patiently waited our arrival. The windshield was revealing a frantic, uncertain future.

“Yer fuckin' crazy...” I screamed.

K.K.'s face was solemn and deadly serious. He was sucking on this adrenalin rush for all it was worth. A couple more seconds went by and we crossed the point of no return. If he tried to stop at this point, he would've sent us both crashing through the windshield...into the future.

I swallowed hard and my arms went limp at my sides. Within seconds my fate would be decided. The stop sign gave up hope and grudgingly watched us fly by. The odds! What were the odds? Please God, don't kill me, I thought. Just this once, give me a break.

I was starting to sound exactly like a Dear Abby column I had once read where the final thoughts of a teenaged drunk driver were described in sappy, overwrought detail. Please God, I'm too young to die! It can't be my turn, can it? I laughed in spite of myself.

The intersection was empty. For a split second we filled it up then crashed into the darkness beyond. For that singular second my heart hit the top of my throat and I took in what could have been my last breath of stale, artificial air. I heard myself whimper involuntarily. A heart beat later, the intersection was a mere reflection in the rearview mirror...the past.

"You bastard..." I said softly, unable to muster any volume to my voice.

"Not too shabby," K.K. stated.

I heaved a sigh of relief and lowered my head. Closing my eyes, I slowly rubbed my forehead. Sometimes I wondered if K.K. wasn't really a stark, raving madman. Why did I hang around with him? Were the joyrides and Jack Daniels really worth it? One of these days he's going to get me...

K.K. slammed on the brakes with such sudden ferocity that I didn't have time to brace myself. My head shot forwards and slammed against the hard surface of the Bronco's dashboard. I flew back against my seat struggling to focus on what was making K.K. stop so fast. We were out of the intersection. It wasn't my turn to die. I was safe, right?

The hideous peal of four balding tires struggling to stop filled the air, drowning out even the music raging from the speakers. The sharp stench of burning rubber filtered into my nostrils and the temperature seemed to rise a hundred degrees in an instant. My breath was caught and stopped somewhere between my mouth and lungs. Why in God's name was he stopping?

Something hit the front of the Bronco with jarring force. My head flew forward again as if mounted on a hinge. I braced myself against the dashboard to save my forehead from another bruising but this time my knees crashed into the glove compartment. Whatever hit the car wasn't metal. It was soft but very heavy. Several sickening possibilities ran through my brain. If whatever



we hit was alive, it wouldn't be much longer.

K.K.'s "death machine" ground to a halt amidst echoes of screeching tires and a thick cloud of white smoke. The future and the past came together to form the present and plunge us back into reality.

"Holy shit!" K.K. screamed. His slim, dark eyes were bright with fear and disbelief.

It took me several moments to gather the energy and the ability to speak. I gasped for air and gazed into the road ahead of us, still unable to see what we'd hit. I felt a warm trickle of blood flow down the side of my head.

"What the fuck happened?" I finally managed to mumble.

K.K. didn't reply. Instead, he opened his door and hopped out of the Bronco. Slowly and fearfully, he stepped around to the front of the truck. His hesitant, curious features turned to a sickened grimace when his eyes focused on the road just in front of his Bronco. He shook his head and leaned against the hood. I remained frozen in my seat. Despite my head wound, my imagination was giving me the full Twilight Zone treatment. A thousand possible futures flickered through my brain. K.K. clumsily opened his door and poked his head into the truck's warm interior.

"Get out here, man," he said. "And bring the gun."

A jolt of surprise followed by a deep feeling of worry washed over me. I still couldn't see what we'd hit. I pulled the gun from out under my shirt and checked the chambers. It was loaded. I swallowed hard and turned to

get out of the truck.

The very second I opened the door I heard a very odd noise. It was so unusual that I stopped for a moment to listen. At first it was a low pitched moaning. Then the sound became a thick, heavy panting. Finally, it changed to an abrasive scratching sound. I leapt from the truck and landed on the hard pavement. The noise stopped for a moment then resumed; moan, pant, scratch.

"What the hell..." I whispered, afraid to move.

"C'mon man!" K.K. urged. "Get the gun and get over here!"

I swallowed hard again and took a couple of hesitant steps to the front of the truck. The noise came again; moan, pant, scratch.

"Oh God..."

At first I thought we'd hit a large dog. For a moment I saw my own pet Golden Retriever lying broken and bloody on the cold asphalt. But it wasn't that at all.

It was a deer.

It looked female and still fairly young. It's soft, brown fur was ruffled and splattered with blood. It's thin, fragile legs were bent unnaturally and sprawled out in contradictory directions beneath its shattered torso. A pool of red-black liquid was slowly forming around its body. If all this wasn't horrifying enough, it was still alive.

It made the sound.



A low, despairing moan came from its mouth. Then it began to heave for air frantically. Finally, its ruined legs sprang to life and moved spasmodically across the rough ground. Its eyes were filled with fear and pain. My heart had all but stopped beating. A lump formed in my throat.

"Shoot it," K.K. suddenly said.

"What?" I gasped.

"Shoot the damn thing and let's get outta here before someone comes along and finds us," K.K. said.

"We can't just..." I stammered. "Maybe we could find a vet, we can't just..."

"Look, damn it, the nearest phone is five miles away. If you wanna sit yer ass out here and nurse this thing back to health, fine, but I'm takin' off and drinkin' the whiskey."

K.K. was just as scared and guilt-ridden as I was. I could see it in his eyes and in the panic-tinged tone of his voice. His hands were shaking.

The deer moaned again, gasped for air, and tried to move.

'C'mon man, shoot it!" K.K. whined.

I looked into its eyes. It couldn't understand the pain or withstand the fear. Again, it moaned, gasped, and struggled in place.

"All right, all right..." I conceded.

I clenched the .38 firmly in my hand and lifted it before me. It felt very heavy, at least twice as heavy as it had before. For the first time I realized

that my hands were shaking as well. I grasped the gun with both hands and pointed it at the deer's head. One shot to the brain and the nightmare would be over. It would be a quick and easy death.

I concentrated hard and tried to pull the trigger. I couldn't do it, the gun fell to my side.

"C'mon man, shoot it! Shoot it!"

I lifted the gun again and pointed at the deer's head. It's wide, dark eyes peered up at me.

Moan, gasp, scratch.

"C'mon man! shoot it!"

I took a deep breath and concentrated. The gun fell at my side again.

"Are you a fuckin' pussy? Shoot the goddamn thing!"

The pool of sticky blood was huge now. It was creeping slowly under the truck towards my feet. The deer's breathing became louder and more forced. It's eyes blinked rapidly. I was staring into the face of death.

"Shoot it! Shoot it!"

I lifted the gun up and pulled the trigger. A shot rang out, then another, and another. Three dark holes appeared in the deer's skull and its whole body convulsed violently following each one's appearance.

There was a brief moan, a sharp breath, and a tiny movement. Finally, it lay still.

For several moments the air shivered with the echo of the gunshots. The



whole forest seemed to look on in anger and revulsion. A thousand ancient eyes had watched us torture and murder one of their own. I fell back against the truck unable to move or speak. The gun fell with a clatter from my numb hand to the ground. I heard K.K. drag the deer's heavy body to the side of the road. A wave of nausea rose within me. I fell to my knees and threw up all over K.K.'s right front tire.

I collapsed on my side moaning and gasping for air. My jeans scraped against the stony ground. I struggled to get up but I couldn't. The night sky swirled above me, a million cold eyes staring down on me.

"C'mon man," I heard K.K. say. "It's just a fuckin' deer. No cause to yak on my Firestones, dude. Me and my Daddy hunt 'em all the time. Actually, this isn't bad for your first kill."

K.K.'s rough hand reached down, grabbed my arm, and hauled me to my feet. His worn, faded army jacket was stained with the deer's blood.

A fresh sense of rage swept through me and I pushed K.K. back towards the gravel-choked ground where he'd dumped the deer's body. I clenched my fist and cocked my arm backwards. For a split second I was sure I was going to give him my best right hook right in the face.

"What the hell are you?!" I heard myself gasp.

"What's your problem?" K.K. said putting on his "fighting mask." His arms spread out at his sides like a vulture showing its wingspan. His eyes glared madly. He was always looking for a good excuse to fight.

"You just tortured a living thing," I said.

Suddenly I felt very strange, like my soul had come unglued. All of my days of commie-hating, gay-bashing machismo seemed to fade away in an instant. A cold, agonizing reality slowly formed around me—I had killed.

In past violent confrontations I had risen to the occasion with masochistic delight. Now all I could do was stand there meekly as my leather high-tops shifted uneasily on the slick, bloody asphalt. Any more violence would have been blasphemous. I stepped back.

"What?" K.K. hissed incredulously. His fighting stance shifted to one of blatant superiority, like the way a bully stands next to a nerd he's about to pummel.

I felt the anger drain out of me. It was replaced by a deep feeling of apathy and a vague sense of fear. I just wanted to get the hell off the dark road and get home. I had to diffuse the situation somehow so I let off a brief smile of concession.

"You are one crazy motherfucker," I stated simply.

K.K. hesitated a moment then accepted the surrender in stride. I would be another puff of air for his inflated ego.

"Crazy as they come..."

We climbed back into the jacked-up Bronco and the sounds of the Slaytanic Wehrmacht filled the air. Warm, fake, musty air swept over us. The tires squealed and I watched as the lump of bloody fur disappeared in the review mirror...fading



into the past.


Ahead, in the future, I saw another stop sign and another dangerous intersection. I watched as the speedometer slowly climbed back up to 70. Breathing deeply, I pressed the warm barrel of the gun against my leg and hated it with all my heart.



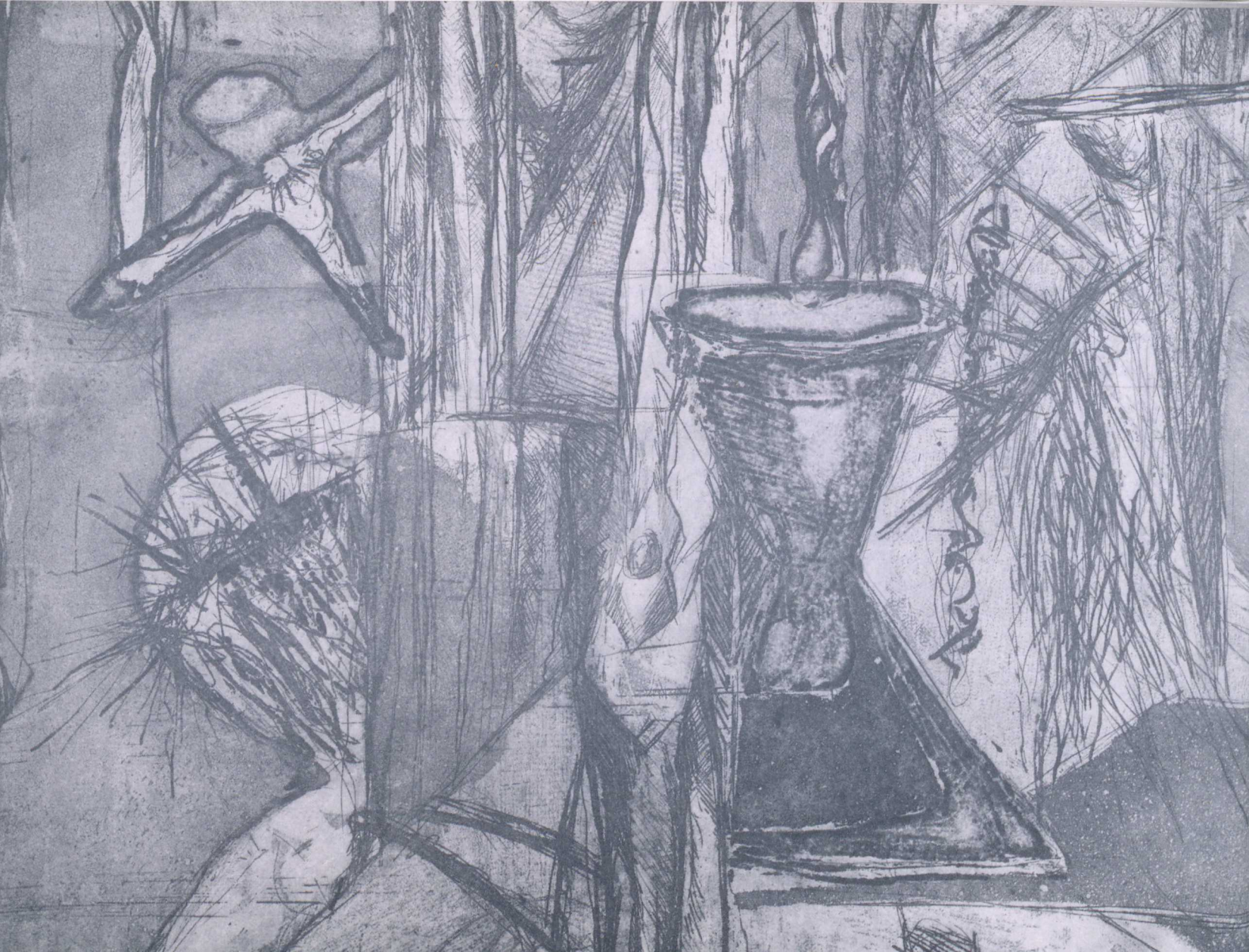
TOWERS 71

70



 **Trouble Drawing Your Face**

I think the hardest part
was your ears, or maybe your eyes.
Your ears refused to stay even,
outweighing each other at intervals
like a scale unable to do you justice.
Your eyes ended up too big from
stuffing everything I see into them.
Your nose had me wondering
about where, when, and how
you received that bump on the bridge.
Maybe a misjudged fly ball
while still a tomboy.
Your lips were no problem,
I've been there enough times.
I applied too much make-up,
more from a lack of practice
than an effort to conceal.
Your hair wound up a tangled mess,
traced like the flight of a half-drunken fly.
But I take solace in the fact
that I can't comb my own
So I'll say it's finished for now,
because tomorrow you return
and I begin work on your body.





Goodnight Kiss

To this bed where I lie
safely tucked in
an elderly woman tells
a bedtime story from the next
curtained room—her voice low
and soft as a dying grandmother's;
her words
raffled at random.

From the space behind me
a young man sobs for all of our sins
from his horizontal cross, the scene
of his buckled-in crucifixion—
I imagine His pain.

The nurse is in the fluorescent corridor
following each charted recipe while we wait
dragging through disease
wrapped in vivid black.

We accept the needle's liquid rape
(she tells us this will help us sleep)



and ten minutes later
we are dreaming
of the coveted corner
in the shower room down the hall
where someone's forgotten razor
waits like a toy under a tree.



The Conference

Long, tired stares glare across a
Wooden Sea

Blank, empty faces that say nothing
Yet, concern lines their eyes
Ideas fill their heads.

The Tyrant at the helm
Barks instructions at the helpless
Subordinates
"Yes, yes, yes" to everything is the reply.

As the tasks at hand loom larger
The Wooden Sea expands
To an abyss so wide the subordinates
are lessened to bite size morsals for
The Tyrant.

The Tyrant is hungry
Demanding the impossible
is how he prepares his meal.
Those who do not complete their mission
Become his entrée.

Soon the anchor is raised
The Tyrant retreats to his cabin
And the now frightened and defeated Crew
Guides the ship in fear.





Saudi Arabia and Hallmark

When I feel this mail
It is only paper
Still on my table
It catches no light from the window
And I can't move it

Your mother sent me
This birthday card
Because you couldn't
And she wants to be normal
She wants everything to
Seem like it should

I have no place to
Put this card
That pulls me into the
Sudden awareness
That no one wants

And no one advertises
More than the company
That printed this card
Somewhere in Denver
Someone even now
Is stacking more of them

Stock piling more greetings
Than anyone needs and
Birthdays hardly matter
In the sand mornings
That you sit and stare





Fire

When I was young and sirens sounded,
I thought the world was drawing to an end,
coming to a close like the clock in the hall:
never fixed, clanging its bell,
then stopping:
its pendulum pulled to a close
by invisible hands.

But the sirens always wailed by,
faded onto other fires in other homes,
and mother's small hands, pale porcelain,
pulled the chains that wound the clock.

Most evenings father's hand
moved from the paper to the radio dial.
I didn't see much of him
and spoke with him even less.
It was odd,
he seemed like a priest,
hands softly calloused,
hidden by the newspapered walls of his confessional.

Ritually, the hands appeared, blessing the radio,
bringing forth the uneven strains of AM 1091,



Bill Foster's Evening of Gospel Glory.
Mother, the smell of wistaria trailing,
would come from the kitchen to sit
in her green velvet chair by the window,
crocheting coasters to prophetic damnation
and a world of refining fire.

Christ was rising in a new world
while I played with Lincoln Logs,
building cabins and forts in the wilderness
of our living room floor.

I didn't understand the screech of Pastor Bill's voice
or the stomping noise his feet made,
but it was clear to me, as the evening paper rattled,
that the idea of change excited my father.

The day I came home from school
to see my father changed,
water and ash smeared like blood on his shirt,
standing in our smoldering living room,
and mother, her violet dress wilting
as she sat on the blackened floor,
I knew that Christ had come.



Traveling in Pieces

I used to have a memory
That tilled the particles of gray matter
With no sharp points
And felt my hands reach air above my head
Tracing clouds with falling fingers
Bending elbows back onto grass
My arms constantly break on the steering wheel of my car
Twisting tires west and north
I drag my teeth across the middle of america
My lips part in the rear view mirror
And I relax my mother's face
That everyone calls me
And I stretch my grandmother's legs
That I've been using for 26 years
On petals that push their way to Minneapolis
Leaning on my forehead
I have only two more hours
And I will see a city
That's never felt my knees in its dirt

 Irrigation

At Midway

I see the storm that you have ridden

It splashes the curved glass

"We will drive it out," you say

As my eyes widen with the windshield

I am moving this car

With no hand thought

Past the muted greens

And corrugated speckles of silos

I am rushing toward the water

You have told me

All the words that have brought you through the last few days

And I have run them in faster than the black and white cow spots

Releasing from the rear view mirror

As I turn off this highway

Out the window you see some deer

Stringing across the new dirt

And I am wreathing sunlight on my lashes

Trying to tie myself to the air of your gestures

And the shadow tones of your soft throat

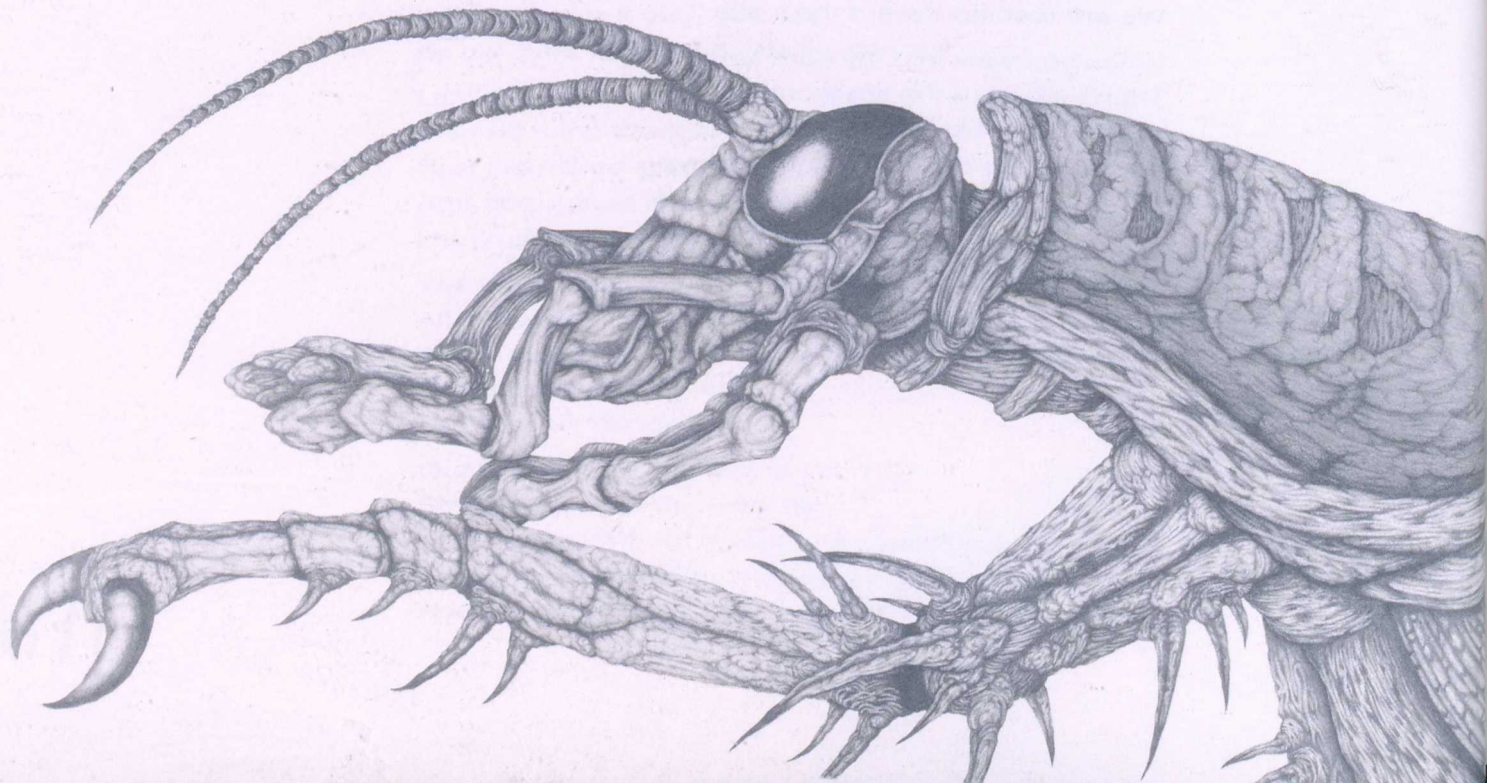
Down from the sky and out of your city
We grow tighter with every brown and white lettered sigh
Placing us on the map we don't have to use
We are rushing toward the water
When you walk into my corn field
Then I will burn the scarecrow
Let the late frost hair-line any sprout
Drop my hoe on all this untilled land
Right now
In the real touch of your close-timed arms
I am losing you in pieces by this lake



M I K E L S A M S O N

a Untitled

Drawing



f A Grasshopper Cerebrates Humanity

Early September, hot and humid, still too much like August. The young man slapped the back of his neck, annoyed. His forehead was sweaty and he ran his palm over it, brushing his dirty hair back and away. There was a little coolness, and then more sweat. Not much further to go and then he would be in the dorm, sipping a cola under a fan. The fan, of course, didn't help any. It just blew the hot air around the room. Not much to look forward to, but it was better than being under the sun in ninety-eight degree heat. He panted like a dog, waggishly.

"Stop that," the girl said, in loving amusement.

He panted more heavily now.

"You'll make it," she grinned. "Look Tommy, the psych building." She turned his head to the left. "See, the psych building."

"All hail to the psych building," he breathed heavily.

"And the library's just up there," she pointed.

"Have mercy on us library. Grace us with your divine shadows library."

She sighed, "Seriously, did you need to rest? You look like hell."

He stopped panting and walked more normally, less like a hunchback.

"I'll manage." He walked forward, not looking sidewise if he could help it.

"I'll manage," he repeated. "But will you please let me kiss you before I die, just in case?"

Smiling wryly, she stopped him, and kissed him, moistly, still lovingly. She would leave him in six months, but neither knew it now. "There, how was that?"



"Succulent, delicious, sexy..."

"You know what?" she whispered in his ear, smiling.

"What?" he spoke aloud.

"Shhhh," she whispered more gently. "This is important."

"What?" he spoke even more quietly.

"I promise," she announced, "never..."

"Never?"

"*Never to feed your wallet to the goose again.*"

"Thank you," he whispered back while he took out his wallet. "Now, do you see this?" he asked her aloud. "This is a bill print. A bill print. On my genuine rawhide leather wallet. I had this hand crafted in Mexico you know. And now it has a bill print on it."

"Oh! Poor baby. That's too bad," she smiled again and kissed his cheek.

"Well that makes up for it then," he said, stuffing the wallet in his front pocket where he always kept it for safety's sake.

They kept walking. The sun came out from behind a heavy cumulus cloud, making the shadows on the pavement in front of them more defined. Neither of them spoke for a short time. A frisbee whizzed over them, hit a tree, fell in the grass. A young, blond, shirtless undergraduate ran to get the frisbee, a beer can, icy cold and sweating, in his right hand. He got it and ran off.

A hot breeze stirred up some dust on the sidewalk and sent a cigarette butt skittering away. It landed fifteen feet ahead of the couple, next to a small,

green object. Some dry dust landed in Tom's hair, causing it to become matted down. He brushed his hair back again, perspiring.

"What's that?" the girl was saying.

Tom looked at the cigarette butt, puzzled. "What's what?"

"Oh, it's a grasshopper."

"What. Oh. That thing," he stopped beside her, peering down at it. "Don't scare it. I want to see if I can catch it." The boy bent down slowly. "Don't move now. Boy, I haven't touched one of these things since..."

"Oh, leave the poor thing alone."

"No, just let me get him. I won't hurt it. I promise."

She sighed impatiently, glancing around. It never ceased to amaze her how Tom could get as worked up as a six-year-old about the silliest trivialities. A man sipped from a water fountain in the distance. She was very thirsty and the glistening water looked good.

"Look at this," Tom was saying. Looking like a cat ready to pounce, Tom was on all fours.

"What is it now?" she asked, frowning.

"He's missing a leg, and his guts are torn out."

"Swell. And you want me to see this."

"Stop complaining for once. This thing is still alive."

She relented and knelt down beside him. This wouldn't last long, she thought. He would get bored soon enough and then they could leave. It was



almost time for dinner anyway and the cafeteria would serve hamburgers and fries for once. And soda. There would be soda. Which reminded her, "Did you buy that soda like I asked?"

Tom looked at her squarely. "Susan, will you PLEASE look at this thing?" Again, she gave in, miffed. She saw that the creature was missing its hind leg and its abdomen was torn open. Its entrails hung out loosely. The insect sidled along in a half circle, trying to escape the boy's groping hand. "It's afraid of us," the boy stated, unnecessarily.

"Instinct."

"I bet it's fear."

"Instinct," she said, irritated.

He softened a little. "I mean, he knows we're trying to get him. And it's trying to escape. Here, I'll leave it alone and watch what it does." He withdrew his hand and watched carefully. "See, it's just sitting there."

Susan waved her hand over her head and the grasshopper jumped half a foot or so, some innards scraping against the cement as it landed. "You're right," she said, indifferent. "It sees us at least."

"I'm sure it see us as a threat. It's a reasonably intelligent creature, I'm sure." He crawled with stealth toward the creature. "I bet it's in pain," he said as he moved still closer. The grasshopper scabbled around a little and Tom stopped.

Susan stood up again. Founder's Memorial Library was close, and it was air conditioned. "Yeah," she humored him.

"It'd be cruel to leave it out in the sun. He'd just fry alive."

"He's pretty much frying now," she observed.

"It's such a beautiful creature."

"It is." Her tone was half-sincere.

"Really it is. I mean, I hate bugs. But grasshoppers are the nicest looking bugs I've ever seen. Roaches are gross and flies are disgusting, but grasshoppers aren't that bad. All they do is hop around. They don't invade houses and eat garbage or anything."

Thinking Tom's tribute was little silly, Susan smiled. "Yeah. so what are you gonna do with the little guy?"

"Yes. He is little isn't he? I've seen bigger ones than this before. My cousins down in Missouri, they once caught a grasshopper that was just under four inches long. It's true. We measured it."

"Now that's gross."

"No it wasn't. It was like a grasshopper under a magnifying glass. I got a chance to look at it close up. My relatives lost a lot of crops to those big grasshoppers though. They have voracious appetites."

She was hungry but she didn't say so. Maybe if she just remained quiet, Tom and her would go and eat lunch soon.

"I think it *is* in pain though," he continued. "It's still moving around even though we aren't. It's got to be misserable, I bet."

"Yeah."

"I'm going to have to put it out of its misery Susan."



"Oh don't. Don't they grow their legs back if they fall off?"

"I don't know," he contemplated. "Maybe. But his stomach is ripped open. I'll still have to step on it I guess."

"Well, do it when I'm not looking then," she said, turning on her heel. Tom stood up as Susan walked away toward the library. The grasshopper tried to stand too, but kept falling down and over.

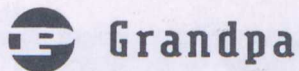
"This is going to sound stupid Susan, but I don't know if I can do this." Susan didn't reply and kept walking. "Susan?"

He centered his foot above the insect which started scrabbling frantically. He lowered his foot until he could feel the creature under the sole of his shoe. It still moved. He stepped forward and heard the wet cracking sound as the exo-skeleton shattered under the weight, and heard too, the crunching sound as his foot dragged along the pavement, leaving behind a long, green splotch. Some parts of the grasshopper were still identifiable and Tom ground them to oblivion under his heel. He cleaned his shoe in the grass, feeling a negative sensation not quite definable. It made him queasy.

The girl was walking up ahead and Tom followed her with his eyes. He noticed he was sweating again and started to walk. There was a stick in the middle of the sidewalk which he picked up and flung away to his left. He wiped his sweating forehead against his shirt sleeve. He was sweltering through yet another sultry day.







It was the rhythm—
the up-down-upness
that made me carry the basket
behind you.

A hand to the vine
and back to the basket
and again into the leaves.

With each reaching,
words poured, roaring:
how you played the speak-easys
in your jazz days,
how FDR ruined the country,
and how the bugs were devouring
the tomato patch.

I followed you down the rows,
my father's father
tireless in July, even wearing
your banker's vest and coat
I watched and learned.

It wasn't the words though,
it was the Rhythm.



a 69



Photograph



The Thrill of It All

Leaning against Earnie Pilzudski's brother's car in the McDonald's parking lot, oblivious to the talk of the others above the slurping of the last of her vanilla shake, Marge affected a pose both laid-back and indifferent. But inside she tingled with the excitement of having finally *arrived*. She had walked there with Earl, who, having met with her on the corner of her block, had dragged his feet the entire mile there as if his boots were made of lead.

"I don't know why you want to meet these shitheads," he'd muttered.

"I just want to know what they're like," she'd answered.

"They're like dopes."

And they'd walked the rest mostly in silence, so strangely unaccustomed to walking together as a pair, a couple, especially during hours when the rest of the town was awake and when the headlights of cars weren't a cause to duck behind a tree, when they could see people inside their living rooms from the street. Occasionally she would attempt conversation, mentioning Mr. Jameson, her English teacher, who picked his nose, or Ellen Cartwright, who still wasn't wearing a bra, but his responses were all monosyllabic, often mere grunts as he dragged his heels and trudged along looking at the ground before him as though he were headed into the most dreadful situation imaginable.

She hadn't even known who Earl Oggiden was until that September of her sophomore year, when her friend Robin had pointed him out as they



waited between classes on the crowded patio. She had seen the tall, gangly senior standing with his friends, smoking, had noticed the brand new snakeskin cowboy boots. It was Thursday and the story had been circulating around the school all week of how Earl, Dale Strodka, and Ernie Pilzudski had broken into Browning's shoe store. But they had burglarized it in no conventional manner, for Dale Strodka, finding the cash register empty aside from two dollars in change, which he took, had suggested that to make the break-in a success they should at least make away with some nice shoes. So while Dale and Earl carefully made their selections in the storeroom, Ernie Pilzudski had ran home, drank shots of Popov Vodka with his father until he could get the old man to pass out at the kitchen table, stole the keys to his work van, and backed the big vehicle up to the rear entrance of the shoe store. By that time Earl and Dale had stacked near the back door a good-sized pile of men's engineer's boots, cowboy boots, some over-the-ankle dress boots—the kind with zippers—and an assortment of gym shoes, for which they had no use but could probably sell, they figured, to a lot of guys back at school on sports teams. The entire burglary had lasted over two hours, largely because of Earnie Pilzudski's father's tolerance to vodka, and was officially a success when the shoes were secure in Earl's closet, under his bed, in his desk drawers, and crammed into the eaves of his upstairs bedroom.

She spotted him then for that first time after four school days of noticing more and more of the boys in shop classes wearing brand new engineer's

boots, boots they had bought from Earl, Dale, and Ernie. She'd even seen Mr. Fussel, the wood shop teacher, clomping awkwardly down the hallways, the new black leather lovingly polished and buffed. And Earl, Robin explained, had worn a different pair of boots to class everyday that week, changing out of his old, worn out sneakers every morning in front of a group of neighborhood kids as they waited for the bus, eager to see what new footwear he had hidden away from his mother in his backpack.

So *that's him*, she'd been thinking, standing there on the patio, *That's Earl Oggiden*, as Robin drew hard at her cigarette and related her own experience with this neighborhood boy, "one ugly motherfucker," as she put it, the youngest of five just-as-ugly brothers, who lit bottlerockets in the street at midnight and stole car stereos. She listened but did not hear Robin's description of the decrepit Oggiden house, in need of repainting, reshingling, and smelling inside of urine. She listened but did not hear, looked but did not see Earl at all, with his pock-marked boy's face, a face at the age of seventeen not even beginning to sprout hair or lean out in the cheekbones or jaw, with his long, greasy reddish brown hair that lay pancake flat, usually covering one or both eyes. Instead she saw a boy—a senior—as tall as she. Who even *slouched* like she did. Who, unlike most of the other tall boys in her school, probably did not have a girlfriend. And at six-foot-one in flats, those were vital characteristics to look for.

"You like him, don't you Marge?"



She glanced down resentfully at her tiny friend.

"Are you crazy? Robin, the kid looks like an asshole."

The patio bell rang, pronouncing her late for third period—Typing I—and the girls filed along with the rest of the crowd into the luminous hallways, moving in a mass of flannel, denim, and leather to their classrooms. Opening the door to a stairwell she saw the smooth, shiny snakeskin and watched Earl ascending until he missed a step and slid backwards another three, finally grabbing the handrail and catching his balance. Before he could regain momentum she was on the step below him asking, "Walk much?" and trying to step past him without giving him the chance to reply. But he leapt ahead of her and turned, poking her in the shoulder with the long, bony finger of his long, skinny white arm, his limp hair hanging down over his left eye.

"Fuck... You..."

He said it with such sincerity and conviction that she almost swooned. Then he was vaulting recklessly up to the second floor, his hair swinging back and forth and his untucked flannel shirt waving behind him.

"Nice boots," she'd said, knowing that he only pretended not to hear her as he dashed out of the stairwell door. In typing class she sat in the back row, deaf to the buzzing, ticking machines, her practice book open and her eyes on the copy, but typing over and over in a single column:

Earl Ogdin. Fuck you.

Earl Ogdin. Fuck you.

Earl Ogdin. Fuck you...

* * *

The first few times she snuck out of the house to meet him, Robin having grudgingly written him a note that "My friend Marge likes you" and Dale Strodka carrying the message back that "Earl dares you to meet him at Warshawski Park at midnight," she had begged Robin to go with her, but her friend absolutely refused. "*You're the one that likes him.*" The words would echo in her head as she tip-toed out of her dark house, half-paralyzed with the fear of the dog barking and her getting caught, half-paralyzed, too, with the fear of him, almost hoping that her parents would wake up and give her an excuse to dart back into her bedroom and tell him later: "I couldn't. My folks almost caught me. I'd be grounded forever." But she always went when he asked her because something in that fear, she knew, something to do with the way she instinctively felt not specifically about Earl but about boys like Earl, compelled her towards him. As she crept out of her silent house on those nights she could hear the voice of her father speaking of "those goddamned punks who ran over my mailbox," could see the face of Timmy Kerquiewicz, the first boy she'd ever seen tell a teacher to stick something up her ass back in seventh grade only to get thrown against the lockers by their principal, his wiry back slamming into the brown metal doors and his face turned away in a sneer as the other students gazed on, aghast.

So she would hug the curbs of darkened streets all the way to the park, wary of being picked up by the police for breaking curfew and always imagining the looks on her parents' faces when they would open their front door to



the sight of flashing police lights and her in handcuffs, when they would have to act shocked and appalled at their only child's shameful, promiscuous behavior. Upon reaching the dark, heavily-wooded park, she would see the glow of Earl's cigarette and gradually make out his features as he slouched against a large, shadowy tree, his hand-me-down clothes sagging down his body like loose rags and flapping slowly in the breeze along with his hair.

The first night they sat talking on a park bench, cold and damp with dew in the night air; soon she was shivering, and he put his arm around her to keep her warm. But she had worn only a sweater, and this, coupled with her fear, had caused her to shake uncontrollably, and after only twenty minutes she told him that she must leave. He let her go with a violent, brutal kiss, completely void of finesse or gentleness, a kiss that bumped teeth and bruised her lower lip. She attributed it to her own shaking, but in the following nights she found that this was his way, that he even preferred it this way, for when she would grasp his pock-marked face in her hands and try to show him how to go slowly he would only press his mouth harder to hers and attack her tongue with his own in an even greater frenzy. Once she accidentally bit his lip, and, tasting his blood, felt him become icredibly excited, so much so that he almost crushed her with his long, clutching arms.

And although his kisses never weakened in their brutality, she was aware of a certain kindness in him, a kindness reserved for her alone, for at school, where the two acted as though they didn't know each other, his attitude towards

others was more hostile than before. Boys he challenged; girls he blasphemed; teachers he mocked. It was as though every act of gentleness he showed her—bringing her a blanket or a coat, listening to her long stories about school and her parents, offering to walk her home—had to be negated by another act of cruelty at school. Several times he had started fights with basketball players for no obvious reason, and he had been punished accordingly, often getting trounced by their teammates and finally serving detentions in the dean's office.

But to her the knowledge of his two sides, of his split personality, made their relationship all the more exclusive, all the more exciting and taboo and above all a *secret*, for not even Robin knew that she'd kept meeting him in the park all those nights. Perhaps it had been going on for a month, two or three nights a week, she wasn't sure. Her sneaking out just before midnight, dressing ever more warmly for those few hours when they could meet undisturbed, his bringing ever more paraphernalia: a blanket, a sleeping bag, a radio, some beer (which was warm and almost made her gag). And she learned that she could tell him things, stories of her gym teacher who leered at the girls, a lesbian, she was positive; of the death of her cat, Tisha, and of how no one in her family cared or understood; of how much she hated being tall, of being labeled "Large Marge," of being taunted all through sixth grade with the song from the commercial: "Ho, ho, ho, ... Gre-ee-en Giant." And in turn he would share with her confessions of disgust for his family,

a father who'd deserted him and a mother too weak to keep order, of four brothers who offered no sympathy, no trust, no compassion, all of these tales told in bitter, blasphemous language that, when finished, left him shaking with unresolved hatred.

But more vital than sharing in self-pity was the mere fact of each other's company, of feeling liked, appreciated by *someone* if only for the giving of one's time and presence. In him she recognized an unrealized wish, a need for security and for *her*. When he told her from the bottom of his heart that he often thought about his boots, about them coming from the skin of a king cobra or a diamondback rattlesnake, hunted and killed by a master of snake-trappers, and about how he liked to think that there was a little bit of that man and that snake in him, it was at moments like that when she knew that she was in a place where no one else had ever been with him before, that the pawing and mauling they sometimes shared wrapped up in that greasy blanket was to him only a reflex, a wrestling match that paved the way for afterwards, when he could tell her about what was on his mind. And so what had initially begun as an act of rebellion, a thumbing of her nose at the teachers, parents, and students who'd had her so neatly pegged as a *nice* girl, a *quiet* girl, had instead begun to acquire the peculiarities of something like love, or at least something like infatuation, which stayed with her after they would part and which left a warm, quiet feeling inside her when she would finally crawl into bed those nights at 3 a.m.

It took some prompting on her part to make Earl concede to meeting during what she called "normal hours." At first she'd thought he was embarrassed to be seen with her in public, and the idea perplexed and bothered her the most when, seeing him pass by in the hallway, she would find herself staring after him, mooning at him, as he clomped along in a crowd of his friends, deliberately avoiding her gaze. For a time she refused to let him know that it bothered her, and in fact even told herself that it wasn't important. But after a month of midnight meetings, she became more aware of the "normalness" of their relationship, of the fact that it was, indeed, a relationship, whether he'd planned on entering one or not, and that to continue, it needed affirmation, *public* affirmation, of its existence. And in her mind, too, was a sense of not-quite-satisfied-ness, a feeling that this very personal experience was incomplete, for she'd met her end of the deal by meeting him in the park; she'd taken the dare and she'd proven herself. The reward had been him, the reward had been their getting together, but something was missing because what good was a trophy if you couldn't show it off? What good was a medal if you wouldn't pin it to your chest?

"But I thought you liked keeping it a secret," he'd said. "You said it was exciting meeting at night."

"I know. It's just ... it makes me tired the next day is all."

"So take a nap after school."

"I don't want to have to take a nap. And I hate coming home all cold and wet."



"I thought you liked it."

"I did."

"But not anymore."

She paused, looking at the tiny shine of light from his eyes, realizing in the darkness that they'd narrowed, that his voice had turned slightly colder. They were lying in the park on the ground under a fir tree, and she could hear the fallen needles rustling beneath them when she moved. A heavy woolen Army blanket covered them, and the ground, covered with the light needles, was dry, but she could feel the dew on her face and in her hair, and knew too well the coldness and dampness of those early morning hours when she would arrive home shivering and sniffing.

"It's not that. It's the cold. It's being so wet all the time when I get in."

"So dress warmer."

"But you can't. I'd have to dress like an Eskimo. It's just not like a house. Everything here gets soaked. Every night."

"So dress like a fucking Eskimo then."

"Earl—"

"Look, no one made you come here."

"Earl—"

And she'd grabbed him by the wrist to exaggerate her point, her fingernails ready to break his skin. Which turned out to be a mistake as he'd countered by grabbing her hair and slowly twisting his grip, a calm, firm, "Let go my

arm" issuing from between his clenched teeth. She obeyed, and he released her. She moved away from him then, and didn't meet his stare or speak a word until she was positive that she could continue without a tear falling, without her voice cracking or even trembling, with no water building up in her eyes at all.

"You listen. If you're too ashamed to be seen with me at school you tell me now. If you're ashamed of your friends seeing you with me, you tell me now."

"You want to meet *my* friends?"

"Yours. I want to be introduced."

He looked off behind her, confused, thinking. "You're stupid," he finally said, utterly bewildered. "Really crazy stupid. But okay."

She was unsure of whether or not he was somehow complimenting her, expressing shame not of her, but of his own friends. Of things, she was sure, that he had risen above by the simple act of their meetings and by the unspoiled, exclusive world they had created. And she didn't dare ask him, at least not directly.

"Earl, this—us together like this—is cool. I do it because I want to. But I don't want to have to hide it from everybody. It's exciting, but it's sneaky, too. Like something we're afraid to admit."

He made no response, but waited for her to continue.

"I just—can't we just act *normal*, be normal like other people?"



He smiled, a plastic, phoney smile.

"Normal," he said.

"Yeah. You know, like say 'hi' to each other."

"...Okay."

"And maybe even talk to each other in between classes."

He'd thought for a moment, had sat up to light a cigarette.

"You're not going to bring that fucking Robin bitch around."

"I don't know," she'd said, finally dropping her gaze and making circles in the fir needles with her finger. "I haven't thought about it yet."

* * *

When they'd reached McDonalds', her first impression was that Earl might have been right as they crammed into Ernie Pilzudski's brother's car, which had been left there, Ernie explained, while his brother had gone to get high with Randy Gross.

"Oh, great," Earl had said. "My favorite guy."

So they'd all piled into the old Eldorado—her, the sulking Earl, Ernie, with the scruffy hair on his neck, scrawny Dale Strodka, and another boy, fat Angel Rodriguez—only to sit there, as Ernie didn't have the keys, and smoke cigarettes. Earl hadn't introduced her, although she was sure that they knew her name and she certainly knew all of theirs. And although the boys had made no noticable acknowledgement of Earl bringing her at all, she was

certain that their silence had everything to do with her being there, that she had somehow invaded and changed the mood of the whole group. They'd sat there in silence, the smoke in the car becoming almost unbearable as she scrunched between Earl and Angel in the back seat, her feet propped up on the hump, and only Dale in the front seat had thought to open his window. She was aware that no one had offered her a cigarette, even though she didn't smoke and would have refused anyway, and feeling very awkward and fidgety and cramped in, she finally blurted out, "So what do you guys do here? Just sit and smoke yourselves to death?"

Against her right arm she felt Earl sinking down in his seat and could see him from the corner of her eye, visibly in pain and turning to look, as though very interested, out of his window at the traffic going by on 87th Street. They were parked in the back corner of the lot under a security light that didn't work. She had often noticed cars parked back there and typically people slightly older than she was gathered around them, juniors and seniors and high school graduates and dropouts, some of whom she'd seen before on the school patio. But stopping at McDonalds' with Robin for Cokes and french fries, she would never have dreamed of approaching the people back here, would never have dared to simply walk up to them unwelcomed. And what would her proper friend have said, she thought then, had she passed by and seen Marge in the back seat of this car with these trouble-making boys? Because she'd imagined it being so much different than this. More reckless. More wild.



"Hey Earl," said Dale from the passenger seat. "Your girlfriend don't smoke?"

"She's not my girlfriend," Earl mumbled, continuing to stare out the window, his hair hanging down across his face.

She felt a tightness then in her throat and had to restrain herself from striking him, from grabbing hold of the back of his long flat hair and pulling, pulling. "*Not my girl friend,*" she repeated in her head, "*Not my girl friend?*" And, teeth almost clenched shut, in her most sarcastic voice she replied: "My name is Marge, Dale Strodka. And I don't smoke, and I don't light off smoke bombs in the john, and I don't steal shoes, either."

Dale, who'd been drawing hard on his cigarette, suddenly went into a fit of coughing, causing Ernie and Angel to laugh, and even Earl smiled. "She got you good, man," Earnie said, punching Dale's scrawny shoulder, almost knocking him over. Dale was laughing, too, in between coughs. When he finally recovered, he turned and faced Marge, his eyes red and glazed and so deeply set in his tiny head, and, smiling, said, "Fuck you, bitch."

"Fuck you, too, asshole," she replied, and shoved his tiny frame forward into the dash board.

She felt relieved then, and sat back as comfortably as she could, sandwiched between Earl and fat Angel, her long legs scrunched up on that hump. Dale muttered "Bitch," and she smiled and punched him in the back.

"Earl, man, your woman's beating up on us," said Angel.

"Didn't you hear? I'm not... his... *woman*," she said, pounding Angel's fleshy arm after each word.

"Just hit her," said Earl, acknowledging, she thought, that she was.

"I can't believe you're telling them to hit me," she said.

"You deserve it," he said.

"*You* deserve it."

"Jesus."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"*What?*"

"*Nothing*," he said. "I didn't know you were such a bigmouth."

"Surprize," she said.

"Uh-oh," Dale snickered. "Trouble in paradise."

"You better smack that bitch down, Earl," said Ernie.

"Fuck you guys," she said sarcastically. But she felt that even though Earl was still moping, the other three had at least begun to accept her.

Dale had been looking through Ernie's brother's cassette tapes, which were kept in a box in the glove compartment, and he chose one and slid it into the rigged-up tape player, its wires sticking out every place, immediately filling the car with the sound of Iron Maiden. At first she had trouble recognizing the noise she heard as music; instead she had to wonder if it wasn't some poorly-tuned-in radio station, so full of static and buzz that it hurt her ears.



But as Dale and Ernie began to jerk back and forth, Ernie banging away at the steering wheel as drums and shaking his bushy black hair and little Dale shrieking the words, which she couldn't make out, she caught something like a melody within the song, at once vulgar and primitive and obnoxious, and she understood that the music was exactly like them: angry, ugly, *loud*.

There was a squealing of brakes and into their right-hand parking space screeched a worn-out Mazda, so full of dents along the driver's side that there was scarcely any portion of smooth body work visible. Inside sat Lucy Ptstkowski, whose black roots were just beginning to reappear beneath her platinum-blonde hair, and scowling Franny Reed, who Marge had once heard openly discussing her abortion.

"Oh," said Lucy, shutting off her engine. "It's *you* guys. Where's your brother, Ernie?"

"What do you care, bitch?" countered Dale.

"Fuck you, twirp," said Franny.

"Dykes," said Earl.

Lucy peered at Marge, who had slouched down in the back seat. "Oh my god, Franny, I don't believe it. They've got a girl in there. A *girl* in the Homo Club!"

Marge could hear the two gasp in mock-wonder and Dale turned the volume down on the tape player. Then Earl chuckled and the doors opened and slammed as Dale, Ernie, and Angel got out of the car. "What are you

laughing at?" she asked him as the girls rolled up their windows and Angel began kicking new heel-shaped dents in the doors of Lucy's car. "What are you laughing at?" And above the music and squealing and laughing she could barely hear Earl's reply—"Nothing"—and see his smirk in the darkness before she pounded him once playfully on his shoulder with the soft heel of her fist. And then she could not hear him but could only see the shape of the word formed on his lips—"Homo"—before she cursed him and began tickling his ribs.

But soon they realized that the noise outside the car had stopped, and above the fuzzy distortion of the tape player they could hear the voices of the others:

"Aww.... Aren't they cute?"

"Tickle, tickle...."

"Coochy coochy coo...."

She felt him gently but firmly push her away and watched him sit up and get out of the car. Then she got out, too.

"Earl's got a girl," sneered Franny.

"Who's your girl, Earl?" said Lucy.

"She's not my girl," he said, and this time she was glad he'd said it.

"Ear-ul's got a gir-ul," sang Franny.

"Does she grab your pearl, Earl?" Lucy asked.

"Does she like your little squirrel, Earl?"



"Squirrely Earl's got—" But the force of his kick against the car door stopped Lucy from finishing the remark and sent the car rocking back and forth.

"Fuckbrains!" she yelled.

"My name's Marge."

It had slipped out in that moment's silence, and then she felt everyone's eyes, even Earl's, scrutinizing her. She hadn't even realized that she'd been standing up straight when she'd said it.

"See, Earl?" said Franny. "Wasn't that simple?"

"Hey," said Lucy to Marge. "You're in my brother's homeroom, I think."

"Danny Ptstkowski?"

"Yeah, that's him. You punched him in the back, right?"

"He grabbed my ass."

"That's cool. Hey, Franny, she's alright."

And so she stood there outside Lucy's car, speaking to the two girls of what a creep her homeroom teacher was, and Lucy told stories about her brother, who already bragged about drinking nine beers, and Franny allowed that the boy was "a good reason for abortions." And *This is more like it*, she'd thought, this was what it was like to be cool and to be around people who knew they were cool, too, because she felt at ease and welcome but a little bit scared, as though something—anything—*wild* could happen right then. Meanwhile, the boys had returned to Ernie's brother's car to blast

the stereo, and when she glanced back at them she noticed Earl, too, shrieking along with the lyrics, jerking and wrenching his body the same way the others had done before. In fact the entire car was rocking, but as Franny and Lucy seemed not to notice she decided not to mention it.

"So are you and Earl going out?" asked Lucy.

She thought for a moment before saying, "I don't know. I'm not sure what you'd call it."

"He likes you. You can tell because he never looks at you."

She stole a glance at the next car thinking *That's for sure*.

"All guys are assholes," said Franny.

"He's sort of cute, you know?" said Lucy. "Some guys, they're, like, so ugly that they're cute."

"Earl's an ugly motherfucker, alright," said Franny, who, Marge could tell, only put up with her being there because Lucy appeared to like her. From the glove compartment Franny took a bottle of peppermint schnapps, which she gulped once and handed to Lucy.

"You're just mad because of Randy," said Lucy.

"Well?" Franny said.

"Well, it shows you right."

"Fuck you."

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Marge interrupted, accepting the bottle from Lucy.



"Me? Nah. We're banquet waitresses."

That was an answer of some sort, she knew, but failing to understand Marge merely tipped the schnapps to her lips and drank. She liked Lucy, she'd already decided, liked her openness and friendliness and the way she'd taken her, Marge, at face value. She liked the way Lucy talked and talked, her big doe eyes just slightly crossed, giving her a look of complete and friendly vacancy, her peroxide-blond hair stiff with hairspray, scraping lightly against the inside roof of her car. After the bottle had been passed to her a few more times, Franny turned on the radio, and she joined the two in singing a song by Triumph:

"She's young now,
She's wild now,
She wants to be free.
She gets the magic power
Of the music in me...."

and noticed that they were both tone deaf, especially Lucy, whose voice grew louder as she sang and did not even stop, as hers and Franny's did, when they heard the boys howling like coyotes from the next car.

But by then her head was beginning to spin and everything seemed only funny, hilarious even, and yelling "Fuck you guys!" she caught Earl's glance—once—and time seemed to take off, for next thing she knew she was buying vanilla shakes for Lucy and Franny and the boys were outside

their car, too, tossing a Nurf football back and forth, occasionally trying to nail her or Lucy, but leaving Franny alone because of that scowl and leaving Angel alone, too, because he was eating french fries. People appeared, and she was meeting them and talking to them crazily, laughing at anything: a boy with a ferret inside his jacket that peeped out near his neck, then ran down his back and into his sleeve; two more girls in McDonalds' uniforms, smelling of grease and not even embarrassed, she was surprized, of their brown polyester outfits; four boys in the black car (She got hit with the football then and was sure that Earl had thrown it, and had smiled and even asked one of them *What's your name?*); a dirty, foul-smelling man who staggered and had been sniffing glue, or so Lucy had whispered in her ear when he'd walked away. Then Lucy had touched Franny's shoulder and pointed, and Franny's little smile had vanished, and up walked Ernie Pilzudski's brother Ed and Randy Gross, who was two years out of school. Unshaven Randy Gross, who stood there stoned from smoking pot, leaning against Ernie's brother's car and smoking, and who, she noticed, had a tattoo of a snake on his forearm. Randy Gross, who acted bored and angry and only listened when Ernie's brother talked. Who finally looked at Franny, then Lucy, then at her, and said to Ernie's brother, "Ed, man, your brother and his little friends are fucking homos. There's three women there and they're all the sudden interested in football."

"We didn't come here with them," volunteered Franny. "Only she did,"



nodding to Marge once again with that scowl.

Randy looked at Franny again, and Marge wondered what had happened between them because Franny was trying so hard to look unaffected, and Randy looked as though at any second he might simply spit on her and walk away. Then he stepped back and looked at Marge slowly from her shoes up. "Hey, you're a big one," he said, and Ernie's brother laughed.

"She goes out with Earl," said Franny.

Randy slapped himself on the head and pretended to be dizzy. She felt very sober then, and time slowed down to normal and Franny laughed once nervously.

"*Earl?*" He laughed. "Cowboy Earl? all right!"

He began walking around in a circle, imitating Earl in his boots. "Hey, Earl!" he called across the parking lot. Earl had been watching, expressionless, standing back among the shadows of the lot, and when she looked she couldn't see his eyes, for one was covered by his hair and the other one was in shadow, but she could feel that fear of him start all over again inside her and could feel her head clear up and everything go into focus; was aware of Earl looking at her even though she couldn't see his eyes and even though he wasn't facing her and thinking *Oh shit* and Lucy looking at her, too, and Franny smiling.

Randy was hunkered over then, walking bow-legged, slouching his shoulders and sticking his neck out crooked. "Howdy, Earl!" He walked in

a circle with a big crooked smile on his face, pretending to tip his hat to Lucy, then Franny, who laughed again nervously, then finally bowing to her. "You-all are one purdy girl, Honey. Purdy tall, that is, haw haw haw."

The Nerf ball narrowly missed Randy then, zinging right over his shoulder and hit Lucy's car with a dull thud, and he turned and looked at Earl. "Take it easy, pardner. You-all are gonna get me mad, and I wouldn't wanna have to see you get those boots scratched up none when I kick your ass."

"Fuck you," was all Earl said.

There was a long moment before Randy turned and looked at her and smiled, then turned to Earl and pointed back at her with his thumb and said, "Fuck you, pardner. *And* the horse you rode in on."

She stood speechless staring at the back of Randy's head thinking really hard *Fuck... you...* and only heard the sounds of Earl's quickening footsteps coming nearer and the pop of a fist hitting bone, and then Earl was on the ground yelling *Motherfucker* and she was pounding on Randy's back and trying to scratch at his eyes yelling *Motherfucker*, too, and felt the backhanded slap across her face like sandpaper and tasted the blood. Then she'd backed up against Ernie's brother's car and looked up to see Dale and Ernie and Angel holding Randy's arms and pulling him away and Earl leaning into the picture, his left leg poised and then the heel of his boot in Randy's ribs, the crack so awful that she thought she felt her own ribs breaking; then Earl grabbed her by the wrist and they were running out of the parking lot and



across 87th Street without even watching for cars and halfway down the next block before they stopped. She wasn't even tired, only out of breath when Earl said, "Are you okay?" but her arms were already up and around his neck and her mouth pressed brutally against his, teeth crushing against lips, before she tasted the blood.

A N D R E A S T A R K



You Never Know

Is it a
Touch
A taste
A tap
A tickle
Or a test
Of some
Bone some muscle
Some ligament
Or pressure point
The semester
You had gross
Anatomy
I looked
Over my shoulder
A lot

A L I C I A B E R R Y

 Color

I want
to scrub my skin
until it tears.

Then,
bleeding,
I will braid wildflowers
into my stringy veins.

TOWERS 71
120



" P A U L A D U D Z I K

a Untitled



Photo manipulation



I Must be Stretched

I keep answering the phone upside down
My roommates think its funny
I am not laughing very hard

Like when you're driving
And you feel your cold fingers
Rolling down the window
A mouse width
You could throw something out
A guinea pig
A cat

Like an alien
I am walking in downtown Chicago
I see Philadelphia
And New Brunswick
And the air doesn't hit my face
I must have grown away from my skin

My arms really swing
Making no path in space
They are only
Arms in transit

I am half way there
To every destination
And half way not
Backwards against my memory
Of Cities keep my words
Tilling them with
so many others
Pulling
My lips
My eyes
My knees
In separate pieces
Down my body





Editing

My sister calls me
And I tell her I know what I'm doing
Tying my shoe laces to the bannister

I know people who are dying
And my room is a mess
I'm tired of my eyes
The weights they lift at night

If I wanted to be tired
I'd undo my laces
And lean over the balcony


If I wanted to be sad
I'd repeat Bach tapes
And count the times
You told me where your spirit lived
In every fugue
Increasing volume for effect

If I wanted to be new
I'd give your picture
To another brown bag in the kitchen
Or feed it to Pete
And he'd lace the edges with his teeth
Until you were only
Pieces of matte finished studio art
Stuck to cedar chips



a **Untitled**



 **May Day**

You in your hiding him mama
and I couldn't understand
All those flowers
and how they folded that flag
Three riflemen firing seven shots
and why you dressed me in that black suit
Never knowing him
and throwing ball
or flying kites
All taken from my hands
and given back a stranger
With blood
and dirt
and matted hair

I remember my grandfather
marching in that fourth of July Parade
How tightly he held that flag
and how he wouldn't cry
Why were they cheering mama
And other boys had sparklers
And that girl had a pinwheel



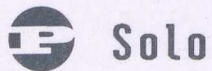
And they could all see good
from where they sat
high up on shoulders
And those children had fathers mama
fathers

TOWERS 71

128



722100



My mother is upset
Because I will hand myself
Out in pieces to you
In any order
Even repeating my limb dance

She is not asking
Any harder questions
But her words
In the mail
And her breath
By my ear

Make my reactions slower
And I have forgotten
Some of your favorite choreography





Last Historic Season

A crack of pine
reveals summer's passion—
Finding fresh excitement in green
Dust, stirred by passing feet
Settles to outline
the stark white
of tanned athletes

Shouting vendors clap
shiny metal lids
A religion of hot dogs, beer
and peanuts

The basis for stretching a leather hand
Scraping a sky blue ceiling—
Catching a piece of cotton

Balconies echo the
cheering choir—
celebrating a
403 foot homer

Arching backs collide
against splintered green
seats—

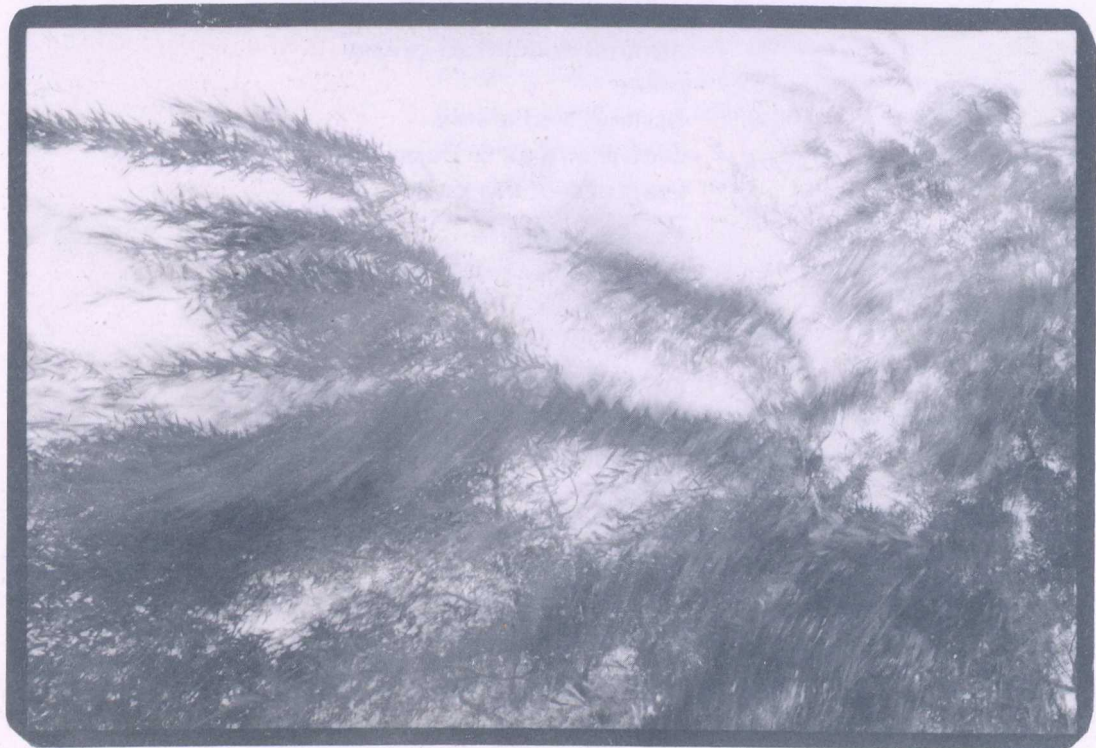
Spilling into aisles,
crowd strives to capture
the prize of the park


Voices explode
through ancient brick arches
gaping out
on South side streets

Next door's steel beam sculpture
shadows
the last historic season.



a Untitled



 **Eternal Life**

Where should I embark? Maybe with something pure or immoral? How about something evil and delightful? How about this: a black ball covered in red blood gyrating down a confined passageway. The bloody red ball comes to a halt near a dying willow tree. The willow tree is crying; the tears run down its frail limbs. Beneath the tree, at ground level, the tears have become an ethereal rain storm. The black ball is dazzled by the coming shower. As the rain slowly comes down, it purifies the black ball of the red blood. But this black ball is no ordinary ball, it has a mystical energy within. The rain mixes with the red blood that lingers down the isolated passageway. At the end of the passage stands an enormous steel door. Without hesitation, the blood mixture flows under the angular air space between the iron door and dirt floor, into the restricted room.

Splashes of red blood and dust, cover the thick, cruel walls. To the left of the door a worn heart lies pumping loudly in a puddle of blood. On the table above rests a middle-aged man, destined by fate to die on this day. His body is exposed, a sign of investigation. As the heart beats, it shares its own individuality of pure, unwoven suffering and immortal pain that completes itself with the sight of helplessness. The internal organ pumps; an unusual, empty void engulfs the room as the heart waits in absolute silence.

Then abruptly the room comes alive with spirits, of the departed and the eternal. The ambiguously constructed ceiling made out of rugged material unhinges itself frequently to vacuum up the unforgiven souls. Metamorphosis



begins to thicken its way through the cadaver of the man until all that's left is a core of ashes for the devil to guard as his keepsake.

The pumping heart was now tiring and the alcove becomes silent. To the left of the heart the obscure, bloody floor gives way. A reddish glow saturates the room which emerges from the open floor. A black steam rises out of the hole in the floor. From the opening comes a pair of eyes which gleamed wickedly toward the silenced internal organ. Then instantaneously, a body appears from the black steam and turned around immediately, and his face looks uglier and more disfigured than ever. His frightening scarlet eyes glowed with hatred and anger. The figure of immortality ascended to where the organ struggles for existence. Thick, rich smoke comes from his vulgar breath which suffocates the room with evil. He bends down and violently grasps hold of the lifeless organ. The body turns and inspects the corpse. The evil figure laughs and then turns back towards the murky steam which has taken over the room. Then suddenly the abstract ceiling unhinges itself. A bright white gloom takes over the reddish glow, and a white cloud descends around the disfigured body holding the lethargic organ. The reddish glow and the black steam has disappeared. The room becomes filled with a magical spirit of morality; meanwhile life returns to the heart. The disfigured body dropped the newly awakened heart and flees to the open aperture where everything vanishes.

Now the heart was pumping forcefully while miniature sparkles of phlegmatic light descended from the disengaged ceiling. As the light penetrates the thick muscular walls of the pumping heart, it turns into a bright glowing ball of impressive, blinding light. A warm radiance overwhelms the room as the glowing ball dances around the chamber. The ball finally comes to a hover over the dead corpse. Then suddenly, in a flash of sparkling light, the ball jets through the steel door, up the confined passway and collides with the black ball. Only for a moment, bursts of dark black light and bright white light erupt around the dying willow tree. But, the confrontation does not last long, it ends with the retreat of the black ball into the ground.

The glowing ball rests among the willow tree's branches. After a few seconds the ball starts to encircle the dying willow tree. Each time the ball proceeds around the tree, a greenish blue light becomes brighter and brighter until the ball vanishes into the aura of light that surrounds the tree. With one last streak of illumination, the glowing ball disappears, the passageway and the room are gone. Only an exuberant willow tree near a pond endures.



a Untitled





Cemetery Rain

After the rain moves on, water drips from the rhododendron.
I imagine, if my head were placed under the leaves,
that this would be water torture,
pleasant torture with strong blossoms spilling over me,
water dripping slowly, almost silently,
on my now perfumed and perspiring skin.

When I lie flat,
the earth pushing hard at my back
and the sky waiting for my fall forward,
I feel long, a snake stretching across
the grassy field of the cemetery.

But it's only water torture and rhododendron blossoms,
and there's no time for torture;
dad wants some dogs buried.
So I rise, my head knocking the leaves,
spilling rain and bumble bees and gentle petals like life.

The dogs are stiff inside plastic garbage bags,
but I'm able to carry two at a time:
one under each arm like expensive luggage.



The cemetery is a quarter mile behind the animal hospital,
out near the railroad tracks, not really a cemetery at all,
just a field of tall green grass.

Dad says death is the best fertilizer.

When I bury dogs sometimes I pretend,
after the grave is dug, that the cemetery is a sea,
the dog a dead sailor,
and the body laid in the grave, settling to the floor of a silent sea,
a soul slipping into the dark.

Today, after the rain, it's easy to pretend:
tall grass wets my shorts and shirt.

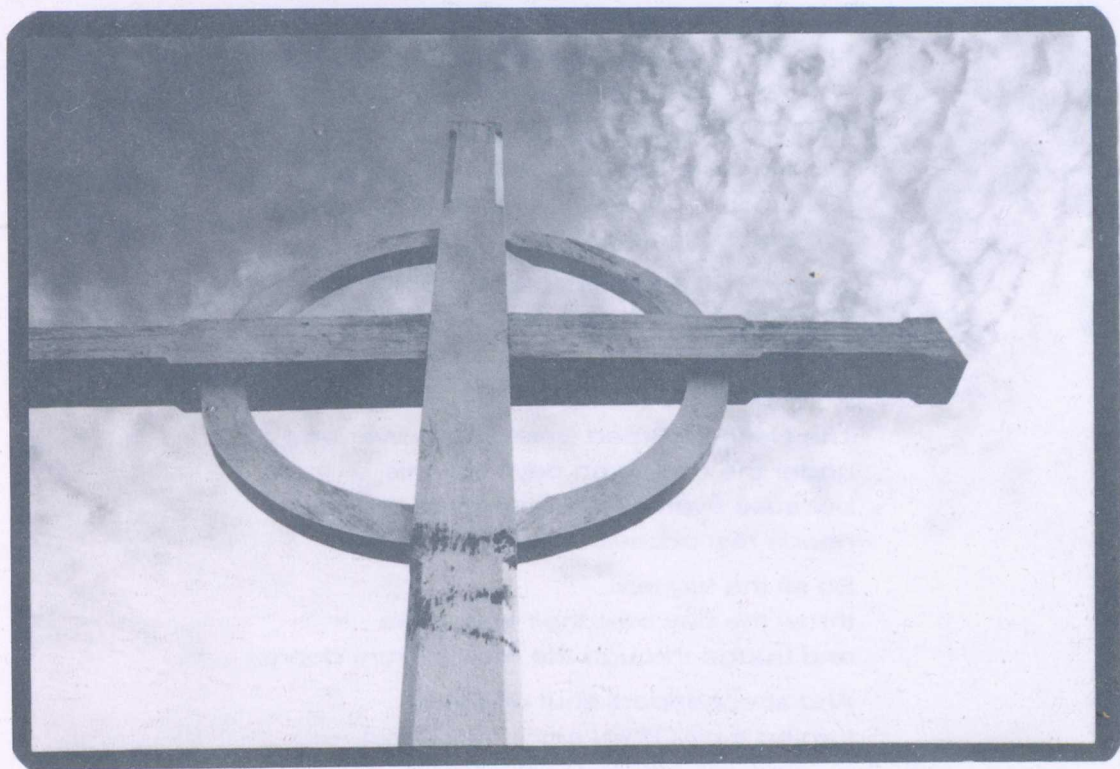
My shovel moves through the wet earth easily,
sensibly like a rudder navigating the surrounding sea.

Rain begins again, water filling the grave floor,
and soon, purple petals and bodies float like ships
while quiet rain falls from leaves in pleasant torture.


Dad calls for me to come in from the rain,
and I will.

But, at the moment, it's nice to lie under the rhododendron,
letting blossoms fall like rain at sea.

a Untitled



Photograph

 **From My Girlfriend's 12th Floor Dorm Room**

we could see where the drainage ditch
formed a slightly deviating "Y,"
and the lagoon lay sleeping
with a headboard made of pines.

Out across acres of topsoil
a white farmhouse looked like a pinhole
in a black blanket.

The gray of a looming April storm
settled into the Illinois soil
like an overweight lap cat on a sofa,
pawing lightly before sleep.

The Nation's Bread Basket rolls over and curls up
under the covers on days like this,
because even a well-respected region
needs rest occasionally.

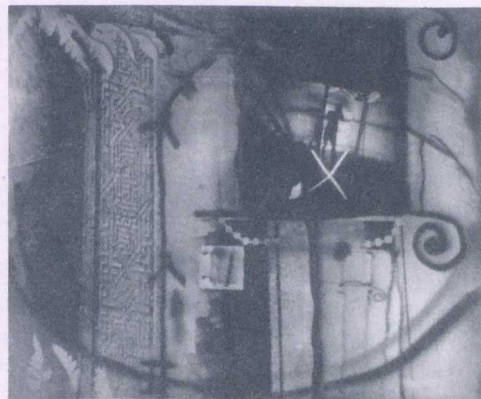
So all the farmers
throw the day over their shoulders
and trudge through the mud to front doors.

And shopkeepers shut off lights,
turning their OPEN signs inside-out.

And the full-timers
push their eyelids into the time clock,
punching out for the evening.

And all the used car salesmen
roadworkers, business men,
barkeepers, drunkards,
bus drivers, future politicians,
crossing guards, and grocery clerks
climb with us into the giant heartland feather bed.

a Little Forgivenesses



Silver Gelatin Print



Self Awareness

I saw myself
Cut my leg
This morning
In the shower

The razor
Chuckling in
Its smooth path

I watched
This leg
Blood drip
On my ankle

The same place
I always cut it
But watching



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