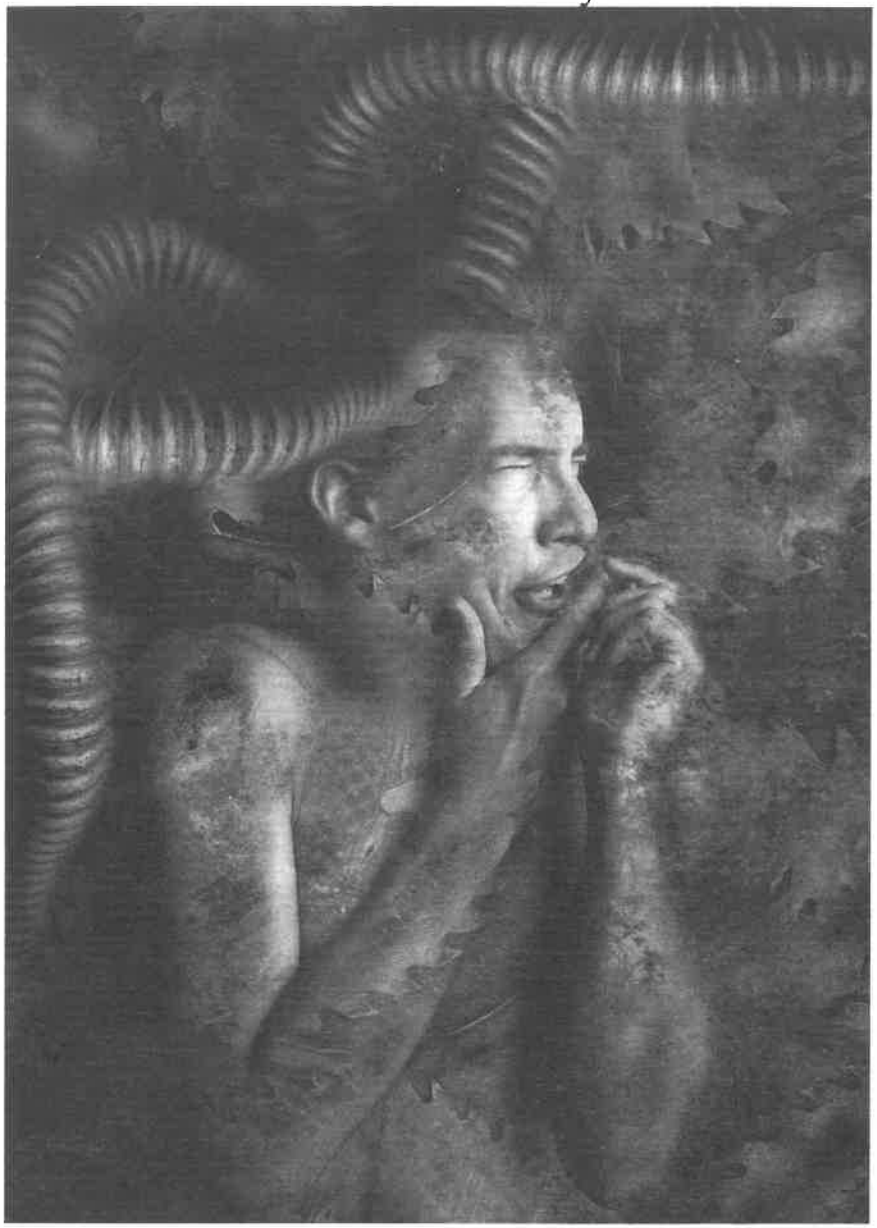
Thin Air

A Journal of the Literary Arts



Volume III, No. 1 $4.95

Thin Air

Journal of the Literary Arts

Volume III Number 1 1998

Northern Arizona University

Cover Art: "Blades," a photograph by Mark Hillis

Thin Air is published two times a year by the Graduate Creative Writing Association in cooperation with the English Department of Northern Arizona University. Our submission period is from September 1 through May 1. Manuscripts arriving between May 2 and August 31 will be returned unread. The editors welcome submissions of stories, poems, essays, reviews, illustrations and photographs.

Submissions should be addressed to:

Thin Air
P.O. Box 23549
Flagstaff, Arizona 86002.

All submissions should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Submissions from other countries should be accompanied by a sufficient number of international postal reply coupons. Please query before sending book reviews & interviews.

Subscriptions
$9.00 for one year (2 issues)
$17.00 for two years (4 issues)

Subscriptions to foreign addresses are $1.00 a year extra.

Thin Air administers one annual award. Send SASE for competition guidelines.

Volume III, No. 1 (Issue 5)

Visit our website at http://www.nau.edu/~english/thinair/TAFRAMES.html

Thin Air is a nonprofit organization.

Founding editors: Jason Dick, Jeff Huebner, Rob Morrill, Todd Peterson, William Tyree, 1994-95.

Thin Air

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From the Editors

With the printing of this issue, we believe we heard a giant, collective sigh of relief. It seemed to emanate and flow forth from previous staff members now residing in states far and near, as well as countries overseas. You see, small journals are not easy to maintain, to say the least. It seems that at every turn in the road, by simply leaning into the curve too hard, or not quite hard enough, the delicate balance of things could be permanently disturbed. In other words, this job ain't easy, and we're relieved to have made it this far.

And we've been through our share of growing pains. We started out as a book-size literary journal. The cover of our first issue, adorned with Bill Hatcher's haunting black and white crucifixions, simply read *Thin Air*. With Issue 2, we decided to take on the appearance of a more contemporary and magazine-like publication. *The Right Kind of Trouble* was introduced and the cover sported a photo of Arizona boxer Cactus Dick. *The Right Kind of Trouble* carried us through Issue 3, but was discontinued with Issue 4. Although the current staff does frequently enjoy and look for opportunities to get into the right kind of trouble, we felt this subtitle might have been too defining or limiting. The cover of our fourth issue, like our first, included only the name *Thin Air*, and was colored with an illustration by Jeffrey Hurt (be sure to check it out in the 1999 *Poet's Market*).

So, with that said, with our history mapped out, the question still remains: where exactly are we going? The answer: we are going back to our beginning, back to the modest, stylish format of our first issue. We have come full circle, and our growing pains (most of them?) have receded. In December of last year we were awarded nonprofit status, which somehow felt like our last official hurdle (now you can make that long awaited tax deductible donation). You may also have noticed our determination that we are a journal of the literary arts (something we've always known), which finally feels like the right fit (even though I'm sure we'll never shy away from our share of trouble).

We hope you like our new (old) style, and that you are pleased with what you find on the following pages.

Sincerely,

The Editors

Photograph by Jason Dick

TARANTULA DREAMS

I scuff my boots through dry, red mud and ask
the man in low orbit over the Mogollon Rim
"what's scrub oak?" and the man in low orbit
replies, "it'll take seven to ten days to get your message.
You see I'm in low orbit. Sometimes it's longer,
then I must be in high orbit." From the rim
I reply "ah, hah, ah" when Dostoevsky
would have said "what . . . what . . . what" or Kerouac
"who . . . skoo di dee skoo di doo di dee doo . . . who."
So from low orbit the man says to wait, so I do
from down here on a rutted road of brown that meanders
over the rim and into the space of the high desert
below. But what's scrub oak? I ask the man
in low orbit again, but not loud enough to stretch
it out to him, and I crack dry twigs and flame
them up for a little extra heat in the early Spring.
The ponderosas root it out in the dry ground.
The cliffs jostle their way into space.
The man in low orbit will speak, but now
I'm sitting flat in front of the fire and wrestling with night
bugs and sounds of birds too hurried to grapple. I wait
and from low orbit hear "you're scrub oak,"
and from the ground up bones in dead dirt I know.

Photograph by Timothy Watkins

AT TUCKER PLASTICS FACTORY

Go see Ireno Castaneda. He's your boss for today, but he'll still
call you the little *jefe*.
So go see Ireno Castaneda because that's better than working in
regrind and the itchy heat
of wrestling defective trash cans, hangars, baskets,
and crates into the chomping
end of a machine.
Go see Ireno because that's better than top-loading barrels or
walking
the rotting boxes in warehouse 3.
Go see Ireno Castaneda. He's the one with the maroon shirt that
reads "Parump."
Go see Ireno. He's the one with the forearms that are nearly as
wide as they are long.
He'll tip you off. Warn you not to drink ice cold
water. Show you how to whack
nails (not your house nails, but the heavy-ass duty
kind) into truck trailer floors,
secure molds, crank banding wire. And he knows
money to boot. He'll slip you in
on the number 52; 52 being the number of hours
after which you lose money for
OT work--*taxes and all.*
So see Ireno. You're clocked in.
Go see Ireno. The sweat's already rolling off your tired skin.
Go see Ireno Castaneda. He'll shove a shoulder between you and
the blistering metal
of a slipping mold.
Go see Ireno Castaneda. At lunch he'll show you wallet pictures of
his six daughters,
and say, smiling, cheeks thick as muscled arms, *the
oldest one is at college
in Tucson.*
Go see Ireno Castaneda. He's the one who doesn't speak in a

dozen 721s, off-load 38s,
high and tight 46s, or 702s. Instead, he'll sing a
tune that's not in any English
you know, but not in any Spanish you know either.
Go see Ireno Castaneda. He'll sing you a tune like this:
lo dee da dee da dee da momo momo,
la dee da dee da dee da mó mó mó mó mó mó.

TOILING IN THE MORNING

On the green carpet of the trailer's porch
a girl does push-ups on knuckles.
Beyond the yard the arroyo secures her strength
under the rocks that a raven is walking upon.
There are the stories of Tripitaka and monkeying
that makes the Buddha spit up nimble rays.
There's the one about the sun rising across the face
of the black dog of day, both woken in a startle,
the light broken up by fur, the quick parting of grey.
There are the footprints of the moon's dances at dawn.
Here, there's a girl on green.
She is shoving through sweat and red, thin calluses.
She is working up rain.

GROUND

I start the morning hunched on a concrete chair,
feet planted in wet grass. I wait for my name

to be called, the tag passed out:
grounds worker for the state of Arizona.

I wait for the day
to get on, so it can get over.

Four ravens scuttle about
on the nearest roof.
Four ravens begin to pull me from a slow slouch.

The names gather into groups,
and I'm not certain what grounds
worker means, but I pick up
people's garbage, plant tight rows
of trees, shovel, clean out
buildings, haul furniture.

The title makes me
think of groundwater, which is really more intriguing than grounds
worker, since even at six a.m. I can tell it's going to be hot,
tell that there's not enough shade.

I imagine happy men slouched
against adobe, covered with giant sombreros, so I push
my yellow hat down on my matted hair a little tighter
and think of groundwater, although I can't.

I can't imagine ground water the way I read it in newspapers,
can't picture millions of years compiled
then drained in a few decades. Can't see it pumped to exotic
crops in the desert. Can't see golf courses

in Phoenix soaking in it.
Something so big should be easy,
but I can't imagine anything but marble fountains
when I see the print in the columns on the page.

I can't understand why a name
can summon me forth from concrete,
summon forth the day, as I move from grass to the back of a truck.
Can't imagine anything, but the smell
of diesel, no hopes of grasping what goes on
underground, and underground
is being turned
into big business by someone, somewhere, I think . . . possibly.

But I don't know.
I'm in the business of progress, and progress needs patches,
and progress hasn't been around long and has to hold
what it has,
and so here I am with shovel,
heading towards an elevator shaft, a white mask
rubber-banded to my face.

Working for a little more than minimum,
I ride on painted black metal, hauled
with others who look tired and dumb,
dumb as me, maybe more tired, mabye not . . . no one able to stare
through the horizon. No one able to look through rock,
a task easy enough . . . I think.

Easy enough, if someone would step up and focus
on the rock instead of giving up on the sky
as we bump around in the back of a flatbed.

I should
just mind my own business;
I hear it over and over like that song,
or the supervisor's soft voice.

I file out
and crowd into the elevator
with ground workers. The rest of the truck
hauls the others to their jobs.

The worst detail I get, and it doesn't matter because now I know
I can't grasp groundwater, can't count to ten
thousand without goofing
it up, much less find an in on a million, a billion.

Four walls
of cracked concrete, stand covered in fur like particles.

Peering at the dull
light cracking off their edges,

I figure: the inertia of one small non-event
consisting of no mass somehow exerts itself into other non-events,
the momentum immeasurable,
and this isn't what physics should be like, yet I'm certain
that it is; or it was in a magazine
with colored charts and diagrams.

I shovel.

Try to toss the physics of magazines and get by on the thought
that today's shit work means
an easy tomorrow, although it's never been that way
as the same guys roll on
to short jobs with long breaks.

This crew looks familiar, somehow to me,
but without the name tags
I'd be hard pressed to know who they are
because groundwater can't be grasped,
not by me, and my job is to patch

as progress tries to hold
its waning ground, as pink particles of insulation tumble
down a shaft
from some guy with a shovel above . . . maybe.

Where he's getting it; who knows?

Pink flops in sheets and rests
in the elevator like the stuffing for a beat teddy bear,
and this somehow makes me feel better
about what I'm doing. I lean
on my shovel, wait for my cue and pass the pink into a blue can.

But now I'm wondering,
wondering if anyone is
tossing the old insulation down, as I lean
a little more and squint the sweat out of my eyes.

I'm wondering if anyone placed that insulation,
as a constant buzz of a small engine rides through the walls;
I conclude insulation
has always been there or else they wouldn't take it out.

I fill my blue can, roll it out into the sun, wrestle
it upside the others, hole up my logic for one more run
at the rest of the day, and take a look at the dozen
blue cans getting hot in the now afternoon sun.

MAINTENANCE MAN

He strides across campus in scuffed work boots
and oily jeans. Orange letters stitched onto
his blue windbreaker gleam: "Glitter, Don't Litter."

His blonde hair jags over his ears.
His glassy stubble shimmers in the sun.
As students run to hold his Weedeater, to touch

the pliers holstered at his side, he pulls
his plastic visor down, and trims the grass
around a sweetgum—not missing one blade,

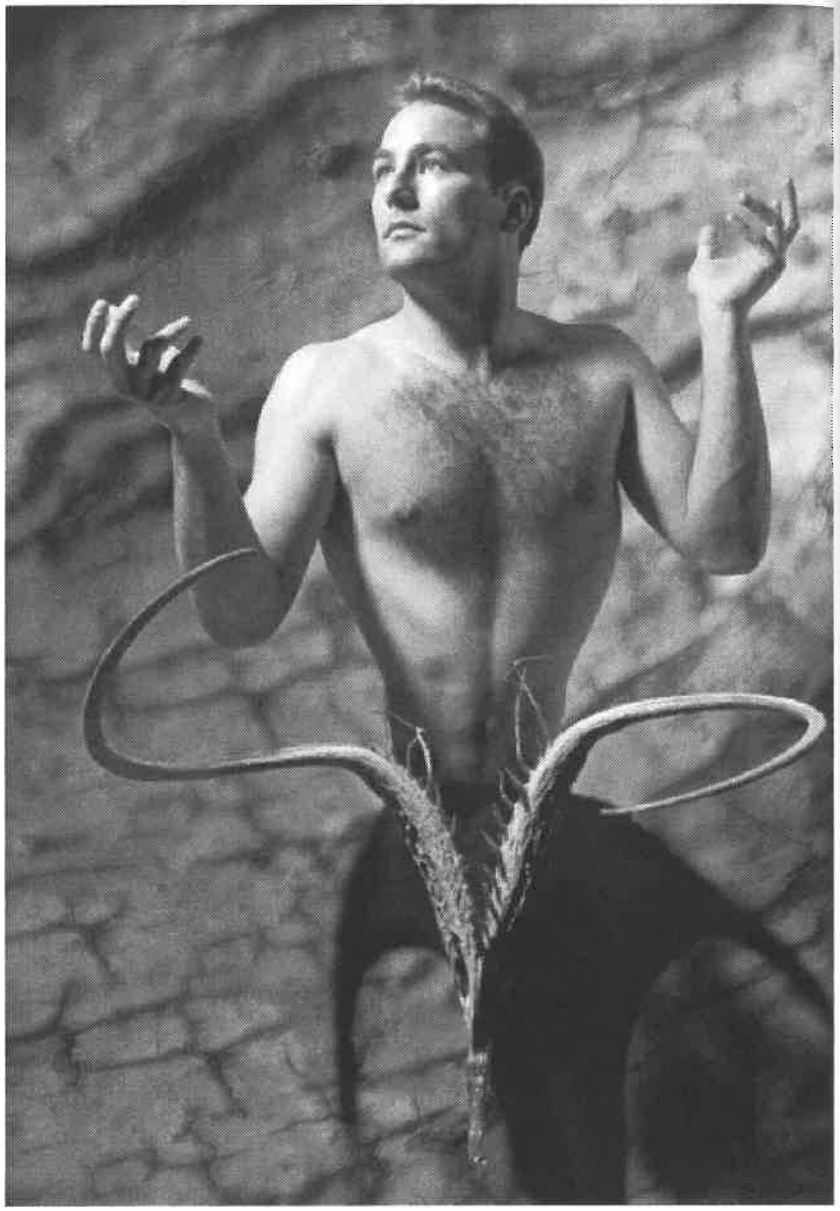
or brushing the bark with the slightest breeze.
His colleagues demonstrate lawn-watering,
daisy-planting, ivy-clipping, building-

barriers-so-fools-can't-traipse-on-new-laid-sod.
José drives a lawnmower, surgical mask
shielding him from clippings and gas fumes.

Hank shoves a power sweeper down the street,
trash bag billowing like a circus tent.
Across the country, lawyers, doctors, C.E.O's

fidget and sweat in their foreign cars and clothes,
and shrink from maintenance men's eyes,
sneaking into restrooms for a filthy cigarette

the way professors here slink room to room,
chalking graffiti on blackboards which, every night,
the maintenance men sponge until they shine.



Photograph by Mark Hillis

WEEDS

Their seeds are arrows, mace-heads, awls,
torpedoes, augers for piercing
reluctant dirt. With their hooked ends

for hitching rides on the unwilling,
and their adamantine shells
made to survive the guts of birds,

they drop like delayed-action bombs
on Mom's chrysanthemums, which themselves
sprang from weeds the way chihuahuas

sprang from wolves: curried, pampered,
bred until they were like humans-
once-removed, designed to please

our monstrous brains and hairless
bodies as we lie down,
exhausted by our lives-once-removed,

to watch on *National Geographic*
the proto-apes we sprang from
spread across the earth like weeds.

ANDREA CARTER BROWN

THE ORRERY

1998 POETRY CONTEST WINNER

One friend has left for love, the rest
let mosquitos do their thing, waiting
for that early August hour between
sun set and moon rise when stars
fly through the sky. "Mighty storm

or heavy drizzle," the experts predict
depending on how thick are the dust
clouds the river of debris shed by
Swift-Tuttle runs through. The last
such rare meteor storm occurred almost

thirty years ago, when we were somewhere
on the road to grown-up. Back then
the universe seemed too distant to get
our minds around so we set our sights
closer to home, sending probes to shoot

Venus and Mars, watching a man in gravity
boots practice his putts on the moon
in our living room. In school we built
a model of our solar system, although
the scale had to be skewed to get Pluto

in the same room with Mercury. Cranking
a coat hanger, we spun styrofoam planets
around a rubber sun, their elliptical
orbits rounded to concentric circles.
Instead of homework after supper,

my sister and I lay down on the rug
with *House and Garden* to plan
our lives. She was consistent from one
year to the next, through Colonial, Country

French, Victorian and back to Early

American wanting the Donna Reed
thing: a doctor husband, at least five
children and a station wagon. She has managed
to have four kids, but the used Town and Country
Squire died pushing two hundred thousand

miles and her face is prematurely lined
from too much to do and too little money.
The second man I loved, I used
to tick off every possible disaster
that might keep us apart, small scale

and large, as if thoughts could insure
against loss. And when the unforeseen
happened, in this case his father dying,
I didn't even know at the time
this was the beginning of the end

of us. The only guarantee in life is that
you screw up and when you do
get what you thought you wanted it's
lacking some essential ingredient,
like love or money, you neglected

to stipulate. More often what
you get is what you wanted without
knowing it, such as tonight, looking
out over the great lake into space,
haze and fog obscure the show so just

one chunky burst of brilliance cuts
through the crap, so unlike the graceful
trajectories of those man-made shooting stars
we call fireworks, so brief we don't
trust our own eyes, wondering afterwards

whether we imagined what the heavens failed to provide. Satisfaction is an acquired art: the marriage of convenience to desire. And sometimes a single split-second of light is enough.

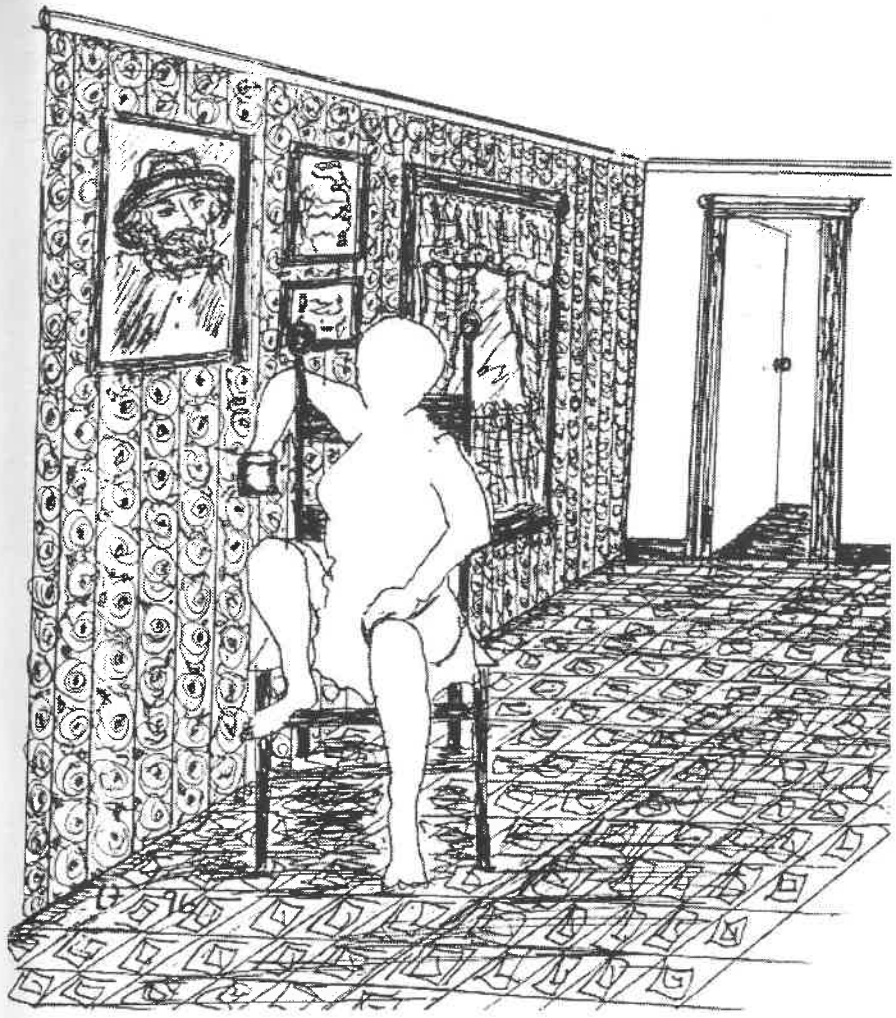


Illustration by Lynn Freeman

WHERE'S FRAN HAYNES? *1998 FICTION CONTEST WINNER*

It's Tuesday, which is my Sunday, and I'm entering the Shannon Arms to share a liquid lunch with one of my oldest friends, Dorfman. A while back I thought I was on the death slope, the sensation of a blade twisting under the ribs on my lower right side that left as mysteriously as it came, but not without implications, resolutions. I resolved to be the worker of the month at my job. I resolved to catch up with my old friends.

The bar is long and dark with a low ceiling. Dorfman has his bootheels hooked in the rung of his barstool, his head down. He looks like a wet long-haired dog with glasses. He's reading the cover of a matchbook. I want to be eager to see him and I might give him a slap on the shoulder, the big handshake, but the sight of him drains me. I take the matchbook out of his fingers and read an ad for the One Way Truck Driving School—a religious vocational program. He downs the remainder of his stout.

"You're going to drive a truck?" I say.

"Why not?" He's sullen because I'm two beers late. "You're a prick, Kash," he says.

"I'm a prick?"

"You're a prick."

"They won't even let you hold the darts in here anymore," I say. "Am I right?" I ask the bartender. Her face is buried under a pile of hair and she doesn't look up from her newspaper. She circles a word in the WordSearch. I think her name is Rhonda.

"What will it be for you?" she says in a voice like scissors cutting tin. The rumor is that she used to be stunning.

"Give me one of those." I point to Dorfman's glass. "Better make it two."

"Who says I can't hold the darts?" Dorfman lifts his head two inches, drops it.

"I says," says Rhonda, her back to us.

"You want to drive a semi, Dorf?" I say. "Why would you want to do that? You'd lose your disability."

"I have a hearing next week."

"Your ass is still numb, right?"

"Just the left cheek," he says. "I don't want to talk about it."

The bartender puts the first beer down in front of me, but Dorfman scoops it up. He puts a hand on my shoulder. "I'll tell you what," he says.

I wait. How did his nose get so many red lines? He's only thirty years old, same as me. He wipes the foam off his lip with his flannel sleeve.

"I can make you laugh with just two words."

"Marty Dorfman?"

"Harry Chong," he says. He studies my face. Rhonda turns her head from the tap. I think they might have a wager on this.

"This is your idea of funny, Dorfman?" He's so close now, so still, I can see the brain behind the yellow-flecked eyes. He's forgiven me, I think, or he's forgotten.

"Chong Chong," he says.

"What, I'm three years old?" I say. He's fighting a grin, but it's a backed up faucet ready to explode. The fucking idiot. He's the same guy I met at State University ten years ago. We were in the same quad, played on the same flag football team, dated the same woman, though not at the same time. I take my beer from Rhonda and tip it back.

"Chong Chong Chong," he bursts laughter.

I spit a mouthful of beer back into my glass. The fucking genius.

"That was three words," says Rhonda.

Monday, of course, is my Saturday and Saturday night I spent with Schultz. I left my reading glasses in his apartment and made a plan to meet him this evening at La Valencia, a white tablecloth establishment. I take the Muni to the bus and then on foot I manage to stay a half step ahead of the rain clouds coming in off the coast. Schultz has a table next to the fireplace, a soft green drink in a round glass on a long thin stem.

"Leo," I say.

"I'm a busy man," he says, looking anything but busy. He

licks his thumb and touches his eyebrow—a new tick.

"I'm—"

"How's that sorry ass, Dorfman?" Schultz was also a quad mate, the quarterback of our flag football team. Schultz also dated the woman that Dorfman and I dated, but he dated her first.

"He might be considering a career change," I say.

"From nothing to what?" He beckons the waitress, touches his eyebrow. "Nevermind, I'm not really interested," he says. Black skirt, white satin top, she arrives at our table, puts her pen to her pad, shakes her head and I watch as her bangs fall exactly where they had been over her left eye.

"I'll have on of those." I point to Schultz's drink.

"How's the ex?" he asks. This is our way of referring to the only woman we ever loved. We don't say her name, presumably out of respect, or because it would be too painful. Sometimes I can't remember her name.

"I told you last night, I don't know," I say.

"Alright," he says, "Don't wet yourself."

"How's the teaching business?" I ask.

"I told you all about it last night."

"Tell me again. Now what department are you in?"

"Interdisciplinary Studies."

"Ah, that's right. Now tell me again, what's that all about?"

"Kash, you're pissing me off."

"You started to tell me about a project. A book. You were excited."

"It's nothing," he says.

"A culmination, you said. Hobbes, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Habermas."

"None of the above."

"Hume."

"Nope. I'm looking forward now," he says, embarrassed.

"What's your book called?"

"Forget about it. Forget I ever mentioned it."

"What if somebody wants to know? What if say you-know-who calls me some rainy dark night and asks, 'What's up with our old friend, Schultzy?' What am I going to tell her?"

Schultz shakes his head. "Don't laugh then."

"I won't laugh." He wets his thumb and touches his eyebrow.

"Come on already, what's the title of your book?"

"Making Meaning Mean Something," he says. He drinks.

"Huh," is all I can say.

"What does that mean?"

"You'll have to excuse me, Leo."

"Nothing is, you know, written in, you know, stone."

I pretend to be wiping my lips with a napkin. I can't stand it. "Do you know what Dorfman said?" I say.

"I think I couldn't care less."

"He said, 'Harry Chong'."

"That's not funny."

"I guess it's not."

"I don't think it's funny at all, Kash."

"No no, I guess you're right. You'll have to excuse me, Leo." I walk to the men's room and lock myself in the stall. I try to think of something that will help me compose myself.

My answering machine greets me with a red number three. After a long pause, I hear Dorfman's crusty "You left your wallet in the bar, you sad sack. Ya wanna know what's funny?" I can barely hear his voice above what sounds like clattering dishes and cackling laughter. "Rhonda thinks your credit is good."

Next is Schultz: "Hey, if you-know-who calls, don't say a word about anything. You're a prick, Kash, you know."

The last message is silence. I get these too often.

It's a wet Wednesday morning, my Monday, and I'm riding the bus to the BART. I'm the Assistant Branch Manager of Canned Foods. I was in the Quality Assurance Department, then I got moved to something called The Concept Team, and now this latest promotion, though my raise hasn't been approved yet. I used to ride in the back of the bus, but when I began to fear I was dying, I

started riding up front. I found that talking to the bus driver was a way to avoid unpleasant thoughts. Today there is a new driver.

"Where's Fran Haynes?" I ask her.

"I don't know any Fran Haynes," she says.

"Fran Haynes is the man who usually drives this route."

"I don't know him."

I can't always read people, but I can tell right off that she's not one for chatting. This woman is not going to be my friend. I sit back and watch the windshield wipers. I think about the old days. I think about Dorfman wearing his baggy white shorts on top of his sweatpants, the plastic strap of his mouthguard like a tongue sticking out of his face, his enthusiasm for a muddy flag football game. I can see Schultz wiping his hands on a towel, then zinging a perfect spiral to Dorfman in the flat. Schultz gives me the pitch and I look for the seam. I run behind a pair of dog-mean pulling guards and I wait for Dorfman's crackback block before I make my cut.

We were no ordinary flag football team. We practiced. We had a playbook with fifty plays: straight ahead runs, trap blocks, sweeps, screens, quarterback options, halfback options, reverses and double reverses. We choreographed our steps. We cut classes. We lifted weights. We drank nutritional drinks. We were almost unbeatable.

I can see our ex on the sidelines. She never missed a game. She used to wear the most distracting stockings, candy cane stripes of red and white or purple and orange. She had a floppy coat with a hood big enough for two heads, or one head with a fountain of hair. On the days when the sun blitzed through a hole in the clouds, everyone looked at her hair. She'd holler such things as, "You can do it, Leo," or "You can do it, Marty," or "You're the one, Kash."

The grayness and the whine of the wipers lulls me back. I feel the way I feel immediately after one of the silent phone messages—defenseless. I wonder if I'll feel the stabbing pain in my side.

I feel it.

"It's not what you think, Fran."

"I'm not your friend Fran. I don't know who he is."

"Right." I cramp forward. "Do you mind if I talk to you?"

"I'm not going anywhere," she says.

I try to sit back, but the pain makes me lean forward again. "She used to say she didn't care if we won or lost. Of course we couldn't believe her. How could we? We cared so much. But she said, 'I just love to watch you boys play.' She said, 'I can't explain it, but watching you play makes me so happy.' She didn't have to explain it, though. We could see it. We could feel her happiness."

"To start with, who's she?"

"I made a promise not to say her name. I'm sorry."

"I don't care," she says, but I can see she does. The way she pumps the brakes and sends a man reeling forwards, the way she pulls the lever that opens the door.

"It was 1986. The year I would have graduated from State, had I stuck with it. My friend, Dorfman, blew off his career sciences internship. He dropped out of school. My friend, Schultz, took a number of incompletes that semester, but the following year he pulled it together and got his degree in . . . I can't remember what. Schultz always had a little more of what it takes than Dorfman or myself.

"It was December, the week before Christmas break and she was with me then and we were in the championship because we always were, because we practiced. Schultz hated Dorfman when he lost her, but when she left Dorfman for me, Schultz didn't hate Dorfman any less. I'd expected that he'd hate me, but he didn't. Schultz's was a pointed and unequivocal hate. Dorfman hated me and hated himself. He hated Schultz because Schultz hated him. It was a wonder we could play on the same field together, but we hated the idea of losing so we muddled. With grunts and twitches we communicated.

"She wore the red and white candy canes, with Christmas right around the corner . . . what? . . . did you say something?"

"Nothing," says the bus driver.

"The team we were facing had a QB who could send it downfield, not pretty—wounded ducks, as they say—but fifty yards in the air. They had a wide receiver named Stickman and it

was freaky the way he could jump. But that was all they had. For the first half of the game that little passing connection enabled them to match us score for score. In the second half we figured out how to exploit their weakness—a lineman named Harry Chong."

The driver pulls a lever which causes the bus to kneel down at the curb. She opens the doors. I pause because I think she's not going to take in what I'm saying. "If you want my opinion," she says.

"Yes, I do."

"You boys were a bunch of fools."

"I can't argue with you."

"Didn't you see how she was playing with you? Three boyfriends on one team."

"But it wasn't like that. It was, but it wasn't."

"And no doubt she left you right after the game or else you wouldn't be telling this story."

"Are you just filling in for Fran?" I can't be selective. The pain is getting worse and I need to continue.

"Your precious little tart left you for this Harry Chong." A woman and two children step in at the front of the bus. A man in a wheelchair enters the side door. The driver secures the man with straps and buckles, then returns to her seat. "I've known plenty of Harry Chongs," she says. "And plenty little tarts, too."

"No," I say. We've passed my stop, but I need to set the record straight. She puts a stick of gum in her mouth. She chews. I take a deep breath and try to compose myself.

"At halftime the score was twenty-four to twenty-four. She was standing on the sideline with a canvas bag, two long looping handles. She'd brought lunch for all of us, but Schultz and Dorfman wouldn't have any part of it. They milled about, you see. They were so busy milling away from her that they milled into each other. I saw them talking for the first time in months. She and I decided to have our picnic under one of the goalposts. A lovely repast of potato salad with crushed coriander and some sliced cucumber. We talked about the holiday break, how I might catch a Greyhound to Grass Valley and share a glass of eggnog with her mom and dad at midnight on Christmas Eve. Neither

Schultz or Dorfman ever met her family."

"And I'm guessing that you never met them either." The driver leans into a wide turn. She sits back in her seat. "In fact, I'm sure of it."

"Well," I say, "you're right, but," I can't help adding," Fran Haynes is a good listener. He's not so concerned about being right."

"And I'll tell you what else. This Harry Chong no doubt steals your candy cane."

"There you're wrong."

"Am I?"

I lean forward and lean back and lean forward again. I'm watching the way she chews. I want to see her bite her tongue. "Harry Chong never played, probably never even watched a game of football in his life before that day. Their team had lost one of its linemen in what has come to be known as The Groin Pull Incident—another story. Harry Chong was a quad mate. A body. He was big, well over two hundred and fifty pounds. He had the face of a man who can't laugh. He was shirtless, rolls of fat over the waistband of his yellow shorts. He couldn't or wouldn't get into a proper three-point stance; instead, he squatted, his butt inches above his muddy sneakers. He was unbalanced."

She slows the bus, but her gum chewing continues full speed ahead. "Do you think all of this is relevant?"

"Crucial," I say. "You see, it's only because we could effortlessly knock Harry Chong flat on his back that we won and that we lost."

"All I can see is foolish boys."

"It was Schultz that said that all we had to do was blitz on Harry Chong and we could be kissing the quarterback before he took a step back from center. Perhaps this was the subject of his halftime conference with Dorfman, I don't know. Dorfman suggested the two-man blitz. We didn't need to blitz two. Any one of us could and did singly send Harry reeling backward into the slop. I can see him now, waddling to his team's huddle, mud smeared on his back and caking in his hair. I can see him squatting, blank-faced, ready to be flattened again."

"And your part?" Fran Haynes has never asked me what was my part. At the worst he would wag his head in a kind of bored bewilderment.

"I invented the code," I say. "There was no secret to it, though we did whisper at first. By the end of the game we were shouting it. 'Chong' meant blitz on Harry Chong. And 'Chong Chong' meant two men blitz on Harry Chong. And 'Chong Chong Chong' . . . you get the picture."

"I suppose I do."

"We humiliated him. We won the game. We lost her. I lost her. We lost playing. Let me out at the next stop." I'm holding my ribs as I step down into the stairwell, my back to the driver.

"Do you want my opinion?" she says.

"No."

"Foolish boys."

The decision to promote me to Assistant Branch Manager, I was told, was based upon two facts; I never miss work and I am never late. It was also noted that I made exceptional contributions to The Concept Team. I am ten blocks from work at the corner of Mission and South Van Ness wiping rain out of my hair.

It was I who suggested that the generic food items be shelved on one aisle called 'Basics.' Shoppers who buy no-name brands know exactly where to find what they are looking for. They save an average of fifteen minutes per week. It was my idea to display toothpaste and toothbrushes beside the assorted candies in the checkout lines. These items have more than doubled their inventory. I poured over the schedules until I found a way that two workers could share the same break time. Morale, of course, is immeasurable, but it has noticeably improved. I was worker of the month last month, my three-by-five photo is mounted in the center of a white slip of posterboard above the Noodles-In-A-Cup display.

It is Wednesday, which is my Monday. Two buses and a Muni later, I'm not surprised to find Dorfman slouched over his favorite stool in The Shannon Arms. I am surprised to see Schultz seated next to him.

"Yurly," Dorfman says. And then to Schultz, "Zurly." He looks back in my direction and says something that sounds like, "You look awful."

"I thought you were going to ask for a raise today," says Schultz. "Looks kind of like you blew it."

"What about your book, Leo," I say. "Why don't we talk about that?"

"Never mind."

"You're a busy man," I force a laugh.

"It's all over," Leo says. "Kaput." I expect him to lick his finger and touch his eyebrow, but he doesn't.

"I guess I have to agree with you," I say. "It's over."

Dorfman belches. "Suckers," he says, loud enough almost to get Rhonda's attention. He sits up too straight too fast. Schultz and I catch him before he falls on his back. I'm reminded of the time Dorfman first injured himself on a kickoff return. Schultz and I carried him off the field. I think we loved each other then.

"Harry Chong," Dorfman says.

"It's not funny anymore," I say.

"It never was," says Schultz.

We watch Rhonda cut a lime in halves, quarters, eighths.

"How 'bout a game of darts?" Dorfman says.

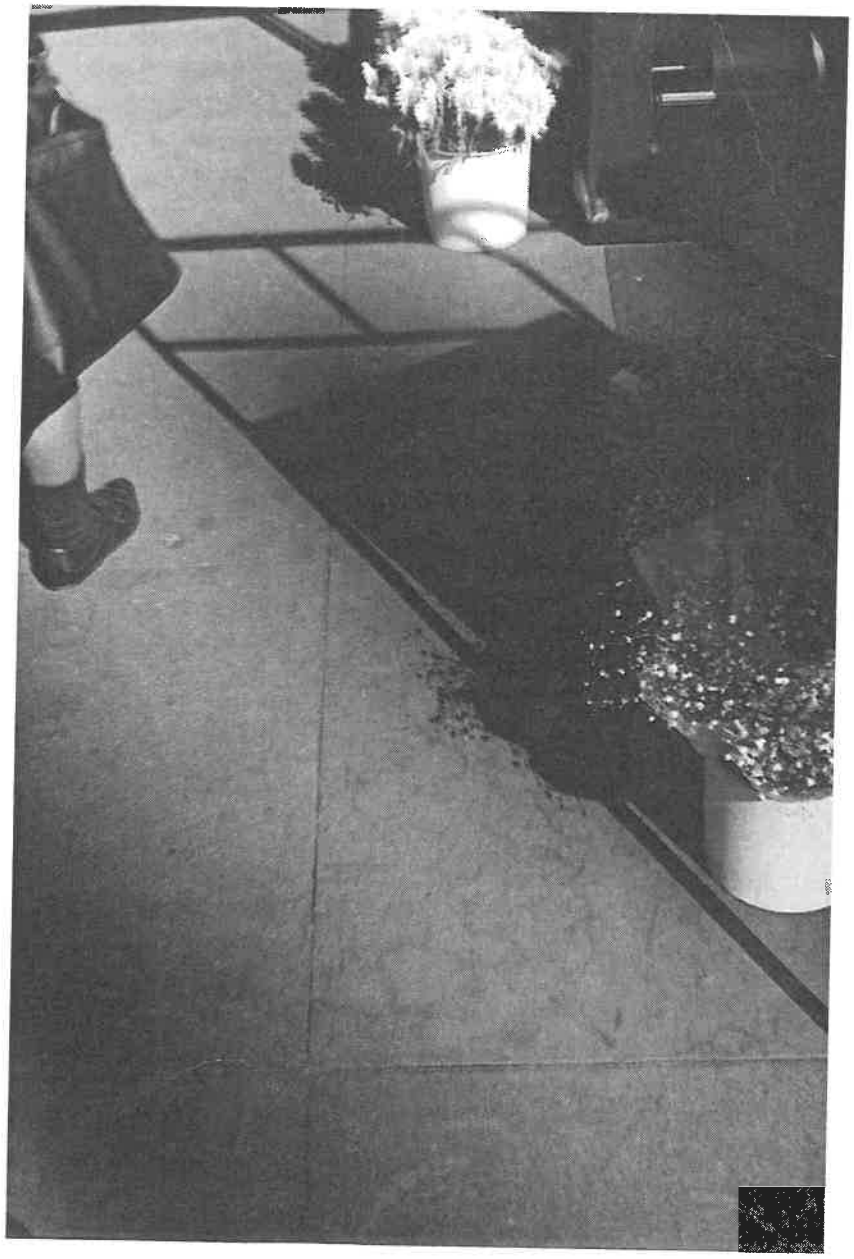
Rhonda shakes her head.

"Come on, Sweetie," Dorfman says. He looks at Schultz. He looks at me.

"I think it will be ok," Schultz says to Rhonda. "We're the only ones in here."

Rhonda looks long and hard at each one of us. "I don't think it's a good idea," she says.

"It's a good idea," I assure her. "It will all be fine. You can watch us play."



Photograph by Timothy Watkins

YELLOW TRAIN

The yellow train brings itself large against us,
tarantular column of rain. Move across, dark,
visible only to tongue. Third, the silent eye eloquent
for the loss of sorrow. Eight legged regrets amble
between sanguine ties. Bind them to the spikes,
off-threads of earlier lives, pulled
canines from the dry-mouth of change.

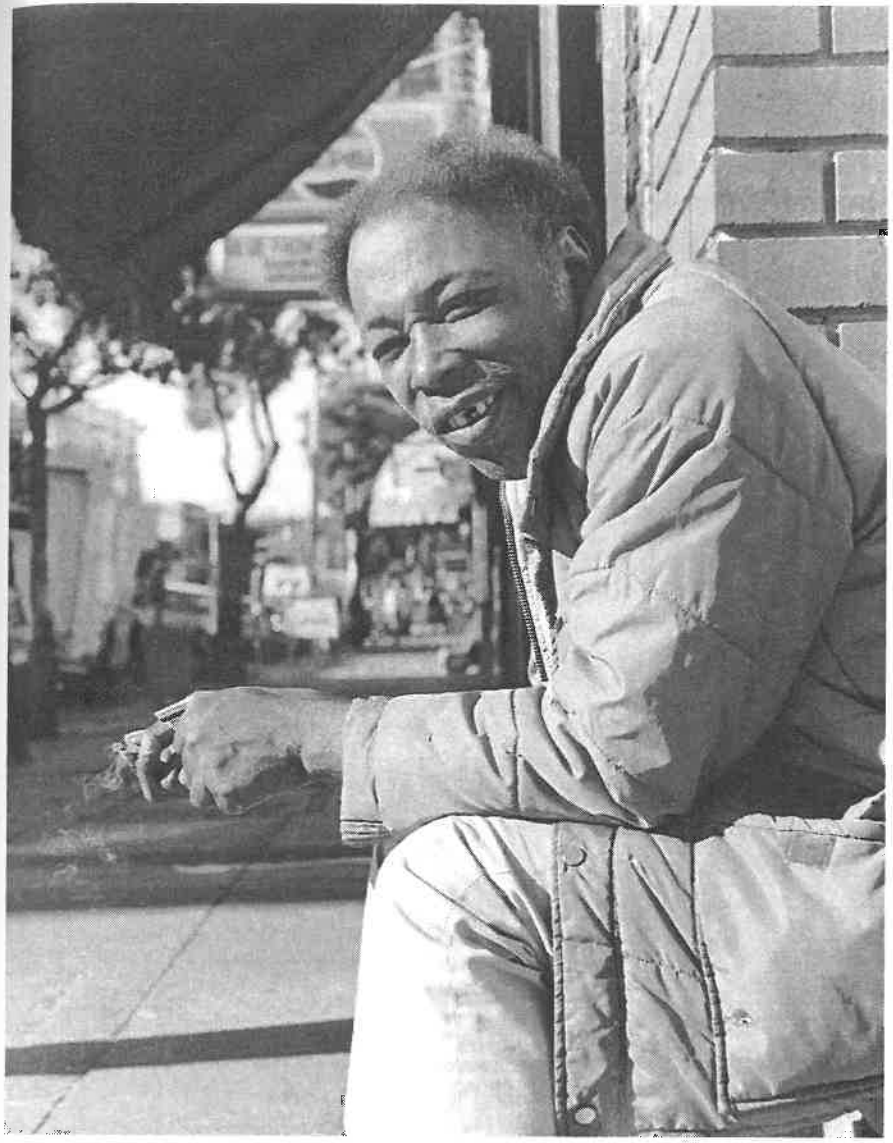
Tracks weed past our backyards, rattle the laundry
line poles, rumbling up roots of stories
earth words clinging to dust, subterranean
river language, woman on the porch wondering
should she have bothered washing them at all.
Rubbing cloth between the heels of her dancing hands,
releasing events of the week, fears to rest
removing history. Soap reminds her of milk.

Down the yellow sand red sand black pepper salt sand
past the brush-combs and chrysocolla, you lie
beneath the plant we call "big momma," her huge blue
succulent green desert leaves long as your legs,
casting a hot spike-shadow into the sky.
Children hide pennies in her clavicular hollows
each that gather rainwater, return to find lillies
on the swallowing mirror. Lying in Josie's bath,
mica sheets in the twilight, sweating
summer heat letting water drip down tears.

Skin exorcises itself from above mouth and eyes,
porcelain places that threaten my defense. I resist
drowning, put the bottle over my heart, thermostat
of mind. I know I'm afraid because I've worn
my necklace in. Let the beer's teeth
bite my swollen lips, cool pleurodontic lizard

feeling wrist pulsing against the ceramic wall,
imagine every tile thundering. The room becomes loud,
dizzying in the heat. Hand steaming against the cold
glass neck, competing with the chopsticks in my hair.

You tell me I am leaning too hard on your middle,
antelope eyes, in the studio or a book, flint jawed
striking fires. She's built a sandbar to beat the waves,
contoured ribs from the heart of a wren.
Swell it with your fighting nose, trophy from the Small Boys'
Wars, thoughtful distraction of a stick or red rimmed jade.
Luck tangles with lint fingers in the bottom of your pocket;
dig deep, friend, hear the owls document the night.



Photograph by Timothy Watkins

Bull Island

The way one forgets (not by memory
but by absence of the empirical)
under the darkness of a new moon.
Heliotropic bloodlines in a robin's egg
are how I remember, a reconstruction
of the bosun's net and the sky map
I will draw on you, circumnavigating
clavicle and scapula (the cape of the good hope)
to the smell of the soft hairs
in the damp bay between arm and heart.
I will rest in the new idols and mythologies,
will read the stories your skin reveals,
will steal the salted freshwater from your lip.
I will weave you a net, hemp twining sailor's knots.
On your knees for Amphitrite; the sextant has arrived.

Pissed at Potter's Funeral

That frosty November day,
Tom stood at the edge of the grave
we'd dug the night before.
The preacher, stern, Bible in hand,
prayed *God have mercy* on Potter's soul.
Guilty as Potter of too much fun, the rest of us
bowed our heads, bit our tongues,
but Tom never played by the rules.

He whistled, barked out a staccato laugh,
then poured Budweiser on the casket.
His cackle yanked and lashed
every sorry neck erect.
B.W. and Rastus both sprung for him,
grabbed his arms and shook him hard,
hissed he'd better *knock it off*
or they were going to kick his ass,
but Tom was drunk, beyond, and crazy-strong.
He threatened to piss in the grave.

Only Potter could handle him well,
speaking those low, gentle tones
he'd used to calm horses and dogs.
I watched the pine box in the bottom
of the hole, knew easy was over
for good. Tom struggled to open his zipper.
The three of them almost went down.
Potter's mother let go of the minister's
arm, crossed to Tom and sheltered
his hands with her hands.

She smiled. Her thumbs rubbed
the ridges of his knuckles,
and he melted, bent forward and cried.

She whispered in his ear, slipped her arm
through his arm. The two of them
shuffled away. The wind swayed tall pines
that banked the plot. I looked west,
and two ravens hovered motionless
in currents above the river, then peeled off
and disappeared downstream. There was snow
up Whiskey Gulch. I didn't know what to do,

so I scooped the first shovel of dirt in the grave.
It covered the inlaid cross on the coffin lid
and interred the gifts Tom left behind,
he'd made for Potter's journey:
a pipe and beaded medicine pouch—
beside the empty beer can.

GALLOWS JUBILEE

They found the dull-witted neighbor boy
sitting beside the railroad
tracks by a wild, stunted apple tree,
two miles from the house, alone.
At home his once bright sister
curled into the leather smell
of worn shoes and suitcases
in the back of an upstairs closet,
whimpering under the hanging clothes.

Down stairs the crib was empty.
On the bed, Mother and Infant dried
together in stiffened sheets —
rent and flaking rust.
Black flies dug in the iron
wounds. The jewelry box was gone.

What flash or fluctuation
in barometric pressure drove rain
deep into the furrowed garden rows?
Father face down, unmindful
between potatoes and squash; the sad
ax washed almost clean, haphazardly
leaned against a cabbage head.
One strand of hair stuck on the edge; brown
outline of a cloud stained the blade.

Two suspects caught, black and white,
pawning a locket and pocket watch,
both gold and inscribed *with love.*
Fifty years ago — this newspaper column
recalls the last man hung (black) in Montana.
No account of the aftermath — who
scrubbed the bloody handprints from the walls.

Years, miles, copyrights — belief
is a matter of distance.
Dramatic measures. Coffins speaking
in dreams, the pleading voice — our own.
We would rather harvest beets,
dig graves, bring food for the funeral
than think about what went wrong,
or worse — that it's right, that pain is love,
and murder is perfect as childbirth
or apples we pick each fall.

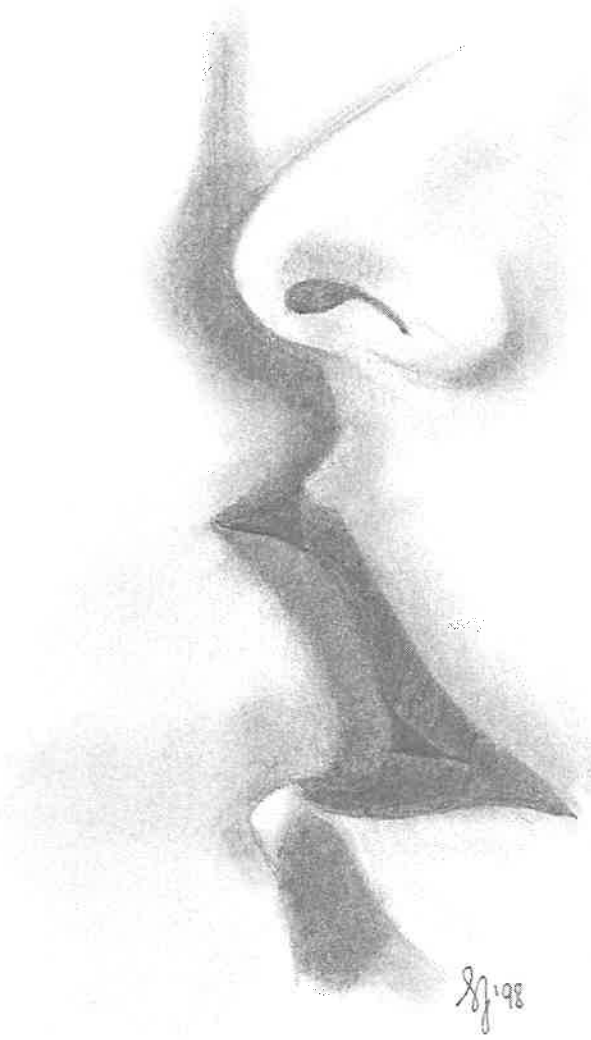


Illustration by Sandra Johnson

THE MOLTEN HEAT OF AUGUST AFTERNOONS

you live in a farmhouse
on catherine hill

the fields are empty
all summer long

you go insane in a quiet way

you notice how the clouds
never stop changing shape

your wife has learned
to accept your fists
and your children
have all moved as far away
as possible

your father's been dead
for seventeen years

when he talks to you
in the molten heat
of august afternoons
he tells you
you've made him proud

this is all
you've ever wanted to hear

WEAPON

i wait for noon
in a room with
no clocks

i carve the history
of america
across the backs of
teenage girls

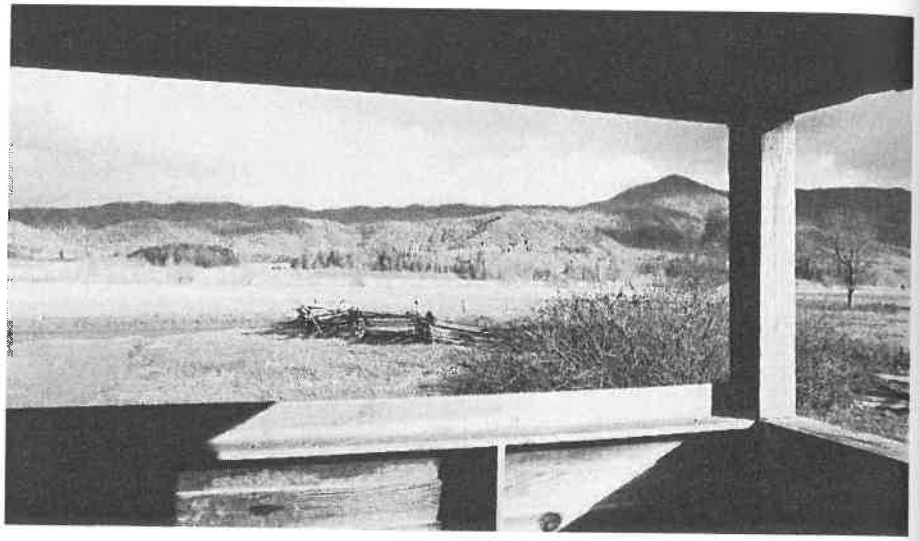
you understand
that these are just
words

as weak as children
locked in basements

as hopeless as
animals
crushed in traps

i wouldn't know
what to do with
a real weapon
if i had one

it's not the same
as being a coward
but it's close



Photograph by David Klein

GRAVEL

White crosses stitch along the highway, indicating the sites of accidents, of volition abbreviated, of stationary death.

Speed packs the mile-markers together tightly and we roll over the plains like a quick summer storm or a finger tracing a map. The road is still swelled by the sneering heat of the day, and I feel trapped, cocooned. I've been in this car, with this man, holding this baby for so long I expect that when I emerge I'll have evolved into something else, into something of beauty and grace, something lasting.

I mean a real change, not something fake and temporary like the hundred-dollar makeover the local morning news forced on my sister Janie. They happytalked like taking her down to Pretty Nails and whipping her black hair up until it looked like a tinted windshield growing out of her head was on par with renovating the Sistine Chapel. And it didn't even *take*—the next morning, she looked herself again, hair all limp like a dying houseplant, wearing her clownish birthday cake make-up, and Grandpa already calling her Jane Shit the Rag Lady the way he does. No, I want something that takes. Something inside.

The crosses are white, ghostly in the headlights. They appear too often, every couple of miles, casting death from the shoulder, from the gravel and the barbed desert plants.

The crosses are the end of motion.

* * *

We're at a rest area, at night.

Texas stretches around us as thick as time itself, with a sky so long and deep I suspect it is actually a week of nights, a month's worth, somehow pressed into one. Frank snores in the driver's seat and I listen to the world: the passing cars, the splash of someone emptying a cooler on the pavement, the talk of the three Mexicans across the lot. By the bathrooms, a plaque grimed the color of a long-buried penny dedicates this crumbling highway-island to

Dwight D. Eisenhower. The wind kicks hard.

The Mexicans stare at us and the baby is crying. Their van is skeletal and rusted, a dented beer can, and they sit outside of it, smoking, talking their nervous, muddy Spanish. They wear faded cowboy shirts and straw hats that droop.

A beaten El Camino skids into the lot and the Mexicans pile back into their van, circus clowns in reverse. The El Camino smells of rubber and scalded oil, a pile of smoldering tires. Cans scatter and collide in its weedy truckbed as the driver slides to a stop across three parking spaces.

Empty night moments stretch by. Nothing happens. The Mexican's van is silent. Now that nobody's staring, I pull the baby to the front seat and roll up my shirt.

In Stillwater, Oklahoma, Frank bought a bag of orange-circus peanuts.

The thing is, we aren't supposed to stop the car for anything except gas and sleep, because we never know if it'll start again. But in Stillwater, he stopped at the Food Lion without a word, right in the sweet-spot along the curb where the no parking line had been rainstormed away. Saying nothing, he cut the engine and disappeared inside.

The baby and I watched the car from the glassed-in entrance, standing by gum machines and a fifty-cent horse ride named, of all things, "Lucky the Happy Horse." The air conditioning turned our skin to ice cream.

He got circus peanuts, the fat orange candy ones, and nothing else. I thought of something else my grandpa says, *nobody knows why people do the things they do.*

"What're those for?" I asked.

"I wanted peanuts," he said back in the car, working the flat head screwdriver around deep in the steering column. "Take one." Above the parking lot, heat smeared the air, a grease mark on glass.

"I'd rather eat toes."

Somehow, the car started, engine clanging like silverware in a washing machine.

"And anyway, you look stupid, like somebody's dad, when you eat peanuts."

"I am somebody's dad." We hit the highway. He held a peanut to me and I bit into it: inedible, but perfect for packing china.

"You need some sweat pants. A coolie."

He didn't know what a coolie was until I explained. "You know, a floatie. A foamy. You put it on your beer so it don't get hot. Slip it on, like a rubber."

"Don't start that bull hockey again."

He said 'bull hockey' because I won't let him swear around the baby. He sounded cute saying something so stupid—he sounded fun, silly, the way he used to sound before I broke his hand with that shovel, ending his pitching career. He sounded like his old self, edited for television.

* * *

The Mexicans are quiet, the baby feeding. I shouldn't have started, yet. The night is nervous, skittish like a horse before a storm.

I think about the times I've been stranded. On the country roads at night, at downtown gas stations, begging quarters from clerks bottled up behind their bulletproof glass. Overheated, between screaming highways, with the tastes of sweat and exhaust turning solid in my throat.

There's little worse than that stranded feeling, that helplessness. The only thing that beats it, I think, is this: knowing you'll be stranded soon. The clutch has been slipping and the engine gurgles and sloshes like the stomach of a sick whale.

About an hour ago, a guy on a purple Suzuki motorcycle pulled in, went to the bathroom, and disappeared in the woods. He was tanned so dark he looked deep-fried; his bike is plastic and girly enough to be on a bathroom knickknack shelf.

The man in the El Camino just sits there, in the dark.

Earlier, when the sun was setting and the Impala's broken speedometer was whipping around like a pin wheel, Frank threw a half chewed circus peanut out the window.

I was lost, almost immediately, in thought; as soon as that stupid peanut was gone, it was gone, forever, absorbed by the unending Texas emptiness.

"I don't understand why fugitives get caught," I said. "There's so much space."

"So?"

"I look out there and think if someone wanted to just *dissolve* in it, they could hide forever."

"They'd find you."

The baby was asleep. I looked ahead, through the windshield as dirty as day-old dishes, at the beginning of night.

"But there's so many creeks and woods and silos. Someone could hide forever."

"I'd find you," he said. "You'd turn up, at your mom's, at some bookstore. At the K-Mart, buying diapers. You gotta get diapers."

I figured he was right, but it didn't matter, anyhow; he's promised not to drink anymore. I looked out the window a while longer, watching dark infect the day, but even states I've never visited all look the same after awhile. *Jesus*, I thought, *you could've at least bought real damn peanuts.*

"Frank?"

"Yeah?" He flexed his left hand, the way the therapist had told him.

"Do you think Lucky the Happy Horse is happy because he's lucky, or lucky because he's happy?"

When I feed the baby, I can feel its heart. I feel it in mine, in my throat, in the front part of my head, the part I usually only notice when it aches. When we drive, sometimes the rhythm of travel—the black rubber laid between slabs of concrete, the leaden thud of the bad back tire—synchronizes with me as well.

I don't like to feed, then. I don't want the road in my boy.

Frank sleeps behind the wheel, his tongue peeking out and his legs straddling a gas station Coke. He's skinny, but not as skinny as I used to be. Now, I'm still fresh-baby puffy, with a pale stomach stretched out like pizza dough. If the car won't start, at least the walk will do me some good.

The baby's tug is moist and warm and I look out the window and up at the sad moon hanging there like some pale cosmic afterthought, at the parking-lot: a couple of dark cars, a camper, the purple Suzuki crotch-rocket. The El Camino, dark and silent. Two Mexicans, feeling brave again, sitting outside.

I hear a sucking sound.

The baby makes happy baby noises. Outside, the trash cans overflow and shake in the wind. A yellow map of Texas is thumbtacked by the pay phones, under winking, bug-clotted lights.

I've been disappointed in Texas, so far. I haven't seen a real damn Texan yet, shooting into the air, soldering bull-horns to El Dorados. Texans could've been my life: Frank almost signed with a farm team in Amarillo, once. They always need left-handers.

The baby finishes and I lay him down in his box. I pull Frank's map from the glove compartment and trace our path, trying to figure out where we are.

I hear a sucking sound.

On the map, my finger crosses a river at the lower left-hand corner, into the pink shading of whatever county this is, across nothing and nothing until it comes to rest, finally, over the UPC code.

I hear a sucking sound.

I check the baby, reflexively. I see a shadow, outside, on the driver's side.

Frank speaks without saying anything. The shadow drops below the rear window.

I think of the stories I've heard about nowhere rest areas: deviants, alien abductees, children locked in trunks. That abandoned car in Jacksonville, with the glovebox full of intestines. I reach for Frank, but hesitate, listening. The sucking sound is now part of a mouthy sequence: suck, spit, breath, suck, spit, breath.

Without waking him, I ease the Styrofoam cup from Frank's crotch—44 ounces, sweating, half-filled. I lean over him and the stupid circus-peanuts in his lap. I heave the cup through the open window, at the sucking.

Someone screams and the drink splashes. I'm outside and around the trunk before the sucker can recover; there, beside the open gas-tank, squats the third Mexican, Coke-slicked and wide-eyed, muttering things that sound slap-your-mother nasty, trying to hide a gas-filled milk carton. I snatch his rubber tube and manage to whip his face with it before he can get away.

I've been praying lately.

It's one of those things I always assumed I'd never catch myself doing, but it feels perfectly natural—like quitting smoking, or beating a gas-breathed illegal with a siphoning hose.

(When I found out I was pregnant, I assumed kicking my pack-a-day habit was going to be rough. I imagined myself on hands and knees, coughing barbed black coughs, licking Kentucky dirt just for the taste, but it didn't happen. Other than a tuning fork twinge every time I see the cool white imprint my Zippo left in my jeans, it was easy, natural. It was as simple as beating Frank's hand or becoming a mother.)

I watch the Mexicans, but drift.

I never thought I'd pray. When I was a girl, our pastor ended his sermons with the stern pronouncement "And *this* is the word of God" as he slammed his bible closed. Every Sunday, I would concentrate on his words as long as I could, every muscle in my head flexed in his holy direction, hoping to learn exactly *which* word God had claimed. The sermons were as dry as the crackers at Communion, and I lost myself in naughty secular thoughts: school/boy/Iwantapony. And always, just when I was at my furthest away, my most lost, the pastor would shout his conclusion, thrusting his arms to the sky as if Team God had just kicked a field goal and shout: "*This* is the word of God."

I imagined it to glow like Vegas in the desert night. I imagined the Word of God to be something of impossible glory, a word red-inked like 'Jesus', Christmas-lighted across the sky. A word everybody understood without having to try, a word that fills you like a warm meal and makes everything okay.

The Mexicans whisper, but the wind carries their words across the lot. Instead of nasty, though, their Spanish sounds frightened and cute, almost innocent. They laugh a lot, nervously and the other two make fun of the whipped gas-thief.

But one day, I figured it out: he didn't know it either. When I realized the pastor's vocabulary was as earthbound as my grandfather's, I stopped. I stopped praying, stopped churching, stopped caring.

My current prayers aren't creepy or anything. I don't go at it like the wailing pew-humpers of my mother's church, the wethaired crazies folded up by their beds with churchsteeple hands and uncomfortable *thees* and *thous*—I just check in, sometimes, quickly and secretly, asking things that would fit on Post-its: "God, don't let this stain be permanent"; "God, make sure nobody catches me dropping this Gerbers in my purse"; "God, let this trip work out okay."

One of the Mexicans is shouting at me. He's in front of the van, saying the same words over and over and over, bowing. He bows exaggeratedly, as if he's in a silent movie, nose close to the ground.

He says something I can't understand. He's missing half of his right arm.

The other two—the gas-sucker and a friend—point and laugh at him. He drops to one knee, *senoritas* at me, and reaches on apologetic hand across the lot, to our caved-in Impala. The other cars are so dark they could be abandoned.

The siphoner tries to drag the shouter away, but he resists. And he dances. He etches a fluent, silent two-step in the gravel, leaping comically, crashing to the ground. He stands, spins himself, and bows.

I laugh, and applaud, silently, hands out the window so he can see. I applaud and he bows again and, without thinking, I pray, *God, let them get where they're going*.

Who knows why?

Even though I know there are a thousand dead highway crosses outweighing every moment of beauty or grace, I catch myself praying.

When we were going, hours before, I lost myself in the hills. As we soared up the big ones, the ones that hid all the land beyond, I would pretend that the peaks were the end, that beyond there was nothing, and we would float away over the end of the world, forever and unstoppable.

Now, nobody moves.

The baby sleeps in my lap and I read the stars and the desert hills are stacked like sandbags in the distance. The world could end and I wouldn't notice. The world could end and I wouldn't care, but for the briefest twinge maybe, when I found out and wished I'd had a chance to name my son.

Texas at night is beautiful, peaceful. With one finger, I trace the elegant curve of the black hills beyond, with the other, Frank's cheek.

"Stop that."

"Sorry. Go back to sleep." Black trees are staggered along the highway. Somewhere in there, a quarter mile or so from the rest-area, is a cross, marking a death.

Metal squeals on metal as the El Camino's door opens. A can clanks to the pavement. An electric buzz from inside reminds the driver to remove his keys. He stretches out, tall as a ladder. His face is bearded thick, a black Christmas wreath.

The Mexicans watch from their van. The El Camino man spits and says, "Shit."

He pulls a paper grocery sack from the backseat. He studies the cars around him, nods at each, and walks to the restroom. He stares at me, his eyes as black and wet as chewed tobacco. At the Men's room, he kicks the door open and tosses the bag inside.

The night is silent but for the buzz of the El Camino. The keys are still in it.

"That bike," Frank says, suddenly awake, pointing to the purple Suzuki. "Straight from Fagotron." He yawns and shifts in his seat.

"You need sleep," I say.

"I don't want to. Not in this damn car."

Since the El Camino man went to the bathroom, the night has been unendurable, stretching along like a Fourth of July doubleheader. There has been silence from the Mexicans, from the highway, from the night. Silence from everything but the El Camino and the Men's room: for God knows how long I've listened, my ears strained to the bathrooms like my child's mind to the pastor. I hear an unmistakable rhythmic flushing.

"Then let's drive," I say.

"Let's stay here." He reaches to me, and touches my cheek. "Do you want to? It's been a while."

"No."

He bites into one of his ridiculous peanuts and puts his hands back on me. "You never want to."

"These seats stick to my back. It's too hot."

"I like it hot."

"When I sweat to these seats it makes a sucking sound."

"*That* makes a sucking sound." He points to his son, to my chest.

"That isn't this."

Frank turns away from me. "Fine," he says. "Too hot."

The night is dead but for the hum of the El Camino. I feel my stomach under my shirt—still loose and grabable, like a broken air mattress.

Straining, I think I hear dim flushing, and shouting. Frank doesn't.

"Just wait for my aunt's house," he says, flexing his hand. Ever since I broke it, he hasn't drank a drop. "Central air. You've never had it so good."

I put my head out the window and look up: since the last time, the moon has moved the length of my hand. I pull back in-

side and say "I'll drive," but he doesn't hear.

He can't sleep when I drive, he always says, and I'm better with the baby anyhow, and, once we're going, we can't stop for anything except sleep, gas, or the second coming until we hit Arizona. Mesa, Arizona, where his uncle owns a store that rents office furniture, where they promised (years ago, drunkenly, after his father's funeral) Frank a warehouse job if he was ever down on his luck. His uncle is old and fat and smells like a burning bag of feet; his aunt is all pickle-skinned and always looks at you like you just kicked her puppy. They hate me.

Flushflushflush.

It's evil, I know: something evil is going on in the bathrooms, something wicked. It's a code, a flushy message, a toilet hymn to summon sewer demons. There's a human head in that sack, or bits of that girl I went to school with who disappeared at the church lock-in two years and twelve hundred miles ago. Stinking squishy parts the forensics team won't be able to identify.

But I don't like to think like that. With luck I'll temp someplace, or work day care, or pick fruit until my hands are as brown and worn as Frank's useless ball glove. And goddamn it, I can drive fine. He's right about one thing though—you can't trust a man with the baby. Leave them alone for ten minutes and my boy'll be sitting in a bear trap and on a pile of *Playboys*, in the path of a lawnmower, drinking from a can actually labeled "Heart Disease."

I can't tell if I hear flushing or if I imagine it. Frank's nosy breathing sounds like rocks rubbed together.

The bagman steps outside, holding his sack. He spits, impressively, as if he was starting a puddle.

Frank is asleep and the baby's in the back and even the Mexicans have calmed down and started moving around, again, peeking from their van. The one-armed dancer slipped away a while back, and hustled to the woods, undoing his pants as he ran, and even though I know better I imagined him and the motorcycle man together out there, doing things that'll stain your soul just to think of them.

The bagman's hair and beard are wet and he's just as much

a badass as he seemed at first, as hard and dirty as well-used engine parts. He walks slowly to his buzzing car and climbs onto the hood. He leans against the windshield and gazes upwards.

What's he waiting for? The motorcycle man? A one-handed drug lord? A young mother to skin alive? He opens the bag and spits inside. Drugs. It has to be drugs, nothing worse than that. Drugs, or ears strung together like Christmas popcorn.

The dancer's business is finished. He steps from a tangle of bushes, sees the bagman, and collapses, hiding. He snakes backwards from the lot, and his van-mates try not to laugh. I hold the baby to me. It has to be drugs, just drugs for the Suzuki man.

The bagman lights a cigarette, sucks it for what feels like hours, sucks it the way the Texas sun sucks the chill from a morning. Finally, he leaps to the pavement and drops the bag ten feet or so behind the El Camino. He kneels to it, gauging the distance between it and his back tire. Satisfied, he returns to the car and slides behind the wheel.

I reach to Frank, but don't bother. The bag is moving. I see this the same way I heard the flushing or the preacher: I strain towards it, aching for confirmation.

The bagman revs the engine, throws it in reverse. He leans out the door, aiming, beard flailing, the bag in line with his tire.

But somehow, the dancer is there, behind the car. Who knows why people do what they do?

He kicks the bag and dives, gashing his head against the oncoming hatchback, swallowing rocks and gravel and glassy parking lot filth. He rolls away, graceful as a stuntman. The bagman spins out, engine wailing like a dying beast.

"What the shit?" The bagman demands. He spits out the window, his best yet.

The dancer picks up the bag and hugs it to his chest. He stands still, defiant, and I know, suddenly, that this is not a cross-cultural drug deal, that this isn't some trilingual Mexican/Suzuki/bagman nastiness, that this is uglier and more beautiful than I thought.

"Goddamn beaners mind your own beany tacofuck business," the bagman says. The engine gurgles furiously, the devil

clearing his throat, and the El Camino donuts around laying a circle of rubber thick as hamburger.

Frank stirs, a bit. I step from the car. The air is finally cool, the wind dead.

The high rear of the El Camino lurches and sways. Smoke black as burnt toast clouds behind it and Lucky the Happy Horse is lucky because he's happy, that lucky son of a bitch, and I clear my mind like I couldn't back in church. The dancer holds his ground but is directly in front of the car, eyes locked with the bagman's.

"Hey!" I scream so loud the words become a red-throated nothing, "El Camino!"

The driver looks at me and I run, toward the dancer, into the headlights. He waves me away, crying his odd brown words. I stop beside him and face the car.

The bag is crying.

The driver shouts and the one-armed man shouts and we could move out of the way, into the woods, but I have a baby and a husband and a van-load of gas thieves to protect. He closes his eyes and hugs the wet sack. An engine roar saws through my stomach. With sudden inspiration, I wave to the vibrating car directly before us, politely. With a grace I haven't felt in years, I bow to the driver.

Gently, I touch the Mexican's rough, tree-bark hand, and pull it between my own. His eyes open and he smiles, and, as the car finally lunges ahead, as the long static moment breaks, he steps with me, pressing the sack between us, and dances.

I had expected their van to be miserable inside, hazed and smoky, loaded with hubcaps to hock at flea markets. But it's simple and bare, full of blankets. I've gathered from the dancer's pantomime and careful explanations—Anselmo, I think his name is—that they paddled across the Rio Grande on the hood of an old car, their clothes and money in two plastic sacks tied to their heads. Work is hard but harder to find. A box in the corner holds letters to home, each stuffed with bills.

The siphoner apologizes and apologizes, but I stay away

from him. In the dancer's eyes, I still see the red I saw as we tangoed, as the El Camino shot past a step away from us—the red of the tail lights, burning away, getting smaller and smaller as the bagman neared the highway, as the night's pulse slacked, as the world relaxed.

The bag. Stunned, we had danced while the other two ran to us, danced until the imaginary music slid from our muscles, until worry returned.

The dancer held the bag. My stomach was knotted, my nose clenched, my imagination creating pinker and darker visions of what could be moving and crying inside. I hoped my boy would never have to do this.

Anselmo opened the bag. Kittens.

One, two, . . . six, crying, wet with toilet water, pink eyes barely open. Licking each other. Taking care of each other.

I shrieked with pleasure, with shock, and cradled the first one I could grab. I made kissy faces and investigated it for damage: the poor thing was waterlogged, sneezing, its hazy fur slick and cold. I tickled it, *ooohh*ed, waved my finger in front of it to see if its eyes followed. The rest were curled in the sack, overlapping each other like paislies on a tie, blinking and crying, getting ready to exist.

Who knows why people do what they do?

The urinals are ashtrays, the toilets choked with leaves, and water splashes with each step. There's one kitten, clogged in the handicapped stall, in water the color of pickle-juice. Anselmo rolls up his sleeve and retrieves it. It's slick and dismal and I wrap it in toilet paper. The man who prayed earlier says something that sounds pretty and pure.

In the van, the siphoner watches my boy while he builds a cat bed out of boxes and newspapers, his own shirt and pillow. The six survivors lay on the sports page. They lick each other dry and cry at the inside of the van. They are too young to move around without collapsing. I pick each up and kiss them on the head.

The cross is bigger than I expected, more substantial. When you're moving, they just float by, fluttering like the calendar days in an old movie, just brief, grounding reminders of the suffering of others, of your own good fortunes.

A truck passes, whipping dust at us.

We had cut through the woods to the highway, wary of running into the motorcycle man. A quarter mile up, we stopped at the cross. The kitten is light and the toilet paper wet. With my fingers, I dig at the rocky, weed-whiskered ground just beyond the gravel shoulder. The Mexicans help silently with their old tools and hard fingers until we have a grave the size of my hand. My eyes are wet.

Morning orange stitches along the night's dark hem. I place the unfortunate bundle in the grave, in the gravel, and search for words. The praying one says something, and the siphoner shushes him. I search for something we will all understand.

I hold dirt and gravel in my hand. My fingers spread and it falls slowly. My face is moister than my mouth and I can't pray the hard holy way I'm supposed to.

"El Camino," I say, voice dying like the night around us.

It's better than nothing. I scoop another handful from the shoulder, and say it again, firmly, hoping it'll take.

"El Camino," the dancer says. Gravel slips between his fingers, spiraling into the footprint grave.

"El Camino," the praying one says. He nods, drops his gravel, and says it again, slowly, as if it were some canonical centerpiece.

The siphoner holds my baby. His face is red and he wants to laugh. As the sun looses itself from the hills behind him, he swallows, rubs his cheek, and says it.

I think of the times I've been stranded and thank God for circus peanuts.

Frank is asleep, but I push him aside. I slide the screwdriver in, and the Impala starts as if it were never in doubt, as if this

rest area were the showroom floor. The last of the night struggles weakly against the morning, and we roll as fast and dark as the Mexicans' double *r*s.

Before driving, I called the three of them to the car. I returned the siphoning hose to the red-cheeked gas thief, and, with an apologetic "El Camino" to the prayer-man and the dancer, I gave the only gift I had, a half-empty bag of foamy circus peanuts.

The day will be harsh, but, right now, while Frank holds the baby and we hit the top of the first Arizona hill, the morning is as bright and soaring and perfectly crafted as the word of God.

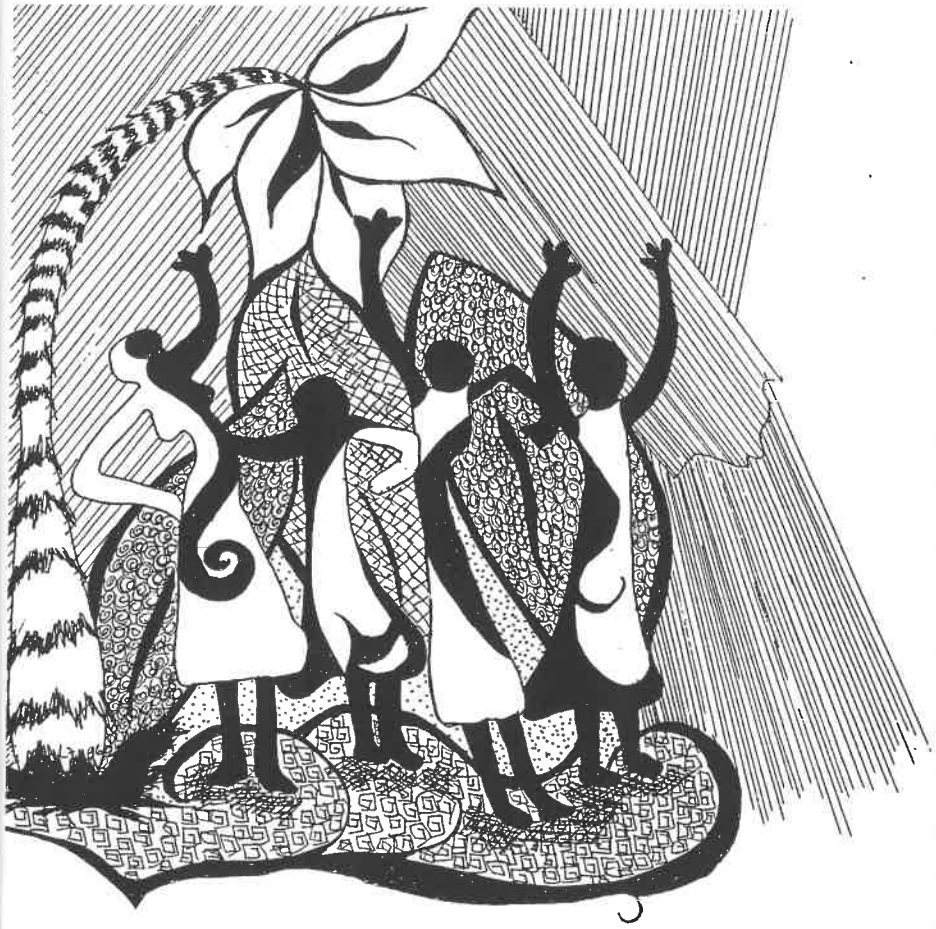


Illustration by Lynn Freeman

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Editors invite you to become a *Thin Air* Patron. Your gift will be recognized in the journal according to the following elements: nitrogen ($1,000), oxygen ($500), argon ($250), neon ($100), and helium ($50). Donations of $500 or more entitle you to a free lifetime subscription and recognition in each issue. Gifts ranging from $50 to $250 will bring you a free one-year subscription.

Thin Air would like to thank the following donors:

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Special thanks to the following for their time and effort:

Barbara Anderson, Don and Lisa Biggar, Dan Crawley, Collins Irish Pub, Toni Lefton, Chris Wangelin, Tom Carpenter, Literacy Volunteers of Coconino Co., Larry Preston, Allen Woodman, Jane Armstrong Woodman, Greg Pape, George Pieper, Jim Simmerman

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$4.95

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