



ALR

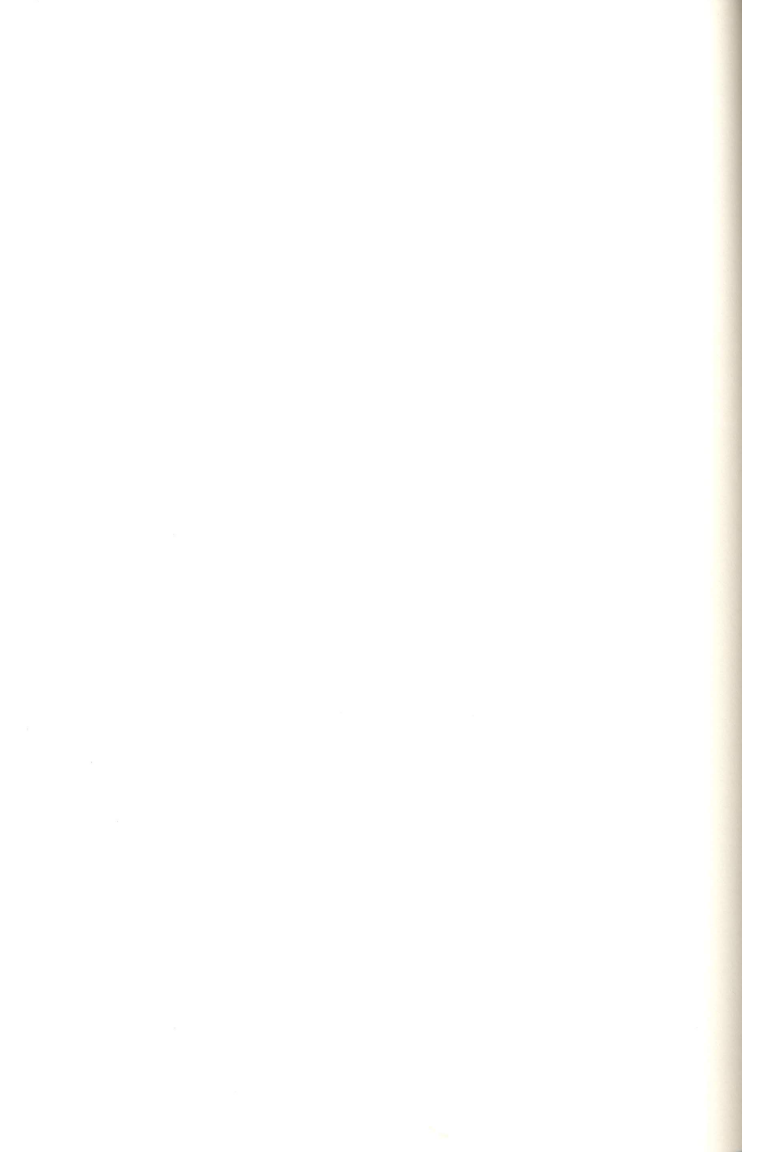
Alabama Literary Review

1996-97

Number 12



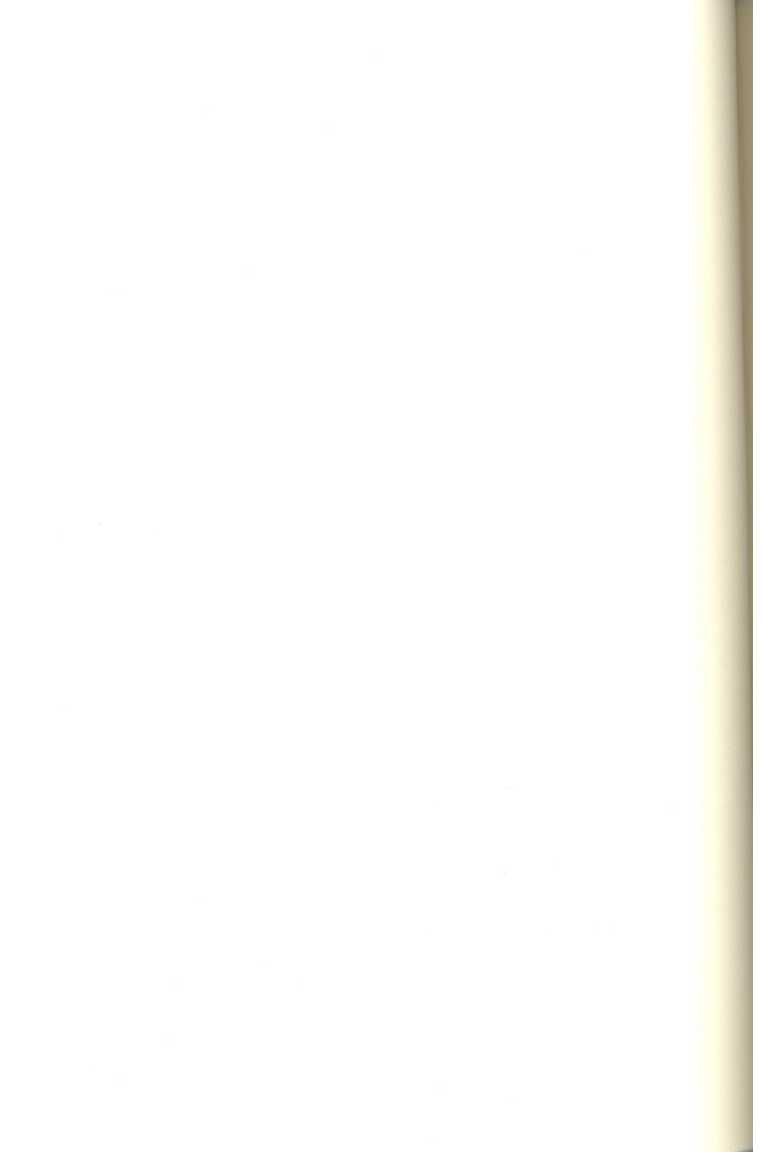
Crissa-Jean Chappell
Tom Cody
Beth Gylis
John Hodges
Dorothy B. Mack
Leo Luke Marcello
David Musgrove
Howard Park
Yasmine Beverly Rana
Thomas Reynolds
Wendy Wood



ALABAMA
LITERARY
REVIEW

1996 - 1997

Number 12



I write to find out what I'm talking about.

Edward Albee

STAFF

Chief Editor	Theron Montgomery
Associate Editor	Jessica Bryan
Production	Lori Jo Kleindienst
Editor for content and style	Beverly Gibson & Keith Hunter
Fiction Editor	Jim Davis
Poetry Editor	Ed Hicks
Reviews Editor	Stephen Cooper
Drama Editor	Tom Smiley
Faculty Reader	Keith Hunter
Students	Jennifer Jones & Richard Atkinson

STAFF HONORARIA

Anniston Star	The Montgomery Advertiser
Southern Natural Gas	The Blount Foundation
Riley N. Kelly	Sara Newton Carroll
Louis V. Loveman	Elise Sanguinetti
Roberta Hunt	Yvonne Kale
Robert M. Williams	Mr. & Mrs. Winton Blount

The *Staff Honoraria* have made tax deductible contributions to the Troy State University Foundation for support of *Alabama Literary Review*.

Graphics by Charles Orlofsky

Acknowledgment is made for the Fair Use of Edward Albee's quote, taken from *Good Advice on Writing*, edited by William Safire and Leonard Safire, published by Simon & Schuster, 1992.

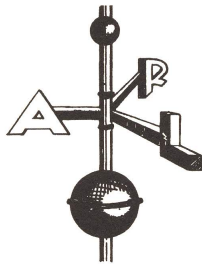
Alabama Literary Review is a state literary medium representing local and national submissions, supported by Troy State University and the Troy State University Foundation. Published once a year under the direction of the *Alabama Literary Review* staff, *Alabama Literary Review* is a free service to all public Alabama libraries and all Alabama two and four-year institutions of higher learning. Subscription rates are \$10 per year; \$5 for back copies. Rates are subject to change without notice.

Alabama Literary Review publishes fiction, poetry, essays, reviews, and short drama. Essays must follow *MLA Handbook*, third edition. Pays in copies. Pays honorarium when available. First Serial Rights returned to author upon publication. Manuscripts and editorial or business correspondence should be addressed to *Alabama Literary Review*, Smith 253, Troy State University, Troy, Alabama 36082. Submissions will not be returned nor queries answered unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Please allow two months for our response. © 1996 *Alabama Literary Review*. All rights reserved. ISSN 0890-1554.

Alabama Literary Review is indexed in *The American Humanities Index* and *The Index of American Periodic Verse*.

Contents

- 1 *Parkway Five*
 John Hodges
- 10 *Evening's Chair* (poem)
 Wendy Wood
- 13 *Psyche's Advocate*
 Crissa-Jean Chappell
- 22 *The One I Love* (poem)
 Beth Gyllys
- 24 *Double-Face Woman* (poem)
 Dorothy B. Mack
- 26 *We Disappeared* (poem)
 David Musgrove
- 28 *Everything is a Fossil* (poem)
 Thomas Reynolds
- 31 *The Future*
 Howard Park
- 49 *Decent* (play)
 Yasmine Beverly Rana
- 58 *Will* (poem)
 Leo Luke Marcello
- 61 *The Roaring Boy* (play)
 Tom Cody



Parkway Five

John Hodges

Corey watches from her spot on the porch the black clumps of seaweed washing onto the beach, hissing and roiling, lining the shore with bloated snakes.

"Fuckin bitch don't realize I ain't got no money!" comes the voice behind her, the shouting voice in the house that never stops. "They got money! They should pay it their own damn selves. I work for my money. I'm a honest tax-paying citizen!"

Corey has a picture in her head of a lady she has never seen. It is the woman Bobbyman killed, in the sand, face down, wearing clothes like her teachers, with heels and red lipstick. And the worry-heavy, thick, black like night when she closes her eyes, is all inside her. She thinks the dead lady might come get Bobbyman. The dead lady can get me too, she thinks. At night, and cut off my feet so I can't walk. And cut off my head.

They'd gone for pizza seven miles away and didn't come back for two days. That's when Bobbyman drove the truck into a woman.

As Corey looks across the water, a shiver creeps up her spine onto her neck. The shucker at Eaters told her people never died, that inside was a soul that went to live with God. "What's God?" Corey had asked. And the shucker told her the Wind.

The rusted spring of the screen door stretches its noise in Corey's ears. Her back tightens.

"Gonna be a big one," Bobbyman says, and the door behind him slams. "Nothin but niggerhair in that sky."

Corey looks at her feet, moves her toes, doesn't know how it is her toes move when she wants. Just do. And she thinks of the dead lady.

"Feed the dogs?" Bobbyman says, cupping his hands to light a cigarette.

Corey's heartbeat quickens. Her eyes climb the man, starting at his black galoshes and moving up his filthy jeans, into the shadowed swoop of his naked upper body.

"No daddy."

Bobbyman looks out at the water, blowing smoke which whirls away into the wind.

"I forgot," Corey says.

"What else is new." Bobbyman snorts a glob of snot into his throat and spits it off the porch.

"I'm sorry, daddy," Corey says.

"Story my life." He turns on his heel, looking down at her. "I don't ask much of you do I?"

"No daddy."

Bobbyman shrivels his face, raising his upper lip and flaring his nostrils with such disgust it makes Corey shudder. He raises his arm as if to lash her, and she wants to run, but can't. Her legs are stiff, feet woven into the porch like splinters. Corey closes her eyes, but the blow never comes. Instead her father chuckles. She opens her eyes and he is there, swaying above her like a piece of raw flesh on its nub.

"That's all right," he says warmly, putting his hand on Corey's head. "We all forget now and then." He looks back into the horizon. "You can do it later. I reckon somebody's gonna get weter'n a motherfucker." Bobbyman flips his cigarette off the porch. He coughs a little, then goes to the couch and plops himself down.

Corey knows what to do. As her father empties sunflower seeds into his mouth from a pack of *David's*, she kneels before him on the floorboards, stretching her hands around the slimy black rubber of one of his boots. Using all her weight, she pulls, and the boot slips off. Then she takes off the sneaker, the damp sock. She does the same with his other leg and begins her job of squeezing his feet.

"Oysters were bastards today," Bobbyman says. "How can a man spec to pay a funeral when oysters are bastards?"

"Beats me."

"Well, it damn sure beats me too, Corey. Your mama says I got to do it, but I ain't got to do shit do I?"

"No daddy."

"That's my girl."

Corey digs her thumbs into the wet wrinkly flesh as the familiar smell is loosed about her face. His foot is like a dead fish. Worse, because it is alive. Sometimes after school Corey gathers dead fish and makes towns of them on the beach. She gives them voices, strokes their backs and moves them through the sand like toy trucks.

"One day when you're a woman," Bobbyman says. "I'm gonna take you out in the boat w'me just to show you how much a bastard a oyster can be."

Last time Corey was in one of those boats, Bobbyman got it in his head to pierce her ear. Said she needed to be more ladylike. The other guy in the boat held her arms while Bobbyman ran a hook through her lobe.

"Have a good day in school?" Bobbyman says.

"Yes daddy."

"Well good. I'ont want you going up to be like your mama. That woman has caused me nothing but trouble, and you know what? I can't even be sure if you're my own damn daughter. Ain't that a load of shit?"

Corey grabs the other foot, pulling her fingers through Bobbyman's toes.

"Answer me."

"You said somebody might could've switched me in the hospital."

"Don't you dare back talk me, girl," Bobbyman says, raising his hand up again.

Corey pulls back, blinking her eyes, wishing she had blue ones like Bobbyman and Alma.

"It's a crime," Bobbyman says. "A woman should stick to the house. You know what that would make you, Corey? If it's true you ain't even mine?"

Corey squeezes his foot, hard the way he likes. "Yessir," she says.

"Look at me when you speak."

Corey raises her black eyes, ashamed, looking into the man's blue ones. He is so big. Skin dangles from his brows like the edges of oysters.

"See to it you don't go a'whoring, understand?"

Bobbyman's tongue slips out with bits of shell. He spits them, stretching his toes and taking a deep breath of wind. Blond streams of hair whisk across his face, and his cheek twitches how it sometimes does.

"What are you?" Bobbyman says, nibbling more seeds.

Corey knows how to answer. "A bee," she says.

"Say it right."

"A bitch."

"And don't forget it. You take that one to Mama."

"Yessir."

Bobbyman snatches his feet away, grabs his shoes and boots and goes back in.

Now Corey can feed the dogs. She glides down the concrete steps around to the side of the house. The air is salty and rumbling, cracking like a belt. The dogs barking, and Corey grabs their silver bowls as they snap chains, licking her, clawing her arms and dress. It begins to drizzle. Take it to Mama. Always take it to Mama. Corey takes the bowls to the dilapidated stationwagon, opens the door and scoops out some food from the big red barrel. He once put a collar on her and made her eat dogfood. Take it to Mama, he said when she cried.

Corey is in the bathroom, her favorite place. A loud bang shakes the earth, searing the clouds and it comes down hard, like oysters on the rickety tin roof. Lightning strikes, the bulb flickers, goes out.

She is in the dark now, sitting on the toilet and alone. She can hear the wind roaring outside the window, and Bobbyman groaning beyond the door somewhere. Corey hopes the dead lady isn't left on someone's picnic table because she'll be getting wet. It might make her angry. Corey imagines the dead lady jumping up into the wind and flying to a shed where it is dry.

Alma shouts. Her voice rises up over the thunder. She calls Bobbyman a whore, and he yells back, telling her to shut up, and calling her a liar and a whore whose wings are gonna get broke if she doesn't shut up and, "Those are my cigarettes bitch, I got them with my own money, you go out in the rain and find your own damn cigarettes."

"I know you're awake," Alma says.

Corey's body is half swallowed by the cushions on the loveseat. Every night the brown marshmallows suck her down into the earth where fish wear clothes and girls fly.

"You can get up now. I made you oatmeal."

Corey doesn't stir. She is watching the dead lady walk, red heels clicking in front of the oyster mountains, fat pelicans riding the air.

"Corey!" her mother shouts. "Please get up. I want to sit down."

The dead lady smiles and says, "I want to sit down."

Corey opens her eyes. "Do I have to," she mumbles.

"Yes," Alma says. "Now hurry up, child."

Corey brings her legs around, and Alma sits down, plopping the steaming bowl in Corey's lap.

"The rain is going back to the sky now," Alma says.

Corey imagines a worm poking its head out of her oatmeal.

"Did you know that, Corey?"

"No."

"It's true, child. Haven't you ever wondered where all that rain goes?"

"The golf of Mexico."

"No, that ain't right," Alma says. "Raindrops get sucked back in the sky."

Corey raises the silver spoon heaped high with mush. She takes a big breath and blows on it.

"It's because of the sun," Alma tells her. "When the sun gets thirsty it drinks the rain."

No wonder the sun is so big, Corey thinks. Miss Henderson said over a billion planets could fit in the sun. Corey puts the food in her mouth and chews.

"Mama," Corey says. "What did that lady look like?"

"What lady? Damn, I wish I had a cigarette."

"That lady y'all killed?"

Alma purses her lips and squints one eye at Corey. "What you wanna know about that for?"

"I don't know."

"She was tall," Alma says.

"How tall was she, Mama?"

"Taller'n you."

"Did she wear glasses?"

"Hush girl. Eat your food."

Corey lifts her spoon and puts more in her mouth. "What she said, Mama?"

"No," Alma says. "She didn't say noth— Corey, don't ask me about her. She's dead." Alma shakes her head and sips her tea and looks over at Corey and messes up Corey's hair. Then Alma smiles affectionately. "We was talking about you, honey," she says, winking.

"Me?"

"Yes, in case you got to know, Corey. We run her down when we was talking about you."

The front door is open and Corey can see the water from where she sits. It is a clear day, bright and fresh from the all-night rain. A group of pelicans fly by, calling Corey to the beach.

The sand is warm on Corey's knees. Her hair already hot from the sun. She kneels in front of her new town of dead fish, eyeing them suspiciously as she trucks them around.

"I'll bite your tail if you don't stop tickling my nose," she says, from one fish to another.

"No, don't bite my tail," she says, speaking for the other fish.

"I'll eat your tail," Corey snaps.

"Ow, no, don't eat my tail."

It is five fish in all. The sand shark is the biggest. Corey puts the shark at the front of the train, and moves it forward a step, then the next, and the next, until all fishes have advanced.

"Wait for me," Corey says, grabbing the last one's head. It is a sickly thing, rotted, with an array of bones showing through the meat. She holds it to her face and looks through the spikes. The sea is a million pinches, white at the tops, and gulls drift between the bones, cawing in the wind as they roll their eyes in big circles.

The shucker once told Corey she was pretty. Said her eyes were black pearls, and rare, that any mother would be proud. Corey remembers how he sat on a bucket with his fat stomach hanging between his legs. "That's a fine dress," he'd said. He could split an oyster with one hand. "And you got some

pretty legs too," he said. "If you was my daughter, yessirree, I'd be happy as a trout."

The wind still blows from the night before and dozens of oyster boats rest along the horizon. Sticks. She knows her father is in one. She wishes her daddy was the shucker. She has only seen that shucker three times, but he was so nice. And what he said about people living in the wind. When Corey told her mother about it, Alma laughed and said it was a lie because everybody knows God is the man who lives on the moon. But Corey didn't believe that because Miss Henderson said nobody could live up there because there wasn't any air.

The fish in Corey's hand is slimy like her father's feet. She wrinkles her face at it and sticks out her tongue. "Fuck!" she says, nastily. "You're a bitch!" She clutches the tail and slaps the shark with it. The head breaks off and rolls in the sand.

"Take it to Mama!" Corey yells, grabbing another fish and hitting the shark with it.

When Corey took it to Mama she was slapped so hard everything went black. When the light came back, Mama was kneeling over her on the kitchen floor saying she was sorry. She kissed Corey's cheek, but Corey never took it to her again.

"That's a fine dress," the man had said. Corey wonders if the shucker is really the man on the moon come down to see how things are going.

Corey grabs the shark's body and runs a finger over an eye. It feels like a jellyfish, and she sees her face in it, tiny, and the whole world all around it like the globe on Miss Henderson's desk.

Corey unlatches the safety pin from where the top button used to be on her dress. She runs the needle around the eye of the shark, causing it to pop out a little. She grabs it with her fingers and pulls.

Corey puts the eye in her palm, holds it in the sun. It looks like an oyster in its juice with bits of blue and green. She squashes it up and holds the pieces against her eyelids.

Corey laughs. She has new eyes. And remembers how it was when her parents didn't come back from getting pizza. She had walked in and out of the house slamming the door and yelling for the dogs to shut up. She could do anything, and the next night when Corey was alone, she left her dress in the yard and went to the shore and made like a pelican in the sand. Gurgling in the wind, she watched the others purring and feathering in the moonlight.

Corey pulls her hands away and opens her eyes. The sticky clumps roll down her cheeks. She looks at the sky and sees a floating buzzard. The nearby palms are snapping, and even the pines in the forest she can hear. She puts her hands to her chest and flaps her wings, but the wind doesn't lift her.

"Make me a pelican," Corey says.

Nothing.

She falls back in the sand amongst her family of dead fish, staring at the sun, seeing the rusty doorknob of her house. She can walk right out the door if she wants, down the steps out into the fast road.

* * *

Corey's first step is the silver pin she throws into the bright sweeping sand. She looks across the road. Her house glows. She whispers goodbye, and runs, with her dress hanging open like a wishbone against her chest. She walks and walks, seems like days. And her legs are tired and wobbly. She is thirsty, looking for puddles of rain, but the sun is thirsty too. Beer cans, trash, and styrofoam cups litter her trail of tall weeds and glass. She is a dwarf in the green weeds and small as the grass. Only breezes come from cars that honk as they speed by. The shiny chunks of metal leap across the land. Heads turn in the windows, and Corey wonders what they think. Do they have water? She wonders if they know about the dead lady.

Corey topples to the ground. It feels like something bit her. Then comes the pain, setting in slow. And the blood. It was broken glass that cut her. Shoots tower above her, hiding her from the road, competing for her air. She holds her foot in both hands, studying the wound, so big that it makes her cry. It looks like a laughing smile bleeding red from the corner of its mouth. So she licks it, thick and sweet. And looks inside the gash to see if she can see her soul in there. But all it is is red. Still, she worries that maybe her soul can get out and mix with the wind. She pinches it shut, and crickets buzz around her with sun and the ants on her thighs. A ladybug on her shoulder.

* * *

Mostly when Corey bleeds, she takes dirt and smears it in the cut, but the ground is so thick and rooted with grass that it only hurts her fingers trying to get some up.

So she sucks at the smile in her foot, trying to quench her thirst, and thinking of all that water she could drink if she was home. In the bathroom she could wrap her mouth around the faucet and let the water stream down her throat. At home she could sit on the toilet watching between her legs the dark mirrored face floating on water. Everything in the bathroom was safe. The tall white sink and tub were always shiny and cool to her touch. Corey sometimes climbed in the tub pretending she was dead.

* * *

Her dress is sticky against her, a skin that isn't hers, wet and cumbersome. Despite the pain she continues. The sun moves. Soon, Bobbyman will need Corey to take off his boots. He will need her to feed the dogs, rub his feet, listen while he talks of Mama, oysters, dinghyboys, people he used to know, and what he should have done in this or that situation. Bobbyman needs Corey. For his life—to fetch beer, smile, get scared, light cigarettes and agree about Alma the whore. The least Corey can do is light cigarettes and agree about Alma. Don't you know I work all day so you can eat my food? I work like a nigger, break my back in the sun so you and your shittyass mother can eat my food and spend my money. You think I like that? Do you?

Corey limps along, legs crossing each other like a warped pair of scissors. In the distance appears a figure that seems to be moving toward her. She wonders. Could it be the dead lady? Her heart flutters and she imagines a truck screaming across the road and slamming into her. "Goddamnit!" she hears her father say. She hears Mama crying, sees the dead lady with blood on her face, but the dead lady is still in the distance, dark, with steam on the green ground.

You want me to box you?

No daddy.

A pelican flies by, turning its nose at Corey, looking her up and down.

Did you feed the dogs like I told you?

Corey waves and the pelican blinks its black eyes. It continues down, flying over the dead lady and cutting over the density of trees at the other side of the road.

The dead lady is closer now. Corey's throat dry, tongue dry, swallowing no spit. She can see the color in the dead lady's clothes. She wears a red skirt, a yellow shirt. The figure grows with each step and she can see the dead lady's face, sagging from her face-bone and rotting like her fishes in the sand.

There is a flashing--the sun catching the rim of the dead lady's glasses. Corey thinks it means the dead lady is mad about her casket. Corey decides that if the dead lady comes after her, she'll lie and say she'll pay for it herself. Trick the dead lady, because all Corey has is twenty-eight cents she stole from the rug. She has it hidden in a brick-hole in the back yard.

Corey's heart thickens in her ears, drumming with insects and buzzing in the sky. The world is so bright and colored. It sizzles, breathing beneath her, and the dead lady looks hungry. Corey thinks she hears boats grinding against posts, then a huge metal snake slithers into the grass behind her with a terrible whipping sound.

"Hey!" cries a voice. "Ain't you Bobby Basum's little girl?"

Corey looks back and sees the face behind the wheel. It is the shucker, and he looks mad, and Corey suddenly knows the shucker is God, coming to punish her for whoring. Corey turns and runs fast and hard, falling down and getting back up again and running for the dead lady bobbing up and down inside her eyes.

The car door slams. "Where you going?" God shouts.

Heavy footsteps punch the ground, after her, and Corey screams. There are crickets inside her, jumping crazy, and she falls, washing into the tall green weeds, a slab of meat, roadkill. And gets up, not feeling her feet anymore, and runs. Falls. And God reaches down and pulls her from the grass.

"Let go!"

The dead lady is holding a plastic garbage bag over her shoulder.

"What's gotten into you, girl?" God says.

The dead lady bends over, reaching for something. Her face is withered, wrinkled and brown.

The shucker chuckles. "Damn girl. You need to calm down." He grips her easy as an oyster. Fat calloused fingers coil around her, pulling her legs, wrapping her in hot seaweed. He is brushing the dirt from her dress and skin, wiping off barnacles, grit, getting her ready to split. Will pull the knife between her ribs and crack her, reach in, yank out her soul and stuff it in his mouth swallowing.

The dead lady opens her sack and throws in a can.

"Wait!" Corey cries.

And the dead lady stands up straight, tilts her head sideways, looking at Corey as if trying to remember something.

God opens the front door of his Plymouth and throws Corey in, shutting away the outside between a quickly narrowing pair of metal walls. A dog barks wild in the back. The engine snorts and roars and Corey doesn't move. She is laid along the red cushion seat as if dead, too scared and too drained for anything but wishing she was gone, or a bird, huddled with others by a mountain of shells. ■

Evening's Chair

Wendy Wood

As for this sea, no one can swim in it.
The beach is lost forever in the glass.
Though these words point tirelessly to your absence,
They are not a name shouted at the sky.
Because the Kobe widower cannot mend the ground,
He screams his wife's name to the sea.
At night, speaking to the glass of his perpetual bride,
He is not insane. For him, the window was torn in half.

As for me, I live in a modern city.
My ceiling is a sky blue umbrella.
My walls are newspaper and squares of light.
I am arranged like flowers in a still life.
Fingering the box of living, I gaze at a glass eye,
But I am asked no question. I string mirrors
Like Christmas lights around my objects,
Trapping the flitting seconds of my face.
On the floor, I force long sentences into picture frames.

I peer behind a lace curtain of cloud.
On the street, vague figures drop their hats,
Vanish into invisible buildings of glass and rain.
Men bring me paper cones of flickering things
Stained to look like long red roses,
But are black and crystalline by morning.
I wrap the smoke tighter around my weary body.
I am sorry, I have no reliable description for loss.
When I am sad, I fold myself up and put her neatly to bed.

Yet we are very loud about our feelings.
The man down the hall often sings like a suburban parakeet.
The woman upstairs fills a juice glass with tears.
I want to be very clear, but *agony* is the one whose sleeves
Are soiled, and her child is also very dirty; it's a word we feel
Is too helpless. *Tragedy* has too many cups; it sounds unreal.
As for *love*, I have heard that word, but I can't be more specific.
When I gave him my name, you see, he often said, Celeste.
It is like that here.

The Kobe widower cannot mend the ground.
The beach is lost forever in the glass.
As for this sea, no one can swim in it.
Though these words point tirelessly to your absence,
They are not a name shouted at the sky.
An empty chair faces the night.
How I long to fold my umbrella
And howl at the stars
Until I no longer know why.



ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



Psyche's Advocate

Crissa-Jean Chappell

Biscayne Bay is a ribbon threading my stained glass window. Shin-deep in muck, I believe the bay is prettier that way, winding a path through painted palm trees and seagulls pumping W-shaped wings. Sun-stripped beer cans float in a wreath of foam. Tawny sawgrass fields waft like water in the wind. A mottled blue land crab, big as my fist, scuttles sideways over plastic six-pack rings. These things I do not recall from girlhood walks.

St. Claire watches me roll cylinders of note paper, slender as drinking straws, and stuff them in Coke bottles. My sister knows that the bottles contain bad dreams. She says a psychic named Norm taught her this trick. Those troubled by nightmares should write their fears on paper, sign both sides and burn it. Because I'm uncomfortable with matches, I baptize my nightmares in the bay. St. Claire furrows her brow, mumbling that the trick only works before midnight on the summer solstice.

Cuban boys, crab-hunting with sea-green nets, hoot as I fling bottles out to Chicken Key. I pray the nightmares won't resurface. Last June, I rescued a bottle snarled in fishing wire, bobbing against the barnacle-crusting chimney that rises at low-tide. Trembling, I popped the cork and read, "I'm floating in a casket like the Lady of Shalott," scrawled in my own craggy penmanship. It wasn't the watery casket that I found appalling. It was the fact that nobody had bothered to bury me.

Walking home, I filch a ballpoint pen from St. Claire's pocket and sign my wrist, Helena Ruth. My sister says by breakfast it will rub off. As a child, she never sketched her name in beach sand and bathroom mirror steam. She never even signed that ceramic ashtray or coaster or whatever it was in kindergarten. Just slashed her initials, C. R., which could belong to anyone. I wonder how my sister grew older than myself. Mama used to mash her hand on Claire's head, pleading, "Promise you won't grow! Why grow when you are just the right size?" Now I have shrunk, despite the decade between us.

"So what did you dream last night?" St. Claire asks.

"Mind your own beeswax."

She rears back, pursing her lips. "That naughty?"

"Why, yes," I want to say, "Yes, it was."

St. Claire whistles, "I'll Be Loving You Always." She does not realize that my incubus cannot be bottled and tossed in the bay. This morning he will finally have a face. He will learn that my eyes crease like pleats in a piecrust and specks that are not freckles dust my knuckles. It matters little to me what he looks like. I have never heard his voice or felt his touch. Yet I know more of him than Howie, whose sole love letter St. Claire shredded and hurled in the compost heap. Thirty-two years later she confessed her guilt. "Who cares?" I shrugged. "Howie's probably married. I bet his hands still smell of Fleer's bubblegum."

Royal Palm Drive seems the same as when I wore burlap shorts dappled with winged mailboxes. Frowning, I believe my hair also seems the same, though threaded with gray. A French braid staples my head in taut crisscrossing bobby pins. When Mama permed my hair, I hacked off the stinking ringlets with sewing scissors. Mama hollered, "You look like a skinny, freckle-faced boy." She called me "Carrots and Milk" and said, "At least you got your father's giraffe eyelashes." Fishing my key out from under the welcome mat, I wonder if giraffes have eyelashes.

More important than looks, I inherited Daddy's Dade County pine house and adjoining fruit stand. Bougainvillea glows against the flaking white-washed cedar siding. Mullioned windows mirror picnic tables. A snack bag crumples against the porch. I spot wire plant-holders grasping at nothing and grit my teeth.

This is St. Claire's responsibility, the confusion outside. But Daddy's house and all its gentle glitches are mine. What a time we had after Hurricane Andrew: beds molded to rugs which molded to hardwood floors. Bleached spots I painted with strong coffee. Cat urination stains remain blackened and blotchy. In the bathroom, I pounded gashes into plaster and smashed insulation board with my sledgehammer. I like to think that I'm returning Daddy's house to its original state, except for central air-conditioning.

While St. Claire rattles cupboards, I tiptoe into her bedroom. The dresser bears five different mascara tubes in various shades of kohl. Compacts gape like startled clams. Tortoiseshell combs clogged with hair and sticky residue jut from a German beer mug. Muratti 2000 cartons, harlequin glasses, vitamin C gum, Fantasy Five tickets wrinkled from the wash...crazy as Claire's mojo hoodoo. With my finger, I smudge Cinnabrick lippgloss on my cheekbones. That's enough. I crack open the slatted closet, fling aside skinny ski-style trousers and jingle hangers. Finally, I settle on a creamy pantsuit so creased it resembles a relief map. Maybe the suit will flatten if I toss it in the dryer with a damp face cloth. I lean against the windowpane, catching the crunch of high heels in gravel. A man's voice barks, "Hurry up, sweet."

"Sweet," he said. "Will my incubus call me 'sweet'?"

"What's his name?" St. Claire asks.

I drop the coat hanger which clangs on the tiled floor. His name is Leonard. It reminds me of my favorite word, "learned."

"Well?" Claire hikes her wispy eyebrows.

"This is absurd," I say, shrugging out of the silky fabric.

"Don't take it off. You look good," she chides. "Grab the curling iron. I'll fix your hair." St. Claire pricks her frenzy of ringlets with a plastic fork. "So you do have a lover. About time," she twitters. "What do you and Romeo talk about? Building foreclosures? Respired saws?"

"Reciprocal," I correct, batting aside her makeshift comb. "Reciprocal saws."

"You have really pretty eyes, Helena. You should play them up."

Behind the windowpane, a man's voice barks again. "Sweet," he said. Sweet.

I spin around. "Will you help me?" I ask Little Sister. "Please?"

St. Claire nods and swipes a shadow-smudged Q-tip from the dresser.

"Sit down," she says. Her soft strokes tickle my eyelids. "It feels like I'm putting on a lot but I'm not," she assures her twitching canvas. "So where did you meet this guy? At the sock hop?"

I met Leonard through his writing, not stuffed in scented envelopes, but etched in the picnic table outside. Sitting under the sausage tree, scanning the *Sunday Herald*, I spied a carnal macrocosm under my elbows. With each turn of the page, I paused to peek, my cheeks flaming: Phallic idols festooned a child's finger-tracing. Homosexual euphemisms sealed crude pledges of perpetual lust. No donation proved too clumsy for the picnic table's exhibition. Each was accepted with barbarous civility so much as the art remained anonymous.

Leonard broke the rules. He carved his signature in a leafy doodle's veins. Such defiance prompted an ink-stained assault. Beneath cracking Liquid Paper lumps and Swastikas scraped with a ruler's edge, his bold-faced L deepened. Leonard made a Louvre of that picnic table, sculpting the arch of a squirrel's haunches, hubcap whorls and teens he had noticed near the vending machine; flawless down to the horseshoe groove amid nose and upper lip. As Leonard's work corkscrewed down the table legs, I longed to send a message of my own, to ask why he drew such things. Snaking my hand under the *Herald*, I sketched a single word, "Why?"

I stood back, hands on my hips, and thought, "Not bad for a novice." Now all I had to do is wait.

Days passed and Leonard ceased to write. Rubbed with skin grease and soda stains, his doodles disappeared. Apple peels plastered the table's surface in mottled shades of yellowish-brown. "Please," I wrote again and again. "Answer,

please," and still no response. I couldn't bear his silence. I drifted to another seat, a circular stone table near the sidewalk, and studied what Claire calls, "Scotch Movies": joggers, their sweatshirts soaked in cumulus stains, teenage couples draped over benches. A girl's meaty fist swallowed her boyfriend's middle finger. She yanked backward. He stumbled, catching her jacket for balance.

"Let go!" he hollered, "Let go of me!"

They skulked away holding hands and staring in opposite directions. I wondered, "Could Leonard be little more than a child? A gifted recluse? A felon? A female?"

"Helena?" my sister called. "Will you help me?" St. Claire, armed with a soapy bucket, bent over the picnic table, rubbing furiously. "Unbelievable," she quipped. "McCalls said soda water would work and lo and behold it does."

I wrenched the bucket from her grip and it slipped, sloshing my blouse, gushing a tidal wave of greasy rainbow-hued bubbles and bloated paper towels across the picnic table. I ran my fingertips over bleary phrases. The final smudges resembled "Good" or "God" or maybe "Good-bye."

"What's wrong with you?" St. Claire demanded.

I never learned to talk. That's what's wrong.

St. Claire snorted. "I can't figure you out." She flounced off, bristling.

I examined the table, its moist mahogany tones deepening like a varnish. Tree rings came to mind as I traced the stubborn scratches, fairly visible under a curtain of froth. "Daddy," I murmured, "You taught me how to measure with a level before I could speak. Why didn't you ever teach me how to talk?"

I left the picnic table and turned toward the house. A shopkeeper's bell jingled as I opened the door and heard the Weather Channel's drone. Forecasters with hair the texture and color of steel wool described low pressure systems in secretive tones. I riffled *Reader's Digest* magazines, copies so stale I had memorized the creases. Still, the contents remained a mystery. I only read the vocabulary page. In the kitchen cupboard where silverware should be, I found my sledgehammer. By the time St. Claire shrugged into her nightie, I had demolished a quarter of the fireplace hearth.

"Helena, what the hell are you doing!" she shrieked. Her glance darted over the old flowered bedsheet I had flung over the hearth as protection from flying shards. Bits of shattered brick topped the floors, shelves, and even the sink. Dirty slivers as small and jagged as teeth nested in my hair. "Ugly bricks. I always wanted marble," I said. Then, yearning for stiff cotton sheets, I sought my bed and burrowed under the covers. I fell asleep before St. Claire changed the channel to CNN.

"Feeling tired?" she wanted to know the next morning.

"Yes," I longed to say. "Tired of watching tornados mangle countries I'll never see. Sick of *Reader's Digests* and teenaged couples holding hands."

"Hmm?" my sister said, addressing the blender. It grated with a chunky metallic sound I could almost taste. With Claire, it's a ritual. The morning after the hurricane, she lit a can of Sterno and warmed her weight-gaining concoction in a glass jelly jar. "After this I've got more graffiti to erase," St. Claire said. She flossed her teeth with an Instant Breakfast packet. "Stupid kids. I swear the stuff sprouts overnight."

"Let me," I said, prying the Brillo pad from her fist. St. Claire never saw me mash it in my apron. Nor did she see me pouring over the picnic table. A. J. still loved C. J. forever and Casey sucked four-letter words. But there, beneath "Why?" were the etchings of, "WHY NOT?"

Why not, indeed. What I should have asked was, "How?"

So began our ping-pong match of words. Leonard wrote, "WHO?"

I echoed with, "Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?"

The following Sunday he wrote, "WHAT?" and I scribbled, "What is it to grow old?"

But our match ended the morning he wrote, "WHEN?" and I asked, "When can we meet?"

"FIRST YOU MUST TELL ME WHO YOU ARE."

Spilling childhood secrets was easier than I anticipated. In fact, it was fun. Leonard learned that my second toe stretches a centimeter past my first and that I cannot sleep unless the classical station signs-off with Our National anthem. I told little lies about a girl who nailed pigs' teeth to a pecan tree in Clarke County, Georgia. The tree slopes over Uncle Bender's garden but the girl was St. Claire.

"HELENA," he wrote. "TRACE YOUR HAND ON THE TABLE. WHEN WE MEET, I'LL KNOW YOU IN THE DARK."

I wondered what exactly this implied. Splaying my left hand wide enough to outline with a Bic pen but not so wide that it resembled an elephant ear, I believed Leonard would laugh. The pen wobbled between thumb and index finger and skittered over the table's gum-caked grooves. I retraced certain sections near my blunted fingernails, scorning the final result. Leonard would worship fine hands, their half-moon nails polished like mother-of-pearl buttons. That simian claw belonged to someone else, not me, not—

"Helena," Claire says, tapping my head. She drops her lipstick on the dresser. "Will you tell me where you met this man or not?"

"Not," I say, rising.

"Wait! I haven't defined your eyes yet!"

"Whatever you did is fine," I say, wondering just how one "defines" an eye. "I'm going outside."

"Tell Romeo I said hi," Claire calls. "And don't slop on my silk suit."

St. Claire should mind the cash register. Customers have already arrived, plucking eyes from swollen potatoes, stroking the waxy crook of an eggplant. Cool air wafts from an overhead fan, displacing the smell of oil diffusers. Sea sponges dangle from ceiling beams. "Have a penny? Leave a penny," reads the styrofoam cup on the counter. "Need a penny? Take a penny." I loathe the verdant tinge to those coins and the kids who pour them in their pockets. They would filch from the collection plate at mass.

My sister claims to be Catholic. I'm not so sure about that. She cleans her thumbnails with my rosary. Father Santos would not care for the Tarot cards St. Claire reads for her customers. Laminated acupuncture guides, slick with thumbprints, crowd the ceramic Holy Mother on the cash register. Father Santos probably would not care for those either.

I snap a stick of chalk in half and scribble on the blackboard, "Today's specials: baklava, apple burritos, and couscous." On a whim, I sign my name, hoping that Leonard might see. The chalk squeaks. No one notices. Not the pinched woman squinting under a Panama hat, inspecting the soy milk. She whirls, swinging an infant strapped in a papoose-style backpack. The baby teeters her lightbulb-shaped head (surely it's a she for her tiny lobes are pierced) and gurgles, "La-dee!"

"La-dee yourself," I say, plucking my sleeve from her clasp. When she smiles, flashing smooth rubber-pink gums, she resembles the face on Gerber baby food jars. She juts out her tongue, curled like a U, and trickles graham cracker crumbs. I hoist my broom from a rain barrel. The handle, smothered in price tags, feels warm and waxy. Half the bristles have broken but my sister won't buy another.

St. Claire yells, "Would you like to put that away, Helena?"

No, I would not like to put that away. St. Claire opens her mouth but I no longer hear her. That's a little trick I've learned, tuning people out. As long as I nod every so often, why speak when no one listens? Whisk, whisk. The checkered tiles remind me of a ballroom. "May I have this dance?" I whisper. The broom curtsies. Ta-dum, ta-dum. I shuffle my feet and bump into a magazine rack. *The Joy of Juicing* flops on the floor, tumbling cartons of carob candy and nicotine-free cigarettes.

"Bravo," someone cracks.

The young man scowls with his eyes, not simply his lips. He slumps over the picnic table, whittling a Washington apple. His dark, large-knuckled fingers move deftly, shearing the skin in one continuous curl. At least I think it's an apple, sallow like the ivory keys on Mama's "B" Bosendorfer. I watch him raise the moist, bald fruit to his nose, inhaling the fragrance before he bites.

"Excuse me?" I say. "Is this seat taken?"

Head lowered, he does not respond. I study the wire-rimmed glasses, the M.C. Escher tie, the jacket that seems formal on him. Stubble shadows his wedge of chin. His hair rests at jaw-length, sculpted into S-curls with gel. I search for gray and find none. A clean fragrance rises from his hair, the smell of unperfumed shampoo. He sweeps his gaze over cartons of fruit, mazed with flies. If Leonard guesses my age, he shows no sign. The apple shucked, he turns his attention to the table, screwing staple-sized holes. He cracks his gum when I glance at him.

"Sorey," Leonard says. It sounds like a Canadian accent. "I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh. Well, maybe I could just sit here for a minute."

Leonard squints as if trying to solve some complex puzzle. In his lap he hides a hibiscus blossom, most likely plucked from our neighbor's bush. I realize that Leonard doesn't recognize me. Perhaps he is playing a game? In the condensation of his water glass, I trace a wobbly heart.

"Pretty flower," I venture. "For a lady friend?"

"Yup," he says.

"What does she look like? Maybe I can help."

"I don't know what she looks like," Leonard says. "She won't know me, either." He swings his lanky limbs over the bench, preparing to flee.

"Don't go!" I snatch his shirttail, half-yanking it out of his pants. "You forgot your knife."

Slack-jawed and annoyed, Leonard slips the knife into his back pocket. "Look, just leave me alone. I told you I'm waiting for someone."

"And she's waiting for you, Leonard."

He stares, sloe-eyed. "How do you know my name? No, wait--you're..."

I shake my head yes.

Leonard shakes his head no. "No," he says aloud. "You can't be her. No, wait. Let's see if it fits." He guides my hand to the identical tracing. The ring-finger is circled with a crude, felt-tip band, so fresh it smears a stain on my skin. Leonard's doing, no doubt. He seems unimpressed. "I didn't think so," he says. Relief washes across his features. His widow's peak shines as do his cheekbones, steep enough to balance saucers.

"What are you saying? It's a perfect match! I drew it myself." I stare at my hangnail stubs.

"The fingernails are much longer. The hand's larger too," he adds.

"That's because I re-traced it so many times. Because I made a mistake." Because Leonard is trying to slip away.

"It might be her hands," he says.

"Whose hands?"

"Hers. See that lady in the long, denim skirt? They look like her hands. Slender. Pale. Or his," he says. "That fat man over there. I bet his hands smell like cigars. You can always tell a person by her hands. Young hands. Pretty hands. Female hands groping for change, choked with pearls and perfumed with Laura Ashely Number One."

"Or scarred with an artist's callous," I say.

"I'm no artist," Leonard says. "I have to look at stuff to sketch it. Nothing comes straight from my head." He pushes something small and white across the table: characters penned on a paper napkin, an entire metropolis sketched over the words, RECYCLED PAPER. "Why do we do this?" he asks.

"Do what?"

"This," he says, illuminating his capital L. "Are we reaffirming our existence? Trying to make some statement? Or simply saying, 'I was here. I'm not alone.' It begins in grade school with desks. Then telephone booths and bathroom stalls. Sometimes junk stays there for years and I wonder, 'Who is Frank and does he still care for Arlene? Whatever happened to The Lizard King?' And artwork! Geometric doodles drive me crazy, trying to figure out which end is up. I find myself spiffening every portrait, correcting noses and mouths, whatever needs attention."

Leonard crunches his apple. "You don't understand a word I'm saying." He dunks his napkin into his water glass, poking it under ice cubes. Ink figures swell like bloated corpses, the cityscape a ragged streak of blue, a doomed Atlantis.

"What is it, Leonard? What's wrong? What did I do?" I stroke the inside of his wrist. Smooth, supple, like an old wallet. I seek the hook where neck meets shoulder. Leonard's apple toddles and rolls off the table.

"Please, Helena," he whispers, no longer pretending. "Let go."

I push past him and plunge across the concourse, weaving around Pinecrest girls in pleated skirts, sipping Italian ices, pulling on Cokes. I skid on something slippery, flail for balance, and catch the apple crate that topples over. Bruised apples bounce on the ground. I gawk at the ground. Shredded peels curled like apostrophes litter the pavement. I look back, a fatal mistake, and find Leonard contemplating his filthy apple.

The screen-door springs and slams with a sound not unlike a slap. St. Claire, bent over the blender, shouts a greeting as I collapse on the couch. "Somebody gorgeous thinks you're gorgeous," she says. "I can tell by his stare. What's the matter? Don't you like him?"

"I do. That's the problem."

"I don't get it."

"He doesn't care for me, Claire. He cares for someone altogether different."

St. Claire groans. Drawing back the curtain, she peeks at the picnic table, frowns at the filthy apple, shrugs at the shriveled hibiscus.

I ransacked the shelves of handmade soap: jojoba, ylang ylang, and Farmer's Friend hand salve, intending to sandpaper the surface and wipe it down with Murphey's Oil. The scratches will not succumb to soda water. I trace the cloudy outline of a Cheshire Cat, his grimace saluting each triangle ear. Capital letters boast the merits of Texan cows and a cravat-shaped worm dervishes down a table leg. Leonard's Louvre. I kiss my fingertip and touch it to the table's stippled surface.

Tracing paper and number two pencils. That's all I need. I smooth the paper flat, shading lightly with a pencil's edge. Flimsy as a Kleenex tissue, the paper soaks in Leonard's carvings. Then I begin to write. I sign both sides, slip the paper in a plastic milk jug and snap on the cap. St. Claire doesn't know that the jug contains good dreams. I stroll, whistling a Sousa march, trailing my fingers in tree-limbs heavy with Key limes. Biscayne Bay is a ribbon threading my stained-glass window. Shin-deep in muck, I believe the bay is prettier this way, winding a path through red mangrove roots, lapping stony seeds that St. Claire says drift all the way to Ireland. Warm air rushes at my face. I pitch the plastic jug into the water. It floats, then bobs out to sea, a christening wave pushing it back to me. ■

The One I Love

Beth Gyls

Is quieter than dust. I haven't
felt his nimble fingers,
bit him on the neck.
He doesn't enter the room,
babbling about the hole in his shoe,
the crazy driver, the kid
who wouldn't move out of the way.
He takes my hand like air;
he touches my stomach like air;
he whispers nothing in my ear
more delicate than a feather.
He hears me sigh
then is instantly behind me,
I'm here; don't worry,
and the words are like
a gaze from my favorite dog.
He looks into my eyes—
all the way through—
and sees whatever hides there:
buildings falling down,
handguns, quicksand.
I love that, he says,
breeze brushing at my cheek.
He never flinches,
never retreats into himself,
puckering like a mushroom.

He likes me always:
as I soak in the bath,
or twitch before sleeping,
wraps me in his arms,
and it feels like summer.
He never breathes loudly in my ear,
never begs: "Please, don't leave me."
I love him as the daylight
holds my window,
the smell of bread
drifts down the placid street.
I tell you, I am lucky.
He lives entirely for me.
But me, I live for no one.



Double-Face Woman

Dorothy B. Mack

They warned me not to dream of her,
Anog-Ite' the Double-Face Woman,
filled us with terror as young girls,
but after my fifth miscarriage
I didn't care.

Let the other women bead
tiny lizards for their babies,
cut cottonwood twigs for childbirth.
I began to dream for *Anog-Ite'*.

I called and called, drank dark
teas, but when she drifted in,
I did not know her
on the right side,
moist lip, bright eye,
for she would not
turn her head.

At last I dreamed fierce
her bone side, reached
right through the black eyesocket
plunged my elbow deep
to pull out all those designs
pricked in the night sky—
quilled whorls and stars—
into my mind.

My arm did not wither
because I did not touch the bone
but I had known darkness
so I was gifted to work
with quills my hand
steady not pierced
by the black barb.

Now in a house no man
may enter we boil dyes
steaming roots bitter
berry red wormwood black
ochre yellow

we weave black barbs
& white shafts
our lips moist swollen
from sucking quills flat
pahin woskapi sucking
medicine

we are fierce
we are childless
men do not bother us

we are sharp
we pierce
we prick

we know the designs



We Disappeared

David Musgrove

We played games in green yards,
hid from each other in the low, sprawled pecan branches,
buried ourselves in monkey grass and hedges,
lay down in oceans of black-green ivy
and leaped back up,
feeling the soft feet of furry spiders and slick-skinned skinks.
We chased chameleons
across peeling white rails of massive front porches,
watched them bulge their pink bubble necks
in sexual splendor
then leap after one another into the bushes,
disappearing into brown and green,
into leaves and twigs that lay suddenly still
or scurried on tiny reptilian claws.
We battered the grey paper nests
of red-black wasps
with the long, brown stems
of fallen bamboo trees
and ran screaming from the angry clouds,
then cautiously returned,
poked at the fallen nests
and crushed the blind, wriggling larvae
with rocks,
crushed them as they struggled blindly
from their fallen paper wombs.

We chased snake doctors through the creek bank kudzu,
caught the little monsters,
half dragonfly — half butterfly,
and held them by their satin black wings
or their dark green tails
and threw them back into the air again.
We played until darkness came
and tiny bats staggered through the air,
chasing hard, brown beetles
that threw themselves against window screens.
We ran after lightning bugs,
caught them in our hands
and threw the light at one another
or waited for the lemon-green glow
then pinched the little bug in half,
smeared his lantern onto our shirts
and ran away into the dark
like green glowing comets
racing across the warm, heavy sky
until our shapes faded into the dark
edges of the trees,
the dark ends of green yards,
the lantern gave out
and we disappeared from sight.



Everything is a Fossil

Thomas Reynolds

Exhausted,
I work over the last of the fossil
we gathered this afternoon,
digging in ravines near the spillway.
Lit by only a small lamp,
the table is covered with tools of the collector:
brushes, knives, labels, the solution of white glue
diluted with water
used to preserve broken fossils
or to bring out
the delicate quality of the dendrites,
or the finger-like
network of veins of angiosperms.
Each specimen is placed, no matter how small,
into its own carefully marked box or bag,
or in the small green filing cabinet
in the corner of the room.

My eyes blur.

As I bend over the last find,
the desk becomes its own landscape,
strewn with boulders, and the shells
of dead lifeforms begin to move
across the dark rocks.
My hand is no longer my own,
so still and rigid,
as if it were the hand of someone else,
or had turned to stone.

Cricket songs wake me up,
so I turn on the light,
searching at the rug's edge,
behind the desk,
until I find it among the rocks,
resting on a shale piece,
silent, nearly invisible.
It had crawled there
to get out of the cold.
Its legs barely move when I tap it
with my fingertips, the hard casing
of its body nearly as firm as stone.
It does not crawl away, hides
under the shadows of the desk,
so I turn out the light
and hear nothing the rest of the night.

I find it in the morning,
legs drawn up, stiff,
and so attached to stone
they break when I lift its fragile form,
carry it downstairs,
drop it into the mulch
around the flowers.
Its body will never survive,
nor its imprint, nor ours,
but the atoms will strike out,
spinning in ever widening circles,
and be drawn up into other bodies,
through flowers, the dark stems,
air's breath.



ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



The Future

Howard Park

It was almost two years since he bought the tickets; more than a month after he backed out of a deal to sell them. An aging Taiwanese couple answered the ad in the paper, and when he changed his mind, right in front of them, they thought he was asking for more money. Roger tried to apologize, but they just offered higher and higher prices. *You're not even Chinese*, they said on their way out.

At the time, it seemed like a churlish retort, a little silly even. But now, on the sweaty verge of the monsoon season, he wasn't so sure. Roger put his suitcase down on the cobblestones and looked up at his hotel. A cloud of signs, wires, and antennas hovered above him, blocking the sky out completely, and an uneven column of white neon letters descended from it like a lightning bolt: *Hong Kong Paradise*. Next to the "P," he could see a woman's face over the lip of a shallow balcony, red hair flowing over her shoulder like Rapunzel's. Roger studied her foreshortened chin and jaw for a minute, then turned around.

Across the street, a rusting hulk that might have been an apartment building towered over him. Its exposed concrete surface was crisscrossed by clotheslines and studded with teetering air conditioners. An eight-lane expressway came so close to the side of the building that the windows there opened only halfway before touching the guard rail.

On the ground, pedestrians moved in a thick current, forming a kind of channel between makeshift shops and street vendors. Occasionally a car honked and inched its way through them. Glowing puffs of steam and smoke erupted from every vent, and Roger had the feeling that he'd somehow been sucked into a Hieronymous Bosch painting.

A tin cart was stationed nearby, with half a dozen people in a line beside it. One of them, who'd had his head and both hands stuck through the serving window, popped out and issued a belch of a laugh. A few feet away, turtles paddled listlessly in a plastic bucket labeled "KRAUT." A shriveled old woman hissed conspiratorially at Roger, then slid the cover from a second bucket, revealing some kind of marine invertebrate he could not name. Next to her, a man in a pin-striped baseball shirt waved his hands enigmatically over a natty array of electronic components: circuits designed to defeat video copy

protection cradled in a basket of woven bamboo leaves, sweatshop DRAM in lacquerware boxes. The odor of cooking grease drifted past, tinged with those of sewage and factory antiseptics. Further down the street, a group of men wearing stained coveralls sat under a sheet of blue weatherproofing that served as an awning, while a girl in a lab coat and red spangled miniskirt administered glaucoma tests to them.

Roger picked up his suitcase and went inside.

The lobby was cramped, just a strip of carpet between the sliding doors and a high marble counter. There was no one in sight. Then a man in a scruffy Eton jacket poked his head up from behind the desk. Roger interrupted him just as he started to say something in Chinese, "Last name is Kim, K-I-M."

"Pardon me, sir, I'll check." His colonial accent unnerved Roger, and he had to stop himself from staring.

"I'm sorry, but I don't see that name in our register." Roger began to stare again, uncomprehending, then remembered that the room had been reserved under his ex-girlfriend's name.

He winced. "Right. Try Farman, F-A-R-M-A-N."

The attendant typed something into a computer, placed a key card on the counter, and announced, "You're in room 51."

"Lift's over there," he added.

The fifth floor hallway was lit by a pair of wall-mounted fluorescents that flickered on and off unpredictably. There was an open window where it turned a corner, and Roger stuck his head through it. He came out on a light well filled with refuse to about the middle of the third floor and closed at the top by a grate. It smelled smoky.

After a moment of disorientation, he found his room, threw his bag on the floor next to the bed, and slept on top of the covers, not bothering to change.

* * *

From Roger's window, he saw an angular, stepped courtyard and, between a pair of taller buildings, the harbor. In that sliver of blue, he counted fourteen boats: tugs, trawlers, junks, and an oil tanker. It didn't seem possible to navigate in such a pinch, but the boats slipped past each other in a confident, albeit ungraceful, dance.

It was the dance of capitalism, a delirious, unceasing hustle for goods, services, and money. Air conditioners assembled in Cambodia from components made in Macau and sheet metal stamped in India found their way here, to this harbor, so they could be strapped down next to barrels of polyurethane wood sealant and salt-stained sacks of millet and rice, poled across the harbor onto a waiting container, and shipped to consumers in Singapore. From there,

the trip would be repeated in reverse, a steady trickle of cash flowing back downstream, merging with other trickles into a surging wave of profit.

Tomorrow, when China regained possession of Victoria Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories, Roger would get his first chance to witness a bona fide Historical Event: all the boats, with their air conditioners and sealant and rice, would not stop. They would just keep on moving, and an entire city would change hands without war.

Roger showered slowly in the small, ultra-modern bathroom. It appeared to have been cast from a single dollop of hard plastic, pale green and slightly marbled. From the way it was dropped into the corner, without caulk or even plaster, he judged it to be a recent retrofit. The door was designed to fold up like a fan, and there were small signs above every fixture in English and Chinese that warned not to drink the water. Turning on the faucet, Roger decided to trust the local advice: It ran red for half a minute then, sprinkling like a kinked garden hose, gray.

It was past noon when he left the hotel. Except in the most general terms, he had no idea where he was, where he was going, or how to get there from here. Eventually, Roger found his way onto a busy thoroughfare lined with bars and restaurants. Traffic, instead of sharing a single sheet of asphalt, was divided into separate surfaces for cars, buses, and bicycles, interspersed with raised sidewalks, bus stops, curved aluminum rails. The tangle of signs and posters here was even more bewildering than before. There seemed to be more languages involved, sometimes three or four to a panel.

As he passed under a knot of unlit neon tubes, a sign on the other side slid into view. Roger could see a backlit row of square yellow-tinted photographs along its lower edge. Each photograph was harshly focused on a girl's raised buttocks, pale and over-exposed. Roger took another step, and the tubes, lifting like a stage curtain, revealed four more rows of pictures.

It took him almost an hour to find a decent-looking Vietnamese noodle shop. *Phô* was one of the few things his ex-girlfriend, Brittney, liked about Chinatown, and for three months after he introduced her to it, that was what they ate every Saturday afternoon. He never told her he was allergic to coriander.

Roger hunched over the empty bowl, tonguing the scalded skin on the roof of his mouth. He remembered the sense of explaining that made him invite her to a Vietnamese restaurant on their first date. Alien in the land of the whites, he'd learned by then to cherish the act of narration. *Here is the plum sauce; here is the chili paste. You mix them together.* It could not matter that he wasn't Vietnamese. What starts as a simple need to communicate becomes a skill, an aptitude for storytelling. The explanation becomes a coherent, believable explanation, a confabulation, then a caricature and, finally, a fetish object.

Not all at once. It was never obvious which explanations were going to be difficult for his audience to assimilate, which would be too jarring. But after several tellings, the bad ones get weeded out. The teller gets tired. He'd rather put on the show everyone expects—cold, meditative, delicate. This is the language they understand.

This is the reason he can't smile at a picture of a naked girl.

Roger stared at his reflection in the chromed card slot of a public phone. It took him a few moments to notice that there was a crabby-looking man waiting in line behind him.

"You going to use that?" The man gestured as if he weren't sure whether Roger understood English.

"No—I—can't remember the number," he said, stepping away.

While the man talked, Roger fished his passport out of a hip pocket and flipped it open to a business card. "John H. Leung, Attorney-at-Law" was stamped in glossy letters on one side; on the other, scrolling vertically, were three large Chinese characters and a bunch of smaller ones.

John was an ex-roommate of a friend that he and Brittney had had in common. They'd met three or four times before at parties and engaged in exaggerated banter, mostly on the subject of architecture. Roger remembered that he seemed to cherish art in the way only an unfulfilled lawyer can: he read architecture criticism for pleasure.

After five rings, an answering machine picked up, John's voice sounding peeved and remote. Roger clicked the hook down anxiously and held his finger there for ten seconds before trying his office number. The strange dial tone and ringing sounds reminded him even more strongly than the unfamiliar smells that he was in a foreign country.

"Morrison and Foerster, John Leung speaking."

"John, it's Roger Kim."

There was a brief silence, and for a moment, Roger had the feeling that he'd made some kind of mistake.

"How'd you know I was in the office?"

"I tried you at home . . ." His getaway from the answering machine would no longer be so clean. He blinked. Then, after another pause, John's voice softened, shedding most of its British accent, which he had always been able to do at will.

"How are you? Where are you?"

"I'm wandering around Kowloon. At the corner of Hankow and . . . I'm not sure this cross-street has a name. How are you?"

"Well, these are interesting times, and you know what the Chinese say about that. Listen, I'm about to get out of here. It'd probably be simpler if we just meet somewhere on your side of the harbor."

The bar that John suggested was located in a double-height rotunda at the top of a thirty-story hotel. Armature-mounted plate glass extended from floor to ceiling, through three-quarters of its circumference.

Roger sank into a couch, soft leather engulfing him like sand, and tried to remember what his guidebook had said about the restaurant that encircled the raised bar area. He'd spent a whole weekend once going through the gray newsprint pages at the back and underlining all the places he wanted to eat in before they became exiled from the food-producing apparatuses of the West. The book disappeared, though, when Brittney moved out.

Under the potted palms, in the narrow beam of a halogen spotlight, Roger sat and wondered whether she had really mistaken it for her own. He was staring straight at the elevator doors when John came in. By coincidence, they were both wearing khakis and dark blue T-shirts, a fact that caused John to halt in a playful double-take before proceeding. From a distance, they might have been indistinguishable.

Closer up, the differences were considerable. John had a gaunt, triangular face, thin lips, and a delicate nose. His dark brown eyes, nearly black, were round, shell-shocked. Roger stood up to shake his hand.

"What've you got there?"

"Beer."

"I think I'll have one too," he said absently, then, turning to the waiter, "Same for me, please."

They sat next to the window for a few minutes, talking idly; then came the inevitable: "How, by the way, is Brit?" Arching his eyebrow and rounding out the "hooww," as if conceding the trickiness of the question.

"Well, I'm here alone, aren't I?"

"I know you broke up; I meant, have you seen her? Do you talk?"

"Yeah, once in a while. To tell you the truth, it's still kind of strange."

"Strange?"

"Strange. Yeah." Roger shrugged and sipped his beer.

John switched topics. "You know the tall one out there, right?" He indicated the highest point on the Hong Kong skyline, not counting the bowl-shaped oddity perched atop The Peak.

"Yup." It was the Bank of China building.

"And the little silver one next to it."

"Yup." The Hongkong and Shanghai Bank.

"Ever seen the insides?"

"Seen pictures . . ."

"Oy, the irony!" he said, clapping the back of his hand to his forehead in a mock swoon, "The architect hasn't seen the architecture!"

"Well, I'm not an architect any more. Not an architecture student, I mean."

"What?" John's face darkened, then immediately relaxed, expressionless.

"I dropped out. Last year."

He smiled again, expansive but a little forced, and said, sighing, "We have to go see it anyway. You hungry at all?"

There was a tiny new sushi bar further down the peninsula that John had been meaning to try for months. It struck Roger as senseless, surreal almost, to fly ten thousand miles to the southern rim of China and eat Japanese food, but he kept the thought to himself.

The situation reminded him of something he'd read two or three semesters ago in Theory class. It was a Marxist essay that accused capitalism of "effacing national characteristics," rendering German architecture indistinguishable from Dutch or Austrian by fusing them into an international Modernist conspiracy.

That was Frankfurt, 1927. In Hong Kong, 1997, the opposite was happening: "national characteristics," or at least national affectations, were being sharpened, lifted from the murk of historical reality and packaged for immediate brand recognition. The imaginary difference between *yakisoba* and *lo mein* was becoming more pronounced, even as the real differences between Hong Kong and Tokyo, or San Diego, or Nairobi, were disappearing.

"National characteristics," "historical reality"—terms that Brit, tossing her head in a gesture of obliviousness, had coolly refused to accept, though it appeared finally that Roger had managed to persuade her. Five or six months after the breakup, he received an anonymously re-routed e-mail message that contained nothing but the transcribed text of a journal article. The article compared white Americans' increasingly rapacious consumption of ethnic food with the cannibalism of Jeffrey Dahmer, the sado-masochistic relationship between the killer and his victims with the canonization of "the Asian-American experience" in films, novels, and magazines. Real cultural artifacts, it turns out, make for poor eating and have to be reduced to classifiable bits and pieces first. Here are bruised Thai short ribs, Laotian biceps marinated in soy sauce and rice wine, minced heart of Korean boyfriend.

Once, when he brought the article up in conversation, his brother-in-law snapped, "Look, you evidently like women who have nice legs; I like women who happen to be Asian. That all right with you?" As if asking permission. As if the living terror that threatened to swallow him whole were nothing more scary than a pair of "nice legs," no more substantial than the difference between Kato and the Green Hornet.

"Yup," he had answered, "all right with me."

The crowd on the street had become thicker and more purposeful during the time Roger and John had been up in the bar. Now it seemed to be overtaking them, the curious picking up speed, becoming urgent, choleric. By the time he saw the first picket, Roger knew it was a political demonstration.

They entered a narrow, high-walled square, suddenly surrounded by banners, hand-painted signs, and violent calligraphy. The protest's epicenter seemed to be further down the street at the other end of the plaza, but the mob was already crushingly close.

"What do the banners say?"

John steered him toward an unoccupied space between a TV news van and a parked car. Then, looking over his shoulder around the corner of the van, he said, "Kau tsut yik heng, uh, resist going backwards—no going back."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know, but that's the Xinhua—the New China News Agency over there."

"They're protesting a news agency?"

"It's the unofficial Chinese embassy." When Roger responded only with a half-hearted "um," John turned back to give him a look of stupefaction.

"There being no *official* Chinese embassy."

Although the restaurant was no more than ten blocks away, it took them almost half an hour, fighting their way through the dense brake of bodies, to get there. Roger was slowed down even further by paranoia: with his hands in his pockets defending passport and wallet, navigation became difficult, clumsy. He exhaled in relief when they arrived.

The building was a multi-purpose commercial low-rise of a type rarely encountered in the U.S., on account of fastidious zoning and fire-safety laws. The bays shared a concrete frame and a semi-public, semi-enclosed circulation core, but were built out separately and connected independently to metered utilities. One of the bays, wedged between a Jindo Fur Salon and an Ann Taylor, contained something that looked remarkably like a mobile home.

"He's an art dealer," John said, pointing. "Keeps his office up there."

The entryway led onto a kind of courtyard fashioned from steel cable, mylar, and brushed aluminum struts anodized to the color of burnt chestnuts. It looked more like the inside of an airplane engine than a shopping center. At the back, past a daisy chain of angular heat convection membranes, was an antique cage-door elevator.

John got in and pressed the button for the third floor. Roger, following, noticed that "3" apparently meant the third floor above ground level—what he would have called the fourth floor—and that there was no button marked "4."

"How come there's no fourth floor?"

"Huh? Oh, rhymes with death. In Mandarin, 'four' rhymes with 'death.'"

The restaurant was tiled in black, and ancient oval-screen television tubes hung above the sushi bar, illuminating it with static. Ultraviolet lights in corners and behind vases made the waiters' white uniforms glow. Like apparitions, they hovered behind the seats, one to a pair. Tiny Sapporo and Asahi logos were stitched onto the front tapers of their vests.

"This must be the place," Roger chirped.

John smiled at him blankly and wiped his hands and chin with a hot washcloth. Then the waiter bowed and said something in Japanese. John responded in the same language.

"He says they're no longer taking cash here."

In spite of its conspicuously unreasonable prices, the place was packed. Half a dozen shaggy-looking sushi chefs bustled behind the counter, exchanging raucous jokes with the customers. Everyone seemed to be drunk. Roger gave John a quizzical look and they agreed without speaking that a bottle of *sake* was needed. When it arrived, a party of Filipino golfers seated down the bar noisily offered them a toast. The waiters, with an equanimity descended straight from Buddhist monks, smiled impassively through it all.

"Feels like a dry run for the end of the millennium," Roger noted.

The chirashi-zushi he ordered was huge, full of fish he'd never seen before. Before he could dig in, though, John raised his glass.

"The undiscovered country," he said.

"The future," Roger answered, in his most dramatic voice.

They both laughed, clinked glasses, and drank.

"So did you go back to that rinky-dink firm of yours?"

"Heck no," he replied, hoping bravado might deflect the sinking feeling he had about the direction their conversation had turned.

"What've you been doing then?"

"Took an office job."

John frowned but said nothing. They understood each other now: he'd taken a job as a secretary, possibly a "Document Production Specialist." John's disapproval, he knew, had less to do with slipping a few rungs down the socioeconomic ladder than with opting for the easy way out, giving up on the cognitively dissonant trope of a powerful Asian male.

Actually, it was a good job. The hours were short, occupied mostly with Pynchon and Mann, and the bullshit level was low.

His co-workers had felt a little threatened at first, their most fundamental assumptions about education and its relationship to work—"career"—cast starkly into doubt. They groped; they stammered trying to reconcile the idea of

Roger the Ivy Leaguer with his evidently low opinion of money, power, and the American Dream.

Within a week, though, the other idea of Roger—Roger the passive, impotent chinaman—had won out. As a mythical figure, it was more robust, cleaved to the existing ideological terrain more readily. There was some bitterness in him, for sure, over the predictable outcome. But below that, like the scent of rotting flesh, sweet, overpowering, was an unmistakable sense of relief. It didn't feel so much like a losing battle on this side of the great middle-class divide.

"How about you? What've you been doing?" Roger asked, sounding abrupt and a little maniacal. John raised an eyebrow and grimaced, then started laughing a low, rhythmic laugh.

"You're a funny guy, Roger." John poured more *sake* for both of them and downed his without waiting. "Well, let's see. The firm's been busy. Everyone thought we were going to scale back, but of course we did the opposite. Our caseloads have just been getting heavier and heavier. Plus, we're up to our necks in bizarre cases that nobody knows how to deal with. It's true, everything's going to be different."

"Why didn't you leave when you had the chance?"

"Why did you come when you had a chance to bail?" John shot back. Roger felt his teeth grit.

"I'm not staying." He wondered whether John knew about the ad he'd put in the paper, and if so, how. They looked at each other balefully.

John put his chopsticks down and poured himself another drink. Then, still holding the bottle, he indicated Roger's glass, watched him toss it back, and refilled it.

"The fact is, Roger, China belongs to the Chinese. And Chinese, including me—including all the Chinese in Hong Kong—belong to China. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what's going to happen here. What'd you think you were going to see, anyway?"

Roger looked around the restaurant. There was a man wearing a turban at the far end of the bar, but no white people. "I don't know yet," he said.

The rest of the meal was more subdued, the two of them slowly pulling into line behind the other drunken diners. When it was over and they emerged from the restaurant, the sky had reddened to a deep bronze. A sunset crossing to the island seemed unavoidable, fated.

They made the trip in a kind of ferryboat. The fans built into its top were broken, and the cabin was filled with a sweet, metallic scent that reminded Roger of lychee nuts.

It's paint remover," John told him. "These boats are all having their insignia removed."

They found seats next to a team of Malaysians in rowing uniforms and looked at the curved plastic advertising panels that ringed the compartment just above the windows. Rolex watches and dried tiger penises. 532-megahertz Pentium II's and acupuncturists and Coca-Cola. The black water slapping the hull of the ferry was choked with floating aerosol cans and foam packing strips. Ahead, skyscrapers shone like constellations. Roger could still pick out the silvered aluminum trusses of Norman Foster's Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, lambent in the fading sunlight.

And above it, almost exactly, Terry Farrell's Peak Redevelopment Project, a freakish cross between a blood-stained Pagan altar and the monumental entrance gate to the Forbidden City. Clearly the product of an ego gone berserk. Now, standing at the crease between light and darkness, it really looked as if streaks of lightning should flash down from the heavens and touch the points of its giant bowl.

"Building is not the same as Architecture," Roger was surprised to learn in his sophomore year of college. Architecture stems from a conceptual grammar, the grammar from an artistic tradition, the tradition from a common history. The history unfolds the same way every time: the Parthenon, the Pantheon, then Hagia Sophia, Chartres cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore—a canon, undoubtedly—and "Architecture" is revealed as a strictly local phenomenon.

But then Terry Farrell has the brilliant idea to take a safari into the inscrutable Orient, dig up some ancient-looking relics, and cart them back to British Museum, where they've been promised a spot next to the Elgin Marbles. Now everything can be part of the artistic tradition, and architects can frolic in trashy "references" to anything from the brass temple of the Tokharoi to the yurt villages of Ulan Bator.

Roger sat that way, elbows on his knees, until it gradually dawned on him that John was falling asleep in his seat. He shook him awake and asked whether he always worked on Sundays.

"Usually," John replied groggily.

"Then why were you so weird when I called there today?"

John shot him an embarrassed smile, then lowered his eyes. His hand was resting on the edge of the plastic seat, and the ring on his middle finger rattled against it from the vibration of the engine.

"Actually, I was cleaning out my desk. I resigned last month." John looked up at him again, earnestly this time. "I wanted to make tomorrow my last day."

The boat began to slow, and the rattling stopped.

"It's a pretty weird situation for everyone," John said, getting up. Roger followed him out of the cabin and over a gangplank.

The terminal opened onto a public park jammed with tourists. Roger recognized it from pictures: Statue Square, and beyond, Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. Overhead, the sky faded from mottled, dusty blue to black, and the plaza sank into the greenish glow of the Bank's exterior lights.

John pointed to a boxy colonial building on their left. "That's the old courthouse. Where the legislative council meets . . . used to meet." Its ribbed dome was circled by floodlights. Below, unilluminated, the entrance was cordoned off, and police officers stood guard on the steps. Moving further into the park, Roger saw several olive-drab buses parked on a walkway behind a kiosk and soldiers in black uniforms forming rows beside them.

"What's all the security for?" he asked.

John shrugged. "Expecting a protest?"

Vendors shouted at them as they walked past. All of them seemed to be selling T-shirts that celebrated the end of British tyranny, and some of them, hedging their bets, sold T-shirts that bemoaned the end of democracy as well. There were caps, pins, flags, stickers, cards, earrings, posters, mugs, and six-foot-tall inflatable Godzillas bearing the words "Hong Kong 1997." As a marketing strategy, the transfer of ownership was irreproachable.

Roger let himself be carried along by the flow of the crowd. A swirl pulled him past three-fourths of a string quartet, reading Scarlatti from old, smelly scores. Next to them, a pair of competing caricaturists who exchanged vicious comments about each other as they drew; shell games, sword swallowers, fortune tellers of every conceivable stripe—then an eddy, a sudden clearing. The lens of a television camera gaped at him, and a young woman in a tawny linen pantsuit asked something in Chinese. John was nowhere in sight. She poked her microphone at him. Roger hesitated, then in a slow, deliberate voice declared, "I'm an American."

"Pardon me," she said, her voice supernaturally clear and perfect, and motioned her cameraman toward an unsightly old man standing nearby. Roger's face flushed, and he tried to back away from the reporter but found himself wedged between an overweight Burmese man and his family.

Before he could decide how to escape with a minimum of further embarrassment, there was a tap on his shoulder. It was John, cocking his head toward the far end of the square. Roger felt an inexplicable surge of anger and elbowed his way roughly through the Burmese family.

John, perhaps, sensed this and started toward the Bank without saying anything. As they pressed their way through, turning sideways to avoid drunken teenagers and old ladies throwing trancelike fits, the composition of the crowd began to change.

By the time they arrived at the street, closed to vehicular traffic, it had bled into another crowd, more sedate, gathered below the Bank. They appeared

to be waiting in front of a huge sign, the upper portion of which Roger could see was written in Chinese. John stopped short.

"What's it say?" Roger asked.

John cleared his throat. "Withdrawals from individual accounts have been suspended until July 15. Patrons are, uh, requested to forgive the inconvenience."

"What are all these people doing here then?"

John turned and looked at him with an expression of distaste. "They're trying to close their accounts."

The broad, messy line was immobile and, craning his neck, Roger could see why. The storm shutters below the second-floor lobby were closed and a battery of guards faced the crowd, arms crossed, from behind it.

"Well, I guess this is about as close as we're going to get to Sir Norman. There's this great catenary membrane above the entry level there—"

John's description was interrupted by a muffled gasp spreading out from the direction of the square. Roger spun around, confused. Then, following the gazes of the people in front of him, he saw a man in a loose white shirt climbing the flagpole in front of the courthouse. The Union Jack was at half mast, signaling the upcoming transfer of power, but the man did not reach it. He was dragged down by a police officer and flung to the ground. Other policemen formed a ring, some facing in, some out, and at least one of them had drawn his truncheon. The mood turned instantly volatile. Roger saw nothing more, but he heard John say, "Let's get out of here."

He felt himself being pulled by the arm. People were moving in all directions. He nearly stumbled over someone who had fallen at a bend in the curb. Just as he regained his balance, a heavy blow fell on his shoulder, but he did not stop. John led him around a corner onto a less congested street, then let go and began to run.

Roger halted, bewildered, and watched him run to the end of the block. There, he slapped the door of an empty taxicab until its driver stood up from a trio of old men who'd been squatting on the sidewalk, smoking. Roger jogged up and got into the cab just as the engine was starting.

"I need a drink," John rasped.

Unsure whether they had just made a narrow escape, Roger looked idly at the driver in the rear-view mirror. His face was dark and splotchy, and when he parted his lips, Roger noticed that he had no teeth. Then the cab filled with the buzzing orange light of the tunnel lamps and the mirror turned black.

"I know a place," Roger said.



The sign thrusts out into the street, five feet above them. Five rows of pieces of women, presenting themselves. The raw seriality eliminates any characteristic that might have served to distinguish one girl from another. The form of a commodity totalizing, dictating the contents of a human life.

On the sidewalk, there is shouting, drinking, puking, fighting. It is not much different inside. A long hallway littered with junk, things that had been people. The concrete walls are painted black with goldish flecks like the hood of a hot rod. The hall ends at a steel door framed by an elaborately painted arch.

Through the door, a highly Orientalized red and gold podium. A misshapen old man stands behind it and a pair of heavily-muscled bouncers on either side. Tonight, each patron is required to leave a credit card at the door before entering. Tonight, there will be a very special show.

A crushed velvet curtain parts onto a low, wide space, windowless, with exposed metal rafters. In the center, under a string of painfully bright full-spectrum lasers, a kind of runway. Its corners are edged with tiny flame-shaped lightbulbs. A very young girl, fifteen maybe, marches in circles at its foot, shedding the layers of a motorcycle outfit. At the room's periphery, purple lights, cages, other girls dancing inside them. The music is loud but concentrated below the audible range.

Arranged in ragged files like soldiers, the spectators are silent, faceless. They do not hoot or whistle. They do not wave dollar bills. They look as if they've been here for ages, suckling, gathering dust.

The girl is down to a lacy black bra, superfluous on her flat chest, and a pair of spike-heeled leather hip boots. She puts three fingers into her mouth, sucks them desperately. Her hips move with a will of their own; wet fingers tame them, slide through the downy hairs of her pubis and into the small, bright opening. A sound, somewhere between a gasp and a sigh, escapes her.

"Oh God," says John.

The girls keep coming, in different costumes, different hairstyles, the same girl in different sizes and colors. For hours, the girls keep coming. Then the music snaps off and the lights dim. In the lengthening silence, the audience starts to murmur.

Without fanfare, two women step onto the runway. One, a svelte, wide-eyed Chinese; the other, a gamine blonde. They both wear black spaghetti-strap shifts, black stockings, black heels. Unconventional in the sense that there is little to take off. A wailing echo radiates from the speakers, softly at first, then rising in volume and density until the sound, like a hundred distant sirens, begins to gel, make motion difficult.

But they do move. They move together and apart, fondling each other's breasts, kissing each other's nipples, swollen and clearly visible through the gauzy fabric.

"The tanks should be rolling across the border right about now," John says dully.

Roger closes his eyes and imagines the columns of infantry at the starting line. It's the first running of the Hong Kong Marathon, but the runners all have zipper scars on their foreheads and pegs in their necks. They stomp into the city, crushing the most obvious remnants of British imperialism along the way. Something common to immigrants, foreigners.

Like his father, the Chinese are pursued by an unrelenting need to eliminate the traces of the past, a history in chintzy lamps and used cars. Like him, they will discard every relict memory, cast down every idol and replace it with a new one.

But they will not disturb the deep-laid machinery of capitalism.

When he opens his eyes again, the blonde is on her knees, head to the floor. Her thighs and buttocks are spread wide, and the Chinese makes a show of putting her tongue into the liver-colored crack. Their shifts are pulled up to their waists, but it's obvious that stripping is not the main attraction.

For the first time, it occurs to him that there's something wrong about the blonde. Something about her movements, her poses. The thought crosses his mind, briefly, that she's a man in drag, but the evidence of her glistening organ is clear.

Before he can figure it out, the two women sit up, kneeling, and face each other. The music is making it hard to breathe. They put their lips together; their tongues writhe in the hollow between them. With both hands, they hold each other's faces, palms flat against the jaw and cheekbones. He knows what it is now.

At the same time and without warning, each woman peels a thin rubbery mold from her partner's face. The molds are shaped like continents, their edges irregular. They aren't even symmetrical. As the music reaches a final, booming cadence, they stand and slide off their wigs. The blonde is not a blonde; she's a brunette, an Asian. The Chinese is not a Chinese; she looks Nordic, fair-haired. Roger stands up stiffly, concentrates on the scissoring motion of his legs, the swinging of his arms. The room spins, but his trajectory seems straight enough. It shoots through a gaggle of Indonesian hipsters, arms crossed in their black turtlenecks and sunglasses, along a hallway lined with mint-green pay phones, past an upholstered leather door, then back and through it (the upholstery studs winking at him), through another one, over a Siberian tundra of grouted tile, crashing around a door woven of vegetable matter—wicker, maybe—and into the clean, white embrace of an American toilet.

* * *

John, behind him, sniffs. "You enjoy the show?"

Roger pulls his head up and opens his puffy eyelids. Bits of raw fish and seaweed greet him, half-digested grains of rice like stucco sprayed onto the rim of the toilet. There are tears in his eyelashes, where they've been coughed out by the heavens. "D't it get you going?" His speech slurred by whiskey into a sneer.

Roger rolls, sitting, into the side of the stall, tries to look John in the eye, but he's facing away, into a mirror. Giving up, he mumbles, "Guess so."

John snorts. "Don't even get it, do you?" He jerks forward a little. "You get the little message those two are—are sending out there?"

"I get it," Roger growls.

"You sure?" He sways, puts his hand on the mirror. The massive leather doors have ground the music down to an intermittent rattle. The only other sound is a gentle hiss vibrating through the pipes and fixtures.

"You know," John continues, "I used to really hope—you and Brit could keep it together. At least, I think I did. I don't know, maybe I didn't. But I sure don't—have any hope like that any more. I've lived in Hong Kong too long."

"Oh, what would you know about it anyway? You never fell in love with a white."

John snaps his head toward Roger, takes three measured strides, and crouches beside him. His intonation has sharpened, lost its garbled quality. "So what was it like then? You tell me. Was it like giving up on being Asian? Huh? Was it like having all your talent ripped away? All your clever little quotes? Huh? Look at you! *Was it? Is that what it was like?*"

Roger looks up at him. Oddly enough, a quote pops into his head. *The most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power.* His voice is hoarse, almost a whisper. His desire is nothing more than an article of oppression. "Pretty much."

They stare at each other this way for a dozen heartbeats, then John stands up. "Can you find your way back to your hotel from here?" His British accent has returned.

"Yeah. No problem."

"I've got some last minute stuff I've—"

"Look, don't bother, okay?"

In the ensuing pause, one of the sunglassed hipsters enters, hesitates.

"Okay. Goodbye."



None of the forewarnings made a difference. Still it surprises. The trucks are green, older than anything else on the road. They might have been built during the last World War. Red stars are painted on the doors, and the stars are what everyone outside is staring at. As the trucks drive by, the stars are what everyone is afraid of. Then the column ends, and another one, consisting entirely of taxis, passes by.

Judging the search for a cab clearly futile, Roger guesses at a direction and starts walking. The few people he sees are all running from one place to another. Periodically, there is a flash just beyond the line of nearby buildings, followed by an ominous rumbling sound. The first several times this happens, he looks up, but then ignores it, walks with his head down as if tracking someone.

He thinks he's nearing the hotel now. This alley looks familiar. From far down at its end, an amplified voice echoes faintly. He turns in the other direction, but the sound seems to get louder and louder. Within minutes, a jeep with loudspeakers mounted in its bed overtakes him. In the passenger seat, an officer of the Chinese army speaks into a microphone. His words, two or three sentences repeated over and over, ring up and down the street. He could be warning everyone that a curfew has been instituted and that anyone still outside in fifteen minutes will be shot on sight. He could be ordering all non-residents to come out onto the sidewalk with identification papers. There's just no way to tell.

Roger hurries to the next corner, where the alley opens onto a wide boulevard. He looks down the prospect, trying to orient himself. Through the knife-like slit between far buildings, the aircraft warning lights of the Bowl blink steadily back at him. And there, on top, standing with his feet apart and his hands at his hips, Terry Farrell does his best Howard Roark. He's at least fifteen stories tall, and his mouth emits a guffaw like a sonic boom. "We do not occupy a point in history," he roars, "we occupy them all."

The lobby is cool and empty. Roger peeks over the counter to make sure, but there is no one. On his way to the elevator, he stumbles over a low step, and before he can right himself, the doors skid open and the desk clerk bursts out, nearly toppling him again. He says something breathlessly in Chinese and rushes to the front desk just as a phone is beginning to ring.

Roger gets in and rings for the fifth floor. On a whim he rings for the fourth too, but the button does not illuminate. Roger rings and rings, and he does not give up until the elevator has stopped. At the sound of the chime, he begins his walk down the corridor, pauses at the light well. He puts his head through the window. Is he just imagining that the level of refuse below, like a tide, has risen overnight? The smell has changed to that of day-old coffee

grounds, and a fine ash seems to drift upward toward the glittering orange light. From somewhere above, a volley of small fluttering objects—coins, maybe—rains down. They make no sound as they disappear into the rolling surf of garbage. Sighing, he enters his small room and closes the door behind him.

He unbuckles his belt, lowers himself gingerly onto the bed, the biggest thing in the room, and lies very still. He remembers turning on the TV, but he can't hear it now and he can't move his head to look. He thinks he might be able to catch a reflection of the moving images on the lamp fixture or on the clear plastic ashtray, but he sees nothing.

He lies this way for a long time. Outside, a light clicks off; the room darkens and tiny flickering pictures appear on the doorknob and the ashtray. If he squints, he can almost make them out—a cactus bending sideways, tongs that open and close in syncopated rhythm, gingerbread people on a striped triangular tray. Somehow, he rolls himself over onto his back and looks at the screen. The sound is on low, and he hears it clipping back and forth in a dry British accent. He can't make out the words, though. It's some kind of fashion show, a cortège of fair-skinned Chinese girls trotting up and down the stage, savagely skinny, wearing costumes that bear no obvious relation to the human form.

Roger turns his head toward the TV without lifting it from the spongy bedcover and watches until it looks like the program is almost over. Hurriedly, he kicks his pants down to his knees and touches himself. His penis is almost shapeless, shrouded in a thicket of wiry black hair, and his massaging fails to produce any sign of arousal. The fashion show ends and, after a sequence of commercials, a news program begins. The lead story features a live feed from Statue Square, in front of the Legislative Council, where an apparently well-organized army of rioters is biting and kicking its way through a shaky line of policemen. He watches without moving, inhaling in slow, sour breaths. He closes his eyes.

Then, silently, the semen begins to flow, like blood, without exertion or release. But something else follows: a terrible, unnameable emotion swelling in his midsection that causes him to double over, gasping.

Once, the first time they had sex, she put her ear to his hairless chest and called him beautiful. She kissed the smooth skin of his arms, saying he was *beautiful*. And in return, he sent her a plane ticket. Made excuses to an old man and his luckless old wife and sent her what was hers to begin with.

But she doesn't come.

Soon, the test pattern that has been on the TV for some time breaks down into static, and then nothing. A few minutes later the electricity goes out. In blackness, Roger uncurls himself and sits at the edge of the bed. He looks in the direction of the window, toward the harbor, and in the canescent Eastern sky, he sees the future. ■

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



Decent

Yasmine Beverly Rana

CHARACTERS:

COREY DAY: Attractive Mid-Twenties Female

BRAD SMITH: Early Forties Police Detective

TIME:

The Present. Dusk. Summer

PLACE:

A Motel Room in New Orleans

The room is small, dark, filthy. Piles of takeout food cartons cover the floor and bed. Clothes are everywhere. Newspapers and newspaper clippings cover a desk in the center of the room. The room is sparse with only a desk, double bed, bureau, and small television set. COREY DAY is sitting at the table cutting out newspaper articles. She is disheveled. She looks as if she hasn't slept in days. The curtains in the room are closed. There is little light, except for a slight neon light streaming in from across the street. There is quiet.

COREY: (*clipping articles*) One, two, three, four... Poor girls. No more. It should stop now.

(A knock at the door. Corey doesn't move. We hear the knock again. Corey still doesn't move. Brad enters. He is wearing a suit and appears quite put together.)

BRAD: Oh, you are a bad girl! Leaving the door unlocked in such a dangerous place.

COREY: I don't like keeping people out.

BRAD: Some people should be kept out.

COREY: Like you?

BRAD: (*puts his hand over hers with the scissors, preventing her from clipping*) Quit for a while.

COREY: (*pulling his hand away*) If you don't like it, don't watch.

BRAD: You'll have more pages to clip tomorrow. Two more today.

COREY: Where?

BRAD: River.

COREY: It should've stopped by now.

BRAD: The bodies emerged from the water.

COREY: Like a baptism.

BRAD: (*laughing*) Yeah! Never thought of it that way, but sure. All we needed was a preacher.

COREY: Did she look like she was just baptized?

BRAD: She can't come back from where she is.

COREY: Where is she?

BRAD: Either one of two places.

COREY: And you know which one it is.

BRAD: I have a pretty good idea.

COREY: Just because of how she got a hot meal?

BRAD: Selling oneself puts one into a bad place.

COREY: Because good places are reserved for only the decent.
And she wasn't decent?

BRAD: I saw the body.

COREY: So did I.

BRAD: But I saw it first. When it was fresh. I was assigned to handle the evidence. So I touched it, and felt it. I know.

COREY: You saw all the bodies?

BRAD: It's my case.

COREY: You had to touch them all?

BRAD: They're all mine.

COREY: Do you like that?

BRAD: Sure. Who wouldn't?

COREY: I saw her differently, when I had to identify her in that cold, gray room.

BRAD: That must have been difficult.

COREY: No. "Yes. That's my sister." That part was easy. It's reading and clipping all these articles. That's hard.

BRAD: Don't do it.

COREY: I have to.

(Brad tries to force her to stop. Corey holds the scissors up to his neck. He backs off.)

COREY: I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it.

BRAD: You had better watch yourself.

COREY: I know. But I have to do this. It's not just my sister anymore. It's all these others. There are so many It's so much work.

BRAD: But it's all the same story. They just change the name. Hell, they don't even have to change the face!

COREY: The faces do look the same. Different tones and different features. But it's all the same. Hardened, disillusioned, pained.

BRAD: We all have choices.

COREY: Some of us don't.

BRAD: You didn't choose your sister's profession.

COREY: I could have.

BRAD: But you chose not to. So you're still here, sittin', talkin' to me, and she... isn't.

COREY: All these women...

BRAD: Every day. One, maybe two of these women are found, naked, bound, bruised, cold, kinda like ice.

COREY: And what do you do about it?

BRAD: You should leave this place.

COREY: Not yet.

BRAD: It could take weeks, months, possibly years before we know.

COREY: I can wait.

BRAD: No one's waiting home for you?

COREY: Not anymore.

BRAD: For Christ's sake! You hadn't spoken to your sister in five years!

COREY: That doesn't matter! She's gone! And I'm still here, alone, without her!

BRAD: She left you a long time ago.

COREY: Why aren't you doing your job?

BRAD: I'm doing the very best I can.

COREY: By sitting here? Talking to me?

BRAD: Work is work. What do you want anyway?

COREY: From whom?

BRAD: Him.

COREY: It's a him?

BRAD: Yeah. I know it's a him. So what's going on in that pretty little head of yours? What kind of torture plans are you making for the monster once you get your hands on him?

COREY: I haven't thought about it.

BRAD: Come on! I find that awfully hard to believe. Sitting in this steaming crap motel room, all day and night. Never leaving. Reading and cutting out these articles about all the girls. Memorizing each detail, each piece of evidence. Going to sleep with their faces dancing around in your head every night. What are you going to do to him once you get him?

COREY: Nothing.

BRAD: Nothing?

COREY: That's up to you.

BRAD: I've got no say. I just gotta catch him.

COREY: Why is that so hard?

YASMINE BEVERLY RANA

BRAD: He's good. He's real good. Very fast. Quick! It's like one moment he's there and the next... snap! Gone! Poof! Into the air. Like magic!

COREY: Is he even real?

BRAD: Oh, he is. I can smell it. It's all there. Flesh and bone.

COREY: But no one's ever seen him?

BRAD: Never.

COREY: How then?

BRAD: Like I said, magic.

COREY: You seem to read him very well.

BRAD: Oh, I have to. It's my job.

COREY: You have to get close to him?

BRAD: Under his skin.

COREY: Aren't you afraid of getting too close?

BRAD: I don't have time to worry.

COREY: You have time for me. I'm sure the other victims had family members too.

BRAD: I like you. You're different than the others.

COREY: How?

BRAD: They rant and rave and cry and beat themselves up about their dearly departed sisters or girlfriends or mothers. You don't.

COREY: I can't. I don't feel enough to cry.

BRAD: You want her back?

COREY: I want him.

BRAD: But you have no plans of punishment?

COREY: It's the eyes. I want to see his eyes.

BRAD: And look for what?

COREY: Something sinister, not human, unreal.

BRAD: You're still wondering if it's a real human being. Man, flesh, and bone. Blood pumping through the veins! And everything that goes along with it! You can't believe it's real.

COREY: I don't want to.

BRAD: Leave it to me. Let me do my job, catch him, bring him to you, so you can see for yourself. Maybe I'll even let you touch him.

COREY: You can't even touch him.

BRAD: You don't know me very well, then. I am very good at my job. A case becomes mine and I live it. Every second of the day, I see it all.

COREY: I see it too.

BRAD: Cause you got your nose in those newspapers.

COREY: I can't help it. I have to know everything. They wanted to live. They made promises to themselves, maybe even to some higher power.

BRAD: Didn't make a difference.

COREY: Not in her life, or death.

BRAD: She wanted to go home to you.

COREY: How did you know?

BRAD: She put up a great struggle, even to the very end for a purpose. It wasn't to stay here.

YASMINE BEVERLY RANA

COREY: That's what they told me. She fought him. For herself.

BRAD: For you. She scratched his skin away.

COREY: How do you know?

BRAD: Evidence.

(Corey gets close to Brad.)

COREY: I like being close to you. I feel like I'm close to him.

BRAD: You want to be close to him.

COREY: I have to be. I have to see.

BRAD: Nothing to see.

(Corey touches Brad's skin. He pulls her away.)

COREY: I just want to feel.

BRAD: Nothing to feel.

COREY: You're cold.

BRAD: Stay back.

COREY: I have to feel him.

BRAD: He's not here.

COREY: You've felt him. You've felt his work. What he left behind. You've felt his skin under my sister's fingernails.

(Brad's nervous and walks away from Corey.)

COREY: I'm sorry.

BRAD: I am scared. Of him. Of gettin' too close.

COREY: How close are you? Why was your skin so cold, and so hard?

BRAD: Corey . . . go back to your clippings.

COREY: I want to feel again.

(She tries to touch his face. He gently pulls away.)

BRAD: I don't want you to.

COREY: Why are you so afraid now?

BRAD: Don't look at me!

COREY: *(She gently touches his face.)* It's different.

BRAD: No! Everything's the same! It's just like when we first met! When you came down to this place and I was your only friend! There's no one else here but me.

COREY: Who are you?

BRAD: I'm what's right.

COREY: The eyes are different.

(She follows him. He backs away.)

BRAD: I'm what's true. I'm just and lawful. Good. Pure. Decent.

COREY: Is he here?

FADEOUT

Will

Leo Luke Marcello

Last night I saw you for the first time,
sleeping in the warm bed,
curled up and breathing heavily,
stretching as your mother adjusted
the covers and kissed in the way only our parents can.

In the sometimes cold rooms
of complicating lives,
kisses may lightly graze us,
filling the emptiness like cups
we sip at slowly,

sometimes sweetened,
sometimes so hot
we have to wait or blow
gently to prevent the tongue
from scalding numb.

The thrill of it, Will,
the slow kiss worth
the wait, when no longer
so hot you scorch but
still warm enough to radiate
the body, head to foot,

to take away the chill
to bring the taste
to its perfect moment

any of them, those

delicious moments
of being loved when
we turn in bed, asleep
like a child, a kiss
that does not wake us

but which we feel
even through closed lids,
the head on our shoulder,
the lips that touch our faces

as we grow and turn, Will,
the thrill of it, maybe even
the embarrassment later of it
when someone tells us
how we looked that first look
asleep, child of our friend,
kindred who looked upon us,
called our names while we slept
even before we knew ourselves.



ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



The Roaring Boy

Tom Cody

SETTING:

All action takes place in living room of Dan Ryan's apartment

TIME:

The present

CHARACTERS:

DAN RYAN: retired phone company worker, in his sixties

DAN RYAN: as a young man

HELEN RYAN: waitress, Dan's second wife

FITZ: bar owner, in his sixties

VOICE: Dan's mother

VOICE: Brendon Sheridan, in his twenties

KATE: in her twenties, Dan's first wife

HERMAN: in his forties, Kate's father

BERTHA: in her forties, Kate's mother

VOICE: Jerry, sanitation worker

AT RISE:

Living room of a middle class apartment in New York City. The furniture--chairs, tables, couch, small bookcase, a full-length mirror--is old, inexpensive. Helen Ryan, in her late fifties, and wearing a waitress uniform, enters from the kitchen. She is plump without being fat, her face is attractive but shows signs of hard living. She goes to the mirror, rubs her fingers under her eyes and down her cheeks, as if she can ease the signs of aging.

Dan Ryan, in his sixties, enters from the bedroom. He has on pants, a tattered sweater and slippers. He pauses, observing Helen and shaking his head.

DAN: (*Speaks in gruff tones*) It won't help. Your only salvation is to follow the example of the lasses in Tralee, my dear home. A generous daily application of axel grease. There wasn't a lined face in all the town, women of eighty walking around with faces smooth as a baby's ass.

HELEN: (*Stops rubbing, turns around*) Fuck the lasses of Tralee, fuck you too.

DAN: Nothing like a cheery greeting to off-set a dreary, rainy morning.

HELEN: You don't deserve anything cheery. In Fitz's last night you didn't say a dozen words to me. Or to anybody else either. For the past two weeks you've been a fucking grouch. All the regulars in the bar are talking about you. Even Fitz, your best buddy, sees something's wrong. You, the biggest blarney bullshit artist of all time, sit like a zombie without a tongue. You're not interested in the horses of those goddamned stupid detective stories you're always reading. And you're not interested in your favorite pastime, fucking. No matter what I do for you, your prick is like a string of spaghetti. Christ, the horney king of lechers, and he can't even give it to me once in a blue moon.

DAN: And I'm sure you've not gone without some substitute. That Greek who owns the greasy spoon you work in must be standing behind you in your time of supposed distress.

HELEN: Don't get snotty now. No matter what problems we've had, I've never cheated on you. That's more than you can say for yourself.

DAN: (*Goes to table, picks up yellow sheet of paper from waitress's pad and reads.*) Take laundry to laundrymat. Don't forget to pick it up. Talk to the super about moving upstairs when the Whites move out next month.

(*Crumbles paper, drops it on table*) And what's wrong with this apartment? It's served me well over the years. Is it because I lived here with my dear departed Kate?

HELEN: Shit, I wouldn't care if you lived here with the Queen of England. It's the goddamned traffic, every time a truck passes I think it's about to smash through the window.

DAN: Kate never had any trouble with the traffic.

HELEN: She didn't have time to worry about traffic, she was too busy trying to tame you and putting up with your shit.

DAN: There was never a cross word spoken between us.

HELEN: Because she couldn't understand what you were saying. You're bad enough now, I can imagine what you sounded like when you got off the boat, talking with a mouthful of shit.

DAN: By the holy Jesus! It's the elocution teacher herself, spouting off on the speech of her betters. (*Mimicking voice*) Dan, he *don't* mean it, she's *mischievous* Dan, I know I *brung* it home with me, Dan.

HELEN: You old bastard, it's bad enough I have to take that shit from your two snotty kids, I don't have to take it from you too.

DAN: Leave Mary and Father John be, they're no bother to you. Once I took you for my wife instead of my paramour, they accepted you into the family.

HELEN: You son-of-a-bitch! I told you a million times not to be using those big words with me. Paramour, Scharamour. Acting like a goddamned highbrow because your two snots went to college. Anyway I graduated high school. How far did *you* get in school?

DAN: Far enough to know I couldn't benefit from any more schooling. In addition to which I had to support my dear old windowed mother, may the Lord have mercy on her soul.

HELEN: She needed the Lord's mercy, having you for a son.

DAN: A vicious lie. I was a fine lad, the best in all of Tralee. For miles around I was the topic of conversation. Did you hear, they'd say at the dinner table,

what young Daniel Ryan did today? Up before the sun he was, ploughing the fields, and working right through till sundown with never a stop for food and only a few swallows of water to see him through the parched day. A remarkable lad, they all agreed. And they were right, I set the whole town agog, a stripling of ten tender summers and doing the work of three grown men.

HELEN: They talked about you when you were ten because you were out fucking their daughters. How old were you when you got your first lay?

DAN: I lost my virtue to the most desirable colleen in town when I was a mere seven years old. I remember the occasion well, it was the night before I made my first holy communion.

HELEN: You may have been seven, but the thing you got into went baa, baa, baa.

DAN: Another vicious lie. But tell me about yourself, were you out of the crib when it first happened?

HELEN: I was twelve and my father's best friend sent me to the store to get him a newspaper. He told me when I got back to his apartment he'd have something nice waiting for me. I was expecting at least a dime, but instead he gave me his big cock and almost killed me.

DAN: Your father obviously had loyal and devoted friends. Did you tell?

HELEN: Hell, no. It just would have started trouble. Besides once I got over the shock I decided I liked it.

DAN: Let's see now, you started at twelve and you've been at it with abandon for fifty years. An enviable record.

HELEN: Don't you ever get tired of trying that age bit on me? I'm fifty-five, eleven glorious years younger than you. You've seen my birth certificate and other papers, you old fucking wreck.

DAN: While sitting on my personal bench in the park yesterday I was reading an article, very interesting, about forged documents, birth certificates and the like. It seems they're readily available for those who want to chop a dozen years or so off their age.

HELEN: (*Starts to put on coat*) Dan, listen to me and listen good. I married you for two reasons, you were fun to be with and you liked fucking just as much as I did, and still do. I don't know what started you on this gloom shit, but I know I don't want to live with it. I've lived with enough grouches in my life, I'm done with that. But I'm not done with sex, and I need it. I'd like to get it from you, but if you're not able to perform, I'll get it from someone else.

(*Goes to door, stops for a final word*) I'm leaving now to serve crummy bastards their bacon and eggs, and to laugh at their crummy jokes so they'll leave decent tips. When I stop in Fitz's after work I want you to be your old self, your old horny self. I want things to be like they were before this shit fell on you. Enjoy your day while I'm slaving away.

(*She sticks her tongue out as far as she can, running it around in circles, and then she leaves.*)

DAN: (*Walks to window, looks out, shakes head in disgust*) For once the baggage is right. A festering gloom hanging over me, a shroud shutting off life. They're all talking about me, even Fitz. And are they right? Coming near the end? Has that old devil concupiscence finally deserted me? First time in memory I haven't had the horny feelings, beautiful legs and mouth-watering tits pass by without causing a stir in my miserable body. I've become the poet's paltry thing. And what was it with Fitz when I entered from my daily constitutional yesterday?

(*Door opens, Fitz, in his sixties, and wearing bar apron, enters. He carries bar rag and a book. He goes to table, wiping it off, as if it were a bar. He looks up at Dan.*)

FITZ: I've been waiting for you, you're later than usual. Were you caught up in some adventure?

DAN: The adventure of sitting on my bench, watching boats pass up the river, wishing I had the stamina to jump into the water, swim out to a boat, and tell the captain to take me away, no matter what his destination.

FITZ: You'd be missed. (*Holds out book*) I finished it last night. And Jesus, but that Franklin Clarke was a bad one. When did you know he was the murderer, Dan?

DAN: I don't remember. It's been a few weeks, and my mind's drawn a blank.

FITZ: Dan, your mind is too keen to be drawing blanks. It's the lack of interest, you have none, haven't had in weeks. (*Leans close to Dan*) You sit here, a pale

imitation of yourself, sour as vinegar. You haven't had a good drunk on in ages, you don't come bursting through the door after your walk to compare notes on our detectives, mainly Hercule Poirot. Good looking women pass by with no comment from you. You sit there like a statue, you don't run out when an extra good-looking woman passes, telling her one of your stories, grabbing her arm and leading her in here for a drink.

DAN: Fitz, would we have been better off if we'd never come to this bewildering country?

FITZ: Dan, we'd have spent our lives doing backbreaking labor, making barely enough for an occasional pint. Ah, you're still in the mood, there's little sense talking to you. *(Takes bar rag and book and heads for the door. Just as he's about to leave, Dan calls to him.)*

DAN: Fitz, wait, don't go, don't leave it like this. I want things like they were before the dark spirits visited. A month back, I was my old self and life was a glorious challenge. Let us play back that glad time.

(Fitz stops, shakes his head, and returns to the table-bar.)

FITZ: I've been waiting for you. And how was your weekend stay up in Westchester with your daughter, Mary, and family?

DAN: Duty visits should be abolished. People fuss over you like you were in grave need of a keeper. But believe it or not, Fitz, a glorious discovery was unearthed this past weekend.

FITZ: And what discovery would that be? Westchester has nothing of note except snooty ladies. Your daughter is excepted from that remark, of course.

DAN: No need to except Mary. She's been known to take a few tumbles from walking with her nose pointed to the heavens.

FITZ: The discovery?

DAN: A name, Fitz, a name.

FITZ: What name?

DAN: Sherlock Holmes.

FITZ: Sherlock Holmes, the limey detective?

DAN: The one and the same.

FITZ: What about him?

DAN: An absolute wizard, a marvel, the unparalleled champion of deduction, even though he is English.

FITZ: And how did you come across him?

DAN: I fell into a conversation with my young grandson, Paulie, about books and such. He politely invited me to look over the shelf of books in his bedroom. Knowing of my interest in detectives he handed me a book, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. He assured me it was a whiz read, and I'd like Sherlock Holmes. That night, Saturday it was, I'm sitting by myself, everyone having gone off to bed, which seems to be a law in Westchester, everyone in bed by ten. I've also finished the miserly quota of beer the tyrant Mary sets aside for me. So just for something to fill in the solitary hours before it's time to retire, I delve into Mr. Holmes and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. A revelation, Fitz, an absolutely stunning find.

FITZ: I thought those Sherlock Holmes stories were for kids.

DAN: A great fallacy, Fitz. These clever and masterly tales should be kept out of the hands of callow youth. Librarians should place them on top shelves, much like you put the choice bottles on the top shelf, keep them out of the clutches of the young.

FITZ: Is he as good as Hercule Poirot?

DAN: Hercule had to take lessons from Sherlock. All that clever reasoning we so admire in Hercule is child's play for Sherlock.

FITZ: Then I'll have to read him and we can discuss him the way we do with Hercule. Speaking of which I've just finished *Cards on the Table*. Hercule was his usual self, a quick solution to the case.

DAN: As well he should have solved it quickly, there were a mere four suspects.

FITZ: Yes, but I didn't like the story as much as all the others we've read. That damn card game, bridge. How could people waste time on that stupid game?

DAN: True, Fitz, but look at the positive side. Bridge is a card game for the wealthy classes, and while they're occupied in the silly but harmless pursuit they have less time to oppress the working class.

FITZ: By God, Dan, you're always thinking. You see things I'm blind to.

DAN: An activity that costs nothing, in addition to lending a certain confidence to life. As to seeing things what did you think of Hercule's high jinks with Mrs. Luxmore in *Cards on the Table*?

FITZ: Mrs. Luxmore, the one involved with that Major Despard?

DAN: A tall, handsome woman. The opportunity was there, Hercule was alone with her, a maid was easily disposed of.

FITZ: Ah, Dan, now you're seeing things that weren't in the book.

DAN: Damn it, Fitz, between the lines, all there plain as day.

FITZ: Why would he get involved with that one? She had no use for the husband, and she was always playing up to Major Despard.

DAN: Fitz, although Hercule claims to be Belgian, I've long held the notion that he's a Frenchman. I picture him prowling the streets of London, Paris, Cairo, on the lookout for some buxom woman to sniff underarm hair and kiss sweaty thighs.

FITZ: Frenchmen do those things?

DAN: With a passion. Not everyone, but more than one could count. And realize, Fitz, I mean no disrespect for our hero, Hercule. I continue to admire his ability to pick up the scent of the criminal as well as that enchanting scent thrown off by an eager wench.

FITZ: Belgian, French, whatever. Dan, there's a thing I've been mulling over for some time now. (*Looks around to be sure no one is listening, then leans over towards Dan*) Why are there no famous Irish detectives?

DAN: An interesting question, Fitz. No, there are no famous Irish detectives, but the important item is the reason. It's because there's so little crime in Ireland that a detective couldn't make a decent living. He'd be forced to work part time as a solicitor or perhaps a bookmaker.

FITZ: (*Hand on chin, thinking*) But Dan, why couldn't he go to another country to practice his trade? Hercule Poirot is Belgian and he solves cases in every country except Belgium. (*In almost a whisper*) Dan, we do have the brains, don't we?

DAN: (*Waves off the question*) Our heads are fairly bursting with gray matter, but crime and misdeeds hold no interest to the Irish mind that's tuned to the song of the birds and the wind whispering through trees and the lovely sound of a tap dispensing cold frothy beer. Fitz, it's not the logic of things but the magic of things that hold our attention. (*He looks towards the window*) And by jumping Jesus, that holds my attention.

(*He rushes to the window, points out*) Did you see that, Fitz? More beauty than should be allowed in one body. Should I run after her, comment on the beauty and start a situation fraught with infinite possibilities?

(*Looks at watch, shakes head and returns to the bar-table*) More's the pity but the she-devil has been on the warpath of late and there's little reason to set her off. Her waitresses' pad, Fitz, it's a diabolical instrument. Before she's off to work in the morning she leaves messages, chores for me to perform, go to the store and such. And then there are comments on my behavior, I was too friendly to Betty Moran, our next door neighbor. All because I helped the dear girl with her groceries. And I swear on my mother's grave I barely touched the dear girl, an accidental brush against a splendid pair of tits that were struggling to be loose of the tight blouse she was wearing.

There are always comments on my drinking, which is certainly the height of nonsense. She makes me seem like a member of the Pioneers the way she laps up the sauce. Not one, Fitz, but two hollow legs, and if you doubt that, when she makes her appearance later I'll hold high one of the legs. You'll clearly hear the liquid swilling around, gurgling like the waters of the Liffey on a stormy day.

FITZ: It's a sound I'm not anxious to hear.

DAN: Ah, you're right, Fitz, the woman is a menace, but she does stir the blood, and of course, having the blood stirred is one of life's necessities.

FITZ: When I go home to Bridget at night she stirs my blood.

DAN: But how often?

FITZ: I get sufficient stirring.

DAN: Nightly?

FITZ: By God, I'm not you, Dan. I'd be dead and in my grave.

DAN: Weekly?

FITZ: If it was weekly it would have to be very *weakly*.

DAN: Monthly? And that's as high as I'm going.

FITZ: You're coming close and let us leave it at that. Now I have to serve my other customers or I won't be making enough to pay the other head.

(Fitz walks out the door. Dan goes to window, looks out for a few seconds, then walks around the room.)

DAN: Yes, a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick. And you wrote the truth, you scribbler of our lore. *(Suddenly bangs table)* But damn and damnation, I'm not part of your truth. Until a short while ago I was a roaring boy, out for mischief and the pleasures of debauchery. And what brought on the fearful change? Think, man, think. Hercule, Sherlock, let us put our heads together and sort out this damn mystery. Let us examine everything carefully, go back and pin down a time. Two, three weeks? That's about it, and what irregular event took place that hurled me into this dungeon? Up each morning, going about my business in orderly fashion, taking my walks. The walks. Anything out of the ordinary there? Can't recall anything of note, no terrible accidents or misfortunes witnessed, no unusual meetings, no sexual encounters either, more's the pity. After the constitutional stopping in for the morning chat with Fitz, discussing the horses for the day and our readings. No strangers in the bar causing trouble. Nothing, nothing, but there has to be. Something's been overlooked, the only possible explanation. Since life has moved along in its accustomed course, it must be some outside force. The weather? An outside force and conditions have been decent the past couple of weeks. A couple of rain showers and that one fierce storm with its pelting rain that kept me at home and from my walk. Moping around the house and what did I do? Going through the closets and, by holy Jesus, the suitcase. Taking it down from the closet shelf, unstrapping and there staring at me in four bundles, the letters,

letters back and forth. Mine to the dear sainted mother and friends left behind. The replies, a litany of sadness and death mixed with grand dreams and dashed hopes. Alongside the letters, documents, cards, a few fading photos, mute evidence a handful of people intermingled.

(Almost shouting in his exuberance) Yes, and by all that's holy that's what set me off and brought me to this sorry state. By Christ, Sherlock and Hercule, stand behind me, I'm a worthy companion and a bit more. And Fitz was complaining about the lack of Irish sleuths. The complaint is now rendered meaningless, and I'll inform him when I make my appearance. Yes, I remember every movement, going to the closet with no plan in mind, taking down the suitcase as a matter of curiosity.

(He goes to closet, takes out the suitcase, puts it on table. Undoes frayed straps and stares at the contents. Takes out four bundles of letters and places them on the table. He picks up two bundles) Copies of my letters, the mother pile and the rogue pile. Youthful conceit leading me to believe my sparkling and solemn and blasphemous reflections might be worth preserving.

(He takes a letter from the mother pile) The first letter home to the sainted one. The day after my arrival and suffering a fearful morning-after. Settling down to write the least of my desires, but a mother's love has more weight than a pounding head.

(As he holds letter we hear his voice) Dearest Mother. Arrived safe yesterday and so overjoyed to depart the rickety boat that I was sorely tempted to kiss the ground even though it wasn't the good green sod of home. Michael was there to greet me, and I was so happy to see a friendly face that I was tempted to kiss him too. Fortunately, I restrained myself from kissing the ground or Michael. Mother, you wouldn't believe how grand this country is, and religious too, which was a great surprise to me, having heard many unfriendly stories about the loose morals of Americans. But I can honestly report the stories are bald lies, and the inhabitants are decent, clean living people. The first thing we did after we arrived at the apartment, a lovely four room place with more appliances than they can have in Buckingham Palace, was to run off to church. St. Joseph's it's called, and while not an Irish saint, a worthy one nonetheless. I got down on my knees, thanking the good St. Christopher for safely hauling my carcass across the seething waters, and then I had a chance to look around. Well, so many people were in attendance I whispered to Michael that I must have lost track of the days while I was on the boat because with so many people in church it had to be a Sunday. But no, Michael assured me, it was an ordinary Tuesday and the church was filled like that every day.

(The voice stops and Dan shakes his head and returns the letter to the pile.)

DAN: God forgive me for being such a barefaced liar, but lending comfort to the elderly and worried should count as a corporal work of mercy. The worry lines on the brow and a legion of prayers for the errant son seeking his fortune in the land of opportunity.

(Takes a letter from the second pile) The first rogue letter, to Brendon Sheridan, chums since our diaper days. Urging him to come across with me, but the always cautious Brendon had no heart for the unknown.

(As he reads letter we hear his voice) Brendon, dear friend. I've been here a week now, and I've become so Americanized I've already had two baths. It's a seductive country, Brendon, but I'm more than willing to be seduced. Bars are open from eight in the morning till four at night, with no shutdown in the afternoon. The bars here outnumber the stars in the sky, and if you get thrown out of one, though it's almost impossible to do, you simply walk a few steps and you find yourself in another one and starting fresh. The police are quite friendly, and make nightly stops in the bar, having two drinks, with no money exchanged, while checking on the decorum of the patrons before taking the short walk to the next bar. Another enticing seduction, Brendon, the lazy man's mass. Starting at noon, it enables a thirsting soul to debauch on Saturday night and still arrive at mass on Sunday to pay homage to the good Lord. The most bewitching seduction, scores of gorgeous women, many dull-witted and tongue-tied on every subject except sex. Each takes pride in some exotic bed specialty, and each wearing a few inches of clothing and a ton of makeup. By God, each night when I drop down on my knees to say prayers I ask the good Lord to grant me one favor, have old Father Flynn take out of the pulpit in Tralee and transferred here to St. Joseph's, my parish church. The old buzzard would last for one mass, and when he took one look at the female congregation he'd go right through the ceiling of the church. He'd return to Tralee with material for one hundred and sixty sermons on the evils of modern dress and the general breakdown in morals of the young.

The following is for your eyes only, Brendon. My first day here the melancholy was on me, but cousin Mike, shrewd cousin Mike, had the proper remedy. Cora Jensen her name is, she's a regular in Fitz's, the bar where we do most of our drinking, and I must confess Cora made the melancholy disappear like a magician causing eggs and rabbits to vanish. You know Brendon, comparing us to Americans, there are many points on which we Irish are clear winners, in the areas of intelligence and story telling, for instance. But in the all important area of sex Americans are so far ahead that we're living in the Neanderthal age. When it came time for me to perform with the salty Cora, I started to assume the missionary position, the way we in our ignorance have always assumed to be the proper way. But Cora, the dear girl, shoved me off, throwing me on the bed, and saying, "Hey, Dan, welcome to America." And then she proceeded to

show me the glories of America. It's difficult to recall the exact sequence of events, but I learned a great deal about directions, up down sideways front back crossways topsy turvy crossed intersected. By Jesus, I thought I'd come around the world on the boat that dropped me on these foreign shores, but Cora showed me how ignorant I was as she took me around the world without leaving the bed. Brendon, take my word for it, Irish girls are totally unschooled in sexual matters. But take heart, all is not lost, for a brilliant idea just struck me, and I'll mention it to the regulars in Fitz's tonight. We'll take up a collection and send Cora over to Tralee to give lessons to the colleens. We'll equip her with all the necessities on this end, a box of chalk, a ruler, some charts and an eraser, all to insure competent instruction. Your only task will be to hire a hall, preferably the church hall, and I guarantee that if the homegirls take their lessons seriously very few of the lads will be leaving for these shores.

But you should leave, dear friend, pack up before it's too late. A good job awaits you in the phone company, working alongside Mike and myself. After work, which doesn't require three ounces of sweat a day, we'll go out on the town. We'll make a formidable trio, swaggering up and down Eighty-sixth Street, the main thoroughfare in our area. Bars and taverns crowd both sides of the street, music blares out of every establishment, and an army of beautiful women sit at the tables eagerly waiting the Irish triad. After a night of drink and dance, we're off to our place for an exhibition of the satyrs and their concubines. Before your arrival we'll sound-proof the walls, an absolute necessity for I well remember your prodigious ability to bring smiles to faces of milkmaids. One Saturday night while sitting in O'Connor's pub, we heard a scream that was a mixture of pain and joy. None could identify it, but I knew that my chum Brendon was ensconced in some haystack at the end of town delivering a bit of pleasures to one of the town girls. And the next morning at mass I identified the pleased one by picking out the lass with the brightest smile as she lifted up her eyes to the heavens, no doubt giving thanks for the Saturday night indulgence.

(Voice stops, Dan shakes head and takes a letter from third pile. As he looks at it we hear Brendon's voice)

Dan, old friend. Are you sure I could get a decent job if I came out? I'm sure the phone company doesn't hire people off the street. You know I don't have training for anything special, unless they're turning that Eighty-sixth Street you wrote about into a cow pasture. Things are bad here, but at least I make enough to keep body and soul together. And to be honest, Dan, the thought of starting over, in a strange country with strange ways frightens me. I'm not like you, I never was. You always welcomed challenges, and with that sharp tongue of yours you've never been frightened of anything, you wouldn't step aside for the

devil himself. As for being ensconced in a haystack that happened to me one time, I was with you, and we were engaged in that deadly sin that was said to drive its practitioners insane. But even at that unholy time your brain was active as you thought of the words we could use in confession to make it seem less of a sin.

(Voice stops, Dan returns letter and picks up mass card from the suitcase.)

DAN: *(Reads from card)* May Jesus have mercy on the soul of Brendon Sheridan. *(Returns card to suitcase)* Ah, Brendon, you left us at 47, but if you'd come across another dozen years, perhaps a score, would have been yours. And I kept increasing the lures, wild nights of debauchery, light penance from lenient priests for mortal sins, and what I thought would prove the irresistible lure, the purple haired girl who worked in the phone company office. But you paid no heed to me, Brendon, and you've gone to your grave without ever fucking a purple haired woman.

(Picks up fourth bundle of letters, puts it back into suitcase, but then takes it out again. Takes out letter and we hear his mother's voice)

My Dearest Danny. My prayers were answered, my wonderful son is working for a big company. It's such a relief to know that your cousin Michael is there to help you get started. Your Aunt Agnes and myself talk every day about the both of you, and we read your letters over and over. I can't believe buildings are as tall as you say, I'd be afraid to walk the streets, sure that one of them would come tumbling down on me. And I thought for sure you were trying to be funny when you wrote about the restaurant where you put money in slots and food comes out on a plate. But I spoke to Mrs. Finnegan, who worked in America for many years, and she said it was no lie you were writing, and that those Automat restaurants are scattered all over New York City. I'm certain you spend a good part of your pay putting coins in the slots just to watch the food come popping out. I can't believe the phone company pays you all that money, but I don't want you sending me any of your hard earned salary. I'm managing nicely and my wants are few. I have a story to tell you about something I did that I probably should be ashamed of but I'm not. Last Sunday after mass I stopped Mrs. Kerrigan and Mrs. Hanratty, those two old gossips who used to tell terrible stories about you, and who predicted a bad end for you when you left for America. I bragged to them shamelessly about your good job and your wonderful life in America. Well, their mouths just dropped open, and for the first time in all the years I've known them, they were struck dumb, not a word to say. Oh, it was a tonic for me, and Agnes and myself have been laughing about it every day since it happened. Now that I've gotten so bold I'm planning

to get Father Flynn in a corner at the next church social, and sing your praises to him. I'll take a nip first to loosen my tongue, but I'm determined to do it. And when I'm done with heaping praise on you, I'll remind him of the many times he twisted your ear and the many times he told me there was no hope for you.

(Dan returns letter to envelope, and as he opens other letters we hear his mother's voice)

I hope you're not too lonely now that Michael is married and living out in that Queens place. Maybe it's time for you to think of marriage too. I'm sure there must be many Irish girls that you meet on your job or in church. You'd be a great catch and I know you'd make a wonderful husband and father.

I told you not to send your hard earning money to me. And what in the world would I do with a coat? The one I've been wearing these past years will outlast me.

Poor Agnes is gone, and I miss her every day. I keep expecting her to walk in the door for tea and a chat. I'm happy that you're there in America to lend comfort to Michael. Agnes was more happy than I've ever seen her when he wrote that he became a foreman with the phone company. To celebrate we had a couple of nips with our tea. I know your turn will come soon.

My heart is pounding like it wants to break through my body. The happiness that's on me is so powerful that I feel it must be a sin. My own dear son getting married. My hands are shaking so much I can hardly keep the pen on the paper, so forgive my mad ramblings. I wish I could meet your German wife-to-be, Kate. There must be some Irish in her family because Kate is more an Irish name than a German one. You have a distant cousin named Kate, on my side of the family. I saw her years ago, a beautiful girl, but I'm sure not as beautiful as your Kate.

(Voice fades, Dan returns letter to envelope)

DAN: Kate, Kate. German and Irish, a curious combination for the times. But highly rewarding. The father, old Herman, stopping at Fitz's every Friday after finishing the week's work at Ruppert's brewery up on Third Avenue. Allowed one hour, then rushing around the corner to a wife and daughter. Enjoying my stories and one magical Friday he enjoyed so much that his one hour allotment extended to three. Terrified the wife would kill him, I went to concoct a story to lessen punishment. Walking into the apartment, my life turned upside-down.

(Dan walks out door, passing two women coming in, one in her forties, the younger in her twenties. The older woman goes to table, makes motions of preparing food while the

TOM CODY

younger busies herself in a corner. Door opens and Dan enters with a man in his forties, whom he supports with an arm around his waist. Dan is now in his twenties.)

HERMAN: Mamma, this is Danny, my crazy Irisher friend, and there is a good reason why I am late. *(He pushes Dan forward)* Danny, tell Mamma why I am late.

(Dan stares at daughter, fascinated, then addresses the mother)

DAN: All my fault, Herman wanted to leave the bar hours ago, but I prevented him. Off the stool he was headed for the door, determined to rush home to his lovely wife and daughter, and seeing you two lovely ladies I well understand his anxiety to get home. I apologize for my gross behavior, grabbing innocent Herman, pushing him back onto the bar stool, keeping him a virtual prisoner while I spouted some gibberish. It was unforgivable on my part.

HERMAN: Mama, say hello to Danny, and do not yell at him for keeping me, he's a crazy Irisher.

BERTHA: *(Snorts)* Ha!

HERMAN: Danny, say hello to my Bertha, she is the best cook in all Yorkville.

DAN: Hello, Bertha, the best cook in Yorkville, and I'd wager, far beyond. When your name is mentioned in cooking circles I'm sure famous French chefs hide in fear of being compared to you.

BERTHA: *(Snorts again)* Ha!

HERMAN: Danny, say hello to my daughter. I think you cannot guess my daughter's name, you smart Irisher. Guess. *(Doesn't wait for Dan to answer)* Kate, her name is Kate. When Mama and me come to this country we hear Kate Smith sing "God Bless America." We buy the record and play it every night. And when our daughter is born we name her Kate.

DAN: Hello, Kate, and it's a lovely name, a stunning name. And from this moment on it's my favorite name, no other being even a close second.

(Kate smiles and shakes her head)

HERMAN: Mama, what is to eat?

BERTHA: You ask to have food. You get nothing to eat tonight, bed you get.

(She moves him towards bedroom. Before the door closes he calls out)

HERMAN: Good night, my good Irisher pal, and it is all right that you keep me out late.

DAN: I'm ashamed of myself, Kate.

KATE: Why, because you kept my father out late?

DAN: Not at all, that was a mere nothing. I'm deeply ashamed because I live two short blocks from here, and yet I've never laid eyes on you. I'm completely at fault, what can I do to make it up to you?

KATE: *(Laughs nervously)* My father is right; you are crazy.

DAN: Would you settle for crazy in love?

KATE: You don't know me. How can you say that?

DAN: Do you believe in miracles?

KATE: If it says so in the Bible.

DAN: Ah, yes, the Biblical miracles. Lazarus raised from the dead, healing the lame and the blind, water changed into wine, which until now I've always considered the greatest of all miracles. But now we have a non-Biblical miracle, Kate and Dan. The names go together beautifully, don't they?

KATE: You're so crazy you frighten me a little.

DAN: You're never to be frightened of me, Kate. Are you going with anyone?

KATE: That's none of your business.

DAN: But of course it's my business. If you are going with anyone, I want to give you enough time to let the boy down gently.

(Bertha returns from bedroom, sees Dan is still present and snorts).

BERTHA: Papa is sleeping now. You can go, Mr. Irisher. You have done enough for one night.

DAN: Perhaps I should stay a while, just in case Herman meets with an accident, falling out of bed, for instance.

BERTHA: We can take care of Papa. Are you Catholic? We are Catholic.

DAN: Devoutly so, I break few commandments and attend church every Sunday.

BERTHA: We go to eight o'clock mass.

DAN: Certainly the best of masses. But in my case I have a bit of a problem. I work for the phone company, a good, steady, dependable job, but the work is exhausting, and by the time Sunday rolls around it's only my prodigious faith that moves me out of bed and into church in time for the last mass.

(Bertha repeats snorting sound, and takes Dan by the arm and leads him to the door).

DAN: Yes, I should be leaving, although reluctantly now that I'm aware of the two treasures that live here, a cook who puts all others to shame, and the loveliest girl my eyes have ever had the pleasure of gazing upon.

BERTHA: *(Tries pushing him out the door)* Goodnight, Mr. Irishman.

DAN: *(Resisting)* I'll leave now, but I look forward to that mouth-watering meal you'll soon invite me to, and Kate, I'll be seeing you at the eight o'clock mass this Sunday. I'll be there if I have to go without sleep, and after mass we'll discuss our impending marriage and other goodies.

(Bertha's and Kate's mouths open in amazement, and Dan waves and leaves)

BERTHA: You don't see that Irishman after church or any other time.

KATE: Oh, Mama, he wasn't serious, he was just being funny.

(Bertha and Kate leave. Dan returns and goes to the table)

DAN: And I did go without sleep. Prodigious prizes require prodigious effort. At the eight o'clock mass, squeezing into the pew behind them, and the lovely

smile telling me I was welcome. Our walk in Carl Schurz Park setting in motion our year's courtship, ending in our standing at the altar in St. Joe's. Twenty years that flew by like a quick breath until the devastating news.

(Takes letter from mother's pile and we hear her voice)

My Dearest Danny. This is one of the happiest days of my life. Your son, my grandson John, and I've just had a nip or two to celebrate what I've been praying for since the day you married. And it does my heart good that you're calling my grandson John, after your own father, and may the Lord have mercy on his poor tortured soul. My! Nine pounds, but I'm not really surprised because boy babies in our family have always been big. You were a big baby yourself, almost nine pounds too, and everybody in the hospital talked about the big Ryan baby. Oh, I'd love to hold young John in my arms, all nine pounds of him. It would do me more good than all the pills and medicines the doctors push on a body.

Lately I've been thinking a good bit about your father, just as I have been thinking of you, the two men in my life. Your father had a wayward spirit that made it impossible for him to find contentment. He couldn't find it here, in our small town, and he was forever having work problems. He was always pushing for better working conditions, better pay, shorter hours. He wasn't very popular with the bosses and owners, and after a short time on a job there'd be an argument and your father was out of a job. I think now that we married too young, we were barely twenty, and in those days most men didn't marry until well in their thirties and forties. All of his friends were off gallivanting in the pubs, and he was sitting here with me, restless and feeling trapped. He'd start to read one of his books but then the restlessness took over, and he'd put the book down and begin to pace the floor. Finally one night we sat down and talked it all out. And we decided he'd go off to Dublin to see what he could make of himself. He was so sure he'd be successful in a big city like Dublin, and we'd never have another worry. Once he got settled with a decent job and a place to live he'd send for us. You were two at the time, and you put up a big fuss when your father left. We waited for his call, but whatever it was he was searching for wasn't there in Dublin. After a year he came home, a discouraged and embittered man. He had only five years left to him, and harsh, grinding years they were. He worked part time in different jobs, but none of them lasted long. Then he stopped attending mass because he'd taken it into his head that the priests were using influence to keep him from jobs. I'm not very smart but I believe there are some men, your father was one of them, who are possessed by an uneasy spirit that is forever at them, driving them towards goals that are forever beyond their grasp, and causing them to be unhappy with the ordinary

things of life. But I want you to remember one thing about your father, he was a good man, there wasn't a better man in this whole town when he wasn't suffering the uneasy spirit. That's the picture I'd like you to have of your father, and it should comfort you to know that the end he let me call the priest. I pray that his soul has finally found peace in heaven.

Merciful God! This is the longest letter I've ever written, and I'm afraid I'm rambling on like some old biddy. Kiss dear John for me, whisper in his ear that it's from his proud grandmother. Oh, you and Kate must be the proudest parents in the world, just as I'm the proudest grandparent.

(Voice fades, Dan returns letter to envelope. Holds up last letter in pile)

DAN: One final letter to be gotten through. *(Takes letter halfway out of envelope, then pushes it back. Stares at envelope, deciding if he should read letter)* Ah, Jesus, there's no escaping. *(Takes letter out of envelope)* Pinched handwriting, the once beautiful penmanship turned into a child's scrawl.

MOTHER'S VOICE: My Dearest Danny. It's been ages since I've written. I'm sorry about that, but I was out of sorts for a while. The young doctor, the one who took over after Dr. Feeney passed away, made me stay in bed. A young surly thing he is, and when I told him I couldn't be wasting my days in bed he said if I didn't he'd put me in the hospital. No manners at all, he may know a thing or two that Dr. Feeney didn't, but he'll never know how to provide comfort the way Dr. Feeney did. But I'm out of bed now and back to my chores, with only a few stops to rest these weary bones.

I'm sitting here in the kitchen by the window, looking down the road, the way I used to do waiting for you to come skipping along. I don't ever remember you walking, it was always a skip, hop and a jump, like you were in such a hurry to get home. But when you did come home it was barely time enough for a bite to eat, and then you were off again. I'd ask where you were going, and you always gave the same answer, you were off to do God's work. And then you'd undo my apron strings without me knowing it, and as soon as you were outside I'd hear your ringing laughter, knowing my apron would fall off the minute I got up from my chair and started taking up my chores again. Oh, I close my eyes and I see you, the impish look on your face, mischief sparkling from out your blue eyes, the unruly hair falling down your brow. You were a good looking youngster, and your Aunt Agnes and myself had friendly arguments who was the handsomest, you or your cousin Michael. But looks aside, I must say you did give me fits each day. I'd be wondering what kind of devilry has he gotten into. But it was never a mean kind of mischief that you did, teasing the girls was your favorite trick, and a body couldn't stay mad at you because you had the saving grace of a bright smile and a clever word.

Now I must tell you something but I hope you won't think your old mother has gone daft. Yesterday afternoon I was sitting here in my rocking chair, and I must have dozed off, and I woke to what I thought was a miracle. Glancing down the road I saw a boy come bounding along, and maybe I wasn't fully awake because I could have sworn it was you. My mouth dropped open, and I jumped out of my chair, my heart beating like a drum. I threw open the door, ready to catch you in my arms. Then just as I was about to call your name I saw it was the Timmons boy, passing by on some errand. Oh, I want to tell you it gave me a start and I had to take a wee drop to steady my trembling body. I suppose it's a sign old age is fast creeping up on me, or maybe it's just that I miss you so much. And of course that goes for Kate and John and Mary. Each day I sit here, looking at all the photographs you've sent over the years. The grand Ryan family, and my dear son is the grandest of all. I hope you're able to read this letter, my handwriting has gotten so terrible. And to think that one year in school I won a pin for having the most beautiful handwriting in the class. Well, beautiful handwriting is gone now, like so many other things, and the shame is that life passes so quickly a person hardly has time to enjoy it. When I started this letter the sun was blazing in the sky, but now the sun has gone down, it's cloudy and I've turned on the lamp. My old eyes are weary so I'll have to close this wandering letter. I love you with all my heart, and no other mother could be blessed with a finer son.

DAN: (*Drops letter in suitcase without putting it back into envelope*) Ah, sweet Jesus, I've opened a can of worms, and I'll pay for the rash act.

(*Puts straps on suitcase and returns it to closet*) Out, Daniel, away from the unsettling deed. Brave the rain, a hurricane if need be. Away from Fitz's, no familiarity this maudlin day. A strange bar on Third or Lexington, where sullenness is allowed, and I'll be the most sullen.

(*Goes out door. A short pause and he returns*) Yes, that's just the way it was on that foul day with the storm raging and me wondering how to spend the morning. Letters and memories plunging me to the depths. Now that I've found the cause some action must be taken. Ignore the suitcase and it's baneful contents? No, I've been doing that unawares these past weeks with calamitous results. Letters lying in wait, and each time I pass the closet they'll speak to me, pressing down like a huge stone.

(*He walks past the closet, looking up, deciding on a course of action. He does to the small bookcase, picks up two books*) Ah, Hercule, Sherlock, what course would you follow? Some action must be taken.

(*Returns books, walks past closet and then to table*) What's to be done stands out like a beacon light, cruel though it might seem to the uninformed. No, it's not a

sacrilege to the memory of my dear mother and friends, a necessity to continue life in my rapscaillon fashion.

(Goes to closet, takes suitcase, puts it on table.) I'll dispose of it, but mother and friends, you'll never be forgotten. And dear mother, wonderful mother of mine, you'll always have that special place in my heart, and I'll sing your praises on high whenever it's story time in Fitz's and the regulars trot out their favorite mother stories.

(Pats suitcase as in farewell, goes into bedroom, returns almost immediately with socks, shoes and a jacket. He puts on clothes.) And by Jesus, it'll be a merry time in Fitz's. I'll walk in glowing like a man who's just had a death sentence reprieved. There'll be friendly bantering and no doubt requests for one of my tunes. Yes, lads, you've been denied my glorious voice for a time but Daniel Aloysius Ryan has returned, and what is it you'll have? "The Shithouse Rag" and as that old saw goes, there is no accounting for tastes. I'd much rather render something of a religious nature, say "Gaudeamus Igitur," but if it's low you want, low you'll get.

(Places both hands on the table, bends down almost to floor, then slowly comes up, his hands moving up the back of his legs as he says the words in a voice between singing and talking) Sam! Sam! The Shithouse Man! /Superintendent of the crappery can. / Picks up the papers, / Folds up the towels, / Listens to the music of / The movement of the bowels. / Flip! Flop! / Hear them drop! / Whoops!--That's the Shithouse Rag!

(Takes a bow) Yes, music lovers, hold the applause and have Fitz fill up the empty glass. Yes, money.

(Takes out some bills from coat pocket, counts, shakes his head) Not nearly enough on this day of liberation.

(Looks at the bookcase) The hidden Franklin! Stashed from the prying she-devil. Ferreting out my bankbooks, insurance policies. Putting the hundred away for emergency, and by all that's holy, it's emergency day.

(Goes to bookcase, takes dictionary from case and puts it on top of suitcase.) Yes, she'd look through my detective stories but she'd never open a dictionary. And Jesus, Dan, you should be a detective, you analyzed the enemy perfectly. Now, let's see, I used the fornicate page for easy memory.

(Opens dictionary, takes out hundred dollar bill, kisses it) Ah, yes, Ben, I know you're grateful for your release after so long in captivity. Clear of eye, determined chin, and above all, pure in heart. I don't care what stories are told about you being a rake. All dastardly lies, invented by jealous enemies who jumped to conclusions when you were seen shuttling between bedrooms of duchesses and scullerymaids. But of course mistakes were understandable, and Hercule Poirot himself would get lost in those oversized French chateaus.

(Starts to return dictionary, but stops and opens it) Fornicate was your page, Ben, and let's see what it says. Fornicate: to commit fornication. And sweet Jesus, as if that would tell a searcher of knowledge a blessed thing. Shillyshallying bastards, a simple fuck would have told it all and saved space in the bargain. And the world will never lack for ignoramuses, especially among the educated.

(Returns dictionary to case and there is the chugging sound of a truck. He looks towards the window, then to the suitcase, as if making a decision. Runs to window) Jerry, hold up a bit. I have something to add to your collection.

JERRY'S VOICE: O.K., Dan, but hurry it up. The fucking inspector is after our asses, he thinks we're goofing off too much, not picking up enough garbage.

DAN: Jerry, there's little appreciation for the working man in these callous times. If the bastard inspector comes by tell him it's a work of charity you're performing, and then dump the suspicious minded son-of-a-bitch into the back of your truck and let him be ground up in his beloved garbage.

(Returns to the suitcase, pats it again) Dear mother, dear friends, this is the necessity of life.

(Picks up suitcase, goes to window, throws it out)

JERRY'S VOICE: Christ, Dan! You must have brought this old piece of shit with you from Ireland.

DAN: That I did, Jerry, clutching onto it for dear life since it contained all my worldly possessions at the time.

JERRY'S VOICE: What the hell's in here, Dan, anything worthwhile?

DAN: Some distressing memories that are best rid of. *(Holds out the hundred dollar bill)* Jerry, when you and your helper take a break stop in at Fitz's. I'm putting this hundred dollar bill on the bar and it's staying there until whoever is in Fitz's and myself have drunk it up.

JERRY'S VOICE: Hey, what happened, Dan, is it your birthday or did you finally hit one of those parlays you're always playing?

DAN: Let's just say I've won back something.

JERRY'S VOICE: O.K., Dan, we'll speed up the collections, see you in an hour or so.

TOM CODY

DAN: I look forward to your arrival. (*Waves, sound of truck going on. He looks up at sky*) By Jesus, the sun's peeping through the clouds, a sign from on high telling me I'm on the right track. (*Starts to turn away from window, but then turns back*) By God, another sign, the beauty coming down the block, mammoth tits, gorgeous legs, and a face of rare grandeur.

(*Calls out window*) Darling, you should be in the movies. You're far more beautiful than the talentless frauds who are splashed naked on the screens these days. And a word of advice, you shouldn't be walking about without a body-guard, at least a bloodhound to ward off the lecherous louts who are allowed to walk the streets in this careless society.

(*He waves, turns away from window, looks down and feels his crotch*) Glory be to all the saints, the final sign of the restoration of Daniel Aloysius. Stirring like a ramrod, and the she-devil will sing no sad songs this gladsome and festive night.

(*Starts out the door but stops, goes to table, picks up crumpled paper and again reads the instructions*) Take laundry to laundrymat. Don't forget to pick it up. Talk to the super about moving upstairs when the Whites move out next month.

(*Crumpled paper again*) We're staying put, noise and all. If it's high up the restless wanton craves, I'll impale her with my eager tool, send her soaring to the ceiling, first warning her of the possible danger to her back. The clothes can stay dirty for one more day. My only complaint with this country, too much bathing and showering and dousing with ungodly scents that would embarrass a French whore.

(*Takes paper, throws it in air, then kicks it with back of his foot. Starts for door again, putting the hundred dollar bill in his pocket*) Come. Ben, a number of dreary days to atone for, and by Jesus, it's grand to be alive and kicking and to be a roaring boy again.

(*Does a few dance steps out the door as CURTAIN FALLS*)

Contributors

CRISSA-JEAN CHAPPELL is a Creative Writing and Film major at the University of Miami. Her work has appeared in *Artisan*, *Impressions*, *Po'Flye*, and the *Amherst Review*.

TOM CODY was born and reared in New York City. He has published in *The Long Story*, *Samisdat*, and the *Volcano Review*. In 1994, he was the recipient of a New York State Foundation for the Arts Grant in fiction.

BETH GYLYS is currently finishing her Ph.D. in English and Creative Writing at the University of Cincinnati. Her poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *New Republic*.

JOHN HODGES writes and takes pictures in Florida where he lives and plays the banjo and fiddle with his friends in Wakulla County. His fiction has appeared in *Sundog* and is forthcoming in *Words of Wisdom* and *The Quarterly*.

LEO LUKE MARCELLO is a frequent contributor to *Alabama Literary Review* and the author of several collections of poetry. He currently lives in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

DOROTHY BLACKCROW MACK teaches Native American literature at Linn-Benton Community College in Oregon. She is the editor of *Calyx*. Her work has appeared in *Impetus*, *Northwest Literary Forum*, and *Sideshow*.

DAVID MUSGROVE is a native of Prattville, Alabama, and is currently in Africa. His first epic chapbook, *The Bear Hunter*, was published by Alabama Literary Review Press in 1996.

HOWARD PARK was born in Seoul, Korea. He currently lives in New York City.

YASMINE BEVERLY RANA is a native of New Orleans, Louisiana. She was the recipient of the Paulette Goddard Fellowship to New York University's Film School where she earned her BFA and MFA in Dramatic Writing. Her one act play, *Doves in the Trees*, was produced Off-Off Broadway at the Pulse Ensemble Theatre.

THOMAS REYNOLDS is a graduate of the Creative Writing program at Wichita State University. His poems have appeared in many journals.

WENDY WOOD is the recipient of the Academy of American Poets College Prize for Bennington College and is included in *New Voices*, an anthology of college prize winners from 1979-83. Her poems have appeared in *The Bad Henry Review*, *New Observations*, and *The Pearl*.



The
Alabama Writers' Forum

*Is a professional network providing support
to Alabama's literary community.*

Writers, editors, publishers, and anyone interested in promoting literary activities in the state of Alabama are invited to become associates of the Alabama Writers' Forum.

Associates receive *First Draft*, a newsletter featuring news of literary activities in the state and region, as well as interviews with writers, book reviews, grants deadlines, and information of use to writers, publishers, and educators.

Associateships are:

\$5 for students (enrolled full-time) \$10 for individuals \$25 for corporate associates.

To receive a complimentary copy of *First Draft*, and learn more about the Alabama Writers' Forum, please write:

Jeanie Thompson, Executive Director
The Alabama Writers' Forum
Center for the Arts and Humanities
Pebble Hill
Auburn University, AL 36849-5637
334-844-4947 FAX: 334-844-4949
ThompJ1@Mail.Auburn.EDU

*The Alabama Writers' Forum is supported by funding
from the Alabama State Council on the Arts.*



Habersham
REVIEW

A general literary journal with a regional focus, the **Habersham Review** is published twice a year by Piedmont College.

EDITORS:	David L. Greene Lisa Hodgens Lumpkin
ART EDITOR:	Cheryl Goldsleger
POETRY EDITOR:	Stephen R. Whited

ADVISORY BOARD: Malcolm Call, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Rosemary Daniell, Frank Gannon, Maggie Holtzberg-Call, Terry Kay, Stanley W. Lindberg, Bettie Sellers, Alexa Selph

The *Habersham Review* contains stories, poems, reviews and essays, primarily (but by no means entirely) with a Southern focus, by both established and beginning writers. Each issue features an unpublished work by a noted Southern writer and an interview with that writer. The first six issues feature Terry Kay, Rosemary Daniell, Mary Hood, Frank Gannon, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Raymond Andrews.

Subscriptions for one year are \$12.00 (two issues), or \$6.00 per issue. Please make check payable to *Habersham Review* and return it with this order form to: Piedmont College, Demorest, GA 30535.

PLEASE PRINT

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

For more information about the *Habersham Review*, please contact the editors in care of Piedmont College. Telephone: (706) 778-3000.

request for manuscripts



LUNGFISH REVIEW

POETRY, FICTION, ETC

1 ISSUE (\$5.)

1 YEAR (\$10.)

LUNGFISH REVIEW
73½ Government St.
Kittery, ME 03904

“...see a world in a grain of sand...”

—William Blake

Tampa Review

ART • POETRY • FICTION
ESSAYS • TRANSLATIONS • CONVERSATIONS
FROM FLORIDA AND THE WORLD

Lee K. Abbott • Stephen Dunn • Sara Maitland
Dionisio D. Martinez • Peter Meinke • Rosalind Belben
Robert Stackhouse • Philip Salom • Tom Disch
Elizabeth Jolley • Silvia Curbelo • Amy Hempel
Maciej Swiercocki • Ron Carlson • Duane Michals
Elizabeth Spencer • Dmitri Prigov • Denise Levertov
Kelly Cherry • Shirley Geok-lin Lim • Joseph Duemer
Tess Gallagher • Adrian Popescu • Alane Rollings



ORDER FORM

Tampa Review

Two issues annually: \$10. Single Copy: \$5.95.
(Add \$3 for mailing outside U.S.)

- Please send me the current issue of *Tampa Review* for \$5.95.
 Please enter my subscription for the next year for \$10.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Please make your check payable to "Tampa Review" and return your order to:

Tampa Review • Box 19F • The University of Tampa
401 W. Kennedy Blvd. • Tampa, FL 33606-1490 USA

Alabama Literary Review

A state literary medium for local and national submissions

"A good representation of contemporary arts and letters."

--*Library Journal*

"Comparable to the best among them."

---Sobel literary Agency

"A beautiful mag."

--*Z Miscellaneous*

* Selected to *Writer's Digest's* "Top Fifty in Fiction" Survey, 1993.

* Selected to the Long Ridge Writers Group's "Best of the Magazine Markets," 1993.

* Listed in *American Humanities Index, Novel & Short Story Writer's Market, Poetry Writer's Market, Dustbooks, Photographer's Market, Directory of Literary Magazines, Dramatists Sourcebook, and the Standard Periodical Directory.*

Fiction * Poetry * Essays * Drama

253 Smith Hall/ Troy State University/ Troy, AL. 36082/ 334-670-3307/3286

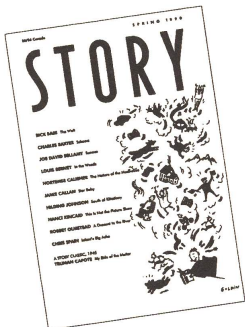
Published once a year\ \$5.00

Back copies and guidelines are available, or see your local library.

A Literary Legend Returns...

The magazine that first published J.D. Salinger, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Erskine Caldwell and many others is back after 22 years!

With the revival of **STORY**, you can share in the discovery of great short fiction by today's most promising new



authors. You'll count yourself among the first to enjoy brilliant short fiction by unknown writing talents, plus new material by more established authors.

Become a part of literary history, and accept our Introductory Subscription Invitation today!

Subscription Invitation

1991

I accept! Enter my one-year subscription to **STORY** at the introductory rate of just \$17 for four quarterly issues.

Payment enclosed Bill me

TRRDLMX

Name (please print) _____

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

GUARANTEE: If you're ever dissatisfied with **STORY** for any reason, simply cancel and receive a full refund for all unmailed issues.

*Outside U.S. add \$7 (includes GST in Canada) and remit in U.S. funds. Watch for your first issue in 6-8 weeks!

For faster service, call 1-800-435-0715 to charge your subscription order to your Visa or MasterCard.

STORY

P.O. Box 396 Mt. Morris, IL 61054

SYCAMORE REVIEW



Fig. 7.1 Contemplating Life After Washington

INQUIRE
SUBSCRIBE
SUBMIT



POETRY FICTION ESSAYS VISUAL ART INTERVIEWS REVIEWS

Department of English Heavilon Hall Purdue University
West Lafayette Indiana 47907 Phone: 317/494-3783

E-mail comments & inquiries: sycamore@expert.cc.purdue.edu

WWW: <http://expert.cc.purdue.edu/~sycamore/>



Object Lesson is a cooperative literary magazine, an arts journal, a care package.

Join the

It appears about four times a year filled

Object Lesson

with manuscripts, artists' books, overheard statements, etc. *Object Lesson* is interested in seeing what you are

artists' and writers'

excited about—film stills, plays, photographs, poems, essays, collages, interviews, stories, documents (found or

cooperative

created), books, and especially things we can't think to name. *Object Lesson* is a cooperative and only accepts work from its readers, so if you do not have a subscription, check us out before you submit.

\$20.00 for subscription | \$5.00 for single issue

Hampshire College Box 1186
Amherst, MA 01002-5001
(413) 582-5229



253 Smith Hall Troy State University Troy, Alabama 36082
ISSN 0890-1554