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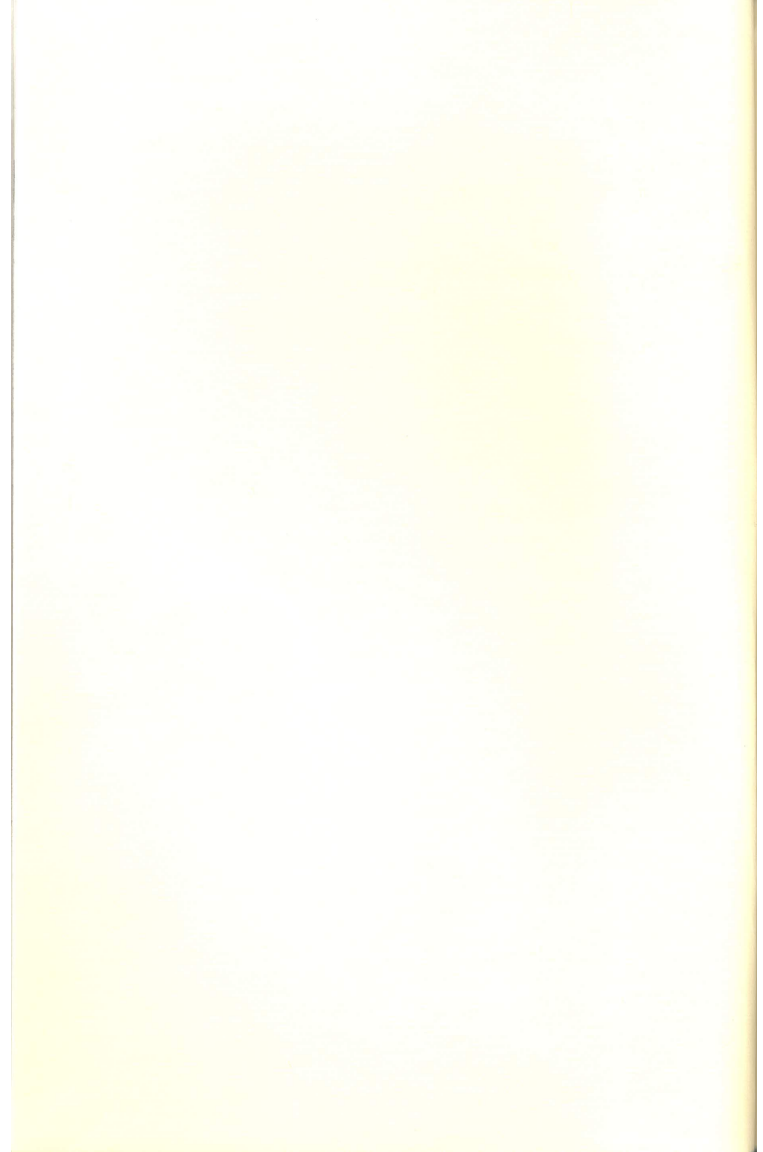
Alabama Literary Review

Fall 1995

Volume 9, Number 1

Barry Bradford
Edward Byrne
Patricia Cronin
Carol Hayes
John Hayes
David F. Johnson
Bob King
Reina McHeithen
David Musgrove
Jay Prefontaine
F. J. Schaack
Mark Turvin
Richard Wirick





ALABAMA
LITERARY
REVIEW

1995:
Volume 9
Number 1



The task of a writer consists in being able to make something out of an idea.

--THOMAS MANN

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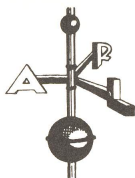
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Maemal's Heart

Patricia Cronin

You can't get lost driving from Chicago to Carrollton, Illinois; there's no simpler destination. Pick any day, setting aside five and a half hours. Drive south for four and a half; turn right. Go on for another sixty minutes until you see a sign boasting the town's population of 2,800. As you cross over the railroad tracks of the city limits, so to speak, make a quick left turn—now, this would be before you ride past the grain elevators—and park in front of the Levee Tavern. Mention my name and the owner, my Uncle Joe, just might buy you a beer.

I find great comfort in directions, the reliability of arrivals and departures, calculating the miles travelled, tracing my index finger along the major and minor arteries of a Rand McNally Atlas. Suddenly, daily contradictions are diminished in size and threat, and I live the neat, uncomplicated existence of an algebraic equation: ' $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$.' True ecstasy, however, is knowing precisely where you want to go and how to get there, without the benefit of map or other cartographic recipe. I'm haunted by life's resemblance to a pop quiz I feel destined to fail. Not because I refuse to do my homework, but for the absence of clear-cut answers. And so, the drive to Carrollton gives me reassurance that life can be a steady, cheerful ride along a scenic path.

Arrival in that small city is another matter entirely, for there I become part of the larger country known as "family," and well-known borders begin to shift. I'm no longer a single thread in a living tapestry, some familial work-in-progress. Instead, I belong to a tribe, surrounded by people who have the same last name as me. We're propelled by an ancient hunger for renewal and bring to the circle our argots, superstitions, and family myths. We huddle closer, fueled by rituals of celebration or mourning. But there is no ritual to address the reason why I drove here today. I have only come to visit Maemal.

Specifically, you do this: south on Interstate 55 for four and a half hours. Make sure you pack sandwiches and have one as you pass through Bolingbrook, since there's usually some kind of road construction going on. Clip past Braidwood, Dwight, Odell,

Lexington, McLean, Atlanta, and Lincoln. Begin to fall asleep at the wheel when you hit Springfield.

Attempt to spy the dome of the capital from the road as you're driving through—it's exactly at this one sort of hilly stretch of I-55, kinda past the sign for the airport, maybe two or three miles. You'll have to stretch your neck and focus over the treetops. But it's there. I've seen it.

I arrive at Maemal's empty house. Exhausted, I lay on her bed and study the ceiling cap where a light fixture should be. I wiggle into a more comfortable position, my arms spread away from my body, legs apart, and I feel like that drawing by da Vinci: suspended, motionless. My backbone becomes rigid and in my mind's eye I trace each segment of my spine, but rather than vertebrae, I see the road signs for the different small towns I pass while on the interstate. Driving down I-55 is a lullaby that rocks me to sleep and into some recurring dream. Each trip I am six years old and car sick, or ten, sandwiched between two older brothers in the back seat of a '65 green Buick, my parents and sister seated in the front. Or, I am thirty and travelling alone.

I stand in the kitchen trying to conjure up an olfactory memory of Maemal's fried chicken or sweet vinegar coleslaw, something that would architecturally support my own memories like beams and scaffolding. The house will remain empty until her children decide what to do with it. Until then, it serves as a guesthouse for vagabond granddaughters and the like.

The shelves and closets are mostly bare, a few photographs and nick-nacks remain. The house is airy, not in the way that makes me think of spring, but of something vanished. While sitting at the kitchen table, I concentrate very hard, sorting through mental snapshots trying to decide what is real and what isn't. I get a blurred image of her sitting there, not at the head of the table where she should be, but off to the side somewhat, saving the place of honor for my father, her oldest son. I can recall only two other memories I possess for certain, the others have become family myth—part reality, part hearsay—growing larger than the original.

You'll drive past neat cornfields, growing in precise, ribbed rows and opening up like Japanese fans. Singular squares of farm land cut into the earth resemble old Polaroid snapshots and document years of family and work and prayers for good weather. Stare with suspicion how the expanse of the flatlands distorts the size of perfectly red barns, populated with still and silent Holstein cows. Look to your right at the Amtrak rails running parallel and feel trapped in the enduring landscape, a scene built around some omnificent child's H-O train set.

Once when I was about 16 or 17, I sat next to Maemal as she played the piano for me. Up until then I never knew she won a local music contest in high school. The melody was breezy and romping though I can't recall the name of the piece, and doubt that I would recognize it again. In an act of boldness or innocence, I can't tell even in retrospect, I asked if it was hard for her when Grandpa died, leaving her with seven kids to care for alone. She kept playing, not missing a beat or giving me a look while she answered, "I was very busy, so I never really thought about it."

I believe I knew even then that it was a lie. While I don't think she spent nights sobbing, it's difficult to imagine her unaffected, despite her correct posture and stern warmth. Perhaps she didn't want me to worry or be afraid. And I have no idea what made me even ask such a personal question. But I did and I got the answer I expected, though I don't believe it was the truth.

Check your watch. If you left Chicago at 9:00 a.m., right about 1:30 you'll see a sign for Route 108, and off on the top of the hill, toward the left, there's the Country Kitchen Restaurant. Great cherry pie. Keep that in mind. Turn right onto 108. The two lane road passes over veiny little rivers such as Taylor Creek and the Little Joe, often dried up like death itself. Just past Carlinville—the big town east of Carrollton—about a half mile out, but still proceeding on 108, gas up and pee at the Mobil station on the left hand side of the road. Directly across the street is a Dairy Queen. Right about this time a Peanut Buster Parfait is not out of order.

The summer I turned nine, my cousin Bertram Lee and I spent our entire vacation exploring Maemal's sewing kit. I recall watching her for stretches at a time while she mended my Uncle's shirts or worked on her quilts, and when she was finished, we'd rifle through her supplies. Bertie always liked to play with the pinking shears and button-holer. I preferred piecing together scraps of fabric, matching the colors with different buttons. Our enthusiasm usually left the sewing kit in mighty disarray so that Maemal was forced to hide it or otherwise place it out of reach. The delight we took in this game was Juperterian, so while it did take us some time to unearth the sewing basket, ultimately we found it. Once, as Bertie balanced on a dictionary atop Maemal's rocking chair, reaching up into her closet to take down the basket, he began picking out her pin cushions: a tomato, strawberry, and the last one—heart-shaped and completely filled with pins. As a joke he dangled it in front of my face menacingly and said, "Look Annie, Maemal's heart!" Our humor has kept its darker shade and now the joke is, 'if you want to visit everyone in the family, you need to make only two stops: the Levee and the nursing home.'

In the front lobby of Mt. Gilead is a registry so that visitors may sign in. Like a wedding. Or a funeral. On Saturdays the local paper prints the week's

comings and goings. These visits are an issue that forms its own camps: some wait in the car, some drink at the tavern, some sign in but turn around and leave, or else rush by like amateur thieves, unable to force themselves to hesitate their steps, to stop even for a minute and say hello.

There was a time when Maemal knew my name with very little prompting. She would stare closely and smile, "You have your father's eyes." I used to take such recognition for granted—walking down a crowded street, the flow of traffic requiring adroit balance and pacing, and I'm stopped, interrupted by some familiar face, "Hey, what are *you* doing here?" As the rest of the pedestrians wash past, I have had one brief moment with an old friend. Something like that happens every day, anywhere. But it does not happen here anymore.

Yeah, well technically speaking, you can choose from two routes. It's just that I don't take this way anymore: I-55 south, Route 36 west, south on 67, and south again when it turns into 267. That will take you right past my Aunt and Uncle's old house. The basketball net still hangs on the garage, and maybe you can even see the paint chipped off it. But ever since they split up I don't like to go that way anymore.

It happened slowly, of course. It often does. Years would pass and I could still eke out some faint, albeit brief recognition, "Oh yes, Bob's youngest," her head nodding, piecing together the fragments of names and places, but the information didn't adhere for very long. There was the usual difficulty of getting past the amenities of "How are you, Maemal?" Stupid question. She was old and failing and who knows how aware of it she was. Did she even try to reclaim some of her former spirit?

I don't recall when my family began talking about her in the past tense, the tense usually saved for the dead. I suppose it provided a more pleasant alternative than the daily reports from the nursing home: "She doesn't eat much," "Nope, still quiet the whole time," "She barely knows when I'm there." Besides, were there other choices—perfect, or simple past? A simple past, indeed.

We strain to understand it all. Aunt Dingo's theory is that her heart was big enough for all the pain and the good times. Her head, though, just couldn't take it anymore. My sister believes they can't help but fail being in that home, saying, "There's nothing for them to do but get wheeled around and eat." When I tell Bertie I'm going to visit Maemal, he asks, "What for?" not in a way that's cruel, but neatly decisive, immune to the show of pointless duty. He tries to explain further: "Don't get me wrong, I love Maemal." Then recalling perhaps the last time he did visit her adds, "What's left of her anyway."

After the Peanut Buster Parfait in Carlinville, drive another 30 minutes and you'll see the following: a gravel driveway that leads to the local golf course, the Greene Country Fairgrounds, the town sign welcoming you to Carrollton, the previously mentioned railroad tracks and my uncle's bar. Remember, if you pass those grain elevators, you've gone right past the Levee. A Budweiser on tap costs you seventy-five cents.

In one photograph she stands petite, but solid, a true force to be reckoned with, easily twenty-plus years of school teaching behind her. No hint of award-winning piano contests or Sunday fried chicken here. Her dress is blue flowered print, buttoned down the front, fastened with a fabric belt, no-nonsense collar, short sleeves. Sometimes when I wander the second-hand clothing shops I'll see one like it. I hold it up for inspection, and carry it throughout the store—not dragging it behind me on its hanger or casually folding it in the crook of my arm. Instead, I drape it over both arms, like a fragile, colicky infant, careful not to disturb it. Each time I swear I'm going to buy the dress. Then always, at the last minute I say, "No, I don't think I'll take this one after all," and place it back in the soft, rumpled, boneless heap of other Maemal dresses.

You'll find the Dairy Bar at the northeast corner of the town square. It's a building the size of an area rug, like 9 X 11, but you can get anything you want there, it's amazing. There is a problem though with the way the plastic letters are arranged on the window, spelling out the menu. Certain words are formed too closely together, so if you're driving by the first time you'll think you can actually get "Baseball card pizza" and "taco sundaes," as well as "strawberry slush Kleenex."

Even today, saying her name is an invocation of sorts. We always called her "Maemal in Carrollton," as if there was more than one Maemal and had to distinguish between them all: Maemal in Carrollton, Maemal in West Palm Beach, Maemal in Prague.

One legendary story dates back forty-plus years. My Aunt Dingo was getting married, and my Uncle Ted was quite sick at the time—tuberculosis. He knew he was ill and his fear and confusion led him to contract another malady, one my father calls "Irishman's Disease." Along with being afraid, Ted was embarrassed about his ill health and did not plan to attend his sister's wedding. Maemal would hear of no such thing and assured Aunt Dingo, "He'll be there." Dingo expressed some doubt, mistaking Maemal's tone for a simple act of hope rather than determination. Maemal repeated calmly, "Yes, he will. I'll make sure of it." On the Friday before the wedding, Maemal visited the local taverns looking for her son, and when she found him, climbed up on the neighboring

barstool without so much as a glance and ordered a beer. Maemal quietly asked Ted if he would please come to his sister's wedding. Uncle Ted sat quietly, unable to say 'yes' or 'no.' After some time, he said, "I'll go if you do one thing—have another beer with me." With that Maemal caught the bartender's eye, raised up two fingers, then flicked them down quickly: "Two here. *Now!* "

You'll want to make the complete pilgrimage: the house where Joe and Bernice first lived and Raney Park; the family pew at St. John's Church and Maemal's old house on Sycamore. The weeping willow in her back yard was perfect for playing Tarzan, and Suzie Bumbutt lived across the street. Visit the cemetery and walk slowly around the half-dozen stones belonging to you. Not many by most standards, but you realize anyway, 'there are so few of us left.' This is holy ground.

I'm trying to round up the past, corralling the stray memories of my cowgirl years, a period of time when I was an outlaw from my own family. I could always visit Maemal though, and she would never ask the hard questions; just open me up a cold Pepsi, though I really wanted a beer. It's as though I want some proof of a life, of a past. But whose? I keep thinking that if I make the trip often enough other missing parts will come back to me. Until then, we look into each other's eyes unable to piece together shared recollections.

Pushed toward me in a wheelchair is my sweet shrinking grandmother, secured in by straps and a highchair-like table top. She is no longer held buoyant by the collective family adhesive, but off on a journey by herself. Some thieving entity has come in and stolen her away bit by bit, silently extracting her inner mortar so that frail brick upon brick teeters for an indeterminate amount of time. I look into my grandmother's formerly sweet face—her eyes red-rimmed, half closed; she no longer wears her glasses. Do the nurses think, "What's the point?" Inching nearer I search for some sign of joy or even pain, and discover instead that the otherwise clear border between life and death shows a nasty crevice. I take her hand and lean over to whisper, "I love you very much Maemal," and I'm surprised that she holds my hand so tight in return, happy for some response. She calls me "Johnny"—another one of her sons, an uncle I never knew, but I feel electric nonetheless. When I begin walking toward the door, one of the other residents, a woman I don't recognize says, "I knew you were one of them. I knew you was a Quinn. You got that look." Yes, I nod, I am one of them.

You can usually make the ride back home in less time, or what feels like less time anyway. For some reason, the roads don't look like inverse images of themselves, as you're sure they will. Just north of Pontiac, two-thirds of the way home, you'll pass

under wires that reach across the highway, strung on Eiffel Tower-like telephone poles, and joke that you've driven too far, that you lost your way and accidentally ended up in Paris or some other foreign city.

While my dreams play in color, my memories are held securely in black and white. Color snapshots yellow and fade, looking jaundiced, or worse, the red tones rage clownish, out of control. But in black and white they are kept intact. I leave behind a sense of who I am, attached to me like a shadow, long and slim in late afternoon, stretching oblong, like an exclamation point, a bold truth.

I cherish those few things I own that were once hers: a deck of playing cards, a quilt, one haircomb. The memories I have of her though, seem like the richest gift of all, a commodity that can be replenished to some degree. My hand still feels warm from her grasp. I slowly close it, trying to keep tight this moment: an intangible prized possession like Maemal's heart itself, placed high on a shelf, safe but accessible only with great effort. ♦

High-Ridge Road

Edward Byrne

In night-chill, trickle of moonlight still evident
as the ashen sky awoke over the Wasatch,
I drove the high-ridge road that circles the city,
the small pools of light downtown, the dark yards beyond.

Stopping above the Capitol Building, whose dome
glowed like a spaceship in some science-fiction film,
I stood and looked down as far as I could to where
late winter snows again burdened the southern range.

In a moment I'd rehearsed many times before,
I thought the cold a refuge, thought the white shoots of
my breath as explicit as the unreachable
past, and thought friends and lovers I no longer know
once lived here.

Night Fliers

Reina McKeithen

All summer Sims watched his corn die of thirst. He carried water from the well and the spring until the water table dropped after a month of spitty rain and then he hauled it home from town, fifty-gallon drums of artesian well water, one at a time in the trunk of the Studebaker with the lid flapping as he drove slowly on the dusty washboard road to the house. But it wasn't enough. The strong young green leaves lifted up straight as spikes, looking like sugar cane. They stayed that way for a week or more, raised in beseechment like they were praying to the heavens for rain, then the leaves seemed to give up, sagging and hanging like they'd been wrenched in their sockets and the corn bowed itself over to face the sand it started from. At night in the moonlight the corn looked like dead people standing in the fields.

The bear was there, watching and waiting, its fur blending with the browning stalks. Sims could see it out of the corner of his eye as he chopped cotton and in desperation hoed the cornfield, clearing it of moisture-sucking weeds so that maybe the corn might come back. But it was useless and he knew it just like he knew it was useless to try to plug up the spring to keep the water in, but he did it because he had to do something. He could feel the bear's small hot eyes on the back of his neck as heat rose up between the cornrows and the leaves curled and folded over on themselves and it seemed to Sims that his own blood was drying up.

Sims tracked Retta through the cornfield. Saw her straight-footed prints stitched between the rows of parched cornstalks. Like Indian tracks. Like a deer. Like the piebald deer last winter that banker Arthur Gates shot. Wanted the head to hang in his office. That's what they do with them, bankers and such. Sims' people made head cheese out of them. Used to do things with the antlers, too, a long time ago. And the hooves. Retta screamed at him all night.

"Why'd you tell him? Why'd you even tell him?"

He tried to explain.

"We was just talking. Men talk. About hunting and things. I just said we had a piebald deer on our place. When he asked me to take him hunting I couldn't turn him down. He offered me good money to take him in our woods. He has our mortgage."

"You must of knowed he was after that deer," she screamed back.

He didn't know. He didn't even think about that deer. The tractor needed new pistons. Spring was coming. Seed money time. Bank money due.

It was part her fault. She'd been feeding that deer. It wasn't scared enough of humans. It come toward Gates to get food. Maybe even a scratching. Sims knew what Retta could get creatures to do. Gates shot it. Didn't ask. Just shot it with that fancy gun of his.

"I didn't know he was going to do it. I'd of told him no if I had. I would."

She wouldn't listen. She went off and stayed in the woods all day and left him the little boys to feed and everything. Gates took the head and hide and steaks. Left him the rest. He had to take it to his mamma's to make sausage out of. But he got the tractor fixed and some toys for the little boys' Christmas. Got his mamma a box of candy, tie for his daddy. Got Retta a new dress for church, red to make her dark eyes shine and her hair. She had the prettiest black hair, like a cloud of night.

"Why didn't you get pink? I always wear pink or yellow," she'd yelled at him.

"I thought you'd look pretty in it."

His hands throbbled down by his sides. He'd hooked his thumbs into his overall pockets to take the weight off them. He couldn't return the dress. D'nelle's Dress Shop didn't allow that. 'Once bought, it's yours' was the sign over the cash register.

She wouldn't wear it, not to church, not to town, not even to the Mahan family reunion in June. Then the mad dog came, slimy with sweat and foam, making those sounds. After they killed it they had to fight the woods fire all night. Shells from Ellsworth Greer's shotgun had set the pine straw afire and then some of the trees caught. The bear was after him that night, too. Sims didn't have time to think about Retta or the mad dog or the bear or anything but the spurting flames and the heat and the cinders that seemed to bore into his skin. He fell into bed around daybreak. Didn't even know Retta wasn't there. The little boys woke him up the next evening hungry. They'd gnawed on crackers and cornbread and some peas they found on the stove. But now they were hungry again. He got up and fixed them some food and asked where their mamma was. They didn't know.

He looked around the two room house, behind the pink flowered curtain she'd put up to make a closet in the corner and under the bed but he

couldn't find her red dress or her pocketbook. She had run away again and she was wearing the red dress, the dress she wouldn't wear for him. Sims went out to the well and pulled up a half bucket of gritty water and washed himself. Told the little boys to go over to Mamaw's and went after Retta in the Studebaker. He wasn't worried. She'd already run away two times that summer but had never got far. Only trouble was, he remembered as he put the key into the ignition, she'd been gone a night and a day this time.

He drove across her footprints in the dry cornfield, churning up fine dust, the dead cornstalks snapping and crunching under the wheels all the way to the railroad tracks.

Sims knew where she was going to now. He followed the tracks to the highway crossing and turned north on the paved road. Retta wouldn't go south. She was always wanting to go up north where there was snow. Snow was the coolest thing she said. Just looking at it made her feel cool even in August. She had a picture she'd kept off an old calendar, a tidy white house and a dark red barn with snow piled up all around it. That's how a farm should look, she said. That farm would always have water, she said.

Sims drove all night, his eyes pressed against the dark ahead of the Studebaker's lights. The car shook when it got up to 50 miles an hour. It made Sims' teeth feel funny but he kept it up there, stopping at every truck stop to ask about Retta. On the other side of Macon a waitress said yes, there'd been a black-haired woman in last night. He showed her Retta's picture.

"Red dress, huh. We get a lot of them." She leaned her fanny against the counter. "Last night was a slow one. Lotta blue. No red."

She poured a cup of coffee without looking at the cup on the counter. Sims turned to go.

"Say," the waitress made a flapping motion with her apron like Retta shoeing chickens in a pen or the little boys back into the house, "there might have been one. It was kind of late."

Say it's her, he begged silently. "Take another look." He held out the picture, its edges curling like his high school diploma. The picture was black and white, taken in a booth at the fair in Farrell before they were married, before Malcolm was made. She was wearing a flowered blouse and skirt she had sewed out of feed sacks. She was so little she could make an outfit out of three. She was smiling at the camera and looked happy. Happier than he'd seen her look in a long time. There was a little bit of something at the corner of her mouth. Cotton candy, he bet. She loved cotton candy. Said it was like eating pink clouds. Or maybe it was a piece of dust on the camera lens. The fair-grounds were always dusty.

The waitress looked at Sims, taking in his blue eyes, his short blond hair, stubbled tanned face, faded khaki clothes. She looked at the picture.

"That's her," she said. "I remember now. She was headed to North Carolina with a trucker going to Rocky Mount. Or maybe it was Wilmington. Say, you want some coffee to take with you?"

But he was already at the door. He'd find her now. She couldn't get away from him. He didn't know why she always had to run away. She knew she had to come back, if not to him, to the little boys. Sims drove into the searing dawn light. He had to rub his eyes every few miles. His skin felt like it had shrunk. The old black Studebaker was a dull slate color, pitted by the sands that blew around on the farm, bleached by the sun, spotted white as though salt had leached out of its metal skin. But it was still dark enough to soak up heat inside.

Sims kept an RC Cola bottle on the seat beside him and every few miles unstopped the cork to take a swig of the warm water he'd filled it with at the truck stop. It tasted different from his well water. More like medicine or watered down shine. He couldn't seem to get enough. He refilled it every time he stopped to show Retta's picture around.

At noon he was between Augusta and Columbia. Nobody had recognized Retta since Macon. One waitress said she thought she'd seen her but the woman had been wearing an orange dress and her hair was short. That couldn't be Retta. She wouldn't cut her hair.

The center line swam between the black watery lanes of the highway. Sims couldn't stop thinking about the woman in orange with the short hair. It could be Retta. She had always threatened to cut her hair off. It was hot enough to make her do it. But she didn't have an orange dress.

A few miles down the road a thought thudded between his eyes. Somebody could have bought her the dress. The trucker or whoever she was riding with now. She could have told him she didn't like the red dress and he could have said, 'Honey, I'll get you any color dress you want,' and they could have stopped at the next town and bought her the pink dress she wanted or the yellow or orange. Did Retta like orange? He couldn't remember. The woods alongside the highway streaked by. The asphalt sizzled with blue sparks.

He was a fool to think he could find Retta. She could have headed west from Macon. Or northwest to Atlanta on up to Chattanooga or St. Louis or even Chicago. He'd never been past Macon himself. How could he hope to find her if she left the highway, went to a city. Sims didn't know anything about cities. And what if she had got on a bus somewhere? He might never find her, just drive around and around looking for a woman in a red dress (or pink or yellow) like somebody in a song on the radio. Maybe she was the woman in orange.

The bear that had crouched between his cornstalks all summer was riding in the back seat now, hot dry wind blowing its dark fur into whorls with

white centers like little eyes. Sims could feel the bear's hot breath on his neck, its fur sticking to his sweaty skin. "Get away," he told the bear. "I got to find Retta."

Sims caught himself as the Studebaker left the road. He wrenched the wheel. The heavy car veered to the other side and two of the wheels left the pavement to hang over the steep edge of a ditch. Sims turned the car the other way and almost went off the pavement again on that side. The bear was slung against the door. Sims' eyes didn't seem to belong to him any more. They felt heavy and gummy, like they were full of hot tar. He needed to stop.

Around the next curve he came upon a lake, wide and green and smooth with a bait shop grocery store by the road. Sims stopped to buy a loaf of white bread, a jar of sandwich spread, a half-pound of boiled ham slices, a box of moon pies and a bottle of milk from a woman so tired she could hardly wrap the ham in butcher paper. She had to punch the cash register key twice to get it down.

The lake was almost an oval with trees growing down close to the water. Old rowboats were tied to some of the trees or pulled up on their bellies on the bank. He drove around to a shady spot on higher ground and got out of the hot car. He sat under some pines, his back against the rough resinous bark and ate his lunch. The milk felt like smooth ice to his throat. The lake danced with light. A breeze slid off the water, riffing the pines. I'll just lie down for a minute, he thought. The ground was hard beneath the mat of pine straw but it felt good to stretch his sore back out.

Retta kissed him. Her lips were tender and loving and warm. She ran her tongue over his lips, his chin, his cheeks, his eyes. Sims moaned and reached for her. He woke up with an armful of red bone hound. She looked at him and licked his nose, the only spot she had not cleaned. Sims let her go with a shove. "Get away, hound."

She gave him a reproachful look, then slunk away but only as far as the car. Sims had never allowed a dog on his place. They carried fleas. His daddy kept a pack of hounds. Sometimes his yard was full of fleas. Sims would go over and the minute he got out of his truck, the fleas jumped on him, jumped right out of the sand up as high as his knees and hung on to his pants legs.

The dog sat down to watch him as he walked down to the lake and washed his face in the water. Glassy minnows raced away from his scooping hands but one lay in his palm between callus hills as the water drained through his fingers. He could see its delicate bones and organs as it flailed about searching for water. Gently Sims lowered his hand and the minnow raced away to deeper water. He turned to the hound.

"See. I didn't hurt it," he said. He felt the need to explain. The hound watched him.

"I seen her one night at the fair in Farrell. She was from over at Doerun. Her momma died when she was little. Her daddy left before that. She was raised by some of her kin; passed around to whoever had a new baby and needed help. Had to stay home from school a lot and never got past the sixth grade. We got married before the first little boy was born. That was important to her. To me too. She wasn't but sixteen. That was Malcolm. He's six now. Or seven. He goes to school. Then there's Lawton. He's going next. And Carvell. He's about three. The baby Judge we call him. He's one about."

The hound gave him all her attention. But when Sims moved closer to the Studebaker, she went under it and lay with her head on her paws, looking up at him from beneath the running board. She made a sound in her throat. It didn't seem threatening but he bet she was the kind of hound that could run off a bear.

"You hungry, hound?" He answered himself. "Hounds're always hungry. Wouldn't be hounds if they wasn't." He took out a piece of the boiled ham and rolled it in a slice of bread. Then he broke off a bite and tossed it between the dog's paws about an inch from her nose. She sniffed it and the bite disappeared behind a row of small white hound teeth. Sims threw her another bite. She sniffed it, then ate it just as quickly. He didn't even see her chew.

"You must be mighty hungry." He fed her the rest of the sandwich and made her another with the last of the ham. Then he gave her plain bread. She licked crumbs from her paws and then the dirt between them and looked at him, wanting more. Sims unwrapped a moon pie and broke it up. His hands were large at the end of his wiry arms, his fingers blunt-ended, his nails cracked, a thin black line of dirt deep underneath that no scrubbing could reach. His hands and arms had little scabs and pink spots where the cinders from the wood's fire had burned him. He laid the pieces of moon pie on the wrapper in front of the dog. She ate them daintily, chewing this time. Her claws were black and delicate and each of her front paws were tipped with white like they had been dipped in milk.

He poured the last of the milk from the bottle into his hand and let her lick that. Her tongue rasped against the calluses. Then he stood up and opened the car door. He would take the dog with him. She would be company on the road.

The hound regarded him with puzzlement. A dark furrow ran between her light brown, almost yellow eyes.

"Come on, hound."

She backed away a few inches under the car. Sims bent to pet her. She flinched but stayed where she was. He touched her fur. It was stiff and rough, worn away in patches. He stroked her head. The fur was softer there and smoother. She put her head down but her eyes watched him.

He tried to get her into the car again but she stayed under it. He squatted almost to her level. She looked back at him, waiting. "You don't trust me, do you, dog? You're just an old throw away stray hound and you won't even go with me. A little food, a little petting ain't enough for you. You don't have nowhere else to go, do you? President Truman didn't invite you to the White House, did he?" He laughed at his joke. The hound opened her mouth in a grin.

"That's better. Here's the way it is, girl. You don't have a home. You was starving just now. I don't have no wife, and I'm away from home. If you want to come along with me, I'd welcome the company. The eating won't be fancy. I don't have much money. I don't even know exactly where I'm headed or if I'll know when I get there. How about it?"

The hound stared straight into his eyes. He'd always heard that dogs didn't want to be stared at. They got all nervous and guilty acting and slunk off under something. They would look at you with one eye or glance at you with two but wouldn't look at you with both eyes for any time at all. But this dog did. She just stared and stared. She seemed to want him to look at her.

Sims was the first to look away. A breeze drifted through the pines and the air felt suddenly cooler. Across the lake toward the north a line of dark clouds lay along the tops of the trees. Sims stood up and held the door open. "How about it, hound. You coming or not?"

The dog slid out from under the other side of the car and walked down to the lake. Sims watched as she meticulously lapped water.

His own mouth felt dry. There was an ache somewhere in his chest and he realized that it had been there a long time. He tried again. "Come on, girl."

She raised her head and looked at him. Water ran out of her mouth. She put her head down and drank more. Then she looked across the lake. She seemed to be studying the clouds.

"Come on, Lady. Let's you and me get on down the road."

She turned back and he noticed she had eyelashes, short fine eyelashes the color of dust. He couldn't read her eyes. She seemed to be studying him.

He tried once more. "Please, Lady. Please. Come on with me, that's a good girl. Come on now, please, Lady. Please?"

The dog blinked.

"Is that your name? Lady? Did someone give you a name before you lost your home?"

Slowly, with her head high, the dog strolled back to the car. She stopped and looked up at him again, seeming to question him. He waited quietly, his hand on the broken door handle. "Let's go, Lady."

She leaped to the running board and onto the seat. Without being told, she moved over to the passenger side. Sims got in and slammed the door hard

so it would catch. The dog didn't flinch at the sound. Sims leaned over and rolled down the window on her side. The dog put her nose out and sniffed. Then she bobbed her head, gave Sims a look and sat back.

Sims started the car and drove it up on the blacktop. The Studebaker lurched as it left dirt but settled out on the road. Wind sang in his ears and occasional raindrops blew in and wet his damp cheeks as Sims drove steadily north. If the bear was in the back seat, the dog didn't seem to notice. Her attention was on the road ahead of them and Sims thought maybe they had left the bear back by the lake.

"We got to go to Mamaw's," Malcolm said.

Carvell was licking peas up off the floor where he'd spilled them.

"Don't do that, Carvell," Malcolm said. Carvell went on licking until he got a splinter in his tongue and howled.

"Told ya. Spit it out. Don't swallow it. It'll grow a tree in your belly."

You mind Malcolm, Daddy had said when he left. Lawton didn't see why. Malcolm didn't know anymore than he did. Malcolm could read but that was only because he had been to school. Lawton was going in a few weeks. He would learn fast, faster than Malcolm. Lawton bet he'd be reading the first day. He bet he'd be reading as soon as they gave him the book. He would know all about Dick and Jane and Sally and that dog named Spot the first day. Malcolm thought he knew everything.

Carvell spit with a loud *ptui*. Most of it landed on the baby Judge, still in diapers. Judge yelled and poked Carvell who punched him back.

Lawton stared out the window. "Why don't they come back?" he said. It was already getting dark outside. They should have left earlier for Mamaw's. The woods seemed to come closer in the dark. Sometimes Lawton thought the trees tiptoed up and watched him while he slept. If he woke up during the night, he wouldn't open his eyes, not even to go outside to pee. He would feel his way out of the room they all slept in through the other room and out the door where he would pee in the sand off the porch. Once he'd peed on the hood of the car pulled partly under the house. It made a funny sound, like the rain on their tin roof. He'd squinted a little and seen the dark shape. It didn't look like the car. It looked like a giant toad crouching there, a toad with silver teeth shining in the moonlight.

"They won't be back for a long time," Malcolm said. He pulled Carvell off Judge. "Come on, put on your shoes. We got to go. Daddy said."

"I don't want to go," Carvell whined.

"Me neither," Lawton said.

"Lookit them shadows," Malcolm said.

The room was full of them. They were getting big as trees, crawling all over the walls. Lawton threw a leg out the window and jumped.

Malcolm piled some clothes into the old wagon out in the yard and set Judge on top of them to hold them down. Carvell wanted to ride, too, but the wagon was too heavy to pull through the sand with both of them in it. "You'll have to walk," Malcolm told him.

Carvell sulked.

"Ride to town on that lip," Malcolm told him.

"On a horse," Lawton chanted.

"On a mule," Malcolm sang.

"Pulling a plow."

Carvell punched Lawton but he danced away, kicking up hot white sand with his clumsy high-top brogans. Lawton liked making dust fly out of the fine sand and forgot about the woods until he glanced at the edge of the sky and saw the curved moon hanging just above the dark line of trees. The sun had sneaked away when he wasn't looking, leaving its warmth lying behind in the dirt.

The boys crossed the field of cotton stalks hung with tight little brown balls where the cotton ought to be but wasn't because of the drought. Lawton thought he could hear the balls rattling but there wasn't any breeze. It could be a rattlesnake. He studied the rows for thick brown stick shapes that might jump up and bite him.

They were headed toward the black woods, blacker now that the fire the night before had scorched some of the trees. Daddy and the men had killed that mad dog that started the fire in the pinestraw but there were other things in there.

At night the woods were loud. Sometimes the noise woke Lawton up, the frogs and crickets and panthers and things that screeched and hollered, and things that thrashed and thumped and roared Daddy said was gators in the black swamp. Lawton would lie in the dark afraid that they were coming up out of the woods and swamp, creeping toward the house to lie in wait. To get him.

His stomach felt like it was full of sand. He tasted the peas and cornbread and greens and fried fatback Daddy had fixed them before he left in the Studebaker to bring Mama home. "Maybe he's found her. We ought to go back."

"He ain't going to find her this time," Malcolm said. "She had a head start. She's probably clear to Atlanta now."

"That don't mean nothing. She's had a head start before. Daddy always finds her and brings her back." He would find her this time. He had to.

"He won't find her." Malcolm was confident. "She left last night while he was fighting the fire. I seen her."

Carvell whimpered. Lawton felt tears start. He hadn't seen her leave. He should have seen her. He could have stopped her. He was watching the fire, crowded in the window with his brothers, one leg slung over the sill for balance, watching the pines spurt, his daddy and the others--little black stick men against the red flames.

Judge laughed and banged on the sides of the wagon. "Fasser! Fasser!" The wheels squeaked. Anything could hear them. Malcolm should have put lard on them.

"What if he don't come back?" Lawton whispered. "He'll come back when he don't find her. Won't he?"

They came to the end of the field. "Let's don't go in there," Lawton begged.

"We got to."

"No we ain't. We could take the road."

"It's too far. It'd take us all night."

Lawton didn't care. He'd rather walk all night on a road that had car lights on it and farm lights low-hanging like friendly stars. He stuck his thumb in his mouth as they turned onto the pinestraw trail through the woods. Even in the daytime before the pines were charred from the fire, the woods were dim and dusty. Bushes and briars snatched at what light sifted through the needles.

Lawton looked back at the open field behind them, their house a dark smudge now with its lopsided porch, the tire swing like a round black O mouth hanging from the pear tree. Then the woods closed around them, the ashy smell sharp in Lawton's nose, in his mouth. He needed to sneeze. Malcolm went first pulling the wagon, then Carvell, and Lawton last looking behind him every few steps checking for snakes, panthers, boogermen, his left thumb glued to the upper part of his mouth.

"Farp! Farp!" Judge ordered.

"Shut up," Lawton told him. "You don't know what might hear you."

That quieted all of them.

Lawton couldn't see the moon now. He reached out and grabbed Carvell's shirt. Carvell tried to pull away. "I ain't no baby."

"You might get lost," Lawton told him. "Hold onto the back of the wagon." Carvell clamped his fingers onto its rusty back rim.

They tramped on through the night sounds, sticks and pinestraw snapping under their brogans, the wagon wheels squeaking. Panthers and alligators bellowed all around. They sounded close in the dark.

"Will Daddy come back if he can't find Momma?" Lawton asked.

Nobody answered. They all knew he wouldn't. They'd heard Sims say he would never let her leave. He'd always go after her. And he'd keep on looking for her til he found her. She belonged to them. But she wasn't theirs, Lawton thought, or she wouldn't keep leaving. So if she wasn't theirs, she wasn't his neither and she wouldn't come back even if he found her and he wouldn't come back cause she wouldn't. Tears slid down his face. A palmetto stuck his arm. Briers pulled his hair, jerked at his clothes. A branch slapped his face.

"Owwww," Judge yelped.

Carvell whimpered.

"This ain't the way to Mamaw's," Lawton accused.

"It is," Malcolm insisted. "It is too the way."

"We're lost." Lawton could hardly say the words.

Carvell squalled. "I wanta go home."

"Shut up, stupid," Malcolm said. "We ain't lost. I know the way. I been this way hundreds of times."

But not in the dark. Never in the dark. Lawton could only see the faintest glimmer of Malcolm's face and he knew his brother was scared.

Something soft brushed Lawton's forehead. He screamed and clawed at the softness. It was sticky. "What was that? It was a bat."

"It was a spiderweb," Malcolm said.

"I bet it was a bat."

"It was a spiderweb."

Lawton was sure it was a bat. He'd felt it. Maybe even heard it squeak. "We lost."

"We ain't lost," Malcolm said. "Lookit, there's the moon."

There was light ahead. It wasn't Malcolm's face. It was the moon. But Lawton didn't trust that moon. It looked blurry, the way the kerosene lamp did sometimes when the kitchen steamed up. And it was too low. Lawton didn't think it was even in the sky. Moons didn't grow in trees.

The light grew bigger and brighter. It was a house. "It ain't Mamaw's," Lawton said. He hoped he was wrong.

"It might be." Malcolm didn't like to give up.

But it wasn't Mamaw's. It was a house none of them had ever seen before, a tall house looming above them in a clearing, making its own light somewhere inside, its white paint peeling, a big porch across the front with four big posts holding up the roof and a little porch hanging over the doorway. Light spilled through the wide open front door and they could see a woman just inside. She was brown and wore a shiny purple dress. She was wiping a bar-top with a limp gray rag. Lawton didn't want to go in.

"Well, looka here, Henry," the woman said when she heard the squeal of the wagon wheels. "Four little angel boys. You angels musta slid right out of that cradle moon."

Behind her a man's voice laughed.

The man was tall. He leaned on the bar, working a burned wooden matchstick around in his strong yellow teeth under a straight line of moustache. Tables and chairs sat about the room and in the one beyond, barely visible in the light shed from two overhead kerosene lamps. Behind the bar a stairway disappeared into the darkness above.

The woman laughed. The boys left the wagon at the edge of the porch. "You got to walk now," Malcolm told Judge.

"Hi y'all," the man said as they climbed the steps to the porch.

"Bet you hungry." The woman said her name was Esther. The man was her brother Henry.

"They thirsty." Henry took two bottles of cocola from a box under the counter and opened them up. The caps clinked on the floor. He poured some cocola in a jelly glass for Carvell and jerked his head at Judge. "He use a glass?"

Malcolm nodded. They were all thirsty. The bottles were cold and slick with ice water and bits of ice stuck to the thick green glass. That cocola was the best thing Lawton had ever tasted, dark as swamp water shining red in the lamplight. It prickled his nose as it washed away the ashy black taste of the woods. Lawton didn't know how long they had been lost but it must have been a long time.

"Mighty slow night to bring in angels," Henry said.

"What you angels doing out this late?" Esther asked.

Malcolm told her.

"You way off track," Henry said. "Reckon you better stay here tonight. We'll take you down to your Mamaw's tomorrow."

Somewhere upstairs a door slammed. A thin young man in a green shirt ran lightly down the stairs. "Car coming."

"It could be you know a visitor," Esther said.

"Could be. But I think there's a red light on top. Sugarlee's cooking tonight. I got to warn them. He ain't paid. If it's your friend, keep him here." He went out the back door just as car lights flashed two big eyes on the wall above it.

"Oh Lawd." Esther hummed as she set Judge up on the bar. His eyes were wide open. He rubbed her dress and she laughed.

Lawton had felt sleepy but now he was wide awake. Carvell drank all his cocola and asked for more. Henry opened another bottle and said heartily, "On the house."

"I'm hungry," Carvell told Henry.

"Give him some of them saltines," Esther said. "Now you boys don't say nothing 'bout nothing, hear?"

They nodded and crunched their saltines as a boiled-looking man in a tan uniform got out of the car and clomped up the porch steps. His leather belt and holster creaked as he leaned on the bar. "Evening Esther." He pushed his wide-brimmed hat back an inch. His sandy brown hair was plastered to his pale forehead. His eyes looked like pecan shells, stuck in among light stubby lashes.

"Evening, Sheriff. What you doing out here so late? It ain't your night." She wiped up saltine crumbs that fell out of Judge's mouth.

"Heard there was some stew being cooked out here tonight." Esther and Henry laughed like he'd made a joke. He looked hard at Henry who went on picking his teeth.

"Henry barbecues on Tuesday. You know that. This Thursday." Esther laughed again.

The sheriff didn't look at her. "Didn't hear it was Henry doing the cooking. Where's Sugarlee?" He turned as he spoke. Lawton sucked his thumb and stared at the sheriff. He was big. The Mahans were thin people. Mamaw always said they was lean as a lizard-eating cat. The sheriff was heavy, but not fat.

Esther shrugged. "I can't keep up with that boy. He's got him a new girl."

"Sonny?"

"Ain't seen him, neither."

"Well. I'll just have a little look around."

"How 'bout a little drink first?" Ice rattled as Henry took a bottle of beer out of the cooler. Ice chips glittered on the brown glass, on the dark skin of his shiny wet hand. Henry took off the cap and it rolled away to join the others. He wiped his hand on the bar rag.

"Just one." The sheriff took a long swig from the bottle. He jerked his chin at the boys. "Who the Little Rascals there?"

"They my sister's boys from up near Macon."

"They look white."

"No." Esther shook her head. Her thick fluffy hair swayed from side to side like she knew what she was talking about. "They black."

The sheriff looked at them. Their hair was black except Carvell's that always turned brown in summer. Their blue eyes looked dark as they turned their faces up.

The sheriff regarded them in silence. He didn't appear to believe her. Lawton swallowed. "We black." His voice sounded funny, high like a swamp peeper.

"Reckon you are then. Nobody, not even a kid would say he was black if he wasn't. That right, Esther?"

"Sho is, Sheriff." She shook her head again but the other way this time.

"What they doing up so late. It's near midnight."

"They little angel boys fell out of the cradle moon." Esther laughed and so did the sheriff.

"Angels spose to be white." He put the bottle on the bar.

"Up in heaven we all white," Esther said.

The sheriff cut his eyes at her. "Now don't you be getting ideas on me, Esther. I look after you but I can't do it if you get to talking that way."

"It just a joke, honey."

Lawton glowered at the sheriff. He shouldn't be talking to Esther like that.

"What's that awful smell?" The sheriff raised his head and sniffed. Lawton looked up and saw hair sticking out of the sheriff's nose.

It was Judge. "He messed," Malcolm said.

"I believe I'll just mosey on upstairs and look around," the sheriff said. He took the bottle. It left a damp ring on the bar. Esther ignored it.

They tracked him by the creaks on the stairs. Esther whispered to Henry, "He's gone up to the third floor to look out the windows for the cooking fire. What'll we do?"

Henry spread his hands flat on the bar. His fingers were thick and splayed on the ends. His nails had white moons where they grew out of his skin. "Ain't nothing we can do. Hope Sonny got it out in time. Might change that baby's britches, though."

Esther noticed Judge. "You little angels got something to put on that baby?"

"We'll get it," Malcolm said. "Come on, Lawton."

The sheriff's new black '47 Ford was parked right by the steps.

"Get down," Malcolm hissed at Lawton. They crept down to the yard. Lawton touched the car's bumper. The chrome gleamed in the light from the doorway. If he could drive he would jump in the car and go through the woods, ahead of Sonny to the cookout to warn Sugarlee and then out on the road to find his daddy and his mamma. He bet he could drive if he had the key.

"What we gonna do?" he whispered.

Malcolm crouched behind the sheriff's car. "You know how to let air out of tires?"

"I seen Daddy put it in."

"You unscrew the little cap off and hold the nozzle down til it goes flat. Then throw the cap in the bushes."

Lawton nodded. He could do that.

"It'll make the sheriff mad. Don't let him see you."

Lawton nodded again and put his hand over his mouth to stop the giggle he could feel bubbling there. He crept over to the near front tire and unscrewed the cap and held the nozzle down, his other hand over the spewing air. It sounded like a soft fart. It smelled like swamp gas, like cabbage, like a fart. The hissing air rose over Lawton, up and up as high as the trees and higher. Lawton wished he could go up with it, float over the treetops, the swamp, over the alligators and snakes and ghosts and panthers, as high as the moon. He could look down and see Mamaw's house and his house. He could see his daddy's car and he could see his momma running, running away through the cornfield. Lawton would wave to his momma and she would look up and see him and stop running and say, Lawton how in the world did you get up there? And then she'd say, Lawton, you come down from there right this minute before you get the moon dirty and I have to come up there and scrub it. And Lawton would giggle and she would laugh and everything would be all right again.

When the first tire went flat he moved to the other side and flattened that one while Malcolm did his. He kept the little caps. Nobody would find them in the bottom of his pocket. He could put his hand in there and feel them anytime he wanted to.

They took a clean cloth cut from one of Mama's old dresses out of the wagon. It was soft with pink flowers faded from all the washings. Lawton thought he could remember her wearing it before she cut it up for Judge. He wanted to bury his face in it and smell his mama but he handed it over to Esther.

Esther had cleaned Judge while they were gone. She folded the flowered cloth before she pinned it between his fat legs. He was the only one of them who was fat. "Been sucking his mama. The rest of you is sure skinny little angels. Bet your mama is, too."

The sheriff thudded down the stairs moving fast. "Gotta go," he said, thumping the empty beer bottle on the bar.

"Where to?" Esther asked, reaching out to catch his sleeve. Judge kicked at him.

The sheriff pulled away from Esther's hand and left it touching air. "There's a light over in the southeast woods," he said. "You know anything bout that?"

"Might be a house," Esther said.

"A bonfire," Henry offered.

But the sheriff didn't wait for their replies. He stomped down the porch steps, slammed the car door, revved up the motor, and flashed the red lights. The car bumped partway across the clearing before the sheriff hit the brakes.

"Sheriff's tires is flat," Esther said from the doorway.

"Mighta ruint them if they been scraping the road again," Henry observed from behind her.

The sheriff jumped out and checked his tires. He kicked each one, cursing in a high whine. "Who did this? I want to know who did this."

Esther and Henry turned mystified faces to him. They didn't know. They had been right there in the bar the whole time. "Maybe it happened in town," Henry said. "Took this long for the air to go out."

"I only got one spare," the sheriff said: "You got any tires?"

"Naw. We ain't even got a car. Had one once," Henry said.

The sheriff wasn't listening. He called his deputy on the car radio to come out with tires. "I don't care. Wake him up. I got to have tires."

The sheriff had another beer while he waited. He went outside and Lawton could hear him cussing and pissing off the porch.

The deputy came with his siren full blast. The sheriff roared away in the deputy's car. Through the doorway Lawton watched the deputy change all four of the tires. The boys had fallen into a sleepy heap beside the bar. Judge was snoring and even Carvell puttputted softly against Lawton's leg. Lawton wished they could stay there until—he couldn't think ahead to until. Now was far enough. Malcolm was awake but Lawton drifted in and out of sleep. The noise from the woods wasn't so scary here with Esther and Henry talking above him, his brothers around him. Lawton reached up and felt the hem of Esther's dress. It was the softest thing he ever had felt, softer than cornsilk or creek mud. His fingers slid from the hem. Esther's skin was smooth and warm. Things floated in the lamplight, his mother with hair like shiny black wings and Esther with her black cloud of hair. They both wore purple dresses that swirled and billowed about them. They soared out the door, over the treetops in the light from Sugarlee's fire, swooping and dipping, the stars and the moon spinning above them. They beckoned to Lawton. He stood on his tiptoes and stretched and then he was flying, too. It was easy. All you had to do was let go.

The deputy came in and had a beer. Esther told him the story of the black angels and the deputy said you could sure have fooled him that they was white. ♦

The Kikuyu Boy

David F. Johnson

There is a Kikuyu boy
rapping in the darkness
within my head
struggling to breathe out
the tusky moon
and the flika sun
he has seen
while tending goats

thoughts when he thinks them
are the long grey stalks
beyond the Delta
honey-colored sweet potatoes
as virile as the war mask
of the Ngong hawk

but they are lost
on an island
off the continent
in the head of the Kikuyu boy.

Kissing Gramma Jean

Jay Prefontaine

If you were to sit up or roll over,
give me your hand as a sign,
the charms dangling from the bracelet
looped around the stiff hollow stick
that is your forearm
would make music,
the only sound in this room
where a stranger has placed you
in a cold satin bed, your lips
sewn and your hands neatly folded.

We children of children gather round you
and stare. Tracy and Robin snivel,
then whine. Lori howls, but only once.
Craig stares, blinks.
My brothers bow their chins.
I'm thinking I want to crack your skull
open, share your brains with the kin.

I want your heart on a silver platter.
And your liver, too.
Let's pass them around the room.
Let's sing, dance. Scream. Do something!
But this room is stuffed with family,
friends, your seventy-seven year old lover,
who sit glassy-eyed and numbed.

Why can't we douse you and your box
with gas, float you onto the pond
behind your house, let you burst
into bright orange and yellow flames?
You loved to sit and watch that pond.

Elbow to elbow, we stand and stare some more.
They are watching for your chest to rise,
for a smile to tear from those lips,
your magnified eyes to open
as your face turns to us:
Come now, everything will be all right.
My hand touches your arm again.
There's nothing inside you. You're gone.

I want to steal your arm, slip it
into my pocket and take it home
to Lady, because you would,
you spoiled her rotten.
Lady would bark for your arm.
Lady would go fetch it,
if I threw it across the yard.
Lady would gnaw that arm,
get down to the bone
in a final celebration of you.

I need a way to say good-bye,
but the stranger informs us
it's time to move along...
the children are next in line.
You must be bored, disappointed.
You're somewhere in this room,
flying around maybe, I don't know.
And you're saying, *Kiss me. Kiss me,*
good-bye. So I do.

JAY PREFONTAINE

I lean over you
and my eyes close
as my face drops to yours,
our lips joining
my living with your dead.
I know you're smiling
at my wishing you were in there.
You laugh and dare me
to lift you out of the coffin.
You want that last dance.
But everyone knows I can't.
So I remain bowed to you,
in this my last embrace,
asking myself what's so dismal
about what we damn well knew
will be coming for all of us.



Fentry's Tomorrow

(after Faulkner and Foote)

F. J. Schaack

And so Fentry raised the boy.

In the fields, the cotton fields of rich cultivation that had been stolen from woods and bears, in the fields somewhere between Oxford and Tupelo, Fentry raised him. With the child strapped to his back, the planting and bending and wielding of farm tools curved his spine closer and closer toward his heart. The weight of the child, sometimes squirming, sometimes sleeping heavily, molded into a cavity on Fentry's back until both hearts were the same heart. The boy grew too big and could toddle through the prickly bushes himself. Fentry actually yearned for the burden missing from his back. But piggyback rides through the brambles and hide-and-seek games and thank-and-please prayers whispered into the covers while kneeling over the bed already covered by the omniscient darkness (the darkness that nightly recorded the holy messages of father and son, stilled in its own utter darkness at the uncommon poignancy of the common moment), all these replaced the living knapsack which had grown, physically at least, less symbiotic.

The rides in the wagon full of cotton puffs, both man and child submerging in the terrestrial clouds of cotton which they themselves had picked, picked each individually with dried crimson lines on their hands as proof, these rides going nowhere since they hadn't yet hitched up the mule came at the end of the longer days as just reward. The grown man and manchild sat throwing clumps of cotton at each other, throwing peals of laughter across the Mississippian back woods, throwing into each other's arms each other until their sweat mixed into a sweetness of hard work and hard love, and blessed the day's harvest.

Only when Fentry found him playing in the fenced graveyard did he reprimand him. The graveyard so alone on the highest rise of flattest land, which eternally held the Fentry clan, a compost of collective generations. And, also, the resting place that should have held the boy's mother, although her sudden death made it impossible for Fentry to bring her back here, to bring her to become part of the modest Fentry spread, to bring her back here one way or another. This graveyard made him spank the boy once. Only a strong

one-handed swat before he even knew Fentry was behind him, before Fentry himself knew why he was swatting him, before either of them ever knew. The boy's eyes swelled with tears. Soundless and confused. Fentry instantly swooped him up in his arms and wiped away the salt lines with his own tears smearing with and becoming the boy's. This one time inside the graveyard, the insides of Fentry broke and as quickly mended, as he assuaged the child, this child whose pale eyes were so like Sarah's, like those who should have been living beside him or at least buried in the hallowed plot of land in this rough land of northern Mississippi.

But it was too blessed to last.

When they came, when he saw them coming down the twisted road, Fentry knew. He knew when he saw them coming for Sarah's boy, because the Thorpes claimed the boy as one of their people, more a Thorpe than a Fentry, they'd say (though not in ways that mattered or ever would, ever really would). And from that ubiquitous moment, with the boy still clutching his hand, still his alone for the briefest of moments longer, Jackson Fentry knew what he'd have to endure tomorrow. Their emptiness of tomorrow lived today. The years of tomorrows that would soon stretch longer than the longest furrow in this land's most barren of fields. ♦

Salt

Barry Bradford

I remember a hundred biscuits in the oven and hungry niggers on the ground outside with a fire and some sausage; raw-boned niggers that worked for food. Before daylight they hauled themselves onto the wagon and rode down into the woods with daddy, facing a hard day of work already paid for.

I remember the day the drummer came. I was in the yard. It was noon when he stood on the road and looked at me and the house and said his name which I forgot. He had a bag on his shoulder that was dark with shiny greases and paint and made a noise when he walked. Momma came out to the porch. She asked him who he was, I think, and he said he was a seller of things. He hauled two pans out of his bag saying they were cheap, then a Bible and offered to read to us for a meal. Momma said it was okay and went in.

It was cold and rain began. He bent down and asked me how old I was. Five, I said. He asked something about daddy and looked at the clouds which were black. I told him about the storm pit daddy and the niggers built in the bank behind the house. He asked me to show him.

It had a wooden door at an angle that led to nothing more than a hole in the earth with some supporting timbers. I watched the drummer go into the dark. He turned and all I could see was his face in what little light there was in there. He stretched out his hand to take mine. I looked at the house and back at him.

He said there were wonders in there, things that I should see, that I could only see as a child. I told him I was afraid of the pit, that it had caved in on a nigger when they were digging it. He said darkness and fear were brothers and they were his friends. He had seen their faces and I could see them, too. Take his hand, he said. I stepped to the mouth of the pit.

Momma called and told me to get in out of the rain.

He dropped his bag by the door and took up the large Bible. He told me he had others, smaller ones that were new for fifty cents. Where he came from he was known for his readings, he said, and could stop bleedings by pronouncing certain words of scripture. He had gotten this gift from his father, an evangelist, a man who could take up serpents without being hurt, who once stopped a flooding river, drying up the water with a verse and a scattering of salt.

I asked him if his father still read the Bible. He said he did not know. His father had gone into the woods to baptize a young woman and they had not come back. The town searched for them but all they found was his Bible, on a stump beside the creek. This very Bible, he said. On the book lay a moccasin he himself removed, the drummer said, without being bitten. Upon reading the passage which lay open before him he was in a moment given eyes to see his work. It was this work which he now performed, he said. He began to read.

The smell of pork mixed with words from the Law. The drummer moved in great strides across the front of the house, becoming louder and gesturing often with his hand. His voice was deep and rich. He chuckled, glancing at me with a smirk before moving to the other end of the room, then back and stopping in front of me. He squatted and squinted, holding the Bible out and I looked carefully at the cover of bluish, pitted leather. I opened it and turned through the pages. In some places great red marks were drawn across passages. In others words were written in the margin or over the print.

His father never read another book in his life, he said. The old man's only work had been his study of the Bible and these notes. No one had seen those notes before but his father and himself. Now he had shown them to me.

The storm beat down on the tin roof. I sat down while Momma moved around the kitchen pulling together our meal of biscuits, salt pork and turnips. Then she went into the back of the house. The drummer came in and laid the Bible beside his plate.

The drummer'd followed the creek for three days after finding the Bible. There had been no other sign of his father. But after the third day he came upon a black man deep in the woods. The nigger was half-naked, crouched near the cold waters. He gripped a cross made of pan handles and said the Beast was in the creek. But God had sent the Prophet to chain the Beast. The Prophet gave the nigger watch over the Beast until he returned with the hosts of heaven. Before he left, the Prophet gave him a box and said a certain young man would come for it. He was to say to the young man, With this do God's work.

2

The drummer reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his hand in a fist. He reached across the table and opened his hand slightly, letting something fine and white fall into the turnips. He then went to relieve himself in the yard. Momma came back and began to salt the turnips. I told her she didn't need to because the drummer had already salted them. She looked at me until the drummer came in and sat down. He asked to say a prayer, raised his hands and gave loud thanks for God's gift to him of this meal. He then went to work bringing biscuits and pork to his plate.

Momma asked him if he would have some turnips. He thanked her but said he could not eat greens as the juices made him bilious. Momma then produced my daddy's old navy revolver from her apron. She held it steady in the drummer's face and said he would have some greens.

He didn't move until she cocked it, then spooned a small helping onto his plate. He looked at the turnips, then stood and said he would be going. Momma stood. He would eat the greens or be shot. He ate them and died on the kitchen floor.

3

We tried to drag him out to the yard but he was too heavy. Momma sent me to her room and closed the doors to the kitchen. Daddy didn't come home that night and I slept with Momma behind a locked door. The rain went on. I thought I could hear the drummer walking through the house and the pans clanking in his bag. I dreamed the drummer was knocking on the door and reading scriptures to bring the waters to a flood. I woke Momma and we crept with a candle to the front room. Momma felt in the dark for his bag. I took the pans back to bed and slept with the handles crossed on my chest.

The rain went on through the next day. The wind grew stronger. In the afternoon Momma looked out the front door. The rain had stopped and it was quiet. She picked me up and ran through the house, out the back door and to the pit. We went in and sat in the blackness listening to the roar of a tornado.

The rain returned. The yard was already a great pond. We sat in Momma's room and chewed stale biscuits. Toward dark Momma said she had to go back to the kitchen. I followed her and looked in. She took down a large bag of salt and carefully poured it over the drummer beginning with his feet. His face was twisted on one side and his eyes were open. She covered it with a great mound of salt.

4

Daddy and the niggers got home the next day. The sun was out. The swollen Alabama had kept them away. They loaded the body onto the wagon and started back into the woods. One of the niggers climbed on with the bag and began to hand around the new Bibles. Another took up the large one and read aloud until the wagon disappeared into the trees. ♦

Costs

David Musgrove

Within walking distance of the beach
in a small house,
its floor gritty with sand,
I sip warm, watered whiskey
not wanting it
wasted the
eleven dollars
for the two pints.
The girl has already been done
caught her
shower
half dressed, bikini, bra, something,
the vodka moving through her veins
like some Russian white snow demon
somehow bottled and brought
to this sun blasted shore
in the Western Hemisphere.
I took her on the counter
myself standing
finishing quickly, not liking it
afraid.
The trip down here, wasted
like the whiskey
melting into the paper cup.
The girl sleeps.
Unhappy, I sit in a chair
preparing to go home.
She is there
with all the things I am struggling for

and my old enemies
that I am always struggling against
are here with me,
are always with me.

The trip has given me perspective
on all my feeble struggling
and on the sun sinking and the moon rising
above porpoise-plowed waters
and crab-scarred sands.

And on the twisting, gravel street
short steps from the beach
I have been given new worries
born on bathroom counters
but the trip has cost me only
gas money
and eleven dollars for the wasted whiskey,
so far.



Kingfisher

David Musgrove

The blue bird grabs a fish
and carries it to a limb
where the fish
wailing silently in its fish tongue
is devoured whole.
I watch the Kingfisher
from this tree,
watch it work the stream
swoop and devour tiny fish.
I watch the stream crossing
for deer,
the rifle across my legs
is old and scratched.
I have seen the Kingfisher
eat many a fish,
I have seen many a deer
fall to its knees.
I wonder
if my own death that devours
will be a brilliant blue beautiful
thing,
like the Kingfisher over the stream.

Tuxpan

March, 1995

David Musgrove

I

At 4 A.M. in Tuxpan
we arrive by bus
and the town is quiet in its darkness.
The ever-present Mexican dogs
watch us
white men like monsters
packs on our backs.
The only human I see
a retching drunk
leads us to a clean, cheap hotel
and, as if having then fulfilled his purpose
staggers away
trying to find home.
The man asleep on a sofa in the lobby
grudgingly awakens
and we are soon asleep.

Tuxpan was once a pirate town
and Fidel Castro once lived here
and one spring
on my way north back to Texas
I passed through.
There is no dust in the streets of Tuxpan.
There are palm trees
and a green river
and fog every morning
that blows in from the sea
and burns away each afternoon.
At night along the green river

cut by ferry wakes
and the thin lines of hand fisherman
who crouch among the rocks
like hunched pelicans,
the women of Tuxpan are beautiful.
By morning they awaken
naked and ugly in hotel rooms
and my friends,
half dead from drinking,
awaken and laugh
at the naked brown thing in my bed
and watch me, expectantly
as if there were not another person in the room
but some thing, possession
that I have picked up, brought along
and am now responsible for.
I wait for her to leave
hating her for still being there
hating that she does not disappear
with the moon and the stars
at the onset of day,
hating her
all women, all people
myself.

II

There is one white man in town.
He is sixty-five
his girlfriends are all fifteen
and his name is Charlie
but he speaks English
and helps pay for the beer.
In the concrete house
where we drink that night
the roof is tin
the doors are curtains
the shower is a garden hose in a back room
and the roach
as big as a rat

is brave
as he crosses the floor
considering the hungry chickens
and drunken humans.
He does not make it
and when the young, knife-scarred Carlos
picks up the crushed beetle
and tosses it to the rooster in the living room,
I realize that
through the fighting and the whiskey,
the women and the police,
and most of all
my own madness
I,
I will never finish my own brave journey.
Later that night
outside a bar
I watch Mexican boys
half my size and age
beat Charlie with a belt
and kick him in the face
until broken and bleeding
the old man can no longer rise.
I reach for the knife in my pocket
but although my travelling companions are gone, somewhere
my Mexican friends are there
and I will not be harmed
I do not owe anyone a ride
Marijuana, money, anything.

III

Down the high, wide, concrete sidewalk
that borders the river
two policemen with machine guns stroll by
but I am assured by the girls
it is not necessary to hide my Corona
and I remember that public drinking
like so much else

is allowed here in Mexico.
Her friend will tattoo my arm for free
but I decline
still unsure if I want one or not.
Rodriguez shows off his,
one is a Tasmanian Devil,
the other a naked woman
and the word, Monica.
He makes it clear
that Monica is his love
but later that night
that is not the name
of the girl underneath him
I am sure.
Franco and I talk all night
with exaggerated gestures.
I know ten words in Spanish
he knows one in English--goddamnit
and we never understand
each other's desperate, drunken speeches.
There is no bottle opener
and the Mexicans
open their bottles
and mine
with their teeth.
I drink lots of whiskey with my beer
but no tequila
because I cannot stand the way it smells.

IV

On a corner of the town square
is an open-air restaurant.
The walls are hung with fishnets
and seashells are embedded by the hundreds
in the concrete walls.
The shrimp here are the best I've ever eaten
and I smoke a cigarette after the meal
and hope we are not recognized

because after two days in town
I already know too many people.

On the peseros
that rattle down the road
that hugs the river
and links the beach to the town,
I peer out the cracked windows
at bridges and boats
thatch huts and tin roofs
and an occasional huge freighter
pulled up to a crumbling river dock
like a whole other town
come to visit.

The schoolgirls in their clean, pressed uniforms
with their smooth, brown skin
dark hair and eyes
sit next to me on the little bus
and watch me out of the corner of their eyes
and look at me as they get on or off
but they do not speak to me
and I say nothing to them
because I am not drunk.

V

On the beach we buy huge coconuts
because we cannot climb palms
and do not have a machete.
The white meat is good
and I carry around chunks in my pocket
but the milk is watery
and sucked through a straw
tastes like nothing.
Out on the horizon
loom ships like distant islands
and closer in are shrimp boats.
The surf is green and low
and I find tiny shells
deep in the underwater sand

with my toes.

In Tuxpan they drive their cars on the beach
and every other one
that leaves the road for the sand
buries itself
and the driver, who has lived here all his life,
has not learned to avoid this
in the hundreds of times it has happened
and looks out his window, helplessly.
There is a man who sits on the beach all day
in an old wooden chair
near the end of the road.
He has a shovel
and each time a car gets stuck
he rises, slowly, and approaches it.
The driver will give the old man a few pesos
and the car will soon be freed.
There is another man who stays at the beach all day.
He tries to sell us hats made from woven palm fronds
but we do not buy them,
saving our pesos for beer,
but we listen to his stories
in broken English
of surfing in Hawaii, Puerto Rico.

Where the river empties into the Gulf
there are long rock jetties on either side.
Men stand on rocks hidden beneath
the water's calm surface
and throw their cast nets
watching them sink, then pulling them in.
Other men don masks and slip underwater
down among the rocks
with spearguns.
A small boy crouches near the end of the jetty
with a fishing line
and a piece of bark to wrap it around.

VI

On the beach in Tuxpan
we eat plates of swordfish and rice
and cheap as it is
the beer is cheaper.
The shrimp is good too
and the ever-present Mexican dogs
appreciate the huge fried heads I throw them.
At night when I sling my hammock
between weathered poles
of what was once a thatch hut
I am not alarmed
when black-clad men
with machine guns for arms
awaken me and ask for my papers.
I did not see the Mexican naval base
hidden in the palms and cedars
that crowd the beach
where the green Tuxpan River
flows into the Gulf.
They let me go back to sleep
and do not care
as no one seems to care
in Mexico.

The night before we leave
the mosquitoes are bad
and I wrap myself in a sheet
and sleep at the edge of the surf
and dream of sharks
with eyes like bottomless wells.
I am awakened before dawn
by men hauling in nets
and dogs snapping up stray fish
and sniffing my bare feet and ears
to see if I am dead yet
and can be consumed.

The night we leave Tuxpan
I sit at the back of the bus
near the cooler of Cokes

and when we stop in Tampico
I eat as many aspirin as I can
and sleep then,
no longer feeling the sunburn,
the days of drinking.

There is a lighthouse on the beach at Tuxpan.

At night it flashes
constant, brilliant
beams of light,
the huge, glowing, mirrored bulb
swinging in arcs
like a comet spinning in place.
It shows the ships
where the mouth of the river is,
the ships that are so far out to sea,
where I want to go,
far out to sea
to the lands across
to the seas beyond
past any guiding light
that might show me the way home.



Summer's Blood

Richard Wirick

*Though the visible realm was conceived in love, certainly the invisible realm was
conceived in fright.*

Ishmael, *Moby Dick*

I

To make one was to make a face, really, a human face--eyes, nose, mouth and teeth--and to carve it up out of earth, or something part of it, that grew up out of it, something like dust--like God made up Adam out of dead dirt and breath. It was to have your parents let you do something complicated, as complicated as the things they did, or God did every day, just this one day. They let you use a knife, they let you cut. They gave you the power to make something like a life. But when you pushed through the skin you knew it was death, too, that had been put in your hands.

At Christmas you didn't make anything, at Thanksgiving nothing. And nothing at Easter that was fun for a boy, the dyed eggs smooth and hot and amazing the way their whiteness took the color, but really a frilly thing, something for girls to do. Nothing at any other time, either. Only here, only now, could you take something up and carve out a head and put a candle in behind the eyes to make a soul, a mind, a *Geist* as Mrs. Bernsteiner would say (*Geist* was something a knife should usually go through, but here was a time when you made one with a knife, like a wand, waving hard shapes out of next to nothing). It wasn't a holiday like any of the others, but it was the one of making--building up something, this *thing*, out of fire and dirt and--what was it--fruit?

Pumpkins were easy enough to get, though some years only certain farmers would grow them. They were there in all their gardens though, and some grew wild along the road, the grooved sides poking out at you through their fern-like tops. Older kids found them wherever they could--rotten ones to throw, that you found split later in their girlfriends' yards. What you needed

for a jack-o'-lantern was the biggest, the roundest you could get. You needed one that gave when you pushed the knife. Its skin had to be as soft as meat.

The best place to get them wasn't a farm but just a house, Slayton's, sitting in the woods on old Hanley Road. The drive took you through four covered bridges, over the Clear and Black Fork Rivers, past the fruit farm which you floated by slowly (it was fall, and the Keenans who ran it served free cider, their eight whooping kids running down the lawn from E.B.'s mansion to grab the white cone cups from a stack, knocking the tap, the brown blood sputtering, going over the cup's lip, colder as its color cleared), and down from there, that highest of the county's tiny mountains, to a darkened glade of moss and rot still leopard-spotted with what the sun let down--like the deep water light you saw on TV lying on sunken boats, on chests of treasure. That was where you found Slayton's, just barely.

It needed, you thought, a farm stuck to it. A barn or a shed. At least some outbuildings. At first it looked square and serious as a farmhouse, with uncurtained windows like worried eyes. But it didn't have the whiteness, the feeling of warmth. You imagined lights inside a farmhouse. Their place was grey, cave-cold with hickory shade. Its siding was dark as a charcoal mare's.

Nobody could figure the Slaytons out. Some say it was the Old Mother who kept it that way. Others blamed her son; the lazier he got the darker it grew. His lupus wife couldn't do anything either, her steel crutches inching up at you when you drove in. "Walked like a spider," my father said. Nobody knew where Mother's husband had gone.

They themselves looked just like the place, like they could have come out of one of its walls. When you visited you wanted to get back to the patch. But they always took you through, as if *that* were the payment, before letting you pick for your dime or quarter. Blanche pointed with a crutch to where you should park. The half-off door swung back at your face.

You wanted to go in but then you didn't. But the swing of the door made you know you would. Mr. Carter, in Sunday School, talked about that feeling. "Dread," he called it. Drawn to it, drawn away. We wondered enough to go in but then stopped: at the sound of the clink, the lock falling behind us (Grandma Jana said Grandpa spoke in the bed as he died of a soft falling sound like that, almost sweet and musical, in the great space he entered. He didn't seem scared. Maybe inside were the same stamping cattle, the milk cans he held every morning of life).

Which all seemed right, this idea of a door. The spirits' doors opened on this one night. The dead came through them to dance unseen, to be with us living, who had not yet been called.

But that came later, thinking about that. What hit you when you first stood in the room was the heat, the warm block of it coming down around you

like a coat. October wasn't that cold, but they kept the furnace on. The coal pan was bad. Underneath you the chunks of it slipped in the fire, bleeding and deepening in the flames. Soot blew through the registers and blackened the dust. Rude people, my mother said, wrote their names in it on the tops of things.

A morning's worth was on their faces by the time you saw them there. Mr. wore it thickest, like a five o'clock shadow. He never ignored you. "Golf ball eyes," was what Bub called him. Bub said he wore a diaper Doctor Reed fixed him up with. I looked for pins under his Oshkosh, but his hands were always there, quick and busy with picking, bringing up seeds he pushed into his gums. He used a wheelchair a lot; my mother said polio. Bub had heard nothing was wrong with him: "The coot just likes to sit," he said. Dennis Anderkin's Mom told him the same. He'd given up on the world, May said--no point in walking through it anymore. "Malingerer," was my father's opinion, the longest word I ever heard him use.

My Grandmother Jana said he did every foul and unnatural thing a human could commit. He picked the scabs that grew from his hopeless fence mending and hedge trimming. The cracks of his skin were filled with dirt, his nails all black, purple, and soft-bone whiteness. Jana said this by itself could send you to the hospital. But Mr. even picked the hairs of his nose. This would instantly kill most people. She told us about a man in the Bible who'd been set up for hundreds of years of life, picked one hair and dropped dead like a bird.

The Old Mother would sit in a wheelchair too when she got tired of wandering and swatting the curtains. The swatting and cobbing drained her of blood. She slid down in the chair, her skin white as the curtains the window's breeze wrapped her in.

Mrs. minded the kitchen, the patches, the "business," running in from somewhere always out of sight. On this trip I came right up on her, leaving my father and the girls in front. Lila Slayton had been smart, maybe still was--a physics degree from Brown, a shelf of the Great Books. But her hair was wild as cabbage grass, her teeth stained brown like a man's who chewed. She jumped when I came up behind her at the sink, her hands holding dark globs of soaking rags.

"Jacky," she said. "Come for your pumpkin? How's your Grandmother Jana?"

"Ma'am," I said, "she's fine."

"Come for your pumpkin?" She came up to me, closer. I could smell the Southern Comfort on her breath. I once saw the two pint bottles she kept behind the orange juice jug on the icebox shelf. I wasn't snooping, just looking for water. Its label was the thing I loved: the etching of a paddle steamer like my other Grandma Ada and her sisters--all the Willcoxans--had ridden down

the Ohio on to Gallipolis. Smoke floated out of the boat stacks on the label, over high-hatted people waving from the banks.

"Yes," I said. "Like usual."

"Like usual," she said, looking down at my shoes, new bright sneakers like nothing she'd seen before, never going--I knew-- to stores where they'd be. She squinted at them, then gave a sad nod, the nod of a railroad bum or a full-on madman like Speedy Heiser. Then she looked away and into the sink, drying her hands to come out back.

The door the garden opened into made no sound. It was like a wall of dark air itself, hingeless and smooth with nothing to its touch but the slightest cool sense of a passage. It opened out. It told you the step was down, into something darker. This was the place where the patches started.

I followed her, walking as slow as I could in the dusk. She lifted the leaves with the end of her ashplant. Little clouds of dust came up. The first ones we saw still had a good color. The long months of sun had poured down their orange.

"Jacky." I turned around. My father stood in the doorway. Elly's pixie bangs were there under his hand.

"Why George," Mrs. said, straightening up. "Come down here and pick out something."

Both came down the steps, Elly uneasily, him shifting her over the last cracked one. She swung like a puppet on his long, bare arm.

"How's your mother, George?"

"Oh fine, fine," he said. His eyes were down under the leaves, and I could tell he wasn't listening. It was like walking with him when he hunted. Everything else disappeared to him. There were only his eyes and the thing he waited for—the thing which was everywhere and nowhere at once.

I went on ahead. A cat jumped up. They were everywhere at Slayton's, circling the furniture, nosing in cupboards, lying on the Old Mother's doll-lined shelves. This was a calico. Orange and black, it looked right for the pumpkins.

I kept going, kicking, watching for the perfect one. The sky was clear, and the space it became seemed far from us. Bright roads of stars waved up out of the buttonwoods. The breeze coming through them chilled my skin, and somehow made me think of cutting again—the cutting that sent things from world to world. The road between heaven and earth was a blade. It let you in and it let you out. It let you pass over like the dancing *Geists*. I thought of the movies of babies being born—the cord had to break before they were here. And it let you out. On the same TV the Jap soldiers died, their hands feeling down for the bayonet holes.

"There," she said behind me. This one was big, but not too big. It hadn't grown enough to sag and flatten. The cloud of its dust hung there in the

floodlight. She held the leaves when my foot pulled away.

"Right there."

* * *

"Where'd you get your pumpkin?" Leo asked.

We were in the treehouse of the Grand Kazan. He headed the house and owned it and set the rules during his reign. They never changed much because nobody could ever think of anything new. Just the basics: no girls, no parents, no kids older than the GK. He watched over the footlocker that held the things we stood for: wampum belts and arrowheads, books about screwing (*Sexology*, was one Tim got from his mother's attic, by Dr. Albert Ellis), and a space for the still-beating Poe hearts we'd get someday from other kids, from other clubs, kids we'd kill and cut up and tear the skin off in strips like the Iroquois did in battle. We'd vowed to be like them, without pity, and vengeful for our fallen.

Rolf Bernsteiner was the GK now. We all had German names—Hartmann, Wolff—sounds tongue-rolling tough: Gevertz and Fasnacht and Werner (my own). The kids from clubs that called us Huns were German too, so that didn't make much sense. Besides, we were Indians, and whoever had to learn it would learn it at the stake.

"Slaytons," I said. I put my green apple branch—my offering, my talisman—in the center of the circle we made with our chairs.

"Weird bunch," said Roxy Falde. "Like a bunch of frigging trolls."

"Like the dwarfs," Tim said, "at Disneyland. But with no stocking caps." He liked knowing that we'd never seen Disneyland. His dad was rich, did something with satellites. They flew to California every summer.

"The dolls the old lady has give me the creep-o's," Bub said. He put the bottom of his palms against his lips and made a farting sound.

"Ditto," said Roxy, "wrapped up like that."

"She collects them," I said. "She's crippled." Bub's sound kept up, trailed off. "Gives her something to do."

"But when you go in, Gadzooks!" Bub said. "It's like something in hell. Dead people on shelves. It's like bleachers full of stiffs."

"In cellophane," said Tim.

"Saran wrap," said Rolf.

"Keeps off the dust," I said, and pictured the rows of them, twisted and frozen. This last time I hadn't paid them much attention. But there they were each visit, built and set there, it seemed, with no thought or feeling—just a

constant, silent, mindless attention. They were like the crowd that waited in front of you at Sunday School recital or scout camp when you had to make a speech and had nothing to say. Awful little hollow people waiting for something, something you'd promised to give them, *only you*, but found that you couldn't. They weren't like the pumpkins--raw and waiting for life. They'd already had a part of it and wanted more, all their eyes watching your little evasions.

"I saw Vick Schechter's baloobas," volunteered Leo.

"Oh futz you did," said Zimmerman.

"Did."

"Did not."

"Where at?"

"Right here," Leo said, pounding his chest with gorilla beats. "Two," he said. "They look alike."

"Where at?" asked Zimmerman again. His forehead was red. This was serious business.

"Up against the window of their bathroom."

I thought of how this might have been possible. The Rieffs lived next door to the Schechters, in those clapboard houses that lined Maple Street and that you'd see once in a while coming down West Main on a flatbed truck. Leo's bedroom window looked straight across to her bath, and I let the picture of it clear into something believable--the rising steam, pink flashes through the frosted panes.

All of it irked me, his thinking about it. My hunger for her had begun. She deserved my thoughts, only mine, to belong to. She had just turned sixteen, ripe and lovely. None of us, really, could stop thinking about her. She was my babysitter, Walt and Libby Schechter's daughter. She had the street whirling in the smell of new sex. She had my father's young eye, but my mother forgave it. Lib was her best friend, partly because of her being a nurse, that circle of women who had flown from the trap of husband and house and out into the secret night world of Marshfield General's sneakered halls--white doves of freedom, they must have seemed to her. She'd talk to Lib on the phone for hours, sighing after an episode of *Ben Casey*. Lib would go on about working the OR, in the soupy red sea of a real doctor's hooks and clamps and trays of bright knives.

"The closest anyone's gotten to them," I said, hating myself for it, but feeling the claim of her stronger than anything else I could say, "was me and Bub. Bug collecting."

It was true. We got them for her biology class: everything we could find from Ridey's field--Viceroy's and dragonflies and luna moths; blind, burrowing beetles with heads and eyes like clots of blood. We took turns standing

on the top stair of her porch while she kneeled to pin them, lifting them gently from each jar. Her breasts were golden and freckled, nested loosely in her soft sling bra. I wanted to press my face against her, nose their rubbery tips, touch paradise. I had some vague knowledge it would transfigure me, give some answer to any question my life could ever ask. She squealed when she drove the pins through, and watching her made small pains flick up my chest, as if matches were being lit there.

"I saw them. Her," said Leo again, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "I saw her from the front and side when she was drying. And from the back. She spread the towel across the rod." We saw it, all of us, the legs widening, the cleft of hair between from the back. I grew redder, and knew they could see the color coming to me.

"Did you see her pajoda?" asked Sowash.

Leo made dog sounds, nodding his head up and down to sniff.

"Was it fuzzy, like a beaver?" Sowash asked.

Leo caught it all in the same long nod.

I was furious now. I knew I would stutter if I tried to talk. A secret had been torn from me, a thing of my own imagining taken without permission. I wanted to choke Leo, to get him down and put a stick across his throat and push each end down with my knees. But like all the rest of them, Leo was bigger than me. He could have choked me without a stick.

"Did everybody go to Slaytons'?" I asked.

"Does the Pope shit in the woods?" said Sowash. I liked Sowash. There was something adventurous and military about his family. His father was a colonel who owned a truck and a printing press.

"Only place to get your pump," said Leo. "Now all we got to do is pump it." I felt better now, getting her out of their talk at least.

"We've got a big one," Jim Roper said. His last school picture had a fly sitting on top of his crewcut, and he'd told me once, in a soft voice full of shame, that his parents were planning to divorce--unheard of then except in the movie magazines.

We all were growing tired now. Some of us crawled out to the ironing boards we nailed between the forks of the larger branches. They were bowed by the rain and smoothed of chips and splinters enough to be easy on our backs and made a good, almost level, porch for the place, a good place to lie down and watch the stars.

I saw Cassiopeia, the Queen. The legs of her chair were like columns of diamonds. I thought of being in love with Vicky, of what the look of love from her would be like--smiling and flushed and thrilled to come close, seeing me when my parents left not as a parent would, but as a woman wanting me, wanting to give herself. And that feeling grew to the strongest and sweetest of feel-

ings, one that had visited me before—that something lay waiting for me to find it, set down in advance and pleasantly made, but ever-changing as I ever searched: something of the strongest and loveliest power.

II

Then it was finally carving time, the night we all headed over to Reeds. Mr. Reed had the family living in the basement while he finished the house. Its floors were full of wood shavings and steel rods and lumber, so the parents voted their place the place. Bub called old man Reed "The Fly," and Roger Jessup called him "eccentric," a word I never got a good hold on. But there had to have been something to it, the way Ralph yelled out his words, as if you couldn't hear him even when you were close. He bought threshing machines at back country auctions, and ran them for no reason on weekend mornings. But then I thought how everyone could be eccentric to somebody else, how my father called Roger that because he held his gun funny. So maybe it was one of those words that meant everything, everything and nothing. One that you used in place of understanding.

Mr. Reed worked nights at Ideal Electric. He was a lead man who pulled parts down from one belt and made them into big-dialed radios on another—the ones whose grills and knobs looked like a face (My father kept one on the toolbench shelf, the dial's soft light spreading across the jars of screws and two-penny nails that stretched our reflections when we passed by the table saw). Mrs. Reed led the cub scout troop. My mother claimed she tried to turn them Pentecostal, speaking in tongues at their Weblos fire.

She spread us out Indian style in the unfinished upstairs. We put our pumpkins between our legs and walked up to the table to pick our instrument. It was scattered with things from Mr. Reed's toolbox—files and pliers, all glimmering with oil. It had a sliding lid, and when Mrs. wasn't watching, I opened it, closed and opened it again. It gave off a smell of iron and kerosene.

We never cut ourselves, and I think one of the reasons the mothers let Martha host us was that she had watched boys before, guarded them against their carelessness, one of "all God's dangers" she always talked about. This time I chose a buck knife like the one my uncle Yeager used to skin the deer my father shot. I walked back to the wall with it, feeling its weight, running my thumb up against the knobbed horn where the blade started.

I started my lid with square cuts, pulling till the juice came up through the crack. I wanted an octagon, a hexagon, whatever it would be. Most cut in circles and didn't get far. Everybody eventually all got going, the same sawing sound—like a thumbnail grating on coil wire. My stem was still on, long and curled and furry: like what's left of the cord once the baby is out.

My lid, I thought, was a piece of geometry. Brought up into something from paper and thought. Inside was mush and soft seed and plant blood. It was much, much brighter than the skin: the thick blood all brains floated in, surrounding and feeding it, pouring in life. I wondered what would happen if you cooked it. People ate the brains of cows. They made Liz Taylor faint in *Giant*, and a cow's brain, I thought, would make me faint too.

The mush closed fast and cold as water around my fingers. Its color mixed under the white of my nails. It was too light to stain though, a melon's soft color, one mostly water, with a water's clearness. I pulled it out with a coffee mug and scraped the meat from the walls. I turned it upside down and knocked. Even that wet, every seed fell out.

I made the mouth with lots of teeth, not most of them missing like most people did. I left a few of the bottoms out, and made a good square cut for the one missing top. The mouth would be more real that way, like Speedy Hiser's or the bums' that cooked at the depot fires and smiled up at your car when you slowed for the tracks. The eyes were the hardest. They could be anything--squares or circles or the triangles everybody made. But the knife seemed to fall into a shape of its own, nothing more than a normal eye. I leaned the whole thing up on my knees and pushed the carved parts in with the knifetip.

Now it was time to really get going, to give it its brain, its final light. Mrs. had come around earlier to watch. She hadn't said anything when she passed mine. I guessed it was all right with her, but it wouldn't have bothered me if it hadn't been. I liked her and Bob in a way and felt sorry for Mr.--his whole life a mess of sad, scattered trinkets--but I had enough of my father's contempt for them in me, enough to feel that where they were wasn't where you should end up. I knew that I couldn't, that I wouldn't end up there. And I also knew--far, far more importantly--that my father wasn't as sure of that as I was.

She was behind me now, holding a box of candles spiraled and tipped like a bullet, the color of dirty, mud-made ice. I trimmed the wick and lit it with one of the long, blue-tipped matches she laid in front of us. It leaned well going in. No wax went down the sides. I rested it on the lid edge while its bottom filled with the clear, hot drops, and stood its end in the center of that.

Mrs. came around a third time, smiling a little with her little mouse face. I put on the top, put it on the floor, pushed it toward the center with my stocking feet.

"Well," she said, smiling more, "There now. There."

I was really too old to trick or treat, so when that night came I talked my mother into letting me go out with the Legacy brothers. They promised to drive the Nova--silver, from their father's lot. I let Elly light the pumpkin before the first beggars came. My mother lit a small pink birthday candle and

put it in Elly's hand, and lifted her over it so she could touch the wicks. When the big candle flared, their faces blazed. My mother said, "Good," and Elly squealed. We put it on the milkbox and turned the welcome mat sideways. The flame threw its color down onto the rubber.

When Legacy took us out East Main in fourth and made the cross and upward kick to fifth we flew back in our seats, and finally felt free then, part of the night, like ghosts going out over the ground. The breeze in our hair made us feel like pure thought, or fire or air and no earthly thing.

One by one we saw signs of magic. Mrs. Wyrzynski had hung her Indian corn to ward off evil spirits. My uncle worked with her husband, Detlef. His coverall pockets were filled with amulets. She thought there were spirits in the place they worked--a roundhouse of darkness and crumbling brick, where hammers rang like bells in front of glowing forges and splashed fireballs of iron onto the ground. She'd given Detlef a thumb-sized stone, face-shaped and smoothed by a river in Lodz, where Germans--*like you*, she said to us once--shot three of her brothers in front of her eyes. She never had a jack-o'-lantern, only this corn. She'd told us of Poland, of Lithuania, where Halloween was called All Hallow's Eve. The dead came across the rivers and roads of heaven, the Himmelfahrstrassen, just to watch you all night, remembering life. Legacy said old Wodja was crazy.

"She's off her nut," he said, peeling rubber in front of her walk.

"A baskethead," said Leo.

But the rest of us wanted to take what she'd told us, throw it into the pot and keep it. Magic was magic and old people knew. They came from places where miracles happened. Fire crawled on the ponds at night. Hourglass sand ran from bottom to top. Streets filled with crocodiles in the middle of winter. "In goddamn Poland," Bub said, in a vote for belief. The old ones knew. They knew and had seen, or they knew who had seen. You couldn't laugh off voices with a ring like hers. It was the sound of what had happened.

And it rose, that magic, each street you went down, like the rising peeps of morning birds. The kids in costumes all held hands--bag-headed, draped with sheets or crepe; the girls in pointed witches hats like giant thorns or soft white good witch angel dresses, with wands that ended in sprinkled stars. Some wore plastic store-bought Dracula and Frankenstein masks, with PJ bottoms the kids burned up in, Bub said, like marshmallows for being dumbbo futzes. "The really sad thing is the candy melts."

We stopped at the corner of Frederick and Clever. It was the longest chain of hands we saw. A pretty girl led them, as pretty as Vick and probably a babysitter. When I looked closer, she seemed to have a uniform, something a beauty parlor lady or nurse would wear. Their masks floated strangely over

their bags, cocked in different directions, and they turned around each other like they were dizzy. When we got close enough, I saw they didn't have masks. Their eyes were wide apart and rolled to each side. Their faces looked squeezed. They all had bangs. They looked down at their shoes, like blind people walking.

"Tards," said Leo.

I knew they were from the Shriner's home. Their faces got wide in our lights and they smiled. They moved so slowly, just holding on, as if moving itself were some kind of pain.

None of us said anything for awhile. We passed the junior high, then Church Street and the square. The light was green--I saw it the same time Legacy did--and he punched it hard, knowing the only cops would be behind us now, out of hearing in the parking lot behind the gym.

Going down Plymouth felt like the first long, falling ride on the Blue Streak up at Cedar Point. He made it this way by tearing us through and coasting the hill so our stomachs flipped. We forgot what we'd seen, or added it to the long night's strangenesses. Some strangeness, some magic would always be sad. Some of it showed the mistakes of the world. The knife could slip. The candle could drop. Anything could do it, and it was best not to think about.

Legacy punched it. I was scared of a crash. I put my knees up under my chin. My hair flattened over my cold, tight ears. The air was wet and full of fog. The trees and lawns made their morning dew. The dark air seemed meant to hold more than itself--everything rising to a sign of something. We felt the night around us as restless, but with a restlessness we had spun ourselves. We felt our whole past lives flying by, like me on a ship watching land disappear. There was nothing behind us we felt like remembering. This moment would always be only this moment.

Down the long slide of Plymouth and Smith, and out past the mill shanties all of us saw them: the pumpkins and porches or big rocks they sat on, the stream of them melded together by something. We had made ours and someone made these. But someone or something had made *us* up, at least into whatever filled us then. All of it--candles and bushes, ourselves--was a long, rich thought that the night had grown.

The eyes and mouths and sometimes lidless points of flame went on and on and on like a river, one that the moon had shattered in pieces. The town was gone once we crossed the tracks. The country houses jumped out from their trees. Legacy gunned it. The faces flew faster--miles of whirling and grinning fire. ♦

What Can't Be Spoken Of

Carol Hayes

If left too long unfed
the mare will bolt--
take the side of anyone's face
held near. There's no
comfort for her but fresh
grass and feed not
fought for.

Our stomachs full, we watch
scatter cool morning
certainty that brought us
here, follow the lead
rope broken through
rocks, mud, manure
to sweeter

places we've lost sight of
don't remember
in our fullness what drives
the tongue to wet
itself on salt blocks
left dry in a
dead place--
what memory forms crust
too thick for much
more than food, its smell or
lack of, to breach
or by what power such
rising of forelegs
suck breath from one moment
of ignorance.

Hesitant, we flank her
sides, pat ribs we've
grown blind to, whisper
around the truth
of why old ropes don't hold
and what can't be spoken of
give every name
but what it is.



THE SINGER

A Monodrama In Nine Minutes

Bob King

There is no set. This is done with sound, lights, and a male actor in his forties. In the blackout, a piece of obscure, classical music is playing. Lights reveal the farmer. He listens to the music and eventually speaks.

Farmer

Did you ever get a song in your head that just won't go away?

He listens again. The piece finishes or fades away, replaced by the sounds of a late spring, country night.

I like it out here in the country. I like the quiet. The cycles of nature.

Smiles

Drove my daughter crazy. She couldn't wait to go off to college.

Slight pause

When I came back from 'Nam, things seemed pretty dull to me, too. Just . . . civilians, doing civilian things. And, I did a lot of drinking. Don't get me wrong; I wasn't one of those boys that the war messed up, those kids that never got used to the killing. Boys like me . . . used to the cycles of nature . . . had it a little easier. No, I was drinking because . . . because something wasn't complete, I guess.

A wry smile

Or maybe I was just bored. I had been to see the elephant, and it just wasn't the same watching crops grow.

Slight pause

Watching my daughter grow changed all that. I got my head screwed back on straight, got married, and I started a family . . . though not necessarily in that order *and*, I suppose, not necessarily all that successfully. My wife left me after about five years. She wanted . . .

Shrugs

Well, she wanted more than this.

Slight pause

And now my daughter is on the verge of stepping out into that bright, shiny world full of wonder.

Smiles

She wants to be a singer. A real singer. When she first went off to the University, it was all rock and roll. She hated this old stuff I play around the house all the time. But she got lucky and got a teacher that showed her there was more to music than flash and glitter, more than MTV. She got a teacher that . . . *cultivated*. My daughter was back home this past spring break, practicing for her graduation recital. I heard . . .

Slight pause

I heard her sing, and she's pretty good.

Chuckles

I guess she gets that from her mother. I couldn't carry a tune in a body bag.

He stops. Surprised, puzzled and pained. After a pause, he speaks quietly.

Where did that come from?

Slight pause

I knew boys that wanted to sing.

A pause

To most of us going to 'Nam, the world was as full of wonder as it is for my daughter. We were young and full of juice. But we were also scared.

Slight pause

I keep thinking about that song.

Slight pause

I was in Seattle, shipping out the next day or two. I wouldn't have paid any attention to her if she hadn't been crying. She was just sitting on a park bench, sort of staring off into space with tears rolling down her cheeks. Once I looked closer, I saw how pretty she was. So I went up to her, and, well, to make a long story short, I guess I picked her up. Only not like in a bar or something. She didn't want to have anything to do with me until she found out I was going to 'Nam.

Slight pause

For the longest time we just talked. Walked around the park and talked, like young people have a knack for doing. She was mysterious. Would never tell me her last name. Said she didn't want me to carry it to Vietnam. And she wouldn't tell me why she had been crying. Why, from time to time, big tears would just fill up those sad, brown eyes. We finally went somewhere and ate, but, mostly, we just walked and talked. And I fell in love.

Smiles

Well, I was only nineteen and couldn't hardly tell the difference between love and lust. I guess I was falling in both.

Slight pause

We wound up at her place, and, after a couple of hours, I thought . . .

Almost shyly aware of the audience

Well, we had most of our clothes off, and then . . . then she asked me not to go to 'Nam.

Slight pause

I said I had to. That boys from my part of the world had to.

Slight pause

She put on a robe and moved over to the window seat. Light was coming through the curtains, sort of framing her face and hair. She sat and looked at the night. The light was shining through tears. And she said, "I promised a boy that went over there."

Slight pause

I sat back on the edge of the bed and just stared into the dark at my feet, remembering all the stories I had heard about the war.

Slight pause

And then she began to sing. It was a foreign song, sort of low and sweet. It wasn't like for a funeral, but, still, it was maybe the most sad song I have ever heard.

Slight pause

I don't know how to put this into words, but I was thinking about things without thinking. Just pictures coming into my mind. Images of things I had known and believed would never end: Football nights in high school. Girls. Drinking secret beer on a dark country road. Swimming in a summer pond. Things I would never do again or see again through the same eyes. . . . And I began to cry.

Slight pause

She stood up from that window seat. The robe just sort of floated down into the shadows, and, for just a moment, she hesitated in that golden light. Then she came to me.

Slight pause

BOB KING

I was leaving; I had to leave. And I begged her for her name. But she never spoke again. She kissed me, and the door slowly closed. The click of the latch in that dark hallway was as sharp as the sound of a rifle bolt.

A pause

They flew me back into California, but I went up to Seattle and looked for her. The apartment, the places we went, the park. People vaguely remembered her, but she was just another college kid. No one knew her name or where she'd gone. I hung around town for about ten days, walking the campus grounds and the parks. But, finally, I gave up and came home.

Slight pause

I've forgotten what she looked like. Over time, she's become a mixture of all the women I've ever known. But I never forgot that song. I guess, over the years, I must have bought every classical record ever made. I like to think that's one of the reasons my daughter took a liking to that kind of music. But I never heard that song again.

Slight pause

Until I heard my daughter practising for her recital.

A pause

I'm going up to the University tomorrow to hear my daughter sing that song again. And to meet the teacher that taught it to her.

Fade to blackout

END OF PLAY

Selective Memory

A One Act Impromptu Discussion

Mark S.P. Turvin

Characters:

Jeff Klein--46. Tall, dark, wears a formal tuxedo.

Matt Klein--21. Tall, dark, also wearing a tux. Jeff's son.

Setting:

A dim stage. Center is a seven foot long platform, set as a table with a starched white tablecloth, almost floor length. On the center of the table is a single candle in a beautiful silver holder. At each end of the table is a chair.

Time:

Any spring after January 20th, 1981.

THE CURTAIN RISES--to find Jeff Klein seated in the SL chair, hands folded on the table. There is impatience in his stature, which is conveyed with an economy of movement. A door is heard to open off SR with difficulty, then shut. He stands expectantly, straightening his cuffs. His son, Matt Klein, enters, carrying two bone china coffee cups.

Jeff

Do you need any help?

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Matt

I've got it, thanks dad.

(He puts a cup down at each end of the table; there is an awkward pause)

It's hot chocolate. I remembered--not coffee.

Jeff

Thank you.

(Pause)

Uhh, congratulations.

(Sounding rehearsed)

A cause for celebration. Another college graduate for the Klein family.

(Offers his hand to shake)

Matt

Thank you.

(They shake hands stiffly)

Jeff

Onto graduate school, hmm?

Matt

Mmm-hmm.

(Pause. Matt goes to sit down. Jeff does so, too)

Jeff

English?

Matt

Theatre, too.

Jeff

Oh.

(Pause)

Jeff (cont.)

You're not staying at Syracuse?

(Matt shakes his head)

Where to?

Matt

Boston University. Haven't I told you this already?

Jeff

I don't remember you telling me that they accepted you. That's good. Scholarships?

Matt

Mmm-hmm. I won't be needing them now, though. Not with the money I'll be getting from this--

Jeff

(Interrupting, not wanting to bring up the subject)

Use it to find a nice apartment up there.

Matt

Right.

(Silence)

I just found out about my summer job. I'll be a floater at IBM. I'll be making about fifteen dollars an hour.

Jeff

Good. Maybe you'll like it there. It's a good company.

Matt

And it's only a ten minute subway ride away from B.U.

Jeff

Maybe you could stay there during the semester.

Matt

Well, it's not like I'm really going to need the cash.

Jeff

(Nods)

But it still would be nice. Make connections up there.

Matt

What am I going to need connections at IBM for? I'm in an M.A./Ph.D. program for Theatre and Writing.

Jeff

You never know--good recommendations, that sort of thing.

Matt

(Brusquely)

Right, right, yes dad.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Jeff

What's wrong?

Matt

Nothing. Forget it.

(Pause, sighs)

Jeff

You were out on Thursday when your mom called you about this.

Matt

Yeah.

(Pause)

Jeff

Where were you?

Matt

Ingrid and I went to the Mets game.

Jeff

Oh, that's interesting.

(Beat)

Who won?

Matt

San Francisco.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

Good game?

Matt

The Mets lost, you tell me.

(Pause)

Why were you surprised?

Jeff

About what?

Matt

When I told you that I was at the game.

Jeff

I didn't know you like baseball, that's all. It must've been something you picked up at Syracuse.

Matt

Oh, Jesus, right. Right.

(Beat)

At Syracuse.

Jeff

Now what?

Matt

Nothing, nothing. This isn't the time or the place to get into this. Can we try to

find something we both can talk about?

Jeff

You're always pushing things off. Let's talk, here and now. It's the perfect moment to. We can talk about things from when you were growing up. We can talk about how you're feeling right now. Maybe compare notes about some things.

(Pause, softly)

People will be coming in soon, taking this moment away. Let's just talk to each other, straight. Please.

Matt

(Sarcastically)

Sounds great, dad. About what? I think the weather is the only thing we can agree on, if that much.

Jeff

Did I say we had to agree?

Matt

Good thing, too.

(Silence)

Jeff

(Launching into a new subject)

What do you want to do after grad school?

Matt

What *kind* of want?

Jeff

What do you mean?

Matt

Realistic want, or hope want?

Jeff

Realistic might be a welcome change of pace.

Matt

What does *that* mean?

Jeff

It doesn't *mean* anything.

Matt

Sounded like a crack to me.

Jeff

Do you have to act paranoid here, now?

Matt

I use what I'm given.

(Pause)

Listen, I'm just . . .

(Beat)

a little tense.

Jeff

I understand.

(Pause)

When did you make your decision? About which grad school.

Matt

You really don't remember me telling you how I got into B.U.?

Jeff

I knew that you had applied to B.U., Syracuse, and another--

Matt

Yale Drama--

Jeff

(A little too excited)

That's right, an Ivy League school. Very impressive.

(Beat, offering an explanation)

We haven't talked in a while. You've been busy with graduation, and I was setting up the income comparison data for Stanton.

Matt

Well, I decided to be daring, played a hunch. I sent in a copy of a one act play to Boston University instead of writing the essay that they had asked for.

(He pauses, looking to see if his father is interested)

You listening?

Jeff

Of course.

Matt

I mean, you're the one who wanted to know--

Jeff

I'm listening, Matt.

Matt

(Quickly, brusquely)

Okay.

(Beat, goes on)

So, the essay was supposed to be about what you just asked, what I wanted to do with my degree when I was done. So instead of the essay, I sent them the play I wrote at the beginning of the year; the one that mom came to see at Syracuse Stage. It's about this mother and daughter who have to care for the physically abusive grandfather who's had an accident and is now wheelchair-bound.

Jeff

(Quickly jumping in, trying to impress his son)

Conscious Kindness. I would've come up to see it, but the fourth quarter numbers were due for ProTech--

Matt

(Interrupting)

No, it's called *Conspiracy of Kindness*.

Jeff

(Warily)

Close--

(Silence, prompting)

Go on, Matt--Please--

Matt

(Pause, a little hurt)

Right. Well, I sent it to them, and they *called* me. It was the Chair of the Theatre Department. He called me on a Friday afternoon, and asked me to meet with him in Boston the next Tuesday morning. I canceled rehearsals for that Monday and Tuesday night, and we drove into Boston in the--

Jeff

(Interrupting)

We who?

Matt

Ingrid and I.

(Pause, seeing if he remembers)

My girlfriend.

(Jeff nods his head)

She's the one with the car.

Jeff

Ingrid has a car?

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Matt

Yes, a restored vintage Beetle. What does this have to do with the story, dad?

Jeff

I just didn't know, okay.

(Pause)

I'm sorry, go on.

Matt

(Standoffishly)

Some of my friends are respectable people. I mean, Ingrid's--

Jeff

(Talking over his son)

I said I was sorry, go on with your story--

Matt

Ingrid's not even in theatre, she's getting *her* degree in Elementary Education.

Jeff

(Quietly, when he's finished)

Please. I'm interested. Tell me your story. I didn't mean to digress.

Matt

(Testing)

Where was I?

Jeff

Ingrid drove you from Syracuse to Boston on Monday.

(Quickly)

See, I *was* listening.

Matt

(Smiles slightly, tells the story with little dramatic pauses, fully aware that he's playing storyteller)

Okay. She drove me into Boston through this freak late April snowstorm. I'm expecting that I'm going to get an interview, and that I'll have to defend my writing and come up with all this technical jargon to B.S. this guy with, right.

(Beat)

So I go in, dressed up in the Armani suit you and mom gave me for Christmas, and he looks me over and says, "Why'dja send a play?" I told him because if he wanted to know about me, he'd find out more by reading my writing.

(Beat)

He sat quietly for a minute, nodded his head, and said, "You know, Mister Klein, you could've gotten in a lot of trouble if you'd tried a stunt like that and you weren't a good writer." He shook my hand and took me on a tour of their Equity House on Huntington Street and their Playwright's Theatre on campus.

(Excitedly)

Oh, and I met Derek Wolcott. He's B.U.'s playwright-in-residence. He just won a Pulitzer Prize. I was introduced to him as the first in their next crop of graduate playwrights.

Jeff

That's great.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Matt

Do you know what kind of a pleasure it is to get an acceptance call from Yale University and reject *them*?

(He smiles)

Jeff

(Concerned)

You don't think you might have been too hasty? Yale's a great school--

Matt

Dad, Yale's only good for its connections. I want to learn how to write, not how to network. The big joke about actors that come out of Yale Drama is that they know how to audition better than anyone, but couldn't *act* to save their lives.

Jeff

It's just that it's an *Ivy League* school--

Matt

Ivy League, bullshit. I don't want to buy a name, I want an education.

Jeff

If that's what you think is best.

Matt

(Perturbed, he sighs, then they both fall into a silence. Motions to the empty cups)

Do you want anymore?

(Jeff shakes his head)

Wasn't very good, anyway. You'd think with the money this place charges, you'd get real hot chocolate, not the packaged stuff.

(Beat)

And you need whipped cream in it every time.

Jeff

(With a knowing smile)

Or marshmallows.

Matt

Oh, yeah. The mini ones that mom always threw into the mug.

(Smiles, pause)

Jeff

How is she?

Matt

She'll be in later.

(Silence)

Shit, is that the only thing we agree on?

Jeff

It's a start.

Matt

Well, a start isn't good enough. Not now.

Jeff

(Slowly, deliberately)

Yes, it is. It can be.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Matt

I'm twenty-one years old. A start isn't good enough.

Jeff

Please, calm down, not right now--

Matt

If I don't start now, when?

Jeff

I wanted to keep this pleasant.

Matt

The others will be here soon.

(Pause)

Now that I think of it, this is the perfect time. This isn't a time for pleasantries. Not anymore.

Jeff

Please, Matt. For God's sake, let's just leave this alone.

(Matt stops, leans back in his chair, fuming. Silence)

What *exactly* are you going to get your Masters in?

Matt

Creative Writing with an emphasis in Playwrighting, and Directing.

Jeff

There's Publishing in there somewhere, isn't there?

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Matt

Why should there be?

Jeff

Don't take this the wrong way. I just think it would be good to have something to fall back on.

Matt

If I need to fall back, I'll teach. I don't want to work for some magazine as layout. The classes would be wasted on me. And I don't want to be an editor of other people's work. I want my own to be read.

Jeff

Don't get upset again, I'm just trying to make sure that you're doing the right thing.

Matt

It's what I *want* to be doing.

(Silence)

Jeff

(More to himself)

Okay, that's all right. You're still young enough to do that.

Matt

I'm glad that I have your approval.

Jeff

You do, Matt

Matt

Oh, do I? Every time I mention something about theatre, you get this look on your face like you're smelling shit.

Jeff

Matt, please, you have to understand, the world that you've grown up in, and moved into is--

(Searches for words)

it's a little alien to me. When your mother and I were growing up, we didn't have the choices that you have. Everything was more cut and dried. Money was tight, so we had only one way to do things.

(Pause, hesitant)

There was a time, though.

(Allowing himself to reminisce)

When I was six, I remember that I had this crazy dream. I wanted to be a journalist. I'd seen this movie about a foreign correspondent, and it seemed so glamorous. Dangerous. Here was this man who was able to dig beneath the surface and find the truth. He was always going to these exotic places and doing exciting things.

(Smiles)

I used to write up this little newspaper for the block we lived on in Brooklyn. I called it *The Flatbush Times*. I'd find out all the local events, the happenings, and the gossip. I'd collect it and write it all up once a week, and then Mr. Von Dreele would let me use his ditto machine to print about twenty copies. I'd sell them for a penny a piece.

(Pause, proudly)

I'll bet you didn't know I was the Assistant Editor of my high school newspaper.

Matt

I don't remember hearing about that.

Jeff

(Softly)

Maybe it was more than a dream. I guess I really wanted to go to school for journalism.

(Harder, hiding the hurt)

When I was sixteen, though, and graduated high school, I went to Syracuse for a *business* degree. There was no choice. It *had* to be a business degree. I supported myself through college with academic scholarships and by working the night shift at McDonnell/Douglas. My father knew what he wanted, and I did it. And when I graduated college, I went to work for him. He needed me to take over what was left of the accounting firm then. He'd named it Klein and Klein for a reason.

(Pause)

And when your mother graduated from City College, we got married. We didn't,

(Beat, just a hint of disdain)

we *couldn't* live together, first. We squeaked out a living, until the firm started making some money and we were earning enough to move to the suburbs. I commuted to New York City every day, six days a week, eight to six. We had you. There was a path, and it had to be followed. And we did all of this so that we could make sure that you had the opportunity to have it better than we did.

(Beat)

And I guess we did.

(Pause)

MARK S.P. TURVIN

How funny. I guess we really did succeed with our wishes. It's just that we never expected that if you *were* given every opportunity, that you wouldn't follow me into the business. You had everything you needed. We never spoiled you, we just wanted you to be happy. It was a complete shock to your mother and I that what you wanted, more than anything else, was to become a writer--

Matt

(Interrupting)

Don't you mean a disappointment--

Jeff

No, no, *really*, a shock. We never had the chance to try anything besides the vocations that we were given. I was expected to take over the business from my father since the very beginning.

(Pause)

And, who knows, if my father had been able to give me the chances that we gave to you, maybe I would have done something else. Maybe I would have become a journalist. But even if it was what I wanted, it couldn't be.

(Pause)

These days, though, things are much more open, permissible than they were when I was growing up.

(Beat, justifying)

The arts were for the Bohemians, the ones who lived in hovels and cold water flats in Greenwich Village. Unshaven beatniks and drug addicts. You just didn't *do* that sort of thing for a profession back then, it was just an excuse to avoid work.

(Trying to make it seem pleasant)

But now, it's honorable. Writing for television, or the movies--

Matt

You see, there you go again. Movies and television. Dad, I want to write for *theatre*. You can't seem to get that into your head. Don't you see, I may *not* make truckloads of money. I may be respected by my peers, even have some plays produced on Broadway, but that's not going to be good enough for you. I have to make more money than you before I can earn your respect . . .

Jeff

(Interrupting)

Listen, I understand that you're upset--

Matt

Upset? Classic understatement. You know what's pissed me off since I first got here? You and your fucking bad memory. Where the hell were you when I was growing up?

Jeff

What does that mean--

Matt

I've *loved* baseball since mom took me to my first Mets game. I used to play ball in the front yard with Marc and John and Steve. I collected baseball cards. Don't you remember that I once ruined one of your t-shirts with a magic marker trying to make it into a Mets jersey?

Jeff

That was more than ten years ago--

Matt

(Cruelly)

Is that an excuse or an explanation?

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

Just fact.

Matt

And meanwhile, you're surprised that I went to a ballgame with my girlfriend. I thought I was *worth* a little more than that to you.

(Long silence)

Jeff

(Hurt)

That was uncalled for.

Matt

(Quickly)

No dad, that was very called for. You *never* showed up for my childhood. Every memory that I have has my mother, or my friends in it. I don't see *you* fitting anywhere in it.

Jeff

No, now there's something wrong with that.

Matt

It's true. I would play baseball with my friends, and sometimes *their* fathers, and I'd go places with mom.

Jeff

And who the hell do you think was driving the car to those places?

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Matt

I--

(Falls silent)

Jeff

What, did you forget that there were two people in the front seat?

Matt

I don't remember you--

Jeff

To use your phrase, is that an excuse, or an explanation?

(Pause)

Matt

But you weren't there when I was playing ball, or running around with my friends in the front yard. You were never home, then.

Jeff

That's not true, too. I was home at quarter to seven every workday.

Matt

But you never came outside. You were never out there with me and my other friends' fathers.

Jeff

You don't remember it.

Matt

No, I swear to God you weren't.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

You were the one who demanded I buy the Nerf football. You had me throw that thing to you wherever we were.

(Beat, remembering)

Once we knocked over that porcelain cat that your mother loved. Doesn't any of this ring a bell? We were both scolded for weeks after that.

Matt

(Shaking his head)

But you never did anything. I mean, you don't remember what I liked. And on those long drives

Jeff

(Interrupts)

You were always in the backseat playing with your Matchbox cars.

Matt

(Stopped, realizing)

Oh, Jesus, my cars. I used to love those things.

Jeff

Your allowance was one dollar and four cents a week, the cost of each of those cars with tax.

Matt

Oh, shit. When they raised the price to a dollar nine, I had a fit.

Jeff

We let you do the dishes for money.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Matt

Oh, come on, I used to get those things and not have to do any work. You corrupted my childhood with those stupid work ethics you introduced.

Jeff

Corrupted, hmm? Taught you high finance, now didn't I?

Matt

(Begrudgingly)

Yeah, I suppose.

(There is a pause, the first pleasant one)

Still, I swear to God that I don't remember you there a lot of the time.

Jeff

In a way, I wasn't. You were so introverted, always playing games by yourself and creating imaginary friends. I didn't get much time in there.

Matt

But I remember everyone else.

Jeff

I guess you remember everyone in descending order. I was never quite as popular with you as your mother. I was always very jealous of the way you two were. I felt left out a lot. It's not surprising that you forgot that I was there. If it didn't involve your imaginary friends, your real friends, or your mom, there wasn't much room left for me.

Matt

(Pause, thinking about this)

Makes me sound like a complete ass.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

Considering the circumstances, I guess it was a natural enough thing for you to do.

Matt

Why didn't you remember my obsession with baseball?

Jeff

Because I *hate* the game. I hate most sports. I used to like it when the Dodgers were still in Brooklyn, but when they deserted us, I lost my interest.

Matt

Very self-centered of both of us to do that.

Jeff

(Nods)

That's true. It's a real shame. When I was growing up, I could never talk to my father, either. Nothing was spoken, just understood. I knew what he wanted me to do, and I did it.

(Pause)

He never understood--no, I think he *chose* not to understand that all I ever wanted to do, from the age of six, was to be a journalist. To write, like you want to. Long before I had my dream, though, he had his expectations.

(Pause)

And I swore to myself that I would not be the kind of father that my father was.

(Pause, this is hard for him)

I guess I failed--

(Matt is about to say something, Jeff cuts him off)

We failed.

(Matt looks down, nodding slightly)

I started to think of limits and expectations, and you became defensive.

Matt

I feel like a jerk.

(Pause, hoping for more)

I wonder what else we did that I've forgotten.

(No response)

Shit. It sucks.

Jeff

Look at it this way, you might not have remembered this much. I would have gone to my grave and you still wouldn't have figured out who that guy was driving the car during vacations.

(Matt looks down)

That was a joke.

Matt

No, it wasn't. I guess there's a lot I'm going to miss, now.

(Pause)

I don't want this to end.

Jeff

You know it has to.

Matt

I was just starting to talk to you. It's been a while since we've really done that.

MARK S.P. TURVIN

Jeff

Better late than never.

Matt

(Loudly, angered)

Oh, stop it with your fucking lame clichés, dad!

Jeff

Forgive me for saying this, but clichés are clichés because they're so true.

Matt

Oh, God, spare me, please. Shit. This is almost worse in a way. I may as well not know that you were around and how you were feeling for all the good it does now.

Jeff

It can give you a lot of things. You can remember things, use this as a lesson.

(Pause)

Try living it.

(Short pause)

Try *changing* it.

(Beat)

Maybe even write about it.

Matt

Dad, stop this, please. I needed more time.

Jeff

(Quietly)

But we can't. Live with that. Live with what you've been given.

(Silence, looks away from Matt)

I'm sorry.

Matt

(To Jeff)

No, I'm sorry.

*Jeff looks at Matt after he has said the last line. They stand, and Matt seems to wait for a hug. Instead, Jeff offers to shake hands. They do so, and there is a feeling that there would have been some kind of connection other than this had things been different, but there can't be. Without showing emotion, they stand looking at each other for a few seconds, then Jeff gathers up the cups from the table and puts them on one of the chairs. Matt gets the candle and holder and puts it on the floor beside the platform/table. They move to opposite ends of the table, and lift the tablecloth and fold it, revealing a flat-topped coffin underneath. Matt takes the folded tablecloth, and opens the coffin for Jeff. Jeff climbs in, and lies down. Matt closes the lid, and replaces the candle and holder and folded tablecloth on the top of the coffin. He moves the chairs in front of the coffin for kneeling, and takes up the two coffee cups. Without looking back, he exits to--**Blackout**.*

END OF PLAY

The Altruist

A One Act Play

John Hayes

Characters:

Stewart -- the altruist

Eleanor -- a married woman

Set description:

The set is simple. A row of expensive townhomes should be depicted. Center stage requires a door frame and a door that will open. Eleanor is on one side and Stewart is on the other.

A table should be upstage next to Eleanor. A large book is also needed.

Setting: An exclusive neighborhood of townhomes.

At Rise: A forty-year-old man wearing a pinstriped grey suit, blue shirt and red tie enters from stage left. He carries a large book and a note pad. He matches the address on the note pad to one on a house and walks to the door and knocks. An attractive woman in her late thirties opens the door. Her red housecoat is tied at the waist with a violet belt. Dark glasses cover her eyes.

Stewart

Good morning lovely lady. My name is Stewart. I represent the *Brothers and Sisters of Jesus*.

Eleanor

Never heard of them. (*Tries to shut door*)

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Stewart

(Blocks door with his foot) I am surprised to hear that most lovely lady. Everyone I have talked to in this block has heard of Jesus.

Eleanor

I've heard of a Jesus. But if he's the one I'm thinking about he didn't have any brothers or sisters.

Stewart

Many people share your ignorance of his glorious family. The truth is, he has a sister, Mary, and two brothers, Luke and Duke.

Eleanor

I thought Mary was his mother.

Stewart

This is what the entrenched church would have you believe. But the true truth as explained in this magnificent volume, *Open Your Eyes and See True Truth*, proves conclusively that Mary was a virgin and could not have been his mother. *(Offers her book)*

Eleanor

(Ignores book) You may be right. I'm very busy, if you'll excuse me I have a talk show to watch. *(Starts to push door closed)*

Stewart

(Pushes back on door) Those glasses you wear seem extremely dark. Is something wrong with your eyes?

Eleanor

There is nothing wrong with my eyes.

JOHN HAYES

Stewart

Are you certain?

Eleanor

There is nothing wrong with my eyes.

Stewart

Lady, are you certain? If something is wrong with your eyes, the *Brothers and Sisters of Jesus* can help.

Eleanor

There is nothing wrong with my fucking eyes. See. (*Removes glasses*)

Stewart

You have a black eye. Something is wrong with your eyes.

Eleanor

Nothing is wrong with my eyes. There is mild discoloration around my left eye. Nothing is wrong with my right eye. It is fine. Therefore nothing is wrong with my eyes. Actually, they're rather exotic. Look.

Stewart

(*Looks into her eyes*) Lady, I stand corrected. Please accept my apology. There is nothing wrong with your eyes. They are truly exotic. However, *The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus* can help with the discoloration around your left eye.

Eleanor

I don't give a fuck for the *Brothers and Sisters*. I don't give a shit. Do you fucking understand? I don't give a shit that my eye is discolored. And don't call me lady again. My name, not that it's any of your damn business, is Eleanor Shirley Ann Hartly-Jones.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Stewart

Eleanor, the queen of the Nile, the mother of Jesus, I bow to you. (*He kneels, takes her right hand*) How soft it is, how smooth, how supple. (*Kisses her hand*)

Eleanor

(*Extends her other hand*) You may kiss my left hand also. (*He kisses the back of her other hand*)

Stewart

(*Looks up*) It is true, as written in this unprecedented volume of *Open Your Eyes and See True Truth*, in your eyes flows the wisdom of the Nile.

Eleanor

What?

Stewart

Eleanor, queen of the Nile, mother of Jesus, in your eyes I see your ancient wisdom. You are the reincarnation of all that is good, all that is true, all that is beauty.

Eleanor

What?

Stewart

It is written. Written in this magnificent volume. No home should be without it.

Eleanor

You cheap hustler. Get to the price. I'm busy.

Stewart

Lady.

JOHN HAYES

Eleanor

Eleanor, not 'lady', fuck head. (*Extends her palm*)

Stewart

(*Kisses her palm*) Your majesty. Eleanor, I am your slave. *The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus* are your slaves.

Eleanor

I don't see any one else here. Have you got any references? What about identification? Are you in the phone book? (*Rubs the side of his face*) You need a new blade.

Stewart

Alas, most valued lady.

Eleanor

My name is Eleanor, fuck head. Alas what?

Stewart

Eleanor, queen of the Nile. Most lovely queen of all.

Eleanor

I thought Cleopatra was loveliest.

Stewart

You beat her in a beauty contest.

Eleanor

I did! Really? When?

Stewart

April 11, 49 B.C.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Eleanor

Is that in the book? *(Takes book from him and opens it)*

Stewart

Where else? All truth is written in the book.

Eleanor

The book tells about my past lives? *(Flips thru pages)*

Stewart

Absolutely.

Eleanor

My beauty? My wiles? Forgotten lovers? It's all there?

Stewart

Absolutely.

Eleanor

It tells of my charm? Men who killed for me? Were there many?

Stewart

Your charm permeates the volume. Strong, glorious men, all.

Eleanor

(Closes book and hands it back to Stewart. Flashes her diamond ring)
Four karats, my husband insisted. He adores me.

Stewart

(He is uncomfortable holding the book and shifts it from one hand to the other. Finally gives it back to her) Who hit you last night?

JOHN HAYES

Eleanor

Are you from the police?

Stewart

I am from *The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus*.

Eleanor

You got identification? Show me. (*Places book back on table*)

Stewart

My card. (*Extracts card from pocket and hands it to her*)

Eleanor

(*Reads*) Stewart Anthony Scythe, Co-founder, *The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus*.

Stewart

That should be proof enough for you. I'll have my card back, please. (*Extends hand*)

Eleanor

(*Puts card inside her housecoat*) Don't you have any other cards?

Stewart

Alas, the printing order was delayed.

Eleanor

Delayed, really?

Stewart

Really.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Eleanor

I don't remember there being an address or phone number on the card. You should have an address and phone number.

Stewart

The phone number and address are shown on the cards at the printer. Delivery is next week.

Eleanor

If you're going to be out saving you shouldn't use old cards. People won't think highly of you.

Stewart

I agree most precious Eleanor.

Eleanor

Then why are you?

Stewart

Why am I what?

Eleanor

Out saving with an old card.

Stewart

Most majestic Eleanor, to you I will speak only truth. I did take off from my virtuous duties until such time as my cards were printed. But last night in Kelly's Brasserie I saw someone hit you and knew I must act. I followed you here. I returned this morning. When your husband left, I knocked. It was your husband?

Eleanor

He left late.

JOHN HAYES

Stewart

Your eye is discolored.

Eleanor

A little make up and it's gone.

Stewart

As you left Kelly's last night you vomited on my shoe.

Eleanor

I thought you looked familiar. I am sorry.

Stewart

Madam, I must help you. *The Brothers and...*

Eleanor

(Finishes for him) Sisters of Jesus want to help me.

Stewart

Yes, madam.

Eleanor

I prefer 'lady' to 'madam'.

Stewart

Lady, you hurt. You hurt physically, I can see that; you hurt emotionally, I can feel that. Let me help you. Let *The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus* help you.

Eleanor

You are from the police aren't you?

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Stewart

Did you call the police?

Eleanor

No, why would I call the police? My husband adores me.

Stewart

Precisely. Then I am not from the police. I am from...

Eleanor

The Brothers and Sisters Of Jesus. You want to help me.

Stewart

I must help you. The book will help you. Take it in both hands. Feel its power embrace you.

Eleanor

(Warily picks up book) Maybe I could use a little help. Yes, touching the book helps. I feel succor. My heated blood swirls.

Stewart

Lady, I am going to save you from any further emotional or physical harm. It's your husband, isn't it, who abuses you.

Eleanor

Yes, he forces me to drink with him in sleazy bars.

Stewart

Sleazy bars?

Eleanor

Like last night, Kelly's, a real bumner.

JOHN HAYES

Stewart

(Cringes) How often does this happen?

Eleanor

Once, maybe twice a month.

Stewart

Drinking is evil ma'am, no person should do it. Since I found the true truth, I do not drink or smoke or cuss. You must pray.

Eleanor

I doubt that will do much good. Why were you in Kelly's Brasserie if you don't drink? *(Offers book to Stewart)*

Stewart

(Ignores book) Sitting in bars is my form of penance.

Eleanor

Mine too. *(Places book on table beside her)*

Stewart

There is something I must do for you.

Eleanor

It's taking you long enough.

Stewart

When the time comes I will act. But now pray, seek forgiveness, you must pray.

Eleanor

I pray you get the fuck away from here.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Stewart

(Touches her swollen face) My touch will heal your bruise. *(Removes hand)*

Eleanor

(Takes mirror from pocket. Looks at face) It looks the same to me.

Stewart

Perhaps a kiss.

Eleanor

Do you really think a kiss will help?

Stewart

The brothers do. I kiss for them. *(He kisses her mouth. She grabs and kisses his eye, his mouth, his ear)*

Eleanor

Why did you kiss my mouth? It's my eye that hurts.

Stewart

I thought it was the area around your eye.

Eleanor

It was, but now I have something in my eye.

Stewart

Where? Let me see.

Eleanor

Don't look at it. Kiss it.

JOHN HAYES

Stewart

(Kisses her eye) Is that better?

Eleanor

It's the other eye.

Stewart

(Kisses her other eye) Better?

Eleanor

Much better. But my navel hurts.

Stewart

Are you an inner or an outer?

Eleanor

Inner, I think. Check for yourself.

Stewart

Probably lint. *(He removes her housecoat and takes his card from her black bra as she drops his trousers revealing pink boxers with black dots. He places the card in his left coat pocket)*

Stewart

Your beauty is unsurpassed.

Eleanor

I know. Maybe you should come inside. *(He waddles in, closes door)*

Stage slowly darkens. Then slowly lightens. Door opens. Stewart steps outside, turns to face Eleanor.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Stewart

The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus thank you.

Eleanor

I wish more of them had been here.

Stewart

It might have been too much for you.

Eleanor

Not if they all are as quick as you.

Stewart

What did you decide about the book?

Eleanor

I'll need to sleep on it. I hate making impulsive decisions.

Stewart

A queen must learn to act on impulse.

Eleanor

A queen does as she damn well pleases and I prefer to move with caution.

Stewart

If I acted with caution, my virtue would wither.

Eleanor

I thought you said you quit smoking since you learned about the true truth?

JOHN HAYES

Stewart

I did quit but it would have been rude of me to let you smoke alone.

Eleanor

You came alone.

Stewart

It is my failing. Did you enjoy the smoke?

Eleanor

I've had better.

Stewart

The coffee was very good.

Eleanor

Yes it was, it was instant.

Stewart

That explains it. Doesn't it?

Eleanor

Yes, come back when you get new cards. Are they embossed?

Stewart

It may be awhile before I get them.

Eleanor

Are they embossed? You should let me design them.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Stewart

I need to order them.

Eleanor

After you get them embossed, come back.

Stewart

It may be awhile.

Eleanor

Why?

Stewart

I'm really not certain.

Eleanor

You could always lie.

Stewart

I never lie.

Eleanor

Then it is all true. I am the reincarnation of that broad that beat out Cleopatra in a beauty pageant.

Stewart

Absolutely.

Eleanor

And the mother of Jesus? How can that be?

JOHN HAYES

Stewart

It was a rapid series of reincarnations.

Eleanor

The delivery was difficult.

Stewart

Also his sister.

Eleanor

Both?

Stewart

All three. Do you want me to kill your husband for you?

Eleanor

(Beat) Are you from the police?

Stewart

No, but I have a tomahawk.

Eleanor

You didn't mention it before.

Stewart

There was no reason to until now.

Eleanor

Did you really like the coffee?.

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Stewart

Yes, very much.

Eleanor

Is it very sharp?

Stewart

Sharp enough to slice a pubic hair.

Eleanor

Before or after?

Stewart

Before. After, I would need to resharpen.

Eleanor

I think my talk show has started.

Stewart

You won't want to miss it.

Eleanor

I don't know if you really should. It seems so (*Beat*) conclusive.

Stewart

It's seldom I have the opportunity to use my tomahawk for such a good cause.

Eleanor

I've always supported good causes.

JOHN HAYES

Stewart

I know. It's in the book, page 191.

Eleanor

Maybe I support too many causes.

Stewart

Don't change. Your charm will fade, your beauty wither. Page 63.

Eleanor

Wither, really? That seems so *(Beat)* ghastly. Page 63 you say. *(Takes book from table)*

Stewart

Whatever you do, don't wither. It's horrible and very painful.

Eleanor

He'll be home around ten. I'll be at the tobacconist. *(Leans forward and shoves book in Stewart's hands. As he awkwardly takes it, she removes his card from his coat pocket and places it her bra)*

Stewart

(Moves book from hand to hand) Does he have Turkish cigarettes?

Eleanor

Not he, she. The owner is a woman, Mable, Mable Bodtower. She's an ardent feminist. So am I. I try not to flaunt it, though.

Stewart

I didn't realize. Does she have Turkish? *(Offers her the book)*

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

Eleanor

(Ignores book) She's very modern. I could ask.

Stewart

American is fine. *(Turns, walks toward stage right)*

Eleanor

(Calls after him) Don't forget your sharpener.

END OF PLAY



Contributors

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JOHN HAYES is a Baltimore playwright and poet. He has produced two of his one-act plays, *Broken Romance* and *I Am Not Now*. His poetry has appeared in *Carleton Arts Review*, *Thema*, *Bogg*, *Poet's Sanctuary*, and *Brouhaha*.

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F. J. SCHAACK recently received his Ph.D. in Humanities from the University of Texas at Arlington, where he leads creative writing workshops. His works have appeared in *The Seattle Review*, *The Black Scholar*, *Pleiades*, and *America's Review*.

MARK S. P. TURVIN is currently working on his Ph.D. in Modern American Literature at Arizona State University. He won playwrighting awards from the Arizona State Commission on the Arts in 1991 and 1992, and his murder mystery dinner theatre production, *The Big Kill*, has been running continuously in Phoenix since 1991. As of 1993, he has been Playwright, Dramaturg, and Director-in-Residence at Playwright's Workshop in Phoenix. *Selective Memory* was written in response to his father's serious illness in 1989. William Turvin has since recovered and has moved from New York to retire with his wife in Phoenix.

RICHARD WIRICK writes and practices law in California. His prose, poetry, and book reviews have appeared in *The Indiana Review*, *The Northwest Review*, *Kiosk*, and other publications. He is completing a collection of short stories.



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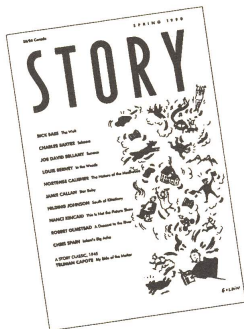
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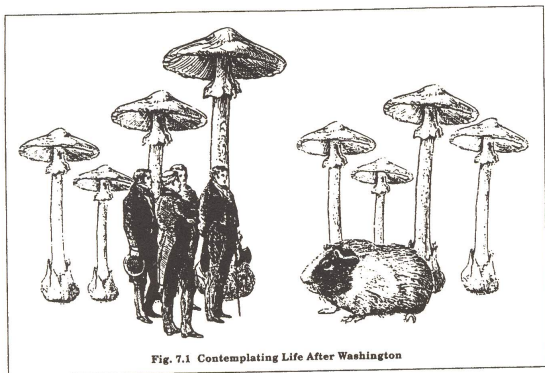


Fig. 7.1 Contemplating Life After Washington

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