

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

"Man's Terminal Split"

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Department of English
Advisor James Giles

by
Mark A. Engels

Dekalb, IL 60115
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Approved: Jana R. Allen

Department of: English

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PROEM

Of Man's Terminal Split, the Little Boy
Who brought to men a justified dessert
From suffering Apollo: New, Improved,
And More Immortal than the Gods, a Fire,
But robed in death that nothing could escape,
Come sing, Musae, your long dead bodies, lost
In Grandma's rich and loamy arms have left
Your now Intoxicating Spir'its to find
A home in Yeast, Potatoes, Wheat, and Corn.
I beg your genie's aid in razing out...

And Heaven, that you aid me. May I tell
Of Three, the Technologic-Trinity
That brought to Life an All-Too-Human split,
Of Two, the dreadful battle in the Soul,
Of One, the Little Boy, who, going down,
Thus lit a lantern, in the Morning Sun,
That's rays outshone Celestial Light and proved
The words of a Syphelitic Madman, who,
In circumstances similar, cried out
That God is Dead..

(signed by) T. Crosley Northright

--the preceding was recopied from a stall in the men's restroom
of a tavern in the midwest--the middle section having been
besmudged with feces by persons unknown--

Men drink, don't they?

I sit alone at the bar eating pretzels and staring vacantly
at the tv. All my mind registers is the voice of yet another
newscaster giving yet another special report. And when I get up

to go to the restroom I look around but don't see anybody I recognize.

On my way back to my seat, though, a voice behind me calls out, "Hey ol' sport, have a drink?" I turn to look for where the voice came from. The methodic red pulse of a cop's flashing light and siren is the only thing from the outside world that reaches this far into the room. I find myself silently looking at the face of an older man.

"Huh?" I finally ask.

"Buy ya drink," the older man repeats.

I look at him curiously. "What for?"

"Ain'chew the Krizan boy?"

"Nope."

"Ah,...well,...spittin' image of Krizan, ya know it? Here then, have a drink anyway. Siddown." The older man nods at the chair across from himself. He looks harmless enough, so I sit down.

"How old would you say I am, killer?" he asks, pouring a shot of the liquor into a glass.

I think for a while, but it's dark in here and I don't want to play his game so I say, "I don't know," and drink the shot. The amber burns red going down but sits comfortably. "Thanks for the drink," I say, getting up, "and I hope you find who you're looking for."

"Ain' really lookin' fer no one, sport. Ye don' hafta leave 'f'ya don' wanna. I jus' like ta talk."

For some reason, I don't really know why, I sit back down.

"So," I finally begin, "what brings you here?"

"Good," he says, pushing the bottle at me, "have 's'much as ye want. I do. Inspires me."

I pour myself another drink and he begins fishing around in his pocket. He pulls out a rock of some sort and puts it on the table between us.

"I knew a guy once, gave me this crystal," he says. "It saved my life. Healed me up. I've learned a lot in my life. 'Specially how to focus and 'member.

"'Membered people I useta be. Ya know it, I was a poet in ancient Greece. Sho' 'nuf. But I'm too old to do those things anymore. To old to sit and write fo' weeks on end.

"An' now lookit what's happenin' out dere. Might's well be the big'un. The biggest one. Right out in front a my nose. Yep. ' Too many lives, sport. I lived 'em all. An this'un's it. I gotta get ridduv dead weight. So I'm gonna tell ye.

"I know why this is all comin' down. One man, only...two men..."

The tone of his voice changed. Eerily he said, "I cannot tell how the truth may be; I say the tale as 'twas said to me."

Then he began.

...and Omega

This wasn't too long ago, see?

She was settin' there beside him as he lay in the hospital bed battlin' fo' his life. Her chair was pulled up close and the lights was turned down real low. An' all around them in this little room were these machines. Machines that were keepin' 'im alive, and other machines fer makin' sure the first set a machines was doin' their jobs.

The man that was connected to these machines lay in the bed as still as his cool steel monitors. His only movement was the steady rise and fall of his chest under the thin white sheet. This movement was accentuated (and caused) by the movement of the machine that made his lungs rhythmically fill and empty with air. The woman counted the passing time by the rise and fall of the man and the machine. She wasn't supposed to be here, but the lounge had been maddeningly soothing and the chapel smelled of disinfectant, so she had sneaked into his room earlier and so far nobody had caught her.

The room was calm and comfortable, but she was absorbed in the man. The lights were dim, nearly off, and the machines gave off various lights. These lights were eerie and she wondered vaguely if she should close her eyes so as not to see him in this light. She couldn't though. She scarcely even blinked. She

stared smiling into his face. She didn't want to miss any move that the muscles in his slack body might make. Any response to show her he was there somewhere.

But then, a frail looking nun-nurse found her and escorted her out of the room. As she got up to follow the older woman, she looked back on the man. Her eyes fell on the screen of the machine that monitored his heartbeat. A single line, wavy and imperfect. Neverending. His life was on that screen, and at that moment she somehow wanted their lines to roll together.

She went to the cafeteria and got herself some coffee. She sat down at a table and rummaged in her purse for a pen. She pulled out a Bic ballpoint and turned over a paper place mat.

"Well," she said out loud to herself, "it's hardly a wax tablet and stylus, but it's a lot more convenient." The tension was too much for her and made her realize the stupidity of her words. She smiled briefly and took a careful sip of coffee before starting to write.

The clear sky was open to the billion pin pricks which were stars. Beneath the canopy of blackness was the frozen land, covered in a thin white sheet of snow. The snow-cover was broken through only by a young elm, whose branches were too thin to bear the weight of the snow. In the crook of one of these branches, though, a small bird had found refuge from the cold. It sat, feathers ruffled, unnoticed by humanity for days on end. Only the wind knew it was there.

A sudden breeze shook the tree and the tiny brown bird flew into the night air. It eventually lit on the the roof of a

house. It hopped and pecked at the snow covering the roof before spreading its wings and perching on the chimney. The chimney was cold on the bird's feet, and it hopped around until it fell into a hole in a screen intended to keep such creatures out of the chimney.

It flew-fell down. Through the blackness that was warm and damp with creosote and soot. The tunnel seemed endlessly long to a bird who knew not which way to go, and as it grew more and more flustered it went farther and farther down the shaft. At the bottom, it saw light.

Terrified, it looked out of the fireplace and into the house. The colors and light made its eyes sparkle. It spread its tiny wings and flew full into the mass of warmth and color. Its muscles stretched and loosened. It was comfortable. It knew not where it came from, nor where it was going. Being a bird.

This time didn't last long, though. The bird soon flew out a door and back into the cold night where it remained unnoticed.

Later, she didn't know how much time had passed (but she had nearly filled the mat with her thin black handwriting), one of the nurses found her and told her she could stay with her husband. She was led to another room in another wing and left alone at a closed door. She pushed it open and looked to the bed. It seemed that he was in exactly the same position. She pulled a chair close to his bed again and sat in it. There were a great many machines in this room, too, but she sighed when she realized that his breathing was his own.

She sat and stared for hours on end, leaving only to go to

the bathroom. And she thought about how a thing like this would change a person. She didn't speak. She didn't sleep. All she did was stare at him.

The bustle of nurses and doctors running into the room woke her from her trance-sleep. The healing hands of a doctor pushed her roughly aside. She stared in disbelief as the people stripped the thin white sheet off his body and began tearing open his pyjama shirt. The line was straight. No bumps. No waves. She saw and could not remove her eyes from this screen.

She didn't notice as the doctors then proceeded to remove the wires from his skin, rendering the machine useless. She didn't notice as the doctors spread a conductive salve on his chest and stood back. She saw a flat line. She didn't notice as the doctor in charge gave a signal and the electricity ripped into his unmoving heart. Nothing else. Among the voices of the doctors and the hum of electricity, she heard a voice speak her husband's name. And the smell of clover.

"It's been a long time, Thomas."

"Cabel?"

It was her husband's voice.

Alpha...

The road sped under the spinning wheels. The top of the brand new Comet was down and the wind ripped through his hair. "This is just the beginning," he thought. He had just turned sixteen, he had a new car, and the summer was finally turning warm. He smiled and drummed his thumb to the beat of

He had grown to love the vast emptiness of the country. Driving down an endless road, the needle wavering just around one hundred five, made him comfortable. It seemed that time had stopped for him. The sun was halted a scant few degrees above the horizon and he felt good. Right here, right now, nothing could stop him.

His stomach growled.

A lone groping hand reached across to the passenger seat. Nothing there. He glanced at the road to be sure it was still beneath the car; then he reached to the glove box.

Stuck.

A hastily made fist slammed into the locking device. The car swerved and gravel shot across the bottom of the car. The little door popped open and several small pieces of paper were sucked out of the compartment. He looked at them in the rear-

view mirror and they reminded him of angels battling as they spun around and around each other. He watched as they settled to the ground deciding it would be too much hassle to go back and get them. He scooped the candy bar he had bought at Ray Moen's with the bottles he had collected out of the glove box. Tearing the wrapper with his teeth he smelled the chocolate and his stomach knotted even tighter.

He finally bit into the candy bar, or at least tried. It was rock-hard-stale. He gnawed at the sliver of chocolate that had broken into his mouth, but it was gritty and awful-tasting. He was mad at Ray for a moment as he spit out what was in his mouth and put the rest of the bar in the passenger seat.

Long moments passed as the car sped along and saliva poured into his empty mouth. Thick cakes of saliva built up and refused to be swallowed. Suddenly he pressed his foot on the brake. The car skidded a little, but finally gripped and slowed to a stop on the narrow grassy shoulder. He grabbed the candy bar and got out of the car.

There, as he stood on the side of the long country road, he didn't wonder for an instant what had possessed him to feel the urge to feed this stale candy bar to a couple of his bloated bovine buddies. The idea had just struck him and he ran with it.

The cattle were lowing in the field, cud being chewed by most. He jogged across the road toward them, the melancholy hum of crickets replacing the beat of rock music easily in his ear. As he stepped off the road on the other side the chirrups around him stifled instantly and he continued, hopping across the

stagnant pool of water in the drainage ditch.

"C'mere, Bessie," he called as he trotted to the fence surrounding the field.

Then, in one deftly fluid motion, he popped the candy bar half-way into his mouth and grabbed the wire fence to jump over. His weight was almost entirely on his hands when they touched the bare wire, and an overwhelming surge of power entered through them when he connected.

The electricity was much too high. His hands clamped stiffly closed.

An insane giggling filled his brain. This soon was numbed into a warm static buzz. His momentum wouldn't let him jerk back. Thin wisps of smoke rose from his fingers. He didn't smell it. His teeth clamped shut, snapping the candy bar in two. A small line of blood trickled from his flared left nostril.

Finally inertia let him fall face forward over the fence and into the soft clover of the beautiful field. A grasshopper bit on his face, moved to mandibles, and hopped away. But his eyes were rolled tightly back into his head.

Blackness...

Prote Ousia

October 16, 1944. Another battle of the war. It's five-twenty-eight in the morning. There is the roar of the sea, but no ears to hear it. The swimming warriors are deaf. They make their blind way to a destination they only instinctively know. The number of their force, which is considerably smaller than it was at the off-set, travels together slowly. The quest seems infinitely long, and the way insurmountable, but they struggle on unthinkingly.

One realizes that he has finally encountered the foe that his army has been searching for. He batters himself into her large, impregnable fortress. No response. He rams again. Nothing. But others sense his struggle and join in the battle. But who will be the conqueror?

At the present they all look the same. Equally weak. For the victor, the one who succeeds in storming the fortress, there will be great spoils. The least of these is a reprieve from the death sentence his brothers in battle will suffer. For only one will leave this battle-field. Only one will survive this assault.

One anonymous swimmer-troop, near death from fatigue, receives a sudden, seemingly futile burst of energy. He makes what will surely be his final assault. He rams into the shimmering fortress. And his body sinks in! He has won.

The moment he enters her realm, she seals herself off completely. No more shall enter. Now it is between she and he. One on one.

They lock into a life-death grip. A timeless battle which is played over and over again because the outcome is nearly the same as the toss of a coin. Heads he wins. Tails she wins. But this particular battle is won by him. The warrior assimilates the vanquished and they become one entity.

Then split.

?

She smiles. Her body is slight, but her hazel eyes reveal her true strength. "Do you want to play?" she asks, voice coming from deep in her throat. She giggles softly, knowing what the response will be.

She walks slowly to the bedroom, clothes being shed the entire way. Her blouse slides easily over her head. The skirt falls teasingly down her ample swaying hips. She lies on the bed and stretches full length on her back. Her face is ivory white and smooth. The eyes inviting. The nose, aquiline and defiant. The lips, full and parted slightly.

Beautiful hair snakes brown on her long neck. And below that, slight shoulders with thin arms. She sits up for a moment and the white camisole is pulled over her head.

She lies back, her breasts are small and capped by dark, quarter sized nipples that are already erect. Her waist is thin, and her stomach flat. Gently curved ribs ridge both sides of her torso.

A thin young woman, lower down her pelvic bones thrust harshly up. Her hips and buttocks are fully padded. She raises them and the panties come off. Her breathing quickens.

Her body moves rhythmically now. Small sighs escape from between her reddening lips. Then... nothing.

She opens her eyes.

"Sorry," he says.

"No,... don't be."

He sits up and removes the condom and throws it in the wastebasket. He moves to touch her shoulder, but pulls the sheet over her exposed body instead. He pulls his underwear on hastily.

"I've uh... got to go," he pleads. "I'm sorry. I've got a lot on my mind. That big account's got me tense. I need to finish, uh... a bunch of the figures." All the time he is talking, he is putting on his clothes and she is staring at him. As he finishes the impromptu escape speech, he is tying his shoes. "I hope you don't mind," he adds.

She pulls the sheet off, exposing her angry breasts, "No, really. It's okay."

He gets up, "I'll give you a call," and leaves.

"Okay."

He isn't there. She lies alone, getting cold, thinking.

Her face hardens and her cheeks begin to glow. "Goddamn physicists," she mutters, "pin prick."

In the garbage can beside the bed a few tiny sperm blindly escape their rubber vault. They've discovered a small escape hatch. They're too late, though. They will end their lives not on a noble quest for life, but on the harsh surface of a wadded up tissue of the back of last month's electric bill. Only a few of their compatriots managed to dart out in time, and already they are beginning to recoup from being ejected into hostile territory. Their quest is only just beginning.

Urania gets up and goes to the kitchen. She pulls some of her books together and goes back to the bedroom to read. Her passion is astrology. She is a bright woman, works as a secretary, because, being a woman, she is not very important. She refuses to be left behind, though. She learns as much as she can during her off hours, waiting for a break to come. She knows it will come because the stars have told her she is destined for great wealth.

When she found out that the pin prick had gotten her pregnant she looked into the stars and decided to have the baby on her own. She hadn't seen the physicist since that night and decided this was for the better. In a journal she kept records of the pregnancy. She charted weight gain, marked down mornings when she was sick, wrote about the cravings she had and whether she indulged them or not, and described how the child could kick in two opposite directions. All went well and her belly swelled to enormous size with the fruit of the womb.

She lost her job soon after she started showing. Having saved a good deal of money, though, she did not worry about that. The pregnancy went well until May seventh. On that day she awoke with cramps. She fretted about them for half the day and they got worse. When she finally went to the hospital she was in a slight frenzy.

The hospital sent her home before the day was over and she was embarrassed at having been such an inconvenience. Inside her was a smile. The test run had been successful. With a few minor calibrations, the life inside her would soon escape.

She fawned over the life inside her, sure that there were twins. She named one of them Cabel, but could not decide on a name for the other. She talked to the Cabels when she was lonely, which was often, and praised them for all that they did inside her womb. She could not wait to see the Cabels, and she didn't have to wait long.

On July fifteenth they wanted out. Her labor started about two o'clock in the morning. By noon she was in the hospital screaming as the pains ripped through her body. The maternity ward was hectic that day, though, lots of babies waiting to be born and a few refusing to wait, so she was left alone with her pain for quite a long time.

By midnight, when the doctors finally got to her, she was raving incoherently. Her agony was incredible and her mind was slipping. Her voice was shredded, and a thin line of mucous ran from her nostril to her mouth. The doctors examined the madwoman and declared that the baby was not aligned properly. They then

diagnosed an immediate Caesarean operation.

She was gassed and fell into a deep sleep. While under, her ravaged mind dreamed of fire and death. Inside her, the child felt these things and struggled to free itself.

When light finally became a part of its world, and it was plucked gasping from her womb, it was exactly 5:29:45 a.m. of 16 July 1945. It was over.

He screamed.

=====

Urania awoke later and asked to see her babies. The nurses brought a small boy in and gave him to her. He smiled into her face, eyes blue and watery. She cooed praises to him and told him what his future would hold for him. She asked to see the other baby, but the nurse looked at her with confusion.

"I understand," said Urania. Then she whispered into the baby boy's ear, "Cabel, you are a breed apart. People will try to stop you, but you cannot let them. Go above them. I'm broke now, lost everything seeing that you were born. You're going to go away now, but I'll get by, and some day we'll be together again like we were before."

She handed the infant to the nurse and asked to see a doctor. She got a lawyer and saw to it that her child was given to a respectable family before he had grown to be a week old.

IV

The boy's earliest recollection was of a Sunday morning in 1951. He was staying (up/down?) with his grandparents for the weekend. The three of them were going to church. His grandma said he had been baptised in this church, but he couldn't remember that. This was going to be his first time in a church.

When he first looked at the building, he thought to himself that it was tall and heavy looking. It reminded him of the mauseleum in which his other grandpa was buried. (Why?) The three of them went in the giant wooden doors. His grandparents dipped their fingers in a bowl and touched themselves. Then they uncovered the organ in the back of the church and his grandma sat at it waiting to play.

He and his grandpa then walked to their seats. He inhaled the deep scent of incense. But hidden far beneath this smell it seemed to him to be some other odor. Like rot.

His grandpa kneeled down beside one of the pews, moved his hands in front of himself, and motioned for the boy to sit in this row. He took a seat and his grandpa kneeled beside him. The boy became enrapt by the windows of the place. They were pictures. The largest of these showed a group of angels fighting one another.

His grandpa sat next to him when the organ started to play. The boy's eyes looked toward the front of the church. In the middle of the front wall was a dead man nailed on a cross. The boy knew this man's name was Jesus Christ. Standing in front of Jesus was a statue of a beautiful woman. Her face was looking at her feet. Around this pair were candles. Lots and lots of candles. Their light was pale and shivering in the cool dimness of the front of the church. Through the entire mass, the boy sat transfixed by the face of the man hanging on the cross.

When they got to his grandparents' house after church, his grandma gave him a book: The Bible. It was his first adult book.

"This is the Word of God," she said. "Read The Book and live The Book."

The Bible was the beginning of a voluminous library he would later own and study intently.

Later in the afternoon he asked his grandpa about Jesus.

"Jesus," grandpa said, "is God."

This passed, for the moment, right through the boy. His young mind had decided on another pastime. He took a pad of paper and some crayons from his bag and tried to re-create the window with the angels.

Their white robes had been firey with the morning sun. And they had been carrying glinting swords. Their faces now eluded him, but he drew them as he thought they should be. The battle in his picture was ferocious and decidedly more bloody and dim than the window had been, but he liked it anyway and drew it over

and over again. And, before he knew it, his parents had come to pick him up.

They had just bought a new car. It was shiny. His dad opened the hood and talked to grandpa about things he didn't understand. Their heads hung low as they peered into the black motor. The boy thought they were performing a ritual and hung his head in mimicked reverence.

The drive home was long and the boy sat in the back seat reading his new book. The words were alien to him, they were not alive like the other books he had at home. He soon began to doze. As he did, snatches of his day came oddly back to him.

The face of the man that was hanging on the cross.

His grandpa's voice, "Jesus is God."

Over and over.

thomas.

When he was a small boy he lived in the city. At that time the tall buildings and cracked sidewalks were his only friends. After school he would walk home alone. The other children shunned him and he closed them out completely. On rare occasions, about once a year, the leader of the pack would re-initiate the tauntings. The boy's face would grow hot, but he would ignore them and their jeers always subsided.

The hour after school was always the worst part of the day for him. He loathed it so because of his babysitter, Aunt Thalia. She wasn't really his aunt, just the woman who lived in the next flat. And her name was Sally. But when he was young he could only pronounce it as Thalia, so she kept this nickname.

He thought she was a horrible woman despite the fact that she gave him delicious pastries and curly Swedish candies. He imagined her as a woman he had read about in one of his favorite childhood books. She was the woman who had fattened a boy and his sister with similar delectables in hopes of eating their plump young flesh.

He studied the words of that story constantly. The pages on which it was printed soon became considerably more worn than the rest of the book. He hoped that by reading and understanding the

characters, he would be able to avert what seemed imminent disaster. He eventually knew the story of the child-eating woman word for word.

What he didn't know was that the woman loved him. She bought the treats with the money she earned watching him. She was an odd woman. He also didn't know, for instance, that on weekends she went away to a nudist colony. It was her way of reveling in her brown shriveled body. She had earned this body by exercising and exorcising. Each of the children she so boldly conceived was systematically removed from her womb by a black woman who kept a small room in the basement of a Chinese laundry.

This was the woman who loved the ten-year old boy she had been babysitting for five years. Even in her deepest subconscious mind she would never have thought of (at least not literally) eating the boy. She found him sensually irresistible. At night she lay in bed and fantasized about him. In her dreams he always came to her.

He was wearing a white satin robe that stopped at the top of his thighs. He entered her room, but her room was a round, platformed stage. She was in the middle, on her knees. He walked across the room and reached out to touch her. He ran one smooth warm finger along her arm up towards her neck. She closed her eyes as his finger traced a line down from her neck across her chest. At this moment she always awoke. Her back was always tightened as waves of sensation ripped through her body. The boy was never there, but her heartbeat told her he had been. And the dream was always the same.

The boy was scared of her though. Because for five years he had been having a similar dream. His, however, continued where hers dissolved.

He was standing beside Aunt Thalia. She was on her knees and her skin was tight against her bones, like leather. Her naked body was wrong, though. Instead of having wrinkles, she had seams, as if she had been stitched together. Curious, he reached out to touch one of the seams. He followed it up her arm and to her neck. It was cool and dry, worn skin. His finger followed as the seam ran down her chest.

He felt awkward touching Thalia. Even if it didn't seem that this was Thalia. He decided, though, that since it wasn't really Thalia, then it wasn't really himself, either. So it wasn't wrong to run his finger down the seam that was now winding around her breasts.

The breasts were not at all flesh-like. They were hard, like the leather had stones pressed under it. He was glad when the seam finally reached down her belly. When it came to her navel, his finger felt suddenly colder. The belly button seemed to plunge far, far deeper than it ought, and he pulled his finger away, afraid.

He re-began the tracing below the belly button, where the seam reappeared. It went a few inches lower and became lost in a patch of dense, coarse hair. He kneeled in front of her to see where the seam led. As he parted the hair to search, he felt warm air blow onto his face, and Aunt Thalia's hands touched his shoulders.

He bolted up. But she held firm and pulled him in an embrace. One hand fell down his back and pushed his bottom so that their hips met. He felt the warmth of her hairiness against him and he heard babies wail, and their cries sounded like his name.

The seams of her body began to burst open. She drew him into the widening fissures, devouring him completely. Tiny hands grabbed him from inside her and held him in the blackness. As she began to seal back up, encasing him, he heard her laughter, far off, like she was in another room.

Then he would wake up, the morning sun coming up in his face. Urine would be chilling his groin where he had wet himself in the night.

At first the dreams had scared him. When he woke up crying his mom came in and told him they weren't real, that someone else was doing the things he dreamed. She didn't know what the dreams were, but her insistence that the other boy wasn't himself reassured him. He even began to enjoy the dreams in spite of himself.

But he still didn't like Aunt Thalia. He knew she was somehow the cause of his dreams. He thought she was a witch.

One day at Aunt Thalia's he was sitting listening to the radio. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a woman walking up to the door of his parents' flat.

"Aunt Thalia," he called, "there's someone at our door. Should I go see what she wants?"

"No, honey, I'll go out and check."

He went to the window and looked through the lace curtains. He opened the window a crack so he could hear the two women talk.

Thalia bustled into view and stopped the woman knocking on the door. She was younger than Aunt Thalia, and pretty. When she looked at Aunt Thalia, he saw Thalia shrink under her gaze.

"Could you tell me," the woman began, "if Cabel lives here?"

"No, there's nobody here with that name."

"Well that might not be his name, but he's a little boy, blonde, blue eyes,...very pretty boy," the woman said, staring deeply at Thalia.

He shrunk back behind the curtain trying to hide. This woman. She looked like a gypsy. He didn't know any gypsies. She was pretty, but he was afraid.

...blackness.

Tommy looked around, not able to remember how he had gotten here, but not really trying to remember. He didn't question the fact of the matter. He simply was.

And he smelled clover.

The place reminded him of a hospital. There were a lot of people milling about and the place stank of disinfectant. One man walked close to Tommy. The man was flailing his arms around, and sparks of static electricity crackled out of his finger tips, burning them beyond black and making wisps of acrid smoke that wafted up toward the old man's pained looking face. The man lisped over and over, "I'm there, I'm there." Tommy walked away from this man as quickly as possible, bumping into another man

who looked like a construction worker.

The construction worker looked like a patient also. He was skinny and had long wavy hair. Around his waist was a thick leather belt with a steel ring which held a hammer. The belt also had pouches which were stuffed full of nails and broken white feathers. Tommy heard the man mutter, "Daddy?" before he got far enough away to feel safe.

In another room Tommy saw a teen-aged boy who looked like himself. He watched this boy who seemed preoccupied.

When the other boy finally noticed Tommy, he said, "Hello, my name's Thomas." The other boy looked at Tommy for a moment and blinked.

"Hey,..." he finally replied, "I'm Cabel. Isn't this place great, I thought I was the last one."

"What's with these people?" Tommy asked.

"Don't you know? They're all dead."

cabel

The little boy pulled a rocking chair out of the house and onto the porch. He sat down and rocked back and forth. The crash of the ocean was behind him, and in front of him the sun was waiting to rise. Back and forth. He took a picture out of the pocket of his robe. It was of a place he wanted very badly to go to. Back and forth.

In the picture time was frozen at a moment very early in the morning. There was a park, and a hoarde of Chinese pople were doing various exercises in it. Back and forth. He knew that the

Chinese did their exercises early in the morning because they
believed the air was fresher before dawn. Back...

...and forth.

VI

thomas

He was hot.

He hadn't been sick for years. When they lived in LA he was prone to being ill, then they had moved to Illinois when he was about seven. He had no friends before then, but had found his first friend in -----, the girl who lived next door.

She helped him adjust to living in the country. As he grew, so did the town they had moved to, and so did his dreams. Rich people moved to the town to live by the river, and his dreams became infected with theirs. In highschool he began writing to release the tension of the dreams. -----, who was now his best friend, read his stories. When he wrote about her dreams she assured and affirmed that she had had those same dreams.

Now he had mono. His mother had looked at him sadly when the doctor had announced this. And Tommy was put to bed to suffer. He couldn't stay awake, but he hurt too much to sleep soundly. The dreams were wretched.

He slipped into one of them with his eyes open.

<DREAM SEQUENCE>

cabel

He walked slowly up to the dark porch, nearly stumbling on a large round stone. Should he ring or knock? It was late. He didn't want to wake anybody up but he was feeling odd. He

couldn't decide what to do so he turned and started to walk away.

This was stupid. He had walked all the way there. He needed this. He turned and rang the bell.

It startled him. It was loud and incredibly harsh. He considered running, but couldn't find the nerve. Footsteps approached the door. The door opened. Lights poured out. Warm, bright light. He knew it was her.

"Hello," she said, somewhat surprised, but obviously understanding.

He froze. Dead silent for several seconds. Until, "I want you to come with me but I need to be alone. Can you do that?"

As soon as he had finished the sentence, she turned and retreated into the house. Then she was back.

"Sure," she said. She stepped lightly onto the porch and into the darkness.

He closed the door behind her and ambled slowly out into the night. He made his way to the end of the drive, and not knowing which way to turn, went straight. He walked straight through people's yards. She walked beside him.

The night was cool and the dampness of the grass fell into his shoes and cooled his sore feet. He shivered as they walked by the darkly beautiful houses. The houses all had people in them. Rich people sunk deep in sleep or laughing in their dim security. They made him gloomy.

His thoughts shifted from one to another. Back and forth. Never balancing on one idea long enough for him to grasp it. Finally, when he couldn't stand the confusion any longer, he

spoke.

"Do you believe in God?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Well,... think," he prodded.

She wondered if she should have gone outside with him. She didn't know him that well. She was going to prom with his best friend. That was all. He was usually a lot of fun though. She hardly knew what to think.

He sensed this and was about to change the subject when she said, "I guess so. What do you think about God?"

He smiled. She got him. Now he had to think. They reached a road and he turned left. So did she. They were both hooked.

"I believe in God," he stated boldly. But not the way everyone else believes in him. There is definitely a god, though. He's just not the same for everyone. God is what you make him. He's in your mind. But he has physical being too. I really can't explain it, but do you understand?"

No answer. He felt compelled to elaborate.

There was a long pause as he thought once again.

"God is really hard to explain," he began over. "I just don't know where to start. But then, that's usually my problem.

I suppose I'll just talk. And if I forget anything, I'll just, uh...

"Okay. You see, God is different for everyone because God is a part of your mind. Everyone has a diety. Even the worst people and athiests. Not that I group bad people and athiests together. I don't. But people need something higher than them.

Something to blame and something to look up to when things are good. But this God is only a piece of mind.

"He's real, though. God is practically touchable. People work up a great amount of spiritual energy for God. We make him as real as ourselves.

"Stop," he said, jarring her slightly by derailing her train of thought. He grabbed a clump of grass from the side of the road. "See this," he ordered. Obviously she did. "Touch it," and he thrust his hand out to her. "It's there, isn't it?" She nodded haltingly. "Watch." He opened his hand, showing all of the grass. Then he closed his hand and pushed all of the loose blades into his fist. When the grass was all tucked into his fist he mumbled some words and blew on the closed hand.

"It's gone now," he said, "Want to see?"

She nodded.

"Do you think it's still there?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Well, then it is. You have to believe it's gone."

"I can't. I saw you put it in there."

"As long as you believe it's there, it'll be there."

"What kind of trick is it?" she asked dumbly.

"It's not really a trick. It's a show of faith. I don't believe it's there anymore and all the grass is gone. But if I open my hand and you don't believe that the grass is gone, it'll still be there. The grass can't be there and not be there, so one of us is obviously wrong. Then what?"

"Well," she rationalized, "what if we both believe the grass

is gone and it's still there?"

"Then we'd both be mad. But it's not there. Really.

"I don't know," she said. She was becoming more than worried.

"Well then, I'm not going to open my hand." He started walking again, his left hand clenched in a whitening fist.

As they walked, she watched the thick fist. Slowly, as the blocks passed by, the fist opened. She watched, but nothing fell from his hand. Her eyes widened.

He stopped walking. He turned and looked into her eyes.

"You believed, didn't you?"

VII

thomas

He walked out of the small grocery store, opened the new pack of Lucky Strikes, and lit one. It was only a short walk from the campus to the store but he hated it. He leaned against the brick of the building, standing in a bath of neon from the store, and took a slow drag off the cigarette. He looked at his watch. It was after 9:30, he had work to do.

He straightened his back and walked into the surrounding night. The cigarette, a small orange dot that punched through the black, was all that he could see by, but he walked unwavering back to the campus, the slap of his hightops popping lightly in the air.

When he got closer to the campus, which was far better lit than the town,^a he headed toward the Union. The walk would be a little longer, but the Union was warm. He stepped hard on the steps, into the worn indentations, grasped the door of the staid building, and plunged into the warmth and light.

The halls were comfortable and he walked slower now. In the distance he heard music, a piano and a violin, he dropped his

cigarette on the floor, ground it out with the flat of his heel, and headed toward the sounds. When he got to the ballroom he saw Jenny and Alec on the stage. Jenny was playing the violin, and the notes slid across the air very sexually with her hips. Then he remembered that Brian and his jazz band were going to be playing tonight so he waited at the door for Jenny to finish her piece.

When she finished he walked in and looked for an empty seat. There was one in the back, so he sat next to a rough looking man he did not recognize. The man shuffled in his seat when Tom sat, and then remained still, staring off to the right of the stage. Brian took the stage and introduced himself and sat at the piano and ripped out a tune while the rest of the band set up and warmed up.

Tom liked Brian's music. Brian had found a guy with a steel drum and another guy with a big bass. The two instruments sounded very good together and made Tom feel queer.

They began playing the first tune and Tom watched, the music was familiar, but he could not feel comfortable. The drum rang and the bass throbbed a beat. Tom only stared.

Then the man beside him touched Tom's leg and whispered something in his ear.

?

"I have to explain," the man said again, "what it is that is happening."

Tom looked at him, he was a thin man, his complexion clear and dog-like, a pair of round eyeglasses sparkled in his eyes.

His hair was fine and his clothes looked immaculately well kept. The man had to be at least thirty. And his hand, now squeezing Tom's elbow, was somehow wrong.

Tom looked at him awkwardly, the man just sat stock still and waited for a reply.

"What do you mean?" Tom asked.

"I've got the answer to... everything," and the man took something from his breast pocket and popped it into his mouth.

Tom got up as if to go, the man sat still, waiting, so Tom left. A minute later the man got up to go, the music of the drum and bass synchronizing. They came together again in the hall where they could talk.

Silence.

"So what have you got," Tom asked.

"I've got some wonderfully beautiful paintings. And if you like them I could probably let you read some of my stuff." The man fidgeted as he spoke.

Tom didn't understand the lingo the man was using. What was he offering to sell? Tom refused to look green, though, and said, "Yeah, sure, sounds cool."

They turned, wordlessly in unison and walked out of the Union. As they did they passed a wall whose entire content of signs had been shredded. This was where the rally had been. Tom was against the War, but he hadn't attended the rally. He was too secure to be anything but apathetic. Secure because he knew he would never be drafted.

They walked to the man's car and got in, then drove to the

man's house. The house was old and gigantic. It had pillars of white marble. Tom knew the man would have good stuff for him.

They walked into the house and the man brought Tom to a large, long room with red velvet draperies that hung from the ceiling to the floor. The floor was white tile and there were white candles on dozens of different stands.

The man gave Tom something and he took it. Then the man lit a candle and turned off the lights. From candle to candle the man walked, sometimes crossing the entire room to light the next, as if they all needed to be lit in the right order.

Tom looked at the man, watched him slide back and forth lighting the candles, lighting the room, reaching to him, only to light a candle. The flame wavered red and liquid and Cabel blinked. He looked into the man's face, into the pores of his cheek-chin, watched the hairs that were growing out of the tiny-caverns, and wanted to know what it would feel like to take a razor to the hard angles of that soft skin and shave the impending beard, and then he blinked. The man was bending over, candle in hand, lighting another candle that was within Tom's reach, and the blood rushed to Tom's face so he took off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt and lay back onto the floor his head lolling to one side but his eyes staying on the man and the candle, its flame indecisive yet bright, then he blinked. Watching the fluid motion of the man, slow long arms reaching out. Candle flame to blackened wick until a rush of flame ignites the pair into one glow before receding back into two desperate points of life. The blood welled in a small nick on the

man's chin, "I'm sorry, I'll be more careful. Shall I continue?"
"Yes." the flame... looking at it... feeling like it... reaching
out to it across the room. But the candle... it is falling...
dying... the wax drips onto the cool tile beside his face...
warm... cold... what it feels like to die. But outside himself
the yapping of puppies.

Cabel

Cabel laughed at Joel. They were sitting in Pat's
Restaurant. Pat's was a good place. All the college students
hung out there. Pat refused to take any hassle from the kids who
stopped in after class to order a quick sandwich. In fact, one
day, a guy paid for his order by dropping the change in his half
empty water glass. Pat saw this, turned the cup over spilling
icy water in the laps of the young man and his girlfriend, and
picking the change from the ice cubes, dropped the still wet
coins in her apron.

Joel was crazy. An English major, he had ideas about
literature that were unprecedented. In the years to come Joel
would become a professor in an ugly but stimulating state school,
where he would spend most of his waking hours researching
Beowulf and building an argument to the effect that Grendel was
god and Beowulf was Satan. An argument that would be coming
together quite lucidly until Joel died of jaundice.

"You can't be serious," Cabel told him.

"I am," Joel said. "Come on. Think about it. You've been
Chosen. All you've got to do is pass a test."

Pat was yelling at a girl, "and the damn bathroom door's

going to stay locked until whoever wrote on the mirror decides they're going to apologize and clean it off."

Cabel thought about the offer Joel was making. Joel had told him he was a member of an "aloof organization." It was an organization devoted to what Joel had said, "were ideals you, my friend, are an epitome of." When Cabel asked if the organization had a name, Joel had said DOG. This was too good to be true. Joel and who ever else was in on this thing were a riot.

"Yeah, sure, what do I have to do?" Cabel asked.

"Okay, meet me at the race track, gate eighteen, at midnight on Friday."

Just then the jukebox started playing a Louis Armstrong song. Cabel saw _____ and asked Joel about her. They discussed the pros and cons of sleeping with red haired women before long and everything was normal with Pat yelling at someone else before too long.

Friday night came, Cabel talked to his father on the phone about this and that and then proceeded to get drunk. At quarter after eleven he remembered he was supposed to meet Joel. He looked at his clock, his eyes fuzzy.

Tick tock tick.

He grabbed a fifth of whiskey and his jacket and climbed out the window. The snow crunched under his feet, but he was on his way.

He got to gate eighteen in about a half an hour, his feet numb in his tennis shoes. He sat in a corner where the wind had cleared the snow from the ground. He took a swallow from the

bottle and wondered if Joel was going to show up. Then, above the wind, he heard footsteps in the distance.

Joel appeared in front of him, steam billowing from his mouth like a dragon. In a mute, serio-comical gesture, he motioned for Cabel to follow.

They walked beyond the racegrounds, Joel leading, Cabel following, to where the ground abruptly fell away. They slip-walked down the gully, past strewn rocks and small trees, to where during the summer there was a healthy sized creek. The water of the creek was frozen over now, and snow covered the ice so that it was hard to tell where the bank was. They walked until they came to a large rock that they sat and talked on when it was warm.

Joel spoke. "DOG is a confidential order. Nobody knows about it. That's why we all have to pass a test. Before you do the test, though, you have to swear that once you're a DOG, being one will be the most important thing in your life."

"Yeah, I swear," Cabel said, shifting his weight from one cold foot to another.

"Your test, then, is to cross the creek."

Cabel almost laughed. He looked at Joel though, and saw he was very serious. He looked across the creek. It was only six feet deep at most. And it had ice on it that was covered by a layer of snow. He looked back at Joel who said, "Give me your jacket, first."

Cabel nodded and gave him the jacket. Then he turned to the creek. The wind bit deep. He wanted this over, he couldn't even

feel his feet anymore and his nose was starting to run. He stepped out where the ice started, unsure why this was a test. By the time he was a third of the way across, he began to understand.

The ice groaned. His stomach flipped over in his gut at the sound of the beast, but he refused to turn back. This was good. This was real. This was fear.

He slid his foot forward, plowing a trail through the snow. Nothing. He slid the other foot forward. A crack pinged and shivered about five feet to his right. He moved his foot forward again and the beast swallowed him whole.

My feet are over my head I think.

My eyes are closed tight, so I open them. In the distance, which isn't very far, I can see a man moving toward me, but he's upside down. His hair is white and his tattered robe is grey and both flow slow-oddly though I can't see why he's upside down. As he gets closer I see more that isn't right about him. Minnows swim in and out of holes in his chest cavity. In his hand is a tarnished pitchfork and on his head is a bent crown.

He speaks to me without moving his mouth, "It's true, you know."

"What?" I think. The figure stares at me vacantly, his eyes shriveled and weak. "I'm dead. We're all dead."

I know this man from somewhere. I wait for him to go on to see if his next words spark my memory.

"You do not believe me?" A pause, "Come, reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side. I have been dead longer than

the one you are most familiar with, my decay is more thorough. But be not faithless, be believing. He is dead also."

I reach out to touch the man. The body is real. The flesh is hard and slimy. I want to ask him a question, but my mind is growing hazy. I cannot breathe. My lungs ache and my head pounds with every beat of my heart.

Joel watched as his friend fell through the ice. His heart froze and he moved toward the edge of the creek. But there was nothing he could do. He waited a moment, confused, then turned to run. He stumbled on a stone, and as he was scrambling to get up he heard a splash.

He saw Tommy grasping at the edge of the hole. He fell to his knees as he watched his friend slowly, painfully, drag himself out of the water. When Tommy reached the bank, Joel wrapped the jacket around him and made him stand. They walked as best they could to Tommy's house, all the while Tommy was clutching the arrowhead in his now bloody hands.

VIII

thomas

"No."

The heat was intolerable. The fires burned, but the black smoke from the rubber obliterated all the light. He came to coughing, gasping for breath, the dream of the woman with the large swaying hips and the terrifyingly piercing eyes was still fresh in his mind.

How long had he been unconscious? It was light out when the bastards had ambushed them. Now it was night. He thought hard, feeling his body without moving to see if any bones were broken. Nothing. He reached up to his head and felt the hair matted to his skull with what must have been mud and blood and he realized then, as his hands drew away from his head, and he saw them for the first time, that his hands were mangled.

"This isn't happening," he thought to himself.

It wasn't. But it had.

The smoke poured acrid into his lungs. His head swam. He couldn't see any movement through his tearfilled eyes but decided to remain still and listen. He could hear the sound of the flames as they ate whatever it was that burned. And beside that he heard nothing else for a long time.

Then he heard someone crying off in the distance. Was that Anderson? Or was Anderson running point. Because he was sure the point man had been hit first. The ambush had surprised them all and had come from the front, so Anderson was surely dead. But the crying continued, a voice calling out for mom. He couldn't stand it and wished the crier would die.

The black walled cafe was where all the much-too-pretentious people went when they wanted to drink coffee, write, talk about big ideas, or, when night fell, drink liquor in secret, because nobody could see more than four feet in front of them, and if they did, wouldn't care what the pretentious were doing anyway. He went because he liked the music. People came in and played whenever the urge came to them. In fact, one time he had seen two guys who had both wanted to play at the same time. Neither one would back away from the platform, but they were both pacifists, so they just played at the same time.

The music was different. One played Indian music on a sitar the notes high and singing. The other played a ragged bass the notes throbbing in your guts. And when they sang, the music came together in a sick but pleasing way.

The black walled cafe. The woman with the swaying hips. His brain clouded with the thick smoke that wasn't of cigarettes. She was there, her eyes as powerful as his were weak. And she danced to the music. The music was two men who both wanted to play with each refusing to wrest control from the other. A battle of passivity. A war where the most beautiful woman in the whole entire world danced on the battlefield. Danced on their

graves.

He watched her dance. Wanted her. Such wonderful hips. Hips that could give birth to the world and rock his life at the foundation. He moved to get up and talk to her. What would he say? It didn't matter.

His eyes teared full from the smoke, she faded into a swim of shapes, and the voice called out, "Mom." But it wasn't Anderson, was it? It was himself. His own voice. Crying as he struggled in the muck to get up. God he wanted to die. And the cloud of black hot smoke blew in his face but he stood and wiped the sweat from his face, smearing blood where his hand touched. Anderson was dead. He stood up.

He swayed, danced, nearly fell down. He felt like he was stoned. The black walls had closed in on him and he was looking for that woman. She would be his, he knew this. It was predestined.

But the rubber broke in and he remembered where he was and he knew what he had to do even if he didn't know how to do it and he didn't even think about why he was doing what he was doing and none of this really mattered because he was going to succeed and go back to the states and do what he always intended to do: live.

Mom.

<cough>

A few steps and he stumbled. The dance was over. But someone was behind him. His partner in the Danse Macabre. Anderson. Anderson's leg was gone. No wonder he couldn't dance. Why didn't he just say something? Shit.

He got up again...slowly. "I just got killed and I'm back," he said. This was it. He had to keep going. Walk. Move. Get back to where he belonged. Find the rest of his patrol. Find anyone American. He looked around at the waste. <wheeze> Find anyone.

Anyone except the damn person he found. It was one of them. The body was crumpled in a heap and when he got close it rolled over to face him. It was a half naked woman, her stomach bloated, her face twisted in pain. A piece of cloth was clenched between her jaws. He watched her. She watched him. The contraction subsided.

She didn't make a sound throughout two more contractions. He watched in awe. After the third contraction she finally moved. She took the rag out of her mouth and said something to him under her breath. He moved closer, hoping to hear and understand her words.

When he did, her arm darted out and grabbed his hair, dragged him down to her. Balance was lost and they tumbled down a gully and into the water. Struggling against each other, they both sank. On the side of his throat he felt the cool steel of a death-claw. He pulled against the monster and the claw bit into him.

They fought for several minutes, his head exploding. Minutes grew to hours. He hurt. The slimy water poured into the wound. Amorphous shapes came at him and receded. And still he fought. Tearing at her with his bare hands. The claw came at him again, he felt it cool at his groin. He grabbed the arm and

pushed it away, twisted it with all his strength. Something made a popping noise in his ear. Maybe it was the pressure of being under so much water. Maybe it was the pressure of being twisted so hard. No matter. As the wet shuddery sound popped in his ears and as he struggled to free himself, he felt oddly warm. Then he did something completely out of his character in the next moment. He passed out.

cabel

The bar was pretty empty when he walked in, only a couple guys at a pool table and a few standing up at the bar drinking beer and whiskey shots. The whole atmosphere was brown and dim, down to the layer of sawdust on the floor. When he walked in his feet scritchd across the floor. One of the guys at the bar looked familiar.

He looked to see if Jack was there yet. He wasn't. He liked Jack. Jack was a good guy. For eight hours a day, six days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, and for three years he and Jack had welded the equipment that would go out into the field and be used to build bridges.

They had gotten to know each other real well, and even though he was much more educated and intelligent than Jack, they still got along well. Jack was a good guy. He knew how to tell a story. And he had plenty to tell.

I knew a guy once.... That was how most of Jack's stories started. Jack was older, and had spent quite a few years in the field before coming to work at the shop, so he knew a lot of

guys. And a lot of stories.

"I knew a guy once," Jack had once told him, "was this old German man. He was the fuckin' funniest thing in the world. Small guy. Had a moustache. Ferget his name.

"But anyway, he's stopped at this stoplight one day, it's rainin' cats and dogs, and his car dies. He tries to start it but the engine won't even turn over. The light turns green and hi's sittin' there tryin' to start his car.

"Then behind him he hears this 'Beep, beep.' Yeah, when he told me the story he was sayin' 'Beep, beep.' So he's sittin' there trying to start his car and the guy behind him's goin' 'Beep, beep.' It isn't even turnin' over, his engine, and the guy behind him is goin' 'beep, beep.'

"Finally, he gets out of his car, goes to the car behind him, knocks on the guy's window with one hand and dangling his keys from the other hand an' he goes, 'Here, pal, these are my keys, you go start my car and I'll sit here and beep your horn.'"

He and Jack had a good laugh over that one. And that wasn't even one of Jack's better stories. Jack was a good guy.

"I knew a guy once," another one of his stories started, "who towards the end we practically had to hit in the head."

But Jack wasn't here yet. And it was already half past eight. No matter. Cabel walked to a barstool and sat down and got a bottle of beer.

He thought about Mel. She was beautiful. They had had dinner last night at the little Italian restaurant on Court Street. They had sat in a dark corner all to themselves. The

candle light made her pale skin glow and her hard eyes soften. Right there and then he thought that she could probably be the one. She reminded him of someone, but he couldn't remember who. They talked until way late and he brought her home, where he kissed her on the cheek.

He looked at his watch. Jack was late. He looked around the bar. When he did his eyes met with the man standing a few feet away. The man glared at him, but Cabel didn't pay any mind to him.

Cabel waited for another fifteen minutes, finished another beer and decided to just go home. He gave the bartender a buck and stood. His feet scritchd across the floor as he left.

Outside it was cool and autumnlike. He walked across the gravel parking lot slowly.

"Hey," a voice called out. He turned to see if it was Jack. It wasn't, it was the guy from inside the bar. Cabel turned and kept walking.

"I'm talkin' to you, asshole," the man called out. Cabel turned around again.

"Aren't you the clown who was out with Evie last night out at Mama's?"

"I don't know anyone named Evie," Cabel said.

"Don't fuck around with me, her name's Mel. She's mine, got it? I hear you're out with her again and I'll wring your scrawny neck. Got it?"

Cabel looked at the man. He was huge. His head and face were covered with thick black curly hair. Mel had mentioned an

ex-boyfriend. This was the guy. This was the kind of guy he'd always had to deal with. And here he was telling Cabel not to see some woman. Cabel wanted this guy. Wanted to get even with all the stupidity this guy stood for.

"Fuck off," Cabel said. And he turned around.

A second later Cabel was face down on the gravel, the guy was on his back, a thick bristled arm was locked around Cabel's throat.

Cabel flipped the hulking man over easily, looked into his crazed eyes and saw only beast. He smelled the beer on the man's breath and knew he was in trouble. The beast reached his hands up to Cabel's throat and lifted Cabel off him easily. Cabel lashed out at the man but missed.

"Get that guy," a voice called out. "He's wastin' ya."

Cabel didn't know what was happening. Didn't care. Only knew that he had to get even with this monster. Then he was thrown.

Cabel smelled the dust of the gravel, didn't feel the weight of the man, and stood. The other guy was standing in front of him, hunched into a brawling stance, but still taller than Cabel. They circled each other for a moment, then one of them lunged.

Cabel thought only of revenge. He had been humiliated. He needed to pay this guy back. But this thing was pushing his head down and slamming its knee into his face. The pain. The blood. The hate. Nothing mattered. He had to win.

Cabel bled. Hurt. Got angry. Grabbed the thing's leg and

pulled up. The thing lost its balance and fell back. Wuff.

Cabel pounced, pummeling the thing's immense chest to no avail.

The thing reached out and threw him again. Cabel groped the ground to get up and felt a bottle. Stroh's. Yes. He took the bottle in his hand and the thing leapt back onto him. Heavy.

Shit. No breath. Fists pounding his body. Then nothing.

Cabel was talking to Jack, in Jack's pickup. Jack had come and beat the guy with a baseball bat just before Cabel had blacked out. Cabel ached. He dropped the Stroh's bottle and felt his ribs to see if any were broken.

IX

thomas

He let the bottle slide slowly out of his hand and onto the kitchen floor. The liquid foam spread across the wooden floor but he didn't care, he had just heard the bathroom door close. He was getting married tomorrow and his best man was pissing again. He walked slowly to the bathroom.

"Bill," he called through the door. Bill had been in the bathroom at the bar nearly all night. More liquid was going out than was going in. Tom was sure Bill would be a pile of dust by the morning.

Bill eventually came to the door.

"You okay, man?" Tom asked. Bill nodded and walked to the living room and sat on the couch.

Bill's eyes were bloodshot. He took his glasses off and threw them onto the floor. "I can't believe you're getting married," he said.

He was serene. She was a good woman. He was happy. He had known her forever, it seemed. He looked at a picture of the two of them in college. He was thin then. Skinny. She had long hair, that ran into her hazel eyes. She was a tiny bodied woman,

but had a strength that shot out of those eyes.

It was a hot day when they had sat for the picture. They had spent it floating down the river, drinking lemonade with vodka in it. Their conversation a living Rorschach test. Taoism became Winnie the Pooh became Freud, flowing over things they used to talk about in college. By noon they were quite drunk but not quite done. Tom landed the boat at a riverside restaurant. They ate sandwiches and drank lemonade.

After eating they got back into the boat and drifted some more. Tom lowered the anchor and they swam for a while. When they got tired they swam back to the boat, their naked bodies chilling, toweled off, and fell asleep. They awoke and it was night. They drank some more, made love, and Tom asked her to someday marry him.

"I do," she said.

He kissed his bride. And as he did so, a woman that looked like she could be the mother of the bride, for the resemblance was striking, darted out of the backmost pew and left the church. Small bells rang from under her skirts with the swaying of her hips, but then the church bells pealed.

Tom's mother stood, tears streaming from her eyes, looking at the couple, and Bill, eyes dry as dust, held her hand tightly. He couldn't cry, he was too drained.

He had thrown a bachelor party for Tom, spent the entire night with Tom, but he had been in the bathroom urinating every half-hour. It had been a strange night. He remembered finally ending up at Tom's. He was sitting on the chair in the living

room. His eyes hurt.

Bill's eyes were bloodshot. He took his glasses off and threw them onto the floor. "I can't believe you're getting married," he said. He crossed his leg and moved his hand to adjust his glasses and muttered something. "Why is she marrying you? She never even liked you."

It was the day before their boat ride. Tom remembered it easily. He opened his mouth to explain it to Bill, but nothing came out. He thought for a moment. Then told the story.

"It was the fall of last year. Remember how everything was then? Remember the Halloween Party at the Elks that everyone went to? You went home early because you had drank too much, but you remember how I was way out of it and asked for some way to make her talk to me? You told me she was sculpting recently so I used that and it worked. She talked to me. But there was more to it than that.

"I went out to the parking lot, it was really late and I'd had too much to drink, so there I am, sitting on the curb, my head spinning, I swear I thought I was going to be sick, just tryin' to catch my breath. An' like she comes out a' the party, and she doesn't see me, but I see her, and she's dressed in this outfit that I just cannot believe. So I sit an' watch her for a while.

"Then, whatsisface, the bonehead, uh... you know, he was dressed up like this big whirlbird or somethin'. Remember? Well he comes out an' he sees her an' I see him, but he don't see me. He starts talkin' to her an' I think, fuck, guess my chances

are down the tube.

"I mean I was gone. Blowed. I been friends wit' her for ever. Nothin' between us. But just that night I realized I really wanted her.

"An' next thing I know he's got her arm and he's draggin' her behind the bushes. But she's lookin' all wild eyed, an' tryin' to yell. So I get up, run over there an' by the time I get there he's got her on the ground wrestlin' wit' her costume an' tryin' to get the damn feathers away from his cock.

"Hee, Hee, Hee...." he began to laugh. Bill shook his head at him, not understanding what was going on. Tom laughed for several minutes, clutching his sides. Bill went to the bathroom again and when he returned Tom was staring at the place Bill had left. Bill sat back down, Tom shook his head briskly and began again.

"So I grabbed dis guy by the neck, pulled him offa her an' punched him in the beak. He went down like a rock. An' she gets up, cryin', an' grabs me an' all I can do is tell her it's all right now. So I just held her dere an' asked her if she wanted to go fer a ride in my boat the next day. She said yeah an' the next day, when I was sober, I still kinda had a thing for her and she seemed to like me too. So we jus' sorta, I dunno."

Tom stopped talking. His lips moved. But he made no sound. His eyes glassed over. But he still stared.

Bill fell asleep in the chair and Tom stared. He knew something was going on, he just didn't know what. His mind flashed back to things that were his past and things that

weren't. He couldn't stop them, and soon they all seemed the same. She would help him. She would make him whole. That's why he needed her. He knew that, but he didn't know why. His lips moved. But he made no sound.

cabel

"Could you please speak up, sir?" said the woman behind the glass.

"Goddamnit, Mel," Cabel growled, "you know why I'm here. Do you really want me to announce it?"

She lowered her eyes and shook her head. "Could you please wait until my lunch break? Then we'll talk."

He glared at her. "Yes."

She pointed toward the reception area and he turned. As he walked to the magazine rack, the next client, a dog-faced man with circular eyeglasses went to the window and spoke in a soft voice words that Cabel didn't hear.

Cabel took a magazine off the rack and sat in an uncomfortable chair. He looked around at the men in the reception area and opened the magazine. He didn't like Mel working in the clinic. But she never had any physical contact with these men, so he couldn't argue with her about it. He looked down at the magazine and waited for her to go on break.

He got lost in the glossy photos, his mind wandering and his memories mingling with the pictures.

<DREAM SEQUENCE>

Mel tapped him on the shoulder, "Want to go?"

"Huh," he said, "Yeah."

He got up and put on his coat. They walked out into the brisk air and he looked hard at her. They went along in silence, walking down the sidewalk of Main Street. He loved her. But he was hurt. He didn't understand.

"How did you find out?" she finally asked.

"That's not important, I just want to know why you didn't tell me. What did you think?"

"I don't know. I guess I wanted to be sure."

"Well, now you're sure. What were you planning on doing? Were you even going to tell me?"

"Yes."

He looked at her. Her eyes started to water. He felt like shit now. He didn't want to hurt her. He took her arm. "Will you marry me?" She pulled free, staring at him with hurt in her eyes. Then she turned and darted across the street.

A horn blared as she moved into the center of the lane. Cabel didn't think he merely ran towards her. Another man moved to and reached her first pushing her to safety. This man was hit by the speeding car and thrown into Cabel with jarring force. The car wrapped around a light post and blew up.

Later, when Cabel woke, Mel was beside him crying. The police were brought in and Cabel made his statement attesting that he had saved Mel, but that as the car swerved, it had struck the other man. Mel heard this, and not knowing any better, broke down and said that she would marry him.

The Beginning and the End

"It's been a long time, Thomas."

The landscape was surreal. It was visible darkness. In the hazy distance he saw a Greek temple with pillars and a gold roof. From the front of this was a trickle that grew into a river. The ground was strange. Flames that flickered black and ice that wasn't really cold. He shook his head.

"Cabel?"

"You recognize me, huh?"

"You look like... me?"

"Wonder why."

Silence. They stared into each other.

"Here's the deal, old man," Cabel said to him. "I'm going to kill you. I owe you. but seeing's how I had to come all the way here to get you I really want to kind of savor the eternity. So we're going to play a game. I'm sure you've heard about it. It's a hunting game. I give you an hour's lead, and you live as long as I don't find you. Bye."

Thomas looked at Cabel. "Why?" he asked.

"Ticktocktick"

Thomas looked at Cabel, began to understand the madness, and ran.

(ONE INFAMOUS CHASE SCENE LATER...)

A rope was stretched across the two towers. Thomas looked down, the fall would be deadly. Behind him he could feel Cabel drawing near. Irrational. Thomas stepped onto the rope.

His movements were jerky. His balance was hard earned. Slowly. His calves burned with the effort. His head swam. The rope felt drawn under his feet. The towers seemed infinitely distanced. Everything crystal clear. Focusing on the far tower.

The trap door opened. He heard it, but didn't turn. He felt footsteps shiver the rope behind him. He was half-way across. Suddenly there was a cry behind him. Close. Over?

A man in jester's clothing. Orange. Purple. Jingling bells. Landed in front of Thomas. Seeing this man, Thomas froze. The rope swayed as the jester ran to the far tower. Thomas swayed. Back. The jester stood on the platform before him. And forth. The jester turned and stared at him. Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Back...

Thomas fell. Arms and legs flailing. Mind screaming. Ground racing to meet him.

"No!"

This was not Thomas' dream at all. This dream had originated in Cabel's mind. The body fell with a sickening thud. Bounced.

But Thomas was standing beside the body. The body moved. Eyes met Thomas.

"What are you doing here?" Cabel asked, his voice thick

with blood.

"All of this. It's your doing," Thomas said. "Hell isn't real. And your soul will be dead before your body."

"No." Cabel's hand groped until it reached a chavel bone. He raised the bone at Thomas. "It's not my fault."

Thomas stared hard at Cabel. Then he died.