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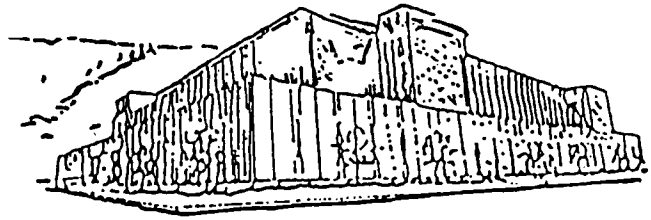
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Dance Outside the Light

by

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B.A., Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 1993

Presented in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
Masters Of Fine Arts
The University of Montana
1996

Approved by:


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Dance Outside the Light

*This time I know where I am going, it is no longer the ancient night,
the recent night. Now it is a game, I am going to play.*

- Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*

For my father

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Prologue: Blue's Dance

Other days we hate him. This being Tennesse,
waitresses don't take kind to his advances.
Each week he loves a new one and each time
scorned he cries behind his beard
and spits on her customer's plates.

Bartenders pool tips on Tuesdays
to purchase dentists, pay rent,
buy him a shirt or new shoes.
His old ones mildew and crack monthly stuck
as they are in water eight sometimes ten hours a day.

It's not the lost cash we mind, just his promises to payback.
He points his head down, shamed of his cleft face,
moves his hands wildly and pleads
his future wealth like he talks new lottery or Jesus.

But Saturdays, come Jesus or no,
the dishroom sings. His feet splash, spoons clatter,
pans whistle to ring against the crusted stainless sink.
Plates grow cold at this place two famous
Chets drink, but the staff stalls among frozen steaks to watch

Blue whirl and whirl metal.
This racket, these moving feet, battered pots,
oiled and welded cast-iron skillets,
these soft and bloodless hands flying,
this enormous tattering beat

sears us quiet. Behind noise
there is not much. I've seen stars
telescope into burning galaxies of light,
but outside immense night washes all away.

Later we pour each other drinks and smoke.
Last pot hung, Blue stools up to someone.
He will touch her. She will slap him.
He will open his mouth to a bitched guttural
so mangled we can listen.

Aspects of Speech

Ashley begins with muppets. Swallowed
by a frayed beanbag I hope she'll outlive, she sings,
Grover gives a cookie to Oscar Oscar gives a cookie to Grover
and knows the difference though I'm certain I did not tell her.
She drops Big Bird and frowns, her face creased and stitched.
She says, Do you ever get sad, Michael?
Sometimes, I say. Sometimes, she says.
I ask, What makes you sad? When people don't like me
and yell at me and when I can't think of anything
for my Barbies to say. I say, Maybe we should ride the Viper
at Jungle Jim's or play outside on your new swing or color.
That's a good answer, she says.

On the operating table, tears burned bone
and nurses strapped her battling limbs. Ashley screamed
long and loud in one note that did not stop.
She turned to the hand unringed at her neck and chomped.
They clawed on the gas mask, her mouth thorned and shaking.
They did tests. The day we met she stuck a cigarette
in that mouth and smiled at me where I stayed late in bed.
I took it away, her lips crooked around the butt so gaudily
like my own. She crawled in with me. She spilled
Camels and Vicks from the bedside across my bare chest
and counted to fifteen again and again. She stopped,
put her breath quick like a cat's up to mine,
asked, You sleeping? Yes, I am. You mad?
Why would I be mad? You ain't woken up yet.
No, Ashley, I'm not mad. She looked away and said
barely to the wall, as if searching, You're pretty neat.

When I left her I crossed the desert alone
and descended from Idaho. Stars traced and retraced
crazy ellipses above. I stopped the car and got out.
I laughed there among the conifers and granite,
but said nothing to the world. I'd hoped one day
I had only to lead her, barefoot and dancing,
where the thousand deserts crack and bubble shyly,

(no stanza break)

speaking for us. And I'd hoped heavens
would blink and these aquifers explode
to whip wind from our breaths and sluice
hot, salted fingers from her marless face to mine.
A month later the dogs attacked. Blood filled the hole,
completing curvatures of what once was a face.
Her tests are back. Tonight I am not silent. I howl for us.
Smell her sweat like cooking vinegar.
Hear the voice that once babbled playgrounds
rise in screams pure and unscathed as black angels.
She will not die. Look at her. Look at her.
She needs more than a face. She needs marrow.
Her bones grow brittle; her veins invite sickness.
I've seen the needles, long and tensile to suck
from my bones some red chaos that will heal,
hopefully, the diseased blood dripping now across her lips.
I try not to be scared. Those lips have things to tell me.

Music

Granny could have been a concert pianist. Her hands, broad-palmed, long-fingered, stretch across her lap as she works the beans in the late morning air. She whistles beautifully and forever as she works, and her fingers syncopate each note as they pop the ends of the string beans and break them in two or three according to their length. She does not look at her work. She is on the back porch looking down hill towards the crops. Her hands know the beans intimately. Granny has bush beans and lima beans and kidney beans and string beans. The string beans she plants amongst the corn and they crawl up the stalks all April in slow and spiralling chaos to blossom in the sun. She has been down there earlier this morning and every morning of summer for as long as I've been alive. She picks through the vines and drops the ripest of the green tendrils into her plastic five-gallon bucket. She scatters feed to the chickens. She gives the cats and dogs eggs and milk and patty sausage left over from breakfast. She climbs up the steps of the back porch and faces west and I come out the screen door to sit beside her chair in the morning shade. Together we separate out the beans and she dumps a large and mangled mass of them in her lap to begin breaking off their ends, to begin making our meal, to begin whistling all those songs and gospels she knows and confuses into melodies anew.

"Gonna be a hot one," she says between whistling.

"Yes ma'am." I say.

"Yes, sir, yes sir," she says. "Surely is, surely is."

Granny has raised six children, helped raise three grandchildren and has just seen the birth of her second great-grandchild. She and her daughters took care of their cousin Martyce's kids while he worked the Goodyear plant in Gadsden before it shut down; they take care of the preacher's two kids in summer; they took care of all four daughters of a woman at church whose husband drank away while she worked twelve hour shifts as a nurse's aide in Birmingham. They keep pictures of them all. When I was young, the clothes lines were always full of laundry. Aunt Shirley, Granny's youngest child, does the wash every morning except Sundays and hangs it out to dry before lunch. Tendrils of her straight and early greying hair swirl in the breeze above her plump face. Everything is there strung between the tool and canning sheds: sheets, dishtowels, Sunday dresses, bras, panties, the Ace bandages Granny wraps tightly around her legs to keep the verocose veins in. Not everyone in the family taps away musically all day like Granny does. Shirley and Sarah spend the days with all the kids that hang around and are taken care of at the house. They do laundry and dishes and watch soap operas and cook lunch. Frances, the only one of the women to earn a living, leaves at four in the morning for her warehouse shift at Gregorson's Grocery. She might whistle and sing away there but I've never heard her open her

mouth but to speak. We are a family of notoriously bad singers. Aunt Ruth has sung since the day of my birth every Sunday morning and Sunday afternoon and Wednesday night with the choir at Mt. View Baptist church. Her voice screeches and croaks undeniably among the other half-trained voices and the congregation listens intently and patiently and sings "Hallelujah" and chants "Amen." No one complains of Ruth's voice. She was crippled by polio as a child. Her back is bent, her left hand broken into something resembling a cardinal's claw slammed into glass. She is Granny's eldest child. Perhaps the congregation feels that if they survive the pentinence of her voice three times weekly, they will most assuredly go to heaven.

Lunch is a meal of leftovers and sandwiches and baked beans or chili and coffee on everyday but the Sabbath, and on that day it is a feast. Uncle David and Aunt Bonnie and their daughter Karla come over, and Granny's sister Lucille, Aunt Bundt we all called her, always arrived after lunch at her house to eat at ours before she died two years ago this February. Sometimes she brought her eldest son, Martyce, and his family. We all sat in bent and stained vinyl chairs around the cracked linoleum table that had begun to sink in the middle vaguely concave and ate fried chicken or chicken fried steak or baked ham with cornbread or buttermilk biscuits and okra and green beans that began cooking early that morning before church. We ate fresh onions and radishes and homemade ice-cream and watermelon. When I was six Frances began to get sick often and lose

weight radically. She went to the hospital for the first time and when she came back she drank buttermilk instead of Coke and made her Pepsi salad with Tab and saccharin jello.

In the fall we'd also pile onto the shredding couch and two lounge chairs and watch football. We'd watch the pro games mainly to see the highlights of the Alabama and Auburn games we'd already seen the day before and talked about in between Sunday school and the sermon and again after the sermon. All of us are Crimson Tide fans except David, who somehow defected to the War Eagles years ago. On days Alabama wins the Iron Bowl I call him up from wherever I am and chant "Roll Tide, Roll Tide, Roll Tide," obscenely into the receiver. On days Auburn wins I unplug my phone altogether. Granny is always silent at meals but for her fingers thumping. Lucille barely stopped talking enough to eat. Now Bonnie takes over that role.

"That doctor of David's," she says, "he got a kind of stocking he wants David to try for his veins. Thought you might could try them, Granny. Might help you."

"You know, Bonnie," Shirley says, "she don't like stockings none at all."

"Well, thought she could try." She reaches for more cornbread.

Granny eats. Frances says, "She won't wear stockings the day we put her in the casket."

"Frances!" Bonnie says.

"Well, it's true."

"How's your diabetes, Frances?"

Frances drinks her buttermilk. "Fine. Fine. How's your allergies?"

"Oh, they're something awful. Just awful. Doctor says I'm allergic to my own hair. You believe that? My own hair."

When Granddaddy was alive he sat bald and smiling at the head of the table and now in a gesture poetic in its strict economy anyone who can't find a place elsewhere sits at the head. The last big Sunday meal at which Granddaddy and I ate together was between Christmas of 1980 and the first day of 1981. He smelled of death, the cancer moving so swiftly it caught his breath and poisoned it during its exhalation. At the hospital in Birmingham they said the cancer was too advanced to do much of anything about it so they just shot him up and sent him home. He didn't do much those last days, just laid around and breathed and spit his chew into a can and lost weight. But on the Sunday after Christmas he rose up from his bed, regal and dying, and slowly shuffled his way to the dining table. Even though it was afternoon, I remember the lights being very dim and yellow, like his skin, and the storm wind outside rippled and rattled the plastic-tarped windows in front of the Christmas tree with its lights blinking all colors in shadows, blinking red and blue and green on all of us. No one expected him to get up. We all stared as he came out of the bedroom, determined, wobbly. Granny came out of the kitchen with a sheet pan of fresh buttermilk biscuits and saw him holding himself steady by the back of a chair. She quietly put the pan on the bent linoleum and took his arm and sat him down there at the head of the table. He didn't say

much but piled his plate high with food, porkchops and canned tomatoes and corn and biscuits and green onions, as if he could eat it all. He had on a brandnew pair of overalls that swallowed him. He did not eat. He held his hands tightly around the edge of the table, gripping it for support, holding on. He smiled at each of us. I was too young then to understand what hope was, and I do not know if any around that table saw his emergence from his and Granny's bedroom as a sign of recovery. I know Frances didn't. She was crying. Granddaddy said, "Can't you see people trying to eat here, Frances?" I didn't either. When you're ten death has a smell that grabs hold of your throat and won't let go. He pulled me up into his lap and I struggled to get away. I was afraid he'd take me wherever he was going with him. Granny came up behind me and put her hand on my shoulder. Granddaddy pulled a carved walnut pipe from his bib and an old and almost formless baseball cap from next to the chair and put the hat on my head and pipe in my mouth. He pulled me to him and hugged me. My face brushed against the fragile and scratchy skin of his cheek and the pipe in my mouth sunk into a hollow of skin where there once was a muscled throat. He said, "Now go play with all those new toys you got from Granny and me, son," and I did. I saw him take my younger brother in his lap as he'd done me, and then my cousin Karla, and they both struggled but Granddaddy held on. Then he rose shakily to walk back to his bed while Granny was doing dishes in the kitchen, whistling, whistling, whistling "Washed in the Blood of the Lamb."

I don't know what happened to Granny when she was young. The details she gives now that she's almost eighty are sketchy. She quit school in eighth grade to work the crops. She met Granddaddy on a hay ride one Sunday morning after church. I figure Granddaddy must have had his eye on her to go on the hay ride because for as long as I knew him he hated sitting down and hated church. They both came from big families and had a big family between them, children always around the house. Somehow, though, Granny has communicated to each of her daughters an unmistakable fear of men. Perhaps some boys caught her one day in the field and did things. Perhaps Granddaddy was not always as loving as people claim him to be. Shirley told me once he never hit them, just sat them down on a chair when they did things wrong and lectured until you might prefer to be hit. She could've been lying. Perhaps some other boys caught poor crippled Ruth one day outside of Alexandria High School and did things to her which she would have been defenseless to stop, and news of that experience, though hushed up, was passed quietly from sister to sister. Although both of Granny's sons are married with children, none of her daughters are. They all live with Granny in that two bed-room farm house on highway 431, Granny in her little room, the four of them in the other, two to a bed.

Whenever a man stops by, Martyce, for instance, to turn the field each spring or help them with some of the house's old wiring, or the preacher come to chat and get himself a piece of Frances' chocolate cake, all five women holler at each other in their loud and bellowing voices to get dressed, to get into something

decent, to, Shirley, please, wear something besides shorts. One day in the late afternoon while we were all getting dressed for Wednesday services I walked into my aunts' bedroom to find Shirley reading one of the hundred Harlequin Romance books she kept in boxes underneath the bed and playing with herself. I didn't know what she was doing then. I must have been eight or nine. She had her fingers between her panties and skin. They were moving around the black shadows there. She didn't notice me at first, and I didn't say anything. I thought she was scratching an itch. Her hand and fingers moved in slow, practiced, deliberate circles. With the thumb of her other hand she flipped the page of the book and read on. She finished and, breathing hard, put the book down to see me staring at her, staring at the mound of hair between her thighs that the hitched-up night shirt left exposed. "I need to get dressed now," she told me, and that was all that was said. I left the room. None speak of sex in that house. A few years later, when I was just beginning to learn the joys of sticking my own hands down my pants and scratching there, I walked on to the back porch one early evening to be with Granny. She was humming something and scrubbing a blouse with Lava soap and a hard brush. The sunset was filtering down among the leaves of a great elm tree. Down below us in the yard a rooster mounted a hen. He grappled with her tail with his claws and grabbed the loose skin of her neck with his beak. He began moving quickly while she squawked. I turned to Granny.

"Why's he doing that?" I asked.

She looked up from the blouse, saw the two birds, and looked back down

to her work. "Why," she said, " he's punishing her for being bad."

On afternoons the welfare checks come, we celebrate. Granny gets one for herself and one for Granddaddy and now Ruth gets one too. In these parts it's tradition to break the new bills on a case of Pabst, but we're homeowners now, and Granny always has been a Southern Baptist, so we don't drink; we go to Wal-mart. Though Granny and the aunts live in a town of less than a thousand people, three Wal-marts sit large and inviting within a twenty-five minute drive, one in Gadsden, one in Anniston, one in Oxford. There's one in Talledega as well, but we only went to that one while Karla's husband, Darryl, worked there. Until Goodyear cranks up full time again, Wal-mart is our main industry. Granny fears not to tell relatives and strangers alike, "it ain't a bargain if you got to spend a quarter to save a dime;" still, her daughters drag her along to shop at each store, a 90 mile trip. They'll say they're seaching out the best price on diapers, or Barbies, or Sunday clothes, or candy, but really, they like to shop and see.

It's a celebration after all, and Wal-mart is the vision of America we've been taught to believe: bright clean aisles full of shiny things made more or less in America, whites, blacks, hispanics all walking together in relative peace. And those are people like us working the registers. When the ACLU paid two out-of-staters to attend Gadsden State and then sued the school for Ten Commandment posters hung in large Gothic letters in every room, the cashiers at Wal-mart all wore little ten commandment buttons in solidarity.

The manager of the Gadsden Wal-mart once gave an inspirational lecture about Sam Walton at the business college where Karla goes, but she never got the knack of founding a multi-billion dollar retail operation, so here we are. And when the old people get together around the Exxon station couch a few miles up from Granny's in order to bitch, they're not like those folks in Vermont. They don't talk of aesthetics or small town economies; they complain that tires there are only a few cents cheaper than tires at Sears, that Darryl worked two years at the customer service counter without a raise and then had to drive forty miles to Talledega to get an 85 cent one. It's a vicious cycle of course. A company buys land at cutthroat prices because - after all - unless you're growing pot on it, it's not worth much, hires the lucky among us at minimum wage and then subtracts insurance and the company meal plan, and the money we earn, we spend there. But it's the only cycle we have. We're not so much a company town as a company state.

Recently, the World Bank's own Russel Summers stated it was alright to send America's hazardous waste to lesser developed nations. People there don't live long enough for carcinogens to be a factor anyway. He might as well send it here. We don't live that long either. We need the work. We rank just above Mississippi and Louisiana in life expectancy and standard of living. We have one of the worst educational systems, one of the highest crime rates. It's not that hard to figure out. Despite the country's fascination with certain religious practices here up and around Sand Mountain, we're not dying because we drink strychnine

or handle copperheads. The poison's watered down. Copperheads rarely kill a grown man. We're die young because we're poor, because a Coca-cola and sweetbun for breakfast have more calories per penny than granola and fresh-squeezed orange juice could ever hope to have, because in fact we already have two of the most toxic waste dumps in America right here. Before the government posted signs finally admitting they were deadly, we used to go four-wheeling in them.

Just this summer I brought a woman back to the house. We didn't stay long. People of the opposite sex don't sleep together at Granny's unless they're married, and even if they are, they sleep in Granny's room, with Granny. Still, Shirley called Frances at work so she would buy good food for dinner. That household of women looked at my friend a long time as she played with the great-grandchildren before they turned to me, as if on cue, to say, "She's real good with them kids, Michael." She is a farm girl just like they are, but she is slender and pale and pretty, which for Granny means she's rich. And when we sat for early supper at a table replete with the first ham they'd had for months, beans and corn, home-made ice cream and chocolate cake and fresh watermelon for dessert, Granny turned to her and over the chants of prayer and over the collective amen, said, "Honey, now you know how poor folks eat."

Around six on Sunday evenings we go to church for the second time of the day. In spring and summer it often begins to rain around this time. The aunts sit

anywhere among the pews of the left side of Mt. View Baptist but Granny religiously sits in the second pew, right behind the preacher's family. Her purse is always packed with candies and gum, and after the sermon all the children come round to get some. They all call her Granny. Even the preacher calls her Granny. Sunday nights are for revival. The preacher rants on, his face red and sweating. Aunt Ruth and the choir screech out "Ezekial saw the Wheel," "Go Tell it on the Mountain," "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Granny's fingers thump away on her large print bible.

The preacher chants at the congregation, "how can you be baptized if you ain't even been saved?!"

We all chant "Amen."

The preacher chants, "You must accept Jesus Christ Our Savior in your very heart if you care to be a member of this church."

We all chant "Amen." Granny's fingers scat along unconsciencely.

Around the time I began playing with myself I began playing with the idea of God. In fifth grade I listened to the preacher's every word. After week upon week of the revivalist sermons I started to believe that I did in fact hear Jesus in my very heart. He sounded just like the preacher. I was afraid of them both. At the end of end of each sermon the preacher's voice would soften up and the choir would sing along to the notes of "Amazing Grace" on the piano and all who had indeed heard Jesus were invited to walk up to the altar and pray for their souls. Every week people did walk up and pray, and I knew them all: Jack O'Connel,

Zach Taylor, Ed Johnson, Francis Mackerney, and others. They seemed so courageous to walk up in front of the congregation and pray for their salvation, pray to stop that booming Jesus inside their hearts. I wanted to be like them. I looked at Granny and she tapped away and sang. I got up and walked towards the altar. The preacher stared smiling at me. Jesus' voice, the preacher's voice, bellowed away inside my head. I turned and went to the side door and walked downstairs to the bathroom. In one of the stalls I prayed to Jesus to stop his yelling. I thought about dunking my head in the toilet as a Baptism. Just come and save me, I thought, please just come and save me. He didn't, or not that I could tell. The yelling didn't stop. I walked slowly back up to the chapel. The service was over. Everyone was milling around, visiting. I walked up to Granny surrounded by kids asking for sweets. She looked at me and held a butterscotch in her hand and smiled. For Granny, sometimes, there is no crisis of the soul not solved by God and candy.

After church one evening just like that one, Granny and Granddaddy and I all got into the green Chevrolet pickup and went to visit Aunt Bundt. It was dusk and spring and the rains were coming hard and fast. Water poured over the windshield in sheets. I couldn't see a thing and Granddaddy drove and Granny whistled. Everything was growing black when we came to the bridge over Tallahatchee creek. Granddaddy stopped the truck and got out. I could feel the air rush into the cab, as if looking for a place to dry. After a few minutes he

jumped back inside, dark and dripping.

"Think we got it," he told Granny over my head and drove on.

We didn't. The Tullahoma was running fast and haphazard everywhere, over its banks, over bushes and fields, over the bridge. When we were less than halfway across, the water lifted up the rear end with its wood plank truck bed and began turning us downriver. Granddaddy floored the accelerator and the creek flew up and roared around the back tires in protest but we didn't move. He told Granny to go out and sit in the bed. She opened up her door and sunk her bandaged legs into the flowing water and walked towards the rear end. Granddaddy turned and watched as she unhooked the gate and sat on it. He let the clutch in slowly and we began to go forward. He let the clutch go a little more. The engine stalled. He cranked it and it whined but did not turn over. He cranked again and nothing, and then again and then nothing and then once more and once more nothing. I turned to look at Granny. She was lost in the shapeless wet.

Eventually Granddaddy got out to look around. Granny came back in sopping and heavy. The creek rose. Granddaddy came back in and sat down and rested his forehead against the hard plastic steering wheel. It seemed the truck was drifting. Dripping and quiet, they looked at each other over my head. There was no sound but the flowing darkness underneath. Granny took my hand. "Come on, now, son," she said.

We got out slowly and the current pulled at my shoes and pants, trying to take them off me and into it. The water was far up into the wheel wells. The black

and pouring night huddled around us. Granddaddy took my left hand and Granny my right and we waded on in the direction we came, towards home. Near the beginning of the bridge I slipped and they lost their grip. The creek poured me into the railing and pinned me there, beneath its rising surface. I couldn't get up, couldn't find the concrete beneath my feet. After a few seconds I realized I was stuck horizontal against the railing, the creek rushing at my face. I began to open my mouth to scream and then remembered not to. Fish and weeds and clods of dirt and trash brushed against me and then went on. I began thrashing around uncontrollably. I tried to lift my head up above the water but couldn't. It was difficult to tell in that darkness which way was up. I listened for Granny or Granddaddy. The bubbling creek denied all other sounds. I tried to move my head again. It clanked against the railing behind me and I moved no more, stunned. The water rushed on and on. My mouth opened against my will and I breathed it in. I wanted to cough but couldn't. I felt the black go blacker. A hand touched my ear. It grabbed my lobe and then crawled up to take hold of my hair. Another took hold of my face, squeezing my nose and mouth and cheeks together. I could tell the hands were Granny's. She pulled and I lurched up past the creek's surface coughing and crying. She held me against her side. She yelled at Granddaddy standing not a foot away: "We should a stayed in the truck, damnit Homer." It was the first and only time I heard her curse. We walked on, huddled together with the black around us. I did not fall again.

That night after we got home and dried off and stood in the hall to take

warmth from the gas heater there, I went to sleep in the bed next to theirs and dreamed of water coursing forever and without end. I began whimpering then screaming. Even though I was old enough not to, I pissed twisting and thrashing in my sleep. Urine went everywhere. I cried and pissed more. I could smell Granny crawl in next to me. She lay right in the wetness of my dream. She held on despite the urine that must have been soaking through her gown, sticking to her thighs and stomach, and finally, I slept.

Two summers ago, long after Granddaddy and Aunt Bundt died, long after Granny and Aunt Ruth and my father all joined Frances in her diabetes, long after the unidentifiable lesion gobbled up half of Martyce's leg, I went back to the farmhouse to visit. I slept in the bed I slept in when I lived there, the one right next to Granny's. She snores horribly now. I always retire early so I can be deep asleep before she finishes reading her daily verse and crawls into bed. My second night there, Frances did not wake up at four. She did not wake up at all. I woke up when Sarah and Ruth and Shirley started screaming. "Mama," they yelled again and again. "Mama!" Granny and I got up and went into the other bedroom. Three of my aunts were huddled around the fourth one, who just slept on. She wasn't dead. We could see her breathing slightly. She was in a diabetic coma, what Shirley calls "one of Frances' little fits."

Sarah called the hospital in Jacksonville. Granny took a sugar pill from the vial next to Frances' and Sarah's bed and with her large and worn hand placed

it under her daughter's lolling tongue. Frances slept on. The ambulance came, its swirling lights bringing color into the yard. Four uniformed men marched through the house and put Frances silently on a stretcher and then rolled her away. Ruth and Shirley and Sarah got into the same truck that Granddaddy and Granny and I tried to cross Tallahatchee Creek in, and followed the ambulance to the hospital.

Granny and I did not go back to sleep. I put some coffee on to boil and she said nothing. We sat together at the cracked linoleum table and waited for the sun to rise over the highway. The phone rang. It was Shirley. Frances had been revived. They would be home that afternoon. This was not the first time Granny had seen her daughter not wake up and the ambulances come. I know of least four times in the last two years when Frances has had to be taken away. I'm sure Granny cannot help wondering which time will be the last.

The sun did rise up over the highway that morning. We went outside and scattered feed to the chickens and hunted for eggs in the coop. She cooked breakfast: eggs over easy, buttermilk biscuits, bacon, Coca-cola from a can. We ate and said nothing. I piled our dirty plates on top of each other and put them in the sink. I brought her more coffee.

She pulled herself up from the chair and walked onto the backporch. She forgot to bandage her legs and they glistened swollen and blue. She put on her floppy straw hat with the green visor and stood looking out towards the down sloped hill and garden. The siding of the canning shed needs to be replaced. The

crown of her hat is broken and frayed. Beauty and perfection are so alien they barely ever meet. We walk together down to the corn. I let my hand thump softly against the stalks as we go past. We pick ripe beans from the vines and fill our five-gallon bucket to bring it back up the hill. I offer to haul the bucket for her but she refuses. The ground is wet from the night rain.

Back up on the porch we begin to work the beans. We take a mass of them into our laps and begin snapping off their ends. She begins to whistle and hum while her fingers pop away. String beans broken in half and thirds begin to fill the other bucket. I hear strains of Amazing Grace and Tennessee Stud and America The Beautiful all wrapped into one long theme and rambling on. After a bit I realize her hands have ceased to hold green beans and for one of the few short times in her life she has taken a break from her labor. She seems to sing and hum and whistle simultaneously, and her fingers tap along. She wraps herself with the notes of her music, as if they were a cloak of her sewing. She sews on and they drape her shoulders and wrap around her round and wrinkled face and cover her ruined legs, and then they cover me.

She hums and whistles and taps some more and the cloak grows out into the new day. It must be large this cloak, and warm. It flows down the hill into and past the garden. It floats up into the sharp and crisp morning air. It must be warm this cloak, it is the only thing we have to wear. She whistles and taps and hums, whistles and taps and hums. It is the only thing we have to wear.

Aborted

The day I found I was God
I still waited in line to find
how much it cost. The kid
in front tested my two-day beard.
He allowed his slimed
fingers just a touch
of my glowing chin.
He was not dumb. He knew
even holy razors cut.
Next day, simply another
man among millions,
I walked the cracked meadows
above town and imagined her
with me. Dancing, we
would find the frozen shallows
and peer down into imperfect
heavens. Supernatural, really,
the way I know the sex
of children before they're
not born, know even the fallen
must reassemble whom
they punish. My face
will be hard and hard.
It will turn snow like stones.
I have found the ice.

Houston

The unregistered sit on scalded park
benches awaiting unregistered work,
Forbidden shadows, they box for cigarettes.
I stand on corners, counting seconds
until the sun explodes. Or I dream
dreams of a world so blue it dances
on violet, blue washer dryer set,
catfood, dogfood, grass and snakes behind
the house I played in. You could dive
into that world, and nothing burned.
These are my highschool haunts: The assembly
where I once lied about character and saw
standing ovation, the wall into which
I buried my head as my inherited mother
threw insults or plates when I did not get A's
(she'd certain control issues, poor woman),
the attic where I connected live wires,
took them apart and then reconnected
everything, listening for voices below,
hands sweating calculus. I don't visit.
I love a girl. She's far away. Perhaps
I could say I'm broken hearted but no -
or better - who is not? I have come
for work and found it. Twelve dollars each hour.
Today my skin will blister, fill with lime.
Tonight I will see a woman whose son
sits watching TV in another room
while we fuck. She is quiet
and her skin is dark, which I like.
She will light a candle. I will blow
it out and she will anyway I hope -
throw me on her waterbed and descend,
a heavy cloud.

Flood Plain

In Canton, Missouri, Abel Covington counts boats. He straddles a swing under the shade of a large elm, binoculars before his eyes, watching the tows drift up and down the Mississippi, pushing their tremendous loads. He has sat in this same spot for years, looking only at the river, the Army Corps of Engineers lock and dam, the hazily shrubbed edge of Illinois across the water. He feels more comfortable here than in his bed. No one else sits with him. The weathered soft pine of the swing seat retains a vaguely heart-shaped stain of sweat and oils on the left side.

He stands, holds the binoculars at his side with his ruined left hand. A silver camper with Minnesota tags pulls into the parking lot next to the Army Corps of Engineers building. A flock of sparrows streaks overhead. He smiles at them. Two men with sandy brown hair step from the camper, then comes a golden retriever, then three little girls. The dog runs towards the river, only to be stopped by the wire mesh fence surrounding the lock, which it sniffs suspiciously. The humans approach the fence as well, looking at the Mississippi as if they had never before in their entire lives seen water.

Covington approaches from the side, watching their faces screwed into expressions of awe or confusion or joy. He smiles, he who has watched the water more than most. It is only water. There is nothing mystical here.

The people from Minnesota turn to him as he drapes his arms along the fence in a stance mirroring their own. Without the binoculars to hide and enshadow it, his face glares palely in the sun. One of the men with the sandy hair turns to Covington and stretches out his hand. They say hello. Covington stretches his hand out to the other, whom he notices has a long scar along the base of his neck as if a new head had been sewed on there, and they too say hello. The three girls with baby blue jumpsuits and matching blonde hair done up in long and slightly frazzled french braids notice his face, with its tan and wrinkled sides and forehead and milky cheeks and nose and mouth. They notice as well that his eyes do not look in the same direction, but rather focus on different things entire. They wonder what the other eye is looking for, wonder what else or who else might be coming. They shift and stomp their feet softly, impatiently, like horses.

Covington turns to them and then gestures grandly to the tow and its cargo of barges waiting in the lock.

"That's the Dick Harbison there," he says. "Double diesel engines capable of 4500 horsepower. Built in Mississippi, bought by a company in Arkansas a few years back and re-commissioned there."

The girls look at him and nod. They see that one of the buttons of his blue shirt is missing and that brown and wiry hair peeks out there. They say nothing. One of the men says, "That's a lot of horsepower."

The other man, the one with the scar, says, "That's a lot of gas."

Covington says, to both or either of them, they are not sure, "yessir, it is. It is indeed."

The man with the scar around his neck says, "How long will the boat be in this long shaft-thing here."

"The lock? Could be a while. It's got a full load of fifteen barges. That's 570 rigs full of grain. Can't fit them all in the lock at the same time. So they got to break them up in half, put half of them through, then the other half and the tow. Tie them all together again. Could be longer if they change crews here."

The man puzzles over this a moment. He asks, "What kind of mileage these things get?"

Covington laughs aloud and coughs. "Mileage?" he asks them all. "Mileage? Well, just with the deisel the captain's used up sitting here you could go a fairways to wherever you're going and back again."

They say nothing. The old man produces from someplace along his body a few xeroxed black and white photographs of the Army Corps of Engineers Lock and Dam station 20, and then a few graphs measuring the towing capacity of tug boats in eighteen-wheeler rig loads. He distributes them among the girls. One of them asks, "Do you work here?"

"No," he says.

The dog comes back from its tour of the fence and the surrounding trees. The man with the scar begins to shoo the girls and the dog towards the silver camper, extending his arms dramatically as if he could hug or protect them all. The other man turns to Abel Covington.

"Do we owe you anything for the, for those things?"

"No."

"I missed your name," he says and extends his hand.

"Abel Covington. And yours?"

After they leave Covington mounts his Honda and rides up the small two-lane along the river past the campsites, past Freddy's Ferry, past the short, squat grain bins, to the end of the road to scope for tows. He takes the binoculars out of his saddle bag and holds them to his face. He's waiting for the Darby Ferry, a large one, 6800 hp, probably pushing wide oil barges, he thinks, since it'll likely be coming out of Baton Rouge. He hopes Captain Mazatlan will be at the helm because there's a man who can make shoving a city-day's worth of electricity up the middle of the country look like artwork. Mazatlan never has to backtow, never oversteers the mark on the lock, barely even scratches its sides. And the whole time he's up top smoking his rolled Drums singing in Spanish. Just last week, he yelled down at Covington, "Hey Old Man, the old lady kick you out again?"

Covington replied, "No. But a man on disability's got to do something."

"And what do you do there all day?"

"Oh, I tell myself lies."

Mazatlan took a long drag on his smoke and even across the link fence and up atop the Darby, Covington could see the captain's smile. "*Bien dicho*. That, my friend, is a very good answer."

With his left hand, the one missing half of each of four fingers, he pats the leather gently. He thinks if he had had children, this is the way he would have touched them. He heads home for lunch. On either side of the road is the pasture and flood plain that a few years back filled up with useless and floating sandbags and cattle and children's bigwheels. That was a sparse year for the tug boats. There to his left is the Conoco station where people travelling from St. Louis to Iowa City or Minneapolis stop and drink bad coffee and eat sweet rolls. There to his right is Ayres Plumbing with its industrial tin siding that has been repainted blue and green and tan over the years to hide the fact that it is just industrial siding. He worked in that building until he moved to St. Louis to try to be with his wife. It was green then. And there behind it, bordering the flood plain, is the house they lived in before she left. In the entry hall she had hung during the last years of their life together a Leonard Freed photograph of two cats walking gingerly, cautiously towards each other in a bare Naples alley full of buildings that dwarfed them. She always stopped before the print,

Covington's wife did, when he was within ear-shot to exclaim, "That's just like us before we met, honey, and who knows if they're going to fight or fuck."

Her language troubled him. For many years he assumed she so easily used words like fuck because she came from the brownstones of St. Louis, but after a while he became uncertain, and came so easily to take it as his own. When Leonard Freed published the photograph and she had an exhibit with him, they would indeed fuck every so often after she said that, and the sex was angry and long, as if only then, Abel Covington thought, they could release their varied and multiple fears or lonelinesses or anxieties or all these things together, whatever that would be, upon each other and be content to simply ravage.

The structure of the house there behind Ayres is not like most of the other light colored houses with their simple front porches and panelled exteriors. Covington on his Honda glances over at it now and is glad he no longer lives there. He always believed the Mansard roof that came down to within four feet of the ground made the house look more like an unfinished box than anything else. But she wanted to be near the river, and he worked next door.

He rides up Fifth Avenue to his upstairs apartment. The children of the couple that owns the house are playing football in the front yard. Their tackling in the soft and freshly cut grass upsets cities of tiny insects which twirl endlessly in the afternoon light. They nod to Abel Covington disinterestedly. In his room are his bed, a table, two large windows facing west, the small kitchen with its

two-burner stove. He almost knocks a small sculpture from the sill. He steadies it and runs a hand up its rough patinated surface. Stepping back, he sees, barely, the almost human figures twist round one another. In the kitchen he hoists himself up on the lone counter. Today is Friday, and like all Fridays since the end of the war, he eats Gifelte fish.

The first time he ate Gifelte fish, he had come to St. Louis to join the ranks of women and older men and young boys who built the war machine of America. In a plant that would later be the headquarters of McDonnell-Douglas he met his future wife while she riveted two curved pieces of re-inforced metal into the wing of a B-17. He watched the huge thing create itself like some sword of gods and archangels, appearing out of what had looked merely sheets of tin in the smoke and sparks and sharply slanted light of the factory. And from afar he watched the sprite playing fire along its edges. He was not working that day. After she climbed down, he asked her, shyly, he remembers now, and making certain to look in her eyes for fear of staring at her breasts, if he could buy her a cup of coffee. She smiled, he remembers too, and her dark pewtered lips snuck a parabola into her cheeks. He asked what she was doing just then. She said, "I'm building planes to bomb that shit Hitler all the way through the entire planet and watch him fall into the clouds someplace in China."

Abel Covington laughed. She said, "I want to hear him scream." He laughed more, a ginger sound that was genuinely felt but nervous. "And I want

to rip that weak little excuse for a mustache from his face." She grabbed at his sleeve and with a turn on a dime change of emotion that he would later come to expect from her, said, "I'm writing Mr. Franklin to convince him to bomb all along the eastern front, so the Germans stop killing the Jews there, will you write a letter too?" Everyone demonized hilter then, and he'd heard something about Jews on the radio, but it seemed mainly a gossip show, and he hadn't paid much attention. He looked straight into her eyes, which were strangely deep blue even against her olive skin and long swath of curly hair. He said, "I'm sure Mr. Franklin has a plan to win the war."

She looked back, suspiciously. She said, "Which one?"

He had no answer for that. Still, they went for coffee. They walked all the way to Grand Avenue through Forest Park to listen to jazz. They wrote letters to the President he repeating what she said to type. They ate the sickly-pale lumps of stringy gifelte fish from a jar. He gagged. She said, don't you like gifelte fish. He said, I like pork chops. She said, You'll get over it. They danced to no music in a flat on North Court, hitting the floor loudly with their workboots, caring not a bit about whom they might wake up in those quiet and steamy nights in summer during the war. She confided that her parents owned the building. They had sex. It was such an easy antural thing for her, pulling him on the bed. They danced and ate more gifelte fish. They had sex. They flew through the streets of Central-West End with all its brownstones and newstands, stopping only to kiss under each unlit streetlamp.

In Canton, Missouri, Covington rises from his table and rinses his plate in the sink. He washes the remains of the meal from the surfaces of porcelain and like a child clumsily imitating his father, fumbles with the buttons of his shirt until it is undone. The world is flat to him, he determines dimension and depth only through shadow and touch and memory. He watches his left hand with its short and scarred remnants of fingers reach out to touch the knob for hot water and screw it on. Steam rises. He bends slowly into its twirling and tangled mists and throws the water upon his chest. The heat of this ritual never ceases to amaze him. He feels the blood shocked to his skin, the brief sensation of what might be touch in the stubs of his hand. The water rivulets down his chest, over his bare and hairless head, across his back. He feels the water like floods after rain find the same paths in the crevices of his body, running through them under his pants, through the cleft of his ass, down the inside of his legs, into his boots. He is an old man in a mystery of steam. He throws the water against his skin again and again, until he is soaked, and walks to the window to see the day, drops hanging from his chest hair glinting like a myriad of solarized dagger points .

Covington is old now, and though he has not had sex or even had much of an erection for years, he remembers vividly sex with his wife. During the war they would meet on Wednesday and Friday nights and spend part of Saturday together. She would say, "It's nice to have sex on Shabbat." He would try not to look at her as if she were speaking some foreign tongue. He remembers the

burning torture of waking up beside her and not reaching over to wake her, the urge to move with her, through her, the desire, the necessity even, to somehow pull his entire body past the lace sheets around her own, past the long shirt she slept in, and squeeze it inside her mouth or chest or pubis. He imagined often while they had sex that his entire being left into her and that finally they inhabited the same flesh with all its blood and heat. Once she was on the floor nude and waving her ass at him. He crawled to her and held her there on her knees. She thrust and ground back against him. They moved at an almost unimaginable speed, he thought later. He placed his hands around her face. She licked his fingers, took them into her mouth. He arched over her back and bit her face, wanting so desperately to claw, finally, underneath her very skin with his teeth.

One night he asked her how she imagined sex. She was straddled over him, her hands on his shoulders, breathing, smiling down towards his face. She looked up at the ceiling of the flat on North Avenue, apparently looking for an answer as if it might be carved in ruins by some ancient knife in the rouged cove deeply gutted by shadows. She dropped to her elbows, her face not a half foot from his own, her hair draped across his brow, the smell of sex over her forearms. "It's like," she said, "it's like walking through a garden or a field all wet with rain. And each drop of water that touches you, and each leaf and piece of grass that touches you, they, they tell you where you are, they define your body for you."

He had no real reckoning of what she meant. He asked her, "Do you like sex with me?"

She smiled and kissed him, the lips an emissary of her body. "I've found nothing in the world I like better," she said. She pulled off him and onto all fours, arching over him like a bridge, and began kissing the rough ridge under his jaw, the hollow below his Adam's Apple, his sternum, his belly. She looked at him blankly, in mock seriousness, said, "And we're not done."

He leaves the window, water drying on his chest. He picks up his catalogue of tugs. In the afternoon he will study. He puts it in his saddle bag and pats the leather once again. The wind is cold against his wet legs as he rides down to the river. The smells of fish and gasoline mix around and attach to him, even through the movement of the Honda. A group of teen-agers is painting the tin siding of Ayres plumbing grey, and he smiles now that they are finally admitting what kind of place it really is. At the lock and dam, he uses his binoculars to scan up north towards the island in the Mississippi where she bends west, checking for tows he might have missed while at lunch. In front of him, in the lock, a crew is tying barges of wheat together. The captain of the Clemens III must steam forward slowly. He only has one foot of clearance. The gates open halfway to level the water of the lock with that of the rest of the river. A man with a huge wench attached to a rope end as thick as an arm is calling out numbers through a hand-held radio to the captain. The two sections of barges bump silently. The man with the wench begins to tie them together.

Covington looks on as if within their movements are contained some secret of the world.

After those nights in St. Louis, they woke to all things blue and yellow and wished for breeze feathering through the windows, a scent of cool before sun. Covington would rise, or she would rise, and patter, sleepy silent ducks, to the bath to catch water in a washcloth. They tickled wet, wiped away the night's sweat or saliva from cheeks and lips, necks and stomach. These are the moments Covington thinks he remembers most fondly now, those mornings before the long work watching tiny streams slide over skin, separate, stream, pool, mingle, disappear, and then stream again with a new twist of the rag. In summers the heat beat them all, and the city seemed to sigh in a collective prayer for the end of rationing and the end of humidity. They did not pray. They worked, sweated, and came home to each other. One morning, relaxed and wet and half asleep, Covington said, "When I was a kid, and we played ball, and I was good at ball, sometimes I would get a hard grounder to my right, and I'd have to jump over there, lurch in a way, and I learned to just flip the ball up out of my glove just as I jumped to throw, and I began to throw before I even caught the ball, and when I did that, and it worked, I thought there wasn't a better feeling in the world, but I was wrong."

She just looked at him from the bed. "Are you talking about me, now?"

"Well, yea, I guess so. I am."

"So I'm better than...baseball. Well, Abel, I think that might be the most romantic thing anyone's ever said."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"No, darling, I do mean it. And I don't mean the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me. I mean in the history of the world, that is THE most romantic thing."

"Oh, come now."

She got up, arched her back, first convex then concave, and walked to the window overlooking North Ave. "Ohcomenow what? Now there's a handsome man. I wonder how he can stand to wear that suit, where did he get the suit even, I wonder if he would say those romantic things about baseball?"

"Alright, you win."

She turned back to him. "I win?" She walked back to him, naked. She said, "Good. You win, too." She kissed him.

He said, "But if I - if we, maybe - had children, I would teach them baseball." She pulled back to a foot or so from his face. "If you want to teach your children baseball, you better start looking for a wife."

"Oh, I thought... It was just that I was thinking -"

"That we'd be together? Well, of course we could, if you ask, but we will never have kids."

"Um, do you hate baseball that much?"

"No, I don't give a damn about baseball one way or the other. I just couldn't have kids with you. They wouldn't be Jewish, and I won't have kids who aren't Jewish."

I don't really care about that. We could have Jewish kids."

"It doesn't really matter what you care. They wouldn't really be Jewish, raised by a Jewish family. I don't want to do that. Don't worry. If you ever get the nerve up to marry me, I'd do it without hesitation. It would just mean no kids. You should know that."

"Were you ever going to tell me that."

"I was waiting, but I would have told you after I said yes."

Covington said, "Now that would have been romantic."

So, after the war ended, and after the rationing ended, he took his lover's hand in marriage, promise of no children and all. They moved to Canton at least partially because her parents spoke to her no longer after she married a gentile. She loved the house next the flood plain with the French Mansard roof. He worked as the field manager for Ayres Plumbing. They were the only full-service plumbing contractor between Hannibal and Iowa City. They bought furniture. A check in her father's handwriting with no accompanying note appeared one day in the mail. They bought sterling silver. Young men came back to the town and those surrounding and found wives and built houses and irrigated crops. Every night they ate some concoction of hers, or on Saturdays, his, and would sometimes go into Hannibal to catch a film reel, and afterwards

have sex. Some days, he would take her walking down the river, pointing out trees and fields and the people who owned them or the people with whom he had played or flirted among them. Often in those early years, he would ask her, "Am I boring you, honey?"

And she would always say the same thing. She would say, "It's wonderful, darling. This is your place. You should get to know it. Know everything about it and the people in it. It's makes you you."

He would say, "It's your place too."

"I know. Oh I know," she would laugh and then push him down into the grass and nestle against him as the sun fell once again from the vacuous sky.

They neither went to synagogue or the methodist church in which he had been raised. On some Friday nights, but certainly not all, she would light a candle, yet said nothing to him. Its light would splinter weakly in the kitchen window, furrowing out the kitchen into some shadowed, silent, reverent place. They often went to a show on Fridays. "A comedy, my love, I want to see something funny tonight," she said. He had thought it very brave and righteous to bring back a Jewish wife to Canton, Missouri, but no one much seemed to care. No one seemed to notice that he had finally gotten married at all. He had stopped going to church when he was a child, the year the pastor told him Moses and Noah were not actually in heaven, but in a kind of easy-going hell called purgatory. No church and all, Rogers Hornsby still hit .424 that year.

Covington walked home once to find his wife in the shed melting metal. He stood outside the door and watched. Smeared black across her cheeks and arms, dark glasses tight across her eyes, his wife scrunched over cut slices of lead pipe she welded with her tools from the war. She clamped two circles together so they touched only at tangent points and torched them there. She studied them for a while and then clamped another circle down to the others and torched the new contact. On she went until she felt her husband's shadow across the thick air, or perhaps she could smell him even through the seared dust, but suddenly she turned to him. She stopped. "O," she said.

"Hello."

"What are you doing?"

"Watching you. What are you doing?"

"O, just playing I guess."

"Looks like you're making something."

She looked down to where her toe was drawing something in the dirt.

"Are you mad?" she asked.

"Why would I be mad?"

"Um, I don't know, I just thought, I don't know." She finished her dirt drawing.

Covington asked, "are you having fun?"

"Look," she said. With both hands she grasped her concoction and held it high, a child with a trophy. "Do you like it?"

Years later he would be reminded of this, her first sculpture, when he saw the Pillsbury doughboy. To him, what she held in her hands looked like a stick figure drawn in circles.

"Are you having fun?" he asked again.

She would have none of it. "Come on, Abel," she said. "Do you like it?"

He said, "I don't think I'd ever a thought about doing that with pipe."

"But do you like it?"

"Yes," he said.

"Great." She put her work on the table and ran to her husband.

Later, naked and tired in bed, she grew suspicious. She propped herself up and turned to Covington. "You lied to me today."

"What? I didn't lie to you about anything."

"No, you lied to me. But you did it because you love me."

"No I d-"

"Shut up, Covington." She laid her head upon his chest and placed her hand in his. "It's alright. I'll forgive you."

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur came for years and then went and he waited for his wife to make some signal that she might like to go somewhere for the Holy Days, but that signal was long in coming. One moist May afternoon, she got hold of some photos sent in the mail of thousands of dead bodies being buried in Poland. She cried in the bathroom for two days. He pissed outside in

the garden. The wind frequently sprayed the stream into his leg and he would try not to become angry. On the third day, he walked to Ayres Plumbing to tell them he would be taking the rest of the week off. They were not happy. He told them to fire him, then, which in the end they could not. Back at the house he silently undid the lock of the bathroom door, a pantomime with screwdriver. Inside she lay huddled in the corner behind the toilet, her face blotched red and speckled with dried food, vomit covering her grey linen blouse and the toilet seat and the ends of her hair, the photographs clenched into something resembling old and grotesque candy wrappers in her hands. She was shivering, perhaps dry-heaving. "I-, I-, I-, I-," she stammered to his boots as he stopped in front of her.

He said, "O honey."

"I-, I-, I-, I-," she said.

He said, "I know. I know."

"No you don't. You don't know," she said. He bent down and pulled her to him. He placed her head against his neck and chest. Bile and tears slimed his skin. He held her tight. She cried a long while and then was silent and then finally nestled up to him and they lay together against the claw tub in the sharp rays of afternoon. Her mouth was soft against the firm curve of his neck, but her eyes looked right through him and the bathroom and sun into another world altogether. "You don't know," she said. She said, "I love you, but you don't know."

Stan Musial hit .376 with thirty-nine home runs and 135 rbi the next season, and Israel was officially sanctioned as a nation. The day they heard the latter, she went to the kitchen and made challah and grilled steaks. She lit a candle, and as Covington watched, she waved both her hands over its flame in slow and vaguely circular motions, coaxing its fumes into her face and speaking to it in a tongue he did not understand. He felt her staggering through the verses, whatever they were, and distinctly heard her stumble and then start over, but eventually she seemed satisfied with what had been said and stopped speaking. She walked over to him in the flickering darkness of the doorway, took his hand. He walked with her to the table. She picked up the challah and presented one end for him to hold. "Baruch ata Adonai," she said, "Aluchenu m'lech a'alom." She said other things, but he was not able to make out the sounds. She broke the bread and ate a piece and he followed. It was sweet and eggy and hearty. He loved it. He asked if he could have more. She said, "Of course, darling." She said, "have all you want." And it was only at this moment, when invited to participate in her ceremony, when she was celebrating something he could only be happy about for her, when she baked the loaf of challah and said her prayers and pulled him out of the doorway, that he realized how he could be a stranger even in his own house.

"Eat," she said. He looked at the food in front of him, but was afraid. He felt as if he were being tempted by some forbidden sweets and that as soon as he began to partake of them, some angry and unknown parent would come in

to scold him mercilessly. "Eat," she said, and took his knife and fork into her own hands and cut his meat and placed it there, warm and running with juice, on his tongue.

That night they had sex many times. She pushed him against the wall of their bedroom and crawled up his naked skin. She pulled her nails through the thinning hair of his scalp. She said into his ear, "I'm going to fuck you." He felt, almost, as if he could dissolve right into her and her words. Much later he asked her if she had felt the same way. She said, "I told you, darling, even before we were married, I don't see it that way. It doesn't make me us, it makes me me."

One night when fireflies lit the world for love and the river smelled strangely of lilacs, Abel Covington awoke with a start to his wife's absence. He searched the house for her and then followed the footsteps in the dewed grass. She had picked the man of circles out of the dust and bolted him to a thick plate of stainless steel. With a scrapeflint she lit her torch and turned it on the figure. Covington stood barefoot in the yard and watched the only light in Canton heat lead. The circles reddened and then turned bluish star white and then became lost in their own fluid. The figure dripped down on itself. She removed the arms, let the head and torso fill solid and gaunt. Impurities sparked up and flamed out and still she kept the torch close, her hand blistering. Something was happening here, Covington knew, and something

told him not to enter. He sat outside the door and listened to the torch's hiss turn the circle man into a metal shadow of something vaguely human. At some point, his wife apparently satisfied, the torch stopped and he watched the ember glow in the shed's middle fade slowly, slowly into nothing. His wife shook him awake in the wet grass.

"Come on, now, honey," she said. "Let's go to bed. You'll get sick."

"What about you?"

"I'm fine."

"I just got up and you were gone and ."

"I know. I know. I'll try to do my sculpture when you're at work."

Sculpture, he thought, and fell asleep.

He had tried to get rid of the photographs from Poland. Each time, she stubbornly refused. They remained for a while hidden among the clothes of her chest of drawers and then were stuck up like portraits of ghoulish and unwanted relatives inside the door of her armoire and then finally came to rest, crumpled and still stained with bits of bile, on her vanity table. The images unnerved him everyday. To Covington, keeping those photographs there was an act of inflicted torture. Sometimes he lay in bed dreading the simple movement of getting out and heading for the bath, for he imagined the dead bodies stark in their black and white graves visible and glowing even in the pitch of night. Sometimes he caught himself looking at them, each filled with

just imaginable and therefore horrific numbers of harsh and brittle legs and arms and sharp and starving pelvises and heads frozen each and every one into what could only be an agonizing love and anticipation of death. She came up behind him once as he stared at them. She placed a hand on his shoulder. He said, loudly, "Why the fuck can't we throw these away."

"Have you ever wondered why you're here?" she said. "Have you ever wondered why you were born in this place with this face, with these friends and relatives? Why not someplace else, why not Egypt or France or some communist country?"

He said, "I guess so."

"My grandfather took his family, including my mother, away from Hungary the year you were born. Not a day goes by I don't wonder what if I was born there, why I'm not one of those people gassed and buried with bulldozers."

He turned to his wife, pulled her to him. "I'm thankful you weren't."

Into the flannel of his shirt, she said, "That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"I can't just forget it."

"Look, you're letting all those horrible people kill you too. You can't give them that. You've got to have a life. Those photographs just sit there hurting you. Don't you remember? You were practically drowning in your own vomit when I broke into the bathroom that day."

After that, she stepped back from him and looked at her shoes. She looked up after a moment and touched his face with her bandaged hand. "I do have a life, it's just-"

"Just what?"

"It's just, it's just I can't simply have a life in spite of all that, as if you could forget it; I have to have life that ... that lives with it.

"How do you that?"

"I don't know, really."

"Well, tell me when you find out."

A bird lights upon the swinging bench where Covington sits in Canton, Missouri, counting boats. Its feathers shimmer deep navy in the afternoon, highlighting a separate geography entire in the forest of their tiny twills. He smiles. The bird steps closer. It nods quickly, almost robotically, at his shoulder. He says, "I have nothing to feed you today old man." The bird chirps once, either in warning or response, he is not sure. Although he has lived a lifetime here along the western banks of the Mississippi, the first time he truly noticed the birds was during the flood. Water was everywhere, muddy and filled with sewage and trash and dead and dying fish. There were no tugs coming up or down the river. Only he and a few others, who had been there their whole lives and knew every tree and rise and bluff, could determine where the river was anyway, underneath all that water. The mayor of Canton, who

owns the room where Abel Covington lives, and lives himself downstairs, was at a complete and utter loss for action after the sandbag levy broke. Covington, in his boots and blue shirt with the difficult button, waded down the stairs and swam down Fifth Avenue, down past Ayres plumbing, down to Freddy's ferry. His wife had long ago made her pilgrimage to Israel, where she saw old men with numbers scarred into their arms board the busses and sit, silently. The rain spattered into the vast water through which he crawled and stung his one good eye. The currents fought with each other for direction, fought to determine which would be the one to pull him under, and he swam on. At Freddy's ferry, he climbed, exhausted and babbling, above the brown and shimmering water that stretched towards forever into the upper foliage of an elm that rose a lone and miraculous mountain there in that savannah of flood waters. His movement among the branches disturbed a flock of birds that took flight filling the sky with their blurred motion. They flew westward to another tree and there other birds joined them. And so they went, their number growing ever larger until they took up the entire grey sky, quick and dark and angelic in their silent flight, in the insane curvature of their turns, flying west seeking some beginning of the solid earth they once knew. Covington watched, silent and now still, until they disappeared. Eventually he moved. He forced out one of the row boats that Freddy rented from the upper reaches of the elm and rowed back through town, stopping at houses along the way to pick up children

perched on rooftops and take them to the highway, where the National Guard had bigger and faster boats to take them to dry land.

It was not a condition of their love that he love her work, but one night after she'd barely talked during a date in Hannibal, he thought he'd ask a few questions about sculpture.

"How come everything you do now is so tall and thin?"

"I don't know, really, why do you ask?"

"You think it's pretty?"

"I guess so."

"You want me to be more tall and thin?"

"No, not at all," his wife laughed. "I think you look great."

"Good, because I don't want to go round with no arms like those things."

She picked at the meat she'd forgotten she'd ordered. "I'm trying I think to see how much you can take away and still have a man."

"Doesn't seem you can have a man without a face."

"Why do you say that?"

"A man's face tells you where he's been, what he does, what kind of people he's from. Take all that away and you don't have much else."

"Hmm. Maybe you're right. Maybe you should try it. See what you'd come up with."

"I'm fine being a plumber."

She smiled.

"Still," he said, "there's something to them."

"You're cute," she said but did not touch her meal.

Around the time boys too young to fight the big war went off to the one in Korea, Covington's wife received in the mail a large check from her father's estate and bought her husband his first motorcycle. It was a black and chrome Motto Guzzi 750 with racing mufflers, sleek and loud. She said, "Now you can ride around to all your favorite places in style."

He said, "Won't you come with me, honey?"

For a while she did. They learned to handle the clutch and the six-speed transmission and the accelerator together, with the help of a young man in town who had driven one similar in North Africa before his arm was torn off by a mine. They would race down roads next to the Mississippi, through fields, stop under trees and have picnics. They flirted on those drives like teen-agers on vacation, like strangers in strange lands. They looked very good together on the Motto Guzzi, a weathered middle age man with his greying hair cut short, and his dark and full-breasted wife.

Eventually, though, her trips with him through the lands of Northern Missouri became infrequent and then non-existent. On Friday afternoons, she would drive to St. Louis to participate in the various ceremonies of Shabbat, baking a loaf of challah for him before she left. Other days she worked on

various sculptures that now had overrun the shed and scattered across the yard. He toured the various roads of the country in style and alone, trying to learn more of the topography and the slowly dying farmers who inhabited it. He would often stop under a tree and study each leaf among the shade. For months he thought them incredibly romantic, these lone trips through the countryside of the heartland of the country, and then he did not. When he saw lots being bought up thousands of acres at a time, and little signs on each hundredth row of corn pronouncing "AGB Hybrid 132," he recognized that these were just fields, the dirt simply soil more or less like any other, the river a body of water that reached throughout most of the continent and had as many different personalities as the people looking at it. There were a thousand beautiful countries scattered across the globe; this one was just his. He told his wife of his feelings. She smiled broadly, the parabola creating wrinkles in her cheeks. She said, "Try riding in the rain."

He said, "Don't you think that's a bit dangerous?"

"The last thing in the world I want is for you to die," she said. "But living is dangerous."

"That's a dumb thing to say."

"Then don't do it."

"Why don't you come with me?"

"I spend most of my waking hours for you. We don't have to do everything together. We can have our own interests, right?"

"Of course."

"So, I got that bike so you could ride. I prefer my own time while you're on it."

"Still."

"Still what?"

After rains and during rains he would ride, and did indeed love it. He anticipated each curve and oil slick and gravel wash. The water burned his face and in that wet fire the world was born to him anew. The Motto Guzzi throbbed beneath him, and the Mississippi and the fields and trees and rises appeared to him a freshly painted landscape, and he raced through it. His wife laughed at him in his grimed clothes whenever he returned. Once she came out of the shed and hosed him down where he stood in the yard, fully dressed, the mud broken up and coursing down his trousers. She bought him a leather saddle bag to keep a notebook of his observations in.

During the High Holy Days and Passover, he would travel to St. Louis with her. Those days, the conservative synagogue she chose to attend was packed, although she seemed to know most everyone. Covington had seen nothing like those ceremonies. He had thought that they would be more or less like church, if he could remember what that was like, just in a foreign language, rather like Catholic mass. But it was not like church at all. Not only was most

of the service in Hebrew, it was sung, and the rabbi said very little. All those people there, not to hear preaching, but to bellow out syllables which had no meaning for him, and maybe had little meaning for them, except for the fact they could all sing them.

One holiday, his wife was asked along with a few men to read from the Torah. The rabbi brought it down from its elegant perch behind the pulpit and removed it from the hand knitted sheath. She'd been practicing her Hebrew with him. Covington was very proud. He closed his eyes and listened to her foreign words drift out over the congregation, trying not think of all the faces he imagined were staring at him. She had become quite well known, his wife. There was talk of buying her sculpture for the synagogue, maybe even sending a piece to Israel. She pushed for the institution of female cantors and rabbis. She complained, "If a woman can lead the homeland of the Jews, why can't she lead a service?" Twice yearly, Abel Covington sent a check for \$360 in his wife's name to the B'Nai Brith of St. Louis.

The rabbi arranged for her to have a small showing during a Leonard Freed exhibit. When they met him and bought one of his photographs, they had come to live different lives entirely, although he held secret wishes still that they could once more drop their lives and be only with each other in a world populated by people they neither needed nor cared to know. He wanted once again the opportunity to try to melt into her body. They each were sympathetic to the various small defeats of the other's daily life, but they did not share.

More and more, they walked around the house sulking like scorned lovers, fighting over issues that seemed at once trivial and all-encompassing, making things up to be mad.

Once, during a fight over dirty dishes, Covington stopped and asked, "Is it because I'm not more involved in your sculpture?"

"My sculpture?"

"Yes."

"No. This has nothing to do with me being a sculptor. I don't care about that."

"Are you having sex with the rabbi?"

"What?! How can you say that? He's the rabbi."

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"You spend all your time with him. He gets you shows. I don't know."

"But he's the rabbi!"

"So."

"Abel, fuck you. Can't I have a life without you thinking I'm having an affair?"

Covington walked into the entry hall and sat down. "We don't have sex anymore."

"We have sex."

"Not like we used to."

"We're getting old, that's all."

"So it's my fault."

The absurdity of his reponse must have touched her. She walked to him and sat on his lap and kissed his cheek. She pointed to the large black and white photograph over his head, said, "that's just like us before we met, honey, and who knows if they're going to fight or fuck." She led him to the bedroom. But afterwards, still angry somehow, Covington felt no closer. He turned to his wife to talk but her look told him, whatever his problem might be, discussing it wouldn't help. He turned and fell asleep as she stared out the window.

After a time, she left. On her note she wrote, "Walk in your fields." Two nights afterward, he left for St. Louis on his Motto Guzzi to look for her. It was a desperate and stupid thing to do, he knew then, and knows now, although he does not blame himself. To this day, he feels there is no melodrama in acts of love. The stars jostled across the firmament in time to the vibrations of his cycle. The sky and world were so dark then, he determined where the horizon was only by the fact that it was a blackness that contained no such vibrating stars. In St. Louis he took up a furnished room in a motel and paid rent once a week. He looked up her family in the phone directory, searched the streets of Central-West End for apartments she might be living in. He stopped at corners where there had once been streetlamps he kissed his wife under, and stared for a long time at the neighborhood scenes unfolding, as if she might separate

from the crowd and float to him. He went to the conservative synagogue on Friday evenings, waiting for her. She did not come. After two weeks, he took up a job on a construction crew remodeling houses around Washington University. He worked ten and twelve hour days and walked the streets all night looking for her, or for nothing. At the job, he passed the time away with jokes of all colors that kept his co-workers in stitches. At home, he would stare at the ceiling. He bought a dictionary of Hebrew expressions, and read through it in the pre-dawn hours. He never felt tired. He could never sleep.

On Rosh Hashanah of that year Covington caught his wife entering the Hillel building with a crowd of students. He walked behind her quickly and then slid his arm into hers. It felt so natural hooked around her elbow, his arm did, so comfortable, and perhaps she felt the same way, for they took three or four steps together before she suddenly turned to face her husband. She sucked her lips back into her mouth as she looked into his face, then turned to the ground. She said, "No."

"No what, why are you leaving me?"

"I'm not leaving you. I'm letting you be."

"You're mincing words."

"Important words."

"Important words? What the hell is that? You leave and write - as if in some code - 'walk in your fields' and you talk about important words."

"I wanted to write more, write everything, but the words, please understand, they just couldn't do it justice. I tried."

"You tried? I tell you, all those times we lay in our bed and I washed you, dripped water all over your body to keep you cool, I was trying . . . I was trying to wash away every separation of the night, of the week, of every moment we were not together."

She looked around at the Jewish students walking past them. She looked west to the last colors of the sinking sun. He stared at a dog in the crowd moving frantically past people's legs, wagging its tail. She said, "I know." She said, "Darling." She said, "Abel Covington, I remember everything, even the way on that first day you fidgeted so shy, even though it's such a simple thing, asking a woman for coffee, and even though you fidgeted you looked so straight and bold even into my eyes and didn't look away. For my people, this is a new beginning. I have to do things and you can't come with me."

"This is America. I can do whatever the fuck I want."

"You can't just become somebody else. I've tried it."

She took his hand in his. She reached up and kissed both of his cheeks and turned and walked towards the open door behind them. He called out her name. She turned. He said, because he'd been practicing and because there was nothing else to say, "L'shana tovah." He could see the one drop of water run down the side of her nose, race quickly over her lips, drop to the ground

from her chin. She said something, but it was lost in the moving and mumbling crowd. He would like to think now she mouthed the words, "Thank you."

The next day, while the diaspora was celebrating the new year, he drank himself into a rage. When the bars closed in Missouri, he rode across the Mississippi to Illinois and drank more there. On the streets of East St. Louis at five in the morning, prostitutes approached him as he walked in the suit he had donned for the holiday. They said, "Did you come over for a good time, big boy?" He hissed and spit at them shamelessly. He searched for his motorcycle until dawn came, but never could find it. He walked across the bridge and through downtown and towards Washington University. The rising sun made him sweat, and that felt good.

At work, he took off his suit jacket and his white oxford shirt and went to work on the sixteen foot scaffolding. He and two other men were putting in a tongue and groove ceiling. It was difficult to see. His hands kept disappearing from his vision, and then his vision would disappear altogether. He went to the edge of the railing and vomited. His co-workers laughed at him. They said, "Abel's just learning to have a good time." They said, "Aren't you a little old, old man, to start drinking." The foreman yelled at them. He said, "Drunk on Monday. Drunk on Friday. I pay for five days and get three. What the shit is up with that?" Covington said nothing. He stuck a screwdriver into a joist overhead to try to pry together two warped siding boards. His hands were disappearing. When he pushed, the screwdriver slipped and then he lost his

balance and then he was falling, taking the tool with him. He fell through a board someone was ripping with a circle saw. The mahogany bent and split easily beneath his weight. He landed with his right hand shielding his face from the floor, and the screwdriver he held tightly there tore through his eye and ruined whatever nerve endings were behind it. He bounced and broke most of his ribs. He felt one ripping into his lungs in exquisite slow-motion agony. The power saw that had once been on the board he shattered came to a rest on his left hand and stopped spinning only after most of his fingers had been spliced and scattered across the concrete slab.

Covington screamed and kept on screaming, and with each breath, the bloody hasping pain in his lungs grew larger. Men rushed up to his sprawled and broken form and debated what to do. Hands touched him everywhere, turned him over, and still he screamed on. He screamed until they backed away and looked upon him in agony themselves, and in confusion. It seemed to them that they no longer heard Abel Covington, but some different entity entirely, yelling there on the unfinished floor. They wanted it to go away. They wanted it to stop screaming. When the ambulance finally arrived, the men wandered shocked and quiet and relieved, unable to answer but the most basic of the paramedics' questions.

Doctors operated on Covington four times, and eventually he lived. Labor unions were still strong in those days in St. Louis, Missouri, and the one Covington had joined to work on the crew made sure the company paid for

everything. He went through physical therapy. It took a long time to re-envision the world as one without depth. He went home to Canton and lived on his disability pay and savings. Every year around September he drank himself into a good stupor. There are whole months he does not remember.

One day he woke up next to the river. He pulled himself up slowly from the asphalt parking lot of the Army Corps of Engineering building and coughed up bile and counted boats. He came back the next day. He has come most every day since. With the notebook his wife bought him and with others he has bought since, he records every motion in the water. Sometimes when no tugs are in the lock he sketches with his one hand. Birds fly all around. He searches his bag for photos of the lock and dam and remembers he gave his last three away to the little girls from Minnesota this morning. He writes down, "Copy more pictures." He stands and walks down the chain-link fence to the edge of the Mississippi. His feet easily fit the creviced rocks of the river banks and root themselves there. The Darby Ferry has still not come. He thinks outloud, "Too bad. That Mazatlan would be good for talk or two. Maybe he likes baseball. He thinks, "maybe I'll invite him down for coffee when I see him next, point out his boat's picture in the book. He'd get a laugh out of that." A breeze strikes up and in that wind he bends over the water to see his world held within its surface. He sees the elms towering over his head, the fields that come right up the river, the lock and dam with its moveable crane rising high into the sky. It is nothing really, just a river and some rolling hills, just some

fields owned by companies he does not know and a lot of concrete poured into the water to regulate its level. It is nothing really, and he knows it, but it is his. In the smooth plane of the water undisturbed by passing boats and barges this moment, he sees his pale face with its sun-burnt sides and forehead, and he sees behind him the last remnants of the day itself dropping once again from the sky, leaving all the world captured there in its own shadowed beauty.

On the Anniversary of the Death of a Beloved Environmentalist

Last night, between clips of men killed
 hugging black trees,
I watched players in swirling
 silver and blue
beat each other with sticks. Men
 around me
snortled and cheered. Thud,
 went our glasses.
Once, on a night like that, a woman
 I'd mooned for months
told me her horrors of high
 school sex,
then took me to bed. I thought us
 close, but no,
she was drunk and lonely, and I,
 apparently, am a boy
who likes vulnerable girls.
 Indifferent rain
shook me cold and chattering
 like sewing machines
strewn along these streets.
 It's a joke, almost,
what we give, what we take.
 This morning,
I entered the world trembling
 to my fat cat
licking red from his whiskers,
 crying love.
The bag lady at the corner shouted Green,
 Green, to her sleep.
At the Bakery, coffee cost half as much
 for twic more,
if you brought your own mug.
 I moaned, my need
so apparent, and counted
 dear change.
This is what happens,
 my cup winked,
when the world is saved.

Jailhouse Rock

Theodore I hear you have blood in your piss
again. Lots of it. Lord we drank our bit back then.
Martha came by here this Wednesday last and told me.
We fought through the plexiglass. Damned
cubicles are so small. I wish I could of just held her hand,
said, Sorry. She's a good woman. Remember those
marks we dug into that old elm by the sinkhole
for each girl? I was always inventing names to catch up.
I guess there won't be anybody in the basement to say,
This is where we grew pot for us and the kids,
no one in the kitchen to recall Chris and Joe
bouncing their big brown bellies over enchiladas
they'd cook after we took apart each new car,
no one to say, This is where we hid dead quiet
next to the creek with all the stereos
in the van, watching the deer come, our first customers.
Lawyer says I could maybe never get out now
that the man I hit in the cafeteria died.
Motherless short eyes, they oughtn't never to let him
dine with us men. Theodore, do not worry.
They treat me alright here. Guards hated that boy
much as we did. I told that damn lawyer
if he knew a chump here he could actually help
he'd best get off his ass and do it.
Martha told me the doctors told you you might
not be coming out of the hospital this time. Praise be to God
Mama's dead. I'd hate to see her see us now. Theodore,
truth be told, sometimes I stick my fingers out the bars
into the sun and wait for someone to lick them.

Blues for the Leaving

In the Village men flocked their eyes
at us and wondered. So we laughed,
bought more pitchers and kissed cheeks.
Perhaps we should have told them we weren't lovers.

Instead, we stole cars in thunderstorms,
no one caring to open doors
to the alarmed rain. You'd jimmy locks
and I'd spark wires so we could leave, cranked.

We hopped trains to Knoxville, drove U-Hauls
with Jersey tags full of straw and Sonys.
We took the great Indian with his cut smile
from under the wax Mandrell's silver stare,

and once, when we needed to, I aimed
a common kitchen knife into a carotid
while you pressed its owner to the sanded
asphalt and explained, the slightest crescent

creasing your lips, he'd best pray
no smack of his or anybody's ever
reached your sister's apartment.
Back to back, our guns blazing, thus

we had dreamed the final battle, each of us
alternately Billy the Kid or some other loyal
heroic thief of kids' stories. Together we'd destroy
this world where criminals are no longer wild.

There are no battles anymore. And you never
let me know the money on your head,
where the cars went, who gave us
the tape decks. That I would await

your bus from Boston and ask no questions
as we drank at the Village, the Iguana,
40s on the brick terrace behind the hospital
until you stopped shaking;

(stanza break)

that we each had unattainable women
we loved locked away in stalls of our minds
like prized and puzzled ponies;
that somewhere dogs attacked the blistered,

dripping moon and rejected teen-agers
crawled streets crying mothers;
that we would allow ourselves to do neither -
these were the rules.

Last night I walked past the warehouse
where once we sat, two streetside Romeos
in a beaten cathedral with our heist
of power tools and all the cash

we could not count, me laughing, you
swearing Italian at pigeons
shadowed through tall light that found
us twisting and skipping on the floor.

I saw you in the arc of a short-haired kid
and his Pall Mall, the green spark
flaming his face pale like hospital sheets
and then I could not.

I've changed my drink of choice.
I gave the keys, the picks, the credit cards
to the sewer. But never believe, Marcus,
I did not hate

as I left down tracks through the heart
of this town that has killed you,
the hail on steel screaming chorus
as I faced the oiled clouds to sing, a fool.

Dance Outside the Light

I don't take no stock in mathematics, anyway.
-Huckleberry Finn

They call me Professor, and I play the part. I wear my face with the requisite two day beard. I have round, stainless steel glasses. I fill my closets with fancy silk ties stained slightly so the world might think I'm absent-minded. As if in a film, I stand in front of my students in their ancient, revered and scribbled desks and tell them I do not make them smart, I simply help them realize how smart they already are. When their fathers come to my apartment, both they and I are dressed well. I sit them down in the rocker or on the new leather couch and offer coffee and talk of their children, what great artists they hold promise to be, what good jokes they tell, whom they are falling in love with in the halls of tenth grade. I divide and weigh and tie and offer advice about SAT's and prep schools. They send their children to the most expensive school in Tennessee. They want to hear success. Although they cut deals all day, some are nervous. I can see in the way they rock too quickly and too hard,

slowly jerking the chair towards the wall, the continual grasping and letting go of their own hands. I throw in 5 mg. valium for free.

Last week the producer of Hee Haw vomited all over my bathroom. His show was finally cancelled. He didn't know what to do. I offered herbal tea. His skin was tanned a rough orange and I thought, perhaps he takes pills for that too. I put on Sarah Vaughn. I told him his daughter was the star student of my southern History class, which she could be if she ever came. He stopped rocking so hard at this. On the way out he stood and stared a long time at a black and white photograph hanging in the hall. Many of them stare. It's a late afternoon horizon piece of sanded and scrubby hills. There's a road rolling on the left side and on the shoulder a woman walking away from the camera. She is the focus of the picture, anyone can tell, but she is small and shadowed in the sun and through the tossed grey of her sundress the light picks out her thighs. Men don't know what to do with a woman's thighs leaving. Who, he asked, is that? It's my mother, and I told him, which was a mistake. He bobbed his briefcase and dropped it. He tried to pick it up and dropped it again. He must not have locked it. The clasps popped open and out spilled among various papers an autographed glossy of Minnie Pearl and Roy Clark with the eight ball he'd just bought sitting on their faces.

More people than usual came to our weekend house outside of Sewanee on Friday. Bone was back from St. Louis with a good supply of heroin. I could hear him somewhere in the kitchen, singing Hello, Satan, I think it's time to go, at the Henckel knives I'd bought Janet. And Janet was in the basement with all the hippie boys she picked up. I don't mind when she brings new ones. I trust her judgment. Sometimes she brings a girl for me. Someone clean. They were all down there, watching re-runs of "Leave it to Beaver" with the sound off and dancing, badly as far as I could tell, to some tribal drums. Little Ed was there too, although he rarely comes to our hide-away. He had already done his blow and Bushmills and was reading Elliot, mumbling. I sometimes like to read poetry too, but not while anyone's around. Except Janet, I can read in front of Janet. There were more, I'm sure. The whole place was filled. Everyone came with an entourage. I'm a lax leader. Although noone there would admit it, they had come, and I knew it, because there had been a rumor that tonight I would really shoot up. I did everything with them, really, except needles, and somehow this kept me separate, and everyone wanted to see the night when I let Janet tie the rubber strap around my bicep and turn my veins into mercury. It was an event. The big glass table in the vaulted den was littered with diabetics' disposable needles and Janet's little leather case, everything hygienic and glittering, metal and plastic and black hide glinting. I glanced over at it. From the couch the strewn works seemed sculpture, a small city in miniature,

waiting so patiently. We are not so much junkies as good hosts. We all waited patiently.

When I met Janet and then Bone, they were nothing. I had walked into the Sweetwater one afternoon after class, still in a double-breasted wool suit, the only suit I had that fit then. The bartender was a thin and harrowed man swallowed by a Crimson Tide sweatshirt. His slender blue hands poked out of sleeves long enough to pour shots of Jaegermeister for his clientele of bikers and Vanderbilt students. He frowned at me. I did not sit at the bar. I understood that he did not like suits here, but then I had the first steady job of my life and a few decent clothes. I did not take them off. And dressing down to drink is insulting. That was three years ago, and I still had some secret aspirations of being a photographer. I spread out some photos I had taken in South Dakota and waited to get a drink. They were horrible really, pictures of old men and women in hunting caps and native shawls, but I had been paid for them. The only one I liked was an 11"x14" of a small child licking the lips of his dead dog. This I placed on top of the others and stared at for a while. I needed to redo it, burn in the dog's frozen smile, use a starker filter. I placed my hands at opposite corners of the paper, contemplated various crops. A voice above me said, That's sick.

I looked at the dog's smile a bit longer before glancing up. A waitress in baggy jeans and leather biker's jacket stared back.

Yea, I said. Maybe.

She said, I like it.

Good.

Where'd you get it?

I took it.

Are you an artist or something?

No, I said. Not really. Are you?

No way. Every fuck who comes in here wants to be an artist.

Not me.

She let just the tiniest bit of a smile show a few teeth. Someone cranked up a bike outside and its sound caught the concrete block walls and shook them slightly. She said, My name's Janet. What can I get you?

Janet, I think I'd like a pitcher of Bud to get drunk real slow on.

Anything from the tap will get you sick before it gets you drunk.

A jack and coke then, I said.

She said, a jack and coke then. When she turned and walked away, I saw HELMET plastered in large sharp letters across her jacket's back.

Later that night she approached me while I was watching a pool game. There's a man in the bathroom vomiting all over. I don't know what he's on. Do you know anything about medicine? You look like somebody who knows medicine.

I said, I don't think I need this.

She said, his vomit, it's green and pink.

I followed her towards the door marked Men. The bartender looked up at us and then down. The bathroom was small and grey and dirty. It smelled of acid and ammonia. A condom machine hung next to the door sported various scrawlings. There's no one here, I said.

He must've left. She locked the door and pulled from the inside pocket of her jacket a thin and expertly wrapped joint. Want to smoke? she asked me.

I'm an amphetamine and red wine man, myself.

She fished out a lighter and stared into my face unabashedly. I caught myself looking away from her in the mirror.

She said, Amphetamine and red wine man. You're not exactly the rich guy you make yourself out to be.

No, but I play one on TV.

I watched her light up and inhale deeply and I watched her place her lips on mine and exhale down my throat. She smiled, a long and crooked grin this

time, looked up at the ceiling all blue and then at my face all pale and said, that's good enough for me.

When two officers from the Grundy Co. Sheriff's Department came through the door on Friday night, we were still waiting. Even the cops called me Professor. I smiled. I'm not sure they meant it as a compliment, but still, I smiled. I had not heard them approach, not that we had watchdogs or lookouts. We were very relaxed out here and we had protection in Nashville. We only sold to Belle Meaders, the people who consistently voted for higher police salaries and flat taxes, and to the bikers passing through at the Sweetwater. Bone and Janet knew the bikers. The cops could plainly see the hypos and spoon and cotton on the table, the lines on the reading desk next to Little Ed. They stared into the room silently. The one in front was a slender black woman, which surprised me. Grundy had very few Blacks, and I'd never seen one with a county job. Her partner was white and short and ugly. His nose looked like it had been drawn by someone crippled with chronic muscle cramps. I stood up.

The woman looked at me and all the bookshelves. A professor? she said, raising her eyebrows.

I looked at her uniform. Grayson. They not teach you to knock at the academy, Ms. Grayson? I asked. Cops, really, should be no reason to ruin the

evening. I looked briefly at Ed. He watched us wide-eyed. He was not one to babble after snorting.

We have a warrant for the arrest of a Mr. Martyce Darrel Freedman, also known as Bone, Bonehead, and Bonecrusher, variously. We believe he's here.

Mr. Freedman seems to have a tremendous vocabulary. I could hear Bone outside on the deck behind the kitchen. I'm gonna take your woman, Satan, he sang. She'll become satisfied. I smiled again at her.

She did not smile back. Is he here?

Janet! I called. We have guests.

I looked back at Grayson. I asked, Who?

The short ugly one stopped staring at the room. He side-stepped Grayson nimbly, like a dancer I thought, and took out his gun. His nose, with its nostrils opening forward like a small set of animal eyes, was flaring. He would be the one to watch. Everyone here is under arrest, he yelled. Everyone here is under arrest!

At this point Little Ed stood up. He is 6' 8", and must keep all of 340 pounds underneath his baby skin. He is one of the largest men I've ever met, and perhaps the largest one the officer yelling had ever met either because he stopped yelling for a moment. We all listened to Elliot's Collected fall to the floor. Ed was good to have around in situations like this. Plus, he he came from four generations of lawyers.

Do you have a search warrant?

We have probable cause to enter, Grayson said. Still, she looked at her partner with a long frown. Bury my body by the highway side, I heard Bone sing to the darkness.

Ed took a step forward. The short one pointed his gun straight at him. Stop. Put your hands up, he said. I looked at his shirt.

Do you really think you can take everyone here, Mr. Rollins?

I'm calling this in.

Ed took another step. Janet came up from downstairs. She moved closer to the couch. She was wearing a long red dress with small black flowers and a biker's jacket.

Stop where you are, Rollins told her. He moved the gun to her.

I suggest we solve this like adults, I said.

Solve what? Grayson asked. She was looking at Ed. She had not taken out her gun.

How much, I asked, would our citations be?

Rollins said, We're serving a warrant for vehicular manslaughter and you've got the fucking mother lode in here. There ain't no goddam citations.

Perhaps I have not been clear. My question is, how much would these various offenses to the state cost?

Your asses in jail, is what they cost.

You've come into my house searching for a man I've never met and asked for the arrest of all my guests, here, in the county that certainly is the crime capital of all Tennessee, as if you officers had nothing better to do. Nonetheless, how much, I ask, would our citations cost. If we were to pay for them right now?

I don't understand, Rollins said.

500 dollars worth? 750 dollars worth?

I-

A thousand dollars? Two?

Rollins, Grayson said, put down your gun.

I said, Ed, perhaps Mr. Rollins and Ms. Grayson would like a drink.

I have not had sex with Janet, ever, and after that first night we haven't shown much more physical affection than kisses on the cheek and forehead. She brought me to her apartment on 31st, not four blocks away from the bar. It was old and wooden and shifting. The french doors were no longer plumb. From the many windows you could see downtown yellow and steel. She brought me red wine, Gallo, said, Sit down. I did.

She put on the Bill Evans Trio and sat down on her futon just close enough that I would have to reach to touch her. What? I asked. No Helmet? No Tool, no Danzig?

She swirled her wine and drank. You, she said, can be an ass.

Yes.

I don't go much for that rusted razor rock. That jacket, it's just for tips.

I'll drink to that.

From the looks of it, you'll drink to most anything.

Just about, I kissed her.

She said, My ex-boyfriend is getting out of the pen next week.

I said, Is he big?

Bone? He's crazy.

His name is Bone?

Yes.

Do you like him?

Well, he scores, she said and kissed me. Then she took my wine glass out of my hand. I thought she would lead me to her bedroom, but instead she took the wine and poured it slowly over my head. I felt it slide like quick, cold snakes over my ears and under my collar, into my jacket.

This, I said, is not a cheap suit.

Rich guy on TV, she said.

OK, OK. So I took her glass and tossed its wine right into her chest.

Good, very good.

In the kitchen we kissed and poured the remaining contents of the wine jug over our heads, fighting with our hands over which direction it should rain while our lips locked. When it was empty she pushed me hard into the refrigerator. I turned and opened the door and pulled out a half gallon of milk. I grabbed her and held her close and gnawed gently on her neck while pouring milk generously into her hair. Our stumbling, troubled feet slogged back and forth in what must have seemed a grotesque pool of blood and curdled cream. Then she reached for the beer.

In the bedroom she crawled clothed and soaked beneath the covers, and I crawled on top of her, bedclothes strangled between us. After what seemed an appropriate time, I peeled back the stained sheet and began to unbutton her shirt. She stopped. She put her hand on mine. She said, I don't think I want to screw you.

I said, You don't think you want to screw me?

She turned her face into folds of pillow for a moment and then looked back at me. No, she said, I know I don't want to screw you.

I said, huh.

Are you pissed?

Can I ask why?

You know that's none of your business.

It's my nose, isn't it? My bigass broken nose. You know, when I was a kid, I had of those perfect little ski slope noses. Now, I try to wear the right clothes, say the right things, but my damn nose gets in the way.

You think I'm not having sex with you because of your nose?

Well-

There's nothing wrong with your nose. I like it, I like it alot actually, now that I think about it. What? Some cheerleader in highschool laugh at you when you ask her to the prom, so you got an issue about your nose?

No, I think having it broken twice gave me an issue about my nose.

You had your nose broken? Twice? Rich guys on TV don't have their noses broken.

I know. Believe me, I know.

She said, Look, you're cute, different anyway, and for reasons that really aren't your concern I've been out of the scene awhile and I thought I could use you to get back in. Now I don't want to.

OK, no more questions.

She said, I know you're worried about that suit, can't pick up chicks without the threads. There's Woolite in the bathroom, and a robe you can put on. If you soak it now in the tub while everything's still wet, the drycleaners can get it out tomorrow.

The suit's not a problem.

The suit is a problem. Now get off and take care of yourself and I'll take care of me.

So I did. I went into the bathroom and stripped and filled the tub. I sat on the toilet seat an hour or so in her fake silk robe. When I got I up, I looked in on her where she slept, still clothed and wet, and I did not wake her. I went to the futon in the living room and eventually went to sleep myself.

The next morning she woke me up with coffee. I asked what time it was.

She said, It's Saturday.

Oh.

Thanks for not fucking me last night.

I said, anytime.

She said, hey what's your name, anyway?

After we paid Rollins and Grayson off, they each did a line and a shot and looked at the photos framed along all the walls. They were left over from my exhibits. I had not put them up. Janet insisted on hanging them. This will not be some den out of *Superfly*, she said as she drove in the hooks, this is our home, Kevin. I told them about the people and the locations in the images, which is what people want to hear about photographs, and I remembered the film I'd used, the filters, the different developers, the chemistry of illusion. I had been

good. I met Little Ed back then. I borrowed a suit, the first one I'd worn since my mother's death, for his first big exhibit and bought the little glossy book highlighting his work. Inside the cover, he wrote, You are clearly the man. You are the one who will make us famous. I can feel it. You know it. What kind of responsibility was that? In my houndtooth two sizes too large, I denied everything. He thought I was being coy. I used to sit in the back of the critique room at the Institute in Chicago and, like Rimbaud blowing his mind out on his thousand poems, yell Shit! This is shit! They hated me. The instructors would pull me aside, tell me I had so much potential but needed to change my attitude, as if somehow you could simply replace one with another. One punk came up to me once. He was from sculpture I think. He told me he wanted to do this photograph, a high-detailed blow-up of a very old man with a wrinkled face. And in his eye, he told me, there will be a reflection of a baby. I laughed, laughed hard, and then his father, a senator from South Dakota, came to one of my shows and paid me \$6000 plus expenses to go to Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River to take pictures of old Indians the state had taken care of, whatever that meant. I bought a dog for the trip and charged it to him, and tried to feel like Steinbeck travelling America, but I knew I could not. There are no roles for artists, just shadows of them, and I was supposed to have potential. I took the photos, took the money, sold my cameras, went to Tennessee. Ed understood. He got a job at National Geographic, the most conservative place in all

photography. Before I called him to come to Nashville, I subscribed just to see every issue his work was in. His images rivalled Mapplethorpe and Adams in pure technique. And they were so boring. I smiled at each one, and imagined Ed smiling with me.

When my mother and I were young she used to smile at me while I helped make cookies. In the little house out on the Ben White Highway rats ate holes in the backs of the flour bag and left their droppings on the shelves. They scared me. But my mother always smiled rats or no and showed me how to scoop only the uncontaminated flour off the top of the bag to bake with. Men sometimes came around and played ball with me right on the gravel shoulder of the road or showed me how to shoot cans lined along the rim of the trash barrel out back. They drank beer on our front porch and looked at the cars go by and told my mother in her constant sundresses which ones they would buy her. Convertible Jaguars, Cadillacs, Lincolns with those new digital speedometers, Mercedes, these men went on. They were dreamers one and all and my mother just smiled and let them drink beer and talk of automobiles. Of course, I know now, they were leering at her, taunting her, and once in a while she'd say to one, If you ever get that truck fixed and clean enough to take me and Kevin to town, then you can start dreaming up which kindom you'll buy me. This would stop conversation for a while on our front porch, but even so, even at

six, I always placed myself between the men and my mother. One man, tall and fat and balding, didn't last long there in our house and I remember the last time I saw him he brought me candy, tootsie rolls, which I refused, and told me I'd better sleep with my eyes shut tight because all my mother's rats would eat them if they were open while I slept. None of these men touched my mother, at least not while I was around, except for Mr. Simmons, and I never awoke to find any in our house. Mr. Simmons, with his white curly hair and his moist smell of pipe tobacco, was my mother's favorite. He came by most every week he was in town with a baseball or something for me and an iris for my mother, always an iris. She hugged and kissed him on the cheek, and he was the only one. Sometimes I went to the bathroom before bed and waited for rats to come out. That bath had a closet in it, the only one in the house I remember and in it we piled clothes and boxes and old magazines and I knew the rats were in there. I opened up the door and stood behind the sink so I could kill them and wondered, standing there with a Louisville Slugger in my hands, why we never put the flour in a Folger's can or anything that would keep the rats out, why they were always around and why my mother just smiled.

I went for Bone. He was still outside singing Robert Johnson to the trees.
Bone, I said. Bone. Bone.

He turned to me, finally. The wind was blowing now and I heard the rustle and stop and rustle again. He was wearing those ridiculous wraparounds that made him look like a swept fly.

Bone, the cops were here.

He was leaning against the porchrail. He said, Kevin, man, do you have a smoke?

This is what he said to me the first time we met. Janet and I both had gone to pick him up at the bus station on 8th. It was night and his white shaved head gleamed in the streetlight. He pointed to me over Janet's shoulder and asked her who I was. She said, That's Kevin. He teaches art. He's my new boy. We're bringing you to a hotel. Bone nodded and looked away towards the Greyhound station for a moment. Then he started for the car and we followed. He got in the back. As we were crossing I-40, six blocks away, he retched forward and tapped my shoulder. Kevin, he said, do you have a smoke?

On the porch I said, Come on, Bone, I said the cops were here. Why did they come? They said vehicular manslaughter. Did you kill somebody?

He looked right and then left, thinking, or at least seeming to. He said nothing.

I asked, Were you in an accident?

Yeah, I think I hit somebody.

Where?

I don't know. Outside of Nashville someplace or another.

Had you gotten to Nashville yet?

I don't think so.

What car were you in?

The jeep. Yeah, I was in the jeep.

Where is it now?

Bone said nothing. I heard a baby cry far off. I thought since we had forty acres butting up to a ridge, that baby must be crying loud.

Where is it now? I asked.

Well, he said, it's here.

You killed somebody in the jeep and then you brought it here? What the hell are you thinking? We're trying to keep a low profile here and you're going to get us on the fucking news.

Bone said, Kevin, man, I always wanted to be on the news.

Not with me you're not. Why didn't you just stop in Nashville? Go to my place or Janet's or a hotel and call us. You should have just dumped the car.

But I had the dope in it - for a punk he always used old slang Yours and Janet's dope. Everyone knows tonight's the night man. He scratched his calf with his foot. Janet took away my keys.

I said, Fuck it. Now I want you to get rid of the jeep now. Take Ed or one of those hippy boys Janet has and get rid of it. Burn it, leave it, dump it off Savage Gulf, do something.

Bone said, Remember that first night when you were dropping me off at the hotel I said I didn't have no money and you said you got tonight and I said what about the other nights and you just stood there for a second or something and said well, if you've got the connections I have the buyers. Just like that man, that's what you said, you're pretty smart you know, you've always been smart, Kevin man.

No, Bone, don't just leave it. Don't leave the jeep. Burn it. Take it a good twenty miles from here and burn it. Take Ed. There's gas in the shed.

Man, I can't stand Ed.

OK, take somebody else, but I want it burned. And I want to talk to who you take before you go, you got it Bone?

Kevin man.

You got it, Bone?

Yeah, I got it Kevin man, Bone said. To the door before he opened it, he added, Bury my body by the highway side. He is crazy, to be sure. But he doesn't just score; he manufactures. Any one can get smack from St. Louis or Chicago or Baltimore if they have cash, but among us only Bone can make cocaine. He's no dummy. I don't know where he gets the leaves. Every month

he drives to Florida and comes back smelling vaguely of new cut grass. I hate to think of him in a darkroom someplace with dangerous, flammable chemicals bought with my money, but in a true alchemy of acetone and hydrochloric acid, at just the right mixture and temperature, he always produces great, clean coke.

Inside I waited until he and a tall gawky kid with long unwashed hair went out to the shed. I sat beside Ed and looked up to where his face was blank. I said, Take whatever you need to drive after him and make sure he gets rid of the jeep. Leave in five minutes, ok?

I went down to the basement recreation room. The television was playing a cartoon of a man with an impossible head some demon popped in and out of. Everyone sat on the shag rug and watched. Janet sat on the couch and cut lines on glass with a nine inch butcher knife. I sat next to her. I said, We're going to have to move this party someplace else.

OK, she put the knife down.

I don't want to have to pay every cop in Grundy County.

She said, OK.

Move them out, tell them to go anywhere. Give them something for the road.

Janet reached out and grabbed my forearm as if she was about to say something important. She said, Where's Todd?

The tall one?

Yes.

He's with Bone getting rid of the jeep.

She let go of my arm. I looked over the seated hippies. Which one was for me?

She pointed to small a dark haired girl with light skin and long fingers splayed through the rug catching television light. That one there. Kim. I know you like them petite.

I said, Yes. I said, Can we take a raincheck on the other?

Janet said, Anytime. She smiled broad and closelipped. I'm not a guru, she said, we can do it anytime you want.

This was our game, our sonnet. I said, But you are my guru. You are my guru of cocktails and gas-powered chainsaws.

Janet chanted, softly, I, the powertool mama, and you, the wrecking ball blowing through buildings at whim.

Then, from the title of Ed's first exhibit, I said, Would that our love be destroyer enough to stare down destruction.

Oh it is dear, she said. It is.

I'm not sure what it is about needles. It's not the injection itself I'm afraid of. After my mother died and I went to Chicago I used to sell plasma for food money. I must have been pricked and drawn a hundred times. Ever since I left home there were needles around. People in Chicago will shoot up about anything. I think Ed used to shoot up horse tranquilizers. I think I'm afraid of taking anything I couldn't vomit up if I got too much. It's an illusion of control and nothing else. The old addicts will say that's where I falter, that inability to give in. They feel they have nothing to lose. I have everything to gain. If I learned anything on my mother's porch from those men it is that people from my neck of the woods in the dirt outside cities look at those big stocky square buildings like courthouses and jailhouses and know that they were built by those who have things to protect them from us, who had nothing. Those men would come and go and come back months later from jail or probation or some other state hiding as if it were just a way of life, as if there was no consequence. I have things now. I make decisions that matter. If my mother had lived long enough, she'd have the convertible Jag. With a little notice, she could have two. Sometimes late at night when we are alone Janet and I play another game. She will be nodding off and I will be coming down off methadone, pussy dope, Bone calls it, and she will say, I'm pure as the driven snow, and I will say, I'm

pure and unscathed as angels. It's a joke and we should laugh but even in our hazes we are sad and I always feel vaguely that that's not right and I take her and we waltz around the room slowly, stumbling. It's a formal dance, stepping back, forward, side, side, and we touch each other only enough to say: We are here.

Janet chased all the hippies out, a swirl of patchouly and hair in four-by-fours. The house was empty except for the two of us and I went outside to sit on the backporch and pop perkovitz. I hung my feet over the edge and watched the black hill fall away below. It began to drizzle and the rain filtered a constant drip drip through the trees to splatter on the wood decking. I thought of Mr. Simmons, the way late afternoons he would lie down in the slice of shadow right in the corner of house and porch to nod off, his scotch and soda shifting with each breath and sweating down his fingers. My mother got off the swing with the same sigh each time to take the drink from his loose fist and place it slightly tilted on a window sill. She got from the house some shirt or old sweater and folded it under his curled and matted head. Janet came out and sat beside me. Our feet dangled together like children's snuck off to flirt on some dock or creekside. I'm wired, she said, but I can feel the headache coming on soon.

Here, I said.

She opened the bottle, shook out a few pills. When are Bone are Ed coming back?

As soon as they're done, I hope.

I'll be downstairs or in the bedroom one. She left, taking the bottle with her. I laid down to feel the rain hit my face.

I awoke to Janet screaming. The sound was high-pitched and incoherent. My left leg had fallen asleep and I hobbled all crooked as I ran through the open door. Her voice came up from the stairs and as I headed towards them it quieted and I could hear some fast talking. She was on the couch stretched out. Bone was kneeling down as if in some prayer to her. He held the butcher knife loose in one hand so that its point rested just below her breasts. It had pierced through the fabric and now he tented the dress with it, pulling the flowers from her skin, ripping them more.

Bone, Bone, Bone, she pleaded.

Bone sang, I'm gonna make you satisfied.

Bone, she said, you're going to hurt me. Why are you hurting me? She turned and saw me past his shoulder. Her pupils were so dilated they swallowed the irises almost entirely. I motioned for her to be quiet.

Fuck, Janet, Bone said, it will be just like old times.

I don't want old times.

Bone said, O yes you do. He said, Me and the Devil we were walking side by side. I took a step closer. With his free hand Bone lifted the dress and split it down the middle to her thighs. Knife at her throat now he bent to kiss her exposed stomach. Janet screamed, Kevin, Kevin.

Bone said, Don't worry he's out cold outside.

I said, Bone.

He kissed her stomach. I could see the soft white quiver below her bellybutton. He licked. She screamed again. I stepped closer.

Bone, I said, louder, put the fucking knife down. He did not move, his nose still touching her flesh. Bone, I yelled.

He stood but didn't face me. I burned the jeep.

Good, Bone, put down the knife. The front door slammed. Ed, I called. Get down here.

I even took off the plates.

Bone, put down the goddamned knife.

Janet, should I put down the goddamned knife?

Give him the knife, Bone.

Bone turned, knife in hand. Ed's heavy steps started down the stairs. You want the knife?

Yes.

Here, he said and rushed me.

I think I said Shit. I think I grabbed the arm with the knife but he was stronger and the point still came down and cut my cheek. I tried to knee him someplace, anyplace, and I think I connected. We went to the floor in a mess. Janet screamed, Bone. I heard her get off the couch. He was on top and all I could think of was that knife, where it was, where his hand was, but my head was up hard against the floorboard and all I could see were our chests pressed together. I squirmed and tried to push him off. I tried to knee him again, but his weight held me down. Kevin man, Bone said, you fight like a pussy, and then, suddenly, he wasn't there. I flailed my legs in the open air. Little Ed stood above me, Bone in his hands. Janet scratched at his arm and took away the knife. Little Ed threw Bone against the wall. One of the framed photographs came crashing down. I turned to the noise. Little Ed held Bone against the sheetrock and punched him cold.

Janet said, Fuck. She dropped the knife to the floor.

Little Ed said, What should I do with him?

She said, He was just hallucinating or something. Put him to bed, he won't remember in the morning. Ed looked at me. From the floor, my neck aching now from being pressed against the wall, I tried to shrug. Her call.

I've always hated this fuck, Ed said.

We need him, Janet said.

I pulled myself up to where I was sitting. I touched my face and saw the blood on my fingers. I didn't need this, I said.

Janet bent down and kissed my cheek. She took the glasses off my face. You look cute, scarface. All your students will go gaga over you now.

The few people at work who know me, they ask sometimes, Why do you live life that way? Or, how did you get started? Usually it is in the teachers' lounge. The room has cleared out after school and smoke still lingers. Their faces are turned slightly and frowning. They are troubled I know, and compelled. I have no answer. Every so often I collect the debris left in ashtrays after bars close. I'm looking for empty matchbooks and butts with two different shades of lipstick. I'm looking for the names and phonenumber people leave smoldering there. If I weren't lazy, I'd throw them all together, along with letters I find on the roadside and in busstation bathrroms, into some framed exhibit for all the world to see. These are the remnants of clients who need me. Mother, do not be scared. I have our kingdom.