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### Oleanders and fish

Anne Calcagno

*The University of Montana*

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OLEANDERS AND FISH

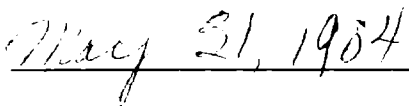
By  
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B.A., Williams College, 1979

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my teachers, because I have not learned alone. I extend my thanks, for always, to Joan Burns, Rick De Marinis, Richard Ford, John Gardner, Mary Lee Morse, William Pitt Root, and Richard Sewall. And especially to William Kittredge, who gave me more time, gentleness and wisdom than I could ever have expected to receive.

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Fiction Monthly

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The Slackwater Review

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TO SEE WITH

Because the leaves fell  
I saw the many that had waved greenly  
before  
as if I now borrowed green sunglasses  
formerly belonging to the deceased.

## LITTLE BOY

There are 34 trailers here  
and some are hooked  
while others have had the hooks  
removed  
because they are going to remain.

And little boys are growing  
with dust on their shorts  
on bikes that are  
too large or tiny.

The clouds like boats  
Sail overhead  
in a big sea, a universe  
no one sees the end to.

The boys are staring up.  
they wonder if it will rain.  
If it does  
there will be more or fewer  
flies  
in the swimming hole that's green  
and fishless.

When the 8yr olds grow bigger  
the court grows smaller  
and the rain falls like  
a wall, and the mud  
traps their bikes.

And their hearts feel pushed  
while their wiry  
biceps  
pull at spokes and wheels  
to get to someone else's trailer  
or simply to travel.

Just that it's so hard on some days  
and the tiny diamonds of ideas  
in their skulls  
begin to feel wrapped  
in a rough grey cloth  
and because their ideas  
don't have the shape or  
agility or manipulation  
of hands  
they can't seem to unwrap this.

And then  
when they ride  
they feel their heads  
that are pushing the breeze becoming  
fat stones.

This is why,  
sometimes,  
that one bony blue-eyed urchin  
who lives mainly  
outside my window  
screams at his friends  
then bangs his head  
one, two,  
against an oak.

I SAW HIM GONE

My mouth gaped. The oleander bushes swayed,  
shook off the imprint of the blue bus  
when it left the curb  
where it had packed and crushed and wadded  
the flowers.  
Some blooms died.  
The rest, like a lady shaking loose her hair  
or flipping off her bra,  
suddenly jiggled,  
swelled.

An oleander grew in my eyes: wet,  
cool and delicate  
as I saw  
the bus clearly, the month end.  
Emergent, I merged  
with remainders.

A thin ticket sprung  
him into the heat.

The road dust has settled.  
Oleander pistils trumpet  
like legs into the sun.  
My limbs walk abandoned  
ground.

I waved.

The past is sudden.

## CATERPILLARS

The people climbed through my ear  
and proceeded to eat like caterpillars  
the leaves in the folds of my brain  
which I tried to recuperate  
in vain.

While some thoughts went on their routes  
a few, then more  
began to fall through the jagged bites  
to a place  
where they did not forgive me  
though I was scared, too.

Aghast, unseen, they called on telephone lines  
they'd lashed to leaf stems  
like raw silk.

I was too few footholds and too many holes.

When I was spoken to  
the caterpillar people stole  
my reply, substituted theirs.  
I metamorphosed--  
opened like a perforated roof  
much life was going on  
among insects and plants  
while furious thoughts careened into the vegetation  
of trouble.  
And caterpillars wove cocoons  
anticipating the time when eggs  
would fertilize.

4

WHEN THEY DON'T MEET YOU

He came from far  
2,300 miles and an odd more.

He arrived to call her,  
a longing pressing the pulse  
within his heart.  
His eyes shot like pinballs  
at the city that crowded so much  
utter pushing indifference.

But she'd skipped town.  
Everything that had pulled him and still did so now  
began to separate  
into roses  
falling from the sky.

He began to run  
stopped at 7 telephone booths  
called everyone she knew  
who said her disappearance  
was incredible and sadly something they  
couldn't attend to.

He could think only  
my God, my heart  
meeting nothing.  
"She isn't here," he cried.  
"But IS violent."  
Some eyes turned on him  
like mirrors.

It was to her that he should speak  
and she should hold him  
in the strange city  
of magnificence, horror, and disconnection,  
like a child.

But he learned  
and did not learn  
that she could just go  
at variance  
into multiplicity.

NO PHOTOGRAPH OF THIS HOUSE

The world was in  
the Atlas  
and the lady and her husband  
were looking, turning pages  
to photographs  
by satellite.

They remembered, from school,  
that mountains,  
from satellites,  
surface less than a defect  
on an orange rind.

It made them sad.

The room they were in  
was lined with etchings, paintings:  
Goya, Braque, De Chirico.  
But never  
had anyone  
photographed this prominence  
for the sake of public information.

The room became abrupt,  
walls of art undiscovered.

The walls talked to them,  
they replied to the walls.  
The paintings were their victims  
and also their joy.  
The man saw the lady's profile  
in the drawing of a filly.  
The woman saw her husband's hand  
in the fingers of another.  
They clutched each other tightly  
and didn't hear the Atlas fall.

BALANCE OF THE LANDSCAPE

I am a giant  
woman on the hill  
above a head  
of curled red leaves  
and an elm  
which spits  
gold.

These trees eat--  
my delicious eyes,  
like minerals,  
risk depletion.  
Tender white  
they are prey.  
I am good.  
I will be tasted.

Below, the cobalt river  
curls, fingering  
into a leash  
I am afraid  
will lash me, as it  
does in certain dreams  
while leaves of the elm  
and sumac are  
torn off, and  
the mountain I've hypnotized  
lies sleek and small  
in my palm, like a mole.

I see so much  
so more is mine  
yet the quantity I can be  
taken by increases.

I see, color, hear  
an illusion of my size  
sufficient to overtake me.  
And what I know and watch  
leaves me eaten  
with less of a stomach  
and a larger appetite.



## PATRICIA'S JAW

Patricia's grey hair was like wire mesh: when she pushed it back, it stuck brittly in place. Joe called her eyes little blue birds. Silence was all around her mind. Her years were not quiet because he talked and talked, but his words had slowly become unspecific like a hum in a field. He poured gin into himself the way ground takes rain. When he fell flat dead asleep, she pulled him to bed, removed his shoes. He was a trapped man and cried because of it. In the mornings he held her tightly and rubbed his calloused hand through her hair. He called her 'urchin'. "You're my only honey," he'd say. "I still love you."

Their home was small and dark. Joe liked to sit at the kitchen table with its red and white checkered tablecloth. There were two chairs and one window to look out of. He said he needed her to be

there. She had become distracted, did not wash the dishes, sweep or move much. Her heart had shrunk into a tiny pebble and lay small and still. She thought: he's eating himself. But there was never a time to say this.

He would come home from work and slap his hat down, "Christ, ten years of the same crap. Patty come over here. Rub my back. They're breaking my bones. You know what construction makes you? A spineless slug, honey. They're hiring cheap young kids. But don't you worry; I'm making it so they can't afford to can me. Just appreciate that. Look at you-- Christ you're fat. What are you: four hundred pounds? I'm ashamed to take you out."

He did not mean what he said to her. He bought her presents, said: "Don't mention it." Once, it was a boxed set of five ball-point pens, with only three in it. The plastic box was new and it said "5". All evening, she worried about the disappeared pens. Tears began to slip out of her eyes. "Christ, there's never anything happy about you," Joe said. She bowed her head: tears plopped on the plastic and began to run off in little lines. "Oh, honey," Joe said. "It's OK. Don't I know it's a damned bad life."

His hands were large and heavy and, the third time he beat her, he broke her jaw so that they had to tie it up with wires at the hospital. They told her that because some bone chips had already slivered loose from another time, this was the last occasion she'd have to heal properly. The doctor said, "A jaw is sufficiently frail; you'd better think you need it."

They didn't allow Joe to visit her and the room was quiet, very white. There were moments when she heard people in the other rooms breathe in a strained way. She ate through straws. The nurses gave Patricia pads of paper. They had handed her magazines with photographs of battered women. Patricia hid them under her bed. The sunlight swept in on her sheets.

Patricia thought of momma's home with its clean flowered curtains and scrubbed surfaces, and momma wearing frilled aprons, brewing jams. The house smelled of baking. Her sheets were hung out to dry in the wind so her beds smelled sweet. Patricia had stumbled meekly through this home full of things momma was bringing to life. Momma ran after her, trying to fix her up. She'd say, "Heavens, take that dress off. I won't have you going around like a wrinkled up rag. You have got to learn to be more feminine. Patty, there's no man who likes carelessness in a woman." Momma would iron, sweating.

Joe had been muscular, enthusiastic, and he had swept her out of momma's house, seeming not to notice what Patricia could not do. Now they lived in a small dark hole. His thirst chewed him up. Once, while he talked, she noticed long dustballs hanging from the ceiling. She wondered how they had flown up. Momma didn't know that houses could become strange.

The nurses bustled through her bright room and looked at her with flat sympathetic eyes. Patricia wondered what was in their hearts. It scared her that they had said this was a last chance. She liked seeing the emerald summer trees out her window and the sky like a

sapphire. She drew on her pads and wrote about what she noticed. Women counselors had come to talk to her. They said: " Why do you let him do it? Ask yourself what your motivations are. The law is on your side." They spoke about separation, independence, oppression of women. The hum began in her head. "Write what you feel," they said. She wrote:

My husband always makes me listen to him. Please don't talk to me so much.

They did not come back and she was not sorry because she had not learned anything.

It was a short stay. Joe came to pick her up. "Honey, baby, I missed you so," he said. "I'm a mean sonofabitch but I love you, Pat. I'm just all wrong. You've got to forgive me please, Patty." He gripped the steering wheel in his large reddened hands. Black lines ran through the knuckles and fingertips, making her think about how many divisions skin has. Then she thought about the wires that pulled her jaw together. She wanted to sleep on the thin bed in the guest room. She took out one of the pads they had given her at the hospital and wrote:

Joey, I am very tired.

"I can't read while I'm driving," he said.

There were fewer fat summer trees as Joe neared the house. Frantic yellow grasses filled the horizon, whispering against the doors of the pick-up as it hit the narrow dirt road. The kitchen light was on and the house was spic and span. "I can't believe you're

going to have to write notes," Joe said. She wrote:

Joe I have to sleep alone. They're scared about my jaw.

He looked at it. "Did they talk to you funny over there?" he asked. "Hey look, I apologized. Those damned people don't have any rights to tell you where to sleep." But he let her sleep there. His eyes were peculiar, needy.

She stepped through the things thrown and scattered on the floor, cleared the bed and wrapped on clean sheets. That night she dreamed of emerald hills and willow trees and of trying to describe them. When she woke, she felt different, thinking that perhaps finding the right words to draw a picture of something made you see it better and love what you saw-- even trees, normal things. If you thought about the particular ways there were to say things maybe you'd care more about all you said and heard. She saw a new hope for her and Joe and she tried to write this to him. He thought her eccentric, thought they had drugged her at the hospital. He checked the vitamin capsules and protein powders the nurses had given her, and he disliked them.

"If they put anything in you, I'll kill them," he said. "And you better sharpen up honey, or I'm dumping this vegetarian shit in the garbage hole."

Patricia wrote frantically:

Joe, if I don't have those I'll die.

She shook it at him. A little hand seemed to grip her heart. "Yessir," Joe said. "The way I hear it, you're going to die if you don't get to sleep in that room, too."

Patricia was losing weight. Loose folds came on her throat and legs. Joe threw one of her pads away. Her body was shriveling up. Her heart would shrink. Then her words would fly away: her mind would remain only a hum. She began scavenging for paper and hid pieces in a drawer which, every morning, as soon as Joe left for work, she'd write and write on-- about parts of the house, space, individual crickets, grasses. She uncovered terrible complex detail: weeds thinner than skin, baby crickets' eyes. She hid her notes. Joe would come home, pour himself a gin. She saw it running in the lining of his stomach, a chewing stream.

"Patricia, you've got to get out of that room," he said. "You're getting lonely and peculiar."

She wrote:

Joe, it's a last chance. If my jaw doesn't fix up I won't be able to talk again. That's why I have to stay there.

He threw the note on the floor. "Listen," he said. "I can't stand this. You got me kow-towing to some special interpretation and private room business and the hell if I see you doing anything. Didn't they give you some deaf-and-dumb exercises to do? Hell, I bet they did. Now you get yourself practicing or I'm going to knock the damned words into you and not the way you like."

She jumped up from her chair. "Oh, honey," he said. "I didn't mean that. I swear, baby, I'll never hit you again. Oh honey, honey. I didn't mean to scare you."

The next evening he brought her a present in a crumpled brown

bag. Inside, there were colored hair ribbons marked with small black stains. "You don't have to say anything," Joe said. "You deserve them." He drank some gin. "Honey, I'm damned tired," he murmured. "But I do it for you, and for us. I'm bringing in the money. Those vitamin plasters cost a mint, but we manage, right? Now, you should start taking care of yourself so you don't keep shriveling up like a deflated balloon. The thing to do is get exercise."

It became night as he talked. She could see two stars. She was thinking about how big the heavens were outside, how she and Joe never looked out, and Joe's words became a drone. His face turned redder every night. Patricia thought they were sad there, and that she did not hate him, even when he hit her, and that she did not know how to make a change.

(He looked at her. Christ, her mouth was all stiff. He couldn't stand to see it wired up like a crate. Then again, a man had to look at a lot of things he couldn't stand. You might try to talk to people about it, but people had holes in their heads where their ears were supposed to be. The whole damn thing chewed you up, got to you. He tried to get it out of his system, talked, told Patty, but she didn't pull it out; she was always across the table, never nearer. What did she want out of him? She had a kind of space in her head-- or maybe it was like a piece of cotton, something kind of thick and soft and lost. He had thought he liked that, but it made him sad, and sometimes crazy. It made him wild how people had holes for their ears

and they let your words rush out of their minds. He felt such a hunger. He clutched his gin. Then he hated her, wept inside for hating.)

His fists pounded the table. As her eyelids shut, her head kept snapping to her chest. Suddenly she leapt in her chair, and stared disoriented at his eyes. "Oh, get the hell to bed," he said.

He lit the fireplace and murmured at the flames. His sweat poured. His head would fall against his shoulder, sullen and knocked out, soon. Early on, she had used to grow frantic, imagining the house blazing in a terrible pyre. But he would always catch her if she crept in. Once he had bought a banjo. She crept in at dawn. He opened one eye. "Honey, I'll play you 'Oh Susanna'," he said quickly. "Jesus, this is a happy song."

Joe refused to read any more notes, tossed them numerously to the floor. One evening, she wrote:

I want you to die.

He crumpled it. And when he talked she began writing more and more notes, thinking of all the things she felt, and they littered the floor.

When they took her wires out, Joe wanted to move back into the bedroom. She was thinking of how she sat on the steps outside, in the mornings, looking at the grasses, the way heat made little flies jump. and there were lost little flowers between them. Things she didn't know she knew were coming together. She remembered words from her



mother, a tree she used to climb on, and how white the hospital was like snow. She wanted her room.

When Joe slept with her, he called out strange words: weezoo, give us a lick, flap it up, baby go. She shut her eyes. He pushed and she felt she had to do it, and she was an animal like a dog or a pig. Before touching her, he would say, "It makes me sad we can't have a baby." Sometimes he did it two or three times. "Maybe you're a little fertile yet," he said. But she was unable to have children. She imagined babies in her, wanted them, to stop him.

In the hospital, she had begun getting strange heats. They examined her, expecting to diagnose an internal hurt, but they found she had started menopause.

Joe said, "Well, it'll be nice to have something warm in bed again. Thin as you are, you'll do. We'll get you fattened up."

She picked up a pad and began writing on it.

"You can talk now, damn it," he said.

She wrote:

I have menopause. I want to sleep in the guest room.

He threw it down. "I don't have to read any damned notes," he said.

She lifted it and smiled at him.

"For Christ's sake, what the hell's the matter with you?" Joe said. "Patricia it's over. You're OK."

He read the note. "My God, I don't care about that. Happens to every woman. Honey, don't let that bother you." She wanted her room.

She touched her jaw. He jumped up from his chair. "Listen, you're making me crazy," he said.

Patricia started to write a note. She felt she could make him listen. Suddenly, he slapped her.

She ran into her room and turned the key. Her cheek burned. Her jaw was a hot liquid. His sweat, his weight, it would smash and break her up like pieces of clay. When he had shattered her jaw, two teeth had broken, and the blood had come out snaking and spitting on the floor. He screamed, "My God, Patricia." But he didn't remember. He hit, hit. Patricia picked up Joe's pellet gun, thrown in the room long ago and forgotten. She inserted a pellet. She gathered all her papers and put them in her coat pocket. She took the money order. Joe had told momma that Patricia had tripped on the pick-up step and broken her jaw and they needed help with the hospital bills. When the money order had come, Patricia had hidden it with her papers. Joe shook the door.

"Damn bitch," he shouted.

His fist splintered the wood panel; his fingers wriggled through. They were pink, blind worms. They reached for the lock. Her heart beat hard. She lifted the gun. She had to be a warrior. Oh, how was it happening? Joe smashed in; she shot at his face, his hand clutched his forehead, he stumbled and fell. She ran out.

As she ran, she felt how awkward and brittle her body had become, her legs like iron rods. Joe always left his keys in the pick-up. She turned them in the lock. The engine started. She drove. The

pick-up shook on the dirt road. No neighbors would see. There were none. She reached asphalt; everything shouted in her ears: how she had always been fat, with no friends, and no babies, a shame to a husband and, worse now, transformed. She pushed on the accelerator. She wanted to touch her face. The car was going deeper and deeper into fields, dark in the night. She began to cry. And, after that, she felt something was being drawn from her. The car window was open. The wind grabbed at her. It pulled her hair apart. It was whirring things out of her. She felt alone.

In no time, pink climbed up everywhere, and all the grasses were cherry-color sticks, then rosy ones, ruffled up by ground winds. She saw that she was soft and pink, too, through the windshield, and felt that a prettiness had come to protect her, and she began to think about protection. She drove far into a dirt road and stopped the pick-up. Her jaw was OK and didn't hurt her. Placing her papers under her head, she lay down. She understood that she needed to get new licence plates, a new residence state.

Crickets jumped and rasped all around her truck. She leapt up: she had seen an eye bleeding, then Joe's face. He picked the wet eye out of his head and handed it to her.

The sun was brilliant, burning color out of the sky. The land was flat. Millions of insects flickered from the grasses. She was going out of her mind with thirst, and her hunger became dizziness. She started the pick-up. She had driven in contrary directions, zig-zagging. Following signs, she realized she was near South Dakota.

She recognized town names she had heard once or twice. She thought about how words changed, and became necessary places.

The farther she went, the more impossible it seemed for her to go back. She heard people call her criminal, saw how she had been gentle but had finished that. The pick-up surrounded her like a shield. She drove through ten towns afraid of stopping where there were waitresses with their hawk eyes and their plans to help the police. Her muscles and joints ached and her throat was a burning skillet. She wanted to find the words for all this, the things to write. She had to record the hills, where they rose up, and how the horizon yawned like a huge window. The road became a spool of black yarn and unwound where the sky was turning silver, heated. Then different species of birds cried in fields around curves from one another as if the fields were separate countries. Some puffed out of blue and purple breasts, another type flew on slender green feathers like leaves. And, in her sleep, she had nightmares of Joe. If she wrote them down, they might leave her.

In White Owl, she saw a laundromat. It was shady. blue inside, empty with many blue chairs. She parked. She found the bathroom, combed her hair, washed her face, and drank for a long time from the sink. She pulled out her paper and a pen and sat near the washing machines to write. It was very quiet. She scribbled out her harsh dreams, sweating. The road was dusty and sunlit. It was about noon; no one passed outside the laundromat windows.

"Most people have their own washing machines," a dry voice said

at her neck. Patricia clutched her paper. "But you don't have money for one." He laughed.

He was extremely thin, old, with many creases in his skin. Red blood vessels sprinkled through his cheekbones. Green veins ran up his temples, into his hair. He leaned a hand on her shoulder and she leapt up. "My God, I'm sorry," he said. "Nobody's afraid of me here."

She pulled her papers to herself, heading for her pick-up, but he came after her saying he was sorry again and again, asking her, please, to sit. He gave her two donuts and a coffee, and tried to understand what upset her. She shook her head and ate slowly. He began telling her things.

"I got a long life sweetie. I've been running this quarter and dimes place since I don't know when. At least it's mine, a hell of a lot better than what I tangled myself up with for my hare brained nephew. He's got me collecting rent from houses I have to drive twenty miles into the middle of nothing to get to. All sorts of people come down that black road, needing a place to stay. You bet you they're beating it back the way they came from after two months. Honey, humanity is fleeing. What are we all going to do if we've got nothing to stick to?"

He said he had half a mind to wish his nephew's places would burn down. Leave little black smudges in the grasses and be done for. Amen. He'd have his peace. "I'm sorry, hon, about how I upset you before. I guess a man doesn't really have a right to go around

touching other people, especially these days." Then he looked at her paper. "A letter?" he asked. She shook her head. "You writing love poems?" He winked at her. "Hell, I used to write poetry. It's a good thing to do."

He wore a baseball hat. His eyes were wide, dry, with miniscule veins cross-hatching the whites, gentle and preoccupied. She was thinking of the dream she'd been writing out. Joe had a hole in his head; he had just come back from the hospital where they had bandaged him up and tried to understand if he could think because all he kept crying, with fat tears falling on his shirt, was: "I wanted a baby, a tiny baby." They sent him home; he had to walk for miles. He sat in front of the fire, at home, watching the flames grow and be born from new twigs. Then it grew out of the fireplace, and he was happy because he liked it fertile. And it climbed onto his slippers and set his feet on fire. Joe could not get up. Patricia was shouting, "Water, Water!" but her feet were locked into the floor. Pages of her writing began floating in the air, multiplying, covering her view of him. Then he picked up his drink and threw it on the fire and it burst like an oil refinery. She saw fire shooting out of Joe's head. Patricia's hand was shaking. She spilled some coffee.

"You're sick, honey. You're very sick," the man said. "What's the matter?"

She looked sadly at the thin man. "The dreams will eat me. They're going to steal me. They make him bleed," she said.

"You talk like a poet," he said. "You got to watch out not to

get ill. It's a mean world. Don't you have a family, honey?"

"I can't have babies," Patricia said. "I need a home." She watched his eyes cautiously but they were mild. She murmured, "I don't like houses on a road. I would like a place to write, and I can pay."

"Maybe you can write about my laundromat. Would you like that? Hon, I've got a nice place for one person. I'll take you there. Now my name is Frank. You know what I'm going to call you? Pretty Eyes. How do you like that?"

They drove for awhile and reached a green house, all by itself. Frank opened the main door. On the ground floor, to the right, was another door. "Your neighbors," Frank said. "But not for long. They've got the itch, too; they'll be going to Florida. Maybe nobody's got grandchildren. You think that's it?" Short green steps lead to a landing with two doors. "OK, this one here is your private bathroom, and this one's your apartment," Frank said.

Patricia liked having two doors, two small places. The apartment was narrow, with a kitchenette at one end. The floors had broad wood panels and the wallpaper was flowered with pink and yellow roses on thorny stems which were grey and jagged. Each rose had five leaves. There was a bed without sheets. The windows stared out to a space of fields. "Momma sent me a check, but I have to change it first," Patricia said.

"Oh, sure honey. You come to the laundromat and pay me. You come and do your laundry for free, too. I've heard about artists

falling on hard times."

Patricia thought about how funny people's heads were; what they planted in them. Some sprouted lovely wild blossoms. Others grew mean.

(Joe had stood up and dried a trickle of blood. Damn her and her illness and strangeness. And damn himself for hurting her again. His hands were beasts. From the window he noticed the pick-up gone. Christ! She couldn't do this. He was going to see her sitting with the car parked half-way down the road, but he was out the door and he didn't. She was sick and crazed. He saw her disheveled in the truck. Patty had been fat and still; now she was skinny and what could she do? It was dark outside like a pit and he went in. The clock ticked. He saw how things set a man up to fail, to twist on himself. He loved her. Maybe now she was telling strangers everything. A black space opened up and began growing around him. He poured himself a gin, but he dashed it to the floor. He took another glass and poured gin and swallowed. It was illegal to leave like that; he had to catch her.)

The room was very still. The sun came in, in orange rectangles. the sky glowed, part violet and part blue. She found a cup. There was only water to drink. She took a bath. Every sound was loud. She thought about how she was nothing to the world. She was so hungry; there was no food. Patricia lay down on the mattress and shut her eyes tightly.



In the morning, she wrote a letter to her mother:

Dear momma, Joe lied to you about my jaw. It was he who smashed it.  
I left home. I am looking for a job and soon enough will get one  
because it's very good for women these days. I live in a beautiful  
flowered room, momma. You'll be proud of me. I need \$200.00 just to  
start me. Please can you lend it?

She wrote down the laundromat address Frank had given her, with a:

P.S. It would be very dangerous if Joe knew where I was. Thank you,  
momma.

Patricia searched through the cupboards and drawers. She found a fire escape ladder made of rope. It had rings that latched onto two hooks sticking out of the windowsill by the kitchenette. She didn't find anything else. She fished in her pants' pocket and lifted out the two teeth she had saved from her jaw smashing, then put them in the drawer with the rope. She was going to drive to Pierre. She stopped to ask Frank for directions. "Straight on route 34," he said. "Don't you let anyone talk to you funny and ruin that nice poetry you got inside, Pretty Eyes."

Patricia went to Goodwill and bought sheets, a pair of cotton pants, and shirts. She purchased a plate, glass, fork, knife and spoon, and a small bowl. A helper told her about a radio for \$2.50 and gave her hangers. The tellers were very fast and easy at the bank. And, at the Motor Vehicles building, a lady with silvery glasses was pleasant. Momma had given them money for the pick-up and

Patricia's name was on the registration. The lady handed over shiny new plates.

Frank was happy to see her back. She paid him. "We got our money matters settled, didn't we?" Frank said. "I'm telling you straight; I wish there were more like you."

From her apartment window, Patricia looked out to the sunset and the grasses with golden insects jumping in them. The air smelled like honey. Her papers, all her words, were laid out over the kitchen table. She turned on the radio and listened to "Wheeler Dealer", and the weather coming ahead, and the world, how it made decisions. The military said armies and missiles were creeping in. An old actress died in bed. A baby had its eyes operated on for free because his mother wrote to the President. She heard the neighbors' dog bark. The wind whistled as if this was the strangest place on earth.

Then her neighbors wrote her a note:

On week-ends don't turn the radio on so loud, please.

She had seen them. They saw her, and nodded their crunched up fat faces and shut the door behind them, on her. Their fat dog was tied to a chain and when it barked awhile the husband went out and kicked it. Then it whimpered.

After awhile, they wrote another note:

We don't know what kind of shoes you wear, but they stomp right over our heads. Could you please wear slippers?

She went for a walk. She stared into the low sun. A breeze seemed to run from it, to her, sweeping through her hair, rustling the

grasses in a topaz light. She tried to speak to it all but did not know what to say. Those people had complaint in their hearts. Their words were ugly, wanting to hush her. They knew nothing. She was scared they would discover everything. She had tried to write and poem and she had ached because another, new and dark face to words had hovered before her. Her answer wasn't so simple anymore. The breeze was fresh and kept blowing. She found wild irises tangled in the weeds; suddenly, she began clipping them with her fingernails. She gathered them up, but threw them down. They scattered, falling on their purple heads.

Frank came to visit her, in the morning, with an envelope. Her mother had written:

Are you all right? Love, momma , and enclosed a check.

Frank said, "I've missed you. You keep having your mail sent to the lanudromat. I've got to go now, to pick up people's rents. It's a sad thing. Folks barely open their curtains to you. Don't you ever think it's lonely, Pretty Eyes?"

She looked at him. She thought she wanted to say something nice to him, very softly, but she couldn't think what. She decided to write Frank a poem. It needed to be happy. In the morning, on a sheet of blue paper, she brought it to him:

He got a blue baseball cap  
 And the walls are azure.  
 The whirr's from the machines,  
 Making everybody clean.  
 You say. "Two quarters and a dime."  
 Boy, you are feeling just fine.  
 Your shirt is white  
 Ready to fight

The light  
Of the sun  
When you run for fun.  
Don't forget your laundromat:  
Maybe it's where you sat  
A lot and thought  
Eating a donut,  
Being a poet.

"It's fantastic. It's about you and me," Frank said. He put his arm around her. But his hand made her scared to move. She thought his hand would twist on her, if she upset him. She had made the poem a provocation. A dry noise caught in her throat. "Oh, honey," Frank said. "Didn't anyone ever thank you?"

"Oh," she said.

His hand tightened on her like a wrench. She didn't know why she had never found the way things should be done so she wouldn't become prey.

"I'm going to frame it, honey," Frank said softly. "Nobody'll hurt it."

Frank visited her a week later. "I met your brother. Where's he gone to? Did you see him?" When Frank left, Patricia drove to Pierre. A locksmith returned with her and installed a steel rod lock on her apartment door.

When it was dark and late, she heard a car drive up, then a knock on her neighbors' door. There were murmurs, then their door clicked shut. Voices began speaking underneath her, Joe's voice. She tried to imagine what he had said so as to be allowed inside their house. He knew how to talk. A wind rattled her windows. The wife said, "Why yes, we guessed it. And today with a man hammering at her door. The

landlord's been coming over, finding excuses to talk to her. We thought this wasn't regular. I'm sorry to hear this happened to you. A home's not a home any more. We thought he world'd gone crazy. You poor man. Well, we've only got a couple more weeks here, thank God."

Patricia's heart beat hard and jerky. She thought of Frank, how confused and hurt he was by people who ran.

Joe left. Patricia sat in her apartment and her food ran out. She could not sleep because of nightmares. Her sleeplessness made her dismayed every minute. She imagined escapes, but she saw Joe waiting for her. Police cars would surround her and the men would stare from their seats; they'd say: "an eye for an eye." She wouldn't be able to explain their misinterpretation to them. Empty fields stared at her; Joe's hands lifted. All she needed was her pick-up, but there was a one-way road out only. She thought this was a dream, how it all closed in on her so quickly.

He returned, visited the neighbors, and helped them unload boxes from their house for UPS. He looked strong and large and intent. The husband said,

"If you're going to stay here, you want the mutt?"

Joe said, "Sure, a man's best friend."

The fat husband muttered, "Yeah."

Joe took the boxes away. Her neighbors remained like guards. Patricia's eyes were red, shrinking under her lids. She wanted Frank to come, but she thought she would have to cover her face with her hands, and he wouldn't know what had happened. If she told him, he

would think he hadn't known her at all. She didn't want him to think she had lied.

When Frank came and knocked on her door, she did not move. He left mail in her box. Patricia watched him walk away and get into his car, thin and bent up. She fetched her mail. Joe had never written to her before:

I found you, honey. I ask forgiveness for everything I did. And if you're scared you injured me, don't worry. It was a scratch. I want to start a new life with you. I was always meant for you. You been lost, honey. I will wait. I am going to be downstairs when these neighbors are moved. Why don't you start being softened up? Patty, this is a love note, honey. Joe.

Patricia's heart hurt. Momma wrote, too:

Now, Patty, Joe wrote to me about what they tried to do to you at the hospital. The way they were doctrinating you with ideas of women's lib which I tell you only women who have no heart and salt in their brains are going to tell you. They try to make women like me to be of no account when it strikes me as funny that they probably never had a husband to love them. Joe told me how you went wild and he wants you to get the right kind of help. Anbd I want you to know that when you get home, then I'll come visit you and we'll have real good times together. Momma.

P.S. And I am not sending you any more moeny, for what you've done is wrong.

Patricia cried and the wet letters wrinkled. There was one more

to open:

Pretty Eyes, it said, I got the poem framed. I miss you. The afternoons are very hot. We'll have brush fires soon. You take special care of that poetry in you. Come and do your laundry soon.  
Frank.

Patricia thought about how many people you met who were lonely inside, like stray dogs. Then she remembered how she was being pursued. That was lonely, too. Patricia had tricked Frank; his heart got played with. Joe had discovered her and now he would always hold her. She would become numb and fat. She tried hard to remember how poetry made you see new patterns; there was something in her that she had to look for. The fields were quiet. Joe came into her mind, sitting in front of the fireplace; a drop of sweat fell in his gin, he drank it. He never noticed how he ate himself. He watched the fire. She had been staring at the sunset. The sky was orange. She saw clearly and knew what to do.

Her neighbors were leaving. They wore new straw hats. "It's Florida," they said.

"Hell, of a suntanning place," Joe said. "Don't mind me if I'm on your tail a short ways-- I've got to get to Pierre for licence plates now that I'll be installing myself in these parts."

The wife said, "We would like to buy you supper. You've been so nice to us and we wish you well. May we treat you?"

"I never turn down good company," Joe said. The cars left.

Patricia was startled. It was not a decision to be postponed.

She began to move fast. She removed the sheets from her bed and stretched them on the floor. She hung the blanket over a window, then crumpled newspaper into wads and placed them in the cupboards, on the chairs, and the sofa. She knew about insurance, the money that could be made. The radio had talked about it one day. Nobody would be hurt. She took her two old teeth out and put them on the floor. She put her poetry in her pocket. The teeth would be her, later. The doors had to be locked from the inside. She hung the rope ladder out the window. There would be money for everybody. Frank's life would be easier. Patricia lit a match. It was like lighting a birthday cake: her eyes shimmered. Little flames licked up, while the red sunset came in like rubies. It seemed to her maybe there was more strangeness than not, to win the world with.

She climbed down the ladder; no one was about. The dog barked. She had newspapers under her arm and tore up some dry grass. She locked the main door, surprised it had been open. She stuffed the pile of dry things part-way under the door and put three matches to the edges. Flames blew out of the upstairs windows. She climbed in the pick-up and began to drive. Her heart would open. She would find poems for this, of beginnings.

(He knew she listened behind the curtains. She would hear him talk about licence plates, would try to leave the house. He had to surprise her. He stopped down the road, thanked the old couple. He said he had forgotten some important papers in his suitcase. at their



house. On the seat next to him, was a bunch of purple violets. They were curling up fast. He had the keys to the house and he was coming in now. He saw Patricia's soft, plump hands, in his mind, and her worried eyes like tired little stars. When she had left, his solitude was like a tunnel. He thought his heart was burning him; he drank but he couldn't get cool enough. The drink grabbed him and pulled him to the God awful darkness. When he drove back, he didn't notice Patricia at the window. The pick-up was there. He held the violets and went up the stairs. He lifted each foot quietly. Then he went into the bathroom, shut the door, and tried to think of how to talk to her, to stop her from writing those damned deaf-and-dumb notes. He filled the sink with water for the flowers. He began to wash himself up a bit. He wanted to touch Patricia. He heard a rustling. There was a peculiar smell. Joe saw a piece of light lick up from under the bathroom door, but suddenly he was numb. One night, he had fallen into a drunken stupor. Startled by a noise, he had awoken staring into a huge fire. He had screamed. But it was just the hot fireplace, with calm, prancing flames. But they had followed him in his mind; they were a roar.)

## WATER IN THE ACQUARIUM

Jennifer Pearsall was an efficient teacher but her ideas wandered untidily as she walked home. She stared up at the London sky which she thought of as periwinkle blue, and felt lost and lovely. Her new dress was the color of the sky and, soon, she'd wear it. The sky brimmed with orange at the horizon. And at the edge of her mind a decision she had to make now reappeared.

Back and forth, along the green tiles of the pool edge, she pursued and corrected her swimmers every day. Jennifer Peersall was tall, lean, and punctual, changed her bathing suit three times a day, as each class changed, though she believed it was unnecessary for swimming instructors to descend into the water. She grew irritated with 'experimental' teaching methods which demanded that teacher and student 'share' experience. A cowardly approach, she said. The students were going to be in the water alone when they left her so why should they need her when she was there?

This was realistic: in her tours to other swimming centers, she'd watched classes where parents came as assistants. The children clung, the parents feared their children's fear. Jennifer could imagine a

boat overturning, people spilling all limbs into the cold sea, the children paralyzed because, first, they thought to grab their mothers.

She had private conferences with the family or parent of each entering student, explained this belief, and noted, philosophically, that contrary to much that was frantic in the twentieth century, her courses were carefully managed, determined. She taught the flutterkick, the crawl, the breaststroke, and floating. Her ritual, at the end of the introduction, was to point to two framed embroideries. One: "The turtle, not the hare, won the race." The other, with a stick figure pointing to the words: "Know thyself." With modesty, she added, "Of course, swimming is not life training."

Yet in a sense it was, because a kind of wild chance leapt into people and overturned instructions and then something more lifelike and intrusive and complex had to be handled and fixed, which had started out with swimming. This afternoon, a livid mother had demanded Nick's resignation. Nick, Jennifer Peersall's assistant, had lost his temper earlier in the day and struck a child. The girl had wept to her mother and the mother had come furiously to Ms Peersall's office. Jennifer Peersall had found herself defensive and intransigent, heard herself justify an unforgivable act; she too was horrified by physical abuse. She must fire Nick immediately, and disassociate herself. Now, she saw this clearly and wondered what misperception had entangled her. It was unusual for her to grasp a situation slowly. Lately, her mind was more out of place, her rules and order less concrete, more foreign to her. She must watch out.

She paused. It was not quite four-thirty, and Friday, the upcoming hours closely planned, her decision now made. The hands on her watch moved toward a pleasant evening. Her periwinkle dress lay pressed, with its silk scarf, and a cream slip, stretched along her bed, her black shoes, polished.

"Six o'clock will do, won't it?" Jason had said.

She stared up. The sky stretched far away, moist and even, changing colors. The pure air and simplicity and apricot grace of it made her hold her breath. The houses were quiet faces in the empty street. She drew in a sharp winter breath that jarred keenly in her chest, slivering like pure crystals. A breeze tried to funnel itself up her coat sleeves, and she could feel tiny goose bumps rising, and her skin felt suddenly alive, her limbs cold and supple, and she began thinking of her qualities. She had used to believe time should be grave, not used to stare at or contemplate oneself. "Life is in the mind, not in a mirror," mother would say. "It's God's spirit that gave you life. We'll have no primping around here." There were times when Jennifer wished she hadn't been seen. Those times remained indelible as if, inside her, change had stopped. When she was sixteen, Ivan Simpson had been giving her her first kiss. His tongue was sweet and ugly and curious like a small frog in her mouth. Lorna, a classmate, had suddenly tapped Jennifer on the shoulder. She said loudly, "Hey, you sure don't look like anything they show in the movies. Wait till this gets around." Lorna's big breasts flapped when she laughed. Jennifer had thrown Ivan off and run home, and

wept, denigrated. And maybe the only part that was wrong was being seen. In that way the body hurt you like a gate that wasn't supposed to be open: grazing creatures wandered out. And sometimes, with men, she would see animals trickling out and she was the pasture and she locked herself like a gate in front of them. She made each frightening encounter with a man, brief; cautious not to let him offend her physically.

But she was trim and young-looking: thirty-one: straight back, firm breasts. She walked with punctuated steps, tossing her dark blond hair curtly.

Suddenly she frowned and, for an instant, her anticipation of the evening worried her. She had so much to remember and it wasn't all in place.

He'd said, "Why'd you cut your hair like this? It's styled like a sponge. Tell you what: let it grow long...." He had just kissed her. He put his hand behind her head and drew her forcefully. She sat paralyzed in the seat, inept and immobile, not knowing how to want. Jason's hand touched her knee, then he said this about her hair. She slapped his hand away roughly. He clutched it to his breast. And she felt horrid, apologized. She saw he had only made a light comment, and she became awkward. Jason was piqued.

"Don't men tell you what they like? Well, I won't tell you if that's what you want."

"I don't like you to tell me what to look like. I didn't know

you were going to kiss me."

She sat straight, feeling every part of her turn grey, and thought she better go home. She'd seen his face coming nearer, his eyes wide.

Six Mondays ago, Jason McCurver had enrolled for swimming lessons. The pool director, Mrs.Chanson, introduced him to Jennifer as a reputable man, the friend of Mrs. Chanson's cousin. He would come on Monday and Wednesday with the thirteen year olds, the oldest group. "Mr. McCurver needs thorough instruction so give him your best. Jason, we have absolute trust in Ms Peersall's methods. She'll be a great help to you."

Jennifer did not trust Mrs. Chanson's reason for allowing an adult to register for a course at the Center. And was it for free? Jennifer had never taught an adult.

Mr. McCurver had stared at her with a discomfoting glint. He was just thirty, she guessed, and wore a crisp blue suit. His hands were in his pants' pockets: the shape of his knuckles bunched like knobs on the side of each leg.

He returned later that afternoon for the course. She proceeded to direct the class, walking along the rims of the pool, as usual, ordering the students to go toward the deep end, requiring them to blow into the water, and collect aluminum covered coins from the shallow bottom. Mr. McCurver lingered near the edge of the pool, remaining straight like a tree in a flood. Then he approached her,

staring up at her from the rim. "You have to help me, Ms Peersall."

"Mr McCurver, I have a rule. I remain out of water because it won't help you to learn if I'm near you. Swimming is an individual skill."

Mr. McCurver's nostrils flared. "Well, then I had better change my mind about this course. I am an adult, Ms. Peersall. I don't ask for help when I don't need it. But I do know my own limits. Which makes your theories ridiculous. You should know that."

He was unbecoming but Mrs. Chanson had her favorites, made Jennifer obligated to them: "Watch out for him," Mrs. Chanson would say, a command. Jennifer felt unusually warm. The teenagers held their aluminum coins, eavesdropping. "All right, Mr. McCurver. I'll assist you and you'll learn how to float on your back. I won't accompany you again."

She had stepped into the pool, lain Mr. McCurver on his back, and slid her arms under his shoulders and pelvic bones. "Relax, relax, tilt your head back," she continued to repeat.

Though he was buoyant in the water, he felt heavy to her. He would not shut his eyes and continued to watch her. There was some fear in his composure. Then, suddenly, she understood his anger. She felt him dependent in her arms, not unlike a child, and an overwhelming affection swelled in her for this man. He had pleaded for her help. His eyes shut for an instant and she grasped for his shoulder blades, to place her hands more firmly. Her face tilted close to his as she bent. The water lapped and bounced around her

waist. Suddenly he had flashed his eyes on her, harsh and suspicious. She snatched her hands away from him, dropped him. Her breaths were pounding out of her. She pressed her hand to her breast. Her neck jerked. Twisting and floundering, his arms smashed the water. But he stood up. The water was shallow.

"You bitch," he screamed.

She stared at him wild-eyed. She must disguise this professionally. Two of the students giggled, then a general tittering began. They watched this man whose fingers squeezed against one eye then the other, clearing the water out, while intermittently he swore: "Sadistic bitch," he shouted.

"This is how we test our students, Mr. McCurver. If you fall out of a boat, this is what will happen. But if you feel the treatment is unfair, you can leave." She managed to gather her wits about her like laundry from the rain. Jason McCurver walked out of the pool.

When the class was over, the students gone, she stood still listening to the faint churn of water from the cleaning filters. Each evening, alone, she crossed the pool for forty laps. Off the diving board, she sprung herself up into the silent air, aligned, sharp as a knife, anticipating her body's cut into the water, the water's quick way of lifting, then containing her, blue all around: healing, cool, flickering. Now the pool seemed to fill her eyes with his face, his arms lashing, and she thought she would feel the water full of limbs, and she went home.

Yet, he returned to class on Wednesday, on time. "My severe



teacher," he said, then he added quietly, "Please let me apologize for my behavior. Perhaps you'd let me buy you a cup of tea- if you have any extra time. There's a crucial matter I'd like the chance to explain to you."

"If it relates to your lessons, I will try to arrange that," she replied.

The tea parlor had flowered walls and a reddish sort of light. Mr. McCurver had driven. They ordered tea, and he did not wait long to speak. "Fear changes a person," he said. "This can't go on. I'm a salesman for a pharmaceutical company in Bristol. We've just formulated a product which we think will cure rheumatism in this century. We're going to champion it: five businessmen and myself have been commissioned to travel by ship to ports along the south coast, down to Plymouth, then toward Ipswich. Then to France. I speak French." He stuck out his open palm and pursed his lips. "J'ai pour vous un produit fantastique!" She smiled.

"Who knows what's happening to your body, being near water all day," he said. "Ms Peersall, I have to get out of the grip of this. I spent Augusts, as a boy, alone, in a sticky house, terrified of the insistence with which friends invited me to the shore, making myself cowardly with excuses. The sea is a nightmare for me. I must feel able to swim. No one knows this: it was a matter of pride."

"You should have told someone. Your behavior was inexcusable in the last class," she said.

"Will you help me?" He looked at her nervously.

Cold tea lingered in her cup, her fingers pressed tightly on the curved handle. She was not used to being talked to. Seven years of living independently had taught her to arrange and fill her time. She had never been chosen as a confidante. She always told herself that this solitude made her wise, unlike those distracted by many friends. She felt she knew about bitter worries, knew about secrets. Her most anxious hope was that one person might creep in with her in this confidential world. Only the two of them would know the mystery and, because they would never dare reveal it, they would share a magical world amidst all other concerns. A small thing in her seemed to move like a wild mouse.

As he drove her home, she found herself talking. "I was born near Brighton. My mother was a lifeguard and taught me how to swim when I was three. She just threw me in the water: some children will paddle instinctively. Mother said that if you knew air and water you had a greater sense of God."

"What did your father say?"

"He didn't know how to swim." She liked talking about her family. A week later, Jason kissed her.

The blue sky was dimming. Now she startled herself by almost walking past her building. These past three weeks she had walked in a reverie, filled with fertile reconstructions. She felt newly gentle. She greeted the custodian, who was knitting pink booties for her grandchild, and climbed up four flights of steps to her apartment.

When she opened the door, she felt pleased. The apartment revealed a fresh attitude, though it was so familiar to her. It was partially the clothes on the bed, lying crisply ironed, that made the difference. Her anticipation of the evening almost relied on the dress itself.

She undressed for her shower, then stepped into the hot stall, with a dark blue oil capsule in her fingers, the shower pouring in a stream over her shoulders, down her hips. She pressed the capsule along her legs until it burst and the oil slipped to her toes. She shampooed: it smelled like carnations, then she swathed herself in a large towel and walked into the bedroom. She put cream and make-up on.

Tonight she was missing a "Women Instructor's League" meeting, a small negligence. But she was resolved to be cautious, keep her relationship a secret. As her mother always said: "Don't trust any woman when it comes to a man. Any woman will get you in the back for a man." She saw mother lifting the tablecloth, the pattern of flowers and gates curving in the air as she shook it, then dropped it back on the table, cleared of crumbs, the flowers once more straight and clean. Mother had said, "There'll be the time when you'll be coming up roses. There'll be a time."

She put on her cream-white slip, pale blue hose and the dress. She slipped on her shoes, and adjusted her camel's hair coat on the bed with the scarf around its collar, a black compact waiting next to it. Then she filled a glass with selzer water and went into the

living room to wait. She ran her fingers over her dress. Then she studied her hand reaching for her glass on the table next to the couch. Her fingers were nimble and sinuous and, lately, she noticed herself touching things with abandon, as if they extended from her, and increased her.

Even after his confession, her diffidence had lingered, though she wasn't the weaker party. But, recently, she believed their intimacy. A few mornings ago, while she'd been directing a class along the length of the pool, it occurred to her she could lose him through mistrust. The hours had been long until he arrived and then the teenagers were obstacles as she watched him swim. She still shied from disclosing her secrets. Jason said their relationship was a pure undiscovered island. Sometimes she thought he treasured their secludedness more than she did. Tonight, she would meet his companions.

He had said, "You should know them, but I don't want swimming to come up. Would you consider playing out a disguise? You could pretend you're my cousin; it would be more relaxed for you, too; you wouldn't be under inspection. My buddies and I are all from Bristol, you know: grew up together. You can think of them as my arms, legs—extremely attached." He laughed.

She was thinking she would linger in Jason's mind a bit like a buoy when he overcame his fear of water. "I could be a cashier, Jason," she said patiently, imagining holding coins in her hand. It

occurred to her that cashiers often wore too much make-up.

"Why is it I can always count on you?" Jason laughed.

She found herself thinking of his phrase, 'I know my own limits.' It helped her understand him. A man who knew what he wanted: he wanted her.

One afternoon, he had said, "It's quite a coincidence, Ms Peersall. The apartment I'm renting has an aquarium. I think you would like it. I can't entertain you for long because I have a dinner appointment, but would you visit?"

His door was to the right, off a long hallway. She kept her distance. When the lights did not work, he guessed there was a main switch control that the cleaning lady had shut off, yet he could not find it. But an eerie green light danced in the room. "At least the aquarium's working," he exclaimed. Then in an awkward voice he said, "You see that green light is a little like your eyes. Ms. Peersall, your eyes are mysterious fishes."

He left her alone, seated on a double bed that jutted into the living room. The aquarium rested on a table on one side of the bed. Strange nimble water reflections fell on her skirt. When he returned, he sat next to her and gazed at the fish. Then he took her hand evenly and tenderly and held it awhile. Inside, she began throbbing: the noise intensified and battered against the green, lapping patterns. His face, with green ribbons, twisted and bounced before her. He called her curls 'tendrils' and touched them. His hand became strong and playful and another hand crossed over to her waist.

She kept her eyes open, her back a column. The green waves shimmered over his neck and ears and he kissed her throat and leaned her back so fast on the bed, and she was fighting him- but he was speaking.

"Green eyes...my lovely strong woman...my woman to hold...my teacher,yes...green eyes...oh, hold me now...."

Why did she shut her eyes?

In the morning, yellow-gold light dilated on the bedspread. She lay curled up, not touching Jason. Her clothes were scattered along the floor, on top of the bedspread, the chair. She shook. She grabbed her hose: her fingers stumbled pulling them on. She shot furtive glances at Jason with each bit of clothing she gathered to herself, not wanting him to awaken, to find her half-naked. She moved faster and faster. When she had only her shoes left to put on, she had not known what to do. She sat in a chair that faced the bed and waited, incapable of weeping because she could not bear any noise, unable to leave. The sun grew dangerously.

" What are you doing there ?" Jason bellowed suddenly. "Oh, Jennifer, you look so cold. Why didn't you make yourself some tea? I didn't leave the window open, did I? Do you have to leave now? When do you have to be at work?"

The questions were formidable. She stood up. He climbed toward her. "It will be different, my lovely, when I meet you for tonight's lesson," he said, and squeezed her hand.

She worried all morning. She did not eat lunch. She went for a walk. He had defiled her. She put her hands to her face. She must

never see him again.

But when he arrived, he took her hand and said, "I'm ready for my lesson. I give myself up to you. Can I see you tonight? You aren't tired, my lovely?" She had given up to him, and now it all went on.

Every moment away from him, she relived these events. The buzzer rang. She said, "Hello," into the intercom.

"Jennifer, do you mind if I don't come up? The car is running and we're late."

She hung up, walked into her room. She twirled herself from side to side in front of the mirror, watching her dress. She felt as if she had a small flower or a fly in her throat, and gathered up her coat, holding it tightly.

"Oh, you're beautiful. I'm not going to like watching you talk to other men," he said as she sat down.

"We'll see," she replied, and smiled at him.

He touched her thigh. "For God's sake, don't talk about swimming."

"You don't have to say that." She looked at him, feeling her eyes growing hot quickly. "Why shouldn't you trust me?"

"I should," he said.

He kissed her and turned on the radio and they drove swiftly past stoplights and neon announcements. The city glittered with decorations and signals.

As they entered the restaurant, Jason waved his arm at a long

table of men. Jennifer noticed there were no other ladies with them. "You're going to be our Queen Bee," Jason whispered in her ear.

She walked rigid and proper at his side. When they reached the table, one of the men leaned forward, raising his glass. "Ah, a victim for Casanova," he said. He had a short round body and a neck the same thickness as most of his head. His hair was white blond, cropped. The rest of the men stood up and bowed in a reserved way as Jason introduced Jennifer Peersall to them.

The short man said, "I'm just the clown around here. No harm intended. Pleased to meet you." He stretched his hand. The men waited gravely for her pronouncement. Jason looked abashed. She felt most of all that they should all sit down.

"Of course," she said, smiled pleasantly, and shook his hand.

"Where did you find this pretty lady?" a gaunt man with thin black eyes asked.

"I've had her for years. Jennifer's my cousin, twice removed. She's a cashier."

"What a becoming dress, Miss Peersall," the man said.

Jason said, "Let me introduce Jim to you."

"I say we go by our nick-names," Jim said. "My name's Forest. I like being outdoors."

Jason went on, "Right. You'll never remember all this, Jennifer, but no matter: the loudmouth is 'Banana'. 'French Fry' over here, loves potatoes." He was stout with a wide-nostriled nose, and a tight quick, grin. "'Tubes' father was a plumber, George is 'G'. Jesus



we've had these names since we were teenagers. Aunt Marie should've brought you to visit us when we were all younger."

The men drank beer, but Jason ordered Jennifer a bottle of white wine. They chose their meals, then spoke boisterously, gregariously. Voices swam around her. She let them wander and didn't listen. Smoke and wine made her heady: little fish seemed to flick and tingle her skin, pursuing currents along her capillaries. She watched Jason, the men's affection for him. His name was 'Baby'. They laughed hard at his jokes. He bought a round of beers. Her limbs began to feel rubbery.

"Do you know that if I did have to choose a roommate on that ship, Baby would be my pick?" Forest said to Ms. Peersall.

Banana interrupted, "I say: never trust a man until you meet his company." He scrutinized her. She felt he was a thief and tried to hold something close to herself but didn't know what. He was a snake charmer, and made her skin feel cold.

Forest said, "We all have the company of this pretty cousin." And he asked her questions about her work as a cashier.

Jason flicked his hand to her knee, under the table, rubbing a sign of his assurance into her. She thought of him tenderly. The wine became rather hot inside her, her head feeling a bit fat, her hands weighing on the table like plump hedgehogs. The men ordered more beer. They discussed their work. Some doubted the ship's success, some said they were prepared for Friday. They wondered about the locals they'd encounter. Forest asked Jennifer if she met many

types herself, while cashiering. He knew there were many bloody types but it was fascinating, too. Confidently, she explained that in every country of the world you could find the same types: you had to have a set of rules and act on principle.

Forest said, "Well that's true." He smiled at her.

She smiled back, and imagined wearing red lipstick as a cashier, and what if, instead of her hands, she used pet hedgehogs to carry money back and forth from the register to the customers' hands. Then she was lifting her hands up and down on the table.

"Are you playing chess?" Banana asked.

"Check-mate!" she cried.

"Mating's good for you," he said.

"Watch your damn tongue," Jason said.

"Watch mine," Jennifer interrupted, and clicked her tongue, then pouted. "I've got a good tongue." She started to laugh and laugh and then felt strange as if suddenly it was brilliant daylight and her skin had turned utterly white. Her eyes wide, she turned to Jason.

"Sweet, you'd better not drink any more wine," he said. The men looked away.

The meal arrived and the portions were large: potatoes, green beans, tiny carrots and peas, steaks or sausages. The men laughed and reminisced about their home town. Jennifer nodded under the heat and confusion, hazed and crowded in, hypnotized. Jason placed his arm on the back of her chair and whispered, "I want to be alone with you."

When the meal was finished, the plates in disarray, pushed to the

center of the table, the room had become quiet, most of the people in the restaurant having left. The conversation began to flag, and Jason said, "I must take this young lady home."

Jason's friends shook her hand and bowed, said they hoped to see her again. Jennifer answered, "But I hope so also." Jason winked at them and waved.

In the car, she asked, "Did I drink too much?" She toyed with her scarf.

"You did, but darling, that's fine. Everything went wonderfully." Her nervousness increased. She wondered if she'd failed him, wanted to reach for him, but she'd made things fettered, unclean. In her mind, a great wind seemed to be rushing, and she felt she was trying to collect scattering leaves, only her nerves remaining tense, like branches. Stars glittered lightly in the sky.

Jason opened the door and switched on a lamp. The orange glow spread through the room. The eerie green aquarium waves almost disappeared. He took off his coat and sat next to her on the bed, turning off the light. He pushed her down. Jennifer pummeled his back playfully but he was on her, insistent and hurried, and she wanted him so near her and then for a moment she felt the skin on her belly being tugged upwards and she became aware her dress was crumpling. It bunched on her leg and he pressed himself against the lump. He said, "Jennifer, we have only a week. I want you, lovely. Let me come so close, close."

Suddenly, she was crying. She had never wept in front of a man

before. And she embraced him while she cried, and told him he was the finest swimmer, and she would wait for him and write letters to the ports....

Jason hushed her abruptly. He said, "Listen!" They could hear shuffling noises in the hall, then voices. "It's them," he whispered in her ear. "They know I'm home. It's Banana and the rest. Lie quiet and they'll leave."

He clenched her arm. She grew clammy. She pressed into the mattress to disappear, but felt like she was touching and being wrapped in wet, ruined paper.

"Leaving your friends out in the cold, hey?" they shouted. Then the voices melted.

"Come kiss me. They're gone," Jason said. "And we have something to complete." He tugged at her leg.

"Jason, hush!" They'll know I'm here." Their proximity pressed on top of her. Her heart was about to crack her. "Jason, they found us," she whispered, grabbing his arm.

"They didn't," Jason said. "They're gone." He put his arms around her and pulled her close. "What twerps," he said. Jennifer began weeping again. He would leave. Jason breathed violently and said many things. And Jennifer clutched him. And now, when they were finished, they lay in the darkness for some minutes. She smoothed his hair and kissed his ears.

"My hero-swimmer," she called him.

He stepped out of bed and pulled his pants on. "Don't miss me."

he said and walked into the bathroom. She glided her legs along the smooth expanse of the mattress.

"Heavy breathing, huh?" she heard from the wall. "Quite a lover, don't you think? What energy. Gives his all."

She grabbed the sheets to her. The walls spoke. She saw lights under the hallway door. Along its border, shadows began to move. "I say a good meal is bound to fill you up with passion. Hey Forest, bet you can't match that style?"

"You want to try me?" They were pounding on the door. "Stingy. Baby's stingy," someone cried. She shut her eyes. She did not trust this, as if it were a dream. The doorknob was rattling. She screamed.

Jason burst out of the bathroom.

"Everyone should get their share," a voice called into the wall. They began shouting, "Knock, knock, knock."

"Get the hell out of here!" Jason yelled. "Piss off, you assholes. I'm calling the police. Oh Jennifer," he said. He came over to her side. "It's being drunk. They've done it again. We'll ignore them."

"Jason, they're going to come in!" she screamed, grasping onto him. Then she said wildly, "What do you mean: 'again'? Jason they heard-- what we did-- Jason, why did you say 'again'?"

"Oh God, I'm sorry, Jennifer. I didn't expect this. Listen. it'll be all right. It's just a joke. They'll go in a bit. They're embarrassed, too, deep down."

He ran his fingers through her hair. She felt little animals running in her, scrambling and scratching at her because she was a cage. And then the cage caught on fire.

"Jennifer, we'll be all right," he said. "We've got to sleep it off."

She tried to remember all that he had said to her, just now. It was atrocious. "Jason, did you know they were there?" she demanded.

"Sleep now," he said. "You've got to sleep."

She could not lie still. Echoes boomeranged against the walls and her skull. She wanted to dredge and purify. Instead, her hand began to grow and swelled and soared over her head, upswinging, leaden, like a wild pendulum, thrashed up, and then it careened down to crash on Jason's cheek, slapping the bone. His whole body jerked. Then he slithered off the bed, stood up, and walked into the bathroom. The water began running. There were no other sounds. She was a marble anchor on the bed. He returned, undid his pants, and climbed into bed again. "I put cold water on that," he said.

He splayed his back to her. She remained still. Eventually even his breathing abated. Then she dressed herself. But could not leave; couldn't counteract the stern logic that said adjust, that included this as part of the earth, and night, and what she had never received from loneliness. And, then, not knowing what she expected for sure of their intimacy, she crept back into bed, in her clothes, only removing her shoes. And lay waiting for morning near Jason.

## LOCUSTVILLE, OHIO

Pauline loved a man. He believed she couldn't have enough of possessing men, though she never went to bed with any but him. Pauline was righteous and her friends agreed with her and, when she came home late to him, she shouted that he was wrong to trap her in. She would return from walks, from shopping, later and later, expecting him to realize that he could lose her by torment. She said time was a vast coincidental space. He would wait up. His eyes got lean, threatening. She grew flamboyant, waiting for his breaking point and change. Three men called her frequently and she went out to meet them. She told John in a burst of feeling that men, like jewels, could be kept enclosed in glass. They were brilliant: she didn't touch them. Her requirements increased: John should participate in household tasks, she wanted him to spend money on her. But his heart grew colder. He had become ridiculous to himself.

He told her that, as he tried to change, she changed in his eyes.

He believed that she had grabbed his fears with hands like hooks, and hung them in his skin. She argued so that veins swelled in her throat, and her eyes became shiny and weasel-like, and he had slapped her. He had left. He did not return.

She had waited for days until it became evident that this is what it had come to. At night, she lay still as death, listening to a drum in the room, mechanical and loud. He had pierced through to an understanding of her she had never imagined. It had changed her. She had never expected to find that she might be revealing herself to the world in ways she was invisible to. Others suddenly made her highly nervous. She clicked like a lock, called up the three men and told them each never to talk to her again.

She moved to a new house, Victorian, with intricate woodwork. The terrace seemed a broad piece of lace. It was prettily dotted with pots of orange marigolds. Onto it, every day, and absolutely punctual, at 4:00 p.m., came the old ladies from the second floor. They sat in their white wicker chairs and took fresh air. They hypnotized Pauline, became a habit to watch. Their ankles were spindly, and their faces white. One of them spoke less than the others, but dressed more gaudily. Pauline took photographs of them from her attic window, unseen, and her quiet room became a telescope.

Their lives, so regular, had the circumference of a merry-go-round, their brains seemed thin as doilies. Those doilies wove shallow conversations into the air, indicating how little people had to say to each other. She planned to make them an artistic



project, entitle it: "Old Age and Leisure Time" or "Women on the Brink". She didn't quite know what her purpose was in choosing them however. She felt sad and angry. She would forget John, her friends. She would feel powerful, but locked. Then, again, sometimes, when she placed her eye to the viewer and squared the possible picture, whatever it was that she had thought was mundane, took on the possibility of being symbolic, took on some idea that could be eternal. And, at these moments, she retreated into herself, feeling that she had been absent, hearing the metallic noise of a train like a sudden alarm.

Pauline's window looked out on narrow branches rife with dark jade leaves. Jefferson street was lush with oaks and elms. In other places with no shade, the heat was in the nineties and stark.

"No, I don't like this town, " Pauline had said to a friend she didn't trust any more. "But I can't tell where I would be better. Tell me if it matters at all, anyways, where you are. You can't leave yourself." She didn't feel interested in places. She was keenly interested in ignorance, in everything a person didn't know about things while they were happening. She would see his face and it was a departing stranger to her.

So she started reading newspapers, went out to buy one daily. The ladies watched her. She was tall, thin-limbed, sallow. Her face was oval, with a fleshy purplish mouth, and her dark hair had a purplish tint. Her eyes were narrow and green like leaves. One of the women, Marie, had once said, "There she goes like a purple iris."

and the others had nodded. They knew how lucky Pauline was to be in the flower of her youth.

As Pauline walked this morning, the mixture of air and light was moist and warm, somewhat like a hand laying on her. The day would be muggy and this hand which held her in it reminded her that she was, still, strange to herself. Recently, she had gone for a walk down a path in Locustville's park. The park merged indistinctly into a wilderness area with wooded trails and hills. She had found herself in a field rioting with dandelions, lupins, and bell-shaped fuschia flowers. She had picked so many, so wildly, and found herself with a glorious bundle, standing there like a mythological nymph. Then, abruptly, they had seemed exaggerated symbols of her solitude. She did not want to give them to herself, had carried them like an unwanted child she was unable to just drop into the field. She had rung the ladies' doorbell. They had thanked her for them effusively, embarrassing her. She felt small. She did not want to need anyone. She disliked the old ladies for being a part of her mistake. Their faces were pasty and they had made suh a fuss.

The women: Teresa, Rona, Marie, and Betty, had momentarily stepped out on the terrace this morning. Because of the humidity, the flies were out, randy, irksome. The marigolds hung immobile, like things unalive.

"Oh, they're a plague. Grab the flyswatters," Rona said.

flicking her swatter. "That dog has flies in his eyes. Poor thing, he can't blink enough."

Teresa's hands were arthritic, curved in like birds' claws. Rona took care of her, hitting flies she was helpless against.

"They like perfume too much," Marie said. Her hand fluttered up and down like a handkerchief.

Betty relished the heat. The women's sensitivities were making her nervous. Just in this, at least, their sharing of the outside and the sun, she wanted the women with her. The sun filtered into one's skin with a warmth like youth.

"There she is," Rona said. She pointed at their neighbor. "Where are her parents? She's getting skinnier and bonier every day. I can't stand to think of her withering up in that little attic. It's sad, really."

Betty went indoors, shutting first her ears, then her eyes. She did not want the world to be an accordion squashing her between its folds and whine. She believed a person must feel within herself a vigorous, free, wind-meeting landscape, the Great Plains: one needed that. But she felt crowded. Her body was like a wildlife sanctuary. Conversations multiplied vivid as birds inside her. She was seventy-one, and had a memory for conversations. They fluttered and beat against her rib cage. Between flies and dinner plans, Teresa, Marie, and Rona had told their stories. They were plaintive, like organ music, like crows. Betty didn't know if they heard it like she did. She could no longer hear how one pain differed from another:

they mixed and there was no more longing. Rona said, "God played on me. I loved my husband like a little boy. I cooked the fish he caught. He was always misplacing his glasses, and he brought me daisies or carnations. I had so much. Now it's hard on me."

Each woman was an instrument of fate. They added up. They were multiplication, they increased, they got uglier, like crustaceans. Betty felt death flying in and around baking smells, chair legs. The women were birds and numbers, music, thick and craggy-shelled. And Betty wanted more and more to be freed. She had told Teresa because Teresa had lived in New York City, knew painters, had been an educated playwright. Betty was an artist. Teresa said, "But, Betty, art doesn't make you free. Your hopes choke you and you become so hungry for attention that the good in your heart turns callous and greedy. Art doesn't help the world. It doesn't help anyone."

Betty had just read a book about the Expressionists. The men (because there were no women in it) often picked up their bags and left. They had an idea of horizons, unmet places for their paints. Betty had poured her heart out of herself like a horizon, into paint, like the men.

Pauline climbed up the steps with her paper. In her attic, she took out a book of Edward Weston's photographs and began studying them. She pulled out her camera, focused it by habit, leaned against her window, sharp-eyed, but the women were gone. She heard the clacking of a train. Trains slipped through the back of the town like

snakes, hampered occasionally by dazed mothers or hallucinating drunks, but seemed prepared for this, slowed down, patient.

Transgressors stumbled away, protected. It was nice. In other towns, trains charged like possessed demons: you could kill yourself more easily. She looked at Weston's photographs of a pepper, a naked woman. She studied how he brought out his subjects. She wanted to see correctly so her life would not fail her, and she concentrated.

After awhile, it was time for lunch and she had no food. She had closed the book, wanted tomatoes, walked over to the train station to cross the tracks over toward town but a train was blocking her way. A short Indian with long black braids climbed up the supports between two cars and slipped himself down to the other side. Impulsively, Pauline followed him. She raised her arms, latched onto the railings, pulled herself up. Then she leaned her body back and imagined riding the wind. She was five feet off the ground and giddy, freed, part of an escape, a Western. Her muscles felt lean, taut. She felt speed, though everything was still, felt stealth and power. She jumped to the other side like a puma, when a car drove up in front of her down the railroad sidewalk and a man began shouting.

"And when you're crippled and in a wheelchair because those cogs have smashed up your thighs, then what are you going to say to yourself? This is my job. I work in insurance. I treat cases like you, young women disabled for life. Don't you have any idea how fast trains move? Don't you ever read the newspapers? Did you hear about those kids that got their car stuck on the tracks and there's not one

of them left? What do you think that does to their families?"

She said, "I'm sorry. Don't shout."

"So what am I supposed to do to get you to understand?" the man yelled. He sat in a shiny emerald car with a red face as if he had been sunburned or he drank or his blood vessel system was poor.

"I understand," Pauline replied.

"Well, that'll do you good," he said.

At four o'clock, the women were on the terrace. They wore hats. The air was leaden and the flies whined. Betty had on a yellow and purple print shirt and a yellow skirt.

"I'm lucky not to have asthma," Marie said.

Betty pulled at her paint-splattered cuticles and breathed deeply. "I'm going to move to a studio," she said.

"What's the matter?" Rona asked.

"It'll make me happy," Betty said.

The hem of Rona's skirt slid up her knees. She pushed it down.

"It's lonely," Marie said.

"I know that kind of decision. Art makes people solitary," Teresa said. "It plays a game on you."

"It might be a financial strain on you. Even the price of chicken is climbing," Rona said. "Betty, you shouldn't leave us."

"We can have dinner together every evening," Betty replied.

"When Harry died," Marie said. "I could not stand eating breakfast alone. The piece of toast, the fried egg, the orange juice.

my coffee-- they were all so single. I thought I would go crazy hearing. My teeth, tongue. I would think of chicks when I ate an egg, think I devoured life." Marie sat very still with her hands in her lap, taking the sun. "You'll want to talk badly," she said.

"I'll telephone you," Betty said. She was staring intently at the thick, spacious, grey sky letting the conversation recede like a migrating flock. She looked at the attic window. She had heard the young girl crying today. The other day, the girl had bought a summer dress at the thriftshop where Betty worked, saying just audibly. "I love cotton."

Betty had bought a cotton shirt, thinking about what it was like to love it. She wondered what the girl had lost. She decided to go upstairs.

She knocked on Pauline's door. The paint was cracking. Through the door, she said, "I hope I'm not bothering you. I'll be moving to a studio soon. I wanted to say good-bye."

The room was very sparse. Pauline's eyes were red. There were a few tomatoes on her desk top, on a plate, but the tomatoes were not cut open.

"You must wash those before you eat them," Betty said. "Because of insecticides." The girl looked sadder. "They look tasty."

"Perhaps," Pauline said. Betty looked garish inside the white room. Pauline looked away. She had been wondering what composed an error and why she could not avoid humiliation. She accepted that there are systems of authority formed to correct and reprimand you

when you didn't help yourself or were not wise enough to. But she did not understand why she could not do things in the right way. The world was interminable and she shrank and she was accused. She saw John's face, her own, and Weston's, and every bit of flesh was mean.

"My husband died of gastro-intestinal poisoning: that's why I'm so careful," Betty said. "How's your day been?"

Pauline replied, "Fine. I have a lot of free time lately. There's nothing wrong with that."

"Not at all," Betty said. She had the impulse to pat Pauline's hand and she did. Pauline stared at her. Her leaf-like eyes narrowed. "Do you like Locustville?" Betty asked.

"I like the summer," Pauline said.

"You love cotton, don't you?"

"Somewhat," Pauline said. She scrutinized Betty, noticed that Betty's hands were spotted brown, leopard-like. People acquired all sorts of homely things they didn't really want. The cause was not even personal. She thought they would photograph well, strangely. There were traces of paint in the cuticles. She looked up to study Betty's face.

"Will you come to the marketplace with me tomorrow?" Betty asked.

Betty walked slowly. Her sandals made a smacking suction sound. Her hat ribbons bounced. The air was pristine, the leaves still. Pauline was quiet. She shivered and felt cold and her heart ached.



She felt stale. She blamed Betty. She had felt obliged. Betty was glancing up at the cool and brilliant sky, the air fresh and stinging her pores, widening her eyes, her movements. The girl was a mystery, a silent iris.

Every imaginable vegetable and fruit was being sold. Beach umbrellas shaded the vendors and half of the wares. Betty took her time, bartering for prices. Pauline felt like a pet on a leash.

"Granddaughter?" a man asked. He winked.

His skin was dark. It occurred to Pauline that the sun was in his food and in his skin. Perhaps it added something to him. She wondered if he ever got the soil out from under his nails, if his thoughts were abstract as he bent to the ground. She thought him lucky to be able to blame the elements for failures on his land but, suddenly, she felt she was utterly wrong, that, in other people's lives the things she judged were not merely props. She couldn't imagine what was inside him. She began to feel people's spirits wandering around her, as they selected fruit. She was staring very carefully, dumbstruck.

Betty grabbed Pauline's hand and tugged her toward a water fountain. "Now shut your eyes. It'll be cold."

"No, I don't like this sort of thing," Pauline said.

"Hush, you don't know," Betty said. She knew how much time had already been wasted. Now she rushed. Her husband had disliked the

smell of paints. She switched from oils to acrylics to watercolors. He didn't like the subjects of her paintings, saying he didn't want their home to look amateur, didn't want any canvases up. Joe said she wasn't an artist. He was overweight. His jowls were heavy and Betty felt like an appendage. She had stopped liking to paint because he explained that she was embarrassing others. Slowly, she distrusted any compliments she received. Her pleasure had begun to appear selfish. She felt like a woman who crochets too many potholders, and gives them as presents every holiday. There is nothing wrong with potholders, but perhaps in never getting tired of them. After she and her husband separated and their children were married, she began to paint in the naive style because she admired Grandma Moses whose paintings made people happy. Joe was dead. In the summertime, she felt younger; peaches and plums and corn were ready to burst. She ate everything fresh, feeling that she was eating flecks of the sun. It was her favorite season to paint in and she painted it: orchard hills, children skipping rope.

"Close your eyes," Betty said.

The plum was ripe, cool from the water, sweet, biting cleanly between her teeth. It tasted dense and golden. She ate the rest of it. Betty seemed childish. She took Pauline's free hand and held it. Pauline could feel Betty's heart pulse beating like an insect in her fingers.

"You're too thin," Betty said.

When Pauline was eight years old, one day, in a supermarket, mother had let go of her hand to pick ingredients off the shelves and Pauline stared at the cake mixes: Cherry Vanilla, German Chocolate, Hungarian Swirl, feeling hungry and imagining birthdays. Then she was lost, but she knew her mother was there, just that she couldn't find the cart, the hem of her skirt, her hand. Pauline felt very small and alone. She began to cry. They announced her name over the supermarket and gave her an Almond Joy. Still, she was very careful after that not to let go of a hand. Until she was ten, when she decided she liked losing herself, her mother, and wandered around multi-colored aisles, thinking there was so much to know, so much to eat. She liked it when supermarket people saved her and she felt she didn't need it. Her mother said Pauline had changed into a nuisance. Pauline liked seeing very clearly that she could hold on or let go.

The light was strong and direct, making the white of the Victorian house seem effulgent and pure. The curls in the woodwork were distinct, a lovely ornateness. The pots of marigolds swung slowly, barely, in an imperceptible breeze. People were passing in the street. Pauline was thinking of how her fingers had been pincers gripping a man's heart. She had thought to pull it so close, but it vanished. She saw an animal biting its way out of a trap. People in the street were oblivious to this. She and Betty were taking their time. She did not know anything about Betty, about what Betty saw. The taste of the plum was dank and dry in Pauline's mouth like a

strange form of communion.

"You'll have to see my paintings," Betty said. Then she whispered passionately, "I know why you love cotton. And I love summer. I won't paint death." She took Pauline's hand.

"Death comes when it wants to," Pauline said. "What are you saying about painting?"

"Yes, it'll come," Betty said. "Thank you for the company."

"I have a lot of time."

"I'm sorry. I must have taken up much of your time," Betty said. Then she said, "Listen-- you can throw out all you were growing on all your life. A lot of new things begin to be born. That's the way not to die yet."

When Betty went inside, Rona said, "Did you talk to that girl about how thin she is?"

"Yes," Betty said.

"She needs to eat," Rona said.

Up in her room, Pauline was feeling envious of the kind of love Betty must have had in her life, of how she must have been embraced, sorely wanted. Like a sweet plum. She thought she would never have that to say about herself. She could photograph fruit. She thought that when you made a face, scene, branch or fruit into a square of art, you changed the true facts, the way the world was crowded with things that didn't see themselves: eyeless, deadened things, flaccid.

Weston took a rock with moss, a dehydrated trunk; they became brilliant, instead of just wet or dry. You could perfect the world if you dissected seconds from minutes: you got hope if you gleaned the concentrate. The scene's bare error was your document. Her heart stormed. Then she was left over; she was a conglomerate. Still, love went flying around existence like a flecked bird: it searched. She was thinking that a heart is not much bigger than what two palms can cup, large enough to hate the world. And she did not want it so large.

## MARTINE

(The word "Zia" means "aunt", in Italian)

Martine waited longest at the door because she had nothing to forget. She had everything on: pink shorts, pink and white striped shirt, white sandals. She held the round door knob with both hands clamped around the metal, pretended she was stuck to it, leaned back with her arms taut, and swung, the door gliding open fast, her back arched. She did this again and again. Each time the door opened and her her head swept into the opening, she could see Claire standing in the yellow outfit that spread like a balloon at her bottom, staring at Martine. Claire had begun to scream, "Teen, Teen," and Martine had begun to feel powerful-- become a pliant coconut palm, fighting storm winds through the door, bending, rebounding, cringing. Zia came, ushering Claire into the landing, "Martine, you know the knob will break and you'll fall. Come on, let's go," with her keys jangling, the door hard to lock. Martine grabbed Zia around the waist. "You are the despair of my life," Zia said.

She was looking after the two pliable, blond, small girls, her city neighbors' children. They grabbed onto her thighs, her her

hands, turning to her like small mirrors, growing borwn and plump in the Sicilian sun. They were hers for six weeks.

The landing was cold and quiet, made of large green and orange stones, followed then by white steps. Claire took a long time going down, using her left foot first, staring at the steps. The swelling part of her outfit cranked up, out and down like an accordion. Martine followed one step behind. She tested her balance, staying on one foot, twisting the other like a corkscrew around her leg, until the next step was freed. Then she pressed into the wall like a piece of gum, to pass them, sprinted down, jumping the last three steps, her knees sending pins into her head. She put her hand into Zia's mailbox, broken and left open because Zia didn't want it to break again and have the mail stuck in it. It was empty. She stared out the glass door and began humming. In the car, she opened the window when she sang so her voice flew to the sky and to everyone. The building was a microphone. The song enlarged into a chorus. Once, here, when she'd sung the national anthem, hearing it grow, swelling, a lady who had short black hair, and a one-piece bathing suit, and was a friend of Zia's had asked her to stop. She had her hand at her forehead, almost whispering. She asked Martine where she had learned to treat the national anthem with such disrespect.

"There is a time and place for such things. Our children are not educated anymore. The nation is changing. There was a time when our country had dignity and pride."

"Hush, Martine," Zia had said.

Bands played it loudly: people stood still. It vanished like a snowflake. The building changed into gigantic shadows, multiplications of the lady's face, a hundred hands flying tensely to their ears.

At the beach, Zia whispered, "Don't worry about her."

Martine tried to climb onto her lap, pushing her face up to Zia's. Claire was in her lap and Zia wouldn't put her down because she didn't want her to wander onto the hot sand.

Zia clutched Claire. Claire's hair was fuzzy and her right foot dangled. Martine watched Zia's green bag which hung on the end of her outstretched arm as if her arm was a pole. The cloth curved at the bottom with wide thick folds like the lap of Zia's skirt when she sat down. Again and again, it hovered over the next step, about to collide, but, like a bird, it swooped low, rising suddenly into the air.

Zia's arms were thick and suntanned. They changed things. When she beat an egg yolk in the morning, with sugar, it rose, yellow and soft, the sweetest thing to eat. "It's pure protein; your hair will be so shiny," she said. The eggs she bought had tiny grey feathers stuck to them which didn't fall off. Martine ate one, then two and, once, three in the morning. "You really like them?" Zia said. Martine pretended she was putting Zia in her stomach.

Zia selected apricots, plums and oranges from wooden crates. She said, "Squeeze them lightly. If they're ripe, they'll be tender."



She said when you baked a cake the flour must be light enough to float on a breeze and Martine sifted and sifted. The cake was warm when Martine ate it. Claire took naps, and Zia told Martine about when she'd worked in an office: she stood up on top of her desk, imitating how the authoritative boss acted at meetings, then the boss had walked in. Later, he asked her to marry him, but he was too old. She didn't marry. Martine was Zia's little girl, Zia said so.

"And I'm the despair of your life?" Martine asked.

"Oh yes, you are," Zia said. "And you're my treasure, too. You're a fairy tale girl."

"Am I your favorite?" Martine asked.

"Yes, that's a secret. Do you know how to keep a secret?" Martine put her head in Zia's lap. Zia made her hair into a braid. Martine wanted never to leave.

She became twenty years younger with them. They repeated her words like marionettes. She taught Martine old sayings: Martine carried a pad of paper around with her, following Zia on the terrace while she hung the clothes out to dry. "Zia, you said that one already."

"Wait as minute. Did I tell you: 'Beauty is only skin deep'?"

Zia wore a straw hat with a red ribbon around it. Underneath she wore a red bikini her stomach folded out of. At the beach, her bottoms swung like fat peaches. She said, "You and Claire are little

moths and I'm a lamp. When you flutter around, you distract any eyes from me."

Martine would say, "Tell me a story."

"You are the despair of my life," Zia said.

There were steps outside and inside the building. Cactuses and geraniums were everywhere. The sun played like brilliant music crackling over the gravel, humming in their hair. Cats stretched over the steps, purring. Martine scraped them under the neck. They distended their backs, squinted their eyes. At home, Tootsie ran from her because she'd cut his whispers when they'd grown long. Claire climbed down carefully.

"And don't forget," Zia said. "Walk against the wall when the sidewalk ends. Touch the wall with your fingertip."

The sidewalk was broken intermittently by jutting porches, stores, and restaurant property on which tables had been set down, the sidewalk walled off and taken in. Across the road, over the hedge, was the long beach, filling with people. They had to walk down aways to their particular section. The road curved, marked by huge mirrors which showed cars approaching from sharp turns, appearing as if out of the bottom of a thick glass, over the black asphalt. "They are real as deaths," Zia said, and they watched the mirrors. "If anything should happen to you, I would die."

Claire began yelling, "Teen, Teen," while Martine was making peculiar faces at her.

"Watch the mirror," Zia said. "And don't forget to behave. The

beach isn't our private property." Then she whispered to Martine, "We're lucky to be allowed on this beach because it belongs to the sisters. I paid the lifeguard."

The nuns came down twice a day with their children who came each summer. They sat in rows of chairs with blue umbrellas, barefoot, white tunics sashed around their waists. They kept one hand at their heads because the headpieces caught in the wind, and swung like gulls. Zia nodded at them. She said the children were orphans. There were other people on the beach who didn't belong with the nuns.

Zia was saying, "How can I put the umbrella on the pole if you don't keep still?" Hot sand grains shifted into Claire's sandals and she began to cry. Zia kissed her, rubbed her feet, and removed the yellow cotton outfit, while Martine undressed herself. She told Zia she couldn't unlatch her sandals, and Zia bent down to help her. Martine walked to the water. She turned around, squinted at Zia, and then went in. She dove her hands onto bottom rocks, exploring for shells, thinking about octopuses. Zia had overturned in a boat at sea. Now she would not go swimming though she still went in boats: when she rowed she sang songs. She told Martine to take her bathing suit off to get the sun in all er pores like a nymph.

"Are you a nymph?" Martine asked.

"No, I'm a crustacean," Zia said.

Zia brought Claire down to the water. It was noon, hot and brash, the waves meek, towing lightly, retrieving, then murmuring up quietly again. Martine was splashing Claire a bit and Claire always

said, "Teen, Teen." Zia pulled some water up over her shoulders and arms, and it began to run soaking lines into her bathing suit. "I'm going back to the chair," she said. "These legs aren't all muscle. 'All that glitters is not gold', Martine. Watch your sister."

Sometimes Martine pulled Claire by the legs in the dry sand, using her bottom to carve out a smooth path to shoot marbles on. The other game was this, and she began to play it: she kept her back to the water, her hands around Claire's stomach, holding Claire in front of her, waiting for when the water would wander up. Martine bent forward, looked between Claire's legs. Just before the water ran up to sheet over her feet, she lifted Claire and beat the wave. Claire was crying out, "Wet, wet," and Martine dangled her again, the ripple curls swirling between her toes, the sand wet and running back, swallowing away. Then up again and down. Claire was very soft.

Zia said the liner, the Michelangelo passed the beach twice in July. The haze was like a skin on the horizon when it passed, now. Its wake slipped under the water, long and powerful. A slim lady with a green terrycloth turban walked close to Martine and called out, "Hey. come here, get out of the water John Michael-- ." Martine looked up at the rows of chairs with ladies whose thighs, stomachs and arms sparkled with greasy diamonds. Their faces, with their eyes shut, turned like yellow sunflowers toward the sun. Zia was talking to a nun, then she went to her chair, and tilted her head back, looking sleepy. Martine watched her, and Zia's eyes closed. Claire said, "Wet, wet."

The wake reached the square life buoy, slapped it, and the buoy upswung high, the teenagers on it flat, laughing, with sea-wide eyes, laughing at the edge of the wake as it left them and surged up from the sudden vertical, shallow rock

face. Martine lifted Claire, her bottom to the sky and waves, the ripples murmuring, as she heard the laughter in the water, turned and saw a phenomenon, the way a wave was climbing high, growing on top of her, amazing. She opened her fingers and ran the dry sand to Zia.

Something was startled on the beach. Umbrellas, sun, tans were a postcard shot. No one moved. Then as if a postcard had broken loose, five or six people were running to the water, the edge where Martine had been playing between the whirls and foam heaving back to the sea, to find the other little girl's head, instead they found the sand flat and began crying to each other, searching again, dizzy, unwarned. Zia's eyes had been somnolent, closing, then re-opening to the dazzling water, the girls streaked with sunlight. The water was level, opened like a mouth. She screamed. Martine was at her, clutching her leg as if to chain her, but she pushed her off. Then Zia was running, her hands at her head, her head awry. "Down there, down there, please," she was crying out. "Some of you men--" she was screaming.

The old lifeguard looked up from his deck of cards in nervous apprehension. He started to run, paused: there were people at the edge, no one called him, but he began running again. He began to notice people who now bent over the water, their hands hitting the

surface of it frantically. On the beach chairs, people broke the tilt of their heads on the cloth and stretched them, looking, awakened, curious, uncomfortable. Mothers were dragging their children onto the sand. The nuns called loudly to their orphans.

Martine watched from near the chair. She watched Zia's red bikini, Zia in the water, and the people in the water in a line, now. Zia's voice called out, "My God, oh help us." Martine began to cry. her fingers became dry and strangely stiff and she stared at the men's hands slapping the water. Between her hands she remembered the warm shape, gone, then all things took on a distinct light, separated and pure, and indifferent to her. She walked toward Zia to reach her. And if she could get her arms around her, Zia couldn't leave and would hold her the way, once before, when Zia had cried, she had kept Martine in her arms. Zia's bottom stuck out and the lifeguard was pulling her wrist. Then Zia was running into the deep water. Suddenly, Martine latched onto a man's arm, holding tight. he flyswatted her down onto the thick sand, and she lunged at him and bit his shin. he was shouting at the beach. Someone pulled Martine up by the armpit. It was the lady who lived across the hall.

She pulled Martine to Zia's chair, then looked at her. "We'll go home," she said. "And stop that crying." Then she brought Martine over to the showers the nuns used. "Wash all that sand out of your bathing suit," she said. The water splattered on the wooden slats and down into the sand, a dark splotch. Martine turned the water off and she could hear the sea climbing up and swooshing back between the

voices ruffling down at the edge of the water, the people crowded there so she couldn't see Zia. Then the lady began pulling her over the dry and crinkled sand, and Martine began crying out, "Zia! Zia!"

"Now you hush. How much trouble do you want to cause her?" the lady said. "Put your sandals on." The lady held her hand tightly, going up the cement steps. Martine could hear the cars on the road. The lady looked at the large mirror, then they crossed, and reached the gravel area where it was quiet like in the mornings, after shopping, when everyone had already left for the beach. She saw the cats and stopped crying, the sun warming her before she stepped into the building's tense shadows and began to climb, trying not to make a sound, up the white steps.

## A RIVER FAT WITH LIFE

His destination was his home town, Tuscania. Piero was counting on this day. He had been feeling pale, slipping from himself, and in a recurring nightmare he fell into a river. When he had first started having the dream, the terror of drowning made him thrash and scream. But he never sank, and saw something else happening. The river was a chemical, stripped the color from his skin, his weight. His limbs became so light he had nothing to lift. There was no struggle, just disappearance. He was afraid he would die in his sleep.

Piero drove. Emilia, his wife, was next to him. She was his age: thirty-eight. His eyelids sweated. The sun hit farms, terracotta rooftiles, sheep, cows and chickens, transforming what it touched into the color of orange roses. His two guests, Sarah and Tony, were Americans and Tony lived upstairs, alone. From time to time, he and Tony, a philosophy professor at the American University in Rome, went out for a drink. Tony'd been growing fat, his black, wiry hair thinning. The girl had been one of Tony's students, was lithe and



quiet, waiting out the spring listlessly, aware of vague promises and directions to take, Tony said.

"So you want to give her direction?" Piero had asked.

Tony replied, "Sarah's been wanting to get out to the countryside. We could all go. It's May, after all." Because Tony appeared awkward about being alone with Sarah, Piero wondered if she had a nasty streak in her.

Piero had grown excited planning an expedition to the Maremma which he'd explained to them was once Etruscan land, impenetrable to Roman warriors, until malaria had taken over. His Tuscanians were Etruscan descendants. The town mastered its hill with seven ancient towers.

His eyes were marbled with red veins because he hadn't slept. He drank into the late hours, full of philosophy, talking to Emilia. When she fell asleep, he turned to newspapers, the political reports, the sorry conditions, furious that revolutions turned inactive, that the governments of men were merely a cause for print to repeat itself.

Piero turned to Tony. "We're in the Maremma now. There are horses that run wild here."

They stopped to fill up with gas and Sarah watched four chickens clamber up a small rise, their anxious heads pecking at the ground, then the sky. They suddenly jerked into the orange light, their heads bright. They turned and ran back down the rise.

"The sun scared the chickens," Piero said. "Little cowards. Like people. People sleep too much, Sarah. Or they're busy running around

like chickens. I'll show you the real life, real men, today."

"He's so proud," Emilia said.

Piero ran straight at curves, pitched up sharply, and rose toward emerald leaves. The countryside was blossoming and rich and glittering. Piero motioned at a hill in the distance. It was surrounded by towers like thin necks. They peered crookedly into the sky, curved away from the fat landscape. The sun was a herald. His guests shifted in the back seat.

"Tuscania," Piero said. "Smell the air. It's young and sweet. It's rich," He stuck his arm out the window. He saw color filling the air, evidence so brilliant and contrary to his dream, a refusal of it.

"Yes, yes, open the windows," Sarah said suddenly. "Tony, look at all the animals." She had been whispering, "I feel carsick." Scattered sheep and cows stared at them through fences. Tony looked at her. Sarah was a vegetarian.

"It's all thriving," he said, and noticed her long throat.

"Old man, you're going to get more than you asked for," Piero said.

"Good," Tony said.

Piero wiped the sweat from under his eyes. "Good enough to make you weep." he said. He noticed that Tony's eyes, which were round like small brown dishes, stared blankly, oddly preoccupied. And he wanted Tony to be directed, aware and lively with these sights. The sun was climbing, the stone barn was just outside Tuscania, the farmers near and waiting. In his heart, Piero felt their call, knew such familiar

hands would slap him on the back.

Men rose up eagerly to greet them. Sarah had a nervous, long-lashed glance and lovely legs and they liked her.

"Sarah," Tony said, introducing her to the men.

"Now for our greeting, " Piero shouted, and he pulled wine out of the car. "Glasses for my guests," he cried. When these were brought, he poured red wine like a waterfall. Sarah watched her wine drip for awhile, bleeding over the cut glass design. She saw, on a grill, a line of little flat fishes, blue, and grey and green with open tiny mouths. Two men put their hands on her warmly and pointed to the catch she was staring at, while she removed their hands.

"When I hooked these fish, the light was barely pink," one of the men said to her. "I walked to the river in the dark."

"With me," the other said.

"And what did you do while it was dark?" A third man slapped them on the back.

Piero came near her, "That river gives up the sweetest fish. It's fat with life. I grew up on it."

"They look good to eat," Tony said.

"Now, in Rome, I find myself staring at the Tiber," Piero replied.

Sarah stared at the grill, thinking: There was a language in them before they died so this hooking is a theft that pops into people's mouths, oily and bittersweet. Poor fish.

"Come along now," Piero shouted. "I'll show you a forest of

umbrella pines like a sacred grove."

Emilia walked cheerfully to Piero's side, cautious in her high heels, dignified and unruffled.

Tony slipped his hand into Sarah's. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Holding your hand," he said. She pulled away. "Why are you so lovely and so tight?" he asked. Then he said, "I'm sorry."

"We could enjoy this," she said, her glance beginning to slip away from him, furtive. He remembered how she would ask a question, utterly interesting, and it would vanish from him as he stared at her white fingers or her collarbone, the thin v-cup in its center. She was passionate about the early Greeks and they'd grown to be friends through the subject. He had used to hand her scraps of paper with scrawled names of books.

Piero turned around. He wanted them to feel included. He felt invigorated-- by smells, the manure, the sweet candy-like whiff of dried pine needles. The girl was staring at him. "Come on, old man," he called back.

Tony waved. The girl caught up.

Pine needles shifted under their feet, like Pick-Up-Sticks. For twenty feet up there were only emptied stark branches, fingering rusty and unperturbed, dead from the shade. The light was bluish. Dark green plumed out high above. Some of the men had been following behind, and now they all stopped together.

"Where can you find such peace? Listen to the wind," Piero cried

out. He tilted his head far back. Then he said, "Did you hear that?"

"My God," someone shouted. Four of the men stumbled away.

Exclamations and names echoed through the air and faded.

"Where?" Emilia asked.

And others were saying, "What? What?" while more that had heard ran off.

Sarah and Emilia peered at each other, then turned their eyes toward the trees, searching, but there was no sign of what had cried. The wind whispered, strange noises entered their minds. They wanted to hear. Two men reappeared through the trees. They spoke to Piero.

"It's Gino's. Stupid animal. Gino'll have to pay; the car was dented. Ah, the gate wasn't shut."

Four men carried the sheep. The head wobbled loosely and its eyes were green. Sarah lifted her hand to her throat.

"OK, Let's find the meat," one of them said, a butcher.

They tied the big animal up, roped splay-legged to the branches. The butcher slit him open. They saw his left side crushed completely, the meat broken in small pieces, deep in blood.

"Hardly half of him'll be worth anything," the butcher pronounced.

Sarah drank her wine, quickly, remained transfixed. She watched the sheep come apart: they were so fast and eager to it. The butcher skinned it. The hide dropped, folded softly on the needles. Bolts of blood fell on the curled fleece. The butcher handed pieces of meat to the men to be taken away. Some held the meat over their heads and

danced off with drops of blood falling into their hair. Like a ceremony. Of death, dismantling. Watch. Their hands are like mechanical levers, in conjunction, on a route, fierce as habit.

Piero poured wine into her glass. He watched the butcher's beautiful precision. Death bled profusely. Men were getting their meat. He saw adjustment, correction, honesty and a butcher of skill.

"Sarah, Sarah," he said. "This is an important lesson. Do you see how capable these people are? Nothing is wasted. The sheep makes lambs, then it dies. And these people use everything that's left. This is how dead things continue to live through us. We're filled. We don't want to be a supermarket country like the USA. We want to know life and death."

He laughed. Tony walked away. Piero stared up at the sky. "Dear God," he said and left.

She was alone with the butcher and he cut the last of it. He threw glances and little smiles in her direction. The flavor of the wine was dry in her throat.

"Sheep are so stupid," he said. "They'll go right for a car and smack--" he slapped the heels of his palms together, "And look at how it ruins that nice meat."

He came near her. The knife hung loosely in his hand.

"Your pretty little stomach would fly into pieces, too, wouldn't it, if you got hit? I would like eating you, too." He laughed. He touched her arm. The blood sank into her shirt. She looked up and saw the head of the sheep dangled on the branches.

"Now look what you've done," Sarah said.

"Did it scare you, sweetie?" he asked.

She returned to the barn. The fish were cooking. A large wooden table was set with plates and cutlery. and the high ceiling made the air cool and vast and slightly dark. The blood, through her shirt, was wet and stuck to her skin. Tony came near her. "Don't go away from me, here," she asked him. "These men are funny."

"What happened to you arm?"

"The butcher," she said.

"You stayed alone with him a long time," Tony said. And he wondered what she had said that he couldn't re-appropriate from the man, and it was dismal that he wanted her to stay by him. The discussions of closed books waited for him, while he felt an ache in his brain and his groin. Often, she couldn't be found though he telephoned and searched in his mind. He depleted himself. A loop of her reddish hair rested, curled on the stain on her shirt and he wanted to lift it. Sarah walked over to the table.

Piero was shaking hands with the butcher. He smelled the fish and the cheese, and the wine was strong; everything fed him. The men brought platters of cheese, and the fish surrounded by fat olives.

"They look so delicate," Sarah said to Emilia.

"They are," Emilia said. "You can't even buy them in Rome".

"Eat, drink, and be merry," Piero shouted.

A fat man sat next to Sarah and cut a slice out of a fresh white round of cheese, marking it with half-moon grey fingerprints. "Here."

he said. "Do you know I have six children. My wife died. I don't know why--she killed herself, you see. I have a little one, just four. What am I going to do? She was not easy, then she jumped out a window. People saw her. Do you want to marry?" he asked, and put his hand on her knee.

Piero called out, "Tony would you like to buy some of that meat from Gino? No chemicals in that animal and a good price."

"Let me think about it," Tony said.

Emilia turned to Sarah, "Do you like mutton? I'll show you how to make a special dish."

"Gino's offering you a real favor," Piero said. He got up and walked over to him. "It'd be a nice gesture," he said. Did Tony understand his position as a guest, the offerings, the feast, a day's work?

"That butcher's got fast hands," Tony said. "We'll see. Sarah doesn't like meat."

"That was a master craftsman," Piero answered. It occurred to him that something wasn't working, and he felt his face grow hot. Around him, people were laughing and passing plates.

"The fish is delicious," Tony said.

Sarah smiled sympathetically at the widowed man. Two men at the end of the table called out. "Watch out for him." They guffawed.

"I'd marry you," the man said. "You're beautiful."

"She isn't eating," Piero shouted across the table at Sarah.

"It's Sunday, you must eat," the widower said to Sarah, and he



lifted a fish and put it to her lips.

"No, please. I'm a vegetarian. I can't eat fish," she said.

"Ah, nobody here's that kind," the man said to her.

"Is something the matter?" Piero cried out and the men looked at her.

"Not at all," the fat man said.

"Give her wine," Piero exclaimed. "Where are you going to get food like this? People like this?" What was it with the two of them? Tony was dispassionate. Ingratitude. It was offensive to his friends. The day was giving itself to them. Did anyone need explanations?

Emilia was sitting next to Piero with a napkin pulled over her shirt. She split her two fishes with her knife and fork and they broke open evenly. She put a slice of lemon on her fork and squeezed the juice. Piero nudged her, pinched her cheek. "Don't get fat."

"Never honey," Emilia said.

A young man walked over to Sarah and said, "He's not the jealous type, your boyfriend, is he? Why do you go out with an old man like that?"

"I don't," she replied.

"Oh," the man said. "Who is your boyfriend, honey?"

Tony looked up at Sarah and she didn't reply to the man. Tony got up and spoke in her ear. "Are you trying to meet somebody here?"

After lunch, Piero wanted to drive to Tuscania. It was on a steep hill and the trees that lined the roads grew diagonally. The walls remained only in part, and through them they caught glimpses of

siena-colored, pink, and saffron houses. The towers were in different stages of disrepair. They had picked up a friend of Piero's, Gianni, and he guided them toward an abandoned monastery he had the key to. He unlocked the door and led them into an orchard, a balcony garden with a wide view of the countryside. There were fig trees, weeds, blossoming peach trees, and vines scattered on the ground, over marble shards, up stretches of wall. The hills were cut into gold and green squares. The sky was brilliant blue.

"This is glorious," Piero said. "Don't you feel it? Nothing is like this."

Sarah noticed the peach blossoms, stretched like pink tulle arms toward the heat. At the base of the trees, petals were scattered.

"Jesus God: it's really Spring," she said.

"Yes, enjoy yourself," Piero said. "Come back alive."

Emilia smiled. Gianni led them through chambers and a library, explaining that an archbishop had taken over this place which had been a sanctuary for monks. He had refurnished it and used the monks as servants, and required levies from the farmers.

"The rich are always filling themselves up with the poor," Piero said. "Our farmers have never had much for themselves. They've been beaten back a hundred times, but they remain sturdy. It's not like that in universities, Tony. You'll always be nice and safe in your cocoon."

"Did it ever occur to you that this town might be a cocoon?" Tony asked.

Piero said, "Tony, you've lost it and real things are fading from you and you don't even know it." He suddenly leapt onto the thin, waist-level rim of the balcony. He spread his arms out at the valley.

"Piero," Emilia cried. She turned to Tony and Sarah, "The wine's gone to his head."

"It's not the wine," Piero called back. "This isn't a cocoon. You think I'm afraid? If I jump, the earth can claim me; I would feed it. This soil has drunk blood before. This is it, Tony. None of your academics. This is life or death. What do you know about it?"

Tony stood very still. Then his eyebrow twitched and a drop of sweat that had been forming itself began to inch down the side of his face. "You're overdramatizing," he said.

Emilia was murmuring, "Gianni, oh please stop him."

Piero crouched. He stared below him. Animals looked tiny. The valley was emerald and waited. He looked back at the group huddled in the orchard. Slowly he climbed down. "Go to hell," he said to Tony. He turned to Sarah, "You see my friend, Gianni. He knows everything about this town. He's the real scholar." He hugged Gianni, then slapped him lightly on the cheek. "Let's go now. I'm thirsty."

"It's time to leave," Emilia said.

Sarah took a quick last look at the valley. It stretched far away, indifferently and lush. It's our illness: eating ourselves mostly. she thought. Everything is shaping itself: the leaves are, and the blossoms are dropping on the grass to give way for peaches. The buds are alive. A desperate, firm need to be born.

They climbed into the car. "This town is in my blood," Piero said. "I have the map of it in my brain. I can shut my eyes and drive. I know every twist." The car was in motion and Piero closed his eyes. Tony shifted in the back seat: the steering wheel couldn't be wrested from Piero without making the car swerve. Piero turned to Emilia, "Are you thirsty, pet?" he asked her.

"Why, yes, I'd be quite happy for something." she replied.

Piero felt thirstier and thirstier. He had unity with the wine: and these green, fat hills, and the air. It was his guests who disengaged. He turned around to them. "I planned this day for you," he said.

Emilia swiveled around, her hair a bit in disarray, her eyes focused keenly on them. "We know you did," she said.

Tony put his hand on Sarah's knee. "OK?" he asked.

She whispered, "What's happening?" He shrugged. She looked out the window. Her knee felt firm and cool as polished stone.

Piero wanted to visit people in town. Cupboards were opened; wine, liqueurs, and pastries were taken out in abundance. More talk, more drink. Piero gesticulated, his cheeks red. He walked over and murmured in Tony's ear, "Are you comfortable? These people are great, rare. They'd give you the shirts off their backs."

He poured wine into Sarah's glass. "They're wonderful people," she said. She was thinking The history of the Maremma is converted into these rooms. And where am I going? And them? All these red faces.

Piero knew they were waiting for him to leave. He shouldn't have brought them. They paled life, stole flavor, they were so tired. And they were hurrying him home. They threw his excursion in his face.

It was late. The town was hushed as they climbed into the car. Piero said,

"Those were the descendants of the Etruscan race. Don't ever forget that." He flung his hands up. They hit the roof of the car. "Damn it. Damned claustrophobic car." He hit the dashboard.

Emilia said, "The key. honey, use the key."

"I know what to use, you idiot," he said. "We're leaving a fine race, don't you see? And where are we going to? Tell me."

"I understand honey," she said.

"Where are we going?" he repeated, turning around.

"Home to bed," Sarah said.

Tony added, "No man waits for Rome."

Piero started the engine. He moved into the night without his headlights on.

"It's not very safe to drive by moonlight," Tony said.

"Right old man," Piero answered. "We don't drive chariots any more, do we?" He accelerated into roads that curved north and south, plunged perpendicularly, rose back up again to views of the fields, grey and blue in the moonlight. The road hissed. The stars wheeled great arcs.

"My God Piero, slow down," Tony said.

"Jesus Christ," Piero muttered.

"Piero," Tony said. "Sarah and I wanted to thank you for bringing us."

"I shouldn't have," Piero said.

The road was a narrow unlit maze. It shot headlights, blinding them from sudden hairpin turns, shoving them aside.

"I'll get you yet. You'll move for me," Piero shouted.

"Sarah," Tony whispered. "Come near me, sweet. Are you sleepy? Put your head in my lap. Oh, honey, hold on tight."

She felt queasy, unable to focus. She leaned on Tony. He held her close, caressing her forehead distractedly soft things, the peach blossoms. she said to herself. Tony held her hard. She rested her head down on his lap and held herself to him. Disconnected thoughts hopped in the dark: the gate was open and the sheep escaped.

"I'll be with you, Sarah. For the love of God, oh God," Tony was whispering.

"Listen to the lover in the back seat," Piero said. He pressed his foot on the accelerator, felt the fury of the night as he always did. But now he drove. The wine was fire in his mind and limbs. Life failed him in little parcels, ruined days, with their accidents. Here he had a carfull of people clinging to life. What was it to them?

Sarah murmured, "The sheep, oh the sheep," and began to cry.

"No Piero. No you can't" Tony shouted. He held his hand to his heart, tears rising to his eyes. "Piero, it's enough now. Please now Piero," he said.

The car pierced ahead like a beautiful bullet. Piero didn't care about what Tony was saying, but he knew that every time headlights shone into his eyes, they were beacons he faced. "You'll move aside for me," he hissed at them. He wiped away the sweatdrops under his eyes. The night was black and blue and brilliant. They were coming to a bridge. The river underneath pulsed, alive, an oil of grey with the moonlight flickering through it. "This is my river," Piero said, with energy. "With the fish running through it. It always waits." He said, "Hey. Tony." and bright yellow lights drove toward him. "Here you come, come sweet, move for me-- Tony hey, I told you the day would make you weep, didn't I? It's the truth that's hit you. Bring it home."