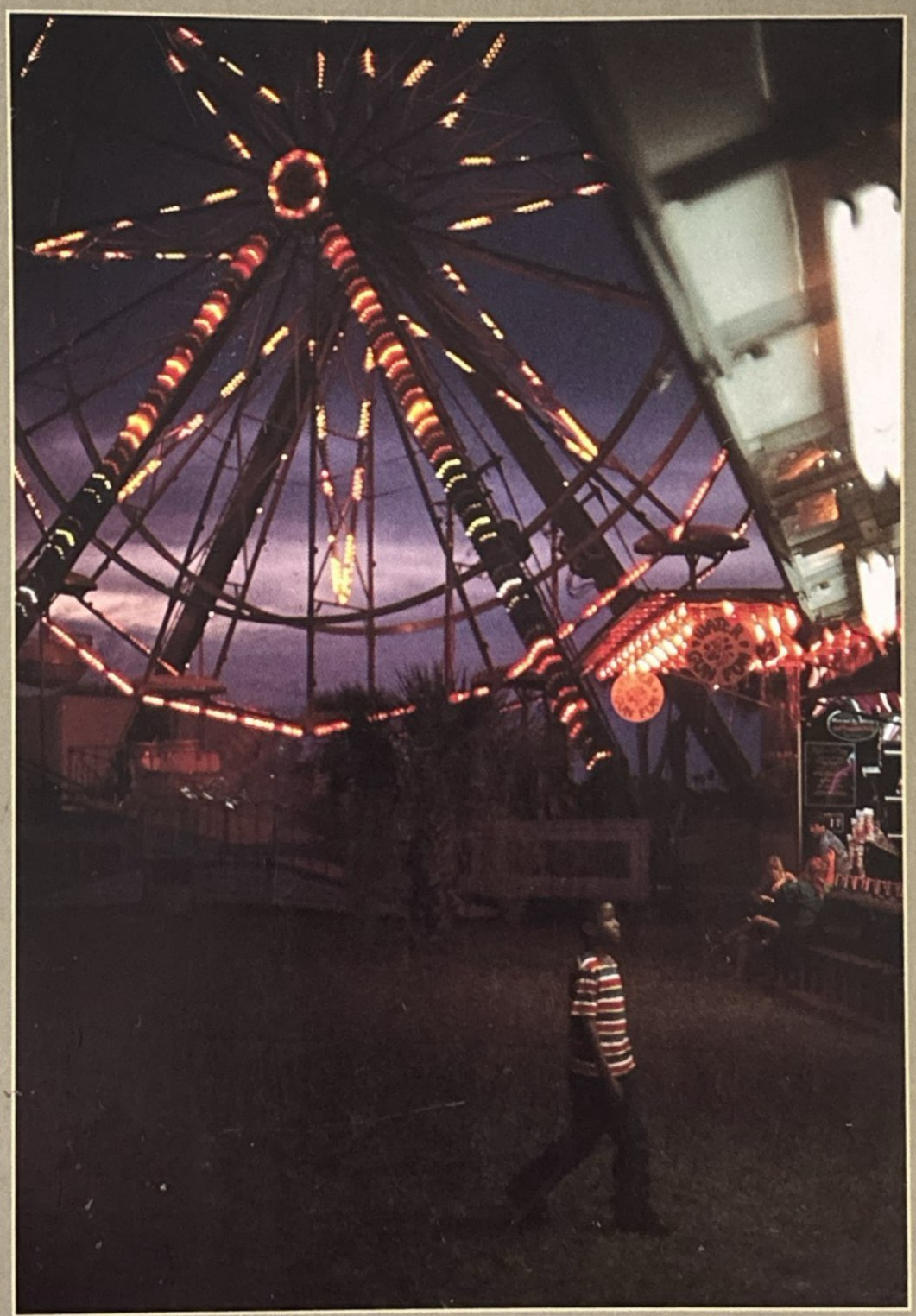
Lullwater Review

A Journal for the Literary Arts



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29 January 1999

Dear Reader,

This issue marks the end of my term as editor-in-chief and I leave the position with a little sadness but mostly with great confidence in the abilities of the dedicated staff. I think you will find that this issue is truly representative of both the diversity and quality our readers have come to expect from the *Lullwater Review*.

This issue we are pleased to feature accomplished photographer Zak Riles of San Francisco in addition to the various poetry and fiction pieces from around the country.

Once again, we look forward to receiving your entries for the sixth annual Lullwater Prize for Poetry contest, which will be judged by Saher Alam, Emory's current fiction fellow. All contest submissions must be postmarked no later than March 20, 1999.

I would like to thank my parents and my grandma Monie for all their love and support during the production of this issue. Also, many thanks to Leah Wolfson, Marcelo Guerra, and Ryan Caster, without whom absolutely none of this could have been accomplished.

Enjoy!

Becky Brooks

Becky Brooks

Table of Contents

Poetry

Artwork

Fiction

Poetry

Terry Tierney • Edwina Pendarvis • Noelle Rydell • Leslie Norman • Jean Howard • Marie Kazalia • B. Silva • Marcia Garcia Tabor • Theresa Pappas • Julian Edney • John Davis • Robert Cooke • A.J. Stewart • Analisa Lee • Branley Branson • Dale Kushner • Kathryn Kirkpatrick • Judith Werner • Ryan van Cleave • Brant Lyon • Catherine Ferreira • John Knight

Terry Tierney

Her White Tattoo

I remember how it began,
how the houses he painted
seemed to frame her poems,
how her words grew there, filling rooms
as she read them, pressing on windows
and doors like the fumes of a dream
trying to breathe into waking.

In the rooms where he worked
she smelled the fresh odor of paint,
the linseed oil, and mineral spirits,
each pigment a different scent, and she traced
his strokes along the trim of every room,
above, below, all edges sanded.

In her mind she painted rooms
he never touched, knowing
the twist of his hands, the dip
and spread of his fingers, a dancer's
stroke, dissolving darkness.

Even in a room she just rented
miles away, she recalls his touch
and the print of her bare shoulder
on the wet frame of the dining room door
that morning she leaned there, reciting
a midnight poem. Some lines
she never forgets, how they adhere
to her skin like a bandage,
the sterile scent of spirits,
her white tattoo.

Edwina Pendarvis

How to Enter an Iceberg

for Linda

Blue-green popsicle tinting your lips.
Wearing shoes of fire.
Slowly, slowly, one toe at a time.
Nonchalantly, with sangfroid—
twirling a walking stick.
Amnesiac, forgetting your name
and where you've been.
With salt on your eyelids.
Listening to the heartbeat of whales
boom through seven oceans.
In tandem or alone.
Wearing a cloak of feathers.
Backward, trustingly,
into the frozen sea.

Noelle Rydell

Ariadne

I wait here at the side of the brook.
How dark it is. My hands shine big and blue
as knitting needless clacking.
Thread unravels from me as though he,
the one I gave the end to, is taking my intestine,
as though the string is blue and encased and warm
and tangled as my veins,
my blood unmixed with air.

If the string were to break, my blood
would mix with oxygen, turn red in his hands.
So the string uncoils like a tree
from a fishing line, cast poorly,
hooks stuck in the upper branches of memory,
or maybe the hook bobs under lily pads,
heavy as myth.

And I pull a little to see if he is still there.
I wait. I weave the string into words
then unloosen the knots and loops,
setting the words free, sending them
into his fingers.
I tap my nails together, clicking.
String coils around me, unraveling my lies
until I am pure silence.

The string tugs and I see a tunnel,
darkness beyond. A small pale light
and hushed voices rattling like chains.
The scuttering of insects and animals.
They sit with me, watch me curiously,
lending me webs and claws
to help me sit at this dark place, waiting
at this dark stream unraveling.

Leslie Norman

Her Hands

Just her and her husband's clothes
spin in the eye of the dryer,
one big dark eye with legs and sleeves sweeping the screen.
Their clothes mingled,
unlike their bodies which hadn't touched in years.
She sat in a straight-backed chair with a cigarette,
her hands with veins like balled up shoestrings.
She knew as she knew at 19
that it is just age and more age,
laying down, waking from the velvet of sleep to a wrinkled bed
and the sun through the lace curtains stamping hex signs on the
wall
and her hands like a barometer.

She knew as she knew at 19 that it all led to your own wooden box.
and praying hands, pies and casseroles at church,
and what happened in between was no more than was needed.
She had read an article once on Zen
and that each object, each act, had a spirit
and that man should live each moment as if it were holy.
She felt the author had probably been dealt a lucky hand.
He hadn't slept in the same narrow streets,
hadn't seen the same mailbox everyday perched
on the post like a bird nailed down.

She lifted from the closet a make-up bag filled with gloves
and a packet of razor blades.
She pulled on the gloves confident of the strength in her hands.

Jean Howard

November Still Clinging

like old lingerie
tinged
and hanging in shreds
from the maple trees,
the air wants
to wrap itself
around you
and end.

The way
a star ends
like a spark
in high trees.
Or the way
a fight ends
one back turning
nose bleeding
on sleeve.

The way a fish
one day
floats
belly up for
the breakfast feeding.

Wrapping itself
around your neck
its wool will love you,
bright at first
with burning tweeds,
then draining slowly
into straggling
threads.

How that scarf
tightens.
But now it has
the awkwardness
of a hand falling
on bed clothes,
a gesture the dead
use most often.
Still looking alive
but filling with
chill.

Then it is over.

No one says
"It's over."
A different light takes
the room.
A shadow exaggerates
under a willow.

A note shrill
and numbing plants
itself in the upper
nostril.

A movement spills,
snow-filled
and full of meaning
from the outer limb
of a chestnut tree

and you suck it in,
white and painful
until it's done.

Marie Kazalia

Cost

During the short intervals
between rings
he has to find more
coins
to put into the pay phone
and dial again.
Each time I lift
the receiver
slam it back down
costs him thirty-five cents

B. Silva

in walked bud

and the lights glimmered,
the night,
the satin sheaths of women,
open swirling jackets
all shimmered in the music.

even on mondays,
even on lowdays,
the piano player roared with the cubans
on and off the stage in easy bossa novas;
women laughing,
flashed a diamond or two
into the palms of their fancymen
when they smiled
and it was going to be
a buttered jam.

even on sundays,
even then the unholy lions
prowled the streets
for plantains and
bawdy girls.
in the turn of an ankle,
the money clip loosening easily,
the milk of smack careening the curves
of bored cats' veins,
the roar of sirens
streaking, breaking
through the ghettoes—even then
on mondays,
on lowdays,
"in walked bud."

Marcia Garcia Tabor

The Thimble

The rocking chair moves
like a sewing machine.
The baby's cheek forms a seam
with his father's shoulder,
his saliva a dropped stitch
coloring his shirt with patches
of deep blue. He quilts a yawn
with the heaviness of the moon.

The mother watches from
her cushioned position
where she is pinned
by his eye. If she moves
he will sit up, his spine
straight like a needle
so she threads herself
onto the couch,
a pattern of stillness.

His eyes begin to roll
like bobbins spooling
into satin dreams. His cheek
twitches as if pulled
by a string. The mother tears
him away from where he blankets
his father's frayed lap,
and frames his sleeping
softness with a crib,
where he embroiders himself
upon the flannel of the night.

Theresa Pappas

Watching the Men

From the bleachers, we squint
through wire grid into the sun,
trying to recognize their silhouettes
aligned on the field. In the evening glare,
their movements are molten, blacklit,
filtered through vapors. It's hard to remember,
but these are the bodies that wake
alongside us, familiar as our own.
Guided by a ball we sometimes see,
they weave across the dirt—ghostly
shadows of the men we know,
their middle-aged figures disguised
in loose clothes and frayed even more
by the sunset. As the game goes on,
they lose themselves to a memory
of themselves: as boys who wanted
to be men who want to be boys again.
Their voices and their signals
Dissolve against the dusk.
And later in the bar, they peer into
the television haze, their recorded actions
once more arising. They stroke their injuries
vaguely, pretending not to be proud.

Julian Edney

woman attacked by her garden

from left to left, to right, dark dented leaves
and mangoes hang in a cosmos and brilliant buds
and among the simultaneously-breathing lobes of papayas
is the amethyst sadness of garden birds, and guavas float, pink-lunged.
all still as a woman comes out of her back door.
the garden makes the quiet interior spaces between stars
and she steps out where the branches meet
like answers in the air, to break off flowers, more, more.
and turns back, stumbling for her door. she turns: she herself
now runs with floral things: her face her skin illuminate
with forest scenes; her breath is colored, crowds with vine
and leaves. feeling equatorial lights rise within,
she bolts the door and screaming, through a small barred window,
with iron tongs tries to put the flower back.

nebraska, walking

there's one overhead black wire that runs to the horizon.
the sky walks its lightnings. the weather's
a glorious shorthand, an inhabited idea of innumerable rhythms,
wind, three curves at a time and thunder
shudders like hollow trestles overhead,
and out of each next canyon
come clouds, like squids, crawling out of shoes.
wind howls iridescent. the scut and scut
of these blown plains. the one black wire we follow sways
to distant point past a broken trailer; a rural phone booth.

after the storm it looks like spray lifting from a sea
and an eerie copper glow. and after the clouds pass
there's a colossal light. birds pluck the wire
and adjust their intervals with terrifying little fights.
we walk in wet overcoats and boots, shuffle over dislocated feet,
watch as the corners of the nebraska sky ignite.

John Davis

Café of the Horizon

The zebra blends into the night like a ballad,
balks, lifts his wine glass.
Someone is juggling giant vanilla beans.
Someone is punching the air with a voice
seven octaves above heaven.
Car exhaust layers the horizon.
Rachel, painting at the table, advises
no one of the riots in her eyes; she can't
blend a zebra's lashes into her skyline.
Who has taped *clean-the-oven* reminders
to his rain slicker?
Someone is tonguing the guava-like curves
of his girlfriend, someone striped
with rhubarb eyes. In the morning his eyes
will feel tired like dried-up raisins.
Tintinabulation is missing from the menu.
On the corner Jack counts stars like kilowatts
so that he will electrify his science
teachers with facts and frequent eclipses.
Nowhere will the sun be so nourished.
Even as guitars whine like parents,
even as car engines layer the frozen raisins,
frozen wine, frozen curves, love arrives
on your plate warm as kilowatts.

Robert Cooke

Helping My Daughter

for Emily

I look up at the moon
to help my daughter with her homework.
Half a moon and no stars.
I like the way the grass looks,
September 10th. Light from the kitchen window
pools in the spirea, light from the sailing moon.
As I come back into the house,
I see my daughter, her head bent down over her work.
In the microwave behind her,
the green digital numbers of the clock change.
I look back at her,
she holds her head in her hand
and her pencil moves across the page—
so young, so much thought and effort.
The grass still growing, the air chilly,
some flowers already thrown onto the pile.
When I go inside, it will be warm.
I'll sit down next to her, close,
listening to her whispering thoughts,
watching her hand press down hard.

A.J. Stewart

Beautiful Fish

After catching two small trout
casting with flies the last of the sun
speckled them more and we walked
carrying them over stones as dusk slipped

among willows where the Delores River
slipped among stones. And we cut
willow whips and stripped them and pushed
their pointed ends through the fish

mouth to tail and hung them
over a small fire roasting
with a few drips sputtering
now and then making sparks

jump in the smoke. And we ate
those beautiful fish, peeling back
their crisp skin blackened
picking white flesh from delicate bones

between the head and the tail
and they gave the river to us
completely that night, and the sky
peeled back too, giving stars.

Analisa Lee

The Dissolution of Rock

Sandstone, for instance, how the sea
settled in itself and receded, leaving
the sleep of animals who did not know
they were sleeping, footbeds of bedrock
flitted with what lasts: tight spirals
and mollusks and spines slipped from the flesh
so long ago they are called something
other than spines.
Remember this in the landscape you want
to lose yourself against: water that carries in
carries out. Rock marries the water
but water has already married
the wind, and will stay married.
It is all right, finally, with me, for the rock
to be taken back to granular grafting
of silted animals, to be carried into rivers
even where there are not rivers.

Branley Branson

Dawn

Infusing air and dew-dappled spider webs
With glint and spare design, invigorating
Sleeping eyes and hungry maws and thoughts of domain,
The white and spiteful light soon descends the bleak
Demands of whirling space and the tilt of time.

At these latitudes, we are slaves to heat and light,
Mere motions in a suit of clothes and shoes,
Caught up in nocturnal dreams of recompense
For having suffered birth and cycling days,
While in the Arctic night there is no dawn,
No heat to sweep away lethargy.

I lie in contemplation of my stock
In the vast expansion of the universe,
Shrunk to the size of a senseless molecule,
Bombarded by electronic rain and storms
That are not of my making, spiraling through galactic
Dust that never settles on the surging fields
Of abiding energy that comes with light.

There is no turning back against that tide,
Not for Arctic fox or ptarmigan in white
Design, nor leopards in the stifling heat,
Or me in the controlled climate of rooms
Not of this world—we all succumb to light
That brightens on our dying circumstance:
We have nothing to say to one another, yet
We all speak the same variable tongue of earth.

I rise from sleep, no better I was
Before my rest but only closer to
My Arctic dreams of unending glacial ice,
And phantoms from the night yet linger in
My thoughts like thorns embedded in my skin.
I can not cast them out, nor shall the light

(No Stanza Break)

Itself expel them from the coteries
Of fright that conspire against the simplest acts
Of sight and breath that attend the motions of life.

The day comes, not fruitfully onward,
And we are cast out with demons on the streets—
The fox, the ptarmigan and me—to fend
Them off before the night finds us defenseless
In the lack of light, in the craving for light
As we cringe away from solitary cells
That are set for the coming of another dawn
That will not differ from all those pass through
The alembic of our eyes and jangled nerves.
We are slaves to the spectrum of falling light.

Dale Kushner

Connections

after Pavese

The train waits in an empty field near a line of mulberries. Across the tracks, the oats have been cropped and piled into hayricks. Vestiges of ice on the stubble. What's left of the cabbage is blanched and tattered with worms. Turnips keep their heads buried until next summer and Time is jealous. It has to keep hurrying even while the trains sleeps like a black snake in its skin.

Elsewhere a girl has bitten into a speckled pear. The pear has come a long way to her from further south. Down there, black goats necklaced with bells doze under olive trees. When they stir, their clappers fracture the air. Grapes run recklessly up the trellises. The rye is a sea of gold.

Pears travel north by wagon past acres where red poppies curtsy and bow. The farmer who drives the wagon smells sour, of goats, but his hands, which only this morning have gathered lavender and thyme, are deeply perfumed. Mules, not horses, trudge along the clay-packed road. Baskets of pears. Jugs of wine. Casks of oil. Straw hats woven by the village women while the grappa sweetens.

If she were on the train, the girl would wish to go south to the sea, the green sea with its white beach and lion-colored cliffs. The train would sing clackety clack, clackety clack, and the girl would remove her shoes and socks and hum along. For now, she has finished her pear, its sugars lingering on her tongue.

All day a fine rain has pressed against her window. Evening has brought a stop to the train, but clouds lacquer over the promise of stars. Hidden inside the core of her pear are lustrous black seeds. Black, like the train which has begun to lurch forward as if released from a cage.

The train ascends a steep mountain. Climbs vertically, not round and round, the way the road is cut. Straight up, past the peak and into the sky. As once, herself a passenger eating a pear by the window, she climbed with it.

Kathryn Kirkpatrick

Life Story

She was silent on the subject
of serving them each morning
before herself,
                though laundry waited
for the boiling kettle in the dirt-
swept yard, and cherries heaped unpitted
in a prophesy of afternoon pies.

But I know for a fact
that the men and the boys ate first,
that she sat down at the table
after they left for the fields.

I hope they left for the fields.
But perhaps one brother
stole up to his room
to open a book
                while she lifted
a biscuit cold from the plate.

When I asked my grandmother
to write her life story, she chose
what she thought I could keep—

water from a deep well,
                a bucket
of cedar and brass,
                the brass
scrubbed shiny
                with sand;
corn ground
                to grits or hominy;
sweet potatoes
                under wigwams
of cornstalks and banked earth;

sorghum cane pressed and cooked *(No Stanza Break)*

for molasses
that seeped through
gingerbread,
gingersnaps,
found its way into peanut brittle

and between the hands of children
pulled to a brightness.

I know you have seen wheat fields
or at least pictures of heads of wheat

marking carefully the distance
across which you had to speak

of fringed green heads turned golden,
scythed to a cradle, dropped
neatly to the ground

and you behind your father,
handfuls gathered and bundled,
the shocks left to cure in the sun

the thrasher, separating wheat
from straw

your father leaving before daylight
to take the wheat to be ground

real white, then second grade,
middlings, finally, bran.

Sometimes he was home before night.

I liked to run, jump ditches, ride
down the hill on barrel staves
in pine straw.

But when your sister married,
you left your brothers
for the flat iron
and starched men's collars,
those shirts scrubbed with soap

(No Stanza Break)

you'd made from fat and lye.
Your brothers went to college.
You stayed behind, though you grew
silent on that subject too.
Instead: the beds made, the dishes washed,
the house tidied, the cottage cheese
hung in its cloth bag, the butter molded.
Cotton combed and carded
for homespun white,
dyed yellow
with the bark of red oak trees.
Wood floors scoured with sand.

It seems that I did have more
to do than the boys. I didn't
resent it as I thought some things
were girls' work. Not so today!

That opaque exclamation
brings back the day we gathered
at your house and I refused to join
the kitchen bustle, the chorus
of aprons
went outside with the men
to take a turn on an uncle's riding lawnmower,
superfluous in your small yard

then sat down in an empty room
between the kitchen laughter
and the roar of lawn machines.

I think you pitied me the complication
of that dogged in-between.

But there were never words
to set me straight
or to console.

And now your furniture
stands in my dining room
though you never willed it
to me.

The strokes that left you *(No Stanza Break)*

without seasons, without
your ample porch and sturdy home

gave back instead
the long dead, sisters, cousins

and every last thing
immediately before you—
these glass beads, the fabric
of your shoe, my hand reaching
for you as I never reached before.

Gave, too, a certain frankness
to your speech as when I mused

about just what I might pass on
to a daughter

I guess you'll have to get one
first, you say.

As if I'd not done that,
the obvious thing, but chose instead,
line by line, to undo
the careful silences.

Dreaming Patriarchs

1

Even though I believe
in the shared ride, the commuter
pool, mass transit,
the first time I died in a dream
I was a passenger.

I accepted a lift
from a powerful man,
or rather, a man
in a powerful position.

From the back of his car
I saw clearly
the iced road
the truck marked
FLAMMABLE

So this is what comes
I thought, as the white light
met me, *of being driven*
by men.

2

In the sequel the man resigns
his powerful position.
I am alive again.

But other men arrive,
their mouths full of betrayals.
Even the men I love turn
treacherous, place before me
impossible choices.

I am a thicket of wrists.
I am the body blurred

Down scores of whites steps.
Running.

3

She faces me like a mugshot,
eyes wide and unblinking:
You'll never belong
anywhere.
        As if someone
had to tell me
about the contours
of this world
            how we
had better be
            of it
and not of it.
            I wake
myself
        with weeping.

4

And then the many splendid
rooms. They are all mine
to share. Divans in brocade.
Tables and chairs inlaid. Wisteria
winding the portico. Pink marble.

Here are men too. Some dimpled
and urbane, some bearded
and broadchested. They are powerful
without position. They play cellos,
chop wood, grow oregano.

I am finally powerful too.

I am standing aside,
                letting
the light stream me.

Judith Werner

Morningside Heights

from the University

The dawning city spreads its dollhouse towers
before my too believing, sleep-filled eyes.
Astringent lemon sunlight cools the air,
etches the walls in ink, kindles the panes,
and stacks the tenements to children's blocks.
Far in the valleyed river, water shines
like hammered pewter and a tugboat's wake
engraves its slowly spreading signature
where lyred bridges dovetail city spires.
Day breaks the spell. I hear a distant roar
of grumbling pigeons on my window ledge,
maneuvering mauveness over balanced eggs.
One, fixing me with inlaid eyes, takes wing,
ancient feathered bone, above the slums,
while I, beguiled in my ivory tower
wake waxy-winged on morning's Icarus isle.

Ryan Van Cleave

We Speak Like Babies Howling

Were my brothers to understand my words,
I would be labeled *uhlanya* and dismissed
a lunatic
None of us should want to know
The sharp language of men
not us
the spirits of the dead
the bush-babies
But I needed to understand their thievery
I listened and strived to puzzle their secrets
They were a wildly different bunch
Speaking various Bantu tongues
Umbundu and a few others that were choppy, clipped
I slowly began to make sense of their noises

I hadn't seen a female in many months
Not since the Portuguese man-settlers were massacred
Their bodies taken to smelly, smoky sawmills
Where the corpses were sliced in half
Lengthwise like lumber
And stacked in rows along the adobe walls outside
The bones to be picked clean by bushpigs and beetles
Then collected and fashioned into necklaces or charms
To be sold as lion-bone good luck tokens in distant towns

Many of us fled across the cutline then
But stayed to watch the metal trucks
And uniformed men navigate the dirt and muck
Many of them were missing an arm, a leg
So strange to watch them shuffle on the trails
I needed to understand their ways
It seemed there was no other choice

I gained your trust by offering you kola nuts

(No Stanza Break)

The thick pods broke apart under my knotty fingers
And we shared the fleshy, bitter seeds
I crushed and ground them between my teeth
And when they turned my tongue dark
You picked the smallest pieces out and ate
It was then that you became mine
Unlike the men we feared
Our kind unites for life

The blister red sun had traveled the sky twenty times
Before I woke one evening in the wet elephant grass, alone

They fed you ground glass mixed in a mush of berry and flour
Before you were shipped in a huge wooden crate
With reinforced metal bands and twice-wound ropes
The box was marked "Medical Supplies—Handle with Care"
But you were dead and within a week of your arrival there
I know this is true
Our kind shares communal blood
That is thick with the memory
Of lives forgotten, lost, or still to be

They feed the glass splinters to a third of those stolen
From the arms of mothers and mates as we slumber by day
They do this to keep the price of our flesh high
The ladies with their English gardens don't notice the cost

There were no msasa leaves where they took you,
No lovely copper and burgundy colors
No orange honeysuckle shocks
Nothing that we have named our own
To them we are admired as exotic pets
for our enormous dinner-plate eyes
but mostly for our shrill howl
that to their simple alien ears
reminds them of their babies' cries

Come dance with me in a baobab tree, my love
It was my song to you the day I found you
In the kaleidoscope canopy of jacaranda and flame trees
Come dance with me

Brant Lyon

Re-painting the Stone Lions

Women in scintillating saris the color
of a Himalayan sunrise, goat's blood,
or marigolds, float through fumes of car exhaust
and the din of taxi horns, silently padding
past the rickshaw drivers and motor scooters
stalled by a sacred cow that nonchalantly
plops a pile of dung onto the pavement
as it stands in the middle of Asan Tole.
Nearby the square the spreading trunk
of a bodhi tree has rent the sides of a tiny shrine.
Two teen-aged boys with the patience
and conscientiousness of men stand in the dusklight
outside the entrance to the Annapurna Temple,
with brushes like offerings to Mahdevi held
in their hands, repainting the stone lions.
A fresh coat of enamel applied for the harvest festival
of Dasain shines off these paired sentinels;
one boy fastidiously colors each claw
on the paw of the lioness, while the other—
reverently, and without shame—paints
the tip of the lion's erect lingam red.
A man and wife with toddler sandwiched
in between pull up on a motorcycle.
The woman looks on as her husband removes
the miniature helmet from his daughter's head,
stands with his arms folded across his chest
at the temple door as she, unescorted, toddles in.
The image nestled in this squat room
has been smeared with vermilion paste,
festooned with flowers, and showered with rice,
as thus homage to the goddess of abundance
always has been paid for centuries upon centuries.
She picks out a butter lamp and places it below the idol.
A temple matron with lines deeper than the Kali Gandaki
river valley etched in her face smiles as she exits.
The father lifts his little girl above his shoulders.
She reaches up and tugs the clapper of the huge bronze bell
whose peal reverberates into eternity.

Catherine Ferreira

Theology Experiment

Paris—*a top geneticist is undertaking the most controversial experiment in the history of science: The cloning of Jesus Christ using DNA from the Shroud of Turin.*
—Ann Victoria for the Weekly World News.

Finding a womb
Wasn't the problem.
Many were willing.
They found a virgin
Named of course Maria,
And He was born again
To a room full of adoration
And just beyond
Chants from picket lines,
Something rhyming about life and God,
Body and spirit. This baby
Forcing the hand of God
Too soon, and even before
The small red fists open,
The red face opens, and the small eyes
Undoubtedly blue, open
The men in the room are arguing
About who will act as father,
About how the son of God
Should be raised and what if,
One man whispers, what if
The child is simply genetics
With no divine spark,
The body but not the soul
Of Christ. He is hushed
First by his aging wife, then
By the sharp electricity of fear
Flowing throughout the room,
The only sound rustling cloth
As the famous geneticist
Falls to his knees.

(No Stanza Break)

The child smiles, burps
Then a strange thing happens,
Or nothing happens
Depending on who you ask.
Maria moans with exhaustion
And the baby on her breast
Sighs—his breath like mist in winter
Yet suffused with light,
And she breathes in his life
And grows strong again.
Others see the baby die.

John Knight

Miscegenation

Rain kinks the peasy hair
and makes shine the dressing
of grease from a Royal tin.
The garden in the mist
is reminiscent of the first sin.
Eve is a pickaninny
just before the breasts budding
in blood-flooded aureoles.
Already the hips are turning
about paradise. Beneath
cypress at the edge
of the swamp, the pigmented
feet walk on lighter
soles into the darker water.
With white teeth
like a bleached enamel sink,
she smiles, bidden to remove
the worn shift of clothes.
Her body begs the coating
of bees wax, lyes,
and petroleum, the black skin
shining in omen, merging
with the moisture
where the young master
walked after miscegenation.

Artwork

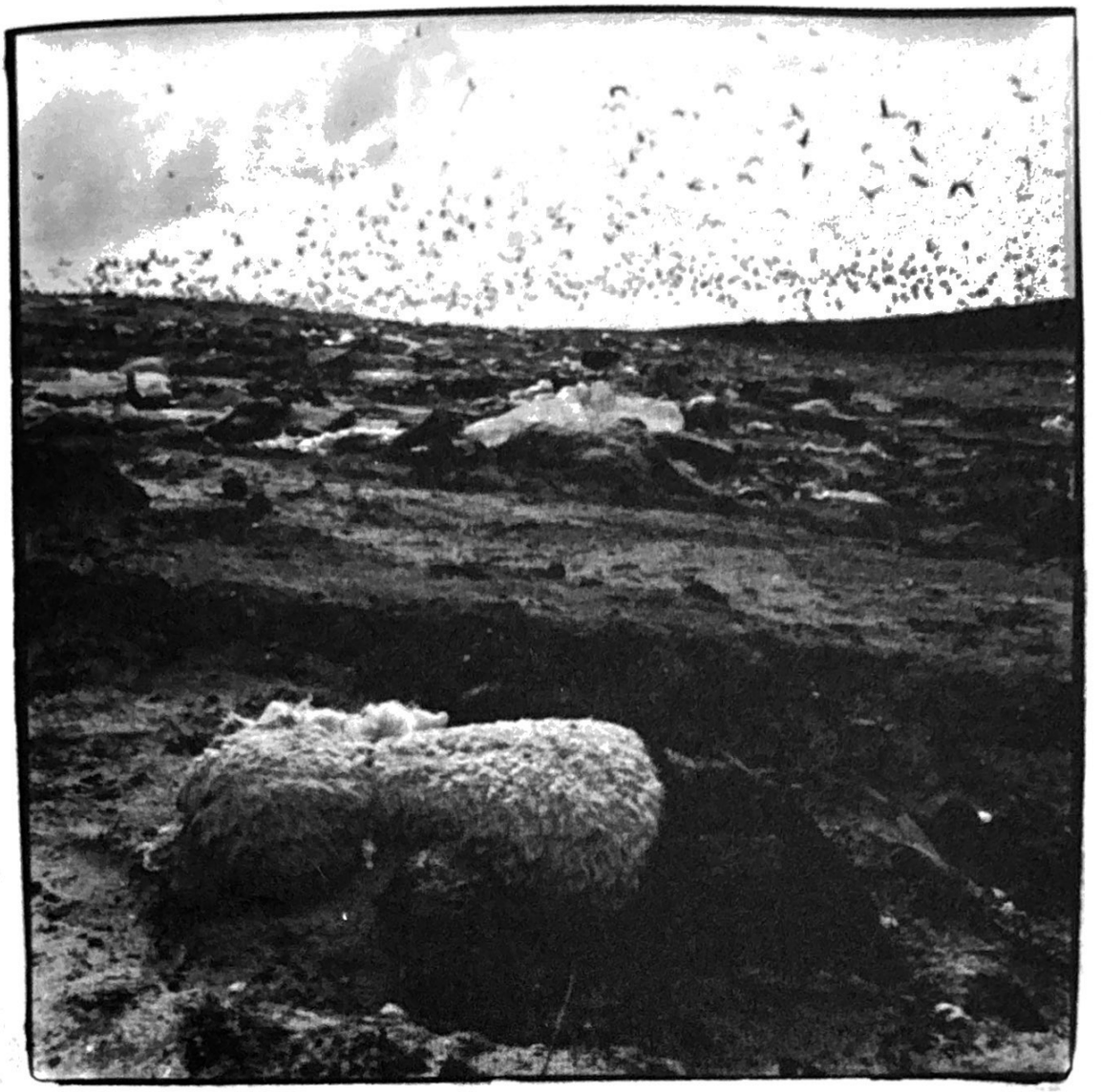
This winter the Lullwater Review *features photographer Zak Riles.*

❖

Landscape of an American Landfill
(original: 6X6 format. Silver gelatin print.)

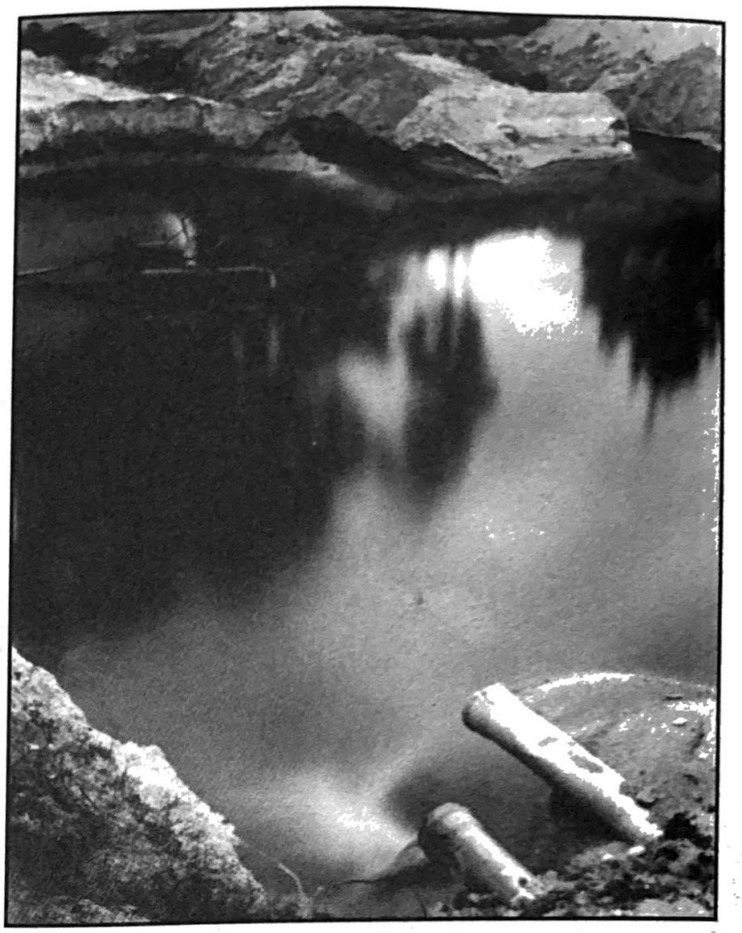
❖

Seagulls and Clouds
(original: 6X6 format. Silver gelatin print.)



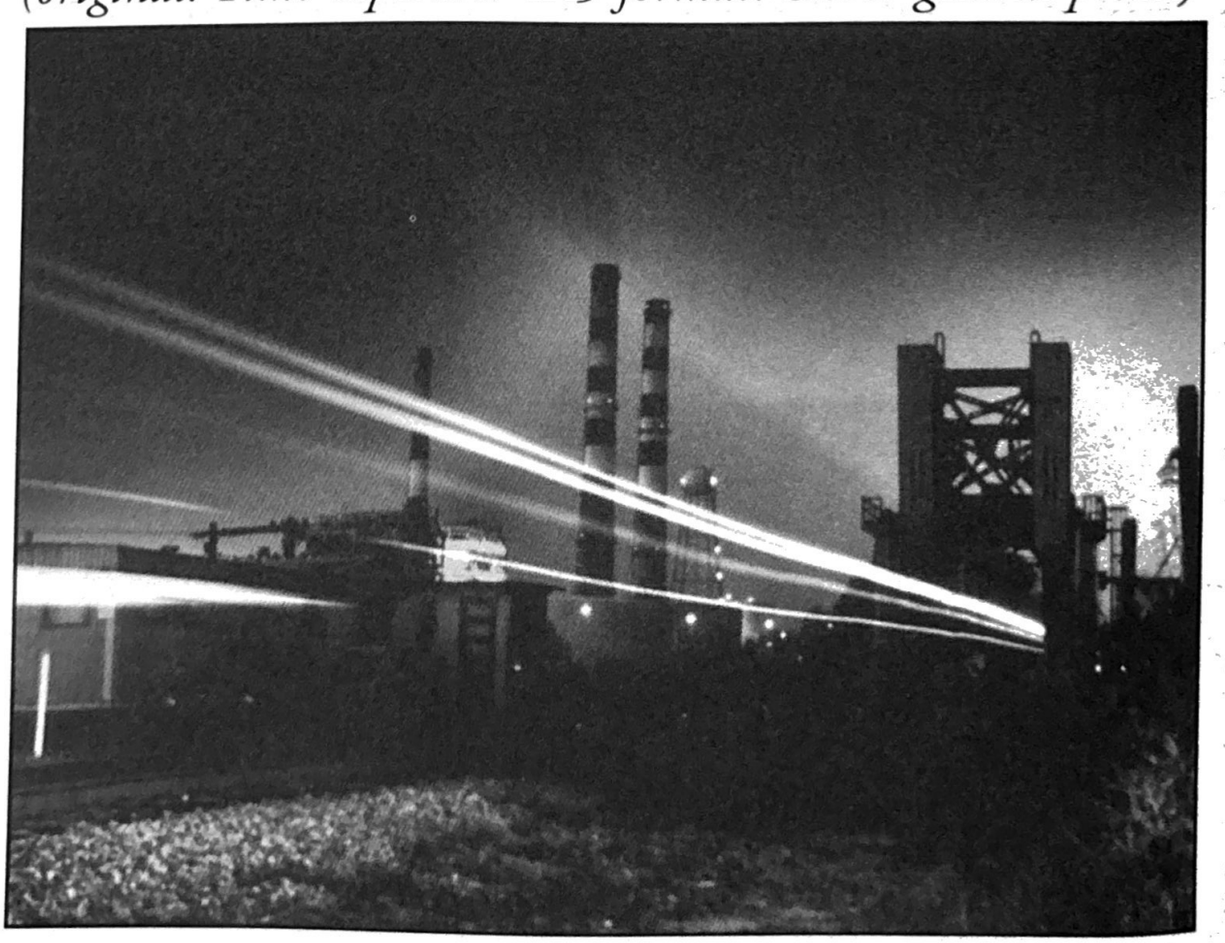
❖

Garbage and Birds
(original: 6X6 format. Silver gelatin print.)



Reservoir.
(original: 4X5 format.
Silver gelatin print.)

A Night Time Train Crossing the St. John's River
(original: Time exposure. 4X5 format. Silver gelatin print.)



Fiction

Tom Juvick • Roseanne Thong • Judith Sudholt • Sean Mccarthy • Greg Jenkins

Tom Juvick

The Demon Nash Rambler and the Daffodil Parade Fiasco

After my cousin Naomi received a seven-figure legal settlement for nearly swallowing a prophylactic that had somehow found its way into a bottle of Boffo Cola, she became the talk of the town. This was before color televisions became affordable, so there was not that much else to talk about. Still, given the fact that she had nearly choked to death on the unsavory thing at the Schmidt family picnic, she managed to appear gracious.

"If there is an order to this universe, and I believe there is," Naomi declared to reporters after donating two-hundred dodge balls to Horace Mann Elementary, "then I found that birth control device in my soda pop in order to accomplish some good upon this Earth."

"Good" represented something different to each member of our family. I am certain, for example, that my father thought it had something to do with a lifetime of free beer and shuffleboard at The Family Tavern. From my perspective, it had more to do with Naomi moving to an island off the coast of Borneo where she could do all the embarrassing things she wanted without damaging my fragile social status at school. Whatever else she accomplished with her indiscreet fortune, everyone assumed that Naomi would begin by helping her parents. It seemed a certainty that Uncle Fudge and Aunt Bertha would sell their pawnshop and retire to Acapulco.

I hoped not. Each spring the sidewalk in front of Swede's Loans afforded our family the ultimate view of Tacoma's Daffodil Parade. This year Mary Lou Zitkovich was scheduled to serve as Junior Daffodil Princess, an honor that would necessitate her riding atop a flower-festooned float while wearing a low-cut taffeta gown. I had been awaiting this moment since kindergarten, when destiny brought us together as finger-painting partners only to separate us when her brother Bubba tore a cat in half during show-and-tell. This indiscriminate utilization of household pets caused her parents to transfer her to St. Patrick's Catholic School, where she would not be tainted by the same public school dementia that had turned her brother into an amoral goon. Since the day Mary Lou and I and the cat were torn asunder, I had thought about little else except what might have been. Now, as my fifth grade year at Horace Mann neared an end, I could only admire her from afar. Rumor had it that

that the vice squad invaded happened to be the same day that we mustered the courage to follow a group of Fort Lewis Army recruits through a door in the back of the building and into a darker-than-dark room. There, for prices ranging from a nickel to a quarter, these men were entertained by personal motion picture machines about half the width of a jukebox.

After a brief argument that ended, as usual, with me punching Irving on the arm, we invested a dime in a machine in the farthest darkest comer. As luck would have it, the movie featured two men kissing one another on the nipples. After I chased Irving down and muffled his screams by stuffing the pink baby blanket he always carried into his mouth, we gave it one more try. For the price of a package of Good 'N Plenties, we viewed what we believed to be our first flaming nymphomaniac, a heavily bosomed woman with thick, dark eyebrows. She was squirming around on a bed, and seemed just on the verge of touching herself between the legs when the lights in the room flashed on and a policeman with a handlebar mustache declared, "Halt! Police!"

Zippers shrieked by the dozen.

While half of Fort Lewis was herded into paddy wagons, Irving and I were escorted next door by the handlebar mustache cop and delivered to our Uncle Fudge.

"What if your mother and Aunt Bertha found out about this?" Uncle Fudge demanded. "What then?"

Irving and I exchanged grimaces before I formulated a satisfactory answer. "The same thing that happened to Uncle Silas?"

The first thing that Irving and I did after Naomi took over The Fun Circus and transformed it into a home furnishings store was to reconnoiter the entire building in search of any movie machines that had been accidentally left behind. All we found were carpet remnants, light fixtures, and framed pictures of poker-playing dogs.

Apparently no one who frequented Pacific Avenue was looking for these things either. Not a single customer entered the building, unless you counted the three times it was robbed and the occasional soldier who wandered in looking for The Fun Circus.

As the weekend of the Daffodil Parade approached, Naomi hoped that the crowds that traditionally flooded Pacific Avenue might develop a hankering for sofas and end tables. The newspapers advertised "special daffodil prices blooming at Naomi's Home Furnishings." This advertisement might have attracted some business except Naomi insisted on including a photo of herself and Vince to give it that friendly personal touch. She would have done better to substitute a snapshot of mating gorillas.

On parade day, Uncle Fudge always braced himself for a huge influx of "legitimate" business. There was always someone needing film or hop-

ing to finagle a good deal on used jewelry, shotguns, and musical instruments. He and my father rarely caught even a glimpse of the floats and marching bands, so embroiled were they in haggling prices over silverware, luggage, and the occasional accordion.

My job on parade days was to set up lawnchairs at the curb in front of the store for the dozens of family members who attended this gala event. This year was no different except we felt entitled to more curb space because of Naomi's store.

However, on this particular Saturday, I arrived to begin my labors only to find Uncle Fudge scurrying around Swede's Loans in a panic. The shop was brimming with customers, but my father had not shown to lend a hand.

Occasionally I had earned money at the store by agreeing not to play the musical instruments, so I figured that waiting on customers was the next logical step in my business training. "I could sell anything except maybe firearms," I offered.

Uncle Fudge scratched his beard and examined me with a one-eyed squint. "You're in fifth grade, right?"

"Yeah, but...

He gave me a pat on the shoulder. "This ain't like swapping sandwiches, Joe."

"How about I go next door and see if Vince can fill in?"

Uncle Fudge shook his head. "Even if I thought he could keep his hand out of the till, on pure principle alone I could not allow an individual who never washes his hair to wait on my customers. The guy looks like he's wearing a shoe on his head, for criminy sakes."

At that moment, my father came rushing breathlessly into the store. "Sorry I'm late, but I just unloaded Uncle Silas's Rambler."

Even the Heavens seemed to smile down upon this transaction, the sun breaking free from the clouds at that precise instant and glinting off the Sousaphone in the display window. Normally we could depend on a monsoon downpour on parade day; the pert and golden daffodils festooning the floats would become limp and bedraggled, eventually taking on the consistency of lard. Although a sunny day meant that Swede's Loans would sell few umbrellas, I whispered a prayer of thanks to the parade gods for this meteorological miracle. Good weather could only enhance the already breath-taking beauty of Junior Princess Mary Lou Zitkovich.

Normally anyone even contemplating a glimpse of this freckle-faced, strawberry-blonde goddess could count on having his face demolished by her brother Bubba. But today his hands were tied unless he planned to stalk the parade route and thrash half the population of Tacoma. No, the city fathers had seen to it that for these few hours, anyone who wanted to could gaze upon Princess Mary Lou and luxuriate in the glow of her smil-

ing ivory overbite.

Like other avid parade fans lining Pacific Avenue, I awaited the arrival of the royalty floats with my binoculars and a Brownie camera hanging from straps around my neck. I had also weaseled two other cameras from Uncle Fudge's inventory and set them up on tripods on the street comer. That I had prepared for the parade much the same way that Matthew Brady had readied himself for the Civil War might seem a bit suspicious to Bubba Zitkovich if he happened to come by. However, I had already arranged for our neighbor, the taxidermist's wife, to claim the cameras were hers.

Everything was set. Not only would I be able to gaze upon Mary Lou for as long as the Burnside High School Band slowed the parade route with its intricate marching routines, I could enjoy my photographic treasures forever. Already I had formulated plans to salt them away beneath a loose floorboard in my room, which also served as a depository for six months of a "cheesecake" calendar that featured remarkably endowed women pretending to be automobile mechanics. My neighbor Rodney Capp possessed the other six months, since he had stood watch the day I stole the calendar from his father's gas station.

As I checked the light meter I had also borrowed from Uncle Fudge, I imagined how Mary Lou would look wearing her low-cut, yellow taffeta dress. Yes, she would look even more fetching than the February page in my calendar, which featured a red-haired woman garbed in short-shorts and a skimpy halter-top squirting lubricating oil into a carburetor. Once I finished snapping all the film I had loaded into my three cameras, I would have enough photos of Mary Lou Zitkovich to fill all the otherwise empty hours of my youth. Whenever I desired, I could dwell at length on her rounded shoulders, the curve of her begloved forearms, and the subtle curl of her wrist as she waved endlessly, endlessly, endlessly from the Rotary's junior princess float. Even after Mayor Sluggo's crepe-papered Lincoln Continental became so much flotsam and jetsam in my memory, the miracle of photography would make Mary Lou Zitkovich mine forever.

As the approaching band grew louder and the flag escort marched into view, my mother and Aunt Bertha, along with assorted family members and several neighbors, settled into the lawnchairs along the curb. I battled to keep the crowd away from my cameras, scolding a three-year-old who had toddled into one of my tripods. This was not going to be easy, I decided as a retinue of clowns came frolicking along the avenue tossing saltwater taffy as they went. All the children mauled one another to rescue these sugar treats from the horse manure left behind by the Parkland Equestrian Drill Team. A few blocks away I could see a line of floats blending together into one long train of flowers. I imagined Mary Lou Zitkovich blooming in their midst. Another fifteen minutes and she

would be mine.

A quarter of an hour soon became a lifetime. As though in slow motion, the Filipino Women's Club trudged past, followed by a Ford convertible featuring Miss My-Tee-Good Wieners. She, in turn, was trailed by a bunch of four-year-old twirlers who kept dropping their batons and stumbling over one another as they chased them down. The massing clouds began to darken the sun.

"My light," I anguished, peering into the lenses of each of my cameras. "All my light is disappearing."

While I lamented the gathering cumulonimbus thunderheads, my younger brother Irving seized my only camera with a telephoto lens and wasted an entire roll of film on his favorite cartoon show hosts, Brakeman Bill and Crazy Donkey. I smacked him with a solid backhand across the epiglottis, and while he lay at my feet struggling for breath, my mother threatened me with a loss of allowance. I waved her away as Mary Lou's float began to glide into camera range. That was when the sky broke open.

For something like the millionth consecutive year, Mother Nature unloaded on the Tacoma Daffodil Parade. The Queen and all her princesses began to melt beneath the torrent. Their expensive permanents collapsed into drenched rag mops. Mascara ran, transforming the Daffodil royalty into deep-sea vampires. Still, even as acres of umbrellas opened along Pacific Avenue, the plucky Mary Lou Zitkovich continued waving from atop her float, her smile unwavering, her taffeta gown cleaving to her flesh in a way that made her more provocative than I could have ever imagined.

I was just turning to the remaining tripod camera when Aunt Bertha opened her umbrella and knocked it over, sending it careening into the swelling storm drain. Now my final hopes rested on the dilapidated Brownie hanging from my neck. Squinting into the viewfinder, I searched for Mary Lou's image, my finger poised on the lever.

Suddenly the float lurched toward the other side of the street. Instead of Mary Lou Zitkovich, I was staring at ... the radiator grill of Uncle Silas's diabolical Nash Rambler? Immobilized by horror, I watched it fill the lens of the Brownie. How could this be?

I looked up in time to see the haunted Rambler roar toward our curb, the crowd scattering as tires screamed against wet pavement. An instant later the accursed automobile crashed into the display window of Naomi's Home Furnishings. Plate glass shrieked against steel. Brickwork crumbled. Metal snapped. The engine of the Nash roared like an agonized archfiend and then coughed spasmodically before expiring.

A man wearing a nylon stocking over his head stumbled out the door of the car, his revolver drawn.

"Another robbery," Naomi despaired. "Oh, when will it end?"

Her gigolo husband Vince cowered just behind her as she faced this

desperado. When my father stepped out of the pawnshop, the nylon-stockinged man leveled the revolver at his forehead instead.

"You! This car you sold me is a lemon. I want my money back, pronto!"

My father calmly assayed the Rambler, scrutinizing its twisted remains as sirens wailed from uptown. The old man's hand rasped along his whiskered chin as he considered the wreckage. "A lemon, huh. Well, don't get me wrong, here, but it looks to me like you've been driving her pretty hard."

Mary Lou's float was pulling away from the opposite curb and beginning to resume its course. In a moment she would again be within camera range. I glanced at the revolver. Dare I make a move with the Brownie? In a matter of seconds, the girl of my dreams would be gone, perhaps forever. With an instinct born of lust, I raised the camera. The stocking-faced man trained his weapon on me.

"Enough of this rudeness!" shrieked Aunt Bertha, hacking him to the ground with a single swipe of her umbrella.

A shot exploded skyward before Aunt Bertha rammed a spiked heel into his groin. As the defeated desperado lapsed into unconsciousness, Aunt Bertha stood over him with arms crossed, a foot firmly planted on his forehead as though she had bagged a trophy animal. Despite her beehive hairdo, she looked remarkably like Ernest Hemingway.

"This would look great on the cover of *Life*," decided my mother as she wrested the Brownie from my grasp, the strap tearing at my brainstem as she snapped shot after shot after shot of my triumphant aunt.

While I fought to maintain consciousness, I watched the royalty float trundle past. Mary Lou's wave seemed the most memorable and endless of farewells.

By the next day, I was sharing headlines with Aunt Bertha, who claimed she had seen exactly what to do in a dream she had when she was thirteen years of age. The irate motorist who demanded my father buy back the demon Nash Rambler turned out to be a robber who had held up the Piggly Wiggly Supermarket. He had been foiled in his escape attempt by the strange and yet undeniable fact that the haunted getaway car had decided to pay one final visit to our family. According to this hapless miscreant's confession, the Nash had sped down Pacific Avenue and piled into the display window of Naomi's Home Furnishings of its own volition. Aunt Bertha supported his testimony by relating the car's supernatural origins to the papers.

The entire event, plus a bonus article re-capping Naomi's encounter with the million-dollar prophylactic at the Schmidt family reunion picnic, took up a special supplement in the Sunday edition of the *Tribune*. The following Monday, just before midnight, the police stormed Naomi's luxury apartment and handcuffed her husband Vince while the two of them were

cavorting in their king-sized bed.

"Give me just another minute," Vince had pleaded, to no avail.

"Hey, count your lucky stars we got here in time," one of the arresting officers informed Vince as he was being hauled away. "You shoulda seen what she done to the last guy."

An FBI agent had spotted Vince's picture in the Naomi's Home Furnishings advertisement and recognized him as Alphonse Trulolo, AKA Jimmy the Slug, A.K.A Vincent Philharmonic. He had left a long trail of dead rich women behind him that stretched all the way from Zanesville, Ohio and came up just short of Tacoma, Washington. It did not take long to discover that Vince had already siphoned off a third of Naomi's misbegotten fortune.

"What could he have spent it on?" Naomi wondered aloud.

"Certainly not personal hygiene products," Uncle Fudge was quick to remark.

Naomi was inconsolable. One night she broke into a Dairy Queen and was not discovered until morning. Estimates of the havoc she wreaked on the fudge topping alone ran into the thousands.

I was, of course, equally despondent. Not only had I not taken a single photo of Mary Lou Zitkovich, I owed Uncle Fudge for a broken tripod. All I had to show for my efforts were the snapshots my brother Irving had taken of Brakeman Bill and Crazy Donkey. Clearly the demon Nash Rambler had extended its heinous influence beyond our city streets and right into the privacy of my bedroom where, somehow, I was going to have to make six months of a gas station pinup calendar last me until this time next year.

Roseanne Thong

Any Time Now

She savoured each step like a slow bite of chocolate: cherished, decadent, unhurried. Bare toes ran over polished teak-—till cool with morning's breath—and she scrunched them back and forth with delight, making small, controlled squeaks. On the dining room floor there were six hundred and forty-five tiles—she knew because she had counted each one as she studied their unique, wood-grained swirls. Then, entering the main hall tentatively as if on a first date and on her best behavior, she held back blazing fingers. Size overpowered her. Great shadows from chandeliers and highbeamed ceilings crossed her path and settled in a cavernous hollow beyond. Facing the sea window, she inhaled green mist, a lazy horizon ,and the crisp vinyl scent of ownership.

Hong Kong dawn flooded the room with its sharp, blue-white presence. It was a workday, a Monday morning, and Sammie stirred between the sheets. Eriko reflexively jumped out of bed before he woke. They could not both dress at the same time—there was only a foot and a half of space between the bed and the sliding closet door—just enough room for one of them to bend over awkwardly, stuff crooked legs into a pair of trousers, and with a half turn in the air, squeeze an obstinate ass into position. She looked back to the spread of cream-colored silk sheets meant for a king-size bed that draped like a bride's train around three sides of their small futon. They had been a wedding present from Liz, Eriko's best friend and former colleague, and still smelled of the night's lovemaking.

A strong arm toppled her center of gravity and towed her back onto silken waves.

"Haaaaa!" Sammie roared a hearty man-roar. "Thought you'd beat me this morning?"

He had Eriko on her back, directly on top of his stomach, and his arms imprisoned her at the waist.

"Sneaking off without a hug?"

Eriko giggled and tried to squirm free, but Sammie's legs clamped down on her thighs, twisting like impassioned tendrils. Then the alarm clock went off.

"Damn," Sammie cursed with mock exasperation, flinging the sheets to the floor.

Eriko resigned herself to the bed while Sammie dressed for work. Although her days as a criminal defense attorney were behind her, she remembered the morning rush with a mixture of loathing and sympathy. She watched Sammie's athletic, American-sized torso wrestle with

Lilliputian space: clumsy and bear-like in his haste, evaluating each step to avoid sharp corners and jutting doorknobs. It wasn't fair. A body that grand needed an expansive backdrop to show it off, a proper chamber with large dressing mirrors and a walk-in closet to get lost in—like luxury homes had back in California. There was a loud bump and then a "Shit!" Eriko winced. As she predicted, Sammie stubbed his toe on the door as he left. "Pack it all up," Sammie's voice had swelled and crested along transpacific cables just a few weeks before. She was still in Los Angeles then, tying up the loose ends at work before she quit.

"Every last wedding gift—Howard says we'll have a full ocean view!"

Eriko had jumped at the chance. She was tired of the LA grind: defending murderers and drug dealers with their haughty "screw the world" attitudes. Then there were the ethnic slurs disguised as male banter: "Little Miss Tokyo" and "The Teriyaki Kid." The hours were long and endless paperwork invaded her private life, not to mention the interminable commute on the freeways. It was not that she didn't enjoy working; her profession was her identity and she prepared each case with consummate attention. But the raw intensity of it all—the reeling power that once drew her to the field—had lost its charge. Now, she had an opportunity for change. The role of a housewife was not unappealing—certainly not while living in a magnificent seaside flat—and she would finally have time do what she had always dreamed of: write a book.

" Swaaaakkk," she propelled a loud kiss through cables that amplified in Sammie's ear some seven thousand miles away. "I'll start packing tonight."

* * * * *

They had met Howard Kwok—chairman of Sing Wah Bank and Sammie's current boss—on their honeymoon trip to Hong Kong just a month before. It had been midsummer, a time of merciless heat and humidity, and after touring the requisite landmarks, they headed for Aberdeen Marina to charter a private junk. The South China Sea was dotted with outlying islands replete with sheltered bays and cooling waters. It was in one of these bays that they anchored offshore to swim. Sammie stripped down to his trunks and raised his arms overhead in dive formation, but the splash never came. Eriko turned to see why. That was when Howard and his 85-foot yacht, an imposing bulk called the *Floating Fortune*, first appeared. As he approached, his arms waived excitedly as if he had just discovered a continent.

"Water's not clean here," he bellowed after floating within earshot of the junk. "Sewage leak last week. Just six kilometers further—around that bulk of headland there's a cove. It's where I do my diving." Then after a

moment's hesitation, he extended the invitation. "I'm heading over that way. If you'd like, you can follow."

The newlyweds agreed, and after anchoring they joined Howard on his yacht for a Remy Martin.

"Whatcha do, Sammie?" Howard patted him on the back with a jovial, Americanstyle slap. He had been educated in Texas, and was fond of loud, bold gestures.

"Computers," Sammie responded. That was the beginning of it all. The buzz of shoptalk ensued. upgrading, networking, disc drives and CPU's. There were comparisons of speed and size—who had more megabytes of memory and gigabytes of storage space and who was lacking. It was like comparing horsepower in cars or more precisely, exaggerated comparisons of male genitalia. Eriko got bored and went for her swim. That's when the job offer came. It happened so quickly that Sammie swallowed it effortlessly, like the cognac in his glass. Four weeks and many phone calls later, after the newlyweds had returned to California, Sammie flew back to Hong Kong to see if Howard had been serious. As it turned out, he was. Eriko did not unpack the wedding gifts: silver soup tureens, lace tablecloths and place settings for twelve. She found temporary replacements in a hardware store—four Melmac dishes, a set of chopsticks and a steel pot and wok. Her only indulgence was a tall, mauve-colored ceramic vase for the orchids that Sammie brought home several times a week—the kind she loved to orchestrate into traditional ikebana arrangements. The two settled into their schedule, and by the end of the month things were as they would have been anywhere: Sammie rising at 6:30 for work, Eriko joining him at 7:00 for a cup of coffee, a stretch of time apart—Eriko working on her book and Sammie networking the bank—and then in the evenings, sometimes later and sometimes earlier—an impassioned reunion.

As Eriko had predicted, she enjoyed writing. As soon as she plugged in her laptop, it clicked with an avalanche of ideas spawned from her courtroom experience. Only late at night when the pads of her fingers were raw and callused, would she shoot off a few quick e-mails to friends:

```
To: lizzieb@aol.com
From: eriko5@hk.super.net
Subject: doing fine
Date: Mon, 22 September 1997 01:21:19 +0800

Dear Liz,
Greetings from Hong Kong—again! Sammie loves network-
ing the bank. It's a very CHINESE organization: long
hours and mandatory socializing, but he says it has
real potential.
```

As for our temporary flat, it's—well—small. Sammie calls it our "little love nest"—a mere box of a room, but with housing prices among the world's highest, we can't afford more. Not even on a professional's salary. Believe it or not, we were lucky to find the place-most landlords don't rent by the month. But never mind, October is just around the bend. That's when the head office in Beijing should approve our housing—you know, the luxury flat we were promised by the sea.

Yes, I do miss my job (of course you knew that I would), but I'm giving writing a fair shot. Being alone all day is a challenge, especially in the midst of a crowded metropolis like this, but I'm getting used to it. I've set up a small desk—no wider than my laptop-between the refrigerator and sofa, right in front of a little window. A porthole, actually, but it's nice. When I need a break, I watch the bare-chested Thai construction workers across the street. They've got giant cranes and hooks and don't wear safety harnesses-this is such a remarkable city!

Love, Eriko

One mid-October evening Sammie came home to a different flat. It was after 10:00 p. m.—he had been drinking late with colleagues—and his sloping eyes burned with the distrust of his senses. He squeaked open the front door, embarrassed by the hour, and immediately noticed the red lacquered chest of drawers stacked on top of the TV console. Something was amiss. His eyes followed the chest's surface six drawers up and saw that it shouldered three large boxes which had at one time occupied the living room floor. The top one was squished into the ceiling's low-lying plane, and the middle one buckled at its girth. To the right of the TV, arranged with teeter-totter equilibrium, was an end stand supporting four suitcases and a useless glass table perched on top like an acrobat's prop. Sammie flinched and offered a small prayer to an unknown god of earthquakes.

He found Eriko in the kitchen warming up a seafood dinner, but he had already eaten. Extending three orchid stems for forgiveness, he noticed that the kitchen, too, had been transformed. It now resembled a bear-proof campground: bags of fruit and groceries hanging from a suspended clothesline above, while frying pans dangled like giant industrial ornaments from high window latches. As he closed in for a kiss, a large cockroach scuttled across the floor between them, perturbed by its loss of

hiding space.

"Like it?" she asked in a thin, worn voice.

"Yeah," Sammie nodded, unconvinced.

"We've got 25 more square feet of space measured. We can finally stretch out a bit!"

Sammie chuckled vaguely, planting the kiss on her lips.

"Sorry I'm late. You know how Howard and the guys are. They wanted a drink, and before I knew it—"

Eriko sighed and put the food away—so much for the housewife role. Cooking dinner had not been a labor of love as much as a way to fill up pools of stagnant time. In the afternoons, when she tired of writing, there was really nothing else to do. She had tried joining local women's groups like the Ladies Corona Society and the YWCA, but she didn't seem to fit in. The members discussed fashionable boutiques and charity balls: frivolous issues for someone used to debating constitutional law. After several visits, she decided not to return.

Eriko migrated to the living room table where she pulled out two wooden stools. She had hidden the others under the bathroom supply cabinet to save space.

"Did you ask him?" she whispered.

"I asked." Sammie sat down slowly, shifting his weight back and forth on the stool's uneven legs.

There was a silent spell before he continued.

"You know how Howard is. He gets all peppy and excited and tells me, 'I can see it now—just you, your wife and that splendid house. The sea views—the sunsets—any time now!' He says he's faxed Beijing again. They know we're waiting. Then he pats me on the back and says 'November, for sure.'"

"I guess we can wait," said Eriko, molding her downturned lip into a wan smile. "Perhaps I could start looking for furniture. We'll need sofas, chairs—just about everything."

"Good idea," Sammie confirmed. "And with our ocean view, maybe even a spyglass!"

Sammie snored loudly that night. He had snored before, but for the first time it disturbed Eriko. She rolled to one side for shelter, but in the small confines of the futon there was no escape from the trapped, wheezy sound like the rattle of small stones being sucked down a pipe. In a fit of desperation, she got up to search for the pair of electric-green earplugs that the stewardesses had passed out on the plane. Then returning to a silent bed, she wedged her pillow between Sammie's nose and the back of her head just in case.

To:lizzieb@aol.com

From:eriko5@hk.super.net
Subject: hanging in there
Date: Son, 20 November 1997 23:02:16 +0800

Dear Liz,
I have found the perfect sofa: aquamarine to set off our "soon-to-be" ocean view, with just a hint of lemon yellow for contrast. What do you think? I also have my eye on a rosewood bookcase.

Writing is challenging. Not for lack of material, but for serenity. They are building a new tower next door and use pile drivers that won't quit—not even on Sundays. Thank God I've got my earplugs-they seem to do the trick. Howard promises Christmas now, so with a bit of luck, your holiday gift will be sent from a different address!

I really miss working—if I only knew British Law, I could find something here. How is Edwards VS the State progressing? Macmillan VS Sanchez? Oh, why do I torture myself with such questions—I'm already out of the loop!

Love, Eriko

A gentle breeze ruffled through large bay windows causing the curtains to stir. It was mid-summer and a blessing. She let them tickle her face—both the breeze and the curtains, which fluttered like playful butterflies. Aquamarine was the right color—she confirmed it now as she watched the fabric dance like swells on the South China Sea. She loved her slice of sea, the one that greeted her each morning as she crunched her buttered toast from a white wicker breakfast chair. The sea was brassy today, like the color of her tea, and filled with great freighters and container barges that scurried off to exotic ports of call. At times there were pleasure boats whose sails puffed out like white paper lanterns. She liked to start the day off here—in front of her large three-paneled window that stretched the length of the wall where it met the dawn. Then later on, as the sun lifted its heavy bulk to a higher plane, she would retreat a bit into the cool shadows of the main hall—cool and aquamarine, the way she had designed it.

Eriko woke to a cold, damp floor. During the night she had been rolled by unknown hands to the bed's extreme edge, probably making the final plunge when Sammie's massive form shifted sides. She could swear the walls were leaking; winter humidity hung in the air and the windowpanes dripped with proof. She crawled back into bed, foraging for

warmth in its center, but met again with familiar resistance. Sammie was bigger than she was and undoubtedly more uncomfortable, but as of late, he had lost his patience with space. He fought for it now territorially like a wolf, and would not share his hard-earned inches.

She decided to shower: it would rinse off the disappointment. She shuffled slowly towards the door, teetering with sleep-induced clumsiness, when she slammed her hip against the side of the wardrobe. Sammie awakened to the thud.

"Let the working man have his bath," he stood up and stretched, baring a hairy chest to the cold. "You can take one later."

"I'm freezing!" Eriko snapped. "You hogged the bed last night."

"Hogged, or took my rightful share!"

"Share?" she hmmmphed and jumped back into bed, scrunching the blankets around her chin to dramatize the point.

"Come back to bed with me, instead?" she asked in a hopeful, lighter voice. "To help me warm up?"

There was a softening smile and then a heavy thump at her side. She made a mental note that he still cared—she had wondered lately, but quickly withdrew such a poisonous idea. Then, Sammie's solid log legs, legs that had refused to budge in the night's coldness, bent like green boughs around her slender thighs, searching for deeper warmth.

Eriko rose after the clank of kitchen utensils had long disappeared. She jumped into the shower and, encouraged by the unusual quietude of the morning, began organizing mental notes for her book. The details took shape under curls of wet steam and soon evolved into a well-developed plot. She turned off the water, dried off, and skipped breakfast lest she lose the words. The familiar hum of her laptop sang out, its cool, plastic keys reassuring the pads of her fingers. She finished the first page just as the noise commenced.

It was not the dull thud of pile drivers next door, but a much nearer threat that scraped and whirred at her very doorway, or was it her windowsill? Eriko grabbed the earplugs and cringed, shoving them deep into the canals of her ears. She was sick of earplugs—both at night for Sammie's snoring and in the daytime for concentration. They boxed her into a silent, isolated world of sensory deprivation. The puzzling din continued, and Eriko leaned laboriously over her computer to open the porthole window. That was when she saw him: wiry, sunburned legs dangling right before her eyes like a sly spider on a loose line. He held a thick blade in one hand and an electric scraper in the other, evoking scenes from a B-grade horror flick. They were remodeling! Eriko watched the man gouge the building's large, gray tiles from their cement bedding, foot by screaming foot. She slammed the window closed, pushed down her laptop's lid and raced to get her purse. A cockroach skittled across her path as if to spite her efforts. She could not take this anymore!

She left the front door open—the workers could have the fucking place for all she cared—and marched onto the sidewalks, now murky with February's chill. She drilled through crowds the way the construction worker had violated her walls, sharp with violent outbursts. She was sick of the flat and its imprisoning limits, but the sidewalks weren't much better. They overflowed onto the streets with an excess of humanity. She decided on Pacific Place—a vast shopping mall with ceilings that extended towards heaven. She would be able to breathe in there—walk without bumping or crunching, revel in unhampered movement.

Two hours later, arms laden with paintings, cushions and bookends that she knew she had no place to store—Eriko collapsed onto a wooden bench. A great sadness seized her. Her efforts had been in vain, unless—yes, unless, the thought progressed into a clear vision—there was always Sammie's office. She could store her purchases there for a short time! Eriko congratulated herself on the idea. Howard was off to Beijing—he'd never know—and besides, he would surely come back with their housing approval. For the first time in weeks she smiled effortlessly, and got up to hail a taxi.

Sammie came home later than usual. His arrival time had been gradually pushed back from nine to ten, and now it was eleven-thirty. His hands were void of orchids; he would say the stalls closed early as they seemed to do quite often these days. He had been escaping, and it wasn't fair, damn it! Not at all. She had no drinking buddies. No corner bar. No sweet-talking waitresses to serve her. She was stuck at home without friends or a proper career—stuck with whirring tools and insects that mocked her. And Sammie left her here, willingly. First all day and now most of the evening, too.

"Any word from Howard?" she attacked as he entered the room. Sammie threw down his coat on a stool and paused. The air was heavy-with the smell of beer and cigarettes, not just from an hour or two: the stench was too well entrenched in his clothing fibers. He had probably been at the bar since four that afternoon, and the thought made Eriko sick.

"Very good news," he threw a salted glance her way. "He's working on it now—should have it straightened out by tomorrow. The weekend at latest."

"Thank God!" Eriko sighed. "I've had one hell-of-a-day!"

One hell-of-a-year, she thought to herself.

Sammie scanned the room for changes, which he figured would accompany his wife's mood swings. It was then he saw the sofa hidden under several weighty boxes and shopping bags.

"They're things for the house," Eriko explained a bit embarrassed now by their sheer volume. "Can you stick them in your office for a week?"

My office?"

"Yes, your office. That is, unless you don't want to use the sofa any more."

"Well, I don't use it much anyway—not during the day."

The idea had backfired and Eriko was livid. Sammie was not the one who would suffer from loss of space—it would be her!

"Not during the day or the evening," she snapped. "You're never here!"

Sammie scrunched his eyebrows, not sure how much of the invisible slap he had deserved. Then, with a conciliatory voice and outstretched arms, he approached his wife slowly, a bit uneasily.

"Just another week," he ventured hesitantly, glancing at her eyes for a reaction before continuing. "I know it's been tough, but you can't give up now. Like Howard says, 'Any time now!'"

"I can see this right now," Eriko commanded an unwavering voice, pointing to the bundles on the couch, "moved into your office!"

To: lizzieb@aol.com
From: eriko5@hk-super.net
Subject: help!
Date: Tue, 20 January 1998 10:53:29 +0800

Dear Liz,
I can't take it any more! Not the cramped flat, Sammie's absences, his snoring, or the incessant noises all day. They're scraping the tiles off our building—did I tell you? They come with high-powered tools that make dentists look timid. I haven't worked on my book for a week. Do you know how many floors this building has? At the rate they're going, it will take a month. I just hope to God we have our house by then. We better have, or I'm coming home. No, I'm not a quitter, but I may need a break. Really! Just for a few weeks. Would you mind some company? I could help out with your caseload.

Love, Eriko

She felt Sammie enter the kitchen to rummage for food. She had been at the stove, back turned towards the door, when her body smacked against cold tile walls. It was not the shove of brute force, but a quick, frustrated jolt caused by superior arms demanding space. She thought back to their first weeks in Hong Kong when they had both fit into the kitchen at the same time. Sammie had made a joke of it, kissing her ankles as he weaseled his way into knee-high cupboards to search for a plate. But

now there was no flirting or pleasantries. Passage had been reduced to a contest of size: like trucks on the open highway, the biggest one had the right-of-way. Sammie was a bulldozer now, a ramming hunk of steel. Eriko shed a tear and made up her mind. When Sammie arrived home that evening, there was a shortened pile on the right side of the TV console where two suitcases had departed.

Sammie,
I couldn't face it anymore. Please don't worry—I'll be staying with Liz for a few weeks. For a vacation, that's all. It will do us both good. Eat the stir-fry shrimp I've left on the stove, and check the freezer for 10 TV dinners. After that, you're on your own.

Her number's in my phone book—call me if you'd like, but please let Howard know that I'm not coming back until the house is approved-every square inch of it—including the sea view window!

* * * * *

She sat on the top porch step of her modest California bungalow, watching the day transpire. She was proud of her garden. Tiger lilies blossomed and a lemon tree bulging with fruit scented the air. She looked down the block at many similar bungalows redolent with simple, earthy comfort, and sighed. This was what she wanted. It had been an exhausting week at work, but worth every minute of overtime—she had won the Edwards case! The front door creaked behind her and a roommate appeared with a kettle and two teacups. She smiled, taking one cup in hand, indulging in conversation and mint-flavored bliss.

Sammie was tired. He had had enough of the long hours and mandatory socializing, even though it was part of his daily routine now. Begging off from his obligations for the evening, he escaped at five o'clock and embarked on a search for a new watering hole—anywhere, as long as it was far away from Howard's bar. He was disappointed in his boss, a man with Texas-sized ideas none of which had materialized into a corn kernel's worth of good. Sammie had trusted Howard until the end. Until Howard had returned from Beijing empty-handed and apologetic.

"They're preparing their annual budget now," Howard began sheepishly before steamrollering the rest. "It's just bad timing. They can't approve housing 'till the spring, but that's just a month or two more. You can handle it, bud, can't you? I'm very sorry." He placed a weak pat on Sammie's back, one that lacked its usual heartiness, and Sammie knew how pathetic they both were.

He headed for the Wan Chai girlie bars, a row of tattered façades whose windows displayed photos of well-endowed women in various stages of undress. Touts called from entrance-ways while sandwich

boards advertised "Lovely Linda" and the likes. Sammie chose a place called "Ricky's," mainly because he felt cheapened and used, and the bar's interior looked as though it matched his mood. He mounted a high, red velvet barstool scarred by years of misplaced ash and ordered a gin and tonic. The room itself was dark and cave-like, creating an atmosphere that could give womb-like security or smothering claustrophobia, depending on one's frame of mind. A bevy of topless hostesses hovered like moths in the half-light, raising stray eyebrows to show they were available. Sammie caught the reflection of their enhanced busts flapping in a three-way mirror.

He drank silently, thinking first of Eriko's small, firm breasts, which he missed awfully, and then of the departure note lying mute on the living room table. It had been printed quickly in pencil without the usual flowery script that she reserved for friends and had not been signed. He wondered if it was all over.

Several drinks later Sammie paid the bill and returned to the darkening sidewalks. It was a Friday night and the crowds were thick. It seemed like the whole city had followed him there, and he squirmed to get away. He was drunk and could not walk fast, and soon was pushed along like flotsam on a current. Tonight the sidewalks teemed with a full range of society: vegetable hawkers, students, tourists, sailors, old men with bird cages, and a few thousand office clones on their way home. Rejecting the thought of home, he continued on, without volition.

The neon lights had just come on with their colorful, blinking tubes. He looked across the street to Pinkie's Bar and watched a green neon swizzle stick stir up a huge strawberry Margarita. There were sailors in the entranceway; Americans, he guessed, from their crisp white pants and scarves. He wondered if they were rednecks—he couldn't tell from the distance—they could even have been from Texas for all he knew, but they were strangers—safe, anonymous strangers, and he needed a chat.

As Sammie crossed the road, there was a blaring honk and a sharp, searing screech as he fell. Crowds appeared out of nowhere, not just from the miles of sidewalk but from the towers and office blocks above. The sailors filed out of their bar and huddled with interest. Several tourists stopped momentarily to gawk at the businessman, still clad in a smart pinstriped suit and paisley tie, whose limbs had been tossed like driftwood upon the pavement.

The next morning Howard stopped by Sammie's empty swivel chair and set down several curled pages. He was ruffled by Sammie's irresponsibility. It had bothered him all morning, and he now concluded that Sammie was no different from other young men of his generation. They had no perseverance. No stick-to-itiveness when the going got tough. Howard recalled how he had discovered Sammie, trained him, believed in him and fought for his housing. Now: not even a phone call to say he

wasn't coming in! It really got his goat. Howard glanced down at the first page of the fax, reading it for the second time in Sammie's absence.

We are pleased to announce the approval of your new Hong Kong residence, which we hope will be to your liking. It is located in the exclusive Repulse Bay Towers overlooking the beach on the island's south side. The flat is 2,000 square feet, and its on-site facilities include a swimming pool, sauna, gym, game room and private club. It should be more than satisfactory for you and your wife, although there are two extra bedrooms for guests or a future family. Please check with your superior, Howard Kwok, in regards to your moving allowance and budget for interior design. The terms and conditions of the contract are attached and should be signed and returned by the end of the month.

Sincerely,

Wu Guo Rong, Chief Executive Officer,
Sing Wah Bank, Beijing

Judith Sudholt

The Way She Tells It

Jessica's mother always tells the story the same way, with a slight touch of humor at viciousness that has ended well. This is the way her mother tells it: Eleven-year-old Jessica got mad at her little brother, then only four, and threw a brick at him, hitting him in the head.

Jessica remembers the rest: She and her friend, Robbie Burke, dragged her brother into the kitchen as tomato-red blood oozed from his forehead and spattered like grease on her mother's white, no-wax linoleum. Robbie Burke's mother was there too, looking back and forth from Jessica to her brother and shaking her head.

Jessica sat at the kitchen table, crying in big, noisy sobs and wiping her nose on her sleeve. She couldn't keep enough air inside of her to form words, but she tried to tell her mother what had happened. She and Robbie had been playing a game, competing to see who could throw a brick the farthest, and Jessica's brother had gotten in the way. Jessica looked for Robbie to back her up, but by then he had disappeared. Neither her mother nor Mrs. Burke believed her story.

Now Jessica's brother has a two-inch scar in his hairline that can only be seen when he sweeps his hair back with his hand: a living illustration of his mother's story. Everyone in the family remembers the story the way Jessica's mother tells it. After all these years, Jessica herself is no longer sure of the facts. Sometimes when her mother tells it, Jessica puts her hand on her own forehead and expects to feel a scar.

The Devil in Disguise

On the night of Mary's first period she saw the devil in disguise. It was a warm summer evening, and Mary sat by her open bedroom window overlooking the barnyard as she brushed out her hair. She was trying to ignore the new sensations within her body, the clenching pain in her abdomen, the rough, raw feel of the boiled and bleached flour sack against her skin, which her mother had given her to stem the flow.

It was past twilight, but the moon had not yet risen to full height. In

the gloom of the yard, Mary saw an animal enter through the half-open barnyard gate. At first she thought it was their hound dog, Jasper, returning from a nocturnal visit to a bitch in heat at another farm. She looked away and when her glanced happened to fall into the barnyard again, the moon had risen enough to cast a pale blue light. The animal had reached the center of the yard, and she saw that it was not Jasper, but an enormous black dog. As she watched, the dog dissolved into a swirl of gray smoke, which then vanished.

Mary gave a little scream and dropped her hairbrush. She could hear it clatter onto the porch roof jutting out beneath her window, but her gaze never left the spot where the dog had disappeared. Her older sister, Ruth, came in, and asked with a faint edge of impatience if Mary had seen a mouse again. Mary, never taking her eyes off the barnyard, told her sister in a shaking voice what she had witnessed.

But Ruth only laughed and asked her sister who this apparition might be. She suggested the shade of their nearest neighbor, old Mr. Hill, who had drowned three weeks earlier after climbing into his well to retrieve a fallen bucket.

"It wasn't Mr. Hill," Mary replied, refusing to let her sister's levity deter her. "I think it was the devil himself."

Ruth laughed harder this time, collapsing onto the bed. "Really, Mary. I'm sure the devil has better things to do than to creep around our barnyard scaring poor, innocent girls."

But Mary was not convinced, and long after Ruth had gone to sleep in the bed they shared, she sat up in a straight chair next to the window to keep watch, her abdomen aching, as if an invisible hand clutched at her from the inside.

The next morning, after their mother heard from Ruth what had happened, she gave Mary a little of her headache powders to help calm her and insisted that Mary spend the morning resting. By noon, Mary could feel the clenched fist loosen its grip. Her entire body became light, as if she were floating. She got out of bed and went outside, eager to walk in the sunlight with her new-found sense of peace. She'd even decided that the demonic apparition she'd witnessed might have been ground fog, though fog usually didn't appear until later in the evening.

She had walked a little ways down the dirt track leading away from the farm when she saw a few tall stalks of corn near the path swaying wildly in the still air. In daylight, Mary wasn't afraid. Ruth had told her shocking stories of hired men who took their sweethearts into the cornstalks for privacy, and Mary would have hurried by without looking, but as she drew closer, an inhuman sound came from the field. Mary had been around barnyards long enough to know the smack and slurp animals made while eating. She surmised that the new calf had broken out of its pen again and was making itself sick on the unripened ears of corn.

She parted the stalks and went in, her feet sinking in the softly churned earth, the sunlight reduced to a pale, vegetable green by the bladed leaves over her head. A few feet in she recognized not the calf, but Jasper, their hound dog, making a meal on something in front of him. He was so engrossed that he ignored her approach and only looked up when she'd drawn near enough to be a threat to his prey. On the ground in front of him was a rabbit, its belly ripped open to expose pink entrails glistening with a thin veneer of red blood. Jasper looked up at her, white, frothy drool dripping from the sagging flesh on either side of his mouth, the hair around his snout red and matted. Then Mary saw his eyes. They were rimmed in the same pink as the feast in front of him, and they turned up to her with a knowing look.

Mother Mary

My mother always prays to Mary because she says Mary had it worse than Jesus did in the end. Her reasoning is that nothing can be more terrible than watching one of your own children die. And my mother should know. She's buried two babies—my older brother and sister. Besides, she says, Jesus' death was so dramatic, people tend to forget about poor Mary suffering at the foot of the cross.

But not my mother. Every room in our house has pictures of Mary, even the bathroom. And we have a big oil painting in the dining room that my mother found at a flea market. It shows Mary all in blue—her hands folded together and her eyes rolled upward, with little yellow sparks shooting out of her head. My mother has two votive candleholders on a table underneath the picture, along with a book of matches that I'm not allowed to touch. I'm embarrassed to bring my friends over. It's like living in a shrine.

My mother's dream is to go to Lourdes where the Holy Virgin appeared to Bernadette. Next to Mary, I think my mother likes Bernadette best. She saw the movie with Jennifer Jones three times and made me go twice. Now I like to imagine the Virgin Mother appearing to me with a message that we should just give it a rest and leave her alone for a while. I'd receive the visitation in my room at night, and afterwards I'd walk out into the living room—barefoot and rapturous—to announce Mary's message to my mother. She'd take one look at my face and know it was on the level. On top of everything else, it would just kill her if the Virgin came to our house and talked to me instead of her.

Once, when I was putting away the good china after Thanksgiving dinner, I found another votive candleholder in the back of the china cabinet. I figure it had been meant for me, because the doctors didn't think I'd last much longer than my brother and sister. To everyone's surprise, I pulled through, but I guess one child can't make up for two, so my mother goes on praying to the Virgin.

Sean McCarthy

A Little Death

Medusa's head had rolled across the floor. The snakes still squirmed, and trickling black blood rose into small, fleeing beetles. The Gorgon's face grimaced in fury and horror. A touch of surprise. She hadn't quite anticipated the decapitation. Before this day, no one before had ever drawn so close, but Perseus was clever. To be so clever, thought Jack. Or just merely so talented; the painting was remarkable. Few depictions could cause him to really cringe. This one had. Rubens was magnificent.

Jack took another step back. Kate was on the other side of the room, moving slowly from one canvas to the next. He didn't have to turn to know she was still there, of course she would be; Kate didn't move quickly for anyone or anything. Head cocked and hands on her hips, she was standing with her legs together, her feet forming a right angle. Her pose of intrigue. She liked the picture she was looking at. Her hair, blond and long, was pulled back in a ponytail today. But the thing with Kate was that a look like that only made her more beautiful. More tempting.

Jack made his way across the room. The lights were fluorescent and bright, the furniture and people about him placed so carefully they almost seemed props. There was rarely total silence in museums. Every movement echoed. Jack approached Kate from behind. He placed his hands lightly on her shoulders.

Kate didn't turn and reward him with surprise; he had known she wouldn't before he even laid his hands upon her. Her shoulders did not even tense beneath his grip. She knew him too well—his touch and sound and smell. More than likely she knew he was approaching before he had moved. Jack had often comforted himself on this aspect of their relationship. It was important to know each other.

"First impression?" he asked.

"I like it," she said indifferently.

"It's kind of disturbing."

"That makes me like it all the more. What's the point if you can't be moved or disturbed?"

The painting depicted a brawl in a tavern somewhere in the seventeenth century. Men with large noses and rosey cheeks, some dressed in rags of brown, and others draped in the cloaks of burghers. Beer was splashing, and mugs flying, and the fight was tumbling out the doors into the dirt of the street. One man lay with his eyes open and his tongue spilling from his lips. His head was cracked open and the blood ran in

thin streams. A small skeleton with a sickle was crawling out of the beer mug beside him.

"A little death," said Kate.

"He looks to be a man on the go," said Jack.

"He does. Lots to do, I suppose." Kate turned to look at him, eyes alert and clear blue. Her eyes never stayed alert and clear blue for long, never after sunset. She paused for a moment as if stuck on a word. A thought, or decision. She always thought before speaking. Sometimes too much, too long; it made for many silences.

Outside it was very cold. The wind blew sharp and the trains clanked in the distance, crackling blue lightning into the sky. The rest of the city was awake, but indoors. The lights of the pubs looked yellow and warm, and neons glowed further down the road. It was snowing, but only lightly; it was much too cold to snow more than lightly. Spiraling crystals, moving about and evading the earth. Kate had her arms tight about her, shivering, her chin tucked tight against her chest. She lost all poise when exposed to the cold. It didn't bother Jack as much, but he wasn't exactly a fan.

"I see the lights," he said. "One's coming."

"With our luck, it's probably another line," Kate said.

Jack pulled her close and wrapped himself about her. "No," he said. "It should be the right one."

He sat close beside her on the train, and Kate continued to shiver.

"Is it much better down there?" he asked quietly.

"Much. Just the word south makes me feel so much warmer. I think my blood has completely thinned since I've moved. I can't take winters like this anymore."

There were only a few other people in the car. A man with a battered face sat with his elbows on his knees, sipping sloppily from a bottle in a bag. He had one glass eye, looking slightly off at an angle, and his nose was broken. Olive skin and a thick head of dark hair. He kept lowering his head as if he soon would fade out. Three kids took turns pushing each other at the far end of the car, cursing and taking strikes for each others testicles. They were too young to be doing much more than being foolish. Their jeans were too large and nearly falling about their knees, baseballs caps at backwards angles. The other rider was a middle aged woman with her head in a book. She looked to be nearly sleeping.

The man with the bottle looked up at Kate. Grimaced. "She's beautiful," he said. "Me, I'm very ugly. Maybe a little uglier today. But she's beautiful. Is she your wife?"

Jack wasn't sure whether he should answer or ignore him. Either would prove fairly uncomfortable.

The man was still staring. "Is she?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Jack.

"I'm Jesus Christ," said the man. "No one believes me." He set down his bottle and folded his hands before him. "Pray for me," he said, looking both lost and sincere, "please, please pray for me. I'm Jesus Christ and no one believes me."

At Park Street they hopped from the train. The Common was still speckled with the weary lights of Christmas, the thin branches of trees wired up and down with whites and greens and blues. The lights looked pretty in the midst of the snow. Jack wondered how long they kept them up. He figured with Christmas people were either all to anxious to have it pass or much too hesitant to let it go. It fazed everybody tremendously one way or the other. Kate had missed the holiday with him. Work and school had kept her in the deep south. Just this year, she had said. Now she locked her arm in his, her cheek nestled tight against his shoulder and they started up the street.

They had planned on dinner after the museum, but Kate had said now that she no longer wanted dinner. She wanted a drink. The Shillelagh was closest.

It was too early in the evening for there to be much of a crowd. As they stepped inside, Jack immediately felt the warmth and pain of nostalgia rumble through his veins; it had been some time since they had come here and they used to come here often. There was little inside now that still looked the same. It took him off guard. The Shillelagh, once old and battered and identifiably Boston Irish with warped hard wood floors and leather topped stools now looked more like a sports bar. Three televisions and a five dollar cover charge. The photographs of the old politicians had been either removed or crowded to a small corner and had been replaced with hanging penants and Celtic jerseys. The floor was sparkling tile, and the lights, once always dim and soothing, were now fairly bright. Bright lights were no good for drinking. Not for serious drinking. Everyone knew that. No one looked very good climbing half in the wrapper. Dim lights were much better. Jack and Kate had met in a pub.

Upon entering, Kate went straight for the bar. She shivered still, shaking off the cold.

"My body is convulsing," she said.

"Your body is incredible."

She pulled off her skarf. "I can't go back out there, not yet."

Jack watched her, the tremor of her chest, and quiver of her lips. Beautiful lips, full and deep red. He hadn't yet really even kissed them; she was staying with her parents. Her father had retrieved her from the airport late the night before while Jack worked at the bar—the bar was three doors down from the house he shared with his father—and in the morning she had called Jack and suggested that they go directly to the

museum; it was the last day of the Rubens show.

"Do you want some whiskey?" she asked now. "I want some whiskey. I need to warm up. "

"Maybe just one shot," said Jack hesitantly. "Then I'd like a beer, I think."

"How can you drink beer in this cold?" she asked.

"I like beer," said Jack. "I've always liked beer. We both have."

"I feel like having some wine," she said.

"Then I'll have some, too," said Jack.

The bartender brought their shots and Kate raised hers to meet him for a toast. The whiskey burned but then warmed, and Jack could feel the deep change bring tears to his eyes. His nose was now running, and his cheeks tingling with the warm meeting the cold. Pins and needles. He took his wine and followed Kate to a table. She waited a moment before slipping from her coat, and when she did he found himself marveling at how delicate her neck and shoulders were. Her breasts were well rounded and lovely, and he caught himself staring just as she blushed and suddenly looked away; he hadn't seen her for three months now, and the fact that she would blush made his love surge for her all the more. The surprises and revelations of each other still seemed to affect her as they did him. Without mystery there is nothing, he thought, nothing.

"When did they change this place?" she asked.

Jack shook his head. "I'm not sure. I haven't been here since the last time I came with you. When was that, anway?"

Kate sipped her wine. "Last May, I think."

"May would be nice about now," Jack lamented.

"Anything would be better than this," said Kate.

"You get used to it."

"I never will." Kate lit a cigarette, dragged deep, puckering her lips and then turned to exhale blowing the smoke away from him. With her head turned, she gazed through the window. Jack followed her gaze. Across the street, in a small park with three benches, stood a stone James Michael Curley, the fabled mayor who had delivered the Irish. Boston, though known nationally as an Irish town, had once oppressed the people of its lore. And then came Curley. Now the snow was blanketing his shoulders.

Kate's mind was someplace else. Jack could tell by the distance in her eyes. She turned back towards him, parting her lips as if beginning to speak, but then said nothing.

"You look very beautiful," he said.

"Jack, stop it."

"You do."

Kate held up her hand, knuckles curled, and looked down upon her fingernails.

"Well, I don't feel very beautiful."

"How come?"

"I don't know."

They were silent for a moment, and they both turned to watch the street.

Few people were passing. It was much too cold. The windows were beginning to fog.

"So, how have you been?" asked Jack.

"Jack, you know how I've been. You ask me every time you speak to me on the phone."

"That's not very often. You're hardly ever home."

Kate again looked down at her nails. "Graduate school isn't like college. It takes all your time. Sometimes twenty-three hour days. If I'm not in the library, I'm in the lab."

"How's that going?"

Kate sipped her wine. "Stressful."

"I should be down there with you."

"Please don't bring that up again."

"Kate, its been six months since you moved."

"I know how long its been." Kate avoided his eyes, and then she turned her head towards the bar. "Look at that man," she said. There was only one man at the bar, his hair spiked and blonde. He was wearing a heavy overcoat and sipping a stout. His cheekbones delicate and nose sharp and thin. "He keeps staring over at us."

"Maybe he likes you."

Kate smiled. "Or by the looks of him, more probably you."

"Oh, please."

Kate was quiet again for a moment. She sipped her wine. Her glass was nearly empty. "He's giving me the creeps though," she said. "I don't like his eyes."

"He's more than likely harmless."

"Everyone is harmless to you," Kate said indifferently.

Jack shrugged again. "Not everybody." He paused. He studied her for a moment. She was looking at her nails again; she seemed quite taken with them.

She was holding something back. She wasn't hard to read. Not for him. He wondered how long she would wait before telling him.

"I missed you," he said.

"I missed you, too," she whispered. She looked slowly up at him. The waitress came by and Kate ordered another shot of whiskey. Jack got one, too. He had to match. If nothing else, he had to meet her wherever she was heading. This one burned but not quite as much as the first. Still, he felt the blood snapping in his cheeks and his eyes about to tear. His throat closed up tight, but then all opened, smooth and wide. Kate didn't seem

phased by this shot except to put two fingers lightly to her throat to quietly clear it and swallow. She lit another cigarette. The man in the overcoat stood up and went to the jukebox. He leaned over towards it, his hands grasping the sides as if he were preparing to cry, or faint, or maybe bang his head. He did none of the three. He just stared at the selections. He seemed in a trance. Or possibly was just listening. There wasn't much to listen to. All the other patrons were seated far away, and the bar was fairly quiet. Possibly the bartenders were whispering, possibly about him. Jack could hear their voices, muffled and distant.

Jack felt his stomach slowly tightening. "So what's new?"

"Too many bills, not enough money."

He tried to smile. "What else?"

She looked up and smiled back. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I know you too well."

The man had put on a song by the Mazzie Star—"Fade Into You." He stayed there, blank-eyed, looking at the selections for a moment, and then strutted slow, his eyes preoccupied and focused hard on the floor, back to his stool.

Kate looked back out upon the street. "I don't know how to say it."

Jack felt something rise in his throat, his heart again beginning to pound, and a tingling in the tips of his fingers tight about the stem of his glass. It was all going numb. He hated her sometimes. How could you hate so much someone you loved so dearly? Sometimes he could just look at her, and it all made him marvel over the effect she had on him. But not now. He wasn't interested in how. The hows only came in retrospect. There was no retrospect now. Now it was just his belly tight, twisting into a hard tense knot, and everything else inside feeling just about to collapse. Escape. Get far from him.

"Try," he said.

Kate shrugged a little. "I've been seeing somebody."

Jack felt as if someone had smacked his head from behind. There it was. Almost better now that it was out, but he could still feel it cutting, starting at the edges and now slowly working its way in. He glanced down at her hands. She was pulling at her fingers. It was a few minutes before he was able to respond. He pressed two fingers to his temple.

"Christ," he said.

"It's been driving me crazy," she said hurriedly. "Keeping it from you, I mean."

Jack strained, trying to make sense and trying to remember. It all came too quickly. Excuses made, curious whispers during conversations on the phone, and the receiver cold in his hand when there was nobody home. The holidays. "I don't know what to say," he said.

Kate ran her fingers up through her hair. "I don't blame you," she said. "I think it's the hardest thing I ever had to tell anybody."

Jack twirled his glass a bit on the table, eyes locked tight on her. Kate reached for a cigarette.

"Do you hate me?" she asked, eyes again averted.

"Do you love him?"

Kate slowly nodded. "Yes."

Jack shrugged. "Then I don't hate you."

"I wouldn't blame you if you did," she said. "It's a lousy thing to do."

"Are you happy?"

Kate nodded.

"Well, then I'm happy for you. I just want you to be happy." Even as the words passed from his lips, he wasn't completely sure he didn't mean them. His thoughts were racing. It had been too long since he had seen her, and if she wasn't happy with him what was the point? She couldn't have been happy with him and gone after somebody else. It made little sense. And if she weren't happy, he wouldn't be happy. Two tied in misery. Still, he couldn't really picture life without her. A piece would be gone. A very large piece. He wondered if he would ever again be complete. It didn't seem reasonable to think so. They had been together nearly seven years. The world was coming apart, crumbling, all so quickly.

Kate was searching his eyes. He wondered what she was looking for.

Jack lifted a cigarette from her pack and struck a match. The smoke was foreign and harsh at first, but then soon settled, deep in his lungs. "So how long?" he asked.

"About three months. I met him just after I went back last time."

"And you're already in love with him?"

"Yes. "

Jack was staring at her, but his thoughts were racing too fast, obscuring anything before him that could actually be seen. "What's he do?"

Kate's lips curled to the beginnings of a smile. "He's a professor at school. Not in my department though—he teaches English. So it's not like were doing anything unethical."

Jack paused for a moment, staring at her. And then he lowered his eyes and snubbed out the cigarette. It didn't help and tasted like dirt. "How old is he?"

She smiled again. "Forty-three."

"He's almost got twenty years on you."

"He doesn't seem it though. He's really pretty cool. He loves to party," she added. "I didn't want to tell you over the phone."

"That he loves to party?"

"You know what I mean."

Jack sipped his wine again. It didn't touch him. He needed something inside of him—food, drink or smoke—something to fill him, but nothing was working. His grief was clutching his soul, and hollowing his body. "And when did you stop loving me?"

Kate locked with his eyes. She gave a small shrug. "I haven't."

The noise level in the bar had been slowly building around them. The evening crowd had started to pour in, voices and music mixing in confusion. The crowd left the man at the end of the bar alone, an empty stool to either side. He continued drinking. Staring down at his reflection in the gloss of the bar. Kate ordered two more shots of whiskey. Jack took his and sipped it. He didn't want to look at her anymore. Looking at her was not making it any better. But not looking at her would just make it even worse. She was very beautiful, more so now that it seemed she was no longer his. Not his. It seemed too unreal. She was slipping away. He tried to picture her with the other one. Kissing and touching and moving. Possibly crying out in pleasure. But the picture wouldn't come through. The man had no face, just actions and hands. He could only see Kate clear, but still, it tore at his heart. It just made him want her all the more. She was with someone else, smiling up at him, whispering I love you. Doing things that had always been theirs. What did she do to please him? Positions, angles, entrances.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said I haven't stopped loving you. How could I? I'll always love you, I think. The problem is, I'm in love with you both. I never thought that that could be possible." Kate reached across the table, and took his hand. "I was just getting so lonely. And having you down there wouldn't do any good. I wouldn't get anything done. Oh, I don't know. It's so confusing right now. It feels better to talk about it though."

Jack looked at their hands.

The music was vibrating. Something loud. A women's laughter was thrown from somewhere on the other side of the room, resounding like an echo, or the passing titter of a spirit. Everything seemed as if from another time. Things happening around them, but they weren't really part of it. They were separate somehow, and the people and sounds all seemed surreal. The lights were dimmer now, glasses were clanking.

The glasses were stacked before them. Kate was focusing with one eye—the way she did when smothered in drink. Her breath was warm, sugared with whiskey. She had moved around to his side of the table and was close up beside him. She still had his hand, and her other hand was on the inside of his thigh. She had been telling him how much he meant to her and she had been kissing him. Jack had let her kiss him, his lips tight and nearly immobile. The noise around them was now louder, the table sticky with beer, wine and whiskey.

"I love you," Kate said again. Her hand moved further up along his thigh, and she put her lips to his ear. "I want to make love to you."

Jack felt a chill as her tongue slipped inside his ear, his spine was alive, and the room was much colder now. His head was fogged. He won-

dered how much time she was spending with him, the other one. Which did she prefer? It didn't matter. Yes, it did. There was a chance to work it out, always a chance. Why hadn't he thought of it. He thought too much, and never enough. Never refined. Of course they could work it out, they had known each other so long. He pulled back and looked at Kate, but could still barely see her. She had faded and mixed with the confusion behind them. Colors and shapes spun into the collage. Removed from him, and viewed from a distance. It was all very warm, he didn't feel warm, he felt very raw, cold and exposed. Kate's face was streaked as if she had been crying. No. There was no chance. None to speak of. Not anymore. She had destroyed it all. Too much and not enough. Jack could see her again with the other one. He felt his thoughts closing in on him. He had a sudden urge to run, to keep running. He reached out and brushed her cheek with the edge of his thumb, and then slowly pulled his chair away. "I'll get us another beer," he said.

He turned back once to see Kate moving towards the ladies room, and then he pushed towards the door.

Outside it was still snowing, but it seemed to have gotten warmer. The flakes were large and falling heavily, covering the cars and the walkway. The cars sped by, bright headlights and wet snow spinning beneath slick tires, the sound fading into night. Jack quickly crossed the street, his head down and his hands deep in his pockets. He stopped when he hit the park. He wasn't sure which way to turn. The trees were bare like skeletons, fingers reaching into the dark of the night. They had been planted in two neat rows, running the length of the narrow park. These branches, too, were strung with white lights and lightly covered with a thin coat of ice. Time was frozen, as was the mayor at the foot of the trees. He stood, solid and proud, completely oblivious to the snow piling upon him.

There were actually two statues of the mayor. The one sculpted standing, and another relaxing back on a bench in the shadows. The man from the bar, head in hands, was sitting beside the second. Jack hadn't seen him at first.

Jack's breath fogged in the darkness. Cries in the night flickered all around. There for a momnt, and then gone. A horse and carriage trotted by, a tourist couple snuggled in back.

The man from the bar looked up at him. "I don't think I can walk," he said. He seemed almost amused by it all. The mayor, his arm over the back of the bench and head plated in ice, watched on in silence.

"Then I suggest you don't," Jack said apathetically. He stuffed his hands back in his pockets. "Go back in and have another drink."

"I have to get home," said the man.

"Then call someone to take you."

The man shook his head. "No," he said. "There is no one." He stayed

looking at Jack for a moment, but Jack swallowed his breath and looked silently away. He watched the cars passing and the shadows of movement in the bar across the street. His shirt was now wet, and the snow melted upon his nose and brow, warming to rivulets to pass over his lips.

Back in the bar, he took Kate's hand and led her hurriedly to the door. In the cab to the motel, she stayed pressed tight against him and hummed softly with the radio. He turned her around and entered her from behind nearly immediately after they shut the door to the room, but there was nothing, and the nothing spread quickly within him. When they were finished, she wrapped herself tightly around him, and it wasn't long before her labored breathing enveloped the silence and darkness. Jack lay still, focusing on the ceiling.

In the morning, she was still fast asleep, lips barely parted and a long thin leg climbing free from the sheets. Jack dressed to the hushed voices of the radio. His throat was quite dry, and he swallowed some water and wet his head. From the motel window he could see the icey river. He searched his pockets and found a token. He shut door quietly behind him and padded slowly through the snow as he made his way to the train station.

Greg Jenkins

The Bet

Shell-shocked. Weirded out. Spooked. Lost, agitated, on-edge. These were just some of the direful terms the workers were using to describe the appearance and manner of their foreman who had once been so cheerful and carefree. In recent months, Virgil had acquired sepia rings beneath his glazed eyes, a sickly hollowness into his stubbled cheeks and a persistent tremor in his calloused hands. He had begun to look like the mayor-elect of the Village of the Damned. The workers on his shift all knew by now what the source of his problem was, but there was little any of them dared to do about it. Besides, a bet was a bet, was it not? So on this drafty November evening when Virgil burst abruptly from his office and strode determinedly across the shop's sooty concrete floor, through the harsh flickering lights and shadows, and the drifting dark clouds of pollution and the clattering industrial noise, the many pairs of eyes that squinted after him were both fearful and sympathetic.

He pulled up within ten feet of the largest man in the plant, perhaps the largest man in all of West Virginia, a MIG welder named Winston. Nearly seven feet tall, Winston must've weighed in at 350, an unfair portion of it muscle. Staring serenely into space—Winston worked pretty much only when he wanted to—he was loitering next to a covey of CO tanks, his visor projecting upward and outward from his vast misshapen forehead like a horn. The message on his dingy tent of a sweatshirt read KILL'EM ALL, LET GOD SORT'EM OUT. When he spied his shrunken boss approaching, Winston made a half-hearted move back toward his station as if he were about to do something productive, and then he thought better of it and stayed where he was. Like everyone else, he'd noticed the apparent decline in Virgil's health and had felt a faint tingle of uneasiness and foreboding as a result. Still, he'd seen no good reason to amend his work habits.

Hands on his frail hips, Virgil screeched at Winston in a voice so sharp and jagged it cut through the din like a lathe. "You, Winston!" he said.

Winston started to protest, but Virgil jerked his thumb in the direction of his office and turned on his heel. With grudging obedience, Winston followed him along at a certain distance; the image was of a man taking his pet mastodon for a walk.

Virgil closed the office door behind them, reducing the noise level just slightly, and motioned for Winston to have a seat. Cautiously, the huge welder lowered himself onto a folding metal chair that emitted a tortured

whine and began to pancake ominously beneath him. All business, Virgil sat down stiffly behind his desk, in reality a bulky wooden crate whose soiled surface was littered with seven or eight mounds of paper and, among them, uncounted drill bits, bolts, washers, rods, pins and a life-size bust of Franz Schubert, whom Virgil admired for his romantic temperament. Under the most favorable of circumstances, the Spartan office was snug; with Winston in there, it seemed physically tight.

Once more Winston took off on a grieving explanation of why he'd been doing what he'd been doing and why he hadn't been doing what he was supposed to've been doing. But Virgil cut him short.

"You owe me money," Virgil said evenly.

Which was true. And as remarkable as Winston's size clearly was, this condition of owing Virgil money was even more remarkable. No one on earth owed Virgil so much as a nickel except Winston, whom Virgil had financed to the tune of $43.86 in last Saturday night's game of stud poker.

"Catch you on payday," Winston rumbled.

"I don't want your cash, Winston," and immediately the welder's eyes expanded with amazement and then narrowed with suspicion. "No," said Virgil casually, "I'd rather you did somethin' for me."

"Like what?"

"Got a guy that's been botherin' me." Virgil folded his unsteady hands together. "Thought maybe you could persuade him to stop botherin' me, you savvy what I'm sayin'?"

Winston's prehuman face broke into something between a leer and a gargoyle's grin. Virgil was hinting at the kind of labor Winston could perform with genuine enthusiasm.

"Botherin' you, huh? Who?"

"Some guy works here at the plant."

"What's his name?"

"Cosmo."

The eerie expression Winston had been wearing seemed to collapse on itself. "Cosmo ... Cosmo Blodgett?"

"Only Cosmo we got," said Virgil testily.

"You're talkin' about that bet you made with him," it occurred to Winston with a shock, and some of the color faded from his normally roseate cheeks. "Ain't you. You want me to step in, get him to drop The Bet. Don't you."

Virgil said nothing; just hunched his shoulders as if in response to the chilly draft.

"Well, you can forget it," Winston spat. "Ain't no way I'm stickin' my snoot in that can of worms."

"Look, I don't want you to croak the guy or nothin'—

"No, thanks. Uh-uh." Winston made a slashing gesture with his monster right hand, and it was as if a 747 had just passed overhead. "I ain't

messin' with Cosmo. I'll pay you your money, Virgil; I'll pay you back double what I owe you. But I don't want no parts of Cosmo."

Using his finger, Virgil methodically prodded a wing nut across the top of his makeshift desk. "Winston," he said at last, "you ain't a-scared of Cosmo, are you?"

"You're damn right I am," Winston answered, and stood up to leave.

Exhaling, Virgil let his eyes wander to the grimy window in his office door and contemplated the bright orange shower of grinder-sparks that flew outside.

Virgil Cain was a gambler. Not an extremely successful gambler, but a dedicated one. He was known to bet on cards, horses, basketball, boxing, checkers, the stock market, who could outdrink whom, whether the "S." in Harry S. Truman stood for anything (it didn't, Virgil learned to his chagrin), and anything else that might appeal to his romantic imagination. Almost always, he lost.

It wasn't that he lacked the shrewd judgment necessary to win a wager, he decided; it was just that Fortune seemed always to be against him. Such was the rationale he offered his maenadic wife Eloise when, in January of 1990, he blew a thousand big ones on the Super Bowl. Having hustled some poor sap into giving him Denver and 44 points (!), Virgil sat grayfaced, openmouthed and stupefied in front of his TV as the bumbling Broncos got busted, at the rough hands of the 49ers, by the surrealistic score of 55-10.

"I—I think Fortune must be against me," he eventually managed to say in a hoarse whisper.

"Then why the hell do you gamble?" Eloise shrieked.

Before he could frame a marginally intelligent answer, she packed a couple of suitcases and took a Greyhound bus back to Milwaukee, where she'd lived contentedly before meeting and marrying Virgil.

Soon after, not quite five years prior to his strained conversation with Winston, a sadder but no wiser Virgil made his fabled bet with Cosmo; it was a piece of speculation so out and so unprecedented that it would become immortalized in local lore as simply The Bet.

The very picture of health and vitality with his taut tan skin and clean blue Dickies work outfit, Virgil was cruising along preoccupied in a forklift. He was still chewing on his departed wife's unpalatable question: If Fortune was against him, why the hell did he gamble? Perhaps, he mused, it was for the same reason he drank, listened to Schubert, and tolerated more horseplay from the guys than OSHA would've liked: he gambled to alleviate the crushing, relentless, excruciating boredom of his daily routine in a machine shop. Hardly the best of reasons, he would've conceded, but there it was.

A puff of black smoke cleared away, and Virgil saw, way off to his left,

a trio of workers lingering at the company's sole Coke machine. Break had ended ten minutes ago. Looked to be Cotton, whose munching mouth was always so crammed with tobacco that every word he spoke sounded the same ("Mmph"), Hooter, who liked to go around making animal noises—horses, pigs, cattle-and the new guy, Cosmo. About Cosmo, on Virgil understood only that he was a burner and that he always wore this intensely purple toboggan, indoors and out. Covered it with a hardhat when he had to, but never took the toboggan off. Warm and expansive in those days, Virgil reckoned he'd go over and cut up with the guys a little before ordering them to get their indolent asses back to work.

"Probably slipped your mind," he shouted good-naturedly, bounding out of the forklift, "but you fellas work for Commercial Shearing; you do not work for the Coca-Cola Company!"

Cotton and Hooter vibrated with nervous laughter (not a pleasant sight in Cotton's case), but Cosmo, long and lanky and pale as paste, just stared at Virgil. It didn't seem to be an unfriendly stare, so far as Virgil could tell: it was more the barren, vapid, unfocused stare of a man who hadn't yet learned what was expected of him and, more to the point, hadn't been blessed with an intellect that would draw fan mail from Mensa. As he stared, Cosmo displayed a detached, yellow-toothed half-smile. Virgil's banter had gotten worse reactions from people, and he now took it upon himself to rib this newcomer a bit, try to bring him into the fold.

"Man, that's a real eye-catcher of a hat you got there, Cosmo," Virgil declared.

"Yep," came the reply.

"You ever take it off?"

"Yep."

"Couldn't prove it by me." Virgil guffawed; the others didn't. "Just outa curiosity, how long you think you could wear that jewel without taking it off?"

"It's a nice hat," said Cosmo vaguely. "My Aunt Thelma got it for me."

"Think maybe you could wear it a week straight and not take it off your head?"

"Probably."

"How about a year?"

Cosmo cocked his muffled noggin. "A year'd be a right smart while to wear a hat without ever takin' it off."

"Hey—I once heard of some dude wore the same damn hat for five straight years—never took it off the whole time. Think you could do that?"

"I think maybe I could," Cosmo allowed, "but I'd need me a durn powerful reason why."

During this exchange Cosmo never varied his demeanor. He continued to stare vacantly at Virgil, continued almost—but not quite—to smile, continued to hold his twangy voice at the same neutral pitch and volume.

"Tell you what," Virgil said. "You wear that handsome purple thing the next five years and don't take it off once and I'll ... I'll buy you a car."

"What kinda car?" asked Cosmo, after only the briefest of hesitations.

Virgil held out his hands, palms up, as though to catch falling objects. "What kind do you want?"

"Grand Cherokee." No hesitation here. "Coal black. Shiny new."

The two men shook hands on the proposition, and Cotton and Cosmo headed back to their stations. Cackling, Virgil grabbed Hooter by the shoulder and pulled him aside.

"How long you think he'll last?" Virgil wheezed.

"On The Bet?" Hooter took a moment to thrust into his filthy workgloves. "Oh, I'd say five years."

Virgil's face instantly surrendered a good deal of its mirth. "Say what? You really think that monkey's gonna go five solid years wearin that same stupid hat?"

"Cosmo's nuts," Hooter explained. "Especially when it comes to motor vehicles. Hope you'll be ready to buy him a new Cherokee." And he began to snuffle and oink like a pig.

Alarmed, Virgil once again took hold of Hooter's ratty shoulder, pulled him even further aside and demanded some quick elucidation. What exactly did Hooter mean, Cosmo was "nuts"?

"Whacko," Hooter elucidated. "Crazy as a loon. Daffy as a dodo."

Clinically—and indeed dangerously—demented was more accurately the concept Hooter sought to convey. It seemed (as he now repeated the grisly tale to a spellbound Virgil) that a few years before, Cosmo became embroiled in a dispute with an auto repairman in a Bluefield body shop. Details remained sketchy, but apparently the repairman didn't fix the problem he'd agreed to fix, or didn't fix it properly, or charged too much in either fixing it or not fixing it, but Cosmo in any event was bitterly dissatisfied with the outcome. So dissatisfied, in fact, that he seized the man's live torch, wrestled him to the greasy floor and proceeded to cook him from head to toe, laughing uncontrollably all the while. Radical consumer groups attempted to portray Cosmo as a folk hero, but the cynical D.A. was unconvinced and promptly indicted him for murder. Cosmo, however, pleaded temporary insanity; the jury agreed, and he beat the rap.

Virgil shook his dazed head. "My God," he murmured. "Some of the people we hire here..."

The outlandish story rattled him, but Virgil was too smart and too

cool to panic—he had not risen to the rank of foreman by pure chance. Hooter may have been, not for the first time, ill-informed, or he may have simply been having some fun with Virgil, just as Virgil had been toying with Cosmo. (Later, when Virgil probed others about the alleged Bluefield incident, he found that while some considered it fact, most dismissed it as fantasy. Many had never heard of it. A timorous few claimed in hushed tones that Bluefield was merely the tip of Cosmo's warped iceberg of personal history.) Anyway, The Bet could well run for another five years, enough time for Cosmo to slip up or give in. Virgil relaxed.

The days began to slide by, and the weeks too, but the top of Cosmo's head never perceptibly changed. "How's the ol' bean feelin' tonight, hey Coz?" Virgil would needle him. "Gettin' a mite itchy up there, is it? Haw, haw!" Sometimes he'd make a show of strolling over to Cosmo and scrutinizing the hat and the head carefully, front, sides and back, like a detective. No one knew what clues he was searching for on these occasions, and, in fact, neither did Virgil himself—he just felt he ought to exert some form of visual pressure on Cosmo. Outside the burner's earshot, Virgil would make brusque inquiries of the other workers: "Anybody seen him without the hat?" No one had. For his part, Cosmo seemed to tolerate the process well enough, though his conversations with Virgil, never excessive, now contracted to almost nothing. "Four years, eleven months, one week and five days," he would remind his boss, marking the amount of time left. Or "Four years, eleven months on the nose," depending on the calendar. Never a hello, never a see you later or anything else. And always there was the empty, gimlet stare and the yellow, mocking half-smile.

After a while, Virgil began to have deep doubts over what he'd gotten himself into. For one thing, he'd never once witnessed Cosmo, even before enacting The Bet, without his toboggan. Virgil was forced, on this basis alone, to wonder about the sheer logic of his dare. For another thing, how would he know if Cosmo was taking off his hat in Virgil's absence? On his way to work, perhaps, on his way home, on any of the man's sixteen off-hours per day? ... Surely Cosmo didn't sleep in his hat—did he?—didn't bathe in it.... How was Virgil to know?

"Here's what I want you to do," he muttered, pressing some wrinkled greenbacks into Cotton's clutching hand. "I want you to keep your eye on that boy, awright? Off the job. Before he comes in, after he leaves. Be discreet."

His loathsome mouth packed to its considerable limit with Red Man chew, Cotton nodded, disappeared and rejoined Virgil several days later.

"Well?" said Virgil. "What'd you see?"

"Mmph," Cotton replied.

"Did he take that damn hat off or not?"

"Mmph."

"Just shake your head for me."

Cotton obligingly wobbled his head in every direction.

"Damn it all to hell and back!" Virgil exploded from the black pit of his frustration and, giving Cotton a shove, swung his feverish attention at once to the legalities of the issue. How might a court of law view his predicament? Was he legally bound to pay off if it came to that? Was it remotely possible that his teasing comments to Cosmo represented a kind of contract?

Referring to his scribble-filled notepad, he put these questions and others much like them to his attorney, Howard Fleeceman, early one grim and overcast morning. Actually, Virgil had retained Fleeceman in the wake of a divorce suit Eloise had filed from Milwaukee, but the Cosmo problem now struck Virgil as more troubling and had quickly over taken their discussion. Fleeceman, a silver-maned smoothie who'd once practiced criminal law down in the southern tier of the state, assured his client that he had nothing whatever to worry about.

"You sign anything?" Fleeceman asked.

"No."

"Any witnesses there when you set this thing up?"

"A couple, but they ain't much account."

Fleeceman waved his hand contemptuously. "Forget it," he said.

Virgil began to feel a notch more confident. "I just hope Cosmo'll forget it," he sighed.

A shadow seemed to darken Fleeceman's honest-looking face. "Cosmo..." He got up, walked to the window, gazed at an especially ugly segment of the awful, gravel-colored sky. "You know, I once represented somebody named Cosmo. Course, the media didn't call him that; they called him the 'Bluefield Burner.' Murder case, gruesome as hell. Oh, I got him off all right: pulled every third-rate trick in the law book. Afterwards, I couldn't sleep nights from thinking about what I'd done. The man was a psycho, he was evil personified, and here I'd put him back on the street. Cosmo...God almighty. Had this blank sorta half-smile...Finally I left town, came here, took up divorce."

Fleeceman pulled away from the window and turned back to Virgil, whose face had taken on the same hue as the sky.

"So cheer up, Virg," the lawyer said. "I'm sure your Cosmo'll be easier to deal with than mine was."

That afternoon, seconds after clocking in, Virgil went straight to Cosmo, who was standing quietly at his station. Lost in secret thoughts, the burner was dutifully scrubbing the nozzle of his torch, preparing it for another shift's blazing work.

"Hey, Coz," Virgil greeted him, "about that silly deal we made, whenever it was, you know I was just funnin' you, right? I mean, you know I can't really afford to buy you a new set of wheels, right? Don'tcha?"

Cosmo didn't answer him right away. With a measured deliberateness, he set down his brush and picked up his dark green hardhat with the dark green protective shield attached. He tugged the hardhat down, yes, over that dreadful purple toboggan, and adjusted a dial on his torch, thus triggering the invisible flow of acetylene. Snapping an ignitor once-twice-before the torch's foul-breathed maw, he shivered slightly as a soft orange flame now billowed from the tiny orifice. A second adjustment to a different dial, this one controlling the oxygen, and the flame suddenly hardened into a fierce blue triangle, correct for slicing through blocks of metal. Again he shivered. His homely face wore the enraptured expression of a child playing with his favorite new toy on Christmas.

"Four years, five months, one week and three days," he tolled like the bell on some distant steeple, and lowered the shield, covering his wild, ecstatic face.

Too swiftly the weeks became months, and the months grew into years. Disasters occurred. Both Macy's and TWA filed for bankruptcy, the Chicago River flooded the city's central business district, Yugoslavia spiraled into chaos, and the American electorate chose Bill Clinton as President. But none of those developments hit Virgil with as much force as his own aborning catastrophe. Though oily shoots of mud-brown hair twisted extravagantly around its tattered border and even sprouted grotesquely through its scruffy skin, the purple toboggan stayed unshakably in its place atop Cosmo's smelly head. With short-spoken but fanatical insistence, the burner continued to favor Virgil with his countdown of the time left, and had lately added an equally frightening detail to his unwholesome behavior. On breaks, in a rough, loud, gratingly off-key voice, he had taken to singing that classic tune from 1971 by Paul Revere and the Raiders:

> Cherokee people, Cherokee tri-hibe!
> So proud to live, so proud to die!...

Realizing that his best hope (unless either he or Cosmo happened to drop dead) was personally to catch Cosmo minus the hat, Virgil by this stage was surveilling him regularly, on the job and off. Sometimes Virgil forgot to eat, and his sleep was fitful and unrefreshing; his hale appearance began to deteriorate. How was it possible? he asked himself as he sat hunched in his aging Ford pickup waiting sneakily for his quarry to emerge from a market, a liquor store, a pool hall. How was Cosmo able to maintain such stony discipline? And what agonies, physical and psychological, must Cosmo himself be confronting every day, every scalp-crazed minute? Yet the toboggan was always there, frayed now, the purple gone nearly to jet with accumulated muck. But always there, like some satanic flag.

If Cosmo was cheating, Virgil deduced, he must be doing it at home. Virgil resolved to find out, but he recognized that this phase of the investigation wouldn't be easy. His sleuthing to this point had made him aware that Cosmo lived out-of-town, along a remote dirt road and amid a gnarled clutch of trees, bushes and shrubs. His home was actually an abandoned county school bus that Cosmo had fixed up, not too artfully, with some of the comforts and amenities of a real house. All those windows, most of which were unshaded, would likely be a disadvantage to Virgil, he feared, since they would enable Cosmo to peek out from any angle and spot him. Then again, he supposed, they might operate to Virgil's advantage since his intention was to peek in.

Confused about the windows, Virgil nevertheless hiked down Cosmo's winding road late one autumn night, making for the bus-house. He had parked his truck half a mile back and brought with him a Polaroid camera that he doubted he'd get to use and a flashlight that he declined to use, since it might betray his presence. Up ahead, set back from the road, lay Cosmo's dwelling, long and yellow and black in the dappling moonlight like a giant rotten banana. Virgil left the road and plunged boldly into the thicket, fighting his way stealthily through hackberries and hawthorns, willows and witch-hazels, beeches and sons of beeches. Scratched, his face and hands trickled blood.

Most of the bus-house was dark, but a dim light could be seen shining from the windows in the back section, above where the rear tires would have been had they still existed. Virgil crept toward the whitish glow—was it a TV? A reading lamp? And soon pressed his nose against a cold windowpane on which an unknown historian had scrawled, in mauve magic marker, HOMER LOVES TILLIE. The light was coming from an open refrigerator through which Cosmo, clad in red flannel pajamas, was diligently rooting. Because Cosmo was stooped over, Virgil couldn't see if he was wearing the hat or not. Virgil fumbled excitedly for his camera, took an eager step to the side, hoping for a better view, and felt something snake around his left ankle and pull on it—violently.

The camera went flying as Virgil's world flipped upside down. He'd been caught in a snare. Swaying high above the ground, he flailed and screamed and kept on flailing and screaming until he recalled where he was and what he'd been doing. Then he went silent.

A twig snapped nearby in the darkness. Someone—Cosmo—had joined him.

"I got my rights, Cosmo!" Virgil cried out pitifully, hanging by his ankle.

"That's what the guy in the body shop said," came the familiar voice from less than a yard away.

"But I really do got my rights. I got a right to check-to see with my own eyes-to make sure you're doin' what you claimed. That's only fair,

ain't it?"

A tense moment went by, and then a small tongue of fire leaped from nowhere and lapped hotly at Virgil's blood-heavy cheek. Cosmo had flicked on his Zippo lighter.

"So take a look," he said.

What a nightmarish scene it—was: everything upside down and slowly swinging, the inky woods behind, a dancing flame up close and Cosmo hovering inches away in those red flannel pajamas like a demon. On Cosmo's head, of course, where it perpetually seemed to be, was the purplish black toboggan, rank, decaying and most unfashionable—but definitely—there.

"Two months," said Cosmo, "two weeks and two days."

Not long after that debacle, Virgil approached Winston with the notion of using a debt in the amount of $43.86 to pay for a contract on Cosmo's vile head. When the strapping welder chickened out, Virgil was reduced, as he saw it, to having just one card left to play.

He invited Cosmo out to dinner.

Cosmo, with surprising grace, accepted.

"Come now, and let us reason together," the Good Book counsels, and Virgil, though not noticeably religious, aimed to sit down across from Cosmo and reason with him. Granted, the burner had revealed no strong tendency to reason before this, but neither had he yet been treated to the full glory of Virgil's persuasive charm.

With less than a month to go on The Bet, the gamblers met one evening at a quaint, home-style eatery known as the No Finer Diner which was the only place Virgil knew of that was willing to serve Cosmo in his current bedraggled state. (In this instance, Virgil had relied on a C-note to enhance the full glory of his persuasive charm.) The weary foreman watched from a window as Cosmo drove up in an ancient Ford pick-up, so ancient that its natural color appeared to be rust. In truth, the truck looked like a first cousin to the one Virgil owned.

At the insistence of a pinched-faced waitress, the men sat secluded in a corner booth. Cosmo ordered stuffed clam casino, potato leek soup and center-cut Angus T-bone steak. Virgil ordered black coffee, nothing else, and then couldn't bring himself to consume even that. The intimate presence of Cosmo in this moderately civilized setting had destroyed Virgil's appetite. Stalks of slimy hair rose like seaweed through what was left of the wasted hat, the dull stare had become even more unnerving, the teeth even yellower, and the odor!-it was as if some diseased rodent had crawled onto Cosmo's head, died and decomposed there. After bringing out their orders, the waitress slunk away and wasn't seen again.

Inevitably, Virgil broached the subject of The Bet.

"I been thinkin' about that doggone wager of ours," he said as

offhandedly as possible, "and I ain't sure, Cosmo, that it's a hundred percent fair to me. What I mean is, I don't stand to win nothin.' I mean, if you win, I lose, but even if you lose, I don't win. You see what I'm sayin'?"

"It don't matter none," Cosmo judged, waving his steak knife and chomping heartily on his T-bone, "since I ain't gonna lose, and I am gonna win."

Virgil nodded, cleared his throat and tried again. "OK, fine, so how's about this? Some would argue that there's a bunch to be said for the unbeatable flexibility of cold hard cash. How's about I slip you ten grand tomorrow and we call it quits."

Cosmo shook his head, causing several globs of hair to wiggle. "Only grand I want's a Grand Cherokee. That was the deal. Now, if you wanna throw in some gas money on top of the Cherokee, I won't fight it."

Virgil peered down lugubriously at his untouched coffee. "Just outta curiosity, Coz, I don't reckon you'd consider no used Cherokee, would you? One that's in super condition, say a coupla years old, maybe twenty thousand miles? Them four-by-fours hold their value like you wouldn't believe."

Swallowing, Cosmo shook his head again. "Brand spankin' new, right off the truck—like we said. And I'll tell you why: I just love that new car smell."

Catching a whiff of Cosmo's smell, Virgil turned away and coughed. "I dunno how the deuce I'm gonna swing it," he said sincerely. "I dunno where I'm gonna get the scratch."

Cosmo put down his knife and fork, patted his lips with his napkin. He had already spoken more words to Virgil this evening than he had in the six months prior, but he meant to get in a handful more.

"I'll tell you how it is," he said seriously. "I like to gamble, but I guess I ain't much good at it, 'cause mostly I lose more'n I win. But I seen this hat business as a beautiful opportunity for me, and I've worked hard at makin' 'er pay off. Real hard. Gave up my wife, gave up friends . .

Cosmo with a wife? Virgil was astounded. "Your wife—left you?"

The cold hollow stare reached out to Virgil, gripped at something inside him. "Would you wanna live with the likes of this?" said Cosmo, rolling his eyes upward. "Hey—I don't care how you do it, but I fully expect you to honor your end of The Bet. Else in another two weeks and four days I'm gonna be awful damn disappointed."

Leaning back, he produced a cigar the size of a table leg and lit it with his Zippo A "No Smoking" sign hung on the wall beside him. Comfortably, Cosmo blew big, bountiful clouds of smoke.

Word of The Bet leaked out into the community, and the presentation of the vehicle was attended by a rush of publicity. The scene was the plant's parking lot, which held not only the new, brilliant black sport ute,

but a dense throng of well-wishers, including the mayor and his latest wife, a willowy redhead wearing WVU earrings. Local newspapers had reporters at the site, as did two radio stations and one Washington-based television station. A helicopter circled in the cold windless sky, taking aerial shots. The mood was festive. Virgil grinned abashedly for the cameras, and Cosmo, wearing the toboggan, even yet "force of habit," he said with a chuckle-threw his skinny arms around Virgil and gave him a prolonged bear hug. Virgil had kind remarks for Cosmo, who in turn had even kinder remarks for Virgil, calling him a true sportsman, a model citizen and the last honest man in America.

The rest of the smiling community generally agreed with these warmhearted sentiments right up until the day, about a month later, when Virgil skipped town. Vamoosed in the middle of the night. No one, least of all his creditors, could say for certain where he'd gone, but gone he was, along with his rusted-out pickup, his CD collection and his leaden debts. Some folks guessed he'd hightailed it to Canada, to Saskatchewan maybe, though the logic behind this conclusion was never made clear. Others leaned toward Mexico, hinting at some unspecified connection between Virgil and the infamous Poncho Villa. Some, who seemed cocksure of themselves, maintained that Virgil could be found, right this second, in or around Milwaukee, no doubt listening dreamily to Franz Schubert's Eighth Symphony in B Minor, the melancholy theme for cellos and basses leavening his soul, bringing him a touch of relief from life's pains.

Contributor's Notes

Among other magazines, **Ryan G. Van Cleave's** poetry has been published in *Oxford Magazine, New York Quarterly, Notre Dame Review,* and *Reed*. He serves as poetry editor for *Sundog: The Southeast Review* as well as coordinator for the annual "World's Best Short Story" competition.

This marks the first time **Robert P. Cooke** is published in the *Lullwater Review*. He is recently published in *The Sun, Skylark,* and *Puerto del Sol.*

John Davis is a high school teacher on Bainbridge Island, Washington. His poetry appears recently in *Aethlon, Georgetown Review, Journal of American Medical Association,* and *Sou'wester*. He formerly edited *The Duckabush Journal.*

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Catherine Ferreira studied poetry at Northwestern University. Her work has appeared in *Folio, Mankato Poetry Review, Wolf Head Quarterly,* and *ArtWord Quarterly.*

Jean Howard has appeared in many notable newspapers and magazines including *Harper's Magazine, The Burning World, Spoon River Review,* as well as the *Chicago Tribune*. Ms. Howard has also been featured in various public and network television combining her poetry with theater, art, dance, video and photography.

Greg Jenkins is an English professor now living in Maryland. His stories have appeared in such journals as *South Dakota Review, Tampa Review, Descant,* and *American Literary Review*. His last book was *Stanley Kubrick and the Art of Adaptation*. His forthcoming volume will be a collection of his short fiction, entitled *Night Game.*

Thomas Juvik received the 1987 Christa McAuliffe Award for Excellence in Education for his work as a high school English and social studies teacher in Port Orchard, Washington. In addition to various television work with the Fox network, Mr. Juvik has published in the *Seattle Review, Aethlon,* and *Palo Alto Review* among others.

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Theresa Pappas' work has appeared in *Sou'Wester, Kansas Quarterly, Iowa Woman, Widener Review,* and other journals. Her collection of poems, *Flash Paper,* was published by New Rivers Press. She lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Edwina Pendarvis lives in Huntington, West Virginia. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Antietam Review, Appalacian Journal, Bone and*

Flesh, Now & Then, Phoebe, and *Small Pond,* among other journals. Her poetry collection, *Joy Ride,* is published in Hyman Landscapes by Bottom Dog Press.

Noelle Rydell lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

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Roseanne Thong is an English teacher and author, whose work has appeared in *American Studies Journal, Louisville Review, Poetry LA, Timber Creek Review, Northwoods Journal, New Ways, Transitions Abroad,* and *TESOL Matters.* She is currently working on a story collection based on Hong Kong life and culture.

Judith Werner has published poems in several anthologies and many magazines, including *The South Dakota Review, Riverrun,* and *Yankee.* Forthcoming work will appear in *Bridges, The Lyric,* and *Rattapallax* on which she also serves as senior editor. Ms. Werner resides in New York City.

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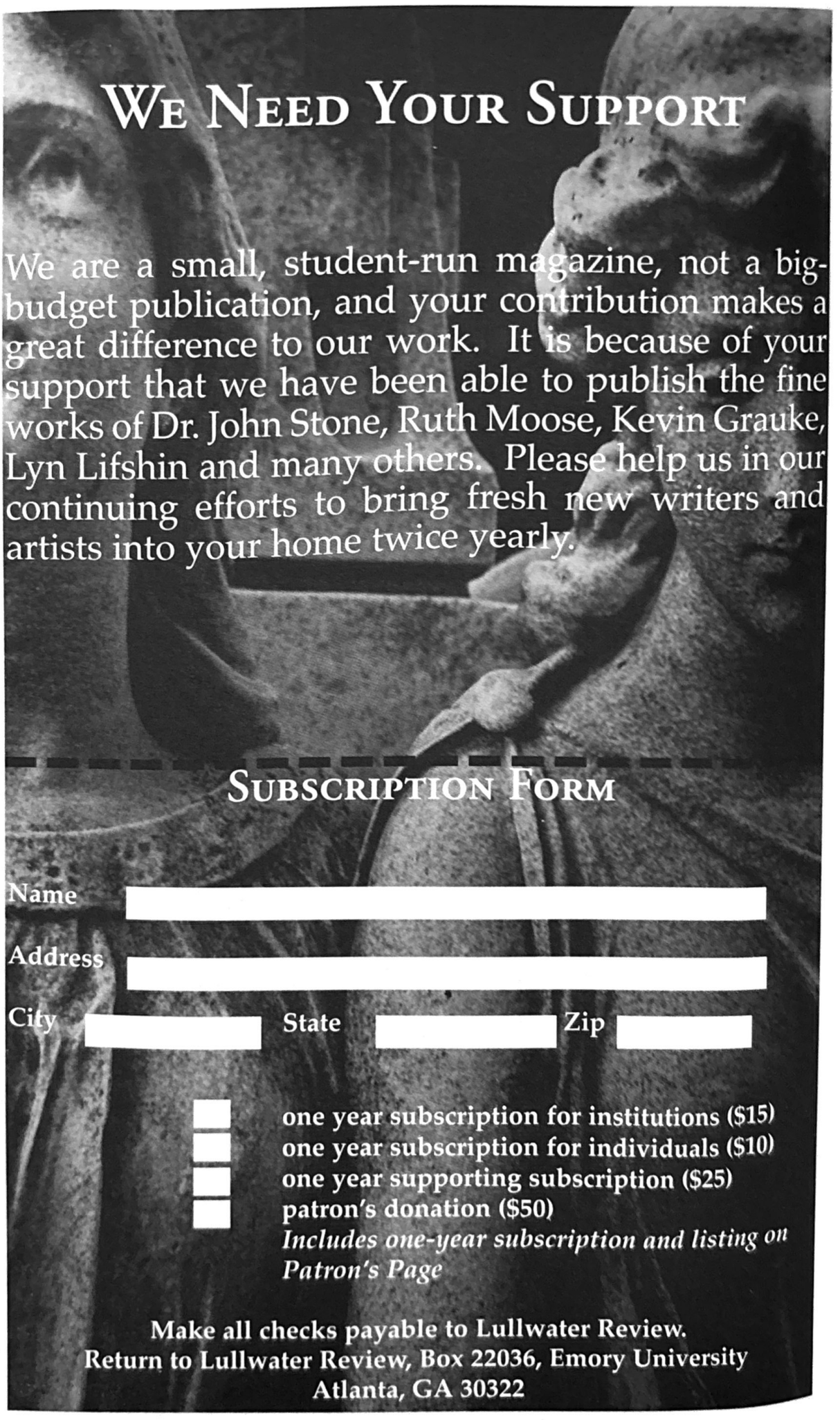

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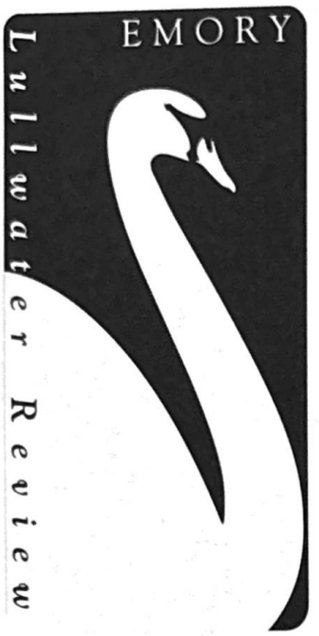

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