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The Vehicle, Spring 1989

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Michael Salem

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Recommended Citation

Zordani, Bob; Salem, Michael; Groth, Monica; Stroud, Allison; Santor, Denise; Reed, Jim; Dickens, Rebecca; Sparks, Amy; Watson, Alma; Peters, Patrick; Hanson, Erik; Sparks, Amy; Caldwell, Tom; Montgomery, Robb; Moutray, Ann; Atkins, Diane; and Berkshire, Jennifer, "The Vehicle, Spring 1989" (1989). *The Vehicle*. 54. <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/vehicle/54>

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Archives

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1989

Spring

THE VEHICLE

SPRING 89



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Vehicle Spring 1989

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poems

Home Movies

Here I am running in a field
I don't remember, the hillside
flowering yellow. It is good
with me now falling and laughing

mutely into the camera. There's Jim
waving from the barn where the go-carts
live. He's still too small to drive
fast across the barnyard like me

but putts slow and crooked
as grandma's creek. One day
we will ride hard into those woods
and come home hurt, heads busted,

noses streaming blood. For now
we are safe, life simple as cows
by that farm pond. Stand next
to the oil tank with your muscles

flexed, skinny father. Be with him
mother. Slide your hand across
his hairy chest. Pinch his cheek.
Smile, folks. Smile. We're watching.

Bob Zordani

Mummy Breath

They say it won't hurt
or if it does
it will pass.

Like a stone?
Or perhaps a septic tank
with a fist-sized rupture.

Probably they are right.
Probably they are.
Probably.

If car exhaust had vitamins.
If curdled milk was a delicacy.
If hairballs were collector's items.

Bitter?
Oh no, not me.
Never.

I enjoy swallowing tacks,
having my face run over by a jeep,
and French kissing fetal pigs.

I exaggerate.
I am not offended.
I am stoic imperturbability incarnate.

You simply plucked out my eyes,
tore free my brain with pincers,
and scooped my entrails out with razors.

I forgive you,
from the rock bottom
of my visceral cavity,

with vowels fermented stale
thickening with grit
in that dry hollow.

Michael Salem

Pop Art

i want to lose my virginity
(or what's left of it)
in an art gallery
with walls as white as snow
and just as cold.

i want to lose my virginity
on the floor of an art gallery
below discreetly placed lights
elevating the mood
and, the subject.

i want to lose my virginity
silently, with church like stillness
as detached and quiet as
mannequins miming a ritual,
animated sculpture.

i want to lose my virginity
beneath the portraits' eyes
mute spectators witnessing
the run of the bulls.

i want it to be an event; a ceremony
as pure as a fairy tale and just as unreal
i want the gauze white walls of the gallery
to sanitize the bloody red truth
of tearing skin, of letting in.

Monica Groth

Grey Haze and Moon

In summer
the sun is a dish in the sky.
But nights, when you're not here,
stars are shattered cups in the
silent blue.
Some are small glass slivers
that haunt the floor, waiting
for the soft padded feet of our baby
who cries often now.

All afternoon
a wet wind breathed
through the window screen,
kissing my cheek. From the sink
my housecoat on the line
fluttered in the fickle wind. Even it
moved so easily without me.

It's June,
the grey haze crackles
like static.
The green presses against the house.
The dirt uprises
trying to get in.
You smuggle it in on your boots at noon, your eyes
dazed from staring at neat furrows
and that expanse of sky.
We eat in silence.
The baby disengorges the lower cabinets,
patters in the pots and pans.
The tractor waits patiently outside for you
to repair its tender insides
yet again
and I don't know what to do.

All winter
I moved from room to room, followed sunlight around
inside the house
inside my beating head.

All spring and summer you're gone. And nights, now,
you leave again.

The sheets glowed in the gloom like lightning.
I waited in the dark
but you didn't come.
And when you are here, I only move
beneath you, stare out a window at
trees and wish that I could rise up and settle into
that blue tapestry of moon.

Tonight
I listened to a freight train
comfort itself as it moved through
fields and when I could stand it no longer
got up
drove past the house, your truck
so familiar in that strange lane, and sat
while the baby slept beside me on the seat.

I drove slowly home, past white
houses glowing in the semi-dark, barns black
against the waiting sky.
I put the baby to bed,
made a pot of coffee,
sat on the wooden back steps, waited
for you to tell me what you would.

You could say these
nights keep you sane - And I could
raise my head to meet your
words - if only it were not
for that grey haze
rising up into my eyes even
now.

Allison Stroud

The State of Being at a Soap & Suds

(Spring 1988)

A young woman,
Pink curlers for hair,
Brings her son, his runny nose,
And several Kool-Aid stains,
To a crowded laundromat
On a Sunday afternoon.

This young woman,
Pink slippers for feet,
Pulls a copy of Hamlet
From her basket
And begins to read.

No one, not her son
With the Kool-Aid stains,
Or the change girl
With hickeys on her neck
Notices that this woman cries
As she sits with her son,
Thinking of Ophelia,
Sorting socks that don't match.

Denise Santor

LETTER HOME

from Cape Hatteras

Trees
Have grown tall here,
Tunneling roads that
Branch like broken twigs
Of limbs trimmed and marked for cutting.
Not like Indiana where
In our palms we held
Stars as kites
Pulled down by fence-rows
Of treeless fields

Here clouds sail,
Untouchable,
Over pointed crowns of dark pine
And I feel small,
Small in my small car
On an empty road,
No hint of the Sound or
Watery smell but,
Glints low against
The grey trunks,
A speckled black stone
worn nameless

We are there
In twisted protest
Of our loss---
Years ago someone
Moved that marker,
Snapping taught the line
That cut our hands, held
Firm the pulling away
Of stars.

Jim Reed

Thursday Afternoon in the Stacks

He's like a cat.
You're never sure he's watching you,
But sometimes I think I catch him.

I can just picture her.
Small, pointy,
Smells like celery.

"Marriage scares me," he tells me.
"She's really pressuring me."
I nod sympathetically.

The side of my body
Closest to him
Hums.

Rebecca Dickens

Sizing Down

I laugh loudest when alone,
and I can't tell my tears from the rain.
See, my face is uncomfortable in any position.
Like a cat with ear mites
that never quite go away.

My father's face--
now there was precision.
So solid and brittle,
his mother must have carved it on her baby
who before had the faceless face of an egg.

I carry his rings in my pocket now.
Both are gold plated;
I don't know yet what's underneath.
One is rugged nuggets
with a blinking ruby set askew.

Not bloody red,
just the shade of wine through crystal.
The other is smooth as an eyelid
with a black tiger's eye peering through the denim.
Its pupil's streak is squinting white.

Never took them in for fitting.
Wouldn't feel right anyhow--
like sliding a leash on a kitten.
Jingling when I move
as a laugh I vaguely remember.

The ghost of an accident.
A lost echo of breaking Tiffany,
finally finding an ear to die in. . .
like a soul wearing itself down towards nothing,
or the bell in a dusty rubber mouse.

Michael Salem

Intellectual Anatomy

my mind
has a
hymen.
stubbornly,
it shields me
from
penetration.
knowledge
can thrust,
and buck,
and grunt.
what I don't
know
Can't hurt me.

Monica Groth

Grandmother Poem

My grandmother sits beneath
mind's flickering yellow lamp,
her savage fingers pulling
at knots in white yarn.
Knots of daughters, knots of sons
pulled sharp against calloused palms.
After mornings of steam and starch,
afternoons of neighbors' children
she knits afghans,
intricate patterns of old expectations,
waiting with distant, dry eyes
for the man she knew as husband
to stumble in
followed by sons
travelling his path
from porch to tavern to grave.

Amy Sparks

Blues of the Brotherman

Today . . . It's suppose to rain.
I think I might stay home . . .

My little girl touches my arm in the dark.

It's six o'clock in the morning and she's up.

Her momma lies by my side . . . very still.

I can hear her snore.

I get out of bed and walk to the window.

I pull the shade and at my command another man's
creation rises up.

Small power.

I say to myself again, "It looks like rain today. I
might stay home."

I step out on the fire escape with my little girl in my
arms.

I light a cigarette and take a long drag.

My other girl.
Her mother.
Shuffles in the covers.

My baby looks at me.
At least that's what my girl claims.

I think I see my eyes in hers.
I doubt sometimes.

My baby smiles her little smile and my heart gets warm.

I look out across this city and all that I have

accomplished.

Nothing . . . and I begin to wonder.
I look back into my small apartment.

Nine dollars lay on my dresser.
If I go into work today that's how much I will make.
Three dollars an hour and some "chump change."

I just cling to my child like death . . .
and I don't go in today.

I decide to stay home . . .

"It really begins to look like rain."

Alma Watson

MIGRATION

At the Museum of Science and Industry
there is a heart large enough to walk through,
its chambers big as rooms.
Stepping from one ventricle to another
I expect to see my father tying flies
in the circle of a bright lamp
and my mother, who hasn't yet had her breast removed,
teaching my sister to dance slow.

We are told mistreatment of our hearts
leads to the grave. Fifteen billion beats
to each of us. The unfortunate, less.
Malaysian monks believe each teaspoon of sperm
subtracts a thousand beats from our already
slim total. The equation simple
as third grade math: Beats minus X to the nth
equals dust. We are doomed even by love.

At night my new wife's heart amazes me,
how her steady muscularity times our lives.
Pressing my ear against her sternum
I believe in the hugeness of the heart,
its capacity for echo. I hear the heavy rush
of wings rising up, see myself overlapping
my hands into a call, pulling the swelling sky
into the deep arc of my arms.

Patrick Peters

Riding

Today every pebble a boulder
on your favorite hill, the one place
you spin down so smooth

it is not even riding
but the swift dream of flight
and easy landing. Today

you know you will fall,
that something will break, shatter
under a weight too heavy

to comprehend. At home
the woman you love cannot remove
you from her life. She

does not know you will die
and wipes clean the table where you
have eaten, thinks she will read

a good book of poems,
that fame is nearly yours. It's only
your wheels won't grip

the gravel as you turn
knowing this is your life
and it will not hold.

Bob Zordani

All Hallows Eve

The bitter October night
folds its arms around
the costumed body of a child
crumpled by the car like
a discarded newspaper

I think first of the dent
then of the figure in the white sheet
costume first now a shroud

I actually find myself angry at the kid
Like a psycho angry at his girl
for bloodying his knife
or an assassin resentful of his target
for taking his bullet

Do I feel guilty?
Maybe
but I drive on into November
thinking about Thanksgiving

Erik Hanson

Waiting Room

In a box
painted soothing blue,
a woman stares.
In her hands
purple veins trace
an ancient alphabet.
Alpha for seven stones
dotting a Mother's Ring.
Omega for an Easter suit
never worn,
and a rosary held
in colorless hands.
Along her arms
small holes search
for elementary school scribbles
to explain the nausea,
the lumps of gray hair
clogging a bathtub drain,
the clothes hanging
from a stick.
Inhaling the passing minutes,
fear swells in her blood.
She waits.

Amy Sparks

Father Forgive Her

Shirley's got a dogma
and it eats
better than her kids.

It's true she's no virgin mother
(Shirley's mama to eight kids)
But at least she didn't use no birth control 'cause
Shirley doesn't sin.

Her husband left her finally
(Shirley's man is Jesus the Lord)
She doesn't miss the sex 'cause
Shirley rubs her rosary beads.

Shirley's got a dogma
and it sleeps at the foot of her bed
She doesn't suffer from dreams at night 'cause
Shirley has visions all day.

Whatever she sees, Shirley tells
She's a real preacher --
Even has some pamphlets 'cause
Shirley's got the call.

Shirley says Change is no good
and neither is Vatican II
It don't matter the Church Heads disagree 'cause
Shirley ain't afraid to send the pope to hell.

Shirley's got an only daughter
who's marrying a man with an
annulment
Shirley's boycotting the wedding 'cause

Shirley's got a dogma
and it eats
better than her kids.

Monica Groth

SILENT REPLY

I got your letter today
And I imagine you expect a reply
The way I did:

You, standing rigid,
Lips pursed, a convenient wind
Stealing the words.

I wish I could send you a picture
That you'd hang on your mirror
And study each new morning;

Watch it yellow,
Slowly wrinkling at the edges
Around my smiling face.

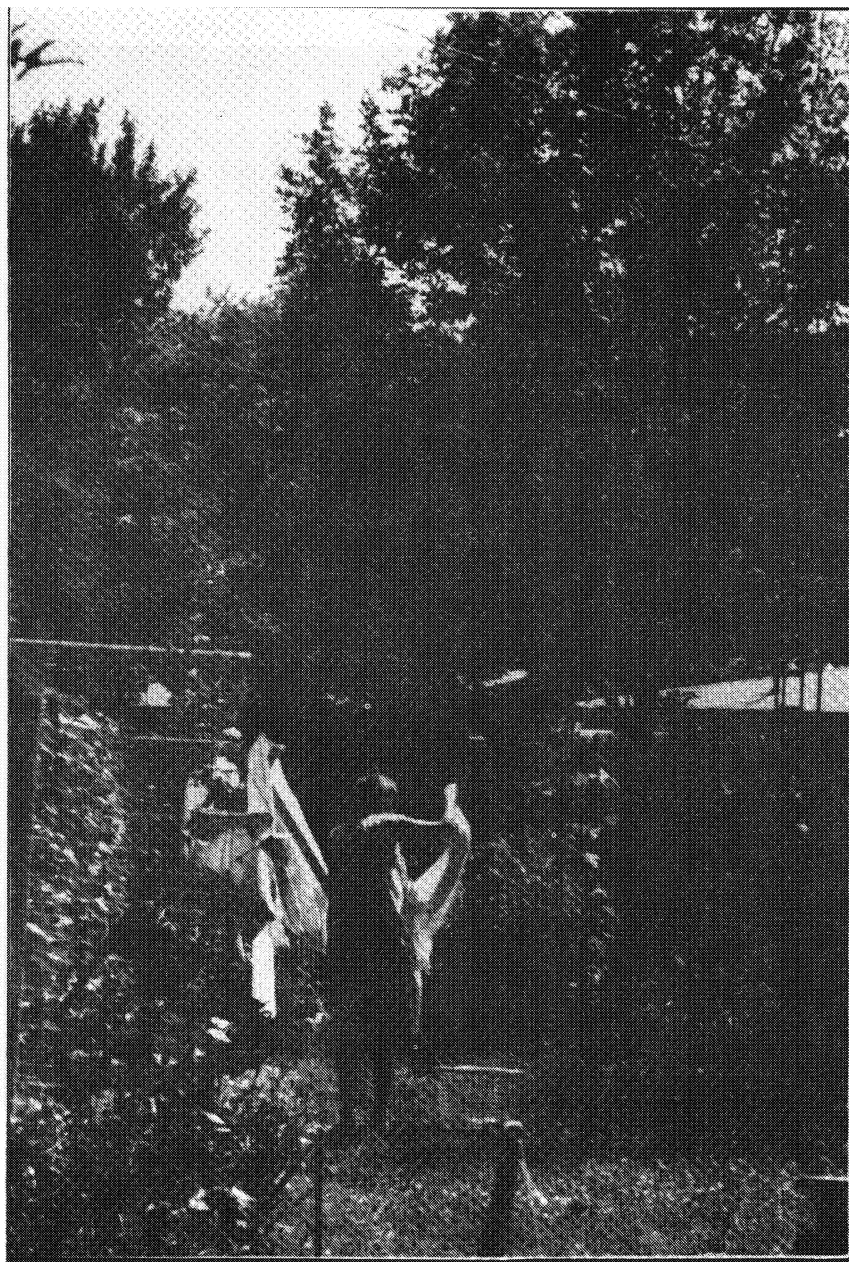
Tommy Caldwell

photos



Untitled

By Robb Montgomery



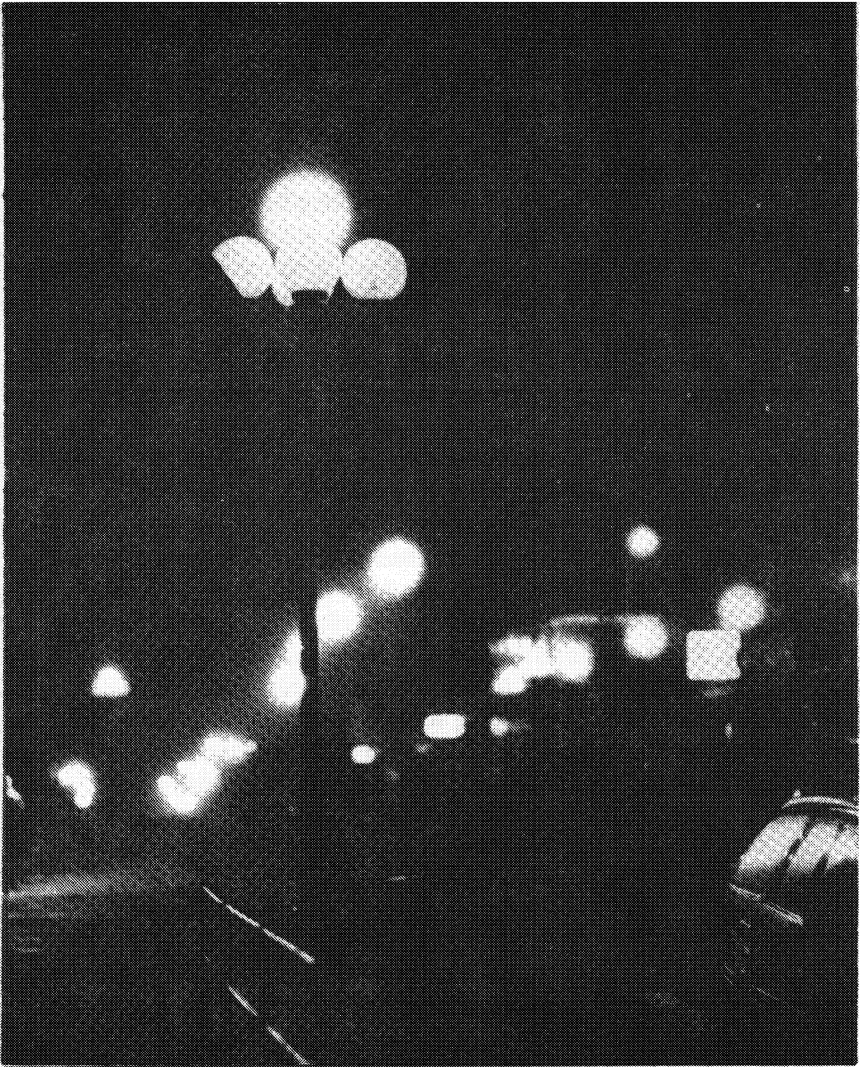
Washday

By Ann Moutray



Untitled

By Diane Atkins



Uptown Fog

By Robb Montgomery

stories

shinbones and skulls

I had a dream last week that a friend of my mothers had died it wasnt just that he had died but that he had well hung himself he had done it from a tree it was the tallest tree I had ever seen I remember wondering how in the world he had gotten up there his body was blowing back and forth in the wind perfectly straight like the pendulum of a clock I was standing next to the trunk of the tree staring straight up in the air it didnt look like a body at all at first but just something stuck to a branch then I was up there too and I saw his face

someone told me once probably my mother that Im obsessive I cant help it though its as if something an idea or a picture maybe gets stuck in my head and wont go away when I was little I was obsessed with the fact that my mom and dad were going to die every time one of them had a birthday I would count the number of years that they had left assuming of course that everyone lives to be one hundred

I suppose that its because I read too much I can never seem to separate fiction and reality last year I was obsessed with the fact that I was going to be old one day really for the whole year that was all I can think about it wasnt the physical part that bothered me so much no I could handle the idea of getting soft and having white hair and riding a bus with a shopping bag or a big alligator purse clenched between my thick-knuckled hands not even the thought of having varicose veins and big clunky ankles jammed into thick soled shoes bothered me too much I mean it happens to everyone doesnt it

no it was the head part that really got to me I would imagine myself waking up in sixty years and not being able to remember anything it would be sort of like the feeling you get when youre all doped up on cold medicine and you cant clear your head no matter how hard you try only it would be like that all the time I would try and make myself feel better by thinking of all the great exceptions like mary leakey the famous archaeologist shes at least eighty but she just doesnt care shes so obsessed with finding pieces of skulls and shinbones that she doesnt even have time to think about the fact that shes old she just goes on

I guess my mother was right about me being obsessive it doesnt seem like its my fault though you know how sometimes youll find a word that youve never heard before like acquiescence or you know the kind of words no one ever uses and all of a sudden its everywhere in the papers and on the news and people are wearing it on their clothes you start to wonder how you could have possibly gone this long without ever seeing it or hearing it before my dad told me once about this superstition he had

probably the only one he ever had he thought that if someones face just popped into your head out of the blue someone you hadnt thought about for ages that it was sort of a sign that you were about to see that person again he said that it always worked for him hes so conceptual though probably the only reason he remembered someone at all was because he had just seen them and had already forgotten it

well thats sort of how I feel about death or how I would explain my obsession anyway someone died and I became consumed by the fact that I was going to die too all of a sudden it seemed like it was everywhere in everything I read and saw people were dying and contemplating their death and planning it I know its silly you die and then theres nothing and so why should it bother you I used to play a game with myself I would pretend that something really awful had happened to me something so bad that I couldnt live anymore I would think of every possible way to die and then force myself to pick the best way and the worst way the worst way was always the easiest I think I finally settled on being drawn and quartered I could never pick a good way though

I met this girl a while ago and I was really starting to like her then she told me that she was going to die not the way everyone does eventually but soon anytime I feel so silly now I mean all this time I havent been doing anything but planning the perfect death my death and heres someone who has it staring her in the face all the time I had a teacher once that stood in front of the class and told us that the only common bond that all of us had was the fact that we were all going to die I was so young at the time I remember actually thinking that she was wrong

I hope I dont end up like a metaphysical poet not that I can write poetry like that or anything thats not what I mean I mean the way they were so obsessed with their own mortality that they couldnt think about anything else ever when they were eating or sleeping or having sex or anything all they could think about was the fact that they were going to die Im not that bad at least not yet

jennifer berkshire

SUDDEN SMALL PHRASES

My friends call me Brash.

"Brash," they say, "is an idiot.. A penniless idiot because he sends his money to anyone."

I do.

"You had a hell of a curve, Brash," they say, "but you got nothin' up here," and they tap their heads.

I did. And I don't know.

I had a hell of a curve. Threw it with the Tigers for four years. I was drafted right of JuCo, and went straight up to the Bigs, until 'eighty-two, when I lost all the fingers of my left hand, my throwing hand, to a broken band saw. Now I'm a right winger. That's a joke. Wings are what we call arms in baseball.

And sometimes I do, sometimes I don't.

Have anything upstairs, that is.

For a long year I had been out of the Bigs. I moved out of Detroit on my own, heading, it seems now, directly to this small town: Tyler, Indiana, population 3,000. For a while I was headlines.

"Brash Downer lives here," folks were telling their relatives over the phone. "See him every day. Gettin' to be right good friends. His hand isn't bandaged. He's learnin' to pitch right handed behind the high school. Should be back in the Majors next season. Maybe the end of this."

Guff.

That was all guff. It's o.k. if I never pitch again as far as I'm concerned. If God delivers me a new left hand parcel-post tomorrow, that's fine. If he doesn't, that's fine too. But the town isn't bad. Quiet, crickets being most of the entertainment. Once in a while one of the high school's teams will make a run at a state championship, usually basketball, and I'll follow the games around the area. But mostly crickets.

One evening, after I'd been here a few months, I was relaxing on my front porch cleaning a pair of boots. I had just hammered a big chunk of dried mud off the sole with my screwdriver, and there she was. How I loved this town then! She could have been a movie star. With her long strong legs she was like a gazelle. A brunette movie-star gazelle with dark, oh dark eyes! A young Liz Taylor, or Mary Tyler Moore.

By the time I was out of my chair and on the step shouting "hello," she was almost out of sight. I shouted and waved from the porch, but she didn't look back. Like she didn't even hear me. Didn't see me. I wasn't

there for a minute. Perhaps she had a blackout. A sudden bursting of blood vessels in her brain that had caused a short lapse in good sight and judgment.

It dawned on me then, the stupidest idea in the history of Brash Downer: Maybe she was foreign. After she had jogged down Jefferson, around the corner, and to who knows where, I thought "of course, she doesn't speak English." Maybe she was afraid of me shouting from my porch. Maybe she thought I was telling her not to run on my lawn, or that I was saying "watch out for dogs."

•

My friends said, "Maybe she saw you before you saw her. Maybe that was the problem." But I know better. "Guff," I said, and forgot them. Though I lost my big league fingers, the rest of me was still big league. With my bad hand stuffed in my pocket I am all-American: Tall, two-twenty, which isn't real heavy, but an even two-hundred is my perfect pitching weight, blonde, with the good character of a twice broken nose above my thick shoulders. "Everyone in town would know if a French girl was in town," my friends said. "News spreads like wildfire around here."

•

She looked French. The way she carried herself. Her strange haircut covering her ears, then cropping up short in back again. "French women," I told my friends, "look exotic." I said "I don't think she understood me because she's French."

I had a French girlfriend in Detroit. She had perfectly shaped hands, smooth like the hands of a doll, a collection of light print dresses, and only a little English.

"Big leagues," she would say. "Baseball."

I would take her in my arms, later watching for her along the third base line. She would wave her small doll hands, and from the mound I could make out "Brash, Hooray!" on her lips. My curve would break three feet then. Once, I stood on the mound while the rest of the team hogged off the field. I was dazed with her, not even aware the inning was over: one, two, three. Finally, Jimmy Lynch, the shortstop, came out of the dugout and poked me on the shoulder.

"You o.k.?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "What's the matter?" And he walked me to the dugout, telling the other guys I had been mending my glove.

My French girlfriend said to me one night, "Brash, you never stolen base, never hit homer run. I am looking for someone strongly." Things fell down hill from there. I would try to explain that it was not the pitcher's job to drive in runs, but to keep the other team from scoring. How stealing bases was a threat to my left hand, therefore to the team. She continued to complain, and I would get lineups confused, throwing

fast balls to fast ball hitters, sliders to slider hitters, everything. She left during a seventh inning stretch never to return to her box seat. I was left stranded. No runs, no hits, one error. I suppose that's a little bit of a joke now too.

My porch began to see lots of use. I painted the trim and railings. Carpeted the deck with astro-turf. I was washing the screens on a sunny October day, one of those when you can't believe the leaves are really falling, when she jogged by again with her straight back, compact, muscular legs snug in lycra tights.

"Hello," I said, and waved a big wave. She looked over at the porch. "Hi," I called again, and she watched me closely, as if I were hiding a club behind my back. "I played big leagues. Baseball," I said slowly, allowing her to catch it if her English wasn't so great.

I hoped she understood. A coach told me once, "All nations understand baseball." She gave me a very tight wave and jogged by.

"Definitely French," I told my friends.

"She heard me, but couldn't understand. She waved, but didn't speak English," I told them.

"A hundred and ninety bucks is a lot of money for tapes," my friends said.

"But they're language tapes. I'll learn French."

I had put the check in the mail that morning. "Guaranteed results within a week," the ad said. I could see it all happening. She would jog by perfectly, like an Olympian, "Bonjour" I would say. That would stop her. "Finally, someone civilized here," she would think, or "God, I love him." I would throw out small phrases. "Your eyes are like beautiful stones, your hands lovely petals." All in French, of course.

A hundred and ninety bucks was almost nothing. And within a week.

When the tapes came, I right away plugged them into the cassette player in my living room. This sounds simple, but with only one functioning hand, everything becomes one-sided. That's another joke.

A voice rose out of the speakers. "Good afternoon," it said. Then another voice spoke. "Bonjour," it said. Right away I was on to it. There was a pause. "An English word or small phrase will be said, followed by the same word or small phrase in French. After the French pronunciation, there will be a short pause, during which you repeat the word or small phrase in French. Bonjour."

"Bonjour," I said, exactly as it sounded on the tape. I could smell her hair when I said "Bonjour." It smelled like champagne.

The tapes rode with me in my car. They sang me to sleep at nights. They hummed soothing European sounds while I massaged the stubs of

my lost fingers as therapy. "Bonjour, ca va?" I was saying. "Je m'appelle Brash," I told her one night in a dream, becoming fluent.

•

Days I sat on the porch working over my newest lesson. I played the tapes on a small cassette player I had listened to radio tapes of my games on. I burned those tapes years ago. I had been watching sports highlights in a bar a few blocks from my place in Detroit. I recognized old teammates. There was Jimmy Lynch, with the Reds now; Larry Carr, one of the best pull hitters I've ever seen, still in right field with the Tigers. I went home, drunk, and tried to hum a fast left-handed curve past the lamp in my living room. The ball flipped backwards out of my fingerless hand, thudding softly into the sofa. The ball, the tapes, and my glove went up in flames in the fireplace. The tape player had survived, and moved out of Detroit with me a few weeks later.

•

My friends tell me now, "Brash, keep your head about women. Don't do stupid stuff, like run out into the street after them. You need to say the right things."

•

When she came down the street again, I was conjugating the verb "parler," to speak. "Parle, parles, parle," I was saying. She turned the corner, and I began shouting "Bonjour, ca va?" while she was still a hundred yards away. She ignored me. I stood and went to the steps. "Bonjour," I shouted, and waved my good hand.

My friends say I am self-conscious about my fingerless left hand. I will say I am not. I must have been, though, because right away I stuffed the hand in my pocket like a ball of rotten dough.

When I waved my good hand she took notice. I lowered my voice and stopped the waving.

"Bonjour," I said.

She returned the same timid wave as before. Just a slight movement of the hand, the elbow fixed in place, the tiniest smile. "A cultured smile," I thought. She kept jogging, though. I ran onto the road and stopped her by the shoulders.

"Bonjour Amour," I said. "Je suis etudiant d'amour," I said. Just like that. "I am a student of love." Just like that.

Up close she didn't look foreign. Beautiful, still a gazelle, but not French. She shook her head "no" and struggled while I held her shoulders.

"Je m'appelle Brash," I said.

She shook herself free from me. She was furious, shaking her head.

"Why won't you talk to me?" I said.

Her hands began to fly like birds. She didn't make a sound, but her hands were swooping, lifting, forming patterns, then diving again. Once,

she stomped her foot after a flurry of gestures. I think that's what finally shook my head loose.

"You can't hear, can you?" I said.

She carved the air.

"You're deaf," I said.

Her hands danced like a familiar couple.

I pushed my left hand deeper into my pocket, thinking maybe I could find those lost fingers there if I dug down far enough. Her hands slowed and fell to her sides as if her battery had run down. I couldn't look at her. I kept thinking "What the hell, Brash? What the hell?"

"Jesus, I'm sorry," I said. "Godawful sorry."

"What the hell? Jesus, Brash." I thought, walking away. She stood there in the road, almost flying, her hands were making such motion.

On the porch, the language tape was still playing. "Ecoutez," it said. I carried the player inside, mumbling "ecoutez," during the pauses. With my hand out of my pocket I saw just a lump of dough. "Dough, dough, dough," I thought.

My friends tell me now, "Never, Brash. Never in a million years. Not in ten million years. Not with one hand, Brash. You'll only get half a sentence." But I don't listen.

I got a book in the mail last week, and when I'm not studying the pictures of fingers and hands spelling out words, I turn on a lamp, set the light behind me, and make shadow phrases on the wall.

"Ten million years," my friends say. On the wall, I watch my good right hand say, "I am sorry. Speak to me."

Patrick Peters

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