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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Gregory K. Coyle for the Master of Arts in English were presented November 7, 1996, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Gregory K. Coyle for the Master of Arts in English presented November 7, 1996.

Title: *No Boat, No Bridge*

In a world that devours one technological advance after another, the simple human questions persist. They endure despite the increased speed of the personal computer or the decreased size of the cellular phone. In a time ruled by measurements they remain elusive and undefined. The longing for love, the crisis of past versus present, the nagging hunger for meaning in the face of constant change--these questions manage to be both small and huge, both slow and fast, all at once. They are the inheritance of every generation; they are written on the very lining of our hearts.

These stories are, then, simply a short list of questions. Whether it be a story like "Bones," where love and time intersect, or one like "There is A.," where moral strength is at issue, each asks a question. Each attempts by a different angle to flush some answers from the brush. What does it mean to love? When does hope become foolishness? When lost, is it always better to stay put? These are some of the concerns taken up in this collection.

In the end, the answers remain just out of reach, having only just rounded the corner at our arrival. The reader is left to either the tremulous bravado of the boy in the second story, who asks, "What do I care about wolves in the night anyway?" or the paltry rebellion of the man in "Making for the Phoenix" who is reduced finally to throwing rocks at the windows in his office building.

NO BOAT, NO BRIDGE

by

GREGORY K. COYLE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
ENGLISH

Portland State University
1996

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Bones

The bones were wrapped in an old army blanket largely rotten from time and the cold wet earth. Exposed, they were mostly unhinged from their joints, their dull white color stained with dirt. From her place in the kitchen May secretly watched her husband Warren as he unfolded the remains of the blanket and then arranged the bones on the lawn like items for sale.

The discovery had been unexpectedly made after the pulling of an old stump from the yard. Once the knotted remains of the tree had been pulled free of the ground like a diseased tooth, there they had lain, collected in a loose bundle. May had not seen it all, but she had seen enough. She watched the delicate way Warren retrieved them from the hole. She watched him pick up each piece in turn and inspect it: the pale wing of the hip, a piece of knotted spine, the duplicate curves of a section of rib cage. To her it was as if he had stumbled upon some portion of her own soul she had kept hidden even from herself. Watching him there on his knees in the yard, and seeing the small bones naked in the sun before him, she tried to be relieved.

* * *

She had met Dr. Capshaw in the spring of 1970. During visits to town, she had heard of his arrival. But it was not until finding him one afternoon at her door that she finally spoke to him.

At first seeing him on her porch that day, she had mistaken him for a salesman. A shortsleeved shirt, a striped tie, crisp slacks, a leather satchel in his hand, all had appeared brand new. Plus, he looked young, especially about the chin and mouth. Together these elements had inspired in her an immediate sympathy she could not quite account for.

"Good afternoon—Mrs. Graves?" he said through the screen door.

She nodded, and squinted at the sunlight behind him.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I'm not interested in buying anything today. I really have everything I need. Maybe try the Trenton's down the road."

"No, no, Mrs. Graves, I'm Treat Capshaw," he said. "I'm taking over for Dr. Weathers? And, well, I was just visiting all the neighboring farms in the area to introduce myself. Let them know I'm here."

In the living room over iced tea and pear slices she told him that since her husband Warren had gone to the war she had been forced to sell off a good deal of the livestock.

"I know," he said reassuringly, patting his satchel.

That's how it had started. In his shortsleeves and clean-shaven face, letting her know he was there.

* * *

"May!" Warren yelled, without looking up.

Getting no answer, he returned to arranging the bones on the blanket. One piece here, one there, some rearrangement. Like a puzzle he put them together, and soon the constituent parts took their collected shape. It lay naked and small under the sun. The narrow skull he added last. When completed, he inspected what he had made. On Warren's face, below the shadow made by the bill of his cap, he admitted his awe. For some moments he sat still and quiet, his weathered hands on his knees.

"May!" he yelled again, this time looking toward the house.

She pulled back behind the curtain. Through the loose weave of the fabric she could still see him. Once more unanswered, he turned again to the

blanket, wiping free the bits of dirt clinging to its edges. Next to him yawned the vacant hole in the earth, and next to it, the wasted stump with its dirty roots exposed and unprotected. Kneeling there as he did, he suddenly seemed to her so sad and so good, so immeasurably good. Such a kind heart, she thought, such a fine, fine man. He had always loved her and had given her a good life. When finally beyond the war, and free from the misery of those miles, they'd survived. Yes, she thought, since then all the yesterdays had been put to rest. It made her feel better to think so.

* * *

By June of 1970, one of the mares had been ready to give birth. May worked hard on the farm in Warren's absence, and the prospect of the new foal excited her more than she expected. They'd bought the farm together, she and Warren, and together they'd nurtured it back to life. In the face of the war, this new pregnancy portended good things. It was a signature of good fortune. She imagined his return, walking up the long dirt drive. He'd smell the juniper and scotch broom, the scrub pine, and he'd hear the crickets murmuring in the tall grass. The cows would raise their heads and watch him pass. It would be spring, like now, she imagined, and it would all

greet him: the small house encircled by the deck they'd built, the barn, the hills wandering off casually to the horizon—all of it. Then as he came further up the road he'd see the new colt at the fence, spirited, tobacco-colored and sleek as burnished stone. It would be fine then. Things would be restored to their proper order. Everything would be good.

* * *

Warren stood and walked toward the house. After a few steps he stopped and looked for a long moment at his feet. Behind him, pointing east on the wizened grass, stretched his lean shadow. Then he returned to the display on the blanket and picked up one of the larger pieces. He tested its weight in his hand, looked briefly at the now incomplete skeleton, then moved once more toward the house.

May quickly retreated from the kitchen and climbed the stairs to the second floor, then those to the attic.

"May, come here and see what I found!" The screen door clapped shut behind him.

She left the attic door ajar to listen. The room smelled of dust and

sunned wood, sweet and rich. Everywhere were old things, things discarded and forgotten, but which lived still in secret, forever waiting. Against one wall leaned an old Charles Russell print, the Indian on his horse now obscured by dust. A hooded sewing machine rested quietly in one corner. In another hung a dilapidated bicycle. The room was mostly boxes. They were scattered everywhere. Some remained closed, while others had over time sprung open, looking like the wasted slough of some now long absent creatures.

Downstairs the floor creaked, then in a moment the pipes groaned and the faint sound of water hissed in the sink. She sat on a box marked "Books." Next to the room's one window she admired the way the shaft of light broke into distinct and fragile tines on the dry warping wood of the floor.

From this height the hole in the yard seemed rather insignificant, and so too the bones displayed next to it. The horses looked oddly delicate. Arrayed in a scattered rank in the adjacent pasture, they bent their heads to the ground. It was as if they were only figurines, made from porcelain or glass, and might be blown away by a strong wind. Further, beyond the horses and the yard, their long drive loped into the distance.

* * *

She had heard it before she saw it. Then, shading her eyes from the sun, she could spot his car, plumed in dust, making its way quickly down the dirt road toward the house. Its roof sparked in the glare. She wiped her hands on her pant legs, and watched him approach. Dr. Capshaw had come right away, as he promised he would.

Once he'd parked, she led him immediately to the barn. There they found the horse on its side, snuffing, its eyes wide and rolling in its head. As he moved about the mare, he spoke to it softly, reassuringly.

"O.K. now, you're O.K., you're fine. You're going to be a mama, that's all, you're fine." He stroked the animal's neck, and made soothing sounds like a parent putting to sleep a troubled child.

May watched him and enjoyed the delicate way he dealt with the mare, the gentle caresses he gave it.

"Alright. Mrs. Graves," he said, "it looks like she's ready. Now, I'm going to need your help a little bit, O.K.? And in a few minutes we'll see if we can't—" Just then the mare interrupted with a loud broken whine, its eyes rolling, its legs kicking.

"O.K., O.K. You're fine, you're O.K.," he whispered as he stroked the animal's neck.

"I've never done this before," May said.

"That's alright, I'll tell you what to do."

"We've only had one other birth and Warren he—"

"You'll do fine," he assured her. "But we have to do it now, she's uncomfortable."

His hands were hairless and nicely shaped. They looked oddly animate as he soothed the mare, as if separate from his body. In recent weeks he had proven himself very capable. The horse never shied from him. In fact, her spirits seemed always calmed in his presence. May too, witness to his gentleness and encouragement, found herself breathing more comfortably in his company.

The mare kicked its legs again and brayed a tight pitiful cry. Its teeth clicked, and May could see the meaty red of its tongue. The belly was so large. Dr. Capshaw moved to the rear of the horse. Having wandered in from the nearby pasture, another horse momentarily interrupted the light at the barn door. It stopped at the entrance and looked in, its ears stiff-straight, but came no closer.

"O.K., Mrs. Graves, now I need you to hold her head. Can you do that?"

She felt weak all of a sudden, but managed to kneel to the animal. She

rested its head in her lap. Its black nose chuffed and snorted, and she felt the warm breath on her arm. The dark eyes fixed on her, large and round. She tried to think of him coming down the road, the tobacco-colored colt at the fence. She tried, but the mare cried again and she could not conjure up the picture.

"Is everything O.K.?" May asked, thinking the sound of her own voice vaguely peculiar.

From behind the animal, the doctor reached and grabbed something from the bag next to him.

"You're O.K. honey, hold on," he said.

The belly, it seemed so large. May felt the muscles in the mare's neck and the hot, damp coat. She could smell the dull musky breath.

The doctor shuffled about in the hay at the rear of the animal, still whispering to her. Soon he too was breathing heavily. When, after a few minutes of this, he looked up at May, his face was flushed, and beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

"What's happening," she asked. "What, what is it?"

He shook his head, then disappeared again behind the animal.

The horse shrieked, and May had to hold fast onto its head. She could feel its heavy breath through her pants.

"Damnit. It's wrong," he said. "It's wrong."

The doctor's head moved about frantically. The horrible appeal in the mare's eyes kept May from getting to her feet to see.

"Now hold her tight, Mrs. Graves. You've got to hold her tight!"

The horse panted and had begun to slaver. May stroked the broad muscled jaw, and tried in a cracking voice to calm her.

"It's O.K., Dr. Capshaw will—" she tried.

Dr. Capshaw grunted, and the horse tensed and cried like a man. The doctor tipped over the bag at his feet and feverishly searched amongst its contents. The spilled instruments glinted in the hay. As he worked he huffed in a kind of syncopated rhythm with the animal. He nodded at May.

"Here we go," he said, and ducked again behind the mare's flanks.

There was a flex as muscles tensed and the animal let loose a sound unlike the others it had made. May held tightly. Then in another moment it was over and it stopped, everything stopped. The mare whined softly and its muscles relented. She lay spent and breathing heavily in May's lap.

"Dr. Capshaw," May cried. "Dr. Capshaw—"

But he did not look up.

* * *

The screen door slammed, and from the attic window she watched her husband enter the yard again. Still carrying the bone, he returned to the blanket and replaced the missing piece to its proper position. She no longer wanted to see. In the ray of window light lazy sun motes, vagrant from their origins, spun endlessly in the hot air. A hat hung from a nearby beam. May blew on the wicker brim and the plastic flower that adorned it sending a small dust cloud into the air. Then she placed it on her head, precisely, as if there were a mirror before her.

She turned to the boxes, and began rifling through them. The racket she made dishing one item after another to the floor did not seem to bother her. It created tiny cataclysms of noise which were at first swallowed by the otherwise quiet of the house. Soon, however, it was too much and in aggregate the clatter compounded, and remained in the air like the swirling motes. This book, that book—to the wood floor. A pair of old candlesticks, some silverware. A cache of weathered shoes.

In one box she found old clothes. She upended the box and spread them on the floor. Kicking through the mess, she picked up a blue blouse from the pile. She snapped it in the air, creating once more in the small room a chaotic architecture of dust, and then put it on over the top she wore.

The sun poured in and could not escape. She could taste the baking floor boards, the wasting cardboard, the dust that had come to rest on her

eyelashes and the blonde hair of her arms. On the floor, in the boxes, hanging on the wall, she found things long since forgotten. Dusty china stuffed and protected with fading newspaper; more discarded clothing. One box was full of old record albums. These she inspected one-by-one and dropped to the floor. Fantailed at her feet, they were so achingly familiar she felt slightly nauseous and lightheaded. Why ever did they keep such things?

In the far corner opposite the bicycle hung a weathered garment bag. Stepping over the confusion on the floor, she approached the bag and slowly unzipped it. Inside, sharp as the day it had last been pressed, hung her husband's old army uniform.

Standing before it, she repeated the word "May" to herself until it ceased to be a name and became only a sound.

* * *

She helped Dr. Capshaw wrap the stillborn foal in a heavy army blanket. Later, when the heat of the midday sun had broken, he dug a hole in the yard near the tree and they buried it. Then it began to rain.

Looking on from the covered porch, the dirt of the fresh mound looked as dark as coffee grounds. Yet it seemed to May the kind of darkness

wherefrom things are born, not interred. Oblivion surely can't reside in the same place as life, she thought. It can't, it mustn't. They are opposites. She tried to fix it in her mind, but there was only the rain, and she began to cry.

"Gone," she cried. "So far away."

The doctor laid his hand gently on her shoulder and she leaned into him.

"But the mare's going to be fine," he said. "She's strong."

He led her to the bench and they sat themselves. The rain whispered, and mottled the otherwise pale dirt of the drive. He was warm and she held to him tightly. Since learning of the mare's pregnancy, a dream had been given shape. As the mare grew each day heavier with its foal, hope and respite from nagging worry had begun to warm in her again.

But now these things were given exit and she felt herself collapsing, emptying out. Her tears streaked the thin layer of dust that remained on her face, and Dr. Capshaw gently wiped them clean with his thumb. Suddenly, she wanted only to pull him closer and closer.

He spoke to her softly. "Just think about the mare," he said. "Think how lucky the mare is. To be alive. There'll be other foals. There'll be other foals."

Pressed against him, she shook her head.

"But he's gone. He's gone. I know it."

There would be no bright colt at the fence, she realized, no homecoming. It would rain. And anyway, the mare had been sedated and lay as if dead in its stall. The fact is no one can predict what's going to happen. None can hope for better than to say, maybe he will live, surely he will die.

"No, there's nothing left—" she said.

"I'm sorry, May. I'm really sorry."

His young, clean-shaven face looked with the dust on it weathered and vaguely aged. Yet, she saw at the same time the way life presided on the surface of it, giving him the same flushed fragile look she'd seen that first day on her porch. There was to him this delicate countervailing balance of man and boy she could not deny, and which even now supported her.

"I'm so very sorry, May. Really. I wish—"

She stopped crying and strengthened her grip about him. They held each other this way for a long time. Swallows or starlings made great sweeping arcs in the sky beyond the porch. Other birds, remaining protected under the eaves, chattered, then went quiet. She wanted to say, "I'm scared." But instead, she kissed him. When a breeze found the narrow space between their two bodies, it chilled her and she pulled him close and kissed him. He smelled of dirt, of hay and sweat, but his lips were warm. Their two bodies pressed into each other—she did not want to be half anymore. She wanted

only to be whole again.

Each kissed the dust from the other's cheeks. He was there, she could feel the heat of his skin, the rapid ticking beneath his shirt. In this, and all that he was for her at that moment, he was life. She clutched him the tighter for it, kissed him the more passionately for it.

No more was said of the foal. In fact, they said little otherwise. When they soon went inside and climbed the stairs to the bedroom, they did so silently, holding each other.

* * *

She pinched the army jacket at the shoulders as if it were not empty and she checking its fit on its owner. The fabric was rough and heavy, and smelled oddly of some stubborn living thing. She ran her hands down the sleeves and touched one cuff to her cheek. It had been years stored in the same corner of the attic. While the other items bore in color and shape the unmistakable taint of time, the uniform looked less corrupted. The banded bars at the one pocket remained bright. The gold of the buttons still shone. She held the cuffs in her hands as if weighing them, as if hand-in-hand with

the man who had worn them at his wrists. She tried a kind of dance with them, but found she could not.

"This is the young man who is young no longer," she said.

She put her hands to her face. The words in her head had years ago ceased to help her. Time had taken that from her, too. And now the bones returned to prove it so. For all of it, for what she had done that afternoon so many years ago, weak in hope, she cried. In the end, she cried as much for the inability of crying to save her. Today she had no choice but to surrender, deep down, at that place lying beneath words.

"May? Honey?"

Warren stood in the attic doorway, his leathered hands at his side.

"Honey, what is it?" he said. He glanced at the disruption of the room, then back to her.

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Warren," she said. "I'm sorry."

What Do I Care About Wolves in the Night?

Busbow

The plains always remind me of the surface of the moon. There's nothing there but evergoing space. It's like God forgot this part of Montana, or maybe was saving it for some special purpose he decided better of later. It makes your eyes tired to look at it there's so much nothing—bush, dry dusty bump, bush, dry dusty bump, horizon. I always expect to wander onto some dead body, the person's hair blowing absently in the wind. I never do though. It's as if the plains are too conspicuous a place to die, and that even the dead are driven elsewhere by the desolation.

At night, the plains disappear. In their place reigns a kind of forever darkness. It seems everything has just been pushed off the edge of the world, or that some enormous box has been placed over Busbow, closing it off from the universe.

In the evening, we stay inside—I've heard wolves roam after the sun goes down. I draw at the kitchen table. From there I can watch bats veer by the porch light and listen to nightbugs batter against the window. My mother also sits in the kitchen. She has her special chair where she knits.

Every now and then she looks toward the living room and frowns at the sound of my father singing along to his Irish records.

Leaving Home

There are no stories left I have not heard. When my father drinks it's always the same ones. From the living room he calls to me in the kitchen where I sit with my mother, and says, "Come in here and sit with your father awhile." At this my mother looks up from her knitting at me, then sadly resumes again. In the living room, he pulls me down to squeeze beside him in his recliner. There, he clutches me too tightly and tells me here's a father and son sitting together. The stereo is playing, and I know all the names: Tommy Makem, the Kingston Trio, the Irish Rovers, the Clancy Brothers, the Chieftans. He explains to me the story of this or that song, between loudly singing patches of it himself.

"This is a very old famous Irish song," he says, pulling me to him. "Very famous. `Sabout a young woman, a young Irish woman, in a city called Enniskillen . . . Listen." The voice he uses is insistent and, it seems, only vaguely directed at me. Then he sings a few lines, banging the hand of the arm he has around my shoulder on the arm of the chair. "And her lover, William, he's banished, sent away from Ireland to North America by her father." Here he stops, and slowblinking, his head nodding slightly, listens

for a moment, seeming to have forgotten me altogether. Then, just as quickly, he continues, "But she follows and finds him and they are finally together, and free. Free in a new world." At this he shakes his fist for emphasis. "And they, the two of them, they never think about Enniskillen again."

But I know the story. I know all the stories.

He lifts the cigarette in his right hand to his lips and the motion presses my head uncomfortably against his chest. Ash drops to his shirt front. Then he starts to sing again.

In the morning, my mother picks up the empty cans around his recliner, and lets him sleep. She gives me my lunch and sends me out the back door.

The Plains

Busbow A.F.B. is the name of the town. There's barely more there than the blank plains that surround it. It's one street, decorated by a movie theater, a police and fire station, a gym, one bar, one gas station, and a grocery store. Busbow used to be an air force base, but it's not anymore. The soldiers are gone now and exactly one half of town is totally empty. Right after Ruby Street the houses are empty and there are no sounds, save echoes, and no movement except the erratic shadows of birds overhead. To me, it's as if all the people escaped by night, onto the prairie, leaving behind

them their homes like a bunch of empty traps, or outworn husks. Jeff prefers to say of Busbow that it is a pair of Siamese twins connected at Ruby Street, only one is dead.

By the time we moved here a year or so ago for my father's job the soldiers were already gone. They are only a story I've been told. For me Busbow has always been this Busbow.

Killing Lions

I met Jeff England because our fathers work together. At fifteen, he's one year older than me, and has his own motorcycle. He was born in Busbow so knows all the tricks: how to climb onto the roof of the school; how to sneak crabapples and rhubarb from Mrs. Valdesen's yard; how to get grasshoppers to fight and spit tobacco. Last summer he taught me how to trap gophers with a bucket of water and a fishing net. When I insisted on keeping a few of the ones we'd caught in our spare garage, he warned me against it, but didn't argue. And when in two days they all turned up dead, he only said, "You just can't keep them cooped up like that."

I learned something else as well.

Not long ago, and for no special reason that I can remember, he bet me he could jump his motorcycle over his father's Volkswagon bug. Without thinking, I told him I'd like to see that. He immediately set about collecting

plywood and cinder blocks for ramps. Having more than once secretly driven the car, he had no problem backing the bug out of the driveway onto the street. He then set up the ramps at either end of the small blue Volkswagon, and jumped up and down on them to assure their sturdiness. That completed, he once or twice rode his motorcycle slowly up the ramp at the front bumper and then backed it down.

I kicked myself for challenging him. It was a selfish thing to do: borrowing a bravery I didn't own.

I bought time by telling him, "Well, we need to properly decorate your helmet before you can do it." Sitting in the driveway, we spent the next half-hour drawing red flames and stars on his old white helmet. But still he persisted. I then assured him that we had to similarly design his shirt, that his helmet required a match. He was less excited about this but agreed and helped color his white t-shirt with a corresponding design.

For a brief moment he strutted about the driveway, showing off the new outfit and I thought the idea had passed. But these preparations were not nearly so interesting to Jeff as the jump itself, the intricacies of which he explained to me as if he'd already accomplished it. Before I could think of anything else to say, he'd started the bike's gurgling motor and retreated to a spot about a half-block away. He yelled instructions to me. I pretended I couldn't hear him and he rode back up to me again.

"I'm going to put my thumb up when I'm ready, O.K.?" he said. "When I do that, you hold up your hand, then drop it. That will be my signal to go."

I told him I understood, and he rode back to his position. After he gunned the engine a time or two and readied himself, I stepped in front of the ramp and waved my hands. He rode back up to me again, this time a bit exasperated.

"Not until I hold up my thumb," he said.

"C'mon, you're not really going to do this."

At this he kind of sniffed at the air and looked about. "Just get out of the way," he said, and sped back to his starting spot.

He sat there a moment, astraddle the bike, and checked his gloves and the cinch at his chin. Then, after once again revving the engine, he held up his thumb. When I didn't respond, he jutted it further into the air. Stuck, I finally raised my arm, but held it there a long time. Then I dropped it, and the bike jumped and Jeff came speeding down the street, the engine whining. His chin cut into the wind before him and I could see the sharp shape of his shoulders beneath the t-shirt now flattened to his body. As he passed I admired the design of his helmet and t-shirt and imagined in that split second that I watched myself shooting by.

The front tire hit the ramp with a hollow thump and Jeff and the bike lifted into the air, but unfortunately not enough. The back tire sort of rode

up the windshield, cracking it, then came out from under him altogether somewhere on top of the car. Both he and the motorcycle skittered across the last half of the bug then flew off onto the pavement. Still linked somehow, they spun disastrously some distance down the street.

But I was not shocked, or scared. Suddenly it was all so amazing to me. It was like watching a rocket, or a fireworks display. Before I knew I was doing it, I found myself cheering as if celebrating every good in the world. Whooping, waving my arms, I ran after him, leaping down the street.

"You won," I yelled, "You won, you won, you did it!"

He lay a few feet from the bike, trying unsuccessfully to push himself to his knees. Both hands and one arm were quite bloody, and his torn t-shirt allowed view of an injured chest as well. Our design of the helmet, outside of one scratch, remained untouched. As for the bike, it lay in a heap near the curb. The handlebars were badly bent and so too the gas tank now scraped of much of its paint.

I danced about him and punched at the sky.

"Man! You did it! You did it! You said you would do it and you did it!"

I helped him up and to the house, finding it difficult to control my enthusiasm.

At the screen door he turned and looked back at the bike in the street and the dented car. One of his front teeth had been chipped and he ran his tongue over it and smiled.

He patted my shoulder.

"Shit," he said, "landings don't matter anyway."

Irish Music

On those nights my father doesn't return from work, he is at the Rainmaker. My mother will often send me there on my bicycle with a note for him. Inside, the place is hot and smoky, and poorly lit. People near the pool table always look at me strangely, their faces obscured and vaguely menacing. As you enter, the pool table is on the right. The bar is directly in front of you. My father sits at one of the tables scattered haphazardly to the left, near the fireplace.

"Hey boy," he says as I approach his table. He pulls me close to his side, his arm tight about my waist.

The people he sits with look at me blankly and don't move.

"This yours?" some joke, usually women.

I hand my father the note and while waiting quietly inspect the map laminated into the table-top. Every table in the Rainmaker has one, and all

are of Montana. Each time I go in there I make a bet with myself that I will finally find a map of someplace else. I know there must be one somewhere.

"Tell your mother I won't be home for dinner," he says. "I'm going to be staying down here awhile longer."

Though I want the note back, I can't bring myself to reach for it. As my father crumples it in his hand, he shakes his head. "Wives," he says, which prompts a woman sitting to his right to playfully slap his arm.

Later, I am awakened by his roaring voice. In between bursts, I hear my mother's attempts, diminutive and whispery. She does not want him to wake me.

Looking for Maps

Not far from Jeff's house there is a street that dead ends onto the prairie. There are plots nearby where houses look to have been planned, even a naked cul-de-sac unadorned but for the great sky above it. The street, "Y" street, just peters off, incomplete, the end of the asphalt crumbling onto scrub grass and wide open nothing.

The stop sign at the end of Y street is our favorite target. It makes a satisfying "ping" sound when hit with our pump BB guns. Sometimes we'll shoot for specific letters in the word, sometimes for the wood post on which its nailed. Other times we'll just run by and fire one-handed like cowboys in

a shoot-out. But the stop sign is always the bad guy, always evil. It's made up of every villain of every movie we've seen at the Busbow Theater. It stands there poised at the end of the street, and we shoot its eyes out.

"Bingo," Jeff says, ringing the pocked metal face from one knee.

"One of these days we're going to shoot it down," I say. "And then there will be no more stopping on Y street."

Siamese Twins

My mother explains it by telling me the job my father found in Busbow was not the one he thought he was accepting. "It's not the responsibility he expected," she says. She tells me he's a very brilliant man.

Number one in his class from the University of Massachusetts. "If only his work were more challenging." I am to be proud of my father. Circumstance can do things to people, she informs me, that may make them may react in ways very different from who they are.

"Your father is not the man we see at night. He's not that man. He doesn't mean to do what he does. He's just unhappy."

What she doesn't know is I don't care about his job.

Brilliant, or not. Happy, or not. Late at night, after I have gone to bed, I listen to him down there, in the living room. When he is not singing, or mumbling to himself, there is the gross stumbling about, the sound of the refrigerator opening, the gasp of a new can being popped.

“But I don’t want you to worry about it, O.K.?” she says. “I know you worry about me, and I don’t want you to. Everything’s fine, everything’s going to be fine.”

Sometimes, he does not sleep in the living room. On those nights, after he has climbed the stairs to bed, I can often hear their muffled voices and then, in time, the rustling of blankets and creaking of bedsprings. I have trained myself to hear it all, down to the sound of hair brushing against skin, the sick smacking of lips. Were my ears stuffed with cottonballs I would still know.

No More Stopping on Y Street

The vacant part of town was a favorite spot for me and Jeff. It was the best place for games. Depending on our mood it became a ghost town, an outpost on another planet, the battleground for gangsters. We filled the streets with what we chose, populated the houses with whomever our imaginations suggested. Still, beneath the games, there remained always this eerie feeling peculiar to deserted places. I think I liked it best for this

reason. It was as if seeing no tenants, time sailed right over the roofs, bound for places where it could resume turning men to dust. Yell on those streets and you were answered by only buoyant echoes, bouncing off the empty houses and returning to you.

Two days ago, we'd been shooting at the sign on Y street for awhile when Jeff suggested going over to the vacant part of town. He always called it "going over to Ruby Street." We had no plans and at first we only walked its dead streets talking, our BB guns slung over our shoulders like lion killers in Africa. Then after a bit, Jeff said, "Hey, I bet you can't hit that porch light there." I took my gun from my shoulder, pumped it a few times, aimed, and was actually surprised when the bell of glass shattered. The hollow pop then clatter of glass momentarily filled the street and reverberated.

"Not bad," Jeff said, slapping me on the back.

Even when the sound of breaking glass had gone, there remained in the air a kind of electric tremor that was very satisfying.

"I bet you can't hit that one," I said.

"Hell, you know I can hit anything you can hit."

I pointed at the target for him.

He quickly pumped up his gun, sighted, and in a second that light too fell in pieces to the ground.

"Eh?" He nodded proudly, pushing me. "Dead-eye."

"O.K.," I said. "O.K. That was an easy one. How about that one there, a house down?"

He nodded again, aimed, and hit that light as well.

"Two to one, me."

"Alright, alright, point it out," I challenged.

The competition went back and forth as we wound our way through the empty neighborhood. A few street lights here, some porch lights there, a pane in a front door. We went back and forth, tallying the score.

"O.K., here it is," Jeff said. "Pump it up as much as you can and then let me see you hit that window on that blue house over there." He pointed to a house a half-block away.

"O.K. Which one?"

"The blue house, right there."

"No, I mean which window." I held my gun ready.

"The big one in front there. You can hit that one can't you?"

I made a swipe at him and he jumped back laughing.

"You're only beating me by one," I reminded him. "This should be worth two."

Using a mailbox to steady my arm, I sighted the window and fired. When I missed Jeff jeered and threw one of the loose BB's he had in his pocket at me.

"If that was a rhino you'd be dead about now!" He laughed.

I fired a second time, and missed again. Third time, missed.

"Shit, move over!" he said. "Let me show you how to do it!"

Jeff made room for his gun next to mine on the mailbox. We both aimed, and both missed. Then another miss. In no time we were racing, firing and pumping and firing again as quickly as we could. For some minutes we filled the empty street with the shucking sound of the gun pumps, the soft but backed-up expulsion of the BB, and our excited exclamations. Finally, seeming to break and fall of its own plan, or in sympathy for our poor shooting, the big living room window simply came crashing down in huge sharp sheets. It made a great echo down the block. It seemed a long moment before the glass lay quiet, then Jeff and I erupted, jumping about and cheering like lucky contestants on a game show.

Jeff ran down the street pumping his gun again and in front of the blue house shot out the second floor window. He then took out the one above the garage. I ran after him, and shattered the large bay window in the adjacent house, and then those of the bedrooms. We proceeded this way down the block, destroying every piece of glass we could find, celebrating all

the way. It was a such a perfect sound, that great, mean crashing down of glass! One after the other, the houses were left looking toothless, and yawning. I don't know how many we'd hit before we heard the sirens.

If we hadn't got caught, I think we could have shot until there wasn't a window left, or at least until we were out of ammunition. But, who knows, maybe then we would have thrown rocks.

At the police station, my father looked small and pitiful sitting in his chair, clutching his jacket on his lap. With the cop he used this soft weak voice I'd never heard him use before. He sat there, his knees together, leaning forward slightly, and agreed with everything the cop said.

"Yes, of course . . . wrong path . . . jail . . . yes, I understand . . . yes, we will . . . absolutely . . . yes, better nip it now . . . my wife and I, yes . . . he will, you can count on it . . . thank you very much . . . yes, thank you."

It was worth everything just to see that.

In the car on the way home we said nothing. But as we came to a stop in the driveway he informed me my gun was to be locked away, and that I was forbidden to see Jeff.

"What in the hell are you smiling at!" he yelled, finally looking at me.
"You think something about this is funny!"

But I didn't think anything about it was funny.

Learning the Unimportance of Landings

Once you've started it doesn't take long before the lights of town begin to look like fragments of stars broken and fallen to earth. Not long at all.

Jeff didn't show at the Y street sign as we'd planned. I waited all afternoon, but he never came. I thought about going to his house to find him, but then decided against it. For some reason, it seems as if it was foolish of me to have ever expected him at all. Still, I don't hate him for it, I couldn't. Things are different, and I suppose that can't be helped.

I'm glad I remembered a flashlight though because in the dark I have to be careful of the gopher holes. Break an ankle out here and it could be all over. Every once and awhile I shine the light on my shoes to remind me I am moving.

What do I care about wolves in the night anyway?

Death by Forfeit

Standing in front of Hope's building, Grant leaned against the passenger door of his car. He had left the headlights on and they lit up the red truck parked in front of them.

"I can't treat you that way," he said, "because that's not how I see you."

This was his new tack. He always trusted that eventually Hope's lack of skill in these situations would work to his favor. She stood before him, her back to her building, and when she did not respond he continued.

"I mean, friends. It's like asking someone to all of sudden look at a member of their family as a stranger, treat your mother like just some woman at a bus stop. It's impossible."

Hope never responded right away during these conversations. Though normally more voluble and spirited, when the subject turned to the issue of their status each word seemed a painful declaration for her.

"I don't know what you want me to say," she said after a long pause.

"You know what I want you to say," he said.

She had always seemed vaguely fragile to him—a quality he credited to her being only 24 and almost six years younger than himself—but now, sometime past one a.m., she looked doubly unfit for the world. Silent, she stared at the ground, seeming to be almost trying to make herself so small as to disappear. Behind her, Hope’s apartment building stood indelicately shadowed, blemished by the glow of the nearby streetlights.

“You know what I want you to say,” he said again. “I want you to say—to admit—that you’re thinking about it.”

She looked up from her feet, fingering a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“You know my situation,” she said.

“Well, this was eventually going to come up, don’t you think?” he asked. Her eyes returned to the ground.

Absently picking flaking paint from the door of his car, he considered reaching out for her hand, but then thought it too soon.

Earlier they had been out drinking with a couple of friends, having a great time, even dancing a bit. It amazed him how delicate a balance they managed, and how quickly she could change. After the friends had left the bar for home, they had exchanged a simple glance that said neither one was ready yet to leave. These were the inspired moments. Most of the time

Grant felt their communication resembled that of scuba divers underwater, reduced to gestures and charades. But when it worked, when gestures were enough, he told himself the small successes would eventually make all the difference. Like single drops of rain revealing the grass hidden beneath standing snow, they would together finally uncover the real intimacy he knew waited to be discovered.

Driving her home from the bar, emboldened by an easy evening and the crisp chill of the open window on his warm neck, he tried again.

"The other day at work—you were wearing that grey turtleneck sweater—I looked at you, and it all seemed suddenly so clear to me."

"What other day?" she asked.

"The other day—Tuesday—do you know what day I'm talking about? You were wearing that grey turtleneck sweater."

"Grey turtleneck," she whispered, squinting at him.

"Tuesday."

She stopped squinting, and looked at him intently.

They passed a row of derelict warehouses, darkened and grimly tenanted by the frailest moonlight. Two men pulled boxes from a gaping truck-end and carried them to a loading dock and stacked them.

"Well, you were wearing that," he said, "and I remember I turned around just to say good morning, you know, say hello, like we do every day and it

just struck me.”

She did not say, “What?” but he continued.

“I nearly lost my breath. I don’t know if I gave myself away, but for a short second there I couldn’t quite breathe, looking at you. That’s when I realized I don’t see you as a friend. I don’t. As much as I might try.”

At this Hope looked away. Her mouth gone flat, her hands collected lamely in her lap, it was as if something within her had retreated and closed itself off. Like the slow rolling shuttering of an armadillo behind its scales.

At a stop sign Grant looked both ways, then continued through the intersection.

“I can’t make any more promises,” he said. “All I can do is treat you like I feel. So if that bothers you, well, I guess, I don’t know, I guess you’re going to have to decide what you need to do.”

After a block of silence, at the next stop sign, she said, “Thanks a lot.”

“Well, I want to be honest,” he said, thinking this the place to be courageous.

A truck passed them and a teenager in the back yelled something at Grant he could not make out but which the teenager’s friends thought very funny.

"Would you want me to act unnaturally?" he asked a moment later.

"I just think it's unfair of you, Grant," she said.

"Unfair?"

"You know my situation. You know it's not going to change. You know I'm with Tony, and that's not going to change."

At a stoplight Grant was distracted by the crude opulence of a corner car dealership. Bulbs marking the lot, flags limply waving in the dull night breeze, shiny grinning autos all lined up. In the small trailer office the light was on and two men sat in loosened ties talking animatedly. Before Grant could wonder what they talked about, the car behind him had honked for the green light.

Hope said nothing. To Grant she seemed to calcify, to harden to the point where were she to talk her jaw would surely creak.

"I'm just saying," he said to her.

She twirled the silver ring she wore on her right hand around and around on her finger.

The car hummed across the grating of the bridge separating the old part of the city from the newer downtown. For a brief moment Grant wondered what it would be like if he simply turned off, pitching the car and the two of them the hundred feet into the river below. It would be easy. As easy as

that, he thought, pretending to cut the wheel right. What's more, he wouldn't be scared to do it.

As they pulled up before Hope's building it began to sprinkle lightly. Once parked, they silently watched as a woman, her boyfriend or husband encircling his arms about her from behind, unlocked the building's front door. The couple entered the building looking like a two person conga line.

Grant, with thumb and forefinger, smoothed his eyebrows with slow outward strokes toward his temples. He knew there was much he could say, but not a thing would come to him. Something needed to happen, that was clear. One way or the other, something needed to happen.

"So," he asked after a long period of quiet, "do you understand what I'm saying?"

They remained in the car for some time. Grant had trusted that like searching for something lost in one's yard, time and persistence would eventually pay off. But tonight, very late and the streets quiet, none of it sounded right anymore. They had been circling each other for nearly a year, and beginning to creep into his thoughts was the vague suspicion he'd been cheated. Not by her specifically, but by circumstance partnered with hope. Though it was hard to separate her from that.

After awhile, collars turned to the weak drizzle, they got out to stand next to the passenger door. Grant leaned forward and tried to kiss her, but

Hope backed up as if avoiding a bee buzzing about her face. He said she obviously had feelings for him and she did not deny it. He said life was short and she agreed. He told her fear spawns its own nasty stepchildren; she turned the ring on her finger. Doing nothing for fear, he told her, leaning against the car and crossing his arms, is like death by forfeit. As he said this, he again imagined his car, freed and aloft, plummeting silently into the river.

Though Hope said little it was she who pointed out the man approaching them.

The man seemed to appear out of nowhere. Walking slowly, his face hidden in the shadows of his jacket's hood, his gait was ambling and pigeon-toed. Grant picked more at the chipping paint on his car. With the thumb of his other hand, closing one eye at a time, he wiped the rain from each eyelid and told himself this was it for Hope.

The man stopped a few feet from them. His hands were sunk deep in the pockets of pants that looked too big for his narrow hips. His face was thin and marked by a kind of mouth tic that made him seem to be forever puckering his lips.

"Hey, how you doing?" he said, spitting into a runnel of rainwater at the

curb.

“Not bad,” Grant said, waiting for the inevitable panhandling appeal. The man glanced at Hope’s apartment building, then pulled up his shirt to show the butt of the gun hidden there.

“This is a robbery,” he said. “Give me all your money.”

Grant’s heart jumped, but then immediately quieted again. Still running through his mind were the possible things he might say to Hope, the revisions in strategy, even the appeals, if it came to that. The interruption only made him feel how he imagined celebrities must feel when, say, at a restaurant with their family a stranger approaches asking for an autograph. It was simply a violation of privacy that must be dealt with. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket, knowing it held only two dollars, that as usual he carried his cash loose in his front pocket.

“You’re free to it, man,” he said, opening the wallet to show the man. “But there’s not much here.” He pulled out the two ones and handed them over.

“You,” he told Hope. As she dug in her leather purse Grant found himself admiring the beauty of her hands. Tapered, thin—but not fragile—with well-tended nails and just the right number of rings. He wanted to tell her, to gently touch them like a blind man as they opened the clasp of her wallet.

She handed the man the six dollars she had. At this he pulled the gun from his waistband. "Your pockets, what do you got in your pockets?" Hope began to quietly check.

"Hurry up," he said, beginning to fidget, circumspect. Pointing the gun at them, he glanced about the street, his mouth ticking.

With her palm opened she showed him a few miscellaneous bits of change and a blue ponytail band. After using the gun barrel to inspect what she had, he pushed her hand away, sending the nickels and dimes to the sidewalk.

"C'mon, hurry up, what the fuck are you doing?" He slapped at Grant's right pocket.

Grant sunk his hands in and before he quite knew he was doing it began with his fingertips to push the thirteen dollars he had to the bottom of his pocket while pulling out the white lining to verify he had nothing. In his frustration, the man gave Grant a weak shove.

There prevailed in the air the smell of wet asphalt and the dull cool smells of a big city at night. In the darkness, Grant's car's headlights dressed the red of the truck before it in a kind of ghastly richness.

"Fuck," the man said, running the back of his gun hand across his face. "Let's see it again." He motioned towards Grant's back pocket. "C'mon! Fucking hurry up!"

Grant pulled out his wallet again and handed it to him.

The man rifled through it, dropping pieces as he went. As his school ID, his driver's license, and his credit card fell to the ground Grant felt oddly that they did not belong to him, that the pictures they bore were not his own.

"I told you there's no money in there, man," he said.

"Your pockets again, let's see your pockets." He waved the gun at him.

"I already showed you my pockets." Grant held his hands out to his side. "I don't know what you want me to do."

His mouth puckering madly, the man stepped forward and pressed the point of his gun into the divot at the base of Grant's throat. Hope looked at him, her lips pulled back, her body slightly back-bending at the hip, as if he, Grant, were some grotesque, a monster. He wondered if she were scared of the prospect of his blood and tissue spraying on her, then he thought it might be funny if they did.

This close he could smell the man's breath which smelled to him like black licorice.

"I'm not going to have any more money when I'm dead," he told the man. "I guess you just picked the wrong neighborhood to rob people."

The man breathed heavily now. He spat again.

"Cigarettes," he said. "Give me some cigarettes."

"Don't smoke," Grant said.

“Fuck!--dump your fucking purse! Hurry up!” He nodded maniacally at Hope, waving her forward.

Hope quickly emptied the contents of her purse onto the rainwet hood of the car. As the man looked over the small pile of stuff, muttering to himself, he pressed the gun deeper into Grant’s neck. Moving out of the way, Hope caught her heel on the curb and fell to the ground near the front bumper. The man jumped, and pushed Grant hard against the car.

“You motherfuckers are dead,” he said, glancing both ways down the empty street.

Lit by the headlights, Hope lay there, half in a puddle, her one leg out to her side, her mouth agape like the pictures of those who have stumbled before the bulls in Pamplona. Grant could feel the pain of the hard metal pressed into his throat, but all he could think about was the childish appearance Hope’s shiny black buckle shoes gave her. He closed his eyes and when he re-opened them nothing had changed.

“It’s important—” Grant tried, the gun making it difficult to talk.

“Shut the fuck up!” the man said.

“I have something to say,” said Grant.

“I said shut the fuck up!” The man punched him in the ribs with his free hand.

“It’s important to be brave,” he whispered, wincing and drawing a hand

to his side.

A light went on in the apartment building.

Hope neither moved nor spoke.

“Aren’t you going to say anything, Hope? Can’t you say anything?”

The gunman turned and stared at Hope. At first she did nothing. Then, with muddy hands, she slowly got herself to her feet.

“Aren’t you—” Grant tried, the man grabbing him by the hair and pulling his head back.

“Shut the fuck up,” the man growled, again looking down the street.

“Nothing? You’re not going to say anything? Just going to stand there?”

The man yanked Grant’s head back farther. Hope stood dripping, her jeans turned dark from mud and water. The garish wash of the headlights showed her oddly shrunken in her sodden jacket. Her face glowed dully over an expression both implacable and grave, her cheeks glistening.

“After all this—” he yelled, groaning as the weapon squeezed off his air.

She did not move, arms held delicately out to her side as if covered in something far filthier than dirt and water.

His neck pulled nearly to rest on the top of the car, Grant shouted at the sky, at the rain falling on his face.

“You just stand there!” He pushed the gun away from his neck. “I talk

and talk and talk, and you let me go on and just stand there, never saying a thing, but always coming back! Why do you keep coming back if it's how you say it is?" The man brought the butt of his gun down on the side of Grant's face, sending him to ground.

"I told you—I told you to shut the fuck up!" He raked his arm across the hood of the car sending Hope's things skittering across the pavement.

"Well get on with it, then!" Grant bellowed, punching the air. "Do it, do it already!"

Hope hugged herself as the man waved his arms about as if pursued by something invisible and foul smelling. Then he abruptly stopped and looked at Grant. In another moment, without warning, he turned and began running down the street. His wet pant-cuffs made a heavy clapping sound as he entered and exited the small orbits of light made by the consecutive street lights.

"Run you bastard!" Grant yelled from his place on the ground. "You fucking coward bastard!" He began awkwardly digging into a front pocket of his pants. "Look! You stupid asshole," he added, "thirteen dollars—I had thirteen dollars you stupid asshole!" He waved the crumpled bills in the air.

The man disappeared around a corner. Grant could hear Hope's breathing now turned suddenly ragged and heavy. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her walk into the stream of his car's headlights and look down

the block.

"He's not going to come back," she said. "He's gone, he's not going to come back. He knows we don't have any more money." At this, she quickly looked at Grant, then began to quickly collect the items of hers spread across the asphalt.

"No, he's gone," she said again, this time louder.

The headlights of a car on a nearby street momentarily traveled over Grant and the pavement, then disappeared. It reminded him of the rest of the world. It's day somewhere, he thought. Somewhere the sun has already come up, and in another place it hasn't yet gone down. He looked at the spot where they'd earlier stood, and saw himself leaning against the car, she tightly wound and severe before him, yet beautiful, always beautiful.

It was suddenly colder now. He felt the night cut clean through to the dry white of his bones. The dancing and drinking seemed days ago.

Hope once more looked off in the direction of the man, then back at Grant. "Grant? Are you O.K.?" she asked.

He lightly fingered the knot already forming on his head.

"I don't think so," he said, clutching the thirteen dollars tightly in his hand.

She wiped a strand of wet hair from her eyes. Then they heard the

sirens, and in moments saw articulated on the wet face of everything the chaotic twisting of red and blue light.

There is A.

Standing near the front of the crowd, A. had originally laughed like the others. It seemed funny when the man, at a break between songs, had staggered onto the ground-level stage and sat down next to the bass drum. Like the two teenage girls next to him, A. laughed as he watched the young man lazily nod his head to the music and mutter idiotically to himself. It even seemed funny when the man at one point between songs managed a garbled "Ha' fun, we're all here to ha' fun! Ri'? Have fun, have fun!"

It was a free day-long festival of local music, held under the shadowed arm of a local bridge. A. wondered how the man had come to be here, and more, how he had ended up in such a gross state, slumped on the stage. The man was cleanly shaven with a the rounded tan face of someone probably in his early twenties. He wore wire-rim glasses, a baseball hat bearing the logo of a local golf course, pale blue jeans, a button down shirt under a dark v-neck sweater, and sandals. He had just walked on stage and sat down with the kind of matter-of-fact aplomb of a man taking a seat on a bus.

It took three songs before his attempts at singing along stopped and he listed entirely onto his side. He lay that way for a time, then he tried to

crawl, mimicking the movements of a man nervously climbing a ladder. His legs moved awkwardly behind him. Finally giving up, he just lay there, his face looking misshapen and oddly grotesque resting on the ground.

A. tried to look away. The band barreled through its song, while the crowd bounced to the throbbing beat. Lying there, the man tried to spit but managed only to loop the discharge on his chin. Those in front, including the two girls next to A., laughed, as if the man were a performer who once the song was concluded would jump back to his feet and, doffing his hat, bow to the appreciative audience.

The two girls were young, and thin, their milky girl's necks plunging into shirts and jackets a few sizes too large for their bodies. One had dyed her hair a brash red. The other had cut hers to pale whiskers of hair that she ran her hand over like an old man ruminating.

"God, give me some of what he had!" the redhead yelled over the music.

"Yeah!" her friend answered.

The man slowly inched his way back up to sitting posture, one leg bent, the other straight out. Somehow he'd lost one of his sandals. Above him, the guitarist jumped about madly as he played, and A. felt little shocks each time he neared the man's extended leg. Yet when the music ended abruptly A. did not want it to stop.

"Not bad for free, huh?" the bassist huffed into the microphone, short of

breath. He wiped his face with his sleeve and plucked once or twice at his bass. Glancing at the man, he again plucked at his instrument. The audience stirred, waiting, electric and buzzing. Some yelled out song titles, but none said anything of the man wiped out on the stage.

By now the man's chin was dipped to his chest as if he were attempting a close inspection of something on his shirt. He spit between his legs, incompetently wiping his lips of what remained with the back of his hand. A. expected at any second some friends of the man to appear, perhaps even laughing, and carry him away, but none appeared.

A. put his hands in his pockets, took them out. He waited for someone to say something. The two security people stood just off stage. One idly smoked, but the other seemed to be looking in the direction of the man. The bassist wiped his face again with the towel and then said something to the guitarist. The drummer made a comment and the two others laughed. The man did not stir, and in his head A. heard himself yelling "Do something, do something, somebody!"

"Alright. This next one is called 'Hill 881,'" the bassist announced before launching into their next song.

Instantly, the mass of bodies began vibrating and jumping again, squeezing A. from his spot near the front. For a moment he allowed himself to be jostled about in the fray. One hand to his glasses to protect them, he

tried to see the stage. But there was too much movement and too many people. In another moment he closed his eyes and shook his head. This made him feel better.

When he opened them again the redhead was swinging her hair about and dancing. Two guys on his left were feverishly strumming their hands across their thighs and singing. Everywhere people were riding up on the music and giving in to it. The song would slow down for a few beats, and then erupt again. The crowd did the same.

A. wanted like the others to get lost in it. He put his mind to it, and smiled at the girls next to him as they bounded back and forth in the throb of the crowd. Perhaps the man was already gone, having got up and walked off to who knows where.

In a few minutes the song ended with a crunching electric sound. A. cheered along with everyone and enjoyed hearing his own voice above the others. He liked the idea of feeling newly energized and free again. The crowd crackled with energy, the occasional person whooping louder than the rest. A. bounced from one foot to the other. He wanted the music to immediately start again.

Looking behind him, he was surprised how large the crowd had grown. On the slight rise of land where the shadow made by the bridge ended and a sunlit patch of grass began, more people sat on blankets, some with picnic

baskets. Above them, the sky had just begun its turn from day to the fragile, luminous interval marking day from dusk. A. shifted weight again. Hands to pockets again, and out. Suddenly there was a commotion near the front, and girls next to him began laughing.

“Lookit the guy! And all over himself!” the girl with the shaved head yelled.

Closing his eyes didn’t work. It was a whole concert of voices. The redhead was doubled over.

“Now that’s fucking gross!” she said.

“No way!” one of the guys nearby added.

The whole front portion of the audience rocked with laughter. A. imagined out on the patch of grass it was quickly growing dark.

Those in front were shoulder to shoulder, necks craned. A. inspected the detritus on the ground at his feet: an uneaten apple, scraps of paper, cigarette butts, a smashed plastic container. Then the band started again. The full, heavy sound dropped from nowhere. Still, those in front nudged each other, and pointed. When the bodies parted, he saw the man: shoulders sagged like an idle puppet, eyes closed, still sitting the way he had been, one leg bent in, one straight. But now he struggled pathetically to push his penis back through the opened fly of his pants. He would manage to get it in, but before he could zip up, it would limply plop back out again.

Patient, his head still sunk to his chest, his bottom lip distended, he looked like an idiot employed in a mental task beyond his ability. He'd wet himself and his high thighs were discolored by a dark semi-circle radiating out from his lap. A damp spot also marked the floor between his legs.

A. forgot about the music. When the man finally tucked himself in and successfully closed his fly, A. heard with a kind of nauseating clarity the cheer that went up. The two security people he had seen earlier were gone. And where the hell were the man's friends? He felt suddenly short of breath.

The song finally ended as if snuffed out. A. moved about like something caged, yet he also felt oddly out in the open, unprotected. He flexed his jaw in wait for the band to start playing again, for the dancing to continue.

"Thanks a lot," said the bassist, "We're '7 Leagues' and we're outta here. Thanks for coming out!"

The crowd roared. A.'s stomach twisted.

"You got some piss up here," the bassist added after a passing glance at the man.

That was that. Those around A. began to quickly disperse, most heading for the grass. In a few minutes, only stragglers remained. Once again, A. heard himself calling out. In his mind it was loud and sharp. Before him, the musicians set about quietly breaking down their gear. All three moved about

the man as if he were a piece of equipment it was necessary to leave to the end. Above the man's head the drummer unscrewed a cymbal from its stand.

Now the two security people appeared again. They stood off stage as they had before and appeared to be looking at the man. One, a heavy set and very masculine looking woman with cowboy boots, pointed at the stage. A slim pale man listened to her, then the two moved off again. Since zipping his pants the man had moved little. The band worked around him disinterestedly, winding cords, and loosening screws.

A. looked for the man's friends. People were milling about in small clusters, talking, smoking. But none paid even passing attention. He took a step toward the man, then stopped. Words bubbled up then evaporated on his tongue. Finally, the stocky female guard reappeared with the show's emcee, a wiry man wearing a small beard at the point of his chin and a shiny dinner jacket. They approached the man, then, having positioned themselves on either side of him, placed one hand under his armpit and one under the bend of his knee and lifted. As they carried him away, the man's head lolled about like the bulb of a perishing flower. Away, away and out of eyesight. That was enough; that was everything.

Smiling, A. removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He wanted to say something to the two guys on his left, something to verify what had

happened, the relief.

“Man, that guy—” he managed, shaking his head and affecting a loose conspicuous laugh.

They nodded but said nothing.

Looking once more at the crude spot left by the man, A. took a few deep breaths, re-positioned his glasses, and wiped his hands on his thighs. For some moments, he stood amid what was left of the murmuring crowd. The thing that had wound up in him was uncoiling itself, going limp. He could feel a satisfying cool breeze at his collar now.

Soon, he made his way through the remaining people with the mild intoxication and pleasant giddiness of a man who has just averted disaster. He even smiled at how his tongue clucked in his dry mouth as he made his way to the grass to await the next band. The two girls who had been directly in front of him were now sitting Indian-style on the grass with unlit cigarettes in their mouths. Many people were collected about the lawn, relaxed, enjoying themselves. Behind them the sun had all but gone down and the whole lot bore the delicate amber glow of that hour. Saved, A. let himself breathe very deeply for it.

Looking for the bathroom a moment later, he saw him. To his left, ten or fifteen feet from the stage, there the man lay, with his torso on the grass and his legs sprawled out on the concrete. On his side, his eyes were closed

and his hat and glasses still on and now bent and mashed under him. One sandal lay a few feet away. In position he resembled a fallen soldier, unnatural in attitude, abject. No one tended to him. A. could not bring himself to move. The two that had carried him away had moved him only so far as they had to, then deposited him on the ground. The man did not move. "Dead," A. thought. He heard the word in his head. The man's back showed no discernible rise and fall. Still, A. could move no closer. Everyone simply walked by the man. As he lay partially on the concrete many had to maneuver around him to get by. Some laughed, while others looked upon him as one might upon finding a wasted gull on the beach.

He resolved to do it, but remained frozen. During alternate seconds he satisfied himself of the man's safety. A yell for help warmed again in his throat. The security people, the emcee, none were anywhere to be seen. Meanwhile, the steady stream continued by the man, looking down upon his crumpled and abased frame as if visitors to some carnival side-show.

Then it happened, the man's chest arched slightly and a thin mostly colorless solution issued from his mouth. Once or twice more the back bucked and released, the man's mouth wide and yawning below his closed eyes. The three people sitting closest to him, two young men and one girl, cringed, then giggled at the sight.

"Fucking A'," one of the guys said, "He just fucking puked all over

himself."

"`Just Say No,'" the other guy joked, wagging his finger at the man.

In another moment they took no more notice of him, and returned to talking and the girl to braiding one of the men's long dark hair.

A. felt a sour convulsion in his own stomach. Two kids, wiry and feral-eyed, poked at the man with their toes, then jumped back in gleeful shock at spotting the pool of vomit. "Stop!" He wanted to tell them to stop.

Approaching the man tentatively, snickering, one boy, naked to the waist, stood over the man and after looking back at his friend, leaned over the body and aimed a gob of spit at the man's face. That was enough. A. launched himself at the boys. He grabbed one by the neck and threw him to the ground, sending the kid hard onto his knees and the heel of his hands. The second twisted free and danced out of reach. The first quickly scabbled away, A. chasing after him.

"You little shit! You little shit! Come here! Come here!"

A. lost him amid the legs of those standing near the stage. The boy was fleet and oddly arboreal in his quick maneuvering through the bodies.

"You little shit!"

A. reached after him, off-balance, bumping into people as he did so. Red-faced, he careered through the milling audience. He didn't get too far, however, before he felt a heavy hand on his arm stopping him.

"Hey! What's going on here?" The female security guard looked at him, her eyes grossly enlarged by thick lenses.

The two boys skipped up the hill on the far side. Once there, they turned back, pinkcheeked and adrenalized, and yelled at A., flipping him off.

"I asked you what's going on?"

"Isn't anyone gonna help that man over there!" said A. "He's just laying there, and people just keep walking by him, isn't anyone gonna do anything!"

"Whoa, what man?"

"The guy right over there! The guy who pissed all over himself on the stage! The guy you picked up and just dropped on the concrete!"

The woman pushed her glasses higher on her nose.

"The guy those two little shits were just—"

"Now just relax. What happened?"

"For all I know—why didn't you call somebody?" A. wrenched his arm free from the woman's grip.

"Just relax," she said. "Are you his friend?"

"No, no, I don't even know the guy!"

"O.K. So those boys were bothering the man?"

Her eyes were distracting.

"What has to happen? I mean, what has to finally happen?"

She followed A.'s gaze. The man lay unchanged in position. A. pointed

at him.

“You guys picked him up—you guys picked him up and I figured you were gonna help him.”

“Well, we determined he had just had too much too drink and—”

A. felt out of his body, as if swimming above their heads, above the body of the man.

“Somebody needs to call an ambulance. He’s more than just drunk.” A. put his hands in his pockets, took them out again. Looking at them and his fingers they seemed ugly and ill-made.

The woman scanned the slowly thickening crowd, then waved at someone A. could not see.

“O.K., now just relax. We’ll take care of it.”

She walked a few feet away and met the emcee who was approaching on casual loping strides too long for his body. They talked a few feet away, out of earshot, the woman gesticulating with her hands, the emcee looking once at A. and nodding as he listened. The woman pointed to the man, and then both turned and looked blankly at A., before resuming their conversation.

A. ignored them and proceeded to the t-shirt table a few feet away. While the black-haired woman taking the money was temporarily distracted, he quietly lifted one of the shirts from the table. He moved quickly to the

stage, and amid the final preparations of the next band, knelt and placed the shirt over the spot earlier left by the man. Kneeling, still, the scene returned. The man is slumped at the spot as before, the music blaring. And there is A., stepping squareshouldered from the bucking crowd, and moving to him laying pitifully on his side. There is A., walking between the jumping bassist and guitarist, and kneeling to the man. There he is helping the man upright, talking to him reassuringly. Telling him everything is going to be alright.

The t-shirt in place, A. stood up and moved confidently back through the crowd. His expression was fixed now, and he moved with a new certainty toward the far side of the stage and grass. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the female security person. She began waving her hand, but he pretended not to see her.

“Hey, hey! You!” she yelled.

A. pushed through the bodies.

“Hey!”

She intercepted him fifteen feet from the man, still motionless on his side, his naked foot extended onto the concrete.

“I just thought—” she started.

“I’m going to do something, check him, call an ambulance, something.”

A. felt the blood in his cheeks.

“That’s what I was—”

"You were going to do something, I know, but you determined he was just drunk and so just dropped him on the ground, I know."

And then there it came down the street. Over the woman's right shoulder A. saw the fractured red pulse of an ambulance, and heard the blunt whine of its sirens. It bleated and shrieked, moving quickly down the street before pulling into the turn-around near the bridge and stopping. Two medics quickly jumped from the vehicle and hurriedly approached.

"That's what I was trying to tell you," the woman said, "Someone already called. Someone called a little bit ago. So he's going to be alright."

"Someone called?"

"Yeah, apparently she's a nurse and she called on her cellular. So he's going to be alright." She put her hand on his shoulder.

The medics made their way to the man, one carrying what looked like a large tackle box, the other pushing a stretcher. A. saw that beside the man there now knelt another man and woman, the woman gently rubbing his back, the man talking to him. Once at the scene, the two medics stood for a moment nodding at a second woman as she spoke and pointed.

The security woman continued to talk to A. but he didn't hear her. He pushed by her and moved on toward the grass. The two medics were now kneeling, the one digging about in his opened box. A. came to stand directly above the man. The two others also kneeling there looked up at him as he

crouched and joined them. He noticed immediately the man's face had been wiped clean.

"I saw him here," A. said, "and I thought, man, he's not just—"

"O.K., now we need all you to move back," one of the medics interrupted. "Please give us room here. Step back, step back, please."

The other medic shuffled around the now supine body, pushing A. from his spot. The medic spoke to the man, lifted his eyelids and shone a penlight into his eyes. The other held the man's wrist while checking his watch.

A crowd had gathered, and before he knew it, A. found he had been drawn back into its body. Jostled about and bumped by the eager onlookers, he watched as the two medics gingerly lifted the man onto the stretcher. One of them then rolled the stretcher up the sidewalk to the open doors of the ambulance. The other remained a moment talking earnestly with the small group that had been near the man. He shook their hands, each one allowing a small smile to creep onto their face. When the emcee and female security guard approached, the medic nodded to them, too.

A. felt everyone pressing in around him. He felt sick. It was fully dark now, and behind him, he heard the music starting again.

No Boat, No Bridge

In the recurring dream she is pregnant, but the room they share is small and foul, and her maternity dress hangs on her tattered and soiled. Looking at her, he sees the child at her navel and tries to hold her and make her see it too. But her face is shorn of color and fixed by an expression of such disaffection that it makes him feel small and pitiful. His child, and there is no window in the room for sun; his child and there is no light.

He dreamed this off and on for years, and upon awaking could never remember what, if anything, they had said to each other. In time he came to treat the visitation like an old athlete does a trick knee, making room for it in his life.

* * *

The bar was a carnival of strange familiarity. People's faces had changed with age, and children, and even, presumably, with tragedies that had in the intervening years visited their lives. But they had not changed so much they were unrecognizable. He saw in the heavy, rounded builds of the men the

slimmer builds of the boys he had known. And beneath unfamiliar hairstyles and on legs, in many cases, wider at the calf than he remembered, he spotted the women he had known. Everywhere stood little clusters of the people that had once populated his life. But he didn't see her. Sprinkled about the room were other familiar faces: Si, Al, Todd, Bill, Suzanne, Sheri, Angela, and on and on. But not hers. He was surprised by how many had come. For some he could remember only first names, and for others he could remember neither. When they greeted him he said either hey, or how are you, or well, well, well, while doing his best to smile and appear interested, meanwhile scanning the room for the one person he had come to see. All those eyes, bristling with nervousness and recognition, mouths cocked in various attitudes of embarrassment and laughter and surprise. Someone who remembered him but whose name he could not recall laughed and said, "This is weird isn't it" and he agreed it was.

* * *

Phil kept at him. They sat in the booth next to the window and waited for the waitress to bring their lunch. Outside, the bright sky that had earlier marked the morning was slowly giving way to clouds and the spreading ash-grey of bad weather.

“How often do these things come around, every ten years? Just pretend you don’t know she’s going to be there. And you never know she might *not* be there! Have you thought of that? I don’t understand what the big deal is anyway, you haven’t seen her in what, at least four years or something—a long time—so I mean, who cares if she’s there or not!”

“Naw, I think I’ll pass. I don’t know what I’d say if I saw her. Sometimes it’s better just to leave things where they lay.”

* * *

He had not even been in the United States. He had been nowhere near familiar haunts or in fact anywhere that could have understandably inspired the recollection. He had been traveling on the east coast of Malaysia, and so thousands of miles from old photographs, old mementos squirreled away in shoe boxes, old friends who, seeing him in the grocery store, might have asked him about her, or themselves updated him as to the state of her life. Nevertheless, it had been at ten o’clock or so, just outside the city of Kuala Terengganu, and some three years or so since the last time he could remember having thought of her, that he found her warmly inhabiting his thoughts.

He had missed the last of the boats that until nine p.m. ferried people from the town proper to the narrow scoop of land where his hotel sat. For this reason he'd had no choice but to make the long walk out of town to the bridge, the only other means for crossing the slim inlet. In the calm come to tropical places at night, and under a sky brilliantly riddled with stars, he had walked and thought of her in a letter he never wrote.

* * *

Things started better than he expected. The room bubbled, busy and full of people from the class of 1984. The good turnout reassured him that should he choose to leave, their numbers would probably allow him to do so quietly. He stood near the door with Phil and a revolving group of others. It seemed to him a good place from which to look for her.

Si Miller spotted him and they had a nice time catching up, Si telling them about his new business selling signage in the surrounding area, and yeah he loves his girlfriend but he just can't live with her. Si was the same, always some plan in the works. He had in recent years put on considerable weight, but it somehow seemed only to add to his air of confidence and social ease. They talked about old times, and laughed, and agreed they were both stupid at sixteen. The small group of five guys talked for some time at

the spot near the door. They recounted old stories, and sipped from their beers. Still, he never once let the changing configurations of the room go unnoticed. He looked for her in all the dark hair he saw, in all the dark-haired shorter female frames he saw shifting in the mess of bodies.

* * *

"You gotta go!" Phil said.

"Why would I go?"

"You've been gone a long time, people would like to see you!" He named some names.

"Well, it sounds shitty, but I don't really have any great desire to see them. I'd just rather not deal with it, you know."

"Well O.K., what about Justine then? Don't you want to see her? I can tell you do. Don't you want to know what's been happening with her? You can't tell me you haven't wondered about it, because you've told me you have."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"When was the last time you heard anything from her?"

"Ah—I guess, let's see—it's been four years or so, probably 19--89 maybe. The last time I saw her was the day she invited me to dinner and to

see her new apartment. I guess we had been officially broken up maybe four months or so. Something like that. Maybe more, I don't remember— we'd been broken up for a little while anyway, and she invited me to dinner. I haven't seen or spoken to her since."

"Well it seems about time you two find out what's been happening with each other. Wouldn't you say? Doesn't it seem kind of stupid to avoid it for no reason?"

"I don't know, Phil. I never explained all that to you. A lot of things happened. I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"Why? What? Come on! You never explained what to me?"

"It seems like such a long time ago—It's amazing sometimes when you think of the things we manage to live through."

"What? What happened?"

* * *

By nine o'clock the streets of Kuala Terengganu stood largely silent, save for the indistinct hum of the voices in the restaurants he passed. Once out of the town and in the full quiet of its outskirts little distracted him. The unpaved road wound vacantly into a darkness of no street lights made navigable only by the soft velvety wash of the moon. And for a reason that

he could not fathom but to which he was grateful, he allowed himself to think of her after all this time, and wonder how she was. As he walked, listening to the dirt at the roadside crunch under his feet, he enjoyed dictating to the spectral and moon-illuminated waters, a letter for her.

"Dear Justine,

"O.K, time may turn mountains to dust, and swallow up oceans and rivers and leave civilizations to ruin, but it's harder for me to understand how far it has taken us from each other in just a few years. It's amazing how someone can go from being such an intimate part of your life to something closer to a stranger. You have no idea how it is I write this letter to you from Malaysia. And I don't even know where you live; what good and bad things have intersected you since we last saw each other that night at your apartment. Maybe you don't even live in Seattle anymore. Maybe you are married. So far away am I that where once I was familiar with every outfit you owned, now I do not even know if you are still among the living. I hope you are, and I really wonder how you are doing these days. It's been a long time, and it's taken me awhile to get here."

* * *

They sent him to the bar for another pitcher. He slowly worked his way through the glut of people, contorting himself as he did so in an effort to avoid bumping those around him. The place was packed and loud and marked by the frenzied kind of shudder so common to taverns and pubs on Friday nights. But there also circulated in the air, mingled with the smoke and the sour woody smell of the beer, and the concert of voices, an electricity and sense of expectation unique to the evening. As he maneuvered through the crowd, nodding to those people whose names he could not remember or with whom he shared no other connection than their school and class, he remained constantly on the lookout for her. It was time to forgive history, he thought, and time to bury the innocent ones for good. It was time to start over. At this thought he worried that she had, in fact, moved away from the area and would not be attending.

On his way to the bar he saw many familiar faces, and even stopped for a moment to slap backs and joke with Ray Dockery, an old baseball teammate and friend who now coached at the high school. Ray still wore his hair the exact same way, plain and straight, with a haphazard part on one side. Ray talked with considerable eagerness about the team they would have that spring. Soon, however, he had to tell Ray thirsty people waited for him. They slapped each other on the back again before he continued on toward the bar. Not until he asked for, paid for, then balanced in his hands

the full pitcher of beer did he see her. Her hair looked longer but it was her. She stood in profile at the far end of the room talking to two other women. She was smiling with her arms crossed at her chest. As he had thought of nothing beyond finding her, now he could only stare. With the pitcher in his hand and people ebbing and flowing around him in tight little currents, he tested old wounds for sensitivity and his own heart for strength.

Once back with the others near the door, Phil grabbed him at the elbow and said, "Justine's here."

* * *

The waitress smiled, refilled their coffee, and assured them their orders were nearly ready. He looked at Phil and wrapped his hands about his cup, enjoying the warmth come to his palms.

"Yeah? Go on, so what happened?"

"It's weird because six months ago, a year ago, there is no way I could have talked about this. It was just one of those things you try to forget about."

"This is about Justine?"

"Yeah. That last night that I went over there for dinner? Well, I get there—I haven't seen her for awhile, a month or so—and I get there and I

can tell right away there is something on her mind. She is scurrying all over the place, showing me this and that, and pointing to things out the window, but all the time I can tell she's nervous about something, that I'm over there for a reason. I thought maybe she was going to tell me that she was living with somebody or something and just didn't know how to come out and say it."

"Was she living with somebody?"

"No, no. It wasn't that."

"So?"

He had long imagined what it must have been like for her: her fear having no place to hide in the conspicuous brightness of the rooms, the grin of the stainless steel tools as the lights reflected off them, the masked faces around her. He imagined her placing her hands delicately on her ribs and crying.

"I don't know—"

"What?" Phil asked, eagerly.

"She'd—uh—"

"She'd what? What?"

"Forget it." He shook his head. "Forget it. I don't think—"

"Come on! What happened—"

"An abortion, she'd had an abortion. She was pregnant—from me—and she'd decided to get an abortion, without talking to me—without telling me." His raised his eyebrows at Phil and briefly sucked at his top lip.

"She said hadn't been able talk to me about it, and so she had asked me over. She said she felt guilty about having kept it a secret. I didn't even know she was pregnant. When I asked her why, why she'd done it, all she said was she just wasn't ready."

"Wow—"

"I told her I would have married her, that we could've gotten married, and she said she still loved me but that she wasn't ready to do that either."

* * *

"It's nice to think about you. It's almost as if something in me broke open tonight. Some hard casement that had sealed you up, finally split and gave way. And there you are. It really is like that. I don't know why, but tonight, on this empty road of all places, it seems some spell I didn't know I was under has relented. I can breathe you. Tonight, for the first time in a long time, it doesn't feel like it's been so long.

You know, you are a catalogue of my firsts, and maybe it's just a matter of time before we necessarily remind ourselves where we started, and what

it meant. Tonight I can say I miss you. Even though I haven't spoken to you in years. And so I am sharing all this with you, wherever you are—if you could only smell the air here, it's so fragrant and mild. The only thing I can figure that might explain how it is that I come to think of you today is that perhaps I am in your thoughts as well, wherever you are."

His voice melted softly into the breeze and the whispering jungle about him.

* * *

They drank, and talked at a volume loud enough to overcome the din of music and other voices. But still he kept his eye on her, and when he saw that she and the two other women were laughing and wandering in his general direction his heart rattled at its filament and he pretended with an increased enthusiasm to be interested in the conversation just then taking place around him. He watched her from the corner of his eye and saw with a mixture of regret and relief as a small group of others near the jukebox intercepted her before she saw him. They stood not too far away, but the confusion of people moving here and there made it difficult for him to watch her with the kind of attention he desired. If she saw him, without her knowing he had seen her, maybe, he thought, she might make the first

move. Different people continued to walk by and, if men, they invariably said hey or something to that effect and shook his hand and maybe stuck around for a bit, joining the circle in which he stood. If women, there might be a hug and the exercise of that habit of reunion where the two friends stand face-to-face, each with the hands of the other in theirs, and that way exchange greetings and compliments.

When Sandi Crowe entered the bar she shrieked with happy surprise to find him standing there. As he greeted her he knew Justine must have heard the commotion and must now be looking. Sandi and he hugged and she told him how glad she was he had come. She told him she had made Phil promise to drag him to the thing if he had to. They hugged again, and then she proceeded to shriek at each realization of who else shared the cluster near the door, and then hugged each one of them in turn. He smiled and watched the reunion of old friends, and when it was completed, and he attempted with a transparent nonchalance to once more absently survey that spot near the jukebox, he found Justine's face staring directly back at him.

* * *

He sipped his coffee and Phil chewed his swizzle stick, slowly shaking his head. The bell at the door jangled as four patrons, having finished their meal and paid their bill, exited to the street.

"I didn't know any of that."

"Quite a story isn't it?"

"Yeah, what a shitty way to leave something—you guys never talked again after that?"

"No. I called her house once or twice, but I always hung up. It's funny, for the longest time I felt both anger and guilt. Anger because I had been betrayed—"

"I can imagine."

"And guilt for not being there for her, you know. I know that she excluded me, but still it couldn't have been easy for her, and I would have liked to have—helped somehow."

"I really should apologize. Asking you to go to this thing, I didn't even know what the hell I was talking about."

"No, it's alright. I think I've really worked through it all the last few months or so—well, since Malaysia anyway."

"Well, have you considered this might be a great opportunity to do that. And start all over."

"Yeah, I think you're right. I mean, I've thought that all along. But, you know, hold a grudge long enough and it becomes like a kind of ally, a kind of friend."

"Who knows, you guys start chatting, and you set things right, who knows what might happen from there. I'm sure she still cares about you, and wonders what you're up to."

"I suppose anything's possible."

"Who knows, you may totally connect again—and in true romantic fashion you'll close the evening with a walk down at the marina and wah-lah!, love restored!"

He thought of the marina, where before a dance they had once taken an after-dinner stroll, and he had put his jacket around her shoulders. He smiled as he remembered how much they had laughed when she caught the heel of her shoe between the planks of the dock.

* * *

The sound of the dirt under his feet satisfied him as he walked. Above, the sky bore only very faintly the last expiring glow of the sunset. It calmly and with a kind of courage awaited the thickening darkness. He took his time, and was almost disappointed when he found himself at the bridge. He

stood for a long while at the rail and admired the way the trees at the shore hung out languidly over the water, and the way those boats collected beneath their branches looked in the moonlight mute and ancient and wonderfully colored by the night.

"You know, my mother told my brother that I changed as a person when you and I broke up. I thought about that often, and in fact my brother and I often joked about it. He would kid me about how somber I had become, which is, if I remember, the coarse translation of what my mother had said. But standing here, thousands of miles from home, and a handful of years from you, I think perhaps she was right. Raise our lives like erecting a house, and in the first cross beam is carved your name and mine, and a heart. There must be firsts, and the memories of those firsts are kept in some finer place than all those that follow, no matter what happens. And you were mine. What's incredible to me is that while my mind has done its best to fortify its grudge and concentrate on certain things that happened between us, my heart has quietly been tending to my deeper feelings. Somewhere, and without my knowledge really, all my memories of you, and all my warmer feelings, have been groomed and looked after, protected in some secret trust only to be granted to me when I am ready to understand them. That's what forgiveness means, I guess."

* * *

He excused himself from the others and approached her as she stood near the jukebox. She watched him and smiled and they did not take their eyes off each other. He too smiled and tried to think of something cute and perfect to say. Instead, he said what he had said all evening to everyone he had seen.

“Well, well, well—Justine, how are you? You look great!”

She smiled and as they hugged he closed his eyes and enjoyed the smell of her hair.

“How are you?”

He said he was fine and asked her the same.

“I’m good!” she said. “Wow, it’s nice to see you. It’s been a long time. I didn’t know if you would be here or not.”

“Well, I almost didn’t come, but—you look great!”

“Thank you, so do you. You look very healthy.”

For weeks he had tried to imagine how this might go.

She was as beautiful as he remembered. Her hair had grown longer and now hung straight to a spot below her shoulders, but it suited her. Where he remembered seeing in her eyes and the pink of her cheeks a youthful innocence, he now saw the bearing of a woman come with some experience.

In her movements and in what he could remember of the fantastic minutia to which couples are privy to in their partners, she seemed the same. The same way she had laughed. The same way she had always brushed her hair from her eyes. Yet all of it seemed subdued somehow, as if he were seeing her through a murky pane of glass, or through water.

“Boy, I haven’t seen you in how long—well I guess no one’s really seen you! You’ve been just kinda roaming around the globe I hear!”

He tried to see things in her eyes, the old boats pulled to shore and silent and finely shaped beneath the stars; her heel stuck in the planks of the dock.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve done a little wandering around, I guess.”

“Its sounds like it! Somebody told me—the Far East? Is that right?”

He explained to her where he had been and what he had done, but there was nothing there in the telling. He did not care about that, about the places he had seen. Looking at her, he did not see that thing he could not name but which he had hoped would be there. They ran over the entire list of pleasantries, just as he had with others that night, and he told her about his trips, and told her about his plans now. But it wasn’t right. She asked about his family, and he told her everyone was fine and that his mother asked that he say hello to her.

“Your mom is great. I really miss her.”

“And everything’s O.K. with you,” he asked.

"Yeah! Very good. I'm a little tired, but things are really good." Her friends, whose names he couldn't remember, began to giggle and fidget and look at her and smile.

"*And* as you can probably see—" She opened the loose vest she wore, looking down at herself. "I'm pregnant and--"

He did not hear the rest, nor the other women's assurances to her she looked radiant and beautiful. He stood frozen, letting the way she had said it, the off-hand way someone announces something they have been announcing all night, wrap him up and tighten. Letting the vest close, she looked to the girls and smiled.

"Well, congratulations Justine, that's great!" He hugged her. "Justine. Justine's going to have a baby. That's great! How far—"

"Just about three months or so," she said. She smiled and looked down at her stomach again, then back at him.

"Yeah, it's pretty darn exciting. And a little scary too, of course. But we're excited." She put her hands to her ribs and smiled.

He could not tell how she looked at him. Nothing at all, and no dreams he could identify. All of this, it was clear, had been shared, and told, in the exact same fashion all night, to everyone she had spoken to. It warmed into a dull ache in him to see it.

“So will this be your fir—” he asked and then immediately cut himself off. “Isn’t that amazing—I don’t even know if you have any other kids.”

“Nope, this will be our first—”

She went on to explain about the nursery they were decorating, and some of the other preparations. When finished, she looked at him for what seemed to him a long moment, before turning to answer the kidding of the other women.

“Justine’s going to have a baby,” was all he could think to say. And the women around her twittered and chirped and looked upon her with smiles, lavishing her with the kind of giddy pride meant as praise and always tendered by other women to an expectant mother.

This was her. This was it. He looked at her and wondered why she had come at all, for what reason. He learned she had a husband of two years at home. And lived in a nice house on the west side purchased with the money they both had earned as employees of the gas company. What was she doing there, at that bar? They spoke awhile longer and he wanted to tell her she was the only reason he had attended the reunion. But there was no way over to her. She stood on some opposite bank, and there was no boat, and no bridge.

Soon the whirligig of movement peculiar to parties, the liquid comings and goings of people, separated the two of them, carrying them increasingly

further apart. A short time later, he looked for her. When he found her friends they informed him she had gone.

Double or Nothing

In the past year the video poker machines at the Full Moon All Nude Revue had eaten a good deal of Mickey's scant surplus income. Two months earlier, for example, in something of a watershed loss, he had stopped in for a beer on his way home, which was his habit, and found himself, after twenty minutes, up \$250. After thirty minutes it had grown to \$400, and after about forty, to over \$600. Unfortunately, an hour later it was gone. Just like that. For two weeks the thought of video poker brought the taste of copper to the back of his mouth and touched him with a kind of nauseating delirium not so different from seasickness. To feel better he told himself he'd learned a lesson. The thin soup he subsisted on the few days after the loss was not economically necessary, but was, rather, a kind of self-inflicted penance.

Tonight, however, his machine rang and whistled with success. Neighboring players looked on with expressions of gross concern, their faces pinched and creased, their eyes sharpened on him. At the machine to his right a thin woman with her left arm in a dirtied cast spat out her exhalation of cigarette smoke. To her right, a man in a baseball hat standing behind a

seated friend leaned back at the waist to see the source of the noise, then bent forward and said something to his friend. Both then looked at Mickey.

One-thousand-five-hundred and thirty-one dollars. All that money. Little pricks lifted the hairs on his arms. He thought about it for a moment, then quit the game and collected his ticket. This time he would not allow greed to ruin him.

As Mickey made his way to the bar he passed Tara doing her turn on the stage. She was his favorite of all the dancers at the Full Moon. She reminded him of an "I Dream of Jeannie" Barbara Eden, blonde, gentle in expression, with a vaguely Asian angle to the shape of her eyes. He liked that her body looked athletic and natural. More than that, he appreciated that every time he saw her perform, she smiled and seemed genuinely to be enjoying herself. Never once did she resort to the bland mechanical movements so common in some of the other women. Holding his ticket in his hand, Mickey leaned his back against the bar, ordered a beer, and watched.

On stage, Tara moved in complement to the music, from slow arabesques to energetic spins. When she looked at him, smiling, as she did to every man, Mickey allowed himself for the briefest moment to believe it.

A hand slapped him on the back.

"Big win back there. Congrats, huh?"

He found the hatted man from the poker machine standing next to him, raising his finger to the bartender. "You know, I'm not sure I've ever seen anybody win that much before," he said, pulling a few ones from a handful of bills.

"Oh no, it wasn't that much," Mickey said, circumspect.

The man sniffed and itched his forehead with the back of his thumb.

"Shit, what are you talking about, that's a killing! I bet it's the most you ever won—it's more than I ever won. That's for fucking sure. That thing just eats my goddamn money."

As he spoke the man ran the toe of his right boot up and down the back of his left calf. Mickey noticed a small tan sheath at the man's hip.

"It eats my money, too," Mickey tried.

"So I guess this one's on you, then, huh?" he said. "Next round on my friend here!" He looked down the bar, slapping Mickey on the back again. The others sitting at the bar turned to look, their faces dull and blank.

The bartender put the beer before them, looking first to the man, then to Mickey, then back at the man again.

Mickey began to pull out his wallet.

The man pushed three dollars across to the bartender. "Just shitting you, man," he said. He took a drink from his glass. "Better be careful though. You got to be careful with that much cash—you know how people

are. Those strippers find out, they'll be all over you." Turning from the bar with his glass, he laughed and tugged at the bill of his hat. As he passed in front of the stage, Tara smiled at him as she danced, tossing her hair back from her face.

Mickey quickly finished off what remained of his beer, and handed his ticket to the bartender who disinterestedly made his way with it to the cash register.

Finally inspecting the ticket, the bartender looked back at Mickey and raised his eyebrows.

"Christ!" he exclaimed. "Damn good night for you, huh?" He counted out some bills from the till, then pausing, put them back. He said something to a bearded man sitting directly in front of the cash register, and both laughed.

"Look," he said, "we don't have that much cash in the cash register, so if you can just wait a minute."

Mickey nodded, aware the other men nearby were watching him. The bartender disappeared through a door at the far end of the bar.

Waiting, he played with the buttons of his jacket and thought the music louder than necessary. Tara didn't seem bothered by the volume. Now totally naked, she beamed, and maneuvered about the stage, swinging her hips, rolling her shoulder.

In a moment, the bartender appeared again, walking toward Mickey, fanning out the stack of bills he carried. In the doorway through which he had just come stood a thin man with curly hair, one hand on the door knob.

"Alright," the bartender said. "One thousand, five hundred and thirty-one dollars." He licked his thumb and began to count it out on the bar. The thin man in the doorway stood there for a moment, then retreated again into the room.

"Tully said this is the most we've ever—"

Mickey put his hand down on those bills already counted out. He felt the boiling discomfort of total conspicuousness. Just then a waitress reached the bar, and depositing a tray of empty glasses, noticed the money. She looked back and forth at the two men.

Nodding his understanding, the bartender waved Mickey to the door of the dancer's locker room just off-stage. Inside, the room was brightly lit. At the vanity at the opposite end of the small room, a petite brunette sat brushing her hair. The bartender didn't say anything to her as they entered, but Mickey smiled at her reflection in the mirror and she waved back with the brush.

"Yeah, sorry about that," the bartender said. "I wasn't thinking." He began to count out the bills into Mickey's open hand. Through the door Mickey could hear the announcer's voice in the bar saying, "Alright guys,

give it up for Tara! Tara!"

"That's O.K.," Mickey said, still circumspect. "I was just, you know— everybody watching out there."

The bartender mumbled out his count. "One-hundred, two hundred--"

Suddenly the door behind them opened and Tara, with her clothes in her arms, ran directly into the two, pitching the cash into the air.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, startled.

"Christ, Tara!" the bartender said.

"Well, what are you doing just standing here!" she asked, bending to the floor, her knees together as if not naked but in a tight fitting skirt. She glanced about quickly, then dumped her clothes in a pile out of the way. She smelled of a commingled reconstitution of sweet perfume, cigarette smoke, and the pricking briny hint of sweat. Even this close, there was not a blemish on her skin. Especially as it was lightly glazed by perspiration, it looked as polished as an apple. Mickey reached for the bills like a blind man.

"What is all this money anyway?" she asked as she helped collect the bills, one hand holding her hair from falling into her eyes.

"This guy here just broke the bank, won over \$1,500 at video poker."

She looked up from the floor. "Oh yeah?"

Mickey shrugged, feeling a heat rise up the back of his neck to his ears.

"Had to get money out of the safe to pay him."

He imagined himself reaching out and gently cupping one of her breasts in his palm. Just to admire its smoothness, its weight in his hand. It seemed such an easy thing to do it made him nervous to think about it. In the background the voice announced the next dancer. As they stood—Tara and the bartender handing Mickey the retrieved bills—the brunette exchanged smiles with Tara and brushed passed them out the door.

“\$1,500, I should get you to teach me,” Tara said.

Mickey wadded the bills into his pocket. “No, I was just lucky.”

She bent to collect her pile of clothes.

“Well, I could use a little of that,” she said. The bartender mumbled something then turned Mickey back toward the bar.

Once the door was open, the music immediately spilled into the room. Then, without knowing he was going to say it, Mickey heard himself asking, “You want to help me spend some of it?” So surprised was he by the sound of his own voice, he wondered if the words had issued not from his mouth, but had somehow escaped through his ears.

Tara glanced at the bartender, then back at Mickey.

“Well, what are your plans?” she asked.

“I don’t know, whatever—whatever you want to do.” He coughed.

She put her clothes down on the vanity and then sat and began to root among the jars and tubes of makeup. When she didn’t answer right away,

Mickey continued toward the doorway until the bartender caught him by the arm.

"I got to work until 11," she said. "If you want to go at 11."

"11 o'clock? Alright." He checked his watch. "11 o'clock."

In the mirror she smiled at him and nodded, running her fingers through her hair.

Outside, Mickey checked to see if he could see his breath. Though the air was crisp and the night sky clear and decorated by bright stars, it was not cold enough. Or maybe it was only him, he thought—he felt nearly combustible. He wanted to yell at the top of his lungs, and looked about to see who might be nearby. Instead, he said "Man" in a regular voice, and began to laugh. Through the door he heard the delicious hum of the bar, the music, and as the pool table stood just inside, the clack of the balls striking each other. For a second, he pretended what had just happened had not really happened, that he was only now awaking from some vivid imagining.

He checked his watch--7:24. The first thing he would do before returning to collect Tara was treat himself to an expensive dinner. And Tara, that was another issue—what to do with her, and how to make a good pivot on this opportunity so as to parley it into something. Finally, he thought, his turn.

A block from the Full Moon Mickey flagged a taxi. The driver nodded into his rearview mirror as Mickey slid into the back seat. He asked for the Harbor Inn, a place on the waterfront he'd heard was good. The driver told him he'd driven a few airline pilots around one night, and they had said it served the best martini in town.

As they drove they talked. Powerless to keep it to himself, Mickey explained why he had to be back at the Full Moon by 11 p.m. The driver made a strange wordless sound that Mickey realized was meant as a sort of nasty congratulation.

"The night don't really mean much without a woman with you, that's what I feel," he said.

"Yeah, it's certainly nicer, isn't it?" Mickey said.

"We'll see what happens, who knows, you never know." He grinned at the thought.

They crossed over the bridge connecting the old part of the city from the new. The wheels sang on the metal grating. Above spread dark girders of bridgework and the broad expanse of night sky. Below, the river was mostly hidden, except where delicately contoured by the vague moonwash and dotted by the stars' reflection.

The driver, his right hand on the wheel, reached his left back to Mickey.

"My license reads Charles Malty," he said, "but everyone calls me Still."

"Still," Mickey repeated.

"It's a long story. I'll give you the short version. I'm forty-four, and me and my Ma still live together. So as you can imagine people'd give me shit—you know, 'still living with your Ma' and all that. But hell, what do I care, she's my Ma. Finally it just became 'Still' and, shit, it's no worse than Chuck."

"What does your Mom call you?"

"Usually lazy son of a bitch," he said, mugging in the rearview.

Mickey volunteered his own name, then couldn't help telling Still of his luck at the video poker machine.

"Is that right?" Still yelled, "Man, I won free groceries once, but, Good Christ, never nothing like that!"

Mickey immediately wished he'd kept it to himself.

"Man, in one night you've got what men work their whole life to get, and still don't get! Money and a beautiful woman. And you got it in one night!"

Beneath the cab the tires hummed, then turned a soft purr at the concrete of the far side.

The Harbor Inn sat, as its name suggested, nestled into the curve of a small harbor. It was as nice a place as Mickey had ever been. The tables

were adorned with white linen tablecloths, sparkling dinnerware, candles burning in red globes. Feeling generous, Mickey had invited Still to join him. At the door the hostesses were attractive and aloof. Fingering the lump of cash in his pocket, he enjoyed their treating him and Still less than politely. He asked for a table for two and one of the hostesses, a thin blonde with a becoming scar at her lip, apologized.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, "Our policy is you must have a jacket."

Mickey looked down at his corduroy coat, polo shirt and jeans.

"I'm sorry," she said again, this time vaguely motioning toward the cloak room behind her, "But we have only one left."

By this time a second hostess had come to stand next to the first, this one older, with surprised eyes and an expression suggesting she was the superior. Both stood with their arms crossed identically at their waists and looked at Mickey and Still.

"O.K., fair enough," Mickey said. "But save us the jacket and that table right there."

They did not follow his pointing finger, and he and Still were out the door before any more was said.

Back on the street Mickey motioned for Still to wait on the sidewalk. The cab driver looked confused, his wild hair bunched in unkempt tufts at the side of his head.

"I know I'm on the clock, I know," Mickey said as he quickly made his way down the esplanade, the water and bobbing boats on his right, small shops and restaurants on his left. As he walked he made a quick cursory look into each of the store windows. After reaching the end of the paved walk, Mickey retraced his steps, this time inspecting the patrons dining at the outdoor tables.

About half way back to where Still stood he approached a table with two young couples. He said a few words, and then stood politely with his hands behind his back. Those at the table first looked at him curiously, and then ignored him. After a moment, Mickey produced his wad of cash from his pocket. The others looked at him again, and then laughed. At this Mickey shrugged and began to walk away. Meanwhile, the two women at the table chattered at their friend, pointing at Mickey. Finally, smiling, and with his friends watching, one of the men got up from the table and called to Mickey. As the two approached each other the man removed his jacket. They exchanged a few words and Mickey took the man's jacket while counting out money into his open hand. Back at the table, his friends had begun to laugh.

"Alright then, let's eat!" Mickey yelled to Still, not quite believing what he'd just done.

Back at the Harbor Inn, Mickey felt strange and powerful as the blonde hostess showed him and Still to the table he'd earlier pointed out.

After dinner, which included a couple bottles of wine, they drove back into the heart of the city, then out the opposite side. They left the lights behind, and once again entered darker outskirts. As they drove they passed a third bottle of wine back and forth. For a short time they traveled alongside railroad tracks, the metal braces silent and glinting in the spare light. Soon, Still turned the cab and began a long, slow uphill ascent.

"You're going to love this place," he said. "I go there all the time."

The road was poorly lit, empty, circuitous, and flanked by dark woods. Mickey sat with his right arm resting in the well of his opened window. It felt pleasantly chilly to him. He could smell the leaves, the rank earthy humus, the cool pine. Night too has a smell and he could smell that as well. Out the window the moon was crooked as an inviting finger. He laid his hand proudly on the slightly smaller wad of bills in his pocket.

After following this road for some time Still turned the cab into a gravel lot marked by a plain sign that read "The Tip-Top." Once the engine was turned off Mickey could instantly hear through the place's opened doorway the mild whirring sound of music mixed with voices, mixed with the movement of bodies. Out of the car, Still smoothed his front, buttoned the

bottom button of his new jacket, then unbuttoned it again. Mickey took one more long draw off the bottle then flung it bravely into the woods.

Inside, few heads turned as they entered. To the left a couple danced near the jukebox to a Willie Nelson song. To the right, amidst a pall of smoke, the men about the pool table stood either regal as sentries or hunched and severe. At the bar they ordered beers from an older woman with a poor wig. She and Still exchanged greetings and he leaned across the bar and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"This here's my friend Mickey," he said, reaching back awkwardly to put his hand on Mickey's shoulder. "He's celebrating tonight!"

Still and the woman looked at Mickey as if he were not exactly human, as if he were a newly purchased toy Still were showing off.

"Yeah? Well what're you celebrating?" she asked.

Just then a large man moved gracelessly to the bar, bumping into Mickey. He unscrewed the top of a jar of jerky sitting on the bar, and after taking out two pieces, deposited a handful of change and left. Mickey smiled and tried to lead Still to a nearby table.

"He's celebrating a big win!" Still said, rubbing the fingertips of his right hand together as if counting the beads of an invisible rosary. "Big win tonight. We're gonna play some pool with Hub and Leon." The old woman stared at Mickey appraisingly.

They found a table near the pool table, and after Still nodded to a few men at the far side, he explained who all the people were. Mickey checked his watch, only to discover it gone from his wrist. After looking a moment on the floor he reminded himself it was a cheapie anyway. He would buy himself a new one.

"O.K., so you play pool, right?" Still asked. "Let's play, what do you say?"

"I play, but not really very often. I like it though." "You want to play?" He made a stroke with an invisible pool cue.

Mickey wiped a speck of something from the lip of his glass. "Sure, you want to play?"

Still slapped his hands on his meaty thighs. "Great." He stood and spoke to those around the table as they glanced at Mickey.

Returning to the table, he said, "I told them you're celebrating and they agreed to let us jump in." He then leaned closer and in a conspiratorial whisper, said, "Hub, the guy with the mustache, he thinks he's good, but he's not really. Couldn't make a bank shot to save his life. I usually let him win only because if I do he's good for a round or two."

Mickey didn't like Still's using the word "celebrating."

"Hey, Still," he said, "why not let's just keep the celebrating thing to ourselves, O.K.? I mean, I don't want to, you know, make things funny or

anything. You know?"

"Oh no," Still assured him. "These are good guys." As they picked out cue sticks from the wall, Still told Mickey again how good the guys were.

Being the guest, Mickey was invited to break. He was not a bad player, especially when the shot required a soft touch, but Still, despite an unorthodox style, immediately distinguished himself as the most consistent at the table. He was usually good for at least one or two balls each turn. In the first game he made most of the shots, and then Mickey sank the eight to win.

"Nice shot, Mickey!" Still said, clapping him on the back. Mickey was surprised he'd made the shot. For having not played in years, he was actually very pleased he'd held his own. The performance inspired in him a feeling of confident camaraderie with the others around the table.

"Play again?" Hub asked before the ball had even finished rattling through the table to collect with the others.

"Rack `em up," Still said.

"Rack `em up," Mickey echoed, clinking glasses with his partner.

Hub knelt and placed the balls in the rack. He was a lean man with a thick mustache that hid his mouth. He smoothed it in a downward fashion with the open palm of his hand after each sip of beer. His partner who had been introduced to Mickey as Leon, was very thin with rotting teeth,

yellowed fingertips, and a sunken pocked face.

The old woman approached their table with an empty tray. Mickey raised his glass to Still, who likewise lifted his, and both finished off what remained of their beer. Mickey made a peace sign asking for two more.

As she made her way back to the bar Mickey yelled to her. "Make that a round for everyone," he said. "On me." He made a casual sweeping movement with his hand to indicate the five or six people around the pool table. With his other hand he pulled the wad of bills from his pocket. The woman picked something off the tip of her tongue, wiped it absently on her apron, and returned to the bar without a word.

Mickey broke again to start the second game, and with some fine shooting by Still and a few nice shots of his own, they won that game as well. Still treated him to a straight shot of tequila which they downed together at the bar, slamming the empty glasses upside down on the bar when empty. The beer of the Full Moon and the wine of the restaurant mingled now with the beer and liquor of the Tip-Top into a comfortable invincibility for Mickey. At the table, he joked with Still about what he was going to do later with Tara and playfully slugged him on the shoulder.

"C'mon, time for another drink," Still said.

A bit later, after returning from a visit to the bathroom, Mickey found Still standing at Hub and Leon's table holding open his jacket, Leon curiously fingering the fabric. Hub lifted his chin at Mickey when he saw him. At this the others stopped talking.

"Hey, Mickey," Still said, turning quickly to meet his partner. "These idiots here, they just challenged us to a little bet and I told them, shit, we'd be happy to take their money!"

Behind Still, Hub snubbed out a cigarette, his final exhalation issuing in stray trails from beneath his mustache.

Mickey felt fortified and unstoppable. "Great," he said. "But first things first. Where the hell's my—ah here it is." He picked up his beer. "O.K., so what is it?" he asked, confidently digging in his pocket for his cash.

Still looked at Hub. "I don't know, we were thinking, say, forty. What do you say?" Still pulled a loose twenty from his pocket.

"Perfect." He confidently added twenty of his own. "But this time—this time I'm going to run the table, you suckers watch."

After a flip of the coin, Hub broke. But little went right for them after that and inside fifteen minutes Mickey and Still were forty dollars richer. More drinks were ordered. Mickey put his arm around his disheveled cab driver and said, "To Still Living With His Mom!" and then, remembering the Full Moon, "and to Tara, beautiful Tara! Who tonight, in—" He checked his

naked wrist.

"Oh, you got time," Still assured him, flashing his own watch in front of Mickey's face. "It's only quarter after nine. Plenty of time."

The old woman at the bar looked dully over at the commotion and Mickey gave her a thumbs up to which she responded with neither gesture nor expression.

"What say we go again," Still said, putting his arm about his partner's shoulders.

Mickey liked the feeling of solidarity. "You guys up for it?" he added, his arm now similarly on Still's shoulders.

Both nodded agreement as Leon shared his newly-lit cigarette to light the one dangling from Hub's lips. But this game went much like the one before it, both Hub and Leon struggling to make all but the easy shots, bickering about who was the dead weight. In no time Mickey and Still won that game, and then two more after it, each one another forty dollars. After the third victory Mickey bought another round for everyone, and gave Still five dollars for the jukebox.

"One more game," Hub said. "C'mon."

"I don't think so," Still said.

"What time is it?" Mickey whispered to his partner.

"Nope, I think we're done." Still shook his head at Hub.

Hub produced a wad of bills and waved them in the air.

"I tell you what," Hub said, "how much you guys got?"

Mickey was about to speak, but Still put an arm out as if to protect him.

Still shook his head again, and for a moment no one spoke. Then Hub shrugged and returned to Leon and the others at his table. Mickey and Still seated themselves at their own.

"Shit, these guys—" Still said. He rolled his eyes. "Don't know when to quit."

They drank their beer. Before they could finish they found Hub standing at their table.

"I've got almost \$900 here, and—" turning toward Leon, "Leon's got about \$800--pay day today. You win, you get it all, we win, you pay us half. That's more than fair, I'd say."

As Hub spoke Mickey noticed one of the man's eyes, his left, veered off slightly cross-eyed. It was mildly disconcerting.

Hub fanned the bills out on their table, pinning them down with his fingertips.

"What do you say?"

"I say you've got to be drunk, or dumb, Hub," Still said.

"You guys aren't that good!" Leon volunteered from the other side of the pool table.

"Shut up, Leon," Hub said.

Still looked at Mickey and raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

"Take a minute," Hub said and returned to his table.

Mickey picked up the money and held it in his palm like something delicate and alive. He could not keep himself from imagining how the rest of his evening might go if he returned to Tara almost a thousand dollars richer. Maybe they could stay at the Marriott down on the river, that would be nice. Maybe they could order room service, and sneak into the pool he was told was on the roof. Skinny dip, bring champagne.

At the others' table Hub took a sip of his beer and nodded at some question put to him by one his party.

Still seemed to be about to say something, then stopped himself and only smiled.

Mickey put the bills into an orderly stack. Someone nearby was smoking a cigar; he could smell it. At that moment, for some reason the Full Moon seemed to him such a long time ago. As he thought back on the events of the early evening, the man he imagined living them was someone slightly different than himself, a strange shadowy Doppelganger he recognized but didn't know. He pulled the remaining wad of bills from his pocket and addressed Hub and Leon.

“O.K., you got it,” he said. “If you’re willing to lose it, we’re willing to take it.” He counted out his cash and put it beside the rest.

As Hub racked the balls, Still chalked his cue and laughed. “Shit, I’m going to be able to take the next few days off after this!”

Again they flipped to break, this time Mickey and Still winning. With a tight, but explosive technique, Still sent the balls caroming about the table, dropping a solid. He then pocketed three more in quick succession. Hub leaned on his stick watching as Leon whispered something to him. When their turn, Hub immediately sank two of the stripes before missing a difficult combination. Mickey then missed an easy pick-up near the mouth of the side pocket.

The two teams traded good and bad shots, Mickey and Still managing through it to hold a narrow margin of one to two balls. Finally, Hub and Leon had two stripes remaining, and Mickey and Still only one solid and the eight ball to win.

“Get ready to start spending,” Still whispered to Mickey as he once more chalked his stick and approached the table.

Hub and Leon stood together, their sticks at their sides, looking like lackluster guards. One of the others sitting nearby stood, and clutching Leon

at the elbow, said something to him that made him smile.

Still sighted his shot, then with a pretty bank, dropped the ball into the side pocket.

"Alright Still!" Mickey exclaimed. Just as it had taken a long moment after his win at the video poker machine to fully appreciate what had occurred, only now, after Still's penultimate shot, did he fully comprehend what was happening. He thought back to the scene on the esplanade earlier and looked down at the jacket slung over the back of his chair, and smiled. And Tara. Again Tara. She hung there in his imagination, bending down to help pick up the dropped bills, swinging at the stage's brass pole, pulling the hair from her face to tell him yes. **"Man, in one night, you've got what men work their whole life to get, and still don't get!"**

Still walked around the table measuring his options, finally settling on a cross-table shot into a corner pocket. Mickey expected Hub and Leon, or at least Leon, to say something to rattle Still, some jeer or joke, but they didn't. Both remained quiet, Leon sipping from a beer. Still methodically chalked his cue and talced his hand, then bent to the shot. With a lean modulated delivery he sent the cue ball cleanly into the waiting eight, sending the eight, then, the two feet to the pocket where it quietly disappeared.

"Hey, hey, Still!" Mickey yelled, spilling his beer as he excitedly bounded over to embrace his partner. In that instant the whole evening came into

focus. It was not that he had expected to lose, he hadn't really thought about losing. It was more that he couldn't quite fathom winning. But now he'd won—he'd risked it and won.

Still remained frozen in his shooting posture, Hub and Leon too. All watched as the cue ball, as if willed by some greater power, innocently followed the black eight into the pocket. For a moment, Mickey, though of course knowing the rules of the game, remained dumbfounded at the celebration of Hub and Leon and those at their table. They jumped about, exchanging high fives, Leon cheering loudly, "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!"

Still straightened slowly, his face gone blank, and shrugged at Mickey. One of the others sitting nearby retrieved the cash and handed it to Hub.

"Shit," Still said. He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know what happened. I never do that—I never scratch on the eight."

Mickey stood with his hands hanging lamely at his sides and noticed for the first time the thin alternating stripes of blue in Still's jacket. It was ugly and too small for him, and he wondered why Still hadn't taken it off to shoot. Momentarily lost in the design of the fabric, he felt sick to his stomach.

"Well," he said.

"Damn good game guys," Leon said, motioning to the bar.

"I guess the luck just turned our way finally, huh? Let us buy you a—"

"Do you know what time it is?" Mickey interrupted.

"Eh? Time?" Leon said.

Mickey tapped his wrist.

"Almost quarter to eleven," Leon said. "But really, good game though! Man, that was a hell of a dogfight—" He went on to replay certain shots and situations, but Mickey didn't hear him. He touched his hand weakly to his pocket like one might the back of a disinterested lover in bed.

"Still, I really need to be getting back, I should get back. It's almost eleven."

Still stared at him as if uncertain of Mickey's identity. "What're you going to do?"

"What do you mean?" Mickey asked.

"I mean, you know—" He held his hands out to his sides.

The old woman arrived with the beer and set them on a nearby table. Leon was clarifying a point of strategy early in the game, pointing with a cue to the spots on the table where the balls had been.

"Let's just go, I really need to go," Mickey said.

Still pulled at his nose a few times and squinted at something on the floor.

Mickey grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair.

"Uh, Mickey—yeah, see, this is it," Still said, "I've really had too much

drink to be driving.” He held up a nearly empty glass, trying a smile. “I could lose my license and if I lost my license, well—you know—”

The others now stood around their table animatedly talking and drinking. The bright light hanging above the pool table seemed suddenly to Mickey both too bright and oddly futile. Still cuffed him on the arm.

“C’mon stay, you might as well stay. We’ll call a taxi.”

Mickey stood for a moment tapping a forefinger to his lips. Then, without another word, he walked out of the Tip-Top and into the crisp night air. Outside, he could see his breath, gray and fragile in the dark. Though not terribly cold, he pulled the collar tight to his neck as he took a last look at the bar. Then he started walking. Still’s watching shadow eclipsed much of the light of the opened doorway.

The street next to the gravel lot was wet, and corrupted stars shone in blurred reflection on its surface. After walking for awhile he said “Tara” aloud, but in the empty dark it sounded almost eerie so he said nothing more. It was a twisty road with little shoulder and less light, and he worried about cars not seeing him as they sped down the hill.

Making for the Phoenix

Friday, breakfast.

This morning my apartment smells like cat shit. The cat. I wish I had the strength to just lead it to the sidewalk and tell it to hit the road. To go find another alley somewhere else, some other fish bones in someone else's trash. I know he has a name but I don't know it. I call him Manny. But he doesn't come to it. He was my neighbor's cat. Still is I suppose. My neighbor, Mr. Feldman, is a pharmacist and one day I hear all this commotion in the hall of my building and the cops are dragging him away. It was really a sad scene. Have you ever seen someone trying to arrange his drooped eyeglasses while his hands are cuffed? It's sad. I was told a few days later by someone in the elevator he had been quietly stealing his favorite prescriptions for his own personal use, and had been caught. So they had come one day to get him. Ever since then his cat has been taking up residence in my place. You should see the way the thing prances around. Somehow I think that might make Mr. Feldman pretty unhappy in jail, to know how well his cat is getting on without him.

The problem with the cat is if I leave him for even one night he shits all over the place. Every now and again I like to go spend the night in the airport. It's just something I like to do. I like the feeling it gives me. I pretend I'm going somewhere, or I'm just returning from somewhere. I pretend I either have a really early flight, or maybe that I'm stranded, on my way home for the holidays for some big family to-do. I like it because it distracts me. I'm kind of a collector of distractions. I catalogue them like some people do butterflies, or stamps. If they fit in jars or boxes that's where I'd put them, tagged and ordered.

The airport is an especially good distraction. All the activity, the beehive, the rumbling rhythm of so many feet and schedules, all criss-crossing. It's fun to watch all the people and try to determine who's miserable and who's happy. When I return to my apartment the following day, and sleep in my own bed the following night, it feels different for a little while.

So last night I went to the airport. Usually when I go I will maybe pretend to read the newspaper for a while, undo my tie, walk around with a cup of coffee acting like my plane's late. Other times I won't do anything but sit. But I feel more a part of things when I walk around looking tired and miserable. People like to see other people that way. It seems to make them feel better. Last night, though, I just sat there and watched the room change

with the evening. I smoked cigarettes and wondered at the people and the places they were going.

The only problem is, of course, whenever I do this, go to the airport, the cat shits everywhere. I don't get it. I should just leave him on the sidewalk and see what he thinks of that.

Friday, work.

Even with all the office noise I can clearly hear the ticking of my watch. It sounds like the hammering of a very little man. Maybe securing the lid of my casket. What occurs to me is how in the past hour the world will have grown one hour older, circumambulated a few more beats on its axis. In that time, around the world, people's lives will have changed. They will have died in the hundreds of thousands. More will have been born. Countless things will have happened, great things, horrific things. Think of it, one hour over the whole world!

But my desk here, it remains exactly the same. It is still desperately out in the open, lit too brightly beneath fluorescent light and covered by my pens and markers, my paper clips, my random papers and files. It still has about it the peculiar smell of warm wax, the source of which I have failed to discover. It remains as intimate as an old scar. One hour has done nothing for it, or me.

Despite this, because it's another good distraction, I sometimes like to walk by my building very late at night and watch it with all but its security lights off. I do it because of the sick feeling it gives me, like when as kids we would hold each other's hands and swing each other around like airplanes. It creates a kind of nauseous disorientation in me. My building upsets the same place in my body as being swung around like that, somewhere near my liver and my stomach. When I do sometimes walk by it at night, that is the place where my body reacts.

Saturday.

My other neighbor is Mrs. Van Dyke. Her name is punched in white letters into blue tape and stuck beneath the eyehole in her door. Sometimes she will go days without picking up her newspaper from in front of her door. They will pile up there and grow grey, then, if left long enough, the color of meat that has gone bad. Then she will go on these cleaning binges and she'll pick them up in her arms like logs and dispose of them somewhere. At those times, I can hear her over there vacuuming, scrubbing, the blundering bumps and thumps of things being picked up and moved.

I visited Mrs. Van Dyke today because I had to use her bathroom since my toilet is backed up. I don't think she knows my name but she has always

remembered to wink when she sees me. So I didn't feel too badly about asking her if I might barge in on her.

Her apartment is the same dimensions as mine. It's small. She answered the door in her housecoat and from the interior the rank odor of camphor and cigarettes rallied out. Her television was on and the flashing colors danced on the glass of her china cabinet.

"Hi, uh, do you mind at all if I use your bathroom," I asked. And as if I were a bug exterminator, or a gentleman from the gas company sent there for a particular reason that merited no suspicion, she said:

"Oh yes, oh yes! Of course come right in!"

"I'm from next door, and—"

"Yes, yes! of course, come right in!" And then after I entered she asked, as if my visits were common, "Can I get you something, something to drink, something with rum in it perhaps?"

"Ah no, but thank you, I just need—my bathroom, my toilet is backed up and they're supposed to come up and work on it."

"That's fine, fine! You go right ahead!"

"I probably should of thought of that before I had that third cup of coffee," I said as I followed her to the bathroom.

"You need anything just holler!"

A moment later she anxiously knocked on the door, "You have towels in there? If you don't have a clean towel—is there a clean towel in there?!" I thanked her and told her there was.

In the bathroom, sitting on the back of the toilet, she kept a coffee cup full of loose cigarettes. I thought that strange. Cigarettes. Left out like butterscotch treats, or chocolate kisses, for the pleasure of her guests. But I couldn't see that she had too many guests. I knew she lived alone because, one, I had never seen anyone else leave or enter her place, and two, her cabinet was full of prescription bottles bearing only her name, and a variety of what I took to be, due their unfamiliar packages, women's products. But maybe people visited.

When I came out of the bathroom she was waiting with two glasses in her hand. She smiled as she matter-of-factly handed me one. It was just easier for me accept it.

"I know its messy in there," she said, "I've been telling myself for the last week or so I need to get in there. I'll do it tomorrow! Remind me, if you see me not working tomorrow you remind me! I gotta get that done."

She finished the last sentence while heading back into the living room, her head already turned toward the TV and the couch, and the cigarette she had burning in an ashtray on the coffee table. The room was wallpapered with small roses and vines and the mean pall of a place too long hidden

behind drawn curtains. She retrieved the cigarette before sitting and put it to her lips. It was rum and Coke. I could tell this after one sip. Rum and Coke. I prefer a Manhattan, that's really my drink of choice. But a rum and Coke is okay. Sitting, and replacing the cigarette temporarily in the ashtray, she removed one of her slippers and actively itched a bandaged toe.

"It's a never-ending battle, isn't it? It's either the dishes, the laundry—the kitchen! Always something. Sometimes I think it might just be better to become like cavemen again, you know?"

I'm not sure how old Mrs. Van Dyke is. But the skin at her neck was loose and her bottom lip had the kind of constant quiver unique to old people and idiots.

"Thanks for letting me barge in on you," I said. "And thanks for the drink." I slightly raised my glass to her.

"Oh, my pleasure, anytime, anytime—so what got lodged in there anyway, hair—some gauze or something?"

"Eh?"

"In your toilet?! In your *toi-let*?!"

"Oh, uh, I don't know." I nodded and smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

"I don't really like to put anything down there, you know, like any of those—cleaners, I just don't like not knowing where it goes when I flush it. It's probably spilling out into some river somewhere." She squeezed up her

face, and shook her head. "I don't think that's so good. Plus, it's kind of unnerving when things are too terribly clean, dontcha think?"

"Uh—"

"I mean, a little bit of—oh what would you call it?-- dirtiness, disarray—mess, is good. Really clean things seem to me more—susceptible to disease and germs. They're so—clean! There's nothing already there to kind of fight off the germs! When it's too clean, I mean. Plus, it just never ends.

Always, always!" She looked up from her foot. "Sit down, sit down!"

I nodded and smiled but remained standing. She seemed like a nice enough lady to me, Mrs. Van Dyke. She smoked like it was something as natural as breathing, or talking. And there was a dramatic quality about her I really liked. She seemed like an actress who skipped the career and went right to the destitute glory of the washed-up star. The drink was quite good, and after a few swallows I found I had nearly finished it.

She was watching a show where there was one woman sitting in a single chair, and beside her, two other women, all very nicely dressed and sober looking. After looking at the screen rapt for a few seconds, she turned to me and said, "I just love these shows. Boy, to have these people's lives—can you imagine!" She shook her head, and squinted slightly as she put her cigarette to her lips.

As I sipped my drink I looked at the framed picture sitting propped on the table next to me. It had the vaguely olive-yellow color peculiar to old photographs. It showed a man, a soldier in sunglasses. He sat on a wood crate beneath a bright sun, with his green shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbows. On his feet he wore heavy black boots with the legs of his pants tucked into them and a soft green hat rested on his knee. With his hands he seemed—with a large knife—to be whittling a stick or a bone. Young, mustached, with strong rounded shoulders, he smiled at something out of the picture and I tried to make him look like someone I knew, but I couldn't.

But most striking about him was his tattoo. It colored his right forearm in a rich dark black and gave the arm a great muscled contour. I think it was an eagle. Or maybe a phoenix. I picked the frame up off the table and inspected it more closely. The bird, whichever variety, was very dark and impressive, black wings spread, the profiled beak opened in a silent shriek. It made everything about the man who wore it seem sure and strong. I focused on it for a long moment then looked again at the man's smiling face. A tattoo, the idea had never occurred to me.

Mrs. Van Dyke pointed at the TV screen with her cigarette hand. "This woman here, she is the sister of the other one, and she is addicted to sex, and what / say is good goddamn aren't we all!" She laughed. The untended ash of her cigarette, grown long and grey, fell unnoticed to her coffee table.

Another picture nearby—there were pictures everywhere--showed the same man standing next to another man and before a helicopter. Both were wearing cameras around their necks. The man from the first picture had one hand raised for the glare of the sun, his tattoo spread across his forearm. I admired how it wound from just above his wrist to almost his elbow.

"Which one is that?" she asked, startling me.

"What?"

"Which picture is that you're looking at?"

I turned the frame out toward her.

"Oh yes, that one, I really like that one. He looks like Errol Flynn in that one!"

And he did, when I looked again, my neck craned for close inspection. He did—dark, swashbuckling, even heroic, with his young man's chest at the top of his partially unbuttoned shirt. And his tattoo inscribed like some manifest courage on his arm.

"You certainly can't say of that boy that he ever shied away from anything!" She shook her head. "He was always a terror. Even when he was in diapers."

I looked again at the picture as I finished my drink. I felt good. Suddenly, I felt resolved about something I couldn't identify, but I was resolved. I returned the photo to the table.

"Well, thank you for the drink. And the toilet there," I said.

"Oh, anytime, anytime! What, are you going to do, interrupt me from my crosswords?! No! Anytime!" Another tendril of ash fell to the carpet as she rose. I raised my glass to show it was empty, and set it on the table with the photographs.

"Thanks again."

"Now, just remember, don't pour any of that stuff down your toilet, you know, because who knows where all those chemicals end up, right? Just get the landlord up there, he'll take care of it for you." She followed me to the door and saw me out. In the hall, I heard as she turned up the volume on her television.

Later, and twilight.

The bar I go to is called The Altamont. It is small, and old. It is owned by a woman named Alice whose husband killed himself a few years ago. She runs the place with a kind of distracted indifference that makes it comfortable to drink there. I don't know why her husband killed himself. But whenever we hear of someone killing themselves, even if we don't know why, it's always easy to somehow apply our own reason to make it understandable. I like to think he just figured, well, if next week is the same as last week, and this week is no different, then forget about it.

Now I'm drinking Manhattans. Alice knows my drink, and she makes a respectable version. I feel like something has been answered, and in my head, while I drink, I try and think what the question was. Since leaving Mrs. Van Dyke's I just feel better. I have forgotten about tomorrow, I feel strong. I feel like Errol Flynn. Or someone else like that.

When I come to The Altamont I don't generally engage those around me in conversation—sometimes I will talk to Alice about the weather or something, but usually I just drink and listen to the haphazard delirium of the bar. I just watch the people who come in and out. I listen in on their conversations. But tonight, I don't know why, I am talking to people.

"Hey did you by any chance hear the score of the baseball game?" I ask a guy who leans in on the bar to make an order. He says no.

"What you guys playing over there, eight ball?" I ask another guy who carries his pool cue with him to fetch a new pitcher. He says, yeah, eight ball, but claims he's getting his ass kicked.

"Might as well get drunk then," I joke. He says, yeah, he might as well.

When two women come in and approach the bar I say good evening to them, and ask them how they are doing. They say they are doing fine. While they are waiting for their drinks I ask one what kind of perfume she is wearing because standing close to me as they are I can smell her. I tell her I

have a nose for fragrances, and she tells me she is not really wearing anything. I say well maybe it's her shampoo I smell.

I am talking to everyone. I ask another guy near me if I can borrow his lighter even though I have one in my pocket. He slides it down the bar to me.

"We better enjoy these now," I tell him, "because one day, if the damn liberals get their way, we won't be able to smoke in public at all anymore!" I say this even though I don't care, and only smoke as it is a distraction. He blows smoke upward toward the ceiling and nods his head as I slide his lighter back to him.

When I order my fourth Manhattan Alice asks what I am celebrating. I tell her I am still trying to figure that out.

"But you certainly got the recipe down tonight, Alice!" I tell her. She smiles the way people do who aren't used to smiling, vulnerably and somewhat unconvincingly. "Perfect," I tell her as I stir the drink with my pinkie then suck it clean.

"This is one of those nights people don't have very often," I say. "I can't explain it. I just feel—I don't know, you know?" Sure, she says. "I feel strong. If my boss walked in here right now, I would tell him to fuck off! I'd tell him to fuck him and his shitty job!"

Someone near me says, "there you go," and I feel I've made myself clear. Things are building up nicely. I keep talking to people and drinking.

Two or three doors down from The Altamont is a place called Merchant's Tattoo. I pass by it twice a day, every day, and their window says "The best in town." But I'd never really noticed it until earlier this evening on my way to The Altamont. I've noticed it, of course, but now that I think about it, I bet their tattoos must be pretty good. There always seem to be people hanging around the place. I'm drinking my drink and thinking about Merchant's when I hear myself say, "Forget the other crap, I'm going to get an eagle or something on my arm!"

Another man sitting near me at the bar turns to look at me. Then he says, "Go for it!" He's dressed in a black leather vest and cowboy boots, and seems very drunk. I tell him I'm going to do it and he rolls up his sleeve.

"Look here at this god-damn beauty! Now tell me that ain't pretty, uh?!" On his biceps sits a skull with a snake circling out a dry vacant eyehole. "First rate, huh? I got this in uh—in uh fuckin' uh—Sante Fe! Sante Fe."

"Yeah, looks pretty damn good to me," I say.

"Long time ago. Damn right! Look at that snake—he could crawl right off my arm and bite your ass!"

"Yeah, it's perfect. That's it. That's exactly it."

Fifth Manhattan.

My blood is hot now, I could go to war like this. I could be brave, and move about in the jungle without the least fear. The fifth drink seems to disappear in a few visits to my mouth. The room is louder, busier. People are everywhere. A guy jostles me to get to the bar, and when I tell him to back off he does. My jaw is set. My eyes are as sharp as beaks, as sharp as knife points.

"Let me see that again!" I tell the tattooed guy.

"Yeah!" he bellows, flexing his biceps.

"Yeah! Alright!" I yell back, fumbling with my wallet.

"That's it!"

I stand, buffeted by the bar and my stool. I look around and drink the last dregs from my glass. Everything is brand new. "Alice--," I say, as I place my money on the bar and look at her through my right eye, my left pinched at the spiraling smoke of my cigarette. Before I have a chance to say another word she has collected my cash, my empty glass and is gone to other duties, other patrons. "O.K., good-bye," I say to no one in particular. Behind me a man is standing, looking at me as I collect myself to go. "Are you leaving?" he asks. I tell him to have a little goddamn patience. I tell him if I want to stay I'm going to stay, if I want to leave I'll leave.

I push my way through the people to the door. Outside, there are no stars that I can see. The moon glows worn and splintered between dark clouds. Alright, I say to myself, alright. I make my way down the block, past the dry cleaners, past the Chinese restaurant that spills out onto the pale grey street its admixture of smells; past the office buildings, closed-up and mostly dark; past the clothing store; past, past the beauty salon and its pictures of women staring streetward as bigeyed as cats. At the flashing "Do Not Walk" sign of one corner, an old man, greybearded, face creased and leached of color, absently navigates a shopping cart to the opposite side.

Then Merchant's. The bell rings when I enter. It's suddenly bright again. The man at the desk is longhaired, with a dark beard. He looks up from a magazine but says nothing and offers no expression. On the walls are numerous drawings, some in black and white, some in color. My eyes wander from one to the other for the sheer number. I stare at one that shows a big breasted woman perched in a martini glass. Behind her, fanned out, are four aces. Then another similar one. There's another with a woman wearing guns. And another just posing naked. But I don't want anything like this.

There are numerous designs with skulls. Skulls wearing German helmets, skulls with roses, skulls grinning eyeless, skulls with snakes, like the man's. A lot of skulls. One or two look pretty good. Next to them are

designs with full skeletons, some of which are also pretty good. One shows a skeleton dressed like a pirate, with a sword in one hand.

After I have inspected the offerings of a couple of sections the man says finally, "Can I help you?"

"Ah not yet," I say. "I'm looking for the right thing. It's gotta be the right thing." When he does not answer I turn to him and he is staring at me. "It's gotta be the right thing," I say.

The next wall has animals. There are tigers of varying sizes and shapes. In fact, there are all kinds of cats, panthers, mountain lions. A black panther would be perfect. On my biceps, or my forearm. That would be perfect. There are also snakes, large and small. Some are winding around, others coiled up, jaws sprung. Then I see the eagles and I forget about the panthers and the snakes. Eagles in all shapes. Raised, screaming, tongues pointed, and wings spread. Fierce and stern. Eyes peeled. Some the whole body and wing-span, others nice close-ups of the head. This will do it.

"Wait! Do you have any phoenixes?" I ask.

"Do we have any what?"

"Phoenix's." I hold my arms out like I'm being measured for a suit.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"It's a kinda bird. It's like an, an eagle but—but different?"

“That’s all we have right there.” His eyes are dark, and his mouth looks crooked on his face.

My head is singing. It’s resonating like a bell with this faint subterranean thrum. My heartbeat is ransacked and I have to keep my mouth open to breath. I can smell myself, too. Thanks to the bar, I reek of cigarettes and liquor, of the musky scent of a room too concentrated with people and too short on ventilation. I stand a long time looking at the drawings made on squares of white paper of varying sizes and tacked somewhat indiscriminately on the walls of the place. I stand a long time looking. I visit other walls. I see my shoe untied but when I bend I think better of it and straighten again. The lenses in my glasses are speckled and distracting. The other walls have flowers, cartoon characters, portraits of people like Jimi Hendrix, Jerry Garcia, and an Indian I can’t identify. Displayed also are the various types of lettering you can get, types of geometric designs and symbols. The last wall, directly next to, of all things, a pinball machine, is decorated with Polaroid pictures of previous Merchant customers. It’s only body parts, thighs, calves, forearms, chests, backs. Here is a shoulder with a wizard and a crystal ball, there, a blooming rose on woman’s back. In another picture a man displays the chain and lock he’s had tattooed into his neck. For a moment I try to construct the various pieces into one person, one body, but it’s impossible.

"You sure you don't have a phoenix," I ask, "it's a lot like an eagle, powerful, strong, you know—broad wings?"

The guy doesn't say anything. We stare at each other for a moment. Then I say, "Okay, okay, I'll take—the eagle!--the eagle." I look at him and nod, but he makes no move and continues staring at me.

"You see that sign right there?" he says.

"What? Do I what?" I ask.

"The sign right there! The sign says we can't serve people—we can't tattoo people—when they're drunk. It's against the law."

"Against the law? Drunk? What's against the law?" "We can't—give anyone a tattoo when they're drunk," he says.

"Ah shit," I say, "I'm not drunk. And I would like *this* eagle put right--*here!*" I fumble with my shirtsleeve to bare my forearm. "C'mon, right here." I tap the spot.

"Come back tomorrow—wait that's Sunday—come back Monday and I'll give you whatever the hell you want wherever you want it, alright?"

"Now look," I say, trying to get my wallet from my back pocket, "I got the cash and I came in here to get a god-damn *eagle!*"

Things are swimming a bit, but I feel as strong as I have ever felt. I feel like this is where it's done. Something is spreading apart my rib cage,

making way for something larger; I can feel it. I slaver at my lips a bit and catch it with the back of my hand.

“I tell you what you are gonna do, you are gonna go back there—you are gonna go back there and get whatever stuff ready—and you’re gonna *give* me an eagle right *here!*” I wave my arm at him.

The man steps out from behind the counter. His arms are darkly inked, covered with confused images all the way to his shoulders. All at once it seems dire to me, to do this thing. It’s like a flag has been waved. The world outside is pricked by desperation, and it runs ugly in the gutters of the street. It seeps in under the door. It pounds on my chest, and rattles my ears. I nod and tap at my forearm. He tells me to get out. I take the cash in my wallet, I take my entire wallet, and I say, “You motherfucker, you are gonna give me a fuckin’ goddamn tattoo right fuckin’ now! Right fuckin’ now!”

He moves to his right. I am delirious, bigger than my body.

“You are gonna give me a goddamn—right now or I’m gonna fuckin’ destroy this fuckin’ place! I’m gonna destroy this fuckin’ place, I’m gonna--”

Everything is spinning. There are no colors, only combinations of color. There are no sounds, but rattling and ringing. Ringing and ringing. I can feel my throat stiffed and wrapping itself heavily around the words. I can feel it.

I can feel my heart. I can feel the pressure in my face from all the blood there. And I am enormous, and let loose.

He straightens and readies a bat taken from behind the counter, a wood bat which he holds in both hands like one might a sword, to the side, at the hip. His face is narrowed in. His eyes, mouth, and nose all come to a collected hardened point, but with his mouth slung slightly open for breathing. He doesn't say anything and just stands that way. I throw my wallet at him, and the cash. It flies everywhere and he flinches but then immediately resumes his position. His fingers work at the handle, dancing there.

"C'mon motherfucker!" I scream, "C'mon crack my goddamn head in! C'mon!" I tear at the drawings on the wall, throwing some in the air, throwing others vaguely his direction. "Right here! Right here! What's the matter?" I turn and put my fist into the front of the pinball machine.

"You better get the hell outta here right now!" he yells, "or I'm *gonna* fuckin' take you out pal!" He waves the bat in readiness, in promise. "*Right now!*"

I stand there for a second, panting and loosed, then my teeth click and I make for him. Before I can reach him he plants the bat in my side and propels me into the counter. He is hollering now but it's only noise. I try to rise and he keeps on yelling and hits me again at the legs. Then he starts

kicking me. I make for the door on all fours and he keeps kicking me. By the sidewalk I manage to get to my feet. He lunges at me with the bat and I hold my hand up for the blow and begin to run. He keeps screaming. I stumble and run, my side roaring at the ribs, my hand sticky with blood. I run. I run and no one chases me. I keep running for blocks until I can't hear him anymore, until my coughing stops me.

Eventually, I look behind me and there is no one. The streets are empty but I keep to the shadows. After a few blocks I catch my breath. I don't know what to do so I keep walking. Before long I find myself looking up at my office building. It's squat and ugly and for a moment I think about throwing rocks at its windows.

Jackrabbit Runs

Pape Dowd can't remember the last time he dreamt during sleep. His nights seem to him little deaths from which he is, each morning, miraculously resurrected. The risen sun glows through the old sheet he uses as a curtain, the radio clicks on to the talk station he listens to, and life somehow finds him again. Lately, he wonders where his dreams have gone, in whose head they've taken up residence. But then, he thinks, it's more likely they've simply dried up, been invalidated and eventually killed off by the lifelessness of his days.

Pape turned fifty on Tuesday. In the morning he shaved and visited his father at the nursing home. The old man, implacable and unreachable behind dull unlit eyes, only stared at him from his propped-up position in bed. Pape read to him from the sports page. At lunch he took one spoonful of tapioca pudding for every two he fed his father. After lunch they watched a re-run of "In the Heat of the Night" in which Carol O'Connor and Richard Roundtree attempt to prove the perpetrator of a rape on a local white high school girl is not the black youth charged, but her white football player boyfriend. Later, saying good-bye, he gripped his father's lean shin through the blankets

covering him and told him, "You need anything you make sure you call me, O.K.?" Then he left and proceeded to get very drunk.

Wednesday morning Pape woke up over 400 miles from his home in Eugene, Oregon, his back bowed against the garage door of a house in Sacramento, California he claimed was his sister's. The owner of the house called the police upon finding him in his driveway, pale and broken and sleeping. Mrs. Emily Setzer—formerly Miss Emily Dowd--*had* lived in Sacramento, but in a different neighborhood. What's more, she had died some years earlier. It proved difficult for the police officer to determine if Pape ever fully understood this fact. All they could get from him was that he was visiting his sister, and something about if they were going to get him, he might as well just go ahead and do it to himself. As for the last half of Pape's confession, it remained unexplained.

In his haste to get out of Eugene Tuesday night Pape had taken only a few things from his small place at the Manor Crest apartments. He packed a small bag with his reading glasses, two pair of dark socks, the wool sweater he changed into every night after work, the remainder of a box of cigarettes, a toothbrush, a small framed picture of him and his father, and a few books, mostly haiku poetry. Bag in hand, he then very quietly shut his door, and as gingerly as his labored breathing and urgency would allow, descended the three flights of stairs to the ground floor. He went immediately to his bank

and withdrew all of his 300 and some odd dollars. This, with the nearly twenty he already had in his pocket, he took with him to the downtown Greyhound station where he purchased a ticket for Sacramento. Waiting in the small station restaurant for his 9:30 p.m. bus, he drank three beers, ate a candy bar, and smoked one cigarette after another.

A few hours into the ride, a woman got off in Roseburg, Oregon and called the police. She'd been sitting beside Pape. She told them, "I don't know if it's anything, it's probably nothing, I mean a lot of weirdos ride the bus, you know, but I thought I should call about this guy I was sitting next to, just in case."

"What can we do for you?" the cop asked.

"Well the guy just seemed real nervous to me. He was sweating and was all pale and everything, and I don't know, it seemed like maybe he was escaping or something."

"Escaping. Escaping from what?" the cop asked.

"I don't know," she said. "He just seemed way too nervous. You know what I mean? I tried to talk to him, you know, but he only nodded, and mumbled, and looked around like someone was following him."

"Did you happen to get the man's name?" asked the cop.

"No, but he stunk of booze—and oh! he did say one thing I remember."

"What's that?"

“He did say he thought it was `fucking unfair’--*his* words, not mine—that it was fucking unfair he couldn’t smoke on the bus.”

“Uh huh, anything else?”

“No, not really, I just remember thinking at the time he seemed to be way too upset about the smoking thing.”

Six a.m. Wednesday morning Pape’s bus sighed into the Sacramento station, but he wasn’t on it. The seat he’d purchased in Eugene was by Sacramento occupied by the disheveled remains of the evening’s newspaper and some McDonald’s trash.

Hours earlier, in the Shasta station, amid the casual hubbub of passengers exiting and entering, Pape had quietly dropped his bag from the bus window, stretched—feigning a yawn—then alighted from the bus for the illusory purpose of having a cigarette. Once out, he stealthily retrieved his bag and quickly made his way out of the station. If they were following him, he thought, he would not be easily caught. He tried to put their faces out of his mind. But they persisted, rising up in his imagination as he’d seen them earlier that evening, obscured beneath a sharp angle of shadow made by the stairs of his building. Their black faces had seemed in their smooth relief like those of some cryptic talisman rendered from polished stone, teeth white as if chipped from bone. More than that, he could still hear, like the snippet of some inescapable song, their whispering voices plotting his murder. It didn’t

matter that he'd been drunk and hadn't heard it all—he'd heard enough. It likewise didn't matter that he couldn't identify what he'd ever done to them to call this action against himself. What mattered was getting away.

Early morning California smelled to Pape of cinder, of brick mixed with car exhaust, and the absence of natural odors made him nervous. Walking through Shasta, he looked for the nearest freeway. After a few blocks he heard the rattled low of what he believed to be the bus he'd just left, and hiding, saw on an adjacent street its headlights then its body pass on into the night.

He walked for some time, eventually finding an on-ramp to the highway going south. Deciding to eat first, he entered one of the two or three brightly lit restaurants clustered nearby. He'd not eaten since lunch with his father that afternoon and was hungry. The alcohol of earlier had some time ago lost its bravado and had gone flat in him leaving him only weak, somewhat fevered, and isolated. He thought, "Absolutely no one knows I'm here," and the incisive truthfulness of the thought made him wonder if he'd actually said it aloud. When the waitress came to him, pad in hand, he ordered a beer and a plate of steak and eggs. She was young and funnel-shaped. When she walked she had the tipped uneven gait seen in some varieties of flightless bird.

"That highway there go to Sacramento?" he asked.

She looked out the window as if to remind herself. "Yes, and south from there." She scribbled frustratedly on her pad. "You headed to Sacramento?"

"Sacramento," he said, nodding.

She nodded back. "Christ," she said, and began snapping her pen in the air like nurses do thermometers. "Damn thing—Ah—" Still staring at it in her hand, she turned and moved back toward the kitchen.

"And the steak," Pape said, "I'd like the steak well done. Just shy of burned." He glanced about, suddenly nervous and circumspect.

The waitress looked over her shoulder and gave him the same look she'd moments earlier worn while staring out the window at the traffic zipping by, then continued on to the kitchen.

After finishing his meal and three beers, he stood in line to pay. The man in front of him handed his cash and ticket to Pape's young waitress behind the cash register.

"Just great," the man said. "But you know me, Peg, so long as its dead, all you got to do is pour some gravy over it, and I'll eat it."

The waitress laughed and shook her head. "Headed north or south tonight?" she asked, returning his change to him.

The man was helping himself to a few toothpicks.

"South. South down to Bakersfield tonight." He plugged a toothpick between his lips, depositing the rest into a shirt pocket.

"Alright, well you take care." Smiling at him, she reached across her body and itched an elbow.

"Always," he said. He moved past Pape to the doors of the restaurant.

Anxious, Pape only nodded and grunted at the waitress's questions, his eager palm outstretched. Outside, he did not at first see the man. Then he spotted him stepping up to the cab of his truck. The air felt cold on his face as Pape ran after him.

"Hey," he yelled, immediately glancing about to see who else might be nearby.

Half up, looking like the conductor of a departing train, the man turned to Pape.

"I overheard you're going to Bakersfield," Pape said.

"Sorry buddy, no passengers. Company policy." He opened the cab door and pulled himself up into the seat.

"C'mon. I only need to go as far Sacramento."

"Sorry, man, no can do. It don't matter where you're going as far as, if they ever found out I could lose my job." The sound of the door closing echoed faintly in the broad parking lot.

"Please, just to Sacramento."

The man shrugged resignedly.

Pape paced back and forth. The truck shuddered slightly at being started, then rumbled.

"I'll pay you," Pape yelled.

The man looked through him as he slowly backed out of his spot.

"C'mon, I'll pay you." He retrieved his cash from his wallet and waved it at him. "Look, it's a matter of life or death."

The truck stopped. The man stared at Pape for a moment, then, his hands still on the steering wheel, turned and looked out the windshield. Pape stood next to the truck looking pitiful, as if ill-made by hurried hands.

"O.K., O.K., climb in." He shook his head. "I'm just too easy."

Pape awkwardly hustled to the passenger side of the truck, passing consecutively into then out of the truck's headlights. Starkly washed in the bright beams, he looked like some nocturnal creature made when illumined strange and phantasmal. Like the nightmarish inhabitants of the black depth of the ocean when lit up.

"But I have any problems," the driver said, "and I'm dropping you off on the side of the freeway."

The telephone poles seemed in their quick and relentless passing from Pape's view like an incontrovertible tally of something he could not name. It made him anxious to watch them and he tried to concentrate on other things. He tried to remind himself of the distance he was every mile putting between himself and the danger he believed he'd left behind.

At a quick stop for gas, Pape bought a 12-pack of beer.

"My name's Paul," Pape said.

"Virgil," the driver said.

"I don't suppose you can have one of these, can you?" he asked, opening, then weakly extending a can.

Picking with a fingernail at something between his two front teeth, the driver glanced at Pape, shook his head, and returned his attention to the road.

Pape nodded and took a long drink, nearly draining it. Even after lowering the can to rest on his thigh he continued to nod as he watched the yellow center line draw them inexorably into the night.

After a few miles of silence Virgil turned on the radio. An evangelist was explaining how the kind of miracle man needed could not come from the flesh. But he turned it off again before the man could explain where the miracle would come from.

"So where you headed?" he asked. "Just Sacramento," Pape said. "That's the end of the road for me."

"I know Sacramento, but why, for what reason are you going there?" Pape admired the perfect circle made by the top of the can in his hand. He ran a thumbtip around its ridge to the sharp opening.

"I'm tired of the mountains," he heard himself say. "I want to be able to look around in all directions and see nothing but horizon." At this he finished

his beer and thought passingly about crushing the can, then just as quickly decided against it.

They passed a rest stop. To Pape the sparsely populated lot looked beneath its meager rank of lights like the wasted remains of some large animal picked almost clean.

"What was all this, then, about life and death?" Virgil asked. His voice suggested he'd suspected all along Pape's dire appeal had been made purely for effect.

Pape thought about the question for a long time. "I just don't know what I did to them," he said finally.

"To who?" Virgil asked.

"They didn't know I could hear them, but voices travel a long way in that stairwell, farther than you might think."

"Could hear who?"

"And the way I look at it, I'll be damned if I'm just going to wait around. I'm no idiot. If anyone's going to kill *me*, it's going to be me doing it to myself, not some goddamn punks shooting me in the head one night."

"O.K., you lost me," Virgil said, looking at Pape's reflection in the windshield. "Shooting you?"

"I heard the bastards down there whispering, plotting. And I'll be damned if I'm going to wait around, you know."

Pape shook his head, then opened and poured half the contents of a new can of beer down his throat.

"You're going to have to start over," Virgil tried.

After a long pause Pape said, "Nah, I don't. It doesn't really matter."

The wheels of the truck made a kind of delirious moan on the road. As he drank his beer, Pape could not keep from ascribing the sound a human origin. He imagined the street below them as being paved not with asphalt, but the bare backs of lost men.

They traveled in quiet for some miles. Then all of sudden Virgil stood on the brakes, the wheels squealing, the cabin bucking. There was a nasty dead thump as something hit the truck's grill. Heavy and sudden, the sound struck simultaneously in Pape's chest, like a fist. He felt it at the very point joining the complimentary sides of his rib-cage and felt all the air go out of him.

For a moment they coasted, breathless, as if having just driven off a cliff. Then Virgil pounded the steering wheel.

"Goddamn jackrabbits!" he yelled. "Goddamn, goddamn jackrabbits!"

Face enshadowed, eyes big as bowls, Virgil slowed the truck, but didn't stop.

"Those fucking things, they ought to be rounded up and shot!" he said.

The truck moved forward as if itself startled and shaken. Beyond the illuminated red hood the two headlights bled off into dark. They betrayed nothing save two matching swaths of highway made to look when lit somehow foreign and vaguely ominous.

“You sure it was a rabbit?” Pape asked. He glanced instinctively behind them only to be greeted by the rear of the cab and the dark figure of the trailer. The side rearview framed only another piece of darkness.

“You’d think the stupid things would learn, wouldn’t you,” Virgil said. “Hell, how many of their buddies do they have to come sniffing at mashed on the highway to learn?”

At this, he shifted the truck back into gear, and pitching the vehicle into a graduation of labored clunks and groans, once more reached highway speed.

“It sounded pretty big to be a rabbit,” Pape said, sitting on his hands.

Virgil dug a pinkie in his ear, shaking his head. “Goddamn jackrabbits,” he said.

At a sign some miles later that read “Geary’s One-Stop” Virgil pulled the truck into a well-lit lot and parked. The brakes sighed deeply and the engine clicked at the rest.

“A quick piss, a cup of coffee, maybe a piece of pie,” Virgil said. “They got damn fine pie here—and then we’re on our way.” Getting out of the cab

he added, "You're not in any hurry, huh?" Because it didn't sound like a question to Pape he made no effort to respond. Instead he toed at the box of beer at his feet.

Walking toward the restaurant Virgil seemed, in the uneven light made by the lot lamps and the glow from the place's windows, to have a slight limp Pape had not noticed before. For a reason he couldn't identify, Pape hoped it had not been a bad draw at birth, but, rather, a flaw acquired in some secret trauma hidden away in the man's past. About halfway to the restaurant doors, almost as if called to, Virgil stopped and turned to look back at the truck. Still sitting in the cab Pape raised his hand, but Virgil only absently rubbed his finger under his nose before continuing on to the restaurant.

Pape wondered if he could be seen in the unlit truck. He liked the thought that maybe he was temporarily invisible. Drinking his beer, he sat in comfortable silence and watched the dots of light appear in the far distance of the dark highway, like the birth of fear in the imagination. In approach, the spots widened and spread, swallowing up evermore of the landscape, until it seemed the next moment would certainly find the white flash-end of everything, the final expiration—the end of Pape, Virgil, Geary's One-Stop, the highway, and all matters of life and consequence in the world and maybe the world itself. When the light finally passed on in the hum of tires, back into the darkness, it took Pape a moment to reclaim himself from death.

Eventually, Pape climbed out of the cab. He walked to the front of the truck and stood before its broad face. Lit dully by a nearby light, debris interrupted its glistening grillwork. He put his finger to the dark spot, and though he expected it, was surprised to find a patch of coarse hair. It was still warm to the touch and had to him a rich musky scent faintly reminiscent of red wine. He thought about pulling it free from the metal lattice and tossing it into the nearby brush, but then wondered at a reason and so left it.

In the restaurant's bathroom he took a pen from his pocket and wrote on the white wall above the urinal:

*The jackrabbit runs,
but running in the darkness
is like standing still.*

They drove for another two and half hours. Pape continued to drink and at certain times along the way actually forgot, or at least no longer cared, where it was he was going. Only occasionally and with little of the earlier nervousness did he check the side mirror. The lights of other vehicles just came and went, looking like the time-lapse blooming and passing away of flowers.

By seven they were near the city limits. "Well, we're getting close to Sacramento," Virgil said, moments after a mile sign whipped past. When Pape did not answer Virgil turned to look at him.

"Sacramento eight miles," he said.

Pape nodded and itched the back of his neck. Retrieving his wallet from his jacket pocket, he opened it and looked to Virgil.

"So what do I owe you?" he asked.

"What do you what—oh no, no need for that." He frowned looking as if having just come upon something foul smelling. "Unless you're running from the law, forget about it."

"I told you I'd pay you," Pape insisted.

"Keep your money," Virgil said.

Pape slowly closed his wallet and put it back in his pocket. Empty cans littered the floor at his feet. "I tell you what," he said, "I'll leave these two last beers for you, for when you get to Bakersfield."

"That'll work," Virgil said.

Eight miles further on at a stoplight, Pape collected his bag and stepped down from the cab.

"Hey," Virgil yelled, leaning across to the passenger window. "You never did tell me what it was that was so life and death."

Pape fitted the strap of his bag over his shoulder.

The truck's idling engine made a throaty *gung-gung-gung* sound in the relative quiet. Colored by the red of the stoplight, the trap of massed jackrabbit fur in the truck's grill looked to Pape like a kind of grotesque ornamentation.

Affecting the voice of Virgil, Pape said, "'Goddamn jackrabbits.'"

At the first neighborhood of houses he came to Pape approached a common looking two-story home with a well-tended yard. He knocked on the door, but to no answer. Still none answered when he cupped his hands about his mouth and pressing them against the glass next to the front door, yelled, "Emily!" This he tried a few times, persisting even after realizing no one was home.

In time he retreated to the slip of shadow made by the house's roof. There he sat with his back to the garage and pulled his knees to his chest. It seemed to Pape that both his fatigue and the warm wash of morning appeared out of nowhere and at the same time. As for the new day, he hadn't expected it. So dark had the night been he thought it must last forever. The arrival once more of the sun, of another day, wearied him beyond all answer. Seeing by its shadow the palsy of his hand, he made a fist then pulled it back beneath the line made by the roof. Again, he saw the faces of the two black men under the stairwell in his building, talking about killing him. But now, worked on by miles and hours, he could not be sure if

it had not in fact been a dream, manufactured in a drunken delirium. The image proved hazy, like something seen at a distance on a hot highway. Rather than think about it he put his mind to sleeping.

"Wake up, buddy," the cop said. "Here we go now, wake up." He shook Pape's knee.

Pape opened his eyes to the swimming image of three strange faces back-lit by a bright sun.

"Huh?" Pape asked, putting a hand before his eyes as if about to be struck.

"Wake up, you got to get up." The cop grabbed his elbow.

"Where am I?"

The cop glanced at the other man standing behind him.

"11 18 Bellevue Greens," the man whispered to the cop.

"You live around here?" the cop asked.

Still in the shade, the fabric of his bag felt cool in his hand. He looked from one face to the next. "I'm here to see my sister," he said.

"Who's your sister?" the cop asked, temporarily relaxing his grip on Pape's arm.

"Emily Dowd."

The officer repeated the name, "Emily Dowd," and turned to the others. The man who had spoken earlier shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"He's drunk," whispered the woman next to the man. "I can smell it from here."

"Does she live around here?" the cop asked.

The halo of light about the officer's head made Pape nervous. He covered his eyes with his hand.

The cop tightened his grip and once more began to pull Pape to his feet. "O.K., c'mon, let's get you some place to sleep it off." The others backed up as Pape stood.

"I'm here to see my sister," he said.

"There's no Emily Dowd here, mister, no one by that name lives here. Why don't we head down to the station and see if we can't find her for you."

"My sister—" he started.

As the cop led him to the patrol car the cop exchanged a few words with the man and woman, but Pape didn't listen. It was too hot. The neighborhood didn't look familiar after all, nor did it look strange. He could not make out the difference. Appraising the rows of identical houses, warmly rendered in the sun, he remembered the jackrabbit. In an instant he relived in his own heart the dead thud on the grill, the coarse fur on his fingertips.

"I heard them," Pape said. "I'm sure I heard them down there whispering, plotting. And forget it, I'm no idiot, I'm going to do it myself before I let them shoot *me* in the back."

The cop and the couple turned and looked at Pape. A voice crackled on the radio in the car. In a nearby tree a bird chattered to no reply. Hot and lightheaded, Pape thought he might pass out.

"I think I need to sleep," he mumbled.

The cop nodded at the man and woman, then gestured Pape toward the car. He guided him into the back seat, tossing his bag into the front. A few more words were passed between the officer and the others, and then, at the slam of the cop's door, Pape found himself on the move again. As he sat there he suspected the name of his destination remained inscribed somewhere, hidden, unplumbed in all the dreams that had ceased visiting him. But ironically, he understood as well sleep also provided refuge. He counted on it as he leaned back in his seat and quietly closed his eyes.