

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1990

God machine and other stories

Kathleen M. Cholewa

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

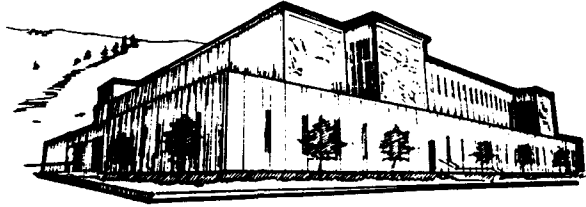
Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Cholewa, Kathleen M., "God machine and other stories" (1990). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 2461.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2461>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



Mike and Maureen
MANSFIELD LIBRARY

Copying allowed as provided under provisions
of the Fair Use Section of the U.S.

COPYRIGHT LAW, 1976.

Any copying for commercial purposes
or financial gain may be undertaken only
with the author's written consent.

University of
Montana

THE GOD MACHINE AND OTHER STORIES

by

Kathleen M. Cholewa

B.A., University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, 1984

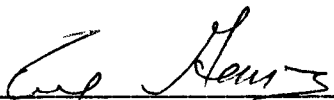
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1990

Approved by 
Chair, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

June 5, 1990
Date

UMI Number: EP34039

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent on the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP34039

Copyright 2012 by ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This edition of the work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

6-29 90

Table of Contents

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| Extraordinary Women..... | 1 |
| War..... | 24 |
| The God Machine..... | 30 |
| Porpoise..... | 57 |
| Casper and the Rabbit..... | 70 |

Extraordinary Women

Three goldfish, two white guppies, and one thin, yellow fish with black stripes: Kala chose them for the interaction of color, both with each other and with the decor of the room. Kala observed their placid existence from her futon where she sat indian-style, blonde curls framing brown eyes painted with creamy-colored shadows. Her friend, Che, sat on the sofa across from Kala, her legs crossed at the knees, a flat, pink shoe dangling from her toe.

"I took sleeping pills for three days," Che told Kala. Her red hair, jewel-like against a purple tank top, fell to her white shoulders. "Every time I woke up, I'd look over and see him watching me, not a hair on his head, except maybe one curling out from his nostril."

It was July 3rd and Che had arrived back in

Pittsburgh that morning after a year long photography assignment in California. She was describing her new husband, a man she met at the Vegas Diner in San Francisco a week before she married him. He was Malaysian, and because his seven year visa was nearly up and he wanted to stay in the country, Che married him as a favor.

Kala realized Che had gotten married a month back when she received a message at the university where she taught classical languages. Che had left her name, first and last, and attached by a hyphen to her last name was a thirteen letter, Sanskrit-looking word. Kala had raised an eyebrow at the message: Che did nothing by the book.

"So now I'm getting letters from nieces and nephews all over Malaysia," Che said, lifting her hair off her neck, holding it in a ponytail.

"So his family doesn't know the truth?"

"No way," she said. She rolled her eyes and touched her hand to her breast. "The in-laws are dying to meet me."

Over Che's shoulder a goldfish stalked innocuously back and forth from one end of the aquarium to the other, over and over past a bovine guppy, still, in a torpid float. Because Kala believed Che's actions as abstruse and instructive as koans, she watched and listened for omens: a relationship between the motion of the fish and life of Che, an unexpected sound, or a mysteriously

opening door.

"You're not getting any money out it?" Kala asked.

"No," Che answered. "Actually, I've loaned him \$200."

"Amazing."

"Not really," Che said. "He just happened to meet to coolest chick in the world."

The July heat buoyed the scent of jasmine emanating from Che, subtle as breath. Kala reached to the end table and switched on the fan; it's hum quieted to the shushing of blades chopping air. She turned back to Che whose face had drained of expression, a backstage Miss America. Kala thought she looked like a pampered, scarlet cat on a shiny, purple pillow.

"What about his bills?" Kala asked. "Could you end up responsible for them?"

"Nah," Che brushed the question off with a wave. "He should be more worried than I am."

Kala's face scrunched in concern, trying to detect all the possible glitches.

"How long do you plan on maintaining this...arrangement?"

Che looked down and ran her hand over the grainy weave of the sofa.

"Two years," she said, "he'll be legal, then."

Che reached to the coffee table for her cigarettes. She looked out from under her bangs at Kala.

"Kala," she said. "Don't worry. I wasn't worried when I did it, so I'm not going to start now that it's too late. Besides, he's a nice guy. Real smart. We had a quick courtship, a quick honeymoon, and now I don't have to see again until the divorce."

Of course Che hadn't sat down and made a list of pros and cons, Kala thought, because Che didn't act with reason, but with purpose. She served as a gauge for Kala: the more similar her own life was to Che's, the more extraordinary she herself was. And now, one year without Che nearby as a constant reminder and Kala had faltered. She wasn't sure of what was being measured, but she knew she didn't measure up.

"I knew it couldn't be on the level," Kala said, "but I'm still shocked."

"Oh, I was shocked, too," Che said. "I really couldn't believe I had done it. But I had, so I got used to it. Life's a free fall." She put her cigarettes into her purse.

The fan rotated its neck directing a perfume-sweetened waft of air at Kala. It reached around her neck delicately, lifting her hair off her ears.

"Yes, it is that," Kala answered, meaning Che's life.

"I have to go," Che said, putting on her shoes. "I'm eating with the kin tonight, but I'll call you tomorrow."

Kala walked her to the door, then ambled back into the

livingroom. She always felt exhilarated in Che's company, and then dropped, tinny and empty, when she left.

In the livingroom, she sat down on the futon and tucked her feet up beneath her. She bit on the nail of her middle finger and eyed the pillowy guppy, still unmoving. It would be fitting, she thought, if it were to open its mouth and belch.

Kala stood and walked to the tank. She sprinkled food from the shaker onto the surface of the water. Watching the pellets sink, she wondered: Does a woman have to take sleeping pills for three days to cope with being the coolest chick in the world? In contrast, she worried about the price of being ordinary.

Kala and Raymond drove to Garcia's for dinner. They had been together for over a year, since right before Che moved. After the first time Kala slept over at his apartment, she had called Che from a phone booth on her way home to tell her how astonishing it was to wake up at dawn and see such a black, black man beside her wrapped in such white, white sheets. When she told Raymond about Che's marriage, all he said was that she could get arrested for fraud.

"I used to drive at 125 mph., climb fences to get into concerts. You know, I skinny dipped once in park

fountain."

"I'd like to have seen that," he answered.

"I lived life to hilt, but somewhere I slowed down and hit bottom." Kala took picky nibbles from an already masticated fingernail. "I was moving so slow to begin with that I hadn't noticed I had stopped."

"Maybe you should elope with a Malaysian," Raymond said.

Kala ignored him.

"In a 90 second ceremony," she said, "Che is no less married than my grandparents were after 60 years."

"Legally." Raymond reached over and brushed her hand from her face.

"Whatever," she said. "Che has single-handedly placed thumb to nose and wiggled fingers at every bride and groom that ever walked the aisle. Know who the witnesses were?"

"Who?"

"The owner of the Vegas Diner and his wife. They were wearing Vegas Diner t-shirts."

"Kala, these sorts of marriages happen all the time," Raymond said. "It's nothing new."

"But for free?" Kala turned in her seat and leaned toward him, one hand on the middle of the seat, the other beseeching him. "For the sheer joy of pushing over a sacred cow? Don't you see that the word doesn't mean anything anymore. If I say so-and-so got married, who

knows what I mean?" She returned to her side of the car. Raymond opened his mouth to speak, but Kala got there first. "There's this word, marriage," she said, "but the word has nothing to attach itself to anymore. The word is a... the word is a loose cannon."

Raymond rolled his eyes at her affectionately.

"Baby, jack down." He reached over and rubbed her knee.

Though Kala had described Raymond to Che as being black, black, he was really more a resorbant brown, the color of an old penny. But either way, it didn't matter anymore as when she looked at him she no longer studied the texture and color of the skin or the whites of his eyes that were more truly the color of tainted cream. She had stopped looking at ruddy, flushed pink of his skin beneath his fingernails when his large, dark hand covered her tiny, pale one. At this point, he could be purple, and he'd still be just Raymond.

They arrived at Garcia's, an Italian restaurant with red and white checkered tablecloths and private, oil burning lamps on each table. A perfume of tomato sauce and garlic filled the room, inciting hunger.

Kala picked at her antipasto. She watched Raymond add a mound of grated cheese to his spaghetti. He put down the shaker and pushed his sliver framed glasses up his nose. After dinner, he was flying to Chicago for the holiday to visit family. She hadn't been invited to join

him.

Raymond talked computer marketing; Kala wasn't listening. She didn't understand most of it, and never had anything to add to it, so instead, she thought to herself, and tried to put a slant on Che's marriage that would cast a more favorable light on herself: Maybe Che had done it for kicks. Nothing more. But then what would Che do, she wondered, when the novelty wore off, when nobody any longer shook their heads and said, "You did what?" Would she have to murder him? Or maybe have his baby and drown it in the sink? What kind of message would she leave at the university to convey that?

Raymond stopped speaking. Kala nodded in false acknowledgment. She looked over his shoulder to a red-vested busboy clearing a table. To change the cloth he snapped open a fresh one, and as he pulled it over table's top, he drew the soiled one off, keeping the surface of the table concealed throughout. The technique reminded Kala of sleight of hand tricks and pulling of table cloths out from under settings for four without so much as rattling a spoon; and that, in turn, again reminded her of Che. Looking at life with Che was like watching a magician while sitting next to someone who kept explaining the tricks.

"Che," Kala said, reflectively.

Raymond continued eating.

"Her life is a piece of art. Acting on pure

instinct she reveals what's happening beneath life's surface. The trappings of marriage cover up its true nature. What Che has done is given herself to another for nothing in return. She has revealed the essence of marriage: A non-mutual human sacrifice."

Raymond removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Has she asked to be redeemed?" he asked. "Why are you trying to make something more of this than it is?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kala said.

"Trapping means a lot, Raymond. It takes guts to give social icons the finger. It's more than you're willing to do."

"Moi," he said. "How'd I end up dragged into this?"

"Moi, you bet. You've given your whole heritage the ol' heave ho for white, middle class culture."

Raymond put down his fork. He squinted his eyes and returned his glasses to his face.

"How come whenever your self-esteem suffers, I end up in the dog house."

"Don't try to turn it around, Mr. Republican, Mr. Dijon- Mustard-On-Everything."

"Dijon mustard?" he rubbed his chin. "Would barbecue sauce imply cultural loyalty?"

"No," Kala answered. "I didn't mean that."

She ran her hand through her short, blonde mop. She fiddled with her silver earring.

"Just tell me why you haven't dated a black woman since high school."

Raymond tossed his fork to the middle of his plate.

"Not this again," he said. "What the hell is with you?"

"I just want to know."

"There is no reason," he said, his voice suggesting finality.

Kala lifted her fork. She turned it over in her hand, catching the reflection of the oil lamp's flame.

"I'm bored," she said, not looking up. "Things aren't good enough."

"You want to marry an illegal alien, go ahead," Raymond said. "If you think that'll make you happy, do it."

Kala lifted her napkin from her lap and threw it onto the table.

"That not it and you know it."

"Listening to you tonight, you'd think I didn't know anything." He shook his head, then stopped. "Is this worth fighting about?" he asked. He smiled conciliatorily.

Kala wondered which "this" he meant. She shrugged in response.

They talked of other things, but the Che in Kala watched her, judged every word she said, the thoughts that crossed her mind; her image loomed, huge with

exaggerated gait, like a parade balloon.

She tuned out Raymond again. She was done with him. Across from her, she imagined him turning to sand, disintegrating into a little pile on the seat of the chair.

Once he turned to sand, he was gone. He could sleep in her bed and zip her dress, but ejected from her matrix, he was indiscernable from a wall, a floor, or door. There was a frightening lightness to the recognition, an un-anchoredness as tactile evidence of the "who" in who she was dissolved.

Raymond and Kala were late getting to the airport. They had raced to the gate to get him boarded, a trek complicated for Kala by her straight skirt and heels. After kissing him good-bye, she stopped at the airport cafe and ordered a slice of cold strawberry pie from a teen-age waitress. She slipped off her shoes and looked at the other patrons. One table was occupied by three men dressed in suits; they slouched, arms slung on their chair backs. One of them caught her eye and winked. She looked away.

The waitress delivered the pie and Kala ate it, disappointed with the hard, blandness of the hot house strawberries. She wondered if Raymond were planning the demise of their relationship up in the sky as surely as

she were planning it here. It would take some time, yet, she knew. This relationship wouldn't have a slam blast ending: Instant death, carnage. It would be a more natural, the parts beginning to break down or rot, repair considered, then the idea scrapped opting for complete replacement.

She looked past her reflection in the glass wall of the cafe to the stream of people passing on the other side. It exhausted her to think that each of them had a life as consuming and complete as her own. Some of them, she hoped, were filler.

She cocked her head. That's terrible, she thought, but continued to think it anyway - that some people might be filler, sorts of soul-less automatons, provided for the real folk, to play life with, or among. She decided on a theory to determine one from the other: Automatons, Kala thought, exist only when acknowledged.

Dragging a piece of luggage on wheel, a women hobbled past in high strappy sandals, her waist bound by a thick white belt. Kala thought she resembled a large, prehistoric bird natural selection had failed to root out. Perhaps the suitcase was her egg. Two stewardesses passed, dragging their smaller, less elegant eggs. More women, Kala thought, who looked like large, flightless birds. She thought that when they opened their mouths, not words should come out, but long, awkward squawks. She imagined them as a flock, with their ill-adapted feet and

exaggerated markings. Awkward stepping, butt up, chest out. Squawk, squawk.

Kala retracted her vision until she saw only her own ghostly reflection in the glass. She glanced quickly toward the table of men to be sure that they weren't watching her watch her own reflection, and then returned to her own eye.

She pushed her empty plate away and watched a woman who had finished eating pull a lipstick from her purse and apply it using a tiny round mirror for guidance, a gesture as unambiguously feminine as standing to pee was masculine.

Kala opened her purse and put four dollars on the table. She stood to leave but then froze, her attention caught by a woman outside the glass wall. The woman looked to be in her 60s or 70s, a fact undisguised by hair lacquered stiff and black, and a face that could be removed with a sponge. Her arms were bent at the elbows, her fingers touching the cheeks of an elderly man - her husband, probably. His bald head was shaped like the woman, herself - bulb-like on the top, curving inward at the temple, then bellling out again, wider than his forehead at the jowls. The man was sweating. A young child - grandchild? - stood beside the woman, one hand grasping the woman's skirt, the other hand curling around her own ear. Kala sat back down in the chair that had remained across from her empty as she ate. She rested

her arm on the back of the chair, looking over it through the glass.

The woman place a hand on the man's back and tried to guide him toward a bench. He held up a hand in declination. He didn't want to move. A young man carrying a briefcase joined the couple momentarily then took off at a run down the terminal. The woman looked around anxiously with eyes painted and lacquered to match her hair.

Kala bit down on the back of her mouth to suppress a flex of the lips that seemed disconnected to anything happening inside of her. She watched the woman's face, eyes darting back and forth in the back of an inky tunnel, a dumb painted beak opening and closing. Would she have a mouth at all if she hadn't painted one on?

The man collapsed, taking the woman to the ground with him. She rolled him onto his back and sat over him like an exotic hen. Paramedics appeared, one dropping to the floor beside the man, two others collapsing a gurney. A loose crowd formed and through the gaps in the people, Kala could only see the contorted face of the woman and the child's hand fisted tiny on the woman's shoulder. A suntanned couple stepped into Kala's view. She stopped seeing the woman; and instead she felt inside of her, trapped panic like sweat in polyester, lost somewhere between the backs of the eyes and the surface of the skin. A gaper lost interest, perhaps had a flight to

catch. He moved and the woman's face reappeared, cheek
creaks running black, the banks flooding. Kala tried to
send a telepathic message to the woman: Don't melt, she
instructed, molt.

A sheet was drawn over the man's face and he was
rolled away. The woman and child followed, doing their
best to keep up. Her one hand clutched the child's and
the other stretched out toward the gurney making the
woman look as if she were futilely chasing a purse
snatcher. Kala stood quickly and left the restaurant.
She click-clacked on the linoleum, chasing after them.
The woman elicited in her a thrill and a sense of a
dread, a longing and antipathy equitable to envy. Just
like Che made her feel.

The woman and child turned a corner. Kala clenched
her teeth and slowed her pace. She would have to finish
it in her head, and she would, for she wanted to witness
the whole she-bang unravel.

Kala drove home, the woman still with her. In her
mind, she turned the woman into a wax figure and placed
her in a museum, yet still, she continued to live,
dipping Noxema onto cotton balls and mopping off her
face, the 'who' in who she was irretrievably receding.

Kala reached toward the gas pedal and slipped off
her shoe. She placed it on the seat beside her and then

removed the other. She rolled down the window, and turning a corner, tossed out one, then the other.

When she arrived back home, she stood outside her car watching early fireworks in the distance. The heady scent of lilacs made sultry an otherwise muggy night. In an intimate gesture, a warm breeze lifted her hair from her ears as she watched a pink explosion in the sky. From the center of the pink burst pedals of blue, and from the center of that, silver, opening out like a sequin rose. The flash and twinkling faded as it fell, like electric confetti, or a wilting star. Kala's eyes followed the shower of light as it descended, vanishing before hitting the ground.

At the bottom of the driveway, Che perched like a cardinal on the hood of her car, waiting for Kala to notice her. Kala walked gingerly down the drive, the gravel sharp beneath her feet.

"Where's your shoes?" Che asked.

Kala looked down. Her toes appeared webbed inside her pantyhose.

"I threw them out the car window."

"At who?"

Kala checked Che's feet. She wore silver sandals. She joined Che on the car's hood; the aluminum was cool on her thighs and hands. Che had been waiting.

"They weren't comfortable," Kala said.

Another rocket shot into the sky; it popped without

color. Kala didn't want to talk to Che and so wondered if she could do with Che what she had done with Raymond, simply withdraw her attention, and watch her slowly fade away. Kala imagined Che reduced to transparency...

"I have weird news," Che said.

Kala looked to her. She re-materialized, her eyes focused on the horizon.

"During dinner tonight," Che said, "I got a call. I'm a widow." She turned her head to face Kala, smiling, though Kala wouldn't call it a smile. It was a miscellaneous expression, for those occasions where an appropriate one has not yet been invented.

Kala started to swing her legs back and forth.

"What happened?"

"Auto wreck. One of his buddies was with him. This buddy lived, and he helped the cops locate me. The cops told me how I can contact Kumaar's family in Malaysia, but I don't want to do it."

"Can't his friend do it?"

"First off, he's in the hospital with troubles of his own. Second, he doesn't know the marriage is a fraud."

Tiny splinters of warm rain hit Kala's cheeks.

"Rain," she said, opening a hand to the sky. A drop spattered in her palm reminding her of the Airport Widow. Had she melted completely, evaporated, and was now returning to earth?

"Will you call them and pretend you're me?" Che asked. "They won't know the difference."

Kala breathed in deeply and let it out quickly. She wanted to spend time in her head with the Airport Widow, and the widow, Che, threatened the direction of the fantasy. Kala, for the first time, she saw Che as a bloody pain in the neck, a domineering Eve on the back of Adam: "Adam that ain't no squirrel, that's a camel. This isn't marriage. This isn't death. Here's what it is. Let me name it."

Kala pulled her knee to her chest, resting her foot on the hood of the car. Reaching toward her foot, she ran her fingernails up and down her calf until her pantyhose hose were in tatters. She performed the same operation on her other leg and in a minute, her pantyhose hung about her legs like a loose layer of skin.

Che watched the process, silently. A bottle rocket hissed and popped.

Kala couldn't think of any reason not to do it, except to deny Che - and for a moment that reason seemed valid, indeed. She was also curious as to what would happen should she say no. Would Che find someone else to do it? Would she blow it off completely? She knew that Che, herself, would not call. She couldn't; it was impossible. She would have to abdicate the responsibility of being Che to do so. That's why she had come to Kala.

"What's his name, again?" Kala said.

"Kumaar," Che answered, hopping off the car.

"Let's do it."

"Give me your shoes," Kala said. "It will help me get into character."

Che smiled. She leaned on the car to remove her shoes. Warm rain spattered haphazardly, forming drops on her hair, making it sparkle.

They went inside and Kala dialed the overseas number written on a white square of paper Che gave her. She was not Kala and she was not Che as she leaned against the wall, facing Che, who leaned against the arm of the sofa. Kala held the receiver to her right ear and dangled the base of the phone from the fingers of her left hand. Static crackled on the line.

A woman answered.

"I'm calling about Kumaar," Kala said.

The woman jabbered something back. The only word Kala recognized was "Kumaar".

"Kumaar has been in an accident," Kala said.

More jabbering, though not into the receiver. She shrugged to Che. A male voice came on the line, coughing an abrupt "Hello."

"Kumaar is dead," Kala said, slowly and clearly.

"He was in a car accident. Car wreck."

She listened to the man report to Kumaar's family. She heard voices cry out in the background. She thought

she ought to hold out the phone for Che to hear, but she didn't.

"Who this?" the male voice stuttered.

Kala was silent for a moment.

"Che," she said. "Kumaar's wife."

Che winced.

"Reach you?" the voice said.

"My phone number?" Kala said.

"Yes."

Kala didn't know Che's family phone number by heart. She put her hand over the receiver.

"Your number," she said.

Che nodded her head. No.

Kala looked at her, exasperated. She gave the voice her own area code and exchange. She made up the last four digits. She hung up.

"Che," she said. "How could you do that?"

"Kala, it's not right that I be involved. I didn't love him."

"I didn't either."

"Well, you're not involved anymore."

The woman regarded each other blankly.

"Do you want to go out?" Che said. "Relax a bit?"

"No," Kala said. "I just want to go to bed."

Kala walked Che to the car, and stood in the rain, falling steadily now. She watched Che's rear lights shrink before vanishing around the corner. Now Che was gone to Kala, and, Kala thought, she was probably gone to Che. Kala remembered hearing about a stage in a baby's development where you hold a rattle in front of her face and she gurgles and delights; but then when you hide it behind a book, as far as the baby's concerned, the rattle has vanished. Not simply concealed, but gone.

She looked down at the silver sandals she still wore. They glistened with drops of rain, and they fit. Che told her to keep them because she thought in the ripped up stockings, Kala's feet looked like they might unravel if she were to remove them.

Kala's hair curled and grew heavy with the weight of the rain. She wondered if the sandals would come off, or if they were stuck on her feet permanently, a fairy tale-like consequence for lying. The sandals slid off easily, though, and she wished she could throw them up in the air and see them explode into silver rain like a firework. But instead, when she dropped them, they clacked to the ground. Kala reached down and took a hold of the ripped-up hose and busted her feet through the bottoms. She continued removing them in such a manner, from the bottom, up.

She left the sandals and hose at the bottom of the driveway and went back inside her apartment. She picked

up the white square with Kumaar's name and number on it off of the phone stand. As a fraudulent husband, she had failed to picture him, but as a corpse, his image formed distinctly: Dark skin gone ashen in death, the body unfamiliar to family without the glasses he had worn since grade school.

Kala shook her head and placed the paper into a drawer. Mentally, she took roll: Che's gone, she thought. Raymond's gone. The Airport Widow is here. Kumaar's here. The Airport Stiff is gone...

Trying to analyze why who remained did, and what it all meant, she headed for her bedroom, but stopped noticing a slip of orange floating atop the aquarium like an umbrella for the guppy to keep it from the air. Kala fished out the floater with a plastic net; it laid flat and still as a packaged sardine.

That's three, Kala thought, as she flush it down the toilet. If fish count, that's three and it must be over.

She went into her bedroom and unzipped her narrow skirt. She pushed it to the floor, stepped out of it, and then tossed it toward the trash can where it caught the rim and hung half in and half out. She picked up a t-shirt lying on the floor and toweled her face, leaving her make-up blotched up inside of it.

She removed the rest of her clothes and looked at herself in the full length mirror: A wet macaroni head, small breasts and straight hips.

She stepped back to take in a full view.

"Three down," she said, "and none of them were you."

She burst out laughing and imagined her image sprouting hair on her legs and under her arms. She watched it grow, twist, and unfurl, perfect and ungodly as a cat with a bird clamped firm in its chops. But both smile and image withered as she sensed a drifting snatch of recognition like an unfocused slice of dream. She closed her eyes in the attempt to hold it still and see what it was. It came forward without form.

She was not the cat, and she wasn't a widow. She was not Che, nor Raymond's woman. Kala was not.

Frightened, she opened her eyes. The woman in the mirror was naked, smooth and seemingly hairless as a dolphin striking a pose in mid-air, before vanishing again beneath the surface.

War

In early December, I gave my live-in an ultimatum: we commit, or split up. But the truth is, I was bluffing. No matter what he said, we were breaking up. I just didn't want to be the one to do it.

He answered me, "Let me think about it," his response to most things. What happens when he says this is I wait, and wait, and finally ask about it and get told he hasn't had a chance to think about it yet. In the past, this had made me feel ignored, but I see now that this was his way of deflecting responsibility: See what happens rather than choose it. Maybe we both hoped we could split up by default, by accident somehow, in case it became the biggest mistake of our lives.

So I feigned patience and waited, went about business as usual - until the day he broke my bistro. He had given it to me as a gift before he moved in. The two

of us had bonded over coffee. We met in a coffee shop, and that first day we spoke to each other, we spent six hours there, consuming nearly eight pots of coffee. After he moved in, we would make romantic late night coffee runs when realizing at 10 p.m. we were low on beans and knowing that in the morning we would want to hear the comforting and promising sound of the grinder.

Yet, coffee was a point of contention, too, as there seemed to me a discrepancy between who drank more coffee and who bought more coffee. Near the end, a thing so simple as finding us to be out of cream, and knowing I wasn't the one to finish it, would stir up in me a resentment so complex and deep that it could only be expressed through a violent washing of dishes, an emotional display I believed he was blind to, my childish attempt to hear the words "What's wrong?"

He bought a new bistro to replace the broken one that same day, a quality cup of coffee being so central to our lives. But this new bistro, I recognized, was his, not mine, a subtlety I'm not sure how I identified, but identified accurately.

I looked at this new bistro - his new bistro - and the material ramifications of our impending split dawned on me. I took stock: The livingroom lamps were his, the art on the walls was his. Before he moved in, I had used a paring knife to do everything from cut threads to carve turkeys. His cutlery had spoiled me; I would need proper

kitchen knives. The shower curtain was mine and drapes were mine, but still I shopped for new ones, for in my mind, the house was transforming. It would not simply lapse back into mine, for the me in mine was not the same person, and somewhere between a caffeine addition and slamming pots and pans, my interaction with him had changed me.

He never got back to me on the ultimatum, and I didn't beg for his decision, but prepared for the inevitable. I shopped in the Home Improvements department at K Mart and kept my purchases in the garage. For Christmas, I gave him an espresso machine, figuring it would serve as leverage when I argued my rights to the bistro.

Three days after Christmas, while watching t.v., I told him that since we weren't moving forward, he should move out. He said he'd start looking for a place tomorrow.

We didn't even turn off the television.

But when a week passed and he hadn't done so much as open the paper, I started asking, "Find a place, yet?"

I wanted him out.

My metamorphosis from a coupled to single person had started months ago, before I was consciously aware of it, and now, the words spoken, I expected the situation to immediately manifest, believed the words contained the catalytic quality of "abracadabra", and that our wills

should issue forth, releasing tensions, resentments, and the household goods building up in the garage. The words spoken, something pressed from the outside, and space had to be made or the dam would burst and the rush would come without any hope for civility or control.

Pressure built, and I inquired regularly as to the progress of his exit. Finally, he turned to me one evening and told me that according to law, he had a month to move out and that I was to lay off.

I told him he was wrong; he was to get out as soon as possible. He argued legalities; I argued their irrelevance. We screamed at each other about the philosophical nature of "fair", and we crammed emotions so diverse hate, love, and hurt into a single squabble over moral propriety. He condemned my sense of justice, and quite possibly, he was correct. I wanted to behave rightly. I wanted to be fair. But damn, more than anything else, for once, I wanted to get my way.

We battled, and no one surrendered. But I knew all I had to do was not care what he wanted, and he wouldn't stay.

He was out by the week-end.

The day he left, I came across a story called War by Luigi Pirendello. It is set in Italy during WWI and begins with a fat woman loading herself onto a train. She is mourning because her son in the army has been sent to the front. The passengers begin to discuss their own

sons' involvement in the war. They argue among themselves: What is worse? to have one or two sons in the war? One man claims he does not mourn his son who has been killed. Analytical and verbose, this man philosophizes about patriotism and youth, argues that it may be better to die young, before having to experience life's disappointments. The other passengers congratulated this father who spoke stoically of his son's death.

I understood this conversation in the train, the effort put into explanations and justifications, the need to tell the story like it was all for the best, and that the one who tells the story most dispassionately, is the one who understands best. I recognized the need for strategy when relating to an entity for which strong feeling are present, be it a person, or death. Such manners of relating objectify the subject, provide the safety of self-absorption through reflection and interpretation.

The fat woman in the story felt ashamed of her inability to be as brave as this man. She listened to him explain that his son died a hero, happy and without regrets. Then, the woman turned and asked the man: "Then...is your son really dead?"

The man begins to weep, and the story ends.

I looked around at the blank spaces on the walls, at the liberal closet space, and the bistro I claimed on the

kitchen counter. I wonder: Then... is he really gone?

The God Machine

A spotless aisle of linoleum passed between the smugless kitchen appliances, passed beneath the thick, glossy heels of Ramona's slippers, and led to the bulb at the end of the room which contained the glass top table covered with a yellow crotcheted cloth. Ramona's daughter, Daphney, sat at the table looking through where the circle walls were interrupted by bay windows looking out over neatly mowed grass. Her brown hair hung straight to her waist, covering the lacy back of her wedding dress. She had been to the bridal shop for four fittings, yet the dress puffed and gathered inelegantly on her still coltish physique; alterations to hems and seams unable to change the impression of a fraud.

"Dad's not walking me down the aisle," Daphney said to Ramona who stood at the sink, apron tied around her thick waist, her backside jiggling, reverberating from a

determined hand-washing.

"This is what you tell me," Ramona said, her European accent still intact. "Maybe you should tell Tatus seeing how the wedding's in two days and he's the one walking you."

In synchrony with her upper lip, Daphney's shoulder rose and dropped. She was the middle daughter of Henry and Ramona Zielinski, Polish immigrants who, as thousands like them, spilled into Chicago after WWII. Henry had worked in construction, at first, buying Southside apartment buildings, fixing them up, and selling them at a profit. After the girls were born, he studied real estate and moved his family to the northern suburbs.

Daphney rose from the table, gathering the smooth, slippery train of her dress, throwing it over her forearm like a maitre d' with a towel. Rustling she stepped, clean sock on polished floor, to the sink and snatched a bit of the raw hamburger her mother spiced and kneaded for cannibal sandwiches.

"Watch the dress," Ramona said.

"You know why no one's walking Donnie down the aisle?" Daphney said.

Ramona wiped a blonde hair from her eye with the back of her hand.

"Because he's wearing a rented tux and you're wearing a \$1300 dress."

"No," Daphney said. "Because he's seen as

autonomous, and I'm seen as property."

Ramona patted the meat into ball.

"Did you ever think of it as being because your father is throwing this wedding for you, and it's a way of presenting you with the gift," she said.

"Then why do they call it giving away the bride?"

"Why do you have to turn it to something ugly?"

Ramona said, putting the meat to the side and washing the grease from her hands. She turned to face Daphney who leaned against the refrigerator.

"I'm not turning it into anything," Daphney said.

"And the last thing I'd try to turn this into is a party thrown in my honor. This is just another bash for the Chicago Pollacks to get together and get drunk at, and act like everything is okay now because the young people are happy." She picked at a bead on her sleeve. "I'm sorry," she said, "but your clan isn't going to use my wedding to stand around with wistful smiles, acting like your lives sucked but everything's wonderful for me."

Ramona turned away from Daphney. Guilty and satisfied, Daphney folded her arms across her chest. Ramona reached over the sink into the cupboard and pulled out the aluminum foil. The foil crackled around the hamburger.

Ramona's family escaped from Poland before the Nazis invaded, but still, she was part of the war ravaged clan, complete with general somberness and invisible

scars, and so, perhaps due to tribal instincts, was offended by Daphney's remarks. Daphney knew the chronology of her mother's escape, the midnight trek through Austria, the sleet in Italy, and the relieved arrival in England; and she also knew that her father and his family hadn't been as lucky. Her father's parents escaped before the village was invaded, but they left Henry and his sister with grandparents. Because it was rumored that the Nazis only wanted those who could work, Henry's parents hoped that the young, their children, and the old, their parents, would be safe. So they disappeared in the middle of the night. To keep the children from asking questions, they were told their parents were dead. But the death was never discussed. Henry was four.

Two years later the Gestapo returned his parents to the village which was now a prison farm; their resurrection was no more explained than their death.

But all the refugees had done pretty good for themselves in America and rarely talked about the war. Yet Daphney sensed that although they acted like they had left the hard times behind, in fact, they carried them always, strapped to their backs. It wasn't that they didn't express joy; they did. But it always possessed a peculiar shade, a joy "despite", observed but not felt. Daphney felt that they had designated her generation to feel joy and gratitude, and she resented it.

"I'm not going to make everything okay for you by pretending everything's okay for me," Daphney said.

"You act like anything's okay? I wouldn't dream of it," Ramona said. She picked up the covered meat and stepped toward the refrigerator. Daphney moved. Ramona put the package in the refrigerator for her husband to eat later. He would spread it on cocktail rye while watching television.

There were two exits from the kitchen, one right before the bulb which led into the t.v. room; the other led to the hall that went to the livingroom and up the stairs. Ramona left through the first, but paused in the doorway. She turned and pointed a finger.

"Take off the dress before you ruin it," she said.

Daphney dropped the train to her dress and let it drag across the floor as she returned to the table to sit down. Her cat, Tipsey-Doodle, leaped into her lap and closed her eyes beneath the caress of Daphney's hand. For a minute, Daphney thought nothing, her breathing in rhythm with the cat's purr.

Ramona returned to the kitchen.

"Black hair and claws. Nice."

"I'm taking Tipsey, you know," Daphney said.

"And your sister's going to murder you in your sleep."

"Whatever," Daphney said, standing, carrying the cat with her.

She left the kitchen and stood in the doorway of the t.v. room where Becky, who was twelve, slack jowled and heavy, sat in the center of a mess of colored paper, scissors, and tape. Daphney both felt and heard her mother climbing the stairs, hand on the railing, slippers slapping against her heels with a flap. Daphney thought of the cavity where her mother's uterus had been up until a year ago. She wondered where the uterus went, and where went her own tonsils, and MaryJeanne's appendix? Daphney read recently that spleen was now considered equally disposable. It disturbed her to think that the universe came with extra, expendable parts.

An old black and white movie played on the t.v. screen. The picture flashed and in place of the movie was a game show, a pretty woman pointing at furniture. Daphney looked to Becky who looked back, her standard sullen expression in place, her hand on the t.v. remote control.

Daphney raised Tipsey-Doodle to her face and kissed the cat on the head.

"I'm taking Tipsey, you know," Daphney said.

"No you're not," Becky snarled.

"Yes, I am. I just wanted you to know so you wouldn't be surprised."

"Mamus," Becky hollered.

"What?" Ramona yelled back.

"Daphney."

"I've taken the most care of her," Daphney said. "I think she'll be more secure if I take her."

"Mamus," Becky yelled, again.

"If you want me, come upstairs," her mother said.

Becky stood up out of her mess, larger and heavier than Daphney, still in possession of all her parts.

"I hate you," she said to Daphney, brushing past her.

Daphney put down the cat and entered the room, her dress's train dragging pieces of Becky's project. She bent over and picked the Scotch tape up out of the mess and carried it to the Laz-E-Boy, "Dad's chair". She sat down on the arm and pulled a long strip of tape from the roll. She held one end in each hand and touched the sticky side to her dress, lifting the dark, thin hairs that looked like fallen lashes.

She did believe the cat would be most secure with her. Daphney had taken on the responsibility of the cat's care from the start, twelve years ago, when she was seven and her father appeared in room's doorway, filling it with his six feet of height, carrying the kitten in the palm of his hand so its head stuck out between his forefinger and thumb.

Ramona had been sitting on the sofa nursing Becky. On the floor, Daphney played Yahtzee with MaryJeanne who was by one year the oldest. Hair still covered Henry's head then, whereas now it parted widely down the center,

frequently striking Daphney as a path or road running over the top of his head. He was smiling that night, so his handsome crow's feet deepened, whereas they filled-in forming outward reaching scars when he did not. His excitement filled and altered the energy of the room, as on other nights did his disappointment, anxiety, or anger. Even back then, when her father arrived home, Daphney always sensed that a voice had sounded in her sisters' and mother's head that said "Act natural."

It had rained that day and Henry carried the kitten bundled in a towel. When the girls realized what he held, both jumped to their feet. MaryJeanne ran to her father; Daphney, carefully, lowered herself back onto the floor.

"My tire went flat on the Dan Ryan this morning," Henry told his family, holding the kitten to his chest, stroking her head. "She watched me change the tire. I laughed looking at her. She was soaked."

"That kitten was on the shoulder of the Dan Ryan?" Ramona said.

"Yeah," Henry answered, sitting beside Ramona. "She was hitch-hiking," he told MaryJeanne.

MaryJeanne stood at her father's knee, reaching in with one finger to touch the the kitten's head. Daphney sat very still, trying to express interest, without revealing delight. Daphney had brought home a kitten from a friend's house two years before, when she was

five. She had named it Topsy-Doodle because of the way she sprung at bugs and rolled when she missed. Her parents made her take it back.

"Did you take her to work?" Daphney asked.

"I filled a drawer with paper towels," Henry said. "She slept there most of the day."

"You saved her," MaryJeanne said to her father. "Are we going to keep her?"

Henry looked to Ramona, nodding his head 'yes' with quick little nods, like a child.

"What will we name her?" MaryJeanne said.

"Waterbug," Henry said, placing the kitten on the floor. She backed up against the chair, looking tiny and afraid. Henry laughed.

The next day while Henry was at work, Daphney proceeded to call the cat Tipsey-Doodle. Since it was more fun to say than 'Waterbug', MaryJeanne called her that, too. Because Henry was home the least, the cat learned to respond to Tipsey-Doodle, and now Henry called her 'the freeloader' and said that she didn't like him.

"Daph," Ramona said.

Daphney crumbled the piece of tape and put it on the stand beside the Laz-E-Boy. She turned around and faced Becky and her mother. Becky stood a foot behind Ramona, her arms crossed, her face puffed and red.

"No talk about the cat until after the wedding," Ramona said. "Got it?"

"I just..." Daphney started.

"Don't start," Ramona said, "And take off that dress."

Ramona crossed the room and bent without grace to pick up the t.v. remote control. She deposited it on the stand beside the Laz-E-Boy where it was always to be returned so to be in easy access to Henry.

MaryJeanne called the t.v. remote control the God Machine because who ever held it decided what everyone else saw.

Daphney went upstairs and closed her bedroom door behind her. She crossed the blank, empty half of the room that used to belong to MaryJeanne. Last year when MaryJeanne announced that she was going to get married, Henry said that she just needed more space and privacy and so gave her Ramona's sewing room. It worked; MaryJeanne stayed. But Daphney didn't assume that because MaryJeanne moved to another room, the abandoned half necessarily belonged to her.

Daphney sat at the bottom of her twin bed, the mirror directly across from her. But she looked not at herself, but toward her father's old, big, bird cage. It sat squarely on the floor, three feet by three feet; she had removed the lid before filling the cage with a

confusion of green, leafy, plants, vines climbing toward the French windows which opened up like double doors to the east. When Daphney watered and fed them, she often thought of their tangled roots coiling in the ruddy, clay pots.

Daphney reached behind her, back to the bed's pillow where she had tossed her jean jacket earlier. She put it on over her gown and faced the mirror. The jacket was too big all over, the sleeves rolled up and the shoulders wide.

"Daphney?" MaryJeanne said from outside the bedroom door.

"Come in."

MaryJeanne entered the room carrying a package. She still wore her black leather coat, the belt undone, hanging at her sides. She smiled, and her large eyes and lips overtook the rest of her face.

"I got a dress for the rehearsal dinner," she said, opening the package and unfolding tissue that veiled dark, blue fabric.

The dress unfold as she raised it and held it against her body. It was made of blue velvet, the skirt straight, the top long-sleeved and scoop necked.

"It's beautiful," Daphney said, rubbing the fabric between her finger and thumb.

"Thanks," MaryJeanne said. "Decided to wear that jacket down the aisle?"

"Like it?" Daphney answered.

Still sitting on the end of bed, Daphney turned to the mirror. In the glass, MaryJeanne's brows drew together, an expression that emphasized her resemblance to her mother's side of the family. She sat behind Daphney and talked to her reflection.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" MaryJeanne asked.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," Daphney said.

They laughed. MaryJeanne was the only one who knew that Daphney had wanted to get rid of Donnie and figured the easiest way would be to give him an ultimatum: Marry me or get lost. She never thought he'd propose. For the past nine months Daphney had been intending to stop the wedding, or waiting for something to stop it.

Daphney raised the jean jacket's collar a la' James Dean. The jacket used to belong to Donnie.

"Maybe I should wear this down the aisle," Daphney said. "It could be symbolic in a way. Remember the day this coat became mine? the day Dad caught me and Donnie up here in the bedroom."

"What a nightmare," MaryJeanne said.

Boys weren't allowed upstairs in Zielinski house, even when Ramona and Henry were home. But MaryJeanne's stereo was in the room at that time, three years ago, and Donnie had brought over some music that Daphney hadn't

heard. They had walked home from school in the rain, the albums wrapped in plastic. Neither Ramona nor Henry were home, and neither MaryJeanne nor Becky would tell.

Donnie waited downstairs while Daphney changed into warm cotton sweats and dry socks. Then he came upstairs and sat across from her while the music played. Leaning against the headboard, Daphney closed her eyes and stretched her legs out in front of her. She wasn't thinking about Donnie, across from her, but about how when she was small, after her bath, she would do a little dance, shivering on the mat outside the tub waiting for a warm, cotton towel to be wrapped around her shoulders.

She had been surprised by Donnie lips, chapped, but not unpleasant, suddenly touching her own. She was more surprised the next moment by sound of Henry's voice.

"Get out."

Donnie leaped up, jumping and turning at the same time. Henry stepped out of the doorway and Donnie hit the stairs running, leaving his jacket hanging damp on Daphney's desk chair. Becky was standing at the bottom of the steps and Donnie asked her, "Does he mean forever?" She told him, "Uh-huh."

Daphney scrambled off the bed and followed her father into his and Ramona's bedroom. The music continued to play, behind her.

Henry hung his suit jacket in his closet.

"Dad," Daphney started, but didn't know what to

say.

"What do you think this is?" he said, not looking at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We were just listening to music."

"He was on top of you."

"No, he wasn't," Daphney answered, indignantly.

"I can see," he said. "He was on top of you."

"Why are you making something ugly out of it?"

Daphney said.

Henry didn't respond. In his mind, there were no explanations, no blanks he couldn't fill in himself. His perceptions were truth. He never spoke in 'I thinks' or 'as I see its'. He would call them as he saw them, and when there was no possible way they could have been what he saw, MaryJeanne would say 'okay, God' and roll her eyes. Becky called him God sometimes, too, but Daphney didn't. Not ever.

Daphney watched the back of his head as he crossed the room, and then his profile as he stood at his dresser removing his tie and ring. His nose was not large, but his nostrils flared slightly, and when mad, the capillaries stood out like lines on a map.

Henry pulled a pair of shorts and a polo shirt out of a drawer and dropped them into a sports bag on the bed. He zipped it, and headed out of the room.

"Dad," she said, but he kept on going. "Wait. Talk

to me." She followed him down the stairs and through the house to the door that led to the garage.

"Don't go," she said, but the door between the house and garage echoed when it slammed. It's the Nazis, Daphney thought as she moved through the house to the front door to catch him as he pulled out of the garage. He had to hide that he hated them and he's afraid that if he even acknowledges how he hates me, all the rage will come rushing up and he'll kill me.

Daphney ran out the front door, just as his car hit the bottom of the driveway. She chased it down the street, its tires peeling wetly on the asphalt; damp grit clung to the bottom of her socks. The car didn't stop.

"Dad," she screamed long and loud, standing in the middle of the street, watching the car turn the corner. She stared at the empty intersection, like it was her house, and it had just burnt to the ground.

The space surrounding her as she stood in the street's center was cool and silent. Slowly, she lowered herself to a squat and buried her face in her hands. Space congealed around her, the ether, thickening, her father's judgment seeming to issue instructions to molecules that pressed on Daphney from without, forming a layer, or shell, she must penetrate to see and be seen.

She sat very still, and tried to steady herself from the inside-out. A single, but large, raindrop splashed on the crown of her head. She rose and walked back to

the house.

The incident was never further discussed, and as far as Daphney knew, Ramona never found out. Her father's reaction had been the same when she was caught shoplifting earrings at JC Penny's when in seventh grade. He answered the phone when the security gaurd called, and he was the one to pick her up. Now when anything in the house was missing, even misplaced for a short period of time, Daphney sweated out the item's recovery, feeling so sure she was suspect that she would begin to wonder if she had done it. She would sit in her room and wait, fantasizing Henry entering her room, and somehow finding the missing item there. He would turn and glare at her and then...something. Anything. If he hated her, she wanted to know and be done with trying to change it. It was not knowing for sure, stupid hope, that kept her trying to make him see her.

MaryJeanne folded the blue velvet dress and held it in her lap.

"What are you going to do Saturday?" she asked.

"Get married, I guess," Daphney answered, half-laughing.

After dinner, Daphney laid on the carpeting in the t.v. room, the cat curled up beside her. Her father sat in his chair, the footrest up, his socked foot tapping to

a slow, silent beat. Daphney felt tendons of energy stretched taut between herself and her father. She thought he felt them too. She hoped he did. Becky sat on the floor busy with her project, alert and expectant.

Daphney rolled onto her back and lifted Tipsey-Doodle, holding her in air. She lowered the cat to her face and kissed it on the nose. She shot her eyes toward her father, then pulled them back. He was watching the television.

Daphney placed the cat on her chest. Her father had that daydream look about him, watching t.v., but thinking of something else. She wondered if he secretly thought back to his childhood, as she did for him. She would imagine the Nazi invasion of her father's village, five soldiers marching to where he played with a black Lab puppy in front of a farm house. In Polish, he would be murmuring to the puppy, and when the Nazi soldiers reached him, they would take the dog, teasing the little Polish kid by tossing the puppy around between them. Running soldier to soldier, her father would chase the puppy as it was tossed through the air. He'd cry and beg for them to give it back. Then, one of the soldiers would catch the puppy and say to Henry, "Want your puppy back?" Daphney imagined her father's face, tears running down blushed cheeks, nodding his head yes, please, please. And then the soldier snaps the puppy's neck.

"Sugar, sugar," Daphney sang to the cat lifting her

in the air again. She pulled her knees to her chest and rested the cat on her shins. Tipsey curled there comfortably as a sphinx. Daphney stroked her from her head to haunches. She shot another look toward her father. He stared straight ahead, foot rising and falling in the rhythm of breath.

Daphney picked up the cat and rolled up into the sitting position. Becky glared at her.

"Good-night," Daphney said, standing and leaving the room.

"Good-night," she heard her father answer.

Daphney sat awake in the dark. Her wedding dress, hanging from an unused plant hook, seemed to float in the air like a fairy godmother, catching light coming in through the window. She listened to the house quiet, to the sound of weight on the stairs as her family climbed to bed.

The gown looked curious, hanging like that, as though it possessed essence, or character, of its own accord and didn't need an occupant to have motive or desire. Daphney imagined it flying toward her fast, a wedding gown possessed. The gown would fly around, wrecking the room, liberating the plants from their metal cage. Daphney would try to catch it, wrestle it to the ground. But even without hands, those satin, beaded

sleeves would grip her neck and strangle her.

Daphney got out from under the covers and walked to the window. She looked out over the cage, over her neighbor's house into the sky of the cool March midnight. She stroked the leaf of a rubber tree plant between her forefinger and thumb. With her other hand, she ran a finger up and down a thin, metal bar. The cage had once housed Bruce, a yellow, green, and gray cockatiel with a nasty, curled beak and an ugly pink tongue. Henry brought it home two years after the kitten. Ramona had been horrified, dreading the day she would come home to scattered feathers and blank, staring eyes. Henry said not to worry.

Daphney was nine and watched worriedly during Bruce's exercise hour during which he would be freed from his cage to fly laps around the house. He'd leave sloppy, white slime behind him which Ramona would clean with a wet, paper towel. After his laps, Bruce would land on Henry's foot, and ride it as it flexed and rocked.

At first, Daphney locked Tipsey in her room for that hour, but Tipsey would cry and howl, and soon Henry forbade it. So while Bruce perched on Henry's foot, Daphney and Topsy stationed themselves nearby, Tipsey's tail snapping and twitching. The bird was either too stupid or too arrogant to recognize the threat.

Tipsey sprang at Bruce on a Sunday morning. Henry

had been in the kitchen reading the paper, his foot crossed over his knee, Bruce perched on his toes. Daphney stood by the sliding glass door in the t.v. room, eating a banana. From the kitchen floor, Tipsey sprang from a deceptive languor onto Henry's lap sending Bruce screaming into the air. Daphney screamed too, dropping her banana. Bruce flew into the t.v room, screaming and shitting, flying frantically in circles. On reflex, Daphney yanked the sliding door open. Horrified, she watched Bruce fly out across the yard, a flash of green and yellow disappearing between houses.

Heat rushed up from her stomach and down from the top of her head. Henry's belt appeared in the doorway at her eye level.

"I'll find him," she said, running out the door, running down the street. Running, and forgetting to look up.

Daphney let go of the leaf and knelt down before the cage. She placed both hands on the cage wall.

"Pszepraszam, Tatus," she said. "I'm sorry." She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, and when she opened them, everything glistened. Soft light pouring in through the window in one pencil-thin line illuminated a withered, brown leaf, its fragile stem still holding desperately to the plant's core.

Daphney stood and reached into the cage to pluck it. But when she reached it, instead of effortlessly tugging

the dried offshoot, she gripped the plant right above where it disappeared into the soil. She pulled, feeling the moist dirt fall away from the veiny roots, losing the shape enforced by its container. Daphney stood at full height, the plant dangling from her hand like a voodoo doll. She walked to her desk, opened a drawer, emptied it with one hand, and then dropped the plant into it. She pulled the drawer completely from the desk and placed it on the floor beside the cage. One by one, she uprooted the plants, often closing her eyes, savoring the feel of weight breaking to pieces, form falling away from secret arteries that reached blindly into the dark.

When the pots were empty she lifted them from the floor of the cage, stacking them beside the drawer where plants laid like a pyre, one thrown deathlike on the body of another.

Daphney threw one leg over the side of the cage, and then the other, moist dirt filling the lines on the bottom of her feet. She stretched her nightshirt down in the back and lowered herself to the cage floor. She looked up through the window, the plants' old view, and saw a corner of chimney and a blue-black sky, a sliver of moon blurry behind filmy clouds. She leaned on the cage wall and wished she had thought to bring her pillow as her objective was not punishment, but containment. Marrying Donnie and moving out won't make everything stop hurting, she knew, but not marrying him won't change

anything either. She knew that if she couldn't go in peace, in satiation, she couldn't go. It would come with her.

She felt empty, and the expanding nothing reached out from her chest to the perimeters of the cage. It climbed the metal rods, filling the space to capacity, but not overflowing. Like a wave in a jar it turned over on itself, dipped hell-ward drawing up grainy sediment and tossed it skyward without letting it go.

Daphney stood and unlatched the window, opening them out like doors. She shivered beneath the touch of moist air, the final vestige of winter like a star, invisible in sunlight. She bent slightly and gripped the cage bars and jerked them up, pulling the spokes from their thin, round holes. She drew the cage back over her head, removing it as though it were a suit of armor. The cage folded together flat, two walls against two walls. Daphney angled the flat piece of metal and launched it through the window. It hit the lawn making one "chink" like a bag of pennies on concrete. Daphney stepped off of the cage floor and tossed it out the window too. It hit the cage at a perpendicular angle, then fell flat upon it. It made a rattling noise, like a raccoon forging in the garbage.

The noise might have frightened an unsleeping child, but was otherwise unspectacular. Daphney pulled the windows closed and relatched them.

As soon as the chauffeur had closed the limo door Daphney said to her mother, "Dad's not walking me down the aisle." The two of them argued in Polish while Becky and MaryJeanne looked on. Donnie's sister, Celia, stared into her bouquet, embarrassed to be privy to her almost-in-laws' dirty wash, even if she couldn't understand a word of it.

The limo pulled up to St. Joseph's, a white, modern church, icy spikes like stalagmites rising up from the roof. Daphney sat still; Ramona, Becky, and Celia unloaded. MaryJeanne waited until the others were out of hearing distance. Daphney looked at her sister's face. Make-up sat there idly with nothing to do.

"Are you coming?" MaryJeanne asked.

Daphney looked up.

"Get Dad," she said.

MaryJeanne reached out and touched Daphney's knee through the satin gown, then stepped out of the limo holding down the flowers in her hair against the cold, March wind. The day had begun clear, but cold, and as the day ensued gray clouds gathered high in the sky, collecting for a group descent, straight and solid as a curtain. Daphney watched her father descend the church steps. The wind tousled his tux jacket revealing his pink cumberbun as he walked to the car. He opened the door

and leaned in.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Please get in," Daphney answered.

Henry got in the car, sitting across from her.

Daphney pressed a button to slide open the window that sealed off the chauffeur.

"Drive around, would you?" she said.

"What is it?" Henry said.

Daphney looked up. Henry looked confused, but not angry.

"I don't want to be walked down the aisle," she said.

Henry grimaced, seeming more irritated than angry. Daphney winced.

"If that's what you want," he said.

Daphney examined his face for a hurt feeling but saw none; his face seemed to have grown and aged around his blue eyes for specific purpose of camouflage.

"That's not what I want," Daphney said. She pressed a button that rolled down her window. She needed air. She put her face to the wind. A wet, sloppy drop struck her temple. The desire to bail out, to chuck herself through the window and roll to the safety of the gutter overwhelmed her. She hit the button that opened the partition to the chauffeur.

"Pull over," she said.

The chauffeur obeyed, parking in the small downtown

area, on a street of drugstores, shoe shops, and dentist offices.

Daphney pulled the door handle; Henry reached out and grabbed her wrist. His brows drew together.

"If you don't want to get married," he said, "it's okay. If you feel you're making a mistake, don't do it."

"I'm not making a mistake," Daphney said, pulling her arm away and getting out of the car.

She started off down the street. Wet flurries clung and dissolved quickly on her dress.

"Daph," Henry called to her.

Daphney stopped and turned around. Henry stood outside the limo. Neither took a step, he toward her, nor she back to him.

"Why do you do this?" Daphney yelled. "I want you to stay and you go. I want you to leave me alone, and you pick on me. Why can't you just do what I want?"

"What do you want?" he said, turning out his palms out to her.

Daphney took a deep breath to hold back tears. She hated her father's face for its patient and curious expression. His always-right blue eyes focused on her, his lashes drank the flurries. Daphney sensed, though, that he wasn't waiting for an answer from her, but thinking. It was like when he watched t.v., but his mind was far away. He wasn't doing it out of meanness, but habit.

Daphney took a step backward. She felt he had asked 'what does she want' knowing that his asking made it impossible for her to respond. All she needed was for him to love her and she could walk away and get on with life. But to ask for it, she felt, would be to hand him the sword that could finish her off.

She watched her father's adam's apple rise toward his chin and resettle heavily: Her father swallowed hard. She was sure of it. He's afraid I'll ask for love, she thought. As afraid as I am. He knew, she realized, that he could not give it to her because in doing so, he would lose what he needed, that is, to hold on to her.

Daphney shivered, her skin rising in goose flesh. If he won't give it to me, she thought, I'll have to take it.

"Your coat," she said. "I want your coat."

Henry removed his tux jacket and stood still for a moment. Each of them took two steps toward each other and the jacket was passed carefully, though across a chasm. Henry's face reddened in the cold. Daphney threw the jacket across her shoulders. She stared at her father's chest, at the two black suspenders leading up to his neck, his eyes, his forehead, and the path that ran down the middle of his head.

Then, Daphney stepped backward, pivoted, and preceded down the sidewalk, her dress heavy, wet, and

ruined. Before her, gray clouds sealed the earth shut, meeting the sidewalk at the horizon. The space here was limited and would fill and be done with. Her father's jacket kept the wet snow from melting through the thin lace on the back of her dress and on into her skin. Her father loved her, she knew. It was a desperate love, love with rights, unexcusing and unforgiving. But it was there, and it was behind her.

Porpoise

Caddy curled her fingers in the whitewashed wire of the chainlink fence that surrounded the amphitheater where the porpoises performed. Freshly laid and unshowered, she smelled her arm, honey and mushroom smells. The smells were more than his smells; they were hers too, coaxed from glands long boarded up. But last night, nails popped and planks were pried back. The man responsible, or credited rather, left this morning for Austria. It made the flavor no less sweet. Caddy flicked her tongue to her forearm.

Waiting for Jerry, she looked over her shoulder. She watched him approach, his torso rocking atop a lanky stride. He sidestepped the puddles on the freshly hosed pavement, his gait too genuine to be a swagger, yet confessing of a sheepish self-love that extended beyond his body into the yet unmelted cool of the April sunrise.

In each hand, Jerry carried a styrofoam cup and he stretched his arms to the sides as he walked. He hit a brief operatic note, and said, "Beautiful day." When he reached Caddy, they entered the empty amphitheater and sat on the lowest bleacher where the kids sat who wanted to get splashed. Caddy and Jerry's blue jeaned knees lined up, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. He handed her a cup of coffee.

Caddy closed her eyes tightly and reopened them, trying to adjust to the ice coolness of the color scheme, the contrast of its scoured facade to her musky condition. The aseptic blue and white motif insulted her sensibilities, striking her more as sky than ocean. The bleachers, like a regiment of clouds, were latched together with blue metal, and a ring of blue tile circled the white bottomed tank. Above the grandstand, blue aluminum awnings arced, laced with white frost. Fake crashing waves.

Caddy didn't want to be there. Today, she and Jerry were to report in on the pact they made last week. Neither had kissed someone - other than each other that one time - in over a year. Jerry wanted a girlfriend bad, but only fell for women already taken; Caddy hadn't wanted to be within an arm's length of a man since the morning she woke up and found herself in bed with a man she knew only as Cowboy. She had gotten drunk, and gotten screwed, she knew, by the sticky chaffing on her

inner thighs. She remembered not one second of it, but had sworn off sex to punish herself.

Their pact was this: they would end their sabbaticals from the sensual and find someone to neck with for sheer joy of it. Jerry swore to stick to available women. Caddy agreed to touch and be touched without feeling like the whore of Babylon.

"Tell me the facts," Caddy said, peeling the plastic lid from the cup and letting her pores drink the rising steam. She did not want to go first.

Jerry shook his head. He stuffed an index finger under his glasses and rubbed at the corner of his eye.

"Horrible," he said. "Remember Marcie, the girl who paints pictures of starving kids and plays right field on my softball team?"

"The one that doesn't wear a bra and adores you?"

"That be her," Jerry said. "After the game last night, the two of us climbed the water tower to drink some beers and look at the moon. Did you see it?"

"Yeah," Caddy said. "It was full in Scorpio."

"Well, the night was warm and all that, and I figured, suck some face, grope some breast, why not? But my mouth got to hers and her tongue poked out, gritty as a cat's, and hung there between her lips. No imagination." By way of demonstration, he stuck out his tongue like a third and middle lip. "She stuck that cactus finger of a tongue in my mouth and just left it

there. I decided to pass on the grope. No wonder her art is so bad."

The sun spilled in from behind the awning spraying silver throughout amphitheater which reflected off the water creating undulating waves of light on the white backboards and illuminating the top of Jerry's sandy, brillo hair, frosting it like freezer ice on a fish stick.

Caddy leaned backward and rested her head on the next bench up. To respond to Jerry, she considered digging up stories from her past of nightmarish kisses, kisses that said return to go, return to your own face. It would be easier than trying to tell Jerry about last night. To report the facts seemed too locker room, but that was the way she and Jerry talked. It's was Jerry's way that she had adopted. Avoid interpretation and let the event speak for itself. She called it Jerry's Language.

A porpoise cut loose with its back throat song. It rose from the water, and did a backward fin shuffle. The pool rumbled with signs of the porpoises that inhabited it, motion in the water's surface as they swam morning laps.

Caddy looked up out through the top of the amphitheater. She spotted the moon, cloud-white against the blue sky.

"The moon's still out," she said.

Jerry leaned back.

"There's a U.S. of A. flag up there," he said.

"That sucker's ours."

"You're spoiling the romance."

"Too late," Jerry said. "That happened last night."

They turned their heads toward each other. Their eyes met and flashed. Caddy felt as though she had been touched.

Guilt formed a pit in her stomach, not guilt for what she did, but for enjoying it.

"What do you think makes for intimacy?" she asked. "Is it something you should ask for, like, 'excuse me, but may I be intimate with you?' Or does it just happen unexpectedly?' She sat up. "Do you think sex is necessarily intimate, or does intimacy have to come first?"

She turned to look at Jerry. He hadn't budged. His eyes were closed beneath the lenses of his glasses. Caddy slapped his leg.

"I'm talking to you."

"You're talking around me," he answered. "What's the situation? Tell me the facts."

Caddy took a deep breath. She folded her hands together and held them to her face. Their smell reminded her of the woody, red wine taste of her Austrian's breath and the fibrous mushroom contours of his shoulders and back. To really tell Jerry what happened, she thought,

she'd have to do a dance or sing out strange, primitive noises. She imagined herself gyrating on the edge of the porpoise tank singing ca-too, wok, wok, sh-umm, umm, umm. She laughed.

Jerry sat up.

"What?" he laughed, but his eyes looked scared, which made Caddy scared, and made last night scary, too. So, she quickly diminished it: Just because it felt good, she thought, doesn't mean intimacy occurred. This is intimacy, she thought. Last night was sex; today is intimacy.

"You suck face last night?" Jerry said.

Caddy smiled.

"Hmm. No cactus finger tongue for you, huh?" Jerry said.

"No," Caddy said. "No cactus finger tongue."

She covered her mouth with her hands to shrink the smile.

"He's a student from Austria," she said. "I met him last night at my sister's party. We took a walk on the beach. I liked it."

"Well, that's great," Jerry said.

Caddy scowled. They didn't say things so vague to each other as "that's great." It dropped from his lips impersonal as weather, and it headed for the concrete, the ocean, the sky, or whatever it was the floor was supposed to look like. Caddy dove to catch it.

"I don't know," she said.

"You don't know if you liked it."

"No," she said. "I'm not sure that kissing someone just for the heck of it is such a good idea."

Jerry stood.

"You're really full of shit today," he said.

"Let's walk."

Caddy felt too guilty to be offended. Besides, Jerry was right. She was full of shit, in his language, as in his language being full of shit included withholding or evading the facts.

They carried their cups through the white stucco tunnel out into the park. White sidewalks and guard rails curved around circular pools, blue trimming white and white trimming blue. The corners of the gifts shops were rounded like shoulders and sloped to the ground. Caddy cased the landscape for the rare island of green, patches of lawn like life rafts in the concrete sky. Jerry walked ahead of her to a blue bench bolted into the ground before an empty pool, white and scrubbed as a picnic cooler in December.

Jerry sat down and picked up a square plastic package left behind by a tourist. He opened it and the contents unfolded: A flat, wrinkled porpoise with a nipple for a blowhole through which to inflate it.

"I was nine the first time I came here," Caddy said as she approached him, trying to explain and trying not

to be full of shit. "My Dad brought me and after the show, he arranged it so I could pet one of the porpoises. Its skin was tender," she said. "Or rather it was the quality of its flesh that made the skin feel tender."

Jerry put the nipple in his mouth. His cheeks puffed out and the plastic toy expanded, taking on an arc as it filled with air. Caddy sat down and Jerry nodded for her to continue.

"It seemed to enjoy having me pet it, and I felt like it was as aware of me as I was of it."

Jerry tucked in the nipple and held the inflated porpoise in front of Caddy's face. Its eyes rolled backward toward its tailfin.

"It felt so alive," she said, pushing away the toy. Jerry brought it back up.

"Last night on the beach," she said, "he felt like porpoise flesh. The feeling made me remember something, but I'm not sure what it is."

Jerry rocked the toy back and forth as he spoke as if it were the plastic fish doing the talking.

"Pet me. Pet me," he made it say. "I'll help you remember."

Caddy got up and walked to the guard rail of the empty pool. She couldn't recall what it used to hold.

"I never thought the feel of a human being could be as fine as the feel of a porpoise," she said.

Jerry joined her, the inflated toy tucked under his

arm. He turned her by the shoulder to face him. Their eyes met, but it wasn't like touching. Jerry's smile was lopsided. Caddy knew he was going to kiss her.

"I screwed him on the beach," she said.

Jerry kissed her. She placed her hands on his chest in the position to push him away, but she didn't push.

She and Jerry had slept together once. The wine had been great, the sex, okay. At the time, she had wondered how it would change their relationship. In the weeks that followed, she found herself trying on three different outfits before meeting him. She bought a new perfume. She waited for him to come to her in that way again, but he never did. She learned to accept it, take the event for what it was and avoid interpretation. Today, she hadn't even showered.

They had referred to it only once on a Sunday morning over coffee. Jerry was talking about women's capacity for multiple orgasms. She told him she didn't know any women that had them, and she confessed that she hadn't even had a singular one. She hadn't been thinking of Jerry, in particular, when she said it, but as soon as it was said, she knew his next question.

"Not even with me?" he had asked.

"Never is never," she said.

He hadn't mentioned orgasms since.

Caddy lowered her head to escape from the kiss.

"He was great last night," she said to Jerry's shoes.

"I came."

Jerry stepped away from her. He took the plastic toy out from under his arm and looked at its rounded nose. Caddy reached to touch it but Jerry twisted, keeping it just out of her reach. He held it over his head with one hand and launched it into the drained pool. Caddy looked down at it, lying on its side against the whitewash.

"Why did you do that?" Caddy asked.

Jerry's eyes followed hers to the toy. Caddy looked at him.

"Not that," she said. "Why'd you kiss me?"

"It was just a thought," Jerry said, eyes forward.

Caddy realized she had not told him that her Austrian was gone, and she wondered if Jerry had kissed her now because he considered her potentially attached, and thus more desirable. But even if she was right, she knew Jerry wasn't lying. The kiss was just a thought. An idea, a plan.

A gray cloud covered the sun; insubstantial snips of rain sprinkled haphazardly. Caddy appreciated the diminished glare.

"Are you mad because I slept with someone?" Caddy winced at the girlfriend-y sound of the words. She wasn't Jerry's girlfriend.

Jerry looked at her like she was crazy. He said, "I'm glad you had a good time."

They drained their coffee cups and headed back

toward the amphitheater to beat the rain. Jerry put his hand on Caddy's back, and she knew that if she wanted to have sex with him, she could.

In front of the amphitheater, they stopped. Jerry slid his empty cup into hers.

"Next Sunday?" he said.

Caddy squeezed the cups. The styrofoam collapsed.

"Yep," she said.

Their eyes locked; Caddy looked away.

Jerry turned and walked toward the park gate. Caddy usually left with him, but she couldn't get her feet to move. She summoned enough will to step forward and the sun re-appeared from behind the storm cloud. Instead of stepping, she turned her back to Jerry and entered the stucco tunnel. She dropped the cups into a giant blue bin and headed for the pool.

It was two hours before the show, and the porpoises were warming up. Caddy watched a man on a platform twelve feet high dangle a sun glittered fish above the pool. A porpoise blasted up from the water to the exact height of its breakfast. For a second, it appeared to pause in mid-air, snatching up the fish and curling its tail with a flourish before splashing back down. Another porpoise rose from the tank on its tailfin and hoochie-cooed across the water, body wriggling, mouth open and laughing.

The gyrating porpoise tipped backward into the pool,

sending up a frothy, white shower. Cold and wet, a drop rolled slowly down Caddy's neck; it sped up, slipping between her breasts and disappearing into the curve of her stomach. A purifying, electric tingle remained where the drop had passed. Jerry's kiss faded from her lips and she felt a pleasant whir in her heel as though it were just now the Austrian kissed the inside of her knee.

Caddy held in her stomach to get the most of wayward drop. A salty spray hit her face and she touched her tongue to her lip.

The man with the fish climbed down from his perch and squatted at the pool's edge petting one of the porpoises. Caddy studied their contented faces and she stepped forward. The man looked up at her and she froze in her tracks.

"Its okay," he said, and he scooted over.

Caddy knelt beside him at the side of the pool, reached out, and touched the slope of the porpoise's brow. Silent, and attentive as children building castles of sand, she and the man caressed the smooth arcs and curves of the porpoise's neck and torso. Caddy's hand melted into the rubbery give of its flesh, and her head cocked and her lips flexed into small, surprised smiles in response to the sensations rising up through her fingers. An alarming sense of delight flooded her; she felt exposed. She shut her eyes and raised one hand to

her face and breathed in the fresh, musty scent. Her other hand laid still upon the porpoise's flesh and she breathed and touched the porpoise until she felt inside of it, swimming out from the tank and sliding into the sea, tumbling to the murky bottom of the sky.

Casper and the Rabbit

"Has he got a girlfriend?" Tracy asked me.

I squirmed and dug my toes into the cool September sand. I re-adjusted my beach chair - one of those low to the ground models - up one notch.

"I don't know," I said. "I've seen women there."

She was asking about Doug, the man who lived in the duplex behind mine. Our yards met, divided by a mesh wire fence.

Tracy pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head. A fluffy, white cloud blocked the sunlight. I pulled a t-shirt on over my bathing suit.

Tracy asked, "Did you ever see one of them leaving in the morning?"

"No," I replied.

"Did you ever see any of them holding the rabbit?"

I squinted into the breeze watching Casper, my

German shepherd, stalk seagulls. Tracy had a way of seeing meaning in subtle behavior, even of people she never met. No. I had never seen anyone else holding the rabbit. The issue would have never occurred to me, and yes, somehow I knew it was important. But still, I was hesitant about discussing Doug with Tracey. Tracy and I had a way of making phantoms of men, transforming them into ideas, abstractions, philosophies twice removed from reality. They would become like books to be entered, enjoyed, and understood; then, closed, shelved, remembered but only until the next story. I wanted to preserve Doug's humanity, protect him from Tracy and me. Keep him some-body, and not some-thing.

Tracy stood up and Casper bounded over to her. She bent over and massaged his neck gently. She looked at me.

"Did you?" she repeated.

Although the clouds had thickened, the sky now a milky, grey blanket, her sunglasses were back over her eyes. Tracy wore a jean mini-skirt and a tight off the shoulder shirt: She never wore a bathing suit. I never asked her why, but felt self-conscious when wearing one, myself, when I was with her. The breeze brushed her black Cleopatra hair across her olive-colored cheek; her face was a virgin to cosmetics.

"No," I answered. "I've never seen anyone else holding the rabbit."

Every morning, Doug slipped through his sliding glass door and step gingerly over his sparse, stony yard. I would sit at my kitchen table and watch him through the bay windows. Shoeless, he stepped carefully - as though crossing a stream - with the small, yellow dish in his hand. He'd squat down in front of the hutch and turn its latch. Then, he'd pull from it, by the scruff of its neck, a rabbit - brown, with the standard cotton tail. He'd feed it raw vegetables by hand.

Casper charged into the surf, sending the seagulls into the sky like a mass of released balloons. The beach was the only other place I ever saw him, Doug. Sometimes, while walking my dog on the beach at sunset, I'd spot him sitting cross-legged in the sand, palms up on his knees, his hands large pads I imagined soft and firm on the small of my back. He would face the surf, eyes closed, his face the face of a fire angel, one of the Seraphim, maybe Micheal himself. Flecks of gold would flash in his sandy hair.

Tracy straightened up and reached toward the sky. She stood on her toes revealing the fine muscular definition of her calves, calves she often rubbed and stretched as though she was a dancer. She took a deep breath and put her hands on her hips. She nodded her head curtly.

"There's no doubt," she said. "As soon as you get your hands on that rabbit, Doug is all yours."

I met Tracy 3 years ago, my first summer in Wildwood and my first summer as manager of the Sun Cave Restaurant. She showed up at an employee party with one of the waiters. Standing next to the keg, she told me that the man she was with was not her boyfriend. She lived with her boyfriend, and one of his best friends was here and she had to get out fast. We left out the back door and I drove her home. "Stop on by sometime," she told me. As it turned out, we both lived on the Crest, only 4 blocks apart. I stopped by. I met her boyfriend, Tony.

In Wildwood on the Jersey shore, where we live, the tourists begin trickling in during May, and then seemingly, like cells, keep dividing, never becoming anything different. By October, the tourists are gone and nearly everything closes. Those who stay on for the winter go on unemployment, which was what Tracy and I had done these past three years.

People forget about the shore in the winter. They forget it exists. If not careful, off-season residents, too, can forget they still exist. Some say it's that very sense of non-existence that people stay here for; others say that some people get sucked in and don't realize that it's happening. Like a tree, they sleep, hibernate, and dream. They awaken without the awareness

of having slept.

To feel alive in both the rush of the summer and the void of winter, Tracy had affairs. Not many, but one-nighters. I had 4 relationships in three years. They were all the same: I told Tracy about a particular man I was interested in. I filled her in on my observations. We speculated, fantasized, about what he was up to, what he thought, what he thought about me. We discussed how I might bring him around to the point Tracy called The Snag. Soon, though, the Snagging didn't matter. What mattered was the talking, Tracy and I's talking.

Still sometimes, I get lonely. After all, Tracy's got Tony. And now, I'm afraid to talk about Doug with Tracy. I'm afraid he'll become "ours" instead of "mine". I'm afraid he'll become another source of distraction for Tracy and me to share, rather than my lover.

"You've got Tony," I told Tracy back at her apartment.

We were burning incense to cover up the smell of burnt metal: Tracy had put the wrong pan into the microwave. She stood whooshing the front door back and forth to fan out the smell.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," she said. "I never even thought about it that way."

"I didn't either," I said. "Not 'til this past

summer when I realized I'd go out looking for a jump, and the whole time I'd be talking to the guy, I'd be considering the story he'd make. For you and me."

"Wow," she said. She came and sat down. "I wonder if I do the same thing." She sat quiet for a minute. "I get bored, you know, and go out looking for something to do. But the fun part," she said, a grin creeping over her face, "I mean the really fun part is going over it with you."

There was a glint in her eye, and I could feel a similar light in my own.

"It's just so fun," she laughed.

There was no way I could resist smiling. She was right. We sat silently together, appalled and delighted: We were delighted at being appalled and appalled at being delighted.

"It's really not a fair thing to do," I said. "Help me, Tracy," I said. "Help me do it right this time."

"By not saying a word?" Tracy said.

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't know."

I left before Tony would get home although Tracy had asked me to stay so to keep at a minimum any fighting over the broken microwave. Casper rose from where he lay outside Tracy's apartment door and followed me across the balcony and down the stairs. Despite the delight I had just experienced being myself and being with Tracy, I felt good, too, that I could have a real relationship

this time, that my life would be something more than a soap opera episode that Tracy had missed, and I was filling her in on.

I walked a block out of my way to stop at the market on 38th street. I bought a bundle of celery, carrots, and radishes. I considered buying the nastiest-looking bundles and telling Doug that I had not eaten them and they were just going bad, would your rabbit like to have them? But I reconsidered. I had never seen close up what he was feeding it, but considering the care he took, I figured the stuff must be quality.

At home, I sat at the kitchen table slicing vegetables and watching his yard through my window. I stacked the vegetables in tin foil to look like leftover appetizers. I went over the scene in my head: I'd call from the yard. 'I had some guests over and these vegetables were left and I'll never eat them. Would your rabbit like to have them?'

I thought it was a good plan. I wanted to call Tracy while I cut and waited. I knew she wanted me to call. I was sure that right now Tony was chewing her out for breaking the microwave, and I knew if she knew I was in that situation, she would call.

I called.

"Yeah," she said. "It was a scene. He stormed out. He said if I looked like Christie Brinkley I could blow up the whole apartment, but I guess things being as

they are..."

I hated when Tony said such things to her.

"What are you up to?" she asked, voice knowing, anticipating.

"Well," I said.

"Are you watching him from the window, or am I not allowed to ask that?"

"Actually," I said, "I'm cutting vegetables for his rabbit. I bought some on the way home. I'm trying to make them look like leftover appetizers."

"Wow," she said. "Make sure you put them on a good plate so he'll have to return it."

But of course! I thought.

I heard Doug's motorcycle.

"Oh God," I said, "He's home. I better go."

"Good luck," she said. "Call me."

I grabbed a stone platter I had bought in Mexico on which tiny blue shells were hand-painted. I tossed the vegetables onto the platter, not neatly, and covered the whole thing with plastic wrap. I went into the bathroom and brushed my hair quickly, not wanting to miss him.

In about 20 minutes, he stepped through the back door. He sat on a lawn chair and put on his gym shoes. He wore white baggy pants and a gauze pale blue shirt. He looked beautiful.

I pick up the dish and set out the door. I walked to the half-way point in the yard before calling to him.

"Hello?" I called.

He looked up and smiled. He stood and walked to the fence to meet me. I held the platter.

"How was your summer?" I asked.

"Busy," he said. "I'm glad it's Fall."

"Me, too," I said. "This will be the restaurant's last weekend. I'll be glad when it's over."

"Yes," he said. "I've been giving catamaran tours of Cape May all summer. Since Labor Day, I've only taken her out four or five times."

"Are you staying the winter?" I asked.

He smiled, revealing a beautiful row of straight, white, viking teeth.

"I'm going to brave it," he said. "I hear it gets pretty desolate."

"We'll have to get together to rough it." There, I said it.

He didn't respond.

"I had company the other night," I said. "The Doritos were kissed, but I had some left over vegetables. I thought maybe your rabbit might like them." I held up the tray for his inspection. Was my offering worthy?

"Well, thank you." He took the tray. "Cloe hasn't been eating much lately, but I'm sure she'll enjoy this."

"Not eating?" I asked, trying to make conversation.

"How come?"

"Oh," he said. "She's not feeling well."

I wanted to get across the fence, onto his turf. I imagined the world even smelled different on his side.

"You know," I said. "I've been so busy all summer I've only seen your rabbit from a distance. May I see her?"

"Oh," he said. "Oh, sure."

We walked to the rickety gate which he opened for me. I stepped into his yard. It felt good. I was in his space and it felt as warm and soft and wonderful as it had looked from my kitchen window. His wind chimes that I had heard at night were a circle of silver fish and stars, hanging from wire. A silver crescent moon hung in the middle.

Seeing me leave our yard, Casper lunged out my kitchen screen door and through the gate into Doug's yard.

"Casper, you. Wait," I called.

He sniffed Doug right between the legs and then took off over the yard, nose to the ground, following some scent that moved him in jerky circles.

"Casper! Get over here."

Casper found the hutch and barked at it furiously.

Doug and I both took off towards the hutch. I hollered like shrew.

"Casper, you get the hell over here! Now!"

Casper came, head turned backward as he ran, still barking.

"Get home," I said. "Now."

Casper growled under his breath. I took hold of his collar and led him into my yard, closing the gate behind me. Casper sat, whining, nose poking through the fence wires. I stayed in Doug's yard, though not sure I was still welcome. I walked half-way to the hutch where he sat with his back to me cuddling the rabbit.

"Is it okay?" I asked.

"She," he answered.

"I'm sorry," I said. The platter sat on ground a foot away from me. "Is she okay?" I asked again.

"Yeah," he said in soothing voice, speaking more to the rabbit than to me. "She just a little scared."

"Well, I'm really sorry," I said again, my heart in my throat, sinking, going down like a bad oyster.

"Its okay," he said, still in that beautiful voice, still to Cloe.

He stood and turned in my direction though he kept his eyes on the rabbit nestled in the crook of his arm. Her nose rose and fell quickly creating the illusion of nervousness. One black rabbit eye stared seemingly defiant, in my direction. Doug stroked her, comforting her like a lover.

"Sorry, again," I said. "Bye."

"Thanks," he said, looking up as though he forgot that I was there.

I wasn't sure if the "thanks" was sarcastic, but it is best in such situations to assume the worst.

In bed that night, I cried. I was lonely, I knew, because I was so stupid. Why didn't I close the gate? Why didn't I have a brain? Damn Casper. I didn't want to be alone at night, nor did I want to be cool and cocky, in bed with a stranger or a story. I wanted an arm or leg slung over me and words whispered sleepily into my hair; someone who thought I was tender and delicate and beautiful and strong - maybe not Doug - but someone who could be Doug. Then I wanted Doug, Doug knocking at my door at the late hour, yes, with flowers for me and even a bone for Casper and pale blue feelings all around.

I could tell Tracy. That might help. I'd tell her about Casper, Doug, and the rabbit - what was its name - Clover? The story could be transformed from tragedy to comedy: It didn't happen in my and Tracy's world. It happened in that other one, the big one where everybody else lives, the one we study piece by piece, trying to understand just how one participates effectively.

It is mid-September, I close the windows at night. The other tenants are only down, now, on weekends.

Unless Casper cries fitfully in his sleep, it's quiet.

"He didn't..." I stuttered.

Tracy stood in front of my bathroom mirror. Her hands and elbows were cut. She had dried blood under her nose and streaking down her cheek. Her banging on the door had roused me from sleep. I wore only the oversized t-shirt I slept in. She burst past me when I opened the front door and hustled to the bathroom. I stood in the bathroom doorway, holding her jacket, sleeves smeared with rusty spots and blotches.

"No," she said. "Tony was really quite decent. That's why I know its over."

"What happened?"

Tracy rubbed the blood off her face with a warm washcloth.

"He found the letters from that guy from Pittsburgh. The one from last summer. The one with the Mick Jagger lips."

"Yes," I said. "I remember."

"Two letters," she said. "Two obscene little letters. He says he was looking for some old checks."

"Geez, Tracy, why did you keep them?"

"Because I'm stupid, I guess." She whacked the washcloth into the sink, then bent her arm, elbow pointing at the mirror so to examine it.

"Anyway, I went storming out of the house - the scene needed a good emotion - and went stomping down the steps. I hadn't tied my shoelaces, and I tripped on them and fell down the stairs. I guess he didn't hear."

Tracy opened the cabinet-mirror and took out the rubbing alcohol and cotton balls. "No band-aids?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Tell me something," Tracy said, not angrily, but tiredly. "When women have babies, there's a lot of blood. If they don't have a baby, there's a lot of blood. When they hit puberty, they start to bleed. They bleed when they get their first jump. Why can't women begin a new phase of anything without bleeding?"

I didn't answer.

Tracy turned out the bathroom light, but we both still stood there.

"Is it really over?" I asked.

Tracy put her hands on the sink and her head fell forward. She stood silently for a minute maybe thinking what I was thinking: She and Tony had broken up before. Three times. He almost always found out about her flings. I must admit, I never understood why he stuck around, or rather let her stick around: It was his apartment. I remembered the time he kicked in their bedroom door and the time he threw all her clothes over the balcony on the 4th of July.

Tracy turned her back to me and walked over to the

bathtub and sat down on the side of it. I closed the toilet seat and sat down, too.

"It's over," she said, calmly, with a sense of completion. "He was calm, not mad. I guess its true that love and hate are the same thing, but indifference," she said, "that's the end of the story."

More quiet. The white shine of the bathroom porcelain provided a pearl glow in the place of light. Tracy pushed on the end of her nose as though testing it to see if it would give. She kicked off her shoes and rested her feet on the tiles.

"Do you care?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said, still pushing on her nose, still testing.

"I talked to Doug tonight," I said.

"Really?" She moved her hand from her face. "What happened?"

It was small and cozy in the bathroom, and I told her the story of Casper and the rabbit. We laughed and examined, poked fun at and mourned the event. Then we left it and went on to other questions. Important questions.

"Are we bimbos," Tracy wondered, "because we shave our legs?"

I didn't know.

"You know," Tracy said, "I have no idea how my underarms look unshaved because I've been shaving them since I was twelve and noticed the first five hairs. Maybe," she said, "this would be a good time to grow it out."

"Maybe so," I said. "Maybe so."

The bathroom floor grew cool. I headed for the bedroom to get Tracy a nightgown, hugging myself against the breeze that moved down through hall. The front door was open, just wide enough: Casper was gone.

Tracy came with me. In sweaters and light jackets, we combed the neighborhood and the beach, calling out in hollered whispers. The high tide at sunrise pitched sparks of green, blue, and purple into the air, a foot above the surf. We walked from the Crest to North Wildwood, 5 miles, past the boardwalk and silent landings where Ferris Wheels, Zippers, and Round-Ups stood as though frozen, lifeless and barren, silhouettes of past glory like museum dinosaurs.

The sun rose higher and isolated bits of activity - a woman out on a morning walk, a surfer - made us feel out of place. These people were fresh, starting the day seeking out the comfort of that small feeling of insignificance the ocean bestows upon the off-season observer. A sense of beginning filled the landscape, and

we had no place. The gulls cried decreeing a change in guard. We left the beach and headed back to my duplex.

"He's probably sitting at the front door wondering where you are," Tracy said.

Just as Tracy said this - and I don't know why - I thought about the rabbit. Casper killed the rabbit. I knew it surely as though I had already seen the tumbled hutch, the open door, the inside, empty.

I stopped walking.

"Oh, my god," I said.

"Oh, my god," Tracy said back, stopping, too, knowing immediately as though 'oh my god' could only mean Casper killed Doug's rabbit.

We continued walking, walking faster, knowing we were racing the morning as though by finding out for sure before Doug stepped into his yard with a plate of fresh vegetables, my vegetables, that yes, indeed, his rabbit was mutilated, we could somehow reduce the force and tragedy of the situation.

We entered through my front door and headed straight for the back of the house, the kitchen, which overlooked the backyards. The hutch sat upright looking suspiciously untouched. Downright peaceful in the yellow-blue light. Quiet and rested, it was the exact opposite image of the two baggy-eyed women peering anxiously through the bay windows. From our vantage point we couldn't tell whether the door to the hutch was

opened or not, but there were no signs of tampering or struggle. No scattered bunny fluff, as Tracy said.

"I think its okay," Tracy said.

"Yeah," I said. "I don't know why I was so sure of it."

We were both exhausted. I called the pound and the animal control people. No luck. I had to sleep before looking further.

We settled in, me into bed, Tracy into the sofa. My body stung with anxiety, half wanting sleep, half signaling morning. What would we have done, I thought, if things had been as we imagined?

The tide was out at 2 in the afternoon and I walked along ripple marks in the sand. I called over and over, anxious and worried. At first I was more concerned about paying the 30 bucks to spring Casper from the pound, but now the dark fantasies had set in. Casper was hit by a car. Some crazy shot him for taking a dump in his front yard, and on and on.

"Casper!"

Such morbid fantasies made warm tears gather in the corner of my eyes. I've thought about Casper dying before, sometimes as I sat beside him, stroking his head. It was a good thing to be sad about. It allowed me to

secretly grieve all those things normally tucked away safely where I'm unable to feel. I flinched remembering Casper's nose pressed into Doug's crotch and remembering the trembling rabbit. I hadn't punished Casper in any way, but thought maybe he knew that he had blown something for me. Maybe pets know such things and experience guilt.

And besides all that, Tracy was leaving.

This afternoon she went back to the apartment while Tony was at work. All she had was clothes and books, and she was going to move them to my place using my car.

"Can I store my stuff here for a while?" she had asked. She said she knew a guy in Ocean City, Maryland she could stay with for a week or two while she decided what to do. I didn't say 'why don't you stay here? You can stay here with me' because that clearly wasn't what was going to happen. It was not what she wanted to do. In fact, I wasn't sure it was what I wanted either. For two to three years I had been thinking that the world existed for my and Tracy's entertainment. Today, I believed that the world was real. It knew more than either of us.

And what if Casper were dead?

Tracy had come back to my place at 6:30p.m. with the last of her stuff. "The last of my stuff," she had said, "and the last of Tony's." She held out a bottle

of Quervo.

We drank it by the shot, no salt, no limes. It hit our stomachs like gasoline creating the pleasant sensation of drinking poison. Tracy and I could kiss a bottle of tequila in an evening. The drunker we got, it seemed, the more clearly we thought. This only worked with tequila. We would cry into our beers, our vodkas, and gin and tonics; but we danced into tequila. Just wasn't nothing to cry about no more when the heat soaked through our stomachs, making our blood hot and bubbly. On tequila, we believed we understood a man's attachment to his balls.

When we heard the whining and scratching at the door, Tracey sang 'Who is it?' But I leapt from my chair and fandangoed down the hall.

"Oh," I called to Tracey who followed me. "Casper has brought company."

Casper dropped that rabbit like a retrieved slipper. Tracy laughed so hard her face turned red and tears streamed down her cheeks. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, she kept saying, but right after she'd say it she'd explode in a cackle even louder. She started choking, finally, from a lack of oxygen.

Yes, I laughed too, but I think it was just to release some unnamed emotion that I had never learned how to express. I squatted near the rabbit's sandy corpse. I poked it with my finger. It was just beginning to

stiffen.

Tracy pushed closed the front door and, when the coughing passed, squatted down opposite me. She poked it, too.

"At least it's not mutilated," she said, flipping it over.

"Must have had a heart attack," I said. "Look." I pointed out a tiny puncture mark in its back.

"That wouldn't kill it," Tracy said.

"No," I said. "Must have been a heart attack."

Tracy stood up. I looked up at her.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what?"

"You going to put it back?" Her face was getting red again.

"What?"

"It's not ruined, or anything," she said. "It's just a little puncture mark."

"Tracy," I said, "it's dead."

I put on my rubber dish washing gloves and brushed the sand and flakes of dried blood off the rabbit. The tequila burned in my stomach like lava, especially after I took a long pull, finishing off the bottle. The lights were out across the yard; my head felt unbalanced on my neck. The cool air helped me think, I thought to myself,

not knowing what I was thinking, as I crossed the yard, barefooted. The rocks poking and puncturing my feet produced an odd sensation, a subtle and pleasant pain. I caught my leg, the second one, as I tried to swing it over the wire fence. A rip-burn shot down my calve and I fell onto my side holding out the rabbit with an extended arm as though sparing from the fall something of delicate glass.

"Care-ful," Tracy called in a course, sing-song whisper followed by laughter strained through her nose.

I giggled.

I walked crouched, like a burglar. I reached the hutch, opened the door, and pressed the stiffening creature against the back wall. I came back over the fence without a glitch and ran, still crouched, to my back door.

I stepped inside. Casper sat at Tracy's side and they both looked at me. The left leg of my jeans was ripped from the back of the knee to the ankle. A thin cut, thin as a vericose vein, bled bright red blood. I held my hands before me in the pink rubber gloves like a surgeon standing over a patient. Casper's tail brushed back and forth across the floor, and I was sure, at that moment, if Tracy had had a tail, it would be wagging too.

"If Doug and I end up married," I asked Tracy,

"should I tell him the truth?"

I lay under the covers. Tracy sat beside me with her back against the headboard. Her ankle bracelet of strung stars flashed silver in the dark.

"Save it for your deathbed," she said. "It'll give him something to think about after the funeral. 'He never really knew you' and all that crap."

Tracy was going to go to Ocean City tomorrow afternoon.

There, she said, she'd re-group. Then, maybe, for a while, she'd go back to college. College, she said, was a good place to be until things started happening again.

Tony never called.

I wanted sleep. I was dizzy and nauseas.

"I'll miss you," I said, rolling onto my side, my back to Tracy.

"I'll miss you, too," she said, casually. Then, more seriously, "You know, I never think about you."

We were quiet.

"Not much to think about," I finally said.

"No," she said. "That's not what I mean. I think to you. I tell you stuff in my head, but I never ponder or contemplate you."

I didn't know if this was good or bad, but it was the last thing I remembered Tracy saying.

Tracy was still dressed when I awoke, but asleep with one leg slung across my hips. I slipped out from under her warmth and turned to look at her. Her hands were folded together under her cheek as though in prayer, and her facial expression was slightly pained: She looked like a angel. A hungover angel.

I would drink beer today. Lots of beer. And then for the next two days, I would be groggy and dehydrated. Then, on the third, I would be okay. This was my standard post-tequila procedure. The restaurant would most likely be slow this weekend. That was good.

I drove Tracy to the bus station. I drank Lite beer to ward off the headache and dry heaves. The day was beautiful: 72 summer degrees set on a backdrop of an orange, autumn sun. In the early evening, I took Casper to the beach, thinking the fresh air would do me good.

We walked north about a half mile towards the boardwalk before turning to head home. In the distance, I saw Doug sitting crossed-legged in the sand. He wore a peach-colored shirt and seemed to give off a small glow, a gaseous appearance like a gentle flame: I believed he could float. He made me remember when I had first moved to the shore and thought I was clairvoyant because as I walked on the beach I would see flashes of light - oranges, yellows, and greens - dancing off people passing by. This stopped, though, when I switched from hard contacts to soft ones.

As Casper and I approached, Doug's eyes flashed in our direction like two new, blue marbles in the sun. I recalled last night. The memory seemed to rush up from my stomach and heat my face. Doug looked in my directions and I smiled an apologetic, guilty smile.

"Hey," he called to me.

Casper, the murderer, acted non-chalant. He busied himself with seagulls. Doug stood, and I walked to meet him.

He put his hands in his pockets and looked down the beach thoughtfully, as though not quite sure of what he wanted to say. Bright clouds behind him framed his face like a silver screen. His eyebrows drew together. He spoke without looking at me.

"Did you," he paused, then continued. "Did you by any chance notice anyone in my yard yesterday?"

"No," I answered, "I had company," as though one negated the possibility of the other.

"Oh," he said. "Thanks." Then he faced me. "This may sound crazy," he said, "but, well, Cloe died, you see."

"Oh, gosh," I said, "I'm so sorry."

"No," he said. "It's okay. She was old. She had cancer. She was blind."

"I didn't know rabbits got cancer," I said, awkwardly.

I looked out at Casper, very much alive, splashing

in the surf. The softness of this man hurt me.

"Well," he said. "What's weird is that I buried her on the beach yesterday afternoon and then, this sounds crazy, but she was in her hutch this morning. Kind of stuffed in the back. "

I feared that I stank from lack of sleep and drinking. Beads of tequila-beer sweat rolled down my neck. My oyster heart was caught somewhere between my throat and stomach, and yet, I I suppressed a smile.

"It makes me wonder if I dreamed her dying in the first place," he said. "Dreamed burying her to wake up and find her dead."

"I didn't see anyone," I said. I looked back again towards the surf where Casper was digging in the sand.

"Casper!" I called, too shrill. Casper bounded over to where we stood. "That's very strange," I said. "I'm sorry about your rabbit."

"Thanks," he said, sadly.

I left.

I sat in my dark kitchen drinking another beer. I thought about Tracy. Yes. About. I remembered times she would say she didn't like women and how it always made me feel special, that somehow I was better than the rest, if she, who disliked women, liked me.

At the same time, I thought about leaving the shore

for the winter. Somehow, the two thoughts were one in the same. You needed to be with someone in order to live here during the off-season, someone who could stir and stir inactivity until the vacuum itself took on a presence and became a thing to be observed.

Doug's outside light flickered on, bright and round, like a small, low moon. Doug slid open the glass door and walked across his yard, sure-footed: He wore shoes. He swung one, then the other leg, easily over the fence, my platter tucked beneath his arm. He watched his feet, until he looked up and saw me watching his approach. Then, he smiled and held up his hand in greeting.

Casper's breath steamed the windows. He whined softly. He turned his head as if trying to tell me, "It's him."

"I know," I said out loud. My stomach stayed where it belonged, as did my heart. I figured Doug was probably beginning to realize what it's like to live here during the off-season; he's beginning to learn one must not differentiate too much between "making do" and "making love," a subtlety I was more familiar with than I cared to admit.

I rose from my seat to open the door. I'll talk to him. That's what he's looking for. I'll tell him about Tracy. See what he thinks.