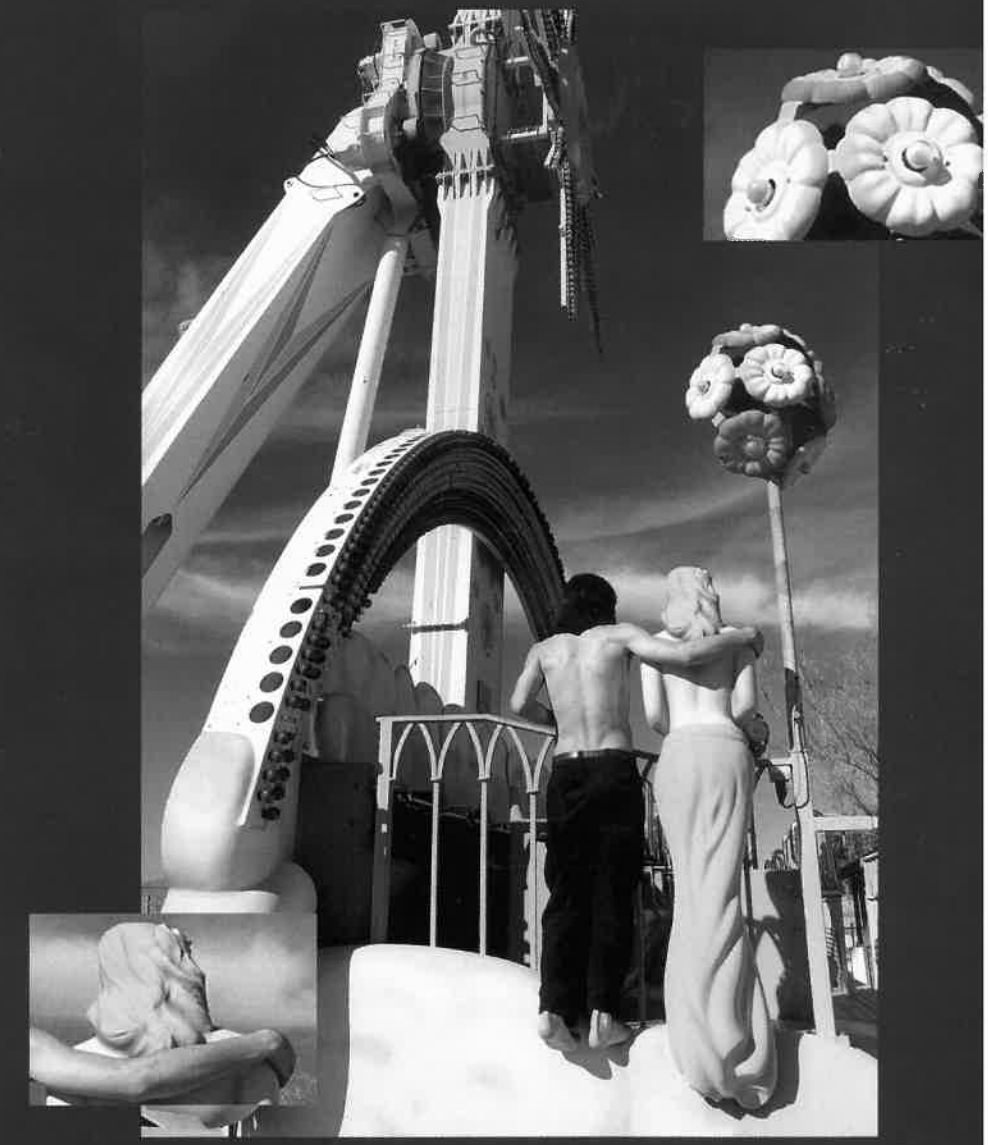
Thin Air

MAGAZINE



Thin Air

MAGAZINE

Volume V Number 1 2000
Northern Arizona University

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Contents

Contest Winners 2000

Thin Air
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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 and interviews.

Thin Air administers two annual awards. Send SASE for competition guidelines.

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

Thin Air Congratulates Contest Winners 2000

Fiction Contest Winner
Christian Frazier

Poetry Contest Winner
Vivian Shipley

Judges for the Contest

Fiction
Ron Carlson

Poetry
Annie Finch

This annual cash award winning contest is open to all writers and poets. Winning pieces were selected based on style, content and originality.

Vivian Shipley

Herring Gulls are Decisive

Holding out for McDonald's french fries, refusing
to eat week old hamburger buns, apple cores I scatter

above frozen foam that waterfalls sand, these birds
are like my father who leaves bacon, red eye gravy,

even cornbread I fix to make him forget the nausea,
two more months of chemotherapy, this Yankee winter

he has settled into. Low tide, ice lilypads algae, holds
seaweed in place, but for us each day is more unstable

than Morgan Point's shoreline. A crossover to beach
is frozen rock and hard going in the harbor wind

from New Haven that sweeps this inlet. I'm seeking
metaphor in a kite tail, evergreen branches that storm

our seawall. I settle for goldenrod, injecting its winter
stems with memory of September, of yellow rays,

feathers clustered with monarch butterflies and bees,
strung like lights out of season on a Christmas spruce.

Scrub pine that takes whatever comes, my father refuses
a Lexington post office request for a new address, to put

one root down in Connecticut. Unwilling to give up
going back home to Kentucky, he tells me goldenrod

is his state flower. Like him, one isn't just like another.
He lists categories I can use as fieldguide: plumelike

and graceful; elm-branched; clublike and showy;
wandlike and slender; flat-topped. I clip stem ends,

brown as sable, for him to examine. Rigid oval upper
leaves clasping hairy stems, my father is positive it is

hard-leaved goldenrod found west of the Appalachians.
Nothing I say brings my father certainty, nothing I cook

brings him comfort. He thinks only about surviving,
longs for hollows not shore. Filled so with emotion, I am

useless, have no way to release my father, guide him home
with eyes that are frozen like stone in sockets of sand.

Poetry judge Annie Finch is an associate professor at Miami University. Her upcoming book of poetry *Marie Moving* is forthcoming from Story Line Press in 2002.

Christian Frazier

A Short Stay

The last thing he saw before he opened the car door and stepped out into that New York night, onto that New York street, was her, Mary Beth. He wore that moment around his wrist. A stopped watch. She was tapping the glass, her long prosthetic hair braided into a hundred different strands that must have weighed as much as her small body. The strands hid most of her face. At her request he opened the door and stepped out. It was a new feeling for him, and so he waited a moment, longer than usual, before he too had his second breath. He had been to New York many years ago with his family. But that was long before he had read the novels of Jack Kerouac, before he had watched the films of Woody Allen, and long before he had seen Brassai's photograph of Grand Central Station, the one with the light beams perfectly trapped in both time and space. He had been to New York before bearing witness to all of that. And so as he stepped out of the car and stood in front of Mary Beth, who was the dangerous embodiment of cynicism teamed with an overwrought self-confidence, he wanted to shrink back into himself a little, to lean back into the car and sit in the passenger's seat (though that espoused similar discomfort). He felt marooned.

A car-ride going north, Baltimore to New York. A distance traveled.

That distance became a memory.

Space mutating into Time.

Jackson and his girlfriend had been dating only six months. They had had an intensely dramatic beginning, with all the emotions, all the uncertainties, all the poems, and all the late night phone conversations. Before they met, both had been trying to "come into their own;" instead, they came into each other. Then they had had an intensely tumultuous middle, with all the arguing, all the uncertainties, all the jealousy, and all the unreturned phone calls. But things had calmed since then and they were just "us" at that point (the beginning of their trip). An us in quotation marks. An us not equivalent to Jack & Judy or Judy & Jack. An us with a him and a his-girlfriend. A him and a his. An us alone. A lonely us.

On the trip up his-girlfriend had suggested a game: they were to each tell something they had never told anyone before. Jack wasn't sure he wanted to play—it seemed a recipe for disaster. ("Come on, it'll be fun," she said). He gave in and she went first. She told him about a time she had cheated on an exam. She was ashamed, she had never told anyone. He told her of the time he wrote his ex-girlfriend's name and number on a bathroom stall, just underneath "For good head call...." She laughed and went to tell her next secret, which was about some cousin she had once kissed. That went on for a while, those things that had never before come from their mouths finally then pouring out. It felt good, like turning on a faucet that hadn't been used in a long time: the water was a little dirty from the rust that had built up inside, but at the same time, it was cleansing. Rusty stories polished by dirty water.

His-girlfriend told one last story. Over the summer, while they were dating, she had accidentally found a way to get an orgasm in her bathtub one night after she had come home from work. If she positioned her body just right up against the jets, she was able to feel like she never had before. Every night after that she would come home from work and get into the tub. As he heard her tell this last secret his body split in two—half was turned on by the rampant eroticism in her story, the other was jealous that he might not be able to evoke those same feelings of ecstasy. He felt he had to outdo her story but he had nothing left. He had already told her about masturbation. ("That's nothing," she said. "Everyone does that.")

So he lied.

He told her that when he was younger, he and his sister had taken off all their clothes and lay with one another in bed, each slowly exploring the other's genitals. They didn't have sex, he told her, they only explored. There were no more stories after that. Instead, his-girlfriend looked out the window and said that now they knew each other better, that their walls were thinning. His incestuous lie had sucked all noises from the car. A vacuum sucking out all the air, leaving no gravity to hold down words. A vacuum allowing only silence to remain. A small silence. A silent betrayal.

Jackson and his-girlfriend arrived in New York at eleven. He wore that time on his wrist. The sky had held a dark intangible visage for a long while; the car had held a dark intangible quiet just

as long. The last thing he saw before he stepped out onto that street, before he broke from the suffocating air of the car, was Mary Beth. She had grasped his hand unnaturally. She introduced herself. There was a coldness in their shaking of hands, not so much from her but rather from the air they trapped between them.

Mary Beth led them down the street to her apartment. Her long hair let wind pass through it and it looked like chimes hanging on a front porch, little bells bouncing into and off of one another. Her hair didn't seem to fit her head. It was awkward the way it was placed. She had had extensions put on her hair. His-girlfriend had told him, warned him, about them. ("God, the things that girl does. Be prepared.") His-girlfriend and Mary Beth talked, catching up on their lives. (They had once been roommates.) Mary Beth walked in front of them, the unusual us, never looking back to see if they were still there. His-girlfriend watched Mary Beth's figure as she walked. She told Mary Beth that she had lost weight. Mary Beth assured her that she hadn't, and as she grabbed her ass she remarked on how anything she ate went straight there. "I have a black ass to go along with my black hair," she said.

Mary Beth's apartment was not what he had expected. It was dirty, small. He had imagined a kitchen, a dining room, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, all fully furnished, all decorated in that pseudo-intellectual sleek black with the accompanying gray. His expectations arose from the stories his girlfriend had told of Mary Beth. That one time Mary Beth had gone to Ireland with only a week's notice. That she had spent the previous summer in South Africa, shopping in the streets of Johannesburg. That she worked when she wanted to and played most of the time. But those stories belied the condition of the apartment he was standing in. There were one and a half rooms, a small kitchen and a bathroom he could not stand up in. Her refridgerator was old and empty save a bottle of water and a few condiments. Her rooms were furnished with failing chairs and tired couches with pied patterns of blue-greens and black-greys. The faucet in her bathroom sink dripped persistently, the sound of Chinese water torture. Drip. Drip. Like thoughts slowly dripping onto the mind. Inimical thoughts.

They stayed in the apartment for only a few short minutes. Then they hurried back out into that New York night and walked down the streets. Mary Beth said she was only wandering but Jackson felt otherwise. She moved like a moth, a vacillating trajectory always destined for the light. A dotted line of sureness

coyly hidden by a mask of uncertainty. They followed as she fluttered to a small bar. Jackson had a drink, Scotch. A slow Scotch to sip through that scene. Mary Beth had a Cosmopolitan and convinced his-girlfriend to have one too. Mary Beth said that she liked Metropolitans better than Cosmopolitans, though Cosmopolitans were good all the same. They took their drinks into a small side room where the ceiling looked as though it was falling. A visual pun—the name of the bar was Ozone.

They sat in the falling room and talked under very dim red lights. The lights reminded Jackson of his mother. When he was younger she had a bathroom with a Jacuzzi in it and one of those red lights. Whenever she would get into the tub she would turn only that light on. A red hot bath under a red hot light. Clandestine bathtub orgasms tinted red. His memory made him sweat. He forced the memory out of his mind and it left a cold wetness on his brow. The two girls talked, caught up. He listened. Mary Beth talked for some time. She and her mother were in a fight. It was over something trivial. A lost phone call. A misconstrued pause. A small silence. She and her sister, who lived together, were also in a fight. Mary Beth had gotten back together with her ex-boyfriend and her sister did not like him. Mary Beth and her sister lived together in that small apartment with the leaking faucet, the tired couches and they fought.

There were small intervals where Mary Beth stopped to take a drink or search the room for people who might be looking for her. Searching for people who are also searching for people. It was impossible to see in that dim red light, through that impregnable fog of cigarette smoke. But in those small intervals where nothing poured from the mouth of Mary Beth, his-girlfriend would try to squeeze in a sentence or two about her life, her happenings; though to no avail as Mary Beth was seemingly impervious to other people's thoughts, statements, wanderings of the mind. Whatever his-girlfriend would say, it would simply ricochet off of Mary Beth in a form that then reflected her. He looked through that dim red light, through that impregnable fog, he looked through to see if she had ears. He didn't see any. All he saw was a constant efflux of egomaniacal ejaculations. I'm doing this, or I'm doing that, she would say. I want this, or I want that, she would say. The world an infinite reflection of her desires. A hall of mirrors, each one stained by Mary Beth.

After a few more drinks, which her boyfriend bought when he

showed up, they went back to Mary Beth's apartment. Jackson's head was spinning a little. The Slow Scotch disrupted his consciousness. He was happy not to hear what Mary Beth was saying. He was happy to know that he wouldn't remember. Mary Beth and her boyfriend argued about a woman's role in society. Jackson looked to his-girlfriend. She was in her own world, her eyes glazed over. Before her last Cosmopolitan she had winked at him, and mouthed an I-Love-You. A soft, sweet pretended nothing. That was an hour before.

Mary Beth and her boyfriend argued for some time. She said that she was independent, she could live without him. Her boyfriend said that he had bought her everything in the goddamn room. Jackson never did that when he was drunk. He never argued. He only wanted sex. Mary Beth's boyfriend finally left in a fury of anger stopping only to kiss his-girlfriend on the cheek and to shake Jackson's hand. Mary Beth went into the next room to go to sleep, alone. She was not upset. She was not angry. She was just-herself, and she seemed happy sleeping with just-herself. Jackson's girlfriend found a blanket, threw it over the two of them, and whispered into his ear. ("I want you so badly," she said.) He whispered back: "If 't were now to die, 't were now to be most happy." Soft, sweet pretended nothings. Words without meaning, the catalyst for a Shakespearean tragedy. She smiled, closed her eyes, and fell instantly to sleep.

There are instances where merely a breeze betrays a gust of memories, where a glance can recount a history. There are instances where a word or two become the voice of a world of pain - though not physical since pain is never physical but simply thought to be so. Life is made up of microcosms, short sentences hinting at paragraphs, collisions of tiny atoms carrying the weight of world destruction. Small things always give rise to that which is larger.

After breakfast the next morning, Jackson and his-girlfriend walked around the city. His-girlfriend showed him her-city. Her-streets. Her-shops. Her-self. The places she had been now became a moment in her past. Space mutating into Time. His-girlfriend stopped and grabbed her leg. He asked her what was wrong; she said it hurt. He asked her why. She said he knew. He told her he didn't ("From sex," she said)

Earlier that morning, during that twenty-four hours in November, as Mary Beth was getting ready to go to class, Jackson had woken to the touch of his-girlfriend. His eyes opened and he

saw Mary Beth standing, wearing nothing but a T-shirt. She was not facing him but instead her chest of drawers, searching through them for what she was going to wear. Her white breech stared at him. It was not flattering to her, that image of her ass in the pale morning light. It was naturally unflattering, like a candid photograph from National Geographic. Jackson's girlfriend laughed, then sighed, then commented on how that was just like Mary Beth. When Mary Beth left the room without once paying heed to her onlookers, his-girlfriend reached into his pants and squeezed. She then pulled him toward her, as a mother pulls a child by the neck when he has been caught doing something he's not supposed to. (Later she would ask, "Did she turn you on?")

They had sex that morning, he and his-girlfriend. The unusual us, the us alone. Him and his. All of them had sex. Mary Beth left her keys on the kitchen table so that they could lock the door and then she left. She had to go to class. His-girlfriend lay next to him, caressing his stomach for a few minutes, and then she took off his pants. This was not something he was used to, her wanting the sex, her instigating it. He was always nagging her for it. ("I'm not in the mood," she would say.) She then took off her own pants and pulled him on top of her. Jackson started slowly, unsure of his surroundings. As he moved within her he heard the exterior sounds of cars going by, people greeting each other, people yelling at each other, garbage trucks backing up. The bed began to creak. He stopped. She prodded him to continue. He did. The bed creaked loudly, rhythmically. It was torturous, like the dripping faucet. The slow incessant creaks of love-in-motion. The creaks of an unusual us. He stopped again and told her that he was worried about the neighbors, he was worried the walls were too thin. ("The walls are thin everywhere here," she said. "There's an understanding among neighbors.") They started up again and the phone rang. Jackson did not listen as the answering machine picked up and someone began leaving a message, but was sure it was the downstairs neighbor complaining about the noise above her.

The undulations became faster and faster. The understanding became less and less. Love began to force its way out of the creaks, leaving small love-sized holes for lust to fill. She was moaning, louder than she had ever before. But her moans sounded contrived. He knew that they were not having great sex. Great Sex, a proper noun. Like a character in a novel. A character that loomed in the mind of the lonely us. As Jackson grew more and more nervous,

she grew louder.

At the time, during that day in New York, he thought she was moaning louder because of the traffic outside, because of all the noises that were invading that room, that small, cold room. However, she was vicariously living out a fantasy of hers: to be Mary Beth. Later, he would come to this conclusion. He would believe that she was moaning because she thought it was something Mary Beth would have done. Before he had gone to New York that day in the middle of the semester, before he had ever met Mary Beth, his girlfriend had told him many stories about her. They were fantastic stories: stories of Mary Beth and her boyfriend driving across Idaho naked in the middle of the night on their way to visit relatives, of Mary Beth and some guy having sex while his-girlfriend was in the room pretending to be asleep under the covers, of sex in the shower, of sex in the laundry room, of sex, of sex, of sex. Great Sex looming. His-girlfriend told him those stories and he could tell, he could see it in the way her skin moved, that part of her wanted the same experiences, the same fantasies.

Later, thinking of her on that bed, on Mary Beth's bed, he realized what an out-of-body experience his-girlfriend was having. She was trying to embody that sexual being that Mary Beth was. She wanted to feel that exhileration of reckless abandon. ("Mary Beth once had a three-way," she had told him. "She's kissed a girl.") When it was all over, when all the love-sized holes had been filled with lust and the ejected out again, she leaned into Jackson, kissed a drop of cold sweat off of his shoulder and told him how good it was. He looked out the window, trying so hard to hear the exterior noises, the cars going by, the people yelling at each other, the garbage trucks—but he couldn't hear any of it. He lay prostrate on the bed and heard only her breathing next to him. Each breath came from the Chinese sink. Dripping breaths. Slow. Heavy. Torturous.

Later that afternoon, after he and his-girlfriend had walked all over the city, they met up with Mary Beth at the subway stop near Grand Central Station. Jackson looked at it, Grand Central Station, amazed that it was the very same spot that Brassai had once photographed from; that he had been there, where Jackson was standing. At that moment, he wanted to be one of the people in Brassai's photograph. He wanted to be trapped in space and time forever for all to look upon. He wanted to be one of those busy people, people too busy to stop and look around them, people that

had no idea that they were being captured and then reproduced. He looked around and saw a myriad of camera flashes going off. But they were only tourists snapping photos for their vacation albums. Jackson didn't want to be in those pictures. Jackson wanted to be art.

He and his-girlfriend walked out of Grand Central Station and saw Mary Beth standing in the place where they had arranged to meet. She was talking to another girl, a very thin girl, too thin. Jackson and his-girlfriend walked toward her. She looked in their direction but made no acknowledgement of them as she talked to the too thin girl. After she finished her conversation with the girl she kissed her on the cheek, said goodby and then walked over to them. "She's gotten so much thinner than the last time I saw her," she said, referring to the girl who was then descending the stairs to the subway.

The three of them walked down an avenue looking in the windows of the boutiques. Three has many meanings. Three could mean Mary Beth, him and his-girlfriend. It could mean the unusual hair with the unusual us. It could mean just-herself with us alone. The three walked down the avenue as Mary Beth talked and the other two held silence in their hands. As she talked Jackson saw words coming out of her mouth and then moving about in the street. Each word wended its way to a nearby pedestrian. Each escaped and danced in the streets. They danced without choreography. Moths fluttering. Jackson had to distance himself from everything around him. Everything was pressing down: gravity, her words, and his-girlfriend's words that wanted so badly to be Mary Beth's.

In an effort to get off of the street, to get inside, to fight off gravity, he asked Mary Beth and his-girlfriend if they wanted to go into a little bookshop. The name of the bookshop was Shakespeare and Company. Jackson went to a display that had an assortment of biographies. He picked up one of Woody Allen. He had read it before. In it was the real name of Woody Allen: Allan Konigsberg. Woody was his pseudonym, some perverse manifestation of his sexual anxieties. When Jackson had first read that, that Woody Allen was not his real name, he thought how ironic it was that people directed either so much admiration or so much animosity toward a combination of words that didn't even exist, that had been made up. He doesn't feel that way anymore, for what is in a name? It's his flesh that people either hate or love, or don't even know.

His-girlfriend and Mary Beth headed straight for the section on sex. They were flipping through How-To books, slutty versions of the Kama Sutra. One of them would find a picture, show it to the other, and then they would both giggle. He watched his-girlfriend as she laughed. They whispered back and forth. He wondered what they were whispering. (Later, she would tell Jackson that they were talking about him. "Mary Beth thinks you're cute. She thinks you're a keeper.")

They abandoned the shop and walked toward New York University. His-girlfriend was hoping to go to school there, Graduate School. She said she missed the city, that she would like to get back to it. They walked around the campus for a little while. The buildings were nothing like he had seen before. Funny shapes with funny patterns. None of the buildings seemed to match the other; each was a separate entity, not tied to anything around it, like the furniture in Mary Beth's apartment. They took a few photographs. Jackson took some of Mary Beth and his-girlfriend. Mary Beth took some of him and his-girlfriend. She froze them in time and space. She froze the lonely us. When water freezes it traps little pockets of air in between the water molecules. The photograph trapped little love-sized pockets of lust between him and his-girlfriend. "This one could be a postcard," Mary Beth said. An unwanted correspondence. Later he looked at those pictures. Like the buildings, none of them seemed to belong together.

After they ate some lunch at a pizzeria they walked back to Mary Beth's apartment to take a nap before they finished exploring the city. Jackson still wanted to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, his-girlfriend still had some shops to explore. But they were tired, so those things would have to wait till they had gotten some rest. On the way back to Mary Beth's apartment his-girlfriend put her hand in his. He held it for a moment and then saw Mary Beth grasp hold of his-girlfriend's other hand. He let his-girlfriend's hand go. Mary Beth saw him do it. She saw his fear. She smiled. She looked at his-girlfriend. "I'm going to make you a lesbian," she said. Jackson looked back down at their hands. (His-girlfriend had once said to him, "Guys get turned on by sight, girls by touch.")

In the interim of sleep, night had moved in on day. It is a strange occurrence, falling asleep blanketed by light and then waking up in darkness; it's disorienting. Sleep had not done them any good. The sluggishly gathered their belongings and let themselves out of the apartment. The moved down Lexington on

their way to The Met as if they were a laggard breeze, never quite catching up with the night ahead of them. At that point they still had at least six hours until they would get into the car and head home down the New Jersey turnpike, a drive that would take the entire night.

They entered The Met knowing that they could only spare fifteen minutes there; they had to have dinner before the concert and the concert was only an hour away. Jackson dragged his-girlfriend to the one painting he wanted to see, the one he had wanted to see for a long time. It was *David's The Death of Socrates.* The painting was so large, much larger than in the art books he had seen it in. It had a presence. It was a character, like Great Sex. Jackson looked around the room to see if anyone else had noticed the masterpiece that was in front of him. They hadn't. Not only were they not looking at that painting, they weren't looking at any paintings. They were pushing themselves from painting to painting, not stopping to look. People feel cultured enough walking around famous art galleries with their faces at their feet, never noticing that paintings hang on walls around them. There's no level of appreciation for the painting, only a sense of self, the constant awareness of the viewer's new gained sense of culture.

Staring at the David painting with the crescent moons under his eyes from so little sleep, Jackson could only indulge it with a textbook appreciation. Everything looked so scientific, so planned, so geometric. Socrates, with his hand in the air, was motioning "I have an idea." Jackson had no ideas. He just stared at the cup of poison which Socrates was about to drink and thought that any kind of sleep, the sleep of reason, the sleep of days, even the eternal sleep the renowned philosopher was embarking upon, was enticing.

Jackson and his-girlfriend walked toward the concert hall, dazed. He was so far from his-girlfriend. All of that talk in the car, all of those revelations, and he still felt remote from her. He felt defeated. He thought pain, his body ached. There are those moments in life where everything seems clear. Epiphanies. That overwhelming feeling Jackson was having was the antithesis of clarity. His mind was a vacuum of certainty. He walked his desultory soul up a few blocks, his-girlfriend trailing in the dim night. He stopped on a corner. In the middle of the street two cars were stopped, two men were arguing. One man stood next to his fish truck, hands flailing, words flying. The other man remained in

his car, sticking his head out of the window like a turtle, lashing out at times, recoiling when necessary. The fish pointed to a dent in his bumper. The turtle yelled, "fuck you," and recoiled his head. The fish reached into his truck and retrieved a bat; he was flaring at the gills. The turtle rolled up his window. The fish broke the window and proceeded to beat the turtle about his shell until his body appeared cracked and broken. Jackson picked up his eyes and walked to the other side of the street, motioning for his-girlfriend to follow. He didn't turn around to see if the man in the car was all right.

There were fish in the concert hall. The band had a fishbowl resting on the body of a man. It looked like the headless horseman, although the guy in the concert hall had a business suit on and his eyes were made of fish. The concert was long and trailing. The music danced on the cusps of Jackson's ears, the palpitations of the drums just out of reach, lagging as they had all day, like a breeze. At one point his-girlfriend bent down, crouching to the floor. She said she was going to be sick. A guy, probably early twenties, was jumping up and down using Jackson's shoulder as a springboard. Jackson told him to stop. The guy got angry. He said some things Jackson couldn't hear. He was half Jackson's size, but they were in New York. The rest of the concert Jackson felt a pang in his lower back, right in the spot where he thought the little guy might dig his knife. The same feeling occurred to him as he and his-girlfriend walked to the car. A few filthily clad men walked behind them as they stumbled through the streets, not sure where they had parked the car. Jackson and his-girlfriend found the car. They weren't stabbed. They paid the parking ticket. They made their exodus.

The car ride home was similar to the drive into the City. Driving north there were words spoken, pregnant words, that continued to proliferate an unspoken misunderstanding. Driving south their tongues propagated a stiff, profound silence. Silence means the mind is working. In the car Jackson was thinking about why he had conflated a lie, an incestuous lie, with all that truth, all that unbridled honesty. He was thinking about how afraid he was of the girl next to him, his-girlfriend. He was afraid of the magnified insecurity caused by a thinning of walls. He was afraid of who she was, afraid of who she was with him, afraid of who she was with Mary Beth. Maybe she was nothing with either of them. Maybe they were all nothing with each other. Maybe they were like those buildings at New York University: separated by streets,

dissociated by color and pattern, alone.

With his eyes hanging like shades on a window, the diffraction of light made the road look wider than it actually was. He loosened his grip on the wheel. He loosened the thoughts on his mind (dripping thoughts from the Chinese sink). He drifted south to Baltimore with his sleeping girlfriend, who he would later call his-fiancée, his-wife, then, his-ex-wife. They had managed to live together for fourteen years without ever really knowing anything about each other, or being too scared to admit that they did. Jackson had come the closest to knowing her those two days, twenty-four hours in fact, in November. But that knowledge had somehow punctured the breathing faculties of their relationship. In the years following that day there was a soft, just audible wheezing. Trapped air. Then, as they grew older, the wheezing grew louder and louder, like the sound of a leaking balloon, until the noise was unbearable and the escaped air took on a life of its own, positioning itself between the two of them. They were no longer an us alone. The unusual us had become an us undone. They had been pushed apart expanding nothingness, by lust-sized pockets of emptiness.

The car ride up portended the woebegone lovers they were to become. Candidness became the fountainhead of dishonesty, or more appropriately un-honesty, since it was their silence that engendered lies. Rusty lies polished by dirty water. Unfortunately it was this same dishonest silence that protracted their relationship, allowing it to evolve into insubstantial forms. Small silences. Silent betrayals. Their relationship had gotten the best of them.

A relationship knows more than the relatives.

A poem is smarter than the poet.

That afternoon in New York, just prior to going to the museum, prior to drifting south toward Baltimore, they had slept for an hour or so. He and his-girlfriend were on the bed. Mary Beth fell asleep on the tired couch. Sleep was close to them, it was tangible; dreams were just as tangible. Jackson had closed his eyes and dreamt of Mary Beth, he dreamt that he was Mary Beth.

Earlier that afternoon, during that stay in November (a short stay, a stay of execution, a staying loss), he told his-girlfriend something as they walked down Fifth Avenue. He told her that Mary Beth fascinated him. ("Did she turn you on?" she would ask later.) Mary Beth's liberating wave of a hand (which seemed to calculate destiny), her ostensibly stoic demeanor, her blas,

irreverence to life struck him. There was an ineffable appeal to her wantonness. He told his girlfriend that he wanted to be that way. He wanted to be Mary Beth. And as he said it he looked into the eyes of his-girlfriend. She was fixed on her hands, trying not to betray what lay just behind her widened pupils: desire. She wanted the same thing. They were two thinly disguised profligates, wanting only to reveal their true selves; they were human and had malefic thoughts and wants, immoral thrusts beneath their skin. She didn't know he saw that in her. She didn't know he saw that behind her eyes. She remained fixed on her hands and pretended not to notice.

Jackson had pretended not to notice Mary Beth as she left the apartment that afternoon. She had slammed a dresser drawer shut and he awoke suddenly, with nothing moving but his eyelids. He was awakened during the unearthly rising of sleep, the moment where not even gravity can hold down one's dreams; the point of mutation of veritable senses to virtual senses, where as one were to die in their dream, then surely life would mirror that catastrophe. Since he was dreaming that he was Mary Beth, consternation overwhelmed him as he saw her standing in front of him after the thunderous clap of the drawer. She was getting dressed for work. The clothes were in her hands, her body was bare. She stood there holding a shirt and jeans as if she didn't know what to do with them. She didn't know that belonged on her body. She didn't know that it was gauche to display one's genitals openly. She was primitive. A photograph in National Geographic.

Jackson was under the blanket, his eyes looking at the primitive photograph through the small holes in the cloth. Holes that could create stars on one's face if light shined through.

Holes that were love-sized to fit lust.

She looked at him, his one eye peeking out, never hinting a slight blush beneath her pallid cheeks. Jackson tried to look into her eyes, to look behind them. He couldn't see anything through her blurred pupils, but they held something ominous, like clouds of certainty hiding an eminent storm. He looked away, burying his star-clad face in the pillow. Mary Beth dressed. Without saying a word she walked through the old apartment, passing the failing chairs and tired couches. That apartment, those things in it, lost their shape and became a moment. Space mutating into Time. Mary Beth kept moving through those temporal rooms. She fluttered like a moth through Time. She walked past the bathroom

and out the door, not noticing the persistent dripping of the Chinese sink that had come to be the slow dripping of thoughts on his mind. He never saw her again.

"We're giving the nod here to the most complicated and ambitious piece and that is "A Short Stay," by C. Frazier. Here he uses language to mirror his protagonist's state of mind, and though a great deal of the story is psychological, it has unusual vigor."

—Ron Carlson

Ron Carlson is author of five books of fiction, most recently the story collection, *The Hotel Eden.*

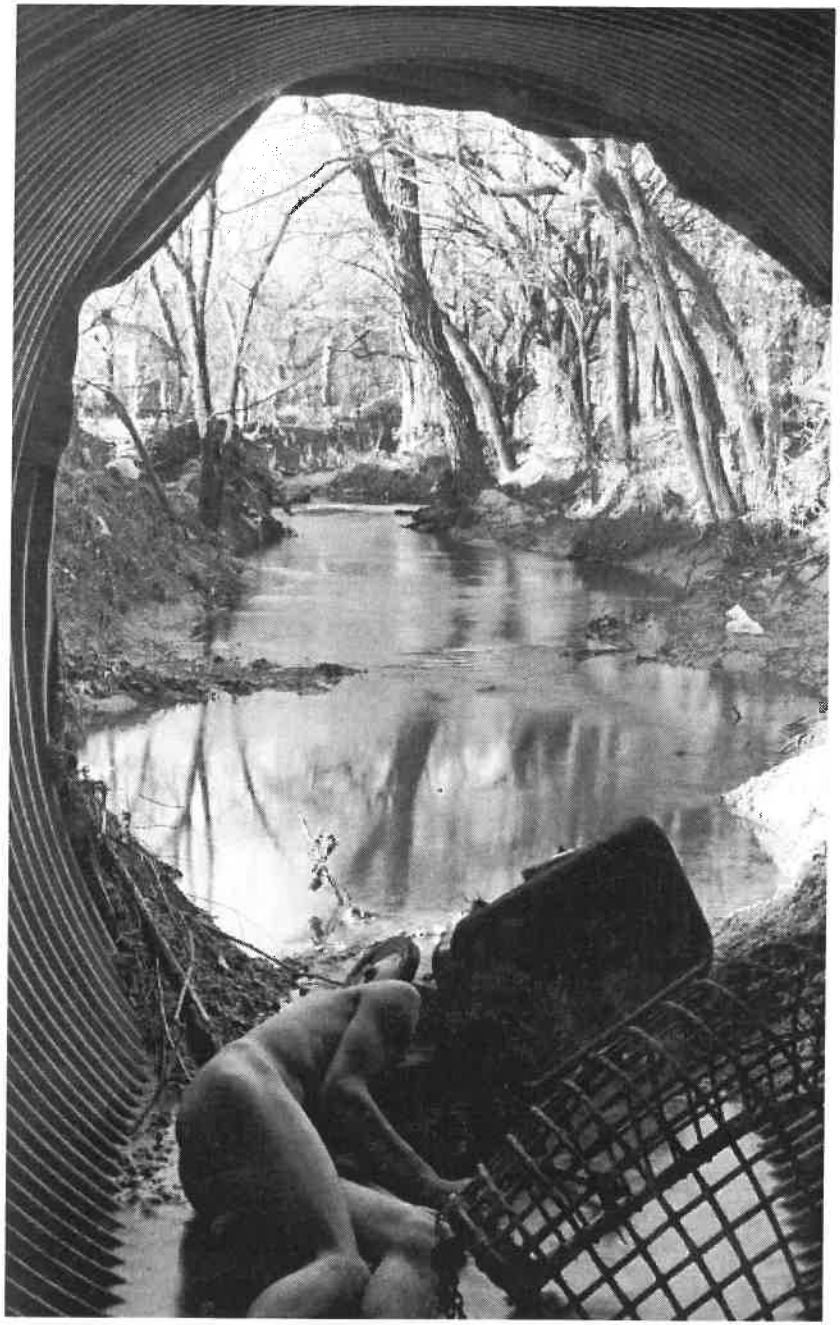
Peter Serchuk

Minor Poet

for Joe

He's made plans to die in obscurity;
to be found at his desk in the basement
next to the dryer, a toilet flushing
above his head. When the buzzer sounds
it means the clothes are dry
and the poems are done.

Who would have thought
he could shape a life out of this;
music for the mice and the dust.
Under these pipes he's examined each kiss,
argued fate with the listening dead.
Half asleep in his beer he scowls at the Muse;
I'd rather be rich than read!



Untitled 3, By Alex McDonald

Rene F. Cardenas

Filling the Ledger

Wearing seersucker coveralls,
given out in depression lines, is over;
spelunking is over, bat shit and mud
wearing like a second skin and listening
to Snider complain is over; and
by the way, jumping out of a Cessna
over Georgetown, trying to avoid
angry nopaleras, yes, aha,
the skydiving kid, is over; writhing
with a red-headed woman in Phoenix,
drinking gin fizzes in the melting
afternoon, finding ha-ha allusion
with saguaros, my, isn't that over;
looking for love in the jungle trails
of Meta Colombia is over,
as is leaving a message carved on the bark
of a tree, and hoping the renegade
guide didn't kill us in our sodden
hammocks, and toasting aguardiente
on New Year's Eve with a pulpy aguacil
fancying my Tejano belt buckle,
I guess that's over; deftly hopping
through exploding mortar rounds north
of Wei-Jung-Bu, and diving into
an abandoned, thank-you-God bunker,
and baroom-wharam-bam-shit-jesus
(as one hit the trench) why did I join
the army, is all over, pal;

Writing sonnets, linking nouns to color,
counting feet and rhyming reason, is over
the hill, gone with Spencer to Alexandria,
or thereabouts; looking at pastel skies
over the Rio Magdalena,
dotted by the green-hide sloth, drinking
parrots by the barrel in Medellin,
smitten with Jewish love at the Andean
University, bugs arranging my guts
in Cucuta, hopefully, that's over,
red rover; banishing adverbs,
defenestring swifties, stacking dangles,
and limning lemons is gone, man, uh-huh,
with the broken wind, over, lover;
blue beer abolutions, wrist mass peasants,
rummer locations, and bistro honies,
is no more, señor, the bar is closed, bro.

Carlotta Lady Izumi Abrams

THE DOLL

Wassim is telling me
about his mother,
a Bengali
who is a seamstress
and his father, a professor

Lately, Wassim is
saddened watching her
watching television
while making repairs on clothes.
Its so lonely
he says.

I know. I tell him
I remember
My mother had
A sewing club
in her little town.
They made patterns and dolls
for craft fairs

Wassim is also complaining
about the college town.
I tell him I go to the country
when it gets to me.
Drink whiskey with
the boys at the Honky Tonk,
or at Ezell's store,
Go driving,

smoking a joint

I wish I could do that.
he says,
go to those honky conks
and drink.
But I tell him
he might get shot
He's a little darker than I
am.
a little darker
and its Mississippi.

I'm sick of the way
they dress up women
in this town,
like little girls, he says
as if they never grew up.
I want to meet
some women
who wear t-shirts
and no makeup

But I know they would shoot him,
looking for that t-shirt
like that Japanese boy that was
trick-or-treating in Alabama

Then I begin to think
of what Glen says they
have been calling me
at Ezell's store,
Tommy Wayne and Miss Claudette
been calling me

the Doll

I asked him why.
Because
they aint never seen
No one look like you.

I choke,
think about
a China Doll,
and all its about,
think of Wassim's mother,
and my own.

Now Glen says he gonna
Work hard at the mill
And buy me a trailer.
I'm gonna make you
Proud,
Girl,
Build you a lodge
And we'll live in it
And if you want to have
A baby
we can have one.

All I know, bro,
Is that I can't sew.

On Painting Women

for Helen J. Vaughn

Something in the girl's attitude intrigued her.

She was sitting on the courthouse steps, arms latched about her knees, gazing distant, oblivious, her long dark hair lashed into tangles. Wind ravished the trees, sun made red and yellow fires of the falling leaves, their shadows darted live over the ground. The clouds and endless blue mirrored in the glass walls of the courthouse deceived; you could touch sky and cloud and fire, but not.

Netta entered the flurry of people and took the elevator. Rob was waiting in the corridor outside the small courtroom on the fifth floor. "Here you are." She handed him his glasses. "Without these you'd have to rest your case.

Rob laughed, and kissed her.

"You're to blame. I wouldn't have left them in your studio if you weren't so distracting,"

"After twenty-five years? It must be the women I paint."

"But you're the real thing."

"*They* are."

Through the windows in the courtroom door she watched as he took his place.

"Excuse me."

Netta could not help staring.

That girl.

The girl looked past her with that same oblivion and halted an instant before pressing through the door.

The face cried out for paint. She was very young but...the woman was pressing through. You could almost peel the girl away.

The girl took her place at a table by Rob. Hs client, then? Besides the two, there were only Judge Wardell, standing, and a boy sitting in the first row with a young man and a middle-aged couple behind them.

She watched Judge Wardell and Rob talk—and the girl, in profile. Twice the girl turned full toward the boy, and her gaze

lingered.

I must, Netta thought, must.

She waited.

And when the girl at last emerged, she approached her.

The girl gazed with an innocence that defied indirection.

"Excuse me for being so bold," Netta said. "I'm a painter: I'd like very much to paint you."

"Do what?" The girl stared, either startled or scornful.

"I'm a painter," she said. "I wonder if you'd pose for me."

"Pose for you. Me?"

"Yes."

Now she turned curious, or perhaps suspicious.

"Why'd you want to paint me?"

But how explain a quiver more delicate than down.

"You've got the face. Oh, it wouldn't be hard. I take lots of photos and then...."

"Photos? I don't know about that."

She laughed: "Oh, I use them to make sketches before I actually paint. My studio's no court. It's private. It's just across the street. You don't have to decide until you see it and see what I do and then if you're sure you have the time..."

"Time!" the girl said. "Wish I didn't. It's all I got."

"Then...."

"Not now. Momma's to take me back. It's New Hope I live at. You know it?"

"Oh, yes."

"Sides, I couldn't. I got no car. Him, he never let me drive it none."

"Him?"

"Billy. I'm divorcing. It's why I'm here."

"But—I could pick you up. You'd find it an interesting experience, and of course I'd pay you for the work."

"Work?"

"Posing's work."

"Well...."

"And I'd take you back. Just tell me where."

"It's no easy find—it's country—'less you ask in town. Anybody in New Hope'll tell you Billy Dawn's place. But I'll be getting out. I don't know when."

"Getting out?"

"I got to leave. I ain't staying in the country alone no more and

no car and no way to get around. I went that route long enough."

"Where will you go?"

"Maybe to momma's a while. There's momma waving. I got to go now."

"Oh, you haven't told me your name. I'm Netta...." She dared not say, yet, your lawyer's wife.

"Name's Melissa. Billy's a Dawn. Plenty of Dawns out New Hope way. See you." She ran down the steps.

Netta crossed the street and mounted the steps to her studio, but when she took up the chalk, she kept seeing those Medusa tangles of blown hair lashing around that still, indifferent face.

At home she said, "She's a haunt, that girl of yours, Rob."

Rob was mystified. "Girl?"

"The one in court this morning."

"Melissa Dawn. Pretty little thing. Up for divorce."

"Rita's age she must be!" What her Rita, or her Matthew, might have been if poor and raised country.

"I asked her to model for me."

"You! You won't do!" But there was admiration in his voice. "So you're fired again."

On a morning of fierce wind that quivered the trees like naked nerves and stripped last leaves, *that girl* she saw, the blow of tangled hair, the distance in that face, the resistance, *a fiber—it teased,* and instead of going to the studio she drove out over the mountain till she came to an arrow left to New Hope shielded by woods before a bend into town.

The girl was right: the first person, an old man walking with his dog, knew Billy Dawn's place. "Yes, Ma'am. Just you follow this here road 'bout a mile. It's a shotgun cabin, sudden like, down the bank, and it right beside of the stream."

Precisely. A driveway worn into dirt to the porch. Paint curling like dead skin. And there was
Melissa, come to the door.

"You mean a thing when you say it, don't you?"

Netta laughed. "Or why say it? Are you by yourself?"

"How else'd I be? Two years by myself out here."

"Two years!"

"He's no homebody. You come in. I got some coffee made."

Melissa led her straight through the dogtrot to the kitchen, but Netta caught glimpses of rooms nearly naked-in one a couch, all

shot, a TV on; in one a frame bed and bureau; in another only a bed. And the kitchen was sparse, a small table, two chairs, a few pieces of crockery on the counter, a kettle, two pans hanging by the stove—and shining, everything.

"I wonder, if you've thought it over...You might come to my studio and let me take some photos—I'll bring you back, of course—if you've time, I mean."

"Time! Time to count them leaves falling." Her head tilted and her eyes rested on the stream and woods, the shorn trees. She turned and said baldly, "Why'd you want to paint me?"

"I'll find that out when I paint you."

"You mean you don't know?"

"That's part of it."

"Sure sounds like a puzzle."

"Something like that."

Quick as a firefly, a face, a body spoke. It excited. A mystery teased. You had to probe, discover, make it yours, then liberate it—and, so, yourself. That joy!

She said, "You follow a lead. I don't really think there's a word for it. It just happens."

"I know all about that. *He* happened." She stood, shunted him, and said, "I got all day."

"And I have!"

Cold the day, the mountains like islands rising out of a great lake of sun, all the bare trees quivering awkward fingers.

"You got no man?"

She would tell her, but—not to lose her confidence—not yet.

"Two!" Netta laughed. "The other's my son, Matt, Mathew, he's an architect. And I have a daughter, Rita—she's away, studying."

"You're rich, then. Oh, I don't mean money rich."

"I know what you mean. And I am."

Melissa laced her fingers and stared ahead, still.

In no time they were walking up the studio steps. "Here we are!" Netta opened the door. Melissa cried, "Oh," and halted, but her gaze darted. Netta said, "A mess, my maze, isn't it?" Melissa stood silent, her eye shifting from canvas to canvas. "You did all them?" Then she moved slowly up one side of the long room, through light pouring in from windows on the street side; along the other side, stopping before the women hanging there, before women in frames propped against the walls between the long table in the middle of the room and another worktable laden with

paints, chalk, brushes; past easels and cabinets. Her hand went out to touch, but did not. She stopped to study a sad woman caught meditating in pale melancholy light, then a woman standing defiant in her shift in an alcove, then a woman in a white satin slip lying on a Persian carpet luxuriating in rest and in the soft texture and five colors. Netta said no word, but watched. When Melissa lingered long before the woman huddled in the center of an enormous fine China saucer, dwarfed by it, she said finally, "I can feel for this one. She's give out. Can't get out, can she? Can't move 'less she does everything *their* way. You sure do see things."

She ran her fingers over a museum board.

"Rough."

"I coat the board with acrylic—it has an earthy color--and that gives me the texture and density I want. Then I apply the local colors. You want the women to look alive."

"They sure do. You don't do that in no minute."

"You've got to take time. Would you like to start?"

"No time like now. Where you want me?"

"To begin with, put that blue negligee on, then sit in this chair. Just relax and be yourself."

"How'd you know you wanted to paint me?"

"Because when you were sitting on the courthouse steps...."

"You saw me then?"

"Passed you. Your look caught me."

If you didn't follow impulse, the moment—irrecuperable—might haunt long after you'd lost it.

As she talked and observed, she took shot after shot, shifting angle slightly, recalling how she had seen her on the courthouse steps, hoping for *the* glimpse....

"I usually have an idea of the form I want to paint a model in.... If you'll turn toward the window.... Yes...."

Light carved her. Stone her face seemed, but the skin toned soft, warm. And her lips bold full, ripe. But the eyes stared green and almost brazen straight at you, uncompromising, indifferent to her own body molded by sun and shadow through the blue, thin as gauze and faded.

"I love women," Netta said. "Does that sound funny?"

"And me men. Does that?"

They laughed a gale.

"Oh, except maybe momma," Melissa said. "But no kind of love's wrong, is it? I grew up on a farm and seen animals and some

strange folks too, and I can't knock love if it don't hurt nobody. But people are funny. They maybe understand things, but I think they don't want to—you think so?"

"I'll ponder that for when you come again. When?"

"Guess. I'll have to."

"Can I watch you work sometime?"

"Whenever you want to. I love having people watch. Shall we go have a bite before I take you back?"

When Melissa dropped in a few days later, the *form* she had: on the board she had sectioned Melissa's body to size in a line drawing with Cont6 crayon in preparation for a charcoal sketch, the figure waiting—she liked to see it that way—for its private life.

"You got to put me in that? You got a long way to go."

"That's the challenge, and the joy—getting there."

"You'll make it. You did before."

"But never with you. Each one's a beginning."

"Momma, she brought me."

"Then you've moved?"

"Had to. The month's gone. Oh, his folks said *he* could wait till I got good and ready to leave, but staying'd be mean, and it's death there alone—always was. I got to get work."

Struck by the girl's hands, her palms, settled in such tender rest over her belly, Netta lowered the camera.

Why, she's pregnant!

"Are you?..."

"What?" Her hands, and the wistful look, betrayed.

"Pregnant. Are you?"

"How'd you know? It don't show yet."

"Bodies talk. And don't forget—I've been there before, twice. Have you told him?"

"Oh, he knows. Been knowing."

"And let you go?"

"He didn't do it. I did."

"But the baby's his too."

"He don't want it."

"It's still his. You'll have to face that."

"When time comes. I can go it alone till I don't have to."

Tiny flicks of gold in her eyes shone hard in that soft green.

"But you love him?"

"There's some you can't live with except maybe in your heart. I got him inside me. What I wanted—him, his baby. I wouldn't

change that for nothing, no. Oh, I won't fool you--he took me to paradise, but tripped on beer cans. Yes, love him. But it's for his own good. I'm thinking it's the only way'll show him he's got to tend to hisself if he ever wants to live normal. Oh, don't think it don't hurt. I could die sometime thinking, but it's maybe the only way'll save him, and for sure save this one. I ain't having it wrecked. Two years of that, and me putting up with it, my mistake in the first place. One suppertime I let him have it, told him *no, no* more, with me or without me, home or in town, days or nights, and when he come home furious that night smacked me he did, smacked me good. I'm not spending my whole life on the wrong foot. Momma always said after the first meanness comes the second. What's your man like?"

"A friend if there ever was one."

"Lucky you."

"You know him."

"Me know him!"

"Rob's your lawyer."

"Lawyer Brentley's your husband! Well, you got one man. He sure treated me gentle. Made everything easy. Well, not so easy for Billy."

"You mean jail?"

"Fixed it with the judge so's Billy got two days just to give him a real scare. And fixed it so Billy can't come near me."

"A restraining order?"

"That. I don't want to hurt Billy," she said. "Sad enough he hurts hisself and don't even know it. All he thinks is *him*—have him a time. When there's not a thing out there, then *sure* here he comes home. I know. He brags to the guys What I got at the house. That's how he thinks: it's always here waiting for him when it's nothing doing out there. Worse now—stays most of the time away. Mad as hell cause I'm this way. He don't want it. Spoils *his* life. You get that? Spoils his life! And me the one's got it. Ain't *I* his life, and *this* his life? No, he's got to be a boy. How come some men don't grow up. Stay boys. My daddy, he never stopped being a boy. Ask momma. What momma didn't put up with!"

A woman's, any woman's, life was so complex, deep, rich, yet so private, so *hers,* that you had to be alert every moment to perceive the subtlety whenever the least gesture revealed.

Rob could always read her *throes* but knew the futility of questions because until she went through the experience of living with the growth

of a portrait she could not know, and could not define, even after because of its ambiguities. Or why paint? How often she ended up saying, "You have a look, Rob."

"Now what?" Melissa said.

"Oh, *you're* not finished yet—for today, yes. I'll need you for your expression...and your hands...They speak too."

Melissa laughed. "What're they saying?"

"We'll find out."

"You won't do!" Melissa said.

In a few days Netta had set the first area colors with hard Nupastels and pastel pencils, gradually toning it with soft Rembrandt and Sennelier pastels, but the face...It was Melissa's churning stillness that stirred her: she wanted to capture that still fire. But she needed Melissa, wanted her to move and speak, hoping she would fall unconsciously into that interval that so revealed.

On the following Saturday morning on impulse she drove out to New Hope. A Ford Escort was parked by the porch and before she could approach, Billy—she'd caught only a glimpse of him in the courtroom—came to the door, much taller than Melissa and rugged with a fine aristocratic face and thick sandy hair, in baggy pants and boots, with an innocent look. Quick he said," If you're looking for Lissa, she's not here," in hardly an innocent voice.

"Can you tell me where she is?"

"You that painter?"

"Why, yes! How'd you know?"

"I wouldn't go sticking my nose in if I were you."

"I really do need to see her."

"That's your problem."

"At least tell me where her mother lives?"

He slammed the door. She heard his boots hard on the floor.

Back in the studio, before the portrait, thinking not of Melissa but of this Melissa, she murmured *Where are you?* because her *form, placement, flesh* she had, but not yet the woman's face emerging from the girl's skin....

"I've lost her, Rob, before I really found her. Billy was absolutely hostile, adamant, not about to give me a clue, but did give me a warning."

"Warning? You don't have to put up with that."

"Oh, he was protecting his rights to what's *his*, I suppose."

"Actually, he doesn't have any now."

"And *I* don't."

"You!"

"It's the incompleteness ... I'm dangling. You know how I am."

"*Do* I ! You're saturated. Turn to something else. That'll solve it. It's happened to you often enough."

She did turn away, but there were moments when she found herself at the window and gazing at the courthouse steps....

But nobody.

On Saturday she was working on the last of her series of angels from monuments photographed in Europe in August when she heard the door open below, steps, and then a halting at the studio.

"Rob," she said, "what do you think of it?"

"I don't believe in angels."

"Melissa!"

"Thought I ran out on you, didn't you?"

"Well, I did go back to New Hope for you."

"Momma said. Billy told her. She and him's peas in a pod. So I got out. Staying with my old school pals Jennifer and Danny for now. Danny'll keep Billy away. And guess what! I got me a job in the junior high lunch room, and next month night school. But I can sit some for you till classes start."

"Oh, it won't take much. I *would* like you to sit—for your face, the live color...The tone's the key. I want you and the background and the objects to seem to come from the same source. It's that earth color that holds everything together."

"Oh, you got to hold things together!" She laughed, but her eyes shifted.

"You will, Melissa."

"I do."

"And *I* will—if I can hang on to you long enough. I want you sitting in the wooden chair again
in the sun as if it were morning and you still in your shift back home."

"Alone. I'm used to that."

"Will you manage now?"

"Your man saw to that. Billy'll come through. Oh, he's a good worker. Cuts trees. Has more fun on the job! And can't wait nohow to get with the gang after. Jokers, A of them. And beer! Guzzles, I'm here to tell you, like it's going out of style. And comes home stinking. But he's a clean one! And mad if his clothes ain't ready. Eats, takes him a shower, and takes off."

Melissa sat by the windows, full light stark over her, her lines

stark, and shadows stark, and her body stark through the shift as if light itself took shape.

"Seems like I'm always behind a window looking out. But no more."

She raised her head to sun, embraced by sun and bared by it, and stared out, defying even sun, brazen, 'No, no more," and laid her hands in a tender shield over her stomach.

"Don't move," Netta whispered soft as a prayer and to herself *don't move don't move,* taking shot after shot to capture this... *interval.*

Just *let* me....

After a long concentration, Netta said, "Fine! Relax."

"You get it?"

"Something." But she was exultant.

"Yeah, you did. I'll be like that with this one." Melissa touched her belly.

"Oh, yes! Nothing in the world's like the first moment you see your baby. It's you but not you. "

At dinner Rob said, "Something's happened. You're in a trance."

Netta lay her hand on his. "You know me too well."

"No. I'm still learning. That's what it's all about."

"Melissa's face is a miracle."

"I've seen."

"You!"

"You show up in my blind spots. I'm glad you don't paint men!"

"I couldn't paint you. If I had to choose one moment with you, I'd get lost."

"That's when somebody should paint *you.*"

Lost.

You *could* be. Was that what you always experienced—painting through this labyrinth of others until you found a link, and this link you?

The next afternoon Melissa came to watch her put on any finishing touches.

"You sure you don't mind me watching?"

"I got used to it when I worked in the museum and gave classes. It's almost finished. Later I'll spray the fixitive on it."

"Takes my mind off things."

"Doesn't work help?"

"Sure! That place! Working I got no time to look up. And the

girls, they're a riot! My friend who let me off picks me up early for work."

She sat to watch the face becoming that other self.

The pouring light made the flesh grow live and the room a shadowed reality.

"It scares me, that picture."

"Scares you!"

"I mean you see too much."

"I can't see what's not there."

"Maybe what you see's what you are. You think that?"

Why, Melissa! Alone out in the country the girl had done some thinking.

"What makes you say that?"

"You can't do a thing without its part you."

"You mean I'm painting myself!"

"No. I mean because you seen it, nobody ever did."

"That's why I paint."

"If that's all, then *I* could. No, plenty more to it than that."

"But that's first or a portrait would be nothing."

"You'd know!"

Somebody shoved the door open.

"So this is your new hangout."

"Billy!" Melissa cried.

"Thought I wouldn't find you?"

"Don't you dare come in here. You got no right." Her voice tremored. *Love* Netta heard in that tremor.

"Well, I'm here and nobody stopping me."

He stood poised like *Look at me,* like knowing his stance tempted, his face milk clear and eyes clean blue and full lips damp, his blue shirt fit trim with creases pressed sharp. A quick drift of cologne. But all taut fury. He did not look at her, Netta.

She said, "Melissa's right. You've no right here."

Still he looked straight at Melissa.

"What's with everybody talking rights, you and her and the law. And me? I got no rights?"

"Not to me, you ain't." She saw it cost Melissa to say it. "You better git."

"Not before I show you...." He moved toward her. Quick she moved aside. But he halted: it was not her movement that stopped him, but the painting....

He stared at that Melissa as if encountering a strange presence,

blunted—briefly, though it seemed long before he said, "What'd you do to her?"

His face had a sudden lost look. Cut *off.*

"That's not Melissa," he said.

I don't know who else," Melissa said. "Bout time you seen me."

"You!" He turned to Netta. "Can't do without them, can you?" He flung his arm out at all the women. "Got to take and make her think she's somebody else, do you? Worse than stealing. Well, you're not the only one can do things."

When he moved she thought he was going to strike her, but he darted past them and with a wild fling swept pots from the table, seized a can and heaved its contents at the painting. Cobalt streaked over the face and body and chair and whipped a trail over the floor.

Melissa let out a cry that died in a quick choke.

Netta stared, stunned.

"How you did me!" he cried at Melissa.

And turned to her, Netta. "You! You!"

In his fury his eyes filled with tears.

Despite shock, despite his accusation, she thought, He's just a boy. He's afraid of what he doesn't know how to handle. Matt, she thought.

She gripped Melissa's hand and drew her away. No need. Billy turned abruptly and went out, slammed the door and thundered down the stairs.

"Ohhh...." Melissa bent her head and cried against her. Netta held her close.

Melissa said. "You got to report him."

"No."

"No? But, jesusgod, what he did! Look at it! All your work!"

And she did look at the blighted canvas—chaos. That chaos revealed his own. But it told her what she had achieved in the portrait.

Yet that awareness gave her no pleasure, not the least glimmer of what she'd felt at having captured a moment's essence in the portrait. No. She felt a loss at not being able to be the uninitiated viewer of her own work. She could never experience Billy's anguish and fury at the sight of that still fire of defiance in the portrait, but she recognized the passion that made him strike out not only at Melissa but at her: because he was obsessed, and because he could find no way out but by destroying, he accused her.... *Take.* But not to give back more? But she could not escape his accusation *You can't do without them, can you?*

Could she?

You can't, can you?

No. *No.* It came like a confession: Not to have, but to have. Yes. To possess and make andlet go. You could not keep. Nothing in the world you could keep. You had them. You lived, believed, this illusion that they were yours, your husband, your children, the women you painted.... They possessed your mind till you gave them body, freed them from yourself But *what* freed?

She saw now what prison his was.

And hers.

"If I reported him, you'd only be sorry after, Melissa."

And *I* would.

"He should go to jail for that."

If Melissa could know.... He was not out yet. He might never be.

Or she.

"You don't really want him to, do you? After all, he's--" But she did not say *the baby's father.*

"You're not going to?"

"No."

"For sure?"

"For sure."

"But suppose he...."

"He won't be back," Netta said.

"You think that?"

"He won't be back," she said.

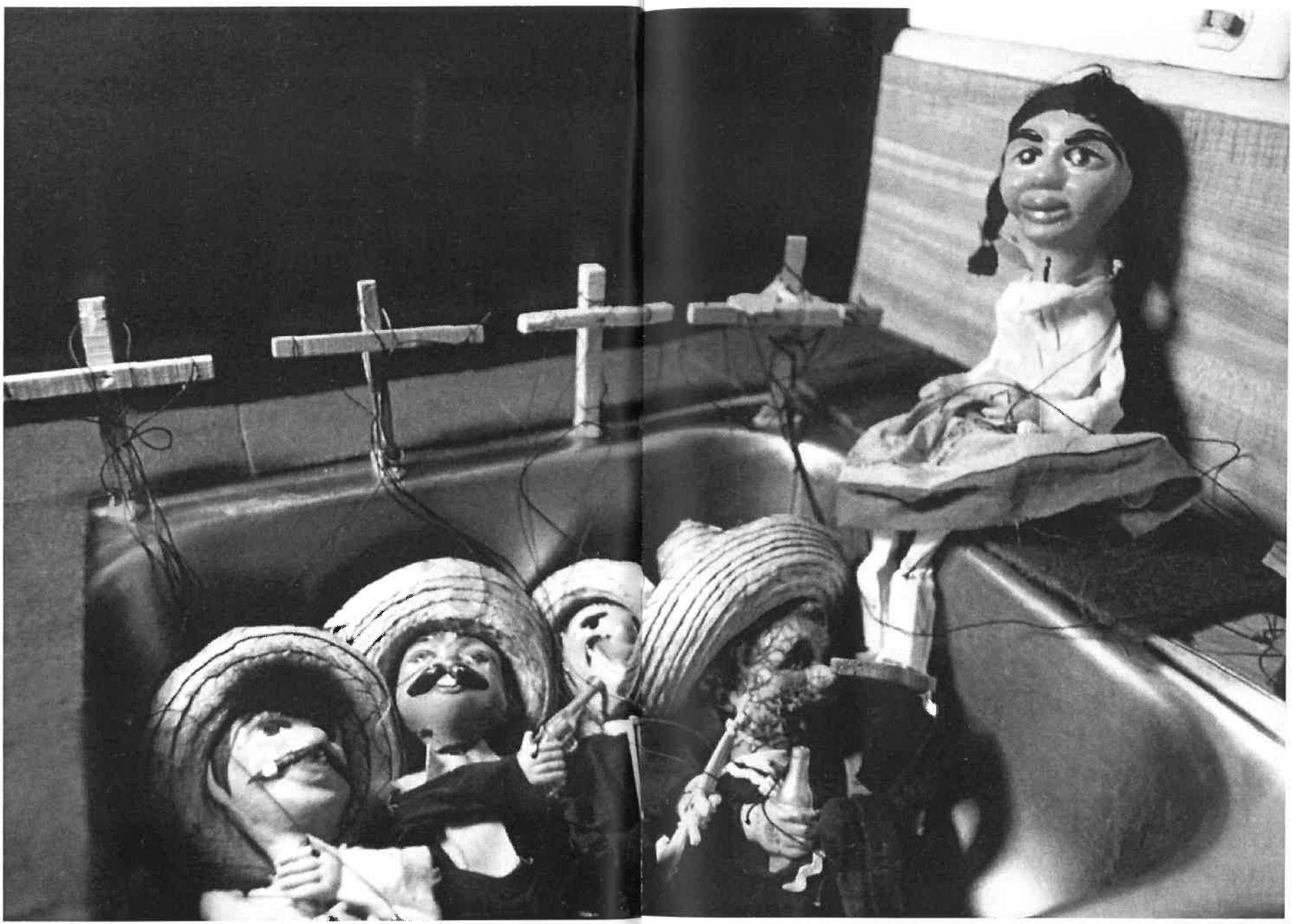
"But what will you do about the painting?"

"We'll begin again."

"But can you?..."

"It's the only way."

And the new one I won't sell, she thought. I'll never let it go.



Untitled 4, By Alex McDonald

Anthony Tracy

Coleridge: In His Waning Days

For Tyrone Tyler

The toughest part was when he wanted to
concentrate, set down some minor iambs
of imagery and inspired syntax,
to braid together some loose ends of rope.
But his body felt like an abandoned
shipwreck, an empty tomb, his brain too
scattered and disheveled to render
even the most simple-minded suggestions.
The experimental drugs administered
by the good Dr. Gillman aided
his complications only temporarily,
as all drugs do. Still he was hell-bent
on making discovery, even in
his waning days, poetry his true
anodyne. So to succor his half-
illumined brain he reintroduced
himself to the classics: his favorite
literary passages and musical
sublimities to sharpen his ill-
witted metaphors. He would gaze out the
window at the wind scoured fields
and occasionally think of Grasmere,
no doubt, believing the mirror of
history could rescue some para-
disiacal charm hidden within a
season's changing. But alas, it amounted
to loose change, like the stricken lines of
his *Khubla Khan*, for his faculties were
hot wired and his muse dead at sea,
checked out on stultifying opiates.
He resorted to queer mumblings left
unrecorded and tugged at the stray
fibers of his worn cashmere sweater,
sweating profusely as if raking a
field in search of thought. Finally he
cedes to stroking the cat stretched
before him; her head perched queenly, paws
downturned—an image of his picture of
the image: the Sphinx protecting the
sacred burials of Giza. All that
time behind him ablaze with the promise
of resurrection.

Kate Bertine

The Gibbledeschnarf: An Essay on Communication

"Conversation takes the importance, the seriousness, the truth out of everything." -Franz Kafka

"Know what that is?" Emi asked, pointing to the grayish-pink splotch on her knee. It was the first day of first grade, and we had just come in from recess. I did not yet know this girl with the shiny black hair.

"A scab!" I answered, feeling brilliant. "Does it hurt?"

"No," Emi said. "It's gum. I fell on gum yesterday. It won't come off."

"Eeeew!" I shrieked, delightedly. "Can I touch it?"

"Yeah. Ok." Until she moved away a year later, Emi was my best friend. Her family went back to Japan before the start of third grade.

"Write," I said.

"Ok," she said. She did. Then I did. And the pattern continued, for sixteen years. During this time our letters had progressed from "Hi! How are you? I am fine. School is Fun!" to "Hey, what's up? Things here suck... " and finally grew deeper over the years.

"Emi, what should I do about James?"

"UCLA?! Congratulations!"

"My mother is still in a coma...."

We sent each other photographs both with and without braces, early Christmas and belated birthday cards, postcards and souvenirs, music tapes and sound advice. We always had each other's current addresses from summer camps to college internships, and we sent our phone numbers along too. Not once did we communicate by telephone, but in every letter I heard Emi's voice and she heard mine.

In the seventh year of our written correspondence, Emi's family returned to the United States, settling in San Jose, three thousand miles away from their first home in New York. In the tenth year of our friendship, I accompanied my father on a trip to California, and decided to surprise Emi by showing up at her home. I called her parents to arrange things and found myself waiting in their house one afternoon to see the girl I had not seen in a decade. When Emi came in from school, she noticed someone sitting in her living room. She looked at me, then looked away. She furrowed her brow, then un-furrowed it, and looked back at me. The books in her arm fell one by one onto the floor. She stood there in silence for a moment, staring at a seven-year-old in a seventeen-year-old body. Emi was wearing shorts. I noticed that the gum scab had healed. Speechlessness is a deafening form of communication.

I have kept all of Emi's letters, and she has done the same with mine. It has been suggested to me that I keep them bound with a velvet ribbon, because they are very special. I keep them jumbled in a cardboard shoebox, because they are very special. They lie here like puzzle pieces, out of order but complete in number, and there is no need to put them in order because I already know what the finished arrangement would look like. Emi's voice, incarnate.

I shuffle through these letters from time to time, and listen to them. I search the pile for old envelopes marked with Hello Kitty stickers, and large, wobbling, block-letter addresses that slanted or squished together because we were still learning that written words took up more space than spoken ones. I listen to the different sounds of magic markers, mechanical lead pencils, ballpoint pens, type-set impressions and computer processed words, and I notice that you can tell time not only by numbers but by alphabet as well. I listen to white-out splotches and how their tone is much more controlled than the harsh streaks of a scratched-out word and the meek cries of the better word or the correctly spelled version above it. Emi used white-out. I used an eraser - sometimes. I listen to the "theirs" that should have been "there's" knowing that they're both right, because when letters speak, homonyms can't be heard. I listen to the fonts of handwriting in Emi's letters, and recognize that, despite the letterheads of Arthur Anderson, LLP or the yellowed Snoopy stationary, the tone of her words still sounds the same. When we read, we listen with our eyes. I read in-between the lines of lineless paper, and listen to conversations that never took place. I own one-half of a chronology of sixteen years; the half that is not actually mine. I listen to this unique timeline, and all of these letters announce to me that. Because of each of them, I am a

writer today.

As a writer, I have been trained to search for the true pulse of the story, hidden deep within the print. I must tune into the subtle whispers of tone and theme. If the subtext fails to palpitate, the story is dead. If a strong and healthy rhythm is located, the story survives. What gives life to a letter? Perhaps just the fact that when it is sent, it becomes immortal and can talk forever.

Everybody's was a busy restaurant during the summer of 1996. Most of the patrons waited patiently for a patio table, even in the sweltering, southern heat, with the hopes of catching a glimpse of a famous gymnast or cyclist, who were being housed in the fraternities across the street at Emory University. From time to time, an Olympian would come into the restaurant and order a pizza, but the majority of non-Atlantan customers were foreign officials, judges and other fate-deciders who waltzed into *Everybody's* five minutes before closing, drank dozens of imported beers and left little or no tips when they finally staggered out. The servers despised waiting on these foreigners who were either deliberate evaders of or ignorant concerning the concept of gratuity. As a hostess, I did my best to shuffle the ingrates around the seating charts, so that no one server was constantly left shortchanged. During the Olympic rush, the management had hired extra staff, especially busers, to keep the hungry crowds flowing smoothly.

Most of these dish collectors were "punk kids" with multiple piercings in various orifices, monsterish tattoos that gnawed on shoulders, neck and forearms, prism-colored, multi-length hair and other physical attributes that begged to be stereotyped as wild, ruthless and sad. The busers took too many smoke breaks, and in-between, they wore impenitent facial expressions as they cleared tables and washed dishes. But not Russ.

Russ was a quiet kid, no older than eighteen, with permanent markings and metal attachments just like the other busers displayed. Russ however, went about his work with care and ease, holding no grudge against the customers who spilled their sweet tea or diet cola, and requested his cleaning services by calling to him, "Boy, hey boy...." Russ did not converse much with the other busers, or the servers, and he spent his breaks reading tattered paperbacks in a comer of the kitchen, or near the kudzu vines by the parking lot fence. My only communication with Russ was a

small "hello" when he came in for his shift. Passing shyly by my hostess stand, Russ answered my daily salutations with a timid "hi" and then disappeared into the kitchen. We spoke two words everyday to each other, for two months. A couple of days before I left *Everybody's* to return to college, Russ quietly approached me.

"I hear you study English. I write poetry. Would you like to see my book of poems?" Russ asked, eyes studying the floor.

"Yes, Russ, of course I would. Can you bring in your notebook tomorrow?"

Russ smiled, then nodded and walked away. The next day, when I arrived at work, there was a book waiting for me on my hostess stand. A black, gloss-covered, 186 page, published paperback book of poems from the Ridgewood Press in Minnesota, copyright 1995, first edition. *Webs and Arrows*, by Russell Nye Barton. Russ the busboy.

He was watching my reaction from the kitchen door, and I motioned to him, still in shock, to come over. I expressed my surprise that he was already a published author and wondered why he was working here. Poetry didn't pay the bills yet, he told me. I told Russ I would read the book immediately and get it back to him tomorrow.

"No," Russ said, "Keep it. Please." I asked him why he was giving me this gift after I said nothing but "hello" to him all summer.

The shy busboy looked me in the eye, "You're the only one who has."

Until I met Russell, I did not know there was a subtext to "hello." Sometimes, I did not even say "hello," but surrendered an interaction even more fleeting, like "hey," "hi," or a wordless wave of the hand. In speaking less, it seems as though I had said more. Not everybody needs the specific banter of communication, just the general enactment of it. In an untitled poem on page 64, Russell Nye Barton had written,

> "your eyes swallow your voice...
> in our own way
> we all say who we are
> and what we need
> even though sometimes it goes along
> unheard."

Kafka would have been proud of Russ.

* * *

Something profound occurred last night, I think. I cannot say what time it happened, but it was at one of those indistinguishable hours, perhaps two or three or four a.m. My boyfriend nudged me out of sleep and whispered, "Kathryn, what if I told you something...I have something I need to say to you." He propped himself up on his left side, and leaned his head against his hand. With his free hand, Drew gently brushed his fingers across my cheek. He looked into my eyes and held his gaze longer than he ever had before. Something big was coming. An affirmation of happiness? A declaration of love? The impossible opposite of either? After a moment of silence, Drew sighed away the breath he was holding in, and shifted position. Lying on his back, he broke eye contact with me and re-focused on the ceiling. Another minute of silence passed. Something huge was coming.

I touched his shoulder, meekly prodding "Drew...what? What is it?" Again, silence. Then his lips parted, and he softly responded, "kkkkhhhununhhh." He then repeated his response. Over and over. Again and again.

"Drew!" I pressed, shaking him awake.

"Huh? Whuh?"

"You were about to tell me something? What?! What was it?!"

"I was?"

"YES!"

"Oh. Ok. Hmmm...kkikkhhhuuuuhhh."

In the morning, he remembered nothing about our "conversation" but was greatly amused at the power of his nocturnal subconscious. Drew often speaks in his sleep, reciting sentence fragments from the unwritten paragraphs of his dreams. On separate occasions, I've been told to go get the mail, watch out for descending airplanes, and keep a "heads up" for an incoming foul baseball that is headed towards the bleachers where he thinks we are sitting.

"Really?! I did that? Ha!"

"Yes, very funny. HaHaHa." I hit him with a pillow. Touching my cheek, he told me I was beautiful. When he swung the pillow back at me, I believed him.

Like written communication, there are two pulses to our verbal efforts of conversation: the one we hear and the one we feel. One is a rhythm loud and clear, a hearty snore. The other is faint and soft, impressionable like a pillow. Our auditory senses give us no choice in what we can and cannot hear, but the underlying pulse of these soundwaves allows us to choose what we will and will not listen to or believe.

Five months after receiving my driver's license, I was assaulted in my car. In a parking lot not far from the skating rink where I was headed, a man approached my door and opened it before I even noticed his arrival. In one swift movement, he communicated what he was after. Grabbing the back of my neck, the man twisted his fingers into my hair and yanked my head away from his, so that my head craned towards the ceiling in the back of the jeep, and I could no longer see his face. His mammoth build began to heave itself into the car as he reached across my body towards the keys that dangled from the engaged ignition. I flailed a helpless arm and caught his face with the side of my hand.

"Bitch...." he warned.

My hand then landed on the gearshift. I pulled it from first to neutral, the stripped gear wretching out with a metallic squawk, and the car began to slowly roll backwards down the incline where I had parked. To this day, I do not know how I came to do that. My instincts whispered soft, clear instructions and my body shouted them out in actions. The man, half inside my car, felt the momentum and was forced to abandon his entrance. He shoved me with frustration, and then he noticed the parking brake and pushed it down. The jeep lurched to a halt. He climbed back in. Again, my instincts spoke. Push! they instructed. I put my sixteen-year old hands on his brawny, thirtysomething chest and felt a strange surge of strength course through my arms. The man lost his balance and fell from my car. My senses put the car into first and drove it away for me, out of the parking lot, and safely across four lanes of traffic I still do not remember crossing.

I spoke not one word to this man who carried on a monologue of actions. Although both of us knew what he wanted and neither of us knew if he would obtain it, this man and I conversed in silent clarity. We both articulated physical communication that stemmed from private words inside us, each of us "discussing" among our inner selves how we felt about the situation. I do not know where my survival instincts came from, or how they knew the things they did, but I heard them. I recognized the voice they spoke in. It was my own, although I did not understand how that could be. I have never heard anything like that again; those shift instructions, put the car in neutral, and push! These words that resonated in my

exact vocal tone have not spoken to me like they did that day seven years ago. The words were loud and clear. Actions, I believe, do not always speak louder than words. Actions and words are in cahoots. We are used to only hearing half of their conversation.

My mother underwent brain surgery immediately after an aneurysm erupted in her temporal lobe five years ago. Following the operation she had a stroke, as the doctors predicted she might. After fulfilling that expectation, she had another. The next step was to enter a coma, from which we thought she would take no more steps. After a few comatose weeks, my mother proved us wrong. For the next two months of hospitalization, our family would witness the full range of powers of the human brain. Specifically, the power of communication.

At first, every day was different when we entered the hospital ward. Mostly, she slept. When she was awake, there was always a new adventure in frustration awaiting my father, brother and me. Sometimes my mother babbled unconscious speeches to an audience she did not recognize, as we nodded in agreement to all her nonsensical points. Some days she thought she knew us, and we played along to the roles she assigned.

"Yes, mom," I lied, "swim practice was great today." I was not a swimmer. In the hospital, I learned how to tread water before I sank into the sea of her confusion. The doctors warned us that any of these stages of her thought process and her communication pattern might be permanent. We would have to wait and see. Wait and see. Wait and see. Wade in sea.

"I see," said my father, nodding to the doctor, as his wife of 25 years cooed sweet gibberish to him. Communication, as I knew it, was over. Lost for good. My father would not accept this. Weeks passed by like the squares of a calendar, same size, same shape, same consistency, differing only by the little number in the corner that eventually repeated itself, too. One afternoon in late May, something, namely conversation, had changed. When I arrived at the hospital, my father—pale and worn—explained that my mother had begun to use coherent words in structured phrases, but mixed her own made up language into most sentences.

"Some words we know," my father said smiling, "others are pretty original." He walked over to her cot and took her weak hand in his.

"Hello Hello Hello Hello," my mother greeted me, in a string of salutations.

"Hi Mom," I responded, weakly surprised.

"Yes!" she replied. I placed a large stack of get well cards by her side.

"Look, dear, Kate brought more cards for you," my father explained. My mother's eyes grew wide, and she picked them up and frantically shuffled through the pile.

"Oooh! Yes! More cucumbers! I like cucumbers!" She began to count the cards out loud, "One! Two! Three! Four cucumbers! Look how many people like me today!"

Cucumbers? I felt sick to my stomach. She lost interest in the cards before opening most of them and began to babble in the direction of my father, forgetting about her cucumbers and me. I tried not to listen to my parents dialogue and turned my attention to the television in the corner of the hospital room. A commercial came on. My mother stopped babbling and turned her frail neck towards the screen.

"Ooh! I like this!" she insisted, squinting at the TV. She ran her hands along the sides of the bed, searching for something. She bolted upright, glancing around the room with narrowed eyes. "Where are they?" she mumbled.

"What?" my father asked in a soothing tone, "What do you need, dear?" My mother began to grow more and more frustrated.

"I can't find my...my...my rigglerts! Where are my rigglerts? Have you seen them? My rigglerts?" she asked, and then called out, "Riiiiiigglerrrrrrts...."

My father looked over to the window. My mother's ancient pair of black, horn-rimmed glasses, held together at the cracked nosepiece by a worn-out Band-Aid, were lying face down on the sill.

Without a moment's hesitation, my father pointed over to the ledge and said, rationally, "Dear, your rigglerts are over on the gibbledeschnarf."

"Oh! Is that where I left them?" She reached over and put on her glasses just in time to see the end of her favorite commercial.

My mother made a full recovery, mentally and physically, in less than a year. She speaks perfect English, and can still answer just about everything on Jeopardy. The brain surgeons believe that their acute skills saved my mother's life. The hospital doctors and nurses and therapists think that certain combinations of medicines and drugs and rehabilitation enabled her to survive. Close friends and

family attribute both dumb luck and my mother's stubborn persistence to bettering her chances of life over death. I believe that it was the gibbledeschnarf that nursed my mother back to health. It put the importance, the seriousness and the truth back into conversation and saved both of my parent's lives.

Kafka was on to something when he summarized the power of communication in one simple line. If verbal conversation does indeed take the importance out of everything, what forms of communication put it back in? Letters, pillow fights, assaults, surgery and even the syllable "hi" are branches on the tree of communication, that, like any other living thing, will thrive or perish depending on how it is cared for. What Kafka was getting at is that too often conversations are void of sincerity, and although each participant can sense this, the words continue to flow, flooding communication instead of quenching its parched cry for importance, seriousness and truth. Given the innumerable branches of communication, and whether we adhere to either philosophy, we communicate by what we do say; we communicate by what we do not say; we all experience the effects of miscommunication from time to time. Verbal miscommunication is often our primary introduction to conversation.

If we read the lyrics of Metallica to a baby in a soft voice that burbles consonants and vowels together and fluctuates through our vocal pitches like a roller coaster of tender speech, the infant will not know the difference between heavy metal and Mother Goose. Unlike babies, once we understand communication, we learn the perils of miscommunication. We are accustomed to using the phrase, "I do not understand what you are saying," but it is not often that we look at this dilemma from the standpoint, "I do not understand how to hear you." What do we do with communication when it catches us off-guard, when words are non-existent, nonsequitors or even nonsense? Like the gibblebeschnarf, sleep induced babble, cartoon stationary, angry fists or again, the ever-basic hello, all the secrets of communication can be discovered by one word. Asking.

*First appeared in *Touchstone Magazine*

Stephen Sundin

Auction

At a benefit I bought a painting titled *Frida Kahlo and Friends*. Rose Blotto helped me position it on my apartment wall. Frida stood on the left with that familiar black gull above her eyes. She had a yellow monkey in her arms. The artist stood in the center, a mole or birthmark just under his widow's peak. On the right, a slimmer Diego than I had ever seen before. Dashing sombrero. Near the top border in some background dream, a woman on a gurney, bleeding quick strokes down her back. I asked Rose if she thought I got a good deal on the picture. She said she liked the monkey, how its paws were trying to get past the frame.

*Also appearing in *Luna* Magazine

William Aiken

The Source

At the Jesus Seminar pin-striped disciples of the truth bend to
examine words once clothed in authority, grading them black, gray,
pink, or red according to a spectrum of journalistic probability.
Black means Jesus did not say anything close to this.

The object is less translation than excavation, bringing to light the
historical Jesus, as Schliemann searched for his passionate Troy,
delving to where Cassandra walked and red-and black-figure vases
fell to shards at his touch.

George Fox told his followers to hew to the spirit behind the
words, not to the words themselves. This was the bell that rang
through all his life. But here is my difficulty: I sail on an ocean
that has lost its surge.

According to the Westar Institue, 82% of words ascribed to Jesus
are in doubt. The Lord's Prayer gets a barely passing grade of 67.
For those who are in a "relationship," of course, words are no
problem. But for me, for me...

"Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these..."gets
Black. New York can relax. But, wait a minute: "Give to
everyone that begs from you" gets Red! Tolstoy's favorite lines,
"This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you..."
gets Black. Nobody's favorite line "Turn the other cheek," gets Red.
Solace has seeped from the Gospels, and we are left with acerbities.
Jesus may not have said those things, and we are alone down here.

But I cannot despair. There is a new consolation. The saying I
had always thought absurd, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," gets Pink.

Steven Davenport

My Untranslatable Signature Bomb Sonnet

That first fuck you was hard to take. Then the second
like the dull head of a hammer bruising the wood
around a punched nail. Nothing negotiable.
Later, now, in the knuckling face of your anger,
the phrases you light and toss back like Molotovs,
shards peppering the air, I bottle resentment.
Tonight, with six fingers of bourbon blossoming
in my hothouse skull, I'll pull up the kill floor, leave
the marriage box through a trapdoor. I'll chase the noise
of my blood into the trees of repose, yawp word
and body, howl hundred-line rooftop bomb sonnets,
a yodel my untranslatable signature.
The bruises I'll wear like stories until they fade
and become baggage, old badges of my damage.

Untitled 5, By Alex McDonald

Stephen Davenport

Phallusary 1

Here a long green hose
in an April circular.
There a Maypole jammed
in stony ground.

Here a chisel plow working
her back forty, laying furrows
for all the seed she can handle.
There a ten dollar cigar

in a banker's mouth
foreclosing rural possibilities
Here a knife opening a letter
addressed to someone else.

There a pen or a paintbrush
pissing off the side of a ship.
Here a cock, there a cock.
Phallus, I tell my students,

is the privileged signifier,
full presence, then pulsing first.
Trouser trout, they shout, pocket rocket.
We get in a circle and start over.

Rob Davidson

What We Leave Behind

Paul was only ten minutes late. He sat quietly for a moment, watching tendrils of blue-gray smoke curl out from under the car's hood. The old Toyota was an oil burner, but it still got him from A to B. So what if the passenger-side seat had broken through the floorboards last winter? It was a rust bucket, but at least he had a car. If you've got a car, you've got options. It was important to remember that.

He opened the glove compartment, took out his plaid yellow tie and pulled it over his head. He checked his hair in the rear-view mirror, popped a mint in his mouth and slid the knot up against the base of his throat. He kept thinking he had to pee, though he'd just peed a few minutes ago in the satellite at the practice range. It was just those damn Warner shows.

What he hated about the Warner shows was how every line and every action was scripted and prepared in advance. Nothing to do but go through the motions. Learn to do that with heart, his manager Dawn had said, and you'll be rich.

The only motions Paul wanted to go through was a golf swing. He'd found the best way to kill time between Warner shows was to shoot range balls.

From the rear of his Toyota he took the white cardboard box containing the Warner display unit and his gray plastic briefcase. He pulled on his sport coat, which felt unbelievably warm and, because he hadn't dry-cleaned it in over two weeks, smelled faintly of BO. He closed the Toyota's hatch. A few flakes of rust fell to the pavement at his feet. He locked the car—his three-year-old set of Pings were in plain view in the back—and walked slowly across the Copeland's front lawn. The brown grass was stiff under his loafers. The house looked nice enough: a small blue-and-white two-story, in need of a little paint and a good hedge trimming. Drapes covered the front windows. Paul crunched the mint in his mouth into tiny shards and told himself he was hungry. This was a sale. He imagined he already had the $300 commission in his hands. He imagined in a month, or two months, when he was

finally selling three or four of these things a week, like Dawn had said he could. You have to *believe*, she said. You have to *want* it.

The front door was open, so he knocked on the screen door. He dabbed at his face with a handkerchief. He was still sweating from hitting range balls, plus he had to pee again. The street was quiet, drenched in sunlight. There weren't enough leaves on the trees yet for heavy shade. A girl rode down the avenue on her bike, her long blonde pigtails flapping behind her in the breeze. He heard the *click-a-click-a-click* of the bike's gears as she pedaled. Smooth and rhythmic, going through the motions.

Mrs. Copeland came to the door barefoot, wearing a close-fitting navy T-shirt tucked into khaki shorts. A white belt was cinched tightly around her waist. Her gray-black hair was cut short like a boy's. He figured her for about fifty.

She gave him a quick once-over, then leaned a shoulder against the door frame. "You're not a Mormon, are you?"

Paul laughed. "Lapsed Catholic. And that's being generous."

"Figures. A Mormon would never wear a tie like that."

He grinned and picked up the tie between two fingers and flapped the end around. "Too loud and crazy?"

"Too something," she said, smiling. "So who are you?"

"I'm Paul Hammond, from the Warner company. You won a free carpet shampoo, remember? We spoke on Monday."

She bent over a little to one side to scratch the back of her leg. Her forearms and legs were thin—the kind of thin that gets you wondering.

"What're you selling?"

He took a small green card from his coat pocket and held it up.

"Mrs. Copeland, you've won a free gift. Remember that contest you entered? You signed this card."

From her shorts pocket she took a pair of reading glasses with low, rectangular lenses. She lifted her chin and read the card, then looked down at the box and suitcase at his feet. She removed the glasses and put them back in her pocket.

"Thought I signed up for a grocery giveaway."

"That's right, you did. And you're still registered for that giveaway, which will be next month. In the mean time, you've won a free carpet shampoo. How about it?"

She furrowed her brow and ran a finger along the top of her shorts, as if checking to make sure the belt was in place and her shirt was still tucked in.

"How come you're sweating so much? I don't know if I should trust you."

He smiled. "It's hot, Mrs. Copeland." He took the handkerchief from his coat pocket and dabbed his face. He pretended to wring it out before putting it back in his pocket. She actually laughed.

"Sandy," she said, opening the screen door. "Come in and get yourself a drink, Paul. You look like you could use one."

The house was warm and a bit musty smelling, like she'd opened the windows for the first time that day, after the long Minnesota winter. He set his briefcase and display unit in the front hallway. His shirt was already sticking to his back.

"What's your fancy? The fridge is full."

He shrugged his shoulders. BO wafted up to his nose.

"Water would be fine."

"Tssk," she said, shaking her head. "You're no fun."

He followed her down a short hallway and into a small kitchen-dining area. The table was piled with coupons and a week's worth of the *Star-Tribune*. A window looked out onto a narrow backyard of brown grass bordered by a tall wooden fence. A rusty old Weber with one bent leg stood in the middle of the yard.

Sandy came out from the kitchen with a tall glass of water and handed it to him. He said thanks and took a drink. He was trying to think of what to say next.

"Front talk sets up the sale," Dawn had told him. "No front talk, no sale." She was full of little sayings like that. "ABC" was another one: "Always be closing." Dawn believed in these sayings, Paul could tell from the excited way she spoke. She'd jab at the air in front of her as if she were digging her finger into your chest, pacing like a cat across the front of the room as she talked. She'd slam the podium as she fired off questions. She got so worked up, the back of her blouse had a damp spot between her shoulder blades. Dawn was a believer. When she talked, Paul felt his life was not completely off track. If he wanted it bad enough, he could turn it all around.

He drank the rest of his water in two greedy gulps, then wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve. If just one of his college professors had been as hyper as Dawn, he might've gotten a degree, instead of the "Withdrawn—Failing Grades" notice the university had mailed him a few weeks after he'd left.

"Thanks," he said again, setting the glass on the table.

"Hey, it's just tap water, kid. Drink as much as you want. Minnesota's the land of ten thousand lakes, right?"

"Yeah," he said, laughing. He went to the sink and refilled his glass, then rejoined her in the dining area.

"So how much carpet do you clean on this deal?" Her fingers were wrapped around the lip of a tall glass of something clear and fizzy, with a twist of lime in it.

"One room."

"Come on and I'll show you the one, then."

He followed her into a sunken, rectangular living room directly off the dining area. A coffee table stood in front of a long couch, next to which was a recliner, its footrest fully extended. There was a patio door and a TV on the left. Paul set his demo unit and briefcase on the floor near the patio door.

Sandy picked up a lit cigarette from a glass ashtray on the coffee table, knocked off about an inch of ashes, and took a long drag. He wanted to ask her if she'd mind him lighting up, but figured he should wait.

"This is it," she said, waving a hand around the room.

Above the mantle hung a painting of a huge mansion, built of gray stone. A tall set of bay windows in the middle of the first floor looked out over a flat, green lawn. The sky overhead was blue, but heavy, gray clouds were building along the horizon. Up on the second floor of the mansion, on the right-hand side, was an enormous clock with its hands at twelve-forty-five. That clock blew Paul away. Why would a guy build a mansion like that and then put a damn clock in it? But as he looked at the painting a little more, he began to recognize things. That clock, for one. On second thought, he was sure he'd seen it before. And that lawn in front of the mansion—it had a sluice or ditch running across it, with this funky little arched stone footbridge. Then it hit him, and he felt like an idiot: it wasn't a mansion, and that wasn't a lawn.

"That's St. Andrew's, isn't it?"

"What?"

"That painting. It's the clubhouse at St. Andrew's in Scotland. It's where golf was invented." He dabbed at his face again with his handkerchief. He needed to take his coat off. "I've always wanted to play that course."

She frowned. "You're a golfer."

He nodded. "I had a scholarship to the U. For a while,

anyway. I'm playing the amateur circuit in the upper Midwest this year. I'll turn pro in a year, maybe two at the most."

"Pro golf. Really?"

"Yeah," he said, smiling and bobbing once on his toes.

"That's a shame. You look like a nice kid." She took a drag off her cigarette. She pointed up to the painting. "If that's what Scotland looks like, count me out. All those rotting old mansions standing alone in the fields? Too dreary."

"I guess it rains a lot in Scotland."

She bent down and ground her cigarette out forcefully.

"Honey, it rains a lot no matter where you are. You ought to know that by now."

Paul nodded slowly. "Sure, I know that."

She picked up her pack of Virginia Slims and lit another cigarette, then cleared her throat. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she had dark circles under them.

"So, you going to clean this carpet, Paul, or what?"

"You bet." He took off his coat and set it in a corner, then bent down on one knee. He ran a hand over the carpet, felt the nap. The gesture didn't mean anything, but it made him look like he knew what he was doing. What he knew about that carpet: it was red, maybe maroon. It was pretty old and beat up, with obvious wear patterns near the steps and the patio door. The room was small. It would only take about forty-five minutes to shampoo, rinse, and buff, with a long smoke-break in the middle.

"I guess you don't have to worry about cleaning under the furniture. It never moves." She laughed.

"If we could just move this coffee table, that 'd be good."

Together they pushed the table in front of the fireplace.

"This'll have to do you," she said. She leaned over and popped the lever on the recliner, which snapped shut quickly. "Like I said, if you want something to drink, the fridge is yours. Let me know when you're done." She turned to walk out of the room.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to take just a bit of your time to show you our product. To give you an idea of what we'll use to clean your carpet."

She frowned. "I don't care what you use to clean the carpet. It's free, right?"

"Absolutely. All I'm asking you to do is take a look. No hitches." He pointed at the couch. "Have a seat right there, Mrs. Copeland."

She did.

Surprised, he knelt down and laid the Warner box flat. He removed the lid and propped it up so that the brand name, boldly embossed in red, faced the couch. He quickly laid out the Warner's key parts and accessories, various colored plastic nozzles and hoses, in a neat little row to his side. Then he took the snub-nosed power plant out of the box, slowly removed the plastic bag from it and set it on the carpet. With its sleek curves and molded aluminum, it'd always reminded him of the back half of a '40s Ford sedan.

"The Warner," he said, slapping his palms against his thighs.

Sandy pursed her brow as she took a long drag on her cigarette.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," she said, suddenly bursting out with a throaty laugh. She set her cigarette in the ashtray. "My mother had one of those." She leapt out of her seat, startling him, and knelt down on the floor. She picked up the power plant, ran her fingers all over it. "Put the product in the customer's hands," Dawn always said. If only it'd been that easy every time.

"I can't believe it," she said, running the power plant back and forth on the carpet. "My mother used to let us kids play with this thing, like a toy. I haven't seen one in thirty years. I didn't know they still made them."

"These things can really take a beating."

"You can say that again." She picked the power plant up in her hands and spun one of the plastic wheels. She glanced quickly up at Paul, then back to the power plant. "My brother, Jimmy, he used to kick this thing around the floor like it was a soccer ball. He'd pretend it was a tank and he'd throw baseballs at it, like a bazooka shell or something. He was a crazy kid. Always pounding on things." She shook her head. "You know what he said to my husband on our wedding day? 'Treat her right or I'll kick your ass.' Dean almost wet his pants."

They both laughed. Sandy leaned forward, hands on her knees, and bowed her head. Her shoulders shook with laughter. Then her shoulders quit moving for a second and she brought a fist up to her mouth. She started coughing—great, huge, raspy coughs, about six of them. She stopped and patted her chest a couple times. She was still bent forward. Paul asked her if she was okay, and she held up her index finger and nodded. A moment later she lifted her face to him and he saw that her eyes were wet. She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head a little to her left side and he thought for a second she was going to cry. That, or keel over. It

was an awkward moment. He tried to think of something to say to steer them back.

"Where's he now?"

After a long pause, she said, "Florida."

"Really? That's a great golf state. What's your brother do there?"

"Jimmy?"

"Yeah."

"Jimmy lives in Las Vegas. He runs security at a hotel."

"Oh." He picked up a red plastic nozzle, turned it over once in his hand, then set it back down.

Sandy coughed once more, then said, "I've got to quit smoking." She smiled as she picked up the power plant and set it down before him. "This thing is a lot lighter than I remember."

"It's a new model."

The smile dropped from her face. "Yeah, there's always a new model." She climbed back up onto the couch, then took her glass from its coaster and took a long swallow. She settled back into the cushions. Her gaze moved to the painting above the fireplace. "Forget Scotland, Paul. Forget golf. Go to Las Vegas. You're young. Blackjack and twenty-four hour buffets. And the women. You know what I'm saying?" She looked at him and raised her eyebrows.

His eyes dropped to the Warner and all the parts laid out in absurd little rows, color coded for function. He still had to pee.

"Do you mind if I smoke a cigarette?"

"Be my guest, sweetheart."

He took his Camels from his shirt pocket and lit one. Then he had a drink of water. He started talking about the Warner in no particular order, forgetting the script, not worrying about what Dawn would say if she knew what he was doing. He talked about the adjustable head lamp, the two-speed motor, the dual fan system. He unwrapped the thirty-two-foot power cord, which, he pointed out, could conceivably allow you to clean your house using only two or three outlets.

Sandy sat quietly on the couch, chain-smoking Virginia Slims. But she was listening.

"The Warner power plant moves 152 cubic feet of air per minute," he said. "Again, with the dual fan system, you can suck it up or pump it out, depending on the configuration." He lit another Camel. "Now, I know your mother had one of our older

models. And as great a machine as that Warner was, I've got to tell you they've made milestones since. For example, did you know that your new Warner can function as an air compressor?"

"Ho ho. Not my Warner. I can tell you right now, sugar, I'm not in the market."

"Gotcha. But let me just show you something. You'll love this. Did you know that you can pump up your car tires with this thing? Would you like that?"

"If I had a car, maybe."

"Fair enough. How about a paint sprayer, or a furniture cleaner? Do you go to the lakes? I bet you go over to Lake Harriet all the time. This little number can pump up your air mattress."

"Don't go to the beach."

"Really? That's fine, Mrs. Copeland. The water's filthy there, anyhow. I never go either. Who needs it? That's the beauty of the Warner system. If you don't need an air compressor, no problem. Your new Warner does so many other things, you'll never even miss it."

"I told you I'm not in the market," she snapped. It felt like being hit with an ice-cold bucket of water.

"I'll tell you something, Paul. Mr. Salesman. You should've been here a month ago, okay? My husband just loves this kind of crap. He'd have been your sale." She stood from the couch and picked up her cigarette pack. "This was amusing for a while, but I'm bored now. I've got...I've got things to do, you know? I'm going downtown in a little while. Okay, so I don't have a car. You want to know what I need? I need a car. I have to take the bus downtown, do you understand?"

She closed her eyes, brought her cigarette to her lips, and took a long drag.

"Mrs. Copeland, I...."

"You know what it's like to look for a job, don't you, Paul? The buses run every half hour and you have to have exact change. It pays to have a car. You're right about that."

He nodded once, slowly. He took a long, final drag off his cigarette, then leaned over and dropped the butt, still burning, into the ashtray. They looked at each other for a long moment. Sandy narrowed her eyes at him and crinkled up her nose a little, as if she were suddenly asking herself what in the world he was doing there in her living room with all that crap spread out on the floor.

"I want to show you something," Paul said.

He quickly attached the filter to the exhaust port, opened it, and inserted a paper dirt pad. After snapping the wide-mouth suction head onto the front of the power plant, he attached the long, D-shaped handle to the top of the machine, converting the Warner into a hand-held portable. He picked up the Warner and a handful of paper dirt pads and stepped into the dining area.

"Which way to the bedroom?"

"What?"

"Is it through here?" He pointed down the hallway, then walked toward the front door. He stopped at the base of the stairs and turned. When Sandy appeared at the other end of the hallway he knew he still had a shot.

At the top of the stairs he turned right, into what looked to be the master bedroom. The shades were all pulled down. The air was warm and stale, faintly musty. A dim yellow light hung in the room. Sheets were strewn in a rumpled lump across the queen-sized bed. Paul looked for an outlet and found one behind a chair. He tossed the power cord to the floor like a coil of rope.

Sandy leaned against the door frame, her hands behind her back.

"You'd be surprised at what can accumulate in a mattress, Mrs. Copeland."

He clicked the Warner on, then moved the bed sheets to the foot of the bed. He dragged the hand-held mattress cleaner across the bed, pulling three strips before turning off the motor. He opened the filter and extracted the paper pad. A layer of gray-brown dust and silt lay on it, fine, light and powdery. He walked over to Sandy and held it before her.

"Do you know what this is?"

She shook her head.

"Putrifatic body ash," he said, slowly. "It's not only your household dust and dirt, but the dead skin, the dried body fluids that we rub off in our sleep. It's what we leave of ourselves, what we leave behind. Over a period of years, even months, our mattresses, pillows, couches collect an enormous quantity of this stuff."

She stared at the pad in his hand, gently chewing her lower lip.

"It's a health thing. Germs. Virus. The residue of who we are."

Sandy's eyes flashed up at him. Her chin quivered. She backed away from the door frame, bumping the door gently against the

wall as she turned and walked downstairs.

Paul stood there for a moment with the pad in his hand, then walked over to the dresser and dropped it in a small plastic waste basket. On the dresser were several picture frames. Black and whites of people in old-fashioned clothing. A color picture of two young boys standing barefoot on a dock alongside a small lake. In the sky behind them, an arching rainbow. Sandy and a tall, trim man with dark hair greased back tightly against his scalp, arm-in-arm in front of the house he was then inside. Sandy and the same man kissing in the middle of a dance floor, under piñatas and soft lights.

Paul loosened the knot of his tie and unfastened the top button of his shirt. He walked over to a window and pulled the shade back with his finger. His cream-colored Toyota sat alone in the avenue, baking in the sun. Spots of rust dotted the car's body like bullet holes. Or sores.

The beer can opened with a hiss. He lit another cigarette and leaned against the kitchen counter, flitting ashes into the sink. It'd felt so good to finally pee. He'd washed his hands and face in the sink and come to hang out in the kitchen for a couple minutes before he shampooed Sandy's carpet. He wasn't in a rush anymore.

Several minutes later, she reappeared, wiping her eyes with a tissue. Her face looked red and puffy.

Paul held up the beer can. "You said anything in the fridge, right?"

"I think maybe you better leave now."

"I haven't done your shampoo yet."

"You don't have any idea...." Her voice trailed off weakly.

"I'll get started right away."

He took the small plastic shampoo attachment into the kitchen and filled it with hot tap water. He opened another beer and returned to the living room. Sandy sat cross-legged on the couch, watching him, but he was done talking. He picked up the briefcase and the cardboard box and put them on the couch next to her. After assembling the Warner into an upright and attaching the shampooer to the power plant, he began to lay down strip after strip of white foam.

After five minutes he felt the sweat trickling down his back. Sandy was sorting through the cardboard box, picking up attachment tubes and brushes. She held the spray gun in her hand, pulling the trigger. She rubbed the bristles of the Qwik Brush. Her mouth was moving, but the loud whir and hum of the shampooer blotted out the sound of her voice. From time to time she raised a tissue to her eyes. When he was on the last go of laying down the foam, she got up and left the room, the Qwik Brush and spray gun still in her hands.

Paul turned off the Warner. Millions of tiny bubbles were popping and bursting, filling the room with a steady, soft, relaxing sound. He wondered where Sandy had gone. He had to let the bubbles soak for at least fifteen minutes. He took his beer from the mantle of the fireplace, and that's when he saw the golf club sticking out of the umbrella stand next to the patio door. He picked up the club. It was an ancient iron, with a worn, slightly tarnished head and a blond, wooden shaft. He read the embossment on the back of the club head.

Mashie Niblick
Warranted—Hand Forged
Bob Croll Special
Perth, Scotland

"Mashie niblick," Paul said. The sound of it made him smile. "Mashie niblick."

The varnish on the wood was brittle and cracking. It needed to be resealed. The red leather grip needed work, too. It was dry and slightly loose, with a wear spot near the top of the grip, right where you press the base of your left thumb into the leather. The club was probably worth a lot of money. Hand-crafted, for sure. The kind of club you would've used a hundred years ago. Maybe even at St. Andrew's.

He opened the screen door and stepped into the back yard. He took a couple of loose practice swings. The club was much too short for him, but he enjoyed holding it. He liked the feel, the heft of the club head as it swung around; it was much heavier than his Pings. When was this mashie niblick last used? It might've been sitting in that umbrella stand for twenty, thirty years. He lined up a small pine cone and swung, the club head cutting through the long grass with a swish. The pine cone flew, wobbly, in a short arc across the yard and hit the wooden fence with a soft tock. He took a sip of beer. The lawn was covered with pine cones, each of them begging to be knocked against the wooden fence.

When he returned to the living room he put the club back in the umbrella stand. The house was very quiet. The foam had soaked into the carpet and left a flaky white residue. He disconnected the shampooer and attached the Karpet Perk fluffer-buffer. He began to work over the carpet, sucking up the flakes, working slowly.

When he was half done, Sandy reappeared. She said nothing—didn't even look at him—but picked up a handful of Warner attachments from the box on the couch and left the room again. Her eyes looked glassy and she seemed a little out of it, like she'd forgotten he was there. Paul kept working. A few minutes later she returned and left with another armload.

She appeared one more time before he was done. She took his briefcase and the assortment of vacuum cleaner bags he'd laid next to it. She looked at him shortly, her face puffy and loose, just plain worn out, and then was gone again.

Paul finished the last pass in the living room and turned off the engine. All she'd left were the cardboard box and the little plastic wrapping bags and foam inserts. He disconnected the power cord, wrapped it up and tossed it into the box. He quickly broke down the Warner and laid it all in the box on top of the cord. Then he moved the coffee table back into place. He looked around the room. The carpet actually did look better—the color was a little brighter and the nap was fluffed up—though the wear spots were still visible. He listened for Sandy but heard nothing.

He used the bathroom just off the hallway between the kitchen and the front door, then walked back to the kitchen. He took another beer out and opened it. He thought about where he would go when he left Mrs. Copeland's house. He sure as hell wasn't going back to the office. Too many questions. Dawn would want to know where his demo unit had gone. Somebody had to pay.

"Mrs. Copeland," he said once, loudly. "Sandy."

He walked back into the living room. The remains of the Warner sat where he'd left them. He sipped the beer. He looked again at the painting of St. Andrew's above the fireplace. A lawn mower came to life in the yard next door, the engine coughing and sputtering before settling into a high, steady hum.

He took the mashie niblick from the umbrella stand. He imagined himself on the eighteenth fairway at St. Andrew's, lined up, feet spread to shoulder's width, ball back in his stance, neck down, shoulders flat. He's one stroke behind in the Scottish Open. He brings the club back slowly. The blade of the iron meets the ball with a soft, metallic click. The club head swings up and over his left shoulder. The ball travels in a silent, graceful arc, a solitary white dot against the brilliant blue sky.

The shot goes in. He wins with an eagle. The crowd roars.

Mashie niblick.

He thought about that club, murmuring the name like a mantra, as he walked out of the house and crossed the front lawn, heading for his Toyota. He could re-wrap the grip himself. Tarnish remover would brighten and polish the club head. With a little work the old club would be looking almost new, a real prize, something to hold onto.

Peter Serchuk

A Small Map of North Dakota

1.
Start by measuring yourself against the sky,
By remembering the sky is a mirror
Horizon to horizon
And spared the shame of hiding secrets
You're free as any cloud.
Never try to outsmart the weather.
You can't bluff your way past a prairie wind.
At thirty below, every breath is a blessing,
Every house is a star by the side of the road.
Ask for prayers and return the favor.
Love thy neighbor, the first snow says.

2.
Pity the Indians, frozen in history,
Admired only by strangers.
Theirs is a river flooded and dry,
The sadness of a mystery revealed.
They're here to remind you that good luck's
The best medicine; that some seasons won't pass
Until you let them go.
This is no place to wait for miracles.
What grows here thrives on low expectations,
Feeds on the milk of empty space.
Make no mistake, your star is small.
But here, the stars still rule the sky
And each one has a familiar face.

Untitled 6, By Alex McDonald

Tony Tost

Tracy Acts Like She's Eating A Whole Bird

This is what father says.
Father says taking Tracy out to eat
is too much like filling up the Chrysler.
She eats chicken strips:
the half-amused/ashamed look,
the lonely kid look: alone, in public,
to the side, reading science fiction books.
At least it's not ice cream.
What mother says is what I say
which is: nothing as bad
as a fatty eating ice cream.
The look on the face.
They want to have fun and eat it,
but they should be embarrassed.
It runs down the hand and wrist,
cherry ice cream, down the sleeve.
They hold it. Eat it?
Or drop it and walk away?
Cherry ice cream down the sleeve.

Tracy took to getting fat three years ago.
Skinny as a rake/happy as a clam,
then she took to getting fat,
no reason, Mom and Dad asked.
Are you not happy?
Yes I am happy.
Are you having trouble in school?

No I like school.
Did somebody touch you where they shouldn't?
No people touch me where they should.
What do you mean?
No, people touch me where they should.

Tracy didn't eat any more than any one.
She ate as much skinny as a rake
as wide as a road. But she eats
heavier now wide as a road.
Real heavy. She eats bread crumbs
like they're so heavy.
The waitress is done smoking
And the ice hits my teeth.
The waitress comes by.
Father always says our family is good tippers.
I say to the waitress our family is good tippers
And she gives me more water.
I laugh real hard and Tracy doesn't want pie.
She stabs a chicken
And says she wants to write,
But she doesn't say that.
She doesn't say she wants to write
Or I want to write or anything,
She writes I want to write on a napkin
Because she's trying to be funny.
I ask her if she means the captions
In vacation books. Yes, she writes,
I want to write about green fields
And blue skies and deep lakes and pretty fish.
Yes, she writes, I want to write
Like I swim with pretty fish in big rivers.
Yes, she writes, I want to write
Like I take care of small birds.

Mitchell Metz

Doing Dillard

If the Annie Dillard of the killer publicity
shot, black & white from the 1970s, that
impales me neat & cruel like her insects

on pins each time I crack
Teaching a Stone to Talk,

and makes me borrow the stupid thing,
all ablush, from the public library again
& again after reading it six times among
everything else Dillard I get my shaking
hands on or eyes over, as over a bible

or porn, because that's what it is if you
read it right knowing soul ought to, if it
doesn't, share an etymological mother
with cunt, oh just to gaze at it, that one

photo, and wondering, awed, try to pin
the words within to an eternal soul fuck,
or even one sans soul and ur-corporeal,

damn me, just like I'll watch The Sound
of Music over & over again for hot, holy
Julie Andrews and wonder about ruining
her soulfully or corporeally or anti-nazily
or any way at all up and down the Alps—

if that Dillard lay open and asking for it

before me, could I even do Annie at all
much less as she deserves to be done?

I mean, man oh man, would she, lolling,
look at me as under a microscope like
she does, or a cosmoscope? See mites
on my nostril hair or court universal or-
gasms from depths of me just not there?

And who is this damn "Richard" to whom
she dedicates essays and even mentions
among them? How the hell does he stay
hard with one hot and heaving pilgrim on
or under him? I suspect I could probably
beat him up, and frankly find solace if not
poetic justice in that.

David Jordan

Tease

It's one a.m. "Striptease" straggles
along on the cable channel,
Demi Moore contorting
her road-worn form,
trying to pass as a stripper.
Commercial time arrives
and a male voice, deep
and soothing, extolls the virtues
of a recorded album of sacred
music, $17.99 by phone.
Sample tracks echo
in the background—"How Great
Thou Art," "As I Walk
Through the Garden Alone."

There it is again, the interplay
of sex and religion
that has taunted and confused
me since I was twelve.
Spanish priests impregnating
Aztec maidens, Rev. Martin Luther
King bedding Betty Coed,
my eye undressing all the pretty
girls in the congregation
at Gordon Street Baptist Church,
TV admen hawking hymns
between Demi Moore's boobs.
I long ago decided I should give up
one or the other, so

I saved sex and set Jesus aside.

I think.

Untitled 7, By Alex McDonald

Authors' Notes

Carlotta Lady Izumi Abrams has a bachelor's degree from Wesleyan University, an MFA from Arizona State, and a doctorate degree from the University of Southern Mississippi. She has published in *Half Tones Jubilee, Brushstrokes, Red Rock Review, Ibidan Journal of Folklore, Prairie Journal, JCI Rapsheet, Caprice, Poetry Motel, Free Focus, Asian Sun News,* and *Heart Quarterly.*

William Aiken works for low-cost housing projects in Appalachian Virginia. Aiken's recent poems have appeared in *The Malahat Review, Parting Gifts, The Seattle Review.* His forthcoming poems will appear in *Blue Unicorn, Chiron Review, Haysdea-Syducy Port Review.*

Kate Bertine just graduated with an MFA in nonfiction from the University of Arizona, where she served as the editor for the *Sonora Review* magazine. She recently won *Touchstone Magazine's* Graduate Nonfiction Contest. While an undergrad at Colgate University, she received an AWP Intro Journals award in 1996. In an effort to deter entering the real world, Ms. Bertine currently trains as an elite triathlete in Tucson, Arizona.

Rene F. Cardenas is a Texan who has had experiences in Korea, Japan, Central and South America. Cardenas was educated in Texas, Arizona, Washington D.C., and New York. She is currently working in tourism and completing a novel.

Stephen Davenport lives in Urbana, Illinois. In addition to the typical scholarly this-and-that, he's recently had poetry and fiction published in *The Iowa Review, Flyway, and Berkeley Fiction Review.*

Christian Frazier is an English student at the University of Maryland. He is twenty-one years old and describes himeslf as an "aspiring writer."

David Jordan is a former newspaperman and college teacher turned poet/fiction writer. He lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and three children. His poems have appeared in several magazines, including *Rattle, CQ, Spillway, Lynx Eye, Long Shot, Calapooya, Vol. No.* and *Peaky Hide.*

Mitchell Metz graduated from Brown University in 1981, where he was an All-Ivy football player and wrote really bad poetry. After twenty years, he finally put football behind him, and his poems since have appeared in over a dozen publications, including *Slipstream, Raintown Review* and *Poetry Motel.*

Peter Serchuk published his first book of poems, *Waiting for Poppa at the Smithtown Diner,* with the University of Illinois Press. His second book of poems, *Soldiers in What War,* is in search of a publisher.

Stephen Sundin has had poetry appear in *Denver Quarterly, Folio, The Prose Poem: An International Journal, ACM, key satch(el), NYQ,* and an anthology of Northwest Poets: *Playing with a Full Deck.*

Tony Tost lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas and is working for his MFA at the University of Arkansas.

Anthony Tracy has had his work appeared or is forthcoming in *The Chiron Review, Press, Flyway Literary Review, Rattle, Cedar Hill Review* and many other magazines and journals. In 1997, *Center Press* published his first collection of poetry titled *The Christening.*

Vivian Shipley is the Editor of *Connecticut Review* and the Connecticut State University Distinguished Professor. She has won numerous awards, including the Reader's Choice Award from *Prarie Schooner* in 1999. She has published six books of poetry, most recently *Fair Haven* from Negative Capability Press, 2000. Raised in Kentucky, she has a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University.

Northern Arizona University's Master of Arts in English with a Creative Writing emphasis

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For application forms call (520) 523-4911 or write:

Creative Writing Area Coordinator
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