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### Some Stars Explode Across This Darkening Road| A collection of poetry and fiction

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*The University of Montana*

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SOME STARS EXPLODE ACROSS THIS DARKENING ROAD

A COLLECTION OF POETRY AND FICTION

By

Jo-Ann Marie Swanson

B.A., University of Saskatchewan, 1975

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing

University of Montana

1986

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"Bright bicolor blooms, an intense shade of scarlet with a reverse of silvery white, unfurl in dazzling profusion."

"Only when you see the perfect star-shaped blooms actually turning a richer and deeper hue -- almost black at the petal edges -- can you know the excitement ..."

-- Jackson and Perkins  
Roses '84 Catalogue

"Here a star and there a star,  
Some lose their way."

-- Emily Dickinson

### My Mother Hungers

My mother hungers  
for a mountain ash,  
such strange high words  
in flat Saskatchewan,  
already she sees its alpine  
heights leafing out, spreading  
over the sun-bared plain.

My mother hugs  
home a mountain ash  
in a terra cotta pot  
like a peinssettia poised  
out of holiday flower,  
she says she wants  
a prairie lily next.

My father makes jokes  
about forests blocking  
the view.

My mother wants  
a mountain ash,  
to flower and live  
forever in that grassy land,  
the black soil bleeding  
vegetables hearty as peasants.

Today, I walk  
outside this facade of rock  
and see, like sunrise, a sudden fiery  
mountain ash,  
its rich apricot leaves  
and its scarlet berries.  
Bleeding.



Roses on Temperance Street

She polished roses of wax  
into that grey and red kitchen floor  
until their faces blurred  
than emerged however dim  
on that old country linoleum.

Twelve red-fisted roses he sent her.  
They waved in the courtly shadows  
of her cold room with raw beating  
now that their child, for him,  
would grow wild, bawling perfume.

Who remembers how she sang,  
her voice blossoming blood,  
like the gash of a bud,  
the mouth of a womb.

Petals dripped by the window,  
smeared the floor in full view  
of his grey city. But he never came,  
and she could not talk of him.

She strewed dried petals like stars  
on her frosted childhood bowers,  
a wild meadow, a pond, a room  
where first Narcissus early bloomed.

When You and I Die, Bruce

Together didn't we  
 flame like arrows through  
 that finished city.  
 Jumping fences, picking  
 arguments, we'd finish up  
 in that seedy beer parlor,  
 hothouse flushing misery,  
 and we reacted willful  
 as unscathed children.  
 Wild as basil. Sharp as dill.

Amidst the Mumbler and Old Bill,  
 the Greek owner, the old men sat  
 in silent orbits of memory,  
 space shuttle posters greying  
 on the walls. Our longings wide  
 as your blue ether eyes,  
 we hunted down change, dizzy  
 for another round. That night  
 we crouched under a table,  
 writing chain letters, we knew,  
 sober, we would never send.  
 I have seen our faces there  
 starred in the cloudy mirror  
 many times. Sun-god Apelle  
 and Artemis, his twin,  
 watching the moon. The Apelle Room  
 at the Ritz Hotel. The mission  
 in space. Prisms on the beer steins.

I still see the blackened shine  
 of a linoleum floor,  
 your grandmother telling me  
 how your grandfather died sudden  
 on a Saturday night in Star City,  
 that stark Hutterite hamlet  
 with a name like a sweet rocket  
 from your mother's garden,  
 an arrowhead shot with burning flame.

When I flew in for your wedding  
 I wasn't your best man (our joke)  
 after all. Your aunts and chance  
 cousins were family but I couldn't  
 spell their proper Latin names at all.

On flat blue carpet, you showed me  
 tea roses, you collected a crystal  
 I had never seen. Feeding me cucumbers  
 fresh from your garden, soured  
 in vinegar and milk, an old recipe.

I spend my dimes in a two-bit trailer,  
a tin jukebox of silence,  
remembering us in a blue-petaled  
ring of flushed smoke, like chrysanthemums  
we found in the garbage can that day.  
You are pressed in my catalogue  
like the waltzes of your grandmother's  
roses across linoleum, like your mether's  
tern dahlias on a stormy day.

Already, we blew like wallflowers tossed  
aside, wildflowers lost on a folding  
Saturday night in a dead star city.

Sure as your grandfather, you and I  
mist die, Bruce, in full bloom  
on a flat Saturday night.

for Una

They said she sang hymns doing the dishes,  
back erect, hands in soapy baptism of suds  
and submerged desire. Her voice full in its  
flower, all three octavesful of blood.

Later, her fingers circled dizzy as worms  
knitting to keep the numb body warm  
when she was my mother. Darkening sunsets,  
her paintings that troweled the heart,  
after I had gone. After I left her son.

Ragged long days I wore out on the train,  
days like printed dresses washed plain,  
the miles spinning me home, returning  
to her, all the grey threads of our  
slow-witted love. I closed my eyes, the gods  
clacked past on disapproving prayerful feet.

Embarked on time for the black-bordered holiday,  
and I watered her blue hydrangea, the popcorn geranium.  
She who loved frivolity and bought us, her "girls,"  
the floral nightgowns, blushing showy as seed pearls,  
over our bare feet that blue night in her kitchen.  
In time for the last tessed bouquet, I arrived too late  
to watch her die.

Yellow, her tulips scissored into pallbearer bloom  
that morning after she was gone, resilient and mocking  
her short-cropped lawn. And far in the shadows  
her multiple myeloma bloomed, a weed with petals  
that spread like fire, and the body, at last,  
gone to seed. Stiff gardenia, waxed. That  
elegant crooked back.

The black clot, I remember, spun  
from her mouth like a rose. Time unraveling,  
unraveling her bones until they broke  
one by one. Like the blueheart that glowers  
in curdled purple clusters,  
the photographs the family sends me later  
emblazen every berserk floruous bruise.

## Blue Rose to Bloom

Together we will wait  
 the eternity it takes,  
 wait for the blue rose  
 to erupt into rare bloom  
 outside the blue prayer  
 of the bare picture window.

Today, we show passersby  
 the yellow rose, giant as peony,  
 and the baby rosebuds,  
 pink as pinpricks of hope.  
 My mother snips off a worm  
 like a feather. Wavy umbilical cord.

Last summer, a brown wren  
 of furred hope threw himself  
 against our blue window  
 and died fluttering on the ground.  
 We buried him, butterflied,  
 beneath the roses where he belonged.

Perchance the busy-bodies stop,  
 our roses wither in words,  
 like puffballs of wispy smoke.  
 Big-footed locals tamp our soil,  
 and they leave with armloads  
 of the lumped ~~hawkish~~ lupine.  
 My mother sees all this better  
 than me. She snips off words  
 with her scissors.

Next year, my mother and I agree,  
 we will send to Germany  
 for the black rose.  
 A new addition to the family  
 to stop our visitors cold.

I heard tell of the black rose  
 from a tin man selling  
 porcelain china for a nickel.  
 I still can hear the fork  
 ting his china roses like a bell.

Someday our roses will toe-hold  
 and root all the way to China.  
 Or maybe grew wild, unruly, we say,  
 like my dead uncle's roses  
 climbing the crib rails  
 in fisty bloom, to touch the sky.

As shadows out the day, we stand  
and long for the black rose,  
newborn in its plush velvet coat,  
pronged by its black eye  
and starred with baptismal dew,  
waiting to die.

For now, though, we turn  
to our slow-budded dynasty  
outside the blue pane  
of the picture window,  
waiting for the blue rose  
to hurry up and see the light  
and be born.

## Black and Blueberry Peor

Blueberry. Blueberry peor.  
 So we slump in the kitchen  
 and savor the imitation muffin,  
 the stand-in cow's butter,  
 as good as mud pie, we say.  
 Slim pickings of supper.  
 Sun flooding such golden  
 in our mouths we almost agree  
 these berries are real.

Today, the utility bill came  
 scratching at the door. Pay up  
 or shut off. Tulips blossom  
 over winter's blue look-up.  
 Still one fifty-nine cent  
 carnation rusts on the table.  
 So we are peor; what of it.

Just this: Cranberry. Too sour  
 aftertaste, tart, the narrow  
 halls of this trailer, brambles  
 collected like unpaid bills,  
 landlord picks at our reasons here.  
 All this fizzles thick on the tongue.

Blueberry. Swallowed like stones  
 as we dream of sloed eyes in sun.  
 Minutes or money might pit syrup  
 and honey, fleshed in our mouths.  
 But we feast with glass eyes,  
 scarecrows in buttery fields,  
 straw heads plucking hungry pockets.

Blackberry. Blackberry peor.  
 To plump our appetite, we crave  
 the summer cherry of black raspberry,  
 the puckery huckleberry, maybe ham it up  
 with wee black and blue berries.  
 Succulent, we learn to say,  
 even sun-ripened, such lush words  
 lap at the tongue.

Pincherry. Prickles we smooth  
 with fingers washed like strong wind  
 through bear brambles and worms.  
 Mouths budded in supplication,  
 we beg black currant imitations  
 to drizzle down our chins.  
 Roots pruned away, we stand, shivering  
 for the real true-blue thing.

## Charlie Musselwhite Conducts the Blues

Not bad for an old man  
on the wagon,

Hay wagon, hayseed  
gone to hell  
in a handbasket.

White man with blue veins  
with white name  
made blues pay  
for harm done, for  
damages inflicted,  
made blues jump  
like catfish  
in muddy sad waters.

Made blues move, smooth  
as chugged lightning wine  
down his cheap whiskey throat.

Some kind of fist  
this fission he made  
that night, blues burden  
looped by waist-high  
kick jive. Lips and tongue.  
He flutes his blues  
into a high-jinx spell,  
and you watch him float it ... wide  
to the heartbeat edges.

He spelled his pain  
out of stone, jagged  
years he jackhammered  
out of the road.  
Made peanut shells rain  
on the dusty floor  
of Wet Willie's  
in wilting Sacramento.

All the chained spirits  
of the animal world  
quaked in his raining  
sweat, his harmonica  
glowered golden  
like saxophone, notes  
fading his pulsating  
blood like magic bullets.



And the black bodies  
in the crowd bopped  
up and down like the end  
of the world had begun,  
come from this skinny  
little white man  
stick man  
with the concave belly.

Made blues yell  
"Had it," give up,  
ery "Uncle," and the crowd  
jitterbugged to his cuts,  
crooned to his bruises,  
as Charlie Musselwhite  
held fast the husking  
blues through his shivering,  
ravaged no-body.

## Black Octaves

"Black octaves" of silence,  
 he wrote of the nightly  
 ambulance, and what did I  
 know of his nights  
 for he lived at the bottom  
 of the bridge, I perched  
 at the top, the South  
 Saskatchewan River could have  
 been the Sea of China.

That summer we walked the plank,  
 took the bridge down for lunch  
 at a local cavern with sconces  
 on the walls. And then he left  
 for higher ground, for spires.

"That grassy ocean of land,"  
 he wrote me last year,  
 and again the wind singed me,  
 while we walked the grey sod  
 and the prairie in our minds  
 roared like a mating call until  
 I, too, took flight years ago.

He gave up his poetry, he said,  
 yet the prairie grows vaster  
 in his letters until I swear  
 it will take over the world  
 as far inland as White Russia.

Refrains we explain in our letters  
 why we plan never to return  
 and the tidal waves pull us  
 back to the continent's core  
 while we hesitate for the dove  
 and the olive branch until we are  
 sea-sick as sailors. Scurvy-limbed.

When we meet again some day,  
 we will know one another  
 by the furrows that blacken  
 our foreheads, by the wildflowers  
 wilting our eyes, by the gopher tracks  
 that mapped our faces. And all  
 those sparrow songs  
 that flatted our years,  
 then flew away.

### Her Piano

She drapes her brown cascade of careless hair  
Against this dark old sill by the window,  
Sighs aloud for a polished baby grand piano.

In this roomful of books, undusted, overdue  
At the library, she'll open her ruby throat  
And varnish that piano, note by shining note.

"By a window," I add, "with tulips peering in."  
"Roses," she echoes. "The roses in busty bloom,  
A bowl of oranges, a cat asleep in the room."

We grow older and graft ourselves to solid things.  
She writes me of her glowing job, her shiny daughter  
With flaxen hair spun from pats of marigold butter.

I locked myself in a tower of moth-eaten books,  
Caged myself daily in its cloudy observatory,  
Punching black holes into squares of delicate ivory.

She turned to botany, I dusted off her piano.  
Sunflowers mocking the white walls with strippling bars.  
Her piano riding my back, branding roses fiery as Mars.

### Don's Comet

He told how 4,000 stars vanished  
 as he looked unswerving into sky,  
 how the sudden comet hung heavy,  
 a sword parting the night, a stone  
 gritting the corner of his eye.  
 How he braked on his way to Billings,  
 city of trailing vapor lights.

His voice shone amber as a lantern,  
 tracing this old celestial omen,  
 a broom from an old Chinese tale,  
 maybe the year Jerusalem fell,  
 the forked tail of a devil from France  
 or the journey of the Bethlehem star.

I thought of the blue crackle, the hot awe  
 of fiery northern lights, a trip that lasted  
 years, eyes blurring like small stars  
 from the spit of highway dust. I saw  
 cold sundogs hanging high on a hill,  
 their hackles in shredded rainbows  
 from another world, when I took a trip  
 from Canada in 42 below.

Listening to his miracle, I considered  
 his gift in my slow-wheeling maelstrom  
 of voices and murk. This dirt party  
 that goes on everyday, street-lights  
 that line my night. Slow black dots  
 of sleep circling, and I thought  
 of that truant comet come to kiss  
 his eyelids while I lay heavy asleep.  
 I thought of his comet until dawn  
 when his elitism flashed me like a knife.

And I mused on radium, one thousand  
 shooting stars in a large, quivering sky  
 under magnifying glass. Released from uranium,  
 turning to gas. And then lead, a half-life  
 of lead, longer than the rest of my life.  
 Or: lead spun into gold, three ions removed.  
 A light, a fire, in this brief oscillating life.

Then, at dawn, I remembered  
 how near the Potomac River  
 its hard mist steaming black,  
 he saw a new-born calf  
 wobbling straw in the frosted air.  
 Shining, this drowned star  
 brought hard with wonder  
 into a world of ice and Midas light.

## Constellations

Steering this slippering rim  
welded to jet wheels  
on a runted orange tractor  
called Allis  
guiding it like an eily butterfly  
in wary concentric orbit  
under an apricot blusher moon,  
I dream of clustered cities,  
the tingle of neon signs  
under my acned skin.

Greasing the sheen of mower blade  
to crop hay, I dream of makeup.  
Stere counters of perfume,  
snipping the bee-hum alfalfa in sun.  
Not knowing them the same,  
I want to whirl with my taffetas  
rustling the sky, with dirt  
never shuffling the palms.  
Become a constellation glittering  
in shuttered, smoky rooms.

This land I never knew.  
Where the galaxies of grain  
lay like bright permanent waves  
on a woman's soft skull.

The Coarse Grain of Old Photographs

This morning  
 I am making the bed  
 tucking in  
 the square good corners  
 the barley beards  
 and whitened oat-blue chaff  
 a certain laughter of blue flax,  
 this phalanx of place.  
 If I pause by this patchwork,  
 I snag my hem on your prairie.

I see you crossing  
 those restless waves  
 of wheat readying  
 for hard spring, you sift  
 your liquid harvest  
 into the green two-ten  
 and you drive away, but  
 you never wave.

This spring,  
 raking the lawn,  
 I see your stubbled  
 fingers move,  
 the grey-green bene  
 you brought me  
 from Spain  
 lost now like the skull  
 of woodland caribou  
 I find by the river,  
 your wink is that old,  
 and you always move.

This daguerreotype, charred  
 grey as mosquito smudge  
 to keep memory's pinprick  
 from burning black  
 as a prairie fire.  
 The new growth will shoot  
 square and clean as this bed.

Last time I returned,  
 your shadow cut  
 the plain like the hunting  
 knife of autumn on my face.

One good man, one moon so golden  
 when the weather turns  
 the scythe of the years.

## Bent Arrows

[for a girl who jumped from University Bridge,  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, January 1973]

You should welcome  
such Golden Labs, these bent arrows  
all wind-screams and slide-ass  
panic-struck and down the river bank  
come to find you.

Golden Labs that streak down your hill  
like a meteor shower,  
frantic as shooting stars.

You are waist-deep in river  
on those broken legs  
and the city lights of Saskatoon  
play a mean game on your face.

What dog crossed your bridge  
what regular meter  
collapsed your weather.  
I stand high on this bridge  
but I cannot  
help you in that water.

"My legs -- I don't feel a thing,"  
your voice small as a stickpin  
and the siren  
it bays  
so angry, come toward  
your black avalanche.

Girl, you wear such  
mud, this blue pneumonia,  
pearl blue, how you glint  
like a cold dime  
in a wishing well  
mired in your hell-hole  
on an iced January night.

You play your newest part,  
petulent, as Lady Lazarus.  
Some breakthrough you made.

Miffed,  
you act like  
it's some surprise.

Like Icarus, maybe, you tried  
to travel toward the sun  
and plunged instead into the sea,  
at an ice-breaker of a party.  
And you walked on the water  
anyway, and complained  
of the cold.



### Tire Tracks

The tire tracks unravel  
all over my front lawn  
some careless hand  
tracing double rings  
dangerous in the night.

The snow is melting  
patches into ripped earth  
and dum grasses and worn trees  
beg another chance, crooked  
under winter-killed sky.

Tonight the river  
throws a curved reminder  
of my heart's dirty bouquet.  
Dragging your wet boots  
in a trail of mud,

This week will carry you  
far to Denver, a streamer  
flown in Blackfoot breeze.  
Meanwhile the north wind  
knots up my hair.

Men used to steam  
down this river.  
They never got farther  
than Fort Benton,  
40 miles away.

My father and I will roll  
through that naked land  
on that rutted Indian road  
looking for swaybacked  
barns. We will take pictures,  
just as we always planned.

Last time, as usual,  
we were in a hurry, and  
I said, another time,  
and he said, there's no time  
like the present. We argued  
but he gave in like a man.

Last week, my father caught  
his finger in the auger, drove  
himself to town 22 miles.  
When I was young, the auger  
grabbed him by the pantleg,  
choked his leg a blooming mauve.

A year ago, my father burst  
his catheter in the bathroom  
like a balloon. Last year,  
his hip socket was replaced.  
Now he needs new knee joints.  
The elbows will be going soon.

My father and I, says my mother,  
stock our cameras like armories,  
always ready to shoot down moving  
things. My father collected arrowheads  
when he ploughed his land. Me,  
I'm busy with historical enquiries.

This month, I twisted my ankle  
ice-skating my way to Easy Street.  
And we argued arch supports  
like bones could span the distance  
that crosses continents  
between our restless feet.

Next year, my father and I  
will prewl that foundering  
back country, and admire swaybacked  
barns, and while we're at it,  
we'll stop and snap pictures  
of one memorial we missed  
from that old war battleground.

In my mother's rose garden  
most of the bushes  
winter-killed this year.  
She sighs. Knuckles swollen  
like a blossom, my mother's hands  
cup wounded wrens.

My mother says they found my uncle,  
her little brother, 59, dead  
in his house two weeks,  
air spewing with flies.  
Even the blue rose,  
the one that never bloomed  
is done, she tells me.  
Died last summer. Bugs.

In our old house, weathered  
grey as dust, the mops and brooms  
hanging tall, the sunlight  
is warping the wood crooked.

My mother's cheeks  
blistered into roses  
from cold, hands tamping  
the loose stones of earth.  
I plunge my hands into ground,  
I cover them over, my mother says  
to me today on the telephone.

Slicing homemade bread,  
my mother's chunky hands  
are moving like oxen  
over the furrowed fields  
of my childhood.  
Rough on the scrambled shine  
of my crimped blonde hair,  
she combed my hair into roads.

Last time, I went home  
her hand operation was due.  
She poured a pitcher  
of soft water from the rain  
barrel over my darkening head,  
and she cried over the sudden  
grey in my hair.

My Mother and Black Cat

"Fingers," my mother proclaims.  
 "You and your little devil fingers."  
 As she tromps down the basement,  
 the bright little bow-tie cat  
 watches her, upright as penguin,  
 flexing his littlest left toe,  
 just a trifle, he watches her alert,  
 his eyes alive with enemy fire.

Fingers that tip teaspoons  
 with a tinker's addled paw,  
 fingers that flick her freezer  
 switches off, trip her power.  
 First, he peed on her side  
 of the queen-size bed when he  
 came to visit. He tore open sugar,  
 fell asleep in her best canning pot.

This winter, he was my baby. I cooed  
 to him and talked him out of shadowed  
 coma, his wanting to sleep. His eyes  
 were sloey and sweet, as  
 liquid dreams in a teaspoon.

All summer, my mother raised wrens  
 in the birdhouse my father built.  
 Arms raised, she shoed the farm  
 cats away, Angora winter coats  
 hanging off them like second tails.

When the neighbors came by to visit,  
 Black Cat stole the smallest baby wren,  
 fresh from the birdhouse, on a branch,  
 and brought her wren to her like a gift.

His sly gypsy "fingers" cradling the bird,  
 like a gentleman at tea, he ate him.  
 He made friends, then, the wren bones crunching  
 like splinters of polite conversation.

## My Father's Town

My father was born to Great Depression,  
lost his father to mustard gas,  
missed his mother a few years later.  
With his only sister, he floated  
on the shores of Indian Lake Manitou  
when he was seventeen, that salty lake  
where you can swim forever  
and you never drown.

Tossed flapjacks for logging camps  
at Big River, sold hairbrushes  
and dinner plates to Russians  
starving for news. Found a shy girl  
milking a cow, invited five hundred  
to their wedding. Brought her back  
to land piled low with poplar  
by beaver, pimpled with stones,  
and began to farm.

When the old-timers began to die,  
my father, in his best brown suit,  
skidded home granaries, failing pig-barns.  
Our farm became a huddled wren  
of greyed buildings, a town.

The tracks of my father's rubber boots  
spun filaments across the mottled yard.  
His eyes seeded scores of home places  
with people I had never known.

And after we children were gone,  
my mother planted flaxseed across the yard.  
Flaxseed, blue as the sea,  
blue as his mild watery eyes that saw far  
over that windy town of mud and weeds.

We met to refine the art of alchemy  
once a week,  
to speak of the ultimate mystery  
of the universe,  
to define the elemental elegy,  
and ended up admiring precipitates  
falling from worn gilt paperweights.

We met for comfort in our basic laboratory  
somewhere in northern Idaho  
to polish our best test tubes until  
they beamed, and we measured  
catheters full of each other's specimens  
like strobe lights spun from stick men  
at our elite little gatherings.

We wanted only to coax the bare essence  
of gold, to whirl  
with the undercurrents  
of electricity  
but stuck in our bodies, we investigated  
space probes. We only wanted to begin anew  
the fad that everybody left off, years ago.

We agreed to cooperatively annihilate  
all pleasures of the flesh  
and desire instead  
to mesh with the very best  
fissures of the universe,  
but our members were petty.  
We took turns guarding the door.

We cracked open a great many heads  
but we found  
few pearls or nutshells of vital interest.  
Metal so cold it shone,  
we called it stainless steel  
and still we could not  
discover gold in anything passably real.

On my way home from speculation one night  
I saw our noses pressed flat  
against tiny test-tube glasses,  
gilt streaming through the velvety sky  
like the life of the assay, a joke.  
I ventured home wearing the finest  
hypothesis  
I've ever exposed.

Some Stars Explode Across This Darkening Road

Sudden

I see this lash  
the flight  
of little commas,  
mad dashes, startled  
furballs crossing  
your night.  
Your continuing narrative,  
not a  
period in sight.

Yet not one  
dead dog, stiff grinning  
cat appears. Sirius  
emblazons your trip.  
A simple declarative  
sentence. The definite  
objects of the night  
play dead, draw  
a blank, play  
possum.

The street stretches  
smooth as a ream of paper,  
grey as mouse, purple  
as a bruise. Black  
as a brake.

Marvels

to be seen each night  
for the braking.  
They emerge, star  
eyes blur  
in the exclamation  
points of your  
flight.  
Your leave-taking.

Even the squirrels  
tear up  
the road, flash  
their tails, asterisk  
chatter of disappear.

Rolling along,  
you don't even  
see this little  
one, kitten, tail  
of a question  
hunching tall,  
a silent pause, padding,  
gone across your road.

If you stumbled  
to a stop, at least  
a semi-colon, the kitten  
with a broken leg,  
a mangled paw,  
emerged intact,  
and he purred, walking  
his bone into  
crooked seam.  
White as a rabbit,  
his feet loped  
out of sight  
down your road.

Little stars  
crossing the street  
for you. Does your  
epic never end?  
When they walk  
past you, they put  
your sad shambling  
trips, your typos,  
your flight,  
across the lines,  
around the block,  
all out of my sight.



An airy wash of snow,  
a mesh daubed with soft sponge  
overlays this sad rectangle day.  
Two pines diffuse faint mystery  
into the painting,  
a fine squiggle of black,  
a knack, a feeling for form,  
you might say. Here where white  
sweeps a bare zero of color,  
sure absence of pigment, of tint.

These watercolors run  
spilled by a careless hand,  
obstruct the bridge,  
and these city slickers  
strut into nothing.  
Their grey shapes blur  
inside the frame.

The slow, sweet span,  
the vanishing point  
of bridges in winter.  
Water runs a ragged black  
that absorbs all colors,  
all white. The bright pulse  
of blizzards, the tragic wink  
of ebony water. They pull like magnets  
and span the horizon, then  
pool out of the frame.

Under the bridge,  
two mallard ducks  
swim like careless dots  
behind the eyes  
in that icy water.  
Their trails razor a V  
that rides the water  
triumphant as alien  
India ink.

Sailing from under the bridge  
on that goblin black water,  
they take the only journey  
made today.  
Suspended on white overlay,  
the eyes trace  
this focal point, their brisk sail  
out of the painting.

## When He Held This Knife

What you remember. Mostly, you remember this: Rain drizzling thick as tar. After midnight. He had a knife. You knew that already. Nothing to do with you. At Hardrock, that lonesome lumber town, he pulled it. It shone like silver, that hunting knife. Not pulled on you, literally, you understand. Quick as a magic trick, he flashed it. Strange things he had up his sleeve. Surprise.

You were hitch-hiking through the Rocky Mountains with him, and it was October. Wet and October-cold. You had not taken to the mountains at first sight -- they blocked your view. Mountain sickness. Nobody told you. You had never been so far west. It was an unexpected thing. Claustrophobia. Fenced in by rock.

You sat very still in the front of the pickup, or the car, or whatever, all the grim way through the mountains, and you pretended to smile. Bored and blase, that's what you wanted to be.

When you were a child, you imagined roads stretching ever and down the mountain sides, over and down. Not round and round, circling blindly so that you never knew where you were. Maps didn't make sense in the mountains. That is, you knew where you were generally. Geographically, nothing seemed right. Even a compass would have been a dead weight, there in the mountains.

Question: "Why isn't farming done in the mountains." Answer: "The tractors might tip over."

Wrong answer. You were in Grade Six, and Mrs. Seymour laughed at your answer. Read it aloud to the class. Threw her head back with prim abandon. All the way into the mountains, you leaned way out, gravity tugging against the curves.

There, in those mountains, you passed flashes of sorry lives ambushed by scrub pine. Rusted tin cans, glinting a dangerous orange in the night. Inside the tin-roofed little bars, the chipped formica tables, empty except for Saturday nights. It was an unknown red-flag country ("Drive Slow") just beginning to boom. The hunting knife came from a dark leather scabbard he wore hitched to his hips.

He said that he knew that country. It had everything to do with him, then. Everything to do with the stranger who gave him and you that ride. So the stranger, who lived there, may not have been completely innocent, after all. See, the man you traveled with pulled mean rank on this stranger, God knows why, on a kind man neither of you had laid eyes on before that Saturday night. He made sure the kind man would pull, in turn, a vanishing act.

Hardrock, the king of plywood in the West. Plywood, strips of wood shavings glued at right angles. Out in the middle of nowhere, in the blue midnight, like a bonfire set in all that plywood, he pulled the hunting knife. Rain drizzling hard. Black.

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First, he took you downtown to buy survival gear, the basic wardrobe for going on the road. The 1960s, after all. You had never carried anything but a suitcase. A suitcase, he said, wouldn't do. Your seabag hung heavy over your aching shoulders later, heavy with your mini-skirts, fishnet hose and travel-sized makeup and potions for every possible occasion.

You paid \$10.99 apiece for the turquoise sleeping bags. One had a purple drawstring; the other drawstring was black. Nylon so cheap is squealed when you moved. You bought the aluminum mess kit, shiny-new, and seabags and the hunting knife for slicing meat and cheese. Down at the Army and Navy Surplus, down in the basement where the sun never shines. The shabby light was dim like the far country of cloudy dreams. He knew some of this better than you. The mess kit fit together like measuring cups. The lid clamped down tight. Also: one tent, \$13.99. A two-man pup tent. Room enough for one person, really. And so you headed West.

First, you passed the curvilinear foothills, bumped and swollen like a disease. Then came the big ones, mountains, more dangerous, more abstract. You knew they would never end. Ditches, gorges alongside the road. One curve after another, shining in the sun, and you just sat and stared. The cars that picked you up hurtled those narrow roads at what you considered excessive speed. Like arrows following right angles, like boomerangs. You held onto one dash after another, and waited for whatever came around the next curve. You had never been anywhere on a dare before.

The question you asked yourself, over and over, eyes on the curves and the driver and the odometer, was: "Why now?"

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Cash Creek. A mist of evening lights coming on and you remember the feel of damning nostalgia that pervades small towns every-

everywhere. The desperation of spending a night there, in that deadly little town, with too little money. Robbed, maybe. Stabbed, sleeping by the side of the road. Dangerous plans.

Then a silver car flashed by and squealed to a stop. Barracuda, you read on the rear bumper as you ran for the door. The man you were traveling with, hot on your heels. A car too flashy for good taste, you thought. A hesitation. The man at the wheel. But, wait, a small boy upright on the back seat, chubby hands tugging the man's long curls. Relief. As good as a Pieta anyday.

"Where ya headed?" Some town you'd never heard of.

"How old is your boy?"

"Three or four, I think." As you were considering this, it turned dark.

In the front seat, the two men shared a smoke. From the back seat, you saw the rolling fog pervade the mountains and block the headlight beams, and then came the curves. Switchbacks, they are called, you learned later. Curve upon curve upon curve. And you wound around and around and you felt the tires begin to unravel, to lose contact. And he almost lost it. Once, you rolled outward and outward, out of orbit, and then you almost didn't come back.

"The kid. He's got a kid," you told yourself, holding the doorhandle with both hands. The odometer: Now 80, now 90. You closed your eyes until your stomach whirled. Rose to your throat.

Street lights, reflections glinting sideways, noises of traffic, and you opened them.

"Do you know this town? Where's the Keg and Cleaver?"

Shocked, you looked at the driver, the black leather jumpsuit you never noticed before. You shook your head: No.

When you jumped out at the next street corner, you turned to the man you were traveling with. "He didn't even know the road. He'd never been this way before," you marveled in awe. And then you began to shake. Spasms like sebs. Teeth, bones, everything.

"He didn't even know the road."

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The last stop before you reached the coast, he stopped and bought pre-sliced cheese that tasted like Plasticine and sliced bolegna, an unhealthy speckled pink, and doughy bread that dented in the bag like a surly marshmallow. The driver dropped both of you, him and you, at a campground rimmed by rocks. In the clearing, the water dripped off the branches, and the split wood was wet and green. Although your grandfather taught you to make fire in a wood-stove, pleating strips of newspaper like chiffon, tonight you could not make a fire. Neither could he.

In the morning you caught a ride, got warm. Your high-heeled boots were beginning to wear down, heels crumbling jagged and uneven. So much for romantic interludes, you thought.

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When you reached the coast, you found a bus-girl job. No one wanted to hire him. Every night, as the fog wafted in, you crossed

the bridge to work, reviewing the Neptune Flatter menu as you went. You couldn't tell a scallop from a crab. Not that you cared. The kitchen floor was slippery with seaweed. The restaurant was a moored steamship, with a picture of Long John Silver on one wall. Petunias planted around the prow.

A few hours into every shift, the bumps on your Achilles tendon blistered and bled, oozing through your nylons and white nurse's shoes. The head dragon lady told you that your blue eyeshadow was too loud.

"Here," she said, handing you a used napkin. "Wipe it off. While you're at it, wipe the blood off your legs. Table Five wants more hushpuppies. Forecastle."

And every night you returned to the hotel. The cleaning lady at the hotel quit because she said you were cooking in your room. Just a little cheese and bologna, you said.

Then, one night the man you were traveling with was not at the hotel. Finally, you found him. Down the street, in a little bar, arms around two women. Talking to the one that looked all of sixteen, in a Sophia Loren kind of way. Black hair parted in the middle, green eyes batting false eyelashes big as butterflies. When he could no longer stand straight, finally, you took him back to the hotel.

The next morning, you cut your long hair into a short pompadour, and found one of his jean jackets, and together, you strolled downtown, serene as an old married couple, almost broke. That night, you didn't bother going to work.

You saw your first cockroaches, and he laughed when you called them water beetles. Every morning, you began to eat breakfast at Woolworth's. Eighty-nine cents. Lunch and dinner were a three-course meal at a Chinese cafe, long and narrow as a hallway. A dollar eighty-nine. A better deal. You only threw up after the breakfast.

And then you got the letter. It was a sunny, almost happy day, you remember. A slight chill hung at the edges, almost dispelled by the sun. You spent your last quarter on a chipped crockery cup of soapy coffee. Suzy, your best friend, was headed inland, she wrote. She was leaving Maine, and her boyfriend, in a little fishing village at the edge of the sea. "A picture book place," she wrote. Houses in bright colors, she said, like children's blocks. You had seen those pictures but thought they were a lie. Her boyfriend, she wrote, spent their last \$20 on a second-hand guitar. Now, he needed strings. Worse, he could not sell the guitar with broken strings. She was going home, she wrote. No extra baggage.

You held her letter gentle as a tea-leaf reader would hold a teacup, turning it sideways, up and down. But you had no money.

"Inland," you told him. Out of the mountains, you thought, away from the salty air, the fog. He argued, of course. "Inland," you repeated to him, angry now. Inland, of course.

Together, Suzy went home, boyfriend in tow, you learned months later. She gave in. Side by side, they hitch-hiked, two thousand miles. The last two hundred miles, they stole sugar packets and coffee creamers for tiny spurts of energy. Going home.



Suzy told you this years later, after they married.

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And so you packed your seabag and bought a suitcase, second-hand, for the extra things like nurse's shoes. By then, he had found a job.

"No traveling light anymore," he grumbled. He came anyway.

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And so on a Saturday night in the mountains, he pulled the knife. That afternoon, on the trip out of the mountains, a young man in a four-wheel drive stopped and took him and you into town for dinner. And then the three of you ended up at the bar. You sat with them at a chipped formica table, listening to George Strait and Red Foley on the jukebox. The young man bought round after round of beer.

Later, at the young man's log cabin, he cracked open a new case of beer. The man you traveled with wrenched the bottles open with his teeth, but you used the bottle opener and drank from the glass. Both men drank their beer straight from the bottle.

Sitting around, warm and pleasant as you could please, and out of nowhere, the man you traveled with stood up and pulled the knife.

The knife curved to a silvery point.

"I'm going to kill you, you mother," he told the young man.

Behind him, on his right, away from the knife, you walked over to the man you traveled with. "You don't mean it," you said. "You're

joking, right?" And again you said it. "You're trying to scare us," you said finally. Neither of them said anything; they just looked at each other. That was all.

"Come out to the perch," you told him. "Now. I want to talk." You stayed behind him all the way outside. And on the porch, in the rain, quiet as a kid, he cried. And you took his knife.

"You were going to leave me." His face hung with the effort of saying it. The night surrounded you. "Weren't you?"

His head bobbed like a bottle lost at sea, with the pain of it, tears streaking his face like rain knifed by a windshield wiper.

(Sometimes, when you're traveling, you see a figure from afar, crossing the road maybe, and that is who you want to be. Or maybe it's someone you meet. The possibilities narrow. You see the road for the rag you're wearing, a journey to, and from, the places that reminded you of home. The rest becomes mere background scenery. And then somewhere in that stream of exhaust, a little house pops out at you, jumping from the side of the road, and likely it has a picket fence. You think: If you get off, it will all stop for you. And how you'll settle, and buy curtains and measuring cups. The sweetness of street lights coming on, like stars against purple twilight. That's what you thought, after reading Suzy's letter.)

So now you saw you'd made your bed and, God help you, how you'd lie in it. A lie that would travel light years and how one day, no guarantee on survival gear, would end. You simply couldn't see the plywood for the pickets back then.

"No," you told him. Gaining momentum then, picking up speed.

"No, you're wrong. You're imagining things, I tell you."

When you went back inside, the young man, as harmless as any blue-eyed boy with dimples, was slumped over the coffee table. He was crying.

"Wish to God I never seen you guys. Never picked you up, or anything," he sobbed.

You put a hand on this young man's shoulder, the first time you had touched him. "He's sorry," you said. "Real sorry. See?"

"Yeah, real sorry," the man you traveled with told the young man. "I don't know what came over me. Went crazy or something. Too much beer. Man, oh man, I'm sorry." He slumped into an armchair, heavy as an old man, face buried in his hands.

"Everything's fine now," you told them. "It's OK, see?" Like traveling a curve, you were trying to stay on solid ground.

"Let's all have a beer and get some sleep," you said.

"How did you ever get into this mess?" you asked yourself. You sat in a corner, feeling sick and bloated, as the two men drank another beer. Your eyes foggy as any windshield in cold drizzle. Slightly steamed.

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The next morning, the young man gave him and you a ride to the highway, on his way to work at the mill at six. First, he stopped and bought two large syrupy coffees and two soggy plastic-wrapped sandwiches.

"Thank you so much," you told him, getting out of the pickup.

"It's been great. It really has."

"I guess I like to help," he said slowly. "I always think: One of these days, it could be me."

On the highway that morning, you saw your breath disappear like clouds as you watched the exhaust from his truck vanish down the road.

"It's not like we'll ever see him again," you told the man you traveled with. "Is it?" He didn't answer you.

Neither he nor you ever mentioned that night again.

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Shortly after, the frost began to melt. You took the road that stretched past the foothills and farther still. Out of the mountains, you knew the fog had lifted and you could see a long way. For the first time in a few months, you thought you would have a long-range view.

That was the day that you passed out of the mountains, past Hell's Gorge. You breathed a long sigh of relief when you began coming down into the foothills. By then, you had begun to bleed, spotting a little, giddy with exhaustion.

Listen: Suppose none of it ever happened. You made it all up. You had to, so that you could survive. Where else but in the mountains? And, maybe, if some of it were true, if you were forced to live with something like that -- suppose it had nothing, truly, at all, that country, nothing to do with you?

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And so you got off the road with him and you moved to the outskirts of a little prairie town. For days, come spring, the wind howled in the coulees. You sat in your snug house overlooking the gentler rolling hills and plains, snug as a Buddha. The wind, he complained that spring, made his head ache, made him crazy. One day, he brought home a child's toy train with a whistle that sounded like a boiling tea-kettle. Weeks later, it derailed.

And he didn't ask about it, but you carried the knife like a shield, the talisman in its dark scabbard, something you might need to live with him, buried deep in the black folds of your seabag, on the upper shelf of your closet. You had pulled the knife out of his hand in a town called Hardrock. But then triumph is not everything. You didn't know.

Later, you realized that you didn't remember the young man's face, but you knew you would know him anywhere. No stranger, he was just like you, trying to get along in a living room that turned frigid as the Alps. Way before you even guessed the question, the man you traveled with knew the story of any life: Doves forced from a black coat, released to sudden silvery light. Surprise.

Did you ever leave that plywood town at all?

This is what you remember. This: All the way back, not one stop sign in sight. Jagged peaks in the rear-view mirror. An empty two-lane highway. Just what you thought you finally wanted. Coming down out of the mountains, flat blacktop all the way.

Bebbee Cee

See, Jela Cee is in the bathroom. That's when Marnie lets go. Big cheerleading Marnie with knockers that make you look like a boy in cheerleader's uniform. Marnie with the planed face, a moneyed cure for acne (her last husband), and that deep red slash of busy hair with bangs, or is the Dynel tonight? You'd bet anybody in this bar a Budweiser that Marnie grew up with golden screen cutouts of pouty Brigitte Bardot on her teenaged walls. Not you. But, sure as Cinzano, so did Jela Cee.

"God damn that little pisser. I'll kill him." Marnie grits her pearly baby teeth. The barstool squeals, uneasy under her.

"Who?" You think maybe it's Benny who gave up smoking and took up eating instead. Benny, Marnie's boyfriend with the white patent leather speedboat shoes. Chomping on Caesar Salad, rib-eyed steak. Pinky lifting, baring that diamond-crusted wedding ring, shoveling it in. But Benny's not little, by any means nor is Diana, his fat wife with the squinty pig eyes hidden in that brown swag of hair, who comes in once in a while and doesn't suspect a thing. "Brown cow," she moos at us. Of course, we all laugh at her. All that Kahlua and cream. Funniest thing you've ever seen.

Marnie doesn't say anything. Who are you to push it? You swipe down the bar with a just-bleached rag and look at her, curious as anything.

"Ugh! Get that thing away! she mutters, rubbing her snub nose. Clouding up her mirror, you think. Her shiny formica bartop. But no,

she's perched on the barstool, surveying the lounge like Missolini with a hangover.

How does she manage, you wonder, refilling the sweet-sour mix. Does she glue on that hair, along with her eyelashes? And, if she's as big-boned as she says, how come she's not hefty. Her, she could put on a \$2.95 dress the cost of two bar shots, and she'd look like a champagne cocktail. You'd look like a bar-rag, in need of some bleaching, you think.

How old is she anyway, you wonder. Thirty-eight, that's right. That old. You saw her application form one time when cute little Roe, with the red Dorothy Hamill cubist "do," swished by in a hurry, as usual, dropping some papers under a barstool. You shake your head. Who'd believe it? That old.

You pick up Marnie's half-eaten orange slice and dimpled cherry. Your fault. Again. You forgot she hates cherries when you mixed her strawberry Piña Colada. Worst of all, Marnie can be nice, well, almost nice when she's not playing Golda Meir or Maude. You wonder, for the hundredth time, where women like Marnie come from. Once, you think, all women wanted to look a certain way: like Marnie. And tried. Now, none of them do. But Marnie. Hasn't she heard that flat-chested is in? Now, you, you're fashionable. But not sexy. You change the napkin under her drink. You're beginning to feel like Marnie's maid.

Face it, you're tired. It's only 6 p.m. on a Saturday night, and you've only been on shift an hour. It's winter and already dark. In another hour, the place will be crawling with barflies and fruitflies. You still have to slice the oranges and lemons (no thanks

to Marnie. She's the other bartender. It's her job, in the day-time when business is slow.), and your white ruffled shirt is already stained with cherry juice. Your bowtie is slipping. You re-pin your name tag with the happy face, and give Marnie a dirty look. You hope she doesn't turn around just now.

You twirl a few napkins with your highball glass, ruffling and fluffing the edges just so. You set them in rows like doilies on the bar. Marnie jabs a pile with her pointy elbow and they float over the bar ledge into the sink. You toss the soggy mess into the garbage. She doesn't even notice.

Probably looking for a new boyfriend, you think. Hot date. You cut your finger on the paring knife. "Damn," you mutter, sucking the cut.

All you need now is Bobbee Cee to come mooning in, and start clowning around with his usual nonsense.

"Naw," says Marnie, turning back to the bar. "Use the other paring knife. It's sharper. Not Benny -- this time," she threatens, stubbing out her black gold-tipped Nat Sherman cigarette, defiant as nobody's business. Her laquered fingernails (Are they real? Can't be.) flash like fire.

You eye the golden filter littering your ashtray. Cupping another ashtray on top of hers, you lay a fresh one down, and stack the dirty one in the pile on top of the dishwasher. Once at closing time, you found a cigar stub in an ashtray. Under the rosy bar light, the stub looked like the tip of a dead finger. You circled around and around the table, not daring to touch it, until the lights came on and you saw it was just a cigar.



You sigh. Not loud.

"Where the hell's Jola? Drown in the bowl or something?" She jerks herself upright then, smoothing her decorative fingernails on that short black skirt swathed around her hips. Some uniform, you think. The white sweater sails the curves. You're not from the same planet, you think. Several men at nearby tables turn to applaud. So maybe, you think hopefully, she's mad at Jola Cee.

"Keep her busy, that son-of-a-bitch says!" Marnie ignores the men. You see her swagger over to meet Jola at the door, and they move to a table on the upper level of the lounge. You start a double J&B and a strawberry Pina Colada, double light rum.

A couple of customers at the bar begin waving their empty highball glasses now that Marnie's disappeared. You ignore them and light a cigarello. "What the hell's going on now?" you mutter to yourself. "And why a rush hour on a big-time Saturday night? No fireworks. No bar fights. Why don't people just plain stay home, for Chrissakes? Why me?"

"Annie, hurry up." Dave, the food broker in town again this month for a couple of days, calls from his usual spot down at the end of the bar, where he can eye newcomers, preferably blonde. Does he think you're his maid?

"OK, OK. Coming," you stub out the cigarello half-smoked. What a waste of money, you think. You dip into the back room and take a slurp from your latest mispour, a "mistake." As you pour Dave's scotch, you squint at him through the clouds of smoke. Next thing, he'll be wanting you to pick up his socks, too. Already, his tie is flopping around the limp collar of his wrinkled shirt.

"Last call for happy hour," you announce.

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See, Bobbee Cee is a Texas orphan. The way he says it, it sounds like the whole state up and died on him. You ought to know; you've heard him tell it enough times. If you wanted to play a fool, you couldn't do it any better than Bobbee Cee. Hell, you could put on a Hitler-thin mustache and a black tuxedo and tell Bobbee Cee's story without one mispour. You're small enough. Concave. His parents up and left him, so he says, and then he grew up on the street in El Paso, stealing and playing the flute or something for nickels or dimes. When Bobbee tells this part, big tears well up in his eyes and down his acned cheeks. About that time, his listener orders another round. When it gets to this point, even though you're just bartending, and half-listening out of boredom, you almost feel like you're in on it, too.

"Thanks most kindly. Most appreciated," Bobbee Cee says, all formalese, and he raises his glassful in salute. About this time, there's usually a muttered altercation over the bill, because Bobbee Cee only drinks in numbers above doubles. Then, says Bobbee Cee, he was in and out of detention homes for years, headed for trouble, when some old lady took him in off the street and made him clean up his act. She made him eat regular meals and (ugh) drink milk, says Bobbee Cee, and she bought him piano lessons. And then Bobbee Cee fell in love with this here baby grand, he says, and he's

talking about the piano, not Jola Cee, and he named her Penelope in honor of the old lady, and took her on the road. A big black and blue polished piano. Bigger than little Bobbee Cee, you think.

And, by now, it's time for another round. "Aint't it time for this one to be on the house?" wheedles Bobbee Cee. And then, shortly after that, he met Jola Cee. Jola, a big woman with a kind, aging face and brown eyes and a wide bottom, except Bobbee Cee doesn't put it like this. And they took up orbit on this carnival circuit. Except Bobbee Cee believes in putting the best possible light on everything. The way he tells it, he fell in love with Jola Cee, and they moved into a palace and lived happily ever after, after this "Ranchetta Mirage" got to be their home. Double, or ditto for Jola Cee, of course. Shelter from the road. And here Bobbee Cee laughs and gives somebody, some female, a hug. Actually, Bobbee and Jola Cee are here only three months out of the year, six weeks at a time, but sometimes it feels like they're never gone. Six years at a time is more like it, and the bartenders don't even get a break. Not when Bobbee and Jola Cee are around. They haunt this place like ice-tinkling poltergeists.

"How's my gals?" Bobbee Cee yells like a rodeo cowboy, with his on- and off-again Texas twang, different every time, as he swaggers into the lounge. Likely, he pretends he's got a gun slung to his skinny hips. He hugs and kisses everybody that he just left minutes ago. "My home away from home," he sighs, happy as a fruitfly in an orange bitters bottle. "All my beautiful women."

So we pour him several drinks into one glass, a measured pace of doubles, on the house. He gives us his cowboy hat, big, black,

ten-gallen, to hold.

\*\*\*

The first night you met Bobbee Cee, you thought of a mongrel puppy. He strode in, whistling, and when he sat down, his backbone stuck out like a diagram of vertebrae. His big black eyes glowed at you.

Bobee and Jola Cee, the little chicken bone man and his shiny Big Mama, perched at the bar like a bright pair of birds, alternately pecking each other and preening, eyes watching everything, like perky whiskey-jacks.

They acted like tending a bar was some kind of house-warming party, meant just for them.

"Hi, I'm Bobbee Cee, and this here is Jola. I'm the new act."

To be nice that night, you buy them a drink, praying, by God, no bosses are in sight. The bosses like to sink in at a table of regular customers and watch the bartender with shot-glass eyes. They like to act like Pinkerman Detectives. Give away a drink, they tell you at staff meeting, and you're fired.

"Doubles," Bobbee Cee explains. "We drink doubles. It saves on glasses and bar soap." And he winks.

They are silent a full minute in reverence, as they gulp their drinks. You concentrate on making a drink for Freddy, one of the dining room waiters.

"Didja see that?" Bobbee Cee turns to Jola. "What is that, the funny one with the colors? The rainbow?"

"Pousse-cafe," you mutter, oozing liquers over the back of a long-handled bar spoon.

"Wonderful. Isn't she plain wonderful," Bobbee Cee commands Jola Cee.

"It's the densities," you explain. "Some liquers are lighter than others, that's all. Nothing to it." You don't mention that half the time you pour too quickly, and the liquers run into one another, and then there's this tiny pony glass that looks like someone threw up into it. Grenadine on the bottom, not even a liquer. A sugar syrup with red dye and cherry flavor. At that price, a customer deserves better. Marnie can never get it right.

A deadly hesitation. You hope Bobbee Cee doesn't want one.

"A teacher," declares Bobbee Cee cheerfully, banging his empty glass down like a shot. "You otta be a teacher, I say. You otta be in the schools."

"A teacher?" It's like you've never heard the word before. Is he trying to say you can't pour? After thatousse-cafe? Maybe the doubles are too weak, you think.

He waves his glass outward, to signal he wants another drink.

"Too much class for a bartender. Leave it to the rest of them. You'd be good with children. Look at me, how far I've come." His big black eyes land on Jola Cee. "Wouldn't she?"

"Uh huh," she agrees, stifling a yawn, smiling at you.

"Get Jola one, too. Here, top 'em." He hands you both glasses.

You pour triples this time. "Fresh rocks?" you ask, dropping the subject of teachers forever, you hope.

"Might dilute the gold." Bobbee Cee winks at you.

You are a quick study. Bobbee and Jola Cee, you learn that night, keep their bartender on her toes. They are a bar crowd in themselves, except they don't take up too much room. Two barstools, two glasses, that's all. Cheap drunks. High prices.

The yellow J&B labels on the green bottles pile up, flashing from the floor by the dishwasher. And big Jola and little Bobbee Cee keep drinking until nine, when Bobbee Cee's set begins. Lord knows what Marnie does with them in the daytime. Lucky, Jola's not as bad. But Bobbee Cee must hang on, sticky as a fruitfly.

At nine, Bobbee Cee plugs in the stars on the ceiling (actually they're white Christmas lights), and he begins to croon.

By the end of another happy evening at the piano bar, Bobbee Cee is swackered, lurching over his piano like a crooked blue-black crow and slurring his theme song, "Love Me Tender," and nobody ever seems to notice.

"Goo'night, folks. Thiz bin Bobbee Shee. Shee ya to-marah." Arm in arm, Bobbee and Jola Cee travel across the bar, across the motel to their room, down one of those nebulous hallways.

And before he goes, Bobbee comes and points his little face over the bar, almost falling into the drinks you're making.

"Shomeday I'll be a shtar," he tells you. "I'll go far. And I'll shure as heck remember you."

That's when you duck into the back room, and swallow a few "mistakes," the mispours you've been saving all night. Rusty nail (ugh, drambuie), Dirty Mother (orange juice instead of cream), a Stinger (now you're talking). Bobbee Cee will remember you.

By now, the opening bars of "Love Me Tender" make your stomach muscles quiver like you're going to throw up or you're getting ready for the race of your life, out of there.

Sure enough, your troubles double. Bobbee and Jola Cee and Marnie and even Kitty, the head waitress get to be friends. Kitty's been here for years, ever since her husband set her house on fire one night after she and her five kids were in bed. About that time, Kitty kissed off the husband and came to work here, to get even. For all you know, Kitty sat down and wrote an IOU. What Kitty owed: Every man in the world a chance to let her take them for a ride. So now she "puts out a little," but nothing of herself, she says, and her men take her to all the best hot springs and lobster traps she hears about. Lucky for them, she's never heard of cavier, yet.

"I hate men, anyway," says Kitty. "Besides, Bobbee and Jola Cee are different. Harmless, but crazy." And then Jola and Marnie got to be friends because Benny was so busy with his business and wife and friends, and Marnie got pouty. Besides, they're the same age.

Before you could shake up a martini, the Castille white rum bottles and Kitty's Bristol Cream Sherry bottles were nestling by the J&B bottles on the floor of the dishwasher. At least with Bobbee Cee, he put most of his drinks on his tab. Actually, he probably drank more money up than he made playing. The others' staff drinks were under-the-counter, free. You called them your "little mistakes."

You can say one thing for Bobbee and Jola Cee: They didn't

want anything but drinks. They knew the true value of a bartender. They were crippling your pouring arm.

You couldn't even "float" the Scotch on top of their "water light"s at the end of the night. Not even once. They had noses like weasels, those two. They could tell.

Like fallen arches, arthritis, hangovers, like anything else, you get used to Bobbee and Jola Cee.

\*\*\*

"What's the big mystery?" you ask Carol, when she comes on shift at seven. "Heard anything about why Marnie's mad?"

"Nope," she says. Sighs. "Who cares? I hate her."

"Sad little sap," you think, looking her over. "Farm girl married a dentist, and he's almost handsome. Gets her teeth capped, and lets herself go to hell. Afro huge as a mop. Still, she's ugly as sin, dumb as a rock." You smile at her and hand her the \$20 float. It's going to be a long night.

You hear her asking Bet and Kitty in the back room about Marnie. Bet, sharp and quick as a pin, saunters over and gabs with Marnie and Jola. By then, the bar is filling and emptying like the set-up of glasses in front of you. The law of supply and demand: drinks.

When they call it speed-pouring, they're not kidding. You line them up like Mayhew, your old boss, taught you: Rye, Rum, Gin, Scotch, Vodka, Blended, Wine and Beer. Carol never remembers the proper order, and she drives you crazy.

Besides, you have to be careful, pouring that quickly: clink two



bottles together in too cheerful a speed-pour, and likely you'll break the bottles or the glasses. Smashed glass flying above four sinkfuls of ice is no party; it can kill 20 minutes of peak bar rush time. The place can riot in ten. You should know; you had it happen your first night here.

And then, before you know what hit you, you look up and it's like you blacked out. The clock has moved two hours ahead, without you. When things slow to an ordinary bar rush, you come back to earth, sweating like a melting ice cube.

"Goddamn Bobbee Cee," screams Bet when she comes back.

"Tell 'im to turn it DOWN," you scream back. "Ballad, Request. Not 'Love Me Tender.' Give me your order while you're gone."

She goes. "Goddamn Pink Ladies, blended bullshit," you mutter. Now Carol's winking at you because Bobbee Cee has launched into another blockbuster. She mouths her order. No blended. You forgive her at last. You smile back.

You look at your watch. Stuck to your arm. Nearly 11:30. Thank God for bar time. Twenty minutes fast. Another two and a half hours, and then rest. You wiggle your swollen toes and check the tips in your jar with a sticky finger. Ten dollars, plus 20 percent from the girls. Not bad, considering your mood. Considering Bobbee Cee. Marnie. Considering the bar seats eight -- booming, as usual, on a Saturday night. What else would people do in this town, besides drink?

\*\*\*

"Tips OK?" you ask Carol when she comes around again. Thankfully, Bobbee Cee has moved into grenadine range. Wine and roses. It always get the women. They practically swoon over their drinks, with names like "Between the Sheets" or "Sloe Comfortable Screw"s.

"Uh huh. One old guy left me ten," Carol smirks.

Two girls in front are mooning over Bobbee Cee. The Singapore Sling crowd, you think. Sip one slow, all night. Never heard of tips. Actually, mere like Shirley Temples. Jail-bait.

You nod in their direction. "Check their ID?"

"Yeah," she sighs. "Twenty. I don't believe it a minute."

"Fake ID," you say. "Only detected under a black light. Forget it. It's not our problem. With Bobbee Cee around, it's theirs."

Bobbee Cee, his black tux crooked, is starting to lean a little, and it's just as well the lights are dim, you think. Likely, your eyes are bloodshot by now.

After thundering "My Way" to a dramatic close, Bobbee Cee sits with the two 20-year-olds. The men from the nearby tables crane their heads for another quick once-over. By now, Dave is gone from his stool.

"Where'd Marnie and Jola go?" you ask Carol. Bobbee Cee waves his glass and she rushes over to him. Carol's got the bottom section and she's complaining, as usual, that Bet's going to get better tips than her or Kitty. Of course, Kitty's got the best section and Bet smiles at Carol, saying their sections are the same. If she admitted her section was better, she'd have to share it. Hell, you think, you might get \$10 alone, from Bet, or even Carol. Buy a bottle from the bar, go home and have at it, in earnest.

"My turn and I'll deserve it tonight," you think.

"Isn't he a sight for sore eyes?" Carol is back. She nods her head at Bobbee Cee. He's pulled both girls toward him in a bear hug. They sit like that, all of three of them. Motionless. One girl's low-cut blouse gapes open.

"I deserve it right now," you think. "If only Jola Cee and Marnie keep out of sight."

\*\*\*

One a.m. "Last call," you yell, triumphant. Bartender's revenge.

You argue with a pair of drunks that did not get happy tonight. Funny thing about drunks, says Bet. Out of four of them, three get happy. One gets mad. You swipe down the bar and start stacking glasses. The plush red chairs empty, and the girls pick glass and swizzle sticks from the carpet. You hope you get out of here by two.

"You owe me two-fifty," you tell Carol.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. Right," She counts it to you in dimes.

You ring out your till and line up the Singapore Sling glasses. Staff drinks.

And then Marnie and Jola show up. They're swacked. Now that the bar lights are brightened, you can see the crow's feet wrinkling the corners of their glassy eyes.

You dirty the blender again. You'll have a load of glasses to wash from the staff drinks, you think. To hell with it, leave them for Marnie in the morning. She deserves a break. From Bobbee Cee.

You follow Marnie into the back room when she gets her fur coat. She's staggering. You grab your empty Sling glass.

"Well?"

"Know that sixteen year old step-daughter of Bobbee's, from Jola's first marriage?"

"Little blonde. Tight jeans. So?"

"Bobbee gives me a twenty this afternoon, tell me to keep Jola busy." Her eyes burn staccato fire. "Busy! I'm sorry I ever ..."

"Did you?"

"What the hell else? Poor dame. Her husband playing around with every whore ..."

"But -- doesn't she know?"

"What the hell you think? How the hell should I know?"

"Maybe not," you say. You look at your empty glass.

Marnie's lips, thin without their pink lipstick, quiver. You wouldn't want to get close to her. Not if you were Bobbee Cee.

"I couldn't stick this dive tonight," she says. "He sure knows how to hurt a woman's pride."

You dim the lights, as you follow her back into the lounge. Jola's off-white sparkly sweater and shiny pants glitter. White on white, you think. You think of Marilyn Monroe who borrowed it from Jean Harlow. Platinum hair, skin. Jola Cee will be the only hit that Bobbee Cee gets that goes platinum, you think. Poor Jola Cee.

She is walking out the door with Bobbee Cee, a bottle of J&B twinkling under his arm.

"Bring me that bottle back tomorrow!" you yell louder than you

intended, nervous. In the empty air, it sounds like a threat.

"Empty by temarah. Tab, love. Tab. Night, beauties."

"Let's do it again," Jola Cee sings to Marnie as they leave.

"Soon," says Bobee Cee, the phony.

"Stupid, stupid," pronounces Bet, going for her coat. She stops and looks down at Marnie disapprovingly. "You're sure," she warns.

Marnie doesn't answer. Finally, she looks up. "Benny didn't call?"

No one says anything.

"Well," Carol rushes to the door. "Night, all."

"Goddamn Bobbee Cee," you announce, gulping your drink and putting the Sling glass on the bar. You turn in the doorway.

"What's it to you?"

"Don't tell Jola Cee." She glares at you. There is a red stain on her white sweater. She hurls the glass, and strawberries and rum run down the wall. You leave.

As you dump the money bag on the front desk, the night clerk comes over. "Boss says the liquor inventory's down. One of you gals stealing booze? Somebody's head is gonna roll."

You reel across the street to your car, throat still burning from the whiskey. A depressing night, you think, any way you look at it.

When you get home, you realize you forget your bottle of whiskey. And forty dollars in your pocket. Your husband Sammy is already asleep. You stand for a minute, looking at his defenceless back.

You pull a couple of beers out of the fridge. The ashtray in the living room is overflowing. The beer cools your throat.

"Goddamn that Bobby Cee," you say aloud. But Sammy is still sleeping. As you expected, he doesn't wake.

\*\*\*

Before you leave town, you stop in for a drink. Bobbee and Jola Cee said they wanted to say goodbye, you tell Sammy. A shame about your getting fired like that, they said. Hooray, you say. Nothing around here was ever the same anyway, ever since that night that Bobbee Cee did whatever he did. Or that afternoom. Even Marnie is finished with Benny.

Sammy's been sulky about the move.

"Remember," you tell him. "One drink. No doubles. And don't buy him one. Unless you mean to buy him two or three. I want to go."

Sammy grunts, crushing his beer can. Did he even hear you? This morning, he put on a cowboy hat before he packed the car.

"Your hat is like Bobbee Cee's," you tell him. "Except his is bigger. Where did you get such a god-awful thing, anyway?"

"Hey, all right," Bobbee Cee exclaims, swinging the door of his room open. He bows, and hugs Sammy, and their hats almost collide. You cough, to cover your smile.

When he hugs you, his skinny bones twitch.

"You guys serious or what?" He looks from Sammy to you.

"Of course," you say, muffy. "We're leaving town."

"I meant your outfit," he says, winking at you. He's talking about Sammy's hat, and your red beret, and the green dress with the yellow squares.

"Of course," you say. "I'm all through with black and white uniforms and sticky money." You think: No more ringside seats, no more bull, no more Bobbee Cee.

"C'mon, I'll buy you a drink." Jola is still in bed. You walk over to the lounge. The smell of bleach, of stale beer wafts at you.

You order a Bloody Mary for the hangover. Dsm has another beer. To celebrate, Bobbee orders a triple J&B. Milk on the side."

You look at him in surprise. "Coats the stomach," he says. "Ulcers."

You beat Bobbee Cee to the punch. "To a star," you say.

"My first of the day." Bobbee Cee lifts his glass after you, in self-congratulation. It's a lie. He had a half-full glass when he came to the door. You saw it.

Behind the bar, Marnie is karate-chopping the lemons and oranges. Her uniform is, as usual, freshly pressed, the white blouse bleached. No stains. Once in a while, she lifts her head and gives you a dirty look. You and Bobbee Cee.

"Time to hit it, Sam," you say, gulping your Bloody Mary. "Good luck, Bobbee Cee. Say bye to Jola for us."

He cups his hands outward on our heads, like he is pronouncing a benediction. "Come home and visit," he says solemnly. As you escape, you drapes his scarf around your neck.

You wave at Bobbee Cee, silhouetted through the big lounge windows, as you drive away.

"Fireworks there," you say. "Marnie and Bobbee Cee. Some pair." You giggle. "Didn't even buy goddamn Bobbee Cee a drink."

"Trying to give me a scarf, can you imagine? The man must think

he's Elvis Presley." Of course, you suddenly realize: "Bobbee Cee." Bobby Vee, Bobby Vinton, Sandra Dee. All those people from the 1950s. Bobby sox. "Bobby's Girl," that old song.

"Goddamn Bobbee Cee," you yell. You tilt your head against the seat. "Go, let's get out of here."

Sammy hands you your bottle of cherry whiskey and opens a beer.

The sun pours its yellow heat down over the narrow hills, green as a whiskey bottle. The lush country in this natural light is so bright that you almost feel exhilarated, drunk, at this hour of the morning.

When you are hundreds of miles down the road, you will smash this bottle somewhere in the dark. The headlights will pick up the explosion like a sudden shower of shooting glass. Streaked with rosy trickles of cherry whiskey, that shot glass.

You settle back for now, drinking in the road, floating toward that inevitable black. When you get to it, you will be as inebriated, as decapitated as Jayne Mansfield.



# Tonight Your Life Begins At 3 a.m.

Your nights would string a noose. Every undergarment of your ecru-colored days, every black-eyed night, your eyes ride shotgun on the clock. Its lighted dials wink without humor, without effort, like red eyes mocking dark. Every night, your eyes burn through black. You dare not breathe.

Scanning the black cue-card of the night, you wait: Lights. Action. Sex. Violence. Death. You strain until your ears roar in black octaves, and you swallow hard in fear.

Every fifteen minutes the clock clicks, and you jump a mile. Like a security guard, a voyeur, you patrol this house in the back of your eyes. It is very simple really; You are a haunted woman haunting a house.

The fridge launches into a hum. "Shut up," you spit, sudden in your silent fury. Your nerves afire. Three-thirty is quitting time. You wait, every night. Until four, just to be sure.

When dawn thrusts its bony fingers through the drapes, you descend gingerly into abysmal sleep. You congratulate yourself. You made it through another night. Here where you don't even get a measly coffee break. Blackness, a black lace corset, 24 hours a

day. This is the hardest job you've ever held, this living by violent standard time.

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Will you make it? Only time, its red eyes glowing, will tell. Every night, you wait. Poverty-stricken, robbed of sleep. The founding member of Insemmiac's Anonymous. The mind lies stunned and gagged by possibilities. The cellar door. The windows. You count the minutes like lost sheep. The last recorded attack was three-fifteen. "You can take it," you tell yourself. You must not take his presence personally. Thirty-four before you: not one, ever, hear, was you. Before you?

The blood clots, sluggish, chilled. The mind buzzes in alarm. "Stop," you yell, dead in your mind's tracks. You are tired, so tired of not sleeping. This silent vigil you tell nobody about. There will be no ransom note. Above all, you should not just be lying here. Trussed, eyes pepping wide. Lying here, not able to scream, silent like a victim.

\*\*\*

Looking back, you think it was the dinner plates that set off the alarm. Innocent things, glass dinner plates. The ancient patterns of Limoges or Spode. Never mind the cost. Visions of Harriet and Ozzie. Family gathered at the table, blessing. Those things.

Here is what dinner plates mean: Glass dinner plates break. This man has changed the rules of china and linens in radical new ways. The high cost of replacements, of unspoken invitations. Most people stay in clusters around a nebulous television set. They don't disturb the neighbors. This man makes direct contact.

You will hide your dinner plates under your bed to throw at him in the night. He will not use your dinner plates against you. He has violated the basic rules of housekeeping. The dinner plates will splinter off him, sideways, like a white explosion of clumsy stars.

They say he smiles, and his smile is blinding as an eclipse of the sun. You see this kind of man, often here in California. Their teeth shine like flashlights, like pearls knotted above the neck.

Every night, you tell yourself: Dawn is expected soon. The magic 4 a.m. It will be a sunny day, bright as the smile that flashes the dark sky. Wide as lightning.

\*\*\*

First, there was the Zodiac Killer in the Bay Area. He was ahead of his time, doing his own publicity and dealing in horoscopes. A true full-moon child. A reformed hippie, maybe. And they never caught him.

The Zodiac Killer sent his victims' horoscopes to the police. He described his victims in loving detail, before the fact. He was

as concerned as "Dear Abby" during a nervous breakdown. The year divided into wedges, like slices of pie. Bloody blueberry, blackberry. American as Mom and apple pie.

He told the police this: when, who, where, what. Never why. He gave them a good lead triangle for every front-page story. The top of the triangle, unraveling the paltry little facts. Clots of detail.

And one day, he simply stopped.

We are entering night's mean heart here, the oily pumping of the mind's perennial ooze. A world of men, mean as ice-cold speculums. They never caught him. One day, let's say, he simply disappeared.

\*\*\*

Who would not fall in love with him? He was handsome. There was a list: polite, friendly, eager to help, willing to please. Those were his victims.

For years, he cruised the West, picking up young girls with long brown hair parted down the middle, like a scar, with pierced ears, like the pinpricks of thumbtacks on "Most Wanted" bulletin boards, girls with easy smiles. Girls everywhere talked about him. Stories ran on the second-last pages of metropolitan newspapers. More girls disappeared.

Even today, now that they've caught him and call him Ted Bundy, you wonder: Was it really him? You have seen Ted Bundy, the accused, on TV. Slicked hair, that young James Garner face. A movie star.

Every year, young girls learn to worship James Dean.

There was only one thing missing all those years in the West:  
a description.

\*\*\*

The worst movies late at night when you are alone in the house are the horror mysteries. The shrieking woman tries to escape out of the mansion on a stormy night in, of course, a thin white nightgown. She stumbles down the steps out of the house in her satin high-heeled mules. She loses one. Like a fool, unthinking, she runs back to retrieve it. Her precious mule. Tombstone-eyed in terror, she turns and runs into -- it's the man who will save her. The friendly neighbor. The husband. The savior. A sigh of rasping relief. The heavy breathing. But -- what's this -- he grins. O-mi-God, it's HIM!

Kind of old-fashioned.

\*\*\*

One time, you were twelve, and your parents' house burned. You spent whole nights planning for the next fire. Nights for two years, you strained your pupils in the dark, watching the mute smoke alarm with skeptical eyes. Straining for signs of fire with cloudy, myopic eyes. Never call "Rape." No one will rescue you. Yell "Fire," the experts advise.

\*\*\*

Arsenals. Cities, houses, rooms, lives. Barricades, chastity belts. You are held hostage by crime. Lying here, you see how one man could change the world. If you had to, could you change the world back? One woman alone, after all, is not Superwoman. Is anyone else this angry -- yes, scared? A woman's body is her house, and she has a room between her legs. A locked room and he gets in. Nobody talks about this, at least, nobody you know.

You are prepared. The list: New locks; Broomstick handle nestled in the groove of the sliding patio door; Tin cans tied to drapery rods. You bought a nightlight for the hallway, but it magnified shadows like mastodons. What worries you is: the flashlight, the gun, the knife. How can one man hold all three? How can he hold all three and still do the things he does to a woman?

\*\*\*

For the record, then: All the facts the newspapers never say. Details. Clues that only insiders know, a standard procedure. Keeping mum about the kinks, the signatures of florid style. The newspapers tell the story in that terse, impersonal style, as said by "anonymous." A legacy of the Scientific Revolution, the abbreviated story, minus the old narrative of gossip, short as a woman's nightgown. Eastside, newspapers say. Watt Avenue. Stretching miles. Neighborhood patrols spending coffee-awake nights. Finally, a few live citizens venture out into the deserted streets. And, one night, two blocks away from the patrol, he still gets in.

\*\*\*

When you were young, you read your uncle's detective magazines. Carefully. True Detective, Police Story, names like that. Blunt and factual names. Arrows, circles, triangles, like mathematical equations in grainy photographs of a nebulous world. Clothing askew, one terry-cloth mule kicked aside in the struggle. Stab wounds like strange outer space objects. "Done by persons unknown."

"This, too, could happen to you." You read the headlines like you might listen in on a telephone party line. The real message, of course, was: "You could do this, too." Perhaps this man, out in his cloak of night, has drawn an arrow or a circle in his mind with a red felt marking pen. Perhaps he has pushed a few pins in. A million persons in this metropolitan area. One by one, he selects his victims. A needle in a haystack. One needle gone haywire.

They say this man might be a former policeman. He knows too much about police action, about his victims. He never leaves a fingerprint, not even on a dinner plate. Black leather gloves. Or perhaps, like Mork of TV fame, truly an alien.

And another thing: How does he get the watchdogs into the closet? Or: Why does he never wake the sleeping children? And: How does he get in? Never a sign of forced entry.

Once, when your retarded "dull-normal" friend Rickie came to visit, he asked you to check the closets in the house before he went to sleep.

"Are the shadows gone?" Rickie asked you.

"Yes," you told him. "The Shadow Dog got them. He chased the shadows into the closet and I locked them in."

At least, Rickie slept that night, satisfied with the world.

First of all you lied. Worse, you laughed at Rickie's  
obsession. And you were wrong.

\*\*\*

It is the sunny, golden-haired kind of day you used to believe was epidemic in California. The warm winds steam like hot breath on the back of your neck.

At the corner Short Stop (open twenty-four hours a day), a caved-in Doberman Pinscher is stuck, upright in the squat trash barrel. The dog's ribs project like rounded arrows.

"Poor dog," you tell your husband Ron.

"I'll see if I can get him," says Ron. The dog growls. Ron disappears into the store, and comes out with a Milky Way. The dog swallows the chocolate, tongue pumping at Ron's fingers.

"OK," sighs Ron. You first knew you would marry Ron when he stopped to pat every animal you passed on your evening walks.

So you buy another bar, a Mars this time, to coax the dog into the back seat. You take him home. The dog keeps lunging at the half-open windows of the old Mercury.

The dog won't venture out of the back storage room until you unwrap the pound of hamburger for tonight's dinner, and set it on the floor. After he has inhaled it, he sits under the table in the kitchen, at your feet.

"Looks like you made a friend," says Ron. The dog growls.

You smile. You found a watch-dog. You will sleep tonight.



\*\*\*

Not one closet in sight. For the dog, you mean. You remove all the closet doors that afternoon, before dinner. "It's more airy this way," you explain. You put new batteries in the flashlight and tuck it back under your bed.

This is part of the rules; you need the arsenal before he attacks.

First, he blinds you with the flashlight. Like car headlights in a dark room, he comes and he keeps coming, ninety miles an hour, as Hank Williams said, "on a dead-end road."

He collides with you. He explodes at you, smashing you to smithereens. This is not all. What does he really do? The victims never, never talk. They disappear forever. Sucked into black holes after the explosions. Maybe they leave town. What else could this man possibly do? He could kill you.

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That night in bed, the Doberman thumps on top of you.

"Down," you tell him. "Bad dog."

Sure enough, you sleep. The next morning, the dog corners Ron in the kitchen. A watchdog, you think. That dog is going to kill somebody; it is merely a matter of time. You know it. You distract the dog with a buttered muffin. By now, Ron is not talking to you. He has never encountered an animal before that didn't like him better than you. Except this possibly dangerous dog.

The dog lies in the living room, sunning himself, like an ornament. Would the tall blonde man with the so-called dizzying smile bring a buttered muffin, a pound of hamburger, you wonder. Somehow, you think not.

Finally, Ron goes to work. As he leaves, you hear the Mercury door slam.

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You are lying on the couch that afternoon reading Agatha Christie when the dog jumps you. His eyes shine and he straddles you.

"Bad dog," you scold. Just a little frightening, you are trying to shove him off the couch when Ron comes home. You are pinned, and cannot move.

"Help, Fire," you laugh weakly. "Look at this crazy dog."

"Yeah, crazy," he says. "Sure you want to keep him?"

A couple of days later, a lady from down the street answers the ad. She pats the top of his pointed head gingerly.

"Nice doggy," she says. He wags his stump of a tail, and his leering brown eyes glitter at her.

"I need a companion for my puppy," she says. "OK, I'll take him."

"It's a sacrifice giving up a good watchdog," you tell the lady. "But it's all for the best, I'm sure."

That night, getting ready for bed, you see your neighbor Rick getting out of his pickup. "Hi, Rick," you wave, in your

nightgown from behind the screen door. He slams the pickup and keeps on walking, even faster now. He rounds the corner.

Not Rick, after all. You slam shut the outer door. You look it. Listen, the dog is gone. You knew better, you knew better. Didn't you?

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Groggy, you answer the doorbell, losing a mile as you go. You wrap your robe around you tighter still.

The same well-dressed woman from two days ago, tears streaming down her blusher-streaked cheeks. She stands on your doorstep in hysterics, her Comet running at the curb.

"Here. Here," she screams. "Just -- Here. He's yours."

She shoves the chain that tows the Doberman at you.

"He tore my puppy's throat wide open. I'm going to the vet," she yells, running back to her car in her high heels. Before she gets in, she yells again, "I don't want him. My puppy's bleeding to death. My velvet seats." She goes.

Turning, you see the dog's eyes shining at you.

"Bad dog," you say.

Ron comes out of the bedroom. "I'll find him a home," he sighs.

"I heard. Everybody in the neighborhood heard."

"Tomorrow's my day off. I'll ask a few farmers out of town."

The next morning, Ron takes the dog for a ride. You pat his head sadly and shiver as you take a final look at those glittering eyes.

Ron comes home early, before noon. His hair is getting sun-bleached, you think.

"Already?" you ask.

"This old farmer wanted him. He runs this orchard and he said he'd been looking for a dog." Ron pulls a beer out of the fridge, and smiles at you in quiet triumph.

"Really?" You are suddenly happy for this starving dog that wouldn't fit into a one-bedroom duplex in a shabby section of East Sacramento. You open a beer, relived.

"A toast," you say. And, yet, you're not sure.

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What can you say? Ron puts a sign on the back of the U-Haul that says: "California is for suckers."

You do not look behind. At the California border, you sigh in relief. You sleep like you have not slept in years. Peaceful as a baby.

Later, your sister-in-law writes that he has moved. First, he struck willy-nilly all over town. No area was safe. And then he headed out of the city. Stockton was the last place she heard, Sally said.

You write back that these things are happening all over. A town called Butte in Montana. A serial burglar-killer in Missoula, you heard. Same M.O., you say. "Not to worry," you write.

Not even close.

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By then, there is a list: The Green River Killer, the L.A. Strangler. Perhaps they should hang the L.A. Strangler from the transplanted palm trees. Drown him in margaritas, smother him in guacamole. The women, you mean. But, of course, this is no longer any concern of yours. Is it? The trial of Ted Bundy. Florida. Florida?

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The sun rises and sets. By daylight, wherever he is, he is gone. In cities across the land, they screen off blocks. They patrol alleys. He is never found. The dog is in the closet, not barking, the house still shuttered, tastefully quiet, locked. Not a fingerprint in sight. Shazaam! A life suddenly become anti-matter.

You could stick pins in a map of America. A map is not an ouija board. Or a blonde-headed doll. From force of habit, you read the back pages of newspapers. You wait.

And, deep down, you wonder: What is it really like?

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One morning, when things are going worse than usual, out of the blue at the breakfast table, you ask Ren: "There never was a farmer.

Was there?"

He blinks. At first, he doesn't understand what you're talking about. The color rises in his cheeks. "He was down the road," he informs you, voice rising in defence.

Like a shivery blow out of that old darkness, this thought has come, tunneling toward the light. One starving dog, a sacrifice. All those years you never knew. All those years you knew.

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So now you know. He will never appear, sleek in his black delicious armor, never put a balaclava over his face for you, never tie up your husband, never balance your dinner plates on his back as he makes him lie on the kitchen table, face down. Never force him to listen. Never force your dog into the closet.

He will never: lie in wait in the corner of your bedroom, black in the blackness, and again and again, assault you, until almost dawn. While your children listen in the dark. Your dog. Your husband. The audience. That whole maelstrom.

Once in awhile, on page 32, you see a brief mention of him. As usual, there are never good details. You press the newspaper until the print blurs. Your fingerprints leave whorls all over the newsprint. Only this: He simply disappears.

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To think like the victim, you must begin to think like the

perpetrator. The contrary logic works both ways. Together, the two of you, you and he, he and you shove fists through the black eye of the night. After the fusion, there is no turning back.

In a magazine recently, you saw a photograph called "Bride and Her Bachelors." The sculpture depicted was made of suspended lead, tin foil and glass. When the glass shattered into a huge broken star, the artist pronounced, "At last, it is done."

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A man somewhere "out there" with distorted memories of dinner plates that could chill housekeeping forever. Like flying saucers in darkness, that man stacking those dinner plates. A man who leaves no fingerprints. A space man.

In the end, only you know and he knows that 3 a.m. is the magic number. The silver bullet. His Holy Trinity: A gun, a knife, a flashlight. A beam from the future that leaves black holes in your night.

You wait for him. In the end, you wait alone.

No longer counting minutes like lost sheep, you name the hazards of California while you wait: Earthquake, Volcano, Tidal Wave.

And you marvel: You never hear him leave.

He is that silent. But still.

Still, still, you cannot hear him breathe.