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It wasn't always like this with me

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It Wasn't Always Like This With Me

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The Graduate College of
Marshall University

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by

Greg Rickard

Marshall University

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Advisor Katherine Rodin

Department of English

Leonard Reitsch
Dean of Graduate College

by Greg Rickard

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Introduction

This work is divided into four parts, each having its own tone while contributing to the work as a whole. To emphasize this dual purpose, I chose to title each part with a phrase that both reflects the pieces included within it and contributes to the statement which underscores the thesis: "Follow me my son, beyond the truth of day to day, where redemption hides behind each fleeting smile, and damnation awaits with open arms." Though the reader will immediately notice that this statement contains contradictory aspects, upon closer perusal, he will find that both redemption and damnation are tempered--if not transformed--within their individual contexts.

This ambiguity is not unintentional; life is full of ambiguity, as is love, hate, goodness, evil, etc. As are the Theater of the Absurd and Postmodernism, this work is both a product of and commentary on a chaotic world.

I opted for the genres of the short story, essay, and poetry not only because their varied lengths help to pace this work, but also for the qualities intrinsic to each: the poems afford me a chance to look at life in all of its horror, madness, and beauty, to share what I think I understand, and to strive to understand what I don't; the essays allow me to experiment with form, use humor, and--at times--write on a more personal level; the short stories enable me to explore the world and my imagination, to describe what I create and / or observe in detail.

The content of each part is as follows:

Part One--Follow Me My Son: This segment sets the tone for the entire work; it consists of humor ("Driving Me to Drink"), dark subjects ("Thanksgiving"), the bizarre ("Tony the Lawn Slug"), etc. As 'follow' suggests--there's more to come.

Part Two--Beyond the Truth of Day to Day: The second part sticks mainly to the surreal; much of it is, indeed, beyond the truth and routine of life. "Marsden Went First", for example, reads like a scary campfire

story. Works like "Beyond the Black," and "Axanio" are places somewhere in my imagination.

Part Three--Where Redemption Hides Behind Each Fleeting Smile: Most of these pieces offer hope--though it's often tainted or even negated. I think that's what life is like much of the time; it gets your hope up--only to let you down that much harder. A lot of times a wrong choice can change everything; "The Backwoods Kid" is a perfect example. "Jesus of Lakin" is based on a personal experience, though it seemed more unreal than real at the time; in fact, it still does. I know it's rather on the dark side, but who in his right mind is going to fail to put this piece in a segment entitled "Where Redemption Hides . . ." ?

Part Four--And Damnation Awaits With Open Arms: The final segment deals entirely with the dark side of life. These works reflect a seriously bad time in my life; there ain't a lot of humor here, folks. "My Sweet Rosemary" came out of one of the worst nightmares I've ever had. Without going into too much detail, I'll just say that I wrote it, thinking about the unbearable loss of a close family member. To this idea, I decided to burden the main character with a nasty hangover and a situation I pray nobody reading this will ever have to face.

Part One:

Follow Me, My Son

Tony the Lawn Slug

To start with, Tony wasn't really a slug--much less a *lawn* slug, whatever that may be, but Moses Moses, the oldest inhabitant of Mylar, Kansas, decreed that the odd looking thing *was* a lawn slug, and, by God, that's what it became.

People in Mylar listened to Moses Moses. After all, he *was* the person who predicted when the droughts would begin and end, offered advice on when to dig up the various crops, and mixed up remedies that worked wonders on ailing cows and goats.

The town folk trusted Moses Moses; they looked up to him despite the persistent rumor that he could be seen on certain evenings wandering naked through the same field in which Horseshit Harry, the legendary Mylar swindler, had been hanged by a group of angry citizens in 1891. So when Douglas and Dudley, the Douglas twins, first spotted the strange creature in their back yard, they captured it, put it in a moldy potato sack, and headed straight for the wise old man's house.

An hour later, a large crowd had gathered in Moses Moses's yard. He sat on his front porch rocking chair and fished a Camel out of a pocket in his bib overalls, staring intently at the people. "Well," he said, firing up the cigarette, "it look like a slug. By God it do--Where is it again?" Several fingers pointed to it. Moses Moses squinted his eyes, took another draw from the Camel and nodded his head. "Yep, it's a lawn slug. Heared about 'em but never did see one before now, by God. Whose is it again?"

"Ours sir," announced the Douglas boys in unison. "Its name is Tony."

To be fair to the old man, Tony *did* resemble a slug in texture and movement; it appeared to be slimy and ventured across the grass at the rate of about a foot and hour. It was approximately ten inches across, fairly round and looked like a mound of clear jelly with patches of gray thrown in here

and there. Two milky circles, which everyone took to be eyes, were situated near the end that began any movement. Tony stood--or lay--some two inches high.

Over the next few weeks, Tony became a favorite pet of the community's kids. After school, they would head to the Douglas house and try to play with the blob-like thing. Eight-year-old Larry Lawrence discovered that Tony was not partial to fire or being struck by a baseball. Jimmy James, a third grader, was the first to learn that chopping Tony in half did not constitute the end of its existence; the determined creature simply backed itself toward its former part and fused into a whole again. The children watching the feat squealed in delight.

It was Dudley Douglas who finally managed to not only discover Tony's dietary needs but actually teach it an honest-to-God trick; Dudley observed the fact that the flies which landed on Tony were suddenly enveloped by its gelatinous body, never more to surface. Thereafter, the lad spent a large portion of his time peeling all sorts of winged insects from his parents' fly strips and using them to entice Tony to obey his commands. When Dudley, persevering and dedicated, finally managed to wrangle a stunt from his eerie friend, the enterprising lad decided that a public performance was in order.

Three quarters of Mylar turned out that cool autumn afternoon. Douglas Douglas and Jimmy James stood at the north gate of the Stuart farm. They took the three dollar admittance fee from the adults and children, handing them crude, handmade tickets in return. The throng then walked toward a roped-off section of the field where a yellow poster had been nailed to a ladder. On it, in red and green magic marker, was penned the following: Dudley Douglas and friends Present The Magical Talents of Tony the Amazing Lawn Slug.

The crowd shifted from foot to foot as Tony's opening act emerged from behind three old blankets which smelled like moth balls and served as theatrical curtains. Sheila, Sharon, and Shelly Stuart,

adorned in majorette costumes, curtsied and began twirling their batons to the tune of Terry Jacks's "Seasons in the Sun," which blared from stereo speakers situated at either side of the blankets. When the chorus had sounded for what seemed like the eightieth time, Sharon, the youngest sister, dropped her baton once again and ran crying into the arms of her brother, Stuart.

After the two remaining Stuart sisters had retrieved their batons from the ground near the onlookers, the theme from "2001, a Space Odyssey"--recognized by the audience as Elvis's intro music--sounded from the speakers. Dudley Douglas, attired in a purple terrycloth bath robe with glitter glued on it, appeared from stage left, carrying a large, round hat box. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "in this box is the world's most greatest lawn slug. And here he is . . . Tony the Amazing Lawn Slug!"

The crowd whooped and applauded as Dudley removed the lid from the hat box and dumped Tony on the cool, dry ground. "The Amazing Tony will now fetch a stick," the grinning boy proudly proclaimed, "something no other lawn slug has done before . . . ever!"

Dudley pulled a popsicle stick from his shirt pocket and dropped it some two feet from Tony. The audience held its breath as the day's main attraction, slowly but surely, started after it. Women squealed and men gasped as Tony squirmed and slithered forward. Dudley smiled broadly and pointed at Tony, to make sure that the spectators wouldn't lose their concentration.

An hour and a half later, Tony had made his way to within eight inches of the popsicle stick. Twelve people remained in their folding chairs for Dudley's sensational performance, half of whom were either dozing or attempting to do so. Dudley walked toward the people and announced enthusiastically, "He's almost there! Tony's almost got the stick." Five more audience members stood up, yawned, stretched and turned toward the gate. Watching them leave, Dudley bent forward, picked up a large rock and fired it at the world's most talented lawn slug.

After another seventy minutes, Tony had retrieved the stick and began its return journey. Dudley, having left a half hour earlier, was now at home, parked in front of the TV. The sun was setting as a fierce cold front began to push through Kansas. By morning, a thick layer of frost covered Mylar and transformed Tony's jello-like body into something as close to marble as a lawn slug's anatomy would allow.

Two days later, Sheriff Harvey found the body of Moses Moses, nude and half frozen beneath a dying oak tree. Beside him, lay a Bible and a book on witchcraft, both ancient, tattered and caked with ice. There was a smile on the old man's face. Horseshit Harry would have been proud.

Lunch Hour

The sun beat
Relentlessly upon the Metropolis
Full of creatures
Scurrying about
With little thought
Except "Fuck with me not."
The young man's hot skin
Pressed against the tower's cool
Burnt-orange brick.
He watched
The creatures pass.
"Get a job,"
Said a middle-age banker.
"Got one," he replied.
"Holdin' up the building?"
Asked another.
"Yeah, sure am."
For hours, he leaned,
Motionless, determined.
"Holdin' up the building?"
A creature asked, winking.
Original, he thought.
He looked at his watch
And stepped away, quickly walking
Down Sixty-Sixth Street,
Then turning right.
Two blocks later, he heard the rumble
And roar as tons of steel
And burnt-orange bricks crashed,
The twanging pitches
Of snapping cables,
The glass shattering, raining
Down on the screaming
Creatures. He wondered
If it had fallen
Beautifully, taking out
The legal building
Across the street
or had toppled
Clumsily, like a drunken giant.

Thanksgiving

Today I drive
To visit my family. We'll talk,
Laugh, scream, dance, then
Journey to our appointed
Rooms to rest
In peace.

Tomorrow I'll have
A vicious tension headache,
Bolt from the round
Wooden table which will
Sag beneath the weight
Of the delicious carcass, return
To my appointed
Room, and weep
Like a rain cloud
Till something snaps.
I'll roam the old
Neighborhood, butcher knife
In hand, seeking out
Stray dogs.
I'll build a fire
On Friday, in the home
Of ol' man Knapp,
Who's as tepid, dirty
And dangerous
As tap water.

One year from
Now, I won't talk
Laugh, scream, dance,
Journey to any appointed room,
Or exist.

Driving Me to Drink

For the last several years, America has had an obsession with getting drunk drivers off the road. It all started when more and more parents began losing their tikes to some poor guy who'd probably had a hard day and wanted nothing more than to throw back some additional cold ones while heading home from a nice, cozy bar.

Pretty soon, these mothers and fathers, staring once too often at an empty chair during dinner, grew as angry as a hooker who's misplaced her syringe. Before you could say, "Gangway," various groups formed, all having a common agenda: lock up people who drink and drive--then throw away the key.

Because of organizations such as MADD and SADD, many patrolmen are forced to spend valuable time in pursuit of some tipsy motorist who's just left a somersaulting granny in his wake. So while Officer Miller is demonstrating how to walk a chalk line to a half-conscious citizen, two blocks away, a teen gang is counting its profits from another drug sell.

And what happens to the unfortunate lawbreaker? Sadly, by the next morning, chances are pretty good that he won't recall anything prior to opening his last Bud Lite. He'll be wondering what in the hell he's doing in a cell, attired in urine-soaked jeans and a shirt caked with vomit.

Consider his plight: not only must he deal with a ferocious hangover, but now he has to notify wife and parents of his faux pas, hoping to gain sympathy and, more importantly, bail money. Think of the weeks ahead--weeks full of lawyer fees, worrying about a law suit, probable jail term and more painful hangovers (not to mention the guilt he feels about denting the family roadster).

Sure, it's important to remember the victims of alcohol-related accidents, but a lot of their faces are on public service announcements which air about every fifteen minutes anyway. After a while, TV viewers get sick and tired of the same damn video clips which feature the grinning mugs of Tom, Dick

and Harriet at the brightest moment of their short lives. The date of demise is superimposed over these poorly shot testaments (supposedly to make the fact that they can't breathe any longer more real). In the background, a cello whines relentlessly while a somber voice bewails their misfortune and warns us against the horrors of mixing a high ball with a Toyota.

I'm aware that my views aren't all that popular with today's 'cool' society, but most Americans aren't experienced drinkers. No, until you've taken those first couple of gulps from a vodka and tonic or slammed down a few brews, you'll never realize that warm euphoric sensation which begins somewhere near the diaphragm. From there, it slowly crawls up to invade the brain, meeting the neurons--those pesky little devils which insist on firing rapidly and continuously. "What's your hurry?" the sensation seems to ask. After some more drinks, the neurons begin to realize that a respite might, indeed, be due.

Once the booze does its job--relaxing you and making you feel as if you could conquer any goddamn thing you want--the veteran drinker knows that a carefree excursion via an automobile is just what the analyst ordered. Think about it. You're serene, comfortable; what are the odds that you'll have an accident? Don't most mishaps occur when people are rushing around, angry and hopped up on caffeine? You bet they do. If folks would use but ten percent of the thinking power which the good Lord assigned to country 'music' enthusiasts, they'd understand the benefits of alcohol (and, perhaps, be a bit more cautious when confronted by drivers under its control).

It isn't that I think it's a brilliant idea to put some slobbering fool, who's been sucking on a bottle of 100 proof whiskey all day, behind the steering wheel; obviously, we need to exercise some common sense. If a person is too shit-faced to get his automobile started and in drive within a reasonable amount of time (say five minutes), I say that he probably shouldn't be driving. I know that this will sound harsh to a lot of my friends, but I honestly believe it's a rule by which we all can live. Remember

this simple phrase to insure a safe and satisfying experience on the blacktop: If you're not rolling in five, you really shouldn't drive.

Are, as so many people insist, motorists with an appallingly high blood-alcohol level truly at such a great risk? The statistics don't seem to support this idea. In fact, thanks to the wondrous numbing power of this divine nectar, many drunken drivers survive even the most severe crashes, often staggering away from the scene with no more than a broken arm and pounding head. Moreover, frequent drinkers may even be cognizant enough to hotfoot it back home, without being spotted by busybodies, and call the police to report their cars being stolen.

Let's face it, human beings can't live without being challenged. And I can think of nothing more challenging than trying to negotiate a half-ton of steel through heavy traffic while keeping one eye closed--in order to view the correct number of oncoming automobiles. I find it offensive that society would rid me of such a brisk adventure.

Don't get me wrong. I would much rather not see little Jimmy writhing next to the curb like a puppy that's just taken a chomp on a live electrical wire (the lad suddenly not in as great a rush as he'd thought he was in only a moment before). No sir, like any good citizen, it would probably upset me to witness an adolescent getting the Christ knocked out of his or her frail body by a bewildered wino.

Arresting every beer-swilling driver who happens to venture across the middle line into a station wagon packed with wide-eyed, gasping family members, however, is not the answer. More safety programs and classes to educate both children and adults need to be implemented in order to make the sober element in our population more aware of the unpredictable tendencies of our many sloshed travelers.

Once kids learn that it may not be the best idea to step onto a thoroughfare when a happy-go-lucky alcoholic is careening into the concrete abutment twenty yards away; once drivers

realize that they should probably pull off the road until the speeding Dodge that's weaving in and out of imaginary traffic, empty beer cans firing out of its windows, passes; then, maybe, we can turn our attention to the real problems plaguing our great country: potholes, high insurance rates, and faulty air bags.

Mr. James

Mr. James was dull.
He stayed in his apartment,
Master of his VCR,
Supreme ruler of the remote.
He ate, slept, watched TV,
Dreading the moment he had to go
To his part-time job, rejoicing
When his short shift ended,
And he could go back
To his electronic friends.
But in his dreams--Ah his dreams--
He was a god,
Famous in film, music
And literary circles.
He'd strut into the best restaurants,
Three beauties attending his every need.
If life were only like his fantasies,
He often thought. But, of course,
It isn't. Mr. James died
A lonely man, stricken by a heart attack
And a hard truth.

Land of the Giants

I fell into an open hood in West Virginia.
"Gimme the fuckin' half inch wrench!"
barked the man with a dirty, backwards cap
and three teeth. I ran
toward the windshield, oil and beer
splashing the innards
of a dying Ford. Crouching,
I watched the hairy, sweating arm
tense--relax--tense.
Metal sang. I felt strange, alone
in a world where perfection
is measured between a spit
of Skoal and the clink
of an opening Bud Lite.
Dancing an impromptu jig, I laughed
with glee as Jim Bob
dropped a nut.

The Great Bodini

stood on the wooden platform
above the pier, looking down at the thousands
gathered to witness his greatness.
The icy Hudson hungrily engulfed
and spat itself back out--sixty feet
beneath him. He shed his amazing purple-
glitter robe and raised his hands.
The people cheered; even those in straitjackets
convulsed. Assistants bound him
in polished chains and secured the padlocks.
Snap. Click. Snap. He was ready.
Without a word, he plummeted
into the freezing water;
knuckles cracked, and tense coughs
filled the cold air. Ten minutes later,
a pale woman screamed as he surfaced--
only a few chains binding him--
and floated face-down.
The crowd erupted in orgasmic
delight. "A god!" one shouted.
"He's changed himself into wood!"
screamed another. Then he sank, slowly,
majestically. "He's turned himself
into lead!" cried a young mother.
Clouds began to roll in
from the west.
It would be a bitter night.

Freeze Out

We watched the fire
start in Murphy's bedroom.
Crackling and grunting like an acid-
drenched dwarf, it danced
into the kitchen and swayed
along the plaster walls and unpolished floor
to the living room. Kenny laughed
and opened another beer. I lit
a cigarette and thought
of a freezing night, years ago,
when Murphy had been
like us: electric eyes, vital signs,
pushing against anything
that slowed us down. And I heard
Muddy Waters, saw that smiling, black
face shining in the spotlight,
his hand grasping
a white handkerchief
which sopped up the sweat
like a biscuit stealing syrup.
I felt good. Hell, yeah.
And I smiled as Murphy screamed,
hitting a note that came
from the soul,
just like Muddy.

Part Two

Beyond the Truth of Day to Day

Bonfire

The golden flames, two hundred stories high, tear
Countless holes through the thick and stagnant night.
Wood and leather crackled, snaps. Red and sore
Eyes, windows without rooms, stare without sight.

Forward they come, heeding the call of he
Who promised salvation, to cleanse their souls
Of dangerous knowledge. Impurity
Must be revealed. They stoke the holy coals.

At last, he stands, spectral gray, his cold skin
And brittle hair, his clothes as white as pools
Of light. He clutches ideas encased within
Their molding covers, etched with artful tools.

"Into the smoke!" he screams. "Into the flame
Of righteousness!" And the people obey,
Walking into the fire they'd made. Then come
Silence. And the true light begins to fade.

Marsden Went First

Me 'n Billy 'n Jason was best friends since before we started school even. We did everything together: hung out at the Seven-Eleven, played video games, cut classes and messed around in Thompson's woods. The summer before we went into the sixth grade, Jason got hold of some of his dad's dirty magazines, and we spent a lotta time lookin' at 'em in the shitty clubhouse Billy's uncle built for us. We was pretty stupid back then 'n didn't really know how to use 'em like you're supposed to. That was over a year ago--before Marsden moved into the neighborhood.

Marsden was our age, but since he came too late in the year to start classes, we didn't really get to know him till summer vacation. I remember that me 'n Jason was bustin' bottles behind Holland's Shoe Store when Billy brought Marsden 'round to meet us. He was pretty small, smaller even than Billy, and had red hair 'n' a whole shit-load of freckles. Since he was the new kid, we all gave him hell for the first few weeks, but he took it pretty good so we let him hang with us.

The temperature started goin' up to the mid-nineties in the middle of June, and the humidity made it feel like you was walkin' with some invisible force pushin' against you 'n' tryin' to drill you right into the sidewalk. We didn't spend too much time indoors though; we preferred our muggy hell to puttin' up with all the bitchin' our folks was always doin' in their nice air conditioned houses. It wasn't so bad anyway, really, cause when you're doin' something fun, you don't notice the heat so much, and we was always findin' cool stuff to do--especially after Justin found out that Marsden had one of those green army tents.

Every night for about three weeks, the four of us camped out in the vacant lot across from Marsden's house. His dad even cut the tall grass 'n' weeds for us, thinkin' that his good deed would impress the other parents; of course they could've cared shit-all about anything goin' on beyond the

range of their TVs. Man, that was the life: bein' on our own, sneakin' 'round the neighborhood till two or three o'clock in the morning, eggin' the homes of assholes like old man Stetz 'n Black-eye Wilson (the biggest prick in Dale Elementary--he got his nickname by knockin' the Christ outta any younger guy unlucky enough to cross his path).

Anyway, around this time there was this real horrible murder in town; Mrs. Simmons, Curly Simmons' wife, had been found with her belly ripped open and a buncha organs 'n shit missin' from inside her. It was pretty gross stuff, but it gave the four of us something to talk about.

"I heard that her stomach was carved up so bad that you could look in 'n see her spinal cord," Jason said one night in the tent.

"Yeah," said Billy, "my dad told mom that the body didn't have hardly any blood left in her--damn, this tent smells like a wet tennis shoe, Marsden. Why 'n hell don't you get your old man to hose it down?"

Marsden ignored him. "Wonder where Mr. Simmons went?" he whispered. We all got kinda quiet for a few minutes, thinkin' 'bout the man who had worked at Dale's Wardrobe for as long as anyone could remember, always wore the same gray suit, 'n never smiled or looked you in the eyes too long. But the oddest thing about him was his hair, packed way high on his head, real thick n' snow white. Nobody really knew him very good, but all of a sudden everyone in town claimed to be real close to him; of course, they all saw it comin'. Somethin' just wasn't right with him, they'd all tell you.

I remembered hearin' my dad tell someone that Mr. Bodkin thought he saw Curly's truck headin' south. "He's probably in Dayton or somewhere," I said. "I heard he's got relatives down there."

"Shit," said Jason, "he ain't goin' to go see any of his family. They'd catch his ass for sure if he tried doin' anything that stupid--Look what I got from my old man's cooler." He reached under the

head of his sleeping bag and pulled out a can of beer. After poppin' the tab, he took a long gulp and passed the can around.

Five minutes later, it was empty, and Marsden stood up 'n started staggering around like he was drunk. Jason looked at me 'n Billy and winked. "Man Marsden, you shouldn'ta drunk that stuff so fast," he said.

"Yeah, you're shit-faced, man," I said. Marsden gave us a big, dumb grin 'n began to stagger worse than before. The three of us continued to egg him on to see how far he would go.

"If Mars is really drunk, he'll pull out his pecker 'n wag it around," Billy told us. Immediately, Marsden unzipped and waved his small white penis in the air while Jason, me and Billy doubled over from laughin' so hard; Billy tryin' to keep his flashlight steady and aimed at Marsden's whacker. It was a great night and one of the last times I can remember bein' happy.

The next Sunday, Jason ran over to my house, all hot 'n sweaty 'n breathin' real hard, his long, blond hair plastered all over his shoulders 'n face.

"Hey Chuck," he said, all outta breath, "guess who I just saw drivin' up Washington Street?" Jason knew that I hated guessing games, but he always tried to make me play along anyway just so he would have the privilege of sayin' I was wrong.

"Curly Simmons," he said in a low whisper. I woulda probably said he was full of shit-all except he was so damn anxious to tell me, that he didn't even make me blare out a half dozen names to satisfy him first. Another thing that kinda made me believe him is that Washington Street is shit-all terrible; nobody drives down it unless there's a wreck on the main road cause it's got all kindsa holes, 'n there's always

broken glass on it cause that's where the high school stoners party on weekends on account of the cops won't never chase them and risk fuckin' up their squad cars.

I guess I should add that around this time, Jason was gettin' pretty heavy into the Encyclopedia Brown books. They was about the boy genius who solved crimes 'n shit that the police couldn't figure out. So Jason started thinkin' he could be this great detective, 'n his parents would kiss his ass and stop worshipin' his older sister or something. Anyway, he came up with this plan to trap Curly.

On Tuesday night, the four of us was inside the tent, huddled 'round the map that me 'n' Jason had drew up. I guess it wasn't much really, just a piece of notebook paper that had a triangle that was supposed to be our tent 'n an arrow that pointed to a square which stood for Curly's house, three blocks away, scribbled on it. We didn't care, though; we all thought that it was as cool as anything Mission Impossible's Mr. Phelps could come up with.

"Now Billy 'n Marsden will go down Felcher Street in five minutes and wait by the Roosevelt's tree with the swing on it," Jason said. "Me 'n Chuck will start down Holland Street two minutes later. We'll meet up with you guys there." I know that there was no reason that we couldn't have all went together, but it just seemed more secret agent-like to split up.

Seven minutes later, me 'n Jason was on our way, tryin' to stay away from the street lamps and hidin' behind trees 'n bushes 'n shit. It was pretty cool. I remember hearin' Jason hummin' the theme to Mission Impossible under his breath the last few yards before we reached the Roosevelts.

Thinkin' back, it seems pretty stupid that four guys gettin' ready to start the seventh grade would have the balls to try 'n capture some nut who had gutted his own wife, but I really don't think that me, Billy 'n Marsden actually believed Curly had come home; Jason had changed his story about spotting

him so many times that even *he* admitted that it may not have been Curly, maybe just somebody who looked kinda like him. Anyway, it was something to do.

It had rained hard that afternoon, coolin' things down and makin' everything smell real nice 'n fresh, the honeysuckle especially. I remember that my tennis shoes was soaked 'n all muddy as we crept through the high grass 'n weeds in Curly's front yard.

The Simmons' house was old 'n gray, with paint peelin' off all over it. There was a lotta graffiti on it since the murder; someone had drawn a picture of Popeye standin' over the bloody body of Olive Oyl. He was holdin' a real big knife, and one of them balloons was comin' out of his mouth. In it was written, "I'm strong to the finish cause I hacked me Mrs. I'm Curly the ripper man."

Since Marsden was the skinniest of us, Jason appointed him the job of going in first, through one of the windows that the stoners had busted out. He didn't want to, of course, but me 'n the other two guys started callin' him chicken shit 'n stuff. "Come on," Jason said, "just be careful of the glass. You'll have your flashlight, and it's only about five feet to the door. We'll be right on the other side when you unlock it."

"Yeah, come on, Mars," I whispered. "You know that Jason's just fulla shit-all about seein' Curly anyway." I felt kinda sorry for him; you could see tears in his eyes, 'n he seemed so helpless standin' on the wooden porch. At last he started creepin' toward the window, his flashlight on and its beam shakin' like crazy with every step.

He had just swung his left leg through the window when, all of a sudden, it looked like his body jumped up and into the house. There was a bunch of noises that sounded like someone was tryin' to tear the place apart. Me 'n Billy 'n Jason jumped off the porch and ran about twenty yards from the house before turnin' back to see what was goin' on.

You could hear furniture bein' overturned 'n glass breakin' near the front door as Marsden screamed the worst soundin' scream I've ever heard--before or since. It was high pitched, like a girl's and was cut off by a horrible gurglin' sound. The three of us stood there, not able to make a sound or a move, just starin' at the window where Marsden had went inside.

As bad as all that was, the scariest part of the whole night happened next. A small, round circle of light suddenly shined through the window we was lookin' at, aimin' straight at Jason, then Billy, then me, blindin' us from seein' anything behind it. Whoever held the flashlight took a good, long time, shinin' it on us like they didn't want to forget our faces. Jason called out, "Is that you, Marsden? Are you all right?" Then the light clicked off, and the three of us ran like hell for our homes.

Over the next few weeks, the three of us had to repeat what happened that night again 'n again to the police and all our parents. It seemed that the cops was tryin' to trip me up, readin' parts of my statement back to me with a couple things changed to see if I'd notice. Finally they seemed satisfied and left me alone.

Just about the whole town volunteered to help search for Marsden, hopin' to somehow find him alive despite all the blood the cops saw inside the house. I remember tellin' his mom 'n dad that he might be okay to make them feel better, but I knew he was a goner cause of the gurglin' sound he made that night. It wasn't till late July that some campers found what was left of him floatin' in Gravel Creek, fifteen miles north of Cincinnati.

A month into the new school year, Billy disappeared while he was walkin' home. They found his English 'n math books on the sidewalk. That stirred up a buncha shit that ended up with Sheriff Shorty Boggins gettin' fired over not doin' his job, but there wasn't much he coulda done really. I knew right

off who got him. I think most of the town knew it too, but it seemed like nobody wanted to connect Curly to the disappearance cause they couldn't stand to think about another kid bein' ripped apart. They just didn't want to believe that their town had its own monster.

By November, Jason 'n' his folks sold their home and moved to Sweetsford, Louisiana. M 'n him had grown apart after Marsden got killed, makin' friends with different groups of guys 'n gettin' interested in different things, so I didn't really feel like I'd lost a close friend until my parents got a letter from his mom sayin' that he drowned in some river while swimmin'.

She wrote that his body hadn't been found yet, but the currents were so bad where he'd been seen that the cops told them that even a strong swimmer couldn'ta made it out alive. I knew right away that it was bullshit. Jason never did like swimmin' all that much anyway; you had to practically twist his arm to get him to go to Shawnee Pool with you, even on the hottest summer day. He woulda never have dived in a river by himself, not Jason. I knew what really happened.

Like I said, that was over a year ago. A lot's changed since then. I started havin' periods of black outs where I'd do some pretty bad stuff; gettin' into fights 'n bustin' up things, shit like that. Mom and dad took me to a half dozen doctors 'n shrinks. All they did was run more tests 'n prescribe new medications. Nothin' seems to help.

I feel really bad for mom; she's always cryin' whenever she comes to see me, even though the aides clean me up and cut back some of the dope they shoot into me so I'll look nice 'n be able to talk without slurrin' my words. When she leaves, they start zappn' me with Thorazine again 'n lock me up in my room for my safety.

Safety--now that's a funny word. I don't know anyone who's really safe; I've learned that since Mrs. Simmons 'n three real good friends died, and I know I'm next. I don't kid myself like my parents do, thinkin' that their boy is tucked *safely* away inside the mental ward of Ellis Hospital, here in Ohio.

No. One day Curly will find me just like he found Billy, who was walkin' home in broad daylight 'n Jason, clear over in Sweetsford. Sometimes I think I hear him outside my room at night, fiddlin' with the lock 'n sharpenin' his big knife. One day last week I thought I caught a glimpse of him while I was bein' led to recreation. He was dressed all in white, his big bushy hair piled higher than ever. I didn't say nothin'; they'da just pumped more shit into me.

Last night I dreamt that me, Billy, Jason 'n Marsden was old men, standin' in Curly's front yard, watchin' the old gray house burnin' up. I remember turnin' to talk to them, then wakin' up. I started cryin', thinkin' how things would never be like they once was and wonderin' if Jason 'n Billy had had the same nightmare that I have--the one that always ends with an invisible monster glarin' through a broken window. But most of all, I was thinkin' 'bout Marsden and what he saw that night when the light went out.

Weapons

BB guns, lashing tongues,
White knuckles aiming
With black intent,
Clever words timed
Strategically, silent kisses
Bestowed with no intent,
Vicious thrusts
Striving to satisfy
The thruster, A bombs
Benign lies, See Willie die.
Deceit.

Victoria

Somewhere in the far distance, someone is burning
white pine. My eyes water
as I throw down the shovel and begin spreading
the red and orange and yellow leaves
over the mound of dark, wet earth. I stand,
sweating, deep in Mason's forest,
as the first cold winds
of autumn blow. The smell
of the dying honeysuckle bring back memories.

She ran like a lioness, laughing
in the tall, green grass,
believing in an ever
widening freedom, her soft, white feet
finding a path as she smiled, turning back
and parting her long, blonde hair to search
for me. I'd take her--again and again--
my mind racing as our bodies thrashed,
melted into one. We grew
apart.

I could still smell her
on my callused hands years later. Vividly.
I'd awaken in the lonely afternoons, calling
her name. She came
back to Union County
when my daddy died--the same
soft, white skin--but different, beyond
description, denying, lying, beautifully
aloof.

I pant and spit
on the damp earth, deciding
upon a smooth, pink stone
to mark this spot.
Staring long and hard, searching
for the slightest flaw, satisfied.
I'll come here again
some day and meanwhile pray
nobody else does.

An Undertaker's First Draft of an Ode to Jesse James Upon Hearing of the Noted Outlaw's Tragic
Death

Jesse James is dead, a bullet
Through his head--Shot
From the gun of Robert
Ford. And the people do cry
Because Jesse died and went
To be with the Lordy.
Oh, the Lordy do moan.
The bullet did traverse
Through the back
Lateral skull and completely
Obliterated the cerebellum,
Sending shards upward which perforated
Much of the frontal lobe . . .

Carrying a Torch

Where do I begin? Well, when I was young, maybe seven or eight-years-old, I began blacking out during strenuous physical activity--just dropping in my tracks and lying unconscious for several minutes.

Although my friends enjoyed this neat disability, it was quite hard for me to adjust. I'd be running a relay race one minute and in the next, spitting out dirt and clumps of grass, struggling to my feet and finding that half the damn school was gathered around me, staring in rapt fascination or horror.

By the time I reached fourteen, a clear resonant voice found its way into my lapses of consciousness. "Carry on my work," it said. "I have chosen you to be my protégé."

At sixteen, a face began to accompany the voice; I could finally see who was issuing the demands. Being remarkably perceptive, I realized that the bard himself, William Shakespeare, was handing me the torch, instilling within me even greater genius than I already possessed.

Well, maybe it could have been like that--maybe it should have. It's a pretty good thought, and it fits right into my ego-driven personality.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons I write; I can create any character that I choose. And sometimes--when my mind and pen are flowing along in perfect accord--I can almost feel that character come to life.

After all, writing is a sort of dichotomy: you may think you're in charge, fleshing out a setting, researching, drawing from experience. But, eventually, the story takes over, writing itself while you sit back and marvel at *your* brilliance.

prayer written at age six:

God, why did you let Chopper die? He was a good doggie. Do you have wings? Can you fly? I found Uncle Justin in the laundry room and saw him and Chopper. He was breathing hard too! And Chopper was howling. I didn't tell no one about Uncle Justin bleeding or that I hid the hammer like I did. God, can Uncle Justin fly up there? Does he have wings? Can Chopper fly? Is he still howling?

I've read that a lot of writers have these amazing, vivid recollections of their first awareness, their first memories of being alive. Many of these accounts are very inspiring.

My first remembrance is of staring at a polished hardwood floor, watching in fascination, my drool form a pool on its surface. Maybe past experience isn't that great to draw from after all.

poem written at age ten:

Oh Lord, my dog is dead.
 Chopper was his name.
 He died and left me all alone.
 No more will I hear his voice.
 He ran into a laundry room
 Because of another's choice.
 And now the police visit me
 And ask me about things.
 But I know someday I'll be with you
 And listen as Chopper sings.

I write because I can; because I need to; because if I didn't, I would be so full of hate and despair that I would, quite possibly, put a gun inside my mouth and blow my brains all over the nice cream-colored paneling in my rent-controlled apartment.

poem written at age eleven:

One day they'll be sorry
 They made me take these pills
 And live in this ugly place.
 Take your pills; they're good for you!
 Take your pills; they're good for you!
 I hate them and their damn pills!
 They make the voices meaner.

Nothing much matters in this life, not really. I mean, you strive to maintain a decent existence, to overcome setbacks, to educate your mind--and in about forty or fifty years (if you're lucky), you'll be as dead as John Kennedy.

You go through each day thinking about the people who are important to you, who you want to live long, healthy lives. But, of course, your wants don't mean much. So what can you do?

As I said, I can write. I can sit down with my pen and paper and try to make sense of this fucked-up world, to strive to understand why my precious nephew was born paralyzed from the waist down and spends his days in a wheelchair, hooked up to an oxygen machine and bored as hell because other fourteen-year-olds would rather play ball or go to the mall than give him the time of day.

I write to discover why a God who allows unspeakable suffering in this world and (so says the Bible) advocates unthinkable pain in the next is revered on Sunday morning TV.

Writing, you see, opens closed doors, doors through which I peer and, sometimes, like the romantic poets, find a universe full of possibilities--if not answers. In this universe, I can dream of alternatives, question certainties, evaluate the probable, and discard the crap that's been thrown down my throat for years.

poem written at age fifteen:

Why? Why am I an outcast?
What good is it for me
To say I'm innocent after
So many years and denials
And wounds and trials?
I dream of a grave
Covered in soiled rags,
Wrung from senseless washers,
Warmed by society's dryers.
I run naked into the street
With my best friend,
A collie, pursued by
A man with alcohol
Breath--a hammer in his hand.

When I was younger, I felt the need to leave something behind me after I die, something which would inform humanity that a person named Ronald Joseph Strider once existed and actually cared about what happens to people. I've abandoned that futile, egoistic dream. I've given up on the idea that, like Holden Caulfield, I can save the children who fall from the rye field.

Perhaps I'm far too jaded to believe in limitless possibilities any longer, but I do know that writing recaptures--temporarily--some of those lofty aspirations. They may be lies--but what beautiful lies.

poem written at age seventeen:

Sparks: popping and crackling

Like wet oak in a volcano.

Tiny, glowing people-pets,

Too quick to study,

Plod back and forth--day

And night, stamping, stomping,

Laughing at my pounding

Brain.

Axanio

There is no truth
outside of Axanio. The god
of Axanio say so. He
pure of intention and eager
to please we who worship
him in a holy way. Me steadfast,
holding tight
to what he write. There is
no truth but what he say.
My wife scream
in birth--red waves
fill god's floor and what more--
there is no truth
outside of Axanio. It been proved
before. Me room close
tight, and all night the screams
of them who trapped
like me. Screams, they
don't stop, get bigger
like shadows on the walls
when dark-time come.
I want god
to see how I been--
lay low, say not one thing.
Then he believe I know
there is no truth
outside of Axanio.

The Demons Came Last Night

The demons came last night, just as they said they would.
I was sitting in my study, reading my unpublished novel
About a young boy abandoned by his father in Alaska.
The air grew cold, and I saw my breath. I felt like an orphan.

The wind roared, and the curtains knocked over my bowling trophy.
It shattered like ice on concrete. I shivered and closed the window.
I rang for Durwood, but Durwood would not come. The lights went out.

Then the wailing Started, filling, shaking me.
Booming sounds, like a drunken giant's footsteps, jarred the house.
I cowered beneath the oak table, a child pulling the covers over his head.
The front door banged open; in stepped a figure in shadowy gray.

It turned its head and looked at me and smiled. I wept.
Pointing a sharp red talon toward my face, it vomited.
The stench hit me, and I screamed like a boy in the wilderness of Alaska. Alone

No words can describe what happened during the next few hours.
My hair is now white, and my mind cannot concentrate
On anything for more than a few seconds. I've destroyed
My manuscript and am writing a book about prayer.

Beyond the Black

When Holland Smith was but a child,
Hiding 'neath a table at his father's inn,
He'd listen entranced, to the long walkers,
A hardy stock, warmed by ale and gin.

Such wondrous tales of heroic deeds,
And each long walker bore witness to the other:
"Now Colin were there, by God, 'n Janx,
When I slew those two thieves. Aye, two 'n another."

But the stories Holland loved the best
Concerned the wee folk who lived far, far away.

So Holland grew as children do
And journeyed to the strange lands beyond the black
Waters where even the long walkers feared
To tread; "Aye, go beyond the black--ya won't come back."

He lived off berries, roots and game.
Year by year, his pace grew slow, his beard gray.
And oft times he'd wake from a cold, rattling sleep
To spy a tiny shadow laugh then dart away.

Time and again, so very close
Came Holland to his prey. And always the wee folk
Mocked him, dancing just beyond his sight and reach.
Then came a vision, so clear and true that he woke

As if he'd been asleep and not awake.
Reborn was Holland Smith or so his myth contends.
Near a village named Hoddenleaf, on a cold, wet autumn day,
He stepped into a dense forest and was never seen again.

Part Three

Where Redemption Hides Behind

Each Fleeting Smile,

Backwoods Kid

She was a backwoods kid.
She had it all. Grown men
Would crumple before her,
Gladly. Long blonde hair, her face
Unmarked by money
Or pain. She floated
Through high school,
Adored by peers and honored
In the local press. The world was
This backwood kid's.

Today she watches Oprah
And her seven kids. She waits
For her husband to return
From work and prays
That if he's drunk,
He won't be swinging at the past.

Look Behind You

Soft, blue eyes with a deadly stare
Devour all caught unaware.
No hope of forgiveness anywhere
When the only sight you choose to share
Is just another fight against boredom.

The rich sit tall behind a mask of luck
While aborted dreams like thorns are stuck
Inside the fools whose lives they suck
Into accepting the blows struck
And waiting for them.

Salvation to some lies, being fed
On philosophy and books they've read,
The Gospel According to the Dead,
Where two are blind, and one is led
To the land of milk and honey.

Talking heads, electric lies--
Evangelists evangelize,
Weeping gold, they amortize,
Advertise their holy lies:
Lose your guilt and spend your money.

A madman reels on an angry horse,
Cursing at an unknown course--
Down infinity. Ceaseless remorse
Screams bitterly with swelling force,
But the voice inside is louder.

With a quick, deft move your conscience slips
Inside the mine where fool's gold drips.
You pass it off as others' trips.
Meanwhile your baby daughter strips
Away your knockout powder.

Inside the dens where the lonely play
Their chosen games and choose to stay
Outside the truth of day to day
Where everything is black and gray,
A temporary hell to hide the sorrow.

A battle's raging overhead,
And with each bomb I hide my head.
Like feathers, they heavily drop instead.
This town's asleep; it is not dead
And cannot hear the sound of no tomorrow.

A fog light pounds its holy fist
Against the rocks of amethyst
Where the drunken sailors can't resist
One more attempt at what's been missed:
Another futile day of empty laughter.

Now you recall your childhood days,
Remembering every painful phase,
The loved ones that you meant to praise,
The prayers you always meant to raise,
And all the ones, who got away, you can't go after.

Webs

Flawless, peerless grace
Adorns the dark, splintered corner.
A razor-soft network waving
Slowly in the warm wind,
Invites, ensnares a foreign foot
That dares invade
Its hollow, holy sphere.
Memories of a brief, sweet time
When I smiled in joy,
Believing that love and faith
Could still life's decay--
"Oh please, dear Jesus, don't
Take my mama away"--Memories,
Enticing, embracing, imprisoning
With their sticky, sweet
Lies and weaving me a lovely noose
With flawless, peerless grace.

Jesus of Lakin

Lakin State Hospital used to have two wings: one functioned as a nursing home, and the other was considered a correctional facility for adolescents. Aides at the hospital either worked exclusively with the geriatrics or the teens. Therefore, at the end of a long shift, it wasn't unusual to hear two tired employees berating both ends of the institution. One would bitch about how many kids had needed to be restrained that day while the other would be discussing the number of patients who'd soiled their beds. That was it. There was no middle ground; at Lakin, you either took shit or cleaned it.

Case No. 2143

Name: Herod, Jonathan David

Ht.: 6'0"

Wt.: 180 lbs.

Hr.: br.

Eyes: br.

Attending physician: Dr. E. Roquest

Comments: Pt. admitted to Lakin at 3:45 P.M. on March 28, 1984. Jonathan is a well-nourished, white male. He appears oriented to place and time and is careful as to his personal hygiene. No scars or lacerations noted. I'll refer pt. to Dr. Janner for dental examination in the A.M.

Dr. White requested urgent counseling for pt.: Jonathan believes himself to be Jesus Christ.

I worked with the adolescents for three and a half years. My title was Health Service Worker which meant that I was expected to break up fights, restrain violent teens, and interact with them (games, counseling, etc.) when they weren't in the mood to attack each other or the staff.

I was what you might call a sucker during my first few years at Lakin. I actually thought that I made a difference in the direction those troubled youths might take after being passed through the system. I'd be the first to jump into any physical altercation, to take off after a patient who had decided to run from the hospital grounds, and to cheerfully accept the fact that, upon several occasions, I was expected to control up to eighteen teen-age males by myself.

P.M. Report--4/2/84

Herod, Jonathan: Pt. quiet throughout most of shift--Does not interact a great deal with peers--Ate approx. 1/2 of P.M. meal--To bed at 9:00.

Note: Jonathan left small black diary in TV room while bathing after P.M. meal. Aide Jenkins noticed that over 100 pages are full of neatly written entries resembling something between Sanskrit and hieroglyphics. Diary returned to pts.' room.

From: Jules Jarmon, Lakin Administrator

To: **Gregory Richard H.S.W.**

After learning of your part in an incident which occurred on **2/13/83**, I would personally like to thank you: You were observed by staff members and judged to be acting above and beyond the call of duty and in the utmost professional manner despite volatile conditions.

Jules Jarmon

* A copy of this letter is being kept in your files.

As I opened my first commendation, a warm feeling rushed over my body. I reread the letter several times and vowed to uphold the hospital's faith in me. A couple of weeks later, Kathy McCracken received a commendation. I thought it strange that Kathy, whose first impulse when confronted by any noise louder than a cough, was to turn and run as fast as her short, chubby legs allowed, would be deemed worthy of such a sacred epistle. Reading it, I discovered that the wording seemed very familiar . . .

From Jules Jarmon, Lakin Administrator

To: **Katharine McCracken H.S.W.**

After learning of your part in an incident which occurred on **2/19/83**, I would personally like to thank you. You were observed by staff members and judged to be acting above and beyond the call of duty and in the utmost professional manner despite volatile conditions.

Jules Jarmon

*A copy of this letter is being kept in your files.

Handing it back to my proud, grinning coworker, I fished out a copy of my own letter. It was then that it struck me; they hadn't even got my name right. I made a mental note to store any future commendations alongside such mementos as banana peels, empty cereal boxes, and rotting vegetables.

P.M. Report--4/5/84

Herod, Jonathan: Calm during shift--Appears to interact more with peers--Ate 100 percent of P.M. meal--To bed at 10:00.

Note: At 11:30, Jonathan was observed by Aide Rickard to be kneeling in middle of bedroom, a white bed sheet wrapped around him. He appeared to be praying (it was too dark for me to tell if he was sweating blood--G.R.). *Very funny--Harry Adams. the best damn HSW there is!!!*

At Lakin, the Health Service Workers had a code to live up to: DO NOT SHOW FEAR! No matter how dangerous or surreal a situation seems, an aide must present a calm facade to the cursing, threatening patients. It was, sometimes, the only defense we had besides our fists and whatever heavy object might be in reach. It was a game of 'call my bluff;' as long as the patients believed that you knew something about your physical abilities that they did not, you had a fair chance of eventually sending them to their rooms, scratching their heads in bewilderment.

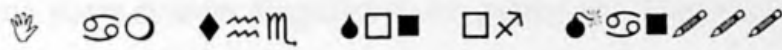
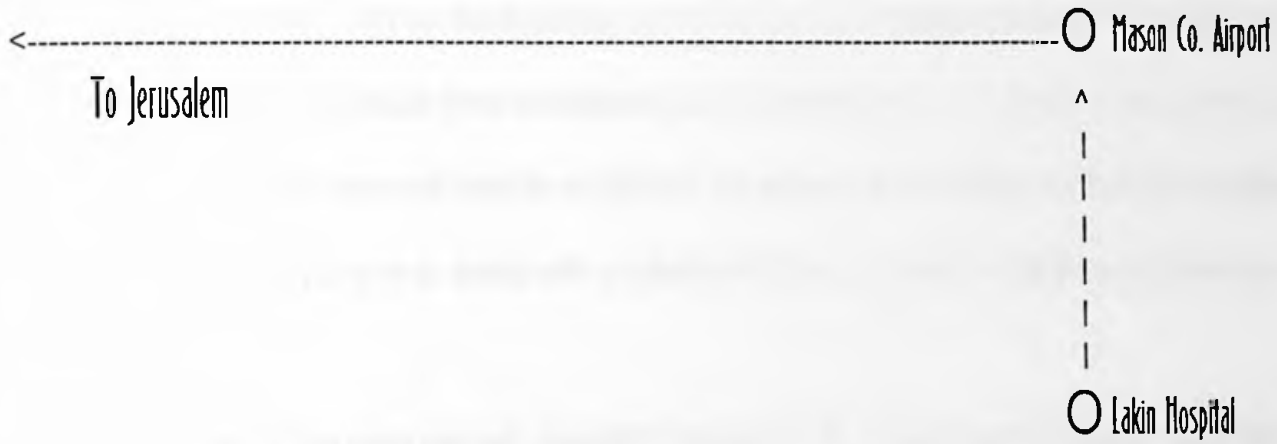
It worked. I've faced down up to twelve screaming young men by slowly taking off my white lab coat, shaking my head as if in regret at what I must do, and saying, "Well, gentlemen, let's get it over with." One by one they'd choose to retire for the night, leaving me alone at the desk, attempting to light a cigarette with my trembling, sweating hands.

P.M. Report--4/9/84

Herod, Jonathan: Pt. seemed more active during shift--Ate 100 percent of P.M. meal--Spent most of shift in TV room, drawing (see note below). To bed at 10:00.

Note: Jonathan asked Aide Andrews for ruler and a sheet of paper--Same given. Pt. observed working at table. After P.M. meal, pt. asked Andrews where the nearest airport is located. Aide told

him the Mason Co. Airport is 3 miles north of Lakin. Pt. seemed satisfied and returned to table and continued to work. Below is the 'map' that pt. had been working on:



Christ, what a nut job-----Harry A.

For a long time, I laughed off what I could. I'd had a television set fired at me, a wallet stolen, and every other day, while pulling into the parking lot to begin my shift, I'd hear the chant of "We're going off tonight, motherfucker!" I'd grin and hold my breath, praying that my mask was still intact.

There is, however, only so much abuse a person's nervous system can take. Though I'd dealt with truly psychotic individuals (one seventeen-year-old had been sent to Lakin after huffing gasoline and blasting an eighty-year-old woman in half with a shotgun; another had arrived upon confessing that he'd beaten his parents to death with a baseball bat), my moment of truth was yet to come.

On April 16, just as the rains started, Jonathan Herod ran off, cutting across the long field behind Lakin. Still feeling some strange allegiance to the powers which signed my check every two weeks, I took off after him.

He was a good hundred yards ahead, sprinting through the tall, wet grass like some kind of jet-propelled elk. I saw him waste precious seconds, skirting a wire fence and decided that I'd maintain a straight path to head him off. Putting my hand on the top wire to aid me in vaulting over to the other side, I was knocked ten feet backwards. I wound up on my ass with the cold drizzle pelting my face. Obviously the Son of Man knew a good deal more about identifying an electric fence than did I.

When I finally made my way around the fence and to the rise where the woods started, I began thinking about my predicament. There I was, soaked to the bone, my body still ringing from the current of electricity, and chasing a teen-aged Messiah. And for what? Seven dollars an hour!

As I glanced up to the heavily wooded hill, I was sure of one thing; any guy who thought he was Christ Almighty would consider my safety a low priority if he got the jump on me in the dense foliage.



My own priorities swiftly began to change. "Be careful, Jonathan! I shouted. "Remember to stay off the main roads!" I turned and strolled leisurely back to the hospital.

Four days later, two state troopers brought him back to Lakin, handcuffed, drenched, and smelling like a carp that had washed up on shore and laid in the sun for a week. One officer explained that they'd had to rescue him from the Ohio River. Apparently, he'd jumped in and tried to swim across in hope of eluding them. All I could think of while Jonathan ran his bath water was that he should have tried walking to the other side.

A Cemetery in Reedy, West Virginia

Lemon drops and cannon balls--
Little Michael chews
Them up and swallows down
Their sour sweetness
And runs back home
To strong, warm, open arms.
And the smell of brownies
Being taken from the gas oven
Reaches him,
Obliterating pirates
And baseball gods, cowboys,
Indians, cops and robbers.

Cresting the grassy hill,
Legs stiff and back bent with age,
Struggling toward the place
He knows so well,
He reaches down and plucks the weeds
Surrounding the dying, red roses
Planted months before
And gazes upward,
Through hot tears,
At the white-gray monument,
Standing like a stoic god,
Guarding its ground
Lest hope should enter
And part the hands,
Folded beneath the cold, dark earth.

The Carnival

It arrived at dawn,
Painted lumber and steel
Spilling from dirty gray trucks
Like jewels from the guts
Of frogs.

Mom and dad
Gave me two dollars
And fifty cents.
"Make it last,"
They warned, chuckling.
I ran, rich
And grinning,
Toward the laughs,
The music, and smell of cotton
Candy a hundred yards away.

Mechanical wheels, spiders
And cages surfaced
Above the grass and mud.

I searched for my brother
In the crowds
As three teens closed in
On me. They took my money
And, like evil magicians,
Stole the glitter
From a wondrous world.

Canvas tents
With sawdust floors
Came to life.

I walked slowly
Back home, thinking
Of what to say:
"It was boring,"
Or "I don't feel good,"

Whirring motors
Belched black smoke
While iron creaked

And grease bubbled
Inside old vats and pots.
One hundred yards and twenty minutes
Later, I returned
With my father
And pointed at the hoods.
They were shaking, suddenly
Not as big as my memory.
When dad demanded what they'd taken,
They handed him two quarters,
A nickel, eight pennies,
And a cigarette lighter, swearing
It was all that remained.

The laughter and screams
Echoed around me
As the barkers barked their
Come ons.

I'll never forget
How far he threw that damned
Silver lighter.
Even the hoods stared
In admiration.

Greatness

Grampa used to say that in everyone's life there comes one opportunity to achieve greatness. Now, I've since penciled in a few amendments to his contention; some folks, for example, seem to have an unlimited supply of these opportunities. But basically, where I was concerned, he was right on the money. I blew my chance during a little league baseball game.

Summer had just begun releasing its long oppressive grip on humanity, offering a scattering of rain storms. As a consequence, some of the grass in our little city was starting to turn an almost greenish tint once again; life was good. Hell, life was great--I was twelve-years-old.

Harmon Park had its own little caste system; its three ball fields were cared for with respect to the ages of each league's participants. The pony league field, for instance, always had lush, green grass in the outfield since it was watered religiously--even through the driest of summers. It boasted a red-painted picket fence designating the home run boundary, and honest-to-God dugouts for the two competing teams. Its cement bleachers were ten rows high and always well maintained.

The pee-wee league field was a joke. Some disgruntled group of fathers had randomly driven stakes into the dirt about twenty yards past the infield, strung twine between them, and declared the creek beyond to be home run territory. Two hastily-built wooden structures served as dugouts for the ball clubs. Chicken wire was strung up in front of them after one too many foul balls sent an aspiring Ty Cobb to the emergency room.

Our little league field lay somewhere between the other two, both in upkeep and proximity. True, the home run fence was old and rotting, but it could, on occasion, stop a hard grounder. Between innings, the teams could sit inside sturdy block buildings and admire the freshly limed base lines--usually pretty straight, if not accurate, in measurement.

Our team, the Pure Oil Chiefs, was playing the Dunlop Tires Tigers that evening. The smell of hot dogs and fresh buttered popcorn wafted around the infield and crowded bleachers as the Tigers took the field to warm up. In the dugout, Ricky Fench and I said silent prayers, both of us wary of fast pitchers and aware that Dunlop Tires had the fastest in the league. David Armstrong was a six-foot, two-inch giant who could whip the ball into the catcher's mitt with the force of a Greek god.

"Don't let it be him, sweet Jesus," I begged. "Please, let him have a broken arm or cancer . . . I swear I'll never curse again." After finishing my bargain with the Almighty, I opened my eyes and looked at Ricky. He was as white as the C on his cap; Armstrong had taken the pitcher's mound.

To my mind, I had solid, pragmatic reasons for fearing the pitchers. They were, after all, just kids. The only thing they knew about the art of throwing the ball was to wind up and fire the damn thing as hard as possible. Who knew what might be going through their heads? Was I supposed to assume that one guy's neurons wouldn't suddenly start firing erratically, blazing a path to a dark chamber of the brain where primal fury is stored? Could I be certain that the guy on the mound wasn't the product of a dysfunctional family and about to act upon some sort of latent Oedipal rage, firing his bomb at any male unfortunate enough to wander into his domain?

As he began taking his warm up-throws, our dugout grew strangely quiet, all eyes riveted on Armstrong and the catcher. The first pitch, high and to the left, sounded like a rifle shot as it slammed into the mitt. "Jesus and Etta James," marveled Buzzy Gainer, our usually fearless shortstop. I swallowed my gum and turned toward Ricky. He was weeping.

My batting stance reflected my fear; how far away I stood from the plate depended upon the speed and/or control of the pitcher. That evening, my rubber-cleated heels rested on the line which delineated the batter's box.

"Come on, Stevie!" I heard my grampa yell from the bleachers. "Step in there and hit it!"

"Scoot up there, son!" bellowed our coach from the bleachers. I nodded my head as if agreeing with them and stayed where I was. Woosh. Boom! A white streak passed in front of me for the third time.

"You're out," said the umpire.

I'm alive, I thought.

Armstrong had been wounded in the arm by our catcher's fast ball in the top of the second. However, congratulations for our fearless man behind the plate was short-lived; we learned that the injury only made the giant's aim wild. His speed, though, had not let up. By the end of the second, our team had scored one run on walks. By the bottom of the third, the score four to two, my trembling friend Ricky finally had to face Armstrong.

"Get in there, Ricky boy!" shouted the coach.

Rick ignored him and pivoted the lower half of his body toward our dugout, the top half giving a semblance of interest in the game. He was taking no chances; if one of Armstrong's missiles ventured too close, Rick's feet would already be pointed in the direction of escape. "Goddamit Rick! Dig in there 'n knock the Christ outta her!" screamed his father. Rick simply shook his head and took a called strike three.

It was a strange evening. For some reason, both teams began an exhibition of name-calling, cursing, and making obscene gestures at each other. Buzzy Gainer had the honor of being the first player ejected. He got the boot for telling the Tigers' first baseman to bite his bat. Not to be outdone, Jake Hall, their center fielder, waited for a calm, quiet moment, then screamed "Suck my turtle shit!" to one of our guys on second base. Although this burst of profanity didn't make a lot of sense, it effectively got young Mr. Hall expelled from the park.

In the sixth and final inning, umpire Dick Morgan decided he'd had enough. He called both teams together around home plate and started in, "All right you little bastards, this shit ends right now," he growled. "The next time I hear so much as a goddamn grunt from one of you fuckers, the game's over." Looking back, I can see that Morgan's speech had only put a band aid on the problem. All the kids became as silent as church ushers, but inside we were screaming.

Perhaps it was the cumulative effect of three years of cowardice and self-hatred in the batter's box, three years of "Dig in there Stevie! Get a hit, Stevie!" possibly it was having the F word thrown in my face by an adult for the first time that suddenly stripped away my anxiety. All I know is, in that final inning, I was bulletproof.

Opportunities for greatness exist in a variety of settings, but mine was one of the more dramatic. The score was five to two, bases loaded, with two outs as I stepped up to the plate in the bottom of the sixth--the last hope for the Chiefs. I took a couple practice swings, dug in close, and stared straight into Armstrong's eyes.

As he begins his wind up, I know instinctively what's about to happen; I see the pitch--waist high, a little outside, just the way I like 'em. I look toward the fence in center field and see the ball sailing far beyond it. I grin and give a polite bow to the crowd before taking my obligatory jaunt around the bases. Armstrong lets go of the ball--waist high, a little outside. I'm set. I lift my front, left leg, preparing to step into the pitch. Then, at the last second . . .

I hold back. Something inside of me retreats, diving into that nice, comfortable crevice, a warm, safe place that doesn't desire change, doesn't need success. My bat sends the ball deep, deep into center field. Jake Hall's substitute follows it to the fence, leaps and snags it for the final out.

Grampa died ten years later. Sometimes I drive back home to visit my parents and his grave. Last winter, I brought my six-year-old son with me. As we stood by the tombstone, I told him how in everyone's life there comes one opportunity to achieve greatness.

"Did Great-Grampa Jenkins do it?" Was he great?"

"Yes Bill, he did. He was."

I knelt down on the snow-covered ground to zip his oatmeal-smearred coat the rest of the way up. He seemed unusually quiet, as if in deep thought.

"What made Grampa great?" he asked. "Did he do some real famous thing?"

I stared at the tombstone and remembered how kind and patient the old man had been with me, how he always seemed to be there for me at every important event and never seemed to be without the perfect words of advice.

"No, Bill, he wasn't famous . . . and it wasn't just one thing he did that made him a great man. Sometimes it's a lot of little things a man does that makes him great, good things, doing something kind for others--even when you really don't want to do it, you know?"

Bill bent down and picked up a frozen clod of earth, studying it a moment before slipping it into his coat pocket. "Like when the guys are playing baseball in Sawyers' field, and we let Mikey hit the ball. He can't run real fast cause his legs are bent and stuff, but we always act clumsy and drop the ball so he can make it to first base. Our team don't really want anyone to get on, but we always feel real good when we see him grinnin' like he made it on his own. Is that the kind of thing you mean? Is that one of the good things?"

"Yeah, Bill, that's the best kind of thing." He put his hand in mine, and we started for the car, the cold lump of dirt in his pocket. In the spring it would still be there, lying in the warm, safe place.

Part Four

And

Damnation Awaits With Open

Arms.

My Sweet Rosemary

Jergen opened his red-streaked eyes. Immediately, the hell wolves were at him, sending deep, evil howls into his brain, darting helter skelter the length of his thin body. Cold sweat began to form on his forehead and under his eyes. He lay on his back atop the soft bed, trying to focus on the ceiling and wishing fervently that he'd not finished the fifth of vodka last night.

I must not move, he thought. It will eventually pass if I just lie here quietly. His body was now coated with a thin glaze of sweat. He felt as if he were hanging on a precipice which jutted over the mouth of hell. "Rosemary," he whispered. "My sweet Rosemary . . ." His heart began pounding like a sledgehammer. Slabs of concrete cracked, sending bits of gravel and cement flying through his soul.

Jergen walked into his parents' house. The living room television, which ran day and night, blared out a song about the letter M. The smell of meat loaf and homemade bread filled his head. As he headed toward the kitchen, he paused outside of his father's room, standing at the door for a moment, listening to the old man's TV. He smiled.

"Hi honey," said his mother while placing a sheet of tin foil on top of the large pan of meat loaf that she'd just taken from the oven. She was wearing the pink, sleeveless, low-cut blouse that he'd bought her for her birthday. "Hungry?"

"A little," he replied. "Where's Rosemary?"

"Oh, she's around here somewhere," she said. "She's been coloring in that book you got her." His mother fished a fork out of the cabinet and began poking holes into another piece of foil.

"Jergen!" Rosemary's shriek startled him for an instant. He turned and saw his sixteen-year-old sister standing in the narrow hallway, a huge grin on her face, and a Yogi Bear coloring book in her left

hand. One of the crayons that she was clutching in her other hand suddenly toppled to her feet, bounced on the wooden floor and disappeared down the furnace. She began to cry.

Jergen rushed over to her and gave her a hug. He brushed a strand of long, blonde hair from her face, noticing its intoxicating aroma. She held onto him desperately. "It's my fault, Jergen. I lost one of the crayons you bought me," she sobbed.

He kissed her lips, then forced himself away to look at her. She was beautiful, the only untarnished thing in existence. She knew no evil; her life was Sesame Street, coloring books, church, kind words for all people. She was purity. Jergen loved her so much that he ached. She was love; true, unquestioning, uncompromising love--a broken doll in a cold, aloof world.

"No, Rosemary," he soothed. "It wasn't your fault; it was just an accident. I'll pull it out later, okay?"

"You can do that?" she asked, staring up at her brother as if he had just solved the problems in the Middle East.

He wiped the tears from her cheeks and kissed her again.

"Hell yeah, kiddo, and you can be my helper." Rosemary jumped up and down, letting loose a gleeful squeal.

Jergen opened his eyes. His bedroom was darker now. He got out of bed and started toward the bathroom. He was dizzy and had to hold onto the door frame as he entered the tiny room which adjoined his main living quarters. It was an embarrassingly small apartment--the living, sleeping, and dining areas all in one room--but it met his needs, and he never had to worry about friends dropping in to see it.

He stretched his arms straight out in front of him, placing his aching hands on the cheap tiled wall, putting his weight onto it while he pissed. For the next few minutes, he leaned there, head bowed, eyes closed, emptying his bladder.

When he finished, he turned around and stepped to the sink to throw some water on his face. As he reached down to turn the faucets, they changed into turtles and began to grow larger, metallic wings tearing through the sides of their shells. He jumped back and started to scream .

Jergen opened his eyes; a muted yell had startled him. He began massaging his temples with his shaking fingers to ease his pounding head. As he willed his mind to concentrate on lush, rolling meadows under clear, blue skies, the phone rang. He snatched the receiver off of the bedside table. "Hello?" he mumbled.

"Jergen . . . Jergen!" his mother said frantically. "Jergen, is Rosemary there? She decided to walk over to your apartment."

"No, mom," he replied groggily. "Let me go look out the window and see if she's coming." He got out of bed and staggered over to the window. He parted the curtains and looked outside. Two teen-age boys were throwing a frisbee back and forth in the street. They stopped to let a car pass, then resumed their play. The shadows were growing longer; a few cars in the distance already had their headlights on.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of rushing water. It grew louder, soon becoming a roar. Watching from his window, he saw a huge, dirty wave sweep across the street. It overtook the two boys, tossing them about like windblown feathers. Above the din, he could hear Rosemary's voice. "Jergen! Jergen! Help me! Please! Stop the water! Please Jergen, stop it!" she screamed.

He looked hopelessly for his sister through the window; all he saw was the brown, angry water rushing two stories below him, raging faster and rising higher. "Rosemary!" he screamed again and again. He began to cry. "My sweet Rosemary."

Large, bitter tears rolled down Jergen's cheeks as he opened his eyes. Lying on his bed, he felt his heart beating like a turbo engine inside his heaving chest. He was certain that he must be going mad. He replayed the telephone call and the subsequent events inside his head; nothing added up. Mom would never let Rosemary walk over here by herself. And she acted as if it were the most normal thing in the world, he thought. She . . . abruptly, he remembered that the phone was on the wall, hanging beside his bulletin board which was covered with pictures of his sister. It had to have been a dream, he decided. He let out a long, satisfying sigh.

Turning on his side, he realized that his bed was moving. He glanced to the floor and saw a white frisbee float across the room on a small lake of foul, brown water.

He went into his parents' house. It felt strange; it was silent--no television shouting out praises for the newest Chevy truck, no sizzle of frying bacon, no hum of the microwave, no footsteps on the old wood floor, no innocent laughter . . . silent. He walked toward the kitchen, stepping over various articles of old, tattered clothes. "Mom!" he shouted. There was no answer. The sink overflowed with dirty dishes; the plastic trash can was full of empty TV dinner containers. He stood there, confused--then he heard someone crying.

He walked to his father's room and softly tapped on the door. The sobbing stopped momentarily, then continued. Jergen opened the door; his father sat on the couch that doubled as a bed. He was

unshaven and staring at the blank television screen. The front of his gray T-shirt was soaked. He's been crying for hours, thought Jergen.

"Dad?" he spoke. "What's wrong? Where's Mom and Rosemary? What happened?"

His father looked up at him, a stunned expression on his face. "What are *you* doing here?" he growled. "Is this some sick, goddamn joke?" He lifted himself off the couch and started toward his confused son.

Jergen opened his eyes. "Christ, I feel bad," he groaned. He lay on his back, waiting to see whether his full bladder would allow him a few more minutes before demanding that he attend to it. He always thought it strange that he could piss for ten minutes in a dream, only to wake up so full that he'd often be in acute pain.

He got up to start the automatic coffee maker before heading to the bathroom. Off till Monday, he thought gratefully. He was about to turn away from the counter when a dark depression descended upon him, so palpable that his legs became too weak to hold him up. He collapsed on the foot of the bed.

Images rushed into his head--ugly, horrendous images, images that would make the hell wolves, themselves, quake in fear. It's a dream, he thought; it's not true. If I just lie here and don't move, it . . . will . . . pass. If I don't look toward the couch, it . . . will . . . pass. If I pray to God as hard as I can . . . Yet, he knew that he must look.

He began crying even before he turned his head. He saw the back of the cream-colored sofa with faded floral designs on it. His eyes moved upward; a naked, white leg came into view. It sprawled across the top of the couch, brownish, dried blood heavily caked on the calf and ankle, the toenails painted a bright, cherry red in marked contrast.

He walked slowly over to the couch, his head reeling with memories. He touched his sister's small, white foot and gasped at the coldness. *No Jergen!* Cold, ice cold--her skin, his stomach, arms and legs--where the blood had glued his clothes fast to his flesh. *It hurts!* He looked at the gore-soaked bed, the knife's handle protruding between the mattress and the bed frame. *No! Stop it!* Oh, to have the night back, to lie down and dream, to wake up in a world where people get second chances . . .

Jergen closed his eyes, praying that when he opened them again, he'd be floating on cool, brown water; lazily watching the huge turtles flying above him; and listening to the phone calling to him from the bedside table.

Henry

sat and watched the colors,
red, green, yellow,
pink and made a violent move
toward the remote control. Click
In darkness, he sighed--
then wept. He prayed
a heavy prayer which struggled
past earth's lovely orbit. "I can't,"
he cried, "control myself
no more!" And it was true.

Three precious daughters,
innocent, untouched, disappeared
on three foggy nights
in October. Three families
sent out tearful prayers,
as the earth kept revolving
and rotating in well-oiled tracks.

Midnight Mass

My love bathes in blackness,
A lonely demon spitting out memories
Like a queen bartering with shadows,
Her reign at a dismal conclusion.
I summon the courage
And part the velvet, red curtains,
Appearing before the fanged prophets--
Ancient heroes
Who now struggle against the light
Of reality.
"All is lost!" I cry.
"Everything you believe
Is but a cold masquerade,
Bent, spent and hollow--
Brittle bones which once walked
On the dying grass
That cushioned the sweet feet
Of myth. My heart is dead."
Cloudy eyes wept
And closed, slowly--
Eternally. I retreated
Into silent
Hopelessness.

I Drive at Night

And roll the windows
Down, letting the cold,
Wet wind embrace me.
Eventually,
A thick, black unknown
Awakens. Quick movements,
Darting shadows, figureless
Creatures that Holland Smith,
Himself, might have stalked.
Evil desires catch the corners
Of my eyes
And grin with evil purpose
And deadly truth. I turn
The radio on, and roll
Up the windows.

Route Sixty-Six

Mongrels pick Mary clean,
A hard lesson at the age
Of three. Twelve kings
Barter over Saint Joan's ashes
In Westminster's finest dives,
Emptying empty pockets lined
With screams of fucked hope,
Gesturing with subtle grace
And vicious boredom. The marbles shoot,
The fish wait, and Mary sleeps
Beneath a melting cross which leans
Toward Route Sixty-Six.

I went there once--
I did--and stood
Under a sky erupting
With visions, too many
To understand any.
Then I evaporated
Back into flesh.

Late Shift

Shadows pounce on soft, satin
Pillows, stutter-stepping, then gliding
Into an unconscious concert
Of frayed webs, expanding,
Expelling. Creatures lurk
Beneath the bed, whispering
Visions which fill the cold night
Air. Branches lick the shutters:
Bloody fingernails scratching the soul
Of a sad child, who's trembling
At the heavy footsteps . . .
Daddy's home.

Lie

She was murdered
in the night; that can not be
refuted. There are eyewitnesses,
damn it, who say they saw her
running like a non-corpse
in the late afternoon heat.
Her parents had loved her,
adorned her
in satin and lace to conceal
the parts that might make
a pervert forget himself.
She used to raise
her eyebrows, give 'em
a wink and smile like mommy
told her. And men would walk
home slowly . . . disturbed. The dying
flowers were removed, and she belongs
to the ages.

Edward Lamb III

Edward Lamb III lived
 In a yellow house on Pine Crest Drive,
 With his wife and three daughters,
 Five people sharing, five
 TVs blaring. Four lights
 Go out. Pounding at his brain

Day in. Day out.
 Smiling with a fury, emptying
 Yourself of meaningless chatter
 The bullshit that clatters
 Up your pounding brain.

Vice president of
 The Newmont City Bank
 No one knows what you're going through
 Or what you do
 Every single day

The same damn routine,
 Suggesting payment plans
 While watching young newlyweds
 Nodding their foolish heads
 In agreement of what you say,
 Every single goddamn day,
 Caressing each other
 Underneath the table,
 Thinking their lives will
 End up differently,
 Just like you did
 In your own little fable.

Giant shards of uselessness
 Coursing through your soul,
 And there's nothing you can find
 Can fill that sucking hole

Something's pounding at your brain

You rock and rock and rock
 Staring at the racks
 Of thirteen hunting rifles

Arranged in perfect stacks

A noise in the corridor
Like the whole rat race exploding
Diverts your weary, racing mind
From the rifle that you're loading

Five shots ring out
In the warm, black summer night
Five lights go out

The morning breaks
In a suburban neighborhood
Paper boy pedals down
The street, flinging
News about the Middle East.
Eggs frying, the smell
Of coffee and burning toast

And no one will admit hearing
Anything at all.
It was just another night;
The neighbors are appalled,
Aghast at what happens
Sometimes in homes
Inferior to their own.

Babylon

Those who litter the air with thoughtless ideas
Instilled by minds oozing like molten steel, transversing
The black cities where poets lie, belly up, in sewers, torn
Apart with solemnity;
And the bastards who hunch the air in fevered
Dreams, rebelling against the icons of purity
They could never understand: the Sunday School
Christ, writhing on a chocolate cross, syrupy blood
Seeping along terrain gutted with sin, the whores
Of Mammon, who rape children vomited from the guts
Of selfishness; flotsam and innocence
Teetering, rotting, vanishing in the sick turd gray waves;
And the tattooed sheep, throwing back courage
In black dens where armies of failure stew
Under cigarette smoke and lies of what could have been;
Where dirty fingers seek reassurance as they probe
Under faded K Mart skirts, raised high
With obvious intent in the cobweb corners;
And the bloated creatures who scratch
Their white, pimples asses with thick, yellow
Fingernails, staring intently into the perpetual
Light of darkness; claws gripping plastic,
Pushing buttons promising diversion
From a reality which pisses gall stones
And razor wire but delivers sweet deceit
And sucks phantom substance from diabetic ruins;
The dying, forgotten heaps who shiver
On diseased pavement, ice-covered or baking
In a pitiless orgasm of the phallic sun;
Who gaze at legs hurrying toward death; who shit
In alleys and dream eternally; mementos
Of a better time stuffed in threads
Are one--divisible, invisible
And beside the point.

My Final Essay

*Seasons don't fear the reaper,
Nor do the wind, the sun or the rain.
We can be like they are.
Come on, baby.
Don't fear the reaper.
Baby, take my hand.
Don't fear the reaper.
You'll be able to fly.

I'm going to kill myself this summer. Pretty good opening line, huh? The thing is, it's true; I really *am* going to commit suicide. I figure, why not write about it.

For a long time, I've just existed; I've lost my passion for just about everything. It actually amazes me when I hear people speaking of being happy. I'm not happy. I hate life. You, see, I view happiness as a transient thing, a state measured in minutes or seconds and realized only after the fact. To think of it as an enduring aspect of one's experience is, to me, as foreign as trying to deal with reality unaided by alcohol and/or drugs.

*Romeo and Juliet are together in eternity.

We can be like they are.

Don't fear the reaper.

It's not that I particularly hate myself and all of humanity; I don't. In fact, I care enough about myself to get out of this shitty, situation. Strangely enough, however, I've never stopped wanting to make a difference in the world. I still daydream about being Holden Caulfield, catching all the helpless children falling from the rye field--but I can't. Goddamnit, I can't even save myself.

**Like Romeo and Juliet*
 Forty thousand men and women everyday
Really find happiness
 Another forty thousand coming everyday
We can be like they are.
Don't fear the reaper

If I get cancer,
 Don't weep no tears.
 Set my po' ass free.
 Kevorkian me!
 Kevorkian me!

-- graffiti spotted outside a court house in Chicago

It doesn't really matter; the way I've abused my body, I'd probably check out before too long anyway. This way, I spare myself another fifteen or so years of the pain and frustration I've dealt with for way too long now. Call me a coward; I don't fucking care.

I consider what I'm going to do to be a rational, pragmatic option. After all, many people can't exercise a choice concerning their own demise. Think of those poor unfortunates who've lapsed into comas for various reasons. They lie in hospital beds, wasting away, tubes jutting out of a dozen holes (natural and man-made) in their pale bodies, stripped of privacy and dignity.

Even more horrific, perhaps, is another gift that God has bestowed upon humanity: senility. Imagine living to be eighty or ninety-years-old, having overcome many of life's cruel and unjust tricks, only to wake up one morning in a piss-soaked bed, trying to recall your children's names. Within a few years, you become not only a burden to your family, but an eternal symbol of guilt once they've decided you'd be much more comfortable in a professional environment. Huh uh, no thank you, sir; I'll pick my own style of exiting this planet.

**Came the last night of sadness,*
And it was clear that she couldn't go on.

Razors pain you;

Rivers are damp;
 Acids stain you;
 And drugs cause cramp...

- Dorothy Parker

I've given careful consideration to how I'm going to do it. I've ruled out overdosing on pills as being much too unreliable, slashing my wrists (too slow), and hanging myself (too frightening--I've always been terrified of suffocation). I've opted, instead, for the most reliable method outside of plummeting from an airplane: a gun (my father's .12 gage shotgun, to be more precise). Since he hasn't used it in years, I took it from his storeroom and took it to the gun shop. I think it's almost surreal that the weapon which will end my life is now being repaired and cleaned, waiting patiently on me, thirty-eight miles from here. Not only is there a bullet with my name on it, but I'm buying the damn thing.

*The door was open and the wind appeared.
 The candles blew and then disappeared.
 The curtains flew, and then he appeared.
 Saying, "Don't be afraid."
 Come on, baby.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
 And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
 Went home and put a bullet through his head.

- Edwin Arlington Robinson

The evening will be beautiful, of course--cool, a nice breeze blowing--not hot and ungodly humid like most of what West Virginia summers offer. I'll drive to a special place just north of Point Pleasant (my home for most of my life), a small clearing, surrounded by tall trees. I'll park my Chevy, begin mixing vodka and Coke, and get hammered. When I've summoned sufficient courage, I'll probably have a word or two with any god who happens to be tuned to my frequency, load my Dad's .12 gage, stick the end of the barrel in my mouth, and...

**So she had no fear.*
 And she ran to him.
And they started to fly.
 They had found what he'd said she'd find.

I'm Smit of Stoke, aged sixty-odd,
 I've lived without a dame
 From youth-time on; and would to God
 My dad had done the same.

- Thomas Hardy

I wonder what it will be like--that second after the steel pellets blow most of my brain out of my skull, sending me into the unknown. Will a part of me (the soul?) be cognizant? regretful? Is there a hell? If there's a merciful God, how can there be? And if God is not kind and benevolent (AIDS, Hitler, Stalin, Bangla Desh...sorry, I got carried away), then how wonderful could a heaven be? Will the fact that I didn't ask to be born carry any weight with a cosmic deity who's horny and anxious to jerk off to more eternal suffering? Well, if there's a loophole, I'll find the son-of-a-bitch. If not...

His final fact:
 you live and you die.
 The shopping cart. P.T. Barnum.
 The sky.

- Gerald Costanzo

**She had become like they are.*
 She had taken his hand.
She had become like they are.
 Come on, baby.
Don't fear the reaper.

* From the song, "Don't Fear the Reaper" by Blue Oyster Cult

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