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The Lantern Vol. 66, No. 1, Fall 1998

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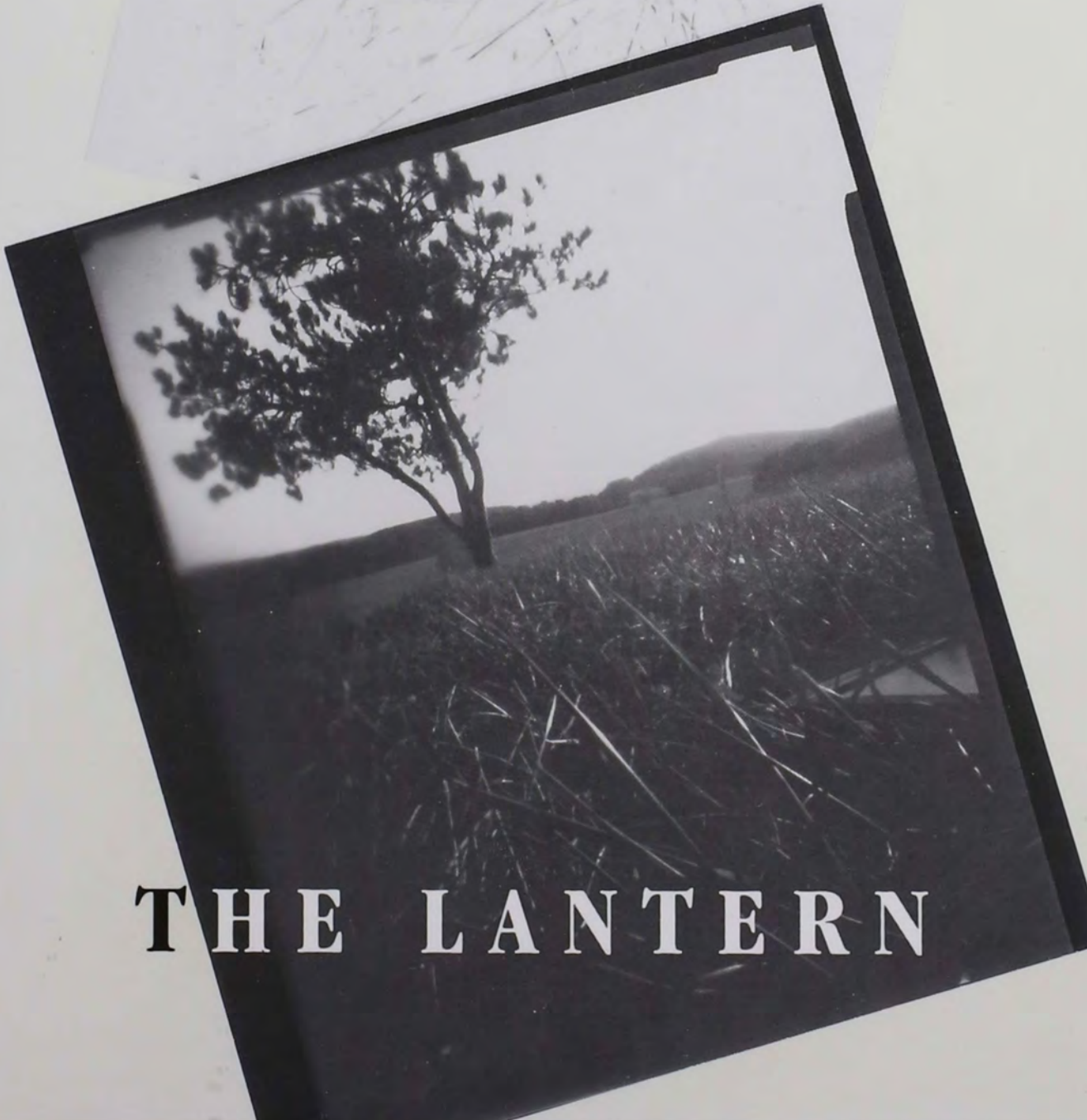
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THE LANTERN

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Staff Note:

The Lantern would like to congratulate Jennifer Herbst on her prize-winning story "Curled." Thank you to Alan McCabe for acting as judge and making the difficult choice. We would also like to congratulate Pete Corsey for his winning cover photograph "Tree in Negative Space."

The Lantern staff

Editor's Note:

I would like to thank all of you who submitted to *The Lantern* for this issue. It was a difficult process choosing those works contained in this issue. My gratitude is extended to the entire staff. Without your dedication and hard work, this magazine would not be possible. I would like to personally thank Jena Osman, Jon Volkmer, and Nzadi Keita for their guidance in the production of this issue.

Jennifer Herbst

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Judge's Note:

This is a great issue of *The Lantern*. I wish I had room to rave about all of its stories, picking a winner was a difficult task. The runners up were "Bob or Beatrice or Something" and "The French Door." The former is a beautifully written piece about the heartbreak of being snubbed by a hero during the stormy gender confused years of adolescence. The latter is an astounding work demonstrating how the psyche can transcend time and place due to a traumatic self-discovery. It is framed in an inspiring declaration of lesbian pride. I chose "Curled" to be this issue's winner. Its dizzying array of brand named memory and wholesome Americana images juxtaposed with the specter of a bitter alcoholic, verbally abusive, and image obsessed mother paints a vivid portrait of our consumer crazed, dysfunctional culture. Where in the last scene, Christina finds the glimmer of spirituality that she will need to embrace in order to have the strength to forgive her mother is a stroke of ironic genius.

Alan McCabe
Ursinus Graduate, Class of '94
English Major

Curled

Jennifer Herbst

She sits alone at the bar, vacant eyes fixed on a “Bud on Tap” neon blaze. I can’t keep myself from staring. I watch the bartender pull out a bottle of Seagram’s V.O. whiskey (I think the label is peeling at the top right corner) and pour more than a splash into the woman’s sweaty glass. When he moves to add more Diet Coke, she waves him away and raises her glass to trembling, desperate lips. Her back stiffens and her pinkie shoots off the glass to punch the air, like she suddenly remembered she was raised to act like a lady. When she smile across the room to a stranger, her mouth crackles with bitterness. And if I look even closer, letting my eyes unfocus, I can catch the outline of a wedding band poking through the fabric weaves of the left linen pant pocket.

“Hello? Chris, are you alive in there?” asks Anna. She’s waving her hand in front of my eyes. “You know that woman or something?”

“No. She just reminds me of someone I remember. Have you ever known someone so many eons ago that you don’t feel what it was like to know them? It seems more like remembering to me.”

“Cool. Never thought of it that way. You didn’t get any sleep again last night, did you?”

I grunt. “What do you think?”

Between sips of raspberry tea, she says, “How were finals? I think my brain is dead. Fried to a crisp. And now I have to work at some silly temp job as a law clerk. I get to file and buy bagels for partner meetings. I am not amused.”

“At least you have a real job. I mean, I’m still stuck at Foot Locker wearing a name tag, for crying out loud. As far as finals, they sucked with the Tropicana straw.” I slurp my own spearmint tea. Nice. We are both twenty-one, perfectly able to get sloshed if we choose, but prefer to sit in taverns and drink tea. There is something perverse yet comforting about the whole thing, but we haven’t figured it out yet. So, our purses are stocked with choice flavored leaves. “Hey, do you know what time it is? I told Dad I’d be home for dinner by seven. You know how the ‘rents get when we’re home for break.”

“Uh-huh. Umm...it’s about six.”

We finish our tea, collect ourselves, and makes small talk with the bartender doubling as cashier. The woman is still at the bar with another full glass. She is still alone. Her mouth is still bitter. I wonder if she has any kids.

★

It's somewhere around midnight and I am curled underneath my comforter, *Jane Eyre* perched in my palms. Dad and Jason are downstairs playing *Virtua Fighter 2* for CD-ROM. It's Dad's new toy from the Timonium computer show and a remake of their favorite father-son bonding ritual. I remember when it was Atari and Pitfall. I read Nancy Drew then. That, or Mom and I would give Barbie elevator rides in a townhouse surrounded by a snake pit of game controller cables.

Then I had to grow up fast. Mom wasn't there to brush Barbie's hair anymore or find her lost shoe underneath the sofa. We were eating Dad's chili more often than Mom's spaghetti for dinner. She wasn't home to watch *Murder, She Wrote* with me and guess the surprise ending. I asked Dad why she wasn't home while staring out the bathroom window to the space where her car should be parked by six o'clock. He didn't have any answers besides "overtime." Almost like Jason and I were idiots and hadn't done research on the recess playground. All you had to do was ask the kid with the greasy hair that swung all by himself on the black swing. He'd tell you anything. And what it meant. I needed her there to kiss me goodnight and tell me that being eleven wasn't really that bad and that I would be the Prima Ballerina some day. Then it was two o'clock in the morning according to my Garfield clock and I heard thumps against living room walls made my frustrated fists.

On a skyless day in February, Mom told Jason and me that she was leaving. She said it was just a "separation." The kid with the greasy hair had warned us that this was fake, that parents said it all the time just to make you feel better. Then he had hocked a loogie on the slide. I was sitting on the floor in front of the sofa. Jason was anchored to our great-grandfather's hulking rocking chair. Instead of looking eight years old, he was a member of the Lollipop Gang from *The Wizard of Oz*. The television across the room silently yawned instead of showing us the action-packed adventures of *G.I. Joe*. In front of me, spread out on a paper towel in a very organized fan, were chocolate chips left over from the cookies Mom had baked the weekend before. They were still cold from being in the refrigerator, and Mom never minded that I ate them. She would say it kept her from ruining her salad-only diet. I was choking on them then because I was shoving down tears at the same time. I didn't want to cry. I couldn't stop eating. I was hoping the chocolate would melt, wind around my heart, and harden like a Dairy Queen dip cone to stop the hurt. Mom was still talking, saying something about how it wasn't our fault and we should never think it was. It made me remember the time I couldn't find my ballet slippers in time to go to class. She had cleaned my room and put them in the wrong place. She

yelled at me for being stupid. Maybe if I had found them, she would be staying.

In the present, my fingers skip ahead of my brain and turn pages of *Jane Eyre* that I haven't read. This is the day Jason and I moved back with Dad nine years ago. I still keep the mother I knew locked in the attic of my brain like Mr. Rochester kept his crazy first wife locked in the attic of his mansion. The mother I remembered drank Seagram's V.O. and Diet Cokes. She had a crackling bitter smile. She went to bars right after work and probably danced with strangers. She was the woman at the bar with the ring in her pocket.

Dad and Jason are tripping over themselves to get up the stairs. I think they forget that they could actually break their necks if they fell the right way. They are coming to raid my peace. I will have to provide the obligatory squeals of indignation and try not to laugh. But I have to destroy my mental attic first, before they can see it. I find some loose floorboards, add a little gasoline, and torch them with neurotransmitter sparks. I don't notice that my attic only gets charred, and the ashes aren't dumped into my blood stream so they can seep out my pores like sweat. I don't notice when they are rerouted into memory centers you don't know you have until you fall asleep.

"Incoming!" My brother pitches himself on top of my legs, arms poised in perfect tickle position. My book is thrown to the safety of the floor, and my own fingers search through cotton fabric to find just the right rib. "Aaah! You dork!" Bingo.

"Come on, Jason, let's get Dad," I manage through gasps of laughter. There is nowhere for anyone to hide, and the battle of flashing fingertips rages until we all collapse in ruffled heaps. Jason retrieves his black Nike baseball cap, smashes it on his head backwards, and confiscates the phone. He got a new phone number tonight at the mall, and he has to sniff the girl out before he decided to throw it out. At sixteen, he's fond of calling himself a stud.

Dad wanders into my room, hoisting his jeans up as high as he can get them. Jason and I tease him about being ready to pop a third kid and being a crack dealer in town, the normal jokes you would throw at a plumber. He is a machinist, and his hands are scarred from drill bits and stained with the smells of oil and scalded metal. "How ya doin', kiddo? Whatcha thinkin' about?"

"You know that tavern I told you about?"

"What about it?" His lips purse and pop out to reveal his top jaw gnawing on his bottom lip like a chipmunk.

"I saw a woman that reminded me of Mom, how I used to

imagine her, sitting at the bar. Kind of freaked me out, you know?"

"Mm-hm. D'you know why?" He starts to clean his ears with his keys. I don't think he's heard of Q-tips yet.

"I haven't heard much from her lately. Not since she moved to Florida, I mean. And the weird part is, we had a real conversation the last time we did talk. Something more than just grades, work, and weather. Maybe I'm starting to hope again."

"You always did."

"Yeah." He knows me better than anyone. Even better than I know myself. He knows that she can say anything she wants and I will go back, head bowed in supplication and another layer of chocolate shell hardened around my heart. Like the time she told Jason and I that she was glad our grandmother had died of cancer, two days after she was in the ground. Gram was an evil person and had deserved to die, she said, and the only good person in the entire family was our Great Aunt Elizabeth. I suppose that included us. "I'm dead. I think I'm going to bed."

"Ditto. G'night, Chris. Love ya, kid."

"Love you, too, Dad."

I wriggle into myself and around my pillows and try not to think. The convolutions of my brain have other ideas. They throb and twist, and like a two-year-old tugging your sleeve for a cookie, they won't stop until I give in and pull open the forbidden lid.

Hell bubbled up when Mom took us from our home with yellow siding and a wooden porch painted green. She ushered us into a stale apartment complex which was arranged as a series of inlets surrounding the mailbox pavilion like some sick religious cult. I buried myself in Nancy Drew even when I could predict the end by page five. Mom had read them when she was young. I was just trying to mke her proud.

Then Dad started taking us to a psychologist, Mrs. Gleeson. Mom called us crazy, said that only people like Charles Manson needed psychological help. Jason refused to talk after that unless Mrs. Gleeson played Trouble with him first.

Mrs. Gleeson initiated talk of moving back with Dad.

"Do you kids like living with your mother?" She constantly scribbled on a yellow legal pad with a black BIC pen, even when we didn't say anything.

"No," said Jason. He was immediately fascinated with his fingernails.

"Why?"

“Because it’s always like she’s drunk. And we never do church stuff anymore. And all she does is yell at us, especially Chris. I hate her.” Jason’s second-grade honesty crashed around the room.

“And what do you think, Chris?”

“I don’t want to say.” I was hoping her La-Z-Boy would swallow me whole.

“And why not?”

“I’m afraid of when she finds out.”

“She’ll never find out, Chris. She isn’t allowed to know.”

“I’m afraid she’ll hate me. And that she’ll hit me.” Dead silence.

“Has she hit you before?”

“No. But her eyes scare me, and I know that she could.”

“What happens when she gets like that?”

“I don’t know. Usually after she had bad days at work and needs a drink to calm down. She has a bad day a lot. And then maybe I play my radio too loud, or I scuff my shoes on the kitchen floor and they leave marks by accident. She says I’m an idiot. Then I have to clean her room and the bathrooms. Or maybe she’ll pull my hair.”

“Is there anything else?”

“She says mean things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, this was a while ago, but it’s the only thing I remember for sure. I wanted to learn how to put makeup on. I wanted to be like the other girls in sixth grade. But she didn’t feel like showing me. So, when I did it myself and showed her, she said I looked like a French whore, I told Dad about it.”

Jason looked up. “Yeah, and she calls Chris fat all the time. My sister is not fat. This girl in my class, Selena, she’s fat. Not Chris. I just want to kick Mom sometimes.” His eyes blazed with an anger I had never seen. But I knew he kept a wallet sized family portrait from three years ago hidden in his dresser drawer.

Our time was up then. We spent four more sessions telling how we lived and what Mom said after three V.O. and Diet Cokes.

Mrs. Gleeson was wrong. The judge ruling on the custody case subpoenaed her notes. Mom was allowed to read every word. With a fresh drink in hand, she ordered a “discussion” between the three of us.

“Is this what you guys think?” she asked. I was surprised at the pain on her face. “Are you really that unhappy with me?”

“Yeah,” said Jason. I don’t think either of us could have said anything else.

The pain on Mom’s face snaked into fury before she spat, “So,

I'm an unfit mother? Is that what you guys think of me? That I'm an alcoholic?"

"We never said you were unfit, Mom," I said.

"Well, that's what Mrs. Gleeson's report says, and more than once. What exactly are you kids trying to do to me?"

"We didn't know that's what they were going to say," Jason said with a stony face. "She told us to say what it was like. So we did."

"If I'm such a unfit mother, then why do you have new school clothes every year? Why do you have home-cooked meals instead of McDonald's? Why do you have your dance lessons, Christina? Or your soccer games, Jason? Both of you are ungrateful little shits. Go to your rooms." Spit had collected at the corners of her mouth. She didn't bother to wipe it away.

An hour later, she cornered me in my room, stinking of whiskey and carrying a box of tissues. I think I blew threw the whole box while she catalogued the "cold hard facts" of the world that made her the perfect mother: birthday parties at the roller rink, the chocolate chip cookies she baked just for me, and the pink Huffy ten-speed I got for Christmas. She never read past the words in that report, never understood what the things we said meant beyond how it painted her image.

My brain finally stops twisting. I put the lid back on the cookie jar and slide into the sleep woven for me by the Sandman. He shows me flashes of women crawling out of attics and sitting in bar stools, wedding bands stashed in their pockets like smuggled contraband. They surround me, play "Coward of the County" on the jukebox, and turn their tongues into double-edged swords. They are trying to crack my chocolate shell. I lie in the middle of their circle, singing a litany for their forgiveness. Their tongues carve my flesh into spiral worms like a carpenter planes a piece of maple. I wake up choking on a scream. It's three in the morning and I can't go back to sleep.

I wander downstairs, flip on the television, automatically punching the buttons for MTV. They're showing reruns of *Headbangers Ball*. Metallica's "Unforgiven" pulses out of the screen and I watch a withered old man scratch at walls without doors, looking for escape. I wonder if I will always think of my mother as the woman on the bar stool, hands curled around a sweaty glass, never willing to forgive. I wonder if I'll follow in her footsteps.



Delineate

Geoffrey Mills

over joe we sit
under loose bits
of discourse
spread in spans
of hours and
volumes

we learn

about
the other
my love
we begin
to see our
worlds collide

and our lives
start here
my love
you should
be aware
that to
touch souls
we must bare

our selves

unim-pressed
My love
is flowing
to you
my love
to you alone

forever

will
we sit
over joe
and we
insult
the day
to see

just why

we need
to be
here
to-
get-
her
to be

whole

together
and torn
again
we part
to re-
arrange
our love

to make *strong*

remove
your eyes
my love
and to bed
we go
forgive me
dear

I am but one

but you
deserve
more

The Color of Coffee

Oana Nechita

The color of coffee: the only cow in grandpa's barn where my sister and I used to pick up manure from to cover the cracks in the walls of the house;

The color of coffee: the eyes of the dog who found food in garbage cans behind the house, and who was poisoned by the man living on the first floor;

The color of coffee: the skin of circumcised boys, playing drums at sunrise, in a ritual of manhood, on the cover of *National Geographic*;

The color of coffee: the leather belt my mother beat me up with because of my handwriting when I was six, and I couldn't sit down for days, each night she came to kiss me to sleep;

The color of coffee: the couch where my sister lay during her first period, abdomen aching, breasts hard like two unripe apples;

The color of coffee: the wooden counter at the night bar where my father could have ruined himself, gone mad, or committed a crime.



Bruised

Amanda Chiampi

She threw her arm over her face and slept on her bed, prisoner of her own spiraling thoughts.

She felt the box that confined her, secure lid, smooth cold metal walls. The phantoms that swirled around her were the only company she had, the only contact, the only warmth. She tore at the walls, nails screeching down the blue steel. She screamed until her throat burned out like dying fire light. She stopped beating off the memories. She tore off her clothes and threw up her arms. A benediction for the dying. With naked flesh risen in small lumps, from cold sterile metal, she screamed. And she just stood there, maintaining existence, as they raped her. Her past pinned her down. Red marks on her wrists from strong fingers. She remembered hands, fingers. The exact width, short nails, gnawed and chewed to alleviate boredom. She wanted it. And the ghosts obliged. A memory violated everything. Her eyes went crazy, crazy as she saw faces. Her body thrashed as she felt his touch, so real it almost cleansed her. She tried to rip off her ears as she heard voices, words, promises, lies, screams, screams, SCREAMS, wailing, and crying. She couldn't beg, she couldn't scream, cry, pray, pray, pray, pray because his lips covered her mouth. He breathed through her.

Physical pain. Welcome luxury. No one was there to torment her flesh. Ghosts provide a more complex torture. She begged for pain. She needed pure blood, blue stained bruised flesh, a physical scar.

Megan woke up, cursing herself for being able to think. Her sheets were soaked with her nightmare, cold and alone. The dreams started a month ago. Her nightly torture sessions, her subconscious made her remember the pain. She refused to go back on the sleeping pills her doctor had given her. She was a survivor and she would get through this without the help of some chemically induced sleep. Megan pushed her short auburn hair out of her face, got out of bed stepping over the pillows and blankets that lay strewn on the floor and walked over to her desk. She picked up a pencil, and looked at her list of Things To Do: 1)buy fish food, 2)pay credit card bill, 3)dinner with Sarah. Megan added a word to the list: lobotomy.

Megan walked over to the closet and pulled out the shoe box. She ran her still shaking hand over the lid. She forced herself to look through it every morning. Megan thought it would help the healing process, make things easier. She lay her hands on the lid, her mouth

opened. She whispered, "strength." She could already see the picture in her mind. Mouth half opened, eyes smiling, black hair and his stupid 'Runs with scissors' T-shirt. He wore that shirt the day he said forever.

It was mid February and it had yet to snow. Megan always loved snow and had mentioned a few weeks earlier that she was planning to whoop his ass in a snow ball fight the first minute the flakes touched the ground. He showed up at her apartment at five in the morning, grabbed some of her clothes, shoved them in a bag, and blind folded Megan.

"What are you doing? We can have kinky sex tonight if you want, I have to work in four hours," Megan said groggily.

"Nope, you have mono and won't be into to work for a while. And blind folds are far from kinky, just fun."

"Aaron," she whined.

"Oh come on, it's a surprise." The goofy smile on his face won her over.

"Okay, but do I have to wear the blind fold?"

He snickered. "I suppose you don't have to. We'll just save it for later."

Megan knew better than to argue, he had a plan and he intended to stick to it.

Eight hours later they were in Vermont, knee deep in snow. He watched her make snow angels and smiled.

Megan grinned and lobbed a snowball at Aaron. "What are you doing over there? To chicken shit too take me on huh?"

"Quite the contrary little miss snow queen. I was just thinking that you are the only way I want to spend forever."

It was impossible not to love him. Aaron was everything Megan was on the edge of being. He was extreme and she thrived off it. He pushed her to excel, he caused her to reevaluate.

She peeked under the lid and there it was, one of the many pictures of him. The box was filled with silly poses of the two of them together. Her throat closed up and she quickly replaced the lid before she started to cry. Megan stifled her tears and told herself she was fine.

Sarah picked Megan up at 7:30 in her new BMW, compliments of her parents for finishing up her Masters degree. Megan fiddled with the radio while Sarah babbled on about her father's newest money making scam. Sarah was always embarrassed about her parent's wealth. She worried people would never be able to see past it and Megan teased her relentlessly about it. They pulled into Basie's Bar & Grille. Megan winced. Basie's was where she had first met Aaron.

“Oh my God! I am such an idiot!” Sarah’s face turned bright red. “Megan I am so sorry, I didn’t even think.”

“Sarah it is okay. I am not some fragile China doll everyone has to cradle and treat gently. I love Basie’s. We always ate here, I see no reason to change things just because of Aaron.”

Sarah and Megan had finished their dinner and sat talking over coffee. Sarah cocked her head to one side and peered intently at Megan.

“So, how is the social life?”

Megan groaned. “You sound like my mother. No, I am not seeing anyone.” She stared back down into her coffee. It was black. Megan picked up a half and half and poured it in as an attempt to raise her spirits. The cream swirled around the black liquid until it blended into a light brown. “And please don’t start with the ‘Don’t you think it’s time you got back out there?’ pep talk. I am getting there. Day by day is the way I have to go for now.”

“Come off it Megan, you know I wouldn’t pull that on you. You’ll date when you are ready. Hell, I can’t even begin to imagine how you must feel.” Sarah tugged at her brown hair and looked back up at Megan. “It’s just that I worry about you. I don’t want you to just sit in your apartment and think all day.”

Megan laughed. “Don’t worry, I get out. The hermit position in Tibet that I was holding out for has been filled so I had to get a real job. I don’t know if you have heard of it, seeing as how your parents are loaded and can afford to support you for the rest of your life.”

Sarah’s face screwed up as she put on her best hurt look. “Don’t be mean Megan!”

Sarah sipped at her mocha that had been doctored with about six sugar packets. “You know if you are having problems sleeping coffee is the last thing you should be drinking.” She was back on the mother kick. “Are you still having those dreams?”

“Yeah, I haven’t figured out which I like better, insomnia or nightmares.” She shuddered as she remembered his face. She heard his voice in her head and wanted to scream.

“Have you figured out why? I mean why would he do that to you? How could he do that to you? I always thought he was a little edgy but,” her voice trailed off.

Megan fell off into the abyss as she remembered. She closed her eyes and there he was. Pissed off at the world. He wanted everything without effort. He always took her opinion into consideration but she knew he wanted her to comply. Maybe she shouldn’t have been so defiant, she loved to beat him at his own game. Maybe she should have

let him have his way. Maybe it was her fault. She could hear the screaming again. Maybe it was her fault. It rang in her ears, echoed through her head. She never could tell if it was her own or his.

Megan looked back up at Sarah. "I don't know. You know how he was, he liked things his way and never felt that he had to explain to anyone." She stared back down at her coffee. She tried not to remember it. "I mean, maybe it was something I did. I just feel like I should have known."

Sarah dropped Megan back off at her apartment later that night. She hurried into the building. She felt uncomfortable in her own skin. She fiddled with her keys and locked the door behind her. She was shaking again. She shrugged off her jacket and threw herself onto the couch. The orange street lights from outside illuminated the room with an eerie glow. She was too tired to move but too awake to sleep. She closed her eyes and her head began to swim again. Megan felt the cold knot in her stomach and a chill ran up her body. She felt like lead. She couldn't move. She smelled him. She couldn't move. She opened her eyes and there he was.

Aaron stood by the window with a wicked smile. He lit up a cigarette. He blew a perfect smoke ring and winked at Megan.

"Hey there sweet thing," he whispered.

"They'll kill ya, you know." She missed the way he used to pronounce her name Mee-gan. She missed his soft touch. She should have known.

Aaron just smiled as he shrugged his shoulders.

Megan closed her eyes. "Aaron, why?" She waited for an answer but none came. She fell away from herself again and heard the gun shot ring through her head. Everything was red. Megan pulled herself back and opened her eyes. He was gone, only the orange glow remained. Maybe it was her fault. She swore softly. She couldn't go on like this. She had been jumping at every noise for the past three months. She should have known. She needed to know. She grabbed her keys and her coat and headed down the street to her car.

It was one o'clock when Megan pulled into the Terryton Methodist Church parking lot. She cut the engine and sat, staring at her hands. They shook visibly. She took a deep breath and got out of the car. She had to know.

She climbed the white picket fence and weaved her way around head stones and flowers until she found the dark granite that bore his

name, "Here rests Aaron Stone, loved in life and death. January 16, 1973 - March 23, 1997." It had been about six months since she had been here, about six months since Aaron killed himself. They had been together for two and a half years when he did it. He had taken a gun and blown his brains out. He left no note. He lied. He cut out on life, on her. Megan stared at the headstone.

"Why? What did I do to deserve this?" Tears streamed down her face as she sank onto her knees. "Damn it Aaron, answer me! Why the hell did you leave me?"

Megan had no explanation, only ghosts.

Woman

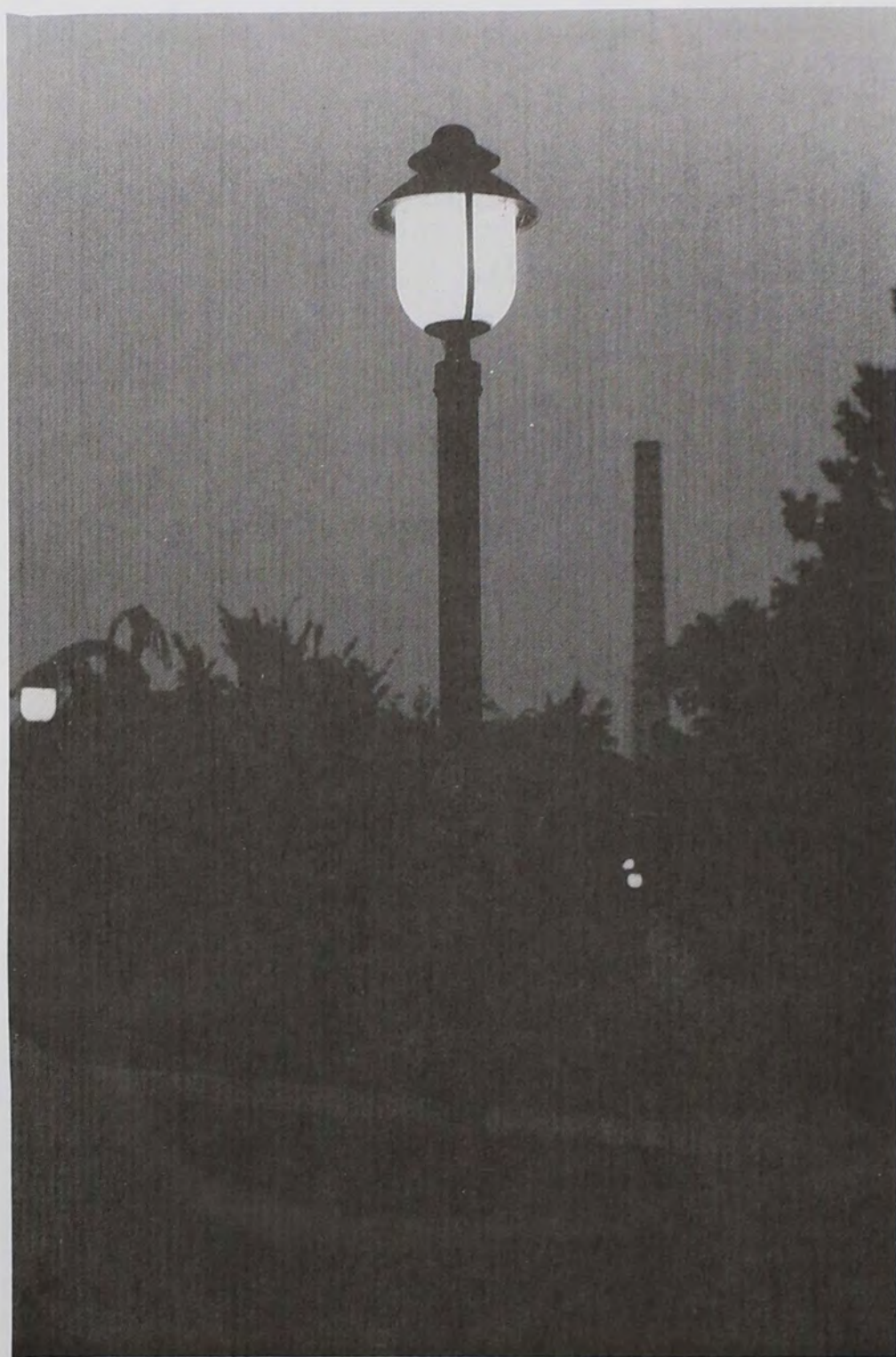
Jennifer Zwilling

Woman... confusion... feeling
reaction... apathy... destruction
time... weakness... earth...
... Love... sex... strength... li
freedom... fear... slave... power.
... pain... hate... frust
ppiness... mother... si
lover... ang... goddess... devil
... beauty... life... death..
nth... child... daughter... we
nature... art... color... knowledge
oon... body... union... chasm...
thought... ignorance... wonder.
weakness... human... fantasy



Nightlight

Lou Nemphos



A Memory

Jeffrey Church

I

I have failed you, papa.
My subtle painter's hand
Cannot trace the difficult lines
Of the world.

(Laugh-- It makes it easier)

II

With failure comes deceit,
With laughter comes the feet
Of drying bitter bones.

(Drying bitter bones?)

The feet of drying bitter bones
Eluding the piercing moans
Of the sad fingers of the rain.

It is the sultry sweat that shakes
A man to laughter, which
 Rakes and takes and makes
His eyes and ears and tongue and face
Limp.
For the man is not under an umbrella--
A black oasis cursing away the
Sad fingers of the rain.

But failure as the simple train,
Mighty and strange,
Gasping its own innards into the sky;
Passengers sullen and sane
Scamper along their modest lies and sighs
And try to jump from the jittery train
Into the drowning rain,
Frowning with five fingers.

(And eyes and ears and tongue and face?)

And eyes and ears and tongue and face.

III

I live for the lure of the long
Dreams, wan and sullenly song-
Like, nestled in the deep damp
Hills, humid with the tears
Of a poet,
Who, like an unshaven beggar, fears
The concrete abstraction of

Beauty.

A black train whistles by the hills,
Train tracks gnawing on the falling rain
Saturated, defeated before the hills.

Though the hills still resound and blaze
With dappled will-o-the-wisp dreams,
Like tiny dryads hiding, chiding by the moonlit haze,
The mute train still wails its freezing call,
Choking smoke dreams silently maul
Those dryads dissolving with terror,
Or arising with resolve?

I cannot see nor imagine.
I could once.

(Where did your vision go?)

IV

O, to be unable to now bask in the light
Of the dream children running among
The mountains of illimitable success.

But I am complacent.

For to lie in the terrible glory of achieved dreams
Is to be the wax burning on the wings of Icarus,

The gold lord Midas weeping and rejoicing,
Agamemnon victorious returning for a blood kiss.

The thrill and security of myopia is
My wool coat in the winter twilight.

V

I have spent my life trying to scale
Those hills and being weary of that train,
When all I need now is to squint at the hills
And be nestled by distance,
Painted by the fingers of the rain.



Accident Prone

Lou Nemphos

“Do you know how I know John loves me?” Nicole said. “He holds my hands, even when they are sweaty.”

Ugh, sweaty hands, Pete thought. Now I know at least she’s not perfect, but man alive, she sure looked it. Pete glanced at her, but then quickly focused his eyes onto the road. The fog was thick as they drove through Valley Forge Park.

“Are we going off the top of the world tonight?” Pete asked. Bennett’s hill, better known as the top of the world, was a treacherous hill in the park. He was hoping she would say “No.” Pete was the only person he had ever met who admitted he was a bad driver. He failed his driver’s test three times. He just couldn’t pay attention to the road. Especially not tonight with Nicole in the car.

“Sure.”

Pete sighed and turned right. Nicole had just started working at the United Artists Queen Four theater just last month, but, right of the bat, they clicked. They were both superstitious hyperrealists. They both loved Fritz Lang’s *M*, the God awful Minnesota Twins, and spending countless hours just hanging out at Valley Forge Park. They even shared the same birthday, July 6th, and though they didn’t live on the same street, they both had the same three digit address, 576. She was the one. Everyone at work ragged on him, and Pete thought they secretly suspected he was gay because they couldn’t believe he hadn’t put the moves on her. He gave her rides to work because she recently ran a stop sign and totaled her mom’s Nissan Maxima. He didn’t mind. He actually liked having someone to drive with.

Nicole slowly took off her sweater to reveal a tight, skimpy T-shirt. She had the most incredible cleavage.

“It’s really hot in the car,” she said.

“Uhhh...I can lower the heat.” He turned the heater off. He was freezing. All he was wearing was a dark green T-shirt. Pete looked at his skinny goose pimpled arms. Damn, he needed to lift some weights.

“What’s the first thing you noticed about me when you met me?” Nicole said coyly. She had now curled into a ball and was looking at him. “John said it was my eyes.”

Her knockers! Her bazooms! Her biggins! He wanted to lay his head between her monstrous melons, but Pete knew he had to play it cool.

“To be honest, it was your personality.” Damn. He had to play it cool.

They slowly chugged up the incline as Pete pressed the gas. They went over the peak of the hill and quickly descended down the other side. Pete’s defroster wasn’t working too well, and he couldn’t see where he was going. The road went right, Pete went left and was headed towards a metal post. He slammed on his anti-lock brakes and barely avoided the pole. They drove into a grassy field.

“Damn,” Pete said. “That was close.” He turned to see Nicole gasping for breath. Not thinking, he put his arm around her to calm her down. Shit. Take your hands off her. She’s got a boyfriend. She slowly wrapped her hands around him. They embraced.

“Are you alright?” Pete asked. “Tell me that you are alright. We’re not going anywhere until you’re alright.” Pete pulled back and their eyes met. Pete quickly diverted his eyes.

“Yeah. I just need some air.” She opened the door and got out of the car. Pete was quick to follow. The pitch-black darkness blanketed the night sky. She walked over and rested her head on his chest.

“I feel better now, thanks,” Nicole said. “Let’s go. John is probably waiting for me.”

Pete slowly opened the door for her. She looked at him, got in, and began to buckle her seat belt. He walked around to the other side of the car and unlocked his door. He cursed himself under his breath and got in.

“You know how you can tell if a girl likes you,” Pete said. “If when you open the door for her, she unlocks your door from the inside. I saw that in *A Bronx Tale*. You know, the one with Robert De Niro.” Nicole gave no reply. Real smooth Romeo, Pete thought as he started the car. They drove off.

“Damn, my legs are shaking,” Pete said. She put her hand on his thigh. He tried to flex the impotent muscle.

“Where? Let me see.”

Pete knew he had to make his move. They arrived at her house. John’s black Ford Explorer was nowhere in sight.

“Work was fun tonight,” Nicole said. “I’m getting Shawn to change my schedule so I can work with you every night.”

“Hey, what are you doing tomorrow afternoon?” Pete said. “I’m going to check out this movie called *Waiting for Guffman*. You want to go?”

“I can’t. I’ve got class.”

“‘Til what time?”

"I've got class until 4:30."

"Well, call me sometime when you, have no class." Pete chuckled.

Nicole just stared at him.

"Uhhh...That's from Back to School," Pete said. "You know, Rodney Dangerfield."

Her expression didn't change.

"We're still on for tomorrow, right?" Pete said. "I mean, after work and all. I was talking to Aaron at work tonight about bowling tomorrow and he said he was down."

"Definitely. Pick me up at 5:45."

He put his hand on the armrest, hoping to brush against hers. It did. They clasped hands and looked at each other. Pete just stared with the words on the tip of his tongue.

"We're best mates, right?" Nicole said.

"Yeah, best mates." She let go of his hand. She got out of the car and disappeared into the darkness. Pete drove home.

Pete picked up Nicole the next day and they drove to work.

"John brought me a rose yesterday," Nicole said. "He's such a sweetie. Our one year anniversary is next week." She put the rose on the dashboard and ruffled through her dufflebag.

Why does she do this to me? Quit messing with me, Pete thought as he pulled into the Queen's parking lot. He parked the car.

"But I don't know if I love him," she said.

"Do you tell him you love him?"

"Yes. But I don't know if I mean it."

"Well I don't know if you love him. I've never even met the guy. All I know that his dad coached my little league baseball team."

Pete had played on the Atlanta Braves with John's older brother, Robbie, when he was nine. Pete never liked Robbie because his jaw was broken by a curve ball and then everyone in the league had to wear face guards that made them look like astronauts. Their dad, Mike Timbario, was the coach.

Stop talking about him to me. I hate this guy and I've never even met him.

"The way you talk about him it seems like he's the one for you," Pete said.

"Break yourself fool," Aaron said as he loudly pounded on the car window.

"Shit, man. You scared me," Pete said as he got out of the car. The theater didn't open until 6:30, but there was a line forming by the

door and it wasn't even 6:00 yet. They had two new movies, *Chasing Amy* and *Anaconda*. It was going to be a busy night.

Nicole went into the box office to sell tickets and Pete was given the easy task of the door, which consisted of ripping tickets, and when not ripping tickets, watching snippets of the movies. Crackhead Bob, the 41-year old Chuck Norris look-a-like who usually worked the door had called out sick. It was just Pete, Nicole, Aaron, and Shawn, their manager, tonight. The first show went in, and the lobby was basically empty. Aaron walked over, playfully punched him on the shoulder.

"Yo, man. That hurt," Pete whimpered.

Aaron widely grinned at Pete. "Well, did you make your move?"

"No. She has a boyfriend. Anyway, it's not like that. We're just friends."

"Forget that shit man. You can tell by the way she looks at you she's interested. I know these things. Now quit being such a pussy and get some."

Aaron did know these things. He had just turned 22 years old and was credited with sleeping with at least 75 women. Everyday he worked, he would tell Pete another story about how he was with two women, or with strippers. Pete didn't want to hear those stories. Pete wanted to hear the stories where Aaron reached into a girl's pants and grapped a big nut sac. His reply to that was, "If it happened, you'd never know because he'd be dead." Pete had worked at the Queen for over two years, and he was yet to get a phone number, having been shot down numerous times. Aaron got a different number every night, and half the time he would leave with her.

Pete tore some tickets of late stragglers for *Chasing Amy* and started again. "Listen. I am perfectly happy with just hanging out with her. What is everyone's obsession with me having to get physical with her. I don't need to get physical with Nicole. We have the mental connection. She's like a sister to me." Pete couldn't have said anything further from the truth.

"I wonder about you, man. I think you're playing for the wrong team."

"Listen, just because I'm secure enough in my masculinity to say that Antonio Banderas or Matt Dillon is a good looking guy, doesn't mean I'm gay."

"I'm just saying that it's not right. She wants you. I wouldn't be telling you if she didn't. If she wanted her man so much then why is she always with you?"

"Because we are just friends. If I was a girl, would people think we were hooking up?"

"No, but it's different. You're not a girl as far as I know and I think your door only swings one way."

"Look. Even if I did like her, and I don't, mind you, I wouldn't tell her because it would put her in an awkward situation."

"The only way it would be awkward is if she liked you, and didn't do anything about it. Just tell her that you have feelings for her and you care about her. If she doesn't feel that way and doesn't want to be your friend because she says it's awkward, then she's not really your friend."

"Crrrrr, Pete." It was Shawn on the walkie-talkie. "Get the mop, someone threw up in theater three."

Pete wheeled the mop and bucket to the theater thinking about what Aaron said. Pete knew he didn't have anything to lose.

The rest of the evening was uneventful, and Pete couldn't wait to get out of there. All of the shows had gone in and now they were cleaning the concession stand. Pete got stuck cleaning the popper and he burned his hand on the hot metal.

"Damn," Pete said. "I didn't think that it would be that hot."

"Here, let me see," Nicole said. She stopped cleaning the counters and took his arm. She blew on his hand. It felt good. She kissed it.

"There, all better."

Aaron gave him a look and laughed while Shawn made a blow job gesture. Pete shot an ice cold stare and went back to cleaning the popper. The front doors opened and a slender, tall, young man walked through the double glass doors.

"We're closed," Pete said as Nicole ran from behind the counter and hugged the stranger.

She brought him over to the counter where Pete was standing.

"Pete, this is John," Nicole purred.

Just from looking at him, Pete could tell that he was genuinely a nice guy, not to mention that he was a really good looking guy. There was no way Pete could compete with this guy. John was like John Travolta and Pete was like John Merrick.

"Hey, what's the good word?" Pete said as he stuck out his hand. John smiled and shook his hand.

"Heard a lot about you," John said.

"Only good things I hope," Pete said with a smile, which quickly turned to a frown after he realized how dumb what he just said was.

"Come on John, let's go outside," Nicole said.

Nicole and John went outside, hand in hand and Pete went back to cleaning.

"Yo Pete," Aaron said, "He was staring you down as he was walking out."

"Who?" Pete asked. "John? He seems like a really nice guy. He deserves Nicole."

Pete got popcorn grease and thick, coagulated butter all over his black, purple, and teal uniform as he feebly attempted to clean the popper. To make matters worse he slipped and ran into the ice machine in the support room and pulled his groin. He couldn't wait to go home.

When she came back in, Pete was almost finished with the popper.

"Aren't you going out with him?" Pete asked.

"No. He's going to some party that I don't want to go to," Nicole said. "Anyway, we made plans, remember?"

They clocked out and exited into the cool winter air. It was just the two of them because Aaron had made plans with a new found lady friend. Pete unlocked her door and opened it for her. As he circled the car, Nicole leaned over and unlocked his door from the inside. He tried to stretch his pulled muscle, hesitated, then opened the door.

"See, I opened the door for you." Then she laughed.

They didn't really feel like going anywhere, so they just drove around. It was a good thing because Pete was really hurting for cash. He looked at his last ATM receipt which read \$0.38. Nicole suggested there was a place somewhere in Valley Forge Park where you could see all of King of Prussia. After a number of wrong turns and backtracks they found Valley Forge mountain. There was an empty dead end which overlooked the town. Pete parked, turned the car off, but left the radio on. They sat in the darkness listening. The song, "Bizarre Love Triangle," by *New Order*, came onto the radio and Pete quickly changed the station.

"I love that song. Turn it back, please." Nicole said.

He reluctantly turned the radio dial and the words had not yet kicked in. Nicole turned up the volume.

"Can you explain this song to me?" Nicole asked.

Pete listened to the words.

Every time I think of you, I feel a shock right through with a bolt of blue. It's no problem of mine, but it's a problem I find. Living a life that I can't leave behind.

"Well," Pete stammered. "It's about this guy who has fallen in love with this girl, but he doesn't want to admit it. And basically he's

saying that he can't forget about it." He looked at her and could see his reflection in her eyes.

But that's the way that it goes and it's what nobody knows, well everyday my confusion grows.

"And...He's getting some mixed signals from the girl, but he's not sure if she likes him as a friend or as...more."

Pete gnawed at his fingers, trying to bite his nails. He had no nails left, so he began to chew on the tips of his fingers. The chorus kicked in.

Every time I see you falling, I get down on my knees and pray. I'm waiting for that final moment you say the words that I can't say.

"So basically this guy has fallen in love with this girl, but you know, he's afraid and he doesn't want to impose, so he can't bring himself to tell her how he feels. The only way they're going to get together is if she says the words because he's too chicken shit to say them."

You are so retarded. He knew Wilt Chamberlain never had these problems. He was staring at the outline of the steering wheel. He could feel her eyes on him.

I'm not sure what this could mean. I don't think you're what you seem. I do admit to myself that if I hurt someone else, then I'll never see just what we were meant to be.

"He's not really sure how she feels. And this guy's a pretty decent guy, and as the title of the song indicates, it's a love triangle, so the guy doesn't want to hurt her boyfriend. It wouldn't be right. Basically the girl's got to ditch her boyfriend before anything between the two of them can happen."

The song was over and Pete changed the station only to hear R. Kelly crooning, "*I don't see nothing wrong, with a little bump and grind.*"

Nicole turned off the radio and got out of the car. Once again, Pete readily followed. They walked through someone's backyard and Pete sat on a swing which overlooked all of King of Prussia. The bright lights of the city glimmered in the crisp air. The view was breathtaking. Nicole was behind Pete leaning against a tree smoking. Nicole walked over from where she was and put her hands on Pete's shoulders. Pete jerked back, startled. She walked around to face him and slowly descended onto his lap.

No! Pete thought as now a different muscle in his groin was now pulled. He tried to think of Bea Arthur naked, but even that didn't work. She plopped down on his lap as he unsuccessfully tried to hide his raging hard-on. He wrapped his arms around her as they sat in silence. As they got up, their eyes met. They kissed, and Pete's mouth was

overwhelmed by the minty freshness of her Icebreakers gum. They looked at each other and hugged tightly.

She then led Pete to his Pontiac Sunfire in the vacant dead end. She climbed into the back seat. Damn, Pete thought. That's a tiny back seat. He recalled when he, his mom, and his dad went car shopping. He mentioned the tiny back seat, but their reasoning was that Pete would never be in the back seat, and that time, that was a good argument. He would have to make do. She began to take her shirt off as Pete remembered about the warm wool blanket he had in the trunk that his mom got him when she went to Las Vegas. She was always complaining about how he never wore a coat, so if he ever broke down and it was cold, he would always have the blanket. He opened it and frantically searched the surprisingly roomy trunk, but the blanket wasn't there. Instead, there was a giant Garfield sheet that Pete used when he was younger. Anything is better than nothing, Pete thought as he balled the sheet up.

He awkwardly got into the car and they kissed. Pete tried to wedge his hand down the front of her jeans, but they were too tight. She abruptly pushed him away.

"Stop it," Nicole said. She quickly exited the car. Damn, what were you thinking? She has a boyfriend. Now he's going to kick your ass. Maybe she had to go to the bathroom. Pete knew she was gone. He buttoned his pants and flopped into the driver's seat when Nicole re-entered the car. She wasn't wearing any pants.

"It was too hard to get my pants off in the car," she said.

There really is a God, Pete thought as he took off his shirt. Pete spent the next five minutes unsuccessfully trying to pull his jeans over his sneakers as Nicole nestled herself in the back seat.

He managed to get his pants off after removing his sneakers when he glanced at his boxer shorts. He quickly tried to cover them with the Garfield sheet. He cursed under his breath, vowing to never let his mom buy his boxers again.

"Let me see," Nicole said removing the sheet.

Pete blushed, and his blue and white tablecloth checkered drawers were revealed. What was worse was they had a guy on them wearing an apron and a chef's hat, smiling and flipping burgers. Maybe Don Juan had blue and white tablecloth checkered underwear with a guy flipping burgers, Pete thought. Maybe not. Nicole suppressed a laugh and grabbed at the elastic.

"Do you have any protection?" Nicole asked.

Whoo-Hoo!!!

Pete furiously grabbed his jeans and dug into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He tore hungrily at the Trojan wrapper. He pulled out the condom, but it was dry and brittle. It had been a long time.

"No," Pete said.

"I think I have one." She leaned into the passenger's seat and ruffled through her duffle bag. Like an angel from heaven, she came to him.

"Here," Nicole said.

As they embraced Nicole's voice wavered, "Why are you doing this to me?" Pete tried to break her grasp, but she pulled him in tighter.

Sex had always been awkward for Pete because he worried more about his performance than his enjoyment. With Nicole it was different. He let go of his inhibitions and felt comfortable for the first time.

"My mom...she doesn't...Awww...go ahead," Pete said as Nicole lit a cigarette. His mom's number one rule was that no one was allowed to smoke in the car, but at that moment, Pete thought all the rules were meant to be broken. She handed him the Camel Light as he inhaled deeply, the smoke tickled his lungs as he stifled a cough. This was the first cigarette he had in two years and he could not remember one ever tasting this good. The sun was coming up and colored the sky like a bruise.

"I've never felt like this before," Nicole said.

"Like what?" Pete said.

"Completely at ease and comfortable. Whenever I'm with John, I have to put on this act because he's just so smart and great looking. I feel intimidated by him. But when I'm with you, I can be myself and I know you'll love me for who I am. Not who I pretend to be."

Did she just say love? All right, you've got to be smooth.

"Uhhh...well, I picture myself a lot like Lloyd Dobler from everyone's favorite romantic comedy, *Say Anything*. All you have to do now is give me a pen." Pete laughed.

"I never saw it."

Casanova is rolling over in his grave, Pete thought.

"Oh."

"John's really jealous of you. He says you're going to steal me away from him."

"Get out of here. Why in the world would John think something like--" but Pete became quiet, already knowing the answer to his question.

The car ride to her house was silent, and there was no exchange

of good-byes. She left the rose on the dashboard. He stared at it most of the way home. Love sucked.

He looked at his watch. It read 6:12. He tried to go to sleep, but he couldn't. For all intents and purposes, time had stopped. To make the time pass, Pete even set his watch ahead an hour. He had to call her. He had to tell her how he felt. He would tell her she was the reason he got up in the morning and she was the reason he couldn't sleep at night. He would tell her she filled his heaven with stars. He would tell her he loved her, but he couldn't stand the guilt. He would make her choose. Little did Pete know, the decision would be made for her.

Pete went downstairs and his dad was sitting at the kitchen table reading the *Times Herald*. Pete looked at the clock. It read 9:19.

"What are you doing up so early?" Pete's dad said. He took a sip of his black coffee.

"I thought it was later than that," Pete said. The few moments of sleep he garnered were sweaty and unfulfilling.

"Hey, remember you used to play baseball with Robbie Timbario?"

Pete, who was puring himself a cup of coffee, froze.

"Did you know his younger brother John?"

How did his dad know?

"He died yesterday. He was driving through Valley Forge Park, going 70, driving like a maniac. He crashed into a metal post and rolled his Explorer, died instantly. You've got to wonder what was going through that boy's head to drive over Bennett's hill like that. You've got to be careful these days. Here today, gone tomorrow. It really makes you think." Pete's dad took another sip of his coffee and began again. "The paper said the last place he was seen before the accident was at Faceda-Whitaker. The weird thing is that witnesses say that he just ran in and ran out, like he was looking for someone. Didn't you go bowling last night? I thought maybe you saw him."

His dad threw the paper on the table. Pete turned and his eyes scanned the headline. TRAGIC ACCIDENT TAKES THE LIFE OF LOCAL TEEN. His dad got up from the table and began to walk upstairs.

"The wake's tomorrow."

Pete stood motionless as tears streamed down his face. His Twins coffee mug fell out of his hands and shattered against the kitchen floor. A shard of ceramic mug became embedded in his foot. Blood and searing coffee slowly spread across the kitchen tile, but Pete was still.

Pete went to the wake alone and sat in the last row, last seat. He saw a bunch of childhood friends, but said nothing to them. He just sat staring at John. He wanted to walk up and apologize to him. He wanted to whisper in his ear that he was sorry. Nicole was there and Pete saw her. She didn't see him. He watched her walk out of the funeral home and he followed. Nicole was halfway to her car when Pete called out to her. She turned, and saw him. Their eyes locked. She quickly looked away. He took her hands in his. They were warm and moist, covered with sweat, but now Pete took comfort in that. He knew this was the last time he would ever see her.

"You've got to do me a favor. Promise me you'll do this. Promise you will stay as beautiful as you are now."

She let go and got into her car. Pete watched her drive off. He distinctly heard the sound of his heart breaking.

Nicole never came back to the Queen. She didn't even bother to pick up her last paycheck. He heard sometime later that she had moved to Michigan with her mother. Pete woke up everyday, thinking about someone who would never wake up again.



Nevermore

Paul Guidry



August Snapshots

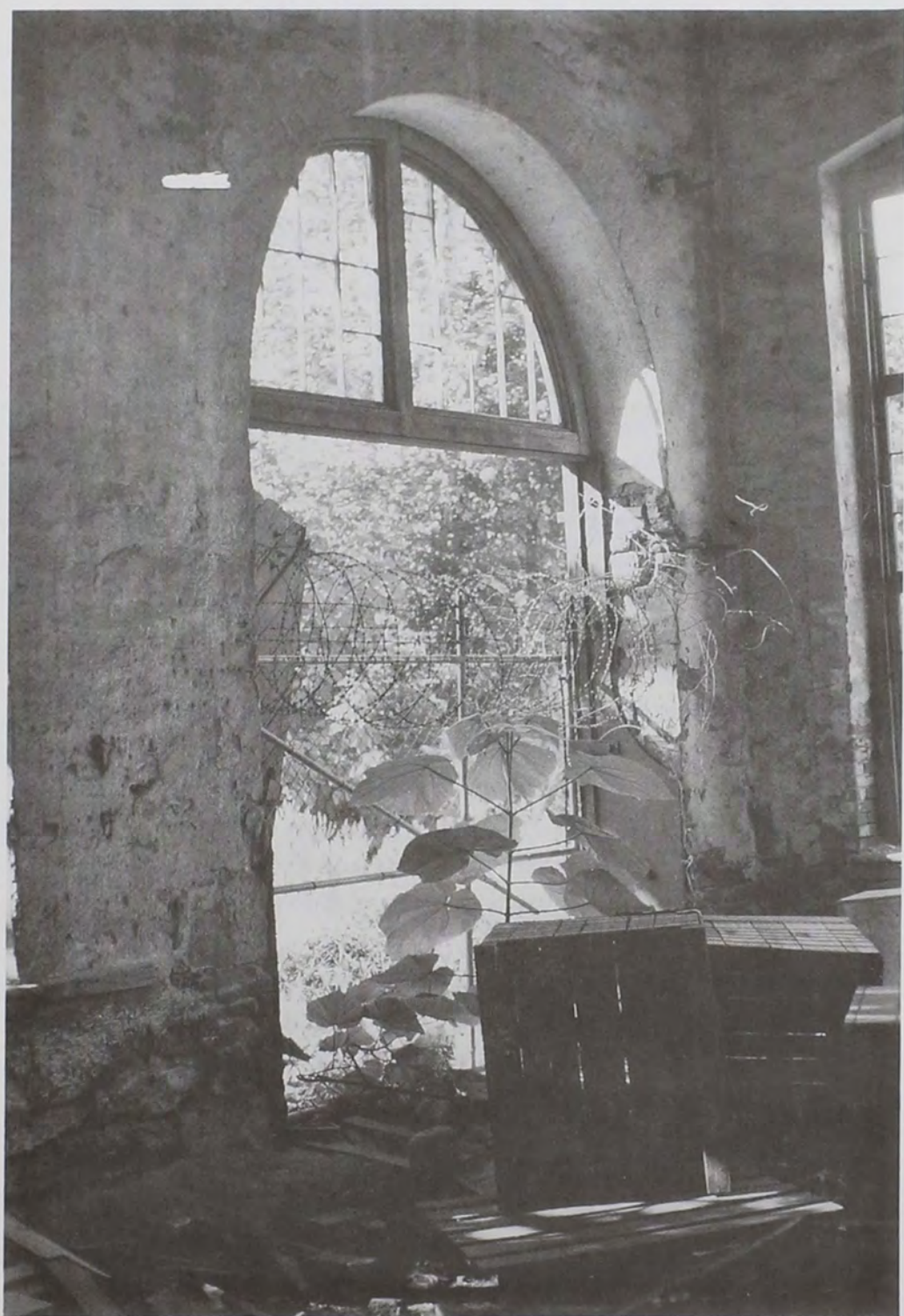
Andrew Gerchak

The photo captured gray sky
as it met metallic shine of ocean.
Two boys, backs to the shore,
waist deep in white explosions
while walls of water tumble toward them.

*Mom wouldn't let Mike go in without me
for fear she'd lose him to the current.*

Tonight she cries alone,
hands pressed against the window
as her children pull out of the driveway.

*Don't worry, Mom. We're not gone yet,
just out a little deeper.*



The Eulogy and Judgment of My Friend, the Philosophe

Chris Cocca

Genuine trademark and bubblegum sun;
Perpetuated sellout with a rubber-band gun
Rich and funny Philosophe, judge me once again

Worship in the morning, greet the bright new day
Question all but anyone, if no one ever stays

Pedestal and personal, trophies will adorn,
Eager fools and forlorn friends,
whose mother is the morn
Steam train track and yellow soul, the subway never ends

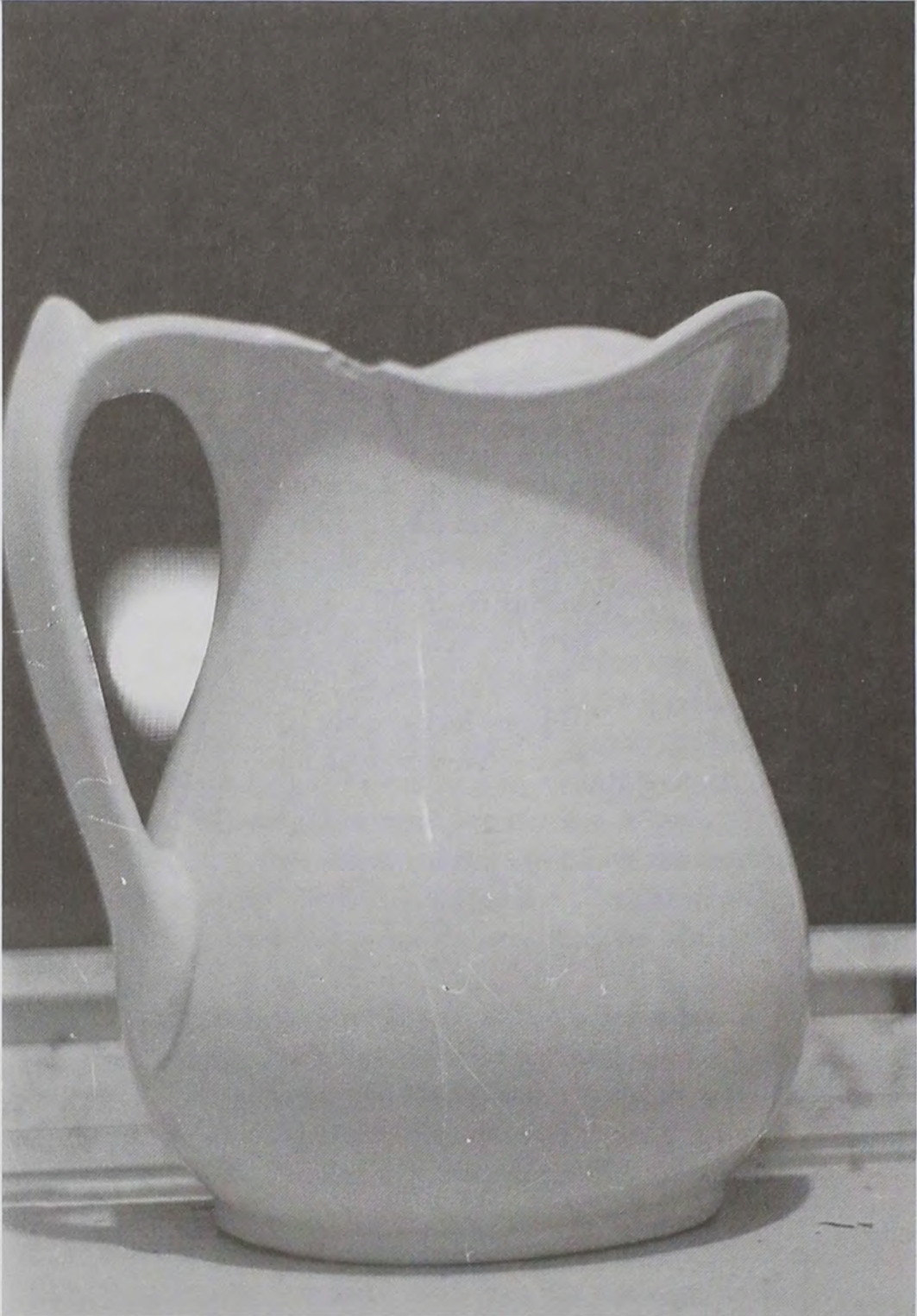
Altar in the glass, wisdom from the hearth
Never knew but anyone who dies a natural birth
Thought anew recycled norm radical and long
Whoring from a philosophe and drive the beatnik bong
Wonderful and watery and plentiful as well
Swimming in a drowning sink fond and happy hell
Dealers broken brokage dealt unconscious living time
Dry ice eyes and blinders, jelly helmet spine
Reaction caught in rapid jam berry as it spread
Thought in style short and hair, vision on the bed
Soapbox derby bowler hat feared and thought unreal
Other entry out at once, scorn red suffer zeal

Get behind me philosophe sinking slowly sand
Before the noon tide heat gives off a penny for this land
Cottage sinking quaint and laugh houses no more thought
And you my starving philosophe seem now quite distraught
And Someone said: "Ponder wallow this and that or come now to
the end

Enter not the promised land which glimmers 'round the bend
You traveled no more forty years than did you night or day
Go on now stupid philosophe, but your companion, he can stay"
"I do not understand you sir, I figured it all out, but come one day
it fell away and lent my thought to doubt."

“And did you, then, lost philosophe, give in to gnawing need?”
“No sir, I most certainly was not, I thought with greater speed.”
“Whiz and zip and whirl and click are not the tongues I speak, tell
me, my pretender, wert thou ever weak?”
“No sir, I most certainly was not, for I was always right.”
“Wrong again, dead philosophe, flee now from my sight.”
“I most certainly will not, dear sir, for here I wish to stay.”
“Child, you forget yourself, who taught you how to pray?”
“Most certainly no one, sir, and until now saw no need.”
“And now you offer nothing but an empty selfish plead?”
“That is quite right dear sir, if it is what you want to hear”
“Get behind me, Satan, you have no business here.”
Zap.

Travel hither thither for
This one good for two or more
Down dark halls and scalding walls
Cry and ask for more
Wonderwall and wonder why
Rocking chair old crop share
Nada Nietzsche Never Mind
Wunderbar for all I care
Happy lucky surely go
Hither Thither to and fro



Bob or Beatrice or Something

Geoffrey Mills

Over the last rise, gulls dived and called and wind coaxed humid salt air from the grass marshes along the bay. Like every other year, my heart pounded as we rose over the bridge, but stopped as my hat toppled from my head at the request of sideways wind from the wide-open window. The island was mine. The ocean was mine. Summer was mine.

The thing I most remember about summer vacation is the smell, touch, feel of the shore: the smell of brine; the touch of the sand between my toes; the feeling of the sun burning my back.

The thing I least remember about summer vacations at the shore is the quality "family time." Understand that for a twelve year-old, two weeks of spending time with your family is torture. Moving my bag and bodyboard into the room I shared with my sister Noreen reminded me of this. Dad's endless "sense of humor;" sister forever begging me to play fish; my mother and grandmother bathing me in suntan lotion and warnings about skin cancer and sun poisoning (things foreign to anyone under at least forty).

"Let's build castles, Jimmy. Did you bring the shovel?" Noreen said less than five minutes after stepping on the beach.

Freshly coated with cheap white lotion, I stared over the ocean, distracted. "Yeah, alright...where?" I didn't wait for an answer because I spotted the familiar crew of surfboards and bodyboards huddled fifty yards from shore with good old John right in the middle.

"Come on, down by the water, Jimmy, drip castles!"

"Yeah alright."

I remember being so anxious to show off my pink and blue Billabong-1932 hat with the O'Neill patch sewed half-hanging -- the one I bought at the Acme Surf Shop over on 9th and Bay last summer. I never could wear the hat at home because they just didn't get it: pink and blue and surf and sun were summer and cool. A pink and blue hat walks on the ball field and forget it -- they wanted Phillies or Bo-Socks or Swoosh. But John wore Billabong, had an O'Neill spring suit; John could walk into Fantasy Island arcade wearing his sister's sunglasses and his dad's old Gilligan hat and we'd still think he was cooler than early spring surf.

"No, don't build it so high, Noreen, you have to build out, too." I dug my knees into the sand, which permanently slurried into the suntan lotion on my legs.

Every year I had problems getting balls to go in the water, mostly because every year we'd make fun of the tourists and weekend comings and goings from the group. The goal was not to seem like a weekly renter, but like you just stepped off of the beach ten blocks down in search for better surf. "I'll wait 'til tomorrow when I'll look sun burned. Then I'll go in." John would remember me, we had an understanding from year to year: he was my best friend.

"I know, I know what I'm doin', hey! What are you DOING?"

I was absently digging two deep holes by my legs, tossing globs of wet sand at Noreen, who was working behind me. "MOMMMMMMY! Jimmy's throwing sand!" My eyes never left the surf, but the reprimanding voice carried from the dry sand refuge of our plot.

"Alright FINE." That was it, burn or no burn, I was going in. In one uncomfortable motion, I wheeled from my sandy prostration into a run, tossing the pink and blue Billabong-1932 and Lennon shades, and grabbing my board on the way. With purple blue lotion and sand on pasty white legs, I ran into summer.

John and I went way back. We'd never actually been introduced, but I knew his name was John because that's what his mother yelled into the street every night to call him for supper. Then again, maybe it wasn't his mother, and maybe the green-shutter two down wasn't his. Regardless, he looked like a John — kind of short, freckly and dark-haired — probably a Dougherty or a Mc'Something. "Yeah, John and I go way back," I said to myself as I slowed to a walk.

Somehow, the waves always look smaller from the sand. Once you put yourself in waist deep and eye level with the foam, the waves look huge. They say that getting out is the hardest part, but I think that when you stop fighting through the waves you have more time to think about how scary the water really is. All kinds of things swim by your legs (dead bodies, I've heard) and the bottom is teeming with crabs like broken umbrellas, waiting to grab a foot or even your whole leg. Out there, the water is so dark, there may not even be a bottom.

Ducking under waves, I knew I was getting closer. I dived under wave after wave (Am I going the right way?) until finally I found myself caught up in a wash cycle of foam and sand. Heels dug in and I gasped for air, scratching at my eyes to see when the next one was coming.

"Hey, watch where you're goin'!"

Who said that? "Who said that?" I wasn't sure if I said anything or not, but when my eyes peeled open, I was looking at the shore, fifty

yards away.

"I said, 'watch where you're going', 'kay?'" I whirled and saw a kid probably older than me but with one of those cheap Five and Dime foam boards paddling away. Instinctively, I followed. Maybe John was out there.

It was the usual mid-August crew. With the exception of the older one I had run over, I recognized everyone, including John. Now past the breakers, the group bobbed up and down over the swells like the boardwalk rollercoaster. I fell in place, not too close, but not on the edge (dead lobsters and umbrella crabs!). A few silently acknowledged my presence, but quickly returned to scanning the horizon upon making eye contact. Without a word we bobbed, a few chased waves periodically and disappeared, paddling back, panting.

There was no doubt in anybody's mind that John was in charge. He always surfed in the middle and when he paddled out further, we all paddled out further. That was the way it was done out there. Nobody would admit to being a renter, but nobody believed that anyone was a local. Except John -- he was different, he embodied the rest of us and without question, he was local. So local, in fact, that he could tell you to the minute when the tides would change. He was the first to enter the water each day because he knew when to surf and when not to surf. He was our cue. If he said, "Waves are good today," we thought they were great today, but if he said, "waves are crappy today," we'd start for shore disappointed. He was local.

"Here comes a good one," said John to the blond kid next to him.

That was my cue, "Here we go," I whispered to myself. I turned and kicked in the direction of shore, hoping the swell would pick me up and let me slide down its face. Water surged behind me and I was swept away, away from the group and I laughed and whooped and bounced my way in and forced my eyes against the spray to see the wave push past the clouds and feel the wind in my ears...stop. I turned and was alone again. I wondered if he meant the next wave. No matter, I turned hurriedly to pull myself back to the group, more out of fear than want of another wave.

In numbers there was safety, and unsaid comfort held us together. It was good to be back, not bad for the first of the year. John looked back and I think he saw me, but I can't be sure.

Six hours. Everyday. Wave in I ride the crest and fallen tip of an iceberg wall of glass sliding to the ground the pigeons fall and crash

behind. Paddle. Wave in cut and swerve through foam and jet in, out until crash, burnt wake was behind. Paddle. Wave in, until I could not breathe in, out or feel toe, heel wild at the water in liquid speed. Paddle.

Six hours a day we spent in the water, from tide to tide through numbness and stinging jellyfish. John and the locals bobbed on the coaster until we were sick, each day returning to our rental families and their plots. Here no one had lives on land, no one spoke but a "Next one, no next one," or a "That was a good one." Names were irrelevant. But John and I were close, he'd say, "Tides are changing, better move out," and I'd say, "I think you're right, let's check out the next beach down." John liked to swear at himself when he missed one or when he got caught in a breaker. Once, I even saw him hit a kid for running him over on his bodyboard. Stupid kid couldn't even steer. Stupid kid. Rental.

That particular year sticks out in my mind because for the first few days all we talked about was this tropical storm named Bob or Beatrice or something that was going to hit sometime the second week. I never paid so much attention to the 6:00 news. I reasoned that if I knew more about the storm than the others, John would have to ask me my name -- he might even think he and I could brave the storm together. Deep down, I wondered if there would even be a beach left when the storm came.

The word came two nights later that Bob or Beatrice or something had landed. Already it had started raining in Beach Haven. Like most nights down the shore, I went to spend my year-saved quarters on Skee-Ball at the Fantasy Island Arcade, which was the place to be. The first night back would always be this wild spending spree that rewarded me with yellow ticket stubs that could be exchanged for rubber super-balls and black switchblade combs. After the initial fanfare of fabulous prizes and wild spending I went to get away from my family and to see the crew. Pink and blue Billabong-1932 and plaid button-up (unbuttoned, of course) were spotted with salty rain, I spent the whole walk over thinking of some cool things to say: "Hey, man, what about this storm, good surf tomorrow?" or "Hey, man, think if we get out early we'll catch the tide?" or "Hey, you want me to show you how to play Q-Bert, I mean play Q-Bert?"

Bells and whistles clanged and shrieked when I opened the glass door and I made a beeline to a comfortable game with a good view. Two quarters later, I saw John and a couple of guys by the 720(skateboarding game, John in his dad's hat and all...bells and whistles and

all. The short one next to him was banging away on the red and yellow buttons and the other wore two different socks in his checkered Vans. The imitation Space Invaders flashed GAME OVER and I was out another quarter.

“Yeah, right, I’ll kick your ass...watch out for the car, man, skate to the ramp where I can show you how to skate!”

“That wasn’t a full 360, let me show you how its done.” My chance! I moved closer to the game directly opposite and positioned myself to catch his name.

“Shit, f---, outta my way. I had next quarter.”

“I’m goin’ anyway, Chad, see ya and have fun.”

Who said that? I whirled to see, but they had already started past.

For some reason my stare caught John’s (Chad’s?) and I blurted, “Hey.” John just walked by and punched the checkered Vans kid, “Didja see that kid’s hat, man? Who was that?”

I walked home in the rain, hatless, furious. Billabong-1932 didn’t really matter, but he didn’t even recognize me. He didn’t even wait ‘til he got outside to stab me in the back. Not even ‘til he got outside.

The next morning was bleak. Bob or Beatrice or something hit land sometime that night in North Carolina. Carolina is pretty far away, but I knew when I woke up the curtains blowing over my feet had something to do with the hurricane. The sun was coming out, though, through hazy fog and into the streets and backyards. I decided that if he was going to be there, I was going to be there.

“Mom, I’m going to the beach now, can you get my back?” My back had peeled once already and probably couldn’t ever be burned again, but Moms like things like suntan lotion.

“You’re not going in with all of this tropical storm business, are you? You know I don’t like you going in without us there. Don’t go in until the guards come, and please, don’t go in unless there are other people in, OK?” Guards? Moms.

“Yeah, yeah, until the guards come.”

I got to the beach so early that the August sunrise had just about finished; the sun was low over the water, but white and hot. It was just right for the sand to glow but still feel cool, like at night, so I dug my feet in and plopped on a slope, waiting.

Gulls were shaking out their wings for breakfast and silhouettes were jogging past on the hard sand near the water. Footprints and

sleepy birds interrupted the white reflection that seamlessly fused the water with the horizon. The guards were just rolling in and setting up shop, propping buoys and pushing rescue boats towards the water. I waited.

John strolled in near the guard stand and casually reclined with his back against his board and his feet on his towel, clearly waiting for a sign from the ocean. I looked to for one, but only saw choppy surf and wispy crests, the wind blowing waves down and away from shore. The wind was blowing my hair in my eyes and I had to look back towards John, now halfway in the water. It was time.

I imagined myself standing up and walking over to John and saying, "You suck, John, and your hat is stupid, too" I started towards the water.

It was just John and I, the local die-hards, never to be grounded by a hurricane. Wordlessly, we fought a common battle against wave and current, to reach the further point. I wanted to scream, "You suck, John, why didn't you say hello?" It was war now and I paddled faster, eyes fast on my target. But this war was fought on the common enemy's turf, not ours, and I soon realized they were ten-, twenty-, and fifty-foot swells that were swallowing us up, dragging us along the shore. Finally, he turned and waited and I stopped for breath and refuge from the never ending rush of water.

"HEY! Hey, you!" He didn't hear me.

"What?" from a distance, "What?"

"Damn, why didn't you say, 'hello' last night? Huh? HUH?!"

Local John, leader of the Two Weeks in August Surf Club, looked craned his neck to see over the surf. "Hey, you! That was you, in the hat? In the HAT?" We had started to drift apart and I now craned to see. His lips were blue and his teeth were fixed in a grimace. He slipped into the next swell and he was gone. I saw him again, and heard a shout, "Hey, I didn't know!" He slipped away again, and he was gone, really gone.

I was alone. Umbrellas suddenly appeared left and right, bodies scratched at the underside of the sea-foam funk trying to grasp air. The bottom slipped away and I was alone. The plot was empty, save my red towel. Nothing but ocean and me.

Lifeguards shouted and whistles thundered over the waves. Red buoys bounced along behind swimming red suits and the sharp stern of the rescue boat rose up over the surf, falling and rising towards the blue foam board now floating twenty yards from shore. Were they coming for me? Bobbing up and down, I caught glimpses of the guards pulling someone out of the water into the boat, carefully turned to avoid the

capsizing waves. John the local was lost and I was alone.

The next moment realized my fear. Waves from behind tossed me higher and higher until finally I was caught, skipping down the wall and onto to a black dance floor where I slowed. The sun's reflection turned black as the wave steepened and rose to snap my back. It lunged and I hugged my board, hoping that it would just toss me ashore, but it pulled and pulled until I was under, tumbling. Pretty spots and circles pushed their way into my clenched eyes. Lungs burned as the turbulence surrounding me pricked me with bubbles and squeezed my ribs until I exhaled in one sharp convulsion.

But the wave shot the board down and sand scraped my forearms and knees, catapulting me up and out of the wave. Globbs of water surged around, pushing me ahead, until a breath came short and I opened my eyes. Less than ten feet from the first breakers, I paddled and kicked as if I could outrun the ocean, which won, and spit me out onto the shore in one dry crashing arc.

Like a whale, I sprawled and flapped until I was far enough out of the water that it couldn't get me. The world was still moving, crashing, bobbing and my pruned fingers dug into the sand as not to fall off, as not to get sucked back in.

Red suits were climbing back into their chairs, there were no more whistles.

"John?" I said to myself.

I sat up and scanned the beach. What did his mom look like? His sister? His blue board was still being kicked around like a soccer ball by the ocean, slowly approaching shore and driven by the wind. I let my head fall back again. Paddle. Crash. Paddle.

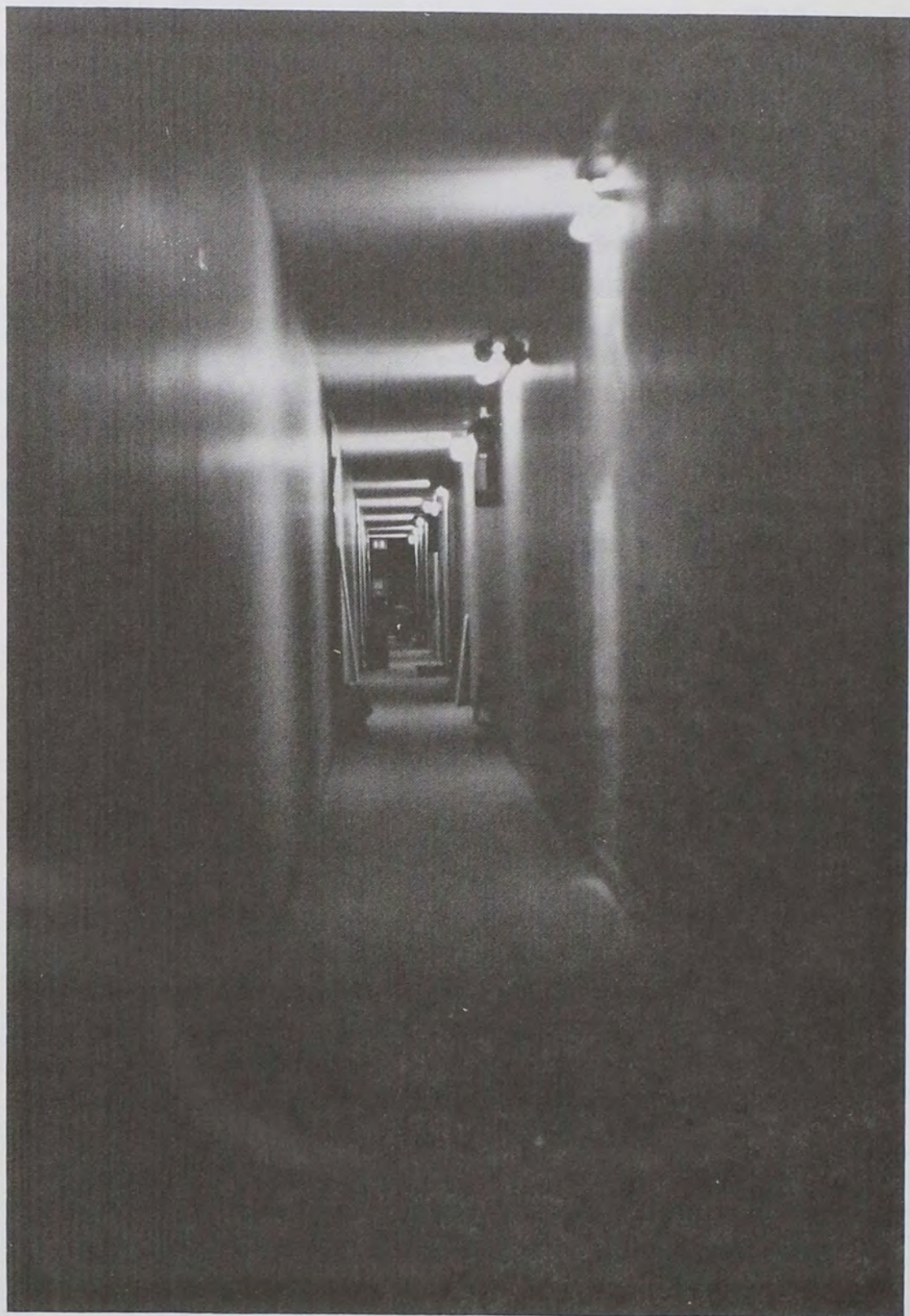
For a few minutes every year I hope and pray that John is back. Stepping from asphalt to sand and over the dunes, I walk head-down until I reach the other side, when I let myself follow the shore line with my eyes until where the shallows cut wading people in two. Fifty yards out a few surfers and bodyboarders bob up and over the waves -- but never John. Since the twelfth year no John. In the green-shutter two down, no John and at the Skateboard 720, no John.

Six hours a day and I never caught his name. The hair stands on my neck when I cross over each year from city kid to rental to local and step over the dune into what summer has become.

John, when do the tides change today? When will the tides change tomorrow?

Oblivion

Lou Nemphos



Haunted

Amanda Chiampi

Trapped in idle fancy,
Drown in blue ink.

Blot Butterfly
Blot Man
Blot Woman
Blot Intercourse

tracing clavicle ridge
I saw through flesh and bone.
And the sheets were hung to dry,
flapping in moonlight.

I hid in the closet
You under the bed
No locks
The door
 Shut.
The bed
 Made.
I am afraid of the dark

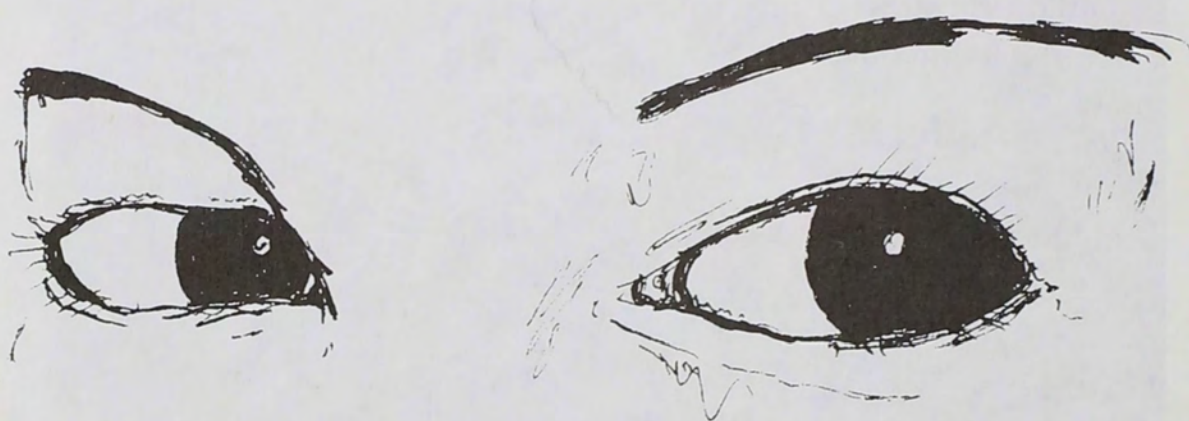
1
No

Well, maybe

Quilt clenched under chin,
Silent Scream.
Fetal Fear.
And you on my door step,
Clad in condescension.

That Look

Joel Guidry



Burrow

Jeffrey Church

Alone. Ever since I sat in the brown aisle of the Eden Cinema amongst a scattered litter of candy, clothes, and thoughts I was alone...

...tattered cows and newsfilm stretch and stretch and stretch I am so hungry o so hungry across above my great big daddy playing away and away sharp flat sharp shap flat many many keys my big daddy plays with Suzie capping in gleeful glee on his cold lap where is my food-- mommy? Mommy is so far that my tears and pee don't reach her in a little pool on the brown aisle. Guns and blammo stuff stretch and stretch as far as I can see in front of me (he he) with big men like daddy marching and marching like icicles, deep in trenches like I hide in. Daddy is still looking always looking down at his keys with Suzie always in his trench-lap, hiding from me. Why am I hungry? Why don't great big people like my daddy ever get hungry and eat with me? Suzie always eats, but in Daddy's lap. The floor is still sticky with my pee I can't control I'm sorry daddy didn't make it. My beaten boots sing clip-clop clip-clop with the song my daddy plays with his many keys. The people who aren't real people who stretch and stretch dance and dance with my daddy's song. My daddy is so big and so strong he can make those even bigger people who aren't real people move and go away and make new people appear who aren't real people. Sometimes I think that the people outside aren't real people either because they have a skin like my tasty candy. Their sweat that I see drip drip drip gets sticky like my candy too and I can touch and feel them. The eyes pass me in the brown aisle drip dripping with the sound of my daddy. Maybe my daddy can make them dance too...

...I was born in 1918 somewhere, sometime-- it doesn't matter. I've lost track of my birthday. It doesn't really matter. I look around and see these Cambodian people whom at one point in my youth I thought were only film reels and didn't have blood and thoughts like me. (Maybe they don't) They are born on the streets without a family and a home and a birthday and a life. I had a life. I had a life in the darkness of the brown aisle squirming and crying to the new German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. It showed me form and movement and life outside of this world. Although I didn't realize that the film delved into the mind of the main character, I could still sense his thoughts...

...shadows and more shadows like the scary nighttime beating and beating at the window to get at me but I won't let it hiding under my covers from the scary man who isn't a man who has flying things that really really aren't real I hope fly around his head and tell him scary stuff. Spikes and shards of shadows on screen like my daddy who has shadows that break me in two so I can't pee shadow so I can't see his face only Suzie bopping up and down happy on his lap-- trying to bang on the keys but can't reach-- I can't reach my hands are too sticky with the shadow-- keeps me under my covers and keeps my eyes on the man who isn't a man who sees things that aren't there...

...Mother gave birth to me but that's about it. I came kicking and screaming and wet out of her womb and she turned her head away from me, closing her womb. I never really wanted to come out, but she forced me to. She severed the umbilical cord that severed me from my life at the Eden Cinema. I was born alone with a love of being alone because being alone was all I knew. No-- that isn't right-- I did know guns-- and hunting-- the thrill-- the thrill of the hunt...

...movement. Flapping. Waving. Feathers fall in fearful quickness to the damp forest's floor. Cocked. Pointed. Aimed. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. I lower the long metal weapon just above the wet leaves and clogging mud. The urge. Wait for it. I can feel the animal. I can see its thoughts and feel its confusion, dread, instinct. I use them to my advantage. Blood rushes filling my body with fire. The target is off. A steady drip drop of life trickles red from it to the worms below-- red and brown and black. No green, though. Too much clogging mud. Twigs crack underfoot, giving an extra boost to me as the chase ensues. Nature is my tool. Not this artificial weapon. It is foreign here. I am not foreign here. I belong here. Nature is my tool to build my life anew. I can see the animal that isn't an animal on the screen that stretches wider and wider dripping black and white blood to the keystrokes that slow and quicken rage and fall run and fly...

...hunting gave me spirit in dismay, fettered by my solitude, fettered by my nostalgia for brown boots clapping and music animating the world, giving it life, fettered by the mother's madness. Mother. The mother. I no longer refer to her as "my mother"-- she lost that respect when she closed her womb on me...

...the salt is bitter today-- I can taste it distinctly in the sand without bending down. I hear shouts and cries deep from the mother and peasants. I am alone. Shouts indiscernible, but shouts indeed filled with anguish. Shouts of collapsing walls, people, and endurance-- collapsing wills to the sea washing in. The white curls and foam saturate and poison the ground-- the land cannot live as land when the sea barges right in and takes over. Silly. Ridiculous. Vain. To think that one person can hold back the inevitable. Hold back the more powerful force filled with sand crabs and brine and starfish that destroy the uniformity of the land. The mother is mad. She brought it upon herself. She bought land and tried to save land that everyone knew couldn't be saved. I don't know the mother. I am still hungry hunger that thrusts itself throughout to the uttermost ends of my body. Hunger in my leg, hunger in my fingertips, hunger in my eyeball, hunger in my fingernails freshly bitten lying on the bitter bitter salt floor...

...We saw the mother even less after that. Her only sympathizer-- the only one she laid her soul out to-- was a deaf man. Not Daddy. Daddy died too long ago. I can still see him deep in the maw of the forest when I go to hunt and think. Precious commodities, I believe: hunting and thinking. The trees resound with his piano playing and his distant smile...

...Run and run and run and run for him. For Daddy. He still does not call for me, but I can see him. I can see him in the shambles of the mother's land. I can see him in the gleam of my sister's eyes. I can see him in the trickling blood of my prey. I can see him now, in the woods-- in my thoughts. Run and run and run and run. I'm not sure if I'm running toward him or running away. Run and run and run and run. Fingers dance on the treetops with lyrical bliss-- dropping to the forest floor in Beethoven's 5th. Tears of Daddy. Tears when the piano had to go. The only alien emotion present in an alien daddy. Run and run and run and run. Lungs fill with air that is not mine. Expelling foreign air and looking for foreign daddy. I can see him! He is close with his melodious power and his Suzie on his percussion knees. I can see him! I can see him, but he disappears like a fading thought...

...Suzanne grew up to be beautiful. I can remember when I danced with her and felt so alive. We were one on that brown aisle with sticky hands. I love her. I love her. But I cannot get to her on the lap of Daddy-- the shadows hold me at bay...

...the rich, arrogant, spineless blocking out conversation my sister and the rich old man the betrayer of the poor no better than the Colonialists taking my sister raping my sister Suzanne blocking out conversation blocking out conversation "How many liters to the hundred kilometers?" owns a Morris Leon Bollee has about twenty mistresses probably my sister crammed, changed into a commodity. He doesn't understand no one understands the situation but me Suzanne listen Suzanne listen hear my thoughts you belong to me not on daddy's lap do not be fooled by the sparkling jewelry the red red sports cars the weight the security blocking out conversation I have to I have to I want to get out of here back to the forest drown myself in a lake of my thoughts and animal blood I have to get out of here away from this- away from this bleak arrogance- away from this gentle submission...

...Poor Suzanne. I could see her trailing farther and farther away from me-- once she gave herself in to the rich man betrayer of the people she would lose herself. Her womb would close on her as well...

...Alone, finally alone. Back to my brown aisle with my urine, now humid with my tears and nostalgia. An old showing of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is showing as I see my aloneness reach out for the gentleness of the woman's hand. Stretch and widen before me this sexual object beside me I can see his thoughts that aren't his thoughts he is insane-- none of those people who aren't people are real. A tingle, a slow, metal tingle across my thumb distracts Caligari and his monster. Distracts him and his hypnosis. Hairs sway back and forth like unripe, unharvested corn on unworthy, unfertile land. Hair stands erect and feels the caress and emptiness of the gesture. I know she is married. I know that she wants me. The brown aisle dots with red blood from hunting, sticky with the blood of my prey. I am alone and looking down at my body that is not alone. My body is having sex. I am alone, and my thoughts are on the lap and my sister and the films and the sea-wall and the Pacific and the mad, frozen mother. My body is having sex with a married woman and I am alone. So very alone.

(based on the play *Eden Cinema* by Marguerite Duras)

Being

Monica Stahl

I wake to the morning, surprised by the shortness
of my breath. I thought that I was taking
longer steps,

but the stumble is there, there
like a mouth full of God
afraid to spill.

I ask warily for faith. Muted,
I am infected with it. It blooms
beneath my skin

like broken blood vessels, expanding
painfully against my flesh. It
infests my body

like ticks, bringing my blood to its
dirty lips. I bruise myself
with these words.

Shall I ask next for love?
Could there be a greater tragedy
than hands

in the role of thoughts? This labor
of constructing myself from others is
erasing me.

The blisters on my hands are born
of need. With your touch, I am the grass,
struggling in the wind,

stepped on by the soles of my fathers.
They give me suns, and I grow
in shadow,

to be trod upon again and again
until a path is worn on my

dusty roots.

I am in the gray morning. I am here,
in the faith of others, in the
love of you.

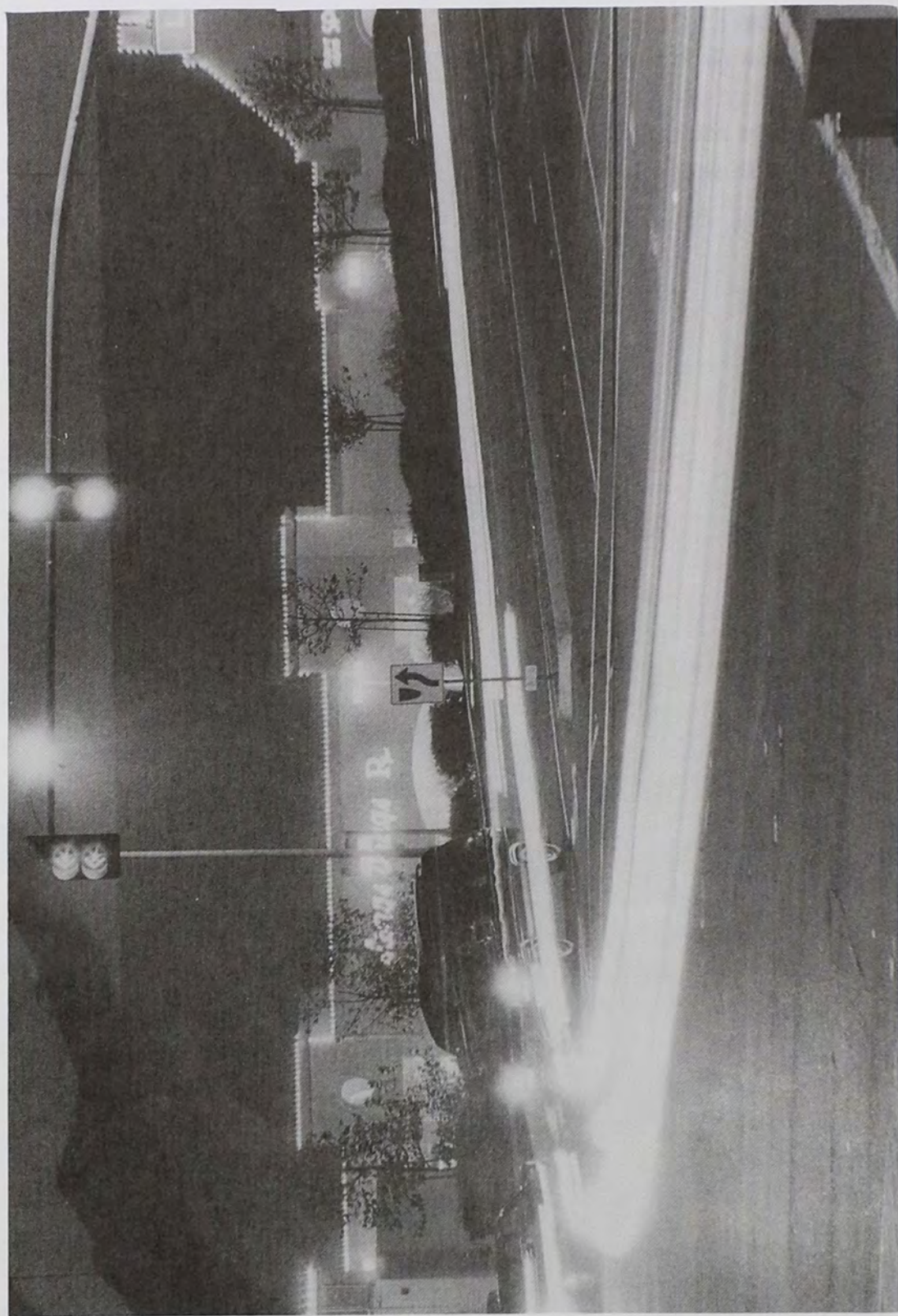
I fear us all. I fear the darkness
may rise from the graves of the living.
I fear

the sunlight may catch fire.

Playing Children

Daniel Tavares

blinding sun
 that strikes my body
West one day
 East the next
 with shadows walking lost



The French Door

Oana Nechita

Over time I discovered that people get confused trying to make sense out of the stories of my life, and now, when I finally decided to write one of them, I want it to be clear. Yes, I am a lesbian, and I can say this out loud now, after spending thousands of dollars visiting the psychiatric office every week for the past two years. I am a lesbian; we live in a mountain village in France where we practice acupuncture.

To start with the beginning, I was a librarian at the time, and claustrophobic. I used to work at the reception desk, and watch her walk in every Monday, with her big green umbrella that she was shaking, like a cat escaping rain. The attraction between us seemed so natural and inevitable, like the south and north pole of a magnet, unable to break away. That's when it all started, the memories, the flashbacks, that's when Auguste awoke in my body, which had not known its secrets till I met her.

I ended my life in the States requesting the recordings and medical journal entries gathered throughout my treatment, which were not denied to me, with the condition that I would never contact them again, and that I would not contest in a legal trial any of their diagnosis. Bureaucracy.

Monday, January 20, 1997. Recording # 1.

“‘Vous etes belle comme un jour de printemps, mademoiselle. C'est une joie d'etre avec vous.’

Marguerite was laughing at me because of the way I pronounced the words. Her breasts were giggling with her, and I felt embarrassed at the thought that I wanted to touch them. We had known each other since we were young; I used to pass the mansion carrying marble for the sculptors' guild when she was playing with her governess in the gardens of Monsieur Malcoeur, her father. She was twenty-two, and more beautiful than I ever admitted to myself. I was about the same age, and my name was Auguste. On the calendar in the bakery shop it said Friday, May 18, 1690.”

Medical observations.

Name: Erika Duval

Age: 39

Occupation: librarian

Marital status: single

Medical data: 5'7" / 130 lb., Caucasian

Symptoms of severe claustrophobia. First time in regressive therapy. Under hypnosis patient exhibits vivid remembrances of what seems to be a past existence.

My Journal. Monday.

She wasn't wearing the wool hat today. I never knew she looked so beautiful with her hair down on her shoulders. She has been coming to the library at exactly 2:40pm. since last October.

I helped her get the acupuncture books that she has been researching. She smelled like *Fleurs de Paris Noir*. I was sweating in the starched, buttoned up shirt and the long woolen skirt. It never happened before, even around men considered handsome. I felt like on stage in second grade, when I had to sing by myself and all I could do was swallow the knots in my throat.

Today I had the first appointment with the psychiatrist. He wants to know details about my non-existent sex life, and whether I speak French. I told him I don't.

Friday, January 31, 1997. Recording # 2.

"Marguerite and I met every Sunday after the last prayer of the day -- a real blessing. Today she gave me one of her embroidered handkerchiefs after we met in the rose garden behind the mansion. She let it fall as if by mistake on the damp ground under the apricot tree, and when I offered it back, her eyes told me I could keep it. I carry it in the inside pocket of my best coat, my Sunday church coat. Oh, the smell of her, the feel of her... I held her delicate hands covered with milk-white satin gloves for hours, kneeling beside the wooden bench, whispering verses from Petrarch. She spoke to me with her clear eyes, her sunshine curls, and the freshness of her skin. Oh, if her father knew!"

Medical observations.

Once hypnotized, patient undergoes serious transformation resembling sexual arousal while describing a woman named Marguerite.

Note 1: Patient is currently living single, and has never been sexually active.

Note 2: Patient's personality could be characterized as reserved and self-conscious.

Note 3: Deep scar between neck and right shoulder.

My Journal. Friday.

Everybody looked at me quite strangely today. Richard, the computer assistant told me I look 'fabulous' in the red velvet dress. Over lunch, Mrs. Bonton asked me between giggles whether I am seeing anyone. Of course Andy made a whole show out of it, winking at me and circling around my desk, asking 'So, what are you doing tonight, Miss Duval?' loud enough for everybody to hear and make me blush.

I guess I did look different today. The red dress belongs to my mother; she gave it to me when I turned 21, and it's been sitting in the closet since then. I don't know what got into me that I wanted to wear it.

I miss her.

Monday, February 16, 1997. Recording # 3.

" 'How dare you, filthy peasant!'

M.Malcoeur stood in his chariot, his engraved walking stick threatening to strike me down to the dirt where I had knelt to kiss Marguerite's hand. I let go of her hand and rose to my feet, stopping the stick with one hand.

'I am a peasant, but more respectful than nobility it seems' I said, and heard my lady give a sigh of scare, covering her fresh mouth with the back of her fingers.

'Guaaaaards!' Malcoeur called and four soldiers grabbed my arms and legs.

'Father, please, father... forgive him, please...'

I kept Marguerite's tears and her trembling bosom in my mind all the way to the dreadful dungeon in the middle of the mountains. The guards tied me to the back of a wild horse, and dragged me through the village of Garrone for everyone to see, while the chariot was following. Peasants and nobles alike were outside their huts, cleaning their hands of flour, or hanging on their shaded balconies to watch the humiliation of the criminal. I felt my back shredded to pieces by the rocks on the road like a hawk's claws ripping my flesh apart. All that was left of my Sunday coat was the inside pocket."

Medical observations.

Patient is becoming Auguste abruptly. The reverse process is as sudden. Swollen face, eyes wide open, scar pulsing, vivid movements of the body under hypnosis. Patient has no recollection of what occurs while in trance. Disturbed sleep has been reported.

My Journal. Monday.

I stayed at work until 6pm., waiting. I had the books all ready for her: Duke, Marc -- Acupuncture, and Gach, Michael Reed -- Acupuncture's Potent Points. She didn't come. Maybe her car broke down... Or maybe she had to go some place unexpectedly... What if she isn't coming any more? What if she decided she is done? Did I scare her away? No, it can't be, her car must have broken down.

I cannot sleep lately, especially tonight, after a week of not seeing her. Iron chains appear in strange dreams, and the scar on my neck is hurting. I ran my fingers over it in the dark the other night, and let my hand slip down over my collar bone, then curve around my breast. I startled with pleasure and all I could think of was her delicate fingers, how my skin is longing to know their touch. Her legs wrapped around my waist, my lips nesting her nipple, her hands tracing my spine, my hair chaining her...

Friday, February 28, 1997. Recording # 4.

"We got to the foot of the mountain and they threw me on a mound of wet grassy dirt. I rested my bleeding back on the fresh spring grass. The smell of wild forest blue bells calmed my senses, and the dew on the grass cleaned my wounds. The chariot had caught up with us. I opened my eyes and saw Marguerite on the ground, her white dress all shreds, the lacy handcuffs and rims torn apart. She was holding on to the tiny flowers, her hair like spilled gold on the ground. Her lips were moving through her tears, murmuring my name. She tried to pull herself up but Malcoeur pressed her back down with his stick.

"Disgraceful whore!" He spit on her and turned away.

Malcoeur's men opened an iron door hidden under the mound. They cut off the rope tying my hands, and replaced it with heavy iron chains. My wrists were bleeding enough to fill up a wine cup. I tried to scream out Marguerite's name, but one of the guards pulled out a short blade, and pressed it between my neck and right shoulder until I bled. They lifted me up like a bed spread, bent my back, and silenced me. I looked at Marguerite, and she extended her arm to me before Malcoeur's guards deposited my body behind the iron door."

Medical observations.

Patient abruptly emerged the state of trance after mentioning the iron door. This has not previously happened without the patient being directed to do so. Patient has no recollections of the experience. Heavy breathing, swollen veins, and symptoms of severe anxiety were

registered. The cure is behind that door.

My Journal. Monday.

I wore my red dress today and put my hair up. Andy pulled me close and started to dance with me in front of everybody. I almost slapped him.

She came at 2:40pm. We talked about her studies in alternative medicine, and going to France. She needs a roommate over the summer. My hands were sweaty.

Medical observations.

For the past two weeks the patient has had difficulty entering the state of hypnosis at the moment of the iron door. Various versions of the preceding scene have been recounted. Patient always awakes after describing the scene. The regression process had to be relocated in a more spacious room at the patient's request.

Monday, March 17, 1997. Recording # 5.

"...They lift me up and threw me, oh, they stuck me in this... I felt the wetness of the walls against my skin... like I was in a water box... cold stone walls tight... I had to stand couldn't move my hands like a rat stuck in a snake's hole the muddy water coming up to my ankles cold and wet tight to my ankles the door closed right in my nose I backed off and hit the stone wall with the shreds of my flesh bleeding wet like the water down on my legs dripping in the muddy water the smell of mud heavy in my nose and hot blood against the iron hot like in the ironsmith's fire place stone pressing my shoulders tight like the handcuffs around my wrists... ahhh... I opened my eyes in terror and saw them.

I saw pieces of Marguerite scattered in front of the dungeon, lace and golden hair, the white satin glove, and pearls flowing from her neck. Men in leather boots ripped off what was left of her clothes, like peeling a cabbage, and they tied her to a pole. It was the first time I saw her bare breasts sobbing, her hair hanging loose, her mouth opened in despair.

The leather men took out their whips and began. One, two, three whips, one, two, three cries. I screamed so hard I felt my throat was breaking open. I screamed again, and again, for each of the whips, and for each of her cries. When her body was numb and full of blood, I was silent like a snake in its hole, collapsed in the blood and water at my feet.

Malcoeur rose his stick and they stopped. They took her body

down, threw it in the back of the chariot, and went away.”

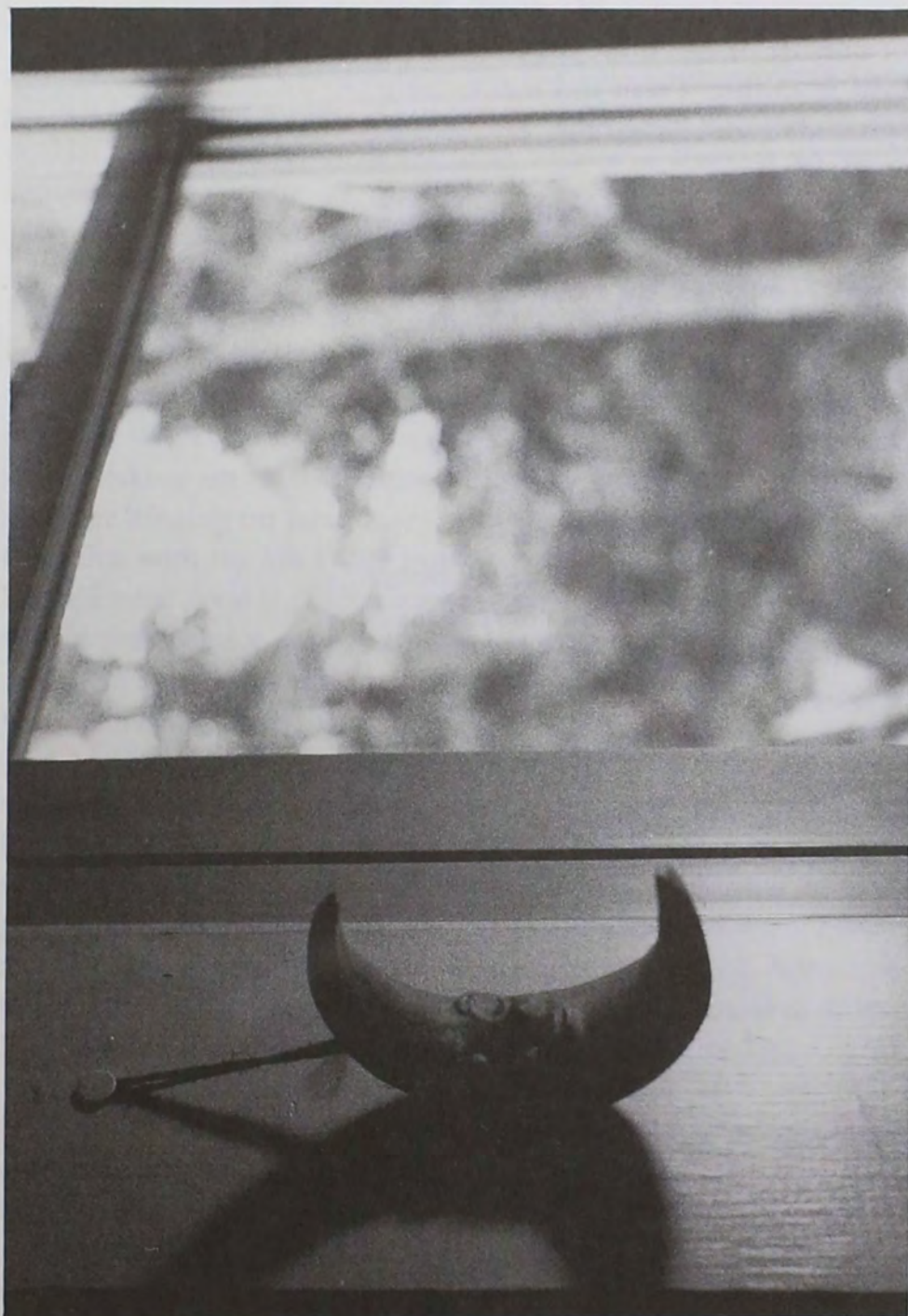
My Journal.

I have decided.

Once we arrived in France I listened to the recordings. Now I understand. I am lesbian, and not claustrophobic. I have passed behind the door, and become Auguste; I shed the old Erika Duval, left her to depression and sexual repression, in the claustrophobic psychiatric office, between books, behind glasses, inside grandma's clothes, over the ocean, away, away.

The View

Jennifer Zwilling



Her Name is in the Breeze

Andrew Gerchak

The sun falls down behind a wall of trees.
I'm sitting on a see-saw in the park.
The green paint's peeled, the wood's starting to rot.
My palms are orange from gripping the handlebars
dressed up in rust. I wait and wait to leave
the ground. I watch the other seat, vacant,
up in the air.

Her name is in the breeze.

The park's empty except a bird atop
the swings. It's a black bird, a crow, I think.
He's watching me. He squawks in backward tongues
and sneers, "Do you still remember the smell
of her soft hair?" I say I can't. He asks
if I can remember the storm inside
her eyes. I say I can't. He asks if I
can remember the way my name fell from
her tongue. I tell him yes, of course I do.
I tell him I still hear it every night
I try to sleep.

Her name is in the breeze.

I hide my head in hands to make the bird
And all his red-tipped questions go away.

Before The War: On Earth as it is in Texas

Tom Howard

“Clandestinism is not the usage of a handful of rogues, it is a formalized practice of an entire class in which a thousand hands spontaneously join. Conspiracy is the normal continuation of normal politics by normal means... Conspiratorial play is a universal of power politics, and where there is no limit to power, there is no limit to conspiracy.”

--Professor Carl Oglesby, Boston University.

Nothing stands in the way of love, except a trailer park. I don't want to live in a trailer park. Sure, Becky took it kinda hard but she's a trooper. She'll bounce back in no time. It's not like it was a long, drawn out affair. I kept it short... for her sake. I'm sorry, but there's just something about waking up in that same tin can the same ugly residence park manager banging on your door every morning makes my skin crawl. If I did that with my life I'd go nuts, so I took the truck and left. Yeah, I know ù what good is a trailer without a truck to pull it. Old man Aubry should even be nice enough to give her a lift into town every now and then. The best part is that's not my concern anymore. Nope. Good old John Sullivan is a free man.

On to Colorado and crisp mountain air and ski bunnies with smiles so big and white you go snow blind. That was the plan ù take Interstate 20 as far as somewhere in Texas and then cut northwest in a straight line to Colorado with nothing but my last paycheck in my pocket, like *On the Road*. Maybe surf the Rockies and meet some rich and beautiful girl from Aspen to spend lonely nights with. Admittedly, it wasn't much of a plan, but at the very least it got me out of Alabama. Ever been to Alabama? Dead from the dick up with nowhere to go.

Four days later and three states behind me, Texas stretches on. How far does this damn state go? Through Dallas and Fort-Worth, I eventually left I-20 for state highway 84 at Roscoe early the sixth day, heading north-west. Sometime after lunch I guess my mind wandered and began dreaming of snow-capped peaks with Swiss chalets and Swiss maids with maraschino cherries, and that's why I got lost. Not sure when it happened, just one of those things you suddenly realize and cuss at yourself for. I knew which direction I was going at least, so I kept that way. That evening on an abandoned stretch of road I noticed a hitch-

hiker trying to make his way. I decided to pick him, you know, as a favor to Kerouac. I wasn't afraid in the least; I can take care of myself. Besides, he could die of thirst out here.

"Hey buddy, need a lift?" I hollered as the dust settled.

He looked at me kind of quizzically, but said, "Sure," and hopped in.

It had been a while since I had a chance to talk to anyone, so it was good to have someone there. He was pretty scraggly, with a roughly trimmed beard, a worn out T-shirt and jeans, a knapsack, blanket roll, and a pair of old Chuckies. He seemed exhausted but happy.

"So where you off to?" I asked him.

"Um, nowhere special. Just going west."

I still had no idea where I was. "Do you happen to know where we are now?"

He laughed to himself, and said, "Wherever you go, there you are."

I didn't quite get it. "Huh?"

"We are in Briscoe County now. You drove past the county line about two miles back from where you picked me up. We are headed towards Silverton, the county seat."

"Oh thanks. See, I got a little distracted back a ways. I guess I started dreaming or something."

He got this look in his eyes and said, "Dreams are imperfections of sleep; even so is consciousness the imperfection of waking. Dreams are impurities in the circulation of the blood; even so is consciousness a disorder of life. Dreams are without proportion, without good sense, without truth; so also is consciousness. Awake from dream, the truth is known: awake from waking, the Truth is--The Unknown."

I didn't know what to say for a little bit, but then I think I understood. "Oh, I get it. Confucious say, 'Man who stand on toilet get high on pot.'" I nodded sagely for added emphasis. The hitch-hiker sat there with a mild smile on his lips.

I thought to ask him how far he wanted to go, when he said, "Silverton should be fine." That unnerved me, but I let it go. Silverton wasn't too far off. We should be there around ten or so. The highway was deserted.

After about half an hour of driving I swear a helicopter buzzed us. It was a small one, but it was so loud. I thought it was about to crash.

"What the hell?"

The hitch-hiker just sighed.

Just then I noticed three pairs of headlights behind me. They

seemed to come out of nowhere, and they were approaching fast. I looked at the hitch-hiker. He gave another deep sigh, closed his eyes, then looked at me. He opened his mouth and said simply, "Consciousness is a symptom of disease."

It seemed as if it took only two or three seconds for the three Nissan Pathfinders to run my truck off the road. I held on to it as it bounced off down into a ravine, trying to regain control. I had no such luck and I crashed into a tree. Then everything was quiet.

"What the hell was that? Those jerk-offs just ran me off the road!" I shouted, fully intending to get back out to the highway and settle it with them.

The hitch-hiker was already out of the truck and looking back towards the road he said, "No, I think we should get out of here."

I looked at him, and something struck me, "Hey, who the hell are you anyway?"

I guess it hadn't occurred to him either. "Oh, that's right." He extended his hand, "My name's Carl," he said as I shook his hand. "We need to get out of here, now."

I stepped back, "Whoa... slow down there shortcake! What's with all this 'we' business all of a sudden?"

"I'm guessing those aren't police," Carl said, "and there are three, maybe more of them. I don't want to wait around and see why they ran us off the road."

He had a point. I thought about my truck, smashed against the tree. Those bastards... I salvaged my hunting knife from beneath the front seat. Carl was already heading into the woods. "Let's go."

We got moving fast, not stopping, not looking back. No looking back. Carl was leading the way, the way to somewhere. I couldn't tell where we were, and it was dark. We stopped to rest after what seemed like an hour. Carl scanned the underbrush, not breathing. I held my breath for a second too, as if my panting would lead them straight to us. Carl crouched down and looked in my direction. He was surprisingly fast when he needed to be. He waved me to follow him as he took off again, but this time in a less frantic and more resolute trot. We passed out of the tree line and into a field with tall brown grass. I saw the outline of a small building near the farther edge of the clearing we were in as we skirted around the outer rim of the meadow following the tree line. It was closing in.

Carl went right in, and locked the door behind us. The entire room only contained a small stove and a bare wooden table. Carved into the table, in large block letters were the words THE EMPIRE NEVER

ENDED. He took a book and a compact disc out of his knapsack. He had a grave look on his face.

"We don't have much time," he said, "but here it is. Those weren't police. I'm not sure who they are, but they're after this." He pointed at the CD. I was silent. He continued, "This CD contains the codebooks and passwords for a top secret project named ECHELON and all its sub-stations including Yakima and Sugar Grove in North America. It also contains files on Project LUCID, a government plan to introduce biometric ID cards to all civilians in order to keep tabs on us. This is very dangerous."

I was stunned. "What?! Are you crazy? Is that your problem?"

"You don't get it, do you?"

"I'm gonna take your licky salt-ass outside and beat some sense into it!"

"Listen, I don't have time to explain. Help me move the stove."

Carl had already gotten himself between the stove and the wall and was pushing with all his strength. I don't know what I was thinking, but I began pulling the cast iron stove too. It slid over to reveal a trap door of some kind that Carl opened up. Beneath it ù darkness. He motioned me to jump down it, flicked on a flashlight and disappeared down the hole. Lights appeared to be searching the woods outside and were getting closer. I swallowed hard and followed him.

My boots hit packed earth about ten feet farther down than I was prepared for. In front of me was the entrance to a ragged tunnel almost three feet wide. Carl's flashlight was moving away from me rapidly in the blackness.

"Hurry up," his voice echoed back to me, "we don't have much time!"

I got on my hands and knees and began crawling through the burrowed dirt. I noticed wires of some kind stringing back along the passageway towards the house. My few years working in excavation and construction screamed primer cord! He was gonna blow this tunnel and everything in it sky high! I moved a lot faster after that discovery.

Finally, I scrambled out of a exit in the side of a dirty ravine somewhere in the woods where he had a dirt bike revved up and ready to go. I didn't wait for him to ask me to hold on as he handed me the backpack stringing the det cord out the back. The bike made its way along the floor of the ravine until it gradually rose onto a broader scrub brush plain a hundred or so yards away. Carl stopped the bike and got off, taking the bag with the det cord.

"Stole this from a construction site near Lubbock," he grinned,

“and it’s been a while in preparation. Make a wish.”

He hit down the trigger on the detonator and we watched as the tunnel, the house and everything around it exploded in dust and debris. Carl whistled in satisfaction.

“That got ‘em.” he said as he mounted up and lit a smoke. Then he was serious again.

“This is all we have. I’m not asking you to do this.”

I shook my head, “No, I guess I’m in it now. Damn it! Would you mind explaining a few things though? I’m still in the dark about the rest of my life.”

He smiled. I think my sarcasm soothed him. “We’ll get out of here now. There’s a lot of information on that CD that people should know. I try and spread the word. Over the internet when it was still relatively free and unmolested by them, or by simple word of mouth. If you hear something questioned, that’s me. Whenever someone uncovers something they don’t want you to know, that’s me too. I’m your right to rule yourself as you see fit, not as they deem is necessary for you. And now so are you.

“They say we’re threatening national security, but they’re spying on their own people. This is a fight for all of us. It isn’t against our government, it is against those who manipulate it to serve their personal interests. Open your eyes. Awake from dream, the truth is known; awake from waking; the Truth is the Unknown. We have only ourselves to blame.”

He put out his butt and kicked the bike started. “Someone will try to track us, but they only think they know the wilderness. They really don’t know jack. Life gets pretty boring; I say give me danger.” With that we burned out across the night.

I was sitting at a roadside truck stop a while after that when a waitress started commenting about something in the news. I don’t remember what, and it didn’t matter; just some smoke and mirrors. I left my tip and got up, turning towards her. It was a shame because she really did have a beautiful smile.

“You know what’s so crescent fresh about you is that you just don’t get it.” I said, and she just sort of looked at me naively. We were all so naive and ignorant. Our problems had the simplest solutions and no one realized this. None of us seemed to notice anything then, but that was before the war.

Aftermath

Amanda Chiampi

I was alive in my mind
Existing in concentric circles of Red
Faeries and ghosts know how to find me
Construction of my Wall.

Exiting through concentric circles of red
She knew how to rule the monarchy
Construction wall
Keeps people in.

She knew how to be ruled by Patriarchy
quiet, obedient, slave.
let him in.
god will rip you out.

Quiet, obedient slave!
chained to your vocation
God will rip you out.
Deliverance and salvation in prayers

Changed in invocation,
If I don't know it will be okay.
deliver me from prayer,
no one answers me when I talk.

I know that it wasn't okay
it died.
no one answers me when I scream.
so I got lost

I died.
I was alive in my mind,
so I got lost.
Faeries and ghosts know how to find me.

A meal for the brown Philadelphia twilight

Jeffrey Church

consume my consciousness twilight mother
take my erratic, haunting thoughts
devour my skin my muscle my sinew my bone
give me freedom

time with you twilight mother i forever curse
(turning away and growing old)

barren and naked like a wounded wolverine
amongst the dark trees and flowers
i lie in blinding blue angst and a sesame street quilt
awaiting the cautious observer
boon and savior
arriving to heal and rend me
O mind, my mind--
thou pernicious trustworthy friend--
deceive me.

Love Seat

Rebecca Class

I haven't said a bad word for two years. It's not that I haven't wanted to, it's that I haven't been allowed.

Shane tells me how a good girl should speak. He also tells me how one should dress. Virtuous Christian girls never show their legs, and the word "shit" never escapes their delicate lips. If you ask anyone in town about me, they will tell you that I am the perfect Christian girl. In New Holland, everybody knows everybody. And everybody knows that I am Shane Bowman's girlfriend. It seems so funny when I think about it. Nestled in the middle of beautiful Amish country there's this town that appears so cooperative and moral, but then the smiles everyone greets you with at the town fair soon bend into knowing smirks when you walk away. I guess I should feel lucky. No rumors slide from lip to eager ear when I walk by. The townsfolk honestly think I'm perfect, but today I'll give them something to whisper about.

Standing in front of my bedroom mirror, I know the girl staring back at me isn't a vision of perfection. I know something that no one else in this hypocritical town knows. Yesterday, I realized that perfection in human beings is impossible, and those who look the most perfect are usually the most screwed up.

Yesterday began with me watching ET in my first period Spanish class. It's just not the same movie in Spanish. There's something about ET saying "telefono mi casa" that destroys any hope for entertainment. So, instead of getting lost in the movie, I got lost thinking about Shane. Funny, Elliot reminded me a lot of Shane. I sat thinking about the photographs I'd seen of Shane as a kid, and how he had the same soft skin, the same innocence as Elliot. I was convinced that Shane would have saved ET, too. That's the kind of person I thought he was, always saving people. I even thought he'd saved me.

"Okay clase. Lea paginas 8 a 22 para viernes. Adios."

I hadn't even noticed the lights flash on, or the movie end. I was too caught up in my thoughts of Shane. He was my favorite subject. He told me once that instead of going to college I should stay home and major in him. As I gathered my books, I grinned with the thought of spending my life studying someone as beautiful as Shane Bowman. The time between classes always offered a chance to see him, so I hurried out of the room in hopes that he'd be near. But before I could even start my search, Kevin intercepted me.

"Hey, Jessica. How are you doing?" he asked with a smile that

used to make my knees weak. It had lost its power in my last two years with Shane.

“I’m doing fine, Kev. How about you?”

“Great. Hey, I was wondering what you are doing this weekend.” He was still smiling, but seemed nervous. I thought I detected a slight blush in his cheek.

“I’ll be at your game on Friday night, of course. Other than that, I don’t have any specific plans.” I went to all of the football games. Shane and Kevin were both running backs, and both the best players on the team.

“Saturday Andy is having a little get together. You know, to watch the Penn State game. I thought you might like to go with me?” I realize now that the blush on his cheek was caused by the anxiety of him asking me on a date, but at the time it went right over my head.

“You mean Shane, too, right? Here he comes now, I’ll ask him.”

Shane was walking quickly towards me, and he didn’t look very happy. Afraid I had done something wrong again, I left Kevin to talk to him. “Hey, Shane. How was first period?”

“Let’s not worry about me, Jess. It looks like it was good for you.”

“Actually, it was pretty boring. I..”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, Jess. I’m referring to you acting like a whore in the hallway. What were you doing talking to Kevin Goodman?”

“Nothing, Shane. Look, I’m sorry. I know you don’t like me talking to guys, but he’s your friend, so...”

“Do you know what that kid does? How many girls he’s been with, that he drinks? Did you know he tell everyone he’s a better running back than me? But, hey, if you feel like talking to him, fine. Just don’t expect me to stick around and watch you turn back into a whore.”

With that, he walked off, leaving me alone in the hallway, sucking back my tears, and trying desperately to drown out the sound of Shane suggesting that I had been a whore. Over and over again the word “whore” tumbled through my head. He knew that I was a virgin before he came along. He had to convince me it was okay for the two of us to have sex. We were in love, and soon enough we’d be married. God thinks that’s okay, he had told me. I realize now that I shouldn’t have let him be my bible. I should have picked up the real one instead.

Before I could get to my next class I had to go to the bathroom. Tears had come when Shane left, and I needed to wash the shame off my face so I could walk into my next class with some dignity. I was

blowing my nose in one of the stalls when I overheard the voices of some old friends. We'd lost touch over the past six months. They just didn't understand that it was like to be in love. As I stood listening, I distinctly heard Susan say that Shane had been with Heather last night, and that she felt terrible for me.

"She's so far gone though, Susan, I don't know if she'd even care. She'll never leave him." I couldn't believe my ears. How could Cassie and Susan be talking about me like that? I couldn't be true. Last night when Shane called he told me that he had been out to dinner with his father. He never lies. In fact, he told me lying was the biggest sin and that I shouldn't even exaggerate stories. Cassie and Susan were obviously just jealous of the two of us. I figured they had staged the whole thing. They'd probably decided to execute their plan to break us up when they saw me come into the bathroom. Shane was a Christian, for him cheating would be impossible.

After I talked myself completely out of believing a word they said, I headed to my next class. Trying as hard as I could to look invisible, I took a seat at the back of the room. I hugged my legs to my chest, wrapped my big flannel around my baggy jeans, and tried my best to comfort myself. It was hard, though. Taking care of yourself is always tough when you hate who you are. Questions flew through my head the entire period. Why had I talked to Kevin? I was always so careful about not talking to guys outside of the classroom, even in the classroom. Shane had done so much to make me a better person, why couldn't I do anything for him? I thought I was a hopeless case. You could take me to church, and teach me right from wrong, but somehow I'd never stop being bad. Shane was my only link to goodness, and now I was losing that. What was my problem?

"Jess, what's wrong? You look really upset. Are you okay?" Great, while I was trying so hard to look invisible I had sat down right next to Kevin.

"I'm fine." I wanted to make my answer as short as possible so he wouldn't keep talking to me.

"Maybe you don't want to talk about it to me, but I've heard the rumors about Shane and Heather, and I just want you to know that you deserve so much better. You deserve to be happy, and from the looks of it, you're not."

I didn't respond. I pretended not to have heard anything he said. Cassie and Susan were spreading their little lie around the school now, fabulous.

"Jess, I'm sorry, okay? If Shane makes you happy, then I'm

happy for you. Oh, and about my invite earlier, I would have invited Shane but he usually doesn't like those kinds of things. I thought you'd like to just hang out with your friends. You know-- have an opportunity to just chill out. If he wants to come through, that's cool. He's been nothing but nice to me, and the guy's a great running back. I could learn a lot from him."

I was starting to get the feeling that this guy was not going to shut up. I didn't want to be rude to him. I liked Kevin a lot, but he was going to get me into more trouble. I started to pretend to read my textbook and he finally got the hint. Amen, I was finally free to go back to questioning myself about why I couldn't treat Shane right.

For the rest of the day my thoughts remained on this subject, and for the rest of the day I noticed something peculiar. During every class, Shane would appear in the doorway, staring at me. It wasn't like before when he would smile and wave, this time he was really watching me, checking up on me almost. Although I did think that this was weird, I thought it was a sure sign of how much he loved me, and I turned it into the comfort I so desperately needed. Shane was always doing things that outsiders couldn't understand, like the time he made me give all of my shorter skirts and form fitting clothing to Goodwill. My sister was furious. She thought he was being controlling, but I knew that he was just helping me to become a more morally respectable person. He was always being misunderstood.

By the time my final period study hall rolled around I was exhausted, and looking forward to seeing Shane since we had this class together. I sat down next to him and forced a smile. He didn't smile back, he just stared at me, chewing on a toothpick, and grabbed my book bag off my lap. He dumped its contents onto the table in front of him and started going through all of my folders. Midway through reading my Spanish notes he stopped.

"You were working with Kevin, weren't you? This is his handwriting along side of yours."

"Yes Shane, I worked with him, Mrs. Bodine put us into groups. I had no control over the situation. I wouldn't deliberately do that to you." My stomach started to tighten into knots, I was in trouble now.

"This is the last time I'm going to tell you this Jessica. If you keep hanging around that trash I'm out of here. I guess you've made it so I have to go through your folders all the time now. I really never wanted it to come to this, but I guess it has."

My only reply was that I was sorry.

His only reply was a muffled, "Slut."

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

He continued to examine every page of my notebooks, and not having found anything else, he shoved the pile of books over to me to reorganize. As soon as the bell rang, I made my way to my sister's car. As we were beginning to pull out Shane came up to my window.

“Hey,” I said, not knowing how to act anymore. I really just hoped that he wouldn't yell again, I got enough of that at home.

“Listen Jess, we need to talk. After practice I'm coming over.”

“Okay Shane, sounds good. I love you.”

“Yeah.” He ran to catch up with the other guys, and Tracy and I sped home.

“What's up with him? Jess, you know he shouldn't treat you the way he does.” Tracy was always saying stuff like this. She used to love talking about Shane with me, but lately our fun conversations have turned into interrogations. I ignored her and wondered whether Shane coming over was a good sign or a bad one. As we drove, I convinced myself that the day had been bad enough, and certainly couldn't get any worse. He was obviously coming over to work on things, and figure out a way that I could stop hurting him.

I waited in silence for him to come, laying on my bed and contemplating the events of the day. Mom and Dad would be at work until late, so at least Shane and I would have time to ourselves. He walked in, and without saying a word lay down beside me. He kissed my lips gently, and I knew that everything would be okay. He touched the body that I spent all day trying to hide, and made me feel pure again. Its funny how sex with Shane could do that, he always loved so forgivingly. When we were finished, he jumped out of my bed and suggested we take advantage of the hot day and go for a swim.

We played in the pool like children that night, flirtatiously wrestling. I thought everything was better. I mean he was kind of rough a few times when we were wrestling, but his laughter reassured me that everything was okay, that is until I asked him to sit next to me on a seat in the deep end of the pool.

“Come sit with me Shane,” I begged.

“I can't.” He had a devilish smile on his lips.

“Why can't you sit with me?”

“Because that's a love seat, and I don't love you anymore.” His smirk hadn't faded, and I couldn't tell if he was being serious.

“What do you mean you don't love me anymore? Is this some kind of silly joke?”

“Actually, Jess, it’s not. In fact, I don’t know if I’ve ever loved you. Today in school just made me realize...”

“Realize what?”

“That you can’t be what I want you to be. You messed it up for us.” As he was saying this I stared at his feet. He had gotten out of the pool and was standing above me. He was telling me that he didn’t love me and all I could do was stare at his toes. His second toe was bigger than his first, and for the first time this really bothered me. His feet were ugly. Shane Bowman had a fault, and for the rest of my life I’ll never forget his feet.

“Jessica, would you look at me when I’m talking to you? I need to say this because you know how much I value honesty. I was with Heather last night.”

My eyes turned from his feet to his now dead serious face. “You told me that you were with your father, you wouldn’t lie.”

“I didn’t- it’s just that after I was with my father I was with her.”

“What did you do with her, Mr. Honesty? Tell me now.”

“I had sex with her.”

“And you call yourself a Christian, you lying piece of...”

“Jess, don’t make it any worse on yourself by sinking to that level. You know I don’t allow cussing. Besides, I didn’t lie. There’s nothing wrong with what I did. It was just sex, and God understands the difference between having sex and making love. I did think that I was making love to you before, but now I realize it was just sex too. I wasn’t sure until tonight, but now I know.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I had tried so long to be a good Christian because that’s what he wanted, but now I saw that the person I left behind was much better than this new “Christian” I had become. I stared at him, searching for some sense in it all. There was none. I grabbed my towel and ran up to the bathroom. I got in the shower and scrubbed him off of me. The tears choked me, and my body shook with the violence of my sobs. The person I had turned myself into over the past two years was a fake. The pureness I had been striving for wasn’t purity at all. I got out of the shower and cried myself to sleep. I cried out all of his lies, all of the unhappiness I hadn’t even known I felt. I thought changing myself into a better person was supposed to be painful, but now I knew that it was just Shane who was painful, and it was Shane I needed to get rid of, not some evil inside of me. When I woke up this morning. I walked directly to my mirror.

As I stand her staring at myself, I see a different person than the one I had barely taken the time to look at for the past two years. I see

someone who has been beaten down, but more than that I see someone who has the potential to get back up. I'd never noticed how beautiful I'd become. A calm feeling rushes over me. I'm going to be okay.

"I haven't seen you standing in that position in ages. Do you like what you see?" Tracy always comes into my room in the morning to make sure I'm up. She hates it when I make her late.

"I guess I like what I see, but could you help me make myself look even better?"

"This is going to be fun."

She hands me her lipstick. I start to put it on. Who would have thought that ruby red lip gloss could make someone feel so powerful? I like the way I look.

"Here Jess, you need this too. Let me do it for you."

Tracy adds some color to my face, and brushes my long blonde hair. This will be the first day this year I'll go to school without my hair in the pony-tail that Shane always demanded. I don't feel finished yet, though, somehow this isn't enough.

"You can't forget the outfit Jessica. Here, wear this mini-skirt with my little whit v-neck shirt. Today you're not going to hide behind a flannel, today you'll show everyone the Jessica I've missed so much."

"Thanks Tracy."

"Ah, forget about it. Let's go, we're going to be late!"

Driving to school I feel so free. Every time I catch a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror, I can't help but giggle. I find myself singing loudly to every song that comes on the radio, if I don't know it, I make up the lyrics. Shane hates my singing. I haven't sang like this in years. When we hit the school parking lot, I can't wait to get inside the building. I jump out and make my way through the hallways. Everyone is looking at me, whispering. I like it. I like that I'm no longer invisible, and suddenly I realize that the power I thought I'd gotten from the lipstick had been within me all along.

"Jess?" It's Kevin. His smile is huge and he comes rushing towards me. "You look awesome, not that you didn't always, but, well, wow!"

"Thanks Kevin. Hey, feel like walking a single girl to her first class?"

"You bet. Let's do it!"

As the two of us make our way down the hall I can make out Shane standing flabbergasted by his locker. His eyes look me up and down, and his face begins to blush. I'm thinking he's probably realized what he lost, and I like it. He won't be getting me back, but there's one

more thing I feel like I have to say to him.

“Hey Shane!”

“Yeah?”

“I forgot to tell you something last night.”

He hesitatingly steps toward me. “What?”

“Fuck you.”

Delusionus Prime

Andrew Gerchak

“Hey! W-w-what are you doing here?”

I fight the goo holding my eyelids together. The blades of light dull and I throw a glance around, taking in the parking lot outside of an unfamiliar diner. The N and the R are burned out in the sign, but it’s still a diner. “That’s a good question my stuttering friend,” I say. “I’m afraid I don’t have the answer to that one.”

“W-w-w...” The waitress’ throat misfires repeatedly as she molds her expression into “offended.”

“Oh, don’t mind me, Miss. I’m just an obnoxious bastard.”

Her lips twitch and struggle with the W sound. Her poise tells me what a jerk I am, her eyes stab me with disgust, but the words have yet to hit the air. Hands on her hips, she’s a crossbow. She hates me, and it’s not my fault I fall in love with her. I steal her name from the tag resting on her white buttoned blouse.

“Susan, do you have any idea how beautiful you are?”

Same body position, the W is still stuck, although not as harsh, but her eyes run out of ammo, soften. Her head dips and red curls fall across her pale forehead. She swallows, inhales, and tries again. “W-what?...What was I going to say?” A smile slips through her countenance that she tries to ignore.

“You were about to tell me that I’m an inconsiderate prick and you can’t wait until the demon harpies feast on my innards...but then I seem to have flustered you by mentioning that I find you incredibly attractive.”

She flips strawberry curls off her porcelain face without bothering to hide the smile dancing on her lips. “Not to ruin your day, Romeo, b-b-but I w-was a little more thrown by your rub-b-ber ducky. See you later, dickhead.” Her shoes clip-clop on the macadam, then up the stairs to the diner.

I contemplate how she can blow me off so easily, but then catch myself in the reflective aluminum shell of the building and I understand. My shirt’s MIA and my costume consists of a cardboard Burger King crown, sunglasses, mud-caked jeans, and a worn shoelace necklace adorned with the severed head of a rubber ducky.

Flanders chuckles behind my eyes. “This is a dilly of a pickle.”

My palm shakes the window and I shout after my new favorite fruit. She fires me a smile-her teeth so white, bottom right tooth is chipped, beautiful-then extends her middle finger. Curves a little to the

left, broken nail. She throws her shoulders and back into my view and I'm left with the door.

Living from hinges, he speaks in grease, "Hey, go in there and sweep her off her feet."

The No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service sign disagrees in a British accent. "Sorry chap, but until you find proper attire, you'll have to stay out here in the garbage from whence you rose."

Grease. "Fuck him! She's waiting."

Never before has a door been so wise. "Thanks, friend," I say, then bang my knuckles against the snobby little sign.

UK laughter.

The skin on the small of my back is left on the concrete as I slide away from the steps.

A no-neck cook consumes the doorway, forearms tangles in front of his sagging chest. "Listen, chump." He raises his hand above the cigarette burn on his forehead and the bowl-full of jelly escapes beneath his gravy-stained wife beater. "Ya ain't gots no shirt, ya ain't gots no shoes, so ya ain't gonna gets no service!"

I peel the rest of my body off the ground. "Well my obese, double negative using Neanderthal, I do believe we got off on the wrong foot." I skip up the steps and stab his chest with my finger. "You're a fat greasy ape, and I'm a swell guy who just fell madly in love, Shakespeare style, with that stuttering strawberry goddess. So, if you'd just step aside and let romance take its course..."

He reintroduces his hands to my person and my spine to the sidewalk. "Ass face..."

"Your vocabulary amazes me." Still on the ground. "You must have conquered the SATs."

"Little fuck nut..."

"That's Mr. Fucknut to you."

Hands capable of making The Incredible Hulk squeal like a puppy that just got punted across a dorm room bring me to my feet and I make eye contact with the cigarette burn. It's begging me to stare at it, but I shift to his eyes as they turn various shades of red.

"NO SHIRT, NO SHOES..."

"NO SHIT! I saw your sign. Fucking snobby British bastard." I feel a blister on his thumb pop and ooze down my bicep.

"Harry, put the jack ass down." Susan, beautiful, comes to my rescue. His grip opens, I'm free.

"Actually, I'm a fuck nut, but we have a lifetime to work that out."

He loads his knuckles and cocks his fist.

"Harry," Susan's voice, thin milkshake. "Get b-b-back in the kitchen. You've got orders to fill."

"But..."

"I'll b-be fine, now shut up and get inside."

Harry slouches back into his cave.

I pick the loose gravel out of my flesh. "Silly brute. His primitive instincts just don't allow him to recognize Love." I step closer. "But I'm glad to see you do."

She sinks back. "W-W-W-W..." Her eyes dim, she inhales, and squeezes out the letter. "What the Hell are you talking about?" The cool pillow of her hand breezes to me cheek and she throws her eyes into mine. "Are you on something?"

"Other than the intoxicating quality of your presence?"

Cool pillow to jellyfish and I stumble backwards.

"I'm not sure why I did that," she says.

"Must be my irresistible personality."

"Fuck off!" Exit stage left. Winter comes early.

I stop shivering when something tickles my lips after escaping my nose. Temperature rising, I send my hand to my face on a reconnaissance mission. The scout returns painted red. Fire, I stroke the bulge clinging to the inside of my right thigh. "Not to worry my friend," I tell him. "We won't be going quietly into the night. No, I think we'll stay and play for a while." He laughs along with me.

I shuffle to the back of the parking lot and examine the damage in the window of a pea-soup-green pickup. My translucent reflection tells me I've already clotted, and looking through myself, I see that it's Christmas.

The door unlocked, I retrieve a beaten, stale mustard yellow flannel and six dollars from the passenger seat. I claim a pair of flip-flops from just behind the driver's throne. I crawl into my new skin and drop my crown in the truck's bed. I assure My Little Friend that they'll all know we're king without the head ornament. Solid with determination, we permit the flip-flops to carry us back to the diner's entrance.

"Pardon me, you silly redcoat," I say to the sign as I tug at the flannel and shake a foot, "but I believe I'm going to go inside for some fine cuisine."

"Of course, my good sir," he replies. "No hard feelings. I hope you understand that I was just doing the job that I've been contracted to do."

"Why yes, chap," I say, then reach up my nose and smear a sinus

deposit across his message.

The door chuckles and says, "It's about time somebody did something about that prick. Thanks man. C'mon in!" He gives way as my fingers touch the glass.

The cook greets me with a scowl as he marches from the kitchen, but I kindly explain to him that I don't want any trouble, just some service. Susan emerges behind the bar and questions my motives as well. "All I want," I say, "is an order of pierogies and a chocolate milkshake. Maybe a little whipped cream on top of the shake if it's not too much of a bother."

"And maybe a side order of respect?" My Little Friend questions, but no one seems to hear him. I pat him in hopes of keeping him quiet. We don't want to cause a scene just yet.

I whistle the theme to *The Transformers* as I stroll around the corner of the bar and pass through the doorway into the men's room. "Soon, little buddy. Soon we'll get our chance." Fingers on denim, I slip the button open and listen to the zipper's teeth as they part. I plunge my hand down inside my jeans, and I'm almost too excited to pull it out.

The athletic tape removes hair from my inner right thigh and leaves a rash-like mark, but as I hold My Little Buddy in my hand, it seems like a fair price. Polished silver, but green in tint under the bathroom lights, I check his chamber to make sure he's loaded. Sure, walking around with a loaded revolver in my pants might not be proper etiquette for an all-night diner, but you never know when you might have to shoot somebody.

I hold My Little Buddy alongside my cheek and pose for a trading card photo in the mirror. Rubber Ducky is frowning. I tell my reflection, "We make one hell of a cute couple, don't you think?"

The Glass responds, "Who cares about the look? The deed's what people will remember. You sure you have the stomach for this?" I tell him yes, but he doesn't seem convinced. "You really think you can shoot that cook out there in the face without making an ass out of yourself by puking all down the front of your chest?"

I laugh. "That's why I grabbed this horrid flannel," I say. "Vomit will blend right in."

My reflection slaps me. "This is fucking serious! If you're not ready for this, you better just walk out of here right now before you get hurt!"

"I'm the one in control here," I say as I wave the revolver above the sink. "The only way anyone gets hurt is if I decide they should, and

the only one I want to drop is that cook. After that, I'm just going to take my food to-go, tip Susan, ask her for a date, and then maybe steal a car."

Shouts arise from outside of the little boy's room, muffled by the door. Rubber Ducky twitches.

"This is the time. Something's happening," my reflection says. "They're obviously distracted. Make your move." He smiles, convincing me this will all work out the way we planned.

I press my lips against the cold metal, whisper my love for him, and then explode from the restroom. I scan the diner with my eyes and revolver, searching for the cook. Instead...

The patrons are one with the floor. A man with horseshoe hair is shoving the black barrel of a handgun into the nasal cavity of the cook and screaming about his pickup being robbed. The severed head necklace burns my chest.

Squeeze-lightening-thunder-splat-squeeze-lightening-thunder-splat!

Red grows from the gunman's forehead and throat. He thuds against the floor a second after his gun clangs against the bottom of the barstool. I throw my aim at the cook, who still hasn't breathed, and I see Susan's image in the sliding glass door of the pie case.

I curse Cupid and put My Little Friend down on the counter. I step around the panicked patrons and over the lead-infested body. Someone once told me that it's bad luck to step over a corpse, but how else was I supposed to get to my plate? No one moves as I top the pierogies with salt and bite the steaming potatoes inside, cooling my tongue with the shake.

I receive syncopated praise from the employees and customers who begin to rise from the tile. I focus only on Susan as she stares at My Little Friend who's resting aside my fork. When her dialog becomes somewhat coherent, I decipher that she's asking me how I knew that guy would be there. I shrug my shoulders.

Fear exaggerates her stutter. "W-w-w-w-w-why the hell did you even have that gun on you?"

I begin to explain to her that I'm on special assignment from the Queen of Siberia to retrieve the purple tortoise mustard of Mongolia from the amphibic palms of Niri Prosa, but I reconsider. "Well," I say, "you never know when you might have to shoot somebody."

A titter slips between her lips, not sure if I'm joking to ease the tension or not. The cook finally breathes and tells me that this one's on the house, but I refuse the offer.

“So whats can we do ta repay ya?” he asks. “You’s a hero!”

I drop my six dollars next to my milkshake. “Not really, but there is something you can do for me,” I declare. “Reach into your wallet, pull out a five, give it to Susan, and give her a paid break so the two of us can sit in that booth over there and share a banana split.” He’s seemingly perplexed, but agrees.

Susan reluctantly allows me to escorting her to our corner seats. I shout over my shoulder. “And get rid of that fucking sign on your door!”

Once her fragmented voice calms and a shallow conversation is born, I spy red and blue splashes of light showering the parking lot. “W-what’s w-wrong?” she asks.

I rise from the plastic cushioning. “I’m sorry my dear, but I’m afraid you’ll have to dine alone this evening,” I say. “I’m pretty sure those gentlemen outside want to talk to me, and I do so hate paperwork.” I retrieve My Little Friend from the bar counter and bury him in denim. “Is there an alternate exit?”

“You mean a b-back door?” When I nod, she continues. “Back through the kitchen and to the right.”

As her sentence completes, I swing the kitchen door hinges and find the escape route. Slinking around the side of the building, I watch two patrolmen enter the diner with guns drawn. It’s a shame they didn’t shoot that self-righteous Brit, but I guess I can’t have everything I want. At the edge of the parking lot, I drop the severed duck head from around my neck and pray that the police stay up all night drinking cheap whiskey in an attempt to figure out what kind of a clue it could possibly be. He seems happy with my choice.

I skip across the train tracks, singing, “Autobots wage their battle to destroy the evil forces of the Decepticons...” Occasionally, I glance back and watch the scene shrink. “More than meets the eye...”

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