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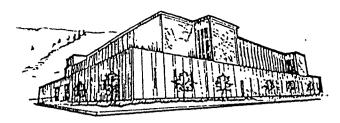
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# THE BLUE OF KNOWLEDGE

# by

# **Richard Stevenson Hunt**

Bachelor of Arts, Speech Communications, Western Kentucky University, 1973

Master of Divinity, School of Theology at Claremont, 1985

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

The University of Montana

1994

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

August 12, 1994

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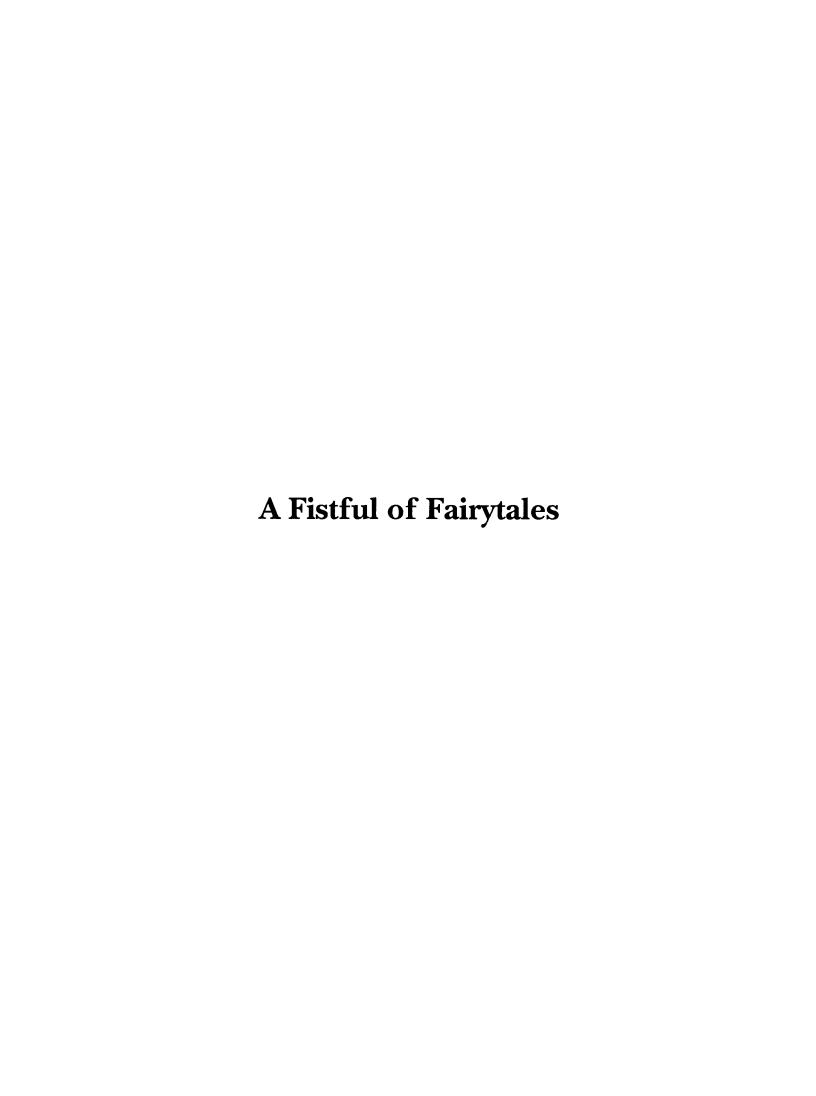


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### The Great Dragon

An aged man is but a paltry thing, A tattered coat upon a stick, unless Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing For every tatter in its mortal dress.

-W.B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"

Sea foam castled the sky: a drawbridge of mist spanned the heavens to the ocean's turquoise surface. The dragon, wings flaming, flew under the bridge and splashed head-first into the waves. Steam spumed into the cool air. As the dragon dove into fathoms deep, the water hissed and sizzled and boiled. His topaz eyes smoking like dry ice, his jaws belching brimstone, his gold-shingled tail lashing the sea with flames, he turned these watery latitudes into a bubbling cauldron.

Plunging towards his ruby-rayed lair, the dragon folded sulfurous wings on his back and began to cool as he dropped into the silent depths. Suns and crescent intaglios scaled his armored breast. He grazed the ocean floor and serpented his tail, winding, ribboning an avenue through a graveyard of sunken ships—white skeletons frozen drunkenly to the rigging of broken masts, seaweed streaming copper-green from the skeletons' skulls, amethyst-finned fish, tiny, darting in and out of the eye sockets. On the ships' rotting decks, iron treasure chests gaped open; ropes of diamonds, gold doubloons and crosses made of lapis lazuli gleamed from their mouths. Nuzzling his fierce horny head into the shattered white of the sand, slithering his burnished belly across the red-rayed throne, the dragon stretched and spiraled upwards, looping, coiling his heaven-and-hell length into one glittering gyre, then, relaxing—his jade head swaying to and fro—he finally rested himself on his scaly apex. Flicking his black tongue, he lay dreaming dark, lustrous moonlight on a jeweled sun.

One thunder soliloquy day, horse-shaped clouds, wind-blasted and black, their long necks curved elegant, their manes streaked silver, stampeded lightning-limned hooves across the sky's expanse. The blind sun, dying, bled millions of scarlet eyes over the water. A wooden ship pitched and rolled, rocking atop the glassy hills of waves, trespassing into the dragon's domain.

The dragon opened his eyes, sapphires showering from his hooded eyelids. Slowly awaking, stirring himself in sections, he cork-screwed upwards and decided to engage in some rollicking sport. His head fathoms directly beneath the vessel, he jerked his tail out of the water, whipping it in a fearsome arc, drenching the sailors with cold torrents of sea water. Ringing his tail in a great mandala around the ship, he considered constricting it and crushing the boat to debris, but instead decided to rise from the hidden depths into spectacular full view. He thrust upwards—the vessel tossed by his back into mid-air—and flicked his spiked tail, batting the boat heavenward. Its boards groaning apart, its nails shrieking, the ship splintered into planks and the white-clad sailors were thrown into the sky's tumult.

But before the dragon, satisfied, could dive back into his ice-cold lair, the planks reassembled themselves in mid-air, the vessel feathered slowly to the sea and the sailors, one by one, fell back on the deck of their floating home. A tall figure stood on the ship's stern before the giant spoked wheel. As the sea mist cleared it revealed Cathbad the Sorcerer, gowned in a flowing maroon robe, wearing a pentagled hat, pointed, with stars shining on its fishskin firmament. Silver-white hair coursed down the riverrun of his back. He clutched in his left hand a twisted black staff, the adder carved from an ancient oak that lightning had struck and charred.

Upon seeing the sorcerer, the dragon thrashed his tail and trembled with rage; he snorted flames and breathed brimstone, scorching the salt-and-brine air.

Cathbad, his beard singed, waved the staff and extinguished the electric fire in

hisses of indigo smoke. The dragon vibrated, muscle spasms ripping their way over the spiny traverse that glinted from his head to his tail's tip; swaying upwards, his head jerking to the left, his black tongue splitting the air, he flailed and scourged the water with his tail, foaming the sea into whirlpools and breakers, emerald-backed. Still as Shiva's dance, Cathbad stood while the ship spun faster and faster in a violent vortex. His gaze fastened on the dragon's smoky eyes, he bottled his gnarled hands around the staff's viper head, pressuring, drilling its rounded end against the deck, and the ship whirled and slowed and stopped.

Sulfurous smoke, burnt yellow, jetted from the dragon's flaring nostrils; its acrid stench overwhelmed the air. The dragon flapped his wings furiously, spiraling cloudwards. He reverse-looped himself in mid-air and hung suspended like an evil star, burning. Diving hard, he tumbled head-over-tail and belly-flopped into the ocean with a great splash. Scalding geysers shot towers of fountaining water, roaring like a pink-whorled conch. A tidal wave, surging, rose up from the turbulence, its glass-blue back arching, its foaming shelf of a head looming. Sparkling and tremendous, it stood poised to swallow the ship and crew into its chaos. Cathbad pointed the black staff and the wave fell meekly back into the sea. The heaving water grew still as a harpooned leviathan.

Cathbad gestured his hand towards the big cannons alcolved in the ship's forecastle. The sailors, their rope-calloused hands shaking, stooped over and fired the fuses. Gunpowder exploding, the cannons boomed, blasting black balls in

arcs. The balls bounced, three by three, off the dragon's gold breast into the sea, falling deep. Whipping the water, the dragon jerked his length into the air. He snared one ball in the hook of his tail, slingshotting it back towards the ship. The shot ripped twilight through the white canvas sail, snapping the mast from its moorings—it toppled end over end into the water.

His stare dark, Cathbad nodded his head to the rows of archers lined on the starboard deck. The archers dipped their flints in barrels of arsenic and then in boiling cauldrons of honey. Drawing their bows taut, they released their numb fingers, shooting raven-feathered arrows, whistling arrows by the scores, singing arrows by the hundreds through the sky.

The dragon stretched, taunting, tall; a thousand arrows pincushioned him, sticking to his saurian hide. Corkscrewing into knots of muscle, sinew and bone, the dragon twisted and whorled himself. Relaxing, he unwound furiously–arrows flying into the ocean.

Breathing flames, circling his length into a fiery hoop-tail in his mouth-the dragon rolled himself as a great glittering sun across the face of the deep sea and rammed the wooden ship. The vessel sundered in two, cracking, shivering apart like the sound of failed lovers' hearts. The ship, two broken vessels now, sunk into the water only to rise a hundred leagues to the east as one vessel with complete masts and sails.

The dragon thrust his head into the foam-flecked sea. He swam circles around the vessel until he swallowed the stars mirrored in the water. His fierce head rising from the waves, he pitchforked his tongue into the night. Beating his wings, he flapped frenziedly towards the heavens. As he soared, flying higher and higher, his wings dropped off, falling into the depths like the shed skins they were. He ribbon-danced around and through dark clouds, back-lighting them with golden dawn. Then he turned and turned and wrapped himself in a gyre on the lustrous pearl of a cloud. Shutting his topaz eyes, he dreamed the world dreaming the dragon.

A sailor, sucking the rind of a lime, whispered to Cathbad, "Now we must seize destiny and steal the dragon's immense fortune." Glaring at the sailor, Cathbad jeered, "You fool, the dragon is the treasure." He touched him on the right shoulder with the staff and the sailor aged, his beard flowing to his feet. Then he smote him on the left shoulder, and the sailor metamorphized into a great oak tree, flowering into blue leaves. A white stork glided to rest atop his crown.

As suddenly as the sailor had grown into the tree, his leaves now changed brown, falling, littering the deck and ocean. Bare of foliage, the tree's branches began to crack and splinter; the stork wheeled his wings and flew away. The once man, once tree stood broken, a towering stick wearing a shredded coat and a white cap of feathers. Turning, Cathbad waved his serpent staff at the rest of the crew.

"Look and learn," he said, "this is the destiny of man and woman who are but dumbstruck things with souls immortal."

### The Mirror, Part I

Once upon a tale, in the enchanted time of Now, there lived a boy named Nels. He stayed with his father in a one room attic. Paint-splattered crates leaned around the loft as their furniture. Turpentine tins gleamed atop the refrigerator. Nels' mother had died of a weak heart when Nels was five years old.

Nels' father was an artist. Three nights a week, he pushed a bucket and sloshed a mop down the halls of the neighborhood school. The other nights and days, he painted his dreams and visions. Canvases stood in stacks, like big decks of card, throughout the room. Campbell soup cans, full of brushes, littered the hardwood floor. Brilliant swirls of paint, where he wiped and striped his brushes clean, whirled, floating over the walls. Whenever lances of sun slanted through

the skylight, the loft changed shape and color. Looking around the room, Nels would feel as though he were trapped inside a kaleidoscope.

Every morning's twilight, Nels' father woke him for school as St. Stephen's tower rang six bells. He ladled oatmeal into Nels' bowl with a wooden spoon.

After Nels left for school, his father showered, shaved, and dove back under the blue covers. He splashed into dolphin-drawn dreams, out from the shore of the world into sleep's expanse of sea. His breathing sounded like the distant roar of a seashell held to the ear. When he stretched awake, he jumped from the bed and seized his brushes. Dipping the wands into the palette's gleams of color, he painted his dream. But no one wanted to buy a picture of dented lockers in a long row, wrapped in seaweed chains, lit by moonlight.

Nels' father glared at the painting and said to himself, "Bah, all that people want to buy are paintings of flowers. Something to hang over their sofas and match their curtains." Curling his lip, he sneered, "They know nothing of beauty."

An image floated into his mind—a hubcap shining like a frost-star atop a snowdrift. In a trance, he closed his eyes. It was as if the scene were painted on the inside of his eyelids. He grabbed a brush and canvas and began painting.

Because his father's lean earnings went for food, rent, canvases and paint,
Nels wore clean but shabby clothes. The kids at school called after him and
nicknamed him, "Swiss Cheese Coat." One morning after returning from work,

Nels' father found him already awake and crying. He ran his hand through his tousled hair and asked what was wrong.

His head down, Nels said, "I don't want to go to school. All of the kids hate me. They laugh about the holes in my coat."

His father hugged him against himself. He whispered, "I've got a great secret for you. Your coat is not a coat, it's magic. All you have to do is put your hand through one of the holes. Then the rest of you will follow into a wondrous world."

"I don't believe in your tricks and magic!" Nels screamed angrily. He twisted, tearing out of his father's arms and ran off to school.

That day, Tom, a loud-mouthed bully, taunted him. In gym class, he shoved Nels in the chest, mocking him. "Your father is a nothing. You're a nothing. You don't even have money for a coat." Old bald Mr. Sprat, the P.E. teacher, broke the boys apart. He dragged Nels to the principal's office for starting the fight.

In his hated coat, Nels sat on the fire escape of a grimy brick apartment building. Wrapping his arms around his chest, he bent over. He stared between his knees through the metal grate at the dizzying space below him. The next chance he had, he decided he would punch that Tom Fordham. He would make him say, "I give," and cry, "I'm sorry." But right now it was Nels who felt like crying. He hated his principal, his teacher, his father and his schoolmates. In fact,

he even hated his mother for dying. He wished that he had never been born. Salty tears ran down his face and stung his lips. With his sleeve, he wiped his cheeks dry. Then he began pulling at the torn threads of one of his coat's large holes. Absent-mindedly, he thrust his hand through the opening.

Nels heard silvery church bells tolling inside his ears. Dizzy, closing his eyes, he held his head in his palms and overheard the soft chanting of psalms.

The ringing stopped. He glanced through his spread fingers. Instead of seeing the littered street below him in bright sunlight, he saw a Celtic cross beneath him in a silhouette of moonlight. He blinked once, twice, three times. Yet he still saw below his dangling tennis shoes the quartz marker. With groping hands, he felt the big bark-arms that slanted in a V above him. Nels realized he was sitting in the rough lap of a tree. To test if he were dreaming, he looked to see if there was an angry bruise on his wrist. But to Nels' surprise, the place where the principal had struck him with the ruler when he tried to twist away was still there.

Swinging from a branch, Nels jumped to the ground. He tumbled over the wet grass and landed hard face-down. His arms sprawled, he stood up and rubbed his jaw. Looking around, he shivered to discover he was standing in an old graveyard. In the night's chill, he hugged his arms against himself. He thought, "Where am I?" Slowly, he wandered down narrow avenues of graves. A black

raven flew over his head and winged into a fir tree. It squawked and cawed at him as though it were trying to warn him of danger.

Nels stared at the names and dates of birth and death engraved into the monuments. He leapt two steps backwards when he saw a stone slab with an open grave. The marker had chiseled on it his name: Nels O'Donniger, Born \_\_\_\_\_\_, Died \_\_\_\_\_\_. Once again, he looked at his bruised wrist. "What could this major weirdness mean?" he asked himself. "Do no dates on the marker mean I haven't really been born?"

He shook his head. Scared, he walked past broken-winged marble angels towards the ruins of an ancient church. Dark shadows followed him. Long shapes slouched across the cemetery plots. The hair on the back of Nels' neck became electric.

Lost, his skin crept cold, and he glanced nervously over his shoulder. He saw shadowy black hands reaching up, twisting out of the graves and stone crypts. Shouting "I'm out of here! I'm out of here!" he started racing. Sprinting, panting hard, he saw yellow lights shining from the church's broken windows. Over the hills, a fir forest curved behind the roofless sanctuary.

Nearing the church, he stopped suddenly. He saw a procession of tiny figures approaching the arched wooden doors, opened wide as if to welcome them. They carried an ebony coffin small enough to hold the smallest infant.

Robed in black, the Wee Folk wore wreaths of faery roses and carried red caps in their hands. They chanted, like a choir of larks, the Psalter of our Lord.

As they disappeared through the ivy-quilted stone archway, Nels ran after them. He bounded up the broken steps that were crumbling under the hard weight of centuries. Stumbling inside, he found shards of green, blue and red stained glass scattered along the pews. The Wee People, their hands steepled in prayer, walked down the aisle. On the cherry wood altar, a shattered halo gleamed like pieces of a heavenly jigsaw puzzle. In the altar's center, a tall mirror stood; it hung on an oak stand carved with tumbling angels. To his surprise, Nels heard himself shout, "Who are you?"

A hooded figure, three hands high, turned and glared. With eyes the blue of an axe blade, he stared through Nels.

Solemnly, the funeral procession marched towards the looking glass. One by one, they stepped into the mirror and boarded a ship made of glass. A sea green mermaid leaned forward on the prow; the vessel rocked on lulling waves. As the tiny figures gathered to draw up the crystal anchor, the hooded figure pivoted. With a crook of bone, he made his finger into a hook and motioned Nels to follow.

His heartbeat drumming inside his chest, Nels' leg muscles tensed to flee.

But he saw in the mirror a faery sail made of a Joseph's coat of brilliant hues. The wind breathed and the beautiful sail billowed out. It was woven of the colors of

the risen sun and the evening moon and the sky of summer noon. Big wooden buttons, sewn by strong canvas thread, resisted the pulls and tugs of the wind. Its arms were tied back by ropes to the mast. The hooded figure pointed at the sail and flashed a toothy smile. Nels heard footfalls and saw a long shadow stripe the altar. He hurried up the gangway.

When his feet touched the glass deck, the mirror spun on the stand. Its back side now faced the sanctuary. Painted on the dark wooden back, an angel with tangled red hair stood holding a flaming sword.

And so they sailed west toward the Isles of the Setting Sun. Like the wedding feast at Cana the water turned wine-red; the ship rolled atop the sparkling breast of the sea.

Nels watched in silent amaze as the Wee Folk tore their hair, pinched their ears till they were bright red and swore oaths. Shouting "The Queen Is Dead! The Queen Is Dead!" they stood in a semi-circle on deck. With ropes they lowered the black coffin towards the water.

Five mermaids splashed their heads up from the foam-flecked waves. The fine floating threads of their hair fanned coral on one side of their faces and glittered golden on the other. They arched their mother-of-pearl tails into the air and formed a silver star of scales. On their upturned fins, they received the casket.

The coffin vanished into the air and the fragrance of roses floated over the glass ship.

Nels saw the radiant face of his mother multiplied. Each of the mermaids mirrored his dead mother. As if by a great magic he had become a Wee Folk, he too, mourned the queen.

Mermen rode forth on blue-backed dolphins. They had shaggy seaweed hair and mackerel-mated beards. They strummed harps of white-gold to the low hum of the Little People and the high tune of the wind. Softly, they sang ballads of love and loss and shipwreck and homewreck.

As they sailed towards blue rock cliffs which had broken many a faery vessel, the Giant Sea Serpent awoke. He wound his yellow length through a maze of underwater caves. Spiraling upwards, he twisted himself around and around. Splash! His five jade heads thrust through the waves' surface. Furiously, he lashed the water with his tail. He looped his length into a great hoop and bit his tail in the middle head's mouth.

Rolling himself as a glittering sun across the blood-red tides, he blocked the southwest passage between the cliffs. Atop this hellish hoop, his other four heads branched upwards like a horrifying candelabra. Swiveling slowly, they flicked the red flames of their tongues into the air. As a great swan flew above him, the serpent curved violently his end head. A feathery white head sticking from his mouth, he swallowed.

His ruby eyes glowed. He awaited the ship so he might narrow the wheel of himself. He planned to shiver the vessel's glass ribs into slivers and crush the marrow from the faery bones.

The hooded figure motioned to a group of Wee People. They carried coiled ropes, sharp axes and spike-boots to a crystal lifeboat. After manning and lowering the boat by pulleys, they rowed hard while the water roiled. Upon reaching the serpent-sun, they stumbled out of the rocking boat. By the silver spikes of their boots, they started climbing the steep curve of tail. As they ascended higher and higher, they hung suspended upside-down.

Simultaneously, the murderous serpent's ten eyes spied the climbers.

While the Wee People tried to swerve their heads away, his hissing tongues striped their faces. Frenziedly, they began striking the scaly flesh with axes. They rang blow upon blow upon his horny hide. Finally, a geyser of green viper blood spurted.

The Giant Serpent jerked his tail from his mouth. He swiped at the Small Folk and tried to knock them into the water and against the rocks. As his tail flailed this way and that, they tossed their long ropes. They lassoed it and shouted, "Heave-ho" and "Ho-heave" and pulled and tugged their ropes hard. Then with all their strength, they threw the rope's loop over the cliff's blue boulder. Suddenly the serpent flew from the passageway high into the air. Upside down, he hung dangling by the cliff's side. His five heads floated deep below the sea's tides.

A dragon ship floated into view over the horizon. Its scarlet wings of sails flapped and unfurled in the gathering wind. From high atop the mast, a black flag with skull-and-crossbones snapped. Wart-nosed Sea Wags manned the deck.

These faery pirates hung turquoise scabbards down their pants' pleats.

They slung ruby-hilted swords into the sheaths. Circling a keg, they clanged their pewter mugs together. They toasted the other and boasted of their infamous deeds. In off-key chorus, they sang: "Diddle dee, diddle dum, long live Captain One-Eye and red rum!"

The gold dragon vessel sailed into the ferocious head wind. It pitched and rolled, back and forth, high atop the waves. The captain wore a black eye patch and swore violent oaths against the weather. As the ship's hull rode the tall back of a wave, he stood angled at the pilot's wheel. He steered by the silver hook that dangled from his blousy shirt sleeve. Gold skull-rings glittered from his ears.

Captain One-Eye turned and snared a mug sliding starboard. Planting the compass point of his wooden leg, he swung the other leg in a great arc. Then he stomped and clomped towards a wood-lidded keg. Left unattended, the pilot's wheel whirled. The ship spun around and around atop the foam-flecked wave. Limping on the peg leg, he seized the blurring spokes. The ship swirled slowly and skied down the wave's steep slope. "Aye mateys," the captain called, "pass out

the muskets." He veered the dragon ship onto a collision course with the Wee People's vessel.

Slooping towards the glass ship, the wart-covered Sea Wags shouted "Hurrah!" They sang, "Ring-a-Ding, Death to the Fairies of the West but Tra-a-la-la Yes! to their treasure chests." Then they tossed their black skull-and-crossbone hats into the air. They drew their swords and caught the hats on their blade points.

The headwind died. The dragon ship sailed towards the Wee People's glass vessel. In the glass boat, high in the crow's nest, a faery cried, "Pirates off the port!"

His head cocked, his warty nose pointed down the butt, a Sea Wag took aim with his musket. Boom! The lookout fell forward from his loft. He splashed head-first into the red sea.

Captain One-Eye chortled a sinister laugh. His silver hook held behind his back, he lunged hard at Nels. As Nels rocked backwards on his heels, the dreaded swashbuckler knocked the sword from Nels' hand. He flashed his blade through the air and slashed Nels' coat to shreds. Then he sliced the big buttons off, one by one. Smiling wickedly, he thrust the blade's vibrating tip at Nels' heart. His sword's point pressed against Nels, he started backing him towards a long plank

stretching out over the water. He bragged, "Aye, ladey boy, you'll now walk the plank or I'll be forever accursed as the blankety-blank of the Seven Seas."

Nels shook like a lantern flame in a fierce northern gale. As he stepped onto the plank, he saw giant sea monsters teeming below in the watery hell. The spilled blood from the Wee Person-the lookout shot and tumbled from the crow's nest-had drawn squealing eels and topaz-eyed octopuses. The eels' sleek black tubes of flesh were poised to swallow Nels, to snap him up tennis shoes first. The octopuses floated submerged near the water's surface: their long arms splayed in every direction. Nels delayed by taking tiny steps. But Captain One-Eye, a dagger-scar knifing down his face, limped faster until he too stood on the plank. He ordered, "Don't drag your feet, boy!" Crystal tears striped Nels' cheeks. The evil pirate said, "Wipe those tears dry. Cry as you may, you'll find no help."

Dabbing at his eyes with a raggedy sleeve, Nels reached the board's end. But instead of stepping off into briny air and salty death, he sprang high off the board. He soared heels-over head in a backward flip. Even so he had misjudged and was now too far away to land. Falling plunging past the plank, at the last possible instant, he reached out. He grabbed it with two hands; in mid-air, he hung dangling and kicking. From the blood tides below, the gaping mouths of eels nipped his heels. A black octopus threw a strangling tentacle around his neck. Captain One-Eye stomped hard at Nels' hands with his peg leg. He screamed gleefully, "Landlubber, you'll soon be sea-blubber for the hungry

monsters below." Nels' fingertips began to lose their grasp and slide. He gasped, "Help!"

Nels and the Wee People stepped out of their rocking row boats onto the stony shore. Sparkling in the distance, a crystal castle shone diamond-bright. It looked like a scene Nels' mother had once read him from her leather book, Faery Lore. Walking ahead of them, the hooded figure ordered them to hurry while there was still daylight.

They traveled through meadows of blue lupine, wild orange roses and dandelions. As they approached the castle's estate, the wind blew the dandelion puffs from their stems. Rising upwards together, they magicked into a white tiger. Purring, the great cat sprang through the air towards Nels. But just before stretching its paw over his shoulder, it dissolved apart.

Nearing the castle's gardens, Nels shivered to see an ancient blackthorn tree stretching into the sky. A greedy screech of ravens was pecking at what Nels took to be dark red ornaments. Nels screamed when he stepped closer and saw that the tree was hung with human hearts. The Wee Folk turned and glared at him like the human he was. The hooded figure's voice echoed inside his head like a heavy hammer's blows, "Those are humans who the Cave Faeries have captured and murdered."

Nels followed close behind the Wee People. As they passed the tree of hearts, Nels stared down at the slate path winding through the flowers. The crows shrieked and flapped their wings around the blackthorn. A wolf hound yapped on the horizon. Nels imagined the crows pecking at the flesh, but he dared not look. "Stay near us," the hooded figure's voice whispered, "Do not venture outside the castle alone, for the Cave Fairies can gage the weight of human footsteps trembling through the soil." They approached the castle and Nels looked closely at the carved children above the door. They were not of the race of the Wee People; they were human children.

They ascended the front steps and the faery in front pulled the door bell's rope. A tall thin faery flung open the big wooden door. Dressed in a grey suit, he smiled an ancient, wrinkled welcome as if he had smiled that smile every day for a thousand years. His ears hung elongated past his chin.

From far back in the castle, the deep, resonant voice of a cello groaned and sighed. The Wee People entered the foyer and followed the ancient faery. He led them down a lamp-lit hall, past closed doors, behind which cried muted moarnings for the queen. But the cello overwhelmed all other sounds.

The group reached at last the concert hall. A human girl, dressed in the peacock eyes of a satin robe, performed for the late queen's daughter. She played to initiate Princess Anna's ascension to the throne. The girl stretched her long fingers up and down the cello's neck and drew the bow with all her passion. Anna

knelt before the queen's gilded chair, her head resting on the silk seat. She listened in great sorrow as though all her tomorrows had died in the yesterday of her mother's funeral.

The Wee People waited at the arched entrance listening in quiet reverence. Nels wondered at the princess, her elf braids swaying behind her, her shoulders shaking slightly. She wore a white garment stained with streaks of red and yellow. "From rose petals," informed the voice in Nels' head. "She stripped the petals from every bouquet she received in her mother's honor. She rubbed the petals into her robe to make the colors last until her life's end. On the day she dies, the garment will fade to pure white again, and her oldest child will wear it on the mourning day of her death."

The cellist drew the last fading note of the song but Anna did not move.

"Princess," said the hooded figure aloud, "The mermaids have taken your mother to the Cave in the Depths of the Sea, where her body will rest in eternal beauty.

Her soul will rise to the surface of the water. It will lift into the air and fly above the clouds to the edge of the world, to the Endelig Mountains bordering the Land of the Dead."

The princess stood with her back to the Wee People. "Thank you, Terje.

Please leave me now." The cellist followed the Wee People out of the room and down the halls to the Banquet Room, where a great feast was being served in

honor of the queen. Nels hid by a gold statue behind the open door of the concert hall. With one eye, he watched the princess through the door's crack.

The room was bare of people except for the princess and her maid, who held a handkerchief embroidered with sea shells to Anna's face and caught her tears. The princess still stood with her back to the door. Nels gazed at her long hair braided in elf locks, and her white gown streaked with rose petals, much too long for her, spilling colors at her feet.

In the depths beneath the crystal castle, a stone stairway gyred in plunging descent to a dank cellar. Thousands of red and green bottles of Wee Wine shone from the oak racks. Whoo, whee! Nels bounded downward around and around the spiral of stairs; he looked for a safe place to hide from the drunken spree of a party. His lips quivered from icy fear and he shivered from the damp cold.

A heavy iron door stood at the cellar's far end. Hearing loud footfalls and wild laughing from the height of the stairs, Nels raced for the door. His face screwed into a terrible effort, with all his might he pulled hard on the door's iron ring. It squeaked and scraped barely open. Squeezing himself through, he made his way onto a narrow ledge. As if slammed by an invisible hand, the door banged behind him. Sliding the flat of his palm along the wall, Nels groped his way down yet another steep flight of steps. Torches on the stones flickered as though the wall had yellow eyes.

As his feet thudded against the floor, he saw that he now stood inside a huge underground cavern of rose-quartz. Flaming torches, bolted on rust-flaked hinges, circled this red chamber. The dust of centuries swirled in the air.

Blinking his eyes, Nels couldn't believe what he saw.

The headless body of a knight raged about. He stretched his arms out and grabbed for his flying face. His head, with toothless mouth and knots of black hair, swerved and floated always out of his reach.

A silver suit of armor clanked and clanged throughout the cave. The shining clothes strode towards the boy. Nels flung his arms high and lowered himself. He cowered against the wall. A hollow laugh sounded from inside the suit. The stiff gloved hand opened the helmet's visor. Nels saw to his horror that no one was inside.

Running circles and circles around the chamber, a defeated sorcerer, with a long white beard, waved a wand. His tall body was severed into two parts: his torso and head floated through the air chasing after his legs. As though he were a dog doomed never to snare his tail, he could never catch them and reform himself.

Blowing a unicorn's horn, the hooded figure trumpeted assembly.

A mob of Small Folk, hiccuping and waving wine bottles while nibbling custard-filled crumpets, wedged their way inside the cellar.

Jostling together, they smacked their frothy lips and whacked elbows hard into each other's ribs. Then they stomped their pointed shoes and roared ferociously, "The human has opened the iron door and entered the forbidden chamber!"

The dragon-like howl lashed its angry tail of echoes throughout the wine cellar. It hurled bottles off their shelves and lunged past the doorway; it wound down and around the spiraling steps to the cavern. But it curled at Nels' feet like a dog's gentle growl. Looking around him, he ran up the stairs to discover the noise's source.

As soon as he stuck his head into the cellar, the hooded figure threw a lasso around his neck.

"Hang the mortal from the Tree of Hearts like the Cave Faeries do!" cried one tipsy faery, his big thumb corked inside a bottle.

"Yes! Yes! Death to him!" the crowd shrieked like a chorus of hungry crows.

The hooded figure surveyed the drunken assembly. He shook his head NO and announced, "Tall human or Small Folk, no difference must be made. He must undergo the trial of the Tower of Swords."

He dragged Nels-a parade of Small Folk wobbling behind them-into the enchanted garden behind the castle. They walked past a thick wall of shrubs, trimmed into the shapes of gryphons and lions. The faeries gossiped and talked

among themselves and sang legends of long ago. As the troupe neared the center of the maze, Nels stared up at a marble giant wielding a club. Blue birds perched atop the stone strands of the statue's hair.

Still gazing upwards with big eyes, Nels stumbled over the giant's marble toes and fell. By the ragged coat collar, the hooded figure jerked him from the ground. Suddenly, as though it had just erected itself before his eyes, Nels saw a silver tower made entirely of interlaced swords. From her bedroom chamber high atop the glass castle, Princess Anna spied on the scene below.

The blue-and-violet-pied sky darkened into ink. An icy shower began to fall. Big raindrops splattered music, shattering Ping! Ping! against the sword blades.

Nels attempted to plant his feet. But the hooded figure tugged on the rope and pulled him through the grass. Nels pleaded in a hoarse cry, "Please, please, spare me, not that."

At that very moment, an invisible violent force lifted Nels out of his sneakers. It hurled him as though he were a javelin through the air. Headlong, he flew straight for guillotining his head on the razor-like swords.

The Tower of Swords had built itself in the immemorial ages of long ago. It had taken place when the world first had been spun into motion like a child's top. This was the time before time when God had lifted the silver-embroidered sheet of a cloud. He snapped his wrists and tumbled the angels who came to be the Small Folk from heaven. Jealous of the Guardian Angels, they had tried to steal their

gleaming swords. But the shiny hilts had fallen out of their reach. Somersaulting end over end, the swords clashed and clanged through the air towards earth.

Miraculously, they landed into a towering tent of silver—the fabled Tower of Swords.

By a great magic, Nels flew through the tower as though it wasn't really there. But suddenly he fell head-over-heels, plummeting towards the sparkling mirror of the crystal floor.

### The Crystal Children

Once upon a time, but as recent as last night's dreams, a mother and father booked passage on a long journey by ship. The husband and wife, weary of old ways in an ancient place, were in search of a new life in a new land. They brought with them their two beloved children, Rebecca age seven and Jason age eight.

The voyage was dangerous. To reach Greenland from England, they had to sail through seasons of storms and oceans of ice.

Days became weeks, weeks stretched into lonely months, and they had still not eyed Greenland through their long, black spyglass. They were hopelessly lost at sea.

To make matters worse, the husband fell ill with a blazing fever. His scarlet face felt like a hot river of knives. The pores of his skin were sweating so feverishly, his brilliant red skin had become sharp to touch.

One dark night when the sky looked as if an immense fountain pen had leaked clouds of ink across it, a new disaster struck. The ship, sailing blind, collided against an ice floe that had calved from a mammoth iceberg. The ship crunched the curled tusk of ice with such force that Rebecca and Jason, who were playing buccaneers on the deck, were propelled over the vessel's stern.

The wooden ship flopped in the ocean like a dying whale.

When the rosy sun dawned above the dark horizon, the frantic mother could find her children nowhere. She searched the deck of the ship. She searched the hold of the ship. The children were nowhere to be found.

The woman was crying. Big tears watered the cold frost flowers on her cheeks. She pulled her yellow hair and cried and cried as only a mother can mourn for her lost children.

The ship's captain was so moved by the mother's heartbreak, he dared to step below into the quarantined area. In a small whisper, he told the children's unconscious father the news of the tragedy.

A strange thing happened. The father rose, like a scarlet corpse, from his fiery bed. Slowly, he climbed the wooden ladder of steps-each step moaning under his weight of 15 stones-to the ship's deck.

The captain didn't care that the father was leaving the quarantine. He knew that the ship was already a floating grave, that the ship's passengers and crew would soon become a shivering family of ghosts. The captain knew that no passage would be found through the floes of ice.

Once upon the icy deck, the father glided like a dreamwalker past his wife and jumped overboard. The mother blinked her sea-blue eyes several times for she believed that she was asleep in a chilling nightmare.

Diving into the freezing, bluish-white water, the feverish father felt as if he had just reentered the cool brooks of his childhood. He could see the big, shady trees on the moss-lined bank. And he tasted the sweet cool innocence of blueberries in his mouth.

The father opened his green eyes wide as he swam past two shimmering spools of ice. As he circled back, he saw in one spool the yellow threads of Rebecca's long hair wound around her neck. In the second spool, he saw Jason's face pressed against the silver window of the spool. And Jason's black hair had become a shiny, night-blue curl of ice. In the hook of his left arm, the father carried first his daughter to the surface and then his son.

Rebecca and Jason were set safely on the ship's deck. The mother cried and laughed and clapped her hands at the miraculous return of her children. The father stood by the children. He was as silent as stone. The father knew.

The father knew that the children were made of ice. As the sparkling ice that encased the children began to thaw, the children began to speak. Rebecca said she was sorry to cause grief for her parents. Jason, shining like cold prisms, said he was scared.

The mother gazed with love upon her children, marveling at their cold resurrection. She dropped to her weary knees and gave joyful thanks for her children's safe return. "Thank you Lord for returning my children to me." She sang out, "My children are alive!"

No longer on fire, the father looked with heartbreak at his shining children. Jason spoke in a little, trembling voice to his mother: "Mother, Rebecca and I are not alive. We are dead."

The mother said in startled disbelief: "But I see you before me looking as bright as crystal. I hear your voices ringing like bells."

Jason held up for view his dripping foot from which the ice had melted. Rebecca held up her fingers from which the cold, icicle sleeves had melted. Their mother screamed. Their father cried. Jason's blue foot and Rebecca's blue hand were already mottling brown-and-black.

Jason said, "Mother, we are dead." Rebecca exclaimed, "Yes! Mother, we are dead!"

Rebecca insisted, "We must talk to the captain." Jason demanded, "We must talk to the captain." The ship's first mate relayed the children's order to the

captain. The captain labored his way out of the belly of the ship's hold as if he were climbing his way out of a deep depression.

Upon seeing the silver-bearded face of the captain, the children sang in chorus: "Captain, steer to the right, steer to the right."

Then the children looked at their parents and said: "We must go. Oh, yes, we must go."

The mother looked as if her flesh and bones were going to dissolve into bitter tears. The father looked calm as if he had seen the worst that life had to inflict and life would never again touch him.

The mother started to seize hold of Rebecca's frail legs. But the father caught the mother's hands in his. And their fingers knit their hands together into a desolate island. The father heard himself speak for the first time in weeks:

"Ruth, we must let the children go. Rebecca and Jason are crystal children now."

And holding hands, the children dove quietly over the ship's rail.

## The Fortune Teller

There was an old woman fortune teller who lived at the bottom of a deep well.

The well was constructed of white stone and was equipped with a wooden bucket and long lengths of hemp rope for drawing the fortune teller into the light of day.

The old woman had cold green eyes that shone like a carp's. Her small face was ancient with worry lines. And her tangled silver hair lay like knots of moonlight at her crooked feet.

The old woman did not like telling fortunes. The work was hard, dangerous, and frustrating. Fortune telling was hard because people wanted their futures told with magic and theatre.

Fortune telling was dangerous because in the eternal, dark night at the bottom of the well, the old oracle dreamed of the people who would be visiting her. And the old woman's mind became a mad confusing swirl of dreams. Visions of fires and births, disasters and deaths, wars and plagues, and famines and celebrations flew, like frenzied black birds, around and around inside her head. Her head ached with dreams, but she could find no relief. No relief, at all. And these dreams became caught and tangled in her silver hair, and she grew more and more confused as to who she was.

Fortune telling was frustrating for no one was ever pleased with the "future" he or she received. And everyone acted with great surprise to learn that she or he was destined to die.

The future unrolls before people as a magic carpet of unlimited possibility.

Thus, people traveled for miles and miles to see if their predicted futures would match their dazzling expectations.

The person, who desired to consult the old woman, would lower the wooden bucket into the well and then pull the fortune teller up to the surface.

The fortune teller, riding the rim of the bucket like a witch, would jump off the bucket, stamp her feet and stare into the person's soul.

Depending upon her mood, the fortune teller would open her mouth and out would tumble a fish, or a spoon, or a frog, or a ball of twine, or a spool of paper. And sometimes on special occasions, all of these objects would come spilling out of her mouth in rapid succession.

But the spool of paper was the oracular device of preference. The fortune teller would stand still as a stone statue with paper unspooling out of her mouth. The white paper would be empty of writing with the exception of a few faint impressions of loops and slash marks. But as the person gazed with rapt attention at the blank, white paper, writing would slowly form until the reader's future was spelled out. Upon the reader finishing his own story, the writing would fade into formlessness again.

It so happened that one fine sunny day, a young man strode confidently to the well. He wanted the fortune teller to confirm what he knew: he was destined for a wonderful life.

Like the others before him, he lowered the bucket, and groaning and moaning, he pulled the old woman up into the shimmering, brilliant glare of the hot day. The fortune teller jumped off the bucket, stamped her crooked feet, and opened her mouth, but this time nothing tumbled forth.

The young man, a devotee of the arts of astrology and phrenology, witnessed the fortune teller's consternation. Ever the gallant, he offered her the crown of his head so that she could see the stars in his bumps. But the fortune teller saw only bumps.

The young man, ever anxious to help, took bones of dice from his hip pocket and handed them to the old woman. The old oracle rattled them in her hands and rolled them hard, but when she started to read them she saw only smooth white bones.

Desperate, the young man thrust forth the palms of his hands. He pointed out his life line, his love line, his success line, but all the woman saw were two, lovely soft masculine hands.

This had never happened before. The fortune teller was quite perplexed.

But as fate would have it, the sun of an idea illuminated her mind. She motioned for the young man to follow her to the woods. Upon reaching the silver barked trees, the fortune teller instructed the young man to defecate.

The young man was shocked. But he obliged and defecated in the woods.

The fortune teller knew that life's events consist of patterns of chance. She would read the young man's future in the pattern of his curling shit on the ground.

For the first time in her long life, the fortune teller was startled. She saw her own future in the curling symmetry of the young man's dark brown feces. She would cease being a fortune teller. The young man would take her place.

The old woman laughed. She combed the dreams out of her long silver hair. And lifting the folds of her dress, as one last frog tumbled out of her mouth, she went whistling down the road.

## The Troll

A one-eyed troll-warts on her sharp nose and knots in her tangled hairlived in the dark night of Norway, deep in the heart of the forest. She lived in a wooden cottage, and above her stone fireplace, there was a great brass tuba with a stuffed human head peeking out from the tuba's horn.

One drizzling night, she was whistling through the forest when she spied a blonde-haired boy with fjord-blue eyes walking amongst the silver birches. Slowly she crept up on him and manacled her iron wrist around his ankle. Her red eye flashing delight, she dragged him behind her. The boy screamed.

Clapping her hands, she jailed him in the heavy wooden cage in the kitchen where a huge iron cauldron stood in the corner. Every day, she fed him the fattest fowl and the richest chocolates in the greatest abundance.

Whenever his wailing annoyed her, she unlocked the padlocked cage and conked him on the head with her frying pan. The boy gained much weight, and although fair as snow, he had shining apples of cheeks. The troll, licking her lips, decided to feed him a special dinner. She served him the plump chicken whose head she had axed. Humming, she left for a stroll.

The boy devoured the chicken, smacking his mouth, stacking the bones. But then he slumped to the floor and cried. He curled into his tears and fell asleep; he dreamt of trolls and one gleaming wishbone.

Excited, he awoke, breaking the bone in half, wishing it into a white key.

He rattled the iron padlock apart. When the troll returned, he leapt from behind the door and axed her head.

The moral of the story is this: If acted upon wishes are magical keys.

# The Dreamer

In the heart of the forest, where golden sunlight dissolves into dark shadows, I discovered a dreaming man. The sleeper, his head pillowed by the hard angle of his bent elbow, reclined on his left side.

The dreaming man was, of course, fast asleep. Dressed in silk rags, the man was covered by a cold shawl of withered vines and white snow. Upon further inspection, I shivered to notice: he was wearing neither shoes nor socks.

His long, white feet were marbled blue-veined tablets. For upon the soles of his feet, a book was written. In wonder, I traced my finger over the tiny curls of indigo script and began to read:

In the age of marvels and belief, I was a prince in a vast kingdom. My father was King Vesper and I, his only son, was destined to inherit the Kingdom of Kilkarne.

As a young boy, each new day was a bold adventure. I hunted wild game with my father. I engaged in make-believe duels with the royal guards. I could taste my future, with the same assurance of pleasure, that I used to bite into the wild sweet strawberries that were growing, like blessings, in the green fields.

My father adored me. The people of the kingdom loved me. All was well.

Upon my coming of age with the arrival of my twenty first birthday, it had been decreed: my father would abdicate and I would succeed him as King of Kilkarne. The future beckoned to me like a lover's promise.

In the twentieth year of my life, however, I met a girl of astonishing beauty.

The girl was made of glass and she sparkled when we made love on the damp forest floor. Scarlet and gold leaves covered her back; she shone like brilliant stained glass.

The king was furious. The people were outraged. It was not right. It was worse than wrong. How could a prince betray his kingdom and his noble race by falling in love with a girl of glass. They protested: you can see through her, she's as transparent as greed.

Love is an axe. It slices sinew; it shatters bone; it severs blood ties. Deaf to the protests of my father, the king, and the good people of Kilkarne, I married the glass girl.

We journeyed to an outlying province of the kingdom, where we would be unknown. We loved in a blue house with a thatched roof.

By cruelest chance, a courier, sent by King Vesper to Lord Suane of our province, spied me while riding his white steed to the village. As the fur-robed rider jerked the reins hard, the horse tossed its head, rearing high on its hind legs, and the man glared at me. Whipping the horse's flanks furiously, he galloped the stallion down the road and cried my presence to the villagers. The villagers, brandishing torches of fire, marched on our blue house. The glass girl and I escaped into the woods and watched our lives being licked to the bone by hissing red flames.

Life in the forest was hard and cruel. We were often hungry as starving deer. Cold northern winds rang through icy-branched trees, frosting our faces. Snows carpeted shadowy blue paths under our feet.

The girl of glass cried. Her salt tears began to make her opaque.

One cold bitter night after gathering tree branches for our fire, I returned to the circle of stones only to find the glass girl gone. It seemed as though some evil magician had cast a spell upon her and made her vanish into the dark of the night.

At first, I searched for her in the mystery of silver-barked trees. I searched for months in the lonely heart of the forest. But as months accumulated into years, I began to wander aimlessly over trails that I had traveled previously.

In the fifth year of my wanderings, a miracle happened. The glass girl reappeared in the forest. I was ecstatic.

But I observed that the blue lights of her eyes were now extinguished. She wore diamonds on each finger of her hands so that she would sparkle as when we were young and loved in the forest.

She spoke to me, while gazing sadly at the ground: "You deserve to know the truth. I have divorced you." As I listened, the ground beneath my feet opened up, and I began to fall and fall and fall. I asked incredulously, "Why?" She said quietly but firmly: "The life we had was too hard." I asked a question that wasn't a question for my heart knew the answer, "Have you remarried?" She said in a still voice: "Yes." "Who?", I asked. She answered angrily: "Your father. Your father, the King of Kilkarne."

The heart is a wound.

I cried. I howled like a wolf. I rubbed lye in my eyes. I rolled on the ground. I devoured empires of ants. I ate the bark of trees.

By feel, I wove a mask of twigs.

Sitting lotus-legged beneath a giant tree, I dropped the mask over my head.

My face a prisoner, my eyes a darkness, I abraded my penis with a sharp stone-the

solar eye bled. I slashed the snowy flesh of my rib bones. I peeled the red skin from my palms. Bloody and raw, I waited in the desolate silence to die.

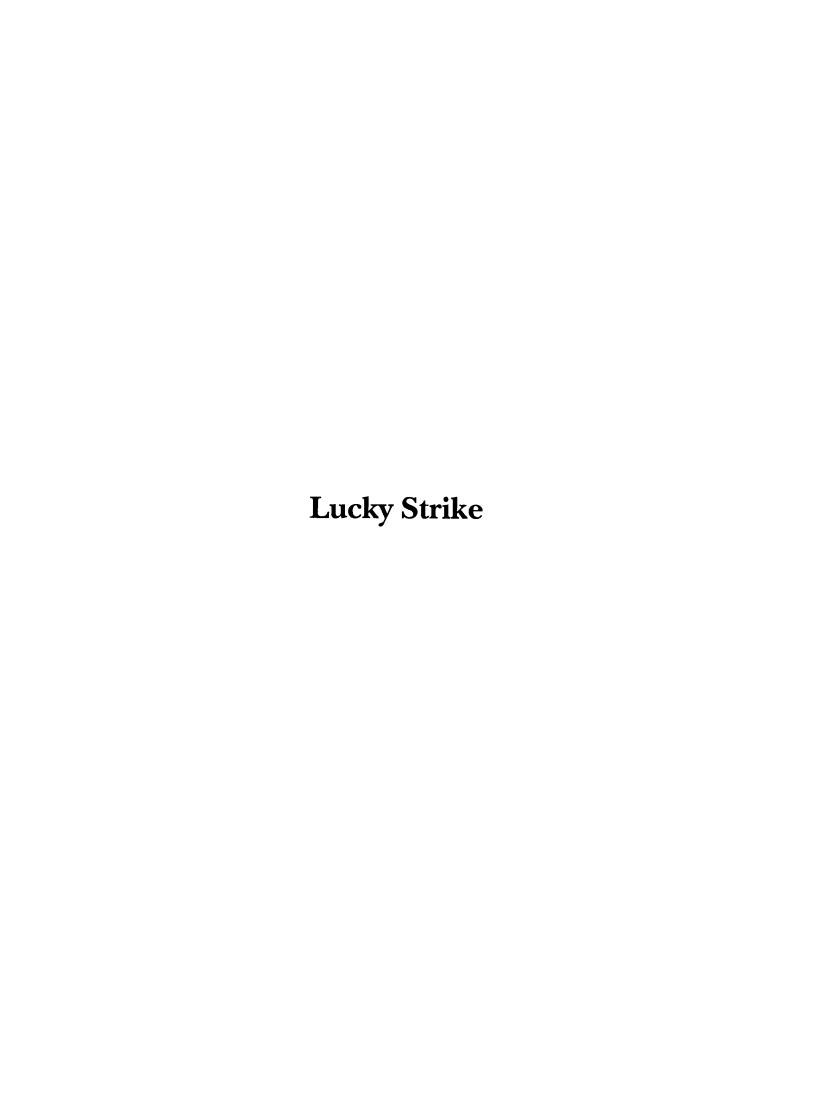
When I realized my fervent wish to die would not be granted-strangely the suffering had endowed me with iron strength-I decided to reenter the kingdom and reclaim my rightful place as prince of the land.

Upon leaving the safety of the forest and stumbling into the village, the villagers rained stones upon my head. My fate fared no better at my father's soft hands. Approaching the castle's domain, the king's guards placed me under arrest. They bound me in great heavy loops of chain, tied my hands and feet to a long pole, and carried me upside down back to the forest.

Accompanying the guards upon this king's errand was Senchae, the court scribe. Senchae, by command of the king, has inscribed my exile upon the soles of my feet.

Let my story serve as warning. Once, I was a prince of a great kingdom.

Now I lie here in this cold country: a dreamer in the kingdom of loss.



Clov: Do you believe in the life to come?

Hamm: Mine was always that.

-Samuel Beckett, "Endgame"

Yes, to buy a green ticket at the Lido Movie Palace is to move inside a floating dream. Once the ticket is torn in half by the scarlet-suited usher, and the moviegoer glides through the resplendent red-carpeted lobby and slides silently through the theatre's black double door, the moviegoer falls, floating into the velvety dark space of dreams.

The old theatre, refurbished in 1938, is an artist's alchemical imaging of an aquarium and planetarium. Magenta dolphins sport in the peeling splash of the turquoise walls. A green-haired mermaid, supine on silvered fin, floats overhead

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in the cracked night of the midnight ceiling. Swimming slowly around her are schools of cold stars.

April 4, 1949. 1:48 p.m. Robert Ford, blinking his tired eyes, walks down the worn aisle of scarlet carpet. He stops at the fifth row of black seats and folds his emaciated body into the hard contours of his regular aisle chair. The theatre fades into blue dark.

A city of light materializes on the silver screen. Skyscrapers of shadow and light are projected in tall, chequered columns of black and white. Traffic jerks in frenzied lines. Cars honk. Pedestrians scurry on the crowded sidewalks.

Robert Ford comes to the Lido religiously every afternoon for the matinee.

He is a supplicant to the blinding dazzle of Hollywood.

Clark Gable strides across the big screen. The black brim of his hat is creased down.

Robert, middle-aged, smells of black coffee and Lucky Strike cigarettes.

There is a small brown hole burned into the trousers of his double-breasted, black suit.

A pencil-mustachioed Gable performs the cinematic cliché of sweeping Claudette Colbert into his romantic arms.

Robert married Ruth Taylor in 1936. He first met Ruth during the Christmas Season in the Radio City Music Hall. From across the tinsel-shining lobby, these two strangers fell into the blue of each other's eyes.

Colbert slaps Gable hard, her hand burning his face.

May, 1938. Ruth met Thomas Stevens III at F.W. Woolworth's gleaming luncheon counter. Tom, a tight-fisted bank vice-president, paid for her hot Lipton tea and toasted chicken salad sandwich.

November, 1938. Ruth changed her checking and savings accounts to the First National Bank.

March, 1939. Ruth left Robert for true love, Tom. She took her clothes, the gold-ringed bone china, the silver tea service, the silver flatware, the art objects, and the big RCA radio. She left behind a hastily scrawled grocery list that she had taped to the humming, white Philco refrigerator. At the bottom of a penciled column of items, she had scribbled: "Robert, here's a list of groceries

you'll need. Please don't take my leaving you as a rejection. I'll always love you.

Ruth P.S. I'll send for the furniture on Friday."

Robert yanked the note from the icebox and crumpled the paper hard in his hand. He then prised the farewell open, and he ran his fingers slowly over the words as if he were blind and Ruth's words were in Braille. He stumbled down the dark long hall to the blue bathroom. He soaped the gold wedding ring from his fat finger and flushed the symbol down the toilet. Feeling nauseous, he lay on the cool blue tiles of the bathroom floor.

In 1940, Robert met, dated, and married Maggie Winthrop. Maggie wore pretty, starched white dresses. Maggie wore her brown hair in a pretty pageboy. Maggie adored cleanliness. Maggie believed lovemaking was for replenishing the earth. Maggie worshipped at St. Paul's Cathedral. Maggie was the perfect wife. In 1941, Robert left Maggie and their immaculate home for the empty room above the Diamond Coffee Shop.

Robert carried with him to his "temporary" room one battered brown suitcase. The following things were thrown into his old grip: three changes of starched white underwear, four pairs of ironed, navy wool socks, a double-breasted blue suit, one straight razor, a tattered paperback copy of *The Sound and the Fury*, and a brown envelope containing glossy pieces of Ruth's and his wedding picture.

January, 1942. Robert received his draft notice.

February 1942. Robert failed his Army physical. He was rejected for a shadowed chest x-ray.

November, 1941. For "unspecified reasons," Robert was fired from his job as cataloguing librarian in Queens. Robert's life as a moviegoer begins.

Gable is now pursuing Colbert. She ignores him.

Earlier today, April 4, 1949. 7:00 a.m. Robert lives an orderly existence in a weary calendar of days. He wakes this Monday to the old worn routine of another week. He lies on his bed with the tired innersprings for exactly one hour listening to the congested breathing of rush-hour traffic. Dangling his varicose-veined, milk-white legs to the floor, he reaches toward a deck of blue matchbooks. These royal-blue matchbooks, with red diamonds blinking in their centers, are dealt across the mahogany nightstand as he topples the stack.

He taps a cigarette from the red-circled white package. Striking a grey paper match, he lights up and smokes his first Lucky Strike. 8:45, coughing in spasms, he grinds the smoldering butt of his third cigarette into the green metal

ashtray that's floating over the nightstand's edge. The ashtray rattles on the scarred mahogany as he buries the butt into a grave of ashes.

8:47, he stands, stretches and stumbles across the cold linoleum floor to the yellowed washbasin. He sponges himself with a dirty damp cloth. 9:00, he shaves his heavy black beard with his straight razor. 9:05, he runs a red toothbrush, Pepsodent striping the chewed bristles, over his tobacco-tarred teeth. He slides a black comb through his thinning brown hair. 9:07, he splashes Old Spice After Shave on his sunken blue cheeks.

9:08, he looks out his dust-swirled window down onto the hustling city; he sighs wearily and goes back to bed. From the bed, he traces the migratory routes of roaches on the brown-speckled, white baseboards. Propping two grey-striped pillows against the iron bedpost, he falls back and conjures the ghosts of his life from the peeling, water-stained wallpaper. His father, mother and brother step out of the wall and enter the room. His father is dressed in his starched Sunday clothes, his mother is wearing her sky-blue dress, and his brother, Paul, has on a pepper-red sweater. For a moment, Robert is back in his boyhood in Montpelier, Vermont. Paul and he are making faces and giggling and bouncing biscuits across the oak dining room table. His father, the stiff red handlebars of his mustache dancing, threatens: "Boys, there'll be no trip to the moving pictures if you two don't get a firm grip on yourselves." In unison, they grab their arms, laughing hysterically. Then Paul's red arms shoot across the table, and mother, ever the

fierce sentry, swats his greedy hands away before he can grab the rhubarb pie.

Father, sharpening his handlebars with his fingertips, laughs, "Sweet son-of-a-bitch, what a family!"

But quickly as they appeared, his family dissolves into the wall. Dad died in 1932, two years and thirteen days after being fired from his pharmaceutical sales job. Paul was twisted and killed in an auto accident in his twenty-first year. And Mom, deaf and dumb as stone, is in an old folks' home–Robert forgets exactly where.

10:15, Robert arises hurriedly and jerks his black trousers up his bluescribbled legs. He glances nervously at the black-banded Timex watch that he
never unstraps from his wrist. He moves into a white shirt, frayed at the yellowed
cuffs, and buttons absent-mindedly the four remaining ivory buttons. After
knotting a grey tie clocked with black circles, he yanks the Windsor knot to his
throat. He stuffs his long shirttails inside his loose trousers. He snaps on frayed
black suspenders. Slipping into his Goodwill black coat, he bends his knees
slightly. He stares into the cracked mirror that's bolted above the washbasin. He
searches the jig-sawed glass for the Robert Ford of years ago. Instead, empty, darkcircled eyes gaze back at him. As he steps toward the door, his image slides off the
polished glass.

10:25, he climbs down a paper-and-bottle-littered flight of warped, wooden steps to the Diamond Coffee Shop. 10:30, a white cup of black coffee is shoved in

front of him along with a stale glazed doughnut glued to a white napkin. This is lunch. 11:00, after two more steaming cups of black coffee, he watches the black reflection of the overhead fan spinning in his metal spoon. Leaning forward, he nurses several napkins from the silver-and-black dispenser. He fingers a napkin from the stack. Wiping his hands, he lets the white paper parachute softly to the counter. His eyes darting right to left, he folds the unused napkins into neat halves and hides them inside his coat.

He eases his hands into his pockets. He pulls out blue handfuls of Diamond matchbooks. His knuckles turning white as dice, he stuffs his hands back into his black pants. His moist upper lip jerking, he scratches the bottoms of both pockets for change. At last, a sigh whistles between his teeth as he fingers a silver coin. Palming the worn quarter, he slaps the two bits down onto the steel counter. Before he has a chance to rise from his black-and-chrome stool, his place is cleared and cleaned.

Needing to piss, he makes his way down the coffee shop's long dingy hall past the roach-infested kitchen to the closet-sized men's room. He shoves in the black door and is instantly overcome by the acrid stench of urine. He runs to the rusty urinal, in which a river of yellow urine is dammed at the drain by a soggy white wall of toilet paper. He fumbles at his crotch and unzips his pants. Leaning his left hand against the cracked white plaster, he pisses in blessed relief. He reads the black-and-blue graffiti that's bruised into the wall. At eye level, "Cheryl gives

great blowjob." He laughs for beneath "Cheryl" some privy theologian has recently blocked in blue ballpoint: "YAHWEH IS THE ALL INDIFFERENT." Shaking his head, he zips up his pants. Out of childhood-instilled reflex, he considers washing his hands. He looks suspiciously at the ancient porcelain washbasin. And for the ten-thousandth time, he decides his penis is cleaner than any ablution he could perform at that grimy, grout-encrusted sink. Reaching inside his coat, he withdraws one of his paper napkins. Carefully, he wipes each finger of his right hand, taking special pains to polish his fingertips.

11:05, grey hands in his pockets, Robert strolls out of the Diamond Coffee Shop. On his way across the shadowed threshold, he reaches behind him and squeezes a fistful of matchbooks from a dime-store blue bowl. He zigzags three blocks east and five blocks north. He marvels at how the city can change so dramatically in the space of a few blocks. New York to him is a constantly changing tunnel world, dominated by the ruthless indifference of sky-tall buildings. Robert feels as if he were a discarded piece of paper being blown and tumbled and pressed along the grainy and shiny corridors by a whistling cold wind and the frenzied stuttering movement of faceless crowds.

11:45, Robert forces his way out of the moving throng. Turning his black coat collar up, he pauses in front of Shernoff's to cough and catch his breath. Five minutes ahead of schedule, he cups his trembling hands together and lights up a Lucky Strike. Satisfaction travels across his face. Smoking, he stands in a bright

slice of light and catalogues the cashmeres and silks that Shernoff's is showcasing. He tilts his head backwards and takes a long leisurely drag on his cigarette before grinding the butt under his shoe.

Staring into the blue shining window while holding his arm with his left hand, a memory of an earlier self comes alive. The hair lifts on his arms as he falls in love with a V-neck, butter-gold sweater that's spotlighted on a bronze mannequin's torso. For an instant, he can feel his arms reaching through soft sleeves as he slips his head through the gold eye of a better life.

Robert closes his eyes and turns away from the sparkling window. He takes long rapid steps down the street. He glances nervously over his right shoulder. His pace slackens as he starts to cough and cough. He hears voices cursing "damn" behind him. His head jerking, his eyes watering, his chest hurting, he coughs dark blood into his hands. Reaching inside his coat pocket, he sponges the scarlet stain with a napkin. Pedestrians step around him, never looking into his face.

Suddenly, Robert is shoved in his back. Without looking behind him, shaking slightly, he resumes walking. 12:01, he sighs a breath of relief as he sees the lacquered green door of Chaucer's Bookshop. Stepping under the green-and-white awninged entrance, he pauses to straighten his angled tie and comb his wind-strewn hair with his fingers. Cautiously, he pushed the brilliant door in; the brass bell, screwed to the door frame, rings loudly.

A glossy, twenty-year-old blonde is sitting on a tall, shining white stool behind the jade sheen of the counter. The saleswoman, dressed in a sexy white angora sweater and tight purple-and-red plaid skirt, is flipping with her satiny red nails the heartthrob pages of *Modern Romances*. Hearing the bell, she glances automatically toward the door. At the sight of Robert, she grimaces, pops her Juicy Fruit, shuts her nyloned knees, snaps her magazine together, and swivels her long legs to the floor. Ashamed to be a nuisance, Robert lowers his gaze and stares at nothing. Still feeling her disgust on the back of his neck, he lowers his gaze further, fixing on his old black-and-white shoes. Silently he slips down a fluorescent-lit aisle of book-lined white shelves—the cool light limning the bookshelves' top right angles—to the rear of the store.

For the next forty-five minutes, Robert disappears into print. He travels in lavish luxury to faraway Paris and London; he bludgeons an avaricious pawnbroker and faints in a Petersburg police station; he watches, from the railing of a bridge, a man drown and refuses to help; he solves a series of heinous murders through the exacting hopscotch of leg-work and rational deduction, and he becomes a brilliant novelist conjuring the world of his childhood from a cup of tea. Occasionally Robert lifts a newly printed book to his hawk-like nose and reveries in the crisp smell of fresh print and possibility. If he wishes that he could purchase the book, he caresses the dust jacket with his nicotine-stained fingertips before reluctantly returning the book to its shelf.

12:53, Robert overhears the salesclerk confide to a silver-coiffeured matron: "Honey, let me get you a fresh *Life* magazine from the stockroom. It's positively frightening–there's no telling who may have touched it on the rack." He tries to escape unnoticed out the green door, but the brass bell jangles his departure. Striped by sunlight, he squints his eyes as he begins the eight-block stroll to the Lido Movie Palace. He paces himself to arrive precisely at 1:30.

He strides nervously under the Lido's yellow light bulb-studded marquee, glancing every minute at the scarred face of his Timex. The dark-windowed ticket booth is scheduled to open at 1:45. Strutting his beat on the sidewalk opposite, a fierce-eyed policeman-eyes hard and small in his sockets like ball bearings-spreadeagles and frisks Robert with a threatening stare. The burly cop spits and pounds down the fractured pavement, slapping his black night stick into his hand.

1:42, a pear-shaped man, with a loop of brown belt dangling below his waist, steps out of a shadowed doorway. The big man has greasy black hair, small brown eyes sunk in fat, and scarlet rouge spotting his white cheeks. He sidles up to Robert and asks in a husky whisper: "Would you like to have a good time?" Robert replies: "No, thank you." Staring at his watch, Robert paces to the other side of the marquee. A wax hot dog wrapper tumbles down the sidewalk and wraps around his leg.

1:45, Robert reaches in his back pocket for his "special" movie money.

Pinching the black leather coin purse open, he counts out forty cents. He steps

forward and buys his "ADMIT ONE" ticket; calm radiates through him. However, cautious, he bides his time before claiming the ticket from the white-marbled black ledge. He wants to made sure that the cashier's soft ivory hand has retracted back into the booth. And for one perfect-paranoid moment as the fuscia-nailed hand withdraws into the dark cage, he sees Ruth, throned on a tall chair of judgment behind the smoked glass window, mocking him, ridiculing him, laughing at his poor life. Cradling his arms together, Robert rocks on the back of his heels. He agonizes for a half-minute; then he seizes the green ticket and runs into the Lido.

1:47, breathless, standing in the red-roped crescent of the foyer, he hands his ticket to creaking Mr. Gontarski. The bent-over usher's white-fringed head is tortoise-shelled with liver spots. His slow tremulous hands are maps of age. A cough builds inside Robert as he pulls his stub from the man's fumbling fingers. In an uncontrollable spasm, Robert stacks coughs on top of one another. The usher asks: "Are you all right, son?" Robert, his red eyes watering, answers: "Thank you, Mr. Gontarski. I'm fine."

2:32, Robert, fascinated by Gable and Colbert's romance, stares at the luminous screen. He leans forward to his seat's black edge, shelving his arms on the gum-stickered chair in front of him.

Colbert throws a glass of champagne into Gable's face. Gable flicks his wrist and splashes Colbert with his highball. Sponging his forehead with a white handkerchief, Gable gazes into Colbert's wet bourbon-beaded face and remarks: "Frankly my dear, we should have ordered the dry martinis."

Coughing hard, Robert falls back into his chair. A smile flickers across his pale lips.

Inside this floating world of the theatre—the ancient smell of popcorn permeating the stale darkness, the dead scent of cigarette smoke climbing the velvet red curtains, the old ghosts of movie stars roaming the auditorium, the shining schools of stars floating on their cold backs overhead, the tiny particles of dust swirling down the white interstate of light being beamed from the projection booth—Robert feels at home for the first time since he awoke. There he sits, watching Gable and Colbert, feeling as though he were a hand and the theatre were a glove.

Nevertheless, Robert realizes that despite the inviolate order of his routine, his life is changing irrevocably. He has observed with bitter regret that Chaucer's has moved the *Times Book Review* from the third tier of the white magazine stand to a hateful exile on the jade counter. The book review has been placed strategically by the big nickel-plated cash register so that it will have to be purchased in order to be read.

Lately he has also observed with profound sadness that the movie stars on the big screen have no consciousness of his small existence. He wonders why he is only now experiencing this manifest truth. Perhaps, Robert, a ruthless jailer of his heart, has dreamed his secret fugitive hopes onto the shivering screen. Or perhaps, he has assumed in a child's wishful innocence that the distant stars are aware of his presence, his devotion, his love.

Absent-mindedly he unstraps the black leather band of his Timex from his blue-veined wrist. Looking longingly at the silver screen, he lays the watch lengthwise on the black armrest of his chair.

As he watches Gable chasing Colbert, as he watches Colbert enjoying the chase, Robert recites the actors' dialogue slightly ahead of them. For no reason, he thinks of being in the fifth grade. He remembers white-haired Mrs. Ryder, who wore snow chains on her glossy black rubber boots in the winter; he remembers the warm room smelling of children and blackboards and chalk. He sees the five rows of varnished wooden desks, the shining kneecaps of freckle-faced girls, the yellow No. 2 pencils dropped on purpose to the waxed floor, and the blushing thighs and the white cotton panties of the laughing girls. He wonders what strange fate has taken him from the bright-faced 5th-grade boy who once poured a pencil sharpener's shavings over Peggy Rippy's blonde braids to this pale shade sitting in a dark theatre.

Robert realizes with the sharp burning of a slap across the face that he cannot bear to leave this theatre and face another lonely evening on the streets, another dead night in his room. He thinks of:

The old Irish man who lives beneath a yellowed tent of bad news-several old New York Times-in the ash-can alley behind the liquor store;

the red bleeding leg lying in the middle of the street-a neon reflection from Crazy Legs Lounge;

the warped wooden flight of stairs adjacent to the Diamond Coffee Shop as a stairway to nowhere;

the swollen shadows in his room and the naked 60-watt bulb hanging from a black cord.

Fear crosses Robert's face. He coughs dark blood into his palm as his face turns as white as a cloud. Coughing violently, his blue-roped fists opening back into bloody hands, he grasps the chair's armrests. His fingers relax . . . .

On screen, Gable slouches against a brick alley wall in the sullen shadows of New York night. He watches a black-suited man who is staring fixedly ahead step off the sidewalk into the street. Suddenly wheeling sharply around the corner, a grey Ford truck, stenciled D'Angelo's Restaurant Supply, sideswipes the man. Not hearing the man's small scream, the burly black-haired truck driver, a cigarette pack tourniqueted on his rolled t-shirt sleeve, grinds the gears, pops the clutch, stomps on the gas and swerves lanes. After hanging back a moment in the alley's

stale dark, Gable runs to the scene. The man, his bruised head pillowed by cigarette butts, his blue cheeks shadowed by beard, lies sprawled half-on the sidewalk and half-along the curb. Gable helps the shaken confused man to stand. He stretches his arm around the man's trembling shoulders and asks: "Are you all right?" The man blinks his eyes, replying: "Thank you. I'm fine." Gable swings his arm from the man's sharp shoulders. Reaching inside his coat pocket, he removes a crumpled pack of smokes. He laughs, saying: "Fellow, you may be as fine as bone china, but you look worse than hell. Here, better have a Lucky." Gable strikes a match on his thumbnail; his features are ignited by the flaring light. The man stares into Gable's shining face as if he were seeing some secret corner of his own childhood. Cupping the wavering flame with their hands, they fire their Strikes. Their lips quiver as they pull pleasure. They cross the street, flicking ash and blowing smoke. Their dark shadows follow them into the all-night coffee shop.

# UP A TREE, A NOVEL

# **Synopsis**

Up A Tree is a novel about a son and his obsessional love for his father. The story examines the Christian context of Western Civilization and what it signifies for postmodern technological societies when that mythic context begins to lose its cultural power, when as W.B. Yeats observed, "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold." It poses the question: In the post-Nietzschean universe of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what could the Christian faith mean?

In simplest outline, the narrative traces the arc of its central character's, Rick's, devotion to his father and his coming of age with his father's death. His crisis consists in how to disentangle his life from his father's failure and death.

"The Sermon" chapter forms the pivot on which the novel turns. Rev.

Parsley has been accused of having illicit sexual relations with underaged Lizzie

Greathouse. Rick's father has called for a meeting of the deacons following the Sunday Service. To forestall his ouster from the church, Rev. Parsley preaches on The Book of Job, identifying himself with Job, the patient and perfect man who has been falsely accused of sin. His rhetoric sweeps the church so persuasively that Rick's father stomps out of the service before the benediction. On the drive home, the thirteen-year-old Rick announces mysteriously, "I want to become a minister." From that time forward, he struggles with the question of his life's vocation, feeling both called to the ministry and repelled by it as well.

By the final scene, the burial, the objective world has collapsed into Rick as he broods over his father's grave. In the moment of his loss of faith at his father's death and burial, he commits himself to a life of faith in the Christian ministry.

## Part I

Fingering the torn saw-tooth edges of the ancient black-and-white of Great-Grandmother Melissa Mae, who's regaled in calico dress and Indian headdress (Why?) and standing in front of the gleaming Plymouth—the Indian hood ornament bearing down the picture's center line—the tableau snapped by that lost tribe of his parents in the Great Smoky Mountains on their only and one vacation together, Rick stretches his hand through the blurred tissues of yesterday, remembering and conjuring the quick and the dead, twining his fingers together with Melissa Mae's ivory-gloved hand, leaning his boy's head into the frail curve of her shoulder, and there, once again, they sit together in the small church at Mt. Pleasant, granny shining, luminous in her age, fierce in her I-don't-give-a-damn, swaying

gently, rocking forward, pausing to pinch snuff, chanting not singing "Rock of Ages," her dark grey hair falling into curls, disappearing like smoke into wind behind the pew, and he feels her tremulous gnarled hands dreaming of a time before the hand moved upon the face of the void, before the endless dead begetting of lineages of sons and daughters, of time before time when she was a raven.

There was this giant old maple tree in the big backyard. I used to climb up the tree like that kid in the beanstalk story, and sit in the maple's knotty lap. But then I would look down at the green ground spinning dangerously beneath me. Scared breathless, ready to pee in my short pants, I'd begin to bawl. And I'd cry out louder and louder for my father: "You polecat skunk, git me from this tree." My Momma, looking as pretty as a patch of spring sky, would be in the kitchen baking feathery buttermilk biscuits and frying up a mess of sizzling, golden-brown catfish. And my dad, cradling a cold Mason jar of sloshing iced-tea in his hand while laughing loudly from his belly, would come banging his way out of the kitchen screen door of the white frame house. And with manly pride in step and big booming music in his voice, he'd ask Tubbie the Collie, who'd be barking faithfully at his heels: "Tubbie, what in the world do we have here? Why Tubbie, I reckon we've treed the biggest darn coon I ever did see."

I'd cry in protest: "I ain't no coon! I'm Ricky!"

Father would set the sweaty Mason jar of sun tea on a tree stump. And he'd make his big hands into a megaphone and holler up to me: "Why, no offense to you, Mr. Ricky Coon, but you couldn't be my little boy. My little Ricky would never call his daddy 'polecat.'"

My freckled face would blush, my raspberry jam-sticky hands would close into grimy red fists, and I'd scream: "You mean ol' blue skunk, git me down, git me down!"

Father, his face stretched in a friendly smile, would fetch the wooden ladder from the garage, lean it up against the tree, climb the wobbly round rungs one by one, and carry me safely down on his giant shoulders.

The cat is in the fiddle and the cow is in the corn, the polecat skunk and me played that game for one whole summer.

I pray the Lord my soul to take if I should die before I wake and I pray for Great-Grandma, Daddy, and Momma, pitiful sick, to get well and swallowed into the dark leviathan belly of sleep, I floated in spumes of slowed breath up into the ancient kingdom of dreams and cocooned in colors and butterflied in the Joseph's quilt, I visioned there's this big gold ladder slanting from earth into heaven the iconography of soul's ascent into the shining face of God and lots of angels with white halos are climbing and their faces glow like yellow crayons light's numinosity aureoling and polishing the sons of god and the angels feathery wings are white and their long

robes are white white-breasted swans rising and trumpeting into the soul's aviary and the angels climb faster and faster but one angel scared looks down at the ground and suddenly there at ladder's bottom a crowd of red-faced devils and all the devils have sharp eyes and their heads are lop-sided and their bodies are crooked and they're holding their long tails in their hands and the bad devils shout ugly words at the angel and he cries the lachrymation of not knowing knowing and the ladder shakes, slides the trembling of connections and meanings and desires I wake in a fall, crying, wetting the bed and caught myself in the violent tumble of the sheets and quilts wrestling feathers.

## Part II (The Sermon)

Reverend Parsley was an ex-marine, ex-husband, ex-bootlegger, exgravedigger, ex-whorehouse bouncer, extraordinary liar who received Heaven's
Call to preach while he was boxing. There he stood, tall, tanned, behind the
tower of the walnut-grained pulpit, his wide shoulders squared, his dented jaw
jutting, his black hair flying as he tossed his head-long greasy strands falling,
splaying in front of his startled eyes, baby blues-and hesitating, he turned slowly as
if deliberating in theological abstraction but instead lost in contemplation, yea
absorbed in bodily meditation, summoning, visioning Lizzie Greathouse's
dripping diaphanous white dress-the sudden darts of those voluptuous almondnippled breasts, amen-when he baptized her-splashing her down, down into the
star-drowned sky of eternity on the hard curve of his left arm, rock-cradling

her blond-curled neck and head with his stretched palm, his fingers looped in the loops of her hair, so so soft, while breath-pinching her nostrils closed with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand-by total immersion in the sacred brown waters, surging of the Barren River three weeks hence. And he felt, yes, understood the great rising of the Spirit-its urgency-and began swaying like an iron church bell tolling exigency and emergency; gesturing frantically behind the pulpit, then clamoring down, he paced dangerously from one limit of the winecarpeted altar to the other, ranging back and forth, from end to end of the platformed Eden as if he was some deranged delimited archangel on the prowl for fornication and sin. He stopped for a moment to sniff the air, flaring his nostrils as though he were smelling the sulphurous stench of souls melting in sin-blistering hell-fire; wild, sweat-dripping he gesticulated with his sculpted arms as if hearing the furious beat of wings behind him, his muscled biceps rippling into and under his white short sleeves, his hairy eyebrows arching in exclamation. The women in the congregation, refined in Sunday Sears dress, wearing smeared raspberrylipped faces, sighed a collective "oh" and exclaimed individual soft "ah's" and fanned faster and faster with their Jesus fans, stapled to big popsicle sticks-Taylor Mortuary printed on the side obverse of a golden-haired Jesus, gentle and haloed, holding a snowy lamb in his arms. Reverend Parsley stood poised, ready to fly on the Seraphimic wings of the Holy Spirit-Praise Jesus, Praise Jesus's sweet nameinto the violent emptying of God incarnating into blood and bone, then he jabbed

his knuckled fist hard, triumphantly thrusting it into the air as if he the most proletarian of men-the eater of vienna sausages and moon pies, collards and pinto beans, man of brawn and music-was punching that effete Prince of Lies, Satan, a fatal one on the kisser, knocking him and his devil-class back into the brimstone of teeth-gnashing hells where they belong. Everlasting, this one man band of a preacher, his voice a troubled trombone, tenor, sliding back and forth in dangerous devil rhythms and resonances all its own, trembled the parishioners and sanctuary, reverberating man, woman, child and stain glass, rattling them with the great primordial horn of God's Word. Pausing dramatically, he mopped his brow with his handkerchief, blew his nose.

"Brothers and Sisters, yes Sisters and Brothers, once, There lived in the land of Uz a man named Job, who was perfect and upright. He feared God and set his face against evil. This good man hated wickedness of any kind. The God Book, I mean to say Good Book tells us that Job prospered," he read on: "'And there was born unto him seven sons and three daughters. His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east." Rev. Parsley smoothed his hand through his fallen hair and played the valves of his voice, "In other words, precious, pre-cious brethren, this good man, this great man Job lived on the biggest farm in Uz; he owned the big-gest brick mansion and the most livestock, the Lord Yahweh had

made his long life good." But then Parsley shook his head as though a ventriloquist Spirit had seized jealous and ferocious possession of him and was now jerking his head, moving his jaw, throwing truth through him; in spasms, he spluttered and stuttered, prophesying, "But there came a day;" his voice not climbing a Jacob's ladder to the star-music of heaven but rather descending deeper into outraged and violated hell, he repeated louder, angrier and yet meditatively, his voice brooding like dark smoke over the bourbon wilderness of 60 watt love and tumbled mattresses, "'But there came a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord and Satan,'" and as he said Satan he struck a note at once vanquished and triumphant, "'Satan came also among them.'" And at this, his knees buckled and he seemed almost to swoon.

No longer able to restrain himself, he paraded into the middle of the altar and parted the hot stale tumescence of air with the staff of his hand. His scarred fingers squeezing the Bible as though it were a bludgeon, he read on, his teeth almost clenched, "'And the Lord said unto Satan, whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said From going to and fro in the earth and from walking up and down it.'" Parsley moaned, "O children of God, the perfidy, the evil of it, that red-eyed, hoof-footed stallion of a devil trotting over the same rolling bluegrass hills that you and I walk on." At this the four bib-overalled saints, sleepy-eyed, in the Amen Corner woke to attention and jerked their heads Yes as though

they were wooden puppets and God High in Heaven was tugging their strings; they groaned in unison, "Amen, Brother, Amen."

Parsley read on, "'And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job? For there is none like him in the earth. A perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil." Then the Lucifer answered the Lord . . . " The preacher's lower lip quivering and his countenance darkening, he spake Satan's words, spitting the Scripture from his mouth, "'Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast thou not made a hedge about him, And about all that he hath? But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face." The preacher sponged the sweat from his forehead and said, "O, wicked, wicked blasphemy: Satan forking his tongue, hissing the corruption of his foul words into the shining face of the Lord God." Sliding the trombone of his voice into desperate scales, he read on as The Amen Corner rang in, "Preach on, Brother, preach on." "The Lord said unto Satan, Behold all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand."

Suddenly, Rev. Parsley slammed his Bible shut and stomped heavily back to the pulpit. Both hands gripping the wood lectern, his knuckles blanched, he leaned forward, looking like a grotesque carved figurehead on the prow of a ship. His bronzed knotted muscles rolling under his shirt sleeves, rocking his head, up and down, on waves of emotion, he cried, "Beloved assembly, Satan, I say Satan then began his underhanded carpetbagging deeds on Job's family and sacred

property." As if by a vatic uncanniness, with one hand, he then split the Bible in two, opening its gilt tissues to the page where he had stopped, and he began narrating Job's catalog of disasters while stretching his right arm towards the congregation: "'And it fell on a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the elder brother's house that there came a messenger unto Job and said, 'The oxen were plowing and the asses feeding beside them; and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them away; Yea, they have slain thy servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped to tell thee'; these words of steel harrowed deep furrows of pain across Job's brow. While this servant was still speaking, there came another messenger racing, sowing the evil seeds of Lucifer's tragic temptation, and he-right there in front of God and his brilliant angels-said, 'Job, lightning has scribbled Satan, over and over, across heaven's vault and these white scars of light have flashed your sheep dead and frightened your shepherds till in terror they have fled, and I am the only one to escape to tell the tale.' While he was still speaking, lo, there came another messenger sprinting, sprinkling blood and spreading manure for raising Cain's crop of bloodcurses-bloodcurses that shatter Satan across the Ten Commandments, yielding harvests of sulphur, fire and damnation; sweating, he said, 'Job, the trifling Chaldeans-their people were always the sorriest kind of thieving trash-have stolen the camels and murdered the drivers, and I am the only one to escape and tell the tale.' While he was still speaking, lo and behold, there came another messenger, a big ol' boy flying who

tore away from the whirlwind's path in such a powerful hurry he didn't even have time to slide into his shirt; his knees churning, heaving past the knot of exhausted messengers, he braked his sandled feet in a dust-cloud before Job. His huge stomach, shaking—the great blind eye of his belly button staring at Job's misery like a graven Philistine idol—between panting breaths, his hand still wrapped around a drumstick, this good ol' boy slurred all the disasters into the story's climax and said, 'Job, your sons and daughters were eating fried chicken and gravy biscuits while chug-a-lugging wine by the mason jar, having themselves a mighty fine time, when a whale of a wind swallowed the house and spouted the walls and roof high into the blue air, and the sky fell down, wrecking in splinters atop your younguns and I am the only one to escape to tell the tale."

Great tears, heartrending tears streaming down the reverberating horn of Parsley's voice, he cried while seizing his shirt front as though to rip it: "The Holy Book tells us that then Job arose and tore his mantle and shaved his head and prayed, defying Satan, 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.'"

From hard pew to hard pew, a disconsolate murmur of Amen traveled throughout the sanctuary.

"Brothers and Sisters, can you see, can you see this good man, this proud man, this patient man, his shaved head bowed to the ground, his back bent-over as if he's some hunchback having to carry the Sin of Satan, yes I say having to carry the hump of shame wrought by Satan on his back." While Parsley was saying these words, he moved and martyred himself in front of the white-draped communion table; he spread his arms wide into a cross and made himself into the broken tree that all sons of God must climb. As though hurled by Lucifer—the angel of radiance cast down from vertiginous heavenly heights, boring—tumbling, head-over-heels, incandescent, spears of sunlight shot through the bloodbrilliance of the large stain glass window that illuminated Christ's crucifixion. Pierced by apostasy, Parsley stood transfixed in ecstasy, superimposed against the passion—a scarlet silhouette of the power and the glory.

And so it came to pass that the God of Creation descended the staircase of heaven—the infinite of stars nailed into a Southern Cross of love—to become the Christ of Sorrow. As he walked down each pulsing step, the Lord of immeasurable expanse, who was formless light and inexhaustible Word, who had commanded the primal "Let there be light" suffered the poverty of being born in the manger of flesh. He felt bone-staves enclosing heart into a grief he had never known while the straw-gold of the sun warmed his face. With this pain and this pleasure, the New Adam experienced the absence of himself as god that he might become the hourglass dust of woman and man. And yet the universe, insistent and divine, not to be denied, gyred down deep within the vicissitudes of guts and genitalia and coiled itself there as stars sun moon wind thunder lightning and blood around and around and around his

spine; he felt the serpent of life that had first wound itself around the Tree of Knowledge stir within him. For the first time, he saw Mary Magdalene, mother of the world, and longed to perfect the absence of himself in the coming presence of her thighs.

His gaze lifted toward the pine rafters of the church, Rev. Parsley spake, "In all this, Job sinned not." Relaxing his arms, he read, "'Again there was a day when the sons of God came also among them to present themselves before the Lord and Satan came also among them to present himself before the Lord. And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man . . . he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause."

Shaking his head, Parsley strode back to the pulpit; his gold front tooth glinting, his body trembling in anger, he said, "Precious children, think of a sacrilege, think of an outrage, then think of the unspeakable. An abomination more notorious than a nigger fornicating with a white woman, an abomination more perfidious than a communist proclaiming his godless atheism from the steps of Independence Hall, an abomination more insidious than a whoring gambler bragging he's splaying a full house of sin when in fact he's playing an empty house—an ark, a temple, a home void of the Living Lord. I say an abomination wickeder than the thrown die of words can rattle and sigh; our gracious God trying to convince Satan, trying to persuade Satan, trying to sell Satan on Job being a

perfect and righteous man." Slamming his fist against the lectern—the Bible-bound-and-solemn King James language vibrating on the walnut railing—he read on, his face bright as a pillar of fire, "'And Satan answered the Lord and said, Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life.'" Parsley stretched his arm threateningly towards the church members and sneered the rest of the devil's spite, "'But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh and he will curse thee to thy face.'"

Parsley paused and gazed down at the lectern. Running his hand through his hair, he lowered his voice and whispered and sighed to the hushed congregation, "'And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon his life put not forth thine hand.'"

"Brothers and Sisters, the Ol' Devil was mighty pleased and proud; he had Job where he could inflict greater pain. Satan steepled his sulphurous hands together, and as he rubbed them, his long flint fingers ignited into tapers of blue fire. Sin blazing in the ruby coals of his eyes, he left the Lord's presence, jeering and leering. He ranged, to and fro, over the earth back to the Garden of Eden and found the Tree of Life that stretched from the earth to the heavens. He scorched, branding with flame, *Satan* into the towering tree's trunk. The tree's great canopy of green leaves began to wither and fall, see-sawing in waves and fluttering brown to the ground. As the climate sweated hotter and hotter, the emerald earth blistered with deserts. Then Satan, strutting and bragging, ranged

back to Uz. His eyes great and hard, smoldering like fists of red ice, he smote Job, scoring him with sore boils from the point of his crown to the soles of his feet.

Job, the patient man, the perfect man, took a shard of pot to scrape himself raw to the bone; on a charred carpet of ashes, he sat alone in the thunder and lightning of his life, scarred red-and-black with the story of Satan's rebellion. Children of the Lamb, Job was scratching his desperate misery, trying to erase Satan's paradise from the book of flesh.

"Satan was still not through tormenting Job. He sent him three false comforters—three false deacons of the church: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuite, and Zophar the Naamathite. Bleating whispers and beating their songbooks, they anointed their heads with dust and sat with Job upon the ground while exchanging pious looks; they kept their counsels to themselves for seven days and nights. But I say unto you as a good shepherd would, beware of devils in the raiment of men; these deceivers were only pretending to be grieved by Job's suffering.

"On the eighth day, the bitter drum of Job's heart cracked and his mourning wail reverberated back through Chronicles, Exodus and into the Genesis of the world's morning; his lonely wail echoed into Joseph's cry of abandonment at being thrown into the well by his worthless brothers.

Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

Let that day be darkness, let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it.

Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it . . .

Because it shut not up the doors of my mother's womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes.

"Now Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, zealous frequenters of Sodomite and Cannanite fleshpots every one, had always been covetous of Job's blessings in their heart of hearts, jealous of his beautiful looks, his great family, his greater wealth and the greatness of his righteous perfection. So as the false deacons sat and shivered on leaves of ashes in the fierce black-winged wind, they listened to Job curse his day: the fall through the doors of his mother's womb into the soul's night. And as they stared at the scars of Satan on Job's flesh, they shuddered and snapped the blinds blown on their windows of perception. Precious brethren, the longer these sorry deceivers glared at the boil-marks, the more their devil eyes bleared red, and the more they read the judgment of their own wickedness–I say sin's iniquity and depravity!—onto the parchment of Job."

## **Part III**

Years later, Rick was to understand the fierce words overheard on the church's front lawn. Marvin Simpson, deacon and songleader at Mt. Pleasant—the man who later would admit to defiling the sanctuary by fucking Ruth the church pianist against the upright Baldwin in every possible key while she caterwauled and praised, "O Sweet Jesus, Yes Yes Precious Lord"; the same deacon who would startle and scandalize Warren County by confessing to pitchforking his wife of twenty grey years Lucille Vera through the heart in the barn's hayloft between Sabbath morning meeting and Sunday evening singing—stood on the grassy knoll in a haphazard knot of the hardfaced men of the pulpit committee. Drawing his hand from his black coat's pocket, he cocked his thumb back and thrust his

forefinger's point at the newly appointed Brother Greathouse-Parsley's shorttenured and short-lived predecessor, the preacher's old creased yellow face looking like wallpaper fixing to peel back to some meaner reality-and spoke, jerking these words off rapid-fire: "You've got to proclaim hell-fire. You've got to make us feel the flames of hell scorching down our collars. Rev. Greathouse, you've got to preach what damned sinners we are in the hands of the wrathful Lord." It was, is and forever shall be as though pleasure demands a gestation to disobedience. As though what is sought in the Word is not some facile eternal salvation but rather an ecstatic illuminatory damnation which can only be achieved in the scarlet heartbreak glow of the world's first suffering and final impermanence. As though both Love and Word are the razor-gleam of an axe-an axe that would cleave the primordial Adam into the grave-haunted brothers of Abel and Cain, Abel fated to fall through anguish into the outraged ground of death where his slain blood cries from the earth for vengeance and Cain destined to tumble the way of all condemned flesh-the memory of despair and the weight of forgetting-into the unfathomable abyss of desire, abhorrence and rage of love, destined to toil the stone and thistle fields of regret and passion into astonished yields of vain and empty satiation, destined to no longer shepherd the flock of stars heavenward to God but rather to wander through the cold mansion of the human heart in search of some dead brother who might understand, of some blinded god who might forgive that which he has never seen, of some silent place

where he might not hear the Lord's words reverberating inside his head, "A fugitive and vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." Later at the trial, after a fit of repentant weeping, his face hardening back to a stone mask, Marvin Simpson had testified that it was the blue of Ruth's eyes that convicted him into a murderer. He couldn't rightly say whether her eyes were the blue of Jesus walking miracles on water or whether they were the blue of angels plummeting from heaven into sulphurous depths. But God damn it to hell, whichever—whatever, whomever he had to slay—they were a blue he was Satan-bent on possessing before he died unto dust. And Cain cried with his hands clasped over God's judgment resounding in his ears, "My punishment is greater than I can bear."

Rick walked into the sterile lobby of death, nodded his empty arrivals and goings to the rustling starched white-uniformed cherubim—their jointed manikin limbs protruding from shapeless sleeves and legs of cotton, their perfumed permed heads floating into cool fluorescence, their faces, old and cracked like the bible night, black, their eyes having fallen into themselves from the weight of sight, things seen and unseen in the world visible and invisible, their grimaces torn into the violence of servility, anesthetized, like the patients they, too, will become, into faux grins. He fingered the light-pulsing button, commandeered the elevator to the fifth floor, strode through the hard wall of silence that Jerichoed the cardiac ward, head down now, gazing at the scarred reflections of the hallway in the black

polish of his Florsheims, pushed on toward the outpost of the hall's end, lifted his Roman nose to scent the antiseptic life to come, the coffining of consciousness inside Lazarus's tomb of sanitized shit and piss, pulled open the door of Room 552 and stared at the twisted frozen mask of his father's face.

The right hand side of his blue-shadowed face was jerked, warped vertically, as if by the violent manipulation-no, the yanking-of steel wires, instead of flesh's bastard truth of dying unto dust. Rick winced at his white, blue-veined hand splayed and cabled to the IV unit and sat silently in the steel and vinyl-upholstered chair, stared and watched, watched and waited, waited and stared for a sign or symbol of the I am, were you there when they . . . . His father's transparent eyelids-permeable to two worlds now-began to pry themselves from the blue of his eyes, at first almost imperceptibly, later slowly as if a curtain was rising in the drama of becoming human. Rick said, "Dad I'm here, how's the patient feeling, I haven't been here long, no, not long at all, hope you're okay, feeling better, you look better." But his father tried to speak, his words slurred, like Rick's words, empty and indecipherable-two dead tongues, two lifeless languages garbled into one inarticulate smoke. Rick touched the warmth of his side and said in his glad ritual voice, the voice of heralds, "Father, father, I have an announcement, I've decided to become a minister, yes, I'm going, I'm really going to Emory, Candler School of Theology, I just received my acceptance letter, scholarship award." His father gestured towards the night table, no, not for water, bedpan, prescriptions

but for grey pencil-embossed in fine gold letters *Ted Hanley Furniture*. Rick rummaged through the chest drawer, through tissues and medicines and get well cards and found at last a white page of stationery, planted the pencil into the pale hollow of his father's hand, curled his fingers, finally wrapping thumb around it, and his father wrote his scripture, inscribing it across Rick's consciousness-its faint drunken loops and long jagged curves, sharp, straining toward the heart of heartlessness in all things, great and small, his hand almost a fist, trembling these words across the page as if throwing them into the wind: "It's a hard way to believe."

The effort exhausted him, and he fell still into the life to come. Rick sat there poised on the edge of abyss and universe, same thing, always the same thing, vanity of vanities, nothing new under this son, his consciousness now spinning on the tips of his fingers, his fingers tiptoe—as he watched and learned—across his father's ash-crossed forehead. A fierce whirlwind gyred through the fatherless kingdom of his soul, blasting him on its black back into the wilderness, twisting, tearing the locusts, even, from his cracked lips. He whispered in starless echoes through that vast lost of himself, with the years whirling beneath him, the walls shaking, god whorling down inside him only to shatter that which cannot be clayed into flesh and form, "Polecat skunk, git me down, git me down."

At his father's graveside service and burial on November 15th, the Year of Our Lord 1969-the sun shrouded by soiled rags of clouds-in a haunted circle of friends, neighbors, and relatives at the Mt. Pleasant Cemetery, in the field of crucified Jesuses, rows of stone crosses, and broken-winged angels lining the withered grass, extolling the old passion, this yard of the quick and the dead adjacent to the white frame church-the black wheels of umbrellas canopying the mourners, icy rain spilling, cataracting off the canvases' steel spokes-Rick, alone, tired-his black collar upturned, his drenched hair runneled across his scalp, his heavy overcoat drowned against him like a skin, dripping-stood refusing the false shelter of comfort, not caring if rain striped him, lashed him, not blowing into the hollows of his freezing red hands, not feeling the slapping sting of the northeasterly wind on his bluing face, for after all, weather was not external, fierce clouds and lonelier winds were blowing across the lost vast of his soul, and he didn't know if it would ever stop raining, raining, raining, if he would ever be sunbronzed and luminous again, if the dead fist, hard, of his heart would ever unclench. He stared at the empty grave waiting to be filled with the cold coffined image of himself-the remainder of his father, the cruel subtraction of flesh from spirit-and he suffered the devastating memory of all that would ever be, and the sorrowful shades of family passed-over-all those whom he would ever surrender himself to in love in the singular short summer of a boy's innocence-shambled past him, single-file, one heart-chained haunt after the other, his mother looking

worn and ancient—how the damp drizzly grave had aged her—his greatgrandmother frail but stepping frantically, and she seemed on the verge of
speaking, but his mother turning, crossed her ash finger over Granny's snuffstained lips as though the dead were silenced by the powers and principalities of
the spectral moon to mute—whether from knowing too much to articulate or
having nothing of value to say, he could not know—and then Bishop, deep in the
raves and rages of spirits even while alive, stumbled into view; Rick knew that
Bishop must have made the harrowing journey from hell, for he didn't have a
chilled gin-and-tonic in his trembling hands, and Rick wanted to reach out to him
to slip him a five spot for a fifth of Gordon's, but before he could move, Bishop
had traversed the abyss of the burial plot and stood shivering with Rick's mother
and great-grandmother on the grave's other side.

As the Reverend, bible-solemn, his feet shod in mud-splashed galoshes, his head bowed-deep beneath an umbrella, recited, "Our Father," Rick mumbled, "who art in," and as if following a stage cue, his own father emerged from the day's sepulchered light of dark and fog and stood forlornly, holding his arms, by the grave's grieving abyss–father and son stared at one another through the irrevocable years of cold rain, and his father waved his shadowy hand, flagging a crisp \$100 bill to signal things would be fabulous in the afterlife, but Rick knew that things would never be fabulous in any life for a Hanley-and quickly as Ted Hanley had materialized, appeared, his father now stood on the grave's far side,

opposite, shuffling away with the other shades as if being with the living entailed more pain than they could bear; turned inward into the desolate centuries of himself, Rick watched the shadows as they walked into formless no names.

Turning away to the hollow world, he stared at the wet raw earth hilled beside the deep grave, and he began to think of that same rainy freezing day he had buried Tubbie, the Collie, when both he and Tubbie were 13 years ancient; he remembered how Tubbie had transferred her fierce wagging allegiance to him after his mother had died (had his mother instructed Tubbie to watch after him?) no matter, Rick remembered the famous sun-sailed days of playing ballfetch and towel-tug with Tubbie and wrestling with her in the tall grass, then later, carrying Tubbie around in his weight-struggling arms-after her muzzle had greyed, her eyes had clouded, and she, fart-smelling and creaking with arthritis, had become an archaeology of bones on the way to the burial mound-till finally his father had slammed his fist against the kitchen table, rattling salt shaker, silverware, and routine, refusing her suffering, bearing it no more and had screamed, begged, discussed, talked with him till he relented and together, both reluctant, his father having driven home for lunch, having elixired steaming black coffee with brandy for courage's resolve, they had trudged Tubbie to the car and trundled her to the Vet's office-the cramped office wild with meowing cats and barking dogs and one squawking parrot-and he, Rick, had jailed her, rocked her, cradled her in his arms-her moist black nose pressed into the warmth of his armpit, her sad brown

eyes lost and frightened, her stiff stricken body trembling-while he lied in hoarse whisper, "Tubbie, don't be scared, old girl; the doctor is just giving you a shot to make you feel better;" the somber white-smocked doctor injected her with heartmurdering dosage-he suffered, shuddered her going limp at the speed of deathblind with tears, he staggered out of the brick building clutching, toting Tubbie wrapped in a blue blanket-no, not the blue of sky-and his father keyed and unlocked the trunk, springing the black lid up, but he shook his head No and pressed the passenger door open, refusing to let go, refusing to let go of his fierce hold, and with the once Tubbie splayed, a lifeless lump on his lap, he stared out the rain-lashed window at nothing; silent for what words were there to say, his father drove, the windshield wipers slapping dead-rhythm, to the house, already emptying of home, and said he would help in burying her when he returned for he was needed at the furniture store, and he, Rick, had answered from a new volition and loneliness in himself, "I want to do it myself." And his father nodded yes, watched Rick struggle from the car, with the weight still in his arms, then reversed, backing into the road, and sped away. Strange, so strange, it was raining dismal dogs and shivering despair that day, too; he chose a secluded spot by the weeping willow and began spading, striking the spongy ground, but the dirt turned to mud as soon as he shoveled it aside, his salty tears striping, mixing with the rain, and he dug desperately, furiously, hoping almost believing he could bury life's impermanence out of sight, but the earth and rain mocked him, defied him

miserably, and it took three long hours of spading, kicking his mud-caked heel hard against the black metal, cursing "God damn" for the first time in his boy's life, before he could gash a wound deep enough to hide Tubbie in her cardboardapple coffin. The grave spanked flat, he paused dumb, then threw the splattered shovel aside and ran to his room, tracking red footfalls through the kitchen that he would have to mop before his father returned; with no hesitation, he yanked the scarlet dragon-emblazoned kite from its privileged place on the wall-its shadowed outline still darkening his unpainted bedroom-and tore, ripping, shredding the brilliant crisp paper from the cross-ties, and he planted, twisting, marking this frail humble cross, impromptu, into the ground over Tubbie's grave; his eyes wild with mourning and incomprehension, he began praying violently, pleading and kneading with his blistered hands dark psalms to heaven-praying for what? resurrection? for he knew, must have known, that Tubbie was dead, irrefutable-but praying for something to believe in even then, but not knowing what he knew, and he stood sobbing and screaming in the rain and wind and his words were lifted up, carried on currents of suffering to fall back into the silence in which he stood. That evening, when his father dragged home from unloading an Ethan Allan Furniture Van of bedroom sets, his father congratulated him for acting like a man, but little did either one know that their education in loss was just beginning, that, indeed, his, Rick's, true rite of passage into manhood would not be learning sex's plenary of touch, but instead would reside in muttering

incontinent prayers in the rain over graves, articulated, but, perhaps, sexual congress is merely the radiant face of death, sex-that shining mysticism of lovers, dying to selves, fucking, while procreating foolish hope, immortal—in which each lover is already uncoupled, already abandoned in the despair that he, she is dead, a shade haunting other shadows in the boneyard of love lost.

Rain drizzling inside his bones, Rick shuddered, shrugging his shoulders, heavy with fatigue and wet. He suffered his lostness like a cold country inside his soul; he understood as if staring into a frozen river, seeing through the frosted crystal surface—winter's breath of fog swirling, brooding like the Holy Ghost above the diamond lights of ice—to the fast flowing nothingness in the depths, dangerous, beneath that there are no hierarchies of love that love. Love is one indivisible passion, a democracy of myriad heartaches; its ecstatic strength, forged on the hard anvil of human suffering, possesses the iron of obdurate endurance, persistent, and yet is evanescent as a snow angel in summer; love, in its fullest sense, lives in a terrifying trembled interconnectedness, beautiful but cruel, with all things fiercely clung to and desired; to splash dirt whether over Tubbie's remains, or mother's, or father's is to inaugurate that long inexorable process, irreversible, of losing all things—the piercing shriek of life come undone, the heartrending cry of fallen Lucifers and children tumbling through the blue of knowledge into adults.

As the bells of rain tolled silence over the bereaved assembly, the minister nodded his head to the eight pall bearers, and they stepped in solemn procession beneath an avenued, dripping tent of umbrellas while the funeral director and his mute, hairlipped assistant, the director's first cousin, made a steel cross, covering the grave, placing first a metal sheet over the abyss, then a second sheet horizontal; the two men proceeded to lay strategically four long straps across the plot, one near each end and two near the middle. Meanwhile, slowly, deliberately, the pall bearers slid the grey casket from the Cadillac's black-carpeted rear end; their faces like blocks of carved wood, grained with mortality, they carried the body to the grave and marshalled it atop the metal cross. The coffin gleamed like an enormous pearl, oblong, in the downpour–rain beads shimmering in lucent lines on the lid as though light itself were being buried into the blinddark earth—while the Reverend, clutching his gilt-edged Bible in his right hand, announced he would like to address a brief testimonial on the life of Hubert John "Ted" Hanley.

The minister, clearing his hoarse throat, droned, "I first saw Ted . . . "; memories of that defeated Saturday, vanquished, flooded through Rick's mind.

10:30 a.m., the funeral director rang him at home; Noah Taylor's dark molasses voice, honeyed with piety, dripped over the phone line, informing him the embalming, "It is finished," and "Rick, your father, dressed in the navy blue suit, has been laid to eternal peace in the deluxe casket you selected; may Lawd

Jesus bless all departed sinners, the body awaits your private viewing this morning." And for the first time in his life, he, the shy timid boy who couldn't climb down trees, defiant, deviled himself into a daring circus performer, swallowing the flames of bonded bourbon-Old Fitzgerald of Kentucky from his father's flasktightroping slow short steps-balancing with his arms-across the tilting hallway for his audience with the dead man. Noah, the ancient conjurer of semblance who magicked natural death into contrived artifice and then back into the image of naturalness, fluttering his soft white hands like frail doves, ushered him into the somber green parlor; long grey strands of hair illusioned across his bald scalp, liver spotted, Noah, his brown eyes sickened from disgust, his nervous hands wrung together as though to stay their flight towards the empty horizon, hesitated and slumped against the oak-framed doorway as he, the only begotten, stumbled and staggered towards the coffin's shining cold slab. Standing sideways, staring blearyeyed, he leaned over the corpse's face and gazed into the ashen mirror, older, of himself while the room spun dangerously, reeling recklessly around and around the two of them-father and son-and grabbing the casket's white plush lip, satin, to steady himself (why are the dead granted more comfort than the living?) his scarred knuckles, like litmus, turned from red to pinkish-white.

But even as he clung to the coffin in desperate tears, he wanted to slam and slap the corpse awake. He thought of the 22nd Psalm's "O, my father, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season and am not silent." He

needed to ask his father the faithless question of the abandoned psalmist and of all broken sons, crucified, nailed by their hands and feet to the tree of despair, "Father, father, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" He needed to slam his fists against his father's breast; he needed to slap him across the face; he needed to scream the dead to life and interrogate, "Don't you see I'm on fire?" Rising flames devour the fatherless living—a funeral pyre of vanity and regret—searing scars over the body of breath while the slumbering father, holy—crows painted by Van Gogh flapping on the insides of his eyelids—dreams in the candled void, yellow, the dreamer's eyes hollowed into graves of night, blind to this world's crosses of sorrow in the cockcrow of bloodmorrow.

As he stared into his father's death mask-the parlor reeling slowly nowonce again, he sat in a yellow-varnished desk at T.C. Cherry Elementary in Mrs.

Duncan's fifth grade-the classroom sleepy warm and smelling of chalk dustreading from an oversized red book how the ancient Romans windowed gold coins
over the heavy-lidded eyes of their dead emperors to pay for the Imperial Caesars
being ferried by Charon across the River Styx to the underworld. Why? archaic
gesture? vestigial superstition? His consciousness resumed its standing sentry by
the casket, open, and on premeditated impulse, he shoved his left hand deep into
his blue jeans pocket; palming the wrinkled paper-Independence Hall folded in
two, Ben Franklin's bald head obvoluted-the bill stolen from the shattered

inviolate frame in his father's study, he slid, smoothing the \$100 inside the breast of his father's blue suit coat. And he reflected, at least, if money is requisite in the afterlife (and why should the life future be less corrupt than the life present?) his father will not bear the leper lesions of being a bankrupt. Also, he hoped his father like the great Roman Emperors would be allowed to drink forgetfulness in his interlocked hands' cup from the River Lethe's sacred waters. And for the eternity of an instant, Rick luxuriated, like a wounded fox splashing cool, in the waters of bliss, the everlasting nothingness of the void.

Noah padded behind him and asked softly, "Son, do you want the funeral service on Monday to be in the funeral home?" Rick jumped slightly, never releasing his hold of the casket, never looking at the director; he spoke slowly, miserly as if he were counting, pinching each of the four words from the coin purse of his mouth, "No, Mount Pleasant Cemetery." And then thinking of it for the first time, he slurred extravagantly "buried like great-grandfather." Noah, his white eyebrows tangled, inquired, "You mean the service?" and he, Rick replied with great deliberation like a threadbare actor mocking himself with stately rich diction "manual internment." Perplexed, Noah stood silently for several seconds as if hoping his hounds would tree a rogue polecat in his henyard, "Son, I'm sorry as I can be—Lawd knows I'd pleasure in obliging you, known Ted since he was a mischief in knee-britches—but we don't use those old-fashioned straps anymore."

replied in sudden measure, sober, "I guess I'm not asking so much as telling." He wanted to add, "I know it makes no difference, absolutely no difference, it's the same, all the same, but it's important for me to act as if I can fence the gaping hole of my loss with the white pickets, gleaming, of family tradition and religion." But he stood there poor of words, his voice hoarse, not knowing what he knew. Noah, his Adam's apple sliding, muttered "damn disgrace" under his Peppermint-Schnapps breath and pivoting sharply on his heels, stepped away.

Leaning over the coffin, he floated above the ghostly mirror of his father's face, seeing not only himself but Great-Grandmother Melissa's features, her sharp Roman nose, thin lips, elongated face. She had been the one to tell him the story of his pneumonia-stricken great-grandfather's burial shortly before World War II's end. Melissa and his Great-Great-Grandmother Julia had cried and moaned and wailed and fainted as the pall bearers lowered John Farmer Hanley's casket into the ground; the two women, dressed in funeral black, had to be carried by the men folk, like swaying hammocks, behind the white frame church so that their daughters could loosen their corsets' stays and administer smelling salts. After that she had said, "There were no other griefs, all the harrowing deaths to come had rattled their skeletons in John's coffin. And sometimes in the graveyard on the night of the full yellow moon, when the wintry wind whistles through the holes in the heart of the world, the ghosts stand and shiver atop their carved headstones, shrilling dirges on flutes of bone." Melissa, a heavy woman until that time, capable

of mule-plowing furrows during the war's gas-rationing, began to melt into air and from then forward was skinny. By the time she crossed-over, her bones had become bird-frail, and on her feather death bed she suspicioned she wouldn't so much as die as "fly away into shadow." But before she flew high over the void, circling the formless, she lifted her head from her pillow, her silver hair tangled like knots of moonlight on her lace gown; she fingered his cheeks, globing his freckled face in her weightless hands and said, "Boy, because you're a dreamer, people will try to remake you in their image. But remember you have soul and heart and carry on dreaming in God. Dreams are all the riches I can will you in this poor old world."

The Reverend glanced in the pall bearers' direction, nodding his head; the eight men, silent, dignified, walked forward, dividing themselves into separate lines of four. Facing on sides opposite of the grave, they stood, bending over to belt the straps around their hands while steadying the coffin with the flat of their free hands. Struggling, they groaned the casket up, lifting the weight off the steel cross, stepping slowly backwards. Moving like a clock's hands, implacable, the funeral director and his mute assistant carried, one by one, the two metal sheets from the grave's opening. When the pall bearers, once again, advanced, he, Rick, approached the wet smeared lip of the grave and dug his fingers into the mud.

As the pall bearers, their faces grimaced, their neck cords strained, their hands wrapped tight about the straps, slowly releasing their lengths, lowered his father into the blood wound of ground, the minister, his eyes downcast, began reciting, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still . . . " Rick, drowned, visioned shadowy dark hands reaching up from the skeletal and worm-riddled depths of the graves surrounding the Hanley family plots, and these shade hands groped and twisted, trying to seize him into their terrible depths, blind. He remembered Great-Grandmother Melissa's story about the grief-stricken family, ignorant, who jerked the startle-eyed corpse of the slain young man-son and brother and nephew-from the casket while the lay, white-haired minister gazed on dumbstruck and then jumped up and spoke in wild tongues-an ecstatic parliament of pentecostal languages. Jerking his upper body violently, again and again, as if the Holy Spirit were shooting him repeatedly with a revolver, he slammed his King James Bible against the pulpit, his long arms scything the sinful air, his shattered eyes staring heavenward, refracting like shards of stain glass the orange flame of the oil lamps. His babbling glossolalia rose to the rafters, echoing there like a prophecy, then sputtered, falling into an inarticulate murmur of English. His hands outstretched in supplication, he tried to counsel them, pleading, urging, wrestling with them over the body; he shouted finally in furious frustration, demanding them to return the corpse to the knotty-pine coffin so he, the Lord's

effulgent angel, could stretch his right arm over the funeral service in shining benediction, but the family's grief refused to surrender its love to death everlasting. When Melissa had told him this story of her mother's family-yarning it out as she crocheted a green sleeve with her needles—he, a nine year old boy, had regarded it as the funniest tragedy he had ever heard, so typical of those shoeless hillbillies in eastern Kentucky, but now he only wanted to dive into the heart of the grave and not let his father go, or, at the very least, to go with him, to ride that casket into the deaf and dumb of heaven or hell.

Icy nails of rain falling faster, harder like a Calvary of water, Rick shivered, grieving suddenly for Tubbie-her nose, once again, buried into his armpit, her tail thumping his leg-reexperiencing, refeeling her death like a mysticism of anguish as though all the world's crosses cares woes-past present future-had been simultaneously existent in that frail old dog's fearful trembling as she was held and injected with betrayal. And he knew that all animals born from blood and womb knew of their own mortality, could smell like stallions-curving necks violently, rearing high, hooves flashing sun-the nightmare of their fates, could feel their deaths climbing in their bodies like the old rattling rage of not-I. He stood there not knowing if he was dissolving into tears or not, not caring if blood was pulsing through his arteries or not; as the minister prayed "dust to dust, ashes to ashes," Rick threw the fist of mud that once had been fashioned from nothingness and then breathed into the reckless intemperate flesh of man and woman at the pearl coffin as its right end thudded hard against the grave's bottom. Staring into the

abyss of love, his life knotted in his throat, he dug his hands deeper into his pockets and as he fingered the Greyhound ticket to Atlanta he thought, "Yes, let the dead bury the dead" and turned and began the long walk home.